

Nancy Agabian: Writing Sample from *Me as her again: True Stories of an Armenian Daughter*  
**Introduction: My Grandmother's Letter to an Armenologist on Mars**

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Dear Nancy:

I'm still worrying about you. I'm still trying to find out what you're doing and when you're going to come back. I'm very lonesome, I'd like to see you shortly (short laugh). Now I have to make up my mind what I'm going to do. I'm still here - I'm worrying, I'd like to go home, you know, they won't take me there. And when you come back I have to decide with you. I'm waiting for you. I hafta - I think they gonna send me to the old age home and I don't want to go.

You have something important to do over there? Don't worry about the job - any time you can find a job around here. Well, Nancy, I don't know how much I hafta say it but ah, but, but, but, you have steady work? I have a lot to say but can't tell you in the letter. When I see you we talk about everything.

Love,

Zanik

"No more - we're not making a newspaper you know"

typed by your brother on Aunt Mel's circa 1962 Smith-Corona Electric typewriter (salmon-colored)  
8:40 pm

Enclosures:

- 1) \$20.00
- 2) photograph

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In the enclosed photo, Zanik is standing in the driveway, in front of her daughter's Reliant K stationwagon, as if about to leave. She's wearing a navy t-shirt tucked in, which collects her drooping boobs at the waistline, a striped blue and white skirt, pantyhose, and white sneakers. A big white jacket and sizable white clutch purse complete the ensemble. Her white hair is short, but not too neat, hands are curved inward, hanging in front of her, gnarled. Sun is dappling off the green leaves in the background and on the driveway cement. Roughly eighty-seven, she's looking at the camera openly but not smiling, with some slight question on her face: Who are you? or What do you see? or Why am I important? or You didn't cut off my head again, did you?

Judging by the way my brother was so delighted by the make, year and color of the machine, I'm guessing it was my grandmother's idea to bring out the typewriter. They would have eaten dinner, always at 6 pm, and then after the news and coffee and dessert, she would have summoned him for a special project. She needed someone to help her write because she did not know how to do so, and she must not have trusted my aunts. As they sat at the dining room table, she dictated, and Leo transcribed practically exactly, knowing that I would hear her old country accent and understand her words and the spaces in between – the way she starts out so confidently, gives a short laugh, questions herself, then, perhaps at his prodding to write a postscript, gives him some old lady sass about wordiness with her newspaper remark.

Lately, I had received several letters from my dad and my aunts, reporting that my grandmother was obsessively asking them every day to take her back to her house in Oxford, out near Worcester, Massachusetts. Grammy lived there from the time she married at sixteen until her late sixties. She was born in an Ottoman Anatolian village where she lived till she was ten, then marched to Syria while watching her family die along the way. She somehow wound up in an orphanage where an older brother found her and brought her to America. It wasn't too surprising why she would be attached to the house in Oxford, a space of stability after a childhood disrupted by horror. It was where she

became a woman, where she raised her family. But she was driving them crazy now with her pleas to go back; she was insistent and had practically nothing else on her mind. No one in the family believed that she would be happy there, alone, on her own; but she was sure she would like it better than being dumped in a nursing home.

Grammy wouldn't have understood why I was in California, so I never bothered answering her letter. I had told her a few times what my job was, but my job sucked, and I hadn't disclosed the real reason for my self-imposed exile, to get as far away from my family as possible. Now she wanted me to help her, but how could I? Valerie, my older sister, had pondered living out in Oxford with her, but I never entertained the idea -- what else would be there, besides Grammy?

It was a fluke that I was even in California at all. Throughout college I had been plotting my mode of escape from my family, which required defying a longstanding Agabian tradition of adult children living with their parents: my three never-married aunts rooming with Grammy, and closer to home, my older brother Leo cramped out in his childhood bedroom. Somehow, I finagled a position at a Hollywood TV studio through an Armenian internship program, which met my parents' approval; they must have thought that it would have lead to a good job, at least for a year or two, at which point I would move back to the Boston area. But something didn't sit right with my mother, for the morning that I was set to leave, she came into my bedroom and whispered, "You can't go."

I turned over in bed and saw her standing above me. Her dark brown eyes were wide and her pale pink lips looked naked without her usual coat of mauve frosted lipstick. A few pincurls were clipped tightly to her head, revealing a delicate white scalp.

"What?" I asked, still groggy.

"You can't drive to California. It's too dangerous. We'll buy you a plane ticket."

The brown of her nipples floated ominously beneath her thin cotton floral nightie. My mother couldn't tolerate people leaving her, a trait so intrinsic that I wouldn't be able to question the reason till

years later.

“No, I’ve made plans to drive and I’m going to drive.” My friend Alisa was sleeping downstairs in the den. Months before we had decided to drive across country with my father’s five year old Toyota Camry, which he had promised me for graduating with honors. It didn’t seem fair to drastically change our plans last minute. “What am I supposed to tell Alisa?”

“Tell her she can take the bus. You don’t have to be afraid of her.” Throughout my childhood and adolescence, Mumma had often assumed I was taking action only because another person was pressuring me, which by now drove me totally crazy.

I started raising my voice. “What will I drive once I’m in L.A.?”

“We’ll give you money to rent a car. You can’t drive all the way across the country. You’ll get into an accident,” she insisted.

