

Freya, My Darling

A memoir by: [REDACTED]

“He broke my heart, but you broke my life.”

Delores from *Lolita*

—Vladimir Nabokov

“VLADIMIR:

We can still part, if you think it would be better.

ESTRAGON:

It's not worthwhile now.

Silence.

VLADIMIR:

No, it's not worthwhile now.

Silence.

ESTRAGON:

Well, shall we go?

VLADIMIR:

Yes, let's go.

They do not move.”

from *Waiting for Godot*

—Samuel Beckett

Chapter 1

All Good Girls Go to Heaven.

“Freya, you’re a good girl, and good girls go to Heaven,” said my mother, and my grandmother, Ellen, agreed. They were very different women, and even at a tender age of four, I innately felt they meant different things when they said “good girl” and “Heaven.” As far as plain words were concerned, they said the exact same thing, but I had to learn to distinguish what they meant.

“Freya, with your porcelain skin, large blue eyes, and platinum-blond hair, I could put you in modeling,” my mother, Vanessa, often stated. “You’re the absolute picture of a beautiful American girl; you’d be perfect. We just have to make sure you remain tiny, too,” she would

continue, her voice changing from soft to stern. “So, we don’t eat sugar in this house. Sugar is junk. We don’t allow junk into our bodies. Right?”

“Right, Mommy,” I said and put away a cookie I was holding.

My brother, Brian, who also had platinum-blond hair and blue eyes, was two years younger than me. Later that day, we sat on a sofa for a family photo. I was holding our new baby sister, Astrid. My long blond hair was tied to the back, with one longer piece framing my face — that’s how my mother staged it. Personally, I remember feeling absolute delight holding my new baby sister. I knew I had to guard her. My maternal feelings were already present and emanating from my little girl’s heart; one hand held the baby’s tender head in a gesture of protection. The light from the window illuminated the photo. In the picture, we looked like a perfect family.

“Freya, it’s time to put the baby to bed,” my mother announced to me, her eldest daughter, in a not so pleasant tone. “It’s time for her bath and bed.”

“Can I help with the bath?” I asked.

“You’re only four,” she yelled. She was always yelling at me but smiled, looking at little Astrid, and added a little softer, “I guess you can help with handing me things when I need them.”

Brian and I were dropped off at our grandparents’ house. It was my mother’s parents’ house: Ellen and Ray. Right away, my grandparents noticed something was wrong.

“Something’s up with Freya,” my mother said as if reading their thoughts. “She’s not the easiest child.”

“I wonder why,” said my grandfather, Ray, and sighed. He gave his daughter, my mother, such a look, and even when young I saw that he was disappointed. “You married a complete narcissist. I hope she’ll be okay.”

I was agitated, disassociated, and overall just trembling. He knew my father was selfish, but even he couldn’t have guessed the depth of my father’s actual depravity. Most good people, like my grandfather, want to think the best of others. Grandpa Ray took my hand. “Come, little one, let’s look at the birds out back in the pear orchard. They’re mighty busy making little nests for their babies.”

“Little nests for their babies?” I looked up with interest. Anything even slightly related to Astrid, who was a baby, got me excited. My grandfather kneeled to my height.

“Yes, little bird babies need safe homes just like little girls do. They need to feel safe so they can fly. Don’t they?”

I nodded. Still kneeling to my eye level, Ray asked, “Freya, would you like to do some magic today?”

I got even more excited and smiled. “Magic?”

“Yes, magic.”

“You know magic?”

“I know a lot of things, and magic is one of them. Would you like to learn some magic tricks?”

“Yes, Grandpa.” I nodded, laughing. My heart was filled with joy. My grandfather had all kinds of neat tricks up his sleeve, and I loved coming over. He loved me, genuinely, wholeheartedly — I felt it. But when he got up and took my hand, I pulled back.

“What is it, honey?”

“Grandpa, I’m a little scared.”

“Why are you scared, Freya?”

“Isn’t it dangerous to do magic?”

