

**THE GROCER WITH
ONE GOOD EYE**

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Old Garbis was a good old man to work for and he was Armenian and he was very kind to everyone who came into his grocery store except Turks and he was not kind to Turks because he was Armenian.

The Turks had killed his people in the old country and so he came to America and was running his grocery store on 69th Street in West Allis which is very close to Milwaukee.

He often told me how it was when the Turks had come that time in the old country and started killing everybody. They had tried to kill him also but the pistol bullet only put him down unconscious and when he woke up he was in the hospital and he couldn't see out of one eye.

"Sonnamabitches," Old Garbis would say about the Turks over and over. "Sonnamabitches."

Then he would pull out his right eye which was the glass one and let me see into the socket which was very empty and after he wiped off the glass eye on his butcher apron he would replace it and ask me if the eye was in straight or did it look to be crooked.

He always had to hold his head to one side when he was slicing meat or weighing things on the scale so he could see what he was doing and after he showed me about the glass eye, I would try to do the same things with one eye closed and I would have to hold my head to one side like he did. Of course, I would pretend I had one glass eye only while he was in the back

eating his lunch or out somewhere and I was tending the store by myself and there was nobody there to see me.

The old man had a daughter who was grownup and married but her husband had died with TB and she was in the sanitarium all the time and her little boy stayed with the old man. The little boy's name was Garbis also after his grandfather.

Sometimes the older guys on the block would see the little boy Garbis sitting in the store window with a sucker and they would all stop and holler and make faces at him.

"Hey little Garbage!"

"You look just like your grandpa and he's Garbage too!"

"Little Garbage and Big Garbage!"

Once the old man got so mad at the gang for this he grabbed a cleaver from the meatblock and chased the whole bunch of them clear down the street and through the cinderlot behind the Kearney-Treckor factory. He didn't catch any of them but when he got back he was very mad and tired and breathing hard through the nose. Then he pulled up a corner of the butcher apron and wiped his one good eye because there were tears in it.

There was only one Turkish family on our block and this was a man and his two boys. The man's name was Hassan-oghli Mehmed and the hunkie kids called him Hassock and his sons were my age and they were Ali and Mustafa. I think his wife died in the old country and he was

very strict with his boys and they couldn't play baseball with us or kick-the-can in the alley behind Dorich's Tavern.

I didn't like Hassan-oghli because he was mean and he hit me once.

It was a Saturday morning and I was tending the store and because there was nobody there I was pretending I was like the old man Garbis with a glass eye. I was shuffling around the shelves with my head held to one side and saying *sonnamabitches* like the old man always said. *Sonnamabitches* I would say out loud and squint at the shelves. "*Coddamsonnamabitches.*"

The next thing I knew I was cracked on the side of the head and was sprawling in the dry onions which were bagged up on the floor alongside the potatoes.

When I could see through my tears there was Hassan-oghli standing over me and I thought of all those Turks in the old country killing all those poor Armenians. He was going to say something and I was really going to call him a *sonofabitch* and run when the old man Garbis came in through the front door leading the little boy.

"Just five pounds big onions, please," Hassan-oghli said.

I didn't realize what he was talking about at first and then I started pulling onions out of the bag in front of me like I was asleep. My ear was stinging and burning like all hell.

"Yes, Sir Mister Mehmed," I said.

"Not Mister Mehmed," he said. "Mehmed is the first name. Hassan-oghli is the last name."

"Yes, Sir," I said.

"Mister Hassan-oghli."

"Yes, Mister Hassan-oghli."

"Just five pounds big onions, please." Then he pretended to see the old man for the first time.

"Ah, Garbis." Hassan-oghli said good morning and good health to the old man in Armenian.

"Speak English," the old man growled. "Or better, don't speak at all."

"Just good morning and good health to you, Garbis," Hassan-oghli said. "I am buying groceries now."

"I can see what you are doing," the old man said. "This is a free country."

They didn't speak after that because the old man took little Garbis and sat in the store window swatting flies to make the little boy laugh and Hassan-oghli went ahead and ordered his groceries. They filled up two big canned milk cartons and he paid for them cash and then picked up one of the boxes and walked over to the old man.

"I take one box now," Hassan-oghli said and motioned toward me. "You can send the boy to bring the other box to my house. Is that all right?"

Old Garbis stopped swatting the flies.

"It is a free country. I would not take groceries to your house myself and I do not ask the boy to do what I would not do. You want him to bring the groceries you ask him. This is business between you and the boy."

"So then," Hassan-oghli said looking at me hard. "You bring the groceries to my house by dinnertime and I will pay you a little something for your trouble. This is business between you and me."

Nobody around the block ever paid me for delivering their groceries, and if the Turk wanted to pay that was all right with me.

"All right," I said. "I'll bring them by dinnertime."

Hassan-oghli left the store and the old man Garbis went back to swatting flies for the little boy to watch. The sting in my ear was almost all gone now.

"Did Hassan-oghli hit you?" the old man asked.

I didn't know exactly how to answer.

"A little bit," I said.

"Why did he hit you?"

I didn't want to talk about it at all.

"I don't know," I said. "I wasn't doing anything to him."

"Goddam Turk. He has no right to hit you. He hits his own sons like that, too. You see how these Turks are mean."

"Yes, sir," I said. "They are mean."

"Sonnamabitch!" the old man said and swung hard at a harsh buzzing fly on the plate glass. The fly spread like a little string of jelly. It made me feel sick in my mouth because the squashed fly was right above the big new bunches of purple grapes.

