

87 The Shawl

Cynthia Ozick

Cynthia Ozick's writing deserves many accolades; she observes things keenly, and in a Jewish way, by taking the ordinary and transforming it. What makes Ozick's writing unparalleled is that she also takes out-of-the-ordinary people and records them in extraordinary ways. *The Shawl* is as much about feelings as it is about the details of events themselves.

All this said, *The Shawl*, published in 1990, certainly serves as a graceful introduction to Ozick's work. "The Shawl" is a short story, followed by its sequel, "Rosa," a novella. Set in Poland, "The Shawl" opens with Rosa as a young woman both cradling and concealing her infant daughter, Magda, in a shawl, as she marches to a concentration camp alongside her fourteen-year-old niece, Stella. Rosa senses Stella's jealousy of her daughter early on, and the shawl's immense symbolism is seen right away; it not only protects Magda from the Nazis, who are unaware of her existence, but it also soothes her sucking mouth when Rosa's own nipples no longer give milk: "Magda took a corner of the shawl and milked it instead. She sucked and sucked, flooding the threads with wetness. The shawl's good flavor, milk of linen.... It was a magic shawl, it could nourish an infant for three days and three nights."

And, later: "Still, Magda laughed at her shawl when the wind blew its corners, the bad wind with pieces of black in it, that made Stella's and Rosa's eyes tear...she guarded her shawl. No one could touch it; only Rosa could touch it. Stella was not allowed. The shawl was Magda's own baby, her pet, her little sister.... Then Stella took the shawl away and made Magda die. Afterward Stella said: "I was cold."

The ensuing scene, involving Magda "with her little pencil legs

scribbling this way and that, in search of the shawl" climaxes with her being caught and murdered. Rosa, helpless, witnesses her daughter's death. It is one of the most riveting passages of Holocaust fiction.

And so *The Shawl* is not only about being Jewish in Poland during the war, but also about motherly love and loss. We are left to imagine Rosa in the ensuing years, surviving but riding on the brink of emotional destruction, her mind filled with Stella's unbearable passive-aggressive explanation for taking Magda's shawl. We meet Rosa again thirty years later in the novella that bears her name.

Finding more meaning in madness than in reality, Rosa has left Brooklyn, where she deliberately demolished her entire junk shop with a hammer and construction metal. Now fifty-eight years old, she lives in a seedy hotel room in Miami, surrounded by the elderly, dependent on Stella for long-distance financial support.

Plummeting to the depths of Rosa's mind, Ozick brings forth an unassailable, highly intelligent character, whose emotional undercurrent is always about her lost life, and mostly, her obsession with her dead daughter. Rosa is consumed with a void that nothing can fill, save her own mind and the shawl itself, which propels her into a fantasy life so rich in detail that she achieves ecstasy through her imaginings.

Through the events leading up to Magda's death and in the detailed letters she writes regularly to Magda, who is completely alive in her mind, we come to understand Rosa, and her erratic logic makes sense to us. We empathize. Her character is completely evoked. In one of these letters Rosa tells Magda about her father, about Stella's lies, and gives a tender account of her feeling of motherhood, "to have the power to create another human being, to be the instrument of such mystery."

In another letter we learn about the four-story house in which she was raised, with its fine architectural features, and her prominent, well-educated family; she speaks of her erudite father, a banker; her shy, refined mother, a poetess; and her brothers. She writes about the transition to life in the ghetto, cramped among "Jew peasants worn out from their rituals and superstitions." Her account of the tramcar that ran through the ghetto, and her description of the passengers in it, and how now she is like one of them, is absolutely fascinating.

Looking down on her peers in Florida, she sees their igno-

rance, and judges them as inferior for not having experienced the war firsthand. Yet she views herself as an old woman, aware that she appears poorly groomed and speaks in broken English. "It seemed to Rosa Lublin that the whole peninsula of Florida was weighted down with regret. Everyone had left behind a real life. Here they had nothing. They were all scarecrows, blown about under the murdering sunball with empty ribcages."

At the laundromat, she meets Simon Persky, a man who wears dentures and a toupee. His wife is crazy and institutionalized. Befriending Rosa, he becomes part of her external life, and it is through their interactions that more of Rosa's inner life is revealed.

She is disgusted by a doctor who writes to her explaining his research on survivors; he wants to include her in his study. Her relationships are minimal: Stella, Persky, and, of course, Magda, to whom she gives everything. Her daughter lives on vividly in her mind, the beneficiary of her deep maternal love.

She tells Persky about three lives: "The life before, the life during, the life after.... The life after is now. The life before is our real life, at home, where we was born." "And during?" he asks. "This was Hitler," she responds.

Rosa is called a scavenger, and her secondhand store serves as an apt metaphor for her life. The war itself took everything significant and tangible from her; first the people and the lives they led were discarded, then violently shattered. The intricate remnants come fully alive only in Rosa's memory, even though her family cannot ever return, and Rosa's own life itself will never come truly alive again.