

CLINGING TO A THREAD

By Leslie What

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I SEE THE CHILD AS CLEARLY as if she were directly before me. Clinging to a gray stuffed dog, she looks around, lost. She is six — seven at most, with fine black hair that crops her porcelain face like a heart-shaped frame. Her pale coloring contrasts starkly to her hair and I begin to think my dream is black and white when I notice the piercing blue of her eyes.

The air is gray, redolent with ash. The child peers inside an abandoned storefront, then picks a pebble off the windowsill to stuff into her mouth. She sees me and starts forward, but stops as if a wall has blocked her way. “Who are you?” I ask. “What is your name?”

“Such questions of a ghost,” she says. Her voice echoes off the empty street and into the chill night air. I realize then that I exist somewhere else outside this dream, and that if I am not careful to stay calm, I will waken. This worries me, for I am not ready to leave the girl who stands just beyond me. She is shivering. As I huddle inside the thick wool comforter from my bed, I wonder why the child has no coat?

Sarah stopped by on her way to visit Mother at the hospital. “I’ll be along later,” I said, not yet ready to get dressed. When my sister asked if I were getting enough sleep, I lied. I was just tired from working, I said, hating myself for pushing away Sarah’s concern as if she were only offering me a second cup of coffee.

Sarah left, and I spent the next hour squinting into a mirror, where I noticed for the first time the cold cream pallor and the deep shadows under my eyes that had so worried my sister. I touched my face with my fingertips, to reassure myself that the wan reflection staring back was really mine. For the first time in years, I put on powdered rouge, smudged the color under the hollow of my cheek, then leathered it upward until the line between artifact and reality was blurred. I did not bother to do anything with my hair. It had tired to a limp brown that would not hold its shape, no matter what. Though I did not feel up to going, in the end I left for the hospital to visit my mother, Ruth.

The dreams had been keeping me on the edge of wakefulness since the night Ruth dropped off the box filled with linens. That had been six months ago, long before Ruth’s first stroke.

“I want you to have these,” Ruth had said. She was not feeling well at the time, her breathing still labored from a recent bout of pneumonia. She was starting to look older, her hair thinned, a dull color that could no longer be considered silver. Her back was hunched and her hands clutched the arms of the chair so she could sit upright.

If Ruth were older, what did that make me, I wondered? My mother still looked on me as a child, but I was now past forty, with a child— a son named David— of my own. Funny, that I could not remember her any younger than I was at that very moment. In fact, I was certain she had never been a child; she could not have had the time. I was born to her only five years after her liberation from a concentration camp in Latvia. She was nineteen by the end of the War, already an old woman.

We do not get along well. Ruth does not like my husband, Jerry, and when David was born, her attitude grew even colder. She never wanted to hold the boy, never offered to watch him, or take him out to show off to her friends. It has been a source of conflict between us. I covered for her once and bought David a present when she forgot his birthday. I did this to keep peace within the family. We are such a small family — just me, Ruth, Sarah, and now David — that it's important we maintain our ties, no matter what.

But it is often difficult to be around my mother, and that night, I could not wait for Ruth to leave. She stayed on and on, despite my subtle hints that I had other things to do.

“If something happened to me, if there was a fire or a robbery,” Ruth said quietly, “I couldn't bear to lose what little I was able to save.” She handed me the cardboard box and I lifted open the flaps to look inside.

“Linen,” I said, unimpressed at first. “Thank you.” At the top was a yellowed pillowcase with a butterfly and floral pattern finely stitched in silk thread. The fabric was cold from being stored in Ruth's unheated basement. “Who did this belong to?” I asked, curious.

“It was my sister's,” Ruth said, and her voice broke. She looked down at her lap and smoothed the wrinkles from her skin. “All these things belonged to my family before the War. They are yours to keep now.” At that, she stood to leave. “This is all I have to remember. I leave it to you to divide with Sarah, when you're ready. Please, take good care of these things for me.”

