

С. Огольцов

The City to Love



The Stepanakert Saga: Book 3



Сергей Огольцов

The City to Love

«Автор»

2026

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The third book of Stepanakert Saga is much more kaleidoscopic and richer in characters than the previous two put together. Structurally, it has two parts: 1. "The Provincial Summer of '98", which depicts Stepanakert four years after events of The Ficus period. Now, it's time for those who stayed alive under bombardments to fight, as hard as they could, for survive in the post-war space. This part is made up of a series of essays published in the summer indicated in its title in the press of the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh. Yep, both organs scrambled for the stuff and turned it out in space of a couple of days after each other. 2. Part Two: Beyond the City Limits mostly justifies its name, yet the city to love still remains the center of gravity.

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Сергей Огольцов

The City to Love

The City to Love...

By Sehguey Ogoltsoff

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The third planet from the sun, the eastern hemisphere, up from the Cancer tropic... long story shirt, here I am, face to face with my PC, the keyboard, and the mouse...

Sehguey Ogoltsoff

The City to Love...

2026

1 Explanatory

What is the *Stepanakert Saga*? It is a book series by an eyewitness, an independent writer. And what exactly is an independent writer?

Someone who writes what is permitted, moral, correct, true, or profitable?

Hell no! With zero regard for conventional standards, he chronicles what he saw, what he felt, and the things that burned him over and over until he finally said, "To hell with all that!..."

He's a bastard with no party affiliation, no ideals, and no homeland—this independent son of a bitch...

The *Stepanakert Saga* is a literary chronicle spanning thirty-seven years, from the hope-filled dawn to the tragic twilight of the Mountainous Karabakh Armenians' struggle for the independence of their native land.

Sounds like the campaign trail word-salad of some populist little prick, doesn't it? Or a speech by a high school military instructor. It is what it is, no getting around it. *Kyanga, li!* It's a mix of sin and laughter—a tragedy so absurd you'll die laughing, a comedy that will follow you straight to the grave.

In other words, it's a highly entertaining read for a wide audience of every stripe, and streak, and interest.

And that includes serious researchers diving into ultra-deep questions, like: how and why did Armenians worldwide—those from Karabakh included, though these were the last to be asked—lose this historic homeland of theirs, the one of ultimate significance?

2 Synopsis

The third book of *Stepanakert Saga* is much more kaleidoscopic and richer in characters than the previous two put together. Structurally, it has two parts:

1. "The Provincial Summer of '98", which depicts *Stepanakert* four years after events of The Ficus period. Now, it's time for those who stayed alive under bombardments to fight, as hard as they could, for survive in the post-war space. This part is made up of a series of essays published in the summer indicated in its title in the press of the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh. Yep, both organs scrambled for the stuff and turned it out in space of a couple of days after each other.

2. Part Two: Beyond the City Limits mostly justifies its name, yet the city to love still remains the center of gravity.

3 Sincere Gratitude

As before yet more so I'm grateful to my editor, translator, co-author and — what's more — my gossip, and my tutor. Thank you, partner, for polishing the clumsy heap of my clunky blabber into something readable.

Part One: The Provincial Summer of '98

4 Public Manifestation of Unfailing Gratitude

(A thing or two about cataclysms, like, for an epigraph)

The fourth Pharaoh of the seventeenth dynasty, Akhulidzalupón Pti-Psi—ruler of Upper and Lower Egypt, et cetera, et cetera...—slipped up in a fog conjured by the vile, seductive trickery of sorcerers from perfidious Mesopotamia.

And oh, how his brains got muddled, thoroughly scammed by those wizardly swindlers, until his loyalty to the state religion—which had survived all seventeen dynasties without a single schism or collapse—went completely to hell. But this Akhulidzalupón, acting like the absolute gull he was, took them at their word, those Chaldean mages making mug of him, swallowed the bait of a quirk idea as if everything present in the Universe abides in an undeniable (though not traceable at a glance) interconnectedness.

Long story short: breathe through your nose and keep it clean, don't play Jesus, and never meddle with the natural course of evolution—lest you trigger a chain of unexpected and, quite possibly, horrific events...

His wife, Queen Naphthalínti, on the other hand, didn't give a flying damn from the top of any and all Egyptian pyramids about the mind-boggling dogmas of abstract theorizing. And when the most beloved of her cats (the bottomless abyss of millennia, having greedily swallowed the beast, refused to spit back a single bone, let alone a name—though even to this day, especially in the evenings, bizarre legends go on spinning about its awesome tail both stiff and springy) suddenly fell ill, the Queen was definitely not in the mood to wait around for the feline critter to drop dead the decent natural way of adequate quality...

She paid complete zero attention to the tight indignant pucker on the Pharaoh's royal mug but commanded the priests of gods with medical tilts to be summoned. Gathering in full council, they unanimously prescribed a thorough flushing of the cat's bowels through his rear pucker.

