

A Drop in the Sea

Armenian
Contemporary
Prose



ARMEN

Of ARMENIA

WHO WANTS TO BE A MILLIONAIRE?

If you're up for it, let's play. You've gotta know "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" Just for curiosity, try your luck. The rules of the game are almost the same, only there are no guaranteed amounts, and there are fewer questions. Only six and a half questions, each with four answer choices. Send your list on February 29th, and I'll be obligated to make mine public on the same day. One million Armenian Drams are being wagered. You'll get the whole amount, if all of our picks coincide. Let's start.

First Question

What do you want?

A. To get rid of my other half. I really want to lose my other half so I can be independent, self-sufficient, and finally live in peace.

B. One million drams. For both of us, one's word is more valuable than money. I promise myself that I will have 1 million drams on February 29th, so I'll shoot straight and on-target. Don't worry.

C. To use the "call a friend" lifeline. I called, said hi, and repeated your number, +374 91 364344, to check if you gave the right number or not. It turns out you haven't tried to put one on me. "You know, I'm reading your *Millionaire*. I want to decide which of the choices to pick for the first question." Thanks for the hint.

D. To know the ending. The launch is easy, although a light start often promises a heavy finale. So, that's why you should extinguish your shallow desire to become a millionaire right from the get-go and jump into the game not for the money but for a passion for reading.

Second Question

What are you looking for?

A. I know you like the palm of my hand. You're not gonna change. You're always gonna bug me. You're gonna caw like a raven 'till you drive me completely nuts. I'm looking for a witch-hunter, an assassin, someone who's ready to whack my other half for a million.

B. If I hadn't given my word, I wouldn't even think of answering. It's too late to bail out. Bring me the photo and the money. I do a clean job. I don't leave unwanted traces. You'll be satisfied. No one has complained so far. You need to wire the money in advance. The deadline is February 29th. I'm going after someone exactly like you.

C. I guess everyone is looking for their other half. If they haven't found them, like me, they sure will one day. I had the strangest feeling talking to you. It's like we're the oldest of friends. We're done playing and are recapping the future. Oops, I'm digressing. My answer is this: to find my other half.

D. I'm looking for the one looking for me. Why isn't anyone looking for me? So, I get to be the object of someone's search. It always seems you've made a good choice, then it turns out it's the complete opposite. Elections in Armenia are traditionally rigged, but no one learns the lesson: to not to vote again. It's something else to get elected. To get an extra vote is already reassuring. That means you're not the only one believing in what you say. To cut it short, simply don't vote. Let others vote for you. In other words, pick answer D.

Third Question

You want to go for a walk?

A. I would, but I can't. I'm not on speaking terms with you. I don't even look eye-to-eye, let alone go for a walk with you. You know what I mean. I can't see you again. That'll mean feeding the raven, and I want to kill it. I've found someone already who's ready to do all the dirty work for the sake of a million. I'm set on passing on the photo and the money. There's no point in waiting – soon I'll be free, running loose like an ownerless dog. Remember? You'd always call me "an ownerless dog" when we would fight.

B. No, I don't. Generally, I've submitted to your literary fraud for the sake of promise and money. Have you read any-

where that a killer goes for a walk with the one who's writing about him? I'm waiting for my client's word so we can meet. I'm expecting the money and my victim's photo, too. I'm not in the habit of asking questions. I don't care who wants to whack who and why. He started to tell me his life. Can you imagine? He was crying on the phone and his voice shook. He said, "Please, don't let him feel any pain. He shouldn't know what happened to him at all."

C. Yes, I definitely do. We're not acquainted personally, but I know you a little bit already. If anything, I read your stuff. I got your cell phone number; I know your name, not to mention the peculiar feeling of reminiscing about the future. Going for a walk while chatting – I got nothing to lose. If not – perhaps. You've warned – if we don't meet and C turns out to be the right answer, I won't get my million. Rule's a rule – I play by the rules.

D. Actually, this is a wrong answer because logically there are three choices. Although this may be the only acceptable choice for the author. In any event, it is nuts to suggest going for a walk to one's self. So, this is definitely a trap. I'm sure it will be considered correct. That's why I pick this choice in particular.

Fourth Question

What are you reading?

A. I'm rereading for the thousandth time the last bit you wrote and want to understand who's written this, me or you? "You're a freak – you live in your own world; you can think what you want. I'm a freak, I live in my world, and I'll think whatever.

We'll meet on February 29th near the Hands¹⁴." We'll live and see. Rather, I'll live and you won't.

B. I've read nothing but newspapers for a long time. Usually, they present my work the next day on the front pages. I feel sort of appreciated. And then, suddenly, weird messages appear like this: "I'm a freak. I live in my world. I have weird thoughts. Do not try to get acquainted and associate with me. Reject my offer to go for a walk. Take the photo and the money quickly and leave. We'll meet near the Hands on February 29."

C. A short story titled "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" I've read half of it – I'm at question four. Some parts are hard to understand, but it's not so bad. I like it. The characters express themselves through the game's multiple choice answers. And in each case, for each answer, the reader must decide whom to believe in order to become a millionaire himself or herself. I'm also a reader. I have a date with the author! I've already agreed to go for a walk, and I hope I'll win.

D. I really wanted to ask this question. It's the best question for getting to know someone. Nothing happens in life that is not written somewhere; nothing happens that can't be read. Someone besides me will read this and I will share my thoughts with him or her, and we'll meet. I read books written for me.

A reading room lifeline:

- A. One quarter
- B. One quarter
- C. One quarter
- D. One quarter

¹⁴ *Sculpture in the capital of Armenia*

Fifth Question

What happened to us on February 29th?

A. I woke up with a headache on February 29th. I took out all the albums from the photo drawer. I was looking for the photo that inspired the most hatred in me. I found one where you look kind of happy, but you're not alone. Someone as happy as you is next to you. You are both smiling, head-to-head. I tore it up and put it in my breast pocket. I took out two raw wieners from the refrigerator, swallowed one, and put the other one in a bag and took it with me. I might need it on the road. I felt how the first sip of coffee changed the taste of my mouth. I took three more sips and got out of the house, without looking in the mirror. I drove to the HSBC and withdrew one million drams from my account. The teller, a young girl, didn't smile at me. She just asked, "You're withdrawing the whole amount?" I said yes. People think I'm rich. I have a job, a place of my own, dress nice. Actually, it was my entire savings. I don't need money. I saw an ownerless dog on the street and felt a kind of kinship, but it had a very ragged look. He was repulsive, invoking nothing but pity. As I drew near, he felt my pity. He sized me up in good faith as well and groaned. I took out the wiener from the bag and threw it in front of him. He looked at me with a devastating gaze; I froze... his eyes... I've seen these eyes somewhere. He didn't get close and waited until I left. I drove, turned back, and saw that he limped. It's okay – a dog doesn't die from limping. I got to the Hands a little too early. The day, sunny. The weather, chilly. Life, evanescent. My raven-killer wasn't there yet. I had always pictured his sad eyes. He was dressed black from head to toe,

befitting a self-respecting assassin. With hair somewhat long – curly and combed back. Height – one eighty cms, let him be tall. He doesn't sleep at night - pangs of remorse. He wants a dignified means of livelihood. He's not content with his luck. Despite his young age, there is a big wrinkle in between his eye-brows, from too much frowning. Even from a distance I noticed that he walked with a strange gait, staring at the ground as if looking for something. He drew closer – one hundred percent what I imagined, even the wrinkle was there. We greeted and drew aside. I took out the photo and the money from my breast pocket and extended it to him. He looked at the torn photo and got worried. His expression changed just for an instant, but it was enough to catch his confusion. I began to persuade, I'm an expert in persuasion. I gave it my all: "I can't do it myself. You agreed to do the job for a low price. You said word is more expensive than money – your words. You chose from the start, from the first question – answer choice B. Now you're bailing out! There's nothing to think about – people kill each other for free all the time, just as a favor . You're not risking anything – it's an ordinary killing for you. Whereas for me, it's a life-and-death question." I said a few other things, but he was unmoved. He was not giving back the money, he was armed, and I was afraid of being duped. He was mumbling something about principles and rules of the game. I had no choice, so I agreed to his game. For the last time, I looked into raven-killer's eyes and realized they're not sad. They were the eyes of the ownerless dog I met in the street, for sure. I was thinking they were probably related, and then I fired a shot.

