

## ARARAT

by Anna Davtyan

Translated by Hayk Hambartsum

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From the valley it emerges like some guardian alpha, a mythic swathe of cloud around its double-crested neck, its slopes shimmering and incandescent from the snow, mirroring, crushing, creedless, inciting, it knows where, it says go, get there, don't look back, find it, tear into it, burst it. It is cold, farther away it is dark and unsmiling. Farther, some other place, but now here, upon this winding road at my skirts at the foot of Ararat, I open the sun, it says, before you.

The sun opens up onto a rush of autumn fields heavy with colours and the red groves succumb to the heat and flames. The highway, E117, heads straight, potholeless, smooth, tearing the way, running blue through the frothy reed heads. Everywhere there are reeds, their summer freshness lost and in the fall, transformed into light-crowned fables. The vineyards are already buried, submerged under heavy lumps of soil and the mountain's breath.

E117 runs straight out from the young photographer woman's heart and stretches ahead of the car with its welcoming asphalt. The camera's placed by her side; in it, two photos of Ararat that convey nothing. She hardly knows where she's headed. On her phone, Google Maps shows the way to a T but it doesn't say what's going to happen at the end of the journey.

She's on her way to photograph a boy named Spartak. His figure intensifies along the road—a worthy subject for her photo series and with whom she's managed to exchange but two words. She zeros in on him in her mind, positions him in different scenes that are supposed to portray male sexuality, of which, presumes the photographer woman, men themselves are not even aware. At least those she chooses to photograph. She goes like an explorer, getting ready to pin her camera's eye on

him, to grasp him before he does, to measure his new masculinity. She casts away thoughts of exploitation; a photo is only for perceiving.

From the highway she has to turn on the road that leads to Artashat, then from there reach the village that lies just below Odzasar—Snakemountain. One by one she reads each road sign she encounters, her heart pounding from the light. Can she photograph whatever she wants? Why is she driving towards this valley of an unknown world?

*After three hundred metres turn right,* says the woman's voice through the phone. She turns. The winding road enters Artashat.

The road leading into town is well-maintained and between the opposing lanes there's a median lined with round trees still such a green-green. Her eyes fall somewhere, on something that's neither a pool nor a fountain, but some kind of watery surface lodges in her visual memory. From then on, the landscape abandons all its townliness and the rows of squalid, run-down outer-district buildings, kiosks, and people crossing the road from every which way begin to appear. She passes through a funeral procession, her eyes searching for the coffin.

Radio Europe begins to rustle as the road leading to the village emerges, but still there are reeds with their tall swaying torsos. She puts on a CD. She sways with them. She passes the village graveyard. It's a flat, uninspiring graveyard with no shade. Just an island of finely cut stones.

In red letters, the lengthy name of the village arches over the entrance. She stops to smoke. She's arrived.

She calls, Spartak? I'm already in your village. "Come straight up the road."

There are so many speed bumps on the asphalt and they've been built so carelessly wide that she's forced to brake every twenty metres then let the car climb with its forward torque over the bump and drop with a thud on the other side. In her head, she curses the builders.

Spartak is standing at the edge of the road, not like someone in waiting. Like a languorous season that unhurriedly awaits its turn. His hands are in the pockets of his blue tracksuit; on his feet, dark blue house slippers. He points plainly to the house and walks behind the car. The photographer clumsily parks the car, going back and forth a few times, squeezed between a tree and a mound of sand. She thinks that when she gets out she should hug him but the boy, his head hung, climbs up the house stairs. Perplexed, she follows him.

The boy's mother steps out from the kitchen, greeting her warmly. The photographer utters some words, places her things on a chair, extends her hand with a smile. The grandmother appears from the kitchen door; a firm, azure, flaxen-haired Russian woman, and the photographer woman realises in alarm that Russian will need to be spoken. The boy doesn't get involved in the scene, he stands aside coolly, leaning on the flimsy kitchen wall. Getting acquainted, saying nice things to one another is their concern, and he has utterly no interest in partaking. He stands watching from under his brows, just waiting.

The coffee preparation begins immediately, and the young woman asks to look around the house to find the right nook for photographing. Spartak takes the lead, hands perennially in his pockets. They pass by the living room, his sister's room, his brother's room, and stop at the entrance of his room. She manages to cast just a quick glance; the bed is untidy, his sneakers are flipped over one another; it's a small and narrow room—there's a computer, the bedsheets and blankets are blue, wrinkled. The boy is indifferent to the messiness of his room.