The very next morning, at the absolute crack of dawn, Akhulidzalupón Pti-Psi burst into Naphthalínti's chambers, waving a broad sheet of papyrus in his right hand. Fresh printer's ink was practically splattering off it in every direction of the compass, and he bellowed at the top of his pharaonic lungs:

"You've done it now! Here's your cat's enema for you! Atlantis is poof... Sunk to the sea bottom goddamn bestiaries! All because of your interconnected bastard furball!.."

...

This piece (acting as an epigraph to what is basically a preface) surfaced back in '89, right after a natural cataclysm—the Great Armenian Earthquake—and shortly before a political one: the Karabakh War.

Mind you, the roads of Mountainous Karabakh were already hosting a full-blown "stone war"—rock-showering any passing car or bus...

Next came four years of modern warfare, implementing the upscale means reached by the current civilization for the purpose, which spared no expense when it came to artillery, rocket, and aerial bombardments.

The world barely noticed that war; it had plenty of other noise to worry about—the clumsy Russian Empire was bursting at the seams and (once again) squeezing itself into a new outfit.

All in all, the international community never quite figured out who on earth these Karabakhers actually were. Rumor had it they were the indigenous population of the region, yet giving ear to the leadership of the former Soviet republic to which Comrade Stalin had hitched them—absolutely not. Supposedly, those Christian shrines from the first half of the millennium before last were built by a completely different ethnicity that later dissolved into thin air. (Frankly, it wouldn't have hurt to dissolve the shrines themselves, too).

My well-bred nose is above poking into these or any squabbles, but if ever asked, I have nothing to conceal: Karabakhers are a root nation of this planet.

Why think small? Just like any other folks who managed to survive until now...

On a grassy knoll at the entrance to Stepanakert stands a monument by sculptor Sarkis Baghdasaryan: a couple of huge man-made crags, side by side. On the right sticks up the bald head of a bearded fellow; on the right is a woman's head, wrapped in a shawl. The locals dubbed this creation Dedo-Babo ("Grandpa and Grandma"), though officially it's translated We And Our Mountains.

Yet the interpretations miss a vital point though; it really should be: We Are Our Mountains.

Old mountains registered in Old Testament. An ancient people. Conquerors marched through here, establishing their reigns. Enforcing their faiths. For millennia, rulers, empires, and religions replaced one another...

And after all that, Gurgен—a KRAZ truck driver whose house is just one door down from mine in Stepanakert—pointed at the slope of the opposite mountain (they call them tumbs around here) while introducing me to his native village and casually remarked:

"Back in the Stone Age, our village stood right over there, but now we've moved across the valley to live here."

He wasn't bragging; it was just a piece of information for the record. But you'll hardly find a blue-blooded aristocrat with family roots running deep into the centuries who could point out an ancestral nest of comparable antiquity.

The roots of humanity are right here. Living roots.

And that, perhaps, is the key to how a populace of 180,000 managed to hold its ground against an empire of seven million. Humanity of this planet, not exactly in the know what's what in that Rfrabakh issue, felt it—not with its brain, but with something deeper: you cannot tear out roots, especially your own...

But generally speaking, Karabakhers are people just like anyone else. Which means you can love them, or get mad at them, or write about them.

I can already hear the critics: You set out to write about Karabakhers, yet look at how much you drone with that 'I-I-I' of yours!

But first of all, I didn't just become a Karabakher yesterday. And second of all, it's not what you write, it's how you write it. My storytelling style is natively Karabakhi—pounded into me during my stint as a translator for the local rag.

The front-page editorials of its editor, Maksim Ovanisyan, taught me that readers love it when a friendly hand drops onto their shoulder, and you just talk to them casually, like a brother: "Akhper, you and me, why, we're in this together..."

The feature pieces by Susan Atanesyan showed me in practice how a story comes alive the moment you drop in a single, sharp detail of everyday life.

And the thoughtful articles of Naira Hayrumyan instilled a taste for contemplation—leisurely and somewhat philosophical.

For a graduate of such a school, it would be a sin not to erect a monument to this unique Karabakhi style. So here it is, brother—a monument not made by human hands!

The artifact of two parts (no, not about Dedo-Babo already) the first one's title is a bit long, but it gets straight to the point: Provincial Summer of '98.

It is precluded by this very epigraph, though it's long enough to pass for a preface, don't you think?

And right on the heels of the epigraph, already on its way, are a couple of quasi-introductions and seven essays, hammered out during the long summer of the year stated in the aforementioned title. The second part's name can be found out by any big boy or girl.

And that's enough explaining: my job here is done—*Lyav kats*¹, my dear reader partner!
'98\11\02

* * *

5 Students Today: Goals and Outlook

(by way of an introduction to Part One in "The City to Love")

Space and time are delicate matters—at least here in the East, an area that doesn't exactly boast about excess fat in its constitution. I wouldn't call it entirely skeletal, but it is running a bit lean. Statistically speaking.

