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This is not a story about the oppression of Caucasian women, nor is it about the oppression of one particular female constituency. It is the story of how one person, a foreigner, attempted and failed to assimilate to a culture that was not her own. It is not about the drudgery of washing dishes, serving meals, being silent during supras, and nodding your head obediently while men laugh at you. As isolated incidents, none of these is in itself a tragedy (for it is no great privilege to speak at a supra), and while a modern feminist may hope for all of these “traditions” to be abolished, that labor may be left to another person.

My story is about the unseen side of being a Georgian woman (in my case for two years rather than a lifetime). The dimension of female experience described here is rarely reflected in public writing. It has no presence in contemporary Georgian literature or in scholarship concerned to uncover the textures of contemporary Georgian life. The entire Georgian population is nonetheless affected on a daily—or, more precisely, nightly—basis by what I am about to describe. They are touched by this condition of Georgian life, in some cases without knowing it, in their deepest, most intimate, moments, in the nonpublic junctures that make possible the public realm. For just as the public has no existence without the private, in precisely the same way does patriarchy, a discursive and institutional phenomenon, depend on patterns of private, cross-gen-der intimacy.¹ I am concerned here with one particular pattern that emerged during two years of life, fieldwork, and research in Tbilisi and its environs and that pertained not only to the goal of exposing patriarchy in the abstract but to my own physical body and to the bodies of those closely related to me.

Georgians often claim that theirs is a “Christian” country, by which they mean a society kinder to women and indeed to all human beings than the societies of their Muslim neighbors: Iran, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. My experience of becoming a Georgian woman (to employ the phrase figuratively) suggests that the line dividing Christianity from Islam is far less significant...
in the realm of gender relations than the line dividing men from women, the line that creates patriarchy. If the former impacts Georgian self-perception, and therefore may be consigned to the superstructure of ideology, the latter overdetermines a body’s trajectory; it adjudicates over life and death to the extent that religious and cultural differences become surrounded in halos of triviality. The common thread linking contemporary Georgian to Iranian and Muslim Chechen culture is patriarchy, the domination of women not (only) by men but by structures that actively militate against their welfare and that women in large measure participate in consolidating.

Recent transnational feminist scholarship has clarified that patriarchy is not overdetermined by religion, and has helpfully focused on patriarchal continuities between Western and non-Western societies, suggesting among other things that the controversy over veiling in Islam displaces deeper problems in the social organization of gender and the public adjudication of sexual difference. I seek to contribute to this body of work, albeit on a more personal level and through the medium of a different discursive genre. Female autonomy is not guaranteed by the European genealogy with which Georgians align themselves when they contrast their Christian civilization with the putatively more primitive culture of the Muslim Chechens. According to the U.S. Department of State, as well as other institutions entrusted with disseminating public information, the religion and culture of the latter represent an impediment to the achievement of female equality.

When one observes as I did during my life in Georgia that the achievement of female equality is far more profoundly impeded by factors common to the daily lives of Georgians and Chechens than by cultural and religious distinctions, the assessments of the State Department and other influential generators of public knowledge appear misguided and productive of dangerously misleading assumptions. Contrary to the popular assumption among both Georgians and many European and American observers that Islam alone propagates the oppression of women in the Caucasus, the two years I spent becoming a (Christian) Georgian woman taught me that patriarchy exceeds cultural distinctions, certainly in Georgia, and probably elsewhere in the world. The deepest impediment to overcoming patriarchy is not religion, whether our own or another’s, or culture, whether our own or another’s, but our very selves, the thing most of us are least inclined to change.

I.

Five months into my stay in Tbilisi, Georgia, I fell in love. Not with a person as much as with a country, though there was a man involved. Like 20 percent
of the male population of Georgia, his name was Giorgi. When he tried to speak English, which he never did very well, he called himself “George,” abbreviating the name of the country he represented. In Giorgi’s view, which rapidly became my own, Georgia was the land of hospitality, of poetry, and wine. Everyone quoted the medieval epic poet Rustaveli at the drunken feasts called *supras*. Friends went out of their way to help one another. Everyone made time for the most important things in life, because, they would say, we only have one life to live, and why waste it in pursuit of worldly goods?

From the perspective of a temporary visitor and permanent outsider, Georgians seemed blessed with a mystical ability to devote their lives to what truly mattered. I had arrived in Tbilisi during an interim between graduate schools on a one-year grant, later extended by another year, to learn Chechen. The year of my arrival was 2003. The Chechen war was in its second decade, albeit slowing to a period of stagnation. Chechnya, the subject of my research, was still off-limits to foreigners. So I settled for nearby Tbilisi and for the prospect of learning Chechen from the Chechen diaspora community there.

