

One Life, Three Cultures

An Iranian-Armenian Odyssey

by

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Chapter 4

My Grandparents' Home in New Julfa

In June, as soon as the schools closed in Tehran, mother packed my suitcase and sent me to New Julfa to stay with my grandparents until she and Emil could join me. On my departure, when she kissed and bid me farewell, I responded with coldness and reserve. I was still angry with her for humiliating me in front of my friend when she was returning the purse.

Our journey started in the early afternoon. There were five passengers in the big black Ford. My aunt, grandpa's brother and another man were sitting in the back. I was sitting in front, between the driver and a family friend, a huge man who rarely spoke, except for reluctantly answering my questions about the car and whatever I saw along the dirt road.

After passing the holy city of Qom, with distant views of the glittering golden and blue domes of its mosques, the driver made a short stop at a small teahouse on the side of the road to let the heated engine cool down and we thirsty passengers drink a glass of tea. Once we resumed the journey, we didn't stop until nightfall. The road was so straight and monotonous that I thought we would never see people again, but after a while, I noticed blinking lights in the distance and heard dogs barking. We were approaching a village where we would have dinner and would spend the night.

At a teahouse on the edge of the village, all they ordered was just a few tiny glasses of sweet tea with some freshly baked bread. Food prepared at the roadside teahouses was considered impure and unhygienic. Instead, my aunt had brought along two roasted salty chickens with some boiled potatoes which we all shared on the carpet-covered wooden beds that served as a table and a seat at the same time.

That night, I slept in the car with my aunt, while the rest stretched on those wooden beds with their own blankets trying to sleep for a few hours. At dawn, after we had a simple breakfast and the driver succeeded in bringing the car engine to life, we returned to the desolate road and headed toward our destination. The trip from Tehran to Isfahan, a distance of 405 kilometers (250 miles) took us twenty-four hours to accomplish.

New Julfa, the Armenian quarter south of the historic city of Isfahan, is located on the southern bank of the Zayandeh Rood River. It was founded

in the 17th century by the decree of Shah Abbas the Great for the Armenian population of the Caucasus that he had relocated to Persia.

Shah Abbas, who ruled Persia between 1587 and 1629, ended the country's anarchy that had been going on since the death of Shah Tahmasp I in 1576. He restored the Persian military forces and drove the Ottomans out of the province of Azerbaijan in the northwest, threatening to capture the entire Ottoman Empire. However, during one of his unsuccessful battles with them, he was defeated and forced to retreat from the west to the east of the extended empire, torching and sacking towns and villages along his way. When he reached the Armenian-populated villages and towns on the border of the Caucasus and Persia, and the most populous town, Julfa, he ordered its inhabitants, famous as artisans and for their craftsmanship, to leave their homes and join his forces returning to Persia. Since the Ottoman army was following and approaching them rapidly and there was no time to provide boats for the people to cross the border – the Aras River – he ordered them to swim its extensive width to the other side.

Out of 450,000 deported people only 150,000 survived. Of those who arrived in the province of Azerbaijan, some chose to stay in Tabriz, others dispersed to other cities, and the rest followed Shah Abbas and his military forces to the capital city of Isfahan in central Persia. They lived in Isfahan successfully for a few years and contributed to the cultural and economic welfare of the country. Later, they were given permission and the option of having their own quarter south of the city, where they built a town, complete with a cathedral and many churches, naming it New Julfa, being happy to be able to practice their religion, Christianity.

I arrived in that small town the next evening and was greeted by my overjoyed grandparents. Tired from sitting for so long and covered in dust, grandma helped me wash and change as she opened my suitcase and hung my clothes in their wardrobe. Then she served us dinner while they took turns in asking me questions about my trip, my mother, uncle and brother. Later, she showed me to my bed, with the promise of going to the public baths the next morning.

