

Five Bathrooms and an Outhouse

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1. High-rise apartment, Vranov nad Topľou, Slovakia: Age 27

I drink a glass of wine just after breakfast at the first house, vodka at the second, *domáca* at the third. By noon, I have a full-blown buzz, and I'm sliding around seatbeltless in the backseat of a speeding Škoda. The fields of sunflowers scald my eyes; my cousins' strange language sloshes around in my head.

The cousins. So many. So observant. My lack of enthusiasm for their liquid gifts has not gone unnoticed: *Don't you like? Are you sick?*

We finish the reunion tour in Cousin Jozef's high-rise apartment with three shots in quick succession. My husband plays by the rules and downs every one while I pantomime a sip and then slip off to the bathroom, drink in hand. I watch the *domáca*'s viscous amber slink down the drain.

Domáca is Slovak moonshine. In late summer and early autumn, families gather bruised plums, worm-holed apples, or burst cherries into wooden barrels. They distill what's starting to rot into something useful, something 120 proof. A bottle sits in my parents' home, untouched, because no one can stomach the taste, thick and metallic and sweet.

As a child, I learned to be ashamed of my origins, as my relatives were ashamed of themselves, of their sweaty feet, missing teeth, and double chins. When we made the long car trip up to Ohio each summer, I'd find my grandfather, mayor turned steel mill worker, perpetually on the porch in his shirtsleeves, swigging. My grandmother, in a painfully obvious wig and shapeless flowered shift, lumbered to her feet, offering yeasty hugs. I knew better than to ask who they used to be: *Let's not dwell on the past.*

But here, the past is all anyone wants to talk about. The cousins bring out pictures of me: in a frilled baptismal gown; with my sisters, in Easter finery; with my grandparents, in front of a brand new car. They assume I have been kept similarly apprised of their milestones:

Had my grandmother liked the photographs of Svetlana as a baby? Had she told me the story about the cow?

But my grandmother died six years before this visit, and before that, I saw her maybe a dozen times before she was lost to Alzheimer's. I wonder how I will begin to explain that, like many other generations of immigrants with hopes of fitting in, my family did everything possible to forget who they once were. But in seeking to make their children's lives better, they may have lost the ability to give us what we most craved: a story of origin.

In this bathroom in Vranov, the edges are blurring, and I'm starting to slosh around inside myself. I splash water on my face, stretch my smile elastic in the mirror. Soon, I will head back out to the toasting and back-slapping. I will hide my ignorance with language.

Nerozumiem: I don't understand.

And when we ride down in the lurching elevator, the night sky will blur through the gaps in the door. Ever vigilant, I swiped an airsickness bag on my flight over. I will fish for it in my purse, sure I'm going to be sick.

2. Childhood home, suburban Maryland: Age 15

It was too warm, so I started undressing while the world slanted viscous. It is still too warm, and so here I lie in my bra and skirt in the doorway of the bathroom as my little sisters' faces waver above me, their mouths and eyes matching O's. I slur my cover story, over and over: *Bad Mexican food. Very bad Mexican food.*

I vomit for hours, crawling between the toilet and this spot on the hallway floor, while my father hides downstairs and my mother stands over me, alternately sobbing and screaming. How could I? What have I done? I am drunk, stupid, sloppy drunk. But I stick to my cover: *Mexican food, Mom. Just something I ate.*

Aside from drinking, I've recently taken to climbing out my bedroom window onto the roof that runs over our attached garage and scrabbling to the edge. Then there is the game of it, getting up the nerve to jump. The worst I do is twist an ankle—it can't be more than a ten-foot drop—but it feels dangerous. In the instant after I jump, it seems there is nothing tethering me to Earth.

I'm fifteen, all swagger and sarcasm, a combustible mix of naiveté and recklessness. My parents don't really drink alcohol, but I know my heritage is hard drinking. Which may explain why, when one of my friends produced a fifth of Jack Daniel's, I bragged that I could drink half of it, straight up.

3. Office building, downtown Baltimore: Age 25

In the next decade, I'll throw up only a handful of times, from stomach viruses, food poisoning, antibiotics on an empty stomach. Despite this evidence of a reasonably strong stomach, I'm always worried that I am about to vomit. That fear has propelled me from my corner cubicle with a window to this seventh-floor washroom. When all the humming—fluorescence and Muzak and chitchat—coalesced into something hot in my throat, I turned to my window to steady myself, but the expanse of tinted glass suddenly wasn't enough to hold back the pavement below. So now I am sweating and shivering on the ceramic tile—my chest tight, my gut turned inside out, trying to align myself with the grout lines.

In my twenties, I've started breaking out in metaphors, new shudders in my limbic system. First, it was my throat or, rather, the constant sensation of having something *in* my throat. A kindly white-haired ear, nose, and throat specialist poked and prodded but then gave me a prescription for Xanax, which I never filled. I knew what he meant.

