

A Wake for Alisja

I

When Peik Guralnik died, no one from our town went to his funeral. People aren't even sure if one was arranged, since who knows how these things go when somebody is hanged. But no one cares either. Peik Guralnik was found guilty of raping and murdering seventeen-year old Alisja Znetskyj. They found her body buried in the woods not a hundred meters behind Vlad's Mini Market. There was no trial. The paper said Peik had confessed. By contrast, however, people do want to honor Alisja's memory in some way. She wasn't from here, and her folks arranged for her body to be transported back to her home country, so we can't have a proper funeral. But people want to do something.

I tried to stay out of it. Not because I thought it was a good idea, but because the entire tragedy seemed, and still seems, incomprehensible to me. I knew both of them, Alisja and Peik, and as a bartender I should be used to seeing the wrong side of life and assuming the worst of people, but I just can't wrap my head around it. It just doesn't make sense. But Ms. Baník, the local butcher and one of Alisja's many employers, came in yesterday to ask me if my bar could be used for a wake. She seemed tired and distressed, and I didn't want to add to her troubles so I agreed. We went over the basics and she wrote down on a piece of paper the date, time, and nature of the occasion, spat out the gum she was chewing and stuck it to the back of the note. Before she headed back out the door, she glanced around the barroom and said: "We need to rearrange the tables. And that red chair, it needs to go. It doesn't fit." Then she left and stuck the note outside the door on her way out. It is set for tonight.

On the upside, during these past couple of weeks, the uncertainty over how to commemorate Alisja has given people something to say to each other. It's like there's a reason now to acknowledge other people's existence. I even saw the honorable Mrs. Gretzchkin talking with Jof, an unemployed ex-coal driver from the power plant, in the middle of Main Street. Also here at the bar, there has been a more or less constant conversation going on ever since they found her body. People either talk about Alisja or curse the person responsible for her death. It often goes on through the night, since I'm not in the business of kicking people out when I close up (I live in the backroom myself, and if someone for some reason prefers spending the night here sleeping on the floor or drooping on the chairs, I usually let them. This is the only bar for miles, and they rarely do anything stupid in the fear of getting barred). All in all, the whole thing seems to have taken people's minds off their own sins and encouraged them to appreciate the exciting possibilities of impromptu social interaction. Well, everyone except the sheriff.

The sheriff is not really a sheriff. We don't have sheriffs here. Everyone just calls him that, and I think he rather enjoys it. His name is Reye Zorn, and he is the head of the local police department. He has earned his nickname due to his love of old Western movies and cowboy boots. The mayor appointed him to his position some forty years ago, and the two of them still pretty much run the town (We are quite an isolated community, and power is pretty centralized. The mayor nominates the town officials, including law enforcement. By and large people don't seem to mind the arrangement, as long as it guarantees that town business stays town business). The sheriff and the mayor used to come here to drink and have a laugh together, but lately the sheriff has been drinking alone. The last time I saw them together was some two weeks ago, about a week after Alisja died. They were talking in hushed tones but it seemed like they were arguing. It ended with the mayor getting up, leaning over to the sheriff's ear and hissing through his teeth: "Don't forget who put you there, Reye". Then he left. The sheriff stayed and drank more than usual that night.

The sheriff and I have talked over this crooked piece of plywood a thousand times. Before Peik Guralnik's hanging, he was never short of a good cop story. Once he told me about a guy they had arrested for a drunk and disorderly who was getting married the next day. One of his officers knew him and had even been invited to the wedding, so that's how they knew it wasn't bullshit. They had given the guy a ride to the chapel in the morning and only uncuffed him right at the door as a joke. They'd had a bet going whether the bride would show up. She had, and the officer had stayed for the wedding. But later that same night the groom was raising such hell at his own wedding that the cops had to be called in to take him back to jail. The bride hadn't taken too well to the idea of being cheated out of a wedding night and had insisted on coming along. The sheriff and his boys hadn't had the heart to deprive the young missus of the experience so they had put them both in the same cell at the far end of the corridor and promised to turn the radio up loud in the office.

