The Journey to Hanford

The time came one year for my sad uncle Jorgi to fix his bicycle and ride twenty-seven miles to Hanford, where it seems there was a job. I went with him, although at first there was talk of sending my cousin Vask instead.

The family didn't want to complain about having among its members a fool like Jorgi, but at the same time it wanted a chance, in the summertime, to for-
get him for a while. If he went away and got himself a job in Hanford, in the watermelons, all would be well. Jorgi would earn a little money and at the same time be out of the way. That was the important thing—to get him out of the way.

To hell with him and his zither both, my grandfather said. When you read in a book that a man who sits all day under a tree and plays a zither and sings is a great man, believe me, that writer is a liar. Money, that's the thing. Let him go and sweat under the sun for a while. Him and his zither both.

You say that now, my grandmother said, but wait a week. Wait till you need music again.

That is nonsense, my grandfather said. Let him go. It is twenty-seven miles to Hanford. That is a good intelligent distance.

You speak that way now, my grandmother said, but in three days you'll be a melancholy man. I shall see you walking about like a tiger. I am the one who shall see that. Seeing that, I am the one who shall laugh.

You are a woman, my grandfather said. When you read in a book with hundreds of pages of small print that a woman is truly a creature of wonder, that writer has turned his face away from his wife and is dreaming. Let him go.

It is simply that you are not young any longer, my grandmother said. That is the thing that is making you roar.

Close your mouth, my grandfather said. Close it, or here comes the back of my hand.
My grandfather looked about the room at his children and grandchildren.

I say he goes to Hanford on his bicycle. What do you say?

Nobody spoke.

Then that's settled, my grandfather said. Now, who shall we send with him? Which of the uncouth of our children shall we punish by sending him with Jorgi to Hanford? When you read in a book that a journey to another city is a pleasant experience for a young man, that writer is probably a man of eighty or ninety who as a child once went in a wagon two miles from home. Who shall we punish? Vask? Shall Vask be the one? Step up here, boy.

My cousin Vask got up from the floor and stood in front of the old man, who looked down at him furiously, twisted his enormous mustaches, cleared his throat, and put his hand over the boy's face. His hand practically covered the whole head. Vask didn't move.

Shall you go with your uncle Jorgi to Hanford? my grandfather said.

If it pleases my grandfather, Vask said.

The old man began to make faces, thinking it over.

Let me think a moment, he said. Jorgi's spirit is the foolish one of our tribe. Yours is also. Is it wise to put two fools together?

He turned to the others.

Let me hear your thoughts on this theme. Is it wise to put a grown fool and a growing one to-
gether, of the same tribe? Will it profit anyone? Speak up, so I may consider.

I think it would be the natural thing to do, my uncle Zorab said. A fool and a fool. The man to work, the boy to keep house and cook.

Perhaps, my grandfather said. Let's consider. A fool and a fool, one to work, the other to keep house and cook. Can you cook, boy?

Of course he can cook, my grandmother said. Rice, at least.

Is that true, boy, about the rice? Two cups of water, one cup of rice, one teaspoonful of salt. Do you know about the trick of making it come out like food instead of swill?

Of course he can cook rice, my grandmother said.

The back of my hand is on its way to your mouth, my grandfather said. Let the boy speak for himself. He has a tongue. Can you do it, boy? When you read in a book that a boy answers an old man wisely, that writer has read the Old Testament and is bent on exaggeration. Can you make it come out like food, not exaggeration?

I have cooked rice, Vask said. It came out like food.

Was there enough salt to it? If you lie, remember my hand.

Vask hesitated a moment.

I understand, my grandfather said. You are embarrassed about the rice. What was wrong with it? Truth is all that pleases me. Speak up fearlessly. If it
is the truth fearlessly, no man can demand more. What embarrasses you about the rice?

It was too salty, Vask said. We had to drink water all day and all night.

No elaboration, my grandfather said. Only what is true. The rice was too salty. Naturally you had to drink water all day and all night. We’ve all eaten that kind of rice. Don’t think because you drank water all day and all night that you are the first Armenian who ever did that. Just tell me that it was too salty. I’m not here to learn. I know. Just say it was too salty and let me try to determine if you are the one to go.

My grandfather turned to the others. He began to make faces again.

I think this is the boy to go, he said, but speak up, if you have something to say. Salty is better than swill. Was it light in texture, boy?

It was light in texture, Vask said.

I believe this is the one to send, my grandfather said. The water is good for the gut. Shall it be this boy, Vask Garoghlanian, or who?

On second thought, my uncle Zorab said, two fools, out and out, perhaps not, although the rice is not swill. I nominate Aram. Perhaps he should go. He deserves to be punished.

Everybody looked at me.

Aram? my grandfather said. Our Aram?

Who else would he mean? my grandmother said. You know very well who he means.
My grandfather turned slowly and for half a minute looked at my grandmother.

When you read in a book about some man who falls in love with a girl and marries her, that writer is a very young man who has no idea she is going to talk out of turn right up to the time she is ready to go into the ground at the age of ninety-seven.

Aram Garoghanian? he said.

Yes, my uncle Zorab said.

What has he done to deserve this awful punishment?

He knows.

Aram Garoghanian, my grandfather said.

I got up and stood in front of my grandfather. He put his big hand over my face and rubbed it.

What have you done? he said.

Which one? I said.

My grandfather turned to my uncle Zorab.

