

## How a Grandmother Tells a War Story

*Kristina Zdravič Reardon\**

The first time my grandmother tells me a war story, it starts with a child. He is the neighbor's boy, the youngest one, the one who still wears a long dress instead of proper little boy trousers. She sees him in the distance as she returns home from hiding in the forest. His cheeks are red and he is stacking leaves, one after another, into a large pile. When my grandmother approaches, she sees that he has covered his mother.

'Mama, warm,' he says when my grandmother approaches. She turns away because she can see, even from several feet away, that the mother is dead.

When she tells these kinds of war stories, my grandmother shakes her head as if to clear her mind, to dislodge the memory. Then, she meets my gaze head-on: 'You never no believe-it. You never no understand.'

If I am to believe my grandmother's stories, there is no reality as real as war nor a reality as urgent, compelling, or unforgettable. Every task at which I fail pushes her back to Yugoslavia in 1941. Cleaning the oven. Leaving my shoes in the foyer, right in front of the stairs. My complaint about the single-ply toilet paper in the bathroom.

'Back in Yugoslavia,' she begins. There was no food to put in the oven. She wore her shoes till the soles wore through. The bathroom was a hole in the ground.

When I learn about trauma theory years later, I wonder if she can ever break out of the haunting cycle of remembrance, of retelling the stories of the years hiding in the woods from German S.S. officers, Italian soldiers, and Yugoslav forces intent on killing each other. If there is a border which laughter cannot cross, I am convinced this is it.

I wonder this until one day I realize that I have never seen my grandmother cry, and the closest to tears she has ever come is uttering the equivalent of a Slovene shrug: to je to. *Well, that's that.* When she ends stories like this, she widens the gap between us instead of closing it. I want to remember with her, to untwist strands of inherited memory from my DNA, but she reminds me that I was not there, and stories are words, not genetics. I prefer to think of them as echoes, though I know I have entered the hall of stories in time to hear only the reflection of sound, the manifestation of its discontinuous waves.

When I hear my grandmother's war stories echoing in my own head, I hear the reverberating parts: the leaves piled up on top of the woman, the dew my grandmother drank off the grass when there was no water, the open sky she stared at for hours when she learned that her own cousin sent her brother to the concentration camp Mauthausen. If I hear these things, it is because they comprise the coda. Their finality and their shock are meant to linger with me long after my grandmother stops speaking. They are meant to force me to reconcile

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myself to my luck, my privilege, and my appreciation for all things America, this place she chose for us. They are meant to remind me that I grew up American, and that I never no understand. They are meant to echo.

My grandmother tells me to go to the kitchen, to remove the largest frying pan from the kitchen cabinet and to bring it into the living room. When I've done this, she places it in the middle of the carpet and calls my brother and sister into the room. Her face is serious, and her glasses begin to slip down her nose as she lowers herself to the ground. She has the grace of the Slovene goat that was the inheritance she could not claim across an ocean. She tells me to squat down next to her. We must all fit into the frying pan.

'Vhen vas var, ve never no have-it sled,' she says. 'Vhat you understand now how ve go sledding.'

'You went sledding during the war?' I ask.

'Ya, ya,' she says. 'Vhat ve go sledding at night, vhat no one never no see us.'

She went, and her sister, too, and her brother, all in frying pans down the hills behind the farmhouse at night. No soldiers could see them at night. The frying pans were quiet. One bottom per pan, every child could fit in a pan—small pans for small children, larger ones for the tallest. If we all sat in a pan, she told us we'd get an idea of how it felt back then, back in Yugoslavia.

Of course, I think, of course they went sledding in frying pans down the hill by the farmhouse. What else would they have used?

'OK,' my grandmother says, as our legs tangle into the sides of the pan. Her bottom spills over the edge.

'What now?' my sister asks.

'Now singing,' she says, and she starts to sing an old folk song about evil stepmothers. 'Ona mene čese da kri iz glave teče! Ti si mene česala na čelo poljubila, mamica moja...'

My mother walks into the room, pauses, and translates the lyrics: '*She combs my hair till blood runs from my head! You combed my hair and kissed my forehead, oh mommy of mine...*'

My mother stops mid-lyric.

'Why are you all sitting in my frying pan?'

We all start yelling.

'Grandma said!' my brother says.

