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Author(s): Jack Chavoor.

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Ghosts of the Genocide

JACK CHAVOOR

Unspoken Journey

My Great-Grandmother Hannah traveled 700 miles from Kharpet to Istanbul, then from Istanbul to Paris and from Paris to Boston. The journey took two years. Missionaries had made possible her escape from Kharpet by providing a wagon and a horse. We don't know how she did the rest. But it was her Turkish neighbor who saved her life and the life of her five-year-old daughter, Ruth, by hiding them in his attic until the Turkish Army was done murdering Armenians in Kharpet. In exchange for the horse and wagon, she agreed to pose as the mother of 15 children to get them to an orphanage in Istanbul.

Sixty-five years later, I was six years old and she was a very wrinkled woman who sat in her chair reading the Bible. I can still see the bones fanning out across the top of her hands, and the veins crisscrossing chaotically. Sometimes she would just hold the Bible, softly speaking words I didn't understand. I knew nothing about her life. No one ever spoke of it.

Coyote

There was no water in the hills, so the coyote came down to the valley, a six-mile journey at night, the pads of her paws stinging from the summer heat of the pavement. It was midnight and he had not fallen asleep yet. He went out in his underwear having heard a noise. He saw the coyote eyeing a stray kitten.

"You have to go back," he said, waving his arms. She ignored him and tensed her muscles for the strike. He couldn't remember if a coyote meant a cursed or a charmed life.

Inventor

Junk Uncle Manoog lived alone in Ventura. Uncle Harry told me the house was small and run down, but there was a long walk to the front door and there were roses and bougainvillea all along the pathway, and that he lived where the air was fragrant with flowers and the ocean. Inside the house though, it was dark, chaotic, cluttered. There was the smell of oil, earth, and cats. There were disassembled clocks and small electric motors on tables counters and shelves,

and there were pulleys, chains, gears, sketches, and tools everywhere. Junk Uncle Manoog was an inventor who never sold any of his inventions and never finished most of them, Uncle Harry said.

Rainy Day

With my knees on the couch, arms on the windowsill, I stared out at the front yard to the rain-polished street. Felix the Cat was on, but I did not turn to look. The cars, hunched and cautious, made their way through the intersection of Verdugo and Catalina, the shush sound from the tires a counterpoint to the rain steadily drumming the roof. Maybe I wasn't born into this family. Maybe I was seed-swapped at the last moment by some advanced space alien civilization testing an invention. The rain fell louder than the moment before. The window steamed in the corners. The rain would not stop.

Laughter

The group leader finished with a prayer and we were eating apple pie complemented with a giant slab of vanilla ice cream. Grace and I were newly wed and had joined a Bible study group. Someone behind me tapped me on the shoulder and welcomed me. We shook hands.

“Where are you from?”

“Burbank.” He laughed.

“No, you know, where are you *from*?”

“*From*? I'm from my mom.”

He didn't laugh as heartily but he still laughed.

“I mean, what are you?”

“I'm Armenian.”

“Oh,” he said, “you're a Fresno Indian.”

His laughter now was loud, to indicate laughter was the appropriate response to his remark.

Mr. Drew's Son

Mr. Drew believed what his son told him.

“No way will my dad let you use the bathroom in our house,” his son had said to me just the moment before.

“But I gotta go. Bad.”

“So go, like, right here.”

And when physiology in crisis would no longer let me argue with him, I crapped on the lawn. He immediately went and told his dad what I had done.

Now Mr. Drew’s enraged eyes were on his son’s friend.

“You disgust me.” His head trembled.

I found no fault in what he said. He flung his cigarette against the cinder-block wall that shielded them from the alley.

Merit

Cub Scout Merit Adventure Opportunity: Build your own electric hot dog maker!

1. Pound two large nails into a 2 x 4. Space the nails so you can impale a hot dog on them.
2. Use bottle caps for the feet of the board.
3. Find an extension cord, cut in half, then cut it down the middle. Wrap one end of exposed wire around each nail.
4. Impale a hotdog.
5. Plug in the cooker until the hot dog is cooked.

