

ARMAND ML INEZIAN

## The Lord Moves Us Forward, Forward

The organist, on the evening of our Grandmother Sella's death, was playing a nineteenth-century Baptist tune, *The Lord Moves Us Forward, Forward*, on his aged pipe organ. This was an odd choice, it has been mentioned, for an Armenian Orthodox wedding, but a small amount of research shows that our parents' generation wasn't interested in maintaining a strong ethnic past. Mostly, they were interested in turning Watertown into a business district, setting up shop; and we, the grandchildren, were busy becoming fans of the Red Sox, Wonder Bread, and Elvis. *The Lord Moves Us Forward, Forward* was considered to have mainstream appeal. Further, it was one of the best in the repertoire of Mr. Dzidzian "Sid" Cherkerzian, our organist. Sid was something of a minor celebrity in the Northeast, with his shiny hair and slick fingers, playing churches in the winter and Armenian vacation camps in the summer.

So play on Sid, please, because we need the organist for our story, much in the same way that an old western needs a piano player. Because when we get together, we compulsively, inevitably come back to the story of how Grandmother Sella died on the day of Auntie Anni's wedding, and your music helps ease our memories, as though what we are remembering isn't quite real.

*"Medz Mama Sella. She was a character," we say forty years later. We meet at Roger's house in Cambridge. Roger, Jack's son, who wisely bought a Cambridge home during the economic slump of the eighties and later had it retrofitted to the tune of a \$200,000 equity loan, starting a career as a landlord, and who has come across as a bit of an ass ever since. We sip our vodka or slivovitz and say, "What a character." The subject is unavoidable, the story engrammed in our heads.*

*"I hated her," says Irena, Haykush's daughter. "I still have the scar on my ear."*

*Cara, Irena's younger sister who went to med school, says that she feels sorry for Sella. "She was crazy, but they didn't have a name for that kind of crazy back then."*

*Diggran's son, Antranig, just laughs and throws his hands up, "She was a Medz Mama! What do you expect?"*

*In Roger's living room, with its substantial wood detail, we reflect.*

Sid and Auntie Anni and the priests—all of us—had come for a wedding and not to see a cross, old woman die. We don't say this out of resentment.

No, this is a lie. We do resent Sella. We can't help it. Sella was a

## ARMAND ML INEZIAN

*gogortiloz*, crocodile, of a woman. Mean, tough, and old-country as they came. She spent twenty-two years in America and never learned much more English than “Yes, cigarette please” and “I need taxi now.” In Armenian, however, she waxed monstrous, scaring us with her stories: the Mad Turk, the Devil Dogs That Ate Children, the Sadana. She walked quickly, usually bent forward and accompanied by a hint of cigarettes and black pepper. She spanked the girls with her hand and whipped the boys with a wooden spoon. But these things were not unique; ask anyone over age fifty. What gives us special reason to resent her was the bitter fury she directed at Anni.

Sella had two daughters and two sons. In the traditional way, she favored the sons. The eldest, Diggran, is legendary for never having done a household chore in his life. Sella married Diggran off to Lena Hagopian, a subservient fat woman, of the Battery Street Hagopians who owned the Yerevan Bakery. After the wedding, they both moved back into Grandmother Sella’s home, switching from Diggran’s bedroom to the in-law apartment. We remember Lena, Sundays after church, picking out Diggran’s Monday clothes.

Jack, whose given name was Krikor, and Haykush were the middle children who, by virtue of their place in the birth line-up, efficiently Americanized and modernized.

And finally Anni, whom we remember as beautiful, with brown hair and a curvy figure. Tight dresses and black shoes. By current standards, Anni would be labeled overweight. But we’ve found photographs of her, mostly shot between the early sixties and mid-seventies, and seeing her curvaceous ass in a tight spaghetti-strap dress still makes us blush. Photos of her in her wedding gown make us sigh. Anni was the youngest by far, and Sella had declared, based on custom, that Anni would stay home to cook and clean until Sella died.

Sella had begun to go crazy in her mid-40s, a few years after Anni was born. Not outright mad but more of a brooding kind of bitter. Our grandfather’s death, about a decade later, brought her craziness out in relief. Disposed to insomnia, she changed bedrooms often, shuffling her children around the house about twice a year, at one point lodging Jack in the stuffy, unfinished attic. She developed a habit of staring at babies, even in public, and in 1968 she was nearly arrested for grabbing an infant from the arms a passing woman on Commonwealth Ave. In 1969 she found Irena, age four, petting a scruffy, stray cat and pulled her ears so hard that Irena’s left earlobe ripped. Once Anni reached high school, Sella forbade her to leave the house after six p.m. Christmas of that year she declared, at a large family gathering, that she would bury Anni alive if she lost her virginity. For us, the big-eyed grandchildren, there was no doubt as to who was Cinderella and who was the Wicked Grandmother.

## ARMAND ML INEZIAN

Finally, there were stairs. In particular, the wooden, well-carpeted oak-board stairwell between the first and second floors of the old family home.