Instead of learning Chechen, I became a member of a culture I never intended to join, a culture I knew nothing about, the culture of my host country, and more than that, my second home. So when a man with a name and an upbringing that mirrored the history of his country entered my life, I poised my soul in his direction. I opened my heart to his world. He returned the favor many times over. I was lavished with lectures on Georgian history and literature, excursions to churches, museums, villages, and mountains. He brought me multitudes of books every time we met, each time neatly inscribed with a poetic dedication; he hunted down censored passages from Soviet editions of Georgian novels and poetry and then read them to me at night. He assembled in the corner of my apartment a library of Georgia’s two-millennia-plus history condensed into three tall bookshelves. A mirror was perched at a right angle to the shelves. I would stare at it as he stared at me, in between hours of reading by candlelight in electricity-deprived Tbilisi, over months of mutual education when time seemed to stop moving, in the summer of 2005.

Giorgi had no expectations. He refused to accept the small presents I gave him in return for his generosity. He would not eat the apple slices I placed before him when he came to pick me up from my apartment. He would not drink the Coca-Cola I bought for him. When he came to visit he sat on the edge of the chair, afraid of overstepping the rules of hospitality merely by sitting down, as though the hospitality he lavished on me would be degraded by reciprocity.

The scales of our affection were reversed. We had become involved with each other in a way that never could have happened to me in my home coun-
try. I was charmed. My mind took flight into the realm of fantasy. I confused a man with his nation—as Giorgi confused me with my America—and fell in love with both. If we had been in America, I could have read the signs. But I was in a foreign land, and even though I was learning the language, I did not know the customs, and beneath that, I did not know myself.

So one day in the middle of spring, as the sun seeped through my window, spreading a halo of gold on my bed, I was busy translating, as usual, a story by the master of Georgian prose fiction, Alexandre Qazbegi. Qazbegi’s story described the rebirth of the world after the frost of winter. Birds flocked to their mates, and bees pollinated the earth, from which sprang forth new life. The text itself set my mind wandering, and I began to wonder what would happen if I allowed Giorgi to enter my life in another way. I shared my thoughts with my Georgian teacher, and we discussed the possibility. No one, I learned, particularly those who care about you, will ever advise you to say no to happiness.

“Spring is the time of love. If you feel something for him, if the birds outside are singing in your heart, then listen to them! Don’t resist. You don’t stand a chance against fate, anyway. Bedistsereba—everything’s written down before it happens. Nature always takes its course.”

My Georgian lessons occurred simultaneously with lessons in another language, Chechen, from the same language family as Georgian but spoken by people who associated themselves with being marked by a different cultural and religious history. Chechens were Muslim—not always faithful adherents of Islam’s injunctions, nor even usually so—but Muslim enough to wish to distinguish themselves from their Christian Georgian counterparts. However, in spite of all the differences between Islam and Christianity that both Georgians and Chechens sought to impress on me, when it came to gender relations and to the status of women, I was more struck by how much Christianity and Islam seemed to share in common, at least in this part of the world.

My Chechen teacher’s name was Makka, the holy city transcribed into her native tongue. Her husband Umar, a former war doctor and torture victim, was unemployed and therefore had nothing better to do than attend our lessons. He became my second teacher, as I witnessed an eight-month-new marriage unfolding among a people who prided themselves on the austerity of their relations with women.

Umar hated Georgia. Born in Grozny, the cosmopolitan heart of the North Caucasus before the war changed everything in 1994, he had an urban pedigree that separated him from diaspora Chechens. Now Grozny was a wasteland, less hospitable than a garbage dump, and there was no way back home for him except through the mountains, and then what would he have done once he returned home? Kill a Russian soldier? Not a good career decision.
“Georgia is as close as I’ll ever get to Chechnya again,” he sighed. Makka devoted her soul to the Chechens, though before the war some might have denied her Chechen identity. She was a Kist, a descendent of the seven thousand Chechens who crossed the Caucasus and migrated to the Pankisi Gorge in the mid-nineteenth century, after the defeat of Imam Shamil. The difference between the Kist and Chechen ways of speaking was merely dialectical. Chechens were better Muslims; Kist piety was marred by admixtures of Georgian Christianity, but once again after the war everything changed; Kists and Chechens merged.

Some say that the Kists and the Chechens who arrived in Georgia after the fall of the Soviet Union belong to different worlds. No matter how many of them intermarry, they are still divided by divergent histories. The other major distinction between Kists and Chechens is their secondary language and passport label. Kists are schooled in Georgian; it is their language of literacy and education. Chechens are schooled in Russian. Some say Kists have more in common with the Ingush, inhabitants of Nazran and formerly Vladikavkaz, known for their mildness in matters of war, as compared to the militant Chechens. They are all collectively called Vainakh.

