

## Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

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"The Cold War"

When I first decided to move out of my mother's apartment and find my own place, I was standing in front of the bus stop at Queens College and on my way home. I was taking night classes to finish my masters, and had also just been hired at Institutional Investor Magazine - my first 9 to 5 job. Through the course of five years nothing felt different or exciting in my life, and I knew I needed a change badly. I had spent my years at Queens College going to parties held in apartments where my friends lived, away from their parents. At the end of those evenings, I would go home and mentally design the layout of my imaginary apartment. Clearly, I would be living in a loft where there was a bar on my block that I could frequent, and always find myself entertained by neighborhood artists and vagrants. They would crowd around me, amused by my charm and unassuming demeanor, helplessly drawn to the simplicity and good-naturedness of my spirit. My kitchen would be stocked with jars of peanut butter and jelly, exotic teas from China, shiny Granny Smith apples, and four flavors of Breyer's ice cream in the freezer. My friends would call at odd hours, in need of company and conversation, both of which I would provide at a moment's notice.

"I'll leave the door unlocked," I would say, "just come on up," and fix a drink for them.

I spent hours wondering when it would be my turn, but eventually waved off the idea as an impossibility. I knew how my mother felt about me moving out; many times I had approached her, and similar to a sleek ninja, she had swiftly disarmed and disemboweled my aspirations.

"The only reason somebody moves out of their parent's house is because they want to have their own place to have sex," she had said on one of those occasions.

"I thought everyone just had sex in their cars," I had replied, to which she narrowed her eyes and sized me up and down, most likely trying to determine whether or not my virginity was still intact.

Being the oldest of her three daughters and a female at that, this journey would prove to be strenuous and taxing at best. I imagined myself as Dorothy, and envisioned the serpentine road ahead of me, snaking it's way through ominous forests until it disappeared and came back to full view ending on top of a very steep, gray mountain. Lucky for Dorothy she had a handicapped crew of misfits to help her along.

"Do us a favor and tell her when we're not in the house," my sister Alice said, when I came home that evening and pulled our little sister Ani into their bedroom.

"Do you think it's going to be *that* bad?" I asked, and already felt my hands moistening.

"Well, like, *duh*, dude. *Yeah*, it's going to be that bad," Alice said.

"But what's the big deal? Why does she have to be like this?"

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"I don't, like, have *time* for riddles," she said, as if she were asking me a question.

"What do you think, Ani?" I asked her. She was sitting on the bed and coordinating her outfit for school the next day.

"Maybe she won't be so mad," she said politely, and stood staring at her matching plaid shirt and socks in speculation.

"Oh, c'mon Ani!" Alice sneered at her. "Don't listen to her, Aida. She's been alive for ten years, she doesn't know Mom as well as we do. Trust me: she's going to have a shit fit and I'm like totally seriously about making sure I'm not around when you tell her."

"Do you guys think it's that bad an idea?" I ask them, and they sheepishly exchange looks. "What? What was that?" I asked frantically. "Should I not do this? I'm tired of living here. She says I have no curfew and then acts like a total bitch if I come home late," I said, slowly beginning my pitch. "I'm twenty-three, guys. C'mon! Everyone I know has their own place. Even when I sleep over someone's house she gets upset and – "

"And somehow she's going to be okay with you moving out permanently?" Alice interjects. "She doesn't even like when you're not home overnight, Aida. Hello! Like, if you're going to do it, know that she's going to be really really really upset."

"Well, maybe you can smooth things over," I suggest.

"No way!" she shoots back at me. "Are you kidding me? You're going to move out and I'm going to publicly support you on this? So then she can treat me like shit after you're gone? Dude, good for you if you want to do this, but there's no way she can handle a shift in loyalties on top of being abandoned by her first-born."

"I am not abandoning her! I just want my own place. I can't believe she would actually expect me to live here until I got married. Never mind my three year relationship with Doug; we all know that's going nowhere, and I don't want to get married anyway."

"Well, let's just hope you keep that gem to yourself, dude," Alice says. "Because if that's one of the fine points of your argument, you'll be screwed three ways from Sunday."

I didn't know one single Armenian female who had moved out of her parent's house, not to mention that Armenian men didn't come to mind either. Granted, there were those who went away to college, but as soon as they graduated they moved back home. All my cousins also lived with their parents, and I knew some who got married and just moved their spouses in to live with their parents. In other words, there were no examples to refer to, no means of logic to appeal to my mother's whimsical sense of reason.