I was a lousy driver, it was true. Now that the day of my departure had arrived, I *was* pretty scared.

But I was more afraid that if I didn’t assert myself now, I’d never leave my mother. Flinging off the sheets, like a character on a nighttime soap opera, I announced, “I’m leaving and you can’t stop me!” and pushed past her to prepare for departure.

As my parents and brother looked on, I backed the packed Camry out of the driveway. *To California!*, I thought as I reversed into the telephone pole across the street from our house. Leo burst out laughing, Daddy arched his neck to see if there was any damage, and Mumma frowned. *Don’t stop now!* I put the automatic transmission in D for Drive, pulled forward and waved. They all waved back and soon the split-level home of my childhood was gone from view.

At the stop sign at the bottom of the street, I broke into tears and sobbed to my friend, “I’m leaving everything behind!”

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It was quite a drive through northern New England, trees so lush and green they looked edible, then west towards Minnesota where I dropped off Alisa. I caravanned with some other friends through Wyoming, encountering the dome of the sky for the very first time. We made it through tornado-like weather in the Dakotas and a snowstorm near Yellowstone. Utah was repressive and Vegas was depressing. But it wasn't until I stepped out of my car at a rest stop in the desert that I felt everything change. I was terrified of the future, but I felt an unexplainable sense of belonging, as the pebbles crunched under my feet and the dry sun beat sharply on my black hair.

Now, two years later, I lived in Venice, California, and I was pretty depressed. Once I was far away from my home, I hadn't really known how to make a life, how to make friends, how to make food, how to do anything. If it hadn't been for Bee, my friend and roommate, I would have totally been at a loss; she had learned to cook all kinds of things from her mother -- tacos and lasagna.

When we had first moved in together, it was after the internship and I was unemployed, looking desperately for a job. I interviewed to be an art framer at a place with the deceptive name "Special Children's School" that was really a daycare center for mentally retarded grownups. My interviewer was taking me on a tour of the art studios when we encountered a middle-aged, 6' tall Special Child wearing grey chinos and a navy blue v-neck sweater; he accused me of stealing his picture, then told me I was mean. I bawled on my way home in the car, but when I told Bee the story, she cracked up.

The truth was she could laugh because her life was pretty pathetic too. The only work she found was taking photos of kids at soccer games, hoping a parent would buy. Things changed fast, though, and she was getting a real job and buying a car. We still lived together, two years later, but so much had changed between us that I actually missed those times now, missed all our shared misery. One night, back then, we were getting stoned on the floor with some Cheetos when our neighbor stopped by our open door to shoot the shit, told us she was an extra on the Keanu Reeves-Patrick

Swayze surfing-FBI movie. She was blond and wearing a bikini top; I tried not to look at her boobs. Her roommate, also blond and built, pulled up on his motorcycle and she hopped on: they were going up to Malibu to watch the sunset. In contrast, Bee was wearing a pair of boxer shorts with the fly wide open and I was in my pair of pajama bottoms with period stains on the butt.

Fortunately, I found an escape from this reality. In a small tower room of Beyond Baroque Literary Art Center, housed in the old Venice Town Hall, a grand, Spanish building, I attended a multicultural poetry workshop for women – young, old, rich, poor, lesbian, straight, bi, black, Latino, white. Hearing their words and absorbing the experimentation of poetry somehow made me feel like I had a story: all of what I had left behind. I spent nights filling pages with stream of consciousness, working my past and problems through the art filter. There was some meaning to be found.

One of the exercises was to write your earliest memory. Mine was of a solitary experience apart from my family, a hospital visit when I was three years old. A nurse was reading me a picture book, a story about the number one. The one was red, an anthropomorphized character with eyes, a nose and a mouth. He happens to be lonesome, so he puts on a porkpie hat and hits the road. He runs into a green one and a blue one bobbing on a seesaw. When he asks to join them, they decline; a seesaw only works with two.

Little red 1 takes to the road again and comes across two yellow ones swinging a jump rope and an orange one jumping. He is informed that his presence isn't welcomed here either. As one encounters other systems of digits in increasing numerical order, he is repeatedly told that if he joins them, he will ruin whatever good thing they've got going. It seems unfair, especially in the case of nine multicolored ones having a party, drinking punch and playing pin the tail on the donkey, while 1 stands by himself in a corner, forlorn. Incensed, I looked up at the nurse for corroboration. She was wearing a white dress and a white nurse hat and she smiled down at me and I loved her.

“Ready?” she asked cheerfully.

I nodded my head.

She turned the page to reveal a big red zero in the middle of the spread. 0 is obviously a girl, with eyelashes and full lips drawn into the vast open space of her middle. 1 has finally met his match, his true fate, his place in the chaotic world of numerals. Together he and 0 form the number 10. It is a happy day. The End.

My mother and my grandmother told me the rest of the story, when I was a little older, five or six. According to Mumma, I was three and a half when I became so sick with a fever that she had to take me to Dr. Edmund, one of only two pediatricians in our small town. He informed her that I had a virus and there was nothing to do except fill me with fluids and let me get better. The next day I seemed worse, unable to eat and listless, so my mother called the doctor with her concerns. Unimpressed, he told my mother “You have to be a patient *nurse* Mrs. Agabian.”

