

Miha Mazzini

Childhood

(an autographic novel in fictitious stories, 42.751 words)



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All persons, places and events are fictitious or are or are used fictitiously.

The author would like to thank his mother, his father and his grandmother. Without them being as they were, this book would not be as it is.

The pages with acting advice are taken from the book *Lessons in the Art of Acting* by Edmund Shaftesbury, published in 1889.

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*The hardest thing about a designer's work is
to make something that isn't complicated.
Complicated constructions are easy to design.*

Mikhail Timofeyevich Kalashnikov

Remembering means creating a story

Grandmother was seated on the back seat, mummified, smiling. I was not worried because I was driving a corpse around, just slightly annoyed. I stopped at the border post and when the police officer asked for my passport I offered him my grandmother. He shook his head and beckoned for me to move on to Customs. The customs officer didn't want her either. I drove down into the valley and tried to hand her over to the Health Centre. They would not take her. I drove to the hospital, also without success, then I woke up with the clear belief that I needed to continue what I had started in my dreams – I needed to let go of grandmother, leave her behind.

It was clear why my dream had begun at the border post. Nona, as I called my grandmother, died in May 1984. I had moved away from home years earlier, Yugoslavia and its borders still existed and this was the era before mobile phones. Supplying oneself with basic provisions in the Socialism of the time meant at least a monthly trip across the border and on that occasion I had gone by bus. A police officer came onto the bus and shouted out whether there was a Miha Mazini on board (he mispronounced the surname, of course) and when I responded he gave me the news. Just in case, he masked it with official behavior but still waited to see how I would react. An uneasiness in his eyes, he would have much preferred to be doing something else.

I thought about how it was just as well she had reached such an age, that she hadn't died earlier, I would have been devastated then. Now that I was grown up, I didn't bother me.

With peace of mind I can nod to the police officer, the expectant gazes of fellow passengers unfulfilled.

*

The young Mozart's music teacher was his father. Allegedly he once told his son to practice his scales and went off to bed. Wolfgang practiced until his father fell asleep and then stopped, of course – but he stopped a note short of a full scale. His father, still asleep, leaped up, went to the piano, pressed the last note and went back to bed.

Youth has two illusions; the first is that it is starting anew and is not a continuation of the past; the other that it can leave matters unresolved. We grow up when we realize that we are a link in the chain of ancestors and descendants, and that the more completed entireties within, the better.

Standing outside the mortuary chapel receiving people's condolences, I kept saying how it was easier now that I was an adult and I no longer had the same feelings toward my grandmother. I repeated the same thing to myself as I looked for the last time upon the waxen face, the hollow cheeks and protruding chin before the coffin lid was put in place. And again as I threw the symbolic fistful of earth that resounded upon the casket.

Not once did I think that I had received an incomplete link that was falling through the branches of my neurons, sinking into oblivion until the body would expel it as it might push out a splinter, painfully and full of pus.

*

Almost three decades had gone by, whereupon, for a whole year, persistently though not too often, I dreamt of going down into the cellar. I don't want to but I have to because my grandmother has sent me there. Potatoes were her staple and the cellar was where we kept potatoes. I started writing the story *Happy Families, Bright White Teeth* and things weren't going well for me. I had lost my voice while lecturing and

the otologist told me I had nodules on my voice chords and would need to have an operation. Once I had finished the story my voice returned and a follow-up at the doctors revealed that the nodules had disappeared.

As a child, Elias Canetti suddenly lost his ability to speak and it took years and many fruitless attempts by doctors before he talked again. During the night he had gone to get some water and caught the maid with her lover who drew a jackknife and threatened to cut off his tongue if he spoke.

A child remembers life-threatening orders with their body, not their reasoning.

*

I wrote other stories, a novel, a film script, then I slowly began forming the story *The Birth*, and I was overwhelmed with a barrage of psychosomatic afflictions, from arrhythmia to lumbar pain and numerous other symptoms that I later included in the story; I truly was a process of delivering the story, giving birth to it. It was clear to me that a part of my brain had set off on a journey. Time had passed and it was shifting back.

Nona had yet to appear in these stories.

With old-fashioned musical stars the orchestra first played a few instrumental pieces, warming up the audiences before the diva appears.

*

The dreams made me wonder how it was possible that I felt nothing upon learning of her death. Or had I merely frozen, standing up in the middle of that bus, an elongated stage?

*

There are questions which should not be pondered over, instead the answer should be experienced.

Twice I locked myself in, closed all the doors, picked up the pillow from my bed and pulled it over my head. I could not stop crying for a long time.

After the sadness came fear.

