

OLGA

William A. Owen

Olga was a hundred and one years old when she told this story to her great grandson, a reporter on the local newspaper.

“When I came to this country I was about ten years old. A memory I still have of the old country is the winter. There is nothing to see but snow. The trees, the grass, the fields, the bushes; they are all snow. You see only white. When the sun is out, the light hurts the eyes. When the moon shines, the howling hurts the ears. The snow makes noise when you walk. When the wind comes up, the snow blows around and makes high piles in some places and leaves others bare and cold.

Where we lived over there, we were farmers; it was flat open land. But here there are many hills and they're close together. The hills here are very pretty, especially when the trees change colors in the fall and when they get their new leaves in the springtime. I always like to see the changes in the seasons. But over there not many pretty hills and far apart. The scene seemed to have no end, but just go on and on, like me. It was that way coming over the ocean.

But I want to tell about what happened to me here. I can't remember everything. It all happened many years ago. I am old now, a hundred, and they say that old people forget everything, even their own names. That's not always true. I can remember what happened to me. Anybody would. No one could forget. I am still the same person..

We had been here about ten years then, maybe a little less. It's hard to be sure of the years now, so fast they all went by. The farm was going good. Ivan was working in the foundry in town and he earned much money. I was even going to school nearly every day then. Dad often rode me there on his big riding horse. What was the name of that horse? It was the name of some famous horse in some story. Dad used to read a lot. I guess that's where I got my love for reading. I always read two or three books every week.

You probably don't remember the farm. You are too young for that. It was a beautiful place, you know. It was on the top of the big hill, south of town, almost at the very edge. Behind the house and the barn and the sheds, the flat land came to an end, but not our property; there started the hill down through the woods all the way down the river. And how far down it was!

Out in front, across the little road that seemed always either dusty or muddy, over there were our fields, flat, fine, fertile land. We were rich people in the old country, and my father put all he had into the farm. He said he got it at a bargain because the owner had no sons and was moving into town with his daughter who had married a doctor.

There was a big elm tree just at the side of the house and I could see it from my bedroom. I always liked to see that tree, my tree, and the birds and squirrels, and the way the leaves changed colors and fell off till the new ones came in the spring.

We had four sheds in back. They were made with flattened logs, flattened on one side anyway. Some of them were always rotting away with big holes everywhere.

It was the same with the barn. You had to go down a slope to get into the barn because the door was on one side. The way down had big stones on both sides, and they always stayed in place; I often wondered why. The rain used to wash away the path down to the door and we had to put little stones there. But the big stones on the sides always stayed in place.

Behind was the edge of the hill. I loved to go there. I thought it must be like heaven looking all the way down to the river. In the summer snakes were sunning on the rocks. I was never afraid of them, and they seemed to get used to seeing me there with them. When it was winter time I could throw snowballs down. Oh!, it seemed that they went a mile down and down.

I liked to read books there by myself. But I was seldom alone. There were rabbits, and birds, and little mice. And the deer, they came too. And they didn't always run away, not right away. They would stand very still, looking and sniffing. And how pretty they were, especially the babies with their little white tails.

And the river down there. In the spring it flooded over and was brown. In the summer dry time it shrunk and seemed clearer. In the winter it froze and the snow came and you couldn't even know that the river was there at all.

We never had many cows, just a few for milk for us. Sometimes, though, Ivan would take some to where he worked for his friends in the foundry. My brother was a fine man, and he was what you say, a hustler, just like he had been born in this country.

Well, we had been here about ten years then, maybe more; it was the time of the Great War.

Ivan would, sometimes, when there was snow and ice and he couldn't get up the hill . . . Well, he would stay in town, three or four days, a week at a time. There were other men from the old country working there and he stayed with them.

Sometimes, though, he would stay at the boss's house. His boss lived next door to the foundry. He was an Irishman and he had a big family. One of his boys was Mike, my husband.

At that time,—that sounds like the Gospel, doesn't it?—Ivan made arrangements for me to go to town with him and stay there till Monday with his friends.

