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Our Mutual Friend: A Personal Essay

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ABSTRACT

"Our Mutual Friend" is a personal essay by Daiva Markelis about the importance of the Lithuanian-American newspaper *Draugas* to her mother in her later years. Markelis also reminisces about the impact of the newspaper on her family and herself when she was growing up.

Although my mother was flexible in most areas of her life, when it came to mail delivery she was positively Prussian. She once accused a mailman of not properly respecting her correspondence, of cramming letters into the little metal box like so much garbage. She blamed another postman for favoring the American-born widows living in her condominium complex – she'd glare as he'd stop and talk to them, delaying her delivery once again.

"How come you don't bring me my *Draugas*?" she asked a mailman when he presented her with only a flyer for a sale at the local Aldi.

"Ma'am, I'm not responsible for when stuff comes into the post office."

"The *Draugas* is not *stuff*," she told him huffily.

Written in her mother tongue, a language she loved with the fervor of a Baptist preacher, *Draugas* provided not only news and entertainment, but also reassurance that life existed outside the confines of her Oak Lawn condo. She depended on her favorite newspaper even more after the death of my father—he had been her best friend, her companion at Lithuanian social events, her confidant in discussing the vagaries of human nature. He would have agreed that *Draugas* was not *stuff*, a word my mother placed in the same category of linguistic vulgarity as *kid* and *jerk*.

She read her *Draugas* in a methodical, almost ritualized fashion, sitting on her comfortable beige armchair, her back to the large glass sliding door that on most days provided ample light – a reading lamp stood at attention, just in case – a cup of late morning coffee or early afternoon tea by her side. She would turn first to the obituaries, the half page of notices on the inside of the back leaf. She did this not out of any macabre sensibilities, but to make sure no distant friend or childhood acquaintance or community leader passed away without her knowledge. It was important to pay the proper respects, to attend the wake if possible, to at least make a phone call or send a card. "A fine man," she'd sometimes utter after seeing a familiar name printed in the thick dark black ink of mourning, or, "A good woman."

Having dispensed with death, my mother would peruse the last page of the paper for announcements of social and cultural events she might attend – song recitals and lectures and *kavutes*—provided she could find a ride. Sometimes she'd cajole me into chauffeuring her to an especially intriguing soiree. "You're such a good driver," she'd say, as if complimenting my driving skills was the way to my heart.

The headlines came next. If the news concerned Lithuania, she'd read the entire article. She prided herself on knowledge of current politics; she understood the sometimes subtle divergences among the different factions. She could discern (or thought she could) the politicians who had overly friendly ties with the Russian government. As for U.S. news, she'd skim or skip it entirely – too much already on the local television stations, too much violence, too much vulgar nonsense.

After reading the front page, my mother would turn to the columns about practical matters, especially those geared towards senior citizens, articles about changes in social security or discounts on RTA passes. She liked the editorials if they weren't too *preachy*, and never missed the write-ups of weddings. When I was growing up, she'd nod in approval if both bride and groom had distinctly Lithuanian surnames, but over the years her stance had softened concerning out-of-tribe marriages, especially if the groom was an *amerikonas*: "It's easier to mold the men," she claimed.

I don't remember a time when both my parents weren't avid readers of *Draugas*. For years, however, it battled for attention with the often controversial *Naujienos*. As a little girl, I thought perhaps *Naujienos* was the more serious of the two papers; the print appeared to be smaller, and there were fewer photographs. The very word *naujienos* – news – suggested a pre-Fox "We report, you decide" objectivity. *Draugas* had a more welcoming appearance, a friendlier typeface, or at least it seemed that way to me.

I didn't understand, then, that newspapers are published by individuals and groups representing different ideologies, that *Naujienos* was a vehicle of the Social-Democratic Party, that the Marian Fathers owned and operated *Draugas*. My growing suspicion that there was no such thing as a neutral press was brought home clearly when my mother cancelled *Naujienos* after a heated phone exchange with its editor over an article she considered slanderous: a writer for the paper had accused my grandfather, a moderate Social-Democrat, of having deep Communist sympathies. The editor's name quickly became, at least in our household, a symbol of ultimate rascality.

