

### IN A COLD COUNTRY

This is a cold country. The people are quiet, polite for the most part even when you know they'd rather not have you here. The long winters have trained them to keep their feelings wrapped and muffled. All things considered, I appreciate that.

Now, with the sudden hallucination of summer, I come to the park to see the soccer players. They're strangers like me. The residents of this clean city have vacated the patch of green for a few hours on Sunday, leaving it to the outlanders who pursue the ball with the noisy urgency of the displaced. Along the sidelines I watch them run, I listen to their shouts, I inhale the rich sweet smell of the grass. When I close my eyes for an instant I can imagine myself somewhere else, a warmer place where the clouds mass every afternoon like domed temples, and in my self-imposed darkness a stray cry sometimes sounds vaguely like a bell.

I'm not a player. Even when both my feet were sound I never went in for those kinds of games, though when I was younger I used to amuse myself on the gymnast's bars. Now I'm simply an appreciative spectator. During the week I appraise goods from all over the world and my Sunday relaxation isn't all that different, to tell the truth. Still, after days of sharp calculations and dark guesses about the motives of sellers, it's exhilarating to step into the simple green of the park and hear the shouts in many languages, with nothing more at stake than

whether some strong-legged young man can kick the ball into the goal.

My eyes are on the newest arrival. He's interested me since I first saw him a couple of weeks ago, looking dazed and lost. He's fallen and he scrambles to his feet, takes a few quick steps before he realizes that the rest of the players are moving in the other direction. He shakes his head as if to signal to the world that though he's been momentarily disoriented he's all right now. He squares his shoulders and joins the rush, charging after the other players with the desperate fury of a cavalryman who's been left behind on the crucial assault. There's a sudden shift in the action and the swift pair of Africans flies past him. You can see as they sail gracefully by that he hates their easy speed and fish-like darting. He himself is husky and thick-legged, built for durable toil. He clenches his fists and gamely pursues the Africans, a suppliant trying without much hope to deliver his plea.

Today when they finish the players break into the usual small groups. He and a handful of others jabber a moment in their harsh tongue, smoking furiously. As I've already observed, though, the others aren't close to him. These men from his homeland have already begun to look for futures in this country. They glance around for women, some of whom have joined other players, they gesture, make loud pronouncements but they're not really including him. I know that he and his fellow countrymen know very few people here. They're newer arrivals, just grateful, one has to suppose, to be out of that place.

We come in waves from our wars and revolutions, midnight changes of governments. Some, like myself, were fortunate enough to arrive with sufficient money to make our journey less harsh, though I suppose few of us would have chosen this and only the most prudent have really been prepared for it. Those of us who've managed to reach this cold country represent all political hues and convictions. What unites us is the oldest of causes, survival.

The harsh-tongued players gesture emphatically, hurling their strange-sounding words into this air whose very warmth seems all the more precious for being so brief. Like everyone else, I've seen pictures of their homeland with its steep, treeless mountains, its grim old

churches, countless mothers in shawls weeping over dead children in ruined streets. The citizens of this cold country are shocked when they see these scenes, as they were shocked by the pictures of the streets of my own land puddled with rain and blood, our magnificent golden temples guarded by thugs with automatic weapons bulging from their anoraks. Beyond the open space of this park is a line of dark trees over which I allow my eyes to pass. Really, if there were a God his greatest power would be the capacity to forget.

The players shake hands with the newcomer and move off as I knew they would. He stays there, on the grass, rubbing his knee. He stretches the other leg, a little self-consciously. He knows I've been watching, knows I've been here the last few weeks. "Can I offer you a cigarette?" I ask him in the language of neither of us. "You played hard. It's enjoyable to watch."

He shrugs, gives the knee serious attention, he shakes his head so that his blond hair catches the sun. He hasn't acknowledged my offer. I'm aware that he's a stranger to this language and may not want to embarrass himself. At last, though, he says, passably enough, "Referee favor Africans."

I smile diplomatically, understandingly. "At least it's a beautiful day," I say.

"Not beautiful here," he answers quickly and I can see he still wants to believe he's eventually going back. I ponder the mysterious connections between people and places. His homeland seems to me a steep, stark and sunless region of barbarism and ancient feuds, goats turning on spits, their eyes still in their heads. I want to tell him that there are worse places on the planet than this country in which we find ourselves where everybody obeys the traffic lights; but he's still absorbed in something--it's not his knee, though he keeps rubbing it--he gives the air of breathing heavily, as if he's just struggled up the side of one of those steep mountains in his homeland.