When she had gone, I pulled the box into my bedroom where I sat on the floor and stared at it, no longer curious, but afraid. Twice I reached to explore it; twice I let my hands fall to my side. Finally, I managed to have a look inside, and like a kid pawing through a treasure chest, I pulled out the bedding and tablecloths into a pile around me. I sat, surrounded by fine linens and cottons with a sweet, musty smell woven through the fibers alongside the weft. The pillowcase caught my attention once more, and I brought it close enough to caress with my cheek, marveling at the fabric and how soft it felt against my skin.

I was named Lena, after Ruth's little sister, who was killed at the age of five. I

saw her picture once, when I went into my parents' room after a bad dream. Ruth stood beside the dresser, talking aloud in her sing-song voice that I knew was her other language. I crept behind her and saw the silver framed picture of a little girl. When she noticed me, Ruth snatched the picture away to hide inside her drawer.

To me, Lena was little more than that one photograph— a statue the size of a doll, with a Dutch boy haircut, and very dark eyes. But then, with the cold pillowcase resting against my cheek, I could only think of how Lena's face had once pressed against the fabric. I closed my eyes and drifted to a state of near sleep when something jerked me back, tugged at my sleeve. I opened my eyes to the dimly lit room and saw a little girl watching me from the underside of the pillowcase. Her face, a mirror-image. Lena.

I grew chilled, as if a hole had opened to my world and allowed something cold to fall through. To warm myself, I pulled a tablecloth from the box and wrapped it around my shoulders. I pictured myself sitting cross-legged like a guru and laughed, but then another image came to mind, one of Jews wrapped up in prayer shawls. It was something I had not seen very often, as I had only attended a Synagogue once, after my father's death.

“What is the point of believing in God?” Ruth used to ask. “What good did it do me?” It was a question I could not answer.

I wrapped myself tighter inside the yellowed sheet, but it soon felt like a shroud. Rocking forward and back, I murmured a prayer for the dead, that I did not think I knew. “Yisgadol v'yis-kadash sh'mey raba . . . “ A thread from the sheet caught against a button on my shirt and started to unravel. Without knowing why, I brought the thread to my lips for a kiss.

MOST DAYS I awakened late with my stomach boiling, my mind stuffed full of cotton that kept me from remembering what I was to accomplish. The dreams always left me feeling disturbed, unsettled, and I cowered under the covers until I was ready to shower and let the water shock me into daylight.

Last week, I went to an estate sale where I saw people gathered like vultures. They clutched knickknacks, (chachkes, as my mother called those things that serve no purpose other than to gather dust) as if they were guarding gold treasures.

I have never understood the value people place on antiques. Unless they come from family, they seem worthless — old wood with someone else's memories in the drawers. Yet this sale drew me to it. I opened the door to the estate sale, and stood on the threshold, where I wavered, afraid of falling into another world.

The next thing I knew, I was in a hallway packed full of people, and crushed against the wall by a stranger whose face I could not see. Panic washed through me as I struggled to catch my breath. Shoulders pushed me, elbows pressed into my

neck, a cold hand touched my arm. All I could think of was how it must have felt to be buried alive, to be trapped inside a mass grave alongside the dead and the doomed. I grew frightened enough to kick the elderly man in front of me.

“I’m terribly sorry,” he said, kindly. “I did not mean to push you.”

I made my way back toward the bedrooms where I found some Condensed Books, a large plastic bag filled with old stockings, photograph albums and cheap vacation souvenirs from every National Park in America. Nothing there that anyone could want, I thought, which made me sad. What if this were my mother’s house? What if strangers pawed through Ruth’s belongings, sizing up her underwear, arguing over whether a lifetime’s memories were worth a dollar or just fifty cents? Without thinking I took the bag of stockings and bought them for ten dollars. I left the house feeling foolish for having spent good money on such garbage; I had yet to do my shopping and now had only a few dollars left. I went to the grocery and bought what I could — a carrot, an onion, celery, and a day-old loaf of bread.

I was exhausted by the time I returned home, though I knew I had done nothing to deserve such fatigue. I could not stop yawning as I measured out a pot of coffee. I buried the stockings in the back yard, then chopped vegetables to start the soup, but weariness soon overcame me. Telling myself it was just for a minute, until the coffee brewed, I sat on the couch and fell asleep.

