

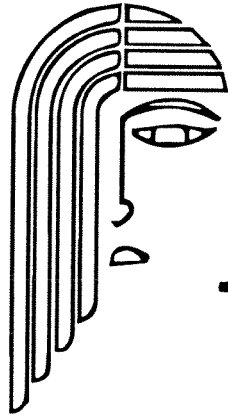
10 May 1993

Dear Harriett and Alan --

Enclosed is copy of PA's speech at Wellesley College on May 8 -- I thought you'd like to see it. She got a standing ovation!

Love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Ley". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the right of the word "Love,".



A . I . W . A .

**"THE IDENTITY OF
THE ARMENIAN WOMAN"**

Second Symposium and Annual Meeting
Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts

Saturday, May 8, 1993

Sponsored by:
Armenian International Women's Association

Speech delivered 8 May 1993
Wellesley College
AIWA Annual Symposium

STONE STORIES

By Laura Kalpakian

I would like to thank Natalie and Cerise, the Armenian International Women's Association, for inviting me to speak today, to be included in this Symposium and to be honored as a person of achievement here in the midst of so many women of achievement. I am reminded of the words of that flinty New Englander, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who once said something to the effect that, as a novelist, he could all but hear his Puritan ancestors scoffing at him: You! A writer of stories! Why, you're no better than a fiddler!

Today at Wellesley we ask how can we maintain the integrity of our Armenian experience in the larger context of our lives as women. We inquire after our place not only in the community, but in the diaspora. In a larger context yet, we inquire after the place of the diaspora, not merely in history--the past--but in the future.

I am flattered to be here as part of the process of inquiry, these questions of identity, particularly as I am not wholly Armenian. My background is very strange and I've never met anyone else whose immediate family was both Mormon and Armenian. I do not speak Armenian, save for a few words--mostly connected with food. I do not read Armenian. I do not live in an Armenian community, or even near one. I live--as do we all--in the diaspora. My Armenian cousins all have last names like Bown and MacKellar and Donnell. My unmarried name was Johnson and I was married to a man named McCreary. No doubt many of you also have names like these in your families. My experience, however, may be unique in that I am Armenian by conscious choice.

When I began to write (and when I began to publish--which, I must say, were not at all simultaneous events), I took my mother's maiden name, Kalpakian, for my own. Now, twenty years later, I understand that to adopt a name not your own is to assume an identity. More than that, to create an identity. In becoming Laura Kalpakian, I was coming to be a writer.

I took the name Kalpakian as an act of affection and respect for my grandparents who had four daughters and so, with my grandfather's death in 1963, the name vanished, or at least what we knew of it vanished. Like all Armenian families there are, there were, somewhere, once upon a time, cousins, perhaps, in any event, people who vanished or were lost, swallowed up in the cities of Europe. So I did indeed consciously hope that I could do my grandparents the honor of preserving their name, that it would live in my work, but I have no recollection of sweating out such a decision, gnashing intellectually over the implications of the choice. At the time I was too busy sweating out, gnashing over my fears that I would never be a writer at all. What would it matter what my name was, if I could not write?

To tell the story of my career from this vantage point, here before this group, the mere listing of the credits seems to testify to the inevitability of success. That is not the way it truly happened. Certainly it is not the way it felt. The sense of inevitability is part of the trouble--and the beauty--of telling stories. Family stories evolve from the happenstantial to the inevitable: words gradually accrue, congeal around a set of events, and with every telling the words grow harder and stronger, until the stories seem to be set in stone, to become stones, nuggets of family experience, modeled into words, cast in stone.

But to return to the question of my becoming Armenian by choice, as well as by blood, whatever the story may be, the truth is, I did this without very much gravity or forethought and

I asked no one's permission.

Had I asked my mother she would have granted permission instantly. My mother ought to be here today. She is truly an Armenian International Woman of Achievement. Born in Istanbul, she was an infant when, with her parents and four-year-old sister, she landed on these shores. And it is through her generosity of spirit--and her skills--that I can be here at all. When she and my father retired, they moved up to Washington State to help me and my children and they are staying with the children now so that I can come to Boston. Indeed, they have stayed with my children whenever I have had to travel. More than that, my mother typed every novel and story I wrote from the first time I set pen to paper, until 1985 when I got a typist. Last summer when that typist moved, we got a computer and my mother once again serves as my assistant. She is an artist at that keyboard. But up till 1985 she did all my work--in addition to her day job as a secretary to an orthopedic surgeon. To say that I wrote these many books and stories is not quite fair. I wrote and re-wrote. I continually write and re-write. My mother is fond of saying that in our family there are three things you can count on: death, taxes and revisions.