I could hardly swallow my food during dinner that evening. When the table was clear, Alice stood up and swiftly grabbed Ani by her arm, and dragged her down the hallway to their bedroom. The door slam could be heard from the dining room, and I remembered Alice's words; she was not bluffing. I pictured her and Ani sitting on the floor and pretending to have a real conversation, and wondered how they would be able to carry on

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any semblance of normality when they knew what was about to transpire on the other side of the apartment.

"I'm thinking of moving out," I said, once my mother had made her way over to the couch, and was sitting in her usual spot.

"Who is?" she said absently, as she began her nightly hunt of television shows.

"Me. I am," I said. "Mom. Put down the remote and listen to me."

My step-father, Sevag, lit a fresh cigarette. This interruption was not temporary, he knew, and settled onto the couch similar to a juror who had just been given an assignment.

Resignedly, she dropped the remote control in her lap and stared at me. "Okay. What do you want to say?"

"It's time that I moved out," I said. "I haven't started looking, but I am very soon and I wanted to tell you before I found a place."

"So why tell me?" she asked. "You're going to move out no matter what I say, so why bother?"

"Because I didn't want to catch you off-guard, and just leave."

"You're leaving either way," she said. "So I don't see why you're going to bother telling me." Her eyes reverted back to the T.V. screen, as if it to punctuate the end our playful banter.

"Mom, I wanted you to - "

"Aida - are you moving out?" she said, as if we had started a game of memory.

"Yes, I just said - "

"So what difference does it make if you're telling me?" She repeated a third time.

This was another Stella tactic, where she was mysteriously able to maneuver the conversation to repeat itself.

"You know how I feel about it," she said, slamming the remote onto the chair, "You know I'm completely against it, but if you're going to do it anyway, then just do it and leave me the hell alone."

"I don't understand why it has to be like this," I said. "I'm moving ten minutes - "

"I told you I don't care!" she started yelling. "If you're going, go! Now get the hell out of my face!"

I looked at Sevag, who was passively staring at the wall. His gaze finally met mine, and he shrugged his shoulders complacently. I went into my bedroom and opened up a book to begin some school reading, but found myself reading the same paragraph four times over. The television was still on full volume in the living room; it was as if our conversation had never taken place. I strained to listen for any fragments of conversation between my mother and Sevag, and surprisingly heard a commercial on the television. Alice was wrong after all. I let out a small chuckle and

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shook my head, reflecting on my fear and foolishness.

Suddenly, the door swung open and she barged in.

"I have one thing to say to you," she began. "We are an Armenian family," she said. "Not an American family, who doesn't care about anything. We have tradition. How can you do something like this and not think about what an example you're setting for your sisters, heh? How can you leave us behind like this? Do you know one person in our community, in our family who has done something like this? Do you know how much money you are going to waste doing this? But everyone knows – Aida has to do everything her way. She does whatever she wants no matter who it's affecting. But remember one thing: if this doesn't work out for you, if you can't pay your rent, if you are thrown out of your apartment, don't come back here. Because once you leave, that's it! Finish!" she yelled, wiping her hands together slowly and thoroughly like a magician. She was staring at me wildly, waiting for my response.

"Okay," I said, "if that's how you want it." "And what other way is there to do things, but mine?" I thought to myself.

"No, no, no, no," she sang in her wily way, smiling, and wagging her finger in my face, "don't put this on me. This was your decision. You're the one breaking up the family," she said. "If moving out is more important than your family, then go ahead and do it."

"Okay," I said.

"You can't come here anymore," she added, waiting for a new response.

"I can't come here because I'm leaving? Are you disowning me?"

"That's what you're going to tell everyone, heh? 'My mother is throwing me out of the house,'" she said, trying to mimic me.

"If you're telling me that I can't come over anymore and see you, then what is that called?"

She left the room, and I left the apartment to go for a walk. By the time I headed back the sky had darkened, and I could hear the faint sound of music from our apartment when I walked into the lobby. An Armenian song was booming from the record player, and Alice was washing the dishes in the kitchen. The song is called "Deleh Yaman" – a dirge about the Armenian massacre, and the Armenian land that was lost to the hands of the Turks.

"What the hell is going on?" I whispered to Alice once I made my bee-line into the kitchen.

