

Grandma, Ray, and America

DID YOU MEAN HER PRESENT?

This is how I always imagined America: you're scooting down the highway from Texas to Mississippi and you don't give a damn about anything. America: the land of Charlie Parker and Etta James, where people love to drink whisky a lot, and to talk just a little; it seems like such a waste of time! Anyway, when I was little I had a plan: I was going to go to America and win the war. Don't ask me which war. I've got no idea, even now. The only thing that mattered was that, in my mind, America was somewhere where you could be free, somewhere where you could be by yourself. At least that's how it seemed in the movies, and I knew, too, that some-where on the other side of the mountains and oceans was a land which gave birth to people who sang freedom songs, songs about love and pain, who battled against the blues and believed in God, whatever that means... Back then I didn't think of America as the land of McDonald's, a land full of fat people who've gorged them-selves with hamburgers and cheeseburgers, a land where sharing your thoughts with your shrink was the in-thing.

In other words, the America I dreamed of was Black America, and between me and it lay several thousand miles and the fervent belief that one day I would step down onto its soil and say "Hi guys! I'm back. Do you know what khinkali is?"

But as it turned out, America was a lot more complicated than that.

My first chance came when I was a student and they announced the new IREX exchange programme. I didn't sleep for three nights straight. I filled out the 32-page application form and produced three essays that were so beautifully crafted even Eco would have been impressed, but in this instant I think that was the prob-lem; the judges found my essays rather overworked and I didn't get through. I responded like any Georgian would: I got angry and depressed, and then, as any Georgian would, drowned my sorrows in vodka and spent half the night with my head down the toilet. That was my first attempt to get to America. But I didn't give up. In my final year at university I put so much effort into it that I managed to track down some acquaintances in America to help me get over there to do my Masters, but – wouldn't you know it? – two months later I fell so madly in love with a pale, skinny guy that I forgot all about America with its Cadillacs and Char-lie Parker, and I got married instead.

"This is the last thing I ever expected from you," said my mum. "Give me a grandchild soon, eh?" said my dad.

“Oh. My. God!” said my sister

And my aunt said: “Right, then you can knock all that Virginia Woolf non-sense on the head, now you’re a married woman, and get in there and do the washing-up.”

So I got in there and did the washing up, and then I cleaned the floor and did the dusting, too, for good measure. And what of it? Virginia Woolf had a husband too, you know...

But never mind her husband; I’d only known my husband a few minutes before I started asking my friends more about him: “So, er, has he got a drinking problem I should know about or anything?” And then a while later our paths crossed again; we ended up partnering each other on a project. Well, the project didn’t work out quite as we’d hoped, but in the course of all that studying and planning there was definite progress in the Cupid’s arrow department. Which is to say, three days into the project I went a whole night without sleep and by morning, exhausted and quite broken, I was ready to admit it: I was in love. There then followed all the usual romantic stuff which goes hand in hand with being in love

– racing pulses, moping around, staring dreamily at each other in cafes – and after a while we moved in together.

And so began a new chapter in my life:

Me: “Dato, your alarm clock didn’t go off – get up!” Dato: “Five more minutes.”

Me: “Get up, you’re going to be late for work.” Dato, still snoring: “Alright, alright, I’m getting up.” Or this: Dato, to me, as we walk through a clothes shop: “What shall I buy you?” Me: “I don’t know. Let me think about it.”

Dato: “Sometime today, yeah? I’m starving.” Me: “God, give me a minute to decide, will you?!”

Me, to the shop assistant: “What’s the most expensive thing you’ve got?” Or this, from one of his friends:

“Open the door, it’s Ucha!”

I prise my eyes open and get out of bed. “Wake up!
Wake up!”

Ucha’s banging on the door so hard it’s about to come off its hinges.

“I’m coming, I’m coming...” I open the door. “What in God’s name do you want at this hour, you git?!”

“Get up, woman! Go and wash your face!”

“They never let me get any sleep. No, they never let me get any bloody sleep.” I mutter, and shake my head. Ucha’s already inside, rummaging through a drawer.

“What are you looking for, love?” I still can’t tell whether I’m actually awake or this is all a dream.

“I’m looking for the drill. Dato told me it was in the end drawer and it’s not here.”

