

Josepha Gutelius

Vibrational Flu

Take your time. God's not going anywhere.

Nana smiles with that weak wakefulness she has when she is drifting off. Her mouth, her purple lace blouse, the strands of akoya pearls on her chest, her Adam's apple don't move because she's no longer here to move them. Her rolled-up eyes don't blink. She doesn't seem to be breathing. The man turns his head away as if embarrassed.

This is devil's work, he says.

Now it is up to me to ask the man if he would like some tea. We are in the sunny room we call the salon where every corner flickers with cobwebs. The stone floor is so filthy it rings like glass under the wheels of the tea caddy I nudge toward the man. May refuses to clean the salon. The room is contaminated, she says. Dead people are rotting in it. But also I think this is the real reason May refuses to clean the salon: she's annoyed that Nana won't let her serve the tea to Nana's clients. May can't help herself, she'll giggle and spill the tea and Nana says May has a silly habit of gawking at Nana's visitors.

I'm trained to serve tea to Nana's women, to be silent and grave. This is the first man I've seen with Nana. As unhappiness is measured, he's on par with Nana's usual visitors, which are always women. Some ask Nana for love potion, and Nana will shoo them off to Chinatown, where there are excellent remedies, she says.

The women come weepy for hope and Nana gives them that in heaps. But men don't come to Nana. Why? I don't know, I've never thought about it until now. May says that men don't have feelings except for pure love of themselves. I don't know if men have feelings but I'm always pleased I can give Nana's visitors a little comfort. I pour tea in a Meissen cup and I play the mime, I offer sugared ginger piled in the center of a hand-painted rose plate. The ginger burns your mouth but the sugar will dilute the burn with an ah feeling after you wash it down with Lady Grey. I urge the man -- with a silent nod and a sweep of my hand -- to eat a ginger candy to distract him from the commotion of Michael's wings. Archangel Michael, who can shrink to the size of a pin and bring babies safely into the world or expand to balance the earth's sacks of disease and tragedy on his thumb. Michael is the one Nana is listening to, and she will repeat what he tells her.

The girl was sixteen, out on a walk, and disappeared. The father begins describing her ...

Something's off about the man's story, even I can sense it. She was sixteen, left home, and disappeared... But something's off, he's vague on details. Time, for instance, the girl left home at fiveish -- or maybe much later, after doing her homework. He doesn't remember, he wasn't looking at a clock. She told her parents she was spending the night with a friend. The father knows the friend, comes from a fine family.

It's all too very general. What kind of music did she like, did she have tattoos or a boyfriend, I would like to ask the man but I don't dare distract Nana. I've been trained to be silent. One swoosh of Michael's wings and Nana holds her palms up. Her eyelids slowly slide shut. She's tuning out the muck, as she calls it.

The man sags into his black suit. His faith is shaken, he says, it's taken everything he has to come to Nana, he's had to tear himself away from Christ, but he must. Perhaps it is God's will that I turn to the devil, he says.

He apologizes to me, You're really too little to be hearing this.

The man can't stop talking even while Nana makes significant whispering sounds that should have silenced him. It was a botched investigation, he says, a coverup or merely sloppiness.

Look, he says, pointing to the sheets of police reports on his lap, they call her missing.

The girl's disappearance was nothing, it rated a small notice in the papers, nothing sensational, as if a missing child was not epic but just a natural course of events. As if probable violence against his child were perfectly acceptable. Please, tell me what you know, he says to Nana, I would rather that, than all the weirdo stuff. He'll bring Nana's description of the murderer to the police to reopen the investigation. He's convinced this will happen with Nana's help.

At last the man shuts his mouth on a ginger candy.

She's happy, Nana says. She wants your attention, wave to her.

Nana's voice is low, with a knowing confidence. She tells the father he must hurry, he must shake out the Evil Whisperers that will rot him. He needs to clear his attractor pattern.

Eat, enjoy a glass of wine, toast your daughter's freedom, let her go.

The man doesn't cry but his face twitches with what Nana calls the vibrational flu. Maybe she can't tell him what she really sees, it's unspeakable. I know how Nana's voice can get squeaky when she's trying not to say something.

The girl has a new body. Her new feet touch a coarse rug, faded pink. Nana can give him details, images, the coarse rug adds a touch of authenticity to Nana's account of the life beyond.

She says the father must clear his karmic band. Only then will he resonate with his daughter's choice to be free. I think it is a terrible thing to say to a father. I may dare to whisper a criticism like that to Nana's spirit but not to her face. And my honesty probably won't make me any happier.

Come back and I will tell you more, when you're prepared to clear your attractor pattern, Nana says, and she pops to a stand, leading him out of the salon, her hand on his back, nudging him into the elevator. There's commotion in his aura, his personal housing, it looks like wind, she says, the Evil Whisperers whipping up a frenzy around the father.

Then they're gone, Nana and the weeping man. I don't hear the angels' wind but a shallow sound -- the spunky pigeon nibbling for grub on the windowsill. I listen for the clanking and groaning of the little elevator in the hall. I'm not allowed to fool around with the elevator, it's not a toy. May will never use the elevator although it was installed for her, to spare her the exhaustion of going up and down so many stairs. May says it wheezes and coughs something awful, a death trap.

