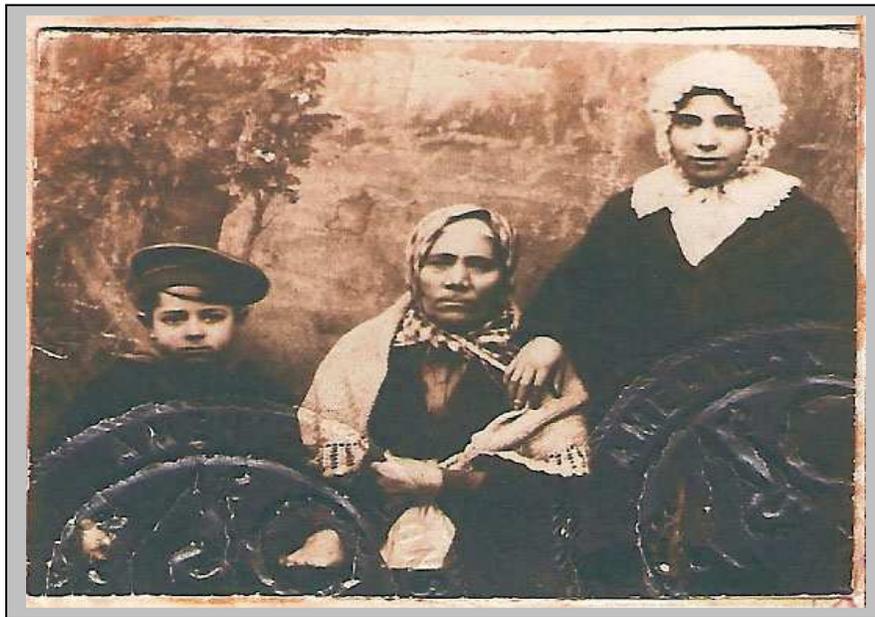


Dragons & Violins

A Memoir of War and Music



DAVID A. ARMSTRONG

*to my mother Georgette,
who taught me how to be strong in the world*

How should we be able to forget those ancient myths about dragons that at the last moment turn into princesses; perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us.

RAINER MARIA RILKE

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Prologue

I HAVE ONLY one photograph of the occasion, yet the image tells me many things. With it and the bright imagination my grandfather nurtured in me, I can relive as if I were there the evening in the sweltering summer of 1956 when he performed a violin solo at Orchestra Hall with members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as part of the conservatory's summer season-opening concert. His solo performance of Mozart's "Concerto in A Major for Violin and Orchestra" was the culmination of an intense, region-wide competition, one for which he had practiced ceaselessly for months, the kind of accomplishment he had set his heart on for four decades at least—since the time when he had been a small boy in Persia, the son of a skilled Assyrian craftsman who made tars, the long-necked Persian lutes whose sound-bowls are covered with lambskin.

My grandfather surely was *born* a musician, and throughout a life of huge challenge and high adventure—one in which he repeatedly had had to struggle

to survive—it was the violin and the music of Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, and Mendelssohn that fascinated him, moved him, and to which he brought his colossal persistence and dedication. Born near the salt-encrusted shore of Lake Urmia in far northwestern Persia—a place that today is part of Iran—near the borders of Iraq, Syria, Armenia, and Turkey, my grandfather traveled with his family on foot and by train to Russia to escape the slaughter of Assyrian and Armenian Christians by marauding Kurds and Turks, endured the famine that presaged the Russian revolution, saved his mother from rape at the hands of a tsarist soldier, then, miraculously, escaped with her to Constantinople, now Istanbul, where they awaited visas that eventually would allow them to immigrate to the United States.

Born Sargis Aziz, my grandfather arrived at Ellis Island on July 4th, 1921, and he long since had become an American with the Americanized name of George Edgar—as well as an aspiring Olympic gymnast and aeronautical engineer—when he and his fellow combat engineers came ashore at Normandy’s Utah Beach four days after D-Day, then fought all the way to Berlin. He had become a captain and been awarded a Bronze Star for bravery by the time he returned home to Chicago, where his wife Ann and a daughter he had yet to meet—my mother—eagerly awaited him. He would live seven decades longer—immensely productive years during which he would father a son, Paul, help design and develop the microwave oven, infrared scopes for the

military, and a host of other technological advances, co-establish the Santa Barbara Symphony Orchestra and play in its violin section for thirty years, as well as become the person in all the world to whom I foremost turned for friendship, adventure, solace, support, and, most importantly, love.