Mumma could not lift me, I was so limp with sickness, so Daddy carried me to the stationwagon. There was no time to find a sitter, so my brother and sister came with us. Valerie was ten and watched over Leo, who was eight, in the waiting room of Children’s Hospital in Boston.

The doctors thought my condition was more serious than a virus and prescribed penicillin. Ingested back at home, it made my skin erupt with hives and closed my throat. Over the phone the hospital told my mother to take me to the nearest doctor because I was having an allergic reaction and needed an adrenalin shot immediately.

“You shouldn’t have brought her to Children’s,” Dr. Edmund reprimanded my parents as they bustled into his office. “This could leave a bad mark on my record.”

“I don’t care about your reputation, Dr. Edmund!” my mother snapped, her dark hair frantically pulled up, wisps in her face. “This is my daughter and she’s number one!”

Edmund administered the shot, and my parents took me back to Children’s Hospital. I was admitted to the ward and tested for spinal meningitis, children’s arthritis, and rheumatic fever. “We

didn't know what was wrong with you," Mumma told me. "We were all very worried."

"Really?" I asked. As a child, I loved hearing that everyone was consumed with angst that I might have died -- it made me seem so special. Mumma said a prominent doctor at the hospital took over my case, gave me strong doses of antibiotics and watchfully waited. He talked about my condition with the residents, young men who asked me for kisses. I imagined that I must have been pretty irresistible, approaching death's door with a mysterious affliction.

"You were cryin'," Grammy told me. "Cry, cry, cryin'! I was so upset." While she and Aunties were visiting, two nurses arrived to insert an intravenous tube into my arm and closed the curtain around my bed. They ran into some difficulty finding a vein and I screamed in agony. Grammy couldn't take it; she clutched her pocketbook tighter and yelled in Armenian for my aunts to do something. Auntie Mel was a nurse and explained that I was in no real danger, but Grammy didn't care. The sound of her precious granddaughter in pain was more than she could bear. "I wanted to push open the curtain," Grammy said. But just as she was about to, it was clacked aside by the nurses to reveal a clear plastic apparatus sticking out of my tiny arm, my mass of black hair messed up, tears smudging my baby face.

Mumma said my condition eventually improved within a couple of days. Everyone shrugged their shoulders and surmised it was an undiagnosed streptococcal infection gone awry. Talk about an anti-climactic ending; after all that melodramatic buildup, you'd think I would have had a really scary disease. I'd never heard of anyone losing their life to strep throat.

But the Children's Hospital episode provided my earliest memory, one that I would recall throughout my childhood, adolescence, young adulthood. I didn't remember the frantic trips to the medics or my mother yelling that I was number one or anyone in my family visiting or worrying or fighting for me; those were the stories of my mother and my grandmother. My story was of feeling alone, of the white nurse reading to me about the little red 1 who repeatedly found he didn't belong



wherever he went. There was a book to attach myself, an escape route, and all I could do was identify. The strongest memory for me was 1's elation when he met zero.

Hoping that the nurse might have given the book to me, I would periodically search for it all over our house, hoping to find zero. But she never turned up. I loved her absence and the feeling it left me with, the melancholy state of being misunderstood and alone. It was my story, a script, as the psychiatrists like to say -- not so original, but one that I could relive repeatedly.

I also recognize that the yarns spun expressly by my mother and grandmother, in which they are heroines protecting something so special and fragile, are interwoven with mine; they are infused into the earliest memory, imbedding the story with a paradox, with more meaning: theirs and ours.

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People don't want me to tell the rest of our stories. It's not because anything very scandalous or controversial happens. There are stories here of the bisexual, the queer, the transgendered, the outsider, the oppressed, the depressed, the victim, the survivor, the denied, the denier, the forgotten, and the remembered, but fundamentally, this is a mother-daughter-grandmother story. By now, 2008, the book market in America has been flooded for years with the autobiographies of un-famous people. Everyone feels the need to tell a life story, in our age, as an act of catharsis and/or social justice. The average reading audience has little attention for the memoir of the ordinary person making a phenomenon out of a personal struggle; the only true stories that get noticed anymore are those that contain specious details, so that the authors can get thrown to the lions. But sometimes you have to forget your time and place – stories can last forever, and you never know who will find them. Armenians have lived for eons, across the planet, and, despite their fears of not existing, it is likely that they'll be around for ages more in order to figure out their problems. Undoubtedly, they are going to need additional reading material. In the meantime, reader, while this story waits to be found by future generations of cloned Armenian colonies or Armenologists on Mars, you are welcome to escape or

identify.

For a while, I too didn't want to hear these stories of the Armenians; I didn't want to be their special little one. Now I tell my life in order to sort out the yarns of the others, those mothers, to look closely at our threads of loss and longing and leaving, braided together, an emotional timeline of similar but different histories passing one another, over and under and around -- bound. This is a story of what was left behind, what passed down, and how all that history pressed itself into bodies and minds as a life unwound.

## **Chapter 1. Clean to Dirty**

I was naked, sitting on a white enamel stool with a black rubber grooved seat in the middle of my grandmother's bathtub. Grammy turned on the tap; when the water steamed, she filled an empty, quart-sized Columbo Yogurt container. I was wondering what she was going to do with it when she dumped it over my head.