B. February 29th was a sunny day, and the weather was

chilly, just the way I like it. I went and bought the morning papers and read about a few murders. I realized they weren't done by experts – self-taught, amateur stuff. I didn't think it was a good idea to set a date with the client in broad daylight. But it was too late to change anything. I began dressing up for a date. I don't like wearing black from head to toe. But I know that that's what my client expects of me. My image dictates such a clothing style. I used to have short hair, but now my hair is long and so I comb it back. That's my homage to Hollywood – not to mention that scar in between my eyebrows, which many people think is a wrinkle. Looking in the mirror, I remembered the bartender girl from the day before, who didn't smile the whole evening and at the end was telling me: "You're not content with your life, it's written on your face. Plus, you have sad eyes." I don't need a real weapon, but I always take a pistol with me. I was barely out of the house when bird shit dripped on my shoulder. It was a raven, which flew away cawing. I've never shot a bird – I have my principles – and never harm animals. I strayed from this rule only once. I was returning from work at night and an ownerless dog came up to me. He was big and mad. I struck him, and he started whining. I was too close to shoot.. He looked at me with an devastating gaze, and I froze on the spot. I didn't have the nerve to shoot him. They say a dog doesn't die from limping – it may live. Anyways, I wiped the bird shit off of my shoulder, but it left a little stain. I decided to walk with a set gait – playing a little game with myself – where you can't step on the lines separating the slabs of the sidewalk. I recognized my client from a distance. He had a bike. We greeted each other, and drew to the side. He took out the photo and the

money from his breast pocket and handed them to me. Even before seeing the photo, I already had my doubts. I felt vaguely that he was playing a dishonest game. The minute I saw the photo, I understood everything. He felt it, too. His expression changed for a second, but even that was enough to reveal his confusion. He started persuading like a real pro. He wouldn't let me speak. I barely managed to nail the point that the million was not the issue. Killing a person is far more expensive, even in our poor country. There was no other choice; that's why I had agreed. For both of us, word costs more than money. Then I said the following: "You had to forewarn me about whom you wanted to kill. When you showed your cards at the end of the game, I could see that you were dishonest. I have my principles, and my rules of the game. For example, you might think this is funny, but I don't shoot birds. You don't even get that you're almost asking for suicide. I won't give you back your money. Here's what we'll do. There's an option. If you're in the mood, let's play the death-game on the million. You must know about Russian roulette. See, I'm taking out all the bullets and leaving only one. This is the game you want, and there's no winner, only a loser, and the one who survives. That is what you wanted, right? Here we go, you're first."

C. The moment I woke up on February 29, I ran to the computer. I opened your webpage and saw that you had posted the answer key, just like you had promised. Bingo!!!! I won. I believed in you, me, the game, the word, and I won. I'm a millionaire. I took a bath, ate breakfast, looked up a few things on the Internet, just to kill time. I felt uncomfortable calling you so early in the morning, because you might've been asleep.

I lingered a little more on social media sites, then called. I said hi, you recognized me right away – we had met once already. You congratulated me on my victory. We set a date near the Hands. The weather was chilly, the day sunny. I came in a taxi cab. I bought two chamomiles from the flower guy. He grumbled and said he's selling by the bunch, not individually. I persuaded him – I'm a master-persuader. You were waiting when I got there, and this time you were the one with a bike. But I wasn't surprised because I had read about it in your short story beforehand. We strolled in the park – the snow had melted away. Tomorrow's spring, and I'm a millionaire. We went for tea. We chatted about this and that. You were sort of hyper-happy, and you kept smirking. Then you asked me suddenly if I would buy a million's worth of wieners for vagrant dogs? You had written about it as well, and I had thought of a unique answer. What I said was probably to your liking, because you laughed sincerely. We talked a while about question five and both agreed that we were the ones deciding what would happen to us on February 29th. I would always inadvertently throw my gaze in front of me, on the lumpy envelope. It says HSBC on it, and inside there's really one million drams. You suggested counting. No, I believe you. Then I said the following: "One game ended. It's time to start the next one. Now it's my turn. I'm the game-show host. If you're up for it, let's play. You've gotta know "Loves me, loves me not." It's the simplest game." We took one chamomile each and started pulling off the petals. We review the last question out loud, together. We smile at each other because we are certain that only the petals of the chamomile know the answer.

D. None of the above. I have my own choice. People look for their other half outside, but it may be inside. Regardless, when two people stay in one place for too long they sometimes get wound up, and one of them wants to whack the other. My grandpa used to say, “Turn your fight into a game, and you’ll always end up winning.” This game was not to my liking from the get-go. I can’t keep this to myself, you ownerless dog! You have a million, go spend it! Why do you wanna give it away to somebody else? My answer is this: Nothing in particular happened on February 29th. It was a regular sunny day, but the weather was chilly. I simply went to the Hands to find out if my other half loves me or loves me not.

Question Six-and-a-half

The game is ending, but it would be unfair not to use the fifty-fifty lifeline. That is what I’m doing, generously making the player’s job easier by taking away answer choices A and D.

Loves me, loves me not?

B. Loves me.

C. Loves me not.

Translated by Haik J. Movsisian
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SILVER GATE

Alisa Melnik will never forget that day in June 1986 when the silver gate at the Sevan Children's Sanatorium rolled in front of her, left and right, like an iron curtain.

Three and a half decades later, recalling this unforgettable moment, that phrase, "iron curtain," ran through her mind. In 1986, when she had turned twelve years old, she had been a Soviet pioneer, and it's extremely unlikely that she would have heard the phrase at that time. (Perhaps a better association would be "iron curtain," with lower-case letters, in the sense of the fireproof theater curtains that were common in 18th-century Europe.) And so, the gate opening before her like an iron curtain seemed to be signaling a new act, in the spirit of Shakespeare and the Globe Theater, where, as you know, all the world's a stage and all the people merely players.

Even more important to mention is the Chernobyl disaster of April 1986. (Gorbachev himself later said on one occasion that Chernobyl had been the real reason for the collapse of the Soviet Union.) So, when the silvery gate of the Sevan Children's Sanatorium rolled left and right like an iron curtain before Alisa Melnik's eyes, the Soviet Union was already in irreversible collapse. However, this was not yet known to the young Pioneer Alisa Melnik, nor to Mikhail Sergeevich, the GenSec who had ushered in the era of Glasnost and Perestroika.

