

A CUP OF HUMANITEA

(A story)

By Anna Grigoryan

There were people who greeted one another in passing with a smile. “Hello, human,” one of them said. “Hello, human,” the second person replied. They say nobody has ever seen them. Perhaps that’s a lie.

The Boulevard Saint-Michel was already bursting with the sound mix produced by the electronic billboards and the crowd. It was the middle of the day but that middle had swelled and blurred on the city and the people. And Karapet, as if separated from that happy crowd, looked like a black dot that was quickly moving towards Montparnasse. His lecture-exposed brain needed a cold liquid urgently.

The city was quiet. Not a single string had remained from the strain ten years ago. Fresco^{1*} had not finished cooking his “Venus dish” but everything was pointing in that direction. “The old fellow will definitely live for a million more years. What a man!” thought Karapet as he breathed in the less noisy air of the boulevard.

Taking the transparent glass from the “Monsieur Fruits” machine containing freshly squeezed pomegranate juice on ice cubes, he directed his exhausted steps towards General Camus Street. The American library extended proudly here exposing its highly neat traits to the sun as if trying to always look beautiful as it greeted its dedicated frequenters.

In front of the library, Karapet greedily consumed the last drops of the juice. However, the cold liquid did not produce its daily effect on him. Well, his brain was in fact “made colder” but there was a hidden point that was still burning. That day’s lecture was about him. Well, it was more about his nation rather than him. And though he valued human belonging more than the national one, there was still something sparkling in his young brain.

The machine beeped and allowed him in, the shuffling feet went in, passed by the guards, then through the halls, suffocated by the neon lighting, and reached the most fragrant room of the library. The hall with paper books was almost empty. There were only a few people embraced by the walls of the hall. Karapet liked big fat books, their smell, their fragility, the impossibility of changing anything in them. And though they resembled a small detachment compared to the infinite army of the electronic books, the direction and destination of Karapet’s steps did not change anyway.

“The final essay of the year concerns the first genocide of the 20th century and its recognition. It is a task that requires time, I know. And hence, I am going to be very strict. You are required to produce a most interesting analysis. It is obligatory to refer to the 2019 agreement. I will be waiting for you here on May 23.”

These were the last words uttered by the chubby History professor on that day. The students had listened

^{1*} Jacque Fresco (b. 1916), an engineer-technologist, Futurist, founder and director of the Venus Project.

to him carefully, had left the auditorium, and had passed to their most important occupation—that of enjoying freedom until the last “horrible,” critical days.

Karapet would have basically done the same but not this time. An internal, deeply hidden sense of responsibility had made him leave the auditorium and direct his steps to his favorite library rather than the cafeteria. It was the point burning in his brain, that very idea that possessed a genetic power: “Nooo, there is no other way . . . I have to be brilliant . . . I am going to produce the best work . . . After all . . . After all I am Armenian . . . Karapet Suryan . . . Just say, Karapet Suryan!!! I have to be brilliant . . .”

And there he was . . . standing in front of the sensor “assistant” and using the agile movements of his fingers to find the location of the section he needed. One of the tables was hosting two young girls sitting next to each other and discussing a book they were reading. Karapet smiled and walked by until the end of the elongated room. The necessary shelves were right there. The room, filled with beige tones, had its unparalleled smell, which ignored that excessive neatness of the second decade of the century and embraced those who entered with a unique, grayish-brown and slightly dusty mood. It made them work absorbed in papers, research, reveal and, most importantly, filter thoughts from noise. While walking through that “path” with yellow lighting, Karapet noticed a man with a neat French suit, rummaging in business books, then he waved to Madame Zella, who seemed to have her permanent home there, and reaching the shelves, he breathed a deep sigh. He spent a long time looking at specific books.

“Are you looking for *104 Years’ Cry*?”

A ringing voice spoke. Karapet turned to that pleasant ringing voice with a smile on his face. The owner of that voice patted a book in his hands as he said.

“You won’t find it since I have it.”

“Hello.”

“Hello, hello. Well, is this what you were looking for?” A smile appeared from behind the gray beard.

“Not only. But that was also on my mind.”

“Do you really need this book? Don’t you have anything else to do?” he said with a slight laughter.

“Yes, I do. I must write an essay.”

“You will, you will . . .” he said as he sniggered and walked out with the book in his hand.

