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While Roland Gaross Was On

Translated from Croatian by Tomislav Kuzmanović

The whole morning people passed through their apartment in an old, stone covered building. Neighbors, colleagues from work, old friends from school, members of the volunteer fire brigade. Jure stood in the hallway, next to his brother and his two sons. All of them told him the same: "My condolences."

His answer was always different.

"Ivan, there's prosciutto, it's not bad, not bad at all. Help yourself."

"Bah, it's okay, come on, forget about prosciutto now," answered Ivan holding his right palm with both hands.

"Hey Sandra, has your Golf arrived? You can't go wrong with it, I tell you. True, it's a bit more expensive, but it's German."

"Excuse me, what? F... I can't come to the funeral in the afternoon, I'm working, you know what's my boss like. Hold on, ok."

"Ok, don't worry, it doesn't matter."

"Aunt Mare, how are you? I hear Tino's doing great at college."

"Jurica, never mind Tino and his college now. But yes, yes, he's doing great. I've always said..."

Jure's wife, Vjera, put on a white apron with a checkered lining so that she doesn't get her mourning clothes dirty. She washed the dishes, cut prosciutto and cheese, drained liquid out of jars of olives and gherkins through her tightly closed fingers. Occasionally, when people came to her, she wiped her hands in her apron, shrugged her shoulders and always offered the same answer: "Thank you. What can you do, poor thing, she suffered. And she was old. Everyone's end eventually comes, ours will too. Help yourself."

When the people left and the crowd grew smaller, Jure, his two sons and his brother sat at the table.

"Didn't I tell you not to take the white off the prosciutto? What did we say, what do you do when you're in the fifth grade?"

"You eat the whole prosciutto."

"So, what are you doing?"

Jure's younger son put the fat he had taken off the red slice of prosciutto, placed a gherkin on it and rolled it.

"What about olives?"

"I don't like olives, dad."

"Ok, but you'd have to start liking them. From the eighth grade that's a must."

His older son put an olive in his mouth, made an indentation on his tongue and kept it in that indentation pretending to be chewing. Vjera passed by him, caressed his cheek, and he spit the whole, untouched olive in her palm. She pressed it with the tiny muscles in the middle of her palm and threw it in the trash.

"Hmm, isn't mommy treating him nicely?"

Those words came out of Jure's mouth as prosciutto, cheese, olives and bread got into them. They came out, and the food came in. Crowded as the bus door.

Jure's brother Peter was sitting on one of the chairs they had borrowed for guests.

"Vjera, do you need a hand with something?"

Vjera first glanced at her husband and then lowered her eyes to the floor. "No, no. You just sit. I can do everything on my own."

"I know. But you should rest a bit."

"It's ok, leave it, I can do it."

With her eyes fixed to the floor she went to the sink, took the rag and started wiping the empty tin surface. When she glanced at Petar at the corner of her eye, he was looking at his shoes. She threw another look at her husband. He was just finishing his meal.

After the meal, all of them except for Petar went to their bedroom where Vjera had prepared clothes they had bought or borrowed in the last couple of days. On the hangers attached to window handles there were three black jackets, and on the bed there were three pairs of pants neatly folded and three ties with already tied, although somewhat loose, knots. The hangers with three white shirts were arranged on the door of a three-piece wardrobe. Vjera tightened her younger son's belt, adjusted her older son's hair, tightened her husband's tie and handed him a handkerchief.

"What's that for?"

"Put it in your pocket. You'll need it when they put her down."

Unwillingly Jure put the handkerchief in his pocket and took it out before it touched the seam, as if something had pricked him at the bottom. "No, it makes my pocket look swollen."

The last one to dress, very quickly, was Vjera.

"Will you put some make-up on?"

"Huh? Should I? I don't know, it's not right. It'll smear all over my face."

"Why would it?"

Barely touching her eyelashes, Vjera put on her waterproof mascara.

"There, see, you look nicer."