A lush, green oasis nestled in the embrace of the surrounding mountains and enclosed by a fence on all four sides, the Sevan

Children's Sanatorium was the perfect metaphor for the Soviet Union: a closed space where educators and staff would walk around in doctors' white coats, even though most of the children at the camp did not have any health issues, a place where everyday life happened in two parallel flows, the fake Communist one (because nobody really believed in Communist ideals after the stagnation in Brezhnev's times, and those final believers mostly consisted of educators from the senior generation) and that of sincere adolescence and youth (because the first people to seriously believe in Glasnost had been the adolescents and, naturally, children – you know, the ones that often voice truths like “The emperor has no clothes”).

And now, our Ukrainian protagonist, Alisa Melnik, had ended up in Armenia specifically because of the Chernobyl disaster, because tens of thousands of Ukrainian children had been “evacuated” that summer to the many children's camps dispersed throughout the Soviet Union on the basis of “whoever ends up wherever.” The population within a radius of thirty kilometers of Prip'yat, the site of the blast, had already been evacuated in the spring, while those in Alisa's hometown of Kiev (which is more than another hundred kilometers away) were sent off under the pretext of summer vacations.

And because the “boundless” Soviet Union had to end somewhere, Alisa was standing in front of this gate, several times taller than her, with a sense of having reached the “edge of the world,” and she was overcome with feeling that she could not go back, that escape was impossible, and that an inevitably new and completely unpredictable life was beginning. This was a complicated feeling, one which combined terror and ecstasy. The terror

was heightened by her clear realization that there was no way home. For the first time in her life, she was so far from her home and parents that she had no way of going back on her own. She could not walk forever or run until she was out of breath; she could not even make it by taking buses or other forms of public transport. And that thought of the impossibility of returning home gave birth to an infinite, endless sense of loneliness, one that had never struck her with such force before. But that tremor of terror flinched before a newly-discovered spirit of freedom, the promise of something bright and adventurous to come, and a shiver of bliss ran through her whole body as if, once again, Alisa was realizing for the first time that she was a whole, separate, distinct, independent and free being, someone ready to rebuild – indeed, to break into pieces and reassemble herself.

How should we continue the story? Standing in front of that huge silvery gate, rolling open like an iron curtain, that petite adolescent girl, whose whole being was ready to collapse in a heap then self-reconstruct, seemed to be in for a coming-of-age story, as this genre is called. Perhaps a young adult summer camp adventure, full of Soviet optimism and yearning. Perhaps her first love story, an interethnic romance seasoned with innocent passion involving the Ukrainian girl and an Armenian boy named Masis with black eyes, muscles that shifted under his sweat-drenched shirt like fish that had been freshly extracted from Lake Sevan, an eyebrow that moved significantly higher than the other whenever he expressed surprise, and a smile that twisted in a self-satisfying way, eliciting the excitement of many of the girls that would end up leaving traces of their first periods right there on the white sheets of the sanatorium. Perhaps it would end up

being a story in the genre of Vladimir Sorokin's satire on socialist realism, where the campers would gather around a Pioneer-worthy fire and endlessly discuss quotes from Lenin and the lessons of Communism, until the full moon emerged from behind dark clouds and the Pioneer anthem of *Rise up in bonfires* would be heard in the background as the group leader Petrov transformed into a werewolf, while the pioneers now singing *Always be ready* would shapeshift into vampires, the Komsomol boys would become satyrs, and the newly-admitted Komsomol girls would turn into witches dancing naked around the fire.

In fact, it might interest you to know that what really happened is based on a true story. Our Alisa did not share the fate of her namesake Alice – neither ending up in Wonderland nor going through the Looking Glass – and no matter how bright and impressive the gate opening before her seemed, it was not in any sense heavenly. It was simply a commonplace, iron gate with bars patterned in a Stalinist baroque design, only unusual in that it did not bear the usual Soviet symbols such as the hammer and sickle or a star.

Indeed, Alisa Melnik had been dreaming throughout the previous academic year, like millions of Soviet pioneers, of staying at the Artek Camp. And although she had graduated from grade 6 with excellent grades, as she had promised her parents, she had not ended up at the camp of her dreams on the shores of the Black Sea but was instead somewhere in the Armenian mountains.

In her heart of hearts, Alisa Melnik already knew that the famous Artek Camp for Pioneers, located in Crimea, was meant only for schoolchildren with exceptional talent, the kids of high-ranking *nomenklatura* or the ones that knew whose palm

to grease, if you know what I mean. And because Alisa's intellectual parents were not ones to offer a bribe, nor were they high-ranking officials, she had tried very sincerely, working hard for a whole year to be at the top of her class, a veritable Soviet Samantha Smith.

It is difficult to describe in words who Samantha Smith had been for millions of Soviet schoolchildren. Perhaps she was the Greta Thunberg of her time or the dove of peace that heralded the beginning of the end of the Cold War, a little Goodwill Ambassador whose bright smile had pierced the first hole in the Iron Curtain, someone who would later spark what was called "children's diplomacy," or perhaps just an idol for Soviet adolescents, a sex symbol befitting their delicate age, who was both famous and divine on screen while also being like family, someone they identified with, their first real American friend and, most importantly for Alisa, a real pioneer in the literal and original sense of the word.

It was the end of summer vacation the previous year when Alisa had learned the news that Samantha Smith had died. Everyone was saying that the plane crash had been the work of the US intelligence services, but Alisa could not believe it. She simply refused to accept that there was anyone in the world who wished for Samantha's death. Alisa had cried for three days and three nights because the injustice of an accidental plane crash was even harder to bear than the conspiracy theory. When she went to school, she had dedicated the full text of the mandatory "How I spent the summer" essay to Samantha from start to finish, as if she had lost her closest friend or her own sister, the one she never had.

(In general, Soviet schoolchildren lived in greater fear of a nuclear attack than their American counterparts, and writing letters to the leader of the opposite side during the Cold War was common practice on both sides, often with behind-the-scenes guidance.)

Alisa had cut out pictures of Samantha from the newspapers and kept them and had put a glass frame on the photo taken at Artek – where Samantha was wearing an Artek uniform and *lodochka* cap – and hung it from the wall of her room. She knew Samantha’s famous letter and Andropov’s reply by heart, which was generally true of anything and everything related to Samantha and her visit to the Soviet Union, and she had memorized it like exam material. For days and months after her death, she had conversations with Samantha in her mind. Alisa was excited by Samantha’s angelic, posthumous, secret vocal presence in her life, and the hundreds of letters that she penned with no response were actually written by the two of them together, to some extent. The Samantha that had died too soon, the Samantha that lived within her, sometimes dictated, sometimes hinted at what she should write. All the letters ended with Samantha’s favorite among the popular Soviet slogans of the time: *Miru mir*, “peace to the world.” She was very pleased at the fact that the words in Russian for “world” and “peace” were homonyms.

And, one day, at the end of the academic year, when Chernobyl had already happened, Samantha’s guiding voice disappeared. It vanished, as if Alisa had never had that constantly dictating, otherworldly inner voice.

Alisa was unable to say for sure whether it had been the terrible story of the Chernobyl disaster that had silenced Samantha’s

voice and turned the fears of the Cold War upside down, now pointing them inwards, to the edges of their own homeland, to a place so close to home, somewhere she could reach if she took an endless number of steps or if she ran till her breath gave out or where she could definitely go with several buses or other forms of public transport, or whether the hundreds of letters she had written and the only one she had received in reply had acted like a slap in the face, waking her up and putting an end to it.