After two years of residency in Georgia, Umar did not speak a word of Georgian and had no desire to learn it. He spoke some French, and had plans to learn English, a language he regarded as a more useful and therefore more interesting than the provincial Caucasian “dialect” of Georgian, never mind that the language was more closely related to Chechen than any language for which he had respect. He spent large portions of my Chechen lessons with my teacher criticizing Georgia in Russian, referring to its lack of civilization as compared to the West, its barbarian ways, and, most fundamentally, the fact that it was “boring.” He wanted to move to Europe or, even better, to America. His wife wanted to stay.

“My being is bound up with my native land,” Makka said. “If I had to go abroad, I would have to start over, with nothing. I would become a maid, or worse. No one would need me. I could teach nothing. Who wants to learn Chechen in Europe? I’d be dependent on the charity of others. Here, my life has a purpose. I fight for the Chechen people, for our people, Umar. I teach our language. If I had to live abroad, what would become of me? You have no purpose here, and that’s why you want to leave.”

Then Umar spoke of the wonderful jobs he could find if they could only move to Europe. He had friends there, he promised, who would give him a job right away. Makka and I returned to our lesson, but her husband continued speaking of how they were going to move in the next two months. “I’ve made up my mind. I’m not taking this any longer. I won’t live like this anymore, and
neither will you.” He turned to his wife, who smiled and continued to recite words in Chechen: “esa—calf, ett—cow, buhig—baby goat, akhar—goat.”

One day I went on an excursion with my teacher and her husband to Gamarjoba (Victory City), a suburb of Tbilisi. Gamarjoba is also what Georgians say when they greet each other, a reflection of Georgia’s war-stained history, constantly under siege, constantly hoping for victory. Makka and Umar introduced me to an old Khevsur man from the mountains, a Christian Georgian who spoke Chechen. We stayed with friends of the family, a biologist and his wife. After a grueling six-hour supra, during which women were expected only to serve food and listen silently as men proposed the toasts, we women were dismissed to go to bed. The men gathered around the table, and before any of us had a chance to leave the room, Umar stood up and announced that he and his wife would soon be leaving for France.

“I don’t think she wants to leave Georgia,” ventured the host cautiously. The now drunk biologist also happened to be Makka’s godfather.

“What asked her?” Umar shot back.

The men assembled around the table burst out laughing. Umar had successfully asserted his manhood and established himself as master of his household, comprising himself and his wife. He had a point: no one had asked Makka whether she wanted to go or stay. She spoke a lot about her plans and desires, and perhaps an argument could as well be made that she ruled the marriage, but I am not so sure. I am less convinced by claims to female agency after the lesson I received in Tbilisi, as I tried to break free from the confines of my culture.

II.

“In Iran,” a Georgian man once told me with pride, “women wear veils. Whenever I see a woman walking down the streets of Tbilisi with a veil on, I want to rip it off her. Doesn’t she know, I think to myself, that this is a free country we live in and she can dress as she wants? We’re not like the Muslims. Here, a woman can dress seductively. She can even wear makeup if it suits her. Her body is her own, and she is in control of everything.”

Later:

“Do you know what kind of sex Georgian men like the most?”

“No.”

“When the woman is dry. That is the height of sexual ecstasy. The feeling of resistance. The brittleness of her hole.”

“You mean when there’s no lubrication?”

“Yes. When she’s not aroused. That way the man has more control. It’s easier to come when she’s dry inside.”
“But think of all the pain the woman must feel! That’s rape!”
“You could say that.”

The speaker was the same. Giorgi loved to shock me with the “truths” of Georgian culture. He made it his mission to show me the real Georgia and measured every observation I made about life in Georgia along a scale of Georgian typicality. According to him, it was typical in Georgia for young women to wait until marriage to have sex. Also according to him, every married Georgian man should seek with prostitutes the deepest forms of sexual pleasure because wives exist to be respected and honored. Wives are the mothers of your children, and must be worshiped for their purity, not used for screwing. Street corners, alleys, brothels, and prostitutes fulfill that function. The married man who does not cheat is a coward and a creep, viewed with scorn by his peers. Even his wife cannot fully respect him.

Once, in the middle of the night, Giorgi rang the bell to my apartment when I was deep asleep. It was two in the morning. He had just returned from a supra in honor of his friend, a young governor of one of Georgia’s provinces near the Azeri border who had died in a car crash. The dead friend was twenty-five. (After President Saakashvili’s sweep of firings of the older generation, twenty-five-year-old governors are ubiquitous.) The man had crashed his car while driving fast and drunk down the middle of a bumpy Georgian road at night. His car wrapped around a tree and he was killed in an instant.

The bell shocked me out of sleep. It was an aggressive buzz at any time of the day, but at two in the morning, in the pitch dark of deep sleep, it was terrifying. The bell rang again. I overcame my fear and made my way to the door.

“Open the door. It’s me, Giorgi.”