“Oh, you’re kidding me. You woke me for that?!”

“Keep your hair on! You had to get up at some point today, right?” Ucha laughs. “Oops. Just remembered – Dato lent it to me a while ago and I’m not sure I ever gave it back...”

I eye him suspiciously. “What? So you mean you woke me up for nothing?!” “Er... Right, well, I’ll be off then. I’ll look for it at mine.”

“Could you not just have asked one of your mates?” I’m actually pretty cross. “I did – I asked your husband, and he’d forgotten I’d borrowed it, too! Anyway,

if it’s not here it must be at my house.”

Ucha turns round so fast the draft almost knocks me over. “Bye then!” he calls from the stairwell.

I close the door and collapse back into bed. I can’t get back to sleep, so after a while I make myself a coffee instead and sit there cursing Ucha. But what can you do? That’s Ucha for you – he comes out with such rubbish it’s actually quite alarming. But the weird thing is, he actually believes it. He’s like some naive little kid. Dato’s other friends aren’t like that. There’s Takhvi, who’s the quietest person I’ve ever met. Yes, he’s a man of very few words: “If it’s cool – cool!”, “If it’s no good, it’s no good!” He’s one of those people: if you know Takhvi and you know how to write, then you write about Takhvi. And then there’s Nikusha and Iago, Moonie, and Achu’s wife Keto. Then there’s Pacho who they all think is gay – even though I’m convinced one day he’ll turn up with some blonde Russian babe on his arm and she’ll look at us and say “You thought he was gay?! God no, he’s all man!”.

But today Pacho comes alone, even though he's not very well, and he comes because it's Ucha's birthday and he doesn't want Ucha moaning at him, and every five minutes we break into a song: "Happy birthday Uchinioooo! Happy birth-day to youuuuu." And "Happy Birthday" is American too, I think to myself. But America is far, far away, and America is only a dream, only a dream...

Ucha's birthday. That was the day it all happened. Or rather, there was a single moment – a snapshot – when everything changed quite fundamentally. The snap-shot looks like this: I'm sitting on the sofa watching the others. Some of them are drinking, some singing, some dancing. But I don't care. I don't care about any of it. Actually, it's not that I don't care, it's just that I have no idea what I'm doing here, and all of a sudden it hits me: birthdays are pointless, evenings are pointless, days are pointless. It's all pointless. I want to go home. I want to sleep. So I get up and I go home. But before I fall asleep I revisit that old fantasy of mine... America is far, far away. But America is the one place you're granted solitude, where you'll never spend your birthday thinking how pointless birthdays are because there'll be nobody there singing "Happy Birthday" to you. I ponder this as I fall asleep. When I wake up I stare up at the ceiling and I realise that I'm depressed. In America I could be alone.

I want to go to America.

NO, I MEANT HER PAST!

This is what depression is like: you lie in bed; nothing interests you; you can't figure out what you're living for; you don't laugh at jokes; you hardly eat and suddenly there's this spot on the ceiling that you just can't take your eyes off, and while you're staring at the spot it hits you that you just don't get it, you don't get why everyone else is so happy, why it is they go to work, and why it is they come back home again.

That's what my depression is like, too, the only difference being that when I look at it from the other side all those thoughts seem stupid, and I'm pretty sure it's time I got out of bed and did something. But I realise that "something" isn't something I want to be doing, and that at the moment the best thing I can do is lie in bed and think. And when you're depressed your thoughts automatically turn to childhood; you think back to a time you can't believe ever really existed, even though deep down you know you lived it. Anyway, I have no idea how or why, but no matter what I think about, my bebia – my grandma – pops into my head, and depression or no depression, pretty soon I'm under the covers shaking with laughter.

There are two basic types of grandma: you've got your sentimental old lady who cries at everything and gives her grandkids so much chocolate it makes them sick, and then you've

got your old battle-axe who shakes her fist at life, swears a lot and takes great pleasure at other people's misery.

Try as I might, I can't fit my bebia into either category. She was such a character that even in the darkest depths of depression you'd find it hard to think of her without laughing. So I use Bebia to help me fight my depression; I flick through the snapshots filed away in my memory as if they were photos, and remember the woman who'd earned the undying gratitude of her whole village, because she'd raised most of them.

