

"PEN PALS"

An Armenian Christmas Play
by Lisa Kirazian

SCENE: Haig's Room, Present Day America
Lily's Room, Present Day Armenia

CAST:

HAIG, an Armenian American boy at three different ages: 10, 12, and 14.
(Three different boys can play HAIG at each age, wearing similar clothes.)

LILY, an Armenian girl in Armenia, at three different ages: 10, 12 and 14.
(Three different girls can play LILY at each age, wearing similar clothes.)

FOUR BOYS, 9-10, rappers/gangsta students at Haig's school

GRANDMA, Lily's Grandma

LILY'S BROTHER, a soldier in the Armenian Army.

FOUR GIRLS, 9-10, trendy and overdressed, at Lily's school

ONE MAILMAN, delivering the kids' letters

MEAN BOY, 11-12, at Haig's school

NARRATOR, reading the stage directions to the side of the stage.

NATIVITY PLAY/SUNDAY SCHOOL KIDS, all ages--

JOSEPH, MARY, SHEPHERDS, ANGELS

ARMENIAN DANCE KIDS, all ages--

Armenian Dance Class students

ARMENIAN POEM KIDS, all ages--

Armenian School students

FLUTE & CLARINET PLAYERS (OR OTHER INSTRUMENTS) - Christmas carols

(This play was first produced and performed at St. John Garabed Armenian Apostolic Church, San Diego, CA, in 2013-2014. It is meant to be performed by a church's combined Sunday School/Armenian school classes, so that everyone can play a part across many ages. Some of the dances, songs, instruments, can be substituted for others. The city of San Diego and other city references can be changed to another city to accommodate the church's location.)

PEN PALS

[Lights open on two students, sitting on opposite sides of the stage at their desks: HAIG, a student from America; and LILY, a student from Armenia. When we first see them here they are 9-10 years old. Both have computers on their desks: Haig's is a state of the art laptop; Lily's is an older desktop. Through the course of the play, they write and read letters - sometimes with pen to paper and sometimes on email/computer.]

Haig leans forward at his desk, sometimes looking at his computer screen. Lily is reading a piece of paper.]

HAIG: Dear Lily. My name is Haig and I live in San Diego, California, in the USA. But I'm Armenian like you. I've never done this before, but our teacher wanted us to find a pen pal -- a friend to write to, somewhere around the world. So I looked on the internet and found this Armenian pen pal site and you were listed on there. I hope it's ok. If your parents don't want you to write me back, that's cool. I understand. Because I'm a complete stranger to you. Anyway, if you want to keep reading: I'm ten years old and I go to school. I like video games and soccer and rap music - at least the ones my mom lets me listen to.

[A group of 4 BOYS run centerstage and start RAPPING a popular but decent song - one doing the beat, one doing the lyrics, the other bobbing his head to the beat.]

HAIG: I go to our Armenian Church too, and I learn about God there. He loves us very much. So what do you like to do? Your pal, Haig.

[Haig sits back. Lily leans forward. Haig opens a letter.]

LILY: Dear Haig. Thank you for your letter. I'm glad having someone to write to now. My older brother had to join the army and I really miss him. We all do -- my dog and my parents and my grandmother. So now that I can't play with my brother I play with the girl who lives down the hall from me in my building. We have fun together.

I like to draw pictures - here's a picture of you that I think you look like. Can you send me a picture of you? I don't know what you look like -- this was just a guess. I also like to play piano, I play for hours, because we have a piano and my mother taught me. I love to sing too. And I like to listen to music on the radio.

We live in the village of Dilijan, kind of far from Yerevan, and the church is sort of far away, my parents said. But isn't God everywhere? You don't have to be in church to be near him, do you? Because I pray to Him every day, even though we don't always go to church. I read his words in the Bible that my grandmother gave me. My favorite verse is something like "I love you with an everlasting love." My grandmother used to say it to me in Armenian all the time.

[A girl dressed as LILY'S GRANDMA says the verse IN ARMENIAN:]

GRANDMA (IN ARMENIAN): "I have loved you with an everlasting love, I have drawn you with unending kindness."