I see a soldier cloaked inside a dark brown haze. He watches the girl at play with her toy dog. His eyes open wide. “I’ll have that,” he says, and laughs as the child cries when he takes her toy.

“The dead do not need playthings,” the soldier says. “My daughter will use this better.”

I follow him into haze. When I come out on the other side, I am in the next day. I look around until I spot the limp gray dog lying in a rubbish bin. Its stuffing is torn out, and a button eye dangles from the painted socket.

“I don’t want it,” someone screams from inside a house. “It smells like a Jew.”

I pick up the stuffing and fabric, and run backward through my dream to find the child. I am desperate to give her something, anything, but though I hold what remains of her childhood, the girl is now nowhere to be found.

I opened my eyes and got up to check the coffee. It was bitter and needed nearly a quarter cup of milk to lighten it to my taste. The pot had bubbled over on the stove. The soup was dark— the vegetables cooked to pulp. Still, when we sat down for dinner, I was consumed with such a hunger that I felt as if I had not eaten in a week. I picked up the bowl, and downed the soup in several gulps. And then,

feeling possessed, I licked the bowl clean.

David began to laugh. “Look at Mommy! She’s so silly.”

The telephone rang and I stood to answer it. Sarah was on the other end.

“Come quickly. Right away,” she said. “Mother has had another stroke.”

Ruth had been moved to a different room. I was directed to the end of a long hallway. Nervous, I walked quickly, and pretended not to notice the old man who clutched the rail along the wall and asked for help as I passed him.

Sarah was crying. I held out the basket I had hastily prepared, and she took an apple without paying me the least bit of attention. Then I looked at my mother, shocked to see her propped up in a chair, her hair dirty, something white around her mouth.

“I brought fruit,” I said, because I could not think of anything else.

“Is that you, Lena? Come closer, so I can see you.” She motioned for me to sit beside her on the bed, but the room smelled strongly of urine or worse, and I could not bring myself to touch anything in it, including Ruth.

“Come here, little sister,” she said then, and I backed away.

“I can’t stay,” I said, and made myself cough. “I have a bad cold. You might get sick. I’ll come back another time. Enjoy the fruit.”

I left the basket with Sarah, then turned to rush out of the room.

She walks toward a bus, in line alongside many faceless children. If she’s on her way to school, why have the windows been blackened?

“You must find out what has happened to my little brother, Karl. I cannot rest until I find him. My sister will know,” she says, facing me. “Ask Ruth, won’t you, please?”

The guard in front of the bus kicks the children between their legs to hurry them inside. She is next in line, and my heart speeds up as I watch her approach the doorway.

She carries something— a scrap of cloth, and when another guard shoves her forward, she drops it. She turns to pick it up, but the guard kicks her, and she screams.

“Stop,” I call. “Don’t hurt her.” The child stares at me with dull gray eyes. It

is only then that I know with certainty she is already dead. “I want to help you. Please. What should I do?”

“Just don’t forget me,” she says quietly, before stepping up to the bus. For a moment, I think I see her face pressed against a blackened window, but it vanishes like a penny sinking to the bottom of a fountain.

I walk to where the cloth lies on the ground. It is a handkerchief with butterflies and flowers that match those on my pillowcase. A single thread has been pulled out, leaving a shadowy line across the fabric.

I clutch the handkerchief and feel something tugging, pulling against the missing string. It is the child, who is tied to me by threads I cannot see. I hold the fabric tight, refusing to let go, terrified the child will fall away. This child is my aunt, my mother’s sister. I want desperately to cling to her. But as the bus pulls away, the thread breaks, and I watch helpless, as the bus disappears inside of haze.

The sheets were cold, drenched in sweat. I pulled on my robe before hurrying out of my room. I could not shake the image of the child from my mind. Even with my eyes closed, I saw her face, an afterimage scratched in the periphery of my vision. I had come to depend on seeing her in my dreams. I did not expect to see her again.

Ruth had asked that I go to her house to pick up a few things she needed. She was transferring to a nursing home. After she was stable, she would come stay with me — until she felt well enough to go home.