“Let's go to the yard,” he says.

He walks in front of the woman. In the yard, with the arrival of the guest, the dogs go wild with excitement in their crate. The photographer woman approaches, slips her finger through the cage to pet one of their anxious noses, and the dog begins to lick the metal fence. “Chickens.” The woman, as if interested, looks at the mixed flock of chickens and turkeys, aimlessly tramping, rubbing up

against one another, pecking the ground for gold. “Let’s go to the roof.” As she walks behind him she glances at his exposed ankles; there are red marks on the bones of his heels from his shoes.

The stairs to the roof are steep, round metallic rods—quite dangerous. He climbs up without looking back, without trying to help, on his own, unheeding of the receding woman’s grumbling behind him. Everything around is in disarray—metal objects, pieces of wood, wires, and the woman sees that he is like a stranger in this house. The unruliness of things doesn’t concern him. “The doves.” Flapping! They fly, swarming through the opening in the roof, rest for a moment, wait for food, and then again, flapping! They fly from the roof to the opening sky. “You’re the one who feeds them?” “No.”

“The dried fruit,” he points like a bored guide, indifferent to the tourist’s excitement.

Between the unstable columns of the roof, peaking above the neighbouring rooftop, stands Ararat. It has stretched out its neon slopes and burns before the village. The photographer woman takes some shots of the mountain, then looks at the photographs, and when she automatically turns around, she sees the boy’s gone through the attic window and is now on the neighbour’s sunny roof, under which the peak of a tiny chapel spreads its silvery hue. “Undress,” she tells him. The boy puts his hands behind his head and pulls his shirt up off his back. The camera toils ceaselessly, fixing his every movement. His shirt—click, click, click—releases his overflowing, muscle-bound body. Firm mounds of muscle form shadows on his shoulders. He lies down on the roof, throws his head back. He knows how to do it. He puts one leg over the other. “Put your leg down.” He submits. Click, click, click. The ambivalence of his body expands over the roof; from below, the chapel yawns, indifferent to the budding scene unfolding. Hair has just started to cover his abdomen, which below, around his belly button, has already formed a dark, black layer. The red blemish and rash on his ribs face Ararat. His muscles appear through the shadows. Their every quiver is important. She photographs insatiably. She exploits his sixteen-year-old body in every possible way, but inside the realisation is already ripening that he’s not the one being exploited. She is perturbed about something, perturbed by her

camera's powerlessness, powerlessness pervades the air. The younger brother—suddenly appeared—calls out over the naked body that mom says the coffee is ready. They descend, the woman quivering on the stairs.

Spartak opens the Fanta bottle. With a glance he asks, should I pour? Declined, he calmly fills his glass, not offering any to his grandmother or mother. The photographer woman smokes, stirring, along with her coffee, strange thoughts filling her head. She speaks with the mother, noticing herself trying to please the boy. She is trying to make him turn towards her, face-to-face. The boy crushes the violet rose on the cake with his fork and takes a piece for himself. He eats sitting behind a vase of flowers, veiled behind the leaves and stems of three single roses. Unspeaking. Only a seldom gaze from his blue-grey eyes, over which his eyebrows play their prominent role.

When his phone rings and Spartak leaves to talk, the mother and grandmother, without waiting for the other to speak, express their worry for the boy, that he's not like anyone else. The photographer woman says he's a teenager; *podrostok*,<sup>1</sup> she says to the grandmother, it will probably pass. She doesn't believe her own words. The grandmother doesn't know she's just taken photos of her grandson, naked on the roof.

They go to the garden. With half a word, Spartak orders his grandmother to sit in the front seat of the car.

"Tut,<sup>2</sup> Lyuba." First that unexpected decency with which he surrenders his place to the grandmother, then that Russian, lost in that village's plots of land. With which he connects more to his grandmother and leaves his mother behind, who can barely string together two words in Russian. Then that resonant apparatus of his mouth, the form of his lips from which Russian flows uniquely beautiful, abrupt, undoubting. Absorbed in his mind, familiar, stainless.

