

A Drop in the Sea

Armenian
Contemporary
Prose



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Yerevan, 2022

VAHRAM

MARTIROSYAN

THE FISH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I

To Vahram Martirosyan

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE FRIEND

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We can't let you in looking like that.”

“Looking like what? I look fine.”

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

“No way! Have you seen yourself in a mirror?”

“C'mon, please let me in!”

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

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

“How can I let him in looking like this?”

“What about his appearance? He looks fine.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What’s wrong with the way I look?”

“Everything!”

“I look fine!”

“If that’s fine, then what do you consider looking bad?”

“Well, if you think that something’s wrong with it, then tell me what!”

“If you keep pushing it, we just might.”

“Well, tell me!”

“And we will!”

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

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

“Well, if he doesn’t want to swap, why should he?”

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

“It’s not your business to be deciding what he should or shouldn’t look like.”

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

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

“I probably did, I don’t know.”

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

Translated by Margarit Tadevosyan

COTTON WALLS

Excerpts from the novel

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

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

“I’m returning the “Leo,” I said.

“Did you read it? Wasn’t it interesting?”

“I finished it.”

“So soon? Really?”

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

* * *

“Would you like some wine?”

“I could have some.”

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

“I would’ve brought a bottle if I knew.”

“Knew what?”

“That we’d be drinking wine.”

“The mistress is against it – she mustn’t see the bottle.”

“Why would you keep living here if you’re under surveillance?”

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

“The entrance, the toilet, and other things aren’t private – isn’t that too much?”

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

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

“It’s the KGB. If they’ve withdrawn they mean to surveil you

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

“Why would I have a file?”

“Don’t be a fool. Haven’t you been joking around, talking about anti-Soviet stuff?”

“Do jokes also count? How can I not have joked?”

“Of course,” Manvel replied sarcastically.

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

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

“Haven’t you had long hair since your school years? Didn’t you wear frayed jeans?” I nodded.

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

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

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

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

“No,” I said.

“Yes,” Manvel said with irony.

“Oh, fu...” I barely restrained myself from cursing.

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

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

“You three musketeers think about it. Then come and we’ll discuss it.”

* * *

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

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

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

“I’ll see about that. We may announce a competition for the best secret organization.”

We laughed.

“Haven’t you ever tried? We’re neighboring peoples, after all.”

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

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

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

“Good question.... I’ll say how we *will* proceed: first, we must go to Tbilisi.”

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

“What was your degree in, Manvel?”

“Philology!”

“And what’s our background? Mine, Zorik’s and Torgom’s.”

“The same, philology.”

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

“Easy for you to say. Are you sure you won’t run into the KGB?”

“Well, that’s one of the dangers. But what if *they* suspect *us*?”

“You’re right. This is the Soviet Union, after all.”

“When are you planning the visit?”

“The sooner, the better.”

“Do you have money for the road?”

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

“Xerox? Of course... Wasn’t George Orwell’s book Xeroxed?”

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Really? Great idea. I will accompany you to the dean’s office.”

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

“Are you sure the information is true?”

“Look.” I took Yelyutin’s decree out of my jacket pocket.

“It seems authentic.”

“It is real. A photocopy of the real thing.”

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

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

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

“Were there any demonstrations in Tbilisi? We didn’t hear about them.” Zorik was surprised.

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

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

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

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

“Chkheidze? He directed the *Soldier’s Father*, Zorik recalled.

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

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

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

The Georgians asked if they might copy the document. We

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

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

“Was it Russian – about the Swedes?” Zorik asked.

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

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

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

“Or rather the female part of them.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

Janet made the best of our bad business.

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

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

¹⁶ *Kukuruz* (кुकүрүза) means corn in Russian. The building got its nickname because of its visual similarity to a corn cob.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

* * *

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

* * *

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

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

* * *

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

“KGB!”

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

“No, we’re not going to take any money from you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s possible that the KGB released you because the letter confused Moscow.”

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

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

2019

Translated by Yeva Martirosyan