I took out her old gray coat from the closet. It smelled badly, like wet dogs. Father had given it to her many years ago and Ruth had steadfastly refused to get rid of it. A thick gray string hung loose off the collar. When I pulled it free, the fabric began to unravel, and I had to look for a needle and thread with which to repair the hole.

I sat on her bed to sew. What I knew of the War was limited to what my mother had told me. She talked often about the cold, how she was always cold, always hungry. She was allowed to keep only a lightweight coat that was much too small for her. It was her job to undress the dead and sort their clothing for the Germans to re-use. Sometimes, their flesh was still frozen to the fabric. Rarely, she found money in the pockets. She had saved what small fabric scraps she could hide to sew into the lining of her coat and make it warmer. Into this, she made secret pockets, where she hid money, bread — anything she found that could be traded or used.

When I left Ruth’s house, I was so chilled that my teeth began to chatter. I put on her scruffy coat, and thrust my hands deep inside the pockets to warm them. There was a small hole in the right pocket. I worked it bigger with my finger until I

could push all of my hand through into the lining of the coat. There, I felt something cold and flat— a packet that I pulled out to examine.

It was Lena's yellowed handkerchief. Inside were three photographs. One of Lena holding her toy dog — the picture I remembered from my childhood. Another of Ruth as a twelve-year-old, gripping Lena's hand. The third was of the two girls, standing next to a little boy who was several years younger than Lena. The boy held an embroidered pillow tightly across his chest. I recognized the fabric. It matched the handkerchief.

I hurried to the hospital. When I had reached Ruth's room, I ran toward her. She was sitting up in bed, staring at the television.

"Mother," I said, and kneeled by the bed. "I have to talk to you." There was no gentle way to begin it. "Did you have a little brother . . . a boy named Karl, who you never told me about?"

She began to tremble, and I dropped my head into her lap and hugged her around the midriff. She patted my hair, as she had done when I was tiny. "A brother," she said, quietly. Suddenly, a low sigh rushed out from somewhere deep inside her. "Oh my God," she said. "Oh God, yes. My brother, but I can't remember what he looked like."

"Was this him?" I asked, and showed her the picture. "What happened to him? Tell me, Mother."

She could barely speak. "Karl," she whispered. "My baby brother." "What happened?" I persisted.

Her words, when at last they came, were not directed toward me. "After Karl was born, my mother was so busy caring for him that she hardly had time left for me." She still caressed my hair, then stopped, as if seeing for the first time that I was in the room with her.

"What happened?" I pressed again, angry she had forgotten her brother as she would later forget my son.

"They came for us, and we hid. I was behind an open door, and Lena crouched below the wood bin. My mother held Karl inside a closet that was hidden by a large bookcase. The Germans searched the room. 'Juden, Raus' — Jews come out, they said. Karl began to whimper, and the Germans knew to look behind the bookcase. I watched them pull my mother out by the hair. They did not see me. Then my beloved Lena gave herself up to be with my mother. I never saw them again after that."

She began to weep. I held her, not wanting to let go or even change my

position, though my legs began to cramp.

“I had wanted him dead so many times,” she said in a whisper, “but once it happened, I asked God to take me instead. Even that small favor was not granted to me.”

I held Ruth until my arms trembled from holding on so tight. I gave my mother the handkerchief. “This was Karl’s,” I said, certain that was true. “All he wanted was to be remembered. You can give him that.” I believed this fervently, and my mother believed it too, for she immediately relaxed, as if she had let go of something heavy.

I sat on the floor and gripped the fabric of my mother’s robe, clinging to it with a fierceness I had never known. I knew that if I lost my hold on Mother, I might sever the only thread still connecting me to the past.

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“Clinging to a Thread” is the first of several stories we have on hand from Leslie What. Leslie’s fiction has appeared in Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine, and regional publications. She is a stringer for the Eugene Weekly, and is currently writing a comic novel

Leslie is the child of a Holocaust survivor. “I started this story two years ago,” she writes, “after looking through a box of linen tablecloths, sheets and pillowcases brought over from Germany after the War. As I touched the fabric I was overwhelmed with the symbolism of having touched something used by people I knew only from photographs. I really did feel the physical presence of someone from the past.”