

Nic

Part One – Ignorance

I never knew my grandfather. The family name, the honey-like hue of our skin and our slanted foreheads were all we would ever know him by. Although this made his tangible existence seem mythical at times, by the laws of biological consequence, without him there would never have been our father and, therefore, there never would have been my brother and me.

My brother and I had heard the stories growing up, about how when Nana was 18 she left her Brethren family and married Nic, a suave European immigrant in his forties. Although they had my Dad, a few years later they split. Dad would have been about five. My nana was an elegant woman. She had honey-blond hair and striking green eyes which I had never seen without deep brown shadow. Even though life had not been its kindest to her, she never missed a hair appointment, perpetually kept her shoes in the same state which she bought them, and had a profound interest in the beauty of art, music, literature and other cultured fineries.

Dad said Nic had fled Romania with his friend when they were 14, in the middle of the war. They had stowed aboard a train, not knowing that it was occupied by German soldiers, when they were caught and sent to Dachau. His friend died and Nic survived, and when the war was over, he travelled to Australia and then New Zealand as a refugee. Nic became a coal miner after the war. I imagined him as brittle and angry, tired of life in a way that coal miners in books are, coming home covered in soot, wearing gumboots with a yellow helmet under his right arm. I imagined Nana serving a hot dinner and then scrubbing the soot from his clothes, which he would put

back on the next day and again become covered in soot. I imagined him bored and tired, living life out of habit, stuck in a cycle of mundanity which he despised but would never break. I imagined that this made him angry, and that although he loved Dad and Nana he couldn't be angry at the world so he was angry at them instead. Of course I never knew what Nic was like; to me he was as real as a character in a work of fiction. Understanding his means and motives was as pointless as trying to understand that of an undeveloped character. So I left this character amongst the talking lions, chocolate factories and wonderlands of childhood literature.

Dad had been to visit Nic in Australia once after Nic and Nana split but Nic wouldn't send Dad home. Dad would occasionally describe their time on the run in vague ameliorative reminiscence, talking about the days they spent together and the presents Nic had bought him. By the time the police found them they were somewhere in Perth and when Dad was brought home Nana didn't let him see his father again.

Two years ago, Dad received a phone call from a Romanian woman in Perth. She said that Nic was dying, and wanted to see his son. Dad did ask if we wanted to come, but it seemed almost tentatively rhetorical, just out of courtesy, so we continued in our all-consuming lives while Mum and Dad went to visit Nic. Dad had changed in the years since he had seen Nic. His smoking habit developed into late-stage mouth cancer and after two years of radiation therapy and surgery, he started a different life, becoming accustomed to his new voice and face. I wondered what it was like, Dad meeting his father again – whether through all those years Dad had stayed the five-year-old blond-haired boy to Nic, whether the bell jar of a lifetime made them unrecognisable to one another.

Mum called from Perth and said that Nic was charismatic in a vague Romanian way, that Perth was too hot, and that they would be home soon. I imagined Nic as a dubious old man whose sense had decayed with his elderly complexion. I imagined that he told elaborate stories of his youthful escapades, which the listener always knew had more falsities than truth, but they would laugh regardless. I imagined that he had a thick Romanian accent, and that when he laughed others would laugh. I imagined that he flirted with the nurses and exchanged words with strangers who could never decipher different consonants through his foreign-sounding diction.

Nic died while Mum and Dad were in Perth. They went to his funeral with the Romanian lady who had called. Dad said that a Romanian priest had chanted and Mum read “Sailing to Byzantium”. I imagined the small chapel with the three guests and the chanting of the Romanian priest. I imagined this chanting like Yeats’s sensual music of neglect and wondered if Nic had moments of unageing intellect, latent beneath his Romanian charisma. I imagined his nebulous character to be the dying animal, which he was harnessed to, all his worldly knowledge undergoing the metamorphosis of life, eroded to that of a small child. I imagined Nic’s unequivocal loneliness and how that only truly became evident after his death. Three guests in a small room so empty it felt large, trying to understand what they were mourning.

Part Two – Understanding

Nic had been reserved when talking about his family, but he had told Dad about his sister, Elisabeta, who he had left during the war. It wasn’t until after Nic died that some family lawyers discovered she had a grandchild named Costel who was about

Dad's age. Costel had been in contact with Nic in an attempt to leave Romania in the 1990s. Dad began to speak with him, and we decided to go to Europe the following year and visit him in Romania.

