

Spake

written by
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"Spake"

Cast of Characters

Priest

Siberian priest in his thirties.

Ann Flynn

Cornell associate professor of language and linguistics, 35.

Jessica Sharith

Cornell junior, 20. Linguistics major.

Nicholas Dolzhivliudkovich

Cornell senior, 21. Born in Siberia, but moved to the United States when he was 8 and speaks accentless English.

Cal

Divinity student, 23. Jessica's boyfriend. Played by the actor playing the Priest.

Edward Rulloff

"The learned murderer." A genius linguist and killer who was hanged in Ithaca, New York, in 1871 at age 53.

Muriel Nolan

Cal's advisor at divinity school, 42.

Irina

Nicholas' sister, 24.

Mark Galen

Cornell language and linguistics professor and department head, seventies. Played by the actor playing Rulloff.

Orderly

An orderly at Tompkins County hospital, twenties. Played by the actor playing Irina.

Radio Announcer

Indiana radio announcer, played by the actor playing Muriel.

Place

In and around Cornell University and the surrounding town of Ithaca, New York, with brief jaunts to the Midwest and Siberia.

Time

December and January.

"No, life ends and no, there is nothing elsewhere,
and no question now of ever finding again that
white speck lost in whiteness, to see if they
still lie still in the stress of that storm, or
of a worse storm, or in the black dark for
good, or the great whiteness unchanging, and
if not what are they doing."

Imagination Dead Imagine - Samuel Beckett

Act I: The Thirty-Sixth Thing

"The language, the language
 fails them
They do not know the words
 or have not
the courage to use them ."

Paterson - William Carlos Williams

Act I

Prologue

Lights up on the pulpit of a church in Siberia. A PRIEST is there, delivering a eulogy. HE begins in Russian which, after a bit, effortlessly transforms into English.

PRIEST

...and what more is there to say? Of all of us, our friend here is sure to have heard it all. Four children, seven grandchildren, twelve great grandchildren, and a hundred and nine years of history. One hundred and nine years. The things he saw, the world he experienced, it was one none of us ever knew. From him, we see our past, what once was and now is no longer. And his family will carry his memory into the future. They've spread out to nine countries on three continents, all over the world, and nearly all returned here today to pay their respects to a man who meant the world to them. He was a monument, a guidepost, a touchstone. One hundred and nine years and there's not a one of us here who feels that was enough time for him. Had we the opportunity to have him back, I am certain--

(But HE is cut off by a low RUMBLING from above. HE begins again.)

I am certain that we would jump at the chance to hear him speak a few more words about--

(Again another RUMBLING. Something has dropped onto HIS nose. HE puts a finger to HIS nose and then examines HIS finger. Quietly, to HIMSELF)

A snowflake?

(HE looks up and we go to black before the sound of a great, thunderous CRASH is heard.)

Scene 1

Lights up on the Cornell University office of Professor ANN FLYNN four days later. SHE is at HER desk and JESSICA, a junior, is speaking. ANN isn't paying much attention.

JESSICA

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...it's the classic example of a good idea in theory becoming horrible in execution. Esperanto failed because ... well setting aside the fact that it was just clumsily constructed, a Frankenstein monster of a bunch of disparate tongues, it failed because it sought to replace other languages. People don't want to be told that their mother tongue is obsolete. You won't get anywhere saying bad things about someone's mother. So, where does that leave us? How do you unite cultures who have been speaking their own languages for millennia, who form their national identity from it? The key is not finding a replacement, it's finding a derivation. A common derivation, and, you see, this is where Rulloff comes in.

ANN

(Absently)

Rulloff's, the bar?

JESSICA

Edward Rulloff, the genius, the madman, the criminal, the last man publicly hanged in the state of New York, who, yes, oddly, has a bar named after him just a mile away from here. Rulloff was working on this very problem, the idea of derivation, of all languages coming from an original one, the mother of all mother tongues. What I would like to do, what I'm proposing as my senior thesis topic, is an exhaustive study of the notes of Rulloff and, of course, a study of other scholars who have tackled similar problems, and, from that study, drawing my own conclusions on if an original language existed, and what might be some of the characteristics of said language if it did.

(Pause)

So. What do you think, Ann?

(No answer)

Ann??

ANN

You know, Jessica, it's ... you should probably save your breath.

