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{ IN HER WORDS }

Hidden Stories

It was August of 1983 and the heat of the San Fernando Valley kept us indoors. There were six of us on my aunt's king-size bed, all under the age of nine: my brother and me and four "cousins" who were technically my aunts and uncles because they were the offspring of my grandmother's two younger brothers. We were the youngest members of an extended family where three and sometimes four generations interacted with fluid familiarity. On that day, all six of us were lost in the magic of Julie Andrews and the von Trapp children. My eyes watered as Captain von Trapp started singing "Edelweiss."

When my great-grandmother, Nene, appeared at the door, I tried to ignore her. It wasn't hard to do. Unlike all the other women in my family, who were loud and demanding, Nene used gestures more than she spoke and, when pressed, offered monosyllabic responses. She had an expressionless face; she moved and behaved like a ghost. A nonpresence, she stood there in her green wool dress, too warm for the Southern California weather, until she met my eye. She motioned for me to come to her and I reluctantly obeyed. I took her hand in silence and followed her down the stairs and into the garage where a partition marked her room.

We sat on her twin-size bed, my mind still spinning with the music of Rodgers and Hammerstein. She asked me how many times I'd watched *The Sound of Music*. I counted to seven on my fingers. I don't remember her exact words, but I know she alluded to my love of stories. "I have a story too," she said. I'd never heard her speak more than four words at a time. Just the idea of her telling a story seemed supernatural.

That was the first and only time Nene told me of her escape from Turkey in 1915. To my knowledge, it was the only time she spoke to anyone about

her past. She never sought me out again and spent the last few years of her life in near silence.

What I remember about her story is this: Nene was only three when she witnessed the public hanging of her father. Days later, her family and all the Armenian women and children of her village were deported and, over the course of several months, marched for hundreds of miles to the Syrian Desert. She remembered the care with which her mother had secretly sewn gold coins into the seams of her undergarments, how she was instructed to walk softly, so that the coins wouldn't make a sound. She described having to eat grass, and fishing for grains in the excrement of animals. She and two other family members made it to the Syrian Desert, where they watched thousands starve to death. When her tale ended, she patted my knee with her bony hand and instructed me to "never forget."

Nene brought history to life that day. Into my eight-year-old ears, she poured the contents of a tale so horrid, it made the von Trapp experience seem banal. I had already heard about the Armenian Genocide, but it was a vague historical narrative, a murky story about a far away time and place. I had no idea about the personal toll it had exacted on people in my own family. The past colored the way Nene stood, spoke, and thought. Her history could be seen in the slump of her shoulders and in the extended sighs that escaped her lips. On that day, I suddenly understood that buried deep in the stories of nations were the voices of real people facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Twenty-four years later, I was a graduate student in American history still fascinated by the untold stories in history. I was also a tired mother of two toddlers. After an especially difficult day of studying and child rearing, I was lying down to rest when I heard an old female voice. She was complaining bitterly about the futility of words. She talked about the grace that comes with silence and insisted that "words could only bastardize an experience. They contain greed, envy and fear. And when you found yourself in a moment of pure joy, words could only disappoint in their descriptive inadequacy."

The paragraph I heard was heady and poetic and certainly nothing I would come up with myself. Whoever it was didn't believe in the power of

words and stories. I've loved words and language my entire life. Sometimes I think that's why Nene motioned to me that day in 1983. She had witnessed my relationship with words and knew I would treasure her story. An avid reader, storyteller, and listener, I went to graduate school in part so I could continue reading other people's stories. Yet the old woman I was hearing wanted to exist outside of language so badly that she'd given up talking altogether. I realized almost immediately that what I was hearing were her thoughts.

I knew she had a profound story to tell and that she didn't think telling it would do the world much good. I decided she was wrong. But the more I pursued her, the quieter she became. And then she was silent. She kept her words and thoughts from me for months, but it didn't matter. I was hooked. I knew hers was the story I had to tell.

By then, I had gained a lot of experience with silent characters. There was Nene, of course, who never discussed her past with me again. Later, as a student of history, I'd spent hours teasing out the faint voices of women and children in the archives. Untold stories had become my specialty. But how do you write a novel about a character who refuses to speak? I didn't have a clue. I tried looking into the old woman's past and what I could conjure up suddenly resembled the villages of my great-grandmother's past. I was filling in all the parts of the story Nene never got to tell me.

I didn't know it at the time, but that voice turned out to be the voice of Seda, one of my main characters, and she led me out of my graduate program and into the throes of a six-year journey that resulted in *Orhan's Inheritance*.

Orhan came after Seda, but he fascinated me from the start. A young Turkish businessman living in Istanbul in 1990, Orhan isn't especially interested in history. History books in Turkey ignore the Armenian Genocide, and the government still denies it ever happened. What happened in Turkey one hundred years ago doesn't really concern Orhan, but I desperately wanted it to. I wanted the Orhans of the world to know what happened to my great-grandparents. I wanted their stories to be heard and their losses validated. I wanted him to learn from me, but the truth is I learned a great deal from him too, and so did Seda. These two characters, one ignorant of his family's and his nation's past, and the other sick of the toll the past has

taken on her life, meet and are forced to weave their pasts together to make sense of their lives.

For me, the hidden stories of people, families, and places, exotic or familiar, aren't meant to be entombed in silence. When uncovered and shared, they make the world just a little bit better. When I think back to Captain von Trapp singing "Edelweiss," what I remember most is the palatable longing in his voice as he crooned the last verse, "Bless my homeland forever." *Orhan's Inheritance* is my contribution to the soundtrack of Ottoman and Armenian history, a history rich with story, romance, danger, and second chances. And one I hope readers will return to again and again.