

imagine how strange must have seemed the Jewish and Armenian kitchens to a man brought up like my father, amongst the Mormons with their traditional hostility to anything foreign.

In retrospect though, my father may have had more in common with his best friend and his sweetheart than he knew. The Mormons have been called, correctly, a peculiar people. In my estimation they are very like the Jews in the sense that to be a good Mormon, like being a good Jew, is not simply a religion one practices on the Sabbath, but a pattern of daily living and thinking, a veritable garment, like their temple clothes, worn to identify and indemnify and protect. Like the Jews, and the Armenians, the Mormons have recognizable enemies and an embattled homeland. Now, of course, they are well known for their conservative politics, but there was a time the Mormons took on the United States Army. They were ready to fight to maintain control of land they had settled. The Golan Heights in the Wasatch Mountains.

As with the Jews and Armenians, there are, I think, identifiable Mormon faces, an audible Mormon accent. Every summer when our family made those dreadful station wagon journeys back to Utah to attend Johnson family picnics, I for one, stood there in the bevy of their pink, fair faces and heard their Mormon accents, felt a deep affection for them, but knew that I would be forever foreign here.

I felt much less foreign at the Armenian picnics, where my grandmother would take us once a year. This is odd, really, because at least the Mormons spoke English.

I had been taught one Armenian word for courtesy's sake: inch-bess-ess and my grandmother would lead me about, talking to old people (they all seemed old to me) who would smile, pinch my cheek, and talk above my head, their foreign words falling over me, their laughter rippling like the smoke from the shish kebab fires, wafting like the steam off the coffee,

the music, floating, notes twanging from the strings of strange instruments, the music, even the spirited pieces, aching with some ineffable sadness conveyed in the singing, if not in the song. All this compounded with the heat and the dust, the smell of dry grass crushed underfoot, the eucalyptus, caught, brewed somehow with the scent of my grandmother's Coty facepowder and her Emeraude cologne, the peppery smell of my grandfather's Old Spice. Marquees were set up to protect against the baking sunshine. The children all wore shorts. The men all wore vests. The women all wore dresses that buttoned down the front and I can still feel their buttons punching my cheeks as they caught me in their embrace and pulled me up against their bosoms. In memory, all these scenes play out against the sound of a fountain dripping somewhere and are stippled about with red geraniums, those twisted, scraggly unlovely red geraniums whose scent is so pervasive in the California summer and the relentless sunlight.

But is it memory?

I believe that memory and imagination are not separate countries, like America and Turkey, but neighboring provinces, provinces who share more than a border, who share the same coastline. I believe that the same currents, the flotsam and jetsam that lap at imagination's shore are borne on the tides of memory. And vice versa--those wrecks that land on memory's coast drift in on currents of imagination. I wish there were a word for this brackish brew of imagination and memory, but there isn't. In terms of the English language they remain unfairly distinct. Memory draws about itself the veil of respectability, propriety. Memory suggests the verifiable, wears the assumption of truth. Imagination, as the Hawthorne quote implies--imagination reeks of the frivolous, the frippery of pretense and fiction. Mere entertaining lies.

What this really means is that words fail me. Words will fail all of us finally. We cannot

rely wholly on words to convey these indelible impressions.

In some ways I have come to understand all this better since I have become a mother. When my sons were babies, I began finally to understand the depth, the why and wherefore of my attachment to my grandmother with whom we lived throughout my infancy and had daily contact till I was about three years old. I believe that these pre-verbal commitments, the ones we make with our hands and our senses, constitute the love beyond words. The love beyond words is more binding than the vows we've spoken with the men we've married. These are the connections that pass from the hands of mothers and grandmothers to the sons and daughters. Manual labor, if you will, the manual labor of love. Look at your hands and think of the manual labor of love they have done. This manual labor of love defies words.

In defying words, then, is memory lost? Must we accede to such loss? Accept it? Perhaps.

I wanted to share with my sons, who are one-quarter Armenian, some ribbon of their heritage beyond those family stories, beyond the family pictures. I wanted that ribbon of connection to be able to flutter recognizably across their hands when they grow to be men. Living as we do, as I have said, in a town where there are only three other Armenians, I took my sons to the Greek Church picnics. There was certainly no dust, no geraniums, no eucalyptus. These picnics are held in the church parking lot and the marquees are up to protect against the expectation of rain, rather than against the heat, and no one wears Coty or Emereaud anymore. But--the faces are there. The smells are there. The music is there. The smoke from the shish kebab fires floats over and wafts around with Greek, a language we don't understand. For me, the Greek picnics are like sitting in a dream where you are not expected to know people and

don't care if you do or not.

