

Never Should Have Opened That Urn

Leningrad this, Stalingrad that, Himmler– Hitler, regardless, the words on the page started to blend together. A perpetual buzzing in her ear; *Great*, Bernice thought. Another migraine- as if someone was drilling their thumb into her forehead periodically. The pulsating feeling gave Bernice nausea, but she knew not to complain, anything could get worse nowadays, better not to jinx it. This feeling of sudden pain was a common occurrence, that she learned was associated with her companion. Her grandfather's absence never felt long enough, and the anxiety of that fact never gave her any semblance of reprieve.

Come on Bernice, you know this one. The voice whispered.

Something...something Italian, something about Hitler. This whole routine of playing games was becoming very tiresome to Bernice.

No games grandpa, just give me the answer. I don't remember this one. Bernice bit the tip of her eraser gently as she wiggled the pencil around.

No, no. I know you know this. Remember, we were there together!

We are ALWAYS together. I promise, I'll do the rest. Just remind me of this one.

Hmm, I'll give you a hint. Think back, it was last night. 7:04 P.M., your mom was watching Jeopardy! while cooking the spaghetti. I remember because you checked your phone to see if spaghetti was

vegan— again.

Bernice's teeth pushed further, slipping into the rubbery texture of the eraser.

I got no sleep last night because of you, the least you can do is give me the answer.

We were in the textbook, on the page about the causes of World War II. Think Bernice. It had a picture of the woman you thought was so pretty, you know... welcoming the troops home. You remember, she had a velvet Victorian hat that you wouldn't stop thinking about. You were on Pinterest for hours after, looking for ones just like it.

It- it's not coming back to me. How about a 50/50, I know it's either A or C. They both sound right... Vienna... Versailles... Vienna sounds right! She pushed her pencil down into the paper.

It was less than twenty-four hours ago, Bernice. How are you ever to learn if I give you all the answers. No 50/50, Bernice. We do not play lifelines here. Our family watches Jeopardy!—

She gripped and twisted the pencil further into the paper until she heard it snap.

—not Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.

She ground her teeth together while the pulsing continued. Two months of horror, sharing every feeling, and thought with her deceased grandfather. Two months of sleepless nights, consistent degradation, and above all, the ever-growing concern that she may be going insane.

She looked up from her test into the dim fluorescents above, letting out an audible sigh. Her teacher, Mr. Aker, peeked up from his book, lifting the glasses

clinging so dangerously to the breadth of his Polish nose that perhaps a whisp of wind would've knocked them off. Mr. Aker studied her look of utter detachment with his thick eyebrows and pointed back down to her desk. She returned a half-smile and lifted her broken pencil. His dimpled smirk instructed her the go- ahead.

Maybe she would remember all of this stuff about T-boats and war crimes if Mr. Aker hadn't been so damn handsome, she thought.

He is dashing, isn't he? I almost think you're one of his favorite students, Bernice, the way he calls on you with such confidence. I could not tell you why though. You're a flunky. A dunce, some might say. Maybe you two have that in common. If I could knock you on the head with my knuckles, I would.

And if I could've watched you breathe your last few breaths before you were turned into a pile of ash I would've. But we have to keep dreaming.

Bernice sharpened her pencil while looking back at her teacher reading from a hard-cover novel. The clunking and churning of woodchips meshed crudely with the sounds the lawnmower made outside the classroom.

Bernice! You do have teeth after all! And not of the gap variety from the photos I've seen on your living room wall. You know the ones next to Aunt Marriot. Yes, teeth whitened twice a year with your adequate insurance, and newly straightened from years of wearing braces, obviously to appropriate yourself into the culture of fitting in. Whatever happened to embracing your flaws?

Not all of us can be comfortable with chiclets for teeth. What do you have against Mr. Akers anyway?

I will admit, you have perfect canines for ripping and tearing

Bernice. You'll be hard-pressed to find me showing any appreciation towards a Stalin-fanatic. What was that video he had us watch last week? An absolutely reprehensible piece. Well, best of luck with the rest of your test Bernice. I'll be here sowing my regrets on siring a petulant granddaughter.

He was silent for a while after that, to Bernice's relief. She began circling letters randomly as she saw her classmates finishing one by one. She remembered hearing somewhere that C was the most common answer in multiple choice tests, so her paper was littered with C's. She read number 29, which had the answer for an earlier problem in the question. So, she went back and redid the answer she missed the first time around, feeling accomplished for noticing such a detail.

She heard grandpa exclaim a brief "hah" and then the sound of imaginary teeth gritting.

