

A BIRTH AT A FUNERAL: REWRITING THE VICTIM STORY

Aunt Tanya's hands begin to tremble, "What do you mean 'no grave'?" "The mortician brought the body," Peter motions to a tall thin man with black hair standing next to the casket. "But the Russian guys from the church did not dig out a grave. There is nowhere to put the body." Wrinkles forming on his forehead, Peter points behind him to a small green lawn with tombstones lined in long rows...



Aunt Tanya has crossed the tipping point, and the dam breaks, waves of raw grief flooding the parking lot. "Mother died and I can't even let her rest in peace. Why did I bring her to America?!" Other relatives are quickly gathering around Aunt Tanya. Like scolded animals they stand in the cold, their tails tucked under. Helpless, they are ready to crawl back home to lick their wounds and come back tomorrow.

A switch flips inside of me. I walk straight up to the mortician. His name is Sam and he had already called the cemetery office from his cell phone. "All of their diggers are out for the day. We all have to come back tomorrow," he says. My eyes widen in disbelief, "So that's it?!" I look over at my family; they don't speak English and seem so helpless. A caldron of red rage begins to boil in my gut. I turn sharply back to Sam. "Can you please dial the cemetery office again?" The phone rings twice and an American man with a calm voice answers, "Green Hills Cemetery, this is Thomas, how can I help you?" "Yes, Thomas. I believe you can help me. I am the granddaughter of Mrs. Ivanova, whose burial ceremony is supposed to be happening right now."



Zhevtnevoe village, Ukraine, 1995

"Oh, I am so sorry; there has been a terrible mix up. We apologize, this has never happened before," Thomas pours out his sincerities. "The problem right now is that all of our guys are out for the day and there is no one to operate the machinery." Impatiently I interrupt, "Thomas, what if your grandmother's body had to be dragged back to the freezer because there was no grave for her. What would you do?"

Silence... "Yes, I will do my best to have a grave for you today," Thomas reassures me. I hand the phone back to Sam and walk up to the family. My teeth are chattering. Even though it never snows in Sacramento today it is much colder than the winters in the Rocky Mountains. As I get closer to the crowd, all eyes turn toward me...

...Their matriarch had died; there is no one to lead them. They seem lost. Aunt Tanya has stopped crying. It looks like she has stopped breathing too.

“The funeral will take place today.” My voice is shaky, cold wind making the hair stand up underneath my red wool poncho. “Really?!” Hopeful sparks fire up in grandpa’s eyes. “Yes, I just spoke with the cemetery office on the phone and they said...,” before I could finish the sentence, Sam walks up from the back and hands me the phone. “It is Thomas.”

Everyone waits in anticipation while I smile into the phone, nod and hang up. “We can all come back at four o’clock this afternoon. Everything will be ready.” Even Aunt Tanya smiles for a brief moment. “Thanks be to God, thanks be to God,” she whispers pulling up her long black linen skirt as she marches toward the car. “You did it!” Peter wraps his arm over my shoulder, “You did it!” I am happy to hear him say this, but he has no idea where my courage has come from.

It was only one year earlier that I was sitting with Rose, a medicine woman with a big scar on her upper lip. Her home smelled of lavender and there was always a pot of herbal tea simmering on the stove. Rose wore colorful skirts from Peru and white feather earrings that tangled in her long curly black hair. Somehow she always knew what was on my mind.

“Are you still not talking to your parents in Ukraine,” Rose handed me a cup of tea. I take a slow sip, trying to decide if I want to go into the whole story. Every time I call home Dad is drunk, pestering me on why I am not a banker or a lawyer, or married to one. Mom is crying on the phone that she will never be a grandmother because I am 22 years old and still have never had a period.



“I feel so frustrated when I talk to them. They never acknowledge what it is that I want to create in my life. It’s like talking to a wall; I end up in tears every time. I need to break away from them to become my own woman.”

“Is that why you drove up the mountain to see me today?” Rose curled her legs up onto the sofa and threw a red wool blanket over her lap.

“Yes. I need your help with starting my body’s bleeding cycles. The European endocrinologists diagnosed me with Amenorrhea and gave me hormone shots,

American gynecologists gave me birth control pills and the result is that I've gained 30 pounds and developed acne. I've tried herbs, acupuncture, hypnotherapy. Even the alternative doctors think I don't have my period because of gymnastics."

"And what do you think?" Rose's answers always come in the form of questions.

"It's true, I have abused my body and now there are repercussions to pay. What do I expect, right? After training under incredible amount of stress, forty hours a week for ten years while starving myself, taking laxatives, diuretics and vomiting the little food I ate, I expect my body to still function as normal. That's not going to happen... And still, why all my gymnastics teammates married now and have babies? And I am the only one not bleeding?" Furious, I jumped off the futon and paced in front of the stone fire place. Large aspen logs crackled at my feet like playful puppies.

Huge windows line the whole wall on the right. Last night's heavy snow is glistening in the sun. How did my dilapidated old red Honda Civic make it up the winding dirt roads in this weather? And why did I come here?

