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Post-Memory

Novel

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Chapter Seven: Injustice and its Polished Faces

Many years ago the stepfather of a friend of mine lay in hospital with very little time to live, perhaps no more than a week. He was a war veteran, a mathematician and a fine man. One morning he asked my friend with some urgency to come back to hospital that evening with her mother. Something had happened to him a long time ago and he'd spent his whole life thinking about it, without ever telling a single soul. Although he'd never spoken about it, it was clear that he had witnessed a miracle, something incredible, something he couldn't have raised in the normal way of things. But now he was afraid he was running out of time, and he wanted his closest family to come and listen to him. When they got there that evening he didn't have the strength to speak, and by the next morning he had lost consciousness and he died a few days later, without having told them. This story, like the very possibility-impossibility of finding out something important, life-saving, followed me like a cloud for many years, constantly shifting in its significance. Often I drew a simple moral from the story, something along the lines of always speaking out, always saying things in time. But sometimes it seemed to me that in certain situations life itself enters and turns out the light, to relieve the distress of those left behind.

'How very strange', I said to my friend, not long ago. 'You never did find out what he wanted to say. I often think about what must have happened to him, and when. It must have been during the war, I suppose.'

My friend was politely surprised. She asked me what I meant, as if she didn't quite believe what she'd heard, but she didn't want to cast doubt on my earnest sincerity. Then she said gently that nothing like that had ever happened. Was I sure that it was their family? Perhaps I'd misremembered.

And we never spoke of it again.

When memory makes past and present confront each other, it does so in a search for justice. The desire for justice is an itch, it rips down structures from the inside, it brings on retribution, it demands it, especially on behalf of the dead – for who will defend them, if not us?

But this itch for justice doesn't quite cover the most fundamental of all the injustices: there is no inbuilt respect for an individual's life. Death takes down the borders between me and non-existence, it reassigns values and makes judgments without asking my permission, it denies me my right to take part in any human gathering (apart from that multitudinous assembly of all the disappeared), it reduces my existence to nothing.

The heart, reluctant to accept any injustice, wishes for victory over death, it pushes back against this fundamental injustice. For centuries this was the Christian promise of salvation, both indiscriminate and individual at once: Resurrection for all!

To use other, stranger words, salvation works when one condition is met: that somewhere near us, and beyond us, there must exist a different, wiser memory, one which is able to hold on its palm everyone and everything; the past, and the not-yet-past. The purpose of funeral rites and the hope of all who hear them are drawn together in the Orthodox prayer to God for 'memory eternal' for the dead, in which 'salvation' and 'conservation' mean roughly the same thing.

Secular society takes the idea of salvation out of the equation, and in one fell swoop the whole construction loses its balance. Without a belief in salvation 'conservation' becomes no more than an institutional archive: a museum, a library, a warehouse, allowing a sort of conditional and limited immortality – a greatly extended single day, the only version of *eternal life* which is possible in the emancipated new world. Technological revolutions, one after another, have made vast digital warehouses possible, and 'possible' in human language means 'indispensable'.

Long ago, the memory of a person was passed into the hands of God, and any extra efforts to preserve her memory might have been considered excessive, unjustified. Being long-remembered was the preserve of those few who understood how to achieve it, or wanted it very much, and you could quite happily die and be resurrected without it, as the task of remembering everyone had been delegated upwards, to the highest level.

Any attempt to fix a memory, to give it body, usually simply means a list of wonderful attributes. In Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, there is contempt for the written memory: 'Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise.'

By the nineteenth century and its technological revolutions, remembering suddenly becomes democratic practice and archiving becomes a matter of general importance. It's called something different, of course, and it's not thought of as this, but all of a sudden there rises in the breast an urgent desire to obtain a studio portrait of all one's nearest and dearest. If at first the disembodied voice provokes fear and recoiling, then slowly the horned head of the gramophone is found installed in homes everywhere, and Moscow dachas ring to the mezzo-soprano Vyaltseva. Change is slow and at first the whole process seems to fit well within the ancient tradition of collecting 'exemplars', the best and most representative things: Caruso's voice, a speech by the Kaiser.

