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Arghmenia

I don't have a clue why I even travelled to Armenia; even now, after all these years, the reasons that brought me to that part of the world remain unclear. When someone asked me what was so interesting about Armenia, I mumbled something about its history, about its people adopting Christianity before the Romans and about little churches from the fourth and fifth centuries.

“And what's wrong with our little churches? Look into your own backyard first,” they advised, “then turn to wherever you like.” Still, during that winter and spring of 1998, I felt an ever-growing desire to travel to Armenia. Days were getting warmer and the Japanese cherries in front of my building revealed their long-expected blossoms. And that’s how April passed. My flight was on May 1. I gave seemingly simple instructions to my girlfriend: “If I do not get in touch within two weeks, report me missing at the Embassy in Athens.” And more importantly: “Please, buy the Sports News next Sunday and find out the score for the Cibalia-Zadarkomerc match.”

“For the what?”

“Cibalia and Zadarkomerc are playing. Football, league one. Got it? It's important.”

“Why is it so important to you?”

“Because we need at least a tie to stay afloat.”

“You and your afloats . . .”

“Will you do that for me?”

“Uhm, okay, I will.”

When I arrived in Armenia, the reasons for my visit were still on the agenda. In fact, it seemed I was repeating what I was saying in Croatia: history, little churches, Soviet legacy . . . Even the Armenians themselves were very distrustful of what I was saying, and I soon realized why: that year, in 1998, as it seems, I was the only tourist in Yerevan. How come I was the only person

among six and a half billion people who was interested in their churches? A man in the Memorial Centre above Yerevan asked me openly: “Guns?”

“History,” I said.

“Something more hardcore?”

“More hardcore than what?”

“Uranium.”

“I am not interested in that.”

“Too bad. You could clear a decent profit.”

In Yerevan

While I was walking down the street, people stopped and tried to discern my hidden motives in different ways. There were loafers who grabbed me by the sleeve in passing, although most of them were very pleased with just looking at me. If I spoke to anyone, some twenty people ran toward me, waving their hands in every direction wanting to confuse me. The first couple of days, I was looking for airline agencies. In fact, since I had driven through the city from the airport to the hotel, my mind was daunted by one thing only: how to get back home as quickly as possible. All of a sudden, three weeks seemed unbearably long. Among several operating agencies, however, no one could help me. Flights were few and far between, and the domestic airline company was in the process of assembling their fleet.

In the evening, desperate and sticky, I would go to the hotel, knowing that I had no water or electricity and that it would go on like that for the following three weeks. I had no idea the city had been living in the dark for years. I would keep one hand to the wall and carefully make my way to the end of the street, taking only small steps. Then I would wait for a car, until its lights illuminated the next stage of my route. Meanwhile, a survivor would scurry by me, stealthily, like a ghost. There was no crime, they explained, because there was nothing to steal.

It was easier during the day, but very predictable. Whenever I asked about things worth seeing, they all pointed at the Armenian Genocide Museum. I couldn’t climb the memorial hill every day and have fun among the photos of Armenians killed during the Ottoman Empire. Soon I became a

nightmare for the laid-back employees at the tourist agency. I counted nine of them in a single shift, but as soon as I stepped into the agency, they would all lower their heads. I suppose they were unaccustomed to tourists. One lady, a bit long in the tooth, was the only one who sighed nostalgically at the word 'Yugoslavia' from the back of the room. Dragging her feet, she stood up and brought a map of the city. She circled a few curiosities I should see. One of them was a football stadium.

Dog Gang

It is hard to endure the summer in a city with 2160 fountains of which 2159 are out of order. Two thousand one hundred and fifty-nine dry wells and rusty sprinklers. Due to water restrictions, the smell of sweaty armpits lingered everywhere. I was no better, because the faucets in my hotel were mostly dry. Downstairs, in a huge dining hall, I came across two peacekeepers from Serbia; one of them looked like a seasoned activist who decided a long time ago that fighting for peace was much more important than her looks, unlike the other one, who had only recently gone down the same path. I was very curious.

“What brings you here?”

“We are on a break,” said the more seasoned one.

“A break from what?”

