

Panning to the Right

by Andrew Gretes

Dear Son,

What I have written in this letter is a history of our people. Use it in prudent emergencies. For example, let's say you run out of things to say on a first date with a potential soul mate. Or, even worse, let's say you're put on the spot at dinner by your fiancé's father, a man who (despite only possessing one arm) could throttle you six ways to Sunday. Or, worst of all, let's say you find yourself in a position where the power has gone out at your father-in-law's house and each member of the family decides to tell stories in a circle until the power returns. In each of these instances, Son, refrain from panicking. Simply recall the contents of this letter and fib where you see fit.

The key to your ancestry is "panning to the right." Every famous figure in history has had a brother or a sister or a cousin who has, for the most part, been edited out of history by poor cropping. It's difficult to stress this enough, so allow me to reiterate: *your family's history is a chronicle of incredibly consistent but unfortunate cropping.* For example, the biblical Adam actually had a brother whose name was Buford. And while Buford didn't cause the Fall of Man or father the entire human race or swallow unadulterated knowledge at his wife's behest, he didn't exactly twiddle his thumbs either. You see, Buford was a loving uncle and pitied his poor nephew's plight. It was Cain's punishment, as you know, to have been branded on the forehead with a "G.O.D." tattoo and thus to be unpopular with the ladies. But all this changed when Buford took his nephew aside and showed him how to use sheep's fat and pig's urine and shellfish blood to mask the mark with antediluvian makeup. The next day, Cain, thanks to his Uncle Buford's assistance, was getting laid in Nod as if killing a sibling was sexy. And the next year, he even populated the world with little "Cainlets"—the technical term for a set of twins in which both are evil. But again, none of this would've been possible without the first makeover in history, a makeover conceived and performed by none other than your oldest and earliest cropped ancestor, Buford.

But cosmetics, Son, isn't the only trade your ancestors excelled at. No, to the contrary (and to the right) of the most prolific philosopher in

history, Plato, was a man called Prapoulopos. In the 4th century BCE, this man was better known as "Prapoulopos Pappapolos" to differentiate him from a noted sculptor of the time who also went by Prapoulopos—namely, "Prapoulopos Phiddapolos." But considering that both Prapouloposes have, for all intents and purposes, been lost to history, I don't think we'll be rocking the boat if we call our ancestor "Prapoulopos" and let the progeny of the similarly forgotten man of the same first name call their ancestor "Prapoulopos." And so long as you don't marry, son, some long lost daughter of the latter Prapoulopos, all should go well with our current system of nomenclature. Anyways, most people know the philosopher Plato through his "Allegory of the Cave." However, Prapoulopos, your 4th century BCE ancestor, also composed an allegory. From my understanding, it was quite chic in those days. The allegory was titled "The Allegory of the Study" and here—give or take the inevitable error which occurs when dealing with oral traditions over 2000 years old—is how it went:

Imagine a room with a low ceiling and four walls so close together that simply being in the room feels masturbatory. Now, imagine that each of these four walls is covered head to toe with bookshelves. Then imagine a small stooped man inhabiting this room, a man who has been residing there for so long that he's completely forgotten that he's in a room called a study and not a very small and rectangular universe. Seeing no doors, no windows, no mouse holes, no sunsets, the man logically concludes: "To live is to read." Until, one day, browsing through his bookshelves, the man stumbles across an unknown papyrus scroll; intrigued, he immediately removes the scroll from the bookshelf, triggering a trap door which whisks the man off to an entirely new location. Rubbing his eyes and gazing for the first time on the outside world, the man sees myriad magnificent things: most noticeably, phenomena outside the Platonic Idea of "Scroll." The most fascinating of these is a creature not unlike the small stooped man himself but with far more pronounced and enticing eyes, lips, breasts, and hips. Astounded, the man approaches the creature and asks in an alien, awkward syntax, "Read, I could you?" To which the creature, full of pity, leads the man to a room

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similar in shape to his previous cell but, content-wise, very different indeed. The man, quite sagaciously, spends little time retracing his steps to his former bookish domicile.