*

I started paying attention to wardrobes. Watching them I felt a pressure, a sense of helplessness and entrapment.

They found their place in my dreams, I would come across them during meditation. I followed the image: I open the door, darkness. Fear that I surmount, I enter. I am inside the wardrobe, a weight on my chest, will I suffocate? Will all the garments fall onto me and smother me? I am tiny, in among the hanging clothes. I look toward the door that has not shut properly, a surprisingly bright gap, the light from it falling across Mother's grey suit. Its sleeve next to my head, rubs me across the face. Someone is talking outside. Why am I in the cupboard? Was I put there as a punishment?

*

I woke up in the middle of the night without remembering my dreams, all I clearly heard was Nona's whispering voice telling me how "the soul in the body is like the body in the wardrobe." She suffered from goiter and had difficulties speaking, one of my roles was as her interpreter.

And fear, this fear. I was more and more afraid. The wardrobe is punishment.

I started thinking about the story *Thee Rounds of Death* and knew that rational construction would not get me very far. I needed to penetrate further into my brain, my limbic system was inundating me with emotions, chiefly fear.

But in there, right in the reptilian brain, was Nona, animalistic, magical, terrifying.

This is how I created the story in which the protagonist, the same age as I was when my grandmother died, comes to visit a demented granny who, of course, treats him as if he was still a child and punishes him by closing him in the wardrobe. The habits of his training were so deeply engrained that he is unable to tear away; in an attack of horror he ends up caged within walls that he could demolish by simply standing up.

*

I always found it fascinating at school reunions how people who have created lives of their own, always fall back into precisely the roles they had at high school. Memories can also be sticky traps.

*

The star of the evening had finally stepped onto the stage. In order to finally move onward it was time for a trip backward.

*

I had visited Topolò for the first time many years ago and when I entered the name of the village into my GPS the device came up with a surprising total of kilometers – in a straight line on the map it was only just beyond some mountains. I requested a rerouting to find the shortest route in distance. Voilà!

I have rarely seen roads so narrow. They became dirt tracks and forest paths, in one case even coming to an end in the barn of a mountain farm (I take this opportunity to thank the young couple for their warm welcome and clear advice). It took a few hours, but indeed the far fewer kilometers and the sight of Topolò with a sense of it being a nest in a hilly forest almost made up for the tortuous drive. All difficulties were finally outweighed by the fact that the locals were surprised how I was able to travel from Slovenia when, due to some goodness-knows-how high level

state visits in Trieste, the borders had been closed off. Clearly not the shortest route suggested by satnav.

Miha Obit had long ago invited me for an autumn week of solitude and the invitation seemed an appropriate opportunity for me to figure out where and how I should drop grandmother off. By now it was clear she was no longer just sitting on the back seat but migrating through my body.

*

I can understand writers who prefer to resort to drink or drugs rather than honestly drilling into themselves; drilling is painful and you never know what you might find. Crude oil is dark and smelly and needs a great deal of refining before it becomes usable. It is easiest to stop after some surface mining, especially if this has already brought financial success. Such temptation unfortunately has not befallen me.

Miha Obit had told me that the village was rather run down and abandoned, the old ladies who were its soul and driving force had mostly died. No one will pay attention to me there, I thought. In a way it suited me, I had a date with a very specific old lady who every so often reminded me of herself through waves of physical afflictions.

*

Stazione di Topolò / Postaja Topolove the web site announces and the slash between the Italian and Slovene languages is an indication of the steepness of the hill leading up to the village. Forests for as far as the eye can reach and as the sun moves across them the colors of the treetops change in long slow sweeps. Forests one could get lost in, simply disappear. I was not here to give up, not here to get lost; I had come to push my way through the thicket.

*

The grapes outside the house are ripe. I eat eagerly. I sit on the bed and stare at the clouds veiled by the net curtains. Rain starts pattering on the vine leaves. Such a simple sound yet so beautiful in its multitude, I try to breathe as quietly as possible so as not to desecrate it.

As the mist rises, it lingers longest beneath the leaves of the vine.

*

If the novel *King of the Rattling Spirits* (2001) was about my mother and me when I was twelve, what I was creating now, if indeed I will create it – an ever-present thought at any creation, will be about the first five years of my life that I had spent with my grandmother. Key years in the basic programming of our brain. I try to think about structure – nothing more than a ladder we can throw into the rough sea in the middle of a storm. If it is not there we wave about with our hands without anything to hold on to. All that is around us then are waves, striking at us with too great a force and if and when the storm settles, all that is left between our fingers is spume. Structure is the climber's hold, something solid that we can progress along, step by step.

