

# A Drop in the Sea

Armenian  
Contemporary  
Prose



# A DROP IN THE SEA

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prose*

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MHER  
ISRAELYAN

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UNIMAGINABLE  
CHEESIES FOR JEFF  
BRONSON

*Dedicated to Brussels  
American School*

“The Earth is round and rotates not just around the sun, but also around its own axis,” I explain to five-year-old Davit.

“Round, like the Khachapuri Mother bakes?” Davit’s eyes grow round.

“Round like the sun, except that the sun does not move, it just sends its warmth to the people and planets throughout space.”

“But where did the Earth come up with Jeff... from the Sun?”

“The Earth rotates, and during that rotation different people and animals big and small end up coming together, sometimes without even noticing each other. But Jeff saw you and stopped for a minute, right there – at Brussels American School.”

Nobody noticed how the cheese-bread recipe delivered from Alashkert to Tbilisi by a tradition-loving Armenian family was slowly condemned to oblivion. Its replacement with the Georgian Khachapuri was also no big deal – so many things change around the world every second that you can't possibly keep up, especially when it is a trifle such as bread and cheese. Thus, the culinary secret passed on by Grandma Vardush to her granddaughter survived for a century, traveled across half the world and ended up as the specialty in the kitchen of an Armenian family that had settled in the center of Europe and would then go on to become a Cheesie thanks to Jeff Bronson, the American teacher at the kindergarten. Wait a bit and I will reveal the recipe. In order to knead this story, I must have a ball of Georgian suluguni cheese, flour bought from the Middle Eastern store, a five-year old Armenian boy named Davit, and an American kindergarten teacher weighing four hundred pounds, or around one hundred and eighty kilograms. Blended into this mix we need to wait for that wonderful moment when this Davit of ours, who has started to frequent the American school and who, in contrast to Jeff Bronson, is the lightest person there, simply picks up the key to this amazing story, opens the door, and says,

“I've made a friend already; my friend's name is Jeff Bronson.”

This piece of good news causes such joy in the family that everyone says in unison,

“Finally!”

He's a little boy, after all, in unfamiliar surroundings, an indecipherable language, nobody to play with... and then, unexpectedly, a friend – and what a friend at that, the heaviest person at the school – Jeff, from the state of Wisconsin, who had been

given the honorary title of Bear by the children and those of the faculty closest to him. We Armenians are a hospitable people and in order for those two to consolidate their friendship it had to be kneaded into a Khachapuri, which Davit would take with him every week from the oven of his caring mother as a treat for his only friend.

“It’s just an unimaginable Cheesie – I’ve never eaten anything so delicious in my whole life,” Jeff would say each time as he scarfed down the Khachapuri, “I’ll give them to the kids during lunch hour.” And Jeff would pass it around, but the American kids had eaten so much pizza that they did not appreciate the Khachapuri and everyone knew that the Cheesie would find its final resting place in Jeff’s boundless stomach.

“Enjoy it, I’ve made it using Grandma Vardush’s special recipe from Tbilisi,” Davit’s caring mother, or Vardush’s youngest granddaughter, would say, putting me in a difficult spot because I would then have to present a brief historical summary of the early twentieth century in order to explain to the man why the grandmother of an Armenian family lived in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi and why that wonderful Georgian Cheesie, which had an unimaginably difficult name in their language, had rolled and rolled all the way to Brussels American School.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what language that is – Armenian or Georgian, and I couldn’t pronounce it right to save my life. But I must confess that nobody imagines bread and cheese this creatively in America.”

“You can call it a Cheesie,” the magnanimous family agrees, “After all, you’re Davit’s friend.”

Jeff Bronson, the Bear of Wisconsin, was not just the heaviest

person at the school, he was also the kindest, the most vigorous defender of the downtrodden, the best rock 'n' roll dancer and the most talented culinary master. He would personally explain to the children that vegetables didn't just appear in shops out of thin air – someone had planted or sown them in the soil, another kind person had watered them, Nature had provided sunshine and rain, and they had finally arrived at our table through God's blessings. And we accept them with thanks, placing them in our plates in the form of one dish or another. The Khachapuri or Cheesie had not appeared out of nowhere either, nor had it come from Georgia or Armenia. It had first existed in the form of wheat and a cow, it had gone through a harvest and milking, been kneaded by the hands of Grandma Vardush, baked through the warmth of hospitality and served to us on a tray of intercultural dialogue – eat as much as you like!

