

NAIRA KUZMICH

The Kingsley Drive Chorus

On the corner of Kingsley and De Longpre, we lived our lives pressed against the glass. Our husbands—carpenters, jewelers, mechanics, and laborers—spent their days without us. When they came home in the evenings, they were quiet and so we were quiet, too. Our girls retreated into schoolbooks with words beyond our knowing and our boys spilled onto the winding streets of Los Angeles. We had done what we could, all the things we told ourselves we could have done. We resigned ourselves to our windows. We wiped down the glass. We waved.

The first time Carmen Oganesyán's son Zaven called her from jail, she did what any of us would do: she blamed his friends. She told us she had a feeling when he first introduced Robert and Vardan to her, all those years ago. They were Mariam's boys. They lived in #3. Robert and Vardan were a little too skinny in the arms, as if they hadn't lifted a single weight in their entire lives. Their hair was spiked. Robert, fifteen at the time, was a tall boy who tried hard not to be. He wore oversized sweaters and pants that added bulk to his thin frame and he slouched when he walked. We all thought he'd have back troubles by the time he was thirty, but he found himself with bigger problems much earlier. Vardan was a quiet child, then thirteen, Zaven's age. Vardan's quietness made us uncomfortable. You'd say hello as you passed him in the garden and he'd glance down at your heavy grocery bags and say absolutely nothing. These were not the kind of boys Carmen wanted her Zaven to befriend, but she had been glad that he was at least making an attempt to fit in; she and her husband had pulled him out of his happy life in Yerevan just months before.

When Zaven called, Carmen was in the kitchen, preparing her famous *kyofas*. Just imagine little eggs of beef, filled with

more beef. They taste great with a squeeze of lemon. New Year's Eve was approaching, and we were all busy making the same food, each of us hoping ours would taste different, better than everyone else's. But no one could make *kyoftas* like Carmen. She had beautiful hands. After dipping her long fingers into the bowl of cold water, she'd mold the ground mixture into a shell, thumbing the beef and bulgur into place. The shells were thin, but never broke, and she'd stuff them with filling before closing them, always leaving an exaggerated tip that hardened after cooking. Everyone broke off that piece first. She'd joke that to make the perfect *kyofa* you had to pretend you were washing a child's head. You had to be careful, certainly, but more than that, you had to do it with love. The egg always knows, she said.

Only eighteen, Zaven was out on bail the next day. Carmen was a proud woman, but not enough to let him stay in jail. She asked us for loans, a hundred dollars here, a hundred there. Some of us helped; most couldn't. All of us, even those without sons, sympathized. Our boys don't adapt well here. Something doesn't translate. We don't worry much about the girls because they're beautiful and smart and quick to assimilate. Like Armineh's daughter, Sona, who's at Berkeley now, a good enough reason to leave her mother alone with a finicky husband all year long. Or Sofia, Ruzan's oldest. We hear she's married and has a kid, a beachfront house in San Diego, a white husband. We don't have many success stories here that star our boys.

Carmen always said her son would be different. But we told her that sons become not their fathers, or even their grandfathers, but something altogether terrible. And we can't help but love them because they are ours, though it is hard to do. Carmen said that this was the problem, that our love stopped being easy, and what is a boy to turn into but a monster if his mother does not see in him a god?

It was drugs. Zaven was found smoking marijuana in the bathroom stalls of the community college with Robert and Vardan. Vardan, just months shy of being legal, got away with a reprimand. Robert and Zaven were charged and then released after a few hours, due to overcrowding. Carmen met her son outside the jail. Mariam wasn't there, so Carmen hugged Robert, too.

We never went to Mariam's for coffee or *gata*. We were polite to her but Mariam flaunted her sons' failures as proof of America's shortcomings, more proud of being right than of anything good or kind her boys had ever done for her. She hadn't wanted to move to Los Angeles. Unlike us, she had lived well in Armenia, but her husband wanted to live even better. Carmen and Mariam were never friends, but Carmen was the nicest of us: a fault, really, that goodness. Her husband tried to beat it out of her. But she was even better than that, and he knew it, so he stopped once Zaven got to be his size. We still don't know if Zaven ever protected his mother, if he ever placed his hand against his father's chest and pushed back. We hope so, but we suspect not.