I slept through the night like a lamb, only to wake up late in the morning to the smell of boiling milk that was wafting from the kitchen. It took me a few seconds to figure out my whereabouts before I jumped out of bed, dressed and rushed to the kitchen. Grandma was standing before a lit Primus stove, waiting to turn it off as soon as the milk rose. (Pasteurized milk still didn't exist.) Hearing my footsteps, she turned around, looked at

me lovingly from behind her wire-rimmed glasses, smiled and gave me a big hug, pressing me tightly to her chest.

Grandma Mariam, a woman of medium height, with a head of brown hair and some strands of gray at the temples, was already considered old at the age of forty six. She had borne four children: my mother Lusik and three uncles: Hovik, Johnny and Hrand. None of them lived in New Julfa.

After a breakfast of hot chocolate, bread, butter and home-made apple jam (from their courtyard), she told me to get ready for the baths. Going to the baths was a whole day affair, a social event. So after grandpa left to run certain errands, and the Persian porter arrived, grandma showed him the necessary items to put on his round wooden tray which he carried on his head. The items consisted of an old blanket, a couple of small copper bowls, soap, towels and clothes in a bundle, and some food for lunch. With the man ahead of us, we walked to the nearby ancient bathhouse which was allocated to female customers in the mornings and to males in the evenings. In the ante-room, the porter unloaded the tray on a space on the platform, and spread the blanket on the warm slabs of stone that covered it.

Grandma and I undressed, wrapped ourselves in aqua-floral wraps, and walked in wooden sandals towards the crowded, noisy washroom, inhaling the sharp smells of wet clay, soap and henna that lingered in the steamy air. As we stepped inside, I saw women and children of all ages, even small boys, covered with colorful wraparounds, standing or seated on the wet slabs of stone next to the sunken hot-water basin, busy washing themselves. Suddenly, I noticed black cockroaches scurrying about in the corner. I screamed and shivered as I tried to summon all my courage just to dodge and walk past them. It was my first time at a public bath and everything I saw was new and scary to me. In Tehran we used a private shower stall in the public bathhouse with its own ante-room. However, my fear didn't last long and I felt at home when we found a space near the basin and grandma introduced me to a couple of girls my age. I soon joined them in filling our bowls with water, talking and laughing together. Once looking up at the glass domes on the high ceiling, I noticed the shadow of a man sneaking away, and I told grandma about it. But she shrugged and summoned a masseuse who approached and started scrubbing her body with a soapy *lufah*.

At lunch time we went back to the ante-room, sat cross-legged on the blanket and ate the food grandma had prepared: cold chicken breast, boiled potatoes, fresh and pickled cucumbers, with cherries and succulent cantaloupe for dessert which we shared with grandma's friends sitting next to us. The women knew each other there. They even made a date ahead of

time to be there the same morning. They gossiped and discussed past and upcoming social events. As they became more intimate, they even revealed some personal secrets, after sipping some home-made wine that one of the women had poured into tiny glasses and passed around.

I spent the entire summer at my grandparents' home, together with mother and Emil who joined me later. But for me, the first month was the best when I was alone with them and they tried to entertain and amuse me. Grandpa had bought a baby goat for me to play with. It was a mischievous pet that liked to run around the courtyard, with me trying to pursue and catch it. One day the goat jumped up and pulled down a bunch of hot red peppers which grandma had tied on a string and hung from a wall to dry. One little bite and the poor thing was howling and running around the courtyard. As soon as grandpa realized the situation, he reacted immediately. He brought milk from the house, caught the little thing in the middle of its run and poured it into its mouth and throat. He repeated it a few times before the baby goat calmed down. I have told this story to my two children and four grandchildren scores of times; even now that they are grown up, they still enjoy hearing it.

The big courtyard had an almond tree whose white flowers I hadn't had a chance to see in spring. One early morning, grandpa shook the loaded tree and when the green-coated almonds fell on the ground, grandma and I collected them in a basket, cracked and shelled them as we tasted one occasionally. There was also an apricot tree, its fruit called *shekar-pareh* (piece of sugar), as well as an apple tree called *golabi*, a hybrid of apple and pear, fragrant and juicy. On the other side of the courtyard stood a pepper tree with a cluster of bees buzzing and swarming in and out of it. When it rained or the wind blew, the tree let out a spicy, hot smell.

