

Attics

MARK BRAZAITIS

Among the few books Alfredas' father brought with him to the Lankauskases' attic after the Nazis invaded Lithuania in July of 1941 was *The Impatient Horse*, about a thoroughbred whose dream is to win the Race for the Roses and its prize of the world's largest bouquet. Unable to stand the anticipation, the horse breaks out of his stall the evening before the race and spends all night galloping around the track. By the next morning, he is exhausted. In the Race for the Roses, he finishes dead last.

In the dim, low-ceilinged attic, Al's father told his sons, Tomas, who was ten, and Alfredas, who was six, that they should abide by the moral of the book. If they acted on their impatience to be outside, they would lose the biggest prize in their possession. The boys didn't need to ask what the prize was. They knew about the Nazis' deadly cruelty.

Seventy-nine years later, in his son's and daughter-in-law's attic outside Cleveland, Al felt the same claustrophobia and restlessness, although his accommodations were far better. He had a bed, a computer, a coffeemaker, and a full bath. As in Vilnius, he depended on the kindness of the house's occupants. Three times a day, his son or daughter-in-law delivered his meals to the top of the stairs, announcing their arrival so he could step into the farthest corner of the attic, safe from what might be on their breaths.

On rare occasions, his grandson, who was thirteen and had what his parents called anger issues—he had twice been suspended from his middle school—appeared at the bottom of the stairs. Sometimes hello was the only word grandson and grandfather exchanged. With his curly black hair and thin, handsome face, the boy looked like Al's brother did at his age. This might have been their only similarity. Tomas was imaginative, joyful, even-tempered, and kind. He loved words: speaking them, reading them, writing them. Al had dyslexia, although he would be diagnosed only later in his life. Recognizing his disability, however, Tomas read to him every afternoon, his voice sometimes like a cat's purr, sometimes like gentle thunder. Al would have listened to his brother read from a medical dictionary.

Some of the books were in Swedish, his father's native language. His father had planned to take the family to Sweden before the Nazis invaded Lithuania, but he'd stalled, perhaps because he didn't think the Germans would prove any worse than the Soviets or because he didn't want to abandon the bookstore he owned, which, even more than his wife, was the love of his life. The Lankauskases had been regular customers. Josef Lankauskas was a professor of philosophy at Vilnius University; Regina, his wife, was a poet.

In the 280-square-foot attic, its toilet shielded only by a red curtain, his brother often recited funny rhymes he'd invented. He even wrote plays that he and Al performed for their parents, in pantomimes and whispers. One day after Al cried because he missed his friends, Tomas withdrew to a corner of the attic with several sheets of paper and a pencil. A few minutes later, he showed Al what he'd drawn: portraits of four of Al's friends. "Talk to them," he said. After Al said hello to his friend Vincent, Vincent, as voiced by Tomas, replied. Al spoke to all four of his friends, and each, thanks to Tomas, told him where they were and what they were doing, although two of them, Al learned later, were already dead.

One evening in May, after reading the latest on the virus—fifteen children in New York who'd been infected showed symptoms similar to toxic shock syndrome—Al heard his grandson speaking in his bedroom below. At first, he thought the boy was talking on his phone, but when he heard another boy's voice, he realized his grandson had a guest. Although the state was easing restrictions after more than a monthlong stay-at-home order, Al found it unsettling that his son and daughter-in-law would permit company in the house.

Al remembered a time in the attic in Vilnius when the Lankauskases's son, Vladas, who was fifteen and as gentle as his parents, had a friend over. Al heard them talking in Vladas's bedroom below. The friend said, "Supposedly there isn't a Jew left in Lithuania, but I bet some are hiding." There was a pause before the friend said, "If you were hiding Jews, where would you hide them?" Al's father, mother, and brother were listening with Al now. Two words—"the attic"—and they would all be dead. "I wouldn't hide any filthy Jews," Vladas said. Al's terrified family had never been so happy to hear a slur.

After breakfast in the attic in Vilnius, Al studied math and writing with their mother while Tomas studied history and science with their father. After two hours, the boys switched teachers. In the afternoons, Tomas read to Al or otherwise entertained him. In the half an hour before dark, their father read to them from the Torah. They spoke in whispers except when the Lankauskases had guests, when they didn't speak at all.

When Soviet troops stormed Vilnius, ousting the Nazis in late January of 1945, Al and Tomas celebrated like the horse in the children's book, running around the block until they were wheezing with fatigue. Their parents tried to find their Jewish friends, but not a single one was left. Al's father's bookstore had been ransacked. Even if it had remained untouched, his father knew the Soviets wouldn't let him run it the way he would want to.

