

The Third Woman in Space

It was meatloaf night when Grandma went to the hospital for the last time.

“I don’t get why you have to make it so American,” Grandma said, curling back her lip.

“I have fine recipe for *Klops*. Is the same except it doesn’t have the—how do you say it? *Ketchup*.”

“We like the ketchup, Mother,” Dad said. “Especially Val.”

Grandma turned to me and searched my face. Dad was using me as a shield against compromise. I actually hated how Mom put ketchup on top of the cooked meat and blasted it all together with the oven on broil, but I didn’t say anything.

“I think it’s great, Maria,” Sveta said, but I knew she was lying. When my parents would go away Sveta would make all of her and Grandma’s favorite Motherland recipes and they would eat it all standing at the counter and talk in Russian. I would sometimes hear “Maria” and then they would both laugh loud and long like no one else existed for miles.

Sveta was a widow that Grandma met at the Jewish Sisters Book Club. Ten or fifteen years younger than Grandma, she was still quite an old lady to me, with little Mrs. Claus glasses that spent more time dangling from a chain around her neck than actually on her face. She said her house creaped her out after her husband died, so she spent a lot of time at our house.

Speak English, speak English, my parents would say to Grandma and Sveta, over and over like broken Teddy Ruxpins. I would hear it all day all around the house. *Speak English, speak English*.

The ladies would just nod curtly at my parents, not looking them in the eyes, and huddle back together to continue their conversation in Yiddish, which my parents didn’t understand.

My parents said they both left Russia with their parents because it was hard to be Jewish there. But they were about as likely to identify themselves as Jewish as they were Russian. Grandma told me her late husband wanted to move to America to make more money. She would sit at the dinner table and talk about how much she had loved her career in Russia, how she couldn't find the same work in America, until my father cut his eyes at her and she glared back silently. Sveta followed the rules. She was wild and funny and loud when my parents were out of the house, but she sat silently at her corner of our dinner table when we were all together, looking up meekly at my parents from beneath her eyelashes, just an old lady with nothing important to say.

My parents wanted to appear as American and as Protestant as possible. They ate meatloaf with ketchup on top. They didn't go to church, but you wouldn't catch them dead at a synagogue either, and we had a Christmas tree every year. They didn't have Russian accents. Instead, they spoke like textbooks, not bothering to dress up anything they said or use any relevant slang. Your average American couldn't tell they were Russian, but anyone could tell something was off about the way they spoke. They had no accent of any kind, like robots. They went to such great lengths to isolate me from anything Jewish or Soviet or both that you might think they were sleeper KGB agents.

Grandma was no typical immigrant babushka—for one thing, she was Grandma, not Babushka or Babka. Before moving to America, she was an engineer for the Russian Aviation and Space Agency. She was stout and strong and had short white hair that she would wear gelled up before it all fell out. She usually wore sweat suits and kept a strict and intense exercise regimen up until the very moment cancer bound her to a hospital bed.

“Valentina does not like this,” Grandma said, raking the congealed red square off the top of my meatloaf with her fork.

I looked at Grandma’s face but couldn’t tell what her expression meant because the chemo had made her eyebrows go away. She would tell me they got blown off by Sveta’s exhaust pipe while she was working on her car and I would laugh but Dad had pulled me to the side six months ago and told me Grandma was dying.

“She likes it fine,” Mom said, looking right at Grandma.

“You know nothing about the child,” Grandma said. “Sveta and I know her, but not her own parents.”

My mother’s face went red at her hairline but nowhere else. She wore thick makeup that changed the color of her skin. “We have jobs, Ana. We get busy.”

Grandma sat back in her chair and scoffed. Mom dropped her silverware loudly on her plate and left the room.

“Mother, would it kill you to behave?” Dad said.

Grandma stood up and leaned toward him as if to say something, the little scarf on her bald head rising from the rush of air. But then the veins in her neck popped out and she threw up all over the table and fell over, hitting her face hard on the mashed potato bowl. I didn’t move and neither did Dad. Sveta screamed and ran to the telephone on the kitchen wall and called an ambulance.

The next day, I wanted to go to the hospital and sit with Grandma like Dad, but Mom said it was better for the rest of us to go about “business as usual.” I dragged my feet getting ready, but by

the time I was in the car I decided it was a good thing I was going to school because I could tell Jenna what happened.