On the strength of those associations, I took my sons one Sunday to the Greek church. It was not dark like St. James in Los Angeles, but the votives and incense smells were there, and the voices. The people were uniformly warm and pleasant, but finally the language defeated us. We understood almost nothing of what was going on. We have no Greek. We have no Armenian. The language defeated me in this attempt to convey to my boys something of the content and texture of my own childhood.

But if memory is thus imprisoned in the fortress of language--for me, the English language--I yet may be able to convey something of memory through food--the content, texture, shape and smell of food. Food is, after all, a manual labor of love as well. And if memory is chained to language, then, perhaps then, the stories can serve where memory fails. Stories rely on language, yes, but they are not shackled.

A true story does not have to be a memory.

Stories have their own content, but they accrete texture over time. Words get ground up, rounded, polished into stories until they lie, smooth as stones, polished stones at the bottom of consciousness. Daily life ripples over these stone-stories like water. The cascade of daily life moves swiftly--indeed, accelerates with time, as you grow older--but these stone-stories, once they have achieved their shape, they hardly move at all. Anyone in my family could tell you the dumbbell story. The exact same story.

This dumbbell story may eventually find a larger venue than my family, or the page. My agent recently offered THE LAND OF LUCKY STRIKE story, with its companion pieces to producers who were impressed, intrigued with the notion of a Christmas special woven from

them. They asked, however, if the nationality could be changed. I said no.

But it occurred to me, with some sadness, that if the producers wished to make the story more current, that could certainly be done--and done without damage to the hard kernel of truth at the story's interior. THE LAND OF LUCKY STRIKE takes place, Christmas 1923, the historical moment when my grandparents first arrived in Los Angeles. But does it not say something of the spewing, messy, sprawling chaos of history that nearly 75 years later this same story could be re-enacted in the present. Updated easily: An Armenian immigrant with scarcely any English, working, in a 7-11, is asked to make change. He cannot understand and so, gets called dumbbell--or in 1994, worse. Perhaps in 1994, he gets robbed.

This character could be in Los Angeles in 1994, having fled the conflict that rages--even as we speak here--the terrible, the ongoing anguish inflicted, the suffering of millions affected by the Armenian-Azerbaijan war. The family the character stays with in Los Angeles could have been there since 1989, having left Armenia after the devastating earthquake of 1988. Make no mistake, the whole dumbbell story could be replayed out today, or tomorrow, or the day after that.

And, there is even the chance that my immigrant character, this mythical 1994 character, might be someone known to me. Such is the nature of the diaspora. Indeed, such is the strength of the diaspora: in being Armenian, we are, in fact, citizens of the world, citizens, you might say, of somewhere else.

That was the phrase Nathaniel Hawthorne used when he returned to his native Massachusetts after many years living abroad, in England and Italy. He said, with some sadness: I have become a citizen of somewhere else.

The phrase has always appealed to me and, given the odd stew of my background, my travels, the swath of my friendship and interests, I've taken comfort from Hawthorne in that phrase. I too am a citizen of somewhere else. And today, like Hawthorne, I am here as a storyteller, perhaps no better than a fiddler. We storytellers think anecdotally and metaphorically and so perhaps I can best illustrate my notion of the strength of the diaspora, my sense of what Armenians have to give the world besides the wail of genocide, my convictions of history, my hopes for the future, with a story. Another story.

In 1981 I was living with my husband in Honolulu. I had only the one son at the time and he was two. My husband was an oceanographer. He was doing research with a group of scientists at the University of Hawaii and one afternoon in August he called home and behind his voice I could hear all kinds of laughter and roistering. It turned out that the Soviet Union's research vessel had come into the Port of Honolulu. The Soviet scientists had called University of Hawaii and invited their oceanographers to come on board the research vessel. Remember, that in 1981 the Soviets, were still fighting the Afghans and indeed, America had refused to participate in the 1980 Moscow Olympics to punish the Soviet Union for fighting the Afghans, in a bit of political judgment I've never understood. In short, the cold war--which we, in this room, have all grown up with--was in its usual fine fettle and so the invitation to come on board the Soviets' ship was an unusual one.

The American scientists had to come on board their ship because the Soviet scientists and crew were not allowed off their boat. My husband said he and the other oceanographers had been there all afternoon, drinking vodka, talking science. The party was just warming up. I was to get a babysitter for the boy and come down to the harbor--and to bring lots of women.

Obligingly I made a few phone calls and found a babysitter for my son and then with some girlfriends, drove down to the wharf. I'd asked my husband how I would know the ship and he said, oh, you'll know it; it's berthed next to the Kanekheoke, which was the University of Hawaii's research ship. Indeed I did know it. The Kanakehoke looked like a plug-ugly tugboat next to this gleaming Queen Mary of a research vessel. My girlfriends and I just wandered on; no one said a word to us (I guess no sailors under any flag ever threw a bunch of women off a ship), and finally we found my husband and the men from the lab--and they were all of course having a wonderful time, and indeed the party was revving up--with music and laughter, many of the crew and scientists on the ship were performing, singing, dancing or playing something. Lots of them had brought instruments.

