

Chris Addy
The Weight of Things

As his neighbor, I could have told you that Leo was a bit eccentric. Grigory Leonidovic Zlasvsky was born in St. Petersburg in the early 20s. By 1950 he was in America, but how he had come here I did not know. Uncle Leo - I liked to call him to myself, he was friendly and dispensed advice without the judging character of a father figure - was an eccentric. I didn't think he was a madman, and I don't think he is to this day, but I didn't think he was capable of the horror he inflicted on himself, in the quiet ways that men of his breed often would.

We shared a paper-thin wall on the second floor of a five-story walkup in the Heart of Chicago, and when July came the heat and the sweat in the air cooked all of the secrets out of people. It was the first of July, but I had begun celebrating the bicentennial since I graduated in early May. My friend Greg, with whom I had gone to school, and I were eating Valium like candy corn while we discovered America in my living room. The Cubs were bad; the White Sox were horrible. Gerald Ford was president, but not for long it seemed. Other than that, there was nothing for a twenty-two year old kid to get excited about. Everyone I knew would be in the city for the summer. The ones who weren't enjoying the season had jobs at law firms or government agencies or whatever. So there was no reason for me to rush out into the world.

I probably would have stayed in that box until Labor Day dropping out to Zeppelin with a rotating bullpen of friends and hangers-on, but Uncle Leo would have a hanger-on of his own over for the fourth, and he wanted me to meet him. After that, I couldn't stomach sleeping in the same building as him. Even the few nights I stayed in that city, I shook like a leaf in a blizzard of ninety-degree heat.

He caught me on the stairs early in the evening on the second. I had a case of beer and a bottle of gin, and when I missed the landing he helped me up and carried the case for me.

"Having a party, yes?" Leo's English was nearly flawless, but it sometimes came out a bit formal when he was trying to tell you something but didn't know how to form the words, and his tone never lost that truly eastern European touch.

"Something like that. You're certainly invited. I'm just having some friends over to celebrate the fourth." By now we were in the hall between the doors to our separate apartments, and the invite was genuine, but I had wanted to get inside. As much as I enjoyed talking to Leo, I was in a mood to be alone.

"You know it's only July second, yes?"

"Well, I think today's the day Thomas Jefferson finished writing the Declaration. So that's an appropriate occasion." I put my key in the lock, and I could feel Leo staring me down. When I looked, I saw that he was, in fact, eyeing me up and down - sizing me up. "Well, if

you're not busy later, Leo, stop on by," I said, hopefully, as a coda.

"James..."

"Jim. Please, only my Mom calls me James. We've been over this."

"Jim. I'm having someone over tomorrow night. You're a smart boy. You studied at university. I want you to meet him."

"Okay. Is this a family member?"

"We go far back. More like old friend. I thought you'd like to meet him. He's an interesting man."

"Sure. What time?" By now, I was more or less fully in my apartment, and Leo followed me in without prompting. This didn't bother me, but it was the first time I had seen him so informal. I now noticed, in the light from the small kitchen window that his hands were shaking. He had a tie and vest on, but the vest was unbuttoned and the tie loose around his neck. I counted at least three beads of sweat on his brow, which he was quick to dab at with his handkerchief.

"Oh, let's make it dinner time. Say six o'clock."

"Leo, are you alright. You seem a bit disheveled."

"Nyet. Just nerves. Just nerves. This friend of mine, I saw him for the first time today in thirty years. He was in the supermarket, in the watermelons. After thirty years, and he's in the watermelons. He was surprised to see me, but not as surprised as me. We made arrangements for dinner tomorrow, and I'd like you to join us."

"Sure. I'll be there," I reassured him while filling the fridge with bottles of Schlitz. When I turned around to face him, all I saw was the yellow wall of the hallway staring back at me. I heard a rapid series of thumps down the stairs, then the door to the building open and slam.

