

## **Breaking the Curse**

by Sky Karam de Sela

When I see an old person sitting on a bench watching the world go by with a pensive smile, I find reasons to look in their direction. Their stillness, their attention, commands mine; it fills me with respect and longing. But I have to walk on. I am a descendant of travelers whether I like it or not. My childhood was filled with movement; stillness was a language I did not speak.

None of my grandparents ever sat on a bench and watched the world go by. If they had, they would have been frowning intently and it would have lasted a minute at most. A wild crossing of continents, languages, and social status is at the root of my grandparents' creative strengths but also at the nexus of their restless inability to provide security for their families.

All four were children of immigrants. Mama's parents: Elena Karam and Norman Schur, were Lebanese-Scottish and Polish-Lithuanian. Papa's parents: Carmen de Obarrio de Sevilla and Alejandro de Sela were Panamanian and Mexican, with roots in Jamaica and France. On one side, seven generations of Latin American nobility led back to landowners and conquerors. On the other, an impoverished Lebanese inventor/tailor who, as a boy of twelve, had stowed away on a ship and made his way to America where he met his future wife, a Quaker from a farming family in Missouri.

All four were brave, brilliant, charismatic—and self-centered. All were passionate about their work, all neglected their own children to varying degrees, and all were indifferent to us, their grandchildren. Whether writing dictionaries, playing concert

piano, acting in movies, or running factories, they threw themselves into their chosen work with energy and discipline. Their sensuality and the romantic relationships in which they immersed themselves were central to their nature; because of their personalities, those relationships proved tempestuous and altered the lives of all who were in their orbits. They married more than once in an age—the 1930s and 1940s—when divorce was still scandalous; Papa's Mama married four times.

Vibrant, intelligent, free-spirited, there was much about how they approached their lives to be envied, but those same qualities contributed to the neglect and absenteeism of how they raised their children. Over time I, one of their many grandchildren, came to see lack of protection as a family curse.

As children, my Papa and Mama were relegated to the outer circle of their parents' lives. "Disappear into the woodwork, darling," Grandma would tell Mama. "M'hijo, tengo mucho trabajo," Papa's Papa would say, before driving away for months and even years, at a time. As they grew into their teens, their place in the family circle was reduced even more drastically. To put it bluntly, Mama was locked up and Papa was kicked out.

Brought up by a maid in a cold, wealthy household, Mama's rebellious response to forced isolation led to stricter and stricter efforts to suppress and control her, until at age sixteen, her parents had her remitted to Roosevelt Hospital, Tower Nine, the psychiatric wing. This confinement led to another, longer one at Chestnut Lodge Mental Institution, where she spent a year before escaping over the roof and across a field.

Papa, meanwhile, was brought up by his mother, a concert pianist-turned teacher and a beauty turned bitter. She "did her best," as Papa would say, but "her

best” included empty refrigerators and violent beatings. When Papa was fifteen and acting out, she emptied her wallet into his hands, saying tearfully, “That's all I have. I will pray for you, mi amor,” before kicking him out. He lived with friends and among strangers, learned how to survive the seediest back streets and how to climb out of the darkest holes.

Three thousand miles from each other on opposite sides of the American continent, Papa and Mama were backed into arid self-reliance early, which led each to become first angry, then proud and creative.

When they met in Guadalajara, it was 1968, and Papa and Mama barely had parents to speak of. Absent guidance, they were both in the throes of intensive drug exploration, struggling against addiction. Mama was a beauty, tragic and sultry; she smoked three packs a day and drank tequila straight from the bottle. Papa was handsome, fractured, vigorous; he played a shakuhachi flute that he had whittled out of bamboo, rolled himself joints at breakfast and took regular trips up the mountain with his friend Gandalf to pick and chew on bitter mushrooms. They were both named Alex.