After the man left, Karapet seemed to be looking for an answer to the words “You will, you will” for as much as half a minute. He couldn’t. Giving up on obtaining the most important of the necessary books, Karapet continued to examine the “Genocide” series.

Taking *Mountains’ Trial 2019*, as well as the translation of Cheterian’s^{2**} *Open Wounds*, he walked towards the machine-guard. He couldn’t make up his mind whether he should feel angry at the words

“You will, you will” or forget them. But when he left the library, he suddenly felt plump fingers on his shoulder. He turned around.

^{2**} Vicken Cheterian, a representative of the CIMERA Center in Geneva, political analyst, journalist, writer.

“You will, you will.”

Karapet got even more confused. The elderly man kept on patting the book with the same caution.

“Did you really think I would give such a careless response standing next to those books? Look what we are going to do. I also need the book. You understand it, right?”

“No problem! Take it!”

“No, there is, in fact, a problem. You need it and I need it too. So, we will read it in turns.”

“How on earth are we going to read it in turns?” Karapet thought.

“What’s your name? It doesn’t really matter though . . . You’re a student, aren’t you?”

“My name is Karapet.”

“So, you’re not a student.” Then, looking at the book cover washed in red color, he added, “Wait a minute! I got it! You’re not a student, you’re an Armenian.”

“I am a student. And yes, I’m Armenian,” he replied with a perplexed laugh. A broad smile shone out of the chubby man’s neat beard and spread across his face.

“Joseph,” the word scrambled from behind the beard, “Joseph Tazim.” He extended his hand. Karapet shook it, a little confused and with a light smile.

“Karapet Suryan. Nice to meet you!”

“Look, Karapet. You will come to my house. I live nearby. True, my apartment is not large but I think the three of us will fit in there.”

“The three of us?”

Joseph embraced his belly with a satisfied but at the same time apologetic smile on his face. The two laughed. But for the ants on the ground, his belly must have seemed an imminent catastrophe that would fall on them and . . . the end!

“Well, shall we go?” he gave the book cover a light knock with his hand.

“Who’s this man? Why on earth should I go with him? Why ‘why’? Because he has the book. Well, whatever . . . Nothing worse than the exam week can happen to me. Even if he kills me, I’ll be grateful.” Karapet’s brain always sought protection from unfamiliar things with the help of such cynical semi-humorous thoughts. He nodded his head and they walked towards Rapp Avenue.

“Let’s buy raisins and tea on the way.” Karapet learned that every Monday Joseph bought raisins and tea from the store about fifty meters away from his house. Before they would reach the store, Karapet already held in his hands both the three books he had taken and *104 Years’ Cry*.

The old man’s apartment was comfortably located on Franco-Russe Avenue. Upon entering the house, the man instructed Karapet to put his books wherever he wished. Karapet started identifying a suitable place with his glance but his gaze stopped upon a huge wooden clock. And then, as if not abandoning the clock,

it moved towards the dark purple sofa and then crawled to the nearby table stuffed with papers. And it was here that the books found their refuge.

“Wash your hands and let us have some tea and chat.”

They washed their hands. While the water was in the process of boiling, Joseph looked at Karapet, who was still inspecting the place narrowly and with great interest.

“Where are you from?”

“I am from Armenia. I was born in Gyumri . . . it is a small city though it’s the second largest. But when I turned three, we moved to Yerevan. By the way, I am leaving to Yerevan for vacations on the 25th of this month.”

The water was already boiling. The vapor was caressing Joseph’s smile, melting and spreading it across his face. Karapet had the impression that his eyes closed with each smile. “How is he able to see through his smile?”

“I have been to Gyumri four times,” then, as if taking the vapor into his palm, he added, “It resembles an old but gorgeous woman who deserved to be loved and cherished but who was not sufficiently loved.”

“I don’t understand. Are you also Armenian?”

The air conditioner in the room was humming, and that tedious, monotonous sound had become an indivisible part of that silence. And only after the deafening bubbling did the answer come, spiced with a light laughter . . . a slightly guilty laughter, in fact.

“Hmm, Armenian? No . . . The opposite . . .”

Karapet did not understand. “What opposite?” And in response to that perplexed glance, Joseph tried to prompt him with the movement of his finger. He pointed to the fat book on the table that he hadn’t returned yet.

It was *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*.

