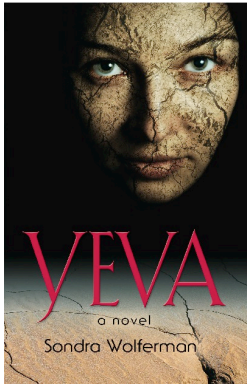




VEVA

a novel

Sondra Wolferman



The story of a woman who survives a natural disaster-the Armenian earthquake of December, 1988-and, after losing her entire family to the disaster goes on to build a new life for herself in the United States.

YEVA

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Sondra Wolferman

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Chapter One

Caucasian Mountains, Northern Armenia, December, 1988

The workers gathered for breakfast at a modest restaurant just off the main highway leading north from the city of Gyumri toward the border with Soviet Georgia. After warming themselves over foaming cups of the thick, sweetened coffee of the region, they boarded buses and traveled northeast through an arid landscape to the end of the paved road. There, jeeps waited to carry them further, on a frozen dirt track along the rim of a gorge high above the Akhurian River—and when that route too became impassable, they climbed onto the backs of mules for the last few kilometers to their destination.

Their journey ended near the edge of a cliff overlooking a steep gorge, where lay the sprawling ruins of a medieval monastery that had been twice destroyed—once by Muslim invaders, and then again by earthquake in the Seventeenth Century—and twice rebuilt, only to be abandoned and forgotten for the greater part of the modern era.

The workers who disembarked at this site belonged to a team of craftsmen—skilled carpenters, masons, and stonecutters—who were entrusted with the mission of restoring this vast complex of broken churches and fortifications to some semblance of its former glory. To what purpose this colossal mission was undertaken, the workers neither knew nor cared. They were well-paid, and they were happy to be working as skilled laborers in their chosen fields while so many of their compatriots, of equal talent, languished in government-

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sponsored jobs that consisted of little more than ‘busy-work’ designed to fulfill the Communist ideal of full employment in a ‘classless society’.

Many an average Armenian citizen considered the government plan to rebuild the ancient monasteries—some of which dated back to the time before Christ—to be little more than an extravagant Soviet plot to show the world what their system could accomplish. Most tried to ignore the irony that, while millions of her citizens were crammed into substandard housing, two and three families to a unit, the Soviets chose to rebuild not the nation’s crumbling infrastructure but rather some antiquities which, while undeniably awesome, were of no use to anybody other than some foreign tourists who would go home with a benevolent view of a regime that went to such great lengths to honor its past.

The ruins were situated on the south-facing slope of a three-thousand-foot mountain ridge. The southern exposure not only protected the site from the fiercest mountain winds, but also kept it free of snow until well into the month of December, so that the restoration work could continue uninterrupted until the New Year. At the end of each work day, around four o’clock when the early winter twilight set in, the workers retired to a base camp that was set up on a plateau about half a mile away from the worksite. This was no rough-and-tumble outfit but a comfortable encampment with heated tents, army-style cots, hot showers, and a dining hall where professional chefs prepared meals for the crew. There was always plenty of vodka to go around, as well as cigarettes, snacks, and magazines—*of the pornographic persuasion*—for sale at reduced prices to keep the workers happy.

The workers were encouraged to go home to their families on staggered weekends, but many chose to remain here in the hills, for reasons of their own. Some of them enjoyed this line of work precisely because it gave them the opportunity to stay away from

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home for extended periods. For those who didn't go home on leave—the unmarried, the unhappily married, the adventurers—there were excursions into the nearest sizeable town where they would carouse and spend their ample salaries in taverns and brothels.

Harout Karayan had joined the crew only lately, when he was hired to replace another stonemason who had fallen ill. He was thrilled to be working at this time of year—which was normally a fallow time in the construction industry—although he missed his children terribly. Harout was never among the carousers, not because he shunned the company of women—on the contrary, he was an amiable man with an easygoing charm that was very attractive to the ladies—but rather because he had sown his wild oats early in life and had since turned into a solid family man with a shrewd, practical wife and two children he adored. His wife Yeva was a strong-willed woman who kept a tight rein on her family, so much so that during the early years of their marriage she had been known to fetch her mate out of taverns and to scare off women who flirted with her husband. While Yeva had mellowed a great deal over the years, Harout's colleagues continued to joke with him about his family life, calling him 'pussy-whipped' and other such expletives.