Anyway, we can send the nutritionists to buzz off for now—we've got weightier (even if delicate) concepts waiting for us. The aforementioned space and time can sometimes tangle themselves into Gordian knots of mind-boggling complexity around here. The loops of so labyrinthine twists that even a compass would drop its jaw in utter confusion: holy cow, what on earth is this? An entrance or an exit?

Space still hesitates about what outfit it really wants to wear; every single day it tries on new epithets for its runway walk—one moment it's a "buffer zone," the next it's "living space," and then it's "autochthonous-ethnic territory."

Time kicks a dust of its own in quirky leaps around like a frisky goat, back and forth and back again. One second it skips out of the time zone of its legitimate geophysical affiliation to land straight into the realm of "economic expediency." Yet a moment later (before it can even bleat baa or mee), its little hooves carry it off toward the "political realities of the regional situation," ensuring that the hours and minutes keep ticking in perfect synchronization with Big Brother's clock.

Oh, the local leadership faces a tortuous choice: whose daylight saving time is the correct one to switch to, after all? Yerevan's or Moscow's?

Both options offer plenty of pros and cons; it's enough to make your head spin from the sheer complexity of the layout.

Amid such intricately entwined matters, you'd better keep your ears pinned back and your eyes wide open. No, this game of leapfrog is no joke! It's just impossible to guess what you'll step into over the very next threshold. Good luck if there's another room waiting for you on the other side; while a desert would be noticeably worse—just pray you don't drop straight into a crater whose volcano has been fired up already.

...

Whew!... Looks like we lucked out this time. Having withstood the final yards of space—thoroughly drenched in an Arabian heat where even the smell of dust radiates fire—you step onto a boot-scraper of rattling iron strips. Left foot first, then the right.

(Though it doesn't really matter; you can do it the other way around. Just on principle, to test and make it sure, take two steps back—you don't even have to turn around. Now switch feet and step back onto the iron contraption. See? Told you so: absolutely no difference... But I admire your scientific dedication! In a heatwave like this, and you actually bothered!...)

Next, you ascend (with a proper dignity) three incredibly long steps tiled with half-inch marble slabs and pass through the wide-open glass doors of the entrance airlock. Finally, you plunge into the quiet chill and the refreshingly soft semi-twilight, styled like at the royal courts of the Reformation era.

Your eyes, still blind after the glare of the sun left outside, are sort of befuddled—pretty disoriented: is this the Spanish Escorial or, after all, the Louvre in Paris?

Beneath the shade of mighty misty vaults there flows the murmuring ceremonial of courtly life. The beauties of the court weave their cunning intrigues. Huddled here and there in chattering flocks between the massive, square columns, they deliver verdicts (at half-glance yet with deadly clinical

¹ Karabahi Armenian: 1) Be well; 2) Behave well.

precision) on the ornate outfits of their friends (who double as their rivals—don't argue, there's no fighting *c'est la vie*) who happened hanging in another flock.

They know real value of everything brought in for their abundant whims by the caravans of dauntless "shuttle-traders" from Persia (otherwise known as Iran) and other nearby oriental lands.

Ah, how miraculously irresistible these outfits are—globally identical!

It calls for a good deal of sorcery and magic to dress in a way that leaves everything perfectly obvious, emphasizing, expressing, and impressing with close contouring the fullness of shapes, the captivating flow of lines, and all the other luxurious baits of goods draped in semi-transparent wrappers!

The witchcraft wafts of perfume aromas and sweet fragrances spellbind your nose at once with both delight and wild elation—the poor thing, filled to the brim, is on the verge of losing its mind from overdose. Stop breathing, you fool! The fail-safe limit is too dangerously close!

Why, if N. V. Gogol found himself amid this flowerbed—surrounded by this unthinkable cross between a rose garden and a columbarium—the great classic would have to choke on his own saliva. And if they somehow managed to revive him with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, he—within than very half-second—would burn the first part of *Dead Souls* too just to redraw *The Carriage* story into a three-volume sequel by the still smoldering paper on its ashes...

Figures in fatigue stroll across the stone tiles of the hall, flaunting their military posture (though without swords—Richelieu banned duelling, you know).

The rest of the courtly youth of the male persuasion (no less dashing, even without uniforms) completely ignore the military. Mind you, they might still fraternize now and then—to plan a feast or strike a wager on... well, they know best.

The military breed is the backbone of any merry company, risky venture, or, for that matter, palace coup...

There hangs a vague, ceaseless hum in the air—a mashup of stomping heels, thin creaks leather belts, the castanet-like click-clack of thick black eyelashes in a stealthy wink, light palm-slaps at biceps, the jingle of cheap jewelry, tempting chuckle, elusive giggles, exclusive briefings: "...oh, you're so brave... and him? Vuy!... and what he said after? Really?!..." —until your mind begins to slowly lose you : is this Madrid, for crying out loud, or Paris, or did I smack banged into some wrong goddamn Vienna?

