2

A Russian couple stood in the kitchen eating breakfast in their underwear, ignoring me as I passed to the bathroom. I showered fast, and made my way outside, where the day waited bright and old women sold pastries from a small box made of fogged-over Plexiglas. I stuck out my index finger, made the symbol for one, pointed to a pastry. A buttery, perfectly heart-shaped pastry.

I picked a direction and walked, chewing the perfect pastry, hoping to find the town center. I took note of how I felt. Nothing barren or empty in me, nothing matted, balled and heavy. My insides felt baseline. The outset. That first walk on that first morning when I could have walked for miles and miles.

Nothing was as it had been the night before in Yerevan. Roads were jammed with wheezing, break-squealing traffic, sidewalks were lined with cones of flowers stacked over wooden crates, roses and chrysanthemums in all possible colors. People clicked by in groups of twos and threes, moving with confident, slow walks. I passed face after face. Olive faces, almond eyes, swaths of coal black hair, bone straight and shiny. The most squarish of men slouching and smoking, the most beautiful women clacking over the slick diamond shaped cement tiles in grace-foiling, tropical colored stilettos. Women with

high arched brows, flared eyeliner, thick lipstick, dramatic rouge, splashy gold earrings and necklaces. I passed face after face and realized how much I stuck out. With blond hair and blue eyes, with nothing angular or dark about me, nothing strikingly sharp, I made a larger statement than their jewelry, I had no chance of fading into the landscape. I considered purchasing sunglasses to shield part of my round, pale face.

I turned into a quiet neighborhood of apartments. Tin siding, corrugated metal roofs and trellises covered with dense, dusty leaves, strung up lines of laundry, satellite dishes. A woman walked by counting through a wad of U.S dollar bills. I stopped in her path and asked if she spoke English, to ask her where the town center was, but she gave one firm shake of her head and continued walking.

I headed the other direction and came to a bazaar on Buzard Street. The dry, thin air smelled of sweet bread and sour milk. Rows of metal sculptures and paintings of pomegranates and the country's beloved Mount Ararat, packages labeled *Armenian Souvenirs*, full of tiny bottles of *blessed water, soil, and incense*. On card tables, soviet metals lay against dingy, black velvet swatches. A man selling baskets of neatly packaged berries, sectioned by color: white, black, red. Men on benches, paunches out, their eyes straight through me as they played cards, scrunched over small tables, smoking long, thin cigarettes. An older woman walked by selling single roses from a basket, a photograph of a young soldier laminated around her neck.

The street opened up ahead and the town center came into view. What I'd seen on Google images—the Government buildings of Republic Square. Towering buildings in volcanic stone, glistening candy pink in the light of morning. Around a large fountain, a set of boys on rollerblades, children in white and blue school uniforms. Police cars whirled around a traffic circle, honking.

I sat just off the square, under a Coco-Cola umbrella at an outdoor cafe. A sweat drop trickled down from my hairline, stinging my eye, the day's heat beginning to mount. I'd walked further than I'd realized. The dry air was pressing me into a dry, flat version of myself. A kerchiefed woman hunched over a small hay broom, dabbed at the cement around my feet, sweeping cigarette butts into a pile. I got that vague sense of shame that comes with watching the work of others, while sitting and worrying about what you will look like for the rest of the day. A dog passed, mangy and heaving, a vacancy in his eyes, sniffing for scraps. Otherwise the café was empty.

A young server walked my way, showing some hesitation, forcing a smile that she eventually managed to spread over her pretty face as she reached the table. I ordered an Americano and bottle of water.

She wiped some crumbs from the table and into her hand. I shook my head and waved my hand. "Oh I don't mind."

She glanced up, her face saying she'd no idea what it was I'd said but certainly it was unnecessary.

She sprinted off and returned, placing water and coffee in front of me. I tapped the porcelain white coffee cup and asked, "What do you call this in Armenian? This. Armenian?"

Her face resorted to the tenuous, taunt expression she'd began with. "I'm sorry no understand," she said, turning away from my horrible question.

I apologized but she was already far away, busying herself with arranging glasses on a shelf.

