

L. Khachatrian

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Аннотация

“You never said what made you become a Christian.” The cold smile stayed on his face. Arshak himself did not expect that he would get so much pleasure from throwing the reality into the priest’s face. “So, what made you do it?” “The longing,” the priest’s big eyes looked straight as if they stroke. The smile disappeared from Arshak’s face. He headed towards the door. The priest called after him. “When Christ comes the second time...” “No one will recognize him,” roared Arshak and left the church.

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Chapter 1

The Panther

The bare-skinned boy was running so fast that from the lashes of the wind his body had become bruised. The chest of the mount was rising up and down in parallel with the tranquil breath of the earth. He felt it throughout his body. In the far he could see the jagged cliffs bulged like an old man's denture and could understand that it was time to be transformed.

There was a pit in front of him. The boy slowed down for a while, took a breath, and then ran so fast that his chest tore apart from the middle. He shoved himself onward. Jump. His muscles strained. An instant. His bones were clattering seethingly in his body. The fangs were lengthening with pain. Short fur was growing on his skin. Descent. He growled and already a panther he leaped ahead. The wounded wind like a lame dog was barely crawling after him.

On the Road

“Everything is more complicated,” the Teacher liked to repeat. And when he saw that the students were looking at each other confused, he added, “Don’t take to heart, we are all going to die one day.” He repeated this worn-out phrase in such a self-satisfactory way, as if he was to live forever. Arshak would believe it, if he was not present at the Teacher’s funeral. Even there, in the atmosphere of tears and sorrow, it seemed that the white-bearded Teacher, who was wearing black suit, would soon rise up and announce that the funeral is over; “It was just an experiment. Thanks to everyone, all are free now”.

When the body was buried, he remembered the Teacher’s mutter: “He exists; the old man definitely exists...” He was talking about God when he was drunk, as if he was trying to convince himself. *“Now, you will surely know, which part of your lectures was true and which was not.”*

The Teacher’s name was celebrated among the Faculties of Theology of all world-famous universities. Over thirty years he studied faith and world religions. He learnt a lot about men and nothing about God. And why did he die? The Teacher left this world all of a sudden, leaving incomplete the research works of his 12 students. Besides, he had promised to select three best students from the group after the holidays and take them

to the Holy City, so they could see with their own eyes how the faithful performed pilgrimage, or, as he used to say, how religion deformed the brain. Nevertheless, Arshak did not expect to be in the selected trio. He never stood out during the classes.

It was no longer important. Under the balanced clatter of the train Arshak was burning his last cigarette. It was the last one, as he was returning home. Although it was already 2 years he was of legal age, he would not smoke in front of his family. His mother would not criticize, but would get upset if she learnt.

“Is there any extra seat?” a young man looked inside from the half open door of the wagon. For a moment Arshak got confused. He was deep in his thoughts and it felt like he was caught smoking. He looked at the intruded head and cooled off.

“Yes.” he answered with a formal smile.

The guest was one of the heroes of the Theological Faculty. It was his classmate-Gregory. Arshak knew that they both were from the same town, but they had never been friends. Gregory was a vigorous and energetic boy. He was also very smart. Arshak always wondered how he could manage everything. Undoubtedly, Gregory was closer with the Teacher. They had even written a scientific paper together. Arshak always felt himself awkward when Gregory was around and tried to be out of his way. This time, however, nothing could be done. They were fellow citizens, the holiday season had started for both and they both had bought the same train ticket. While Gregory roomed his stuff, Arshak quickly opened the Bible which he had

at hand and pretended to be reading.

Gregory sat in front of Arshak.

“Gospels?”

“New Testament... well... The Genealogy of Jesus, the Gospel of Matthew.”

“Not so difficult topic,” said Gregory. “No, don’t look at me like that. I mean literature is unlimited on that topic; you will have no lack of references.”

