

15. Lentils in the Ashes¹

Excavating the Fragments of Ancestral Feminism

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THE STORY might be true, or it might not be. It goes thus: Hosrofouhi, educated daughter of an elite, intellectual Armenian family in 1890s Constantinople, had three suitors. Two suitors lived in Constantinople. The third was an Armenian of peasant origin, who had joined an Irish-American traveling wrestling team based in Chicago. The wrestler's name was Mgrdeech, and he had traveled to Constantinople to seek a bride. Friends told him about Hosrofouhi, and so he came to her gate one day. He asked her for a glass of water, which she fetched for him, and then he proposed to her. Hosrofouhi was faced with a choice between two local men who had presumably found favor with her parents, or the less socially acceptable peasant-wrestler-émigré, who would take her far away from all of her family and connections. To choose the latter would probably run counter to the wishes of her family and would likely mean that she would never see them again. She told Mgrdeech to return to her gate the next day for her answer.

That night, Hosrofouhi went to the catacombs to make her decision. She lit a candle for each of the three suitors, and waited (with feelings of anxiety? indifference? hope?) for the breeze to come up and blow one of the candles out. The suitor whose candle burned the longest was the one she chose to marry. The next day, back at her garden gate, she told Mgrdeech that she would marry him, but that she wanted to go on a vacation to the French Riviera first. And so she did. She then took herself, her trunk, and her feather mattress from France to Ellis Island, and then to Boston, where Mgrdeech was living with his uncle.

This story was told to me by my grandmother, Hosrofouhi's daughter Goldie. There is no one left alive who can testify to its truth. In Armenian folk literature, stories always begin with the claim that "There was and there was not," or *Gar yev chi gar*. It is an intriguing puzzle for a feminist great-granddaughter. What legacy does this story confer upon me? As a feminist, I seek the agency in Hosrofouhi's act. I sift through the ashes of the past to find the lentils of truth. Was the candle ritual a way of asserting some agency in a cultural context that disallowed women from making independent choices in marriage? Was Hosrofouhi hoping to get away from a stifling patriarchal family environment? Having lived through the 1894-1896 massacres of Armenians under the regime of Sultan Abdul-Hamid, some of which took place even in Constantinople, did Hosrofouhi yearn to live in a country in which Armenians were not subject to periodic massacre or second-class citizenship? She might have been a believer in *jagadakeer* (meaning fate, or literally "what is written on the forehead"), might have been sure that the wind represented the will of God or Destiny. Perhaps it was her family, not she, who believed in fate, and the candle was a stratagem to persuade them that her choice was the right one. Or maybe she was really unsure of what to do. Perhaps Hosrofouhi actually lit the candles numerous times, trying out the alternatives until she discerned her actual desire. In that case, hopefully it was drafty in the catacombs.

Women's historians have used fragments of historical evidence to reconstruct women's lives and to hypothesize about women's consciousness, even in the absence of the voices of the women themselves. While I can't see into Hosrofouhi's consciousness, I can attest to the effects of her decision. At the age of 25, as the Hamidian massacres were ending, she ran away to America to marry Mgrdeech, and her family disowned her. She did keep up a flowery correspondence with one sister, but not with the rest of the family. Any possibility of their resolving the quarrel in later years was forestalled by the Armenian Genocide of 1915, in which her entire immediate and extended family was killed by the Ottoman Turks. So what are the effects of Hosrofouhi's decision to throw her lot in with Mgrdeech? Aside from the fact that, had she not done so, she would certainly have been killed in the Young Turks' genocide of the Armenians, it also meant that she had to accustom herself to a new nation, language, and culture. She joined Mgrdeech's family in Everett,

Massachusetts, and their peasant ways were very different from those of the intellectual elite of her own family.

Constantinople was the most cosmopolitan of Ottoman cities, and Hosrofouhi's family, the Balian, were both prominent and affluent. Several of the Balian men were official architects to the Sultan of Turkey throughout much of the nineteenth century, and they designed buildings of great splendor and artistry.² Her uncle, Drtad Balian, the Archbishop, had started a school for boys³ and was an art collector. Hosrofouhi grew up speaking Turkish, which was the politic thing for Armenians in Constantinople to do, but she was also educated in French and Greek.⁴ Most importantly, her home life was intellectually and artistically vibrant. Her family held literary salons in which they gathered prominent artists and intellectuals both local and European.⁵ She would have been influenced by European customs and ideas. European ideas of human rights had been introduced in Armenia, and in the late nineteenth century Armenians were beginning to use a language of human rights in their struggles to free themselves of subjugation under Ottoman rule (Dadrian 570). This period was referred to as the "Awakening" (*Zartonk*), and it included new ideas not only about national identity, but also of education, the family, and the role of women (Rowe 3).

