VOICES

O.K., I admit it -- I am one of those eccentrics who actually enjoys visiting cemeteries.

Now don't get me wrong...it's not like I have a death fetish or anything like that. It's just that I find cemeteries so peaceful and compelling -- gentle, historic reminders of the inexorable passage of time. I like randomly exploring dates on old graves, to determine how long people once lived. I also like the carved angels and other such stonework on fancier tombs, and similarly admire the ornate mausoleums of the wealthy. In a way, cemeteries are like golf courses -- only with hundreds of protruding tombstones and no sand traps!

I hope you don't find it ironic, but I plan on being cremated (an increasing popular option, being both more eco-friendly and much less expensive ) when my time is up, with my ashes tossed into the ocean somewhere or scattered in some farmland soil. As a result, there will be no gravestone for me in any cemetery.

My name is Lucas Mercer, and I was twenty-seven years old when the following story I'm about to tell began. At that time, I was engaged to a lovely lady named Erin Sullivan, and we hoped to marry in September, about six months away. Although I grew up on the south side of Chicago, I currently live in Green Bay, Wisconsin. My newest job is being a hustling sales rep for an extreme sports/energy drink called Nuke'T, headquartered right here in my city. Our company did an impressive $274 million in sales last year, in just our second year out on the store shelves.

Now you probably know that the U.S. 'power drink' beverage market is pretty well saturated with many over-infused brands (featuring extra caffeine, added sugar, and mega-vitamins), so my clever district manager, Chris Reyes, asked if I wanted to travel to Europe for a month and ascertain whether or not Nuke'T might be competitive abroad. Of course, I jumped at the chance -- having never been outside of the States for one, and always eager for any change of scene as well.

"Lucas, I need you to focus exclusively on Italy, Spain, and Croatia. Maybe we can undercut the fierce Red Bull sales there, if we can get our costs down low enough. I'll give you a list of potential distributors in each country, with our firm trade offer stats. Naturally, a case of our beverage samples will be shipped overseas first to each prospective client. Now I figure our brand would probably flop in France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and the Baltics -- even though each nation has plenty of hip consumers with surplus spending money. But frankly, those particular locales are just too pretentious and finicky for our more 'casual' product. On the other hand, the young people in Greece, Portugal, Serbia, and the Balkans are simply too poor to spend their money on either our or any similar product, so you can scratch them off too," Chris declared.

So, with an expedited fresh U.S. passport in my hand three weeks later, off I went. While flying on Iberia Airlines across the Atlantic on my way to Madrid, my mind drifted back to my desire of visiting famous cemeteries around the world. Three places especially interested me: The Pere LaChaise in Paris (final resting place of Frederic Chopin, Sarah Bernhardt, Oscar Wilde, and Jim Morrison); The Recoleta in Buenos Aires (the tomb of Evita Peron); and The Mirogoj in Zagreb (considered Europe's most beautiful cemetery). While the first two were obviously out of the question on this specific business trip, luck was with me for the third, so I excitedly looked forward to exploring the Mirogoj once I arrived in Croatia's capitol!

After successfully bargaining with four large beverage distributors for selling Nuke'T in Spain, I took the train to Milan and similarly did business there and in three other Italian cities. I was impressed that everyone I dealt with in both countries thus far spoke perfect English. ("It's the international language of business," I was politely informed.) Of course, I communicated my progress back to Chris Reyes in Green Bay.

"Excellent work, Lucas! I'll let the our company boss, Sid Granger, know. He's considering setting up a Nuke'T beverage plant and distribution center in Barcelona, if all this works out. There's a nice dormant facility there that we can upgrade and convert for making our product. In the meantime, we can air freight large pallets of Nuke'T to Europe to get the ball rolling once we get the green light. Allison and her team are already working on a new marketing campaign. You're in line for a nice bonus and a raise in pay, for sure, good buddy...so keep going, and good luck in Zagreb!"

After arriving by train in Croatia (at the same classic station where the once fabled 'Orient Express' used to stop), I reserved an Uber on my phone app and went directly to the Mirogoj Cemetery. It was amazing! Huge and park-like, with many stately trees, behind attractive, thick arched walls several blocks long. I was later told that Mirogoj was actually one of Zagreb's most famous tourist attractions. I spent a happy two hours there, wandering around under sunny and mild May skies. I concluded my sports/energy drink business in the city, then went on to Split, Pula, and Dubrovnik over the next four days. Delightfully, most everyone spoke perfect English here as well. International business...yes!

