

WWII British Cairo Armenian immigrant stepmother repatriation
Hamam Middle East fatalism

The Immigrants' Daughter

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THE IMMIGRANTS' DAUGHTER

Chapter Eighteen

The Orange Pouch

I reach the threshold of my teens without displaying any signs of normalcy defined by the image that Father imported from his native provincial town in Historic Armenia, now Eastern Turkey. That image has been frozen in his memory for forty years and at this time I have to live up to it as a young girl in Cairo - a bustling, Westernized, modern city. The generation gap, in our case, is an abyss. Is it any wonder that whenever we meet, we collide?

Cairo is a cosmopolitan city. Store windows display the latest fashions from Paris and the most recent magazines from America, England, and France, among others. The movies are as varied. We have English, French, Italian, Arabic and sometimes Indian films. Intercultural sports like football, basketball, rowing and ping-pong, to name a few, are organized year round. It rarely rains in Cairo. The city offers a variety of diversions, like music halls, exhibitions, charitable events, and excursions to the beaches, sailings on the Nile, visits to industrial centers and other recreational areas like the Dam on its outskirts and the surrounding parks. It is a far cry from what Father is accustomed to for family entertainment but he regards anything, other than what he experienced in his hometown, as distracting and sinful.

“What is the world coming down to? Back in our time we didn’t think of fun. We helped our parents . . .”

At each mention of “back in our time . . .” I cringe.

The presence of the British Army creates another cultural imbalance. Local young girls, as well as young men, are recruited as civilian workers. The soldiers date the girls. Father cannot accept such changes in lifestyle.

“How shameful. In our time, we didn’t see a girl until our wedding day”! Is he going to use the same methods on me? I shudder

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at the thought of being given away to a man I have never met. I certainly would like to measure his ability to think and feel before saying “yes”. I am like a mouse trying to hang a bell on a cat; all protests and no solution.

Father expects me to be an accomplished housewife like Mama; sew quilts, cook *dolma*, make preserves, and raise children, even though this is a gross underrating of her qualities. I have no interest in such homely occupations in Cairo, which offers more options than domesticity. I want to go to school and read to my heart’s content.

“What do girls need an education for?” Father repeats often. “Once a woman earns money, you can’t control her.”

“Control” irks me to no end. It is demeaning to be controlled like an inane person. I wish Mama were alive to defend me. She is probably turning over in her grave now. What happened to the promise to Mama to educate me?

"You should learn how to keep house," Stepmother rubs in. "How will you ever be ready for marriage?"

Sure, I think. It suits you fine.

I already provide mundane daily services and, whenever we have an occasional maid, train her to Stepmother’s directives.

"She used the same sponge for the fatty dishes as for the water glasses," she complains one day. "You didn’t teach her properly!"

Mea Culpa! We are taught to respect our elders and serve them. How can I train the maid? Each newcomer is older than I am and turnover is high. Progressively their services are curtailed in favor of mine. If only I could leave the way they vanish!

“Do you see what I have become?” I confide in Kev, “I’m no better than a maid!”

“What do you think I do?” he replies, “I have to be in Papa’s shop during all my free hours! He uses me as a delivery boy.”

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“Why can't she do some of the work?” I complain. “She's supposed to be our Mama!”

“She'd drown in a cup of water!” Kev remarks with disdain, and adds, with a sour note, “Papa pays his help weekly. I work there for free.”

His and my concepts on lifestyle differ distinctly from our parents'. Kev occasionally escapes to the Armenian Fine Arts Club where he enjoys playing ping-pong or socializing with friends. I love reading and bury myself in books, anything I can lay hands on; novels, non-fiction books, anthologies, and dictionaries. Even the labels on Quaker Oats tins that come in several languages are not immune to my voracious appetite for the printed word. I read books secretly, for a long time after I go to bed, in the shadow of the hall light, by moonlight, or by the light of the street lamps shedding pale beams through the window. I slide them underneath my notebooks at my desk whenever I hear footsteps. I read them walking to school, in the classrooms, at recess, in the restroom. It is an addiction all right. My parents cannot tolerate this abnormal attraction to the printed word.

