

The MANTELPIECE

Issue 6

Literary Magazine

December 2023





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a surprising history*



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Vera Design's jewellery is sold in 24 stores in Iceland and one in the Faroe Islands and on their website www.veradesign.is from where it is shipped worldwide.



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Joy to the World?

As we approach the holiday season, a time traditionally steeped in joy and celebration, we find ourselves at a crossroads. The world outside our frosted windows is not one of peace and merriment but rather one marred by conflict and pain. In this editorial, we ponder the poignant question: How do we embrace the joy of Christmas in a world embroiled in ceaseless conflict?

At its core, Christmas has been a beacon of hope and joy, a festive period marked by lights, laughter, and the spirit of giving. Yet, as we are bombarded with news of tragedies, from violence in distant lands to the more proximate societal struggles, the dissonance becomes increasingly palpable. How can we sing “Joy to the World” when the world itself seems devoid of such joy?

This dichotomy is not merely a seasonal contemplation but a reflection of the human condition. The holiday season, with its inherent message of peace and goodwill, stands in stark contrast to the relentless tumult of our times. But perhaps it is in this very contrast that the true essence of Christmas reveals itself.

Christmas, in its deepest sense, is not a blind celebration of joy in the face of despair. Rather, it is an acknowledgment of this despair, coupled with a defiant stand against it. It is a time when we are called not to ignore the world’s suffering but to confront it head-on, with a spirit of hope and resilience.

This perspective invites us to reconsider our understanding of joy and suffering. In the heart of Christmas lies the paradoxical idea that our greatest joys often stem from our deepest struggles. The holiday season brings with it a reminder that light shines brightest against

the backdrop of darkness. This is a theme that resonates deeply in the human psyche, cutting across cultural and historical divides. The Christmas story, with its narrative of a light coming into a dark world, offers a poignant metaphor for resilience and hope in the face of adversity.

Moreover, this season encourages us to look beyond the immediate gratifications and superficial merriment often associated with the holiday. It beckons us to delve deeper into the essence of what it truly means to find joy and peace. In this view, Christmas becomes more than a mere annual celebration; it transforms into a symbol of the enduring human

“Let us find joy, not as a fleeting escape but as a profound assertion of our shared humanity and our unwavering hope for a world at peace.”

spirit’s ability to find light in the darkest of times. It’s a time to reflect on the triumphs over the trials of the past year and to renew our faith in the possibility of better days ahead.

The narrative of Christmas, therefore, extends an invitation to view our world and our lives through a lens of hopeful perseverance. It’s a reminder that even in the bleakest moments, hope can not only survive but can also flourish, offering us a guiding star in times of turmoil. This holiday season, as we embrace the traditions and rituals that bring us comfort and joy, let us also remember the deeper message at the heart of Christmas: that joy is often born out of suffering, and

that in our darkest hours, there is always a promise of light and redemption.

Our role, then, as individuals in this conflicted world, is not to shun the festivities of the season but to redefine them. The act of celebrating Christmas in such times becomes a radical act of hope, a testament to our enduring belief in the possibility of peace and goodness. It’s a time to extend our hands in generosity not just through gifts but through acts of kindness, understanding, and compassion.

Moreover, the traditional imagery of Christmas—the sparkling lights, the shared meals—takes on a new significance. These are not mere trappings of festivity but symbols of our collective yearning for light in darkness, for community in isolation, and for joy in sorrow.

As editors and writers, our responsibility extends beyond mere observation. We must use our platforms to amplify this message of hope, to weave narratives that acknowledge the pain of the present while upholding the promise of a better tomorrow. Our stories, poems, and essays can become vessels of comfort and understanding, reminding our readers that even in the bleakest of winters, spring is possible.

As we navigate this holiday season, let us embrace the complexity of our world. Let us sing with full hearts, not in ignorance of the darkness around us, but in defiance of it. Let us find joy, not as a fleeting escape but as a profound assertion of our shared humanity and our unwavering hope for a world at peace. This Christmas, let the spirit of the season be our guide, not just in celebration, but in our continued quest for a more compassionate and harmonious world. □ *L.H.*

Exploring Dystopian Realities

Paul Lynch's "Prophet Song" and the Apocalyptic Literary Tradition

Eleanor Jiménez

“**P**rophet Song” by Paul Lynch is a literary masterpiece that has garnered significant acclaim, including the prestigious Booker Prize, awarded earlier this month. This dystopian novel transcends its genre, offering readers a compelling exploration of a world in turmoil. Lynch’s evocative prose and intricate storytelling paint a vivid picture of an alternate Ireland under fascist control, capturing both the intimate struggles of its characters and the unsettling resonance with contemporary global issues.

Dystopian literature has long been a powerful lens through which authors examine the dark and unsettling facets of our world. In recent years, a new wave of dystopian novels has emerged, tackling contemporary issues with vivid imagination. Paul Lynch’s “Prophet Song,” Cormac McCarthy’s “The Road,” and Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale” are three such novels that delve into dystopian landscapes. These books transport readers to nightmarish scenarios, forcing them to confront uncomfortable truths about the human condition and society’s capacity for both resilience and cruelty. In this essay, we will explore these novels, highlighting their unique perspectives on dystopia while drawing parallels in their themes, characters, and writing styles.

One common thread among these novels is the theme of oppression and the struggle for resistance. In “Prophet Song,” Lynch envisions an Ireland under fascist control, where the government’s totalitarianism erodes personal freedoms. Eilish Stack, the protagonist, embodies the quiet resistance of ordinary people caught in the web of political extremism. Similarly, in Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale,” readers are thrust into the Republic of Gilead, where women’s rights have been stripped away, and a theocratic regime reigns. Offred, the central character,

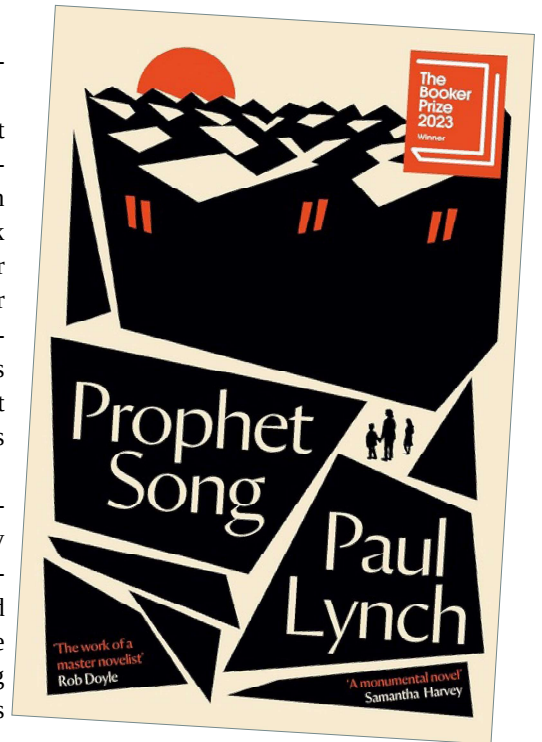
represents defiance and the pursuit of personal agency within a repressive system.

McCarthy’s “The Road” offers a different perspective on resistance. Set in a post-apocalyptic world, it portrays the bond between a father and son as they navigate a bleak landscape devoid of hope. Their struggle for survival in the face of overwhelming despair is a form of resistance against the harsh realities of their world. Each novel showcases the resilience of the human spirit in the most dire circumstances, be it through quiet acts of defiance or the determination to survive.

All these novels use their dystopian settings as a mirror to reflect contemporary issues. Lynch’s “Prophet Song” draws parallels with conflicts in Ukraine, Syria, and Palestine, highlighting the global refugee crisis and political violence. By grounding their dystopias in the familiar, these authors compel readers to confront the uncomfortable reality that the worlds they depict are not as far-fetched as they may seem. They serve as cautionary tales, urging society to address pressing issues before they escalate into the dystopian nightmares presented in these novels.

Each of these novels employs a distinct narrative style that contributes to its impact. Lynch’s “Prophet Song” uses the present tense and immersive prose, creating a sense of immediacy and inevitability. The absence of quotation marks and paragraph breaks amplifies the feeling of suffocation, mirroring Eilish’s experience in her dystopian world. McCarthy’s “The Road” offers spare, almost minimalist prose, reflecting the starkness of the post-apocalyptic landscape. Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale” uses first-person narration, immersing readers in Offred’s inner thoughts and experiences.

These narrative choices heighten the emotional impact of the stories, making readers feel like active participants in the characters’



struggles. They compel readers to grapple with the harsh realities and ethical dilemmas presented by each dystopian world.

In “Prophet Song,” “The Road,” and “The Handmaid’s Tale,” Paul Lynch, Cormac McCarthy, and Margaret Atwood have crafted dystopian narratives that resonate with readers on profound levels. They explore themes of oppression, resistance, and the human spirit’s capacity for survival and resilience. Moreover, these novels serve as cautionary tales, urging society to address pressing issues before they spiral into dystopian nightmares. Through their unique narrative styles and thought-provoking storytelling, these authors offer a sobering and compelling vision of dystopia, challenging readers to confront the darker aspects of our world while inspiring hope in the face of adversity. As we navigate our own uncertain future, these dystopian novels continue to remind us of the importance of vigilance, empathy, and the enduring power of the human spirit. □

More Than Fifty Shades of Gray

Ann Levin

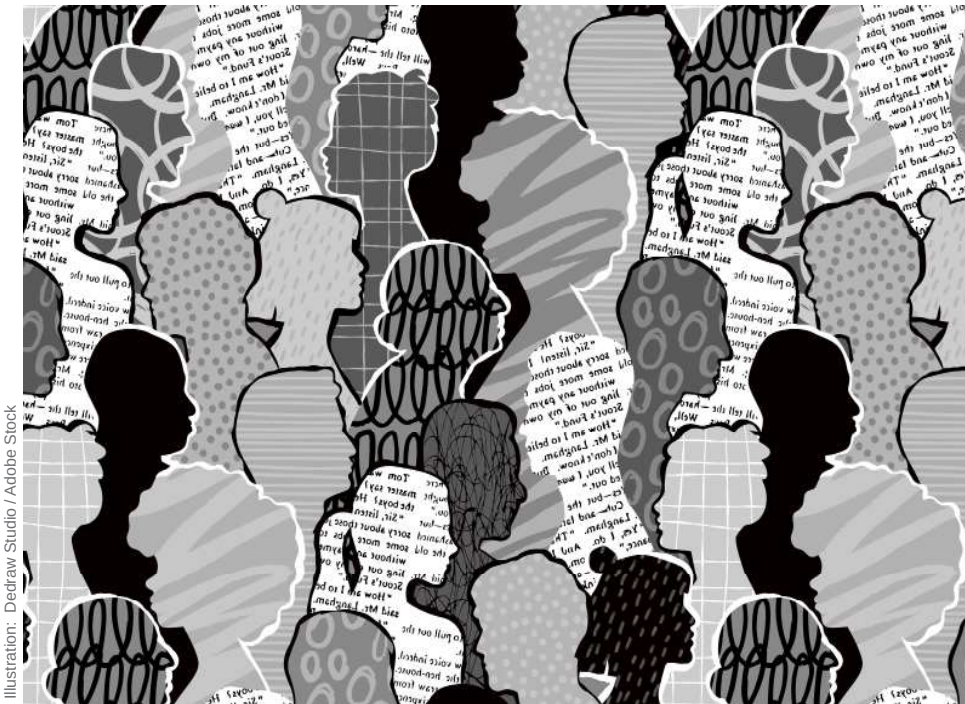


Illustration: Dedraw Studio / Adobe Stock

I still remember the first time. Walking down that street in midtown, ringing a buzzer, climbing a flight of stairs. Then, pushing open a door, a harsh chemical smell and a roomful of women in pastel capes, reading trashy magazines with silver foil hugging their scalps. It was 1995, I was 41, and after a few years of plucking out gray hairs one by one, I'd finally decided to dye my hair back to its original black.