JESSICA

I just told you the whole thing.

ANN

I mean, I won't be your advisor when you start working on this next fall.

JESSICA

I plan to start this spring.

ANN

Even still.

JESSICA

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Is there a problem with this topic? Or me? Have I done something?

ANN

They're not retaining me. That's how they put it. Cornell says there will be no opening for me next year. So ... there.

JESSICA

I don't understand. With Professor Galen leaving--

ANN

He's not leaving. Not anymore. He's enjoyed his farewell year so much that he's found a renewed passion for teaching. That's how *he* put it. Which is great, I guess, unless you were one of Galen's students during the dispassionate years. Anyway, it doesn't matter. I have no seniority. You've been here longer than I have, so out I go.

JESSICA

I'm sorry, Ann.

ANN

It's not ... thank you. I appreciate it. What it means to you, though, what it *should* mean is that you'll have a different advisor during your senior year, and you'd be wise to start your work on this thesis with him or her.

JESSICA

Yeah.

(Pause)

I really enjoyed having you as my advisor. I'm sad I won't get to T.A. that dead and dying languages class you planned on teaching.

ANN

It's too bad. I was even ready to add a new language, in light of recent events.

JESSICA

What would those be?

ANN

The church in Russia. From the news.

JESSICA

I just finished my last final this morning. The news has been low priority.

ANN

Oh. Well, there's a, there was a church in Siberia and they had a funeral there, what, four days ago? Two hundred and fifty people in the church, it was an important member of the

ANN (CONT'D)

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community, a very old man, and ... it was a very snowy day,
and it was a very old church, and the roof collapsed.

JESSICA

(Quietly)

God.

ANN

Nobody made it out. It's been in the papers every day since
it happened.

(SHE searches HER bag for the paper
and hands it to JESSICA who looks
through it.)

JESSICA

And they all spoke some rare language?

ANN

An oral tradition, called Ujide. Only a hundred speakers of
it, and all of them were in the church. So it's gone. Just
disappeared under the snow.

JESSICA

That's ... the man in the picture, it was his funeral?
Alexander Dolzhivliudkovich?

ANN

Yes. He was something like a hundred and eight years old.

JESSICA

A hundred and nine.

ANN

Something like that.

JESSICA

Did I ever introduce you to Nicholas?

ANN

Your boyfriend? Sure.

JESSICA

He's my ex-boyfriend now.

ANN

What about him?

(JESSICA holds up the paper.)

JESSICA

My ex is Nicholas Dolzhivliudkovich. This is his great-
grandfather.

You're sure?

JESSICA

Well, Nicholas has a hundred and nine year old great-grandfather named Alexander, but I guess it could be a coincidence.

ANN

Jessica, I'm so sorry.

JESSICA

I just saw a picture, I never actually met him.

ANN

About Nicholas.

JESSICA

We broke up a month ago.

ANN

I'm saying, I'm sorry that he passed away.

JESSICA

Oh. No, he didn't. He called me three days ago to talk. From here. He sounded upset on my machine.

ANN

And he didn't tell you about all--

JESSICA

I didn't call him back.

ANN

Why not?

JESSICA

I don't know. Because when your ex calls you upset, it doesn't usually mean his whole family died.

(Quietly)

Fuck.

(Back to normal)

He must've stayed here because of finals. He was gonna go back for some family reunion during break, but he had finals first. I should go see him.

(SHE hands the paper back to ANN
and picks up HER bag.)

ANN

How long did he live in Russia?

JESSICA

Until he was eight or so. Why?

ANN

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He probably can speak the language.

JESSICA

Of course he can speak Russian.

ANN

Ujide. Alexander was the oldest speaker of it. His family spoke it, I imagine Nicholas can too.

JESSICA

So what are you saying?

ANN

I'm saying that he's the only one who can speak this language. He's the only one left in the world. That's important.

JESSICA

Not to him.

ANN

No, I don't imagine it is. But it still is. You know that.

(Brief pause)

But you should go though. We can talk about this later.

JESSICA

I don't know if I--

ANN

You should go.

JESSICA

Yeah.

(SHE goes.)

Scene 2

NICHOLAS' apartment, living room, that afternoon. It is dark and nobody is there. A knock at the door. Again. NICHOLAS comes out, wearing a pair of jeans and an old t-shirt. HE checks the peephole. Seeing who it is, HE unlocks the door but doesn't open it. HE exits. JESSICA enters. SHE turns on the light as SHE does. SHE closes the door behind HER.

