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**A Short Book about Dying**

Stories

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## Grandmother and the Ghosts

My grandmother lived in Podlasie. The house wasn't in the village itself. The neighborhood was known as "the colony"—scattered farms separated by stands of aspen and avenues of age-old, slender poplars. The cottage stood amid an orchard. In the summer, even at high noon it was cool out there. The apple trees were ancient and had grown rank. Their crowns joined overhead; it was a realm of eternal shade.

This forest of fruit trees on one side bordered a meadow. But I never heard the usual word for meadow, *łąka*. People said *smug*, the cows would grazing "on the *smug*." Somewhere in the middle of it was a green strip with a well for watering the cattle. The well was old, and in place of a regular wall there was just a framework of planks. The bucket was pulled up using a long pole with a hook on the end. The pole was known as a *kluczka*.

The "u" has the softest, most gentle sound of all the vowels.

Whenever I think of my grandmother I remember those two words: *kluczka*, *smug*. And also a third one: *duch*—ghost.

Grandmother believed in ghosts.

In the sixties they had no electricity there. Grandfather would climb up on a small wooden stool and light a kerosene lamp that hung from the ceiling. In the fall it would be lit quite early, at six, maybe even five. In the fall my father and I would come for apples, we'd load whole cratefuls of them onto the Lublin truck of my uncle, a bona fide truck driver of early and middle communism.

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So anyway, grandmother believed in ghosts. And it wasn't the sort of fearful or reasoned belief that's acquired from contacts with the beyond on special occasions, or from dreams or visions—nothing of the kind.

She would sit in the corner, on the woolen bedspread; behind her was a green and blue landscape with two stags at a watering hole, the delicate yellow light of the lamp bringing out only the silvery white of the water; and she would tell stories. They were long ones. They concerned banal happenings, work, visits, trips to the next village, family get-togethers. A measured narrative replete with facts, names of things and of people. The topography of their village and others nearby, a chronology that ran from Christmas to the Assumption to All Souls'.

In this humdrum subject matter, from time to time cracks would appear, the threads of warp and weft would pull apart, and the gap would reveal the other world—supernatural, in any case Other.

For example one summer evening, coming back from a visit to one of her many

female cousins, grandmother saw a white figure among the hayricks. Half-human, half-animal, it was running along a field boundary, now on two legs, now on four, clearly visible in the moonlight, yet entirely immaterial.

Another time, after the death of a close relative she saw the deceased come into the kitchen. The door creaked, the visitor opened all the drawers and cupboards in the dresser then left without taking anything with him. It was at dawn. Grandmother had just been getting up. She saw the visit from where she sat on the bed, the same place from which she told her stories.

I don't remember them all, of course, I can only recall snippets. But the atmosphere of those tales has stayed with me—it was utterly ordinary, devoid of surprise or exclamation.

This tearing of the fabric of existence mostly took place in my own imagination, I was the one who saw the holes. Grandmother ignored them. In general, for her there seemed to be only one indivisible order of events, all equally real and equally valid. It may have been that she was aware of certain distinctions, that she tacked and patched those doubtful, worn places, but in her stories there were no traces of the repair.

When a miniature whirlwind would appear over the fields on a still, windless afternoon, snatching up a line of hay cones, grandmother would simply cross herself, watch the phenomenon move away, and return to whatever she had been doing. After all, it had only been Evil manifesting its presence in one of its many forms. There was no excitation of the kind associated with table-turning or the stories of Edgar Allen Poe. If anything she was more like Svidrigailov and his banal excursions to the other side of existence. I've come to realize that her relative rummaging in the dresser was just as real and powerful as the phantom of Filka the servant entering Arkady Ivanovich's room with a very ordinary hole in the elbow of his coat.