That night I tried to say good-bye. I delivered a speech in an uncertain mixture of Russian and Georgian, in which I explained that I had discovered the hard way that sex was not the way for us to nourish each other’s souls. I did not know why things happened the way they did, but I did know that sex had destroyed what had existed between us. I was tired of the insinuations of sluttness directed to sexually active women such as myself in a country that did not acknowledge the existence of such creatures; tired of the mold into which women were supposed to fit themselves as female consorts, whether wife, girlfriend, or prostitute. No Georgian man would have conflated these categories, of course, but the differences between these roles were becoming blurred in my perception.

Now that I had discovered that the pursuit of sexual pleasure would result in my own destruction, I was eager to set it aside and focus on more important things; if possible, to return to the platonic miracle that had existed between us but a month before. I tried to explain all this to Giorgi that night, to
make him see how low we had fallen. Language was not what prevented us from understanding each other’s words.

The supra that followed the funeral for Giorgi’s dead friend was attended by the up-and-coming members of Georgia’s young generation: politicians, businessmen, hopeful young diplomats. One of the guests was the president of Georgia’s largest mobile phone company and therefore had cash to throw away. When the women left the dinner, he invited all twenty of the men present to pay a visit to the local brothel. He would pick up the tab, he said.

“Let’s screw in honor of Irakli!” he announced. “It’s what he would have wanted us to do. We’ll send our sperm to him in heaven.”

Giorgi was the only one among all twenty of his male friends to turn down this offer. The phone company president offered free sex at the most expensive brothel in town, where the rates charged were far more than the average Georgian man, even the average young professional Georgian man, could afford. Filled with visions of himself as a hero depriving himself for the sake of my American morality, Giorgi determined to spend the night with me instead of a prostitute. Instead of rewarding him for his sexual fidelity, I had the gall on that very same night to break up with him. He described to me how his friends, all of them married, had scorned him when he explained why he could not cheat on me.

I found myself succumbing to the force of his argument. Part of me still yearned to understand the way his world worked, to assimilate to the Georgian code of behavior so utterly foreign to me. Would it kill me, I thought, to give in to him just this once, for the last time, to comfort a man in need? To renounce my American feminist standards? What was feminism, if not a commitment to seeing the world from multiple angles, to appreciating the different customs that characterize gender relations throughout the world? Why can’t I let go, I thought, at least temporarily, of my American prejudices? Who cares whether or not I am a “Western woman”? Of all people, I cared least of all for the trappings of Western values. I had come to Georgia precisely in order not to be in an America that seemed systematically at war with the rest of the world, and I was only too ready to shed the burden of my cultural identity.

Giorgi stopped accusing me. The red glare of his blood-shot eyes softened to dark amber hues. We kissed the way people do when words stand in the way of comprehension. We kissed because there was no other way we could speak to each other; the only language that existed between us was a complex mixture of hate and love expressible only in the movements of the body.

Then he entered me, without protection. For a brief instant, my body froze. I had been subjected to years of sex education from elementary school to ju-
nior high and knew exactly what I was supposed to do. That training told me to stand up, order him to get out and to never return. No matter how perfect the sex might be between us, I knew in advance—I had known for quite a while already—that there was no future for us together. Why then did I hold on to that instant, that moment of his desire, as though it would determine the course of my life, as though the slightest motion of protest from me risked ruining something sacred? In fact, there was nothing sacred to ruin. It was only sex: flesh against flesh, deceptively metamorphosed into a cosmic event, and now, as I remember, I longed for the inconsequentiality of America, where you can protect yourself against the risk of being human, where, with the simple application of latex, you shield yourself from the terror of penetration. I think, and hanker after, the materiality of condoms, which conceal and protect.

Long before that night we had spent many hours arguing over his resistance to condoms. We had even consulted friends and acquaintances on both sides of the gender divide. Still, we failed to see eye to eye. One of Giorgi’s closest friends, a young female teacher of Georgian to the Azeri-speaking population on Georgia’s borderlands, explained it to me like this:

“In Georgia, women love differently than in America. When a man loves and respects you, he doesn’t want to use a condom when you have sex together. Condoms are for prostitutes, to protect from diseases. But when a man loves a woman, he wants to feel intimate when he has sex with her. If you ask Giorgi to use a condom, that’s like asking him not to love you.”

Translated into an Americanese, protected sex is fucking. Sex without protection, with your wife or any other sacred object, is making love. In any conversation that concerned “love” in Georgia, America was always present as the antipode, the representation of everything Georgia was not. My cross-cultural relationship had become a cross-cultural competition, in which American selfishness and greed were contrasted (always unfavorably) with Georgian self-sacrifice and sincerity. I am no lover of my home country, and my infatuation with Georgia had not yet been erased, so I tolerated and in some ways even delighted in this desecration. The prerequisite of my assimilation into the Georgian society of Giorgi and his friends was that I shed, or at the very least curse, my Americanness. In this they were not typically Georgian, or at least not typical of the young generation of Georgians, who generally seek to adapt to Americans rather than have Americans adapt to them. But Giorgi was different, and that was the basis of my attraction: he was a deep lover of his country, deeply read in its literature and history; my acquaintance with him promised to be an education for me, but not in the sense that I expected.