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<sup>1</sup> *Podrostok* - 'teenager' in Russian

<sup>2</sup> *Tut* - 'there' in Russian

The grandmother submits to his order despite her not being the pitiful type at all. Somehow, in some odd sort of way, the grandson passes, surpasses the grandmother, something in which he's convinced in above all, and the grandmother struggles against that otherness, tries to come face-to-face with him, get him to talk, guide him. There's some kind of conflict between them that's not with words but rather, more within their souls, and now the photographer woman is mixed up in all of that, becoming a third party, not wanting to but, like the grandmother, submitting to his tranquil muteness with which he spreads his self-confidence, his spell over her, confusing and incapacitating her with his sorcery. "Spartak, do you ever speak more than two words?" She tries to assert herself. "Yeah."

She drove. The grandmother was sitting upright beside her, showing her the way. The mother was silent, next to her son who had turned on the camera and was looking through the photos taken on the roof. Nature was like itself, wanting to draw out photos from the camera which would never be of use. It was simply nature that wouldn't allow for any other way but to photograph and conclude that you've freed yourself from it. The trees with untranslatable colours alternating one after another, the old, pitted road, the yellow haven of leaves under the apricot trees, the red and black of the peach trees, the brooks disguised in the grass, the wrinkled bosoms of opposing mountains; Odzasar, with its rocky peak, the tearing morsels of smoke from faraway chimneys, the approaching presence of some *thing*. Agitation and resonation.

She stopped by a flock of reeds, had the boy get out, photographed him just standing in front of them, his accumulating essence ever-increasing in her eyes. Then the boy himself entered the reeds, caressed their twisted bodies as though he were doing them a favour. Not conspicuously, not ostentatiously, but from the inside, knowingly. He was completely in command of his body, aware of it, which pained the woman; it did not submit to the photograph, did not get defined, even his mother and grandmother were more in possession of his body than she was, she who was supposedly making that body speak. Even the existence of that body was mythic, its nourishment, its growth, its splitting into cells, its very possibility to be.

The woman was like the reeds, having lost her spring-summer, on the verge of being outcast from her youth, of losing her youthful splendour. The photo was self-deception, she would like to be newly sprouted herself, she would like to break free from her years and escape towards that unreachable world, towards not knowing anything, towards inexperience. Towards his home, where he would be the knowing one, the self-confident one. The boy was killing her with his unyieldingness, blindness, his self-control, his silence. Either he didn't understand or he didn't want to understand. He loved himself.

The grandmother descended into their garden. She went deeper into the trees and blended with the colours. They continued the journey without her. He didn't invite his mother to sit up front, he sat there. The photographer woman passed him the camera and her fingers brushed feelingly against his fingers. The sensation of touch lingered, outside of which her hands felt like being in ash. She parked the car in a random garden, over a stream.

The garden undulated with autumn. The boy began walking under the trees, indifferent to the trifling words exchanged between his mother and the photographer. The mother was going into detail about whose garden it was, how they irrigated it, how they dug the stream, while the photographer followed the boy's figure through the trees. She could not tame him, she could not understand her role. They were adversaries. She approached him. She gazed into his eyes, trying not to falter. "Lie down on your stomach," she told him. The boy submitted. "Do push-ups." The mother was standing, watching. "More." He started breathing heavily. "More." The heavy, torrid, intoxicating smell of sweat began to pour out from him.

She was bridling him, showing him his place. Asserting her power. Severing him from the protective veil of adolescence. She was proclaiming the man in him by reining him in. She was also affirming things in herself that she'd contemplate later. The boy got up and said, Enough, and went away. The woman stared at the crushed ground. His scent still lingered among the apricot leaves.

When she was taking them back home he sat next to her, silently. They had been in an apple orchard burdened with fruit; she had photographed him under the fertile bellies of the trees, in the sun, the sun through the irises of his eyes, the branches of apples hanging down his arms, him fallen and scattered over the ground with them, but more and more she despaired. It seemed like her time had extinguished, but that wasn't the only pain; she simply didn't interest him, his inexplicable temporality, his pace, his hidden thoughts.

When she kept driving straight after forgetting the correct turn, the mother cried out from the backseat that they had passed the house. She turned and looked at the boy sitting beside her, he was uncommunicative and showing his uncommunicativeness. She didn't know if she was ascribing it to him or if he really did possess such depth.

"You shouldn't brake abruptly like that," he said suddenly.

When she was driving back to take the road to the house, the boy, looking at the mountain ahead said, Enough.

He left her hugless. He just left his torrid smell and went. The mother stayed behind to wave and shout words of farewell.