Cinema is invented, and it has a purely functional use as a way to retell history. But now, from the projection box, high over the audience's heads, you see so clearly that something else entirely was intended (by whom?), something leading directly to the high point of all human progress: The selfie stick. The home movie. The opportunity to retain everything for ever. Immortality, as we understand it, is a kind of trick: the complete and total disappearance of any one of us can be hidden, like a grave, under a scattering of little deceptions that give the illusion of presence. And the bigger the pile of tiny deceptions (saved moments, little speeches, photographs), the more bearable the non-existence of oneself and others. The daily visual and verbal debris is suddenly made respectable, it's no longer swept under the carpet, but carefully put away for rainier days.

You'd think that in order to become a whole archeological strata (and lift the ground under our feet a metre or so), the rituals and materials of our life would have to be obsolescent, used up, detritus, like everything created by humans until now. But it's a strange thing: after the invention of photography and sound recording these rituals and materials have forgotten the art of decomposition, just like today's plastic waste. They won't be made to earth and dust, they pile up higher and higher. They are of no use for the future. Anything that cannot adapt and change is fruitless and surely must be doomed.

In the apartments of the early twentieth century it was still fashionable to display stuffed creatures of various size and shape – from the stags' and boars' heads on the wall to the tiny birds, stuffed so delicately with sawdust that they looked alert and alive, frozen in the act of bathing their feathers. We often read of the elderly ladies who had a generations of pets stuffed, to the point where any house with heavy curtains and fire screens went to auction with a dozen dusty terriers. There were other, more radical methods of conserving one's nearest and dearest: at Gabriele D'Annunzio's villa you can still see the souvenir made from the shell of his beloved tortoise. Fed to giant proportions, it is said the tortoise could barely crawl from room to room or along the avenues of the estate with its victorious-sounding title: 'Vittoriale degli Italiani'. When she died from overeating her body was scooped out of its horned case and made into a dish, an elegant tortoise-tureen, to decorate the table and remind the poet's guests of better days.

The difficult, fragile status of the dead in the age of mechanical reproduction made their very existence a task: if we can no longer hope for a new meeting, the joyful dawn of resurrection, then we need to do everything possible to put what remains of the dead to good use. This conviction resulted in a surge of funereal souvenirs: locks of hair with the initials lovingly bound in, photographs of the dead in which they look far brighter than the living – the long exposure of the studio photographer blurred the twitching features and tiny movements of the grief-stricken to unrecognisable emptiness, so it was immediately clear who, in the decorously-dressed group, was the much-missed corpse.

By the middle of the twentieth century the process had been taken to its 'logical extreme', however you want to understand that euphemism: the rouged face of a political leader lying in state in a crystal coffin on a main square, or millions of unknown bodies, seen only as a repository of raw material or spare parts. What began as the Russian 'anti-death' philosopher Nikolai Fedorov's obsession to give life to the dead, to drag them from their oak coffins so they walked and talked again; what began as an attempt to resurrect the old world with the power of words – to make a tea glass of *tilluel* and use it as an elixir of life – hit against a living wall of the drowned and the lost, the simple impossibility of remembering and calling the dead by their names.

This tidal wave has rolled on for two centuries and is finally at our heels – but instead of the resurrection of the past we have artisans, the production of perfect casts, and taxidermy. The dead have learnt to speak with the living: their letters, their voicemails, their posts on social media, all of this can be shattered into its tiny elements. There is even an app which uses the words of dead people to compose answers to questions put to them. For several years now this app, available in the Apple Store, has allowed us the peculiar indulgence of chatting with someone as famous as Prince or unknown as the unfortunate 26-year-old Roman Mazurenko who was hit by a car. If you type into the chatbox the words, 'Where are you now?' Mazurenko answers, 'I love New York'. There is in this no sense of awkwardness, the seams all meet in the middle, the window doesn't suddenly blow open, a cold wind doesn't send a shiver down the spine.