When they met, the solitude each held within recognized the solitude imbedded in the other, and they fell headfirst into a love as hot and short-lived as brush-fire. In the beginning they followed each other everywhere. They understood that they shared two things primarily: their love for Mexico and their mission, a brave and difficult one—to break the family curse each had inherited, a curse involving old money and too little love. They understood wordlessly that to succeed in avoiding the curse they would create an entirely new sort of family. Theirs would be a unit. It would contain little money and much love. The loneliness, the grief they experienced, would be transformed. In the ultimate alchemical process, they would transmute their

longing into beauty. They had neither example, experience, nor any form of plan, but their inner resilience was extraordinary and their hearts had changed shape, expanded with the love they felt for each other.

Mama got pregnant right away. Their first years as parents were wild and unconventional. They experimented with a free-spirited lifestyle and radical childrearing. They loved us each tremendously, drank and smoked abundantly, ate indifferently. As a child, precarious was not a word I knew, but it was one I carried in my frame. I think I can truthfully say we all did.

Ayin was born in 1969, two months premature weighing two pounds, and had to live in a germ-free glass box with no human contact for the first thirty days of her life. Mexico City, where she was born, was still a medical backwater, and no one had heard of maternal contact helping “micro-preemies.” Mama and Papa could only visit once a day for two hours, and were only allowed to put their hands into surgical gloves attached to a hole in the box to touch Ayin’s tiny, frail body. During those visiting hours, the only person in the hospital room who wasn’t crying was probably the nurse who supervised the visits. Ayin made it through but became a troubled, fiery baby who demanded to be held at all times.

In 1970, when Ayin was one, Mama got pregnant with me. Papa, Mama, and Ayin were living on Staten Island then. I was born only one month premature, so although I was also skinny and frail, I was strong compared to Ayin, and although I had to spend a month in a germ-free box, Mama could take me out and nurse me twice a day. Soon after my birth we migrated to Acapulco. Papa and Mama decided to live on the beach near Pie de la Cuesta. Barra de Cayuco. Not near the beach. *On the beach.*

My first memory is of a vast, sandy expanse, stretching out as far as I can see. My cheek is flat against damp, hard packed sand. I watch a crab make its way towards me. It stops inches from my face. It is as big as my head. The crab of my memory is alarming, but also funny and beautiful.

Papa was selling hot dogs and grass to make a living but this place they had chosen to settle in was a wild, empty place and there were few buyers here. Our nearest neighbors were a herd of thin pigs who roamed free and followed Papa or Mama down the beach whenever they went to dig a hole (we had no bathroom, which was good for the pigs, not so nice for us). Food was scarce, and Mama's milk dried up. They began to feed me Nestle's powdered formula, and this, combined with the difficult sanitary conditions, was the beginning of trouble inside my little body. I started to lose weight. They didn't have a scale or doctor's supervision and three quarters of my weight-loss went unchecked. By the time they understood how frail I had become, I was nine months old and weighed only nine pounds. They called Papa's Papa and begged him for help. He sent us airplane tickets to New York. At the Acapulco airport the attendants took one look at me and made Papa and Mama sign a waiver stating that if I died on the six-hour flight, it was not the airline's responsibility.

We went straight from JFK Airport to the hospital, where they hooked me up on IVs in the intensive care unit. Papa and Mama once again could not touch their own baby, could only visit two hours a day to look at me as I lay behind glass, with my tiny arms spread out to the sides and strapped down. I was diagnosed with FTT, *failure to thrive*, which was just a fancy way of saying I was on my way out. A month later, still strapped onto my hospital cross, I had only gained one pound and was still failing to thrive. Finally, Mama called Darrel, her psychic friend who had saved our family more than once with his intuition. Standing at a payphone, she waited anxiously while Darrel

closed his eyes and did his work. After three long minutes of silence, Darrel said, “Get her out of that place. Take her to St Christopher’s Hospital for Children in Philadelphia. Quickly.”

When Papa and Mama told the doctors that they were taking me out of the hospital, the doctors refused, saying if I was removed from their care, I would die in less than a week. The IV was saving me. But Papa and Mama, without hesitating, shook their heads and asked what they had to sign. Another waiver stating that if I died, it was not the hospital’s responsibility. They signed this quickly and unceremoniously, gathered me up, wrapped my tiny, featherlike body in a warm cotton blanket and took me out of there. Mama held me in her arms for the two-hour drive from New York City to the hospital in Philadelphia, where they admitted me immediately. Two days later, after a battery of exams, the doctors put me on a diet of goat’s milk, explaining that I was allergic to dairy products from cows. I began to gain weight immediately.