Because my return air ticket wasn't good for five more days (Madrid to Newark to Milwaukee, then back to Green Bay), and because I was conveniently not too far from Greece, I decided to celebrate my trip successes by taking a short extra excursion to the Mt. Athos peninsula.

Now, if you think that a keen interest in cemeteries might also include a keen interest in religion, you would be correct. Although raised a traditional Roman Catholic and having never attended college, I have dabbled -- in my humble way -- into trying to understand the various religious faiths around the world. I am honestly not sure which is the one true and meaningful faith for myself yet -- if any -- but I try to keep an open mind. My best guess at this point in my life is that all faiths probably came from some original source and are all leading back to it, only on different paths or levels.

I took the train from Dubrovnik through tiny Montenegro and Kosovo to Greece's second largest city, Thessaloniki, in the north of the country, not too far from the border with Macedonia. From there, I took a bus to Mt. Athos.

My goal was to spend a day and night there in one of the twenty ancient cliff-side/mountaintop monasteries. Twenty Greek Orthodox and ten non- Greek Orthodox visitors are allowed each day, and are given free room and board. The visitor was required to accept the simple but traditional daily schedule of the monks: praying, working, dining, and rest. Curiously, all women have been banned from Mt. Athos for over one-thousand years. In fact, the only females in residence are several cats -- to help control the local mice population!

After filling out the required paperwork and having a short wait before being subjected to a modest interview, I was granted a Special Entrance Permit (the *Diamonitirion*) at the Pilgrim's Bureau, and was then assigned to the guesthouse (or *Archontariki)* of the monastery of Simonopetra. This hallowed place had been founded in the 13th Century on the southern coast of the Mt. Athos peninsula, and it currently housed fifty-four traditionally black-robed and bearded Greek Orthodox monks -- with my being the only non-Orthodox visiting member of the community. Needless to say, I was thrilled to be accepted here, even for a short while!

I was kindly met by an aged and venerable-looking white-bearded monk named Brother Gabriel. Realizing that I spoke no Greek, he easily switched to English. He asked about my reason for coming here from so far away, after glancing at the specifics from my entry application. "Ah, yes, I know where Wisconsin is, in America," he announced. "The famous Annunciation Greek Orthodox Cathedral is near your city of Milwaukee, if I recall."

"Yes, Brother Gabriel, and where I live in Green Bay, there is another Eastern Orthodox church called St. Matthew," I added. Then I continued.

"Well, Brother, to answer your question about why I have come here, I confess that I am deeply interested in reading about and discussing all aspects of religious faith. I also enjoy visiting cemeteries -- if I happen to be near one and have a little extra time," I explained.

We toured the monastery complex, and the old monk helpfully pointed out the large chapel, the dining hall, the various work stations, the impressive library, and the rather spartan monk's cell where I would later be sleeping. Brother Gabriel shared that he had been a monk here for sixty-three years, and had rarely left the complex all that time, other than to tend the productive olive groves on the nearby mountain slopes, which was his required daily activity and physical exercise.

"It has been a good life -- worshipping God through prayer, meditation, choral singing with my Brothers, and studying His Word," Gabriel admitted. "But my body and energy is slowing down, and I sense that my days on earth are dwindling. Soon, I will return to the Father, I think." He said this while we looked out together at the dark blue Aegean Sea far below us, with the smell of cypress and lemon trees and the peaceful chirping of birds adding to the dramatic mood. "I must leave you now, my son, but please sit with me during the evening meal and we can talk a little more afterwards."

The day moved quickly by. The silence of the place was remarkable. It seemed a truly holy refuge, away from the unceasing strife of the world, populated by earnest men devoutly attempting to serve God while trying to fathom His eternal mysteries.

Dinner was plain but nourishing: fresh fish, lentils, pita bread, olives, tart oranges, and pitchers of homemade red wine thinned a bit with water. My assigned duty was to help wash, dry and stack the used meal dishes. Then I joined the congregation of fifty-four monks in the chapel and listened to some worshipful chanting and praying before going to bed at sunset. Brother Gabriel explained that we would rise with the sun and say our farewell after breakfast and its clean-up. That night, I slept soundly in a mood of rare tranquility.