LILY: Plus it talks about drawing so I like that. Do you have a favorite part? Your friend, Lily.

[Haig roams around his desk, talking out his letter.]

HAIG: Yeah, I read the Bible too, sometimes, but I usually like to play video games instead. I watch some videos that talk about God too. I like videos. But I guess I should read more because I don't really have a favorite verse yet. I haven't memorized any yet. Except I know that God loves us.

So I really liked your drawing. It kind of looks like me. Except I don't have glasses. And I have curly brown hair. And sometimes I get little pimples on my face but my mom gave me this cream to use to make them go away. Do you ever get pimples? Can you draw me or send me a picture of you? Your pal, Haig.

LILY: Dear Haig. Sure I get pimples. My grandmother makes this paste from cucumbers and lemon and puts it on my face and it helps. But then I sort of smell like vegetables. I'd like to try cream instead sometime. I wish I could wear make up but my parents won't let me. A lot of girls at my school already wear make up and perfume.

[FOUR GIRLS go centerstage and point at Lily and laugh at her, silently, putting their hands over their mouth.]

Anyway, here is a picture of me that I drew. And here's a new picture of you with curly hair and no glasses and just a couple of pimples. Your friend, Lily.

[Lights dim. Time passes. HAIG and LILY are older kids now. They are 12 years old and look more grown up as they appear onstage.]

Both of them keep checking their computers, their mail on their desk. From centerstage, A MAILMAN comes to each of their houses. Haig and Lily each ask him if there are any letters. The mailman shakes his head no and exits. Haig sits back down.]

HAIG: Dear Lily. It's been like forever. I just had my 12th birthday. I'm almost a teenager. I really liked the new pictures you sent a long time ago. But I haven't gotten a letter from you in a while - I sent you three letters and a couple emails these past few months. Are you ok? Please write me. I've been reading my Bible more -- we're getting ready for a Christmas play we're doing. We're reading the Christmas story in the book of Luke. But I also found that verse you said liked when we first started writing - "I have

loved you with an everlasting love" -- it's in the book of Jeremiah and it's in the Old Testament, I found out. I really hope you write me back. Your pal, Haig.

LILY: Dear Haig. I'm sorry I haven't written for a long time. Feels like we were just turning 10 years old and now I just had my 12th birthday too. But I didn't feel like celebrating too much. I haven't been reading verses lately or praying very much either. How can I? My brother still isn't home from the army. I just keep looking at his picture. When's he going to come home? School's been ok but I don't feel like doing my homework either. What happened? Did God forget about me? Who cares about Christmas? I just want to see my brother.

HAIG: Dear Lily. Gosh, I'm really sorry about your brother. I have a sister, and I'd be sad if I couldn't see her for two years. I mean, sometimes I wish she DOES disappear, but not for that long. But I know God is watching over your brother. I think you'll see him again. Maybe when they talk about Jesus being born at Christmas, maybe that can give us hope or something. We learned last week that unless you believe in Jesus you can't live forever with God. But anyway, please don't stop writing to me. I talked to my mom about you - she said to tell you don't stop doing your homework or praying. I'm sure God still hears you.

LILY: Dear Haig. Thank you for understanding how I'm feeling. It's really hard, but maybe if you can keep praying for me it will help.

[Music, doing homework at desks. Time passes. Now HAIG and LILY are 14 years old and look like typical teenagers.]

LILY: Dear Haig, now I'm writing you over and over and YOU're not writing me back. Are you ok? What happened? I'm worried. Please write me back. Love, Lily.

HAIG: Dear Lily. Sorry. I forgot about writing for a while. I -- I kind of got in a fight at school. There was this kid name Justin who was bullying me. He was making fun of me and calling me bad names because I believe in God, because I'm a Christian.

A young teen, 12-13, struts centerstage and starts arguing toward the audience, and throwing out his fists as if fighting with Haig.]