By the time Mama got pregnant with Lhasa in 1972, Ayin was a sturdy three-year-old and I was a wiry two-year-old. Mama and Papa were eating well and smoking less, but they were still cutting through convention, as determined as ever to find their own way to live. In the wake of the mythical Woodstock concert in 1969, the small towns around Woodstock were a haven for creative hippies and soul searchers of all sorts. Papa and Mama landed there, at number 5 Rock City Road, in a small one room apartment. After an initial period of comfort living there, Papa and Mama were evicted for defending all-too-eccentric friends. They crossed the street to an abandoned three-story Victorian to join a utopian squat/community that called itself *The Family*. We lived there for a few months while Papa worked without pay as a macrobiotic cook in the community’s free restaurant. When they needed clothes or a blanket for us, they went

downstairs to the free store where there were piles of wrinkled, dirty clothes to choose from.

A strong creative current ran through the place. While Papa spent time with the artists who pass through, he was putting away his welfare checks, saving up to buy us our first school bus—a little one, twenty-seater. By the time we left the *Family* house, Papa had transformed the bus into a cozy little home which we parked on the edge of the woods. A gentle interlude followed. Because it was a mild Indian summer, we had interesting neighbors and the woods around us were full of animals. But when the trees lost their leaves, the cold approached, and Mama's belly grew taut, they rented a cabin in a tiny town called Big Indian. Lhasa was born in the cabin, and they would have stayed there happily with the three of us, but a mean-spirited sheriff who had his eye on us made a fuss because our bus had an out-of-state license. That provided him a frail but legal reason to kick us out of town.

We began yet another long, meandering journey back to Mexico.

By the time we children arrived, the thread leading back to our powerful, wealthy ancestors was pulled thin and tenuous. Instead of a grand house with a butler, we lived in a bus without running water or a toilet. Instead of being landowners, we were familiar with eviction. In a few generations our family had dropped from the top rung of the social ladder to the bottom. On Papa's side our grandmother had contributed to this shift with her disorganized extravagance, but the final and most radical drop was Papa and Mama's. It was neither an accidental descent, nor a calculated one. It was a downward leap of faith. Somehow they knew: Old curses are hard to break, and the only way through, is down.

Like Alice in Wonderland, Mama and Papa plunged and tumbled deliberately

down, down, down, having all sorts of realizations as they fell, transforming along the way depending on their encounters and the books they read, falling into their ever-deepening beliefs and convictions.

We tumbled with them.

When their fourth daughter Miriam was born, she was delivered in a home birth without either a doctor or midwife. We had returned to New York and little Miriam was born into the very center of a radical community called the Catholic Worker Farm, led by Dorothy Day.

Among Dorothy's many passions, voluntary poverty was a powerful guiding element, alongside regular prayer and radical pacifism. For Papa and Mama, who were both fleeing their parents' wealth, voluntary poverty became loosely woven into their hippie philosophies. This contributed to a form of child rearing that was eccentric and inspired.

For example, Mama didn't mind if we didn't go to school, but she insisted on good grammar and fine spelling. For three years while on the road we "did school" in our converted school bus. No matter that we ate out of the garbage occasionally; we were not trash, and we shouldn't speak like trash. She wouldn't stand for it if we answered "good" to the question, "How are you?" She believed in leather shoes or no shoes at all. We were vegetarians, but if someone offered us meat, we were to eat it and say, "Thank you very much." Even if it was goat, which made us want to cry.

No pickiness allowed. Gratitude was, in fact, the foundation of their beliefs. We were never to take anything for granted. When we really wanted to insult each other (before graduating to "disgusting pig"), we would say, in a low and spiteful tone: "Spoiled *Brat*" because we had absorbed the fact that a spoiled-brat was the lowest form of life.