Well, that was how I met Mike. We were married about a month later. There was no doubt for either of us. I guess we knew right away there on the front porch of his house next to Ivan's foundry. But a week after we were married, Mike had to go to the war. He was killed there. I never saw him again.

But I had a baby, your grandfather; no, your great grandfather, my little Mike.

But then, quickly, it seemed, one after another, mother and dad both died, and Ivan, too: the flu.

I was alone, alone with little Mike. He was surely a pretty little fellow as ever you saw. He had his father's big blue eyes and my black hair and he was always strong and healthy.

I lived alone on the farm with my little Mike. I didn't work the farm much. I had arrangements with other people for that. It was never really idle. I had a little money, not much, but we really did not need much, just the two of us. There's always enough to eat on a farm.

I suppose I had to let the place run down a bit. The barn and the house were pretty old, even then, and they had never been painted. No repairs but what I could do myself, or have old Mr. Green, who lived nearby, do for me. We had a front porch and it fell down in a big snow. The upstairs was closed and the windows were boarded over outside. I never used the upstairs, never needed it. We slept in the little room next to the kitchen. It was always warm there. We got along fine, but I suppose the place did not look very good from

outside, especially in the winter time and when the sun was gone and the big elm was bare.

Then it happened. The world fell down. Little Mike was a little over two and into everything. I had to watch him all the time. But he was the loveliest boy ever and we were happy together, never rich, but content.

You know. You are American. You would never imagine that anything like that could happen here, would you now? If it was some bad men with guns stealing him away at night; but no, a sheriff, with his badge and his papers at noon.

'The County Commissioner of Public Welfare,' he said, 'has made a thorough investigation of you here alone in this old place with this child, and he has issued this official warrant requiring me to take the child to the county poor house in Van Eaton where he will be legally housed, properly taken care of and become a ward of Briggs County.'

Can you imagine? I could not really believe what I was hearing with my own ears. He seemed to be a nice enough man and he said that he didn't like it either, but he had to do his duty.

It was such a shock, such a big surprise that I was quiet a while before it could really sink into me.

Then I began to cry and yell like a crazy person. Who wouldn't in such a scene? In my own home. With my own little Mike.

But he took Mike anyway. Little Mike was crying more than I was. In his little mind he seemed to know that some tragedy was happening to me, and to him too. He could not understand what the man was saying. But he knew. He knew.

What could I do? I was pretty much alone in the world, a widow with no parents. I had learned English but I never became a citizen. I did not know many people in town, just Mike's family and Ivan's friends in the foundry, all poor foreigners, slobs, micks, wops, they called us.

And I was only about twenty years old then. I was very pretty. Oh!, you can't believe that seeing me now, but I was. My hair was black, and Mike, my Mike, said that I was the prettiest girl in the whole world. Mike was a very handsome fellow and he told me to be very careful and never accept favors from any men, especially from the Americans.

Mike's father, Ivan's boss, I went to see him. I didn't see them very much then. As I said, I lived on the farm, and Mike's father looked just like Mike, my Mike, and it made me more sad to see him.

I could see Mike in my mind whenever I looked at his father.

He told me to see the Democratic County Committee Chairman, a politician, and maybe he could help me. Mike's father liked politics. He became a citizen and voted and went to meetings. But, he said, the Irish would never have a chance in politics there. They could never even elect a veterinarian as dog catcher. But, he said, they were going to change that and the Italians were going to help.

I went to see that politician. I will always remember that meeting, He was short and fat and bald and his round face was red as a tomato. He was a fireman on the railroad. I won't say his name. I don't want to remember it. You could find it, but you wouldn't find what he said to me that day.

Would you believe it? Just as Mike said. That little politician told me that yes, I could get the boy back. It would take a week or so. I could go on a little trip with him, all expenses paid, for that week or so, he said.

He asked me to sell myself, my honor, my body, my Mike, all for a promise from him. I said no, of course. I said no right away. I told Mike's father about it. He had sent me there.

I knew almost nothing then about local politics, about that business of the Irish and the Italians.

