

FOUR GHOST STORIES

The Broach

He explained the existence of ghosts through the laws of thermodynamics. Being transformed, not destroyed, he said the soul was a unique kind of energy: occurring before death and after, an amoeba that entered objects either living or not. He handed me his bottle, cheap whiskey, and I filled the coffee cup he'd given me, one his mother had taken from eastern Europe, a little pastel mug with two lines of gold and silver near the rim.

"You know you're sitting there and you feel something, like somebody next to you, and you can't necessarily explain why you feel it? That's your soul, it's communicating with other similar entities, other souls outside their bodies. I've got books, I can leave those to you too if you want them."

"I don't read much."

"Do you believe in them? Ghosts, I mean."

"I can't make my mind up one way or the other."

"It's logical, rational, it's easy to understand when you think about it."

"I can take the books if that's what you want."

He nodded very slightly. He didn't want me to know this was a relief to him. He'd felt the same with everything else he'd already given me.

We had sat together on his porch like this for years, even before my parents had died and left the house to me. Looking out from his plastic deck chairs, watching the few cars and people pass on the street, it felt like we were the scions of some kind of entropy. He said he had been dying for years, but his sallow cheeks, his blue lips had finally given credence to his claims. He took pills, but never in front of me, things that made his brain funny, he said, that made his stomach burn.

“I’ll tell you, it’s hell to die.” He shifted himself, wincing, on his chair. “Not the end of it I mean, but the disintegration.”

Many summer nights as a boy I walked by his house and saw him sitting on his porch, sipping a bottle of beer (or whiskey, on rougher days). I remember whole blocks of people under their porch lamps, or amidst their lawn torches, or beneath glowing lanterns, even in the dim cast of light from the street poles talking, laughing, and yelling. My parents too, old Slovenes, they drank Slivovitz neat and passed a bottle around to whoever stopped by, sweet little shots in the moonlight. Since my parents died I could not stand the thought of sitting alone on our porch, amidst their presence; I walked to his house instead, where we drank until the lights went off one by one in the windows down the street.

Like the rest of us, my neighbor was born a miner. He’d been one of the first hired when they started surface mining for taconite. He operated the control room, where he monitored each individual process for making pellets. A pellet’s chemistry was a delicate thing, he said: the blasted rock, what eventually was pulverized into slurry and separated into concentrate, contained a handful of oxides not conducive to the production of steel. Silica and alumina, those minuscule impurities in the ore, both assailed him and made his genius flourish—for controlling them controlled the slag, the glass that separated from the brilliant river of pig iron in the Indiana furnaces. Imperfect slag was energy lost, which was money lost; and so the pellets under his watch were as pure as he could squeeze out of his measurements and crew (his demands were something my father, who worked in another crew, vouched for). He had the tunneled focus of a man with a calling, like monks or priests in remote locations who prayed for the world, prayed until they were blind.

“The other stuff, all the research on souls, that was a hobby,” he explained. “Something to do when I couldn’t be at the mine.”

“When did the drinking start?”

“That’s not the question.” He scratched at his neck. “The real question is why it never stopped.”

He put his cup on a duffel bag he’d brought out with him that night, and took the bottle back from me, hid it below the railing when we heard a rattling approach from the nearby intersection—a mother pulling a red wagon with two children inside. The children were sitting amidst Walmart bags filled with what appeared to be groceries. We could barely see their faces in the late twilight.

“They say the booze made my condition worse, but there’s nothing conclusive,” he said after they passed. “Just guesses.”

“Like your ghosts.”

“But the doctors are probably right.” He turned to me, his cheeks as gaunt as something whittled from a stump. “If there’s any value to it maybe it’s a wakeup call for others.”

He carried himself with the preservation of a broken shell, bruises and breaks, long rueful laments, and I didn’t want to believe him. But booze had done the same to many people I knew. Rotting livers, drunken crashes, falls that caused bleeds in the brain. He asked me to promise him I wouldn’t become like him.

I asked him instead what he would miss. He thought long about this, to the point I wondered if he didn’t hear me. The simplicity of trips to Tulsa, he finally said, summer days north of the city, fishing in the creeks with his cousins. Our ancestors, he said, would have thought it was a holiday, like Spain or Greece, a place they might have read of in books. But it was just the plains north of Tulsa, only the grass and sun.

He asked if I knew what places were waiting past this one. If one of those places was like Spain, Greece, or Oklahoma, but without the possibility of returning where you belonged. Before I could answer him he unzipped the duffel bag and took out an object wrapped in a dish towel.

“My mother,” he began, unsheathing what appeared to be a varnished piece of metal. On its back he unclasped a pin and poked himself with it idly. It was a leaf made of silver, slightly curved at the ends, a representation of etiolation that ended in a stem of fine diamonds.