After the drug incident, Carmen told Zaven to stop spending time with Mariam's sons. They're trouble, she said, and they're bringing it into her house.

"Home," Zaven corrected her. "We don't have a house."

"Don't speak to me like that," Carmen replied, raising a finger. They were on the couch, he sprawled on one end, flipping through channels on the TV, his wife-beater tucked into his track-suit pants. Carmen sat rigidly on the other, peeling a grapefruit, dieting in preparation for the holidays.

"And lower your voice." Carmen put down her hand. "Don't let your father hear you say something stupid like that."

"He's not *home*," he said, raising his eyebrows. "See what I did there, Ma?"

"Zaven."

Zaven jumped from his seat and grabbed his mother's shoulders. Shook them—with love, Carmen would tell us pointedly—and said, "You're really something, Ma." He kissed her on the forehead and went to his room. He put on Armenian rap, which Carmen hated even more than black people's rap because she understood every single word. She heard him shut the door and was momentarily flattered by his thoughtfulness, but those lyrics only felt more dangerous now, seeping through the cracks in his door.

Carmen would say hello whenever she ran into Mariam in the basement laundry, or in the cement backyard where we all hung our linens, not trusting the cranky machines the manager installed because of a complaint to City Council (he found the cheapest washer at Sears out of spite, and we kept to our bathroom sinks and tubs). Whenever Mariam's sheets were dry but still on the line, Carmen would fold them, put them in her own basket, and return them to her, knocking softly on the door. Mariam took them in with a quick nod, biting onto her cigarette so she could use both hands. Mariam was not very womanly, no. She was skinny, but not fashionably, her legs so straight that they looked like arms, and she, this strange, hungry creature, was always puffing on something. No hips on her, either, not even a hint. Who knew how she gave birth—if she did at all. We used to talk of adoption. Mariam spent all her time in malls, trying on designer dress after designer dress, pretending she could still buy them.

Carmen didn't fault this in Mariam; she, too, sometimes wished she was someone else. We believed the problem with Mariam was that she didn't just stop there, with wishing. She didn't live here with the rest of us, but rather in her head, with her sad grandeur and delusions of the past. Carmen was nice, she was polite, but she was no friend to Mariam.

Robert and Vardan were just babies when they got to our building. We remember pink, wet lips and fat cheeks, games of tag with older boys who left their mothers hurting as soon as they learned to drive. Then—suddenly, it seemed—they were seven and nine, going to elementary school at Ramona. The first few weeks Mariam walked the mile to school with them, to and from, and we all sighed, remembering ourselves. But it was not long before Mariam let the kids go by themselves. When they returned home, they returned with bags of chips, with orange fingers, or with crumbs stuck in their teeth or spotting their white uniforms.

Carmen did her best following that first arrest to break the boys up, and we were all very impressed by her efforts. She would hide Zaven's cellphone, the charger, and his wallet, and he'd be so

frustrated by the time he found them that he didn't even try to go out. She feigned headaches and strange stomach pains, guilted him into staying home. And whenever Robert and Vardan knocked on her door for Zaven, Carmen made sure to get there first, to tell them he was already out, doing whatever it was that young men do. "I'm sure he meant to invite you two," she'd sometimes whisper. "I'm sure you'll run into him somewhere." But there are only so many times a woman can open the door first, anxious and eager. When Carmen explained herself to her suspicious husband, she was met with laughter, a wave of the hand, a "let the boys be boys." But her son was no longer a boy. She couldn't remember the moment he stopped being one, but Carmen knew that only a man could break his mother's heart like that, getting arrested, in a school, no less.

"Even if he is your son," we told her over coffee, "he's no longer your child."

We'd see them together, Zaven, Robert, and Vardan. Smoking in front of the 99 Cent Store on Sunset, or the nearby Water Station, at the Shell, smoking as they washed Robert's Camry every other day during summer, making use of the quarters their mothers were supposed to be using for the washer; we'd see them smoking by the main door of the apartment building, huddled in their leather jackets zipped up to their chins. Everywhere we looked, there they were, the three of them, so much dark smoke hanging like an omen above their heads.