Jenna was my best friend. She had been the new kid in first grade, and the other kids were horrified by her Coke bottle glasses and freckles. I offered her a seat at lunch because I was fascinated by her. I loved how her glasses made her eyes look so big, like a cartoon. And her freckles were peppered on her face like the stars out at Lake Hudson where Grandma would take me for stargazing.

Jenna didn't wear glasses anymore. They had been corrective for a lazy eye she no longer had. The pressed powder she used to cover her freckles made her skin dry but she applied it religiously.

"Hello, *Valentina*," she said playfully when I met her in the hall.

At Grandma's insistence, I was named Valentina after the first woman in space. She gave me an old propaganda poster she had brought overseas with her. It was wrinkled and frayed at the edges, but you could still clearly see the drawing of Valentina Tereshkova and the Cyrillic that Grandma told me said, "Long live the first woman cosmonaut!"

I respected Valentina but was more interested in the third woman in space, an American, which my parents thought was so cute. It was patriotism, or it could be someday. I didn't actually prefer Sally Ride because she was American, but because I was eight when she got her title. I got to see her on television a lot, got to watch people talk about her on the news. For my ninth birthday, my parents got me a poster of her. She was dressed in a navy-blue NASA jumpsuit. She looked like old pictures I had of Grandma at work. I stuck one of the tiny old pictures between my Valentina and Sally posters.

Jenna loved coming over and hanging out with Grandma and Sveta. She liked Sveta's cooking and giggled at the way they talked, but they didn't mind. They told her she was sweet and called her *vnuchka* like they called me.

Jenna and I sat down in Mr. White's class. Mr. White hated me because I had wasted several of his class periods arguing that the Soviet Union, and not America, had defeated Germany in World War II. I only stopped because he called my parents and they grounded me. The day my punishment was over, Grandma and Sveta secretly took me out for ice cream, and Jenna joined us. Sveta and I pushed Dad's Lincoln up the driveway after dinner so my parents wouldn't hear the engine and Grandma turned the key from the driver's seat and screamed *Lift off!* as soon as we hit the road. We drove by Jenna's and honked the horn from the curb like a trio of high school girls, laughing loud and teary-eyed with a chill up our backs hoping Jenna's parents wouldn't yell at us.

"I didn't do the homework last night," Jenna said.

"Why not?" I asked innocently, but Jenna just responded with a knowing smile.

You know why not, her smile said. She had just gotten her own phone line and kept getting caught talking to Archie Barnes as late as 3 a.m.

"Grandma went to the hospital last night," I said, changing the subject. I steered clear of the boys in our class. They always smelled like sweat and the metal from the playground.

"Is she alright?" Jenna asked, eyes growing wet.

The attention suddenly pleased me. I wasn't too worried about Grandma. She had been rushed to the hospital a few times, but she always came out just as strong. I had to fight back a smile, push my eyebrows together and look sorrowfully at my desk.

"We don't know," I said, which wasn't really a lie. "I'm going to see her tonight."

“Oh, please, tell her to get well soon.” Jenna rested her hand on mine. “You’re so strong, Val.”

When Mom picked me up from school, she was wearing a black turtleneck and dark shades even though it was cloudy out. “Your grandmother is very sick,” she said. I didn’t get why she was telling me this because I already knew.

Grandma didn’t wake up the whole time Mom and I were there. I ran in laughing, remembering a space joke my science teacher had told me, but the air in her room was still and thick like the air over the lake before the sun rises.

A few minutes into my bored sitting on the edge of Grandma’s bed, a young doctor came in.

“Mr. Gulko,” he said. “While you were out today, we gave your mother morphine. You may notice she doesn’t wake as often.”

Dad’s face went loose and he jumped from his chair. Mom stepped between him and the doctor.

“Morphine!” she shrieked. “Who signed off on that?”

“Sveta Miroshnik.”

“This is my husband, he is her *son*! And he did not approve this!”

The young doctor looked over my mother’s shoulder at my father, who cowered awkwardly behind her.

“Sveta isn’t even related to her,” Dad shot over Mom’s head, puffing out his chest.

The doctor took a deep breath, like my parents did when they were annoyed with me.