“A broach made by a jeweler in Trieste,” he explained, “before the city was taken back by Italy after the second World War. She got it as a gift from my dad, actually. Gave it to her before they married.”

He placed the broach in my open palm. Light and cold, I thumbed its sharp edges.

“Isn’t it sad,” he said, “that I have to give it to you?”

The Slovenian Women

The Slovenian women have knuckles like the burls of roots nicked with lawn mower blades. On rainy days they wear plastic over their hair, where water beads like clots before it runs over their shoulders. On sunny days they wear cloths or bandannas in the same way, tied under their chin, visors over their glasses, and blouses with two buttons undone on the chest. On other days their legs and arms hurt too much to leave their homes, and so instead they sit on the couch or in a chair, anxious about the things they cannot do.

They walk for miles to buy their groceries locally. They purchase eggs and milk, bread and butter; they have old recipes from Europe, others from Kraft boxes, the plastic wrappings from ham, or the backs of magazines. They cook in iron pots and cut with rusting knives, drink decaf out of pastel tea cups, stir stews with wooden spoons that are nearly black from heat. They remember a time when there was nothing to eat but fish and beans, soups that were nearly water, warmed on a stove heated with chopped birch logs. They remember when their American money was stored in a coffee cup beneath the sink in case they needed to cross the Atlantic again, and return home.

In their houses they have little to remind them of their parents and grandparents but photographs, dishes, cigarette cases, or perfumes stored in little vials, perfumes only dregs, vials opened only when they are alone, so they can breathe the scent and pine. They have boxy televisions on which they watch reruns of Lawrence Welk and Gunsmoke; they sing along beneath their breath, or tense as much as their muscles will allow, hoping for an outcome they know will not happen. At night the occasional suspicious car passes through the alley; bugs invade the whorls of the cabbage in the garden; raccoons sift through the alleyway garbage; men drink, mournfully, on a porch across the street. In the

morning they eye stairs too steep to descend before they reach the pig-headed conclusion that they must, if only for the clothes from the dryer, recently fixed by their sons.

On other days the Slovenian women walk to CVS to fill their medications and place the orange bottles in their purse to be sorted later, clumsy fingers fitting small pills into compartments for Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, consulting notes not written in their hand but by their sons or daughters, adults themselves with children of their own, loud people whom these Slovenian women love, but are eventually happy to see leave. They write reminders for themselves on pad paper to take their medicine, to walk to appointments, and to water their plants. Their own handwriting looks like scratches to everyone but themselves, almost a different language: half in their mother tongue (not English, they do not hesitate to say), half in symbols like those on the walls of pyramids, caves, lost fossils, or ossuaries at the bottom of seas.

Some still have their husbands, but many don't. Nearly all of their husbands were Slovenian also, miners, boilers, engineers, mechanics, and sergeants, for whom there was no Slovenia, only America and where their parents had come from, first generation Americans who, when the homes of their parents and grandparents were occupied by the Germans, when the Jews were collected and sent to camps and shot or gassed, finally volunteered to fight after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Of those men these Slovenian women have known, those who were not killed in combat, or didn't drown in fishing accidents, or didn't have hearts that exploded in awful, premature collapses, they remember them as the kind of wrinkled they themselves never expected to grow into: the sun-spotted, knock-kneed decay that attracts pity. When the Slovenian women pray the rosary they also pray to remember these men as their facsimiles in newspaper clippings or locket photographs—to transform the process in their brain that recalls them.

I know some of these women. Stuck in time, grandmothers or great, with stories of immigration and the journey west through the states. As time passes more of those women, whom I still imagine I need to impress, pass on into an existence of which I am dubious, but have been reared to believe. Instead, I choose to imagine them as unchanged as trees, standing beside homes empty of everything but furniture, sunlight, and the pictures of children who have long since moved from this place.

Your Research and Mine

Dust fell illumined through the slide projector's beam, from the many feet of another meeting above us at the community center. We breathed its familiar, bitter taste as Dr. Gabriela Menendez, that evening's presenter, clicked a button on her handheld device to show a new photo: an old man shoveling clods of earth from the ground.

“My research further suggests that stereotypes began to focus on Eastern European migrants—Jews and Slavs, mostly, and typically those stereotypes were reflective of the worries of American laborers. These new migrants were assumed to be strike breakers, or people who stole jobs from Americans.”

