

The
**HUNDRED -
YEAR WALK**

*An Armenian
Odyssey*



DAWN ANAHID MacKEEN

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DAWN ANAHID MACKEEEN

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This is a work of nonfiction. All dialogue, details, and events in the life of Stepan Miskjian are directly culled from his memoirs, interviews, or other historical works.

Note: Some names and locations have been changed to protect sources in Syria.

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To my mother, Anahid



A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

THIS BOOK SHIFTS between the early-twentieth-century Ottoman Empire and the present day. All languages in these pages have been transliterated and translated for ease of reading rather than technical precision. That includes my grandfather's primary languages, western Armenian and Ottoman Turkish. In most cases, the Armenian Ռ has been transliterated as a *u*; thus the *u* in the name Harutiun is pronounced like the French *ou*. Modern Turkish, the language spoken in Turkey today, uses the Latin alphabet, unlike Ottoman Turkish. It, too, has been transliterated for easier pronunciation; for example, the name Cemal has been changed to Jemal, and my grandfather's town, Adapazarı, has been changed to Adapazari, the last syllable of which is pronounced like the *a* in *seria*. Ottoman endings in *d* and *b*, which often appear as *t* and *p*, respectively, in modern Turkish, have been left unmodified in the chapters that take place during Ottoman times. The Arabic has been transliterated to the most common forms. In addition, all dates have been changed, as best as possible, from the Julian calendar, used during my grandfather's time, to the Gregorian calendar.

PART ONE

The Lost World

2006

FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER, my mother has been talking to her dead parents. Growing up, I would find her in the kitchen, locked in conversation with Mama and Baba. At the sink, her hands scrubbing a dish, her voice a murmur. So it was no surprise when, in the summer of 2006, I stumbled on her again like this. It had been just a few weeks since I had moved back into my childhood home, and there I was in the doorway trying to eavesdrop, just like I had back in grade school. Only now I was thirty-five. I couldn't quite make out her words, drowned as they were by running water and the clank of Corelle plates. Oblivious to me standing there, my mother continued to shake her cropped brown bob back and forth, moving her lips furtively.

"Inch ge medadzes," she said, shaking her head, the Armenian words sounding like gibberish to me. "Are you talking to them again?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied, her mood perennially upbeat. "I ask them for advice, and they always give it to me. They are my spirit guides, Dawn. They should be yours too!"

I rolled my eyes and we both laughed, not taking ourselves too seriously. In the weeks since I'd left my bustling life in New York and returned to the Los Angeles house where I had been raised, my mother's otherworldly talks had become part of my universe again. I'd forgotten the never-ending surprises of life with my small but plucky mother, Anahid. Spontaneous and excitable, she could transform a drab doctor's office or a corner diner into a party, just by raising her arms and breaking into dance.

My father, Jim, and I would remark that she was the last person you'd expect to be a probation officer. She was unflinchingly positive about the human capacity for goodness, allowing the petty criminals she supervised to get away with nearly anything on her watch. She'd devoted her life to helping people. Not only her clients, but also Armenian immigrants unfamiliar with the customs of the United States. Our phone was constantly ringing. She'd taught my American father and me just enough of the language for us to say "One moment" in Armenian—*Meg vayrgean*—when people called and started prattling away about needing a ride to the doctor, the lawyer, or the green-card office.

Despite the comfort of being back in my roomy, Spanish-style home, the initial excitement had worn off. Huddled under my flower-print bedspread, surrounded by high-school soccer trophies and my homecoming-princess tiara, I felt like a character in a dark comedy about an aging prom queen who returns to her childhood home after flaming out in the big city. By the hour, my life in New York felt farther away—my morning runs through snowy Central Park before work; my deadline hustle to file yet another health-care story at my magazine job; my race to meet friends after work for a wine-fueled late dinner somewhere dark and candlelit. For years, my life in New York had felt like a sprint in a marathon that I never wanted to stop. It was what I craved; it was what I thought I needed; it was why I'd left my home and moved across the country in the first place.

But shortly after my birthday the previous February, something had changed. I'd never paid much attention to my mother's calls to come home, but suddenly I couldn't ignore her anymore. Perhaps it was her advanced age (she was then seventy-eight). Or maybe it was my own realization that, as a reporter, I was spending my life telling other people's stories and ignoring my own family's incredible one.

Because my grandfather had died when I was a toddler, what I knew about him was mostly family legend. Countless times, I had heard the dramatic tales from my mother of how her father, Stepan Miskjian, had wandered in the desert of what is now Syria, how he had staggered across it for a week on nothing but two cups of water. How he had led a group of Armenians to safety, away from the Turks who wanted to kill them.

She'd repeat this tale on loop. As she saw it, any occasion—during a morning bowl of Cheerios or after a piece of birthday cake—was the right time to recount her father's near-death experience.

His story had truly haunted her childhood too, when days would begin and end with Baba in tears as he retold what he'd witnessed. He made a new home for his family in Spanish Harlem, but they were so poor she slept in a hammock. Perhaps looking into his daughter's innocent face reminded him of the thousands of children in their orphan uniforms who had paraded past him in the camps on their way to be slaughtered. He had lost almost everything in the ethnic cleansing; all he had was his story. This was our family's heirloom, our most precious bequest, and it was inherited by every subsequent generation—along with the burden of telling it again.

Still, as a kid, I retained nothing from the much-repeated saga but the single detail that he'd drunk his own urine to survive in the desert. Repulsed, I'd always ask, "Why would anyone do that?"

"It's because he was Armenian and faced very difficult times," my mother would explain. "It's all here."

And then she'd pull out two small booklets published by an Armenian press in the 1960s: her dad's firsthand account of his survival, focused on the period when he was fleeing the Turks in Mesopotamia. I would stare at the hundreds of pages of Indo-European script, unable to cross the language barrier and uncover the secrets of his memoir, a narrative he'd begun writing in the 1930s and continued working on for the rest of his life.