And your gaze, shinning upward just in case, scrambles past the grand staircase with its stained-glass windows at the landing until it locks onto the digitally greenish shimmer on the square face of a black electronic clock box—hitting it dead-center, Robin Hood-style, right in the middle of the ceiling beam.

And whew! Relief... Everything is fine: no Madrids, no Viennas! You are exactly where you need to be—at Artsakh State University, and all this beauty and dashing posture belongs to the youth who have shown up to scoop their ken from the knowledge accumulated here...

But what on earth brought us here, sir?

I don't exactly have time to classify the needs of every present one—except for myself who has a specific assignment from the editor-in-chief of the MK Republic newspaper: to check and present a report on:

1. What is the goal of today's student youth; and (simultaneously, hitched back to back;
2. What is their outlook on their own present and future...

...

On the second floor, not a shred of recollection of the lobby's gloomy chill has the slimmest chance to persevere in tagging along any longer.

On the second floor, every classroom is celebrating the day of open-door and wide-open windows. However, the air, grown brazenly lazy in the heat, has no inclination to budge even

symbolically. It just hangs there (the bastard!)—waiting to be tickled into motion by paper fans torn out of notebooks.

Doors wide open, window wings flung apart, but there isn't a hint of corridor drafts. You can safely stroll down the hallways and—through doors that look ready for a hug—study the outlook of the student body.

The picture inside the auditoriums is pretty much selfsame.

At the desk closest to the open door, back to a pristine chalkboard, sits a professor, half-melted by the heat. Facing that same idle board is a thinned-out handful of students. Their gazes stuck motionless at various points in space.

And only one student, who has pushed himself forward to sit directly opposite the prof, keeps his loyal stare glued to his mentor's face.

A wise move: finals are right around the corner, the examiner's mind needs to be impregnated with positive emotions towards the smart-ass' mug.

Yet even his devoted gaze is noticeably glassy. Even he is clearly not here right now: he's staring into the future...

...

Well, of course, the goal of modern students is the same as it has been in all eras—to finish this... university. It's just that these days, you have to choose your words a bit more carefully. If you blurt out that their goal is to get an education, the professors will laugh you out of the room.

What education, what knowledge! They showed up to buy a diploma. To trade paper for paper. They look at the university as a marriage market. Coming here to flaunt their outfits (and who would spurn the opportunity?), and to hunt down just about anyone (not me! I'm straight! It's just my mission!).

Basically, it's like walking into a store, buying a box of chocolates, dumping the chocolates out, and walking away with the empty cardboard box.

The dean of the N-th department resolutely and loudly denies that students have any right to think they are only here to buy a diploma... (Though in private, she admits that's exactly how it is).

But her opinion is a view from outside the task set before me. How does the student body itself look at its own present?

They look at it with a bitter note of disappointment. Look at how much energy was spent in high school on electives and cramming with tutors or mugging on one's own. How passionately boiled emotions: OMG, just let me get in! Oh, how I will start studying!

The dream came true...

In the first month, the student bought a bunch of notebooks, went to lectures, scribbled down some notes, and dropped by the library a time or two, just like everyone else.

And then came the debunking of illusions. The lecturers mumble God knows what, or simply regurgitate the exact same stuff that can be found in textbooks without them. And the process of academic growth looks an awful lot like prepping for an elementary school pageant: memorize a poem, recite it at the exam—and collect your grade.

And this happens to a seventeen-year-old! A person ready to turn the whole world upside down and make everyone happy, who entered the university for that exact purpose—to ascend the glittering peaks of knowledge, to obtain the keys and access to the secrets and control panels of the adult world.

And this is the person you ask to participate in elementary school pageants? To listen to the tedious mumbling of a lecturer? For four years?! For what?!

Disappointment, like any emotion, seeks an outlet...

Madam A. A. Badalova, a well-known figure in the local educational vineyard when it comes to psychological sciences, recently visited regions that have, for some time now, become "foreign countries." From there, she brought back tidings that for professors over there, the main problem is

also the students' don't-give-a-damn attitude toward their studies—which, according to those same foreign educators, sometimes escalates into horrific excesses.

On our end, when it comes to this matter, we have nothing but smooth sailing and heavenly bliss. Apparently, the provincial solid toughness of patriarchal foundations plays its part. Our youth know how to restrain themselves.

Well, sure, a thing or two might happen sometimes, nothing is 101 % proof.

Take Chernyshevsky on that his portrait—someone doodled a chalk pirate patch over his eye, but to compensate, they used that same chalk to sketch a medal on the guy's chest so as not to leave too hard feelings by the moody dude.

Yes, they stuck a cigarette butt under Maxim Gorky's mastoush. Back in his day, the old man mostly puffed on Belomorkanal, so why not let grandpa treat himself to a Camel for once?

Come on, what kind of vandalism is that? Just horseplay, the innocent pranks of juveniles.