Yet it was his treasure trove of stories from the first extraordinary decades of his life that I clung to as proof that my grandfather was a man of talent, skill, bravery, and determination unlike any other. The stories from those years were the tales I longed to hear again and again as a boy, tales into which I could escape from my own troubled childhood.

*

My grandfather's only daughter, Georgeanne, gave birth to me in 1962 when she was just eighteen. My father, young himself, soon found that the challenges and responsibilities of parenting were more than he could stand up to; he virtually ignored me, physically abused my mother, and they divorced when I was three. Drafted and sent to Vietnam, my father eventually came home to California with a Silver Star and a body and spirit so terribly injured that he could do little but drink for the rest of his life, never getting to know me, never letting me get even a glimpse of him.

My stepfather, also an alcoholic, apparently hated me as much as I did him. My mother did her best to make a life for herself and to offer some stability to my sister and me, but home was a place in which I was constantly

afraid. During my early years in school, I had no friends, few social skills, and little hope that life could be anything other than very hard to endure.

Yet always by my side in my early years was “Poppy,” my grandfather. And it seems unquestionable that among his biggest accomplishments was the fact that he saved my life. The small house in Santa Barbara he shared with my grandmother, Ann, was the sole safe place I knew. I connived to be there every moment of the day I could be, and I spent hundreds of nights on a bed beside his, my chronically ill grandmother asleep on the living room sofa where she was most comfortable. I found acceptance at “Poppy and Mimi’s;” I learned how to give love and to receive it, and I grew up wanting to be just like the man whom everyone in Santa Barbara, it seemed, admired, respected, and wanted to be near. In any restaurant we entered, it was certain that it would take us ten minutes to reach our table, Poppy necessarily stopping repeatedly en route to greet his legion of friends. He was an avid golfer, a bowler, a swimmer—in addition to being one of the best musicians in the small mountainside city that lay above the bright Pacific. And he was the best storyteller I ever knew.

Again and again, I pressed him to tell me about his early years. I related to those stories best, I’m sure, because he was often un-parented as he struggled to grow up, and that, of course, was something we shared. His father had callously withheld his love from his youngest son, and mine had been too

defeated even to try. I had not marched as a small boy across the ancient terrain that bridged the Black and Caspian seas, hadn't been forced to hide, steal—even kill—while still young simply to stay alive, hadn't secreted my way to safety as one of the twentieth century's great revolutions chaotically swirled around me, hadn't fought in a subsequent war to save Europe from an Austrian madman. Yet Poppy's earliest experiences—some of them so harrowing they continue to chill me to this day—were accessible to me because, in my own minor way, I already knew that growing from birth to manhood wasn't always a journey of joy and delight.

*

After everything he survived, it was far from Poppy's most violent account, nor was it his most heroic, but the tale of the evening when he performed a violin solo with members of the Chicago Symphony was *his* favorite story. He had set out to prove to himself and to others that he was a musician of the very first rank, and had practiced far into every night in order to be ready for the competition he ultimately won. Even decades later, I would be soothed into sleep by the sounds of my grandfather practicing his violin until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, the pleasure he took from the music and the striving for perfection distracting him from bed.

In the photograph I keep on my desk at home, my grandfather is dressed in black tuxedo trousers, a white dinner jacket, and a black bowtie. His dark

hair is cropped short on the sides, and his 1950s-era glasses frame his expressive eyes. I wasn't with him that evening, of course, and my twelve-year-old mother and my grandmother were seated in the high mezzanine, each of them nervously waiting for the concert to begin. But it's certain that Poppy *wasn't* anxious as he waited off-stage. Somehow, in the difficult and adventurous life that led up to that moment, he had learned how to vanquish fear and replace it with steady-handed courage and the strictest sort of discipline.

