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OF VITAL
PHENOMENA
A NOVEL
ANTHONY MARRA

COMMENTARY BY KATHERINE PLICHTA

The Most Vital Phenomena

Without love, family or friendship can an individual truly enjoy their success or money? Likewise without the support of others, how much more difficult is it to face the challenges in our lives? To call the Second Chechen War a challenge would certainly be an understatement, but in Anthony Marra's novel *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*, it is clear that without the help and love of others the characters in the story would not be able to overcome the challenges and heartbreak that war creates. In his debut novel, Marra weaves the lives of four families together to create unforgettable individual portraits of the complex reactions that humans experience when faced with loss, death, betrayal and war. Marra's narrative chronicles one week during the war but he also includes many chapters that are flashbacks to old memories, including events from the First Chechen War. Through this technique, the characters come alive as we relive the pivotal moments in their lives and begin to see what formed them into the men and women they are now. Through the novel's most compelling character, Sonja, and her broken relationship with her sister, we most clearly see how losing a loved one changes a person.

Sonja is the only surgeon in the town of Volchansk. Almost by necessity she has become outwardly cold and businesslike, as she runs the hospital with limited resources and personnel. In addition to her excellence in medicine, we learn in pieces that Sonja is consumed by the absence of her sister, Natasha. She has lost Natasha twice. The first time was directly following the First Chechen War when Sonja returned from medical school in London and could not find her sister in their

old home. She loses Natasha again during the Second Chechen War. Natasha's departure and her unknown location penetrate Sonja's thoughts as even small things remind her of Natasha. Through her flashbacks, we learn that Sonja feels responsible for her sister's disappearance and because of this, although she works diligently every day at the hospital, her work seems more like a distraction from her worry about Natasha than anything else. Sonja understands time is not standing still, but with Natasha absent, she views the progression of her days as if it is. She describes her life during her sister's first absence: "[time] turned from day to night, from hospital to flat, from cries to silence, from claustrophobia to loneliness and back again" (15). Without her sister, she doesn't believe her life can be more than just a series of passing moments with no crescendo and no relief from the worry.

Then, without warning, many weeks after Sonja returns from London, Natasha appears. It is evident that all is not right with her; once confident and beautiful, she now sleeps most of the day and rarely leaves the flat. She won't talk about what happened to her, though Sonja makes many assumptions which later prove correct. It is not until Chapter 14 that we get a glimpse of what happened to Natasha. In her attempt to leave her war-torn country, she is sold into prostitution. At first, Marra does not provide many details about this time in Natasha's life. Instead, we have only the haunting response to Natasha's question "Does anyone know where we are?" (199). The three word response from another unfortunate young woman give Natasha and the reader all they need, "The Breaking Grounds" (199). Later, three pages detail the debasement that Natasha had to experience as a prostitute. Sonja tries to help her to move on with her life but in the end the only thing that helps is when Natasha begins to work in the hospital with her sister. She begins to work in the maternity ward and deliver babies. In this environment, the focus is not on Natasha's pain but the pain of others and through her care for these other sufferers she starts to return to a more normal version of herself.

Throughout, Marra succeeds at interweaving the lives of his characters without making the conditions of their interactions seem ridiculous or impossible. The next events in the story mark the beginning of another important relationship which is forged when Natasha delivers a child named Havaa. This same child will come to the hospital eight years later looking for Sonja for help. However, at this point in her life, Natasha only thinks of the event as important because Havaa is the first child she delivers. Natasha does not know that she will meet this family again or that her destiny will become connected to theirs. As the story continues, we learn that Natasha goes on to deliver many more children and finds happiness from bringing others into the world. But even as we read of her triumphs, Marra is

careful to make sure we know that her peace won't last. These moments are merely a flashback and at this point in the novel Natasha is still missing.

We begin to learn more about Natasha's final departure towards the end of the novel. After the death of one of her coworkers in the hospital, Natasha leaves her home never to see Sonja again. In this attempt to leave both Chechnya and her former life behind, Natasha passes through Havaa's village. Now older, Havaa and her family help refugees like Natasha who need a place to stay. Dokka, Havaa's father, recognizes Natasha and asks her to stay the night at his home, rekindling a relationship that seemed insignificant eight years prior. Dokka feels protective of Natasha as the woman who delivered his daughter and gives her a gun to remain safe during her journey out of Chechnya. This is ultimately his family's undoing as Natasha uses the weapon to kill a soldier who is attempting to rape her and then the murder weapon is traced back to Dokka.

The novel opens with the consequences of Dokka's decision to give Natasha the weapon. Havaa wakes from a dream-filled sleep in her neighbor's home. Her own home has been burned to the ground and her father has been taken by the Feds the night before because of the weapon. This event is a tragedy to those in the village, but in larger Chechnya, this is just another day during the war. The night the Feds come, not only do they look for Dokka but also for Havaa. During the war, it is their practice to eliminate the entire family of an enemy of the state to prevent revenge by the orphaned or widowed family members at a later time. Despite this, the first few pages of the novel make it clear that Havaa is special and that she must be saved in order for the story to have any possibility of ending without total despair. Akhmed, Havaa's neighbor and estranged friend of her father Dokka, realizes Havaa's importance as they walk to the hospital, somewhere Havaa might be safe. The war has been especially cruel to the civilian population so much so that it appears as if Havaa is one of the only children who have even made it through the war. In fact, as Akhmed and Havaa continue their journey, Akhmed seems to be the one who is more childlike and unprepared to face what happened to Havaa's father and what will happen next. While Akhmed is scared and knows what will likely become of him for helping her, he still executes his plan to save Havaa and place her somewhere safe.