The coffee, bitter and gritty, did the job. I ran the mud of it over the roof of my mouth and watched a muted television in the corner. A montage of military training. Images of young soldiers in dark green camouflage, jogging up the side of a brown hill, crouched behind bushes with Kalishnakoffs, laughing around a bonfire, walking single file through a cem-

etery, their breath visible in the air. It was surprising to see on television in a café, but then I reminded myself it shouldn't be. This was a country that knew genocide, border conflicts past and present, natural disasters. It was far from Alamogordo Airbase but the soldiers wore the same dark green fatigues my father had worn, just before the sand colored camouflage that came soon after, when we took over the Middle East, so I sensed something familiar in the visuals. It brought that ping of sadness that came with reminders of my father.

A shiny black Mercedes SUV pulled up and an immaculate woman climbed out of the back. An hourglass shape, a shimmering white dress, a faint pink hue in her platinum, mermaid hair. I took out my sketchbook and as she passed I tried to catch the way the light fell over her pink mermaid hair. I tried to scribble her down, freeze something of her composition, her fleeting halo, some scrap of her foreign beauty, something to lug with me.

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Tidy and simple. Paint, sun, building, photograph.

But there's nothing simple about loosening the grip on your life. And nothing tidy about the grip itself. I was fooling myself to think that I was doing something simple for simple reasons. I was fooling myself to think it would be simple to pull off.

Narine knew this but she never tried convincing me not to go any more than she pretended to understand why I would go. Though, she wanted, I think, her words to come along with me for that handful of strange days. She wanted to tell me as much as possible. Even if she knew I was dragging myself in a direction I wasn't quite prepared to go, she was good enough not to deter me from my choice to misstep.

The day I went to Narine's bakery to announce I was going to her home country, she was surprised, too. I didn't tell her my real intentions for going; I never mentioned the framed photo on her wall or wanting to paint that building when the sun moved across it at just the right hour. I just said, "I've decided to go to Armenia."

She laughed and asked, "What do you want to know about it there?"

I had no immediate answer, but she didn't really mind. I shrugged and she shrugged back and said, "Sounds good."

Her reaction made me immediately love her.

Yerevan to Gyumri

Checking out, Hostel Boy asked me why I'd come and where I would go and the only way I could think to say it was "I'm taking a bus to Gyumri to paint pictures."

"To Gyumri to paint pictures," he parroted.

"Yes."

"Gyumri?"

"Yes."

"Why?" His eyes widened, his voice reached a higher pitch before I could answer. "Gyumri! I come from Gyumri! My home. You know the story about Gyumri? You know this? What do you say? The earth moved. You know? Very bad story."

His sudden animation fluttered my stomach. "An earthquake. Yes, I know about it and I'm sorry it happened." I took no time to consider a less generic thing to say, what might feel more right for him to hear.

Hostel Boy said, with something grave on the edge of his voice, "I'm glad you will come to paint pictures in Gyumri. It's a good thing."

I laughed an uncomfortable laugh. I'd shared my reason for being there out loud to someone and out of my head the words sounded strange.

"Thank you," I said.

--

He gave me directions to the bus depot and I left. As I walked over the chipped sidewalk, depleted of much of my morning's energy, I told myself it was a good thing I hadn't shown up carrying more. I considered hailing a taxi and changed my mind, deciding it would only mean more to negotiate—monetarily and otherwise.

As I walked Hostel Boy's words hiccupped through in my head.

To Gyumri to paint pictures.

Tidy and simple, I reminded myself.

--

My father had said he'd been around the same age I was when he started drawing, but then the military had won out because he wanted to fly fighter jets, defy gravity, defend his country.

And later in life, I'd gain some clarity about how his flights away from home, at undisclosed places, sometimes for undeterminable amounts of time, had put strain on his relationship to my mother. She'd resented how much he enjoyed his flights away. So maybe Armenia signaled another trait in my blood passed down from him—the desire to flee. But even so, there were more differences than similarities between our two departures. His desires were executed in a professional manner, based on what he deemed as principle and duty. My instance of flight was flimsy, and arguably reactionary. He left a wife and two kids when he took off. I wasn't sure anymore who or what I was leaving.

In Armenia, when I thought of who I'd really left behind, it was a slim list. Frannie, some friends who wouldn't notice my absence for a few days, and perhaps, whether I liked it or not, Eric.

Eric's face rolled loose in my head. And this last memory of him before I left. It was the night I decided to buy the ticket to Armenia, the night I finally told him it was over.

I'd been listening to him rant about red lights. Red lights were the problem with our urban landscape, were the tiny disruptions of every day that ulcerated through him, were the small hiccups contributing to his hypertension. I made the mistake of saying red lights weren't so bad, that I liked the idea of slowing down and enjoying each moment.