Had I asked my grandmother's permission to use the name Kalpakian, I don't know what she would have said. Probably she would have been aghast. After all, by this time, at long last, I had a husband. (I might add that this was to her everlasting joy. Those of you with old country mothers know whereof I speak.)

My grandmother would have been insistent that having finally got married, I ought to use my husband's name. She was very old country, not only in her respect for marriage, but in her respect for men--which was boundless. I often wonder how different that family would

have been if there had been a son amongst all those daughters. Make no mistake, my grandmother was of the Honor Thy Father School. At the same time, in my family--I suspect in many families--the power, the energy, the will, all emanated from the woman. My grandfather, a warm, wonderful man, enjoyed his patriarchal role, enjoyed sitting at the head of the table, wine glass in hand, making his usual toast--Welcome To Our Home--and we loved him. But we spoke always of Grandma's house and Grandma's car, and it was Grandma to whom we looked for all things. So had I asked my grandmother's permission to become Laura Kalpakian, her first thought would have been for the tender feelings of my husband, then of my father, and had I been able to convince her that the choice was immaterial to either of them, I believe she still would have been aghast.

My grandparents were the most assimilationist immigrants who ever drew breath. They were thrilled that their daughters all married men with conventional names, that the grandchildren had names like Jimmy and Patty and Nancy. Indeed, when they came to this country, Haigouhi Kulaksuzian Kalpakian quickly became Helen Clark Kalpakian, my grandfather, Haroutune, became Harry, my mother, Pakradouhi, became Peggy, so the bright bounce of names like Barbara and Ron and Richard must have been music to their ears. Had I asked my grandmother to use her Armenian name, she might have said -- What! You want to change your name back!

My grandparents had gone to such pains to assimilate. Perhaps the phrase is better put to say that they had gone to such pain. Such pain as is almost inconceivable. Still, they often told the story of their marriage, fleeing the old country, their arrival here, their hard work, their success. The story got told and re-told with a sort of funny aplomb, as though its conclusion had always been foreordained. Everyone in this room has heard this story, or one just like it. There

may be those of you who have told this story.

It goes something like this: Ah yes, we came with nothing, the clothes on our backs. We had no English. We had no home. We had your uncle (or your aunt or your cousin), but we worked hard and became successes, and look at us: Nice home, Nice car, Nice family. Fine lives. Swimming pool. Great Success.

Everyone who has heard, or told this story knows it is a true story, but it's not the truth. Not the whole truth and not even the whole story.

These stories we have heard and told all have a kind of smooth rotundity to them, inevitable as the fiddler's tune, all the roughness, the sharp stab of fear, the bright points of pain erased, worn down as the story is fashioned over time, as though the happy conclusions were predestined. In short, as if these stories were the product of art, not history. History has no editor. History is messy and sprawling and painful and chaotic. Art might strive to simulate the messy, the sprawling, the pain, but art cannot be chaotic. Chaos has no place there. For these stories to emerge, the history must be drained from them; the events must be drained of chaos, of random terrors, of horror, of sheer overwhelming fear. The historical questions facing the Kalpakians were not--would they enjoy success in Los Angeles? Would they eventually have the fine home on Olympic Boulevard and the four lovely daughters? But would they survive at all?

According to my grandmother's story, her father brought his family out of a mountain town in Turkey, down to the city of Adana in 1895, following a wave of destruction by the Turks. He brought them into the city to save them. Michael Arlen's book *PASSAGE TO ARARAT* suggests this did save them. Saved some of them anyway. Saved my grandmother who, by 1917

believed herself to be the sole surviving member of her family. She later found her brother, but that is yet another story which time forbids telling here. She was an orphan, living and teaching in the Adana Girls' Seminary, run by American missionaries. I have her graduation picture--not the least bit like the graduation pictures of her grandchildren, Patty, Nancy, Jimmy and so on. These girls in 1917, all but one, dressed in white, their dark hair smoothly drawn down around faces which regard the world solemnly, or wistfully, some suspiciously. My grandmother actually has the most lively expression in the group: a ghost of a smile hovers visibly at her lips. The smile shows spirit, I think, especially since she is standing beside the only girl dressed in black--a Turkish girl, the sole Turkish student in the school.

The spirit evident in Haigouhi's graduation smile allowed her to decline an arranged marriage and to choose my grandfather (who had equally declined attempts at arranged marriages; his family, so that story goes, was not joyed-over to see him marry a penniless orphan). My grandparents had met when he was a ribbon clerk, his family having left all their prosperous life in Mersin, had moved to Adana in the wake of persecution. The groom had to ask the headmistress of the school for the bride's hand in marriage. The headmistress agreed, but he was obliged to pay Haigouhi's still outstanding debts to the school. No Armenian churches were allowed, so an Orthodox priest came to the groom's family home to perform the wedding. The headmistress and two teachers were the guests. The groom was 31. The bride was 16. The year was 1917.