Alisa did not just address her letters to the White House or the US Ambassador in Moscow, as her schoolmates did under the guidance of others. She would send her letters to all kinds of different people, including a sincere text she had sent to Samantha's Russian friend, Natasha Kashirina, who had had the good fortune of being her roommate and interpreter at Artek. Natasha's reply had been a few brief words, the usual, polite response to Alisa's verbose letter, where the latter had confessed how she had been a bad Pioneer because she had been filled with the vilest of jealousy toward Natasha, desiring with all her heart to be in her place as Samantha's companion. She had followed this confession with a touching paragraph of regret, asking Natasha in the end to share some of her valuable memories of the days she spent with Samantha at Artek and Leningrad. Alisa eventually expressed hope that they would become pen pals and – perhaps someday, who knows – inseparable friends. Besides the fact that she had received a reply, Alisa was also shocked by the P.S. that Natasha had added – *Budem zhit*. These had been the words that Samantha had said in Russian, “We will live,” before she had left Artek, and they had become a catchphrase that everyone used. “We will live, but we won't live as friends...”

Alisa had acknowledged sadly, and ended her fruitless efforts to “bomb” the world with letters.

Natasha was Natalia Rosston now, married to a handsome American and, judging by her Facebook photos, someone with a happy family life in Los Angeles. But who was Alisa?

She was like a pilgrim standing in front of an empty pedestal. During a visit to Moscow in the early 2000s, she had set off with a bunch of flowers to the Samantha Smith memorial in the Bibirevo district. She had arrived at the Plesheev-Leskov intersection and ended up rooted in place. The statue was gone. It had been stolen, perhaps with the aim of melting it down and selling the metal. She had been unaware and had stood there, upset and confused, a bunch of flowers in her hand... A lone pilgrim standing in front of an empty pedestal.

In any case, when she had settled into her room at the Sevan Children’s Sanatorium, she had forgotten about Natasha’s reply as well as the pain of losing Samantha’s guiding voice, because Alisa had made the acquaintance of her roommates and seemed to have found not one but several sisters, the ones she had never had.

There were six girls in the room: four Ukrainians – Darya, Olya, Yulia, and her, plus two Armenians – Sirun and Hasmik. They were all almost the same age, 13-14 years old. Darya was the only one who had noticeable breasts (not yet in adolescent fullness but already clearly protruding), and because she was a bit plump, her behind would bounce slightly when she walked, causing the schoolboys to stare, their snot flowing. Golden-haired Olya had very white skin – a pale, thin, bony girl, her hips not yet round, but with the most extraordinary blue eyes, such that

the majority of the boys at camp were ready to drown in the sea of her gaze. Yulia was the tallest of the lot. She could easily have been a basketball player, although she dreamed about becoming a pianist. Hasmik would have been considered a beauty if not for her aquiline nose. The nose gave her a unique appearance, and she had a sleek and symmetrical body, with long, dark hair, which she combed carefully for hours then braided. Depending on her mood, she would make one or two braids, which she would then sometimes pull into a bun, turning herself into a capricious, high-class maiden from some well-known novel. Sirun, meanwhile, was like the sun – shimmering eyes, a stack of curly hair on her head, a smile constantly on her face. Alisa liked all her roommates at once, even Hasmik with the stuck-up nose, who was not as outgoing or, rather, who had quite a high opinion of herself. Although she spoke Russian fluently, she would always chatter with Sirun in Armenian, which would irritate the Ukrainians a little. Sirun would intentionally but diplomatically respond in Russian, though this caused her some difficulty as she had to search for the right words and spoke with a thick Armenian accent. In any case, the girls were overjoyed when they ended up together in the same cohort at camp.

The very first evening, after dinner, with all the newly-arrived Ukrainians were invited to a meeting the head educator at the camp, Comrade Wilson Tumanyan, who was the *de facto* camp manager. Comrade Wilson Tumanyan was a kind, elderly gentleman past sixty, with a mild, warm smile, always affectionate and friendly with the children but quite strict and demanding when it came to the staff. In any case, his presence caused a palpable tension and alertness among the camp workers. He won

the Ukrainians over at once by saying that Ukraine was his second homeland, a place dearer to him than the land of his birth, somewhere he had been throughout the Second World War. Alisa Melnik felt a spirit of affection and familial warmth in his sincere words, as if this was the first time she had met her own grandfather, the one she never had (neither of her grandfathers had come home from that war).

The first days at camp went by according to the regular timetable: mornings started with Assembly, the only pleasant moment of which was the exercise-dance (to the tune of the Italian Pippo Franco's *Chi chi chi, co co co*) that closed proceedings, a routine that everyone truly enjoyed. The cohorts would line up with their cohort leaders, with whom they would then end up spending most of the day. Alisa's cohort leader was Comrade Areg – a feisty and constantly energetic young woman, who considered physical exercise very important. This meant that their afternoons were usually occupied with team sports, while their evenings were spent wandering in the forested area within the large grounds of the sanatorium. When they grew tired, they would gather in an opening or in one of the gazebos placed under the trees and start endlessly discussing one topic or the other.

They had a free hour before lunch – exactly sixty minutes – and the “Hour of the Dead” after lunch. It wasn't clear why after-lunch nap time was called “dead” when it was in fact a period of indescribable activity. The campers were forced to go to bed, but they created a buzz of nonstop whispering, pretending to be asleep when they heard the footsteps of the monitors on duty, who were pretending in turn to seriously make sure that everyone was sound asleep. And, as I'm sure you can imagine, some

of the more brazen kids slipped out of their rooms during the Hour of the Dead, stuffing their beds with pillows and clothes to make believe someone was sleeping.

The menu? Breakfast – bread, butter, cheese, tea, boiled eggs (every other day), a sausage each (on rare occasions), and a hot meal. Dinner was almost the same as breakfast – more bread, butter, cheese, tea, and often seasonal fruits. Lunch consisted mainly of various vegetable ragus, which were all called the same thing there – *ajapsandal*. Sometimes, they would serve a beef or chicken patty with mashed potatoes, various kinds of side dishes (except buckwheat, which was in very short supply in the Soviet Union that particular year). Nobody touched the soups (except for the days when the entrée was borscht with sour cream or meatball soup), while the hot meal from breakfast also usually ended up uneaten – semolina porridge (*mannaya kasha*), milk broth and wheatmeal porridge, with wheat that was always undercooked, clumping into balls of flour. On Sundays, they would sometimes get a special meal – barbecue, *tolma*, kebabs, all served in small portions that would be wiped clean in a matter of minutes. In the existing acute shortages that were a constant feature of that planned economy, the menu offered at that sanatorium could actually be considered quite lavish. There was no toilet paper, of course, which everyone replaced using carefully cut segments of newspapers, all except *Pravda*, which was never used here for that purpose, for some reason.

