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And the Living Are Silent

1. Where the Dead Speak

Odessa, 1923: The executioners are all drunk, of course, and the snow is slippery as Prisoner Z stumbles to join the others before the firing squad. He pulls at his shirt, sweat-soaked, though he can see his breath. He's worn it a week now. Beside him, fellow prisoners reeking of urine murmur goodbyes and prayers. The sun sinks into clouds. Hundreds of miles away, his pregnant wife unfolds the wrinkled tablecloth like a map. The child inside her kicks. She sets the iron on its end and sighs. He tries standing tall, but his scholar's slouch, perfected over decades, defeats him. He fingers the holy card in his pocket. His wife shakes out the linen. The executioners aim and shoot. A dozen bodies fall. He lies there for hours, trying not to move. Finally, he opens his eyes, picks the dead man's hand off his face, and sits up. His left shoulder throbs. The Bolsheviks are long gone. In the darkness he smells the bodies on either side of him: loosed bowels, the odor of fear—even after death. Far away, his wife can't sleep. She turns to the open window and stares out at the stars, my mother inside her.

When I close my eyes and listen to the wind whipping the trees, it's like the tumbling of time itself: all periods coexist somewhere in our interior cyberspace as surely as every website we've visited lives on in the Cloud. All great wisdom literature tells you it's so, from the Kaballah to Quantum Physics to the Christian idea embodied in one of my favorite words: *apokatostasis*. If time is like a river that flows horizontally, as a poet once suggested, then the only way to transcend it is to pursue the vertical axis, to rise straight up, above it, beyond its reach. The stigmata of time wash away in a heartbeat inside the deep memory of the cosmos.

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Outside, Boston: murder, kidnappings, petty thefts, adulteries. Also, universities. MIT. Rush hour. But we hear none of it, because it's 4 p.m. and my mother is reading to us.

"Us" in this case is my father and me. He's ninety-one; I've just turned sixty. If this sounds a little strange, let me explain.

My mother enjoys what we, in our family, call forgetfulness. Doctors have another name for it, which I unfortunately associate with 1950s horror films. I say "enjoys" because, given the life she's led—growing up in the Soviet Union immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution, enduring World War II and all its losses, braving the struggles of a refugee, at first in camps, then in a new and not always welcoming land—forgetting has its advantages. She reads to us because she still can.

My father, sitting on the couch amid masses of newspapers, wears a sweater vest and jacket, even though he hasn't gone out of the apartment in days. The momentary calm pervading the room is deceptive. Any minute, the whole thing could explode. If I could see auras, the one enveloping my father would be a screaming red. As long as she's reading, we're safe.

I shift in my chair, which I've positioned behind my mother so she can't see me.

She leans her plump body into the book as if she's preparing to hurl herself into it—to drown in the roiling print. Wouldn't that make for the ideal happy ending? *Fanatical reader disappears in book.*

We're sitting in the living room of the apartment to which my sister and I have recently moved them, three blocks from my house. The museum-quality recreation of their place back in New Jersey, down to the yellow walls—as though we hoped they might not notice the switch—can't help reminding me of everything I'd once fled.

How have I found myself here again, in a minefield I thought I'd swept? Wars don't end when the treaties are signed. I never expected to be accused of being "a good son." Or that it would feel like an accusation.

My mother's voice rises and falls, giving every word its proper due.

On the one hand, her mind is very active. Her curiosity speeds ahead full-tilt. She asks us to explain every television commercial (who is *Lunesta*? what is a Kardashian?), whatever street sign catches her eye (why *did* the school cross the road?), and most headlines. Five seconds later, she asks us again. It's as if she's testing us.

I cast my eye around the room. Bookcases run the length of it. The remaining space is covered by three large paintings. The one of a village along the French Riviera was done by my godfather, a successful émigré artist with homes in Manhattan, the Catskills, and Paris. He was the first artist I'd ever met. It's partly thanks to him I chose to risk a writer's life. His free-wheeling, bohemian ways—wine at lunch, Gauloises all day, jokes for every occasion—were a lot more appealing than the restrictive world of rules and principles my father proposed. Later, I envied my godfather's son who, at six, enjoyed more privileges than I did at sixteen. My father, meanwhile, kept encouraging me to join the CIA.

Despite her condition, my mother reads incessantly. Ziggurats of books tilt by her bed and tableside. I'm always skimming off volumes and reshelving them to keep the towers from toppling. She loves reminding me (several times an hour) that, as a schoolgirl in Peremyshl, she and her friend Slava were the only two in their class with library cards. Homework assignments weren't challenge enough. The girls wanted nothing less than a shot at reading all the books in the stacks.