"Wah!" I yelped.

Hot water flowed over me and collected in the crease between my shut legs, making me feel sick to my stomach. I was not used to bathing like this, wet skin in open air; at home, Mumma filled the tub with a few inches of placid warm water before letting me sit inside of it. Shivering now, I began to cry as Grammy soaped a rough white washcloth with Ivory, scoured my skin, and told me to shhh. Then she filled up the yogurt container and doused me again. I cried some more but Grammy persisted. She poured Johnson's baby shampoo into her hand and scrubbed my head, hard. I could feel her fingers, her trimmed fingernails, press right into my skull. "Lotta hair," she said under her breath. "Just like me, when I was little." I looked up at her hair, which was short and gray and waved around her face, but then she pushed my head down and deftly poured several pails of water, one after the other, over my hair to rinse. Bitter suds ran between my eyes and spilled into my mouth. "Please stop Grammy,

no more!” I spit.

“Almost done,” she insisted. Normally, she was gentle with me, adoring even, so her treatment now seemed all the more harsh. The worst part was the anticipation, not knowing if another deluge was coming while water continued to filter through my thick long hair. All I could do was wait for it to be over.

And it stopped: as Grammy was washing my feet, she noticed the black birthmark in the middle of the sole of my left foot. She scrubbed it, and when it wouldn’t go away, she brought it closer to her eyes to examine. “Magic Marker,” she said under her breath, rubbing harder.

“No Grammy, it’s a birthmark.” I told her.

“I don’t tink so,” she said, shaking her head. My grandmother had been tricked before by the accoutrements of the 1970s child. Once she had seen my brother and me eating white Tic-Tacs and had screamed, “Ruth’s pills! Why are you taking Ruth’s pills?” not believing they were mints until my aunt had compared her blood pressure medication to a confiscated Tic-Tac in the palm of Grammy’s hand.

My grandmother kept scrubbing at my birthmark; there was no way she would allow dirt to trick her. There was no way she would allow Magic Marker to soil her granddaughter’s sole. But it wouldn’t go away.

She stared at the mark as if she couldn’t believe it. “Huh,” she said, finally giving up. She dried me off and kissed the bottom of my foot. “Birtmark,” she said in her scratchy voice, her wobbly old accent. She laughed. We both understood that I had somehow won.

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Memories like these streamed out of me late at night, my light on in my peachy pink bedroom, rubber tree thick and full leaves pressing against my window. Sometimes I could hear the bus screech to a stop below on Venice Boulevard. There had been a reading at Beyond Baroque and I tried to stick around to talk to people but I couldn't so I came home.

My hand scribbled columns of words over the lined paper in a little Japanese notebook. Bee had provided me with a constant supply. She worked at the L.A. bureau of a Japanese newspaper, over in Little Tokyo, and instead of the narrow spiral notebooks I'd seen in the stationary store with "REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK" printed on the cover, the Japanese reporters preferred these theme notebooks, around 20 pages stapled together, the cover a sheet of card stock with some specks of dust swirling through it. They reminded me of the homemade books I put together with my father's special appraisal paper and a piece of construction stock for a cover, in which, as a little kid, I would write and illustrate with my crayons the exploits of ducks and frogs.

As a young student I loved reading and got good grades in English. But when I went to Wellesley, I didn't think I could write. So many of the girls went to private schools where the English education was far better than what the shitty Walpole Public school system could provide. After flunking out of my parent's choice of architecture, I declared an art major; I wasn't sure I was very good at art either, but artists represented free and cool individuals which I aspired to. But during my junior year I started to insert words into my drawings and paintings. Recently, I had been taping butcher paper to my bedroom wall next to a mirror, getting naked and drawing life-sized charcoal self portraits; again the words appeared -- I scrawled them on the paper, sometimes smearing them. And I understood that writers weren't artists. Writers were writers. Painters, sculptors, dancers, filmmakers, photographers, singers, musicians: all artists. They had talent with a very specific skill. Writers worked to hone a medium that we all work with everyday, and they tried very hard to make that medium clear, understandable -- they didn't smear their words. They were serious and scholarly with their time alone with the pen and ink or typewriter and all the words in their heads, all the books they read. I never got the sense that people like Charlotte Bronte and her tubercular sisters were smoking dope and experiencing all they could of a full, free, corset-less life, making their little books in their dark and dingy house on the heath cliff.

So in my little Japanese books, I engaged in an artistic process: I wasn't a writer; I was an artist, just moving words around on a page, instead of lines and colors. But it was funny that most of what I wrote was on my family, since they too were a medium that I worked with everyday. They were gone from view, which helped, because now I could just move them around in my brain, remembering what they had said to me, trying to see them a little more clearly. It got confusing when they called me on the phone and reminded me they were alive, across the continent, waiting for me to come home. "The earth cracks over there," Grammy once wailed into my ear. She never called me on her own; Aunt Mel would say hello, ask me how I was doing, and then Grammy would break in on the extension to tell me to come home; then Mel would pass her phone to Ruth, and Agnes would get on eventually.

