

~ Histories ~

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Description: Three short stories revolving around the theme of history and its teaching.

Disclaimers: The characters are mine. Any resemblance to people living or dead is unintentional and purely coincidental.

"It was the second worst day of my life. The day of my sister's funeral. The first was when we got the news that she had been killed.

The funeral was like a movie. The soldiers all around us in their flamboyant uniforms. The coffin with the flag draped over it, a shroud of what once meant freedom. My father stone-faced and unblinking in his uniform, his medals shining in the morning sun.

The gun salute made me flinch. The carefully folded flag had the weight of a tombstone when the boy-faced captain gave it to me. The officers' condolences given in gruff low tones.

Like in a movie, I just sat there, watching, unblinking, untearing, as they lowered her in that infernal hole in the ground. And all I could think was "Why? Why her? Why Kelly? Why die in some senseless war so far away?"

I was the rebel in my family. An army brat that left the life and went on to become a liberal, an activist. She was the apple of my father's eyes. She was the one that followed in his footsteps. She was the one that became everything he wanted. The dutiful daughter. The heroic soldier.

Later, after the funeral, at the house, it was even worse. Men and women I did not know coming to me, offering their condolences and too-many-times rehearsed words. I tuned them out. I did not want to hear them. They were, after all, ensconced in some office here on our ground, not fighting for their lives in some desert hell-hole.

Only the few men and women of her unit felt real. They were not many, only those that had returned because of some injury or other. The rest of them were still out there. Fighting, dying.

It took hours but finally the house was empty. Me, my father and our memories remained. We did not move. I think we were both lost in times and places far away. I don't know what he was

thinking. Maybe about his own days in some foreign battlefield.

I could only remember. I remembered the older sister that loved me, that held me in the dark, that supported me in my rebellion, even if she would never contemplate it for herself.

It was late when I finally found my way out of my memories. I don't think either my father or I could stand being in the house any longer. Neither of us was hungry but it was a good excuse.

At the small diner, we pushed the food around our plates. Our conversation was desultory. Neither of us knew what to say. We never talked, not any more. He was too strict, too set in his ways, too conservative for me. I was too rebellious, too liberal for him. Our contact, the point that our lives collided, was lost.

I don't know who suggested it when we finally gave up dinner for a lost cause. We both needed it. We needed to say our goodbyes in private, without the crowd and the ceremony.

The sun was on its way down to disappear underneath the faint line of the horizon. The cemetery was empty, almost eerie. Our steps were whispers of sorrow on the well-groomed path.

I think we saw it at the same time. The large figure, kneeling motionless on the foot of her grave. My father's growl was almost inaudible. His steps became faster as he angrily walked on toward the grave.

I followed, lengthening my strides to keep up with him. I knew who it was long before we came near enough to make out the details in the light of the falling sun. I wanted to kick myself. I should have known not to come, not to let him come.

His footsteps, loud and angry, preceded our arrival. By the time we reached the side of my sister's grave, Dawson was standing, shoulders thrown back, almost at attention. All traces of tears had been scrubbed away, dark glasses had covered the eyes I was certain wore the telltale signs of grief.

He would have shouted but I think the fresh grave stopped him, so he hissed. "What are you doing here? You are not welcome here, freak! Get away from her! Now!"

For a moment I thought Dawson would shout at him, tell him what Kelly never had the guts to

tell him. It was only a moment though. Dawson turned in perfect parade style. Her words were low, all emotion hidden under years of discipline. "My condolences for your loss, sir. Catherine."

That was it. Dawson did not dawdle, her steps large and quick as she left us. She did not even flinch or glance back, as my father's curses echoed. "Get away from here, you filthy dyke. They should have sent you to Levenworth! I never want to see you here again! You sully her memory by breathing!"

It was still fresh, you see. Dawson had been dishonourably discharged less than a week before Kelly was killed. Dishonourably discharged with my father's signature at the bottom of the paper. She didn't tell him then either.

Dawson's form had long been lost in the falling darkness. My father was still muttering curses even as he carefully arranged the flowers around the freshly upturned earth of Kelly's grave.

"Are you stupid or just blind, father?"

My words left my mouth without thinking. I was so angry, as angry as I was sad. Kelly was gone and I could not help but wonder. If my father had not been so stupid. If the army had not been so stupid. If Dawson had been there. Would Kelly still be alive?

I am not stupid, ladies and gentlemen. I know now and I knew then that Dawson was no miracle-worker, no super-hero. No-one can stop a bullet. But maybe another set of eyes would have made a difference. Maybe if Kelly had not been distracted at the whole discharge business. Maybe things would have been different. Maybe she would have seen the shooter.