JESSICA

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Nicholas?

NICHOLAS (Off)

Would you like something to drink?

JESSICA

I'm okay, thanks.

(NICHOLAS enters with a glass of water. HE sips it as HE talks to HER.)

NICHOLAS

(A pause, then)

Hello.

JESSICA

Hi.

NICHOLAS

How've you been?

JESSICA

Fine. You?

NICHOLAS

I've been better. You're sure you don't want anything to drink?

JESSICA

I'm sure. But thanks.

NICHOLAS

Uh-huh.

(An awkward silence)

JESSICA

I came here to say I'm sorry.

NICHOLAS

Okay.

JESSICA

I am. I'm very sorry.

NICHOLAS

Well, off the top of my head I can think of like three things you could be sorry for. Or about. I'm wondering--

JESSICA

For your loss, of course.

NICHOLAS

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You saw the news, huh?

JESSICA

Yes. No, I, somebody told me. It's not important.

NICHOLAS

I thought it was kinda important.

JESSICA

How I found out, I mean. I didn't mean to imply that--

NICHOLAS

I'm kidding, Jess.

JESSICA

Right. But I'm so sorry for your loss. I can't imagine how you must feel.

(Silence from NICHOLAS)

And I'm, I am sorry for not calling you back. If I'd known that you were calling about this, I would have called you back immediately.

NICHOLAS

What did you think I was calling about?

JESSICA

I didn't know. Maybe you wanted to get back together. It's stupid. What I thought, I mean. Not that what you were saying was ... I'm sorry for not calling you back.

NICHOLAS

It was a month ago we broke up.

JESSICA

I know.

NICHOLAS

I was crying on your machine.

JESSICA

Yeah.

NICHOLAS

You remember me ever doing that before? Even when we broke up?

JESSICA

I don't know. No.

NICHOLAS

That might've been a clue.

JESSICA

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I know. And I apologize. I really--

NICHOLAS

It's fine. It's ... over. That's it.

JESSICA

Thank you.

(Pause)

Would you like to talk about it?

NICHOLAS

My family? No, I wouldn't.

JESSICA

Have you been talking to somebody about it, at least?

NICHOLAS

You mean to people who *do* return my calls?

JESSICA

I'm--

NICHOLAS

Sorry, that was a cheap shot. Um, no, I haven't. People have offered and I told them to go home, start their vacations. It's no use.

JESSICA

You should talk to somebody, Nicholas. Talk about what it's like.

NICHOLAS

It's like having your family and everyone you knew as a child crushed by a collapsing church. There's no metaphor for this. There's no way anyone can look at this and say, I know how you feel, Nicky, something just like it happened to me. Nothing like this happens to anyone. What more is there to say?

JESSICA

Look, you called me and, and I know I didn't call you back, but you wanted to talk then. I'm late, but I'm here, Nick.

NICHOLAS

I called you because I'd just found out and I didn't know who else to call. I had to tell someone, but everyone else I would tell was gone.

JESSICA

Somebody showed up here from the news?

NICHOLAS

No. No, I got a call from the Russian embassy. They asked

my name, my parents' names, to make sure who I was, they said, in Russian, I'm afraid something awful's happened. And then he, the man at the embassy, asked me if I could hold. And I did, for three minutes. I was thinking, no matter what he says it couldn't be as bad as the ... dread I'm feeling right now, of not knowing. Then he came back, apologized, and said what he said. He told me he'd call me back with more details when he had them. I probably shouldn't have called you.

JESSICA

Don't even worry about that.

NICHOLAS

Did I get you in trouble with what's-his-name?

JESSICA

Cal. No, I erased the message.

NICHOLAS

Was he the one who told you?

JESSICA

What?

NICHOLAS

About the accident, my family.

JESSICA

Oh. No, wasn't him. He.

NICHOLAS

Who then?

JESSICA

It's not really important.

NICHOLAS

You wanted me to talk. This is what I want to talk about.

JESSICA

Okay. It was Ann, Professor Flynn.

NICHOLAS

She knew that was my great-grandfather's funeral?

JESSICA

No. I told her, but no.

NICHOLAS

So wait, if she didn't know, why'd she tell you?