No one I had ever known had three never-married aunts. Make that two, or even one. If the Brontes had lived today, they would have been freaks. Spinsterhood, celibacy – not exactly modern American ideals. In their three story Victorian house, they each had their own room, the way my friends in Walpole with multiple siblings had their own bedrooms. But were grownups, professional working women, really supposed to live this way? To be fair, nothing about their housing arrangement seemed strange when I was little. It was only later, as a teen, when I started to project myself into the future and imagine my life as an adult, that it seemed completely unacceptable.

In general I loved visiting them as a kid, for they spoiled me, but it could be a bit treacherous at times, like the above bath experience. Just a child, I didn't have the awareness to explain to my grandmother that we weren't back in the old country and that we did indeed possess indoor running water. Usually I would get sent to her with my siblings, when my parents went to one of my father's appraisal conferences in the summer. But when my brother and sister started going to camp, I wound up there by myself.

One time, I woke in the middle of the night to hear my grandmother snoring, and I had no idea what to do. Laying on the sofa bed, under a clean white sheet safety-pinned to a *yoghan*, I propped

myself up and turned around to look at her. In the dim light, high atop two box springs and a mattress, I could make out the mound of her body, heaving with each snore. The task was to rouse her so she would stop. So I shifted in the bed to creak the sofabed springs. She didn't wake. I cleared my throat loudly; still she snored. Finally, I grabbed a bobby pin off her bureau and threw it across the room; it made a *tink* loud enough to startle her. As she fell back asleep, she stopped snoring. For about five minutes.

There was no choice but to call her name. "Grammy," I said. The word cracked open the night in a preternatural, embarrassing way. "Grammy," I said again.

"*Eench?*" she asked.

"You're snoring," I informed her.

She didn't respond.

"You're snoring," I said again. She shifted in her bed, fell back asleep and picked up where she left off.

I thought of my grandmother's facial features, of her small eyes covered by deep eyelids; her arched, thin eyebrows that she dabbed with Vaseline to keep neat; her high, wide cheekbones; her thin lips covering strong white teeth. And her nose. The skin between her eyes bunched around the bridge, the middle was thick and the end was a pointed bulb: a snoring instrument. The noise was never going to stop, and I was never going to sleep. I wanted to sleep.

So I padded silently over the shag carpeting in the hallway and peered into Auntie Mel's pink room with the frilly curtains. It was quiet inside.

Nudging Mel in her big brass bed, I whispered, "Can I sleep with you?"

"Is anything wrong, sweetheart?" she mumbled.

"Grammy is snoring."

Mel slid her tall, wide body over and I scooped under her quilt. It was only a matter of time

before she also started sawing wood, though not as loud as Grammy; her nose wasn't as big. I gazed at decorative cut-glass bottles filled with colored water that served as bookends for her novels (*The Carpetbaggers; Coffee, Tea, or Me*), wondering what to do.

Maybe Auntie Agnes would be less apt to snore. In an old photo album, I had seen black and white pictures of her, the middle of her face Xed out with a number 2 pencil. "That fool Agnes, she doesn't want anyone to see her old *keet*," Aunt Ruth had said. Agnes's nose had been fixed.

I approached her open door and saw her round body gently heaving with heavy breathing. Since snoring seemed imminent, I paused at her closet door, where there was a poster of a leotard-clad lady demonstrating various exercises. Agnes's paintings of ancient Armenian ruins hung on the walls, and knick-knacks from her worldly travels were displayed on her bureau, but naturally this ridiculous chart of the lady exercising intrigued me the most. I studied her womanly curves just as Agnes startled me with a few quick snorts.

Auntie Ruth's room was located at the end of a long hallway at the back of the house. Her room was the least remarkable, in contrast to Mel's sexy pink frills and Agnes's world exploratorium. Ruth was the youngest, the most no-nonsense, the one who made the minor repairs and cooked many of the meals. She probably didn't have time to deck out her room to represent her personality. The walls were painted blue, and there were no distinguishing interior decorating details. There was also no snoring. I climbed into her bed and fell asleep.

In the morning I explained the situation. "You had quite a night," Ruth laughed in her deep, lispy voice, her sloping eyes filled with sleep. "You silly goose." Ruth sometimes seemed like a kid too, since she was littler than Mel and Agnes and she went sledding with me and Valerie and Leo in the wintertime and she often wound up at the kiddie table during holiday dinners.

"Why don't you snore?" I asked. Ruth had a sizable nose.

"I don't know, but you tell your grandmother and aunts that they were snoring," she said tersely.

“They won’t believe me.”

“No,” Grammy said when I informed her of her nocturnal concert. “I don’t snore.” She put on her bathrobe and disappeared down the stairs.

I crawled back into the sofa and relished the moment of stretching out, alone and tired, beneath the *yoghan*: I had survived. The sun shone through the leaves of the ginkgo tree by the window, and I fell back to sleep like a big girl.

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“Good morning *poopooleeg*!” Grammy called as I entered the kitchen. She was standing by the stove, still in her bathrobe which shrouded her large breasts and stooped shoulders. “*Eench guzes?* What you want for breakfast?”

“A bubble egg, please.”

The aunts were sitting in the breakfast nook. Jam, butter, string cheese and a basket of *choregs* were set up neatly on the yellow enamel table.