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Why did she never tell stories about the saints? About the supernatural beings whose existence is confirmed by the teachings of the Church? Why did she never see Peter and Paul, or Saint Lucy? Them, she used only to measure time. Exactly as if they'd been lifeless objects, along the lines of ideal weights or measures. Their stillness was the stillness of the figures she saw at Sunday Mass. The little wooden church stood among trees in a shade as profound as that surrounding her own house. Once a week the squeaking brown-and-gilt interior offered her an image of eternity, of light, of a distant pledge and an even more distant reward.

Whereas ghosts, accursed sin-burdened souls, death—these accompanied her day to day. The truth that humans beings are closer to death, damnation, and chance than to salvation, found its embodiment in her life.

Nor was she an isolated case. The many aunts and great aunts that I'd meet in her home would take part in these stories, supplying all kinds of additional details, till my grandfather would lose patience and burst out: "Give it a rest, all of you"—though whether he was prompted by rationalism or dread I'll never know. At such moments they'd fall silent for a while, then start up again like perverse Fates spinning the thread of that other, hidden human life which never for a moment forgets it is made up in equal parts of loss and dying.

The story about the mother who in broad daylight saw an unknown old woman in a gray dress out in the fields, and the same day the mother's child fell ill, and subsequently died.

The story about how grandmother went into the cattle shed one evening and

something almost knocked her over as it ran out the door, and no cow had milk to give that day.

Stories. . . stories. . . stories. . .

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Grandmother died in the fall. I was too small to be able to remember the exact date. The wind was blowing at the time, and my father and I were there because the doctors had calculated not just the day but even the exact hour, it seemed. She lay on a board that was covered with black cloth, all dressed in black herself, thin and serene. Before they put her in the casket—such was the custom—all her relatives kissed her on the forehead. Maybe I was too young to comprehend the notion of death. Led by habit and affection I kissed her on the mouth, the way I would always greet her when I arrived at the start of the summer vacation. I was surprised that she was so hard and still, and that there were none of the usual warm, familiar aromas about her.

The fear came later. At the moment when I saw the black church banner with the silver cross hanging outside the house. Someone had fastened it to the wall in such a way that it was flapping noisily against the pale blue sky and the leafless branches.

That was my first ever lesson in the ascendancy of symbol over reality.

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What am I driving at in this memoir-cum-story?

Before long the last grandmothers who looked upon the world of ghosts with their own eyes will be dead. They looked with faith and equanimity, though of course

also with trepidation. A vivid, existing supernatural reality will disappear along with them. Aside from the rare mystical experiences of the chosen few, we'll be reduced to a hard, exhausting trust in the existence of the unknown. The polished surface of the everyday will obligingly show us our own shallow reflection as if those were the depths.

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My grandmother sat on the edge of her bed and told stories. She did it disinterestedly, without any particular goal. The ordinariness of these extraordinary happenings lent them credence.

When you left the house to go outside you passed through a large dark space known as the granary. Old horse tack hung there, clean winnowed grain lay behind wooden partitions. The pungent odor of leather impregnated with horse sweat mingled with the grain's dry smell. Light entered through a small square opening in the wall. On sunny afternoons the darkness of the granary was pierced from end to end by a narrow beam of light filled with spinning motes. I'd run through the blackness, break the rays of light for a moment and rush outside. Each time I did, I was accompanied by the same fear. It was only once I was in the sunlight of the yard that my breathing returned to normal.

Through the window I could see the indistinct figure of my grandmother bustling about between stove and table, preparing dinner. She was all alone in the empty house; the brown-painted floorboards would creak at every step, while in the most ordinary way in the world she would be at the haunted dresser, taking out the condiments, plates, spoons and forks that the dead man had scorned.

Later, after she passed away, I often imagined death. The instinctive picture I

saw was always the same: an old woman with a kind, mildly quizzical face, the face of my grandmother.

