

Miscarriage

Karin Anderson England

WHEN AUNT IONA DIED IN AUGUST, I was glad I didn't have to visit the nursing home anymore. Iona was my great-aunt, my long-dead Grandma's sister. I loved her, of course, but when I heard she'd died that hot summer night, I was relieved. It was the nursing home that I didn't like, not Iona. I had stronger feelings for Iona than for Grandma, since Grandma died when I was eight and I remembered her less. Younger than Grandma and always prettier, Iona was more concerned about growing old and shapeless, gray and slow. When she became mobile after her hip replacement, she walked with her cane to the nursing home beauty parlor once a week to have her bright orange hair recolored or set.

I once told my husband, Philip, that Iona was the kind of old person I wanted to be, if I got old. She stayed alive as long as she was alive. But, especially after I had miscarried a three-month pregnancy in early summer, the nursing home kept reminding me that death was after all of us.

The nursing home was actually a nice place: they took good care of Iona, and it was clean and had big windows. But the residents watched, sometimes called out to me, as I passed them in the halls. For days after my visits, images flashed in my mind of dried-up people, withered like the lawns and gardens in the record-breaking summer drought. My second-grade teacher, Mrs. Chapman, sat in the same chair every day, her once-imposing breasts hanging like shriveled ropes to her lap. I was glad she remembered nothing, glad her

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sticky eyes no longer recognized me or any other citizens of the community she had once drilled in spelling, arithmetic, and junior calisthenics. She had been my mother's teacher, too.

Once I had walked into the nursing home lobby to find Clive Johnson waiting for anyone who came through the doors. He strained against the white canvas bodice that kept him upright in his wheelchair and moaned. He was drooling, and his pants were wet. He had been stake president for almost twenty years. I was old enough to remember his last ten.

"Help me," he growled. "Help me out of this."

"I can't," I said.

"What?" He was almost deaf.

"I can't untie this!" I yelled. "You'll fall and hurt yourself!"

He stared from sunken sockets.

"What the hell you talking about? Can't you see when a man needs help? It's tied in the back. Get around behind me."

I backed away. "It's for your own good, President Johnson. You might fall!"

"Help me with this!"

"It's okay! I'll have a nurse come help you with some dry pants."

I turned and walked, trying to look unhurried, but quickened as I realized he was trailing me like an insistent child.

"Help me! Help! Help!"

I heard him from Iona's room, coaxing the wheelchair down the hallway with his lower legs. "Help me, lady! Come back and help me out of this!"

Iona didn't seem to notice. Maybe her hearing was failing more than I'd thought. I didn't stay long that day, but I did wait an extra fifteen minutes until one of the harried aides had time to wheel the old man to the TV room.

Two weeks after the funeral, relieved as I was to have no more ties to the nursing home, I thought of Vonda, Iona's roommate—wondered if she'd faded away with Iona gone and me, their most frequent visitor, no longer coming back.

So I returned, after all, and found Vonda sitting quietly in her darkened room. A fetal, balding woman, a century old, was breathing in Iona's old bed.

"I watch the sun rise," Vonda informed me as the vapors cleared from her countenance. "The sun comes back up. In the mornings."

"You get up so early?"

"I'm first. The lady comes." She gestured at her dress with arthritic fingers, her thickened nails opaque with age. I remembered that Vonda's room was first on the wake-up route. The morning aides helped

her dress and then deposited her in the giant chair at the east lobby windows until breakfast. Mornings were coming later with the Indian summer now, so Vonda would see the sunrise. I smiled as I pictured Vonda alone, morning after morning, watching the sun rise over the Wasatch peaks.

I took her outside under a tree since it was still hot, even in September. Leaves were brittle on the edges, and some of the mountain groves above us looked brownish, as if they might die before real autumn could paint them. Vonda breathed deep, glad for the fresh air, and I remembered a conversation we'd all had under this same tree before Iona died.

"You'll get over it," Iona had said, just like everyone else. "You'll have another baby."

"More than one," Vonda snipped, more lucid then. "Born and lost. Don't worry."

I was irritable, tired of the subject. All I really felt was relief at being healthy again.

"I know," I answered. "I'm over it already. We'll just try again."

"You will. Plenty of times," Iona smirked, her orange hair bobbing a little. "Phil will see to that."

"You'll have more than you think you want, once you get going." Vonda looked up at me from between bent shoulders. "I had ten. But I lost three. Two before they was born, but not much. One when she was barely two years old."

"I know, Vonda. Your little girl that drowned."

"Anne. My only girl, then. We always sang a song to her. 'Anne, Anne, Little lamb . . .' I told Henry not to dam that ditch till I could get my hands free. I was making bread, like every Thursday. He could of sent the water on down through the garden first, but he couldn't do it different from regular. Next thing I know everybody's shouting out at the headgate. I didn't go out. I knew what the matter was. They brought her in . . ."

I'd heard it before, in almost the same words. Like an incantation, "Anne, Anne . . ." It was sad, but I didn't see the point in dwelling on it sixty years after. Vonda was ninety. Anne would have been an old wrinkled woman by now, too, older than the other daughters who came in once a month from Mount Pleasant to visit their mother. This way, at least, Anne will always be a rosy child, a little lamb.

