

Table Talk

LYING I WON'T certify as hygienic speech, but a lie can do some good. A lie captures truth in the trace of its bite into the plain meat of innocence. Benvenuto Cellini says in his wonderfully demented autobiography that you should not write such a work before you are forty, but five years short I want to give an account of some fabrications that have taken place in my life, lies that were uttered by me or others and left undeniably long enough that they obtained a measure of being, if not truth. Truth itself may be more brightly arranged around the shadow of its adventurous twin.

But for a lie I might not have even been born. During my parents' courtship back in Bosnia, Dad shaved a year or two off his age, fearing the eight-year gap might make Mama look elsewhere. By the time he told her, they were newlyweds, Mama having said the final yes at eighteen. Even with my father's lie, my mother's mother had been against the match, so the lovers eloped across the river to force assent, and so it came to be.

When I was a kid I often heard Mama tell about Shishich, the legendary liar of our town. His prowess at biting into the innocence of fact was so prodigious he could even dupe himself. He spoke of his time in a Nazi concentration camp and how, during Hitler's visit there, the Führer took pains to touch his cap in some intuitive honor of Shishich. Shishich said he once tied his horse to a water pump and when he returned the horse was levitating like a balloon and had to be roped back to earth. Sometime in the late 1940s, when a lot of goods were still rationed, Shishich spread word that flour was being given away at the town hall and then watched the effects of his work as people arrowed towards the hall. He eventually hurried the same way, just in case his lie was true.

My brother Dino made use of his seniority like a dystopian tyrant and wove ells and ells of fine fabrications that took years for me to unravel from my eyes. He told me the Banana Split was named after the Croatian port of that name. He told me the harbor in our town of 5000 souls was the third largest in Europe (he made sure to qualify it by saying *river* harbor, such demotions being the true mark of a genius liar), right after Hamburg and—was it Rotterdam? I once watched him cut a lock of his hair and fold it in tin foil along with some suspicious powder which may or may not have been rat poison; he said it was a bomb. He once took some kernels of maize and other less than promising substances and put them under a domed lid with the injunction not to lift the lid, as the concoction needed three weeks to produce a mouse. And I thought, You can *find* a mouse in less time than that. Apparently he had studied alchemical recipe books. No mouse appeared as far as I could tell,

but it filled my mind with superstitious wonder. When we arrived in Denmark as refugees in 1993 and I saw Banana Split on the menu somewhere, I was a little proud that our Yugoslav delicacy had made it this far north. His grin did not yet give the game away. The one book I distinctly remember him reading before the war was the one about the Baron von Münchhausen.

War came to my town in April 1992, and within weeks we were hiding in uninvaded territory ten miles to the south, with Mama stranded behind enemy lines, her destiny unknown to us. I soon found out how war will make you lie with impunity. One night the house we were staying in was roused by aggressive knocks. Local soldiers had come to mobilize a man who was also staying there; I saw him try to stay down on his mattress, clutching his side, crying pitifully that he had kidney trouble, that he wasn't fit for service. The soldiers eventually left without him. Terror never left him.

Some weeks before our town was taken, my uncle Nune came with a little pistol and told my parents that bad things were coming, that the town would fall, and that we should have something to defend ourselves with. My parents thought he was out of his mind, tried to have him take the gun away, but they wouldn't. They planted the gun in a flowerpot, and then, as if finally understanding something, the very day before the town fell, Dad stowed the entire pot away in the electric heater we kept in the dining room. The following morning, after twelve tanks rolled into town, a handful of soldiers in balaklavas barged into our apartment and asked my father at gunpoint if we had any weapons in the house. They said if we handed them over, we'd be fine. I watched from the side corridor as Dad said we had nothing. As they searched the apartment, I wondered if I should tell them about the pistol. They found nothing, I said nothing, and they left. Some of the townspeople had already been killed. Many had been taken away, whether they had guns or merely unreliable sympathies. Three days later, we managed to get out to a neighboring town.