Harout—although he would never admit it out loud—actually valued his wife's take-charge attitude. He had no use for shrinking violets or cloying, dependent women—didn't even enjoy them in bed—no matter how good-looking they were. His marriage to Yeva was an equal partnership in which she contributed to the family finances with her horticultural skills and her frugality, and he was comfortable knowing that should anything happen to him, his children were in good hands with a resourceful woman who could make her own way in the world.

While his friends taunted him about his marriage, nobody ever joked about Harout's professional skills. He had earned a reputation as one of the most skilled artisans in the region, known for his ability

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to carve intricate designs into the most resistant of stones—tedious work that required a steady hand, an appreciation for finely-wrought detail, and infinite patience. Those who were acquainted with Harout marveled that a man of his volatile temperament, not to mention a tendency to over-indulge in food and drink, was able to accomplish this type of work.

When he was working at his craft, Harout often seemed transfixed by the task at hand and the stone before him, in a way that was the envy of any artist. Indeed, Harout had dabbled in sculpture as a young man, but gave it up because he was unwilling to accept the poverty and indignity that were the lot of most aspiring artists in a Communist regime that seemed intent upon crushing all creative endeavors among its citizens.

He then devoted his talents instead to the lucrative building trade. He had worked on many historic renovations in the past, but never before had he been as impressed as with this remote monastery in the Caucasus Mountains. While the compound of ruins was currently in shambles—the entire eastern end of the complex had long ago tumbled into the gorge—what remained standing filled Harout with a sense of awe and mystery, and he welcomed the challenge that lay before him.

Harout was assigned to work on the *khatchkar*—ornate stone crosses carved into the walls and ceilings of the main church of the compound. He spent entire days perched high above the ground upon a wooden scaffold just inches below the domed ceiling, enjoying the solitude and the sweeping views that this position offered while he worked. Massive stone columns supported the ceiling, while heavy rounded arches divided it into compartments, each compartment with its own richly decorated *khatchkar*, most of which were heavily damaged or eroded beyond recognition.

Working from sketches and blueprints prepared for him by archeologists and historians, Harout labored to restore these

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decorative crosses as much as possible to their original beauty. Using a steam hose, he first blasted away the centuries of soot and grime that were slowly eating away at the decorative panels like acid rain. Afterwards, balanced dozens of feet above the ground with a miner's lamp around his head, he worked with hammer and chisel, chipping away at the damaged areas to deepen the lines and crevices that would make the detail of the *kbatchkar* emerge once again.

It was slow, painstaking work. While absorbed in his task, Harout felt little discomfort, but by the end of the day his arms and shoulders ached with the effort of constantly reaching upward with his heavy tools, and his eyes felt gritty and inflamed from the strain of working in dim light. He welcomed his fatigue at night and collapsed into a heavy sleep after eating a meal of curried lamb stew with chickpeas—while his colleagues stayed up late gossiping and playing cards for money.

Towards the end of the first week of December, the weather turned sharply colder. The taste of winter was in the air, and it appeared that the deepening snows that already blanketed the northern slopes of these rugged mountains would soon begin creeping down the southern slopes as well. While their sleeping quarters were warm and comfortable, the compound where the men labored by day was a cold and inhospitable place, and they were all feeling the strain. Harout could no longer work without wearing clumsy, government-issue gloves that hampered him in his intricate task. He looked forward to the snows coming so he could go home to his family.

Harout often worked with two partners—Helmi, a seasoned craftsman approaching retirement age, and Aram, a young apprentice with a promising future—who stood on different platforms of the same wooden scaffold. All three were in high spirits on the morning of December Eighth, for they had been told they would soon be

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going home, and an easy banter passed between them as they worked.

“When you get to be my age,” said Helmi, “you won’t be in such a hurry to go back to your families...”

The other two men were accustomed to Helmi’s constant griping about his home life. “Oh? Why is that?” Aram responded with a wink.

“My wife nags me day and night...” Helmi complained. “She wants us to move to the city now that our children have all grown up and married and left the house. She’s dying of boredom in our rural village, she says, and wants to be near the restaurants and the movies and department stores...” Helmi continued to paint as he babbled on. “Me? I love the countryside...milking the goats, pattering in the vegetable garden... If my wife wants to live in the city, she’ll have to live there by herself!” he said.

