



Writing | Symposium 2021

## **A Bronx Tradition**

By Ben Teasdale

Late in the fall of 2019, my ninety-one-year-old great uncle fell and hit his head on the bedroom floor of the Bronx apartment he lived in since leaving Romania. Doctors found a subdural hematoma. Later, while on bedrest, he had a stroke and a heart attack. Within the week, though, he was upright in his hospital bed with Sunday's sports section, grunting at visitors as if he were bothered more by the interruption of his routine than of his vasculature. When my mom visited, driving six hours down from Vermont, he pretended to be asleep. "Only Uncle Andrew is invincible enough to pretend to be sick after a heart attack," she said to me on the phone. Six months later, in the spring of 2020, after the hospital cut back on rehab offerings and stopped allowing visitors, he died. I was three-thousand miles away and studying for my first medical licensing exam, struggling to figure out why I didn't feel much about the loss and how I might pay tribute, wondering whether I would feel this way if I hadn't been so far away for so long.

I have come to realize that most people, especially family, are unknowable. Still, there was a consistency to Uncle Andrew's aesthetic that exuded familiarity. Every day, he went to one store to get the salami he liked, another to get the rolls he liked and another to get a Budweiser. He always walked there; he never had a drivers license. He wore a tweed newsboy cap and rimless glasses that hung around large ears and over a thin white mustache. He carried a pen in the left breast pocket of a flannel shirt, which he buttoned all the way to the top and tucked into pants belted high above his hips. I cannot picture him any other way. Even when he took us to the beach down in Seaside Park, he always wore that same hat and those same pants, sitting in the hot sand. He carried with him a bucolic stoicism that lulled you into thinking there was a simplicity to his life, that made it so that even when he told deep secrets, they seemed like storybook tales. (His parents were Germans named Hans and Gretel. It was easy as a child to get confused what was real and what was fantasy).

The apartment where Uncle Andrew hit his head was on the second floor of a three-story townhouse in an Italian neighborhood a few blocks east of the Bronx Zoo. My great-grandfather bought the house in the early 60s, so it always carried a certain mystique to me. I grew up hearing stories of celebrations of St. John's name day. On the top floor, the women—Gretel, Aunt Lizzie, Aunt Mary, and Aunt Margaret—played unnamed games with German-suited playing cards. The men—Hans (the great-grandfather), his brother Pungratz ("Gratzi" to the Italians), Uncle Ralph and a second Hans (a local doorman also from Engelsbrunn, Romania)—drank scotch on the floor below. The younger generation, that of my grandmother, danced on the bottom floor to Herb Alpert & The Tijuana Brass vinyls while my mom and her siblings ran between the rooms. From my great-great grandmother, to my mom as a child, to me, this house once stacked five generations of my family on top of each other, like a pile of Romanian sea lions basking in the sun.

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My Uncle Billy, my mom's brother, called on St. John's name day this year, this time for my brother, John, in place of my great-grandfather (Hans is German for John). He said it was a lonely holiday and I said it's been a long year. No, he said, coronavirus is some of it, but it's been happening much longer than that. It took me a second to see what he meant. I had grown content using the pandemic as a catch-all scapegoat. But he was right. By the time I was born, multi-story name day celebrations had shifted to smaller celebrations of more traditional American holidays. As a child, we could fit everyone on the top floor if we carried extra tables and slid them together. By the end of high school, much of the older generation had died and most of the rest of the family had scattered around the country. From then on, I don't remember ever needing to do anything more than pull an extra chair to the table that was already in the family room. Now, I don't even know if I could name my cousins on that side of the family, and I am struggling to piece together what I knew of Uncle Andrew.