Three weeks after they left the Lankauskases' attic, they moved to Sweden. Four months after this, his father died of a heart attack. In March of 1947, Al, his brother, and his mother emigrated to Cleveland, where his mother's brother lived. They rented a house on Penfield Avenue, in a neighborhood populated by Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Al and Tomas did what they could to help their mother: they delivered *The Plain Dealer*; they sold peanuts at Cleveland Stadium; they washed cars at East 105th Street Ford. Tomas worked his way through Ohio State, where he was the editor-in-chief of the student newspaper, *The Lantern*. After graduating, he became a newspaper reporter at the *Chicago Tribune*. In the early 1960s, he joined CBS and was one of the first television correspondents to cover the Vietnam War.

After high school, Al found work as a car salesman at Freedom Ford on Lorain Avenue on Cleveland's West Side. At age thirty-seven, with financial help from his uncle, he bought a fifty percent share in the dealership. Freedom Ford was located across the street from a Mercedes dealership. Al vowed to outsell his German competition. He promoted his business not only with advertisements on radio and in the *Plain Dealer* and *Cleveland Press*, but with holiday celebrations, petting zoos, and raffles. He called his customers three times a year to see how they—and their cars—were doing. He worked long hours. Idleness made him tense. At age forty-five, he bought the business outright.

When he was forty-six, he married a twenty-three-year-old dental hygienist named

Shona. She playfully called him “my machine” because of his relentless work ethic. Eventually “my machine” became a complaint: He couldn’t unwind, unbend, untether himself from his work. “To sit still,” he told her, “is to wait for death.” She didn’t—she couldn’t—understand him. She’d been born in the U.S., after the war. She died, of ovarian cancer, when their son was a senior in high school.

In the attic of his son’s house, Al tried to adhere to a routine. He gave over his mornings to the Internet, watching news clips about the virus. When would the pandemic be over? He was searching for an answer no one could provide. The indeterminate end date to something awful was familiar.

In the hours after dinner, before he fell asleep, he listened to audio books, especially histories of the Second World War and novels by Elie Wiesel and Bernard Malamud. The closer the reader’s voice resembled his brother’s, the more Al enjoyed listening. He’d listened to Philip Roth’s *Everyman* three times, both because he found the protagonist’s conversation with the gravedigger near the end of the book comforting and because the elderly actor who read the novel sounded the way he was sure his brother would have if he’d lived beyond age fifty-two. His brother, like their father, had died of a heart attack. Sometimes Al couldn’t believe he’d survived for more than three decades in a world without Tomas.

“It’s dinnertime,” said his grandson from the bottom of the attic stairs. It was an evening in early July. Al hadn’t seen the boy in a couple of weeks.

“Where are your parents?” Al said after his grandson reached the landing, a tray in his hands. The boy had never delivered his dinner.

“Dad took Mom to the urgent care.”

“Why?”

The boy placed the dinner tray on the carpet. “To get tested.”

“So she’s ill?”

“She’s just paranoid.”

Al’s daughter-in-law worked as a nurse at Bluebird Pediatrics, which had stayed open

during the crisis but sent all patients with symptoms of Covid-19 to the hospital. “Doesn’t Bluebird offer tests to its employees?” Al asked.

“They must have ran out.”

Run out, Al almost said. But the boy’s expression, which might have been malevolent or might only have been bored, stopped him. He imagined him donning a similar face before one of his fights at school. What a luxury, Al thought, to exorcise one’s anger in fistfights and playground brawls and receive, as a consequence, only a suspension. In the Lankauskases’s attic, Al couldn’t even pound his head against a wall for fear of the sound betraying them all.

“Are you worried about getting the virus?” Al asked his grandson.

“With me, Mom says, it wouldn’t matter so much. I’m young.” His expression softened. “But we have to be careful because you’re old and have cancer.”

Al was in remission from non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, but if he caught the virus, his weakened immune system would certainly collapse. Whenever he left the house, which he did for solitary walks around the neighborhood a few days a week, he wore a mask, goggles, and plastic gloves. He might as well have been in a spacesuit, walking on the moon.

“Did I ever tell you that you look like my brother?” Al asked his grandson.

“Yeah, maybe.”

“I guess you could say he was my hero,” Because he doubted his grandson would be impressed with hosannas to a great uncle he’d never met, he changed tact: “One night, when we were living in the attic in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania...I’ve told you about this time, haven’t I?”

“Some.”

“We weren’t supposed to leave the attic. Ever. To leave would be to risk our lives.”

