

“Vestiges”

by Daniel J. Patinkin

Fiction

August 2023

Yesterday came the news of the fall of Saigon, marking the end of American involvement in the Vietnam War, and, this morning, relatedly, Arthur is feeling the effects of the many beers he drank in honor of the occasion. His indulgence, however, was not a celebration. He spent much of the evening weeping while watching Ed Bradley report amidst the chaos and desperation of the evacuation. He called Joy quite late, waking her up, and blubbered into the telephone until she calmed him down and convinced him to get some sleep. Now, he feels a twinge of embarrassment about his behavior, although his sister surely understood the pain he was experiencing.

He exits the Q train at Union Square, as he regularly does, climbs the stairs amidst a throng of commuters, and emerges onto the square. Rain is tumbling out of the dark thunderclouds overhead, so he pops open his umbrella. Yet the cool, late-Spring air makes him feel a bit better; during a portion of his commute down, he was concerned that he would retch.

It is just after 10 AM and there is a crowd gathered despite the downpour, apparently celebrating. A young man in a head band, wet stringy hair hanging to his shoulders, stands atop a milk crate and speaks through a megaphone: something about the military-industrial complex and the endless waste of life and so on. Nearby, a circle of hippies bang tom-toms and bongos

and some dance in the middle and toss flower petals in the air. Arthur is tempted to pause and observe, but he has a 10:30 session with Mrs. Dacey.

Arthur's office is small and rather cluttered with bookshelves and potted plants. It consists of only a waiting room with two wooden chairs and a magazine-covered coffee table and a slightly larger room, overlooking 16th Street, where he conducts his sessions. He sits in his worn leather armchair opposite Mrs. Dacey, a broad-framed but brittle lady of about age sixty who has been struggling to come to terms with her divorce for the past three years. She typically cries a lot, so Arthur made sure to set out a fresh box of Kleenex before she arrived.

"It's as if I don't exist anymore," she tells Arthur. "People walk right past me, look right through me. No one has the time of day for an old spinster like me. What am I to do with myself, Arthur? What am I to do?" She blows her nose roughly.

Arthur nods. He is listening to what she is saying, but also far away, as if his mind can operate in two places at once. Realizing she is waiting for him to comment, he says, "I don't mean to sound like a broken record, Mrs. Dacey, but I believe that your primary focus should be on somehow establishing yourself within the community. Social groups, volunteering, book clubs, hobbies that you share with others. We've talked about this several times, and, still, I think it would be very beneficial for you. Why have you not made an effort in this regard?"

"Nobody cares about an old lady like me," she repeats. "Why even try?"

"Because, Mrs. Dacey, that's all we can do is try. I cannot guarantee that everything will come up roses for you if you put yourself out there, but I *can* guarantee that your misery will persist until you do."

Mrs. Dacey stares at her hands, tears dripping onto her thighs. Arthur takes the opportunity to light a cigarette. He stands up, opens one of the two windows in the room, allowing rain to spatter onto the carpet, then returns to his seat.

“Can I have one?” Mrs. Dacey asks.

“Of course.” He hands her a cigarette and lights it for her. Her hands tremble.

He eyes her for a moment, then: “Many therapists, myself included, believe that one of the greatest sources of happiness is service to others. I know that, right now, it may be hard for you to see that as a potential remedy, but you have to trust me on this. If you figure out a way to contribute to the community, you may, after a bit, turn the corner on all of this.”

She nods quietly. After a long moment, she says, “I don’t know what I can offer to the community.”

“You told me you are an excellent cook. Is that true, or were you just blowing smoke?”

This causes her to perk up. “I wasn’t blowing smoke, Arthur. I am a fantastic cook.”

“Well, there happen to be a lot of hungry people in this city. I am sure there are plenty of soup kitchens and places like that which serve the underprivileged who could use your services.”

“But...”

“But what, Mrs. Dacey?”

“I... I’m just...”

“Scared?”

“Yes,” she exhales. “Scared.”

“Well, then we have to try to understand this phobia. In reality, there is almost nothing to be afraid of. But, as we know, our minds do not always operate within the bounds of reality. How about we make that our focus for next time?”

She offers a wan smile. “Sure. Next time.”

At 1 PM, Arthur has a break in his schedule and walks through the rain down 16th Street to the deli he frequents and orders a turkey, ham, and Swiss on rye bread. While he waits, he sparks up a Winston and dawdles out front. The sky has grown even darker and lightning crackles above the city. He presses himself against the building underneath the awning.

Visceral images percolate in his mind, of people, both American and Vietnamese, crowding the perimeter of the American embassy in Saigon, wrestling with each other for the opportunity to board a helicopter that would spirit them away from that violent, riven hellhole. He thinks of his son, who wrote home frequently in the sixteen months prior to his death, always in a positive way, avoiding discussion of the horrors of war to which he must certainly have been subjected, relaying, instead, his impressions of the geography and natural environment and culture of central Vietnam. He thinks of his son, who bristled with vitality, who left a sweetheart behind in Harlem when he was drafted. He thinks of his son who was, simply, too good for this world.