Yet there was nothing worse than my father's look of incomprehension. I could not believe that he was so blind. I just turned away from him and left. There was nothing for me to say. There was nothing for me to do.

Kelly was dead. No words of mine, no revelations, would change that.

Kelly was dead and she would never feel again. She would never again hike the forest paths she loved. She would never again come back from a day of training, tired and filthy but with a gleam of accomplishment and pride in her eyes. She would never again joke with me or tease me or talk to me.

Kelly was dead and her future was gone. Kelly was dead and her past would remain hidden and buried.

I am not gay, ladies and gentlemen. I have a husband that I love and two children I adore. I am not here for me. I am here for Kelly.

Kelly is dead and nothing can change that. There will always be a part of me that is buried with her. It is not her death that brings me here, on this stage, in this rally. It is her life. The life she was not allowed to have.

The ring that Dawson gave her on their second anniversary. The ring she could not wear openly for the next four years of her life. The commitment ceremony she dreamed about but could not have, not if she wanted to keep her career. The joys, ladies and gentlemen. The joys and the sorrows that she could not share beyond the tiny circle of friends that she trusted to keep her secret.

I am here for Kelly, ladies and gentlemen. And I am here for Dawson. I do not know where she is. I never saw her again after that night. I was told she left the state but I never found out where she went or what she did.

Dawson was asked but she did not tell. Dawson kept the secret for the six years they were together. She kept the secret when they pressed and prodded her. She kept the secret when they threw her out of the army. She kept the secret even when she was denied the chance to grieve.

I am here for Kelly and Dawson, ladies and gentlemen. Two good people, two good soldiers, two brave fighters. Two people who fought for this country. Who believed in this country.

This country, ladies and gentlemen! This country, and this army, that turned its back to them. That forced them to live in secret. This country that preferred to condemn their love than celebrate their bravery and their sacrifice.

And I am here for my children. They are young but one day they will be adults. I want them to be happy. I want them to have any career they choose. I want them to be happy, ladies and gentlemen. Happy in all the ways that were denied to Kelly and Dawson and so many others that our nation chooses to forget.

I am here, ladies and gentlemen, because this is the moment. This is the moment that we can change the future. Here and now, we can build a future, a future without blind discrimination, a future without hiding, a future where the heroes of our nation will not be reviled. A future better than our past and our present!"

A few moments passed before the chirpy little tone that signified the end of the audio recording was heard. Another second passed before a hand rose.

Kendra Ericson contained her surprise, even as she gestured for Kamatsu Yiannopoulos to speak. Kamatsu almost never spoke in class, far more interested in whatever caught his fancy on the screen in front of him than her lessons.

"Miss, is this real or just a test?" Kamatsu asked, his voice hushed, as if he was afraid of the answer.

Kendra smiled at the small boy. His tiny stature and olive skin an odd mixture even in this age of no nations. "No, Kamatsu. This is a real speech."

Kamatsu did not answer her, merely shook his head as he sat back down. Kendra arched a smile at his reticence. However, now that something had managed to catch his attention, she would not let him get away.

Kendra's voice was warm. "So, Kamatsu, what did you think about the speech?"

A moment passed and then another while the little boy clearly thought about his answer. When he finally spoke, his piping voice echoed in the large classroom. "They were odd people, Miss. Makes little sense, you know, what they did. What does it matter? It's like saying that my pop should not be with my mama because he is a man and my mama is a woman. Odd people, Miss, odd people..."

Kendra smiled once more. She spoke as kindly as possible, the last thing she wanted was for Kamatsu to think her words were a censure. "Yes, Kamatsu, very good. But when would you

date it? Which war does it refer to? Where do you think it was delivered? Like all historical documents, you need to place it into context. Content can wait."

George Dabsey shifted in the uncomfortable chair. For a moment he thought about moving. Yet all the other chairs in the sanitised waiting room were the same.

His eyes moved around the room noting the people in it. He was not alone, on the contrary. The police was there and he knew there were at least two officers on the other side of the double doors at the end of the corridor. The guard detail for his wife that was now completely useless. A few hours ago, they would have made a difference. Here and now they merely stood and waited.

At the corner opposite from where he was sitting, a group of young women sat silently, their eyes darting from the doors to the policemen. For the hundredth time, George Dabsey thought about standing up and walking the few steps to their side of the room. For the hundredth time, he decided not to move.

