



The Doves of Ohanavank

Vahan Zanoian

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The author's anti-trafficking message comes through clearly, as do nuanced relationships and a strong story.

A story about the economic, political, and cultural conditions that allow sex trafficking to flourish, *The Doves of Ohanavank* is poignant, complex, and humane. Its resilient characters, particularly the women, are earnest but not melodramatic. And while the novel carries with it a pointed anti-trafficking message that can sometimes linger a little too often in pity for its protagonists, it is also a suspenseful and compelling thriller.

Picking up where *A Place Far Away* left off, Vahan Zanoian's latest novel sees now-eighteen-year-old Lara Galian return home to her family's farm in an Armenian village. After spending months of coerced labor in the sex trade abroad, Lara is gazed upon with a mixture of curiosity, sorrow, and even contempt by her neighbors and family. Feeling isolated and misunderstood, she forces herself to attempt reintegration into her community and country, but it is no easy task as she and they have all changed in the course of a few short months.

Lara muses, "all the missing, the pining, the obsession, and the life sustaining hope is lost the minute you return. It's done. You're back, against all odds, having conquered incredible obstacles, having beaten people a thousand times more powerful than you...and then you ask, now what?" The question is explored as the novel unfolds. Lara moves to a nearby city and enrolls in college in the hopes of starting fresh, but the ties that bound her to her time abroad and to organized crime were not all severed when she escaped, and they soon come back to find her.

The Doves of Ohanavank tackles trafficking, a very different animal from consensual adult sex work, but does not make this distinction. It is a book with a clear mandate—aside from the profiteers, not many would argue in favor of trafficking and exploitation, so its moral center is uncontroversial. There are intensely sweet moments, such as those between Lara and her beloved brother, Avo, who tries to draw her back into the world they grew up in, one of newborn piglets and family dinners. And, while forming a new friendship with a frightened woman hiding from her own violent past, Lara prophetically says of her, "I've made up my mind to befriend Anna fully...I think it is possible to build a pathway from my heart to hers," and discovers "the joy of helping someone whose plight I understand." Natural dialogue and nuanced relationships complement the solid story arc.

The plot's sticky point is its villains, particularly the daughter of a dead oligarch (former kingpin of the trafficking trade) and her sidekicks, and their nefarious and scheming brutality. Their motivation—perhaps it's truly nothing beyond greed, but this is not really explored—to pursue the business left hanging when the patriarch was killed is vague. But their relentless pursuit does give an urgency to the story that keeps the pages turning until the precariously hopeful conclusion.

SARAH STEWART (July 28, 2014)

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