

[Excerpt from *Simon*, by Narine Abgaryan, translated by Katherine E. Young. Excerpt begins with the novel's introductory chapter. Footnotes are original to the Russian-language text.]

Parting Rites

Melania Ayinants's husband was dead. That isn't to say that his death was completely unexpected for people, although Simon was well into his seventies, more precisely, he was a year short of eighty. But everyone was upset—Melania's husband was the life of the party and loved by all. He lived expansively, irrepressibly, spared no expense, ate as if it were the last time, drank as if drinking would be banned tomorrow and the death penalty could be expected for consuming alcohol. That's why Simon drank wine with breakfast (for vigor), mulberry *oghi* with lunch (to protect against heartburn), and *kizilovka* with dinner (in order to sleep well). In spite of the prevailing puritanical morality in Berd, he never refused himself a brief romantic fling.¹ He loved women—devotedly, with every fiber of his being—was bewitched in an instant, got jealous and idolized, and gave each one some inexpensive but pretty piece of jewelry when the relationship came to an end. “You have to part in such a way that a woman doesn't spit in your face when she meets you on the street!” he instructed his friends. His friends laughed it off and, referring to his boundless capacity to love, joked that “*dzhantleman*” comes from the word *dzhan*—that is, “my darling.”

¹ Berd is a town in the Tavush region of Armenia.

When she was young, Melania would create jealous scenes with her husband, but as she aged, she learned to avert her eyes from his antics. Nonetheless, so that Simon wouldn't take her for granted, sometimes she'd kick up a fuss by breaking dishes and cups she'd saved from the chipped items destined for the trash. Simon observed his wife darting around the house, smashing dishes on the floor, with undisguised admiration.

"Would you look at that!" he'd remark, sweeping up the remnants afterwards. While he cleaned up, Melania smoked on the veranda, flicking ashes into her husband's dress shoes. They lived, in short, in perfect accord.

Simon died on the eve of his seventy-ninth birthday, absolutely healthy and vigorous. Having eaten a full dinner and thrown back a shot of *kizilovka* to ward off sleeplessness, he fell asleep at his regular time, but couldn't get out of bed the next morning. The ambulance crew diagnosed a stroke, but they didn't make it to the hospital—Simon died as the ambulance drove out of the yard. They returned him to his family toward morning of the following day, dressed in a woolen suit and snow-white shirt, meticulously shaved, his hair combed in a perfect, even part. No one would have been ashamed to lay such a well-dressed corpse in his coffin and present him to society if not for the purple ears, overlaid with blue, that spoiled his respectable appearance. The young pathologist, forestalling the relatives' questions, explained that such things happen with people who've died from a stroke.

"And what should we do about it?" Melania burst into tears.

"Bury him!" uttered the pathologist drily; he was not inclined to sentiment.

Melania thought for a long time about how to make the dead man look presentable. She angrily waved away the suggestion of her older daughter-in-law to cover his ears with foundation make-up—"I won't permit my husband to be made into a *meimun!*"² Calling her shameless, she ordered the younger daughter-in-law out of her sight for proposing to tie a scarf around the dead man's head. She didn't even allow the middle daughter-in-law to open her mouth—she couldn't say a single sensible thing. In the end, not having thought up a solution, Melania pinned her hopes on the tactfulness of her fellow villagers and decided to leave things as they were. She entrusted the fuss and bother of the funeral feast to her daughters-in-law, dressed in something dark and emphatically modest, and sat down at the head of the coffin, intending to spend two days in mournful silence.

But her hopes for the tactfulness of her fellow villagers were unjustified. Forgetting their words of sympathy upon seeing the deceased, they immediately inquired why he had such extravagantly blue ears. Breaking her silence, Melania was forced to answer them in detail. The men clucked their tongues uncomfortably; the women immediately proposed doing something.

"What do you want me to do about it?" sighed Melania.

"Well, something!" insisted the women, tripping over one another in a torrent of idiotic suggestions, such as applying ribwort leaves to the ears; drawing an iodine grid on his skin; and plastering the ears with fully risen dough, preferably cold dough, just to be sure. In response, the men made circular motions with their fingers at their temples, caustically curious about how one

² A monkey (Farsi).

could help a person who was already beyond all help. A quotation from *The Idiot* about beauty being destined to save the world, cited imprudently by the literature teacher Ofelia Ambartsumovna, elicited unceremonious snickers from the men's camp and the completely reasonable argument that beauty wouldn't help revive someone who was dead. "But he'd be nice to look at!" rejoined the woman's camp, not giving up. The atmosphere was steadily heating up, turning the farewell ceremony into a skirmish. The newly-minted widow returned the funeral tone to the event. Rising from her place and moving with solemn steps toward the sideboard, she opened it with a creak, dragged out the heavy soup tureen, and slammed it with meaning on the floor. The women, remembering in an instant why they were there, began to wail in unison, and the men went out into the yard to smoke. Satisfied with the effect she'd produced, Melania sat down again at the head of the coffin.