On August 14, 1999, just hours before she saw her son on television, his head being pushed down into the back of a police car, Carmen was listening to Celine Dion and doing laundry. We all knew whenever she and her husband fought because Dion's songs would reach our ears before a word came from her own mouth. She was the prettiest of us, but where we come from, pretty faces are as useless as our husbands' vows of loyalty.

Carmen's hair fell across her chest as she bent down to pick up her son's wet T-shirt from the basket and draped it over the

line. Her hair was long and thick, a cascade of dark waves past her waist, thinning out at the edges over her hips. Her husband had married her for her hair, she once said: “I kept it in two long braids as a girl and when he first saw me, he just knew he wanted to pull apart those braids, comb them through with his own fingers.” It was hard to imagine Ruben having such a romantic notion. He was a factory man, tall, with wide, strong shoulders and a thick neck, built to be a laborer. When he came home from work, he still glowed from the heat he faced all day, forging metal into iron. His skin was freckled as if burned by years walking against the wind. Carmen’s description. She really loved him, poor girl, but when has love ever saved anyone?

Carmen’s jeans were of a faded blue and they were loose around her stomach, the pouch of lost fat wrinkling unattractively under her top as she bent down to grab another shirt. She had been dieting again, which meant our building smelled for days entirely of cabbage. Carmen was an optimist, a master negotiator. It was an art, the way she tried to appease her husband and keep her son on the right path. She did so many things very well. She had learned, she said, to adapt.

She knew just how much salt to put into lentil soup, what shoes Ruben wore most and needed the most shining, when she could wear a skirt and when not. “It’s what four years of engineering school teaches you,” she told us. “There is always a solution to the problem.” Carmen had graduated from the Civil Engineering Institute of Vanadzor and married Ruben three weeks later because that’s what you did.

Unlike his mother, Zaven was a poor student. Disinterested, his mother would clarify, definitely not dumb. He was still going to LACC—*going*, a relative term. Carmen would add, but I know he wants to go to UCLA. He can only take night classes right now because of work. *Work*, another funny word: our children thought that sitting in front of a computer and finding cheap auto parts on eBay and selling them to local shops was work. But work was what their fathers did, coming home with soot under their nails, sweat under their arms, and money in their pockets. We never saw any of our children’s earnings. None of their earn-

ings fed us, put new linens under our bodies, bought towels that did not leave their pink and blue threads on our damp skins. “As long as Zaven takes care of his expenses, I’m happy,” Carmen claimed. We knew otherwise. We knew Carmen wondered just exactly what those expenses were. We certainly did. What does a twenty-one year old without a car, without rent, have to pay off?

Carmen was clipping her wash down when Mariam approached with her own basket. We watched from our living room windows as she put it down by her feet, reached into her dress pocket for a lighter. Carmen’s shoulders must have tensed. Since that first arrest three years prior, Carmen had begun to reconsider some of her kindness to Mariam.

We watched as Mariam leaned against the stone wall that blocked in the building’s backyard and began taking long drags of her cigarette. Carmen moved her basket slightly to the left and continued her work. She threw a white bedsheet across the line and pulled it straight. As she bent to pick up the clothespins, she could smell Mariam’s cigarette. We saw the face she made from the third floor and we knew that she wouldn’t be able to hold it in much longer.

“Mariam, please.”

“What?” Mariam moved her cigarette away from her face and tapped it in the air. “What?”

Carmen pointed at the cigarette. “The sheets, Mariam.”

“Excuse me?”

Carmen shook her head and again kicked her plastic basket to the left, a little harder this time. It scraped against the concrete and stopped by the trunk of the tired fig tree. Our only source of joy sometimes, this, peeling away the sticky skin for a taste of home.

“Do you not understand why I don’t want smoke on my sheets?”

“Don’t be dramatic. It’s one little cigarette. I’m not doing a goddamn barbeque.”

“That’s the problem with you, Mariam. One cigarette is enough to stain a whole load.”