In the context of *Zartonk*, a tradition of Armenian women writers began to blossom. A number of these were contemporaries of Hosrofouhi's who probably travelled in the same circles. Srpuhi Dussap (b. Constantinople, 1841) was the first female Armenian novelist. She hosted a literary salon with her French husband (Rowe 250), so she would have been part of the same circle as the Balian. Dussap's first novel, *Mayta* (1883), "was the first novel by an Armenian woman to address the issue of Armenian women's lack of education and decision-making power" (Rowe 7). Zabel Yesayian (b. Constantinople, 1878) wrote in her autobiography that "in her youth, many of her female friends lamented the fact that they had little freedom; they 'wanted to be educated, to participate in ordinary life, go out with male friends, meet, travel, etc.'" (Rowe 39). These young women felt trapped by their circumstances, and this gives us a new angle on why Hosrofouhi might have fled the family nest. As educated as the Balian were, they may have been among those who frowned upon too much freedom for women. Running away to be married might have been

Hosrofouhi's best chance for freedom. It is also worth noting that a number of members of her cohort (young, educated, intellectual women) did eventually emigrate to Paris, Alexandria, or other urban centers where, perhaps, they could find greater freedom. And so her choice to emigrate was not entirely unprecedented.

These fragmentary bits, these lentils of Hosrofouhi's life in Constantinople, when put together with some of her life choices in America, are suggestive to me of a feminist consciousness. It is notable that Hosrofouhi named her only child, Goldie, after Queen Victoria of England, whom she admired.⁶ Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee was celebrated in 1887, when Hosrofouhi was sixteen. Goldie was born in 1907, only six years after Victoria's death. It is possible that Hosrofouhi admired Victoria because of her sympathy for the plight of Ottoman Christians.⁷ However, I speculate that Hosrofouhi's admiration was based more on the fact that Victoria was a woman head of state, as well as the fact that she was an advocate of choice in marriage for women, and had found happiness in her own marriage. The British Queen wrote to her own daughter:

All marriage is such a lottery—the happiness is always an exchange—though it may be a very happy one—still the poor woman is bodily and morally the husband's slave. That always sticks in my throat. When I think of a merry, happy, free young girl—and look at the ailing, aching state a young wife generally is doomed to—which you can't deny is the penalty of marriage. (Hibbert 104-105)

Armenian women often did not have choice in marriage, and their prospect of happiness in marriage was not promising. Shushanik Kurghinian echoed some of these Victorian sentiments in a poem addressed to an "Armenian Girl":

As a delicate May rose,
Armenian girl, you are in bloom.
Lucky is the one whom
you'll obediently serve, beauty!

The days will pass ... your pretty
face will thread with wrinkles,

silent from grief, the gleam will go
from your dark eyes.

And your only lot in life,
eating, sleeping, and giving birth,
is the mark of the slavery of being born a girl.
(Barba and Rowe 77)

Hosrofouhi was strong-willed, and I think she did not want to settle for the lot of most women. She and Mgrdeech loved each other, and from what we know, they did in fact have a considerably egalitarian marriage—more so than most Armenian women would have had.

Another important choice Hosrofouhi made in America was to send Goldie to college, during a time when lower-middle-class girls seldom thought of attending college in America, and over the objections of Umoo, Mgrdeech's brother, who claimed the role of Patriarch of the family after Mgrdeech's death. None of Goldie's cousins, male or female, attended college. Mgrdeech died when Goldie was sixteen, so Hosrofouhi and Goldie needed to find a means of economic support. Umoo, who was a tailor, told Hosrofouhi that Goldie should begin to earn money by getting a job right away, and that she should not think of going to college. But Hosrofouhi held her ground, insisting that her daughter *would* go to college.

Goldie followed her mother's example of pursuing both education and an egalitarian marriage. She had been double-promoted twice in secondary school, so she graduated from high school at sixteen, which was also the year her father died. She worked in a podiatrists' office, and after a year she began college while continuing to work. But in the end, Goldie only completed one year of college. When *Ludwig* (Luddy) came courting Goldie, distracting her from her college homework, it seemed that the sensible thing was to marry him, since it would ensure that the two women would be taken care of. It was three years before Goldie's first child was born, but I do not believe that she worked out of the home during that time, nor did she continue in school. It is understandable that she would not have had the time to take care of Luddy's domestic needs, work a day job, and go to school at night. Luddy made enough money to support the family without Goldie having to work, but probably not enough to

fund college for her on top of supporting the family.