Alisa also had vivid memories of the inconveniences of bath day. Once a week, they would sling their towels across their shoulders, pack a bag with a change of clothes, and go to the bathhouse, which was a separate one-floor building. The show-

ers were few in number and there was only one cabin, with no internal separations. The changing room was cramped. They had to take quick showers under the watchful eyes of the bathhouse monitors, so that the others would not spend long waiting in line. Hurriedly bathing, the girls would cast curious glances to check out the bodies of the others that had matured before them, some experiencing a pang of envy. Something similar probably happened with the boys. On regular days, they would simply use the washbasins placed on each floor of the main building, where the water was always cold, but invigorating and even pleasant on those summer mornings.

It was probably the end of the first week when one of the girls from Alisa's room, plump Darya, who was also from Kyiv, raised the issue during their gazebo discussions of how she was upset by the unpleasant attitude of a group of Armenian campers. This was not about all the Armenians, of course, but there were some that did not talk to the "radioactive ones," demonstratively kept their distance, smirked among themselves, and never sat next to them in the cafeteria. Some had even secretly changed their rooms, as if these people were lepers. Comrade Areg was taken aback by Darya's accusations. (Had she really not noticed something that must have been quite obvious? After all, there were Armenian children like this even in her own cohort). Comrade Areg had explained the lack of communication with the Ukrainians by some Armenians as a language issue. Russian, as you all know, was the language of the Soviet person, the *lingua franca* of the time and taught in all schools. But would you believe it? Not everyone was fluent in this privileged language, and some did not even know enough for a basic level of communication.

The issue was probably discussed at the educator's meeting that very day because, after dinner, all the Armenian campers were called to the large hall, while the children from other countries were sent to their rooms. Alisa never found out what explanatory procedures took place that evening, but Comrade Wilson Tumanyan was personally present at assembly the next morning and ordered all the campers to warmly welcome their guests from brotherly Ukraine, which was undergoing a difficult period. The delivery of that warm welcome ended up as an amusing and unusual scene, because the several dozen Ukrainians were lined up separately and then the remaining children, hundreds of them, walked up in turn and welcomed them as follows. Children of the same sex would hug each other while, between the girls and boys who were of high-school age, this would be limited to a handshake. As strange as this process seemed, none of the campers resisted it. The ceremony took place with some giggling and snickering, a little happy and a little sad, slightly serious, with some of the Ukrainian girls even getting emotional and leaving the assembly with moist eyes. Was this because of a sense of demonstrated offense or the unexpected-but-scripted display of fraternal affection? In any case, the ice was broken at the end of the event. The atmosphere at the camp changed dramatically in a few days and even the slightest bit of disrespect to the "radioactive ones" was met with sound condemnation by everyone.

Comrade Wilson Tumanyan never found out what genie was released from its bottle through his "correctional intervention," but soon a profusion of free speech hung like an invisible mushroom cloud above the whole camp. The children started

discussing Chernobyl throughout the day, at first talking about the disaster only among themselves, mainly during the hour of the dead or before bedtime. One day, someone started talking about the two-headed or four-legged newborns that had come into the world after the explosion. A huge argument arose. Was such a thing really possible? Eventually, they decided to ask the head doctor at the camp. Alisa had a foggy recollection from years ago of what the bespectacled doctor had said, but she could clearly see the terrified look on lanky Yulia's face, a constant feature during those conversations. Her aunt had been from Chernobyl and was pregnant, and she had decided to keep the child. Many years later, when Alisa saw a picture online of paralympic champion Oksana Masters, her heart beat faster at the obvious resemblance to Yulia. She never gathered the courage to write to Yulia, especially since they had lost touch over the years and had not been in contact for a while.

In any case, this new obsession did not take long to conquer the camp. A wave of panic and alarm took over within a matter of days among the children who were isolated from the adult world, living in a kind of parallel reality. They were overcome with the terrifying thought that they were defenseless against nuclear disaster. The "evacuated" Ukrainian children were the first ones to spread this fear, although the trigger had been a mention by one of the Armenian children that there was a large nuclear power station in Armenia, at Metzamor, as well. What would happen if something went wrong there, like at Chernobyl? All these years later, Alisa was now finding it difficult to remember whether the behavior that ensued had been prompted or spontaneous, but the fact was that everyone began to swipe food from the cafeteria

– mainly bread – which they dried and kept carefully in various hidey holes in their rooms.

The restaurant staff soon noticed the children’s strange behavior. Naturally, Comrade Wilson Tumanyan conducted a little “investigation,” after which yet another lengthy staff meeting took place.

At Assembly the following morning, Comrade Wilson Tumanyan gave a long, explanatory speech, saying that the children were in one of the safest spots in the world and nothing threatened them, but that they should, in any case, always be ready for even the most unexpected thing, shouldn’t they? They were told that the grounds had a warning system, a large number of gas masks, stretchers, and other supplies. The basement of the school building had a large space that could be used as a fallout shelter, which was tidied up during the latest *subbotnik* cleaning day. They also ran several emergency preparedness drills. And with this the topic was considered closed. The sense of alarm gradually died and, a week later, the isolated camp returned to its peaceful life.

A memorable incident for Alisa took place on July 17, when the educators and senior girls at camp decided to watch the broadcast on television of the US-USSR or, more specifically, the historic Leningrad-Boston “tele-bridge” entitled “Women Talk to Women.” It was during this event that the catchphrase “There is no sex in the USSR” originated. (In fact, when the 45-year-old participant, Ludmila Ivanova, who was living with her fourth and final husband, was asked whether commercials were also sexually-charged in her country, she had said, “We have no sex, and we are strictly opposed to it!”) A burst of laughter had been

followed by embarrassed silence and, eventually, the girls were sent to bed before the tele-bridge broadcast had ended. Ludmila Ivanova, who, incidentally, is now happily retired in Berlin (she had later emigrated and joined that same fourth and final husband, who had found work in Germany), even participating in gay pride events and considering German porn to be fake and deprived of real, bodily pleasure, never found out that her legendary words had caused Alisa Melnik's body to feel its first shiver of love later that evening. Until late that night, there was a hormonal storm in Alisa's room. Plump Darya was the first to open up to her roommates, because she was the most experienced of the group. She had kissed the boy next door, letting him touch her and kissing her not just on the face but also on the neck. But she swore as a Pioneer – their version of “cross my heart” – that he had touched her breasts only through her clothes. When she recalled the conversations from that evening and the dream that followed, Alisa thought that ecstatic female moans must have floated out of their half-open windows at Sevan that night, taking wings to rise up to the starry night. In her dream, she was with Masis, who was skillfully repeating every single thing that Darya's neighbor had done. When she woke up, she was head over heels in love with that boy whose eyebrow arched significantly higher than the other whenever he expressed surprise and a smile that twisted in a self-satisfying way, Masis, whose muscles shifted under his sweat-drenched shirt like fish that had been freshly extracted from Lake Sevan.

Alisa usually preferred to slip away from the main building during the free hour they had before lunch and spend time in a cozy, small park that had a round pool. At the center of the pool,

there was a concrete statue of a boy hugging a crocodile, which had been colored using oil paint. A spray of water burst forth from the crocodile's mouth, and the boy hugging it looked like a small cupid from the Renaissance era – but he had neither bow, nor arrow, nor angel's wings. He was simply a boy who happened to be hugging a crocodile that was larger than himself. Alisa would sit on a nearby wooden bench, in the shade of a tree, and dive into the only book she would end up reading that summer, Bulychev's *One Hundred Years Ahead*, which had been turned into her favorite televised mini-series, *Guest from the Future*. She had been delighted to find the book in the sanatorium's library.