“Hey Mister... please buy me a chocolate bar?”

The voice seems to manifest from thin air.

Arthur looks around, then down, where he spots a child of about eight years old. He is a slight boy with walnut skin, wearing beige corduroy overalls atop a dark green t-shirt. He has big ears and a short afro and hazel pupils set within round, white, searching eyes. The rain has made his cheeks shiny.

“You talking to me, kid?” Arthur asks.

“Well, I’m looking at you, ain’t I?”

Arthur chuckles at the youngster’s spunk. “Why would I buy you a chocolate bar?”

“Because I said, ‘please’.”

“Well... I guess you’re polite enough. Where are your parents?”

“My poppa does his work around here.”

“Where?”

“Around here.”

Arthur nods and squints his eyes at the boy. He’s too young to be on his own on the streets. “Shouldn’t you be in school, boy?”

The boy shrugs quietly.

“Do you want me to take you to your father? He’ll buy you a candy bar if he wants to.”

“No, he won’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because Momma says I shouldn’t have ‘em.”

Arthur laughs again. “Your momma is probably right.”

A clap of thunder and the deli man calls out Arthur’s order. Arthur turns around and gives him a “hang on” gesture, then returns his attention to the boy. But the child has already run off somewhere. Arthur looks both ways up the street then tosses his cigarette to the wet pavement and grinds it underfoot.

That night, after the storm has passed, he sits out on the fire escape, eats a leftover carton of Szechuan noodles, gazes westward across Morningside Park toward the tangerine sun as it completes its journey across the sky. He has occupied this creaky two-bedroom apartment for just shy of six years. He decided to sell the brownstone on 119th Street shortly after Louie’s passing. It was too large, too empty, too adorned with raw sentiment for a lonely widower in his fifties. But it is not the case that he wanted to move on emotionally; quite the opposite. He clings

to the memory of his wife and son as if it is the only thing that will prevent him from plummeting into the fiery chasm. He has arranged the second bedroom of the apartment as a kind of shrine: large photos of Minnie and Louie on the wall; below that, atop an oak sideboard, a cluster of half-melted candles and half-burned incense sticks; a plush reclining chair in the center of the room.

After the sun sets, Arthur watches the nightly news. More reports and footage from Saigon. The communists have overrun the city, vanquished the Army of the Republic, toppled the southern government, declared victory over the occupying American forces. Hysterical women with small children board ferries bound for Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines. American evacuees and select Vietnamese refugees are choppered to aircraft carriers, where, after unloading their human cargo, the pilots ditch their craft into the nearby sea and await rescue. In the city there are reports of violent reprisals carried out against the South Vietnamese. It is, in Arthur's eyes, a debacle, a total humiliation. Louie, who lost his life during a rocket attack near Chu Lai, who was no more than cannon fodder to the corrupt forces which had engineered this obscene misadventure, had fought and died for nothing – less than nothing.

Arthur works his way through a six-pack of Schlitz, then migrates to the shrine room. He lights some candles and incense, kisses the portrait of his wife – her golden skin and youthful, full cheeks; forever twenty-nine years old – and the portrait of his child – his wise eyes and unburdened smile; forever eighteen – then falls asleep in the recliner.

The following Tuesday, Arthur has his regular session with Harold Williams, a thirty-five-year-old accountant who suffers from an acute and persistent manic-depressive condition. He is on a substantial daily dose of lithium, but, unfortunately, continues to vacillate between extremes. Arthur recognizes that he can do little to remedy the underlying problem and that his

primary function is to help Harold recognize when his mood has shifted out of the normal range so that he can implement measures to protect himself and those around him. Lately, Harold has been moderately manic. He explains to Arthur that he has discovered a hidden link between the accounts of a clothing company based in Hell's Kitchen and a general contracting service in Queens.

"I'm starting to realize that it is like a giant spiderweb connecting all businesses, all people, all entities on earth," says Harold.

"What is?" Arthur asks.

"Accounting, credits and debits, money, numbers, data..."

Harold speaks rapidly and with great conviction. Arthur nods and notes these observations in his journal. "And what is the significance of the spiderweb, Harold?"

"What is the significance?! It is the underpinning of life itself. It is the scaffolding upon which reality is constructed. It is the unseen truth!"

"So, you're saying you may have deciphered a great mystery of the universe?"

"*May have?* No, I am *certain* I have!" Harold is breathing heavily and on the edge of his seat. His enthusiasm in this moment reminds Arthur of his son, who pontificated about rock music in the way that Harold describes this sort of metaphysical accounting. Joe Cocker, the Stones, Jimi, Jefferson Airplane – Louie could discuss his favorite performers for hours on end. He aspired to start his own music label and discover generation-defining artists. The boy may have had a touch of mania, but not the kind that was dangerous; the kind that propelled individuals toward greatness.