Uncle Andrew did not often speak of his life before immigrating. I know from talking to my grandmother, his sister, that he stayed in Romania while their parents took a boat to New York. He was two years old. My great-grandparents intended to buy a house in America and send for him, but they were denied citizenship. For years they would hide in closets while immigration officers searched the apartments they stayed in, and they paid their stay by cleaning the hallways at night. Many people from their town in Romania were arrested and sent home. Russian soldiers took Uncle Andrew to work in labor camps when he was seventeen. After he died, my mom found a newspaper clipping of him at Idlewild Airport the day in 1959 he arrived in New York. In the photo, my great-grandparents are each kissing each cheek. The caption says: "They left him with kin in Romania 30 years ago on coming here, expecting to send for him. Circumstances kept him there." My grandma told me it was the only time she saw them cry.

When Uncle Andrew told me stories himself, they always seemed in such contrast to my safe existence that I received them more as absurdities than horror. One year at thanksgiving in the Bronx house, I offered to pass him the bowl of sauerkraut. He responded that for years Russian soldiers forced him to eat sauerkraut soup, that for years he ate nothing else, that he swore if he survived he would never eat it again. As a child, I could not begin to consider the horror that experience must have been, how many hundreds of thousands of people died in his situation—I could only wonder where, if not to him, I should pass the bowl.

I know now, only from the tape of an old VHS camcorder my mom found in storage and some time at the library, that Uncle Andrew was one of sixty-thousand Romanians that the Soviet Army forced into labor after the Second World War. Donbas, where they sent him, was a wild steppe straddling Russia and Ukraine. In photos, the sky is criss-crossed with telephone wires and cables distributing power to the colliery or the barracks. All around the soil is black as the coal they take from it. Some diary entries from the 1930s describe the weather as being as hot in July as Palestine and, in winter, when the dry wind comes off the west, as cold as St. Petersburg. In Spring, sweeping rains pit the landscape with rivulets which become gullies and mud so thick it slows horses. Other entries describe the Donbas as a place of famine, a place where children grow up playing soccer with the skulls of the dead. I kept thinking: Uncle Andrew was *seventeen* years old when the Soviet army took him to this place. Was this what he went



through? I couldn't know. I could only read other people's diaries and wonder what he might have thought of them.

There is only one story I remember him telling in any detail: the story of the day the coal mine collapsed on his friend. When he told the story, I always imagined Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C# minor, Op. 3 No. 2, a Russian composer's tale of a man buried alive, a song my grandmother used to play for me on piano. She would sit me down next to her on the bench and play the low opening chords in largo, imitating church bells as they guided the procession of a funeral march. When the tempo rose, she would pause, look up, raise her hands and imitate scratching at the casket as the dirt piled over it. In the final movement the chords slow again. He worked for hours, my Uncle Andrew said, heaving away at a pile of dense rock, trying to free his friend's lifeless body. In the end of the song, the recession of mourners each go their separate ways, and the church bells grow fainter.

Growing up, I never really understood the varying rituals around funerals. My first funeral, my great grandmother's, Gretel's, was an open casket. I wore a bright multicolored tie that resembled a stained glass window, which I had likely gotten as a hand-me-down from my brother's rec-league, basketball game day collection. I lined up for my opportunity to see her with my cousin-in-law, who to this day I have no memories with outside of this moment and watching him play a Nintendo 64. We didn't really know what to do when our turn came. That there was a difference between kneeling and praying was still unknown to us. "Should we touch her hand?" he said. "I guess so," I said. When I did, I said, "It's ice cold," which made him laugh, which made me laugh. My uncle scooped us from our knees and told us this was not a place for laughter. That and "nice tie" was about all I can remember my extended family saying to me that day. As was tradition in the Bronx, we followed the hearse past her home and later, through New York City traffic, to the cemetery. We watched as pallbearers lowered the heavy black coffin into the ground, where a crowd covered it near completely with white flowers.

