

Excerpt from *The Quiet Stays* (tentative title), a novel in progress.

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I met Emma that day, an Armenian American experimental filmmaker from Los Angeles, in the country for 7 weeks to “restart her clock,” having previously lived there for a few years (she couldn’t remember exactly how many) until 2009, when she abruptly returned to the states for a family emergency. She spotted me on Mayisyan Street, between rows of crated grapes, nuts and sinewy root vegetables, pointed my way and proclaimed loudly how she knew an American when she saw one. I didn’t know how to take it but with no real place to be, I accepted her enthusiastic invitation to find a place to sit and talk.

We drank yogurt water served from a large glass jug in a café. Delicate-boned and nymph-like, Emma was larger in presence than stature. A strange mix: elegantly pretty, despite the squeal-pitch of her voice and the anxious way she monkeyed in the chair.

I stayed within myself debating whether or not I liked her and she stayed engrossed with explaining her interest in the intersections between art and seismic effects, the enforcement of building codes, the integrity of structures, superficial inspections and construction that doesn’t conform to approved, bureaucratic design. Emma asked, “I mean how could you *not* be interested in such things in a place like this?” I looked at her and blinked, at first not registering she’d just posed a question. When she continued without waiting for an answer, her words blending into a dense and at times undecipherable mass, I was glad not to be called on for much.

She went on about the shoddy fixes made by tenants to already weak and hastily built buildings. She called this the fast track to building deterioration and the compromise to seismic reliability. “Armenia’s at an unusually high risk of exposure to natural disaster. Not just earthquakes, but hail and mudslides, you name it.

Poverty equals an inability to protect yourself independently. I mean, right? That goes for *anywhere* not just here. But this place, this place. I mean that's why I decided I needed to come back now. In part to film, sure, but more so because when I left, I just felt like something got left behind. When I was here before, as a volunteer, I really discovered some missing piece of me, something ripped apart from me at birth. And now, when I'm not here, I feel diluted. Whatever it is, that piece of me I find here, it can't seem to make the trip back to the States."

Emma halted her monologue, concentrated on my face, her eyebrows up and her mouth curling into a smirk. I worried she thought I wasn't paying enough attention, that I'd offended her. But then she went on, after a dramatic pause, "Tell me about *your* project."

Ill prepared for a transition to speaking-role, I began telling Emma about the picture in the bakery and the painting in progress. My words failed to come together right, so I kept it sparse and tapered off quick, punctuating with, "It's complicated I guess."

Emma squinted, "I can dig it, though it's crazy to only work in such a narrow window. I mean, only being here for like a week or so? *Wild* really. I love the idea of such restraint on process, though."

Her eyes trailed off somewhere and in the silence I thought about contributing something rather than waiting for her to continue. Something, maybe, about artistic process or restraint or time. But I'd gotten used to listening to Emma, rather than talking to her, and preferred to wait for the natural shift of the conversation back in her direction. I suspected she did, too.

She eventually snapped from her distant stare and let out a cackle, rubbed her hand through her black pixie hair and called out to the waitress who conspicuously watched from the corner. Emma ordered something off the menu, or maybe asked

for the check, then leapt back to English. “How fascinating. I mean you aren’t even Armenian. Not knowing the language or *anything*. That, my dear, takes *balls*.”

As patronizing as her words sounded, and for all my silent scrutinizing—my hunt for the reservoir of reasons to resent her in the moment—her prettiness, her language abilities, her ease in her own skin—something sincere ran through her, I could tell. I watched her large, darting eyes, and the twitchy muscles of her face as she talked and I detected nothing but sincerity and a rare, unfiltered joy.

She said, “Doing projects is not a challenge here, *Jesus*, but it can be a challenge to narrow down what you want to do. It’s funny. Two thousand people a year are leaving this country and who the hell are those of us who come back? Artists! We come for the opportunities. Opportunities to live cheaply and to express ourselves. I mean last week in Yerevan I met some Diasporans here, self-funded photographers, who actually said, this was their words: that they want to capture the whole country. From ancient to modern. I mean what’s *that* look like? Right? I’m thinking of maybe turning to straight up documentary work. Doing something about government corruption and housing. More grants in that. Seems though that some people are hesitant to speak up too much about those kind of political topics. The Soviet mindset is still very alive. But, anyway it can be hard to know what the fuck you are looking for. You know?”

I told her I knew.

“Of course you know. You are here after all. Well, have you been to the *domik* villages yet? You know, where the shanties are?”

“No. I mean yes, I know of them but haven’t really gone.”

“Well then I have an idea,” she arched an eyebrow.

“Oh I don’t know about that.”