One by one, Simon's former flames began to arrive, all decked out, as if they were going to Easter service. The first to appear was Sofia Sev-Mushegants, in a cardigan the color of clarified butter, with fake pearls around her flabby neck. Next, Eliza Tevosants looked in. Eliza's sons had moved to Fresno long ago, so she came dressed entirely in American style: dress, shoes, even her purse and dusty rose lipstick—everything was brought from overseas, which she didn't fail to announce, settling herself at the right hand of the widow. Melania sniffed and made a face—Eliza smelled of unbearably sweet perfume. "Too much perfume, I know!" Eliza whispered guiltily and assured her she wouldn't have to endure it for long—the perfume, unlike everything else, wasn't American and would disperse quickly. Susanna Bochkants arrived from far-away Echmiadzin, and in an instant infuriated those assembled with her educated speech; her haughtily raised, thinly plucked eyebrows; and her narrow lips folded tightly together.

Maliciously, they immediately reminded her of her lame, illiterate mother and her ragamuffin father. Susanna returned her eyebrows to their rightful place and, relaxing the knot of her mouth, switched to the local dialect, with which she immediately earned their favorable opinion. Silvia Vdovaya, who had fortuitously married her daughter in Russia, arrived last. Despite the warm October weather, she appeared in a short fur coat of silver fox and a turquoise felt hat. Standing with her back to the window (so that the daylight wouldn't fall across her "sagging face" but instead emphasize the richness of her clothes to full advantage), taking significant, profound pauses, she recited melancholy verses about separation.

Poetry was the last straw. Shoving unceremoniously past the silver fox, Melania went to her room, changed into a gauzy blouse and long skirt that emphasized her slender figure to advantage, and pinned up her hair with her grandmother's tortoiseshell comb. With regret, she refused the temptation to stick antique ivory knitting needles into the knot. Instead, she powdered her face and put on lipstick—she wasn't going to sit among those dolled up tarts like a scruffy old scarecrow. By the time she returned, the assembly had noticeably thinned. The most faithful remained: relatives, her husband's former colleagues, the former flames (all of them), and dull old Katinka, apparently left behind by her children on purpose.

It was she who proposed lubricating the ears of the dead man with rendered duck fat. She said it wouldn't hurt anything and might even help. After all, Piruz, the healer, treated cuts and bruises and even fractures quite successfully with duck fat.

"You can't bury him with blue ears, daughter!" mumbled Katinka, wiping away tears with the edge of her apron. Melania wanted to retort that the color of his ears was all the same to

the dead man but, catching Susanna Bochkants's eyebrows stirring out of the corner of her eye, reconsidered—she wouldn't give Susanna a reason to gloat.

“Bring the duck fat!” commanded the widow.

“The main thing is to apply compresses of camphor oil on top. That's what the healer did!” Katinka poured forth a volley of instructions, making sure they didn't use too much camphor. Otherwise, she explained, he might have convulsions.

“But he can't have convulsions!” pooh-poohed Melania's daughter-in-law.

“How do you know?” bristled old Katinka. “And anyway, instead of flapping your gums, you should be cooling the duck fat to room temperature!”

“Why room temperature, specifically?” Silvia Vdovaya asked out of curiosity, fanning herself with a magazine; in her fur coat and hat she was unbearably hot, but she steadfastly refused suggestions to take them off.

“What do you mean, why?” Katinka threw up her hands. “So as not to burn the dead man's skin!”

Silvia, exchanging a shocked glance with Melania, gurgled something inarticulate and fell silent.

By the time the consciences of Katinka's children awoke and they finally showed up to fetch their mother, they had covered Simon's head with large, cordless headphones, extracted with great difficulty from the younger great-grandson. The headphones safely held the camphor oil compresses in place. In spite of the awkwardness of the situation, the dead man looked fully

at peace, and even happy. The widow and former flames settled themselves around the coffin, sipped homemade wine and, agitated either by alcohol or by the helpless look of Simon, poured out their hearts. Silvia Vdovaya, pushing the felt hat back on her head and exposing her nearly bald head to general view, complained about thinning hair. Sofia, taking off her false pearls and pulling back the collar of her turtleneck, showed the ugly scar left after thyroid surgery. Eliza acknowledged despairingly that her sons, having decided to start their own business and taken out loans, could barely make ends meet, and therefore all her clothes had been purchased not at a decent store, but second-hand, almost by weight. Susanna complained vigorously about her haughty, city-bred mother-in-law: “The old bag throws my country background in my face, but she herself calls a backpack a ‘packaback’!”