"OK, Harold. Let's sit back and relax for a moment. Take a few deep breaths. Bring your heartrate down."

“OK. OK.” Harold eases back into the armchair and exhales a few times, slowly and audibly.

“Now, I am going to say some things that may be hard for you to hear, that may seem completely at odds with your experience. But I want you to think about what I say and try to do so in the most rational way possible, as if you are calculating profit and loss or some other important figure for one of your clients.”

“All right. Go ahead.”

“We know that you have a history of mania, correct?”

“Yes, but –”

“– now hang on. Let me say what I need to say.”

“Sure.”

“You have a history of mania. And what are the symptoms you have experienced during previous episodes?”

Harold shakes his head defiantly. “I’m not manic right now.”

“Then tell me what the symptoms of mania are.”

“Fine. Well, sometimes I start to believe things are happening that aren’t happening... and I get a bit paranoid... and my mind sees connections everywhere...”

“OK. Stop there. Take a few more breaths.”

“Fine.”

“And let’s think about what is going on right now. You told me that you have discovered a spiderweb of data that connects all of existence –”

“– it does!”

“Have you been experiencing any paranoia?”

Harold shrugs.

“Perhaps there are certain people who don’t want you to understand the mysteries of the universe... people who might want to destroy you for making this discovery?”

Harold presses his lips together for a moment, then: “Well, yes... there are certain government officials that have been spying on me... I’m not imagining them.”

The conversation continues in this way: Arthur attempting to demonstrate to Harold that he is likely in an altered state and Harold pushing back unreasonably. Finally, their session concludes with Harold agreeing to call Arthur if he is tempted to do anything rash. However, Arthur knows that, when the time comes, his client will likely not be able to distinguish rash behavior from rational. He escorts Harold out of the therapy room, through the waiting room to the hallway and sends him on his way.

When Arthur turns back to his office, he is surprised to see that someone is sitting in one of the waiting room chairs. It is the boy in the beige overalls. He holds a half-eaten Hershey’s chocolate bar. Some of it is smeared at the corner of his mouth.

“What are you doing here?” Arthur asks.

“I dunno,” says the boy.

“Did you follow me up here? Does your father know where you are?”

“I dunno,” says the boy before taking another bite of his bar.

Arthur gives him a skeptical look. “I see you got someone to buy you that candy bar.”

“You did,” says the boy.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did.”

“I thought your momma said you shouldn’t eat candy.”

“She’s not here.”

“I guess she’s not,” Arthur concedes with a sigh.

The boy stares at him with those lucid, hazel eyes. Arthur appraises him and thinks.

“Well, you can’t stay here. Let’s call your father and have him come and get you.”

“Why can’t I stay?”

“Because this is a place of business.”

“I like business,” the boy says flatly, causing Arthur to chuckle. “What do you do?”

“What do I do? Well, I help people with their problems. I’m a therapist.”

“I have problems.”

Arthur furrows his brow, studies the boy, shakes his head. “Off you go, boy. Come, come.” He opens the door to the hallway.

Reluctantly the boy stands up and trudges toward the door. He pauses before exiting.

“Can I come back?”

“No, you can’t come back.”

Suddenly the boy’s face twists and he begins crying: sour, morose wails and whimpers. He covers his eyes with the crook of his elbow.

The sound of the child’s lamentations drives a spear into Arthur’s stomach. He senses that the boy is experiencing sincere and profound grief, and that it must be due to something much more substantial than being prohibited from loitering in the waiting room. He thinks about hugging the boy but hesitates. “Wait,” he says, “I think we should call your father. You shouldn’t be alone.”

The boy lifts his tear-streaked face and glares at Arthur. Then he runs out into the hallway and quickly down into the stairwell. Arthur stares after him for a long moment, then shuts the door.

That night, Arthur receives a phone call from Joy. He tells her that he is doing fine and that he has pulled out of the doldrums he was experiencing.

“You aren’t drinking too much, are you?” she asks.

“No. Not much,” he fibs, poorly.

“Would you like to come over this weekend? We haven’t seen you in a while. Darnell says he needs someone to watch the Knicks game with.”

“You know I don’t care much for the Knicks.”

“Well, you should come nonetheless. The kids want to see their uncle.”

“Oh, now you’re going to use the kids as bargaining chips?”

“You know I am.”

He laughs. “Fine.”

“How’s work?” she asks.

He hesitates, considers telling Joy about his encounters with the strange child, then decides against it. She tends to worry about all things big and small. “Work is work,” he sighs.

“You’re helping people, Arthur. It’s more than just work.”

“Too be honest, I’m not always sure that I am actually helping these people. The change they experience is so gradual. Lasting positive outcomes are few and far between. When they have real afflictions – psychiatric disorders – psychology can only do so much.”

