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The Death of Leo

τί δέ με καλεῖτε, `κῦριε, `κῦριε', καὶ οὐ ποιεῖτε ἃ λέγω; (Gospel of Luke: VI-XLVI)

He still had the long stride of an aristocrat. And his chin he held up to the sky so that the eyes, bright brown like mine, could look down on us like a god. He wore a woolen habit which he had picked from a gutter, and he clutched a pendant around his neck like he wanted to hang himself with it. We all stank of poverty.

As the sun rose over the gloom of the earth, and showed him walking just ahead of us, I saw that he was more skull than face now; that his long, grey beard was eating him; that his back hunched with the weight of something he carried. I thought then that he would die very soon. For a moment, I hated him, I hated my father.

We – myself, my sister Rufa, Darya, and *him* – crept through the field. Rufa and I pulled the rickety cart, cold brown grass coughing under the crush as the village, a thatched straw maze of high ricketings and low alleythings, grew taller and taller as we approached. We reached its wooden gate. Then, our father Leo raised his walking stick and sang a high C-note quaver-quaver, till a sea of mice, taller than the mice you may know, and running upright, spilled from the body of the village and rushed out to us and waved around us, tiding round the singer whose song then stopped. The mice cheered, ‘Hurrah! Hurrah!’

The mice were all quite pleased to see that lowly Leo the famous would come down to lowly them the poor. They were very poor. And the poor *here* (what does it matter where) always loved to listen to songs and always lived in these mazes of hay. We were the needles. Rufa looked at me and I went to the back of the rickety cart and said little hellos to Rufa hidden under the drape and took from her a silver bucket with the frozen water in it.

I placed it at Leo's bare feet. The mice crowded up to its rim where their childremice jumped and chirped, 'Lemme see, lemme see, lemme see'. And pushed each other to see. Then Rufa carried a long, draped thing to dad's sleeve. The womemice were whispering, 'Look how tall he is... Oh those eyes, oh'... As Leo placed his staff's end onto the ice. Leo reached from his sleeve – a red-black snake – mice are terrified of snakes – I kept one as a pet when I was a rich little girl. This one was dead.

'Squee! Squee! Squee!' and the scared-scatter-patter of paws and some laughs as they watched our show.

"Calm... calm, my friends", said Leo, in his voice lionlike.

I sighed. From the crowd, a boymouse winked at me, and on his head he had a cocked hat, and across his chest he had blue thread and a blue map – where is he going? I blushed. I looked away. I felt shame... Where is he going?

Leo held the snake in his hands; he rubbed it and bent it unto itself so that it was eating itself - circle snake circling snake - let onto the ice and there to lay so that, slowly, the scaredy mice might round it look in on it, until... 'woosh!', Leo lit the snake on fire and the water went water and the black-fleshed body quivered and liquired and went water too. Melted snake stew.

'Oohhhhssss' and 'Aahhhhsssss' from them, quiet, padded claps for the humble, habit man, Lying Lion Leo. My dad.

Then the tour of the village with the headmouse, who was a hideous, snouted nosed huxtering thing. He kept putting his paw on Rufa's hip. Winking at me. They are all the same height, these mice, three feet tall. Their buildings are thirty feet tall and tower above us and are bridged, so we can see mice scampering from building to building on these webs of wood. All of them are consumed with some rodent business.

The ground shrinks down, like all the town is bowled, easier to get in than out. I couldn't see the mountains or the field or the way out. The sun reached noon and turned the icy ground to black mud. I was barefoot and could feel the mud in my toes, slippery, and I could feel the strange sensations of little, hard pieces, somewhere in that mud, that felt like bones.

The mice put on skis or stilts or ride in little boats, rowing after us.

Then, we saw a boymouse weeping under the mouth of an awning by the mouth of a sewer. He was pulling at the reins of his little donkey who was saying, 'I can't, I can't', as the mud swallowed his hooves and the cart he pulled, full of carrots. The boymouse was tugging-saying, 'Please, please...', pleading as the crowd rushed forward and, making sure Leo was watching them, began to drive the donkey forward with their sticks, making wetlashes all along its coarse grey hairs, making them red. The marks of tears showed how dirty this donkey's face was. I felt ill.