“Coat her ears with duck fat, she’ll soften up!” advised Melania to general laughter. Occasionally, one of the women would look under the earphones and announce to the others that the duck fat was utterly useless.

“Did you really expect it to be of use?” Sofia inquired each time and, having heard their assurances to the contrary with satisfaction, she poured more wine into the glasses.

[Each chapter of *Simon* tells the story of one of his lovers. “Perfume” is the second of those stories.]

Perfume

Eliza was the youngest of three sisters. The difference in age among the little girls was considerable—eight years. The poor health of the older two, Mariam and Nina, born just a year apart, frayed the nerves (her favorite expression) of their mother so much that she decided on one more pregnancy after the little girls got old enough, so that they could take care of themselves.

The mother dreamed of having a boy and even knew what she would name him: Karen, in memory of her brother, who had frozen to death in the winter of 1921. She didn't like to talk about that story, and to all the inquiries of her grown-up daughters, she responded with a one-word refusal or else answered with vague, insubstantial evasions. Eliza, the most warm-hearted and sensitive of the little girls, able to catch hidden meaning by the slightest change in someone's voice, sighed in exasperation and clenched her teeth: "Mom, you could tell us all this time later!" Her mother testily brushed her off: "Let sleeping dogs lie!" But from the fact that she averted her eyes and nervously folded her arms across her chest, protecting herself from the meddlesome attention of her daughters, it was clear that whatever had happened in her far-off childhood festered and to this day would not heal. With time, the older daughters stopped tormenting her with questions, having wisely decided that if she wanted to, she herself would tell them everything, and if that didn't happen, well, that's the way it would be. In contrast to her sisters, who had forever closed the topic that was painful for their mother, Eliza didn't abandon the attempt to find out the truth and often, catching her mother in one or another insignificant slip of the tongue, carefully memorized them, hoping later, thinking through the missing links, to

collect them into a full story. For some reason, it seemed important to her to expose the secret of the two-year-old's death, because she intuitively guessed that in his death lay the reason for many of the painful symptoms that gave her mother no peace.

Eliza didn't remember her father—he died of tuberculosis when she was barely three years old. She didn't recognize him in the lean, dark-skinned soldier smiling self-consciously as he was captured in the photos from the front. She was stupidly upset that she could find no reference to herself in the dozens of triangular-shaped soldiers' letters, covered from edge to edge with his fine, neat handwriting. And although her rational mind understood that her father couldn't inquire about her because at that time she simply hadn't existed, all the same she was jealous of her mother and especially her sisters over him. “Write me about how my little angels are doing,” “Protect our daughters more than life,” “Kiss Ninochka and Mariamik for me, tell them their papa loves them...” Eliza involuntarily winced, reading those lines.

The single, hazy memory in which her father was present was reduced to a bright, sunny patch in which some man stood, leaning over the little bed, and in a sing-song voice spoke indistinguishable but unequivocally affectionate words. Sometimes Eliza dreamed of him: in those dreams, he always stood with his back to her, and when she tried to walk around him to look him in the face, either he dissolved into thin air or covered his face with his hands. And it was those hands—with wide palms and large nails that had dark edges, with sharply protruding bones at the wrists and fingers slightly crooked at the ends—that she remembered by heart and often mindlessly drew on the pages of her notebooks, regularly receiving reprimands from her teachers. However, they didn't lower her grades for willfulness, nor for her own good, but because there was no lower to go—in contrast to her elder sisters, Eliza was born a completely

unteachable child. They kept her in school out of pity for her mother who, in order to somehow make ends meet, worked two jobs: as a nurse's aide at the hospital and a cleaning lady at the school.

The older girls, each having graduated from the seventh grade with excellence, entered the textile technical school with a year between them, and each month their mother sent them a little money and some sort of meagre provisions, because their wretched stipends, even with stringent economy, were only enough to last for two weeks.

A whole day was usually spent collecting the parcel: the mother sorted through the potatoes, leaving the slightly spoiled ones to the side of the vegetable cellar for speedy preparation at home—she invariably chose the biggest and healthiest tubers for her daughters. She shucked corn, poured spelt and speckled beans into canvas sacks, leavened dough for bread, cut diamonds of sweet honey from honeycombs, and scraped the spoon along the sides of the clay pot to transfer precious clarified butter to a separate bowl. Seizing a moment when no one was watching, ten-year-old Eliza loved to pick open the knot of the parcel of food destined for her sisters and pull out something for herself: a hard-boiled egg, a handful of dried plums, or a cold cutlet that her mother made of ground meat mixed with corn flour and mashed potato scraps, which made them heavy and dry but incredibly filling. Waiting while her mother went to the bus station to hand the parcel and the tightly wrapped bag of money—almost always it was half of her salary—to one of the passengers, Eliza clambered up onto the couch, wrapped herself in the tattered old woolen shawl smelling of wood smoke and old sheep in which they had tied her crisscross and let her out to play when she was little, and chewing slowly, with great care, ate what she had stolen. She didn't experience any particular pleasure at this, but she wasn't