I never fully assimilated. I continued to insist that he use a condom, even if
it meant that he didn’t “love” me. Giorgi told me repeatedly in full confidence that it was impossible for me to get pregnant if we had sex only on an intermittent basis. I do not know why he considered himself an expert on the subject of female fertility, but so he did. Usually, he consented to my insistence on using a condom. Only twice—the first time we had sex and the last time, on that fateful night after the funeral—did we do it the way Georgians “in love” are supposed to.

Georgian women have developed ways of adjusting to the Georgian male’s resistance to using protection; they have their own method of birth control, called “spirals,” which they insert in the vagina before sex. Georgian men know nothing of this, and therefore Giorgi was not in a position to inform me. Nor did his female friend consider it her duty to help me obtain an alternative method of birth control when Giorgi refused to use a condom. In her view it would be a miracle if I got pregnant. I should be more worried, she said, about making sure Giorgi loved me than about what would happen if I had a baby by him.

“What would you do if I got pregnant?”
“You won’t get pregnant.”
“Just tell me, what would you do if I got pregnant and had an abortion?”
“You won’t get pregnant, so you don’t need to worry about it.”

III.

One month after that fateful night when Giorgi chose me over a prostitute, I purchased a pregnancy test for fifty cents from the local drugstore. My period was late. I was not worried. I had tested myself the day after our unprotected sex and the results were negative. Only later did I learn that my sex education had instilled me with a false sense of confidence. Conception does not occur immediately after the exchange of fluids, which means that pregnancy tests are effective only ten days after intercourse.

I opened the package and waited for my urine to determine my fate. Nothing happened; my bladder was either empty or paralyzed with fear. The stick remained dry. Perhaps my internal organs were playing tricks on me, trying to keep the awful truth suppressed. I drank a full gallon of water and returned to the toilet, waiting for the gods to tell me whether I was to become a murderer. Finally, the urine arrived in a torrent. Two lines, parallel to each other.

I was pregnant.

“I’m sorry you had to suffer so much because of me,” was his first reaction. “Of course, you’re not pregnant, but the very fact that you’re so scared is bad enough.”
He performed the urine-based pregnancy test on his own urine, expecting that the result would be positive and he could use that to show me that the test was unreliable. The test turned up negative.

Our next step was to visit a clinic. The doctor had an Abkhaz last name (the Abkhaz are an indigenous Caucasian population, with whom the Georgians have been engaged in a conflict over territory ever since the breakup of the Soviet Union), and when the results came in positive, Giorgi declared the test invalid because the doctor was not ethnically Georgian. But no one was listening to his raving, not even he himself.

At my request Giorgi asked at the clinic whether they performed abortions. We learned that there are two kinds of abortions in Georgia: “mini” and “didi” (big). Mini-abortions can be performed up to the sixth week of pregnancy. I was in my fourth week, so still eligible for a mini. Mini-abortions are dirt cheap, at the Soviet rate of fifteen dollars a pop. After we received this information the woman behind the glass counter returned to her glossy magazine chronicling the lives of Georgian pop stars and politicians. We searched for someone else to answer our questions in more detail. We found an old lady in a smock, who looked as if she was in charge of sweeping the hall but who called herself a nurse. I asked her if a mini-abortion was dangerous.

“Of course it is, my dearie.” Her smile revealed a row of crooked, yellow teeth.

“Does it hurt?”

“What do you expect?” she asked, still smiling her crooked smile. “It’s not like eating dessert.”

Giorgi asked to see the abortionist. She pointed to a room at the end of the hall. We knocked on the door. No answer, so we opened it. A man was seated behind his desk in a smoke-filled room, watching a miniature black-and-white TV in the corner. When we entered he lazily removed the cigar from his mouth and snubbed the fiery tip out on his desk.


“Yes.” His grin was full of blissful oblivion.

“Let’s get out of here,” Giorgi whispered in my ear.

When we got outside Giorgi told me that the man behind the desk smelled of marijuana.

Giorgi and I spent the rest of the morning together, after which he went to work. He left me that morning suffused with complex, unbelieving joy at the prospect of being a father. So long as I pretended to be happy, I told myself, everything would be fine.

He returned to my apartment after work in a different mood. Now it was I who was to blame for getting pregnant. I was being stubborn and foolish.
had no right to take only myself into account in my decision. What about the baby, weak and powerless? I was going to use my maternal hegemony to end his life. As before, on the night of his two-in-the-morning appearance at my door, I listened to Giorgi. A baby, a heart, was beating inside me. What right did I have to deprive it (him? her?—pronouns fail me) of life?