"Stop!", Leo roared.

Slowly, Leo prowled to the boymouse and his donkey, and he loomed over them and raised his chin and looked down on them. A mouse is often afraid... This one quivered under the shadow of Leo like any would. Rufa came to me and held my hand. I looked at her and saw myself and how I must look – afraid. We were twin sisters.

Leo laughed loudly and happily, as though there was nothing ever wrong in the world.

“Little mouse, I was once a rich man! And now I am poor like thee! That is because all things are as brief memory! Suffer not. And give suffering not. All is brief... May all who are rich go and do as I and sell their possessions... and may those who are poor, give *mercy* to their slaves!” – reaching into his habit, giving the boymouse a golden coin, “Go and buy your family an ox!” – a cheer from the crowd.

Then, Leo whispered something in the boymouse’s ear, something we couldn’t hear. Leo walked round the next corner, mud swallowing his bony ankles, and the mice were scampering or paddling after him and did not hear the boymouse, his donkey, saying, “Please don’t give me away... Please don’t leave me... I am so old... I am so old...” saying it again and again.

As Rufa and I looked behind us, we saw the trade of a golden coin for an ox and a gun.

Then, Leo healed a paralyzed, oldmanmouse by raising his necklace over him and growling something like words; Leo’s necklace had the carving of a coyote with a noose round its broken neck. We all head one. This was our symbol.

A womouse ran to Leo and yelled, ‘Oh, *despota!* What is the meaning of life?’, and wise Leo shook his wiseskull and smiled and said, ‘Mice may have many children...’

And more pawplause, and there was a

BANG

of a gun in the distance...

We reached the center of the village, its lowest point. It was a vast clearing like a parade ground but in its center was monumented the straw hat of a giant named Shawn who had fallen there a long time ago and died there. And left behind only his hat. We went into it and sat down where the great brain may have once been and thought. And we waited.

Soon, all the village came and sat within. The light latticed through the straw. And the air was warm and quiet. A chorus of mice sang ‘domine, o’ domine, miserere domine’, and Leo raised his own canto up through the low air, and the oldmice raised their paws and fell to the ground, and the youngmice cried and jumped up and down. All those fuzzy audiears, seemed to listen, no, to yearn, yearn for years and years as though the great poverty of their life had at last come to an end in this brief moment.... How can the poor feel so fed with so little?

A blindmouse shouted that he could see again. Crowd cheers. And we left the hat. But I looked behind me and I saw this same blindmouse being pushed by the crowd. Stumbling. He fell somewhere under their sea of feet. I’ve always remembered this. I wondered how his body must have looked so little and alone under that big, big hat, no longer empty of a head.

That night, Rufa and I slept in the Hotel Attica, which was a narrow, blue and tall building that had a strange roof like a pagoda. But the headmaster was a grizzly, American bear who lumbered into our room ten times during the night and growled, ‘What can we do for you?’. ‘Nothing, thank you’, we said to him ten times. He placed ferrets to run tracks between our walls; why? I could feel them in my head, skittering on my skull, ‘Will my skull show like *his*?’ – ‘Will my hair fall out like *his*?’ – *he* slept outside upon a cardboard strip beside a little girlmouse so he could play tempty notouch.

Of course, Leo knew that the mice watched him. So it was a show of celibacy. The girlmouse cooed in his wilted flap of an ear, and he snored louder for them all to hear, like he was walking on the water and falling asleep to his favorite sound: ‘Ooohhhsss, Aahhhssss’, and the feeling of sainthood. I think he probably dreamed of *it* anyways. I wonder what his dreams really were. I could not see them, in that moment too, I hated him.

Rufa and I always shared dreams. That night we dreamt of becoming swans and flying to Paris where Proust sang by the Seine, and water lilies talked refrains to us. And again, we felt like women.

