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Opening Extract from...

Anyush

Written by Martine Madden

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Anyush

Trebizond, Ottoman Empire, Spring 1915

Change came to the village in the form of Turkish soldiers – a whole company of them, marching down the street as though they would flatten it. Women pulled their children close and old men looked away as the sound echoed around the stone walls. The soldiers had come to Trebizond in October of 1914 and to the village six months later. The world was at war and all anyone talked of was unprotected borders and a Russian invasion. The young village men had been put in uniform and marched away many months before, and their families still mourned the loss of them. These soldiers were not local, not Armenian, and the air blew cold in their wake.

Two young Armenian girls watched from the foot of the church steps. They followed the progress of the soldiers as they turned into the square and took up formation along the southern side. The smaller of the two girls, Sosi Talanian, was carrying a loaf of black bread which fell from her hand when the lieutenant shouted his command. A hundred rifles hit the ground, rising clouds of dust around the soldiers' boots. The bread was snatched by a hungry dog, and it was only the dog which seemed untroubled by the stamping feet. Anyush Charcoudian, the taller of the

two girls, turned to look back along the street. On the other side of the street, standing in the doorway of Tufenkians' shop, a small woman, Anyush's mother, looked on. She was old for her thirty-nine years and thin like everyone else. She watched the soldiers defiantly, but her narrow face was white as flour beneath the headscarf. It was a moment Anyush would remember. One she would never forget. She understood then that her mother was afraid.



Through a rusty gate and down a lane overgrown with weeds, Anyush walked to the Talanian farmhouse. The farm once had a goat, a pair of pigs with a yearly litter of piglets, a milking cow and a proper hen-house full of laying hens, but by 1914 that had all changed. Sosi's father and her two older brothers had been called up to join the Turkish army and Mrs Talanian tried to run the farm as best she could. Nine months after the letters and money had stopped coming there was no news of the men, and she had given up trying. The pigs were gone, one sold, one eaten, and the sty lay empty. The goat had disappeared and the horse was too old to be of much use for anything. The farmhouse, like Mrs Talanian herself, looked as though it had given up and fallen in. The roof of the long red-tiled building sagged in the middle and a creeper invaded the soffits and crept in under the eaves so that green tendrils hung down over the window of the bedroom Sosi shared with her sister Havat. Mushrooms grew in a damp corner of one of the downstairs rooms, and the shutters on the windows were coming loose or had fallen off altogether. Anyush tried to push one back on its hinge as she passed by, but it was rusted through and fell to the ground. In the yard the youngest of the Talaninans, eleven-year-old Kevork, emerged from the cow byre, pitchfork in hand.

'*Barev*, Anyush,' he said, his eyes on the koghov can she was carrying.

'*Barev dzez*, Kevork. Where is everybody?'

'Sosi and Mother are gone to the village. Havat's over there.'

Havat got up from where she was sitting on the swing in the hay barn and walked over.

'What is it?' Kevork asked, nodding at the koghov in Anyush's hands.

'Taste it and see.'

The boy lifted the lid and inhaled the delicious smell. He scooped some out with his finger and ate it, his face breaking into a smile.

'Your grandmother makes good *kamsi köfte*,' he said, holding some out for his sister.

They sat under the oak tree, eating with their fingers until every scrap was gone. The fishy smell hung in the air and the Talanians' goose lifted its head.

'None for you.' Kevork laughed.

'More,' Havat said, traces of anchovy meatball on her chin.

'There isn't any, Havi, and stop drooling.'

The boy wiped his sister's mouth brusquely with the end of his sleeve.

'We'll check the hens later. There might be an egg for supper.'

But they all knew the hens weren't laying, and the Talanians were living off the last of the chickens and whatever their neighbours could spare.

'I'll bring something tomorrow,' Anyush said. 'Pilaff maybe.'

Havat smiled, her tongue pushing against her lower lip and her eyes blinking in her wide face. In the village Havat was known as the Mongol because she resembled the Mongolian horsemen who rode into Rizay and Trebizond from the Russian steppes. The villagers said her mother had been too old when she had given birth to her, but, to everyone's surprise, Mrs Talanian had become pregnant again and had produced a healthy boy, Kevork.