Better to wait for the doctors to come, give them some information. After all, it would not do for him to speak out of turn. He had learnt that lesson long ago. When your wife is a Senator, you learn when to speak and when not. For now, it would be best to wait.

The sound of the double doors swinging open made George Dabsey stand up. The doctor that came through them looked distinguished as he stood tall looking around the room. His eyes alighted on George and with quick sure steps he came towards him.

"George, how are you?"

"I am fine, Dr. Nichols. How is Emma?" George asked quickly.

Dr. Nichols smiled at George and patted him on the back. "The Senator is fine. A bit shook up. She has a few bruises but nothing serious."

George sighed in relief.

"She is just getting dressed now. She should be out in a few minutes." Dr. Nichols continued.

George nodded. "Great... Great..."

Dr. Nichols patted George's back once again. "I will be going back in now, George. I just wanted to give you the good news."

George nodded again as Dr. Nichols walked away. He watched carefully as one of the women on the other side of the room stopped the doctor, asking him a hushed question. George saw clearly the doctor shake his head and shrug his shoulders, even as he moved away from the woman and her questions.

George cleared his throat careful not to attract any attention. He could see the women's agitation and the worry clear on their faces. He sighed silently. There had been no news coming for that side of the room.

Time passed slowly for George as he waited for his wife, the Senator, to come out of the ER. He could not help but notice the hushed voices of the women across the room as they discussed amongst themselves. Still George tried his best not to overhear. Some things were private, even if they took place in public space.

The doors of the ER opening silenced the group of women and made George jump out of his seat. A small smile appeared on his lips as Emma appeared flanked by two policemen, her aide at her side whispering urgently in her ear.

Emma's hug was warm and George sighed in relief as he held his wife in his arms. He had been so afraid, so very afraid. He was reluctant to let her go but he did after a few moments. Public displays of affections were not Emma's forte.

"Come on, Scott. I am dying for a hot bath and we still have an early flight tomorrow," Senator Emma Dabsey said in a loud voice to her aide, turning away from George.

As Scott replied in his hushed tones, George saw the whole group move slowly towards the exit of the ER waiting room. His eyes tracked without thought to the group of women still waiting for news.

"Emma," he called out.

His wife turned immediately and took a couple of steps towards him. Her voice was calm but her irritation showed in the narrowing of her eyes. "What is it, honey?"

George covered the distance between them quickly. His voice was low, his words careful. "Emma, what about...?"

At Emma's questioning look, George lowered his voice even more. "What about the woman, Emma? Did the doctors say anything? Shouldn't we wait?"

George watched as Emma glanced at Scott, her aide. He saw clearly when the heavy set man nodded slightly towards the group of women on the other side of the room and then shook his head nervously.

Emma's reply came in a whisper. "Not now, George."

George Dabsey cocked his head questioningly. "Emma, she saved your life. I for one would like to know if she's alive," he said pointedly.

Emma gripped his hand quickly, smashing his fingers between her own. "This is neither the time nor the place, George," she hissed warningly.

George looked at Emma questioningly once more. "Emma," he lowly questioned his wife's decision.

Emma's lips pursed and she shook her head slightly. "There is nothing I can do, George. And now with that bill coming in and all the furore..."

George blinked once and then twice. Slowly he turned a bit until he could look at the group of women on the other side of the room. Even more slowly he turned and looked at his wife and then at her aide, who was standing anxiously a few steps away.

George Dabsey shook his head. "Emma," he started, his voice gentle but steady. "This isn't about politics. She saved your life!"

Emma's sigh was sad. She leaned in quickly, speaking to George in a whisper. "George! This isn't the place! And I... I cannot get involved with something like this. Not after that business with Nancy."

George took a step away from Emma. He shook his head in denial. Sometimes he could not recognise the woman he fell in love with in the Senator whose life he shared. Nancy's outing a bare few weeks before had certainly been a scandal.

But in his mind that had nothing to do with now. This was not politics. This was life. And the woman whose name he did not know had saved his wife's life.

George did not have the chance to say anything as a voice sounded low and diffident behind him.

"Excuse me."

George turned quickly to look at the intruder but not before he saw steel entering his wife's eyes.

The tall woman that stood in front of him smiled at him nervously when he looked at her. George kept his voice calm and friendly. "Can I help you?"

The tall woman cleared her throat nervously. "I was wondering, sir, ma'am," the woman hesitated for a moment before continuing in a rush. "I was wondering if you are the one that came in with Matty. The nurse told us that someone famous came in with her."

The woman's slight nod made George glance at the group of women on the other side of the room watching them avidly.

