

The Paint Blistered Doll

By Thomas Gibbs

Sometimes I tell my patients stories. I suppose it is an attempt to relate to them outside of medicine.

Katrina sat on the exam table in room two. This was her third pregnancy. I delivered her first baby, a healthy, Gerber-baby girl. During her second pregnancy a prolonged stay somewhere in Russia, her homeland, disrupted her continuity of care. Her husband was American and had met her while in Kiev following a hockey team in which he held an interest. When she returned the fetal ultrasound in my office revealed a boy with a lethal anomaly. He lived fifty-five minutes.

I remembered delivering and lifting the baby up to his mother. As she held him the room was cleaned, the sheets on the labor bed changed. Still numb from her epidural Katrina dressed the baby boy in a white lace baptismal gown and bonnet. His father leaned over as if being close would help him remember. Grandparents surrounded their children and grandson. I was taken back in time on the wings of intimate tragedy to a world I did not know. I have read the medical narratives of Anton Chekhov. I have attended his plays. I was not prepared for this space; a bedside he could have attended.

I stood back, a witness, as a long bearded Russian Orthodox monk in dark robes walked into the room. He anointed the baby with oil and made the sign of the cross across his body. He then began to chant the newborn's requiem. He started to light candles. I jumped forward toward the priest.

"No, no," I said, "it's impossible with the oxygen in the room; there could be an explosion."

This current pregnancy was progressing without incident.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"Fine, I am happy to see you," she said.

When she first immigrated here I struggled to understand her attempts at English. Her husband filled in. It was easier to communicate now; either her English or my ability to make it out had improved.

We proceeded with the exam. The fetal growth and heart rate were normal. The baby moved as I palpated uterine fundal height. I pulled out my measuring tape and checked off thirty-two centimeters. "Everything is measuring right on target." I said.

I began my story.

"I saw a program last night on the Nature Channel. It was called Radioactive Wolves; it documented the story of the wild retaking the contaminated zone around Chernobyl. Did you see it?" There was no answer so I continued. I talked about the scientists who were studying the wolves who have come back to abandoned land. The teams used Geiger counters to show that even the bones of the predators' prey still held radiation fifty times normal. The camera

caught wolves climbing housetops to search the valley for prey. The beaver were back and damming up the canals that had been built to drain the swamps and create collective farms. Five hundred thousand people were evacuated from the Russian breadbasket.

Eight foot monster carp circled the waters just below the sarcophagus; the cement coffin that entombed the melt down. I remembered miners were brought in to dig under reactor number four. The contamination was so high robots had to be used.

The wilding had turned the land and the river. The forest, burned rust red following the accident, was once again green. White tail hawks had taken over unattended fire towers. Peregrine falcons nested in the crannies of dilapidated factory fire escapes. I saw an apple tree that had stretched its branches through a broken farmhouse window. The blossoms hung over a paint-blistered doll on the floor of a child's room.

Some of the towns, abandoned for eternity, are visited a few hours, one day a year, so that family members could place pictures on the graves of their dead. The plots holding loved ones suffer from human neglect but are not forgotten.

Everything had to be left in place. Shoes and sweaters sat in classroom cubbies. Farm equipment rusted in the middle of overgrown meadows. Grounded ships listing to the side had broken apart where they docked.

I remembered the accident and recalled watching the satellite weather maps shown on the evening news. The world wondered where the jet stream would carry the fallout and where the contamination would rain down. We watched hoping it would not be in our direction.

I stood at the side of the table not two feet from my patient. Her husband sat in the corner on a white wicker dressing room chair. The Waverly floral curtains separating the changing area from the pink wallpapered exam room were pulled back. He leaned forward, intent, as though he was hard of hearing. Katrina watched me, but seemed removed, distant.

When I stopped she began. "My father was gone that day. They came to my house and went to the houses next door and to the houses of my friends. They told the men to come with them. They would clean up a mine and receive a hundred dollars a day."

I was shocked, knowing I had trespassed into a private terror. I remembered her husband saying they had met in Kiev. I did not know she was from the Ukraine. I wanted to say; "Stop, forgive me," but she didn't give me the chance. I realized how fortunate she was to have one healthy girl and this apparently normal boy she carried. I knew why she had suffered a loss.

She continued. "The men went off thinking about the money. They are all dead now.

Only one out of four girls from my town can have children."

She stopped her rapid fire speaking, took a breath, then struggled with the words. "We were afraid of the wind."

Thomas Gibbs' Gettysburg Review essay, "Moved On," was listed as a notable essay in the 2012 Best American Essays. "Magic Hands" appeared in the anthology, *Becoming a Doctor*, edited by Lee Gutkind of *Creative Nonfiction*. His most recent essay is published in the *Kenyon Review* online. Other essays appear in *The Florida Review*, *Brevity* and *Zone 3*, *Blood and Thunder*, *Musings on the Art of Medicine*. Other publications include creative non-fiction and poetry in *The Dos Passos Review*, *The Healing Muse*, *Stone Canoe*, *Hospital Drive*, *Etude*, *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, and others. He supports his writing as an obstetrician-gynecologist practicing in Orlando, Florida.