

Akiko P. Oncken

January 2017

Word count: 1,654

Remembering

One cannot anticipate what may trigger a remembering. One could try to record and archive every detail lived so as to recall it later at will. But that is not how it works out in the end. Take for instance large shelving displays of yarn. The last time I saw one in a store, my eyes gravitated to the right-hand corner of the display, to the yarn in rich crimson red tones. And suddenly, I found myself spending at least fifteen minutes sorting thru memories and emotions.

My grandparents used to have that crimson red colorway in their store. As a child, I always wanted to touch it for they said the dyelot name was “Rosa,” just like the name of the native Quechuan woman that worked as a housemaid for them and looked after me during summers. Her cheeks, crimson from the dryness and severe coldness of the Andean Highlands, had permanent creases from smiling and laughing. It wasn’t that her life was free from hardships. But, she learned to mask the sadness and the annoyance in ways I only later learned to decipher.

No one, at least none of my cousins, knew how old she was when she arrived. I heard once that she had been barely in her teens. For me, she was a permanent fixture. I remember running in the fields playing tag with her, learning to peel fava beans, and watching her polish and buff wooden floors. I recall sneaking into her bedroom, the only one on the bottom floor of my grandparents’ house and behind the yarn store. She didn’t own much, except for several woolen skirts with colorful embroidery that identified her as a *chola*, a Quechuan woman of the southern highlands. The skirts hung on hooks on one of the walls in her bedroom much like a modern art exhibition in a gallery, a bold yet unflappable explosion of color and craft.

On another occasion, I was stuck in rush hour traffic, and as I looked up at an apartment complex, I saw an Asian man using a wooden stick to strike a large rug sending clouds of dust that settled on the street below. I was mesmerized trying to identify what seemed familiar about him. Then, I remembered Rosa again, washing clothes in a large stone basin. After several rounds of passing soap over a pair of pants or a shirt, she would hold the garment with her right hand and, with decisive force, strike it against the basin. I regret now not knowing why the striking was necessary. When I peek inside my washing machine, I often wonder if the machine is doing the striking for me or whether there is a secret she held back that remains untold to the modern urban dweller.

She wasn't the only one that would spend countless hours striking clothing. All along the banks of major rivers in many Andean cities, on clear and sunny days, you could observe Quechuan women hitting their skirts and blouses against large rocks. After rinsing, the garments would dress the bright green grass on the riversides in a kaleidoscope of colors and shapes. I am told this is not very common nowadays. But, every once in a while, foreigners can point from a bridge to a small cluster of women washing in the traditional way as part of an attempt to encourage tourism.

Rosa had family, a couple of sisters and a mother. At least they were the only ones I ever saw visiting her. Grandma would be quite crossed when they came, even though she knew they had made a long journey and had every right to see her. They never entered my grandparents' home. Rosa would step outside and spend several hours speaking to them on the street. I know because I would peek from the study room's window facing the street wondering when she would come back inside to play. Once, after a visit in which Rosa came back looking timidly blushed and rather uncomfortable, I overheard grandma saying that she couldn't understand why

Rosa's family would abuse of her efforts by asking her for more money, the primary reason for their visits, apparently. She reminded Rosa on that occasion that she was a hard worker and that her income belonged to her and her only; her family needed to pull their own weight.

Grandma saw Rosa as more than just a housemaid. Nearly every night, after all the chores were done, they would sit next to each other and in front of a black and white television set with a knitting project. In the case of grandma, it would always involve a large bedspread for one of her children. Rosa would often attempt to make a sweater and grandma would supervise her work. As for me, I was taught to crochet first, and I think I would have been good at it but for my constant desire to belong to their circle; my crochet stitches were always too tight and uneven as a result. I was in high school when I finally felt included with my first knitted project, a light cream vest with mustard yellow and moss green horizontal stripes.

