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Dr Campbell Edinborough
The School of Performance and Cultural Industries
University of Leeds
Leeds
LST 9JT
c.edinborough@leeds.ac.uk

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PILGRIMAGE

by

Campbell Edinborough

I lift the lid of my laptop to check my emails, but an image on the BBC News Homepage draws my attention somewhere else. A video that begins with an image of a young girl, her face framed by a tangle of black curls, shivering in the rain at a border somewhere in Eastern Europe.

She's about seven, with hands and sleeves caked in grey mud. She holds them together tightly to control their trembling. She sees that she's being filmed, standing her ground - such as it is - until the camera moves on to other pained faces in the crowd.

There is something uniquely unsettling about seeing all those children caught on the apparently arbitrary threshold between one country and another. Perhaps it's the way their eyes magnify the confusion that parents attempt to hide in furrowed brows and clenched jaws. It seems like the rain has been coming down all night. There's no grass left underfoot in the field being used by the army as a holding area.

Holding area.

I think about holding hands. I think about holding the soft warmth of my daughter's body in my arms. I suddenly feel quite hopeless. But I force myself to finish watching - identifying myself as a distant witness to the abject misery meted out to families who left everything behind in search of security and stability. It seems to me that huddled together under plastic sheeting and leafless trees, testing the limits of hope and despair, everyone looks the same.

I shut the lid of my computer and notice that the lights in the cabin have been dimmed.

It's early July. I'm crossing the Atlantic to attend my grandmother's funeral, in a small church on the side of a rural road, not far from the shores of Lake Huron in Ontario, Canada. Seventy years ago, she crossed the same ocean for the first time. Not long after the Second World War, she left her home to start a new life with her husband and first child. A young family in search of success and comfort in a land of plenty, large and distant enough to remain comparatively unscathed by the horrors that had swept across Europe.

My grandparents travelled for a week by boat, celebrating their arrival in a diner glistening with the colorful Formica charm of modernity. They sat down and ordered a banana split like the ones they'd seen in the movies. It was a meal that looked like a cartoon and couldn't be defeated with stomachs tempered by rationing. In contrast to theirs, my journey (with wife and daughter in tow) returns me to the country of my birth. More than anything else, it's a journey of familial obligation, marking the transition of a faded bond from the present to the past. Peering out of the cabin window and into the night sky, I'm struck by the difference between these acts of self-definition.

A part of me is envious imagining them at the end of the Second World War. Not for the experiences of bombs or battle. My grandfather, an irrepressible raconteur, talked so rarely of his time in the army that I can only imagine that there were few moments anyone would want to relive. Instead, I'm envious of how enormous and undiscovered the world must have seemed. Almost 7 billion people live on the planet now. In 1945 it was closer to 2.5. A country as big as Canada must have seemed like

one huge blank page, ready to accept whatever story one wanted to write. For those lucky enough to afford passage from the creaking remains of Europe, it must have been incredibly seductive. The romance and relief of it all primed newcomers with the confidence to stride boldly into the wilderness and build weekend cottages. Places to escape and reflect on the successes authored amongst shining new skyscrapers during the working week.

In the face of that kind of confidence I can only recognize the limitations of my own sense of the world. My grandparents struck out in search of a new life. I carefully considered whether I could cope for seven-hours on a plane with a two-year-old.

#

It's humid on the day of funeral. The skies are grey and cars kick up dust as they pass the church. The growing congregation waits on the grass verge near the entrance, conversations striking up between the groups of family and friends who've gathered. No one appears to know who I am. I note the irony of this with dispassion. My daughter and I are the last remaining holders of the family name. But there's nothing strange about my anonymity. This place has little meaning to me. Unlike most of the others, I've only been here once before - for my father's funeral, a few years earlier. In that case, the site seemed to me little more than a convenience. This is simply the church my grandparents frequented in the years after he and I, in our own separate ways, left the country.