Yet these jokes clearly reveal the students' outlook on their own present: they are dissatisfied with it; they didn't sign up for this. They do not accept it, and they express their protest in such a half-baked, immature form.

But what if, since the student now pays for tuition, he isn't just a student anymore, but a customer to boot? What if it's actually true—as the far-abroad lands noticed way before us, having stepped onto the path of market relationships much earlier—that revelation as if the customer is always right?

And even when he dumps my chocolates all over the floor, all that's left for me to do is submissively nod along and wear a blissfully shining smile.

What is to be done?

It's useless to look for an answer in the same-named Chernyshevsky's work—look at him up there, sulking under his Kutuzov eye-patch, and even that Suvorov medal didn't butter him up.

And the author of My Universities, bribed with a Camel, is also on their side.

Despairing, I address the students directly:

"What is it you guys actually want around here?"

And I get a concrete, surprisingly mature response:

"A smart professor who will teach us our future profession."

So much for the vandals!...

(My dear, sweet children! Where on earth am I going to find you any answering the description for fifteen thousand AMD a month?)

...

"Norik, what exactly has this university given you personally over your two years of study?"

Norik casually leans back, resting his spine all the way against the desktop edge behind him. His elbows languidly thrown up, his fingers laces behind his head.

"Here, I have known woman," he modestly shares.

Ah, the greenness of youth! Oh, sancta simplicitas! The naive self-assurance of youth. Oh!... Why, to truly know such a subject... or rather, such matter... well, for a bulletproof notion... a whole lifetime wouldn't be enough!...

But that is a completely different topic...

As for me, there remains just to inquire about their outlook on the future.

Oh, things are in perfect order there! Youth is full of optimism.

A couple more years will pass, they will buy out their diplomas, and then they will definitely turn this whole world upside down and make everyone happy, no doubt.

So the world—and I, included—have another two years in reserve.

Though time is an incredibly slippery thing. Even more so in the perplexing Orient, where ripening happens almost instantly. Especially when it clippety-leaps around, you see, back and forth and back again...

What if these two years turn out to be a couple of months? What then, huh?

An adult will manifest disappointment differently, not like juveniles...

And when they realize they were fed empty candy wrappers instead of the filling, I wouldn't want to accidentally find myself in too close proximity to their whereabouts.

Could anyone tell me where the entrance to the exit is around here, please?

* * *

6 A Family Portrait in a Market-Relations Interior

(by way of the second of two introductions)

A Little Fable:

In a certain state located extremely far away from us (I beg you to constantly keep this fortunate circumstance in mind—whatever follows is said about a completely other place over seven seas), democracy bloomed in such a deeply decadent, triple-tier degeneration fashion that the authorities saw fit to completely remove all oversight from the mass media. The directors of said media outlets received an official clarification from above:

"You, comrades-gentlemen-citizens, are not toddlers. You are expected to grasp the full complexity of the unfolding situation yourself, and to know exactly what the sovereign state interests consist of—interests that must be guarded night, day, and kept in sacred stability. Even more so with the transition to self-censorship. We have no forbidden topics, nor do we foresee any, seeing as you are not toddlers and..." (refer back to the beginning of this clarification).

And just like that, the authorities of this highly distant nation found themselves with significantly fewer headaches. It all worked out simply because (and this must be emphasized with special care) the people on the payroll of the mass media possessed a terminally wild imagination. They had over-read, over-heard, over-acquired, and over-drunk from the well of history.

For an imagination like that, scaring itself into pure hysteria is as easy as rolling off a log.

"Oh, what if they drag me into the dungeons of the Secret Police?"

"Or exile me back to 1937, without the right to correspondence?"

"Or send me to the chopping block with Yemelka Pugachev?"

Guided by these terrifying scenarios of their own making, the media organs self-sterilized to such a touching degree that the authorities couldn't have even dreamed of it back in the good old, pre-democratic days.

After all, "state interests" are an incredibly elastic thing, much like the concept of "the state" itself. Sometimes you have trouble wrapping your head around what exactly they are being stretched over at any given moment around us.

A certain Frenchman... (no, this isn't about the count who invented that safely elastic, stretchable little contraption; this is about a different one, the guy who was king).

Anyway, his name was Louis, running under inventory number fourteen.

So this very same Louis, at one of those given moments, deigned to hand down the following clarification:

"The State," said Number 14, "is me."

But come on, look how long ago that was! So much water has flowed under the bridge since then that it's impossible to even guess which inventory number fits the most popular size on the market today.

What if the current inventory number suddenly gets it into his head that the State is his left heel?

In such setups, a hyper-cautious approach is absolutely the must, lest you stomp on someone's corn—because what if that corn suddenly turns out to be a matter of vital state interest? And we are not toddlers, after all; they can effectively belt us up, down, and sideways...