I do not want to and cannot write a novel. At the age of twelve the brain is mature enough for longer stories, especially with a child such as I was – escaping into an imaginary world, who had a year or two earlier already read everything there was to read in the children's section at the library and moved on to adult reading. Earlier years, however, are mere flashes, images, scenes.

So, it is short stories.

What if I create a list of these flashes and do not connect them into a novel but create around each one a new story, disregarding the illusion of whether or how something had/hadn't really happened? A memory flash as a starting point.

And if I go up this ladder, contriving tales around every rung, is not the result a novel of sorts?

*

“Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy regains girl” is the most widespread formula of American screenwriting.

I spent my first five years with Nona, then her sons took her in and returned her about a year later.

Child has grandmother, child loses grandmother, child gets grandmother back.

But the child is not the same child he was after a year without her. In her absence he experiences playing outside the apartment block all day, running around with other kids, he acquires a taste of freedom. Once you savor it, it is hard to just obediently lower your head.

*

I stand up, stretch and go and make myself a sandwich. As I start covering the open roll with a blanket of mortadella, I hear a whine. A high-pitched thin sound that could also be the rusted hinges moving in the wind. I open the door.



If the bread is good I don't miss the mortadella.

Not during the next few days either, at the same hour, the same movement.

*

Donatella invites me to dinner, attended also by her daughter and a young man who tells us about how he spent two months walking from one mountain farm to another, living off the kindness of strangers. He says what a great feeling asking for something is; I understand his point even though he talks of what I find most difficult.

Without experiencing such kindness from kith and kin, it is hard to trust strangers.

*

The sense of sitting at the edge of the world. Silent and solitary and, with the occasional creak of the chair, I listen for spirits responding in the distance.

The logs in the stove crackle; the structure is written down, fear slowly recedes. Occasionally it cannot bear it and leaps at me once more, this time with thoughts about carbon monoxide.

Fear is the first association I have with my grandmother. The second is the warmth of her embrace. The problem was not that I earned it only rarely but more in that I had no clearly set rules for how to earn it.

I am becoming angry.

*

I am afraid of my own rage. But emotions are like a deck of cards that has been assigned to us and the secret of successful existence is in drawing the right card at the right time; anything else is merely cause for our own and other people's misery.

One of the scenes I have, to my surprise, never forgotten, and was thus included on the list around which I will create my story, is a kick with which I hit Nona in the shin. She cried out and I ran away.

I spent the first five years of my life with her in a plethora of spirits, souls, curses, prohibitions and the torment of saints, the only book she was always reading. The rule of *memento mori*, living *ad sanctos*. Then she was taken away by her sons, oh the *tears*, but all of a sudden I became an (almost) normal child, which in those times meant daylong rushing around outside the apartment blocks, racing our bicycles, and an explosion of smells and colors. Then Nona was brought back and she wanted to restore our previous state. But the spell had been broken and, despite my terrifying fear of God's wrath, of the fire and brimstone of hell with which she threatened me, I gained my path to freedom with a kick.

For a long time afterward I would check my own leg, waiting for signs of it withering.

*

In one night I write *The Bar-Tailed Godwit's Navigational System*, the story in which the boy stands up to his grandmother for the first time. Despite the story not containing anything that happened in reality, it is entirely autobiographical. What it contains is the genuine rage that outpours into revolt. The role of literature is not gossip but insight. In order to capture the truth, we need to make everything up.

*

In 1961 Federico Fellini said that we would initially be satisfied with photographs from the moon (something that happened eight years later) but after a while we would want to send a poet there who would give us a new vision of that new reality.

*

Only once do I visit the cemetery with three crosses above the entrance and a joint grave of Italian and Slovene partisans in the corner. Every morning and every evening, however, I walk as far as the wayside shrine in which Joseph has a disproportionately high forehead and Jesus has an adult face on a child's body. The figures look as if they have been carved out of aerated concrete or even polystyrene.

It shows that Joseph is a carpenter, he looks strong. He effortlessly holds Jesus in the palm of his hand without ever tiring. I stare at his fingers, he has only four. Had he severed his little finger whilst working or was the sculptor simply not a perfectionist?

It makes me think about the photograph I found as a child from which my mother had cut out everything else apart from a man's hand on my shoulder.

*

The Sadness of Frozen Mountains is the story of a child who finds a photograph of his father's hand. On his way home from school he one day comes across a man

with an amputated hand whose stump finishes in precisely the same place where mother's scissors cut off father's hand in the photograph.

*

If I walk to the top of the hill I can receive the phone signal from Slovenia. I check my e-mails, make few calls. Once the church bells start a full concert but by the time I walk back down to the church it is already locked.

I sit on a bench and stare at the clover covering the slope below.