On her way out of the village she stopped, smoked. Ararat had receded behind its shadow, tightened into a dullness, had become a tin plate, didn't contain the reveries of the morning. It had gathered inward all of its shimmering surface and was standing like a two-dimensional banner on the mute horizon. Flanks of clustered reeds moaned next to the car, one of them trembling its bowed head in front of the windshield. She watched, until there was nothing left to do.



## Khanna

(excerpt)

by Anna Davtyan

translated from the Armenian by Laurie Alvandyan

She clearly remembered the cow skull lying under the red plum tree the first time they went to open the door to Lev's house. There was no lock on the door; the two hoops were held together by rope whose color had been washed out from the white sun. The door had old honey-colored glass, and the gathered dust, spiderwebs, and oil reminded of nausea. The hall was empty; four faded walls with two doors on either side. Khanna remembers nothing of the room on the left; it was an abandoned room that didn't demand a place in one's mind, probably empty, and the walls of the room on the right were covered from floor to ceiling in black soot, leaving the impression that one could squeeze oil from them. A black lamp hung from the ceiling almost down to the middle of the room. Whatever was left of a *takht*<sup>1</sup> was placed under the window, a solid black blanket thrown on top. The color of the old-fashioned dresser was indistinguishable, but on it was placed a bright white porcelain teapot with red roses. Khanna wanted, but felt disgusted, to pick it up.

Later, when they were taking apart the old floor boards of the room, the uncle's sons discovered Lev's toilet, which he had made right under the *takht*; he had sawed the boards and made a half-meter hole. The boards were rotten from the excrement and were simply crumbling under the blows of the crowbar, leaving only the heads of rusty nails on the logs. Together with Abgar, Khanna pulled out a few pieces of board, breathing in the urine-soaked wood dust. They emptied the room from the floor, filled the open hole with big rocks, then concrete, and both rooms started to look bearable. Many years ago, the grandma had barbed wire put up between their and Lev's garden. In general, she had something resembling a sickness towards Lev; a certain intolerance, indigestion, disgust, revulsion to the next-door neighbor whose degree of madness was hard to assess because he didn't interact with anyone. No hellos, no goodbyes, only

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<sup>1</sup> A hard wooden sofa.

when he saw the grandma he would say, "My son," would constantly repeat "My son, my son," from which the grandma's vomit would almost fill her mouth, threatening to spill from her toothless gums. Other than that, he said nothing. He wore his grey coat all year round, the belt tied above his waist; he stood on the little mound in the yard and looked unblinkingly at the only tree in the garden. Nobody knew what he fed on, how the meat filled up his body; Lev's way of life was completely unknown to the world. The death of a lonely, crazy old person was not a very unexpected thing, but the sons who arrived from Russia, who were representatives of the criminal world, searched long for the cause of their father's death. News spread that Lev was killed but nothing was confirmed or denied until the older and middle sons returned empty handed, having sold the house and front garden to Khanna's uncle Abram.

The grandma, who had a ritualistic attitude toward all ceremonies and was their first visitor, locked herself at home and didn't go to Lev's funeral. For months, she didn't let them take down the barbed wire, to open the door to Lev's house, fastened with a piece of cord. Her imperceptibility applied also to Lev's space; she didn't allow picking fruit off the tree; she had taken from the pantry and thrown in front of the chickens a sieve-full of plums that the bride had picked from a tree branch leaning to their side. But since business plans having to do with the space were developing in the family, the uncle finally took off the barbed wire, his hands bleeding, and for the first time Khanna and Aksel stepped foot in Lev's sooty rooms.

Khanna had decided to turn Lev's house into a guesthouse where they would take in tourists, feed them and give them a place to sleep.

The grandma did not understand the purpose of that idea; how could people stay at that crazy person's house? Where would the collected soot of all those years go?

Abgar, the uncle's youngest boy, was excited. He had dropped out of the History department, was hurriedly learning English, and preparing for the business. Khanna had found a co-financed grant program specifically for Shirak province, and was trying to make it happen. She was constantly having discussions with Abgar about what they could offer the tourists. All they had was Shirak province's bare nature and the history of the nearby city of Artik, from which they needed to squeeze some kind of concept

and offer as a tour product. Khanna was imagining some kind of indescribable experience for incomers, an alternative world, a Shirak Shambhala, a Shoragyal<sup>2</sup>Eldorado, a magical vision seen through the fog of trails and stories which still needed to be deciphered and defined. The area's plants, animals, sandstones, mines, prison, the mountain's rockiness, as gold...