“This is very uncomfortable for me to have to tell you,” the doctor said. “Mrs. Gulko signed over power of attorney to Mrs. Miroshnik, allowing her to make medical decisions on Mrs. Gulko’s behalf. Mrs. Gulko made it clear that only Mrs. Miroshnik is to make these decisions.”

My mother was like a Roman candle, spewing shrilly about *Sveta Sveta Sveta* and it made my ears hurt because she wasn’t saying it like Grandma. My father took off his glasses to grip the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. He didn’t behave like my mother, but I knew this meant he was very angry.

Sveta stayed at her own house after that.

On Saturday, Grandma needed more “rest” my parents said, so they let me have Jenna over to cheer me up.

I lay across my bed on my stomach, my head hanging off the side. I watched my hair mingle with the carpet, sweeping around all staticky as I shook my head. I couldn’t see Jenna over on my desk chair, but I could hear the *frsk frsk* of her filing her nails and the sharp snapping of her gum. She was talking too but I couldn’t really hear what she was saying. After she moved on from telling me all the ways Connie Thompson had betrayed her that school year to ordering the boys in our class by shoulder breadth, I committed all my focus to the carpet. My head was starting to feel hot and heavy, but I knew if I got up I’d be forced to participate in the conversation.

I had relieved Jenna of sad best friend duty. I told her Grandma would be fine and I believed she would. I wanted to enjoy a Saturday with my friend, but I didn’t think it would be like this. When did Jenna change? We used to go outside, even when it was freezing cold, and

play make believe until we couldn't feel our feet under our snow boots. I was still just fine with doing this, but Jenna preferred to stay inside and *talk*. She took it so seriously, too. A discussion, like adults.

I felt a disturbance in my hanging hair and could suddenly hear Jenna clearly.

“Val, what are you doing?” She laughed. It was throaty and loud and grown-up.

I rolled over on my back so I could see her, upside-down. She was grinning. Her freckles lit up under the shine of her eyes. It was later in the day and the powder on her face had mostly worn off. She sat down on her knees in front of me and got in my face.

“Earth to Val,” she said.

I felt the heat lifting off her face as she came nearer, smelled her stale gum and green apple Lip Smackers breath. Something intruded on my peripheral vision and then a loud *pop*, shaking me out of my trance. I sat up and turned to see her pulling the remains of her colossal bubble off her lips with her teeth.

“Welcome back,” she said when she was finished.

And without thinking, I lurched forward and kissed her on the mouth.

She didn't pull back, but when I did, she looked sick. Like when you've had too much ice cream at a birthday party and you're trying to play it cool and have a good time but you could really barf at any moment. Her cheeks went from red to pale as she pulled her lips inside of her mouth, guarding them.

I didn't know how to fix it except to get as far away from her as possible. I asked her if she wanted to call her mom. She nodded slowly but I was already handing her the handset. She waited for her ride in the living room and I stayed away.

“Jenna says she's sick?” my mother said, standing in my doorway.

“She is,” I said, my throat blowing up like expanding foam, unstoppable. “She threw up.”

I begged my parents to let me go see Grandma that night. They said it was late and Grandma needed to rest. I reminded them that having Jenna over was my treat to cheer me up, but Jenna was gone and I wasn’t cheered up. They offered alternatives. They even said they’d take me to see *Aliens*, which was rated R. I was tempted, but Grandma and Sveta had already promised to take me secretly, and I was sure they still would, so I stood firm.

At the hospital, while walking me to Grandma’s room, Dad spotted Sveta in the hall. He said he was going to grab something from the cafeteria and would be back later. I couldn’t figure out why he wouldn’t just speak to Sveta, even if it was to yell at her. I knew he was mad at her. But adults never say what they mean or what they feel.

When Sveta and I entered the room, Grandma was still sleeping. A rabbi sat by her bed. Sveta spoke to him very quietly and I couldn’t understand what they were saying.

I realized then. Maybe it was the rabbi, or the fact that my parents refused to make amends with Sveta, even though they knew if Grandma got better she’d have a fit if Sveta wasn’t allowed to visit our house. I felt heavy. My ears blew up hot and full and my face felt like it might split in half. Grandma wasn’t coming home. Not soon, not ever.