Today Mom's reading from the memoirs of a dissident. In our house, dissidents were celebrities. We followed their destinies with the intensity of astronomers chasing the latest supernova. Instead of baseball cards, we collected "dissident cards" with pictures, bios, and even home addresses of imprisoned members of the opposition, many of whom were women: Oksana Meshko, Iryna Stasiv-Kalynets, Halyna Didyk. In place of RBIs, they boasted years of hard labor served.

I'm sitting in my parents' living room, iPhone in hand, waiting for a call from the building superintendent. Water's dripping down the walls of the apartment and hallway below. The super has turned off the water running to my parents' dishwasher. Still, the water drips. But plumbing doesn't worry my mother any more than earthquakes or Tsunamis. That life is disastrous is no surprise to her.

I remember the dissident's name, and snatches of his story, though I haven't thought of him in thirty years. He's one of many people on whose behalf I, as a child, wrote letters to presidents and prime ministers around the world.

My mother's wearing one of her favorite garish floral-print blouses over a skirt that covers her ankles. Bent by arthritis, she's nevertheless managed to put on weight, thanks to her sweet tooth. You look pregnant, I said to her. Twins, she replied. Both blouse and skirt were

bought on sale at her favorite store, Macy's, which she still visits eagerly whenever my sister comes to town. Her loyalty to it is as close as she comes to patriotism.

Plyushch was a mathematician, interested in creating mathematical models of biological systems, in particular of mental illness. The wish to create a rational model of irrationality may well be the exact point at which the two merge. My mother is reading an especially harrowing passage in which Plyushch describes the NKVD—predecessor of today's KGB—slowly closing in on him, questioning his friends about his writing and conversations. Soon afterward, his friends began distancing themselves from him.

The phone rings. It's the super, giving me the number for his plumber. I ask my mother to pause a minute while I make the call. She stops, dropping her finger like a phonograph needle on the last word she read. I'm still on the phone when she asks if she can continue. Her satisfaction in performing this task is palpable. It makes her feel useful.

And, I don't mind saying, it's comforting. I no longer fear being smothered by that Bellovian "potato love." We've cycled through many phases in our relationship—from an infant's dependency to my wanting to disown her to this present reversal. Years ago, when she was in her seventies, she fretted constantly about growing older and needier. We were estranged at the time and I brushed her off by saying nursing homes were better than they used to be. Over decades, my parents' lives had gradually grown abstract to me—the spontaneous empathy I felt for strangers didn't extend to them. Our relationship became largely reactive, locked in adolescent attitudes and misunderstandings—on both sides. My brief visits were punctuated by screaming matches Dostoevskian in their intensity.

Go on, I say, after leaving the plumber a message.

For signing petitions in support of various human rights issues, including a protest against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, Plyushch was dismissed from the Cybernetics Institute. The secret police searched his apartment. Finally, in 1972, they arrested him.

Listening, I experience *déjà vu* as Plyushch's drama again threatens to overwhelm our mundane domesticity. What was happening to Plyushch in the late sixties and early seventies was far more important than whatever was going on in Cranford, New Jersey, where I was merely grappling with the usual stresses of the middle-teen years.

So what if last week Billy Weeks hanged himself in the cell where he was spending the night because the cops found drugs at the party he'd thrown while his parents were in Aruba? And there was Chloe, who'd gotten too drunk at a different party. We all know what happens to beautiful, overdeveloped fourteen-year-old girls who stay late, then pass out in a room full of drunken high-school boys. I wasn't there, at either event, but I sure heard about them, in the halls, at lunch, in the locker room. It was all everyone talked about, until Timmy dropped acid and had to be sent home because he was hallucinating millions of mini-versions of himself attacking him from the air like harpies.

Such stories hardly registered on the parental radar. Whenever I recounted tales of our local "dissidents," my parents shrugged and shook their heads: silly Americans, destroying themselves in the face of their near-total freedom. Everything is possible here, and drugs are what they choose? Don't they know life can so easily become a hell on earth? The devil waits concealed inside every moment for an invite.

They didn't seem to notice the alcohol and drugs being consumed right under their noses, by their own family; by me, for God's sake.

On my way over this afternoon, the lead story on the radio was about the Boston Marathon Bombing trial. The city is riveted, as am I. The defense had just begun making its arguments. They claimed that the living Tsarnaev brother was raised by a mother obsessed with her own history, and hopeful for future glory by proxy. Her son would go to Harvard and become an Olympic boxer. As these dreams faded, a sense of injustice, of being ganged up on—as has indeed happened to Chechens over the last centuries—replaced hopes for the future. When our righteousness over the sins of the past overwhelms us, what happens to the present? Does it dissolve under the weight of history, or does it finally resound with its full sonority and dimension? Is it possible that past and future echo as over and undertones of the present?