Davit tries to explain the secret of their friendship: “When the Earth rotated and brought Jeff, he saw me. If he hadn't seen me, he would have squished me underfoot and we wouldn't have ended up becoming friends.”

“It was God's will that you become friends, so he could not have missed seeing you,” I said.

“Jeff knows Vinni Pukh but calls him Winnie the Pooh.”

“The name doesn't matter,” I try to explain. Whether it is Vinni Pukh or Winnie the Pooh, what is important is the person that name represents – the bear in this case, who exudes such warmth through friendliness and amity and has been a balm to people's souls for a hundred years now.”

The faculty had been concerned that Davit spoke no English. They had been forced to put in an extra effort, use new technol-



ogies, and invite special experts to the school. But only Jeff had chosen the correct path. If Davit does not understand English but likes music, then I will sing to him in English, and, because we are friends, he will understand what I am saying. If Davit does not speak English but likes to dance, I will do the rock 'n' roll for him, and he will understand that he needs to learn English to rock 'n' roll like that. And finally, if Davit does not speak English, I will try to speak Armenian, no matter how difficult it is to correctly pronounce those few syrupy Eastern words I've searched for and found online. Such minor difficulties compared to the awe in a child's eyes! If Davit does not play with anyone, I will play with Davit and the two of us will swallow the next portion of his caring mother's Cheesies together. Play. That is the most important thing for a child – the rest is secondary. I will be Davit's playmate. I will be Winnie the Pooh, Davit can be Piglet. We will go look for honey together, or try to find Eeyore's lost tail. We will go hunting for Heffalumps, or discover the North Pole. And when we are in trouble, surrounded by the waves of a flood, we'll write a note, seal it in a bottle and place it at the mercy of the gracious waves, hoping that a kind person will find our message and come to save us. Jeff ended up becoming the playmate of all the children, throwing himself into the game, laughing so loudly that the cold walls of the school reverberated with the movements of his four-hundred-pound body in such a way that the echo of his laughter resonated and embedded itself in the memories of the children, teachers, and parents once and for all.

But every game must come to an end. One day, the Earth rotated in the opposite direction and took Jeff away, to the place from which he had come, placing him to rest at a family cemetery

in the city of Monona, Wisconsin. Davit came back home with Jeff's uneaten portion of Cheesies that day. The school principal Mr. Goldman wrote in the commiseration book that if he ended up having the good fortune of going to heaven, Jeff would be the first person he would want to meet. A lot of people would probably want that too. Another teacher wrote that Jeff was able to make everyone – child and adult alike – feel like they were the special person he had chosen. But all this time Jeff had been the chosen one, picked by everyone. Jeff had no children of his own, but the hundreds of children at Brussels American School wept for him. The school principal organized a memorial event and the children dedicated a song to him. Only Davit did not sing. He had lost his best friend. We did not sing - we just went to the seaside nearby at sunset and wrote Jeff a note, sealed it in a bottle and placed it at the mercy of the magical waves, just like in our favorite story. The bottle floated and floated, taking Jeff's bright smile with it, hiding it in the undulating horizon of the ocean. His contagious laughter still rings out in my ears. That laughter breaks all the stereotypes about friendship, causes all walls to crumble, wipes away any boundaries of language, ethnicity, or geography. That book about Winnie the Pooh's adventures, friendship and other things, which Jeff had gifted to Davit, is on our desk, bearing a little note consisting of words in Armenian writing conceived and reproduced using a computer translation program and incredible effort: «*Deyvid, yes gitev, vor du karogh yes. Du arrandznahatuk yes*». "Davit, I knew you can. You're special." I just wanted to say – to give you a little advice – that sometimes, when you have to overcome problems or need a real friend, you should read that book. I also wanted to say that



a Khachapuri or Cheesie doesn't just appear at our table from thin air, nor does it come from Georgia or Armenia. It first existed in the form of wheat and a cow, went through a harvest and milking, was kneaded by the hands of Grandma Vardush, baked through the warmth of hospitality, and then finally it made its way to us. And because we believe in miracles, and because naturally we also believe in friendship, even today when Grandma Vardush's youngest granddaughter bakes Khachapuris, we don't eat the last piece, Jeff's portion. He's our Davit's best friend, after all, and might read our note one day and come floating on a pot of honey to pick up his incredibly-difficult-to-pronounce Khachapuris or, more simply, his Cheesies.

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