By the time we reached Romania we had already been traveling for three weeks. We had heard the Berlin Philharmonic play the laments of killed monarchs, visited the Reichstag and Brandenburg Gate. We had taken fragments from the Berlin Wall and felt the winter air at the frozen pond memorializing the massacred Roma peoples in the war. We saw the Vienna State Opera perform *La Bohème*, and the biblically white horses of the Spanish Riding School. We saw Caravaggio's Goliath lose his head to David, and Bernini's decapitated stone Medusa. We walked through the blackened, gothic towers of Prague Castle, and sailed up the river between Buda and Pest. I had listened to Shostakovich as we trained through Dresden and my brother and I had pushed each other over and out of the Vatican border. We walked through the blue mosaic entrance to Babylon, looked at the sky through the hole of the dome atop the Pantheon, and saw Michelangelo's lapis lazuli heavens in the Sistine Chapel. Through the beauty of these great cities we had seen the consequence of massacre and communism, brutalism, destruction, Catholicism, corruption, capitalism, memorialism, exploitation, systematization, and utter desolation. For the first time I understood books about war and corruption; I saw its effect on people and its effect on culture.

Romania was cold and primitive. We drove through many towns, exploring the snow-covered landscapes of Transylvania before arriving in Moldavia, the principality where Nic was from. Here we got a small hotel room in Bacau. The entrance and staircase were the only parts of the building which had been renovated in

a long time – a kind of elusive facadism, so if one only glanced at the building it looked much nicer than it really was. When we reached the top of the stairs, the freshly tiled walls gave way to bubbled wallpaper and the room had an odd smell which we couldn't source or get rid of. It seemed we were the only guests, and only a few small shops over the road sold food, but Mum wouldn't let us go by ourselves.

The following day we met Costel and his wife. They greeted us each with a handshake, a hug, and a kiss on each cheek and conversed – as if we had known them all our lives – about Romania and the hardships it had brought them. Costel told us about how communism had destroyed the city, and how he and his family sought a better life in Australia, which was why he had contacted Nic. Their English was fragmented, lacking the fluency needed to be always comprehensible, but Costel's ebullient humour was always decipherable. I thought that he might be quite like Nic.

Costel said that there was a small, poor village about an hour out of Bacau called Tupilați. This was the village where Nic was from and Elisabeta still lived. We drove to Tupilați that afternoon. The roads turned from tarmac to gravel to dirt, churned to a paste by car tyres. Eventually small white buildings rose from the ground. They were all behind fences or low concrete walls which had become engulfed by the ground beneath them so they would rise and fall unevenly from the earth's ever-stretching fleece of white snow.

I had always thought of white as a clean colour. At some of the Romanian chapels we had been to the frescoes depicted St Peter guarding a white heaven. A man explained to us that white was the colour of purity so the heavens were always painted like this.

Here, white just felt cold. It felt like the aching cold of snow on the ground. It felt like the gelid cold of the small houses with unlit chimneys. It felt like the boreal

wind that carried no birds or voices – the piercing chill of quiet. That was the most memorable white of all of them, the white of ambient silence: a cold lifelessness. There was no purr from cars; there were no conversational melodies from local people, just the taciturnity of stillness.

We parked by a small white house with a blue gate. The outside of the building was made from concrete and the paint was falling away from the wall as if repelled by it. The air smelled like manure and the snow was no longer differentiable from the dirt beneath it. As we got out of the car a striped cat scurried over the fence, its petite skeletal frame visible through its thin coat. Costel pushed the door open without knocking. It replied with the sound that swollen wood makes when reluctant to leave its frame.

The room was dark. The walls had been draped with deep red carpets and the floor was made from a quilt of hessian fabric, foot mats, and fabric scraps. I couldn't see what was beneath the patchwork flooring, but I could tell from the cold still biting my toes through the boots on my feet that it was concrete. The room wouldn't have been more than five metres long and three wide, and sitting in the corner on the far side was a woman. She looked old, very old. Her eyes were locked in a wide glassy stare and her motionless posture made her look as if she was no more than a stuffed skin. Despite all the experiences I had lived through, the contorted look on her face was one I had no recollection of. Whatever provoked her wild animal-like gaze was something that I had never felt before. "She is blind and deaf and speaks only a few words of English," Costel had told us.