While she's reading, I get up and go to their bedroom. I put her sleeping meds on the side table by her bed. It, too, is piled high with books. Her bedtime reading centers on a different world entirely. The one to come. In addition to the prayer book (like most good Catholics of her generation, she never reads the Bible—doesn't she already hear the best parts recited weekly in church?), she also has a framed *US News and World Report* magazine cover image of Jesus which she kisses every night before sleep. Given the millions of images of Jesus

she could have chosen to worship, why this one? The table's littered with other images, and memorial cards from funerals of friends and family. Photographs of her mother and father hang above their bed. Separating them is an image of the Virgin Mary clutching baby Jesus. And let no man come between.

I drag the commode nearer her bed.

Plyushch was tried in absentia. Without ever interviewing the accused, a judge ruled him insane. He was sentenced to treatment in a psychiatric facility. There he was given antipsychotic drugs, such as Haldol, used in the treatment of schizophrenia, which made it impossible for him to read and, eventually, think. He lost interest in politics, family—in everything but the most essential bodily functions.

Eventually, Amnesty International took up Plyushch's cause. Thanks, no doubt, to considerable international pressure, he was released. My mother met him one afternoon in Israel, where she and my uncle had gone to plant a tree at Yad Vashem.

The plumber finally returns my calls. He promises to come by the next day. On my way out, I stop on the floor below to look at the weeping wall again. For a moment, I imagine the building itself shedding tears—of joy, grief, relief—for all the lives sheltered under its roof.

I pray for no disasters. Not today, anyway.

And, for today, my prayer is granted.

“Potato love,” is how Saul Bellow referred to that smothering motherly affection paralyzing its object with its fumes of warmth and guilt, a controlling kindness that's impossible to argue with. It can be profoundly satisfying and restorative: the bath of maternal possessiveness is a strangely soothing stimulant, until you find yourself drowning in it. You look up, wild-eyed, and see that the hand holding you under is your mother's. Now what do you do?

“No!” my mother barked, “I'm not finished.” “You'll have plenty of time afterward,” said the nurse. It was a Sunday afternoon and the maternity ward was humming with visitors. The contractions were coming more quickly now. “This minute,” the nurse insisted, reaching for the book.

“No,” my mother lay firm. “I’m almost done.” They transferred her to the gurney, tightened the straps, and wheeled her down the hall, book in hand. She wished they’d slow down. Pinging monitors, screaming patients, me kicking—all the ordered chaos of a busy hospital couldn’t distract her as she raced to finish before it was too late. The novel, Graham Greene’s *A Burnt-out Case*, takes place in a leper colony in Africa. I was a pillow for her hands while she turned the pages that would seal my fate. I’m sure I wanted her to finish so I could hear how the story ended, but I just couldn’t wait any longer. Instead, I felt the title’s shadow like a brand. *A Burnt-out Case*.

The triple decker in Roselle Park, New Jersey, where I grew up, was fueled by a coal-burning stove. Opening a floor vent gave you a bird’s-eye view of the fire at the building’s core. It was like peering into the center of the earth. My cousin Dierdre and I would lie on our bellies at the edge of our domestic volcano and sail tiny paper airplanes into the flames. We couldn’t understand how they didn’t simply escape their container and engulf the house.

The heat from that furnace, though, couldn’t come close to matching the fury radiating from the home’s inhabitants. Whole empires went up in smoke to fuel their journey into the nucleus of the new world—New Jersey!—which had been preparing for their arrival for centuries. Why else had this house been built?

It was a house full of stories. Not all were meant for children. They were mostly about the old country—a mythical land blessed in its geography yet tragic in its destiny. War stimulates an appetite of its own, which must be fed regularly, just like the furnace. To keep alive a world you can no longer see, may never see again, the heart requires constant stoking. Memories are like coal. For a long time I expected that one Sunday we’d climb into the Chrysler and drive from New Jersey straight to my mother’s old-world apartment to see the kitchen where a bomb once busted the wall while my father sat at the table picking his teeth.

In my thirties, I drove through the old neighborhood hoping to show my fiancé where I passed my first six years on the planet. The coal furnace would no doubt be long gone. We approached through Warinenco Park. As we drew nearer, I felt a mounting excitement: she

was about to see something I could never fully articulate or explain. My poet-friend Liam called it *First World*, that incubator whose imprint we spend the rest of our lives trying to decipher. But when I turned up Walnut Street, what I found was a vacant lot. The house had been razed; not a trace remained.

