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Mr. Was

Funny, but after decades since seeing him last, hardly giving him a thought all that time, I find myself with an unwanted understanding of Mr. Was that I now know—and this is the funny, as in odd, part—he had seen coming all along. I wonder what he would have thought of his unspoken prophecy coming true, having missed my chance to find out.

He owned and operated a general store cum delicatessen, next to the post office, on the ground floor of a wooden structure that resembled, except for its bigger size, any other house in Lake Hemlock, sleepy hamlet of the equally sleepy town of Qampanog, New York. He lived on the second floor. Considering his ready access to the necessities of life, like food and toilet paper, as well as full postal services, he had almost no reason to leave the building. A low slung car moldered in a weedy lot out back, bought used when they first started shooting men into space. I don't remember him ever driving it.

By the time I came to work for him, his hair was already retreating like a slow outgoing ocean wave, leaving behind a sand-colored expanse of egg-shaped forehead. He wore thick eyeglasses with black plastic rims and bathed once a week (at that time, for a man his age, the norm). The glasses, having lenses of actual glass and weighing perhaps a pound and a half, constantly slipped down his greasy nose. His habit was to push them up with his middle finger, which I saw him do more than a few times even though they had not slipped, when he was talking to someone I knew he didn't like.

Mr. Was (short for Waskiewicz) believed in the salutary properties of God's natural light as much as he despised paying bills, and the store was small enough, with windows big enough, to keep from turning the lights on during the long days of summer, the whole of my time there. That was fine for white glare days, but on cloudy ones the farthest recesses were murky nether zones, and on humid storm-threatening days the whole place turned into rather a dank, rank dungeon, one corner, behind the counter and all the way in the back, at the farthest point away from the register, pulsing with the flicker of Mr. Was's little black and white television.

What trade Lake Hemlock General Store turned came mostly from the morning coffee, bagel, and bagged lunch set, the rest of the day being a drowsy time-killing twilight. Mr. Was, dressed in the uniform of a man of his era, short-sleeved collared shirt and loose slacks, nested in front of his little black and white at the far end of the counter, sitting on a folding chair with an aluminum, three-legged ashtray stand at one elbow and at the other a small refrigeration unit with a top-mounted sliding glass door, from which he could pull cans of beer at a steady but slow rate that I figured to be around eight or nine a day. For my part, after the morning spurt I had nothing to do. It never occurred to either of us that I might pass the time dusting off the items that never sold, like the tins of sardines or packages of ready-quick noodles. And it never crossed my mind to ask why he should have hired me that summer in the first place, at two dollars

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an hour cash. The same old men and women would come around to chat about the weather or politics, interrupting Mr. Was's television watching though he never let on that he was annoyed, cynically conceding personal contentment to the tiresome duty of working for one's keep. If they actually bought something, a loaf of bread, perhaps, or some aspirin, he would say, "Thomas will ring you up." So I suppose that was my purpose, to hustle out customers so Mr. Was could get back to his television.

He maintained an abiding faith in the human body's defense systems against invasive microorganisms. If I mentioned that I thought some of the deli meat had spoiled, the Dutch loaf, say, not a big seller, he would stroke his chin and ask if it smelled bad.

"Yes," I would say.

"But does it smell really bad," he would say, emphasizing the distinction.

I would check it again and say, "Not yet."

"Then it's fine," he would say, or rather pronounce, scowling, and the Dutch loaf would remain, off-color bits trimmed away until it was whittled down to the size of a baseball, when Mr. Was would eat it himself using the tip of a pocket knife as a fork.

