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To Go On Living

STORIES

Narine Abgaryan

Translated by Margarit Ordukhanyan and Zara Torlone

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Plough

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In Place of a Preface Zanazan

"Zanazan! Hey, Zanazan! Would you like a pear?"

Zanazan has long eyelashes and lilac eyes. Her hair is thick, the color of copper, with no hint of gray. It curls into unruly ringlets by the temples.

I offer her the pear. She looks through it, her gaze fixed.

"Go ahead, take the pear, Zanazan."

She shakes her head no.

Zanazan's skin is olive-colored, with a dusting of red freckles. She is one of a kind, there's nobody else like her.

"Would you like anything?"

She covers her mouth with the back of her hand; the lifeline on her palm is smudged and short, broken at the midpoint.

"Zanazan?"

"Hm?"

"Talk to me."

She says nothing. Her fingers are long and pale, a simple ring on her left index finger. She has a funny way of standing, one leg crossed over the other. There is a half-moon-shaped scratch on her ankle.

"When did this happen?"

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She shrugs and smiles vaguely, as if to herself.

I am aching to put my arms around her and press her to my chest, but I can't. Zanazan doesn't like to be touched.

"I'd draw you if I knew how."

She eyes me distrustfully and, after some hesitation, accepts the pear.

"Tell me something, Zanazan!"

She walks away, carefully shutting the door behind her.

In my mind's eye, I follow her down the stairs, one flight, then the next. She ducks out of the building's chill into the sun-drenched yard.

"Zanazan! Hey, Zanazan!" call out the kids.

She walks on without looking back. Her braid is tossed over her shoulder, held at the tip by a silly elastic band.

The war found Zanazan pregnant. She went into labor in the middle of an air raid. There was no calling an ambulance—the phone lines were dead. Going to the neighbors for help wouldn't do either—why ask people to risk their own lives? She held out for as long as she could. When the pain became too much to handle, she and her husband packed up and headed to the hospital. Her husband was mowed down by shrapnel; they were unable to save her child.

"Zanazan! Hey, Zanazan!" call out the kids.

She walks on without looking back.

She lives alone with her frail mother-in-law.

"Who's going to look after you when I'm gone?" frets her mother-in-law.

Zanazan smiles meekly and serenely as she hands the pear to her mother-in-law.

"Mm-mm-m."

She has thick, long lashes and lilac-colored eyes. Have you ever seen lilac-colored eyes? I have—Zanazan's.

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Merelots

Ginamants[1] Metaksia leaves her house bright and early, at the crack of dawn. A flock of village swallows, having abandoned their perches in the cypress trees, are swooping overhead, making notches on the canvas of the quickly brightening sky with their sharp-tipped wings. The first dew—dense, life-giving—falls, dispatching the night. A cricket, confused about the hour of the day, breaks into its drawling song: chirr-up, chirr-up, chirr-up.

"Good morning to you too, you poor soul," Metaksia greets him in her mind. The cricket, as if hearing her thoughts, cuts off and falls silent.

Today is Merelots, the day of the dead. Traditionally, people attend the memorial service first and only after that visit the graves of their departed loved ones. There was a time when Metaksia also followed this tradition, but then she decided that it was not right to delay the visit to the dead—after all, what use do the departed have for liturgy when they have gone to a place where nothing worldly matters? Therefore, she figured, the proper way to go about it was to start the day of remembrance

1 A note about the names here and throughout the book. The first part of the two-word name of each story's protagonist is neither the given name nor the surname; rather, it is a collective family nickname bestowed upon each family by the local residents. It usually derives from a particular characteristic of each family's progenitor, although in other cases it may simply include that forebear's first name, plus a suffix, which, in the distinct regional dialect of Armenian spoken in Berd, is *-ants*.

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with a trip to the graveyard before attending to any other business. So as to completely dispel any doubts, she consulted the priest. He heard her out and nodded in agreement: "You do what you think is right; if you feel more at peace doing things in this order, then you should." Metaksia certainly felt more at peace doing things in this order.

The cemetery is a ways off. The road that leads to it, paved with river stones, snakes between the houses and then, turning abruptly, climbs up the side of the hill, where the final resting places of the people of Berd keep multiplying, crowded against each other with their low fences. It's as if the people are trying to outdo each other in dying. It seems that only yesterday Razmik's grave was the one at the very end, but now you have to make your way past three rows just to get to it. Metaksia had picked a spot for him with plenty of room and plenty of open sky. She asked them to put him on the right side, in the shadow of the weeping willow. When her time comes, they'll put her on the left side; she's already made arrangements and even paid Tsatur, the gravedigger. Tsatur tried to turn down her money, but she insisted: "Look at you, all skin and bones. What if death comes to take me in the dead of winter, during the deep freeze? Where will you get the strength to dig up the frozen soil? This way, you'll pour yourself a nice bowl of hot bean soup, top it with some pork rinds, chase it down with a shot of cornelian cherry vodka . . . You'll enjoy it, and I will enjoy it too—it will be like I treated you to a meal!" Tsatur took the money, but when spring came, he showed up at Metaksia's doorstep and dug up her garden.

"What, can't bear to be separated from your shovel?" she joked.

"Yes, I've grown attached to it." Tsatur gave her a lopsided smirk and leaned into the handle of the shovel with his shoulder.

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He has been coming over for years now. In the spring, he digs up the garden; in the autumn, he helps her pick potatoes and corn. At first, Metaksia kept trying to talk him out of it, but eventually she gave up. If he insists on coming back, he must need to be doing it, she figures. To show her gratitude, she knits winter hats with huge pompoms for Tsatur's kids. He has three little ones, one younger than the next. In those brightly colored hats, they look like cheerful little gnomes.