# Dog

Our old bitch is slowly dying. It was her hearing that went first, as I recall, then her sight, then finally her sense of smell. But she still gets around a bit, and she has a huge appetite. Every now and then she'll try and bark at something. She can barely keep on her feet, she stares with unseeing eyes and barks at her doggy thoughts, imaginings, maybe she's barking at her doggy memory. She's been with us for sixteen years. We've had her since she was a puppy. One summer a woman friend of ours brought her and left her here with us in the country. At the time we neglected the routine shots you're supposed to give puppies, and she got canine parvovirus. But we somehow managed to save her, driving her to the vet every day for an intravenous drip without which she would have died of dehydration. She was left with a slight loss of control over her hind legs. But for fifteen years she ran around and kept up with the other dogs. Once in a while, in the winter they'd disappear for two or three days at a stretch. I'd be furious, but in the end I'd climb in the four-wheel drive and comb the empty valleys, forcing my way through mounds of snow. They'd be found eventually, exhausted, skinny, half-dead and, it seemed, utterly clueless about what to do with their doggy freedom or how to find their way back home. They would meekly let themselves be loaded into the car and for the next week they wouldn't budge an inch except to go to their feeding bowl.

But the bitch was the oldest of them. All our other dogs were descendants of hers. Children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren. In the country, in conditions of almost total liberty, it's hard to keep tabs on them. Dogs are smart, and when it comes to preserving the species they're three times smarter still. We had her spayed only after her third litter. Her procreational activities had become a burden, because at the time we moved a lot and we were living in rented accommodation, sometimes in villages where

people would get spooked at the sight of a dog bigger than a cat, a dog running free. (It's true, country people are afraid of strange dogs, because strange dogs bite; nothing can shake this ancient belief. A belief, by the way, that is quite justified in the villages. . .)

But our bitch was gentle. Her grandchildren and great-grandchildren will sometimes kill one of the neighbor's sheep. When that happens I curse under my breath, but humbly take my money and pay for the dogs' entertainment. But her, she never hurt a soul. One time, driven by some distant echo of an instinct, she brought her puppies a full-grown chicken. But she didn't do the bird the slightest harm. She held it in her mouth as carefully as if she'd been carrying one of her own young. She even seemed embarrassed by her extravagance. Once released, the chicken immediately stood on its feet and went back to its own kind.

I can see her right now, lying on the veranda in a patch of winter sunlight. Her coat is yellowish, the muzzle slight darker, and she has floppy ears. She's a full-blooded mongrel. There's no way of telling what breeds had to have met and mingled in the past in order for her somewhat misshapen, somewhat comical, kindly figure to have made its appearance in our home sixteen years ago. But her mongrel genes must have been strong ones, because her grandchildren and great-grandchildren entered the world almost exclusively with the same sandy yellow coat and the same droopy ears. Now she's lying in a pool of winter sun, sleeping almost all the time. When one of us goes up close, she raises her head. It's hard to know if recognizes us. But she still likes to be stroked and fondled, the way she did throughout her life. Now, though, she's like an old tattered rug. Winter's coming, yet she's losing her fur, a dense, tightly packed, fuzzy covering that allowed her to curl up in a snowdrift and simply fall asleep, her nose tucked under her tail.

She's lost a lot of weight too. When she stands she looks like a skeleton covered

in dirty yellow cotton wool. She's unsteady on her feet. She sways and totters. She can manage a dozen or so steps, then she goes right back to her bedding. She stinks. The usual smell of old age. Of a body that's stopped moving. In the smell I can still detect her old doggy scent from when she'd run in from the wind and rain, but it's less and less noticeable. Sometimes she tries to scratch herself, though it's harder and harder. That doggiest of doglike activities is increasingly beyond her. The paw misses its target and hangs in midair.

