The Ash Tree

--a novel

Daniel Melnick

I love the taste of the sun in their words:
The Armenian laments, those ancient airs,
Are like the burning scent of blood-red flowers.

--Yeghishe Charents
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Prologue:

A death in the family – January 2, 1972

A car drove out of the foggy darkness and parked in the driveway. From the family room, Artemis heard her husband, Armen, shuffling about in the foyer. The front door opened. She knew it was Tigran, their eldest child; after his divorce, he had moved in with his young son Adam. Tigran’s voice mumbled something. A muffled cry came from Armen, and then Tigran walked in. His face was hard and colorless. She felt her own face freeze white; her shoulders and chest tightened, and the tightness made her shake.

He mumbled something.

“What?” she said. “I can’t hear you. Why do you mumble?”

“I have to tell you something,” he said.

“What?” she spit out, stern and urgent.

“Garo is dead.”

She had not heard correctly. “You’re talking gibberish,” she said.

“Garo was shot at his bar,” Tigran said.

“You’re lying! Don’t you dare speak such lies!” She spoke in a high-pitched rasp and felt the acid of her stomach rise into her throat.

“Ma, Garo was murdered. He was shot. He’s dead!”

She stared at him, and then she screamed.
Part One: The Afterlife of Genocide

Chapter 1

Armen

February 8, 1925

Armen Ararat dreamt that he ran parallel to it, peering in, trying to keep up. He wondered where it was headed as it accelerated across the endless plateau. Straining with the last of his will to keep up with the train, he looked into the compartment. He could hardly make out what was within, but just as it was about to surge ahead, he saw. He himself sat there, eating chocolate. On the seats all about him were the bodies of the dead.

He sat up in bed. Someone was knocking at his door.

“Armen, it’s time to wake up,” Mrs. Hagopian said outside.

“I will get up, Madame Baroness,” he said in formal, polite Armenian. He knew he had dreamed and could remember only a feeling of breathless distress. He had lived with the sensation for a decade, since he was fourteen, when he saw and heard things about which he could not feel at peace.

Armen unbent his sleepy limbs, rose, and dressed. As he walked to the bathroom near his room, his small, attentive landlady disappeared down the stairs to the first floor. Then, in his room, he thought of his early morning appointments tutoring freshmen at the University. Madame Hagopian had once again kindly awakened him. She ran her boarding house in Berkeley with the genteel efficiency she had possessed a decade before while reigning over her haute-bourgeois household in Constantinople. Armenians sometimes called her the red baroness, out of respect for the refinement of her upbringing and for the passion of her leftist politics. Now, in America, Armen was drawn to her idealistic socialism partly because he felt such an
allegiance to the new socialist republic of Soviet Armenia, which was so vulnerable next to Turkey. And reading The New Masses and other left-wing papers, he found an indignation at injustice like the bitterness he poured into some of his poetry. This month he had written “In exile, I cannot forget” with its last lines:

Under the blinding sun, passing alien grain,
I ride the hurtling train of my black fate.
The other exiles and I weep in rage and pain,
For with us sit the beloved bodies of the dead.

Madame Hagopian was a short, thin-boned woman with delicate shoulders, and she always held herself with her back straight. Her thick brown hair was pulled carefully into a bun, prematurely peppered with gray, and her drawn face possessed an intensity which seemed a vestige of the pride and elegance of her years before 1915. After the death in that year of her husband, an esteemed lawyer for the Sultan, she had gathered all she could of the family’s savings and fled with her children from their regal home, travelling across the globe to San Francisco. Now she owned this large Victorian house in Berkeley, renting out the second and third floor rooms and living on the first floor with her ten year old son and her fourteen year old daughter, Zarhouie.

His landlady’s spirit had been tempered into an unblinking graciousness in the decade since her husband had been arrested at midnight on April 24, 1915. Later that morning a decade ago, one of Armen’s teachers had taken him to the Galata district to visit the great poet Varoujan for a second time. When they arrived, there were rumors that something was happening across the Golden Horn in Beyazit Square, the huge public space in the center of Constantinople. “Go home,” Oshagan, his teacher, had said to Armen; “hurry!” Yet he delayed, and alone he began to
walk down Galata Hill, through the crowded labyrinth of streets. Groups of Turkish Muslims milled about the dusty byways; most of the Christian Armenians, Greeks, and Jews who normally filled the quarter had locked their shops and homes and were nowhere to be seen. Armen hurried south to Galata Bridge, where the passage became thick with people; his pace slowed, and he felt paralyzed in the hostile element, as the water of the Golden Horn sparkled below in the April sun.

He burst out of the bottleneck on the Bridge and sprinted down a wide, palatial avenue to Beyazit Square. He must see what was happening, but the vast public space was packed with men. There was the smell of dust and sweat from the multitude, as well as an odd odor of metal, of damp rust. A loud hum arose of curses and catcalls, prayers and rants in choppy, surging waves of the city’s languages. He slipped closer and closer, but always he saw before him a wall of backs, which towered over the youngster. Some were clothed in coarse cloth and others in nicely cut European suits; some heads wore fezzes or bowler hats, and others were bare – some bald and others with hair scruffy or carefully shaved at the neck. The sea of heads churned before him, the bobbing heads allowing him only brief glimpses. There seemed to be a gallows set up for a public execution in the center of the square, and then suddenly he saw the phalanx of gendarmes and soldiers standing at attention below a score of hanging men.

A bloated ripeness had stiffened the bodies, and a crowd of flies hovered around the corpses. Some had been sliced, and the blood had set and darkened the clothing where the knives had slit. His eyes were raw and fixed in place. All the executed seemed to be Armenians, twenty men hanging before him. He saw one of his teachers suspended in the middle of one row of gallows; it was his history professor, mutilated and dead. And then he recognized the contorted
face of Baron Hagopian. The lawyer’s fine European suit had been slit in several places, and the blood had splotched and thickened.

The wall of backs closed in on him. The milling crowd in this sweep of public space seethed with a peculiar lust. He had been reckless to come here, and stealthily now, he dodged away from the crowd. He could hardly breathe, yet he ran and retraced his path back to the Galata Bridge. He must report the horror he had seen to his literature teacher, who like Varoujan was a great writer and would bear witness to the catastrophe.