She was almost finished when she reached the short answer section. It was only one question. An essay question, Mr. Akers called it. "They will be the only questions you get when you continue to college," he had been saying all semester. It read "In your opinion, after all we have learned from this section, who do you believe is morally worse, Stalin or Hitler? Please provide examples."

Her headache worsened, but she put the graphite of her pencil onto the page when grandfather spoke up again.

Allow me, Bernice. Write exactly what I have to say.

Finally, she thought, some sort of reprieve.

What an insightful question, Mr. Akers. Loaded as it were with the implication that we can judge anyone's cruelties relative to well...

what? We can at least say that this is one that has been pondered by the penultimate of greatest thinkers for decades. Not quite top echelon thinkers, but those who had been getting so much done with their totalitarian government breathing down their necks. Where do I begin? Where can anyone truly begin with such a profound question that tells us so much about the human condition and morality itself. Only someone as creatively inclined as yourself, Mr. Akers, could've written such a question— Bernice, you've stopped writing.

She wanted to cry. *I can't do this anymore. You are actively sabotaging my life.*

WRITE IT. His tone shifted from its jarringly calm nature to authoritative, and somehow loud. She still had no idea how she could control his volume in her head.

She shuddered but held strong. *No grandfathe—*

—Write it and we will go back and redo all the questions you've missed. This is middle school-tier stuff, Bernice. If we must share this body, I will not have this brain go to waste. I've been given another lease on life. Which means you too have been given another chance at a life that can mean something. If you're worried about the grade let me say that you will get full credit for the test. Excluding maybe this farce of an essay question, in which case, we can later argue is in bounds of the language given at hand. It is an opinion after all, Bernice. This is what I mean when I say your teacher is a midwit at best. Now... write the rest.

So, she did. Lunchtime came soon after, meeting at her favorite table with her best friends, Marinka and Jess. She pulled out the contents of her lunch, a banana and a PB&J, while she began to ponder the last exchange with her grandfather. Something about letting him take control gave her a freeing feeling, knowing that he could provide her some security. There was a beauty in that,

although double-edged, as she never felt alone in these past months. Although persistently at odds, she felt a comfort that, in everything she dealt with, someone else went through it as well, someone who's had a full lifespan of experience. She had never given him that much control to determine how things may play out for her. It was like autopilot or the feeling of watching a movie. Sometimes she felt like she was driving a car, but from the backseat. Although he was not the ideal grandfather, and even held a downright sinister nature with his thoughts, she felt an awful sense of serenity, letting things play out. These thoughts were overshadowed by the knowledge that she knew, he could be listening to these thoughts as well. Better to not stroke the ego any further.

"Well, I just y'know really– really wanted to know if he loved me" Marinka said in a whisper, as her head wobbled to both sides.

"I've heard of girls giving shit-tests before, Marinka, but that takes the cake. So, what happened?" Jess guffawed, her mouth still filled with remnants of unchewed chips. Her necklace jingled faintly, the sounds surrounded by the clamor of students in the cafeteria.

Bernice heard the jingle in her ear but did not notice it fully, the hum like an old broken television set or a permanent tinge of tinnitus. Her eyes focused onwards and down, pupils dilated staring at the pink flesh before her, a boy's calf; fat conglomerating, then dispersing– tightening, and relaxing, twisting... and now flexing in place. She unknowingly began to salivate at the calf, a light pant leaving her lips.

Then came grandpa. Her fingers unconsciously gripped the metal rods holding up the cafeteria table below. Was it the chill touch of the metal or his voice

that sent for her goosebumps to return, rigid? The voice manifested itself in her head, a low, guttural thing, words being churned in such a way that it reminded her of a snake's hiss. The voice leaped around her jaunting, as if someone was whispering behind one ear and the other.

Awh yesssss, Bernice. You're finally seeing what I see. You see that rose-flush near the tibia? An unnatural occurrence born from a languorous attitude towards just about everything; assuredly not a pristine beast like you're soooooo painfully used to. He probably has never seen the digits on a treadmill go past 00:30 without feeling the tinge of futility. Why not just accept his fate?

We're not doing this. She thought, but her eyes did not wander from the calf, still morphing its contours every so often.

Please, Bernice, a moment of your time. Picture it, with me: Thursday, fifth period, the dreaded day of Mr. Dalynn's mandatory monthly mile. The students around are wearing grim faces, bloated from the cafeteria's incessant need to fill you up with cheap carb after cheap carb. But not our friend over there, can you see it? His face says it all, look closely: he twists his lips just for a moment, but it tells us all we have suspected; he has come prepared. While the rest of the students bake in the wake of Apollo, our mark marinates in the shade with a smug sense of satisfaction.