My mother had spent many years attempting to translate these booklets into English. This wasn't just her personal desire to share our family's trials but part of an attempt to educate the world and ensure that ethnic cleansing never happened again. Her father's story was the story of the forgotten genocide. The trains stuffed with people, the death marches, the internment camps. All were familiar horrors to me, to my generation, but the images I'd seen were from the Holocaust of World War II. As the Jews would be, the Armenian minority had been demonized as a threat to society. The Ottoman Empire used the global tumult of World War I as a cover. The majority of the two million Ottoman Armenians had been forced from their homes and deported to barren regions they had seen only on maps, if at all.

From 1915 to 1918, an estimated 1,200,000 Armenians perished. Those who managed to stay alive were scattered across the globe. My mother's surviving aunts and uncles lived in Turkey, France, and the United States—something I had previously thought was a little glamorous. After learning more about my family history, I found it heartbreaking. Entire families had been lost or severed from one another. Stateless, some of them drifting like embers after a fire, the rest just ashes. Adolf Hitler, before his invasion of Poland in September 1939, said: "Kill without pity or mercy. Who still talks nowadays of the extermination of the Armenians?"

In a way, der Führer was right. Only the Armenians seem to remember the Armenians.

"Help me, Dawn. Help me tell Baba's story," my mother would often say as the years went by and I embarked on a career as a reporter.

"Please help me," she repeated on the phone when I was living in Chicago, San Francisco, DC, New York. "Almost done, Dawn, we're going to print this," she informed me when I came home every Christmas. In truth, despite her determination, her translation would never be finished; her father's language was too difficult. She could speak Armenian fluently but she could barely read the

characters; she had learned the language from her mother but had never formally studied it. However that didn't stop her from trying. She grew ever more resolute as Turkey's denials of genocide grew in volume, with its claims that the Armenians had staged an uprising and sided with the Russian enemy during a time of war and that their deaths were an unfortunate consequence of that. She watched as her parents and her parents' friends and nearly all the other eyewitnesses died.

To my mother and many Armenians, *genocide* is an important word. *Massacres, atrocities, killings*—all these words fail to describe “the murder of a nation,” as Henry Morgenthau, the American ambassador to Constantinople, called it at the time. Nearly twenty countries, including France and Canada, officially used the term, which was created during World War II by a Polish Jew Raphael Lemkin, to describe the atrocities against the Armenians and the Jews.

I didn't understand my mother's commitment, her sense of urgency, until April 2004, when a distant relative finally intervened and translated my grandfather's two booklets. I'll never forget the cross-country flight when I read what my grandfather Stepan remembered, in his own words. His stories transported me back to a very different era, to the last days of the Ottoman Empire, when the Great War consumed much of the world. “Being a witness to that satanic pogrom, I vowed it as my duty to put to paper what I saw,” my grandfather wrote in the introduction to his memoirs in a straightforward, unemotional style that I would come to know well. With his extraordinary memory, he described his road to hell, relating his conversations with the guards overseeing the death march and his dying friends' last utterances. As I turned the pages, I felt sickened by what he had endured. I slowly came to understand what it meant: my mother existed, I existed, my aunt, my uncle, my cousins, my cousins' children—my entire family existed because he had survived what so many had not.

Nearly a century later, where was my sense of moral obligation? Doing nothing felt like forgetting and forgetting genocide seemed almost as heinous as the crime itself, especially in light of Turkey's denials. I read these booklets, which represented only a portion of his remarkable life, and although I did not move back to Los Angeles for another two years, the seeds were sown. Now I wanted to help my mother tell Baba's whole story. I needed to better understand the past.

I finally moved across the country in May of 2006, and soon enough, that summer seemingly evaporated in a haze of Los Angeles heat, punctuated by my mother's supernatural talks at the kitchen sink. By August, I was deep into my routine of squandering days at a café sipping double nonfat latte and reading about the genocide. My plan upon arriving home had been to fill in the gaps in my grandfather's stories and begin shaping them into a proper account. But the plan was quickly stymied by a near total lack of information. Most of the witnesses and survivors were dead; their children too. The bulk of the primary accounts were written in a language I didn't understand. And though Baba's memoir was powerful, it recorded just a few years of his life and ignored other critical periods of the ethnic cleansing. There were so many missing pieces in his story, gaps that left us wondering what had transpired before he landed in an internment camp in the middle of the war. Eager to help, my mother had been calling all her friends, trying to locate survivors from her parents' hometown for me to interview.

It was an almost hopeless task, and the only lead she had was one old lady she remembered who had known my grandfather and could possibly tell us more about the deportations from their hometown.

One afternoon, following my daily coffee binge, I returned home depressed by the reading material and frustrated by my lack of progress. In the living room, near the stained-glass windows, my father, retired auditor, was leaning back in his leather La-Z-Boy, feet up, *Consumer Reports* in hand. From where I stood, only the crown of his head was visible. Across the room, my mother sat on the lime-

green sofa turning the pages of the *Los Angeles Times*. The green shag carpet I remembered from my childhood had long ago been ripped out, but almost everything else seemed frozen in time. My mother could never throw anything away; even the smallest items had value. She rarely bought new clothes or furniture, an austerity measure that I was beginning to understand was a symptom of her having had nothing as a child in Istanbul and making do with hand-me-downs.

That afternoon, I walked off to my room without saying a word to the good people who'd raised me. The house was hot—of course it was—and that just stoked my irritability. Flinging myself onto my bed, I stared at the pictures on the wall of my wrinkle-free younger self with my best friends from the neighborhood.

