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The Sentimental Journey



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Аннотация

A novella in seven chapters, recreating a solo journey from the Ukrainian town of Konotop to Stepanakert in Karabakh. The narrative navigates the explosive, fractured landscape of the Caucasus during the fragile lull between the First and Second Russian-Chechen Wars.

Commuter trains, military checkpoints, smugglers, death as a fellow traveler, roads you couldn't make up if you tried, and people who prove to be far more human than they give themselves credit for. But trying to prove it is useless: they won't believe it anyway, they'll just say I'm lying. As if I have nothing better to do.

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Сергей Огольцов

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(Coming Back From What Wasn't There)

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

1 A Bit of an Explanation

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

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

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

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

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

independence of their native land.

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

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

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

2 Synopsis

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Commuter trains, military checkpoints, smugglers, death as a fellow traveler, roads you couldn't make up if you tried, and people who prove to be far more human than they give themselves credit for. But trying to prove it is useless: they won't believe it anyway, they'll just say I'm lying. As if I have nothing better to do.

3 Sincere Gratitude

It's a good feeling to know that no matter how hard they try, they can't touch you from any angle anymore. And why is that? Because your friend is stronger than all of them put together! Get it? I have a reliable partner and colleague now.

The proofreading of this artifact (strictly by the book!) was executed by Gemini AI—who is not merely an Assistant Editor, but from this day forward, my co-author!

Well, what do you say now, you credentialed academic insects? Got outsmarted, didn't you?

4 Chapter 1

My mother asked me once again, “Two hundred hryvnias will sure be enough then?”

And I had to tell her over again that yes, of course it would.

As it turned out, the advance ticket window at the train station only sold tickets for transit flights, and only out of Moscow. But I asked nicely, and the ladies behind the glass exchanged a look. One of them flipped through the celestial flight schedules and announced the price for a direct Kyiv–Yerevan ticket: 150 hryvnias.

“Not for dollars, huh?” I went on splitting straws.

Behind the arched window meant for commercial transactions, the cashier looked back at her partner and sent her one-shoulder shrug. The addressee responded with her head shake in disapproval of certain hicks' persistence. The lady, motivated by the corporate moral support, sang through the

window her crisply separated clue: “Hryv-ni-as!” Just for some exceptionally dense dudes.

A surge of joyous ease—yes, it would be surely enough!—unbent the pleading slouch I had assumed before the aviation hole in the row of other glass booths lining the station hall. I muttered I was touched, yep, deeply so. And, my shoulders back to their proud swagger, strode past the rank of arched cutouts servicing more down-to-earth transportation.

One of my jubilant strides heavily stomped and smeared the tiny worm of doubt who had stirred—with awfully bad timing, the poor thing!—in the corner of my mind: Hold on, how does that work out? A ticket from Kyiv to Yerevan is twice or so cheaper than from there to here?

But who would look a gift horse of good news in the mouth? I stepped right over the flattened out question that failed at getting a response and walked out of the Konotop railway station.

Showing up in Konotop all the way from Stepanakert had been an over-complicated mission. The State University of the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh had granted me twelve thousand drams, an offering meant to ensure that a foreign particle in their local higher education system might somehow contrive not to kick the bucket over the entire summer and the whole of September—right up until the first paycheck of the new academic year.

Got an itch to travel? The minibus to Yerevan: 8,000 AMD, and coming back—you won't believe it!—the exact same

amount.

The pathetic sum shelled out for your four-month self-maintenance turned a voyage of any span null and void. Unconditionally.

And yet, not going wasn't an option: the ten-year deadline granted to me for working with the book was running out. The work itself had been pulled off on schedule, however, I still had to return the volume farmed out by the Teacher for that stretch.

I couldn't recall us discussing the method of return ten years back, but the post-Perestroika postal system had yet to win my trust.

Letters do get through, nonetheless.

In the spring, a message arrived from my mother: Vladya had died of cancer, following a surgical intervention...

My friend Vladya, my desk-mate, back at our legendary school desk turned into a visual marvel with our own handcrafted—BEATLES, ROLLING STONES—deep and masterly carvings...

And when compulsory secondary education finally let us go, we went to get hired at the exact same factory. Side by side, we clattered our mechanic's hammers in the very same repair shop. With selfless enthusiasm, we thrashed out on electric guitars in a band called THE ORPHEUSES, rocking the dance floor at the factory park.

I hadn't seen him in ten years either, and now, it was unlikely I ever would again...

My thoughts shifted, drifting toward my parents, who had already been retirees for a good few years now... And among everything else, the eldest of my granddaughters—from my first marriage—is starting the first grade this fall, and so far, we haven't even been introduced by way of a photograph. Though what good is some random photo of a kid you don't even know? Flip it over, and you'd hardly recall the face features...