Next came this fear of vomiting, an obsession with keeping it all in. Then it was my heart, which seemed always on the verge of stopping or exploding. I saw a cardiologist, a

therapist, a psychiatrist. But my body's metaphors eluded the doctors. I couldn't swallow, couldn't spit the secrets out; I couldn't catch my breath with them sitting on my chest.

The doctors say the roots of any anxiety disorder run so deep and are so gnarled that it is difficult to distinguish what's genetic, environmental, inevitable, Pavlovian. Some scientists claim they've discovered biomarkers for panic disorder, alcoholism, anxiety—predispositions in search of a trigger. Other scientists say trauma can actually etch itself into our genes, its biological aftermath evident even in children raised in completely different families.

There might be a silently flickering film projected in miniature on the cave wall of your temporal lobe—the fodder for nightmares and panic attacks. Take it a step further: what if your recurrent dream of men in black masks kicking down the door is not your subconscious working through office politics but an ancestor's actual memory? Could you dread large crowds because once, among the clamor of another crowd, your grandfather marched some poor man onto the platform, and your grandmother clapped?

Here's what I know I have inherited: a prominent nose, vaguely Asian eyes, and a faulty amygdala. The amygdala is the storehouse for the memory of fear. What is it my subconscious is sentenced to remember? Over and over, on a loop?

What I was never told: “They say that during the war, your grandmother saved the village.”

My grandmother? In my last memory of her, she is sweet and senseless in the nursing home, flirting with my father, her own son, asking him which village such a handsome boy hailed from.

But when, two years later, I finally visit the village where my father was born, this is what my grandmother's former neighbors tell me. They are an elderly couple, the Tutkos, he

in a long-sleeved button-down shirt and navy dress pants in July, and she in a shapeless blue shift. They chatter excitedly with Andrea, my English-speaking cousin. When they pause, Andrea summarizes their story for me.

In the closing days of World War II, resistance fighters were organizing in the nearby forests. When the Germans arrived to flush them out, my grandmother ran out into the road and invited them to dinner. During this dinner, while the villagers hid the signs of their complicity, my grandfather convinced the Germans there was nothing in the woods except chickens and old women. After some shots of *domaća*, some arm-punching and shoulder-slapping, the soldiers departed. In every home, families raised their glasses and toasted my grandparents that night.

There is also the story of the execution that never happened. The Germans came back, suspecting they had been tricked. My grandfather had already fled. My grandmother had to stick to the story—*No, sir, I'm just a simple woman*— as her five children were lined up against the barn.

I can't imagine the terrible Technicolor of the moment: the afternoon sun making lace of the apple blossoms, glinting off the revolver barrel. She must have counted every knot in the barn siding. She must have counted the shots it would take—*one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five* for the children and then *six* for the simple woman.

4. Off-campus apartment, Baltimore: Age 23

On Easter Sunday, I swing by the seventh-floor apartment of an acquaintance, a chubby frat boy who sells dime bags on the side. One minute, I am chatting with my host and another student-customer, and the next, three big men have burst through the door, waving guns.

This is not the first time I have had a gun pointed at me—or more precisely, in this case, held to my temple. The first time, which was during an ordinary mugging, I didn't react

well. I didn't zigzag through rush-hour traffic, as they say you should, or throw my purse in one direction and run in the other. No, I froze, docile in the eye of a revolver, and bleated for my friend, wisely already halfway across the street to freedom, to come back and save me.

I freeze this time, too, and now, here I am in the bathroom with my wrists duct-taped behind my back. I'm convinced I was brought here to be raped and then shot. I nudge open the old wooden sash window. I blubber to my fellow captive that I'll jump before I wait like an animal for the slaughter, and I'm contemplating the pavement below.

Obviously, I don't jump. Maybe I lose my nerve; maybe I have a moment of clarity. I wait.

I turn to my fellow captive. I memorize his face, sure he is the last person I will see on Earth, though years later I will recall only his barest outline: dark hair, aspiring engineer. I wait, and when the bathroom door opens, there is a gun muzzle, but also a voice saying, *Stay inside, or I'll shoot*, and, moments later, footsteps scrabbling, the door slamming. I wait, and so I end up walking out.

5. Praha Hlavní Nádraží, Prague: Age 27

I have flown across the Atlantic to spend a month studying in Prague. I've transferred my fears of vomiting (or choking or hyperventilating or having a heart attack) into an obsession with blending in. More than anything else, I want to pass for a native or, at least, a native of a nearby nation. Anything but an American.

On a recent hike outside of the city, twilight fast approaching, two friends and I stopped at what we thought was a ranger station to ask for help. I peered in. The station was well-lit but apparently empty, so I took a few more steps down the hallway. When I spun around at a sudden noise behind me, three men had materialized on the threshold, in full military gear, with rifles trained at my head.