tormented by any twinges of conscience, either, because she considered that she was entitled to what she'd appropriated according to the law of family equality; after all, if a parcel was being collected for the sisters, then she also had a right to her share. Under the wood-burning stove, in a heavy, clay bowl tightly covered against mice, lay a cutlet and a handful of spelt kasha left for her, but she didn't even remember them. Having eaten the stolen food, Eliza curled up in a ball and lay, covered from head to toe in the shawl and listening alertly to the sounds of the house: to the decrepit moan of the smoky beams holding the low ceiling on their shoulders, to the creak of wooden shutters, to the cat-like romping of the wind—having piled up dry autumn leaves in the attic, it played with them, now swirling in a whirlpool, now scattering them in corners. Eliza didn't even remember her undone lessons, she lay there warming the eternally cold tips of her fingers with her breath until her mother came home from work. But before she got home, the little girl was already asleep, worn out with waiting, hands thrust under her sweater and then, having hastily eaten some bread and washed it down with unsweetened tea, the mother threw a few logs in the stove, lay down next to her and, hugging her tightly, warmed her with her own warm body.

They ate the cutlet with spelt in the morning, dividing it evenly in two. They didn't have bread for breakfast in the morning, but her mother cut off a thick slice from the round loaf and, sprinkling it with rock salt, gave it to Eliza to take to school. She ate it on the road to school, greedily biting off and hurriedly chewing it, choking with haste and worry. At school, bread might be taken away: the flocks of noisy and brainless teenagers, unable to cope with mood swings (who could explain to them that there was nothing shameful in the changes undergone by their growing bodies?), lost their temper with the elementary school students, especially the little

girls, bullying them at break time and mercilessly abusing them. The mayhem was put to an end by the new head teacher, a one-armed veteran of the front who was stern and not one to brook objections whom the teenagers, rashly, at first didn't take seriously, for which they later paid with many hours of additional study. Thanks to his strong measures, order reigned by the end of the second quarter, but before that it was necessary to get through the day.

Eliza hated school and regarded it as an unavoidable but temporary evil. The shapeless bag that her mother had sewed from old rags dangled from her thin shoulder and knocked rhythmically against her knee with the cursed mathematics textbook, in which she understood nothing. The world of the hard sciences bristled painfully with the barbed elbows of signs and angular numbers, and even the feminine figure eight cinched in at the waist didn't inspire the slightest degree of trust. The spill-proof glass inkwell had to be carried by hand—in spite of its carefully thought-out design, it turned over and spilled in the bag, blotting the books. Eliza never studied her lessons, she copied her homework hastily from others, sprinkling the pages with numerous ink blots, and in the classroom, propping up her sharp chin with a dirty palm and zealously biting the end of her tightly plaited braid, she drew men's hands on the margins of her notebooks, capturing the ray of tendons stretching from the wrist to the base of the fingers, the gnarled lumps of the joints, and the convex surface of the nails with anatomical precision. Her mother was cheered, placing hope in her daughter's artistic talent, but the drawing teacher, undertaking additional study with Eliza, stunned her with the news that even here, her daughter managed to be completely unteachable.

“I don’t understand how she can draw hands, as muddleheaded as she is.” The teacher couldn’t hide her own astonishment and, suddenly catching herself, patted Eliza’s mother sympathetically on the shoulder: “Never mind, the ability to draw isn’t the most important skill.”

For all her boundless and painful devotion and affection for her daughters, Eliza’s mother was a harsh and unjust person and didn’t spare the rod for any offense, even the most insignificant. That day, returning from the school and beating Eliza until the bruises stung, she threw out a bitter and insulting remark in the heat of the moment that sank into Eliza’s soul for the rest of her life:

“You hopeless idiot! It’s all because of your stupid wet nurse! It would have been better if she, not I, had been your mother!”