Early on September 11, 1992, Dad, my brother, and I left the village in northern Bosnia and drove south along roads and mountain macadams and what seemed like goat paths, hoping to reach Dalmatia. What should have been a mere two hundred miles took a whole day to traverse. The next morning we were in Croatia with our dubious passage papers, father speeding euphorically along the road about fifty miles from Split, when traffic police flagged us to stop. They could send us back, we knew. As the officer walked toward the car, we rehearsed what we would say—that we had just heard that Mama had survived a mortar attack and was in a hospital up north in Slavonki Brod and that we were rushing to see her now and who knows if

she'd be alive when we get there—and when Dad rolled down the window we all three mumbled out the fevered screed and the beleaguered officer waved us off, saying, Go, go.

Perhaps if we had not killed Mother in this way we would not have been able to finally see her alive that December on a platform of the Prague train station. The story of how she left our town sounds like a preposterous fiction. The false papers a kindly Serb doctor friend had given her, the trip into Serbia as a Serb ambulance nurse accompanying injured soldiers, staying overnight in the border town of Bijeljina with an elderly woman when passage across the Drina was delayed, engaging in malevolent talk about her own side in the war: each lie bringing her closer to the end of the seven months of not knowing where we were and the seven months of telling herself the lie that we had to be okay, the same lie we had been telling ourselves about her, and that twinned lie just happened to be true.

—Elvis Bego

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SHE SAT at the table with her purse strap still slung across her shoulder and the bag in her lap. Every ten minutes or so over the next three hours, the strap slipped down toward her knees and she would grab at it with clumsy fingers, first one minute after it had fallen, then four, then ten, as if the more she talked about her situation the slower the impulse arrived at her hand. The strap always made it back up to her shoulder.

"Difficult in my home. *Mala vida*. Called for mother. I saw the situation. *Desnudar*, same as your mother. Cried. Mother react—says she protect—*bien fuerte*."

I scrawled intermittent notes as I tried to keep up. She came from a village in the mountains of Guatemala, coffee plantations nearby, at which she had worked since she was eleven. She'd left school after six months, never learned to read or write, stayed home to help her mother keep house but also to protect her. Her father had beaten her mother since she was a child. When the asylum seeker was seven, her father tried to rape her; he told her to take off her clothes, that he was going to do to her exactly what he did to her mother. Here she began to cry as she spoke, one or two tears seeping from her eyes, her hands swabbing as if the drops could be pushed back inside.

We sat at a wood table in an Upper West Side apartment—the asylum seeker, the psychologist, and me, the translator. Two lives lay one atop the other: the fact of the moment, in this apartment, talking about scars, building a case for why she should be granted refugee status to stay in this country; and the inconsistent details of the past, in which the only constants were a village in the mountains, men who beat and raped, and a mother who went back.

But the threads that link stories together into larger, compelling cases did not exist here. The psychologist asked questions and I translated them, and the asylum seeker answered some-

thing slightly different. I was told to translate everything, no matter how nonsensical it seemed. This was difficult, much harder than when I'd translated before, either for foreign journalists or in my own reporting in Latin America. The asylum seeker's capacity for abstraction, to un-link cause and effect, resulted in a flattening of time and situations. Her tenses were blurred: *yo ve*, she said, and I thought I knew but wasn't certain to whom she referred, but the moment passed too quickly and I hoped, afterward, that a minor mistake wouldn't have some inadvertent flustering effect.

Linguistically, she did not express her own participation in her life. Why did you tell your son that your uncle raped you and your father tried to, also? the psychologist asked. Because he could see the situation. How did you express the anger you felt toward your uncle? I thought he's my uncle, I have no trust with him. Why did you leave? What happened to me happened in the past. Also my father said he was going to burn the house down and us in it.

There were nineteen pencils on the table and ten pens, and the psychologist swapped out a pencil each time the lead became dull. Eventually she started using pens. She had told me to try to take notes but that it would be difficult, that everything would move fast. She was right—I took few notes, muddling what she asked with what the asylum seeker answered with what I thought. Simultaneous translation for an asylum seeker involves being stretched so tightly across a performative moment, between two poles of communication and understanding, that you are utterly of the instant, the ego subsumed.

She decided at three o'clock in the afternoon one day to head north and she did. She left her small village in Guatemala and came north with her ten-year-old son. Before departing, she told her mother but no one else. When they walked through the Arizona desert, she wrapped her son in her sweater and carried him. She made it from her small village in Guatemala to Arizona in fifteen days, in buses, trucks, walking—where, she didn't know; how, she wouldn't say. "Fifteen days is amazing time, for someone who says she didn't know what she was doing," the psychologist said to me, wryly. "Don't translate that." Something I couldn't read or didn't have time to sink into passed among the three of us.