They were shouting a command, ugly and guttural. I glanced down at the black travel umbrella in my hand and knew enough to drop it. My hands flew up above my head, and the following words flew out of my mouth, the punchline of a joke I'd just heard in Czech language class:

Promiňte. Jsem jen hloupa Američanka.

Sorry. I am just a stupid American.

They burst out laughing, took me by my elbow, and ushered me back outside. They seemed to be herding all of us to their car, and we assumed we would be getting a reprimand and a ride back into town, but instead, they drove off, leaving us alone on the hilly hiking path, in the dark without a flashlight. When we finally stumbled back into town, an hour or so later, we went straight to the hotel bar and ordered shots. I drank and chain-smoked for hours, until my hands finally stopped shaking.

Since that night, I take extreme measures, riding the metro past my stop six times to avoid asking for help, and avoiding busses and trams because the driver often asks where I'm getting off. Anything to avoid having to speak. I am filled with pride when they mistake me for one of them and filled with shame when I must admit, *Nerozumím*—I don't understand.

Now, in the austere washroom of the central train station in Prague, I am standing in a stall by myself, trying to align my breath with my heartbeat, trying to line up the right words to buy a ticket.

My grandmother left Czechoslovakia from this very same railway station. In March of 1949, she said goodbye to her parents and her eleven siblings. She stuffed her trunks full and sewed money into her skirts. With her five children in tow, she caught one of the increasingly rare trains out of the country. She took the leap and ended up fat and elderly just outside of Youngstown, Ohio. Her youngest sister came along with them to Prague that day and could have gotten on the train but opted not to. By the fall, there were no more trains out of the country. How can you ever be sure it's the right time to jump? If you do it too soon,

you end up splat on the pavement needlessly. If you wait too long, you end up like my grandmother's other next-door neighbors—shipped off to the camps.

6. Open field, rural Slovakia: Age 30

It is my second visit to Slovakia; I am the same age my grandmother was when she stepped out into the road and invited an occupying army into her home.

My great-aunt Margita, the sister who could have gotten on the train but didn't, clucks and chatters, sure that I must understand her. I am staying at Margita's house, sleeping on the same couch that my grandmother slept on when she was finally able to visit in the late 1980s under *glasnost*. Interactions with Margita are as laborious as communicating with my grandmother was: endless pointing and pantomiming, plenty of *nerozumiem*.

I would love to retreat to a bathroom, but there isn't one—just an outhouse more terrifying and disorienting than my roiling stomach. Its darkness is made more eerie by faint music from the Roma camp down the road. Alone out there, I am certain there is no story strong enough to tether me to Earth, that if the planet slants a certain way, I will slide off.

So I'm trying to have my panic attack discreetly, indoors on the couch, when Margita lumbers in, wearing a long white nightgown, carrying a bottle of *domáca*, her finger to her lips. *Shhh!* She gestures to the bedroom where her husband is sleeping. She presses the bottle on me then totters back out. She reappears with two glasses, giggling breathlessly, as if we are schoolgirls about to share our first beer. She pantomimes pouring, so I do—but only a half-shot for myself. She claps her hands to her face, shaking her head emphatically. Clucking, she grabs the bottle from me and fills up my glass the rest of the way.

Nothing matters more than the story you choose to remember, over and over. In remembering, you preserve a fleeting sweetness, or you imprint a trauma on an almond-

shaped cluster of neurons deep in your temporal lobe. This is the story I want to be able to tell myself: You can inherit mental illness, but you can inherit resilience, too.

This is the story I will tell my son: They came from the west, boys in drab olive uniforms, tired and dirty and smelling of dank sweat and piss.

I don't know how my grandmother greeted them, waved them down, what words she had at her disposal. Perhaps she attempted some German phrases, or maybe she stuck to what she knew best. With the *domaća* already in hand, she gestured to the men, to her home, and back to the bottle again.

There wasn't time to hesitate, to weigh her options. She had so few, anyway. So she kept the table groaning under the weight of platters of fresh vegetables, hunks of cheese and dark bread, *pirohy* stuffed with potatoes and onions or dripping with jam, bursting poppyseed *kolaches*. She kept her soft, dark hair knotted and pinned down under a kerchief. Leaning low over the fire until her face stung with something other than fear, she stalled until the men in the woods could melt into the fields of sunflowers, the underbellies of the mountains.

The *domaća* she served was amber-colored, muddled light, like the shot I hold in my hand, stronger than what the Germans were accustomed to. Around the fire, they became boisterous, slapping backs, perhaps even leering at one of her teenaged sisters. Then the *domaća* and their long march caught up to them, and they settled into a warm and drowsy silence.

I imagine then, at least, she must've taken a shot or two herself, to steel her nerves. So I tip back the glass and drink.