Aksel, the uncle's oldest, was responsible for the plants and animals, as he was an agronomist. They first needed to explore, talk to people, get a sense of the area and the history, compile scripts, and then give them to the guides to recite.

Khanna was done with the time for hesitation. She didn't want to spend her whole life teaching children, teaching them right and wrong, especially since she herself wasn't sure of anything. She never attained the ambition of a teacher, especially because she didn't want to. She liked the ephemeral world, where it was possible to swing and wave. Concepts never completely clung to her, everything was confirmed and denied again, and teaching also didn't change the state of things. More or less that's what she taught. The inconsistent and the unstable. It was only the borders that steadily were denied in Khanna's head, and she wasn't afraid to turn the unimaginable into reality.

From the series of the unimaginable was her feeling for Abgar. The thing that was clear was that the borders in her head were like the dilapidated fences of the village's pear field, that were woven with a slender bush. Very little effort, and she would pass.

"What if my feeling for you is wanting love?", she had messaged him.

Abgar was resisting.

"Girl, you know, your rating with me should have gone down after saying something like that, but as it turns out, it went up. How is that?"

Khanna hated the halo planted on her head, that Abgar had braided, and now he was resisting his own creation. She wanted to take it apart, like the floorboards of Lev's toilet.

That short time in summer that she spent in the village was decisive. The days stretched and filled with something exuding from Abgar that enveloped and adorned him in Khanna's eyes. Her body grew and surpassed itself, her insides deepened, darkened purely, and trembled. Khanna was afraid for him, for his potential emotions,

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<sup>2</sup> The name of a village in historic Armenia (present-day Turkey), which colloquially refers to Shirak Province now.

for his affliction. She was afraid he wouldn't understand, he would be shocked, he would go crazy. She was scared, but she told him and met his understanding, but not accepting, curious, but rejective genuineness. Abgar was twenty-two, with the whole youth of his age, with the fervor of his body, with his thin belly, his solidness of a tree. "Don't touch!"

She didn't touch, she maintained the distance, maintained the faint borders.

"I have never swallowed before," she said to Atom.

The sperm was bitter, with some kind of metal taste. Then her lips and teeth began to stick to each other. Atom didn't like that the sperm smeared his body, spread and stuck all over his hair. While Khanna candidly spread it over her whole abdomen, then brought her hands to her nose, breathing in the smell.

They had met at a forum for businessmen. She had immediately felt that it was him. Atom was seated confidently, his leg bent on his knee, the two fingers of his right hand leaning on his temple. Khanna didn't have enough time to think, everything was decided by itself. When he was taking her home after drinking tea at the *chain<sup>3</sup>* of Tsaghkadzor's curves, Khanna said she didn't want to go home. As soon as they passed under the small bridge at the entrance of Avan. Khanna was shaking so much, that the precise outline of the silhouette of the full moon in the sky was shaking under her glasses. Then passed the row of poplar trees, and Khanna, looking at their trunks, thought that they probably hadn't been grown from seed-grown saplings, but rather a side cutting that had shown root and was planted. The uncle's Aksel was teaching how to differentiate how they were planted by looking at their trunks. This would have been unnecessary and uninteresting information for her husband if Khanna had voiced her thoughts. And immediately the decision fell from thought to tongue. She wanted to tell Atom, subconsciously wanted to check to what degree he would share it with her.

"The poplar trees are grown from cuttings."

"How do you know?"

"The trunks are black, whereas they should be like birch trees: white, with black marks on the smooth body."

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<sup>3</sup> Russian word for 'teahouse'

"I saw."

"There are two in the row that are white."

"They look healthier."

"They are pretty."

"Should I take you home?"

"I'm trembling."

"I know."

"No."

The car stopped in the red light of the petrol station. The smell of petrol filled the end-of-summer air. Khanna liked that smell; some fragments of memories left from childhood would always swim out of it. She would see the rainbow created by the petrol in the water spilled on the ground. While the car was filling, Khanna put her hand on her throat, from which the shaking hormones were produced. Later on, Atom said that he had understood that Khanna had liked him from the very first day, because she had constantly put her hand on her neck. Khanna, having the stone of the guilty feeling in her throat, the fear, the despair, thought that was probably something else, but she didn't tell Atom about it.

