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Part 1: Sight Grows Dim

“I see it as my duty to stimulate reflection on what is essentially human and eternal in each individual soul, and which all too often a person will pass by, even though his fate lies in his hands. He is too busy chasing after phantoms and bowing down to idols.”

– Andrei Tarkovsky

I felt nothing. I wanted so desperately to feel something, but I couldn't. I stared outside the window of my living room, my breath fogging the scratched glass. Dark clouds loomed outside. I couldn't see them, but I could feel them. They filled my soul with grey feelings. My house was dark. Rain droplets collected on the windows. The quiet gathered around me. I was alone with nothing to do, and I didn't feel like doing anything anyway. A miserable, lonely summer day – not the way I expected my summer to end up. Now, the past few months, the bright summer sun, the moody nights with friends, messing around on my old elementary school playground, the spontaneous joyrides through the forested southern suburbs, felt like just a dream. A phantom of reality. This terrible weather was true reality. This loneliness. This silence.

Nostalghia is the second to last film of acclaimed Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky's career. His previous film, *Stalker*, infamous for its toxic shooting locations near a chemical plant in Estonia, would claim the life of the director six years later in December of 1986. He would die just months after the release of his final film, *The Sacrifice*. Cancer of the right bronchial tube.

The exact type of cancer that would kill many others from the cast and crew of *Stalker*.

Nostalghia is nestled between these two legendary pictures, and it is notably quieter, more uneventful. The most shocking scene of the film depicts a man, standing on a scaffold structure atop the equestrian statue of Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. He shouts Italian to the crowd,

giving a passionate speech. “The eyes of all mankind are looking at the pit into which we are plunging,” he says. Or, at least, that’s what the subtitles tell me he says. The camera intermittently cuts to the crowd. Long, slow, droning pans that move across the street, showing the various cityfolk – they all stand still, silent, watching the man on the statue. As he finishes his speech, another man climbs up the scaffold and hands him a large tin canister. He takes the canister and holds it in his arms. “Oh mother. The air is that light thing that moves around your head and becomes clearer when you laugh,” he utters, before pouring the canister of liquid onto his body, making sure to cover his black coat. Then the man takes a lighter out from his pocket and flicks it on. He brings it to his chest. Flames. Beethoven’s Symphony No.9 plays loudly, distorted and first and then beautifully clear. The man falls to the ground, writhing in pain. The music stops suddenly, and you hear only the man’s screams before he dies. The audience continues to stand still, silent.

That entire week felt as though it was one long, rainy day. Each day, each moment, melded into the next. I walked outside one morning and cried. That felt cathartic. I tried to cry a lot that week and had failed, but as I stepped outside for the first time in a few days, I finally cried. My catharsis turned quickly to anger as my nose began to bleed, and I had to return back into the confines of my home to get a tissue. I was not allowed to cry, not yet. After the bleeding stopped, I went outside again to take a walk around my neighborhood, which is essentially one big circle in a forested area on the side of the highway. I always liked how secure it felt there, like my own little world separate from everything else. I walked across the rough old pavement past the houses of neighbors I didn’t know the names or faces of. Past the tall, skinny pines that shielded my lonely road. Everything around me lingered in ghastly stillness, except for my

thoughts, my swirl of emotions that wouldn't come out. The trees, the houses, the clouds – still, silent.

Near the end of the film, there is a nearly 9-minute-long continuous shot of the main character, Andrei (named after the director), walking across an empty mineral pool holding a candle. He starts on one end of the old, Italian, stone pool, and walks to the other side, his pace slow, the camera gracefully following him, as he attempts to keep the candle lit. He fails multiple times, each time returning to the start, lighting the candle again, and retrying. The scene has no music, and barely any sound aside from Andrei's footsteps. Eventually, Andrei's candle stays lit as he gets closer and closer to the wall. The camera begins to move inwards, focusing on Andrei's hands holding the candle as he approaches the end of the pool. He cups the candle with his left hand, protecting it from the air that may extinguish its flame at any moment. He lowers the still-lit candle, careful not to let the flame go out, onto a narrow ledge on the wall. Then, with his mission complete, he groans, and collapses to the ground offscreen.

Before this scene, about halfway through watching the film, my nose began to bleed. In frustration, I paused the film and went to grab a tissue. The bleeding was nonstop. Each tissue I used would be soaked in blood after just a minute or so of use. I started to get it under control after around 20 minutes, with a resilient wad of tissue stuffed up into my right nostril. I could feel the blood in my throat. I wanted to gag. My nose had been bleeding a lot that week, but this was the worst incident yet. This *event* happened to coincide exactly with a scene of the main character getting a spontaneous bloody nose in a hallway after arguing with his love-interest. "What's going on?" asks a random woman who walks through the hallway with a dog. "Nothing, nothing." Andrei replies, tilting his head back and wiping the blood away with a tissue.