During that free hour, reading by the pool, she would often see a small boy of preschool age, but it never crossed her mind to talk to the child or play with him. The small boy would sit for a long time next to the pool and stare at the crocodile statue as if enchanted, bewitched. He seemed to be a part of the pool itself, a living statue. But then someone would call out to him, and the human statue would suddenly emerge from his hypnotized state, turn into an active child, jump up and run in the direction of the voice that had sounded. Alisa knew that the small boy lived here, on the grounds of the sanatorium with his educator grandparents, in a slightly isolated single-story and wagon-like structure, long and plain, where staff members from distant locations had been allocated rooms.

Three and half decades later, Alisa Melnik clearly remembers how a red Zhiguli car appeared in front of the main sanatorium building. (Amazingly, they had opened the gate and allowed the Zhiguli to approach the building; visitors were usually made to park their cars outside the grounds.) It was their free hour, and

she had been sitting and reading, as usual, probably very absorbed, because she had spotted it in the distance out of the corner of her eye but hadn't looked up at first.

Three and a half decades later, Alisa Melnik still feels a pang of guilt; she finds it hard to bear that she did not react immediately, that she hesitated, that she didn't break into a run at once and hug Sirun, that she didn't take her address or phone number. She just stood there, confused, watching silently from afar as Sirun approached the red Zhiguli in the company of a male stranger. Comrade Areg and Comrade Wilson Tumanyan looked sad, upset, as Sirun looked around with a searching gaze. When the car moved, she rolled down the window in desperation, as if she was about to suffocate, as if she was about to break into pieces, never to be reassembled – unless she stuck her head out at that moment and saw somebody who cared. And it was at that last, that very last, moment that Alisa dropped her book and jumped up from her spot, running and shouting at the top of her lungs, “Sir-u-u-u-n... We will live, we will be f...” And she didn't know whether Sirun heard her, whether or not she understood. But even if she hadn't heard her, she must have seen her, because at that last, that very last, moment, their eyes met and Sirun, with that stack of curly hair on her head, the very same Sirun with the eyes that shimmered like the sun but were now damp, Sirun with the constant smile, now wiped off her face and waved goodbye sadly, miserably.

Just a few hours later, everyone had heard the news. It was Sirun's father. In Afghanistan. Plump Darya sobbed silently the whole night, her head buried under the blanket, but Sirun was as beautiful a person as her name suggested in Armenian, and

her father had also been someone beautiful for sure, for certain, just like her own uncle, who was also in Afghanistan, and she cried because “the beautiful ones should not die.”¹⁵

At dawn, when Darya finally fell asleep, Alisa sat up at the edge of the bed with a deep sigh and the roommates got up as if coordinated by a silent command. They hadn’t slept all night, except for Hasmik with the aquiline nose, who was snoring with calm ceremoniousness, her behind sticking out.

It only took a few minutes after the wall newsletter for the week was put up for the whole staff of educators, led by Comrade Wilson Tumanyan, to appear, stunned, in front of the wall, because Alisa had dared to author a brief article called “Peace to the World, NO to War in Afghanistan!”, illustrated by her Ukrainian roommates – plump Darya, blue-eyed Olya, and lanky Yulia, all done in secret from Comrade Areg. (Hasmik had not wished to join them.) In any case, they had the newsletter removed immediately, and Comrade Areg was strictly reprimanded right there, in front of everyone, though it was done in Armenian, but everything was clear. And then Comrade Wilson Tumanyan invited Alisa and the other Ukrainians to his room for a conversation where, for some reason, he told them a long-winded story about his part in the Second World War, using the map on the wall to indicate all the places in Ukraine where he had fought. At the very beginning of the war, in the summer of 1941, he had been seriously wounded near Belaya Tserkov and was then taken prisoner. After two years as a prisoner of war, he and his friends escaped in May 1943 and joined the Suvorov Guerilla

¹⁵ A reference to the lyrics of a song from the Soviet animate film *Rusalochka* (“The Mermaid”).

Battalion. In the summer of 1943, exactly forty-three years before the telling of his tale, he had destroyed the military train used by the enemy on the Shepetovka-Berdychev route and followed this success by laying waste to two more trains, including all the military equipment and personnel on board. He received a Great Patriotic War Medal of the Second Order for these feats and was promoted to platoon leader. (As he said this, Comrade Wilson Tumanyan carefully took out his medals from a drawer and displayed them, as if the girls needed to see real proof of what he was saying.). Their guerilla battalion then liberated Bereznika, Gorodnitsa, Malaya Korovnitsa, and several other settlements, blew up many military reserve units, bridges, and cisterns full of fuel. The Suvorov Guerilla Battalion played a major role in destroying Banderite groups that were active in Western Ukraine. (When he said the word “Banderite,” Comrade Wilson Tumanyan looked Alisa Melnik right in the eyes.) Although there was no malice in his gaze and his tone of voice was not angry, Alisa was overcome by a mixed feeling of terror and rebellion. The terror was made more acute by the understanding that there was no way for her to go home on her own, that she could not return to her parents’ secure fold alone, either by walking forever or running until her breath gave out – not even by taking a thousand buses or other forms of public transport. And that terror was mixed with a desperate feeling of rebellion from the thought that this white-haired man right here, this man with the kind eyes and soft smile – bearing that strange name of Wilson and, to her ears, the equally strange-sounding last name of Tumanyan – this veteran and war hero, who could be her grandfather, could also be the man who killed her grandfather because, no matter how

much of a family taboo it was to mention this, she had known for a long time – everyone had known – that her father was the son of a Banderite who had been killed at the end of the war, and that he had been forced to deny his own father.

In any case, Comrade Wilson Tumanyan considered it sufficient to convey the following when it came to Afghanistan – Soviet soldiers were waging a heroic battle there against the global evil of imperialism, just like they had done against fascism in his time. Alisa was forgiven for her ignorance, and Comrade Wilson Tumanyan promised in the end to provide them with a briefing of sorts on Afghanistan in the coming days – *likbez po Afghani-stanu*, or “primer on Afghanistan,” in his exact words.

Naturally, Comrade Wilson Tumanyan never provided them with this briefing. Instead, whether it was the strict reprimand that upset her or the sense of injustice, Comrade Areg gathered the whole cohort in a room a few days later and told them about the hippies and American pacifists that had protested against the Vietnam War, then played “banned music” – Jesus Christ Superstar. And that was how Comrade Areg became a real comrade to them, a like-minded friend and accomplice, their first guest from the future who had come from the fake world of the communist party to the real, parallel world of their adolescence, a true pioneer in the literal and original sense of the word.

And it was probably on that day that the idea came about to stage a musical on the final day of the camp. The final-day performance was a huge event. Each cohort was expected to stage something – a song, dance, recital, play, anything. Special guests were expected from Yerevan, as well as the parents of many of the campers.

