

# MEMORIES OF THE FUTURE

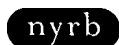
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## THE THIRTEENTH CATEGORY OF REASON

THAT'S HOW it always is: first you call on your friends, and then—when the hearses have delivered them—on their graves. Now my turn too has come to exchange people for graves. The cemetery where I go more and more often lies behind high crenelated walls and looks from the outside like a fortress: only when the fighters have all fallen will the gates open. You walk in—first past a chaos of crosses, then past the inner wall—to the new crossless cemetery: gone are the monumental statics of the old human sepulchers, the massive family vaults and stone angels with their penguin-like wings grazing the earth: red metal stars on thin wire stems fidget nervously in the wind.

It's early spring and the earth clings to my boots, gently retaining me: stay longer, if not forever. This is my fourth time meeting him: the slow squelch of his spade as he digs out the dense and difficult earth—the old gravedigger. First he's visible from the waist up, then from the shoulders, a little more, and his head will vanish into the upturned clay. But I come closer, dodging the lobs off his rhythmically ringing spade, and say, "Good day!"

"Well, all right, good day." He surveys me from his pit.

One circumstance draws me to this old man: he is clearly out of his head and lives inside an apperceptive tangle whose knots Kant himself could not untie. For you see, all those who are off (I won't look for another definition) or, rather, out of their heads, evicted, so to speak, from all twelve Kantian categories of reason, must naturally seek refuge in a thirteenth category, a sort of logical

lean-to slouched against objective obligatory thinking. Given that this thirteenth category of reason is where we entertain, in essence, all our figments and alogisms, the old gravedigger may be useful to my projected cycle of "fantastic" stories.

So then, I propose a smoke, and he reaches up a sweaty hand for a cigarette; I squat down, light to light—and the thirteenth category of reason throws wide for me its secret door.

"What's that alley over there, under the poplars?"

The old man squints at the column of trees and says, "Actors' Row. When it warms up, the young ladies'll come with their keepsakes, and heaps of flowers, and read aloud to one another from little books: not grand-like, but with respect."

"And over there?" I cast an eye farther down the wall.

"That's for penmen: 'Writers' Impasse,' they call it."

The old gravedigger wants to go into greater detail, but I interrupt and shift my gaze to the joint of two walls: the graves there are shielded by a long crenellated shadow, the rust-yellow mounds interspersed with odd patches of unmelted snow.

"Speakers' Corner," the voice from the pit explains. "Best keep away from there at night."

"Why?"

"Mighty restless. Speakers, you know: soon as it begins to get dark, they all start talking at once. Sometimes you walk past that corner of theirs and the ground's just whispering away. Best keep your distance."

"I guess it's true what they say about you, old man: you're out of your head. Who's ever seen a buried man start to whisper?"

"I'm not talking about seeing," the old man balks, "I'm talking about hearing, and it's so. Something happened just the other day. They were burying the deputy chairman of some... right here, in Speakers' Corner, down the end on the left. Got another cigarette? A red coffin, more wreaths than you could count, and slews of people. A great speaker, so they said. Well now, they lowered the coffin into the pit, pulled up the ropes, and launched

into the usual speeches. They went on and on, and then we, that's me and Mitka (my helper), we fetched our spades. I spat on my palms—and suddenly, what do you know: from under the lid: 'May I have the floor. Having heard out the previous...' But then—oh my Lord!—them previous ones, and all the rest, they took to their heels. Even Mitka, the fool, threw down his shovel and turned tail. I looked about me: nothing but two or three galoshes sticking up out of the snow and some forgetful body's briefcase swinging from a crosspiece. But that deputy chairman—he couldn't see anything, of course, being in a pit and under a lid—he was talking a mile a minute: 'Citizens and comrades, don't bury me in the next world—whatever happens, when the trumpets of judgment sound I'll pull the lid to and refuse to be recalled; as a recaller, I'll...'—is that a real word, or did I dream it? I'm not educated—"

"It's a real word. Now go on."

"Go on? Not likely! He wanted to go on, but I was so nettled I grabbed my spade and without waiting for Mitka I buried that driveler and his speech in one swoop. Only imagine how restless people have become. Have you ever heard of such a thing happening before?"

"Oh, grandfather, neither before nor not before. You're raving. You should see a doctor. Have you been to the local clinic?"

"The earth will cure me, son. I don't have much longer to live. But if you don't believe me, come on and I'll show you the grave."

Setting aside his shovel, the old man starts to hoist himself out of the pit by his elbows, but I restrain him.

"Oh, all right, I believe you, I do."

