

A GIFT FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

On the frosty January morning I first walked into Tsmindasqali settlement in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia, Temo Javakhishvili was drunk and agitated. He had just moved into the new “cottage” given to him by the Georgian government, a small cinder-block bungalow built on a damp piece of swampland, furnished with twin beds, a table made of two-by-fours and a sheet of plywood, four small stools, and a television blaring away on top of a cardboard box used for a stand. He paced back and forth on the bare pine floorboards, muttering and sometimes yelling. His eldest son Zura and I tried to comfort him, but he grew more and more upset. Shouting in a slurred voice, he removed his thick glasses over and over to compulsively wipe the lenses. “Nothing! They gave us nothing!”

Temo’s distress was understandable. A victim of ethnic cleansing, Temo was one of twenty-eight thousand people violently ejected from their villages in the breakaway province of South Ossetia during the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008. His house had been bombed by Russian aircraft, looted by Ossetian irregulars, and finally burned to ensure that he could never return. His younger son was killed during the bombing of Gori, and a photograph of his two sons, the eldest cradling the dead body of the youngest in front of a building in flames, had become the defining image of the war.

Temo’s losses were enormous, the grief and emptiness in his life only temporarily filled by becoming blind drunk, which he did often. Yet on that first day, it was not the destruction of his family or the loss of his home that seemed to bother him most. It was the food aid package that had been delivered to him in his new cottage. “It’s New Year’s! The most important day of the year, the day when we hold our biggest *supra* [ritual banquet]. But they just gave us some macaroni. That’s it! Macaroni, and beyond that, nothing!”

As an anthropologist, I had come to Tsmindatsqali to spend a year learning about humanitarian aid and, more importantly, about how people survived inside refugee camps and settlements. I arrived five months after the war, on the first day the “internally displaced people” (IDPs) moved from the schools and libraries where they had been camping out into the thirty-six new settlements built by the Georgian government and financed by the United Nations’ High Commission for Refugees and other international

donors. Most of the settlements were exactly the same: hundreds of identical small white cottages lined up along gravel roads. They were heralded as a base from which the IDPs from South Ossetia could reintegrate into Georgian society and rebuild their lives, but on that freezing gray morning, they offered a bleak prospect. There were no trees, no schools, no churches, no restaurants or parks where people could gather, and no shops to buy anything. What people got to eat was what the World Food Program distributed: 1.5 kilograms of macaroni in a food package, along with other staples like beans, salt, and cooking oil, delivered every two weeks.

It was enough for every person to have macaroni every day. Yet in over a year in Tsmindatsqali—although I saw macaroni piled up under beds, stacked in boxes, and sold in black markets—I almost never saw anybody *eating* it. Given that IDPs had lost nearly everything, why wouldn't they eat free macaroni? How is it that instead of being *something*, a gift from benevolent donors, macaroni came to symbolize *nothing*, the wrenching absence of all that had been lost in the war?

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Problems with pasta came to represent a much more serious issue, one that affects over thirty-five million displaced people in the world: the fact that humanitarian aid, meant to help people rebuild their lives, instead often keeps them in limbo in camps and settlements for decades, dependent on donor handouts for their survival. In Georgia, there was no shortage of aid. In the wake of the war, over \$3.7 billion in foreign aid poured into Georgia. Under the auspices of the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), more than ninety-six NGOs began hastily providing relief to the displaced: cottages or apartments, furniture, food, water heaters, and more. Yet despite this outpouring of aid, nearly every person I interviewed in the IDP settlements echoed Temo's words: "The government is not helping us; they do nothing for us. We are getting nothing from the NGOs, just little things that don't help much. We're not asking for handouts here. We want to work. Give me some land to work; give me a cow! But what do I have here? Nothing! We are alone, we are abandoned, nobody will help us, and we have nothing."

Having nothing in the IDP camp was different from regular poverty. It was the nostalgia for things once possessed and now lost, things whose presence lingered on, even though they were long gone. One day, sitting in the tiny kitchen of her cottage, Tamuna Gelashvili, a dark-haired young woman with dramatic make-up, started to make coffee for me. Unthinkingly, she

reached into a cabinet, and her hand closed on nothing. “*Vai me!*” she said, obviously startled. “I was reaching for the green coffeepot. But of course it’s gone now.” Tamuna described the green pot and the cheerful polka-dotted porcelain cups that went with it in loving detail. She was not the only person longing for the small details of her old life: once I began staying overnight at Tamuna’s cottage, I spent hours listening to her and her neighbors in the settlement describing their former homes, as much to each other as to me. Over long nights with nothing to do but talk, the exact number of peach trees in the orchard and the names of the cattle, the brands of the television and the refrigerator, and the number of books on the shelves all fused together into a collective ethnography of a lost world.

