

American Memory  
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(2009)

Like a length of plywood left out overnight in the rain and happened on in the morning damp, warped and unfamiliar, I discover my body, flaccid in the mirror, as if all of a sudden. As if I don't recognize my own shape.

I stop shaving and go into the other room to look at the photographs I have blue-tacked to my wall: one is a portrait of my grandpa as a young boy, his blonde hair long and locked, with a pin in it like a little girl's; I imagine him at this age eating dinners alone in the kitchen before any of the rest of the family, his claim as first-born son (it then occurs to me that I also eat my dinners alone). Another is a group photograph of the Long Island Mandolin Orchestra that he, by then a businessman and musician, had played in for 20 years, his wife, my grandmother, flaring the tambourine in the percussion section. It is presumed that their parents had passed through Ellis Island with all of the other immigrants; arriving to an ecstasy of invention, they didn't leave their correct names behind. When I would ask family members, I received broad, un-ambivalent answers, but no one had ever really known where we had come from. "Russian Jews," they would say, as if it was the name of a baseball team, "we're Russian Jews." When he had passed on, my grandma had given away or thrown out most of the belongings she and he had accumulated over the years, not only without ambivalence, but with a purge fervor; I managed to guilt-trip a cousin into giving me these few prints I had. Another group picture of the family circled around the lazy Susan in a Chinese restaurant (when out for Chinese the "Russian Jews" always claiming the spare ribs were beef); I look at myself in the picture, fourteen and soft, with a buzz cut. Looking closer at my expression in the picture, I can tell that I had been thinking about video games.

My car's engine relaxes and the A/C releases a last puff of backdraft through the vents into the car like a sigh, gassy and algal. Alive, like me.

This morning I park on the road before the driveway, and walk. Past jewels of dew glinting on the vast lawns and the hum of landscapists resembling glassblowers in the steamy morning; under a tree whose yellow debris lingers along the edges of a shadowed, not yet dissipated puddle, the kind of tree that fills city blocks with the fragrance of semen. As I walk, a glass corner pokes through a stand of cypresses in the humid distance: the office, an open concept box with roof patios, gym and herb garden.

My pocket coos – an email response from my grandma's cousin, Sidney Gold – "your greatgrandmother Yetta was my aunt. Her family came from Moscow or a town nearby. They were a family of 3 boys and six girls. Good luck to you. SID gold" –

Sidney, who I had never met and who at 87 was perhaps my last hope for finding any unexpected lead, unfortunately doesn't provide more than a contribution to the speculations that I had listened to for years. Scrutinizing her Asiatic eyes and flat face, there were also strong convictions in the family that Yetta had come

from Mongolia, though I had seen nothing to support this claim except the portraits of her standing behind her husband.

Last spring, having flown back to New York from California to sit shiva at my grandma's funeral, I tasted kasha for the first time. It was mixed with egg noodles and tasted bland and sacred. An old couple I had never met sat with me; Mrs. Rosen told me how to cook this miraculous food, and then Mr. Rosen with a nonchalance reserved for fact told me he remembered eating dinner at my great grandmother Yetta's house when she was a girl; based on this meal he offered his opinion that the family had originated in Kiev. This simple revelation had been the only substantially new angle in my search thus far, but it effectively led me to Anna.

I arrive to the office earlier than usual and fill my mug with green tea, taking sips and sweating as I stand looking at the small bulletin board affixed to the pillar next to my desk (this is a cubicle-free workzone). I have pinned on it an inkjet of the family tree diagram. I examine my father's side: more fragmented but not as mysterious as my mother's; no bloodline running along these networks, just a series of couplings that had happened. No story.

I open my office computer and look over the project menus. Midway through my first task I am already messaging with her. Following my conversation with the Rosens last year, I began the laborious search for connections to Kiev. Since the names had been bastardized on arrival to the New World it became a process of trying all the variations, related spellings and homonyms, inquiring on message boards and forums, and keeping track of news on the diaspora blogs, often with the help of translation software. It felt like out of the blue when, after months of sifting through information and posting on websites from the Ukraine, Israel and the USA, someone finally got in touch with me: Anna. Through our mismatched languages, we managed to figure out that she is a distant cousin related through Yetta's side, part of the family that had taken a different route to escape the pogroms. She wrote me that she had also been looking for connections for quite some time. As the discussions daily developed, she even sent me pictures and descriptions of her side of the family and their lives. She also attached images of herself, which I would stare at for minutes on end: an amazingly beautiful young woman with blonde hair, smiling at me. Finally the boundaries of ignorance and indifference that circumscribed my family's background are being dismantled and the story is gradually being rebuilt. Though I don't expect to receive thanks from any of them.