HAIG: He says he doesn't believe in God. He said his parents said that religion is for stupid people. And said I'm not stupid, I'm smart but that God is even smarter. And then he thought I was calling him stupid so then he started hitting me and then I hit him back really hard, even though I know I'm not supposed to but I was so mad I couldn't help it. Then we both got in trouble with the principal and we had to stay after school. Then they called my parents and they got mad at me so I was grounded for a while. That means I couldn't play video games or play with my friends and I couldn't write you either. I had to just do my homework. Things are better now but that's why I didn't write.

I was mad for a while but I think I'm better now. Maybe you were praying for me, too.
Your pal, Haig.

LILY: Dear Haig. I was praying for you, as soon as I got your letter. I'm sorry that guy hit you. But you were very brave to be strong for God. That's like our ancestors - they stood up for God too. You have courage just like them. I'm glad you're writing me again. I missed it. I wish we could Skype or something but my parents won't let me. They said that writing letters or emails is enough. Plus you're a guy so they feel a little weird about that. Your pal, Lily.

[They get up from their desks and go centerstage, closer to each other but still a few feet from each other and NEVER looking at each other. They just look ahead.]

HAIG: Dear Lily. Yeah, I asked my parents about Skype too but they said no too. It's ok, I really like writing letters to you too. And I save all the ones you write to me. Since we were ten. Can you believe it? That's like four years.

LILY: I can't believe it either. I'm - so glad we're friends, Haig. Maybe we could meet someday.

HAIG: That would be cool. Maybe my family will take a trip to Armenia.

LILY: Maybe I'll come to college in America.

HAIG: Maybe we could become real friends.

LILY: Maybe.

[They are silent. Awkward but sweet. They go back to their desks, reluctantly. Christmas music starts in the background as they decorate their desks then settle back into their seats.]

HAIG: Dear Lily, we had our Christmas program at church today. First, our Armenian class recited poetry and I was helping out.

*[Stage curtains open part way. Upstage center is a group of SUNDAY SCHOOL/ARMENIAN SCHOOL KIDS reciting **GAGHANTE AYSOR**, a Western Armenian Poem, or something similar.]*

It was awesome! The church hall was full! Then the entire Sunday School did the Nativity Play.

*[The curtain now opens all the way. Upstage center, A GROUP OF SUNDAY SCHOOL KIDS recreate the **NATIVITY: JOSEPH, MARY, SHEPHERDS, ANGELS.**]*

HAIG: The nativity was where Jesus was born in the barn with the animals and Mary and Joseph were there. And all of us took turns reading the book of Luke, Chapter 2, which is the official Christmas story. I was one of the shepherds. My brother and sister were angels, which is so stupid because they don't act like angels at all. But I guess -- neither do I. Not all the time anyway.

[ALL the SUNDAY SCHOOL KIDS take turns reading the second chapter of Luke. Divide the verses up among however many kids there are in the class.]

Lily gets out her Bible and reads along as they recite.]

PLAY KID 1: In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

PLAY KID 2: And everyone went to their own town to register.

PLAY KID 3: So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

PLAY KID 4: He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

PLAY KID 5: While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,

PLAY KID 6: and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

PLAY KID 7: And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

PLAY KID 8: An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

PLAY KID 9: But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

PLAY KID 10: Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

PLAY KID 11: This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

PLAY KID 12: Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

PLAY KID 13: “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

PLAY KID 14: When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

PLAY KID 15: So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

PLAY KID 16: When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,

PLAY KID 17: and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

PLAY KID 18: But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

PLAY KID 19: The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

[Curtain closes on the Sunday School kids/members of the Nativity play.]

HAIG: It was really cool. It made it all so real - that Jesus is real, and God is real. I wish you could have been there. Here's a picture of me in my lame shepherd costume. Your pal, Haig.

LILY: Dear Haig. Thanks for the picture. It wasn't lame; it was really nice. The play sounds really great - I'm glad you were in it. We went to an Armenian dance concert for Christmas at our school. We sang Christmas songs and did some great Armenian dances. Do you know how to Armenian dance? I love doing it - even in my living room.

