

5 Tales



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Recycle

One transgression against the self may beget another. This is evident in persons on strict diets who take a second piece of cake then a third, deceiving only themselves. She threw the book into the recycle, she said, for its own good. Of course I'm against censorship, she insisted, but this piece of shit was remaindered and anyway, it was a galley proof. The late author was a famous experimentalist but these narratives were the awful mean-spirited dregs of his late life, good for nothing but the dump. He said nasty things about the physiognomy of old people. He reviled the few friends he had left. However, the guilt of throwing away a book nagged at her. It burns me, she said, that the book was even published. She had no such guilt about another book on gems and precious stones which arrived in her mailbox without her having ordered it. It was nothing she was interested in, so she put it in the bathroom where it sat for years, along with *501 Slovakian Verbs*, until she finally dumped both into the recycle.

When she was a child, her father taught her never to desecrate books, never to write in them, fold their pages down, break

their spines—all of which she began to do once in the world on her own. First it began with pencil—checking off certain passages, even underlining them. Then as the prohibition gradually lessened in her she took up the pen and would bracket sections. In the 1950s during the “Red Scare” her mother, not a recipient of the same training, found a box of “communist” books in the garage just after they’d moved into a new house. She ripped them apart and put them into the incinerator, only to be severely chastised by her husband who came from a long line of Torah scholars most of whom had died in the Holocaust. A book is a holy thing, her sad father muttered, watching the bonfire. It was the first time she ever heard him use the word holy, as he was not just a secularist but given his history, he had no use for god.

When she initially began to read what she eventually trashed, she had high hopes for the book and thought it might give her ideas. But the only idea that she had was to get rid of it. First she tried to leave it in a restaurant, but the waitress came running after her. Then she tried to find a trash receptacle and there was none in sight. The one thought in her mind was that no one else would or should read this book because they might get the idea that its lack of merit was ‘experimental.’ Au contraire, it was lousy writing. After all, she told me, we know good writing from bad, don’t we? The back cover said that the author worked on it until his death but she joked that it must have killed him when he finished the last word. Crossing the street against a red light with the book in her hand, she said, nearly killed her.

She was determined to rid herself of this book not just because it repulsed her. Ultimately, she felt that it tarnished the reputation of an otherwise interesting writer, and if she could, she would buy up all the copies of this now out-of-print abomination and throw them into the recycle too.

And yet, she confided, if it was so easy to throw away something an artist had put himself into, might it not start a habit? Might she not get rid of the dreadful painting that depicted a scene out of *Things Fall Apart*, a black man hanging, which a student gave her in lieu of a final paper? Or the imposing portrait of an artichoke fifty times the size of the real thing as a wedding present that arrived in the mail fully framed? Would such actions precipitate a clean up of all the books and artworks and odds and ends that no

longer held meaning for her, even offended her sensibility? Would she accelerate her desire to rid the world of bad writing? Would she actively seek out other books like the vigilante “book ripper” of Herne Bay, England, who targets books in a store whose proceeds go to charity, books out of sight of the cash register, particularly in the true crime section, who rips their pages in half and puts them back on the shelves? Was destroying what one deemed a bad text the gateway to further moral lapses? A future of dangerous infidelities to one’s soul? After all, it had to start somewhere.

Destination

One buys a ticket to fly to a place. To get to that place one must take another mode of transport to an approximate place where one waits for a shuttle to get on a bus to board another bus to the town near the place one wants to visit. Then one must be picked up in a car to go to the exact place one wants to visit. Theoretically or geographically, that place is 80 miles away from the city outside of which one originally landed, which, if it were 1890, would take by horse and coach two days with a stopover at a small inn on a dirt road where the proprietor offered a hearty meal, a glass of grog, and a down bed adorned with an embroidered coverlet and the sweet smell of mowed clover permeating the night air (it’s summer) as one gazed out at the slice of moon on the farming village below. One would sleep well, wake refreshed, dress in the dark, eat a slab of fried ham, wash it down with cold cider, and mount the carriage with a basket lunch for another day of jostling over stones and sticks to the steady clip clop clip clop of the loyal beasts of burden owned or engaged by the driver whose mutton chops are just beginning to grey, eventually arriving before dark at the place, greeted warmly at the depot by one’s friends or relatives, and spend a welcome six weeks or two months visiting.