Rosa lived with my grandparents until they died. Alongside their children and grandchildren, no one was more devastated than her when they passed. In fact, when I visited right after grandpa's death, she confided her shock at how grandpa had turned into only a faint shadow of who he had been. "Only skin and bones," she said in tears. She saw cancer take the light out of him day after day until nothing was left but a man holding on to his heart as if it too could be pulled out of him at any moment. She was present also for every stroke that gradually crippled grandma until one day she didn't leave the intensive care unit. And, until everyone managed to control their grief and mourning, she had to live by herself in my grandparents' home hearing the sounds of absent steps and the aroma of uneaten stews. Her eyelids became permanently downcast, which I imagine it was due to crying alone every night. Her hair, which until then had been deep black, began to come with long gray and white silver strands. It was

then that I finally came to know that seriousness and sadness could exist in the corners of her smile.

After grandma's funeral, my aunts and uncles eventually realized that they needed to care for Rosa. It was not only that it was now their duty to look after her. But, she also held on to every one of my grandma's special and precious recipes. She knew what grandma did to make her bread extra soft and crisp. She had the calculations made in her head of every traditional meal each one of them had enjoyed at their home. She knew where grandpa kept the boxes of sweets he always gave to his grandkids and grandma's favorite stitch patterns and knitting needles. So, they found a small lot and built a sensible home for her. I can still recall Rosa's eyes softly gazing with tears the day the house was finished and she walked into the small foyer with her own key.

Several weeks ago, I had to make a trip across Wyoming and Colorado and encountered impenetrable fog almost the entire stretch. The road kept disappearing before my eyes. Before I knew it, I was taken back to the day my entire family, in a caravan, drove across the Andes to attend the funeral of Rosa's mother. On that particular occasion, we set out even as the skies gave us ominous signs of a storm and a thick fog settled before we reached the city limits.

Now, you need grit to take on an evanescent road. Well, at least when crossing the Andes, you must either be foolish or earnest. With no points of reference, it is hard to know if one's car is moving. With good fortune, you can try to follow the line by the curb in hopes to not veer off the road. That is, of course, if there are any lines to follow at all. Unending curvy roads, most often edging mountain cliffs, are susceptible to landslides that gradually eat up the road until barely one car can have enough room. At the highest altitudes, you must prepare to brave it up and drive thru unrelenting fog and rain. Stopping and resting at the side of the road are not an

option. You cannot expect a convenience store, a rest stop or a gas station. Now and then, out of the saturated unending white canvas, a vehicle can emerge coming in the opposite direction. If you are lucky, it warns by honking aggressively and flashing its headlights. As when one turns up abruptly the volume on the radio, the sound of honking horns, the glare of fog lights, and the unnervingly quick encounter can be rattling. If you are not lucky, you can find it headed straight for you on your lane. In that case, a game of chicken usually ensues. As a child, that would make me stand up and hold on to my dad's headrest tightly asking a million questions to take my mind away from incoming traffic.

On that trip, I remember being in a near trance the entire journey. There was silence in the cabin and we were all wearing black garments. We were in funeral mood, aware that we needed to keep a particular countenance evoking grief and deep sympathy for a loss we couldn't yet measure as our own. Although no one ever had bothered to get to know Rosa's mother, her death, within a year of my grandparents', represented the last vestige of a story we were trying fiercely to preserve.

For me, there was more to be focused on. For starters, I was about to see for the first time the place where Rosa had come from. Eventually that place, which until then held an aura of myth in my mind, materialized amidst the fog. A small adobe house, surrounded by fenced fields in a meadow where a couple of cows and sheep were grazing, came to view. It was overflowing with people standing outside for there wasn't enough space inside. In our caravan we were many, and yet, Rosa's relatives made sure we could be invited inside. When Rosa came to greet us, the swelling in her breast and the sudden tears coming down her cheeks made it difficult for her to talk. She was surprised. She had not expected us. While one of my aunts held her in her arms, from the back of my uncle's van, my other aunts pulled out trays and pots filled with food. We

had brought tamales, pulled pork, potatoes, several fruitcakes, and rum. My aunts placed the offerings on the dining table, right next to the boiled fava beans, bread and corn that Rosa and her sisters had prepared. I watched my uncle bring his guitar and gently accompany with music as Rosa and her sisters mourned all that had been and all that wouldn't ever be again. That kind of grief, now too familiar to us, bonded Rosa to our family forever. She became my aunts' sister, and at times even a reflection of their mother. As for me, I mourned silently, while looking out trying to catch a glimpse of the mountains, for my Rosa was no more. The effervescent laughter and every moment lived were fading into the brume with a promise of a remembering somewhere when I could least expect it.