“You could have gone to a concentration camp.”

“We could sometimes hear the trains—and soldiers’ boots in the street—and, at sunrise or dusk, gunshots. One night...” He paused. He hadn’t told this story before—not to his wife, not to his son. He’d buried the memory. It had been so unlike his brother to do what he did, so careless, so stupid. It was late July or early August of 1944. There were

rumors of the Nazis' impending defeat, but there'd been rumors of liberation for months. It was after midnight when Tomas woke him up from where he slept on a rug under one of the attic's eaves: "Come on. We're going outside." Even after sitting up, Al was sleepy and disoriented. "How?" he asked. Tomas told him that when Vladas had delivered their dinner, which lately had consisted primarily of potatoes, he'd forgotten to push the bookshelf back to cover the door to the attic.

"How do you know?" Al asked.

"I have good ears," Tomas said. "I've listened every time."

They crept down the attic stairs, pausing on each step to ascertain if their parents had heard them. Eventually, they reached the door, opened it, and stepped onto a landing. Tomas listened; Al heard only the beating of his heart. They continued down another staircase, quiet as thieves, until they reached a foyer in front of a large door with a rectangular window above it. Tomas told him to wait. Al protested in whispers, but his brother insisted. Tomas disappeared down a hallway. His absence passed in excruciating seconds. Al thought he heard, from everywhere, sounds of his approaching capture.

Eventually, Tomas returned, holding an opened bottle and a loaf of bread. Al wanted to head back upstairs, but Tomas wouldn't hear of it. They left the house by the front door and walked up the quiet street to a park, where they sat in the grass in front of a sundial and shared the dark rye bread. After their years of deprivation, it tasted as tender and delicious as cake. Tomas drank from the bottle, and when he next spoke, his breath smelled like beer. When he offered Al a sip, Al didn't hesitate to drink. It could have been poison and he would have drunk it cheerfully. He never refused what his brother offered.

After Tomas finished the beer and tossed the bottle aside, they lay on the grass and stared at the stars. Minutes passed. "We'll never be free again," his brother said. "I miss so much about the world." Al didn't share this part of the story with his grandson: his brother cried.

"What happened when you got back to the attic?" his grandson asked.

"We went to bed, like what we'd done was nothing but a dream." He and Tomas never talked about their night in the park, as if even to mention it might be to invite what they

were lucky to have escaped.

“I had beer once,” his grandson said.

Al resisted an impulse to show disappointed surprise. “Well”? he said evenly.

“I was like you. I didn’t think it tasted good.”

The boy smiled, and Al did the same.

This was the extent of their exchange. His grandson said goodbye and returned downstairs. Al was hopeful about their interaction, thinking the boy might have been entertained enough to return. He imagined them exchanging little stories of their lives. There was so much, Al realized, he’d told no one—or no one who wasn’t now dead.

Days passed, and his grandson didn’t return. His daughter-in-law had tested positive for Covid. With reason to be extra cautious, his son made lightning-quick visits to the attic with Al’s meals.

Al would be patient. There was, anyway, no other choice.

One night, as Al listened to Band of Brothers, its narrator a retired news anchor, his voice a Midwestern lullaby, he wondered if he would die before he could resume the life he’d known. Even with the state opening up again, desperate to resuscitate its faltering economy, he wouldn’t safely be able to do everyday things—go to the grocery store, eat dinner with his family, watch an Indians’ game in what, decades after its construction, he still considered a new stadium—until a vaccine had been invented.

He remembered his brother on the night they’d escaped their confinement. It had been Tomas’s only surrender to hopelessness, and it had allowed Al the unprecedented role of comforter. As gently as he could, he touched his brother’s face. His tears were warm and, in their rarity, almost magical, starlit emblems not of his brother’s weakness but of the depth of his feelings. They made Al love him even more.

During Al’s move from his house to his son’s attic, his son had placed most of his belongings, including a trunk of his photo albums, in a storage facility outside of Rocky River. Al didn’t need the photos; he could picture his brother perfectly, at all stages of his life, although when he picked up a pencil and a sheet of paper, he had no illusion of being

able to draw what he saw in his mind. Even so, when he pressed the pencil point against the paper, he felt an unexpected happiness. He didn't erase once, not because his dark lines and gray shadings were perfect but because to do so would be to delay a joyful reunion.

When he'd finished, he was surprised. If he didn't share his brother's talent for portraiture, he wasn't entirely devoid of talent. Here was Tomas again, as he'd been in another attic—his mentor, his confidante, his best friend. Al taped the portrait to the wall in front of his desk. He had so much to tell him. □