I doubt I would have done it if it hadn't been for Stephanie. She lived down the hall from me during our freshman year in college. Back then, we were hippies, slumming around our well-groomed New England campus in ratty jeans and flannel shirts. We lost touch for almost 20 years, but she reappeared in my life after my husband and I moved to New York. In the intervening years, I'd become a journalist, meaning I still dressed the same. She'd become a corporate lawyer, meaning she spent \$20,000 a year on clothes.

The first night we got together for dinner, I couldn't take my eyes off her hair. Back in college, it was a kind of mousy, dishwater blond. Now it looked like it was painted by Botticelli, streaked with highlights of honey, caramel, and coppery red. You could stare at it forever and never get bored, picking out threads of vanilla and champagne among the golden-brown curls. When I asked her who did it, she said, with the absolute assurance of a Brooklyn-born maven, "The best colorist in New York." I made an appointment the next day.

Afterward, I remember being euphoric, gazing in the store windows along Fifth Avenue and seeing a completely different me, someone as capable, confident, and glamorous as "That Girl." If I'd been the hat-wearing type, I surely would have tossed it in the air. But soon, my old hippie ways kicked in. In college, I had believed in better living through chemistry—well, certain kinds of chemicals. Now I

worried about the kind of hair dye linked to cancer. Also, the cost was exorbitant, with touchups required every few weeks. Plus, I resented the long hours in the salon with nothing to do in those pre-cell phone days except thumb through a stack of already thumbed-over People magazines. So, I let nature take its course. And for whatever reason, perhaps luck, the gray confined itself to a single skunk stripe that swept back from my forehead. People would say, "Like Susan Sontag!" and I'd delude myself into thinking they meant my brain, not my hair. But eventually, when there was way more salt than pepper, I had to wonder whether it would hurt my career as a writer. My husband, never one to mince words, said, "Nah, if they reject your stuff, it's because they don't like it."

Then, a couple of years before Covid, my Pilates instructor told me that young women were coming into the studio with their hair dyed gray, with names like marbled, mushroom, antique, and greige, a combination of gray and beige. Apparently, gray was the new black. For a moment, I was pleased. Then I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and just went back to feeling old.

Yet that evening, leaving the studio at dusk, I was suddenly struck by the vast variety of grays in the world. There was the watery light, the lengthening shadows, and the charcoal-bellied storm clouds blowing in off the East River. Looking down, I noticed a freshly poured patch of concrete sidewalk. Glancing up, I saw a stone statue of a Buddha by the corner townhouse. As I watched the soot-colored squirrels chasing each other up and down the trees on my block, it occurred to me that there were far more than fifty shades of gray in the world, including my own, and maybe I was okay with that. □

Ashes Riding Shotgun (Grief Is a Cavern)

Amanda L Rioux

Driving home,
Freeway, my dad's
Ashes riding shotgun, I
Wonder if that is all we really are
In the end—just a box of
Dust, and some paperwork?

A life lived, a life
Gone.

Grief is a cavern threatening to
Swallow you whole, a
Blackhole sucking you in,
Against which you must
Fight or be forever doomed to
Sink.

You claw your way out only to be
Faced with the surmounting tasks of
What comes after: the phone
Calls, the letters;
(Remember to cancel the gym).
What do I know of inherited IRAs and the
Rules that come with them? Dollar signs and
ROTHs and "liquidation" go in one ear and
Out the other, no vacancy in my head to
House this information.

I am so tired.

There is no time to process
Death when you are pressed to
Process paperwork.

My kitchen table Ground Zero, a mess of
Forms and bills, "thank you" cards and \$230
Worth of stamps.

Grief is a cavern threatening to
Swallow you whole, a
Blackhole sucking you in, against which you must
Fight or be forever doomed to
Sink.

I still have not bought you an
Urn, Dad. So for now, you sit near the breakfast
Nook, and enjoy my morning coffee with me
In the generic
Box etched with the logo of the
Funeral home

(I'm sorry please forgive me I just have so much
Going on right now).

I fight my way through this unconquerable
Checklist, scratching out one item, two,
But ten more take their
Place like a never ending Hydra I continue to
Slay in a Herculean effort,
(It is exhausting)

Grief is a cavern threatening to
Swallow you whole, a
Blackhole sucking you in, against which you must
Fight or be forever doomed to
Sink.

Twilight Smoke

Zary Fekete



Photo: Mistervlad / Adobe Stock

The imposing Hungarian Parliament Building on the Danube River in Budapest.

I just got back to my Budapest apartment when my phone rang. It was Gabor. I answered, and the fact he didn't speak immediately but tearfully gasped a few times told me everything I needed to know.

"Where are you?" I said.

"The hospital," he said. "I got here just after work. I just missed him."

Gabor and I met each other on the first day of the second grade. My parents were missionaries in Hungary,

and those were the early years of the 1980s. In order for me to have a head start in learning the language, my father decided I should attend the local Hungarian elementary school. My memories of the first grade are almost entirely a blur. I couldn't speak a word of Hungarian yet, and I seem to recall just sitting in the back of the classroom, making up stories for myself, while the overworked teacher struggled to teach the other 29 students.

It wasn't until the summer between my first and second grades that I finally began to understand the complex grammatical web, which comprised fluent Hungarian. Children learn languages quickly, and I was competent by the time my second-grade year began. It was on that first day of second grade when I met Gabor. In many ways, we were destined for each other. I had no friends because I was American. He had no friends because he was a poor student in a country that prizes academics, having given birth to a large number of world-renowned poets, writers, mathematicians, scientists and assorted other oddballs like Erno Rubik, the inventor of the Rubik's Cube.

Gabor and I, misfits that we were, became fast friends and spent almost all of our time together. When my family moved back to the United States after I turned sixteen in 1989, Gabor and I promised we would write to each other, and, for a while, we did, but then life took over, and by the time I was starting school at the University of Minnesota, we had well and fully lost touch.

I followed Hungary's transformation from the socialism of the 80s through its first tentative steps toward democracy through the 90s and early 2000s. Back then, Hungary's current prime minister, Viktor Orban, was still a young man, fresh from his experience in Hungary's public school system of the 80s. Orban wrote his university thesis on the Polish Solidarity movement, and it is not difficult to imagine the hopes he had for Hungary's movement toward greater freedom as it edged out from the shadow of the Soviet Union.

In my early thirties, my wife and I moved back to Hungary so I could teach English in Hungarian public schools. We spent our first jet-lagged day in August 2001 trying to stay awake while walking through the aisles of a local grocery store. I slowly counted on my fingers the new items, never available when I was a boy: cornflakes, Snickers bars, Sprite, and foreign cigarette brands. A few days later, we were shopping at a furniture store, hoping to find a good desk for the small rowhouse we rented in the southern part of the city when I noticed out of the corner of my eye someone staring at us. I looked up and, for a moment, didn't know why this plump, curly-haired man had such a determined grin on his face. Then I recognized the green eyes and was immediately gripping Gabor's hand with the forceful pump which accompanies all deep Hungarian male friendships.

We picked up right where we left off from when we were sixteen. He launched into a detailed description of last night's football game where his favorite team, the green-shirted Fradi, destroyed their northern city rivals, Ujpest. It was as though no time had passed at all. For the next few years, we saw each other almost every week. Gabor drove nights for the Budapest municipal bus network, and often after my workday was done, I met him just before midnight and rode his route with him. As the bus crawled through the dark streets of the city, Gabor and I talked about our childhood and pointed to locations around the city where we once scrambled around as young boys. Gabor told me about his life in the aftermath of Hungary's journey out of the Communist years of the 70s and 80s.

When I returned to the United States in 1989 Gabor flunked out of high school. He entered a trade school where he learned carpentry. He fulfilled his two mandatory years of military service (just as Orban had done) and briefly worked for a construction company before he became a bus driver.

His tearful voice on the phone finally recovered with a few deep sighs, and

he was able to tell me the details. His father, a smoker for most of his life, was in the hospital for the last stages of a long-simmering lung cancer battle. The night Gabor called me was the night his father lost the battle. I was immediately transported back in time to any number of fall days after school in the second grade, where Gabor and I walked down sidewalks covered with yellow leaves, racing our Matchbox cars down rain gutters while heading home to his parent's tiny apartment. Gabor often fixed us a snack of fresh bread smeared with lard, sprinkled with red paprika.

We snapped on his ancient black and white television set and stretched out on the wooden floor of the living room (which also doubled as his parent's bedroom at night) to watch cheaply produced cartoons showing stories from Hungarian folklore and fairytales while we did our homework. Although I didn't realize it at the time, the cartoons were lightly veiled stories of propaganda, animated by Hungarian artists eager to share stories of the triumph of truth over oppression. By couching the messages in the form of an animated series for children, they were able to slip the messages under the noses of the Communist censors.

As was common for most Hungarian school-children, both of Gabor's parents worked. His mother worked for a government agency downtown. His father was a delivery van driver. Their meager salaries brought in enough money to pay the bills for their small, fifty square meter flat. A Hungarian mineral water distribution company owned the apartment, and because Gabor's grandfather worked for the company until his death in the late 60s, the company allowed Gabor and his parents to live in the apartment rent-free.

In the late afternoons, Gabor's father returned home after a day of driving freight around Budapest, usually cheap plastic toys manufactured in Yugoslavia, of which he always brought a few samples for Gabor and me to try

out. The toys were either plastic tanks emblazoned with red communist stars or knock-off Barbie dolls wearing the same shapeless blue smocks that every Hungarian shopkeeper wore.

His father had a personal rule against smoking in the apartment, so when he wanted a smoke, he went to the tiny balcony of the apartment, which looked out onto the backyard. There, he would light the first of many harsh-smelling Hungarian cigarettes, or, if he had had a particularly successful day of work, he might have purchased a pack of black-market Marlboros. Usually, he smoked a Hungarian brand called Szimfonia, each thin paper cylinder held together with poor-quality glue and packed so tight with Russian tobacco that Gabor's father needed two hands to hold the unit together in order to keep it lit and smoking.

It was during one of these late afternoon smoke sessions when his father told me about a proud childhood moment. Gabor's father asked us what we had learned in school that day, and when he heard our subject had touched on the military successes of the Soviet Union, he snorted and stared quietly at the back yard. He blew out a plume of grey smoke and then told us about his one experience with the failed 1956 Hungarian revolution against the Russians.

In 1956, he was a young boy himself, only eight years old. He lived in a small city in western Hungary. School was cancelled mysteriously one day in late October because so many young people were in Budapest for the protests. The town square in his home city filled with gossip about Russian tanks entering Budapest from the Ukrainian border in the east. The nation was angry. Soviet shelling had damaged many landmarks including the parliament building on the Danube River.