And it turned out that lanky Yulia really played the piano well and was excellent at improvisation. One of the boys was good at the trumpet, another played the guitar, but things were complicated when it came to percussion – nobody in the cohort could play the drums or tambourine, although a few amateurs volunteered eventually. Thus, the band Melathon was established. They selected their repertoire of songs over the next few days and wrote the whole script for their musical – *Chernobyl-Met-zamor*. Alisa would have the main role, playing the role of Alisa Seleznyova from the future, who, the script said, had come back in a time machine with the mission of preventing a possible explosion at the Metzamor Atomic Power Plant. They had chosen a very simple method for the performance: they would sing well-known and popular Russian songs, mainly those from the mini-series *The Adventures of the Electronic*, but some of the lyrics would be changed. In some places, the song would be modified into a recital; for example the song *Krylatye kacheli* would end in a repetition of the first line, “In that young month of April...”, which would then transition into a melodeclamation on the April 26 Chernobyl explosion. Masis would play the role of a schoolboy in Metzamor who would help Alisa Seleznyova carry out her mission. His character was a child who was initially lazy and irresponsible, who would perform Syroyezhkin’s song *We are small children, we want to have fun* as a solo. But after meeting Alisa, he would undergo a transformation and become a responsible young man. Masis would also render a performance, accompanied by a choir, of the song *What progress has been achieved*, during which a unique robot dance would be staged. The play would end with people learning from the Chernobyl

experience to prevent an explosion at Metzamor, and the group would perform *Marvelous future*, which would be the backdrop for the scene featuring Alisa Seleznyova's (Alisa Melnik's), return to the future.

Comrade Areg's cohort was enthusiastically rehearsing for the performance, dedicating their whole time during the day to making it happen. Even Alisa no longer used her free time to read. During the first weeks, everything seemed to be going smoothly. But this was a deceptive calm. Soon, a delegation headed by Comrade Wilson Tumanyan appeared at one of the rehearsals. The children were embarrassed at first and tried to gauge what to do based on Comrade Areg's behavior. In the end, they came to a silent but agreed decision to perform their songs without including their modified lyrics. "Make sure there aren't any surprises," Comrade Wilson Tumanyan said in Russian as he left, and Alisa realized that Hasmik with the aquiline nose had played a role in this unexpected visit. Indeed, that very evening, Hasmik gave up her small part and decided, without stating any reason, that she wanted to change her room as well as her cohort.

Hasmik's departure from the cohort was not without consequence. After an "investigation" that lasted a few days, a supervisor was appointed to watch over Comrade Areg, and they changed the whole script of the musical, turning it into something insipid, according to the children.

It was during those fateful days in August that the little guiding voice inside Alisa began to speak again. But this wasn't from the past, it wasn't the voice of Samantha who had died too soon. It was from the future, the voice of a guest from a marvelous future – yes, of course, it was the voice of Alisa Seleznyova, her namesake

and the protagonist of her favorite movie and book, the voice of her newly-discovered idol who shared her name, who couldn't be confused with anyone else, because this was, in a way, the voice of the best version of herself, the voice of the perfect Alisa. Letters! Write letters, flood the mailboxes of authoritative Armenian officials with letters! Appeal to all reputable figures – writers, academicians, other intellectuals – send an outpouring of open letters to all editorial offices, targeting both All-Soviet publications as well as local ones, and raise the issue of Metzamor. And, in passing, invite them all to their performance on the final day of camp. Until that day came, the group had to use their free time to rehearse in secret. When this plan bloomed in Alisa Melnik's heart and mind, when Alisa Seleznyova's otherworldly inner voice began to sound louder and clearer than her own feeble voice, that was the very evening that Alisa organized a secret meeting. She invited all her cohort campers to her room. The children all secretly shared the unspoken opinion that they were crossing a line with this plan and were about to do something “undesirable.”

The next evening, there was a lot of commotion in their rooms. The children were running from room to room, distributing pages torn out of notebooks, trying to find envelopes and stamps, looking up the postal address of one official or the other, an editorial office, or an institution. In the morning, the camp's metal postbox was packed with letters. The boys were watching from afar and saw that, although the postman was surprised, he filled his sack with the letters and took them for distribution, as usual. They would reach their destinations.

Alisa Melnik would never know how many of them had successfully arrived, but the fact was that some of them had been

returned and they now lay on the desk in front of Comrade Wilson Tumanyan, who sat with a worried and frowning face. There had not been a need for a long-winded “investigation” in this case. Comrade Wilson Tumanyan had called Alisa Melnik to his office immediately.

Three and a half decades later, Alisa had a foggy recollection of the long conversation she had had with Comrade Wilson Tumanyan, although she *did* clearly remember the desperate anger with which he had brought down his fist on his desk and the angry, almost weeping “I won’t stand for this” that had come from him. He had then seemed embarrassed by his own unexpected burst of anger, and Comrade Wilson Tumanyan had hung his head low, turning into a hopelessly aging, hopelessly weakening, incapable, feeble old-timer, who had barely managed to muster a pleading voice loud enough to order Alisa to no longer take part in the rehearsals.

When the time came for rehearsals the following day, Alisa grabbed her book and headed for the round pool. Although she couldn’t rehearse any more, she was allowed to move about freely. (Perhaps confining her to her room would have been extremely counter-educational).

As usual, the small boy was there, immobile as if bewitched, staring at the wingless, bow-and-arrowless boy-cupid hugging the crocodile. The two of them sat there for a long time, the small boy at the edge of the pool, Alisa on the bench, the book open in her lap, though the day did not lend itself to reading. “What’s your name, boy?” Alisa called out to him, and the boy suddenly grew animated and ran up to her. “It’s a good day, I’m a good boy, little Armen,” he said, as though he were reciting a

memorized text. Then he grabbed Alisa's hand and almost pulled her after him. The book remained on the bench, opened on the same page as before.

Alisa could now hazily remember – although the little boy will never, ever forget – how he had grabbed her hand tightly and taken her to the rusty, ordinary gate at the back of the sanatorium, to a secret exit far beyond anyone's view, the only alternative to the silvery gate that was the grand entrance. He will never forget how Alisa had followed him without asking any questions, without any signs of resistance, as they slipped out through that back gate, walked up the small hill covered with short, prickly bushes and thistles. At a slight distance from the gate on the hillside, there was a black hole that had a mysterious purpose. Was it a manmade tunnel or the entrance to a natural cave? The black hole was like the open maw of a monster or a whalelike fish. There was a sudden drop at first, which a couple of meters later, then shifted into a sheer abyss. The darkness in that part of the hole seemed impenetrable. Nothing could be seen, even if sunlight fell directly into that open “maw.” If you listened long and hard, you could almost hear sounds coming from its depths. Perhaps Alisa had likened them to weak voices calling for help, as if the tiny offspring of some unknown creatures had ended up at the bottom of the abyss and were now begging them to come down and bring them back up into the light. Perhaps she had heard nothing; perhaps all the inner guiding and rescuing voices within her had been silenced in that moment – both the voice of Samantha Smith, who had died too soon, and that of the unreal Alisa Seleznyova – and a bottomless, all-swallowing black hole had opened up within *her*. Perhaps that was the moment she had internalized

the impenetrable darkness and speechless silence coming from outside, which Alisa Melnik would have to overcome, trying to rediscover her muted voice for the rest of her life.

Three and a half decades later, Alisa cannot remember at all – although the little boy will never, ever forget – how Alisa had hugged him so tightly, so that he would not be afraid and could then hang over the edge of the black hole in order to listen to the sounds coming from its depths. “Catch me,” the boy had said in broken Russian, and Alisa had understood what he wanted to do. She had made him lie face down, and she had lain down on top of him, holding him tightly at the waist, which allowed the boy to lower the front half of his body into the black hole, his head dropping beneath the edge, his ear picking up the enchanting, inviting voices coming from far below. A magical underground waterworld had opened up beneath him, flooded in a transparent blue light that came from somewhere unknown. The spell-binding, multicolor waters of that world were full of crocodiles ridden by small boys like himself, making sounds of joy, calling out to each other and whooping with pleasure, swimming happily in the colorful currents. That was what the little boy had heard and imagined that day or – who knows, perhaps he had made this up later as a waking dream, which had accompanied him for three and a half decades.