“But you’re there for them, Arthur. You are providing the support that they need to get through whatever they’re getting through. It’s not your job to fix their every little problem. It’s your job to give them a foundation upon which to grow and thrive.”

Joy makes a lot of sense, and Arthur reflects on how blessed he is to have a sister that grounds him, that provides him with regular reality checks. “*You* are the one who should be counseling people,” he says.

“Hell, no! I’m too hardnosed,” she retorts with a cackle.

“You know that’s bull crap, Joy.”

“Maybe.”

On Sunday, Arthur arrives at Joy’s home in Prospect Heights around 2 PM. He brings toys for the boys – chintzy squirt guns he picked up at the local general store – and a modestly-priced bottle of champagne. Darnell answers the door with a gleaming, ivory grin. He is a handsome and well-built man; warm and reliable – an ideal partner for Joy. They shake hands and embrace.

Joy is in the kitchen with Jimmy and Roger – ages six and nine – who watch intently as she mixes vanilla cake batter. Seeing Arthur, she steps over and pecks him on the cheek. “I’d squeeze you,” she says, gesturing to her messy apron, “but I don’t want to ruin your shirt.” Then: “Give your uncle a hug, boys!” The boys do so, shyly.

Just as the Knicks game is winding down, Joy announces that dinner is ready. They take their seats and hold hands and offer a brief benediction before passing the dishes around. Barbecued chicken, almond green beans, poached cod, yams, dinner rolls. It has been some time since Arthur ate this well. He heaps generous portions onto his plate.

“I’m glad you brought your appetite for once,” Joy says. She’s ten years his junior, but will mother him till he dies.

After dessert, the boys go out to the backyard and attack each other with their squirt guns. Darnell brews coffee and pours cups for Arthur and Joy. They settle into their chairs and sip quietly, until Darnell says, “I’ve been curious, Art. How do you feel about the war coming to an end?”

“Oh, Darnell,” Joy interjects. “He doesn’t want to get into that. Let’s enjoy our time together without that kind of talk.”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” says Arthur. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot, too... thinking about how I feel exactly. It’s hard to wrap my arms around it.”

“I get that,” says Darnell. “I can imagine that it is a very difficult mix of emotions.”

“You can say that.”

“I feel guilty, in part. I was too young for World War II and too old for Vietnam. I’ve just watched from the sidelines. You saw some action in World War II, no?”

“I did. I did.”

“The Navy?”

“Yes. I was on a battleship during the Battle of Midway.”

“Wow. That must have been an experience.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“He served with honor,” Joy notes.

“It didn’t feel much like honor.”

“What did it feel like?” Darnell asks.

“It felt like... like a kind of hypocrisy. We looked at ourselves as heroes and at the Japanese like they were monsters. They weren’t monsters. They were doing their jobs just like we were. Fighting for their lives. Fighting for their families. Fighting for their future. Most people aren’t monsters. The monsters are in our minds.”

Darnell considers this, then says, “But there is right and wrong, isn’t there? I mean, in World War II, we were defending the free world from tyranny.”

“Well, that is the story we tell ourselves.”

“The story?”

“It is all stories, Darnell. Look at Vietnam. Which side was right? Which side was wrong? Which side was defending against tyranny?”

“So Vietnam was a messy affair. World War II was a just war.”

Arthur takes a deep breath. “It is hard for me to refer to any war as ‘just’. When you’re sending boys into the woodchipper, when you are snuffing out thousands, millions of lives, when all of it is orchestrated by the people who make money off of it, the people with no skin in the game... I’m not sure any of it is just.”

“Damn...” Darnell mutters pensively.

“Enough, boys,” says Joy. “I insist that we pick a lighter topic for discussion.”

“Very well.” Darnell leans back, puts his hand behind his head, stares at the ceiling.

Arthur nods, sips his coffee.

The following Friday, Arthur wraps his day early and walks over to Union Square. It rains lightly. The cloud cover matches the color of the sidewalk pavement. He buys a cup of coffee from a vendor and takes a seat on a bench and watches the motley flow of passersby. He is startled when the boy in the overalls appears on the bench next to him.

“You again,” he says.

The boy looks at him quietly.

“Listen. You should not be all alone out here. I’ve already told you that. If your father won’t look after you, I’m going to have to get involved.”

“OK,” says the boy.

“OK what?”

“You can get involved.”

“Do you want me to?”

“I dunno. I’m hungry.”

“When was the last time you ate something?”

“I dunno.”

“You don’t know? Did you have breakfast today?”

“Maybe...”

Arthur wipes his hand across his forehead. This kid is confounding. They look at each other for a long moment.

“What do you want to eat?”

“Tacos!”

“Tacos, eh?”

“Yeah, I’m hungry.”

“Do your parents feed you?”

“Yes.”

“Then why are you hungry?”

The boy shrugs and fiddles with his fingers.

“You don’t know much, it seems. I’ll cut you a deal. I’ll buy you a taco if you agree to take me to your father.”

“OK.”