A man in a light-blue summer suit approaches me, holding out his hand as he introduces himself. I recognize him as a friend of my dad and remove my sunglasses. He sees the echoes of my late father as my eyes are revealed. Tears roll down his cheeks as the uncanniness of my presence in such close proximity to his prodigal friend's grave unnerves him. I feel myself evicted from my body, becoming, for a brief moment, nothing but my father's son. He apologizes, saying something about how one shouldn't show emotion in front of an Englishman. The sensation of self-absence is sustained. I was born here. Or near here. But I suppose I'm English. Or British. Composure regained, we make small talk until the time comes to enter the church and find our seats for the service.

#

With the first of the hymns complete and the eulogy read, the youngest of my assembled cousins sings *You Raise Me Up*, her emotions preventing her from reaching some of the high notes. (There are many.) As she returns to her seat, eyes fixed to the floor, the lesson begins. It is read by the chaplain from my grandmother's care home - a fixture of her social life, such as it was, in her later years. He provides a meditation on holding dear the values of Christian civilization. The poetry of the King James Bible. Christmas carols sung by the King's College Choir. The things my granny clung to, so it is claimed.

I picture her in a small single bedroom, a lifetime's possessions finally shed. A camel passing through the eye of a needle, ready to judge the tribes of Israel and inherit the earth. As I listen to the lesson, I hear my hymnbook thump to the floor for the third time. I look at my squiggling daughter and then to my wife. We share a look which

communicates that she's done well enough, all things considered, and should be taken outside. I watch them disappear quietly down the aisle, pushing through the doors and into light of the churchyard.

Towards the end of the lesson, I catch myself frowning. While I recognize something of my grandmother in the chaplain's account, he seems to have superimposed his own philosophy onto what I imagine were, for her, relatively minor concerns. As the congregation files out of the church, I am left thinking not of her commitment to Christian civilization, but of her enduring love for Roger Federer. (Perhaps such passions were two sides of the same coin.) My arrival at this moment of reflection is attached to a very minor memory of finding her asleep in front of Wimbledon one morning. The image brings with it a brief sensation of connectedness - just enough to transcend the strange alienation I have begun to feel among these distant relatives and strangers. I leave the church in search of my girls.

#

The ladies of the church have provided a buffet for us. I sit with my daughter, encouraging her to eat the sticks of carrot and cucumber that remain on her paper plate. It's too late though. She's tired and she's seen the cakes and the cookies. We go up to the serving tables to choose something. She takes a cupcake with pink icing. I take a peanut butter cookie, hoping that one nostalgic bite will short-circuit the memories of the last twenty-five years and leave me feeling more at home amongst all these people who loved my grandmother. It isn't what I remember. I swallow and find myself unmoved amongst these strangers. Icing across both cheeks, my daughter asks to go outside to play. I run my hands over her fine blonde hair and lift her into my arms. We make our escape, her arms around my neck and her head on my shoulder. I put her down as the sunlight hits us, holding her hand as we wind our way through the headstones back to what seems to be the family plot.

I tell her that I want to show her something.

'What Daddy?'

'Well, you know that my daddy died? I want to show you where he is now.'

I'm not sure if I'm using the right words, or saying the right thing, but for some reason this feels important. Quite unexpectedly, it feels more important than anything else I might do today.

'This is where we buried my daddy. Your grandpa.'

We stand by a granite stone laid into the turf next to the unfilled hole where my grandmother's urn has been placed.

'Your daddy's in there?'

'Yes,' I say. 'That's where we put my daddy after he died.'

I watch her carefully as she reckons with this idea. I don't know what I want her to understand. Maybe just that I come from somewhere. Even if it isn't really here. I want her to know that she has roots.

We sit on the grass. She plays with the raw earth left from the ceremony - dropping handfuls of it into the hole that holds her great-grandmother's urn. The light coming through the trees is soft and beautiful. Her dress matches the bunch of flowers left at the graveside. Behind her it is possible to see our family name carved into the stone. I remove my phone from my pocket and take a picture.

My wife has found us.

'Do you want me to take a picture of both of you?'

I pass her my phone. We smile. She passes the phone back to me.

'This is where my grandpa is.'

'I know,' my wife says. 'It's very sad that he couldn't meet you.'