“Problem with me?” Mariam put the cigarette in her mouth

and began pulling the wash out of her basket, throwing it on the line, one thing on top of the other, until the line dragged, slumping in the middle with the weight.

Carmen didn't say anything as she reached to grab the towel that was hanging dangerously low. She threw it over her shoulder and continued removing the rest of her wash, a pair of jeans, a few shirts and pillowcases. We shivered thinking about the cold she was bound to get, the wet clothes sinking through the flimsy fabric of her dress and into her bones. She had been complaining about her hands recently, how sometimes she could not make a fist. We told her it was the weather but we knew it as a sign of aging. We told her to dress more warmly.

"Don't worry. God won't let your sheets get dirty. The whole world might end." Mariam laughed and spread the wash across the line, balancing the weight. She didn't look at Carmen, so we did. She seemed so small under all those clothes, her head a little fixture, dimming against the rising whiteness on her shoulders. Carmen lifted her elbow and placed her palm on top of the left pile, bending with her knees to grab the half-empty basket and put it against her hip. Walking slowly, quietly, she moved past Mariam, and Mariam turned her head to watch her neighbor disappear into the building. Then she spit out the cigarette and stomped on it. She lit another and we watched her smoke it for a while.

When she got home, Carmen decided to take a bath. She told us later that she had draped the wash over her furniture, scattering it all around, though she left the undergarments for her bedroom, as they were private business, even if it meant she had to dampen the bed. Ruben liked a clean bed, no frills, just white sheets, good quality, and a pillow for each, but apparently that day he had complained about the breakfast she had made him, that the eggs were too runny, and so she draped her clammy panties and his briefs all over the covers in punishment. She described the scene to us as a little absurd. Sexy, too, a little, she admitted,

and we wondered when she had last performed her wifely duties. It made her blush as she looked at her work—we could picture this so clearly, her rosy cheeks, the color bruising her neck, too. Sometimes Carmen's passion was stronger than her sense of decency, but we knew God would forgive her for that. It wasn't often.

When she returned to the bathroom, she said the heat warmed her bones with promise. In Yerevan where they had lived, the water came on at two in the morning and the Russians shut off the gas five minutes before that. (Our friends, the Russians. How dreadful to admire someone so fiercely and have them hate you in return.) Each day, each night, they had water for exactly fifteen minutes. Some of us remember this, sitting in our darkened living rooms, waiting to hear the deep rumbling of water course through our brick walls and pulse below our feet. We'd hurry to the bathroom to pick up the pots and pitchers stacked on the floor and fill them from the faucet, filling as much as we could before it all stopped.

The day the Soviet Union fell, Ruben started planning their way out and Carmen was grateful. America meant one thing for her: that Zaven would not have to bathe at night, in freezing temperatures, with buckets of water. That she wouldn't have to look down at Zaven sleeping on his stomach, his feet digging into the mattress, the sheets pooled under his chest, and shake him awake. If Carmen was awake now in the middle of night, it was not because she had work to do, water to collect. It was because she wanted to look at Zaven asleep, see his face soften, his eyebrows, slightly touching in the middle, unfurrowed. Carmen used to imagine taking a razor to the hairs in the soft area between his eyes, pushing down the blade against his skin quickly in his sleep, so as not to wake him, so as not to let him know that he was not perfect.

After Carmen rinsed herself and stepped out of the bathroom, she was surprised to hear sirens blaring. She wrapped the robe closely around her as she moved to the kitchen window. She craned her head over the sink, her forehead pushing against the thin screen. Police cars weren't rare on Kingsley Drive, but they weren't common in the afternoon. At night, we knew things hap-

pened, that people got hurt, did things they regretted in the morning.