Philip and I went with my parents to Iona's funeral in St. George. It was a nice drive; Phil and I had forgotten that five hours in a car could be anything but misery. Our trip across the Nevada desert to visit his brother last spring had been sixteen hours of hell in a Volkswagen. Riding to St. George in Mom and Dad's Buick felt

decadent—no rattles, no big bumps. The air conditioning made the outside desert seem benign as a mirage.

But when we stepped outside in St. George, 107-degree heat engulfed us. I was surprised at the number of people in the lobby and the Relief Society room when we got to the church. Iona didn't have much real family left, but the locals had known her well and thought enough of her to come out in the heat to pay their respects. Uncle LeRoy, her husband, died thirty years ago. People speculated that maybe LeRoy Junior would come home again to visit after his father died, but he never did. Iona told me once that she didn't expect him ever to come back to the Church. But she'd thought he'd had enough rearing to come back and see his mother before she died.

"He was a good boy," she told me once, defensive. "His daddy just couldn't make sense of him. There's more than one way to lose a baby, you know."

Had he come to the funeral, LeRoy would have been shocked to see his mother against the casket's satin cushions. She hadn't weighed more than a hundred pounds her whole life, and the box she lay in now could have pillowed two of her. At the viewing, I turned away after only a glance. Only the orange-coifed hair told me it was Iona. Her face, sedimented with mortician's makeup, held no trace of the character I wanted to remember. Maybe that's why I didn't cry—it seemed we had gathered to mourn a stranger.

In the old family photograph on the reception table, the same one Iona had hung on the wall over her bed at the nursing home, she looked more familiar. Framed in heavy gold gilt, Iona and Uncle LeRoy stood decorously behind their two seated children. LeRoy Junior looked sweet and naive at ten years old. I wondered what he looked like now. He'd sent some letters, but never pictures. He'd never married. Rose's face was blurry—she'd turned to say something to her brother at just the wrong instant—but everyone said she was beautiful, of course. She was a year older than LeRoy. Her hair was long, yellow, thick, and her pleated white dress immaculate. She died at thirty of the weak heart that had kept her homebound for years. When I was a child, I had thought thirty was old; but now, with that same age only five years away, my own heart seized in revelation. Rose and LeRoy were Iona's only children, because a bad delivery with the boy had left her unable to bear others.

"Brothers and sisters," my father said from the pulpit after we had all gathered in the chapel, "there are not many of us here who could represent the faith and determination of our pioneer heritage like Iona Koenig did."

I sat back, and Phil leaned forward, both of us breathing heavily in the sweaty air, recognizing Dad's sermon voice.

"Her generation is almost past," Dad continued, "and with its passing we break the ties of personal contact with the men and women who settled this desert and, according to prophecy, made it blossom as the rose. Iona's grandparents, whom she knew personally throughout her childhood, crossed the plains from Illinois, escaping hideous persecution and taming a wild land. The spirit that conquered the Virgin River lived on in Iona Koenig. The integrity that converted the wild Indians of this territory was passed directly by example to my Aunt Iona. We, in this generation, can only speculate—"

"Don't be so dramatic," Iona would have interrupted had she been able, but she couldn't, closed in a trunk and smothered with flowers that would wilt as soon as they met the furnace outside. So we listened. I knew what Dad was going to say before he said it: "If only our own children and grandchildren can look back to us with the reverence that we give our ancestors . . ." As if any of us will ever have grandchildren.

The heat at the cemetery nearly killed us. The dry wind off the red cliffs rattled the dead grass around the gravestones. Brown flowers baked on the more recent mounds. I wanted to point it all out to Iona, support for my half of an ongoing dispute about Armageddon.

"Greenhouse effect," I whispered to the coffin, after the dedication. "Can you feel this heat? Highest temperatures in seventy-five years."

"Well, they probably thought it was the end seventy-five years ago, too," she would have answered.

We'd had a similar discussion a few weeks earlier. "Don't be silly," she had snorted after the evening news. "Dan Rather is not God. You think it ain't been hot before? People said the dust bowl was the end of the world. It's still spinning, ain't it?"

"There weren't holes in the ozone then," I argued. "Icebergs weren't melting."

"How much sea water you seen at your doorstep?" Iona demanded.

Vonda glared at me as if I were a ridiculous child. "You ain't outlived a real war yet, either. We been through two big wars and a pack of little arguments. Drought, floods, wars, dying, they come around. They get over with. Things go on."

"They weren't nuclear," I reminded them. "We get a war now and nothing's gonna go on."

"Honey," Iona said, "you've got to stop fretting over that baby."

"What has this got to do with a baby? It wasn't even a baby! It was only a miscarriage!"

"It won't matter so much after you have a live one," said Vonda. "You'll forget more. Things'll seem regular again."

"I'm fine! Everything's regular!"

"You'll get your kids raised," Iona said softly. She touched my arm, and I caught myself before jerking it away.