He has been in here all morning again, just like every morning since they hanged Peik. He is sitting on his usual stool, the one with one bad leg at the corner of the counter, not saying a word to anyone. Not even to order his usual Rusty Russian (instant coffee with a splash of vodka, my own invention, a perfect hair of the dog!). He keeps staring at the shelves behind the counter, chewing on his fingernails with his fat cheeks quivering like the sides of a walrus moving on land. He takes off his cap every minute or so just to put it back on again. His bald, liver spotted dome glimmers under the fluorescent lights like he was sending the slowest Morse code in recorded history to someone hiding in the roof beams. From time to time he glances over his shoulder, looking in the direction of the lone red chair next to the broken pay phone. The same one Ms. Baník wants gone. It is where Peik used to sit.

Even before Alisja's death, Peik Guralnik was not a liked member of this community. Just to tolerate his existence from a safe distance was too tall an order for many. I guess a part of it could just have been Peik's appearance brought on by some forty years of living on the streets, exposed to the elements in this climate. He had also lost his left eye to the sheriff's baton a long time ago. Apparently, Peik had assaulted him in the street. I'm not sure why, but it was a cold winter's night, so I guess he could have been trying to get himself arrested. It was difficult to really know anything about Peik because he couldn't speak. Or wouldn't, to be honest I don't know which. I know for a fact that in his youth he could talk, since he was only two years my senior and we were friends for a while. This was when I was about ten.

II

As a kid, Peik Guralnik was a wild one. At school it seemed he spent more time in the Principal's office than in class. He wasn't mean and he didn't hurt anybody who didn't deserve it or anything like that. He was just, as they say, too full of life and hadn't quite grasped the whole concept of property rights. If he was hungry, and he saw a candy bar sticking out of someone's coat pocket, he had no problem helping himself to the treat. Also, he always got into fights, but there seemed to be a moral code to his violent behavior; Peik could not stand bullies. He was a tall, wiry kid and he defended the smaller kids around the schoolyard – even though it meant he rarely saw a day without a black eye or a few new shiny red lashes across his backside with the Principal's belt buckle printed on one end like heads on lollipops.

The one thing wilder than his nature was his imagination. He was full of stories so unbelievable that you couldn't help but wonder if they were actually true. Especially when it came to his dad. He had split before Peik was born, and as far as I know he never came to see Peik and his mom. But listening to Peik it sounded like they were the best of friends. He told stories about the dozen cars his dad supposedly owned and how he drove a different one to work every day of the week. According to Peik, he also owned a movie theater and let Peik sneak in whenever he wanted. He also told us about a closet in his dad's house that was "full of porn", which of course sounded cool, even though we were not sure what it meant.

Back then it was actually very nice here. Every spring all the kids waited for the day old man Puzek let his cattle out to graze on the riverbank for the summer. The plans for the power plant must have been in the works already then, since my father used to tease me that soon I would have to drop out of school because he would need me washing dishes at the bar around the clock. When he said it he would run his fingers through my hair and grin like only people who don't fear the future can. I liked school and he of course meant it as a joke, but it sounded so exciting that I really just wanted to be like him and run my own bar one day. Peik wanted to be an archaeologist. He said

so once, when we were throwing stones off the nearby bridge trying to hit some tin cans. I remember because only moments after he said it, a red sports car swooshed by with the top down. A bald guy was driving it, and Peik said, "That was my dad", but I'm sure it wasn't.

Pretty soon after that Peik's mother hooked up with a guy who became husband number two and Peik found himself with a stepdad. From then on, things began to go downhill for him. Peik started missing school and pretty soon stopped going altogether. I went to their house a few times, but no one answered the door. On the rare occasion I saw him in town he looked like all life had escaped his eyes. He was all bruised up, much worse than his usual battle scars from the schoolyard. Also, his mother stopped coming to the shops around town. No one really knew what was going on with the family but after a year or so, on the eve of Peik's 13th birthday, his stepdad died. He'd been shot in the neck with a hunting rifle in their toolshed.