“I can read the decision on your face,” he interrupted himself. “There is nothing I can do to keep you from killing my child.”

We tried to talk about other things. But the conversation kept returning to the same subject: the baby I was about to kill.

“Does he feel pain?”
“He feels the same pain that I feel.”
“Can he hear you speak now?”
“I don’t know.”
“Does he know you are going to kill him?”
“Why are you asking me these questions?”

That would silence him for a few minutes, and we pretended that everything was fine until, five minutes later, our words erupted in another outburst of emotion. This went on for several hours, the attempt to keep death at bay, to pretend everything was all right. But there was a third being between us, which rendered oblivion impossible.

Instead of talking about the baby, Giorgi launched into an attack on the way I dressed. He was ashamed to be seen alongside me, he said, because the tips of my shoes were scruffy. I didn’t notice what people said behind my back and as we passed them on the street. I paid no heed to their suspicious glares, but he did, and he wanted me to change my ways. Why didn’t I buy new shoes? he wanted to know. After all, I had the money.

I pointed out that it was a strange kind of love that felt ashamed of the beloved in the presence of the judging gaze. When I love someone, I said, I want to defend him. I sympathize with his exclusion and against the judgment passed on him. But Giorgi was of another mindset. If a Georgian didn’t like the way I dressed, I was at fault—not me in the abstract but, absurdly enough, the American in me. In all my eccentricities, it was my nationality that was at fault, not my person. For Giorgi it was my nationality, and not my person, that defined me, just as it was his nationality, and not his person, that defined him. Giorgi’s traditionalism concealed a strange kind of relativism: because I was less a person than a representative of a nationality, it was perfectly reasonable to expect me to adapt to all customs and values, all of which were determined culturally. Including feminism. Including the belief that it is a moral and personal necessity to stand up for oneself. Including the American woman’s desire to protect one’s body from foreign intrusion. Including
the wish to prevent unexpected life from being brought into the world. Yes, it is stupid, he agreed, when people judge one another on the basis of what they wear, but the simplest way to deal with this problem is to conform. It was my duty to conform.

“Here in Georgia, we aren’t like you Americans. We care about what people think. We respect the opinions of our neighbors.”

As we screamed at each other about my scruffy shoes we had something else uppermost in our minds: the barely cognizant life nourished by the beating of my heart, a life that was a part of my body and yet independent of it. I tried to numb myself to the sense of being alive. I refused to eat or lie on my stomach because every movement inside my belly reminded me of the baby. And yet, even as I tried to forget, my hand kept wandering to that place on my stomach which had now become the locus of new being.

Giorgi finally stood up from the bed and ran to the window to smash it. He soon thought better of gratuitous destruction, and vented his rage in words. I was a prostitute, a pig, a “depraved” (bindzuri) woman. More remarkable than the content of his speech, however, was the context in which he delivered it. It was the middle of the night, everyone was asleep, and yet he screamed at the top of his lungs. From a man who valued so highly the opinions of my neighbors concerning my sartorial habits, his eagerness to stain my reputation was the most painful part of all. The intended audience for his diatribe was less me than the entire Georgian population of the building in which I lived.

I didn’t care about my reputation within Georgian society. I had no fear of the judging gazes of my neighbors when they greeted me the next day. What I remember instead is the feeling of watching someone you love, the man who gave you a child, who entered your body unprotected, hate you so much that he would give anything to cover you in shame. He did not forget to take back all the books he had given me, and to rip to pieces my notes tucked between the pages, before leaving, as he said with a dramatic flourish, forever.

IV.

If I had to characterize in broad strokes the central imperative of the culture in which Giorgi and I defined ourselves in relation to each other, I would put it like this: women must submit to the fate men dole out to them. There is no right to appeal, and there are no grounds for objection, particularly if this fate is doled out by the men who have a special claim on one’s life: by husbands, fathers, and sons. Yes, Giorgi himself would readily have admitted, it was unfortunate that I was impregnated without wanting to be, unfortunate that he didn’t realize until it was too late that he should have used protection, but
nevertheless, what’s done is done. There was no way out for me. There could be no thought of abortion. It was my duty to pay the price for his mistakes. That was how God had created me, a woman, destined to bear the burden of man’s sins.

Of course men also bow to fate in Georgian culture. The difference is that “fate”—bedistsereba, the word that means everything is written down before it happens—is more circumscribed for men than for women in Georgia. Bedistsereba allows men to have sex with whomever they please. Bedistsereba allows men to abandon any relationship when they grow tired of it. They do not have to answer for ending a relationship that has become a form of torture, as I did when I decided to end my sexual involvement with Giorgi. Bedistsereba for a Georgian man has more to do with a scarcity of jobs and miniscule salaries than with family obligations. In all my encounters with Georgians I never encountered anyone who said that women had the right to live their lives as they saw fit, at least not until I looked beyond the Christian milieu.