“Those books are raping your mind!” Father yells with exasperation.

I'm not going to give them up whatever you say! I determine. Without a real mother, whose advice I can trust, books are my guiding light and my fantasy world. They provide excitement, exhilaration, dreams and a bridge to the outside world. They teach me high aspirations like the ethnic poem “Rise and raise others with you,” or excerpts like,

“Always target the summit
In trying to reach your goal.
Even if you don't reach it,
The effort prevents your fall...”

I am fascinated by new words. I entertain myself for hours looking up synonyms. One summer, I decide to learn the whole French dictionary by heart.

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The past year has been particularly enlightening. English has been introduced into our curriculum - the fourth foreign language to ingest. The teachers encourage me by giving additional reading assignments to test my progress. English opens up new vistas for exploration and it is very convenient. Since my parents don't understand a word of it, I can pass off the extra reading as course study. Under the circumstances, how can I waste my valuable "homework" time doing dull needlecraft?

"Who will want her with her nose always buried in books?" Father worries. "If she would only make some effort at keeping house!"

"She'll have books in her bed, instead of a husband," Stepmother predicts.

I'm not going to sit home and listen to this! I decide. I'm going to work and get out of this hell! But who will hire me at twelve?

"Eli has already a few pieces of embroidery to her name." Stepmother can certainly provoke me by referring to the neighbor's daughter.

"Eli's mother helps her with needlework," I protest.

"Nonsense. Eli does all the embroidery."

I don't want to add that Eli does not have responsibilities at home. She does not have brothers to take care of. Besides, her Mother supplies Eli's hope chest with additional purchases from a peddler, on an installment plan, to increase her chances at marriage. My parents fear I will have nothing to show. What is stored in my brains does not count on the matchmaking scoreboard.

While we each reinforce our positions in our rooted opinions, I am well aware I have fallen behind in needlework, a required course - or rather curse - in this instance.

Embroidery does not stimulate my mind. I might have developed a knack for it, were I left alone in my developmental cycle. Mama used to embroider in a relaxed atmosphere and that picture of serenity is etched in memory. Now Stepmother's remarks, "All girls

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learn needlework. You should have started on your trousseau already!" sound like I am a hopeless case.

The phrase "all girls" always gets to me. Who are these virtuous girls with nimble hands that put me to shame?

My needlework lies around untouched for days on end. It has an interesting design - a basketful of flowers, printed on linen, containing a variety of colors and stitches. In an effort to protect it from dust, I fashion a string pouch from two pieces of orange silk left over from Mama's days. Always trying to be original, I cross-stitch my name on the pouch in a surplus length of pink floss, the way Mama taught me. The pink and orange combination does not produce the artistic effect I had in mind.

Dangling from the S-shaped hook of our mirrored coat hanger in the hall, that eye-catching horror jiggles and sways at the lightest touch, doubling itself in the mirror. It is the first item to attract anybody's attention, even the devil's, should he choose to cross our threshold. Father sees the pouch the moment he steps into the house. I can tell if he has had a bad day at work.

"Did you work on your needlework today?"

"No."

"Why not?"

His green eyes bulge out of their sockets.

I really want to yell, "I don't like it, damn it!" but I don't want to precipitate my funeral. Instead, "I had a lot of homework," I say.

"I don't give a damn! You could have done it if you wanted to. You always have plenty of time to read those stupid books!"

The scene continues at the dinner table.

"I work so hard all day and nobody around here gives a damn! I see other children how good they are, how they help their parents, never answer back! Why can't my children be like them? When will you learn to behave?"

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Kev and I sit there like convicted felons, eyes nailed to the dinner plate, waiting out the storm.

I am really sorry that I do not measure up to Father's expectations. He is indeed a hardworking man who does not see much of daylight. Unfortunately, he does not see much of life either, beyond his tunnel vision. Since I have never seen the small town he came from, nor do I care to, I have a hard time understanding his irritations.

"Teacher said it's all right to read. It's good for us."

"To hell with your teachers! You should listen to me! Everybody gives free advice, but I am the one who pays your bills!"