Which is how I often wish the past would behave, like a self-cleaning oven.

2. And the Living Are Silent

Cambridge, 1980: I'm hunched over a library table with two books in front of me: one is a geometry text; the other is Simone Weil's *Nationhood and Uprootedness*, about our human need for grounding—in a place and a community with, above all, meaningful work. I'm copying passages out of both books into a notebook. My script is tiny. I'm writing with my left hand even though I'm right-handed because I believe it's necessary to keep pushing one's self, to keep trying to stimulate new regions of the brain. Sometimes I write with both hands at once. The geometry text clears my mind of the clutter of opinion, sentiment, and imprecision. Simone Weil feeds my soul with reminders of our obligation to the Absolute. As if I could forget.

The setting for these exercises is Harvard's Widener Library—the Grand Central Station of libraries, with its high ceilings and firm, high-backed chairs. It's the largest university library in the world. Years later I'll meet a Czech dissident who tells me how, when she got out of prison, she was invited to give a reading in Cambridge. She'd been jailed for writing a play that was never produced and had existed in only three copies—the original and two carbons. Her host at Harvard brought her to Widener, where he was able to show her both carbons... she burst into tears: the original had long since disappeared, shredded by the secret police.

These days I'm in a prison of my own. Self-made, self-imposed. At twenty-three, I reached a fork in the road. Or rather, I made one. Done with grad school, I turned away from everything I'd worked for—a job in publishing, a literary journal I'd edited for six years, a relationship brimming with futurity. Though I'd begun publishing in my teens, I didn't

want a *career*; I wanted a life as a writer. To me that meant embracing the uncertainties of independence. A writer was supposed to be at odds with his times and his community, if he was to be of any use. The writers who mattered most to me were all dissidents who risked their freedom not for the sake of dissent but to keep, or create, an atmosphere breathable by all. The only things I needed were the relatively modest tools required by my trade: a pen, a pad, a typewriter, and some extra ribbons.

Widener was my salvation, offering a reprieve from my ruthless self. Back then, Harvard's doors were open to all. I walked through them daily, after work, and often stayed till closing—just as my grandfather once did, it occurs to me now, at the New York Public Library, soon after arriving in this country.

Done for the day, I pack my leather briefcase and walk slowly down Mass Ave., back to the YMCA in Central Square. I take the stairs to my room on the third floor. The beige hall is lined with thin, anonymous doors behind which we lead our rich, anonymous lives.

I drop my briefcase on the little desk and pull down the shade. My single bed is tucked below a small window that looks out on the roof. I turn on the desk lamp and aim it for the bed, across which I stretch out. For the next several hours I read—Merwin, Weil, the Bible—while drinking myself to sleep.

May light bounces off the picture window of the library across the street outside which uniformed kids from the Catholic school next door linger, cradling bookbags and skateboards. An ambulance screams at the rush hour traffic.

“Ready?” I ask.

“I have to find a jacket.”

“We're only going across the street, to the library. You don't need a jacket.”

I wait on the balcony, where, in warm weather, Mom passes a good part of her day reading and looking out for the mailman, whose drop box stands on the corner. Other residents must do likewise because by the time Joe's crossed the street, a gang have gathered at the hot spot. Most grew up in a time when “snail mail” was their umbilicus to the wider world. Few own computers. Every day, my mother waits for the

mail as if she was expecting a summons from the president. Of course, letters were the way she'd stayed in touch with the friends and family they'd left behind.

She emerges in her blue fleece jacket and asks, apropos of nothing:

"Do Buddhists have a heaven?" She has always taken an active interest in my spiritual life. The counterweight to war-hunger is God-hunger.

"They have many. Thirty-three, as a matter of fact. Thing is, they don't last. Everything ends, even heaven."

She nudges her walker toward the door.

"I'm ready," she says, just as I notice Joe crossing the street.

We stop in the lobby while Joe hands her the mail, bundled and banded.

"How's my friend?" he asks.

She beams. His kindness feels personal—even more so than the letters from Yves Rocher, the March of Dimes, and PAL. "Look," she says gleefully while opening another bar-coded missive: "They remembered my birthday!" Every day, I listen to her sing the praises of her friend Joe-the-mailman, who is thoughtful enough to take a few minutes with his customers. No wonder the mail arrives when it does.

