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Riding Saroyan's Coattails

DENNIS ELIA

One spring day in 1964, an Armenian college acquaintance, who happened to be an English writing major, sought me out to obtain an introduction to William Saroyan. The story that unfolds gives the reader an insight into the daily human encounters that people of Saroyan's fame often dealt with.

The student, hoping to fast track his budding career as a freelance writer, sought the counsel of the great Saroyan. I asked: "Why do you need this introduction?" He responded: "Mr. Saroyan knows all the right people and how to do it." In my mind, this was logical, but I had misgivings about whether or not Bill Saroyan would roll out the red carpet to someone who hadn't suffered through the agony and pain that is essential to the creative process.

Nonetheless, I made the call and told Bill that an aspiring writer would like to meet him for coffee and talk about his career prospects. Saroyan was agreeable, and soon the three of us met over coffee. After some tribal positioning and the exchange of pleasantries, Ed, the would-be writer, boldly went into his prepared questions of how he might achieve fame and recognition as a writer.

His opening question was: "Mr. Saroyan, would you help me to get started as a professional writer?" Saroyan, trying to contain himself, looked at him quizzically, and said: "Listen Ed, you've got a long way to go before you're ready to call yourself a writer. Go out and learn your craft." His answer was pleasant and direct. "What are you telling me?" the student retorted. Saroyan's famous bushy eyebrows suddenly began to rise like ocean waves and his forehead lines welled up to give emphasis to his forthcoming answer.

Saroyan leaned forward at the table, looked the young writer squarely in the eyes, and in his fearsome and elevated baritone voice stated: "Go write! Keep writing and don't stop! You'll know when you've arrived." Translation: I've spent a lifetime perfecting my craft, and you want a free ride. There are no free rides. Go out in the world and toil in your craft. It will make you appreciate the effort it takes to create a worthy composition.

Saroyan was driven up the wall when anyone wanted to use his fame for personal gain or to socially rub elbows with him. After helping a few people who later turned on him, William Saroyan became very suspicious of anyone and anything that appeared to have this characteristic.