“No, Freya, this type of magic is very necessary in our world. It’s how Grandpa fixes people’s teeth. The other name for this magic is chemistry, but that’s a big word for a little girl, so let’s call it magic for now.”

“Okay, Grandpa. Let’s do some magic.”

Grandfather Ray and I walked towards the basement. He said, “Today, we’ll just do a simple magic trick to start to show you how powerful two simple ingredients can be, but also the value of time because some reactions are short-lived and must be timed well. Sounds good?”

“Yes, Grandpa. I can’t wait.”

We descended the stairs into a grey-lit space, and Ray went to a large table with all kinds of bottles, flasks, and beakers. It also had powders and liquids in various colors.

“What do you like on your French fries, Freya?”

“Ketchup.”

“And what does your brother like?”

“Vinegar.”

“So, here we have some vinegar.” He poured the vinegar into a glass container. “Now, Freya, I know you’re only four, but this is a scientific question. Are you listening?”

“Yes.” I was so fascinated with all of my grandfather’s ideas, I just opened my mouth in wonder and held my breath in excitement.

“This requires deep skills of observation. Have you been watching your grandmother, Ellen, carefully when she bakes you cakes?”

“Yes, Grandpa. She tells me to make a mixture when we’re in the kitchen.”

“She’s very independent, isn’t she, Freya?”

“Yes.”

“It’s important to be independent in life. So, this is the very important question to test, if you’ve been watching carefully. What does Grandma add to the cake to make it bake nicely?”

I thought for a minute and then counted on my fingers. “There is flour, and eggs, and sugar... Is it baking soda, Grandpa?”

Grandfather kissed the top of my head. “Yes, my little one. Very good! Baking soda is the correct answer. So, can you go and ask your grandmother to give you a little in a cup. Okay?”

“Sure, Grandpa!” I answered and ran quickly upstairs, coming back with some baking soda in a bowl.

“Okay, so now, what I want you to do is put the baking soda into the vinegar. Can you do that?”

He placed the cup with vinegar on top of a small table at the height where I could work easily. Carefully, I put the baking soda into the vinegar. Out of nowhere, it seemed, the mixture started to fizz and make bubbles. I stood back in wonder and said, “Grandpa it’s like soda water!”

Grandfather put his hands on my shoulders. “Yes, Freya, this is how you learn how everyday things you take for granted take actual magic to exist.”

I stared at the fizzing mixture. “Grandpa, I’m going to do magic for the rest of my life.”

“I hope so, Freya. I hope so. I loved being a dentist. It’s a true gift to be able to serve others through doing magic.”

“What’s that other big word for magic, Grandpa?”

“Chemistry is the other word. Chemistry.”

“Chemistry,” I repeated.

“Very good, little girl. Very good. We’ll continue to learn different things every time you come over, so you can have some skills.”

“I can do magic for the rest of my life.” I stood still in wonder, curious at how different life seemed when I was around my grandparents than with my own parents.

“Do you think it is a magical baking soda that Grandma has in her kitchen?”

He laughed. “Well, I think it’s regular baking soda, but your grandmother sure has some magic in that kitchen of hers. She’s certainly a magical woman. Isn’t she?”

“Yes, Grandpa Ray. I love her.”

Once again, it was evening at our house, and I was sitting and playing with my brother and the baby on the couch. Little Astrid was growing fast, and we were all amazed at how her face changed daily, how pliable her brain was, how many new things she seemed to learn all the time.

“Freya, it’s time to put the baby to bed,” our mother announced again. “It’s time for her bath and bed.”

“Can I help with the bath?” I asked again, as I did every day.

“Yes, you can help with handing me things when I need them,” she answered.

She got the little plastic tub ready on a table and filled it with water. She tested the temperature with her elbow, after which she slowly immersed little Astrid. The baby cried a little at first, but hearing our mother’s soft voice, the cries turned to giggles. I was delighted with the baby, looking into the bath, with my mother constantly shoving me. “You’re in the way, Freya.”