For a couple of weeks, it seemed that the toolshed incident was all anyone in town talked about. It was finally put down as a suicide, but it was by no means a simple case. It had something to do with the ballistics – the police said in the beginning that it would have been inconvenient for him to shoot himself the way it was done. Also, there had been no note. The investigation focused in on the immediate family. The sheriff really put the screws on Peik and his mother, and they seemed to spend day after day at the police station. The sheriff had just taken office, a young go-getter, and it was his first case. I guess he was eager to make a mark. I don't know exactly what went on in there during the interrogations, but no one was found guilty of anything. Peik's mother lost it completely in the process, and she was soon institutionalized. The sheriff also got into a fistfight with the mayor on the street in front of the bar. They rolled around in the mud punching each other, and the mayor screamed: "It was the boy! You know it was the fucking boy!" I remember it because I understood they were talking about Peik, and it upset me.

After the interrogations Peik disappeared. I thought he had gone away for good, maybe to live with his dad. But then a few months later I saw him on Main Street sitting in the mud. He looked horrible. I don't know if he was there to beg or not, but people left coins in front of him. When I went to say hi he didn't seem to have any idea who I was and didn't say a thing. And so it was with him and me until the end, it never changed. He never again said a word, never again seemed to remember us ever being friends. It was the same summer they began construction on the power plant.

III

At first it was like the town had won the lottery. There was work for anyone who could swing a hammer, wield a shovel, count, write, polish, assemble, drive, carry, measure, or simply obey orders

and not speak unless spoken to. Just about everyone in town who didn't own his or her own business worked on the construction. The company had also promised that there would be work for the locals at the finished factory, so people felt they were, in a very concrete way, building their own future. After a couple of years, they got the place up and running and locals were hired as promised. The mayor was credited for making it all happen. He spent a lot of time here at the bar once the plant was opened. My father joked that the mayor did not have to pay for a single drink for months.

The power plant ate coal and spit electricity. There is no coal mine anywhere near here, but they hauled it in from somewhere by the truck load, and soon a heap of coal next to the plant turned into a mountain of coal, with narrow, winding roads running up and down the sides for the trucks to climb and dump their black cargo on top. We live in a valley between two ranges of hills, and up until then it had been green here as far as the eye could see. But the black smoke from the factory started to change that. Also when it rained, black water oozed into town from the coal heap. And the bigger the pile got the more ground the black water gained. Pretty soon the valley was gray and black from hillside to hillside. The dark layer was so thick in places that next summer the grass didn't grow there anymore. After only seven years the company went bankrupt and the plant was closed down almost overnight. Salaries hadn't been paid in months towards the end and even though the workers were therefore legal creditors of the bankruptcy estate no one got anything. Whether they were screwed over, I don't know. All anyone knew was that we were left with dead soil, an ever-gray landscape, and a 60% unemployment rate. The mayor stayed away from the bar for a full year.

It was only a few months after the plant shut down that my father passed away and left the bar to me. I was still learning the ropes when out of the blue Peik showed up. I hadn't seen him in ages, but when he rustled in the first time, I could tell straight away nothing between us had changed; I was still a stranger to him. He was a sad sight and clearly homeless. He started coming here every night, and quickly took to sitting on the red chair next to the pay phone. The light over the phone was broken, and because the phone didn't work either, I had never fixed it. When I saw Peik occupying the dark corner, I thought it might be best to leave it that way. I guess I didn't want to scare him away.

When the sheriff came in and saw Peik sitting here, he stood at the door staring at him, not saying anything. After a while he slowly started towards his designated bad-legged seat. Peik started shaking and breathing loudly as the sheriff came closer, but didn't look his way. The sheriff sat on his seat, and it looked like the sheriff was about to say something to him. He stared at Peik with his mouth half open for a moment before turning away and ordering a Rusty Russian. It was also here, only many years later, that Peik and Alisja Znetskyj first crossed paths.