After marriage, Goldie had occasional part-time jobs, one of these being a department store customer service quality control agent who would report on the quality of service that she received from the sales clerks when posing as a customer. I suspect that she would have made a fine professional, although she never again entered the workforce full-time. Nor did she ever continue pursuing her college degree. Instead, she read widely, took classes in painting, and joined a women writers' group. She also channeled the spirit of adventure she inherited from her mother in other ways. One was through her hobby of entering contests—she wrote jingles and slogans, created recipes using contest sponsors' products, and submitted hundreds of sweepstakes entries. In the 1960s she won a Jell-O contest for "Mediterranean Jell-O Delight," a Jell-O mold with yogurt and mint (as a child I remember our house being full of transistor radios, skateboards, television sets, kitchen appliances, and other objects which my grandmother had won from these contests). When Goldie's second child, Martin, was born in 1931, she read in the paper about a youngest baby contest, and the prize was a ride in an airplane, so she drove straight to the airfield from the hospital, won the prize, and went for the airplane ride with Luddy. Hosrofouhi stayed with the two children on the ground, terrified that if the plane crashed she would have no means of supporting her two grandchildren.

While marriage to Luddy meant greater financial security for Goldie, I believe that her main reason for marrying him was that, like her mother, she was able to recognize the qualities necessary for an egalitarian marriage. Goldie told us that she did not love Luddy when they were first married, but that she grew to love him. Her choice was thus more rational than passionate. And Luddy indeed proved to be an excellent domestic partner. He survived the Armenian genocide as a teenager, went to college on scholarship in the U.S., and got a degree in chemistry. He had lost his only sister in the Genocide, although he never told us exactly what had happened to her: she may have been killed, or she may have been taken away to become a Turkish concubine. He worked as a food inspector and then as a stain remover in a drycleaner's shop. He loved to tinker with cars and was an admirer of Abraham Lincoln. Like Goldie, he enjoyed the domestic arts—everything from cooking, gardening, sewing, ironing, and caring for the children. When I was

young, Luddy made a weekly batch of yogurt (*madzoon*) in a big pot that was wrapped in towels and sat on the steam radiator. He also sewed doll clothes.

There was never any question whether Goldie and Luddy's children, Phyllis and Martin, would go to college. Phyllis, my mother, attended Boston University and went on to graduate school in Speech, Language, and Hearing Pathology. She received a Master's degree in 1951—the only one of her friends to do so. She worked both before and after her marriage, taking some years off only when her children were young. Later, she worked in the public schools, which meant that she could work mothers' hours when my sister and I were in school. Still, she was one of very few professional working mothers in our town.

Unlike her mother and grandmother, Phyllis married for love more than for security. But like her mother and grandmother, she found a man with whom she could have an egalitarian marriage. Her husband, Howard, was a very attentive and gentle parent who helped raise two girls without ever suggesting that they should limit their aspirations. He and Phyllis had a flexible arrangement about who made the money in the family. When he was laid off from his job in the recession of 1971, he and Phyllis decided that she would go back to work full time, while he would freelance as an optical physicist. For the next ten years, Phyllis earned the bigger paycheck in the family. Howard did struggle with feelings of failure as a masculine provider for his family, but he managed to confront those feelings and refrain from inflicting them upon the rest of the family. He loved having his own consulting business, and my mother loved her profession and found fulfillment in working. In the 1970s, my father gave a donation to N.O.W. and maintained a membership for a number of years.

I note that each of my foremothers pursued some very unconventional life choices while also being firmly grounded in the intimacies of family life. Raising children was the first priority. Each of the three made unconventional choices for women of their era, and my grandmother and mother both knew that their choices were supported by their own mothers. However, none of them became feminist activists. Given the flourishing activity of women writers of her generation, Hosrofouhi might have been able to participate in some way in that culture, although I believe it would have meant defying her family. Goldie was thirteen when the 19th Amendment passed, so perhaps she believed that

equality was at hand. I asked my mother recently what she thought of the “Women’s Lib Movement” when it came about. She said that she didn’t have much time to pay attention to it because she was working and raising children. Instead, I feel that all three of my foremothers modeled feminism through their day-to-day lived experiences—they all enacted feminist principles through choices they made in their professional and personal lives, and family was central to their lived feminism, rather than being inimical to it.