“What happened last night, Nansay?” Aunt Mel asked. She had a Boston accent like the other aunts but added a lilt of sophistication to it whenever she said any word ending in y: the aural equivalent of one of the frills in her room. She was the oldest aunt, and she operated with an air of authority, like she was taking care of not just her patients at the V.A. hospital but her family too. “I woke up this morning and you were gone.”

“You were snoring,” I said as I sat down across from her.

“No, Nansay,” she said, shaking her head solemnly, wearing a fresh layer of pink makeup and a white nurse’s cap atop her short, silver-streaked hair. “I don’t snore.” Mel had a vulnerable side, too.

“You heard her Mel!” Auntie Ruth retorted, thrusting her chin out, her kinky black hair coiffed into a tight sphere, matching her black knit turtleneck, the mod-Mary Tyler Moore career girl look. Ruth often pointed out when people were being stupid or making mistakes, a know-it-all. “Why would



Nancy lie?”

“Mel can’t accept that she snores,” Auntie Agnes said quietly. The most even-natured aunt, often cheerful and chatty, she was wearing a huge turquoise pendant, nestled atop her big bosom. She turned to look down at me with her wideset eyes. “She’s like that about other things, too,” she stage whispered.

“Oh shut up, Agnes,” Ruth said. “You’re one to talk. You’re the worst snorer of all.”

“I know I snore; who cares,” she chimed in a high voice. “Does it make me a bad person?”

Even as a child I got the sense that Agnes had a wider world view than the other aunts. Of course it had to do with her travels, of which she would occasionally give us a slide show in the living room. But she was also a painter with a studio on the vacant third floor, shelves lined with massive art books, a table covered in gems, semi-precious stones, and a soldering gun to create her chunky jewelry. My brother and I would sometimes escape there during family gatherings to listen to her Frank Sinatra albums, to follow the progress of her current painting, to bang or pluck one of her exotic instruments from Peru or India. She was always going out to some cultural event, the symphony or a jazz concert or a gallery opening, with one of her single girlfriends, and then, she was always telling you about these events, anything she read or thought, even when you stopped listening. The other aunts seemed to resent her, for both the activities and her broadcast of them, and she would passively point out their flaws in response. Though they had different personalities, the aunts were all wrapped up in the same game of self defense.

“Enough!” Grammy shouted from across the kitchen. She hobbled towards us with my egg over easy, yelling quickly in Armenian. Here was their puppetmaster, an unlikely little old lady.

“Oh, Ma, you really know how to hurt me, don’t you?” Mel bellowed. She was up now, putting her dish by the sink.

“What did Grammy say?” I asked.

“She said we snore because we’re heavy,” Agnes said. “That has nothing to do with it, Ma.”

“Razmouhi don’t snore. I don’t snore. Melineh and Aghavni snore because they’re too fat,” Grammy said.

“Ma!” Mel exploded, screaming at Grammy in Armenian. Among the foreign words, I thought I heard “Weight Watchers.” Sometimes when she screamed her voice would go incredibly low, a growl through her nose. As suddenly as she had blown up, she stopped, halted her breath in resignation and shook her head at the floor, as if she didn’t know what had happened to her life. Slinging her pocketbook over her shoulder, she said, “I’ll see you later, Nansay. Give your Aunt Mel a kiss.” I shook my head no. She was scaring me.

“No?” Mel said. “I’m so disappointed in you, Nansay. I’ll get another niece if you don’t come over here right now and give your Aunt Mel a kiss.”

Standing up from my chair, I placed my lips gently on her antiseptic powdered face. She squeezed me hard before walking out the door. A moment later, the other aunts departed, Ruth to a good government job working in the federal milk agency, and Agnes to the illustration department of an engineering firm. I watched their heads bobbing down the back steps past the kitchen window.

Suddenly the house was quiet. I ate my egg and Grammy watched. She buttered a piece of toast for me.

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My mother once told me that my grandfather Jacob, who died before I was born, really wanted boys, according to the outdated old country tradition, the whole worker-in-the field theory: a girl you eventually lost to the family she married into, but a boy could muscle in the harvest and carry on your name. Jacob was ten years older than Grammy who was about seventeen when they started having babies: Mel came first, then Agnes, then Auntie Sherrie, who lived on Long Island with Uncle Tony and my cousins, and then Ruth. Finally Grammy had a boy, my father, and Jacob said she could stop

having babies.

With all those girls growing up under one roof in rural Massachusetts, you'd think there must have been all kinds of intrigue, not like that of the tormented Brontes, with their dark secrets and vows of revenge, but more like the March sisters in *Little Women*: Amy marrying Laurie when everyone knew Jo was supposed to wind up with him, but it was okay because then Jo met that old guy, an intellectual like her dad, a Transcendentalist. Why did aunties remain so single? I imagined it was because, unlike a Transcendentalist, an Armenian may not have been so appealing; it was the only possibility my grandparents allowed, though.

My mother would inform me, when I was a bit older, that Mel had once fallen in love with one of her patients at the V.A. Hospital; he was a paraplegic she would bring around in a special van equipped to load and unload a wheelchair. Grammy had said she would disown her if she married him, so Mel didn't. Grammy had also threatened to disown Sherrie if she married Tony because he was Italian, but Sherrie married him anyway. Agnes had a couple of Armenian boyfriends when she was young, but Mumma said she probably talked their ears off, so she didn't marry either. Ruth never had a boyfriend, it seemed.

