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WR 121 – Kelly LeFave

## My Mother's Life

*by Nadia Gugnyak*

For all I have learned, for all I am, for all I can give to my children, I must thank my mother. She gave me love, which has never wavered, and as a child I absorbed that love like sunshine. She was my confidante, my source of inspiration and comfort, yet for a long time many areas of her life were a mystery to me. She was never too tired or too busy to talk with me, yet one subject was never discussed: my mother never talked about her childhood and youth. Her short, dismissive answers and odd spells of silence alarmed me. I felt hurt and sometimes angry. I assumed that she did not trust me. A million questions I had were not answered: “Is she ashamed? Is she afraid of something? Does it still threaten her? Does it threaten us?” I desperately wanted to know what she was hiding from me. I did not feel safe in a world where a mother can not tell her child the truth. Slowly, painstakingly, I pieced together a few patches of her life, but only now the entire tapestry has been revealed to me.

My mother was born in 1928 in a small, sleepy village resting in the Western region of Ukraine. It was a comparatively peaceful and prosperous time for the country. Farmers worked hard, and rich, fertile soil rewarded their efforts tenfold. From her earliest childhood, my mother had to help her parents. She weeded gardens, herded geese to pasture, watched her baby brother, cleaned, cooked, and scarcely ever had a free moment to herself. Yet despite the hard

work, those were the best years in my mother's life: the only years she would, if it were possible, want to live again. It abruptly changed in 1939, when the true horror came with the first Soviet occupation. Godless communists were like a plague, taking everything they could and destroying what they couldn't. There was no justice against them. A centuries-old village church was plundered and destroyed, many houses burned; rapes and killings paralyzed life in the village. When Germans came in 1941, people greeted them almost as saviors.

German occupation was by no means easy. They set strict rules and did not tolerate any resistance, but they brought order and were reasonably fair to the villagers. Life was tough but possible. My mother remembers how German soldiers shared their rations with village children. She especially remembers one young soldier who liked to play with her, passing a handmade ball back and forth, and once gave her an entire bar of chocolate. It all ended when the Soviet army "liberated" Ukraine in 1945. My mother's most painful, nightmarish memories originated in that time. Her hands still tremble when she talks about the events that occurred then.

Freedom-loving Ukrainians did not surrender to the occupants and a desperate resistance flared up against them. Three of my mother's uncles were high ranking officers in the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which for nearly five years fought against the occupation. Because the Soviets could not reach them, their rage and fury fell on my innocent grandparents. After one especially violent visit from the Russians, blood laid splattered over the walls and on the ceiling. My mother, a 17-year-old girl, hopelessly tried to shield her parents with bare hands against the Russians' steel-capped rubber clubs. For weeks afterwards, she could neither feed nor dress herself, while her mother never fully recovered from blows to her head. It did not end at that. Not long after, her parents were taken and held in prison for two weeks before being packed into a cattle train and

shipped to the Siberian labor camps. On the way, malnourished and cold, they became sick and were discarded at a remote railroad station to die. They survived, but for two terrible months my mother knew nothing about their fates.

Back at the village, their home had been burned, and she had no place to stay. There was a small shed in the far end of the garden that had miraculously survived the pillage, but soldiers searched it often for guerilla fighters. My mother feared the Soviets more than darkness and cold, and for several nights she slept in the fields, hiding in haystacks. But when snow fell, she was forced to seek shelter. No one wanted to take her, fearing persecution. Occasionally, she managed to sneak into sheds or barns and was happy to sleep next to a warm cow or a horse. A slice of bread or a potato from a charitable neighbor was often all the food she had for a day.

When her parents returned, all they had was that small shed. It became their only shelter for the long, harsh winter of 1946. With no land or cattle left, they had no choice but to send my mother to the city in search of work. She did not want to part with them and was afraid to go, but her parents were not allowed to leave the village and there was no one else to help. Thus began another chapter of my mother's life, full of hard, meaningless labor that distanced her from her beloved fields. She remained a stranger in the city and always longed for open spaces, crisp air, and endless sky over vast fields.

Years went by and the past horrors became but deep painful scars in her heart. She never forgot what happened those many years ago and never was completely sure that the same horror would not happen to her family again. She could not trust communists and when the chance to move to America came, she did not hesitate and once again uprooted her life. She went alone and waited five lonely years for her family to join her. Thanks to her, we are all here together now, living the new life bestowed upon us by my mother's courage. How can I

tell her how much I appreciate her for what she has done for us, how much I love her, and how desperately I want her to be happy in the few remaining years?

Seventeen years have passed since my mother immigrated to the United States. Now that she is old, her long-repressed past is overshadowing the present, and she yearns to tell me every detail of her life's challenges. The more I listen to her, the more I realize that my mother's silence those many years ago was her way to protect me from truth too gruesome for a young child. She knows that now I am strong enough to feel her pain and not become bitter or resentful. She also wants to pass, through me, the story of her life to my children when they are ready. This way nothing will be forgotten or changed in the deceptive attempt to make the history more palatable. Horror that once had happened must be remembered and faced in all its brutal reality. It should not have happened, but most importantly, it must never happen again.

*let there be new flowering  
in the fields let the fields  
turn mellow for the men  
let the men keep tender  
through the time let the time  
be wrested from the war  
let the war be won  
let love be  
at the end*

*Lucille Clifton*