Eliza had been born immediately after the war, in 1946, and the broken-hearted mother who had wanted a boy refused to pick her up or nurse her for several days. When, mastering herself, she finally resolved to do so, the little girl, rolling the swollen, aching nipple in her mouth, spat it out with disgust and wept bitterly—in less than a week, she’d become accustomed to the taste of another woman’s milk. That woman lived at the opposite end of their street, and five times a day Eliza’s father or one of her older sisters carried her to nurse. Most often it was Nina, who treated the newborn baby as if she were a living doll. Her own rag doll—sewn by her great aunt from scraps of calico and stuffed with straw, with worn-out wooden buttons for eyes and a braid made of woolen thread—Nina wouldn’t leave at home, for fear that the mischievous Mariam would hide it in some inaccessible spot. Therefore, she asked that her doll be tied to her back in a kerchief, and she carried her tiny, tightly swaddled sister, firmly pressing her to her

chest and moving with short, careful steps. After a month they transferred Eliza to goat's milk, and at six months she refused it entirely, switching to mashed potatoes and kasha. From that moment, she wouldn't eat dairy products of any sort, turning up her nose at the *brynza* and sour-yogurt soup beloved by Armenians that were obligatory on any table.

That day, the unhappy Eliza ran out of the house and hid until evening under the chilly arches of an abandoned stone chapel. Sometimes she would stop in there—after school, or when she had nothing to do—and spend a short while. The narrow windows of the chapel gleamed dimly, illuminating the uneven, centuries-old earthen floor, which preserved the hardened traces of the soles of clogs and bare human feet, the hoofprints of livestock, and the pawprints of herding dogs: in thunderstorms and bad weather, the shepherds often sheltered the herd there, driving it under the low arches of the structure that by a miracle had been saved from numerous nomadic raids but not protected from the barbaric treatment of Soviet power. Eliza knew nothing about religious faith—the adults tried not to spread information that had been forbidden, and at school they didn't say anything about it at all. But despite the general silence, the chapel was never empty on Sundays: elderly people looked in for old times' sake, most often in the morning, to light a candle and stand a moment in silence. Young people came rarely and, having briefly looked at the high arches and tiny, dark side chapels, left with relief. Eliza couldn't quite imagine the reason for this slanted structure with its pointed dome that had been built of granular stonework made from chipped river stones, fitted in corners with tall—as tall as a person—*khachkars*, on which there appeared delicate crosses bordered with pomegranates and

grapevines, painstakingly carved by the hand of a master craftsman.³ On one such *khachkar* stood a man with a crown of thorns on his forehead, his thin arms spread out as if preparing to take flight, with strange indentations on his palms, and his feet placed one on top of the other. There could be no possible doubt that he was in pain—the expression of his face with closed eyes and thin lips mournfully pursed, drawn as simply as if by a child’s hand, spoke eloquently of that. Eliza knew nothing about that man, but with some inner instinct she guessed—from his broken posture and from his desire to take flight and the impossibility of doing so—at a tragedy of cosmic, irreversible power. She stood for a long time in front of the *khachkar*, studying it, but she didn’t dare touch it. Only once, in an unthinking desire to put at least something right, she moistened her finger with saliva and rubbed the indentation on the sufferer’s palm, but she immediately pulled her hand back and never did it again, frightened by the rough feel of the cold, hopelessly dead stone.

Having cried her fill, Eliza emerged from her cubbyhole chilled to the bone, though she didn’t leave the chapel immediately but walked along the row of *khachkars*, stopping in front of each one and gazing at it intently. The sound of her steps, amplified many times, reverberated from the walls and, ringing, rose in a long echo under the high dome. Eliza ran back and forth several times, deliberately stomping loudly and listening to the hum flowing together over her head. Then, not stopping to think what she was doing, she stood in the very center of the chapel, just so, so as to stand with her back to the *khachkar* with the suffering man and, having waited

³ A *khachkar* is a type of Armenian architectural monument, a cross carved in stone (*khach* means “cross,” and *kar* means “stone”).

until the echo of her steps died out, pretending that it was to herself—but actually, it was to him— in a low voice, she began to talk about her troubles. About her father, of whom she remembered nothing except his transparent shadow on her little bed. About her sisters, with whom she had no real relationship of trust because of the large age difference and also, perhaps, because they didn't think she was worth it. About her mother, who whipped her because she hadn't turned out smart: “But that's silly, because the pain passes quickly and is forgotten,” Eliza hurried to defend her mother. About the constant reproaches for her stupidity—“And I really am stupid,” she explained patiently, turning for a second to the *khachkar*—and added, so as not to leave any lingering doubt—“and I'll be that way my whole life!” The suffering man listened to her, his huge eyelids drooping over half his face, his eyes bulging and stretching from the narrow bridge of his nose to his temples, and his thin arms half-bent at the elbows looked like the wings of a sickly bird.

“But what can I do?” Mastering herself, Eliza came to the point: “What can I do about the fact that another woman nursed me and because of that I turned out stupid? She has a daughter, Vardanush. If you could only see her!” She turned again to the suffering man, calling him to witness. “She's cross-eyed and, it seems, generally a fool: she babbles along, and you don't understand what about, and when she looks at you, her eyes wander off to each side, as if a magnet is dragging them toward her temples. Am I suddenly going to get eyes like that, since I've already turned out stupid, like her?” she asked in despair and fell silent.