“From Tajikistan. This is our second year at the peacekeeping centre.”

“I wonder what it must be like over there . . .” I started, then hesitated, but went on to finish my thought, “. . . if this is where you are taking a break?”

“Over there? Two days ago, there was a conflict between the government and a group of criminals in downtown Dushanbe. They brought out tanks. Maša and I had to lie down in the square while missiles flew back and forth. That's why our boss sent us abroad for a while.”

“So, how do you like it here?”

“It's really nice.”

“And peaceful,” said the younger colleague.

“And the hotel is spacious and has a lot of light.”

“Right, and there is even running water from 1 to 3 in the afternoon, in case you didn't know,” I warned them.

“And what would you recommend for sightseeing?”

“Well, I've been to the Genocide Museum and now I am planning to go to the football stadium.”

“Oh, splendid.”

“Would you like to come along?”

“We'd rather use the shower, if you don't mind.”

Enough said.

I went to the Hrazdan River and then, following directions, walked upstream to the bridge. As soon as I crossed the river, I was surrounded by shadows of decrepit and abandoned buildings. The stench of unwashed armpits was replaced by putrid whiffs that spread through the holes of former windows. In the middle of the day, there wasn't a breathing soul on the ramshackle streets. I kept going towards the stadium which suddenly loomed from a sinkhole. It looked like an amphitheatre, except for one thing: it had a pitch and goals instead of stone slabs. Now, unfortunately, it was closed and somewhat eerie. I rested on a bench in front of the entrance. Who could say when was the last time someone played here? A big bird flew up from a luxury box on top and steadily made its way toward the yellowish city of volcanic tuff. The Ararat Mountain glowed red on the horizon, prefacing the dusk. I thought I should find my way out of these dead parts while there was still daylight. As I walked across a demolished market, the holes in the houses had already filled with darkness. Then a dog walked in front of me on scrawny legs which its skinny body made look really long. It walked gracefully and it seemed it was trying to avoid me, but when it ventured between the stands, it stopped and sized me up. I noticed its unnervingly large mouth, which, a moment later, let out a horrifying bark. At that moment other dogs ran out onto the market platform. All kinds of creatures they were, from smaller pets that had that seemingly harmless, sideways trot to purebreds with leashes from some better days still clipped on to their collars. However, the strike team was composed of huge, starved mutts covered in scars across their snouts and bodies. They all growled at me sharing the same bloodlust, forcing me to back nervously towards the wall. The posse of thirty tail-waggers was headed by that skinny murderer with a horrible jaw and dead stare.

I slowly took off my backpack, wrapped it around my right arm and kept going backwards, saying to myself, ‘Do not make any sudden moves and everything will be fine. On the broad market platform, the first line of dogs was getting dangerously close. I could almost taste my own blood in their growls. I looked around for a tree to climb, but there was none. Only that wall – but it was too high. A decision had to be made quickly. I looked at the wall and thought, ‘No, I can't jump over it in just one try. Their teeth will get me and pull me to the ground, and then I am done for. What am I going to do?’ A tattered Pekingese dog (could it be any other) lurking on the side suddenly threw itself at me like a grasshopper. It clung to the rucksack with its teeth until I shook it off. I jumped on the nearest stand. That launched a full-on attack. A few of the worst scoundrels tried to gnaw my feet while others rocked the stand with their forelegs. They’ll eat me, it dawned on me. I closed my eyes and waited for the first bite, but instead, the barking turned into simpering and whining. I watched in shock as the dogs chased their tails in confusion. A man was walking fast from the bridge, shouting something like "Bu-la, Bu-la." From time to time, he took off his beret and waved it around. The pack started to crumble. Even the killer dog gave up. As it walked away, it looked at me, as if trying to say that the battle may have been won, but not the war. The guy who saved me was patting the other dogs on the head, and they were wagging their tails and barking benevolently. Then he threw his arm out and I stepped off the stand. It was only when my feet touched the ground that I realized how much they were shaking.

“Once, this was the belly of Yerevan, but it was severely hit in the earthquake of 1988. After that, the war with the Azeris started, so this part of the city has been in ruins ever since,” the man, who was around fifty, explained while I tried to erase the image of gnarly teeth from my head. I listened and only managed to nod sporadically.

