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The Unspoken Journey

JACK CHAVOOR

I don't remember much about the house on Poplar Street, just fragments. I remember Dad trying to teach me the numbers on the clock in the kitchen. I remember the free-standing tub with the claw feet. The front yard was shady and there were flowers, but except for the hydrangeas, I can't picture the front of the house; when we arrived at Grandma's house the driveway was behind the back door. It wasn't paved and the dirt smelled sweet on warm summer mornings.

Just inside the back door was a chest of drawers, and in the bottom drawer, there were toys and books. I was delighted to know about the drawer because the house had only two grownups living in it, Grandma Ruth and her mother, Big Grandma, and although Grandma Ruth had five grandchildren, I believed that the drawer was meant for me, or at least my sister and me. I knew Charles, 10 years older than I had no interest in it, and our cousins, Debbie and Kirk had their own toys in their house which was a duplex adjacent from Grandma's.

The most cherished item in the drawer was a story about a magic pot that would produce with the command: "Little pot cook!" and would not stop until given the command: "Little pot stop!" The poor owner of the pot would forget the words to stop the pot and it overflowed and kept producing rice until the kitchen, the living room, the house, and eventually the entire village had rice up to its eyeballs. The story was read to me so many times that I began reading it myself, improvising the words according to the illustrations as I went along.

In 1961 though, Grandma Ruth and Big Grandma moved into their triplex on Yale. There, Big Grandma would sit in her upholstered rocking chair with a contemplative look on her face. Her life offered her much to reflect upon. Her husband, a shoemaker in Harpoot, Turkey, had come to the United States alone to learn about sewing machines that might help him make more shoes in a shorter amount of time. When he heard that the Turks were causing trouble in Armenian villages, he wrote his wife and said: "Sell everything and come." So,

with her six-year-old daughter in tow, she made the 5,000 mile journey. I didn't know any of that about her though; I only knew what I saw: a very old woman with veins showing on the tops of her hands, sitting in her rocking chair.

I can't say we had a relationship because we didn't speak the same language and we were 85 years apart in age. I was a little afraid of her and I'm not sure she knew what to make of me. I would say that we merely existed in the same space and only for a brief time, but there were some moments we shared that demonstrated some kind of familial communication.

We were passing in the hall one afternoon at Grandma's triplex. She was going into the bathroom while I was heading to the kitchen. She stopped me and spoke to me in Armenian. I didn't even understand that there were languages other than English, and so I assumed something was wrong with my ears. I decided to take my chances and nod my head yes. This pleased her, and she said: "Goot boyee." It was one of the few phrases that she knew or employed, along with "Bat boyee." I never knew for certain whether she would deem me good or bad because the litmus test was always in Armenian. If I shook my head when I should have nodded, or vice-versa, I got knocked on the head with her cane, not too hard, but hard enough to remember.

I also remember watching her one morning at breakfast eating a soft-boiled egg. I had never seen a soft-boiled egg or a soft-boiled egg holder. The holder looked like some kind of unfinished toy, or something that might hold a very small spinning top. She would take her spoon and tap, tap, tap near the top of the egg as if she were gently knocking at someone's door. With the top cleanly off and set aside, she took the salt-shaker and shook it steadily, pouring so much salt on the egg that I could barely see it anymore. Then the spoon, with its generous load of the gelatinous contents would waver on the journey to her open mouth, while her eyes—frighteningly huge from her coke bottle lenses—kept careful watch. Each spoonful was an adventure but in the end she did not spill, not even once.

The moment that I remember best came one day while I was watching TV at Grandma's. I sat on the couch, and Grandma Ruth turned the TV on to a western then went into the kitchen. Big Grandma emerged from her room, looked at the TV screen for a moment, and then came to the couch—instead of going for her rocking chair—and sat down next to me. I didn't like westerns and Big Grandma had a funny, sour smell. I was not miserable, but something akin to it. She said something to me, in Armenian of course, but this time with a little more urgency than usual. I decided to nod yes. This agitated her, but she didn't reach for her cane. Instead she pointed at the TV screen.

“You...eh-see...dat?”

“Yes,” I lied, not wanting to disappoint her.

“Look...der.”

“At what?”

“Der.” She pointed at the screen again.

“Something on TV?”

“Dat.”

“You want me to change the channel?” I got up; I would be happy to do it, although Grandma Ruth had told me not to touch the TV, but when I reached for the channel knob she almost lost her mind.

“NO! NO!” she shouted. “Look you!”

“Um, I see a cowboy, a horse.” I was shaking.

“Yah. Look, you.”

She apparently wanted me to name things.

“Uh, the cactus, the sky, a wagon?”

“HA!”

One of the last three was the magic word, and she waved her hand like she was hailing a cab in a snowstorm.

“The cactus?”

“NO!”

She burst into a tirade in Armenian, and I felt lucky to be unable to understand her.

The commotion drew Grandma into the living room from the kitchen. Mother and daughter then had a short conversation.

“She wants you to look at the wagon on the TV show,” she explained.

“Ok, I see it.”

They talked again, a little more extensively this time.

“She wants you to know that when she first came to the United States, on her journey out of the old country, she traveled in a wagon like that.”

“Oh.” I looked at the wagon and then at her dark, oval face. She was nodding and pointing. She spoke again to Grandma.

“She wants you to know that she was there in a time before cars, and that you will live in a time after cars. She says that . . .” Grandma Ruth stopped short.

“Ok, but can I change the channel? I don’t like westerns so very much.”

Grandma Ruth looked at me for a long time and let out a small sigh. Then she spoke to her mother at length during which Big Grandma nodded. When she was done speaking, Big Grandma touched my face with her hand and murmured something in Armenian that her daughter either didn’t hear or chose not to translate.

“So can I?”

There was something that was going on between the two of them, but I couldn’t grasp it. I did not know and wasn’t told about the significance of the horse-drawn wagon working its way across Turkey from Harpoot to Istanbul. The wagon was full of orphaned Armenian children. Big Grandma, Hannah Sadoian, and her six-year-old daughter, Ruth, were trying to get to an Orphanage in Istanbul. Hannah, whose husband, Charles, had already made it out of the country, had agreed to be responsible for the children from her village and get them to safety in exchange for transportation to a port town and the chance to leave the country. The 500 mile journey took them a month.

“So can I? Can I watch cartoons?”

Grandma looked at me without speaking for a long time.

“May I?”

“May I, please?”

Again she was processing things I knew nothing of. The presence of their unspoken journey hung in the air.

“No,” she said at last, “Password is coming on.”

She went back to the kitchen, Big Grandma went to her rocking chair, and I continued watching the western, but something was different from the moment before.