

The Dancer's Dream

There was once in my life a dancer named Natalie. Her every step recalled thirty years of splintered bone and cartilage shorn away in ragged patches. A dry ache set into her hips each autumn. “Anna,” she said to me, her voice husked. “Anna, I need to stop for awhile.”

And so I held her, near the churchyard gates of St. Michael's. I brushed the back of my fingertips along the curve of her cheek, tucked a loop of hair back in place behind her ear. The world went quiet, just for a moment, caught between sunset and dusk.

“*Dorogaya*,” I whispered. “*Maya rusalka, dorogaya, tii...*”

A gust of wind whipped through the shadows of saw palmetto and wrought iron. Natalie's cane flew from her hand. It hit the sidewalk with a clack, somersaulted, bounced, and rolled back toward us. My jacket pulled tight as the wind swept by, then fluttered loose in its wake.

“Ah,” I said. “The ghosts suggest we move on.” Her cane slowed to a stop a hand's breadth from her foot. She tapped it once with the toe of her shoe but did not bend to retrieve it. Instead, while watching the dark grass rustle along the chalk white slabs beneath the churchyard's oaks, she placed her forehead to my shoulder, bit once against my jacket.

This is her way: to play at being a child, to invite protection from others. She is one of those who believe that love will split cracks through concrete, grow through to bloom around her. Her hair,

with its lingering scent of peach and honey, is a place in my memory that I can go even now, if I only close my eyes, slow each breath, let go. *Maya malinkaya rusalka*, my little mermaid, my dancer.

Natalie, once in my life.

It is painful to recall that my last night with her she was drunk on Riesling, shattering glasses in the kitchen (she said it was an accident, but no) while I packed my cameras and clothing proper for winter in the mountains.

“For a *war*, Anna!” Natalie cried. “You promised me you were done with it!”

I promised no such thing. She is beyond reason.

“It’s a blood-bath. They’re burning each other alive over there, Anna. You’re going to be photographing babies being shoveled out of burning houses!” She had the Beatles on far too loud. The White Album. Forever, I am reminding her that we live in a townhouse.

“The neighbors, dear,” I said as I walked to the kitchen. She poured more wine. “But, really? That is enough. You’ll be in pain tomorrow.”

“I’m in pain right now,” she said and folded up into herself in a chair by the table. “Anna. Listen.”

She told me that she dreamed of this the night before. That in her dream she saw me, in a forest, not alone, but protecting someone small. We were lost, running, in darkness, while flurries of snow swept through a labyrinth of trees. The smell of guns and smoke were not long distant.

“It was a little girl with you, Anna. You were hurrying her along... the two of you were so tired

already... you'd been running for hours, hoping the snowstorm would hide you." Between her thumb and forefinger was a small ivory bear, Japanese, a carving from her collection. I had not even seen her pick it up.

"They can send someone else, Anna," she said. "They can send someone instead of you."

"*Da*," I agreed. "This is only too true. Or why send someone at all? These days, anyone with a camera phone is qualified to be a photojournalist, yes, a blogger, an 'iReporter'? Do you not know how this feels? How it feels for me to have worked my entire life to perfect an art only to see that art washed away in a sea of mediocrity?"

She said nothing.

"This may be one of the few chances I have left to do what I know I must do," I said. "There will be many fine old estates and blushing brides for me to photograph when I return."

"No," she said and looks away. She told me, again, in vivid detail, about the dream.

For a moment after, both of us were silent.

She turned to leave.

"Natalie," I said. "I do not know where this is coming from. You knew I had this assignment. This is no surprise. And this is not my first time traveling to a dangerous place. This is... Natalie, this is stupid. I do not know why you are acting this way. I do not go alone. I always have a guide with me..."

"Your guide will be killed! Didn't you listen? You'll be cut off from everyone who can help you,

because you see a little girl, right when it... right when it gets so bad.”

I stared at her, incredulous. “This is your wine talking.”

“You’ll go to her, wanting to help. Anna, sometimes, dreams come true. Mine come true. Anna, they kill you. They’ve been in the mountains for months, the ones who find you... they hate these people, the ones you are with... don’t see them *as* people. They find you, you and the girl. They kill you, but not right away...”

I did not know what I was to say to this. I sat back in a chair and watched, in stunned silence, studying the quivering shoulders and arms and hair of my love.

“If I say no, they will not ask again,” I said. “It is as you say: they will send someone else.”

She looked at me.