I light a cigarette and enjoy exhaling into the fresh air. There are times when the conversation proceeds best in silence. I squint from the smoke and study him surreptitiously.

He's a mere boy, with a kind of sullen pout and a need that he only occasionally forgets, to confront the world belligerently. Just now he looks lost, adrift on this green iceberg of a country, and I watch the smoke dissipate over the grass.

"Your friends go." I nod toward the thick-haired compatriots who've joined a couple of others, probably on their way to have a drink. Did they invite him along and did he decline because of a lack of money or are there more subtle feuds among this people of which I'm not aware?

"Not friends," he says and I inhale with satisfaction. Who can say what he means by this? Still, I'm confident now that he'll come with me because he has nowhere else to go to. I offer him a cigarette once more and this time he takes it. Voices of departing players are fading and I have a sense that the park is being returned to the citizens of this country once more. Even as I think this a pair of strapping young men comes into view with another kind of ball. Anyone painting a picture of the scene would place them in the center with their bright sweat shirts and confident air. The other man and I would be patches of less vivid hues on the fringes of this field of fresh grass.

"Would you like a drink?" I ask and he looks at me warily. Out here in the sunlight there's a touch of violet to his eyes' blue. Though he hasn't answered he's raised himself. I point in the direction of my car and he joins me, we begin walking.

"Crippled?" he asks, slowing himself down to accommodate my limp. A barbarian, really, though in the war his people are fighting in those bleak mountains I have no doubt they think themselves the defenders of high civilization.

"An accident," I say, which is true enough. A failure of alertness would be more correct. I swing my cane jauntily and, wonder of wonders, he smiles. It's an utterly charming smile, artless in its neediness, and I can see how grateful he is that I've filled the interval of this Sunday afternoon when even his countrymen have deserted him. I can't help wondering, though, how he left his homeland. Even through the barriers of language he shows himself clearly, this big-

featured young man with the surprising smile and the eyes that are looking for someone--parent, priest, commander--to interpret the world for him and tell him what to do. He sees life simply, he's not the clever kind who's likely to have been spied upon by the opposition party and yanked from a stranger's bedroom in a trashy resort where though they could easily have killed him they chose instead to crush his left foot, a potent and in its way an effective, even subtle kind of message to those to whom they were communicating.

Thinking about it, I feel again how distant I am from my homeland, how much like a historical era are those times when a message like that was thought to have more force than the stupidly reckless killing of that later period. By then the elaborate opera of our politics had lost all texture and nuance, as if a fire backstage had caused all the singers to abridge their parts entirely on their own so that such audience as remained saw and heard the dissonant fragments of a dozen separate frighteningly wretched performances. That my entire family fell victim to that foreshortened final act causes more wonder than grief, since I was always the black sheep, not overly loved by any of them. I feel even more wonder at the fact of my having been spared by virtue, so to speak, of having been away on an errand of dissipation in that same border town where the bones in my foot had been fastidiously crushed by practitioners of a soon to be unfashionable form of politics. So while corpulent uncles and devious aunts were being slaughtered in the capital, I watched from behind a hedge the red light of a police car that turned with the sinister slowness of a death ray in the movies, its liquid reflection mimicking its motion in the wet street.

The involuntary memory is a gust ruffling the pelt of an animal, and the utter instability of things passes over me like a chill--even those dark trees at the edge of the park seem insubstantial. I venture a reckless hand on his shoulder, comradely, virile. "You played well," I tell him. He flinches like a horse that's been bitten by a fly, he turns toward me a trifle challengingly, as if trying to convey in his attitude some quality of fiery independence though all he communicates is a pitiable wish to be judged favorably. Poor devil, I think, another haunted

one. But who are his ghosts?

He's flung away the cigarette though it's only half-smoked. I ignore it. "My car," I point out and he's impressed.

But now he stops like a defender in hopeless retreat who must fire one more shot. "My country," he feels compelled to declare. "It is tragic." I agree with him, I pause, the keys in my hand. He nods gravely before getting into the car. I have a sense of things being settled.

We drive through trim, tree-lined streets and for a moment we're alongside the long blue dream of the river, unfrozen now, flowing out into the world. At last we arrive at a quiet place on the fringes of downtown, nothing to upset my patriot. It's dark and comfortable, the music, the atmosphere bespeak this polite northern city. The liquor relaxes him and we talk for a moment about the game he was playing. Once more he berates the Africans, beneficiaries of the referee's favor.