This is the kind of thing I remember:

"Come outside, you bloody great pansy! Your brain'll rot away if you spend too long with those halfwits!" Bebia stands in the yard by the back door and looks at me with an expression that's giving nothing away.

"Coming!" I answer, and run out as fast as my legs can carry me.

"Don't touch me, I had to give that louse-ridden scoundrel Torva an injection and I need a bath," she says. Then Bebia stands by the tap while I stand on the steps. She washes her hands, and I count how many times she rubs the soap on, guessing she'll stop after ten. I'm right. Bebia dries her hands and sits on a chair in front of the house...

That's what I remember best: Bebia sitting on the chair in front of her house. I remember how she'd adjust her dress and stare out at the village through screwed-up eyes. Goodness knows what she was thinking about. She was such a strong, valiant woman it was hard to imagine anything could possibly be troubling her. The villagers often told me how, when she was six months pregnant, my grandmother had walked twenty-five kilometres through the night to save a young woman's life. But whenever I asked Bebia about it she just said: "Those were difficult times. Things were very hard back then."

She was a fine woman. True, she always called the locals "halfwits" but they loved her anyway, and they were all very grateful to her. Of course they were; as anyone from the village who knew me would say: "Your grandmother? Your grandmother brought me up!" I was used to it. The only thing I could never get used to as a child was being home by eight o'clock. But what do you expect: I was a child, and a naughty one for that – I was a real tomboy, and all I wanted to do was playing. As soon as the clock struck eight, Bebia would come and stand at the window and shout for me so loudly that the whole village would shake. And then there was nowhere to hide. Sooner or later someone would come up to me and say: "Go home, child, your grandmother's calling you, and she's disturbing the whole village." And there was nothing I could do but go home, where I'd find my supper already on the table: bread and butter, cheese, and mint tea.

Tea is the only non-alcoholic drink I don't like. I like mint tea though – but only in the evening, and only in summer, because that's when I used to drink it when was little. I've kept many of the habits I picked up in childhood – or picked up from my grandmother; for example, rubbing the soap on five or ten times when I'm washing my hands, or sitting on a chair in front of the house in the village, staring out at the mountains, or using the phrase “bloody great pansies”. And why not? It sounds so affectionate I feel I can use it with anyone I love and care about.

It's what Bebia said when she decided to sell her medicines. Back then people found selling their things very shameful and it was the last thing anybody expect-ed my grandmother to do, but there was a war on and times were very tough. And so Bebia called us bloody great pansies and started selling her pills. She did it to help us, and I really don't know what we'd have done if she hadn't. The main thing was this: I understood that in spite of how difficult it was for her, in spite of the shame she felt, she did it anyway. Like I told you, she was a great woman. In those days we knew nothing of mobile phones and computers and all the other stuff kids today are obsessed with. All we knew was war and bread queues. I remember it only too well. Fathers didn't come home from work in the evening back then; no, times were very different. Back then fathers were men who suddenly came home in the middle of the night, dressed in military fatigues, and who sat silent, silent, always silent. We never knew what was going on. At least, that's what it was like with my father.

Thank goodness Bebia never lived to see the August war,” I always said. She passed away a few months before it started, and I still believe that had she been alive the strain would have broken her; she would no longer have been able to sup-press the grief she had always kept hidden by staring out at the mountains each night. So, when all is said and done, everything happened for the best. And that's how it is, isn't it? When you look at life you realise that everything happens for the best. And that went for my grandmother's death, too.

And when, one sunny summer's day, I told her about my American dream, she just waved her hand dismissively and said: “What in God's name do you want to do out there with those bloody great pansies? Whores, the lot of them.” And that's when I realised she really didn't like Americans. Then she added – and I've no idea why, as it had nothing to do with anything: “That thing your grandfather was always so proud of, being a descendant of the king – that was all down to a whore, too, you know. I mean, how else could it have happened?” I knew that story. My grandfather was a historian; he and a distant relative had managed to prove that King Erekle had interfered with one of our ancestors. But as far as Bebia was concerned that was nothing to write home about: “Pff, get ten Georgians in a room and at least one of them will tell you they're descended from Erekle. And they're not lying, either. He was a fine fellow, that Erekle,” she would say and if you tried to answer her back, well...

