

A Drop
in the Sea

Armenian
Contemporary
Prose



LUSINE

KHARATYAN

#AMERICA_PLACE¹

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 տեղ (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

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#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

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?"

"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:

"Tyot⁸ 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.

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

⁸ In Russian "тетя" or *tyotyа* ("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,*” 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.

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 conveyor 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 events¹² 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