If the problem of nothing was the fact that the IDPs used to have things and now they didn’t, it would follow that getting new things—including food—would mean that they no longer had nothing. But as humanitarian agencies rushed to give new things, all the aid that was given seemed only to point out how much had been lost. The settlements were full of houses, but the grids of white, identical cottages seemed stark and bare. For Tamuna’s neighbor, Sopo Tsuladze, the plastic wash-buckets given out by World Vision were a constant reminder of her washing machine, now looted by the Ossetians. The shapeless, secondhand orange dress she had been given by the Red Cross made her think of her own clothes, destroyed in the closet where they hung. The cottage’s backless stools called up images of her ornately carved dining chairs gone up in smoke as houses burned. The things given out by the humanitarians were *nothing*, markers that constantly pointed out what wasn’t there, and therefore made it impossible for Sopo to feel she had anything, regardless of how much was given out.

Macaroni soon became the quintessential form of nothing. As part of humanitarian food packages offered by the World Food Program, the macaroni was not intended to provide essential nutrients but to ensure that each IDP received 2,240 calories per day, thought to be the minimum for sustaining life. But in the context of Georgian cuisine, which is full of spices, walnuts, pomegranates, fresh vegetables, and meats, macaroni is hardly food at all. It is not a staple starch, as bread or corn is, and it isn’t served in the beautiful and complex dishes that typify Georgian cuisine. It’s usually just boiled or fried, served in soup or sprinkled with sugar. Macaroni is just *calories*, something that only the poorest of the poor eat. “Look, it’s UN help, it’s to keep you alive,” said Tamuna’s mother, Manana Gelashvili. “But there’s no

comfort in it.” As food that would have been humiliating to serve to guests, much less at a ritual *supra* banquet, the fact that families often had only macaroni made it difficult for them to invite friends and relatives to meals and to restore the ties of kinship and neighborliness blown apart along with the villages. Humanitarian macaroni existed, materially—it supported the essential functions of physical life—but it actively destroyed what was left of village society.

Everything about the donated macaroni made it symbolize the nothingness of displacement. In the first place, it was food that came from nowhere. As Mariam Sabashvili, a teacher from Disevi village, explained to me, food usually came with a tie to a distinct landscape. Like the French, Georgians have a concept of *terroir*. The specific environment where a food is grown—the slope of the land, the amount of rainfall, the way the sunshine falls on a particular segment of mountain or gorge, and particularly the unique taste of the water—all endow foods with unique tastes. Mariam and her neighbors extolled the virtues of their home villages: water that was particularly sweet, or even, according to legend, miraculously healing; soil that gave grapes a pleasant mineral taste. As we sat poking through noodles in thin broth, Mariam even told me about the food from particular fields in Disevi, her home village: the apples from her orchard tasted different than those from Sopo’s; Dito’s *tkemali* (sour plum) trees gave fruit with an aroma distinct from her own, which were in a garden further down the mountain. Macaroni was the absolute antithesis of this deeply place-linked food. It came with only the barest of labels: “Made in Turkey,” “World Food Program,” or sometimes “A Gift from the American People.” The labels were written in Latin letters, which most people could not read, and in English, which nobody spoke. Arriving in big, plastic bags in unmarked trucks, the macaroni seemed as if it came from nowhere at all. It was displaced food for displaced people.

Macaroni was also deeply anonymous. In the first place, it was food that came from nobody. While much of the feeding program had been financially supported by USAID, neither Temo nor Manana nor Mariam had any idea who that was, nor what the World Food Program was. When I asked Manana who was giving out the food, she would shrug and say, “*mtavroba*,” the government; or “*gaero*,” the United Nations; or sometimes just “*Jandaba, ra vitsi*,” “How the hell should I know?” It arrived as if from another planet, food made by nobody and given out by nobody, food that arrived without the context of hospitality and that could never be repaid in kind.