In the film, Andrei, played by Oleg Yankovsky, is a Russian writer and poet staying in Italy. The narrative centers around his alienation from the world around him as he longs to return to his homeland, hence the title, *Nostalgia*. He's forever stuck, between the world he knows and the world he now belongs to, as he creeps ever closer to death, carrying his candle. I began to feel a connection to him, as I sat on the old, red sofa chair in my house's basement, eyes fixated on the dim screen. Maybe it was because we both got a bloody nose at the same time, or maybe it was because I felt as though I carried my own candle, that I still do, and that my flame had extinguished. I was on the walk back to the start of the pool, until I would have to turn around, and walk forward again.

The camera watches Andrei as he wades through knee-deep water within a catacomb-like building; the walls covered in overgrown foliage and dark weathering. He turns around to see a young girl. She sits on a chair atop an entrance above the water. Andrei questions the girl. He asks her, "Are you happy?"

"About what?" the girl responds.

"About life," he says.

"Yes," she replies, the camera zooming in on her.

The sound of the water echoing throughout the old, ruined building stops as a narrator begins to recite a poem. "Sight grows dim..." it starts. The camera continues moving steady and slow towards the girl, who sits cross-legged, calm and at peace. "Like a candle I wasted away..." it goes on. The poem is very long, and it meant nothing to me when I heard it. It still doesn't. It's an obscure poem in Russian translated into English. But just like Tarkovsky's films – distant, obscure, from a different time, in a different language – I *felt* something, still. Through the silence of his camera, of his world, of his meanings, I saw myself.

“Feelings unspoken are unforgettable,” Andrei tells the girl.

I couldn’t make sense of things – of the weather, of the silence, of the past few months. But it was there. It was hard to see. It was quiet. Dim like a grey cloud, like a film screen. What was I to make of it all? “Gather up at dawn my melted wax and read in it whom to mourn...” No longer was I living in memories, young nights, where the rising sun felt further than death. “No longer when night falls do two wings gleam behind me...” Where was I now? My living self, the self that I had come to know this summer, was only there, only in those phantasmagorical days long past. Not here. Here, now – just the dim, grey clouds.

The rain streamed down my face as I walked through the parking lot to my car. My new car. I crashed the old one at the very start of the summer, which might as well had been a lifetime ago. It happened right after my first date with her. I was still riding from the high, the euphoria of an early relationship. I remember driving through the merge lane onto the interstate, looking to my left, when the car in front of stopped abruptly. I tried to brake but it was too late. I slammed into their bumper. I remember the shock as I pulled my car over and stepped out. Confounded, I watched the cars on the interstate dash left and right in the distance. I waited for my dad to arrive in shame. He picked me up from the side of the highway as my car, a dark gray Mazda with a now-crumpled face, went to get towed. I can’t quite recall what exactly I was thinking on that drive in my dad’s car, or who I was. That was a peculiar day – the first in a series of peculiar days.

Those days were certainly gone now. Formally gone. I looked up into the sky. Rain droplets sprinkled my face. I didn’t look back anymore. There was nothing more to look back on now. The rain continued streaming down my face as I drove home. I could hardly see the road but I continued on. The weight of all my sorrow had tumbled down – and there, I emerged again,

my lighter to the wick. I returned from the prison of memories I had been entrapped within, and there I was, gripping the steering wheel and wiping the rain from my eyes.

“How, by donating the last
portion of joy to die lightly
and in the shelter of a makeshift roof
to light up posthumously, like a word...”

The next day was my 18th birthday. It was an alright birthday. I got a record player from my parents. The weather cleared up. My nose stopped bleeding so much. I still didn't understand. Why must I carry this candle? Who am I? At times I feel like the burning man giving his speech upon the equestrian statue. At times I feel like the sick man carrying his candle through the stone pool. At times I feel like rain. Like silence. As long as I'm alive, there is silence. Is this who I am?

Part 2: Waiting Till I'm Alive Again

“It feels now as if I've awakened from some kind of dream...
 after some other kind of life. For some reason,
 I always offered resistance. I fought against something.
 I defended myself, just as though I'd had...
 someone else inside me, saying: Don't give in to anything...
 don't go along with... anything... or you'll die.
 But God, how foolish we are anyway!”