"I need to go for a walk. All this analyzing is driving me crazy, after ten years of therapy I am still stuck" I pulled on my brown fake-leather boots and headed for the big sandalwood entrance door that Rose brought from Egypt. Supposedly it was once a door to a pharaoh's tomb. But, young and angry, I slammed the door behind my back with zero reverence.



Photo courtesy: Lillianne Wallace

Rose had built this mammoth house twenty years ago when she decided to settle down with her husband from all their world travels. He died of cancer before the house was finished. Rose has been living on the top of the mountain alone ever since. She says the land keeps her busy; she is a fantastic gardener. One spring a hungry bear came trumping into her garden, and she actually fought the beast. That's how she got the big scar on her lip.

I grew up in a European city. The land never called me. Until recently, I started having dreams where trees talked to me. I knew Rose had a giant ponderosa pine on the cliff edge of her property. I decided to hike up there.

A blanket of virgin snow, studded with silver boulders, covered the canyon before me. Billows of steam curled out from my mouth. Gazing over the vast landscape, the tension in my shoulders bubbled up and stretched into a smile. Aah... Tiny yellow birds

zigzagged in the crisp air, serenading the Rising Sun, while my moving feet rhythmically crunched the deep snow beneath, 'hrum, hrum, hrum.'

Half an hour later, huffing and puffing, I finally climbed up the hill and wrapped my arms around the ponderosa pine. Ten feet away from the tree was a sharp hundred foot drop. Last summer a lone traveler was camping nearby and fell off this cliff in the dark. But I knew I was safe. The old Ponderosa Pine would protect me. I burrowed my nose deep into her bark; it smelled like butterscotch candy. "Grandmother Ponderosa, you grow your roots deep into the Earth and your branches high into the heavens, please help me," I prayed.

"I am stuck. No matter what I try, I feel bound to my illness. It's like I have made a contract not to become a woman." I was becoming angry. Eyes closed, as if I did not want anybody to see me so low, not even myself, I screamed and stomped my feet like a helpless child. Finally relieved of the tension in my chest, I sobbed quietly.

"You must forgive your father, child. Your own anger is what's hurting you," a quiet thought passed behind my closed eyes. And I swelled up with tender memories...

Hysterical screaming is coming from the living room. My trembling hand carefully gliding against the rough wallpaper in the dark hallway, heart pounding through the pink flannel pajamas, I step into the blinding light.

What I see in front of me is Dad wearing only blue boxers, dragging mom by the hair. He bangs her head on the coffee table until the table shatters, wood shards scraping his large muscular hands. I can't see Mom's face, only her hands, flailing through the air like the flags of a sinking ship. Dad's bleeding arms are wrapped around her neck like two Amazon boas. For a split moment he looks right at me, his eyes are yellow.

I freeze, and float high up from the ground like a balloon. Looking down I see the whole room as if it's a movie: closed red velvet curtains hide a secret world of domestic violence, broken dishes on the floor, the TV is on with the static black and white zigzag waves humming, the house plants ripped out of their pots, dirt mixed with blood on the Turkish rug, and a man beating a woman.

I see a seven year old girl in the doorway, clenching her jaw and the sleeves of her pink pajamas. Her private thoughts are audible to me, "I will never become a woman, if being a woman means being beat up all the time."

And she didn't.

“Forgiveness is your lesson, child,” the Ponderosa Pine whispers into my chest. “Your anger is not your own. Your mother and her mother were beaten; your father’s mother and her mother were beaten too. The men carried home the world’s violence. The women ate the poison. Your grandmothers have died horrible deaths because suppressed anger ate them from the inside. But you can break the chain that binds you all. Your forgiveness will set you, everyone before you and everyone after you free.”

In my heart I knew this to be true. And I knew what I had to do.

Filled with new hope, I thanked the Ponderosa Pine. Turning to walk back down, I was overwhelmed by the sweeping grandiosity of the snow-covered Rocky Mountains before my eyes. Mesmerizing! The far away smoky blue hills rolling for eternity, the morning fog rising from the canyon like a fleece blanket over a newborn baby.

The gift of being shattered inside lies in my ability to stretch so wide as to embrace the extreme sadness in the world as well as its extreme beauty.

...Now I stand at Grandmother’s grave. Aunt Tanya is wailing while the Russian pastor reads from the Bible, looking up into the cold grey December sky between the paragraphs. A dozen or so relatives, all in black, encircle the freshly-dug grave. To the right side is a plain brown casket, decorated with plastic flowers because fresh flowers are too expensive. A beautiful young cherry tree stands at the head of the grave, right by the cemetery chicken-wire fence.

In spring this tree will be pregnant with fruit, heavy branches sloping down over the tombstone. The sight of this naked young tree makes me happy. Warm tears of joy trickle down my face. And there is something else -- a black wet stickiness gathering between my legs. I am being undone, I am giving birth to a new life, at age 22, for the first time, I am bleeding. At my Grandmother’s death, a new matriarch is born.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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