While walking me to the monastery's sole entrance/exit portal the following sunny morning, Brother Gabriel took me aside to see the monk's cemetery. "Here, we have been buried -- when our lives are done -- ever since the 13th Century," he explained, as I excitedly examined some of the worn headstones with their aged dates and Greek names. "Here, I too, will be laid to rest," he softly smiled. "But don't worry, my young friend...I'm prepared to meet The Lord when He calls me."

He continued. "Lucas, I wish to give you a parting gift to help you remember our brief visit together these last twenty-four hours. It is a special prayer bracelet, a kind of Greek rosary called a *chotki*. It was given to me by my mentor monk, Brother Nikolas, when he was dying. I was about your age then. Here, look..."

Gabriel offered me a small rubbed-worn wooden box with a carved cross on its lid, and a dull brass clasp. I carefully opened it. Inside was an azure-colored silk cloth. On the cloth rested a bracelet with eighteen pearl-sized blue agate beads and a tiny silver crucifix.

"I recognized your pure and sincere heart when we first met, Lucas Mercer. When you admitted your desire to learn more about faith and even unashamedly shared your strong curiosity regarding cemeteries, I knew this prayer bracelet was meant for you. Now, you must realize that it has a unique ability to teach you some remarkable things. To use it properly, you must fast for twenty-four hours and spiritually prepare yourself -- alone and in silence. Ask God to guide you. He always will. Then place your left hand, with the sacred *chotki* clutched in it, over your heart. With your right hand, immediately touch any tombstone or grave marker in any cemetery. You will receive a very brief but important message from the one who is buried there. Truly! A lesson will be given to you to contemplate and perhaps heed. You will not be able to ask the dead person any questions, regretfully, but he or she will speak a useful truth to you."

I was very surprised after hearing these unusual instructions. Brother Gabriel, his pale blue eyes moist with emotion, gently embraced me, then said "Go with God now, my son..." He slowly turned and shuffled away. I grasped his special gift and left Simonopetra Monastery shortly afterwards, and caught the next bus away from Mt. Athos. I then made my way back by various trains to Spain in time for my flight home. What an unexpected and amazing experience!

Needless to say, I was anxious to try out the authenticity of Gabriel's rare gift. But first, once back in Green Bay, I collaborated with Chris Reyes at company headquarters to help further facilitate the eventual new sales of Nuke'T energy drink in Spain, Italy, and Croatia. I got both a substantial raise in pay and a big promotion, as promised -- but I told neither Chris nor my fiancee, Erin, about my incredible adventure to Mt. Athos. (My Greek side trip was paid for out of my own pocket, and was not put on my company's expense account for business trip transportation, food and lodging.)

It was on my first free weekend in July that I drove the three and a half hours from Green Bay to Evergreen Park, Illinois. I checked into a Day's Inn and followed Brother Gabriel's instructions regarding the *chotki* rosary bracelet: a twenty-four hour fast with episodes of earnest silent prayer and contemplation. After that not unpleasant ritual was completed, I ravenously ate a large meal at a nearby Denny's, then went to visit my parent's graves at St. Mary Catholic Cemetery. It had been a few years since they were re-interred, so as to be side by side, which was the last time I had been here.

Obtaining a take-away map at the cemetery's main office, I went to Section KK, Block 34, Lot 6, and Graves 7 & 8. My Mother had died at age forty-six when I was fifteen, and my Father had died at age fifty-four when I was twenty-three, just four years ago. They had simple, flat rectangular markers with their names and dates. My family could never afford costly upright marble headstones.

Holding the *chotki* to my heart with my left hand, I knelt down on one knee first by my Mother's grave, then placed my right hand on her marker.

I was stunned to faintly hear her actual voice!

"Oh Lucas, I am so sorry for having been such a bad Mother to you and your two sisters, and for not giving each of you the love and attention you needed and deserved. I was selfishly absorbed in my own life's problems. Please, I beg you, forgive me...and don't hate me!"

I gasped in shock and disbelief.

Gradually recovering after this overwhelming moment, I turned next to my Father's grave marker, crouching down and likewise touching it with my right hand.

"Son, I am ashamed that I was such a poor father. I never taught you manly things, like how to play sports, or how to make home or car repairs. I was a pathetic role model. I wish I could do it over again, only the right way. I always loved you, but I never told you in words. I'm so sorry. Please, Lucas, forgive me!" His voice was likewise pleading, eerie, and unmistakable.

What could I do after both of these encounters but cry? I stood there, frozen, chilled even in the humid August heat, and quietly sobbed for a few minutes. Finally, I wiped my reddened eyes, then left Saint Mary.