But it is a different century. In order to visit a faraway place one must enlist transport to an airport from which one starts the journey, wait copious amounts of time or arrive in the nick of it, strip one’s self of many items as one watches others do the same, and pass through a mechanism that sees through to the bones while hopefully leaving the soft organs intact, wait, re-dress (this of course

if there is nothing obscuring one's bones from visibility to guards snippy and kind alike who may be accompanied by large-toothed canines, not the sweet spaniels of the José Martí Airport a mere fifteen minutes outside of Havana), and hobble off for some miles to one's "gate" which is not a gate at all but a secular chapel furnished with rows of fixed seats facing television screens mounted on high, offering the latest football plays, nail fungus eliminators, and body part enhancements. Then, at the appointed moment, which may be hours later than scheduled, after cruising and perusing magazines pizza chocolate key chains snow domes Navajo bracelets chartreuse leather cell phone cozies wish you weren't here cards Thai pad smoothies pomegranate cleansers love nails duty free antioxidants, one rises to the microphonic announcement of one's flight, only to wait in line to board the portable hallway between the gate and the airplane, the chapel and the bird, not before relinquishing one's boarding pass to an individual who repeats thank you before he shoves it through a machine that clicks, though in these cost cutting times one may have seen the same clerk behind a counter in the lobby of the main terminal informing a traveler that his reservations were cancelled several months ago to which his eyes, fortunately not attached to springs, rise. What, his mouth says. I got a Confirmation of my flight schedule! To which the airline clerk says, Sorry, Sir, but we see no evidence of your having Re Re Confirmed your flight and wait a minute, here it is, we do see it was cancelled two months ago by telephone, to which the passenger grimaces, as if a stick pin on a distant voodoo doll had pierced his brain, recalling how his ex cancelled a previous flight but fortunately for him and his new boyfriend with whom he was then flying to a small island in the Bahamas he could rebook on the spot since no one in their right mind would fly to this place during hurricane season.

At last one is greeted at the portal by a deliriously happy attendant in Bermuda shorts repeating Good Morning or Welcome Aboard as one wades thru First Class (are we or are we not a Democracy?) where a handsome man with a discreet grey ponytail, a high-cheeked woman with deeply exfoliated skin, already and indifferently sip sparkling liquids in fluted glasses while bombarded by battalions of Tourist class passengers pushing by, only to wait again at the threshold of the next aisle piled up held back by small heavy suitcases, sombreros, anoraks flung into overhead

compartments whose contents may shift during travel which seem already stuffed to the gills by the time one finds one's seat which happens to be 19B, the occupants of said row flipping through the flight magazine and to which one must mutter that's my seat and into which one must plop bookended by one 350 pounder and one anorexic Goth whose eye makeup rivals Lady Macbeth on a good day, sporting black lip liner and pink lipstick, while the other aforementioned occupant falls into a deep REM sleep leaning onto one's shoulder while the passenger in the seat behind repeatedly pulls and pushes the seat table and types into his laptop as his son in seat 20B stretches his meaty legs onto both the back of 19B and 19A which causes the Goth to turn around with Stop Kicking, then Stop the Fuck Kicking while two attendants float by with packets of roasted salted not much and a bit of turbulence in the form of a thunder and lightning storm 32,000 feet above terra ferma causes the seatbelt light to flash and the captain to announce Flight Attendants, Take Your Seats and the woman across the aisle fingers a rosary and the man next to her feels for the four inch cross hanging into his chi chis. Smooth sailing for several interminable hours. After more thunder, sun breaks through the mean clouds and at last the cabin prepares for landing. One has to pee one gets up, disturbing the Goth who is nodded out and one stumbles up the aisle not allowed to use the closer bathroom down the aisle and waits again in a line of four ahead of a crying toddler and one of course defers to the neediest and waits and after a long pee and a quick horror-filled glance in the mirror returns to one's seat, fastens one's seatbelt, swallows deeply to enable one's ears to pop as the airplane descends rapidly hits the runway kaloomp that startles a smashed coke can out of a seat pocket into the aisle. Someone kicks it under another seat.

