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Was or Wasn't, Would've or Wouldn't've Been

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Our heroine had a brother, it seems. If she had, then long ago he must have ceased to be, so long ago that she didn't remember this event, and if he never was at all, then it means long ago she must have invented him for herself, so long ago that she didn't remember this event either. From those distant times, however eventful they might have been — first words, first phone call, first steps, first time staying home alone and so forth — she remembered nothing at all, especially not this brother, as if she too hadn't been there then, as if she too had invented herself at some point and appeared into the world from pure invention, like a mouse from its hole, a bear from her den, a snowdrop from beneath the snow. If the brother really had been, then he must have had a name, but his name she didn't remember either, and in her thoughts simply called him “brother”, “my brother”, “hero”, “my hero”, “hero of my story”, etc.

All that she remembered (invented) was that the brother was younger, and his existence ended as quickly as it began. To put it bluntly — he died, died as soon as he was born, didn't manage to live or acquire a name, probably didn't even manage to breathe, didn't manage to open his eyes, didn't manage to cry, didn't manage anything at all, or perhaps he did manage, did breathe, did cry, opened his eyes, but died anyway

— didn't fancy it all. And her mother and father decided not to give him a name, so remembering him would be harder, and inventing him easier. It happens like that, there are such heroes, their existence is sort of in question, they were briefly, but continue to be, they're remembered (invented), but they're not spoken of, they're sort of hypothetical. And so her brother was the same — hypothetical. That's why he continued to be. Had he been absolutely certainly real or absolutely certainly invented, our heroine would have already forgotten him, but like this, with his absence and potential presence, he always occupied a place beside her, or rather not beside, but somewhere far off, a shadow on the horizon, a shadow that falling touched her very self.

Sometimes our heroine looked at her childhood black-and-white photographs, the sort where you can't tell if it's a hero or a heroine, and thought (imagined) that her younger lil' brother most likely looked just like her, his older lil' sister. He would have worn the same black-and-white bonnet, the same black-and-white socks, and possessed the same moon-round, pitch-black eyes. On certain days, when his shadow was darker than usual and covered our heroine from head to toe, they were possibly twins, and in the photograph it was actually him, her hero, and not her, our heroine. They would have played together with dolls and cars and shop and cards and would have drawn together and sculpted from plasticine together, would have gone to school — she with a sisterly pride would have led him by the hand to first grade — would have done absolutely everything together simultaneously the same and differently, like proper twins, even if she were a year older

than him, and absolutely everything would have been different, as with a brother and sister, as with a hero and heroine, and not as now, when the heroine was without a hero.

She even remembered (invented) that her brother was buried somewhere, or rather not just somewhere, but in the Tatar cemetery, which was a bit further from the regular cemetery, the Orthodox one so to speak, where he lay beside her other Tatar relatives in a lil' nameless grave, even though he hadn't properly managed to be a Tatar. Our heroine knew this for certain, for she herself, only half Tatar, acquired her Tatariness only with time, and even now, in her twenties, hadn't actually reached even a quarter yet. Trying to understand how it really was, our heroine often remembered (invented; remembered the invented) how her mother once let slip, saying, "we buried your uncle there, beside him, beside your brother, the lil' graves are well-tended, we go a couple of times a year, tidy up". She probably misheard, the connection was poor, mixed something up, filled in as usual, to inscribe into the lore of her invented life at least some detail clawing at reality — "your brother, it turns out, in your homeland, beyond seven forests, beyond seven hills, has a lil' grave, though still without a name". He was the hero of her myth, or perhaps he wasn't a myth, for one could go to the cemetery and see with one's own eyes that there he is — lying under the earth, but she wasn't going to do that, for then the myth, invented or real, would cease to be a myth, and would become just pure empiricism, a naked fact without interpretation, which nobody wanted to deal with. Facts, unlike myths, are always dead, there's no life in facts,

facts don't breathe, don't cry, and don't see the world, facts lie quietly in children graves in adult cemeteries in complete mute certainty.

Complete mute certainty — that which the hero of her personal story definitely could not be. He wasn't complete, he wasn't certain, but mute he was nonetheless. Speaking of him wasn't done, though nobody forbade it, neither our heroine's dear parents, nor their dear parents, nor the book of unwritten laws lying on every bedside table in every room, not even a sign saying "don't speak of *him*". It was accepted to be silent about him, though it's never possible to say what the silent are silent about. Mother was silent, father was silent, our heroine was silent, photographs were silent, diary entries were silent, rooms were silent, floor, ceiling, walls, air was silent, space was silent. For poetic wholeness and rhetorical effect one could say that silence itself was silent, but no, what tautology (!), that doesn't happen. Being silent — that's the only thing one could do about him. Like this:

Or like this:

Or even like this (!):

A conspiracy, in a word. Numb conspiracy.

This muteness, this uncertainty, this incompleteness simultaneously calmed and irritated our heroine, bothered and sometimes didn't let her sleep. She genuinely didn't understand how they could not give him a

name thought up specially for him in advance during hot arguments, and then forget him entirely, erase him, as if he never was. But at the same time, who would have it easier if he really had been? Easier from his name sounding in the house; easier from constant imaginings of what he could have been like if he'd grown up, what his voice would have been like, what he'd have been keen on; easier from the fact that just a bit more and he could have been, but slipped, stumbled into wasn'tness and would've-beenness. Who? Definitely not her mother. She'd have had a son either way, invented or real, had had to exist a bit before ceasing to do so in any scenario. But she, our heroine, never had a brother, real or invented; she could only imagine what he could have been like, what they wanted to call him, where his grave is, and never, never would she dare approach her mother and ask, is it true, mum? Was he or wasn't he? For if he was, it would hurt, stir where nobody wanted to stir, it would be terrifying to speak of whom they preferred to be silent about. Well, and if he wasn't? Is she daft or what? Invented herself a brother, and a dead one at that! Who does that? Does that even happen? And what difference does it make, was he or wasn't he, would've or wouldn't've he been, if you can't talk to him anyway, if you can't hug him anyway, can't hit him, can't scold him, can't ask him if he's real or invented, if his absence always was, is, and will be beside her.

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