My work hours were entirely optional, but I spent all day at the store, every day with few exceptions. Sundays were one, when I was forced to endure the hot hell of Catholic Mass, after which we, meaning my parents and me, would stop at the store to pick up jelly donuts. It was strange to see Mr. Was upright behind the register, half-lit by streaming sunlight, stranger still to see a smile on his face and a crisp quality to his movements. More than once I asked if I could work on Sunday but, alas, my soul was just too endangered to neglect. The other exceptions were all Mr. Was's doing. I would be out on the stoop, on the weathered wooden bench reading a newspaper (gratis, as long as I folded it neatly when I was done) and sipping from a six-ounce bottle of RC cola, when he would throw open the door and order me away like I was trespassing. "Go to the beach!" he would say. "At your age, for God's sake." And to the beach I would go, after walking home to change, to linger on the fringe of groups, perhaps swimming a few token laps to the raft and back, emerging with a thick coat of slime and algae.

Mr. Was's memory was not good. He often forgot the names of other people's children. And yet when it came to soap operas, which was all he ever watched on his little black and white, his powers of recall were prodigious. He must have followed half a dozen of them, and considering that each featured at least twenty principal characters and at least as many ancillary ones, and that each week at least as many complicated, intertwined plotlines unfolded on all of them, albeit at a glacial pace, his faculty to retrieve and relate their singular ins and outs was, I daresay, genius. Let me paraphrase: "I don't think Marly is really going to have a baby. I think she's faking it to make Ben jealous, though he can't really be fooled because he thinks she's barren, which she isn't, since that was a lie that Julia told him to make him split up with her, Marly I mean, because he more than anything wants a natural heir to the Rochefort line though he has no idea that he himself is a bastard, which, if his younger brother,

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I should say half-brother, found out would get him disinherited, especially seeing as they hate each other. For Marly's plan to work, she'll have to find out that Ben thinks she's barren, then convince him that she's not, then win him back, then fake a miscarriage. Such a scenario is entirely plausible. Then again, maybe she isn't faking. In that case she'll have to convince him of all the other stuff and that the baby is his, a hard sell since they haven't fooled around in over a year, but there was that week when Ben had amnesia, so maybe it wouldn't be such a tough sell even though he was in Guatemala at the time. Of course if she really is going to have a baby, then Andrew has to be the father, since the timing works out perfectly, I mean when they slept together just before he went to jail on that false murder charge. . ." And so on. I'd say ninety percent of what he said to me had to do with soap operas.

He was divorced, an anomaly for the place if not for the time. To me, in my fevered, sticky little universe, firmly of the unconscious conviction that the wider world had been waiting for me to come along to really get going, it was as though he had always been divorced. He had four children, all older than me but not old. That is, not beyond me. His only daughter was the youngest, and whenever she came around I took care to conceal my lower half behind the counter. Just the presence of a woman (a woman, a real woman!) who acknowledged me with polite eye contact when she spoke to her father was enough to put blood in the bone, as it were. She was a veterinarian, a "dog doctor" I once heard Mr. Was say, and he didn't seem to care about anything she said. In retrospect, she was homely if well-shaped. She had the same long, meaty nose and closely set eyes as her father. Come to think of it, I never noticed the resemblance until years later, when, catching sight of her in a supermarket, I saw that her forehead had expanded, egg-shaped like his, and the same ruts had formed from the wings of her nostrils down to the corners of her withered mouth. The resemblance had always been there, but though the young see with hyperclarity, they don't see much.

This is what happened. Mr. Was's daughter burst into the store, throwing wide the door, and before I could react, my lower half that is, said, darkly, "Thomas, would you excuse us?" She followed her father's lead in calling me Thomas. Only they called me that. To everyone else I was Tommy. I liked the formality, like we had an understanding. Anyway I did as I was told and went outside, and she locked the door behind me and flipped the sign over to CLOSED. It happened so fast that I hadn't thought to take a paper with me to pass the time, so I had nothing to do but sit on the bench and look around. It was one of those moments in life. By some mysterious mechanism, the feel of the moment sticks like a hard kernel in the mushy pulp that is memory. The atmosphere was redolent with the smells of summer, the rancid smell of the underside of things. Insect song sounded its singular piercing note, a twined shriek and rattle. It was as mesmerizing as that which has always been there suddenly seen (and don't forget the hyper clarity of youth). After a while I heard voices behind me, through the storefront window, of Mr. Was and his daughter shouting at each other. Or rather, they tried to out-shout each other, both voices running at cross purposes like two different songs from two different radios, as though they competed to see who could talk the longest with a single breath. The daughter, it turned out. I couldn't distinguish any of