For the moment it's been a mild and snowless winter, so she can live on the veranda. It'll be worse when the frosts come. She does her business where she lies. On better days she'll manage to move a few feet away, but often she simply goes right by her bedding. It's hard to get angry with her because aside from human touch, eating is the only pleasure she's capable of experiencing. She eats with gusto, greedily, and when you give her something you have to watch out for her teeth. But whatever it is has to be placed directly under her nose for her to be able to smell it. Even then she sniffs blindly, in every direction, and in the end finds what she's after more or less by chance. So with only vestiges of a sense of smell remaining, it's difficult to tell whether she has anything like taste. Or whether she's merely gorging herself, guzzling things down, filling her stomach, driven by the most primitive of instincts. And then, a few hours later she rids herself of it right nearby. That's why I'm worried about the winter and the onset of the frosts. We'll have to take her indoors, and we'll have to clean up every morning and during the day as well, because she never gives any sign that she needs to go out. She stopped giving signs just like she stopped being able to go out.

These days she actually gets on my nerves at times. As if she were growing old and feeble against us, as if she were doing it deliberately to spite us. I pass by her umpteen times a day, I step across her suffering body and there are moments when I feel

the prick of irritation. As though, along with her life, my affection for her were ebbing away. In this there's a certain cruelty that's independent of the will. I lean down and pet her. What used to be automatic is becoming a conscious act.

I'm writing about this because it's the first time I've watched the long slow death of a being that for many years I shared almost every moment with. I've talked with other people about it, and they tell me the most sensible thing would be to have her put to sleep. (That's an interesting euphemism, by the way. No one says "kill." Everyone talks about "putting to sleep," which is to say, something gentle and, as it were, temporary.) I know that would be sensible, it's what people do, and those who do it have the feeling that they've brought relief, they've cut short distress and that in fact they've acted humanely. I thought about it too for a moment. But we decided not to take that path.

I'm writing this doggy obituary-cum-memoir about a living animal because for the first time in my life I've had the chance to watch closely and systematically as a live creature turns into a failing body, and finally will become a corpse. I look at our bitch and I think about myself, but also about all the people who are slowly slipping away, shrugging off their integument. And so as I watch the dog, I can't shake a certain vision of humankind in its mortality. Our yellow-haired, useless dog (she doesn't bark, doesn't nuzzle up to you, doesn't wag her tail, isn't pleased to see you, won't cheer you up) is turning into a thing that will have to be disposed of. Yes indeed, some people recommend doing it sooner, to spare ourselves some trouble, and the animal some suffering. After all, at this stage nothing is going to change, stop, turn back. A quick injection, and that's that. I could even administer it myself. When I've had to, I've slaughtered sheep and goats. Yet for some reason I can't get beyond the thought of all those people lying in the carefully concealed places that serve for dying. People like that are useless too. They consume energy, money, labor. They provoke vexation or

indifference. I know how it goes because I've seen it many times: three or four people in nurse's uniforms and latex gloves enter the room. Two of them lift the almost weightless body, the others rapidly remove the diaper, clean, put on a new one. Three minutes later there's no indication that anything has taken place. Except that a strange human-yet-not-human smell lingers in the air. In fact, it may just be the smell of a human being, frightening us, disgusting and oppressing us, and that's why we lock it away in those remote, invisible places. We pay the people in the latex gloves to breathe in that smell in our stead. We pay them to accompany dying. When it comes down to it, in a sense we pay them to die for us. Because when we take part in the deaths of other people, of those close to us, we ourselves die a little, we ourselves become a little more mortal. We're simply buying yet another service to save us from using up our own time. To save us from breathing in that smell.

It's strange, this civilization of ours. It saves lives, protects them, prolongs them. Yet at the same time it renders us defenseless in the face of death. We don't know how to behave in its presence. My grandmother was washed and dressed for her coffin by her daughters and her neighbors. A man who lives near me died at home. His daughter checked him out of the hospital because she couldn't imagine him dying among strangers. My neighbor took a long time to die, so his daughter had to learn to do all the things they do in hospitals, including giving morphine shots. And my neighbor died in his own room, with the view of a green hillside that he'd looked at every morning. But my grandmother, my neighbor—those are almost utopian deaths.