“I would gladly trade places with you,” said Aram. “My wife spends money faster than I can make it. And with two daughters to raise, I can barely keep up... I wish we lived in the countryside where there are no overpriced department stores!”

“Why don’t you put your foot down?” said Helmi. “Don’t give them the money to spend...”

“I can see you are not raising daughters... It is hard to resist a six-year old who says she will die if she can’t have the latest book bag or ballet lessons!”

Harout listened to his partners with amusement and chimed in. “My wife has her own bank account,” he boasted. “She works almost as hard as I do...”

“I’ve seen your wife...” said Helmi. “With a face like hers...she’d better bring something to the table!”

“*Ha ha*. I’ve seen *your* wife,” Harout shot back. “And from what I’ve heard...a lot of other men have seen her too, if you catch my drift...”

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“Why don’t you two bozos quit insulting each others’ spouses and get back to work,” said Aram. “I’m tired of carrying the load for the both of you...”

“What do you care? We all get paid the same wages, regardless of who does what... The longer it takes us to finish this project, the longer we will continue to bring home a paycheck.”

“There’s an attitude for you... Before the Socialists took over this country, a man took pride in his work, and now...he just wants to get by with the least amount of effort!”

“What do you suppose we’re doing this for, anyway? Not that I’m complaining—it sure beats driving a taxi!”

“Don’t you get it? We’re doing this so the Soviets can bring busloads of tourists to our historic monuments and show the world how they are striving to preserve the traditions of the ethnic republics...”

Harout had just put down his chisel and stepped back to admire his work when a large raven—there were dozens of the raucous birds roosting within the nooks and crannies of the vaulted ceiling—dove down from its roost as though aiming straight for Harout’s head. “Damn those pesky birds!” Harout muttered, and then a thunderous whoosh echoed through the cavernous building as the entire flock of ravens alit from their perches en masse, beating their wings wildly as they flew upwards and out through a wide opening in the ceiling.

“What the hell was that!” exclaimed Aram.

Harout perceived a slight lateral swaying of the scaffold. All three men realized at once what was happening. Harout and Helmi dropped their tools and began scrambling down the rungs of the ladder that was built into one side of the scaffold, but the youthful Aram stood petrified as the scaffold swayed again, creaking ominously on its brittle supports. A deep rumbling noise rolled over them.

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“Get down!” Harout shouted to the motionless Aram
“*Earthquake!*”

Chunks of masonry fell from the walls and ceilings of the embattled structure. The monastery had withstood many earthquakes since the Middle Ages, but the men could not have known that this time the quake was centered almost directly beneath them. With a sickening crack, the scaffold broke apart. Helmi, spry as a mountain goat despite his age, hit the ground running, searching blindly for an exit in the dust-choked darkness. Harout, having hesitated out of concern for the youngster, was still on the ladder about twenty feet from the ground when he saw the body of the apprentice fall through the air and strike the ground. In the swirling dust and darkness Harout knew not what lay below, but he knew instinctively he had to either jump now or go down with the scaffold. In an instant, he chose to be master of his own fate and, with a powerful thrust of his legs kicked himself free of the ladder. A flash of blinding pain exploded from the small of his back, shooting upwards to his neck, and then...nothing.

Chapter Six

If I could describe our marriage in one word—it would be ‘comfortable’. The passion died a long time ago. We married young—I was twenty-three, and she, twenty-two. I had just landed my first job with a major architectural firm after winning a competition for the design of a new convention center in Buffalo. I was flying high, real full of myself and, like many men who achieve success too early, I was looking for the trophy wife. Fatima was that, and more—smart, pretty, vivacious, and with the kind of bubbly personality that gives men an itch in the groin.

We met on a blind date. I had never dated much in college and, after I graduated and landed my first job, I was still living with my mother. My mom—may she rest in peace—had a deep concern about preserving our ethnic heritage (while I couldn’t have cared less), and she encouraged me to start socializing more with our fellow Armenian-Americans by attending church functions, social clubs, that sort of thing. Since I wasn’t bringing home any eligible women, Mom started ‘arranging’ dates for me with young women of Armenian extraction. Most of them were nothing to write home about, but, when I knocked on the front door of one of those blind dates and Fatima appeared wearing tight white pants and a red tube top, I thought *Hallelujah!* Like myself, she was a third generation American, from an Armenian-American mother and Egyptian father—an Arabian beauty with dark, limpid eyes and alabaster skin,

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tall and full-figured—but spoiled rotten with all the spunk of a modern American girl.