(Word Count: 1,947)

At The Woods

The pink glove on the ground is almost fully covered in snow. Walker Wood, age 45, hurriedly approaches the entrance to his home, luggage in tow, noticing it next to the shrubs. It's Cecily's glove. He cautiously looks to his left and then to his right, confirming that he is not missing any other of her belongings as he picks it up. In the front yard, the ash and cherry trees, burnt skeletons against the rosy light of dawn, have had their fresh new leaves twisted and charred by the extreme cold front that has blanketed overnight the entire province in two feet of snow. These mid-summer blizzards make the suggestion of storing winter clothes laughable; Walker mockingly considers his grandmother's forlorn habit illogical. It is 2150 after all, and erratic weather patterns taunt all attempts at prediction and constancy.

His right hand reaches for the doorknob when hesitation seizes him. He recalls the short note received at twilight. Regrettably, the early morning transport was the only return option available. He wanted to be here sooner. Walker knows the risks of missing a curfew. The timelines that people like him must abide by are very strict. With newfound courage, he closes his eyes as he enters his home. The unusual silent welcome of the compact dwelling admonishes him to look closer. Cecily is neither in the kitchen nor in the living room. But, the oven door is partially open, and a cup of herbal tea rests next to the couch, cold and untouched. He sets his bags on the floor and takes his shoes off. Silently, he inches into the bedroom to find her seating on her side of their bed. Her profile gives an air of frailty and resignation. The photo album is opened on her lap.

He walks across the room and sits on the bench at the foot of their bed. Cecily Wood, age 38, is wearing her lime green pajamas highlighting the darkest of her skin's undertones. Her black hair is down and has not been properly conditioned for it is heavily tangled. She is aware

that he has received the news. It is a requirement for the physician to report these kinds of results to relatives as well as the local office handling diagnostics.

Cecily and Walker are expecting, for their first time. Even a quiet and observant man as Walker has not been able to hide his joy. He has been whistling made-up tunes during his work shift while sorting thru the recycling bins and classifying hazardous content. No one could hear him, of course, because the protective masks and helmets filter all sounds. His shift, and that of many workers in the plant, is spent in a manufactured state of self-confinement.

The first two months have gone by smoothly, as far as he can tell. And, he has tried as much as possible to not miss a single day of work so he may accumulate enough merit for when she really needs him. Walker has not been blind to the risks involved. No one with his classification would be. Cecily, alone, has known about her own prospects. The album is the clear, and yet, only evidence left of her past. In it, the earliest photographs belong to her great grandparents. They had twin girls, Cecily's grandmother and her grandaunt. As Cecily flips the pages of the album with misgivings, she sees the page where her grandaunt Tess is standing behind a playground structure about to push Christine on a swing, the only girl among three children, triplets. It is on that page that her eyes seem glued as Walker gradually attempts to make her officially notice his presence.

He moves now to sit next to her and slowly places his hand on her shoulder. The anger and wrenching pain rising up from her chest manifest as the muscles on her collarbone swell and stiffen renouncing his soothing touch. Placing his left hand on the photo album, he successfully breaks the spell and Cecily's eyes look at him. Accustomed to spending countless waking hours in near silence, her eyes now do most of the talking. They are filled with tears that have not yet found a way to spill over into her cheeks. Instead of letting her thoughts burst out at once, even if

only to her husband, she swallows them in big gulps. Many words and feelings come in such large chunks that they can barely pass thru her throat. Her hand reaches for several pieces of paper stuck under the album. One is a medical report and the other is an ultrasound photo with two red circles drawn on it. She can see his eyes now dodging her invitation to look at them. He tries to center his attention on her instead and attempts a look of elation as if to remind her that they too will be parents, that there will be laughter and sweetness at the end.