“No one warned you about this gang of dogs?”

I shook my head.

“They’ve gone totally wild. Attacking butcher's shops, grocer's, food warehouses. . . . Honestly, I’m surprised they haven't eaten anyone yet.”

“If it hadn't been for you . . .” I tried but couldn't finish my sentence.

“You’re okay now.”

I took a deep breath and managed to say, “Thank you.”

“And what are you doing here?”

I shook my head again.

“You’re in shock, but your color is back, that's a good sign.”

I took out a hundred dollar bill and handed it to my savior.

“Where are you from?”

“Croatia.”

“In the West?”

“I guess.”

“In that case, my fee is ten dollars.”

“But . . .”

“I can’t accept more than that. I’m sorry.”

When we crossed the bridge and stepped on the other bank, I felt my muscle tissue relax slightly. Above the dry city, a wonderful summer moon was shining. My Samaritan offered to walk me to the hotel, to which I gladly agreed. He said talking meant a lot to him because he spent most of his time at home. Step by step, I finally managed to string a sentence together.

“How did you manage to chase away all those dogs?”

He offered me an enigmatic smile.

“I read somewhere that dogs respect the ones who treated them kindly in a past life. It's just that, I don't really believe in reincarnation.”

“But you gave them some sort of a signal?”

“You’re a foreigner, so I can tell you it was all a show. I’ve been unemployed for some time now, this is my only source of income. I pretend to have a method because it's not enough to save someone's life; people want to pay for a real skill so there has to be a method . . .”

“And there is no method?”

“What method? For thirty odd years I worked at the guard booth at the Armed and Mechanized Forces for the Armenian Soviet Army. I only know how to open and close doors politely for the chiefs. I’ve never even had a dog, even though I live off of their respect now. You think I don’t find it strange how bloodthirsty mongrels scamper away every time I show up?! You can exchange money at that kiosk.”

“Sure.”

“I'll go in with you, sometimes they roll a bundle of paper between two bills.”

I paid him according to the Western visitor rate, and the host issued a receipt with the official Yerevan letterhead. It said that the brave citizen Emil Ter Petrosian was allowed to chase away dogs in the quarters to the left of the Hrazdan River, but only on workdays. It stated the rate for local and foreign persons under attack, tax deduction per intervention, and the mayor's signature on the very bottom of the document. Under the dim light in front of the Dvin Hotel, Emil apologized for taking so much of my money and wanted to give at least half of it back. He said he’d issue a different receipt, the one for former Soviet citizens, whom he saves at a cheaper rate. Finally, I persuaded him to keep the money and shook his hand. When I came into the lobby, fifteen of the hotel staff in brown uniforms were sitting or lying on every available armchair and couch. Somewhere in the back, in the huge hall, a generator was humming. I knew the staff were here only because of my dinner. The only table set, with a working light bulb above it, was mine. They held my chair, and from somewhere, a trolley started gliding and dishes rattled from the kitchen. The headwaiter came to take my order. Like any other evening, I asked what was for dinner, and he gave the usual reply: “Sir, today we are serving borscht for dinner.” As always, I said, “All right, I would like a bowl of borscht, please.” He would write it down on his pad, tuck the pen in the top pocket of his suit jacket, and nod ceremoniously. That was the cue for the young waiter to serve a pitcher of tepid water. Meanwhile, four bartenders were on standby at the hall gate, even though the hotel bar had not worked once during my stay. The first couple of days, I felt awkward eating under the collective gaze of so many staff members, but I soon got used to it. The show went on after the meal. The headwaiter would ask about my health and my family's health. The others, including the cook, stood in the gloom and pretended to listen in. The waiter had a standard set of questions which he never wavered from. Apart from my mother and father, he also took to asking

about my grandparents' health, how old they were, what their life was like and if they had many grandchildren. I thought that if I told him they were all dying in unspeakable agony, he would still nod and look right through me. After that realization, I would leave a five-dollar bill on the table immediately after dinner and gesture that it was for the entire staff. It was the only way I could smoke a cigarette after dinner in peace.

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