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My Favorite Town—

Fresno, California

by William Saroyan

paintings by Rollin Pickford, Jr.

WELL, I was born there, if that helps, for birth is into the world, into the unresolved and unresolvable universe, into the entire dynamic mystery of living matter, and not into a town. Still, one soon hears about the specific place of beginning, even if one is no longer there or the place has changed, and so it must mean something to know where one was born.

One even knows the street, sometimes even the house.

The street was H, the eighth letter of the alphabet, the year 1908, the month August, the day the thirty-first. H for Home, no doubt. I haunted the street, on purpose and by accident, for years, but I never saw the house. It was gone by the time I was looking in earnest; in its place was a warehouse, then a garage, then a hotel, and finally a parking lot.

But neither street nor house made the town my favorite, nor the fact that I began in the town; it was something else.

What was it?

I discovered the human race there. I discovered art there. And wherever you discover helpless man and his high hope, that is *your* place, favorite or not. What is his hope? His hope is for meaning, for meaning is everything; anything; and he achieves meaning, inventing it or discovering it, through art.

Who was the human race I discovered in Fresno? It was my family, my neighbors, my friends, the teachers at school, the classmates, the strangers in the streets, and myself; most of all myself and the strangers which were not strangers, which could not be strangers because I saw them, recognized them, knew them.

Were the strangers any good at all? Was it possible to believe in them at all? They *were* good; good and hopeless; and that is why I discovered art, for I didn't want them to be hopeless. If *they* were hopeless, then of course so was I, and I didn't want to be hopeless.



The last thing I shall forget is the weather there.

My mother's cousin, Hovagim Saroyan, dead thirty-five years now, was the human race. He had a vineyard of thirty acres of muscats in Goshen, a railroad siding eight or nine miles out of town, or was it Lone Star? I know it wasn't Malaga, for I had other relatives there.

Hovagim was a man who seemed to have been made of bone and stone, and yet no one laughed with so much joy and compassion; softly sometimes, almost silently, other times loudly and with all of his body, so that he fell or flung himself to the ground, rolled over, leaped up, and nearly died. Perhaps it was laughter that killed him at thirty-seven. I don't know. I've never been able to decide what it is that ends mortal life.

He lived alone on the vineyard in a kind of shack-house in which among other things was a phonograph and a dozen records of songs of Armenia, Kurdistan, and Turkey. He had a cow. He had a revolver and a shotgun. He had a horse and a buggy.

Hovagim's muscat vineyard→

Two or three times he brought the horse and the buggy to the little house on San Benito Avenue, picked up my brother Henry and myself, and took us to the Goshen vineyard. At sundown he got out his shotgun and we went along with him to the muscat vines to see what we would see. We saw jackrabbits, which were pests, which ate the young shoots of new vines. Hovagim shot them and they leaped and died. We saw quail, doves, and kildees, but better than seeing kildees we heard them as they plunged straight away, wailing clean and clear at the enormity of being part of life, a cry both joyous and despairing, which I shall never forget and which shall always be associated in my thinking and in my memory with the human race and one of its first exponents, Hovagim.

After dark we walked back to the house and there he cooked supper and we sat down in the light of a kerosene lamp and ate and talked—in a mixture of bad Armenian and bad English. After supper he put a record on the phonograph and we listened to the old music. He put his water-pipe in order, sat down on the floor, smoked, and listened to the old music.

It was said of him that he had a wife in Bitlis, and two sons; but the wife had died, and the sons had gone along to her father's house. Now Hovagim was alone in California. No one was so fiercely devoted to kindness and to truth as this lonely man.

In the last years of his short life he took another wife; but one knew that he'd lost his life when he'd lost his wife and his sons.

Suddenly I was at his funeral and that was the end of Hovagim, except that here I am, thirty-five years later, writing about him.

Hovagim was the human race: sorrowful, lonely, laughing.

There were others, many others: relatives, friends, strangers.

Huff sold popcorn from a wagon on The Republican Corner when I sold papers there every night after school. He was a skinny old man with a large patch of black cloth over his left eye and cheek. At first glance people were frightened by his appearance; perhaps at second, too. I do not remember anybody ever stopping to chat with him. He seemed grim, if

The Republican Corner→



The church was the First Armenian Presbyterian→

not sinister.

Actually he was a lonely old man who lived in a furnished room, whose only possession in the world appeared to be his popcorn wagon, and whose only place in the world was The Republican Corner. From his room he pushed his wagon to his corner every morning around ten, and back again every night around ten.

Huff and I became friends when he was perhaps in his late seventies and I was nine or ten. I had been selling papers on that corner for about a month before we began to speak to one another.

One rainy night he called me over to the wagon and handed me a bag of popcorn. I thanked him and ate the popcorn. It was very good. After that, we began to be pals. Every night when things were quiet, almost nobody in the streets, we stood and talked.