And whenever an employee of a mass-media information outlet was suddenly and unexpectedly hit by inspiration, and—bam!—some line in a supposedly poetic style crawled out (hatched, so to speak) on its own: "How blue the sky is today!"—the self-censoring element in his responsible consciousness would immediately panic, sound the alarm, and vigilantly call him to order:

"Let me ask you this: what exactly are you implying here, huh? The sky, it's up there. And the higher-ups are the leadership. So, what you're expressively pointing out here is that our government is a bunch of faggots? Every single one of them?"

And the wretched, half-born creation would be ripped to shreds... To hell with it anyway, otherwise they'll boot the poet off to the furthest northern reaches of his native region, where they straighten out goats' horns. And who's going to believe you, after you've been thoroughly processed, that you didn't mean it that way at all?...

But I repeat: all of this took place in a certain very, very distant country, and if anyone gets it into their head to doubt this or draw unhealthy, unjustifiably strange parallels, such a line goes directly against the interests of... well, you know yourselves, we are not toddlers. You probably have children of your own by now, mm-hmm...

...

When my long-time benefactor, Maksim Ervandovich Ovanisyan—for the sake and well-being of my children—agreed to give me a job, he knew perfectly well who he was dealing with.

My very first attempt with the pen (that article about the students and their outlook) did not disappoint his worst fears.

"You write with too much bile. Too much sarcasm. Why?"

He didn't even bother listening to my tangled explanations about how it's not me doing the writing, but something writing through me; that it's the pen doing the work while I'm just being used by some unknown force to spit out the inspired, Beautiful Word. He swept all that bunk straight into the wastebasket hiding under his editorial desk—the one reserved for paper scraps and empty metaphysical delusions.

For a moment, he bored into me with the glinty reflections of his spectacles and made a move that was absolutely brilliant in its virtuosity:

"Then here is your topic. Write about how you survive on your schoolteacher's salary. Let's say your mother-in-law sends you to the bazaar—and what exactly you bring back from there."

Oh, he's a sly one. Damn wise is this heavily experienced Maksim Ervandovich! And his move is as simple as everything genius, and as genius as everything simple.

Here, take your little topic: you and market relations. And from there—knock yourself out! Splatter your bile all over market relations (which have already had so much spooze upon them that a couple of extra spit-takes won't make them hot or cold), or, for a change, you can get sarcastic at your own personal expense.

In short, my dear fellow, did you get the topic? Now trot along out of here—expose it to the best of your talents, heh-heh, or should I treat you to a cup of coffee for the road?

In keeping with the laws of the genre, the coffee had to be declined.

Well, since we're going all in on this gamble, listen up... Or rather—look. If I'm going to expose myself, I might as well go all the way! Here it is—the promised...

Family Portrait

1)

Full Name: Ogoltsoff, Sehguey Nikolaevich, 44 years old

Profession and Experience:

Locksmith (2 years)

Bricklayer (9 years)

Miner (¼ year)

Press operator (1 year)

Analyst-Translator (3 years)

English Teacher (8 years)

Monthly Earnings: 30,000 AMD (15k at ASU + 15k at SGU)

2)

Full Name: Tsaturyan, Satenik Aleksandrovna, 34 years old

Profession and Experience: Physics and Shop Teacher (12 years)

Monthly Earnings: 10,000 AMD (School No. 8)

3)

Full Name: Baghdasaryan, Ruzanna Arturovna, 15 years old

Profession and Experience: 10th-grade student

Monthly Earnings: 00,000 AMD

4)

Full Name: Ogoltsoff, Ashot Sergeevich, 8 years old

Profession and Experience: 4th-grade student

Monthly Earnings: 00,000 AMD

5)

Full Name: Ogoltsova, Emma Сергеевна, 3 years old

Profession and Experience: Independent researcher of the surrounding environment

Monthly Earnings: 00,000 AMD

6)

Full Name: Ovanisyan, Emma Arshakovna, 72 years old

Profession and Experience: Pensioner

Monthly Pension: 8,000 AMD, including disability supplement

...

Also on Hand:

— a hand-built house with a few basic amenities;

— 0.15 acres (6 sotkas) of land on a sharply rugged terrain;

— a rooster (one);

— hens (two)—a gift from one of my sisters-in-law...

Long story short: my mother-in-law doesn't send me to the bazaar; all the finances are held tightly in the hands of her daughter, Satenik.

I set my salaries from the two universities straight onto a glass shelf in the china cabinet (a gift from another sister-in-law), and if I happen to be running late for work, Satenik hands me 30 drams for the marshrutka.

It must be nice, I suppose, to constantly feel a thick wad of high-denomination bills inside your pocket. I wouldn't know; I've never had the pleasure. But happiness isn't found in money. Nor is it found in gold.

The greatest treasure on earth is amber. In Armenian, "Satenik" translates exactly to "Little Amber."

Oh, what a woman she is! What a woman!

A certain poetic soul (with six volumes of published poetry under her belt) helplessly threw up her hands and said: all the dictionaries combined couldn't supply enough epithets to convey just how magnificent Satenik is, and how brilliant, and gorgeous, and... She threw up her hands again.

