

ANNA AND THE GHOST

by Shannon Bickford

The Photograph

Curious, Petra pulled the corner of a small paper board peaking from behind a loose brick. A photograph fell to the floor. She slid the dust to the side, revealing a family portrait spanning three generations. She was drawn to a young girl with shiny curls in the photograph. She reminded Petra of her daughter, Elizabeth, now five, who also carried a head full of curls. Turning to the back of the photograph, Petra found an unfamiliar script documenting the names and ages of those pictured and the year—1941. It was likely German, Petra surmised.

Until recently, Volga Germans had inhabited the village where Petra and Elizabeth lived. Generations ago, Catherine the Great, invited Germans to settle Petra's village and many other villages covering a swath of southern Russia along the Volga River. When the Nazis invaded Russia in June of 1941, the Soviet government, fearful of those with German heritage, branded the Volga Germans Nazi conspirators. Adding injustice to lies, the whole Volga German populace was stripped of citizenship and deported to Siberia and Central Asia. Refugees from the front moved in. Petra and her young daughter had fled the brutal invasion, and by no little miracle, survived. They found themselves in this tiny village now void of the Volga Germans who had built it. In their absence, there was so much of them left behind. Perhaps the German family hid the photograph to prove their claim to a home that just recently was split into 3 tiny apartments to house workers for the nearby factory. No matter now, the State controlled the property.

Anna

"There are ghosts here," said Grandma.

"Ghosts?" queried Anna, more amused than afraid.

"Yes, ghosts." Grandma answered.

"It was just a dream, Grandma. There are no ghosts," Anna replied, speaking more like a parent than an 8 year-old child. Anna regretted telling Grandma about her dream of a young child standing in the garden where they sat. She felt uncomfortable with Grandma's moods of late. Anna tried to change the subject, "Johan will be home from school soon."

Grandma sighed. Grandma's mood would not pass so quickly. "What of ghosts?" asked Anna.

Oddly, it was Grandma who then dropped the talk of ghosts. "The iris are blooming. They were your mother's favorites."

Anna couldn't remember her mother. For as long as she could remember, it was just her and Grandma. The precious little Anna knew about her mother had slipped from her grandmother's tongue. Grandma had resisted Anna's constant questions about her parents, now passed, saying, "They had good hearts and they loved you very much."

Then Anna would say, "I will grow up just like them."

Anna dreamt of the ghost child more and more often, until Anna began to confuse waking and the dream. The dream seemed so real, save that the little ghost child spoke a strangely foreign tongue, likely Russian by the sound of it, but undecipherable to Anna as she spoke only

German. Anna's cat, Katcha, and Grandma often joined Anna in her dream, always in the garden. The cat curled and purred next to Anna and Grandma and occasionally sauntered over to the ghost child. "Evidently," Anna thought, "cats have no problems with ghosts – at least in dreams."

Then Anna heard a woman's voice from the house. "What," thought Anna, "another dream? Another ghost?"

The ghost child came out the door into the garden, cradling a small bowl of milk, setting it carefully in the dirt. Almost before it touched the ground, Katcha bounded to the bowl and lapped up her rare treat of fresh milk.

"How is it, that Katcha drinks ghost milk – even in a dream?" Anna was confused. Then she understood.

She turned to Grandma, "Johan won't be coming home from school, will he?"

Grandma answered sadly, "No."

"I won't grow up to plant iris like Mother, will I?" said Anna.

Grandma answered, "No, child."

Anna asked, "Grandma, how did I die?"

The Revelation

Anna asked again, "How did I die, Grandma?"

Grandma was silent.

Anna screamed, seemingly loud enough for the living to hear, "How did I die, Grandma?!!"

After a long silence, Grandma spoke. "There is a great war raging, many have been lost."

Anna stomped out of the garden. If she was a ghost, she was an angry ghost. Dead?!! Tears welled and floated away, weightless, as is the habit of ghost tears, splattering about the living world like rain from nowhere.

Anna walked the roads of her village. The roads were the same, the buildings, the tree by the school, all the same. The people though were all different. Gone was Mr. Steitz, selling vegetables next to the blacksmith shop. The granary was closed. The school was in shambles. Everywhere, she heard a strange tongue spoken by strangers. If war was raging, was no one left that she knew? She screamed at the passersby. Deaf to her screams, they tended to their own concerns. Noting the occasional splatter of a ghost's tear, they looked up at the cloudless sky, and easily dismissed that which had no explanation. Anna sat in the middle of the road only to have a horse and cart plow through her like she was soft butter. Indeed she was dead. A ghost, a voiceless one.



Heaven

"Is there a heaven, Grandma?" Anna asked. Back in the garden, Grandma and Anna sat as usual on her bench. Katcha, rubbed against their legs.

Grandma looked at Anna, "There is always a little heaven with you, whether you know it or not."

There was so much Anna didn't understand. "Tell me, Grandma, what happened?"