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the words. The shouting came to an abrupt stop and the door flung open and out came the daughter walking hard on her heels, tears in her eyes. She shot an evil look at me through the windshield of her car and backed into the street, bucking, and drove off. I was silly enough to think I'd done something wrong, that the shouting had somehow to do with me, symptomatic of my sticky little universe at the time. I went inside and asked Mr. Was if I should flip the sign to OPEN.

"Funny," he said from his nest, cracking open a beer and throwing the tab on the floor.

"Thomas," he said. "Don't ever get married."

I didn't know what to say.

"Flip the sign," he said.

I could tell he wasn't really watching his little black and white. An old-man customer came in and started to talk about the ayatolla but Mr. Was stopped him cold, saying, "Thomas will ring you up." The old man bought a quart of milk (expired, but I didn't say anything because I hated him) and left. Mr. Was lit a cigarette and spit out a particle of tobacco. For the first time, I didn't want to be there. He must have sensed it because he told me to go without looking at me, the first of many times such a scene would play out in my life. I walked home, changed, and went to the beach. The water was especially bad that day. Everyone, even the girls in bikinis, smelled like a sewer. I lazed on a towel listening to tinny music from a transistor radio and the conversations of others, filling in the bits I didn't know about in order to make sense of them, my eyes finding the lifeguard who was my age but physically ahead of her time.

Mr. Was's ex-wife had died in a house fire. That's when I learned that she had lived only ten miles away, on the far side of Qampanog, and that her life since leaving Mr. Was had been something of a local scandal, what with lots of different men and drugs and the police getting involved, a secret kept from young ones like me until her death presented a good opportunity for moralizing. In the days that followed a parade of customers came through the store, far more than at any other time, ostensibly to buy this or that but always getting to the point, at some point, of offering condolences and asking if Mr. Was was going to the funeral. He was not. I couldn't help notice that he pushed up his glasses with his middle finger a lot more than usual.

After that, Mr. Was went from eight or nine beers a day to ten or eleven. Otherwise, I saw no change in him, except he tended to doze off in his chair around noon. Summer wound down. A few unseasonably cold days killed the feel of it, and my thoughts, or rather my fears, began to turn on the coming school year. Mr. Was went on as usual. After I'd gone home to my sticky little bedroom, and my bikini pinups and my headphones, he closed shop and went upstairs. Not that I could have imagined back then what he did when he was alone, but I'm afraid that these days I can see him as he went upstairs, taking each step with a slow, scuffing foot, head hung, pushing up his eyeglasses with his middle finger. He made a meal of outdated scraps and drank beer on a dusty, flattened old couch in front of a bigger television than downstairs, this one color. He didn't think much of anything, or much at all. Loath to turn on a light, he let the tele-

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vision suffice. At some point he fell asleep, and, waking to a screen filled with snow, and a room filled with a roaring hiss, he finished off what warm dregs remained in the beer can and headed to bed, urinating copiously first but not bothering to brush his teeth. He woke up before dawn with a cold brain and lay in bed until time to open the store, going downstairs and letting me in to do the handful of little things, like putting the coffee on, that constituted preparation for the handful of expected customers. After I had gone back to school, he did those things himself. It hardly made a difference.

That's how I left him, eventually moving away from Lake Hemlock and Qampanog to a more or less identical town, or rather town within a town, getting a place of my own in the basement of an old widow's house, where I remain. Visiting my parents on some holiday, I forget which, I drove by the store just to see it. The sign over the door said Krishna's Pizza. I was told that it had been ten years since Mr. Was had sold the business, and that he still lived upstairs. Then, just the other day, I heard that he had been dead a year. They found him sitting on his couch with a bowl of macaroni and cheese in his lap, the television on. That's too bad. I would have liked the funeral.