She swings her into the air. They look beautiful. Flowers and headstone in the foreground, framed by the grass, the trees and the sky. I take another picture.

#

I struggle to sleep later that night. At ten-past-twelve, I lie in bed and stare at my phone. The bright light obscures everything beyond the bedsheets gathered underneath my chin. I tap the screen, scroll down, tap it again, scroll down, jumping from London to New York to Palestine to Hollywood to Brussels to Syria. I pause at an article that details the experiences of migrant children taken away from their parents on the US/Mexico border. I can't bring myself to read the whole piece. Something in my lizard brain stops me from letting the images, text and abject lack of humanity pulsing from my phone start a fire in my conscience.

At 12:33 I'm still jumping. From Trump and AOC to Boris Johnson and Jean-Claude Juncker to BA's best apple pie to bombs in Tel Aviv to campus rape to the gossip of the transfer window.

At 12:50 my eyes are stinging, but I keep tapping. I remember Jerry Seinfeld saying that the thumb on the remote is the last part of the body to go to sleep. I tap out 140 characters and delete them again. Because I know that no one's out there listening. But I keep scrolling. Through airspace incursions to Lionel Messi to Yemeni displacement to Taylor Swift.

I think about putting the phone down, turning a light on and reaching for a book. But I don't. I stare at the box with the blinking cursor that invites me to fire an opinion into the emptiness of space. Tomorrow, we're travelling to my younger aunt's cottage, a couple of hours east. I hope I can sleep in the car.

#

A few days by the lake settles me into a different rhythm. There's less dread. Reading the news on my phone no longer seems so urgent. Everything feels much further away. Out here there's nothing but swimming, reading, breakfast, lunch and dinner. Maybe, at some point, there will be a game of Scrabble.

After three days of stifling humidity, the weather is finally set to break. Sitting in front of the picture window, sipping on my second gin and tonic, I notice the light drain from the room. The lake goes from blue-green to slate-grey and the heavens open. I smell the earth and pine needles thrown in the air by the falling rain.

I watch my uncle flipping a canoe over on the dock. He re-ties the knots that secure the boats to their moorings. I can't help admiring the work. He's pretty masterful out here. Totally at home with his father's modest legacy. A cottage built by hand over half a century ago. No power tools. No electricity. Timber and stones gathered from across the island. Foundations dug down to the bedrock.

I think about what it must have been like out here in the fifties and sixties. Driving into the wilderness in a packed station wagon. Young brothers given the freedom to paddle from one shore to the other, disappearing after their morning pancakes and returning at nightfall with a little extra sunburn and three pounds of perch from the next lake along. Glowing hearts. Youthful holders of dominion.

With the boats secured, he skips through the trees, dodging the raindrops, even though he's already wet through. As he steps through the door, my aunt hisses at him to close it again quickly.

'I've already got a-hundred-and-fifty mosquito bites.'

'You shouldn't taste so good' he says, kissing her on the cheek.

My wife has wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and sits with her legs drawn towards her chest and an open book resting against her knees. I don't know what she's reading. It's making her frown slightly. Lightning strikes. A few seconds later we hear the corresponding roll of thunder. My aunt butters slices of white bread to make grilled-cheese-sandwiches. My daughter sleeps on one of the bunkbeds. I'm reminded of how long these days felt when I was a child in my grandparents' cottage on Lake Ontario. Endless games of Old Maid and Snap. Paper, pencils and wax crayons scattered across the floor. Hours spent drawing cartoons while the grownups snoozed next to the wood-burning stove. I'm three thousand miles from home and closer to part of myself than I've been in a long time.

I pick up my phone. An old girlfriend, whom I haven't seen or heard from in some time, has started to post photos almost hourly onto Facebook. She has a new baby. I didn't know she was married. I don't know where she lives anymore. I'm not sure how long it's been. The baby is called Rosie. 7 pounds 2 ounces. She had jaundice for the first week. They were very worried, even though it's totally normal, but she's thriving now. The husband, with his lustrous brown beard, horn-rimmed spectacles and tattoos like a pirate, smiles proudly at the camera. He looks like the kind of man who listens to alternative electronica on vinyl. He probably has a sensitive passion for his local non-league football club. Not that he's got time for that now. Not with the new baby.

