

The Tree of Life

Lana had brought the tree in an earthen pot through all of their moves. As a child, Taza's early memories of the tree echoed the main reason for the need to relocate. How the tree came to America from Russia sounded simple enough-- Lana claimed that she simply smuggled the scion wood in a water bottle. That was in 1986, before the complicated air travel security procedures post-9/11. It was only after the small tree branch was grafted onto an established apple tree that it finally bloomed and bore fruits. This occurred after years of struggling as a sapling in a pot in front of their former houses, porches or even in a refrigerator at one point. It was in Shorewood, a one square mile urban village of Milwaukee, that the Praviks and the tree were able finally to put down roots. Like how children can be made to believe in Santas, Easter Bunnies and Tooth Fairies, Taza from a young age somehow accepted that the Tree of Life, as her mother referred to it, determined where her family could or could not live. Later she realized that other families did not move because of a tree, or that they even possessed such a divining thing that determined the suitability of the place to settle. Even though such revelations finally dawned on Taza, as she grew older, the Tree continued to cling to its namesake by manifesting its will on their lives in other ways. In retrospect, she wished she had inherited Lana's dogged faith in giving the Tree its due respect. Its credibility in the sacredness of "meant to be" was proven. The Tree accompanied her family for a reason that would induce her to make a journey back to where her family had started. Like the greatest of all regrets, all of this information could have been obtained from her parents when they were alive. But it was not until she had grown up and lost both of them that she realized she did not know everything about her parents' beginning, especially the significance of the Tree.

She recalled once when her father, Andy, suggested cutting the Tree down to plant a better variety. Her mother, aghast, had fought furiously against it. She was adamant.

“The Tree is an apple tree. It is our Tree of Life,” her mother had said.

“But the fruits are bitter,” her father would reply.

“Well, life is bitter,” she would counter.

As a child, Taza did not understand what all of the arguments were about, but she knew her father was right. The fruits from the Tree were not like those found at Sendiks, their corner market. Yet, her mother would eat at least one bitter fruit from the Tree every year. It seemed as if she were hoping that in one of those years the Tree might someday bear sweeter fruits. It never did. And worse yet, Lana made sure that Taza took a ritual bite of it, too. No amount of protest, tantrums, or feigning imagined illnesses would excuse her from not having to swallow a token of the dreaded fruit. At one point, Taza believed that the old adage of “an apple a day keeps the doctor away” meant that doctors were afraid to come to the house because Lana would make them taste one of those horrible apples. Eventually, Taza convinced herself that it was a mystical tonic that protected her mother from succumbing to leukemia.

A kind and gentle man who loved his wife and daughter, her father had been a nuclear physicist. After completing a brief stint at the University of Hawaii Natural Energy Institute as a visiting scientist in 1985, Andrei Pravik returned to Ukraine in March 1986. After the Chernobyl nuclear plant disaster in April 1986, however, he was no longer able to return to his old job in Pribyat, a radioactive ghost town. With help from various friends and colleagues in the United States, Andrei secured a position at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee. But before he moved to America, he married Svetlana, or Lana for short, in January 1987. She was

the sister of his childhood best friend, Alexei. As a botanist and horticulturist working at the Vavilov Institute of Plant Industry in St. Petersburg, Lana, happened to be home after completing a botanical expedition to Central Asian regions of the Soviet Union. Andrei and Lana's families had been friends for generations and ever since they were children, the families had hoped they would marry. The newlyweds moved to Knoxville where Taza was born later that same year on September 26 at the University of Tennessee Medical Center.

Andrei's career took them to Upton, New York, where Andy, as he was known from then on in America, worked at Brookhaven National Laboratory. After a few years, he was lured away by better salary and benefits, and moved his family to Chicago where Andy worked at Argonne National Laboratory. With each move, Lana struggled to keep the apple plant alive. She complained to Andy that the place they lived was either too hot or too humid for the Tree's wellbeing. She implored him to move on to another place.

With her training as a horticulturist, Lana tried creating an artificial environment to sustain the Tree, for it was a very scraggly-looking apple plant in its pot at this time. In Knoxville, she had bought a used refrigerator from a Chinese graduate student who had just completed her PhD at the University of Tennessee. Lana even rigged a lamp with a full-spectrum bulb to shine at specific times in the fridge when the door was closed, trying to emulate growing seasons in Russia. Lana secured a long krayka, a Ukrainian woven belt, to keep the refrigerator door from opening.