Most surprising of all is his reaction to my report card. Father flings it into my face.

"Why do you have eights and nines?" he bellows. "You should have ten in all subjects. After all the money I've spent is this what you end up with?"

Before I can offer an explanation, he yells in a crescendo; "Six for needlework? Of what use is your going to school when you fail at needlework! Why can't you sit down and do something worthwhile for once instead of reading those stupid books!"

I am not sure if Father understands that there are no perfect grades beyond kindergarten. I am top of the class. My teachers prize me. My classmates envy me. My relatives support me. In fact, my reputation as a smart girl puts me under pressure to face more challenges than I care for. Why doesn't he understand that I am doing the best I can?

After a while, Father's misgivings become normal fare in life, the bitter pill before dinner. I have no intentions of giving up my books! They are my lifelines.

Perhaps I am as unflinching as Father, waving the orange pouch at him as my first symbolic banner of revolt, followed by many more acts of irreverence against the Establishment, as my teenage years wear on. The readings teach me character, change my fatalism into realism,

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inspire me to be pro-active, and to fight for my rights. And fight I will, if Father does not thaw his image of "all girls."

To be treated as a valueless human being, fit only for the background of family life, without any voice or rights, conjures nothing but indignation. Perhaps my power struggle, symbolized by that orange pouch, originates from the collective consciousness of women aspiring to a voice in their own right. Perhaps I am a maverick. I want to break the shackles of tradition that keep girls servile and ignorant. I feel something is unleashing in me. I want equality, the recognition of my emerging self and the preservation of its dignity.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Hamam

The unexpected defeat of the first collective Arab army by Israel, in 1948, leaves a bitter feeling behind. Defective war equipment, unstable internal government, dissidence against the British rule, the assassination of Count Bernadotte on his mission of peace in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and anger and belligerence of the Arab nations against Israel all point to troubled times ahead.

University students continue to demonstrate against British rule and against the pro-British Government, inciting mobs. Housing is in crisis. War with Israel drags on and off. We are living uncertain times. A sense of doom prevails everywhere.

Mama's relatives have long dropped their visits because they get the cold shoulder from Stepmother. Only Mme. Astoria faithfully comes by, at least once a week. She is the breeze in the otherwise stifling atmosphere of our home. She has not changed an iota in the last seven years, since I met her first. She is still a beautiful, corpulent woman in her late-forties, with sparkling eyes and glamorous as ever. She continues to wear bright colors with high platform shoes, sports an engaging smile and emanates an effusive enthusiasm that disinfects the air of all floating grudges. Somehow, youth is imprisoned in her forever. I love listening to her intriguing stories of the "good old days" even when they are not so good.

One day, she surprises me by remembering her Armenian childhood. She relates that her Syrian husband was the first prospect to propose, a man twice her age.

"Why did you accept?" I ask.

"We had no voice in the matter, dear," she says. "We were four girls and just forced out of Adana, Turkey, our hometown. Dad had a

hard time earning a living. Most girls were given away then to save them from starvation.”

I secretly hope Father will not give me away without my consent.

“My husband already had false teeth when I married him,” she jokes.

I want to ask her how you kiss a man with false teeth, but I don’t dare. It is not the kind of question befitting my age. Love is still a four-letter word in our household, akin to plague.

Mme. Astoria is over again, on this chilly and windy day, her jolly upbeat self.

“It’s too cold to step out of the house,” Stepmother complains, while I serve the traditional demitasse coffee. “I don’t even want to dye my hair! You’re brave.”

In Cairo apartments do not come with central heating. Electricity is expensive. Gas heaters are dangerous. Besides, there is no room in our cracker box for such amenities.

“Why don’t we go to *hamam*?” Mme. Astoria suggests. “I could use a good hot bath.”

She turns to me. She needs support to push Stepmother to a decision.

“Don’t you want to come with us?” she asks. “A rough rubbing with *kesse* will do you a world of good.”

Kesse is a black mitt of coarse horsehair that feels like soft sandpaper. It scrapes the dirt out.

I shake my head. I hate going to *hamam*. I am perfectly happy to wash myself in our tiny bathroom, heating water on a gas stove.