At times I'm troubled by a vision of a big city where the dying all remain in their apartments on the upper floors of modern high-rises or in the gated communities that empty out at daybreak and are only repopulated in the evening; they're separated by thin walls from the hubbub of the street, from the swirling, predatory world of the present-

day metropolis, amid the never-ceasing howl of the city, with the glimmer of neon lights in their failing pupils. That is the vision I have. That people aren't dying in hospitals, in hospices or retirement homes, but in houses, apartments, that for most of the time are unoccupied. It's hard enough to deal with owning and walking a dog, let alone a dying person. And how do you carry a coffin down from the ninth floor? Stand it upright in the elevator? Then what? How do you lead a procession through city traffic? Sit in gridlock on your way to the church, the chapel, then afterwards to the cemetery? Honking, flashing your lights so the other mourners won't get lost?

Even in the villages funeral customs have changed. When my grandmother was buried, the procession walked two and a half miles in scorching heat from the church to the cemetery, the coffin carried on the shoulders of family members. At my uncle's recent burial in the same village, the procession went on foot only as far as the last houses, then everyone walked back to the church, got in their cars and rode the rest of the way behind the hearse.

There are more and more of us, and more and more of us will die. And we'll be ever more alone when we do. At least till someone discovers the secret of eternal life. But even this to-be-discovered immortality will likely turn out to be only infinite solitude. Because after all, what can such an immortal talk about with mortals who cannot afford immortality?

It's thanks to our bitch that I think about these things. It turned colder today, and I built a kind of kennel on the veranda. I put blankets around it and inside it. She curled up into a ball and now she's sleeping. She's always sleeping. Nothing would actually happen if she were given that injection. She'd just keep sleeping. She'd stop doing her business where she lies, she'd stop turning over, she'd stop trailing her hind legs behind her, she'd stop eating her own excrement. She'd stop suffering, and we'd breathe a sigh

of relief too, because it isn't easy to watch someone (is a dog someone?) eating their own excrement.

Nothing would happen. People should anticipate events and when necessary prevent them from happening. That's how we've gotten where we are today, so it would seem. And nothing can hold us back. We'll do away with lives that serve no purpose. Since we've learned to prolong life, we'll give ourselves the right to shorten it too, because for some time now we've felt that everything is in our hands. In olden times, before the days of humanism, death was pitiless, it came as always too soon, but life persisted till the end. It was fate that decided. Now fate is gradually receding into the past. One day it'll vanish. For the moment we're removing it from our everyday space and putting it in hospitals and dying places. Then we'll turn our attentions to its timing. We'll be the ones to decide when it comes.

As I write, I look out onto the veranda. She's had something to eat and now she's curled back up in her den of sleeping bags and blankets. Our young dark gray cat follows her in and rolls up next to her in the warmth of her cooling body.

**Grochów**

Down Garwolińska to the end, then hang a right onto Makowska along the railroad tracks toward Olszynka. Sometimes all the way to the roundhouse. The street looked like a village road; on hot days it would be lined with guys sittingand drinking. Branches of fruit trees reached over the fences. If it was otherwise, let someone put me right. In early spring there'd be the scent of burned grass mixed with the smell of creosote. The sun would be warming the bushes and the railroad ties. It was here that the city ended. Beyond lay the kingdom of trains, weeds, and allotment gardens. In the spring the vegetation would burst suddenly and unrestrainedly into life, it would survive through the summer and fall amid the exhalations of railroads and industry, then collapse under its own weight.Only the toughest plants endured. Thorn-apple, hemp. They would stick out from the snow all winter long, till in the spring they were covered with fresh green leaves.

This was where the end was. The city came to a halt in mid-stride, as if over an abyss, like it had run out of breath or been stunned at the sight of that expanse of clay pits, dog runs, tin huts, railroad lines, and all the crappy wonders that went along with it. Everything broke off, and something entirely new began. Szklanych Domów Street was the last shore of the city. Beyond there were low, dark, spreading waters dotted with heavenly or diabolic islands, shipwrecks, stray scraps of the city's firm land, the broken, jumbled floe of industry and recreation.