He ran and ran but made little progress as he crossed the bridge again and stared at the fetid water below. He ran through the maze of dusty streets and passed the knots of Turks standing around, as their children played in the guttered lanes. He gasped for each breath as he clambered up through the steep neighborhood and finally strode around the corner of Varoujan’s street. There he halted. A half block away, at the poet’s door, nearly a dozen gendarmes gathered. They surrounded Varoujan and another writer, grasped each man, and forced them to march down the boulevard to a waiting cart. Two officers had followed, with arms akimbo, chatting and smiling as if they were at a fair.

He knew he was late now. He took his notebook and a book in French from the desk and descended the rooming house stairs two at a time. Passing the dining room, he glanced in.

“You had no breakfast,” Mrs. Hagopian called to him. He said he had no time.

The big Victorian house was covered in dark-stained shingles and had a big turret, a curved bay window, and a wide porch. Armen bounded down its high steps into the February fog and ran to Telegraph Avenue. Then he began walking past the small one- and two-story shops clustered in the blocks approaching Sather Gate, the entrance to the university: a pharmacy,
tobacconists, cafés and food stalls selling American food, and a scattering of bookstores. None of it was as impressive as the student district in Constantinople. But his sense of that city was ghostly now, and fleeting memories floated in and out of his awareness as Armen ran across the bridge at Sather Gate. The fog was slowly lifting, and he hummed a bittersweet folksong: “Alakyaz sarn ambel az” – clouds shroud the mountain. He took the steps up two at a time in front of Wheeler Hall, the new building for the Humanities departments.

“Bonjour,” he returned the greeting of Professor Taylor, as he passed her office on the second floor. The gray-headed woman was the head of the French Department; she had interviewed him last spring and arranged for him to work as a department tutor to first-year students. He had been exempted from lower division courses and admitted to the upper-level French major. In Constantinople, he had translated Verlaine and a novel by Anatole France into Armenian. Armen had hoped to go to Paris and attend the Sorbonne, and he had cousins in France. But when he was nineteen and about to depart, his Uncle Haig had written from Central California to summon him: come work with him there for a year on the farms near Fresno, and earn enough to bring Armen’s brother, his sister, and his mother, who was Haig’s sister, out of the cauldron of Turkey, and come to the safety of America.

So he – and then his family – had come and had worked themselves to the bone picking grapes day in and day out under the burning sun or working in the stifling packing sheds. He remembered driving with his uncle to pick up his family at the Fresno train station and then, on the way south to Delano, they stopped in the town of Yettem near the Sierra foothills; the little Armenian Church there was the oldest in the valley, and it was right next to the cow pasture. Incense came through the open doors and mixed with the farting of nearby cows. Mama began to cry. It reminded her so much of the village. And now five years later, it was 1925, and here he
was in Berkeley, a student and teaching assistant at the University of California. His old teacher Oshagan – exiled in Beirut now – might be proud, if only he knew.

Armen was late, and he headed down the wide hallway to the corner lounge, used for tutoring and TA office hours. The new Hall’s wooden floors were shining, and the resinous smell of wax and wood flooded his nostrils. He opened the lounge door and saw a blonde freshman sitting next to his desk – an eighteen-year-old American girl.

“Bonjour, Mary Ellen,” the tutor said.

On Wednesday he had met her for the first time and planned their course of action. Today was Friday, and she would be reciting for the first time a poem she was preparing to memorize, one of Verlaine’s brief “Romances sans paroles.” Mary Ellen was like the rosy-cheeked well-fed girls he had first seen in New York’s Grand Central Station when he had boarded the train and surveyed the other passengers headed west. He had stopped at the candy stall, pointed to the bars of chocolate, and laid a dollar down on the counter. The attendant asked incomprehensibly, “You want a whole dollar’s worth?” The bars were all he consumed during the days and nights on the train to California. Other passengers would board and depart in waves all across the country, tall, short, friendly or gruff. The American women, whether bourgeois ladies or country girls, looked alike for the most part: they looked like Mary Ellen. She was pretty, but was this really a woman, with soul in her eyes, mystery in her body, knowledge in her brain?

“Mary Ellen, récitez le poème de Verlaine, s’il vous plaît,” he said.

“Le poème…de Verlaine,” she repeated with an American twang. “Il… pleure…dans mon…cœur…Comme il…pleut sur…la ville…."

Her smiling hesitations told him that no rain fell in her heart as it fell on the city for Verlaine, no causeless pain penetrated her soul. Sorrow did not threaten to swallow her whole.
He did not blame her, though he would have liked to dismiss her. Instead he painstakingly corrected her pronunciation. Armen remembered how Oshagan had led him patiently through the poems of Verlaine and Baudelaire. Oshagan was a born teacher, but not Armen. A second student arrived in the TA’s office, and so his Friday morning proceeded.

After tutoring students, he had a cup of coffee and a chocolate bar. Then at 11 in the morning, he attended a seminar on Renaissance French Drama for seniors and graduate students. The old professor droned on in French about versification in Racine’s Phèdre. He never acknowledged how the language captures her tortured sensuality, or how moving is her tragic passion. Armen’s whole soul was intoxicated by the singing of the verse.

The California sun had already burned off the fog and the clouds when he walked down the cement steps of Wheeler Hall, through Sather Gate and then by the same shops he had passed before. When he was a block away from Mrs. Hagopian’s, Armen looked carefully at the distant driveway. In it, there was a yellow car.

Ervant sat alone, waiting for his brother, at the long table in Madame Hagopian’s dining room. He had driven their yellow Dodge up from Fresno, and Armen would be so surprised. The two brothers had bought the roadster together a few years ago, just after their break with Uncle Haig. Now Armen was almost twenty-five, and Ervant was nineteen. Armen always said his younger brother had been only a child in 1915 and so had not seen or suffered too much. It had taken time for Armen to trust Ervant. But he trusted him now with the Dodge – and with a lot more.

Suddenly Ervant looked up, leapt from his chair, and shouted his brother’s name.
“You’re here!” Armen cried, and then as he always did, he assumed the worst. “Who died?”