“Go to bed,” I said.

That was weeks ago.

Now, boys playing at being soldiers, though armed with real guns, smile for me. They stand tall along the trees lining the snow covered valley. I take several bursts of photos and then watch the skies begin to darken. We are more than twenty kilometers deep within the forest, well off the roads and away from villages where the boys would be discovered and removed. I hear the echo of planes over the slopes of the southern mountains and I imagine the sound of troops pouring into the foothills to root

out militants.

There is surrealism to this place. It is beautiful, yes, shrouded in wintry mist. The leaders of the camp are off to themselves, debating options. We were supposed to move forward hours ago, but something has occurred.

My assignment is simple and perfectly suited to the ragtag band of men, women, and children that John has introduced me to: I am to show the faces and the struggles of those who have been displaced by this conflict.

To do this in the best way I am able, I have learned how to wait. For the photographer, waiting is as basic and essential as composition or exposure. You do not chase. Yes, the technical skills, these must be mastered first, but once these have become second nature, if you learn where the picture is going to be and you are there, waiting for it when it arrives, this is enough.

“Show them,” John says. “You show them what is happening here with these pictures. You show them the children. Show them what we do to keep them safe. You show the world that they,” here he motioned toward the far side of the mountains, “are the aggressors. You will do this.”

“I will show what is happening here,” I say.

John grunts. He has known me for a very long time, as he knew my father before me.

My father’s name you might not know, but his photographs, images that appeared in *National Geographic* and *Life* in that strange troubled time between the Yalta Conference and the fall of the Berlin Wall, these you will recognize.

The catch lights of defiance in the eyes of a refugee, the aged hands of a nurse administering oral rehydration salts to a child who seems little more than a skeleton wrapped in skin: these are the stories that he told with still images.

Certainly you will remember this one, of his final masterworks, taken after he was officially retired: a child in Sierra Leone, hands severed. His forearms, wrapped in gauze, glare in the wash of shadow and light, but his eyes are where your own eyes are drawn. That child's eyes are frozen in a single unending question: why?

“What they say in fairy tales is true,” he said to me once, long ago, when I was still so very young. I was flipping through a magazine on the sofa and he was holding his Leica rangefinder and leaning back in his recliner, staring off toward the window. “Monsters hate the light. This camera, though, it is a way of hammering down the dungeon walls, tearing off the coffin lids.”

Is the memory so distinct because I so rarely saw him at home? His was a life of going back to places best left behind.

“Anna?” John taps my shoulder, awakening me from my daydream. “Bogie's truck is dead. We are going to pull what we can out of it and make do. Be ready. We will be moving soon.”

“Yes,” I say. I rub my shoulders. I have not felt warm since I left my Natalie.

Even so, within a few hours, packed shoulder to shoulder in one of the last four remaining trucks, as we travel to the our next destination, I do drift off for a while.

This is what I think about when I am in that place that is not quite sleep, not quite waking: a favorite memory of my Natalie. We were at a little bar in Charleston, South Carolina, on the second floor of a very old building.

She cleansed her palate with fresh bread (a present from pretty Sova, the baker's daughter), and finished the '93 Hungarian Tokay while I made do on house bourbon. Her lips, when I kissed them, smacked of honeyed pineapples, a lightly smoked citrus finish, and a pleasant blur of intoxication.

The moon was full, blood-orange outside the window, with winter constellations washed across the sky. Two young men were laughing far too loud a few seats away from us at the bar. Both of them in crisp white shirts, ties tugged loose at the necks, clanking their bottles together.

Natalie smiled at me, scrunched up her nose in her irresistible way, and touched a fingertip to my wrist. My Natalie. She danced Clara in *The Nutcracker*, the White Cat in *Sleeping Beauty*, and the Venetian Carnival Pas de Deux from *Satanella*.

Just then, a woman walked in with her circle of friends and announced that she couldn't believe how red the moon was, declared it to be so strange, and invited everyone to look.

"Yes, dear, this is only the Earth's shadow passing over," I said, too quietly for anyone but Natalie to hear, and she smiled. "Your pale moon will return to you in time, do not fear for her."

I am enclosed within warmth, safe and secure, whenever I think of her smile and the gentle laugh that flows through it.

At some point, the memory blurs away into sleep.

Night is the safest time for us.

Most of the people in the trucks with me once lived in a nearby village. One morning when the children were dressing for school, soldiers of the new occupying regime kicked open their front doors, called them terrorists, ripped drawers from cabinets, slit bedding open, and demanded to be told where the guns were hidden.