“Deal?”

“Deal,” the boy says.

They walk over to a food cart, Arthur holding his umbrella so that it shields the boy as well. Arthur orders two beef tacos with all the fixings.

“My son loved tacos, too,” he tells the boy. “He loved all kinds of food, but Mexican the most.”

“Where is he?”

“My son? He... he’s passed on. Do you know what that means?”

“It means he died.”

“That’s right. He died in the war.”

“Everybody dies,” says the boy matter-of-factly.

“Sad but true,” Arthur sighs.

The vendor gives the tacos to Arthur and Arthur hands over a dollar bill. He turns to the boy, and says, “Now, don’t forget our deal...” But, once again, the boy has disappeared.

Arthur, mildly frustrated but also concerned, walks around the perimeter of the square once, searching for the child. Unsuccessful, he dumps the tacos in a garbage bin then heads down to the subway station.

During his ride up to Harlem, he thinks about the interaction. The most reasonable conclusion, in his estimation, is that the boy is a street urchin – a homeless orphan who preys on empathetic elders for meals and a few bucks here and there. For a moment, Arthur feels used.

But then he realizes he hasn't actually provided the boy with anything of value. They have had three encounters over the past few weeks, but no money or goods has changed hands. It must be the case that the boy is lonely. It must be the case that he is seeking out a father figure: someone to guide him, to ease his pain, to care for him, even.

Arthur has a strange thought. Perhaps he should take this child in. He has the wherewithal and space in the apartment. Moreover, he, himself, is quite lonely often. Having a young one around might lift his spirits, distract him from... from...

... No. The idea is nonsensical. He would simply be transferring his trauma onto the boy, turning the boy into a sort of emotional crutch, which would be fair to no one. And, in truth, he doesn't want to be distracted. He doesn't want to let go because, if he does, he may never again find his grip. By the time he reaches the 125th Street station, he has made a decision: the next time he spots the boy he will notify the police and the Office of Children and Family Services. It may not be what the boy wants, but to standby while this child suffers, while he roams the streets day and night getting into God's knows what kind of trouble, would be criminal.

June 5th arrives, marking the sixth anniversary of Louie's death. Arthur takes a bus from Penn Station to Washington, DC, bringing with him a small bouquet of marigolds and a copy of Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, which he read once while in grad school. Although it had a profound impact upon him at the time, now, almost thirty years later, he feels – for personal and professional reasons, both – that he needs to refresh his understanding of logotherapy. The primacy of *Why?* in human psychology. He begins reading the book as they pass through Trenton but does not get far. The subject matter – life in the Auschwitz concentration camp – of course, is difficult to swallow more than a bit at a time. But, more so,

his mind begins to churn and he reexamines the various *Whys* that have made his life endurable and, for too brief a time, fulfilling.

As a teenager, his primary motivations were to please his mother, to attain to expectations, and, largely, to make his father proud. He was not an outstanding student, but, boosted by his supportive parents, he believed in himself and in his ability to make a mark on the world. The attack on Pearl Harbor occurred shortly after he graduated high school, prompting him to enlist. Brimming with patriotic fervor, he was determined to serve his country, to stop the Nazis, to make things right. But by the time he finally shipped out, his focus had become singular: Minnie.

They had met while he was stationed in Norfolk, Virginia for basic and specialized training. Of all things, she was the on-base librarian's assistant. Arthur often spent time in the library; it was cozy and warm and his aspiration, then, was to develop an elevated understanding of geopolitical dynamics so as best to prepare himself for an esteemed career in naval leadership. However, after a brief interaction during which Minnie – fresh-faced, elegant, sweet as pie – helped him find a copy of a book about British shipbuilding during World War I, all other things became secondary. He spent so much time in the library thereafter that his mates nicknamed him “Bookworm,” which, for better or worse, stuck for only a few months.

Arthur, shy and short on romantic experience, continued to admire Minnie from afar for several weeks until, quite providentially, he encountered her at a malt shop two months before his cruise set sail. She was seated at the counter with two of her friends, wearing a rose-colored shirtwaist dress and a pair of cream wedge shoes, her hair twisted into a chignon in the back. They made eye contact the moment Arthur entered and he was so flustered that he considered turning around and speed walking in the other direction. But she smiled invitingly and he

summoned the courage to smile in return and they spent the evening strolling around downtown Norfolk and sharing the intimate details of their lives.

Minnie became his *Why*, thoughts of her sustaining him through many a perilous night aboard the battleship. When the war in the Pacific ended and he returned stateside, he immediately took a bus down to Norfolk and, right there in the naval base library, next to the card catalogue, dropped to a knee. Laughing joyously, she accepted his proposal.

Six years later, shortly after Arthur finished his undergraduate degree at the State University of New York, while Minnie was on summer break from her job as a kindergarten teacher in Washington Heights, Louie came into the world. Arthur's *Why* expanded in scope, but also became ever more concentrated, their little family unit his entire universe. His determination to succeed redoubled. His ambition, which had always been an inward-facing drive, now became about guaranteeing everything his wife and child deserved.