“No, no,” Ervant said. “No one died. I just wanted to surprise you!” The two young men hugged then and kissed each other on the cheek.

“So what is it that draws you from forlorn Fresno to this magnificent city?” Armen said in Armenian, and they both smiled.

“I had to drive up. I hear Gloria whispering to me from North Beach,” Ervant said, quiet and deadpan, but then he couldn’t help grinning and flashing his hooded eyes.

Armen laughed as his brother grinned. He could not forget, though, the warnings against syphilis pictured on Red Cross signs and in public offices, the grim reaper descending on unsuspecting couples. Ervant never seemed to feel ghostly or numb, and so he could indulge himself. He could invent stories at will, become wild at a moment’s notice, and even lie, sometimes. Armen only felt that high-spirited in his poems; that was the one place where he felt his blood surge vitally – and, of course, also occasionally in his political speeches.

Mrs. Hagopian swung the dining room door open and entered, carrying platters of lunch foods. It was after one, and there were no other boarders at the table. “Please, sit down,” she said to them. “I hope you are hungry.” She brought them a decanter of strong coffee and filled their cups.

“Thank you so much, Madame Baroness,” Armen said.

“Yes, thank you so much, Madame Baroness,” Ervant repeated. She poured a cup for herself and joined them as they filled their plates with the food.
As he sat eating, Armen felt a familiar strangeness, as if he were separated from both the past and the present. His memories were always there, but he felt somehow barely present in them. And in the present, he felt the same separation. His face was stiff and furrowed, and his compact twenty-four year old body felt thick and numb. As he sipped the black coffee his landlady had poured him, he took all the care he could to show his respect for the extraordinary woman sitting next to him, and she seemed to feel great pleasure in helping Armen, who as a teenager had been a part of the cultured Constantinople Armenian life she so missed.

On the two brothers’ plates were slices of lox on crusty Italian bread; there were also sliced oranges, blue-veined Roquefort, and large Greek olives. Mrs. Hagopian said in Armenian, “The smoked salmon is from the delicatessen – not as good as in the old country.”

“It’s a brave new world” Armen said in English. Ervant, with his pomaded hair, silently hunched forward as he ate and sipped his coffee.

Reverting to Armenian, Armen said: “We used to eat plump, oil-cured olives in Constantinople. Anchovies, the brine washed off, had the savor of a kiss. And oranges tasted of sunlight and the tree.” He extended his hand in a wistful gesture over the table.

“Yes,” Ervant said, without looking up, “a beautiful country, Turkey - beautiful food and beautiful sun – but not so beautiful when they massacre more than a million of you. We’re lucky. If we had stayed in our village, we’d all be dead. They would have murdered us without question.”

His brother was right, Armen knew, but he had to change the subject for Mrs. Hagopian’s sake. “Ervant, I was just thinking about when you came to America.”

“Sure,” Ervant said, “when Uncle Haig brought us to America – and why? To use us.”
“We worked for Sun-Maid and Del Monte,” Armen said, and he saw that his landlady was listening, though he was not sure that this emissary from their lost world quite understood. “We were paid very, very little.”

“But what a buck could get you!” Ervant smiled slyly, “Even a couple of very nice nights in San Francisco.”

“It’s important not to live for the dollar,” Mrs. Hagopian said with polite fervor. She was objecting to Ervant’s excess, and Armen restrained his smile as he remembered Ervant’s bravado as a child. When he was nine, at his entrance exam for school in Constantinople in 1914, the boy was asked about Roman history, and he spoke extemporaneously for twenty minutes; the examining professor said, “That is the most fascinating account of Roman history I have ever heard. Unfortunately, not a word of it is true.” But Ervant was admitted, probably because of his performance.

“It’s true, baroness,” Armen said now; “you can’t count on money. Anyway it soon became scarce for us.”

“Right, and soon there was no money at all,” Ervant said, “because we stopped working for Uncle Haig.”

“That was your fault,” Armen teased in a suddenly neutral voice, as if they were playing cards.

“Somebody had to call his bluff, so I did! Uncle Haig would dress up in his clean white shirt and spiffy tie and spend his days at the Armenian coffeehouse, and one day after we all came in dirty and worn out from the fields – even Mama, his own sister – I asked him: ‘Uncle, how much is in the savings box now?’”
Ervant was now stretching his hands out dramatically in front of Armen and the landlady.

“Haig flew into a rage. Mama kept apologizing for me. She begged him to calm down. But he kept shouting how ungrateful we were. He never should have brought us from Turkey! He would have been better off bringing sacks of wheat! ‘I’ll give you the money - sure!’ he yelled. ‘And I’ll hang myself. Will that satisfy you?’ With that he stomped out, and we never got a dollar from him. We began working for ourselves. And now you’re at Berkeley! And I’m on my way to Frisco.’

“What’s important is the family survives,” Mrs. Hagopian said. “What can we do after all that has happened? We say we are fine, so we can seem fine or at least pretend.”

As she talked in Armenian, Armen felt their conversation was itself like the food before them, nurturing them. He felt like singing a folk song – about good wine and good food – but now his landlady began talking about the fate of Armenia after the Genocide. Turkey had threatened in 1920 to invade across the Arax River near Mount Ararat, and Lenin saved their homeland by sending Russian troops to the border.

“It was the only way we survived,” Mrs. Hagopian said.

“The only way,” Armen said, “as a Soviet republic.”

“There’s hardship, even starvation, I know, but there is hope,” Mrs. Hagopian said.

“Okay, okay. But what a cost!” Ervant said. “How many people did Lenin murder when he created the Soviet republics? And who knows how many Stalin will kill?”

“The Soviets,” Armen said too loudly, “saved Armenia from extermination.”

But now another student boarder wandered into the dining room, looking surprised. Mrs. Hagopian got up to greet him in her clear, slightly accented English.
Ervant whispered urgently, “Brother, I have to talk to you, alone. Right away.” In English, Armen told his landlady they needed to talk privately.

