Word Count: 2934

Tiny Dancer

1971, Staten Island, NY

I hadn't seen Busha in a year, since Jaja died. Before that, it had been another year since mom's funeral. Busha is mom's mom, and she's from Europe, maybe Poland. She and Dad never got along too well, so when her house burned down and she asked to move in, things were a bit awkward. "Why does she have to live here?" I asked.

Dad just shook his head. "Your mother, she'd want me to help."

I could tell he wasn't too happy about it.

Her house didn't totally burn down, just the laundry. The fire started there and climbed up to part of the roof. Busha loved that yellow house so much that she sprayed the flames with her garden hose until the fire department arrived. They doused it in five minutes and saved the day. Anyway, she's sleeping in my bedroom while they fix her house, so I'm stuck on the couch.

A commotion in the kitchen wakes me. Dad curses and Busha mumbles something. They're at it again, bickering back and forth and sounding like the adults in a Charlie Brown TV special. I cover my head and try to go back to sleep. Dad says Busha thinks she's special because she danced ballet when she was young but acts funny because she doesn't want anyone to know

she and Jaja were DPs. Busha can be a real pain, but she's the only family I have left on mom's side.

"Just get *your* stuff together," Dad hollers. The back door slams and the quiet afterwards lingers. I should get up, but my body sinks deeper into the couch. I hear Busha in the kitchen humming a song that sounds familiar. I squeeze my eyes tighter and think about a song she used to sing to me when I was much younger, when I was just a kid and mom was still around.

Sleep, my sweet, little one
Tuck yourself into bed so tight
Or else an old grey wolf will come
And bite you on your side
He'll snatch you up with his teeth
If on the bed's edge you sleep
And drag you to the forest deep

I liked mom's songs better. They were about love and hope. Before Busha came, I snuck into mom's closet. When I miss her, that's where I hide. I took one of her scarves and jammed into my pillowcase. When I close my eyes, I can still smell her, the perfume she wore, and that makes me feel better. I try to wish things were back to the way they were. I try, but the past won't let me back in. I get up and walk into the kitchen. Busha is sitting at the table.

"*Dzien dobry*, Nicholas," she says. She holds up a can of beer, and then she takes a gulp.

"Morning," I say.

She looks at me, as though she wants to say something else. I stand there for a moment, wondering if she wanted me to answer in Polish. I shrug and turn to the fridge. I get some juice and a hardboiled egg and sit down.

As soon as I sit, Busha stands up, like we're on opposite ends of a teeter-totter. She belches and puts the empty can in the trash. She looks at me and inclines her head towards the backdoor and walks out. She's wearing pink slippers and a calico housecoat as she shuffles along the walk. She digs out a pack of cigarettes and lights one. I watch her through the back window while cracking my egg. I peel it and give it a sprinkle of salt. Mom liked pepper on hers.

I take a bite of the egg and think about Busha. She looks small out in the yard, almost too tiny to be real. The housecoat hangs off her shoulders, and her chicken legs look barely enough to hold her. Maybe she feels small living in our house. It's got to be rough to be old and have to sleep in your grandson's bed. And since Jaja passed, I guess she's lonely too. I take another bite of egg and think about her and mom. According to Dad, he was the reason things fell apart between them. Then I thought about her home. The yellow house is what Jaja left for her, and she almost lost it. Something tightens in my chest as I take the last bite of egg. I have trouble swallowing. I get it down eventually and wipe my hands on my jeans.

She takes the last drag off her cigarette, drops it, and twists it out with her pink slipper. She glances back at the house. I finish off my juice as she meanders toward the end of the street. Lately, she's taken to climbing up on the seawall where our street deadends. I told her she's going to twist her ankle climbing up on the rocks, but she waved me off. She told me that I should be more respectful of my elders, and that I should do more with my life than ride a skateboard and read comic books.

I grab my lunch and skateboard and head off to school. It's too gritty to ride on Neptune, so I have to walk to the end of the block. When I reach Johnson Road, I look back and see Busha standing on the seawall, her housecoat ripples in the breeze. I stop for a second and think she

might jump into the Lower Bay, but that's just silly. I drop my board onto the pavement and push it down three blocks of sidewalk to school.

During the first week Busha stayed with us, I swept a bit of Neptune so I could ride. Busha came out and watched me.

"Is this your next job? Street sweeper? Your mother would be so proud."

She stared at me like I was an idiot. I got angry. Anyone would. I also didn't like that she mentioned mom.