Twice or three times a week, grandpa, Haig, and I went to their orchard/vineyard, where vines were elevated and spread on wooden arbors like a canopy, with bunches of grapes hanging from them. Grandpa opened the crude wooden gate with a heavy iron key, which he took from a hiding niche next to the gate, turning it in a large keyhole (through which I could see a part of the orchard). Once inside, he inspected the property for a few minutes then started cutting the grapes with his own hands, dropping them into a bucket. When it was full, he drew water from a well in the middle of the orchard and poured the cold water over the sun-warmed grapes. We ate some and took the rest back home.

In that orchard grandpa kept a couple of tortoises to kill the venomous snakes which sometimes appeared in the grass. Once I saw one of the tortoises grasping the head of a snake and holding it tight in its jaw. The ensnared creature tried desperately to free itself, by lashing its entire long body against the tortoise's hard back until it stopped struggling. A few moments later a raven snatched the snake's limp body from the grass and soared into the sky. As soon as grandpa noticed them, he yelled at me, "Be careful. Those snakes are poisonous!" He was afraid that something bad would happen to me. He always kept his eyes on me wherever we went. He seemed to have assumed full responsibility for protecting me. Sometimes he handled me like a china doll, afraid that if I fell I would break.

Grandpa liked to tend to his orchard personally, with occasional help from a laborer who came to trim the trees, till the soil, or to apply fertilizer. The orchard was irrigated by municipal water that flowed in twice a week. He took pleasure in introducing me to the mysteries of nature by showing and explaining about the fruit trees and varieties of birds and butterflies. Once he showed me how to graft a tree and form a new growth in order to improve the quality of the fruit. I remember him making a cut in an apple tree with his sharp pocket knife, inserting a new shoot, and then wrapping it tight with a thick thread. He showed me how to plant petunias in the flower bed and geranium cuttings by putting them in the soil of a flower pot, letting them grow into a new plant. I was very young when he taught me about gardening, but I have remembered enough to practice it in the backyards of my houses in Tehran and Los Angeles.

Grandpa didn't sell any of the fruit he grew in the orchard, because most neighboring families owned similar orchards. He didn't have a paying job. He had sold his store after his children had grown up and left home, but I guess he lived on the interest that the money earned for him. He kept himself busy with community commitments and for many years he had been a member of the diocesan council, and on the boards of the local schools and churches. He also took part in the activities of a theatrical group which produced and enacted original Armenian drama and comedy plays, or translations from English, French and Russian. In his better days, grandpa being a handsome and jovial young man was mostly given the part of the hero or the lover, which irritated grandma when she saw him rehearsing with another woman. In those days, theater was much in demand, being the sole entertainment for the population of that little town. People enjoyed seeing amateur actors and actresses performing on the stage, and encouraged or criticized them right on the spot, by shouting out their genuine thoughts and opinions.

Grandpa was a tall vigorous man. When I stood next to him, I had to hold my head back to see his face. He had brown hair and eyes and when he smiled he revealed his white regular teeth under his drooping moustache. I didn't know his age, but he was much older than grandma. He didn't like to talk about it. Years later, registering at a hotel in Qazvin on a trip to Hamadan for my Uncle Hrand's wedding, when the receptionist asked him, "How old are you?" He retorted, "Write down *one hundred*."

He was the third of his family's six children. His family had survived the Turkish massacres of the 1890s that preceded the horrendous Genocide of 1915 by fleeing from Erzurum, in eastern Turkey, to Tabriz in northern Iran, then to New Julfa, south of Isfahan. At an early age he had been sent to be an apprentice to a shoemaker, after which he had opened his own shoe store, making and selling shoes for men, women and children. That was before meeting grandma and falling in love. But when he asked for her hand and grandma's father refused to give his daughter to a shoemaker, he decided to change his profession and become a merchant. Apparently having a merchant as a son-in-law was much more desirable for that well-to-do Julfan family who had a pretty daughter like grandma and a wealthy son living in Calcutta.