The psychologist asked again: You don't remember how you crossed the actual border? How did you travel from Arizona to Jersey? The asylum seeker stared at the table, at her hands on the table—buses, trucks, walking, she repeated; there were many people, she added—and the psychologist sighed.

The psychologist had never been to a small village in Guatemala. The asylum seeker hopes never to be in her small village again. I have been to small villages in Mexico, not too far from Guatemala. In these villages, amid cinderblock walls and riotous, gleaming foliage, I have heard stories with details so similar to the asylum seeker's that I can swap them out, interweave them.

The asylum seeker swerved, said she didn't want to think of the past, she

wanted to live a happy life with her son, work hard. She asked for strength from God and usually she got it. She can't go back to Guatemala because there are gangs there, it's violent. There is *mala vida* and her son should grow up free of that. He was learning to read and write and could even speak English, his teacher told her. She got married in March, to a Guatemalan man who treats her son well. A church ceremony. Life is wrangled into minor submissions. They live in New Jersey in a room in a house with eight others and she works at a lipstick factory.

When three hours had passed like one—time had lost its sequential logic—we stood. The asylum seeker and I shuffled around the table, moving our legs. The psychologist crossed the living room and opened the bedroom door and her two cats clattered out behind the asylum seeker's lanky twelve-year-old son.

As we all moved toward the door, the asylum seeker reached into her purse. Her hand emerged holding a folded, crisp hundred-dollar bill. She held it out toward the psychologist, a please and a thank-you, one hand on her son's shoulder, one hand holding the bill. The psychologist took it and examined it. She shook her head and, as she moved closer to the woman and tucked the bill into the hip pocket of her jeans, explained that she couldn't accept money. The asylum seeker took the bill again and stretched it out toward me, her arm as graceful as in a holy ritual. It was sheer intent. I held my hands up and half-smiled. The asylum seeker's eyes were watchful as she smiled back.

—Julia Cooke

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I AM A house-painter by trade. About a year ago I made note that certain houses exude a common odor throughout their interiors. It's right there at the door to greet you. Vaguely floral, vaguely dusty. I am convinced this scent is restricted to old people's houses and especially, if not exclusively, to houses built in the mid-Sixties to mid-Seventies. These homes retain tell-tale elements which date them around that time: prominent fireplaces, narrow baseboards, and large bay windows with side panels made of diamond-shaped panes. If they've ever been updated the changes were incomplete, and by now even the updating happened a long time ago.

I recognize that smell again as soon as my boss has found a front door key that was left for us (under the cement frog by the garden hose) and we step inside. We take stock of the job. The walls are clean—no gouges or holes that we can't fix with spackle—and the "popcorn" ceilings are eight feet high throughout.

"She left it in good shape," my boss says.

"What happened to her?"

He shrugs. "The realtor said she moved into assisted care."

I cover the floor with drop cloths and he mixes the ceiling paint by pouring it back and forth between two big buckets.

I imagine a young woman moving

into this house with her husband when the shade trees along this street were only staked saplings. Neighborhoods like this typified suburbia when "suburbia" was practically code for "utopia." They may have stood at this window waving at the friendly *ding* of a bicycle bell. As for the owners themselves, my mind only conjures two possible versions: a smartly-dressed Darren-and-Samantha pair, or else a more ordinary couple: she, aproned and assigned to roast chicken and soak the dishes; he, fiddling with a wrench somewhere, sleeves rolled up and a Chesterfield wedged in the corner of his mouth, a transistor radio calling the ballgame. I lean toward the latter because I know it.

These closets are empty, but from experience I can guess what they kept here. This air still holds evidence of plastic hangers that must have clacked against one another, and the paper-covered wire ones from the drycleaner's ("Fresh as a flower in just one hour"). Rayon slacks and an Easter dress, old neckties and oily brown shoe polish. The shelf was likely stacked with photo albums, puzzles, road atlases, vinyl purses, and shoeboxes. In a corner under the shirt cuffs an umbrella was folded and tucked into the shadows like a shore bird. I know because the last house with this smell still had the old lady's stuff in it. She died suddenly of a brain aneurism. One day her adult son found her rag-dolled on the stair landing. The house had not a trace of her demise that I could tell, only this same persistent smell of her things aging.