Nor did it seem to make a difference in terms of her freedom and autonomy if a woman was Muslim or Christian Georgian—Giorgi’s contempt for Iranian violations of women’s rights, and for what he called the “obscenity” of the veil, notwithstanding. Though my most intense exposure to women’s daily lives took place in Georgian rather than Chechen milieus, I was confronted time and again by numerous parallels between these two neighboring cultures. Giorgi’s frequent comments on the widespread reliance on prostitutes among married Georgian men sparked my curiosity, and I began conducting inquiries at local NGOs committed to looking after Georgia’s many prostitutes. I accompanied local aid workers as they swept through the city in the middle of the night, dispensing condoms and clean needles, and shared with me their horror stories concerning women whose bodies had been co-opted by male needs. These stories included murder, rape, and incest. They included women of all cultural backgrounds and from all religions. The prostitutes of Tbilisi arrived in the country’s capital, I learned, from all over the country, from Muslim regions, from the Turkic districts of Marneuli to the north, and from Europeanized regions to west, as far away as Kutaisi. The factors leading women into lives of prostitution were economic, not religious or ideological.

With Giorgi gone, I had to find someone to perform the abortion on my own. The first doctor refused on religious grounds. Whereas abortions used to be one of the most common methods of birth control during the Soviet period, the upsurge in religious feeling has transformed attitudes toward abortion, particularly among the generation that has reached adulthood in post-Soviet Georgia. Many of the young Christian men and women who deemed abortion equivalent to murder told me that their mothers and other older
women in their lives had had many abortions. Giorgi’s mother, for example, told him that their neighbor had had thirteen abortions. Her husband was a doctor, and he had performed them on his wife whenever she got pregnant. Abortion was their method of birth control. Until his mother spoke to him about this, Giorgi, not privy to the secret, segregated lives of women, had no idea that abortion was commonplace during the Soviet period. It is not only the American outsider who is ignorant of the day-to-day lives of Georgian women.

I finally found a doctor willing to perform the abortion, an obstetrician who did abortions on the side. When I arrived at the hospital, accompanied by two friends, one Georgian and the other American, I was directed to the abortion ward. On the bed next to me lay a girl who had just undergone her abortion. Her head was burrowed into her pillow. Tears streamed down her face. A man in army uniform sat next to her, lamely trying to comfort her by listlessly rubbing his hand over her back, her convulsed breaths choking the passage of air.

Neither of them spoke, so it was hard to tell whether they were Russian or Georgian. Probably Russian, I thought, observing the girl’s light blonde hair as it cascaded down her back. As I admired her beauty, the softness of her skin, her wide, confused eyes, and the fullness of her blood red lips, suddenly I felt sorry for all beautiful women, condemned to the caresses of men who care only for extracting through sex a massage to their egos and who leave when something bad happens. The irony is that so few people know how much women suffer when they become prized possessions, ciphers of victory, and that so many women aspire to the state of being objectified.

Better to be ugly, I thought. Better to have your dignity, your self-respect, and even your loneliness, than to be harassed by men who screw you and then leave when you need them. She was just a girl, and she cried with all her heart. Probably she did not want the abortion; maybe she wanted to keep the kid. But the soldier, passing through Georgia on his way to bigger and better places, had in all likelihood refused to help her with raising the child, and she probably decided it was better that her baby die than to try to raise a child under such conditions.

My turn came. I wanted my friend to come with me into the operating room, but the doctor refused to allow it. So I entered the operating room alone and was strapped to the operating chair. I had agreed to pay extra for the “deluxe” anesthetic. I didn’t want to feel anything while the abortion was going on. They began to inject me with the magic potion that was to transport me into oblivion. My thin veins inevitably presented a problem for nurses. They couldn’t find an anchor for the needle. I pumped my fist, squeezing and loos-
ening the palm of my hand like a mad woman. I began to panic. The last thing I remember is the phrase that will never leave me for the rest of my life. When I began to get nervous that the nurse would not be able to inject me with the anesthetic, the fear showed on my face. She looked at me, and said, in her nonchalant way: Kai gogo xar. You are a good girl.

I heard these words on the street every day, whenever anyone asked who I was. They belong to that stock of Georgian phrases generically applied to young foreign females, for “guests” to the country of Georgia are always treated with respect in public contexts. I had heard myself called a good girl so often that I cringed every time someone attempted this compliment. I had never expected to hear these words on the operating table of an abortion chamber, for I never met a single Georgian who would have defined abortion as anything other than murder. According to any rule of logic, kai gogo (good girl) and “murderess” ought to be mutually exclusive. When the term was applied to me on the streets of Tbilisi, as it is to any foreigner who speaks Georgian well, or any local who smiles innocently, I paid no attention. It is the simplest way in Georgian to express affection for a passing acquaintance. But it sounded different in an abortion chamber. What was the nurse trying to say to me? Maybe nothing. Maybe she used the phrase mechanically to calm me down. Maybe she used it with every woman who found herself knocked up with a baby that she couldn’t raise. Or maybe—and my heart clings to this belief—she was granting me forgiveness.

