

## **No Santa Barbara Here**

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The inhabitants of one remote Armenian village view political shenanigans in Yerevan with the same bemused detachment as they watch American soap operas on TV

The village of Khndzoresk is a place that time forgot. Hidden away in the south-eastern corner of Armenia, this tiny community has stubbornly kept the rest of the world at bay for centuries. Here, life has always been hard and the villagers know better than to dream of a rosy future.

Up until the 1960s, the people of Khndzoresk were troglodytes. The older villagers can still remember the day when they first brought electricity into the caves and radios echoed through the catacombs. But radio - and later television - were not seen as a link to the outside world, but a strange curiosity that had no relevance to their secluded existence.

However, the Communists eventually decided that the idea of Soviet citizens living in caves was not consistent with their ideology, so they moved the entire community of 1,200 families to a nearby plateau.

Since then, history has washed lazily over Khndzoresk, advancing and retreating but failing to draw the villagers into its wake.

Andranik Arzanian, 74, is the living embodiment of this sense of isolation. He is blind - he lost his sight three years ago after his son was killed in the Karabakh war and his grandson died of heart disease.

He is proud, independent, washing and dressing himself each morning before his wife, Shogher, leads him to his stool by the front door.

From here, he can hear his son, Sevada, setting off to the cowshed where he milks the family's 30 cows then lets them out into the pastures. The herd gives about 150 litres of milk a day, producing 20kg of cheese, which is the main ingredient of the family's diet.

All day Andranik sits, smokes and wallows in his memories of the past. In the old days, he remembers, there was a mill in Khndzoresk where the villagers queued each morning to mill a sack or two of wheat. Now the villagers take their grain to nearby settlements.

"It is cheaper to buy bread than to grow it," says Sevada. "We spend \$200 on each hectare of wheat, plus 100 litres of diesel fuel. And that is for sowing, rearing and harvesting. We harvest 1,500 to 2,000 kilograms of wheat from each hectare. And it still needs to be transported and milled."

In the morning, the women of the house take food to Ervand, a refugee from Azerbaijan, who has a cottage nearby. He has no relatives and lives alone. Without the charity of his neighbours, he would be unable to survive.

Towards lunchtime, Andranik's grand-daughter returns home from school. There are no lessons that afternoon - it's her teacher's turn to look after the cattle.

For the female members of the household, the afternoons are sacred - this is the time when they take up their positions in front of the TV set to catch up on the latest developments in Dallas or Sunset Beach.

Andranik listens with pleasure to the stories from these fairy-tale worlds where people have no knowledge of the deprivations and hardships which are an integral part of his existence.

But strangely enough, the lives of people in Yerevan are equally alien. The family watches the TV news with the same sense of detachment - the resignation of a minister or the passing of a new law are unlikely to have repercussions in this far-flung outpost near the border with Azerbaijan.

"Nothing good can happen to us," says Andranik. "It's all for them, the bosses in Yerevan. It's all the same for us."

In the evening, Sevada and his friends drink local moonshine, distilled from mulberry juice. It's 70 degrees proof. "It's not a drink, it's a medicine", says Andranik, "If you drink one mouthful before breakfast, you'll live for 100 years."

As he goes to bed, Andranik hears Shogher whisper to Sevada's wife, "You shouldn't give up what God has given you." And her daughter-in-law answers, "It's no use. I'll go to the doctor, tomorrow. We can't have another child, we live in such a poverty."

There is no Santa Barbara here.

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