Then, in 1953, while four months pregnant with their second child, Minnie was struck and killed by a utility truck as she crossed St. Nicholas Avenue on her way to the hairdresser.

When Arthur arrives in DC, he checks into the Plymouth Guesthouse in Foggy Bottom. He drinks three double-bourbons neat at the hotel bar before setting off on foot. He walks south along the Potomac to the Lincoln Memorial, where he sits on the steps and smokes three cigarettes while gazing across the reflecting pool. He was there in 1963, with Louie, for the March on Washington that featured Dr. King's "I Have A Dream" speech. The boy was only twelve years old, short for his age. Arthur held his hand as he stood atop a newsrack in order to gain a better vantage. When the event ended, Arthur was certain that a new era had begun, one in which justice would, finally, prevail. He was certain that his son, who had made it this far without a mother, would overcome all adversity.

As he walks across Arlington Memorial Bridge, over the Potomac River where rowers in sculling boats propel themselves along needle-straight paths, it begins to rain steadily. Arthur curses himself for leaving his umbrella behind in the hotel room, then takes a few deep breaths and surrenders to the elements. By the time he crosses through Potomac Park and arrives at the entrance to Arlington Cemetery, the downpour has strengthened, although there is no sign of lightning nor rumbles of thunder.

He knows exactly how to navigate to Louie's gravestone without requesting directions at the welcome center. It is approximately one hundred meters southwest of McClellan Gate beside a young red oak: a nondescript white, marble headstone, matching the thousands that surround it and span the field in serried rows. At the top, the outline of a cruciform, with a simple inscription below:

Louie W.
Sheffield
PFC USA
Vietnam
Jan 21, 1951
Jun 5, 1969
Purple Heart

Arthur lays the orange flowers at the base of the headstone and lowers himself with a groan into the wet grass. He sits quietly for a long moment, still buzzing from the bourbon, the rain pattering atop his head and cascading down his nose and cheeks. Despite the inclement weather, he finds the setting to be arcadian, sedating.

"Louie," he says. "I'm here."

The breeze whisps through the treetops. A red BMW rolls slowly westward on McClellan Drive, splashing through a patchwork of shallow puddles. Two men in trench coats and fedoras, walk across the grounds in the distance, the only other visitors in sight.

“I’m lost, boy,” Arthur continues. “I’ve been lost since the day you left... and I don’t know if I’ll ever find my way again. The sad thing is that I am the one who should have the capacity to make it through. I’ve had countless clients who suffered from profound grief. I’ve told them to deepen their spirituality, attend church or temple, reach out to family members, develop new interests... I’ve tried all of that, and I still have a hole in my heart... a hole the shape of you... a hole the shape of your mother.”

Arthur wipes his face, runs his hands over his wet hair, stares up into the wet, gunmetal sky. Talking to the specter of his son now feels natural after all this time. He regularly engages with the portraits of Louie and Minnie in his apartment, and he visits his wife’s grave frequently. She rests at St. Cletus’s Cemetery in the Bronx and he’ll often spend the afternoon there, carrying on a conversation as if she were still alive. He has the funny thought that he is better at socializing with the dead than the living.

“Are you sad?”

A small voice. Arthur recognizes it immediately.

The boy now stands next to Louie’s headstone. His overalls are soaked through. His tight curls wet and shiny.

“You’re here,” Arthur says tiredly.

“Are you sad?”

“Yes. Of course. I am sad.”

“Why?”

Arthur can't help but snort a short laugh. "Because my son is dead. Because my wife is dead. Because I am alone."

"You're not alone."

"Right now, I am."

"I'm here."

"Yes, you're here."

"Why did your son and wife die?"

"Why? Because that's how this cruel world works, boy. Because, in the end, it does not matter how good or evil you are. You'll rot just the same."

"I think people should be good."

"Yes, yes."

The rain begins to let up. Arthur struggles to his feet.

"What should we do?" asks the boy.

"Do you know any prayers?"

"I know Our Father."

"That works."

The boy steps toward Louie's headstone, brings his hands together at his chest, and closes his eyes. Arthur does the same.

They recite together: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

For a long moment, they remain quiet.

“Deliver us from evil,” Arthur intones.

“Amen,” the boy adds, then steps forward and places his hand gently atop the stone.

It is a touching moment. Arthur gulps and feels a warm tear meld with the cool rain on his cheek. “Let’s walk,” he says.

“OK.”

They cut through the graveyard to Sheridan Drive, their wet feet sloshing within their shoes. Soon they come upon the gravesite of President John F. Kennedy, where an eternal flame burns at the center of a circular granite marker.

“What is that?” asks the boy.

“It is the gravesite of a man who was President of this country.”

“A good man?”

“That is what people say.”

“What do you say?”