Cold morning. Through the ugly window. Leo's staff at the door, 'bang', 'bang', and then his steps. Time to go. Rufa and I put on our woolen habits. And I put on the pendant, which I never wore while sleeping. Rufa had a look on her face; she wanted to talk. Twins are like that, knowing our needs, not saying them.

"What do you remember most about momma?," I asked.

"Her dancing... her dancing.," Rufa had the face of a real saint, and the heart of a girl was on her face, still in love with the early lookings of life and still in love with her momma. Now gone.

So now I know what I must look like when I am in love. But I am not. Rufa wonders if momma is in heaven. I think so, since Leo is not with her. I think life is the hell and that makes me a Lazarus, an unlucky one locked in, and no one saying, 'come out.'

"Tell me" – a lice bit me again, again – "tell me what you're thinking about her?"

"Well, she loved the color blue... Her dresses were often blue, because Maria wore blue, and I remember she wore a soft blue in mornings. When the white ribbon she made was nice too, around her throat, and it went with her golden mane and made her face glow. And I remember her kitchen she made yellow to let the sun sit with us during breakfasts."

"She'd tip the chickens extra for their eggs..."

"And momma was always nice to them."

"And when they were all emancipated by Big-Czar, she invited them inside."

"Sun and us and her and chickens eating their own eggs?" (laugh laughs)

Life-sisters love to laugh (When was the last time?)

“...No, but some seed for them; she gave it to them for free.”, I said.

“They loved us.”

“And they didn’t leave when they could have... They were free and they stayed. Maybe they should have left...”

“...Why do you think *he* hated them so much?”

“He didn’t like to see his servants becoming too much like himself. It was a threat and what’s the difference then? Between us and them? Between us and these mice out there? Hm? The size of one’s paws? That’s not enough... They *need* more difference...”

“What is it...?”, Rufa asked the sad look on my face.

“I remember... When I couldn’t sleep I went to their door and learned about the love thing... under the door and the dark’s quick sound and he thought of new-writings... and he lit a lamp and wrote it, naked, and read it aloud to her, from the desk, in that low, low growl, he said: ‘A marriage is an intimacy with warts and smells. A marriage doubles the obligation and halves the freedom.’ And she pulled the blankets over her head and hid, I thought... She’d never looked more like me than when she hid her face. Isn’t that strange?”

“...”

There was chatter from the window, about a possum lying dead somewhere outside. Darya. Time to go. Something about Darya always reminded me of momma, taking throwing’s and yelling’s for us. Almost covering us. There is a painting in the Kosmuseum of a mother offering her son to the world, ‘Here’s my dead son, the Coyote; take him from me; he’s yours’. Momma was like that painting somehow.

“So, why was it Paris?”, I asked Rufa.

“She liked the sparrow bird.”

I looked at my sisters face, really closely this time: wilted, wrinkled earlier than ought, and it moved to my memory: a sun in the meadow and a cool sky and a picnic of fish that we caught – and the three hens – Ruby, Betty, Michelle –becoming birds of prey and power – just by being there – and Rufa and I beside them lay on the cool blades of grass; and Momma on the earth’s stage above us, for us, was singing that sparrow’s song.

Rufa, moving with this memory, raised her habit to the shape of Momma’s skirt, and twirled like she twirled and smiled more than I’d seen and sang the song of then:

*Des yeux qui font baisser les miens
Un rire qui se perd sur sa bouche
Voilà le portrait sans retouche
De l'homme auquel j'appartiens*

*Quand il me prend dans ses bras
Qu'il me parle tout bas
Je vois la vie en rose
Il me dit des mots d'amour
Des mots de tous les jours
Et ça m'fait quelque chose*

But he saw us lions with chickens becoming and a rage, rage, rage –

Bang!

He’s shoving us down the stairs of the hotel.