No answer was forthcoming, but Eliza didn't really expect one. She had listened to herself and understood that a soul-to-soul conversation hadn't helped, but done entirely the opposite—it had further embittered her heart. She began to cry again, savagely and bitterly, and

then, having suddenly stopped her bawling, tripping over her own lost breath and sobbing, she turned her face to the dim light falling from the window and drew out a strange and plaintive song, stringing together the words instinctively and putting them into lingering phrases. Her voice was unexpectedly rich and beautiful, as if it had been released from a tight cocoon, spread its wings, and taken off, filling the dark expanse of the chapel with itself, and it seemed that it was spilling not from her throat, but from somewhere under her ribs, from the place where an idiotic teenager had once painfully jabbed his fist. Remembering that long-forgotten incident, Eliza began to tell in a singsong voice how the wind was knocked out of her by the blow and her sight grew dark, how she slid down the wall thinking that she was dying, and the teenager, frightened by her pallor, bent over her and asked: “Are you all right?” She sat there, feeling the coldness of the waxed and polished floor and, unable to stir, looked with horror at the hem of her dress that had ridden up and at the bunched up strip of cotton stocking tucked roughly into its elastic garter, and could only think about what the other schoolchildren would see and laugh at. But he, following her gaze, quickly put her skirt to rights, covered the stockings, and she was finally able to breathe and, gathering her strength, kicked him with her boot. Quickly jumping back and laughing, he tore her from the floor by the collar with a jerk, stood her on her feet, lightly pushed her from behind, and ordered her to go. Reaching the end of her song, Eliza was astonished to experience relief, and she decided that she could come back to the chapel sometimes and sing, as it comforted her. On the way home, she thought about the fact that she would certainly be beaten again, this time because she had run off somewhere until nightfall, but the thought didn’t frighten or upset her—so what if she was beaten, it wouldn’t be the first time, it would hurt for a little while and be forgotten about. She was in luck, however—her mother had

been delayed at the hospital and returned while she slept curled up in a ball, wrapped in the old shawl, her cold hands thrust under her sweater. Her mother lay down next to her, covering the two of them with a blanket, and helplessly shed tears, burying her nose in her daughter's hair that smelled of autumn leaves and smoky wind, mourning her bitter widow's fate and cheerless life, in which there was nothing but endless despair and backbreaking hard work.

Eliza married early, barely having reached her seventeenth birthday. By that time, she was already twice an aunt and often helped out her sisters by babysitting her nephews. Her mother noted with satisfaction that although her younger daughter had been useless at her studies, she would be an excellent wife and housewife. It was undoubtedly the case that nature, having deprived Eliza of the slightest inclination toward learning, had endowed her a hundredfold with domesticity and a sense of duty. Without being burdened or complaining of tiredness, she managed any household chore easily: she washed, scraped, rubbed, sewed, knitted, cooked, and baked. The old house that had become decrepit and dilapidated over the last decade gradually came back into repair and even seemed to straighten its shoulders, thanks to her efforts. Sunbeams cavorted across windows washed in three changes of water; the attic shone with cleanliness after being scraped of many years' dirt; the wood-burning stove, freed from rust spots, looked like a brand-new, self-satisfied steam locomotive just now placed into service—all that remained was to toot its whistle and set off. The kitchen garden, cleared of last year's rotting fruit and invasive, thick weeds, delivered such a harvest in the fall that Eliza's mother invited almost the entire staff of the hospital to visit to show it off. That's when the lead surgical nurse's eye fell on Eliza for her son. Casting a discerning glance at the sparkling clean house, tasting and

praising the duck prepared in *kizel* sauce, she began trying to extract the recipe for the dish from the girl. While Eliza, delighted by the praise and attention to herself, recounted the recipe simply and in detail, her mother, having instantly guessed the true reason for the conversation, didn't hesitate to needle the woman:

“Well, are you convinced she made it herself?”

The future mother-in-law, not at all embarrassed or offended, shrugged her shoulders:

“One never knows, you could have prepared it. Every mother presents her child in the best light.”

Eliza wanted to object that, in fact, praise rarely came her way, but she bit her tongue in time, and not because she caught the warning glance of her mother, but because for the first time she realized with complete clarity: never and under no circumstance would she permit herself to complain to anyone about her mother.

Two weeks later, on the agreed-upon Saturday, the matchmakers arrived—to acquaint the young people with one another and, if all went well, to officially announce the engagement. Eliza immediately liked the groom: both his beautiful, lordly name—Tigran—and his handsome self, tall, blue-eyed, with a thin moustache and thick, curly hair that he cut very short to keep manageable, which gave his face a slightly child-like, open expression.

