

*The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has
entered the room and bumps against the ceiling.
Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change,
nobody will ever die.*

V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*

The Three Myths

Nabokov uses the same story for two of his books – *Speak, Memory* and *The Gift*. It is the tale of a boy (Nabokov himself) lying sick in bed and imagining his mother buying him a present. ‘Imagining’ is not exactly the right word; lying in bed, he witnesses his mother going into and later leaving a shop, greeting an acquaintance, driving home through falling snow, and entering his room – where real and imaginary time come together as his mother gives him the present he saw her buy.

Long before I read *Speak, Memory*, my mother, Regina, told me a similar story.

At the end of the Second World War, my mother was one of two surviving Jewish children in Pskov, a Russian town that had been occupied by the Germans. Her father, Samuel, imprisoned at the beginning of the war, was soon executed together with nine others, Jews and Communists – a prophylactic measure. I have a photograph of the execution: the men have bags over their heads; some are lying on the ground, others half hanging from the poles to which they are tied. My mother believes she knows which one her father is, but in fact we don’t know for sure.

Because Regina’s mother, Irena, was part Polish and part German, she had nothing to fear, but her child had to be hidden, even from the neighbours, who could have betrayed her. Their house stood opposite the prison where my grandfather had had his short stay. Several German officers were quartered at the house, which was conveniently near their workplace. One Austrian officer was actually stationed in my grandmother’s apartment.

My mother was confined to a walk-in closet during the day, with no lights on. This is where the first story begins.

My mother is six. She sits in the closet and waits for her mother to arrive home from work. She ‘sees’ Irena close the pharmacy where she works and walk home, one street after another – I know each step of the route she takes. The day is sunny and dusty (it is summer in my story, which seems to make sitting in the closet worse than it might be on a rainy day). Irena turns the corner, goes up the stairs – my mother hears her mother’s footsteps – and opens the door at precisely the right moment. Regina doesn’t get a present, though – an omission that’s easy to forgive under the circumstances.

This story, which my mother loves to tell, is part of our collection of family myths. The size of the closet changes with every new version: in the past I’ve imagined it as a cupboard, a buffet and even a hole in the ground – a dramatic hideaway covered with wooden boards, next to a patch of lettuce and peas, beneath the setting sun. As I understand it now, my mother’s closet was more like a small room. She could stand in it, and it had a little window that faced the communal kitchen, which explains the ‘no light’ policy. A light in the closet could have been seen by anyone using the kitchen.

I also keep wondering about the footsteps on the stairs and the opening of the door – do I believe that the fusion of real and imaginary time actually happened? Or was it more like wishful thinking on my mother’s part?

I am aware of the sensation – experienced by nearly everyone, I guess – of mentally leading somebody home. In my case, I not only imagine the person walking but also try, through the strength of my imagination, to make them come home sooner. If it doesn’t work, I

compromise by making the walk slower, having them take a longer or prettier route. I know that I'm cheating.

I try hard, but so far the story has never ended in the same miraculous way it did for my mother (and for Nabokov). One reason I'd like to have my thoughts merge with reality in that particular way is that I want to be able to do what my mother can do – I want to be my mother's daughter.

I suppose every child has an adoption fantasy spooking through his head. I have no reason at all to doubt my parentage, although both my mother and my father have thick black hair, and mine is just the opposite. Not black and not thick. I've always wanted to be like my mother: spontaneous, funny and fearless. Instead, even the dark space under my bed makes me feel uncomfortable.

My father and I sometimes feel like confused mice, confronted with my mother's speedy decisiveness. She, on the other hand, says she would prefer to think a little longer before taking action. She likes travelling with me, because I select everything we might possibly need for our journey and pack it in separate plastic bags.

* * *

The Austrian officer said he would help Irena and Regina escape to Pechory, an Estonian town not far from Pskov. Irena spoke German and played Chopin; my mother suspects a love interest on the part of the officer. Regina felt she was not wanted in the room when the two adults were together. It is also possible that she yearned for extra attention to compensate for her long hours in the closet, or that she was used to constant attention as an only child under the threat of danger.

By this time, however, Regina was allowed to walk outside in the garden.

I don't know what went wrong, but before they had a chance to escape, they were arrested and sent to a camp near Pechory. They were lucky though – the Austrian officer managed to change their surname to that of Irena's German father. Irena and Regina were put on a transport train, the mother with a suitcase, the child with a knapsack embroidered by her mother. My mother took a book of Pushkin's fairy tales and a doll with her. In the suitcase were clothes, photographs and silver spoons. The rest of the family silver had been buried in the garden in Pskov and has never been retrieved. I own the book, the bag and the spoons.

Because they now had a German surname, the two were sent to a labour camp rather than to a concentration camp. My mother doesn't like to tell that part of the story.

After the war they stayed in Pechory – now part of Russia – under their real names. They lived there until Irena's death in 1954. By some strange coincidence, Irena died on the same day of the year, at the same age and from the same illness as her mother. Regina was eighteen at the time of her mother's death.

The second family myth – more of a visualization than a story – takes place not long before my grandmother's death.

Irena and Regina are living in a small triangular room. It's in the attic of a wooden house.

At an exhibition of work by Bernard Eilers, a Dutch photographer who experimented with colour photography around 1912, I saw a picture of his wife reading at a table. The woman reminded me of my grandmother. The room in which the photo was taken was very much like my mental image of the attic in which my mother had lived. I have a print of this picture hanging at home – my mother said 'Ah!' when she saw it; the similarity impressed her. After I had seen this photograph, the attic in my head became much more colourful.

They had a wood stove for heating and cooking. Irena was not a good cook. She was brought up by governesses and had never really learned how to cook. She disliked all household activities. She believed firmly in the strengthening powers of goat's milk and shaved Regina's head until the age of fourteen – for healthier hair. When I asked my mother

why she hadn't given my hair the same sort of treatment – I did get my share of goat's milk – she said that my fluff looked too tender.

Irena's and Regina's beds stand on opposite sides of the room, with a stove between them.

Irena is on one bed, reading and chain-smoking. Regina is on the other, just reading.

Irena stashed her *papirosy* behind the stove, to keep them dry. After she died – of lung cancer – my mother smoked the cigarettes to keep the familiar smell in the room. It was the beginning of a habit that continued for ten years.

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The third narrative starts some time after Irena's death, when my mother returns to Pskov to study and to work. First she stays with acquaintances, friends of her mother's. After a while, she manages to find a room of her own. She has no furniture and few possessions. Everything she owns fits into a big wooden box, with two handles on the sides. This box also functions as her bed. She hangs her clothes on a large nail in the wall. The room is not big, but it is in an old house with high ceilings. The room definitely has floral-patterned wallpaper; I cannot imagine my mother living in a place without wallpaper. She likes a small, regular pattern on both walls and clothes. Last summer she showed me a second-hand skirt she had bought and that didn't fit her. She said, 'You'll never guess why I bought it.' The fabric featured minuscule white flowers on a blue field.

It must be in the evening, although I always imagine the scene filled with daylight, with sun streaming through the windows, adding to the feeling of happiness that I associate with this picture. My mother is reading, and reading in the afternoon – ignoring obligations and being irresponsible – is so pleasant. I always feel like hiding my book when someone enters the room unexpectedly.

My mother is sitting on the wooden box, reading and eating sunflower seeds. She spits the hulls into the middle of the room, as far as possible. In the morning, she sweeps the floor, only to spit it full again later on. It is like a time loop – with time slowly repeating itself – a perfect moment in which to linger.

I would prefer a more comfortable seat though.

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