

# A Drop in the Sea

Armenian  
Contemporary  
Prose



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Yerevan, 2022

GEVORG

TER-GABRIELYAN

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# 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,”<sup>17</sup> 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.

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<sup>17</sup> *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*<sup>18</sup> on the marquee. A movie poster, pasted onto the wall, announces

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<sup>18</sup> A Russian word meaning "atheist" or "a godless person."

*Namus*<sup>19</sup> and *Chapayev*.<sup>20</sup> 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.

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<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> 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*<sup>21</sup>. 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.

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<sup>21</sup> 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<sup>22</sup> and Sarajev<sup>23</sup> are sitting in the yard of the mosque in a café called Tourist, where they’re drinking coffee. Mikael Mazmanyanyan<sup>24</sup> 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 Mazmanyanyan drawing, and automatically puts the palm of his hand on one section of the paper. Mazmanyanyan looks at the hand and draws an outline of it. Vram smiles.

“Did you submit your letter?” Axel suddenly asks Mikael (Vram’s father).

Mazmanyanyan stops the explanation of his drawing and looks up.

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<sup>22</sup> *These famous Armenian writers died in 1937-38, victims of purges of the Stalinist era.*

<sup>23</sup> *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.*

<sup>24</sup> *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.

Mazmanyany 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 *Bez-bozhnik*. 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...*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> 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<sup>26</sup>.

“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<sup>27</sup> 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

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*surround this historical event, and many of them relate to Anastas Mikoyan, the only one who survived.*

<sup>26</sup> *Stepan Shahumyan, the leader of Baku Commissars.*

<sup>27</sup> *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*<sup>28</sup> Armenian Bolsheviks.

The *askars*<sup>29</sup> 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*<sup>30</sup>.”

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

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<sup>28</sup> *Infidel*

<sup>29</sup> “Soldier” in Azerbaijani and Turkish; the word has a negative connotation for Armenians.

<sup>30</sup> 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<sup>31</sup> 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.

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<sup>31</sup> 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*<sup>32</sup> 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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<sup>32</sup> A prisoner transport vehicle used in the Soviet Union by the People's Commissariat 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<sup>33</sup> 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

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<sup>33</sup> 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<sup>34</sup> 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.

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<sup>34</sup> *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.<sup>35</sup> 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*,<sup>36</sup> 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

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<sup>35</sup> *The main cemetery in Yerevan at that time.*

<sup>36</sup> *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*.<sup>37</sup> 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 Mazmanyán. Mazmanyán 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. Mazmanyán wonders how best to help him. Mazmanyán is a privileged exile: he has been tasked with planning and constructing the city of

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<sup>37</sup> *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?”

Mazmanyany 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,<sup>38</sup> 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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<sup>38</sup> 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*<sup>39</sup>.”

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.

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<sup>39</sup> *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*.<sup>40</sup> 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,

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<sup>40</sup> *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 *podstakannik* 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<sup>41</sup> 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.

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<sup>41</sup> *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<sup>42</sup>. 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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<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> 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.

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<sup>43</sup> *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<sup>44</sup>. 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

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<sup>44</sup> A renowned 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 Heidelberg 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 Heidelberg 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 Mazmnyan, 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, Mazmnyan is sketching the trial. Avetis frowns when he sees it. Sargis is looking straight ahead. Then, Mazmnyan suddenly begins to draw a structure, the Institute of Languages,<sup>45</sup> 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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<sup>45</sup> *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. Mazmnyan 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*<sup>46</sup> 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

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<sup>46</sup> *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, Mazmanyán'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?<sup>47</sup> 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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<sup>47</sup> The Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, 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<sup>48</sup> 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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<sup>48</sup> 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*<sup>49</sup> 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

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<sup>49</sup> 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<sup>50</sup> 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<sup>51</sup>. Copy confirmed – Zarubyan.<sup>52</sup> Agreed: Mikoyan.*

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<sup>50</sup> 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.

<sup>51</sup> Soviet government and secret police officials posted in Armenia after the death of Stalin.

<sup>52</sup> 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*,<sup>53</sup> *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

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<sup>53</sup> *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