"You may as well empty the ocean with a paper cup," she said.

"I could use some help."

"Nobody in this world loves you like I do, but no," she said.

"Just as well," I said. "If people saw you with a broom they'd worry about their children being kidnapped and made into stew."

"How horrible you are. Where do you get such ideas?"

"From that story you read to me as a kid, the last time you were here."

She nodded. "I remember."

"It gave me nightmares for years."

"*Tak,* good story then."

* * *

Pully is waiting for me when I get to school. He looks like he should be in a root beer commercial, the one with the bear. They both have the same belly and like to wear orange.

"What's up, fartknocker?"

"Nothing, pud-pounder."

We're best friends, even if he smells like Vienna Sausages. Pully yanks a bloody handkerchief from his pocket. "Want to see what I found on the sidewalk on the way to school?"

I pause and he takes that as a yes.

He unfolds the rag and reveals a thumb. His thumb, but it's made to look like someone else's. He's got a rubber-band wrapped around it so it's turned kind of blue, and he's added some ketchup to the mix to make it look gross, but it'd only scare someone if they didn't look at it too closely. It might work on girls, maybe a woman teacher, but not on Coach Hall. He'd laugh in Pully's face and make him run laps.

"Whatcha think?" he asks.

"Nice," I say. Then I imitate a news reporter. "This just in: A poor hitchhiker is missing, and all that's been found is his thumb."

"Mr. Farr. Mr. Pullman. Let's get going." Vice principal Phipps shoos us off to class.

Pully frogs my shoulder. "Later, douche bag," he says.

"Smell you later, fart-face."

I go to my locker, get my book, and head to first period, History. Mr. Gordon talks about WW II. *The Great Escape* with Paul Newman is my favorite war movie, and *The Guns of*

Navarone is a close second. But Mr. Gordon doesn't talk about any of that. Instead, he talks about *Give 'em hell Harry*. I want to hear about the atom bomb he dropped on the Japanese, but he goes on about speeches and stuff. I start to think about Busha on the seawall this morning, and my stomach turns. Part of me worries if she made it back inside okay. I tell myself if she could get up there, then she can get down. But there's another part, something else I can't pin down.

"The Displaced Persons Act of 1948," Mr. Gordon says, "allowed 200,000 Europeans displaced by the war to have permanent US residence."

I hear this, but don't pay any attention until the next thing he says.

"The first DPs arrived in 1948 in a ship with over 800 passengers. 200 DPs found new homes right here in New York City," Mr. Gordon says. "While this was a great humanitarian effort, not everyone was happy about it."

"Why'd they have to come here?" The kid next me asks.

"A lot of people asked that. Some thought DPs were bringing diseases."

"Why'd they call them DPs?" another student asks.

"Dee-Pees," he says. "Displaced Persons. They were displaced by the war. They had nowhere to go. They were homeless, so to speak."

I think about Busha and Jaja and their little yellow house and keep my mouth shut.

* * *

During lunch, Pully tries to gross out some third grade girls with his bloody thumb, but they laugh at him. His face is red and I'm sure he's going to do something stupid, so I holler his name across the cafeteria. He sees me and walks over.

"Stupid girls," Pully says. "They don't know a good gag when they see it."

"Maybe they would if they saw one."

Pully glares at me. "That's it, dingus," he says and pulls me into a headlock and gives me noogies. I try to twist out but can't. I reach around and dig for the back of his underwear, pull hard, and give him a wedgie.

Someone screams "Stop it!"

Before we know it, Phipps has us both by our necks and steers us to the Principal's office. Pully starts to blubber when the woman in the office says she has to call our parents. I don't worry too much though, because I know they can't reach Dad at work. And what would Busha do?

Dad's hours are long at the sorting center—he works for the Post Office—so I do whatever I want after school, or at least I did. I started getting good on the skateboard. I learned to do an Ollie, and I met Kelly, a girl who lives two streets over. She's in seventh and is very cool. But since Busha's moved in, everything I do is under a microscope. I don't have my bed or bedroom anymore, I have to stay on Neptune or in the house after school, and she makes me take a bath three times a week. "You smell like pig. A filthy pig boy," she told me the first night. She's worse than Phipps, I realize.

After school, I walk back to Neptune. Phipps took my skateboard when he caught me riding it in the hallway when last period let out. “We are going to have a conversation about your behavior, Mr. Farr. I expect to see you in my office in the morning before school starts,” he said.