I knew Grandma was dying because she loved Sveta so much. That’s why my parents were mad at Sveta. She was killing her. Dad had told me stiffly that the cancer was from the rocket fuel fumes. But I could tell it was the love. It couldn’t exist outside of Grandma’s body, so it had bubbled over, grown into hard clumps of undying cells. I decided to stay away from Jenna from then on because I didn’t want to kill her.

When the rabbi left, I followed him into the hall.

“Where will my grandma go when she dies?” I asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said. “We have some ideas—”

I didn’t want to hear them. “Do you think she might end up in space?”

“It’s possible.”

“I think she would like that,” I said, my eyes filling up, and I hated the sympathetic look on his face, so obviously a grown-up looking down sadly at a blubbering child. “She never got to go. It was almost her turn when she had to leave Russia.”

I needed someone to know this. Someone who wasn’t me or my parents or Sveta or Jenna. A real person out in the real world. Someone needed to know that she’d had dreams. She’d had plans. She wasn’t just an old woman whose life had ended when she had her son. She was somebody.

The rabbi gave me a butterscotch candy, patted my head, and left.

Grandma didn’t wake up again. While she was sleeping Sveta would say *She isn’t in pain she isn’t in pain* as if that would make me feel better. Grandma had been in pain for years. She had been ripped from the country she loved. Her husband made her move and then he died and left her to raise their child alone. She had to retire early. Then she got cancer, but she dealt with it because *Well, this may as well happen to me now*. She took a lot of pills for the pain and IVs that made her puke. But she joked and she chased me around the yard and she told me to stand up to adults when they lied to me on purpose.

I didn’t worry that she was in pain. I worried that she would never talk to me again. She would never defend me against my parents at the dinner table. She would never help me and Sveta sneak Dad’s car out of the driveway. I think Sveta could see this in my eyes. She kept saying it. *She isn’t in pain she isn’t in pain she isn’t in pain she isn’t in pain* but she would sob harder the more she said it. She wasn’t telling me, she was telling herself, and it didn’t matter to

her any more than it mattered to me. What mattered was that Grandma was leaving and we couldn't go with her.

I was sitting on a bench in the hall when the line went flat. Sveta and Mom had been quietly but fiercely arguing by Grandma's bed so I had been sent out of the room. Dad was at work. The doctors and nurses came and there were tubes and wires and everyone was touching Grandma's body. I wanted to pry all their hands off of her.

My mother, who had said maybe four nice things to Grandma her whole life, had mascara running down her face as she gulped big breaths, howling, "Save her! Save her! What are you doing! Save her!"

It was Sveta who told the doctors and nurses to stop touching Grandma and it was Sveta they had to listen to. My mother screamed at her, hit her, spit on her. "Why didn't you want to save her?" she screamed.

Sveta stayed calm, held still while Mom pelted her with weak punches, and said, "Why didn't you?"

I often see Jenna when I come home for the holidays because she works at the grocery store closest to my parents' house. We pretend not to know each other. I go to another cashier's line. I show her mercy. We are both adults after all.

But I see it in her eyes sometimes. She'll be stocking the peas when I pass by and in a half-second's eye contact she apologizes to me. *I'm sorry I didn't write to you after I transferred schools and your Grandma died but I didn't know the address.*

In the remaining half-second I say, *No problem.*

But it is a problem because when I see her, I think about Grandma for longer than I would prefer to. I can see Grandma banging the nails into my Sally poster with a shampoo bottle because Dad wouldn't let her have a hammer. Head thrown back on the driver seat headrest, laughing until Sveta screeched for her to put her eyes back on the road. Lifting Sveta up onto the counter while they were vodka-drunk in the kitchen, ignoring her 15-pound rule from the doctor, Sveta swatting at her with a wooden spoon for not following doctor's orders but unable to contain her swooning. I'm angry that I was never able to really know her as who she was, that all my memories of her are obscured by secrets. I wonder about Sveta, who I haven't seen since the funeral, but conclude that she is probably dead now.

I see Jenna at the register listening to an old man bitch about his coupons and my eyes catch hers as she glances over his shoulder. She only looks at me for half a second, but she makes sure I know, *I'm sorry. I don't know who I am.*

She looks away before I can answer:

I forgive you. Take care of yourself. Stop covering your freckles.