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AH, THAT NIGHT IN STAMBUL!

Leon Z. Surmelian

THE OUTWARD appearance isn't worth describing," Ashod said on our way to Vahram's home on the other side of the Golden Horn. "If I were to write the history of a man it would be nothing but a description of the *mystery* of that man. The mystery is the real thing; it flows like a deep and eternal river under the outward appearance."

Ashod, a boy of eighteen, was a sensitive dreamer who carried Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* in his coat pocket like a prayer book and was given to murmuring melodic lines to himself.

"That's too complicated for me; what do you mean?" Vahram chuckled.

"I mean that men have the same noses and eyes and hair. They are uniformly and monotonously alike in their outward appearance, and little physical differences that may exist are of no significance to the artist. But we all vary tremendously in our thoughts, in our inner life, in our mysterious and true existence. Or take a sunset, like the one we are seeing right now. A conventional description of it in terms of colors, lights, and shadows would lack its essential quality—the mystery of the sunset." Ashod was the greatest literary aesthete I have ever known. I say this in all seriousness.

We passed through the old Levantine quarter of Galata, where the flags of a dozen nations were painted on the windows of cheap beer halls employing blonde Russian emigrée girls as waitresses. The smell of raki, perfumes, and garlic was overpowering. The hurdy-gurdies, played by men with carnation flowers on the back of their ears, were going full blast.

"Boys, look at that African lover!" Vahram said, laughing. A huge black Senegalese soldier of the French colonial army was devouring the white tense face of a Turkish woman with his thick purple lips as she

leaned against a lamp post, with her veil thrown back. "What is love? How would you define it?" Vahram asked.

"Ah, love!" Ashod sighed. "Love is Alice, or Alice is love. That's my definition." He was in love with a pretty school girl with a doll-like face called Alice.

"That's my definition also," my brother agreed, for he too was in love with her. She was quite a charmer. They would follow her in the streets to my disgust and annoyance. I was a stern Spartan soldier and did not like any display of romantic sentimentality.

All four of us were absolutely chaste and hardly knew what love was, but that did not prevent Vahram from speculating on the metaphysics of love. "Is love a pretty ribbon, a shapely figure or a companion for the soul? Well, it may be any of these things, but it is always and forever self-deception! Ho! Ho! Ho!"

Love . . . self-deception? I could not understand it. But then Vahram said many things I could not understand. Perhaps because he was two years older than I. He sometimes sounded like a character from a Russian novel. He translated the works of Dostoevski, Maxim Gorki, and Leonid Andreyev for Armenian papers and was comparatively prosperous, while Onnik and I were always hungry and had to live in an orphanage.

We paid the toll at Galata Bridge and crossed over to Stambul, bristling with its lance-like minarets. The sun was sinking in the Marmara, behind the Princes' Isles. Turks were washing their feet at the fountains of the imperial mosques, getting ready for their evening prayers. There was the hidden menace of the East in this vast Turkish quarter. After dark its narrow, winding streets were none too safe for Christians, even though the Bosphorus glistened with the great fighting ships of the victorious Giaours. The grim shadow of Mustafa Kemal Pasha extended over Stambul. There were disturbing rumors of new massacres in Anatolia.

Vahram's home was an old cottage built a few yards from the ancient Byzantine walls of the city, and like them it was sagging and crumbling under the weight of centuries, but somehow was everlasting in its decay. Its shaky door had two lyre-shaped brass knockers, and there was the inevitable garden in the rear. His mother, a mournful widow, had gone away for the night not to be in our way, and thus we had the house to ourselves, to do what we pleased. Vahram, Ashod, and my brother

Onnik were giving a farewell party for me because I was sailing to America in a day or two to study agriculture.

Vahram spread a feast on the table in the garden, and we raised wassail over two bottles of Bordeaux wine. Our revelry began amid the varicolored mosaics of a Byzantine sunset and continued under the brilliant jewelry of an eastern sky. We raised our glasses and sang a drinking song:

Oh how sweet it is
To be a drunkard
To drink all day wine
And to be cockeyed!
La-ree, tumbara la-la, ha, ha, ha!

The wine quickly went to our heads, for we were not used to it. My brother took out his violin and played "Black Eyes," after which, waving my glass, I poetized:

"The sun of Stambul fell like a bloody head . . . and the day is dying like a Circassian dancer drunk in the agony of her death, with passionate grace. . . . Oh, God, will the sun ever come back again? Boys, look at the moon! . . . The moon is coming up to promenade in the golden streets of the heavens. . . . Look at her, look at her, she is dancing to the music of the night . . . she is the spirit of the Circassian dancer, the moon is"

"All right, that's enough!"