The silence that hangs over the cemetery is so thick that not even the thrush's trilling song can break it. Metaksia tidies up the grave with great care: she washes the fence and wipes it dry, pulls out the weeds, waters the flowers. As she cleans the accumulated dust and water stains off the gravestone, the years of birth and death etched on it emerge in silent reproach. She holds her breath for longer than she has the strength to. Is it ever possible to reconcile with the young ones dying? Seventeen years of age, an entire lifetime still waiting to be lived.

When she finishes tidying up, she measures frankincense into the memorial lamp and gently strikes a match. While the morning breeze scatters the slightly sweet-smelling, dense smoke, Metaksia sits on a low bench and looks off beyond the horizon, her hands folded in her lap. There, far in the distance, beyond the hunchbacked hill, lies her husband's grave. There's no reaching it now; the wind won't even carry her voice there.

Who could have thought that the happiness allotted to her would turn out to be so short-lived! She grew up in a loving home, with two parents and three older brothers. She never dreamed of getting married; she had been unlucky with her appearance—big-nosed, with a lazy eye and a lipless mouth. Having reconciled herself to her solitary lot, she looked after her numerous nieces and nephews, whom she adored more than life itself. But right after turning forty, she surprised even

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herself by marrying Razmik's father. They crossed the border to live in his hometown, Omarbeyli, a small hamlet with five Armenian families to seventy Azerbaijani ones.

Razmik was thirteen—a challenging, prickly age—and his father had a hard time dealing with him. People in the village felt sorry for the child: Poor orphan, it's not bad enough that he's lost his mother, but his father didn't even wait long before getting married again. Who has ever heard of a step-mother loving her stepson? She'll have her own kids and start trying to get rid of this one as soon as possible. Metaksia didn't really pay much heed to what people said, but deep down she also feared that having her own child might push Razmik away. That's why she never had the resolve to get pregnant. Four years later, she lost her husband. He died in the middle of the night from a heart attack; he shrieked in pain, arched his back, accidentally hitting her with his elbow, and fell silent.

No matter how much Metaksia implored him, Razmik wouldn't hear of moving to Armenia. "I'm not going anywhere. I have school—I'm graduating this year!" he protested. She gave in but made him promise that they would move to Armenia for him to attend college. Razmik finally caved, on the condition that she would move his parents' ashes to Berd. His request offended her in earnest: "How could you even think that I'd abandon them!" He put his arms around her and broke into tears. From that day on, he took to calling her "Second Mom," or Second for short. She jokingly started calling him First. And so they lived, counting off—First-Second, Second-First.

When the war came, people in villages along the border didn't worry too much about it—all the families had been friends for decades and regularly visited each other. The war was somewhere out there, in the distance, and they were

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convinced that it wouldn't touch them. God willing, Metaksia rejoined with the rest. That was why she didn't worry when she went to visit her mother, who had taken ill, on the other side of the border. All she did was cook extra food and ask the neighbor to take the laundry off the line when it had dried because Razmik would never have remembered to. Late at night, word reached her that things were restive in Omarbeyli—sounds of gunfire reached the village from the border, and some houses were on fire.

It took Metaksia two full days to make it back. The house stood intact and unharmed; only the gates were bent, as if from a heavy impact. Metaksia ran her fingers over the dent, feeling the roughness of mangled steel in bewilderment. The sheets, stiff from baking in the sun, hung from the laundry lines. It was so quiet inside the house that she could hear the beating of her own heart. Razmik wasn't inside. She eventually found him in the backyard, covered with some dirt and gardening tools that were haphazardly tossed over his body. Metaksia wiped the soil from his face and gathered it into her palms. Without pausing to think about what she was doing, she ate a handful of it, choking in horror and pain, and then poured the rest of it inside her blouse. She lit the stove and warmed up some water. From the cellar, she dragged up the huge basin that she normally used for soaking wool. She carefully laid Razmik inside it. She washed him gently, with bated breath, as if afraid to wake him up. Having realized that she had never once seen him naked before, she started whispering, to overcome her sudden feeling of embarrassment: "You are so well built, my boy, look at that beautiful body of yours. How handsome every part of you is, built for life, for joy, for happiness. If not for this wound in your belly . . . But I'll tie that up so that it doesn't ruin your beauty. I'll dress you in the suit we got for your graduation. I'll brush

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your unruly hair back—you never let me touch it, you just twisted your head and made annoyed faces, let me go, you said, it's fine as it is! You have such a big, bright forehead, and you wanted to keep it covered . . ."

She had to give up on the idea of putting on his shoes because she couldn't squeeze them on over his crushed feet. "Even killing can be done without inflicting unnecessary pain. Why the torture?" whispered Metaksia, as she wrapped Razmik's feet with towels. Then she dragged a cart out of the shed, lined it with a soft blanket, carefully placed Razmik in it, and rolled him out of their yard. The neighboring homes saw her off in hollow silence. Metaksia never even deigned to give them a parting glance. You say goodbye when you have something to say. She had nothing to say to them.

A GUST OF WIND carried the sharp smell of pines and the distant voice of the awakening river. The sun painted the entire sky gold the moment it peeked from behind Maiden's Cliff. Metaksia rose with a sigh, closed the lamp, and put it back into its special nook. She laid a slice of homemade bread at the head of the gravestone for the heavenly angels. She said goodbye, asked him not to worry and not to miss her too much, promising—Razmik-jan, I'll be back again next week. She left, having carefully shut the wicket gate behind her.

Berd was rising with the laughter of the children, with the coughing of the men, with the hushed voices of the women. Metaksia was walking down the slope, taking in the morning's breath. She had to hurry—the liturgy for the dead was about to begin. Needless to say, the dead have no use for it. The living, though, really need it.

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