Arthur stares at the flame and formulates a response. “Some people claim that he would have withdrawn from Vietnam had he lived. If that had happened, then my boy would be alive today. But I don’t know. He was part of the system, and the system has the real control, not the President.”

“What is the system?”

“Good question. It’s hard to explain, son. The system is everything, all of it: the collective ambitions, ignorance, motivations, greed, confusion, spite of the American people and their leaders. And it has a life of its own. The system is a boulder and one man is like a speck of dust. You, me – it’s best if we just get out of the way. Get out of the way at all costs.” Arthur looks up at the darkling sky. “I wish I would have given my son the same advice. I failed him...”

There is a long silence and Arthur knows that the boy is gone.

On July 3, Arthur takes on a new client, a twenty-year-old young man with a pronounced stutter. His name is Donny Whittaker and he fidgets compulsively.

“What brings you in, Donny?”

“W-w-well, I-I s-s-struggle with some thhhings, a-and my grandmother h-heard from her friend th-th-that you are a g-good thhherapist.”

“I see.” Arthur experiences a mild sense of frustration with the boy’s affliction, but reminds himself to be patient, to avoid giving any indication that the stutter is a problem. “And what, exactly, do you struggle with?”

Lonnie shifts and rubs his fingertips together. “I-I... M-my f-f-father abused me when I w-w-was liiittle.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Was the abuse physical, emotional... sexual?”

“N-not sssexual. He b-beat me and sssaid horrible thhhings to m-me.”

Arthur nods, takes a note. He hates to admit it, but, if he had his druthers, he would not work with abuse survivors anymore. There was a time when he had an appetite for it, a desire to mend that sort of acute emotional wound. But lately, he seems to be suffering from a burnout, a dearth of empathy. And, what abuse survivors need more than anything is an empathetic confidante. Yet, when he listens to traumatic stories nowadays, he experiences anger, not so much directed at the perpetrator of the abuse, but directed at the aspect of human nature that allows for it. This shit makes him want to lash out at the universe when, professionally speaking, dispassionate analysis is what is required to help the victim.

“And how do you think that this abuse has affected you as an adult?” he asks.

“W-w-well, y-you hhhear my stutter d-don’t you?”

“You believe your speech impediment is a consequence of the abuse...”

“I-I know it is.” Donny puts his head in his hands and rubs it briskly.

“I see. What else?”

“W-what else is wr-wrong with me?”

“Not wrong with you. Don’t put it that way. There is no wrong because there is no right.

What are your other struggles?”

“I’m a-angry a lot. My t-t-temper is very bad. It has cost m-me a few jobs. I’m vvvery emotional. Sssometimes I c-c-cry all day long for no reason. I have n-no self-esteem. Fffew friends. I’m a-sh-shamed to sssay it, but I-I’ve never been with a woman.” Donny shakes his hands as if he’s drying them off.

“That must not feel very good,” says Arthur. “That must be frustrating, disheartening. Is there anything that brings you joy?”

“Yes. Thhh p-pigeons.”

“The pigeons?”

“I r-r-raise pigeons.”

“Really? Now that’s an interesting hobby.”

“It’s m-more than a hhhobby.”

“I can imagine. Tell me more. Why do you do it? What do you like about it?”

Donny thinks and, for the first time, smiles. “I-I d-do it because it mmmakes the birds happy. Thhthey c-count on me to fffeed them and t-talk to them. And, even if thhthey fly off, they always c-come back. And they d-don’t judge me, don’t have a m-mean bone in their body. They take me as I am. They d-don’t care that I talk funny or that I cry sometimes. They comfort me when I am angry, soothe me when I have anxiety. They need me and I need them...”

Arthur notices that, as the explanation unfolds, the boy's stutter all but disappears. He decides not to mention it, not to draw attention to it, but to let the boy express himself for as long as he needs. He listens and nods as Donny describes the wooden roost he has assembled on the rooftop of his grandmother's home in Long Island City to shelter the birds and the system he has implemented for feeding them en masse. And he explains that he has named some of the birds after historical figures and sports stars. And he goes on for at least ten minutes, uninterrupted.

Pigeons on the ledge outside of the bathroom window. This is the image that surfaces in Arthur's mind. In his first apartment with Minnie, a cramped railroad flat on 128th Street, there were always pigeons roosting on the ledge outside of the bathroom window, which was right above the toilet. Every morning, when Arthur relieved himself, they would coo and leer at him with twitchy eyes. They were there, too, for the birth of his son.

Arthur and Millie opted for a home birth under the supervision of a doula named June, a sturdy woman whose extensive experience was reflected in her depth of knowledge, efficiency, and plainspoken manner. Although there was some concern about Millie's blood pressure during her five hours of labor, there were no notable complications. She delivered in their full bathtub, Louie emerging underwater in a vibrant burst of fluid and blood. Arthur knelt beside her and held her hand tightly for the entire process, and when she lifted the infant to her bosom he kissed them both on the top of their heads and declared, "I have a son! Praise Jesus, I have a son!" Millie, spent by the exertion, laughed and cried at the same time, and the pigeons outside of the window warbled in a celebratory manner.