Gregory stretched his whole body and yawned for too long. His eyes were still smiling, but he did not say anything else.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered boy. He had accented eyes with thick eyelashes and high eyebrows. His brown hair was styled and shiny and he had high forehead. He was dressed neatly. There was no single extra fold on his white shirt. Sitting in front of Arshak in the wagon one could see the contrary of the two. Arshak’s messy black curls fell down on his eyebrows and almost covered his almond-shaped eyes. The boy had not shaved for several days. Tracks of dried mud could be seen on his jeans and brutal sports shoes. His black leather coat did not look novel at all.

When Gregory took a book out of his suitcase, Arshak noticed, that even his book smelled fresh. The pages of the book crunched when browsing through; probably he had just bought it. The shabby and crumpled Bible that was in Arshak’s hands looked quite poor.

“I know the place you live quite well,” said Gregory in the evening. He took two bottles of beer from his suitcase, “Here! It is not cold, but anyway...”

Arshak smiled and took it.

“I know many people from your neighborhood. Both my brother and I used to go there quite often. Together with the district boys we used to beat up the Christian children that lived there. But I don’t remember you...”

“Well... I was mainly at church,” Arshak took a sip. “I wanted to become a priest.”

Gregory’s loud laughter filled the wagon.

“In the end you took the opposite camp, didn’t you?”

“Well yes, it seems,” Arshak tried to smile.

“There used to be a lot of followers of that dead religion in your district”

“Not any more. Few are left.”

“Are you also a Christian?”

“I am a scientist... future scientist...”

“I see. You don’t like tales, do you?”

“I don’t.”

“Neither do I. But I believe in God. Have you read the Holy book, Revelation of 7 prophets?”

“About ten times,” Arshak smiled bitterly. “After all, it’s not thick, 30 pages...”

“Indeed, the truth is never long and fuzzy.”

“*And meaningless,*” thought Arshak, but preferred to remain silent.

Gregory frowned.

“I got it. You are probably one of those scientists who believe the holy revelation is what is left to humanity from so-called world religions. That view is flawed.”

Gregory paused, as if waiting that Arshak would argue, but he heard nothing and continued.

“Ancient religions contradicted each other, sometimes were contradictory to nature, and sometimes were a pile of inhuman texts. It was so complicated and confusing... Especially the Bible; every word, even my grandfather’s swearing, can be attributed to that book. In the end, everything can be found in that enormous tale, which once again proves that it contains incomplete notes of completely different people of different periods that have nothing to do with each other. Or, maybe the link was very weak. And people decided to connect everything and declared that this is the true word of God...”

Arshak said nothing. He sipped from the bottle.

“Well,” said Gregory. “Why I even keep on disturbing you? We have our life and should stop running after the dead God.”

And silence.

“A toast to the memory of the Teacher,” murmured Gregory. Arshak raised the bottle of beer.

“Cheers...”

Gregory fell into thoughts. Arshak noticed that though he also tried to awaken memories, he felt some sort of emptiness. He was just listening to the sound of the even course of the train.

“Listen!” suddenly Gregory got excited. “Were you hoping to be among the selected three?”

“I have not thought about it,” Arshak lied.

“But I have. To tell the truth, once he himself mentioned to me that I will definitely be among the three. But now, as we will be going with someone else, I don’t feel like going.”

Silence.

“Would you like to go instead of me?”

Arshak got confused for a moment, then forced himself to smile.

“Thank you. There is no need. I have other plans.”

Gregory emptied his bottle of beer and abruptly changed the

subject.

He talked about his twin brother for very long. Even their mother could hardly distinguish them. He complained about the economic and moral condition of the country. He told that his brother had flung himself into politics. He would definitely get into trouble one day. Then Gregory recalled his childhood; how two brothers together with friends beat up the boys in Arshak's district. They had beaten everyone up, but Areg, as the latter, even though it was rather strange, was his brother's close friend.

“I still can't understand what he had found in that wordless stupid boy. He was monstrous, like a wild beast. If it was left up to me, we would tear him up first.”

Arshak was not listening.

Return

“A town holding its breath from ceasefire. The mountains folded their hands on their chest followed from all four sides. The forests engrossed the slopes the way the sloppy beard darkened the face of Fedayi.