As kids, when we first heard the story of Sella's hurling herself down the stairs, we laughed, but after we saw purple bruises on her old-lady face we felt as guilty and frightened as our parents.

*Sella first threw herself down at age fifty-three. Of us, only Irena was there to witness the event. Irena will recount the story whenever we visit Uncle Diggran and Aunty Lena, who inherited the old home. Irena looks at the stairs. "We were all going to the Cape for a weekend trip. Medz Mama Sella was already half crazy, so Uncle Diggran and Uncle Jack decided it would be better if she stayed home."*

*"Oh, don't blame me," Uncle Diggran protests, but he leans on his cane and looks as charmed as the rest of us, as though he somehow hadn't been there when that first tumble took place.*

*"Sella was standing on the second-floor landing with a basket of laundry against her hip, and when they told her she couldn't go, she started throwing the laundry at us. To make her feel better, Uncle Jack tried to make up some big story about how the sun would irritate Sella's skin. Then she threw herself down the stairs. Thud! Thud! Just like that. She busted her lip and twisted an ankle. That bloodstain stayed on the carpet for years." Irena points to the spot.*

*Uncle Diggran does a tired old-man laugh, shaking his head, and Antranig laughs along with his father.*

*"She wasn't always so strange, you know," Aunty Lena says, but we don't acknowledge this statement.*

*"None of us got to go to the Cape that year," Irena finishes. "We wound up taking Sella to the doctor and waiting around to make sure she was okay. By that time, no one felt like going anymore."*

*"Sella was nice, aghvor, a long time ago," Lena says again. "I remember when I was young, she used to bake bread for all the children on the street. She would serve it hot from the oven with raisins and butter. It was wonderful."*

*Cara, the doctor, nods, maybe in sympathy, but the rest of us hold our tongues.*

Over the next few years, Sella became an expert at navigating those steps. When any of her children decided to move out, when Jack took the job in New York, or Haykush decided she'd had enough fighting, Sella would throw herself down. She could read the warp and angle of the timber and find the carpeted spots with her eyes shut. Like a stuntwoman, she learned how to tuck her knees, elbows, shoulders and neck in so that she

## ARMAND ML INEZIAN

could roll at a good speed and still hit the sweet spots. She had the acumen of a pro wrestler. She could play those stairs the same way that Sid the Organist could tickle the ivories.

It was around the time of the stairs that Anni rebelled. She had cut her hair short and started wearing dark make-up. She met Garo Miradjanian, a vet with a minor disability, a metal plate in his leg. Garo had a motorcycle and smoked like mad. We were scared of him. We followed him everywhere. One night, some of us lay flat on a third-floor balcony, hidden amongst chair legs and a few storage boxes, watching Garo kiss Anni, framed by amber streetlight and tobacco smoke, his fingers gently pressing at her cleavage.

Immediately, Sella understood the threat that Garo held. She said that they would never get married. She threatened suicide. She screamed and contorted. Once we saw her topless, her breasts not unlike punching bags, chasing Anni down the block with a clothing iron. After, we knew the wedding would be inevitable.

For a few months, Uncle Diggran tried to play peacemaker. He had started to make it big in the baked-goods market and had the money to hire a full-time nurse and caretaker for Sella. The nurse's name was Mary Kaley. She had a stony face with red cheeks, and spoke with a high-pitched girly-voice. Sella referred to Mary Kaley as the *Ter-chun Axhig*, bird girl, because of Mary's high-pitched voice. Mary Kaley did an excellent job, the best she could considering the nature of her charge. She cleaned up after meals, drove Sella to the grocery store, watched her carefully on the stairwell, and put up with considerable verbal abuse, which thankfully she couldn't understand because it was all in Armenian, for four months before leaving for a hospital job downtown.

We suspect that in the end it was Sella's unwillingness to address Mary Kaley directly that drove her to seek employment elsewhere. We remember Grandmother Sella drawing us aside and saying, in Armenian, "Tell the bird girl to hang up my coat."

After Mary Kaley left us, chore duties fell back on Aunt Anni, and it took only a few weeks before Anni, in her purple eyeshadow, announced that she would marry dark and sexy Garo. We all were in the first-floor dining room over plates of steaming *dolmha*, and after Anni made her announcement, Haykush and Jack ran like madmen to keep Sella from climbing the stairwell, but they weren't fast enough. Sella hurled herself down, wailing out loud.

As she tumbled, Haykush, who could swing a temper, kept calling Sella an old bitch. There was a rhythmic repetition that we remember:

Ka-chunk  
Old Bitch

## ARMAND ML INEZIAN

Ka-chunk  
Old Bitch

When she finally hit the bottom, Grandmother Sella trembled as she stood, her hair a gray bird's nest. "You will not marry that man," she said. "Three thousand years and Moses, you will not marry that man!"

