

Art Studio For Working Class Ghosts

I'm not the kind of person who thinks I know what happens to us when we die. If we get a vote on what happens, I think I'd like to open a studio for Vera and Jerry.

My Great Aunt Vera and my Great Grandpa Jerry lived in New York at the same time, but never met. It sounds like an astounding coincidence, that two branches of my family started in the same place, separated, and met in the middle again to make me, but that's the sentimental version of the story. The real story goes that every Irish family came through Ellis Island in the early 1900s, so almost every Meghan or Patrick or Heather-Ann you know probably crossed paths with Vera or Jerry at some point. Once there, everyone had the choice whether to put down roots in New York or move further west. Jerry ran from New York with his mother when he was only 12, after his dad was killed by a police officer during a worker's demonstration labeled riot. Vera, on the other hand, lived in New York her whole life. While other immigrant families were fighting and dying in the streets for a chance at steady jobs, Vera was living the dream. She had one of the most glamorous jobs available to working class girls. When she was just a teenager she was hired to paint the numbers on clocks and wrist washes with glowing paint. It paid more than most assembly line work, and maybe more importantly to Vera, it was painting. My great grandma Elenora told my grandma (who told me) that they were all saving their wages to send Vera to art school one day. My grandma still has some of Vera's sketches; smooth, fluid drawings of blushing women in wedding dresses. Vera never wore a wedding dress herself. She died when she was 19.

The glowing paint was made with radium salts. It wasn't enough radiation to hurt anyone who bought a watch or a clock, but Vera sat at that assembly line everyday. Everyday she straightened her paintbrush between her lips, swallowing just a little radium each time. She wasn't the last teenager in that factory to die, but they were just girls, and the factory continued

with business as unusual for the next several decades. Eventually there was a string of lawsuits (google “radium girls”) and radium dial factories slowly and unrepentantly died out across the country. The land where they stood is still radioactive.

Jerry never swallowed any radium as far as I know, but once on a school trip he was kicked into a fence by a justifiably angry bull he tried to milk. This blunder did not deter the stockyard from hiring him as soon as he dropped out of school. These days livestock are slaughtered using an array of tools that make it quick and painless, but in 1920s Chicago this sort of thing was just done with a hammer. ‘Hammer Duty’ wasn’t glamorous, but it prepared Jerry for the next faze of his life. He escaped the stockyard into the burly arms of the Chicago police force, where he performed similar work to that witch had killed his father. Jerry was eventually retired from the police force for, according to records, soliciting a bribe from a priest. The truth is unclear, and my dad has always been vague when talking about his grandpa’s life. Weather this is out of respect for the departed, a failing memory, or just a sense of theatrics I’ll never know. The things my dad are certain of about his grandpa Jerry are as follows:

1. He was missing three fingers. After the police force washed their hands of him Jerry worked at a factory that handled heavy machinery, and one day he got his hand stuck in one. The details of how and why are muddy. Apparently the pension you got for being injured on the job was more than if you just retired, and maybe he had the idea himself, or maybe his ‘friends’ who got him kicked out of the police force gave him the idea, but that's just conjecture.
2. He was determined to drink and smoke himself to death. Even in his last few years, when his wife knew that every sip was taking another year off his life and banned him from the liquor cabinet. He would tell my dad, not old enough to drink yet himself, to wait until grandma wasn't looking and then go fix him a 7 and 7 (seven up and Seagram's Seven Crown whiskey). Maybe he thought he was just setting the world right. The riots in New

York didn't manage to get him, and that bull didn't kick him hard enough either. The streets of prohibition Chicago narrowly missed him, and he got pulled out of that machine just in time. Maybe he thought that if no one has the good sense to poison you with radium then it's your duty to do it yourself. Then again, that's just conjecture.

3. He painted that clown on the wall. Hanging on the wall of my childhood home is the saddest clown I have ever seen. The painting has an intense face in full make-up against a stark black background. It was a paint-by-numbers, presumably done with Jerry's 'other' hand. He didn't quite keep the paint in the numbers and the clown ended up much sadder than it was meant to be. Don't we all? Still, that's just conjecture.
4. He never asked for forgiveness. Not from the cows. Not from the people he treated like cows. Not from his wife as she begged him not to kill himself. He was a broken kid who grew into a broken man and broke others so he could burn the pieces to keep himself warm. He knew what he was. Maybe it was a blessing that Vera died young and kind, still dreaming of that art school that was bound to be taken from her anyway. That's just conjecture.

If you asked me to show you these people I never met, I would walk past Jerry's black and white wedding photo hanging on the wall of my parent's house. You won't see Jerry in that scratchy, borrowed tux. If you squint, you might be able to see his face on a matte black background, under colorful makeup. You won't find Vera in the warm sepia photograph my grandma sent me, posed in her one good pair of clothes, radiating discomfort and gamma. You'll see her better in those soft sketches of brides that almost look like they're moving.

If there's an existence after this one I'm going to open a studio there. I'm going to fill it with easels and oil paints and watercolors. I'm going to hang filthy, used smocks up by the door before I open them. I'll know they're coming by Vera's warm green glow in the distance, and that's when I'll start to set up the projector at the front of the room. They'll walk in arm and arm,

Jerry and Vera, followed by all their friends. They'll find their easels (I'll be sure to put a cup of water by Vera's to straighten her brush with) and settle in for eternity. I'll project images on the wall of things they never saw when they were alive: Plants in other countries, mountain ranges, the faces of people they never met. We would all laugh together while we painted, and some of the paintings would come out rough and sloppy, but some of them would be more beautiful than anything anyone has painted on earth. More importantly, there would be more of them. More paintings than anyone living has ever had the time or energy to paint. When we get tired of that, we'll move on to sculptures and pottery. Then metal work, then collages. When we've run out of paper and clay we'll move on to guitars and tambourines and tap dancing. If there's a life after this one, I'm filling an art studio with working class ghosts, and we're going to plaster every inch of the afterlife with our paintings and sketches and crayon drawings like 7 year olds covering a refrigerator that never runs out of magnets. We'll fill infinite space with our voices and scorch holy ground with our footsteps.

It occurred to me while I was writing this, while I was imagining setting up easels and cleaning paint brushes and hanging flyers up on the pearly gates inviting everyone to cubism/martini night, that I can't conceive of an existence for myself where there isn't work to be done. Even if it's good work. Even if I'm dead.

There must be something in my blood.