"You're spoiling yourself," he said. "All that self-absorbed studying of the world."

I said, "Not true. I like to take time out for myself when it makes sense. I like red lights because they let me go inward, give me time to sit idle. Where's the damage in that?"

He said, "That's why you like to take the long way to my apartment?"

"It's over," I said. "I mean this."

Then I accidentally knocked his beer off my dining room table and it smashed all over the kitchen. He paused, then sighed and let out a loud, throaty "What the fuck! I mean, what the fuck!"

As he yelled he hit his kneecap under the table and I jumped. I wanted to apologize. On any other occasion, that's what I would have done. But instead of talking I stood and watched him roll the broken glass over the heel of his boot.

"You're worse off than I thought," he said. And then, almost in the same breath, "No sorry, it's okay to doubt."

I said, "I don't think this is doubt. To doubt you've got to first know what's in question."

I picked up the shards but didn't mop up the beer. The next morning, I felt the stickiness under my feet. Beer settled into the wide grooves of the grain. I left it that way and thought about what I should pack.

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I reached the queues of vans, each with a paper taped on the passenger window, destinations and departures, rates, information I'd no way of grasping.

"Gyumri?" I said to a man loading crates into the back of one.

"Gyumri," he repeated, nodding.

I managed a window seat on a van jammed full of elderly women and vegetables. As I climbed in, a woman in the front passenger seat turned around and asked if I was French, or so that's how it sounded.

"American," I said with a smile.

She squinted as though stressing her vision to make out my features, then turned back around.

The driver blasted a compilation of robust smooth jazz covers. Lionel Ritchie songs, Stevie Wonder. *I Just Called to Say I Love You* with drum machine and meandering saxophone.

We left Yerevan and hit a moonscape, the narrow road snaking past stones of all kinds. Volcanic pockmarked stones, red stones and mossy stones. Large single stones in the middle of wheat fields, clusters of stones next to jutting trees, next to a dog with a wobbly leg, next to a woman in a long flapping house dress switching a cow on the ass.

The only speed on the highway was an urgent, anxious fast. We weaved like an ambulance and the other drivers weaved right back. Through the front window, a head on collision appeared imminent at all times. I kept to the side window.

We moved toward the mountains, steep ripples of soft pinks and browns. And then beyond, the faint but massive Mt Ararat, its snow top fuzzing out white in the soft blue sky, a giant, frosty smudge on the hot day. I would never have guessed it would be so tall, unreal in its height and it didn't seem natural to see something so snowy in the heat.

I recognized Mt Ararat from most everything I encountered that had to do with Armenia in my reading, internet searching and talks with Narine. In a documentary about the mountain, which I watched long before I'd ever thought to travel near it, they talked about Noah's Ark, the remains of which were believed to be somewhere on the mountain. Through the decades, people ascended the mountain, willing to risk their life to find the ancient shipwreck. Christian explorers, seeking out the tangible evidence of their faith, used the Book of Genesis as their navigational tool. One of them had been an American astronaut in the 70s. John Irwin, the eighth person to walk on the moon. He'd brought moon rocks back to earth. He'd felt God up there on the moon. He'd felt God and came back down to earth a creationist. There were people like him all over the world, all competing to find proof of their faith. Some had been wounded by falling rocks, some got kidnapped by Kurdish rebels, others died from hyperthermia. At one point a climber thought they'd found the ark—an American. But it turned out to be just a natural land formation in the foothills. Upon discovery, though, the Turks, who'd come to claim the mountain as their own through war, sacrificed sheep on the spot in celebration. Later they turned it into a national park. And even after they proved the site was not a shipwreck, the Turks maintained Noah's Ark National Park, and still bus in tourists for picnic lunches today. The documentary said that the astronaut John Irwin had never come down from the mountain with anything newsworthy.

He called it the greatest disappointment of his life. I marveled at that. What it must feel like to devote oneself so much to a cause that failure to secure its evidence would override the success of space travel.

We passed strange tin objects, two worn, black boots sitting aligned on a rock, a man reaping a field, crooked concrete telephone poles, cemented square structures, slouching hay triangles covered with bright blue plastic. We hit a hole in the road disrupting the crates in the back of the van. A stray cantaloupe rolled past my feet.