"More cheese and less poetry!"

"Pass me that bottle and the olives!"

We ate and drank and shouted, banging our fists on the table.

"Who will lead me to the altar of mysteries?" Ashod presently asked earnestly. "Let us sip the langorous coolness of the night like blue absinthe, for tomorrow I shall have to cover the nakedness of man." (Ashod was a tailor's apprentice.)

"Speech! Speech!" we demanded.

He rose to his feet with a solemn expression on his handsome face, a far-off, dreamy look in his fiery dark eyes. "I have devoted myself," he declared, "to the pursuit of the mystery."

"It's mystery again. I give up. Ho! Ho! Ho!" Vahram roared.

"Silence!" my brother commanded, bringing down his white fist on the table. He had delicate, soft hands, like a girl's. "Silence, I say! Let's hear him. Let's hear this great mysterious speech of the great Ashod." He was feeling good.

"All right, I apologize," Vahram chuckled. "Go ahead, Ashod, and tell us everything about the mystery."

"I have devoted myself to the pursuit of the mystery," Ashod repeated firmly. "Because the mystery is the only thing that differs from man to man and at the same time it's the only bond between one man and another. It's only my enthusiasm for the mystery that makes life bearable for me—otherwise I would kill myself. Without the mystery there would be such an emptiness in me that I couldn't bear it. Is it madness to seek the real truths, the truths of the mystery?"

"It is!" Vahram said.

"This historic generation of ours," Ashod continued without paying attention to Vahram, "has the instinct for victory and song. There aren't many of us left, they killed most of us, but we survivors are strong, by God we are strong! Our orphan generation has the genius of sorrow, and the indomitable power of it. You know, I have always been alone in the world. I don't want to sound maudlin and sentimental, but now that one of us is going to America and we may never see him again I don't mind telling you that I love you boys as a brother. No other love in my heart will ever surpass the affection I bear for you. Yes, I do love Alice, but she is merely an inspiration to me, an ideal. I don't know her at all as an individual girl; she is nothing but a lovely symbol personifying in herself the mystery of her sex." He turned to me: "After you go to America, on a certain hour every day I shall communicate with you in spirit."

Ashod had ended his speech, and shaking with emotion sat down.

"Will somebody pass me a handkerchief? This calls for a good cry," Vahram wailed. Then he got up, scowling fiercely. Strong like an ox, with a shock of curly hair, he looked like a young Assyrian monarch capable of conquering the world. "*Chort vozmi*, the devil take it," he said in Russian. "Here we were enjoying ourselves, and Ashod gets up and spoils everything. All that sentimental rot! Why weren't you born a woman? In fact, you are beautiful enough to pass for a woman. All you would need would be a little make-up on your face. Now, if I had your rosy cheeks I would positively want to be a woman." And he howled with laughter.

"Forgive me, boys, I can't help it. I can't help laughing at everything and everybody because everything and everybody is so comic, really. Some people think I am crazy because I laugh so much, and laugh to myself too, which exasperates them the more, and that adds

to my amusement. But I am going to make a confession—and don't blame me for it, because Ashod started it. I fought in the trenches at Van, but three times in my life I have seriously contemplated suicide, and my dominant inner mood is one of profound pity for mankind.

"Permit me to make another declaration about myself. One of us is a violinist, the best young violinist in Constantinople, and he has won a scholarship to study music in Vienna. I envy you, Onnik. One of us is not a peasant, but he is going to America to study agriculture. Worthy ambition. Ashod will always and forever study the mystery, and who can tell, some day he may write a new Koran. But what I want is to be a sailor on a battleship! There is a tremendous career for you!"

He was silent for a few moments, grinning and scowling. "Seng-See," he suddenly said. "Boys, have you ever heard the story of Seng-See, the Chinaman? It's a poetic parable on the fundamental values of life. Seng-See is an adolescent youth, just like us, hungry for power. And when the gifts of life are brought to him on a camel he chooses power and shuns women. He roams all over the world, gets everything his heart desires—but he walks alone. He is a stranger to beauty and women. Seng-See spent all his talents and efforts on his stick, the symbol of his power. But when he became an old man he saw everything in a moment of supremely clear vision. He saw playful, merry children who were not his, he saw women laughing at his doddering old body. I'll write this story some day.