Carmen couldn't see much, but when she heard the helicopter, so close that the palm trees on our street trembled and whistled in the air, she felt as if she, too, was fluttering away. She hurried to her door and locked it. She clutched at her robe, then dropped her hands to her side, scolding herself. She walked toward the home phone, taking measured breaths. When she dialed his number, she didn't expect Zaven to pick up. Like us, she always had to try her son several times so he would know she was serious, that it was not just another motherly call, a how are you doing or where are you now? She clicked the red button and dialed again, punching in the numbers one by one instead of pressing redial. "To give him time," she explained. At the third attempt, she moved toward the window again and saw all of us making our way toward the main building gate, walking slow and talking fast. She saw us trying to get a closer look. Later when she asked us what we thought we'd see out there, why we left our apartments, why we weren't afraid, we told her the truth: because our sons had either picked up their phones or were already in jail. When you know that your children are safe—even there, even there they can be safe, safer—you grow bold. Relief makes you do foolish things.

Carmen turned away from the window. She moved the damp T-shirts from the couch and took a seat on the cold leather. She picked up the television remote, hoping for something funny. But there, on Channel 7, breaking news, her little boy, looking not very little at all, taking up the backseat of a police car, his face filling, it seemed, the whole window. He was looking straight at her with the kind of expression Carmen always tried to convince herself was learned, something he had picked up from his angry friends, something not natural to his face. Carmen took one of the wet shirts beside her, brought it to her face, and screamed.

The Armenian channel did a special broadcast a week later. We all watched. Mr. Levon Hagopyan sat behind his fancy desk,

hands clasped as in church, and talked into the camera and our living rooms. “Women,” he said. “Women, you need to do something. We have had enough. Enough of these shipwrecked boys, losing their way in Los Angeles. They’re in prisons, in unhappy marriages, in motel bathrooms by the 101 highway, shooting up. They’re your sons. Just what are you going to do about it?” We watched him shaking his head in disgust and we nodded along. It pains us to admit this, to remember.

After the arrest, the only time we saw Carmen was in the backyard, hanging her wash, the snap of the line as she jerked her linens off. We’d glance out of our windows from time to time and she appeared to us smaller than ever, smaller than before, much smaller still.

Mr. Levon Hagopyan told us that police had responded to an anonymous phone call. The caller noticed three men entering a house on Kentwood from the back, dressed in dark clothes and wearing sunglasses. The house belonged to an elderly Armenian couple and they were home when they weren’t supposed to be. They were tied with masking tape. The Sulemanyans sat with hands behind their backs on their maroon couches, waiting, watching, as three boys that looked like they could one day marry their granddaughters ransacked their house. When they heard the sirens, the boys ran to the car. Robert drove, his brother beside him, Zaven in the back. Robert drove for three miles before he nicked a Sedan with two children and a mother inside. “The police report tells us,” Mr. Levon Hagopyan said, “that the Sedan spun twice and then slammed into an oncoming Nissan. The youngest broke his arm and the mother now wears a scar on her forehead.” On Western, the Camry scraped a parked truck, and the police cars behind the boys multiplied. The helicopter caught up. The boys thought to make a run for it, in the daytime, with the helicopter above them and the police behind. They decided to run home. They were running to us. In front of our very steps, on Kingsley Drive, the police got them. Vardan and Robert were brought down together because they were running just inches apart. Zaven met the pavement by himself. The cameraman captured the moment. As she waited for her husband to come home,

Carmen watched the news, all of it. She took one of Ruben's taped movies and recorded over it, a good fifteen minutes. Always of the same scene, that second when Zaven looks behind him, twisting his neck, and the officers press their palms into his face and push him down onto the gravel. And the moment after, when Zaven looks out of the police-car window, the cameras flashing him a ghastly white.

We don't know where Mariam was when her boys got taken away, if she was hiding in her apartment, or hiding from herself, but we saw her the next day, sitting on the low stoop in front of her place. Her head was wrapped in a towel and a tattered robe revealed her purple-veined legs. She was smoking, head tilted back, breathing in the same smoke she breathed out. There was a plate of chocolate cake next to her, a gold-plated fork stabbed into its center. But the cake appeared untouched. When she saw us notice it, she picked it up with her free hand and waved it in our faces.

"You want it? Take it."

We shook our heads.

"Take it. I'm not going to eat it. I thought I might, but I'm not hungry."

"Mariam," we said.