That August, when the fruit and vegetables planted in the meager plots around the cottages began to ripen, Manana Gelashvili had me borrow a friend's Niva, a small Russian jeep, so that she could make some real food. "Come and help me get my jars," she said. "Let's make jam." We bounced over potholed roads through the countryside, until we ended up at the village of Mereti, right on the South Ossetian border. The trip, which was only thirty kilometers, took over two hours. At the first checkpoint on the Georgian side of the border, we had to explain to armed guards what we were doing. With an automatic rifle at the ready, a guard in a camouflage uniform would carefully scrutinize my passport, as well as the car, which had diplomatic license plates. "Why are you going to Mereti? What are you doing here?" Less than a kilometer from the border, in full view of Russian tanks and snipers, Mereti was hardly the place for an idle drive. "Go to the post in Koshki. Talk to the commander," he told us, waving his weapon in the direction of a village on the boundary with South Ossetia.

We drove along the rutted road, littered with the remnants of pavement and full of potholes. At the end of a two-track lane, we saw a small bunker with corrugated metal roofing, piled with sandbags meant to stop bullets. Inside the enclosure, men in camouflage uniforms were lolling around. On a makeshift wooden table, there were metal bowls full of food; the ground was littered with cigarette butts. A tanned man who was a solid slab of muscle came out and squinted at me. "Really, *why are you here?*" he demanded, looking skeptical as Manana and I described our plan to make jam. As he realized that we were not spies, but merely foolish enough to be making preserves in a conflict zone, he threw his head back, laughed, and offered us coffee.

When we finally made it to Mereti, Manana and I had lunch with her cousins in a pleasant garden under a grape arbor. Manana pointed to the round, green hills nearby, past the Russian checkpoints at the border. "See up there?" she said, pointing to a church standing alone on the hill. "That's our village, Disevi," she said. "They destroyed everything but not the church," she said, explaining that the soldiers feared divine retribution. "They didn't even steal the icons," she said, walking away and leaving me to wonder how she knew anything about the village after the war. After lunch, Manana disappeared down into the cellar of her cousin's house, reappearing later with a huge bag of empty jars on her back. "Where on earth did you get those?" I asked her. "From my house!" she crowed, proud that she'd been able to rescue them from the wreckage and laughing at my bafflement.

In fact, Manana's husband, Zviadi, had risked his life to cross the border under the noses of the Russian FSB (formerly the KGB) and dig through the rubble of the house. Zviadi knew the hazards of coming back so soon. While open combat had ceased, unexploded ordnance was everywhere. Roaming bands of Ossetian forces were still out looting. Russian soldiers, who had not been paid or fed in weeks, were scavenging for food and *ch'a ch'a*, highest Georgian grappa, in the abandoned villages. A woman who had tried to sneak across the border on foot through the fields to harvest food from her fields had been caught by soldiers, forced to drop the food in the mud, and pistol-whipped. Others who tried to cross the border on foot had been imprisoned or shot. Zviadi's return seemed an enormous risk, given how little was left of the house. "The money we had in the house, our gold jewelry, everything was gone," said Manana. The looters had not only stolen electronics and furniture but had even torn out pipes, wiring, and the metal roof to sell as scrap before setting the house on fire. "Zviadi cried for two days over how everything had been ruined. He got raging drunk the first night. But he picked through what was left, got into the cellar, and got my jars out. He brought them here to Mereti and then left them, because we couldn't take them to Tbilisi."

Those unassuming glass jars were the key to the family's survival. Since the demise of the USSR in 1991, Manana's family, like most Georgians, had come to depend on homegrown foods. As the Soviet economy collapsed, Georgia's fruit and vegetable canneries, which had once produced food for the entire Eastern Bloc, shut down. Few people could buy industrially canned foods regularly, since everything had to be imported. Instead, women grew fruits and vegetables and canned hundreds of jars a year. Poached pears, *adjapsandali* (a Georgian version of ratatouille), stuffed peppers, tomatoes, *tkemali* plum sauce, and every imaginable flavor of jam were all preserved as each fruit or vegetable was harvested. For the Gelashvilis, these jars of food became even more essential once the 2006 Russian trade embargo cut off their source of cash income, which had come from selling apples to Russia. Cut off from the regional economy and left almost completely without money, they either had to preserve what they grew or starve during the long winters in the Caucasus.