Fog appeared from somewhere, the lights of the coming cars started shining white on the road. The wave of fog was hitting the windshield and running down the walls of the car, leaving glittering drops of wetness on its black shell. Khanna was feeling that although Atom was constantly looking at the road running in front, he kept her in his peripheral vision, in which she didn't know where to put her hands, how to place her body, so that she wouldn't look confused. She didn't feel like crying.

Everything was like this nature, parched in the stones. A bit of grass, a couple of trees are growing on the crags' mines. On the whole surface of the soil, if it's not farmland, are scattered pock-marked stones, the yellow moss of years on them. The surface of the soil is curly. The color is a mix of cinnamon and laurel. Shirak is soil-colored, treeless. Rich with its nudity. With its up-and-down ground. In summer, a few strong flowers, bitter plantains, lizards, sun skewers; in winter, a storm covers the sky in darkness, spinning snowy, smoke wheezing out from the chimneys. Icicles. Small little

lakes in the mountains' little bosom.

Little world of Armenia.

Khanna was neither that country's child, nor was she not. She didn't love the country like her childhood cradle, but she loved it as a thought that had entered her conscious mind, obscure and naked. When she was driving through those places, there was always some kind of ode circling in her head, she was coating those lands with some kind of immaterial thing, but she wasn't embracing it, she wanted to remain an observer. That wasn't nature, with its agricultural or curative side, she was indifferent to it. She was indifferent to the green-loving vibe, to the eco issues, to Vitamin D. She was feeling something else. Those fields had sexuality, were breathing inexplicable, queer, burning, outflowing. The stones and leaves of grass were shooting arrows askew from a thousand directions to Khanna's heart. Were they memories, or imaginary stories taking her captive? The fields were desire. That was the nature uneasily fitting in her head. She didn't want woodsy, she didn't want grassy, this rockiness was somehow running parallel with her inside. To this nature belonged the landscape of her hidden thoughts, as soil's color to soil.

She remembered how they were going to pick *ghmi*<sup>4</sup>, probably in the beginning of summer, when in the oat fields finger-sized worms were ripening and hanging heavy-colored from the heads of the oat flowers. The *ghmi* was being grown together with that plant, and she needed to overcome the terror toward the worms, to bow, push it to the side and pick it. She was imagining that someone was looking at her from the field, from between the oats, that it was necessary to not just be a good harvester, but a field wizard, Indian movie, flower and robust. By overcoming, she was filling the sacks. The whole field was women with colorful headscarves, as the oat worms. They were opening and shrinking. In the far distance, the bus was visible rusty yellow, which was continuing to work ceaselessly even after a hundred years. With that they had come, and with that they were going to leave, loaded with sacks. Loaded with scenery. Khanna couldn't rid herself of the memories, but the country had changed, her aunt had died, with whom they used to bring home so many fields. What remained was to fold

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<sup>4</sup> Local slang for the *Chaerophyllum* plant

up the memories, to put them aside or turn them into a saga or tale for tourists, who are so keen on listening to many made up and unmade stories.

"I'll tell you," say the tour guides.

"I'll tell you," says Khanna, as a master of experiences.

Was it possible that Khanna's story would ever turn into something that they would tell?

The gate creaked.

The dog started barking.

The uncle had painted the gate silver and the leaves of the tall standing poplar tree were falling into the yard by sliding down the silver surface. The grandma was sweeping them the whole day, gathering, making one pile, later the wind was blowing again, spreading them over the yard. The head of the village, Mayilyan, was coming through the leaves. The puny puppy following him. He greeted the men by hand, he nodded to Khanna. In the backyard of the house, the chained dog was cutting itself on its leash.

"I have come about the cemetery."

Khanna wanted to include the reconstruction of the old cemetery in her grant program, and for that the agreement of the local government, in the form of a signature, was necessary. But there was one problem: they had buried Lev in the old cemetery, and the tomb was still fresh, in the middle of the cemetery. It was impossible to do anything with that. But the other stones were old, from the 1800s, grouped by families, surrounded by forged bars and climbing plants. Khanna remembered the growing *khndzorooks*<sup>5</sup> between those stones, that were tiny flowers, that she later saw in the pharmacy on the box of Persen. She was picking them by small handfuls, when the grandma was sitting on one of the tombstones waiting for the herd.

They were thinking of lifting the tombstones fallen aside from the graves, to group them on one side, to clean the area, and they were hoping that in that part, where only sand and trash were filled, a small space would open in the adjoining part of the road for tourist bus parking. But in the middle was planted Lev's grave, and it completely didn't fit with the idea of a bus.