There was a tapping on my back and I turned to find an old woman lumped together in a blue dress-sack. In her lap she held a glass bowl of sunflower seeds. She scooped seeds into a cone made from a torn square of newspaper and reached out a lumpy arm to hand it to me, her gummy mouth arched up in a smile. I leaned in to hand over a coin I thought was probably right, slightly more than right to be safe, and she pushed my hand away, almost violently, laughing.

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When Hostel Boy asked if I knew about Gyumri's story, I did. In a way, at least.

I'd tried to learn as much as I could in the time between deciding to go and boarding the plane, either by talking to Narine or skimming the internet. It had been the cultural capital of Armenia, but that ended in 1988 on a cold, December morning. Hostel Boy's story began at 11:41 a.m. that day. That's when the earthquake happened and the hands of his town square's clock froze in place, as though to say *this is where time stops and the story begins*.

This is what I learned of the story. In the seconds that the ground shook, people ran from schools, factories and beds,

fish jumped from aquariums, packs of dogs scattered, mattresses fell from their frames, sinks fell through the floor, reinforced concrete collapsed down into sandwiching layers. 20,000 apartments were destroyed, 85% of nine-story buildings were destroyed, 80% of five-story buildings were destroyed, and 25,000 people died. Those still walking sifted debris in search of their families. Shopping bags of relief supplies arrived from Moscow, as did truckloads of equipment, workers from as far as Minsk and blood transfusion equipment and dialysis machines. Dogs from America, trained to seek out survivors buried under rubble. Five tons of clothing arrived from Great Britain. The sun sunk and the sky went dark by half past 5 that afternoon. The survivors lit fires and kept rooting around. They slipped on mud and sunk into holes. They dug and sifted and it began to snow.

According to Narine, some believed the story began because of a Soviet explosion, an underground atomic experiment gone wrong, accidentally detonated bunkers of weaponry. But most assumed the story began because sometimes nature is a cruel force and horrible things happen with little explanation. It's just the shoddy way the earth is put together. Just the natural rupturing of 37 miles of thrust fault, falling between the Alps and the Himalayas, great plates of the earth pushing at each other, smack at the center of the Shirak plateau, 1550 meters above sea level, with the Akhurian river passing to the west, the Pambak mountains to the east and Aragats volcanic range to the south. A seismically active crescent, well inside the collision zone— stretching from eastern Turkey and the Caucasus to the west of the Caspian Sea.

Regardless of why the earthquake happened, it's a fact that the Soviet Union had one uniform building code for an entire territory and so in some ways the story is about the flaws of construction, brick and mortar never meant to hold the people they held for as long as they did.

I think the story must get quiet—that's how I imagine it, anyway. One out of every 12 dead in a town must mute the days. And those left alive, left walking, the souls drained from their heads, sometimes had little to say. But the task of unearthing the living and the dead was loud. Or, so that's how it looks on YouTube. That's how it reads online. That's how Narine made it seem.

I don't think Hostel Boy was alive yet, but I imagine the earthquake was passed into his blood. Most likely, he came out wailing it at birth.

Gyumri

I found myself standing on the gravel road of the bus lot, the sun going down fast, the dust kicked up. The air was hampered and nothing bustled like in Yerevan. Other than what I intuited, based on the pitch of their voices as two produce vendors argued over who would get the wheeled cart sitting in the road, there was just a flutter of passengers and drivers. I walked to the road and scanned for a queue of taxis but found none. My luggage was getting heavier.

While daydreaming about leaving, I didn't think about how heavy it would be. I hadn't considered how every paint brush I packed would weigh on my body. I'd packed as minimally as I could, though. A small rolling suitcase for clothes and toiletries; an IPad, a portable French easel, a bag of paints, a sketchbook, some pencils and brushes, tucked in a backpack. But still each item took on new weight with every step as I walked a direction I believed would take me to the guesthouse. According to a print out from Google Maps, evidence on paper that I'd thought ahead on behalf of the me who might be lost, it was 1.02 miles to the guesthouse from the bus depot. A straight shot down Tigran Mets Street. With the sun nearly

gone in a country of few streetlamps, there loomed a threat of getting lost in new and progressively more terrifying ways.