"They're very fast," I say and he concedes as much.

Then he corrects himself. "They're favored," he pouts. He's such a boy. Really, he may not even be twenty-one. His eyes can grow old in an instant, though, and I know he's seen and done things far more troubling than what I'm asking him to do with me. I feel a sudden buoyant detachment, a release from my habitual circumspection. We are, after all, not in a country that demands the wariness of our own lands. I want to ask him, my friend, is it true for you too that the most horrifying memories are conveyed through the nose? I could tell him about waking in the middle of the night covered with sweat, my nostrils filled with the smell of the uncle with the tired eyes who was blown to bits in his restaurant. Or is it sounds for you, I wonder, a distant and somehow sinister knocking of wood against wood?

The jacketed barman comes around and I ask for the bill. I make it a point for my friend to see that I have a good deal of money. "Now," I say, more openly hearty, "let's go to my place and have something to eat."

He looks away, then flashes a joyless smile. Something comes into his eyes, which now

take on a darker cast, they're as old as the mountains in which his people continue to kill each other with such ruthless ingenuity, but I'm reassured that he recognizes clearly the terms of our arrangement. Yet, though he's willing enough to accept them, still he's asking for more. It isn't money, I see, but I let him know with my eyes that I accept his conditions, which I trust him to make clearer before our encounter is over.

Soon we're at my place and I fix drinks, I put on some music. I let him bask in the luxury of the spacious, sunny rooms that look out over the roofs of the city, tentatively he pats one of the thick, colorful pillows flung about the sofa. I light an incense stick, I peel a tangerine and its wonderful pungency fills my nostrils. This will all go slowly, it will be civilized.

He plays his role well. He must be courted, his enjoyment of these amenities is grudging but it's genuine. I light up a pipe of marijuana and we pass it between us. A fine haze fills the room. Time slips off my shoulders like a silk robe, I'm in no hurry to fix dinner, everything will proceed with appropriate leisureliness. My friend too has a loose smile on his face, he's prepared to enjoy this, or he wants to, but his eyes fight the smile, they make it clear he still has to say something. This is his condition, I realize, this is what he's asking of me.

He takes a hurried drink and runs his tongue across his lips. I take his hand gently. "Tell me," I say, and he makes a gesture with his other hand. "I know," I tell him, "that it's hard in this language. Just try to say it simply."

He nods, appreciative. As he speaks he looks toward me, holding my hand all the while as though he's passing to me these jagged fragments of a language both of us have borrowed. I listen and fill in for him where he can only suggest. "My village," he says, and I see the dismal collection of houses huddled against the mountains, a dog lying silently in the narrow main street, its rear legs crushed. He tells me now of the fighting there two years earlier. It isn't hard to imagine the scene: the ominous puffs of smoke in the distance, the smell, the taste of a wall to which you cling for safety, the body reacting to the sound of distant gunfire even as the mind tries to concern itself with something else. How young he was then, I think. I look at his face

and think those years away.

His side had won a difficult and costly victory, he tells me, and I can see them leaning against bullet-pocked walls, talking in loud voices, hurriedly as if they didn't expect to have much time to say the things they had to say, passing bottles among themselves, surprised that they're alive to tell each other, ashamed that they're drinking while some of their friends are dead. In their jubilation they became unwary, he says, and I nod: it's an old story, it's happened before, will happen again. I already know what he's going to tell me.

Mistakes were made, he admits here in this room from which we can glimpse a piece of the great river that turns to ice in the winter, terrible mistakes were made, the kind people are shot for. These weren't soldiers, I remind myself, but pharmacists and truck drivers commanding young men with guns. They were no Bonapartes; of course they would have been unwary. The other side snuck into the village in the night, he tells me, and won back a large part of what they'd lost. They only held the area for a few hours but during that time they killed some of the same fighters who'd been drinking not long before, they raped a number of women. They found the time to urinate on the altar of the church, they even exhumed a recently buried soldier and desecrated his corpse.

He doesn't dwell on this but I can imagine that the shocked villagers blamed the commander whose inattention had caused them to be molested this way. My friend uses only a few of the borrowed words to tell what happened but I can understand all too well how shame drove him and his fellow fighters to a maniacal fury: doggedly they fought centimeter by centimeter and recovered what they'd already won and lost, until most of the enemy fled into the mountains, though they left behind a number of dead and a handful who were wounded.

