

## You're the angel

When I was born a dog started barking in the hall of the maternity ward. Dr. Srećko ripped the mask from his face, tore out of the delivery suite, and said *to hell with the country where kids are born at the pound!* I still didn't understand at that point, so I filled my lungs with a deep breath and for the first time in my life confronted a paradox: though I didn't have others to compare it to, the world where I'd appeared was terrifying, but something forced me to breathe, to bind myself to it in a way I never managed to bind myself to any woman. Recounting the event later, first to my mother, and then my father, and as soon as I grew up, to friends, they brushed me off, said I was making stuff up, that I couldn't have remembered anything, that there was no way I could've started drawing ontological conclusions the first time I cried.

At first I was pissed they thought me a liar, and I wasn't above spilling a few bitter tears, hitting myself in the head, and yelling *you'll be sorry when I'm dead!* With the passing of years I calmed down, having figured that this world, of which I already knew a little and could compare with my experience and my dreams, was predicated on mistrust and the peculiar human tendency to think you a total idiot whenever you told the truth and take you seriously the second you started lying. This aside, relatively early on, when I was about five or six, I came to the conclusion that everything connected with death was a downer and so decided to shelve my threats of dying, at least until I solved the problem of God's existence. God was important as a possible witness; he'd be there to confirm my final mortal experience and he could vouch for me that I hadn't lied about the one in the delivery suite.

*Does God exist?* I asked my grandma Olga Rejc, because of anyone I met in those first six years of my life, she seemed most trustworthy. *For some people he does, for others he doesn't,* she replied calmly, like it was no big deal, like it was something you only talked about all casual and indifferent. *Does he exist for us?* It was most diplomatic formulation I could manage. The thing was, I'd already noticed how my family placed exceptional value on my socialization efforts and loved me talking about stuff in the first-person plural: *when are we having lunch, when are we going out, when are we coming down with the flu . . .* at least at the outset I thought questions of faith would be best set in this context. *For me, God doesn't exist,* she said, *I can't speak for you though.* It was then

I learned about truths you only spoke for yourself and in your own name. I was pretty okay with all this, though less than thrilled I hadn't been able to resolve the God question off the bat.

Ten years later I still wasn't straight with God, but I'd figured the moment Grandma decided he didn't exist. It was early spring, everyone was out somewhere and I'd stayed back at home alone. As usual I started rummaging through their wardrobes. I never knew what I was looking for but always found something, something linked to the family, Mom and Dad, Grandma and Grandpa, something they'd tried to hide from me from some reason. Their private histories were so dark, or at least they thought them so, and my investigative spirit so very much alive, that after a few months' work on their biographies I knew way more from my secret sources than they ever told or admitted to me in the rest of my life put together. My starter's curiosity soon turned into an obsession, and then into a mania. I'd be disappointed if I didn't turn up something juicy or dirty. I wanted proof my father was a homosexual, my mother an ex-tram driver, Grandpa a spy or at least a gambler who'd lost half of Sarajevo in a game of Preference. I loved them all, you have to believe me, but even more I loved the little testimonies of things they'd wanted to hush up so they'd make it into heaven – if only in the eyes of their son and grandson.

But that was the day I discovered the false bottom in the big bedroom wardrobe. I lifted up the base and found a carved wooden box, a round glass container, and a green folder full of documents. I laid

everything out on the rug, heaved a sigh, and opened the box. It was full of dirt. Regular brown dirt with little stones and blades of long-dried grass that disintegrated to the touch. *They won't be planting flowers in this dirt*, I thought, and then, not without some trepidation, sunk my fingers into the box to explore. But there was nothing there, just pebbles, grass, and all this dirt. You wouldn't believe the amount of dirt that can fit in a wooden box. Much more than you'd think. You want to picture what I'm talking about, then tomorrow grab a cardboard box – I mean, I doubt you've a wooden one at hand – go to the park, and fill it up with dirt. You won't believe your eyes!

I moved on to the glass container. It held a pocket watch, a ring (it was too big for my ring finger, I tried it on), this miniature metal figurine of some saint, a tie pin, and a little booklet by Anton Aškerc, printed in Slovenian, the pages the thinnest I've ever seen. The only other things were these two green army buttons with spread-winged eagles, which gave me the heebie-jeebies because I had the feeling I'd seen them somewhere before.