Three-year-old Taza worked on loosening the belt bit-by-bit everyday for weeks. It had all started when she was bored and her mother was occupied with chores elsewhere in the house. And, as always, her father was away for long hours at the lab. The colorful krayka

wrapped tightly around the girth of the olive-colored enamel box tempted her to grab and hang on to it like a gymnast. Curiously enough and luckily for Taza, with each gymnastic stunt, the knot on the krayka loosened until one day the door opened to reveal the mysterious dweller living in the box-- nothing more than a rather trifling, unremarkable plant with little green leaves akin to a bonsai.

The opening of the fridge door must have made a sound loud enough that Lana appeared from the bedroom and slammed the fridge door. Her mother quickly refastened the krayka and strengthened the binding with some rope. Taza had been terrified at her mother's sternness as if Taza's misdeed of opening the fridge door might have almost let an evil genie escape.

When Andy accepted a professor position at a university in Wisconsin, they settled in Shorewood, a suburb of Milwaukee with a thriving Russian immigrant community. The Russian population was large enough to support Russian grocery stores, Russian language as a choice of foreign language offered at the high school, and even Russian-speaking interpreters in the local Walgreens. Here, Lana put her foot down and declared they would stay until the end of their lives in the one place in America she felt was as good as it gets for a Russian émigré family. She also found a job as the manager at a local family-owned Kellner Greenhouse, just across the river from Shorewood.

Tenderly released from its artificial sanctuary, Lana grafted the Tree to another apple sapling in the front yard of their home. In fact, the deciding factor in purchasing the house was because of that already established apple sapling. The Tree flourished with its bitter harvest year after year much to Taza's dismay. She did not know then that the apple tree would insert

itself at crucial turning points as if to remind her of the significance it would continue to play in her life.

On the day Taza left for college in Minnesota her mother gave her a journal with a pressed sprig of five leaves and a blossom from the apple tree inside. Who would have known that eight years later after both parents had died that Taza would earn a Ph.D. in plant genetics, and not only that, she would choose to work on the genetic variability of apples. By then, Taza knew that her interest in apples was indeed due to the Tree. When Andy developed leukemia during her sophomore year in college, she took a semester off to help care for him. Everyone attributed his illness to his exposure to the Chernobyl radioactive fallout eighteen years before. Now, Taza wished her father had joined them in their yearly consumption of the bitter fruit. Andy had needed a bone marrow donor for any chance of surviving the cancer, but no possible match was found.

During her father's illness, Taza thought she had heard her mother saying to Andy, "Why don't we just test her to see if she is a match for you?"

Her father's reply was, "Lana, we both know that it would be extremely improbable."

"Many bone-marrow donors have been matched with people who are not relatives," Lana said.

"That's why we are looking for donor matches from other Russians in the area. We don't need to involve and risk what we both agreed upon when you and I married," and with that no more was said.

Years later, such bits of conversation sometimes appeared in Taza's streams of consciousness when she had studied molecular genetics. These floating pieces in her memory

did not make any sense after she learned that any child of a parent would match half of each parent's genetic material. Therefore, she should be at least a half-matched with her father and in the same way with her mother. When during one of the summer holidays from St. Paul, Taza asked her mother, why they or the doctors did not at least try to use her bone marrow to repopulate her father's immune system, Lana gave her that same fridge door facial expression that sent cold splints into her heart.

On the day that Lana suffered a stroke, Taza had just completed her master's thesis on bioactive compounds in wild and cultivated apples. One particular sample caused uproar of excitement with her academic thesis advisor and everyone in the lab. Her data suggested a glimmer of hope or promise of fighting a rare form of leukemia without the necessity of a bone marrow transplant from a healthy donor. That sample was the sprig from the Tree that her mother had given her in her journal when she left for St. Paul. It was on a whim that she had decided to include the Tree in her analysis. The Tree was the one that contained what could have saved her father's life years earlier. But the joy of such monumental discovery was short-lived when Lana did not recover from her stroke. By the time, Taza arrived at Froedtert Hospital 's ICU in Milwaukee, Lana was barely conscious. She died that night.