Word got to Tim, Mike's brother. He was younger. He tried to get in the army in the war, but he was too young. He even went up to Canada to join their army, but they wouldn't take him either.

People said then that you could get into the army if you were too young, like Tim, and really wanted to go. The local political committee would fix it up, get a made-up birth certificate. Tim went to see the Democratic County Committee Chairman, the same one I met later.

Tim said the chairman told him that he would never even try to get a local birth certificate for anyone with an accent like Tim's, and, besides, he would never do a damned thing to help the Irish. They're only trouble makers, them and the wops; besides, the Irish want Germany to win anyway.

The public welfare man and the county chairman, it turned out, were brothers.

Tim was furious. He was always hot tempered, and he had red hair.

The Democratic County Committee Chairman was killed, shot to death, a few days after I saw him.

Tim was always a great talker. He never hid anything about what he had done to get into the army during the war. So probably the part about the politician, the chairman, was told all over. And he knew that I went to see him, too.

Tim was arrested and charged with murder. The whole thing was terrible, terrible for everybody, Mike's family, but worse for me, especially the trial that I still think was the worst thing that ever happened to me in my whole life.

I had to go there in front of the judge, the jurymen, a crowd of people, Tim and his family, my family then, the only one I knew in this country. I didn't know anything about my relatives back there.

It was the worst day of my life. They said that I would go to jail for a long time if I did not talk at the trial or if I didn't say the truth.

I was always thinking about my little Mike, even then when I was in front of all those people. I was so nervous at first that I began to talk in Polish. It just came out from somewhere. It made the lawyer who was against Tim awfully mad at me, but the lawyer who wanted to help Tim did not say anything then, and the judge was polite and kind. He just told me to be more careful, to settle down and just answer the questions.

There were a lot of them—where was I born, where did I live, about Mike and his family, a lot of questions I did not like it at all.

The most important one from the lawyer who was against Tim was the last, after I had been already the center of attention of everyone for a long time.

He asked if I knew the victim. I guess I didn't understand him or hear him good and I asked him to repeat the question. He said, "Pay attention," in a very rough way.

The judge said to the lawyer not to talk like that to a witness and not to frighten people. You wouldn't know who that judge was. He was Edward, my second husband. We got married about a month after the trial and had got my little Mike back. Edward was a good man, a good husband. But he was killed a little while later when that trolley fell off the new bridge when it was being officially opened. You wouldn't know about that. It was long before your time. But I still have the newspaper about it.

I will always remember Tim's trial, no matter how long I live. As you see I have lived a long time already, and these things all happened many years ago. But I will surely always remember just what I said then.

“Yes,” I said, and as loud as I could, “I once met that vile man.”

That made him even madder and he did not ask any more questions then.

The lawyer who was helping Tim took his turn to ask me questions. The very first was to know why I had called the victim a vile man. The other lawyer jumped up right away and said that could influence the jury and had nothing to do with the issue of the trial and should be erased.

I didn't wait for any more questions from anyone. It was as if there was something pushing me from inside that I couldn't stop. I was crying and half crazy with thinking and remembering. I just kept on talking and told everybody about my little Mike and the commissioner of public welfare and my visit to the county chairman.

When I started talking, the lawyer who was against Tim tried to stop me but I kept on talking out of my heart, and as loud as I could, almost shouting. The whole place, even him, became quiet. I told them everything.

It was a mistake, probably, I don't know for sure. But it showed that Tim, poor Tim, had another reason to want to kill that man.

But I had to talk. I had to tell everybody about my little Mike and me. I had never talked in such a place like that before, with a lot of people there, and a man writing down everything I said, and with lawyers and a judge listening to me. I think it was little Mike talking in me.

Tim was found guilty, not of bad murder, something else. He was sent to prison for ten years. He died there. His father, Ivan's boss, my Mike's father, he died about the same time. The rest of them moved away, spread around. I haven't seen any of them for years now. I suppose there are no more of them now anyway. None of my own friends, people from my own time, none are left now, just me.”

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