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Life after Death after Life

by *Evangeline Jones*

Agnes

On October 13, 1813, Agnes de Groot was born to a young couple in the Netherlands, their first and only child. She came out so fresh looking, they said, so shiny and red and scrumptious, that they were convinced there'd never been a baby like her before. It seemed appropriate that she was born just weeks before The Netherlands' liberation from France because, as her mother told all the neighbors, she was quite clearly the start of something new. They spoiled her rotten, the whole town of them—the blacksmith winking at her from behind her father's horse; other children choosing her first in their games; the grocer slipping her sweets under the counter. Was it any surprise, then, as she grew into a long-braided teenager, that the expectations grew along with her? Was it any surprise that they weighed heavily upon her, slumping her shoulders and hampering her gait? Her mother sought the opinions of all the best doctors, but to no avail. Agnes retreated behind a wall of her own making, a wall of fear and shame and the knowledge that she was not what everyone else believed her to be.

Agnes, for whom everyone had once held such high hopes, showed no interest in sewing or cooking, or any of the occupations befitting a young woman. In fact, nobody was quite sure how she spent her days, holed up in the house with some musty old book, or wandering along the dikes, staring out to sea. The young man to whom her parents had hoped to promise her found another, more suitable prospect, and nobody was quite sure what would happen to poor Agnes.

It was a surprise, then, when Agnes began throwing up in the early mornings, began heaving and vomiting, and a flush appeared on her cheeks and she began eating great amounts of goat cheese with her bread. When her parents could no longer ignore the symptoms, when the doctors could offer a diagnosis at last, it was then, just before her 17th birthday, that Agnes seemed, for the first time, comfortable in her own body. Despite her parents' hounding, despite several pointed visits from the local Reverend, Agnes refused to reveal the identity of her baby's father. She kept the secret held tightly within her, like the child itself; it was hinted at only in the flush on her cheeks, the mysterious curve of her brow.

On March 4, 1831, Agnes went into labor. Her screams penetrated the surrounding houses—scandalizing the neighbors, who thought back to the miracle baby, so shiny and new and promising, and how strange it



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was that these sounds were coming from her. Agnes' mother called in all the best doctors, all the local midwives, but to no avail—after 20 hours of labor Agnes passed away, her baby boy inside her. They were buried in a nearby cemetery—a small cross placed over them—and along with them both, her secret.

Llarico

On March 4, 1836, a baby boy came screaming to life on a windy Bolivian plateau, near Lake Titicaca. His grandparents, uncles and other extended relations, gathered together with his parents in the Mamani family compound, noted the impressive nature of his lungs, how they seemed to overpower the wind itself, and so they named him Llarico—"indomitable." Llarico, who spent his boyhood roaming the plateau in a cone-shaped *gorro*, always felt an intimacy with the strong gusts that came rumbling across the lake, from the mountains to the north. When he and his three brothers were harvesting oca and barley from the terraced hillsides, or grazing llama and alpaca herds on the coarse grasses, and the winds appeared, knocking them into each other and upending their woven baskets of produce, he laughed with appreciation and belonging and a deep, welling sense of gratitude.

As they grew older, Llarico's brothers drifted from the plateau, seeking their fortunes in the gold and silver mines or trading weavings and potatoes for rice, sugar and coffee in the lower regions. When they did return, it was for a bowl of hearty *chairo* stew and some hours spent gazing out over the lake, speculating on the latest antics of the hillside gods. But Llarico—the indomitable one, the one who could never be too far from the wind—he stayed. He built a house of clay and thatched grasses, and when it was ready, he married. Soon after, the couple welcomed their firstborn, a son, and when the baby boy coughed and spluttered to life, after several long seconds without breathing, Llarico fell to his knees with a depth of gratitude he had not previously known possible. He sacrificed a fetal llama to the goddess Pachamama in a private ceremony on the hillside, far from the prying eyes of the Catholic Church, and, years later, when that same son died in the long-standing rebellion against the Spanish, Llarico repeated the ceremony—his gratitude weighted, this time, with grief.

Only once in his long life did Llarico see the lights. He was sitting on the flat rock where he'd spent many mornings fishing for *amanto* with his brothers. His spirit was heavy with the recent loss of his wife, Nayra, and he was mashing some coca leaves between his gums; his teeth were no longer there to chew them. It was dusk, and the breeze was roaring in from across the waters. It was then that the lights appeared. They swirled across the lake in ripples and eddies, red and orange and purple coming together and dispersing in an otherworldly dance. The sky was overcast, but Llarico would have known, regardless: What he was witnessing was not a sunset, but a miracle.

Several days later, on August 29, 1878, Llarico breathed his last. His family buried him in a simple grave topped with stones. In his resting place, they left him a bowl of *chairo*, a mugful of coca leaves, and a cone-shaped *gorro*—preparation for the windy desolation of the spirit-filled highlands.

Wang

On August 29, 1883, when Wang Yuan was birthed to Chinese merchants in Singapore, his mother sobbed tears of relief. She was glad that the difficult birth was over, of course; she was glad that he was healthy. But most of all, she was glad that he was a boy. She dressed him in silk—the reds and oranges and purples of good fortune. She stroked his feet, thanking the gods that she would never be forced to bind them.

