

The Winter of Our Years

It's almost dark, and I drive past the funeral parlour twice before pulling in across the road. There, the lot's vacant corner offers the space I need for my Dodge Royal Monaco. I look at the address on my piece of paper one last time, then get out of the car without locking it.

A small hill leads up to the parlour. A handful of people are outside, some getting fresh air; others a smoke. As I walk by, conversations halt, and heads try their best to discreetly scan me over.

It is a small funeral home, and fortunately the only viewing tonight is the one I came for. Several mourners mill about in the hallway, and it takes me a minute to get through the foyer. I look up at the small black slate prior to entering the room.

"Late Igor Loblevenoski"

I smile, though only to myself. He must have changed the spelling of his name when he made his way to the Americas. He was and shall always be Ygor to me.

It's a frugal floral arrangement, with only two bouquets making up the arrangement. Ygor always had detested flowers, possibly stemming from his phobia with bees.

The poorly hidden stares continue. It's my understanding that dandies abound in these parts, so my cravat and considerable amount of face makeup are not likely the cause of everyone's attention so much as my considerable size. The tallest heads in the room, like in the world in general, barely come up to my shoulder.

There is little movement in the lineup, and I listen to conversations going on around me. Two men, emotionally close enough to Ygor to be fixtures at his wake, but not close enough to be overcome with grief, make small talk about Ygor's life and I focus in on them.

"He spent some time over Europe. When he was younger."

"I'd heard that. Doing medicine maybe. But not here?"

"No, I think he gave it up when he started a family. Bad back, you know."

"Ahh, that'll do it. My aunt had a bad back. By the end of it, she was bedridden as much as not."

"That would have been Carole?"

"Yeah, my aunt Carole."

"Terrible thing. Especially for someone as nice as her."

"Yeah.... The family's handling it well enough? Jesus, the kids are all grown."

"There's good moments and bad moments. You know how it is."

"I do. Hard on them for sure. These things are never easy. The restaurant still open down here?"

"It wasn't, but someone took it over and got it fired back up again. I'm thinking they're open till nine."

"Ok. I'll try to catch it."

"The fish and chips is supposed to be good."

“That’s all I need to hear.”

By now the line has moved a few paces, and the murmurs of the two men are diluted in the mix of everyone else’s conversation.

I stop in front of his casket when the time comes, looking at my old friend one last time. We hadn’t started as allies. But time and circumstance can mold and bend the world, let alone relationships.

Ygor is pale, but at peace. His hands are overlapped on his chest, and his hair is better cut than when I knew him. The youthful robust man I remember is now a grey wrinkled smaller version of his former self. And dead.

When younger, it was Ygor that had taught me how to properly ferment apples to get drunk without poisoning myself, and how to slip my shackles at night to steal chickens from neighboring farms. “Only take the chickens as a rare treat,” he had cautioned. “Remember, pigs get fat, hogs get slaughtered.” A mantra he was so adamant about, Ygor had me repeat it twice back to him.

It was also Ygor that saved me the night the village turned on us. They came up the hill, with their sticks and their fire. At first, I had thought it was about the chickens. Only in later years as I pieced things together do I realize with nagging suspicion I was being blamed for cardinal sins the good doctor himself had been committing. They claimed to know of me, and the menace I brought to the community, and would not leave without me. To this day I do not know if the good doctor would have betrayed me. Not that I hold judgement against him.

As he tried to quell the rising tide of anger at our door, it was Ygor that came down to me, unlocking me and leading me by torchlight through the tunnels away from the castle.

“Follow the path to the river. The trees will give you cover. Then follow the river upstream. Don’t stop for three days. Not even to sleep. Keep moving and keep the sound of the river to your right,” he had told me. “After that, it will be heavier populated. Find a road, and travel only at night. You are free.”

I begged to go fight by my master’s side, or better yet, to be handed over for judgement. But Ygor would hear nothing of it. He shook my hand, grabbing my elbow while doing so. “Brother. The world is yours. Remember how I showed you to fish and make fire.” With that he took a ring off his thumb. Pressing it into my hand, he told me it had never let him down and promised it would lead me straight on my journey. It was far too small for my finger, and I had put it in my pocket.

I nodded, and with nothing more than the clothes on my back, I fled, never looking back. Forty years, and twelve countries over three continents later, I at last see my old friend and mentor for a final time.

I’m far from sentimental but find my emotions rising from recessed shadows I had not even known existed. I drive my thumb into my scarred wrists to take away the sentimentality. The pain, be it only in my mind, takes my thoughts away from the sentimentality.

Before I leave my old friend, I take a ring out of my pocket. The same ring he gave to me so many years before. Being travelled as I now am, I know its nothing more than a

flange of sorts, with a threaded end. But that flange rubbed through my fingers more times than I can remember, bringing solace when I needed it most. I had long ago cut a strip out of it to fit it on my own hand. I place it by his hand, to guide him on his own journey he has ahead of him.

I walk by his family, offering a silent nod to each member as I pass by. At the back of the parlour, more distant family members stand idly in their own conversations. There are collages of pictures of Ygor both as a child and as an old man. Missing from the collages are the ten years I knew him and lived with him.

The nostalgia is too much, and I cut the viewing short. Walking out, I run a hand under my scarf to scratch my neck where one of the bolts is inserted. The bolts, more so the one on my left side, still give me psoriasis when I don't keep enough fluids in me.

I now have a yearning for fish and chips and wonder if I can find the restaurant in this dive of a town.