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HALF

It's about seven o'clock in the evening on the day of the funeral, when Stefan corners me in the pantry and says: 'So. What are we going to do about Vera?'

#

The winter sky is low and the ground is covered in ice.

The funeral is crowded with people like it's a market day, everyone gathered to say goodbye to my father and find out more about how he died. I stand on the marble floor of the small chapel, surrounded by relatives. I watch the crowd outside form a procession for the long march towards the open grave. The chapel has no doors, offers no shelter.

When we return to the house, I lay down on the sofa, shivering. I want a cigarette but someone covers me with a blanket and says: 'You've had such a shock. You should sleep now.' And I do, in the middle of the room where people come and go, eat and drink and talk about my father as if he's still around.

I am woken up by the sound of someone calling, *Vera, Vera!* My mother is sitting on the very edge of the sofa by my feet, but she doesn't answer. I sit up, squinting, trying to adjust my eyes to the lights. For a moment I think I am still in my flat in England, then I remember where I am, and why. Outside is completely dark. The house is hot and stifling

and I almost rip the blanket trying to free myself from its grip. I look at my mother, drugged up and silent, and decide not to disturb her.

‘What needs doing?’ I ask. My aunties bustle in and out of the kitchen, carrying trays with hot food. People are sitting on chairs around the edges of the room, talking in low tones of respect made louder by curiosity and a few impertinent jokes, as always. You cannot tell Serbs to stay serious. Life is too serious for that.

One of the women sends me to find some wine. I wonder what time everyone will finally leave. And how we will spend the night in the empty house, my mother and I, just the two of us.

In the pantry I move sacks of flour, winter stock of apples and potatoes, to get to the bottles behind. It’s expensive business, burying someone. By the time you have fed the hordes, there is little left for a gravestone. But we will worry about that later.

As I bend over to reach the bottle, I hear the door open but I don’t look to see who it is. I don’t really care, about that or anything else. But then his voice makes me straighten up and turn around.

‘You did well today,’ Stefan says to me.

‘Did I?’ I say, eager to please him. He looks so much like my father that tears start to press urgently from behind my eye lids, but I blink them away.

‘You did cry though,’ he says. ‘Our father wouldn’t have wanted us to cry today. He would have wanted dignity. Restraint.’

‘It was the poem,’ I say. ‘The poem Mirko read. It finished me.’

‘Yesenin has that effect on people,’ says my brother. My half brother.

I show him the bottle. 'They're waiting for me. Did you want something from here?'

And that's when he steps closer to me, looks me straight in the face and asks me the question.

#

The guests have gone.

'Where do you want to sleep?' my mother asks in an exhausted voice.

'I'll crash on the sofa, mum.' My old bedroom has been turned into a make-shift store room, unheated and convenient for the keeping of extra cakes and meat which couldn't fit into the pantry.

'Do you want to sleep in the bed with me?' my mother asks.

'Honestly, the sofa is fine.'

'It would be nice to hold you, darling. Like when you were little.' But her tone says it is her who needs holding.

We get ready for bed, neither of us wanting any food, feeling queasy on too many cigarettes. I have no idea what tomorrow will feel like. If the world will actually still be here.

When the heating goes off and the winter starts to creep in from the outside, we get under the wool duvet and lay very close to each other to keep warm. I don't feel this is my mother's body any more, the soft, protective body I remember from childhood. This is some other woman, bony, bent. I don't want to hug her. I can feel the springs on the mattress, I try to manoeuvre my hips around them. My feet are cold.

My mother breaks the silence.

‘Stefan will want the house,’ she says. ‘He’ll want to sell it and get his own half.’

‘He can’t have it,’ I say.

‘Well, he can, according to the law.’

‘But we’ve fixed that, haven’t we?’ I feel a surge of panic in my chest. ‘Haven’t we? Dad has signed it over to you?’

‘He has.’

‘Then we have nothing to worry about.’ Relief makes me feel sleepy at last. I don’t want to think about this any more.

‘I think he will contest it.’ My mother shakes her head. ‘I think he will take us to court. I just have this feeling.’

I suddenly remember, understand. I sit up in bed, my heart dissolving into palpitations. I cannot breathe.

‘What is it?!’

‘Earlier tonight,’ I say, at last. ‘He asked me what we’re going to do about you.’

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I regret them. But it’s too late, now.

