

The Oak Desk by Russell Sacks

The silence in the graveyard was intense.

Distress and pain were visible on the faces of the mourners. Actually, there was no silence. It just seemed so. One could hear wailing and sharp gasps of breath. The familiar smell of smoke from burning damp leaves was a welcome distraction for those in pain. No one spoke. Instead, they hugged one another or stood shoulder to shoulder, bonding. Camaraderie embraced their sorrow.

People who had enjoyed his music and benefited from his generosity and his arbitrations had arrived to show their gratitude and respect.

Aqila could not bear to see her father's coffin lowered into the freshly dug pit. She did not want to look into the dark hole that swallowed him up. Her pain was crushing her and exploding in her soul. She tilted her head and with wet eyes stared into the vast sky searching for God to explain.

She stood alone, dressed in a finely cut black dress. Covering her head was an ash grey scarf. Opposite her, in order of age, stood all the male members of the family, a large, solemn proud group. The fresh, muddy grave containing her father's coffin separated her from them. No clerics had been invited. They were neither needed nor wanted.

Her story began when she was placed in an open drawer of her father's massive oak desk, which had been custom-made by a carpenter friend in Shankill, West Belfast. Around this desk, serious arbitration in all manner of matters was carried out.

The drawer had been made comfortable by her father. He had removed the bottles of whiskey and filled it with layers of blotting paper and music sheets before placing his tiny baby, Aqila, in the drawer. He had chosen her name, Aqila, because it meant noble and intelligent in Arabic.

Indeed, Aqila inherited her father's sharp intellect as well as his brilliance. This had become apparent during the many hours she had spent in conversation with him in his office - at the oak desk.

Her father had been schooled in classical music. The music sheets, mostly for violin, were much loved by him. He had arrived from Saint Petersburg at the turn of the century. As a young classical violinist in the imperial city, he had been talented enough to play in the Mariinsky theater.

One sunny day before the October revolution, he stole the concertmaster's Stradivarius and all the cash from the box office before boarding a Baltic cruise ship. On board, he played his way around the Baltic Sea. Then, on route to Plymouth, the cruise ship stopped in Belfast where he decided to disembark.

Within a short time, he learnt to play his violin like an Irish fiddle and eventually established himself as one of the best. He enjoyed the ways of the Irish Catholics and soon found his niche in the big world of rough but joyful Catholic Belfast.

In 1922, Ireland gained its independence. Northern Ireland remained within the United Kingdom, creating the partition. By then he had acquired a false passport. That same year, he married a lass from Drumcree, whom he had met at the local stepdance competition.

Nine months later, Aqila was born. The very next week, her mother was killed, a victim of sectarian violence. The bus she and Aqila took to visit her parents and her thirteen brothers who still lived in Drumcree, was attacked as it passed through the town of Portadown in County Armagh. Fortunately, Aqila was not harmed but the very severe stutter she developed as a child was attributed to the shock of the incident.

So Aqila began her practicum, tucked up in the drawer of the desk. The sounds of Rachmaninoff's piano music and traditional Irish fiddle music often filled the office. They seeped into her soul. So too the aroma of Irish whiskey and fine Nepalese hashish which was sold by Abiral, a Gurkha neighbour. The hashish worked wonders on her stutter.

Abiral had left his home in the valleys of the Himalayas to join the British army. He fell in love with a magnificent Irish policewoman. In those early days, he was not qualified for much, but he capably worked the doors of the best night clubs in Belfast. He was a natural at preventing fights and separating Guinness-filled louts and. It was rumored that the IRA recruited him as an enforcer and many other stories circulated. In time, he began importing Nepalese handmade crafts and rugs and then top-shelf hashish which he generously shared with his dear neighbours.

Aqila was constantly cared for by the many adults who loved her father dearly. This was the world in which she found herself, always supported and entertained by a wide variety of adults. She absorbed concepts like loyalty, trust, honour, gratitude, appreciation, respect, dialogue, patience and family care. She experienced joy. In time, she was sent to school but her real schooling took place around the big, impressive wooden desk. Meals were eaten on it, birthdays

and special occasions were celebrated around it, many drinks were poured on it, and at the end of the day, it provided a resting place for tired feet, sans shoes.

When Aqila was an adult, there was a shocking rumor that a rogue IRA bomber had been literally nailed to that desk, and interrogated by the stammering woman for three days, until he disclosed the position of his roadside flame fougade bombs.

As Aqila glanced heavenward, looking for answers, a little procession of her father's friends filed silently past the grave.

Abiral sprinkled a handful of his prime hashish onto the coffin, his stunning wife poured a pint of Guinness over it, another added a bottle of Bushmills. Others tossed in roses and mountain thistles. From the final mourner's hands, fluttered the sheet music of Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto.

And from the adjacent hillside, a lone piper played *Flowers of the Forest*.

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Written in the last few years

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