Gabor's father and his two friends heard someone say there was a battalion of tanks headed toward their town from Budapest. The town square was already hung with a number of Hungarian national flags, each one with the red

Soviet star ripped out of the center. Removing the star was a capital offence, and the young men in the town square were hoping for a chance to provoke the approaching Russians. News from the local papers suggested there may be help on the way from Western Europe. "Hold the line," was the repeated mantra among the young men. "The West is coming."

"Weren't you scared?" I said.

He shook his head. "All we thought about was the fight. We wanted to be Petofi."

Gabor and I glanced at each other with a small smile. Earlier that week in our literature class, we studied Petofi, the young poet war hero from Hungary's failed fight against the Hapsburg's in the nineteenth century. Snatches of a small, memorized Petofi poem floated through my mind.

"There is but one holy thing...it is freedom. For it alone ought we to dig our graves with our weapons, for it alone to bleed."

On their way to the town square, Gabor's father and his two friends grabbed home-made toy bows and arrows from their hidden play fort in the woods. They camped out next to a magazine stand filled with black and white newspapers filled with headlines. "REBELS FIGHT ON! MARTYRS? NO, HEROES!" When the Russians finally arrived, it wasn't a battalion, it was just a couple of army trucks with a handful of token soldiers sent to quell the rumors in the town square. Gabor's father and his friends pulled back on their bows, and their tiny arrows flew a few feet, landing harmlessly on the sidewalk. But, it happened to be at that moment that one of the Soviet soldiers fired a warning blast into the air.

The boys turned and ran back to their house, hiding behind the chimney in the kitchen, sure the Soviet soldiers were hot on their heels. When Gabor's grandmother heard why they were hiding, she chided them and told them to pray that the Russians didn't come looking. Gabor's father laughed as he told us this part of the story, blowing

another cloud of cigarette smoke into the evening air. We asked him why he was laughing. He said they were so frightened they forgot all the prayers the priests taught them. Instead, they kept repeating, "Welcome, Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you."

Images of his father blowing out his cigarette smoke flashed through my mind as I listened to Gabor on the phone. When his voice finally calmed down, I asked him if I could meet him at his apartment. I arrived there fifteen minutes later. Gabor opened the front door and finally cried out, with tear-streaked cheeks hanging loosely from his pale face.

It was here when I finally understood Gabor's worry. His father's body was being stored in the refrigeration unit of the hospital where he died. Gabor's small bus-driver salary barely covered his own personal bills. The hospital charged by the week for any bodies being stored in their facility. Because it was now just after midnight on Monday morning, Gabor technically owed two weeks' worth of "rent" on his father's body. He didn't have the money.

I sat with him in his living room while he sank into silence. I thought, not for the first time, about the vast financial disparity between our two lives. I was living in Hungary ostensibly for altruistic purposes, teaching Hungarian students English as a volunteer teacher, but, in reality, my salary was paid by a wealthy American NGO. Hungary in the early 2000s looked wealthier than it had in the 80s. Many Western companies now boasted Hungarian branches, and there were newly paved streets and sidewalks in the richer districts of the city. However, the real financial situation was more complicated. Little of this new wealth actually reached the average Hungarian citizen. Gabor and his girlfriend lived in the same tiny 50 square meter apartment he had lived in his entire life. This was the same living room where he and I watched propaganda cartoons thirty years before. The same home which, until yesterday, he shared with his father and, until last

year, when she died of liver failure, his mother.

I asked him how much he owed the hospital. After a long pause, he told me—\$ 75.

I nodded. Several details from the past few weeks ticked through my mind. My wife and I had planned to upgrade our cell phones soon. I had the extra cash we set aside in one of the back folds of my wallet, around \$200. I asked Gabor if I could call my wife. I said I wanted to tell her where we were. Silently, he nodded. I stepped out onto his tiny balcony and dialled my wife. As we spoke, I looked out at the backyard of the apartment building. It was almost entirely unchanged over the past three decades. I imagined cigarette smoke hanging in the night air, blown out from an overworked delivery driver telling war stories to two little boys. I hung up with my wife. I came back into the living room and handed Gabor the money.

He insisted we write out a contract for the money even though I told him there was no need. I pleaded with him to consider it a gift to his father. He refused. "My father would have wanted us to have this contract," he said.

Two weeks later, I met Gabor and his girlfriend on the banks of the Danube river by a small motorboat dock. Gabor purchased an hour's worth of boat rental time. We boarded the small craft, and a moment later, the waters of the river lapped rhythmically against the sides as we motored out into the center of the stream. When we reached the middle, Gabor took out the urn and scattered his father's ashes into the flowing waters. From where I sat, I could see Gabor's bent body framed by the Hungarian parliament building on the east bank of the Danube. I read earlier that week that Viktor Orban, in that very building, had signed a number of new initiatives with government officials from Brussels.

When Gabor stood after pouring out the ashes, his head touched the clouds in the sky above the parliament building. He smiled at me. With both his parents at rest, he somehow looked happy. □

Apple Pie

Amanda Zambrano



Photo: GradPlanet / Adobe Stock

The apple is cool and smooth under my fingers, mottled in shades of citrine and scarlet, freckled in chestnut and ochre. It fills my hand, my long fingers unable to wrap fully around it. It is large for an apple, even for the delicious Cortlands that grow so prevalently here in the wilds of Western New York State. A tattered leaf still clings to the brown, wrinkled stem, evidence of a farm market apple straight from the orchard rather than the prettified, waxed specimens littering grocery store coolers.

My knife slips in beneath the peel, shearing skin from flesh, revealing the crisp white interior. The peel furls away in a long ribbon, a curlicue of crimson and jade. It won't be long before hungry, grasping little fingers snatch those ribbons away to be munched as an oddly satisfying

snack. My mind drifts as my hands turn to their work, recalling a conversation with my mother from years ago.

I peeled my first apple in one long peel today.

I was thirty or so, married, far too old to brag about such an accomplishment.

Remember how you said grandma could do that?

Mom remembers, then laughs. *How thin is your peel? Mom could peel them so thin you could see through the skin.*

My face blushed in embarrassment. Large chunks of white apple flesh clung to the skin, evidence of a knife too dull and hands less-than-deft. It was a good first start, I supposed. But not one that would have impressed a woman of my grandmother's generation. The women of the Greatest Generation would have been shocked that

it took me thirty years to manage to remove the whole peel in one go.

I think of my grandmother peeling apples—something I don't ever recall her doing, although she must have many times. I have a vivid recollection of the last time I remember seeing her in the kitchen: it was Thanksgiving Day, although I can't remember if it was the year before she died or earlier than that. She reached the counter from the wheelchair, too weak to stand due to years of damage from the cigarettes she just never could give up.

Grandma was cutting oysters.

Raw oysters are a memorable thing, slimy and grey and alien. The oysters, once cut, were destined for oyster dressing—a holiday recipe passed down from mother to daughter for I don't know how many generations. Grandma sat there in her wheelchair, cutting oysters for dressing, laughing at the look of horror on my face.

When I close my eyes and try really hard, I can remember her laughter. It echoes in my soul somewhere, and when it does, I don't know whether to laugh with her or cry for longing. Not a month of my adult life has gone by where I haven't wished to talk to her. In moments of desperation, I've wondered if the Catholic belief in the Communion of the Saints is a valid one. Can my thoughts pass through the veil and reach her in heaven? Does the Holy Spirit act as a sort of cosmic messenger, just to let her know I love her and I miss her? I certainly didn't tell her enough when I saw her face to face.

I remember my aunt telling me once *you remind me so much of her*. I've never received a better compliment.

Thinking about grandma turns my thoughts to another story of her: the apples that would show up on her kitchen table,

unasked for yet sincerely welcomed, during the Great Depression. Kindly neighbors shared and shared alike in those days, slipping into each other's unlocked homes to anonymously leave extras of their bounty, ensuring that children didn't starve during days of poverty.

My apples, bound for a pie, bought out of my own plenty, lead to guilty reflections on mock apple pie – that mystical confection of the Great Depression made of cinnamon and sugar and Ritz crackers when apples were scarce. My life has known months when the money didn't seem to stretch far enough, where a bill was paid late because I needed the next pay check—but I've never known the kind of poverty that made pie out of crackers or that saw my children go hungry. I wonder if I would have had the fortitude to persist the way my grandmother did.

I'm not sure.

Peels are disappearing from my counter, and I hear the crunching of little teeth in the next room. I smile, thinking of my apple-loving boys finding treasure in what I would have put in the trash. I wonder what my grandmother would have done with them—for she would have wasted nothing.

As my knife splits apple flesh into thin slices, I remember the first apple pie I made. I can feel my cheeks grow a bit warm even twenty years later. My sister and I had invited two of our cousins over for dinner, just for fun. I made my first apple pie and neglected to peel the apples. I'm not sure why—perhaps because I'd made apple crisp without peeling them. Or maybe because I thought it would add nice texture or extra flavor. Maybe I was being lazy. Or maybe because I just couldn't remember how mom did it.

My mom, the queen of the delicious pie. She mastered pie crust in a way that mystifies most people. We live in an era of store-bought crusts, and people seem to think “they're just as good.” They're not. They simply aren't. Until you've had one of my mom's pies, maybe you just don't know. Nothing can touch the taste and texture of mom's homemade pie crust.

You didn't peel them? she'd asked,

incredulous. My face burned. *Dan and Nate are going to think this is the strangest apple pie they've ever had.*

To their credit, they never said a word. Teenage boys aren't exactly known for their discerning palates, which makes them forgiving recipients of the errors in teenage girls' cooking. I'm peeling my apples this time, and I'm thinking about that perfect crust chilling in the fridge. My mom taught me to make pie crust. I learned from the best.

Mom always uses Aunt Carol's recipe. The lost aunt, the one I know only through her sisters' memories and her daughter's radiant smile and laughing blue eyes. She was, they tell me, a wonderful hostess. Carol loved to have a good time. I suspect she laughed easily, a trait she shared with her mom. The pictures I've seen of her tell me she had my grandmother's coloring, fair auburn hair and blue eyes. But she had my grandfather's mischievous spirit.

Aunt Carol's recipe is for “No Fail Pie Crust.” I remember mom teaching me: so much flour, so much salt, so much shortening. Cutting in the fat until it resembles pease (whatever pease is). Shaping the well in the center for the water carefully chilled with ice. Gentle handling until a soft ball formed. If it was too sticky, add more flour; too dry, add more water. Until you just knew it was right. Although touted as a “no fail” recipe, it failed me more than once.

Early in my marriage, I attempted a pie crust – Aunt Carol's No Fail Pie Crust – in my tiny galley kitchen. The kitchen was hot from the heating oven and the lack of central, greenhouse-like with its myriad windows painted shut. The dough was soft, melting into my countertops, gooey, and sticking to everything it touched. I was left with curses and tears until my husband physically removed me from the kitchen and cleaned up my mess. He's cleaned up a lot of kitchen messes in the intervening decade, God bless him.

That was the moment when I'd finally had it with Aunt Carol's No Fail Pie Crust.