Our families play a central role in how and why we become feminists. I am reminded of bell hooks’s comment that “I came to theory because I was hurting” (“Teaching to Transgress” 59). In her case, the hurt originated in her childhood experience of family itself, as she writes: “Whenever I tried in childhood to compel folks around me to do things differently, to look at the world differently, using theory as intervention, as a way to challenge the status quo, I was punished” (“Teaching to Transgress” 59–60). She felt like an outsider in her family, and “did not truly feel connected to these strange people, to these familial folks who could not only fail to grasp my worldview but who just simply did not want to hear it” (“Teaching to Transgress” 60). Her experience will surely resonate with many women who began to formulate feminist ideas in patriarchal homes, whose coming to feminism meant making a break with family ideologies and traditions. For others of us, like me, family stood in a different relationship to our emerging feminism. I felt safest, most able to be myself and explore whatever ideas I wanted to, in my home, among my family. The exploration of ideas, the wondering about how and why the world might work more justly than it does, were encouraged topics of conversation in my home.

That some families are safe spaces for the women in them to explore feminist ideas, while others are not, is a complex matter. Armenian families have strongly encoded patriarchal values, which can be traced to the imposition of Christian patriarchal monotheism, circa 400 C.E. Prior to the conversion of Armenians to Christianity, there is some evidence suggesting that there was some greater egalitarianism among women and men (Dadoyan n.p.). But under Orthodox Christianity, Eve’s original sin became central to the way Armenians (like other Christians) understand women and sexuality. My family departed from tradition in declining to participate in the Armenian church. This was also true of Hosrofouhi, Goldie, and Phyllis. My own parents took us

to the Unitarian Church, where feminism was thriving in the 1970s. The choice of church for the family, while not conceived of as a feminist act by either of my parents, nevertheless functioned to protect me from the worst of Armenian patriarchal dogma.

For subjugated peoples, the family may function as an important source of resistance to race, religious, or ethnicity-based oppression, but it may also be impaired in its functioning by that very oppression. In an essay on the Black Family and self-esteem, bell hooks meditates on the damaging effects that white supremacist patriarchy has had on black families both before and after the Civil Rights era. During and after slavery, Black people used an extended family structure, including biological and chosen members, often centered around a maternal figure, to survive racist domination (hooks, "Rock My Soul" 120-21); but many Twentieth-Century Black Americans came to emulate the white patriarchal family model, which resulted in damage to the self-esteem of male and female members of the family alike (hooks, "Rock My Soul" 121).

Armenian diasporic communities stand in a slightly different but still ambivalent relationship to Euro-American dominant culture. On the one hand, the Europeans and Americans came to our rescue (to some extent) during the Genocide, and thus we perceive these nations to have been liberating, even welcoming. On the other hand, the Western powers promised to come to the rescue of Armenians during and after the Genocide, and to ensure an independent Armenia—but these promises were not kept. Furthermore, the afterlife of the Armenian genocide consists of the ongoing denial of this historical reality by Turkey, with collusion from the United States.⁸ In light of this, it makes sense that Armenians in America do not feel that the outside world is safe, just, or that we are recognized by it. The family becomes a haven, but often this haven is hostile to feminism. Many feminists of color and Jewish feminists have noticed that feminism is often perceived as a threat to group solidarity in their communities, and this is true in Armenian diasporic families as well. By declining to affiliate with the most nationalistic of Armenian diaspora institutions, my family also rejected this way of conceptualizing ethnic solidarity.

Finally, genocide, slavery or other traumas inflicted upon peoples have a deleterious effect upon families. Unresolved trauma may spill out through domestic abuse, an inability to express love, and other dysfunctional behaviors and can be passed down to subsequent gener-

ations. This pattern did not have extreme negative effects in my own family. Luddy, for instance, certainly had unshared trauma, since he never spoke about what he had suffered and witnessed. However, he was always gentle and kind with his family; if anything, the family he formed with my grandmother was a redemptive space in which he could recreate the loving, functioning domestic life that had been ripped apart by genocidal acts.