The night around us is dense and quiet. Somewhere in our neighbourhood, I can hear a pack of stray dogs barking, fighting over scraps of food which are so hard to find in the dead of winter.

My mother is calmer than I expect her to be. ‘So what did you say?’

‘Nothing.’

‘How could you say nothing when he asked you a question? Did you just walk away?’

‘Actually, that’s exactly what I did. I pushed past him and walked out of the pantry.’

‘I cannot believe he’s that same boy I used to bring here for some bread and milk because his own mother didn’t feed him.’

She looks at me in the dark, or at least I think she’s looking at me. She could be just staring into the blackness.

‘Why did you not say something?’ she wants to know.

‘I wasn’t sure what he meant. I thought he was just being stupid. You know how he is.’

‘He is anything but stupid,’ my mother whispers, almost to herself.

The energy of my father pulsates in the room, but what it is trying to say to us, we cannot tell.

#

In the morning, my mother makes Serbian coffee for us, even stronger and blacker than usual. It burns a pit in my stomach. We get dressed in the cold and it’s not until after breakfast that the wooden stove has managed to heat the house up. We need a canary in here, I think, to tell us when to get out.

I want to go to my father’s fresh grave and replace the flowers which would have frozen over night.

‘Not today,’ my mother says. ‘We’re going to see a lawyer.’

I’m speechless.

‘We don’t need a lawyer,’ I eventually manage to say. ‘The house is yours. Dad signed it over to you. That’s it.’

‘He has friends in the police.’

‘Who?’

‘Your half-brother. They will come, at night, when I’m alone. They will break in and they will beat me up,’ she says.

I don’t know whether to give her more Valium or whether she’s had too many chemicals already.

‘That is crazy nonsense. Stefan would do no such thing. You are completely over-reacting,’ I tell her.

‘Am I? Two years ago, his mother had a burst appendix. She was taken to the hospital by an ambulance. Do you know what he did?’

I don’t, but I am scared to imagine.

‘He came over to see us, your father and me. He told us it was for an early celebration. We thought he was getting married, or something – had maybe fathered a child. But he said – his mother was about to die. He was going to sell her flat, pay off his debts, move to Belgrade. Start a new life.’

I try to imagine him sitting on our old sofa, smiling, while his mother is on her deathbed. I can’t.

‘She didn’t die,’ is all I can say.

‘She didn’t. She lived. But now your father has. So here we are.’

All around the room there are relics of the past life. Photos of my father fishing, wearing army-issue dungarees which make him look like a car mechanic. Photos of him on stage. Earl of Gloucester in King Lear. Different characters he’s played, the president, the fool, the political dissident, and now for some reason he’s decided to play a dead man. That’s the only way I can explain it to myself.

‘Let’s go to see the lawyer,’ I say.

#

The lawyer says we should hunt my brother down, smoke him out like a fox from its den. Make him show his colours. Make him play his cards.

I am staring at his crimson cheeks and sweaty bald patch, I’m confused by all these metaphors. The lawyer to me seems like someone who eats a fatty diet of American TV.

‘We’re going to send him a letter,’ the lawyer says, ‘telling him that his father’s property needs to be split between the descendents and he needs to come here for a chat.’

Both my mother and I are confused. I try to explain, again: ‘But that’s exactly what we’re trying to avoid. There is no property to split. It’s in my mother’s name now.’

‘Yes, but we have to give him a bait. We have to get him to *ask* for the house, once he sees that other things are being divided. Then, we tell him the house is not up for grabs. He’ll either make his move and take you to court straight away, or he’ll walk away into the sunset. Either way, you don’t spend the next two years in limbo, just waiting to see what he might

do.’ I don’t really follow but then he adds: ‘Find something small, insignificant that you can split with him. Your father’s clothes, maybe.’

I am about to argue that my father’s clothes, which still smell of him, are not insignificant and that my mother is not about to ransack his wardrobe to use as a bargaining chip, when my mother speaks up:

‘I’ll do it,’ she says. ‘Draft the letter.’

#

We are going back to the house in a taxi. Today seems warmer and the streets are full of slush. Everything has turned to dirt, to mud.

It’s almost noon when we get back. People will soon start pouring in again, ready for the lunchtime shift of feeding and talking.

