

Excerpt from “The Man in the Mirror”



They send the Bulgarian on vacation.

Yes, Raisa Bronstein and her daughter, Inessa, take a shot in the dark, and it works. They decide to pack the nonexistent man’s metaphorical bags and ship him off to Timbuktu. That is, they send him to Bulgaria and make him out to be some sort of glorified vigneron, ready for the world’s cafes to brim with his own ambrosial product. They likely do not know that Bulgaria had been the world’s fourth-largest wine exporting country in the 1980s. They likely do not know, with the fall of communism, land for grape-planting was dramatically reduced, constricting Bulgaria’s wine industry like a Boa coiled around its prey. And they likely do not know that these days, wine production in Bulgaria is again on the rise.

So, we could say that the Bulgarian’s departure comes at the most opportune moment. *Carpe diem*. It’s time to make wine. We could say these things, but they’re only half-truths.

The news of the Bulgarian’s departure is delivered to Mark Bronstein when he is again standing, statuesque, in the center of the bathroom (that is, in his shared space with the Bulgarian) so that only half of his frame is captured in the mirror. This time, perhaps all too conveniently for Raisa’s intents and purposes, Mark does not face the mirror. It is unclear why, but he stares at the toilet instead. It sits just two feet across from the mirror and another two feet to the left, so one might imagine that the world in the mirror and the world in the remainder of the bathroom are separate, but, for Mark Bronstein, they now seem to have converged into one. Just an oblique space filled with the shadows of people who are not there and have never been

there—a space where invisible friends come and go, leaving only Mark Bronstein behind. Always behind.

He stares at the toilet as his wife delivers the news of the Bulgarian's departure. She stands in the doorway, out of reach of the mirror's threats. As a symbol of false composure, her hands are folded firmly in front of her, demure and intentional. But inside her hands is a thin red string, scrunched up like a wad of paper. At some point, she likely wore the string as a bracelet around her left wrist, knotted seven times as is the Kabbalist Jewish tradition, even though she is not a Kabbalist herself. In ancient Jewish rituals, it's said that women would tie a red string around the tomb of Rachel and knot it seven times to endow the string with protective energy and good luck. Rachel, as the Bible story goes, was Jacob's favorite wife, and she gave birth to his favorite son, Joseph. She died during childbirth; her second son, Benjamin, miraculously survived. She represents the Jewish Mother, the Matriarch, which is said to be why, after praying around her tomb, the women would then remove the string from the tomb and cut it into bracelet-sized portions to be worn on their left wrists—the side of the body that is supposed to receive blessings and abundance—as a charm for fertility *and* for protection from the evil eye.

Yet, in theory, the red string should never leave your wrist—not if it is expected to work. Cut it off and ruin the protection; it's also probably bad luck. If it falls off too soon, that's a bad omen. But if it falls off due to natural wear, often after months or even years, you're in the clear. It means the bracelet has done its job—has reached its maximum evil-absorbing capacity and can no longer hold any more negativity. It is time for a new bracelet. No need to mourn the old bracelet, no need for some sort of ritual burial. Out with the old, on with the new.