He walked over to her, held her hand and kissed her on the cheek. She stared at the wall to his left and murmured sounds not from any language. Costel smiled at her in his well-humoured manner and said, "Hello Grandma, Nic's son is here. This is

his family.” She didn’t move; her glassy eyes glowed like the cat outside, cowering in the corner.

This was it. The family we had travelled so far to see, comprised of a woman so old she wouldn’t recognise her own reflection, and her grandson Costel who had never even met Nic. I couldn’t face looking at my father. I didn’t want to see the intense disappointment on his face or hear the way he grasped at threads of conversation around him, and most of all I didn’t want him to see me looking at him so he would know that I too felt his disappointment, and thus strip his dignity with one understanding look, validating his fear and failure. So I sat and stared at the wall like Elisabeta.

And then, through the door, came a woman wearing a woollen head scarf, who wouldn’t have been much younger than Elisabeta. She smiled with one silver tooth, walked over to my father and picked up his right hand with two of hers. Without letting it go she kissed him on either cheek and then embraced him. “Nicki,” she said.

Her skin, although old and battered, seemed to have grown soft with age like worn cotton. She possessed the unexplainable quality of homeliness and although I had never met her I wanted her to hold my hand and hug me too.

“This is Anika,” Costel said, “Nic’s sister”.

Those words felt so heavy I thought they would sink before they made it to my ears. Nic had another sister. One who he had never mentioned to Dad or Nana and who the family lawyers had never found.

The woman continued to say “Nicki”, the name of Dad’s dead father, stroking his hands still held in hers as if they were the years that had passed without knowing him.

Then another woman walked through the door. She took my father's hand from Anika and embraced him in the same way that Anika had done. We looked at Costel as if to a prophet for answers as he translated the world around us. "This is Iliana," he said.

They threw noises at each other, in their strange language, and then stopped as Costel spoke. He said that Nic had not one but three sisters – Elisabeta, Iliana and Anika – and there was a brother also, who was the youngest at 82 years old, the only other one who shared our last name. All of them had been born and grown up in this small, poor village and when Nic, the eldest, had left, he wasn't just leaving a war-stricken country but his impoverished family who loved him dearly and had never forgotten him. They had struggled through the war and communism's wake, being their own doctors, farmers and teachers. They had been told Nic had a son and they loved the blond-haired boy through what little they knew of him. These people had lived with nothing but family, and for that reason family was the most valuable thing of all. I think I'll always wonder why Nic didn't tell Dad that he had a family halfway across the world, why he deprived a small boy of all this love by never telling him it was there.

I stepped back from the scene as if an objective narrator in a story that wasn't my own. I saw the three old women and the journey they had followed. I saw Anika's timeless gaiety, Iliana's strength, and I saw Elisabeta like the carcass of a once grand fire that had burned brighter and warmer than all the rest. I felt ashamed of my waterproof coat and blond hair and I wondered how they saw me. I felt like a child, naive and ignorant. I had seen such great things and yet experienced so little. That is why I would never understand Elisabeta's wild stare. I would leave this village and go back to my home. I would grow up and grow old and by the end of it I would still die

a child. These people had lived while I churned through the perpetual mediocrity of life's dull sensations.

Only then did I see that I was the one who had been living in whiteness. I had always had this whiteness. It was where Nic, my grandfather, should have been, the old man who I let die on an island of his own; it was in the country where I lived whose history was so far from mine; it was in the clothes I wore, the language I spoke, and the life, so different from theirs, which I had grown complacent with. I had hosted this whiteness and it had blinded me from my past, present and future because that is what whiteness is – a vast nothingness. And without heritage everything is nothingness.

It has been a year now since we left Tupilați. I found comfort in books that I had read a long time ago. It is funny how the characters change with the years. I think about the trip often – not the golden chapels or Roman forums. Instead I still see Elisabeta sitting in that dark room, the shell of a person free of the pressure of time's steady breath. I imagine the Grecian goldsmith forging an unwaning golden heart, fruitlessly, as it is the mind that fades. And I see her, the decrepit animal, climbing to heavens whiter than snow. I imagine the golden men and women to be only golden shells and I imagine their wild metallic eyes welded in a permanent stare. I hear their conversation like the blabber of small children, only comprehensible to themselves, and the sound of their voices – all unrequited and unheard – like a chorus of unintelligible knowledge, not like a song, but so great that its superposition creates one great hum. One single note. Heard like the chant of the Romanian priest, while we are left, picking the white from life, left to find Byzantium.

