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The Matryoshka by Matias Travieso- Diaz

JULY 13, 2024

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"Marriage is made of lies. Kind ones, mostly. Omissions. If you give voice to the things you think every day about your spouse, you'd crush them to paste."
~ Lauren Groff, *Fates and Furies*

Everyone else had departed and the widow and her daughter were left alone, sitting by each other next to the open coffin, breathing the over-scented air of the funeral home and conversing in whispers. Neither wept any more, though their eyes were red and puffy from earlier tears.

"Daddy seems so peaceful," reflected the daughter, stealing another glance at the body in the coffin. "Yes, they did a good job making him up," replied the widow. "I wish he had such a peaceful

look in the last few weeks. He was so disfigured at the end.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be here. You know, with the kids, work, we live so far away. It’s so hard to get away. I didn’t know he was going to die so soon.”

“No need to apologize. Nothing you could have done would have helped. He probably wouldn’t have recognized you. He hardly knew who I was...”

“Why does it hurt so much?” said the daughter wistfully. “Do you feel the emptiness?”

“Of course, I do. You don’t live almost forty years with somebody without missing him, even a bit, when he is gone.”

The daughter looked at her mother with concern: “You sound like there was a problem between you two. Was there one?”

The widow did not stare back at her daughter; speaking to the carpet she said: “In life, as in marriage, there are always ... problems.”

“But you always seemed very happy together.”

“Yes, so we seemed. When you are married, you learn to put a good face on

things.”

The daughter pulled her mother closer, putting an arm around her shoulders. “I’m a big girl, I’ve had my share of disappointments, as you know. You can tell me about it.”

“I don’t want to speak ill of the dead” the widow said, shaking her head. “There are things children should not know about their parents. No good could come of learning them.”

“It may make you feel better” replied the daughter. “I am the closest person to both of you, and it is important to me.”

“I don’t want you to think poorly of me or your father.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

“You know, he was taken with you from day one; you were such a cute baby.” She paused to rub a tear off one eye.

“It all started with sex, shortly after you were born. I gained a lot of weight during the pregnancy and refused to have sex with your father while you were in the womb. I hoped that after you were born things would go back to normal. But they didn’t.... We resumed

having sex, but not as frequently as before and not as enthusiastically.”

“But he always loved you!”

“Perhaps. After your birth I discovered, quite by accident, that he had been cheating on me for some time with his assistant. When I confronted him with his infidelity, he wouldn’t talk about it other than to say that the cheating episode was a passing fancy and was now over. I suggested that we go to a marital counselor, but he refused, arguing that every couple he ever knew who went to marriage counseling wound up divorced. It was hard, but I swallowed my disappointment for your sake. When I became pregnant again, I thought this was all behind us and that the new baby would be a blessing to us all. Then I had that miscarriage.”

“Mommy, I am so sorry. I don’t know what I would do if Mitchell were unfaithful!”

“Our marriage was like one of those Russian matryoshka dolls; you open one and find another one inside. Besides his infidelity, he was also very stingy. Over time, I came to resent that he was so miserly. When we just got married, I understood that money was tight because he didn’t make that much

money. But there were a lot of small things I wanted to do, like changing the living room curtains that were getting ratty, decorating the house, planting grass in the yard and flowers to make a garden, go shopping occasionally. Every time I asked for something his answer was 'if you want to get something for yourself or the house, go find a job and make some money for that.'"

"He never recognized our anniversary or my birthday, and I felt like I was nobody because he didn't do anything that showed he cared. I always had to act first. Sometimes he responded, but it never made me feel special or anything, and I couldn't see any effort of love from him."

"He always seemed so caring to me," the daughter said. "Every birthday, I felt like a princess."

"That's because he was always very generous to you. He put you through school and even part way through college. He lavished you with expensive things and paid many of your bills. When you wrecked your car, he had it fixed at his own expense. I was happy that he wanted to do all this for you, but it made me wonder why he did not do the same things for me."

"I finally I confronted him. He told me that he grew up in a very poor family, and they had nothing. He said the world is an insecure place and we're all one step away from the poor house. He kept promising he would change if we had a bit more money, a better job, but he didn't. He probably couldn't."

"How did you cope with his stinginess?"

"Since I couldn't beat him, I joined him. I came up with free or cheap activities we could do together, like taking long walks or going to museums and art galleries and discount movie houses. We ate at home rather than dining out and watched shows on television together accompanied by popcorn. All inexpensive. It seemed to work out, since the tension that his stingy ways caused was reduced somewhat. But I was forced to cope in other ways, too."