As I remember it, our first date did not go well. We played miniature golf. Fatima thought (she later told me) that I was a stuffed shirt—which I probably was. I in turn thought Fatima was kind of sluttish—which couldn't have been further off the mark since she turned out to be somewhat of a prude and a cold fish in bed.

Nevertheless we fell in love, or so we thought, and after we married Fatima proved herself to be a darned good homemaker—helping me through the early stages of my career, charming my colleagues and superiors at dinners and parties in a way that resulted in my professional advancement a lot sooner than would have been possible otherwise. I'm an introvert, I guess—the kind of person who can go for days, weeks, even months, without the company of another human being—and feel good about it, which does not always work in one's favor in a civilized society. My bride Fatima, with her lively personality and innate social skills, complemented my surly disposition to a tee.

Once we were settled in our spacious home, Fatima went back to school and got her degree in Interior Design, then worked part-time to help support her expensive tastes. She loved jewelry, designer clothes, and fine furniture, and she decorated our home with fresh flowers, original artwork and antiques. What more could a man ask for?

As an adolescent—even as a young man—I used to get teased a lot because of my small stature and slender build. At five feet seven inches tall and a hundred-seventy pounds, I was a good two inches shorter than my late wife, and I fall well short of the ideal size for American manhood. Add to this the fact that I like to wear tailored clothes, eat exotic foods, and have never attempted a *bench-press* in my life, people tend to think I'm effeminate, possibly even gay. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I'm well-endowed where it counts

and I have a hearty sexual appetite—for women—and I can outperform any of those beef-eating muscular macho types in the bedroom, or so I've been told by the women I've been with.

Except for Fatima. For all her voluptuous good looks and flirtatious charm, Fatima was a disappointment in the bedroom. While she performed her 'wifely duties' with grace and good humor, I could tell she was never really into it, and the lack of intimacy was a bone of contention during the early years of our marriage.

"At least you could fake it once in a while," I argued after one particularly frustrating session.

"You knew before we were married that I was *'good in the kitchen'...*" she quipped, paraphrasing that silly old adage about women who are good in the kitchen being bad and the bedroom, and vice versa...

"Maybe you should see a sex therapist, or a marriage counselor, or something..." I said, with increasingly bad humor.

"I should see a therapist?" she said sardonically. "That sort of thing is for couples, my dear...not just one partner."

"Well...*you're* the one with the problem, not me..." I declared.

"I wonder if any competent therapist would see it that way..."

"I've never had any complaints in the bedroom before..." I said.

"Really? Well, I don't want to deprive all the women out there of such a great stud. If you feel that you have to satisfy yourself elsewhere..then just be discreet about it..." she said nonchalantly while filing her fingernails.

"What a thing for a wife to say!"

"I'm part Egyptian. My ancestors come from the land of harems and seraglios. My own father had mistresses—we all knew about it—and my mother was okay with it."

"Maybe that's the root of the problem," I suggested. "Because of your dad's philandering, you've developed a subconscious

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resentment toward all men, and that's why you can't enjoy yourself sexually..."

Fatima leaned over and shut off her bedside lamp. "Thank you for the analysis, Dr. Freud," she said without any trace of hostility. "Let's go to sleep. I have to get up early to help prepare the buffet for the Ladies Auxiliary Luncheon tomorrow."

That's what I was up against. Fortunately, we still enjoyed each other's company and we were compatible in every other way, so the marriage was never really in trouble. After Sonya was born, we more or less stopped having marital relations altogether. I was passionate about my work, while Fatima had her own hobbies and interests, as well as the baby to look after, so I pretty much sublimated my sexual feelings. Although—I'll be honest about it—I did have a few brief adulterous liaisons during that period.

As a mother, Fatima did all the right things. In accordance with the latest scientific research claiming that breast milk would boost the infant's immune system, Fatima nursed our baby for the first year and beyond. She read books on infant care and child development, and she made sure that our daughter had the finest toys and was enrolled in all the right play groups and pre-school programs. The one thing that seemed to be missing from Fatima's connection with the baby was the same thing that was lacking in our relationship as husband and wife—and that was *physical* affection. I observed how the other new mommies fondled and fussed over their babies incessantly, while Fatima—aside from the very real intimacy of breast-feeding—seldom cuddled or caressed our daughter.