The night ended early with a few friends making plans to see a band or go to a bar. Either way, I wasn't in much of a mood, so I just decided to stay in. I fell asleep to the anchorman reporting that North and South Vietnam united to form the Socialist Republic. I guess all of it was futile in the end.

I woke early in the deep of night to small bursts of sonic assaults. The wall was visibly afraid of the terror that tried to shake itself to sleep on the opposite side. I heard Leos voice, but I couldn't understand his Russian. Each step pounded harder and harder, and then became softer again. He was pacing. The rise and fall of his footsteps etched a parabola in my ears I could trace as an hour paced without a change in his pace. What did change was his voice. What began as fury grew into resignation.

I heard Leo yelling, and I was eight years old again, laying in bed with Dad screaming at Mom in the kitchen. I wanted to get up and fully shut the door. I was afraid to continue listening. I was more afraid to get out of bed and try and stop it. I heard Leo crying, and saw Mom was weeping while Dad packed a suitcase filled with necessities and kept repeating "I won't be gone for long." I wanted to get up and help Leo. He was repeating the same steps over and over for hours, and repeating words like "thirty years" and "bastard, bastard," but I didn't know what I could do to help. If I got up and asked him, I might be breaking into a world that I don't belong in, and would fear far more than the crippling fright of laying here in the heat being washed in the burning fury of a man losing himself in his memories in a box next to mine. More than once I heard him sobbing, but he never stopped moving. I thought for sure I should help him. He was my friend, or at least I considered him more of a friend than a neighbor. He might enjoy some company. No. I decided against it. This was a man who knew war. The only war I'd known was in books and TV. The limit to the questions I could ask my own father of the horrors of youth. I grew too old for a war of my own.

So, between a wall as thick as wrapping paper, one of us walked holes in our shoes, tired our madness, outlasted a haunting and put both to bed. One of us grew restless and built energy in our shame, denied ourselves the tears of anxiety and stayed awake till dawn to keep them company.

As a compromise, I decided I'd drop by early to his apartment to see if he needed any help setting up dinner. His spirits seemed quite high, and I doubt he knew that I heard him weeping only twelve hours before. If he did know, he didn't show it; he seemed very preoccupied.

"Did I ever tell you about my Ida?" His eyes were on the crack in the ceiling and his smile touched each ear. I could tell he was dreaming of a lost love.

"I don't think so. Was that your wife?"

"Daughter. She was the most beautiful thing you'd ever seen. She was Helen of Troy, but with prettier hair." This was the most he had ever talked about his past.

"Where does she live? I don't think I've seen her around."

"She doesn't. She died."

"Oh, God. I'm sorry."

"Don't be, everyone did back then. It was part of the system. But she was very young, and I miss her very much." There was sadness in his eyes, but most of what I saw was joy. Joy that after so long he still could go back to that image of her he held so vividly. "I spent a year in the Gulag when I was twenty-five. I was a Captain in the Army. Now, you have to understand everyone spent time in the Gulag. It was as Russian as drinking Vodka and playing chess. It was hell, but that was

our civic duty. Under Stalin, if you hadn't spent time in the Gulag, you were probably a shpion, and no one should trust you." I had sat down at the kitchen table, and he began to pour me a cup of tea. "I'm not mad at Russia for the things she did to me in prison. I'm not mad at the Gulag. I'm mad at the Oflag. I'm mad at the Germans. I spent the last thirteen months of the war in an officer's camp, while my Ida got sick."

"I'm so sorry."

"No. No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have told you such sad things. I just wanted you to know, so when you meet my friend, you don't think of me as a stranger."

By the time he had poured the second cup of tea, our conversation had turned to more pleasant things. He told me about his decision to come to America after the war, and how he had been a machinist in a factory in Rhode Island, how happy he was to see his son born in America. He showed me a picture of his Mishka at his rabbinical school, and he was tall and handsome, and I could see the pride bubbling in Leo.

Within an hour of my arrival a loud knock nearly shook the door off the hinges. A smile spread across Leo's face and he leapt up for the door.