Akhmed and Havaa make it to the hospital and meet Sonja. As soon as Havaa arrives, although Sonja does not know it yet, her life will have purpose outside of her sister. On their first night together in the hospital, Sonja begins to consider the lost young girl with no kin as merely a body that has not yet reached full development, "Should she make it to adulthood, the girl would arrive with two hundred and six

bones. Two million and a half sweat glands. Ninety-six thousand kilometers of blood vessels. Forty six chromosomes. Seven meters of small intestines. Six hundred and six discrete muscles. One hundred billion cerebral neurons. Two kidneys. A liver. A heart.” (49). By viewing her this way, Sonja is able to depersonalize her and handle her as a body, something she is talented at treating and should be able to interact with without emotional attachment. However, she can only hold this distance from Havaa for a brief period, and then she considers Havaa’s future or lack thereof: “A hundred trillion cells that died and were replaced, again and again. But no matter how many ways she...quantified the body lying beside her, she couldn’t say how many years the girl would wait before she married, if at all, or how many children she would have, if any; and between the creation of this body and its end lay the mystery the girl would spend her life solving” (49). At first it appears as if Sonja will not be part of helping Havaa but she eventually softens towards the girl. She doesn’t admit it at first but we are led to believe that Sonja realizes that perhaps if she cannot help Natasha, she can at least help this girl who is alone in the world.

Until now, Sonja does not know that her sister delivered Havaa, but once she discovers it in a letter that details Havaa’s birth, she knows she must continue to help Havaa. She explains “[h]er sister had delivered hundreds of Havaas, and they were her patients, not her children, neither more nor less loved than the other lives begun and ended, saved and lost...[b]ut Sonja...did not wish for them what she wished for Havaa, a need, newly made, to save this one life her sister brought into the world” (355). It is with this realization that Sonja commits to raising Havaa. Sonja also learns that Havaa met Natasha when she stayed as a refugee in Dokka’s house. She is able to comfort Havaa by explaining that she lost her sister just as Havaa lost her father. Although neither Havaa nor Sonja knows if their loved one is dead or alive, they both realize that because of the war, they will likely not see them again. The new relationship of love and trust that Sonja and Havaa form with each other cannot take the place of their previous relationships but it provides exactly what the other needs: someone to take care of or someone who can be a caregiver. The series of events which brings Havaa and Sonja together sound unbelievable but they all allow Sonja to have closure and redemption for whatever guilt she feels for losing her sister as she begins to take care of the girl who her sister brought into the world.

With Havaa in Sonja’s care, the inevitable happens; Akhmed is also taken by the Feds to Pit B where he will likely be tortured and die. Upon his arrival, he sees a familiar face, Dokka’s. At this point, he is able to reassure him that Havaa is safe, and in this way they are able to rekindle their friendship that was torn apart

surprisingly not by war, but by Akhmed's brief tryst with Dokka's wife. In the last pages of the novel we learn that Havaa will go on to be successful in the world and loved for the rest of her life by Sonja and others. We are led to believe that both of Havaa's father figures die, but that their sacrifices were worthwhile since Havaa lived.

In the author's note at the end of the text, Marra explains he incorporated "two narratives shared by Islamic and Christian tradition that of a parent asked to sacrifice a child and that of an orphan delivered into the family responsible for her orphanage" (382). Although it is perhaps not readily apparent that Havaa's orphaning was Natasha's fault, since she was not aware of it and didn't intend it, her use of Dokka's gun to protect herself is what undeniably led to his imprisonment. Natasha had few choices besides shooting the soldier and most would not blame her for killing a man who was planning to rape her. Nevertheless, redemption seems to be necessary for many of the characters in the novel including Sonja.

The source of each character's problem is not their moral depravity, but instead the reality that in war it is difficult if not impossible to live as one would like. It is the war that split apart Dokka and Sonja's families. Towards the end of the novel, Natasha and Sonja's relationship still seems unfinished. Although Natasha was not angry with Sonja when she left for the final time, Sonja has no way to know this. It is only through her new connection to Havaa and one unexpected discovery that their story is resolved. When Natasha lives in their own house during the First Chechen War she tries to comfort herself by reading different books from the family's library to fill her loneliness. In one book she finds something that perhaps explains the state of things in her life and in her country, "Life: a constellation of vital phenomena—organization, irritability, movement, growth, reproduction, adaptation" (184). She circles it as one of the only explanations of the world that makes sense. The piece of this definition that is likely comforting to Natasha is the idea that adaptation is possible. When the world makes no sense, at least there is the hope that it might one day when we adapt to our current state.

Ten years later when Sonja reads the medical dictionary in order to sleep, she comes across the circled definition. Like Natasha, she feels as if she has discovered a secret of life, "The breaking sky could release no more striking pronouncement" (317). While Marra takes the novel's title from this definition, this definition of life glaringly omits love as one of the vital phenomena. What does it mean to organize, grow, reproduce, and adapt without others? One might say that reproduction is impossible without connection but in this medical dictionary, love, romance, and attraction are absent. Perhaps this stark definition would be reassuring during the

war because it is concrete, something you can come to expect when all else around you is changing, but after the war it feels empty. Marra's novel evades this emptiness which is why the definition seems ill-fitting by the end of the novel. In the worst of times and circumstances, his characters come alive on the page, and through the power of love, they do what is required to survive. This can be witnessed in Akhmed's sacrifice, in Dokka's gift of the weapon to Natasha, in Sonja's search for her sister, and in Sonja's care of Havaa. Marra's novel leaves us sad yet hopeful that even in war one can persevere and strive for more than a basic definition of life and find something whole and full once again.

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