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Return to the Pomegranate Trees

by William Saroyan

THERE are journeys you take again and again, like books you read or music you listen to, faces you see or people you speak to, and each time something is changed and something is the same.

There are places I heard about when I was a kid, and never saw, like the town Goshen, near Fresno. Ever since, I've planned to go to Goshen, but so far I haven't, although I've been to all the other towns anywhere near Fresno. It may be that Goshen isn't a town at all, or if it is, it's one of those towns you never know is a town, a crossroads and a store with a hound on the porch and a rooster badgering two hens alongside.

Oleander's another place like Goshen, but even though I've been to Oleander I can't remember where it is or what it's like.

Fresno is in the center of the great valley that is named San Joaquin, which is pronounced Wah-keen, about which my pal Fat Khashkhash's brother Leo sang to a student body at Longfellow Junior High in 1919, 1920, or 1921:

*San Joaquin, valley green
You're the nicest place I've seen.
Orange blossoms scent the air.
The sun is shining everywhere.*

From Fresno in order to get to the central and north coast of California, and the cities there, you've got to get through the Coast Ranges: either by way of Pacheco Pass which begins at Los Banos and ends at Hollister and Gilroy, or by way of the cut-through after Tracy which ends around Livermore just before you get to the outskirts of Oakland.

But there are other ways, too, and I took one of them in August once. You go to Kerman, on to Mendota, and then you are on a dirt road in low hills with nothing around except hawks and now and then a flock of sheep and a Basque with his dog.

Pretty soon, though, and for miles, for an hour at least—traveling twenty-five or thirty miles an

hour because you don't want to drive any faster and oughtn't to anyhow since the road is unmarked and unfamiliar—there is nothing, and except for the car you're driving you might be in Spain, Italy, Greece or Asia Minor, and you almost believe you are.

The one thought that occurs to you is, "They sure could put a lot of fine people in here and make this whole place over into orchards and vineyards and towns, couldn't they?"

Well, if they could, they haven't, and in any case it isn't easy. It takes doing, and the people might prefer New York, anyway.

The road I followed has a number and a name, but I know neither: it has history, too, which I also don't know. It's a fine drive, though, and I expect to make it again.

The drives from Fresno to San Francisco or Los Angeles, around two hundred miles each, or from San Francisco or Los Angeles to Fresno, are commonplace, but exciting every time I take them. I guess it has to do with leaving one place and heading for another.

The drives around Fresno, to the familiar places, are always pleasant, and I make them again and again, but the drive I want to remember is this one:

The first short story I wrote in the collection that became the book called "My Name Is Aram" was the one called "The Pomegranate Trees."

When I wrote the story I was in San Francisco. The year was 1935 and I had been away from Fresno on and off since 1926, about nine years. The story itself concerned a still earlier time, when I was fifteen, so that I was writing about stuff that seemed at the time far away.

I didn't know "The Pomegranate Trees" was to become the first of a series of stories. I thought it was only another story. I sent it to THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY, after it had been rejected by a dozen or more editors. The ATLANTIC took it, and Edward

Weeks, the editor, suggested that I write more stories of that kind. As a matter of fact I had written more of them by that time, but his letter put me to work in earnest.

The story concerned 640 acres of empty land that my mother's younger brother Aram had bought and planned to transform.

On a portion of this land he planted pomegranate trees . . . twenty acres of them, thirty, forty, or perhaps eighty, even.

I worked on the land, and planted many of the trees myself, working with a man named Nazaret Torossian who had been a wrestler at one time.

The project failed, the land reverted to its original owners, the pomegranate trees were abandoned, and my uncle moved along to other projects.

But while Nazaret and I were planting the trees (we worked for weeks, tending the trees after they had been planted) I couldn't help thinking I would some day return to the orchard and see the wonderful trees loaded with the wonderful fruit.

Years went by and whenever I happened to be in Fresno I remembered the pomegranate trees and where Nazaret and I had planted them, but I never drove out there.

The drive was out Ventura Avenue to where a right turn takes you to Sanger, but you make a left turn and follow the road eight or nine miles, and then somewhere in that area is the section of land my uncle Aram meant to cultivate and transform.

One year, at last, I made the drive again.

With me was my son, at that time aged five, also named Aram.

The drive began with no destination in mind. It was just a drive in the summertime along the roads, among the vineyards and orchards around Fresno. I stopped many times, so the boy could get out and pick grapes or peaches, and eat them.

After a while, though, I began to drive and not stop, and pretty soon I was at the place on Ventura Avenue where if you turn right you go to Sanger.

My father's younger brother Levon and his four sons had vineyards near Sanger, and I suppose I had had in mind visiting them, but I turned left and began to speed down the road.

"Where we going?" my son said.

"I planted some pomegranate trees down here about twenty-five years ago," I said.

At the proper place I stopped the car, and my son and I got out and began to walk over the dry land, as my uncle Aram and I had walked over it a quarter of a century ago.

"Where's the trees?"

"Well, we planted them somewhere around here, but they're not here any more."

"Where are they?"

"Nowhere. They've died."

The whole place was taken over again by the

little burrowing animals, the horned toads, and the jackrabbits. It didn't seem wrong, either.

I believed I might find one tree hanging on, but I didn't.

My son and I went back to the car and drove off.

"What are they?" he said.

"The little animals?"

"No. What you planted."

"Pomegranates."

"Yes, but what are pomegranates?"

"They're poetry. They're impractical."

"I want to see one," my son said.

I drove him to my father's brother's place in Sanger, and in the family orchard adjoining the house I showed him an old pomegranate tree, and the pomegranates on it. They weren't ready yet, but I took one off the tree and handed it to him.

My father's brother came out of the house and took us in, and we visited him for an hour or more.

When we got back to the hotel in Fresno and up to the room we were sharing I saw my son bring the pomegranate out of his pocket. He looked at it a moment, then placed it on the bureau.

The following morning we drove back to San Francisco by way of Pacheco Pass.

When we got home he put his stuff away, and I saw him place the pomegranate on his bureau.

It stayed there a long time. After more than a month it got to looking pretty sad. His mother wanted to know if she ought to throw it out.

"No," he said, "I want it."

Several days later the whole family drove to Fresno and the boy said, "Let's drive out there again."

"Where?"

"Where you planted the trees."

So once again, twice in forty days or so, I drove to a place I hadn't driven to in twenty-five years.

When my son and I had walked a hundred yards or more into the dry land and I had stopped to light a cigarette, I saw him bring the pomegranate out of his pocket. He glanced at it, glanced around at the whole place, and then very carefully set it down on the earth.

I waited for him to say something, but since he didn't I didn't either, and after a moment we went back to the car and drove back to Fresno.

He never said anything about the pomegranate again.

I haven't tried to figure it out either, because they are always doing things like that. ■