"How?"

"You were too young to remember, but your father worked for several years in a hardware store, pinching pennies, and finally saved enough money to buy a notions operation, and through hard work was able to build it up to where he was the largest distributor in the state of things such as buttons, snaps, collar stays, thread, pins, and sewing tools."

Over twenty years he made good money, which he invested until he built a small fortune. All was well until the Chinese started flooding the market with dirt cheap notions, and in less than two years your father was forced to sell his business at a great loss. Worse, after his business failure he took to drinking."

"I didn't know he drank."

"Your father always drank, but he managed to not to drink to the point it affected his business. When his business collapsed, he became quite depressed and could no longer control his drinking: most of the time he was drunk or hung over. He seldom drank on weeknights, and only drank alone, at home, in front of the TV. He discouraged me from inviting guests to the house because he said he didn't want his drinking habits to be exposed, although I suspect he also did not want to spend money on entertaining."

"Mother, you bore your difficulties so well. Never gave an outward sign of your problems..."

"I stayed with him because most of the time he treated me with respect, always apologizing for his failings. I put up with all for your sake and my own. I

also felt that we were like a team and that I would feel like a failure if I left him after all these years. But ...”

“But what?”

“I actually did leave him, but not for long,” she stopped and exhaled noisily. “What finally drove me away was his last illness. He began complaining of fatigue; his eyes and skin turned yellow; and he suffered from abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting. I tried to help. I urged him to see a doctor. He refused. I finally prevailed on him to see a doctor by saying that you would not want to see him in that condition. He was diagnosed with late-stage cirrhosis due to an acute case of hepatitis.”

“I didn’t know much about hepatitis, but the doctor explained to me that the typical way a person can catch such hepatitis is from sexual intercourse with an infected person. Men who have unprotected sex with other men, or heterosexual persons with multiple sex partners, are at risk of getting hepatitis. I didn’t ask how he caught the disease, and didn’t want to know. That was a matryoshka doll I dared not open. I figured that, however it happened, he had done something horrible, and had put me at risk as well. That was more than I could bear.”

"So, I moved in with my sister Sarah for a couple of months, while the cirrhosis was running its course. He had been given six months to live, but in fact he was so wasted that he died within three."

"And yet you were with him when he passed away!!"

"Yes. When the hospice worker taking care of him told me that the end was imminent, I moved back home and stayed with him for the last few days. He was conscious much of the time, but in great pain. He apologized to me time and again, and died clasping my hand. Shortly before dying, he assured me that he always loved me and I was the only one for him." The widow broke afresh in tears, and the daughter joined her.

"Did you still love him?" asked the daughter, drying her eyes.

Only a restart of the air conditioning unit broke the long silence that ensued. Finally, the widow answered: "Yes, I loved him, and hated him, and wished I had never met him, and still longed for the good times we shared. And I already miss him more than I can say. It's as if a part of me has been removed leaving a large hole inside me."

"How could you love him with all his faults?" asked the daughter, bewildered.

"People are complicated, and love is more complicated still." She paused and shook her head. "Besides, I was not entirely without fault. When I learned of his affair with the assistant, I started on a fling with my chiropractor. He may have discovered it, but never said anything."

"Later on, when his notions business took off, I began to take petty cash money for the things I wanted and had been denied to me. That I know he realized, but again he said nothing."

"And when he turned to alcohol and became unhinged, I took control of all things: whatever little money we had left, the household, everything. I ruled him as he had ruled me for over thirty years, and wasn't nice about it. I berated and humiliated him, because I was so angry. I made his life truly miserable."

"But you stayed with him and gave him comfort as he died a terrible death."

"I did. For all his faults, I cared for him, and I know that he cared for me, at least a little. Maybe the fractured love

that existed between us managed to keep us going for a lifetime.”

“Would you marry my father again, knowing what you know now?”

There was another very long silence. At the end, the mother shook her head as if casting away a bad dream. “Probably” she replied, with less conviction than she perhaps intended. “As I said, marriage is like a matryoshka doll. You never know what surprises it holds until you start opening it. At least, I learned most of what your father had inside. With a stranger, the discoveries might have been even more unpleasant.”

“You sound resigned rather than enthusiastic.” “I’m resigned. Love is always a compromise.”

***** THE END *****

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