A DROP IN THE SEA

Armenian contemporary prose

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A Drop in the Sea is a collection of works by a group of contemporary Armenian writers who are members of the Kayaran Literary Club, which was founded in 2011. The club publishes a quarterly journal Kayaran since 2012. The mission of the Kayaran Club is to cultivate, promote, and disseminate contemporary Armenian literary prose. Since its inception in 2011, the club has published Armenian prose works in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Russian. This collection is dedicated to the 10th anniversary of the club.

This book has been prepared by Grakan Kayaran *NGO in the frames of* Civil Society Support for Ensuring Impact on Reforms *project. The project was financed by the Swedish Government. Responsibility for the content rests entirely with the creator. The Swedish Government does not necessarily share the expressed views and interpretations.*

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FOREWORD

The present collection has several goals. First, to showcase a select group of contemporary Armenian prose writers. Our book does not aim to be representative; the selection was based on the availability of translations and freedom from copyright restrictions. Second, we hope to raise awareness of the urgent need for dialogue between the Armenian literary work and the global culture of belles lettres. Third, by offering this collection as a not-for-profit publication, we want to challenge and perhaps mitigate the sometimes toxic competitiveness and volatility of the contemporary literary marketplace and global publishing environment.

Our book emerged at the crossroads of discussion and debate among four groups: the Kayaran journal, the only quarterly in Armenia specialized in prose publication; PEN Armenia, which has recently become very active in promoting writers' communal involvement in human rights, gender and peace issues; The Cellar – an informal small group that unites writers from the

first two groups; and Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF), which works, among other things, on promoting creativity and critical thinking. A grant from the Swedish Sida, channeled via EPF to Kayaran, made this publication possible, We also benefitted from the voluntary work and devotion of the editors. For the editors and writers of this volume, as well as many other Armenian writers not represented here, open dialogue and generative exchange are essential to nurture and advance an authentic literary culture and context. Our writers want to be heard and they want to hear.

We hope that this "drop in the sea" of global literary prose, coinciding with the tenth anniversary of Kayaran, will contribute to an ongoing conversation about the nature and possibilities of prose works, what constitutes a good story, and what Armenian writers have to say to the world today.

Kayaran Literary Club

LUSINE
KHARATYAN

#AMERICA_PLACE[1] FROM 9/11 TO 11/9

#America_place 1

After 9/11, my American family decided to learn about other cultures. This is how I appeared in their home. I tell them about Armenia; they tell me about the Chinese guy they hosted before me.

#America_place 2

My American family is Protestant. We always pray before meals. Especially when eating oatmeal with strawberries around a circular table.

[1] *In vernacular Armenian, the word վայր (**tegh**, place) is often added to the geographical name of a place to refer to the entire context and not only the exact location. For example, "Russiaplace" may be used with respect to most of the Slavic-speaking former USSR and sometimes beyond, from Ukraine to Kazakhstan, while "Europeplace" could refer to any European country. I have chosen to translate this phrase literally.*

#America_place 3

On Sundays we go to church, read the Gospels in the church basement, and look at the blood-colored map of the world's endangered Christians hanging on the wall.

The missionaries of our church work passionately in the reddest spots on the map. I silently rejoice that my country, smaller than a bullet, though streaked in blood on all sides, is still of America's color.

#America_place 4

My American father collects old wall clocks and guns. Guns are hanging on the basement wall and the broken clocks on the wall of the living room. On Sundays we dine in the white room of clocks and, over a cup of life-giving water, discuss the flavor nuances of our daily bread, the functioning of our digestive systems, and the rise of evil in the world.

#America_place 5

Our house is on a lake. It is our private lake that we share with four other upper-middle-class families like ours. My American father built our house with his own hands during his youth, forming the statistics of America's economic growth along with his baby-boomer friends. It's a joy to look at the lake from the glazed kitchen with a morning coffee, while the squirrels scramble on the branches of the huge coniferous tree. Through the glass, under your feet, is the sky, two turtles, waves from the neighbor's motorboat, and the imminent winter hiding in the mirror of the lake.

#America_place 6

My American love is a yarn shop. It was while wandering around in this dark and dirty, uncomfortable November, misty rain on my face, Bach in my ears, tired of Intermediate Statistics, hiding my frozen nose in the sleeve of the jacket, when we met on the showcase next to the spice-smelling Somalian video rental. You were the Orange – thick and woolly. I tightly hugged you, those two thick knitting needles, and got unbelievably warm. And while the radio at home continues discussing the issue of entering or not entering Iraq, I knit you: large, warm, and sunny.

#America_place 7

My American mother walks around our lake every morning. I walk with her on weekends. Our walk takes an hour. On our way, we meet walkers, runners, dog walkers, dog-poop scoopers, cyclists, deer, squirrels, and even wild turkeys. The day is always silent. But we talk. She tells me about the hardships of raising her two kids, about being diagnosed with cancer twice, and escaping death. Twenty years ago and then ten years ago. I tell how my father died in the war. Ten years ago.

#America_place 8

I faced the world at the university. Entered the auditorium, and there it was. Now I am frozen: I look at it and it looks at me. America is in the middle. The Atlantic Ocean, Europe, and Africa are on the right, Asia and Australia on the left. And I was told humanity was born in the Armenian Highlands. I got it. The center of the Solar System is the Planet Earth.

#America_place 9

The basement of our university is our bunker. Built for centuries to come. Strong and sterile. A monolith. Sound-proof walls and countless corridors. A labyrinth. The buildings of past and future are connected with long passages. Medical engineering, social sciences, management, law, history, IT programming, physics, philosophy. Sixty thousand students. I do not know the number of teaching staff. Like dwarfs, we walk silently in the windowless, sunless underground corridors. We look for gold. Each of us in her hole. None of us has boundaries, but all doors and exits are closed. There is not enough air. Everybody is against the war on Iraq. Silence. A step forward and a wall. I order all issues of "Pravda" for 1961 in the library.

#America_place 10

I get out from underground. The sun is cold. The wind brought the news. There is a bridge over Mississippi that has two levels. The lower one is for cars, the upper one for us. It is cold and our bridge has a glass tunnel. Glassy, so the sky and city skyline are visible. Catchwords, slogans, graffiti, invitations. Mumbling in my ears. Out of the system. Even more within the system. Is the system itself. The language of aliens. "Russian club: join us," "Union of Arab Students," "Society of Native Americans," "Gays and Lesbians! We meet every Friday," "Want to learn Salsa?," "Protect your future!," "Osama Bush Laden," "Anthropology . . . More than life." Letter-letter-image-color-number-idea-word-song . . . Staring at me from everywhere. I get it. An audio recording in the tunnel says: "Hi, I am Angela, I am Eric, my name is Jane." They are . . . many.

#America_place 11

My American grandmother is 95. She lives in a nursing home. We came to visit her today. She grows tomatoes in the garden of the nursing home. It is Saturday and my grandma has her hair dyed at the nursing home's hairdresser. She has had a manicure and pedicure. My American father says to his mom, "Let's go play cards." She doesn't hear. He takes her arm and brings her in. All four of us sit down at the circular table. My grandma asks where I come from. She gets only "the Soviets" from her son's explanation. And I tell her about my grandfather who brought American Studebaker trucks from Iran for the Soviet army during the Patriotic War.

#America_place 12

The international students at our university are invited to a dinner. At a rich Americans' club. The millionaires got interested in the world after 9/11 and they want to hear about other cultures from a direct source. The club is on the rooftop of a skyscraper. Women with expensive makeup, men in expensive suits, white-teeth smiles. Me, like a gladiator in Rome. The millionaire I got kept speaking about the fall of the Roman Empire for the entire evening. What a consistent pattern, he thinks. Empires come and go. Yet, America will live for a long time. Because in America they are free. For instance, my millionaire has a permit to fly a plane. And in Europe he would not have that permit.

#America_place 13

My classmate is in the military. So is her father. And her grandfather. And her mother, brother, uncle. She has served, and so

the army now pays for her education. Mine is also paid for by American taxpayers. So we both owe the taxpayers. Democrats and Republicans. We took a class on "History of Ideas in America" together, and we are all against the war. Today was sad. Especially her. Told us that tomorrow she leaves to fight. In Iraq. Is against, but has to. Protect the American values.

#America_place 14

Our internship is in a place where we speak about the Gini coefficient, poverty, hunger, and illiteracy all day. In the evenings, we organize receptions, criticize Bush's foreign policy, Chicago economists, the US not signing the Kyoto. All this around Pacific red salmon and black caviar. Thanks to an intern friend, I betrayed the Orange with Chomsky. Very quickly, in an hour-long meeting, where there were many leftists, anarchists, punks, old hippies, Trotskyists, feminists, immigrants from the Middle East and the Soviets, conspiracy theorists, the lazy jobless, the ideologically unemployed, the homeless, depressive alcoholics, and zealous youths.

#America_place 15

On 11/9, democracy won. My Republican American parents continue praying for me and my family every Sunday. I trust in their prayers.

Translated by the author

First published at ***Asymptote*** *online journal of world literature in translation*

#AMERICA_PLACE PREGNANT

#America_place 16

Our American apartment is in a wooden building. In a four-story American building where the Soviet-born students of our university and Soviet-loved Somali-born refugees of the Midwest are living. In the Soviet of my childhood, we helped the starving Somalis. In the America of my American grandma's childhood, they helped the starving Armenians. I have made a black-and-white collage from the photos of Armenian and Somali starving children featured in the newspapers of my American grandma's childhood and my own. Pinned it on the inner wall of my head, in a place that I can look at only when I want to. But I am pregnant now. I don't look at the collage anymore. I have thrown it away, so I can easily smile when greeting my beautiful Somali neighbor and forget that our common homeland is hunger.

#America_place 17

Our American apartment has a bedroom, a kitchen, and a living room. White walls, beige carpets, many built-in closets with white doors. The round wooden table and blue-colored chairs are a present from my American family. My American father built and painted the chairs with his own hands. We also have a loveseat as a gift from them. Loveseat. This is what a couch for

two is called. It is dark yellow. Soft. In the evenings, the two of us sit down on it and watch a movie online. Bergman. When we learned I was pregnant, we brought a huge convertible sofa left in the parking lot of our building by residents who had moved out. "Take me!" said the note taped to the fabric. So we took it. It is beige. Matching the carpets. Now I sit down on the carpet, lean on the sofa, stretch out my legs and read. My course readings. Homework. About America. Where there are loveseats, Somalis, dishwashers, war veterans, dryers, Protestants, sofas left in parking lots, Trotskyists, deer walking freely in the city, Mexicans, doggy bags, Soviet Jews, garage sales, the Midwest, African Americans, kitchen sinks, WASPs, yuppies, nine-one-one (911). There is also a toilet and a bathtub. In our apartment.

#America_place 18

We have a stove, a dishwasher, and an all-swallowing kitchen sink. Yes, it swallows everything. Food leftovers – egg shells, onion peels – can be left in the sink just like that. You push the button and it grinds it all up and drains it to the sewer system along with the water. I once even sent some broken glass there. The washing machine and the dryer are shared by the residents of our floor. There is a special room in the lobby. They are there. You put in a quarter, pour in the liquid detergent, push the button, and your washed laundry is ready in half an hour and dried in another 30 minutes. Within this timespan, my beautiful Somali neighbor and I say "hi" and smile at each other and for a moment enjoy the commonality of our destinies in a narrow space without doors and windows, next to the rotating laundry. I miss the washline, where the laundry hanging in the

sun and wind confirms the continuity of life. A transient piece of eternity. When, on the roads of a hastily lived life, you meet a color-coordinated clothesline of laundry and suddenly realize that it's yours. In this laundry room with no doors and windows, my homeland is sun-soaked laundry. From another window, in a Yerevan apartment block.

#America_place 19

I am pregnant. Very pregnant. It is winter outside. A real one. Minus 20 degrees Celsius. It is plus 30°C inside. I never manage to convert this to Fahrenheit. Turns out wood is the best thermal isolator in the world. It gives warmth not only through burning. Wood. My friend from 1992. In a furnace heater. I, a product of the cold and dark '92, have put two sweaters on my round belly in this hot apartment in our wooden American building, and am now sitting on the sofa, with my legs bent under me, reading Remarque, printed out from lib.ru. The smell of lentil soup in my nose. The smell of lentil soup in the apartment. The smell of lentil soup on the white walls. On beige carpets. Hanging from the low ceiling. Hiding under the window and on the kitchen table. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Lentil soup, the rear of the Western front. Lentil soup. Boiling on the stove while I set fire to another volume of Lenin in our Yerevan panel apartment. Our neighbor's Lenin, the neighbor who had a PhD in Philosophy. He had left it in the hallway. He had not written "take me". He had said it. Probably. And I took it. On the eastern, western and all possible fronts, my homeland is lentil soup. Also cooked on Lenin. When I am pregnant. And not only then.

#America_place 20

In our state, many have Scandinavian roots. Probably as narrated by Hamsun. They were probably starving like the Armenians and Somalis. I haven't seen it myself, so can't imagine it. My American mother is Swedish, my American father Finnish. The weather in our state is also Scandinavian. Winters are cold, summers are short. It's a pleasure to watch Bergman here. Especially in the winter. When it gets dark early and the crosswind cuts outside. The one that passes from the north to the south across the middle of America and across you, if you happen to be outside. One-by-one tickling your bones. We watched *The Seventh Seal* tonight. Late in the evening. I woke up at night from the dance of death endlessly stretching in my dream. Turns out the dance was in my womb. And the smell was of wild strawberries. It was a bright smell. Forestial, sunny, summery. In winter, my homeland is wild strawberries. Also narrated by Bergman. Black and white. Also, strawberry-color.

#America_place 21

That night alarm again. And me, in pajamas, in an overcoat hastily put on with the buttons unfastened around my belly, my bare feet in boots. Who is cooking at this late hour? The firefighters walk in and out quickly. This time there is smoke, too. I freeze and shrink. I hug my belly with my hands to protect it from the cold. Akram, my Azeri classmate, is in front of me. He is constantly pacing. In his slippers. Carelessly wearing a short jacket and tightly holding a briefcase. He keeps all his documents in one place, so if he ever needs to quickly run away he knows

exactly where his documents are and does not need to look for them. He laughs. He says he inherited this habit from his mother. When they fled from Aghdam they did not manage to take anything. And this caused problems for many years afterwards. They could not leave the country, having no documents. And now, in this America, in this center-of-the-world, a place from which people do not flee, he knows what is important. In life. Especially when there is a need to flee. Perhaps his homeland is the briefcase with documents.

#America_place 22

It was Karine. She said it's a good one, let's go. Me and my belly got out of the building. Again, 911 is in front of the building. Smiling firefighters are actively strolling around. They respected my belly and cleared the way for us. *Kill Bill.* Who told you to watch that movie when you're so pregnant? Karine did. She doesn't talk to me to this day. Since that day. The movie theater is full. Chomp-chomp. Popcorn in my mouth and Thurman opens her eyes in my head. Thump-thump-thump. Thurman walks in my head. Shots. Glass. A white bride with a pregnant belly and lots of blood. A sea of blood. Everything is red. Is that my period? How could it be? I am pregnant. She has entered my belly. Turned everything upside down. I run away. The bride is after me. Karine and Thurman in my head. I've lost Karine since that day. She does not talk to me, does not say hello. Turns out, my homeland is my womb.

#America_place 23

We set a beautiful Christmas table with my American mother's Swedish grandmother's silverware and white-blue plates, which had crossed the ocean. I am in an Andersen fairy tale. About Elisa and her brothers. Because the dishes have blue swans painted on them. Not the delicate festive dishes of my American family but the set that my American mother gave to me to host guests in our apartment. Huh? Could it be that my homeland is Andersen's fairy tales? No. It is the Christmas tree. In my childhood, I would always sleep around the Christmas tree on New Year's Eve. And right before falling asleep, I would imagine how the toys wake up at night and visit each other from branch to branch. I would even develop conversations. Until I opened the present left under my pillow in the morning. My homeland is New Year's morning. The most silent morning in the world, on all possible fronts.

#America_place 24

It was my doctor. He said it's obligatory, that's the rule. Pregnant couples must attend childbirth courses. So, we have been here since morning. Together with ten pregnant couples in their 7th-8th months of pregnancy, like us. The trainer-midwife has put ice in my palm. She says we should hold it for an entire minute. I close my eyes. My hand is burning. Smoke and fire will come out soon. Pins-and-needles. I bite my lips. My husband extends his hand for me to give it to him. I don't. It's mine. He hugs me from behind. My eyes are closed. The midwife counts the seconds: 10, 9, 8, 7, 6... that's it, you can drop the ice. It doesn't hurt any-

more. My eyes are open. I don't even want to drop it. It melted and escaped. And now I massage my face and neck with my wet hand. The midwife says childbirth is like that. In the beginning you cannot stand it, but you go through it and forget. The black woman next to me is going to deliver in a day or two. But she is so large that her belly is not visible. Her husband is half her size. Skinny, short and with a fat golden cross on his neck. He was rapping all the time so his wife would not drop the ice. Our homeland is the pain experienced together.

#America_place 25

We go north. For a seminar. On community-based development. Three hours by bus. It's boring outside the window. Nothing interesting inside either. Two native Americans, two feminists, one retired professor of economics, a pastor from a god-forgotten community, and two sociology students. And me alone, with my collages. What if I die in childbirth? From a blood infection. Or I don't know. What if a miscarriage happens on the road? Or an accident. We'll be staying in a camp. Wooden huts. In a coniferous forest. Mine is the second floor of a bunk bed. The result of a draw of lots. It's a wooden bed with wooden stairs. The one beneath is an old feminist. From Vermont. Her body is her right. She decided to not have a child at a very young age, when she was still a hippy. In her hippy commune, everyone has many children. But they respect her decision. And she respects theirs. She has lain down under me and talks to me. About her commune. Their commune runs a natural farm in Vermont. She grows vegetables. She has fallen asleep. I can't sleep. I'm afraid of falling down. The collage in my head spins. In the years when

the "Starving Armenians" made the headlines of American newspapers, Armenian women gave birth on the road, hungry and thirsty, cut the umbilical cord right there with whatever they had at hand, no matter how far from sterile, swaddled the baby and immediately continued walking. In the movies and books about the Second World War, they delivered babies under shelling. It's the 21st century now, you are in the center of the world, and your state is the center of that center when it comes to healthcare. The last case of maternal mortality was recorded here some twenty years ago. And she had thousands of illnesses. And she was not young. She was not educated. But you are healthy, young. In this almighty place. In the homeland of the Happy Ending. Your body, your right. To have a child. The homeland of the woman beneath me is her body. Mine, too, is my homeland at the moment. In the homeland of the Happy Ending. On the second floor of a bunk bed.

#America_place 26

There is a store owned by Soviet Jews in one of the suburbs of our city. They opened it back in the eighties. The customers are almost all exclusively Russian speakers. Almost all from the former Soviet Union. I come here once in two months. I take three buses. But my heart desires *grechka*,[2] and the supermarkets don't have what it longs for. There are always announcements posted on the door of the store. In Russian. I hang around a bit, read the posts. Someone is looking for an apartment. Or renting one out. There are concerts given by Soviet Jews. Mostly classical music. Someone is looking for a missing dog or a cat. And so

[2] *Buckwheat, a very popular cereal in the former Soviet Union.*

on. The shop sells *Borjomi*,[3] rye bread, *manka*,[4] kefir. I always buy *grechka*. And usually something in addition. On the days when I went shopping there, my homeland was Oleg Dal's "A Moment" from the *Sannikov's Land*.[5] Performed by my father. And the Russian-speaking Soviet Union. Then I discovered the Iranians' store. Where they sold walnut preserve and apricot jam produced in Armenia by an unknown firm, with a low-resolution picture of Ararat posted on its jars. And grape leaves made in Turkey. This is where it struck me: my homeland is apricot jam. No, perhaps it is the walnut preserve, after all.

 # America_place 27

My color-coordinated laundry breathes the sun and wind. The imminent winter is felt from the balcony of our Yerevan apartment block. My son is eating an apricot jam sandwich. He had a fight at school today. They were instructed to memorize a poem about the homeland. He did not. He declared at school that his homeland is America. His classmate blocked the classroom's doorway and said: "I won't let you in until you recognize the Genocide."

Translated by the author

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[3] *A Georgian mineral water named after the town where its source is located.*

[4] *Semolina, a popular morning food in Russia and some parts of the Soviet Union.*

[5] *'The Land of Sannikov' is a Soviet 1974 adventure film where the artist Oleg Dal performs a song called 'Mig' ("A Moment").*

THE MANAS [6]

The plane was slowly descending. It was four in the morning. The numerous planes lined up beneath were reminiscent of large airports, like Charles de Gaulle, Heathrow, or New York's JFK. Arpine was surprised, as she was expecting a small, provincial airport. Only after landing did she realize that those were huge American Hercules planes taking weapons to Afghanistan, and that the famous American military base in Kyrgyzstan and Manas Airport were one and the same thing.

The hustle started as soon as they got off the plane. The Russian woman sitting next to her in the plane was running forward pushing everyone, but the result was the same – she still popped up next to Arpine in the queue at passport control. During the Moscow-Bishkek flight, the woman had managed to tell Arpine that she had been living in Germany for the last ten years. She had complained about Germans and Germany, pointing out that even though she had a German passport she did not speak any language other than Russian and had incidentally mentioned that though she was born and raised in Bishkek, she did not speak a single word in Kyrgyz and never cared to. On the flight, she had also shown photos of her family and had spoken about each family member one by one. She had also informed Arpine

[6] *The meaning of this short story title is twofold. On one hand, Manas is the hero of* ***The Epic of Manas****, the national epic of Kyrgyz, and in Kyrgyzstan "Manas" is widely used as a name for many things, from the main airport to main streets in cities. On the other hand, in Indian philosophy,* ***manas*** *("thought" in Sanskrit) refers to the human "mind" and the capacity that coordinates sensory impressions before they are presented to the consciousness.*

that she had brought two large suitcases full of presents. When they landed, she was hurrying to see her daughter and deliver the presents to her grandchildren as soon as possible. However, other passengers were hurrying too, and so the woman ended up huffing and puffing at the end of the line, next to Arpine. Since she had already exhausted most topics about her family and herself, she once more examined Arpine from head to toe, as if she was seeing her only now. Her searching gaze stopped at Arpine's blue passport and she asked:

"Honey, where are you from?"[7]

"From Armenia," replied Arpine tiredly.

"Huh... Is Putin your president too?"

The question remained unanswered, since right at that moment a man in a uniform called out the woman from somewhere near the passport control:

"Tyot'[8] *Sveta, come here!"*

"Oh, excuse me, let me pass, I'm Sveta, they're calling me," the woman jumped ahead, pushing the others aside.

A wave of resentment rose in the queue, and a young girl (the one who was speaking non-stop in the Sheremetyevo waiting area about the year she spent in Alabama on a student exchange program) whispered something in Kyrgyz, then added "fuck" in English, and then muttered "Once a *Sovok*, always a *Sovok*,"[9] in Russian. But did auntie Sveta care at all? She was already at the passport control booth, proudly showing her German passport.

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[7] *In the original text, the italicized dialogues are in Russian.*

[8] *In Russian "тетя" or* ***tyotya*** *("auntie") is an informal way of addressing women older than the one who addresses them.*

[9] *In Russian slang, "Sovok" is a negative term for the USSR, Soviet people, and the Soviet reality in general.*

Arpine yawned. Something intangible hanging in the air took her someplace deep. She was a lonely stranger here. Most people in the line were returning home. Like in Yerevan, where the new and renovated airport that "meets international standards" has a sign that says "Welcome back!, as if Armenia is a place to which people only return. At this thought, the train station of Wilhelmshaven, Germany, where the railroad ended, hung in front of her eyes. 'Barekamutyun',[10] the terminal station. Oh... it was only now that she caught that intangible smell that had taken her on a deep journey. It was this thing that had stayed in her nostrils since childhood, the smell of kerosene used to polish the floors of Zvartnots Airport in the Soviet period. How many times had she felt that smell while meeting and seeing off people at the airport, securely holding her father's hand? She squeezed her bag tightly in her hand. *"Grazhdanochka,[11] why do you stand idly like that? It's your turn, go ahead."* It was the cleaning lady of the airport standing next to her. She was rubbing the floor, right under Arpine's feet and pointing to the free border guard waiting for someone to approach.

Arpine woke up, proceeded to the checkpoint, and handed in her passport. The border guard behind the glass looked at the passport, then at Arpine.

"Is it true that your cognac is better than ours?" asked the guard.

"I don't know, I haven't tried yours."

"Definitely try it. Do you have one for me?" joked the guard.

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[10] *Barekamutyun (Friendship) is the terminal station of Yerevan's subway.*

[11] ***Grazhdanka or grazhdanochka*** *in Russian ("гражданочка" or "гражданка", literary 'a female citizen') is a way of addressing women you do not know.*

Arpine got confused. She didn't know what to answer. And now the smell of cognac got mixed with the one of kerosene, plus the sleepless night, such that nausea took over. She got her passport and ran to the restroom as soon as she crossed the border checkpoint.

When Arpine reached the baggage claim area, she discovered that someone had already picked up her suitcase from the conveyer and put it aside. She was even glad that there was no need to wait. She picked up her suitcase, looked for the exit sign and walked in that direction.

"Anything to declare?" asked another uniformed man in the doorway.

"No," replied Arpine.

"Follow me," ordered the uniformed man.

At first, Arpine wanted to complain, but then she recalled that US airports would also choose random passengers for luggage checks, and she followed the man in the uniform silently. She opened her suitcase. The uniformed man asked if she had any alcohol. Arpine told him that there should be two bottles of cognac, which she had brought as a present. The uniformed man ordered her to take out her belongings. Arpine looked at her stuff and started taking it out mechanically. Only after the man in the uniform asked where the cognac was did she realize that there were no bottles and someone had already gone through her items before her.

"So, grazhdanka, what's your name? Wait here, I'll be back."

Arpine wanted to leave everything right there and move on. She was so tired that the only thought she had was of a soft pillow and warm bed. She recalled that the last time she had

lost something from her luggage was, once again, when she had been traveling via Moscow. The lost items were not a big deal. Nevertheless, it was unpleasant. Tiredly, she dropped into the chair next to her. The uniformed man returned in a few minutes, introduced himself as captain something and handed the two bottles of cognac to Arpine.

"My Apologies. Welcome to Kyrgyzstan!" he said and accompanied Arpine to the exit.

After these Soviet-smelling checks and baggage claim, Arpine, as instructed, approached the taxi service located in the airport and asked for a car. The name of the service was also "Manas". Following the guidance of a taxi service employee, Arpine got out of the airport and approached the very first "Manas." The driver helped her put her luggage in the car and then got behind the wheel, while Arpine took the back seat. She handed the driver the address of her accommodation in Bishkek, and they proceeded. The night wasn't over yet, and it was very dark – dark in an unattractive, wintery way. No human or car or living creature was visible. It was Arpine's first time in Bishkek, and she knew neither the distance of the airport from the city, nor the road, nor the place where she would be staying overnight. After a few minutes of driving in silence, the driver, a middle-aged man with a non-Kyrgyz appearance, asked,

"Where are you from?"

"From Armenia," replied Arpine.

The driver's next sentence followed after a few minutes of darkness and silence,

"And I am from Azerbaijan."

Arpine grew tense. It occurred to her that she had no working

phone and no idea where she was going. The minutes of silence were once more interrupted by the driver,

"Where exactly are you from in Armenia?"

"From Yerevan."

"Are you married?"

"Yes."

"Do you have children?"

"Yes."

Silence again. The car was passing over a dilapidated road. Not a single settlement could be seen around, only fields and signs with the old Soviet names of settlements here and there. There were signs, but no houses. No other car could be seen either. And the road was not properly lit.

"Don't trust anyone," followed the driver's next sentence.

So, why had he asked about her children? Perhaps he wanted to visualize how he would rape her. The Sumgait events[12] hovered in her mind. That woman, who was naked and brought down to the street, tortured and raped. One thought particularly bothered her – a piece of iron stuck in the vagina of one of the victims. The vagina tightened, the labia squeezed and closed the entrance. Apparently, fear is felt with the vagina... Then some stupid stories came to her mind, from a glossy Russian magazine that she once skimmed through in an airport out of boredom. That one was real rubbish, nothing to read or remember, but it described in detail how the rapists chose victims who had already given birth at some point in their lives, so that the entrance

[12] *Organized pogroms of the Armenian population of the city of Sumgait in Azerbaijan on February 27-29, 1988. For three days in a row, criminals and angry masses violently attacked Armenians on the streets and in their houses, and met no resistance from the local police.*

would be wide enough for them to stick in an object of any size and do whatever they wanted to enjoy the process. The driver's questions were linked to Sumgait, Baku, and also to this other story stuck in her head from who-knows-where. Fear curled, climbed up the vagina, reached the uterus, started looking for ways out of the trap, fused into the blood, spread all over the body, and – bam! – hit the head hard. Her eyes were looking for a way to escape out the window.

"How are things in Armenia?"

"In what sense?"

"Are there any Azerbaijanis left?"

"Even if there are, they are very few."

I wonder how far the city is?

"Don't trust anyone. What will happen to Karabakh? What do they think about that in your country?"

Arpine didn't know what to answer. The driver was on the phone with someone. Was he planning to rape her by himself or with a group? Was he talking to the group now? And where was Bishkek? Fields, only fields. He was probably going to turn off the road somewhere, and...

What about Safarov?[13] The ax came to her mind. Let him do a safarov and end it. That would be much better.

"What was the name of your hotel?"

Why is he asking this over and over again? Didn't I give him the address? Again, she handed him the piece of paper with the address written on it.

[13] *Ramil Safarov is an Azerbaijani Army officer who was convicted for the murder of an Armenian Army lieutenant, Gurgen Margaryan. In 2004, during a NATO-sponsored training in Budapest, Safarov broke into Margaryan's dormitory room at night and axed Margaryan to death while he was asleep.*

"What kind of hotel is this if I don't know it?"

"It's not a hotel, it's an apartment, a so-called bed and breakfast."

"Don't trust anyone."

Well, what should she do? Arpine took out her phone from the bag. Her roaming service was inactive, since she had considered buying a local phone card in Bishkek. She pretended to call, then faked a conversation with someone, letting that non-existent someone know that she had arrived. Time stood still...

"Do you work?"

"Yes."

"And what does your husband do?"

"He is a journalist."

"Oh."

The road was endless. He had probably already called his friends and they were waiting somewhere at the edge of the field.

"Ah, I just remembered it. I once took some Iranians to that hotel. No one stays there except for them. How long will you stay here?"

Ok, that's it. Is it such an unknown place? Perhaps he had told his friends to come there. He is on the phone again. Oh, a house. Finally! But there is no one. She doesn't see a person. Are they already in Bishkek? How will she be tortured? It would be good if they'd just ax her. He keeps driving and driving. There isn't a single human being, not one car. He seems to be going around incomprehensibly in circles. Finally, they are on well-lit streets. Here, a living creature, an old man with a broom sweeping the street. He stopped and asked the old man about the address of the hostel. The old man didn't know either, although

the driver thought it should be here. He made another circle and finally stopped in front of a tall building. The driver lifted out her suitcase, while Arpine jumped out of the car. The driver took out a piece of paper from his pocket.

"Don't trust anyone," he wrote something on the paper and gave it to Arpine, *"My mother is Armenian, call her for a chat."*

Translated by the author

ARMEN
Of ARMENIA

WHO WANTS TO BE A MILLIONAIRE?

If you're up for it, let's play. You've gotta know "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" Just for curiosity, try your luck. The rules of the game are almost the same, only there are no guaranteed amounts, and there are fewer questions. Only six and a half questions, each with four answer choices. Send your list on February 29th, and I'll be obligated to make mine public on the same day. One million Armenian Drams are being wagered. You'll get the whole amount, if all of our picks coincide. Let's start.

First Question

What do you want?

A. To get rid of my other half. I really want to lose my other half so I can be independent, self-sufficient, and finally live in peace.

B. One million drams. For both of us, one's word is more valuable than money. I promise myself that I will have 1 million drams on February 29th, so I'll shoot straight and on-target. Don't worry.

C. To use the "call a friend" lifeline. I called, said hi, and repeated your number, +374 91 364344, to check if you gave the right number or not. It turns out you haven't tried to put one on me. "You know, I'm reading your *Millionaire*. I want to decide which of the choices to pick for the first question." Thanks for the hint.

D. To know the ending. The launch is easy, although a light start often promises a heavy finale. So, that's why you should extinguish your shallow desire to become a millionaire right from the get-go and jump into the game not for the money but for a passion for reading.

Second Question

What are you looking for?

A. I know you like the palm of my hand. You're not gonna change. You're always gonna bug me. You're gonna caw like a raven 'till you drive me completely nuts. I'm looking for a witch-hunter, an assassin, someone who's ready to whack my other half for a million.

B. If I hadn't given my word, I wouldn't even think of answering. It's too late to bail out. Bring me the photo and the money. I do a clean job. I don't leave unwanted traces. You'll be satisfied. No one has complained so far. You need to wire the money in advance. The deadline is February 29th. I'm going after someone exactly like you.

C. I guess everyone is looking for their other half. If they haven't found them, like me, they sure will one day. I had the strangest feeling talking to you. It's like we're the oldest of friends. We're done playing and are recapping the future. Oops, I'm digressing. My answer is this: to find my other half.

D. I'm looking for the one looking for me. Why isn't anyone looking for me? So, I get to be the object of someone's search. It always seems you've made a good choice, then it turns out it's the complete opposite. Elections in Armenia are traditionally rigged, but no one learns the lesson: to not to vote again. It's something else to get elected. To get an extra vote is already reassuring. That means you're not the only one believing in what you say. To cut it short, simply don't vote. Let others vote for you. In other words, pick answer D.

Third Question

You want to go for a walk?

A. I would, but I can't. I'm not on speaking terms with you. I don't even look eye-to-eye, let alone go for a walk with you. You know what I mean. I can't see you again. That'll mean feeding the raven, and I want to kill it. I've found someone already who's ready to do all the dirty work for the sake of a million. I'm set on passing on the photo and the money. There's no point in waiting – soon I'll be free, running loose like an ownerless dog. Remember? You'd always call me "an ownerless dog" when we would fight.

B. No, I don't. Generally, I've submitted to your literary fraud for the sake of promise and money. Have you read any-

where that a killer goes for a walk with the one who's writing about him? I'm waiting for my client's word so we can meet. I'm expecting the money and my victim's photo, too. I'm not in the habit of asking questions. I don't care who wants to whack who and why. He started to tell me his life. Can you imagine? He was crying on the phone and his voice shook. He said, "Please, don't let him feel any pain. He shouldn't know what happened to him at all."

C. Yes, I definitely do. We're not acquainted personally, but I know you a little bit already. If anything, I read your stuff. I got your cell phone number; I know your name, not to mention the peculiar feeling of reminiscing about the future. Going for a walk while chatting – I got nothing to lose. If not – perhaps. You've warned – if we don't meet and C turns out to be the right answer, I won't get my million. Rule's a rule – I play by the rules.

D. Actually, this is a wrong answer because logically there are three choices. Although this may be the only acceptable choice for the author. In any event, it is nuts to suggest going for a walk to one's self. So, this is definitely a trap. I'm sure it will be considered correct. That's why I pick this choice in particular.

Fourth Question

What are you reading?

A. I'm rereading for the thousandth time the last bit you wrote and want to understand who's written this, me or you? "You're a freak – you live in your own world; you can think what you want. I'm a freak, I live in my world, and I'll think whatever.

We'll meet on February 29th near the Hands[14]." We'll live and see. Rather, I'll live and you won't.

B. I've read nothing but newspapers for a long time. Usually, they present my work the next day on the front pages. I feel sort of appreciated. And then, suddenly, weird messages appear like this: "I'm a freak. I live in my world. I have weird thoughts. Do not try to get acquainted and associate with me. Reject my offer to go for a walk. Take the photo and the money quickly and leave. We'll meet near the Hands on February 29."

C. A short story titled "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" I've read half of it – I'm at question four. Some parts are hard to understand, but it's not so bad. I like it. The characters express themselves through the game's multiple choice answers. And in each case, for each answer, the reader must decide whom to believe in order to become a millionaire himself or herself. I'm also a reader. I have a date with the author! I've already agreed to go for a walk, and I hope I'll win.

D. I really wanted to ask this question. It's the best question for getting to know someone. Nothing happens in life that is not written somewhere; nothing happens that can't be read. Someone besides me will read this and I will share my thoughts with him or her, and we'll meet. I read books written for me.

A reading room lifeline:

A. One quarter
B. One quarter
C. One quarter
D. One quarter

[14] *Sculpture in the capital of Armenia*

Fifth Question

What happened to us on February 29th?

A. I woke up with a headache on February 29th. I took out all the albums from the photo drawer. I was looking for the photo that inspired the most hatred in me. I found one where you look kind of happy, but you're not alone. Someone as happy as you is next to you. You are both smiling, head-to-head. I tore it up and put it in my breast pocket. I took out two raw wieners from the refrigerator, swallowed one, and put the other one in a bag and took it with me. I might need it on the road. I felt how the first sip of coffee changed the taste of my mouth. I took three more sips and got out of the house, without looking in the mirror. I drove to the HSBC and withdrew one million drams from my account. The teller, a young girl, didn't smile at me. She just asked, "You're withdrawing the whole amount?" I said yes. People think I'm rich. I have a job, a place of my own, dress nice. Actually, it was my entire savings. I don't need money. I saw an ownerless dog on the street and felt a kind of kinship, but it had a very ragged look. He was repulsive, invoking nothing but pity. As I drew near, he felt my pity. He sized me up in good faith as well and groaned. I took out the wiener from the bag and threw it in front of him. He looked at me with a devastating gaze; I froze... his eyes... I've seen these eyes somewhere. He didn't get close and waited until I left. I drove, turned back, and saw that he limped. It's okay – a dog doesn't die from limping. I got to the Hands a little too early. The day, sunny. The weather, chilly. Life, evanescent. My raven-killer wasn't there yet. I had always pictured his sad eyes. He was dressed black from head to toe,

befitting a self-respecting assassin. With hair somewhat long – curly and combed back. Height – one eighty cms, let him be tall. He doesn't sleep at night - pangs of remorse. He wants a dignified means of livelihood. He's not content with his luck. Despite his young age, there is a big wrinkle in between his eyebrows, from too much frowning. Even from a distance I noticed that he walked with a strange gait, staring at the ground as if looking for something. He drew closer – one hundred percent what I imagined, even the wrinkle was there. We greeted and drew aside. I took out the photo and the money from my breast pocket and extended it to him. He looked at the torn photo and got worried. His expression changed just for an instant, but it was enough to catch his confusion. I began to persuade, I'm an expert in persuasion. I gave it my all: "I can't do it myself. You agreed to do the job for a low price. You said word is more expensive than money – your words. You chose from the start, from the first question – answer choice B. Now you're bailing out! There's nothing to think about – people kill each other for free all the time, just as a favor . You're not risking anything – it's an ordinary killing for you. Whereas for me, it's a life-and-death question." I said a few other things, but he was unmoved. He was not giving back the money, he was armed, and I was afraid of being duped. He was mumbling something about principles and rules of the game. I had no choice, so I agreed to his game. For the last time, I looked into raven-killer's eyes and realized they're not sad. They were the eyes of the ownerless dog I met in the street, for sure. I was thinking they were probably related, and then I fired a shot.