'Bayan Stewart was asking for you,' Anyush said to him. 'She wanted to know why you weren't at school.'

'I'm working on the farm now. I have to help my mother.'

'The prizes are being given out tomorrow. I'm not supposed to tell you, but I think you got one.'

Kevork squinted up at her.

'A medal?'

Anyush nodded.

'You came first.'

He thought about this for a moment.

'Give it to Sosi. I have work to do.'

'I think your father would like you to have it.'

'My father would want me to look after the farm.'

Mr Talanian couldn't read or write like many of the village men but encouraged his children to learn. He had been a childhood friend of Anyush's father and a distant relative of her mother. Anyush's father was a man she had never really known. There was only his portrait hanging by the door to remember him by and a shaving brush she kept in her room. In the picture he posed in a stiff collar and suit, standing beside her mother, who was seated and wore a traditional Armenian dress. They stared solemnly into the camera, like the two strangers they were. The daguerreotype had faded in colour from brown to a hazy green, giving them an otherworldly pallor, but it did not diminish the kindness in her father's eyes or the lustre of his thick brown hair. Anyush adored the man in the picture with the love only a child can feel for a father she has never known. They looked alike, not in height, because he was unusually tall, but with the same dark eyes and hair. Her likeness to him was a source of great comfort, and when the other village girls put their hair up at the age of twelve, Anyush wore hers in a thick plait hanging beneath her scarf and swinging like a cat's tail between her shoulders.

'Push me,' Havat said, taking Anyush's arm and pulling her towards the barn.

She settled herself on the seat and Anyush stood behind, pushing gently against her back.

'Higher.'

The ropes creaked and the rafters groaned as Havat's feet swung through the cool air.

'Higher,' she said, leaning back against the ropes. The old barn seemed to heel against its foundations, joists lifted from the earth with every swing.

'Push harder.'

'You'll fall off, Havi,' Anyush said, giving one hard shove.

A loud metallic screech startled the swallows in the rafters. Anyush caught the ropes and brought Havat to a sudden stop. In the yard Kevork dropped the pitchfork and went to look down the lane. Since the trap had been sold, the gate was never opened and access to the road was through a gap in the crumbling stone wall. The hinges had rusted in the salt air and complained loudly when the group of soldiers pushed it open. They came into the yard as Anyush and Havat emerged from the barn. The men looked mean and dangerous. One of them walked over to the boy. He was thin and short, not much taller than Kevork, with a narrow head and ferret-like darting eyes. One brown eye and one hazy blue were sunk too close together either side of a long nose.

'You live here?'

Kevork nodded.

'You?' he asked Anyush.

'I'm a neighbour.'

The Ferret turned to the soldiers at his back.

'A visitor! Well ... I like to make time for visitors.'

The soldiers laughed as he turned to the two girls.

'We're here for food. All of it. Go into the house and bring it out.'

'There is no food,' Anyush said.

'You're lying.'

'It's true. There's nothing here.'

'Search the house,' the Ferret said to the others, and they disappeared inside.

'The place is a wreck,' one of them said, coming out empty-handed. 'Not a fucking thing to eat. Even the cool room's empty.'

From an upstairs window a flutter of clothes drifted to the ground, followed by the double thud of heavy boots.

'I'm taking the boots,' the face at the window shouted.

At Anyush's side Havat began to cry.

A third soldier appeared in the doorway with a photograph frame in his hand.

'No!' Kevork shouted. 'That's my father.'

The soldier pushed the boy away, but Kevork kept reaching for it.

'Give it to me.'

'Get away.'

'It's mine.'

'Have it then.'

He smashed the glass against the barn wall and took the silver surround. Kevork picked the torn photograph from amongst the shards of broken glass.

'Look in the outhouses,' the Ferret said, and two soldiers disappeared into the pigsty and the barn.

'Empty,' one soldier said. 'Old pig shit, that's all.'

'A few hens in the barn. Not much else.'

'Start with those. Take Sanayi and wring their necks.'