The hot dog had a metallic taste. I threw everything in the trash and didn’t check it off in the book. *It’s a sin to waste*, Dad said when he found out, *that’s the 11th commandment*.

The Pit

Verdugo Avenue had one lane going east and one going west. We had a front porch and the concrete was smooth and cool. I was 12 when the front porch became the den and the city added a lane to each side of Verdugo. There was a pit dug out by our house, seven feet deep with a pallet over it. Mr. Drew’s son pulled the pallet back and dared me to jump in.

“You go first.”

“Chicken.”

I jumped in.

There was the cool, damp smell of the earth. He immediately put the pallet over me. He stood on the pallet and laughed. I was sure that he was never going to change his mind.

Practice

Football taught me how to read a coach's wristwatch, even if it was upside down. Close to five o'clock meant wind sprints, from the goal to the 10 and back, then to the 20 and back, then to the 30 and back all the way to the 50 and back. Then each winner of the 50 got to go in. I looked forward to wind sprints because it meant the end of practice. Tired and sore, I longed for the quiet of the kitchen, the ignoring of homework, the solace of pilaf and pot roast. I put my hand on the kitchen window to feel the cold, blind, dark night.

Sleeping Giant

Mr. Drew's son tried out for football. I did not speak to him much. He was big, strong, and at the same time soft and passive. Coaches called him the Sleeping Giant. He seemed stoned on indifference. Someone on Catalina Street said that one morning Mr. Drew got on a coughing jag, ran to the bathroom, gripped the sides of the sink and began coughing up blood. Death was a distant abstraction to me. I kept playing the scene in my mind—you get up to go to work, start coughing, cough up blood, go to the doctor and he says you have cancer.

Visiting

One week in the hospital followed by a week on the couch at home with Grace, who took a week off to help me. The third week I was alone, and the highlight was a popsicle every day at 2 in the afternoon. On the fourth week my friend Yacoub came to visit. We drove around town, stopping for breakfast at a place called the Train Depot and then after strolling through Rasputin's Records and CDs, arguing over whether there was any worthwhile music these days, we drove around the southwest side of Fresno, came back to the north side and had lunch at In-n-Out. "It won't kill you," Yacoub said, "Not today anyway."

On a subsequent visit a couple of years later we were walking the canal called Fancher Creek and I said that going to Armenia was transformational

and that every Armenian should go there. He said, “Why in the world would I go there?”

Jarbig

Grandma Akmak, who used to babysit us, who used to give us a ride to church when Dad was in tax season and Mom was his assistant, asked me one Sunday when I was 19 what was I was doing, which is to say was I being *jarbig* or dumb with my life. Rather than say *going to concerts and trying to talk to girls*, I tried to impress her in the most Armenian way I could think of; I said I was looking for a part time job while attending college. She offered the following advice:

1. Never apply for a job with a friend.
2. Apply for the job at their busiest hour.
3. Learn more than one skill so that if you lose one job, you can get another quickly.

Blues

Haroot Teramian’s business was buying factory seconds and overruns, including dolls, cosmetics, small electrical appliances and just about anything else and then reselling it. While it waited to be resold it sat in eight-foot stacks all over the ancient downtown building. I got the job because Reverend Boghos knew Haroot. One day I came upon “Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs,” by Derek and the Dominoes on the floor. It was close to five, the back door was open; I was ready to abscond with it, but Haroot’s cousin caught me. Just an old blues album I told him. *I love the blues*, Giragos whined. I was sure he didn’t.

Christmas Day

Zareh sat in the big chair in the living room on Christmas Day waiting for someone to ask what was on his mind. I offered him more mezza or something to drink. No, thank you he said. I sat down in a folding chair and waited.

“There is no such thing as Armenians,” he said.