B. February 29th was a sunny day, and the weather was

chilly, just the way I like it. I went and bought the morning papers and read about a few murders. I realized they weren't done by experts – self-taught, amateur stuff. I didn't think it was a good idea to set a date with the client in broad daylight. But it was too late to change anything. I began dressing up for a date. I don't like wearing black from head to toe. But I know that that's what my client expects of me. My image dictates such a clothing style. I used to have short hair, but now my hair is long and so I comb it back. That's my homage to Hollywood – not to mention that scar in between my eyebrows, which many people think is a wrinkle. Looking in the mirror, I remembered the bartender girl from the day before, who didn't smile the whole evening and at the end was telling me: "You're not content with your life, it's written on your face. Plus, you have sad eyes." I don't need a real weapon, but I always take a pistol with me. I was barely out of the house when bird shit dripped on my shoulder. It was a raven, which flew away cawing. I've never shot a bird – I have my principles – and never harm animals. I strayed from this rule only once. I was returning from work at night and an ownerless dog came up to me. He was big and mad. I struck him, and he started whining. I was too close to shoot.. He looked at me with an devasting gaze, and I froze on the spot. I didn't have the nerve to shoot him. They say a dog doesn't die from limping – it may live. Anyways, I wiped the bird shit off of my shoulder, but it left a little stain. I decided to walk with a set gait – playing a little game with myself – where you can't step on the lines separating the slabs of the sidewalk. I recognized my client from a distance. He had a bike. We greeted each other, and drew to the side. He took out the photo and the

money from his breast pocket and handed them to me. Even before seeing the photo, I already had my doubts. I felt vaguely that he was playing a dishonest game. The minute I saw the photo, I understood everything. He felt it, too. His expression changed for a second, but even that was enough to reveal his confusion. He started persuading like a real pro. He wouldn't let me speak. I barely managed to nail the point that the million was not the issue. Killing a person is far more expensive, even in our poor country. There was no other choice; that's why I had agreed. For both of us, word costs more than money. Then I said the following: "You had to forewarn me about whom you wanted to kill. When you showed your cards at the end of the game, I could see that you were dishonest. I have my principles, and my rules of the game. For example, you might think this is funny, but I don't shoot birds. You don't even get that you're almost asking for suicide. I won't give you back your money. Here's what we'll do. There's an option. If you're in the mood, let's play the death-game on the million. You must know about Russian roulette. See, I'm taking out all the bullets and leaving only one. This is the game you want, and there's no winner, only a loser, and the one who survives. That is what you wanted, right? Here we go, you're first."

C. The moment I woke up on February 29, I ran to the computer. I opened your webpage and saw that you had posted the answer key, just like you had promised. Bingo!!!!! I won. I believed in you, me, the game, the word, and I won. I'm a millionaire. I took a bath, ate breakfast, looked up a few things on the Internet, just to kill time. I felt uncomfortable calling you so early in the morning, because you might've been asleep.

I lingered a little more on social media sites, then called. I said hi, you recognized me right away – we had met once already. You congratulated me on my victory. We set a date near the Hands. The weather was chilly, the day sunny. I came in a taxi cab. I bought two chamomiles from the flower guy. He grumbled and said he's selling by the bunch, not individually. I persuaded him – I'm a master-persuader. You were waiting when I got there, and this time you were the one with a bike. But I wasn't surprised because I had read about it in your short story beforehand. We strolled in the park – the snow had melted away. Tomorrow's spring, and I'm a millionaire. We went for tea. We chatted about this and that. You were sort of hyper-happy, and you kept smirking. Then you asked me suddenly if I would buy a million's worth of wieners for vagrant dogs? You had written about it as well, and I had thought of a unique answer. What I said was probably to your liking, because you laughed sincerely. We talked a while about question five and both agreed that we were the ones deciding what would happen to us on February 29th. I would always inadvertently throw my gaze in front of me, on the lumpy envelope. It says HSBC on it, and inside there's really one million drams. You suggested counting. No, I believe you. Then I said the following: "One game ended. It's time to start the next one. Now it's my turn. I'm the game-show host. If you're up for it, let's play. You've gotta know "Loves me, loves me not." It's the simplest game." We took one chamomile each and started pulling off the petals. We review the last question out loud, together. We smile at each other because we are certain that only the petals of the chamomile know the answer.

D. None of the above. I have my own choice. People look for their other half outside, but it may be inside. Regardless, when two people stay in one place for too long they sometimes get wound up, and one of them wants to whack the other. My grandpa used to say, "Turn your fight into a game, and you'll always end up winning." This game was not to my liking from the get-go. I can't keep this to myself, you ownerless dog! You have a million, go spend it! Why do you wanna give it away to somebody else? My answer is this: Nothing in particular happened on February 29th. It was a regular sunny day, but the weather was chilly. I simply went to the Hands to find out if my other half loves me or loves me not.

Question Six-and-a-half

The game is ending, but it would be unfair not to use the fifty-fifty lifeline. That is what I'm doing, generously making the player's job easier by taking away answer choices A and D.

Loves me, loves me not?
B. Loves me.
C. Loves me not.

Translated by Haik J. Movsisian
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SILVER GATE

Alisa Melnik will never forget that day in June 1986 when the silver gate at the Sevan Children's Sanatorium rolled in front of her, left and right, like an iron curtain.

Three and a half decades later, recalling this unforgettable moment, that phrase, "iron curtain," ran through her mind. In 1986, when she had turned twelve years old, she had been a Soviet pioneer, and it's extremely unlikely that she would have heard the phrase at that time. (Perhaps a better association would be "iron curtain," with lower-case letters, in the sense of the fireproof theater curtains that were common in 18th-century Europe.) And so, the gate opening before her like an iron curtain seemed to be signaling a new act, in the spirit of Shakespeare and the Globe Theater, where, as you know, all the world's a stage and all the people merely players.

Even more important to mention is the Chernobyl disaster of April 1986. (Gorbachev himself later said on one occasion that Chernobyl had been the real reason for the collapse of the Soviet Union.) So, when the silvery gate of the Sevan Children's Sanatorium rolled left and right like an iron curtain before Alisa Melnik's eyes, the Soviet Union was already in irreversible collapse. However, this was not yet known to the young Pioneer Alisa Melnik, nor to Mikhail Sergeyevich, the GenSec who had ushered in the era of Glasnost and Perestroika.

A lush, green oasis nestled in the embrace of the surrounding mountains and enclosed by a fence on all four sides, the Sevan

Children's Sanatorium was the perfect metaphor for the Soviet Union: a closed space where educators and staff would walk around in doctors' white coats, even though most of the children at the camp did not have any health issues, a place where everyday life happened in two parallel flows, the fake Communist one (because nobody really believed in Communist ideals after the stagnation in Brezhnev's times, and those final believers mostly consisted of educators from the senior generation) and that of sincere adolescence and youth (because the first people to seriously believe in Glasnost had been the adolescents and, naturally, children – you know, the ones that often voice truths like "The emperor has no clothes").

And now, our Ukrainian protagonist, Alisa Melnik, had ended up in Armenia specifically because of the Chernobyl disaster, because tens of thousands of Ukrainian children had been "evacuated" that summer to the many children's camps dispersed throughout the Soviet Union on the basis of "whoever ends up wherever." The population within a radius of thirty kilometers of Pripyat, the site of the blast, had already been evacuated in the spring, while those in Alisa's hometown of Kiev (which is more than another hundred kilometers away) were sent off under the pretext of summer vacations.

And because the "boundless" Soviet Union had to end somewhere, Alisa was standing in front of this gate, several times taller than her, with a sense of having reached the "edge of the world," and she was overcome with feeling that she could not go back, that escape was impossible, and that an inevitably new and completely unpredictable life was beginning. This was a complicated feeling, one which combined terror and ecstasy. The terror

was heightened by her clear realization that there was no way home. For the first time in her life, she was so far from her home and parents that she had no way of going back on her own. She could not walk forever or run until she was out of breath; she could not even make it by taking buses or other forms of public transport. And that thought of the impossibility of returning home gave birth to an infinite, endless sense of loneliness, one that had never struck her with such force before. But that tremor of terror flinched before a newly-discovered spirit of freedom, the promise of something bright and adventurous to come, and a shiver of bliss ran through her whole body as if, once again, Alisa was realizing for the first time that she was a whole, separate, distinct, independent and free being, someone ready to rebuild – indeed, to break into pieces and reassemble herself.

How should we continue the story? Standing in front of that huge silvery gate, rolling open like an iron curtain, that petite adolescent girl, whose whole being was ready to collapse in a heap then self-reconstruct, seemed to be in for a coming-of-age story, as this genre is called. Perhaps a young adult summer camp adventure, full of Soviet optimism and yearning. Perhaps her first love story, an interethnic romance seasoned with innocent passion involving the Ukrainian girl and an Armenian boy named Masis with black eyes, muscles that shifted under his sweat-drenched shirt like fish that had been freshly extracted from Lake Sevan, an eyebrow that moved significantly higher than the other whenever he expressed surprise, and a smile that twisted in a self-satisfying way, eliciting the excitement of many of the girls that would end up leaving traces of their first periods right there on the white sheets of the sanatorium. Perhaps it would end up

being a story in the genre of Vladimir Sorokin's satire on socialist realism, where the campers would gather around a Pioneer-worthy fire and endlessly discuss quotes from Lenin and the lessons of Communism, until the full moon emerged from behind dark clouds and the Pioneer anthem of *Rise up in bonfires* would be heard in the background as the group leader Petrov transformed into a werewolf, while the pioneers now singing *Always be ready* would shapeshift into vampires, the Komsomol boys would become satyrs, and the newly-admitted Komsomol girls would turn into witches dancing naked around the fire.

In fact, it might interest you to know that what really happened is based on a true story. Our Alisa did not share the fate of her namesake Alice – neither ending up in Wonderland nor going through the Looking Glass – and no matter how bright and impressive the gate opening before her seemed, it was not in any sense heavenly. It was simply a commonplace, iron gate with bars patterned in a Stalinist baroque design, only unusual in that it did not bear the usual Soviet symbols such as the hammer and sickle or a star.

Indeed, Alisa Melnik had been dreaming throughout the previous academic year, like millions of Soviet pioneers, of staying at the Artek Camp. And although she had graduated from grade 6 with excellent grades, as she had promised her parents, she had not ended up at the camp of her dreams on the shores of the Black Sea but was instead somewhere in the Armenian mountains.

In her heart of hearts, Alisa Melnik already knew that the famous Artek Camp for Pioneers, located in Crimea, was meant only for schoolchildren with exceptional talent, the kids of high-ranking *nomenklatura* or the ones that knew whose palm

to grease, if you know what I mean. And because Alisa's intellectual parents were not ones to offer a bribe, nor were they high-ranking officials, she had tried very sincerely, working hard for a whole year to be at the top of her class, a veritable Soviet Samantha Smith.

It is difficult to describe in words who Samantha Smith had been for millions of Soviet schoolchildren. Perhaps she was the Greta Thunberg of her time or the dove of peace that heralded the beginning of the end of the Cold War, a little Goodwill Ambassador whose bright smile had pierced the first hole in the Iron Curtain, someone who would later spark what was called "children's diplomacy," or perhaps just an idol for Soviet adolescents, a sex symbol befitting their delicate age, who was both famous and divine on screen while also being like family, someone they identified with, their first real American friend and, most importantly for Alisa, a real pioneer in the literal and original sense of the word.

It was the end of summer vacation the previous year when Alisa had learned the news that Samantha Smith had died. Everyone was saying that the plane crash had been the work of the US intelligence services, but Alisa could not believe it. She simply refused to accept that there was anyone in the world who wished for Samantha's death. Alisa had cried for three days and three nights because the injustice of an accidental plane crash was even harder to bear than the conspiracy theory. When she went to school, she had dedicated the full text of the mandatory "How I spent the summer" essay to Samantha from start to finish, as if she had lost her closest friend or her own sister, the one she never had.

(In general, Soviet schoolchildren lived in greater fear of a nuclear attack than their American counterparts, and writing letters to the leader of the opposite side during the Cold War was common practice on both sides, often with behind-the-scenes guidance.)

Alisa had cut out pictures of Samantha from the newspapers and kept them and had put a glass frame on the photo taken at Artek – where Samantha was wearing an Artek uniform and *lodochka* cap – and hung it from the wall of her room. She knew Samantha's famous letter and Andropov's reply by heart, which was generally true of anything and everything related to Samantha and her visit to the Soviet Union, and she had memorized it like exam material. For days and months after her death, she had conversations with Samantha in her mind. Alisa was excited by Samantha's angelic, posthumous, secret vocal presence in her life, and the hundreds of letters that she penned with no response were actually written by the two of them together, to some extent. The Samantha that had died too soon, the Samantha that lived within her, sometimes dictated, sometimes hinted at what she should write. All the letters ended with Samantha's favorite among the popular Soviet slogans of the time: *Miru mir*, "peace to the world." She was very pleased at the fact that the words in Russian for "world" and "peace" were homonyms.

And, one day, at the end of the academic year, when Chernobyl had already happened, Samantha's guiding voice disappeared. It vanished, as if Alisa had never had that constantly dictating, otherworldly inner voice.

Alisa was unable to say for sure whether it had been the terrible story of the Chernobyl disaster that had silenced Samantha's

voice and turned the fears of the Cold War upside down, now pointing them inwards, to the edges of their own homeland, to a place so close to home, somewhere she could reach if she took an endless number of steps or if she ran till her breath gave out or where she could definitely go with several buses or other forms of public transport, or whether the hundreds of letters she had written and the only one she had received in reply had acted like a slap in the face, waking her up and putting an end to it.

Alisa did not just address her letters to the White House or the US Ambassador in Moscow, as her schoolmates did under the guidance of others. She would send her letters to all kinds of different people, including a sincere text she had sent to Samantha's Russian friend, Natasha Kashirina, who had had the good fortune of being her roommate and interpreter at Artek. Natasha's reply had been a few brief words, the usual, polite response to Alisa's verbose letter, where the latter had confessed how she had been a bad Pioneer because she had been filled with the vilest of jealousy toward Natasha, desiring with all her heart to be in her place as Samantha's companion. She had followed this confession with a touching paragraph of regret, asking Natasha in the end to share some of her valuable memories of the days she spent with Samantha at Artek and Leningrad. Alisa eventually expressed hope that they would become pen pals and – perhaps someday, who knows – inseparable friends. Besides the fact that she had received a reply, Alisa was also shocked by the P.S. that Natasha had added – *Budem zhit*. These had been the words that Samantha had said in Russian, "We will live," before she had left Artek, and they had become a catchphrase that everyone used. "We will live, but we won't live as friends...,"

Alisa had acknowledged sadly, and ended her fruitless efforts to "bomb" the world with letters.

Natasha was Natalia Rosston now, married to a handsome American and, judging by her Facebook photos, someone with a happy family life in Los Angeles. But who was Alisa?

She was like a pilgrim standing in front of an empty pedestal. During a visit to Moscow in the early 2000s, she had set off with a bunch of flowers to the Samantha Smith memorial in the Bibirevo district. She had arrived at the Plesheev-Leskov intersection and ended up rooted in place. The statue was gone. It had been stolen, perhaps with the aim of melting it down and selling the metal. She had been unaware and had stood there, upset and confused, a bunch of flowers in her hand... A lone pilgrim standing in front of an empty pedestal.

In any case, when she had settled into her room at the Sevan Children's Sanatorium, she had forgotten about Natasha's reply as well as the pain of losing Samantha's guiding voice, because Alisa had made the acquaintance of her roommates and seemed to have found not one but several sisters, the ones she had never had.

There were six girls in the room: four Ukrainians – Darya, Olya, Yulia, and her, plus two Armenians – Sirun and Hasmik. They were all almost the same age, 13-14 years old. Darya was the only one who had noticeable breasts (not yet in adolescent fullness but already clearly protruding), and because she was a bit plump, her behind would bounce slightly when she walked, causing the schoolboys to stare, their snot flowing. Golden-haired Olya had very white skin – a pale, thin, bony girl, her hips not yet round, but with the most extraordinary blue eyes, such that

the majority of the boys at camp were ready to drown in the sea of her gaze. Yulia was the tallest of the lot. She could easily have been a basketball player, although she dreamed about becoming a pianist. Hasmik would have been considered a beauty if not for her aquiline nose. The nose gave her a unique appearance, and she had a sleek and symmetrical body, with long, dark hair, which she combed carefully for hours then braided. Depending on her mood, she would make one or two braids, which she would then sometimes pull into a bun, turning herself into a capricious, high-class maiden from some well-known novel. Sirun, meanwhile, was like the sun – shimmering eyes, a stack of curly hair on her head, a smile constantly on her face. Alisa liked all her roommates at once, even Hasmik with the stuck-up nose, who was not as outgoing or, rather, who had quite a high opinion of herself. Although she spoke Russian fluently, she would always chatter with Sirun in Armenian, which would irritate the Ukrainians a little. Sirun would intentionally but diplomatically respond in Russian, though this caused her some difficulty as she had to search for the right words and spoke with a thick Armenian accent. In any case, the girls were overjoyed when they ended up together in the same cohort at camp.

The very first evening, after dinner, with all the newly-arrived Ukrainians were invited to a meeting the head educator at the camp, Comrade Wilson Tumanyan, who was the *de facto* camp manager. Comrade Wilson Tumanyan was a kind, elderly gentleman past sixty, with a mild, warm smile, always affectionate and friendly with the children but quite strict and demanding when it came to the staff. In any case, his presence caused a palpable tension and alertness among the camp workers. He won

the Ukrainians over at once by saying that Ukraine was his second homeland, a place dearer to him than the land of his birth, somewhere he had been throughout the Second World War. Alisa Melnik felt a spirit of affection and familial warmth in his sincere words, as if this was the first time she had met her own grandfather, the one she never had (neither of her grandfathers had come home from that war).

The first days at camp went by according to the regular timetable: mornings started with Assembly, the only pleasant moment of which was the exercise-dance (to the tune of the Italian Pippo Franco's *Chi chi chi, co co co*) that closed proceedings, a routine that everyone truly enjoyed. The cohorts would line up with their cohort leaders, with whom they would then end up spending most of the day. Alisa's cohort leader was Comrade Areg – a feisty and constantly energetic young woman, who considered physical exercise very important. This meant that their afternoons were usually occupied with team sports, while their evenings were spent wandering in the forested area within the large grounds of the sanatorium. When they grew tired, they would gather in an opening or in one of the gazebos placed under the trees and start endlessly discussing one topic or the other.

They had a free hour before lunch – exactly sixty minutes – and the "Hour of the Dead" after lunch. It wasn't clear why after-lunch nap time was called "dead" when it was in fact a period of indescribable activity. The campers were forced to go to bed, but they created a buzz of nonstop whispering, pretending to be asleep when they heard the footsteps of the monitors on duty, who were pretending in turn to seriously make sure that everyone was sound asleep. And, as I'm sure you can imagine, some

of the more brazen kids slipped out of their rooms during the Hour of the Dead, stuffing their beds with pillows and clothes to make believe someone was sleeping.

The menu? Breakfast – bread, butter, cheese, tea, boiled eggs (every other day), a sausage each (on rare occasions), and a hot meal. Dinner was almost the same as breakfast – more bread, butter, cheese, tea, and often seasonal fruits. Lunch consisted mainly of various vegetable ragus, which were all called the same thing there – *ajapsandal*. Sometimes, they would serve a beef or chicken patty with mashed potatoes, various kinds of side dishes (except buckwheat, which was in very short supply in the Soviet Union that particular year). Nobody touched the soups (except for the days when the entrée was borscht with sour cream or meatball soup), while the hot meal from breakfast also usually ended up uneaten – semolina porridge (*mannaya kasha*), milk broth and wheatmeal porridge, with wheat that was always undercooked, clumping into balls of flour. On Sundays, they would sometimes get a special meal – barbecue, *tolma*, kebabs, all served in small portions that would be wiped clean in a matter of minutes. In the existing acute shortages that were a constant feature of that planned economy, the menu offered at that sanatorium could actually be considered quite lavish. There was no toilet paper, of course, which everyone replaced using carefully cut segments of newspapers, all except *Pravda*, which was never used here for that purpose, for some reason.

Alisa also had vivid memories of the inconveniences of bath day. Once a week, they would sling their towels across their shoulders, pack a bag with a change of clothes, and go to the bathhouse, which was a separate one-floor building. The show-

ers were few in number and there was only one cabin, with no internal separations. The changing room was cramped. They had to take quick showers under the watchful eyes of the bathhouse monitors, so that the others would not spend long waiting in line. Hurriedly bathing, the girls would cast curious glances to check out the bodies of the others that had matured before them, some experiencing a pang of envy. Something similar probably happened with the boys. On regular days, they would simply use the washbasins placed on each floor of the main building, where the water was always cold, but invigorating and even pleasant on those summer mornings.

It was probably the end of the first week when one of the girls from Alisa's room, plump Darya, who was also from Kyiv, raised the issue during their gazebo discussions of how she was upset by the unpleasant attitude of a group of Armenian campers. This was not about all the Armenians, of course, but there were some that did not talk to the "radioactive ones," demonstratively kept their distance, smirked among themselves, and never sat next to them in the cafeteria. Some had even secretly changed their rooms, as if these people were lepers. Comrade Areg was taken aback by Darya's accusations. (Had she really not noticed something that must have been quite obvious? After all, there were Armenian children like this even in her own cohort). Comrade Areg had explained the lack of communication with the Ukrainians by some Armenians as a language issue. Russian, as you all know, was the language of the Soviet person, the *lingua franca* of the time and taught in all schools. But would you believe it? Not everyone was fluent in this privileged language, and some did not even know enough for a basic level of communication.

The issue was probably discussed at the educator's meeting that very day because, after dinner, all the Armenian campers were called to the large hall, while the children from other countries were sent to their rooms. Alisa never found out what explanatory procedures took place that evening, but Comrade Wilson Tumanyan was personally present at assembly the next morning and ordered all the campers to warmly welcome their guests from brotherly Ukraine, which was undergoing a difficult period. The delivery of that warm welcome ended up as an amusing and unusual scene, because the several dozen Ukrainians were lined up separately and then the remaining children, hundreds of them, walked up in turn and welcomed them as follows. Children of the same sex would hug each other while, between the girls and boys who were of high-school age, this would be limited to a handshake. As strange as this process seemed, none of the campers resisted it. The ceremony took place with some giggling and snickering, a little happy and a little sad, slightly serious, with some of the Ukrainian girls even getting emotional and leaving the assembly with moist eyes. Was this because of a sense of demonstrated offense or the unexpected-but-scripted display of fraternal affection? In any case, the ice was broken at the end of the event. The atmosphere at the camp changed dramatically in a few days and even the slightest bit of disrespect to the "radioactive ones" was met with sound condemnation by everyone.

Comrade Wilson Tumanyan never found out what genie was released from its bottle through his "correctional intervention," but soon a profusion of free speech hung like an invisible mushroom cloud above the whole camp. The children started

discussing Chernobyl throughout the day, at first talking about the disaster only among themselves, mainly during the hour of the dead or before bedtime. One day, someone started talking about the two-headed or four-legged newborns that had come into the world after the explosion. A huge argument arose. Was such a thing really possible? Eventually, they decided to ask the head doctor at the camp. Alisa had a foggy recollection from years ago of what the bespectacled doctor had said, but she could clearly see the terrified look on lanky Yulia's face, a constant feature during those conversations. Her aunt had been from Chernobyl and was pregnant, and she had decided to keep the child. Many years later, when Alisa saw a picture online of paralympic champion Oksana Masters, her heart beat faster at the obvious resemblance to Yulia. She never gathered the courage to write to Yulia, especially since they had lost touch over the years and had not been in contact for a while.

In any case, this new obsession did not take long to conquer the camp. A wave of panic and alarm took over within a matter of days among the children who were isolated from the adult world, living in a kind of parallel reality. They were overcome with the terrifying thought that they were defenseless against nuclear disaster. The "evacuated" Ukrainian children were the first ones to spread this fear, although the trigger had been a mention by one of the Armenian children that there was a large nuclear power station in Armenia, at Metzamor, as well. What would happen if something went wrong there, like at Chernobyl? All these years later, Alisa was now finding it difficult to remember whether the behavior that ensued had been prompted or spontaneous, but the fact was that everyone began to swipe food from the cafeteria

– mainly bread – which they dried and kept carefully in various hidey holes in their rooms.

The restaurant staff soon noticed the children's strange behavior. Naturally, Comrade Wilson Tumanyan conducted a little "investigation," after which yet another lengthy staff meeting took place.

At Assembly the following morning, Comrade Wilson Tumanyan gave a long, explanatory speech, saying that the children were in one of the safest spots in the world and nothing threatened them, but that they should, in any case, always be ready for even the most unexpected thing, shouldn't they? They were told that the grounds had a warning system, a large number of gas masks, stretchers, and other supplies. The basement of the school building had a large space that could be used as a fallout shelter, which was tidied up during the latest *subbotnik* cleaning day. They also ran several emergency preparedness drills. And with this the topic was considered closed. The sense of alarm gradually died and, a week later, the isolated camp returned to its peaceful life.

A memorable incident for Alisa took place on July 17, when the educators and senior girls at camp decided to watch the broadcast on television of the US-USSR or, more specifically, the historic Leningrad-Boston "tele-bridge" entitled "Women Talk to Women." It was during this event that the catchphrase "There is no sex in the USSR" originated. (In fact, when the 45-year-old participant, Ludmila Ivanova, who was living with her fourth and final husband, was asked whether commercials were also sexually-charged in her country, she had said, "We have no sex, and we are strictly opposed to it!") A burst of laughter had been

followed by embarrassed silence and, eventually, the girls were sent to bed before the tele-bridge broadcast had ended. Ludmila Ivanova, who, incidentally, is now happily retired in Berlin (she had later emigrated and joined that same fourth and final husband, who had found work in Germany), even participating in gay pride events and considering German porn to be fake and deprived of real, bodily pleasure, never found out that her legendary words had caused Alisa Melnik's body to feel its first shiver of love later that evening. Until late that night, there was a hormonal storm in Alisa's room. Plump Darya was the first to open up to her roommates, because she was the most experienced of the group. She had kissed the boy next door, letting him touch her and kissing her not just on the face but also on the neck. But she swore as a Pioneer – their version of "cross my heart" – that he had touched her breasts only through her clothes. When she recalled the conversations from that evening and the dream that followed, Alisa thought that ecstatic female moans must have floated out of their half-open windows at Sevan that night, taking wings to rise up to the starry night. In her dream, she was with Masis, who was skillfully repeating every single thing that Darya's neighbor had done. When she woke up, she was head over heels in love with that boy whose eyebrow arched significantly higher than the other whenever he expressed surprise and a smile that twisted in a self-satisfying way, Masis, whose muscles shifted under his sweat-drenched shirt like fish that had been freshly extracted from Lake Sevan.

Alisa usually preferred to slip away from the main building during the free hour they had before lunch and spend time in a cozy, small park that had a round pool. At the center of the pool,

there was a concrete statue of a boy hugging a crocodile, which had been colored using oil paint. A spray of water burst forth from the crocodile's mouth, and the boy hugging it looked like a small cupid from the Renaissance era – but he had neither bow, nor arrow, nor angel's wings. He was simply a boy who happened to be hugging a crocodile that was larger than himself. Alisa would sit on a nearby wooden bench, in the shade of a tree, and dive into the only book she would end up reading that summer, Bulychev's *One Hundred Years Ahead*, which had been turned into her favorite televised mini-series, *Guest from the Future*. She had been delighted to find the book in the sanatorium's library.

During that free hour, reading by the pool, she would often see a small boy of preschool age, but it never crossed her mind to talk to the child or play with him. The small boy would sit for a long time next to the pool and stare at the crocodile statue as if enchanted, bewitched. He seemed to be a part of the pool itself, a living statue. But then someone would call out to him, and the human statue would suddenly emerge from his hypnotized state, turn into an active child, jump up and run in the direction of the voice that had sounded. Alisa knew that the small boy lived here, on the grounds of the sanatorium with his educator grandparents, in a slightly isolated single-story and wagon-like structure, long and plain, where staff members from distant locations had been allocated rooms.

Three and half decades later, Alisa Melnik clearly remembers how a red Zhiguli car appeared in front of the main sanatorium building. (Amazingly, they had opened the gate and allowed the Zhiguli to approach the building; visitors were usually made to park their cars outside the grounds.) It was their free hour, and

she had been sitting and reading, as usual, probably very absorbed, because she had spotted it in the distance out of the corner of her eye but hadn't looked up at first.

Three and a half decades later, Alisa Melnik still feels a pang of guilt; she finds it hard to bear that she did not react immediately, that she hesitated, that she didn't break into a run at once and hug Sirun, that she didn't take her address or phone number. She just stood there, confused, watching silently from afar as Sirun approached the red Zhiguli in the company of a male stranger. Comrade Areg and Comrade Wilson Tumanyan looked sad, upset, as Sirun looked around with a searching gaze. When the car moved, she rolled down the window in desperation, as if she was about to suffocate, as if she was about to break into pieces, never to be reassembled – unless she stuck her head out at that moment and saw somebody who cared. And it was at that last, that very last, moment that Alisa dropped her book and jumped up from her spot, running and shouting at the top of her lungs, "Sir-u-u-u-n... We will live, we will be f...." And she didn't know whether Sirun heard her, whether or not she understood. But even if she hadn't heard her, she must have seen her, because at that last, that very last, moment, their eyes met and Sirun, with that stack of curly hair on her head, the very same Sirun with the eyes that shimmered like the sun but were now damp, Sirun with the constant smile, now wiped off her face and waved goodbye sadly, miserably.

Just a few hours later, everyone had heard the news. It was Sirun's father. In Afghanistan. Plump Darya sobbed silently the whole night, her head buried under the blanket, but Sirun was as beautiful a person as her name suggested in Armenian, and

her father had also been someone beautiful for sure, for certain, just like her own uncle, who was also in Afghanistan, and she cried because "the beautiful ones should not die."[15]

At dawn, when Darya finally fell asleep, Alisa sat up at the edge of the bed with a deep sigh and the roommates got up as if coordinated by a silent command. They hadn't slept all night, except for Hasmik with the aquiline nose, who was snoring with calm ceremoniousness, her behind sticking out.

It only took a few minutes after the wall newsletter for the week was put up for the whole staff of educators, led by Comrade Wilson Tumanyan, to appear, stunned, in front of the wall, because Alisa had dared to author a brief article called "Peace to the World, NO to War in Afghanistan!", illustrated by her Ukrainian roommates – plump Darya, blue-eyed Olya, and lanky Yulia, all done in secret from Comrade Areg. (Hasmik had not wished to join them.) In any case, they had the newsletter removed immediately, and Comrade Areg was strictly reprimanded right there, in front of everyone, though it was done in Armenian, but everything was clear. And then Comrade Wilson Tumanyan invited Alisa and the other Ukrainians to his room for a conversation where, for some reason, he told them a long-winded story about his part in the Second World War, using the map on the wall to indicate all the places in Ukraine where he had fought. At the very beginning of the war, in the summer of 1941, he had been seriously wounded near Belaya Tserkov and was then taken prisoner. After two years as a prisoner of war, he and his friends escaped in May 1943 and joined the Suvorov Guerilla

[15] *A reference to the lyrics of a song from the Soviet animate film* ***Rusalochka*** *("The Mermaid").*

Battalion. In the summer of 1943, exactly forty-three years before the telling of his tale, he had destroyed the military train used by the enemy on the Shepetovka-Berdychev route and followed this success by laying waste to two more trains, including all the military equipment and personnel on board. He received a Great Patriotic War Medal of the Second Order for these feats and was promoted to platoon leader. (As he said this, Comrade Wilson Tumanyan carefully took out his medals from a drawer and displayed them, as if the girls needed to see real proof of what he was saying.).Their guerilla battalion then liberated Bereznika, Gorodnitsa, Malaya Korovnitsa, and several other settlements, blew up many military reserve units, bridges, and cisterns full of fuel. The Suvorov Guerilla Battalion played a major role in destroying Banderite groups that were active in Western Ukraine. (When he said the word "Banderite," Comrade Wilson Tumanyan looked Alisa Melnik right in the eyes.) Although there was no malice in his gaze and his tone of voice was not angry, Alisa was overcome by a mixed feeling of terror and rebellion. The terror was made more acute by the understanding that there was no way for her to go home on her own, that she could not return to her parents' secure fold alone, either by walking forever or running until her breath gave out – not even by taking a thousand buses or other forms of public transport. And that terror was mixed with a desperate feeling of rebellion from the thought that this white-haired man right here, this man with the kind eyes and soft smile – bearing that strange name of Wilson and, to her ears, the equally strange-sounding last name of Tumanyan – this veteran and war hero, who could be her grandfather, could also be the man who killed her grandfather because, no matter how

much of a family taboo it was to mention this, she had known for a long time – everyone had known – that her father was the son of a Banderite who had been killed at the end of the war, and that he had been forced to deny his own father.

In any case, Comrade Wilson Tumanyan considered it sufficient to convey the following when it came to Afghanistan – Soviet soldiers were waging a heroic battle there against the global evil of imperialism, just like they had done against fascism in his time. Alisa was forgiven for her ignorance, and Comrade Wilson Tumanyan promised in the end to provide them with a briefing of sorts on Afghanistan in the coming days – *likbez po Afghanistanu*, or "primer on Afghanistan," in his exact words.

Naturally, Comrade Wilson Tumanyan never provided them with this briefing. Instead, whether it was the strict reprimand that upset her or the sense of injustice, Comrade Areg gathered the whole cohort in a room a few days later and told them about the hippies and American pacifists that had protested against the Vietnam War, then played "banned music" – Jesus Christ Superstar. And that was how Comrade Areg became a real comrade to them, a like-minded friend and accomplice, their first guest from the future who had come from the fake world of the communist party to the real, parallel world of their adolescence, a true pioneer in the literal and original sense of the word.

And it was probably on that day that the idea came about to stage a musical on the final day of the camp. The final-day performance was a huge event. Each cohort was expected to stage something – a song, dance, recital, play, anything. Special guests were expected from Yerevan, as well as the parents of many of the campers.

And it turned out that lanky Yulia really played the piano well and was excellent at improvisation. One of the boys was good at the trumpet, another played the guitar, but things were complicated when it came to percussion – nobody in the cohort could play the drums or tambourine, although a few amateurs volunteered eventually. Thus, the band Melathon was established. They selected their repertoire of songs over the next few days and wrote the whole script for their musical – *Chernobyl-Metzamor*. Alisa would have the main role, playing the role of Alisa Seleznyova from the future, who, the script said, had come back in a time machine with the mission of preventing a possible explosion at the Metzamor Atomic Power Plant. They had chosen a very simple method for the performance: they would sing well-known and popular Russian songs, mainly those from the mini-series *The Adventures of the Electronic*, but some of the lyrics would be changed. In some places, the song would be modified into a recital; for example the song *Krylatye kacheli* would end in a repetition of the first line, "In that young month of April...", which would then transition into a melodeclamation on the April 26 Chernobyl explosion. Masis would play the role of a schoolboy in Metzamor who would help Alisa Seleznyova carry out her mission. His character was a child who was initially lazy and irresponsible, who would perform Syroyezhkin's song *We are small children, we want to have fun* as a solo. But after meeting Alisa, he would undergo a transformation and become a responsible young man. Masis would also render a performance, accompanied by a choir, of the song *What progress has been achieved*, during which a unique robot dance would be staged. The play would end with people learning from the Chernobyl

experience to prevent an explosion at Metzamor, and the group would perform *Marvelous future*, which would be the backdrop for the scene featuring Alisa Seleznyova's (Alisa Melnik's), return to the future.

Comrade Areg's cohort was enthusiastically rehearsing for the performance, dedicating their whole time during the day to making it happen. Even Alisa no longer used her free time to read. During the first weeks, everything seemed to be going smoothly. But this was a deceptive calm. Soon, a delegation headed by Comrade Wilson Tumanyan appeared at one of the rehearsals. The children were embarrassed at first and tried to gauge what to do based on Comrade Areg's behavior. In the end, they came to a silent but agreed decision to perform their songs without including their modified lyrics. "Make sure there aren't any surprises," Comrade Wilson Tumanyan said in Russian as he left, and Alisa realized that Hasmik with the aquiline nose had played a role in this unexpected visit. Indeed, that very evening, Hasmik gave up her small part and decided, without stating any reason, that she wanted to change her room as well as her cohort.

Hasmik's departure from the cohort was not without consequence. After an "investigation" that lasted a few days, a supervisor was appointed to watch over Comrade Areg, and they changed the whole script of the musical, turning it into something insipid, according to the children.

It was during those fateful days in August that the little guiding voice inside Alisa began to speak again. But this wasn't from the past, it wasn't the voice of Samantha who had died too soon. It was from the future, the voice of a guest from a marvelous future – yes, of course, it was the voice of Alisa Seleznyova, her namesake

and the protagonist of her favorite movie and book, the voice of her newly-discovered idol who shared her name, who couldn't be confused with anyone else, because this was, in a way, the voice of the best version of herself, the voice of the perfect Alisa. Letters! Write letters, flood the mailboxes of authoritative Armenian officials with letters! Appeal to all reputable figures – writers, academicians, other intellectuals – send an outpouring of open letters to all editorial offices, targeting both All-Soviet publications as well as local ones, and raise the issue of Metzamor. And, in passing, invite them all to their performance on the final day of camp. Until that day came, the group had to use their free time to rehearse in secret. When this plan bloomed in Alisa Melnik's heart and mind, when Alisa Seleznyova's otherworldly inner voice began to sound louder and clearer than her own feeble voice, that was the very evening that Alisa organized a secret meeting. She invited all her cohort campers to her room. The children all secretly shared the unspoken opinion that they were crossing a line with this plan and were about to do something "undesirable."

The next evening, there was a lot of commotion in their rooms. The children were running from room to room, distributing pages torn out of notebooks, trying to find envelopes and stamps, looking up the postal address of one official or the other, an editorial office, or an institution. In the morning, the camp's metal postbox was packed with letters. The boys were watching from afar and saw that, although the postman was surprised, he filled his sack with the letters and took them for distribution, as usual. They would reach their destinations.

Alisa Melnik would never know how many of them had successfully arrived, but the fact was that some of them had been

returned and they now lay on the desk in front of Comrade Wilson Tumanyan, who sat with a worried and frowning face. There had not been a need for a long-winded "investigation" in this case. Comrade Wilson Tumanyan had called Alisa Melnik to his office immediately.

Three and a half decades later, Alisa had a foggy recollection of the long conversation she had had with Comrade Wilson Tumanyan, although she *did* clearly remember the desperate anger with which he had brought down his fist on his desk and the angry, almost weeping "I won't stand for this" that had come from him. He had then seemed embarrassed by his own unexpected burst of anger, and Comrade Wilson Tumanyan had hung his head low, turning into a hopelessly aging, hopelessly weakening, incapable, feeble old-timer, who had barely managed to muster a pleading voice loud enough to order Alisa to no longer take part in the rehearsals.