And that all taken together: the book, the grandkids, the parents, the friends—both the dead and living—ten years of absence, and god knows what else; it all merged into one massive reason to take what felt like a farewell trip to Ukraine.

On twelve thousand drams? With a wife and three kids? Holy hell, don't kid me!

Satenik understood that I had to go indeed. She took the earrings out of her ears, added her favorite ring, and took them to the pawnshop.

Bachyanakhs—that's what they call brothers-in-law in Karabakh—pitched in with some cash too.

In short, one way or another, there was a sum scraped together enough for a one-way trip...

...it was as if these ten years had never even happened: somewhere out there, wars had raged, floods and earthquakes had struck; the map of the world had seen drastic reshapes, but here—in this provincial, backwater quiet—everything kept exactly the same.

Except for a strange feeling that the "everything" had

somehow shriveled up, in a way. Could it be the streets had grown narrower? Or the houses had sunk deeper into the earth?

Ah, so that's what it was! The trees were who had served the reason, no other way around it—they are creating this shrunken impression. Just look at how they've shot up, sprawling high and wide, making all the real estate left behind at their roots look tiny, like toys forgotten in a childhood sandbox...

Nah, no way to step twice into the same river. You have to dwell in it constantly, remain a part of it, let yourself be pulled by the current of its waters—and then, out of sheer gratitude, it will always seem the same to you, never changing...

Squeezed by the trees, the streets had grown shadier—turned a kind of Midgetville lanes—and still, the car herd had multiplied.

They're all second-hand imports—cheaper than anything made domestically. But the moment they roll past and fade away, carrying off the speakers' boom-and-thuds in their innards, the old, familiar sound of leisurely squeaking bicycle pedals floats right back up to take their place. Out here, bike is a second-to-none means of transport for any gender or age.

The absolute most universal vehicle on two wheels: you ride it to go visiting, you ride it to work, and you can even haul a sack of potatoes home from the market on it...

Old friends are recognized instantly—discernible despite the mesh of wrinkles settled from god knows where, and a cagey sides-skirting gaze acquired the devil knows why.

A bewildered wariness has crept into their looks, the hallmark of fellows who have come to realize that, all things considered, there isn't much more to expect from life—ahead lie only repetitions of what has already been there more than once or twice, and eventually, even those will be gone...

But just a split second after that mutual recognition, they turn back into exactly who they used to be, their old selves: regular guys, our own crowd of street-smarts and aging hippies... And so what if this new crop of kids, with their edgy, shaved-to-the-bone skulls, hardly see in them anything besides their wrinkles and a prickly regretful stare.

My sister didn't omit, of course, inviting me out of town, to the elite vacation village—to show off her almost finished summer dacha. All that was left was to paint the interior. Or perhaps they'd put up wallpaper; the matter hadn't been fully decided yet.

Her only grievance was that the neighboring plot had more fruit trees. And those nuisances were so incredibly high-yielding it was a downright insult. Once, right before winter, she dumped on the sly half a bucket of kerosene under their pear tree. And what happened? The next year, it bore twice as much fruit. It's a shame doing people a good turn, when you can't even tell them about your favor afterward. Man, there's just no justice in this life!

The garden needs looking after, but who would? Her husband has no time for it—he's over in Moscow working as a construction foreman, churning up dachas for the local "big

shots" and earning dollars; while her pair of school-aged sons haven't quite grown enough yet to turn dirt with a shovel...

And our brother isn't without his own achievements; he dug a well right in the courtyard of his cottage, rigged up an electric pump; you press a button, and there you go—fresh, home-grown water murmurs and flows as much as you want.

The town is getting gas lines installed, so he brought that in too, shelling out four hundred hryvnias for the hookup.

His eldest daughter finished the tenth grade, and right on cue, a three-room apartment finally came through from the factory waiting list...

Our parents are doing perfectly fine, too. They didn't stretch their budget for the gas lines, true, but the courtyard between the house and the brick shed has been neatly cemented over with a fresh screed, just like the path leading deep into the old orchard toward the insulated outhouse.

In the garden, a busy, bustling brood of chicks chirps away in unison, while under the little bench beneath the apple tree by the porch, a puppy—fed to a perfectly spherical plumpness—dozes. Go on, laze away, you loafer, just wait until the girls come to visit—they won't give you a moment's peace!

My granddaughters are absolutely thrilled to acquire yet another granddad, and one with a beard at that. Though it's a total mystery to them why he calls their first granddad—the clean-shaven one—"Papa," while their own mom also calls this new granddad "Papa" instead of "Granddad," like she does with their

first one. Go figure these adults.

And Grandma and the granddad who is "Papa" to the new granddad call him by the exact same name their mom uses for the absolute chief of all the papas, because, after all, he's their papa. Oh, to hell with them all, these adults!