Huff, I discovered, was an atheist, but like so many small-town atheists he kept his ideas to himself and was very deeply a good man, perhaps a religious one.

I remember that when he remarked that the human race was vicious I did not feel that he was speaking with hatred; I felt rather that he spoke with regret, compassion, and perhaps even love. He told me about writers whose books he had read—with his one eye, which was itself inflamed, watery, and appeared to be on the verge of falling out of his head.

As time went on I became entirely oblivious of his physical appearance because I sensed his inner handsomeness. He was a proud and independent man.

One night I offered to push the wagon home for him, for I lived in the same direction, but he would have none of it.

And then, weeks later, perhaps months later, one night he asked if I would get the wagon home for him. Doing so was fun, but I knew he was ill.

The following day when I reached the corner with my papers Huff wasn't there. I went to the house on Mono Street where he lived and the landlady said he was sick in bed. I visited him in his room.

As we talked I knew how ill and tired he was and yet how eager he was not to give over and die. He wanted to stay in the world. He wanted to get back to The Republican Corner

The sun . . . the rain . . . the new green of spring→



I got books from the Fresno Public Library→

with his popcorn wagon, so he could go on beholding the human race and being a member of it. He asked me if I would come back the following day during my lunch hour. I said I would.

He was up, sitting on a chair, waiting, very tired when I got there. He asked if I would push the wagon to the corner for him. I did, and left him there and went back to school. After school I found him still there, smiling faintly because he was so ill.

This procedure continued for a month. In the meantime from the Public Library I got the books he had read and began to read around in them: Ingersoll, Paine, Emerson. I read swiftly and carelessly but I think I got what was important for me to get: that the human race is anything any of us wishes to notice and believe it is, and that it *can* be anything we hope.

Huff and I talked about these things. Since it is true, I must remark that now and then I found myself suddenly disliking him very much—his terrible deterioration, his bad luck, his misery and loneliness, his insistence on staying alive at his corner of the world, his very appearance and smell—but soon enough this dislike would pass and I would know that whoever he was, whoever he had been, he was a good man, a helpless one, an earnest one, my neighbor, my friend, my contemporary.

Every day at noon and every night at ten for a month or so I got his wagon back and forth. I knew he was dying. I even asked if he wanted to go to the County Hospital out by the Fairgrounds and get in bed and rest the rest of his life.

He did not. He wanted to follow the schedule we were following.

One day at noon the landlady told me he had died during the night, and so I never saw him again. I didn't go to his funeral. I don't even know if he had one. The theory around town about old men like Huff was that they were misers, and that they had great wealth hidden away somewhere. I never believed any of this about Huff. I knew he had had a popcorn wagon for some time. I never saw the wagon again, either.

Huff was the human race, too.

A boy my age who came to Emerson School barefooted in the winter was another. His family had come to town in a

One boy came barefooted to Emerson School→



wagon that they parked alongside the Santa Fe Railroad tracks near Foley's Packinghouse. There were four or five children, the father and mother. They lived in and around the wagon.

The boy came to school about two weeks, and then the family picked up and went somewhere else. He was a patient fellow who probably suffered more than anybody ever guessed, especially when he could not tell Miss Chambers his address, and when so many of the other boys looked at him as if he were a freak simply because he had no shoes.

I thought a great deal about trying to become this boy's friend but it was not to be. He wanted no friend and it was understandable that he didn't. I wanted to tell him that he could sell papers and make money—help his family and himself—but it is sometimes the very deepest kind of rudeness to try to be of help to some people.

There were others, too, many others.