When the time came for rehearsals the following day, Alisa grabbed her book and headed for the round pool. Although she couldn't rehearse any more, she was allowed to move about freely. (Perhaps confining her to her room would have been extremely counter-educational).

As usual, the small boy was there, immobile as if bewitched, staring at the wingless, bow-and-arrowless boy-cupid hugging the crocodile. The two of them sat there for a long time, the small boy at the edge of the pool, Alisa on the bench, the book open in her lap, though the day did not lend itself to reading. "What's your name, boy?" Alisa called out to him, and the boy suddenly grew animated and ran up to her. "It's a good day, I'm a good boy, little Armen," he said, as though he were reciting a

memorized text. Then he grabbed Alisa's hand and almost pulled her after him. The book remained on the bench, opened on the same page as before.

Alisa could now hazily remember – although the little boy will never, ever forget – how he had grabbed her hand tightly and taken her to the rusty, ordinary gate at the back of the sanatorium, to a secret exit far beyond anyone's view, the only alternative to the silvery gate that was the grand entrance. He will never forget how Alisa had followed him without asking any questions, without any signs of resistance, as they slipped out through that back gate, walked up the small hill covered with short, prickly bushes and thistles. At a slight distance from the gate on the hillside, there was a black hole that had a mysterious purpose. Was it a manmade tunnel or the entrance to a natural cave? The black hole was like the open maw of a monster or a whalelike fish. There was a sudden drop at first, which a couple of meters later, then shifted into a sheer abyss. The darkness in that part of the hole seemed impenetrable. Nothing could be seen, even if sunlight fell directly into that open "maw." If you listened long and hard, you could almost hear sounds coming from its depths. Perhaps Alisa had likened them to weak voices calling for help, as if the tiny offspring of some unknown creatures had ended up at the bottom of the abyss and were now begging them to come down and bring them back up into the light. Perhaps she had heard nothing; perhaps all the inner guiding and rescuing voices within her had been silenced in that moment – both the voice of Samantha Smith, who had died too soon, and that of the unreal Alisa Seleznyova – and a bottomless, all-swallowing black hole had opened up within *her*. Perhaps that was the moment she had internalized

the impenetrable darkness and speechless silence coming from outside, which Alisa Melnik would have to overcome, trying to rediscover her muted voice for the rest of her life.

Three and a half decades later, Alisa cannot remember at all – although the little boy will never, ever forget – how Alisa had hugged him so tightly, so that he would not be afraid and could then hang over the edge of the black hole in order to listen to the sounds coming from its depths. "Catch me," the boy had said in broken Russian, and Alisa had understood what he wanted to do. She had made him lie face down, and she had lain down on top of him, holding him tightly at the waist, which allowed the boy to lower the front half of his body into the black hole, his head dropping beneath the edge, his ear picking up the enchanting, inviting voices coming from far below. A magical underground waterworld had opened up beneath him, flooded in a transparent blue light that came from somewhere unknown. The spellbinding, multicolor waters of that world were full of crocodiles ridden by small boys like himself, making sounds of joy, calling out to each other and whooping with pleasure, swimming happily in the colorful currents. That was what the little boy had heard and imagined that day or – who knows, perhaps he had made this up later as a waking dream, which had accompanied him for three and a half decades.

The following day, Alisa's father arrived and took her home to Kyiv. The camp had not been scheduled to end for another week and a half.

And so she had been within those gated grounds from the start of the summer almost until its end, in a world that was closed off by an "iron curtain," unless we consider her escape to

the black hole with the little boy and the two field trips the camp had taken to the shores of Lake Sevan and its island.

That first field trip had been a swim in Lake Sevan. The lake water was fresh and heavy, not light like the Black Sea. And the sun was hot. And why, oh why wasn't it *she* who almost drowned in the water of the lake? Why did Masis have to dive in and rescue blue-eyed Olya and not her? Why was it Olya that he carried out of the heavy-heavy water, accompanied by the admiring whoops and applause of everyone around them? Why couldn't she look away from Masis' firm calves, the dark black, curly bunch of short hair at his chest, and his muscles that looked like fish freshly extracted from the lake? And when Olya who had recovered consciousness a while ago and calmed down kissed her rescuer, and Masis' eyebrow jumped up in surprise, his smile twisted in a new way, slightly embarrassed, not self-satisfied as usual, and then, and then, when that thing in his tight and wet swimsuit rose quickly and unexpectedly, why, why didn't she burst out laughing like everyone else? Why did she feel a sudden, powerful pain like starvation, that she could not forget to this day? And Masis, upset at the unexpectedness of what had happened, had pushed Olya aside and ran back to the very fresh, very cold, very heavy rescuing waters.

During the second field trip, she had bought an artistic souvenir coin with the image of a girl holding up a torch, which she had carefully kept for years at home as a token of her time at Sevan in 1986, in addition to a few photographs and letters. At that peninsula, which had once been an island, Comrade Areg had told them the legend of Akhtamar. This was the story of the beautiful Tamar, who would light a torch every night for her

lover, so that he would not lose his way as he swam over to her embrace. An evil acquaintance extinguished the flaming beacon one day and the swimmer drowned in those very heavy, very cold, very black waters, with the final words out of his lips being an exclamation, "Akh, Tamar!"

When she was back in Kyiv, when she had written the traditional "How I spent the summer" essay dedicated to her adventures in Sevan from start to finish, when the memory of Masis' unexpected erection no longer elicited feelings of starvation within her, when her mother's gloominess had passed and her father's stubborn silence had ended, when her grandmother's reprimanding words faded, she received a long letter from Darya.

Plump Darya's letter told her about the stunning performance on the final day. Their cohort had been the last one on stage and they had staged *Chernobyl-Metzamor* as originally planned, with an unchanged script. The oldest of the guests from Yerevan, who was perhaps a party leader, had left the hall, followed by Comrade Wilson Tumanyan's whole delegation. The only guests that remained in the hall had been the parents, a young journalist, and the photographer accompanying him, who had apparently then reported the incident in an Armenian newspaper. The boys had carried Comrade Areg to the stage and everyone had given an extended standing ovation. And because the campers were due to leave the following day, no punishments or correctional interventions were carried out. Alisa's role had been played by – I'm sure you've already guessed it – blue-eyed Olya.

* * *

Three and a half decades later, in the summer of 2021, Alisa

Melnik returned to the camp she had visited in 1986 – a guest from the future to her past, with a mission that even she did not understand.

While surfing the internet, browsing through the results of yet another search query, she had come across a Facebook page featuring – how could it be – pictures of the camp she had come to as a child. It turned out to be a group administered by the little boy in the past, who had grown and turned into a bearded writer who had created a page in memory of his educator grandparents. In one of the comments beneath a picture, Alisa saw and immediately recognized Masis. He was a doctor now, wearing a white coat. He hadn't married Olya, he had adult children, his wife was Armenian, with a face that seemed so familiar to Alisa. Her name was Hasmik. Could it be her? Who knew? Perhaps this was their Hasmik, but the aquiline nose was gone. Her hair was short, cut in an ultramodern style, and she looked like someone who knew how to take care of herself. Judging from the pictures, they seemed to be a happily married couple living in Malta.

On a sunny day in June 2021, Alisa Melnik, accompanied by the little boy who had become a bearded man, stood once again before the silvery gate with bars pattered in a Stalinist baroque design, but it did not roll open this time. They slipped in somehow. There were miserable ruins inside, enclosed within gated grounds that were still miraculously lush and green. The space bore a distant resemblance to an erstwhile majestic palace now hidden in a jungle thicket, but it was even more similar to the ghost town of Pripyat that she had visited a few years earlier. They walked around inside. Most of the concrete statue of the boy hugging the crocodile had wasted away. But the large buildings were

still standing, their windows broken, heavy padlocks everywhere. They silently left the area as if walking away from the coffin of a dear corpse who had definitely died but was yet to be buried.

They did not go near the black hole. Instead, they spent most of the day in the nearby village of Tzaghkunk, riding horses, visiting a dog farm, walking to the church at the top of the cliff, eating *lavash* at the oldest *tonir* bakery in Armenia, which had been restored to its authentic original design, and finally indulged in an excellent meal at the newly-opened restaurant in the middle of the village, wallowing in memories until late that night. When Alisa Melnik finished her story of what had happened in the summer of 1986, she stared for a long time at the little boy, who had become a writer and who was playing with his beard, and made one and only request of him. "Armen, if you end up writing this story, please attach this photo to it." A quick airdrop later, one iPhone received from the other, the only photo that Alisa Melnik had taken at the Sevan sanatorium – the silver gate.

And so, dear Alisa, here it is. I have carried out the request you made of me.

July 11, 2021

Epilogue

The Sevan Children's Sanatorium is one of dozens of abandoned and half-ruined sanatoria and resorts left over from the Soviet Era in Armenia. It is located on the road between the town of Sevan and the village of Tzaghkunk.

Wilson Tumanyan was the head ed-

ucator at the Sevan Children's Sanatorium from the early 1970s. His military history as presented in the story is based on fact.

On August 28, 1987, during the All-Union Pioneer Meeting at Artek camp in Crimea, the Soviet children made an unprecedented deviation from the official agenda and asked questions about their rights and other issues that they considered important. This incident is known as the Pioneer Uprising.

In 1987, one of the demands of the newly-launched Environmental Civic Movement was the closure of the Metzamor Atomic Power Plant. The movement did not have much success and, one year later, many of the activists joined another popular uprising – the Karabakh Movement.

On December 7, 1988, the Soviet authorities panicked after a devastating earthquake hit Spitak (25 thousand killed, more than half a million people left homeless) and shut down the Metzamor Atomic Power Plant, which was then restarted in 1995 and continues to operate today, ending the energy crisis that had engulfed Armenia for many years.

The closed border between Armenia and Turkey is considered the final "piece" of the Iron Curtain, even though it was closed due to the First Karabakh War, after the Soviet Union had collapsed. In 2020, after the Second Karabakh War, reopening that last piece of the Iron Curtain has once again appeared on the political agenda.

Translated by Nazareth Seferian

MHER
ISRAELYAN

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.

2016

Translated by Nazareth Seferian

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VAHRAM
MARTIROSYAN

THE FISH

The three of us were sitting on round, high stools, the kind that get narrower at the top and have a wooden circle wrapped around the middle part of their spindly legs. We were on a bridge, close to the railings, looking down and talking about those people. Far below us was the river. The right bank was a steep, almost vertical slope covered in thick vegetation, and on the left bank the openings between the trees revealed faded, wooden split-level houses. The highway supposedly ran behind those houses.

"They mostly lived by fishing," said the person seated to my left, whom I don't remember. "It seems that the fish must have been plentiful at the time and that they lived worry-free lives," I chimed in, saying whatever I could about the subject. "It's been a hundred years since they've fished." "Why?" I said, getting worried, because I quite enjoy having fish for dinner despite an avowed lack of interest in fishing itself. "They re-

frained and waited so that the river could recover its stock of fish," said the person on my right, a medieval Turkish traveler. I looked down more closely and noticed that in many places the river had turned into a swamp, completely stagnant, and covered in reeds and other plants up to its midpoint. Of course, nobody cared about the river or had gone near it for a long time, which would probably mean that it was now full of fish, teeming among the reed-stalks. I even squinted to see if I could make out any traces of movement in the water. At that very moment, the person sitting to my left pointed with his hand towards the left bank of the river, where, on a tall willow, a fish was fluttering. "Look, a flying fish!" he exclaimed.

The fish flew up even higher without ceasing its fluttering for a single second and in a minute or two it almost reached us. With an abrupt sweep of my hands, I caught it. It was a regular fish, thirteen to fifteen inches or so in length, and the only extraordinary thing about its appearance was that the lower part of its body was completely straight instead of being slightly rounded. It was wriggling, so I loosened the grip of my fist and showed the fish to the two people sitting with me.

"What a marvel!" said the Turkish traveler. "I've heard of this fish but have never actually seen one."

It was just one fish, and it was too small to be shared by three people, but since it was such an unusual find, I didn't just want to gift it to my companions. I eventually got tired of it and decided to toss it back into the river. But, as I quickly discovered, it was firmly glued to my hand. With tremendous effort, using my left hand as a lever, I pried my fingers off its body, but it was still stuck to my right palm. What's worse, it started dragging

me towards the river. I pressed it against my leg and, with a lightning-fast movement, finally unstuck it from my hand. But it fastened itself to my jeans right above the knee and continued to pull me, with surprising strength, towards the water. Since I was sitting on a high stool, and the wooden railings of the bridge were rather low, any further movement could have proven fatal.

"Help me," I implored my neighbors in a soft voice.

"It sure looks like a regular fish. And, against the dark-blue of the jeans, you can really see its scales," said the person seated to my left, whom I don't remember.

Suddenly, with the fingers of both his hands hooked, the Turkish traveler tore the fish from my leg. The fish started fluttering around in the air in front of his face. The Turk had fine, curly hair that grew thicker on the sides of his face closer to his chin. If that fish ever got stuck in the Turk's curly hair he never would have been able to get rid of it.

I

To Vahram Martirosyan

It was almost midnight. It wasn't very late. Occasionally, I'd return home as late as three in the morning. On the other hand, it was pretty late considering that I'd promised to be home by 5 o'clock that afternoon. So, I decided that the most sensible thing to do would be to hang back and linger at the party for a little while longer until everyone at home fell asleep. I figured it would be easier to explain my tardiness the next morning. But

eventually we ran out of alcohol and people started leaving, and, after all, I couldn't just wander around outside, waiting for my family to fall asleep.

When returning home later than promised, I always avoided looking at the windows, and, vainly keeping my hopes up, directed my eyes elsewhere. As soon as our windows came into view, I averted my eyes, but I usually managed to notice whether the lights were still on or not. Sometimes they would fall asleep before I got home – why not now?

This time, too, I tried to avoid the windows, but discovered that the living room lights were turned on. Then I took another look and noticed that my room's light was on as well. Why had they turned on the lights in my room? The only thing I could hope for now was that they hadn't turned on the vacuum cleaner; that was my one and only wish. I could only pray that at this late hour they didn't have the vacuum going and moving from room to room under the pretense of tidying up.

As I made my way up the stairs, I listened carefully for any noise. Nothing unusual, just the regular noises of the hour. I halted on our floor and tried to shake myself out of my stupor. Something felt uncomfortable – could it be that I'd tightened my belt too much? Or was it the alcohol making its way to my throat? I loosened the belt just in case, rested for a little while, and only then tried to open the door. I knew that if my attempt to unlock the door with my key from the outside was successful, it would mean they'd all gone to sleep, resigned not to see me until the next morning. If this was the case, then they'd be happy later on that I at least made it home before midnight.

I always wear my keychain attached to my belt, and I try not

to remove it every time because the iron clasp doesn't bend well and might break one of these days. But it's not easy to unlock the door with the keys attached to my belt because the first turn of the key is usually effortless, but on the second rotation, it gets jammed between the other keys in the stack. When this happens, I usually rotate myself in order to be able to move the key and unlock the door.

However, I always somehow manage to unlock it. At the last second, just as I begin to think it's hopeless, the key budges a little, I slightly tilt my body counterclockwise, and, next thing I know, I'm inside.

I inserted the key into the keyhole. Luckily, the inside key had been removed. I swiftly turned it twice, leaning against the door.

I couldn't hear the vacuum-cleaner. I removed my coat in the hallway, and on my way to the dining room I saw that the door to my room was ajar. I popped my head in (the light was still on) and saw myself sitting inside. I wasn't in my usual spot by the computer but by the small coffee table. I was sitting opposite the table – not backwards on the chair but sideways. I was wearing a green polyester winter coat that made rustling noises, a black ski-hat, and I had a red scarf wrapped around my collar. I was also wearing brown pants and large matching sunglasses. I knew that I never owned any of these things. None was in my taste. I really hated the whole outfit, not to mention the straight, flat strands of hair that were sticking out from underneath the ski-hat, which looked nothing like my curly black hair.

I noticed that he – that I was sitting with my legs crossed, with one of my trouser-legs riding up my calf and exposing a narrow line of my flesh between the trousers and the boots – my calf,

like the rest of me, turned out to be made of pink gutta-percha. At first, I wanted to go in, but then decided against it and headed to the guest-room instead.

THE FRIEND

Seven o'clock on a winter evening is far too late for these kinds of things. And it would be ridiculous to have it earlier in the day, say at four or five. I have to go since I've been waiting for it for the past twenty days now, but as I direct my steps there, the closer I get, the more I regret my decision. The last few hundred feet are the hardest, because people are huddled up in groups, three people here and there, leaning against the wall, five people under the tree, ten sitting on the concrete blocks of the construction site, and a few walking back and forth among them. Women are standing in pairs, waiting for their dates. Some children – whose? – are playing among the tree-trunks in the dark.

I am walking with my head held low, but I know I shouldn't hang it too far down. On the other hand, if I lift it too high, they'll think I'm putting on airs. Better think I'm alone, although that only bodes well here, outside. Inside, it's imperative to have at least one companion.

I can hear coarse laughter, but why should I care? I know it can't be at my expense, because I haven't done anything laughable. But if these spiteful people have ever seen me do anything ridiculous, they'll wait – a month, if they have to – until

I pass by them again, so that they can laugh derisively in my face. Brutes! They exchange opinions loudly, but I know it has nothing to do with me. No connection whatsoever. If I keep thinking about it in the days to come, I'll probably be able to figure out what they're saying, but it's probably best if I don't. I've reached them, I am passing them by, and I've finally passed them! Now, I've really left them behind! The entrance is very well-lit, and people are crowding around it. They're also staring at me – if not all of them, then most. How am I supposed to sell it here, under these circumstances? How? But it costs money and shouldn't be tossed away. I'll make one circle and come back to sell it. But wait – I can't make a circle, I don't have the nerve to walk the same path a second time. The first time was bad enough. I can't, and besides, I don't have time. Alas, if you're on time, they'll start with a terrible delay. But if you're late, you'll find the entrance closed.

To sell or not to sell? Not to sell or sell? I doubt anyone will want just one. They'll try to convince me to sell them both, but I won't agree to it. I can't – I don't want to sell mine, too.

If she wasn't planning to show up, couldn't she have told me from the get go? Of course, her explanation is, you didn't ask me before you bought it, not to mention the fact that you'd rather be caught dead than walk across the street with me.

"No, not any street, just a couple of places, why is that so important?"

"Well, if that's important to you, this is important to me. Besides, when have you ever taken me anywhere yourself?"

That much is true, I never take her anywhere. This fear can be such torture!

I'm not going to sell it. I don't care if I lose money on it – it's not just money that I lose, after all. I approach the crowd around the entrance, but I don't want to push my way through them, and I don't even think I can. Excuse me, I say, excuse me, but nobody hears me. I must be speaking very softly. A little later somebody comes outside to make an announcement, everybody gathers 'round him, and I approach the guard.

"We can't let you in looking like that."

"Looking like what? I look fine."

"There's nothing fine about the way you look. You can't go in." "What's not fine? I'm sure I look just fine!"

"No way! Have you seen yourself in a mirror?"

"C'mon, please let me in!"

I despise myself for begging, and I knew all along it was going to end like this. I would come here in the evening, beg, and despise myself. But if I don't beg, they'll close off the entrance pretty soon, and those people gathered around the announcer will turn back, pushing me out of the place.

"Why won't you let him enter?" asks some man.

"How can I let him in looking like this?"

"What about his appearance? He looks fine."

"I know how to do my job. He doesn't look fit to go in, don't play Mr. Nice Guy here."

"Show me, where does it say that he can't go in looking like this? If you don't let him through, I'm going to file a complaint against you."

What a nice man! Really, nobody had asked him to intervene on my behalf, and yet he has. "Thank you," I mutter under my breath, and enter. I have nothing out of the ordinary on me.

Everyone in the lobby is staring at me. I enter the hall. There's general commotion. Many of those who have already found their seats stop their conversations and look at me in wide-eyed amazement. Under their intense stares, I barely find my seat. I'm curious to see whether there are any familiar faces in the crowd, but I know that everyone is waiting for me to turn around, so I sit there, motionless. There are three free seats on one side of me and four on the other. Wouldn't it be nice if it all just started right now! Another few more minutes pass. It's definitely time for them to start. Another five minutes pass.. Shouldn't they really be starting? A few people whistle. Just a couple more minutes and it'll start. Almost everyone is clapping. That's really no way to behave, I must say.

Here they come, two people approaching me from one side and four on the other. They immediately suggest that if I'm by myself I should switch seats with two of their friends. These two friends of theirs have tickets in the last row, but now they are standing right here, by our row, waiting for the others to pressure me into swapping seats with them. Why should I? Just because I'm here by myself? Of course, I'd probably feel more comfortable in the last row because nobody would be staring at me from behind, but it's too far, and why should I be moving just because they've told me to!

"Please swap so we can all sit together." I don't understand why it's so important for all eight to be sitting together.

"I'm not leaving, do you hear me, not leaving!"

"Let's see the stamp in the back of your ticket. You bought these three days after we bought ours, why did those jerks tell us they had no blocks of eight seats available?"

"How should I know? Go ask them yourself. I needed two seats and purchased two tickets."

"Since you're being so rude, we don't want someone who looks like this sitting next to us."

"What's wrong with the way I look?"

"Everything!"

"I look fine!"

"If that's fine, then what do you consider looking bad?"

"Well, if you think that something's wrong with it, then tell me what!"

"If you keep pushing it, we just might."

"Well, tell me!"

"And we will!"

"What's the matter? Why can't you leave this man to sit in his place in peace?" says a friend of mine who's approached us from behind.

"We want to swap seats with him so that our friends can sit with us."

"Well, if he doesn't want to swap, why should he?"

"Ok, fine. We're not saying anything, let him sit where he is, although it's not right to be showing up in this place looking like that."

"It's not your business to be deciding what he should or shouldn't look like."

I look over to my friend's usual seats and see his wife waving to me. I wave back at her, pointing at the empty chair next to me, letting her know that I've come by myself, but she waves me off with a smile and nods to indicate she understands.

"Hey, did you think you had no friends and get scared?" asks my friend.

"I probably did, I don't know."

He goes back to take his seat next to his wife. I sit there waiting for it to start. It should be starting any minute now, I think.

Translated by Margarit Tadevosyan

COTTON WALLS

Excerpts from the novel

The events occur at the end of the 1970s. It is a student novel, presenting the life of youth in Soviet Armenia during the times of "stagnation." The characters live ordinary lives: fail an exam, play tricks on each other, fall in and out of love, until one day they face a danger that threatens their value system and even their lives.

I kept pressing the doorbell of the duplex villa on Charents street. A curvaceous bleached blonde opened the door, and, without saying hello back, knocked on the first door on the right. "Thank you very much," Manvel said to her and led me into a neat rectangular room. I put *From the Past*, one of the cache of books, on the writing table.

"I'm returning the "Leo," I said.

"Did you read it? Wasn't it interesting?"

"I finished it."

"So soon? Really?"

"A stunning book! What people there were, how I wished to live in the Republic of Armenia of 1918-20s… Aram Manukyan, Avetis Aharonyan, Kajaznuni, Dro! Did you know that there had been an Armenian-Georgian war which the British helped to reconcile? Of course you knew that!"

* * *

"Would you like some wine?"

"I could have some."

"Me too. But there isn't any," Manvel sneered, taking a half-bottle of wine from the cupboard. "This is it." There was only enough for two glasses.

"I would've brought a bottle if I knew."

"Knew what?"

"That we'd be drinking wine."

"The mistress is against it – she mustn't see the bottle."

"Why would you keep living here if you're under surveillance?"

"My room isn't at the back like the others," he explained. "It's near the door; we don't often see each other. Plus, it's close to the State Radio, it's clean, and the rent is only 50 rubles."

"The entrance, the toilet, and other things aren't private – isn't that too much?"

"These are the prices on Charents street… And how are you doing? Has there been a lot of pressure at the university?"

I told him that after the demonstration some people had been hanging around for several days but that we hadn't met.

"It's the KGB. If they've withdrawn they mean to surveil you

and reveal your connections. Keep your nose to the ground – you already acquired a file in the State Security... Unless you had one previously."

"Why would I have a file?"

"Don't be a fool. Haven't you been joking around, talking about anti-Soviet stuff?"

"Do jokes also count? How can I not have joked?"

"Of course," Manvel replied sarcastically.

"Even school children who stand out in one way or another are marked from the very start."

"Let me think – what made me stand out in school?" I chuckled.

"Haven't you had long hair since your school years? Didn't you wear frayed jeans?" I nodded.

"That would be more than enough, especially – *especially* – out of the capital. I'm going to tell you a secret now." He paused knowingly. "The professional subjects will be taught to you in Russian before long."

"To us? In the Philology Department? Even Armenian language and literature?"

"Well, maybe not to the philologists but to the students from all the other departments."

Manvel opened a paper folded in quarters that he'd fished out of a pile of books. The letterhead said, *USSR Ministry of Higher and Specialized Secondary Education*. It was a decree by the USSR Minister of Enlightenment marked "Top Secret," according to which the professional subjects in the higher educational institutions of all the republics must switch over to the Russian language. Signature – Yelyutin V. P.

"No," I said.

"*Yes,*" Manvel said with irony.

"Oh, fu...." I barely restrained myself from cursing.

"Do not swear, the mistress will hear. But generally, if it's put to good use, I don't mind."

"Excuse me. We're not peers, neither are we friends. I will never allow myself... And what are we going to do?"

"You three musketeers think about it. Then come and we'll discuss it."

* * *

"It's a pity, Vigen, but we have no ties with the Georgians," Manvel said. I called earlier and we met in Flora's Park.

"What kind of underground organization are you, with no connections?"

"If you know a better one, do turn to them, I don't mind," Manvel said, a little gleefully.

"I'll see about that. We may announce a competition for the best secret organization."

We laughed.

"Haven't you ever tried? We're neighboring peoples, after all."

"We have dealt only with Armenian national issues, and they're not interested in them – with the exception of Javakhk, an Armenian-populated region within Georgia. This will give rise to serious disagreements."

"They can be discussed after defeating the common enemy – the Kremlin."

"Probably. But there is still the issue of finding like-minded people who are as progressive as you are. How would *you* proceed if you were us?"

"Good question.... I'll say how we *will* proceed: first, we must go to Tbilisi."

"What an optimist. You are already in Tbilisi. Then what?"

"What was your degree in, Manvel?"

"Philology!"

"And what's our background? Mine, Zorik's and Torgom's."

"The same, philology."

"Then you have your answer right there. We'll go to the Department of Philology and meet with the students..."

"Easy for you to say. Are you sure you won't run into the KGB?"

"Well, that's one of the dangers. But what if *they* suspect *us*?"

"You're right. This is the Soviet Union, after all."

"When are you planning the visit?"

"The sooner, the better."

"Do you have money for the road?"

I was already in Tbilisi in my head. Unfortunately, we had no money. Manvel thought for a while and spoke: "Do you know what a copying machine is?"

"Xerox? Of course... Wasn't George Orwell's book Xeroxed?"

The State Radio had its own copying machine. Manvel offered to make money with its help. I didn't quite understand.

"I know that the dean's office distributes materials, the reproduction of which is left to the students. You will take over copying materials for your classmates, we'll copy for free – the machine is operated by one of our most reliable guys – and the money will remain with you."

"Some students copy the lecture notes of their more studious peers before the exam, paying them. I've never in my life collected money for anything, but he who falls into the water is not afraid of rain."

"And you can't cross a river without getting wet. But I appreciate the folk wisdom," Manvel said in a mocking tone.

* * *

Zorik was eating a cutlet sandwich in the station cafeteria when I found him. We reached Tbilisi in 12 hours. The train stopped at all stations, semi-stations, even in an obscure passage called "8th kilometer," where there were several houses.

At half past seven in the morning, before dawn, we found ourselves in an empty city. Questioning the few passers-by, we found the university. It was a blue and white building, with three tall pillars in front of the entrance. Although it was older than ours, I didn't like the look of the exterior walls that were plastered and painted. I preferred the look of natural stone, like the university buildings in Yerevan.

We waited until classes started then went to the Philology Department. We lingered about in the corridor for a while, then leaned against the windowsills and waited.

"You said we'd find our way around on the ground. let's chant *long live the mother tongue* and strike up a conversation with whoever joins us", Zorik said mockingly.

But it didn't come to that. Soon a man with a gray mustache asked us in Russian what we needed.

"We are... from Yerevan State University..." I suddenly remembered that, after all, I was still the head of our Literary Studio.

". . . from the Literary Studio. We want to connect with young Georgian writers."

"Really? Great idea. I will accompany you to the dean's office."

The staff in the dean's office seemed a little surprised, but they didn't ask questions, just politely asked us to wait. We went out into the corridor and had barely lit our cigarettes when two guys approached us. Tengiz, a thick-set fourth-year student and the head of their Literary Studio and a future literary critic, and a veiny, midsized second-year student, Anzor, a poet. I gave an impromptu introduction. We, the new Armenian and Georgian writers, live side by side, but we will never read each other's works, unless Moscow bothers to publish them in Russian. And Moscow mostly translates imitations of the classics, Tengiz added in discontent. Seeing that we shared some of the same views, I told him right up front why we were there.

"Are you sure the information is true?"

"Look." I took Yelyutin's decree out of my jacket pocket.

"It seems authentic."

"It *is* real. A photocopy of the real thing."

"What if they change their minds before the next academic year?"

"If you think we should sit idly by until September, forget everything we've said... let's go back to literary topics."

"How touchy you are! When they 'forgot' to mention in the draft of the new constitution of Georgia this spring that the national republics have their own state languages, Tengiz and I were among the organizers of the protests," said Anzor. "It's just unbelievable that they are committing this new encroachment only half a year later."

"Were there any demonstrations in Tbilisi? We didn't hear about them." Zorik was surprised.

"There were... But you have to answer a question so that we can trust you. How did you find out that you need to talk us, specifically?"

"We didn't know," I said. "It was pure chance. We proved lucky. But we, too, didn't sit back. We also organized a demonstration. If you have acquaintances in Yerevan, check with them."

Tengiz gave me a strong handshake and we left the university. They told us about their demonstrations. Back in 1976 some technical subjects in higher education institutions were switched to being taught in Russian. There had been protests for two years, but the people of Tbilisi took to the streets when they tried to replace Georgian with Russian as the state language.

"It is true that leaflets were distributed in the city before that. Do you know Rezo Chkheidze, the film director? His daughter, Tamriko, did it," said Anzor.

"Chkheidze? He directed the *Soldier's Father*, Zorik recalled.

The film, with Armenian dubbing, was shown a lot on our TV. People liked it, we told Anzor.

Anzor had heard that people in Yerevan also protested against the new version of the constitution, but ... we did not know anything about that. It looked like we did not know even about the stuff that had happened in our own country.

While we talked, the Georgians walked us around the city. We took the *funicular* which had been operating since 1905 and was also known in Yerevan, and got off at the highest stop to stroll in a square with a complicated Georgian name.

The Georgians asked if they might copy the document. We

went downtown. The boys went into a basement and came out again with the copied document.

"My classmates copied a sex story here," said Anzor, smiling.

"Was it Russian – about the Swedes?" Zorik asked.

"It was Russian and they were Swedes. They had sex with each other in a large group."

"In our department, it passed from hand to hand during the lectures, but it was typewritten... Karo brought it."

"Well, I never knew that! Did he decide to enlighten his Young Communists?" I said.

"Or rather the female part of them."

Zorik explained to the boys that Karo was the Komsomol secretary in our department, who, despite his small stature, was quite popular with the ladies, at least according to his own stories. They laughed. Tengiz and Anzor exchanged a few words in Georgian and invited us to eat khinkali. It was already three o'clock, we were very hungry, and didn't say no.

We emptied a few bottles of red wine, light but delicious. We toasted the lucky happenstance through which we met, to the independent future of the Armenian and Georgian peoples and to communication without intermediaries (such as the Kremlin). Excited, I promised that as soon as we returned I would apply to transfer to the Tbilisi University Department of Georgian Philology.

"I will document it. Will you sign so that you have no place to retreat?"

Anzor took out a notebook from his bag, wrote my words on the last page, and held it out for me to sign.

"Our Lord Jesus Christ said: *But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and*

your 'No' be 'No', my son." Anzor pulled back the notebook with a smile, but I caught it in the air. "But people are skeptical nowadays, so I will sign."

"Let's make a wager to maintain our interest, as well," Zorik winked to Tengiz.

We made a deal that if I applied, Anzor would treat us all to a bottle of vodka. If not, I would treat three bottles of wine.

We also shared our plan to occupy the university. The Georgians were delighted and exclaimed "Va! to! va to!" but they were sure that if they organized a big demonstration in Tbilisi, it wouldn't merely be tilting at windmills.

"And what if we made simultaneous demonstrations!" shouted Zorik, inspired by his own idea. The guys agreed immediately. We would use the same protest signs.

"What about talking more in Yerevan?" The Georgians accepted our invitation.

* * *

So, I had the commitment in Tbilisi. I went to the Chair of Georgian Studies. The narrow room was occupied by a mustachioed, spectacled, low-key man, whose existence by our faculty was completely unnoticed. This was not surprising. We studied Russian literature, even as a separate subject, Ukrainian literature, but not Georgian language or literature. The man thought that I had entered his office by mistake, but I dispelled his doubts. I was going to transfer to Tbilisi University. He looked up at me, startled.

"Why are you doing this? Do you have relatives there?"

I explained that I wanted to learn the language and translate Georgian literature from the original.

"But we have many Georgian-Armenians who know Georgian," he said, with a slight Georgian accent.

"Yes, but they translate very little, or they translate the wrong thing."

"I, for one, translate, but it is difficult to publish. The state publishing house strictly limits translated literature. Anyway, let me look into this. Come back in a few days."

I was the first Armenian student ever to want to learn Georgian. Perhaps that is why he was not aware of the procedure of transferring.

* * *

The Georgians came to Yerevan very excited. No one in Tbilisi was aware of Yelyutin's order, but all those who saw it, were pissed off. Tengiz and his peers started organizing the students, and several well-known scholars initiated a petition for the Academy of Sciences to convene a session.

While talking business, we showed the guests the city. Lenin Square, Rossiya Cinema (I called it "dirt-bag city," I explained to our Georgians, because of the "crows" crowding there. They laughed and Torgom gave me an evil eye that seemed to say, stop slandering us! I explained to our Georgians that these were the guys with "watermelon" haircuts, dressed in black from head to toe, who'd pick fights with the guys in jeans or whistle at the girls. They laughed.

We did not know where else to take them. The Cascade was half-finished and the trees were cut down at Tsitsernakaberd, where a big sports-concert complex was being constructed. People were indignant that there would be pop concerts and compe-

titions near the Genocide Monument. Our cable railway did not lead to any beautiful places, and the view from above revealed the chaotic piles of private houses.

We finished the tour with the university, the Opera House, and the newly built Youth Palace, a "gnawed kukuruz.[16]" Well, that was already almost everything. Unfortunately, Mount Ararat was not visible, but we swore that it was a magnificent sight when it was open.

We walked into the "4th shop" for coffee; it was empty on a Sunday afternoon. We had not discussed beforehand whether we would "treat" the boys to an interesting person or not, but we had to fill the free time made up by the lack of places of interest. We quickly discussed our options in Armenian: a favorite lecturer, Adamyan, or well-known writer, Loretsyan? But we would not have the nerve to visit both of them so suddenly. There were six of us. Finally, Zorik called Tokmajyan from the payphone.

* * *

Janet made the best of our bad business.

A blend of respect and surprise appeared on the Georgians' faces when they learned that we were friends with two of our lecturers.

Janet served coffee and brandy to our joint group. Shortly after exchanging pleasantries, "Armenian-Georgian relations" took a turn for the worse when Tengiz said that the Armenians of Tbilisi behave like Moscow agents, sending their children to

[16] *Kukuruza (кукуруза) means corn in Russian. The building got its nickname because of its visual similarity to a corn cob.*

Russian schools. Torgom hit back that the only alternative is the Georgian school – in that case, a person has the right to choose whether to become Georgian or Russian.

Tengiz did not agree – there are Armenian schools in Tbilisi. They are closing, the Russian ones are opening. He would like patriotic people living in Armenia to influence their compatriots.

"Perhaps the reason is that the Georgians have pursued a policy of assimilating the Armenians," Torgom said indignantly. Otherwise, why would there be so many Armenians with Georgian last names in Georgia?

"It is not a reason – it is an excuse. They should strive for preserving their national identity," Zorik argued.

"There have been strivers, but when the pressure lasts for decades, many just give in."

"It's okay, it's okay. When Vigen comes to Tbilisi, everything will be settled," Anzor tried to reconcile the parties.

"The ambassador of Armenian literature in Georgia," Tokmajyan said jokingly.

"It would have been better if he had become the Ambassador of the Republic of Armenia... But we'll never see those days."

"And has Mr. Ambassador already applied for transfer to our university?" Anzor smiled slyly.

"Yes, I did... To be more precise, I inquired at the Chair of Georgian Studies. They will respond in the coming days."

* * *

At the station we agreed that we would often call each other and say how things were going. Well, to be exact, it was we who were expected to call. The Georgians were Tbilisian, and they had

phones at home, which none of us did in our tiny rental rooms. We would have to call from the post office.

* * *

I entered the Chair of Georgian Studies again. The assistant seemed to resent that I showed up late. However, it turned out not to matter because the answer was not positive. There were no exchange programs between Yerevan and Tbilisi universities. The only option was to learn Georgian on my own and apply on the same terms as Georgians, an impossible thing. Or, I could easily transfer to the Department of Russian Philology here at the Yerevan University, the assistant suggested.

* * *

On April 23, at 5 o'clock, we got off at the Yerevan bus station and took the bus that traveled on route 46 to the Opera House.

We conferred in the "town of Ararat" and decided to gather reliable people on the morning of the 24th, the Genocide Remembrance Day, next to "Hands of Friendship" in Flora's park, because the KGB would be waiting for us at the university. We would join the university crowd at an appropriate moment and turn the procession into a demonstration.

* * *

We turned to Teryan street, went up to the intersection with Isahakyan street, when suddenly a black Gaz-24 came to a screeching halt by our side. Three people spilled out of it, another two seemed to appear out of thin air. One of them, in a suit and tie, flashed an open identity certificate in my face.

"KGB!"

He grabbed my hand and pushed me towards the car. Zorik, Varuzh, and I wound up in the back seat. Two agents sandwiched us in in a confused heap, and one of them sat in the front. The car lurched forward. We tried to adjust ourselves so as not to squash each other, but because of the sharp bends were jumbled together again.

It is true, however, that the whole mess lasted only a few minutes. The car stopped in front of the iron gate of the KGB building, and its wings quickly swept back. We were all taken to the second floor. I was grateful that they had not taken us to the basement, to the notorious KGB prison cells, where many people had been tortured and executed. In 1937... and before that and after that, in fact. On the second floor they split us up.

* * *

Zorik and I were consulting at the university when Sofik, the secretary of the dean's office, told us, in a tone of disbelief, that Adamyan was ill and had asked us to visit him at home.