On the day of Lana's death, a severe thunderstorm was brewing as Taza left the hospital to go back to their home in Shorewood. With her mother's death, many loose ends would need to be taken care of, but a sense of deep regret now pervaded her being. The many questions that had cropped up in her mind during the last week of the bioactive compound discovery would now seem forever unanswered... such as the origin of the Tree or how her mother had come to possess it or why the Tree was treated with such reverence in her life. If only, she had

been more curious about the Tree, she lamented to herself. Nearly home as she turned the corner of Kenmore Place and Newhall Street, a sudden lightning flash jolted her. There in front of her eyes, as if she were watching a scene from a biblical episode, the bolt of lightning struck the Tree. Bursting into flames, it went up in a smoke as if it meant to follow the death of its owner, Lana. Later, Taza recalled the scenes of chaos of the North Shore Fire engines, the Village of Shorewood cops and neighbors helping to keep the house from igniting.

On the Internet, she was able to contact her only remaining relative, her uncle Alexei, to inform him of her mother's passing. She had never met Alexei until the funeral, but she was so grateful for his presence during this difficult time. After the funeral, Taza and Alexei went to the Shorewood Collectivo café on the corner of Oakland and Kensington. Taza could not admit her feelings of guilt to Alexei for Lana's sudden stroke might have been due to the phone call conversation she had with her mother earlier that day.

Taza had secretly collected her parents' DNA samples from Lana hair and a swipe of Andy's old razor. Her analysis of her parents' and her own DNA revealed that she was biologically related to her mother but not to her father, Andy. When she divulged her newly acquired knowledge, her mother was extremely upset. Why did she, Taza, want to dig up the past with all of that, her mother had demanded. Yes, why did she, Taza silently bemoaned to herself. Yet, in addition to losing her mother, her greatest regret was in also losing the Tree now that it had shown its promise of a cure for millions of leukemia patients. She needed to find out where Lana had obtained it and if another "mother" Tree existed somewhere in Ukraine or Russia or wherever Lana had collected it during her plant collecting work in St. Petersburg. With that in mind, she posed the question to her uncle Alexei about her mother's

earlier life in Russia, hoping that the conversation would yield new detail that would allow her to piece together her own history.

With a faraway look in his eyes and a certain sadness Alexei said, “Yes, it was during a plant collecting expedition to Kazakhstan in 1986 that Lana met and fell in love with a young Kazakh botanist. His name was Kyran Aimanov. He served as her guide to the wild apple forests of Kazakhstan. When Lana came home for Christmas that year in December and announced her intentions of marrying Kyran, our parents were dead set in their objections. They pointed out all of the differences in their backgrounds that would make their union problematic. In addition to being a Muslim, it would be difficult for Kyran to get a job and relocate to St. Petersburg. Besides, it would mean Lana would have to move to Kazakhstan to follow her husband, they argued. When she married Andrei as they had wanted her to, Lana ended up leaving them and following her husband to America just the same,” Alexei sighed.

“So why didn’t Mother marry this Kyran?” Taza asked. In her mind, Lana did not strike her as someone who would so obedient as to follow her parents’ wishes dutifully, without protest.

“Kyran’s family was also against it. Then, she did not hear from Kyran and she assumed he had given up. When your father, Andrei, came back from America and proposed, she agreed and moved to America with him. Years later I heard that Kyran was arrested along with other young Kazakhs in the mass protest that happened in December of 1986, but whether that was true or that was the reason for his not contacting Lana, I don’t know. I think it was my mother who said that someone with an accent had called and asked to speak to Lana. She told the caller that Lana had married and moved away. That was probably Kyran.”

So this was how she found herself in a café in Almaty, Kazakhstan several months after her conversation with Alexei. Taza was anxiously waiting for the man whom she hoped would provide all of the answers that she should have asked Lana but could not. She had contacted him regarding the origin of the Tree. Yes, indeed, the mother Tree is still alive and yes, he knew exactly where and which it is because he was the one who gave it to Lana. But her other reason to meet was to ask that other important question ... but how does one go about asking a man if he was possibly her biological father? Should she ask straight out for a cheek swab sample or a hair follicle perhaps, before explaining why? What if he refused? Or what if after asking him the question, something bad will also happen to him or to the mother of the Tree what had happened to the one in her front yard? It was while mulling all of these questions that he appeared in front of her, in person. In his kind and gentle face, Taza finally understood the hints of folds in her own face, the reason why her eyes were a darker brown instead of Andy's blue or Lana's hazel ones, her straight hair and other subtle features that she thought were in her.

Kyran said, "So, she named you, Taza, just like what I told her I would use to name if I were to have a daughter! Did you know that the name "Taza" meant "clear and bright" in the Kazakh language?"

"No, I didn't," was all she could muster as she stood to give him a hug. She knew now she could finally find the answer to the question by the end of this visit.