

TAMAR
CHNORHOKIAN



The
DIEET
STARTS ON
MONDAY

FINDING TRUE LOVE WILL TASTE SO SWEET

TAMAR
CHNORHOKIAN

The
DIET
STARTSON
MONDAY



First published in 2014,
from the Writing and Society Research Centre
at the University of Western Sydney
by SWEATSHOP: Western Sydney Literacy Movement
UWS, Bankstown Campus, Building 3, Room G 40.2
Locked Bag 1797, Penrith NSW 2751
www.sweatshop.ws

© Tamar Chnorhokian, 2014

Design by David Henley

Printed and bound by McPhersons
Distributed in Australia by NewSouth Books

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Chnorhokian, Tamar
The Diet Starts On Monday
ISBN 9780992488611 (paperback)

A823.4

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored
in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by
any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying or
otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.

This project was made possible through generous grants
from Bankstown City Council and the University of
Western Sydney Writing and Society Research Centre.



WRITING AND SOCIETY
RESEARCH CENTRE

“For with God all things are possible.”

MARK 10:27

To my parents,

Thank you for your love, support and for believing that
my dream would become a reality.

THE MONDAY DIET

‘Man, I could eat icing all day every day!’ Zara Hagopian licked the last of the green icing off the spatula. She stood at the sink, folds of her stomach squashed over the benchtop.

Her father, Levon, ran a business from home called Delectable Cakes. He loitered, large and wide, in the kitchen. The smiley face on his apron complemented his round cheeks. His dark-brown hair was short and crooked, like he had cut it himself. ‘Yes, you’ve polished that off, why don’t you come over here and help me decorate this last cake?’

‘You mean there’s no more icing for me?’ Zara asked; her pudgy cheeks drooping like a bulldog. She tossed the spatula onto the benchtop, splattering green icing across the white granite. Zara was even fatter than her father.

‘Are you serious, Lopig Cheeks?’ Levon asked. That’s what he called her, Lopig Cheeks, which meant Chubby Cheeks in Armenian. ‘What happened to your diet?’ Levon wiped the bench clean.

‘What diet?’

‘The one you started on Monday.’

‘Oh, *that* diet. You *know* what happened, Dad.’

‘I do?’

‘Yeah. It started on Monday and finished on Monday. It’s called ‘The Monday Diet,’ Zara replied, puffing. She hadn’t always been obese. Up until she was twelve years old she was thin and athletic. Everyone commented on what a wonderful wife she would make to some lucky Armenian man one day. Zara wished no one had noticed her when she was a child and that her parents hadn’t taken her to all those Armenian social occasions where jealous people caused her to become a fat person. When she turned twelve and began stacking on the weight, she remembered her grandmother, her Nene, and her father whispering to each other about the evil eye. Her father said it was a curse on the family, the same curse that took Zara’s mother away from them. Levon was Armenian deep down in his blood and believed that all the family problems were connected to curses. Nene believed in the evil eye too, and when she went to Armenia she brought back for Zara an evil eye pendant to keep her safe. It was a Swarovski crystal on a sterling silver chain. Zara wore it around her neck ever since Nene gave it to her, which was four months after her mother’s funeral.

The kitchen was large enough for Levon to maneuver his big body around freely. It was on the left side of the house. The double sink overlooked the backyard and the white granite breakfast bar faced the dining room table.

It was aligned with three black, high-back wooden stools which matched the dining chairs. Underneath the sink just to the right was the stainless steel double drawer dishwasher. There was enough bench space for him to lay out all his ingredients, cookware and utensils. Opposite the sink was the stove and a double oven. Alongside the oven was the side-by-side stainless steel fridge positioned near the white-walled walk-in pantry, the size of a small closet. Next to the pantry was a door leading into the laundry. The wide rectangular layout allowed a big washing machine and dryer to fit comfortably.

‘Come over here. Hurry up, Zaruhi!’ Levon said impatiently.

‘Dad, please don’t call me that! My friends call me Zara!’

‘I don’t care what your friends call you. They didn’t name you. We named you Zaruhi after your grandmother.’ Levon continued to work on the cake, smoothing green over the edges.

