



## The Forever Gift

by

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Sometimes people ask me if I remembered anything about the time before we came to America. I remember my mother saying “That is the house where you were born.” I was crushed against the window of a very crowded bus that was bouncing along the uneven road of a city I had never seen. My mother jostled me, pushing hard and rhythmically against me with every bounce, as other people, standing and towering over us, were bumping hard against her. I had never been on a bus before and this seemed like a funny, pleasant game. Everyone was smiling at me and I smiled back. My mother says I was a gypsy at that age, eager to travel, at ease with strangers and quick to chatter and try to charm.

“You were a lucky child. Whatever you were selling, people seemed to want to buy. It was nice for strangers, but believe me, it could be annoying.”

She pointed her finger into the distance but as I looked through the window there was no house to be seen. There was nothing to see for miles except broken shells of buildings and fields of rubble. The buildings that had once stood there had been bombed into the ground, the concrete and brick now pulverized to jagged chunks with a fine dust hanging in the air.

“Warsaw,” I heard her say to my Aunt later, “has become a city of stones. The people live on them, must eat stones for sustenance because there isn’t much else, and have become as hard and silent and impenetrable as stones. I’ve grown hard, too...”

“You were always hard,” my Aunt interrupted. They were sisters and they never agreed on much.

My mother had brought me to Warsaw for the day to visit friends of hers who had just gotten an apartment. I was four years old and frantic with excitement. The smell of fuel, dust and earth, horse droppings from the carts in the street, sweat from the passengers, all foreign to me till that day, added to the sense of adventure.

Till that day I had never been in a city. I had never seen so many people nor had I even been aware that the world wasn’t contained and compact. Imagine, it was full of strangers beyond counting, so many people that I couldn’t possibly know them all. In my short life all the people around me were known by name, by occupation, by their personalities. Yet I wasn’t afraid. No, I wanted more that day, more and more of everything that was new. The unknowing produced an exciting hum in me like the vibration of treading feet and the music of a marching band. When I was small I was open to adventure.

I remember the apartment we went to was very small, and also very crowded. Many of the guests were dressed with the kind of elegance my mother said she hadn’t seen since before the war. Now though, the clothes were a little shabbier, not always matching or perhaps a little torn, and not quite fitting. People filled the space from wall to wall and spilled out into the dimly lit and narrow hallway. The interior, in contrast, was very bright. It felt like we had walked into

the sun. This was partly due to a string of unshielded light bulbs strung across a very low ceiling and radiating heat. It was funny to me that some of the taller guests were at risk of hitting their heads against them unless they ducked.

There were only two rooms, a large one that was kitchen, living room and bedroom all in one, and a second room, a bathroom. The main room had very little furniture, a narrow bed pushed against a wall, a table with a hot plate next to a sink, a grouping of rickety, unmatched chairs that seemed to create more of an obstacle course than a seating arrangement. Everyone, in fact, was standing, holding mismatched glasses and cracked cups of vodka, and there was a din of voices bouncing off the stark, undecorated walls.

Till then I had never seen a bathtub or a flush toilet. I was amazed to see children, five or six of them, in the bathroom in a tub that took up half the vast white-tiled space. My mother coaxed me in a whispery voice even as she stripped me of my clothes. I needed no coaxing. I got in the tub as fast as I could. I recall that for the whole visit all the children of various ages, naked and strangers to each other sat together having a wonderful time. We splashed vast amounts of water on the walls and floor. The adults crowded the doorway with drinks in their hands; occasionally refilling the tub or blowing cigarette smoke in O's to entertain us. Occasionally they popped sweets into our mouths and encouraged us to uncontrollable laughter no matter how raucous we got. There was no scolding if we got them wet. There was no talk of our getting sick from too much candy.

When I think back to that day I am once again replete with the memory of total pleasure because I had been to Paradise. The gleaming coolness of the tub, the abandoned waste of water that poured out of the taps at our will and didn't have to be hoarded or carried, the shrieking joy of other children, the giddiness of the adults and approval of mess and waste - it was the first time I had ever heard my mother's wholehearted laughter.

Up to that day, there was little drama in my short life. I was a carefully guarded and carefully nurtured child. At that time I was living in a tiny house of small dark rooms situated on a mountain. It was surrounded by towering, swaying trees that made a shushing sound as the wind swept through them, and that blocked the sunlight after early afternoon. There was a tangled garden I wasn't allowed to go beyond, and a very shallow, ice-cold stream I was warned not to go near.

There was another house, not visible to us, but close enough so that I could occasionally hear the shouts of the two brothers who lived there. One was nine years old and the other eleven. They were the only children nearby so I was brought to play with them. That happened only once because the visit was not a success for any of us. There was the age difference. They were also both on crutches. One had a leg amputated and though the other had no apparent wounds, my Aunt said he was very ill. They were both pale, sad looking boys who ignored me in an obvious way while they talked together. I had nothing to say to them either. They had been wounded at the end of the war, my Aunt said. Their mother had been killed, and their father, a doctor, had sent them to the country to recuperate.