Before opening the folder I stopped to think of all the stuff you're not supposed to know about in life. I wondered about the secrets that have to stay secret so the world makes some kind of sense, but since I couldn't remember any, I decided to push on. The folder contained three bits of paper. A birth certificate in the name of M.R., a baptism certificate in the name of M.R., and a telegram that read: "We hereby inform you that private M.R. perished in battle against a Partisan band on September 10."

M.R. was my uncle. I knew he died in the war, and I knew he wasn't a Partisan, but I'd never dreamed that he was the enemy.

I put everything back in its place and closed the wardrobe. Closing it, I knew nothing in my life would ever be the same as before I discovered the false bottom. I also knew my investigations into the family were over. Now it was time for asking questions, but only of those who questions wouldn't hurt and who could answer them without leaving a bloody trail in their wake.

I waited for days for my chance, but it never came. Grandma almost never left the house, and when she did Mom wasn't there, and Mom was the only one I could ask. She didn't know her brother. She was born four months before he died, and although he never saw her, he gave her her name. Grandpa had wanted to call her Regina, but M. wanted his sister named after a tree native to Bosnia. The tree's native to other countries too, but we didn't care about other countries because they were just places Grandpa, Uncle, my father, and everyone else went to war.

I went to see Mom at work. *Can we have half an hour alone?* She frowned, and I could already tell what she was thinking: *he's going to admit he's a druggie, he's got some girl pregnant, he got his fourteenth F in math, he's a homosexual . . .* I wagged my index finger left-right, though we hadn't yet said a word. I sat down. *Everything's fine, just give me a second.* But Mom just got more wound up. I had to get it out before she jumped out the window and broke her leg. Me: *I opened the wardrobe.* Mom: *It had to happen sometime.* Me: *I found something.* Mom: *What?* Me:

*Everything. Mom: Even the dirt? Me: From the grave, right? Mom: Please, just one thing. Don't ever tell her. Me: I know. I came to you.*

The part of the story that follows I learned back then, from my mom, and it goes something like this. When he finished high school, the same one I'd attend fifty years later, my uncle got the draft. Because he spoke perfect German and had a German grandfather, they put him in a unit formally part of the Wehrmacht but made up of our people. They sent them to Slavonia in Croatia. My grandpa combed the city in a blind panic, badgering one acquaintance after another in one office after another, just trying to get his son out of the army. But of all his connections, only a Communist one proved any good. A friend, a manager in the railways and member of the resistance, told him how it could be arranged for M. to desert his unit and be taken in by Bosnian Partisans a couple of kilometers from his base. Grandpa was all for the idea, but when he relayed it to Grandma, she got scared. For a start she thought in his German uniform the Partisans would shoot her son on sight, and even if they didn't, he'd be sure to lose his head in a Partisan one. More to the point, she was of the view that he was safer being the enemy. Grandpa tried to persuade her, but it did no good. He hollered so loud the whole apartment shook, desperate because he himself wasn't sure what was best, but also because he was certain how it all might end, who had justice on their side, and who would win the war. Mom of course had no idea what all Grandpa's hollering was about, but I'm sure he hollered the exact same thing when I was just

a boy and he told me the story of the Second World War: *Hitler's an idiot. That's what I said right back in 1939. Idiots lose wars, but they kill more people than you could ever imagine. And then that trash Pavelić came along. He sent our kids to Stalingrad and turned them into criminals. He created a shitty little state dangling out a big Kraut ass. That was Pavelić for you, and I knew that from the get-go, but that knowledge doesn't help you any, because it won't save your neck.* I think that was also about the gist of what he yelled at Grandma in the fall of 1971, when he again made the house shake and went as red in the face as the Party flag, and his lips went blue and Mom went up to him and shook him by the shoulders and said *Dad, calm down, calm down . . .* But he wouldn't calm down, he just went on, hollering about Maks Luburić, who cooked people in boiling water and in March 1945 skinned Grandpa's railwayman friend alive in the house of horror in Skenderija. Then Mom started crying, imploring *Daddy, sweetheart, please stop, for God's sake, I beg of you . . .* Suddenly he calmed down, not for God's sake, but because of her tears. He put a funny face on and said *let us alone you silly woman, can't you see we're talking about men's stuff.* Then he turned to me and whispered *politics isn't for women. They just start bawling. Golda Meir is the exception.* Back then I didn't know Grandpa had tricked me, that he'd actually told me another story, not the one I thought he was telling me. Mom didn't bawl like other women when politics came up. That I know from when I found the box.