– Eugenia, played by Domiziana Giordano

I lie motionless. Across from me, diagonally to the right, a window. The last vestige of the outside world, to which I no longer belong. I've spent two weeks here, stuck in this bed. High on the wall across from me, a television. I never use it, though I have a remote always next to me. Beside my bed is a table, my world, my access, my everything: sourdough bread wrapped in tin foil, a few napkins, two half-empty bottles of water, a small cup full of large pills, my phone charger. A tube snakes across the thin white blanket that covers me. It's attached to a needle stuck into my left forearm. I don't feel it, yet I always do. I jiggle my legs around underneath the blanket. The doctors say this is something I should do to avoid a blood clot. I can hear footsteps outside the door, occasional talking, beeps and boops, the rolling of metal equipment across the floor; but mostly, I hear silence. I close my eyes. I wait. I wait to be out of this place, to go back home. For everything to be normal again. *What if that never happens? What if I die here?* I don't seriously entertain these thoughts, but they linger over me. Every treatment they've tried so far has failed. Meanwhile I only grow weaker. Few options remain for me. I look out the window. Through the slits of the blinds I see the summer sun reflecting off a building outside, fierce and

stinging light. My body is weak. My skin, pale and thin. The light hurts my eyes. I cannot move. I just want this to end.

For the next few days, I wait in fear. My surgery is scheduled for Friday: total colectomy. I want to be normal again. Normal died when I stepped into the hospital.

Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* opens with a piece from Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Mathew Passion* called "Erbarme dich, mein Gott," which means "Have mercy, my God." The camera moves across a close-up of Leonardo da Vinci's unfinished painting, *The Adoration of the Magi*, which depicts the Virgin Mary holding a child, presumably Christ, amidst a crowd of figures. The painting appears worn-out and shadowy as the credits unfold. The film opens on a man holding a tree upright as he throws rocks around its base. He talks to a small boy wearing a white hat, who does not speak a word. They both put rocks around the tree together until it stands up by itself. They stand next to a path amid a green field, the ocean sprawling out from the shore behind them, and a small forlorn shack in the distance. A postman moseys up the path on a bike. With him, a telegram, which he reads aloud for the man and the young boy. The telegram is from the man's friends, wishing him a happy birthday. The camera slowly pans left through the barren grassy field as the man and young boy begin to walk, leaving the tree behind. The postman rides in erratic directions around them as he talks.

"You shouldn't be waiting like that," he remarks.

"Who says I'm waiting for anything," the man replies.

"We all are... waiting for something. Take me, for example," the postman says, continuing to ride his bike around the man and his boy, "All my life, I've been going around waiting for something. All my life, in fact, I've felt as if... as if I were waiting in a railway station..." He gets off his bike and lets it fall to the side. Then he slumps clumsily onto the

ground in front of the man. “We live, we have our ups and downs,” he goes on, “We hope. We wait for something. We hope, we lose hope, we move closer to death. Finally, we die...”

I open my eyes. My mind a fog. Everything looks bright and fuzzy. I feel a slight pain in my abdomen. I know not to move, so I lie there very still; my flesh still sensitive from the surgery. My father and mother appear at my bedside. My mother holds on to my hand. Then I am wheeled through long, tireless, confusing hallways, filled with foreign equipment and wearied faces, until we arrive back in my assigned room. The lights are off. The pain in my abdomen grows. I squeeze my mother’s hand. I feel paralyzed. Any slight motion begins to strike pain throughout my entire body. Deep, tearing pain from where the surgical blades cut into me. I plead to my parents. They try to find doctors, anyone to help, but nobody comes. Each minute feels like hours as I lie there, my pain meds wearing off quickly, my body debilitated, my parents standing by my side, the dark room around me, the darkness. “Please,” I scream in desperation to my father, “It hurts so much.” But it was not a scream. I could not even raise my voice. I needed to cry but I held myself still. Tears welled in my eyes, but I had to keep still. At this point, every breath was agonizing. There was nothing we could do but wait. Wait for the doctors to come. I’d never felt so fragile, so helpless. So utterly helpless.

Alexander, the main character, paces into his dark living quarters. The camera sits still. The electricity is out because of the nuclear war that ravages the world beyond. The only light spills in, faint and muted, from a window to the left, off-screen. Very dim, white light that barely illuminates the grey wall. Alexander stands in front of a couch, with a lifeless lamp atop a small table to the left. He lowers himself down onto the floor, slowly, as he looks up, reciting the Lord’s Prayer. “Deliver us in this terrible time. Don't let my children die, or my friends... my wife...” He pleads. The camera moves in, focusing on his face, as Alexander continues to speak

with God. He speaks each word as if he and everyone else have already died. There is only enough light to illuminate the side of his face, the rest of the frame immersed entirely in shadow. His eyes move to stare into the camera. Tears fill them.

“I will relinquish everything that binds me to life...
if only Thou dost restore everything as it was before...
as it was this morning and yesterday.
Just let me be rid of... this deadly... sickening, animal fear!”

When he is finished, he turns around and crawls to the couch, where he hoists himself up. Then he lies, back turned to the camera, motionless and weeping. The camera pans backwards. The lighting grows fainter and fainter, fading into darkness.

