

IMPROBABLE ENDURING LOVE

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Vahe H. Apelian, Ohio, 6 February 2015

From the '50s to the early '70s my father ran a hotel in Beirut called "Hotel Lux". Almost all of our clients were Armenian, many from Iraq. Earlier on the Iraqi-Armenians came for summer vacation. Later they mostly came as immigrants on their way West or to Australia. 

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Vartan and his family were waiting for their immigration visas to Australia. Theirs was a traditional family. For all I knew they might have hailed from the Armenian historic town Van or its region. Vartan's parents may have been born there, or were born in Iraq to surviving Vanetsi parents. Vartan was deferential to his parents, in the old-fashioned way.

Vartan and I became acquaintances. For a while we also lived in the same quarter of the hotel. Thus I would see him almost daily. Over time, our acquaintanceship grew into friendship. I seemed to have earned his trust as he confided to me his predicament.

He had fallen in love with an Iraqi-Assyrian girl. Her name was Sarah. Everyone in Basra, their hometown, knew that Vartan loved Sarah, as he would tell me in his distinct accent. "Sagh Basran kidi vor Vartan Saran ge siri" (Սաղ Պասրան գիտի որ Վարդանը Սարան կը սիրի). However, their relationship had not progressed and each had gone their separate way. Vartan had come to Beirut on his way to Australia. Sarah and her family had gone to England on their way to the United States. Vartan had recently gotten hold of Sarah's address in England from a mutual friend in Iraq. He asked me to write to Sarah in English. I don't remember why in English and not in Arabic.

For many weeks I wrote her a weekly letter which Vartan dictated. They were not the usual love

letters--"I love you...cannot live without you, etc.". Vartan's letters were mundane, about everyday happenings, and about his family's wait for their visas.

After many letters and no reply from Sarah, I told Vartan to give up chasing her. The girl is not interested, otherwise she would have replied by now, I told him. Vartan would have none of it. The weekly letters continued.

One day Vartan showed me a letter from Sarah's father which was addressed to him. I remember almost verbatim what the man had written. In plain and impeccable English he said that all the ink in the world would not bring Vartan and Sarah together and that Vartan should have "hit the iron while it was hot". Some anger was palpable in the letter. Vartan's family might have been cool to the prospect of the young couple's marriage for reasons that might have been linked to their departure from Iraq. Both families had started their preparations to leave Iraq about the same time.

Vartan remained adamant. The innocuous "love" letters continued. Through their mutual friend in Iraq, Vartan had learned Sarah's family's address in America and their departure date that would take place more or less with Vartan's family's departure time for Australia. Love-struck Vartan then made a pact with me: After he settled in Australia, he would forward me his letters in Armenian, which I would translate into English and send to him. Improbable as it may sound, that is what we did. But eventually the letters trickled and finally stopped.

The last letter from Vartan was addressed to Sarah's father. While he was not overtly asking the hand of his daughter, marriage seemed to be on his mind. As with the previous letters, most of it was about mundane matters about Vartan's and his family's life in Australia.

I did not hear from or of Vartan after his last letter. Over time our Beirut communal world changed as well. "Hotel Lux" was destroyed in 1975 at the onset of the protracted Lebanese Civil War. I ended up immigrating to the United States in 1976.

Last May, during one of my periodic visits to my mother at the Ararat Nursing Facility in Los Angeles, I learned that an Australian-born Iraqi-Assyrian, Dr. Nicholas Al-Jeloo, would deliver, at the Ararat-Eskijian Museum-Sheen Chapel, a lecture entitled, "Armenian and Assyrian Cooperation and Co-Habitation in Iran's Urmia Region".

Over several decades Whenever I had heard of Assyria or Assyrians, Vartan had come to my mind. I would wonder what had happened to him and of the fate of his impossible love. I decided to attend the lecture that took place on Sunday May 4, 2014 at 4 p.m.

Being hard pressed for time, I could not linger after the talk to share my Assyrian-Armenian story with Dr. Al-Jeloo. I barely had time to purchase his illustrated book which captured old Assyrian villages in Iran. Dr. Al-Jeloo signed the book and gave me his business card. I returned home to Ohio.

Months went by. One day while going over papers I had brought with me from my mother's house, I came across a journal I had kept of a bus trip to Eastern Europe. My parents had paid for the trip to congratulate me for being accepted to the pharmacy school of the American University of Beirut. To my great surprise, I came across a few page entry about Vartan in my journal. It was high time, I thought, I contacted Dr. Al-Jeloo. I sent the email on August 4, 2014.