"Let's go, it's time," she said, paying no attention to the compliment.

"Let's go," Petar said too.

Jure resolutely opened the door. His two sons came out after him, and Vjera offered the handkerchiefs that had stayed in her hand to Petar. He took them and smiled as much as it was possible and allowed in such an occasion.

Vjera felt a bit relieved when she saw that a lot of people had gathered. The noise that could be heard as they arrived and parked the car went silent when they opened the door.

The priest greeted them, shook hands with all of them and walked them to a small chapel. They sat down in the first row. Older women crowded the door, after them came their daughters and brides, and then the men.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today, at this sad moment, to say goodbye to our deeply loved and departed Ivka who had given two sons to this world..."

Jure leaned forward and put his hands on his knees, while Vjera, at the mention of his mother's name, took him by his forearm. He flinched as if he'd felt a fly. She removed her hand, and he sat up straight and crossed his arms on his chests. She sighed and sunk into the pew. She felt as Jure's brother sighed deeply, politely, quietly and almost unnoticeably. Her two sons joined their hands piously, just as their grandmother had taught them. Her eyes smiled unintentionally.

"... as she indebted us all with her life. May she rest in peace."

After these words the bell on the small church sounded, and the cart with the coffin headed for the grave.

Vjera's sister took the boys away from the grave. Vjera stood between her husband and his brother. The

undertakers, their faces perfectly calm, waited for the priest's final words and then slowly, evenly, and with skill started lowering the coffin.

Jure squeezed through his teeth: "Fucking life!" And Petar handed him a handkerchief. Jure paid no attention to him, he just met the tear at the corner of his eye with his index finger and wiped it as if taking the gums out of his eye.

In two cars, just as they had come, the grieving went home.

"What are you going to do with him?" she asked when they came close to their house.

"Nothing, what can I do now. Let him stay, it's late for him to drive back."

"And where's he going to sleep?"

"I don't know where. You figure that one out. You said he could stay with us."

"Only in your mother's bed."

"You did it, so it's up to you."

Closer relatives gathered once again in their apartment. After two days of whispering, their voices once again became audible. The children turned on the TV, Vjera ate hot soup and talked to her sister. Jure's brother greeted relatives and Jure asked the kids: "What are you watching?"

"Nothing, a cartoon," they were still whispering.

"Is there anything else on?"

The younger boy switched the channel.

"Tennis."

"Who's playing?"

"It's Roland Garros."

"So, then?"

"Tennis it is," said the older son loudly and in the next room his mother made a little whirlpool in his plate as she circled her spoon in the soup.

Jure fell asleep in front of the TV, Vjera apologized to the last guests and finally locked the door. She took her brother-in-law in a small room.

"You're sure this will be ok?"

"Yes, yes."

"Should I blow out the candle?"

"No, it's ok."

"Better I do... it eats air when it burns."

"Ok then, blow it out."

She circled the bed and blowing lightly extinguished the candle. She quickly wetted her fingers and pressed the burning thread. "So that it doesn't smoke. I've changed the linens. And turned the mattress over."

"It's ok, it's not my first."

"I know it isn't... but still... you know."

"Vjera, it's ok, come on, don't you worry."

"Eh, ok then, good night."

"Good night."

Vjera headed for the door and put her hand on the doorknob. Then she turned around.

"Are you going to be cold? Want me to bring you another blanket?"

"No, it won't, it's hot. Warm weather got early this year, no?"

"Eh, yes, yes, early. That's why she... It still didn't get warm up there with you?"

“So, so, it’s a bit warmer.”

“Well, there you go. Here it came early. Yes, yes, this year it came early.”

She stood at the door holding the doorknob in her hand. She was looking at the wardrobe, the floor, the picture of the Virgin Mary on the wall. He was sitting on the bed with his bag under his feet. Then she glanced at him with her swift, clear eyes.

“Oh, Pero, look at me, you must be tired and here I go bothering you. You just go to sleep. Good night.”