I felt like a black sheep. A complete and utter traitor, betraying a family legacy of talented bakers because I couldn't get that wretched no-fail-pie-crust to stop failing. I was betraying the memory of a woman

I didn't know and yet loved because she was held in precious memory.

I couldn't help it. I loved pie – I *still* love pie. I want to inherit my mother's imaginary pie scepter one day to impress at church potlucks and win blue ribbons at the county fair. To do these things, I must have my own no-fail-pie-crust. Sadly, it isn't Aunt Carol's. I'll never be able to pass down that family recipe to my children the way I'll pass down sugar cookies and molasses gingerbread men and pecan pie. It will be lost, like grandma's chicken and noodles.

When I found Elsa's No Fail Pie Crust in an Amish cookbook, combining egg, vinegar, and lard along with the standard flour, salt, and water, I'd discovered a miracle. It's Elsa's No Fail Pie Crust chilling in my fridge right now. There is an odd twinge of guilt as I think of Elsa and her pie crust replacing Aunt Carol. I suspect Aunt Carol would have laughed. I think she had quite a jolly laugh, but I feel a bit sad. A bit like grief, losing a part of someone you can't ever get back.

My bowl is filling with thinly sliced apples, Cortlands and Shizuka. The Cortlands are quickly turning brown, but the Shizuka keep their crisp white color. These are apple varieties my grandmother never knew, but they are some of my favorites for pie. Tart and crisp, without too much juice, so your pie isn't soggy. The Shizuka are a pale greenish-yellow, not the vibrant green of the Granny Smith. I'd never heard of them until two years ago when I found them in a large wooden crate at Pine Grove Country Store, a tiny Amish nook that I discovered just around the bend, settled on a hill overlooking the valley.

I notice a whole apple has now been swiped by the toddler, who is sinking his fierce little teeth into the ruby skin. It's a waste of an apple, sadly. In a day or two, I will find the rotten remains in an unlikely hiding place, along with the Cortland peel his brother gave him. Raising boys is not unlike herding squirrels.

I think about the women back and back and back my family tree, peeling apples just like I'm peeling them now. More proficiently, for certain. But they're also minding the toddler doesn't fall into the fireplace and ensuring the older ones aren't

wreaking havoc, while thinking about arguments with husbands and wondering if the taxes will be paid on time. They're smacking greedy hands swiping pie-bound fruit. Women reflecting on their own first apple pies, their own mothers and grandmothers, the beauty of the produce before them. Maybe swelling with pride at their ability to turn the commonplace apple into a treat to delight their neighbors at the church picnic; maybe wishing their feet didn't hurt or that the aches in their wrists would stop so they could pick up their mending or quilting later in the evening without too much pain.

Most of my reflections center around women in my mother's family tree. My aunts, my grandmother, my great-grandmothers. Farm women, for the most part. Coaxing bounty out of their lands by their husbands' sides for generations, all the way back before the founding of our country, back before sailing to an unknown land, perhaps back to the days of settling after generations of nomadic life.

Not so, my dad's family. City women, many of them. Glass factory workers, cigar makers, boarding housekeepers. Surely, they too must have cooked to feed their families, but perhaps in the rudimentary way my paternal grandmother did. I don't recall her ever peeling an apple. Her vegetables almost always came out of the freezer section of the grocery store. But she always had pudding pops and Neapolitan ice cream, and a cool swimming pool for hot summer days. I still make her snowball cookies at Christmas—the cookie I used to sneak by the handful off the Christmas lunch buffet table when I thought no one was looking.

But the part of me rooted to the kitchen, the needle and thread, the beauty of a freshly tilled spring field—that belongs to the maternal side of my family.

The apples are sliced now, piled high in a glass bowl. I roll out the chilled dough, relishing in the feel of the rolling pin, smoothing the mound into a disc. The tricky part, flipping it into the pan, goes without a hitch. There's something miraculous about this pie—perhaps pie wisdom embedded deep in my genetic code, generations of women turning

sheets of dough into pans passing on their knowledge. I prick the dough and sprinkle in a generous amount of flour to absorb the apple juice as it bakes.

I heap in the apple slices.

Mom always fills it until it nearly overflows. The apples bake down; they'll settle into themselves and sink a bit, so you have to fill it until the apples are nearly sliding off the top, balanced precariously on top of one another. No one wants a pie full of air.

Without a recipe—an unusual way for me to cook—I sprinkle in generous amounts of cinnamon and sugar. I watch the sugar crystals filter down through the apple slices, then jiggle the pieces about a bit to make sure the cinnamon follows suit. I dot the top with slices of creamy yellow butter, knowing it will melt and drizzle down into the apples and cinnamon and sugar.

With a wish and a prayer, I flip the top layer of pastry onto the pie. It has a tiny crack, easily hidden by the vents I cut into the shape of a five-pointed star, mimicking the seed chambers of an apple. I pinch up the sides, finger crimping the way my mother taught me when I was old enough to help in the kitchen but too young to do much that was useful.

Many people brush their pie crusts with egg. I don't. I find the egg tends to settle in crimps and become reminiscent of burnt French toast. I use milk. Just a bit, brushed lightly over the top and around the crimped edges. Then I sprinkle with sugar and more cinnamon. One can never have too much cinnamon and sugar.

That genetic apple pie wisdom, bubbling up from unknown depths, had already preheated the oven without referencing Betty Crocker, Erma Rombauer, or Chef Google. I slide the pie onto a sheet pan, place a pie shield over the delicate edges, and slip the pie into the oven. I set the timer as the toddler dances to the little tune the oven plays to inform me it has reached the proper temperature.

I hand the leftover pie dough to the big kid. He's going to make pie crust cookies. He opts to free-hand cut it into fish shapes and decorate them with orange and black

sprinkles. He calls them “fish biscuits” from a TV show he likes to watch. I catch him eating sprinkles and raw dough. *It will give you worms*, I think to myself.

The dough has raw egg in it. My mother always used to tell me dough with raw egg would give you worms. It's what her mother told her. Of course, we all know today that raw egg can carry salmonella, usually the result of improper handling or poorly raised laying hens at large commercial farms. Sixty years ago, my grandmother would tell mom the dough would give her worms—I think it was meant to deter a child eager to put her finger in the batter. Apparently, many years later, grandma told mom she was being ridiculous and “those girls” (that is, my sister and I) should be allowed to eat raw dough if they wanted. Grandmothers are always much more permissive than mothers. It is a privilege of surviving parenthood.

The fish biscuits slide into the oven next to the pie. I'm not particularly keen on eating them, but the big kid will be delighted.

The pie comes out of the oven, the crust golden brown with dark patches of cinnamon. I can see the juice bubbling away inside the vents, and the crust is so flaky it's crumbled a bit where I bumped it with my clumsy oven mitts. I snap a photo and send it to my mom, knowing she will join me in the glory that is a perfectly baked pie. It will be tomorrow before it cools.

I dream of pie for breakfast. Pie prepared by generations of hands, reddened and work-worn, not altogether unlike mine; wrinkled and aged, smooth and young; tiny and nimble, large and strong. The pie on my social media feed will look like pie; a good pie, but just pie. The pie, eaten by children and spouse, will taste like pie; a good pie, but just pie.

The pie I see, the pie I eat—that pie is a little family tree, full of stories and hope and heartache and laughter. That pie is a reminder of who I am and where I've come from, of the generations of women, most of their voices lost to time, who've made apple pies not unlike this one.

Is it my imagination, or will this pie taste all the better for knowing from whence it came? □

Warming Up

Rose Saltman

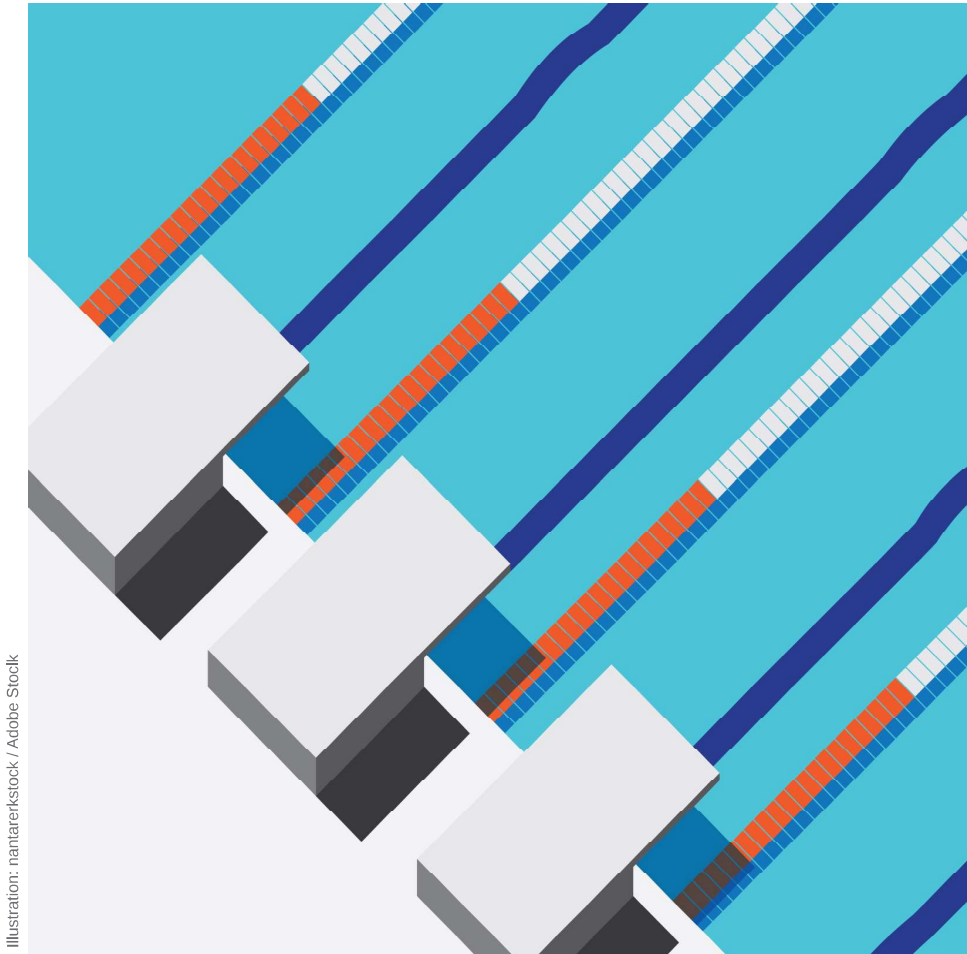


Illustration: nantarekstock / Adobe Stock

My phone reads 12°C, but it feels more like eight on the pool deck of the Manly Aquatic Centre on Sydney's Northern Beaches. In front of me, the 50-metre pool, heated to 26°C, beckons like an Odyssean siren. A westerly whips the surface into a squall and creates a domino effect along the length of the backstroke flags. I think how I could be at home under the electric throw watching a repeat of *Jamie's Great Italian Escape* on SBS' Food channel. On this side of the turnstile, though, a change of mind doesn't qualify for a refund.