"That's our guest, Jim. Excuse me." Leo shuffled across the floor, his feet never touching the ground. He was a specter moving without physical constraint.

"Adelgeise. Zdravstvuitya!"

"Hello, Grigory Leonidivic."

"Come in. Come in."

The way Leo had been acting for the last hour, I would have expected Adelgeise to be livelier. Instead, what I saw was a giant - six foot four inches, easily - with only the faintest hint of a German accent, who shared the silhouette of Frankenstein's monster. He moved uncomfortably and slow in an expensive looking three-piece suit, the likes of which I'd only seen in old movies.

"Adelgeise, this is my good friend Jim. Jim this is my old friend, Adelgeise."

"Nice to meet you."

"And you." I was ready to bolt at this point. Something was in the air. It was palpable and it was all wrong. But I fought that urge, and we all sat to dinner. For an hour the two of them caught each other up on the others lives. They must have known each other during the war, or had spent time together before. Adelgeise had come to New York around the same time that Leo made his way to America, had worked in a textile factory before starting in an advertising agency. In the early sixties he moved to Chicago, and has been a mid-level executive at a market

research firm ever since. By now, we had all finished our meals and Leo stood up and went to the cupboard and picked out a large bottle of vodka. He slid the bottle onto the edge of the table and continued to push it all the way to the other end, until it was almost directly under Adelgeise's nose.

"Do you know how Adelgeise and I met, Jim? Did I ever tell you that story?" He was still standing, with his hands on his chair. He asked me directly, but his eyes never left the man across the table from him.

"No, I don't think so. How did you meet?" Of course he hadn't told me. I had just found out an hour ago that Leo had had a family.

"We met in Poland, in the war," Adelgeise interjected forcefully. His hands were shaking as he poured three glasses of vodka.

"Yes, we did, didn't we? It must have been 1944."

"That sounds right."

"Major Kluge was the guard that supervised our company."

"That is right." Leo instructed us to drink, and though it was nearly a full glass of vodka, I felt too uncomfortable not to oblige him. I drank nearly half the glass in one swig, but they had taken the whole of it in one sip. I didn't think I'd want to be sober for this. For the first time all night neither man talked, and Leo looked at me as if he expected me to have anything to say in that moment.

"So the two of you were in the Army together then?"

"No. I was the guard at the officer's camp, Jim." This was the first time that Adelgeise had spoken to me directly, and his voice and the way he spoke my name froze my spine.

"Yes," Leo picked up. "It was Adelgeise's job to keep us in the barracks, Jim." Both men were speaking to me, but neither of them let their gaze deviate from the man across the table, like their reflection in the mirror. "Back then, Adelgeise made a promise. Do you understand, Jim?"

"Sure." Of course I didn't.

"They wouldn't make us labor in the officer's camp. They thought it wouldn't be fitting for an officer to have to work. So we spent most of our days in our barracks. We were fed well enough, but we were bored, Jim. The men and I would pass the time by telling stories, or by playing cards. But we played a different game with the German officers, didn't we, Major?"

"Yes. Yes we did."

"Jim, Adelgeise made a promise with me so many years ago. He told me that if I ever saw him again, alive, that he would honor me with a rematch. Well, not technically a rematch. We never played each other. But he made me play with one of my men. I thought we could play the game tonight. The problem is, Jim, we need a judge. It's a pretty easy game, but it's easy to cheat, so we need a third party to keep everyone honest. Would you like to referee the game, Jim?"

"I think I should get going, actually. I was supposed to meet a few friends, but thanks for dinner. It was nice meeting you, Adelgeise." I bolted out of my chair and, as politely as I could, made for the door. When I turned the doorknob, I heard a click, but I knew it wasn't the handle.

"Jim, sit down, please." I turned around, and saw Leo's hand resting on a .38 revolver on the table. He wasn't holding it threateningly; he wasn't even holding it at all. But I knew enough to listen to him. "It's not hard, Jim. We just need a third, neutral party. Sit down."