Karapet did not try to voice his guess. Instead, he attempted to ignore what came to his mind and started to repeat to himself, “What does he mean? What opposite?”

“Yes, my boy.”

The air conditioner kept on humming carelessly and the Parisian soft, sweet noise was penetrating through the window.

“My father was the novelist Mehmet Tazim. My mother, Aysel Efgan, was the painter Metin Efgan’s granddaughter. She had followed in her grandfather’s footsteps. And I . . .”

“And you are probably Yusuf . . . Yusuf Tazim?”

With these words, both seemed to circumvent the forthcoming tension, and Yusuf smiled even more brightly.

“Do you now see how opposite we are?”

“But we are all humans, aren’t we? Ordinary homo sapiens . . . Organisms made of meat, blood,”

Karapet blushed from his own words that sounded all too “serious.” “You are simply a bit different. And you shared the book with me. And the tea is ready.”

Yusuf approached, put his hand on Karapet's shoulder in a fatherly way and responded:

"You're right, we are humans. We are different. But when I saw a young man standing in front of that section and selecting 'bloody' books, I could not resist," and then hanging his head as if feeling guilty, he added, "I also decided to invite you for tea and apologize."

Karapet had no more words to say. Embraced in confusion, the words flew out of his mouth:

"But you shouldn't . . ."

"You know." He walked to the shelf, "Blood shouldn't have been shed either."

Karapet liked the tea very much. Yusuf was filling the raisins into the jam. A wonderful combination was obtained with the Turkish tea. They had a long conversation about First World War and even about Marx for some inexplicable reason, and then about Tehlerian (whose surname was actually Tehlirian). Karapet asked Yusuf to tell him about his trips to Gyumri; he learned that Yusuf was still a novice journalist in 1988.

"Actually man is always a novice. If not, it means he does not look forward . . ."

Karapet liked these words. He responded with an affirmative smile.

After tea, they turned to the "shared" book.

"As I can understand, you have an important piece to write. You should work hard. 'Good' does not mean long, it means thoughtful."

"I will read the necessary materials as quickly as possible," Karapet was quick to respond.

"Monsieur Suryan!" Karapet was secretly overjoyed at the idea that Yusuf remembered his surname.

"You don't have to be quick, I am not in a hurry. Just remember that the pleasure of working should not be lost. And time and passion are not good friends."

The last words of this sentence already came from the bedroom. The old man brought a stack of papers, part of which was unused. "You can come here whenever you want, any time of the day. You can work here. You can write, we can discuss, and when you go home, I can read your work. But there is one condition . . ." the words were followed by a pause aimed at regulating the disturbed breathing that the leaning caused, "you should tell me about anything you read or analyze, to the finest detail. Agreed?"

"*Pas de problème*," he answered as he opened the book.

"So far, so good. And now work please. I don't want to disturb you. And I'll take care of my own business."

That sentence was followed by an extremely pleasant working atmosphere in Yusuf's small apartment. The air conditioner was the only thing to break the silence with its hum as if trying to hinder the activity of the two minds immersed in numbers and letters.

From time to time, Karapet would look at the chubby man sitting comfortably around the small table the same color as the sofa and leafing through the unfinished book with an easy movement of the hand. The pleasant sound produced from thumbing through the pages occasionally made Karapet tear his eyes away

from the book and from the stack of papers. This was the first day. He felt he ought to learn. After all, you don't meet people like him every day. The taste of the tea was still in Karapet's mouth. He felt he wanted some more but he remained silent. His eyes jumped from the book to the papers and then back. He had already made numerous notes on the papers.

Karapet had already taken Yusuf's phone number and e-mail address.

Karapet's research topic of the second day concerned the Hamidian Massacres (he had made a list and calculated the date when he would finish researching all the necessary topics).