Giorgi and his friends would be happy to tell me from whom I should to beg forgiveness: the baby I killed, and the man whose life I ruined forever by killing his baby.

I have always been against abortion in an abstract sense, while politically supporting it as an option for others. But abortion never seemed like something that concerned me directly, because I never thought it would happen to me. I thought it only happened to women who had received no sex education, who did not know what they were doing with their lives or why men were penetrating them.

There will always be a voice inside saying to me that I killed my baby, or at least that I killed something inside myself, something alive with a life of its own. Nothing can make up for the loss of a human life, and for me to deny that what was inside me was human would be the same thing as to kill it for a second time.

So I do not seek absolution. I do seek, however, to draw attention to the way in which this “crime” was removed from the sphere of human experience by my Georgian interlocutors and incorporated into dogmas and pieties derived from the strange convergence of nationalism with religion that characterizes
much of contemporary Georgia’s public morality. Giorgi and all his friends declared to me that abortion of any kind is murder, and that no distinction can be made in terms of time from conception. One day, three months, the third trimester—all were the same from this perspective.

But such morality is not based in human experience, which of its own accord suggests that a third trimester abortion is phenomenologically distinct from a “one-day” abortion. If such a thing as a one-day abortion exists it is the morning after pill, whereby a woman takes miscarriage-inducing medicine up to three days after having sex. Interestingly, I took this medicine the only other time I had unprotected sex with Giorgi. I told him about what I had done immediately after, as a kind of warning, and as plea that he rethink his desire for sex without a condom, that he be more careful in his sexual relations with me. But he was unconcerned by the possibility that something wrong had transpired with that potential shortening of one-day-old life.

When I came back to consciousness, all I saw was a basin filled with blood. I remember nothing of the abortion per se; the anesthetic sent me into a deep sleep for about ten minutes (so my American friend who accompanied me told me later). Finally I was able to stand. Dizzy, I made my way to the waiting chamber and lay down on a bed. The blonde girl was still lying in the bed next to mine. Her face was swollen with tears, but she was not crying anymore. The soldier had left her, and she lay all alone. I wondered if she would ever leave. It would have been so easy for the soldier to stay. Clearly he did not care about the baby, and she needed him so much.

I took a taxi home. My friend sat in the back seat, while I sat in front, since I spoke the better Georgian. The driver was eager to talk, and I was eager to try out my Georgian with anyone willing to listen. He asked me about my life in America, whether I was married (the first question any Georgian, man or woman, asks a female of my age), and whether I had kids.

“You will have kids some day,” he promised me just before he dropped me off outside my apartment building. “And you will be a good mother.”

I had to laugh.

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When you bring someone into the world, I have always believed, you take responsibility for their fate. No one ever asked to be born, and the burden of making life worthwhile is on the creator, not on the creature brought into space and time in an act over which it has no control. The best way for me to deal with this terrifying responsibility, I reasoned, was never to assume it, never to create for myself the burden of answering for what I was not pre-
pared to answer for. It is not within my power to make life worthwhile for another human being. My conscience would never allow me to take upon myself the task of doing for others what I cannot do for myself.

But what my conscience would never allow me to do, my body performed with ease. For ultimately I cannot shirk the fact that I allowed weakness to trump over common sense, over any duty to resist patriarchy, or even, less glamorously, over any human’s right to their own autonomy. The most tragic thing of all is not what happened to me, not the suffering I endured, but the life that existed for one brief month inside my belly and that is now no longer on this earth. This happened because my assimilation to Georgian culture required me to accede to the mandate that women submit their bodies (not to mention their souls) to male exigencies, especially if they claim to love the body hardened with desire for them or, indeed, for anything at all. I doubt I would have acceded to this mandate had I remained closer to home; it required a foreign country, and a culture different from yet similar enough to my own, to make things happen as they did.

It was my job to love this creature I killed, because no one, not even Giorgi, loved it as much as I did. No one could understand the meaning behind the loss of this life as I did, as mother and executioner. If writing enables the transcendence of grief, or even its displacement, then stories could fill the holes life inflicts on our bodies. But language revolves around the ego of its utterance and does not accept the voices suppressed within. What is gone cannot speak for anyone, not even for itself. She who undertakes to narrate the cessation of a being that dwelt within her, that was both her and not her, must confront the silence attending everything that once lived, and must learn to deal with language in the context of its absences.

NOTES

1. For an eloquent exposition of the dependency of public spheres on gendered private spheres, see Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in Habermas and the Public Sphere, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 109–42.