When I reach Neptune, I go to the seawall instead of going inside the house. I don’t want to know if Busha answered the phone when the school called. I wonder why Phipps didn’t say he wanted my Dad there in the morning. I guess he knows I’m going though some stuff. But what’s really bugging me is Busha standing on the seawall this morning. It haunted me all day. When my mind drifted off during class, it’s what came into my head.

I climb up on the seawall. The water laps below and seagulls squawk in the air. I like this spot because it feels like I’m on the edge of something. I’m between the sky and the water, and I like it.

“Nicholas!” Someone shouts.

It’s Busha. I lose balance but catch myself.

“Nicholas, you need to be careful up here. You could fall.” She steps from the last boulder and onto the seawall next to me. It seems some days she could barely manage a shuffle from the couch to the bathroom, and today she’s like a mountain goat.

I look at her and try to read her face. I look for the signs of disappointment, of anger, but they’re not there. I’m sure she’s about to tell me that Phipps called, but she turns and looks out over the water. “You’re mother would’ve wanted you to be careful, but she would’ve liked that you were up here, too.”

We'd hardly mentioned mom in the six weeks that Busha stayed with us. I figured it was a deal she and Dad had made before she moved in. I didn't want to talk about her, and when Busha or Dad brought her up something inside me closed down. But Busha made me curious. "What do you mean?"

"She picked that house because of this place."

"Seriously? Dad's never said—"

"He doesn't know. She didn't want him to know. Men are funny about things when it comes to wives. It must be just so with them, and if it's not, well— you know."

Dad got angry like anyone would. Once, mom didn't pick up the cleaning. Another time she cooked a ham on Thanksgiving. Dad really blew up on that one. Then I remember another time. They were going out to dinner and the sitter was already there, but mom took forever to get ready. He walked into their bedroom and he found her dancing to the radio. The yelling was so bad the sitter left and they didn't go out.

And then a memory creeps in. It's a woman dancing, the wind blowing her hair, and the sun rising behind her. She's far away and looks like a shadow puppet as she spins around on tiptoes with arms over her head. It feels real, like a lived moment, but I'm not sure I recognize it. The sudden memory almost crackles in my head when I realize that it's my mom dancing on the seawall. It felt like discovering a new room in a house I'd lived in for years. And then it suddenly makes sense why Busha on the seawall this morning got stuck in my head all day, like the memory itself wanted to come back to me.

"I had to tell you this before I go."

"Go?" Too many thoughts flood my head. I had been thinking about how annoying Busha is, but I also thought about History class, and about how she and Jaja had been homeless. I thought about how I hated sleeping on the couch, but for some reason when I heard her say the word "go" I felt something in my chest and it was hard to inhale.

"Builders called and house is all done."

"Already? Does Dad know?"

"Of course. Told him this morning."

"Why was he mad?"

"He wasn't mad. I offered to help. Maybe surprised. Maybe I surprise him."

"With the beer?"

"I want to celebrate good news with beer. So what it's early, still good to celebrate. Anyway, he worries about you. When men don't know what to do with worry, they get angry."

I hadn't thought about her staying. I had been crossing out the days on the calendar since the first week, wishing she would go. But now, that seemed wrong.

"Your father needs help but won't ask. He should clean out her closet. Two years is too long. He thinks he's okay."

She puts her hand on my shoulder, her fingers grip my arm. "Your mother loved you very much, and God was cruel taking her from you. Sometimes you will feel that pain, sometimes not too bad. When it's bad, you come here." She points down, at the sea wall. "Sit here and talk to her."

* * *

Dad and I help Busha pack up after dinner, and a car service comes to takes her home. They load all her stuff in the back and save room for her in the front passenger seat. She looks nervous, but she actually smiles. They drive off and she waves, and before we know it, we're waving back.

"That woman," Dad says. "Thank god her house is done."

We walk back into the house and his arm hangs on my shoulder. He pats me on the back and tells me it's time for bed. I grab my pillow and blanket from the couch and head to my bedroom. I'm happy to have my room back, but when I climb into bed and bury my nose into the sheets, all I smell is the stink of Busha's cigarettes. I think about what she said, but I don't think the hole in our home can be filled by emptying mom's closet and getting rid of her clothes and stuff. I want to push those thoughts away. I pull mom's scarf from the pillowcase and let it rest on my face, hoping for a scent of the past.