I felt like I was regressing. Shortly after arriving, I had started acting like a paranoid teenager, speaking on the phone in a whisper so my parents could not hear, listening for the creak in the hallway that told of intergenerational eavesdropping. Whenever I went out, I gave them my itinerary and the hour of my expected return, as I had in high school. *Just a little longer*, I'd tell myself. *Only until I can get on my feet and rent my own place.*

I blamed my mother for my sudden mess of an adult life, the way one irrationally faults one's mother for everything. After all, it was her insistent devotion to her father's history that had motivated me to come home.

That Thursday, as I lay there stewing, I was seized by a horrible thought: *Did I make a mistake moving back?* I suspected I had; I was jealous of my friends' rising careers and busy social lives. Pushing it out of my mind, I moped back into the living room.

"How was your day, Dawn?" my mother asked lovingly. "Do you want something to drink?"

"No."

"Something to eat?"

"No."

"Oh, Dawn." She followed me to the long dining room table and sat down in the hard ornate wood chair that she had inherited from her parents more than thirty years earlier.

"I called the Ararat nursing home today, and that old woman we thought might help us . . . she has died."

I frowned at the news.

"She was about a hundred and two years old," my mother added. "Don't worry, honey. You can find someone else to interview," she said before I had a chance to respond.

"Who do you suggest?" I said flatly. "Your father is dead. His siblings are dead. Now the lady in the nursing home is dead. They're all dead."

She didn't say anything.

"Mom, I can't help you with Baba's book."

"Why not, Dawn?"

"Because everyone is dead!" That was it, I told myself. I had put my real life on hold for long enough. I had to move on and start looking for a proper job.

"It's okay, we'll find someone else. Don't give up. You can do it," she said.

We continued this cycle, repeating the same things, raising our voices—mine always louder than hers.

"I can't help you!" I began to cry. Then a voice welled up deep inside of me. It burst out as if I weren't the one choosing the words: "I cannot help you unless you raise your father from the dead."

Silence. What could she say? Dropping her gaze to the hardwood floor, she finally begged, "Please, Dawn. Please," as the shame of my outburst settled on me.

Two days later, my mother woke early and strode to the bookshelf in the dining room where my parents kept their lifetime collection of novels, alternative-medicine encyclopedias, and how-to

manuals. Row by row, she began to take them all out, inspecting each one and then throwing it to the ground, not completely knowing what she was looking for, knowing only that she had to look. She rose up on her toes and reached into a corner of the bookcase, behind some pamphlets. There, to her surprise, she discovered two small notebooks, never before opened by her, bearing her father's writing.

"Look what your mother found," my father said later that Saturday morning. His blue eyes were gleaming behind his bourbon-colored glasses as he stood outside my door, clearly waiting for me to emerge from my room. I didn't answer, still angry and embarrassed by the other day's tantrum. I remained quiet when I found my mother at the dining-room table, books strewn everywhere, as if unshelved by an earthquake.

"It's my father's writing," my mother said under her breath. It was the first time we had spoken in the forty-eight hours since our blowup. In all my years, I've never seen her so subdued. Subdued just isn't something she does.

"What do you mean, Mom?"

She slid one of the books, speckled in black and white like confetti, over to me.

"These are his notebooks. I must have put them there after he died, not knowing what they were."

I opened it up. Black cursive script in Armenian, precise penmanship and clean lines of text. His handwriting was surprisingly meticulous. I'd assumed he was like her, abstract, carefree, since the booklets I'd previously seen had been typeset. Not being able to actually read the text, I focused on the aesthetic details of his script. I must have said something aloud, because my mother responded.

"Yes, Dawn, Baba was very neat."

On the very last page, there were titles and page numbers.

"This looks like a table of contents," I said.

My mother studied it. "Yes, that's what I thought too."

He'd numbered the pages and printed the years at the top of each one; *1910* was on page 15; *1911*, page 37. These were memories of his early years that he'd recorded in the genocide's aftermath. It was as if he'd been trying to reconstruct his old life, chapter by chapter.

My mother held the two notebooks with both hands. They were so thin. *So easy for them to disappear*, I thought. After all these years—almost my entire lifetime—they had reappeared at this very moment when I needed them most.

"I can't believe this. I just can't believe this," I repeated. "Mom, what do you think it's about?"

She flipped through the pages again and struggled to read her father's writing, her voice barely above a whisper. "'*Ashkharhen e . . .*' 'The world is . . .'"

In the coming days, my mother and I scrambled to the homes of her friends and relatives in the close knit Armenian community, the newly discovered notebooks in hand. This quickly became my social scene in LA: everyone I hung out with was upwards of seventy years old, fluent in Armenian, and willing to translate upon request. Doilies and plastic tablecloths were often present, and all my new best friends had an insatiable curiosity about my love life. Still single at thirty-five? Why had I not found a man? They knew just the right person! This refrain echoed into a full chorus. My mother and I kicked off each bright morning with Arlene, a petite woman with perfectly coiffed dyed-black hair who lived two blocks away. After meeting us at the door with a warm kiss, she ushered us into the elegant dining room. As we sat down, she disappeared into the kitchen, then reemerged with little cups of Armenian coffee and sweets on a tray. I spooned a touch of sugar into the coffee, took a sip, and then set the cup down on the saucer. During the first visit, the endearing Arlene immediately launched into a description of her two nephews—both available! She was so kind and wanted only to help, but

as we sat there, I started thinking about an old Armenian tradition that my mother, always the comedian, had threatened me with. “If you don’t watch it, we are going to arrange a *khosg gab* for you!” She could barely finish without cracking herself up. “No, no,” I’d say, feigning fear. A *khosg gab*, as she explained, was basically an arranged engagement. The girl’s answer to the proposal could be found in how she prepared her suitor’s cup of coffee. Did she add sugar or not? If the man tasted sweetness, she liked him, and wedding bells soon rang. My own mother had forgone the tradition, but my parents did marry in the Armenian Apostolic church. Since the ceremony was in Armenian, my poor father had no idea what he was agreeing to; he didn’t realize it was time to say “I do” until he received a good jab in the ribs from my mother. Over the years, the tall, lean man of hearty Scottish-English descent grew to love my mother’s culture and its name for non-Armenians—*odar*—which, he joked, sounded suspiciously like *odor*.

