

A Place of Love

by Anna Nazarova-Evans

I had worn my favourite white dress, despite Auntie Clara's protests.

“What are you dressing up for?” she said to me. “It's a funeral, not a date. Wear black like everybody else. It's blasphemy wearing white to funerals.”

“Both my black dresses are dirty.”

I couldn't afford for Bogdan to see me in black for the first time since we'd parted. White made me look like a princess. He'd said that himself when we were kids, as he put a wire ring on my finger. It felt wrong to lie and to wear white to my Godfather's funeral, but I had no choice. Bogdan could go back to Russia at any point and I needed to make him remember, to make him stay with me.

The funeral was on a typical Ukrainian evening, saturated with the scent of lilac and the chirping of crickets.

The money we had put together for old Vlad's funeral wasn't enough to hire a hearse and our little procession found it tiring treading through the dust.

Bogdan, his head down, was holding up one corner of the coffin, people walking behind him whispering covertly. He no longer resembled his father, which made me wonder if it was Bogdan or an impostor.

When Auntie Clara told me he was coming back to look after Vlad, my heart leaped like a spooked wild pigeon. Now with the sound of the stream under the walkway, I recalled the memory of Bogdan and I chasing paper boats in muddy water, giggling and screaming, with Vlad's kind eyes following us from a bench nearby.

Vlad's family had let me stay in their house for three years following the death of my parents. Without their love, I don't think I would have survived.

On my eleventh birthday, not long after the fatal car crash, I heard the soft clink of pebbles against my window. Bogdan was downstairs, gesturing at me to come down.

He covered my eyes and led me to the river. When he untied the neckerchief, I was presented with the most elegant weeping willow dipping its branches into soft blue waters. A heron stood under the tree examining us with one eye. The place was a perfect hideaway. From then on, we went there every day, with Bogdan writing poems about me and carving my name into the tree bark.

When his wife and son moved to Siberia, Vlad became a recluse. I would see him sitting on his porch smoking his famous pipe, but he no longer looked approachable. In a way, it felt like his funeral was long overdue.

It was a closed coffin, partly because it was cheaper, partly because, by the time the postman found Vlad, the noose had made deep incisions in his frail cancer-ridden throat.

We walked to the very back of the cemetery. The sycamores and marble statues were left behind, as we were presented with a hole in the black mud. On the cross someone had written in squiggly letters:

Vladimir Borisovich Andreyev

5 April 1931 – 25 August 1994

The men put the coffin on the ground and took off their hats. Their silence was interrupted by the sound of traffic from the road. As the coffin was lowered, Auntie Clara spoke of how well respected Vlad was in the community. When Bogdan cleared his throat to speak I held my breath, but Auntie Clara motioned for the men to get back to work. Bogdan looked at her puzzled, to which Auntie mouthed: “You know why,” and he hesitantly picked up his shovel.

Afterwards, the folk walked back in small groups singing ‘The Place of Love, where people still die’. The locals believed that the song was written about Lublianka, but I thought there must have been plenty of places out there worth writing songs about.

The morning after the funeral, Auntie laid out some sweets on the big table in my dining room.

“C’mon, Dasha, tea’s getting cold,” she shouted into my bedroom.

I got up and sat at the table.

“Auntie, please don’t tell me off again,” I said.

“That’s not what I’m here for,” Auntie said, biting her nails.

“I don’t really know how to say this,” she said. “You know I’m no good at this stuff. Please don’t go to Bogdan, let him leave. He doesn’t belong here.”

I pulled the hair back from my face.

“But, Auntie, you’d said it yourself, I won’t find my match in Lublianka. Remember you said that I deserved someone special?”

“Yes, but I didn’t mean Bogdan. He’s no longer his father’s son. That’s not how Vlad brought him up. He’s a rotten apple now, Dasha.”

“Auntie,” I said covering my eyes with my hands. “I know Bogdan. I know he looks different now, but deep down, he’s the same person. I need to talk to him and then it’ll all be ok.”

“Dasha, please, I’m begging you.” Auntie reached over the table and held my hand in hers. “Don’t go to see him. I can’t tell you why, but you have to trust me.”

I looked into her eyes. She couldn’t do this to me. She couldn’t take my dream away.

“Auntie, why are you saying this?”

She sat back down and looked up into the sky.

“I went to the grave last night,” she whispered. “I thought it was strange that Bogdan stayed there so long after we were all gone.”

I pressed my lips together as hard as I could.

“And the cross, Dasha,” she crossed herself. “The date was changed on it. The date of death.”

“What would that have to do with Bogdan?”

“He wasn’t there when the body was found, or when they pronounced the time of death, so the doctor had to make an estimate.” Auntie spilled out.

“So what if he changed it on the cross?”

Auntie looked at me with pity.

“Because if he didn’t have anything to hide, he would have called the doctor himself, like a decent human being, rather than flee the house and leave his dad’s corpse for someone else to find.”

“Auntie, what could he possibly have to hide?”

She looked away shaking her head.

“He always smokes that pipe now too...” she added quietly.

“Old Vlad smoked the pipe,” I interrupted. “He always smoked it and no one ever thought anything wrong of it.”