That was just how she was – she was always fair with me in everything she said and did, and that is why she kept on pushing right to the end. “You know I feel just the same as I’ve always felt,” she told me a month before she died. In the end it was all very ordinary. I was in my first year at university. I woke up early one morning and went into the kitchen. My father was standing by the door looking at my mother. My mother was stirring something in a pan; her face was wet. I was surprised to find my father at home. I realised that something had happened, and that it was the kind of something you don’t ask about, the kind of something you have to work out for yourself, that they’ll tell you about in their own time. So I went out into the loggia, got myself a cup and poured some coffee.

I look out of the window; it’s pouring down outside. I want to ask my father why he hasn’t gone to work. But I can’t ask him. I drink my coffee. I stare out at the rain. I wait, in silence.

“Bebia’s dead,” my father finally says.

I look at my father and after a few moments I ask: “When?”
Dawn,” my father answers and goes back over to my mother.

I stand up, press my nose against the window and start to cry. I need to cry now, before I go to the village, I think to myself, because I’m convinced that if I start crying when I sit down next to Bebia’s body she’ll somehow know, and she’ll be horrified...

And then there I am, sitting next to my grandmother’s yellow, wilted body, staring at my hands. I’m not crying. I really believe that if she sees my tears she’ll be horrified, and I tell her: “Bebia, I know you’re giving everyone hell up there, wherever you are, and I know that we’re all bloody great pansies, too. Hang on in there. And if I ever do go and live in America, I promise that on the anniversary of your death I’ll make those American whores light candles and pray for you. They’ve got some great prayers over there, you know. They’ll all go to church and sing in your memory. You never trusted a word the priests here said, so I don’t know why you’d trust a load of Americans, but I’ve got to thank God for you somehow, haven’t I? And I promise that if I ever marry an American it won’t be some guy who’s twenty years older than me. What else do you want me to prom-ise? I promise I won’t give anyone your recipe for cream horns. Even if I wanted to I wouldn’t be able to. Because I don’t even know it myself.” And I feel myself about to cry. I stand up and leave the room.

“America can go to hell! Now who’s going to keep the whole village awake shouting my name on summer evenings?!” I think.

And then I think: “Grandma’s dead.”

“I need to wash my hands,” is what Bebia’s thinking. I’m sure of it.

Because I don’t believe Bebia’s dead, and I’m sure she must be out there some-where, even if it’s on some other planet where she’s giving the silvery alien inhab-itants hell. What’s more, I’m pretty sure none of us die, we just carry on living in a different realm, somewhere you can look down and see Georgia and America.

But America is far, far away, and until I get there all I can do is dream.

IT’S AMERICA

I lie in bed. I stare at the wall and I ask myself this: “Why are you depressed?” “Bloody hell, I don’t know!” I answer.

“I mean just what is it you want, anyway?!” I ask myself again. “America, sweet Americaaa...” I sing. Yes, America. That’s what I really want. Although actually all I want is a place where I don’t know anyone, somewhere I can be by myself. When I was little that’s how I imagined America to be, and even now I still believe in Ray Charles, in my Black America.

“I want to go to America.” I say to my husband. I’ve finally dragged myself out of bed and we’re sitting on the sofa. It’s evening.

“What do you want to go to America for?” Dato looks surprised.

“I want to live there. But I don’t want to stay in one place; I want to travel from city to city until I’ve seen the whole country.” I realise I’m not expressing myself very well.

“We can’t just drop everything here!” Dato looks even more confused.

“I didn’t mean us. I meant me. Just me.” I shouldn’t have been so blunt. I know I shouldn’t.

“And what about me?”

I shrug, and Dato says: “I see.”

And I suddenly realise I have no shame. But I can’t think about that now. The doorbell

rings and from the way the ringing goes on and on I guess that Ucha's come to wake me up again.

"It's Ucha," Dato says.

"Yep, that's Ucha." I go and open the door.

"God, you look a right state! Have you just woken up?!" "Good morning to you too, Ucha."

But Ucha's already in the kitchen drinking tea. "Did you get your Kindle?" he asks me.

"What Kindle?" I have no idea what he's talking about.

