

The Measure of Love

“In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother Maksim, and we commit his body to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless him and keep him, the Lord make his face to shine upon him and be gracious to him, the Lord lift up his countenance upon him and give him peace. Amen.”

The priest took a handful of dirt and cast it upon the casket.

“Rest eternal grant to him, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon him. May his soul, and the souls of all the departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.”

When the priest concluded the burial rite, a man wearing a white shirt with a black tie, khaki pants, and a zip-up jacket walked over to a slender woman of about thirty years of age. He extended a hand, which she took, and said, “Your father was the only house painter I ever hired who could paint a perfectly straight line without using masking tape. In fact, he didn’t even use to lay down a tarp because he never dripped a single drop of paint. I’m going to miss him.”

“That’s very kind of you,” she said. “Thank you.” After the brief exchange, the man started walking back to his car.

At her side stood the only other mourner, a gray-haired gentleman of her father's generation. He turned to her and said, "Usually there is a reception after the graveside service, but since it's just the two of us, I hope you'll let me take you to lunch."

"Thank you," she said, "but I'm really not hungry, and I still have a number of things to do to settle my adoptive father's estate before I fly back."

"How about coffee and a pastry then? It's not good to be alone at a time like this."

"Well, all right," she said and took his arm.

A drizzle began to fall from the gray sky that cold November morning. Perhaps nature, otherwise indifferent to human affairs, grieved the passing of a man whom so few mourned.

Thirty minutes later, they sat across from one another in a cozy corner of a small coffee shop, their coats draped over the backs of their chairs. "Well, Liubova . . .," the man began.

She laughed. "No one ever called me that except my father."

"What do they call you then?"

"Libby."

"It's the same with me," he said. "Here they call me Rod. I guess Radomil sounds too foreign to them. Well, anyway, I can't believe how you're all grown up. I remember you as a little girl."

"I know," she said. "I used to see you at church when I got out of Sunday school and you were talking to my father over coffee and donuts. As far as I know, you were his only friend."

"He always talked about you when we met at the Russian Club. And now here we are, you and I, talking with each other for the first time really. I mean beyond saying hello. This must be a sad time for you."

“Not really. My father and I were never close, so there’s not much for me to grieve. But, as his sole survivor, it falls on me to put his affairs in order. I’m just doing my duty. That’s all.”

“He loved you deeply, you know.”

She raised her eyebrows as if to challenge his statement.

“I remember when the parish priest—your father went to the Catholic Church since there was no Russian Orthodox Church in town—told him that a drug-addicted woman whom the court had declared unfit to be a mother had just given birth to a beautiful baby girl. The moment they looked into your eyes, he and his wife fell in love with you and arranged to adopt you.”

“He never told me he loved me,” she said and took a bite of her chocolate croissant as if to indulge herself in recompense.

“You have to understand, Libby, that some men express their love not by what they say but by what they do. Besides, after his wife died of breast cancer when you were just two, your father fell into a kind of abyss from which he never climbed out. The magnitude of the loss is measured by the greatness of the love, and your father loved her boundlessly, just as he did you. He was a great man.”

Libby nearly choked on her sip of coffee. “A great man? Why, he could barely speak English.”

“It’s true,” Rod said, shrugging his shoulders. “Your father never learned much English. After his wife died, he somehow lost the will. But he spoke all the Slavic languages fluently: Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Czech, Bulgarian, Serbo-Croatian. And he read both German and French as well.”

Her jaw dropped. “I had no idea. He never spoke Russian to me because he wanted me to learn English, but he couldn’t really speak English himself, so we hardly talked.”

“Your father was a member of the Russian intelligentsia. In St. Petersburg we used to sit up late at night drinking vodka and discussing history, politics, and sociology.”

“And then he drank himself to death,” she said, staring blankly into her coffee cup.

“He didn’t start drinking heavily until you left home at eighteen to go to college. With his wife dead and you gone, the sadness and the loneliness consumed him. He was not made to be alone.”

“I didn’t know. After I graduated, I never went back. I guess there’s a lot about him I don’t know.” Libby took another bite of her chocolate croissant. Perhaps an analyst would say she was trying to fill an emptiness of which she was just becoming aware.

“What a shame. He was such a great man.”

“But he was just a simple house painter.” She no longer felt so sure of itself.

“He painted houses, yes—and masterpieces. In Russia he was a famous artist, the voice of an entire generation of dissidents. His works had the critical force of Picasso’s ‘Guernica’ suffused with the spiritual power of a holy icon. A year before the fall of the Iron Curtain, the authorities felt so threatened by him they wanted to send him to Siberia, but he went underground and somehow escaped to the West.”

“My father, the immigrant house painter, was a famous artist in Russia?” Libby had just stirred her coffee with a spoon and nearly dropped it on the saucer. “But I never saw him paint a single picture the whole time I was growing up.”

“He didn’t believe the Americans could understand his work or that he could ever sell a painting here.”

“So that’s why he stopped painting,” Libby said, nodding as though she understood now.

“In part. He and his wife were willing to live in poverty for the sake of his art. After all, van Gogh himself sold only one painting during his lifetime. But they didn’t think they had the right to impose such a life on you.”

Libby sat in silence. Inside her a Copernican revolution was taking place. Previously, she had drifted like a lonely planet through empty space, but now she was being drawn into an orbit around a sun that attracted her with its warmth and light. She felt herself gravitating towards her father in a way she never had when he was alive.

“So, your father stopped painting to support you,” Rod continued, “but with his meager English there weren’t many jobs he could get. He was pretty much limited to manual labor.”

“When I was going through my father’s clothes, I found a painting wrapped in a sheet in the back of his closet.”

Rod smiled.

“It was of a beautiful woman with dark, penetrating eyes and a sense of quiet dignity and strength, but it looked unfinished.”

“You know who that woman was, don’t you?”

“No.” Both intrigued and confused, Libby waited for an explanation.

“His wife—and your adoptive mother. He was working on her portrait when they adopted you, but after he started painting houses, he never finished it. As a matter of fact, it was the last picture he ever painted.”

“He was a great artist, and he gave it all up for me,” Libby said, though her tone of voice lay halfway between a statement and a question.

“The depth of love is measured by the greatness of the sacrifice. Your father sacrificed everything for you. Art was his life. He loved you more than life itself.”

For a long time Libby sat lost in contemplation. How wrong she had been her whole life. She could see herself as a child feeling embarrassed about her father in front of her friends, staying out of the house as much as possible during her teenage years, and all but losing contact with him in college and as an adult. In fact, she had always resented being adopted and never knowing her real parents. But what biological parent could ever love her more than her father had? Yet, he silently suffered grief and loneliness all these years, and she never knew. She wanted to comfort him, but now it was too late.

Rod looked at his watch. “Well, you have things to do. Perhaps we should get going.” He left a few dollars on the table beside the ticket the waiter had brought, and they put on their coats.

By now the drizzle had stopped, and the sun was peeking through the gray clouds. The temperature had even risen a few degrees.

Back out on the sidewalk, Libby took Rod’s arm again. “You’ve just given me a gift of great joy and great sorrow—joy in knowing how my father loved me, sorrow in not knowing it while he was alive. Now I have something to grieve. Thank you,” she said and kissed him on the cheek.

Glossary of Names

Maksim: the greatest (Russian, ultimately from Latin). He was a great painter and sociocritical voice in Russia.

Liubova: love (Russian). She discovers her father’s love for her and herself as a loved person.

Radomil: dear (*mil*) care (*rad*) (Slavic). He is the only one who cared dearly for Maksim.