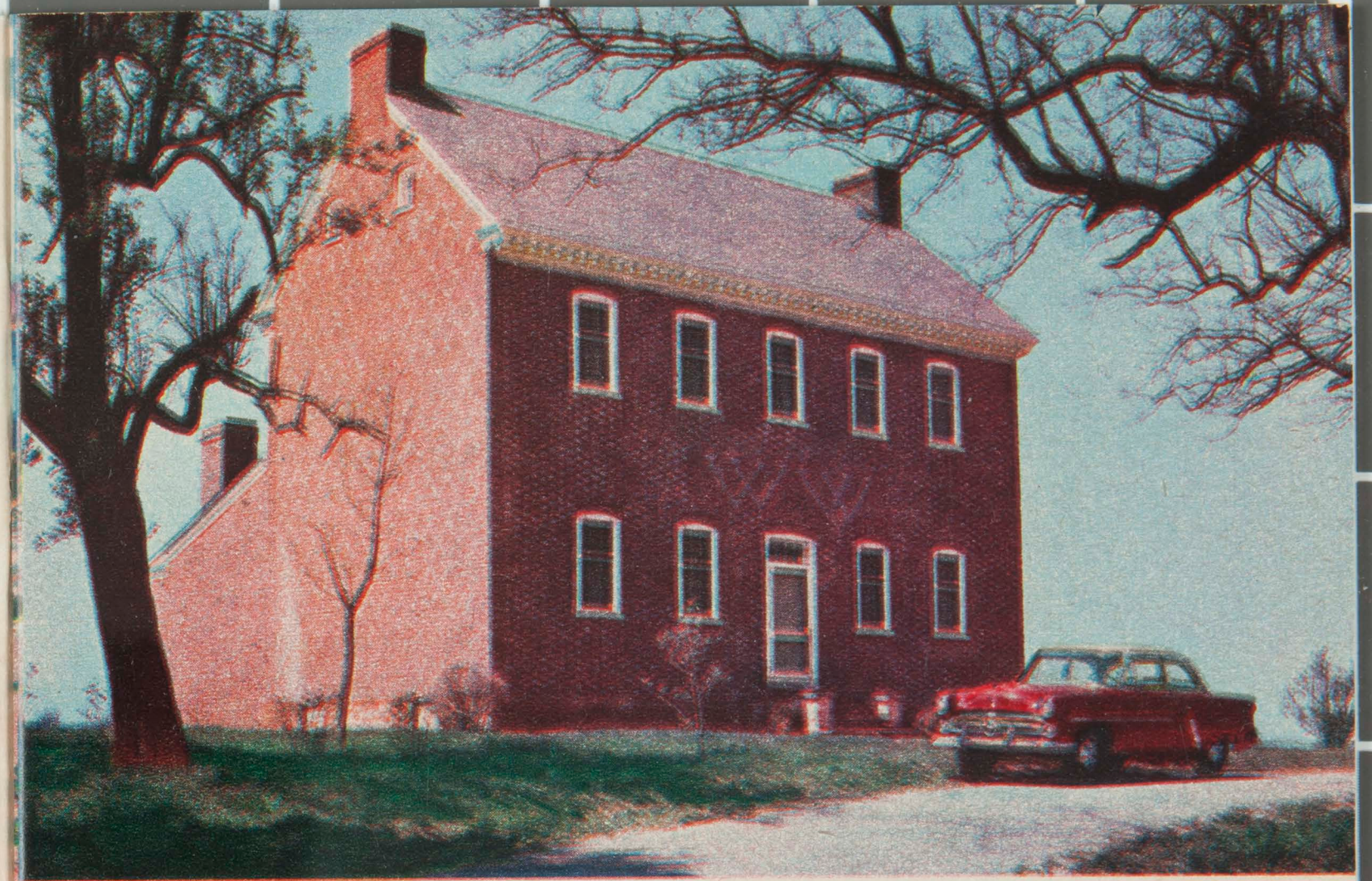
But there were places, too, and the places that meant the most to me I have already mentioned: the Public Library and the Fairgrounds. I needed both. I needed to read, and I needed to see the spectacle of man in action, showing himself off, his livestock, his produce, his machinery, his art even: the wretched paintings and sculptures his confusion and boredom had driven him to making.

Two other places were very important to me in Fresno: the theatre and the church. The names of the theatres were: Liberty, Kinema, Bijou, Strand, Hippodrome, Orpheum. The church was The First Armenian Presbyterian.

At the theatres I saw the human race in moving pictures, on the stage, and in vaudeville. He was forever in search of something: escape from boredom and failure, passage to grace and meaning.

Only at church did he seem to come near grace and meaning, especially when he opened the hymn book and his mouth in earnest song. I sang, too. I still do. The Protestant songs are thus forever a part of my own search for meaning.

There is no end to a town, any town, if it's where you were born in the first place and where you were born again, as it is written all men must be. But oh! the weather there, the heavenly weather there in the spring, the summer, the autumn, the fall, the winter—the hot sun and the heavy rain, the new green of spring and the fire-golden of fall: the farmer's weather of Fresno, in which I lived and became a part of the human race. The last thing I shall forget is the weather there. ■



An Old Kentucky Home— a one-picture story

story and photograph by Sue and John Thierman

THIS old house, with its two bold W's bricked into the front, stands as a monument to its builder, Col. William Whitley, one of the terrific characters of Kentucky history. A fierce Indian fighter, he protected scores of families who ventured through the Cumberland Gap seeking new homes in "Kaintuck." When he was over sixty years old he forgot his rank, re-enlisted as a private and went off to die in the War of 1812.

Said to be the oldest brick house in Kentucky, Whitley's pioneer dwelling has walls two feet thick, double portholes under the eaves, a secret staircase, and a genuine dungeon in the cellar. In 1781, a home on the edge of the wilderness had to double as a fort.

The house is now a state shrine. It is just off U. S. 150, ten miles southeast of Stanford. ■