"You need to wait," said Mayilyan

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<sup>5</sup> *Trifolium pratense*

“Why?”

“The son is coming to exhume him.”

“Whose son?”

“Lev’s.”

“What for?”

“You know what they do. They are criminals, they suspect something, they have some new evidence.”

“What kind of evidence?”

“I don’t know much, I’ve only heard that they are suspicious of Pashik’s sons.”

“Who would give a shit about that poor geezer?”

“They’ll know.”

“You’re not going to sign?”

“Wait a bit.”

Khanna put the papers next to the coffee cup, stood up and casually saw the grandma’s whitened face. Whenever the conversation would turn to Lev, the grandma would become possessed. She was starting to push the one tooth, turned yellow and elongated, into the hardened gum wall in her mouth. Khanna put her hands on her hips because Lev had been planted in the middle of the work, and the village head was not signing the papers. The grandma looked so upset that she had forgotten her concern of force-feeding the guest, and she had sat, black hands on her lap, eyes looking out the window at the yellowed bushes of cucumber.

This was the grandma’s mythical life story, woven into bravado and little legends, that the grandma was not letting be forgotten. She had a bad childhood. After the wars, it was a starving family. They were five sisters, one brother. The grandma was the second after the oldest. She had always studied well in school, and after graduating she had been accepted to the university, the History department. She didn’t have shoes to go to school, and the mother baked bread to sell in the city to buy her shoes. The bread sold well. The mother decided to bake again. It turned out that if she leaves and goes to study in the city, her sisters and brother will stay hungry. She didn’t go to class. She didn’t study. At 25, when she was already considered a spinster, she got married. She



had five girls one after another, cursing her mother that she had left her female-bearing genes. The sixth one, by some miracle, was born a boy. She was a believer, she had gone to a thousand chapels. She had gotten to Saint Hovhannes barefoot and knelt. She had sat on the doorsill and, howling, had demanded a boy, had hit the unyielding door of the chapel with galoshes. She had come back home running, she hadn't stopped anywhere on the way. Her knees were completely bloody. She had jumped on one of the girls and beat her.

She had books at home: the Bible, gospels, hymns. In all of them, on one of the pages, was laid one bunch of Aksel's long childhood hair. The books, from much leafing through with candle-waxed fingers, were smelling like parchment. In general, her whole house was emitting a smell of fanatical faith that was coming from her bedding: from the blankets and heavy pillows, in which she had searched for voodoo for years. In her belief she was putting some fury, the source of which nobody was understanding. Was it Catholicism that demanded so? But, for example, the neighbor Mariam was gentle, and she was also going to church.

Khanna had seen a photograph of the grandma, hair tied like a Spanish flamenco dancer, with gold hoops and a telling expression, who knows what number child placed on her lap, looking at the camera in a furious way, like someone who knew something. If you look down, she's wearing galoshes.

Every house in the village had a prayer corner, the grandma also had one. The uncle had made rows of shelves with thin boards in the corner of the wall, and on them the grandma had lined up images of saints: photographs and adorned cloths. On the back of each image was pinned a single paper rose, and colorful rosaries, candles and artificial flowers were laying on the surface of the embroidery-covered row. Every row had its thin embroidered curtain, and the whole stage decoration of the shelves was giving it the look of an old archaic theater, the performers of which were saints, especially Mariam, with her permanent halo, plump hands and round breasts.

The village considered itself Catholic, the grandma was a raging defender of that, but neither the grandma nor anyone in the village could answer Khanna about what that specifically meant. They were just different, and that difference was their faith. The only

explanatory sentence in everyone's mouth was this: we are *franc*<sup>6</sup>, we won't believe it until we see it.

Ten times a day, the grandma was wiping the dust of the saints, was shaking out the buds of the roses, was lighting the candles two times on each shelf and yawning while praying, with a wide-open windpipe. In front of the candles, the little handmade curtains and the gold-plated edges of the lined pocket-sized books were gleaming yellow. The corner was filling with the smell of candles, as if everything was moving from the air, the saints were coming to life and breathing, the roses were rippling deep red dust, the grandma's hours of prayer seemed like a dream that Khanna was seeing in wakefulness. She had inherited something from that devotion and the theater: the ability to live things dramatically, the dream, the movement of the air, the fury.