“Dasha,” Auntie spoke again. “Old Vlad is gone. The times you had with him and Bogdan are gone. You can’t bring them back by marrying Bogdan.”

Hot beads of water began to prickle the corners of my eyes, but I knew she was wrong. I knew what I had to do to prove it.

The garden was filled with old tree branches Vlad had cut down, but had grown too ill to remove. They tickled my ankles as I stepped down the walkway. This garden used to be Vlad’s pride and joy.

I knocked. Bogdan peaked out, door ajar, his eyes cloudy, pupils contracted into tiny dots. I hardly recognised him.

“Bogdan?” I said taking a step back from the door. “Are you ok?”

He pulled the door fully open and stepped onto the porch followed by a strong smell of vinegar. He was only wearing his pyjama pants and I could see his bare chest full of tattoos. I suddenly became aware of how far away this house was from all the others.

“Yeah, yeah. You ok?” He rubbed his eyes and crossed his arms in front of him.

“I wanted to catch up before you go back.” My voice sounded unnatural.

“Of course!” Bogdan livened up. “Let me put some clothes on.”

He slammed the door behind him, leaving me standing on the porch. I was glad he didn't invite me in.

He locked the door and we walked towards the woods. He swayed as if he was drunk. I followed, thinking about how we were walking further away from the streetlights.

“So, how have you been?” He smiled his boyish smile and the dark cloud over us was gone.

I exhaled and smiled too. We chatted as we picked wild raspberries and walked to our tree by the riverbed. I hadn't been here since the last time I saw Bogdan when he told me he was moving to Siberia.

“I've missed this place,” Bogdan loudly breathed in the dewy air as we sat at the tree roots.

I bit my lip so I wouldn't say anything silly. Our childhood 'bench' turned out to be too small for us both and I could feel the warmth of his body against the skin on my arm. The raspberries stained our hands and turned to a juicy sour mess in our mouths, the same way they had when we were young. We talked about our memories for what felt like hours. It was like Vlad was there again, watching over us.

“So how's work in Russia?” I asked.

“Work?”

Bogdan laughed, showing off his sharp white teeth. His fangs and his smoker's laugh reminded me of the vampire series I'd watched the night before.

“Have you thought of moving back to Lublianka?” I asked trying to make myself feel more comfortable.

Bogdan puffed on the pipe. His eyes glassed up, eyelids moving slowly up and down the pupils like frog's eyes. He didn't say anything for a while and I thought he must have forgotten my question, until he asked in a chirpy voice:

“How about you anyway?” He tapped my knee. His warm touch gave me butterflies.

“What about me?” I said. “I just work at the sweet shop.”

“Ah, but you're such a lovely girl, Dasha. How come you're not married yet?”

I thought I noticed a hint of sarcasm in his voice, but I dismissed the thought at once.

“Everyone here gets married early,” Bogdan said. “You must have lots of suitors.”

I was waiting for you all those years! I wanted to scream, but instead I changed the subject.

“So all that stuff they say about you in town, isn't true, is it?”

“What stuff?” Bogdan asked and blew out the smoke. It rose into the tree crowns like spirits leaving a dead body. The smell of hashish mixed with the smell of the forest and I could no longer distinguish between the two.

“Erm, just about your dad being too weak to... You know.”

“To hang himself?” Bogdan asked, matter of fact.

I swallowed hard.

“Yep,” I said and looked away as I was afraid to look at him.

“Well, my old man wanted to die sooner rather than later and I helped him. What's the problem with that?”

The pearlescent pink sunrise had turned blood red. Clouds of black ink moved across the fields towards us.

“So you killed your dad?” My words splattered on the ground like dead sparrows.

Bogdan rubbed his head.

“Yeah, I guess you'd say I did, but only to stop him suffering. The cancer had got the best of him. It wasn't Vlad any more, you understand? It was only his shell left.”

He looked at me as my eyes filled with tears.

“Ah, what do you understand? You silly little provincial girl,” he said emptying his pipe into the ground. How could I have wanted this monster for my husband? He was right - I was silly.

“So the thing about the money...” I said as if signing my own death sentence. “That's true as well?”

“That *is* true,” Bogdan jumped up and walked back and forth in front of me. “What am I meant to eat whilst looking after him? He never gave me any money, just got me to buy more bread. That's all I've eaten the whole time I've been here, Dasha!”

The last rays of sunshine were gobbled up by the hungry Ukrainian fields. The wind hissed through the cracks in the tree.

I noticed that the arms of his shirt had been folded up and both his upper arms were covered in tiny red holes.

“Food, was it?” I said wiping off the tears. “Is that all you needed it for? Everything he saved for his own funeral?”

Bogdan followed my glance to his needle wounds and stopped. He stood for a minute, looking into the distance.

I tensed up inside - I thought he would say something profound or hit me, but he didn't. He just shook his head and walked away, leaving me amidst the raspberries and ash from his pipe squashed into the ground by the soles of his walking boots. Our childhood hideaway looked pitiful against the gathering storm. The first sprinkles of water from the sky made me look up. Bogdan was gone and, with him, my dream of having my own family.

Auntie's words, said at my parents' funeral, floated to the surface of my mind.

“This whole town is your family now, Dasha.”