The love was there, for sure—Fatima had plenty of that for both of us. She just wasn't very good at expressing it in a bodily way. Fortunately we could afford nannies and housekeepers, and the baby never lacked for attention, physical or otherwise. As a matter of fact, Sonya turned out just fine. Contrary to expectations, Sonya adored

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her mother—and that, to me, was the true test of Fatima’s parenting skills.

My wife’s illness came as a shock to me, although, looking back on it now...the warning signs were there long before the car crash and I ought to have seen them. While the headaches she complained of could be attributed to any number of causes, the subtle changes that began to appear in her personality before the headaches should have raised some red flags. Like the times she flew into a rage over some trivial matters.

On one particular occasion I came home from work to find my wife pacing the living room floor, perfectly groomed as always, but with her ivory cheeks flushed, her jaw clenched, and her deep-set eyes bright with malice, making me wonder if I had come home to an imposter. Fatima had always been even-tempered and unflappable—always the peacemaker in times of conflict, and I couldn’t imagine what would get her so riled up. Before I had a chance to collect my thoughts, she snapped at me.

“What happened to the furniture!” she demanded.

For a moment I was completely flustered, and then I remembered—a few weeks earlier we had gone shopping together to an upscale furniture store to buy a new dining room set. We left a deposit on a custom-designed mahogany table that was scheduled to be delivered a few weeks hence. Needless to say, home furnishings were my wife’s department, not mine, and I had forgotten all about the furniture pretty much before we hit the highway to go home from the store.

“What do you mean *‘what happened?’*” I asked in as calm a tone as I could muster.

“It was supposed to be delivered last week!” Fatima shrieked.

“So what?” I couldn’t believe she was upset about something so inconsequential. “The delivery date was just an estimate...” I said.

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“These things are never on time. Maybe the set we ordered wasn’t available from the factory...”

“You cancelled the order!”

“Cancelled the order? Why the hell would I do that!”

“So you could get the deposit money back! You could have just told me you didn’t want the table...”

I was dumbfounded. Not only was money never an issue between us—I made a *very* good living—but the kind of petty deceit she accused me of was so far beneath my dignity it was laughable.

I restrained myself from laughing. “Did you call the store?” I asked patiently.

Suddenly my wife’s tirade ended as abruptly as it had begun. She rubbed her temples like a woman in an aspirin commercial and said, “You’re right...I’m sorry. I’ll call them tomorrow...”

Genuinely concerned, I moved to put my arms around her and she backed away, so I decided to get out of there and let her calm down before I made things any worse.

Less than a month later, we had another discussion that gave me cause to question my wife’s state of mind. Our daughter, just turned seventeen, was ‘seeing’ a young man several years older than herself who drove a Harley Davidson. Sonya was a fairly serious teenager, never rebellious or ‘boy-crazy’, until she met this guy at a party and dated him a few times before her mother and I even knew about him. When she finally brought him home to meet us, I was not impressed. Not that he was a *Hell’s Angel* or anything like that—he was actually quite clean-cut and polite—but he was twenty years old, so what was he doing dating high-school girls...? He lived in another town and worked as an auto mechanic, or so he said. Maybe it was just a father’s paranoia, but, the fellow seemed kind of shiftless to me, and I never trusted motorcycles anyway, so I felt her mother and I should put a stop to it.

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Since Fatima was the disciplinarian in our family, as well as being fiercely protective of our daughter, I fully expected that she would be in complete agreement on this issue, but, when I told Fatima I disapproved of their relationship, she surprised me by saying, “I don’t see any harm in it. He seems like a nice enough fellow...”

“He’s too old for her,” I said, “and motorcycles are dangerous...”

“Lighten up, Honey...they’re just friends. It’s not like they’re going steady or anything...”

“*Lighten up?*” This was an expression my up-tight wife had never used before, at least not to my knowledge, and her position was so out of character that for a moment I wondered if she’d been drinking. “What makes you so sure they’re just friends?” I persisted.

“Sonya doesn’t lie to me. If there was anything wicked going on, she wouldn’t have brought him home to meet us. Besides, dear, the more we try to stop it...the more she will want to see him. Just let it play out...”

