

THE STRANGER WITHIN

by
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The Stranger Within

“In war, truth is the first casualty” (Aeschylus, Greek dramatist 525 – 456 BC)

Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the case of the tragedy that befell the Armenians in Ottoman Turkey in 1915. While there is considerable controversy about what actually happened, no-one disputes that a decision was taken by the Young Turk government to round up all the Armenians living in Turkey and deport them, mainly to Syria. There is also general agreement that hundreds of thousands of Armenians died in the process. Beyond that, the picture becomes clouded by international politics:

The Armenians and many historians say it was a clear act of genocide deliberately perpetrated by the Turkish government. The Turkish government and some historians say it was the unhappy outcome of a civil conflict taking place against the background of the First World War. Whether it was state sponsored or not, the dry statistics peddled by both sides in the dispute simply act as a smokescreen preventing us from seeing the very real human tragedy involved.

But why should we be concerned about what happened 100 years ago in Turkey? Maybe the following should give pause for thought: The ethnic minority Armenian population lived in close proximity to the majority Turkish population, but often without any significant interaction between the groups. This led to a climate of fear and distrust, a situation not too different from some of our inner city areas today.

The government was finding itself increasingly unpopular with the people. In order to gain popularity, the government accused the Armenians as a whole of fighting a guerrilla war on behalf of the advancing Russian army. In consequence a general feeling of distrust towards the Armenians became outright hostility.

The Armenian deportation order was at best a gross over-reaction to an apparent threat from a relatively small group of Armenian nationalists, based on a few uncorroborated reports. But when the deportation order was given, the hostility towards Armenians spilled over into violence, and death on a massive scale.

But that was Turkey 100 years ago; it could never happen here...could it?

I must stress that although I have tried to represent the general position of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 as accurately as possible, “The Stranger Within” is a work of fiction. The characters and the storyline are not based on any actual historical figures or incidents

Cast

<u>Name</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Approximate age</u>
Emin	<i>A young Ottoman army officer</i>	20 - 30
Anoush	<i>An Armenian woman</i>	35 - 45
Darzita	<i>Daughter of Anoush</i>	15 - 20
Kelebek	<i>Mother of Emin</i>	40 - 55
Zeroun	<i>Father of Darzita & husband of Anoush</i>	40 - 55
Yavuz	<i>Ottoman Security Inspector</i>	35 - 55

Scene 1: A run down barn showing signs of recent occupation. Emin enters

Emin: This is it, mind your head.

(Darzita and Anoush enter. Anoush is heavily pregnant and walks with difficulty, Darzita supports her and carries a large bag. Emin busies himself with tidying the barn. Anoush and Darzita look around the barn, then look out of the window.)

Darzita: Have I been here before?

Anoush: A few years ago we stayed in your uncle Vartan's mountain yayla, not far from here. I suppose you would have been about nine or ten.

Darzita: *(remembering)* It was the kurban bayram festival; thousands of sheep with their shepherds leading them along the road. I remember thinking they wouldn't be quite so trusting if they knew they were being taken to be slaughtered.

Anoush: And now the roads are just as full, only this time it's Armenians being marched along, just like those sheep.

Darzita: No! The shepherds made sure their sheep had plenty to drink, and they didn't beat them with sticks. We're being treated far worse than the sheep were.

Anoush: It's hard to believe we've only been on the road three days. I keep hearing the sound of tramping feet echoing round and round and round inside my head.

Darzita: And all the time almost choking on the dust that cakes your lips and gags your throat; I don't know how you've managed.

Anoush: Only because cousin Borossian let me ride in his cart.

Darzita: Well at least we don't have to sleep in the open tonight.

Emin: It's not much of a place, I know.

Anoush: It's dry and sheltered Emin – and there's a bed too. It seems like luxury after the last few days.

Emin: I tried to get someone to let you in their home, but everyone's scared; think they'll be denounced.

Darzita: Oh my feet! I'm so cold and tired.

Anoush: Oooh! (*Anoush clutches her side with a sharp intake of breath*)

Darzita: Are you alright mum? Can I get you something?

Anoush: Yes, I'm alright, but I think I'm... Oooh!...It's okay, it's easing again. There's a bottle of water in the bag. Don't worry about us Emin – you've risked enough for us already.

Emin: I haven't done anything really.

Anoush: But supposing you're accused?

Emin: I've got my position to protect me.... but for the others, well it would be too dangerous for them to help you.

Darzita: I wonder if there's anywhere we could get some bread?

Emin: I'll go down to the village later.

Anoush: What about the owners of this place?

Emin: A farmer and his wife: They lost their son at Gallipoli. They say they don't care what happens to them anymore.

Anoush: Where are they?

Emin: They live in the village.

Darzita: It's a bit strange having a bed in a barn.

Emin: For lambing time; sometimes he'd stay up here. You're unlikely to be disturbed; the only neighbours around here are sheep! I'd better go.... see if I can find some bread.