I fish out cap and goggles from the green cloth shopping tote that doubles as a hold-all for swim gear. My clothes come off in shifts: shoes first, then woollen socks, which I stand on for the few seconds it takes to drop my denims and wrangle a beige Uniqlo jumper over my head. I rip off the long-sleeve thermal as one would an Elastoplast from a wound, feeling the icy touch of July land on freshly exposed skin. My last defence is a red, yellow and black swimsuit with a geometric design and 'Funkita' scrawled in all three colours across the front. The lycra hangs over my buttocks like a deflated balloon, a legacy of too many chlorinated laps.

I bullet dance to the edge of the shallow end, lower myself in feet first and feel the water steal up my torso. Droplets bead-like goosebumps on my arms. I adjust my goggles so that they will keep moisture out but not make my eye sockets look like a pastry chef has taken a cookie cutter to them. I prepare to launch, arms extended in the shallow position. The water catches my fall as I lean forward and start stroking in a single fluid movement.

I ease myself through twenty laps of freestyle at half pace. The warm-up is always at least a kilometre, the length of time it takes for that initial sluggishness, a feeling akin to swimming upriver through mud, to dissipate.

The black line is my guide, etiquette keeping me to its left even though there is no one else in the lane today. I use the solitude to reflect on tasks crossed off my mental list and those still to complete, revelling in how a decades-long routine of doing laps has given me discipline both in and out of the pool. Swimmers have a reputation for being good at completing tasks; once we get stuck in, they say, there is no stopping us. I know this to be true of myself: it's what got me here today, didn't it? My mind hovers over these thoughts, concentration suspended from the here and now.

Then I look down.

A few leaves have taken up residence on the bottom, along with the odd scrunchy and sweet wrapper. Thanks to the pool's east-west orientation and prevailing wind direction, more detritus seems to collect at this time of year than any other. If this were the sea, the water's density would have popped these items to the surface, the tides and currents making their path of travel as random as mine is deliberate.

There is, however, no such wanderlust for a fresh-water pool's floor dwellers, their fate resting with the vortical suck of a Kreeply Krauly.

Around the 1.5-kilometre mark, my muscle soreness gives way to endorphin-induced analgesia. I am feeling *good* now. I push myself to three kilometres, throwing in some sprints towards the end to get my heart rate up. The clock on the wall of the changing room reads 4.15pm. Within thirty minutes, the sun will slip below the horizon of the next suburb, and the overhead lights will flick on.

A swim coach puts a posse of teenagers through their paces in the adjacent lane. The youngsters have an easy fitness, ripped muscles and an air of invincibility. Their bodies are seemingly impervious to the cold. I envy their ability to rev it up on demand and sustain a pace of which I can only dream. I want to shout, 'Make the most of these years, for they'll soon be gone.' But I know they will not understand how short the spring of youth is, just as I didn't when I was their age. The swimmer at the back pushes off the wall in a flurry of foam, allowing me a clear passage to the ladder. As I haul myself up, rung by rung, the chill air touches my flesh anew, this time working from the top down.

I make a dash for the Ladies. The westerly has winkled its way into the open-air change room, whistling in the wind tunnel formed by a gap between the toilets and privacy cubicles. I set down my bag on a bench below an overhead heater and depress the rubber timer button. It takes three or four seconds of crackling and flickering before the heater's horizontal bars flare into a constant red glow.

I trot to the shower cubicles, choosing the one with a broken floor tile near its overflow drain. This shower has the longest run time on hot water, even if it requires punching the nozzle several times to sustain a continuous three-minute flow. The water spools over my neck and back, recalibrating my core body temperature towards equilibrium. I think about what I'll prepare for dinner. *Spaghetti a la puttanesca*, maybe. Jamie will have a recipe for that. Yes, puttanesca. I'm warming up just thinking about it. □

How Much Carbon Dioxide Does a War Release?

C. J. Anderson-Wu

How much carbon dioxide does a war release
through air raids, bombardments,
gunfire, and tank marches?

While scientists break their backs to find solutions
to remove it, little by little.
Environmentalists exhaust their means to shorten
its footprints, step by step.

Activists cry out at the top of their lungs to reject
unjustified developments, one by one, and
people try their best to adjust their lifestyles
to reduce its hazards, day by day.

All the efforts are undone as the war breaks out.

How much carbon dioxide does a war release
during the world's condemning, negotiating, or
failing and
grieving?

How much carbon dioxide does a war release
during victims' fleeing, seeking shelter, or
bleeding and
dying?

Christmas is coming – Be Prepared

Erik N. Patel

Ah, the unmistakable aroma of pine needles wafting through the air, mingling with the festive jingle of bells, heralds the advent of that most anticipated time of year—Christmas. Indeed, dear readers, this is the season swathed in joy, glittering lights, and heartwarming carols, or as I affectionately term it, our annual marathon of madness. It's when the halls are decked not just with boughs of holly but with the high hopes and expectations of creating the perfect holiday experience.

As we embark on this yuletide journey, we are immediately plunged into a whirlwind of activities. It begins with the retrieval of Christmas decorations from the abyss of the attic or the depths of the garage, an archaeological dig that unearths relics of Christmases past. Each bauble and strand of tinsel carries a story, a memory, a little piece of holiday history that is as much a part of our family tradition as the Christmas dinner itself.

The sound of Bing Crosby crooning 'White Christmas' becomes the soundtrack to our festive preparations. We endeavor to transform our living spaces into a winter wonderland, a task that often teeters between delight and despair. Amidst this, the fragrance of pine needles reminds us of the natural beauty of the season, an evergreen amidst the chaos, a symbol of enduring life and hope in the cold winter months.

It's during this time that our homes become a beacon of light and warmth, windows glowing with the soft light of fairy lights, guiding the weary traveler and the eager holiday guest alike. The sound of jingle bells, whether from a classic Christmas tune or the collar of a pet unwittingly drafted into the festive spirit,



rings in a season that, for all its frenetic activity, is anchored in joy, togetherness, and a touch of magic.

So, as we step into this season of joy, let's embrace the madness, the beauty, the chaos, and the calm. For it's in this unique blend of elements that the true spirit of Christmas comes alive, testing and triumphantly reaffirming our sanity, year after festive year.

First on the agenda is the decorating.

Unpacking the Christmas ornaments is akin to a time capsule of past decor disasters. Every year, we promise ourselves we'll stick to a theme. Minimalist chic? Rustic Winter Wonderland? But, as tradition dictates, we end up with the 'eclectic' look. A melange of tinsel from 1982, flashing lights that only work when they feel like it, and that one ornament your child made in kindergarten that's just... indescribable.

Shopping for gifts is next. Remember, it's the thought that counts, but somehow, we find ourselves elbow-deep in the annual consumerist scrum, wrestling for the last trendy gadget. Pro tip: start your shopping early, like in January, to avoid the December rush. Alternatively, embrace the gift of desperation and discover the wonders of gas station gift shopping at 11 pm on Christmas Eve.

And then there are the relatives, those wonderfully unpredictable characters, who make the holiday season resemble a dramatic stage play. These are the people we cherish, yet sometimes find challenging, especially when confined under one roof during the festive season. The arrival of relatives, particularly the in-laws, heralds a period I like to call the Hunger Games: Home Edition. A time when every family member, knowingly or not, engages in subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) battles for supremacy in various household domains.

Woman at the Automat Café

After a Painting by Edward Hopper

Lillian Heimisdottir

Then, there's the kitchen - a battleground for culinary dominion. Grandma, with her time-tested recipes, faces off against the avant-garde approaches of your sister-in-law, who just discovered cooking during quarantine. The air is thick not just with delicious aromas, but with the silent tension of unspoken culinary critiques.

Let's not forget the living room, where seating arrangements become a strategic exercise akin to a game of chess. The prized recliner becomes a throne contested by multiple family members, each vying for a few moments of royal comfort.

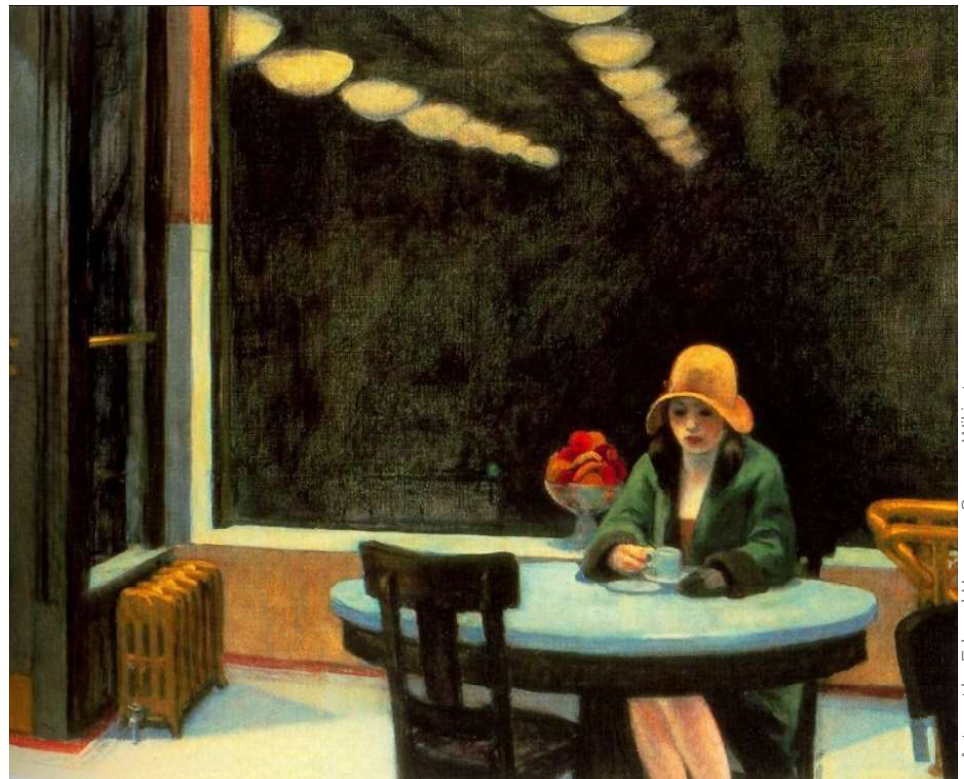
In this festive gamble, the stakes are high, but so are the rewards. Amidst the squabbles and the laughter, the teasing and the bonding, we find the true essence of family. These interactions, as chaotic as they might be, weave the tapestry of our holiday memories, each thread a story, a laugh, a shared moment of love and frustration.

Cooking the Christmas meal is where we all channel our inner Gordon Ramsay, with maybe a touch more cursing. Every family has their culinary traditions, be it a perfectly roasted turkey or a smoke alarm serenading the overcooked ham. But fear not, the fire department is on speed dial, and hey, pizza delivery is just a call away.

But let's not forget the true essence of this festive season—returning faulty gifts. The 26th of December, a day marked by long lines at customer service counters, is when we bond over shared stories of gift-giving misfires.

In the midst of this festive frenzy, we might wonder, why do we do this every year? But then, amidst the chaos, there's that moment. The laughter around the dinner table, the warmth of family and friends, the joy of giving, and the love that fills our homes. Suddenly, all the madness seems worth it.

So, gear up, dear readers. Christmas is coming. It's a wild, wonderful ride, filled with tinsel-strewn trials and yuletide tribulations. But in the end, it's the season of love, laughter, and a well-deserved nap after it's all over. Merry Christmas! □



Automat by Edward Hopper — Source: Wikiart.org

So now what? A last cup of coffee, and then what? Back home? Back home to him? After everything that happened? Or leave? Just leave? Take the train and be gone? Gone for good? It could work. It has worked before.