Once she opened up the notebooks, Arlene translated my grandfather’s writing with ease. Arlene read chapters with titles like “How I Became a Courier,” “An Anecdote from Pera, Constantinople,” and “Return from the Armash Market.” This last one was about how Stepan and his good friend Ners Aghajanian did not want to pay for a second cart back home after a trip to the market with his family. To fit all their goods—and relatives—into one cart, they stuck Nerses’s parents inside two barrels. The story unfolded like a cartoon, of course: while the cart was going up a hill, the precious human cargo rolled off and tumbled down, the dad yelping all the way, though both of them were, surprisingly, uninjured.

How different this time in his life had been, I thought. *Before what is to come*.

So far, the anecdotes Arlene read to us were all from the years leading up to war in Baba’s hometown, then called Adabazar, but now Adapazarı. He recounted each moment almost like a journalist covering an event—the time of day, the number of people in attendance, the full names of friends and acquaintances. Later on, as I grew more familiar with his story and its horrific conclusion, I became obsessed with learning what had happened to these people, even placing advertisements in national and local Armenian newspapers to track down their descendants.

It was the beginning of my own quest, one that would last almost a decade and would take me to a library in Paris; to the Euphrates River in Syria, where I was followed by the secret police; to a snow-covered Viennese monastery populated by compassionate Armenian monks, where I was so cold my fingers went numb as I thumbed through a card catalog in their library.

We also relied on my mother’s cousin Yevkine to help with the translation, as we wanted to spread out the time-consuming burden. She lived high up in the Santa Monica Mountains, and we often gathered in her sunlit breakfast nook, the brightest room of the house, to pore over the notebooks. At first, Yevkine struggled with the script; she hadn’t read Armenian since she was a teen in Beirut. But then she came flooding back. Faster and faster, she translated my grandfather’s words into English. Occasionally she broke into hysterics, shaking from laughter, her eyes tearing up. “What?” I’d ask. “What?” My mother was giggling too, because Yevkine read the Armenian aloud first. “Tell me,” I pleaded.

“Your grandfather told a priest that his friend was a deacon—when he wasn’t. In the middle of the service, they called him up, and the man couldn’t lead the hymn.”

“Mom, he was a little prankster!” I said. I couldn’t believe it. All I knew of him was his struggle, his pain. Somehow, I had reduced him to one dimension: he was a survivor. I hadn’t thought of him—or anyone else who endured a genocide—as having a personality, as being funny and knocking back stiff drinks with pals. That’s what a holocaust does—it erases.

Sometimes, as Yevkine was reading aloud, she paused and looked upward, as if the sky held the right word. I kept transcribing, always asking questions. Occasionally, I would catch a word. This was

a feat, since my fluency in Armenian remains confined to the crucial words a toddler might use, such as *shun* (dog), *gadu* (cat), *got* (milk), *vorig* (butt), and *vardig* (underwear). During one particular meeting, my mother suddenly looked at me and then interrupted Yevkine as if she had made an important discovery: “Baba was very meticulous and exact. You’re just like him, Dawn, in your exactness in telling his story,” she said, her eyes on me. “You have that same drive to be totally accurate. I just thought of that. Baba was very organized. You’re the same, Dawn.”

She was doing it again, encouraging me, connecting me to the past. However, this time I didn’t dismiss her. Something had occurred when we discovered those handwritten notebooks that I cannot—and will never be able to—fully explain. Somehow, it felt like my grandfather was with us, leading the way, alive. As Yevkine pressed onward to another section, my mother continued to confer with her dead father, quietly looking off to the side, conversing under her breath, until she finally declared, “Baba approves of what you are doing.”

I was only half listening to her; I was used to her otherworldly pronouncements, and my mind drifted elsewhere. It was something about the way my mother had said, “Baba was very meticulous and exact.”

Then it hit me.

The two handwritten notebooks we had just found on my mother’s bookshelves detailed his life up to the outbreak of the Great War, in 1914. The other booklets, the ones published by the Armenian press that my mother had spent years trying to translate, began in 1916 and went to the conflict’s end. *A man so meticulous would not have left out two critical years*, I thought, trying to convince myself that there had to be more, somewhere. I desperately wanted to fill in this story’s gap. “Mom, there has to be more of his writing. Can you search your house from top to bottom? How about Uncle Johnny? He was her younger brother, and he lived a few miles away. “Can you ask him too?”

A week later, my uncle Johnny upturned his garage, and at the bottom of a box stuffed with his deceased father’s belongings lay two more of the notebooks.

I don’t know what I had expected. After all these years stashed away, one notebook remained remarkably intact; the other did not. It was yellowed and stiff, the edges curled up as if someone had held a flame to it.

Hopeful, though, we returned to see Yevkine. She knew how important this was to us, and generously spent days with us reading from the same cursive Armenian ink, precise and uniform. We often stayed there until large shadows fell around us and lights began to turn on one by one in the homes on the hillside. In the weeks and months that followed, this was all we did. Yevkine had known my grandfather and felt as pained as we did at his revelations. Often I could tell a terrible passage was coming just by reading her grimaced face. ““Like pickled sardines, we were lying on top of each other without any sleep,”” Yevkine read to us, her expression sorrowful. ““The next morning, they took us out and tightened our bonds.””

These last two notebooks, the ones from my uncle Johnny’s garage, covered the missing time, from 1914 to 1915. Though the writer was clearly the same, his tone had turned somber since the war’s outbreak. While his early words had related all his mischievous antics with friends, now he told of a darker time, alone. I could see the man he was becoming, the seeds of sadness planted.