The wind, rolling down from the mountains, falls into the belly of the town. It curls up on the spot like a frightened snake. It fills the streets with the sniff of already extinct bullets. A town huddled from ceasefire. The morning yawns. The sour light of the sun glides through the brownish buildings and through the flat walls. Tattered tuff. Sweat frozen in the air.

A town furious from the ceasefire.”

Arshak closed the book. This “Collection of Prose Thoughts” was the first thing he bought when he reached his native town. The author’s name was Abel Gichunts. He bought the book, because a woman believer praising the name of One God asked Arshak, if he wanted to get the collection of prose poems by that famous “godless” writer. The chubby shop assistant assured that the book would be useful. The young party members would formally be burning the books of that “damned” writer in the town square that night. “Don’t you also want to throw a book into the fire?” Arshak laughed, “I do.”

The small town located in the outskirts of one of the most powerful empires was a veritable museum. It was one of the unique places where one could still find Christians; a religion, that had long been considered dead. The “World War on Faith” burnt the humanity and forever silenced the prayers. The world saw new prophets that were unanimously telling about One God. The new God did not have a name, did not have complicated commandments; there was only one thin booklet, where the prophets had written how a true believer ought to live. That was it – simple, convenient and understandable. And the humanity started to believe in it. Started to love it. They started to write “One God is with us” on the walls of empires and capitals of small countries. Then, of course, the hunting of the followers of ancient religions began. The leaders of Christian church, and later the ordinary followers, were sentenced and many were publicly burned on fire on behalf of One God. Islam resisted longer than others, but in the end One God took the victory. Now hardly about 100 thousand Christians could be counted in the world. They lived in different corners of the world – split and hating each other. The same could be said about the followers of other ancient religions. They were also mainly tearing each other’s throats in small groups. Arshak’s birthplace had become one of those unique corners of the world that donated delusion of self-esteem to the followers of the dead religions. An almost ruined church had remained near Arshak’s

house; two priests were serving there – one was an alcoholic, the other was tiresome. The walls of the church had become black from the many small fires organized by the fan-followers of One God, and the dome was partly covered by the grass that had grown from the clefts of rocks. Nevertheless, every Sunday the priests called the people to liturgy. Sometimes even worshipping ceremonies were held. Arshak lived in a district populated mainly by Christians,

At Home

Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come...

Arshak was going to knock, but when he heard the prayer from the inside he held his breath. Seconds later he realized what was happening at home and angrily kicked the door. His mother opened the door. A tiny, thin woman looked at his son with a longing stare. She had not seen him for about two years. She asked him to come inside with a hand gesture.

“You have brought a priest, haven’t you?” Arshak couldn’t hide his anger. He sat on the very first chair and began to take off his shoes with nervous movements. His mother was silent. The peaceful prayer of the priest was heard from inside the room.

“It turns out that all the doctors of the city have died,” gabbled the boy.

“The doctor has seen her.”

“And...?”

“He said that Ani is fine. But perhaps after father’s death... She has psychological problems...”

“And you decided to bring a priest!” Arshak growled.

The praying voice became silent.

“The word of God heals souls,” you could barely hear his mother’s voice, but there was tenacity inside her.

Arshak became even angrier.

“You talk like a cave dweller – ‘The word of God’. Should we burn a fire in the house and start jumping around it? Maybe it will help...”

“Don’t say that, my son, it’s a sin...”

Arshak opened the door of the room. The bed of her seven year old sister, Ani, was next to the window, so in the far she could see the vibrating lights of the city while lying. But her eyes were not open today. The girl was thin and pale. She looked like her mother. The priest, who was about forty years old, was sitting next to the child. His gown was black, his eyes were big and round and he looked worried.

When Arshak entered the room, his sister opened her eyes. She looked at her brother, smiled lightly. The boy swallowed his anger and went up to the bed. The priest immediately stood up and gave his place to the boy.

“Hi, Ani,” whispered Arshak. “How are you?”

“Fine,” meowed the girl.