The digital creators of these verbal phantoms (made in the image of a friend) had plenty of material to work from as nothing is ever wiped in the digital age. Instead of one, *the only*, photograph, there are hundreds. No one, not even the photographer, manages to look at every snap: it would take years. But it doesn't matter, the important thing is to store all these many moments, to keep them safe for the Great Looking, the Grand Viewer who has all the time and attention in the world, more than would fit in any lifetime, and who will draw all that has happened into one line of events. There is no one else to do it.

Digital storage presents us with a whole fanning out of possibilities, and it affects how we see things: history, biography, one's own or another's text, nothing is seen as a linear sequence unrolling in time, glued with the wallpaper paste of cause and effect. In one sense this is pleasing, no one is left feeling unloved in this new world, there is space for everyone in the boundless world of the hoarder. But on the other hand the

old world of hierarchies and bardic stories worked on the principle of selection: not everything got said, and not all the time. In some senses, when the necessity of choice is removed (between good and bad, for example), then the very notion of good and evil disappears. All that is left is a mosaic of facts and points of view, which are mistaken for facts.

The past is now 'pasts': a co-existing layering of versions, often with only one or two points of contact. Hard facts soften to play-dough and can be moulded into shape. The desire to remember, to recreate and make real goes hand-in-hand with incomplete knowledge and the only partial understanding of events. Units of information can be lined up in any formation, any order, like in a children's game, and the direction of play will utterly change their significance. My linguist friends, Americans, Germans, Russians, all tell me that their students are brilliant at finding subtexts and hidden meanings, but can't, or don't want to, talk about the text as a whole entity. I suggested asking the students to retell a poem, line by line, describing only what was going on. But I was told that that wasn't possible, *they simply weren't able*. The banal debt to the obvious, along with the need to tell a story, has been thrown overboard, lost in the detail, broken into a thousand bite-sized quotes.

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On 30 May 2015 I left my flat on Banny Pereulok, where I had lived a biblical two score years and one, amazed even myself at the length of time I'd spent here. All my friends had moved about from one place to another and even from one country to another, and only I had stayed put like some ancient Aunt Charlotte on her estate, living in the rooms her grandmother and mother inhabited, with empty sky through the window where once there were tall white poplars, like in Odessa, planted by her grandfather. The rooms were redecorated, even the new décor began to look shabby, and the furniture was long used to standing in a different formation, but when you shut your eyes at night, and saw the transparent rooms of the empty apartment, then all the furniture returned to its original place in the darkness: the bed where I lay was itself overlaid with the shape of the writing desk which once stood there. Its lid covered my head and shoulders, and above us hung the shelf with the three porcelain monkeys refusing to see, hear or speak, and in the other room the heavy orange curtains were back, and the lamp stand covered in a silk shawl, and the big old photographs.

Now none of this was left, there wasn't even a chair to sit on, the apartment had become no more than a series of empty boxes, workboxes of odd buttons or spools of thread. The chairs and divans had departed for different homes, in the furthest room an anxious light burned, even though it was day, and the doors were already thrown back wide as if to welcome new owners. The keys were handed over, dropped from one palm into another, I took a last look at the pale sky over the balcony, and then life suddenly began to move faster than it had done hitherto. The book about the past wrote itself while I was travelling from place to place, counting up my memories, just like the children's poem about the lady and her luggage: a punnet, a pug, a painting, a jug... And off I went on my wanderings to Berlin, where the book stopped, held its breath – and so did I.

I found a home in a beautiful old part of Berlin, which had once been considered a Russian area, and had always been associated with literature. The streets were familiar, Nabokov had lived in the house opposite, and two houses down a person who had, by mutual and loving consent, eaten a man alive. In the little square yard a dozen bikes leant like horses at a watering trough. Everything was underpinned by a feeling of durability and presence, but a strange sort of presence when you remembered that this city had for years been known for its wastelands and its yawning emptinesses, rather than the buildings constructed on these empty spaces. I enjoyed the thought that some of my notes about the impossibility of remembrance would be written within another impossibility: in a city where history is an open wound, no longer able to mend itself with the scar tissue of oblivion.