"There now"—reassured, he goes on with his tangled tales. "Now that one who swallowed the good earth from my shovel, he shut up. But with another of them undecedents, I had an awful wrangle. I live out that way, just beyond the gates—the hut with two windows by the wasteland. The hearses, they all go past me, one after another. One day about dusk I had lit my night

lamp and set down to the table to have my supper when suddenly I heard a sound at the door: knock. 'Who could it be?' I wondered. I went to the door and hallooed, and again I heard it: knock. I undid the latch and peered out. Well now, I've seen a lot of them, so I knew right away who it was: he was standing there, arms all rigid and pressed to his chest, tall and yellow. 'You keep away!' I says. 'Where'd you come from?' 'From a hearse,' he says. 'I saw your light. Let me in.'

"Well,' I thinks, 'Not likely!' I barred the way with my arm: 'It's not right: dropping dead then dropping in—besides, they'll catch on to the fact they're burying nothing. How'd you manage it?' 'Well,' he says, 'as soon as we began to bump over the pot-holes, the lid slid sideways—and through the crack a light winked at me: my last light, I thought, my last. I looked back: some were lagging behind and straggling (it's a long way to your cemetery, grandfather), others were still trudging along, but with their eyes on the ground because of all the puddles. I gave the lid a shove then closed it again and quietly... Let me in, grandfather.' 'But what if you're not in time,' I says, 'what if you don't make it to your funeral?' 'I'll make it, the hearse can barely turn its wheels, don't refuse me this last light before the eternal darkness.' He pleaded with me so, I begun to feel sorry for him. 'Come in,' I says, 'only make it quick—then into the pit.'

"I went over to the night lamp. He followed me with his arms still crossed and bent his waxy face to the light. Then he says: 'Feel behind my lashes, grandfather: my eyes have turned glassy. I may get lost and not be able to find my coffin. Oh, it's time, my hour has come. It's time.' And he left the way he came: through the open door. I watched him out of sight: everything was hazy in the dusk and the bells had tolled. 'Will he make it,' I wondered, 'or won't he?'

"It grew dark. I re-latched the door. Then I said my prayers, got into bed, and was about to blow out the night lamp when again I heard a sound at the door: a rustling. 'Oh no, not at this hour of the night.' But there was no help for it—I opened the

door. 'Didn't make it?' 'Didn't make it,' he says. 'By the time I got there they were smoothing my grave over with their shovels.' 'It's not right,' I thought, 'but the office is closed, have to wait till morning.'

"Now don't stand there like that letting all the cold air in,' I says, 'be my uninvited guest, never mind, you can sleep in the passage by the wall: it's a bit tight, but don't judge it too harshly, a coffin's tighter still.' I threw him some matting. And we went to bed. I woke up around midnight—maybe I'd dreamed it all?—I wanted to turn over, but just then I got a whiff of something rotten. 'Oho,' I thinks, 'dreams won't protect you from that.' I lit the night lamp—couldn't fall back to sleep anyway on account of my uninvited guest—and I went out into the passage. 'You all right?' 'Fine, thanks,' he heaved a sigh, and was silent. 'Did they read the Gospel over you,' I asks. 'No.' 'There now,' I opened the book and begun to read the best I knew how. I could see he was listening, he was, but then he says, 'It's moving, grandfather, but it misses the truth.' Now that got my goat. 'Now look here,' I says, 'the decedent is supposed to lie still—and not bat an eye or move a muscle, but you keep on, like a cuckoo in the nest. You don't know your place.' He fell silent and didn't stir. Next thing I knew it was morning. 'Well, get up,' I says, 'let's go and be buried.' 'I can't move; I'm stiff.' 'Come on now, get up. You got yourself into this mess, you get yourself out: no use complaining.' I pulled him by his arms and shoulders—and finally he moved; rigid and ice-cold, he got up and staggered after me on legs like stilts: click-click.

"We walked into the office. 'Missed the boat,' I says, but the clerks they begun laughing and accusing me, just like you: 'You're out of your head, grandpa.' They told us both to get lost. 'Oh, what a lazybones!' they winked at each other. 'Wants to hire himself out as a dead man. Go back where you came from!'

"'Where did you come from?'—Soon as I got him out the gates, I asked. 'Krivokolenny Lane, apartment 39, my house is number . . .' I took him by his crossed arms and bundled him onto

a tram and the other passengers, they pitched in: 'Citizens, move up!' 'Make way, citizens!' Alive or dead, they didn't care. Then I got on and whispered in someone's ear, 'Won't you give up your seat to this nice decedent?' The ear leapt aside. I bent my uninvited's knees (now stiffer still), pushed his back against the bench, and the tram lurched off. Well, we crawled and we crawled and finally we came to Krivokolenny. Stairs. 'I can't,' he says, 'let them come down and carry me up.' I could see how hard it was for him. So I leaned him against a wall, and went up myself—from number to number: 39. I rang the bell—the door opened. 'You didn't finish burying one of your tenants,' I says, 'take him back.' 'What tenant? From where?' 'You know from where: from the cemetery. I barely got him here; he's waiting downstairs.' Oh, how they screamed at me, all ten of them at once: 'He's drunk! Can't you see he's out of his head?' (Like you just now.) 'Call the Antireligious Commission, they'll put him where he belongs! Here we are, already packed in like sardines, with a dead man at our door! Get out, you flimflammer, before we break both your legs!'