The tall windows show the murky wall of the brownstone across the street. I'm nibbling on a ginger candy. I can't go to the elevator. Not even to look.

I tried that once. I pressed the button and surprised Nana when the door sucked open.

But I did that only once, and never again.

I never want to see that look on her face again.

That afternoon I make the mistake of staying too long in the salon.

The police reports the man clutched in his hand are left to waste on the table whose lions' paws are used to hold up a vase of sweet lilacs.

I peek at the police reports and now I can see just how off the man's story is.

It surprises me that he would leave them with Nana.

It occurs to me he may have mistaken her for a detective, or maybe someone told him she could pull some strings to reopen the investigation. Maybe someone directed him to Nana with the words, This woman has a lot of power. That someone, as I imagine, didn't make it clear just what kind of power Nana has.

I get up from my chair and sit down on the chair the man sat on and I peek at the police reports, more than peek, to be honest ... and an unreal heat passes through my butt and I jump up like I'm scorched. Yes indeed, those skeletal, burnt imps prance around me and I take the stairs three flights up in search of May who is on the fourth floor, ironing.

May has a trickle of a smile, speaks like she knows everything.

May says to me, He looked expensive; he looked like a man in an advertisement.

I make the mistake of wondering out loud: when did Nana start training her eyes to replace what they see with something else, with something no one else sees.

The people who come to her, all those unhappy ladies: the more they believe her, the better Nana gets at describing the invisible.

The steam from the iron hisses, expanding, floating around May's flushed face, her eyes squinting. May mutters into the ironing board, I've told your granny you shouldn't be in there listening to those people.

There's something else I have to say -- not to May -- but I want to try it out on May first. Then I will say it to Nana and I don't know what will happen, I don't know if she will tell me what I want to hear or only

what she can bear to tell me. It was a tap-on-the-shoulder intuition I had in the salon, but I give May a full-blown image: I saw my parents' bodies in a large green metal container. I saw a row of buildings close together, like in an alley. I saw the murderer's face. I saw him run out of the alley and stop to light a cigarette after he threw my mom's and dad's bodies in a dumpster.

May stops ironing and turns down the piano music on the radio. Don't you ever, ever, repeat that, she says. You must promise me, never repeat that. That's nasty stuff. You're imagining things.

I've often imagined my parents dead, drifting up to the ceiling in the salon, snarled in the cobwebs that May refuses to sweep away. But I much prefer Nana's gift of imagery. She says my parents are gone in search of happiness, or adventure, but not dead, they're just young and foolish, and I shouldn't crowd my heart with worries about them.

A breeze comes through the open windows and stirs up the gray grit in the air around May's iron. The grit settles over everything, we live in the filthiest part of the city. There's so much I can't touch without getting my hands dirty -- the laundry room's sticky mahogany paneling, the sooty windowsills. I lay a towel down on the windowsill so I can sit and dangle my legs and watch the man leaving our house.

I see his shadow on the sidewalk: like a shaggy animal; I see, or imagine seeing. I see inside-out, side by side.

I turn away, bored with the game. And that's when I probably missed seeing the man when he actually did leave through the front door.

For days I would see the red light above the elevator and I'd believe he was still in there, left hanging, stuck: the death trap.

Nana shows herself at dinner. It's a hot evening and Nana is sweating, her sharp cheeks sheer with silvery moistness. Something prevents her from talking. Her grave silence makes the dining room more immense than it really is. I talk and talk -- a typical annoying chatterbox kid. But to me, I am not annoying, I'm a bird flying around the gray immensity in search of a branch to land on. Then something happens, a change. I suppose she is having what she calls a "lapse" -- like when she eats too much or too little, sleeps too much or too little, and Nana sees repulsive, burnt creatures, shriveled up, black, skeletal. These imps are full of wiles (Nana has told me), they pounce on your heart and -- and well, you lapse.

Certainly strange things do happen around Nana, which she might explain to me or might not. She's awfully hyper this evening, I have to say.

I understand, I sort of understand, that her hand is hot. Her hand is fluttering in the air. And she, or that sound in the immense dining room -- someone mumbling *my hands are burning* or maybe the girl's spirit or the father's spirit is mumbling *I'm burning*. (Or *she's burning* -- I have no idea.)

I'm making this up. Nana might just be cooling herself off by fanning her face with her hand. It could be that. (I agree it is very hot.) I say to Nana, It's like hell. I don't know what possesses me to say anything. I ask Nana if she is having the vibrational flu.

That look on her face. But perhaps that look has nothing to do with what I said. It's not as if I do stop breathing and drop dead. It's not as if Nana goes on being hyper all evening.

In fact, the dinner goes on as usual.

May serves the dinner less expertly than I serve tea. A plop of beet soup drains blood on the tablecloth.

I see myself serving dinner. I imitate the maids in movies, not the wisecracking, fun maids, but the ones who slip in and out of elegant rooms, soundless, floating. As usual, my time alone with Nana passes much too quickly.