Metabolism has become cruel to me where it spares Jimmy, my Filipino-American friend sitting next to me on the roof deck chairs. The sun is hot by now so his t-shirt is off as he and the others devour their pad thai and subs with impunity. For lunch I drink an espresso from the machine downstairs, which makes my stomach murmur audibly and my mouth dry and rotten. Should have brought an Evian up too. I have become less inclined to take off my shirt lately, even on days like this, so gradually, as I sit stooped over, brainstorming up on the roof with my handheld, my arms and forehead grow darker and my belly gets

paler and softer, mockery of a farmer's tan. I gaze out over the business park and I express my desire for change to Jimmy. Look how comfortable we are here, we're so lazy here in America, I say. He asks why I don't buy a new fixed gear or a BMX, maybe that will help. Get more exercise. I tell him that isn't all; our scopes are too limited here, we don't even know who we are. My grandiose statements don't provoke Jimmy; he stretches out on the hammock, talking Filipino on his mobile (he has an advantage, nobody ever knows if he is talking to the renderers in Manila or to his girlfriend) and I return to my handheld to squint at familytree.com.

Descending to the fluorescence downstairs again after some time, I drink an orange juice and sit at my chair. I am requested in the team leaders' office. I knock on the door and slide it open. Clint and Russell are sitting next to each other behind their desk, one staring at a black laptop and the other at a silver one. They notice me and look up, smiling, genuine and clean. We exchange some short reports about the projects I am involved in, which all seem quite routine; they seem to be taking turns looking at me earnestly, the other's eyes resting on screen. At a certain point I have the attention of both, and their faces grow even franker and more genuine; they express their concern that I am straying from the work at hand. They cite my incessant use of genealogy and social networking websites as an indication that my mind isn't in the game. I don't even argue, don't even point out that this is commonplace around the office, or that I usually spend up to 12 hours a day in or around the building, because I know it is true, and I know that I am a bad liar. As if out of pity they call up a spreadsheet of my network activities and swivel one of the laptops so that I may confirm its sums. I look out the window up at the parasol on the roof and with an earthy slowness I begin to tell them about my search, but by the time my gaze returns to the desk their eyes are already on their screens. However, they are nodding. I stop talking and find Russell's eyes looking deeply into mine. We think you should take some time off to figure this out, he says.

I don't sleep during the flight. The entertainment center on the seatback in front of me has several old favorites on it and the airplane's darkened arc feels womblike and communal, like a moving beehive. My hands flutter with the controller like I am spinning a web to follow back to America. I have the intense feeling that I don't want to leave this state. When the cabin lights come on and the smell of plane coffee perfumes the aisles, I lift up the window flap and see an infinite dull spring landscape. The airplane's weak shadow drags obliquely across it like a ripped apart hammerhead carcass on the seabed.

Out of the plane I immediately switch on my handheld and check for messages from Anna; there is nothing, it is still very early in the morning. She had given me her address, however, so I proceed toward the exit. She was pleasantly surprised that I wanted to come meet her. I told her that this is very important to me. The scene of meeting her plays over and over again in my head during the taxi ride.

Kiev rises from among the witchy trees in large pale blocks; we enter without my really noticing.

I pay the driver and get out. It is still too early so I go get a coffee, and notice a flower shop next door to the café. The woman who sells me the flowers smiles at my inability to speak the language, and her smile makes me feel I have found the right place.

I find Anna's apartment building by the address she has given me and decide to wait outside until I hear back from her. The weather is a bit crisp but I don't feel cold; I think, the extra meat on my belly is coming in handy, and smile to myself. I am doing some work on my handheld. A bird is tweeting.

Two lovers leave the apartment building and walk down the morning after's avenue. Their hands clasp for a moment and the woman's freshly washed hair turns to open her gaze on my eyes on them and they become self-conscious or cautious and loosen their grip, suddenly just acquaintances walking down a street with no subtext.

Continuing to wait, I realize moments later that the woman is my cousin; her hair has been dyed black. His hair is slicked back and his shoulders are broad. Shit. I begin to walk quickly down the block after them.

Anna? Anna Eisenberg? They both continue walking ahead, they say something to each other, turning only slightly, not enough to look at me. I repeat and they stop. Anna, is that you? I am your cousin, I made it. Sorry, I didn't recognize you when you came out, but I have been waiting for you. I look into her eyes; Anna knows some English, but she can't understand what I am saying. She has no idea what I am talking about.

After some hours spent wandering around I decide I will change my return itinerary, try to get an earlier flight, maybe I can reroute a stopover in some city where I know someone. I pass by the flower shop again and the woman is outside arranging the display. She smiles again, she has beautiful blonde hair. At my request we get a passerby to take a picture with my handheld of us together. Take a few, I say, smiling, holding her a little too close.

Standing on the corner I make a post on my microlog. Reunited with cousin – anyone for vodka at Martin's on Tuesday, on me?

Jimmy comments right away. Congratulations! Mos def. Yer cousins hot!