He's silent after he mentions the wounded ones and I know that these were fated to be the most unfortunate of the fighters. After the enemy was routed at last, he tells me, the half dozen or so enemy survivors were rounded up in the village square where, after being subjected to all the vengeful fury of the people, they were put through every imaginable humiliation before they

were finally shot.

I look around this pleasant room, filled with smells that excite the body, and it seems odd and mysterious that not only do human beings fail to grasp all the pleasures this short life can yield but that all too often they're driven instead to these predictable rituals of destruction.

My friend shakes his head. "Not enough," he tells me, looking toward that long river that flows from the hidden interior of this country all the way into the ocean at last, flowing in the direction of his country. His eyes are full of confusion and I'm sure that against his will he's seeing something he's tried hard to forget. Of course it wasn't enough, and the boy whose breath turned to vapor on the chilly village air must have known that more was going to be required. He must have known it all along, even before he watched his comrades, driven by a thousand conflicting motives, set upon the dead men and begin to pull off their pants in order to mutilate them to the cheers of the villagers. Of course he had to join.

"Just a boy," he says, meaning not himself but the dead soldier whose belt he undid. His hands shook, I'm sure, but his bayonet was ready and he'd already seen his fellows take what they'd cut off and jam it into the mouths of the dead men while the crowd, drunk with rage and despair, wailed into the chilly air above that desolate village. For a moment I think of the enemy fighters in the mountains, hearing that distant howling: they would have known exactly what it meant. After the job had been completed the soldiers in the square stood above their victims and solemnly sang a patriotic song.

My friend with his limited language has fallen silent for a moment. All the horror and repugnance he felt in that distant village has passed undiluted into this comfortable apartment where the scent of tangerines suddenly surges up. "But I do it," he insists. "I do." He's withdrawn his hand from mine to emphasize his independence, his free choice. I nod sympathetically. I can imagine his dreams.

He isn't seeing me anymore. The muscles of his face sag. In those lines I see the history of his sad land. So many sad lands. "Now," he says, turning up his hands as though he's carried

a holy relic all the way from that village and it's only now that he's realized that he's lost it. Quickly, confusedly, he tells of reverses, the aid the enemy received from foreign governments, he tells of routs and massacres, he casually mentions his own wounds.

He looks at me as if I might be inclined to disbelieve him. He pulls up his shirt. "You touch," he insists, challenging me to verify that it really happened. "I wounded," he says with a bit of his earlier belligerence. "I wake up in different country."

I nod. Yes, brave soldier, I want to assure him, I never thought you'd flee. You'd have stayed and been killed with your comrades if you'd have had the choice.

He looks at me. His face is almost empty. I've touched him under the ribs in the place where the texture of his skin changes. But there's still a film of hurt over his eyes. I know that for all he's said he hasn't yet reached the most painful part of his story.

"Now," he says, almost shouting. He springs to his feet and walks to the window. Even his gestures have a stammering quality. He waves at the roofs of this city, he waves at the river that carries the freighters laden with goods that his countrymen don't dare to dream about, gathered around candles in houses that have been without power for months. "Here," he says, his voice thick with despair, "this place." He shakes his head. His mouth seeks words and for a moment he lapses into his own language.

Yes, yes, I assure him, I see what he has to say: here in this cold, rich country none of what he did matters, neither his grief nor his shame. His bravery is of as little account as his terror. His history is as irrelevant as mine. I step up to the window beside him. Together we watch the smug progress of the shiny cars in the street, their placid turns, their dutiful stops at the intersections.

"Why?" he says, his eyes filling up. Why, he means, did he do everything he did if it means nothing at all here? Such erasure is impossible for him to grasp, the weight of it pulls down his broad shoulders. He's bent under a crushing lucidity. He must know that he's never going back to that village of his, to those steep mountains, to some place on a sunny corner

where men used to drink dark coffee and grumble about the weather. "Why?" he asks again, desperate for an answer.

I lead him back to the sofa and I pull his head against my shoulder, run my hands softly through his hair. He makes no sound. The incense is sweet, it blends with the smell of the marijuana. I want him to join me in this moment, this now, I want all other countries abolished for the time being. My friend's shoulders shake gently under my hand. Already I feel a twinge of sadness knowing that when this is over I'm not likely to be going to the park to watch him play anymore. But there are limits to what we can do for each other.