The guys along Makowska had rolled up their pant legs. Their skinny shinbones

gleamed white in the sunshine. It was the end of April. Apple and cherry blossom scattered onto their shoulders. They belonged to the working classes. They stared to the north, toward the far edge of the railroad cutting, where the embankment rose higher and the crawling trains grew close and distinct like children's toys in the golden light of spring. Some were headed directly for the world capital of the proletariat. The part of the city that lay in that direction was called Utrata or "loss."

And so in fact it was. We'd go there to appease our own melancholy. To nurture in ourselves a vague sense of bereavement. Some of us at least. In any case me. Makowska was like the coast of a sea. All you had to do was go out there and imagine what was beyond the horizon. Especially in early spring, when the heatedair quivered above the flattened reddish grasses. But that's always how it is in places where there are train tracks. You can't tear your eyes away from the two silver filaments running away into infinity. They're magnetized, and our longing chases after them like a piece of iron, all the way to the end of the world.

It's quite possible that those guys with their bottles of Królewskie beer, their bottles of wine that happened to be called *Kwiat Jabłoni* or Apple Blossom, their bottles of Stołowa vodka—that they too were staring into the depths of infinity. They were sitting on the shore of their own life, gazing into the distance. Yet it never occurred to them to rise to their feet and head out. They were too grownup, too masculine, too proletarian. They would get up at dusk and return to the depths of the neighborhood. The gray brick four-story apartment building has no elevators, so they would trudge up the stairs through all the human smells. That powerful yet indefinable aura made itself felt the moment you entered the building. A thousand cheap dinners, cabbage, minced

meat, tomato soup, shoesleft by the door, hot dusty light bulbs, the acrid note of burning gas, the taut compressed atmosphere of cramped apartments filled to the brim with possessions.It was the smell of people who spend their days and their nights together.

When they slid you into the crematorium I already knew I would want to describe all this. Because there was nothing else I could do. The crematorium, the interior, the cart, all recalled the factory where our fathers worked. Then later where we worked too. It all took place behind a glass screen, but I could smell the heated steel shavings, the sparks scattering from the corundum disks, the oil; the scent of all the different shops, the forges, the temper mill, the rolling press. Though it was all happening behind a glass screen. When the bellows that would

heat the flame to over a thousand degrees started working, it became like asmelting works. Even the green tiles on the walls were reminiscent of the changing room with those awful metal lockers where your working clothes became impregnated with an oily dampness. I hated the moment just before six when you had to change into your dark blue coverall. It was heavy from the factory air. Heavy and cold. Almost like metal. I didn't put it on so much as slide into it in disgust. It needed several minutes to take on the heat of the body. The greasy feel of the insides of the pockets. Metal filings. Now I remember, the material wasn't dark blue but gray. Gray like everything else around, with the greenish casings of the Soviet machinery, the grimy windowpanes, and the floor with its wooden tiles black from oil and filth. Whatever the time of day or year, all the various shops were filled with a wintry light. Even when it was hot. For instance, in the forge by the electric furnaces. Or in the temper mill, where the bright orange metal was dipped in its bath of oil. There too a cold gray light prevailed. That was the

life of our fathers. And we were supposed to repeat it,since it was ready and waiting for us and nothing else needed to be done. Walking from the bus stop, in the early morning, with a crowd of other men I'd pass through the factory gate as if I were entering my own destiny. You can look at it that way, though at the time neither you nor I had any idea what destiny was. *A simple twist of fate. . .* But the feel of the coverall was like the inside of someone else's cold skin. The men on Makowska were like our fathers, but it never occurred to us to sit down alongside them. We would walk on, beyond the reach of their gaze. Across the tracks and the scrub, across more embankments, so we could watch trains speeding away into the depths of the landscape, to East Station,Central Station, or to Vladivostok. Because it was resolved from the very beginning that we would betray our fathers. Because we wanted to get as far away as possible. Because we didn't want to wake up before dawn. Because it seemed to us that that was what freedom looked like. Because we were traitors.