

My Evie by Russell Sacks

It was a good day. Silence, broken only by birdsong, enriched my contentment as I sat with the cats at our regal wooden table in the warm sunshine. My joy arose from fond memories of my grandmother. I recalled her warm, loving smile and her dark brown eyes, eyes full of ardour. Her hair was the colour of hay, her complexion pale. She demanded politeness, not servility, appreciation, not gratitude. Rule Number One was never to answer back.

She had taught me to swim in the muddy river where the willows drooped. She instilled in me that regular exercise honed the body and cleansed the spirit. She had always been in my life. My earliest memories are of her. I called her Evie. No one else was allowed such informality. They addressed her as Eve.

Years ago, a lightning bolt had struck a huge willow tree at the river's edge. A band of young Zulu warriors had salvaged the trunk to use as a target for spear-throwing practice. It was ideal. The wood was soft enough to hold their assegais firmly but not hard enough to blunt their tips.

After the impis tired of using the trunk, my grandfather recognised it as a bountiful source of firewood. He and his donkey dragged it home. It lay drying in the dust through the summer. The cats dozed on it during the day and foxes slept upon its residual warmth at night.

It was the beginning of autumn when my grandmother dreamed that the trunk could be dressed and burnished. She would fashion a table and two long benches which could accommodate the whole family. So she began to chop, to saw and to plane. The local carpenter was recruited to advise and to assist. She insisted though, on doing all the actual work on her own.

I watched as she toiled to fulfil her dream, but did not perceive her deeper aspirations. Knowing her history, I thought it strange that she had chosen wood, rather than wool, as her medium for artistic expression.

She was born and raised a whole continent away on the shore of the Caspian Sea not far from the ancient city of Baku. For generations, her family had fished sturgeon and traded caviar. She filled me with stories of her childhood cavorting on the strand of this vast body of water, splashing in its waves, learning to handle the sturdy vessels that sought bounty from its depths and of the bleatings of frightened lambs. Her father used much of the earnings from the caviar to buy Astrakhan fleece in the high mountains. My grandmother accompanied him on a number of his trips. She had mixed memories of these harsh horseback journeys. She described vast flocks of pregnant ewes being herded down from the mountains to meet the hoards of buyers crowding the tiny hamlets. Their only aim was to become rich by depriving the ewes of their lambs, and the lambs of their skins. The tightly curled fleece of foetal and newborn karakul lambs was highly sought after by the major fashion houses of Europe. The younger the lamb, the tighter were the curls of the fleece. The tighter the curls, the more valuable was the fleece. A jot too late, and the curls would unravel. A mite too early, and the curls would lose their sheen. These secrets kindled in my grandmother a life-long

fascination for the cosy texture of wool. However, much of what she experienced was much more traumatic, and left scars on the young girl's soul. The seeds of nightmares were sown – foetal lambs snatched from uteruses before taking their first breath, newborn lambs slaughtered too soon to taste their mother's milk, terrified eyes of older lambs as the butcher's knife approached their throats, castrations, ear-piecings, the stench of branding coalescing with the reek of roasting meat. While the little girl registered the suffering around her, the nonchalant traders haggled, swilled vodka and savoured grilled lamb and skewered mutton. Evie never ate meat again. In later years, however, she learned to appreciate the vodka and recalled the bonhomie of long tables groaning with food.

My grandmother finished her creation before the end of autumn. A celebration was planned to mark the occasion.

The new furniture was inaugurated with a splendid lunch party for the extended family. The benches were full. The table was laden with the river's blessings - crabs, eels, scaly fish and ducks. With a glass of vodka in hand, tears welled in grandmother's eyes as she surveyed her assembled family. But it was not only their joyous laughter, bird-like chattering and appreciative chewing that brought moisture to her eyes.

Behind closed lids, she revisited her autumnal dream – a table of polished wood bursting through the surface of the river like the head of a hippopotamus, the emerging wood creating circles of ripples, countless eddies of future generations bobbing gently into infinity.

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**Written by Russell Sacks in 2024**

**Posted on the CHOL Share Your Story Site in January 2025**