Mayhaps he got there with a doctor's note saying he has cramps—no, no... worse, vertigo! Dalynn is not surprised of course, all P.E. teachers have dealt with every possible excuse. How else could they be the plebeians of their profession without lying to themselves every day? They are the masters of excuses, but in this scenario, Dalynn is without the ability to reproach. The kids run on, punishing the pavement with each fleeting footfall and some may even show their revulsion to our boy, but he survives knowing he has avoided certain pain. It is that kind of laze I cannot help but

lament. But unlike that boy, when I regress or feel any form of a general malaise, I act. You- you see those freckles all over the back of his calf? He must be third-generation Irish; we haven't tasted that in quite a day. What I wouldn't give for a bite.

Bernice licked her lips unconsciously as she stared on, locked in. Her posture leaned and her neck craned as if her myopia was especially bad today. It had not always been like this. Some days she would hear the voice and instantly shut it down. But recently she felt tired, not willing to put up the fight. Sometimes she even felt as if she was being lulled by his voice, like losing her focus to her psychiatrist's Newton's Cradle as it goes side-to-side, tic... tic... tic...

"Like if I told him I had AIDS or some shit, I would've expected to be ghosted or dropped, but herpes? Who doesn't have herpes these days? Bernice... Bernice are you even listening to me?" Marinka exclaimed.

The sudden name-drop shook Bernice out of the trance. She was once again at her favorite lunch table of her high school's cafeteria, staring at her group of friends across from her. She had known this place for two years now but the jolt back to reality brought upon a sense of uncanniness; as if visiting an old hometown, years later. She looked around, blinking until her pupils eased back into their traditional diameter. These pupils rested onto Marinka and Jess. Marinka's eyes were puddled up, as if any comment would release the dam of liquid laid before her.

"Sorry," Bernice breathed out. She twisted her head, "Something about your boyfriend?"

"Augh" Marinka let out, and low sobs began.

"What a good friend you are," Jess added sarcastically as she wrapped her arms around her friend. Jess's demeanor had also changed, from jest to caring, knowing Marinka was in anguish. "Marinka was telling us that she told Jimmy that she had herpes, and if he truly loved her, he would stay."

"Oh my god, Marinka, I'm so sorry, when did- when did you find out you had herpes?" Bernice wore an inquisitive expression.

The wailing of Marinka got louder, as her head jostled dismissively. A cackle could be heard in the back of Bernice's head. The voice's laughter quieted when he heard Marinka about to speak up again.

"That's just it, Bernice, if you had been listening, you would know Marinka doesn't have herpes. It was all made up to test Jimmy's undying love for her," Jess said sharply.

"Oh," Bernice said and sat quietly for a moment. "Well! That's good news, you just need to tell Jimmy that you were joking! That it was just a test!"

Marinka's mascara had begun to smudge around her eyes as she sneered at Bernice. Marinka looked as though she could scream. Instead she ramped her voice up, increasing her octaves with emphasis.

"NO Bernice! You don't get IT. Now I look like a SLUT! He will never believe I would make up something like that! I already saw him talking to fucking Mindy Hannigan by Mrs. Bronson's class. Three months down the drain, just like that. Where the fuck am I gonna find anyone half as hot as Jimmy Nugent for Spring Formal?" Marinka said with almost a lyrical nature.

"Well...I mean... I thought you said Kevin from your geometry class sent you a Valentine's heart-o-gram. He's cute!

"Ugh! I can't even with you, Bernice!" Marinka's sobs had stopped in her momentary anger.

"GOD Bernice, sometimes I wonder if you are brain damaged. If you had been listening yesterday, you would know that Kevin Alabaster has been DMing Ally Lenowitz since December and was only trying to show Ally that he wasn't into her by giving Marinka that heart- o-gram. Jesus! Get with the program," Jess said.

Marinka's wails returned and Bernice had never felt so confused. Jess wrapped her arms tighter around Marinka and gave Bernice a toothy look that said, "fuck off." So, she did.

Bernice picked up the remainders of her sacked lunch and threw it into her backpack, not wanting to be wasteful before leaving the cafeteria. Ashamed and with a headache that made her want to swallow all the Advil in existence, she headed towards the women's restroom to rejuvenate. She felt a mix of things now, the world had all seemed so different now that her mind had a roommate. Not just any roommate, an overly-meticulous one with outdated ideas and rival political preferences; one who could judge someone for the flavor of gum they chewed; one who could turn your favorite film into nitpicks galore; a roommate that does not pay rent but wants to change the furnishings; the type of roommate who comes and goes whenever it is convenient for them. That is the one thing she felt thankful for; he was not always home, so to speak. He could've made that conversation worse; it can always get worse with him around.