I can see in my mind's eye the steely focus his face must have conveyed when, from the stage, the orchestra's conductor brought him on stage, and I can watch him walk into the spotlights of the great concert hall with the same signature stride he still exhibited as his years waned half a lifetime later in California. He had survived extraordinary trials in nearly a dozen countries in reaching that Chicago stage. This impoverished and largely abandoned son of an Assyrian lute-maker had proven himself a remarkable man along the way, and was about to prove to himself in the moments to come that he was indeed a violinist.

*

With my mother's and grandparents' support and guidance, I grew up to be a successful director and cinematographer working in Hollywood, and they remained in nearby Santa Barbara into my early forties. I was wise enough over

the years to bring a camera along on many of my regular visits, and, over time, I amassed dozens of hours of videotape of my grandfather describing his first forty years, something he did with the clarity of memory and precision of expression that he brought to every other endeavor.

What follows on these pages is the story of my grandfather's early life, as he told it and in his voice. Although he is gone now, I'm renewed each time I hear him describe his first decades, years in which he was intimately linked to some of the twentieth century's most consequential events, a life that began quite precariously inside a barn, his mother and a cow in a nearby stall giving birth at precisely the same moment as gunfire flashed all around them in a harsh land torn apart by war.

David A. Armstrong

Los Angeles, California

Chapter 1

A Faraway Place

I WAS BORN at a violent time in a faraway place you can hardly imagine. No one, not even my mother, remembered precisely when I came into the world, but it was springtime, of that much she was certain—she knew the trees were budding and that early flowers had begun to bloom. People in our distant corner of Persia paid little attention to record-keeping in those days, and saw no need to make lists of the births, marriages, and the deaths that were rather commonplace, after all. I might have been born two or three years earlier, but my mother's best recollection was that I arrived in the spring of 1912, at a time when the winter snows had receded enough to allow Kurdish tribesmen to cross the mountains on horseback and descend on the village called Sheinabad where my parents lived at the time, the Kurds stealing everything they could—

food, wine, tools, money, rifles, sometimes even terrified children snatched from their mothers' arms.

The story I heard from the time I was very small was that on a day when my father and other men from the village were crowded into a small parapet on the roof of the barn, firing at the Kurds to keep them safely at bay, my mother, whose name was Khatoon, or Katherine, lay in the interior of the barn below, far into labor and ready to give birth. A high wall made of mud bricks stood near the thin mat on which she reclined; the wall leaned precariously, and it worried Khatoon as she lay twisting in pain, trying with all her strength to push me into the world. Somehow, she got to her feet and staggered away just seconds before the wall collapsed to the ground where she had lain. A milk cow in the barn was deep into labor as well, and its slippery, half-liquid calf came first, accompanied by a bellowing moan of relief from its mother. A moment later, I arrived, and a woman assisting my mother slapped air into me and suddenly I was alive and screaming. As soon as she had attended to me and secured me to my mother's breast, the woman carried the news up to the roof to my father, yelling at him amidst the gunfire, "Sargis, you've got a new son!"

According to the story I heard so often I began to think I remembered the day myself, my father shouted back that any boy who chose to be born at a moment like that would surely grow up to be a bum, and his lifetime of subsequent insults makes me believe those almost certainly were the first words

he directed toward me. For some reason, from that very first moment, he needed to hate me—not so much for what I’d done, but evidently simply because I existed. And, beginning at that moment, I did exist—a tiny little thing with a wobbly legged calf for a nurse-mate, a heavily burdened mother who had too many kids already, and a father who wanted nothing whatsoever to do with me, surrounded by Kurds who would have been rather gleeful if they could kill us all.

*

When I was two, my family moved from Sheinabad to a place they hoped would be a bit safer—a town called Alwach whose residents were long-persecuted Christian Armenians as well as Assyrians like us, Aramaic-speaking Christians who were the original inhabitants of Mesopotamia and inheritors of the culture of ancient Assyria. Early in the twentieth century, the Armenian and Assyrian homelands were a place of perpetual conflict, and we lived in constant fear of the Muslim Arabs, Persians, Kurds, and Turks who encircled us on every side.