The event, advertised for over three months, was sparsely attended. All of the members of the historical society—myself and another man, and four women in the row behind us—had come with pens, notebooks, coffee, years of our own research, and an inability to consider anything other than our own conclusions. Though we had worked together to coordinate the talk, the society was nothing more than a small group of people with a selfish desire to learn about our own ancestors, strangers who really only knew each other's names. (Which is not to say we weren't friendly. All of us had gone for coffee a few times after our meetings, though each of those outings involved long stretches of little conversation mixed with heated conversation about politics, both American and Slovene. They all ended with excuses to leave, each one more ridiculous than the last.) We had been requesting Dr. Menendez, a professor of History at the University of Minnesota, and author of a best-selling book on Eastern European history, for almost a year; we expected a largesse of studied information, a skeleton key to greater insight that we could not capture ourselves. What we never voiced aloud, but knew about each other nonetheless, was our need to decode our genes—not a simple wish, but a genuine need.

“And that makes sense, doesn’t it? These were people desperate for money. There was often a language barrier as well, and because of it they were taken advantage of, paid less, and then hated for it,” Dr. Menendez said.

Mike, a septuagenarian with round glasses who sat beside me, raised his hand. “No, ma’am, I’ve read that the Law of 1921, and then again in 1924, significantly reduced the amount of people that came into the United States. I saw immigration was merit-based after that, which allowed wealthy Slovenes into the states.”

Dr. Menendez, roughly my age, twisted her mouth. “No, the largest emigrations occurred before those laws, which is exactly why those laws were passed. And they weren’t wealthy emigrants, they emigrated because they were poor.”

“Not all of them were poor,” he said.

“Maybe not all of them but a majority of them were poor.”

“Well no, I have, let me get it out.” He reached into his mail bag and took out a stack of papers. “There’s an article ... the author is Hladnik, let me find it.”

“I’m very familiar with Hladnik.”

“Right here,” Mike said, tapping the paper, looking up from his glasses. “‘My father was a very decisive man and had many jobs and saved money so he could start his own trucking business.’ That’s a wealthy Slovene, and a merit-based entry if I’ve ever heard one.”

“Yes, but Hladnik ... first, that quote doesn’t suggest he came to the United States with money, and second, do you have a date for his emigration? I was just quoting Sellers, who’s 1988—”

But Mike shook his head. “You’re not, no, you’re not representing it right, these were smart and successful people, you’ve got to go look more—”

“Damnit, Mike, would you shut up and let her talk?” said Dot, a woman with a snow-white coiffure that was almost perfectly round.

Mike turned around, taking off his glasses and pointing with the tip of them. “You should be able to have a discussion on other perspectives if you’re a professor!”

“We came to hear her talk, not you.”

“I know my research so don’t, damnit, don’t tell me the sky is green when it’s blue, that’s my point!” He appealed to the rest of us. “Is that such a bad thing to have a discussion?”

“She’s saying there’s no discussion because what you’re saying isn’t true,” I said.

“Oh what the hell does a kid like you know?”

Dr. Menendez stood awkwardly at the front of the room, tapping the surface of the desk she stood before with her blue-painted nails as we argued with Mike and then with each other, defending or impugning the various research we’d found, or not found, ourselves.

Later, Dr. Menendez waited for the others to leave before she packed her things. The slides belonged to the town library; I helped her fit them back into an office box with a loose-fitting lid.

“Don’t let Mike bother you,” I said. “He’s just got this idea of himself, but I guess we all do, right?”

She paused with a sheaf of papers in her hand, and looked incredulously at me. “I could give a shit less whether people disagree with my presentations.”

“Well, it was really good,” I offered. “Really well researched.”

“It was from my last book,” she said, almost angry at the suggestion.

There was something unusual about the energy of her rebuttal. From the podium she grabbed the blue pens we had provided her. She shoved them into her bag, unzipped and mostly filled, but at every new object she put away she glanced back at me.

Finally she turned around. “What else do you want?”

“I want to hear more about your research,” I said, and I meant it. I wanted to know as much as she was willing to tell me, because I wanted Mike to be wrong. I wanted our ancestors to be as fallible as us. As much as I wanted our history to be that of resiliency and strength, I also wanted to know that the responsibilities and expectations we had abandoned were not singular to us—that the possibility of failure was as much within our DNA as the probability of success.

That evening, over dinner, we talked about her. Her PhD in European History, how she adapted her thesis on post-USSR countries into a best-seller. Communism, she said, civil wars—that’s the gist. Though Latin American history is more interesting, she said, and more personally fulfilling, it isn’t where the money is in historical research.

I palmed my rum and water, leaning forward. “I’ve wondered the same, and yet your research, it’s so unique.”

“I mean by design everyone’s should be.” She drank Coors, her third since we’ve arrived, and on occasion, like then, she burped, politely, into the junction of her thumb and forefinger. “That’s, you don’t publish unless you build off the research of what’s been said. Obviously. But where I separate myself is in research that’s more interpersonal, right? Reading letters from sons who lived in Calumet, writing back to their families in Celje. The internet’s allowed me to do that, collect them and compare them to major historical records. I could, I can’t I mean, but I could probably confidently read three or four languages.”