“We had no guns then,” John tells me. “But now, yes, now we do.”

Now they sleep in grave-like hollows in the wilderness, build temporary – always temporary - shelter from tree limbs and tarps when they can no longer stand to sleep in the few remaining trucks. They are shadows passing behind trees, not yet dead but nonetheless haunting the place where their lives were taken from them.

I am standing alongside John and Bogie near the edge of the woods as daylight slips away.

“Look there,” Bogie says, more to John than to me, but I raise my camera just the same. It is a wolf, mangy and fierce, wandering through the snow. She stops, looks toward us. “Yes! Yes!” Bogie exults. “It is a good omen.”

I capture that: Bogie clapping his hands in happiness in the exact instant before the wolf slips away into the depths of the forest. I snap a photo of John, bemused, with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his field jacket. I snap a photo of the trucks parked in the snow, insignificant in the vast expanse of trees and mountains.

John, I will tell you, is a loose approximation of his name. He is a joker, though. If you ask him, he will tell you that ‘John’ is short for John Wayne. He pantomimes a Wild West quick-draw and recites his favorite line from *Red River*: “*Every time you turn around expect to see me. ‘Cause one time you’ll turn around and I’ll be there.*” I have heard him do this routine a thousand times and now I hear it again, mostly for Bogie’s entertainment and to make fun of my eye-rolling reaction.

Yes, and then Bogie says that he is named for Humphrey Bogart. I ask them who my movie actor name is. Bogie says, “Ricky Martin!” and starts dancing. The two of them, were they not caught up in this conflict, would be doing some pretty funny stand-up comedy in New York. Ha, ha. At least in their minds, they would. But I will say this: I trust John with my life, he trusts Bogie, and Bogie is second-in-command here. So there you have it.

One of the older boys waves John over, talks to him. John nods and then relays something to Bogie. Bogie is nodding, okay, okay, let’s do it. All the leaders meet in a huddle to talk.

I pass the time framing scene and scene, releasing the shutter, hoping to make it all make sense, picture by picture.

Time passes.

You’re in a valley, late at night, and the sky is lost in snow. A flash of light lifts you off your feet, and you never hear a sound.

This is what Natalie said to me that night when she was so upset. This is her dream; the vivid

dream.

Your body shields her. You are already badly hurt but you don't know that yet. You just get up. You get up, carrying her, and you walk into the forest.

My thoughts are abuzz in my head. I know that I shouldn't think of this but I cannot stop myself. I am sitting in the passenger seat of John's truck, rubbing my hands together, trying to stay warm. Perhaps, I think, Natalie is correct and I am getting too old. There are no luxuries that can be packed for an assignment such as this to make it easier. I have my Nikon camera bodies, a short lens on my main camera, a long lens on the other, and a wide angle in a pocket for quick access when I need it. I do not use flash in a situation such as this for the same reason that I do not jump up and down and yell, "Here we are!" when enemy combatants are sighted in the distance. I carry enough memory and batteries to get me through. I carry a rubber bulb blower to clean my equipment, which is what I do now, while I wait. I carry duct tape, ear plugs, a few medicines and essentials for personal hygiene. My clothes are simple, functional, and I wear them until the job is done.

But I wish I had lip balm. I brought some – good stuff, too, Burt's Bees – but I misplaced it early on. Now, I miss it terribly. There is a split in my bottom lip from the wind and the constant cold.

I look around and I wonder. How many homes were abandoned, how many lifelong possessions, furniture handcrafted by a grandfather, had to be left behind? I cannot know, but I look for it in close-ups of their eyes. There are uncles here, and aunts, and cousins, and great-aunts, and cousins-twice-removed, and they cling together where brothers and sisters have been lost.

John is talking to a boy I do not know. Not far from here, a bomb went off in a market, just as the merchants were preparing to pack up for the night. At least nine are dead, with many others wounded. The two of them say other things, but too low for me to hear. John's forehead is deeply cut with frown lines. This I can barely see as the last of the light is fading. The sun has all but disappeared behind a peak in the far distance.

They walk away, vanishing into the shadows. I rub my hands together.

Natalie. *Maya malinkaya rusalka. Dorogaya.*

The play of light and shadow at sunset always reminds me of the silent halls of my father's house, in his final days. The soft sound of Natalie's footsteps as she walked the hardwood floor. Soft light poured in from the large north-facing window in his living room and the open doors cut the hallway into alternating strips of light and shadow.