Violence was as commonplace as daylight in that corner of the world, but the beautiful plain of Urmia to the west of the saltwater lake was etched with small rivers that fed lush gardens, vineyards, orchards, melon, tobacco, and even rice fields. Lake Urmia itself was enormous—ninety miles long and fifty miles wide, its glassy and heavily brackish water punctuated by more than a

hundred islands where migrating birds would briefly rest as they traveled north and south.

Like most families in Alwach, we raised sweet and delicious grapes, most of which we sold to the local vintners each autumn, our vines planted behind a wall of linked houses to protect them from the Kurds. The exterior walls of the rows of houses were built of mud-and-straw bricks, the flat roofs of timbers and stout planks that allowed people to sleep on them when the weather was hot and even the slightest breeze was welcome. Inside our house, everyone slept on woven mats on the packed-earth floor, but the focal point was the *canuda*, an adobe-walled pit inside of which a fire for cooking constantly smoldered. My mother would bank the fire as she began to prepare each meal, and I remember that all of us would sit around as if it were a table, careful to keep our feet from the hot coals.

*

By all accounts, the man who sired me, but who had tired of the rewards and responsibilities of raising children by the time I entered the family, was a superb woodworker. In addition to the beautiful tars that local musicians would travel dozens of miles to purchase from him, he could fashion virtually anything from wood. And like many other men in Alwach and nearby villages, he often left home to find work in distant cities, sometimes traveling as far as Russia, where he would join building crews or work in factories making

furniture or wooden molds for casting steel. He would be gone for months at a time, then return with paper money—something our household otherwise seldom had—staying home until, inevitably, my mother was pregnant again and the money was spent, leaving the family without a father and husband once more.

Soon after I was born—and I was the youngest child—my brother Polous, eighteen years my senior, left home as well, traveling to the city of Urmi where he attended an American mission school that was operated by Christians and tolerated by the Persians because they respected its teachers and musicians. That left my sister Nanajan, intelligent like Polous and quite beautiful; Sophia, whose temper was as fierce as a gale; Maria, second from the youngest, and me at home with our mother. I was still very young during the brief time I lived in that house, but I remember being innocently happy there, buoyed by the meals we shared and the warmth that spread out from the canuda to embrace us all, my sisters and I safe and secure every night, my mother constantly tending to our meals, my father absentmindedly playing the tar, one of the dozens he'd made, its familiar but haunting sound filling the small house as the light of the lanterns seemed to flicker in time to his strumming.

My playmates during each day were the animals we kept—cows and sheep and the two horses that patiently endured my playing at their feet—and

in those early years I know I learned something important about being steadfast and loyal from those creatures, and something too about what it meant to care for them. Love for those animals poured out of me, and I thought they cared for me equally in return, and I learned that I could count on animals in ways I couldn't always depend on people, even the people, such as my father, to whom I might have been closest.

My mother loved me without reservation, of that I was always certain. But she had a mountain of work to accomplish each day, and her long evenings kept her at the canuda until our often-meager supper was done. Then, she would mend clothes and attend to a dozen other tasks before she finally stole a bit of time to read the Bible. There were no other books in the house, certainly none meant for children, and sometimes at my insistence, she would read biblical passages aloud to me, and I loved the curious stories about people with strange and exotic names. The Bible, it seemed to me, was full of stories about war, and I began to imagine that life itself was very much shaped by war when the Kurds and Turks returned with more bloodshed very much on their minds.

With the outbreak of World War I and the international chaos it wrought, the Kurds were emboldened to attempt to take total control of far northwestern Persia. First they attacked and plundered the regions of Tergawar and Mergawar, many of the Assyrian and Armenian residents fleeing to presumed safety in Urmi, where Russian troops had been stationed for some

time, keeping an uneasy peace. Then, in October 1914, the Kurds sacked and burned Alwach and the nearby town of Anhar as they advanced toward a massive assault on Urmi.

In a dozen towns and villages like ours, the “Mohamidins,” as my mother called them, rode out from their redoubts in the surrounding hills, killing everyone they could find. Sometimes, a sole rider would gallop into a village and announce that on the following day he would return with a hundred men. The villagers lives would be spared, the rider would declare, but *only* if the villagers left their children behind and fled. And, as impossible as it is for me to remember, many young children—including my own aunt’s—*were* tied to trees and left for the Kurds, in the desperate hope that some of the family might be spared. In our case, the marauders leveled our home to the ground, but, miraculously, none of us was captured or even injured, and my mother and my father—who happened to be at home at the time—saw no choice but to attempt escape, and the sole place they believed might be a safe haven was far southern Russia, immediately north of the Armenian border.