My next stop had to be the grave of my first true love, Emma Wright, who was buried in Arlington Cemetery in nearby Elmhurst, IL. She had died in a terrible freak car accident -- hit by a drunk driver on an icy, snowy road one dismal December night -- when she was only nineteen. We had seriously discussed getting married someday during our three-year romance, such as all teenagers in love do. Her shocking death was still a painful ache to my heart during my darkest moments alone.

Of course, I remembered exactly where my Emma was laid to rest. But while heading in that direction, I saw a curious-looking tombstone with a carved baby angel and the name Victoria Lee (1930-1999) inscribed on it. Somehow drawn to it, I knelt down and placed my right hand on its upright grey stone while holding the holy *chotki* in my left hand over my heart.

"I had an abortion... I killed my innocent baby...The procedure prevented me from ever having another child. My husband abandoned me. My rest of my life was lost and lonely," her low anguished voice confessed.

Not knowing what else to do next, I stumbled toward a different grave, with an older and more faded upright stone, that of another stranger. This was Elmer Franklin (1898-1979). I was also drawn to touch it. This was what I heard from his pained distant voice:

"My older brother, Earl, and I had a falling out over being in love with the same woman when we were both young. I held a grudge toward him for decades, and refused to communicate with him, such was my sinful pride. He begged me to see him one last time when he was dying from cancer, all alone in a hospital. But I refused to go. I am so sorry that I was heartless and stubborn...I wish I had done the right thing and had gone to him!"

Next to Elmer's grave was a small American flag and some crude plastic flowers in a cheap vase. Here rested U.S. Army Private Enrique Rodriguez (1950-1971). Not really being able to stop myself, I reached out and also touched his flat marker.

"Why did our country have to go to war in Vietnam? I killed fourteen gooks there -- men I didn't even know, or have any real grudge against. My left leg got blown off later by a land mine. I was shipped home, but suffered from terrifying nightmares and flashbacks. I died of a drug overdose while living homeless in a back alley."

Even with my mind reeling, I decided to do just one more stranger's grave before going to hear from my Emma. It was inscribed with the name Emmett Rhodes (1902-1939). This is what he told me:

"I secretly stole money from the large banking corporation where I worked in Tulsa during the Great Depression. But when I realized that I had also -- because of subsequent necessary home foreclosures -- thrown poor, innocent, starving families out of their houses, I took my own life while awaiting trial, after confessing to my awful crime."

Four total strangers, each telling four tragic tales. I looked across the well-tended grass and trees at the hundreds of cemetery graves. I realized that each deceased person had something important to teach me! I was quite emotionally exhausted, but pressed on to Emma Wright's final resting spot.

I vividly remembered her parents calling me with the horrifying news of their only daughter's death, and how I felt lost and empty inside at both her funeral and her burial. Yet, after eight years, here I was again, wanting to hear her welcoming voice and feel her real love inside me once more. Clutching the special *chotki* over my aching heart, I slowly touched her grey gravestone with my right hand, while kneeling down on both knees. She was there for me, and spoke...

"Oh, Lucas! How I miss you! You were the only true love of my life. I hated to leave you the way I did, but it was not my choice. My only wish for you is that you be happy. But I must also warn you: your bride-to-be will cause you much sorrow and pain. Be aware and be careful, my love! She is secretly jealous of you and your many fine aspirations, Lucas. She hopes to frustrate all of your future plans, so as to make you miserable like herself. You must believe what I am telling you, Lucas...I send you now all of my love, forever...my dearest, dearest one...Farewell..."

Hearing her voice again, so clear and sweet, was like a soothing balm on my wounded soul. While still kneeling, I tenderly kissed her gravestone and said a deep, sincere prayer of thanksgiving for her message. Her words were pure love, but they were also a mysterious warning of sorts. What exactly did they portend? I replayed the entire day's experiences over and over again in my head as I drove back north to Green Bay.

Things went well at work during the next several weeks, but I still kept my secret cemetery experiences strictly to myself. I slipped out and visited some local city cemeteries, however, on a few Saturdays when I was not with my fiancee, Erin -- just to make sure that the holy *chotki* still worked. After the ritualistic fasting and praying, I touched several graves at random, and heard some more tragic but also some hopeful and uplifting messages.

