

## The Regency Era

After four months without a phone call or letter, our Uncle returned to Portland late Christmas Eve with a cocktail waitress he had covered head to toe in fresh mud. He'd done the same to himself except he'd added a humble sash of maple leaves and was also wearing a helmet made of twigs, and possibly bird shit, and a child's cape. Mom screamed until Grandpa fixed her a drink. Dad took pictures on his vintage camera, all the while insisting that yes, darling, goddammit, the carpet could be salvaged.

"I'm back, kids. I'm back from fighting in the troll wars. I began as an anonymous soldier of fortune and now I'm the King's chief military advisor."

"What does that mean?" my sister asked.

"It means I hold very high office, and that I drink champagne and eat caviar. Women are brought to my bedchamber at night. Most of them are fantastic lays but can't even play a decent game of checkers. But this one, she's gonna be my wife."

No one remembers the girl's name anymore. She stayed two nights, then was 'disappeared' by Grandma with 200 dollars cash and a train ticket to Seattle.

According to our Uncle, the troll kingdom could be found through the crawl space under Grandpa's house. And that's where he admitted to having been for the last four months, soldiering for the armies of a mythical king in a mythical land under a very real easement of unincorporated Oregon hill country.

"Why were you fighting?"

"Trolls are covetous of human women and goat meat. Now, the term 'genocide' has been used by my more liberal enemies at court, in a uniformly reckless fashion, mind you. For the record, we tried to put their children in re-education camps but there

was a drought, the treasury ran out of money and you can imagine the rest. In the final analysis, it was cheaper to put them all to death, except for the baker's dozen we saved for science and the traveling circus.”

We sat there at the kitchen table for three hours while he made us peanut butter and banana sandwiches and continued to analyze his role in an underreported subterranean ethnic cleansing. Then we played Monopoly with extra money and an absurdly low APR until it was time to clear the table for dinner. Before the meal, he'd let my sister choose a beer for him from Dad's garage refrigerator and afterwards I got to pour him a tumbler of scotch and bring his cigarettes to him in the backyard, where he pointed out various constellations.

“That's Narwhal the Giant Fish God. He mates in the Pacific. That's why it's warmer than the Atlantic. It takes a lot of bulls and cows - he's bisexual you see - to satisfy him, at least a hundred alone to fellate him from stem to stern.”

My Uncle enjoyed using words I didn't know. He stayed with us for the rest of the winter and most of the spring and summer until his arrest. Grandpa gave him a per diem for cigarettes and whiskey and used paperback novels. He helped with the gutters and with tearing out the old fiberglass insulation which he made into dolls and left at the playground since he hated *other* children. He cooked with Grandma, chopped vegetables with her, diced the five or six onions she required daily, minced garlic, and gutted fish he caught illegally on the banks of the Columbia River. I imagine him standing there giddy in the face of approaching storm clouds, plotting the whereabouts and editrix of his next hand job while waiting for the line to go taut.

During spring break, he took what my mother called an unhealthy interest in our education. He said our creative faculties were being neglected by a totalitarian school board. A few days later he threatened our principal at the weekly farmers market, reaching into Mr. Breckenridge's cart and squeezing an aubergine until it exploded in lumps over a box of resilient kale from the high desert. To fill the creative void, our Uncle said we should start a family band, until he actually heard us sing and then he dismissed the idea angrily, leaving the house to stumble around the neighborhood and curse God for placing him in the same genus as such pitchy, untalented children.

He was clearly a very disturbed man, but also incredibly decent at times. He always took us to the water park when we asked him. But not before a trip to the library, where he'd waltz among the stacks picking our summer reading list - Dostoevsky for a nine and ten year old did not strike him as particularly odd. He was convinced we were as dark and brooding as he was, in spite of our pastel swimsuits and translucent water guns. At the checkout counter he'd flirt with some girl who was studying library sciences at Portland State and she'd join us later at McMenam's Pub. My sister and I would drink orange sodas and my Uncle and Suzanne would guzzle beer and he'd goad her into several shots of Irish whiskey. Then he'd deposit us on the front step, not even waiting for Mom to come to the door, and speed off with Suzanne in the navigator's seat. His receipts said they'd gone gambling up north in the Great Indian country, land of snow crab salad and bottomless mimosas, regret and quarantine, land of pilfered hotel 2 in 1 shampoo conditioner, land, invariably, of Suzanne, Carole, Alice, Parviny, Wei Ling having to pawn jewelry or wire in cash to cover my Uncle's debts with whatever

unsavory, bookmaking characters he'd encountered in the parking lot at 3 am. He always returned home in a more cheerful mood.

