

Invisible Threads

by

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In memory of my father, Charlie Karson, the first man I ever loved, who sang like an angel and who taught me to recite—with feeling—every word of “Annabel Lee.”

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One

THE PATIENT IN bed two stirred, making thick, molasses-mouthed sounds on her slow passage back to consciousness. Once she finally found a way to re-inhabit her mind, she cursed herself for having bothered. Really, she should have known better. Anyone who'd worked with the elderly and infirm for nearly fourteen years should have gotten the message that a hospital is hardly the place to take the measure of your life.

She'd entered Cedars-Sinai's fifth floor recovery room lost in an anesthetized limbo. The ruddy-faced surgical aide who wheeled her in had all the finesse of a trucker on speed. Without a word, he deposited his load and took off down the hall.

The gurney sat in the middle of the hectic room like an orphan at a new school, until a petite Filipina nurse abandoned her paperwork to push the incoming lumpectomy into a space against the wall between a surprisingly voluble hysterectomy and a bleary-eyed young ulcer. Welcome or not, consciousness returned to the woman in the middle, but at first only in patchy islands poking up through a fog.

"Evelyn. Evelyn Kerr?" Nurse Cory Subharto adjusted the flow of liquid into the elongated cocoon of energy beneath her, suspended between the netherworld of death and the over-loud voices and beeping monitors of the blindingly bright recovery room.

Like everyone else in post-op, Nurse Cory was chronically overworked. Attuned to the struggle of heart and lung to re-establish their familiar rhythms, she could hardly be expected to spare a thought for her patient's muddled mind, where the barest hint of something crisp and weightless nosed its way through clumps of underwater reeds.

Evvie Kerr couldn't quite grasp whether she was a woman or some weaving mound of abraded flesh. And she couldn't tell if it was better to try to fight toward the distant shore of familiarity or let herself dissolve into the powdery murk at the bottom of this sea.

Sound came at her in incomprehensible waves. "Evelyn? Can you hear me? It's all over. You did great. You're okay."

Navigating the entire evolutionary sequence in a matter of minutes, Evvie landed into full consciousness with a grunt. She was no longer a fish, but almost recognizably human, her body hostage to a cosmic flu.

Every part of her was uncomfortable. She was above ground, but she really didn't belong here anymore, especially since some lunatic was trying to convince her that everything was hunky dory, when she was clearly unfixably broken and nothing, nothing was okay.

Dawn brought spiky shafts of sunlight, throbbing pain, and the other three members of the Kerr tribe to Evvie's fourth floor hospital room, but if the family members seated around her narrow bed had any inkling of her radically altered state, they weren't letting on. To be fair, she didn't look sick. Despite the uncomfortable dryness of her naturally moist, coral lips and the slightly sallow tinge to her flawless olive skin, her prominent cheekbones and big, dark eyes were as arresting as ever.

"Hah!" her father Michael was saying. "He should have made it Curse instead of Kerr." While his words were harsh, his lingering glance at her sister Miriam was intimate and glowing, as if he were speaking to her alone.

Miriam wasn't paying him any attention, too busy sneaking a look toward the open doorway of the small adjoining bathroom, where her teenage son Ben was just visible trying to pop a zit in front of the mirror.

Evvie's right breast ached despite the Darvocet she'd been given half an hour ago. She wriggled under a thin cotton blanket as her fingers struggled to loosen her hospital nightgown from its binding fit. She forced a smile of feigned interest. How many times had she been subjected to the same story over the course of her forty years?

Michael Kerr sat forward in his visitor's chair. "Picture it. Seventy-seven years ago. Nineteen-twenty-three. Eighteen miserable months, sneaking across a series of borders in the middle of the night, navigating half of Europe on foot before sailing steerage class across the Atlantic. Most of us were sick and dehydrated by the time we landed at Ellis Island. They had one lousy clerk entering the names of all of us 'tired and poor' in his big black book. Even at nine-years-old, I knew we were in trouble when I noticed his weasel-faced boss standing behind him, sneering like some Jew-killing Cossack from Kasrilivka. The sonofabitch stood there paring himself a juicy red apple, knowing we were all famished and dying of thirst." Michael leaned confidently toward Miriam. "By the way, Dick and I used that scene in *Lamp of Liberty*. Pauline Kael said the guy

playing weasel-face would have rated a nod for Best Supporting Actor if he'd had a few more scenes."

Evvie tried again to loosen her nightgown, until it occurred to her that it was the bandage that was causing her sense of constriction. Relentlessly, her father went on. "I knew it was a bad omen when the sadist sliced his thumb at the very moment the clerk was writing down our name. His blood spurted onto the page like a geyser, smearing the ink so that the letters were barely legible. Sure enough, when our papers were sent to us a few months later, we'd gone from being the Kirschons to the Kerrs, a couple of petty bureaucrats cutting us off from our roots more effectively than a shitty sea journey."

Evvie leaned her weight onto her palms and gingerly shifted her body a little to the right. God, he was an angry man. But as her father reached his finale, spitting out the familiar mantra of her childhood—"What else would you expect from the capitalist sons of bitches? You think it's much better for immigrants these days under Clinton?"—the hairs prickled up and down her arms. She put a hand to her bandaged chest.

Her eyelids grew heavy, and the contours of the hospital room began to dissolve. In her dream she'd become lilliputian, staring in no little awe at a larger-than-life version of a breast. A jagged line of red stitching stretched above its nipple like a primitive archway, out of which a small boy emerged. Three or four years old, he stood on a patch of dusty ground that was surrounded by a cluster of small buildings. The air was crisp. Smells of burning wood and horse manure stung her nostrils. Just a few feet away, a cluster of chattering peasant-skirted women was gathered around a well. One of them lowered an ancient-looking pail by a heavy rope, her hands as thick and calloused as a man's.