As they rose to go into the living room, he glimpsed a forlornness in her face. He felt tears unbidden rising in his eyes. It was as if their leaving the dining room were some sort of grave farewell – it was irrational, he knew, for they were just doing what everyone did in America, hurrying on their way from point to point, one collision to another. Talking with his brother was one such collision. Ervant’s ebullience made Berkeley seem unreal. But already earlier this morning the university had seemed shallow and unreal. Weighted down by his obligations, Armen was drawn to his younger brother’s sense that reality was a crapshoot, where you had to watch for the advantage and take pleasure when life allowed, where chance reigned and fate could always intervene.

“Armen, something has come up,” Ervant said now, as they sat on the couch in the empty living room. “We don’t have much time. We must decide this weekend, or we’re lost. I’m telling you, it’s our only chance to get rich: I can get a one year lease on 320 acres, twenty miles outside of Fresno, prime land—raisins and peach. But I can’t do it without you. If you go in, Arsine’s husband will go in, and we can’t lose if Nubar works with us. I need you, Armen. It’s why I drove up. Mother and your sister and I all need you.”

Armen was stunned.

“I’m not asking you to decide right now. Anyway, I’m itching to spend the evening with Gloria. You tell me tomorrow.”

“Ervant, do you see what you’re asking?” He could hardly speak.

“Listen, Armen. Just think about it. I’ll come back by noon tomorrow.”
They walked in silence onto the porch. He saw his brother to the yellow Dodge and watched him drive down Channing Way through the crisp February afternoon.

In the boarding house, Armen climbed the stairs to his small room with its bed, desk, chest, and stacks of books. There was a photo of Lenin which Madame Hagopian had placed on the wall. Sitting mechanically down at his desk, he started to imagine abandoning his life here and returning to the San Joaquin Valley for a life on the land near Fresno.

From an envelope in his desk drawer, he took some photographs. Among them was one of big Uncle Haig and himself, taken when he first arrived in California. Haig wore a pin-striped suit, a shimmering tie, and two-tone shoes. The handsome man sat on an elegant chair with claws carved into the end of the arms. One of his big, powerful hands held a claw in its grip; the other rested in a loose fist on a crossed leg. Next to him, Armen stood dwarfed and wide-eyed, dressed in a corduroy suit, with his thick wavy hair combed but barely under control. He rested his hand on the shoulder of his seated Uncle, who seemed twice Armen’s size. Haig had pale, expressionless, Northern European-looking eyes. One of them squinted as if it were taking aim at you; the other was open and unblinking. This was the man who met Armen in the train station in Sacramento in June of 1920 and greeted him by reaching up and knocking off his head the beret which Armen had worn for years in Constantinople. Uncle drove him downstate, past Fresno to Delano, where he and the other workers taught him how to labor in the fields, how to cope with the ache and sweat, how to conserve his back as he leaned to work, and how to bathe his swollen hands in vinegar at night. This was the giant who, like a Turk, slammed a co-worker up against a tree one afternoon, holding him there, one large hand tightening around the man’s neck, as if he would rip out his throat or, if an axe were handy, hack off his head. Uncle Haig was always ready for violence, but he was blind to his own brutality; he said proudly that he had killed a man
in a knife fight in Bulgaria, when he first fled from Turkey. Always he was on the verge of exploding.

Yet Armen understood his Uncle. He remembered his first days in the fields when he felt the blinding sun blast his consciousness. At night on this reclaimed desert, the temperature dropped from 110 to 70, as the flatland descended into darkness. Suddenly you were almost invisible and bathed in numbing air. It was a blasted desolation you felt, reducing all the life you knew to your body and its basic functioning, breathing and sleeping, eating and excreting, killing or dying. Your mouth was silenced, and your eyes stared blankly at the blackened endless moonless fields. A year ago, the great Armenian General Andranik Ozanian had talked with Armen about the ruthless Fresno sun and the cruelty of life. Asthmatic but unbroken, Andranik had recently moved to Fresno. Sitting with Armen at the coffeehouse, the steely man with strangely kind eyes had said: “You’re a fine, well-spoken young man, Armen. But life is a vicious dog, and it will sink its teeth into you if you let it.”

Yes, he understood Uncle Haig. All of the Armenian immigrants here had been permanently scarred by what they carried with them from Turkey. They had been cast out of their homeland and ended up here in the Wild West, this vast vacant sunbaked land where they were all one step away from being gunslingers, their outrage always close at hand. You had to be ready for someone to murder or be murdered. “Did someone die?” was always the first question you asked.

How could such knowledge fit into a student’s life? He remembered the hours he had spent translating Anatole France’s “Thais” into Armenian, his tremendous effort to capture its voluptuous asceticism, and yet his goal – to become a poet, an intellectual – seemed unreal and false now. All the learning from his apprenticeship with Oshagan and all the poetry he loved by
Verlaine and Mallarmé – how could his awareness of all this fit into the life of an immigrant in this savage world? Finally, it was idle to try pursuing an American profession, for it would involve the unimaginable labor of remaking himself completely. And what profession would let him enter it? Anyway, his fate was to float between worlds, among languages. He was an Armenian in America, in this land halfway around the globe from Anatolia. So words – whether Armenian or French, English or Turkish – became unreal; they could only bob and float, ungrounded and almost unspeakable. Words would not survive unscathed after the murder of a million and a half Armenians and the exile of another million.

“Sickdir pesavang!” The Turkish obscenity exploded from him. He was not sure to whom he directed it: fate, the Turks, America, himself, or his brother for making everything clear. It echoed hopelessly in the empty room.