Anyway, when Grandpa was done yelling at Grandma, having failed

to convince her to go along with the Partisan plan, which she steadfastly rejected, Grandpa started living months of his own private hell. He'd wake at night, bathed in sweat, with a single recurring thought: that M. wasn't coming home, and that if he did, the sum of Pavelić's and Hitler's crimes would be on his conscience. Grandma was only worried about one thing: that her son stayed alive, the how was no matter. It was in those months she started praying to God.

How they took the news of Uncle's death, whether they cried, yelled, screamed, or just absorbed it in silence, I'll never know. A few months after the liberation of Sarajevo four young guys in Partisan uniforms showed up on their doorstep. Grandma cried, Grandpa held his face in his hands to keep it from crumbling like a ceramic mask. One of the young guys put his hand on Grandma's shoulder and said *don't cry, madam. You've got another child. Look at your little girl. M. talked about his baby sister every day.* My mom, a blond baroque angel, sat on her potty in the corner.

Seven days after my uncle's death, the unit in which he'd been stationed deserted in its entirety and went over to the Partisans. To that point M. had been their only casualty. At war's end three more lay dead. But they were no longer the enemy.

Grandpa and Grandma lived together for a full thirty years after the death of their son, never speaking of him. They held their silence in front of others and probably held it between themselves. Don't expect me to be so banal as to say I know Grandma blamed herself for her son's death. She never once set foot in a church again, she forgot Christmas



and Easter, and only once a year did Grandpa put on his best suit and head to Sarajevo Cathedral for midnight mass. He didn't have much of an ear, but he liked singing the songs heralding the birth of the eternal child.

Grandma didn't decide that God doesn't exist, more that he just had nothing to do with her. She stopped believing in him even if he did exist. Grandpa died in 1972, and Grandma began her dying in the early spring of 1986. She had throat cancer and it got harder and harder for her to breathe. Sometimes she'd call me by M.'s name. They were little slips and I didn't call her on them. Or maybe they weren't little slips at all. By that time I was her only surviving son.

At the beginning of June, an ambulance came and took her to the hospital to die. They cut her throat open, but she still couldn't breathe. She fixed her gaze straight ahead and set her hands together. I smiled like it was all no big thing and that she'd be better tomorrow. But I knew exactly what was going down. Death came slyly and unfairly. It grabbed my grandma by the throat and shook everything left out of her. What was left was the memory of her son. She died during the night of the fifth of June.

Like all old folk, she'd talked about her funeral while still in good health. Under no circumstances whatsoever did she want her photograph to appear in her obituary, over her dead body. But she didn't mention anything about a priest. No one had asked of course. That would have been stupid.

Over her dead body, we got a priest and paid for a memorial service.

I can't explain why to you. Maybe so that God, if he exists, smartens up his act. That's how a friend of Grandma's put it.

I never even visited her grave come All Saints' Day. I can't tell you why. I just didn't ever feel like it. I was sorry she'd died, particularly in such a terrible way; I guess I thought visiting the grave would be to honor such a death. A few days before this most recent war, my friend Ahmed's father died. On my way back from the janazah, instead of heading for the exit gate I decided to take a walk over to the Catholic plots. On the tombstone under which my grandpa and grandma were buried, a huge black dog lay sprawled out in the sun. I sat down beside him, and he lifted his head lazily, looking at me with half-closed eyes. I'd long since stopped caring that no one had believed my first insight and first memory, the one of a dog barking in the hall of the maternity ward the moment before I let out my first scream. *You're the angel, aren't you?* He wagged his tail on the marble a couple of times and sunk back into sleep. My hand followed him.