I was sent to live with my cousin Flora and my Aunt Barbara. My Aunt was nearing sixty and Flora had crossed that age line. They were war shocked, depressed and nervous, though I was too young to know that. All I knew was that they loved me but that they hovered too much. They constantly made me go outside (for the good air). Then they called me in because it was too hot or too cold. They made me eat raw eggs (to build up my strength), made me drink red wine (to build up my blood), made me walk instead of run because I might hurt myself. And they watched me. They constantly watched me. They followed me with food all day and

watched the food going into my mouth with worried whispering to each other that I might not be eating enough. They watched me, as I played alone. Sometimes they watched me as I slept. I knew that because I was a restless sleeper and would wake to find one of them sitting at my side or standing in the doorway in the dark and looking at me. This eventually made me an insomniac. I would try to avoid going to sleep until I could hear them snoring. Then suddenly, in the middle of the night, I might come fully awake with the feeling someone was there even when the room was empty. They were kind, but I felt something must be wrong with me because I grew to have feeling in their persistent vigilance that they were waiting for some disaster. At a very young age I started waiting for a disaster, too, overwhelmed by a sense of danger from some vague source that they had instilled in me by their actions and their attitude.

I didn't know that Flora was a nurse. I didn't know that it was odd for a child not to live with a mother. As I understood it, she had to work in a far away town. Later I learned that aside from the fact that she had no time, and perhaps not the ability or inclination to take care of me, the mountain air was supposed to be healthier for whatever medical problems they thought I had. I didn't know they feared I had tuberculosis since a spot had been discovered on my mother's lungs. I didn't know that I probably had vitamin deficiencies, which is why I ate plaster, the wool at the bottom of the sleeves of all my sweaters, dirt, grass. I didn't know they had another good reason to have turned themselves into such dedicated guardians.

I was the first child born to my family, and into that world, after what everyone referred to as Before or The War. Almost everyone had died. I didn't know that except for a very few of the older, damaged ones, most of the children had been killed. I was a living, breathing symbol of survival for the human remnants of a previous life, and for a while I was the only one, the first one. As a result, some boundaries that had previously existed in relationships had been erased. In this after time, I belonged a little bit to everyone, and would belong for many years not just to my family, but to friends, acquaintances, even strangers in the street. I was a survivor child. Because everything that had once been unimaginable had happened, and in some places was still happening, they were constantly on their guard, afraid that anything could happen to destroy their world again. Which is why they always said, "Be careful." when I went out the door. Which is why they watched, and hoped, but didn't yet believe that they could really avert some imminent tragedy.

Only the man treated me naturally. He was my playmate, my companion, and my teacher. I called him by no other name but Man.

He was obviously old, but also seemed young, not like any adult I knew. He and I had secrets. He and I had adventures. He taught me how to roll down a hill, tumbling over and over as the sky swung. He let me climb rocks that seemed as high as cliffs, and then he talked me into jumping. Timid and fearful though I was of physical activity, I couldn't say no and embarrass us both. He taught me to stand my ground against strange dogs, touch worms, say what I thought even when I thought he might not like it. Mainly, he taught me that I could survive my fears, no matter how diligently everyone else was instilling them in me with their guarded and silent watching. He gave me a different vision of who I might become.

He came infrequently, walking the long road or sometimes getting a ride in a horse-drawn wagon. He came whistling and shouting if the day was fine, or panting and gasping if the day was very hot. The things I remember about him are small things. He always wore a shabby but perfectly tailored suit jacket. He loved to laugh. His hair was thick and gray and I loved the smell of him, of flowers and tobacco and a little wine on his breath. He enjoyed telling long, fantastical stories, as much to amuse himself as to entertain me. I insisted each story have a

dragon. He insisted each story have a princess.

On the only birthday with him that I remember, he told me, "A thousand thousand years of warriors and queens had gone into the making of you. Therefore we must properly celebrate." Then he gave me my present.

My mother said there was no money for gifts. Everyone warned me there was nothing in the stores. They didn't want me to have over-excited expectations that would magnify the inevitable sting of disappointment.

But the man came that day with a giant box, a plain box wrapped in butcher's paper. The box had little holes punched in its sides and he told me to be careful opening it, to open it fast in one motion. When I did, a cloud of ladybugs came flying out in all directions. It seemed that there were thousands. He must have spent hours collecting them and he was as delighted as I was when they came dancing out into the air.

"This was a forever gift," he said, "Even though you can no longer hold it in your hands."

Afterwards, he also took me down the mountain and bought a new ribbon for my hair. He knew exactly how to tie it, too. I didn't tell him how I hated those ribbons, common young girls, because he was so pleased with himself. They were big floppy bows placed high on one side of the head and usually collapsing over or into one eye. I let him adorn me to bring him joy. Even though I was so young, I knew that the focus of our relationship was to make each other happy.

"You must look elegant when we have our picture taken together," he said. We went to a photographer's studio and posed. He made faces and I giggled and the photographer shook his finger and jokingly scolded us.

"I can have this ready tomorrow," the photographer said when we were finished.

The man looked surprised and upset. "No, I will not be coming back this way. Please, as a special favor, try today."

The photographer finally agreed, and to give him time to develop the film, we left. We wandered through the town for a while. When I grew tired we went for ice cream to a little shop with some chairs along the outside wall. When we finally picked up the picture, I was surprised to see him tear it in half. He tucked his image into the pocket of my dress and put mine in his wallet.

"Remember me," he said. "We have captured time. You will look at the image of us and remember and have this day."

I remember everything. But I know now that he was wrong. You can't really hold time in your hand. And memory can't replace what's lost. The house where I was born was gone forever. The man was my father, but that's another thing I didn't know then. And I never saw him again.