We rushed over right away. Adamyan was sitting in his usual place, on the armchair, and was surprised that we didn't bring any vodka. "You wretches, did you think I could be so sick that I would refuse vodka?" He sent me to the kitchen. I brought a lemonade bottle with a white liquid out of the fridge.

"Surprise! It would be worth celebrating with whiskey, but it's been half a year since I had any, and my Diaspora Armenian students do not bring any either. Here, take the money – bring me some."

"No, we're not going to take any money from you."

"Well then, buy it with your own money, my friends. But where is it?"

He explained to us that the lemonade bottle contained 96% ethyl alcohol and taught how to drink it. We took a deep breath, drank in one gulp, breathed out and washed it down with water. When we were able to speak again, Adamyan said that, indeed, he did, have a little cold, but he called us "without observing the rules of conspiracy" to announce that Moscow had postponed the decision of switching the language of instruction in professional subjects in the institutions of higher education into Russian. Zorik and I jumped up and began to waltz around.

Adamyan made us drink another glass, and then told us the up-to-date information he had received "from a very reliable source." The Georgian Academy of Sciences had held a session and applied to Moscow to stop the russification of universities. Moscow was surprised that the secret order became known in the "national republics," as they called the republics of the USSR apart from Russia. Not long after, we were caught by the KGB. They were startled and alarmed in the Kremlin. If there is resistance already now, what will happen when the decree is enforced?

"Good job, everyone. You did not make a revolution in Armenia by seizing the university. But your honest revolt neutralized the Kremlin's conspiracy to enter a new phase of assimilation of nations. And as my ancestors would say," Adamyan declared with satisfaction, "that ain't going to happen!"

"I wonder what the situation of our friends in Tbilisi is?" I asked.

"If the letter of the Georgian academics had been taken into

account, they would not have touched the boys," Zorik reasoned.

"It's possible that the KGB released you because the letter confused Moscow."

"You mean, the local KGB called Moscow to find out what to do with us?" I asked.

"Child! The phone lines were burning that evening. Students staging a demonstration – that's not something you would see every day in this dictatorship with cotton walls. You still have work to do. You still have to find the traitors among you, but for now - *carpe diem*. Seize the day! Enjoy the joy of victory today and never betray yourselves. The great Florentine, Dante, considered this to be the greatest of all sins."

2019

Translated by Yeva Martirosyan

LILIT
KARAPETYAN

BEFORE SUNRISE

for h.s.

The long silence is broken by a buzz of invading words about how the day stretches like a deformed piece of chewing gum. You lost the taste between your teeth, leaving behind a couplet: you bled like the fountains of Julfa when I had just returned from Kars. And the little boy poked around in the bloody pit with a wooden ice cream stick, dividing it in two like the Red Sea, performing a unique miracle. You bled after the gym with your ripped muscles from the heavy weights, and with that sweaty mole on your eyelid from the treadmill, and after Paris, when you threw up in the courtyard of the most beautiful museum and washed yourself with the water of a drinking fountain.

At the beginning of the city are people sitting near mounds of garbage, who, gazing idly and bitterly through a terrible cloud of construction dust immediately recognize you as a foreign el-

ement standing by the newly erected red buildings. Among the ruins that surround me, towers have risen. Cats meow lazily in their shade. But Kars begins with the fortress and ends at the front of the door of the Apostolic church. I wrap myself in a flowery cloth, and I'm given permission to enter. When I enter I will ask: "Father of mine, are you still here?"

You don't believe in any kind of salvation, because the premature fetus was removed from you and thrown into an empty bucket. From the beginning, I accepted the continuation of your birth and played with your dense hair when the kerchief of the woman on the motorcycle rippled in the air and prevented the crows from flying. She squints at people, flees, and again pushes herself towards the man, and like a mongoose boy a miracle arises: she silently approaches my rocking chair sunk in the sand of the lakeshore to serve fresh fish soup. Like a tiny-hooved animal leaving a weak track on soft sand, she climbs up the spiral staircase of the minaret decorated with mosaics in a thousand colors, turning around on every tread to make sure they follow her to the top, to look from the highest point at the little sea and the clustered island in the distance that calls them, with its inner peals of Sunday bells, to come by ferry with rowing natives who have woven legends about the island and about love.

In the evenings, when the hounded trolleybus makes its routine rounds to reach its final destination, nightclubs turn on their red lights, and posters of women with raised hips appear in the windows. We reach the square by circumventing pickpockets, thieves, dark and narrow passages, and male prostitutes who wait for phone calls, because "slut" is not, in any way, a female monopoly.

"Don't rape that woman."

"...?"

"She's got AIDS."

The squares never intersect, never disappear – they are crowded with foreigners, with children, with crying women, with fountains that sprinkle salty drops out of the weakness of women born out of their inability to give love. Crying is one of women's habits, not crying is an expression of conceit, thinking that the exception belongs to me and that I have easily found the otherness of existence, ending up in a nursing home, without children, dreaming of white foamy bread in oblivion: loneliness is me. Now you're probably roaming the streets in the hopes of finding a job, in the absence of your former friends, without the familiar noisy greetings, with your indecisive gaze cast down on your unfastened buckles. You continue to walk monotonously – be careful, don't fall: he is inside of you. Feel the rumble of the underground train with the whole surface of your feet. Moving in unclear directions, the trains transport unusually large, waterproof containers – their expiration date, eternity. They give authority to the people, they turn them into widows, they destroy high-rise buildings, they rip the earth's ozone layer. The crust of the earth shakes with the rumble of the state-owned trains, but the governmental bodies are too busy with their electoral campaigns. It is imperative to follow the safety instructions, to turn off televisions during lightning storms, leave behind a half-watched movie, and go to the elections without knowing the details of the candidates' biographies. Your name on the voters' list is next to those of dead people, and before the law, with equal rights, you will cast your vote, because it is no longer possible

to live without the hope of rebirth, when half-naked Venuses wonder at the beauty of their bodies under the secret gaze of sturdy men peering from behind thick curtains. M. follows me from the fifth floor of the opposite apartment block, especially when I open the fridge and hold up an entire portion of nutrition in front of him – enough to sustain me for a few more days. Crashed face down on the bed, I'm shaking with fear. Answer my call, please, I want to tell you that the mosque in Yazd has been blown up. There will still be earthquakes.

Highlanders with fur hats are sitting around a fire cleaning the barrel of their guns and counting the cartridges that they will point at their targets – emptying them into somebody or some bodies. The sparks of fire spatter all around them. Come, let's go up the mountain and eat freshly slaughtered meat. Before the last sunrise, let's form a circle and go around the fire. You move to the middle of the circle and voluntarily rotate your arms, a white embroidered handkerchief squeezed between your fingers. Woman – this or that way you're beautiful – don't turn yourself over to debauchery and gentle smiles. The smooth caresses from all sides are ready to destroy your identity on the couch.

Ostra was saying: an Indian man rejects mercy and, at the solstice, the mercy of a kneeling mendicant next to a mound of fruit is vindictive; he demands retribution for all those who harmed his family. I hate my homeland before the elections. The streets are overrun by crowds of people cheated out of the promise of a good life. After the elections, behind trees and under thatched roofs, sheltered people are killed, left behind like ashes in urns. Newspapers keep silent. Only a handful of witnesses speak to foreigners. Ostra smoked the whole time she

spoke. We had already agreed on the meeting place, the day, the type of cigarettes, but I never met her again. Under the pretext of studying abroad, she never returned to her abandoned homeland; she probably went to the other side of the ocean, hoping to establish a life on a new continent, surrounded by people with unrestrained morals.

Each of us is led to our own hospital, curled up in our own case. The membrane will scratch its way out one day to be photographed in black underwear for the first page of a magazine. Carelessly sitting on the window sill with tightly sealed lips, she holds back her laughter. Her tights border her bent knees. Instead of her absent eyes, the tights end the last miracle that differentiates them from the reflection in the glass. She'll come out to dig her hand in the sun-cracked soil, to tear off a piece of volcanic lava, and to convince herself that powerful civilizations fell, like Pompeii and Herculaneum. She approached the end of her own world, independent of the heretical prophecies, the result of uncultured deliberations. Like rain, they fall on those who often look up to the sky, substituting the blessing of the Supreme Being during the hunting. They follow on the heels of the leopard who has thrown its orangey coat with black spots on the oak dining table as a festive tablecloth for the guests coming to dinner. Like your skin, exhausted from persecution, it has lost the most important ability – to recover. The old scars have already become history and call to mind past descents. I swaddled you in white bandages when you bled at my feet with your helpless body. I rub the medicinal remedy into the deepest wounds and wait for your rebirth, because resurrections have happened in the past – Lazarus, for example, and now those will

be resurrected who are ready to fly off a bridge without letting out a screech. A sensitive woman commits suicide; a thinking woman slowly drowns in eternal sorrow in the streets of Kars.

A donkey tied to a cart gently descends a slope. A woman pierced up to her eyes, sitting cross-legged, quietly sways out of her eternal immobility, like an evil-eye amulet, now from the bumpiness on the road, now from the thoughtless lashes directed at the donkey by its owner. The narrow streets skirt the antiquity of the city, running past flat-roofed houses made of river stones and baths with sharp-edged domes. A white-bearded old man was telling legends about a soldier who had died of an enemy bullet during the defense of the fortress. He swung his cane in the air and simultaneously rained down curses on the killer's heirs and on their own heads into all eternity. The everyday *namaz* carpet was worn, and children with bare feet were running after me screaming in English: "Kars Castle! Our Kars Castle!" The city choking with mosques rises before me in all her otherness and quietly reminds me that I either have to abandon her or to conquer her all over again. I hurry away from Kars, the tall buildings, the church, and the old man, to return, to bathe in the baths, to be cursed again, and to live in the city.

I never thought that the coinciding rumble of shots would shake all the mountaintops with that kind of force. The impression was such that it seemed as if they had been waiting for a long time for that day. They had prepared patiently, and now the wrath of the highlander erupted like a volcano. The never-ending line of the underground trains wasn't that unbearable. It's as if it had received its own justification, especially after the plans of the new station: the architect was whispering that it should be

built so the trains that don't know how to swim in the sea can climb the mountains. At least one time, one last time...

I look for your name on the list of victims growing day by day promising myself that if you die I will torment your body, I will steal it and take it to my hiding place, where you will never be found. I will tightly lock the lid of the coffin on the inside, and lying shoulder to shoulder, we will talk in whispers about politics. The white balloons soaring in the air suffered a sudden death from the burning fire.

I hear a screech. Victory, a new baby is born! A woman throws herself off a bridge.

Then silence and something remarkable: yearning.

Translated by Nairi Hakhverdi

HRACH

BEGLARYAN

THE OAK AND THE NAIL

The tree had already gotten used to the taste of metal. Brooding and enclosed within himself, he tightened the rings around the spike. Like waves, the images collided in the layers of his memory. He didn't want to become the slave of the clashing waves. He simply sometimes repeated things in order not to forget, not to surrender to the current compulsion that caresses, deceives, and removes one from the world and reality.

It was two years ago when the archeologists came to the forest. They came, looked at the ruined and crumbling church, measured, talked to each other, and struck their tent in the flat clearing. There were three of them, three young men who always nickered like unsaddled horses. In the evening, the youngest of them came out of the tent, made some measurements, surveyed

the terrain, then, taking a hammer and nail, approached the tree and drove the nail into the trunk. He hit and sang, hit and whistled, and this worsened the agony of the tree. At first the tree had no idea what the young man was doing. He moaned loudly, moaned with alarm, rustling the leaves in distress, but the young man didn't care about his alarmed moans. He kept hitting the nail with the hammer.

Afterwards, everything inside the tree, all the cells and juices, were rushing about and circulating around the nail. The young man didn't realize that. He went back into the tent, brought out a portable sink, and hung it on the nail. The tree was astonished at the young man's ignorance. Had he wanted to, he could have hung the sink from a dried branch. But the tree knew from his experience – from the broken, chopped branches, hacked trunk – that humans were the most egotistical and stupid creatures in the world.

Now, for days he might not even feel the existence of the nail. The pain of the first days awakens gradually in his memory and instead of the murmuring pain, now he feels the nail like a persistent itch.

He had almost gotten used to the nail, but he couldn't reconcile the incessant, all subordinating sound of dripping water. The valve doesn't work properly and the water dripped from the faucet, straight onto the roots of the tree.

At first he had been glad at the unexpected gift of a bit of water, but soon the constant dripping had exhausted him – those dreadful, chilly plashes had pierced his roots and wore a cavity in them. Now he can't do anything to close the open wound, to stop the tormenting, percussive plashes.

In spite of these torments, the tree holds no grudge against men. He knows that men are used to subordinating everything to their own needs, seeing everything through their own eyes. He is gently shading the young man, who is lying and whistling in his folding camping bed. He knows that this is the man who drove the nail into his chest, the man who is responsible for the eternally open wound, but he can't hold a grudge against him. He doesn't know whether it is due to his subservient nature, or if it's conditioned by something else.

Now he feels sorry for the nail. He knows that the nail has nothing to do with his own suffering and understands that the nail is more tortured than he is. That's why the oak sometimes looks at the nail as if it were kin and slightly loosens the rings choking the nail's neck. He knows his own strength and how the nail has become worn and molded, becoming one with the tree, while the tree has become one with the nail. The struggle between them lasted two years. The oak was ruthlessly constricting the nail's spine, while the latter was resisting. And at night, when the rings would weaken their grip, the nail would take its revenge, ruining the web of rings that the tree had been weaving around it. They fought for two years. The fight had brought them closer, and now the tree even began to feel some affection toward the nail. Had it not been for the constant scratches on his chest, the tree would try to forget the incident. He would forget, and then . . . what? Then he would still be left with the tortuous dripping that pierced his roots day and night during the summer months.

Previously, he had thought that the most important thing was the roots, which went straight down to the belly of the earth.

The tree had always thought that other parts weren't as important, that they existed only formally, but for three years now he has tried to rid himself of this terrible pain, tried to forget it for at least a moment, but the memory and the pain have always kept him awake, even when the sink was dry.

During the first year he was naïve, though his five-hundred-year-old experience and moderate age told him: *If you try hard, if you really make an effort, perhaps you will be able to move your position and remove your root from underneath the dripping water.* He thought it would be easy. He thought that if he strained himself, withdrew into himself, he would be able to move a few meters. He tautened his roots and leaves, and his trunk would swell and shrink, but no matter how hard he strained, he was unable to move himself.

He understood much later that along with those efforts he needed the ability to see himself from the side view. No one else knows this now, neither the oaks of the same age that grow next to him, nor the young saplings. And the young man doesn't know it, as he rests in his folding bed, the young man for whom the world is broad and boundless and for whom life seems immortal and never-ending. And he, a thick-trunked oak, has been laundering time for five hundred years now, twisting and wringing it out and hanging it out to dry on the rocks on the opposite hill.

He acquired this wisdom after a long period of suffering. He had strained every root and every branch in such a way that everything hurt. At night, sparks would shoot out of his trunk. Sometimes the voltage was so high that the sparks would illuminate the whole clearing. On those days, a woodpecker had found food under the layers of the bark and wouldn't leave the tree. The

sparks were so powerful that they killed the pecker. The lichen turned black in a few seconds, all the nest holes closed in the trunk, and all the excrescences turned into ashes. But that wasn't the most peculiar thing; the phenomenon had terrified the young archeologists. The eldest kept muttering curses under his nose and sometimes made the sign of the cross, involuntarily mixing God with the Devil. The youngest, now peacefully resting under the tree, couldn't close his mouth out of terror, while the middle one kept wetting himself. The tree was straining to move its root, a lonely side root that until then had never played such a decisive role in his life. He suffered like that for two or three nights, but it was all in vain. He only got disappointed and attracted a huge crowd of enthusiasts. Then he stood there – miserable and completely wrecked. All his energy had left him. The tree had even lost his capacity to think. His centuries-old thick bark had become very sensitive. People would come, stand underneath it, touch the bark, make a thousand and one guesses, listen with half an ear to the exaggerated stories of the archeologists, and then leave. The archeologists had already forgotten why they had come there in the first place. People would often look at the tree. The bravest ones would approach to touch the bark, and nobody would understand how he shuddered from their touch. The pain and the memory of the nail would immediately reappear, and he would feel nauseated from the sensation of their hands.

Apart from the idle enthusiasts came a group of men who placed a wire fence around him, started to tap him everywhere, sniff him, and pick his leaves.

There was an old man with a goat's beard among them who was silent and mysterious, and when the sun set, he would for-

get everything. He would sit on the grass, take a bottle out of his pocket, drink the liquid thirstily, and gradually become strange and astonishing. And before going home to sleep, he would make strange and astonishing sounds. The old man would always do the same thing before going home. He would approach the tree, lean his shoulder against the trunk and piss . . . straight onto the trunk. The old man had neither fear, nor presentiment toward the tree. The important thing for him wasn't figuring out the phenomenon, but passing his days in the forest. The old man knew from his own experience that no matter how one named or defined things it would be impossible to explain phenomena. Every creature created by God had to live his life according to God's determination and partly also according to his own will. Later, in the city, he would string a few incomprehensibly muddled words and made-up numbers together and consider the question closed. The more incomprehensible his writing, the more correct it would seem, but now the most important thing was vacationing.

The tree would even echo the words of the old man's song: "My love . . ." But to the old man's ears the tree's song merely sounded like a loud rustle of leaves.

The strange group of people stayed there for a few days. They examined the surroundings, they measured the trunk of the tree, they cut a sample from the bark, and they cut a branch. The old man even picked a leaf in the presence of the crowd and placed it in a special bag. They also dug out some soil from underneath the tree and, filling several bags, took it with them to the city. One morning, they took down the tent, got into their car and left unexpectedly. They would never remember the tree or its odd untree-like behavior.

That summer the tree couldn't get back to normal. He had no more power to fight against the water drops and the nail. In moments of despair, he would move violently with the wind, wishing to tear out the sink from his chest. But the head of the nail was holding the sink tightly, as if it were glued with tree sap.

He talked to the nail and befriended it that summer. The tree admired the nail's iron reasoning, its iron resistance, and the steely strength of its back. He didn't know and couldn't imagine if the nail perceived the words, which he had whispered to himself: "Oh nail, what do you want from me?" These words were uttered after the futile attempts to release the sparks, when he had been desperate and sad.

"Me?" said a voice, quite positively belonging to the nail. "I'm just a nail. They use me for nailing something somewhere. It's not my fault that they've nailed me into a living tree and not a dry board. I had to be used somehow, and this is my fate, to live my life holding up a sink and fighting with you. If I had more luck, I would have been driven into a dry board and my life would have been longer. What do you think my life is like, struggling to survive in a living, giant, and undaunted oak such as yourself?"

"Don't be upset," the oak said with a softer voice. "You are so close to me that you have even become my own now. If you would only scratch me less, we'd live more peacefully together. Lose your head and drop the sink."

"What are you saying? Holding the sink is my duty. I can't be without it."

"But what do you really get out of it?" the tree went on to convince the nail. "Don't become hostile toward me for no reason.

You're living inside me, after all. You have become a bit of an oak."

"Me?" the nail said astonished. "How can I be an oak? You fight with me day and night – you try to break my back, and you consider me to be your ally?"

"Ally? No. But not enemy either. You are simply a tired, emaciated, rusty nail."

"Me?" the nail asked again belligerently and, straightening its back, drove itself deeper into the soft, untouched tissues of the oak.

"Ah!" moaned the tree. "Why did I believe you? Why did I let my guard down? I had no right to forget that you are made of iron, even if rusted iron."

The oak was silent for a long time. He didn't speak for days. He withdrew into himself and directed all of his vital energies to encircling the nail and dissolving it into his body. Externally, the tree seemed indifferent: he didn't respond to the caresses of the wind, didn't move his branches, didn't rustle the leaves, and anyone looking at him would think that the tree was dead. Even the archeologists forgot about him. They were digging the soil, excavating and extracting stones, and getting very excited, as if they had invented the stones themselves, as if they had painted their intricate designs.

"Look, how many centuries have passed and the paint hasn't even faded," the oldest of the archeologists would mumble and whistle in amazement, leaning the painted stone against the tree.

There was nothing more important for him in this world than discovering a stone that had been smoothed, chiseled, and painted by somebody else.

"Look at it!" he would mumble about every excavated stone,

and the tree would quake, tautening his nerves and roots, and wanting to scream.

Look at what? I've seen the man who chiseled this stone, and I have made shade for the man who carried these stones onto the scaffold from the underground on his back. I have seen his sin and I have witnessed his atonement, when he threw himself down from the scaffold and jumped straight into the canyon.

I have seen the man who erected this wall. He carried his burden for sixty years and instead of glory he gained a hunchback and went straight to his grave. He was buried without a coffin, wrapped in a shroud. And for a long time the shroud hindered his soul so that it couldn't free itself from the hunchbacked body.

I have seen how these stones, frenzied and destroyed by a catastrophe, had enough sense not to fall on me and not to handicap me. They fell, but did not bring me down. They carried their own fate and their own cross.

He wanted to say these things, but he didn't. He wanted to scream, but he was silent, because God had created him as a tree and his burden, fate, and cross were the nail, the sink, and the dripping water.

It was very rainy that year. The lightning lit up the sky, day and night. The tree wished that the lightning, even if weak or faint, would strike his trunk. He knew that it would be painful, but at least he would free himself from the nail and the constant dripping of the water.

But that year the lightning was not for the oak. But lightning isn't born and doesn't die because of a tree's wishes. This was wild,

free, and mad lightning, preferring death in the sky to death in soil, rock, or tree. Every day the tree watched the lightning and despaired, understanding that he could only rely on himself.

"Try a little harder," he would whisper to himself. "Strain your circles, squeeze the nail, and you will break its back. Just gather up your forces!" He would think quietly, encouraging himself with all his might. He would make sure that the nail wouldn't hear him, so that the sink and the wind wouldn't find out . . . .

It happened by the dawn. The oak stretched under the first rays of the sun, gathered up all his might, and forcefully squeezed the back of the nail, which, being weak and rusted, broke into halves and the sink fell clanging onto the ground.

At first the tree couldn't believe what had just happened, but then he saw it, and finally relaxed his circles and jubilated: "Sh-h-h-h . . . ."

The water wasn't dripping anymore, but the tortured, hollowed roots of the tree still felt the weight of the drops and couldn't relax. The youngest of the archeologists ran out of the tent with the first rays of the sun. He looked at the trees, the clearing, the sun. Then stretching and cracking his bones, he approached the sink and couldn't believe his eyes.

"What a useless nail! It didn't last very long!"

He went back into the tent, looked around for a while, ransacked the boxes and finally came out with another, much bigger and thicker nail. He approached the oak, touched the trunk, marked the bark with the point of the nail and, with all his might, drove the nail into the trunk.

2019

Translated by Shushan Avagyan

WAITING FOR THE GENERAL

"So, when's the general coming anyway?" a man with big strong arms asked a soldier on sentry duty for the millionth time.

"Dunno," the soldier replied, shrugging his shoulders.

"Ugh!" groaned Strongarm, whether irritably or hopelessly, you wouldn't know, and took a seat on a partially broken sideboard against a narrow checkpoint wall. The sideboard gave a mournful creak under the weight of his large body. Neither the young sentry nor the sideboard nor the friends waiting at the checkpoint door knew that Strongarm had been rather annoyed since morning. God only knows what thoughts had been running through his wife's mind during the night, but she got up in the morning bound and determined, saying, "I'm off to Yerevan." "What for?" he asked, surprised. "I'm going to the hospital for treatment." "Now? . . . But you're forty-one years old?" He tried to argue against it. "Lots of women give birth at the age of sixty. I'm not cursed with infertility, you know." "Give it up, girl. Your womb must be dry by now." He was convinced. "And there's no medicine or doctors left on the earth who can help you now. Why don't you just suck it up?"

After a bout of tears and dismal howls, his wife stood up and hit the road – Yerevan, where are you? I'm coming! Strongarm couldn't go with her because he had an appointment with the general. He'd come here to ask the general a favor, that he re-

quest meadowland from the governor for the guys he had fought with. So what if he's a general now? Shouldn't he care about his former brothers-in-arms?

"Ah, what the hell?!" the man moaned piteously as he thought of what his wife had done, and hunched up his shoulders.

The sentry hung his head, not realizing that Strongarm was in fact angry about something his wife had done. Was it his fault? He was just an ordinary soldier, standing there, expected to open and close the barrier, and report to headquarters on each person coming in and out. He performed his duty appropriately. Was the general coming or not? Who knew? Who would dare distract him from his urgent matters? The general could go wherever he wanted to and could do whatever he wanted to because he was a general, not some ordinary soldier.

Meanwhile, Strongarm was going mad with indecision. He felt madly jealous of his wife. How could he know if she'd really gone to the doctor's or what kind of person her doctor was? He would sometimes toy with the crazy idea of grabbing his machine-gun left since the war, taking aim at his wife's beautiful body, and emptying the clip. Serves you right, doctor! He didn't care if he would be brought to justice afterwards. He had met the eyes of death so many times in his life.

"How on earth can anyone live like this?" he drawled, and rose to his feet with difficulty. "What sort of country is this? People promise, then don't show up, set up a meeting, then let you down."

"He may have gone to the ministry, or somewhere else – who knows..." the sentry tried to calm Strongarm's bitter anger.

Several men were standing in a semicircle in the shade of

the trees in front of the checkpoint. Legless maneuvered his wheelchair swiftly and furiously, as though he were attempting to persuade or prove something to his fellow men. He had gotten so used to his wheelchair over the past five years that he almost forgot he had no legs. Both his legs had been blown off by a landmine, exploding beneath his feet on the battlefield. He never came to terms with crutches, turned down prostheses so he wouldn't feel fettered, and then made a wheelchair for himself. He had taken the rubber tires from his son's scooter, and attached them to a hand-made chair. He sat himself in it, tied the upper parts of his legs to the chair, and moved around better than the strongest runner.

"What does he say?" Legless asked, leaving his speech half-finished, and addressing Strongarm who now approached them.

"Nothing much. Says the general will come if he said he would."

"He's a general after all," Legless gave a snort.

"Oh yeah, he is!" replied Skinny, squatting down. He always squatted when talking to Legless because he felt embarrassed, standing so tall and speaking from above. Besides, it seemed to him that if he didn't squat, his words would float over the legless man's head, and he would miss the message. "Well, I am a marshal then," said Legless, thumping his chest.

"A marshal, right! Then we're your guards, and the wheelchair's your armored car," a young bearded man laughed, flashing the shiny medal on his breast.

"No, the world was made unequal," Strongarm grunted, recalling his wife's frantic screams again. "I thought we were all

equal on the battlefield. So how did this happen? Some of the guys stayed in the army and climbed the ranks, and then we came back to see they'd split everything between themselves..." "Wait! Did you expect every fighter to become a general? No way. Would you bow down to just anyone? Isn't it much better that our friend is helping us? One of you has a kid's tuition to pay, one of you needs treatment, one of you needs a reference... We just turn up like this and don't give a damn that this man is a general. He isn't a governor, he isn't a doctor, and he's not a college director," Skinny argued in the general's defense. Then the men sat on the green grass under the poplar trees. Everyone sat lost in thought, with a hand outstretched like vagrant beggars, in the hopes of ridding themselves of their troubles. Poplar fluff fluttered down onto their heads like snowflakes.

"There wouldn't be so much of this rotten thing around if it was anything good," Strongarm complained.

"You can have too much of a good thing too," the legless man quickly replied. He then put his hands on the ground, jumped nimbly off the wheelchair, fell on his side on the freshly-cut grass, and fitted the chair comfortably under his arm like a pillow. He cast a glance at the trees and the summer sun and, puffing on his cigarette, began to tell a story.

"When I opened my eyes in the hospital, I was, first of all, really glad to be alive. I had lost a lot of blood, but I was alive, and that was all that mattered to me. Later, I felt like walking. Then my heart wanted to climb a hill, and then I wanted a woman very much. Do you know what I want now? You'll laugh when I say it... I want to climb a tree."

Everyone roared with laughter, Strongarm louder than the

rest. But suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in his chest. He was so angry in the morning that he didn't even give his wife a lift to the bus stop. Let her go however she wants, he thought. Let her do whatever she feels like. Clutching his chest, Strongarm pictured his wife in a red dress, dolled up and happy, throwing herself into the arms of another man. He couldn't say for sure if his wife was actually seeing someone else, or if it was just his imagination. If he looked at it calmly, his wife had never given him grounds for suspicion, but who could figure these women out, after all?

"Aaahhh – we're stupid to keep waiting!" he announced with a moan. "In civilized countries, army generals aren't supposed to settle issues like these. The general's priority should be his army, not the favors we're asking for – meadows, tuition, operations…."

"Let him help. Come on, what's he got to do?" Skinny snapped back.

"He's a general," said Legless, rearranging the wheelchair under his arm. "For my part, I'll ask him for a better wheelchair when he comes. One of those shiny new foreign wheelchairs. I'm tired of this lousy thing. To tell you the truth, I tried one of those chairs once, and I didn't like it. It's too official, kind of cuts you off from the land. I've gotten used to running my hands over the ground the past five years. My feet don't touch the land, but at least my hands can."

"Oh come on, man! Touch the land, tread on the land… Land, land, land! Weren't you chanting the same 'Land! Land!' the moment you gave away your legs and came back without them? And now…" Strongarm pointed an accusing finger at his friend as if he had never been to war himself.

"And now? And now what? Say it!" Legless jumped into his wheelchair.

"And now they set a time to meet, but they trick you. What is this? We've been waiting for him, hungry and thirsty, since morning. Are we outsiders, huh? Haven't we broken bread with each other? Haven't we fought together? Haven't we suffered together? I'll tell you what – these are all issues that will take a minute to sort out..."

"He might just be at the ministry. There's a lot to deal with..."

"Oh, please! What ministry are you talking about?" Strongarm flared up. "I know this ministry thing pretty well. He's probably chasing after some girl or sitting at the head of a table."

"He's your friend." Skinny shook his head disapprovingly. "Yep, he is, and that's exactly why it hurts me," Strongarm said with a snort. His soul was now filled with so much exasperation that he regarded any man he came across as potentially his wife's lover. Although he knew it was absurd, he just couldn't help it. At some point, Strongarm felt like letting it all go to hell and driving straight to Yerevan. He would look for his wife, first in the hospital, then at his sister-in-law's place. If he couldn't find her, it must be betrayal. But when he thought twice, logic told him that his wife couldn't have walked out on him.

"I don't see why you are backing him up," he said to Skinny. "I was the one who saved his life."

"So you're going to bug the hell out of him to the end of your days?" Skinny could see that something strange was happening to his friend, but he couldn't work out what it was. He didn't know that despair and malice were mounting in his friend's heart

by the hour. Looking out at the setting sun, Strongarm was beginning to feel more and more oppressed. How could he spend the night at home all by himself? He had finished making the house before the war. Back then, they lived in comfort, and there was no lack of money, like now. Now his house resembled an expensive foreign coffin. The expansive cold would torment him in the night. If he could meet the general, he would ask him for gas, fill up his car, and drive to Yerevan, but...

"They've been promoted, and now look what they've done to us. What is it to them? They can drive wherever they want – they always have a car, and gas. This country is neither mine nor yours – it's theirs now. What do they need us for? Hungry, thirsty – we've dried up waiting around here all morning! He could have called and said he wasn't coming. He probably doesn't even pay his own phone bill!"

Strongarm stood up and leaned his back against the wall. The concrete wall was warm, and he liked it. For some reason it reminded him of the warmth of his wife's thigh swaying under a silky dress, and his blood rose immediately. How many times had he offered to adopt a child? A boy or a girl – either was fine by him. If they had done it before, his wife wouldn't have come down on him like a ton of bricks. When he suggested it, his wife protested. Then they fought. And what a fight it was! Not like in a war-time. And no matter if he was right or wrong: he always ended up beaten.

Now that he remembered his wife's wet eyes in the hospital, his heart melted. He would have liked to be wounded again – even with a leg blown off, even mortally wounded – just to have his wife, tender and kind, by his side again.

His friends were silent, unwilling to object to him. Truth be told, Strongarm was right. The general was no longer what he used to be. Either his troubles had mounted, or he had simply had enough of their perpetual requests – or perhaps things at the ministry weren't as good as they had been.

"Gah!" huffed the one who had been shell-shocked, who was the first to arrive, and was waiting with the papers in hand. He didn't speak because he couldn't. He was following his friends' conversation intently, contradicting or agreeing with them in his mind. He had been to the hospital, where a special educator had tried to teach him to speak again, but he resisted, swearing thousands of times in his head. He wasn't a child to be taught to speak. He knew everything perfectly well and could speak in his head. He just couldn't utter the words. He became mad, unable to voice his anger. He let out some simple exclamations and left the hospital. Then he wrote a letter to the general in his untidy handwriting, so that it would be easier when they met in person, and now, beneath the trees, holding the case report in his hand, he waited. The letter wasn't long. There was just one sentence, written on a piece of graph paper from a school notebook: "Send me abroad for treatment." He had been waiting patiently all day, but could no longer bear it, so he rose to his feet, brushed the dust off the back of his pants, and began walking.

"Where to?" he heard Strongarm call out to him from behind.

"Ohhh!" the shell-shocked man huffed irritably, and pointing at the setting sun, ducked under the boom gate and wobbled off with a slight stumble.

"He's as good a general as any other," Legless said as he puffed his unfiltered cigarette and pushed the wheelchair towards the

checkpoint door. Putting his head around the door, he spoke to the sentry:

"Go ahead and call headquarters or wherever and find out if he'll come."

The soldier blinked his eyes, then shook his head.

"I'm only authorized to ask the duty officer, and the officer said he didn't know."

"Ugh!" Legless replied with an exasperated sigh and moved his chair sharply back in a fit of anger. "Goddam general!" he shouted.

He had once held twelve enemy soldiers at gunpoint, before he lost his legs. He pushed them all the way back to their lines without fear. Once, he snuck behind enemy lines, examined their positions, and then returned safe and sound. But today he didn't know what he was supposed to do. Their friend had already let them down so many times. Were they to blame? Was it life? Hard to say. The number of their friends kowtowing to authority figures had increased dramatically. They had one thing on their minds, but would say something else, afraid of anything distressing reaching the general if that might affect the chances of them being helped. Legless was about to grumble, but bit his tongue instead and, ducking his head under the boom gate, drove off in his wheelchair.

Strongarm remained seated. He was groaning with his head bowed. His old car was waiting for him a little further away in the thickening twilight, with patience befitting a pack animal. The man wanted to get to his feet, but had no idea what to do next. He didn't feel like going home, or seeing anyone at all. The light poured onto the trees out of the checkpoint window.

The illuminated grass was growing somewhat yellow after the harvest. They caught the scent of rotten leaves, dust, and fresh grass. Strongarm had a nasty feeling that the general was fooling around with his wife somewhere. He couldn't put that thought out of his mind, and so got up and headed for the car. He'd better go boozing, even on credit, to drown his sorrows.

"You're not waiting anymore?" asked the sentry.

"Waiting?"

"Yeah, for the general."

"Screw him!" the strong-armed man snapped, and pulled away.

The phone at the checkpoint rang shortly afterwards. The soldier picked up the receiver, stood to attention, and reported,

"They have left, Sir... Yes, all of them... Yes, sir, I shall open the gate!"

The boom gate went up, and the general's armored car passed then sped along the road towards the capital city.

2019

Translated by Marina Yandian

SUSANNA
HARUTYUNYAN

GRANDFATHER'S DEATH IN MY ACT

The clock in the hall showed 10:45. This sunflower-sized Iranian clock was worth a dollar in the market. My aunt had gotten it for free on her way to our house as she was buying coffee – a worthless gift that she didn't want to take home. I was staring at the plastic disk and the numbers, as big as lies, where the hands had stopped, thinking how much it would cost without the import expenses and taxes. They must have been lying around like trash on the streets of Tehran. But that cheap Iranian clock had marked a cruel transition in a man's life – it had stopped.

"It doesn't work. I stopped it," my uncle's wife said with a plaintive tremor. "It's a rule – when a man dies, the clocks in the house must be stopped until forty days have passed."

It was 11:00 on the clock in my aunt's room. This one was a Soviet-made clock. My aunt had received it as a prize during her

school years for winning third place in a chemistry contest, and she kept stressing that she had earned it and would take it with her as part of her dowry when married. But we weren't afraid of losing it because it was unlikely that anyone would marry a woman past fifty just for a mechanical clock. Although it really was a good clock – it had announced all of the great Soviet holidays up to the independence rallies in 1988. It had earned its keep by announcing life's events and had the right to rest, even if it was due to a death.

"It's a rule," my aunt said. "I stopped it as soon as I learned about it."

In my uncle's room, the clock hands were stopped at 10:07. This one was a handmade clock with an obsidian frame, the black shiny surface of which reflected the objects in our house since 1970. My grandfather had purchased it from the Yerevan *vernissage* when returning from the kolkhoz market where he had sold two tons of pears and his pockets were bursting with money. He had taken pity on the craftsman who had not sold anything that day. And the clock was silent with an underscored gratitude and deference.

"I . . ." stammered my grandmother's sister. "Everyone had lost their heads. I was the first to run to the clock and stop the hands." The clock in my grandfather's room was a pre-Soviet cuckoo clock left by the previous owners of the house. My grandfather used to oil the cuckoo pipes, the silver pendulum hanging from a leather strap, and other metal parts that were in the clock's belly. Here, someone had caught the cuckoo at exactly 10:00 and stifled its call by tying a lace handkerchief around its beak. The tiny window was torn open and the cuckoo was hanging from

a spring, blocking some of the numbers on the dial, while the silver pendulum was innocently still.

"The clocks are stopped at different times in each room," I said surprised. "How many times did the man die? Perhaps he didn't die?"

"No," my grandmother's sister insisted, "he did. It's just that everyone found out about it at different times. But, of course, if you don't know about his death yet, he's alive for you." My grandfather had three surgeries in the winter months. We thought that he might not make it to the spring. But my grandmother refused to become a widow and got ahead of him. She was determined – she had a fever one night and died the next morning.

The relatives and neighbors sitting around the coffin on the day of the funeral wept and envied her that she lived and died without suffering. They brought in my grandfather when the priest was saying a prayer. My grandfather was an old and proud man. He walked slowly and heavily like a bear, making the floorboards squeak under his weight, clutching his walking stick in his hand. He was going to give her his final farewell, without a single teardrop, almost expressionless. Leaning over his walking stick, he walked with a composed, calm, and slow gait. Step, step, step . . . . He was moving his body like a snail, pushing the walking stick against the ground, stopping after every other step, taking a breath, then tearing the stick off the ground with a trembling hand and placing it a bit further, his hand trembling on the walking stick while the stick trembled sympathetically. The priest was swinging the censer back and forth, giving us all a headache from the pungent smell of incense.

"When a woman survives her husband, she isn't as wretched," our neighbor said, looking at my grandfather's slumped shoulders. "Look at him – he has turned completely into a motherless child. Lucky is the man who goes before his wife."