[Curtain opens. Another group, THE ARMENIAN DANCE KIDS, enter center stage, doing KOCHARI, an Armenian line dance.]

LILY: And we recited our favorite Armenian poems and songs.

[The Kids recite the Eastern Armenian poem, ZANGAKNER.]

HAIG: I know that one!

(CURTAIN CLOSES)

[Haig and Lily look out to the audience as if imagining it.]

LILY: It was really beautiful. It made me so proud to be Armenian. And so proud to live in a free country with my family. And that we can believe in God without anyone punishing us for it. I can't believe there are still countries where you're not free like that.

[She pauses.]

LILY: Haig, I'm praying again. I think God helped me to be a little happier now. Even though they keep transferring my brother to all these different army assignments and we still haven't seen him all this time. So then I wondered if I'm ever going to see him again at all.

But the other night, I had a dream that my brother was riding a horse across the hills of Dilijan. A white horse! He was like Sasountzi Tavit, but even more handsome. He looked at me and smiled and waved. Then he pointed to a cross that was in the sky, shining like a flame! The cross was beautiful. And somehow when I woke up I knew he would be ok. You know what I mean? I'm starting to feel a lot better. I'm doing all my homework and I started playing piano again. I played my favorite piece.

I even played it at the dance concert. I had never performed in a concert before. My parents were there and my grandmother and they were smiling and clapping and it made me so excited. I wish you could have been there. Here's a real picture of me too, after the concert. Those are flowers that my mom gave me. Your pal, Lily.

HAIG: Dear Lily, that is so awesome. Congratulations on your concert. I'm just learning how to Armenian dance at church too. It's hard. My pinky fingers start to hurt after while. I bet you're really good at it.

You know, when I read your letter, I was really blown away. I mean, when you talked about your dream, about your brother, I felt I could see the whole picture you were saying. Him riding on his horse. It made me want to be brave for God again. It -- really helped me, Lily. Thanks for telling me about it. I'm glad you're feeling better now.

I'm going to send you a Christmas Card. It's sort of a tradition in America. And we put out cookies for Santa Claus. I mean, for Ghaghant Baba. What else do you guys do for Christmas?

LILY: Dear Haig, thanks for the cool card. I liked it. Maybe I'll start doing cards at Christmas. For Christmas we don't do presents -- we go to the church for a special service. But for Nor Dari we do lots of presents and food and celebration. You call it New Year's. We call it Nor Dari. That's when my dad dresses up like Dzmer Papi, like my grandfather used to do.

[LILY'S GRANDMA comes centerstage to exchange gifts, they celebrate and hug.]

We don't say Ghaghant Baba or Santa Claus, we say Dzmer Papi. And we give gifts and sing songs all night until we're too tired to sing any more. I even play piano for some of it. I love it.

[Haig thinks about it, across the miles, in unison with them. Then...]

LILY'S BROTHER, early 20s, in Army uniform, enters and surprises Lily.

She embraces him, with Grandma there too. She sits back down.

*Stage right, FLUTE (OR OTHER INSTRUMENT) PLAYER plays **MESOUREE METCH** or a similar song.]*

LILY: Yeah. We really had a great Christmas. The best gift of all was that my brother finally came home! He's home! We're so thankful God answered our prayers.

[They get up from their desks again and go center stage.]

HAIG: I'm so glad, Lily. God really does answer our prayers.

LILY: It'd be great if you could meet him someday. My parents said, maybe, maybe for New Year's, maybe you and I can talk on the phone or something.

HAIG: That would be really cool. Lily?

LILY: Yes, Haig?

HAIG: Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. Your friend, Haig.

LILY: Shnorhavor Nor Dari Yev Soorp Dznunt. Your pal, Lily.

*[Stage right, Flute/Clarinet/Other Music players play **JOY TO THE WORLD** and **SILENT NIGHT**, with the kids singing along (optional).]*

*[Then Haig and Lily and all the kids sing **WE WISH YOU A MERRY CHRISTMAS.**]*

THE END