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“Is That Your Father?”

BRENDA NAJIMIAN MAGARITY

On January 26, 1977, in early morning, I parked my bronze Toyota in front of William Saroyan’s Griffith Street home to pick him up on my way to work.¹ Even though I had been driving him around the San Joaquin Valley for two and a half years, today was different. This time I was taking Fresno’s favorite native son where I wanted to go. I had been teaching English, public speaking, and drama at Madera High School since 1971, the year I had gotten to know him, and I’d finally found the courage to ask my hero to spend a day with me at my job.

Two weeks before, I informed my supervisor that Saroyan would be a guest speaker. He had a reputation for not showing up to commitments others made for him. To avoid this kind of embarrassment, I didn’t share my news with another soul at work.

When Saroyan opened his door, I was awestruck. In contrast to the usual ragged clothes he wore on our trips to the Laundromat, the market, or my father’s dry-cleaning shop, this well-dressed Armenian had on a dark suit. His black hair, slightly graying and long on his neck, was neatly brushed back. His face appeared illuminated in the morning light, and a thick white mustache drooped down on each side. With the style of a man with a larger-than-life personality, he appeared younger than his sixty-eight years.

In preparation for this event, I had my freshmen classes read *My Name Is Aram* and assigned his plays and *The Human Comedy* to my public speaking and drama students. As we arrived at my school, we were greeted by an immediate uproar as I escorted one of America’s great twentieth-century authors down the hallway of the Language Arts building. Everyone appeared stunned, but within a few minutes, teachers organized a schedule to bring their classes to my oversized drama classroom throughout the day.

“Miss Najimian, is that your father?” a student asked as we entered my room.

“No, Juan,” I tried to contain my laughter. “This is William Saroyan, the writer.”

As the first class started, Saroyan began by telling students he had questions for them. Richard Flores shot up his hand and squirmed in his seat.

Saroyan asked him to stand and state his name.

“What do you like most about coming to school?”

“The girls,” Richard answered, and the audience giggled.

When Rick Elias raised his hand, Saroyan made him stand and spell his name loudly as he wrote it down. He explained that he was deaf in one ear and needed students to speak up.

“How many books have you written?” Rick asked him.

I’ve published more than forty-four books in forty-three years,” Saroyan answered.

“Are you Aram?” Mary Ann Brown asked.

“That’s a good question. It is best if a writer writes what he knows. Aram is based on the experiences of my Uncle Aram, myself and those of my brother and cousins. And, Mary Ann,” Saroyan continued, “what is the best thing you like about coming to school?”

“The boys,” she said. Once again, laughter filled the room.

“Rick Flores said the girls, and now, you say the boys.” He nodded as if pointing out the irony and the honesty of that.

By ten o’clock, the press arrived, photos were taken, and locals came to see and hear him. Some brought books to sign. A general hurricane of excitement blew through the school. Unfazed, he spoke to hundreds of students and visitors who filled my classroom to capacity.

While he remained center stage in the eye of this swirling eddy of respect and admiration, I became the observer. Once again I was struck by how capable he was of capturing the attention of his audience so swiftly and maintaining their attention just as he did in his books. He had the capacity to immediately discover my most challenging students and their need to be seen and heard. Perhaps he was in tune with the same energy my students exuded. Within minutes, he captivated the admiration of some of my wildest freshmen boys.

Although Saroyan's tone still carried that man-child wit, he grew more serious by the fourth hour.

"What would you have done if you didn't become a writer?" a student asked.

"I would've become a car thief."

Over the years, I often thought about this answer, a brilliant observation about the fine line between how one uses the gift of creativity and the choices involved. Writer or car thief? Teacher or what?

I was startled by the subject Saroyan brought up next. The United States Supreme Court had recently reinstated the death penalty. Gary Gilmore, the first person to be executed, had, in his youth, wanted to become a preacher. By the time he turned fourteen, he began criminal activity that eventually led to murder. In the last several months of his life, he begged to be executed, and finally was. He was thirty-five.

"In Gary's case, I do not believe he really wanted to die." Saroyan spoke with a solemn voice.

By now, my students loved him. They heard his words and maybe even received the same message I did. *Sometimes there are no answers.*

Later, I found out Saroyan had written about this experience in chapter seventeen of *Obituaries*, the last book published before his death in 1981. This man, who turned down thousands of dollars in speaking engagements, wrote: "And so why did I . . . talk four times for free . . . I was asked if I might pay such a visit to a school by an Armenian girl who fetched me lemons, oranges and grapefruit from the trees in the garden of the house of her parents . . ."

Of all the moments I shared with him, I'll always remember that day when his voice boomed through the hallways of Madera High. He marched more than walked and carried himself more like a general than a poet. In his presence that day, I felt the entire Armenian nation was with me.

NOTES

- ¹ From 1975-77, Brenda Najimian Magarity was William Saroyan's driver, an experience she recounts in her memoir-in-progress, "The Time of My Life: Driving Saroyan."