The following day, Alisa’s father arrived and took her home to Kyiv. The camp had not been scheduled to end for another week and a half.

And so she had been within those gated grounds from the start of the summer almost until its end, in a world that was closed off by an “iron curtain,” unless we consider her escape to

the black hole with the little boy and the two field trips the camp had taken to the shores of Lake Sevan and its island.

That first field trip had been a swim in Lake Sevan. The lake water was fresh and heavy, not light like the Black Sea. And the sun was hot. And why, oh why wasn't it *she* who almost drowned in the water of the lake? Why did Masis have to dive in and rescue blue-eyed Olya and not her? Why was it Olya that he carried out of the heavy-heavy water, accompanied by the admiring whoops and applause of everyone around them? Why couldn't she look away from Masis' firm calves, the dark black, curly bunch of short hair at his chest, and his muscles that looked like fish freshly extracted from the lake? And when Olya who had recovered consciousness a while ago and calmed down kissed her rescuer, and Masis' eyebrow jumped up in surprise, his smile twisted in a new way, slightly embarrassed, not self-satisfied as usual, and then, and then, when that thing in his tight and wet swimsuit rose quickly and unexpectedly, why, why didn't she burst out laughing like everyone else? Why did she feel a sudden, powerful pain like starvation, that she could not forget to this day? And Masis, upset at the unexpectedness of what had happened, had pushed Olya aside and ran back to the very fresh, very cold, very heavy rescuing waters.

During the second field trip, she had bought an artistic souvenir coin with the image of a girl holding up a torch, which she had carefully kept for years at home as a token of her time at Sevan in 1986, in addition to a few photographs and letters. At that peninsula, which had once been an island, Comrade Areg had told them the legend of Akhtamar. This was the story of the beautiful Tamar, who would light a torch every night for her

lover, so that he would not lose his way as he swam over to her embrace. An evil acquaintance extinguished the flaming beacon one day and the swimmer drowned in those very heavy, very cold, very black waters, with the final words out of his lips being an exclamation, “Akh, Tamar!”

When she was back in Kyiv, when she had written the traditional “How I spent the summer” essay dedicated to her adventures in Sevan from start to finish, when the memory of Masis’ unexpected erection no longer elicited feelings of starvation within her, when her mother’s gloominess had passed and her father’s stubborn silence had ended, when her grandmother’s reprimanding words faded, she received a long letter from Darya.

Plump Darya’s letter told her about the stunning performance on the final day. Their cohort had been the last one on stage and they had staged *Chernobyl-Metzamor* as originally planned, with an unchanged script. The oldest of the guests from Yerevan, who was perhaps a party leader, had left the hall, followed by Comrade Wilson Tumanyan’s whole delegation. The only guests that remained in the hall had been the parents, a young journalist, and the photographer accompanying him, who had apparently then reported the incident in an Armenian newspaper. The boys had carried Comrade Areg to the stage and everyone had given an extended standing ovation. And because the campers were due to leave the following day, no punishments or correctional interventions were carried out. Alisa’s role had been played by – I’m sure you’ve already guessed it – blue-eyed Olya.

* * *

Three and a half decades later, in the summer of 2021, Alisa

Melnik returned to the camp she had visited in 1986 – a guest from the future to her past, with a mission that even she did not understand.

While surfing the internet, browsing through the results of yet another search query, she had come across a Facebook page featuring – how could it be – pictures of the camp she had come to as a child. It turned out to be a group administered by the little boy in the past, who had grown and turned into a bearded writer who had created a page in memory of his educator grandparents. In one of the comments beneath a picture, Alisa saw and immediately recognized Masis. He was a doctor now, wearing a white coat. He hadn't married Olya, he had adult children, his wife was Armenian, with a face that seemed so familiar to Alisa. Her name was Hasmik. Could it be her? Who knew? Perhaps this was their Hasmik, but the aquiline nose was gone. Her hair was short, cut in an ultramodern style, and she looked like someone who knew how to take care of herself. Judging from the pictures, they seemed to be a happily married couple living in Malta.

On a sunny day in June 2021, Alisa Melnik, accompanied by the little boy who had become a bearded man, stood once again before the silvery gate with bars pattered in a Stalinist baroque design, but it did not roll open this time. They slipped in somehow. There were miserable ruins inside, enclosed within gated grounds that were still miraculously lush and green. The space bore a distant resemblance to an erstwhile majestic palace now hidden in a jungle thicket, but it was even more similar to the ghost town of Pripyat that she had visited a few years earlier. They walked around inside. Most of the concrete statue of the boy hugging the crocodile had wasted away. But the large buildings were

still standing, their windows broken, heavy padlocks everywhere. They silently left the area as if walking away from the coffin of a dear corpse who had definitely died but was yet to be buried.

They did not go near the black hole. Instead, they spent most of the day in the nearby village of Tzaghkunk, riding horses, visiting a dog farm, walking to the church at the top of the cliff, eating *lavash* at the oldest *tonir* bakery in Armenia, which had been restored to its authentic original design, and finally indulged in an excellent meal at the newly-opened restaurant in the middle of the village, wallowing in memories until late that night. When Alisa Melnik finished her story of what had happened in the summer of 1986, she stared for a long time at the little boy, who had become a writer and who was playing with his beard, and made one and only request of him. “Armen, if you end up writing this story, please attach this photo to it.” A quick airdrop later, one iPhone received from the other, the only photo that Alisa Melnik had taken at the Sevan sanatorium – the silver gate.

And so, dear Alisa, here it is. I have carried out the request you made of me.



July 11, 2021

Epilogue

The Sevan Children’s Sanatorium is one of dozens of abandoned and half-ruined sanatoria and resorts left over from the Soviet Era in Armenia. It is located on the road between the town of Sevan and the village of Tzaghkunk.

Wilson Tumanyan was the head ed-

ucator at the Sevan Children’s Sanatorium from the early 1970s. His military history as presented in the story is based on fact.

On August 28, 1987, during the All-Union Pioneer Meeting at Artek camp in Crimea, the Soviet children made an unprecedented deviation from the official agenda and asked questions about their rights and other issues that they considered important. This incident is known as the Pioneer Uprising.

In 1987, one of the demands of the newly-launched Environmental Civic Movement was the closure of the Metzamor Atomic Power Plant. The movement did not have much success and, one year later, many of the activists joined another popular uprising – the Karabakh Movement.

On December 7, 1988, the Soviet authorities panicked after a devastating earthquake hit Spitak (25 thousand killed, more than half a million people left homeless) and shut down the Metzamor Atomic Power Plant, which was then restarted in 1995 and continues to operate today, ending the energy crisis that had engulfed Armenia for many years.

The closed border between Armenia and Turkey is considered the final “piece” of the Iron Curtain, even though it was closed due to the First Karabakh War, after the Soviet Union had collapsed. In 2020, after the Second Karabakh War, reopening that last piece of the Iron Curtain has once again appeared on the political agenda.

Translated by Nazareth Seferian