My husband introduced us to Sergei, who spoke English, the only one who spoke fluent English. Sergei served happily as translator for everyone. These men were generous, courteous, downright courtly; they asked us to dance in an old-fashioned way. They showed pictures of their families and gave away cigarettes and candy and liquor--and to this day I still have little pins and mementoes of the Moscow Olympics, which I doubt few Americans have. These were given me, given all of us, by the Soviet scientists. As the various performers came on, Sergei told us a bit of their backgrounds, what they did on the ship, and so on.

Then there came up to sing, a swarthy man of my own generation; he had a full beard, dark eyes, thick brows and high nose. He stood and sang the saddest song I have ever heard. Everyone who had been cheering and clapping time for the other singers and dancers and musicians, quieted and Sergei whispered to me the man was singing about the sadness of his people, the losses, the heartbreaking separations. Sergei said he was a surgeon, fulfilling state

service on his vessel. He was an Armenian.

Really? I said, I am Armenian. And I told him my name. The name not that I was born with or married to, but the name I had chosen.

When this man finished singing, nothing would do but that Sergei should introduce us. He did so, of course, in Russian and when Sergei finished his explanation, this man's face lit. Never in my life has a stranger looked at me with such affection, with such warmth, and happiness. And from the depth of all those church picnics, from the smoke and the Old Spice and the dust, the heat, the geraniums, from the smell of the coffee and old women pulling me up against the buttons on their dresses, from all of that I drew the one word my grandmother had taught me to use on these ceremonial occasions, and I said.

INCH-bess-es.

He pulled me into his embrace, called me his sister. This man sailing under the hammer and sickle of the Soviet Union embraced me, my husband, my friends. And it was from that moment that the party, the camaraderie, the connections across political boundaries truly began.

It turned out that the following night the sailors were allowed off the ship and this Armenian surgeon insisted that he should cook us dinner. He must cook Armenian food for me, my husband, my son and the other scientists. Through the translator I wrote down everything he asked me to buy at the store--he would pay us back. No, we would not hear of it. He would do the cooking and we would all contribute something. The party was to be in our friend Joel's apartment. Joel himself is French and we were all living that summer in faculty housing at the University of Hawaii, which, if you have ever been there, you know it is really sort of international intellectual slum. But that following night, the children of the faculty housing had



got up a play, Cinderella, to be presented in the dry field beside the garage.

I asked the Soviet scientists to come in time for the play, and they did. We all stood in the parking lot and watched, this weed-strewn theater, where the children played out the story of Cinderella, a story so well worn, so well known that the words were not necessary at all--especially when everyone in the play is under the age of nine. After the play, we all went to Joel's flat, borrowed tables, which we lined up end to end and everyone brought something. The Armenian surgeon cooked the meal, the Soviet scientists brought fruit and vodka and wine and musical instruments. It was a summer night in August, in Honolulu, the beer was cold, we had music and laughter, the two universal languages. (There is another universal language, math--but math, mercifully, got banished for the night!) The less universal languages collided oddly. I put my faltering schoolgirl French up against the Soviet French. French is Joel's native language and he would translate. Some of the Soviets had halting English and we were all eager to learn a few words of Russian.

Fifteen of us sat around those tables. The Russians stood, one by one and offered toasts. I stood too, raised my glass, and echoing my old grandfather, dead nearly twenty years, I said: Welcome to my country. We all stood up and offered toasts, more than once as the evening wore on. Uniformly we raised our glasses in salute to the hope that the peace and camaraderie and the affection created there tonight, in the middle of the Pacific, would be a harbinger for the future, for the possibilities of the future, for the hope that our children could one day meet as friends, as comrades across political boundaries.

We were so moved in the course of these toasts to peace and possibility, that we wept. We believed it might be possible, but we did not--children of the cold war, all of us--believe it

was likely. And would we have believed, had someone said, whispered there amongst the plumeria, in a mere nine years Karl Marx's prophecy will come to pass--the Soviet State will wither away--though not at all in the way Marx predicted. The Soviet Union would be dissolved. These men would not be Soviet citizens. They would be, once again, Russians and Armenians and Ukrainians and whatever else they were. All of us there that night would have been incredulous. How, in 1981, could you foresee those events of 1989 and 1990. How could anyone have guessed 1989 would come to be like 1789: not perhaps, the turn-of-the-century, but the end of the era.

There is but one continued, ever-proven and reliable truth in history: the end of one era is the beginning of another. The people living through it can only see or feel or respond to the end, to the notion of loss, to the sprawl and mess and chaos of history. And so, given the sprawl and mess and chaos, the bloody and brutal events in the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, in Armenia and Azerbaijan, I wonder--where is that Armenian surgeon now? The man who, on the strength of my single Armenian word, embraced me and mine. Where is he? Where is his wife whose picture he showed? Where are the sons he had so hoped would meet my boy?