"There was no help for it. The hell with them. I went back down to my vagabond and tapped him on the shoulder. 'Let's go on,' I says. And he—slack-jawed and white-eyed—he whispers, quiet as quiet, 'Maybe this is my soul going through its trials?' 'Don't be silly,' I says, 'your trials are still ahead of you, waiting under a cross. This here is what they call life...'

"Well, it's a long story. Next day I hauled him back onto the number 17 tram, and off we went; a hearse would have done better, but where were we to find one? As we were getting off at Teatralnaya, the people behind us begun to shove and shout: 'Get off, will you!' 'You're holding everyone up!' 'The man moves like a corpse!' I turned around and I said, 'Right you are, because he is a corpse.' Again they begun shouting and elbowing me in the back: 'And now you!' 'Get off this tram, you so-and-so!' Well, I understand, people are busy and rushing about with their absent eyes, what do they care that a person hasn't been properly buried?

"I struggled along with my unlucky-come-lately—hugging

one wall then another—all the way to the employment office. There, in Rakhmanny Lane, it got easier: I stood him in line—when the person ahead gave way, the person behind pushed—and saw things were looking up. I poked his certificate between his fingers and said to myself, ‘Think I’ll run out for some tobacco and then look up an acquaintance nearby, he may have some advice.’ And off I went. Well that acquaintance, he told me: ‘Listen,’ he says, ‘you better get rid of your stiff because this kind of thing hasn’t been *decrimiligaturitized*.’ (That’s what he said.) And that word—*decrim*... can’t even pronounce it a second time—I tell you, it gave me the heebie-jeebies. Wasn’t scared before, but now...

“As I dragged myself back—along Rakhmanny—I just hoped his certificate would do the trick. I begun looking for him among the backs behind backs behind backs, all so rigid and stock-still you couldn’t tell which was dead and which was alive. I climbed the steps, went inside, and there he was jammed up against the wall with his head stuck fast in the window: couldn’t budge. So I went up to the window—the clerk, he was fuming: ‘What are you, citizen, deaf and dumb? That’s the wrong certificate, we can’t register you. Stop holding everyone up! Next!’ I yanked my laggard out by the elbows, my old arms could barely support him—he’d gotten so heavy with wanting to pitch over—and then people begun to talk: ‘They didn’t register him? Why? What certificate? Show us!’ I showed ’em. ‘Good people,’ I says, ‘what is this? He’s got his death certificate, and suddenly they won’t register him. Now if it was irregular, that I could... but this one’s got a number, and a stamp, and everything. How can that be?’ Straightaway we had, you know, acres of elbow room.

“So back I went with my graveless good-for-nothing out into the hurly-burly and the hubbub: motorcars hooting on all sides, people rushing this way and that, briefcases banging into briefcases, eyes absent. In my anger, I gave the thing up as hopeless—that acquaintance’s ‘*regrim*...’ Drat! I still can’t pronounce it.”

“*Recrimiligaturitized*,” I prompted.



"That's it . . . that '*turitized*' had shook me up. 'Goodbye, Un-invited,' I says. But by now he couldn't open his mouth. Then a wave of people swept us up and tumbled us apart—him to one side, me to another—and I saw my come-lately go bobbing off like a bubble in the gutter, being carried farther and farther away by the crowding crowds. I took my cap off and I crossed myself: God rest his soul. Amen.

"After that, anytime I chanced to be in town, any man I met, I stared: might he be my graveless wanderer? But I never did see him again, fate willed otherwise. Don't suppose you ever came across him?"

For a minute we are both silent. Then we have a smoke. And the old man takes up his spade.

"But that's nothing out of the ordinary. Whereas once I . . ."

Just then the bells in the tower above the gate gave a shudder and from behind the wall there wafted, like a draft, a length of quavery choir song. The old man's back dove down into the pit—and over the smack of his shovel and clods of clay upon clay, I heard: "You got me talking and now the grave's not ready. Things go awry like that: first you have a pit with no departed, then you have a departed with no pit. Now step back, else the earth'll hit you."

I turned toward the way out. One set of gates, then another. Under the stone archway in between, I stepped aside to let the procession pass. And walking out of the gates, I thought: Leonardo was right in saying that one can sometimes learn more from water stains than from the creations of a master.