

The Couple in the Woods: Fragments of a Memoir

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2015

Maria was only six years old when she had a brush with death. It was not her first; she was almost eaten by a wolf when she was an infant and starvation seemed to be knocking at her family's door constantly, as it did every door at that time. But this time was different. This time was so horrible, so unspeakably terrifying, and yet Maria had no idea what had almost become of her.

It is a difficult thing to write a memoir. Memory is never a reliable mechanism. The history books give us accounts of an event that fit together to create a greyscale version of history, while our memories breathe life into it, filling it with colour. As writers, we seek to recreate history as accurately as possible. We do our research. We write. We share our stories with our loved ones. We rewrite. Share. Write again. We dig deeper and deeper, until all the different stories unite to create a complete narrative.

Maria, my grandmother, grew up in Ukraine during the time of the Holodomor, the Great Famine of 1932-1933. Stalin had turned the so-called 'breadbasket' of Europe into a famine-stricken nightmare, where people turned on one another through fear and desperation. Soviet soldiers would search the homes of all Ukrainians in rural areas and confiscate every last morsel of food, until a quarter of the rural population were left dead or dying. The rest were suffering through the various debilitating effects of starvation, including visible aging as the skin withered, a swelling of skin tissue in the hands and face which would erupt into festering sores, the appearance of bulging eyes which sooner or later became immobile, severe diarrhoea, and complete fatigue, induced by the slightest exertion, which left them without the strength to bury their loved ones.

1933

Maria was collecting firewood in the forest. The air was cool and fresh, and she breathed it in until her chest felt so full that it couldn't possibly hold any more. She paused for a moment,

savouring the air, and wondered if this was what it felt like to have a full stomach. She let it out slowly and bent to pick up another stick when she heard a voice call out.

‘Hello.’

Maria dropped the stick and looked up. She hadn’t realised anyone was nearby.

‘Hello, little girl,’ it continued.

She looked around until she saw a small, old grey-haired woman standing about a hundred metres away. Her husband, a taller man with a bony, angular face stood behind her. She had a very sweet, kind face, but there was something off about the man. He looked wary, but something glinted in his dark eyes.

‘Are you hungry?’ asked the lady. Maria stood silently for a moment, unsure of what to say. She was always hungry in these times. Who wasn’t? Perhaps the lady was just making conversation. Maria, unsure of what to make of her, nodded slowly.

‘Poor dear, follow me and I’ll get you something to eat, shall I?’

Maria’s stomach let out a loud moan and she quickly began to follow them.

‘Marishka!’ she heard from behind. She spun and saw her neighbour Natalya, a good friend of Maria’s older sister, Anna.

‘Marishka! Come at once. Anna is looking for you!’

Maria remembered the firewood and her stomach dropped. Forgetting all about the couple, she ran back home with as much energy as she could muster, collecting firewood along the way. She desperately hoped she hadn’t taken too long: her mother always made her kneel in salt when she was in trouble. It burned her knees and she could barely walk afterwards. When she arrived home, out of breath, she found her sister.

‘I’m here. Why were you looking for me? I wasn’t too long, was I?’

‘What do you mean?’ Anna asked.

‘Natalya said you were looking for me,’ she answered, only just starting to regain her breath. ‘I was collecting firewood.’

‘I don’t know what she’s talking about.’ Anna walked out of the room to continue wringing the laundry. It was only later, when Maria told her mother what had happened, that she found out the couple in the woods had been eating children. Natalya had saved her life.

2015

‘That’s not actually what happened,’ my Auntie H  l  ne said when I told her what I had written.

‘Really?’ I replied. ‘That’s what someone told me.’ I wondered if it had been my grandmother. For the life of me, I couldn’t remember.

‘Natalya was the daughter of the couple in the woods,’ my auntie said. She saw the surprise in my face and smiled. ‘You didn’t know that, did you?’ The people in my family always seem to get excited when they know more about something than someone else. It must be the arrogance in our French blood. We get that from my grandfather. ‘She was the one who had to go out and find the children. She hated it, but they forced her to do it. And they weren’t just eating the children. Apparently, they were making pies to sell at the market.’

‘Okay, I’ll have to rework that bit...’ I said, wondering what my auntie’s reaction to the idea of the pies would have been when she first heard the story from her mother.

I was later given a transcript of an interview between my father and grandmother, in which she explained exactly what had happened with Natalya in the woods. It was spring, so Maria hadn’t been collecting firewood at all. She was walking through the forest to visit her sister when the story took place, months earlier than I had previously thought.

‘When my sister Anna was at Synyava, her friend came to see me. She said she wanted to sleep at my house and in the morning she would take me to see my sister. I didn’t know at the time that she was no longer friends with my sister because she knew what Natalya was. She stayed over and in the morning she said that we should go through the forest...’