Nana folds her napkin and rolls it back inside the napkin ring. She uses the same napkin for exactly a week, twenty-one meals, the same soiled napkin, which May will have to soak in bleach to get out the stains. Nana wants to be thrifty, but what happens, the bleach turns the white damask yellow, and then May has to throw out the whole napkin, or use it as a rag for polishing the silver or my school shoes. But May never tells Nana that her thriftiness is actually very costly and a waste of effort.

Nana excuses herself, I'm not feeling well, she says, and she leaves me alone in the dining room before May comes to serve the desert.

It's one of those times when I feel lost, left hanging. Maybe it is now I start to doubt Nana. But then I devour May's chocolate pudding and of course everything is perfect.

All of this is important to remember. I still have a summer's worth of memories before Nana drops dead while I'm away at boarding school. This could easily happen: these imps stalking the air are full of wiles, waiting to pounce on any old heart and stop it dead. My two biggest fears: that she will die and I won't remember enough to know the difference between made-up and real.

Will I ever see the man again? I go to bed that night praying that I will. Then I could tell May that I know for certain men have feelings. I would watch him more carefully next time he comes, I also vow to stop showing off to May and to shut up about my parents being murdered. Prayers are answered in mysterious ways, as Nana has so often assured me. And, if my memory serves me correctly (the present tense of this recollection), there is a coda to this story. This is how I remember it: a woman limping into the salon with a

cane, fuzzy-skulled, enormously fat. She introduces herself as the mother of the murdered girl. I sniff the air as she speaks. Can words smell? Smells are invisible, but Nana sees them. They burst through all the capillaries of God's body and bleed out stories, she says. Some days, God's words are doled meagerly and then the space between words doesn't have a smell. With Nana, smell or no smell, the news is good by the time her visitors leave the salon. But if sad and crazy has a smell, they are of this woman who already shows signs of having the vibrational flu.

The woman says to Nana, I've come to thank you on behalf of my husband. It was due to my urging that he humbled himself to come to you...

Nana says, No problem.

My husband thinks you do the devil's work, the woman says.

From one bad second to another, Nana gives me a wishing glance, but I have no tea to serve because May forgot to boil the water. Burning with shame (I will explain why in a few minutes) I can make myself useful only by pretending I'm invisible. Thus I'm crammed into the velvet child's chair to which my recent growth spurt can't adapt. I am growing for this very purpose: soon I'll be too big for the imps to scavenge. But that's another story.

The woman says, The police. They ignore us. As if we're cranks. It's been hellish like that for a long time.

Please stop, Nana exclaims and makes a motion with her hand like she's pulling the angels down from the air. (I'm so excited, I know I won't sleep tonight.) Your daughter hasn't been sixteen for many years, Nana says. She's safe and happy, I can assure you. But wishing her dead is not a harmless foible.

But, but, the woman stammers. The jelly body in the chair is going no-yes: a full-bodied convulsion from the vibrational flu. Me, I'm blown away, shocked by Nana's casual all-knowingness. And I doubt for a minute that the woman with the moist eyes and trembling blubber gives a rat's ass about her daughter. I shouldn't say that: it's the sneaky imps coming around to prick my heart again and bleed out of me that cruel joy I usually keep hidden away. But I've aged a few years in my mind by now, and the imps have found me, exposed me. Maybe I wasn't giggling as loudly as I thought I was. But the woman, whose chins are quivering, drool-flecked, has eyes sharp like an animal's. The police reports, I saw myself, were dated years ago -- do I really dare to say this? So obviously the daughter can't be sixteen anymore. And the point is, the crazy lady wishes her daughter dead for the same reason I wish my parents dead.

The woman says, We don't know how to contact her. We've tried. We've tried but she must have changed her name, we don't know where she lives. Now we're reduced to trying your hocus-pocus.

Why would you wish a loved one dead? Nana asks, but she is looking at me, and I look away, with the most awful shame, remembering I won't have Nana for much longer. Already the big brownstone is being emptied out. The second floor is full of boxes labeled for my boarding school. My future: I won't have May to cook for me, I will live on nothing but crackers and freeze-dried soup.

God help me, is she safe? the woman asks.

Absolutely, Nana says.

The woman says, It's worse, knowing she's alive, and --

Knowing she's happy without you? Nana says.

Yes! I know it's selfish -- the woman says.

Indeed! says Nana.

Thank you, says the woman. It's a relief to say it to someone: yes, I'd prefer her dead.

Of course, Nana says, I understand. But even if you found her, the outcome wouldn't be happy for any of you. She doesn't want to be found.

I feel terrible, the woman says.

No, no, says Nana. Don't. Don't feel terrible. You've lost a loved one and you deserve to mourn her in any way you wish. So, on a positive note, do I have your permission to do the devil's bidding, as your husband would say? I will tell you how your daughter died, when and how. Or better yet -- and at this, Nana gives me a smile I will never forget -- she says to the woman, why don't you ask my eight-year-old granddaughter to describe anything you want to hear. She will tell you in great detail. She'll convince you that it's true....