It is as if the city had unlearned the skill of cosiness, and the city's inhabitants respected this quality of bareness. Here and there building sites opened the wound further, streets were barred with red and white barriers, the asphalt was cut open to reveal its granular earthen heart, and the wind whistled, clearing the space for new wastelands. By every entrance way little bronze plaques in the paving stones told a familiar story, even if you didn't stop to read the names and count the years to see how old they were when they were taken from these elegant houses with their high ceilings to Theresienstadt or Auschwitz.

I managed nothing of the work I had planned in Berlin, in my cheerful little apartment with its Mettlach-tiled stove. Once I had arranged my life there, put out my books and photographs, signed up at a library and been given a library card with a grinning stranger's face on it, I quickly resigned all my energies to a gnawing unending anxiety, which turned its toothed cogs in my stomach. I don't remember how I spent the days, I think I spent more and more time wandering from room to room until I realised that the only thing I could actually do well was move from place to place. Movement was forgiving, the thought of unachieved work was pushed out of my head by the number of steps taken in a day, the physical shape of my achievements. I had a bike. An old Dutch beast with a bent frame and a yellow lamp on its forehead. Once it had been painted white, and at a good trot it made a snuffling-grinding sound, as if its last ounces of strength were being squeezed out of it by contact with the air. It braked with a ticking noise. An old German novel which my mother had loved featured a car called Karl, 'the ghost of the road' – and there was something similar and ghostly in the way we blended in to the hidden underpasses, slipping between people and traffic, leaving no trace of ourselves, not in their memory, and not in mine.

Riding a bike in Berlin was a new and unfamiliar experience. The whole city lived on its wheels, pushing the pedals round diligently, but with ease, as if there was nothing untoward in this behaviour in a grown-up person. In the evenings a quiet chirruping and a flicker of light were all the trail we left behind us, and it was transparently clear that the city had been built for this constant falling through the not-here-any-more, without noticing, like in that Kafka text where the horseman rides across the steppe, his stirrups gone, his bridle gone, his horse gone, and even he himself no longer there. The streets seemed to give way obligingly when a cyclist came through, they offered

themselves up as flatness, so the ride cost no energy and the rider hardly realized she was flying somewhere beyond. The lightness of travel allowed a feeling of safety – the shop windows, the passersby and their little dogs were not even beyond a thin glass screen, but speed and the insect rustling of the bike made everything around untouchable, slightly blurred, as if I were as invincible as the air passing through my fingers.

I wondered then if the people who were destined sooner or later to be air and smoke remembered this sense of invisibility and invincibility and longed for it when they were condemned to walk on the ground on 5 May 1936, losing their right to own and ride a bike. And then in the laws that came later it became clear that they would always remain on the unshaded side of the street, never able to slip amongst the shadows, or allow themselves the luxury of freewheeling without obstacle. And when public transport was forbidden to them it was as if someone had had the explicit task of reminding them that the body, the flesh, was the only property left to them and they should rely on that alone.

On a rainy October evening, when all the passersby walked at an angle better suited to trees in the wind, I turned the corner (from Knesebeck Strasse onto Mommsen Strasse and only from Mommsen Strasse onto Wieland Strasse, as Sebald might have written) onto the street where Charlotte Salomon once lived. Salomon, through a strange coincidence, nearly became a relative of mine. She lived from her birth nineteen thirty nine in the house on this street, only leaving when she was fetched and sent to France in haste to be saved from the common fate. The worst stories of flight and salvation are the ones with a twist in the tale, the ones when straight after the miracle the same death pounces, grown thickly shaggy in the waiting. That is what happened to Charlotte. But this Berlin house took a gentle leave of its child, except for perhaps the crowds of protesters she happened to see from the window, their crooked canvas banners, but then you could have seen these things through any window at the time, and those fine art nouveau frames with their excellent proportions were simply doing their job. On this evening the rain was getting heavier, and a faint light could be seen inside, not lighting the whole huge apartment, just one of the rooms, and the others in a sort of twilight, so I could only really guess at the height of the ceilings and the stucco. In a scene from a book I hadn't read since my childhood, a painting was exhibited in a gilded frame. In the painting was a snow-covered town, a recognisable street corner, windows lit warmly – the resemblance took my breath away – and then a sudden trick: a horse cab travelling from one side of the picture to the other, a shadow, shape-shifting. I wasn't sure why I was so frightened when there was a movement above me on the dark balcony, a cigarette burnt bright, a wisp of smoke.