They named the boy after Millie's grandfather, who was a tobacco sharecropper outside of Savannah. He was a small baby, borderline underweight, but he cried loudly and, after a brief examination including a count of his fingers and toes, June declared that he was viable and

healthy. Arthur remembers that first night with their newborn, swaddled like a little potato in his bassinet. Millie slept soundly through the night, but Arthur stayed awake to make sure that there were no problems, to make sure that this blessing was not an illusion. He sat next to the bassinet and stared at the miraculous entity that he and his beloved wife had concocted. And, before sunrise, when Louie began to stir and gurgle, he delicately lifted the boy and held him to his chest and felt as if he finally understood the essence of life. He finally understood *why*.

Donny clears his throat a few times, which snaps Arthur out of his reverie. He realizes that he has been completely zoned out, has not registered the last few minutes of the boy's pigeon story.

"Sorry," he says. "I was... I was lost in thought."

"Y-you d-didn't hear what I w-was sssaying?"

"No... I heard most of it, Lonnie. It just reminded me of... of a special moment. Forgive me."

Lonnie scratches his thigh unconsciously. "It's all right."

"How often do you spend time with your pigeons?"

"Oh, e-every day, of course."

"That's good. That's very good. Every day matters." Arthur pauses, searching for more articulate, nuanced feedback, but ultimately just repeats himself: "Every day matters."

The following afternoon, the Fourth of July, Arthur joins Joy and her family for a barbecue in Prospect Park. Numerous other families from the neighborhood are there: at least a dozen children and several dogs. Arthur sits on a lawn chair with several of the other men. They talk about baseball and about the movie *Jaws*, which was released recently.

"One of the scariest things I've ever seen," says Darnell.

“I didn’t find it that horrifying,” says a man named Chuck. “Animals don’t scare me.”

“What scares you, then?”

“Aliens, brother.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Man, haven’t you seen *War of the Worlds*? Tell me if something like that happened you wouldn’t be pissing your pants.”

Darnell laughs and says, “Sure, but that’s not going to happen.”

“What about *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*?” a man named Willy interjects. He sits with a chihuahua on his lap.

“C’mon,” says Chuck, “you can’t be afraid of something so absurd.”

“You think a man with a chainsaw is more absurd than giant alien robots?”

“Shit... What do you think, Arthur? What freaks you out?”

Arthur, who was only half-listening to the back-and-forth, sits back and exhales. “You’re asking me what scares me?”

“Yeah, man! Sharks, ET, or psychopaths. Or maybe you have your own thing.”

“None of that concerns me anymore,” says Arthur. “None of that.”

“Arthur saw battle in World War II,” Darnell notes. “Can’t be much in this life that’s scarier than that.”

“I’d have to disagree,” Arthur says. “Fear is a relative thing. It all depends on what you have to lose. Lots to lose, lots to fear. Nothing to lose, nothing to fear.”

The men nod quietly.

Arthur pushes himself to his feet and finds Joy with some of the women at a picnic table. He taps her on the shoulder and lets her know he’s leaving. She stands and gives him a tight hug.

“What’s going on with you, Arthur?” she asks, holding him by the shoulders and looking closely into his face.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’re acting strange. I can’t quite put my finger on it. It’s not necessarily a bad thing, whatever it is…”

“Hmm,” Arthur starts, tilting his head. “Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps I’ve figured out a new path forward.”

Joy raises her eyebrows. “Really? I’d like to hear about that.”

“Some other time, sis. When we find a moment that is more conducive to that sort of conversation.”

“All right, then. I don’t have to worry about you, do I?”

“No more than usual.”

She chuckles and pats her brother on his cheek.

Later, as darkness descends over the city, Arthur perches on his fire escape. Bottle rockets spear the sky in all directions and larger fireworks pop and bloom over the park. He smokes half a pack of cigarettes and finishes a six-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon before climbing back inside the apartment.

In the shrine room, he lights the candles and the incense, kisses the portraits of his wife and child. But, before settling in, he retrieves a wooden chair from the dining room and places it beside the recliner. Then he sits down and extends the footrest and relaxes. Outside: muffled crackles and booms. Inside, the wall clock ticks, keeping time. The candlelight manifests as undulating golden phantasms on the walls and ceiling.

Arthur sighs and looks to his right, where the boy in the overalls is now seated.

“How do you feel?” Arthur asks.

“I feel good,” the boy answers. There is a brightness in his eyes, prominent in the darkened room.

“Hungry?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you like it here?”

“Yes. I like it.”

“Then stay for a while.”

“I will,” says the boy.

“I’m glad,” says Arthur, exhaling fully, his eyelids growing heavy, his heartrate slow and steady. “It’s good to have you with me.”