“I have brought interesting books for you.”

This time her smile was truly happy.

“What has happened? Mother says you don’t feel well.”

“I am fine.”

Arshak cast a cold glance at the priest. He could feel that he was starting to get angry again.

“Then why is this man reading a prayer?” the question was addressed more to the black-dressed man, who tightly squeezed the torn Bible in his hands.

“So they keep silent,” whispered Ani with trembling voice.

“They?”

“The Dragons,” there was horror in Ani’s eyes.

Tremor went through Arshak’s body. He looked again at the priest, barely kept himself from hitting him. They will make this child crazy.

“What Dragons, my dear Ani?”

“Under the ground. They are complaining. Crawling. They are annoyed by the noise, by the trains... they don’t like that clickety-clack, clickety-clack, clickety-clack.”

The girl’s eyes were in tears.

Arshak tightly hugged his sister. Looked at the priest.

“Don’t worry. I will kick the dragon out right away.”

Chapter 2

The Priest

And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her, and saide vnto her, Weepe not.

And hee came and touched the beere; and they that bare him, stood still. And he said, Yong man, I say vnto thee, Arise.

And he that was dead, sate vp, and began to speake...

The priest looked at the believers. They showed indifference. They were deep in thoughts. Some were asleep. Even the old neighbor's eyes were closed. Boredom. The priest closed the book. His breath faltered. He failed the "Bible Readings" again.

...

The ears of the big dog lying at the porch were swaying along the noise. His nostrils widened from the sigh of the wind. His eyes followed the passers-by.

It was quite hot summer. When walking, people kept their mouths open. The dog's muzzle was always closed. People's clothes changed the color from sweat and dust. The dog was always as white as snow. His skin was so soft that when touching

it you would fall asleep. It was beautiful.

Gampr has been living in that small town for already a year. None of the locals had heard him bark yet. As large and muscled as a lion the dog spent the whole day lying at the porch. The dog was always wearing a white sleeveless shirt made of thick fabric. His owner dressed him. But why, no one understood. But the neighbors were ashamed to ask, as Gampr's owner was the priest.

A year ago, on one rainy day, the almost-forty-years-old man entered the yard with his dog. Everyone respected him, but tried not to attend his sermons. The priest was not able to talk persuasively. It was irritating people. And as a rule, people became more demanding at church.

Unlike the priest, Gampr interested everyone, especially children. Many of them would come to the priest's place with different excuses to see the dog. Gampr was indifferent. He was neither barking, nor licking. Ani, the neighbor's daughter, also loved the dog very much. With the other neighbor, papa Torgom, she came every week to help with the priest's garden work. The neighbor papa was snowy-haired and silent like Gampr. While he checked the priest's saplings, the girl sat in front of Gampr on the ground and watched him.

Suddenly Gampr raised his snout. He saw the master.

“Ani, have you come to see your friend again?” asked the

priest. Passing by Ani, he gently stroked her head and went into the house. It was hot. He was tired. He would sleep.

The girl understood, that papa Torgom had finished his work and was waiting for her outside. Keeping her eyes on the dog, she put a step back, ran out and took papa's hand.

...

In the evening the old neighbor came again to help the priest. He was silent during working. He was silent during the dinner as well. Then he decided to speak. He was nervous and worried.

The whole night he was thinking what to say, how to say. But now the words were fleeing and the thoughts were scattering.

"Father," he stammered. "I have been thinking a lot... I think, you must give up the dog."

The neighbor looked at Gampr with fear. The dog was indifferent.

"You were telling that you have found him in the mountains. Let's take him back. What do you think, Father?"

The priest sighed.

"I have neither a wife, nor a child. Without the dog I will stay alone..."

"You won't," the old man got excited. "The priest will never stay alone. God is always with you."

The priest looked strayed at the dog sitting at the corner. He wanted someone other than God to be with him.