I came to love the U-Bahn, and the S-Bahn, the over- and underground railways, the orphaned smells of sweet rolls and rubber wheels, the spider-like map of lines and connections. The glass dovecots of stations with their arched roofs seemed to suggest that you could hide under them but to me they looked temporary, untrustworthy. All the same I always relaxed when the train entered the iron womb of the Hauptbahnhof as if its see-through helmet guaranteed me a moment to catch breath, a sudden eclipse before departing again into the light. There was always a crowd moving on the

platform, the carriage was instantly filled until no one else could get on: someone carried a bike; someone an impossibly huge double bass in a funeral-black case; someone had a little dog that sat so obediently it might have been posing for a black and white photograph. Even back then it seemed to me that all of this was happening in a past that had long ago departed, and was only now in reach if you stretched out a hand right out. Sometimes I found myself looking at the lit carriage, and me inside it as if at a distance, as if it were a model railway with tiny plastic figures sitting on the seats. The wet city circled in the window like a ferris wheel on its side, and in it mostly the bits in-between: the wastelands, underexposed scenes, and sometimes something more real and present: a column, a cupola, a cube or a globe.

During that stagnant period in my life, everything felt close enough to touch, especially when we passed places I had once known, had forgotten and then saw anew, these places gave me a brief sense of warmth. In one place I'd spent a few days in a hotel, where the residents were entertained in the oddest manner. The long narrow entrance hall was uplit with turquoise light, it was like walking down a drinking straw. But at the end of the hall where the glum residents congregated there was a hearth with a fire burning brightly, giving off a visible heat. It was only when you reached the reception desk that you realised it was a deception: the fire burnt across the full width of a TV screen on the wall, crackling and creating an apparition of real cosiness. Together with my plastic key card I was given two turquoise boiled sweets like cough sweets, and I took them upstairs to the little bed-shaped room, with its basin-in-a-cupboard arrangement. The wall opposite the bed was empty of pictures and photos, there was nothing to distract from the main show: yes, there in the room a smaller, but otherwise identical screen with a burning fire. The creaking and champing of the flames could be heard from the door, and, as soon as I entered, I sat down on the turquoise bedspread, as I was clearly meant to do, and looked the fire in the teeth.

In the middle of the night, still unable to switch the screen off, I began to understand the little lesson the hotel's owners had arranged for their guests as a sort of undemanding compulsory entertainment, like the poems used as decorative inscriptions on soft furnishings, or embroidered proverbs in a frame: 'The early bird catches the worm'. The single screen, standing upright like a young conscript, was touched by a tiny flame like a halo at the very edge of the screen first of all, the forewarning of a future martyrdom. The fire grew stronger, seeming to reach out and touch my face, the flames unfurled, droning and subsiding before reaching the very top of the screen, where the bee-whispering grew thicker. Then gradually the intensity dropped and the screen grew darker and then gasped softly and disintegrated into ashes and cinders. A short darkness followed, then the picture momentarily shuddered, straightened, and before me again the quick lithe fire, the resurrected image, as if nothing had ever happened to it. The whole business repeated itself over and over (the recording seemed ever more horrible, the longer it went on), and I followed it more and more attentively, as if I was trying to make out some variation, however small. But again and again the darkness gave way to the wood repeatedly resurrecting itself from the dead.