"Fuck you. I said take it. You want my fucking cake? Take it and don't feel bad about it. Take it home and share it."

"Mariam," we pleaded. But she blew smoke in our faces and we turned away as if slapped. When we caught her eyes once more, she was chewing wildly, her whole face contorted, cheeks puffed out and nose flaring, brown smearing her upper lip.

A month later, Carmen and Mariam had a talk. We tried not to listen in, not to open our windows just a crack, because we understood how easy it was to destroy the illusion of dignity between broken women. We did it anyway because we were hurting, too. We had rooted for Carmen, for her boy, for ourselves. Even when we stopped—we like to tell ourselves now—we

didn't. Mariam had just taken out the trash when Carmen turned the corner with her basket. The women stopped short of running into each other, but the space between them was like no space at all. They stood there for a second before Carmen moved the basket from her hip to her stomach and Mariam took a step back.

"Yes, yes, that's right. You do that. You keep going, Mariam. And don't stop until you're miles away from here."

Mariam laughed and we cringed. Her laugh could be a bitter thing, as if it scraped her throat as it rose from her belly.

"Don't be silly, Carmen. It's not very becoming. What would your husband say if he saw that ugly expression on your face?"

Carmen put down her basket, bending slowly in front of Mariam, and for a moment we worried that Mariam would push her down, shove Carmen into that plastic container that seemed to be forever attached these days to her thinning shape. But it was Carmen who made us gasp as she took a wet blouse from the basket and flung it at Mariam's face. Mariam whipped her head back, but the shirt seemed to fix itself around her, wrapping its sleeves around her ears. Mariam pulled it off with the tips of her fingers, dropping it to her side like it was a dirty diaper.

"You're pathetic." Mariam said it so softly we thought we misheard, and we pushed our heads closer against our windows. Carmen pulled her arm back but she didn't strike. Mariam only tilted her head to the side and looked at her.

"Can't you see what you've done?"

Mariam looked behind herself, then turned back. She placed a hand over her chest. "Me?"

Upstairs we wanted to nod along. We wanted to point. Now the whole world knew what we knew, what we learned here. That we loved our sons not because of who they were, but because of what they were to us.

Carmen lowered her arm, both hands now rigid at her sides. She looked like a soldier. "How can you just stand there? How can you pretend none of this has happened? How can—"

"All you do is ask questions, Carmen. Questions, questions, questions. Why me? Well, why the hell not?"

“Why were you never at the court for the hearings?”

Mariam put her hands over her face and groaned. But then her groan turned into strained, muffled laughter, as if she were convulsing. Carmen frowned, took a step forward.

When Mariam removed her hands, her teeth showed. “Because I know what my boys are. I don’t need the court to tell me.”

“And what are they, Mariam?”

“They’re worthless.”

The slap stunned us. The suddenness of Carmen’s movement, the loudness of the flat thud. We jerked away from the windows, out of breath, and just as quickly, returned to look. Mariam very slowly righted her neck. She licked her lips and we shook our heads. From above, we mouthed a plea: stay silent.

“They’re criminals.”

Carmen slapped her again, her palm hitting the same side of Mariam’s face. An audible sigh escaped Mariam’s mouth. We began to pound on the glass. Carmen kept her hand in the air. Neither woman looked up.

“I wish they weren’t mine.”

There are a few things we remember of that moment. The sound Carmen’s knees made as she hit the ground, like the logs our fathers would axe in the mornings during the summer months, when they were split open and fell on opposite sides. The way Mariam looked down at Carmen, the gentle shake of the head, and the way, leaning back, she finally saw us, her hands brushing the hair from her face, eyes unblinking. How she stepped over Carmen’s outstretched arms. Carmen, there on the ground, bent forward like a Turk, wailing. And when we averted our eyes, resting them on our empty couches, we had the feeling we used to get when we were young girls, our backs opening once a month, that gnawing sensation all over, like little kernels pushing against the skin, ready to puff up, ready to burst, but never gathering enough heat, enough steam, always missing the opportunity to become something beautiful.