Well, I can see, feel, and say all of that without any dictionaries.

But Satenik tells in response that it is a cheap, low-grade trick to dump all the responsibility onto her. I bring home my measly thirty thousand drams, stay completely oblivious, and leave it up to her to pinch pennies and cry because the kids don't have this, or don't have that; she has to borrow money for bread and then stand in the bread lines herself. And she says I only mouth those poetic words to her so she won't send me to the grocery shop.

And it's the truth. Over the winter, I hardly had to freeze for hours on end in the long lines outside the bread shop: she went with Ruzanna, while I sat inside where it was warm, scribbling up lecture texts to be typed next day in the university's computer room, for the students to have something to skip anyway.

Mind you, she only delivers these scoldings toward the end of the month, when the salaries have run dry and we've borrowed money from anyone who'd give it.

So the trick is simply to survive the end of the month, because during the other weeks... oh, what a woman! I state this with the full authority of forty-four years of experience.

But no amount of experience saves you once she catches a earful of those smart talking heads on television droning about the economy, the consumer basket, and other such bullshit.

That's when she picks up a pencil and starts calculating our family budget.

Following these computations, I spend a couple of days stigmatized as a villain—capable only of making children, not feeding them.

But I love her anyway. Because—oh!—what a woman! (When she isn't thinking about the budget.)

That is exactly why I despise the television, though I wish it no harm—the more normally it displays a picture, the more eyesight our kids will keep. I honestly marvel at how they manage to make out cartoons through that hazy blur of fuzzy lines and visual static.

As for the budget—well, what of it? You can't account for everything. Every now and then a random, lucky translation gig pops up, or one of my sisters-in-law passes along some groceries.

...

The expenses for my own upkeep have been strictly pared down to a bare minimum. Since December of '91, I switched over to a vegetarian diet and a booze-free lifestyle. I don't waste pennies on pharmacies either—twice a day I repeat a routine of fourteen and a half wellness exercises based on the yoga system.

Though "fourteen and a half" is probably an overstatement; in that half-exercise, I barely contort myself by a third compared to the photo in Ram Kumar's book.

Shaving doesn't inflict the slightest damage on the budget either: I don't shave at all—I let my beard grow wild.

When things get incredibly tight, Satenik cries and says my godforsaken beard is to blame for everything—it scares off potential English students, and because of it, I don't have a single applicant looking to prep for university entrance exams.

But they aren't fools: why pay someone whom they won't see anywhere near the examination committee?

Sometimes, scissors in one hand, she grabs with the other the beard, hung unsuspecting over my chest, and snips it off above her grab. I don't resist much. But afterward, what a woman!...

Essentially, my contribution to the budget is mostly passive—I don't spend on this, I go without that.

Unforeseen budget windfalls usually come through Satenik. She also sews at home, after all. Some months she manages two frocks; other times, it's just a single skirt over two months. Good luck trying to track that.

...

Ruzanna is a beautiful girl and a skilled hand, but she flatly refuses to wash the dishes. Such an chore is beneath Miss Artsakh-2000 in two years sharp.

As for her needs: they are exactly what you'd expect from any grown daughter. Sometimes the relatives of her biological father chip in—especially an aunt who emigrated to Greece.

Ashot gets hand-me-down clothes from his older cousins, though we buy things too, or Satenik sews them, but he demolishes the first, second, and third kind with equal speed.

Whenever you look at him, his nose is buried out of sight in books, yet you can't harvest clothes fast enough for him—you'd think he was physically hacking his way through jungles on those lost worlds and mysterious islands.

Our three-year-old independent researcher, Emma, keeps gnawing away at the foundations of the world. Her primary instrument of knowledge is her own teeth, and whenever she gives the world a breather, she starts making conversation:

"Am I a hymn-beenin?"

"Of course you're a human being, sweetie."

"I'm a good hymn-beenin! I want to chew *tsamon*²!"

Grandma Emma Arshakovna maintains diplomatic relations with the outside world in the person of neighbors and acquaintances who happen to pass by our secluded courtyard in the dead-end, and on top of that—she enforces her own order in the house.

It truly leaves you stupefied: just how much "order" can be stuffed into such a tiny house. But nothing can shake my mother-in-law's persistency: *karogh a petk ga*³.

The hens lay eggs highly occasionally, but where exactly—they refuse to confess.

They use me as an attachment and a motive force for the shovel and other garden implements.

And so it rolls along, right until the dead season hits—summer vacation. Two practically unpaid months, plus another one to coast through until the first paycheck of the new academic year.

² Armenian: Chewing gum.

³ Karabahi Armenian: May be needed.

And the kids are small, and the prices are high, and the picture on the TV has completely gone to hell, but the mean indiscernible bastard still keeps blabbering on about the consumer basket.

In short, I walked into the newspaper editor-in-chief's office and said:

"I'm a seasonal worker looking for a gig—ready to write whatever you order."