Gampr liked his muzzle self-complacently. The priest was looking at his blue, crystal eyes and as if in the mirror could see a strange man. He was reserved and silent, he could hide Gampr's secret under the knitted woolen shirt. He was able to rescue what he did not understand. The priest had never seen such reflection of his own merits. He knew that in general whoever the man looked at, whatever he looked at and wherever he looked at, he saw himself. Previously, the priest looked at his son and could see the father. But then, the father-priest reflection diminished. It then disappeared.

The priest constantly repeated in mind, "The world is a mirror for men." And the simplest mirror is the pain. Here, everyone's reflection is beautiful. Even the most villainous person is weak in front of the pain. The bigger the pain-mirror, the weaker and more helpless is the man. And the pain of the weak becomes smaller; it is easy to forgive the weak and it is difficult to judge the weak. He came to his senses. He understood that his thoughts had begun to progress in a wrong, apocryphal direction. He took a breath. He looked at the dog sitting under the window guarding the silence like Sphinx. He restrained.

Gampr's eyes were as peaceful as the battlefield after the war; a moment when nothing matters; when the interests, heroism and even gods are retreating. And the sweaty tiredness wins.

Gampr yawned.

Yeghishe

Usually the things you avoid are the things you get confronted with. Yeghishe knew this absurd formula well. In his entire conscious life he had strived for an honest, you can say spotless patriotism. He was always against various movements, groups and especially political parties splitting the nation. Yeghishe's father was not Christian, but had fought against the extremist groups of One God for the sake of Church. His father liked repeating that when patriotism was mixed with politics everything started to smell like gangrene. That smell had also flushed into Yeghishe's childhood.

Before dying Yeghishe's father lost his two legs; one then the other. He left only his opinion about the national values and pure patriotism to his sons. As a result, Yeghishe was now sitting in one of the city pubs with his two friends of the same political party.

"Have you read the book," Andok asked excitedly. He was about twenty years old, with sun-parched skin, freckled, skinny boy.

"Sorry?" Yeghishe woke back to life.

"Where have you been, brother," smiled the dark-skinned, short-heighted Khoren. "How many times should we repeat the question?"

"I was thinking," answered Yeghishe indifferently. "So, what book?"

“The one written by that idiot, Abel Gichunts,” said Khoren.

“He has definitely made up his name... coward,” Andok interrupted.

“Right,” agreed Khoren. “But the fact is that his books deprave the society.”

“What does he write?” Yeghishe emptied his beer and with a gesture asked the waiter to repeat.

“Well, first he talks too much about Christianity, as if it is the foundation of our identity...”

“In some sense it is true,” smiled Yeghishe looking at the empty bottom of his beer glass. “Like paganism, Christianity was a part of our history, thus also of our identity...”

“Yes, but it *was*,” protested Andok. When he was angry, his skin became more flushed. “The times have changed now. Besides, the Christianity has been distorted in his books as well. That idiot quotes from some false gospels...”

“The priest used to say ‘a-po-cry-phal’,” interrupted Khoren with a serious look.

“Yes... right,” continued Andok. “Moreover, the priest also joins our strife. He says that because of the writers like Gichunts, the world has wrong impression about Christianity.

Sneer appeared on Khoren’s face.

“I would argue about it with the priest. After all, Chritianity was barbarism. Good that it no longer exists...”

“My grandmother was Christian but not barbarian,” suddenly roared Yeghishe with his gruff voice.

“Well, of course,” sobered up Khoren. “I am not talking about individuals. We all know that because of that ancient inhuman religions millions of people have been killed. And this would continue till today if there was no true prophecy.”

“And the government,” winked Andok.

“Glory to One God,” agreed Khoren.

Yeghishe emptied another glass of beer.

“Guys, we have got off the subject. Let’s discuss grandparents’ faith later. We have another problem; Gichunts depraves national and social values with his texts...”

“Which you have definitely read from the beginning to the end,” with indifferent gesture Yeghishe ordered another glass of beer. Andok and Khoren looked at each other.

“I have lightly looked through it,” stammered Andok.
“Nonsense.”

“The cover of the book is enough for you to understand that it is not worth reading,” continued Khoren.

“Narek has read it,” suddenly remembered Andok.