'She told us to do it!' my sister says.

'It's just like Yugoslavia!' I say.

My mother turns away and her face registers disbelief as she tries to swallow her laugh.

Grandma stands up.

'Vhy you sit in frying pan?' she asks us.

We look from our mother to our grandmother, and back again.

'In the war, there were no sleds,' I begin, 'and you said –'

She lets out a short breath, the way I imagined the disinherited goat would have done if he'd come over on the plane to America.

'Never no sit in frying pan,' she tells me in a loud voice. 'This no make-it no sense.'

She turns to my mother, and with her witch-like laugh, she says: 'I no know vhy they do this.'

This, too, is a war story. The sled, the song, the trick, and the laugh: they are as much my grandmother's war story as any other piece. I've just been trained to recognize the other parts—the more traumatic parts—as more authentically warlike. It's easier to pull a lesson out

of story about her brother's time at Mauthausen. The sled seems more opaque. Is her laughter directed at me, a young child of privilege who has never been in a warzone? Or is it directed at a memory of a beam of moonlight on fresh fallen snow, a gathering of village children running recklessly in a moment of escape at midnight that she can't find the words to share?

In 'How to Tell a True War Story,' Tim O'Brien writes: 'A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behaviour, nor restrain men from doing the things they have always done.'<sup>1</sup> He goes on to stress obscenity: if a war story leaves you feeling uplifted, he writes, you shouldn't believe it. If it's obscene, he writes, it's probably authentic. If my grandmother were to offer her advice, she would laugh, call O'Brien a *prašič*, a real pig, for even suggesting something so obscene. She would start to tell him a story about the Italian soldier who camped out on the side of her father's farm and who was always kind to her, even once gave her food during a shortage. Then she'd announce that she—as an eight-year-old child—precociously tried to steal his gun when he wasn't looking. It's about the twist, she might say, about the bend in the story you were least expecting. A war story should really make you doubt everyone's humanity, she might say. Somehow, when she tells her stories, they almost make me laugh instead.

Once the frying pan has been moved back to its shelf that day, my grandmother pulls a spoon out of the kitchen drawer and tells me to look close. Can I see my own reflection? Yes, I nod, I can. Is it right side up or upside down? I think it's right side up, but I'm starting to doubt everything. She says hers is upside down, and I squint, and I think maybe it's true.

'What is upside down is vitch,' she says.

'Are you a witch, Grandma?' I ask.

'You never no know,' she says.

'If you're a witch, am I a witch?'

'You never no know who is vitch,' she says. She starts to tell us a story about an old woman down the road in her village, the old woman whose reflection was always upside down in a spoon. My grandmother and her sisters wondered if she was a witch, and they walked by her home every day. Maybe she could tell my grandmother's fortune. Maybe she knew when the war would end.

On Easter Sunday that year, her own grandmother died. The witch may or may not have had something to do with it; the connection is tenuous, and my grandmother attributes some of this to Turkish coffee grounds.

When the S.S. soldiers stop by the farmhouse and see the dead grandmother, the corpse begins to have cadaveric spasms.

'What they think she not dead, what they shoot her three times,' my grandmother says. 'What they shoot dead grandmother three times Easter Sunday.'

She closes her eyes and tells me she was standing right there, next to the bed. They took the Easter bread and the eggs, too.

She shakes her head, trying to clear her mind, to dislodge the memory.

The part that comes next is the refrain, the part that lets you know where the punctuation in the war story goes:

She pauses, puts the spoon back in the drawer, and turns to me head-on.

'You never no believe-it. You never no understand.'

Every one of my grandmother's war stories ends with this echo. It's the refrain that lodges itself into every one of her songs. I want to believe that stories are tools that help the tellers to heal and help the listeners to understand. But my grandmother's stories are circular

<sup>1</sup> Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1990), 67-85.

narratives, ones with no clean beginnings or ends, no matter how many times she retells them. No matter how many times I listen, she knows one thing for certain: she was there and I was not. It's her trauma, but it's also her secret pride. While a war rages in the Balkans in the 1990s, we are sitting in chairs in suburban Massachusetts speaking to one another. She did something right, she thinks, to create this gap, to dislodge us from our ancestral home and from war. But I suppose that's why she always tried to tell me her war stories: to try to close the gap between us, even as she sought to maintain it.