Stepmother hesitates. “I have to ask Dikran about that.”

In our home, nobody’s hair moves without Father’s permission, especially when expenses are involved.

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Mme. Astoria stays around until Father comes home in the evening. The visit to hamam is discussed.

"Is she coming with you?" he asks, pointing at me.

"I can't go, I have school," I risk.

"She doesn't want to come." Stepmother shrugs her shoulders.

Mme. Astoria gives her a stern look while Father turns to me.

"Why aren't you going? Since when do you make your own decisions?"

"I have school," I stammer, trying to avoid long explanations that fuel his angry outbursts.

"You always use school as an excuse!" he yells at me. "You dodge it like a weapon! You go!"

I look at him like a wounded animal.

"I'll be in uniform," I venture, "How will I take my stuff to school?"

Mme. Astoria butts in; "Virginie, why don't you take her clothes with you, so that she can come and join us later?"

"That'll be too heavy. I can barely carry mine."

"I'll send one of my boys to help you," Father offers.

"I'll only take her towel." Then Stepmother addresses me. "You take your underwear with you to school. It's not that heavy."

I am livid but I have gone as far as Father's patience will bear.

"Don't you dare disobey me or I'll beat you to a bloody pulp, without hesitation!" Father swears.

"There's no need for that," Mme. Astoria intervenes. "She'll come. So it's all right for Wednesday? We'll meet there."

On taking leave, she manages to whisper to me. "Don't worry, it'll be all right. We'll have fun."

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I go to bed in tears. *What an old-fashioned idea! How many girls attending an English secondary school go to hamam, for heaven's sake? If my classmates find out, I will be the laughing stock of the whole world! Why do we have to carry on with old-fashioned traditions when they are so outdated? And why is Father so adamant about my going to hamam when he loathes spending an extra penny?*

On Wednesday morning I serve the regular demitasse coffee to my parents before leaving for school.

"Leave your bath towel on the table or else I'll not take it," Stepmother reminds me.

I grind my teeth as I squeeze underwear into my briefcase that has already burst at the bottom seams. I don't want to tell Father about it because I can't tolerate another "look how much your education is costing me" refrain. If I could scrub floors to pay for my tuition, I would. Unfortunately, while books are manageable within one's grip, underwear has a tendency to slip through any available opening.

The trek to school is a high-risk journey with the threat of losing my plain cotton knit underwear in the middle of the street, or worse yet, while crossing a busy thoroughfare. My stakes are higher in class, where my focus inevitably concentrates on the briefcase with a loose bottom sitting underneath my desk. Every time the girl in front of me drops her pencil, my heart jumps into high gear. Will she discover a pink patch peeking out of the briefcase? I'm tempted to forego break in favor of sitting guard to my now overprized possession, but then I may invite more attention.

At the end of the day, with tie and hat on, I carefully put my notebooks back where they belong, clutching my precious briefcase tight, making sure my reputation does not become as loose as its bottom.

It is 3:30 p.m. and the sun lingers on the horizon beyond time, or so it seems. Every shopkeeper sitting in front of his store idling, sipping coffee, or smoking *narghileh* watches me pass by with my

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formal English uniform, holding onto my valuable cargo as if it is an extension of my body.

The bath structure has a circular dome with round skylights, where naughty boys climb up to watch the naked women below. Its small entrance door is barely noticeable. On arrival, I look around to make sure that no acquaintances are within sight. I slide in unnoticed.

A huge mirror framed in ornate gold-color carvings hangs on one wall, dominating the grand scale atrium. It is strategically positioned. The owner/cashier sitting at the door can supervise the operations without rising an inch from where she squats. She looks like a Buddha, except that she wears headgear and never smiles. Her big tummy protrudes from her huge frame in an effort to reach her chin.

Opposite the mirror, on a raised platform, several large rooms with balconies overlook the atrium. The rooms are fitted with divans for the customers' bundles of towels and fresh clothes. The whole place has a musty smell of humidity.