Imagine the questions facing these newlyweds--not where would they put the wedding china, but how would they live? Would they live? Imagine the fear that drove them to cross the border into Syria and to stay for only four months. Imagine the fear that drove them back

to Adana, because by 1918, their first daughter was born there. The questions before Haroutune and Haigouhi Kalpakian were these: How would they survive? How could they protect their daughter? Where would they live? Should they leave? Where should they go? Where could they go? Where would they be permitted to go?

Imagine the questions, the fears that took them to Greece and thence, to the United States. They arrived at Ellis Island a day late--the quota had been filled. They were turned away. They had to sail back to Greece. To wait.

Imagine the terror, the strain, the loss of all hope in Piraeus, Greece in 1923. Imagine the heat. The political uncertainty rumbling, erupting all over the mideast in the wake of the war. Imagine your money running out, the necessity of finding money to pay passage for yet another ship. Yet another trans-Atlantic crossing. Pregnant with yet a third child, when you had two already, a 5-year-old and a baby. Would the house on Olympic Boulevard have seemed foreordained--the nice house, the nice car and so on, would those things have seemed inevitable upon your merely working for them?

Or, would it not have been more clearly foreordained, in the words of 1923's Nobel Prize winner, that the center cannot hold--and things fall apart.

Imagine, then, the long voyage back to America six months later, the joy at being admitted this time, riding the train across the whole expanse of this vast country. Imagine, to eyes accustomed to the narrow twisting streets of Turkish, Syrian and Greek cities, what Oklahoma must have looked like.

Imagine the surprise of people whose necks still bore the metaphoric imprint of the soldier's bootheel, imagine their astonishment to land, feet first, as it were, in Los Angeles in

1923--the broad boulevards, the bright boosterism of a city already self-consciously styling itself the dream factory of America. Would not the dreams of these people be equally shot through with fear, a sense of desperation, terror of failure. After all, these were people of the diaspora. To be of the diaspora means you have no country, no old country. You have only the new country. You have no past to return to, only the future to fashion. No possibilities before you save survival, or the unthinkable opposite: failure.

My grandmother, who had another baby three months after their arrival, spoke English, yes, but my grandfather, the breadwinner, did not. Any of you who have ever tried to live in a foreign country where you do not speak the language know very well the limits of goodwill. Goodwill can contribute to understanding, but it cannot suffice for it. Imagine the obligations incumbent upon making a living, lacking the language. The daily fear. The daily strain. But from this fear and strain, there came to be fashioned in our family a story which was told, and re-told, over and over again. This story sits like a rock in the family stream, a rock with its own color and weight and solidity, its pleasing shape, unchanged by the cascade of daily life that rolls over it.

This story goes like this:

My grandparents first home in America was a tiny house out back of the home of my grandmother's sister and her husband, the Boyds. (They had Anglicized their name too--from Boyajian.) The Boyds had come to America in 1907. John Boyd ran a chain of cigar stands on the beach and in order that my grandfather could have work of some kind, they taught him just enough English that he could say, literally, cigar? cigarette? candy bar? Lucky Strike? Also, it helped if people would point. One day a young woman came by the cigar stand. She did not

want a cigar, cigarette or candy. She wanted him to make change. He could not understand her; what was she saying? Exasperated, she cried out, You Dumbbell! And of course, he could not understand this either. He said: cigar, cigarette, candy, Lucky Strike? When he came home, my grandmother's seminary English was not equal to Dumbbell either. It was left to John Boyd to tell them what Dumbbell meant. The story is always told with a ripple of laughter at the end, laughter from the storyteller, laughter from the listeners.

This story was so often repeated that when, having slid myself into the name Laura Kalpakian that I would wear for the rest of my life, as I was patiently teaching myself to write, I took this story and two others of the family liturgy, I took these stories and made of them fiction. Certainly this was a good way to begin. After all, I did not have to think up the stories. They were given to me. They had been given me all my life. I wrote these stories up. I wrote them down. I re-wrote and revised them. Eventually, I published them. I have never put them all three altogether, one following the other, as I'd originally intended, but I published them separately, this particular story appearing as THE LAND OF LUCKY STRIKE.

THE LAND OF LUCKY STRIKE, as fiction, does not conclude with the ripple of laughter assumed, demanded in the story. It is not funny on paper. It has its moments of humor--I cannot write without humor--but it is not a funny story and it does not conclude with the young lady calling my grandfather a dumbbell. It ends ruminating about what it means to be a foreigner forever. It wonders what it will cost to belong. It ends, in short, with the pain and the terror that the family story (smooth and rounded as it has become) would not allude to. It ends with the ambivalence, the resolve of refugees determined to assimilate.