But, first, six months from now, they will have to make a deliberate choice. There is no getting around that fact. Living in an overpopulated world with an authoritarian regime in control of sizeable portions of the continent for several decades now, Cecily has just found out that she is pregnant with twins. The Woods do not have the privilege of belonging to the coveted classification that would exempt them from dealing with such problem. They are each descendants of the last wave of immigrants that was allowed to arrive from what used to be known as Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab Near East. Their classification is based on the degree of skin pigmentation, which in their case one could say is deeply pigmented, measurement guidelines for their facial features, like the size of their nostrils, as well as DNA markers that apparently confirm their ethnic and racial background as not being of European descent.

For the Woods, a critical decision awaits them. They will have to determine which baby to keep and which to kill when they are born. I suppose killing is too harsh of a term for what the authorities say it really happens. In the case of twins, one is allowed to remain with the parents, while the other one becomes the hero, the one to undergo special treatment and cryogenic preservation for the sake of the survival of the species. At least that is how this regime has been able to keep morale up among those in lower classifications. But, suspicion abounds and rumors spread, even when their jobs must be conducted in silence at night. One time, in fact, Cecily's

co-worker, Felicity, slid a piece of paper onto her suit pocket with details about a center located not too far from their factory, where someone had seen gruesome experiments conducted on what looked to be small human beings. That was, coincidentally, the last time she saw her before their supervisors announced Felicity's transfer to their assembly plants in another province.

But now, in their bedroom, their eyes suddenly lock on each other's. Nearly telepathically, it seems, an idea crosses their mind. The boldest thing they would ever do, no doubt, is rising from the depths of their being.

"We could leave this country," Walker whispers.

"The nearest border is several days away," Cecily doubtfully admonishes.

"We could hide during the day."

"They will know because we won't be at work."

"Not if we use part of the vacation days we have being saving to pretend we will redecorate and renovate the house for the baby's sake."

Swiftly, a hint of promise arises in Cecily's face.

And so, within a few minutes, their plans are in place. Their minds are set out to escape, naively envisioning how they will hide during the daylight hours when they are supposed to be indoors, and without knowing yet what kind of excuse would allow them permission to cross the border. Yet, for all their trepidation, this newfound possibility allows them to go to bed now embracing each other. Outside, birds are chirping while huddled together and still on tree branches warming up with bits of morning sunlight. Under the layers of snow, daffodils make a brave attempt to become erect again. At the Woods, the opaque blinds are down and the lights are out. Everything seems still and quiet there but for the hearts that beat as one.

As the sun rises higher around mid-morning, a white van quietly parks in front of their home. A large green leaf logo on the side of the van is encased with the phrase: "To purify and preserve." Three men dressed in gray pants and white shirts step out holding small tanks on their backs. One of them begins to whistle cheerfully as it approaches exposed pipes by the corner of the lot. They seem to measure gauges before connecting their tanks to hoses attached to the house's plumbing. After several minutes, they disconnect the hoses and pack their equipment back in their van.

At eight o'clock, when the stars are fully visible on the cloudless night sky, the alarm goes off. Walker groans as he sits up in bed. Cecily, with eyes barely open, heads for the bathroom as the radio turns on. Walker is putting his uniform on when a scream makes his foot miss the pants sending him tripping to the floor. When he arrives running to the bathroom, wearing only his underwear, he finds Cecily standing in the shower with the curtain pulled to the side. Her eyes, in bewildered shock, are fixed on the floor. Her naked body shakes and shivers. Gentle rivers of bright blood run down her inner thighs pooling as they reach her ankles. Walker Wood quietly covers his wife in a warm towel as she stumbles unto his arms. He cautiously looks to his left and then to his right. He knows now the risks of speaking out loud.