Young Eliza understood hardly anything of adult life and knew nothing about marital or intimate relationships. She had been raised in a world of women—her sisters, her mother, the great aunt who whisked her away to her home in the country one month each summer, the widowed neighbors who had lost husbands in the war. Of her classmates, only three had fathers,

the others hadn't been brought up by a man, so that they had an entirely hazy idea of the role of men in the family. The schoolboys seemed completely ridiculous to them, having nothing in common with the noble male outline sketched in a young girl's imagination. While babysitting her nephews, Eliza surreptitiously observed the lives of her older sisters, but because of her natural shyness and hesitancy, she didn't start conversations with her brothers-in-law, limiting herself to greetings and run-of-the-mill questions about how things were going. Having seen the bitter loneliness of her mother and the difficult daily lives of her neighbors, she imagined family life to be full of endless worries and joyless responsibilities.

In spite of his charming appearance, Tigran was already a fully formed man with an uncompromising, difficult disposition. Notwithstanding his youth—he was only twenty-three—he successfully led the collective farm brigade and was in good standing with his superiors. He did not care for Eliza. He could not have cared for her because Tigran's heart, youthful and eager for love, was already taken by another woman, with whom he had been having a three-year affair. Twelve years older than he, that woman was raising two children and caring for a disabled husband who had returned from the war without an arm. As a wife and mother, she was tender and loving; she doted on her children, resolutely refusing to get a divorce, which caused unbelievable suffering for her lover, Tigran. He begged her to leave her husband, promising to marry her and care for her children, but she brushed him off—why get a divorce if everything was going fine?

“Then why bother with me?” He banged his fist on the table.

“For my soul,” she answered each time and burst into a ringing laugh, throwing back her beautiful head with its flaming-red curls and covering her face with her narrow hands, which had unnaturally long fingers, as if molded from wax. At such moments, Tigran was ready to kill her. He drew her to him, deliberately squeezing her painfully in his embrace, she moaned and, continuing to laugh, turned her lips toward his. Her eyes darkened into bottomless depths, her face grew concentrated and turned so pale that tiny freckles stood out, she touched his lips with her slightly chapped, full lips, and breathed out—“That hurts.”

“And it hurts me,” he answered.

She was called Shushan, which translates from the Armenian as “lily.” She herself was like a lily—luxurious, sunny, feminine, smelling of floral perfume, dressed expensively and fashionably, much differently from the local standard. She had plenty of money, thanks to her grandmother’s help. Saved from the Armenian genocide, the grandmother by a miracle had had the sense to hide a bag of gold coins and rare jewels in her son’s diapers and had worn the less valuable silver jewelry herself, rightly guessing that it would divert the attention of the guards escorting the procession of Armenians being deported from the heart of the Turkish empire engulfed in pogroms and murders to its desert outskirts. And that’s what happened: as soon as they left the town, the escorts tore off the rich antique belt, bracelets, and heavy necklace, shoving a gun-butt into her large belly—after giving birth, the woman was quite heavy and looked like she was pregnant again—and left both her and her frightened five-year-old daughter in peace, clumsily but tightly clutching the squalling baby in his soiled diapers. The little boy died of typhoid fever, but the little girl grew up, married, and gave birth to four children, the oldest of whom was Shushan. Her grandmother guarded her saved wealth tenaciously, wary of

Soviet authorities who might take it away, and only after the war did she begin to sell it, little by little, to antique dealers and collectors, traveling to Yerevan to do so. Knowing the true value of the jewelry, she made a lot of money, bargained hard and, having won the invariable victory, returned home extremely satisfied with herself, with presents for every member of the family. Shushan, the oldest granddaughter, resembled her grandmother as closely as two peas in a pod, so they spoiled her more than the others. She always had the very best: French dresses of the purest wool acquired from repatriated Armenians, fur stoles, narrow leather gloves fastened tightly at the wrist with pearl buttons, flirty hats, expensive cosmetics, the most delicate silk underwear, fashionable shoes and boots ordered from a shoemaker acquaintance—the best shoemaker in Kars, who had sewed shoes for Turkish officials and rich Armenians. The decrepit and nearly blind master had not worked for a long time, but he couldn't refuse one of his oldest and most devoted customers, therefore, wielding the needle, awl, and hooks by touch, he created true masterpieces for her granddaughter, guessing the shape of a toebox or heel by instinct, long before a new fashion trend emerged. Shushan wore these foreign-looking shoes of unearthly beauty through impassible mud, not sparing them at all, and the women followed her with envious looks and, sadly examining their own hideous clogs, invented ridiculous gossip in revenge, the only true part of which was the rumor that Shushan had a young lover. However, in such a tiny, patriarchal town as Berd, news spread faster than gossip, and by the time the cackling chatter of women, large-winged and multicolored, flew into all the yards, aiming to squeeze through every tiny kitchen ventilation window, people wearily brushed it aside, like a disgusting fly.