Two soldiers closed the barn door behind them and, in the yard, everyone could hear the sound of flapping and clucking which stopped

abruptly. The door opened again and the soldiers appeared with four limp-necked chickens in their hands.

'Where are the other animals, boy?' the Ferret asked.

'There's nothing here,' Anyush said. 'There's nothing left to take.'

'I didn't ask you. I asked farmer boy. You look like a farmer. Are you, boy?'

Kevork nodded.

'So where are the animals?'

He didn't answer.

'Look,' one of the soldiers said. 'A goose.'

With arms spread wide, he hunched towards the bird, but it spat at him, hissing loudly and beating its huge wings.

The soldier jumped away and the others laughed.

'You're not afraid of a goose, Hanim?'

'You catch it, then.'

'Just watch me.'

'Don't take the goose,' Anyush said. 'Please ... they have nothing else.'

'Here goosey goosey,' the soldier said, taking off his tunic. 'Come on ... that's the way.'

The goose spread its wings, lowered its head and advanced on the soldier, but he held his ground and threw the jacket over it. Suddenly, he was on top of the struggling bird, calling for the others to help. Kevork ran over, screaming, but a hand grabbed him by the collar and threw him halfway across the yard.

'Get me that axe,' the Ferret said.

He pulled the jacket off the goose and two of the soldiers stretched its neck over a block of wood.

'Hold it steady.'

Lifting the axe over his head, he brought it down on the goose's neck, and warm blood spurted out like a living thing. It covered their clothes,

their hands and faces. A soldier opened his mouth and drank it as the Ferret held up the headless body triumphantly. But Kevork ran towards him again, biting and kicking for all he was worth.

'Little bastard!'

With the full force of his fist, the Ferret hit the boy in the face. Havat screamed as Kevork fell backwards but struggled to his feet. The boy staggered towards them, but his knees gave way and he began to retch. Anyush ran to help him, but the Ferret launched himself at the boy, punching him again and again.

'Stop it! Leave him alone!'

'Hanim ... calm down ... he's only a boy.'

The Ferret grunted, and as he drew back his arm to hit the unconscious boy once more, Anyush grabbed the pitchfork and rammed it into the heel of his boot. The Ferret roared, turning to lash out at her and pull the pitchfork away. He fell on his backside, clutching the boot and straining to see what damage had been done.

'Armenian bitch!' he swore, blood staining the leather. 'My fucking ankle!'

He stood up and tested his weight. The boot had protected him, and he discovered he could still walk.

'I'll show you. I'm going to teach you a lesson you'll never forget.'

Hobbling over to the barn, he went inside and came out carrying a length of rope.

'Hold her!'

'Hanim—'

'I said hold her.'

He fashioned the rope into a noose and threw the free end over a bough of the oak tree. 'Bring the boy here.'

'No ... please God, no.'

Anyush's knees began to buckle, but the soldiers held her upright. Kevork

groaned when he was pulled to his feet and dragged over to the tree.

'Please ...' Anyush begged. 'Please, I'm sorry ... I beg you.'

By the barn, Havat screamed her brother's name. 'Kevo ... Kevo!'

The Ferret tied the boy's hands behind his back and put the noose around his neck, pulling it tight. Pressure from the rope brought the boy to his senses and he swayed on his feet, the breath rasping through his mouth.

'Are you watching, bitch?'

Holding the other end of the rope, the Ferret pulled harder so that Kevork was balanced on the tops of his shoes. His face turned red and then began to darken. Yanking the rope again, the Ferret watched Anyush's face as the boy struggled to breathe.

'Don't like what you see? Not so brave now, are you?!'

Kevork's mouth was open and his tongue was pushing past his lips. Anyush sobbed as Havat covered her eyes.

'This is only the start of it, bitch. Your turn next.'

'Hanim!'

Two soldiers on horseback rode into the yard. The Ferret dropped the rope and Anyush ran to Kevork who collapsed on the ground.

'What's going on?'

'We were attacked, Captain Orfalea. We only wanted to take the goose, but they turned on us with a pitchfork.'

The captain looked around. He was younger than some of the others and noticeably different. His uniform was neat and well cut, and his boots were polished. He didn't wear a moustache or beard, and his straight black hair was unusually long.