My mother, who never truly acclimated to life in the United States (I do not think she learned more than forty words of English or cared to), predeceased him by nearly a decade. It was too long, I thought, for him to be alone. Yet he never spoke of loneliness.

The best of his work, in black and white, was arranged carefully on the walls, in museum frames. He suffered from debilitating Meniere's late in life. The price, he told me, of too many moments lived too close to the sounds of gunfire and explosions. When his tinnitus flared up, all the sound in his world would be swept under a high-pitched hum. "Like something electronic," he told me once. Other times, his head would go light without warning and he would drop to the ground. In his last few days, he

would sit in his favorite chair in that grand living room of his, facing the window, trembling, with his hands resting gracefully on the top of his cane.

From the side, the window light on his face made him look like a classic painting from days long ago. I told him this. He blinked, trembled, looked on, straight ahead.

“Poppa,” I said to him. “Poppa, you have given me everything. You have taught me everything. I’ve tried to see as you have seen.” I placed my hands on top of his hands. He blinked, trembled, looked on, straight ahead.

I could hear Natalie in the kitchen, preparing sandwiches and tea for us.

“Poppa,” I said. “Poppa, I love you so. Poppa...”

And then the door of the truck opens and I am snapped back to the here and now.

John climbs into the driver’s seat and tells me that the plans have changed, a decision was made. Our convoy is now heading toward the border, where there are refugee camps set up. Médecins Sans Frontières. I am to be extricated there, along with a few of the others. Something in the current situation has escalated beyond expectation.

John has frost on his beard, even on the tips of his eyelashes. There is a thin layer of ice on everything. It only melts away when the engines are running, and even then only on the hoods of the vehicles. “You have seen Porgy and Bess?” John asks me.

I smile. I live in Charleston. Asking if I have seen Porgy is like asking if I have eaten rice.

“It is a sad story. I saw it years ago, when I was younger. It played in the city.” Here his face darkens. “Before all of this began. Back in the days when this was a place for families, for children to grow and learn and make something of their lives other than to fight, fight, and fight.”

We begin to roll forward. The mountain is treacherous. It is dark and we do not dare use our headlights. The snow is blowing all around us.

“Do you remember the scene with the hurricane? How the storm blows in, causes such devastation, and the people are huddled together in their houses, praying, hoping only for it to end?”

I nod. He looks at me. His eyes are difficult to read. He nods in return, and then looks back to the few feet of uneven road that is visible before us.

“And then the skies are clear. This is a miracle, yes? People wander outside, laughing, amazed, so thankful that the storm has passed them by.”

The truck lurches as a wheel hits a bump.

“But it is a lie.” John wipes his beard with his huge hand, wrapped in a heavy glove. “This is only the eye of the hurricane. This is not safety. This is the furthest thing from safety. It is only when they have been lured out of their homes that the skies darken. When it is too late to run back inside, when they have wandered too far into the open, the storm returns.”

“This is what the planes are doing.” He makes a smirk with one corner of his lip. “They fly away as if their mission were complete. Just as the people think it is safe, they turn back for another run. I

suppose they've studied Porgy, yeah?"

"I'm sorry, John," I say.

We travel on through the night, in the darkness and the cold, at a slow roll along the edge of the mountain. We have the quiet rumble of the engines, the crunch of rock and ice beneath the wheels, the whistle of the wind, the hypnotic dance of snowflakes in front of us, and darkness all around. These are good companions for travel.

Hours pass.

The moon, she rises and gives us pale light, not too much. I look out the window and see the steep face of the cliff, how it rises higher than I can tilt my head to see. I have my black ski cap on to keep my ears warm, but when I press my hands to the side of my head, they feel like alien things, undecided between numb and tingly.

John slams on the brakes.

"What?" I ask.

His face tells me nothing. He steps out of the truck. This is something he would not normally do, out in the open, in such a threat condition. I see the others watching carefully, guns at the ready. He barely has room to walk, we are so near to the edge, and he holds the sides of the vehicles as he proceeds.

When he returns, he tells me that the trucks can go no further. "The road ahead is gone," he

says. "It is blown away, bombed, it is gone."

He places his head on the steering wheel for a very long time. His gloves cover his face.

After awhile, I touch his arm.

"John," I say.

We walk.

It is the only option we have.

