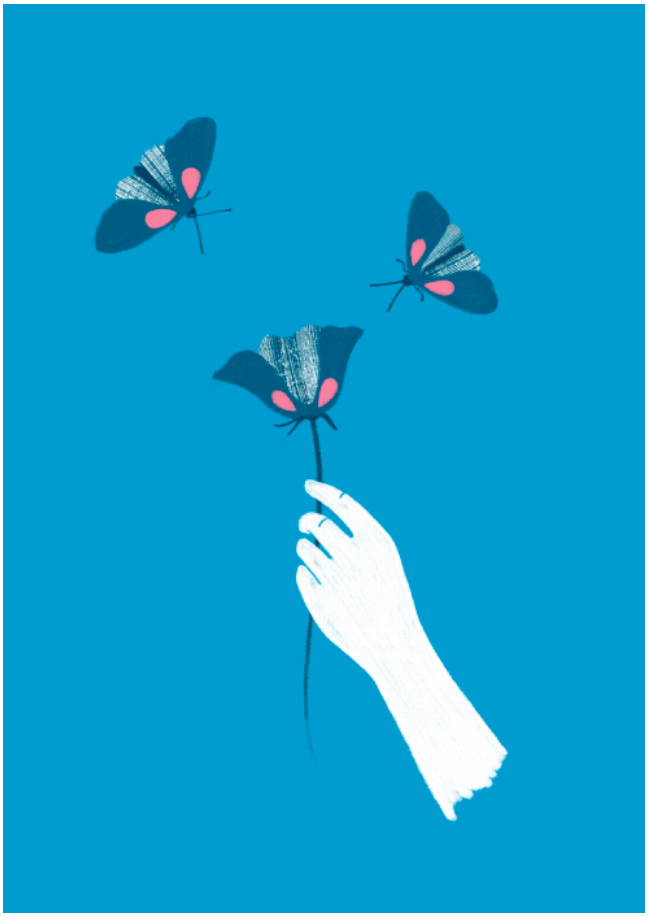
FLASH NONFICTION

The Woman on the Bench

by Ludivine Massin



"Butterflies" by Arusyak Pivazyan

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I was walking down Abovyan Street and my daughter was screaming; as she had been down Teryan Street and all the streets before that, and she hadn't even stopped when we passed the fountain that she loves, the one with the birds in front of Katoghike Church, or when I gave her warm Lahmajoun to eat in the stroller, the good one from the place whose name I always forget.

I reached the Republic Square and she was still screaming. I stopped at a bench — next to the bench you were sitting on, eating a sandwich during what probably was your lunch break. Maybe I was wrong and you were just visiting too, but unlike me you looked like you belonged here. She belonged here too, my screaming daughter. She looked more like you than she looked like me, and her big sister, too. I had been walking around since dawn to calm her down. My first daughter was still at the hotel getting ready with her dad, and I couldn't help thinking how much they both belonged here too; they can speak your language and they exist here effortlessly. It is not so different back home, and when I say home I mean their home for they are German and I'm not, and they're Armenian and I'm not, because I am French and my children are nothing like me.

I had tried everything to soothe her that day, everything except the one thing I was putting off until there was no choice, and I had no choice now, did I? I had to try the baby carrier for the first time — I had never used one with my first child. I pulled it from under the stroller and it was stiff and smelled like something that is brand new, and I proceeded to wrap it tightly around my hips, feeling your gaze upon my shaking body. She was still screaming and I was rushing, trying to arrange the carrier the way it was supposed to be; and what it was supposed to be is easy, they said so in the instructions I read too fast. It didn't make sense to me, which strap to attach to which side, and nothing made sense to me as I was standing in the middle of Republic Square, crying silently, even though she was screaming so loudly that nobody would have heard me. I felt tiny, surrounded by the enormous Soviet buildings, like I do in Berlin too sometimes. Tiny and lost like I'm not supposed to be there, raising kids who speak two languages that are not mine and to whom I failed to transmit the parts of me that I had carried all my life for them. You put your sandwich down and got up, swallowing what was left in your mouth, and came up to me. You said nothing, but like a magician, you moved your hands around and the light pink straps tightened on both sides and the clips clicked and the baby stopped crying, and I think I did too, then.

The square was soundless, or maybe it wasn't but the only sound that mattered had finally stopped, and everything felt lighter despite the six kilos child now strapped against my chest. You were a bit older than me, ten, fifteen years at most. Your kids had to be teenagers already, so you emanated the confidence of those who know everything about raising infants

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into persons. You must have found it hard too sometimes — they say everyone does — but you looked like everything was easy for you, and you knew your way around a baby carrier; your children probably looked like you, and you didn't feel like a stranger in your own home. You didn't smile or attempt small talk, you just helped like it's what you were supposed to do, helping another struggling mother. Raising a child supposedly requires a village and you were part of mine that day. I thanked you and you shrugged your shoulders and got back to your food. My daughter was asleep against my chest, soothed by the sound of the endless flow of cars driving around Republic Square.

I looked at you one last time but you had already forgotten about me and had probably no idea how much I had needed whatever it was that you did for me. As I walked back up Abovyan Street to meet the rest of the family, I kissed my baby's soft forehead and noticed that her short hair was starting to turn blond like mine, and at that moment it didn't matter anymore that I didn't feel home as long as I was hers.

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