Her irritation didn't stomp out my spirit. Children are very resilient. I loved my little sister. As my grandfather said, "You'll protect that little one, won't you Freya?"

I nodded and replied, "Yes, she is my little baby sister. I will protect her, Grandpa."

And even now, when my mother wasn't being very nice to me, I couldn't help but love Astrid.

"When she gets older, I'm going to do her hair for her," I said.

My mother laughed. "You and your ideas for the future, Freya. She won't have hair for at least three years."

"That's okay, Mommy. I'll wait."

"Just worry about your own hair."

"You do my hair."

"Not any more, I won't. I need to focus on the baby now, so she will grow up pure, not like you. Dirty little girl!"

"I'm not pure?" I was devastated at hearing this. "Why? What do you mean? What did I do?"

"Nothing." She frowned. "You did nothing. If taking your daddy's love from me is nothing... You did nothing."

I started shaking. I knew what my mother was talking about. It wasn't something I liked, *and* it made my mother hate me. I had always sensed its wrongness, but I was only four. I lacked the mental capacity and the language knowledge to communicate my feelings properly. All I did was shake to express how terrible the whole thing felt to me.

Still, thanks be to God, there was a safe nest nearby where I could find respite from my parents. Both Grandfather Ray and my Grandmother Ellen taught me interesting things; they

relaxed me; they allowed me to be a child. I was always calm at their house, playing and growing.

One day, during a chemistry lesson, my grandfather told me, “Always tell the truth, Freya. There is nothing free in this life. You must earn everything, but it doesn’t mean it has to be hard earning, like some people think. I’m opening a door for you. If you’re of service to others, you’ll walk through that door and you won’t have to live any lies, like your father, unfortunately. He was a professional baseball player, so talented he made it all the way to the very top, yet he was so unacquainted with humility, he could never just get a regular job once he got injured. He was addicted to the attention. He could never let go of the fantasy of being a star, even when it was obvious he was as far from the light as possible, certainly not shining any light like a star does. Everything fell on your mother. So, always be of service, Freya. It’s how you walk through the gate. I’m giving you the simplest secret to live well. Don’t shy away from responsibility, no matter what that responsibility might be at the moment. Just because you don’t like it, it doesn’t mean you can’t learn something and come out a better person.”

I was little and thought about my grandfather and the words he said. I didn’t understand a lot of it, but I understood he was good and kind, and I loved doing chemistry with him. I don’t know how, because I was four, but I always remembered that thing about taking responsibility — it would eventually save my own life.

Later, I sat on the bed as my mother fed the baby, watching in pure delight. “Okay, Freya, now it’s time for your bath. We need to clean you, although I doubt it will do much good.”

“What do you mean? I am a good girl who goes to Heaven,” I said. “That’s what you and Grandma said.”

“I doubt that very much,” my mother replied. “For one, you try to sneak sugar all the time. I know. I know you buy candy with the dollar Grandpa gives you.”

“I like candy,” I replied.

“No candy at this house!” she yelled. “How many times do I have to say it?” She was so angry. I didn’t understand how a little sugar could make someone so furious. It took me years to realize that her rage had nothing to do with sugar. In fact, it had little to do with me at all. But I was four, and I was terrified. She continued pointing at me. “I won’t let you be fat, Freya. Do you hear me? I won’t let you embarrass me like that. Fat girls don’t get husbands, especially not professional baseball players. Do you think your daddy would’ve married me if I was fat? No, he wouldn’t have. Do you think his daddy, the principal of that huge school, would’ve given me a teaching job if I wasn’t beautiful and thin? No, he wouldn’t have. I was always thin. I always watched my figure. Thin is beautiful, and you must be thin, Freya.”

“But Aunty Hannah is beautiful, and she’s not so thin.”

“Oh, she’s disgusting. “

“I love Aunty Hannah,” I said, on the verge of tears. Aunt Hannah was my favorite aunt. She was a university professor and was always nice to me.