George bit his lip as he turned carefully towards his wife. Emma's voice was cold. "I am sorry, Miss, I don't know anyone named...Matty. If you would excuse us..."

George saw clearly the disappointment in the woman's eyes.

Her words were quick and apologetic. "I am sorry, Ma'am. It's just that... there have been no

news and I hoped... ah... anyway. I am sorry."

George watched aghast as his wife nodded coolly at the woman and immediately turned away, motioning for Scott to lead the way. George stood, his eyes darting between his swiftly departing wife and the tall woman walking towards her friends, shoulders slumped.

"What did they say, Joanna?"

The loud worried voice made George blink. At the corner of his vision, he could see Emma stopping in mid-step and whirling around, her eyes wide. The name made his blood run cold and a shiver pass through him.

George could hear the raspy drowned voice clearly in his mind as the words had been clear a few hours before. In his mind's eye he could see as if it were right now in front of him, the young face, lips ruby with the blood bubbling with each breath. The pale hands grasping Emma's limply. "Please... tell Joanna... I love 'er."

George looked at Emma, their gazes meeting, his beseeching, hers shuttered. Emma's nod at George was clearer than any verbal command. George could tell clearly what his wife wanted. She wanted him to move, she wanted to leave, she did not want to get involved.

For the first time since his marriage George went against his wife's express wishes. He did not think about it, he did not debate it internally. He just did it.

His steps were quick as he caught up with the tall woman, Joanna, just as she was joining her friends. The sound of his running steps must have alerted the woman to his approach for she turned towards him questioningly.

George stopped in front of Joanna. His voice was low, his words intended for her ears only. "She said she loved you," he whispered urgently.

George saw Joanna's mouth opening in a silent oh even as tears appeared in her eyes. He bit his lip nervously even he heard Emma's urgent call for him. "George!"

George Dabsey looked at Joanna. "I am sorry," he mouthed before he turned away.

George's steps were quick as he walked towards his wife and her entourage. He did not meet Emma's enraged eyes for more than a moment, he certainly did not care to look at the disappointment and sourness in Scott's face.

Shoulders slumped, George Dabsey followed his wife out of the ER waiting room.

"CUT!" The voice boomed in the brightly lit room. Everyone seemed to move at the same time as some shook their heads and others looked questioningly towards the ceiling.

The disembodied voice boomed once more. "That was great everyone. Kemal, you did Dabsey superbly. Nora cut the set!"

In the blink of an eye, the hospital waiting room disappeared, leaving everyone standing in a bare blue coloured room.

Wynona Schmidt clapped answering the smiles of her students. It had gone well, very well in fact. Immediately she turned towards the short boy playing George Dabsey.

"Kemal, that was superb," Wynona said warmly, receiving a shy smile in reply.

"How did I do, Miss?" Polina asked anxiously.

Wynona turned to look at the girl playing Emma Dabsey. Her voice was gentle. "You did very well, Pol."

As the teenagers gathered around her, Wynona smiled proudly at all of them. "All of you did excellently. You made this ancient play come to life! Amazing work, everyone! I can tell you have been practicing, the accents, the mannerisms, they were all perfect! You really caught the spirit of the times!"

As the young actors smiled and whooped in joy, Wynona shared a small smile with Alexevna Darkhorse. She nodded at the girl in congratulations. Alexevna nodded back, a wide smile on her lips.

Wynona could feel the girl's joy as her own. She had taken on Joanna's role like a fish to the water, in spite of not having been casted until a couple of days ago. Wynona mentally patted herself in the back. Her gut feeling that the otherwise reserved student would do great even as a last minute substitution to the school production had borne out.

This is it. The final time. The last hurrah. I stand tall, my hands strong on my weapons, my head high. We are the last of the resistance. The remnant of the remnant. As I have done all these years, I continue to send out my words, the running commentary of our lives to the world. Maybe there is someone there still, listening. If you are, may you find freedom one day. Because we found ours.

I turn my head just a little to look at Dusty next to me. Her face is pale from blood loss and anyone else in her place would be long dead. I can smell the coppery blood still seeping from her wounds. We have been hunted down for months. And now we are surrounded. I can hear them coming, their armoured cars, their black choppers.

The others are scattered around this building, our last bastion. I have bid them goodbye already. I could be somewhere in this building with them. But my heart's place is here. On the entrance. I think I can see the shadows of their soldiers coming across the deserted streets.