Armen opened the French-Armenian dictionary on his desk, and the pages of words seemed all at once seductive and untrackable. He would take his books with him back to Fresno, and they would be a lifelong reminder of literature and its temptations. As he was closing the dictionary, he looked at the flyleaf. In the fall when he first came to Berkeley, he had copied a sentence there. “Je cherche toujours pour trouver un maison favorable pour moi:” I try continually to find a favorable abode for myself. For him, there was no favorable place. He felt, too, his lack of any true companion. The image of a small, beautiful, golden woman entered his mind, not a seductress like Thais, not a bearer of the syphilis he feared. No, rather, she was the muse he yearned for, a muse and soul mate.
The gravel crackled under foot as Artemis Haroutian walked down the driveway. An autumn wind blew over the hardpan fields and stirred up the dust at her feet. She would be exactly on time to open the store at 7:30, when she had opened it almost every morning since her eighteenth birthday. That was a year and a half ago, just when the letter arrived admitting her to Fresno State College. As she walked, Degas’ paintings were on her mind, especially his paintings of ballerinas. They had fascinated her ever since she saw them last year in her Freshman Introduction to Art. The instructor was interested in the latest trends, even in the new Cubism, but what most attracted Artemis were the prints he brought of Degas. The ballerinas inspired her. Sometimes they were really contorted, yet always they were floating in a pure, balanced world. Degas showed their reality, she thought, but he also gave them a beautiful place in what her teacher called “the order of things.” Seeing them, she felt much joy.

Unlocking the grocery store, she quickly shut the door against the wind and turned on the lights. The scents of cinnamon, cardboard, and produce filled the empty store. Two non-Armenians soon entered. One was a gray-haired stranger in a shabby jacket and the other a young woman, who brought a glass bottle of milk and a loaf of bread up to the register.

“I heard your mother is sick,” the sandy-haired woman said, handing her a quarter.

“No, she’s fine,” Artemis answered in a clear, unaccented voice. She smiled at the pasty-looking woman, gave her a nickel in change, and bagged her groceries.

“No? Well, you tell Lucy be well from me. She’s such a sweetie.”
The paper bags were low, and she must remember to restock them from the supply room. She took a brown bag, placed the grey-haired man’s bottle of sherry in it, and carefully rested it on the counter. The man put his coins down, and he eyed her coldly, staring at her hazel eyes and light reddish brown hair. His icy look conveyed such contempt that she wondered whether he might rob the store or even assault her. She was worried, but she offered him a cool, courteous smile.

“You people can’t vote today, can you?” the man said.

“You people?” she said.

“I hope Hoover wins and sends you dirty Armenians back where you came from!” he snarled.

“I was born in Connecticut,” she said coldly.

“Sure, and I’m the King of England,” he said and rushed out.

Outrage and bitterness welled up in her. She tried to steady herself, and slowly she inhaled the scents of the store – the citrus, the spices, and the old wood floor. She wished her sister would come to relieve her. It would be a little while yet, but soon she would be at the college. She walked to the back room to restock the bags. Then three more customers came. She swept the store, and other customers entered.

Finally, there was a lull. She took a book from her purse and placed it on the counter in front of her. “Poetry of Byron” was assigned for her sophomore English class this afternoon. She loved the slim volume, the silken flyleaf over the poet’s image, curly haired and handsome, and the small sturdy pages with their clear, intensely black printed type. She loved the Romantics and especially this poet, for Byron fascinated her. She loved the fact that he had been a great leader, fighting like a general, in the Greek war of liberation against the Turks. Also, he had said that
Armenian is a beautiful language and had arranged to learn it at the Armenian monastery in St. Lazare, Venice. She was inspired by Manfred and Childe Harold: “I live not in myself, but become Portion of that around me.” And she was deeply moved by the poet’s adoration of women in “She walks in beauty, like the night,” and the grace and nostalgia of it:

So we’ll go no more a-roving
So late into the night,
Though the heart be still as loving,
And the moon be still as bright.

His poetry was so musical, and Artemis imagined him as a great troubadour like Sayat Nova, the classic Armenian poet with his lute. In Turkey, there had been musicians in her mother Lucine’s family. Lucine’s brother had played the lute in Harput where the family lived, and the two of them had been very close, for they had been orphaned when Mama was six, during the Turkish massacres of Armenians in 1896. Then when she turned sixteen, Mama had met Papa. Artemis’ father-to-be had traveled back to Harput from Connecticut in order to arrange a marriage with Lucine. Mama’s brother had threatened to kill Papa, but Lucine had left anyway. She voyaged to America with an Aunt in 1908, and as soon as she arrived, Dikran had married her. A year later, Artemis had been born in the Hartford General Hospital. And six years later, in 1915, Mama’s brother was murdered by the Ottoman Turks, who destroyed Harput’s Armenian Quarter with its beautiful boulevards and lovely restaurants.

“So you’re reading on the job now!” an abrasive voice said in Armenian. It was Uncle Zorab. She immediately stiffened and closed the book. “You’ll wreck your eyes,” her uncle – one of her father’s stepbrothers – said. He lumbered up to the counter, his large stomach protruding above his belt. His hair was straight and brown and framed a big cow-like face.
“Hello, Uncle Zorab,” she said respectfully.

“What are you reading?” He grabbed the Byron off the counter and held it upside down.

“What’s this? For college? You’ll never marry! Who would ever marry a girl who goes to college?”

Artemis stared at her uncle and said nothing. He dropped the book down on the counter. Maybe he resembled a pig more than a cow.

“What are you squinting at—you must need glasses already. Why don’t you get off your ass and sweep the store? Everybody says you’re lazy.”

“Look around. I already swept the store,” she said and looked down at her book. She heard the terrible hum of gossip in her uncle’s voice, and her whole body tensed.

He let out a dubious grunt and said, “People say you’re still going around with that Bolshevik. If you don’t stop, it will bring shame to all of us, and it will bring horrible ahmot down especially on you, the worst you’ve ever known!”

Artemis had heard Uncle Zorab say such things all her life, along with the echoing voice of her other Uncle, Souren. They even criticized her father—their own half-brother, who was older than them by a dozen and more years.

“We told you to never see that Bolshi again!” He walked out of the store with a bag of red apples in hand and without saying goodbye.

He meant Armen Ararat, who was educated and artistic, like no one she had met before. He was the opposite of her uncle, for he was a brilliant man, an idealist, a socialist, and what was more, he farmed twenty acres of raisins successfully for three years now, ever since returning from Berkeley. People at the Labor Day picnic or in halls loved to hear him give speeches, and he was friendly with the older Armenian intellectuals – Zarafian the actor of Shakespeare in
Armenian, Kalfayan the composer, Moradian the great singer, and Lulegian the publisher of Fresno’s leftist Armenian weekly. And Armen loved poetry. He would take her to Roeding Park, and they would sit on a bench surrounded by a semi-circle of Greek columns and a ring of ash trees. The thick-haired young man would recite Armenian and French poetry from memory in his expressive baritone—especially Verlaine and Mallarmé. “La chair est triste, hélas! Et j’ai lu tous les livres—the flesh is sad, alas, and I have read all the books. Oh, to flee and be among the spray and breeze, the sky and sea.”