It has worked for other people, and it can work for me. People do it all the time. They just leave. They go, and they never come back. They start a new life in a place where no one knows them. They make a fresh start. So why not me? If they can do it, so can I.

Or I could go back. To him. Go back to him. Maybe he will change. Now that he sees that I can leave him if I want to, he will change. He has seen that I can leave him anytime, and that will make him change. He will change, and we will

be happy. Like we were in the beginning. We were happy. I loved him, and he loved me. We were meant for each other. We were happy then, and we can be happy again.

But he won't change. I know that. I know that for sure, and I shouldn't be fooling myself. He won't change, and things will only get worse. And I'm getting older. I'm getting older, and the older I get, the less likely it is that I will be able to leave him.

A year from now, I won't have the courage to go. I won't have the courage to leave him and start anew on my own somewhere else. I know that.

The train is leaving in half an hour. Just enough time for a cup of coffee. This last cup of coffee, and then I'll be gone. □

Livingston Remembered

William Fleeson



Photo: William Fleeson

The girl's white beach dress opened to the sternum, her braless heart-stopping breasts more than a suggestion. Her piled-up hair shone in rich blondes and browns. The slow movement of her legs down the dock matched the torpor of the late-day sun. The whole effect of her struck a contrast with the blue Caribbean Sea and the green needle of Guatemala's Manabique peninsula behind. At the nearshore side of the dock, two figures—the girl's boyfriend, and a cat—awaited her, neither one very mindful of her approach.

The young man formed a roll-your-own cigarette, his feet dangling to the water. The cat, stretched out in the crabgrass, purred quietly when the girl bent to caress it. The couple's voices carried twenty yards to where I sat with a beer in the hotel's covered outdoor café. Their French might have been Canadian or from somewhere else, I couldn't tell. I could hear the words but not the subtleties; I didn't want to go over and ask. I didn't want to seem too eager. They were here together. I was as alone as the cat in the grass.

My divorce had concluded eight months prior. My now-ex-wife moved far away from our Washington, DC home, across a gulf of five hundred miles. We had no children. It was, and remains, my only marriage. Its demise was a kind of death, as a friend, describing his own recent divorce, put it to me, in those first excruciating months after the paperwork was done.

There is a robust covariance between the proliferate suffering—the soul-death—and the rupturing sexual ache I knew in that waterside café. The antidote to mortality is vitality; such urges—the soaring carnal appetites felt, for example, by soldiers just before or after combat—are well-known. I am no soldier, but I might be called a survivor, if the term applies to a dysfunctional union, wifely manipulations and lies and abuse, a two-year separation, my unrequited pleas to honor our vows, the lawyer-succubus my wife hired, and the legal demolition of said marriage.

I had come from the US to Guatemala to do some freelance reporting, and, after a week of that, to stay and use the following week for vacation. To sort myself out. I had turned to the Bible for spiritual solace, and to learn from the stories of sufferers past. (The psalmists understood: “Answer me quickly, O LORD! My spirit fails!”). My little travel Bible was one of the few books I packed for that trip.

In Antigua, Guatemala's southern former capital, and a gringo-backpacker favorite, I met a certain Celine. She had been sitting alone by the pool. At the time I approached her she was waiting for a friend, she said. The friend never showed up; or, the friend who showed up, turned out to be me. Celine's English was fluid but pinched foreign-sounding. Her complexion signaled a Gallo-Roman provenance. Brown hair, brown eyes, high color. Her values landed somewhere amid the post-Christian individualisms

of the millennial woman—feminist, self-actualizing, self-preserving, self-absorbed. Eventually I mentioned I was studying the Bible. In Antigua she had done some volunteering and a yoga course. One could call her a hippie and not be wrong.

Celine was early into a Latin American trip of several months that would culminate with Peru. The trip was a return, if not quite a homecoming. She lived in Lima for a time as a very young child, until the Shining Path terrorist group upended the country and compelled her family's return to their native Belgium. Celine grew up in Brussels, speaking French, as she and I did together. She owned a Brussels apartment. Renting it out funded her travel. We traded numbers after she said she might pass through Livingston.

Livingston is a seaside jungle village in a right-angle pocket of coast, with Belize and the Gulf of Mexico to the north, and the Caribbean Sea and Honduras to the east and south. The town's name derives from Edward Livingston, the US statesman and legal genius who over the 1820s published

the Livingston Code, of which liberal-minded Guatemalans in that day were deeply venerate. Yet the town's founding population were Black Caribs, who landed there, in the machinations of the imperial Caribbean, after a convoluted odyssey of deportation from St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The group is called Garifuna. They were Livingston's majority until about fifty years ago, when rising numbers of Guatemala's Mayans, fleeing the country's four-decade civil war—more Latin terror—sought safety in the hinter-lands. Livingston's surrounding region, named Izabal, is among Guatemala's poorest.

In recent years the town has built a modest infrastructure of services for the budget-minded, backpacker-level tourist. And backpackers *love* Livingston. Costs are low. It's always warm. Pot is available. Backpackers bring more backpackers, like chain migration in reverse, from the first world to the third. For leisure instead of labor.

I finished my beer at the café as the color of the sunlight sank to butter-yellow. The

young couple moved out of sight, likely to find a drink or dinner in town. The cat was gone.

While in Livingston I fought the urge to plan much additional travel from the town's tiny port, which is its umbilical connection to the rest of Guatemala and the world. Livingston's paved and unpaved lanes, by definition all dead ends, supported only small motor vehicles: scooters, motorcycles, light-duty trucks, and three-wheeled tuk-tuks. The kind with the shell and the open sides. Tuk-tuks served as taxis, light-duty freight carriers, and shuttles for uniformed schoolkids. The town has no roads out—only boats. It was the fact of Livingston's isolation, which I found in a guidebook months before the trip, that decided me to go there. I was hoping the isolation could offer some instruction. It was the principle on which the Garifuna and Mayans had survived their own, historic disasters.

A similarly diverse fleet of vessels brought me to Livingston: vans, buses, and finally a commuter boat, called a



A view above the port of Livingston, with the Manabique Peninsula and the Caribbean Sea both visible in the distance.

Photo: William Fleeson



Photo: William Fleeson

A Livingston mural. The town celebrates its Caribbean and African heritage, unique among Guatemala's broader population.

lancha, from the Caribbean town of Puerto Barrios. I left Antigua at 4:00am. I woke up ahead of time, a good hour before leaving, given my usual crummy sleep before a long travel day. I had calculated a two-hour buffer between arrival in Puerto Barrios and the day's final lancha to Livingston.

A shuttle drove me and other silent faces the hour to Guatemala City, the dirty capital, known also by the shorthand "Guate." The bus station teemed, even before dawn, with travelers buying tickets, lining up to board, and hugging out their goodbyes.

The idling bus to Puerto Barrios broke down while still at the station. They loaded us into a tandem of big vans, pattered to another station somewhere else in Guate, and put us on a new bus.

We left, already well behind schedule, as the sun rose. I slept gratefully for two hours. The bus spent the morning moving along the river Motagua, and over the dry

plain of Zacapa; Morales, I saw after I woke, was cheap billboards and tangles of wires ready to blow. Nearing the coast the road accumulated trucks bearing logos like Dole and Chiquita, and their tropical harvests. This land was where the United Fruit Company called in a war—where the firm's commercial descendants still operate today—and from where sprang the term 'banana republic.'

We arrived in Puerto Barrios at two o'clock, just minutes before the final boat of the day. I ran to the dock, rucksack bouncing, stressed and hot and out of sorts. I made the lancha.

Livingston's port greets arriving boats with a jumbled clutch of docks, a playground of cheap concrete, and a short road leading sharply uphill to the town's miniscule center. The village topography consisted of just one other main street: besides the steep one from the port—with its shops

and sweaty heat and market days—there was a flat, coast-hugging second, shaded by palms, which led west to a string of concrete houses and hotels, including mine. The place was called La Casa de la Iguana, a garden that sheltered birds of paradise, cabanas, hammocks, an open-air café, and a half-buried lancha repurposed as a pool. Between the Iguana and the port sat the Casa Rosada, with its café and its dock stretching toward the Manabique, where I saw the girl in the white dress. Beyond the Iguana ran a narrowing road, shifting from pavement to hardpack to nothing, where the villages ended and the jungle resumed its dominion.

Given the heat, I made early mornings of my Livingston week. I'd rise around five thirty and walk the short distance to the east-facing public dock, hoping for a pretty dawn before the Iguana's kitchen opened for breakfast.

One morning early in the week the sunrise from the dock proved disappointing; an altar of swollen cumulonimbus clouds blocked the view. Near the dock's end lay a sleeping drunk, sweating through his tee-shirt. A flip-flop hung from one foot. From the top of his forty-ounce bottle of beer poked a little straw, like a child uses for a glass of milk. He personified, even while sleeping, the poverty and stunted development of this town.

As I walked back a more dignified scene rolled into view. A small Toyota truck, with a do-it-yourself soldered handrail above the flatbed, carried twenty Mayans, almost all of them women. They lived in the villages too far back in the forest to walk. They came to cook and clean in the homes of Livingston's more prosperous families, or to sell wares along the town's main street. In the truck they somehow all faced forward, holding the handrail or each other. They wore their black hair in pigtailed and had on traditional *huipiles*, the Mayan shoulder-cap tunics, explosive with color, as well as shin-length woven skirts and dusty flat slippers. Their faces held as much stoicism and bitter resolve as a socialist-realist mural. I would see this phenomenon—the commuter truck with its freight of villagers—several times every day. Next to them the green landscape faded; no ocean scene looked as brilliant as iron-jawed Mayans going about the grim attritional task of survival. My divorce seemed less onerous next to their trials. My grief would last a season. Their poverty was life-long.

I was sitting over coffee at the Rosada when Celine walked in. With European cheek-kisses she greeted me. She remembered my name and I hers. She had booked a few nights at the Rosada.

The afternoon at the balmy outdoor café brought an hours-long conversation. On books, on travel. On Celine's experience as a twenty-year-old solo backpacker, crashing at a single man's home in rural New Zealand, when she thought she'd be raped or worse. (The man desisted; Celine left in the morning, terrified but unharmed.)

Celine and I approached the intimacy one finds when two people on the road discover each other. Ours was a traveler's trust, one that is reinforced, just as it is kept brittle, by the taxicab-confession feeling that you'll never see this person again, so what the

hell? It is the young passers-through who defend that kind of disposable, hit-and-run sociability, despite its potentially mortal dangers, like those Celine had feared in New Zealand. Older travelers grow sick of this. It's part of what has aged them.

For levity I came back to the theme of books. Celine knew few of America's great writers. I wrote out a list of names and tore out the page from my notebook and passed it to her. I meant it as a gift, I suppose. The paper's lines held the very finest of my country's men of letters—men who have shifted history using only ink and paper. Twain. Fitzgerald. Hemingway. Sherwood Anderson, the Midwestern Chekhov, with his vignettes of Ohio village life. Their names and work mattered to the world, and to me as my personal favorites.

She studied the list, her mind saying their names with a French speaker's internal pronunciation.