“The house is full of them today.”

“And where were you born?”

“Well, but...”

“There is no country called Armenia. We are all something else.”

“Armenia...”

“Even if we have a tremendous scientist who saves the world, he is from the Soviet Union.”

“But...”

“Therefore, we don’t exist.”

Time Before Cars

The TV was on, but it was a Western. I knew there were cartoons on a different channel, but Grandma Ruth had said not to touch the dials. Big Grandma Hannah sat next to me on the couch. The Western was boring, and I began to imagine pulling the leaves off of the Creeping Charlie in the corner. Those thoughts were interrupted when Big Grandma became quite agitated, shouting in Armenian and pointing at the screen. She struck the floor with her cane and whatever it was became urgent enough for her to attempt English. But I couldn’t understand her, and Grandma Ruth came from the kitchen to interpret. They had a conversation and finally Grandma Ruth looked at me awhile and said, “She wants you to know that in the time before cars she traveled in a wagon like that.”

God’s Will

The tiny group of Protestant Armenians met for church in the tiny, under-lit wedding chapel they leased in North Hollywood. Inside the chapel, unvented and warm, the air was depleted of oxygen and overrun with ancient perfume. The widows of the genocide in the front row wore black and cried when we all stood to sing the Lord’s Prayer in Armenian. Phil and I decided to keep the dime our mothers had given us for offering. We crossed Whitnall Highway and walked into the grocery store in our Sunday clothes. Phil had his sleeves rolled up. For a dime dropped in a slot, a machine that towered over us would drop an empty bag, open a gate above it and freshly made popcorn would fall into the bag with much commotion, blinking lights, gears grinding and finally a door opened and the fresh bag of popcorn stood waiting for you. Perhaps God wanted us to feel triumphant, seated on the curb, wolfing down popcorn, away from everything.

Newlywed

Just north of Fresno Memorial Auditorium is the open-air free market where Dad worked on Saturday mornings. Sixty years later Grace and I would go. Pomegranates, end-of-season muscats, beets, onions, cabbage, fresh-caught trout. Baked goods, too. At the back of the lot, the last stall in the last row, there was a woman who sold choreg so fresh and warm that steam pushed back the cool morning air. Grace, lovely and at peace, spoke to the woman in Armenian, both touching the ancestral land they had never been to, and they smiled to imagine it. We thanked her, walked on, split a choreg, saving the other for later.

Mehmed Talaat's Own Words

*The government had decided to
destroy completely
all the Armenians living in Turkey.
An end must be put to their existence,
however criminal the measures taken may be, and
no regard must be paid to either
age
or sex
nor conscientious scruples.
The salvation of Turkey requires the
elimination of the Armenians,
complete and fundamental elimination. . . .
What on earth do you want?
The question is settled,
there are no more Armenians.
I will use all my might to exterminate them.
Those things are inevitable.*

Air Allegro, C Major

The violins played something that sounded like people running for their lives. Then the singer emerged from the wings. He looked like a tuxedoed version of Samson, ready to knock the place down. He took big, intentional strides. He turned and faced the audience and sang with a fierceness that matched his righteous indignation.

“Why do the nations so furiously rage together?”

There followed a hurricane of dynamic singing at a manic tempo with heart clattering emotion. Then he snapped his music binder shut and stormed off, stage right.

War

The oversized Collier’s Pictorial History of The European War waited on the end table next to the wing chair in the corner of the living room, by the window that looked at the quince tree and Catalina Street. In the spring I would crank the window open because I liked smell of the rust on the screen if a breeze happened to move west. I sat with the book on my lap, carefully opening it.

After 100 pages of important generals and dignitaries, battleships, tanks, dirigibles, horse-drawn cannons, soldiers with their chests out, and refugees fleeing, there is a picture of the exact moment a mortar shell explodes, and the ghostly silhouette of the photographer, arms up, surrenders to death.