He was beautifully spoken, and he possessed a sort of grandness she had never encountered before. He was so kind and admiring toward her, and yes, there had been tenderness between them. He would call her an angel. Two or three times kisses had been exchanged in the park. It felt almost like an extension of his wonderful voice – how could she have stopped him? Insouciant, maybe a bit selfish, but always kind and worshipful, he seemed to dodge the traps of shame she knew too well.

And yet she had hoped never to have a suitor who was born in the old country, let alone one nine years older than she. Artemis had always wanted a suitor who was free of the agony of 1915, an American free to soar in America, not weighted down by foreignness and history. One summer, when she was twelve, the family had taken a trip back to Connecticut, and she had seen the big buildings rising tall in Hartford. What was it like to be the wife of the Chairman of the Hartford Insurance Company! That was the life she wanted to lead, for she was born in America, and she could help her husband achieve anything, even become the President of the United States.

“Hi, Artemis,” her sister Satenig said in her sunny way as she came through the door. It was already 9:40 a.m.
“You’re late! You’re so selfish.”

Her sweet, red-headed sister frowned, and Artemis regretted her words.

“That’s a nice green ribbon you’re wearing,” she said. “It’s so pretty with your hair.”

Her sister smiled and said, “Thank you, it’s new.” Satenig had just turned sixteen, and her temperament was serene and accommodating, a little like their mother. Of course, Artemis loved her other siblings too, but for Satenig, who now stood a head taller than her, she felt such fondness and solace, especially after what had happened when Artemis was five.

The two girls exchanged places, with Satenig taking up the post at the counter. Artemis got a quart bottle of milk to take home and said goodbye. The store stood at the edge of a twenty-acre farm east of Fresno, on the corner of Kings Canyon and Chestnut. She walked back toward the house over the gravel driveway. It was rocky and hard-packed, like the soil of the entire farm. The farm had failed soon after they moved there, and only the grocery store they opened had kept them solvent. Her father and mother had bought the twenty acres of hardpan because Uncle Zorab had browbeaten them into doing so. Artemis was two years old then, and she had an infant sister, Lucaper, who had been born, like her, in Hartford.

Then, three years later, in early 1915, her parents had taken baby Satenig out in their Model T and left little Lucaper and Artemis in the care of Uncle Zorab’s wife. Auntie was washing clothes in a low, steaming trough of boiling water, which was on the path between the driveway and the house. When the two sisters in their little wool coveralls heard the Model T returning, three-year-old Lucaper jumped and toddled down the path toward the rocky driveway and suddenly stumbled. In the trough of blistering water, she screamed only once. Lucaper turned purple in her steaming wool jumper. Artemis’ mouth and throat and stomach had risen up. Her lungs had exploded in horror.
From then on, she knew that terror and death could descend at any moment. Yes, there was nothing she could have done, but nothing could lift the load of shame and terror that weighed on her, bending her shoulders and her legs, scarring her memory, and making her vulnerable to all fault-finding. Her stricken mother lay in her bed. Unable to walk, she crawled to the bathroom, and she did not speak for weeks. In the spring, when she finally got up, they told her that her brother had been killed in the Genocide. To five-year-old Artemis, only her baby sister Satenig was some solace, and as her older sister, she stood guard over her throughout their childhood.

Now, Artemis stepped onto the porch. She opened the screen door and saw her mother standing at the glass-topped inner door and smiling calmly. Lucine’s face was so placid, a wide oval, with slanted doe eyes which they called Kirgiz eyes. Her luxurious hair was dark and carefully bound in a wide bun on top of her head. Mama had a serene beauty which seemed French, though she was not.

The living room was dark because of the wide porch roof and the curtains which kept out the daylight. Artemis said hello and handed her mother the bottle of milk. From down the hall, Uncle Souren, Papa’s other stepbrother, was playing the violin in his room. It was a sad folk melody called Groong, or The Crane. She knew it had been transcribed by the wonderful Armenian composer Gomidas. Though Souren’s bedroom was down the hall and his door was closed, the sound of his violin filled the house with the melody and its yearning for a lost homeland.

“Artemis!” her father grumbled from the dining room.

“Papa, I’ll be there soon,” she answered, giving her mother a pleading look.
“Come here right now!” his high, irritable voice called out, and her mother waved her into the dining room. Her father was fifty-eight, twenty years older than her mother, and Dikran had suffered a stroke on his fiftieth birthday in 1920. It happened during a passionate argument about Armenian independence. Papa had been a Colonel and a compatriot of the great hero General Andranik in the Armenian militia, which had risen up after the Ottoman Abdul Hamid’s massacres of Armenians in 1896. Papa knew firsthand how much courage was needed to fight the Turks. Eight years ago, at the Asparez coffee house, he was shouting about the danger that Turkey would overrun the new Republic of Armenia, and suddenly he could not shout, could hardly speak.

Now he sat partially paralyzed at the head of the dining room table. In front of him were plates of flat lavash bread and eggplant with peppers in her mother’s rich Harput tomato sauce. Even in repose his face looked on the verge of speech, his eyes slightly bulging. With his good hand, he carefully wiped his mouth. His thin waxed moustaches were worn expressively long at the ends.

“Zorab was here. This morning,” he said. A sense of being wronged simmered in each word. “He said you disrespected him. But I know you did not disrespect him. He disrespects you. He says my daughter should not go to college. What right does he have to say you should not…” The words would no longer come, and he stared in silence at Artemis. She watched him quietly, for there was no placating Papa when he was in a state. And she needed to get to school; she did not want to be late for her Art class at 11 this morning.

“He says you are still seeing Armen Ararat. He says people talk about you and the Bolshevik! Are you bringing ahmot down on this family, Artemis? On me!” he said, and his eyes screwed in on her.
“Papa, I would never bring shame to you,” she pleaded.