We reached Urmi on foot, our beloved horses and other animals left behind to fend for themselves, and there we discovered that Polous, too, was safe. The Turks were at war with the Russians by now, and in early December, when Turkish soldiers succeeded in destroying a railway line that led north to the Russian city of Tiflis—now known as T’blisi in independent Georgia—the

tsarist government was alarmed enough that it made immediate plans to withdraw every Russian soldier from northwestern Persia to go join the battle against the Turks.

The city of Urmī and the flood of Assyrian and Armenian villagers who had crowded into its streets soon would be defenseless against the Kurds and their new allies—the Turks. By Christmastime, the situation seemed dire. As soon as the Russian withdrawal was complete on January 2, 1915, the Kurdish and Turkish armies blocked every road out of the city, trapping us in the bitterly cold confines of Urmī, where my father and mother were certain we would die.

Yet the rail lines had been repaired, at least temporarily, and, somehow, thousands of Assyrians and Armenians were able to climb onto long trains of flat-cars that rumbled north out of Urmī in the first frozen days of the new and terrible year. I must have been about four, and I remember how strange it seemed that we had to crowd like bees in a hive on those rail cars. Why was everyone so frightened and why were we riding open-air cars in the dead of winter? It was a dreadful journey; we had no water, no place to relieve ourselves, and except for those people crushed in the center of the flat-car deck, no one was safe. Parents desperately held their children's hands, but sometimes the car would lurch and a child would fall to the cinders that sloped away from the tracks, his parents shrieking in horror, screaming for someone to

help, but every time someone fell off, the train simply rumbled on, bound for the mountains of Armenia, and, we, hoped, for freedom.

*

We spent many long weeks in Armenia, my father trying to arrange passports for the six of us that would allow us to enter Russia. In Yerevan, and later in Gyumri, we were lost amidst the sea of the many thousands whose lives had been upended by the fighting, and who were fleeing—somewhere, anywhere—in hopes of encountering a place where they were safe from slaughter and where they might begin their lives again. I remember little more of those weeks than the masses of people, scurrying, running, shouting at family members to hurry along, everyone sensing, I suppose, that with movement came a bit of hope. Like everyone, we lived in daily terror, and Russia was only an imagined refuge that remained very far away.

Then, at last, my father secured the documentation we needed, and we boarded a train for Tiflis, just fifty miles or so across the Russian border. In earlier times, my father had spent several sojourns working in the Russian city and felt comfortable there. We found two small, dirt-floored rooms in the basement of an apartment building, rooms that became our home in a quarter of the city that teemed with refugees like us, people from other places, people with nothing except their desperation.

I was too young to understand why, but not long after we'd settled in Tiflis, my father left us once more, this time traveling to a faraway place called America to see if he could find work. Because those of us who remained behind spoke decent Russian—in addition to Assyrian, Farsi, Armenian, and some Turkish—it was relatively easy for my two older sisters to get work as servants in the homes of Russian army officers—cleaning, cooking, washing clothes, taking care of the officers' children—and they regularly found ways to bring a bit of food home for us. Sometimes, too, we would wait for long hours outside the kitchens of the palatial houses where my sisters spent their days, and Sophia and Nanajan would appear suddenly with leftovers from the Russians' tables, then quickly run back inside.

But a couple of years after our arrival, my father had returned with news that Nanajan and Sophia were wanted elsewhere. Two cousins—who were related to us on my father's side of the family and who had known both girls back in Alwach—had safely emigrated to America, and, according to letters that somehow reached us in Tiflis, they were doing well in a place called Bristol, Connecticut, but now were in need of wives. One, named Sargis, formally offered to marry Sophia, and the other, Absalom Marshall, asked for Nanajan's hand. The two prospective couples knew each other only a little, but that wasn't unusual in those days, and in the tumult of 1916 the offer seemed

to arrive as a opportunity sent to us by God, or at least that's the way my father saw it.