“I’ve waited for this all my life. My whole life has been one long wait, for this!”

The fresh air fills my lungs as I’m pushed through the exit doors. Never has air itself felt so present around me, renewing me with life. A nurse wheels me forward in a wheelchair. I felt perfectly able to walk, though not without some pain, yet the nurse insisted that I must be taken in a wheelchair. I see my mother standing beside her car. Rain pours outside the protective roof of the patient pickup area, raging down onto the road beyond like a waterfall. As we come to a stop, my mother helps me out of the wheelchair and I stand. My mother and I thank the nurse before I open the passenger’s side door and take a seat in the car. My mother loads my belongings into the trunk. The cool leather of my mom’s vehicle cushions me and I feel a great familiar sensation. I take a long sigh of relief. The place where I had spent these past few weeks, months, years, I wasn’t quite sure, was far behind me now. This was it. I didn’t have to wait any longer. My world was saved. Everything was “normal” again, I suppose. We drove home, the

rain pelting the windshield like drums. I wasn't at odds with the weather. It felt right, though I wasn't sure why. Relief is a peculiar joy, for it is always laden with the cost of suffering.

In the striking finale of the film, Alexander, the main character, sets fire to the house where his family lives. The night before, he had intercourse with a woman who lives close by. He was told that the woman was a witch, and, in his despair, believed that conceiving a child with her would save them all from the apocalypse. Unfortunately, this also meant that a sacrifice must be made. The next morning, he wakes up to find that the power is back on, the war had ended. Believing his son to have been sacrificed to God, saving the world from nuclear terror, Alexander frantically stacks wooden chairs onto a table in the house's kitchen, covers the pile in a cloth, and then proceeds to set the cloth aflame with a lighter. The camera cuts to a wide shot as he sits on the grassy land outside, watching the fire – a car parked out front, smoke billowing into the light grey sky, haze shrouding the swampy horizon. During the initial filming of the scene, only one camera was used to capture the enormous fire. Unfortunately, the camera jammed, and the footage was lost. The crew was forced to rebuild the house in just two weeks so that the climactic scene could be reshot. A costly mistake.

In the final take used for the film, the camera rolls continuously for a full six-minutes. Alexander's family comes running frantically through the field as their house burns, now like a tornado of fire and destruction as the wind stokes the chaos. A tree next to the house catches fire, as well as the car parked close by, which explodes from within. For a few minutes, visible within the orange fury is the inner frame, the skeleton, of the house's remaining structure, until the entire building collapses with a violent creak and roar. The characters run around in a mad frenzy. The camera cuts away abruptly. The cut was unintentional, in fact, for the take had gone on so long that the camera had run out of film. Apparently, once the shot was completed at last,

the cast and crew began to break down in tears. The image of the burning house, with the family of characters looking on, huddled in the muddied field, became the official poster art of the movie.

The camera shows the young boy, Alexander's son, lying by the tree that they had planted at the very beginning. The boy was alive. There had been no sacrifice after all. Bach's "Erbarme dich, mein Gott" plays again as the camera moves up and watches the shimmering water through the silhouetted branches of the thin, leafless tree. The credits roll.

"This film is dedicated to my son Andriosh with hope and confidence."

Tarkovsky's later films can be aimless, impenetrable, dense, profound. They are all of these things. Simply, however, they are the expression of a man facing his death. *Nostalghia* follows a man reflecting on his past as he progressively falls more and more ill. *The Sacrifice*, his final film, is about a man and his family comprehending the impending nuclear apocalypse. Tarkovsky never sought, necessarily, to understand anything about life, or about death; he only sought to express, to experience, to *capture*. For like Mercury, the conductor of departed souls, Tarkovsky does not provide answers – he guides. There was no conclusion to be gleaned. There was only an experience to be had. There was, there is still, only a man, an artist, living his final years on this silent earth.

I sat in the passenger's seat of my dad's car. I stared outside at the forest next to the highway, trees zipping past my sight. The late afternoon sun smoldered in the endless horizon. I thought about the crash and my date. If only I had known what would become of things. Seen it. As if my life's future could glimmer in the reflection of the window. My strange journey laid out before me like a prophetic scroll. The rainy days. The pain. The relief. The Sacrifices. Many more lonesome car rides at the end of lost dreams. Lost memories. Fleeting moments.

Extinguished candles and quiet walks. Extinguished dates and quiet crashes. Surely, I would have been afraid. Terribly afraid. But I didn't know. All I knew was that I had just had quite a peculiar day. I was waiting.

I wait. I carry my candle. I suffer. I've spent much of my time trying to understand. Who am I? I am myself at each moment. At times I feel like the burning house. Then I am the boy lying by the tree. There was no sacrifice. The world goes on. I am alive.