That summer, when school finally let out and our bed times were extended by an act of Parliament, our Uncle would serve faithfully as custodian of lightning bugs. And he was an excellent penitent slaver when we fought the English on the Spanish galleon that was our pre-fabricated play structure. Sadly, in spite of being a good zookeeper and an excellent fixer for forbidden items, like candy straws and R-rated movies, they came for him one hot July day while he was making fireworks in Grandpa's garage. For a brief moment in time it seemed like he was the most wanted man in Clackamas County. First Child Protective Services arrived sheepishly, skeptically really, to verify impossible reports of a madman leaving fiberglass dolls for children at the playground. Then, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife intruded and produced dozens of transcribed eyewitness accounts of a shirtless Christ figure offering to gut fish and perform circumcisions in the Columbia River Gorge; all this he allegedly did while fishing without a license. And finally, the regular police descended on the scene, by now a hot, overcrowded garage, teeming with curious children and bureaucrats, to arrest him on the simple charge of assault. Apparently, our Uncle had paid Principal Breckenridge a visit at home and broken his jaw in two places.

Obviously, he served some jail time. He wrote to us, in his curiously neat handwriting:

*Dear Gavin and Fiona,*

*I have been imprisoned attempting to improve your lives. It is not the first time I have served as vanguard. Though I am not presently around, I expect that you are*

*both reading the novels I have chosen for you. While I trust you implicitly, each of you is required to send me a brief analysis by the end of this month, before you resume school, about 4-5 pages, typed, double spaced, 12 point font. Generally speaking, MLA conventions should be observed. Check my bookshelf in Grandpa's study for the 7th Edition Handbook, next to the Playboys and my archived racing forms. This analysis should not be an explication of plot, but rather a commentary on the major themes of the respective novels I have assigned. Consider asking your mother for help since she isn't up to much. Perhaps it will take her mind off the controversy her "lunatic brother's" arrest has undoubtedly stirred in the neighborhood.*

*Alternatively, if you object to writing the analysis, and would prefer to do a creative response to The Idiot or Notes from Underground, send me a typewritten proposal of 1-2 pages.*

*In dealing with Breckenridge the Soothsayer and False Witness, tread lightly, be sycophantic, express humility and regret for my 'wrongdoings.' Do not attempt to avenge me, although you undoubtedly mean to in your little triumphant hearts. Of pure gold.*

*Love,*

*The Uncle Underground*

We never wrote those essays or consulted the MLA handbook, because our renaissance childhood, or whatever it was, ended the day our regent was led away laughing, hands and face covered in a fine sulfurous dust. And other things were happening, too. Fiona had to go shopping for training bras. Six months later, I took a circuitous, forested route to Grandpa's house, wind rubbing my tendril the whole way, to

steal our Uncle's Playboy Magazines and pore over his staggering losses at Portland Meadows. On a routine trip to the town center to buy clementines and formula for the baby, Mom dropped off the Dostoevskys at the library, where Suzanne gave her a look, and all was forgotten. Through Grandma mostly, we heard occasional reports about our Uncle's whereabouts. He had moved East to complete a master's degree.

When we were teenagers, we went to stay with him while visiting prospective colleges in New England. He had a nice condo in a good neighborhood with cobblestone streets and a martini bar at the end of the block. Neither of us recognized him. Gone was the amazing beard he cultivated to hide his double chin. He was slimmer now, sans jolly, pre-diabetic gut, thanks largely, he tells us, to a hybrid elliptical/bike machine he had purchased from Sky Mall while on a business trip to Cedar Rapids. He spent most of dinner congratulating himself for the meal he had prepared, yellow squash julienned to resemble pasta and tossed in olive oil and Parmesan cheese.

"It tastes just like spaghetti, but you don't get all the carbohydrates."

After dinner rather than having a scotch and a cigarette (he also refrained from drinking beer beforehand), he made himself a cup of tea and told us about life as an actuary. I thought he would finally embellish a little. *Well, kids, I use my degree in computational physics to assess the likelihood that a team of Australian treasure hunters, led by a buxom, blonde Oxford graduate, will discover Atlantis. Then, I relay this information to an anonymous billionaire who wants to corner the market in large scale excavation machinery and start a world war.*

Nothing of the sort. Instead, he went on about organic fertilizer and crop diversification. In fact, I'm not sure it happened at all. A calm, rational dinner with my

Uncle, a meal exempt from diatribe, a meal that did not double as an opportunity to plot against Mom or teach some new form of gambling, or provide further elucidation in the field of Indo-Welsh astrology, is too fantastical to believe.

What's more likely, and I consider this sincerely, is that the man we met in Providence was an impostor, hired by our Uncle to imitate him and convince Grandpa and Grandma that their only son, shouter of frequent claims to their Roth IRAs, had finally gone straight. But the truth is that he's down there somewhere, a mercenary turned courtier, drifter turned viceroy and warrior poet. Far below the expandable clay soil beneath Grandpa's house, the foundation of which is a rent firmament for a kingdom of irretrievable magic, my Uncle is finally, finally, father of a nation.