I didn’t come to the United States because I wanted to. I came because my husband Souren came. We didn’t know what life would be like here. People who came here never talked about the difficult things. Complaining is not in the Armenian character. Maybe they were ashamed. I thought maybe I would come here for one year to be with him and then go back. I couldn’t imagine myself without Armenia. I was a city girl from Erevan. I had such a wonderful life in Armenia. I loved everything—my city, my library, my music, my piano, my parents, my work, my home, my friends.

When Souren arrived in the United States, he moved in with his cousin, and then shortly before I came, he rented an apartment for us. His friends all helped him fix it up. They brought everything he needed: sofa, television, vacuum, bedding, blankets, pots, and pans. It was such a nice and cozy apartment; I was shocked when I saw it. That is how we do things. Armenian people always think about each other. We help each other. We need each other. This is how we have survived.

My first impression of the United States was two huge metallic rivers running opposite each other. These were the freeways. Another memory is a street of one-story houses side by side with their lonely, naked palm trees under the burning sun. No shade. When we imagined the United States, we thought about busy, noisy streets with skyscrapers. But the street where I lived looked like the countryside. I was used to the city. This impression stayed with me until Souren showed me the downtown area with modern architecture, sculptures, fountains, and, of course, traffic. I wanted to enjoy each part of the city. But it was shocking to see rich areas of the city so close to other parts built out of ragged boxes, with people living in unbearable conditions. The contrast between wealth and poverty was abnormal.

The year I was in Erevan without Souren, I felt lonely, but the beginning months here with my

husband near to me, I felt lonelier. My uncertain future made me depressed. Throughout my life, I had worked or studied. I didn't know what my occupation would be here. I cried everyday. I didn't know the language. For me, every day without information or news was like living in a vacuum. For the first year, every day I thought I would go back to Armenia. I thought this was just temporary. But when my parents came, I knew it was not temporary. It would be a huge problem to take them back.

After I got my work permit, I went to work in a Beverly Hills hotel in the housekeeping department. It was so humiliating for me to see the private lives of people I didn't know. Even though the job gave me an opportunity to practice my English, emotionally I was suffering every moment.

I cleaned thirteen or fourteen rooms each day and earned maybe $7.25 an hour. Every day on my way home from work, I would decide to quit, but the reality of my life sent me back again and again. "Why am I here? Why did God punish me and change my life?" Then I would answer "You came here voluntarily; it is nobody's fault. Your English and qualifications are so limited." I was desperate. I cried on the way to work. I cried on the way from work. After work I went to school to study English three nights a week. This was in addition to my work, shopping, cooking, and taking care of my parents. At night I was so exhausted. I was just running all the time. I didn't exist.

Then something good happened. Close to Christmas, the management organized a Christmas party and asked if there was anyone who could accompany the choir on the piano. I offered my help. I needed to tell everyone—I am not that person you think I am. I can do more than housekeeping. They must have thought, "How could this housekeeper who can hardly understand English be a musician?" But they were desperate. They needed somebody and decided to give me a try. During the week I found the music for the Christmas carols and began practicing with the choir. It was my time! I enjoyed every moment of these practices. Office

workers from the management and receptionists who had everyday looked at me without noticing me, surrounded me around the piano, trying to sing properly under my direction. During this time I was thankful for my stubborn mom who took me to music school against my will.

Finally it was Christmas Eve. There I was in this huge hall playing the piano for the choir. My heart was full of happiness, and I felt so much pride. After the performance, one of the corporate people approached our table and asked permission to join us. He couldn't understand how someone from the housekeeping department was able to play the piano and lead a chorus. That was my happiest day in the United States. They had never noticed me before....

Adapted with permission from Susan Philips, *In the Heart of Another: Immigrant Women Tell Their Stories* , AYWN Publications (2009).