Her expression soured and I asked what was wrong.

"The problem," she concluded, "is that these are all *men*..."

She looked no less deflated when I offered to draw up a sincere and equivalent list of only women. There were many I read and respected, I told her. But the bad impression I had made was now cast and set. Marked down, as if for good, with ink and paper.

The week passed quickly for such a slow-motion town. The Iguana's staff announced one morning that there was a scheduled electricity outage which would last all day; without relief from the oscillating fan in my room, I went to the beach. Playa Blanca—"White Beach"—is so named because it is the area's *only* white-sand, Caribbean-looking beach. The others, dogged by erosion, had mud and grass extending to the water's edge.

Another day I took a long walk west down a path to nowhere, passing villages and children who screamed with glee when this gringo bid them *Buenas días* from the road. I saw women in *huipiles* inside huts, patting tortillas over hot pans. In town the women and children were more demure, or less interested; their attention lay dormant until you looked ready to buy something.

Meals were unsatisfying and soggy with fry batter, even if a street fajita only

cost a dollar and change. I grew sick of drinking Gallo, Guatemala's over-malted national beer. Mexican imports like Corona and Modelo cost not much more. The backpackers hung out in groups every night on the end of the Rosada's dock. The evening breezes washed over us. The travelers talked and drank beer and smoked joints and cigarettes, and talked some more.

Celine could be fickle in her communication. Over the next couple of days she chose, sometimes pointedly, to do her own thing. I bid her an awkward, too-formal goodbye the night before I left, from within a group of French speakers that had gone out to dinner together. I had mentioned to Celine, at the same dinner, that I was dreading the back-to-reality dimension of my imminent homecoming. My Guatemala trip had offered escape, for a while. The distractions I found, I would leave in Livingston. I would have to resume my slow march through the first year after a disintegrated marriage.

I spotted the white-dressed girl a few times that week. She poked around with her boyfriend, or with a younger, female companion, whose resemblance suggested sisterhood. I passed them once, the three together, as they leaned over lunches of rice and vegetables at a streetside porch-turned-restaurant. The young man's tattoos showed in the sun; the older girl had a dolphin tattooed on the inside of her right ankle. I passed, head down. I had told myself earlier to leave a claimed woman alone.

Even now I regret not approaching her that week. To talk, nothing more. I might have discovered where her French came from. An encounter might have made me feel less depressed and more alive.

I cleared out of Livingston on a Thursday morning. Breakfast brought me to a waterside restaurant, with a dock from which a lancha shuttled people up the river called the Rio Dulce, to the town of the same name, and to mainland roads. I was the restaurant's only customer. Cranes and pelicans swooped over the water. Ahead of me stretched three horizons: the Manabique peninsula, the mountains behind Puerto Barrios, and the taller, more distant peaks inside Honduras.



The Livingston beachfront. Beyond it lie the Manabique Peninsula and the Merendón mountains of northwest Honduras.

The boat arrived carrying a load of Mayans and gringos, and who was aboard but Celine? She told me later that she had decided, late the night before, to quit the town early. I can't remember if I told her the time I was leaving.

From the front of the boat, Celine gave me a wink as I lowered my bag in with the other luggage piled up near her. I took one of the remaining seats on the vessel's hindmost bench. We churned an hour upriver. I watched Celine snap photos and smile at the jungle canyon the river had made. She was watching the distance, almost expectant, as if waiting for a friend.

The group alighted at Río Dulce town for our respective onward paths. I helped Celine and a few others with their bags. Most of the passengers, including Celine, went only as far as the café opposite and ordered coffee. I milled around the dock. My bus was to do the seven-hour haul back to Guate, where I had an early-morning flight home two days later.

After a long vicissitude of Latin time the bus driver called his waiting passengers—all young, all Anglophone, all gringo—over to board. I squeezed in a last word with Celine.

"It was wonderful to meet you," I said,

trying to sound less stiff than the night before. I looked, more intensely than I must have realized, into her brown eyes. "God bless you. And your trip to Peru. Be safe."

Celine paused, lips apart, as if trying to control a stammer. "Thank you," was all she said.

I got on the bus and sweated out the return leg to Guate. The next day I spent in museums and downtown restaurants. The city's climate gave a measure of reprieve from Livingston's coastal humidity. I tried to process the time just past: Livingston's water; its isolation; the scenes of poverty, like the drunk asleep on the dock. The Mayan women slapping tortillas and standing erect in the backs of trucks. The fatty food; the backpackers' privilege of transience. The apparition of the cat. The white-dressed girl. And Celine.

My flight left Guate at six am; I was up, sleepless again, at three. What Guatemala lacked in air conditioning, my layover at Miami-Dade airport had in overabundance, like its excesses of so much else: yoga pants, muscles, cleavage, ridiculous tattoos. I was served a bad Cuban sandwich at a bad Florida-themed airport café.

I spent that evening in a Washington restaurant, where my brother, father, and I had planned one of our periodic "Guys Night" dinners. We caught up on everything. On life. The life that makes us older, the life we speed through as if on some existential jetliner. These trips and conveyances change our lives, for they collapse so much experience, so many miles, into so little time.

Celine texted me three days after I got home. She had stayed in Río Dulce a while, though she had surely heard the local words of caution: that it was a rough place, full of hot and disaffected poor. Río Dulce was a Latin port town and part of the cocaine circuit that had doped and killed so many.

"I hope the re-adjustment to reality hasn't been too hard," she offered, with a nurse's ministrations. "I cherish having met you. Be strong. You are a beautiful person."

Celine's last message was, despite her free-spirit ethos, as unguarded as I ever saw her. I realized this only later, from a distance. It was a distance she intended, as vast as the gulf that now lay between us. □

West Village Tale

Michael Washburn



Photo: deBerarr / Adobe Stock

Ray Vance had not seen *West Side Story* and had no plans to see it, never mind that people could not shut up about the musical since it opened on Broadway a few weeks before. Mainstream fare did not interest him. On his first date with Ellen Marshall, a daughter of one of New York's wealthiest families, he pocketed the tickets that her father bought for them and instead took her to see an experimental play down on Sullivan Street. When Ellen's father invited him a few days later to come over for dinner, he accepted, thinking that things were getting pretty serious. Better still,

Harold Marshall promised an introduction to a friend who happened to be the editor of the *New York Review of Books*. They would talk about a mutual interest, Paul Bowles's tales of Morocco, and have a swell time.

But then, just one hour before they expected him for dinner, he got a phone call saying the editor was ill, and Harold Marshall wanted to hear all about the musical Ray and his daughter had seen together.

At this point, Ray was almost ready to blow his brains out. He could not cancel without being rude and alienating the parents of the most charming young lady he

had ever met. Seldom did a poor Wisconsin farm boy like himself meet and develop a mutual passion with someone from such a different walk of life.

He washed hurriedly, put on his least shabby clothes, and all but ran from his ratty apartment on the Lower East Side up to Washington Square Park. Ellen had a jealous, wealthy ex-boyfriend in Boston and had just spent a week up there. Ray could not help wondering whether she had run into him. This evening would be awkward enough without someone grilling him about a musical he had not seen. In desperation, he began to call out.

“Hey! Has anyone seen *West Side Story*?”

Strangers passed in the dimming air as he began to despair of catching anyone’s attention. He had lived in the city long enough to know that this was the way of things. The moment you make your appeal to strangers, they assume you want their money or cigarettes and spurn you even faster than if you left them alone.

“Hey, excuse me! Has anyone seen *West Side Story*? Anyone at all?”

The passersby ignored him, some no doubt assuming that he was trying to scalp tickets or maybe that he was a crackpot with a theory about how the musical promoted capitalist dominance and exploitation, or just as possibly, given its theme of love across sociopolitical bounds, that it had some kind of sneaky pinko subtext. He cried out even louder.

“*West Side Story*! Have you seen it? I had to leave before it ended; I really, really need to know the ending!”

They ignored him. He had two minutes left. He called out until he began to feel hoarse. A minute and a half to go, and he would be late, his standing in the eyes of Ellen’s parents permanently sunk.

“Someone, at least please tell me what *West Side Story* is about! The grand design, the plot!” he yelled as loud as he could.

A tall man with a horseshoe of white hair, in a tan raincoat and a pair of spectacles, did not stop but turned his head back toward Ray, who steeled himself for abuse.

“It’s a retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*.”

Aha! Now, there was a work Ray knew vaguely, having read it in high school and remembered bits of it. At once, his mind went to work, trying to recall acts, scenes, monologues, speeches, laments, threats, proclamations.

“Thank you, kind sir!” he cried, but the man was already lost in the miscellany of vague forms making their way through the dusk. Ray dashed into the park, ran to the dormant fountain in the middle, turned north, and in seconds closed the distance between the fountain and Washington Square North. Then he froze, realizing how silly and pathetic he would look to anyone waiting on the steps of the Marshall home to greet him.

With tremendous relief he saw no one was there and no faces peered from the

windows. He took deep breaths, composed his hair, walked west as calmly as possible until he reached the home, mounted the steps, and rang the bell. The door opened, and the face of Walter Bannon, the wealthy family’s *consigliere*, appeared.

“Good evening, sir. Follow me.”

He would have liked to linger over the magnificent paintings in the lobby and compose himself a bit longer but promptly followed Walter down the hall. The first floor was bigger than Ray had imagined. They passed a couple of chambers and reached a large room occupying the middle part of the floor. This room had scarlet walls, and its sources of light were an oil lamp resting on an elegant blue marble mantel and an ornate chandelier with bulbs like identically formed icicles in concentric circles. The table was long but not too wide, decked out with a cloth the color of Saint-Tropez sand and set with porcelain silverware that Ray guessed had been in the family since before the nation’s birth. At the center of the table stood three tall red candles in a brass holder. The room could not fail to provoke a visitor to wonder about all the other symbols of status and excesses of opulence that lay in the halls, rooms, and alcoves of a residence so many passed by on the street but so few would ever enter.

Here they were to greet him. The young woman wore a deep blue knit sweater and a pair of khaki trousers as if wishing to reinforce the air of unpretentiousness she had fostered so often before. She could have worn habiliments of fabulous opulence had she wished, and her choices spoke to a familial and interpersonal dynamic that Ray had barely begun to try to grasp. She smiled warmly, suggestively at the guest. The father had alert gray-blue eyes set in a ruddy face and that icky hair of some middle-aged men that serves its purpose of covering a scalp or the better part thereof and knows it has no further use.

He wore a crisp black sports jacket over an ocean-blue dress shirt, a blood-red tie scored with silver stripes, and a pair of dark slacks above his loafers. He directed at Ray a gentle look tempered with suspicion and a protective instinct toward the young lady. Beside this man

stood a blonde, an older version of the girl, with a face on which creases and lines had encroached aggressively for the past few years, but more stylishly dressed in a deep ruby cocktail dress with a black sash over a taffeta V-neck blouse with a floral design around the lapels. Her black high-heeled shoes glinted in the subdued light, challenging the viewer to stare at them. Ray realized he was looking at her outfit longer than was socially acceptable when Harold Marshall stepped forward and extended a hand.

“Good evening, Ray. We’re honored that you could join us for dinner.”

“Thank you, Mr. Marshall. Since I got this invitation, it’s been hard to think of much else.”