As I sat down, I very nearly pissed myself.

"Shall I go first, Grigory?"

"No, Major. You are my guest; it is only fair that you get to go second. If you're lucky, you won't even have to go." Leo loaded a single bullet into the chamber, spun it and snapped it shut. He looked at me and winked, and I shuttered as he raised the gun to his head. Why I didn't scream or run or stop him in that moment, I'll never know. I was so crippled with fear I could barely breathe. I was gasping for air, but aside from shaky hands, neither man looked at all uncomfortable. Leo smiled and squeezed the trigger with his eyes wide open. Click.

"Now you, Major." He slid the gun across the table. It spun, end over end, before it slowed to a stop next to Adelgeise's open palms. He poured himself a double shot, and with his glass in one hand, he simultaneously finished his vodka and put the gun to his head. Click.

"You know, Adelgeise, I was an engineer before the war. Since you didn't spin the chamber before you pulled, you had one in five odds, while I had one in six." Leo drew a smile across his face, and almost instantly the two men began laughing.

"We'll have to even those odds in the next round, then, won't we? Jim, you look nervous." With that, he poured me another tall glass, and for the first time all night he seemed cheerful. "It's like diving into a cold pond. Once you jump in for the first time, your bones are used to it for the rest of the afternoon."

"Hmm. I've never thought of it like that. But it's sound thinking. I think I'm ready for the second round. Major?"

"Ready when you are." Adelgeise handed the revolver back, butt first. Leo giggled to himself; clearly his third glass of vodka was

affecting him.

"What's so funny, Grigory?" Adelgeise asked as if he'd like to join in on the joke, but didn't know where the entrance was.

"I was just thinking. I was thinking about how I was caught. Did I ever tell you about that? Our battalion was marching south and west, and it was our job, my company and a few others, to 'weed out' the landmines. We would walk with our arms interlocked. We would comb out the land mines. Of course, when we could find dogs, or cattle, we would use that, but for the most part it was up to us. I had three men step on landmines while they were attached to me. And after all of that, I was caught trying to find a warm place to piss." The look on Adelgeise's face turned grave, and in a breathless moment, the two men shared something between each other. Was it an understanding? An apology? I doubt any of those things were resolved in that split second, but maybe the two men knew each other, finally after all of their years. "I'm getting tired Adelgeise. I must confess, I cannot drink the way I did in my youth. Vodka makes me exhausted. I'll make you a deal, if you take it. I'll go now, and the next time we meet, we'll play with two bullets, and I'll let you start. Does that seem fair?"

"Yes, I think that's fair." Before he finished his sentence, Leo had put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger. The click was louder than any gunshot could have been, and for the first time in an hour I exhaled. "Well, till next time, Major Kluge."

"Yes, until then." Adelgeise's lips were shaking, and wet with the tears pouring from his eyes, but no sadness, no remorse or guilt or shame, registered in his voice. Just as frankly he pushed his chair in, wished both of us a good night, and slipped out quietly from the door. When the door closed and the footsteps on the stairs died, Leo's held fell into his open arms and he sobbed for a full two minutes. He collected himself shortly though, and offered me a smile that seemed to have forgotten what had just happened.

"What are the odds, Jim? Do you know?"

"Slim, I suppose."

"In the watermelons, of all places. After all these years, and I meet him in the watermelons."

I couldn't believe that he was concerned with the likelihood of seeing someone at the supermarket. It took me a few minutes in my head to deduce that it was a little less than a sixty percent chance that both men walked away unharmed, but that was before Leo held out his fist. He took my hand; turned it so my palm, sweaty and shaking as it was, lay open in front of him. He opened his fist just enough to place the contents of his in my palm, and then he shut my hand before I could see what it was.

"Don't worry, Jim. He and I will play again. I just wanted to make sure he wasn't too out of practice." He looked at his watch and