The photos ache. Colourful bunting over the crib, shot with one of those retro polaroid filters. Sleeping in her daddy's arms. Big blue eyes peering up from an engorged and furious boob. #Lunch.

She lent me her copy of *The Golden Notebook*. I'm pretty sure it's still on my shelf with her notes in the margins. I remember splitting an E with her at a festival somewhere in Hertfordshire. Giggling and nervous, dancing until dawn with eyes as big as saucers. Like we were supposed to. The fun we thought everyone was looking for.

I see that she's online. We could chat. But how would we even begin?

#

On our last night by the lake, we eat barbecued steak and baked potatoes and corn on the cob. We drink a few cold glasses of vinho verde and finish the last of my daughter's third-birthday ice-cream cake. When the sun starts to go down, I decide to take one final swim.

'Really?' my wife asks. 'Now?'

'Why not? When's the next time you'll swim in a Canadian lake?'

Twilight spreads through the trees as we walk down to the dock. We quickly pull off our clothes and slip into the lake to avoid the worst of the mosquitoes - weight suspended in the darkening water, pale flesh glowing underneath the surface in the last of the sun's light. A loon calls in the distance. We watch it dive and resurface. After the recent storm, the water is so still that, even in the half-light, it looks like one sky has been stacked on top of another. Without any doubt in my mind this is where I feel most at home. A tiny dot captured between two clear skies, held by the water, time breathing in and out from my infancy to here and now. It hits me like a kind of grief. My wife stands at the ladder next to dock, immersed up to her shoulders, her skin picked out by the light of the moon, body shimmering under the water like a faded chalk drawing. The loon calls out again and I dive, kicking into the depths with my eyes closed. Weeds brush against my stomach and thighs. Each time my body demands to surface, I force myself to take one more stroke - resisting the flickering muscular contractions that grab at my chest, gliding further out into the depths of the water. I'm unseen and perfectly in place.

#

It rains again on our trip back to the suburbs of Toronto. As my wife and daughter play, I sit in the basement of my dad's older sister's house. Her cat has finally warmed to me. It's taken so long I can't find any affection for it now. He doesn't have the temperament for a house cat - mood turning on a dime, constantly waiting for the door to open. He knows which side his bread is buttered on though, rubbing up against my aunt's legs as she fills the washing machine.

I sit and flick through the enormous stack of photo albums which my granny made year by year. She rarely picked up the phone, shamed me for never writing whenever we met, seemingly oblivious to the fact that she never wrote either, but here

are the documents of her pride and affections. There are Christmases and vacations spanning 70 years. It seems a sin to break up the careful arrangement of the images, but that's what I've been encouraged to do.

'They're not going to be kept,' my aunt says, 'Take what you like.'

I open one of the albums at random and find my grandfather in black and white, sitting on the back of an elephant, sometime in the late fifties or early sixties. In another picture he's riding a donkey on Santorini, looking ridiculous - somehow styling it out with no other means than the smile on his face. I think about him travelling around Europe, introducing his hard-won Cambridge education to the ruins of the ancient world. I wonder if my granny climbed aboard a donkey of her own. I assume she was there.

The next album brings me a little closer to home. My father, aged 15, arm draped around a girl with cropped blond hair. She looks like Jean Seberg in *À Bout de Souffle*. He's wearing a cravat. A dog-eared pair of photos taken in a cramped photo-booth. Part of a set of four that's been ripped across the middle. They must have kept half each. It's the kind of thing you want to find tucked into an old copy of *On the Road*. I wonder what happened to his books - if there were any still stored away somewhere when he died. I ask my aunt who the girl is.

'His first girlfriend.'

'His smile is the same as yours,' my wife says.

I find the two or three albums that evidence my early childhood in Canada. Summers on Garden Island and Christmases that I can barely remember. There are photos of me opening a gift from my father.

A globe.