“But you *have* to!” She pleaded, in mock desperation, slapping her palms on the table like a child, an act I could tell she was accustomed to using. Something about her dramatic pleading led me to believe her motivation for latching on had to do with just this—a plotted out hunt for someone to take to the *domiks*, so she wouldn’t have to go alone. I considered saying no out of spite. I considered that she put something ugly on display and now I had a reason to dislike her. And she might have sensed these considerations, might have read them in some slight shift of my expression, because she tightened her posture and began to explain that there are things at the *domiks* she needed to get on film before making her 8 p.m. ride back to Yerevan.

“I’ll pay for the taxis. I’d just love the company. And it’s something you can’t not see,” Emma said. Then she slipped back toward childish, propping her elbows on the table, cupping her head in her hands, locking her large eyes on me and finally shutting up to wait for my yes.

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There is a relief that comes with letting go, with following, with letting someone else flag the taxi that sweeps you down the same maze of gravel streets you fumbled through the night before. In such moments you can go a little weightless, unruffled.

Emma in the front seat, her voice loud and large, bantered with the driver, whose hiccupping laugh said he was immediately endeared to her. And how could he not be? Emma bounced back and forth between whatever they were talking about and whatever she had to say to me. I imagined it was part of that missing piece she found there—the straddling of two worlds, her utter command of them both and the speed at which she could orbit around them, move between them. I envied it more than I envied her beauty or unfiltered joy.

She sat backwards in her seat and hugged her knees. “After the earthquake, my mom came to my bedroom and said to go in my closet and pull out all the clothes I didn’t want. I remember looking up at her and how frantic she was. I didn’t understand what it meant. And even after she explained the earthquake I don’t know that I totally got it. I remember I made a card and I wrote on it ‘from your friend, I am sorry.’ But I kept working at the card and couldn’t quite get it perfect and my mom ended up shipping off supplies without it because I was taking too long. I was so upset. I asked my mom, what about my card and she said the card was not that important. And I’d wanted to come here ever since. Oh so, there is this town not too far from here where I was filming yesterday. A gold mining town. Species are dying from the shit that’s going in the river. And fauna, greenery, but not just that, now the drinking water is fucked and of course anything that grows from the ground. So the village, they used to say: ‘at least we have a job. We have no life but we have a job.’ Guess what? The job pays less than any job in Yerevan. They give them as little as possible and of course what they pay later in birth defects and other health issues is much more.”

She turned around to the driver, said something in Armenian, then switched to English, “So it’s a con game. And you’ve heard this too, but don’t give up. We have to fix this, this terrible corruption. And it’s possible.”

The driver offered a confused smile, met my eyes through the rearview mirror. I smiled brightly back, a feeble attempt to rise up to Emma’s energy. His dismissive nod told me he wasn’t convinced, I hadn’t reached high enough to meet either of them wherever they were in the moment. Emma said something Armenian and the driver’s response made her laugh. Emma translated that the driver didn’t believe change was possible. They laughed in unison and so I followed along, laughing, too, the three of us laughing at terrible things.

We passed rusting metal umbrellas on the side of the road, what looked like a gas station with camels tied up with ropes, houses in various degrees of completion and

depletion, stones randomly strewn, a rusted out bus frame. Few cars were on the road. We passed the Russian barracks, its chicken wired fences, and another square with more statues—a square I'd walked past coming from the bus just days earlier.

Recognizing landmarks told me I'd hit a growth spurt of sorts. I'd learned something. To recognize a tiny speck on the surface. But slumped in the back of that taxi, it was enough to spark fleeting thoughts of securing a grant to come back. To do a series of paintings. Perhaps the whole of Ghost Town, perhaps animals, the wild dogs and camels at the gas station. From the back of the car on familiar roads, things felt possible, no matter how unmoored I remained.

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We walked down a dirt road lined with *domiks* vacant of people, no noise save the faint squawk of passing birds and wind through weeds. In the distance a cracked bowl of concrete, an empty Soviet-era fountain, left a trace of once-significant but now-dead infrastructure.

Emma extended her camera to arm's length as we walked, a stylishly small, orange object I was glad to find so unimposing. I'd feared the dents and dings her filming might leave on what we found. How could it be welcomed?

She panned over a metal container bolted down by scalloped siding, fenced in with stretched mattress coils and metal grates, everything rusted and sharp. She explained, her voice softer and lower now, "This particular village was temporary housing for people working on rebuilding efforts and their families. People are still living in them. They were supposed to stay two years here, but it's been twenty-some. And over there, a school. A lot of students died." Emma nodded beyond the fountain, toward the stone-chunks resting beneath the remnants of a four-story structure. The sky spanning behind, pinked toward evening.

“And there, the town’s veterinarian’s home, or a zoologist, I’m not sure which, something like that.” She pointed at a structure not far from the school. A nearly identical building of cream colored squares eaten out in chunks, the top right corner stuffed up with tires and plastic and the floor sagging, giving the window frames beneath an inverted arch.