‘Mum, listen,’ I say when we’ve taken off our coats and dirty boots. ‘Whatever Stefan meant by what he said, he shouldn’t find out what we’ve done from a lawyer.’

My mother doesn’t reply, she just walks into the kitchen and pours some water into the small coffee pot.

‘Mum, we are family.’

Suddenly she turns on me. ‘We’re not a family. If his whore of a mother had let him live with us, we might have been one—’ She stops for a moment, thinks about something, then says: ‘What do you mean, what we’ve *done*?’

‘Signing the house over to you.’

‘Do you feel I should just let him take half of my own home?’

I raise my hands in an act of surrender. ‘Don’t shout. Please. Maybe I was wrong to tell you what he said in the pantry. Maybe he didn’t—’

My mother shrieks. “Wrong? So you should have kept it from me? Your father was still settling underground and Stefan was already working out where to put me, which nursing home, which lunatic asylum—’ She’s choking on tears, she can’t speak any more, she’s got a lit match in her hand and I can see it burning down, very close to her fingers, but I cannot move at all.

‘I fed him, when his own mother didn’t,’ she says. ‘Do you understand that?’

‘I know. I’m just saying – he’s so damaged—’

‘If I could go back in time, to that child – but there was nothing else anyone could have done for him. You think that I should now pay the price, for the childhood he’s had?’

Through the kitchen window I can see the first cars, which are starting to park outside the house. Soon we will be talking, serving, comforting, without being comforted.

‘All I’m saying is maybe I made a mistake. It’s still not too late to find out what he’s really thinking, before we get the *law* involved, for God’s sake.’

‘The *law* would have been on his side. Whose side are you going to be on, that’s the real question.’ She goes to open the door to the first visitor.

#

It's the second day after the funeral. The spirit of my father will be travelling soon. It can't wait much longer to see what happens in this small and angry world of ours.

I am sitting on the floor, surrounded by the mementoes of my father's time on Earth. On one of his jumpers I find a short grey hair. The hair seems to me so alive. His shoes have kept the shape of his feet and I hold them carefully, trying to feel the man who wore them until just a few days ago. I look at the pictures of our life, black and white when I was little, always going somewhere, always on my father's shoulders. Amongst the photos, I see some of Stefan. The rare birthday parties he came to, I the beaming centre of attention, he a longing onlooker. I can see it so clearly in these images, for the first time.

The evening comes and my mother is lying on the sofa, her eyes carefully closed lest the world should come in. Outside it's been snowing for hours.

'I think I'm going to book my return flight soon. I can't stay much longer,' I say.

'Had enough of home?'

Before I start to protest, she shakes her head, her eyes still closed, and says: 'Who could blame you.'

I am trying to make myself think of food, get up and go to the kitchen and make something for both of us to eat, when I hear footsteps crunching on the fresh snow outside the house. There is something about the steps, about their rhythm, a familiar lilt. A shiver starts in my tail bone and works its way up my back and neck. I do not believe in ghosts and I know those footsteps are not my father's. But there is only one other person who it can be.

My mother is sitting up now, eyes huge on her gaunt face, chest rising and falling rapidly. 'Lock the front door,' she whispers urgently.

I hesitate.

‘Lock the front door! Can you not tell who it is?’

I can, but I am waiting for him to knock now. I open my mouth to say something, but my mother motions me to be quiet. She’s shaking her finger at me and mouthing *We are not in*. I want this to stop. I want to get up and open the door to my half-brother and invite him in, show him the photos I’ve been looking at, ask him about his memories, whatever’s left of them after his childhood expired and moulded him into the man he is now.

But he doesn’t knock. Second pass, minutes. There is no sound except the murmur of the falling snow. Finally we hear him walking away. My mother leans back on the sofa, covers her eyes with a shaky hand. I count to fifty, then go and open the door.

A tiny bunch of winter flowers is on the front step, slowly getting covered by snowflakes.

#

The next time I see Stefan is in the waiting room at the court house. I don’t know whether he looks at me, tries to catch my eye, because I never lift my head. Inside, there are many papers to sign. He walks out with a few small things that used to belong to my father. Neither of us walk out unharmed.

From time to time I still fly back to see my mother, old now and glad for the company. Sometimes walking through town I see in the distance my brother and his sons, on

errands or coming back from school. The boys don't know who it is, this woman who looks at them from across the street, while they walk on.

THE END