The way back is too long, too treacherous to attempt in reverse gear, and sunrise is only a few hours away. We gather as much as we can from the trucks. Families, having already pared their belongings down to bare essentials, now must say goodbye to all but themselves, their children, and what can be carried by hand.

I help as much as I am able.

The air is bitterly cold and the wind does not stop. We are able to pass, on foot, where the trucks could not, by keeping close to the edge of the cliff. There are spots where it seems the heel of my boot is half on rock, half in the open air. I try not to think about this.

By the time the sun is beginning to rise, we are past the cliff face and onto more level ground. Bogie guides us to a trail he says he knows well that takes us into the forest. I feel that I can hear water, somewhere in the distance, still running along icy banks, but perhaps this is just my imagination. Tired is

something that has been and gone, pain is something that has been and gone, I am shambling like a creature from some horror movie. This is what all of us are doing.

This is when we arrive at a ravine. Once there was a bridge, but now broken pieces of it dangle down from the side opposite to us. We follow the edge of the ravine for almost a kilometer, before chancing upon a fallen tree. It is our only way across.

“There is a house, not far from here,” Bogie tells us. “It is abandoned. There is a barn. Stables. But we have to cross.”

Like machines, this is what we do. Bogie crosses first. Another man follows. Mothers cross on their hands and knees with their children clutching their backs. I photograph this and then I help the small ones who are frightened make their way across too.

After another half-hour in the forest, the house is there.

It is as Bogie said, abandoned, and part of the way collapsed. The early sunlight sparkles on the new fallen snow. The barn and stables are empty, broken things. It looks like Heaven.

We settle in, all of us, on the dusty floor, on the cracked and split wood, and there is no talk of building a fire in the hearth or other jokes. We simply collapse into sleep, our few belongings under our heads as pillows.

The explosion snaps me out of sleep.

I am on my feet, clutching my camera, kicking my bag to the wall. I slip into a corner, pull my bag to me, look around. A few of the others are on their feet as well, looking around, but this is less than half of us. Where are the others? Gunfire. There is gunfire outside.

Another explosion and more of the house collapses. Smoke rushes in.

I crouch low, run close to the wall, hard to see and hard to hit, I hope. Even as I run, I am working my camera, preparing to shoot.

As soon as I am outside, I see John. He is near Bogie and both of them are shooting from a kneeling position at the edge of the barn, using the rusted hulk of a tractor for cover. I photograph this and I move, still low to the ground, aiming for better cover. There are bodies all around, and smoke, and the crack of gunfire.

I slip behind a pile of debris just as something flies through the sky, lands between John and Bogie, and the earth explodes all around them. The world goes white and I lifted off my feet.

When I land, my ears are ringing. I am close enough to the trees to almost touch them. No one, I think, has seen me. Find cover, I think, do it now! Then, I see a girl, a child, out of the corner of my eye. She is alone, crying, holding a scrap of rag that might have once been a doll.

I scoop her up and we disappear, using the smoke and the confusion as our allies.

I don't know how long I have been running. I hoped this was the trail we followed, but now I am not so sure. Did I sleep at all? So much of me feels broken. What happened? What was this? An

ambush? And why? My head and heart feel heavy and I know that I will never learn the answers to these questions. I carry the girl and I force myself to keep moving until the sounds seem distant.

Now I am sure that I hear the sound of water running. I follow this sound.

When it seems, by what I can judge of the sun in the sky, that the afternoon has grown late, we stop to rest within a small group of trees. I stack branches to build a lean-to. If I cannot find the way back to the trucks, I can retrace our path through the forest to the house. When it is safer, we can do that.

For now, I share what food and water I have on me with this child, and we rest.

Rest turns to sleep as the day darkens.

The crunch of snow beneath boots startles me awake. I hug this child, who is still sleeping, close to me, and I am very quiet.

I do not think there is much more to my story.

I brush her hair, softly, and feel the fever that she is carrying inside her. For too long, this sweet girl has been pushed forward, forced to walk, hunted, and for what? I kiss the top of her head. What color are her eyes? I cannot remember. Is this not terrible? I only saw them look to me, pleading, for a moment, before she was in my arms and we were moving.

That moment, like all the moments of my past, are lost to me now. But there was, once in my

life, a dancer named Natalie.

Now, all I have is this single moment, frozen in time, safe between horrors. There is food in my belly, warmth in my arms, and I am doing what I know to be good and right. I have this. I have this moment.

I look to her.

She is still as Heaven, the face of an angel, untouched, as pure as the newly driven snow.

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