So then too, imagine Harry and Helen, these ardent assimilationists struggling with their

English in Los Angeles, their home a sort of island of Armenian in a sea of English. Imagine the fear of failure rampant when their eldest daughter's kindergarten teacher comes to them and says their daughter is having trouble in school. Trouble with the language. (This story too is passed all through the family.) They are told by the teacher, that if they wish their daughter to succeed in school, they must speak only English at home.

I might add here as a postscript that this daughter grew up to be a language teacher, so perhaps the kindergarten teacher was not such an authority as my grandparents believed. Nonetheless, this visit struck terror in their breasts. Their one wish was to be American, to have their children be American, to embrace all things American, and if it meant that they had to rip the very tongues from their heads and refit new English-speaking tongues between their teeth, then so be it. Imagine the loss, the pain, as the sea of English grew bigger, the island of Armenian dwindled, no longer the house, but the bedroom, probably diminishing eventually to the bed alone.

In their ardor for assimilation, my grandparents did it. Indeed, as my grandparents purged the old country from every aspect of their lives, food alone was spared. Everything else was refitted to the American mold, including their religion.

They began going to Protestant churches. Both my grandparents were buried by Orthodox priests, but as we all stood by their graves, not a single person among the family understood a word those priests said. The Orthodox Church was not part of any of our lives, except for special occasions which stand out vividly in memory because they were special occasions: the incense, the gold, the heavy smell of flowers from the altars, the drip and scent of candles, the tiny threads of smoke floating over the votives, the shine and rustle of the priests' robes, the odd

un-Latinate language, the dim interior of the church, so very different from the bright Mormon churches where my siblings and I had been taken (at first taken, then merely dropped off) every Sunday since I was ten years old. I obediently went to the Mormon Church till I was 17 and then I refused ever to go again.

Indeed, all three of my aunts are still active in their respective protestant churches. In 1944, my mother was a student at USC and teaching Sunday School at the Wilshire Methodist Church when she met my father, at a USO dance on a Saturday night. He asked for her address, which she would not give. No Armenian girl gives a Navy man her address. She said if he wanted to see her again, he would have to come to the Sunday School class the next day at the Wilshire Methodist Church.

I wonder if she knew he was a Mormon.

My father comes from a tribe of raw-grained, rural, backwoods, up-country Idaho Mormons, half of them truly, positively Latter Day Saints and the other half accomplished bullshit artists. My dad is the eldest of five and had, literally grown up in a log cabin at one time. When World War II broke out, he had just finished his degree at Utah State University and then he joined the Navy and was stationed at Long Beach, California--never again to return to Utah or Idaho to live. Until they moved up to Washington State to join me, my parents always lived in Southern California.

Los Angeles, my grandparents' house, was truly the center of our young lives. Every Sunday we would go there, driving from the San Fernando Valley over the Sepulveda Pass to Los Angeles. We had Sunday dinner at Grandma's. We sat all around the huge table and watched my grandfather lift his wineglass and say Welcome to Our House. (The very words I

still use with guests in my home.) We drove to Grandma's after having spent Sunday morning in the Mormon Church (kids, at least, were obliged to go to the Mormon Church) where we were told that drinking wine is a sin, absolutely forbidden, where we were given graphic, grisly descriptions of the hideous afterlife awaiting non-Mormons, including my mother, who in her steadfast, well-mannered way, refused ever to join their church.

My grandparents' house on Olympic Boulevard was qualitatively different from ours, from the homes of any of my aunts. Theirs and ours were all practical, efficient tract homes with the unvarnished ugliness that only California in the Fifties could muster and perfect. At my grandmother's house, the contrasts were always more intense: outside it was blindingly white stucco. Inside, the windows were curtained, it seemed dark and cool, the carpets were dark patterns, the floors creaked, the passageways were all rounded, and furniture all huge and dark, set about in rooms that seemed inexpressibly vast. To go to my grandmother's house was like going, not over the Sepulveda Pass into Los Angeles, but going over the present and into the past. My grandmother's white stucco house with its dim interior seemed snipped, cut away, apart from post-war LA, pasted there perhaps, as in a scrapbook, but not integral to the pages. It was like going to a foreign country.

And so it must have certainly seemed to my father, emigrating as he did from the backwoods of Idaho. Los Angeles must have been a wonder and a mystery. Here he met my mother, Peggy Kalpakian, daughter of a Los Angeles Armenian family, and here he met his best friend, best man at his wedding, Sid Finegold, the son of Los Angeles Jews. As my father is not given to story-telling, I can only imagine how vast and foreign and intriguing must have seemed his sweetheart's home, his best friend's home, to a man of his frontier background. I try to