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## *Washington D.C. to Yerevan, Armenia*

After the Paris layover, a pastor from Sarasota, Florida sitting across the aisle told me everything he wanted me to know about Armenians. How beautiful they are, how smart and educated and jobless, how the men have hearts that give out by 55.

“The biggest problem with Armenians,” he said, “is nobody has money. They need so much. And they have so much to give. Tragic.”

The pastor told me how he married an Armenian woman he met online, the granddaughter of a leader in the Azerbaijan war and former mayor of the town of Gyumri. I told him Gyumri was where I was headed and he cocked his head to the side with quiet theatrics, then wrote an address on his cocktail napkin and handed it to me.

“When you get there, go talk to my wife’s family over at Tolstoy #24. I mean that’s what’s so great is you *can*. They’ll take you in no questions asked.”

The pastor told me how he sponsored an Armenian orphanage and periodically went over to check in. In Sara-

sota, in addition to his church work, he ran a dry cleaners and kept a little bucket on the counter to collect money for supplies he sent back to the kids. At the orphanage, the ones who arrived with no surnames got a name that translates into son-of-bird.

“Makes more sense in their language,” he said.

His big advice: “Don’t be too quick to smile. Don’t smile too fast like an American. You know how we are! They’re going to be kind to you but standoffish at first. They’ll size you up. A young American woman travelling alone is rare. Let them take their time to sniff you out first and then you’ll see they’ll be your best friends. They’ll break right open for you.”

He adjusted his neck pillow, closed his eyes. “I’m surprised you would go,” he said as he faded off. “Strange choice for a vacation.”

A sliver of me wanted to say, *Yeah I’m surprised, too*. I kept silent, though, let his talking taper off. He’d lost me with the online wife thing, but regardless, I just wanted to be as alone as I’d left home to be.

The plane jittered with the back and forth of mothers working to appease tugging children. Square-jawed, gray-headed men in tweed coats and hats stood in the aisle. The Armenian language fluttered over me. A collection of buoyant, undecipherable sounds massed together in the air like one collective conversation. Everyone seemed to know everyone else. Everyone seemed to have boarded together, and in four hours they would all pour out the airport exit together. All glad to be home.

I swallowed another Xanax and lifted the window shade to a gauzy sky, the land fading to patches of dry brown and gray rock thousands of feet below. Somewhere in the fuzz between wake and sleep, I waited to get where I’d told myself to go.

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Call it a strange choice for a vacation, but I'd intended to see the sun there. And a building. One specific building, with the sun hitting it. A building in a photograph that lived on the wall of Narine's Armenian bakery in Washington D.C.. A photograph I'd seen for years.

I'd told myself, I just wanted the sun hitting that specific building. And I just wanted the sun hitting me as I stood next to that building. And I wanted to set up my easel and paint it as it happened. On that plane, rushing away from my life, I told myself that my wants were a tidy and simple package.

He hadn't asked for an explanation but even if he had I wouldn't have said any of that to the pastor from Sarasota, Florida. Other than telling Narine, I hadn't explained anything to anyone. Other than her, nobody knew where I was headed. Nobody knew I was leaving.

I thought: *What's there to explain to a pastor from Sarasota, Florida?*

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I'd turned to art early, committed myself in a half-ass way.

Growing up in Alamogordo, New Mexico, my family lived at the thinnest point of a thinning highway beyond a standard air force base checkpoint, in a standard air force base duplex. The days were always too bright and the nights a flat purple.

When he was home from mysterious flights in his F-15, my father would doodle with pencil and paper. He'd sit on the porch or in his favorite chair in the living room and make caricatures of my younger sister Frannie and I, and occasionally my mother when she didn't demand he stop.

He'd encourage me to draw, too. He never showed me technique, I was probably too young for that anyway, but he was good at supporting the act itself.

"By drawing things you can remake them," he told me once. He was drawing my toddler sister who was playing in the yard in a sand pile, he gave her elongated horns and I laughed.

"It's a power," he'd said. "To freeze something. Make it live forever the way you want it."

Of course, this is the sort of thing you say to a five-year-old, to make it seem more mystical than it is, or just to keep them occupied. But it appealed to me, this practice, this idea of freezing something and carrying it away.

"You got the knack," my father had said. I had something, a skill he'd passed into my blood.

After my father stopped being, and my sister and mother and I carried on our lives in Maryland, I relied all the more on the skill in my blood.

I'd decided early on that I wanted to be a painter. I preferred landscapes and unpopulated settings. I relied on color to make up the structures that fell in my path. Familiar bridges. Grassy acreage lining the city's gray. Maybe some light twinkling on the surface of water in the night. On a handful of occasions, I sold what I made.

But the money that came came rarely, and so, at thirty-two years old, I let my day job—that gray mass of hours spent in a windowless office—take up the bulk of my time. I wasn't much in the habit of making things live forever the way I wanted them to be.

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Before Armenia, when I daydreamed about what it might look like to run away without telling anyone, it looked something like

pulling my car over on the way to work, hopping the highway guardrails, running through the dense evergreens, and finding a rolling pasture on the horizon that would swallow me whole.

None of it ever looked like the queue for boarding a plane, anxiety medication and credit card debt from flights and accommodations. I'd never daydreamed about that sort of experiment in movement. But then there are pivots sometimes. Things force you to look new directions, feel out new edges.

It happened during that gray mass of hours, in that windowless office, when the architecture of my body failed and I tumbled down from my chair, stirring to confusion with a whale-sized cry. A bloom of red filled my eyes, like that hot spot that takes over your vision when staring at the sun. The spot went from red to violent white. Then came the tingly blackout that comes with pain. Then the hard light over a hospital bed.

I thought, *this is death, this whiteness.*

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I was the host of a rare disease. Thirty-two years of abnormal development. The kind of tumor they sometimes call a *homunculus*, the Latin term for the phrase *little man*.

The doctor said, smiling, "We call them that because they're all covered in hair, teeth and nails. Little monsters."

The way I remember the doctor explaining it, I came from a womb composed of fragile cells. And from the beginning the little man took to claiming my fragile cells as its own. Taking advantage of my weak terrain, it clutched up inside me and gradually organized itself over the course of my life. I was the terrarium, the right ecosystem, the right blend of moister and heat for disease.