For all my mother’s devotion to Baba’s story, these were details that she had never heard. Listening to the recounting of her father’s awful days, my mother would stare somewhere far off, her narrow eyebrows frozen in an extended arch as we heard about how his feet were beaten with wooden boards. *Did he cry out?* I wondered. *For his mother? For God?* In other passages, we learned about how he was pushed to the river’s edge to be shot by two gendarmes. We also listened to him describe the richest girls of his town and how they had carried the embroidered fabrics of their dowries from cam-

to camp until they realized there would be no future, no wedding, and had traded them for bread. I bit my lip and inhaled deeply to keep from crying.

Often, when Yevkine turned a page of the fragile notebook, the corner would snap off and fall soft to the sunburst-colored placemat underneath. Periodically, we would stop to tape the corners back onto the pages. At times, full sheets came away from their decades-old binding. Yevkine patiently proceeded despite holes in the paper that had swallowed entire words. She was as entranced as we were, having no option but to try to follow a road that was quickly being washed away.

“I had no idea,” my mother would say, shaking her head. “I had no idea.” We were both getting to know this side of my grandfather, two generations trying to piece his life together. It was as if my grandfather had understood—what he couldn’t finish in his lifetime would be finished in the next.

Sometimes, we had a pile of the notebook’s pieces and were unsure where to place them. We’d search for the matching triangular shape on the page or the interrupted sentence. “It’s like a puzzle,” one of us would say, each snippet—whether it was there or missing—revealing the shape of my grandfather’s life and transporting me back to the past, where I increasingly found myself living. I wanted to leave the present, often cutting short evenings with my friends to go home and study the earth. In addition to his account, I was consuming every memoir and history book I could find about the Armenian experience during World War I and those years from 1914 to 1918. Slowly, I began to see his story in four parts: His dreams for himself before the war. His subsequent conscription into a labor battalion, and the exile of his family from their home. His struggle to stay alive in the Mesopotamian internment camps. And the refuge that he found, so far from home, with an Arab sheikh who transcended their differences of religion and culture and welcomed him into his clan. With my grandfather’s words as my guide, my day-to-day life receded into his. In my dreams, in my waking hours, it was a lost world that I began to inhabit.

He had written his entire story. Somehow, I just knew. As I sank deeper into his narrative, I could feel the dry air; I could see the earth closing in around me. I could feel my thirst, his thirst. I had to visit this place. I wanted to touch the land my grandfather had walked, drink from the Euphrates River like he had, because I had some sense that it would bring me closer to him. I also wanted to see what his life had been like before it was all stolen. I wanted to visit his tree-lined hometown where he had played tricks on his friends, the place that had shaped him. I wanted to see the green hills surrounding his Adabazar, where his dreams of becoming the town’s first courier had taken root, before they withered and died in the desert. I was afraid, but I had no choice. My grandfather had left a road map to his life—all I had to do was follow it.

Empty Plans

1910–1912

THE LOCOMOTIVE RELEASED A SWIRL OF STEAM and edged down the tracks. In his seat, Stepan Miskjian settled in for the five-hour ride to Constantinople. The twenty-three-year-old Adabazar native took this journey frequently and knew it well—the long lake of Sapanja, the dense trees of the mountaintops, the brilliant blue of the Marmara Sea. As the train whipped past the countryside that March day, the magnificence of Anatolia flickered past him, illusory as a daydream.

In the distance, a cluster of red-tiled rooftops sloped down a hill, and he could see the station in the next town of Izmid teeming with passengers. Shortly after the train pulled up, the doors of the cars flew open, and a crowd bustled in and spilled into the remaining seats. From the platform, the travelers asked the heavily mustached Stepan about room in his compartment. “It’s full,” Stepan replied, though four spaces around him were empty. As the people continued to shout, the conductors escorted some aboard. Stepan tensed. He wanted to be able to stretch out but realized it would be impossible to keep the seats vacant. Better to share with fellow Armenians, he thought.

He leaned toward the window and called out in his native tongue to the swell of waiting Turks and Armenians. Understanding his words, three passengers quickly boarded and slid into the spaces beside him, and the train departed. The throaty churn of their language soon filled the car, and the conversation bounced around, inevitably landing on the men’s livelihoods. The soft-spoken Stepan explained that he was a *perezag*, a peddler, on his way to buy skirts and blouses. The newcomers, in turn, relayed that they were *emanetjis*.

Inch e? What? Stepan’s brown eyes looked flummoxed. He’d heard the word but was unsure of its meaning.

“We bring in goods to the merchants, transport parcels, deliver currency, whatever the merchants want,” they said. “We either deliver things or pick them up.”

Basically couriers, he understood, only they were depositaries too. “How are you able to transport so many pieces and still make a profit?” he asked. “The railway charges so much for luggage.”

“We usually take the steamboat and don’t pay for parcels, just five *ghurush* per passenger. But today we had a rush order and were obliged to take the train.”

“How many of you do this type of business?” Stepan asked.

“There are four, and all of us make a living.”

Characteristically, Stepan did the math. If the small town of Izmid could support four *emanetjis*, what about Adabazar? His town was twice the size of theirs. Already, he regularly traveled his *sanjak* or county, selling the women’s clothes bundled atop his donkey; he knew the streets and the residents could tell a good opportunity from a bad one. As the train rumbled west toward the steeples and minarets of the jagged Constantinople skyline, he questioned the men about their work. Before long, they pulled into Haydarpasha, the capital’s stately main terminal.

A grand clock stared out from between its two towers like a Cyclops, casting an eye over the bright Bosphorus Strait, normally dotted with bobbing boats. Even after so many trips, Stepan was still impressed by the sight of the majestic new railway station. Recently built by the Germans, Haydarpasha was part of an ambitious project to increase trade and military might by connecting the rail of the Christian West, specifically in Berlin, with Islamic Baghdad.