Or if you prefer, Son, to scour your mother's side of the family, you'll find an Arabian princess named Dunyazad who was, if not completely cropped out of history, at least very poorly framed. By contrast, Shahrazad (her sister) is a name that rolls off the tongue like Solomon, Saul, or Sinbad. And that's because everyone who knows anything about storytelling knows that she's the author of the *1001 Nights*, a story based on an innocent woman's need to spin as many cliffhangers as possible in order to prevent her once cuckolded and now suffering from PTSD husband from killing her in revenge for his first wife's infidelity. But despite the fact that the name Shahrazad, as I commented earlier, rolls off the tongue as mellifluously as Andrew, Aladdin, or Ali Baba, Dunyazad was by far the more logical of the two sisters. And the pithier I might add. In fact, to prove this point, on the 532nd night, Dunyazad scribbled down a fable and handed it to her sister in hopes she would use the fable and thus end her tedious ordeal. The fable went a little something like this:

There once was a man who murdered his wife because she was an adulterer. The man, concluding all women were thus adulterers, proceeded to marry more women, deflowering them and murdering each and every one of them on their wedding nights. This, however, was a hasty generalization and thus a logical fallacy. Just because one woman proves unfaithful doesn't mean all women will prove unfaithful. The moral being: stop killing innocent women you irrational pig.

Unfortunately, Shahrazad never used her sister's fable for fear she might become the more famous and celebrated of the two. Instead, she stuck to her original (rather fallacious) strategy of bombarding the king with school after school after school of red herrings.

But even more recently, Son, your mother's aunt's cousin's sister was tragically cropped out of history in favor of Mother Teresa. Posterity, it appears, can only handle one altruistic Albanian avenger at a time. Now, as everyone knows, Mother Teresa spent half a century tending to the poor and the sick and the dying and the unbelievers, winning a Nobel Peace Prize for combining consolation and conversion into one tidy little package, but what everyone doesn't know (and yet *should* know) is that next door to Mother

Teresa was an existentialist of the Kierkegaardian vein named Mother Mimoza, a woman who spent her entire life exercising an unbelievable gift: that of being *infinitely funny*, so funny in fact that all those who heard her jokes inevitably died, their hearts rupturing with unconditional hilarity. This realization—that her jokes were of a killer caliber—forced Mother Mimoza to abandon her life as a budding scholar and to follow a very different path, finding her true calling as a hospice nurse. There, Mother Mimoza lived out the rest of her days in relative obscurity, waiting for her patients, one by one, to summon her to their deathbeds and ask for that final blessing: to expire in ebullience.

Most recently, this curse, Son, has struck my own father's brother-in-law, a man who is being cropped every day a little more from the public's common knowledge. The evidence for this, I'm afraid, is ubiquitous: simply go out to the street and ask a stranger who were the first two men to touch the moon. Inevitably, you'll receive the answer, "Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin." Then ask the same stranger who the third man was who waited on the Apollo spacecraft. Inevitably, you'll receive a blank stare followed by a shrug of the shoulders. But that man, Son, was Michael Collins, and, if you so desired, you could chart him as a wayward branch jutting out from the right side of your family tree. What the world doesn't know (besides Michael Collins' name) and what NASA doesn't know (despite knowing Michael Collins' middle name), and what even Neil and Buzz don't know (despite knowing Michael Collins' favorite color) is that this relative of yours did in fact touch the moon that day. While everyone else was glued to their television sets watching Neil and Buzz hop around like low-gravity kangaroos, Michael Collins surreptitiously slipped outside, taking the most placid leak of his life, wetting his diaper in the Sea of Tranquility.

So, again, Son, when worst comes to worst and you're perhaps put in the spotlight to say something witty and wonderful by a merciless circle of in-laws, take a deep breath, relax, recall your illustrious ancestry, and do the deed historians never fail not to do: *pan to the right*. Son, trust me on this one—it seems to have worked on your maternal grandparents.

Love,
Dad