“Then how can he say it? He disrespects me. A Colonel! I fought shoulder to shoulder with the great Andranik, God rest his soul. I fought to protect children like you.”

She had no time to hear the stories he would spin again, yet she did not want him to be troubled. “Papa, I must go to the College. I’ll be back, and I’ll explain. I must go to my classes now,” she said. With that she scurried out of the room. Her mother called for her to eat something, but she had no time. First she went out the kitchen door, across the back porch to the outhouse nearby. Then she walked through the house to the bedroom she shared with her sisters. She thought her period might come early, but it had not. When she was twelve and began to menstruate, she felt only shame. Her uncles had found out. “It’s time to get her a husband,” Uncle Zorab had said in front of everybody. “What’s a woman for when she gets breasts? Like in the village, it’s the way we do things.” She was enraged by Zorab’s cruelties. Like in the village! This was the 1920s in America, and she was an American.

On the back wall of the bedroom there was a framed picture of Mt. Ararat she had drawn from imagination and with the help of the encyclopedia. She glimpsed herself in the foot-long rectangular mirror; she was well proportioned, but her rounded shoulders and her back looked as if they held up a heavy burden, and her small, pretty body felt oddly battered. Why, she wondered, but her face stared back from the mirror without an answer. She had her mother’s round face and golden complexion, and her father’s widow’s peak and silky hair and his alert, brooding, slightly bulging Renaissance eyes. She put on a nice gray dress and gathered up her coat, notebook, and sketchbook.

“Are you ready to go?” she heard two voices say almost in unison through the bedroom door: her mother and her uncle. “I’m ready to take you,” Souren said impatiently. Artemis
opened her door and swept past them through the hall. She was already in the passenger seat of their Dodge when Souren opened the driver’s side door. With his long violinist’s fingers, he turned the key in the ignition and held the steering wheel as they drove out the crackly driveway. It always surprised her that the tense man’s strangely elongated fingers could make such beautiful music. They passed the store and headed west on Kings Canyon toward town. Mama had asked Uncle Souren to drive Artemis to her classes. He was unmarried, in his forties, with thinning hair and sad eyes like her father, though he was slight and had neither Papa’s physical intensity nor Uncle Zorab’s piggishness. Also unlike Zorab, he had encouraged Artemis’ painting, though slyly, never in front of other family members.

“You must be kind to your mother,” he said in a soft yet oddly threatening tone. “Don’t you dare get her into trouble.”

“I would never do that, Uncle Souren,” she said anxiously.

“Wouldn’t you? They say she’s too lenient, and they’re right.”

She would not answer him, and in silence they turned north now on Blackstone, toward the state college campus. If they had turned south and headed downtown, they would come to Armenia town, filled with immigrants living in the neighborhood surrounding the Armenian churches. Last year, Souren had driven them to the massive funeral there given for General Andranik, the great Armenian national hero and her father’s commander. They had to park blocks away and walk to the church—Dikran with his cane, Lucine, Artemis, Satenig, Souren, Zorab and his wife. People said there were four thousand mourners, all of them survivors of 1915 in one way or another. Artemis saw only an ocean of heads and backs. They never got into the church. In the hall after the burial, though, her father had positioned the family at one of the tables for the Hok-e-jash – the “soul meal” – and they heard speech after speech. Across the hall
sat her friend Armen Ararat with his family – his mother with her upright posture and striking white hair, his brother Ervant with his hair slicked back, and his sister and brother-in-law. When Armen stood and spoke about the General, everyone was riveted by his words.

All the while, her father sat, crippled and seething with paralyzed intensity, unable to summon the voice to tell his story to the assembly. In 1903, Dikran had been responsible for stockpiling rifles in Harput’s Armenian cemetery; he was thirty-three then, and he could not bear to see a repetition of 1896, when Sultan Abdul Hamit II’s troops massacred hundreds of thousands of defenseless Armenians. That autumn, General Andranik sneaked into Harput, contacted Dikran, and asked him to give half the weapons to his fighters. Andranik was a somber, noble man of immense physical courage, who could not be disobeyed, and in 1904, he used those rifles in his defense of Mush a hundred miles to the east. After the Genocide, Andranik had spent his last years in Fresno, struggling to cure his worsening asthma.

In those last years, Andranik had come to their house. Dikran and he would exchange stories of fighting in Turkey, and her father would listen to the handsome General’s laments. Artemis had been allowed to sit at the dinner table the last time General Andranik visited. Lucine made him her famous manti—meat dumplings with yogurt—and kufta burgers in her rich Harput tomato sauce, with buttery pilaf. Artemis was hypnotized by the stern grandeur of the General’s presence, the sweep of his authority as he daintily ate the tender dumplings.

“I’ve traveled half the world, Dikran, and I’ve never before seen a place like this. Do you understand? I have seen massacre and carnage. I have led armies into battle and with my bare hands killed those who were destined to die. But now I spend my days with petty, empty men who have little knowledge of life and death.” His breathing was labored, yet his shoulders were stiff with power and pride. His fine eyes seemed kind and deeply sad, and Artemis thought of all
they had seen. “The Armenians in Fresno are half-men. They know neither what they’ve lost nor what they’re about to lose. In America, the Sultan is not a person but a thing; its name is Money. It will swallow the Armenians whole, Dikran, and spit out their bones.”

Andranik seemed to lead an alternative life to the paralysis surrounding her and her family. Artemis wished that a woman could lead such a life, could achieve such grandeur and sweep of spirit. If she could, Artemis too would become a General. Whatever adversity she met, no matter the challenge, she would never give up, even in the face of death. She would be ready for anything.

“Well, are you getting out?” Uncle Souren said to her.

“Oh, yes,” she said. His car was parked on McKinley near the entrance to Fresno State College. Its walkways were lined with newly planted trees.

“Thank you, Uncle Souren,” she added respectfully. “I’ll see you at four.”