Stepan exited the station to the docks, where he caught a ferry to Stamboul, the hub of old

Constantinople, just a short boat ride away. To Europeans, the district of Stamboul felt exotic, like something out of “Aladdin and His Magic Lamp.” It was a place of secrets, of city sounds that seemed to follow visitors everywhere, of darkened hamams and their arched entryways. The alleys were imprinted with the city’s Muslim present and Christian past, with centuries-old churches, tombs, and mosques peeking above the buildings.

Stepan pushed down the lively streets of Stamboul until he reached Mahmud Pasha Street, the location of his modest boarding house. The narrow road was lined with cramped shops and merchandise carefully arranged under awnings, the names on storefronts written in the various languages of the empire—Armenian, Ottoman Turkish, and Greek. Men with fezzes and women in hijabs (headscarfs) could be seen strolling through the outdoor bazaar amid men in tall hats and women in puffy Western skirts.

That night, Stepan climbed into bed and closed his eyes but couldn’t sleep, his wakefulness fueled by excitement. An *emanetji*, he mused. He calculated distances, demographics, baggage costs. The equation was simple, really; if he could withstand the initial losses and convince others to trust him, he would succeed.

Of course, he knew he couldn’t endure heavy losses for long. When Stepan was ten years old, his father, Hovhannes, had died unexpectedly, and since then, money had been tight for the Miskjian family. His father had co-owned a successful hardware store, and Stepan had expected to work alongside him one day. With Hovhannes gone, his wife, Hripsime, had had no choice but to take her two boys—Stepan and his older brother, Armenag—out of school immediately and turn them into breadwinners.

Stepan knew the stakes. If he failed as an *emanetji*, his family would lose its livelihood, its *lavash*. His two older sisters, Zaruhi and Aghavni, had married and moved out, but the two younger ones, Arshaluys and Mari, were still at home and very dependent on him. Despite not having much capital, he did possess another form of currency, perhaps more valuable: his reputation in the bazaar. He was rich in this, he told himself, having started his *perezag* business on his good name alone. At the very least, it would allow him to take out a loan for a job that seemed custom-made for him. Though only five feet four inches tall, Stepan was strong, and his long legs resembled a spider’s, ideal for carrying goods across the web of streets in his *sanjak*. In a month, he would turn twenty-four years old. Did he want to remain a peddler forever? Surely the universe had bigger plans for him than selling goods from behind the haunches of a donkey.

The first morning back in Adabazar after his trip, Stepan rose early in his three-tiered house. He crept past his siblings, Armenag, Arshaluys, and Mari, and didn’t divulge a word of his intentions. He kept quiet on the first floor too, since his widowed mother slept not far from the front door, as if to protect them all. Always dressed in black, his mother, Hripsime, was familiar with her younger son’s high jinks, and she disciplined him for the most minor infractions, like the time he fashioned one of her fine slipcovers into a canopy for his rickety carriage. What would she think of his new endeavor? Thankfully, he managed to leave without arousing any suspicion, and he stepped out onto Nemcheler Street, which arched its back like a ruffled cat on the edge of town.

Down the avenues, the freshly shaven Stepan walked briskly, his wavy hair parted for business, the wrinkles smoothed out of his clothes. He passed through neighborhoods of two- and three-story dwellings with small flower boxes outside windows and fences. Typical Ottoman architecture, the buildings were made of wood and stone, much like Stepan’s own family’s home, only his was freestanding. Above, wooded hills hemmed the plain. The town slowly awakened, the workers hurried to the mills and the fields, the horses tugged loaded carts, the Armenian women started to spin yarn on their wheels, and Stepan’s own sisters tended to their cocoons of silkworms for extra cash. Almost

everywhere else in the empire of some twenty million—a stew of Arabs, Turks, Greeks, Jews, Kurds and others—the two million Armenians were outnumbered. But in Adabazar, about a hundred miles east of Constantinople, Armenians made up half of the approximately thirty thousand residents. One could easily determine the Miskjians' Armenian ethnicity by their last name: it ended with *-ian*, or “son of.”

Like other families, the Miskjians were deeply religious and proud of their heritage. In the early 300s, back when they had a country to call their own, the Armenians had been the first people to formally accept Christianity as their national religion. The four quarters of their exalted town were named after the churches that rose up like an altar in the middle of each one. But the courier-to-be wasn't that observant, really; he had once schemed to drink shots of *oghi*, an anise-flavored spirit, on the way to service with his friends, but he was foiled. Still, he'd be awfully lonely if he didn't attend the religious events. Spirituality permeated Ottoman-Armenian life, influencing social gatherings, schools, and governing councils. To the Armenians, their hometown wasn't called Adabazar; it was Asdvadzareal Kaghak, the God-Created City. Never mind the intermittent plagues, the biblical flooding by the nearby Sakarya River, and the fault line that trembled underground. The God-Created City was Stepan's home.

After making flyers at his friend Harutiun Atanasian's print shop, he proceeded to the Uzun Charshi, the Long Market, where Armenag's store sat tucked away amid the other Armenian-owned shops, bunched together like a tuft of wool. The Turks, the town's other majority, congregated their business at the bazaar's opposite end, and the Greeks and the Jews toiled somewhere in between. Nervous, Stepan knew Armenag wouldn't approve of his new venture, but he was duty-bound to tell his twenty-six-year-old brother about this idea. Given the speed at which gossip raced from stall to stall, he also couldn't delay.

Armenag appeared in the storefront now, handsome with his thin mustache and baby face. Though he towered four inches above Stepan, the brothers bore a strong physical resemblance to each other, with their matching square jaws and deep-set eyes. This was a surprise visit, yet Stepan didn't say a word of greeting. Instead, he handed Armenag the newly printed flyer. Curious, his brother read, “Starting tomorrow I will make a weekly round trip to Constantinople and am ready to take all types of parcels and goods for pickup or delivery. Those who want to see me can find me at my friend Baro Mihran Sahagian's coffeehouse.”