‘Okay. But can you remember to call me Zara in front of my friends?’

Her father raised his eyebrows. The skin beneath them was flabby. ‘Anyway, just because you get off track with your diet doesn’t mean it’s ruined. You don’t have to wait for Monday to come around again. That’s just an excuse to pig out for the rest of the week.’

‘It’s not!’ Zara blurted, trying not to smile. Her father

went on diets all the time too, and they never worked. Levon was very lenient with Zara, ever since her mother passed away. Zara knew that he was afraid he would lose her too. She watched him create a black and white soccer ball out of edible gum paste. It made her stomach grumble.

Levon stepped back to check out the cake. 'Zaruhi, piping bag please.'

Zara leaned over and grabbed the piping bag off the kitchen bench, making sure not to squirt the white icing everywhere. 'Here you go, Dad.'

Levon's hands remained steady as they moved up and down, forming letters into words. When the task was finished he looked up. 'What do you think?'

Zara studied the big square cake. It was a soccer pitch with the soccer ball in the corner. She read the message written in white against the green background: *Happy 40th Birthday Robert.*

'That looks terrible!' she said, poking out her tongue, which looked like it was made of strawberry fudge.

'Very funny, Zaruhi. Now hand me that box please.'

Zara went into the pantry to grab a cake box while her father stayed busy checking the stuffed cabbage rolls he had made for lunch. Zara sighed. She couldn't stand the smell. It was like someone had farted. She much preferred the aroma of baked sugar and flour, which wafted from the double oven each day. Levon loved his stove in all its shiny, stainless steel and glass glory. That and the side-by-side

stainless steel fridge were his kitchen pride. Levon had centered his life around the kitchen. He spent most of his day in there, cooking food for his daughter, his mother, and his customers. When he wasn't cooking, he was cleaning. A small ice cream container always sat on the kitchen sink. Levon would constantly fill it up with lots of hot water and dishwashing liquid. The bubbles would rise to the top and almost overflow. He'd soak the sponge in the container and wash the dirty dishes, baking trays and cake tins, then rinse them over and over again with hot water until they were sparkling clean, only to place them in the dishwasher for another round. Then he'd dust the dining room, living room, the three bedrooms and study with the same attention to detail given to the dishes. The one thing he took extra care when cleaning was the rectangular canvas painting of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus. It hung on the off-white wall above the black leather couch in the living room. Mother Mary was cradling baby Jesus to her chest. Their white porcelain skin complimented their deep blue eyes and the halos around their heads were as golden as their hair. Levon would carefully take the canvas off the wall and gently dust it with a clean rag three times. He'd then wipe the glass frame of the other picture that hung on the opposite wall. It was a family portrait of Zara with her mother and father when she was ten. Levon would handle it with care, wiping the glass over and over with a Wet One. When he was finally done he'd wipe down all the

black leather furniture and then move on to the glass top dining table. Once that was cleaned he'd mop all the white tiles in the house.

'Once you've boxed that cake, can you go drop off lunch for your Nene, please?' Levon asked, taking the pot off the heat and placing it on the cooling rack.

Zara picked up the cake and prepared to put it into the box. The comforting smell of creamy, buttery, fresh sponge rushed up her nose, drowning out all other scents. Her enormous belly began to tremble. She imagined just dropping her face right into the cake and smearing it all over herself. Her heart raced. She quickly placed the cake in the box and closed the lid.

'Be careful, this is hot,' Levon said. He handed over the plastic box of stuffed cabbage and took the cake box in exchange. Zara knew she had just averted disaster.

DEVIL WINGS

Zara's mother Nora was always cursed. Two days before she began her cake business she broke her arm in a car accident. A red Jeep Cherokee ploughed into her from behind as she went through the roundabout on Prairievale Road and smashed in the entire rear end.

As soon as Nora got home, Zara's grandmother was waiting for her; she had rushed over when she got the call. Zaruhi was wearing her regular three quarter, black and white polka dot housedress and navy cardigan. It hung loosely on her body. Her wavy, grey bob hair was always slicked back with a brown headband. The wrinkles near her eyes and the creases in her forehead were etched deeply into her fair skin.