A dull ache spread from my ribs to my pelvis. I was learning about the strain everyone warned me about after the surgery. I had a history of misunderstanding my body and had taken the illness as a lesson. Since the little man I'd sharpened a focus on my body, a keen awareness of every twinge and every ache. I now regularly took inventory of my body's parts. Arms, muscle, wrist, stomach, back. As I walked I told myself that the dull ache was just indigestion or the onset of monthly cramps. I wasn't sure. With my new keen awareness of all things somatic came a realization that pains manifesting for different reasons could still feel the same. For months I had thought the little man was just the result of not stretching well enough at the gym. Or indigestion. The drawback of my new heightened awareness was that every feeling began to feel like pain.

I brushed away the fear that the trip's exertion might rob me of my recovery. I brushed away the fear that I felt more pain than the average person my age. I brushed away the fear that it would soon be dark. I told myself that what went on in my abdomen, walking in that moment, be it gas or cramps, was a natural part of being alive. I told myself there was no room for doubt or hypochondria. I told myself to focus on getting where I needed to go.

Under my breath I chanted. *Yes, I am curious. Yes, I am not afraid. Yes, I am prepared.* The answers to questions no one had asked.

--

If I would've told anyone I was going, beside Narine, it may have been Frannie—if only out of a bad habit of reluctantly letting her into my world—a world she always seemed right

at the edge of, crooking her head for a better look, inquiring, questioning, criticizing.

Frannie would've said not to go, and I had no room for that. I could hear her in my head: *How ridiculous, Sara. Why? You can't afford it.*

She might have listed statistics about disaster risks in earthquake zones, something she'd heard in class or read in some Huffington Post article. And maybe, in a rare display of assertiveness, I'd have told her to shut the fuck up. Or, I would've whined, *But I need to go*. And she'd say, *How could you have healed enough?* And I might have lied, *But I feel great*. And she'd say, *Tell me it doesn't still hurt when you sneeze.* And I'd deny her the satisfaction of being right and tell her *I don't hurt at all*. And she wouldn't believe me. And I'd remind her she told me to be curious, and she'd hate hearing that.

But in the end she'd win because she'd say that I knew what she meant when she said to be curious—camping in Vermont, maybe. Not Armenia.

But she wouldn't *really* win. And neither would I, because we wouldn't be talking about the same thing, we wouldn't even be fighting the same fight.

Frannie always had words of encouragement when I didn't want to be within range of her voice. Her rally cries hit like pebbles flicked at my head. She'd say, *It's what you make of it.* She'd say, *It's just growing pains!* She'd write it down on birthday cards, sign it from her and our mother. *This is going to be the year!*

Once as children, after we'd moved to Maryland, I'd accidently knocked her down when she walked in front of the swing set. She hit a rock and the gash on her forehead left her face a bloody horror. She cried and then I cried. My mother had swooped in, making a rare appearance out of the apartment, and I remember wondering how she could have been on the scene so fast.

Just before sweeping my sister up in her arms, she knelt down to me. "Why would you *do* that?" She said it low voiced, dramatic, shaking, with the sweetness of liquor in her breath.

She did not wait for me to tell her it was an accident. There was no time for my excuses.

Later in the hospital lobby when I saw the butterfly stitches, how they sewed up the part of Frannie I'd torn, I started to cry again. But she was dry eyed by that point. She kicked up her leg and said *You're going to be okay. Don't worry.*

As I walked the quiet Gyumri road, passing still storefronts, sluggish willow trees, stones of all shapes and sizes, my bag slipped from my shoulder, knocking my easel to the ground. I imagined my sister seeing me in that moment.

Sara, you should have taken only what you could carry.

I thought about what I'd say to her the next time I saw her. Most likely I'd just apologize for not clueing her in. But maybe I'd pop up at her door and say: *I'm back! See! I knew what I was doing all along.*

That would feel good.

I swallowed the dull nausea that rose up with thoughts of Frannie.

I wondered what she might say back, but in my head I could hardly hear her talking. I'd buried it too far down, the sound of her voice. A small and lovely accomplishment.

--

I'd booked a guesthouse that belonged to Levon. A tall, broad, angular man, casually dressed. Red shiny shorts with matching jersey and blue plastic sandals.

After ringing the bell and announcing who I was, I entered his living room and let my belongings slip from my shoulders onto the elaborate red and gold carpet. I rotated

my shoulders and cocked my neck back and forth, relieved to shed the burden.

Levon looked down at my luggage and scratched his chin. He said, "Yes. Okay then."