"My brother has no one now," grandfather's sister intoned between sobs. The duduk player gathered air in his cheeks and slowly blew into the hollowed-out apricot branch with finger holes. The air between the mouth and the tip of the instrument matured from grief, turned into melody, and wept bitterly, reminding everyone of the irrevocable loss. The women howled in collective lament, not for my grandmother but for my grandfather and his state of misery.

"Calm down!" the priest ordered. "Listen to God's word," and he started to pray with all his might and proceeded with the ceremony. My grandfather was unable to stand like that for very long. He slowly sat down on the chair in the back, and the priest made an approving sign with his head.

"Look at him," grandmother's sister whispered in my ear with resentment. "He won't even spare a single tear. And for such a woman like my sister!"

"He's a strong man, what do you want?"

"What does strength have to do with it? A good partner is as dear as a mother. Is a teardrop too much? She had endured her dragon sisters-in-law, her monster mother-in-law, and for fifteen years had taken care of her terminally ill father-in-law. If nothing else, she gave birth to six children . . . . But look at him!" she threw an angry look at my grandfather. "I'll be glad when you're dead, you rascal!"

"Stop talking, the priest is looking at us!"

"No, but just look at your grandfather's face! No pain, no sadness. See how calm he is? He must have something on his mind. He won't stay alone for too long. He'll marry!"

My room had been locked that day. I had some love letters and money hidden in the room, so I had locked it and had taken the key with me, and so the clock had been ticking away, unaware of what had happened. My grandfather was alive in my tiny fourteen square meter room.

"Hurry!" grandmother's sister ordered. "Stop it before anyone has seen it – otherwise they'll harass you."

I had devised my own clock. I had seen how they do it on the television show, *Skilled Hands*, downloaded the animal signs from the internet, glued them on the board, then painted the board green, peeled off the animal signs, producing stencil images, and affixed the hands . . . Capricorn was on the twelve o'clock line and Cancer was on the six o'clock line.

I took the chair, put it under the clock, got on it, stretched, and pressed my palm against its cold metal hands. It made its last tick under my palm. That's it, my grandfather is no longer alive.

"After grandma's funeral he kissed me over twenty times," I said emotionally. "I'd say good-bye, move away, and he'd call me back and kiss me again and again. I was laughing, telling him that I wasn't going to the army. Little did I know – he was the one going! I even got a letter from him. "He's so antique," I thought to myself. "Who writes letters in the age of internet, telephone, and fax machines?"

"What did he write?" grandmother's sister inquired.

"He wrote . . . just a few lines: 'I had decided to die in mid-Oc-

tober, but I didn't want to ruin the harvest season. I thought to myself, let them work, let them store away their harvest for winter so they can eat at the funeral repast with a calm conscience and mention me kindly. Nothing will happen if I die ten days later. But ten days later they brought a dead man from Moscow. I thought, we can't have two funerals in one day. People won't know which funeral to attend. The man who had died in Moscow was young, and it would have been unfair if I shared his portion of tears. The day of my death was confirmed then for the first week of November, at 9:30 in the morning.'"

"So . . . at 9:30," the old woman looked at the stopped clock with guilt.

I recalled my grandfather's pitiful state at my grandmother's funeral and her sister's hissing at the old man barely leaning against his walking stick.

"The poor man had decided to die. And you were saying he was going to marry!"

"Well, yes, didn't I say that he wouldn't be alone?" My grandmother's sister wouldn't give in.

"Isn't it the same? Was he alone? He managed his life pretty well."

Translated by Shushan Avagyan

A RED-CRESTED DAWN

"Like a priest's worn-out Bible," thought Teresa, looking at the woman who had just gotten out of the car. "I'll bet she is just like our Aunt Siroush, who eats up half the meat before her soup is ready. Look at her huge and ugly tits!" The woman who attracted Teresa's attention stood at the clear, cool spring, surrounded by the children, and looked so proud of her youthful good looks, as though she would never grow old. She took a photo of a beautiful young woman out of her bag, showed it to the children, and was amazed by the way they expressed their admiration for the young lady's beauty. The woman then distributed ice-cream to the little ones, who gulped it down, melted cream trickling down from their chins to their chests.

"Oh wow, she's so gorgeous! Who is she?" The kids strained their necks for another glimpse at the beautiful young lady in the photograph.

"Ah, that's my daughter from my first husband," answered Teresa's sister-in-law, Uncle Aram's new wife, quite indifferently. "Her Armenian was so proper and eloquent," the woman continued, "one would think that Mashtots created the Armenian alphabet in her honor."

The dog kept jumping tirelessly up and down and barking loudly at the newcomers.

Teresa was busy sharpening a knife against the wall of the

house. Sliding back and forth on the grey basalt, the knife was crying like an animal in the slaughterhouse. Soon the grass at Teresa's feet was covered with dust, and the grass bent lower to the ground under its weight. Teresa shook the dust off her shoes and raised the knife up against the sun. Then, licking the tip of her index finger, she touched the blade and – ouch! She frightened herself – the knife had been honed to razor sharpness.

The children were merrily carrying a bag that they had removed from the trunk of their uncle's car.

Uncle Aram arrives . . . .

Teresa's brother-in-law had arrived with a new wife, his third, along with his two former wives. The first wife had left him, taking their daughter away with her, and his second wife was still wearing the mother-in-law's gift – a ring – on one of her fingers. Although Teresa hadn't seen any of them yet, she knew that all the members of her brother-in-law's entourage had arrived with him. She knew this from Uncle Aram's movements. They were clumsier than usual, his rueful kindness as he pinched the children's cheeks, and the servility and fear with which he opened the car-door for his new wife. . . .

Uncle Aram glanced at Teresa and, giving her a wave and a homely smile, continued to remove bags from the car. Suddenly, one of the bags turned over and something yellow and round that looked like a melon or a ball rolled out of it. The eldest of the twin brothers remained close to the bag while the other one ran ahead to catch the yellow thing. The older twin (older by five minutes) put his right foot out and the melon bumped into it.

The children threw the bag on the ground, laughed and pushed one another, and jumped over the bag. The strongest

of the boys perched on the bag and gave everyone a triumphant look.

Teresa headed for the basement. Right at the top of the stairs, she stumbled and twisted her ankle. This was where her husband had passed away. A heavy drinker, he had mixed a bottle of vodka with a bottle of insecticide in a jar, guzzled the whole thing and, groaning with pleasure, died shortly afterwards. After his death, Teresa inherited his old house and all its inhabitants: the hens, the dog and the cat, the twins from her husband's first wife who had died during childbirth, as well as her own offspring. The roof of the house was starting to collapse. It needed to be mended long ago. When Teresa's husband was alive, he used to say that he'd have it mended sometime – always later. Teresa knew very well that *later* would never come. The children would grow up, become men, and stop cheering, as they did now, about the melons their uncle brought. Who could say for sure when exactly that later time would come? Would it come at all? Teresa continued to wonder what type of person her baby boy and the twin brothers from her husband's first marriage would eventually become. Would she be able to endure it, broken-hearted as she was, with a continuous pain in her back? Would she make it to *later*?

Teresa grabbed a bottle of wine from a dusty shelf, opened it, smelled the wine, then put the bottle back on the shelf. Then she took a bottle of vodka, opened it, smelled it and quickly put it back. Teresa then picked up another bottle of wine. She was convinced that her brother-in-law, with his poor table manners, would mix it all up, as usual, his wife's favorite vodka, her choice pieces of chicken neck, and the sheep's lung.

"Don't you have white wine? Apple wine, not grapes, if you don't mind."

His wife would look at him in surprise.

"Sorry, hun, that wasn't you... You like apple vodka," and he would laugh his head off at his own stupid joke.

A brother-in-law, Teresa was thinking, is like capital punishment. Freezing cold water keeps dripping on to your brain, non-stop, blob-blob-blob, until it makes you go completely mad. Honest to God, there is nothing positive in this man; even his blood type is negative. He was kind to the children, though, and helped Teresa and the children sometimes. Uncle Aram paid them a visit with his new wife each year and every visit was like compassionate murder.

The children ate the ice-cream, rubbed their mouths with the palms of their hands, then wiped their hands on their bellies and grabbed hold of the bag. The bag handles broke and some old clothes fell out of it. The children, looking merrily at the old things scattered on the floor, bent down to collect them into the bag. Teresa looked surprised.

"Those are our old . . . I mean to say, our spare clothes," Uncle Aram's new wife said. "We can't wear them in the city any more. Either the color is out of fashion or a button is missing. Look at this coat, it's pretty new, you know – only the buttonhole is ripped. You can wear it in the garden or when you go to fetch the cattle from grazing.

The mischievous boys had found a pretty red dress, laid it on the ground like a corpse, the arms folded across the chest, and started to cackle with delight. In fact, the scene made them roar with laughter. One of the twins solemnly tried to imitate a

priest, uttering R.I.P. in a deep voice, and the children continued to howl hilariously. The youngest of all, with his hands on his belly, threw himself on the ground rolling with joy. Teresa liked the red dress. She liked the color of it. Red symbolized fire, blood, pleasure, sunset, and sunrise, ripe fruit and wine, passion and pain. It was the color of life. The cut and hue of the dress were pretty. *It must have been striking when it was new*, Teresa thought.

"Come on, kids, shoo the hens this way," Teresa cried out to the children, pointing at the net with a hand-knife. Teresa was wondering how she would fix dinner for so many stomachs with only a one-kilo rooster at her disposal. The strong drinks and the pickles that she put on the table would give everyone a good appetite. The fresh country air, too, is great for a good appetite. Trips, too, can make you hungry. Life itself is an appetite stimulator. One is never really satisfied, whether one eats or not. Lucky are those who have been sated! Do such people exist at all?

The children left both the bag and the red dress lying on the grass and rushed to hunt the hens which were running hither and thither. The rooster acted like a real man. Having spread his wings and clucking non-stop, he tried to soar up into the air like an eagle. The flight didn't last long, though, and the rooster fell down on the ground. Roosters aren't eagles, anyhow. The rooster quickly rose up into the air again but immediately fell down. He ran a few steps, spread his wings, then flew up, fell down, did it again. Do what you will. The fact is that chickens are not birds of the air and cannot fly over the fence. The rooster bumped into the fence and fell down, bumped again and fell again. The harder he hit the fence, the harder he fell down. The rooster tried

so many times that he ripped the feathers from his breast. They floated gently through the air. Finally, the kids caught the rooster, and it made them happy. They were very proud of themselves, indeed.

"Bring the rooster over here," Teresa said to the children, still staring at the red dress on the grass and pointing to the fence with the knife that she continued to sharpen against the wall.

A gust of wind rushed up underneath the red dress on the grass and lifted it up. The dress began to dance, the arms flapping like storm-tossed sea waves and the hem whirling like wind-blown sand. The children instantly forgot all about the rooster and concentrated on the dancing dress, cheering and clapping their hands in delight. With a head on its shoulders, it would have looked human. The wind had donned the dress, filling out its hips and breasts. The button was heavy, anchoring part of the dress to the ground, while the rest kept flapping in the wind, fluidly trembling and flirting, beckoning and coaxing, like a treacherous river.

Teresa placed her right foot on the rooster's trembling claws and placed her foot on his wings. "Lucky is the one who wore this dress when it was new," Teresa thought with bitterness. Holding the hot head of the rooster tightly in her hand, she stretched his neck and cut it open with her knife. The blood gushed out from the rooster's neck like the first rays of the sun springing into the world at dawn.

Translated by Marina Yandian

THE MIGHTY END

The humid, weepy summer was unbearably hot – airless and stifling. The sky was choked up with tears from day to day, to crying its heart out. Drizzle and drizzle – all of the time.

"The roots are rotting in the soil from this heat and humidity," remarked mother, observing the yellowing grass. "Soon the sky will spill its pain over the earth. Why's the sky so overcome that it can't stop weeping? Next thing you know the potatoes will start rotting, too."

The moment we went in it started pouring again.

"Don't ask me, it's your sky, you should know what's wrong with it," I said taking a swig of water from the paunchy carafe on the table. "I'm tired. That's it, I'm going to sleep."

The shelter, dug into the ground, was dark, and the air inside was warm and a little musty. It left a bitter aftertaste in your mouth and constricted your chest. But the shelter was the only safe place in the entire village, and I happily stretched out on the cot, which smelled of dampness. As soon as my head hit the pillow, I fell asleep.

My mother's coarse, uneven breathing woke me up at night. When I called out to her, she groaned, "I'm dying."

"Wishful thinking," I said in the sternest tone I could muster. "Dying's easy, living is the tough part...."

That morning, we bid farewell to the last group of the wounded. My mother's own wound was very small, so insignificant, in fact, that it appeared to have been a mere scratch, and mother

wouldn't allow me to bandage it. "Why waste the bandages," she said then, "save them, we may need them later." And here she was now, moaning, "I'm dying."

I didn't believe her, so I turned over and wrapped myself tightly in the blanket.

"We shouldn't have stayed," mother said with self-deprecation. "That good-hearted driver insisted a thousand times, 'Get in the truck, come with us, there's nothing here worth staying for.' I'm like a predator. I get so attached to one place that I can't part from it. And how are you going to fend for yourself without me?" she asked, as if chiding herself for maternal neglect.

"Cut it out," I muttered, annoyed. "As if this darkness isn't bad enough – and now you with all this silly talk."

"Please be sure to cry over my body," suddenly asked my mother.

"Whatever...."

"What, you can't spare some salty water for your own mother?" she flared up.

"No, I can't. If I cry, the water will eventually dry up but the salt will crystallize and cover my soul like frost. I will dry up and crack, just like a salt-marsh."

"This isn't the time for idle talk," she said didactically. "You are my sole heir. It's your duty to mourn my death."

"Honestly, I have other things to worry about at the moment. Why don't you let me get some sleep. There's so much to do in the morning. We've got to go door-to-door, check every house. What if some frightened child has been left behind in one of the houses or people have abandoned dead bodies and such?"

"But I'll be more than just some dead body to you. I've lived

a decent life and fully deserve to have my passing mourned by my heir," she kept insisting in a calm tone.

Annoyed, I finally sat up, pulling the thin, moldy blanket around me, "I'm so hungry right now that if you give me something to eat I promise I won't just cry over you, I'll tear my hair out in grief."

"Well, there're beets under the cupboards, and ...." But I didn't let her finish.

"Do you think you're feeding the pigs? Beets!" I screamed, livid. "How about something sweet that you've stashed up?"

"Nothing."

"As if I don't know you! I am sure you've put something away. Think carefully!" I wouldn't let it go. "From what you used to give to the wounded? I want something sweet!"

"How about something stronger?" Though her voice was weakened, she tried to chide me. "I'm dying here, and you're pestering me for something sweet."

"So?"

"Can't you get it into your head that I'm dying?"

"What do you want me to do about it?" I started toying with her. "It so happens that I'm not a priest, so I'm afraid you're going to have to wait."

"One has to live a godly life to die with a priest."

"And what, pray tell, was so ungodly about your life?" I thought to reassure her. "You never stole, never whored around. What sins have you committed?"

"You are my sin," she said dejectedly.

We both fell silent for a while. I thought she'd fallen asleep – her breathing had grown more even. It was dark. I had no idea

what time it was. I curled up next to my mother, pressed my feet against hers, and felt how cold they were.

"I'm dying," she whispered again.

"Maybe, you're right," I said, "Your feet are ice-cold, like a dead person's."

"And I can't breathe," she added with a choking sound, like letting out a sob after crying for a long time.

"Are you sure this is how one dies?"

"How should I know? This is the first time I'm dying."

"I've seen many things but never seen a corpse crack jokes," I chuckled. "Nothing's going to happen to *you* – but you're going to drive *me* nuts."

"In any case, please make sure you cry over me," my mother started again.

"Oh! I can only imagine what an unbearable child you were," I sighed in mock-desperation.

"I was a wonderful child," my mother said with emotion. "But promise me you'll cry over me."

"Oh, I'm getting sick and tired of this." I was almost yelling at this point. "I'll cry, I promise. And you think that tears are an expression of grief? People cry for many reasons – pain, joy, love, hate, helplessness, happiness, unhappiness."

"And you, what do you cry over?" she exploded.

"Nothing," I cut in, cold and dry, "my soul has gone numb. Once you've seen war, nothing can make you cry. Have you seen how they drive needles under the nails of crazy people to awaken a feeling of pain in them? Right now, I doubt I'd cry if I was being crucified."

"Oh, dear Lord," my mother started wailing. "What is this

generation you've raised? I became very soft-hearted the day my mother died. My soul softened, and I cried. And there were so many funereal wreaths there....We couldn't make room for all of them in the house, and I started placing them by the wall outside. I sobbed the whole time. And people just kept coming and coming.... My mother died and suddenly everyone noticed her existence.... I am an Armenian, I can't hide my emotions, least of all my grief. I wept loudly, and other women joined in. We cried in a chorus, and my grief was transformed into a song of lamentation...."

"I don't know where you're going with your story, but don't count on my following your example. I can't even carry a tune."

"You don't have to be a nightingale to express your grief. A human voice will do just fine."

"Don't try to change my mind. I freeze over when I'm grieving – I lose my ability to talk, let alone sing...."

"So you won't put your grief for me into a song?" my mother asked, palpably disappointed.

"Not a chance."

"What's my life worth then?" she sobbed.

"Mom, I think you're messing with my head," I yawned.

"Well, you'll only have to tolerate me for a little bit longer," she said, clearly offended. "You'll see, Archangel Gabriel will come for me soon." She cleared her throat, barely holding back tears.

"Mom, has he promised you that he's definitely coming?" I interrupted her, laughing.

"No," she stopped. My question had startled her.

"If he hasn't promised, why are you setting your sights on strange men?" I joked.

"Shame on you!" she burst out laughing. "Why are you in such a playful mood all of a sudden?"

"What else is there for me to do?"

"What do you mean, what else? Your mother's dying."

"She's not dead yet."

"You can mock the Archangel and me all you want. When your time comes, you'll follow him, meek as a puppy."

"Well, there must be something special about him if everyone follows him so complacently."

"How can I abandon her alone with this half-baked brain of hers?" my mother worried.

"How about we make it through the night and then we worry about it, ok?" I implored her.

"That's not in my hands, is it?"

Later that night, mother became delirious. She would periodically regain consciousness and start instructing me on how I should bury her – with everything properly done, in an expensive coffin with silk and velvet, with weeping relatives and unshaven men, with tables packed with abundant food but no sweets, with tears and wails, with an exaggerated account of her sufferings on earth, befitting the mournful occasion.

Mother died that night. I buried her by myself, first wrapping her in a rug eaten through with dampness. I loaded her body on a cracked, weathered cart, dragging it myself, since we'd eaten what was left of the cattle over the winter. The cart squeaked the entire way, and the shovel made hollow pangs as it knocked against the sides.

Luckily, the day was sunny and warm. I was sweating from dragging the heavy cart, my neck hurt from the tremendous

effort, and my muscles tightened and felt sore.... A cliff had disintegrated into blasted rubble, blanketing the floor of the gorge with detritus. The unevenness chafed my feet. My heart ached but there were no tears.

By the time I got to the cemetery, the sun had begun to set. It was still light out, and yet I had no tears. Leaning against the side of the cart, I pondered where to dig mother's grave – next to my father, my grandmother, or in a new spot, so that I could secure some space for myself next to it. I felt sorry for my mother. The beautiful death she had envisioned didn't materialize....

Translated by Margarit Tadevosyan-Ordukhanyan

HOUSE OF HORROR

Mr. and Mrs. Verdyan were happy, and every time the landlord looked the other way the husband would give his pregnant wife a thumbs up, grinning gleefully. The landlord, in turn, made sure he cracked a smile of satisfaction only when his back was to the buyers, just to make sure they did not suspect anything.

"There you go," the notary finally said, pushing the contract to the middle of the table.

When the husband winked at his wife and picked up a pen, the notary asked offhandedly, "Aren't you wondering why the

house is so cheap? Real estate is very expensive these days, after all."

"No," Mr. Verdyan responded casually. "That's what house hunting is like – someone gets lucky sometimes, other people don't. It can never be a good sale for both sides."

The notary was overcome with sincerity as he glanced at the pregnant woman's belly. "You know, a person's home should be as pure as his soul. But there are evil forces and ghosts just pouring out of the windows of this place, like a river flooding in the spring."

"Did anyone ask for your advice?" the landlord interrupted angrily after a few seconds of quiet but annoyed grumbling. "Why are you trying to sink this deal? All you have to do is stamp the contract. So let's keep quiet and do that, shall we?"

Mr. Verdyan paused for a moment, then said, "If those forces were really so evil," then they would have long since reduced the house to ruins. But this house has been standing for so many years..."

"Fifty years, fifty." the landlord said quickly. "And not a single stone has been dislodged, not even from the wall around it..."

"But tell them, tell them how many people have owned the place before you... Misak spent two nights there and died unexpectedly. Anushavan ended up with a burst gallbladder – they say it was caused by a sudden scare... That Haykuni couple divorced for no reason, not to mention your own aunt who got that house for free from the village council because she was a refugee from Karabakh. She's is now in a mental institution...."

"She was traumatized by what the Turks did to her – don't blame that on any supernatural forces...." Turning to the buyers, the landlord explained, "Please ignore everything he's saying.

There are people out there that simply can't bear to see someone else have some good fortune... All he wants is to keep me from making a little money, that's all."

"Why would I care about your money... this is the truth... you see?" the notary pointed at the pregnant woman's belly. "Children will be living in that house too! Oh, and by the way," he glared piercingly into Mr. Verdyan's eyes, "they even brought in a priest, and he blessed the house, sprayed it with holy water, but it didn't help at all!"

"I don't get it, why are you acting like this is your problem?" the landlord said, his frightful gaze resting on the pen that had been rendered motionless.

"Please don't argue," the buyer said in a calming voice. "I know that ghosts and evil spirits have possessed that house. It's always that way with houses in valleys, and that house is in a valley, after all."

"And you're buying it anyway?" the notary's face expressed surprise, his gaze now turned to the pregnant woman's face.

"We're not buying it to live there," the woman explained.

"We're launching a business – Horror Hotel!" the husband informed them, excited by the idea. "People who love horror will come and stay there, freezing in fear and trembling with terror.... We'll make a ton of cash, basically. And the best part is that every cent will be pure profit. My employees will be the evil spirits and ghosts. Isn't that amazing? They won't ask me for food, clothes, salaries, not even for vacation days. I won't have to deal with trade unions or pension funds...."

"What if they are angry with you for taking their house away from them?"

"But I'm not taking it away from them. They can keep staying there and treat the guests any way they like. I'm giving them an opportunity to express themselves. I won't even renovate the place. They'll pour into the rooms through the cracked walls and twisted pipes. As you say, they'll flood right onto the customers. Can you imagine that? Anybody with a love for extreme experiences will go crazy about this!"

"Yes...." the notary sighed with concern as he stamped the contract. "What has this world come to? There are crazy people everywhere. It is a rare thing to see a normal person nowadays."

Even before they had registered the name of the hotel, the Verdyans launched a big advertising campaign. The video that was constantly on everyone's TV screen called on customers to "Experience Hell while still alive," and asked them, "Have you ever wanted to have your own personal ghost?" using a variety of expressions intoned by an actor with a manly voice. Soon, there was such a large queue of people lining up to try this service that customers had to register months in advance. There were even those that did not want to sleep in the bedrooms of the house. They preferred to occupy the collapsing attic so that they could experience the paranormal beings up close and personal.

The Verdyans would assign people to their rooms before darkness fell, provide them with food, and leave Horror Hotel just before dusk. "This is when the real fun starts," Mr. Verdyan would tell each of the guests, just before leaving at sunset. "You will be all alone with the ghosts from this point forward, so defend yourselves any way you can." And when they would hear the shouting and screaming from Horror Hotel on their way out, the

husband would shoot his wife a gleeful look, saying, "Thanks be to God, another satisfied customer."

"Yes," his wife would respond. "What wonderful evil spirits! They never let us down, never take a sick day."

And they would go home, thinking about how they would transfer the day's profit to their bank account and calculate the interest that would accrue.

The villagers, who had until now been afraid of even taking their animals to pasture in the valley, shook their heads with envy. "Why didn't we think of that? We had such a wonderful resource and we just handed it over to someone else – and real cheap at that! Smart young people can turn evil spirits into a source for good, and we get nothing from our many saints!" They would say such things to each other remorsefully.

But there were those who were less envious. "We don't need that kind of money," "nor do we need that kind of screaming. Those horrified guests shout so loudly that you can hear them from kilometers away!"

"For the love of God," sighed the ones with the most life experience, "people have suffered a lot more for the sake of money...."

And then, a child was born to the owners of Horror Hotel. For a mother, the child's best age is when it is still in the womb, because as soon as it is born, its needs are born with it. The hotel owner's wife would no longer be able to help her husband if she had to stay at home with the baby, so they were forced to bring the baby with them to work. At first, the baby's crying, then his laughter and the clicking of his toys caused the evil spirits to gradually leave the house. "We'll go bankrupt if this goes on," Mr. Verdyan worried. "What can we do? Evil spirits have

always feared life," his wife sighed. And then, one day, the house was ghostless. All that was left were the people. To make things worse, a busload of people arrived that very day. Mr. Verdyan looked at them with regret, spotting the frightened but resolute expressions on his guests' faces. They were in the mood for a good scare, already jittery at the thought of coming into contact with ghosts.... And the money, the money... it would be so horrible to lose all that. Mr. Verdyan didn't miss a beat. He walked up to the group and smiled, saying, "Just one night.... Staying any longer than that could be dangerous.... Please give me your passports." He carefully registered their vital information and returned the documents. Then he gave them some advice as he handed them the keys to their rooms: "Don't go up to the roof – the old hag living there will chew you up and spit you out in a second. I'd suggest that the ladies stay on the east side so that they can get the first rays of the sun and free themselves of the ghosts' clutches."

"The cellar? Oh no! Even I never dare to spend a night there..."

And his trick worked! The people never realized that the spirits had left, and customers kept coming, bringing their own fears and ghosts with them. They would go into their rooms and scream and shout in terror all night, suffering at the hands of evil spirits and clamoring for help, throwing their shoes at them in defense, then feeling liberated and satisfied in the morning as they returned to their everyday lives. The owner of Horror Hotel continued to distribute his guests into rooms, cunningly giving them the keys and some friendly advice: "Don't go down to the cellar, don't go up to the attic...." Sometimes, he would have bouts of insomnia and, in the middle of the night, he would

look out the window of the house he had rented nearby, staring at the hotel listening to the sounds that came from there, and wondering whether or not that house had ever truly been possessed by ghosts and evil spirits. Perhaps it had always been a place to exile one's own ghosts and fears, to avoid coming face to face with them....

Translated by Nazareth Seferian

GOD HAS PASSED THROUGH HERE

When the Europeans came to see the girl, they were still naïve because the driver hadn't told them yet: "When we get there, we'll be offered strained yogurt. Folks in these parts eat strained yogurt with rose-petal preserve and that's the best. When'll we get there? In about twenty minutes, when the highway ends and we turn right. Then we'll take the first side road. It's about fifteen minutes long, after which . . . No, we won't come to the village, yet . . . but it will be closer. When we get off the first side road, we'll turn left and get on the second side road, which is twice as long as the first one, so we'll be on it for about half an hour. And then the village will be even closer. Once we get off the second road and keep going straight, we'll get to an incline, after which . . . Yes, we will

be closer to the village. But not quite there . . . We'll have to go up the incline . . . If we make it, we'll reach the mountain's jaw. You'd think the village would finally appear because it has nowhere else to go. And it will, of course, but not right away. If we make it up the incline, we'll reach the path that'll take us – it's three kilometers on foot – to the cliff, which we'll have to climb . . . It's worth the suffering . . . Strained yogurt with rose-petal preserve . . ."

When the Europeans came to see the girl, they were still naïve. The driver hadn't told them any of this yet, and he wasn't really inclined to. For the moment, he was just mumbling a song: *There's no one else with me in this place but God.* The car was dancing over the stones. Sometimes, when the driver braked suddenly, the passengers in the back would be thrust forward, banging their stomachs against the backs of the front seats; this would bring up the food they had eaten seven days ago. The driver warned them, pausing his song: "Tell me if you get sick – don't vomit on my neck." The visitors took it as a joke, laughed heartily, and thought they'd arrived as soon as the car turned off the highway. One of them kept steadying the camera hanging on his chest. He hoped to photograph weeping rocks and mountains cracked by the sun, to impress his technocratic countrymen with nature's ways. But when the car turned off the highway, two kilometers in, after passing over rocks as sharp as Satan's nails, the thick American tires were shredded and the passengers now had to carry the car instead of the car carrying them. And when they reluctantly got out of the car and looked at the world of stones around them and the steep incline ahead of them, they whistled in surprise and fear. They began sweating in the sun and had no choice but to push the car, ripping

their shoes and pants on the sharp rocks. They were still naïve because they thought the hardest part of what was left for them to do to reach the village would be going up the incline, because it was impossible to imagine a higher and steeper place than that. But . . . there was a steeper place – it had simply been impossible to imagine. So when the Europeans finally came to see the girl, they were exhausted, beaten by the rocks, shoes and clothes torn. But at the moment they were still not there. They were still naïve. They sang the national anthems out of despair, encouraging each other, moaning, pushing the car, and spitting dust and stone. And when they reached the top they saw that there was yet another unimaginable, rocky incline, with rocks blacker and sharper than Satan's nails, with the glimmering, coiling vein of the gold mine between the nails – and one of them cursed and wept, removing his hands from the car and beating his head. The car rolled back, almost crushing everyone else. Panic-stricken and shouting, they drove their feet against the ground, ripping their soles and heels. Red in the face from all the tension and howling foreign words, they somehow stopped the car. Even then the terrified Europeans were still naïve. The driver kept looking at them with pity, he wanted to say something to comfort them and alleviate the cruelty of the stones and the sun. He said, "The sky is so close here that it rains when angels weep." Then he looked at them and added: "But that happens in October, when the mountains are covered in snow and dreams can't find their way to the sky."

When the Europeans finally reached the village hidden in a hollow at the top of the mountain, they were still naïve. Swallowing the sun and scorched air, bleeding and with clothes torn

like the persecuted escaping from Hell, they had already lost hope that there was such a place that could be reached. As they dragged their bodies past a pile of stones – staggering, hungry, sweaty and cursing and still naïve, the old men weeding behind a stone fence straightened their backs, and one of them wiped his soiled hands on his shirt and, squinting his right eye against the blinding sun and with the other eye examining the foreigners, he asked, "Who are the visitors this time?"

"Europeans," answered the man next to him, smirking at their tattered clothes, the cameras hanging from their necks, and their sweaty backs and legs weak with exhaustion.

"And where is Europe?"

"Oh, thousands of kilometers away!"

"U-u-uh," the first old man, who was weeding bean beds, drawled indulgently.

* * *

When the Europeans came to buy the girl, they were naïve, because everyone knew that she'd already sold her body once at sixteen.

It was her father who brought the buyers from Yerevan. To be precise, he brought the second buyers. The first ones came by helicopter . . . It was August when they came. The sun had burned the mountains and the peaks looked like grief-stricken souls. The small and large stones had covered themselves with moss so as not to crack and their singed skin smarted underneath the moist roots of moss. It was an ordinary summer, and the helicopter, together with its passengers, melted and dripped down on the cliffs. The father met the second group in Yerevan and brought

them to the village on a lame donkey that had been attacked by a pack of wolves a few months ago and had lost its right hind hoof. The visitors took turns sitting on the lame donkey, respecting one another, granting the privilege to moan and groan to the elders, tormenting themselves, and admiring the height of the mountains, and the closeness to God. They suffered, but did not complain. They said: "At this height, the entrance is easier for heavenly beings than for earthly men." From that day on they'd boast that they had taken part in the building of the Tower of Babel because they'd reached the knees of God and gotten tangled in his beard. Praising nature, getting sunburned, envying those who lived in this pristine place, they arrived in the village to buy the girl. These were polite Russian men who kept kissing the women's hands from the moment they arrived until their departure. In the village, they called such men *castrates*. Hiding behind trees and rocks, the village children followed the visitors and laughed at their hand-kissings, their "sorrys," and "thankyous."

The father slaughtered a lamb born in the fall (it had been coughing and might have been sick). They put the table outside, somewhat away from the scarecrow, where the sunflowers had thrust their heads so high up into the sky that the angels might have thought the birds flying around them were spies.

The guests ate the steaming lamb stew with great appetite, throwing the gnawed bones to the cats gathered under the tree.

"Which one of your daughters are you going to sell?" the Russian asked, taking a piece of *lavash* from the youngest girl's hand. The host pointed his index finger at Noem, who was washing greens in the spring to bring to the table.

"I like this one better," the Russian said, picking up some

more *lavash* and eyeing up the youngest. "The one you're pointing to is a bit faded and pale."

"Nonsense," the father disagreed. "Wait till night falls . . . You haven't seen such a wonder. No one has ever seen such a wonder!"

Noem had known for a few months that they were coming to buy her and that she would have to get undressed. She even tried to get undressed in front of the mirror, and her mother made her do it twice in front of her brothers and sisters, so that she'd get used to the idea and not make a scene in front of the guests. But she felt nervous now that the buyers were here.

At around eleven at night, when the mountain exhaled the moon from its mouth, the mother came to fetch her.

"I feel ashamed," whimpered Noem.

"You have no conscience," the mother reproached her. "Your father nearly killed himself going back and forth to the post office and sending letters. He spent so much money, slaughtered a lamb . . . What are you ashamed of? You have undressed in front of your brothers so many times! What's to be ashamed of?"

"My brothers are ten years younger than me. I see their naked bodies too when I bathe them, but these . . . a bunch of old men," Noem sat huddled on the edge of the sofa, crying. "I don't need any money."

"I don't either," her mother said. "But we aren't talking about just *any* money – it's a *lot* of money . . . You can build a church with that kind of money. What's to be ashamed of? Imagine you have gone to the doctor, say, your chest hurts or you've broken your leg. Aren't you going to show it to him? Aren't you going to let him examine you? But it's all right if you don't want to,"

she said, sitting down on the edge of the sofa and sighing. "Your father's knee? Let it hurt. The bones get soft like chalk anyway. He has lived healthy for fifty years – he can live with a little pain now . . . There are people who are born sick, what about them? We aren't fascists after all! We don't want to torture you. If you don't want to . . . although what's there to be ashamed of? Men become sexless with age like angels. And your father . . . Well, you're of his flesh. Are you ashamed of your hands, your legs, your eyes, your heart? You would've saved us if you'd agreed. We'd have gone to live in the city. Everything is made for people there – for their convenience. You call *this* life? But it's alright, you don't have to," she stammered tearfully. "We've lived on the edge of this mountain for a hundred years, and we'll live on it a hundred more . . ."

The Russians were standing by the door and listening to the sound of tumbling stones mixing with the breath of the mountain, greedily sniffing the air and the sky, waiting for Noem to come out from the back door of the house.

"My God," gasped one of them, seeing the girl running through the garden, "What a marvel!"

"A living moon," another said eagerly.

"Didn't I tell you?" the father boasted, "You didn't believe me. What's the moon compared to this? They say it's artificial, made by extraterrestrials to keep an eye on Earth, while this here is all natural, created by God."

Noem ran through the rows of sunflowers and stopped near the scarecrow. The scarecrow stood proud and tall with its straw hair piercing the sky's eye, like a thorn. Its three-meter-long dress made of varicolored rags reached to the ground, hiding

its body, made of boards. It had no arms because it was only a scarecrow and its straw hair was enough to terrify the birds. A rusted iron pail hung from its neck, which was now just above Noem's head. The children believed that stars would fall into the pail at dawn, but her mother dutifully cleaned it once a month, emptying the bird droppings under the trees. The girl clutched with both hands onto the scarecrow's dress gown stiff with dirt.

"Come home, you'll catch cold," her father shouted in the direction of the scarecrow.

Noem pulled the scarecrow's dress. It slipped down. The girl took it from the ground, wrapped it around her naked body and walked home through the rows.

The charmed men were sitting in a room, and their eyes burned when Noem entered. The oldest, with blue eyes and a beard, resembling a kindly sorcerer from a fairy tale, approached Noem.

"Can you lie down somewhere, say, on the couch or the table? Wherever you like."

"Of course she can," Noem's father responded instead of her.

"Please, go outside," said the other man, "We don't need you anymore. We'll take it from here."

The father left the room and one of the men locked the door after him in order not to be disturbed.

Shivering, Noem laid on the couch. The men encircled her. One of them turned off the light.

"Forgive us," said the old man, bowing over Noem. "Due to the specificities of your body, we have to carry on in the dark," and he carefully pulled down the dress from her chest. One man

carefully moved her toes, another man started examining her chest, leg, and then her arm with a microscope . . . Yet another pinched her thigh, and another made a scratch near her elbow with a needle.

"Can you please bend your knees? The position you're in isn't convenient for us . . . we have to see everything and ascertain everything. You see, my girl, it's sacrilege for a man of my age to touch a woman of your age, but I must examine you – that's my profession. We can produce any effect now with the help of medicine and chemistry. We're going to spend a large amount of money to acquire you, so we must examine everything." The old man switched on his small flashlight, shining it in the girl's face, brushing her hair to the side, feeling a spot on her neck, and rubbing it with a wet cotton ball. Leaning down, he breathed on her face for a few minutes without removing his gaze from her neck, then he rubbed her with the wet cotton again, breathed on her face some more, and finally, satisfied and victorious, mewed under his nose: "Wonderful! Excellent!"

They each approached, looked curiously at her neck, breathed anxiously on her face, not believing, and each in his own turn rubbed her neck again, slightly to the right or left of the original spot. They waited, took the microscope, and examined her cell by cell, all coming to the same conclusion: "Wonderful! Excellent!"

Then they turned on the light. Two of the scientists approached Noem, one held her arm while the other said: "Don't be afraid, it won't hurt," and he pushed the needle into her vein.

* * *

"There is no deception," said the blue-eyed old man, coming out of the room, "Everything is all right, everything is perfectly natural . . ."

"I know," replied the father smoking by the window, "the local doctor says that seventy percent of her body is phosphorus. That's why she glows like that at night."

"It's possible," said the old man. "But it's a fact that she's a wonder."

They drank wild apple wine, sitting in the garden beneath the heads of sunflowers. The lawyer, papers and stamp tucked under his arm, kept tapping the glass to get rid of the bubbles in the young wine.

"My girl," he said, taking Noem's hand, "regardless of what your parents think, you must know everything before signing the papers. I'd like to tell you the most important things you need to know before selling yourself . . . We are Christian Armenians, after death we have to be buried in the ground and go either to heaven or to hell. There are no other options. You must know that after this transaction you'll lose all of that. You won't have a grave or a gravestone in the form of the ancient Armenian cradle and your parents won't come to your grave to burn incense for you. After death, all of your relatives and neighbors will be buried in the village cemetery, but you won't be there. After death, your body will belong to science. Scientists will study you, in order to understand why some people, like you, can emanate light like the moon does, while others can't. By study, we mean that after death you won't be buried, that they'll break your body, cut it into pieces, dissolve, decom-

pose, boil, treat it chemically and with high temperatures. They must mutilate you, my girl, to understand why you aren't like everyone else. Do you consent to this?" he asked. "If we sign the contract now, the government will immediately pay half of the sum, while the rest will be paid to your parents after your death, after handing over the raw material, so to speak. Think about it, my girl, do you consent to this?"