Nobody stayed long at the cemetery. Quite a few had remained at the chapel to put the casseroles and salads out, and the rest were quick to get out of the sun and back to the food. The heat pulsing from the ground was making me dizzy, but I wanted to push my point. I wanted her to admit that some things used to be easier. I could hear the Buick, the only car left, idling behind me. Phil got out and walked back across the graves to take my hand.

"It's all right, Carrie," he soothed. "You'll get over it. She was so old. Let her go."

"I'm fine," I said. "I'm not out here bawling, you know."

"Well, maybe you ought to be."

We stared at the red dirt.

"I think she kept her hair that crazy orange because it matched these cliffs," he grinned, trying to make me laugh.

"Yeah. Maybe."

"You ready to come? It's hot."

"She could stay out all day in this, hoeing."

"People must have been tougher then. Their lives were awful hard."

"I know! I've already heard about it! 'Times were hard! But we made it through! We had character!' Well, I'd trade any one of them! You think character is gonna get *us* through?"

I stalked to the car and got in the back. The plush seat and frigid air were a shock. Phil let in a short blast of heat when he got in on his side, but it dissipated in seconds.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I said. Dad glanced back through the rear-view mirror, meeting Phil's eyes for a second before trying to catch mine. Mom looked back at me and opened her mouth to say something, but didn't speak. Shivering, I turned my head toward the shimmering orange cliffs. I could feel my husband's gaze and sensed his hand hovering over my shoulder, but I pressed against the door and didn't respond. He pulled his hand back.

We didn't stay long at the dinner. Mom and Dad talked to some St. George stalwarts in the lobby on our way out, then we walked over the rubbery parking lot to the car. Dad drove slowly through town and sped up on the interstate for the long push to Salt Lake.

When I was a little girl, I always knew when we entered and left St. George because we drove between the cutaway sides of a long, black snake of a ridge. On our way to visit our grandparents, my

brothers and sisters and I would compete to be the first to see the two giant "trains" colliding and would anticipate the thrill of driving between them, speeding past just in time to avoid being smashed to oblivion in the middle. After that, it was only a short drive to Grandma and Grandpa's house. From their front picture window, we could see the temple, most beautiful at sunrise when the whole eastern face drew light into its broad white surface.

Like everyone else in her generation, Grandma defied the desert by planting flowers. The shade lovers proliferated between the house and the titanic cottonwoods, established two generations before, while beds of sun-worshipping blossoms threw light like prisms back into the glare. Aunt Iona would walk the three blocks from her house to see us, or we would go down there. Grandma and Iona would circle the yards, boasting about the day lilies, violets, tulips, irises—forgetting their starting point, raving two or three times over the same flower beds.

Grandpa took me once, alone, no brothers or sisters, to see the old sandstone tabernacle, built before the temple was even begun. No one was there but us, and I stared from the pews at the giant eye painted on the high wall behind the pulpit. I was terrified, yet I didn't want to leave.

"That's God's eye," Grandpa said.

Since then, both sides of the black mountain have been blasted hundreds of feet back, and it's harder to perceive the enormous natural barrier that made pioneer access to the valley so excruciating. We passed through it on our way home from the funeral with only vague recognition; and, from the safety of my cool, cushioned seat, I watched the fantastic red and orange ridges fly past. The outer walls of Kolob Canyon looked as if they could ignite the atmosphere, but the inside cliffs and towers softened to a cooler hue, almost purple in the distance. I relaxed, watching them, and slept without knowing it.

Phil woke me later, when we were almost home. The sun was down, and the high Wasatch peaks were blue upon softer, softer blue in the fading light. I didn't realize I had been crying until I pulled away from the wet seat back and sobbed harder against him, still shaking from a dream I couldn't remember.

"Carrie," Mom said, "try to remember just a little bit of it. Phil says this has happened several times."

I groped for the images, still hovering in the black part of my mind. "No. It's gone."

"Can you remember even a part of it?" Mom asked again. "You can't get over a nightmare until you can talk about it."

"Well, I just can't."

“Let’s get her something to drink,” Mom suggested, and Dad pulled off in Lehi. They all ordered ice cream and soft drinks, but I only wanted water. I drank three glasses, sucking the ice cubes until they were gone. I wanted more.

I’ve almost remembered the dream at odd, unrelated moments several times since then. But it was only a day or so ago, when I saw Vonda again at the nursing home, that I retrieved a fragment that stayed: a huge rocking chair, creaking, and a little girl, alluring, but her face a blur as she turns to speak to me, rocking softly, her hair damp in the heat of the room. On the east window behind her I can see the glass shimmer, then drip like melting ice, and I reach into a suddenly, absurdly empty chair, still rocking. Mrs. Chapman breathes behind me, or maybe inside of me, and President Johnson says, “Help me! Get me out of here!” and calls me by my name.

That same visit I realized that Vonda’s mind is going fast. If her thoughts connect, her conversations don’t reflect it.

“I watch the sun rise,” she told me again. “It comes back in the mornings. Beautiful. Beautiful.”

I understood. Every extra dawn must be a miracle to her.

“Goodbye, Vonda,” I said. “I have to go now.”

“Bye-bye, Anne, Anne,” she waved. “Come back, little lamb. Come back in the morning.”

I promised her I would.