It is not impossible that this surgeon might have fled, become a refugee, that lacking English, he could conceivably be behind the counter of a 7-11 selling slurpees in L.A.

It is, equally, not impossible, indeed, it is more likely that those hands that clutched mine, that made the Armenian dinner, manual labor of love that August night in Honolulu, that those hands are now cutting flesh and dressing wounds, that this surgeon is working amongst the dying, the victims, the soldiers, the maimed, the wounded of the Armenian-Azerbaijan war. I pray that

he is not one of the wounded. I pray that his wife and sons are not amongst the victims. I wonder--does he ever think back to an evening, now twelve years ago, when a single word of Armenian united Soviet citizens with the French and the Americans, when we stood around a table, with trade winds blowing through the open windows, and raised our glasses to the wish for peace.

We have not got the wish for peace. The world has changed, but peace has not come with that change. The end of one era is the beginning of another and we here in this room--adults all, values shaped and formed--we are probably only conscious of what has been lost, or changed, or left behind. We are, in that regard, time's refugees. Our children are time's assimilationists. They will be assimilated into the future. We will be stranded eventually in the past.

As a mother, I am curious about the world in which my sons will be men. In the year 2000, my eldest boy will be 21. My youngest will be 17. Seventeen years old at the century's dawn! They will be adults in 2015 when the genocide will commemorate its centenary.

For me, it is crucial that my sons greet the year 2015, one hundred years after the Armenian genocide, with something besides the wail. The wail is important. I do not dispute that. But the wail is a sort of single note in a world that will be symphonic with complexity. I have to give them more than that, a fiddler's tune at least. Something more than a one-note anguished cry.

I have given them, already, the manual-labor-of-love, those pre-verbal commitments when they were babies. I have given them the smooth round polished stone-stories current in our family, and in doing so, though they may not know it, I have given them tools. Awareness of

their Armenian heritage--beyond the genocide--will be a most useful tool for the world in which they will be men.

Why? Remember it was the single Armenian word of greeting, INCH-BESS-ESS, the only word I had, that united those Soviet citizens with the Americans and the French. The single word united that surgeon and me, not in a community, but in the diaspora. As a citizen of the diaspora, one becomes a citizen of somewhere else, and in doing so, of necessity, one creates community.

As we move toward the next hundred years--years, we in this room, will not live to see--history will mandate that very nearly everyone will become a citizen of somewhere else. History will see to it that the importance of one's country will wane and correspondingly, the importance of one's community will strengthen. I believe countries with homogenous population will succumb to mass migrations made possible by technology, made imperative by politics. History will require these homogenous populations to change irrevocably, with the influx of new diasporas. These new diasporas have already altered the complexion of cities like London and Paris and Vancouver and Los Angeles. Two blocks from my grandmother's Olympic Boulevard address, all the signs are now written in English--and Vietnamese. At their old address, the signs are in English and Korean.

In the world in which my sons are men, I expect diasporas will fan out all across the globe, not merely those traditional diasporas, those peoples persecuted, punished, starved, beaten, denied, reviled, maimed and finally exiled: the Jews, the Armenians, the Irish, the Chinese, the Indians, the Africans and so on; indeed, we and these other peoples will be at a tremendous advantage in the world that is to come. We are educated for this brave new world. We are

experienced. For two thousand years Armenians have been experienced in the diaspora. Our sons and daughters, young as they are, have 2000 years of experienced education in how to be citizens of somewhere else--which is to say, citizens of the future. This experience will be priceless to them in the next hundred years.

The diaspora endows Armenians with a complex identity, complex knowledge and a complex tradition. These are the very tools essential for the future. Not tidy homogeneity, but the ability to lead, to understand, to educate others, how to live in the diaspora, how to be a nation, but not a country, how to be a citizen of somewhere else. How to help others navigate through the seas we have charted--hugging the shores of memory and imagination. If we do not endow our children with this complex knowledge, we have done them--and the world they will live in--a disservice. If we give them only the single note, the wail of genocide, we condemn them to do nothing but cry, and remember. I want more for my sons.

I say, let us give these children--and their children--what Armenian women have always known: how to preserve their identity when they have lost their country. How to preserve their families when they have lost their men. How to preserve their integrity when they have lost their dignity. We have all been refugees, citizens of somewhere else; we have all endured the wreck of memory, and washed up on the shores of imagination. Armenian women have always used their hands in the manual labor of love and we have learned--and our children must learn and teach others--how to preserve, to connect, to mortar memory with imagination, to form those smooth rounded stories, hard as stones, light as breath, that travel with us always, undeclared at any border.