Anoush: Won't you be missed?

Emin: Oh, I said I had relatives nearby. They won't expect me back in camp until much later.

Anoush: Thank you for everything Emin.

Emin: There's not much to thank me for. I could only get you one night. They expect you back on the road tomorrow.

Anoush: I still don't know why you're doing this for us.

Emin: Your family has always been kind to my family.

Anoush: I don't think we would have risked our lives for you.

Emin: I... Don't ask me to explain more now.

(He leaves)

Darzita: Oh mum! This is awful.

Anoush: Hush girl, there's worse places than this to give birth; at least I've got a bed, that's more than Mother Mary had. *(Pause)* Come on let's make the most of it – unpack the roll and let's see what I managed to put in.

Darzita: Is there any food? I'm starving.

Anoush: Oh it was all such a hurry; I just put in the first things that came to hand. I think I packed some pastries in the bottom.

Darzita: What's this, Bath towels! *(She lifts up two Turkish bath towels.)*

Anoush: I thought it would be good to have some cloths – we could wrap ourselves up to keep warm, or use them as headscarves.

Darzita: I don't think we'll be going to the baths for a while.

Anoush: Do you remember the last time we went together?

Darzita: Do I remember it! It was one of those crisp winter days, a clear blue sky, the smell of wood-smoke in the air.

Anoush: Isn't it strange how things that once seemed so normal and ordinary now seem to belong to a different world?

Darzita: After the autumn rains it felt so good to be out in the fresh air again....

Anoush: Things won't always be so bad Darzita.

Darzita: Won't they? How do you know? This world just seems to be so full of evil right now. It makes me feel so dirty.

(Lights dim)

Flashback Scene: (*Lights up on a steamy Turkish baths. Anoush and Darzita arrive at the Turkish baths armed with a pile of towels, a picnic hamper and several bottles of oils and lotions.*)

Anoush: Come on – what you need is a good scrub and massage.

Darzita: Where shall I put the things?

Anoush: Let's put them.... on these benches.

Darzita: Shall I unpack them?

Anoush: Yes, do. Put the food in the alcove; we'll be hungry when we've bathed. And give me my soaps will you?

Darzita: I really don't know why you need to bring so many.

Anoush: A lady needs to look after herself my girl. It's alright for you, your skin hasn't started to wrinkle. I'm beginning to look like an old prune.

Darzita: Mother, you're exaggerating. Ah! I've found the pastries! You said the alcove didn't you?

(*Enter Kelebek.*)

Kelebek: Ooh! It's so hot in here! Anoush hanım! I haven't seen you for ages.

Anoush: Good morning Kelebek hanım. Some of us have other things to do besides gossiping in the public bath house.

Kelebek: You're looking well; suspiciously well! Are congratulations in order?

Anoush: I am expecting another baby, if that's what you mean, thank you.

Kelebek: Then congratulations are indeed in order, you have been well blessed. Is that your daughter? Hasn't she grown! In the name of God, I swear she's taller than you!

Anoush: Darzita, come and say hello to Kelebek hanım.

(*Darzita bows her head in respect, then sits, ready to speak when spoken to*)

Kelebek: It seems only yesterday since she was playing with my Emin in

the garden together.

- Anoush:** Talking about the youngsters, I hear your son's just had some good news.
- Kelebek:** You don't miss much; even if you don't have time to gossip, do you?
- Anoush:** It's true what they say then is it?
- Kelebek:** I don't know what 'they' say. But it is true that my son has just been given charge of the Ordu garrison.
- Anoush:** He was always a clever boy. You must be proud.
- Kelebek:** No-one could be more proud, I cried when he had his passing out parade.
- Anoush:** So he'll be coming back to live with you then will he?
- Kelebek:** I should think so! – He's a good boy is my Emin. How's that son of yours doing?
- Anoush:** Drafted into the Armenian regiment, to fight on the Russian front.
- Kelebek:** Oh! *(pause)* I'm sorry.
- Anoush:** *(puzzled)* Sorry?
- Kelebek:** I've heard conditions are really bad there.
- Anoush:** Antranig's strong and brave. He can look after himself. *(pause)* How's your back?
- Kelebek:** No better. That's why I've come here for a massage.
- Anoush:** And I thought it was just for the gossip! Have you seen the doctor about it?
- Kelebek:** Doctors! Pah, what good can they do? I'm going to Maçka next week, to visit the shrine at the monastery. They say that prayers to the Virgin Mary are far more use than a visit to the doctor.
- Darzita:** The monastery! But that's....
- Kelebek:** A Christian shrine...Don't look so shocked. Your Jesus is our

prophet Isa; we revere his mother too you know.

Darzita: But is it safe?

Kelebek: I don't know. Sometimes I wonder what kind of world you young people are growing up into. When your mother and I were young there were as many Muslims visiting that shrine as Christians.

Anoush: We used to share so many things.

Kelebek: Everything's changing, and not always for the better.