Maksim Ervandovich took a moment to think it over, but he agreed, even though he knew perfectly well what he was asking for...

Yet Satenik outran me even here; she found a job before I did...

...

You can find plenty of discrepancies between the factions in just one humanity—running the gamut from political to aesthetic or even ethnographic. Yet on one specific point, their views converge. How exactly do you look at ice cream when it is an absolute furnace outside?

You look at it with pure lust. Everybody loves ice cream.

In Stepanakert, there are two workshops that produce ice cream: the since long established one at the state dairy plant, and the private newly constructed othe in the suburb named Myaly-Byahlu.

The heat rolls in—the season opens, and the workshops need female workers: to fill, to remove, to pour, to pack, so that by tomorrow the pedestrians on the streets of the capital city will have something to enjoy.

I don't have info regarding the dairy plant, but in Myaly-Byahlu, work runs in two shifts, and ninety percent of the workforce consists of female schoolteachers from the city schools.

For the owner, the benefit is twofold: first, there's no need to spend ages explaining the production process to the new workers—they all have higher education and catch on instantly; and second, teachers have the gift of gab, so now the entire conversation in the city at the middle-educated level is strictly about the types, varieties, and high quality of the ice cream coming out of the new workshop.

For the production of a single portion of ice cream, a worker is entitled to one dram, but they provide the advertising free of charge.

My mother-in-law was categorically against it at first. I mean, of course—the centuries-old foundations of the East going straight to hell!

The second shift finishes past midnight: one in the morning, two, three o'clock at night, and the woman isn't home. Then she comes back and talks about a hitch on the production line, or how the vehicle of the driver who shuttles the second shift home broke down. And it's not like he drops her off right at the front door.

A woman. Alone. In a night city. Without proper protection and due supervision.

Look where these market relations have dragged us!

It's bad enough that you gave up money, and meat, and alcohol—now you have to give up your wife too, while you, waking up at one or two in the morning—alone in an empty bed—toss and turn like a lunatic loner, fighting off the fiercely bold hooey of a sleep-deprived imagination.

Not every husband is cut out for such an ordeal. Some forbid their wives from engaging in this daily—or rather, nightly—seasonal temp work.

And such a lack of civic consciousness, by the way, leads to problems in the process of manufacturing delights for daytime pedestrians...

...

But I'll give it to you straight, fellow males (though this also applies to any other strutum of society): if you doubt your wife, it means you aren't sure of yourself—of your own, shall we say, capabilities.

A dangerous sign. Out of insecurity, you risk truly failing to measure up, and then—yes, there's no getting around it, she's left with only one way out: skipping to the left. And you can find that kind of action much closer than Myaly-Byahlu...

Unfortunately, I don't possess precise statistics on the matter at hand, but elementary life experience won't argue that the percentage of cuckolded husbands is exactly identical: both among the spouses of "stay-at-home" women and among those whose wives are employed in the sphere of production, services, and other "out-of-home" economic activity.

If there's a demand, suppliers will pop up. In other words—*jurn ir chamban kgitni*⁴.

Remember how the fairy tales of The Arabian Nights begin?

There was this one dumb genie who locked a woman inside a chest, wrapped chains all around it, and slapped a padlock too. What's more, he didn't dare leave this cargo at home; he lugged it around with him everywhere he went—just for a guarantee that this woman was his absolute, total property, because he had supposedly prevented all other options...

Well, and how did that turn out?

What, do you think I signed up to tell you fairy tales here? You are not toddlers. Go back and re-read it yourselves.

As for me, I have more important things to do. Look, I need to flip on the light bulb out in the yard.

Then I'll come inside, and crawl into an empty marital bed, and fall asleep if I'm lucky. And around one or maybe closer to two—I'll wake up: waiting to hear the clicking shoes of Satenik, marching from the gate to the front door; the captivating, enchanting, indescribably beautiful Satenik.

Well, no, not mine, of course—just a woman.

But oh, what a woman!

* * *

7 (1) The Genies of Vital Cleanliness

When the retreating night slowly gives way to the pre-dawn haze—wherein the wavy contour of the ridges surrounding Stepanakert begins to emerge, and then, over the crest of the tumb-chain on the eastern side, the pale pink fingers of Eos, the ancient goddess of the dawn, stretch out (not to feel or pinch anything—heavens, no!—but to physically check the cleanliness of the skies over the city: Oh, this night! No matter how many times you explain it, it's completely useless—look over there, on the left side of the vault, someone went and scattered fluffy cloud strands again!)—the Dravants spouses, Ashot Vartazarovich and Hasmik Arzumanovna, are already on their feet.

And in the early hour of the dawn's birth, while the young and old are still peacefully asleep in the city's houses, this married couple (and they are not alone) is already breaking bread and washing it down with tea, before switching off the artificial lights and stepping over the threshold of their home into the streets, untouched (for now) by the rays of the radiant sun.

⁴ Armenian: Water will find a way.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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