IV

Alisja Znetskyj only set foot in this town at the end of last spring. She was Polish and came here to work as an au pair for the Ashida family, who also had just moved in. The Ashidas moved away before the year was out, I guess from their point of view coming here in the first place was a mistake. But Alisja stayed. She was like a ray of sunshine in the dark, and the whole town was in love with her.

It never ceased to amaze me how this place didn't seem to bring her spirits down. She was seventeen, and by the look of it she was utterly incapable of having a bad day. After the Ashida gig ended local entrepreneurs were basically lining up outside her door begging her to come work for them, since customers were drawn to Alisja like bees to honey. However, she was smart and didn't tie herself to any one job but reached an understanding with everyone that she would come and work for all of them in turn. She usually stayed with one employer for a full week, and then went on with the rotation. She even worked here on a few occasions, when I knew an especially busy night was coming up and she agreed to come and help me through the worst of it.

We always had a good laugh together. For someone her age, she had great wit and a brutally dark sense of humor. The first time she was here bussing tables, Peik was sitting in his red chair. Some drunken idiot was harassing him, calling him names and going on about how he smelled bad. Alisja stepped between them, stared at the drunk and said: "The thing is, sir, that he can take a shower and smell better tomorrow. But you will be a disappointment to the human race until the day you die." The bar broke into a roaring laughter and the guy stormed out and didn't come back. Peik looked the most stunned of them all with his mouth open, and soon a tear was running down his chafed cheek. Alisja winked and smiled at him, and brought him a shot of vodka on the house "with apologies for the unpleasant incident".

From then on the two seemed to develop some sort of a friendship. Any time Alisja spotted Peik on the street or in the bar she went to him, and they could sit together for ten-fifteen minutes at a time with Alisja talking and Peik listening and smiling. I have no idea what Alisja talked to him about, but whatever it was it seemed there was a trust between them. And that's what baffles me the most about her death and Peik's hanging. I just can't see the motive. But a confession leaves fairly little room for speculation. I don't know, maybe crazy people simply do crazy things. At least that's how they explained it in the paper.

When the news about Alisja's body being found in the woods reached me, I was just about to open. Peik and a few others had spent the night at the bar and someone had already been out to get the morning paper. There it was on the front page, the horrifying news complete with a picture

of Alisja smiling at the camera in her school uniform. I was just about to come out of the back room when I heard a roar. I thought some big animal had stormed in, maybe a moose or a bear or a fucking elephant for all I knew. It was so loud and so sudden I nearly shit my pants. But it was Peik. Staring at the paper, crumbling the page with Alisja's picture in his hands. He wouldn't stop howling. He went outside into the pouring rain and stopped in the middle of the street. It was so cold that I could see his breath. There he stood until he fell flat on his face into the mud. I went out to check on him and shouted for the others at the bar to call the ambulance. It was the last time I saw Peik.

One of the sheriff's officers, the same one that had been to the wedding in the story, told me on one of his visits here that Peik had been arrested at the hospital. It had taken two weeks to get him into good enough shape to be transferred to jail.

V

Bang.

The bar door flies open. It's the officer.

– Oh here you are, Sir!

– What is it, officer?

– Sir, the mayor is looking all over for you. You were supposed to be at Town Hall a half an hour ago. The paper is there to do an interview with you about the Guralnik case. The mayor says it's a huge deal. He's furious.

The sheriff takes off his hat once again.

– You tell the mayor I'm presently otherwise engaged.

The officer doesn't reply.

– Have a seat Raval, the sheriff says, – Have a round with me.

Raval goes to the other end of the counter and sits on the red seat Peik used to sit on.

– Not there, the sheriff says.

– What was that, sir?

The sheriff pulls out his .45, aims it to Raval's left temple without looking and cocks it.

– I said don't sit there.

The officer falls off the chair and backs up against the wall on all fours.