Home-canned foods were more than an economic necessity, though. Jars of food also circulated among the Gelashvilis' large extended family, their friends, and their neighbors. After enjoying the meals Manana prepared,

guests almost always left with big bags of fruit, plastic soda bottles full of milk, or jars of *tkemali* and jam. Food flowed not only within the Georgian community but also between Georgians and Ossetians, who had intermarried for generations: Manana herself was Ossetian, and the food she and Zviadi grew was often traded with her sisters in nearby villages, who sent back whatever they made to vary what both families ate. The path traced by the circulating jars defined the social network that gave each person a place and identity. When the war came, the loss of the food Manana had already canned was one of the bitterest losses for her. It symbolized not only the loss of her home and the hours of hot, sweaty labor in the field and in the kitchen gone to waste, but also the ruptured connection with her Ossetian family, now behind the border.

The loss of the empty jars posed its own danger after the war. With new jars costing one to three *lari* each, Manana's family, who was living on the meager government subsidy to IDPs (about 125 *lari*, roughly \$80, for a family of five), couldn't afford to buy the hundreds of jars they would need to can for the next year. Getting the jars back meant the difference between having enough fruits and vegetables to last the next winter and trying to eke by on little more than macaroni and beans.

Manana's overwhelming desire to get her jars back highlighted another problem caused by macaroni and the other donated food. It wasn't just that macaroni showed that the IDPs had nothing; it also exacerbated the problem of *doing* nothing. In the Georgian villages in South Ossetia, most people had been very busy. Farming is hard physical work, and even people who had jobs outside of farming, like Mariam Sabashvili, the teacher, also worked on their family's farm evenings and weekends. At Mariam's, there were fields to tend, and most of the work beyond plowing, such as weeding, spraying, and harvesting, had to be done by hand. Her orchards required pruning, and her bees had to have their hives tended. The care of the cows, which is considered women's work, fell entirely to Mariam, who had only sons, and so she took them to pasture and milked them twice a day before gathering eggs and feeding her chickens. Once the food was grown, it had to be processed. Mariam sliced and dried apples; made strawberries into jam; filled five-liter bottles with cherry compote; and slaughtered, plucked, and roasted chickens. Once she had made meals—from scratch, three times a day—she carried the food scraps out to the pigs and the dog. Except in the dead of winter, Mariam's family, like all of the Georgian villagers, worked long days.

In the IDP settlements, though, inactivity and boredom were constant problems. Living, as they were, on donated food and never-ending macaroni, the work of growing and cooking food had been dramatically reduced. In the first winter of displacement, Mariam's sons had no need to tend the small garden plots the IDPs had been allocated, and she had no food to preserve or store. Even the work of making meals was truncated: there was no meat to butcher or cook, since it was unaffordable; no cakes to bake, since nobody donated ovens, and everything had to be cooked on a gas burner; and in Tsmindatsqali, where factory bread was delivered as part of the food package, no need to bake bread. In the absence of chores, the IDPs spent hour after hour doing nothing at all. People watched endless hours of television on the sets donated to them by the Georgian government. Men played cards listlessly in tents set up by UNHCR for food distribution, or they stood on the corner in *birzhas* ("exchanges") and talked aimlessly. Some men drank heavily. Many people slept most of the day away, not because they were tired but as a means of alleviating boredom. There were few *supras* or communal meals, which once had taken days to make.

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The donated macaroni was easy to cook, fast to eat if somebody felt like eating it for the hundredth time, and every bit as bland as the days in the settlement. It thus came to represent doing nothing as well as having nothing and being nobody. When people from surrounding villages began coming into the settlements a few months after the IDPs arrived, offering to trade their homegrown produce for the other staples in the World Food Program packages, people rushed to make the trade. In the mornings just after dawn, as I lay on my bed in the Gelashvilis' cottage, the still air of the settlements would be broken by the crunch of tires on the gravel roads and a voice calling "Rze! Rze! Rze vqidi" ("Milk! I'm selling milk!") or "Kartopili! Kartopili!" ("Potatoes! Potatoes!"). Manana and Mariam and Sopo would spill out of their cottages, holding bags of macaroni to trade for whatever was in the trunk of the car passing through. The ratio was decidedly not in their favor, since a kilo of macaroni never bought a kilo of carrots or apples, but they seemed not to care. Anything was better than more macaroni.