So in the first decade of the 20th century, grandpa started following the footsteps of the New Julfa's community of merchants who had originated a trade network in the late 17th century, stretching as far as the Indian Ocean to Southeast Asia and beyond. He traveled with a caravan to India (a British colony) and brought home an assortment of goods which he sold in his old, renovated store. It took him a couple of years, however, to make his fortune and become eligible enough to marry the girl he loved.

On our way back home from the orchard, we walked down the narrow, unpaved dusty street which had houses and shops built on both sides. Other than Nazar Avenue in north of New Julfa, the rest of the streets were unpaved and dusty. So every day, in the early evening when the last rays of the sun lifted from the walls, a couple of laborers would arrive with their large water-sprinklers and douse the streets with water. I liked to watch the process. I loved the smell of the damp earth so much that every time I caught a whiff of it, I closed my eyes, inhaled the friendly odor, and was ready to lick the earth with my tongue.

Shops were not level with the street in New Julfa. To enter one, you either had to climb or descend a few steps to a higher or lower level. I have seen similar streets and shops in Old Quebec and in historic Old Tucson (before it burned down). It seems that, although remote geographically, their urban plans were products of the same era architecturally.

The streets were so narrow that the few cars that arrived from Isfahan only traveled on Nazar Avenue and came as far as the old *Vank*, the All Savior Cathedral, where they brought tourists or took passengers back to the city. The most popular vehicles were bicycles, motorcycles, horse-drawn carriages and donkeys, whose owners brought produce from the farms to sell.

Instead of having back yards, houses had front yards. To enter a house, one had to walk all the way across its spacious courtyard. The entrance doors were flanked by built-in stone benches where the owners sat in the summer evenings, met their neighbors and chatted, while the children played around them. The benches facing the street served the same purpose as the balconies did in Tehran. Behind the entrance door there was a covered porch which also had built-in benches, where neighbors usually gathered during the day for short visits. The thick-walled porch was warm in the winter and cool in the summer. Many years later, on a trip to Prague, I visited the old house of an Iranian friend, which had a similar kind of plan, with a porch and built-in benches around it.

I have seen something amazing in New Julfa that I haven't seen or heard about anywhere else. Since there was no sewage system, the waste from the toilets accumulated in shallow wells. The toilets were situated close to the streets with small trap doors conveniently opening outward. The farmers haggled with the owners and paid for the human waste, which they carried away in containers hanging on both sides of their donkeys like saddlebags. They used it as fertilizer. It was a profitable deal both for the owner and the farmer. The waste was so precious that sometimes the farmers stole it when the trap door was left open and nobody was around. This fertilizer was so effective in enhancing the quality of produce that we could see the result in the market square, the *meidan*, on Saturday mornings, when grandma and I would go grocery shopping. Every time we approached the crowded noisy market, I could smell the aroma of apples, apricots, cantaloupes and melons, even cucumbers, tomatoes, parsley and mint. It was a wonder what a stinking human waste could do to improve the quality, taste and smell of fruits and vegetables.

Grandma didn't buy cantaloupes, honeydew or water melons from the market. They were too heavy to be carried by hand. There was a farmer who brought them to her door on a donkey and she bought not one or two but the whole content of his saddle-bags, relieving his poor beast of its heavy load. She kept them in the cold cellar, which served as a natural refrigerator in those days, but she didn't keep meat or dairy products in it. She bought and consumed those on a daily basis. The milkman delivered milk, butter,

cheese and eggs, and the butcher had freshly slaughtered lamb ready early in the morning for the customers to buy at his shop. The entrance to the cellar was a small, removable cover set in the floor of the veranda, above a flight of stairs. Each time grandma wanted something, she sent me down for it. There, I could see jars of melted animal fat, baskets of fruit, melons, and bottles of home-made wine, sitting on the shelves or on the floor. I didn't really like the place. It was dark and scary with its network of cobwebs. I always tried to finish the job as fast as I could and to climb up the stairs while she held the cover open for me.