He knew and respected the two young men who were offering to pay the girls' travel expenses, then husband them throughout their lives; the children they would raise would help keep Assyrian culture alive, even in the United States, and when these two new Americans cousins offered to pay for my father's passage to the United States as well, the deal was done. Never mind that my father would be leaving his wife and three of his five children in a war-torn Russian city overwhelmed with refugees; never mind that our very survival would remain in doubt as they traveled. My father would send for the rest of us, he promised as he, Sophia, and Nanajan packed three small bags and walked out of the tiny room and out of our lives, the man who was certain I'd always be a bum too eager to be underway, I suppose, to take a moment to tell me good-bye.

We wouldn't know the stories from their journey for many years, but actually reaching America was not such a simple matter for them. Because Assyrian Christians continued to be hunted and murdered, even inside Russia, my father and sisters pretended to be Russians themselves, traveling under the name Edgarov as they crossed the breadths of Russia, Finland, and Norway before finally boarding a ship in Kristiania, now known as Oslo, and sailing across the Atlantic. It was an arduous and exhausting trip from Tiflis to faraway

Connecticut, but the three of them had arrived at last, we knew, when a letter arrived assuring my mother that as soon as he had earned enough money, my father would send for us as well.

Six months after my father's letter arrived, my twenty-three year-old brother Polous left Tiflis too—not for America and its many delights but for the Russian city of Sartov, where he would enroll in medical school, something the missionaries and teachers at his school in Urmi had made possible. It was Polous whom we knew was capable of great things, Polous whom everyone in the family looked to for support and counsel more than we did to my father, and my mother was thrilled to think that a son of hers one day would be a physician—it was wonderful just to imagine it—but Polous's departure left her with a thirteen-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son to care for alone, and who knew how we would eat and pay the rent on our damp, dirt-floored basement rooms?

*

The Russian people had grown weary of the world war by 1916. Two million soldiers had been killed in battle; two million more were prisoners of war, and a million army regulars had deserted. People in every part of the huge country hated the autocratic rule of Tsar Nicholas II, and in Tiflis their passions were equally intense. The Caucasus, in fact, was a hot-bed of Bolshevik partisanship, and when the revolution began in the fall of 1917, thousands of the tsar's

soldiers boldly strode through the streets of the city each day in a heavy-handed show of strength the government hoped would keep the revolutionaries at bay.

But the Bolsheviks already had enormous influence, and an important figure in the Bolshevik party kept an apartment in the upper floors of the building where we lived, in fact. I remember that as he came and went there was always an air of grandeur about him, even though he was a tiny man. His daughter Svetlana continually wanted to play with a group of us who lived on the street, but we didn't want her to be part of our boy-only games. This great Bolshevik went by the name Joseph Stalin, we learned after he had spoken to the father of one of my friends, asking him to make us relent. But we wouldn't, no matter who her father was. And I'm sure we brave boys wouldn't have said yes to his request even if we had known that in future years he would become one of the greatest tyrants the world has ever known.

The revolution and the civil war that followed were still young when their terrible violence descended on Tiflis. We felt the wall-shaking and always terrifying percussion of bombs during the long nights and sometimes watched in astonishment as buildings near ours burst into flames and burned to the ground. Mortar fire shrieked across the night sky; the bullets from machine-gun sliced through shadowy midday streets and alleys, and the fighting—and the killing—were things to which I quickly became accustomed. I can't remember why we were out in the streets, but one day my mother and I were with my

friend Alexander, who was fourteen and very grown up and worldly, it seemed to me. I was still no more than five or so and very proud to be in his company, and Alexander was clutching my hand to be sure I kept up as we crossed a busy street. Suddenly, we heard rapid machine-gun fire and saw everyone around us, even the soldiers, begin to run. As we fled, too, Alexander fell to the pavement, and, as he let go of my hand, I felt a hot stinging sensation on my back, as if I'd been jabbed with the point of a fireplace poker. Then, I felt the sting a second time, but I was afraid for Alexander, and I rushed back to him and shouted, "Come on, Alexander, get up, get up!"