Emma lifted her camera above her head, zoomed to the top right corner of the veterinarian’s/zoologist’s building, said “I’m just amazed at how these homes are pieced together. Pieces of things that have no business getting put together. Right now it’s warm and there aren’t big problems, but when it becomes colder and they don’t have anything to heat their houses, that’s when things get dicey.

12,000 people!” Emma managed to exert her enthusiasm without raising her voice, leaving me with hope we’d get to the other side without upsetting too my people.

Then, from a slit in a small tin can of a house, came a ruddy-faced woman in fuzzy blue slippers, her salt and pepper hair swooped back in a pompadour. She approached, said something, squinting up at our faces, perhaps perplexed, perhaps very pissed. Emma responded, kept the camera steady on the woman’s face, and the woman said something back, turned to me, scratched her head and laughed.

Emma translated. “She thought maybe we were here to see the children. She says her grandchildren are studying in a boarding school because it’s impossible for them to live here. There’s no water, nothing, so the kids stay at school as much as possible.”

The woman pointed beyond us. Another woman now stood in her yard. She waved and we waved back, Emma said something loud and bright. I wondered if she’d met them before.

Emma translated, “So, she told me they just put up this mesh barrier made from a mattress frame because they are afraid for the children at night—when they come

back from school for visits.”

I let some desire to engage, some stupid question, fly from my mouth. “What is she afraid will happen?”

“Rats and wild dogs.” Emma continued, “They have rabbits and pigeons they raise in small cages to have meat for the children in winter. She’s blind in one eye. She says they’re waiting for someone named Vaughn to bring wood. Soon it’ll be winter and they don’t have money to buy any wood.

“She has lots of debts in the shop. She owes too much money to buy anything. If she has to, she’ll burn all the clothes she owns. I think she thinks we should know Vaughn because I guess he’s someone who comes here a lot with foreigners?

“She owns the village grocery store. Every day she goes over her ledger of credits more full than the cash box. One person takes on credit, another pays back a debt and gradually she pays back the suppliers. They all call the store: ‘A Poor Shop for a Poor Life.’”

Emma had never met these women, I came to realize, and from that point I started rationalizing how much money I should give, or if giving anything might be a faux pas. Another woman walked up and then a man behind her. They stood at some distance, in a yard of rust piles, and I told myself it was okay. We’d been noticed and it was okay. I was horrible to be there but it was okay. I shifted my weight from side to side, struggling to make the proper gestures, and told myself I was there for art, just as Emma was there for art. Two artists doing something specific. I dug my sketchbook from my bag. A prop, some proof of purpose.

Then another woman.

“This one is 82 and she is living alone, blind. Gave up hope for getting a house a long



time ago. Before the quake she was working in a kindergarten where she had 45 children but now she has nothing and she doesn't know why she ended up in this situation. Says she just doesn't know why God doesn't let her die. You can hear the suffering in her voice. I mean can't you?"

I nodded yes. I must have heard the suffering in her voice. But I can't say now what that sounded like. From here, now, at this distance, recalling the murmurs and utterances, the consonants and vowels, the waterless and childless homes of the homeless, where makeshift fences keep the rats and dogs out and the rabbits and pigeons in. There was matter and sound, there were particles, floating, but even then at that moment it was all so impossibly distant.

"But when it's raining the sun will come out soon. And when it's dark it will be light soon."

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Emma and I walked about a mile before spotting a taxi. As we rode, we stayed silent. I was thinking of all the ways I didn't know how to be among what I found there. I didn't know at what angle to look at anything. And I hadn't given a lot of thought to this before arriving, no matter what Narine might have told me. Maybe she knew this, it must have been apparent.

Experiencing Emma's quiet sent a wave of guilt rolling through me. And when I heard her snuffle in the front seat of the taxi, and for a moment believed she might be crying, a flicker of desire passed through me, to take the not-diminished parts of me, what was hunched in the backseat, and relinquish it over to her.

Then she said, "It was meant to be that we would find each other today. I mean this was *magical*." And her voice was too buoyant for crying. I snapped back toward my indecisive feelings, where I didn't know what to think of her. But I agreed and said "It's magical, I know," and it came out sounding more automatic than intended. I

tried mustering something interesting to add, a clever way of admitting my surprise at just how good a grasp she had on the place, but nothing came that didn't sound arrogant or self-deprecating, so I left the matter alone. I left it at just saying thank you for bringing me along, which she either didn't hear or ignored.

Outside of Levon's, Emma sprung up from the car to hug me, handing me a scrap of paper with her email address. I agreed to make plans to see her when I returned to Yerevan, before flying away for good, though inside I doubted I'd have that kind of energy.