Occasionally, Papa took us to one of those metal clothing bins outside of shopping centers. There he hiked us up on his shoulders; we dove in headfirst one by one, until all four of us were fishing around happily, elbowing each other and laughing, emerging victorious, each with “new” clothes. We were small but had already absorbed our parents' taste; we did not choose anything acrylic or pink or anything with Barbie on it. The expression *beggars can't be choosers* did not actually make sense to us because we were both.

I remember meeting a woman named Tearsa at one point in our travels. Her last name was Joy. Tearsa Joy. My sisters and I managed to choke down our giggles and keep straight faces, but we laughed about her for years. “I'm Tearsa Joy, Praise the Lowered!” we would howl. We thought that names like Rainbow and Moonbeam, were hilarious. We had no idea we were part of a movement, a current. Our names: Ayin, Sky, Lhasa, and Miriam, were not *hippie* names. They were—*us*.

We also did not realize our parents were spiritual searchers, choosing a path that led away from material comfort. All we knew was that Papa disliked stuff. He was always sweeping our things into a big pile and calling to us: “Get your stuff or it's going straight into the garbage.” We came fast because he wasn't kidding. He had nothing he cared about, except his portable altar which featured a wooden statue of the Virgen de Guadalupe and a framed photograph of Paramahansa Yogananda. And his bamboo flutes, which he had made himself. And his stash of grass, but that's not a thing, is it?

Mama, on the other hand, owned a few large objects that really mattered to her. These things travelled everywhere with us. They made our buses, camping spots, squats, and *palapas* beautiful, made them home. The ornate Irish harp with leaves and flowers painted carefully in gold and green. The carved wooden couch. And our

table. The surface of the table was a chaos of burnt coffee rings, scratches, and stains since Mama never used table cloths, but the table legs were graceful, sculpted with swirls, and the tabletop was a piece of dark cherrywood. A connoisseur would be able to tell at a glance that it was a rare Spanish antique. Yet if we received a pen for our birthday and nothing else, it didn't occur to us to be disappointed. I loved pens. Pens were the best.

Although school was an option, education was a treasure, second only to creativity. And beauty was primordial. "Always, always leave a place more beautiful than when you found it," Papa drilled us. "When you walk away from somewhere don't leave garbage, even if it's not yours. Put the trash in your pocket if you have to. Clean the space, leave a flower, something."

I realize now, beauty was so essential to them, that instead of safety, they gave us art. We were brought up in precarious, even perilous circumstances at times, but a poetic and esthetic world was abundantly at our disposal. We had no Legos, no Playmobiles, nothing made of plastic. In fact, as I remember, we had no toys, but I also do not remember missing them. We were taught to read at home, given books and kept away from television's language, its images and colors. Starting at a very early age, we were trained to lean towards the lyrical rather than the cheerful.

The only movie we saw in our early childhood was an adult art film. This was while we lived at the Catholic Worker Farm. Mama had seen and loved a movie, called *Kwaidan*, *Japanese Ghost Stories* by Kobayashi. She wanted us all to see it, so our whole family piled excitedly into the old Chevy, the one that belonged to nobody. To this day I will not forget the film's images, which were both fascinating and terrifying. Long wispy black hair continuing to grow on skeletons. Minute calligraphy covering a man's body in black ink. Tiny perfect ideograms everywhere. The ears were forgotten, unpainted,

and so they were cut off with an axe, and their owner could not make a sound, because if he did, he would be killed on the spot...so he sat still and mute as he agonized, and for me, age seven, that muteness was the most terrifying thing of all.

On the way home, when we told Mama that we thought it was *such* a scary movie, she was mortified. She had not thought of it as scary. She had thought simply and truly that everyone would love it as much as she had: the living poetry, the strange and haunting beauty of it. And even though she felt bad, she wouldn't have it any other way. A Disney movie was her idea of hell, with its Barbie-shaped ladies, its swirling pink and yellow balloon landscapes.

Somewhere in my forties, I realized that I innately mistrusted the words *fun* and *nice*. To Mama they were both synonyms of *vacuous*. *Fun*, she would say, shaking her head, I don't need *fun*. Of course this did not mean she didn't need joy. But for Mama, both joy and beauty had to carry weight. Otherwise, they were like a person without a shadow.