One emerges. One is not greeted at the gate as this is not possible anymore, one uses a nearby bathroom again waiting in line thinking to waste a bit of time while the baggage makes its way down mysterious chutes and ladders. One walks quickly or slowly up escalators, down stairs, along moving sidewalks to the left or right to arrive at the carousel onto which spits so many suitcases in the dim light that anyone could mistake black for dark green, etc.

After nearly herniating a disk from retrieving one's belongings one follows the signage directly to the shuttle bus where one is told

by an attendant with a thick patois and a walkie talkie to check in at an interior counter for a number. More buses are boarded, time passes as though it didn't exist, and at last one arrives at one's destination.

One is immediately asked by the husband of one's dear friend how long will we have the pleasure of your company, and one is careful to announce that one is slated to stay for no more than a week and one's host makes a head movement similar to individuals from the Indian subcontinent that both affirms and negates one's plan and place in this place.

Could Have Been

She could have been lying. A tense I rarely use as I am not a suspicious person. She lost her keys for the first time in her life but why do I suspect she didn't. We looked for them in the wet matted leaves and all we could see in the dark was yellow. We walked over the yellow to crunch the keys but all that happened was yellow leaves. We retraced her steps with yellow leaves clinging to her suede boots. She kept zipping and unzipping compartments in her purse which she said was new. I didn't believe that very much, women know what's in their purses when they're the type who uses one with compartments. Did she lose her keys or were they hiding in one of the many pockets in her yellow raincoat? Was this a novel form of flirtation? She rejected my advances several times before, and was she drunk? We sat in my car and took everything out of the many zippered compartments of her purse. I felt the corners but unearthed nothing but breath mints which do not in any way feel like keys. The rain began to mist the windows, the windows began to steam up, though we weren't breathing heavily, she acted sincere, but you cannot both act sincere and be sincere. The keys were of some importance, of course, but what if she, I mean we, for she had dragged me into this treasure hunt, couldn't find them. She would want me to drive her home which I would gladly do. A tense I'm more familiar with. Do you want to know how this all turns out? Are you holding yourself in suspension until the ending, happy or otherwise? But there is never a happy ending in the end. It just is, and offers more of a relief. And the real story is, if I haven't made it

clear whether she really lost her keys and was using them as a ruse, the key to the ruse is her character, perhaps mine, we are the center of gravity in this little story, a very tiny story on the face of a big earth and its dire problems. Still, one likes a person to tell the truth, to not manipulate one. It was her idea, to return to the party, to return to the site of the last known spot in which the purse had been with, she thought, the keys. She disappeared then returned with the keys in her hands. But she wasn't happy enough, which is why spoiler alert, I said before, there are no happy endings here. Where did you find them? I innocently asked. On the bench, where I put my stuff. The question is, how did the keys exit the purse? They were too bulky to slip through the cracks of the zippers. Did she? You already know what I'm thinking. But why, what were her motives? Certainly she had no intention of inviting me in if I would have had to take her home. Would have had is a terribly complex construction that could be difficult to teach a Chinese speaker. I have a Japanese wife. What is such a verb tense called? I should ask her, but I'm too busy thinking about the whole event, though it took perhaps a half hour, reflected something between us, some pattern once established between two people and rarely changes, the lunging forward, even passively, as in need, and the pulling back when the need is satisfied. Did she really just find the keys on the bench? I am an unreliable narrator, I'm terribly patient and nice and as you can see, my vocabulary is limited. My wondering isn't. I shouldn't give the incident a second thought, right? All is well, the keys are found, the woman goes home. And yet, I'm left holding the proverbial bag. The bag of doubt. You know how much that might weigh?