‘We stopped in the middle of the forest and Natalya said, “Let’s collect some berries.” I said no, because I felt that something wasn’t right. She tried to force me to go with her but I was too strong and pulled away, then she ran into the forest because a wagon was coming.’

Natalya was not Maria’s saviour after all.

There were two women walking with the horse-drawn wagon. These women had saved my grandmother. They walked with her to Synyava. Along the way, they told her that Natalya had been sent by her parents to catch children, so they could be made into pies and sausages. They told her she was very lucky. Although Anna had known about her friend, she couldn’t bring herself to tell Maria, as if giving words to the unspeakable would somehow turn taboo into reality. Besides, nobody liked to discuss such things, especially with children.

1933

The daughter of ‘the couple in the woods’ lured two children back to her home, where they were dispatched by her father and cooked by her mother. Of course, the children did not provide enough meat for the pies. They were combined with whatever could be found. Rats, sawdust, newspaper and other miscellaneous items were added to bulk out the meat. The pies were then sold at the market, perhaps so the family could bribe somebody into giving them food. People knew, or at least suspected, what went into them, but it was never discussed. No one wanted to think about it. It was just a fact of life. An act of desperation. People did not want to believe that all humanity was lost. But Natalya could no longer bear it. The next day, she reported her parents to the police.

2015

‘Did they care?’ I asked H  l  ne, furiously taking mental notes. ‘After all, wasn’t it the government who was causing the famine?’

‘Oh, yes,’ she replied. ‘The police were locals. They definitely did something about it. Their own children would’ve been at risk too.’

1933

When the police arrived at the cabin in the woods, Natalya’s mother had already died of starvation. When Natalya’s father realised it was the police who had shown up, he jumped out of the window and fled.

2015

‘What? He literally just jumped out the window?’ asked my colleague, Raelke, as we sat in our brightly lit office at the university. She had a smile creeping up behind her look of disbelief. I knew my auntie’s account would have to be reworked, but I thought I would get another opinion first.

‘Yep. That’s what I was told,’ I replied, watching her try to contain her laughter. ‘Sounds pretty comical, which doesn’t really fit with the rest of the story, but what’s even funnier is what happened next...’

1933

The police caught up with him and dragged him back to the cabin for interrogation. But the man jumped out of the window again.

2015

‘Ha ha! Yep, now it sounds like a comedy!’ Raelke cried. ‘You’ll definitely have to reword it to suit the mood of the piece.’

‘The next part sounds more serious, but yeah, you’re right. I’ll need to rework it.’

Any writer with a good story will tell you the truth can sound more ridiculous and unrealistic than fiction, but in reality, I knew there was nothing funny about this story. It had to be told right...

1933

When the police arrived at the cottage of the couple in the woods, the door was unlocked. They pushed on it gently, with Soviet rifles at the ready. Three men. Three rifles. As the door swung open, the smell of putrid rotting flesh hit them with full force. In a corner of the room was a large bundle, wrapped in a tablecloth. The police had seen enough death by now to know these were the remains of the woman. The man cowered in the next corner by the window. Clearly, he did not have the strength to bury his wife. He was shaking all over and his eyes were round with fear, yet they did not look big enough to fill their hollow sockets. His face was that of a skeleton, but it was covered in matted dark hair. In the same moment that the police decided he was too weak to move, he suddenly leapt up and hauled himself through the window beside him. The man’s adrenaline could fight the weakness of hunger only for so long, however, and the police quickly caught up to him. They dragged him back to the cottage by his arms, his legs following limply behind. When they returned to the cottage, they sat him down in a chair. They told him that they were going to interrogate him, that he was suspected of killing children, and what would happen to him if this was true.

Perhaps it was the shame that engulfed him, perhaps the despair that he had lost everything — more likely, it was the fear of reprisal — but the man summoned the strength to once again escape from the cottage, through that same window, and run from the police.

When the police caught him this time, they shot him on sight.

2015

‘What happened to the daughter?’ Raelke asked.

‘She stayed with my grandmother’s family,’ I replied. ‘They looked after her until she was able to find somewhere else to live.’

They say that some families turned against one another during the Holodomor, while others showed love and compassion. The former became desperately selfish in their struggle to stay alive, but they say it was always the latter who were the best survivors. I have heard stories of women who ate their own children, or jealous neighbours who surrendered members of the community to be executed as ‘kulaks’. My grandmother’s parents surrendered the last remaining morsels of food to their children so that they could survive. In the end, my grandmother’s parents died, and so did the parents of the girl from the woods.

I guess death takes saints and sinners all the same.

End

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