By the last line, Armenag's face had contorted as if he had just swallowed curdled milk. “Those are *bosh* plans,” he sniffed. *Bosh* meant “empty.” “Your present work is good and more secure, and so far we are getting by with honorable work.”

Armenag's colleague had overheard the debate and wandered over, wondering about the fuss between brothers. In the close-knit community, butting into others' affairs was a birthright. Armenag passed him the flyer. “Huh,” the man said, and then he sided with Armenag. “Those are empty plans. Don't act like an ignorant teenager.”

But Stepan knew the timing for this venture was perfect. Just two years earlier, before the life-changing political revolution of 1908, Stepan was able to sell his goods only within his *sanjak*. After the rebellion, the new leaders lifted the long-standing travel restrictions, and Stepan was now allowed to take trips to Constantinople for business. His profits quickly doubled. The party behind the advancement, the İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti, or Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), had blazed into power by seizing government buildings and telegraph lines in the Balkans. Battalions dispatched to quell the rebellion had even switched sides. Fearing a march on Constantinople, the despotic Sultan Abdul Hamid II gave in to their demands and reinstated the constitution, which guaranteed rights to all, regardless of creed or ethnicity. The new Muslim leaders were intellectuals and exiled officials

who became known as the Young Turks. Their passion was contagious, and celebrations of their victory had clogged the roads of Adabazar as Armenians proudly waved the Ottoman flag and tossed flowers to welcome the new era of the CUP and its professed trinity of ideals: liberty, equality, fraternity.

To the Armenians, it had seemed like this day would never come. Under Ottoman governance, non-Muslims were broken into *millets*, or religious communities, each with its own patriarch, local councils, and distinct laws that often treated them unfairly. Families like the Miskjians struggled with fewer rights than the Muslim Turks had, paying higher taxes to the government and local officials and lacking a voice in court. They were also denied the right to bear arms, unlike their Muslim neighbors, which left the Armenians vulnerable to attack. They dreamed of a better life. Theirs was a golden history with Armenian kings who reigned over swaths of land in the east and beyond. The eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire had been their ancestral homeland; their roots dated back thousands of years. However, that was a long time ago, before all the conquests and the lengthy list of rulers: the Persians, the Macedonians, the Byzantines, the Arabs, and, most recently, the Seljuk Turks.

In the late 1800s, the Armenians pressed for reforms, and the sultan installed a new constitution that guaranteed certain rights—but it was quickly suspended. When Stepan was about eight years old, frustration among Armenians mounted, and pockets of them rose up. The sultan cracked down, and many were killed. Nonetheless, still hoping for change, a few more Armenian towns rebelled. The empire's response was swift, and the newspapers covered the tragic consequences. "Another Armenian Holocaust: Five Villages Burned, Five Thousand Persons Made Homeless, and Anti-Christians Organized," read the *New York Times* on September 10, 1895. In all, some two hundred thousand Armenians were massacred. The toll of the casualties from 1884 to 1886, according to a German priest who explored the region in the aftermath, included twenty-five hundred settlements destroyed, six hundred and forty-five churches and monasteries ruined, and scores of coerced conversions to Islam. This violence earned Abdul Hamid II the epithet "the Red Sultan."

Now, in 1910, the feared sultan was exiled. The counter coup in 1909, in which religious fanatics had tried to restore the deposed sultan, wasn't successful. Still, to quell this attempt at an overthrow, the threatened and vulnerable CUP did what would once have been unimaginable: they turned to Armenians for help. No longer barred from military service, the Armenians formed a provisional armed unit to protect the fragile new government. Though the overthrow was thwarted before the militia saw much action, the Armenians were proud of defending their new rights. At last, a progressive government was in charge, and the possibilities for the future seemed endless.

In the bazaar, Stepan wasn't surprised by the shopkeepers' reactions to his new business. *Closed-minded*, he thought as he walked away with his circulars. The town had been founded, after all, on the principle of commerce. It was even incorporated into the town's name: Ada-Bazar, the Island Bazaar. Unswayed by the skeptics, he made his way down the Uzun Charshi, pasting up a flyer at every Armenian coffeehouse. As he papered the commercial district, criticism of his new venture mounted. Traders and customers mobbed him with questions; one critic pronounced, "This type of work won't pass muster in Adabazar!"

Stepan stepped out of the marketplace and brushed off the cynics. For once in his life, he felt absolutely certain about his path, his optimism buoyed by the warming weather. Another harsh winter was behind him; the flowers and plants around town were poking out of the soil, as if no longer afraid to bloom; the deadened trees were bearing their first leaves. He, too, would grow. He, too, would break new ground.

Despite those negative rumblings in the bazaar, the hopeful Stepan was in good company. His greater community was undergoing an unprecedented cultural awakening, ecstatic over their new

constitutional rights: freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, and freedom of speech. Cafés were stuffed with bundles of new Armenian-language publications as a mostly skilled working-class populace swooned over all things intellectual and arts-related. The once-repressed citizenry was almost unrecognizable; it had its own reading room, stocked with two hundred books. “The true readers have been checking out books and newspapers with pleasure,” read one article in the inaugural issue of *Piüt’ania*. There were also credit unions funded by Armenian capital, a sports club, and even ads for coloring one’s caterpillar-size mustache.

For the rest of the morning, Stepan hawked garments in the Greek quarter, his mind spinning like the water wheel at the edge of town. In all these years of peddling, he’d been reliable, rarely returning home empty-handed, pressing through his fatigue, his faithful donkey by his side. On the days Armenians were in church, he traveled to the Turkish or Circassian areas; when they were busy, his shouts reverberated through the nearby Greek villages. He gave a warm *yassas*, “hello,” to his Greek customers, a *marhaba* to the Turks, and a *parev* to the Armenians, striking up new conversations with his rainbow of friends and clients to land a sale.