That summer, I met a veterinarian displaced from the Greater Liakhvi Gorge who discovered how to transform the loathed macaroni into something to do. In February, each IDP had received a "winterization payment" of one hundred *lari* for each member of the family. It was meant to buy winter coats and boots, which the IDPs had obviously left without when they'd been

displaced the previous August. But Aleko Mentashvili, his wife, and three children did not buy coats, instead making do with layers of donated sweaters and often just staying cold. With the money, Aleko bought chickens and a piglet and began raising them in makeshift pens in the small yard around his cottage in Skra, a settlement not far from Tsmindatsqali. Of course, there was no way that he could afford commercial animal feed. Instead, he fed the livestock table scraps and macaroni, emptying the bags of pasta that had piled up under beds by throwing it to the animals. While raising livestock was difficult and smelly, given that the animals had to live so close to the houses, it gave Aleko a vestige of his old livelihood back and, for a few brief moments, something to do.

Soon he was selling eggs and piglets in the local market, and with the money he gained, he bought a roan heifer. With the milk from the cow, his wife made salty white cheese. The cheese and eggs gave Aleko's children enough protein and calories to subsist on a diet otherwise mostly of bread and beans, and once the cow gave birth, selling the male calf brought in cash for their clothes and school books. As Aleko's animals recycled the bland gifts from the American people into the more appetizing forms of eggs, meat, and money, other livestock enclosures soon dotted the landscape in Skra. Even people who could not cobble together pens from cardboard or scrap wood found ways to raise animals: in front of Aleko's neighbor's house, I once found a chicken on a leash, tethered by a bit of twine wrapped around one leg.

If macaroni symbolized nothingness and the bitterness of loss, and if it could not replace the jars of food and the ties to the places and people they represented, there was one kind of food that could. One afternoon, I was perched on a twin bed shoved against the wall in lieu of a sofa, eating off the wobbly table that Aleko's family had been given as humanitarian aid. As we drank *ch'a ch'a* that burned all the way down, we ate terrible bread made by Aleko's wife from flour given out by the World Food Program. There was something wrong with the flour, and the bread would not rise, so everyone in the settlement was stuck eating bread that sat in the stomach like a lump of concrete. "It's not fit for animals," Aleko complained as we got progressively more drunk, his normally pink face turning flaming red. But then, with a flash of an idea, he rose unsteadily and wobbled into the kitchen. Returning with a small jar and a spoon, he said, "Taste this!" It was honey, sweet May honey fragrant with plum blossoms and fresh-cut grass. He spooned the

dregs of the jar onto a plate, and we all dove in. “Where’d you get that?” I asked, knowing that honey was twenty-five *lari* a kilo, far out of Aleko’s budget. “It’s *mine!* It’s from my bees!” he said.

I was confused, since Aleko’s house was in the village of Tamarasheni, which had been utterly destroyed. Aleko had been famous all over the Patara Liakhvi gorge as the “Bee Guy,” the man who had more hives and made more honey than anybody else in the region. In Tamarasheni, he had a full kit for managing almost a hundred bee boxes: a hat with a sweeping veil to protect his face and a smoker he had made out of an old coffee can, which he used to force the bees to leave the hive. He knew the bees so well that sometimes he could reach into the hive and remove the frames of hexagonal honeycomb without being stung. He would take the frames to an old Soviet washing machine, little more than an agitator in a barrel, that he had rigged as a centrifuge. There, he would spin the honey out of the comb and into jars, which he presented with pride to his friends and relatives. Aleko’s honey was, in large measure, the crystallized form of his identity, the product that defined him in local society even more than his status as a veterinarian.

46 When Aleko was displaced and the bees were lost, his relatives from villages inside Georgia proper made the kindest gesture they could think of: they brought his honey back to him. As we drank on that cold day, we ate the honey by the spoonful. At the bottom of the jar, Aleko scraped up one last spoonful and held it out to me. “This is the last honey from Tamarasheni,” he said, his eyes overflowing with sadness and drink. I declined it, and Aleko ate it slowly, savoring the last taste of his land. It was as if his displacement would not be complete as long as the honey remained, but with the last of it gone, he became truly unmoored in space, a person who was now from nowhere.