Luckily Ayin and I shared a bunkbed (and a quilt), in the Mansion so after seeing *Kwaidan Japanese Ghost Stories*, we warded off the nightmares by holding each other. We saw only one live performance that I remember. An Indian sitar player was giving a concert, and an Indian dancer named Indira accompanied him. The audience sat on cushions on the floor. We were the only children in the audience. We sat cross-legged and listened with rapt attention for the first two hours. At intermission, an adult came over to us and said, "You little girls are so well behaved. Do you like the music?" We nodded adamantly.

"And, you're not bored?" she asked.

Bored? We had spent years on the road listening to the deep rumble of the bus motor under us as we crisscrossed the United States and Mexico. Without school,

without friends, without extended family. Just us, and the world passing by outside our windows. So were we bored now, by Indian music and a live dancer? To that nonsensical question we only grinned and shook our heads. Bored, no way, José. In fact, as I watched the dancer intently, I could feel the seed of something planted deep inside of me beginning to grow. Somewhere between my heart and my mind.

After the concert the dancer signed posters in the lobby. I edged as near to her as I dared and stared at her velvety brown belly, spilling just slightly over the belt of her embroidered skirt. At her bare foot with its cascading silver anklet. Mama, who was watching me watch her, asked gently, "Do you want a poster, Sky?" I nodded with wide eyes. As Indira signed my poster, I gazed at her beautiful, composed face. I decided then, without even telling Ayin, that I would be an Indian Dancer when I grew up.

Once, when we were very little living in Guadalajara, friends gave us a television, out of pity. Without a moment's hesitation, Mama threw it out the window. It broke into ten pieces on the sidewalk below. We stood at the open window and looked solemnly down at the pieces.

With all of these eccentricities, Mama and Papa were teaching us what to look at. What to listen to. And although from the outside it might seem that our family was lazy or lacking in structure, in fact there was great discipline, even severity, to our free-spirited education. Beauty and poetry were to be found in our own lives in the midst of material poverty and chaos. Period. In the life they made for us, there would be very little sugar. No anesthesia. The search for meaning would be thorough. There would be nowhere to stop on this road. Papa and Mama disagreed violently about many things, but agreed wordlessly on this.

Our parents did not do things halfway. They poured intense idealism into our upbringing. But no matter how much they loved us, no matter how fusional we were, one-two-three and four did not make a family. Not ours anyway. Because of five and six. Or rather, one and two: the first daughters, the eldest. The unspoken reason for our fifty thousand miles on the road. The source of our ceaseless uprooting and Mama's terrible restlessness: my two missing sisters.

In a custody battle as brief as it was tragic, our sisters had been taken away from us before we were born. Our entire nomadic childhood had been defined by their absence. Our deep instability was as emotional as it was geographical and had carved out of a dark, anxious place at the center of our family's heart. For the idealism Papa and Mama harbored to truly take root, for the curse to be broken, we would need to get them back.



**Sky Karam de Sela** was born in New York in 1970 and raised off the grid throughout Mexico and the United States. She joined San Francisco's Pickle Family Circus as an apprentice in 1984, where she learned the basics of trapeze, juggling, and acrobatics. Six years later she studied in Montreal's National Circus School. After time with "Circus Circus" in Belgium, "Circus Flora" in Missouri and two summers of street performance in Quebec's festivals, as age twenty-four she co-founded

"Pocheros" in France and toured extensively through Europe, Cambodia, and Australia with a production titled "Circus of Images," followed by "La Maison Autre," a show that included her three sisters. With the arrival of her children, she moved into clowning and the production of an autobiographical show. For the past fifteen years she has primarily been dedicated to teaching clowning while also directing shows in France, Chile, Iceland, Mexico, Sweden, and Switzerland. After a trapeze related injury suffered in her youth developed into debilitating arthritis, she has found inspiration in the written word. Her autobiographical saga, told in three volumes, is titled *Driftwood*. "Breaking the Curse" is excerpted from the first volume. A mother of three, she lives near two of her siblings in Burgundy, France.