Everyone was anxiously waiting. Her brothers, sisters, and neighbors had gathered near the scarecrow, and even the cats had left the bones under the tree and joined them.

"A psychological study could also produce some excellent results. It wouldn't hurt to discuss that as well," one of the members of the group suggested to the blue-eyed old man, while Noem was thinking.

"I wouldn't advise it," said the lawyer, who'd been invited from Yerevan, leaning forward. "Armenian women don't open their souls completely even to God . . . That's going to be an unnecessary expense – a loss of time and money."

"I wouldn't have agreed anyway," said the father, taking the plate with sliced fruits from his wife's hand and setting it on the table. "Despite everything, only God may touch my daughter's soul. Humans are unworthy of that."

The group of scientists left early in the morning. It was so early that the rooster hadn't called yet, but the stars in the cool mist around the mountains had already disappeared. The guests said thank you for everything – for the hospitality, for the generosity, and for signing the contract.

"We really enjoyed you. We're very interested in you," the old scientist said, shaking Noem's hand. "Until our next meeting!

We'll be waiting . . . for your death," he joked.

"We will too," laughed the father.

* * *

They hadn't even spent half of that money when the Soviet Union collapsed and the ruble was devalued. Armenia declared its independence from the Soviet Union and entered into a new partnership with the European Union.

When the Europeans came, they were naïve because they didn't know that the Russians had been there before them. The Russians, who'd come before the Europeans, came after the Ottomans. The Persians, who'd come before the Ottomans, knew that before them and after the Seljuks came the Tatars and the Mongols, and even before that – the Arabs, who came, it seems, after the Greeks. They had come at the same time as the Egyptian pharaohs, before the Romans, who had come before the Byzantines, who came after the Assyrians, who came after the Khuris. But even before that – Noah had passed through here and he had stopped, because God himself had passed through this place. And Noah was the only one who'd left something instead of taking something away. Otherwise, it would've been impossible to know that God had passed through here. And then the Europeans wouldn't have come.

Translated by Shushan Avagyan

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THE SUN IS THE FACE OF THE LORD, AND WE BEHOLD IT EVERY DAY

My shadow curled up as I sat on the ground. I was feeling tired. I had been standing by the roadside for a fairly long time, but I hadn't seen a single car or person pass by. The sun was blazing hot. The dry, parched ground burned the soles of my feet. The air was boiling hot. I seemed to exhale balls of flame from my lungs. What was I thinking, setting off in the heat of the day?

I was feeling sorry for the time I had wasted, so I decided to go home. I could have laid down and slept for a while, weeded the cabbage beds until the heat subsided, maybe even watered the trees.

The moment I turned towards the village, I heard the distant roar of an engine behind me. It couldn't be a car. I stopped and swung around to take a look. I saw a military truck in the distance, and my heart leapt with joy. Rushing into the middle of the road, I started to wave my arms frantically.

The truck pulled over, up the road a piece. I ran up to it. The door handle was quite high up, and so was the footboard. I waited for the driver to open the door and offer me a helping hand, but he made no move. I decided to wait a few more seconds, but then, fearing that he would drive off, reached for the handle. I tried a few times, but my efforts were in vain. I was

mad. I felt like telling him off. *Would it be too much to ask to open the door for me?* But I didn't have the guts. God knows what sort of man the driver was. If I hurt him, he would leave, and I would have to stand there and wait even longer. I stretched as far up as I possibly could to reach the handle. My spine clicked loudly, and I felt a sharp pain in my big toes under my weight. It felt like my spine and neck would split off from my body, but I somehow managed to reach the handle. I finally managed to open the door with just the tips of my fingers.

The driver looked at me and smiled. He was a tall, well-built man, his neck and jaw lost in a mass of straggly hair, his mouth hidden behind a bushy beard. His eyes were large and round. As he looked ahead, his pupils became motionless, almost hypnotic. He clutched the steering wheel in his huge hands. There was oil residue under his fingernails.

"Get a move on, we're running late!" he said. His eyes brightened and crinkled at the corners. His beard twitched upwards from both sides. He might have cracked a smile.

"The footboard is pretty high. I can't raise my foot up there." I glanced at his strong arms, hoping that at least now he would think to stretch out his hand to help me into the cab.

"Your skirt's narrow and restricting your movements. Tuck it up so to step up more easily," he advised.

"I wonder why God made you six-foot four with huge hands if I have to pull up my skirt to get into your truck?" I couldn't help grumbling aloud. I folded up my skirt, put my knee up, and stood on the footboard.

"Not that much, gal, you've almost taken your dress off," he laughed.

"I'm no *gal* to you," I snapped irritably. "I have a son twice your height!"

"Some people have sons three times taller," he laughed, and his eyes filled with tears. He started to cough, unable to finish speaking.

"What a waste of time." I took my seat without looking at him. "I'd jump off and split if I hadn't waited so long."

"Why's that?" He became serious all of a sudden. "We're just having a good laugh, that's all... I haven't heard myself laugh in a while. Don't be sore. I liked you right from the start," he said, turning the key in the ignition. The truck's engine began to shudder. "What's wrong with sharing a joke with a woman you like?"

"Oh, come on!" I waved him off. "Maybe I'd better just wait for another lift."

"It's up to you, but if you get off now, you'll scorch in this sun before too long. I'm the only one coming from there," he pointed his thumb over his shoulder, "...and going back. I expect there'll be no one else for some time."

"So now you're a national hero?" I asked, my voice dripping with contempt. "Our village is within spitting distance of the front line, so we know better than you who's running in and out."

The truck started rolling down an old, cracked asphalt road.

"Huh?" he looked at me expectantly. His eyes were aquamarine, like the shallow part of a lake, and fragments of his entire life seemed to settle to the bottom of his weary eyes like so much silt.

"I mean this is the first time I've seen you," I replied. "You must be new to these parts."

"Do you really think a man my age can be a newcomer?" he shouted at the top of his voice. "I've been driving back and forth every single day for the past ten years, since the war started. Then he leaned towards me and shouted, almost into my ear, "Every day I set off when the sun's up, and go back when it's down."

"And death doesn't scare you either." I curled my lips contemptuously.

"No, it doesn't. Death is the best punishment. Why should I be scared?" His voice grew so sincere that it now sounded naïve. "Besides, why should I think about that? My job is to be alive and well. I don't know about you, but I for one plan to hold tight to this wheel until a ripe old age and carry on driving to the battlefield and back. I'll be ferrying dead bodies to be buried, delivering letters from loved ones to whiny conscripts, rushing the doctor to the wounded, and taking deserters back and yelling at the cowards. It's hard, but I'll keep driving back and forth." He remained silent for a moment, then continued with a touch of irony in his voice. "And I will sometimes give rides to unkempt women like you, taking them to town so they can spend their yearly savings on a tasteless dress and return to show it off around the village."

"I want to buy clothing and other things for my children, not myself," I began to explain in a leisurely manner. "I never have enough money to buy things for everyone, so I always buy things one at a time and always struggle to settle everything."

"How many children have you got? Are they grown-up?" He looked at my reflection in the mirror.

"No, they're still kids," I replied, yawning. "My daughter is five years old. She can't manage the broom very well yet, but she's

supposed to sweep the house and the yard, so I get her big red ribbons in town. My youngest son doesn't like boiled eggs, but he promised to eat them, so he gets a toy gun and a school bag. My eldest son's voice has turned croaky but it hasn't broken yet. He's in charge of the little ones and shouts at them if they start fighting, and I buy him hairspray for that."

"Do you have a husband?" He tried to catch my eye through the mirror again.

"Uh-huh."

"Is he a good boy?"

"How should I know? He's not a boy anymore," I mumbled incoherently.

"Do you love him?"

"You're weird, you know!" I let out a growl, and looked at him quizzically. "Can you really love someone whose face you've been seeing for twenty years on end?"

"Twenty years is not a long time." His eyes gleamed under bushy eyebrows.

"Not at all," I agreed, "but what I see is only a human face, not God's face."

The roof of the truck had absorbed a lot of heat, and the air in the cab made me drowsy. I gradually dissolved into that heat. I didn't feel like talking. My head was leaning against the headrest. I felt tired and slightly dizzy. The truck rumbled over a bumpy road, rocking me to sleep. Soon I began to nod off, and it was at this time that a fugitive idea struck terror into my heart: the war might reach our village before I returned home. Who would take my children out of the village, and where would I find them afterwards? Fear roused me from sleep, and I stretched out.

"This life – what does it want from us, anyway?" I sighed, addressing no one in particular.

"Why so bitter?" he asked. There was genuine surprise in his voice. "After all, I am the one returning from the battlefield."

"What kind of life is this?" I grumbled.

"You shouldn't be saying things like that." He stretched out his rough hand and punched me lightly on the shoulder, saying, "War and peace are like the sun and the moon: although they're knit together, they can never cross. Like it or not, the day is divided into two equal parts: day and night."

"Where, eh?" I rubbed my shoulder where he punched it. "We keep marching in procession behind the dead. My soul has been ripped to shreds and ruined like a pilgrim's feet, but the holy place is still nowhere in sight."

"Up there," he pointed a thick finger out the window, "in the sky."

"Up there," I tried to imitate him. "What's up there?"

"My dear, even chickens look up at the sky when they drink water. Have you ever really looked up?" he scolded.

"I have." I sat up, lifting my head from the headrest. "It's blue sky up there, and it can turn black or red whenever it wants," I said drily.

"The sun's up there too!" my fellow traveler added graciously.

He leaned forward, becoming tense as he caught sight of a large pothole further down the road.

"Oh yes," my voice was faintly mocking, "the sun is the clock and you are the pendulum."

"Look, my dear! The sun is the Lord's face, and we see it every day," he said, patiently explaining, like a parent to a slow-witted

child. “I am just a man who gets up with the rising sun and goes to sleep at sunset.”

A brief silence lingered in the air, and then I asked, “Have you ever killed anybody?”

The muscles at the bridge of his nose twitched, and his brows drew together in an angry frown.

“I mean, an enemy,” I clarified.

He slammed on the brakes, and the huge car jerked to a halt. I flew forward and my head almost smacked against the windshield. I turned towards him but wasn’t given a chance to lash out.

“What the hell kind of woman are you?” He flung his arms out wide and shouted furiously. “The hell with calling you a woman! You sit down comfortably here and start sounding off about war and killing people – to a man you don’t know. I’m already sick of your moaning. Fuck you!” He continued growling under his breath, probably needed to curse me more in his head.

While he yelled, I forced myself to stay silent. I wanted to get where I was going to as soon as possible. Men like it when you pretend to be a frightened slave. They need to yell and dominate to boost their ego. I focused my eyes on his face so I wouldn’t shout back. His beard was turning grey from the corners of his mouth to his sideburns. The grey spots were like twisted dry leaves. The whiskers around his chin were still dark.

“Your beard’s starting to go grey, you are becoming a wise man,” my voice had turned suddenly melodious and tender.

“I’m not wise.” He stopped shouting, disarmed by the sound of my gentle voice. He added in an aggrieved tone, like a sulking child, “But I have seen a lot in my life and understand perfectly well all the aches and pains a wise man must endure.”

No sooner had he said it than he put his hand on my shoulder, caressed my neck with his thumb, then pulled me towards himself, and kissed me. I drew away immediately. He removed his hand from my shoulder, laid it on my knee and began stroking it. He must have had calluses on the palm of his hand. They lightly scratched my knee.

"Take your hand off my knee," I demanded coldly. "I don't want runs in my tights. This is my only pair of tights – I haven't got any other."

"Yeah, you're right," he agreed straight away, "let's pull them off to keep them undamaged."

He slid his hand up my thigh.

"Thank you very much!" I jerked his hand back, opened the door and jumped out of the truck.

I found myself at the edge of a wheat field. I stepped into it. I grazed my arms on the spiky heads of the wheat stalks, but didn't pay them any attention. I felt a pang of painful regret, and I could hardly walk.

Suddenly someone hugged me tightly from behind, and I was immediately lifted up and shoved to the ground. The rough-stemmed wheat stalks broke under my back with a loud crack. The truck driver fell on me and started kissing me passionately. His hands began chaotically pulling up my skirt. I meant to hit him in the stomach with my knee and roll him off, but I didn't do that.

He tried to urge me on as we headed back to the truck, saying, "Make it quick! We should hurry to get the soldiers' corpses to their relatives." He made a path for me by trampling down clumps of wheat stalks with his heavy boots.

"What corpses?" I asked, baffled.

"Those in the back of my truck." He pointed to his truck. "Stuffed full with eighteen to twenty-year-olds, covered with a thick tarp."

"Good Lord!" my knees buckled from fear. I felt dizzy, and knelt down on the ground. The driver carried on, but stopped after a few steps, turned around, and was surprised to see me on my knees. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I'm scared." My voice had dropped to a whisper. I curled up into a ball and pressed myself against the ground.

"What can I do?" He shrugged his shoulders and pushed on towards the truck. When he got there, he turned around again, and shouted towards me,

"Are you coming now or should I go?"

"Yes, I'm coming," I tried to shout back. "What does it look like I'm doing? I'm coming. . ."

Translated by Marina Yandian

GEVORG
TER-GABRIELYAN

THE "GODLESS" MOVIE THEATER

Armenia, Twentieth Century: Blockbuster

The screen is dark, then illuminated.

Prologue

A bird's-eye view of the center of Old Yerevan: the *caravansary* next to the mosque and the old market, the church on Amiryan, converted into a movie theater called "Godless,"[17] and the Mayakovsky school and the military barracks next to it. And then the Commissars' Park (formerly called the English Park), but without the Sundukyan Theater, which hadn't been built yet.

[17] *In the Soviet Union religion was declared 'opium for the people' and churches were being destroyed. This church was temporarily made into a movie theater with an appropriate name - "Godless" ("Bezbozhnik" in Russian or "Anastvatz" in Armenian). It then was blown up, and in its place we have the Charents School since early 1950s. Inside that school there is one stone left from the original church.*

And then the fruit gardens and houses in place of Swan Lake or Sayat Nova street, with the Opera House being constructed in the distance, Mamur Creek being abruptly cut off by a construction plot, suddenly featuring in place of its continuation.

The voice of the filmmaker says

I had lived for more than half a century, but never seriously collected the stories of my parents or their generation. I finally managed to gather some material from things I picked up here and there and so I wrote a screenplay that spanned from about the 1930s to I guess the mid-1950s, up to the point my father and mother met and got married.

My father had always wanted to write a screenplay.

This may not be literary prose, but it'll do for a screenplay. Because it will probably never be made into a movie, and it's probably too long, anyway, I suggest that let it unfold in your imagination instead. Genre-wise, it will be a combination of *Amarcord* and *Mirror*. Bertolucci has had an influence, as has Atom. Because it will be impossible to turn this into an actual movie, I suggest that you make an effort to screen it mentally in front of your eyes.

The scenes are mostly documentary, which means they are based on true events, stories, or on things that I've heard over the years. However, I've built a plot – fictional, to a certain extent but, on the other hand, woven into legend – and the incidents are neither accurate from a factual point of view nor strictly chronological. The end of the thirties blends into the forties and fifties, and my mother's age has become closer to my father's. The Yerevan of those times is not completely accurate either. This is my own life-legend of Yerevan.

Credits roll across an image of Yerevan.

Gratitude to my mother and father. Thanks also to: the book *Yerevan: Twentieth Century*; the ArmenPress digital photo archive; and the Armenia Totalitaris group; to Marat Yavrumyan, Sarhat Petrosyan, Mark Grigorian, Anna Sargsyan, Tigran Paskevichyan, Ara Shirinyan, Vardan Azatyan, Vardan Jaloyan, and Ara Nedolyan, for the work they have done online and elsewhere that has provided me with a moment, fragment, detail, or nudge in one form or another.

Scenes

1.

The prelude

A female professor is tidying herself up in the instructors' lounge. She is alone, and there is a fearful but determined smile on her face, which she tries to conceal. The growling, (for lack of a better term) of the radio and the ambience suggest the fifties, around 1954. The black shadow of a picture frame, where Stalin's portrait used to be, is still visible on the wall of the instructors' lounge.

She walks through the empty corridor to the university classroom, opens the door, and goes in.

There are only girls in the classroom. More than forty of them.

The professor looks at them, takes a breath, and then fearfully takes out a picture of Charents from her breast pocket. It is part of a wrinkled newspaper article, which she unfolds, looking

around her to make sure the classroom door is closed before showing it to the class.

"Good morning. I have some very good news to share with you. There was an amazing poet, very talented, named Yeghishe Charents. This is him. We haven't spoken about him until now, but we can finally do so. I urge you very strongly to read some of his work. Unfortunately, not a lot is left. But if any of you happen to have some of his poems at home, you can bring them to class and we'll choose one and write it on the blackboard. We'll read it together, discuss it, and memorize it. Which of you might have a book by Charents still lying around at home?"

The whole class raises their hands.

2.

Earlier, at the end of the thirties

The seven-year old Inga is at a concert in the newly opened Opera Hall. A young girl is playing the piano there with an orchestra, a classical piece. Inga has sharp eyes and suddenly notices that the girl is reading a book instead of looking at the sheet music. The camera zooms in and we see that the young girl is reading the Russian novel *Anna Karenina* while playing. She turns the page when she finishes it, and nobody notices that she's reading a novel while playing, without making a mistake. The piano player's name is Evelina.

3.

Evelina and Vram's house. There are three rooms – a bedroom, a living room and the office of their father, Mikael. All three rooms are very small.

Classical piano music can be heard from the living room.

Evelina and Vram's father has come home, tired and moody. He's writing a letter at his desk, sitting in his large armchair, after eating. The table is covered with a green cloth. We see the letter he is writing in Russian. *I am writing to inform you that if you arrest Comrade Gasparyan, then you must also arrest me, because I was in charge of operations and could not have been unaware... I have been privy to all of Comrade Gasparyan's orders, and if he is guilty of any violations, then I am guilty as well. Moreover, if there have been any violations, then the blame is chiefly mine and not his...*

He falls back in his armchair and calls his wife.

"Siranush, some water, please?"

Siranush's hands are covered in flour. She's been baking something in the kitchen. She looks down at her beautiful small hands and calls out in the direction of the room.

"Evelina, Father wants some water."

The piano goes silent. Evelina appears, walking up to the window and shouting out into the yard.

"V-ram! Vram!"

The boy replies from a distance, "What is it?"

"Father wants some water."

She goes back to the other room, and the music starts again.

The yard, full of trees, has two ponds in which children are splashing. Vram, however, is further off, at the edge of the yard, where the territory of the church begins. The church is now a movie theater, with Armenian letters that read *Bezbozhnik*[18] on the marquee. A movie poster, pasted onto the wall, announces

[18] *A Russian word meaning "atheist" or "a godless person."*

Namus[19] and *Chapayev*.[20] There is a bas-relief etched into the upper edge of the church depicting an array of interlocked hands.

In the churchyard Vram and Uncle Vanya, the Public Education Commissar, his son, and some other children are making a real "big" aircraft – a U-2 plane. Uncle Vanya is also a pilot, and he's wearing a pilot's helmet, with the earmuffs untied.

Ten-year-old Vram descends from the left wing of the plane and rushes in from the depths of the yard, enters his house, fills up a glass of water, gives it to his father, then returns to the plane.

The father drinks the water and looks at his watch. He sits quietly for a while longer, then folds up the letter, and puts it into his briefcase. Rising from his chair, he carefully adds a spare set of underwear and a pair of socks (which had been resting in a corner of his desk) to the briefcase and trudges wearily out the door, without saying anything to his family. It is seven in the evening.

4.

Vram is in the forest with Uncle Ghazar and Chibis the dog, an Irish setter. Uncle Ghazar has a rifle.

"Let me show you a water carousel," Uncle Ghazar says.

Vram imagines a carousel on the water – joyful, musical... When they get there, he'll sit in it and spin around on the water, splashing this way and that. How many kids would there be besides him? It's quite strange, though, for a water carousel to be located in the middle of the forest. No music can be heard... But Vram believes Uncle Ghazar.

[19] *Literally translated as "dignity." This was one of the first films made in Soviet Armenia in the 1920s and based on A. Shirvanzade's story of the same name.*

[20] *A Soviet movie from the 1930s about the celebrated Red army commander, Vasily Chapayev.*

Uncle Ghazar brings him to a whirlpool. Scraps, twigs, and leaves are spinning in it...

Vram is disappointed, but he doesn't make a sound.

On their way back, they see people cutting trees, including oaks that are hundreds of years old.

Two oaks are entangled at the top, one sickly, the other robust. The woodcutters have cut one of them, but their branches are so closely intertwined that the healthy tree does not let the other one fall. The woodcutters are persistent and finally manage to fell it. One of the woodcutters, angry but satisfied at his victory, kicks the healthy tree and hurts his leg. He then stands on the fallen tree and begins to chop off its branches.

"Why would anyone do that?" Vram asks. "The poor trees, they're so pretty and they give us clean air..."

"You're right," says Uncle Ghazar.

They sit in Uncle Ghazar's *Emka*, and the driver brings them back to town, where they stop at the Forestry Commissariat.

A plane soars above them in the sky and Vram waves at it, convinced that it is Uncle Vanya.

It's a beautiful fall day in Yerevan. The trees are multi-colored. The people, however, are walking past each other with looks of suspicion, silent and moody, avoiding eye contact.

The Forestry Commissar is a 27-year old boy wearing a *budenovka*[21]. Above his head, there is a huge diploma from the University of Heidelberg. While the adults converse, Vram studies the diploma and its golden stamp, and Karl Jaspers' sprawling signature. The diploma says that the Commissar gained his master's in philosophy at the age of 19.

[21] *A military hat of the Red Army during the Civil War of 1918-1920.*

"Listen to what this boy is saying."

Vram repeats his words like a straight-A student who has memorized the topic well. "Why would anyone cut trees? They are living things, after all, they feel pain, and they're pretty."

"You're right, young man."

The Commissar picks up the phone and issues an order for the tree cutting to cease.

5·

Uncle Ghazar, Vram's father Mikael, as well as Charents, Axel Bakunts, Totovents[22] and Sarajev[23] are sitting in the yard of the mosque in a café called Tourist, where they're drinking coffee. Mikael Mazmanyan[24] takes out a piece of paper from his pocket, lays it out on the table, and draws the sketch of the Publishers' House building.

Everyone looks at his drawing.

Vram and Bakunts' son Sevada are playing next to them.

Vram comes closer to the table, sees Mazmanyan drawing, and automatically puts the palm of his hand on one section of the paper. Mazmanyan looks at the hand and draws an outline of it. Vram smiles.

"Did you submit your letter?" Axel suddenly asks Mikael (Vram's father).

Mazmanyan stops the explanation of his drawing and looks up.

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[22] *These famous Armenian writers died in 1937-38, victims of purges of the Stalinist era.*

[23] *Konstantin Sarajev was a famous musician and a director (rector) of the Yerevan Conservatory, who, as an exception, wasn't formally prosecuted in the 1930s-1940s.*

[24] *A famous architect and the designer of several key buildings in Yerevan.*

"Yes," Mikael replies.

"And?"

"Silence."

"Mikoyan's arrived," Charents says suddenly.

Totovents says nothing. He looks at the mosque, which is in bad shape.

"Someone should tell him what's going on," Uncle Ghazar says.

"Who can do that?" Totovents says suddenly in a singsong voice.

"I can. I know him from Baku. He won't reject me, he'll accept a meeting request. He can't turn me down."

"Just the two of you escaped," Charents suddenly says with an indescribable intonation.

"They sent me away earlier," Ghazar responds with humility. "I was following Comrade Lenin's orders."

"Give your picture to my son," Mikael says.

Mazmanyan looks at Vram, picks up the paper, and holds it out to him.

Vram takes it, turns it around, and looks at it, but his father snatches it from him.

"You'll wrinkle it." And he puts it in his briefcase.

Sarajev silently taps a musical piece with his fingers on the table, moving his lips along with it.

In the distance, near the wall of the mosque's courtyard, a deep trench has been dug, and construction has begun on the market square for what will later be known as Stalin Avenue. Several clay pitchers and two human skulls that were extracted from the trench have been placed on the ground, near the

trench. Vram and Sevada watch as homeless children in rags run up and start to play football with one of the skulls.

The children are also being watched by a beggarwoman sitting nearby. She is the mother of Avetis and Sargis (we will see more of her later). Ashkhen, Inga's mother, walks past her, opens her bag and takes out a one-*kopek* coin, which she places in the hat lying in front of the woman. Seeing what the children were doing (playing football with the skull), she rolls her eyes. It isn't very long before she quietly says, "stop it."

The children disappear in an instant, as if blown away by the wind, and the skull is left lying there in the middle of Stalin Avenue.

Among those sitting in the café, only Charents notices this, because he was watching Ashkhen's svelte figure with satisfaction, as she disappeared at the corner of Amiryan Street.

Sitting on a horse, clicking along the street, comes Garegin, Askhen's husband and Inga's father, from the direction of Etchmiadzin. The horse carefully avoids the skull and keeps moving toward Amiryan Street.

Here, near a two-story building, which is in the same block as the "Godless" church, Garegin climbs down from his horse, stretches wearily, struggles to tie the horse to a post near the house, and walks in.

As soon as he enters and closes the door, an explosion can be heard. The horse bucks and whinnies. The wind blows and raises a cloud of dust.

Garegin does not bother to step outside to see what has happened.

Everyone in the Tourist café raises their heads. Sarajev stops

tapping his fingers on the table. Vram and Sevada run out of the mosque courtyard and rush towards Amiryan Street. The church is being demolished, including the big letters on it saying *Bezbozhnik*. In recent years, it was being used as a movie theater. The explosions were being supervised by Vram's neighbor, Uncle Vanya, the Public Education Commissar. Sargis is helping him. Mikoyan is standing some distance away, personally overseeing the demolition of the church.

After the explosion, he marches up to the *Emka* like a soldier, gets in, and the car drives away.

A piece of the frieze falls near Sevada's feet. Vram picks it up. There's a hand on it with broken fingers. Vram puts the fragment in his pocket.

The courtyard of the church also contains the airplane that the children were making with Uncle Vanya. It has been rocked by the explosion, and its right tire and left wing end up broken. The boys look on sadly.

"Don't worry, we'll repair it and get it airborne," says Uncle Vanya.

6.

Uncle Ghazar approaches the entrance of the government building and says to the guard, "I want to see Comrade Mikoyan." He writes a note and sends it off. He sits down to wait.

Flashback (made in the same style, as a 'movie within a movie,' as will be seen later)

Baku, Bolshevik Commissariat, 1918...[25]

[25] *What follows relates to the Baku Commissars, a group of bolsheviks who briefly held Soviet power in Baku in 1918 and then the 26 of them were executed. Several legends*

"You have a party assignment that is a top priority," says Shahumyan[26].

"Yes, sir!" says Uncle Ghazar.

"Our comrade must urgently be rescued from the blockade. He has an important secret message to deliver to Comrade Lenin."

"Yes, sir!" says Uncle Ghazar.

"Can you do it?"

"Yes, sir!" says Uncle Ghazar.

A younger Uncle Ghazar walks along the sleepy streets of Baku with a cart containing two barrels, drawn by a buffalo. He is wearing the costume of a Tatar[27] villager. The cart enters a courtyard. It is evening. Uncle Ghazar opens the cover of one of the barrels and takes out a sack of apples from within. Then he turns to a small house in the yard and calls, "Comrade."

Mikoyan emerges from the house. He appears to be the same age as he was in the thirties, twelve years in the future. He is small and dressed in uniform and boots. He marches up to the cart like a soldier.

"Please go in here." Mikoyan twists his mustache and climbs onto the cart. He looks into the barrel, sighs, climbs in, and huddles down.

Uncle Ghazar picks up a disk with holes drilled into it, a kind of false lid, from the bottom of the cart, covers Mikoyan, then empties the apples from the sack on top. He closes the barrel

---

surround this historical event, and many of them relate to Anastas Mikoyan, the only one who survived.

[26] *Stepan Shahumyan, the leader of Baku Commissars.*

[27] *At the beginning of the 20th century, Azerbaijanis were still often commonly referred to as Tatars.*

with the main cover and taps on the barrel wall. Several less visible holes have been drilled in the barrel wall.

"Everything okay?"

He hears a tap in reply.

We see the road leading out of Baku. Uncle Ghazar drives the cart along and whistles.

Two armed Tatar soldiers appear in front of him.

"Deyendirdir. Ne götersen?"

Uncle Ghazar starts to actively engage them in chit-chat and opens the barrel in which Mikoyan is hiding. He takes out an apple and offers it to the soldiers, then spits out a couple of expletives at the *gavur*[28] Armenian Bolsheviks.

The *askars*[29] walk around the cart and stick their swords into the hay. One of them even has the other barrel opened and thrusts his sword into the apples there, moving it around.

When he removes the sword, there is a red apple sticking to its tip. He brings it to his mouth with satisfaction and bites into it with a crunch.

From the booth at the edge of the road, which is their watch post, a "white" occupying British soldier calls out, "Enough of that. We are not here to waste time on innocent peasants. We need to look for the real enemy – *musavats*[30]."

The *askars* don't understand the English commentary, but they step aside nonetheless.

"Geç, geç."

Uncle Ghazar pilots the cart along happily, urging the buffalo

[28] *Infidel*

[29] *"Soldier" in Azerbaijani and Turkish; the word has a negative connotation for Armenians.*

[30] *A political party in Azerbaijan*

along with a "ho-ho," only later realizing that this was typical of how Armenians herded their livestock. But it is too late.

The *askars* watch him from behind, sensing that something is wrong. Uncle Ghazar does not look back, but he can feel them staring at him.

One of the *askars* wants to stop him, but the British soldier calls out at that moment, so he spits and walks towards the booth.

Uncle Ghazar sighs in relief, then taps on the side of the barrel.

At the banks of a beautiful river, he turns the barrel over. The barrel rolls down from the cart. The apples fall out of it and Mikoyan crawls out, groaning. He straightens his moustache, dusts off his uniform, and gives Uncle Ghazar a firm handshake. "I'll never forget this, comrade. You saved my life."

"What's going on?" asks Uncle Ghazar.

"I shouldn't say anything – it's top secret. But you deserve to know. An attack is being planned on Baku. All our men will be killed."

"Why don't they run away?"

"Bolsheviks don't run away," Mikoyan says. "Would Ajax[31] run away? Not in a million years!"

Voiceovers . . .

So why did you run away, Uncle Ghazar doesn't say.

Because they are martyrs, and I'm just another rascal, Mikoyan doesn't say in response, as he turns around and vanishes into the bushes.

---

[31] *One of the nicknames attributed to Shahumyan.*

7.

The next scene features a raft with Shahumyan and the remaining 25 Commissars on it, tied with rope, lying on the wooden deck.

"Isn't Miko going to save us?" Fioletov says quietly to Japaridze.

"If he's managed to create a cell in Krasnovodsk, then he'll make it," Shahumyan replies wisely.

Azizbekov shrugs his shoulders in desperation.

"Only Lenin knows..."

"Silence!" the Turkmen in the sailor's costume says, jabbing him with the bayonet at the end of his rifle. "Traitor!"

Azizbekov is dumbstruck, and everyone else falls silent as well.

The raft rocks on the calm surface of the Caspian Sea.

The flashback ends . . .

The guard returns, holding a note – *Very busy, can't meet, unfortunately. I send you my heartiest Bolsh. greetings. Mikoyan.*

8.

Vram has come to Uncle Ghazar's house to take Chibis the dog. Ghazar's wife, Nadya, a tall Russian woman, is urgently gathering some items in the house. They have taken her husband away. Some people are telling her to "hurry up and vacate the house." They are rushing her. One of them taps his feet and says in Russian, "What are you digging around for? You've dug enough holes with your anti-Soviet activities." A cart can be seen in the distance carrying a woman, two small children, and several

suitcases. The cart is parked some distance from the house, and the woman and two children watch, waiting silently, without climbing off. The woman's mouth is open, and she licks her lips.

Nadya is wearing boots and a man's khaki paramilitary uniform. She says to Chibis, "Go to him" and points to Vram. Then she walks up to Vram and gives him some things in a hurry.

Vram escapes the scene, accompanying Chibis along the same path that he had taken with Uncle Ghazar. The water carousel is still there, whirling furiously, like the dance of dervishes. The water is murky, with a hint of red. Vram walks ahead and sees that there are people cutting trees again. He is holding a package in his hand, given to him by Nadya.

In Yerevan, Vram reluctantly goes to the Commissariat of the 27-year old Commissar. He sees a *Voronok*[32] parked there. The young Commissar is led toward it, his hands twisted behind him. He is being taken away. One of the men making the arrest is 18-year old Avetis, who signals to Vram with his eyes as if to say, "stay away." The other, 24-year old Sargis, Avetis' brother, tracks the direction of Avetis' gaze and sees Vram. The 27-year old Commissar suddenly makes a move and the gun hanging from Avetis' shoulder slips down. Sargis gives the Commissar a shake and straightens the gun on Avetis' shoulder, giving him an angry look. Vram suddenly notices that Sargis' hands have no fingernails. When Sargis looks again in Vram's direction, the boy is already gone.

At home, Vram unwraps the package. There is a Kolibri typewriter in it and a Zeiss camera (just like a Kiev). His father picks up the items and takes them to his room.

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[32] *A prisoner transport vehicle used in the Soviet Union by the People's Comissariat for Internal Affairs, better known by its abbreviation in Russian – NKVD.*

9.

In the morning, Vram sees that his father is reading the newspaper – Sahak Ter-Gabrielyan[33] has been arrested.

Vram goes to school. He is late for class, and his teacher pounces on him: "That's how it is! The children of enemies of the people don't bother to be on time."

Vram turns around, runs out, and goes to his father's workplace.

His father is still at work – he hasn't been taken away. The teacher had confused him with Sahak. His father takes him by the hand and they go to the Public Education Commissariat. The Commissar is their neighbor, Uncle Vanya, the one with the pilot's helmet. His large German diploma hangs on the wall behind him. He listens to Vram's story, picks up the phone, and makes a call.

Vram returns to the school. That teacher, her personal belongings all packed up, walks towards him. She has been fired. She throws a hateful glance at Vram, then passes him and leaves. Vram opens the school door, goes in, and closes it behind him. When Vram leaves school later, a plane is inscribing death loops in the sky.

10.

We see the yard in front of Vram's house, the one with the ponds. A *Voronok* is parked nearby. From one of the floors above, the Public Education Commissar, Uncle Vanya, is being led out with his arm twisted behind his back. His neighbor is walking

[33] *A Bolshevik political leader, arrested in 1937, a relative of Vram's family.*

behind him and shouting, "Hurray, they're taking him away. Away!" She's licking her lips. And then she starts to dance with joy in the street.

Once again, it's Sargis and Avetis taking Uncle Vanya away. As they walk, Avetis looks with wonder at the woman, then sees Vram standing in the distance and looks away. Vram looks up at the sky. The plane is gone.

Uncle Vanya's son is in the yard, surrounded by children from the neighborhood. Vram walks up to him and tries to play with him – tries to get him to talk. But he doesn't make a sound. His mother comes and takes him by the hand, leading him home. He doesn't seem to have the will to walk, so his mother drags him behind her.

Vram comes to school late again in the morning, opens the classroom door, and enters. His teacher is back. She has been restored to her position in the school. When she sees Vram entering, her lips curl into a smile.

When Vram sees her, he turns around and runs away from the school. He runs, schoolbag in hand, in a random direction. Chibis soon joins him.

11.

Perch's mother has made him wear a beret. They are a family that repatriated recently from France, and Perch's father had been the university rector until his capture. When Perch goes to school, the boys whistle.

"Gavroche, Gavroche," they call out.

Perch does not want to remove the beret his mother has given him, even after school, although he knows where this will lead.

He leaves the courtyard of the school (another school, not the one that Vram attends), and the boys catch up to him and start taunting him. Perch argues with them and gets into a fight. But he's smaller than them, and he's outnumbered. They begin to beat him ruthlessly.

Vram, running with Chibis, notices the scene. Chibis wants to attack the assaulters. Vram grabs him by the neck and holds him back. "Chibis, sit, sit!" he says in Russian. He then rushes over and sets about defending Perch. The boys grudgingly retreat. Vram and Perch, scuffed up, walk away. Perch's beret has been damaged and looks funny, but he does not take it off his head. As they walk, they ask each other's name and get acquainted.

While walking, they see Nadya in the distance, her feet and ankles wrapped in cloth instead of shoes, wearing a ragged military greatcoat, dragging two buckets of water. Suddenly, Vram sees his father walking up to Nadya, giving her the package with the typewriter and the camera. They talk. Nadya refuses to take it. Chibis wags his tale happily but somberly at Vram's feet.

Perch comes home. He lives opposite the university building. His mother, wearing black, is busy with her chores. There's an unfinished canvas in the room covered with a cloth. Perch pulls the cloth off the canvas – it features a portrait of his father. Saryan[34] had painted the original but it no longer exists, so Perch has been trying to reproduce it from memory. His father has already been taken away. He had been the university rector. His office had been opposite their apartment. Perch glances from the balcony and sees the ransacked office on the other side of the street.

[34] *A famous artist.*

12.

Avetis is asleep in his family's hovel, still wearing his uniform. The hovel is a small hut made of mud. Avetis's mother and Sargis are looking at him. Avetis wakes up. It's half past midnight. He gets up, smiles at his mother, then tells his brother, "Let's go." They leave. We see that they live at the edge of Tokhmakh.[35] The dim light emanating from the door of the hovel reveals a line of gravestones, extending into the green darkness.

The *Voronok* is parked outside. The boys get in. Their mother makes the sign of the cross as they leave. She looks tormented.

13.

1942 or thereabouts

Mikael (Vram's father) is sitting in his armchair and staring fixedly into space. The newspapers are bundled in a corner of the table. He opens the table drawer. It contains a *Lady's Browning*,[36] his personal stamp and, underneath, a huge diploma from the University of Heidelberg. He picks up the *Browning*, checks it, and looks in the barrel. He puts it back. He picks up the small metallic stamp, looks at it, blows at its surface, and cleans it with his finger. He puts it back, then takes out the diploma, thinking about where to put it. He places it beneath the drawer in a hidden compartment, then he takes it out again and slides it into the bundle of the newspapers on the table.

He picks up a pince-nez, folds it, and puts it in his coat pocket. He gets up, opens his suitcase, and starts to pack. He takes

[35] *The main cemetery in Yerevan at that time.*

[36] *A small handgun, used on several occasions in the 1930s in suicide attempts by those who were under imminent threat of arrest.*

the camera and leaves the house. Suitcase in hand, he goes to the hospital.

Vram is lying in the hospital. A greatcoat is hanging next to him. He's a conscript. He looks pale. Mikael gives him the camera. He's brought him food.

"It's *khavitz*.[37] Your mother sent it. Eat it."

Vram barely has the strength to move. He looks at Mikael in silence. Mikael says goodbye and leaves. Vram watches him go.

