

Portrait of a Bosnian Neighbor

March 2021

My first memories of learning math are ragged and threadbare. A cardboard times wheel, pencils thrown across the room in utter frustration, and my dad hopping around in a sixty-gallon garbage bag to demonstrate skip-counting are all the moments that remain. I bragged about the garbage bag incident to my neighbor. I sat under their homebuilt whitewashed pergola, my pudgy arms on an ocean-blue table of tile and cast iron. He fed me club soda in small glass bottles and supermarket mango juice cocktail. On a hanging bench he rocked, listening intently as I spewed my knowledge of evens and odds, the algae-infested rope squeaking rhythmically as he moved back and forth.

A few years after that encounter, he gave me a DVD titled “Home Improvement.” It contained a few episodes of a comedy show featuring a kooky handyman with a knack for overclocking his tools and causing general havoc. He lived next door to an eccentric Wilson, a master of double-entendres and heavy user of the phrase hidey-ho neighbor! Josenko and I adopted that phrase quickly after that, and it stuck for years and years, until I became a high school hermit and we stopped joking around, or seeing each other very often, for that matter.

A few weeks ago, I caught him on the driveway. Or, rather, he caught me. Through the row of carefully flattened shrubs that lined the asphalt, I saw him beckon. A ride-on lawn mower lay partially disassembled at his feet, the scuffed front cover pried open and the twin cylinder spark plugs exposed. In his hands was a ratchet wrench and in his eyes was a flicker of annoyance. He asked if I had a special spark plug wrench. As a matter of fact, I did. Over the summer, I changed the plugs and coils on our 2013 Tiguan, and I knew about the special type of socket that grabbed the bulbous metal tip, allowing an easy extraction.

I crossed over the grassy meridian that separated our two houses and deposited my payload. He fumbled with the larger tool at first. It didn’t seem to fit. He turned and walked into his garage, where a formidable set of tool drawers lay next to an even larger rack of shoes. The shoes were, to my confusion, of the exact same type. Stilettos, arranged neatly in pairs, balanced on twin rails of wood. The late afternoon sun caught some of them, and I saw that they shone in different colors, dull prune, polished amethyst, pacific blue.

During this ordeal, Josenko’s son pulled up in a Volkswagen beetle. Bespectacled, pale, and bearing a feeble attempt of a goatee, he held a piece of paper as it were a medical specimen, gripping it on the corner between his thumb and forefinger.

“Why are you so busy? I had to get Max to help.”

“Good.”

He flicked open the door, slipped inside, and the door clomped shut. Josenko had found what he was looking for, and he bent down on one knee, inserted my tool, and pushed down. With a metallic crack, the plug screw broke loose and started turning, its gunked threads making a disgruntled squealing noise. He turned to me.

“You drink coffee?”

We joke about our races openly. Him, a Slavic masculine who escaped the Bosnian genocide as a refugee, and me, a scrawny Chinese boy, the son of two immigrants. He sends us presents on Chinese New Year, filled with chocolate-covered banana marshmallows and once, on the Year of the Dog, a metal light-up dog. But unlike mom, I’m rather egalitarian when it comes to drinks.

“Yeah. Coffee. Tea. Anything.”

“Beer?”

“I’m eighteen.”

He pulled out the plug and inspected it. He had admitted, rather sheepishly, that he had not changed the oil on the mower and feared permanent damage to the plugs. The metal was charred but surprisingly intact. Producing a sheet of sandpaper, he scraped off the gunk.

“Not even a taste?”

“Nah. Don’t think I’d like it either”

He grunted in recognition. On many summer nights, Josenko would ask me to drag my dad out for a “lift.” Him, my dad, and the husband of a former english teacher would stand around an ornamental brick pillar and drink beers and talk like adults. Once, when I was too young to understand double-meanings, I asked if I could help with the “lift.” He had laughed in the shy way that he does, a low fading rumble, and told me that this lift was the kind only adults could do.

Satisfied with the job, Josenko screwed the plug back in and, with a meaty fist, coupled the plug wire with a loud thump. Suddenly, as if realizing something for the first time, he turned to me.

“You know, the world’s crazy.”

I nodded. Pro-masking and Anti-masking didn’t make sense to either of us. I, a scientist, tended to stick to the numbers. Him, a consultant who finds jobs for refugees, sticks to the soul. Two means to the same end. He smiled.

“Friend sent me news article recently.” He made a rectangle in the air, his thumbs and forefingers framing the corners, the wrench still in his left hand.

“Pfizer makes Viagra, and no one questions. Pfizer makes vaccine, everyone questions.”

He set down the wrench.

“I had a refugee, someone of my kind. One day he came to my office and said ‘I want Niagara’”

He had sat him down all businesslike and showed him the drive up Interstate 90 and Route 190 to the Canadian border. The man had shaken his head. No, no, he asserted. He wanted Niagara. Again, Josenko pointed at the map. And again, the man had rejected it, pantomiming a little pill.

While he talked, he was clipping the hood back in place and easing the mower off its brick risers. As he got to the punchline, he stopped and looked at me.

“He wanted Viagra.”

We both laughed. With the oil replaced and both spark plugs checked, it was time to start the metal contraption. He made a lighthearted cross gesture, touching his sooty hands first to his forehead, then his chest and two shoulders. His elongated face, riddled with perpetual furrows and a sort of roughness, bore a constant gravity. So, he looked like some crazy rocket scientist mounting his creation for the first time.

The key turned, and the starter motor crank-crank-cranked in a continuous cycle, its high-pitched roar removing any possibility of commentary. He turned the key back. Pondered for a few seconds. Then, with mathematical precision, turned the key again. The motor whined, but this time it was combined with the dull thumping of the twin cylinder engine consuming fuel and misfiring in its first few stokes. A few seconds later, the whole beast roared to life, spewing black smoke.

When I went home later, the spark plug extractor in my pocket, he was making his rounds in the backyard on the mower. Behind his spring-cushioned seat was an old license plate that he nailed on for fun. Almost exactly one year ago, he had approached me as I was raking a patch of dirt. Speaking in the deadpan, tongue-in-cheek way that he does so often, he warned me never to buy a real house. The work was never worth it; the constant weeding, seeding, cutting, fixing. But I knew he was joking, because he knew, and I knew that he knew, that these things were what kept us sane. A wrench, a hammer, and a rake against the wild, wild world.