He bent down and smashed his cigarette into a delicate crystal dish sitting on a white-lace covered table. Other than the low murmur of a TV the house was warm and quiet. It was furnished, tidy and dense with the low hanging smoke from his cigarette. I noted the feminine touches of the room and hoped the matriarch would soon appear. Levon bent down to pick up my luggage. I motioned no, I have it, but he came back with a *no-no-no*, a belly laugh rumbling out of him with a smoker's grumble. He picked up my belongings and I followed him down the hall. I felt acutely how still the house was and began to wonder if we were the only two.

In the guest room, Levon pointed to a neatly folded hand towel sitting on a chair and some mint colored silk slippers, neatly placed at the foot of the bed.

"Yeah?" he asked, maybe more a statement than an actual question, low toned, shrugging his shoulders.

"Yes," I confirmed. "Thank you."

I laughed my anxious laugh. He shuffled back down the hall.

The small room shrank against the weight of a large, elaborately carved wooden chest. A machine gun sat on top of the chest, its tripod mounted to a marble slab. Balancing on the back of the gun sat a fist-sized rock, pocked, chipped and sparkling. The object seemed to say that the room belonged to somebody, maybe someone who'd be back any minute. I found a corner for my luggage and lowered myself onto the hard, twin sized bed like an intruder.

Levon's face appeared in the doorway and I mustered an alert smile to which he responded with a smirk and bowed head. "Please. You come, see books and watermelon."

He motioned me to sit on the couch and disappeared into the kitchen, reappearing with a bowl of melon and a large hardbound book, which he placed on the table in front of me.

"For guests," he said.

He eased into the chair next to me, a chair I could tell was his and his alone, well-worn and shaped to him. Grabbing the remote, he turned the volume up on the television, an interview or news show set to a laugh track.

"Will other guests be joining us?"

When he didn't answer, I concluded we were alone. Or, he just hadn't heard the question. I thumbed through the book—black and white photos of Gyumri.

"There," Levon said, turning in his chair, pointing down to a two-page spread showing a pair of images of the Church of the Holy Savior, dated 1967 and 1988—pre-earthquake and after. The first image, a church. The second image, a cupola resting on the ground. "Churches from earthquake."

I said, "It's amazing that could happen. I've heard about this church and how it's yet to be rebuilt. Still sitting in pieces in the town's square."

He'd already turned back to the television. "I do not understand," he mumbled.

I realized he meant he didn't understand me.

--

A skeleton key in the guest room door offered the option to lock myself in and I did. Lying on top of the bed, not bothering to find my way under the blankets or even to change my clothes, a dull panic rolled through my already achy muscles. I turned to my side and the gun with the rock on it stared down at me. The wind jerked the bedroom door in its frame

and though I knew what it was, I imbued it with significance, a foreshadowing of things to come.

I got up to dig out my iPad, deciding it time for a more familiar world, for sending messages home. But there was no Wi-Fi signal, though the guesthouse's website listed it as an amenity. Not even a prompt for a password. Levon's Guesthouse website was a fraud and now I was sure he was, too. Levon could be anyone. Lying under the gun I told myself he was nobody to fear. That it was only a few days. That it was okay that I'd come without telling anyone. That soon enough everyone would get the emails I owed them.

--

I went back to the bakery a few days after telling Narine I was going to Gyumri. She sat one table over, folding plastic ware into white napkins, eyes on the task as she talked. The bakery was otherwise empty.

I didn't bring it up but she said, "I'm delighted you'll go, but it confuses me. I have people for you to contact, I'll give you numbers. They could help you, but they don't speak English, so…" She drifted off with a shrug of her shoulders.

"It's okay," I said.

The young man normally stationed in the kitchen came out to empty the trash bins and the tenuous expression he flashed me said they'd be closing. After he shuffled back to the kitchen I asked Narine if he was her son and she paused her hands. "I don't have kids," she said. What I took to be annoyance ran thick through her words.

I felt like I should apologize for asking, but decided instead just to leave without ceremony. As I placed my cup in the bin above the trashcan, Narine raised her head and put down the plastic ware.

"Gyumri will be a mystery to you."

Her grave expression broke and she gave me an uncharacteristically broad smile, broader than usual, before lowering her head back to her task. She shook her head with animation, as though to say no, or that she wouldn't get through to me, or that she'd just witnessed something indecent, but more funny than embarrassing.

As I pushed the door to leave, Narine called out, "Whatever it is you want to affirm or reaffirm. Whatever it is, you may find it there. But likely you won't. You will find many other things you didn't expect. "

All I could think to say was, "Thank you."