I felt the rum swim in my head, my third also. “That’s intimidating.”

“It’s not so intimidating, I hope, as not to be inviting.”

I took her hand and held it much longer, and more firmly, than I should have. She looked kindly at me. She felt my fingers, cold from the condensation of my glass, and brought them to her cheek.

In the morning she left early, but called later, explaining that she didn't want to wade through traffic. She told me again about her city life: the people, the culture, walks for hours down blocks with diversity and life. She told me I should visit. For a weekend, she said, at least try a weekend. I collected my things in a bag and put it on the bench by the front door. I imagined myself with her friends, a man from the North Country responding calmly to their misconceptions. I imagined telling them about our intelligence and grit, about the eastern Europeans who live here now, and how they were the product of men and women that followed the siren call of hope across the Atlantic, through New England and the eastern Midwest, into the bitter swamp cold of the North. I imagined telling them how the winters harden us, and how the opportunity you earned here meant so much more because it was pulled and molded from the mutinous earth.

The months passed, and I came and went, taking a bottle with me, glancing at the dusty bag on the bench, like a promise I'd eventually uphold.

On Dying

The mining company bought him large red carnations. The smell of all of them, spicy and sweet, nearly overpowered the faint frankincense in the church. I thought of women covered in perfume, of hair rollers and cross necklaces, of cigarettes and long earlobes stabbed with old gems. The carnations were placed next to his casket, so near to his face that it gave his countenance an almost lively pallor, until they were moved into the church. Then he looked as I remembered him: wan and contrite.

Seven of us attended his service. The other six were his distant family, the oldest a woman of eighty-four I later learned was his aunt. After the service we dipped our fingers into the same fount of holy water, and unbidden she told me she grew up in this church. She'd been baptized in this same water, she said, pointing a burled finger at the burbling pool. She said the priest had poured the same blessed water over her forehead, a cold shock of true awakening, just a seven year old girl who had been raised Protestant until her parents had learned what was true.

Her daughter, a retired nurse, had to remind her she hadn't grown up here, but in Cleveland, and had been baptized Catholic as an infant.

"Well, I'm sure at least it was somebody's story," his aunt said.

After the service I sat with them for coffee and sandwiches. Four others had left; we and the priest sat at one end of a large cafeteria table. The priest told stories about his two years living in southern Iowa, the corn and the earth, gifts of bourbon and wind storms on the prairie that pulled snow into whorls as tall as water towers. They asked him about our winters. He glanced at me, saying they were cold but manageable, and so very different than his seminary in the Maldives. We nodded politely, we offered kind comments, we laughed. The air system hummed with the smell of incense and dust, the

taste of old metal and unchanged filters. In the grate of the fan a single ribbon, white but stained red at its knot, whipped smartly in the draft.

We left together, all of us except the priest. His aunt, who walked with an oak cane, carefully navigated the pot holes in the parking lot. His cousin explained how nice it was for both of them to have met me. How different I seemed, they said, from their expectations. His aunt smiled, but not kindly, rather like someone trying to appear engaged in something banal.

“It gets harder every year to go any far distance,” his cousin said, stopping at a gray Honda with a handicapped sticker in the window. “We even talked about not coming today but ... she was adamant.”

I grasped her mom’s hand. “I’m very glad you did come. He was a kind person, and a good person, too.”

She looked confused. “I’ve bad hearing. My right is a little better, say it into my right one.”

“I said that I’m glad you came,” I repeated, slowly intoning my syllables, ensuring each word reached the bottom of her ear.

She gave her daughter a quizzical look. “What the fuck is he saying?”

As they drove off I saw the flare of a match, and then the swirling threads of cigarette smoke pulled out of their windows.

At home, I closed my door to the long shadows of the house. I was nervous to be amidst so much presence. I searched the name of his aunt and cousin on my computer, trying to distract myself. I wanted to call them and tell them about the broach, I wanted to tell them to come back for it, but when I did not find their information I walked to the door, took the broach out of my bag, and turned it in my hands. Outside, the day was closing sharply. I’d asked Gabriela to come to the service, though I knew she wouldn’t. I thought about mailing it to her, an offering to help her remember me, but I knew she

would sell it or, worse, use it in her research. Of all the things that upset me, the idea of her demonstrating the broach as an artifact of history is what crushed me into a ball on the floor of my basement, amidst my concrete and clothes, to listen to the kick and hum of the dryer.

In the early morning I woke to the twee of birds like the calls of ghosts from transposed souls and out the window I saw trees shiver like hands without drink, the sun in the reflection of a screen door opposite like a formed fist, and in the empty intersection a mother pulling her children, their faces nearly lost in the Walmart bags around them, their eyes large and raw like the vacuous peace that follows a long, desperate shriek.