At first, she thought it was her consciousness. She never knew where thoughts or ideas came from. But suddenly some entity was feeding her mind phenomena she did not understand. Manifestations of words that were unknown to her, little observations she had never noticed. Things she could not possibly think up by herself. They came to her as if they were her own ideas.

Then she started hearing him. A voice. A voice she had never heard before. It had a soft touch to it, a pleasant frequency. Though it came with a capricious nature; sometimes despondent, then erring on the side of threatening. Like an Oleander on the roadside, on first glance: a mesmerizing sight, until it murders you. The voice came softly to her in the beginning, a light hum when she was falling asleep. Fear did not strike her. She thought it was the most normal thing to imagine between the time of delirium and dream. But she was having dreams too now, dreams where she was not herself. Dreams where she was a man from a different time.

She proceeded into the restroom and gazed into the mirror. Her eyes were a bloodshot mess, melded in with the accrescent dark circles just above her cheeks. She could not remember the last night of good sleep she had gotten. *Look like shit, feel like shit*, she thought. She turned on the sink and the strikingly cold water ran down her palms.

Tsk tsk tsk. She heard him. *Aren't you getting sick of the constant ennuï, Bernice? You really have chosen poorly for friends.*

Please stop... please. I can't do this anymore. I can't live like this.

I sense it's from a mix of things. When we first met Marinka, my first inclination was to believe that she had a hard upbringing... well, relative to this time I mean. A mother who drinks and drags

her daughter into every department store, dressing her to fit in- in hopes Marinka could be the "cool" girl she never was. Maybe a father who sleeps around, who gets home and screams at his homemaker wife for spending so much on luxuries they can no longer afford since his failed contracting career.

She let him run on with it. Assumptions upon assumptions. Stereotypes and generalizations. What was even the point in fighting him? What did she do to earn such circumstance? This tedium had become eternal.

But the more Marinka speaks the more I realize I may have overestimated the problem. The new leading theory is she is a culmination of this society's desperate infatuation with hedonism. In my time- we of course were vain as well, but never have I seen the caliber of such in the youth. This vapidty stemming from your generations... dare I say, mania with instant gratification. The cyclical rhythm of man, Bernice, is a duality itself, fated to repeat time and time again. It is also why I suspect that Jess is such the sycophant. The most loyal lapdog is still a dog, and an ugly one at that. For all her attempts at coining a new sense of fashion and appearing "unique" all she has done is made herself appear offensively "basic" as you kids say. All this time's fads are so trite. Hmmm I assume combining the girls together would hardly be a decent meal. Less meat than a trout betwixt the two of them. Heh, I once believed that vegetarianism was a hackneyed trend, but never again, I underestimated people's lust for vanity. If they applied themselves to be decent human beings half as hard as they applied themselves at being skinny you might have competent friends. We won't bother garnishing them. Pfft, can you imagine the memorial service the school would provide? We would be witnessing their memorial for months to come, their faces plastered on every monitor, pictures on every wall up and down these halls. The school would probably have you speak of anecdotes of their graciousness, and their hopes and dreams. No- never...still, I'm sure we can find a use for the two of them. Everyone has a part to play, Bernice.

...What the fuck is wrong with you?

She slapped water onto her face from the sink below. She slapped her face several times until she couldn't feel her cheeks, just to make sure this was all real. She returned to the south-wing hallway to find Mr. Akers looking at her. His brow furrowed, fuming.

This oughta be good. Ooooh I feel as giddy as a schoolgirl, Bernice. Well technically, I am a scho-

FUCK OFF.

Mr. Akers bit down on the side of his mouth as he spoke. "Vice Principal O'Feely and I would like a chat Bernice, let's go."

"Maybe first we can look at where you went to university, and which hack peddled his communist manifesto down your throat... thrusting it down your throat over and over again," Mr. Akers said as he read the short answer from Bernice's history test verbatim. He looked towards Vice-Principal O'Feely while standing, one hand clutched the paper so hard it was creasing at the center. His other hand made distorted motions in his pants pocket.

"Should I go on?"

With some labored breaths, Mr. O'Feely spoke up. "That will be enough Mr. Akers, thanks for coming to me with that. I think we get the idea. I just don't get it, Bernice, what is going on with you? You used to be the ideal student. This is the third complaint I've gotten from faculty this week. Do we need to bring your parents in? Maybe we should have you speak to a counselor?"

*Bernice, if you would be so kind, would you please tilt your head 30 degrees to your left. I would very much like to see which *ahem* accredited university Mr. O'Feely went to.*