The Trickle Down Effect

In the age of lies, cotton blend often got passed off as cotton, and we all knew that meant mostly polyester, something a whole generation tried to boycott, if not eradicate, long before it became dire to worry about fossil fuels and their deadly effects on the very earth upon which we planted our feet. I personally began to lie like a thief whose very freedom depended upon narrative. I began to write fiction, having cut my teeth on poetry, for better or worse. I began to love to create little fictions. First it was a character

in a story who lied about being broke and stole from his friends when in fact he was heir to a large fortune which embarrassed him. I felt sorry for him. Then it was another character that no longer wanted to talk to certain people who considered themselves friends but who he considered annoying acquaintances. Why could he not just tell them the disagreeable truth, since eventually he would have to run into them at an event or on the street and without having framed a smooth fiction, fumble around and say something awkward and revealing. Instead, he resorted to the overly used, I've had some health problems or I've experienced some family problems that prevent me (from attending yet another uncomfortable evening in your presence). Then I created a better, more fleshed out character who would claim specific but fabricated illnesses if she didn't want to see someone, something she hadn't done since adolescence, when she and countless other mildly un-athletic females would use that old bodily function, menstrual cramps, as an excuse for skipping gym. But the fact is she skipped gym because she did or didn't want to see a boy she had a crush on who was running laps during his gym period on the other side of the girls' bleachers. The fact is that she felt perfectly justified in skipping gym, though unbearably guilty about the excuse for its poverty and unoriginality. She felt the same way as an adult. But how to rid one's self of an acquaintance's persistence, calling and emailing every week like a bot? How to eliminate from one's life someone who no longer enriched it but forced one every time they communicated to insincerely flatter their work or their paltry contribution of three lemons to the potluck. Or to swallow their sarcasm and digest their gossip. The fact is my character abhorred lying! But she had to lie to get out of falsifying. She had to lie about herself to get out of lying to herself. As a reader you might want to know more about the few other people she gradually dropped from her life by lying. I made her lie to the bookstore clerk with tardive dyskinesia every time he asked her out for a drink. I made her lie to the well-coiffed junkie who spent a half hour in the bathroom or nodded out into her fish stew while everyone else was eating. Mommy, said her child, why is that lady sleeping in the soup? She quickly replied, because she is very very tired.

But this was when the country elected a president who lived in an "alternative reality," who lied seventy times a day, whose tongue lied with his fingers on a tiny keyboard before he got out of bed in the

morning, whose primary activity was to stir up chaos and bully and kick millions of people around. He was a corporation unto himself. Every word he said was a lie, including *and* and *the*. So as a writer, I felt perfectly justified in switching to lies in the service of the truth. A poem could never handle a lie. I felt perfectly okay about switching from poetry to fiction when the occasion arose. After all, I was not a seasoned fictionist. I could always revert to poetry, the non-fiction of the unseen.

Boot Soles

So now the shoe is on the other foot. As you always suspected that foot is a little bit smaller, now someone new has to speak, someone else has to represent themselves. I never want that lonely only place at the table. The egg has been scrambled, the shell is in the trash. Don't ask me to retrieve a broken covert casing, that luminous protection cracked to smithereens. For my departure, I want a hip swaying effigy, I want Smokey Robinson to sing a capella as I am a natural woman. Meanwhile, they pay tribute to a minor hero, kissing his patriotic ashes for a week. I am a farmer but don't claim it on my income taxes. I have to gather flocks of words, and believe me, they are unruly and there are millions of them. Don't give me court orders to redraw the legislative maps. My flocks spill out, the other foot panders its gerrymander, there are yellow-eyed salamanders near the rain water. Red tide, blue algae, green party. I'm a lean machine in harm's way. The tank overflows, what seeps out feeds something else. Something blooms and the manatees wash up. Oh my goodness, everything alternative is going out of business, even newspapers with naughty ads. What happened to the brash young and jazzy whose targets were clear and clean. Every pipeline poses significant threats—don't stop eighty eight yards from the land of the ancestors. Nothing has limited scope or duration. Every tropical storm weakens to a depression. I picked up a rant and ranted, I wouldn't recant when they converted, I felt the raw sewage and so should you—it's important to know just where waste goes. Whoever touches me, touches a blunt subject. If you don't find me, look under your boot soles.