But perhaps, she thought ruefully, much later—perhaps it would have been better if she had. Wang was always exploring—under the table, into the cupboards and closets. His mother joked that he was like the goat of his zodiac sign, always butting into things. When Wang's father caught him burrowing amongst his books and papers, he scolded him and whipped him with a bamboo stick. But when it was his mother who found him, she simply laughed; relieved that his feet were still growing and there were so many places he could go.

On November 3, 1888, when Wang was just five years old, he disappeared. His mother checked all the usual places—the closet, the cupboards, the stacks of books and papers. When she couldn't find him there, she tottered outside on tiny feet to peer under the front stoop. She overturned shipping crates and knocked on neighbors' doors. Had anybody seen her Wang, her goat-like son? He didn't return that evening, or the next, and in the weeks and years that followed, Wang's mother grew hunched and somber and withdrawn. To this day, it is said, she can be seen stumbling down the streets of Singapore, knocking on doors; asking, begging, for any word of her beloved, unbound boy.

Nabiya

On November 3, 1893, Nabiya Barakat slipped into the dusty world of rural Saudi Arabia—the fifth daughter to her mother, Ayah, and her father's sixteenth child. The family celebrated quietly, with coffee and sweet breads. It should have been a son, the other wives whispered; Ayah should have drunk the parsley tea. But Ayah paid them no mind. As she gazed into her newborn's eyes, she knew that this one, somehow, was different. Despite her husband's protests, his assertion that it was somehow disrespectful to Islam, she named the baby "female prophet," Nabiya.

Nabiya grew into a strong-limbed young girl. Her heavy black *abaya* didn't stop her from climbing the date palms with her brothers, or urging the camels bareback through the desert. As punishment, she

spent long afternoons confined to the kitchen, watching the Sudanese slave girls prepare their noontime *khuzi*. It was there that she came to know Sameea; it was there that their friendship formed and solidified and a secret language of hand signals was devised. They shared jokes about her father—about the bits of lamb that would catch in his beard—and planned forbidden, late-night walks together under the stars. On one of these excursions, they made a pact: If one of them were ever in need, she would chime her anklet bells outside the other's window. To seal this pact, with solemnity, they kissed.

When Nabiya, at 14, was promised to a boy from the neighboring town, one she'd never met, the girls' hands danced constantly, urgently, expressing their distress. Nabiya begged her father to take Sameea with her. But as though he was punishing her for some unuttered failing, some lingering resentment, Nabiya's father sold Sameea to the next band of traders passing through. The girls never saw one another again.

Nabiya's new husband treated her well, but he was often absent. When she grew lonely, Nabiya veiled herself and walked the three dusty miles to her former family's compound. But even there, amid the cooking and the chattering of the women—even there, the restlessness remained. Nabiya longed for Sameea and the secret language they had shared; the comfort of another, matching soul.

Years later, on the night of May 16, 1972—when her stomach had sagged from birthing several children and wrinkles furrowed her cheeks, when she was much more likely to stroke a camel's nose than to ride one—Nabiya woke to the sound of bells chiming softly. She rose, donned her *abaya*, and padded outside, into the dark. The sounds seemed to come from beyond the compound walls—from across the desert, to the north. She followed them there, beneath the crescent moon, and it was there, once the scorching sun had risen, that they found her—her anklets hugged tightly to her chest; her right hand outstretched, as though in gesture to the stars.

Sarah

On May 16, 1977, Sarah burst into the Gilmore family in Sacramento, California. Unusually strong winds came howling from the north, and the chimes by the front door clamored with abandon, as though to announce her arrival. The announcement was hardly necessary, however: Sarah's brother, sister and young parents—all blond, as was the family's dog, Ruffles—were quite shocked to see her ginger mop of hair. When Sarah was five, her mother's best friend and coworker, Greg, the one with the fire-red beard, left to work at their company's office in Ireland, and Sarah's father took her brother to start a new life with his "juvenile infatuation," as her mother called her, in Chicago. Suddenly, with one stroke, all of the men in Sarah's life were gone. Sarah's remaining family moved into an apartment complex—one that didn't allow pets—and even Ruffles moved to another, more masculine, home.

The complex did have a pool, which provided some distraction. Sarah spent many afternoons there, trying to tan herself into oblivion, or if not, at least her freckles from existence. The diminutive man who cleaned the pool and trimmed the shrubbery, Domingo, was from Bolivia, and he told her of his own daughters, the ones he'd left behind. When Sarah learned, years later as a medical student at Tulane, that Domingo had been deported, she decided, against her mother's wishes, to make South America the location of her requisite study abroad. The following summer, she attended university classes in La Paz, the windy mountain capital not far from where Domingo lived. She visited his village sometimes, on weekends, and met his children, who were busy producing young ones of their own.

On October 13, 2005, Domingo took Sarah to see Lake Titicaca, several hours away. It was a special place, he told her, a magical place. There, as the wind whipped at Sarah's ginger-colored hair and she munched for the first time on grilled goat cheese—there, Sarah felt finally, for once, at home. She was reluctant to leave—to go elsewhere, to go anywhere—and so when an alpaca crossed the road, forcing Domingo to swerve suddenly in his rickety pickup; when they rocketed off the cliffside and into the air; when Sarah gazed down at the rainforest far below and fast approaching, she saw not a life un-lived but a flight through time; a string of red and orange and purple; the hauntingly beautiful echo of a mystery yet unsolved.