I dip a fat roller in white latex and work it against a wire grid in the bucket, pressing paint evenly and deep into the nap.

This could have been my childhood home, so simple is it to project scenes of my past onto this empty set. My father would have sat there by the window in his armchair buffing his wingtips with a shoe brush, the Kingston Trio or Tijuana Brass on the record player. The coffee table would go here, and my mother's cup would have a pink crescent of lipstick pressed onto the rim like a tiny segment of grapefruit.

I consider the heavy drapes standing slump-shouldered at the picture window, looking weary of the same old view. They must know plenty about this fragrance, as scent molecules will hold stubbornly to porous fabrics. Still, its vagueness frustrates me. I stop looking for one source and decide that the smell is a little bit of everything here and mostly of what is already gone. Somewhere in that olfactory muddle I tell myself I can pick out hints of Faultless Starch, cake frosting, mop water, the Sunday crossword and *TV Guide*, Christmas candy and Beefeater Gin. I smell factory-made things: assembly-line products, patented materials and dyes. They have outlasted the factories themselves, but at a cost. The sun-bleached curtains and the carpet are coming apart at their chemical seams, releasing aldehydes into this strange mix. And what about the tawny varnish on the mantel and baseboards, thick dust on the door chime, strands of gray cobweb snagged on the heavy stipple of acoustic ceiling texture? Theoretically, in an unventilated room, a smell can last forever.

Staleness is what all these things have in common, in fact. This is the smell of the modern grown old. This is the smell of time.

My job is not to dwell on the old, but to cover it. The trick is to refresh things and to prepare them for the future assaults of wear and fashion. So what business is it of mine to speculate about who lived here, their personal habits and belongings? Why do I analyze the emptiness of their house? Two thoughts occur to me: this smell has my attention because I have found it to be replicated—identically, I believe—in several different houses; also, because this hodgepodge is formed of scents which are fundamental to the era of my own existence in the same way a pop-musical soundtrack might describe my placement in the history of man.

I, too, am of the Sixties. I was born half a year before capital letters were forced upon The Grassy Knoll. My earliest memories are banal details of a suburban split-level when I was three—a wooden handrail, a springy doorstep—and then our next house, where I sat cross-legged in front of the television with a bottle of 7-Up, my arm hairs prickling as Neil Armstrong climbed down The Eagle's ladder to stand on the moon. I am proud to remember that, though not in any nationalistic way; I was too young to have an awareness of, let alone a stake in, the Space Race. I am proud because, while the moon landing may only be a history lesson to younger generations, I saw it with my own eyes.

By now some windows have been wrestled open. The ceiling has a clean coat of white and we've sanded and brushed out some of the trim with an oil-based primer. It breathes a shimmering cool perfume into the house. Even the new homeowner says, "Ah, the smell of fresh paint!" when she breezes in on her lunch break to drop off shelf liner and brand new green and yellow sponges. The ambitious air of remodeling begins to take over.

Tomorrow the carpet will be gone, cut into strips, rolled like pink sod, and hauled away. For now, its drab pile makes a fine record of history. Like a wilderness guide, I can read the tracks of what has been here. The soft prints that form a square were left by the feet of a heavy chair. The larger ones next to it, a sofa. Here an end table, there a floor lamp, each stamping a record of where they stood as clearly as a boot tread in moon dust. To imagine my life separate and protected from the fate of this house and its previous owners would be natural, but a mistake. For the same sweep of years that erased them has eroded me, too. I suppose that would seem obvious, but suddenly it matters to me—I am not young anymore.

It is mid-to-late afternoon when we take our brushes outside to wash them and return the house key to its hiding spot. The sun has crossed the street and sunk into the neighbor's tree, but the cement steps here and the black iron railing are still warm. It won't be dark for a couple more hours. Not far from the hose a bee bobs in a tipsy orbit, doting on a bright red tulip, and the air is yet sweet with dandelion and green lawn.

—Jim Ringley