Eating the food that boomeranged back to the displaced—honey, jam, bottled fruit, and even homemade “white lightning”—became a ritual in many cottages I visited. Almost always, the foods were accompanied by beautiful, idealized, and elegiac descriptions of the house and the land they had come from. Judging from the few photographs people had gotten back from relatives along with the jars, the villages in South Ossetia were not much to look at: ramshackle brick houses, scraggly gardens, rutted dirt roads, and unmowed clumps of tall grass everywhere. But to those who had lost them, the houses and the land were paradise lost. Where macaroni, a hollow tube around a center of nothingness, could only trace the outlines of what had

been lost and point to the space it once occupied, foods from familiar places truly filled the holes left by what had been lost, if only for a moment.

Later in the summer, I saw Aleko transformed. He had scraped together money from his piglet operation, an aid organization, and his relatives, and he'd purchased bee boxes. The beehives surrounded the small cottage, and the air was thick with the buzzing of bees flying in and out. Aleko proudly showed me the blue wooden boxes, covered with stickers from an NGO that held down the already peeling paint. Carefully lifting the lid of one of the beehives, he drew out a frame of honeycomb, showed me the queen, and beamed. Delicately, I tried to ask him if it made sense to invest in beehives if he thought they might return to South Ossetia, or worse, if there might be another war soon. After all, given tensions on the border, many of his neighbors were carefully avoiding investing in any property they couldn't run with. "I hope we'll go back," he said. "If they said we could go back tomorrow, I'd leave immediately. Even if everything were destroyed, I would rebuild it all myself if I had to. This kind of life, here, makes me not want to live. But for now, we have to live as if we are going to be here forever."

Just as for Aleko, the sweet taste of home was for other IDPs the beginning of making their own food, reattaching to their homes, and rebuilding their connections to one another. As the late summer harvest came in, people began eating more of their familiar foods. People from different villages, now neighbors in the settlements, began to know one another as they gathered outside on warm nights to eat roasted sunflower seeds and gossip. Later, as they started having food to serve, they shared simple meals in each others' cottages: salads of tomatoes and cucumbers with cilantro and dill garnishing the top, or warm Ossetian cheesebread stuffed with beet greens. There were even *supras* again—less lavish than before the war, to be sure, but important occasions nonetheless.

In August, exactly a year after the bombing of South Ossetia, I was invited to the first wedding thrown by the people from Disevi since the war. With everyone contributing, they had managed to rent a banquet hall in an old concrete building in what had been a Soviet-era factory district in the town of Gori. Over three hundred people came, decked out in the best clothes they could muster, and chattering to all the neighbors they hadn't seen in the year since the displacement. The bride, a girl from a town far away, floated in on a haze of white tulle and silver tinsel rented for the day. She held the arm of her new husband, who had met her while randomly dialing

telephone numbers and waiting for girls to answer. Behind them came the bridesmaid, in a short, shockingly pink nylon dress, hanging on the arm of the best man, Sopo Tsuladze's son. Neither the groom nor the best man had ties or jackets—it was a catch-as-catch-can wedding, and there was no money to rent suits. But their shirts were crisply ironed, and Sopo beamed at how handsome her son looked. Manana, sitting next to me, sighed contentedly. "It's a good wedding, a *normal* wedding. In Disevi, we would have had an even better one, maybe with five hundred people. Some people think that we shouldn't celebrate like we did before, because we're refugees. But this is like a rich person's party, which is amazing since we don't have any money. But everybody gave a few *lari*, and here we have a real wedding!"

As the band played traditional Georgian music with a disco backbeat, the women of Disevi circulated, pouring homemade wine from recycled soda bottles. We got up to dance the *lezginka*, the traditional dance of the Caucasus performed with arms high in the air. Arms out almost like the wings of storks, men and women circled one another without touching, gesturing to each other elegantly. The men often did star turns, jumping or showing off fancy footwork, while the women seemed to float on air, their hands turning as they made tiny footsteps. In the break between songs, Manana smiled and whispered delightedly that the bride was already pregnant.

When we returned to the long banquet tables, exhausted and giddy from the dance, we saw the tables laden with literally hundreds of dishes made by the women of the village, who had been cooking day and night for weeks. With plates stacked upon plates the entire length of the table, there were two kinds of fish, fresh apples and juicy peaches, and hot chunks of roasted pig with crispy skin and rendered fat. There were plates full of spinach and eggplant *pkhali*, pieces of boiled meat and cones of fresh cheese, but no macaroni. Bottles of soda and sparkling water stood alongside the row of plates, and glass jugs of wine were constantly refilled. As dozens of tiny cakes glittered in their frosting at the top of the pile, people laughed and danced and ate the dazzling feast.