I ignore the cashier and head straight toward the deck where the bathers park their clothes. I recognize Mme. Astoria's platform shoes next to Stepmother's traditional pumps. I settle down to take off my uniform but not fast enough. Someone notices me.

"I remember you from the Armenian school," she says. "Aren't you Kev's sister?"

"Yes," I mumble, avoiding eye contact and hoping my strange appearance at *hamam* will not make the rounds of the Armenian grapevine. Much as I hate being naked, I hate being recognized even more, so I grab my towel, ignore the clogs, and take the fastest escape on the slippery floor of the atrium to the misty dungeon.

Upon opening the door leading to the baths, the heat overwhelms me. The steam makes the whole scene hazy and the soapy floors prove treacherous. The "masseuses," with flattened breasts like boiled eggplants, congregate around the central fountain, awaiting a call for service. One of them helps me to the semi-privacy of the cave-like nook where the constant flow of hot and cold water has formed a sleek

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mossy layer over the wall and around the sink. Everybody is naked. The place has the flavor of leftover rituals from pagan days. Some women parade in the nude nonchalantly as if they are on display. I can hardly breathe in this atmosphere. I stick to my towel as if it were sewn into my skin.

“Here comes Mary,” Mme. Astoria beams, sitting in her skin folds, red like a boiled lobster.

Stepmother sizes me up. She is on the second application of *hennah* and looks as gray as her ashy hair.

“You finally made it,” she sneers.

“I’m glad you came.” Mme. Astoria casts me a smile. She fills her *tass* with water, pulls me towards her and pours it over me in baptismal style. “Come, let me rub your back,” she says, lovingly.

I don’t let *her* do it, of course. It would be a public insult to Stepmother, even though she never rubs my back. She never touches me.

Grandma, father Paul’s mother who is a frequent visitor to our home, has joined the group. I don’t understand the fascination of these ladies with *hamam* except for its social aspect. For them, it is a picnic in the nude. For me the mossy rock seats and fountains, the steamy heat, the slippery marble floors, and the lack of privacy translate to a physical and emotional torture chamber.

I’m also surprised to see Katerina, Mme. Astoria’s daughter, off from work to join us. Katerina would not hesitate to come down the catwalk in the nude, proudly flaunting her well-proportioned contours, were she so required. After a curt, “Hi Mary,” she calls in the masseuse and, without hesitation, throws off her towel to get the *kesse* treatment. Grandma, an import from Lebanon, stares at Katerina intently, taken aback. She crosses herself several times.

“Are you all right, Grandma?” Stepmother checks with her. She’s worried that Grandma may faint in the stifling heat.

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“Yes, yes,” Grandma whispers, looking in Katerina’s direction and hoping that Mme. Astoria does not see her stares. “Do you see that? God Almighty! Look at her body!”

“What’s wrong?” asks Stepmother.

“Don’t you see the dark and light shades of her skin?”

Stepmother laughs hysterically. The lines from Katerina’s two-piece swimsuit can be traced all over her body. “Don’t worry,” she assures her, “That’s just a tan. Katerina’s skin will be back to normal by January.” She makes sure Mme. Astoria is in on the joke.

I wonder if Grandma has ever been to a beach in Lebanon in her thirty years of residence there. Is she another dark tunnel denizen like Father? Katerina gets up and bathes, shedding her dead cells with abundant joy. She leaves immediately, unaware that she added one more joke to her mother’s repertoire.

I leave the steamy chamber next, barely able to breathe. The others linger until the last minute, till the Buddha yells out “Hurry up!” because the men are already on queue outside, ready for the evening shift.

“You carry your own clothes now,” Stepmother nudges me.

We emerge from the building squeaky clean, glowing with red cheeks, and not a dead cell to reckon with. Mme. Astoria heads toward the streetcar station while Stepmother, Grandma, and I walk silently to Father’s shop. He beams at me with the glow of a trainer who has just tamed a wild animal. The four of us walk home, me in front of them in my English uniform, hat and briefcase, carrying the *hamam* bundle like an exhibit of my wounded ego.

Wait till I graduate, I grind my teeth. You will never subject me to this type of humiliation again. Right now graduation seems a century away.

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