Outside, there was a dead girlpossum lying on the ground in front of us, slowly sinking into the mudblack. Her name was Darya. What a crowd today was around us. Bated breath mice baited on the hook of the hanged Coyote. And the sky was grey, cold, snowless.

Rufa had a tear on her cheek. She wiped it away and it left a red streak, like the habit was too coarse a hand for too soft a cheek. ‘Lacrimosa...’, I heard myself sing.

Leo raised the bones of his arms, and a hush fell. He began to move his hands in a circle over the corpse, as though turning its soul, its wheel of time, backwards.

“Girl.... Come out!”

A great cry wrenched from Darya, a painful sound (back to hell) and a convulsion in the chest, a stompsplashing of the mud and a clenching of claws and a scream; Darya sat up, alive.

“Behold the power of the Lord!”

“Stooooopppp!”, Rufa ran to the center and raised her own hands for her own attention.

Why’d you do it then, Rufa? Why did you show yourself? Was it the song you sang...

“You have been tricked! Look at this girl! Do you know her!? Has she been seen here before, you mice?”, she yelled, tears marking the occasion of sudden boldness.

Rufa then rushed her hand under the collar of Darya’s shirt (peasant’s cloth, like theirs), and pulled out a pendant: A Coyote, hanged.

“Darya is a Sister! We have deceived you... My father...”, then she got scared, real scared. And she got quiet.

Leo the Great had begun to hunch his back, lower, lower, until now, on all fours, with a growl choking his throat, with his nose a snout, he was about to leap upon Rufa. But as his legs began to leap, a terrible spasm stopped him, gripped and shook his form, and I heard his bones rattle as he fell to ground. He was clutching his chest, coughing red blood out onto black mud.

Darya, our playing possum, screamed in shock and ran as some of the menmice, feeling humiliated and worse – tricked – leapt after the poor trickster, becoming white rats as they chased her, their eyes became bright rubies, their tails hairless whips. And the womemice, seeing the example of their husbands, now converged upon Leo and began to scream at him.

He rose to his knees and looked to Rufa.

And then one of the rats spit on his face. And he turned to her his other cheek. And she spat there too. And he seemed shocked that she would spit on him twice. Tats hit him with sticks and threw mud and their waste on him. They bit his hands. He seemed to be completely engrossed among them, covered and submerged by them and their cacophonous cry - 'Guilty! Villain! Eat him!', and we heard the low wail of his voice, underneath, wordlost.

Then they came after Rufa and I, like a dam broken loose, and we ran ... A rat tore my pendant off as we ran. We were lost amongst the rat town, dodging the falling stones that were thrown down onto us from all around, and we held hands, slipping, wet with mud and other things, and I heard the yell of a bull. I felt bones under my feet. We reached a small gate that led out onto the earth and the brown field, where the few rats that still chased us, feeling afraid when away from the sea of themselves, turned tail, turned back to mice, and left us alone...

Then Rufa and I wept; the sun set. And it got very cold.

As the moon rose over the mountains, and made blue all the ground, Rufa and I walked, clutching our woolen habits about ourselves, back to where we had left him, alone upon the ground. How quiet all now seemed, as though the mice had, somehow, been relieved of some great aggression. For they left us alone. They paid no attention to us. We were nothing to them.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry...", Rufa whispered to me.

"I know. It will be okay."

"But what if he is?"

"It will be okay."

We found him where they left him. He had been stamped into the mud, which had frozen, and so he was caught halfway into the black earth. Half dead. He was still breathing. But there were marks of bites and blue bruises and strange shaped bones swelling under the skin. And he

smelled of dung. The blood had frozen black colored along his scalp. His skull had been cut. His face was marked. I thought of Shawn the giant. Hatless. His humble habit was torn to shreds.

We couldn't lift him; so Rufa reached under Leo's torn sleeve and found the hidden fire-lighter which had worked upon the snake, and with it she carefully thawed the mud underneath him, just enough for me to move him. But he was too heavy to carry. We waited. I didn't know what we could do.