One of the things my parents most admired about *Draugas* was that its owners, editors, and writers recognized viewpoints outside of a narrow and perhaps stereotypical definition of Catholicism – they were catholic in the original meaning of the term. The newspaper published eclectic, thought-provoking articles and reviews, especially in the Saturday cultural supplement.

I can still see my parents sitting around the kitchen table Saturday afternoons, sipping coffee, commenting on a book review, discussing a poem.

"Listen to this," my mother says and starts to read aloud a poem by Henrikas Nagys.

She stops half way through. She calls me out of my bedroom, where I've been perusing Teen Beat and wolfing down Milk Duds.

"You might like this," she says, and asks me to read the poem out loud.

I get lost in syllables as dense and gorgeous as a grove of pines.

"You're pronouncing the words wrong," my father jumps in. "It's *ahh-zuolas*, not *a-zuolas*."

Despite my father's criticism, I am hooked – on Nagys, on Lithuanian poetry so different from the rhyming patriotic odes to the motherland learned at Saturday School.

Draugas not only published writers whose work had earned critical acclaim in pre-Soviet Lithuania, but also pioneered new and emerging writers in the diaspora, often individuals with day jobs as engineers or secretaries, men and women who struggled to make a living in their newly adopted countries. *Draugas* published poets barely out of high school who wrote about birch trees and sex and the absence of God; their poems appeared next to those of writers with one foot in the grave who took as their subject matter death and redemption, tyranny and freedom. *Draugas* published fiction writers from Boston and Baltimore and New York who wrote nostalgic stories about growing up in Telšiai or humorous tales of misadventures in Displaced Person's camps. *Draugas* published reviews of artists who'd had shows in Paris and those just starting their careers in Chicago.

During the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, *Draugas* also gave voice to writers living in Lithuania. I remember reading poems by Janina Degutytė and Sigitas Geda, gazing at the faces in the accompanying photographs, wondering if I would ever have a chance to visit the homeland of my parents. I admired the writers for the beauty of their images, their complex subject matter, their subtle ways of writing between the lines. And I admired *Draugas* for publishing the poems at a dark time in the cultural and social life of émigré Lithuanians.

During the last months of her life, my mother was in and out of the hospital. I'd visit her regularly, asking her what I might bring: "A mystery novel, a magazine, some chocolate?"

"No, just bring me my *Draugas*," she'd say.

I'd prop her up against the pillows so she could read and urge her to sip some of the weak tea beside her bed.

She'd follow her usual routine: first the obituaries, then the last page, then the cover, then the articles. She saved the Saturday supplements for last.

"Did you read the essay on wayside crosses?" she asked me once during those long and painful days.

"Not yet, mom."

"You'll find it interesting. And the review of that avant-garde play. You should read that as well."

She asked how my work was coming along, whether I'd published any more essays, read any interesting novels.

"We Lithuanians are a creative people," she said, nodding her head.

Years after my mother's death, I look forward to receiving the Saturday *Draugas* in the mail. It arrives several days late – I live in a university town in Central Illinois where, without the students, the population hovers below 10,000.

When I first moved to Charleston, I lived in a small rented apartment. My neighbor was a little old man with missing teeth who kept his curtains perpetually drawn. The mailman had once mistakenly delivered him my *Draugas*.

"This here belongs to yee-ew," the neighbor drawled. "It ain't Spanish. Is it Roosian?"

"Lithuanian."

He glared at me as if his worst suspicions had been confirmed—the newspaper clearly contained unsavory information, perhaps even instructions for assembling an atomic bomb.

My husband and I moved to a house overlooking a ravine where our nearest neighbors are nosy raccoons. I have found unexpected happiness amidst the cornfields and unpolluted skies of Charleston, but I also miss my Chicago friends, bacon buns from Racine, the beauty of the downtown skyline, art exhibits at Lemont. I miss the lilting cadence of my native tongue. The postman drives his boxy car from house to house, sitting on the right side of the auto, British style. He doesn't even get out, just slips the mail into a plastic box shaped like a barn. Sometimes he crams it in as if it were so much stuff.

"Be careful," I told him once. "You're messing up my *Draugas*."