I remember thinking: I would like to smash Hassan-oghli like that fly. That Goddam mean Turk sonofabitch. The old man Garbis and I didn't talk about this anymore then and all that morning I pretended I was smashing Hassan-oghli with my fists and watching him flatten out and spread out his insides just like a fly.

Hassan-oghli himself opened the door when I brought the box of groceries to his house. He had a starched white apron around his waist and a big wooden spoon

in his hand. He motioned me inside and I went into the kitchen and there were the boys Ali and Mustafa sitting very straight at the table and eating.

"Hello," I said to them.

"Hello," they said.

The kitchen was very clean and scrubbed-looking and I remembered I didn't clean my shoes on the porch. I looked down at them and they were dirty all right. I wouldn't have cared too much except that I knew Ali and Mustafa had to scrub the house. Hassan-oghli took the box of groceries from me without a word. Then he went to the sink and washed his hands and wiped them on a fresh towel.

"Now, he said. "I want to talk to you."

"I have to get home and eat," I said.

"I will not keep you long," he said. He came over and stood in front of me with his hands on his hips. The hands were very big and red looking from the hot water.

"Do you know why I hit you this morning?"

"No!"

"No, what?"

"No, sir Hassan-oghli."

"I hit you because you were making fun of the old man Garbis. Do you understand?"

"I wasn't making fun!"

He put out one of the big hands like a policeman.

"Wait, I am not finished. You were making fun of an old man with one glass eye and this I would have told you in the store only there is no point in the old man knowing what you did."

"I wasn't making fun and besides you have no right to hit me!"

"I do not argue with you young man. If it had been my own sons making fun I would hit them also as they will know. Or," he raised his voice and stuck his finger in my face, "if your own father had found my sons making fun like you were making fun, then I would expect that your own father hit my sons and teach them also!"

"My father would not hit Ali and Mustafa because he is not mean like you are!" I looked at Ali and Mustafa and they were just sitting staring down at their soup bowls.

"My father is not mean like a Turk," I shouted.

Hassan-oghli looked like he had been stabbed.

"My father does not kill Armenians and put out their eyes and beat up his sons so they are black and blue!" I was shaking and I was afraid Hassan-oghli would hit me but now I didn't even care. He watched me for a long time and didn't say a word and when he finally spoke, his voice was very low and I knew that he was mad enough to kill me.

"Who tells you these things? The old man Garbis?"

"Yes," I said. "He tells me all about the Turks in the old country and how they killed all the Armenians."

"And so you think all Turkish people are mean and bad?"

I stopped and looked at the two boys at the kitchen table.

"Ali and Mustafa are all right but they're not grownup Turks from the old country."

"Go home now," Hassan-oghli said suddenly. "Go. I will tell your father of our talk. He should teach you with a razor-strap, your father."

"Go ahead and see if I care," I yelled. Then I slammed out of the house and ran hard all the way home and I only looked back just a few times.

When I got back to the grocery store after lunch, I got the shock of my life. Hassan-oghli and his two sons were standing by the old man Garbis in the front by the soda cooler.

"Young man, we are all waiting for you," Hassan-oghli said. "Now, come."

Everybody followed him as he led the way back to the big meatblock for chopping. We all gathered around him and then Hassan-oghli began talking about the old country and the Turks and the Armenians and then he stopped talking in English and I knew he was talking in Armenian. He was speaking very fast and the words just rolled out of him and while I couldn't understand what he was saying I had a general idea of what he was getting so worked up about. I felt he was telling the old man about what happened at his house when I delivered the groceries.

Hassan-oghli talked for a very long time and wouldn't let the old man interrupt him at all and when he finished he picked up a butcherknife from the meat block and held it out to the old man, handle first. You could have heard a pin drop, in fact, I heard a fly buzzing somewhere near us. The old man Garbis took the knife slowly and stood there staring down at the long blade. When he finally looked up from the knife he turned to face me and his one good eye was glistening and wet.

"Do you know what is being done here?" the old man asked. "Do you know what means this knife?"

I shook my head now feeling my heart going like a hammer. The old man Garbis hefted the knife in his hand.

"Hassan-oghli says I am to take his eye out with this knife for what his people did to my people in the old country."

I stared at Hassan-oghli in disbelief. He was standing tall and unflinching and Ali and Mustafa were the same way. The old man looked straight into my face out of his rapidly blinking eye and then he dropped the knife on the block and turned sharply away and was sobbing. Instantly, Hassan-oghli put an arm around the old man to keep him from falling. They stood like that for a long time.

Then Hassan-oghli reached two one dollar bills out of his pants pocket and held them out to me.

"Here. Take. I promised you a little something for bringing the groceries." I wanted to protest but the words wouldn't come.

I shook my head no.

"Take," Hassan-oghli said. "Buy please bat and ball for the baseball. Ali and Mustafa they would like to play this also now." Hassan-oghli shoved the money into Ali's hand because he was standing closest.

"Go now. All of you together. Old Garbis and I will be the grocery store businessmen this day. Also together."

I asked Old Garbis if this was all right and he sobbed yes, everything was all right now. We three, Ali and Mustafa and myself, then walked slowly from the two men who stood holding each other and we did not look back.

In the front window, right above the new purple grapes, I got one of the dollar bills from Ali and reached down and wiped away the smashed fly smudge. Then the three of us stepped out into the hard sharp sunlight of 69th Street and walked without talking in the direction of the Sears, Roebuck Store two blocks up and three blocks over on Greenfield Avenue.