I'm thrilled. Sitting next to him sprawled on the sofa, a faint smile on his swollen face. Bloodshot eyes. Bloody Mary. Looking at it now, I try to imagine how he might have come to buy it for me. Trudging through the snow with a hangover, the stores about to close.

Why not a globe?

I look so happy. I remember spinning the world on its axis over and over again, stopping it at random with my index finger, reading out the name of the country, imagining the distances travelled. Thinking about it makes me regret throwing it away a few years ago. The seams were starting to come apart, the borders were no longer accurate, but it feels like a mistake now. I pull the photos away from the tacky surface of the album's cardboard pages and place them in a pile on the table.

In the later albums, it's possible to trace the peaks and troughs of my father's struggles with alcoholism. It's all here to see, even if it tended to go unsaid. I think about where I might have been when these were taken. Somewhere on the other side of the world, not giving him much thought. Looking at the pictures now, the damage to his body feels somehow personal - distance and strange familiarity colliding in front of me.

In one photo I calculate that we must be about the same age. Then and now, we share the same eyes and the same smile. He looks like he's been trying to kill himself. For all our physical similarity, I can't imagine what he was thinking or how he felt.

In the last album there are pictures from the one trip he made to England when I was a kid - after the divorce. I wonder how they made their way into my grandmother's hands. I think about her going through his belongings - deciding what to keep and what to throw away. I think about what these blurry photos, taken with a disposable camera, could have meant to her. I wonder how she kept pictures like these and didn't think to call. I wonder why we all stayed so distant.

I remember that trip vividly. He was going to take me and my sister to the Hard Rock Café. But when we found him, drunk on a bench in Swiss Cottage Underground Station, my mum wouldn't let him take us. She said we could all go and have tea together instead. At some point, in the back of the car, he changed his mind and asked to get out, closing the door behind him and disappearing amongst the crowds on the Finchley Road.

On the next page in the album all that is in the distant past. My father stands outside a white church near the shoreline somewhere in Halifax, Nova Scotia (I guess). He's about forty-five, healthy-ish and handsome in a turtleneck and blazer, looking off into the middle distance. The picture doesn't mean much to me beyond the limited facts about his life on the East Coast, gleaned from letters sent to my sister and me every now and then. I remove the photos and put them in my pile - stacking up the missing years.

#

The cab we booked to take us to the airport arrives in good time. We place our bags in the trunk and hug my aunt goodbye. I'm ready to leave. We fly through the night. I watch my daughter's face as she sleeps. She's been perfect both ways. My wife and I scroll through the movies and watch the kind of films that only feel right at 30,000 feet. As the seatbelt light is switched on, I lift the plastic blinds on the windows to find the south of England doused in rain. It's a relief after the heatwave we left behind.

I call my mother as I wait for our luggage. She is relieved we're back. I am too.

'She slept the whole way. She's been amazing.'

Something about the change of scale feels good. There's a sense of familiarity here that doesn't feel so jarringly strange or nostalgic. I feel it in the buildings and roads, in the voices on the radio coming through the loudspeakers in the car, and in the intermittent orange pulse of streetlights that beat out the distance travelled on our drive up the motorway. I take a deep breath, a little unnerved at unexpectedly encountering the person I've become without noticing.

#

We step across the threshold of our house for the first time in three-weeks. I turn on the light in the hallway and pick up the post that's gathered on the doormat. My wife carries our sleeping child up the stairs to her bedroom. By the time I climb the stairs to check on her, she's already thrown off her blankets. Her knees are curled underneath her chin.

I kiss her on the cheek and cover her over again. She turns towards the wall and grumbles, holding on tight to her bear. I wait in the doorway, listening for her to take a breath in and then out again. I catch myself thinking. I want this to be her home. I want her to remember this as her home. I want to redecorate this room for her, so she'll remember it as hers.

I undress and get into bed and reach out for my wife. My thigh pressing against her leg. My arm around her waist. The gentle movement of her ribcage. The familiarity of her body in my arms. I try to make out the shapes and objects in the darkness, listening to the water tick through the pipes. My eyes are getting accustomed to the dark. This is it. We're here.