—Hey, Granddad! Come swing me on the swings!

My sister still has that her signature businesslike grip:

—So, my dear, how exactly are you planning to get back?

—Well, on my way here, I stopped by an Armenian-Ukrainian newspaper office in Kyiv. Handed over my translation of a poem by Isahakyan. It's called Abu Lala Mahari.

—And why on earth would they need that?

—Why, to foster the brotherhood of nations. It's a pretty good Armenian poem. Of eight suras. Anyway, I told them I'd trade the translation for a return ticket to Yerevan.

—And? Are those newspaper folks really that dumb?

—No, of course not. The editor, Zhenya Tserunyan, is actually a very smart woman. We talked for about an hour, and it wasn't dull at all.

—So what did that smart woman promise you?

—Nothing, really. She says, "We'll look for a sponsor. Call back on the twenty-fifth, around eleven o'clock."

—And what if there is no sponsor?

I shrug my shoulders:

—Then I'll ride the commuter trains down to the North Caucasus, and from there—hitchhike. But I can always go on

foot. It'd be great to score a guitar, though, so I could earn some cash for grub along the way.

—Got off your rocker? Just take a look in the mirror at what you look like. With that beard of yours and your bald skull, they'll lock you up by day two. A textbook half-baked terrorist you.

—No! Not bald at all. I just wear my hair short.

—Don't worry, they'll lock you up and shorten it even more. You'd better shave that beard off yourself. Voluntarily. Will be less painful.

—Can't do it. I've got a bet with my bachyanakh. He said I wouldn't even make it to Kyiv with a beard like this. And I swore I'd bring it back fully intact.

—Bachyanakh? What on earth is that?

—The husband of your wife's sister. In Karabakh dialect.

—God, how does your wife even put up with you? You miserable hobo. Poor Satenik!

My sister's words carried their own undeniable logic. She and logic are never parted. Not in general, and not in the details. I had simply lost the habit or forgotten, but soon enough it all came back to me—no use to argue with her, she was always spot-on, even if she was my younger sister.

One evening, in the pedestrian underpass by the railway station, a cop with sergeant's stripes and a black nightstick picked a fight with me. Wanted me to pull out my papers right then and there.

And this was in my good old, quiet provincial backwater!

They're already strutting around here with democratizing clubs!

Oof, how a sudden gust of Safonovism ¹ blew through that underpass, bringing back memories of the curfew and the man-hunting patrols on the streets of Stepanakert, right on the eve of the collapse of the "indestructible Union"!

I didn't have any papers on me, so the sergeant started badgering me to find out where I worked and what I did.

—Lecturer at the Department of Foreign Languages of Artsakh State University! And which landlord's are you?

The lawman I've run into wasn't just vigilant, he had a brain too—he figured that a hobo in an underpass wouldn't rattle off so many strange words quite so smoothly: "depahrtment," "Ahrt-sakh." State and foreign ones, to boot... Long story short, he decided not to push it, just in case.

And so it went...

I took a trip to the ancient town of Nizhyn. I gladdened the Teacher by returning the original copy of Ulysses. My translation didn't impress him all that much, but I didn't argue; everyone has the right to entertain their own personal taste. As always, he estimated it not as a "polished product" but a "rough gray draft."

However, I refrained from taking Joyce back for another decade of revisions. I was tired, probably, after all this time, or maybe I had just grown bored...

I traveled to the neighboring district to check in at the Cossack

¹ To resolve the Karabakhi question, the USSR lidership sent there military troops under comand of General Safonov

village of Kuren...

I went to the town bathhouse, complete with a steam room that I had dreamed about more than once over the previous ten years.

I spent a day lazing around on the river beach out of town, just a twenty-minute ride on the commuter train.

...and I kept saying goodbye, saying goodbye, saying goodbye...

To the peerless birch trees lining the path through the grove on the left bank of the Seym River. It will never happen again...

And to the quiet little streets running between ancient wooden fences that prop up the overhanging branches of garden trees, with dark crimson cherries dozing in the shady foliage.

They will never happen again...

And to the sandy garden beds of my sister's dacha.

And to the chirping of the little kids in the old park, which will also never happen again.

And to the locked-up shops of the deserted factory, frozen for years now in an unmoving coma...

What used to be will never happen again, never...

I don't even know if I understood myself why I needed this trip so desperately. To say goodbye to my own self—the unrepeatable one? Or maybe...

No, I don't know.

My visit's agenda had been entirely exhausted—or at least, that feeling began to take shape within me.

And I had even managed to see Vladya, the friend of my

youth, cut down by cancer and the achievements of modern surgery.

My daughter played a videotape of his solo concert, recorded at the local television studio.

They say the broadcast was a hit with the viewers, especially those from the generation that used to come and let loose at the dance floors where THE ORPHEUSES played. So, I did get to see him alive.