'You were attacked,' he said contemptuously. 'Five of you. By two girls and a boy.'

The soldiers looked uneasy, but the Ferret stared sullenly. 'I wasn't going to hurt him. Just scare him a bit.'

The captain went to where Kevork lay on the ground. The boy's nose was broken, his face bruised and swollen, and red rope burns ringed his neck.

'Lieutenant, escort these men back to base.'

'She attacked me,' the Ferret said. 'I've a right to defend myself.'

'And throw Corporal Hanim in detention until I decide to let him out.'

The soldiers left, following the lieutenant down the lane, and the captain walked over to where Anyush was crouched over Kevork.

'Is he alright?'

Anyush nodded. She helped Kevork to sit and loosened the collar of his shirt. The captain looked around the yard, at the broken glass and the mutilated goose.

'Keep the boy indoors for a while and maybe stay away from pitchforks next time.'

Anyush got unsteadily to her feet. 'Next time I'll put it in his belly.'

Diary of Dr Charles Stewart

Constantinople

April 14th, 1900

We arrived in Constantinople two weeks ago as the rain pelted down and I thought I was back in wintry New York. Hetty and I were both exhausted from travelling but we were relieved to see Elias Riggs waiting for us at the quayside. I'm not sure what I had been expecting of an ageing American missionary, but I really didn't think he would be so energetic or so tall. He's been working as a doctor in the Empire for over forty years, and when I told him about my plans for trachoma research, he seemed more interested in telling me about the times of religious services in the area. The man is very devout which makes for a certain awkwardness between us. I did of course take this job as a 'missionary' doctor but, as Hetty pointed out when I first proposed coming here, I'm an atheist and she's Jewish. We do go to services occasionally, some of them at least, but I think Elias already suspects I'm not what he thought I was. For a while, it looked like he was going to send us home, but it turns out he badly needs help at the clinics and he's already very fond of Hetty.

Our final destination is to be a small village in the Trebizond area on the Black Sea coast. From what I've learned, the place is pretty remote but not that far from Trebizond city, a large town and an important sea port. The village is at the centre of one of the most badly infected trachoma districts in the country, so a lot of hard work awaits us.

For the moment, we're living on Istiklal Avenue in Pera. It's not exactly luxurious, but it is clean and serviceable and on the European side of the Bosphorus. Just three rooms which come with a Greek kitchen maid, a Turkish hamal (or jack of all trades) and a Polish cook. Hetty, my khanum or lady as she's called here, is in her element. She cannot practise as a doctor because women doctors are only allowed work in the harems, but she's up early most mornings sketching the ruins in old

Constantinople. Her fascination with the city is understandable. The Whore of the Orient certainly lives up to her name and is magnificent and tawdry in equal measure. On any given street there are sights to take your breath away, the grandeur of the Hagia Sophia church or the opulence of the Topkapi Palace, while around the corner vermin-ridden slums spring up in the ruins of buildings levelled by the earthquake of 1894. Paris in miniature extends along the elegant boulevards on the European side of the Bosphorus, while on the eastern side women in full purdah walk three paces behind their husbands and the Prophet reigns supreme. As Elias says, it is a city of contradiction and contrast.

We've already made good friends in Henry Morgenthau, the American Ambassador, and his wife, Josephine. They're Jewish, so Hetty feels right at home, and Henry is a stimulating and interesting character. He entertains royally and has a very fine cellar, so it amuses him that a 'poor missionary doctor' should be partial to a good claret. The Morgenthaus know everyone in Constantinople, from the diplomats to young men on the Grand Tour, and they seem intent on introducing us to all of them. We will be seeing more of the Morgenthaus in the immediate future now that Hetty is expecting in the autumn and our travel plans have been put on hold. The delay is unavoidable but frustrating, although it seems we would have had to wait for travel permits anyhow. In this country it is impossible to work, build or do the smallest thing without them. Elias counsels me to be patient. He tells me that when he first came here the old Sultan would not allow foreign reading material or gas lighting for fear of corrupting his subjects. He bids me to remember that I, at least, can read and have lamps to see by. Amen to that!