Alexander didn't move, however, and it was a moment before my eyes focused on the pool of blood that was spreading away from his head and the terrible wound that now marked his temple. I tried to lift him, but before I could, my mother grabbed me and whisked me off the street and into a nearby alcove. "Alexander fell! Alexander fell!" I kept shouting at her, but she begged me to keep quiet. "Alexander is dead," she whispered. "He's dead." It was only then that she saw that the back of my jacket was stained with blood. She gasped, lifted me in her arms, and as the gunfire subsided, we made our way back to our basement rooms.

By the time we got home, the pain from the bullets that had entered my back was intense. My mother laid me on a sleeping mat, stripped off my jacket and shirt, then left me for a moment while she gathered a shaving razor my

father had left behind, a few clean rags, and a bottle of vodka. Small and strong and afraid of nothing, my mother took a long drink from the bottle, then poured some of the vodka on each wound, as well as on the razor. She used her own weight to hold me still, then dug into me to try to find the bullets. The pain was terrible, and I fought to escape it, but my mother was strong enough to hold me, and soon she held one of the bullets in her hand for me to see. She searched for the second wound, and the pain made me scream in agony, but no matter how deep she dared push the razor, she never could feel it hit the hard metal of the bullet. When she gave up her search and ended the makeshift surgery, she cleaned my wounds with vodka again and bandaged me with strips of cloth. She offered me a sip of vodka to help ease my pain, but I didn't like the taste, and fell asleep in terrible pain, the images in my mind focused on my lost friend Alexander lying motionless in the street, his head surrounded by blood. I was too young to understand, I suppose, that my mother had saved my life. Nor could I have imagined that soon I would do what I could to return her favor.

*

Before he had marched off to America, my father had left his pistol and a few bullets with us, thinking, I'm sure, that they might help keep my mother, Maria, and me safe in his absence. I hadn't told my mother, but a distant cousin named Benjamin, who also had found his way to Tiflis from Urmia, showed me

how to use the pistol, and I was quickly a decent shot with it as we practiced in the alleys.

One day, I was playing games in the street with my friend Abrahaim, and we noticed a group of the tsar's soldiers enter the large building where we both lived. After a while, I heard screams from inside, and, somehow, I knew they were the cries of my mother. I ran inside and down the stairs to the basement, terrified by what I might find. The door to our rooms was open, and inside I could see that a Russian soldier had pinned my mother against the mattress and pallet we slept on, which were stored against a wall. She was fighting desperately to escape the soldier's grasp, shrieking in horror, and pleading with him to spare her. I *had* to help and was wise enough not to rush up to the soldier and try to tear him away. Instead, I slipped into the room where we kept the pistol, found it, and made sure it was loaded with bullets.

When, seconds later, I returned to the sleeping room, the soldier had his pants down, and he turned toward me with a look of disdain when I pointed the pistol at him and shouted at him to stop. "Get out!" I screamed in Russian, but he simply cursed at me and threatened that I would be next. As forcefully as I could, I announced that I would kill him if he didn't stop, and even with his pants at his ankles, the brute awkwardly tried to move toward me and snatch the pistol from my grip. As he lunged at me, I pulled the trigger and the bullet I fired tore his face apart. He fell instantly to the packed-earth floor and

was dead, his blood and tissue heavily splattering my mother, the mattress, and the walls.

She and I stood silently for a time, shocked and disbelieving. How was it possible that one of the tsar's soldier had marched into a residential building and attempted to rape her? And after that odious business, did he intend to kill her? How had a seven-year old with a pistol in his hand managed to stop him? For a single moment, I imagined my father being very proud of me, but then I realized that, more likely, he would be angry because I had allowed the soldier to enter our rooms in the first place. That was my father's way; nothing I did ever pleased him, and I suddenly was very afraid that he would blame the attack on me when, inevitably, he heard about it in a letter from my mother.

Before either of us finally was able to speak, my cousin Benjamin burst into the room. He had heard the shots in the basement and now he was astonished by what he saw: the grizzly remains of a uniformed soldier, my mother still dazed and afraid, and little Sargis holding the weapon whose loud report he had heard seconds before.

“What did you do, Sargis?” he asked in disbelief.

“I killed him,” I told him calmly.