"Which reminds me, we should publish our own magazine and clean up all this mess. I have in mind a thick, substantial magazine, angry, vicious, shouting at first, quiet and melancholy later. We will call it *The Broom*, and sweep with it all the cobwebs off men's minds, throw out all the dust and dirt. Zavén is right. We must return to the village, we must go back to our people. All this high culture and sophistication and Byronic ennui disgusts me. My most cherished dream next to working on a battleship is to sit on the grass after a hard day's work in the fields and eat bread, salt, and onions."

Vahram reached for his wine glass on the table, examined its contents with screwed-up eyes, and emptied it in one gulp. Smacking his lips, he continued:

"I want to live like a song, like the song of a violin. Yes, boys, let us resolve to be the strongest, kindest, and most perfect of men. And in conclusion let me say this: I must grow a mustache. I am old enough to have one and I consider it necessary for diverse reasons. For instance,

there are women who love the devil because he is covered all over with hair!" and roaring to himself, he sat down.

Then it was my brother who rose to his feet. "I can't make any fancy speeches," he said, "but I will play something Zavén likes." My brother had carried his violin with him during seven years of wars, massacres, revolutions, and migrations. His violin was a part of himself. He played my favorite number, the overture to *Tannhäuser*, while we drummed the table with our fingers and sang the music, without knowing the words. Then for half an hour or so he played Russian gypsy and Armenian songs, we drank more wine, ate more cheese and olives, and finally it was my turn to make a speech. I was the clown of our group and its youngest member. I hardly ever opened my mouth without making them laugh, and in my patched-up uniform of an American soldier, a gift of the Near East Relief, looked like a scarecrow. I was just skin and bones and my uniform was too large for me and my wild black hair was impossible to comb. But that night I was dignified and serious.

By now the Dostoevskian Vahram was measuring the size of the moon with his fingers, Ashod seemed to be groping desperately with the inner meaning of things, and my brother's violin was a bit cockeyed. I had difficulty standing on my feet. The wine had done its work.

"I have located on the map the college I am going to," I said. "It's in the very center of America, the agricultural college of a strictly geometrical state, four straight lines, absolutely straight, like a piece of cheese. You think I am funny-looking, but what do you bet if I return with a beautiful rich American wife, a millionaire widow? A widow with red hair. I think she lives in Chicago. Yes, I can see her at this moment. There she is! Talking to her parrot. She is lonely, waiting for me. She lives on the top floor of a building which is so high that if you looked up at the windows of her apartment from the street below your hat would fall off. They say, boys, in Chicago there is a society of women millionaires with red hair who have their own constitution and clubhouse."

Pause. Another swig of wine.

"We must live like the ancient gods!" I thundered. "And like the troubadours of old. Forward march! We are in the trenches. To hell with art! I am for shooting down all the poets we have. I would rather plant trees in Armenia than write the greatest poems in the world. Long

live the trees! If we must have poems, then let's have agricultural poems, poems about cows and bees, tractors and steel plows.

"American machinery will save us! I am going to America to study scientific agriculture because that is the proper foundation on which to build our nation. The soil, the holy and eternal soil. Let the cowards and the fools retire to their ivory towers. I am a tree. With my arms spread to the winds and my feet clinging to the sacred cross-embossed tombstones of our land I stand like Jesus upon the mountain. Yonder, below, I can see harvesting machines marching through the wheatfields like giant birds with their wings outspread, and the knives of steel plows are flashing in the sun of our land, and under their passionate kisses is split open the black belly of our soils. The belly, boys, the belly of the virgin soil, the virgin belly of the soil. The holy and eternal soil.

"Ah, every night in the moon-sweet vineyards lithe and handsome village lovers will go a-harvesting. Every drop of tears from the eyes of our dead mothers will be a grape, a fine, translucent, moon-sweet grape. And the crickets will be cymbals to this blessing, to this blessing of our hearts, to this blessing and this singing of our hearts. *Laree, tumbara la-la, ha, ha, ha!* Four straight lines, absolutely straight, near the Missouri River. But we are soldiers in the trenches, forward march!"

I was now fairly leaping through the air and brandishing an imaginary sword. I saw my companions through a haze of unreality. They had become spectral figures in a dark, revolving, receding and approaching void. Their voices came to me from afar, traveling across vast mysterious cosmic distances. I heard my brother playing his violin again and Ashod reciting some lines from Baudelaire, while Vahram was laughing his head off, but the music and their voices sounded as if coming from another world.