I grew up amidst dried up plants. They looked like Nona, brittle and grayish white. Even the bright red rosehips darkened and became covered in white hairs.

When we learnt about Ottoman raids at school I remembered Nona and me; we were the Ottomans. All of a sudden she would stand up and start collecting plastic bags she would always keep, flattened with her hands and carefully folded. She would fill a basket with them and off we went.

Past the apartment blocks, along the railroad, past some wooden shacks that were called the Base, on toward the fields, opening up the valley through which the river meandered. We never went as far as the river because it kidnaps children and returns them bloated, full of eels wiggling out of their eye sockets and carp grinning from their throats.

We grabbed anything that Nona perceived as medicinal herbs. She spread them out on all our cupboards so the tiny apartment smelt of hay, on the balcony she arranged halved hips of roses, as she called them and would indeed make tea from these; I do not recall her ever using any of the other medicinal herbs in any way. In the autumn our balcony was full of slices of apples set out to dry. The apples slowly darkened, bees buzzing around them and flies slamming against them.

She collected the dried slices in plastic bags, locking them in the cupboard. They were a reward, not a snack.

*

We had to cross a bridge and once my foot had become stuck in the track points.

The moment I discovered that Nona loved God more than she loved me, *Something Everyone Talks About Yet Nobody Has Ever Seen*.

I realize that I am staring at the clover around my feet, looking for one with four leaves. I never found one. Not in Topolò either.



*

I make my list of *thorns* as I now call those flashes of memory. I still don't know how I will use them but I have created the ladder I will climb up.

The good news is that I already have a title for the entire collection: *Childhood*.

Simple and predictable, but every one of us has to get through it.

God willing, I should be able to write it within the year.

*

(Nona never used the future tense but always the present + “God willing,” believing that the future is in no way dependent on us)

*

Writing is no therapy, it has never cured anyone. It can merely be a sign of shifts being foretold, minute tremors in the magma, trying to find a way out. Creating offers us a retreat and the zeal of concentration that directs the lava into the channel we have prepared for it. We thus connect our emotional thorn with creation like Pavlov’s conditioned reflex and we are unable to differentiate between the two. Christian countries associate creativity with suffering; just consider the suffering of Jesus, the son of the greatest Creator! So we fear forfeiting our problem, falsely believing that without it we will no longer have the capacity to create.

So I stand on the top of the hill and because the signal is weak I need to step on the tips of my toes to contact my therapists and arrange a meeting.

*

Rilke never dared, “If my devils are to leave me, I am afraid my angels will take flight as well.”

James Agee did not manage it, believing that with therapy “his soul would no longer be his.”

Kipling was afraid of introspection; therewithin, he believed, await breakdown and madness.

Beckett hesitated until rashes, boils, panic attacks and irregular heartbeats forced him to enter therapy.

After therapy, Graham Greene declared that it had helped him to better creativity.

*

The list is completed, two more stories written and a few others planned, it is time to return home.

Four kilometers of a very steep hill lead down into the valley. I start the car and need to drive only a few meters before the road dips. I switch to neutral. I no longer need the engine; forces that have been and that will be propel me along and accelerate. All I need is to take care not to go too fast, I brake before corners and above precipices that could swallow me. I do not slow down for the fallen branches left in the wake of the storm, they crackle under the wheels and their crushed freshly exposed cores flash in my rear-view mirror. I am on my way. Grandmother is not on the back seat, she has moved into my head. I know that we will talk a lot before I prepare the book, a bed for memories, every page a sheet that both reveals and conceals, somewhere I can move her to.

Certain beings undergo a complete transformation within their existence; for example, they live as larvae, pupae and butterflies. People often look at their youth as if it had happened to someone else, as if it was the first stage of a metamorphosis, followed by adulthood and old age.

Writers are the only ones in a position to add an extra developmental phase to other people's lives.

When I first encountered my grandmother she was fanatically religious; some time previously she had shed her skin of a frivolous young girl. I had already left home when what encyclopedias predict happened, under the entry for 'pupa' that it

describes as a “motionless phase,” during which they “are inactive, and usually sessile,” the process in which a large role is played by controlled cell death.

Nona persisted in this phase for almost three decades before she was prepared for the next transformation for which she needs my help.

She could have carried out all that living in the tiny apartment on her own.

Set in motion, I cannot stop half way down the hill. I have work to do. I must forego what experts describe as: “comprehensive changes in the structure of the body; some organ systems (e.g. the nervous system) can entirely decompose and reestablish themselves.” I will transform my grandmother from a corpse and the emotions of my own experiences into a story.

This is the ultimate that people can become after death.