"I'll know what to do next time," I remember thinking, but no funeral since has been the same. I've lit candles for friends, taped favorite colors on the back of lacrosse helmets, liked memorializing Facebook posts, scattered ashes on a favorite hike and listened to favorite songs in a local bar. My grandmother's ashes sat for years together with the metal pin from her hip replacement on her piano in a ceramic vase covered with an old breakfast bowl, as it had no lid of its own. When my grandpa died, her husband, we boxed their ashes separately and my brother lowered them each into the same grave. Even though he got on his stomach and reached down low into the hole to avoid tossing them, there was an anticlimactic overlap between this image and the recycling of an old cereal box. Still, I cried in a way that I couldn't have understood at my first funeral. I felt a heaviness from the sense of finality, the loss of an era, the thinning of generations above me that anchored my youth. It was a heaviness that yearned for large wooden boxes and long black cars.

My Uncle Andrew died at a time when everyone was beginning to understand the lockdown was indefinite. By then, new ways of saying goodbye had already fatigued: hospital bedside phone calls, candlelit Zoom vigils, sleeved plastic walls for hugging. There was no discussion around waiting for a funeral. Instead, my uncle and his wife, who lived together with Uncle Andrew in the Bronx house, were the only ones who could attend his burial. They texted a

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video from the dimly lit backseat as they tried to continue tradition, driving down Pelham Parkway, past their house and to the cemetery. The video has lagging double takes of masked neighbors waving goodbye from their porches, large pixels of golden yellow at the periphery suggesting the setting of the sun. “A lonely funeral,” I thought.

It wasn't until I finished my exam and began my clinical rotations that the reality of my uncle's death struck me. It was late in the winter and the Bronx house had just sold. I was in the Emergency Department on my Neurology rotation. A man had just been admitted with right-sided paralysis and global aphasia with a CT scan showing ischemia in the distribution of a massive left middle cerebral artery stroke. When MRI images came back, it was clear, to the neurology fellow if not to me, the patient's condition was beyond any medical or surgical intervention. The fellow, who wore a yellow gown and blue nitrile gloves, a surgical mask over an N95 and a face shield over his glasses, shared this update with a man in the hallway of the emergency department, the patient's son. “If I go home, will I be able to come back to see her?” The patient's son said. “Can my brother?” I hated that these were his first questions.

I always thought that one of the incredible things about medicine would be to bear witness to the resiliency of people, to walk with them as they face tragedy and move forward with their new lives. Now I am not so sure. In *The New York Times*, I read an article that said so many people had died during the pandemic that funeral homes were forced to forklift corpses into refrigerated trailers, that they were storing bodies in warehouses on a Brooklyn Pier. A photo of the pier shows unmasked people walking by as if this were nothing special. The other day, my mom told me the reason Uncle Andrew never wore shorts was to hide a scar from an accident in the coal mine. When the coal crushed his leg, he tied muddy rags around it to stop the bleeding and found a way to keep shoveling, else the soldiers would have shot him or withheld his rations. I always figured it was some quirky fashion statement of an old man. It's awful, really, the things we learn to overlook.

Now, in the emergency department, I watched as a man was losing his father, and he knew—his *first words* were—to ask permission whether he could leave and come back. He did so stoically, as if it were just another thing he had to do today. I stood in the corner of the room, donned in PPE still more valuable than my clinical acumen, wondering why it was me in the room, why his family was away and he was with me, why my family was scattered around the country while I was with him. I kept thinking of my Uncle, the pile of rocks and the man in the coal mine, each alone. I found myself failing to replay the memory with my Uncle's same overtones, as if I woke up in a reality where the piano as an instrument ceased to exist. With a surgical mask hiding my face, I realized I could let out a few dry sobs without being noticed. I could feel my breath get hotter, see the bottoms of my goggles fog, where through this pale smoke I could imagine the jerking outlines of a solitary workman's figure, the smell of sulfur, the endless emptying of wagonloads of dark rock.

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(NEWS foto by Tom Gallagher)

**Closing the Gap.** Andrew Klein, 32, is kissed by parents, Mr. and Mrs. John Klein of 1855 Bogart Ave., Bronx, at International Airport. They left him with kin in Romania 30 years ago on coming here, expecting to send for him. Circumstances kept him there.

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