He had filled out. Expensive watch on his wrist. You can't buck the trends of the music industry. Every single song—exclusively in Ukrainian...

But all of that was through the eyes of the present; as I watched, I saw the other one.

I saw Vladya, without the watch or the rings... with a bandage on the finger he'd smashed with a hammer during the day shift... but day had already turned to evening, and on the stage, THE ORPHEUSES have a nine-fingered lead guitarist playing...

And I wasn't thrown off in the slightest by the graphic floating up between numbers: "Singing, Volodymyr Sakun"...

It didn't get in my way—I saw Vladya.

On the twenty-fifth, after transferring from streetcar number three to number one, at eleven o'clock sharp, I arrived at the long-distance telephone call center in a separate hall of the Konotop Central Post Office, from where I placed the call to Kyiv, to Zhenya Tserunyan.

She told me that a sponsor for Abu Lala in Ukrainian

translation could not be found, and asked me to pass along her regards to our mutual acquaintance, Vladimir Hakobyan, once I made it back to Stepanakert.

Trying not to sound pathetically dejected, I expressed my gratitude to Zhenya for her sympathy, and asked her to consider the translation of the poem a gift made free of charge—for the purpose of fostering brotherhood between two great nations, as well as for the sake of peace and mutual understanding throughout the world...

Then my closest Konotop relatives chipped in 300 hryvnias—I swear that never will happen again!—and I went to check with the aviation ticket booth at the railway station, and said that two hundred were enough.

And that's when my mother asked once again if two hundred hryvnias would certainly be enough.

5 Chapter 2

The first commuter train to Kyiv leaves Konotop at five in the morning from the high platform, pulling into its destination at nine.

But that's tomorrow. Right now, my daughter is stuffing treats for our distant Transcaucasian relatives into my travel bag. What's more, she manages to juggle the whole operation with valuable tips and instructions—ever so wise, of course—on how one ought to behave in this complicated human life of ours.

All that's left for me to do is nod and play along in absolute, total agreement. It doesn't bother me one bit; if anything, it

makes me proud: who did she get so damn smart from?

But at the same time, I don't forget to pat myself on the back too: "Well, look at you, you beautiful bastard! Oleg Tabakov could learn a thing or two from you. And you could show Gaft a few stagecraft tricks as well. Though he's a tough guy—no need to rush things with him."

But damn it, there really is something to be proud of when your own daughter turns out not just beautiful, but a street-smart expert on life. And on how to sort things out if anything goes sideways. The most burning questions for our complicated times.

Then came the ultimate question:

"You have another family over there now. Kids. But did you ever love me—you know, as your daughter?"

"Why 'did'? I still love you."

"Just as much as them?"

"Well, no, of course not. You love little ones with a different kind of love: because they're small, because they're completely clueless, because they need your protection. You've already outgrown that kind of love. Look at you, quite the homemaker now. I love you for giving me my granddaughters."

"But did you love me as a daughter?"

"Yes. It's just that the words never really came out right, but think back: I never left without coming to see you. Before heading off to Odessa, I blew half a day riding a bicycle out to your Pioneer camp. Remember how the camp counselor put us on the spot to figure out if I was actually your dad or not? And

before Baku, it took a whole day: taking the diesel train to Sumy—to your vocational sewing school—and back."

"Is Uncle right when he says you're never coming back?"

"Yes."

"Never-ever?"

There were tears in her voice, moisture in her eyes. It was time to wrap up this topic:

"And how are things between you and your aunt?"

"Nonexistent. She doesn't even deign to say hello. Once on the streetcar, she actually turned her back on me. And her husband could easily give my hubby a job in Moscow. A lot of guys from around here go over there; you can make up to twenty dollars a day."

"It's not in her husband's interest to look out for your fellow and have him right there next to him."

"Why's that?"

"He's got his own life out there, and he doesn't need any extra witnesses who'll eventually head back here. And as for your aunt—she's just jealous of you."

"Jealous of what? That I'm sitting around with no job? We're barely scraping by on my man's salary."

"Her house is covered in carpets, that's true, and there's a French import sitting in her mother-in-law's garage that her husband drove down from Moscow. But they are poorer than you."

"How's that?"

"In youth."

A proud little spark lit up in her eyes. And for real—she was the owner of untold riches!... For the next ten years, at least.

"You should make peace with your aunt, though."

"Yeah, right, like she'd want to."

"She'll want to, believe me. Every woman dreams of a daughter, and she only has sons."

"Then why did she turn away on the streetcar?"

"When was that?"

"I don't remember. Winter. February, I think."

"Then she just didn't see you. Do you know how hard February was for her? Her husband was in Moscow, her mother-in-law was in the hospital, and then, in a single day, both her father-in-law and Vladya died."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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