Zara watched her Nene gather some items from around the house and bring them to the kitchen. The first was a pair of scissors. '*Vor lezounin gedrem* – this is to cut the tongues that cursed you,' she said to Nora and then looked over at Zara before placing them on a large tray. Zara felt both curious and frightened when she saw the intensity in her grandmother's eyes. As an eight-year-old she wasn't

sure what was happening but from the look on both her Nene and mother's faces, she knew it was serious. They both looked pale. Nene's left eye was twitching and Nora kept running her fingers up and down her cheeks.

The next thing her Nene did was place a thong on a tray. This was so wherever her mother stepped foot, the wagging tongues would not follow her. Then Nene sprinkled some salt on an onion and put it on a small plate to ward off the evil spirits. Next came the mirror to ward off evil looks. The last thing to go on the tray was a small bowl of water with a needle inside it. Zara stood there quietly wondering what Nene was going to use it for. Nene took out something small and silver.

'What's that?' Zara asked.

'It's lead,' her mother replied.

'Lead? What is Nene going to do with that?'

Suddenly her grandmother called out to her son. 'Levon, *butunya meh perh indzi.*' – 'Levon, get me a blanket.'

Levon ran over with a pink blanket from inside his bedroom. He was light on his feet back then. Tall and slender, he glided around the house with ease. Levon covered the blanket over his wife's head and then held the tray above her while Nene went over to the kitchen and put the lead on a spoon. She heated it over the kitchen stovetop until it began to melt. Zara could hear the silver fizzing away. Once the silver had melted, Nene threw the hot lead into the bowl of water with the needle in it. She waited until

the lead hardened and then took it out of the bowl with the spoon again. She melted the lead again and then threw it back into the water and then repeated this action for the third time. When she heated the lead for the fourth time she didn't put it back into the water, but instead grabbed the needle from the bowl, piercing the lead with it before throwing it into the backyard from the kitchen window which overlooked the kitchen sink. All the while Zara's mother sat with the blanket over her head, Levon hovered the tray over her and Zara stood watching in amazement.

Zara's Nene walked out into the yard and collected the lead off the grass, knowing exactly where it had landed, like God Himself had placed it where He knew the old woman would look, and then she took it back inside to Nora. The silver had taken the form of a face with a dozen tongues shaped like snakes protruding from a mouth.

Nene's left eye began to twitch again but this time so did her right eye. 'You see how many people had spoken about you,' Nene said out loud. Zara and her mum and dad stared like ventriloquist dummies at the silver clump before them.

'We're nearly finished,' said Nene.

This time Nora was made to stand with her back to the yard and throw the water in the bowl just near her right shoulder. It splashed on the grass not far from the clothesline. Nene placed a ribbon through the hole in the lead. She took the picture of the Virgin Mary with baby

Jesus off the wall with one hand and hung the ribbon with the lead dangling from it onto the hook with the other. Then Nene hung the picture back onto the wall, covering up the lead, so that it was secure and safe.

Two days later Nora was ready to start her cake business. It grew quickly by word of mouth, due to the support of the Armenian, Assyrian and Arab community in Fairfield.

Zara remembered how happy her mother was in the kitchen. Whenever she baked she always tied her straight ash-brown hair neatly in a bun. The brown shade of her hair matched her amber eyes. Her gum line was slightly visible whenever she smiled and the dimples in her cheeks brought that extra warmth to her face. She would twirl her banana-shaped body effortlessly around the kitchen, humming to herself and bursting out into song as she went about her way. *Toun intz hamar antaram ess – My love for you will never fade*, was a song by her favourite Armenian singer, Paul Baghdadlian.

One night Zara remembered a knock on the door. It was her mother's friend Terese. She was a short slender lady with a slightly hunched back. Her long nose was as sharp and pointy as her fingernails. On the ends of her nostrils sat two warts that stood out against her wrinkly skin. Her beady black eyes were the size of peanuts and they would sink into her gaunt face whenever she spoke. Terese came over to pick up a cake she had ordered. When

THE DIET STARTS ON MONDAY

she was about to leave Nora mentioned it was the first anniversary of her new cake business.