Parade

Dad wore sweaters under his sweaters and t-shirts upon t-shirts. I asked him why and he said that when he was a kid, he marched in the parade commemorating the end of World War I and didn’t wear a sweater. In Worcester, Mass, it was bitter cold, and he followed the parade for miles. He got a chill and a fever and almost died. His mother stayed up with him praying for three days and three nights, putting cold rags on his face. Finally, the fever broke. He never told me about the influenza epidemic that killed a thousand in Worcester, the millions throughout the country or the 35 million people around the world that winter.

Crisis

We became friends five months before we started kindergarten. Now we were 19 and he sat on the living room couch, holding his head in his hand, trying not to cry. He described his circumstances, but I didn’t have any words. *Shouldn’t have done that shit? Get a lawyer? It’s gonna be ok? With nothing to say, I felt I had failed him.* He said that as far as he understood life and himself and the world and all the people in it that he was picked out to suffer. I said no. He said being Armenian, I should understand.

Jerry's

Mom said come with me and tipped her head toward the car. I was in my late 30s at the time; we hadn't gone grocery shopping together for quite a while. She drove west on Burbank Boulevard. I was confused—all her stores were in the opposite direction—until we arrived at Jerry's Armenian Deli. Jerry no longer owned the place, but there was still that sweet and spicy cloistered smell, the proud non-franchise store with the dilapidated screen door in the back leading to the alley. She said get whatever you want, and it was out of character for her, but I picked choreg, halvah, sesame candy, string cheese, and lamajoon. She tossed in Ak-mak and apricot leather. She spent \$65 altogether, paid cash.

Somethin'

What is you anyway, Mr. Chavoor?

What am I?

Yeah, you Mexican, Indian, or what? You somethin'.

Well...

Cause I know you ain't white.

End Credits

Sometimes we just find one name, but that is satisfactory. Other times there may be as many as four. When there is none though, we feel a loss even when the movie is wonderful. You may have seen us, any of us, anywhere in the U.S., in any theater. A million and a half Armenians live here. You might have been wondering, why haven't we left the theater yet. That's us, sitting until the Motion Picture Association of America logo arrives and the house lights come up. We don't want to miss an Armenian name. We also read all the names on a playbill or a donor's list in a museum or a library or a college or a hospital. We are a proud .005% of the United States. We like to celebrate our presence.

Ruth's Question

They had been traveling for a week when Ruth finally asked her mother, Hannah, why she cared for Hovaness, an orphan boy they had never known before, more than she cared for her own daughter. Hannah always had the boy at her side or on her lap. She sang to the boy. Spoke to him often. Hannah sighed with a sorrow that Ruth had not ever heard before. *Achigess*, Hannah said. You

do not know what has happened to Hovaness. You did not see what he saw or suffer as he suffered. When the Turks came to his house they asked where his father was. He pointed to the fireplace and the Turks found that he had climbed up the chimney to hide and they could not reach him to pull him down so they pointed their pistols up the chimney and shot many times until he fell down to the fireplace where they shot him again. He was a doctor. He could have helped many people in his life. But now he is dead and Hovaness has no father and he has not been able to tell me what happened to his mother and sister.

Coda

The Armenian Genocide is our ever-present sorrow. Atrocities that were handed down to us, the ghosts we journey with, the things we can't forget even before we hear about them. It's the desert we cross, the hatred and humiliation we push against. They say your brain stores every experience and every word we read or hear, and even experiences that came before are present in our DNA. An article I read in college claimed that with the skull opened and a little electric stimulus, memories from the past would come right out of your mouth. But this morning I forgot my favorite quote from Mom. I pushed my brain to open files, but nothing arrived. "Mild memory loss," they said to me. Comes with age they said. Not too unusual. Then I remember all of the quote but one word. Then I remember the dreams I had right after she died 25 years ago. "Talk faster," she said, "before I die again." Finally, what she said one day pops up out of nowhere: *There are two things in life, memories and hope.*