Like many other vineyard owners, grandpa used to make wine with a special burgundy-colored grape that he cultivated separately in his vineyard. He made the wine by placing the grapes in a cloth sack inside a copper basin. He crushed them with his fists--sometimes asking me to wash my feet and tread on them as hard as I could. After the juice was extracted from the pulp, he went through the process of filtering, fermenting and bottling the wine, allowing it to age in the cellar for a year or two before consuming it at special events. Sometimes, at lunch, he poured some vintage wine in a glass, added some water, and gave it to me, saying, "Drink this and get strong. Drinking wine will keep you from getting sick."

On the other hand, grandma boiled the juice of the green grapes until it turned into syrup then poured it in shallow plates. She added pieces of walnut to the extract, leaving them exposed to the hot summer sun. After the excess fluid had evaporated, she cut the dried-up thick brownish substance into squares and treated us to it. It was something like the fruit roll my grandchildren like to eat here in America. It tasted sweet and sour, delicious, and very nutritious. After all, it was concentrated grape juice.

At nights, my grandparents and I slept under the starry sky on a huge veranda in front of the brick building. The beds were covered and protected with mosquito nets, with their edges tucked under the mattresses. Grandma would tell me stories from the Bible, and grandpa those from *A Thousand and One Nights – Hezar Afsaneh, A Thousand Fairy Tales* – a story book in Persian and Armenian, with suspenseful tales of *Ali-Baba and the Forty Thieves, Alladin and the Lamp* and many others, with the disguised presence of Harun-al-Rashid, the wonderful, benevolent Kalif of Baghdad. The stories were told by Shaherezade, the young wife of King Shahryar, who had the habit of marrying a woman and beheading her the next night. In order to save her life, Shaherezade told him a story, stopping at a cliff-hanger point, with the promise of finishing it the next night. And thus, for a

thousand and one nights, she kept the king so amused that at the end he abandoned his cruel intentions and spared her life and those of other women.

Shaherezade's captivating tales have not only remained in my mind and made me tell them to my children, they have also inspired generations of readers, writers, storytellers and artists. And what is more, her name has been immortalized by the 19th century Russian composer, Rimsky-Korsakov, who orchestrated a musical piece based on her succession of stories.

Grandpa also told me exciting stories about his travels to India where he went by a caravan every other fall to buy merchandise for his store, returning home in early spring. Every time the news of his upcoming trip to India spread in town, friends and relatives, even strangers came to his home or store, asking if he would take a package, a letter or cash for their children who studied in Calcutta. Then one week before his departure, envelopes of letters and cash would begin to pour into his house. Some would even take the liberty of sending packages of dried apricots, peaches or, the most popular one, a cluster of shriveled grapes preserved in sawdust and packaged in a small light weight wooden box.

The caravan would start from New Julfa for the port city of Mohammareh on the Persian Gulf (Khorramshahr today), with passengers consisting of merchants, a few women, and sometimes teenage boys. They were bound for India, Java, Sumatra, Singapore, Hong Kong, or elsewhere along the coast of the Indian Ocean, wherever an Armenian community with its churches and schools existed. The teenagers, however, were mostly bound for Calcutta to continue their education at the Armenian Philanthropic College, a high school founded in 1821 that had served generations of Armenian students in India and Persia. Some of those boys lived away from their families for so long that they forgot what their parents and siblings looked like. After graduating from college, they preferred to stay in Calcutta. They found a job, married an Armenian or a British girl and grew roots in their newly adopted city. So it was a really heart-breaking scene when these boys bid farewell to their mothers, who kissed and crushed their sons in an embrace, then beat their chests and plucked out their hair when they had gone, because they weren't sure they would ever see them again. Grandpa took Hovik, his eldest son, on one of his last trips. Hovik had been invited to study in India by grandma's wealthy brother, Peter, who had offered to pay for his nephew's education at a British college after graduating from the Armenian high school in Calcutta. Peter was married to a British woman and had no children.