Rumors about cheating were always spread in whispers and squeamish bursts of chatter, and attitudes about infidelity, especially by a woman, remained extremely judgmental and doomed her to indelible shame. Any other woman finding herself in similar sordid circumstances, if she didn't kill herself, would have walked the streets as a mute shadow, not daring to raise her eyes. Any other, but not Shushan. Endowed almost since birth with an independent disposition, she didn't worry at all about the opinions of her neighbors and acquaintances, which she wasn't about to consider, and she lived as she saw fit. She cut off Tigran's mother, who had come to shame her and beg her to leave her son in peace, violently flinging out:

“I live my life the way I want to! I'm not holding your son, and I don't constrain him. He comes to me himself!”

Shushan didn't bother to tell Tigran about what had happened. His mother told him herself when she once again exhorted him to take a closer look at some girl. Bursting into a rage, Tigran demanded that she never dare interfere with his personal relationships again.

“You need to get married, but you're tied to that trash!” his mother flung at him angrily.

“It's my business,” snapped Tigran and rushed out of the house, pulling on his jacket as he went and getting tangled in the sleeves. His mother noted to herself that he had ignored the insult, and she was encouraged: it meant that the idea of Shushan as an indecent woman was lodged in his head and that he realized he was doing wrong.

The match was made during one of the regular quarrels between the lovers. Tigran, as was his wont, was jealous of his beloved's husband and demanded that she leave him and she,

having refused in her unchanging, haughtily ironic way, turned her lips toward him to smooth out the quarrel with a kiss, as usual. Not only did he push her away roughly, he also raised his fist. Instantly offended, she gave him a resounding slap and threw him out, demanding that he never again darken her door. Tigran tried several times to make peace, but Shushan was adamant and the last time, she threw the insult in his face, “No one’s irreplaceable, I’ll find myself someone else.” “Have you found anyone?” Tigran narrowed his eyes evilly. “Consider it done!” she shrugged. Although Tigran knew that what she said was only stupid bravado, he was mortally offended. The next day Eliza’s mother arranged the get-together to show off her home, and in two weeks the match was made, at which time the two young people were introduced.

Eliza was the complete opposite of Shushan: short, thin, and angular, with chestnut hair pulled back into a heavy knot and a timid smile that revealed an uneven row of slightly overlapping upper teeth. She smelled of suffocatingly sweet eau de cologne begged from her mother, but even the cheap perfume wasn’t strong enough to disguise the stale smell of country life, with its persistently acidic scent of sourdough starter and vegetables fried with garlic in aromatic sunflower oil. She guessed this, so she was ashamed of her plain appearance and, not knowing how to hide her confusion, nervously fiddled with the sleeves of her knitted jacket, first rolling them up and then, on the contrary, unrolling them to the end. They left the young people on the veranda so they could get acquainted and look at one another. The soft light of the October sun filtered through the leaves of the grapevines twining around the wooden arches and lay in wide strokes across the plank floor, streaking it in a spotted pattern. The sparrows, fighting over a crust of bread, screeched as if their lives depended on it. The wind lashed around the yard, carrying the salty scent of the gorge that smelled like seaweed and burning-hot stone familiar to

them from childhood. Tigran studied Eliza for a minute, unceremoniously stuffing his hands into the pockets of his trousers and rocking from heel to toe, while she stood, not daring to lower her head but not brave enough to lift her eyes to him. Her face—open and clean, resembling the heart-shaped leaf of the waterlily because of her low forehead, prominent cheekbones, and sharp, short chin—was flooded with a bashful blush.

“So, your name is Eliza!” He didn’t ask, he announced it.

She nodded.

“Don’t you want to ask what my name is?”

She answered, drawing her words out a little, as if singing them:

“Why should I ask if I already know?”

He chuckled, agreeing—why ask, indeed?

His heart ached and yearned for Shushan, for her long, thin fingers and the red curls on the back of her head—she loved to pin her fiery hair up high, revealing her beautiful, feminine shoulders and the short, rebellious hair underneath curled in rings on the milky-white neck and behind the tiny ears.

“Will you marry me?” asked Tigran, mastering himself.

At long last Eliza was brave enough to lift her eyes to him. She took in his face with a gentle gaze, as if she were stroking it with her hand. He even shrank back, physically feeling that touch.

“Yes,” she whispered, after a pause.

[Chapter continues.]