A low sound of a bull came towards us from the dark of the far street; in the street was the boymouse Leo had given the golden coin too. Silently, we hailed him as he passed, begging the use of his cart and the help of his ox. He passed by us. He didn't look. We were strangers stranded on the road.

"Dad... Please... I'm sorry.", Rufa whispered, again and again.

I said nothing... but Leo stirred at the sound of her voice. He opened his eyes and smiled warmly. He seemed, somehow, happy.

"Daughters.... Help me to my feet.", his voice was like wet gravel in tin.

He rose together; we held his arms which felt broken in our hands; and he held his pain in his chest, which heaved with the violence that had been done to him. He never said a word. He walked, leading us and us holding he, out of the village, down a road that led through a gulley and turned to the mountains. We had left his staff behind, and his red draped cart behind, and we never saw Darya again.

After some time of walking him, we saw a small cottage along the road, with a dim light of a lantern suspended in its one window, and it had a green door. Rufa lay on the road beside my father as I crept to the door and knocked and knocked again, gently.

Eventually, the sounds of small feet came to me; the door opened, and an old, greyblack hen appeared, with a moocowoman beside her.

“What do you want?”, the hen asked.

“To share your home for one night, please.”

Of course, she knew what we were. She knew what we were to her. But she welcomed us in anyways and, when seeing Leo’s injuries, gave him her own roost which was warm straw. And she tended to him, guiding us in setting what bones weren’t like gravel, and cleaning and tapering his many cuts, and feeding him grain and milk, more than he’d ever eaten since he had killed our mother with one angry, accident-drunken push, and found redemption with the Hanged Coyote, and sold all our wealth, and lived as you have seen us live, slave saints.

In those last hours of the night, Leo had coughed up little things like red rose petals, which smelled of metal, which felt like sponges. Between these spasms, before he retched the last of his lungs from out of himself, he had sung his favorite song for the hen and the moocowoman. He sang it poorly and brokenly. But it was most honest. The hen’s name was Biddy and she thanked him for the song and said that it was very pretty.

He slept. As dawn rose, he woke one last time, “Why don’t they love me?”, I heard him say, again and again, as we lay beside him, as Rufa was asleep, and I couldn’t sleep or dream.

“Please don’t give me away... Please don’t leave me...”, he hushed, a dim, pointless look in his brown eyes that were like mine, that roamed about the hut, that found no one. And in that moment, I loved him, my dad.

A terrible shudder seized him, and suddenly he began to clutch at his chest and his whole form was seized by a great roar, and then a great heave, and the last of his lungs caught in his

throat and stuck there as we, all of us, raced to him to turn him over, to empty the contents of the voice of himself, and he sighed...

And

Leo was dead

with his chin was pointed up, like he was racing to the sky.

Rufa and I buried him with the help of the hen and the help of the moocowoman. We thanked them with a song and they gave us eggs and milk, half of what they had. Bidy, the hen, gave us the coats of two sons that had died, and she pointed to us where Paris was, which was somewhere over the horizon. In that way we went, keeping the mountains to our left side; they loomed over us, looked down on us as we passed underneath their intense gaze.

There was soon a river that followed the lines of the mountains. And one morning, the air was clean and the air was cool and I caught a fish. And in the mouth of the fish we found a wooden pendant, on it was the carving of a Coyote, hanged to death. I kept it about my neck.

And I walked with you, Rufa, and we wanted dinners and compliments and dresses and dances and a man's caress, lying on the soft blades of grass. We wanted Paris. But at the end of the river was a deep fog and a deep swamp, and we lost the holding of our hands. So we hummed to each other our momma's song. But our hums grew distant, and faint. And I lost the sound of your voice. And I wondered if you ever found it, Paris.

In our dreams, this sound of our voices was forever and clear and close.

And alone now, and old now, I wonder who is in heaven and who is in hell, and what is heaven and what is hell. I still hold the pendant in my hand and around my neck, tightly.

And I look at his face and wonder who had hanged him, and why.