Once out of the car, she walked down a path through the arbor of plum trees, whose leaves still clung to the branches in the slanting November sunlight. It was a path she loved. She began to think about the prints her art professor had shown them; there were new images of Monet’s meadows and Degas’ dancers, and they gave her that joy she found nowhere else in life. She passed a small sign posted on the lawn and pointing the direction to a voting station in the College’s Library building. It was Election Day. Eight years ago women had been given the right to vote by the Nineteenth Amendment, and in two years when she was twenty-one, she would vote. Then she noticed a short stocky young man, with slicked-back hair, slouching by the Art building entrance.
Armen’s younger brother wore his hair full and with thick pomade. Ervant knew people said he was cocky and wild. He was a little short, but he thought the fancy long-sleeved shirt he wore, embroidered white on white, made him look impressive, for now his brother had devised a brilliant plan – with his help, of course.

“Artemis,” he said in a hoarse urgent whisper. She stopped by him on the steps, looking upset, naturally. “Armen is sick; you have to come with me and help him.” He stared earnestly into Artemis’ sympathetic eyes, and he knew at once that she would come with them.

“I have a class,” she said. “How can I help him?”

“He’s in the car, Artemis. He’s very ill,” Ervant said, and then added dramatically, “Please, you must help me take him to the hospital!”

Just as he thought, she was swept up by the urgency of his lie, and she followed him down the path past the plum arbor with its few, last clinging red and brown leaves rustling in the wind that picked up now.

His 1924 Ford was parked in an alley across the street from the college. Armen was lying down in the back seat. When she approached, he sat up, bending forward as if he were in pain. He looked like he had been crying. His wavy hair was wild and unkempt, but he, too, wore a beautiful, embroidered white shirt.

Ervant touched her arm, and she glanced questioningly at him, as he opened the back door of the car.

“He’s sick,” Ervant said very softly. “He’s sick with love for you.”

“My angel,” Armen said worshipfully as he reached to hold her hand, “my angel goddess, I can’t live without you. Please, will you marry me?”

Ervant saw panic on her face.
“Artemis,” Armen cried out, “please, angel, I will die without you. Please marry me.” He was watching her with anguished adoration, and she still stood speechless at the open door of the car. “I will hang myself if you don’t marry me. You don’t know how desperate I am. Please, angel, I love you.” Suddenly his anguish seemed to penetrate her resistance.

“How can I marry you!” she cried out. “What would my family say!”

Ervant whispered, again very softly, by her side: “They already know. I had a letter delivered to them just now, telling your family that you’re eloping with Armen.”

She could not breathe. Her face felt simultaneously icy and hot, and her legs began to buckle.

Armen reached for her and helped her sit by him on the back seat. At a distance, it seemed, she heard his voice explain his plans. They would be married at one p.m., he said. Arrangements had already been made at the Courthouse. And they would drive north to stay a week with John and Lucaper Hatchaturian, mutual friends in San Francisco. Then she would move into the house on his Fresno farm. She was outraged, but she was also amazed that this brilliant man was so deeply in love with her.

For the next two hours, she remained in a daze – during the drive to the Courthouse, signing the official document, the brief ceremony in a judge’s chambers, and later the drive north in the Model T borrowed from Ervant, who would use their old Chevy truck for the week.

Forty miles out of Fresno, they were driving through downtown Madera on 99, and she suddenly awoke.

“Stop here, Armen. I must send a telegram to my parents.” So they parked by the Western Union office in the little farming town. She opened the creaking door. Standing in the
dim office, she felt completely alone. The man in the cage asked her what she wanted. She wrote out her fifteen words on the form he handed to her: “Armen and I got married. Going away for week. It is my fate. Don’t worry.” Yes, she had been grasped by fate and had been forced to consent.

Armen was smiling broadly when she returned to the car. “Angel,” he said. She sat in the passenger’s seat, and the car rattled onto northbound 99. From the corner of her eye, she kept glancing at him as they drove, seeing the smile flicker on his face and his now combed hair tremble in the breeze from the window, which was open a crack. This man had just destroyed her secret expectations of what life could contain—to lead a new, fully American life. And yet she was drawn to him, to this young genius. What was more, he adored her.

At the wheel, Armen began singing. It was a sweet folk song. “Kele kele kelit mermen: You walk and walk, and I would die to walk with you. I die for your beautiful spirit, my quail, my lovely little quail.”

He sang loudly, above the car’s motor, and she wondered at what had brought her to this moment. What were his motives, his faults, and his virtues? He called her his angel, his goddess, and she realized that his imagination had transformed her, Artemis Haroutian, into something like an icon, like the statue of her namesake, the classical goddess of the moon, of the hunt, of fertility itself— or maybe an icon like one of Degas’ beautiful ballerinas. It moved her despite all her resentment, and she began to feel tenderness toward him. But then she wondered if he was deluding her. Perhaps he was the sort of rake who attracted an innocent girl to use her, to trap and exploit her. She had been tricked. Yet listening to him sing, she could not believe that he was so ruthless.

They reached San Francisco at 7 p.m., and Artemis was famished.
She had skipped breakfast, and they had eaten only a light picnic lunch with Ervant in Roeding Park – a celebration under the ash trees, during which she was mostly silent. But now she was delighted with the dinner that their friends the Hatchaturians served the newlyweds. There were the mezes of sour tourshi and string cheese and lavash, and then roast lamb and wedding pilaf with almonds, raisins, apricots, and dates. She even drank a single shot of strong, anise-tasting Raki with the others. She looked out the window of the small dining room, and she saw the fog-choked street and the yellow dots of isolated street lamps. Lucaper had kindly prepared the little back guest room for them with flowers and a special nightgown in a package on the bed, which had been made up with thick blankets and white sheets beautifully embroidered with pale gray leaves.

Initially she felt flattered by the adoration he expressed for her—her face, her skin, her breasts—and even a reciprocal attraction. Then there was the oddity of his organ against her and the uncomfortable moistness of their first lovemaking, though no pain. This, she thought, was what all the fuss was about. His gentle entry into her was touching, and she did not feel nothing. There was tenderness she felt and an irresistible impulse to protect, to care for her genius. After he finished and withdrew, he whispered “my angel, my angel,” and then fell quickly to sleep. Slightly damp, she was bothered by the knot of feeling inside her, and for a time she remained awake beneath Lucaper’s beautifully embroidered, stained sheets.