“But you'll be . . . he's a soldier and you'll—”

“Forget it,” my mother interrupted, finally able to talk. “He saved me from being raped by this scum. He did a good thing. Sargis was brave.”

I almost never heard words of praise from her, and those she offered me now seemed to fill me up and make me into a man. I had saved her, and she understood that I had, and at last I amounted to something, I now was sure. When my mother said, “Now we must get rid of the body,” I was eager to help and to further prove both my valor and my worth.

But Benjamin was reluctant, still afraid that we all would be killed for killing the tsar’s soldier, asking, “Where can we take him?”

“Close the door and help us,” my mother scolded, and Benjamin did as she said. “They say the tsar’s soldiers desert more and more every day. Who will think that this one didn’t do the same?”

“But where will we put him?” Benjamin asked again.

“Can you get a cart? In the dead of the night we’ll dump him in the incinerator.”

Benjamin looked frightened, yet he nodded his head. Yes, he could find a cart. I echoed my mother’s words, as if to affirm them. “We can burn him. No one will know.”

“All right,” Benjamin said after he considered the plan for a moment longer. “I’ll find a cart. But I’m not sure I can get a horse. We may have to pull it ourselves.” Then he instructed me to take the soldier’s money, his identification, and his weapons, and telling my mother to find something to wrap his body in.”

“I know what to do,” she reproached and hurried him toward the door, telling him to return late in the evening, warning him not to breathe a word of this to anyone.

*

The soldier had no more than a few rubles in his pocket, but I took what seemed to me to be a whole cache of weapons from him—a rifle, the bayonet that was attached to it, a pistol, a knife, and what I imagined was mountains of ammunition. I would have to hide them away from our rooms, we agreed, in case someone came looking for the soldier, and I knew just the place. My mother, my sister Maria—now home from her job as a maid—and I worked into the evening, cleaning the blood from the walls and floors and wrapping the dead man in burlap sacks that we secured with rope.

Then we simply waited, and I thought it would take forever for the night to descend and the streets to empty. But at last Benjamin knocked on the door. His younger brother was with him, and the two men came into the room, looked the bundle over, and pronounced it acceptably wrapped. We worked together—all five of us—to get the body out to the hallway, up the stairs, out to the cobblestone street, and into the horseless cart that awaited us there. Then, we pulled the dead soldier through the silent Tiflis streets, telling ourselves we would explain that we were en route to the cemetery with a son and brother who had died of consumption if a policeman or soldier should ask

us to explain our errand. But no one stopped us in the few blocks between our house and the public incinerator, and when we reached it, we dumped the body over the high metal lip of the smoldering furnace, simply dispensing with the tsar's soldier without a prayer or even a word of good riddance.

Before it grew light, I made two trips to the hiding place I had determined was perfect for the weapons, ferrying the rifle first, then returning a second time with the pistol, knife, and ammunition. Someone my sister Nanajan had known before she left for America operated a grocery store not far from where we lived; he had befriended me and had offered to pay me a token if I would look after the pigeons he kept in coops on the roof of his store, and I had quickly agreed.

I loved animals of every kind and was much more drawn to them than I was to people, perhaps because they never were cruel, as far as I could ascertain, and they always filled me with both pleasure and a sense of peace and the rightness of things. I spent long hours feeding those pigeons, and cleaning their cages, and I was always happy there, where it was quiet and safe above the din of the streets, a place from which I had a broad view of the city, including the great house where friends of the tsar lived, or so people said.

There was a crawl space under the eaves of an adjoining roof that I'd already made my secret spot; no one in the world knew of it, I was sure, and that was where I hid the rifles and knives. They would be safe there, and if

anyone came round asking us about missing soldiers or their weapons, we simply would say we knew nothing. I couldn't have imagined during that long night that I would use those weapons repeatedly, or that that devil soldier would not be the only man this refugee boy would ever kill.

The smoke from the incinerator carried with it a terrible smell as it wafted into the air above our neighborhood, a hideous stink that lasted more than a week, no matter how hot the fire burned or how much new trash the people of the city heaped upon it. Yet none of us ever spoke of the smell or what we suspected must be its cause, and unfortunately, it would not be the last time I would smell the stench of burning corpses.