In 1969, a year after I was born, the aunties all found themselves with jobs in Boston, and Grammy was a widow, so they pooled their money and bought a house in nearby Watertown. At the time of this particular visit, in 1975, Grammy was seventy, and the aunts were in their late forties and early fifties.

As I said earlier, I didn't think it odd that they lived together. It was fun to be around so many ladies and their beauty processes: Ruth's Dippity Doo smeared into her rollers, Mel's endless shades of bright pink lipstick, and Agnes's Queen Helene Mint Julep Mask which made her look like a Martian. It was like a pajama party, except for when they yelled and screamed.

Mel was the worst for sure, followed by Grammy and Ruth. Agnes wouldn't let her temper flare out of

control, but often she was the target of someone else's rage, so she would have to fight back. When the outbursts happened, often with no warning, I could feel myself swallow something hard, like a peach pit. I wasn't really scared, more in shock, even though it happened repeatedly. I didn't hate them for it, or want to run away even; there was something so compelling about a hefty, menopausal lady completely losing her cool. And of course I didn't question it. I can't say it was like watching tv, but there was some safety, perhaps a voyeur aspect to the drama, knowing that they would never cause me bodily harm nor draw me directly into their craziness. But I had swallowed some of it.

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During the day, while the aunts were at work, Grammy cleaned the house. She hung the wash on the clothesline so that the sheets smelled nice. Hand crocheted doilies covered the tables, which Grammy expertly dusted. She vacuumed the oriental rugs in the den and dining room and the white shag carpeting in the living room and parlor.

When she finished cleaning, Grammy joined me in the dark, wood-paneled den for games of Gin Rummy and Go Fish. She taught me how to crochet, to twirl yarn around a hook in order to make a bookworm, while she watched *The Young and the Restless*. When *Sesame Street* came on, she switched the channel and pulled a pad of paper and a pencil from a side table. As the show progressed, she practiced her English letters. I turned around to look at her from my spot on the oriental rug. "I learn too," she said shyly.

Grammy didn't drive. Holding hands, we walked down to the Woolworth's in Watertown Square, where she bought me a toy jewelry set of necklace, earrings and bracelet, the plastic garnet birthstone reminding me of the pomegranate seeds we ate the afternoon before.

As we walked home, Grammy told me that when she was young she wore a whole armful of gold bracelets. She gestured to her elbow to show how many. "But we sold to get on the boat to America. Beautiful gold. Tsk tsk," she said through her teeth. "The family I worked for, the Arabs that saved

me, they paid me. Tree, four, five bracelets a year.”

When we got home, I sat on the floor in front of her on the sofa and she spoke some more.

“They cleaned me, the Arabs. I had lice, swollen feet, dirty, dirty, dirty. From all the walkin’. The dust. Nowhere to rest.” Grammy paused and looked at her hands in her lap. Then all of a sudden her scratchy voice became louder. “Walk, walk, walkin’, the Turks make us walk, and then we can’t walk anymore.” She shook her head. “One morning, I’m sleeping with my sister, her arms around me, and she won’t get up.” Grammy wrapped her arms around herself. “Wake up! Wake up!” Grammy wailed. “Her arms were so heavy. I couldn’t move them. She never woke up.”

Head down, I pulled at the band at the end of one of my braids, yellow elastic stuck and ugly between blunt ends of black hair.

“And then this man,” she started again, looking determined, “this man grabbed me. He shook me...” She clutched the air, her voice rising. “How would you like it if that happened to you? If a person did that to you?” She wasn’t looking at me anymore. She was interrogating the wall as if the scary man were looming there on the wood paneling, hanging there like one of Aunt Agnes’s paintings.

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After the aunts came home from work, we had dinner with them at six o’clock prompt. Grammy made salty pilaf, roast chicken with crisp skin, and a salad dripping with oil and vinegar. She served me more of everything as soon as my plate emptied. When I finished the seconds, she spooned thirds onto my plate.

“Grammy, I can’t eat any more,” I protested.

“Eat!” Grammy said. “You’re too skinny!”

“Ma, leave her alone!” Aunt Mel intervened. “Didn’t you hear her? She’s full!”

“Ahccch,” Grammy said, waving her hand at Mel like she was a fly. “She tinks she’s the big boss.”

After dinner we watched tv in the den until Grammy said it was time for my bath.

“No!” I said. “I don’t like how you do it.”

Mel was reading the newspaper. She put it down.

“What’s wrong with how I do it?” Grammy asked.

“I don’t like how you pour the water over my head with a Colombo Yogurt container.”

“Nansay,” Mel intervened. “Why don’t you take a shower instead?”

“I’ve never taken a shower before.”

“You’re seven years old and your mother hasn’t taught you to take a shower? What’s wrong with her? C’mon, I’ll help you. You’ll like it – it’s the grownup way to wash.”

Mel led me upstairs to the bathroom that the aunts shared. As I removed my clothes, she turned on the shower to make sure the water was temperate, and then she opened the sliding glass door to let me in. A moment later she hopped inside, surprising me. I had never seen a naked woman before. Mumma never got nude, and Valerie was still just a girl. Mel had big white breasts and brown jiggly-eye nipples. Even scarier was the black curly bush between her legs.