In the following weeks, Carmen seemed to return to her former self. She smiled when we saw her outside, checking the mail; she winked when we caught her cutting the basil that grew by her stoops—our landlord forbade it, said the smell hid other smells—pocketing them swiftly in the money pouch she wore around her waist when she was gardening. She came over for coffee, for stories. We tried not to pry but Carmen appeared comfortable sharing with us the details of what she was feeling. We weren't too surprised; we were like that, too, finding comfort in the telling. It saddened us, disappointed us, but her acceptance of the situation was of great solace, too. She was not any better than us.

Of course, some things we knew we could never ask. What Ruben thought about all this. What Zaven had to say, how he was doing. Some questions are not so much questions as they are accusations. When Zaven was convicted in November, we learned about it through the *Armenian Daily*. We were careful. We couldn't help it. We had our friend Carmen back and we tried to forget about Mariam, the way she looked up at us that day, all-knowing and unapologetic. Carmen never mentioned her name.

The holidays were approaching and we went to work. We buttered our filo doughs and ground our walnuts. We chopped up our carrots, pickles, and potatoes and put them in the back of the refrigerators. We took out the beef to thaw and rinsed out the bulgur. We unearthed our fine china and the Italian-made tablecloths left over from our dowries.

When we first came to America, our children tried to force us to celebrate Christmas on the 25th, like their classmates did. But ever since we could remember, we had exchanged presents and drunken kisses and plates of *kyofa* on New Year's Eve. It was a Soviet leftover, one that we tried very hard to get our kids to understand. Celebrating a fresh beginning, where the past didn't matter, where the past was just that, past: that still had great meaning for us, especially as immigrants. So the 25th came and went, and we hurried to the department stores to do our "Christmas" shopping, taking advantage of all the sales on clothing and ornaments, shirts and shoes and dancing Santas.

Carmen cut down the laundry line on the morning of the 30th. She just took a scissor close to the two poles and snapped it right off. The thin rope fell to the ground and Carmen bent down and began rolling it loosely around her wrist, like it was merely yarn for the knitting. When she was finished, she looked up at us and we waved from our windows. She smiled and waved back. It was her normal smile, wide, no teeth showing—she was always embarrassed about her teeth. But did the smile reach her eyes? We women always wash our windows on the 31st, so we can welcome the New Year with light unobstructed, our glass spotless and vision the most clear. On the 30th, we couldn't see as closely.

It was Mariam who found her. Mariam who stood up on the stool that Carmen had used to loop a noose from the drainage pipe in our laundry room. Mariam who wrapped one arm around Carmen's waist as she cut down the rope ripping into our friend's skin. Mariam who fell under Carmen's body on the dirty concrete floor next to the washing machines. Skinny old Mariam. It was then that she cried out, when Carmen's body fell on her chest, Carmen's head gently sloping over her pounding heart, then that Mariam let out a howl so terrible, so strange, so loud, that we stopped in our kitchens, in our living rooms, and ran downstairs. When we reached the laundry room, Mariam was sitting with her legs spread open, Carmen between them, Carmen with her head falling back over Mariam's shoulder, Mariam rocking back and forth, Mariam *shh shh shh-ing*, as if it was a child in her lap, as if Carmen was still alive and only hurting.

Ruben didn't tell Zaven that his mother was dead until after the funeral. Zaven served six years; he was out early on good behavior. He married quickly, began driving a truck, bought a small one-bedroom condo a few miles from here. As for Robert and Vardan, we don't know much. Mariam tells us that they are free to live their own lives and that her main concern has always been to do the same. Now she says Los Angeles is not such a bad place

to grow old in. She waters the fig tree in the backyard and plants a new batch of basil every spring. She takes cooking classes at the community college and invites us over for dessert. Before she takes the first sip of her *surj*, Mariam raises the cup in a toast. To all those we have lost, she says.

And knowing what we know now and seeing what we have seen, we can't help but nod. We bring the demitasse cups to our lips and sip soundlessly. But the taste of Mariam's coffee is always bitter. At night, when we return to our apartments, when we put our heads to the pillow, when we lie beside our husbands, we still can't help but wonder: if all it took was for them to see us dead, we too would've done it ourselves.