Mikael goes to the station. A large number of young men are getting on the train, many wearing parts of a military uniform. Some are not in uniform at all. Their parents are saying goodbye to them. Mikael waits for another train. When it arrives, many wounded people are taken off on stretchers, while cloth has been used to cover some of their faces. Mikael manages to find a seat on this train. The lettering on it says *Rostov*. Later we see him sitting in another train. The lettering says *Novosibirsk*.

Deep in the snow of a northern city, Mikael limps as he takes a letter to a relatively well-constructed wooden structure. This is the city of Norilsk, as yet half-completed. After handing the letter to the guard, he sees a man in a white coat who shouts, "Mikael!" It's Mazmanyan. Mazmanyan embraces him and takes him through the storm and snow to his hut, the crude structure next door. He feeds him. Mikael unwraps the bandages on his legs, which are frostbitten and swollen. His hands are the same, they haven't changed – they're small and delicate. Mazmanyan wonders how best to help him. Mazmanyan is a privileged exile: he has been tasked with planning and constructing the city of

[37] *An Armenian dish made by cooking flour with sugar, popular among poor people.*

Norilsk. Despite the fact that he does not have his freedom, he is managing a large number of people. There are guards around him constantly.

"But why have you come here?"

"All of you are here, or in Tokhmakh, or not even in Tokhmakh. Where would I go?"

Mazmanyan clicks his tongue in disapproval. He doubts if Mikael will survive.

14.

Vram has just been released from the hospital. He has been discharged from the army because of his condition. He walks towards the home, the bag and camera in his hand. On the way, he sees young women rushing out of the girls' school, building up a depot of snowballs in the *26 Commissars'* Park. They put stones inside the snowballs. Then they kneel behind the benches. Soon, young men pour out of the boys' school, the very same boys who were beating up Perch. The girls attack them, ruthlessly pounding them with the armed snowballs. The boys run away. Vram takes several photographs of the scene.

At home, in the dark kitchen, under a red light, he develops the photographs. Inga is on one of the pictures, laughing, her arm swung back as she strikes with the snowball a boy who is hunched up, his arms raised in defense.

15.

We see Inga's apartment. Inga's voice can be heard, reciting the folk epic, *David of Sassoun*.

The doorbell – the kind with a round, mechanical turnbutton – rings. Inga's mother, Ashkhen, opens the door.

"Hello. Is Garegin home?" the visitor asks.

"Hello. He isn't back yet," Ashkhen says. "Please come in and have a seat. He'll be back soon."

"No, I'll wait outside."

"No, that won't do. Come in and sit down."

The visitor, who is wearing a shabby coat, hesitates before entering. He starts towards the room but stops, looks at his feet, then begins to take off his shoes.

"We don't take our shoes off here," Ashkhen says. "Go right ahead into the room."

There are traces of sludge on the painted floor.

"I'm used to taking them off – I can't just walk in," the visitor says, removing his shoes and walking into the room, still wearing his coat.

In one corner of the room, Inga is reciting *David of Sassoun* from memory to her small sister, Ida. The splendid book, decorated with Kojoyan's illustrations and freshly published,[38] is lying on the table, unopened. Inga does not even look at it. She recites from memory as Ida, sitting next to her, moves her lips, repeating her words in barely audible whispers.

"Hello," the girls say.

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[38] *A compiled version of the epic poem* ***David of Sassoun*** *was published in 1938, comprised of several, actually hundreds, of oral versions, transcribed since the 19th century. The publication in 1938 occurred as if on the occasion of the 1000th anniversary of the epic. The reason for this was that the Soviet authorities wanted to counter "individualist-based" literature, based on a single author's narrative, with "people's literature," with no authorship, as a way to emphasize that* ***the people*** *were more important than individuals. The epic poems of every nation in the Soviet Union were collected and published in those times, one after another. Hakob Kojoyan, a famous artist, did the illustrations for this jubilee-publication.*

The visitor says hello.

"Have a seat," Ashkhen says.

The visitor sits awkwardly on the light couch. He has a small package in his lap.

Ashkhen looks at the kitchen and then at the visitor.

"Would you like some water?'

"No, thank you."

Ashkhen goes to the kitchen. The doorbell rings.

It's Inga's father, Garegin. He's tired. "You have a guest," Ashkhen tells him in the front hall.

Garegin puts the saddle down and goes in. He frowns at the visitor, hesitating for a minute, then extends his hand.

They exchange hellos.

"We'll have dinner soon."

"No, I'm not hungry."

"I insist. Did you arrive today?"

"Yes."

"How was the trip?"

"Well, I left at night..."

"Do you have a place to spend the night?"

"The *Kolkhozniks'* House[39]."

They sit at the table. The guest does not take off his coat. Nobody invites him to take it off.

Ashkhen brings the food – a thin soup. The girls go into the kitchen. Ashkhen thinks for a minute, then takes out a can of American stewed meat from the drawer, brings it to the kitchen, opens it, empties it onto a plate, brings the plate with stewed meat to the room and puts it on the table.

[39] *Collective farmers' house was a dormitory for peasants arriving to the city.*

They eat in silence, making just some chewing noises. They don't touch the several pieces of black bread, nor do they eat any of the canned food, even though Ashkhen has specially put plates and forks on the table. The visitor places his package on the table, next to his plate.

Ashkhen clears the table and brings tea that was really no tea at all – just boiling water in a kettle. She pours it into glasses set in metal *podstakanniks*.[40] The tea glasses are thin and delicate. She puts a bowl with yellow sugar next to the kettle – barley sugar. Garegin takes three spoonfuls and passes the sugar bowl to his guest, stirring the sugar in with a spoon before slurping a sip.

"We'll finish the papers tomorrow," Garegin says through his teeth, as if to himself, without looking at his guest.

"The difference was twenty kilos," the guest says. "She's a widow. The bandits shot him that year. She does what she can. She has two children. I've got three of my own."

Garegin is silent.

From the kitchen, Inga listens to what the guest is saying.

Flashback

1934, or thereabouts.

A field. A road. A man wearing a *budenovka* is kneeling between two others on horses. He's twenty-seven years old. His horse is a bit further away. One of the men jumps off the horse, puts a gun to the man's temple and fires.

The horse whinnies.

In the village, a woman is standing in front of her hovel, waiting, frowning into the distance. She doesn't hear the shot,

[40] *Metallic holders were commonly used with transparent glasses in the Soviet Union to drink tea.*

but she hears the horse whinny and is startled by it. Inga sees that the woman is her maternal aunt Anush. The child next to her is Ida.

Far away, beyond Anush's field of vision, a woman sits with two children on a cart full of luggage. Her mouth is open, and then she expectantly licks her lips.

Flashback ends

"This is from our garden," the guest says and slowly begins to unwrap the package. "It really warms you up; if the kid catches a cold, all you need is one drop of this in boiling water."

The package contains a sealed black bottle filled with liquid.

Garegin suddenly jumps from his seat. His glass falls to the floor, shattering inside the *podstakannik*, the water splattering across the floor.

"Is this why you've come?" he shouts. "Grab your trash and get out!"

Ashkhen raises her hand to her mouth and takes a step towards her husband. A fragment of glass crunches under her shoe. The sounds in the kitchen stop.

The visitor gets up, leaving the bottle on the table.

"No, take that thing you've brought with you and get out of my house," Garegin shouts, beside himself.

His wife embraces him from behind in an attempt to calm him down. He is on his feet looking at the visitor, who has crumpled the package in his hands and is walking out.

Garegin goes after him, shoving him along, and opens the door, then pushes him out and closes the door behind him.

"Calm down, calm down," Ashkhen says, rubbing his shoulder.

Garegin sits in the couch and throws his head back, closing his eyes and stretching his legs.

"Ohh..."

Later he is asleep. His wife covers him with a cloth and goes into the kitchen.

There's a folding bed there, where her sister Anush is seated. Anush's husband was killed by bandits, and now she with her daughter Ida live in Garegin's, Ashkhen's and Inga's apartment. Anush is reading a gold-lined Bible with a red cover, the book placed on her knees. Inga and Ida are seated next to each other in a corner. Inga is continuing her recitation in a whisper. This time it is a section about Tatyana from Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, in Russian. When her mother enters, she stops and looks up at her.

Ashkhen switches on the radio at low volume, and the words tumble out: ...*Children's best friend and an ingenious linguist, the irreplaceable leader of the Communist Party, the man behind an unprecedented boom in agriculture, the supreme commander – generalissimus Stalin has struck a shattering blow to the enemies of our state.*

"I wonder if that poor man knows all the things they're saying about him, "Ashkhen says in a low voice. "If he ever heard this, he'd want the earth to swallow him whole. What kind of people are they? Aren't they afraid that he might hear them some day?"

The radio is struck dumb in mid-sentence. Only static can be heard.

Anush raises her head from the Bible, puts it aside, then asks the girls, "Did you do your English homework?"

16.

While Vram is developing the photographs, there is a knock on the door. Vram opens the door. It's Sargis and Avetis, and they have come to take some things. Since Vram's father has left in self-exile, he has not been arrested, nor has his family been driven out. But they have decided to confiscate his belongings, so they take Mikael's couch and his table. Vram secretly gives Evelina the stamp, camera, and Kolibri in a package, and Evelina gives it to Vanya's son through the back door and returns. They take away everything else, including the items needed for photo developing, and they put it all in a truck. They don't take the books away, however, but throw them into the yard.

"If we take these, they'll come for you. Who knows what books you have in there," says Avetis, leafing through some of them, then tossing them out the window.

Siranush stands near the bedroom, with her arms folded and nose pointed upwards, blocking them from coming in. She says that these are her personal items, not Mikael's. Avetis wants to go in. Vram quietly slips him the *Lady's Browning*, "It's a wonderful thing," he says. Avetis glances at the gun, puts it in his pocket, and says, "Fine." When Sargis moves to go in the bedroom, he says, "There's nothing left there, we've got everything important."

Sargis looks at him, turns around. and goes to check the kitchen. He takes the teapot and Mikael's glass with its *pods-takannik* and leaves. The newly developed photographs are on the floor in the kitchen and he steps on them as he walks. Vram bends down and picks them up.

They take out the piano last. They can't get it through the doorway. They try to detach its legs, but it doesn't work. They

break the door to get it out. When they break the door, one of the vertical beams supporting the ceiling is damaged, and the ceiling starts to collapse on Vram and his mother's heads.

Uncle Vanya's son comes down the stairs and watches silently. Their floor has suffered damage too.

They lift the piano up to the truck. Sargis siphons some petrol from the tank of the truck, walks up to the pile of books, pours the fuel on them, and strikes a match. He waits until the books are aflame, then gets into the truck, and it sets off.

The neighbors rush up to the pile and extinguish the fire, then start grabbing the books from each other.

One of the books is a half-burned Charents. A neighbor picks it up, puts out the fire and starts to blow on it. Vram runs up and grabs it from him. The neighbor lets him take the book. Vram looks at him like a wild animal. The neighbor retreats slowly. He's licking his lips.

17.

Vram is walking along the street in sorrowful contemplation. Suddenly, he sees Perch. Perch is wearing a beret again.

"Vram, what's up? Why so sad?"

"My house is falling apart."

"Let's go take a look."

Perch comes and sees the collapsing ceiling and the broken vertical column sticking out of the wall.

The house is empty – there's nothing left but two broken chairs.

"I'll come by tomorrow and we'll figure something out," Perch says and leaves.

The following morning, there is the sound of a car honking in the yard. Vram does not pay any attention. Perch walks in.

"Are you sleeping or what? Hurry up, let's go."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

They go to the yard, where a truck is parked. Vram gets into the empty cargo hold and Perch sits next to the driver. The driver is an elderly man. He drives to the Osobtorg[41] and stops to honk near the gate. The guard opens the gate and the truck enters, with the gate closing behind it.

At the Osobtorg, Perch, the driver and Vram go up to the director's office. Perch takes out a piece of paper – a list of items, certified with a stamp and signature, that the shop should provide to the visitors. The list has all kinds of items in it. Laborers bring the items and load them onto the truck. Chairs and all sorts of other things. There is a well-polished wooden beam, in addition to everything else.

When the truck is full, Perch signs a piece of paper, the gate opens and they drive out, coming back to Vram's house. Perch helps Vram take the beam inside.

"I'll come and help put it up tomorrow," Perch says and gets back into the truck. The truck drives off.

Vram watches the truck leave with a pang of regret; he wouldn't have said no to a few chairs either, but they are going away before his very eyes.

---

[41] *The main industrial goods shop of Yerevan, the Osobtorg, opened in 1940 on the intersection of Abovyan and Sverdlov (currently Aram Street). For many years it was the main mall of Yerevan. It was privatized after the collapse of the USSR and it has been closed since. In 2022, the building continues to remain closed for unknown reasons, despite a recent renovation.*

18.

Vram and Perch are replacing the vertical column that supported the ceiling with the wooden beam. Perch is on a ladder. Vanya's son is beneath him, helping out. Suddenly, someone walks in.

"Is Perch here?"

"Perch, come down," Vram says.

Perch steps down. The person hands him a paper with a stamp on it and says, "Perch *jan*, we need this."

He looks like a thug.

Perch examines the stamp on the paper carefully.

"How many times do you need it to work?"

"Once is enough."

Perch returns the paper to the man, who folds it and puts it in his breast pocket.

"Vram, do you have any potatoes?"

Vram brings out a dozen potatoes from the kitchen in his arms. Most of them are rotting.

Perch wrinkles his nose in displeasure and picks up each one, carefully examining it and testing its firmness. He looks closely at it, presses it, smells it, then puts it aside. Finally, he chooses one, then takes out a folding knife from his pocket and divides the potato into two halves. Using the edge of the knife, he begins to etch all the details of the stamp right there into the potato's surface. He finishes in a few minutes, examines his work and blows on the potato.

Vram looks at his hands as if hypnotized.

"Get some ink," Perch says to Vram.

Vram is in shock but obediently brings the ink pot made of

blue glass, which his father had brought one day from somewhere, and which Sargis and Avetis hadn't taken away, because it had dropped to the floor on the day of the search. Some of the ink had spilled. The stain could still be seen on the floor.

Perch says to the visitor, "Give it to me, please."

The man quietly takes out a piece of paper from another pocket, unfolds it, and holds it out to Perch.

Perch uses his finger to get ink on the potato, then he presses it to the paper.

He swings the paper in the air, blows on it, looks at it, then gives it to the man.

The man says "thank you" and gives Perch a gold coin, after which he takes the paper, folds it, puts it in his pocket, and leaves.

"Perch, what was that all about?"

"How do you think I got your wood?"

Perch cuts up the used half of the potato into small pieces and throws them into the trash can. He holds out the other, undamaged half to Vram.

"This still may be used."

"You're not scared?"

"Even if you are afraid of wolves you don't stop going into the forest and you don't start howling with them, either[42]. I don't want to howl with the wolves," he says in Russian.

"So, the other items..."

"It's getting late. We need to finish this – I've got other things to do."

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[42] *An amalgam of two Russian proverbs: 'If one is afraid of wolves, one wouldn't go to the forest' and 'If one lives with the wolves, one howls as the wolves.'*

Uncle Vanya's son is holding the ladder firmly. Perch climbs up, the boy holds up a bowl filled with plaster, which he takes and begins to apply the plaster to the wall.

Vram looks at him and then at the ceiling. The wood is already in place. You couldn't take it out even if you wanted to...

19.

Sarajev walks past the Conservatory at night. The sound of the piano being played by someone can be heard.

Sarajev enters the Conservatory. The guard looks at him in fear. Sarajev goes up the stairs and opens a classroom door, then another. He sees Evelina in a third. She's playing the piano. He closes the door unnoticed. He stands and listens.

He goes back downstairs and asks the guard, "When did she get here?"

"I'm sorry," the guard replies. "She said that she forgot something, then I heard her playing. But I can't leave my post and go after her."

"It's okay," Sarajev says. "If she comes again another evening, let her enter and play."

In the morning, he's in his office. His deputy walks in and puts some papers on his desk.

"You're letting that girl from that family of the enemies of the people come in and play here?"

"She doesn't have a piano at home. Let her play. She's not bothering anyone. If she were bothering someone, she wouldn't be here in Yerevan."

The deputy looks at him with the expression of *enmity of the people* and walks out.

The newspaper has the picture of an official framed in black: "Academician Aharon Besikyan's life has prematurely ended."

Flashback

1937

Sarajev is at a funeral. There are only seven people in attendance. It's very cold.

"Well, Sahak Ter-Gabrielyan is gone too," someone says. It's academician Aharon Besikyan.

"They say he picked up the investigator's inkpot, threw it out the window, broke the glass and jumped out after it," he continues. "From the third floor of the NKVD building, where there are no iron bars. That's how he slipped through the investigator's fingers. I wonder what they did to the investigator for that mistake?"

"I don't believe it," the university rector (Perch's father) says. "Sahak wasn't one to commit suicide."

"I've seen the inkpot with my own eyes," Besikyan says. "It was lying on the ground. Blue glass. I was walking past it. It hadn't even broken."

Flashback ends

Sarajev is walking along the street, towards the Conservatory. The other instructors and students walk past him, or in the opposite direction. Nobody says hello. He walks with his head held high, not looking at anyone. He enters his office. The secretary is not there. The deputy is nowhere to be seen either. He sits in his chair. It's nine in the morning. The sounds of music and singing can be heard, but there is something macabre in the cacophony. He sits and stares fixedly.

20.

Flashback

1937

The window of the university rector's office faces the window of his house. The rector is Perch's father. Perch is at home and sees how people in uniform are entering his father's office. They grab his father, hit him and throw him to the floor, then start kicking him. Perch watches, his fists clenching. His mother comes in, covers her mouth with her hand, and embraces Perch. Perch holds his mother and they watch together, shocked.

The people in uniform drag his father away, then begin wrecking the office. On the wall, there is a portrait of the rector painted by Saryan.[43] They yank it off wall and drop it on the floor. One of them tries to set it alight with a match, but it doesn't burn well. The one trying to burn it is, of course, Sargis.

The father is dragged out of the building and put in a *Voronok*, which then drives away.

Flashback ends

It's nine in the evening. In the silence, only the sound of Evelina playing the piano can be heard. Sarajev gets up from his seat, leaves his room, walks along the empty corridors, nodding to the guard as he exits the building. He walks with his head held high, not looking at anyone. The rare passers-by look at him in surprise (they are amazed that he is still not taken away). Sarajev pretends not to see them so that they are not forced to make a choice about whether to greet him or not.

[43] *Martiros Saryan painted the portraits of many public figures in Armenia. From the 1920s to early 1950s, when some of these individuals were prosecuted, their portraits were destroyed.*

21.

Flashback

The prison cell is packed full. The door opens and the university rector is thrown in, half-dead. A man approaches and helps him sit up, dipping a handkerchief in water and cleaning his face with the wet cloth. He puts the handkerchief back in his pocket. The rector's hand is broken, his fingers are bent in the wrong direction. He regains consciousness gradually and holds his broken hand. A horribly dirty old man is sitting next to him. It's Acharyan[44]. The old man mumbles something softly. The rector responds to him just as softly. They exchange a few sentences in French. The old man says a few words to him. Then he takes out a filthy handkerchief from his pocket, unfolds it, and takes out a piece of hard candy from inside. He gives the candy to the rector. The rector puts it in his mouth, gratefully. Then Acharyan wistfully bids farewell to his handkerchief as he uses it to bandage the rector's injured hand.

In two short hours it's time to sleep and the lights are switched off in the prison cell. The door opens, the rector is taken out once again. He is pushed forward with the barrel of the gun held to his back. As he walks in the corridor, one hand holding the other, he sees the door of a cell opened fully, with a few lines scrawled and etched in the walls in Charents' handwriting. Some of the lines are in red and there are streams flowing from them to the floor.

Flashback ends

[44] *A renouned linguist, who was taken in during the purges but eventually left out.*

22.

Inga is walking on the street. She sees Nadya in the distance carrying two buckets full of water. Inga sees that Vram walks up to Nadya, takes the buckets and walks next to her. Nadya says something to Vram. Suddenly Vram feels something, looks around, notices Inga staring at him and nearly drops the buckets. The water splashes around. Inga laughs and leaves.

23.

1944

Sarajev is walking on the street, his head held high. People see him and turn away. He does not look at anyone. Vram walks up to him, with Chibis at his side.

"Good day," Vram says.

Sarajev is surprised that someone has acknowledged him.

"I'm Mikael and Siranush's son," Vram says "Evelina's brother."

Sarajev's face lights up.

"Uncle Ghazar is coming back," Vram says, "He is ill. They have allowed him to come back and die in his homeland."

Sarajev and Vram go to the railway station. Perch is also there. The train arrives and wounded soldiers get off, some of them are taken off on stretchers. After everyone has left, a man appears, thin as a ghost. It's Uncle Ghazar, wrapped in rags. Vram runs up to him, as does Chibis. Vram is holding a bag, which he shows to Uncle Ghazar. It has the Kolibri typewriter and the camera. Uncle Ghazar sways, he is unable to hold the bag. Perch holds the bag up for him. Uncle Ghazar takes out the camera from the bag and hands it to Vram.

24.

Sarajev is sitting in his office and drinking wine with Uncle Ghazar.

The sound of Evelina's playing can be heard.

"I tell them I'm a professor and they say, 'There are no documents to prove that,'" Uncle Ghazar says. "I tell them, 'Give me a passport,' and they say, 'Show us your diploma and we will.'"

"Which year did you graduate?"

"1905. It was just like this one."

Uncle Ghazar points at the gold-lined University of Heidelburg diploma hanging behind Sarajev's back, signed by Max Weber.

Sarajev gets up, goes down to the second floor, opens the door of a classroom, and tells Evelina,

"Please go and call Vram, quickly."

Evelina leaves her music unfinished, jumps up, and runs out into the corridor.

Vram and Perch are in the same room with Sarajev and Uncle Ghazar. Perch has a small suitcase in his hand. Sarajev takes his University of Heidelburg diploma from the wall and gives it to Perch. Perch goes into another room.

Vram, Sarajev, and Uncle Ghazar wait.

Perch returns with two diplomas in his hands. He gives one to Uncle Ghazar, who looks at it from various angles. He looks stunned with surprise. He silently extends his hand in Perch's direction.

Perch takes his hand and looks at it from various angles, studying his fingerprints and wrinkles, as if through a magnifying glass.

25.

1946

Perch's trial is underway.

Vram and Evelina are sitting among the attendees. Sarajev's guard, Sarajev, Uncle Ghazar, Uncle Vanya's son, and other familiar faces are also present. Mikael Mazmanyan, who has returned from exile, is also there. He is sitting on the chair at the end of the row. Next to him, in the aisle, Sargis and Avetis are standing, tense and alert. On a piece of paper, Mazmanyan is sketching the trial. Avetis frowns when he sees it. Sargis is looking straight ahead. Then, Mazmanyan suddenly begins to draw a structure, the Institute of Languages,[45] around the Katoghike Church. He imagines this structure as a fortress that will protect the little church. At the edge of the façade of the Institute of Languages, he draws interwoven human hands in the style of ancient Armenian masonry, sketching their fingernails with great care. There is a male hand, a female hand, and a hand of a child as well.

"You should have had *this*," the prosecutor shouts at Perch and waves a small blue book in the air. "*This*. There is a stamp here – it is real, and a watermark. It is real. Not like your work."

Then, the time comes for Perch's closing statement.

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[45] *This building was built around the part of the church that survived, to protect it from destruction, since the Soviet Union was demolishing all churches if their facades faced the streets. Mazmanyan was not actually the architect of this building, but at that time architects often drew versions of various buildings that were planned to be built, and he could have drawn his own version of that building as well. The Institute was the place for the development of the Armenian language, and many famous linguists, including Acharyan, worked there. It was destroyed in 2014 and a new church was built there, St. Anna, along with the Catholicos's Yerevan residence. This was one of the controversial cases where a 20th century valuable historical building, put in place of an ancient church that was destroyed in its turn, was demolished without leaving a trace, in order to rebuild the church.*

"Honorable court," Perch says, "Over the course of two years, I have increased the production of the factory by three hundred percent, and our targets were exceeded by triple the amount. Had you not discovered that my diploma was fake and that I do not have a university education, you would only have noticed that I have been tirelessly working for the prosperity of our socialist homeland. So what if I don't have that miserable diploma? Is that what a real diploma is? Is that the diploma I should be holding? Don't tell me that what matters in our homeland of laborers and peasants is that piece of paper. I know a lot more than my specialization requires, more than any graduate. Do you want to test me with an exam? The punk who turned me in was causing losses, he was no better than a thief; to save himself, he was accusing other people of stealing Soviet state property, and dozens of people were going to suffer. I fired him and now, because of his delusions, you are going to deprive the homeland of a dedicated head engineer like me."

(In the distant background, we can hear Evelina playing, let's say, Tannhäuser *or something like that)*

Sargis and Avetis take Perch away.

26.

1951

Vram is running around the yard of the Armenfilm movie studio, a camera and a tripod stand in his hands. A tall director is shouting out instructions. Near the pool, with one arm on a scrawny mulberry tree, a girl is singing,

"The dawn has come, let me go to the field,

The green hill and meadows will bear their yield,

That tractor-driving boy

Has won my heart, Oh joy!"

Her clothes are in the fashion of the fifties, and she's wearing platform shoes. In the pool next to her, there is a small statue of a girl holding a jug at an angle such that water is flowing out of it. The camera focuses on the jug.

The tractor-driving boy comes out and sings in response,

"Open your window,

Let me see your cute body,

Let me see those pretty eyes,

Wet and full of many tears."

The boy approaches the girl and they embrace.

From behind the scene, a choir of girls appears (four of the girls who were preparing snowballs) and sings,

"Varsenik's black hair is shining, it's shining..."

Vram turns the camera slowly. The choir is not in the frame at first, Vram focuses instead on the tree and the statue of the girl with the jug.

"Cut, cut!" the tall director shouts, "You've ruined it again..."

Everyone stops, the choir breaks up.

"We can do it this way, too," Vram tries to propose.

"You're going to argue with me? When *you* will make a movie, you will do what you want. Here, *I'm* the one who decides. That's all. You've ruined it again. All you've managed to do is increase our costs. Get out of here."

Inga watches the incident from a slight distance away. It turns out that the female lead – the singing girl next to the pond - is Ida.

The director keeps shouting. He's angry. He orders Vram to put the camera down.

Vram leaves the vicinity of the movie studio with his head hung low. Inga watches him secretly. He doesn't notice Inga.

27.

Vram is walking along Amiryan street with his head hanging, past the half-finished Charents School, where the *Bezbozhnik* cinema used to be. Suddenly, he sees Perch, who is calmly walking along the street.

Vram is dumbstruck.

"Perch?"

They embrace.

"You've been set free?"

"No big deal," says Perch. He takes out a piece of paper from his pocket and shows it to Vram – *Due for release based on case review,* it says in Russian.

And there is a stamp.

"They'd sent this for someone and I copied it, then I asked a friend due for release to send it by mail from Moscow. As soon as it arrived, they hurried to come and release me. The certificate arrived eight days late due to a postal delay and they were afraid they were going to end up in court because of the late release. They asked me to sign a backdated form that suggested I had been released on time. But I had arranged everything that way on purpose..."

"I'm so happy to see you! What are you going to do now?"

"I'm not going to stay here, that's for sure. I've come to see my mother and tie up some loose ends."

"But where will you go?"

"I want to be a defense lawyer. You can't do that in this country, there's no point."

28.

Perch crosses the Armenia-Turkey border. The border guards fire as Perch runs towards the bushes on the road to Ararat. The sand in the no-man's land reveals his footprints. The border dogs come and smell his footsteps, then they howl. It's a strange smell, they can't run after him. Perch jumps into the Arax River and swims away quickly. The border guards fire rounds of ammunition. Perch's head goes below water and does not come back up.

Ripples appear in the water and a few bubbles, like a small whirlpool – a water carousel. A few twigs float about in the whirlpool, then suddenly sink in the middle and disappear.

Vram reads in the newspaper, "Yesterday, the brave Soviet border guards prevented the felonious attempt of a dangerous criminal, a runaway with multiple convictions, Perch Ter-Dzitoghtsyan, to cross the USSR-NATO border. The criminal has been destroyed."

Vram looks at the paper powerlessly, as the writing seems to blur and fuse together. He sees the water carousel before his eyes.

29.

A movie within the movie

1912

In front of the house with the high gates in Shushi, Khatun *khanum* sits in traditional dress, her hair covered by a headpiece. The massacre of the Armenians is taking place in the city.

Men and women in a panic run around in front of her, holding children's hands, fleeing from the bloody *khanjali*[46] of the cruel Tatars. Khatun *khanum* is sitting calmly, her eyes half closed, rocking slightly.

Sometimes desperate people stop in front of her and say something softly, hurriedly, pleadingly.

If they are women and children, Khatun *khanum* nods her head towards the door of the gate. She lets them all in. In the case of men, not everyone is allowed. Some are permitted to enter, others are not.

Those who are not allowed in leave in desperation to face their deaths, and their final scream is heard shortly thereafter.

Suddenly, a mountain Tatar appears in front of her.

"*Salaam aleykum*, Khatun *khanum*. I would die for my brother, I would die for the *khanum*, I would die for my friends... With Allah as my witness, my wife is dying."

The Tatar's donkey is a ways off, tied to a post.

Khatun *khanum* looks at the man, sizing him up, then nods her head.

The Tatar goes in.

There is no place to walk in the yard – women and children, some elderly people and men, are all sitting quietly and looking at the Tatar in fear. Only a few newborn children can be heard grunting. Walking among the people is a blond man, talking to them in the Tatar language, with a jug full of water in his hand and a cup. He offers them a drink. It is Sahak Ter-Gabrielyan.

There is a huge oak in the yard. Many refugees are seated below it, in its shade. It stretches upwards, high above the roof

[46] *A curved sword*

of the house, its branches intertwining with those of another oak, which, strangely enough, is growing from within the house.

The Tatar passes through carefully so as not to step on the people seated. He greets Sahak, approaches a patio which leads into the house, goes up the stairs, and enters.

The huge oak is growing from right in the middle of the guest room, breaking through its ceiling, and intertwining with the second oak in the yard.

The next room is white. It's intended for medical use. In one corner, on a small table, there is the hand from the *Bezbozhnik* wall sculpture, its fingers missing. Above it, Mazmanyan's sketch for the Publishers' Building and the outline of Vram's little hand hang on a wall. The medical cupboard is next to it. On another wall is Abesalom's gold-lined diploma.

There is a girl sitting on the patient's chair, her mouth open as it is being examined by Abesalom Hamayakovich, Khatun *khanum's* son. Seated in one corner is a young Mikael, Vram's father, and the son of Abesalom.

"*Dokhtur*, my wife is very bad, she's dying."

"Can't you bring her here?"

"She's dying, I told her I'd get the *dokhtur*. She said she would try to hold out, *ama*, she is slowly dying."

"I can't come – don't you see what's going on? They would kill me *and* you."

"May Mohammed's lantern burn out if they kill you. I'll take the *dokhtur* to my place and bring him back safe and sound. *Dokhtur*, my wife is bringing my child, save them."

Sparks seem to fly from the eyes of the girl with the open mouth when she hears what the Tatar is saying.

Seated on two donkeys, they go up into the mountains. Abesalom has wrapped a cloth around his head like a mountain Tatar and is dressed in their traditional costume. A white box with a red cross hangs from the side of the donkey and strikes the side of the animal with each step. It's covered with a mat, but the donkey's movements reveal the edge of the red cross from time to time.

Abesalom looks below towards Shushi, which looks like one of Bosch's paintings. The broken windows of houses look like a mass of decay blackening a once-perfect set of teeth.

They arrive at a pasture, where there is a straw hut and the Tatar's wife is lying on the ground, moaning. Abesalom walks up to her. Her eyes are closed.

"Mam-ma," the woman says, "Mam-ma."

Abesalom stiffens for a minute and carefully looks at her face. Then he puts the medical case decisively on the floor, opens it, takes out a scalpel, prepares everything and, with a quick movement, he digs the scalpel into the Tatar woman's belly and cuts it. For a moment, all we can see are her two brown nipples and the red line of the wound on her swollen belly, perpendicular to the line between the nipples and slightly angled such that it's closer to the left nipple. Abesalom quickly digs his rubber-gloved hands inside and takes out a little Tatar who starts to cry immediately. Abesalom cuts the umbilical cord. He looks at the little child whose hands and fingers are moving in the air. Abesalom counts the newborn's fingers and toes, checks his nails. He gives the child to the father.

The woman stops moaning.

While suturing her abdomen, Abesalom pricks his finger

with the needle and a drop of blood emerges through the rubber gloves. He pays no attention and continues his work.

The sheep are scattered like pearls on the green pasture and the shepherds shout from mountain to mountain, spreading the word.

"Hoooo! Long live the *dokhtur*! What a blessing. Kimir has a boy, a boy! He has an *askar*, an *askar*! *Allah akbar*!"

"What?"

"He has an askar! An *askar*!"

"Huh?"

"What do you mean 'huh'? He has a son! A son!"

The ribbon of the movie within the movie begins to burn and a hole forms in it, which grows, similar to a water carousel, and twigs and leaves swim in circles in it before they are consumed...

The movie within the movie is interrupted

30.

1955

"Stop, stop," Vram shouts, "You bonehead!"

The lights come on, and we are in a small movie theater, where the Cinema Commission is in session, headed by Sargis.

Sargis has reached new heights. He's fatter and more mature, dressed in a good suit, but wearing boots, one of which has been worn out and has a hole in it.

Vram leaps up and runs to the film booth, glancing at the faces of the Commission members on his way. Then he returns and takes his seat.

"This is not going to work," Sargis said. "It's good that you haven't made the whole thing. You had the brains to call us in

advance, at least. Tatars? Seriously? And in Shushi? Are we now promoting the houses of the rich? Who was that clergyman whose portrait was on the wall? Was that old woman deciding who the Tatars should massacre? Who was she supposed to be, Azrael? And aren't you ashamed to show a childbirth on the screen, that too of a Turk? Are you trying to start a counter-revolution in our cinematography?"

"We'll cut that scene..." The tall director who had been shouting at Vram tries to interrupt the flow of words coming from Sargis, "This is just a preliminary..."

"Preliminary what? It seems quite final to me. You think I don't notice these things? What was that oak doing growing in the middle of the house? What was that supposed to be hinting at? And that girl, that girl... is that what our brides are like? Their mouths open like that. It looks like she's ready to swallow a horse. She isn't a suffragist, she's an Armenian, an Armenian! And you think Sahak would have behaved like that before the revolution? You think he'd speak Azerbaijani like a simpleton?"

"We can't destroy it," the tall director says, "We've spent money on this. If there's an inspection, they'll ask what we spent the money on. I'm responsible for the financing. Let's just put it in storage..."

"I'm the inspector," Sargis says with a cynical smile. "No trace of this should remain – not a trace! If anyone sees this, we're sunk. We'll be tried and that will be that – hello Siberia, goodbye pension. You can redeem the costs any way you like. You can take it from *The Secret of the Mountain Lake*'s budget."

And then he decides that he has reprimanded them enough, that they had learned their lesson, so he changes his tone into

a more caring and humorous one, so that he can educate them and not allow the Soviet people to be too disappointed.

"What were you hinting at with those donkeys – that the people of Karabakh are donkeys?" he says paternally, as if it's a witty joke, "What if Comrade Mikoyan were to find out? I'd like to see your creativity then! The whole movie studio would be destroyed. Good thing there turned out to be at least one alert person among you."

He then grows serious.

"And you think I didn't see that reference to Mandelstam?[47] Prohibited literature! I notice everything! You can't hide any secrets from us!"

Vram's facial expression twists and a sly smile forms on his lips.

31.

There is a bonfire in the yard of the movie studio, and Sargis personally throws the film into the flames. Vram watches wearily, his face darkening. His curly hair is practically standing on end.

Inga and a foreigner walk past them. She is the foreigner's translator and guide as part of her student internship.

"Hamo Beknazaryan's first film, *Namus*, was made in 1925. *Namus* means shame. Actually, no, sorry. It means *dignity*. It's based on a classic Armenian novel."

"Wow, *Dignity*. You Russians are stuck on such noble concepts, aren't you?"

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[47] *The Russian poet Osip Mandelshtam, killed in 1937-38, had written a poem about Shushi (1931), titled* ***The Carriage Driver*** *with the famous line "Forty thousand dead windows..."*

The foreigner sees the film burning.

"What's this?"

Instead of replying, Inga jumps towards Sargis, who strains to grasp a soft, green branch from a scrawny mulberry tree next to him. He twists the branch off, injuring the tree, and now holds the branch in his nailless fingers, trying to flip the film over in the fire. The branch is so soft it bends and its end blackens, its sap pouring onto the film. So much smoke emerges that even the viewers can smell it in their nostrils. The film burns quickly and vividly, crackling away, even without Sargis' help.

Inga attacks Sargis, striking him in the chest with her fists. Inga's bag, hanging from her arm, flies into the air. Sargis retreats.

Vram is very emotional, a wild look on his face, and his hair in disarray. With self-restraint, he grabs Inga's shoulders and pulls her aside.

"It's okay, it's okay."

The American seems not to be surprised at all.

"Tell him that we're burning an unnecessary piece of film," says the tall director.

Inga does not reply but gives them an angry, tearless look.

"Film, film, capiche?" The tall director says, "Too much film, too much film kaput. Hitler kaput, too." He then adds in Armenian, "You dumb son of a bitch!"

"Yes, we do that too, but in a more environmentally conscious way," says the American.

He walks up to the fire and uses his foot to pull out a piece of film that has separated from the rest. He looks at the director.

"Souvenir?"

The director is dumbstruck. So is Sargis. They have no choice but to let him take it.

"Get it from him later," Sargis says to the director. He then turns around and goes to the white GAZ-21 waiting for him on Teryan Street, striking his boots with the branch in his hand. He's wearing a suit and tie, with boots. "If I find out that a piece of this has survived, then your ear will be the biggest piece left of you."

He throws the branch down on Teryan Street, gets into the car and is off.

"Get it from him later, Vram," the director orders.

Vram looks at the injured part of the tree – it's white and long. Sap is trickling from it.

Inga approaches the American and holds out her hand.

"Can I have that? I would like to keep it myself."

The foreigner willingly hands her the piece of film and wrinkles his nose at the bad smell before walking off to get some fresh air.

Inga takes the film, rolls it, opens her bag, and puts it inside.

The director watches Sargis leave, then suddenly sits on the ground and starts to strike his head with his fists.

"What have you done, what have you done..."

Vram stands next to the mulberry tree with his head hung low, and the sap continues to flow abundantly from the light green scrawny tree.

The film technician emerges from the booth, lights a cigarette, and looks left and right. It is the man who used to be the guard at the Conservatory.

32.

Inga and Vram are sitting at a bench in the 26 Commissars' Park (the former – and future – English garden). Vram is upset and sad, but calm. Vram gives her the book with Charents' work, with some pages singed. There is a hand drawn on the cover. The fingers have been burnt. Inga leafs through the book, then opens her bag and gives Vram the remaining piece of the film. They hold it up to the light and look at the frames together. When the few frames end, the movie continues to play out before Vram's eyes.