Let them come. We are ready. Dusty's grip is strong in spite of the pain and the loss of blood. Her eyes meet mine and my heart clenches. Even now, in pain, just a little while away from death, she looks at me and smiles. I have to smile back. I know what she is thinking for I am thinking the same.

We fought, we fought well and long. We won many battles, lost friends, killed enemies. And we lost the war. But somewhere, somewhere amidst the running and fighting, amidst pain and loss, we found something, something important.

We found freedom...and each other. We will die before the new day dawns but we will die free. Free and together. That they can't take away from us. I squeeze her hand and she squeezes back.

The choppers' blades sound somewhere above us and the slinking shadows of the soldiers can be seen just around the corner. I hear the sound of her pistols as she draws them forth and I ready my machine-gun.

The first bullet hits the doorframe just beyond my shoulder. I have time only for a final smile Dusty's way. My finger squeezes the trigger and I can see one, two of them falling to the ground.

Dusty appears in front of me, tall and proud. Her body convulses as she is riddled with rounds meant for me. She falls at my feet and I hear the hollow clicking as I empty my magazine at them. Another one falls.

The pain is great...

I see the stars against the blackness of night. It's closing in.

I am done. Last breath... free...

The lights turned on slowly, the images fading into the ether.

"Sir? Sir?"

Johan Ibrahim smiled at the boy, almost a young man, gently. His eagerness to speak was obvious and Johan could only smile. "Yes, Doda?"

Doda Karenin smiled brightly as he took a deep breath to speak. "Why, sir?"

Johan chuckled. "Why what, Doda?"

Doda looked around his classmates before speaking, his voice breaking from his newfound tenor

to a child's alto only a word in. "Why would this be entertainment, sir? It's bleak and sad. What's fun about it?"

Johan nodded slowly, his eyes roaming the students in front of him. His voice was deep but gentle as he watered the seeds of discussion. His pleasure was palpable. He had been certain that this would get the discussion going.

"This is a great question, Doda. History is more than dates and events, everyone. At your level, you need to ask the whys. Why was this entertainment? Why did people watch it? What did they get out of it? Most importantly, what does it tell us about their society? What was important to them? What did they hope to achieve? What made them laugh and what made them cry? And is this merely entertainment? Or something more?"

Eager eyes watched Johan as he walked at the front of the small auditorium. Johan could not help the brightness of his eyes or the enthusiasm in his voice. He loved teaching at this level.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Jonathan?" Professor Theodor Karenin, Doda for his friends, gave Jonathan Mendez permission to speak.

"I think I am in the wrong course," the young man admitted, embarrassment colouring his face.

Doda chuckled at Jonathan's perceived embarrassment. "I would think not, Jonathan. This is a compulsory course for everyone."

The question shone brightly in Jonathan's face and Doda could see similar looks in other faces in his large class. Doda spared a smile at young Jonathan, for all his bravado and fumbling ways the student had given him the perfect opening and for that Doda was grateful.

Doda spoke in full voice, the amplifiers around the podium bringing his words to every ear in the vast lecture hall that held almost ten thousand students.

"A lot of you are wondering what the point of this sequence was. And I know that even more of you are wondering why this course is compulsory and why you have to take it."

Doda could hear the shuffling of feet and bodies as students became slightly more interested in what he had to say. It was always the same. All the enthusiasm that students had in their chosen classes was equalled by their disinterest in the compulsory ones.

Still he would do his best with this lot as he had done with their predecessors for years. Most of them would only understand years later, if ever, why this class was important.

Doda's voice filled the lecture hall once more. "This was a sequence of memories, as most of you already know. My memories to be exact. This was merely a selection intended to illustrate a point. You just watched a hasty summary of the moments that brought me here. The moments, the events that led me to become a historian."

Doda paused, feeling thousands of eyes concentrating on him. When he continued, he hardened his voice creating the aural cue that told the students that this was important. "Most of you have similar memories whether you recall them or not. In the simplest of terms, history is based on historians. And it is too easy to concentrate on the great academics that you read and research now and forget the most important historians of all."

Doda paused for a fraction of a second, enough to make his next statement appear even more important to the students. "The educators! The teachers that guided all of you here, whether consciously or not. And that is the point of this course. Whether you are considering a career in education or not, this course will teach you the basics of classroom teaching."

Doda smiled inwardly at the groans and moans from thousands of throats. Years ago he had moaned and groaned too, when Professor Ingibi had explained the purpose of a similar course. They would learn, just like he had learned, even if they never used their learning after they graduated.

The End

Thanks for reading. Any comments, good or bad, are welcome at rh.black@hotmail.co.uk ~RB.

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