‘Well,’ Terese said in Armenian, ‘You have a great business, a handsome husband and a beautiful daughter, everything is in its place.’ That night Nora died in her sleep. The doctors said it was an aneurysm, but Zara knew better now . . .

KNUCKLE SANDWICHES

When Zara got angry all hell broke loose. She'd roar like a lion and disturb the neighbours. She'd throw things around the house. Her favourite act was to slam her bedroom door. To her, slamming doors to prove that she meant business had to be better than spitting. In recent years she'd discovered the most unusual thing – teenage Lebbos spitting on the street because they think they're tough. Zara had to side-step the spag when using the T-way station. At one point she avoided the stairs and got the lift instead because she was sick of dodging the phlegm. One time she saw a sign near the lift at the T-way station that said a fine of one thousand dollars would apply for spitting. The sign only lasted a few months, but the spit remained, so Zara guessed they couldn't enforce the rule. On several occasions Zara walked past a bunch of teenage boys who would look her straight in the eye and then spit. She'd watch the feral fluid fall from their mouth to the ground. When she looked back at them it was like they were proud of it. They really believed it made them look cool or tough or gangster-like. Zara felt like saying, 'Do

you want a tissue, homeboy?’ She wondered if they would have spat in front of her if they thought she was hot, if she was skinny.

Zara knew that if there was one place in Sydney to find homeboys it was in the West. She grew up in Villawood. Her first vivid memory of violence was when she was about ten years old and skinny like a tree twig. She and her father looked very different back then. One night they were at a petrol station in Bankstown. They were waiting in a long line to fill up. There were about three cars in front of them but of course Zara’s father, who had no patience, abruptly told the guy in front of him to ‘hurry uph!’ The next thing Zara knew, this huge man got out of his car and came around to theirs. From what Zara remembered he looked like an Aussie. Not the type with white skin, blond hair and blue eyes. He was a bikie-looking Aussie, with olive skin, long curly black hair and a black moustache. This built bloke leaned into the driver’s window and said, ‘Shut up you stupid wog!’ Then he plastered Levon in the nose. Zara began crying hysterically as she watched the blood pouring. The next thing she remembered was her dad driving around holding a rag to his nose to control the bleeding. They were both panicking so they went around in circles for a bit. Somehow, they finally made it home in one piece. Levon left Zara in the care of her mother and his friend took him to the hospital. Luckily his nose wasn’t broken. But he still had a small bump which Zara was sure

was a result of that altercation. Since that night Zara constantly warned her dad to control his mouth and temper. 'Sssh, Dad! Stop it! Do you want someone to punch your face in again!?' she would remind him. It fell on deaf ears.

When they were living in Villawood her dad would tell off the neighbourhood boys. He'd shout out something or he would speak with his eyes, giving them a disapproving look. If Zara said something he would yell at her in Armenian. '*Toun lereh!*' – 'You shut up!' As a young girl that was the last thing Zara wanted so all she could do was cringe.

Levon's temper was something he got from his angry old dad and being brought up in Lebanon, where bombs were going off all the time. Even after thirty-five years of living in Australia he still had difficulty understanding that this was an orderly country. Things were done by the book. People waited their turn. Angry outbursts at checkout chicks and nursing staff were not tolerated. Zara reminded Levon of this when she'd say, 'Dad, this is Australia!' He would just flash her a dirty look and say, 'I don't give a shit, mike!'

'Dad, it's mate, not mike!' Zara would laugh.

After Zara's mum died, things changed and it broke Zara's heart, even though she never spoke about it with her father. There was a new set of teenagers Levon kept his eye on across the road from their house. There was always trouble happening at the T-way station. Whenever Levon saw a fight break out on the bridge or the cops hanging

THE DIET STARTS ON MONDAY

around on a Thursday night he was tempted to be a part of the action, but instead he would just stay put in the house, baking cake.

Teaching notes available from:
WWW.SWEATSHOP.WS