I believe, then, that the model of family life held out as the example for me was differently inflected than either that of the many middle-class white Americans, or that of many Armenian American girls of my generation. While some people come to feminism out of an experience of abusive, devaluing, or dehumanizing forms of gender oppression in their homes, I did not. And while most of the Armenian American girls of my generation were raised according to strictly patriarchal and religious values, Armenian nationalism, or with family dysfunction created by genocide trauma, I was not. In fact, I believe that the “lived feminism” of my great-grandmother, grandmother and mother are the lentils in the ashes—the seed of feminism in my life.

So, how did these seeds of feminism sprout in my life? In part, I came to feminism through my encounters with the sexism of the outside world—the world outside my family. I also came to feminism because of how the lessons of the Armenian Genocide were interpreted in my family. I learned from my family that we are all morally bound to be on the side of the oppressed of the world, to stand with them, whoever they are and wherever they may be. This was a slightly different reading than the dominant Armenian diaspora interpretation, which was much more nationalistic. Indeed, my identities as “Armenian” and “feminist” seemed mutually exclusive for many years. It wasn’t until I found a small group of Armenian feminists as a young adult that I realized how my feminist and Armenian identities could be compatible.

In this paper, I have argued that the family can sow the seeds of feminism through the lived feminism of its members, even when those members are not activists. I also argue that it is essential for us to tell our motherline stories if we are to fully comprehend where we wish to stand as feminists. Narrative is always political, and narratives of the past—our individual pasts and our collective pasts—require a theoretically grounded reader in order to be fully understood. Fredric Jameson puts it thus: “Only a genuine philosophy of history is capable

of respecting the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past while disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles, with those of the present day" (3). Jameson contends that only Marxist philosophy is adequate to the task of excavating the "political unconscious" in order to uncover its "socially symbolic acts" (6). He emphasizes that the public/private distinction is important in such an analysis, as any analysis that maintains a public/private distinction in fact clouds the underlying politics that shape and produce behaviors in the "private realm." But I would suggest that feminists have long understood a similar logic by virtue of the recognition that "the personal is political." For Black women this knowledge was always present due to their lived experience (Collins 9). For many white Second Wavers, this critical reading ability was developed via consciousness-raising groups—they learned to decolonize their consciousnesses and frame their stories in a way that would be most beneficial to themselves and the women who shared their political aims.

The earned result of such excavatory work is clarity about who we are, where we stand, and what strengths we may draw upon. In my case, the ashes covering my great-grandmother's life are thick and have yielded but a few lentils for me to find. But they have been fruitful lentils nevertheless. The lived feminisms of my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother cleared the ground for me to stand upon. I'm standing on that ground, from which I've swept away as much ash as I can, and I can feel the lentils like pebbles beneath my feet.

¹"Lentils in the ashes" is, of course, a reference to the Brothers Grimm version of *Cinderella*. But the ashes here also refer to the past, which in the Armenian case underwent such a conflagration that our records are lost. Our stories are lost. The people who held them are lost, erased. What we have to work with is ashes. That is how we must reconstruct our stories. This is true of all of us whose family stories are interrupted, erased by violence or imperialism. Lentils are also a metaphor of growth, since they are seeds. And they are food: they give us sustenance. The Armenian word for lentils is *vosp*.

²Dolmabace palace, etc. are still major sightseeing attractions in Istanbul. For further reading see Pars Tuğlaci's *The Role of the Balian Family in*

Ottoman Architecture.

³In Gesarya, the Anatolian city where the Balian family lived before moving to Constantinople.

⁴Many Armenian girls attended French schools, and my guess is that Hosrofouhi was one of these. Rowe reports that schools that educated girls in Armenian began to proliferate in the 1880s, which is the right period for Hosrofouhi to have attended, but apparently, she did not.

⁵Rowe writes that the literary salons, which flourished in the 1870 and onwards, were instrumental in making space for women and men to discuss important social issues, such as women's roles.

⁶"Goldie" was my grandmother's nickname; her real name was *Voski* (Golden) *Takouhi* (Queen) *Victoria*.

⁷After the Turkish slaughter of Bulgarians in 1876, she wrote in a memorandum that the "principalities" of the Ottoman Empire ought to be freed from Ottoman rule and formed into an independent state (see Hibbert 244), but Britain's main goal in the outcome of the Turko-Russian War was to protect its own interests, and I doubt that Hosrofouhi viewed Victoria as an uncomplicated champion of the Armenians.

⁸For further reading on Turkish denial, see Smith, Markusen and Lifton, "Professional Ethics and the Denial of Armenian Genocide"; on the current state of U.S. collusion, see Zunes, "Obama and the Denial of Genocide."

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