

Sydney Stern

Red Harvest Girl

The river isn't much further ahead, a hallmark of closeness to our destination. From what I've gathered, the arrangement is final. We will stay here unless something changes, until a sultan who's never met a single one of us declares otherwise. My back aches with exhaustion, my vision blurred and uncertain from days without sufficient rest. I've lost touch with time in the practical sense, which was once determined by clock hands. Now, in the era of war, the sun guides our movement; when she rises, we move like machines. When she descends into the desert sand, slipping into a distant dimension beyond visibility, we lay still under the black sky, lined up side to side like dynamite sticks. I cannot blame her for disappearing, who would want to gift warmth to humanity? Some fortunate few can muster a minute of rest, but I cannot shut my eyes peacefully.

"Keep it moving," growls an aggressive voice to my left. The guard's sharp bark bellows with unnatural bass, the result of rampant tobacco use. I've seen them press their live cigarettes into live prisoner flesh, not a sliver of remorse observable in their cold, reptilian eyes. I obey his command silently. Those of us still standing, still marching know compliance is the only way to avoid the alternative. We've seen the other end, the pitiful outcome of those in opposition. All guards are equipped with death-at-the-ready, in the form of golden shells displayed across his chest. I'd rather be herded like cattle than discarded in the river. And so I 'keep it moving' in this foreign land, on sand too far from my home to feel real.

I used to pray on Sundays, and ask for jewelry or an increased allowance or more leisure hours, during which I'd disappear into the blushing village vineyards. Before they tied us up with rope and chains, deprived us of any measure of identity, I used my free hands to collect grapes. When the woven basket was brimming with red and green gifts from nature, my sister and I jubilantly crushed them in the winery. Stomp, stomp, and stomp until they bled with pulp. Now I march, march, and march even further to avoid bloodspill of my own.

In tattered remnants of cloth, weathered far past a sewing needle's repair, and thoroughly soaked in sweat, we're as fragile as teacups in the range of ammunition. Any act of perceived defiance, a single word spoken in our forbidden native tongue, an attempt to flee into a passing forest, is a death wish, a quick ticket to undocumented finality. As prisoners, the luxury of a grave or birth certificate is laughable. Conventions of the past, before the indignity and darkness ensued, are now inconceivable, as though we experienced them in a distant, primordial era. It wasn't us who went to school, owned land or had jobs, but fossilized versions of ourselves oblivious to imminent doom. I'd watched the guards pin women up like posters against wooden stakes, light their hair on fire with gas and matches, or gag them with provisions and take turns. The fear of fatality unifies us women, hundreds of us in front of me and far behind, as we tramp together through this forced voyage.

Trouble strikes like an ax up ahead. A current of disturbed curiosity arises amongst the caravan; another Armenian down, another triumph for the tyrants. No balance or justice in this game. I'm too far from the commotion to have witnessed the inciting incident, if there was any at all.

Following the regimen of maintaining fast transit, the guards routinely shoot women too weakened from dehydration to proceed, piling up the rotting bodies like laundry. Elderly women are especially at risk, most of which hardly survived the first week on foot. The volume of the caravan had thinned dramatically since we first set out, when we were forced to abandon our burned villages and belongings behind in flames. Everywhere you looked, there was fire. They separated the men from the women long ago, a deliberate tactic to render us defenseless. The alleged security a man is said to offer is nothing more than a myth, which optimistically fails to consider dire circumstances like this. I watch as someone's wife, eyes wide and awake with fear, collapses with a thud on a sand dune. Someone screams.

A stocky guard hungrily glares down at the woman, assessing his work. I can just see his figure, towering with omnipotence sanctioned by his uniform, and he casually steps over her still body. He signals a few of his men over, instructing them in Kurdish of how to dispose of the corpse. I'm too removed to react. Where there should be feelings of alarm, I find only resignation. This isn't the first death I've seen, not the first *today*. To preserve whatever I have left of myself, I cautiously avoid looking at the sallow, despondent faces of other prisoners, a painful reflection of

my own condition. Yet something internal implores me to abandon this method of self-preservation. Perhaps it's the indifference of the gunman, who resumes his responsibility leading the caravan. I decide she deserves a last look, a final prayer. I attempt a stolen glance at this dead stranger.

“Keep it moving or you’ll end up like your sister over there,” sniggers the ashes-for-lungs guard, interrupting the brief pause I failed at disguising. My sister. He’s referring to the lifeless vessel of a woman being hauled off by a trio of troops into a nearby sand groove, digging hastily to deepen a ditch. This guard has no knowledge of my identity or background, let alone my nuclear family.

Through his fixed, hateful vision, all Armenians are one and the same, members of a reprehensible bloodline. Sonia and I were separated roughly a month ago at a preliminary check point, the guard ripped her from my pathetic, famished grip with ease. She could be detained in the plateaus of Persia, or being stowed away, shipped like freight in the Pacific Ocean...or in pieces.

His taunt strikes me square in the chest, and although this woman is clearly not Sonia, several decades older and too fair-haired to

mistake her as such, I’m reminded of the startling, unavoidable reality. He’s right, I could. I might. I quicken my pace, I fall in step with my sisters in this bloodbath of a desert. The river is steadily approaching. I tell God we must arrive soon.