✘ I gave the doctor a summary of Vartan's story and added: "I never got a wedding invitation. If nature was kind enough to their enduring love, they should be now grandparents or grandparents to be. I wanted to share their story with you. Unlike Queen Shamiram not giving up on Ara the Handsome, this time around it was every day Vartan not giving up on the love of his life, Sarah."

More than two months passed and I did not hear from him. I figured I had come to a dead end and that I should close the book on my memories of the days with Vartan on the veranda of "Hotel Lux".

On October 19, 2014 I received an email from a Suzan Dickranian. Her name did not ring a bell. The email started: "Greetings from Melbourne, Australia!" I did not give much thought as who she could be and why an email from Melbourne? When I opened the email I was stunned to read that she was the daughter of Vartan Dickranian. Lovelorn Vartan of Hotel Lux. The bygone years had somehow erased the family name from my memory and at the moment it did not dawn on me.

Few days earlier, Suzan wrote, her mother had met Dr. Al-Jeloo following a lecture he had delivered about the Assyrian Genocide. The doctor had asked her whether she was married to an Armenian. She had responded in the affirmative. He had then asked her whether her husband's name was Vartan. Astonished by the question, she had confirmed that it was.

Suzan then wrote what her father had dictated: "*I (Vartan) was then brought over and introduced to Dr. Nicholas, who explained that he had received an email from you, which included a story about an Armenian man he met in Beirut, who was in love with an Assyrian girl. It soon became clear that, by*

coincidence, I was the man you were talking about!

"I am happy to tell you that I DID end up marrying the Assyrian girl I was in love with!...and the following is our story.

"I arrived in Melbourne, Australia in 1968. Two of my brothers were already here before I arrived with my parents. Unfortunately my father died in 1969; nine months after we arrived. Prior to his death, he wrote a letter to Sarah's father in America, asking for her hand in marriage on my behalf. Sarah's father accepted this proposal and, as a result, Sarah arrived in Melbourne in 1970. However, my father had unfortunately passed away by this time.

"Sarah and I were married just ten days after her arrival, in October of 1970. We had a small wedding with only twenty people.

"In 1972 we had our first child; our daughter Suzan. We lived in a small apartment to begin with. We eventually bought a house in 1975, which we are still happily living in to this day. In 1977, we had another child; our son Armen.

"Suzan grew up and married an Armenian man in 2001. Armen is now engaged (also to an Armenian) and will be getting married in November this year." The email also contained a copy of the inscription on the back of a picture. For forty-five years Vartan had kept a passport-size picture of mine which I had forgotten giving him as keepsake.

I was saddened to read about Vartan's father's early death. From what I remembered, he had ran a pastry shop in Basra. He probably found his world had completely changed in Australia. I am sure theirs was also a close-knit community in Basra. The circumstance which couldn't be duplicated in Australia. Even though the presence of his children would have softened the impact of the change, nonetheless Basra and Melbourne would have been worlds apart for the ageing patriarch. However, he had carried on his responsibilities to the end with dignity. After assuring himself that the family was settled enough to assume the responsibility of providing a comfortable haven for a daughter-in-law to be, he had consented to Vartan's marriage and had even written to Sarah's father asking for his daughter's hand for Vartan.

Probably no student who has attended Armenian school wouldn't know about Assyrian Queen Shamiram's infatuation with the handsomest king in Armenian history--King Ara the Beautiful. Loyal to his wife and indifferent to mighty Shamiram's advances, Ara had committed the blunder of his life by rejecting the Assyrian queen's affection. An enraged Shamiram had attacked Armenia with orders to her soldiers not to harm Ara. But King Ara was killed in battle. Distraught, she had placed his body on a hill hoping that the gods would lick his wounds and bring him back to life. In vain. Ara's and

Shamiram's story became part of Armenian folklore, if not history.

Over time the Armenians adopted Christianity as their state religion and built a chapel on that very hilltop where pagan gods were once supposed to descend. They had become Christian but had kept the memory of the happening in pagan times. The village that sprang around the hill came to be called Araliz--a compound word made of the king's name and the Armenian verb to lick. The village now has grown into a town and, as is the regrettable Turkish tradition, its name has been obliterated per a comment I read in Keghart.com in response to my inquiry about Araliz.

This time around it was not a royal affair but a devoted commoner named after one of the most esteemed names in Armenian history, Vartan (Mamigonian). The historic Vartan's name had bolstered his clan's reputation...placing it second only to the Armenian King of Kings Dikran the Great.

Vartan and Sarah have now formed their own "dynasty". I am sure their descendants will carry on the legacy of the improbable but enduring love of the family's patriarch and matriarch. As in Vartan's and Sarah's lives, upheavals are inevitable in their descendents' lives. They also will face trials and tribulations but they will be able to overcome the odds as long as they are committed to each other--much like Vartan and Sarah. For true love endures.