At last, the open air! And every step a hazard. Crossing the street takes courage, even with a walker. "I used to be called Helen the Jumper," she recalls each time she gets self-conscious. She embodies who, once, she was: "My braids touched the floor. Now I'm nearly bald."

In the library, we settle at our table near the door.

"Will you get me a chocolate?"

"This is a library, not Burdick's."

"No, I remember. Over there," she gestures toward the children's wing, recently renovated with a grant from New York's former mayor, Medford-born Michael Bloomberg. "They sell very good chocolates."

"No. They don't."

"Yes they do."

"They don't."

"Can't you go over and just take a look? Please?"

"I'm looking. Nothing."

"Please," she says in a child's voice, and smiles.

I bring her a stack of magazines instead. She appears to forget her request as soon as she begins flipping pages. She especially loves *National Geographic*, but isn't above pouring over *People* and *Vogue* so

she can voice her dismay at current trends. Women in pants trouble her more than tornadoes or wars.

Her reading habit arose from necessity. After her two brothers were born, her bed was moved to the living room where her father stayed up half the night reading homework assignments. Unable to sleep with the light on, she'd keep him company with a book.

"Are you sure they don't sell chocolates? Are you sure?"

An hour later, we slowly make our way back to her apartment.

My grandfather and I are walking down Cranford Avenue to the river, gathering chestnuts. Along the way, my grandfather stops every few feet to pick up stray wrappers and bits of garbage. The tall, stooped seventy-five-year-old, attired in his fedora, sweater vest, and baggy gray worsted jacket is a sight on our suburban streets. My mother's father looks every bit the Eastern European intellectual he is. Educated at the University of Vienna, he'd been a specialist in Byzantine Art, before being lined up in front of that firing squad outside Odessa. Later he'd wound up in Moscow, where he's alleged to have persuaded Trotsky to let him travel with the Red Army so that he could remove valuable icons from churches before the soldiers destroyed them. On arriving in the United States in 1950, he took a job as a shipping clerk in Wannamaker's Department store. Evenings were devoted to his scholarly projects.

He had books in eleven languages—German, French, Italian, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Old Slavonic, Polish, Russian, and of course Ukrainian. Only a few were in English, which he began learning after arriving here. In New Jersey, the books didn't speak the right language.

Something crystallized the day, years later, I had to clear out his library. I was downsizing my parents' stock before moving them north. Who would be interested in the mimeographed literary journals or pamphlets describing the burial rites of the Scythians?

The Ukrainian Library at Bound Brook, adjoining the cemetery, took in the bulk of them. It seemed fitting—tombs for bodies and books. Both rarely visited. I recalled the motto above the entrance to the New York Public Library: *Where the Dead Speak and the Living Are Silent*. The librarians at the cemetery were gracious, taking many things I'm sure they had in triplicate, though some of the publications were

fragile, and some were tiny, stapled things. In many cases the covers had come loose. They were as battered as their owners. After finding homes for half his library, I still had to figure out what to do with the remaining thousand or so volumes.

Two or three hundred I could squeeze into our already overstocked basement. Another five hundred could be forced onto my parents' shelves in their new apartment. That left some half-dozen bags homeless. I had nothing to offer them. No room at the inn. And so, the night before trash day, under the cover of darkness, I carried them out and left them on the curb.

I wasn't without misgivings, not without guilt, not without a sense of despair. What was all that human effort for, the making of the books, and the collecting of them, the hoarding—to what end had he—and all those others involved in the production of books: the editors, typesetters, copy editors, printers, binders, distributors, and bookstore operators—labored?

I don't know why it came as a shock that what happens to people also happens to books. For some reason I thought books immune.

From the porch, I surveyed the bags amid a landscape of broken bicycles, mattresses, toaster ovens—refuse from half a century of life in these United States. The scene looked desolate as the ruins of a city. All that was missing was the smoke. I tried reminding myself that my grandfather had traded a continent for the right to breathe, think, and speak freely. He knew what mattered wasn't stuff—and, in the end, even books were stuff. What mattered was the people, the human term. Anyway, it had to be done—my parents could no longer safely manage the stairs to their second-floor apartment. This, their final displacement, from New Jersey to Boston, was for their own good. Even so, it's hard to look at the books lining the curb without feeling coldhearted, like a negligent parent.

Then it occurred to me that so long as there remains one reader who remembers it, a book hasn't died. And if that solitary, faithful reader manages to find another sympathetic soul, a miracle occurs. While not exactly a resurrection, it's the commutation of a sentence, with the real prospect of continuance. Surely that's why every library feels like a kind of whispering gallery in which our silence gives voice to the world.