“Please, call me Harold. Ellen tells me you are a nice boy but have an obsessive streak. Almost to the point that she is concerned about your mental health.”

Harold could not have seen it, but the smile on the face of the young woman behind him and to his right broadened into an ingenuous grin. It seemed she wished to communicate that Harold was a tactless person but that here was something she and Ray and his friends would have a good laugh about later.

Kate Marshall stepped forward.

“I’m so very pleased to meet you, Raymond. Ellen can’t stop talking about how much she enjoys your time together.”

This information was too much, especially in light of the deficit of knowledge Ray feared would make him sweat and tremble uncontrollably. He managed to smile.

“Thank you, ma’am. I think we’ve barely begun to unearth this city’s secrets.”

“You’re welcome. But there’s one person here I think really wants to thank you herself for all you’ve done.”

Ellen stepped forward, her lambent hair in a bun and her lips a ruby oval, and planted a kiss on his lips. Her own lips felt alive and supple without being soft, and she kept them there just long enough to suggest that she could not do as she wanted here and now, but there was more, infinitely more, where this came from. Then she edged back a few inches and stood holding his wrists in a light grip.

“Thank you, Ray.”

He wanted to frame the moment of that kiss in his mind and play back the memory for hours, but that would require a focus close to meditation, and it was time now to sit down at the table. Harold led everyone in a brief prayer, and then a servant in a smart white outfit came out of the kitchen with a gleaming metal canister, pulled the top open, and began distributing slabs of chicken in lemon sauce on the plates. Another servant came out with a basket full of crisp bread, followed by yet another with two bottles in hand, a cabernet sauvignon, and a pinot grigio. Ray opted for the red.

“Well, Harold. I’m so very sorry that your friend has fallen ill and couldn’t be here this evening. I take it he has an interest in that segment of the literati that has found a spiritual home in Morocco.”

Harold nodded and sipped his white wine.

“Oh, yes, Raymond. Morocco. That does seem to be the *fad du jour* for both good and bad writers.”

Ray felt the force of this dismissive remark like a blow. He had hoped to keep the discussion on Bowles and Morocco. He wanted to tell Harold that Morocco was an intriguing place with a rich culture and history but dreaded sounding didactic while venturing into a subject he knew little about. Kate spoke.

“Do you want to move there?”

He could not tell how serious her question was.

“Oh, no. I sure couldn’t walk away from my life here.”

“Ellen says you have an ailing father back home in Wisconsin and that it’s increasingly tough for him as he gets older. It must be hard for him with his son living in New York, let alone Morocco,” Harold said.

This remark, with its wildly different tone, carried the sting of provocation. Then again, maybe that was just Ray’s sense of it, knowing what he knew, what few others suspected, about the content of his relationship with the man in the weathered house on the plain. To Harold it might have been a fairly innocuous thing to say.

“My father has an outstanding caretaker and social worker who’s helping him turn his life around,” Ray said, and almost

added, *What do you take me for? I wouldn’t dream of leaving him all alone while pursuing a young man’s dreams here in the city.*

Harold nodded again.

“Anyway, getting back to my friend, the critic. He’s really big on the use of improvisation. Don’t take anything I say at face value.”

Harold and Kate exchanged knowing looks while Ellen gazed across the table at Ray calmly. The light in the room seemed dimmer now except for those points of light on the mantel and those hanging from the ceiling. Ray wondered about the reaches of space in unseen rooms and corridors in this venerable house and whether they were hermetic compartments where you could live unsuspected for days or weeks as the owners of the property went about their business.

“I would still very much like to meet your critic friend when he’s feeling better; he sounds quite smart,” Ray said, hoping to err on the side of politeness as he groped for a way to keep the conversation on one thing and not another.

Harold nodded.

“I’m sure he’ll be charmed to meet you once he gets over this thing. In the meantime, Kate and I are glad to have someone here with an intelligent perspective on the most popular musical on Broadway.”

At this moment, the wine in Ray’s mouth lost its taste, his intestines felt heavy and clogged, and he was aware, in a way he had not been before, of Walter’s presence at the table. Walter sat beside Ellen on the other side, eating his food with small bites and watching the guest calmly and appraisingly. The light in the room was dimmer than ever, and the shapes that stood out were the four others, but none of them applied as keen a scrutiny as the *consigliere* to whose counsel Harold and Kate almost always listened. Ray wanted to run off and colonize one of those unseen rooms elsewhere in the house, in which these mortals were short-term visitors.

“I don’t think I ever thanked you properly for the tickets. It was an honor to take Ellen to see the show. What an amazing spectacle.”

“Yes, that’s what everyone who’s seen it tells me. I was hoping for some insight. There’s tons of spectacle, and that’s all well and good, but tell me what you think the writers were trying to say.”

Ellen wore a poker face. The others looked at Ray with interest. He paused a moment, then spoke carefully and distinctly.

“The message is clear. We can’t let tribal loyalties overwhelm and subsume our duties and responsibilities as members of a polity. Our decency as citizens, if you will. I’m sorry we don’t have your friend, the critic, here because I’m sure he’d agree with me that it all goes back to Shakespeare.”

Harold nodded sagely as people do when they are struggling but want to appear to understand. Kate seemed intrigued.

“Shakespeare?” Walter said.

“Yes. A perfect analogue. Take the scene where hotheaded Tybalt is seething with hate toward ‘that villain Romeo,’ and Capulet tells him to show courtesy to Romeo as long as the latter is in Capulet’s house. The head of the house rivaling Romeo’s, and ostensibly one of the villains of the play shows some of the noblest qualities. So, in *West Side Story*. You can’t fail to see the message here. The nobler instincts can’t withstand the onset of passions as the gang war escalates.”

Ray said this in reply to Walter but looked directly at Harold.

“So, Ray, the message is that it doesn’t matter if you’re the head of a rival street gang or a family; you put your citizen’s duty first,” Kate said.

“You’ve said it beautifully.”

“And one of the rival gangs fails to do that.”

“I think it’s fair to say that the warring gangs of the West Side both fail. They have ethnic and cultural differences, but in the end, they’re all too human. And paradoxically, their inability to transcend those differences is a human failing that unites them. The dynamic is highly similar to Shakespeare’s.”

Harold nodded sagely again.

“Please explain.”

“Of course! In Shakespeare’s play, Tybalt will not or cannot listen to cooler

heads, and he kills Mercutio, and then Romeo himself snaps and succumbs to a homicidal rage. He has to kill Tybalt to avenge his friend. He's as human as anyone. That's the tragedy."

"An interesting point," said Walter.

Ray went on.

"As Juliet laments, the mess would be bad enough if things stopped there, but they escalate further with the banishing of Romeo. It's quite remarkable, from a sociological standpoint, how the warring street gangs in the musical follow a similar pattern."

"It's funny that we keep coming back to Shakespeare," Kate said.

"Yes, it's almost like you can't understand the musical without the play."

Walter chuckled.

"Why go see the musical? You could just sit at home and read *Romeo and Juliet*."

Ray laughed to show his appreciation of Walter's wit.

"But then you'd be missing an amazing spectacle. Really incredible. The dancing, the singing, the direction and the scenery. They've redefined the concept of the musical and what it can do. Oh my gosh, you've never seen anything like it in your life."

"That's what people tell me," said Harold.

"Go and see it, by all means. It's worth spending more to get the best seats in the house."

"I think I may see it, Ray, based on your review. But I'm going to be brutally honest and admit that I've never read *Romeo and Juliet*."

"Oh, Harold, I don't think that will dull your appreciation of the musical one bit."

"But they're so complementary, Ray. You've made that point well."

"Oh, I'm just showing off. I don't even know how Shakespeare came into this discussion. I really do encourage you to go and see the show."

"But can we really get away from Shakespeare?" Walter asked.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"What I mean is, he seems to be the profounder source thematically."

"He is relevant. I just don't want to show off."

"Sure you do."

Feeling everyone's gaze, Ray tried to show forbearance.

"Okay. Please indulge me. I think that *Romeo and Juliet* does have things to say to us as we go about our lives here in Manhattan in the fall of 1957. The play has never been more resonant or its messages more applicable, particularly when it comes to showing decency, courtesy, and fairness to people from a different clan or milieu or walk of life and listening to one's heart rather than falling in line with societal or familial expectations. To my mind, the most eloquent speech is the brief one late in the play where Juliet says she would rather leap from a tower than marry Paris or face serpents and bears and lurk amid the skeletons in a charnel house. I honestly can't think of a worse torment than having to spend your life with the wrong person. And Paris may come forward in any number of guises and through any number of spoken or written media to assert his claims over your heart. You will know Paris when you see him and must resist his charms as you would those of a serpent."

As he said this, he did not once look at Ellen. But in his peripheral vision, he noted her unflinching stare.

Harold rose from the table.

"Well said, young man. I would like to propose a toast to Raymond Vance, whom fate has brought to our humble residence this evening, and who has repeatedly demonstrated his kindness and generosity in his relations with our daughter."

Harold, Kate, Ellen, Walter, and Ray raised their glasses and clinked them together. Ray did not spare himself a good look at Ellen's smile and the mischievous light, unmistakable even in this dim setting, in her deep brown eyes.

Unfortunately, he did not get to spend the bulk of the remainder of his time in the Marshall home this evening with Ellen or even exchange more than a few words. After another glass of wine, Harold took Ray into a lounge with dark red walls, a smaller chandelier, and framed images of the New England countryside, including a number of locales where Ray gathered that the Boston branch of the family had deep roots and had owned or recently sold property. As soon as they had sat down facing each other in plush chairs, Harold treated Ray to a long, digressive, often

hard-to-follow excursus on the vagaries of the stock market and the president's fiscal policies and the plans that Harold hoped would come to maturity. Sputnik had badly shaken a number of his investor friends, Harold said, but maybe it was just the type of short-term panic you have to expect given how dangerous a place the world is and the cyclical nature of things. Still, it would be good to have a bit of clarity on the likely course of the great-power rivalry and how things would shape up. No one, no one at all, was happy or confident about the way things were going down in Cuba. Politics aside, Harold was quite curious about Ray and let on that he wanted to know where Ray got his knowledge of things literary.

When Ray and Harold emerged into the hall and met the others, Ellen planted another kiss on his cheek, longer than before and ever more charged with the promise of things to come. She took him aside, and they talked briefly about the week ahead. He proposed that they should meet at a café, the one where they had drinks on the day he lost his job at the publishing house, though, of course, he did not mention that affair. She said yes, but a minor crisis in her workplace meant that there would be another maddening delay. They would meet late in the coming week. He wanted to ask her about her time in Boston and, what she had done and whom she might or might not have seen up there but did not dare broach the subject here and now. A resolution was not to come just yet. He would have to go off to Wisconsin, to a house on the plain and a lonely old man, Ray's ailing father, with the memory of that kiss in mind and the hope of finding out more about Boston and what she might or might not have kept to herself, at a point in the future when the information would come at a price he could manage.

And yet, the final moments of this evening would stay with him forever. At the conclusion of the visit, the Marshalls and Walter Bannon stood in the lobby smiling and thanked Ray profusely and sincerely for gracing the home with his presence. With little doubt of the impression he had made, he walked home in the cool air feeling more confident than he had in years. □

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Heimir Steinarsson



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