The crumbled up subconscious was flooding into the dreams. The soul of the sex. All the objects, the areas, the people were pounding with the sex. Some kind of *karot'*, longing, *taska*,<sup>8</sup> a desire to be wrapped up by them. Existence soothed, softened, and faint from the sex. Sometimes work that is done by hands, small movements, corners, blurriness. And only the dream reveals. Khanna loved the theater of looks and touches, which was done under the veil of sincerity, carelessness, and effortlessness. Her husband had no merit in that, hesitating, an asker, a tangler, idle in movements, his gaze always hanging down.

In her dream, she had seen her former coworker, who had moved on to a new position and had left the previous workplace. And in the dream, she had been waiting for him, waiting for his call, and suddenly realized she had his email password. She put it into some incomprehensible device, and the room of the parents' old house filled with paper letters, pictures, and notes. Khanna's childhood girlfriends were also there with her, who also wanted to read the letters, but Khanna, like a rabid dog, got in their faces and bit them. Only she was going to read them. She was seated on the top of the pile of letters, within reach were some small little postcards from which she could not

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<sup>6</sup> What Catholic Armenians in Armenia call themselves.

<sup>7</sup> Armenian word for longing.

<sup>8</sup> Russian word for longing.

distinguish anything clearly. Suddenly came he, whom she had been waiting for so long, whose name she didn't want to give. But he didn't need to see his letters being dug through. Khanna forgot that she was in pajamas, jumped up, hoped that the girls would pick up and put back the letters in the otherworldly way they had arrived. She led him away from the door and took him to the room where she used to sleep with her grandmother as a child. The room had crumpled blankets and pillows. She was aware of her ugly yellow pajamas that her mother had sewn. But nothing was stopping Khanna. And she hugged him. Not with hands, but besieged him with her gaze and got back the answers. The dream made their whole silent confrontation turn into sex. Khanna had him inside her. She woke up. Her husband was sleeping peacefully next to her.

The country had to be fitted into the grant. Khanna was thinking the words.  
Country.

On a transit road set in the mountains. The history and the dream of the sea stretch from end to end. From end to end it's a couple hours. By foot, a couple days. One big mole had dug and filled with stones here and there. They spread oxygen. Filled the laughter here and there. We are covered with old days. Black soil and seasons. Twelve seasons. Solid summer and lean winter. In the middle, colored stripes of fields that do not fit and roll down the hills. Roads dug on the slope of the mountain. Forests of thorn and wheat. Crop rows and horse. A church at the foot of a mountain, wherever possible. Monks' stories. Crossroads in every book. Heirs. Heritage. Black and blue eyes. Wheat-colored skin. Yard and tiny garden. Crooked little door. Callous hand. Callous and soft heart. Basket. Dry greenness of trees. Bud. Poplar. Raven. Decrepit stones. Pipes and wires. From the edge of the mountain, a dome. Monuments. Unknown soldier<sup>9</sup>. Worship. Grapevine. Mint, thyme. Abandoned railway. Turk. Thistle, bush and prickly thrift. Dead body. Snow posters. Manure and egg. Enemy tanks. Tulips' greenhouse. Footpath. Closed trail. Thin rivers. Trickling waterfall. Blue deer. Earth's motion. Three colors. Mine vein. Round dance. Reservoir, fraxinus. Rough facial features. Tractor.

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<sup>9</sup> Refers to the memorial for unknown soldiers of the Great Patriotic War.

*Matsun*.<sup>10</sup> Armenian cochineal. Closed mouth. Forest beauty.<sup>11</sup> Anna rose. Frontline. Twilight.

There was one day left until the deadline for submitting the grant application. Khanna stuffed her thoughts into the grant language, which politicians and NGOs speak even when there is nothing to say. It is always possible to say words. She had grant-speaking guru girlfriends, one of whose language assured her the position of deputy minister. She did the writing, fighting against the grant windmills, and sent the application to the provided email address. The village head's signature was missing.

### **B1. Project name**

Write the full name of the project.

**Masnik village: Rural tourism integrated development pilot in Shirak province**

### **B2. Project geography**

Write the name of the village or community in Shirak province where you are going to implement the project.

**Shirak province, Masnik village**

### **B3. Project description**

Please briefly describe the essence of the project (idea, expected tour product, competitive advantages). Please also describe the project's sustainability measures.

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<sup>10</sup> Armenian yogurt.

<sup>11</sup> Name of a variety of pear.