Tell the boy which mischief to acknowledge.

There appear to be several.

He knows which one, my uncle Zorab said.

Do you mean showing the neighbors how you pick your teeth? Using one hand to hide the work of the other.

My uncle Zorab refused to speak.

Or do you mean walking and talking the way you walk and talk?

This is the boy to send with Jorgi, my uncle Zorab said.

Can you cook rice? my grandfather said.

He didn’t care to go into detail about my making
fun of my uncle Zorab. If I could cook rice, I should go with Jorgi to Hanford. That was what it came to. Of course I wanted to go, no matter what the writer was who wrote that it was a fine experience for a boy to travel. Fool or liar or anything else, I wanted to go.

I can cook rice, I said.
Salty or swill, or what?
Sometimes salty. Sometimes swill. Sometimes perfect.

Let’s consider, my grandfather said.
He leaned against the wall, considering.
Three large glasses of water, he said to my grandmother.

My grandmother went to the kitchen and after a moment returned with three large glasses of water on a tray. My grandfather drank one glass after another, then turned to the others, making many thoughtful faces.

Sometimes salty, he said. Sometimes swill. Sometimes perfect. Is this the boy to send to Hanford?

Yes, my uncle Zorab said. The only one.

So be it, my grandfather said. That will be all. I wish to be alone.

I moved to go. My grandfather took me by the neck.

Stay a moment, he said.

When we were alone he said, Walk and talk the way your uncle Zorab walks and talks.

I did so and my grandfather roared with laughter.
Go to Hanford, he said. Go with the fool Jorgi and make it salty or make it swill or make it perfect.

In this manner I was assigned to be my uncle Jorgi's companion on his journey to Hanford.

We set out the following morning before daybreak. I sat on the crossbar of the bicycle and my uncle Jorgi on the seat, but when I got tired I got off and walked, and after a while my uncle Jorgi got off and walked, and I rode. We didn't reach Hanford until late that afternoon.

We were supposed to stay in Hanford till the job ended, after the watermelon season. That was the idea. We went around town looking for a house to stay in, a house with a stove in it, gas connections, and water. We didn't care about electricity, but we wanted gas and water. We saw six or seven houses and then we saw one my uncle Jorgi liked, so we moved in that night. It was an eleven-room house, with a gas stove, a sink with running water, and a room with a bed and a couch. The other rooms were all empty. My uncle Jorgi lighted a candle, brought out his zither, sat on the floor, and began to play and sing. It was beautiful. It was melancholy sometimes and sometimes funny, but it was always beautiful. I don't know how long he played and sang before he realized he was hungry, but all of a sudden he got up off the floor and said, Aram, I want rice.

I made a pot of rice that night that was both salty and swill, but my uncle Jorgi said, Aram, this is wonderful.
The birds got us up at daybreak.
The job, I said. You begin today, you know.
Today, my uncle Jorgi groaned.
He walked out of the empty house and I looked around for a broom. There was no broom, so I went out and sat on the steps of the front porch. It seemed to be a nice region of the world in daylight. It was a street with only four houses. There was a church steeple in front of the house, two blocks away. I sat on the porch about an hour. My uncle Jorgi came up the street, on his bicycle, zigzagging with joy unconfined.

Not this year, thank God, he said.
What?
There is no job, thank our Heavenly Father.
Why not?
The season is over.
That isn’t true.
The season is over, finished, concluded.
Your father will break your head.
Praise God, the watermelons are all harvested.
Who said so?
The farmer himself.
He just said that. He didn’t want to hurt your feelings. He just said that because he knew your heart wouldn’t be in your work.
Praise God, the whole season is over. All the fine, ripe watermelons have been harvested.
What are we going to do? The season is just beginning.
It’s ended. We shall dwell in this house a month
and then go home. We have paid six dollars rent and we have money enough for rice. We shall rest here a month and then go home.

With no money, I said.

But in good health, he said. Praise God, who ripened them so early this year.

My uncle Jorgi danced into the house to his zither, and before I could decide what to do about him he was playing and singing. It was so beautiful I didn’t even get up and try to chase him out of the house. I just sat on the porch and listened.

We stayed in the house a month and then went home. My grandmother was the first to see us.

It’s about time you two came home, she said. He’s been raging like a tiger. Give me the money.

There is no money, I said.

Did he work?

No. He played and sang the whole month.

How did your rice turn out?

Sometimes salty. Sometimes swill. Sometimes perfect. But he didn’t work.

His father mustn’t know. I have money.

She lifted her dress and got some currency out of a pocket in her pants and put it in my hands.

When he comes home, give him this money.

She looked at me a moment, then added: Aram Garoghlanian.

I will do as you say.

When my grandfather came home he began to roar.
Home already? Is the season ended so soon? Where is the money he earned?

I gave him the money.

I won't have him singing all day, my grandfather roared. There is a limit to everything. When you read in a book that a father loves a foolish son more than his wise sons, that writer is a bachelor.

In the yard, under the almond tree, my uncle Jorgi began to play and sing. My grandfather came to a dead halt and began to listen. He sat down on the couch, took off his shoes, and began to make faces.

I went into the kitchen to get three or four glasses of water to quench the thirst from last night's rice. When I came back to the parlor the old man was stretched out on the couch, asleep and smiling, and his son Jorgi was singing hallelujah to the universe at the top of his beautiful, melancholy voice.