Some happier-sounding and positive voices shared such lessons as:

a poor widowed woman proud of raising her eight children successfully into adulthood, for "they never went hungry, and always wore clean clothes, and never missed a day of school";

a Hungarian immigrant man who attended medical school in Philadelphia, became the first doctor in his family, then went on to practice in Green Bay;

another woman who served in the Peace Corps in Zambia, then came home and founded an orphanage for displaced African child refugees;

and a bachelor businessman who anonymously gave away his surplus wealth to the Salvation Army and to library literacy campaigns.

Soon, my September wedding came around, and Erin Sullivan became my wife. Our life together started off smoothly enough, but then little problems appeared, and seemed to magnify over the next several months. Lots of arguing about money -- she was a rabid, reckless spender, wanting more of this or that, or wanting the latest this or that. Our credit card bills skyrocketed. When I tried to put the brakes on her wasteful habits, Erin went into rages and tantrums. I tried to explain to my bride that we needed to save more money if we ever wanted to afford a nice house and get out of living in a cramped rented apartment. Sadly, our marriage was turning out to be nothing like I expected. I felt trapped and miserable. Our once-amorous love life in the bedroom likewise deteriorated. Erin complained that I wasn't focusing all of my attention and energies exclusively on her. "What about ME?" she wailed, whenever I wanted some quiet alone time or asked for a brief private weekend activity with my -- by now, understandably sympathetic -- coworkers at Nuke'T.

I started to mull over what my *chotki* experience with my beloved Emma had warned me about. Was what she predicted actually happening now? Still, I told no one about my Greek rosary bracelet, and kept it carefully hidden -- its ancient wooden box wrapped in a clean hand towel and secreted in the bottom tray of my large red toolbox, which I kept in our apartment's garage. Erin would never find it there, even if she snooped around, if ever looking for nothing in particular.

One of the few activities that my wife and I still enjoyed doing together was bicycling on flat 'rails-to-trails' bike paths around the Midwest. So when summer rolled around again the following year, we loaded our bikes on our Subaru Outback SUV rack and drove from Green Bay to Manitowoc, Wisconsin. Once there, we boarded the S.S. Badger car ferry, which took a four-hour trip across the entire width of Lake Michigan, terminating in Ludington, Michigan. From there, we would get off and drive inland for some splendid and scenic bike trails -- stopping in quaint small towns for rest, refreshment, and overnight Air B&B lodgings.

Trying to salvage our crippled marriage, I secretly brought along my sacred *chotki* on this particular trip. I decided to tell Erin the whole story (except for my special episode with Emma), starting with my extraordinary meeting with Brother Gabriel at Mt. Athos, and outlining the several voice encounters at various cemeteries with both my parents and with deceased total strangers.

In the middle of our Lake Michigan voyage -- which was like being on a vast sea, with no land in sight -- I told my wife the entire saga, then produced and carefully handed her the beautiful blue agate Orthodox rosary bracelet.

"Well, that was certainly a very weird story, Lucas," she declared, fondling the sacred *chotki* in her fingers. "But this odd object seems to be yet another thing that is coming between us. It's taking your time and attention away from me, don't you see? So frankly I don't think you should have it anymore."

In shocked disbelief with what she had just said, I was even more appalled seconds later when Erin casually flipped the rosary over the ferry boat's metal railing, into the cold blue waves. I gasped in horror, screaming "NO!!" But it was too late. My deranged wife looked at me with a disgusting mixture of malice and triumph, her green eyes defiant.

We divorced three months later. No surprise, right? Thankfully, there were no children to fight over, but Erin cleaned me out of half of my assets. A real financial nightmare that I am still struggling with...

In late October, however, I got a letter with a Greek stamp on it, postmarked from Mt. Athos. When I opened it, I saw that it had been hand-printed -- in rather shaky lettering -- on Simonopetra Monastery stationary. It read:

"Dear Lucas --

By the time you receive this note, I will have already left this world to be with Our Lord in Heaven. I hope you have learned some important lessons about life during your cemetery visits. One day, you will have a son -- I saw his face in a dream -- and you can give him the holy rosary bracelet when the time comes.

Take care and be well, my friend. May God bless you now and forever.

Yours in Christ, Gabriel"

Five years later, part of the good Brother's prediction did indeed come true. I had happily remarried, and my new wife, Bernadette, delivered me a son which, fittingly, we decided to name Gabriel.

But sadly -- as you know, though the monk obviously couldn't foretell -- the sacred *chotki* that he had given me was long gone, and was never seen again...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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