Strange as it seemed, her argument was not without merit, so I let it drop.

Despite these infrequent episodes, I was still in denial with regard to Fatima’s condition. On some level, we all knew something was wrong, but, it seemed, none of us wanted to address it openly, in the hope that it would just go away. Up until that point our family had been lucky enough to breeze through life—an attractive, successful couple and their well-adjusted daughter living out the American dream—until the car accident and Fatima’s surgery put an end to those delusions. Then, for the first time, our family had to come to terms with reality and, not surprisingly, Fatima herself was the one who displayed the most courage.

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While recuperating from her surgery in our transformed den, Fatima said to me one day without a trace of self-pity, “I am going to die.”

“Nonsense. You’re young and strong enough to beat this thing, and you will.” These were not just empty words of consolation on my part—I fully believed she would recover.

“If it makes you feel better to believe that, I won’t burst your bubble,” my wife said, “but...we still need to discuss certain things, just in case...”

“What things?” I asked stupidly.

“I’ve already made out my will. Most of what we own is marital property. There isn’t much in my name alone, but...I’ve willed my jewelry collection, such as it is, and the remainder of my inheritance, to Sonya. The assets shall be placed in a trust fund, with the income going towards her college education. The principle is to be turned over to her at the age of twenty-five. It’s all explained in the document, but, if you have any questions, Noah can answer them for you.”

Noah Biehl was our family attorney, a grandfatherly type close to retirement, with white hair and a full beard. I couldn’t help feeling a little disturbed that Fatima had gone directly to Noah and drawn up a will without my participation, but I kept those feelings to myself.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’ll see to it that Sonya is well taken care of...”

Fatima fought to stay alert. “I know she’ll be taken care of financially,” she said. “That’s not what worries me.”

“She’s practically a grown woman...”

“She’s at the age when a girl needs her mother the most. She’d be better off losing her mother as a child...so that she could adjust before reaching adolescence.”

Fatima spoke as if her imminent death were a certainty, which made me very uncomfortable...and afraid. What, if anything, did my

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wife know that the rest of us didn't...? "First of all, Sonya is not going to lose her mother," I said. "and besides, our daughter has a good head on her shoulders, thanks to you, no doubt..."

"She still needs a female role model...and who knows what kind of woman you are going to hook up with after I'm gone..."

Ouch. For the first time I felt my eyes start to water as the stress of the last few months finally caught up with me. "That's not fair," I said. "I know our marriage has never been perfect, but...I've always..."

"Always what...? Loved me?" Fatima's voice had a tenderness that I had not witnessed from her in a very long time. The next instant it was gone. "That's all well and good," she said briskly. "But we still have to face reality." She reached out for my hand and said, "I don't expect you to remain celibate for the rest of your life...just promise me you will consider Sonya's feelings before you get serious with anyone."

This conversation is ridiculous, I said to myself. *In a few months time, when Fatima is fully recovered, we will both be roundly embarrassed by it...* Aloud I said with a smile, "I promise you there won't be any wicked stepmothers in Sonya's future."

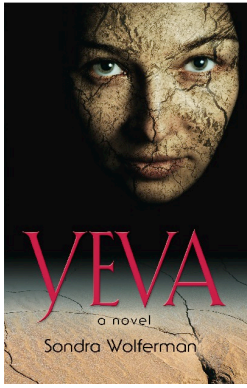
Fatima's bandaged head bobbed drowsily with the effort of talking, and her brow furrowed with pain. "The morphine's wearing off..." she murmured.

Fatima had an IV stuck in her arm with one of those newfangled systems whereby she could deliver her own pain medication in small doses whenever she needed it, at the press of a button. True to her fighting spirit, my wife tended to push herself to the limit in tolerating as much pain as possible before seeking relief from the medication, rather than keeping a steady stream of morphine in her system as the doctors had recommended. Now that she had finished unburdening herself to me, she gave herself a dose

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of the medication, and I waited until she nodded off before leaving the room.

Whatever her medical prognosis might have been at that time, it was easy to see from the foregoing discussion that my wife was still quite mentally fit and alert—which made it all the more difficult for me to accept the idea that she might not recover.



The story of a woman who survives a natural disaster-the Armenian earthquake of December, 1988-and, after losing her entire family to the disaster goes on to build a new life for herself in the United States.

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