It was 1975, the sexual revolution in full tilt, coinciding with a widescale back-to-nature ethic evidenced by Euell Gibbons, an old lumberjack who ate tree bark on tv in order to hawk Grapenuts; in parts of the U.S., there probably were families doing their household chores entirely in the buff. What was so weird about an aunt, and a nurse at that, helping a little girl to take a shower? All I can say is that I was dumbstruck. Everyone in my family covered their bodies, from bathroom to bedroom; even at the beach none of us were comfortable exposing so much skin. We just weren't the type of people who could be blasé about our bodies. So why was my aunt now revealing herself to me? Perhaps she wanted to break me from our modesty, or perhaps it was all done in innocence.

But I felt differently. “What’s wrong, Nansay?” Mel asked, handing me a bar of Ivory and a washcloth. I didn’t answer and rubbed the soap into the towel, a rain of water stinging my eyes.

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Nervously shifting from foot to foot in the kitchen, I stood by my suitcase, dreading the ritual of kissing and hugging Grammy, Mel, Ruth and Agnes goodbye. Their mouths were sharp when I kissed them, the perfume and close contact to bodies suffocating.

I hugged Grammy last. Her breath smelled slightly of string cheese, her skin of warm Vaseline, a sad look in her eyes. “Let her stay a few more days,” she said to my father.

“No, Ma,” he laughed, “her mother misses her.” I looked at his five o’clock shadow, dark sideburns, and cigar. The week of separation made him seem like a stranger and that my aunts and Grammy were actually my family.

When I got home, I noticed my mother looked odd too, smaller, thinner and younger than my aunts. “Welcome home, sweetheart,” she said in a smooth, soft voice. “Did you have a good time at your grandmother’s house?”

I told her that I did. I showed her my birthstone set.

“Did your aunts or grandmother say anything bad about me?”

I told her they didn’t, choosing not to relay Mel’s criticism that she hadn’t taught me to shower.

“Are you sure? They didn’t say anything about our messy house?”

I shook my head.

Mumma went on, “you know there’s four of them and only one of me. Heaven forbid if you kids help out around here. They only take care of you a few days a year. What right do they have to come over here and judge me?”

Grammy and Aunties would occasionally drop by our house unannounced with a box of Dunkin’ Donuts. The doorbell would ring: “Jesus, it’s his *mother!* Clean up the house quick!” Mumma would command. Scattering, we would grab our belongings and throw them into our rooms. Daddy would open the door, and as they entered, the aunts and Grammy would look disapprovingly at the dust on the

mantle or the piles of newspapers on the footrest. When she was feeling especially brazen, Ruth would sneak up to our bedrooms and announce that she was mortified by our slovenliness.

“Do me a favor, please, and don’t tell them anything about me,” Mumma said.

I trudged up our narrow staircase to my room, which was still the way I left it -- bed unmade and inside-out clothes stomped on the floor. I put down my suitcase, filled with clothes that Grammy had washed, hung out to dry, and neatly folded.

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After a while I stopped taking baths because they were for babies; instead I took showers. Mumma didn’t seem to mind but once school started she insisted that if I went out after taking a shower, my body temperature would plummet and my immune defenses would disengage. “I’ll give you three days,” she would caution. “In three days, you’re going to get sick, and then who’s going to have to take care of you? I will, that’s who.”

I showered every two or three days partly to avoid her wrath, but also because I felt sick to my stomach whenever I took off my clothes. I’d be fine while inside our narrow shower overcrowded with shampoo bottles, but once I jumped out, I’d feel queasy until wrapped inside a big towel.

One day Mumma brought home from CVS a spray-on shampoo called Psssst. “You can use this on your hair so you won’t catch a cold,” she said. Pushing the aerosol button triggered a load of white powder that covered your hair like a layer of artificial snow. Then you rubbed it in to absorb the oil secreted by your scalp. Come winter I heeded Mumma’s advice, showering just once a week and using the Psssst when my hair got greasy.

Sometimes when Leo was using the Psssst, he totally overdid it, hogging the bathroom while he sprayed an even coat of the chemical concoction over his thick, bushy black hair. Then he emerged from a cloud of noxious gas, his hair whitened like an old lady, and proceeded to entertain us with an imitation of “Momma”, a campy old crone played by Vicki Lawrence on *The Carol Burnett Show*.



Momma lived with her middle-aged daughter Eunice and they constantly argued, drawling anger in Southern accents. Often Momma criticized her daughter until Eunice pitched a mental fit. Naturally, we thought they were hilarious.

Leo would stand in front of the fireplace, on the brick ledge that acted as a stage for the living room, assuming his character. “Eunice!” he yelled, “You’re gonna lose on *The Gong Show*! There’s no way your whiny voice can get past the gong!”

I ran onto the stage and joined him, taking my part as Eunice, screaming, “Oh yeah, Momma, I’ll show you. I’m gonna follow my dream!” Then I sang, “*Feelin’s, whoah whoah whoah feelin’s, whoah whoah whoah feelin’s, agin in ma heart.*”

Leo gonged me, using the fireplace pitchfork against the grill. I stood frozen, the way Eunice had on tv, looking completely bewildered, like I didn’t know what had happened to my life.