*Sometimes, we secretly hope that Sella was just an evil witch who caught a fitting end, rather than a victim of biology and history because, as Roger the landlord puts it, "Having to pity that woman, retroactively, would require a hell of a lot of legwork."*

*Cara the doctor, who has two children of her own, sometimes confesses to lying awake at night, hoping that whatever had gripped Grandmother Sella's head was not genetic.*

*We know that Cara might be right; that Sella would have had a better chance if she had been born fifty years later. Sella lived in Man's world. Maybe there was no healthy way to express her needs and feelings, whatever they might have been, in the sixties. Maybe a high-school diploma would have made some small difference. Maybe, born fifty years later, she would have had the chance to shave her head and dance to the Circle Jerks, or be diagnosed with bipolar disorder or chronic depression, or go sky-diving, or gone on to love another man or whatever would have helped calm her madness. Then our thoughts travel to Aunty Anni who now lives quietly, divorced of course, in Michigan, and we worry about heredity.*

The family quickly concluded that Anni's wedding would have to take place in a church with no stairs. When that proved impossible, they convinced the church office to keep all the doors to the stairwells locked for the duration of the ceremony.

Anni wore a simple, low-cut dress that left a lot of skin showing. It made her appear contradictorily innocent and sultry. Garo looked brilliant and brooding, like Rudolph Valentino, in his black tux. The two would ride off to the honeymoon on his motorcycle. To children who were starting to show some ambivalent interest in the other sex, it was enchanting.

*"Seeing them together like that, wow! It was my first erection," Roger jokes when he's in that type of mood.*

*We don't often like to think about events afterward, because it complicates things. Anni and Garo had a stormy relationship, which we didn't learn about until most of us had left for college. They fought hard and bitterly. They moved to Michigan where Garo could work for a motorcycle concern, and lost contact with the family. A few years after that, Garo left her*

## ARMAND ML INEZIAN

*for another woman. Anni was diagnosed with depression and entered therapy.*

*Anni stayed in Michigan. She doesn't come back to Watertown and only returns calls in a sort of noncommittal way on major holidays. We hope she is as beautiful as ever, but we hear her smoker's cough and imagine her eyes are big and hollow and tired. Maybe we don't want to see her anyway. Is she still in heavy eyeliner? She never went to college. Michigan winters make people fat. Maybe she'll remind us too much of Medz Mama Sella.*

*We would rather hold on to the magic that the wedding seemed to promise. A bit of a happy ending. We'll go back there—to the ceremony.*

Sid played for us. Still does, in our minds. We remember him. His pomaded hair and winning smile. His slender fingers. He was known for *The Lord Moves Us Forward, Forward* which he played with love, depth, and a quickness at Aunt Anni's wedding. We knew the words. We still do; it's a popular tune. Some of us sang along.

The Lord moves us forward,  
Forward  
Into the valley of joy  
And joyfully we go onward  
Forward  
Singing Praise on him we go.

Thankfully, Sella seemed a bit tired and withdrawn. She was low-key during the ceremony, but we kept an eye on her.

The Armenian Orthodox priest, with his long beard and velvet robes, chanted in old Armenian, which we could scarcely follow save for the triple recitation of *Der Voghormia, Der Voghormia, Der Voghormia* which we understood as the Armenian way of saying Hallelujah. We tilted our heads back to catch glimpses of the cathedral ceiling, painted sky-blue with murals depicting half-naked men and women going about the mighty business of religion: crucifixion, temptation, baptism.

The girls watched the audience, carefully noting each family member's reaction to the ceremony. The boys watched Anni's bosom—you could just see it through her veil—which rose eagerly with each breath. Our parents, uncles, and aunts had their eyes on Anni and Garo. That's when Sella must have walked out.

Unbeknownst to any of us, except for God maybe, if He was in the house—Sella had left her seat and found a service stairwell to the basement. In order to do this, she had to leave the actual congregation and walk out a side exit. The stairs were waiting for her, long, lean and made of unforgiv-

## ARMAND ML INEZIAN

ing stone. It was a steep drop-off, vanishing into darkness.

*We think life is unfair, and we think it holds marvels. Among us, we have a feminist, a Marxist, a historical reconstructionist, and a postmodern deconstructionist. And a few of us simply fall into the camp known as "Medz Mama was fucking crazy." But these perspectives hardly matter. Or they only matter to a certain point. We all have the same picture in our heads—like the waking end of a dream, the image of a chubby, stuffy woman in an ill-fitting formal gown tumbling, like a porcelain doll, rolling into the darkness until we can no longer see the steps, and it appears as though she is floating or flying away.*

We remember. Dzidzian "Sid" Cherkerzian stared at the keys of his organ, not playing, and flicked a stray bang from his forehead. The priest paused for just a second. Aunt Anni took a shimmering breath; her future, for the moment, was bright. We wondered when our turns would come. We, the grandchildren, looked at each other. We noticed that Sella was gone. We figured there was plenty of time to dwell on her disappearance. We held our tongues.