“Disgusting!” my mother yelled. “Do you hear me? She’s my cousin and all, but she’s disgusting. How can a woman let herself get so fat? Your father would never look at her. Never. Do you want to be disgusting?”

“No, Mommy.”

“Good. So, we don’t eat sugar, and we don’t get fat.”

“Okay, Mommy. I won’t eat candy. I will be thin and beautiful and marry a player like Daddy.”

“Baseball player, not a player. A player is a bad man,” she corrected. “You don’t want a player. A baseball player. You want a baseball player.”

“Player like Daddy...Player like Daddy...”

My mother grew more frustrated and said, “Oh, there’s no use in talking to you, Freya. You just repeat what you want to repeat. Just like with your grandpa and that stupid chemistry set he gave you for your birthday.”

“I like the chemistry set.”

“Girls aren’t good at science. I never was, but look how successful I am. I married a professional baseball player.”

“Player like Daddy...”

“Not a player... Like I said...there’s no talking to you. You’re too stupid.”

My mother took me to my bath this time and washed me. She took care of me in some ways, and I loved her for it. I loved spending time with her. Then, she put me to bed. I shared a room with my younger brother, Brian, who had also been washed and put to bed.

“Okay, goodnight, you two. Lights out,” she announced.

“Story, Mommy. Read us a story,” I asked.

“No stories tonight, Freya. Your brother is still very little. He needs more sleep. Goodnight.”

It was dark, and after an adventurous day with my grandfather doing chemistry, I fell asleep fast. But I was awakened in the middle of the night by a smell, one I knew already. A smell that meant nothing good. A horribly uncomfortable experience followed that smell. And that smell would follow me for the rest of my life. Even at four years old, I knew what it was called: it was the smell of whiskey. And sweat. And rough baseball hands. And a cracked

whisper. “Hello, my little girl.” I heard my father’s hoarse voice. “Long time no see. Daddy went on a long trip. I was trying to play baseball again, but now I’m back, back to my little one, my good little girl.”

“Daddy, is that you?” I whispered in the dark, my voice sleepy, my eyes still closed.

“Yes... Do you remember what Mommy said?”

“What, Daddy?”

“She said good girls go to Heaven. And you’re my good little girl. Right?”

“Right,” I answered.

“Do you want to go to Heaven, Freya?”

“Yes, Daddy. Mommy said all good girls go to Heaven.”

“Do you want Daddy to be in Heaven with you?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“Let me take you to Heaven, Freya, and you can take Daddy to Heaven, too.”

“I’m okay, Daddy. I don’t need to go to Heaven now. You can go to your own bed.”

“But you know our game, our little game. Remember? We take each other to Heaven.”

“Oh, Daddy...I guess...you can...” I said. I was so uncomfortable, I felt nauseated, but he was my father, and my mother, whom I loved, thought the world of him. He was her shining star. Everything she did, she did for him.

I stiffened, waiting for the unpleasantness that followed, which I knew all too well by then. My small body went rigid. The dry, calloused fingers touched my four-year-old body. I went rigid and mute, and I sort of left myself until it was over. I learned to just sort of black out and endure.

Once it was over, he said, “It’ll be our little secret, Freya. Right?”

“Yes, Daddy. I won’t tell anybody.” The muteness would stay with me for many years to come.

After my father left my bedroom, stumbling and falling over his own feet, it’d be an hour before I relaxed enough, and then I was too angry to sleep but too young to know it was anger. Too young even to know that I realized the “going to Heaven game” was wrong. In my gut, I knew it was just wrong — against all life and how it flowed forward. I knew it was wrong the way all children know certain things are wrong.