However, when the hands on his pocket watch twinned at twelve, he returned to Mihran’s coffee shop and saw the bulletin board with his sign-up sheet—iniked with three names, including Antranig Efendi Merjanian, one of Adabazar’s most respected moneylenders, a man so revered that everyone addressed him as Efendi, the equivalent of Sir. His interest was a clear vote of confidence, Stepan told himself, and he set off to meet his first client.

On seeing Stepan, Antranig Efendi smiled widely and congratulated him on his pioneering endeavor. The key to success was trust, he said, and Stepan was steeped in it. He pointed to some provisions and asked the cost to transport them to his sons in Constantinople. Stepan strode across the room, lifted the heavy basket, and told him to pay whatever he wanted. He did the same with the next two men. At the station, he was charged twenty-seven ghurush—nearly three times what his customers had given him. No matter; Adabazar’s new courier was soon transporting his first load to the capital. No one needed to know it was at a steep loss.

On Stepan’s return two days later, his brother, Armenag, was waiting for him, his soft features sharpened into agitation.

“How did it go?” the older brother asked.

“This time, I only recovered my expenses,” he fibbed. “I didn’t make any profit.”

“Didn’t I tell you that this is an empty plan?” Armenag said.

“I’ll succeed soon.”

Armenag tried to persuade Stepan to alter his course. Any decision Stepan made—especially the reckless financial ones—affected all of them. As the elder man of the family, Armenag felt particularly responsible. They were barely making it, surviving mostly thanks to the thrift of their mother. Armenag knew he’d be remiss if he didn’t say anything. “You know we won’t be able to live on the wages I make,” he stressed. “What will happen to us if you don’t make any profits?”

“I’ll continue my street peddling two days a week, so I’ll be able to contribute to our family expenses while I build this other business,” Stepan told his brother.

In reality, he had already stopped his peddling. He was living exclusively on loans now, and in just one week, he had lost fifty-five ghurush, nearly half a Turkish pound, eleven times what he used to earn in one day.

That year, during a trip to Constantinople for *emanetji* business, Stepan rode the tram up to the Hill of Liberty, high above the city. He and a friend attended a ceremony commemorating the Muslim and

Christian martyrs of the revolution, buried together in one grave. These were the men who had halted the counter-coup of 1909, who had given their lives for their new liberties. Thousands of people, including dignitaries draped in elegant dress, crowded around Stepan to honor the heroes. Afterward, with the tram no longer running for the day, he and his companion walked back down the hill, surrounded by the city's fashion-minded Christian and Muslim elite who were conversing in German, French, Ottoman Turkish, and Italian. Their worldliness suddenly gave Stepan an idea. He signaled to his friend, and the two began speaking a made-up language that they routinely practiced, combining foreign words and talking loudly as they strolled. "*Ari chepishéh, medareh sefish, che meh khosheh, part ghoch,*" they said, the sentence part Armenian, part Ottoman Turkish, part Stepan. Immediately, the learned people turned toward these two overlooked men, taking guesses as to their origin. Stepan wanted to laugh but kept his face perfectly straight.

With all these visits to the capital over many months, Stepan was starting to project an image of success back home, but that did nothing for his bottom line. His losses proceeded to spiral. No longer able to haul shipments by hand, he was paying out more and more to porters, cart owners, and the railroad.

For an entire year, he had to float the business like this. By 1911, his debt had climbed to one hundred gold pounds. "Enough losses!" he finally said to himself. "I'll set my own prices." The result of that revealed themselves in just one week: Stepan broke even. The next week, he actually earned money. Soon after, he started bringing in eight to twelve pounds a month, and he expanded into cash transfers by undercutting the official post office.

No longer a peddler, he was a bona fide *emanetji*.

He was a part of the town's renaissance. All around him, people faced off in political debates and even discussed the merits of women's rights. This was unorthodox and groundbreaking for a patriarchal culture in which a new bride couldn't utter a peep to her father-in-law until he gave her the green light. But change was in the air: a thousand Armenians were congregating together, largely because they finally could. Schools were too small for them, as were the churches and even the old silkworm mills. Stepan wanted to remedy this. The town needed a place for its Armenian citizens to assemble. The auditorium should be modern, Stepan thought, and large enough to fit two thousand people, with a stage, chairs, the works. To realize this dream, he joined a community group, and together, the dozens of men began to raise money for the hall.

Even when their country went to war against Italy, they continued to plan for the building's construction. At a play that December, as the evening performance began, the political tensions of the time surfaced. Two drunken men punched the ticket collector and entered the chamber where Harutiun Atanasian, the erudite publisher of the new Armenian press, was seated. "Quiet down," admonished Harutiun, prim as ever in a dapper suit and round glasses. Immediately, one of the men grabbed the intellectual's hat and threw it to the ground, a burst of drama more mesmerizing than that unfolding on the stage. "He has put on an Italian hat. What purpose is there for an Italian here?" the man slurred and then he uttered his opinion of the Italians, "Those bastards!"

The drunk expressed what many were feeling. Just a few months earlier, the Italians had attacked western Tripoli, the Ottomans' last real North African territory, given that Egypt had practically become British. With that, the Turco-Italian war commenced, and it dragged on into 1912. Then the Dardanelles came under fire too, so the Turks closed the slender passage joining the Aegean Sea and the Sea of Marmara, resulting in a massive aquatic traffic jam. Next, a handful of Ottoman islands in the Aegean Sea turned Italian almost overnight. In the press, the empire was called "the Sick Man of Europe," as it kept losing land. Several years earlier, Bulgaria had announced its autonomy, and Austria-Hungary had annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina. In fact, starting with the independence of Greece in 1830, the Ottomans had been hemorrhaging territorial possessions in Europe, which they had

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