Karapet's inner world was flooded with an amazing and unprecedented feeling. He was sitting in the house of a man who belonged to a nation which only a century ago "was feasting" on Armenian blood at the table. But he did not feel uneasy in that house, neither was he afraid of having near him that sack of kindness consuming sunflower seeds and books. And he didn't have that strange feeling when you feel easy and uneasy at the same time. And that was only part of it—being physically present there. What about working there? The mood in the room was intoxicating with joy and a researcher's passion . . . Even the air in the apartment was in the working mood, the air which was constantly drawn out of the room by the humming air conditioner, which seemed to be trying to draw attention on itself. After the third day's research, Karapet talked for about one and a half hours, and each sentence was followed by a lengthy discussion. On that day, they squeezed oranges and filled them into small glasses. Karapet was very tired that evening. He simply crawled from his desk into the bed. In his dream, he was telling his grandchildren about a chubby man whose house was an essay-writing office, and there were cups filled with Turkish tea on the tables, and the whole furniture in the office was dark brown and made of wood . . . And the owner often mumbled Bob Marley's "Natural Mystic" with an easy smile on his face:

"Many more will have to suffer, Many more will have to die."

"You know, I'm so happy I met you specifically in the paper books hall," Karapet suddenly said on the fourth tea-drinking day. "I love their smell. You will understand me."

The answer took the form of a smile.

"Would you like some more tea? Help yourself . . ."

Karapet filled his cup, sipped the hot tea and his gaze froze on the table. An idea was buzzing in his mind. "Every single item made of paper has a smell because it is natural and it arouses nostalgic feelings . . ."

It rained on the sixth day. Karapet finished his essay. As he was reading it for Yusuf, he stopped on the words "many children" on the third page and said:

"I have known you for six days, but I have forgotten to ask one question."

"Whether I have children?"

"Do you?" he asked with a smile.

"I was planning on asking you to pay for the book after you finished reading the essay for me."

At that moment Karapet's attention became more focused. He did not hear the humming of the air conditioner anymore. Or maybe it had intentionally become silent in order to be able to listen to Yusuf's

words.

“Why are you looking at me that way?” he gave a hearty laugh. “Calm down, I do not need money. I have one only request.” Karapet was smiling but he was still confused. “You will be surprised but my daughter and my grandchildren live in your city. Yes, yes, in Yerevan. I will ask you to take a small box with you.”

Karapet agreed.

“Of course! With great pleasure . . .”

Karapet submitted his work on May 23. Two days later he knocked on Yusuf’s door. The door opened and Karapet gave a tight hug to the chubby man.

“I did it! I did it! They said it was a brilliant work.” “Well, what else could they have said?” Yusuf answered with a friendly laugh.

On the morning of departure to Yerevan, Karapet met Yusuf. They had coffee in Montparnasse, they talked, Karapet took the small box, and they gave a tight hearty farewell hug to each other.

“We will meet when I come back. Thank you so much!”

“Be careful! And have a nice trip!” the smile said.

On the very second day of his visit to Yerevan, Karapet called Yusuf’s daughter and talked to her in Russian (Yusuf had instructed him, “Either English or Russian”). At six o’clock in the evening, he was already standing by the door. It was opened by a young brunette woman. Before Karapet could say hello, he saw the twins who approached and began to examine the guest with their smiley eyes while hiding behind their mother’s dress. Though he was in a hurry, the woman managed to persuade him to go in. The table was already laid. They had dinner, they chatted, they had tea, and then Karapet left. It was on this very same day that he wrote to Yusuf to tell him that he has wonderful grandchildren, that his daughter is a wonderful mother and that the dinner was exquisite, and the tea . . . “It reminded me of your home.”

August 31 saw a sunshower on Saint-Michel Boulevard. The street was much calmer. Karapet had brought Kishmish raisins for Yusuf from Yerevan. On the way, he was already imagining how he would give the old chubby man a squeeze hug and how his sight would be caught by the old, dark purple “residents” of the house.

Franco-Russe Avenue was calmer than usual. He knocked on the door, then he knocked again. He knocked for half a minute and then thought, “Maybe he’s not at home.” But in response to the last hopeful knock, the next door opened. It was an old loopy woman.

“What do you want? Why are you breaking the door?” she asked with a screeching voice.

“Isn’t Mr. Yus . . . Joseph at home?”

“He’s not here . . . They took him away in July. He won’t be back. Stop breaking the door already!”

The owner of the most old-fashioned apartment in Franco-Russe Avenue had used the computer on the dark purple table to write his last letter addressed to Aisel Tazim.

“My girl! How are you? I am fine . . . I have met a young boy. We have become good friends. His name is Karapet. He will bring you the clothes and books that I am sending. Invite him in, lay a table for him, offer him some tea. He enjoys it very much. In a nutshell, take good care of him . . . We are in his

home, after all . . .”

[Translated by Kristine Goroyan]