

The Armenian & the Armenian

IN THE city of Rostov I passed a beer parlor late at night and saw a waiter in a white coat who was surely an Armenian, so I went in and said in our language, How are you, God destroy your house, how are you? I don't know how I could tell he was an Armenian, but I could. It is not the dark complexion alone, nor the curve of nose, nor the thickness and abundance of hair, nor is it even the way the living eye is set within the head. There are many with the right complexion and the right curve of nose and the same kind of hair and eyes, but these are not Armenian. Our tribe is a remarkable one, and I was on my way to Armenia. Well, I am sorry. I am deeply sorry that Armenia is nowhere. It is mournful to me that there is no Armenia.

There is a small area of land in Asia Minor that is called Armenia, but it is not so. It is not Armenia. It is a place. There are plains and mountains and rivers and lakes and cities in this place, and it is all fine, it is all no less fine than all the other places of the world, but it is not Armenia. There are only Armenians, and these inhabit the earth, not Armenia, since there is no Armenia, gentlemen, there is no America and there is no England, and no France, and no Italy, there is only the earth, gentlemen.

So I went into the little Russian beer parlor to greet a countryman, an alien in a foreign land.

Vy, he said with that deliberate intonation of surprise which makes our language and our way of speech so full of comedy. You?

Meaning of course I, a stranger. My clothes, for instance. My hat, my shoes, and perhaps even the small reflection of America in my face. How did you find this place?

Thief, I said with affection, I have been walking. What is your

city? Where were you born? (In Armenian, Where did you enter the world?)

Moush, he said. Where are you going? What are you doing here? You are an American. I can tell from your clothes.

Moush. I love that city. I can love a place I have never seen, a place that no longer exists, whose inhabitants have been killed. It is the city my father sometimes visited as a young man.

Jesus, it was good to see this black Armenian from Moush. You have no idea how good it is for an Armenian to run into an Armenian in some far place of the world. And a guy in a beer parlor, at that. A place where men drink. Who cares about the rotten quality of the beer? Who cares about the flies? Who, for that matter, cares about the dictatorship? It is simply impossible to change some things.

Vy, he said. Vy (slowly, with deliberate joy) vy. And you speak the language. It is amazing that you have not forgotten.

And he brought two glasses of the lousy Russian beer.

And the Armenian gestures, meaning so much. The slapping of the knee and roaring with laughter. The cursing. The subtle mockery of the world and its big ideas. The word in Armenian, the glance, the gesture, the smile, and through these things the swift rebirth of the race, timeless and again strong, though years have passed, though cities have been destroyed, fathers and brothers and sons killed, places forgotten, dreams violated, living hearts blackened with hate.

I should like to see any power of the world destroy this race, this small tribe of unimportant people, whose history is ended, whose wars have all been fought and lost, whose structures have crumbled, whose literature is unread, whose music is unheard, whose prayers are no longer uttered.

Go ahead, destroy this race. Let us say that it is again 1915. There is war in the world. Destroy Armenia. See if you can do it. Send them from their homes into the desert. Let them have neither bread nor water. Burn their houses and their churches. See if they will not live again. See if they will not laugh again. See if the race will not live again when two of them meet in a beer parlor, twenty years after, and laugh, and speak in their tongue. Go ahead, see if you can do anything about it. See if you can stop them from mocking the big ideas of the world, you sons of bitches, a couple of Armenians talking in the world, go ahead and try to destroy them.

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