– Sir what are you doing! I'm going to report you!

– You do that, son. You do that.

Raval looks like he's been hit over the head with a two by four. Without saying another word, he gets up and hurries out the door. The sheriff lays his gun on the counter and takes something out of his breast pocket. It is a small envelope.

– Sorry about that, Anton.

– No harm done, I reply.

– I want you to do something for me. Take this.

He gives the envelope to me.

– What's that?

– I'm going to leave now, the sheriff says, – Wait until I'm gone before you open it.

– And what am I going to find in there? Not the money for your tab?

– No. It's something I thought I needed, but I don't want it anymore. A kind of insurance, I guess.

– You really ain't gonna tell me? What I'm supposed to do with it then?

– Do you believe in karma, Anton? What goes around comes around and all that?

– Forgive me for saying so, but you're in a strange mood today, sheriff.

The sheriff stands up, takes his gun and puts it in the holster, looks about the bar and starts towards the door.

– How long do you want me to wait?

– It's up to you.

He walks out the door. I wait a few minutes, and since the bar is empty, I open the envelope right there on the counter. It's a cassette tape. It says "Int. Room #1, P.G." on the sticker. I still have a couple of hours before Ms. Baník and her lot come in to decorate the bar for Alisja's wake, so I go in the back where I have a small portable stereo and put the tape in and press play. It's the mayor talking.

"So still no progress, no suspects? It's been two weeks, Reye."

"I know. There's no one."

"Okay, then we're doing this. We need a win, Reye. I need a fucking win. You're not recording this, are you?"

"No."

"You know you're up to your eyeballs in this shit just like me, so try not to fuck this up, you hear? When they bring him in, you just follow my lead like a good boy, Reye. You're gonna keep your fucking mouth shut unless I ask you a question. And when I do you're going to agree with every goddamn thing I say, true or not. We're going to put this thing to bed right here and now."

There is a sound of a door opening and closing and somebody being escorted in. The mayor's voice starts up again.

"Peik Guralnik, as I live and breathe. It's nice to see you again. Are they treating you well, Reye and his boys? I apologize for the food here, I know eating that crap is punishment enough for anyone."

By the sound of it the mayor's the only one laughing at his joke.

"Just so you know, Peik, all of this is off the record. Everything we say here stays between the three of us. There's nothing to be afraid of. You're with friends now. So, I guess you want to know what I'm

doing here. The thing is, I want to level with you. I'm sure you heard about poor Alisja. It's terrible what happened to her. But the truth is Reye here has gotten nowhere with the investigation. We simply don't have the slightest idea who did it. And the longer it takes, the harder it gets, right? I'm sure you can understand that. And I'm afraid that poor Alisja's in for a whole lot of unnecessary brutality and desecration unless we get this case closed quick."

There is a long pause.

"You know what they're going to have to do to her body to look for any remaining evidence? They are going to have to cut her open and slice her up. Invade her every orifice with nasty instruments. Right, Reye?"

"Mayor..."

"Right, Reye?"

"Yes."

"They are going to cut her into little pieces and for what? They are not going to find anything that could help us catch the killer. We can all understand that, right Peik? It's gonna be all for nothing. But it's the protocol. That's what you do in these cases. Ain't that right, Reye?"

"Yes."

"How does that make you feel, Peik? I've seen you follow her, talk to her."

Silence.

"You loved her, didn't you? "

There's sobbing.

"Now Peik, listen. You have the chance to do right by her. We all know what happened to your stepfather all those years ago, we all know what you did. But Reye here let you off the hook, or maybe he was just bad at his job, I don't know."

"Mayor."

"Shut up, Reye. We all know what you did Peik. But now you can make up for it. You can save Alisja. Save her body from all that horrible, unnecessary shame. All you have to do is sign a piece of paper..."

I hear the door, it is Ms. Baník and her friends. They are early. I pause the tape.

- I thought I told you that red chair needs to go, she shouts from the barroom. - It doesn't fit.