If my father had had humility, like my grandfather said, perhaps he’d never play these games with me, or perhaps the perversion was always in him. It wasn’t the only distortion of his character. He should have worked things out for himself and his family. Instead, he gambled away all the money he had earned as a professional baseball player, and, later, his wife’s money and the mortgage on the house, too. If he had had humility, he’d go to therapy and leave the fantasy of being a star player behind. He’d have picked up his cross and never touched a drink. The drinking allowed him remain in the shadows of his own past, endlessly drowning in self-pity. But such small, humble actions of not falling into your comfortable patterns required courage; courage my father did not have because those things were too small. Only big things would save him: the big gamble and big win. And when it didn’t happen, when he failed to win big, I was always there to comfort him. His little girl and our “Heaven.”

I pulled the covers over my body and my head and cried myself to sleep, as I had on many nights when my father was home.

I saw the winks. I tried to get my mother's attention, but she just gave me angry looks, tugged hard at my arm, and hissed into my ear. "This is a church, for Christ's sake, Freya. We're at your grandmother's funeral. Behave yourself."

I stood frozen in space with dread of what was coming. The winks did not escape my attention. They were signals, and they frightened me.

Later, during the wake, my mother — beautiful, thin, and perfectly put together as always — greeted all guests and distributed food.

"The house is beautiful, Vanessa," said one of our family friends. "You've outdone yourself for this wake. All these flowers and decorations. How do you do it with working and three kids? You're a marvel of a woman."

"Oh, it's nothing, really." She waved her hand but basked in the compliments. She lived for appearances.

"Really, Vanessa. You're a genius with decorating."

"Oh, if you insist. Thank you."

She handed out the beautifully organized platters of sandwiches.

I needed to go to the bathroom. "Mommy. Mommy, I have to go." I pulled at my mother's black, expensive suit. I left big, fat, grease stains on the black satin. The angry look I got was enough to realize she was not on my side.

"Freya. Are you crazy?" she hissed into my ear again, pulling it. "Don't touch me with those filthy fingers. You were eating butter cookies again. I'll show you what happens to girls who eat cookies." She pulled hard at my ear. "You will stand here in the corner and think about what you did."

"But I have to go." I was on the verge of tears.

“Maybe if you pee your pants, you’ll learn not to eat cookies.”

“I won’t eat cookies, I promise, but I have to go to the bathroom.”

“I am not taking you to the bathroom,” she hissed again.

“I’ll take her,” a man said, smiling.

“Whaaaat?” I asked in tears.

“Yes, let Uncle John take you,” Vanessa said coldly. “He’s your father’s brother. You should get to know him.”

“You will let Uncle John take me?”

“Yes.”

I walked up the stairs to the bathroom with Uncle John, feeling completely betrayed by my mother. I loved her, and she had betrayed me. I didn’t want Uncle John to take me. I had seen the winks between him and my own father. I had a sense of what was coming. It was nothing pleasant. I was nauseated at the very thought.

After I peed, Uncle John said, “Now we have to wash. Yes?” Which he did. The callused fingers of a grown-up in my vagina again. Tightness in the tummy at knowing — somehow already at that age — innately knowing it was not just wrong, but was soul-breaking. These men broke my soul. When he was done “washing me,” he put a finger on his lips and said, “Be quiet, Freya. We tell no one about this. You want to be a good girl and go to Heaven. Right?”

“Right,” I replied.

But this time, I couldn’t keep quiet. I went straight to my mother and said, “Uncle John tried to wash me after I went pee-pee. He’s not supposed to do that.”

“You are a disgusting little girl,” she hissed again. “We don’t talk like that about your uncle. We just don’t. At a funeral, too. God! You’re not very well behaved. I’m not taking you to

another family funeral ever again. You have ruined my day. My whole life, actually, but this day you've ruined for sure."

I looked at she and knew again that I was not in a presence of a friend. Still, the conflict remained because as I saw Astrid now, I remembered love. I remembered I had once been in my mother's strong, young arms, hugged and kissed and told I was, "Freya, my darling... My little darling daughter! My ray of light." I remembered this love. I would always remember it, and it pulled me right back into my family, despite all the revolting things I endured, the memory of my mother's love. That biological bond was so strong, it pulled me right back into the black hole despite the darkness; despite all other contrary evidence, it was not love at all.