"War causes much hate," Grandma replied, "Our families were torn from their homes and many died before their time. Sometimes the dead wake up with all that confusion, and seek solace in familiar places."

She took Grandma's hand, noting that ghosts (and cats evidently) feel real to other ghosts. It made sense to Anna that she would return to Grandma's garden. She had spent many living afternoons in the garden with her grandmother. This was as close to heaven as any befuddled ghost could be. She missed her family—now gone—and held tight to her grandmother, fearful that she would lose her too.

"No worries, child," said Grandma, reading Anna's thoughts, "You will never be far from those who love you." Anna wept. Katcha, used to the sight of sobbing ghosts, chased the floating tears as if they were butterflies dancing across the garden.

Petra

Petra wondered about those who had built the village that she and Elizabeth now called home. As she walked to work, she studied the silhouette of the village church. Succumbing to religious suppression, the church was stripped of its spires and cross and turned into a tractor factory. The factory, where Petra worked, now served the war effort by producing tank parts. She stood in wonder of the arched windows and sturdy brickwork. She imagined the altar without the green metal shelves loaded with tank parts. They could not hide what Petra felt in her heart—that we are all God's children.

It was in the garden outside her door that Petra felt the strongest link to the Volga Germans. The garden had been larger and carefully laid out, though now a tangle and bounded by a patchwork of both old and new, a hurried adaptation to house workers from the factory. She imagined some Volga German gardener sitting on the well-worn garden bench and soaking in

the sights and scents of her well-tended garden. It was there, sitting on the bench that Petra first felt them...ghost tears!

The Braucher

Petra would have preferred to ignore the whole thing as a foolish superstition; but the ghost tears came more and more often. Petra forbade Elizabeth to play in the garden. Reluctantly, Petra hinted about the ghost tears to her neighbor. The neighbor told Petra of an old German woman, a braucher, a faith healer, who had stayed behind during the deportation given her marriage to a Russian man. Perhaps she could help. Now that Petra saw this braucher, a bent, coarse woman stumbling through the garden buoyed by a crooked cane, she regretted asking for help.

The old German woman said simply, "They are not bad ghosts," and began walking off.

Petra followed, "But I want them gone, I have a child who plays in the garden."

The old braucher turned and scowled, "I believe they were here first."

This reminder that Petra had benefitted from the demise of the Volga Germans angered Petra. Exasperated, she cried, "How do I make them go away?!!"

The old woman looked annoyed, "You must help them heal," and walked away.

Petra sighed, could the old woman be more cryptic? "And how am I supposed to do that?" she begged.

Petra didn't get an answer until the old woman was nearly out of earshot, "Tell them your story," she mumbled.

Petra's Story

Petra could not decide who was more insane, the old German woman or herself, having decided to tell the ghosts her story. She gathered her grandmother's crucifix that she had hidden, as religious objects were frowned upon; and most important, the photograph of the Volga German family found in her apartment. Straddling the bench in the garden, she laid the photograph in front of her with the crucifix and a newly cut iris.

Petra had been too busy, too fearful, too worried about her daughter to look back, to think about how she came to be in this garden, stolen from others. "War is a monster," Petra's words caught the ears of Anna and Grandma. This monster took her family and her daughter's father with unfathomable finality—God how Petra missed them. She and her daughter barely escaped the advancing German army, joining the throngs of refugees, surviving the cold, the hunger, and the crowded train journey. Finally, assigned to the tank factory, they had a roof over their head. Their apartment was barely a closet, but it was safe. For that, she was thankful.

It was hard for her to accept that all those Germans who lived in these Volga lands were Nazi conspirators and deserved to be shipped to God knows where. It was a convenient falsehood that kept her guilt at bay when she had benefitted from their suffering. She would do the same again for her daughter. Anyone would. This certainty did not save her tears, though. She cried for her daughter, herself, her husband and her family. She cried for the nameless

Volga German family in the photograph whose lives were destroyed by a lie. She touched each one of them and prayed for forgiveness, and wondered how one or more of them ended up a ghost in her garden. While Petra's story was spoken in an unfamiliar tongue, Grandma and Anna listened and were moved by Petra's tears, which fell into her lap as the weighted tears of the living do. Grandma and Anna felt the frustration familiar to all ghosts—they were powerless to comfort the living.

Healing

While ghosts and the living are separated by a quirk of time and space not yet understood, cats and tears have no such boundaries, for they inhabit both realms at once. The old German faith healer knew this. She knew also that compassion has purchase in both worlds, and when it is shared through the veil of death, compassion can heal. Such was the intent behind her suggestion to Petra to tell the ghosts her story.

Dreams of Heaven

The sun painted patterns of shade and light in Grandma's garden. The summer heat was merciless to the living. Katcha panted quietly under the bench. However, ghosts are spared such discomfort. Anna shared the garden bench with Grandma.

"I had another dream of heaven, Grandma." Dreams of heaven had come to Anna more and more often.

Grandma smiled, "Time that you come to know heaven, child."