“Right,” rejoiced his friend.

“I know,” Khoren admitted grimly.

He really did know and understood far more than those two scatterbrained. Narek was the one to start the youth party movement against Abel Gichunts. He was the one that did not like the ideas of the town’s famous ostentatious writer. In fact, Yeghishe thought, that though there was nothing

to like in his texts, only stupidity of the literature would not force Narek to shake off the city. He had other far-reaching objectives. Gichunts was scandalous and famous writer. The protest movement started against him would keep the lost town's youth wing of the National Party, especially Narek, in the center of attention of press. He would declare that he was fighting against scabrous people like Gichunts, but in fact he would be in the center of media. Everyone would get to recognize him. Then, he would be noticed by the head office of the National Party, especially by the party leaders, who were also members of the big Parliament.

"They have mentioned several times that they want to renew the party, give it a new breath." Narek had told Yeghishe a few days before. "They are looking for new faces, new names. If they notice us, they will definitely ask us to go to the capital; me, with my small team, where you also will certainly be included, brother."

"I don't think that the noise raised against a writer will be enough for it," Yeghishe had objected.

"Those are details. Do you remember one of the leaders of the party, Mr Isaiah, who visited our town last summer?"

"The one that promised to rebuilt the Christian church?"

"Yes."

"And he didn't..."

*"Not **Yet**. He will definitely. He liked me very much. He said, that the Big Parliament needed true patriots like us. Isaiah is*

considered to be the second person in the party. He promised when the time comes he himself will introduce our names to the leader. We just need to make some 'noise' here. You know, he needs a reason to talk about us..."

Yeghishe did not say anything that day. He was silent this evening as well.

While half-drunk Andok and Khoren were disputing about who would be the first to break Abel Gichunts's fingers, Yeghishe emptied another glass of beer. The broad-shouldered, big-eyed boy with a heavy sight did not look his age, but older. Feeling light dizziness, he stood up, without looking the check he threw money on the table and went out of the pub.

In the evening the town air had become sort of sweet. The light wind brought pieces of an old liberal song sung by a beggar in the far. The inflections of his odd voice were increasing Yeghishe's dizziness.

"Damn," he muttered. "The beer was disgusting."

Yeghishe staggered home. The beggar's voice was slowly receding; from the veer of the wind the voice was abrading, becoming subtle and turning into a soft voice coming from the lattice of cradle. In his head, Yeghishe could hear his grandmother's sole song sung in an early sunny day.

...God with us, revealed in us,
And heard was the sound of peace,

And gave command of holy greet...

Collision

In the morning, after looking for five minutes at the breakfast, Arshak, with an empty stomach, with the newspaper page titled “job vacancies’ folded in his hand ran out to the street. He took a deep breath; it seemed to him if he stayed at home for a few more seconds he would suffocate. His lungs swelled up from the smell of the ancient town. With his head looking down he went up the narrow street of the Christian district. His eyes followed the straight steps of his feet. He did not raise his head up; he wanted to see nothing in between the craggy houses. If he was lucky he would not see anyone who would stop him and start asking about university life for hours.

But suddenly he stopped. He heard the bells of the sole dilapidated church of the town. He raised up his head, smiled. This trick would work even millennia later. The bells call for the men; does not matter when and whom. Arshak entered the church. He felt the smell of the incense. He approached the grimed saint image that had almost merged with the wall. He took his folded notebook and the pencil that was smaller than his little finger from his coat pocket and started to draw. The boy was thinking that the image would soon disappear, at least the copy would be kept, for only a few dozen saint images were left in the world, while there was a time....

“Hello, Arshak.”

The boy was caught off balance. It was as though the priest appeared from nowhere. It was the same thin man whom Arshak had driven out of the house a few days ago. Arshak noticed that the priest looked as exhausted as his church. He too will soon disappear.

“Good afternoon,” uttered Arshak indifferently. He continued drawing.

“Son,” the priest addressed to him.

“I am not your son,” answered Arshak without taking his eyes away from the paper.

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