The movie within a movie 2

We see Abesalom's home. Khatun *khanum* is once again seated at the gate. The sound of wailing comes from within. There is a coffin in the white medical room, and mourning women dressed in black are crowded around it, including all the women who were seated in the yard during the massacre. The men are in the other room, where the oak is growing. The room is brightly lit now and we can see that a portrait of Khrimyan Hayrik[48] hangs in one part of the room, with a symbolic paper ladle in one hand, lowered into a pot. The picture of mount Ararat is on the other wall, with the Arax river flowing below it in a blue line. The branches of the oak spread over the men who stand quietly, some leaning on the tree or holding onto a branch of it. At times, we are unable to distinguish whether they are men or another branch of the oak tree.

Suddenly the very same Tatar comes in with his wife, a baby in her arms. Everyone grows quiet.

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[48] *A famous Armenian Catholicos (1820-1907). Legend has it he claimed that Armenian diplomacy was defeated at the Berlin Congress (1878) because they only had a "paper ladle" and not an "iron ladle."*

A blond man walks up to them and says coldly, "*Ne var?*"

It is a young Sahak.

"The *dokhtur* was my friend. I would have given my life for him. He went to heaven in my heart."

Sahak reluctantly lets him pass, pointing to the white room. The Tatar goes into the white room and lowers his head at the sight of the coffin. He then takes the cold, white hand of the deceased, examines it from different angles, then kisses it, indicating to his wife that she should kiss it too.

The girl who had once sat open-mouthed in the patient's chair watches them with savagely shining eyes and then jumps at them.

"You killed him, you killed him. His finger was infected because of you. Your pup killed him..."

The Tatar's wife recoils in fear.

Mikael reaches out and holds the girl's shoulders, pulling her back.

"Grandmother isn't saying anything, and I am not saying anything. He is not to blame."

The girl sticks her nose in the air proudly.

"That's the last thing we needed, for you to say something."

Sahak, standing behind them, softly reprimands Mikael.

"That's enough, tell them to leave. You're not being firm enough – there's going to be trouble..."

Sahak's eyes suddenly meet those of the little one, and he falls silent.

The girl stands with her back to the coffin, her nose stuck up, her neck proud, and her arms crossed against her breasts, as if protecting the deceased from any further meddling from the Tatar.

Mikael looks at the elegant hands of the girl. She is Siranoush, Vram's future mother.

The second movie within the movie ends

The film in Inga's hands has long ended. Inga lets go of the film strip, and it coils up and lands in Vram's hand. Inga laughs, then looks at Vram and shapes her face from laughter into a sad and compassionate expression. She gets up, and walks away swinging her bag. She has to get to class. After crossing one of the bridges over the canal in the 26 Commissars' Park, she turns around and waves to Vram.

After she is no longer visible, Vram looks at his hand and moves his fingers.

33.

Vram is extremely emotional and disheveled, wearing a striped jacket with a red rose in the front pocket, but a *kosovorotka*[49] under it. He is walking towards an office building. Garegin works in that building. His horse is tied to a post in front of it. When Vram walks past the animal, he and the horse scowl at each other. The horse turns his head and watches Vram as he walks. The office is the State Supervision Committee on Moskovyan Street. Vram exchanges words with the guard and goes to the upper floor. He stands in front of the doors, thinks for a minute, knocks on one of them, then peeks inside with trepidation...

"What do you want?" Garegin asks, "Come in."

Vram opens the door a crack and sidles in.

A few minutes pass. Then we see the small office with the

[49] *A traditional Slavic peasant shirt with no collar.*

saddle in one corner and a tower of papers on the table. Vram appears red and ruffled, while Garegin is looking at him in anger and surprise. Suppressing his feelings he says, "Don't you have any male relatives who can come here and talk to me man to man, boy? I can't make sense of this. You're so agitated!"

Vram hangs his head, turns around, and walks out.

34·

Avetis is in the KGB building, walking through the same basement corridor through which he had once dragged Perch's father. He's wearing a uniform and has a red band on his arm. He walks without looking past the closed door of the cell which had lines from Charents scrawled on the wall. He has a ring of keys in his hand. He toys with them then puts them in his pocket.

He walks upstairs on the twisting staircase. He knocks on a door and enters a grand office, where he gives a salute. His supervisor calls him over and gives him a piece of paper. Avetis reads the paper. It says in Russian – *Due to the exceeding of his authority and due behavior unbecoming of a chekist*[50] *consisting of the destruction of important evidence related to elements of anti-Soviet activity, I order the arrest of Sargis Yegorovich Berikyan. This order must be executed immediately. Serov, Piskunov*[51]*. Copy confirmed – Zarubyan.*[52] *Agreed: Mikoyan.*

[50] *An employee of the CheKa, the abbreviated name of the first of a series of Soviet secret police organizations, established in 1918 by Dzerzhinsky. The word* ***chekist*** *entered the Russian language since then to denote a person officially working for state security agencies.*

[51] *Soviet government and secret police officials posted in Armenia after the death of Stalin.*

[52] *The Head of the Communist Party of Armenia at the time.*

"You'll become a colonel," his supervisor says in Russian. "Your brother has overstepped, and you will surpass him. I appreciate your action! We'll be working together."

There is a portrait of Dzerzhinsky behind the supervisor, but it's a small one, and it is obvious from the pattern of the color fading on the wall around it that another picture – a larger one – used to hang there until recently.

Avetis stands stiffly and looks without blinking at Dzerzhinsky, so that his eyes do not meet those of his supervisor's.

Afterwards Avetis is in the KGB restroom, once again in the basement. There are dark stains all over, like crimson camouflage. He leans his face against one of those stains on a wall and stands like that for a while.

He opens a tap and rinses his face with cold water, then looks at himself in the mirror. Instead of his own face, he sees Sargis in the mirror, back in front of their hut in Tokhmakh, and the gravestones are lined up, one after the other, like a train. Two new ones have appeared: *Mikael Abesalomov Ter-Gabrielya* is written on the larger one, *Chibis* on the smaller one. The larger gravestone is actually small compared to a normal-sized one, and so the end letters of the patronymic and last name cut off.

Avetis comes out of the restroom, walks along the corridor, and goes up the stairs. He says *heil* to the people he passes instead of saluting them, and they reply in kind. He walks up to his supervisor's door, knocks, salutes, enters, and approaches. He takes out a piece of paper and places it in front of the supervisor.

His supervisor reads the Russian text aloud: *Please accept this resignation made of my own free will due to family circumsta...* "Have you lost your mind?"

Avetis walks along the street and looks around him. It's sunny and hot, the month of May. People happily walk by. A resurrected plane buzzes in the sky. Avetis arrives at their new apartment in the building of academicians on the Cascade and walks up to the third floor, to the apartment that used to belong to academician Miskaryan, as the nameplate on the door still indicates. He opens the door with his key and walks in.

The apartment has been tastelessly remodeled in high kitsch style. It is full of furniture; there's barely any place to walk. Evelina's piano is stuffed into one corner with its keys to the wall and an impressive bust on top of it, also facing the wall.

Avetis's and Sargis's mother is sitting on the couch with Sargis standing next to her.

"I'm being transferred to tourism," Sargis says in Russian, "and sent off to the peripheral regions."

Avetis approaches them and embraces his seated mother's head and his brother's waist, swaying with them.

"And I've been moved to culture. Starting from scratch," Avetis says.

"We've been pushed into a dead end," Sargis says. "Such are the times."

Their mother looks at an icon of Stalin placed in the corner of the room with a candle below it, and says in Armenian, "Thank God the devil is no longer among us. My sons are saved."

She makes the sign of the cross.

Sargis picks an invisible hair off Avetis' coat with his nailless hand. He then turns around and stops, and all three of them turn their faces toward the camera.

The three of them dissolve into an impressive black-and-

white photograph, a heart-wrenching document of the times past, if one sees it one becomes sentimental.

35·

Vram is walking on the street, thinking about who to send to Garegin. Sarajev? Uncle Ghazar? He doesn't find either of them suitable, and is embarrassed to talk to them about his heart affairs. Uncle Vanya? But he is no more. Garegin's horse can't be seen in front of the State Supervision Committee building, which means Garegin is not inside.

Vram walks on Lermontov Street, the future Sayat Nova street. The Swan Lake is not yet there. Fruit orchards are being cut down, the fruit falling helplessly to the ground. Little old houses are being demolished. Vram takes the rose out of his coat pocket and gets the urge to throw it away, but he keeps it, rolling it around with his fingers.

Vram is at home, which remains empty and almost without furniture, since that now distant day when almost everything the family had was looted away.

In her bedroom, Siranush is sitting on the bed, her hand held out. Uncle Vanya's son has brought some clay and is using it to make a sculpture of her hand. Mikael's portrait, in a black frame, hangs in one corner of the room. It has been painted by hand, the work of Uncle Vanya's son, because when Mikael died in Siberia, they realized that they didn't have any photos of him. Next to it, there is a half-finished copy of the painting by Saryan of Perch's father, a remnant from Perch, given to Vram by Perch's mother.

Vram is sitting in the living room, quiet and frowning, with Mazmanyan's pencilwork above him – the sketch of the Publish-

ers' Building and the outline of little Vram's hand. Vram has not taken off his coat.

There is a knock on the door. Vram opens it. It's Avetis.

Vram's lips tremble.

"Excuse me," Avetis says, "I have good news."

Vram steps aside and Avetis walks into the living room. He looks around – he hasn't been here in about thirteen years. He sees the sketch and turns away. His eyes rest on the renovated and strong ceiling. He notices the closed door to Siranush's room. He smirks and his hand mechanically goes to his pocket.

"You want to make a movie, don't you?"

"An American exhibition is coming here for the first time in our history – American graphic pieces," he indicates the paper sketch with a finger, then continues. "It's a very important event. Around forty Americans are coming – artists, art critics, what have you. A documentary film needs to be shot about them, a chronicle of sorts. You'll have to be with them constantly and then you'll send all the material to me. We'll watch it together and decide how it will take shape. We'll choose the copywriter later. There are art critics – regular guys – who are ready to do it. Comrade Mikoyan will watch it himself.

"You have to realize how important this task is. It will be your rehabilitation, so that that other story can be forgotten. If you do a good job, you'll be allowed to make a feature-length movie."

36.

Vram looks through a camera mounted on a tripod in the vicinity of the airport. It's winter, but there is still no snow and the sky is free of clouds.

A buzzing can be heard from above. Vram looks up and sees a small plane doing death loops. Vram is standing in the crowd of people who make up the reception committee. Near the airport gates, a slight distance away, stand Inga and Avetis. A large plane with four propellers lands with a loud roar, taxies up and stops not far from where the people are standing. The propellers have not yet stopped completely when a mobile staircase drives up and attaches itself to the plane door. The door soon opens and the passengers, the Americans, start to disembark.

Suddenly, the place is flooded with children, who leave the crowd of people and rush through the gates, running towards the arrivals. The guests, American, men and women, whose bodies look huge, stop and pet the children.

"*Tzamon*,[53] *tzamon*, gum, gum!" the most boisterous of the children shout. The smaller kids, such as the four-year-old girl being dragged along by her sister, simply look on in wonder.

The Americans take out colorful pieces of chewing gum from their multicolored bags and present them to the children – as if they knew that this would be requested of them, and came prepared.

One of them, a hulking man with a green beret, suddenly falls to his knees and kisses the pavement of the runway. Everyone looks at him.

When he gets up, his eyes meet Vram's – it's Perch. Vram is dumbfounded. He can't believe his eyes. He tries to pull himself together, pretending that everything is normal. He wants to shout but suppresses this instinct. Perch smiles secretly. There

[53] *Armenian for "chewing gum."*

is a tear in his eye. He signals to Vram that they must not reveal that they know each other. Avetis is close by.

Flash forward

Vram is holding Perch by the hand and dragging him to the State Supervision building. Perch is wearing the same coat that Vram had on the previous occasion, with a rose in the front pocket. But he's wearing blue jeans. When they walk past the horse, Perch caresses it and the animal emits a brief, agreeable whinny.

They enter and go up to the third floor. Vram knocks on the door.

"Come in," Garegin says, "Who is it?"

Vram opens the door, pushes Perch in and closes it, then puts his ear to the door in an attempt to listen in on what is going on in the room.

No sound comes from inside.

Vram starts to pace in the corridor and talk to himself, waving his hands in the air.

The door suddenly opens.

"Come in, boy," Perch says with friendly contempt.

Vram enters with trepidation, his head hung low.

Flash forward ends

37.

The Americans have just seen the ruins of Garni Temple, and they are now getting back on the bus, which sets off to Geghard. The Americans are noisy and sing songs. Inga translates for them, answers questions, and is very animated. Vram is recording the scene. Avetis is seated, alert, tense and anxious. Perch, seated at

a distance, joins in the songs, asks Inga questions flirtatiously, and plays games.

The bus comes to a stop suddenly. There is too much snow, and it can go no further.

The people get off the bus. The sun is blinding, and the mountains are white. A colorfully-dressed crowd gathers around the parked bus – more colors than this mountain has ever seen.

"How much farther to Geghard?" the leader of the American group asks. Inga translates.

"Seven kilometers," the driver replies.

"Let's walk! Hey, who's up for a hike to Geghard?" the group leader shouts.

"Yeah!"

All the Americans raise their hands.

"What? Walk? It's far away – you won't make it!" Avetis starts to panic.

"Seven kilometers is no big deal – it's only five miles," the group leader says. "We'll make it there in forty minutes if we maintain a good pace."

"You'll catch cold, you'll fall ill!" Avetis starts to plead.

"One never catches cold from walking quickly. And we're all wearing warm clothing."

And he shows them their colorful coats made of polyester with cotton inside.

"There are wolves out there and... and, they'll attack...I can't let you..."

"We'll drive them off – hooo, hooo!"

Inga faithfully translates everything, including the "hooo, hooo."

Avetis finds nothing to say.

"Ready to go?" the leader asks the group.

"Let's go!" the group echoes in unison.

"You can't do this. I'll be fired. Foreigners are not allowed to wander around Armenia without a guide," Avetis laments.

"Do you want me to translate that?" Inga asks.

"Translate the last part," Avetis replies.

"Come with us," the American says in reply.

"But how can I? I've got a hole in my boot," Avetis says.

But they don't pay any attention to him and begin to move. They walk along the mountain slope in single file, sinking into the snow, marching energetically in the direction of Geghard. Perch winks to Vram and Inga, then joins the group.

Avetis starts to panic. He takes out a gun from his pocket (a *Lady's Browning*), points it upwards, and shouts, "I'll fire!"

Inga attacks him.

"Stop it, you fool! Do you want to cause an avalanche?"

She stands between him and the group, her back to the crowd, her chest facing Avetis, her arms folded.

"Come to your senses!"

Vram, carrying the camera, runs over and puts a hand on Inga's shoulder, holding her back so that she doesn't attack Avetis. He looks carefully at the gun in Avetis's hand.

The driver lights a cigarette calmly and sits on the steps of the bus, watching the scene with interest. It is the man who used to be the guard at the Conservatory.

"I'm done for if they find out," Avetis mumbles, beside himself.

But the Americans don't pay any attention, as though they

haven't noticed that he has brandished a gun. They ignore the shouting, and continue walking with their backs to him. The snow crunches beneath their feet.

Avetis hesitates, then puts the gun in his pocket.

Not knowing what to do, he rushes after the group, but he turns and runs back.

"Why are you still standing here? We have to all go together. Move!"

"I'm waiting for a good shot," Vram says. "We'll catch up – you go ahead."

"Armenians can't stay here unaccompanied. This is a military zone."

"Let them get a bit farther away, so that I can get a good shot of the scene."

Avetis spins on his heel and rushes after the group, sinking in the snow. The Americans march deliberately and at an impressive pace.

Avetis turns around again and takes a few steps towards Vram and Inga, waves his arms, then spins again and tries to catch up with the group.

The Americans continue to march briskly, at a military speed, as if they were all CIA-trained secret soldiers indeed. The men and women – large, strong, and clad in multicolored outfits - look a bit like aliens. Vram lets go of Inga's hand and digs the tripod deep into the snow as he attaches himself to the camera viewfinder.

But when he looks through the viewfinder, the group is no longer one of aliens. Instead of Americans, with their colorful coats, they've become the main characters in this movie – the 27-year old

Commissar, Uncle Vanya, Charents, Bakunts, Sevada, Totovents, Grandpa Mikael, Uncle Ghazar's wife, Abesalom, Besikyan, Garegin, Comrade Gasparyan and many, many others. Perch has a guitar which he's plucking, singing in an accented voice, *"Gori, gori, moya zvezda, gori, siyay zavetnaya."* They march on briskly, at an athletic pace, sinking to their knees in the snow. Beneath their colorful coats they are all wearing khaki canvas pants, all of them – men and women alike – and many of them have bandages around the feet, plows in their hands, an ice pick or an adz.

And each of them is doing something that is personally characteristic. Uncle Vanya is wearing a pilot's helmet, Anush's husband and the 27-year-old Commissar are wearing *budenovkas*. Sarajev is walking without looking around, his head held high, looking haughty. Nadya is wearing a colorful coat but has boots on her feet and buckets in her hands. Uncle Ghazar is carrying an oak log on his shoulder. Acharyan takes out a handkerchief and reveals a piece of hard candy, which he offers to the person walking next to him. Only Mikoyan is not walking. He is standing on top of the hill, holding his hand to his forehead to protect himself from the sun (but this also seems like a salute). He follows them with his eyes, with his usual half-smile beneath his mustache. He is a bust made of metal.

(This action is accompanied with music that transitions from Perch's song to Evelina performing a classical piece, such as Mozart, on the piano.)

The sound of a plane can be heard in the sky; it is doing death loops.

(The music changes, Charles Aznavour begins to sing.)

The scene is now being depicted from a distance, as if we are

watching it from the plane. The colorful, single line of tourists stretches out from the bus in the direction of Geghard, with two small figures apart on the mountain slope. A man emerges from the line and rushes to the two figures, then turns back and returns to the line. He says something to Mikoyan's bust, salutes it, reports out, then rushes after the advancing line. The snow that covers the mountain slope starts to blacken at the site of his failed efforts. It is trampled. His footprints fuse together to form a small black pool, as if after a dog fight.

The line continues to walk without stopping, like a strange colorful caterpillar. From our highest vantage point, we can see the ruins of Garni on one end and Geghard in the distance, two points which the colorful, twisting line is trying to connect across the shimmering mountain slope.

And then the shot dissolves into a colorful, sparkling curve – on the picture of Armenia seen from space – perpendicular to the peaks of Ararat, which look like two nipples. The curve is slightly angled and appears to be closer to the larger of the peaks.

THE END

The filmmaker's voice:

I was born nine months later. Apparently, as a result of the ruined film.

The screen blacks out.

2017

Translated by Nazareth Seferian

TODD

S. GERNES

ON DISCOVERING THE OCEAN IN A LANDLOCKED COUNTRY

Afterword

You are not a drop in the ocean,
You are the entire ocean in a drop.

The contemporary Armenian writers represented in this collection of literary fiction are members of the Kayaran Literary Club, which was founded in Yerevan in 2011. "Kayaran" means railway station in Armenian. The Kayaran group soon began to publish a yearbook and then a quarterly. The Kayaran Club's mission, as the editors of this collection suggest, is to "cultivate, promote, and disseminate contemporary Armenian literary prose," publishing works in a variety of languages, including

English, Spanish, Arabic, and Russian. Importantly, these stories reflect the authors' focus on issues at the crux of global literary culture today: creativity, critical thinking, and human rights, in the multilayered context of war and peace, artistic freedom and political repression, empire and national autonomy, gender and sexual violence, and the weight and permanence of history versus the ephemerality of contemporary digital culture. *A Drop in the Sea* opens with three stories by Lusine Kharatyan: "#America_place from 9/11 to 11/9" and "#America_place pregnant" from the series #America_place, and "The Manas." "America_place," a numbered series of astringent vignettes, portrays contemporary American culture through the eyes of an Armenian foreign exchange student hosted by a Midwestern, Protestant, Republican family. The narrator encounters a new domain, and while she is aware of the relative naiveté of her hosts and herself, her vision is at once ironic, self-reflective and ethnographic. In "The Manas," Kharatyan recounts the story of Arpine, an Armenian woman visiting Bishkek, the capital city of Kyrgystan, near the Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan border. In her travels and border crossings, Arpine carries her national history with her, a traumatic history shot through with organized pogroms and weaponized sexual violence that causes her to see the world darkly, through a kind of veil.

Armen of Armenia's "Silver Gate," which has its premiere in this volume, is a historically rich and resonant tale – a set of intricately nested stories, in fact – that takes place in mid-1980s Armenia in general and the Sevan Children's Sanatorium, in particular. "Silver Gate" unfolds at the time of the nuclear catastrophe in Chernobyl and the irreversible collapse of the

Soviet Union. Like other stories in this collection, "Silver Gate" has a valuable microhistorical dimension, mapping the uneven – at times jagged – social, cultural, and political terrain in the late Soviet Era, with a focus, at once realistic and magical, on everyday life.

Mher Israelyan's charming tale, "Unimaginable Cheesies for Jeff Bronson," is set in the Brussels American School in Belgium. "Cheesie" was a child-friendly (and American-friendly) term for *khachapuri*, or cheese bread, a traditional food that Davit's mother bakes, from a recipe passed on by Grandma Vardush to her granddaughter. The secret recipe had been delivered from Alashkert, an Armenian historic town in Turkey, to Tbilisi, Georgia, surviving for a century and ending up as the specialty in the kitchen of an Armenian family that had settled in the heart of Europe. Such are the vagaries of cultural transmission, Israelyan seems to suggest. Jeff "the Wisconsin Bear" Bronson, a 400-pound gay kindergarten teacher with a heart of gold, befriends the five-year-old Davit, "a little boy, after all, in unfamiliar surroundings with an indecipherable language [and] nobody to play with."

A Drop in the Sea includes three early pieces by Vahram Martirosyan and also excerpts from his novel, *Cotton Walls*. The contrast between Martirosyan's dreamlike miniatures and his more realistic novel illustrates a fundamental and telling tension in this collection between storytelling anchored firmly in history – narratives carrying the weight of past – and storytelling that unfolds in dreamtime, mythic time, or the eternal present. "The Fish" is an iridescent, lyrical fable that seems to reimagine folktales from the region, capturing their cadence and resonance. In *Cotton Walls*, a student novel, Martirosyan presents the life

of youth in Soviet Armenia during the Era of Stagnation, the period between 1964 and 1985. The plot of the novel turns, in part, on a top-secret decree by the USSR Minister of Enlightenment "according to which the professional subjects in the higher educational institutions of all the republics must switch over to the Russian language." The interaction between Georgian and Armenian students depicted in this piece is significant, as is the fact that both groups are anti-Soviet and pro-nationalist, with the implication that they also need to be mindful about not sowing the seeds of future discord between their nations.

Lilit Karapetyan's haunting and enigmatic story, "Before Sunrise," is a fluid and imagistic piece that layers vivid and allusive word pictures freely associated with the narrator's visits to Kars, a city in northeast Turkey. Kars has an important and complex role within Armenian history, both ancient and modern. In Karapetyan's nocturn, set during the AIDS epidemic of the late twentieth century, the city seems forbidding and corrupt, hopelessly locked in a cycle of decay and rebirth. The story is very close to a prose poem, with its lyricism, ambiguity, layered imagery, and deft decentering.

Hrach Beglaryan's two contributions to this volume, "The Oak and the Nail" and "Waiting for the General," unfold in mythic time and allegorical space and yet touch on very real legacies in contemporary Armenian culture and society: environmental degradation (and environmental stewardship), war, political patronage, and militarism. While "The Oak and the Nail" tells the story of the conflict and interdependency of nature and culture from the point of view of a hyper-sentient oak tree, "Waiting for the General" closely documents the situation

after the first Karabakh war: a war-time fraternity is undermined by the greed and corruption of the careerists, as is typical for post-war societies.

Susanna Harutyunyan's five stories are rendered in richly detailed prose that immerse the reader in modern Armenian history: the Soviet Era, the time of the first war with Azerbaijan (1990s), and forward, into the new millennium. "Grandfather's Death in My Act" explores the effects of death, the passage of time, and the dissonance (and harmony) between traditional and contemporary cultures. "God Has Passed Through Here" is a modern allegory about a beautiful, strangely luminescent girl, Noem, who lives with her family in a village hidden in a hollow at the top of a mountain. European scientists seek her out to investigate this phenomenon, persuading her parents to sell her body to science. In the contours of the story the reader discovers a critique of western colonialism and paternalism in the name of "science," as well as the high cost of the intentional and unintentional naiveté of the poor. In "A Red-Crested Dawn" Harutyunyan offers readers a glimpse of everyday life in an Armenian village through the eyes of Teresa, a woman somehow caught in a web of rural culture and kinship and unable to stop the relentless passage of time. "The Sun Is the Face of The Lord, and We Behold It Every Day" is an astonishing and macabre story about the flowering of passion, even if a touch perverse, crushed by the ruthlessness of war. "The Mighty End," a tale steeped in black humor, captures a mother and daughter confronting (or avoiding) end-of-life issues in a story with the light touch of a well-wrought situation comedy. In "House of Horror" Harutyunyan offers a fractured gothic fairytale about

materialism, superstition, and the importance of confronting one's own fears.

A Drop in the Sea concludes with Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan's complex work of "closet cinema" (a film that unfolds in the reader's imagination), *The Godless Movie Theater*. The screenplay is set in Yerevan, "from about the 1930s to the mid-1950s." *The Godless Movie Theater* is a work of life-fiction, blending realism and legend. "The scenes," the author notes "are mostly documentary, which means they are based on true events, stories, or on things that I've heard over the years. However, I've built a plot – fictional, to a certain extent but, on the other hand, woven into legend – and the incidents are neither accurate from a factual point of view nor strictly chronological." Although *The Godless Movie Theater* is most definitely filmic in structure, including flashbacks, montages, parallelism, and cross-dissolves (in this viewer's mental screening, anyway), we might also think of this piece as an album of vintage postcards from Old Yerevan. Importantly, Ter-Gabrielyan documents the situation of artists in Soviet Armenia during the Stalinist Purges of intelligentsia in 1936-1938 and beyond (the legacy was, unfortunately, quite enduring).

A Drop in the Sea is not intended to be representative of contemporary Armenian literary prose as a whole, the authors assure us. After all, they are members of a particular literary society, the Kayaran Literary Club. And yet the themes and characteristics that emerge in this collection are somehow representative: the long history of trauma and genocide in Armenian history; the culture of violence – a legacy of empire and militarism; the postcolonial contours of everyday life in contemporary Armenia;

multiethnicity and transnationalism; the long shadow of Soviet oppression and repression; the tensions between folkloric traditions and modernity; and the blurring of historical and mythic time – with a trace of transcendentalism, perhaps. Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, the eleventh-century medieval poet and Sufi mystic, wrote, *"You are not a drop in the ocean / You are the entire ocean in a drop."* The writing collected here may, in fact, be representative not in its universality but in its diversity and cultural specificity. And yet in each drop we may glimpse an entire ocean of literary possibility.

BIOGRAPHIES

AUTHORS

Lusine Kharatyan

Lusine Kharatyan (b. 1977) is a Yerevan-based cultural anthropologist and writer. Born and raised in Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia, she has lived and studied in different parts of the world, including Russia, Egypt, and the USA. Her writing is significantly influenced by her anthropological research and fieldwork, as well as her travels. Kharatyan is the author of a collection of short stories Ամմոռուկի փակուղի (Dead End Forget-me-not, 2020) and the novel Ծուռ գիրք (The Oblique Book, 2017). Published with a monetary prize from the First Yerevan Book Fest, in 2021 her collection of short stories *Dead End Forget-me-not* was shortlisted for the European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL). Kharatyan is a member of PEN International and the Chair of Women Writers' Committee of PEN Armenia.

Armen of Armenia (Armen Ohanyan)

Armen Ohanyan (pen name: Armen of Armenia) was born in 1979. He is a fiction writer, essayist and literary translator. He holds a BA in philosophy from Yerevan State University and a graduate certificate in Translation from the American University of Armenia. He's the author of a story collection *The Return of Kikos*, a trilogy of novels, *Mommyland*, and several short stories and essays. He is a board member of several Armenian NGOs,

and a human rights activist. Armen Ohanyan is President of PEN Armenia since 2017. Please see the webpage of Pen Armenia: https://penarmenia.org/

Mher Israelyan

Mher Israelyan was born in 1974 in Yerevan. He is a graduate of Yerevan State University, Department of International Relations. Due to his work, Mher Israyelyan has spent 15 years of his life in the United States and other European countries. He started his literary activity after the death of his father, renouned prose writer Vrezh Israelyan. Inspired by his father's work, Mher decided to continue it. Mher Israelyan's stories published on literary websites have been repeatedly awarded prizes in the category of the best story of the year. The collection *A Dog's Luck on the Old Armenian Road* has received media agency Armenpress' special prize of the year. Mher Israelyan is the author of the novels *I Must Live Before I Die* (2015) and *I am the King of the World*, the Novels of a Family Tree (2019). The collection of stories *The One and Only Planet*, published in 2021, a story from which is selected for this book, is about all the people who, willingly or unwillingly, came and settled on that one and only one that is spinning and will continue to spin for a long time.

Vahram Martirosyan

Vahram Martirosyan started publishing early. He is the author of two collections of poetry. From the first years of the Pannational Movement (1989), that brought Armenia to independence, Vahram Martirosyan took up political journalism. He founded and led one of the first independent infor-

mational-analytical programs for Public Television. In 2000 he left television, announcing that he intended to lead the life of a professional writer. At the end of the same year, Martirosyan's novel *Landslide* was published, becoming the first Armenian bestseller since independence. Soon the novel was translated and published in Hungarian, Russian, Azerbaijani and French. In 2001 Martirosyan became the co-founder and co-editor of the *Bnagir* literary internet site and its printed collections. The nonconformist writers united around *Bnagir*, as it put forward new criteria for freedom and broad-mindedness into Armenian literature. In 2002 Vahram Martirosyan published *Disguised in the Name of the Cross*, a historical novel. In 2005 he pulished *The Owls*, in 2015 *Love in Moscow* (a novel), and in 2019 *Cotton Walls*, an excerpt from which is included in this collection. Vahram has also written screenplays and has translated prose and poetry from Russian, French, Spanish, English, and Hungarian into Armenian.

Lilit Karapetyan

Lilit Karapetyan was born in 1990. She has a Master's degree in art history from Yerevan State University. Her work has been published in several literary magazines. She has translated literary works from English, Russian and Farsi. In 2011 she was awarded the Presidential Youth Prize in Armenia. She is the author of two collections of short stories, *Between the Asphalt and the Sky* (2009) and *Monologue in Two Voices* (2013), and a novel, *The Auger of Desert* (2021).

Hrach Beglaryan

Hrach Beglaryan was born in the village of Lernavan, in the Lori region, and currently lives in the town of Sevan. Hrach is a Candidate of Historical Sciences and a member of the Writers' and Journalists' Unions of Armenia. He is an author of two dozen literary and academic books and translations. The most well-known books are *The Call of the Land* (1996), *The Oak and the Nail* (2013), *Charkakap* (2014), and the collection of poems *Paradise Window* (2004). He has published several novels: *Year of the Dwarf* (2009), *Tlol David* (2009), *Square* (2011), T*here Were Angels in the Sun* (2016), and *Beyond the Milky Way* (2020). His works have been translated into English, Russian, Ukrainian, French, Spanish, and Swedish.

Susanna Harutyunyan

Susanna Harutyunyan was born in 1963 in Karchaghbyur village in the Vardenis region of Armenia. She graduated from the Armenian State Pedagogical University. Her first short story, *When I Was a Fairy Tale*, was published in 1974 in the youth newspaper of Soviet Armenia. She is author of more than ten collections of stories. Susanna Harutyunyan is a recipient of the Presidential Prize for fiction in Armenia (2015). Her works have been translated into several languages. Her prose has been published in Russian in literary magazines *Druzhba Narodov* and *Zvezda*, literary weekly *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, in the collection of stories of the South Caucasus writers *Yuzhniy Kavkaz*, and in many other magazines and collections. The play *Harmony* was translated into Persian and staged in 2000 in Iran. Her novel,

Ravens Before Noah, was translated in English in 2019 and published in London.

In 2011, together with the Edit Print publishing house, she established the writers' club *Kayaran*, with a literary magazine of the same name that she edits. *Kayaran* and Edit Print hold an annual competition of literary works for schoolchildren, called *Hasker*, and publish story collections for children. In collaboration with the Alajajyan Foundation Susanna Harutyunyan administers the *Stepan Alajajyan writers' competition*. In 2019 she established a literary-cultural NGO, *Grakan Kayaran*.

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan was born in Yerevan in 1964. He published his first short story in 1980. He has published in Armenian the memoir-novel *Hrant* (2018) and three collections of fiction and essays: *Square Cellar* (2012), *The Godless Movie Theater* (2018), and *The Problem of Short Poplars* (2021). He is an author of many stories published in various collections, as well as several non-fiction essays, as well as editor of and contributor to a few non-fiction collections on tolerance in Armenian literature, the culture of violence in Armenia, and the essence of power. He is a recipient of various mentions and awards, including from the Ministry of Culture of Armenia, the Granish and Inknagir literary magazines/sites, the Galust Gulbenkian Foundation, the Decameron project, IBBY Armenia, etc. Gevorg has taught at various universities, has lived in six countries, and is a recognized speaker: many of his videopresentations on various social and humanities topics are available on the net. He leads Eurasia Partnership Foundation in Armenia since 2007.

Some of his fiction in English, including *The Yatagan Syndrome* and *Zarmanazan*, is available on his personal site: https://www.gtergab.com/

His English-language non-fiction book, *Armenia 3.0*, is available here: https://epfarmenia.am/document/Armenia-3-0-Understanding-20th-Century-Armenia

TRANSLATORS

Margarit Ordukhanyan

Margarit Ordukhanyan is a scholar and translator of poetry and prose from her native Armenian and Russian into English. In addition to contributing to collections and anthologies both in the US and abroad, she also studies literary bilingualism, translation theory, and translation pedagogy's role in the language and humanities curricula. She has authored numerous articles and book chapters on the intersection of literary bilingualism and translation theory in the works of Vladimir Nabokov. Her current translation and research focuses on the works of exophonic Armenian women writers including Narine Abgaryan and Goar Markosyan-Kasper, whose Russian-language novel *Penelope Ordukhanyan* is currently being translated into English.

Marina Yandyan

Marina Yandyan is an experienced multilingual translator with a strong background in educational, scholarly and literary works, memoirs, websites, movie scripts and historical docu-

ments. Marina Yandyan is trilingual from early childhood. She is also a proficient editor and proofreader.

Shushan Avagyan

Shushan Avagyan is the translator of several works, such as *Energy of Delusion: A Book on Plot; Bowstring: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar; A Hunt for Optimism; The Hamburg Score;* and *On the Theory of Prose* by Viktor Shklovsky (Dalkey Archive); and *Art and Production* by Boris Arvatov (Pluto) from Russian into English. She also translates from Armenian, e.g., she translated *I Want to Live*: Poems of Shushanik Kurghinian (AIWA).

Nairi Hakhverdi

Nairi Hakhverdi is a writer and translator. She is best known for her translations of modern and contemporary Armenian literature. Her translations include works by Aksel Bakunts, Gostan Zarian, Aram Pachyan, Hovhannes Tekgyozyan, and Armen Hayastantsi, among others. Her works have appeared in a variety of literary magazines and publications. Her latest translation was Yeghishe Charents's *Book of Verses* commissioned by the Charents House-Museum of Yerevan.

Nazareth Seferian

Nazareth Seferian was born in Canada, grew up in India, and moved to his homeland of Armenia in 1998, where he has been living ever since. His university education did not specifically include translation studies, but his love for languages led

him to this work. He began literary translations in 2011, and his published works include the English version of *Yenok's Eye* by Gurgen Khanjyan, *The Clouds of Mount Maruta* by Mushegh Galshoyan, *Ravens Before Noah* by Susanna Harutyunyan, *Jesus' Cat* by Grig, *The Door Was Open* by Karine Khodikyan, and *Robinson* by Aram Pachyan. He has also translated several short stories by other Armenian authors, such as Artavazd Yeghiazaryan, Levon Shahnur, Armen of Armenia (Ohanyan), Areg Azatyan, Avetik Mejlumyan, Anna Davtyan and more. Nazareth's typical work week includes a variety of nonliterary activities combined with several pages of translation, driven by his desire to promote greater availability and recognition of Armenian culture for English speakers worldwide.

Yeva Martirosyan

Yeva Martirosyan is a translator, interpreter and environmentalist. The circle of her translation favorites focuses on contemporary literature. Eva's English translations feature short stories, poems and essays by Vhram Martirosyan, Arpi Voskanyan and Karen Antashyan. The highlights of her Armenian translations include Charles Bukowski, Samuel Beckett and Orhan Pamuk.

Haik Movsisian

Haik J. Movsisian is a translator, editor, and educator. He was born in Yerevan in 1977 and moved to the USA in 1994. He has two Master of Arts degrees, one in English Literature and the other in Applied Linguistics, from California State University, Los Angeles. He has also attended Cornell University and

New York University. He has taught English in universities and colleges across the US, including Santa Monica College and California State University, Northridge. He is married and has a son.

EDITOR

Todd S. Gernes

Todd S. Gernes was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1962 and grew up in Watertown, Massachusetts, an important location, in time and space, of the Armenian diaspora. He is an Associate Professor of History at Stonehill College in Easton, Massachusetts, where he teaches courses in U. S. History, World History, Writing, and Digital Humanities, specializing in interdisciplinary and cultural approaches history, chiefly of the 19th and 20th centuries. He also has had a lifelong interest in the multiethnic literature of the United States. He has received fellowships from the Getty Research Institute, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Antiquarian Society, and the Winterthur Museum. In addition to publishing scholarly articles in *The New England Quarterly, MELUS,* and *The Winterthur Portfolio*, Gernes has published historical articles for the general reader (most recently in the *EVN Report*, in Yerevan, Armenia). Additionally, he has published original creative nonfiction, edited collections of poetry, and produced a historical play and short documentary film. With his Stonehill colleague, Dr. Anna Ohanyan, Gernes directs the LION Program, an intensive program that blends travel, civil society internships, and study in Yerevan, Armenia.

«Կաթիլը ծովում» ժողովածուն ընդգրկում է ժամանակակից ութ հայ արձակագիրների գործերի անգլերեն թարգմանությունները: Այն կազմվել է անգլալեզու ընթերցողին այսօրվա հայ արձակի մասին պատկերացում տալու նպատակով: Հրատարակման է պատրաստվել «Գրական կայարան» հասարակական կազմակերպության կողմից՝ «Կայարան» ակումբի հիմնադրման տասնամյակի առիթով: Հրատարակվել է Շվեդիայի SIDA զարգացման գործակալության և Եվրասիա համագործակցություն հիմնադրամի աջակցությամբ:

A DROP IN THE SEA

Armenian contemporary prose

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