"Like, what do you think is going on?" Alice whispered back fiercely. "She's upset. I wouldn't even go in there if I were you."

"Because I'm moving out?" I said.

"Duh!" she said loudly, and continued washing the dishes.

Sevag and Ani were nowhere to be found. When I went into the living room, I found my mother sitting on a chair and looking out the window, sobbing uncontrollably.

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"Ma," I started to say.

"Just leave me alone!" she said, turning away and heaving another sob.

It took six months to find a place. It was a basement apartment in Astoria, a ten-minute drive from my mother's. During the course of those six months, Ani became the designated messenger, and knocked on my bedroom door to deliver any news or requests that had been directed from my mother.

"If you're finished using the washing machine, Mom needs you to take your clothes out because it's her turn to use it."

"Are you sure she hasn't poured any bleach on it yet?"

"I checked for the smell. You're in the clear this time."

It was a minefield, where I would stumble upon mysterious occurrences that initially disarmed me, but became more predictable as time passed. At first, the bombs exploded quietly, yet implicitly: only four portions of food would be made for dinner, leaving me with nothing to eat; phone messages would be withheld and never made mention of; two of the locks on the front door would be locked, one of which only my mother had a key to; and the list goes on. Until finally, one Saturday afternoon as I was washing the dishes, my mother walked in and started pulling my just-washed clothes out of the washing machine and throwing them on the kitchen floor.

"Mom, c'mon! I just washed those," I said, and started picking up my clothes off the floor. In response, she started throwing her clothes in and ignoring me.

"Mom. How long are you going to keep this up?" I asked, to which I was met with the same response.

"Oh, I get," I said finally. "Since I'm 'abandoning' you, you're going to 'abandon' me in your own special way."

Without a word, she grabbed her mug of fresh coffee and threw it at me across the kitchen. It hit my chest and coffee spilled all over my crotch. "Now you have a fancy psychology degree and you're going to analyze me, heh?" she yelled.

To save the expense of renting a van, which would have emphasized the finality of my decision, I filled my car with small boxes and bags and made numerous trips from my mother's apartment to my new one. At the time, my family owned a custom van, which I desperately needed for my larger belongings, but was too proud to ask to borrow. Until one rainy evening my mother wasn't home, and I stepped into Sevag's study in hopes that he would allow me this last luxury.

Without looking up from his books, he said in a muffled tone, "Go use it. Quick, before she gets back."

Once I moved in, the only things I unpacked were my boxes of clothes. The rest of everything I had hauled and deposited in the apartment sat huddled in the middle of the living room for three weeks. Any stereotypical bachelor would have found the contents of my refrigerator deplorable;



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the only items it held were a large bottle of Poland Spring water and a lemon.

I was either going out every night or having people over for drinks, ignoring the necessities of my daily life. Rare was the evening that I came home before two in the morning, and even rarer were the pangs of missing my mother.

Six months after I had left her apartment, the phone rang just as I walked through the door.

"Who are these boys?"

"Mom?"

"Yes. About Alice – who are these boys?"

"What boys?"

"All these boys call – Jimmy, Jammy, Mark, Clark, I don't know who else.... Who are they?"

"I really don't know. Friends from school I guess," I offer, full well knowing that Alice was haphazardly giving her number to any cute boy she met in college.

Silence.

"Why she gives her number to them, heh?"

"Mom, they're probably just friends. She lost a bunch of weight this summer and probably a few guys are interested in her."

"I don't know. They call at crazy hours and I told her many times to stop giving the goddam number to just anybody."

"So tell her," I said.

"What difference it's going to make?"

"Well tell her and see what happens."

I am still stupefied that she is calling me after a year of silence. We say good-bye and I realize that she is now officially back in my life and I have obligations again. I am disheartened as I light a cigarette and put away the groceries I had planned on cooking for dinner. I was not feeling elated or relieved, but rather depressed and irritated. Once those feelings passed, any form of gratefulness was naturally substituted with indifference. And with indifference I came and I went. The subject was never addressed. Somehow, though, the rift between was slowly bridged with once a day phone calls and weekly visits. I felt obligated to cook dinner for the family once a week (which slowly tapered off when I realized there were four people who lived in the apartment and none of them were disabled), and instead, went over every Saturday to help her cook. And sometimes while she would be talking away, my thoughts would wander, and I would think to myself, "We all know Aida – she has to do everything her way." Maybe so.