As if he alone were aware of Evvie's presence, the child signaled her with a nod of his curly brown head. He disappeared inside a small hut whose chimney spat coils of black smoke. She followed him, swerving around an odd jerry-rigged outdoor pantry that reeked of curing meat. She had to duck her head to clear the shallow doorway.

It was a single-roomed dwelling, with a gray cement floor and a few holes cut into the walls for windows. She guessed that the thin wooden boards leaning against the walls were used to fit into the openings and block out at least some of what must become a bitter cold at night. The atmosphere was pungently suggestive of human sweat, cooking onions, goat cheese. A pot

simmered on a cast iron stove. Curled in an alcove above the stove, a ginger cat blinked lazily at her before slipping back into sleep.

The boy stood in a dim corner, stretching his hands toward a teenaged girl whose fiery braids reached halfway down her back. She was painstakingly transferring a network of stretched red yarn from her hands to the boy's in a complex cat's cradle maneuver. She danced away from him, past a rustic worktable where a length of floral fabric spilled across an open sewing basket. Pulling the half-finished garment across her chest and making a graceful pirouette, she collapsed in a fit of giggles onto a pile of blankets that looked like it might make do for a family bed. The web still taut in his hands, the boy stumbled after her, laughing with abandon.

Evvie wanted in the worst way to join in. But now she felt like she was falling, and suddenly an irritable voice was telling someone to get off a bed. She opened her eyes and saw her sister Miriam's blue ones, glittering with anxiety, just inches from her face.

Miriam looked so pale that the dusting of freckles across her chiseled nose stood out more sharply than usual. Her long red hair fanned around her head as she darted an accusing glance at Ben, who stood beside his seated grandfather at the foot of the bed.

Evvie smiled uncertainly at her visitors. Her father's expression was blank, Miriam was shooting sparks out of her eyes, and Ben's young face wore a stricken banner of apology. Even though her seventeen-year-old nephew towered over his grandfather like a giant sequoia, Evvie couldn't help but feel protective of him. She fidgeted under her covers and signaled him with her eyes, willing him not to feel bad.

Ben leaned forward and patted Evvie's blanketed ankle. His expression relaxed as she murmured, "Mm, that feels good." She was well aware that the crooked grin he gave her had conquered half the female hearts at Uni High. He'd conquered hers the moment he was born.

"Sorry, Auntie. It just felt weird to leave without...some kind of contact. I didn't think that a little touch on the foot would wake you up."

His mother broke in. "Didn't think? I warned him, but he never listens to *me*." Ben inclined his head sheepishly.

Evvie's tongue felt thick as she spoke up to defend him. "S'okay. Shouldn't be sleeping through your visit, anyway."

Was that all it had been—a dream? It had seemed so real, as if she'd been transported back in time to the Ukraine of her father's childhood. Surely, that child had been him. She put a hand to

her forehead and licked her anesthesia-cracked lips. Sensing movement in the room, she looked up to see her father rise stiffly from his chair. He moved purposely toward the door.

Ben had noticed how dry her mouth was. He fetched a moist washcloth from the bathroom and gently dabbed her lips. She shot him a look of gratitude, then heard her father say to no one in particular, “Evvie’s as strong as a horse. She’ll be back in form in no time.”

Evvie struggled to sit up straighter so she could make eye contact with her father before he left, but found herself calling, “Bye, Dad,” to an empty doorway.

Her cheeks burned, but a glance in her sister’s direction made her laugh for the first time in days. Miriam had grabbed an empty paper cup from the bedside table. She’d clapped it onto her head and was rolling her eyes comically. “Well, I guess we’re going, too, or the next story we’ll have to sit through is how he had to walk all the way across LA to get home.” But for all her sarcasm, Miriam hurried to conclude their visit. She slid the phone a little closer to Evvie’s bed. “Will you call me just as soon as Dr. Manning comes?” She glanced at her watch. “Jesus. Nearly noon. I love how they tell you he’ll be doing his rounds before ten and only get around to mentioning he’s had an emergency after you’ve been waiting a couple of hours.”

But when her surgeon showed up, Evvie was hardly in shape to remember her sister’s request. Her latest hit of Darvocet was pulsing through her bloodstream. Her eyes traveled up Dr. Manning’s lab coat to meet his earnest gaze. She decided he resembled a kindly seal.

“Evelyn, I’m sorry I’ve made you wait. Actually, it’s a bit of luck that I was delayed, since we’ve just received the initial lab results.”

Cruising along a road of pleasantly dulled feeling, it was hard to keep track of what he was saying. The few words she managed to catch—“margins” and “nodes” and “Dr. Abrams”—bounced off her brain like snowflakes against a windshield. She tried to nod in all the right places but was mesmerized by the physical sensations of her gown being carefully lifted off her shoulder. Long, tapered fingers gently coaxed her bandages away from her breast, nearly imperceptibly tapping the skin bordering her incision. She looked down and with unwelcome clarity saw a dark red gash, land-mined with black stitches. The puckered skin alongside the incision looked swollen and weepy, but as he tenderly reattached the bandage, Dr. Manning assured her it was doing very nicely.

Shuddering, she closed her eyes. She’d rather risk another dream of her father’s childhood any day over this ravaged battlefield her body had become.