"The one Dato ordered for you... Oh, hold on. That might have been a sur-prise."

I look at Dato blankly.

"Idiot! You complete idiot," Dato says to Ucha. I laugh.

"Look, I'll see you later. I'm off to bed," I say.

"Are you going for a sleep? What time is it?" Ucha asks in surprise. "No idea." "What's the matter with you, woman, are you dying?" Ucha puts his hand on my shoulder, as if he's comforting me at a funeral. "You really are an idiot!" I laugh again.

"You'll live long enough to pop out a kid or two though, right, for Dato's sake?" he continues. "Although I suppose he'll just find himself a new wife as soon as you're gone and..."

"Alright, hold it." Dato cuts him off.

I kiss Dato on the forehead and go into the bedroom. Kindles are great! There's not a person on earth who doesn't eat, drink, shit and wipe their nose,

and there's not a person on earth who hasn't at least once in their life wondered what the hell the point is. Julius Caesar wondered about it, and I bet Mother Ter-esa wondered about it, too. I have a husband I love and who loves me, a husband who watches me wake up every morning and who's giving me a Kindle. I have friends to drink coffee with and have a laugh with, who talk to me about anything and everything and who tell me jokes. I have a mother,

and I have a father. In other words, everything should be fine. But it's not. Everyone has a place some-where on earth they call home, whether or not they actually ever manage to get to it; I think America's my home, but it's a home where you have to live by yourself.

I close my eyes and imagine myself arriving in America:

The plane starts its descent. My heart is pounding in my chest. "At last, at last, at last!" I mutter to myself as I walk down the steps of the plane.

"Americaaaaaaa!" I wail at the top of my voice and if everyone's staring aghast I really couldn't care less.

Or maybe it goes like this:

I look stunning. I'm wearing a short dress and high heels. My hair's all tousled, my lips look full and gorgeous. I come down the steps of the plane, look around, smile, and when I step down onto terra firma I scream "Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!" I run up and down like a madwoman and throw my shoes in the air.

Yes, this is America...

Or maybe this is America:

I go into a bar and order a double whisky.

"You aren't American, are you?" the barman asks me. "Yes. I'm from the East," I answer with a smile.

That's as far as the conversation goes. We don't speak again until an hour later, by which time I'm so drunk I can hardly focus.

"Do you like your country?" The barman leans his hands on the bar in front of me. "Hahaa! Hahahaa!" It's not much of an answer. The guy looks really confused. "What do you mean?" he asks me.

"Hahaa! Hahahaa!" I repeat. "You're drunk."

"Hahaa! Hahahaa!" I realise I'm starting to annoy him.

"Are you trying to tell me you hate my country?" He's pissed off. I'm pissed off too. "Dampalo..!" I mutter angrily. Loser! "What?"

„Dampalo!“

“What did you say?”

“Dampalo – It means “good”. Okay?” “Really?” His anger quickly subsides.

“Yes, and traki – it means “super”,” I say. Asshole. “Traki!” - he repeats. Asshole.

“Yeah! You are traki!” I start laughing.

“I’m traki! I’m traki,” he shouts, and starts laughing too. “You’re traki” I repeat, adding: “And America is beautiful.” “Yes! And the people are nice.” The American is ecstatic. “Hahaa! Hahahaa!” I start laughing again.

He looks at me. I look at him.

I start to cry and say: “I’m also traki.”

“And why are you crying?” the guy asks in surprise. “Do you know what love is?” I ask him.

“Love? Yeah, of course.”

“And you know what is home, right?” “Yes.”

“How will you feel, when your home is one place and your love is another?” “Are you in love?” he asks sympathetically.

I don’t answer. I drink my whiskey and after a while I say: “Trako!” He smiles at me.

“Trako! Dampalo trako! Bindzuro trako! Ho, ho, Trako!” You asshole. You stupid asshole. You stupid, loathsome asshole.

“Hey, relax!” He tries to calm me down. “Hahaa! Hahahaa!” “Stop it, please! You’re drunk.”

That’s right. I’m drunk. It’s time for me get up and go home. “I’m going.” I put on my coat.

“See you later.” He smiles.

“Bye. You are a good boy.” I smile back at him and walk towards the door. Yes, this is America...