“Good night.”

“I’ll hear you in the morning when you wake up. There, good night now.”

“Good night.”

She closed the door and stood there for a moment. Then she went to wake up her three sleeping men and talk them into washing their teeth and moving to their beds.

She was the last one to get in bed. She snuck into her half of the bed and waited for her dream, with her eyes open.

“Come closer, what’s going on?” Jure asked.

“Nothing, nothing, I thought you were asleep.”

“Come here.”

Vjera turned to her husband and wanted to put her arms around him. He grabbed her ass. She flinched.

“Jure, what are you doing?”

“Come on, come here. I want you.”

“But Jure! We can’t do it tonight. Come on, calm down.”

She removed his hands from her ass and put them around her waist. She moved her head to his chest and drew her fingers through his hair. She caressed him. She could feel his warm breath on her breasts. It seemed to her he sighed. She pressed her head closer and kissed him keeping her lips in his hair for a while. He bit her nipple.

“Jure!” she almost shouted getting out of his embrace.

“What now?”

“Your mother died!”

They sat up on their bed and leaned on their pillows.

“I know we’re not supposed to. It just came to me... I don’t know.”

“It’s not easy, it’s not. But she suffered enough. And you and me with her.”

“Yes, it’s okay. What can we do now, we have to keep on living.”

“Are you ok?”

“There she goes again. No, of course I’m not. But do we have to talk about it? I’m not the first whose mother died old and sick.”

“I saw you cried.”

“I didn’t. I did a little. But the tear didn’t escape me. Uh, wouldn’t you be happy if it did.”

“Pero cried.”

“That’s his business.”

At the mention of his brother he sunk into the bed again, turned his back on Vjera and adjusted his pillow with his hands and his head. Vjera stayed awake, her back against the pillow. She heard the church clock. She heard the neighbors walking in their apartment. She smelled the first bread from the nearby bakery. She saw the line of light under the door. She heard the bathroom door open. Quietly she snuck out of her bed.

“Where are going?” Jure asked without moving.

“I didn’t change the towels.”

“I don’t believe he came without his towel. Go to sleep.”

Vjera came back to bed. She turned towards the wall. Jure rolled around and turned towards her again. He drew her near him from behind. She could feel it “came to him” again.

“Jure, that’s not ok,” she said as she obediently lied on her back.

“I’ve heard somewhere,” he stopped in the middle of his sentence for a moment as he helped himself with his fingers to get into her, “that it is.”

She put her hands on his back and waited for the end. It seemed to her that later, when he turned to his side, he again, with the same movement as he had done in the afternoon, picked something about his eye. She waited. It didn’t happen again. She went back to that little piece of the bed where she knew he wouldn’t reach her in his sleep.

The mattress’ edge cut into her cheek. It seemed to her she was getting more air that way. She heard the sound of the toilet. She heard the shower. She heard the door to her late mother-in-law’s room open and close. She heard the zipper of Pero’s bag. She smelled another batch of bread. She heard her husband sleep. She heard the church clock strike full hour. She heard the bakers when they came out to light a cigarette. She saw the night fill with light. She heard the full hour. She heard the door to her mother-in-law’s room. She saw a line of light under the door. She heard her husband sleep.

She pulled out one leg, then another, and lowered them on the floor without making a sound. She removed the blanket making sure not to touch Jure. She sat up with the strength of her stomach muscles. She pushed away from the bedsides with her hands and slowly lifted her torso. She took her bathrobe from the wardrobe, barefoot she quietly passed by the bed, pressed the doorknob for some time and finally left the room. In the hallway she put on her bathrobe. She tightened it firmly. Pero sat in the kitchen fully dressed.

“Hey,” she whispered, “want some coffee?”

“No, it’s ok. I should get going.”

“You’ll be able to drive? Did you catch enough sleep?”

“I fell asleep. That’s what’s important. When I get tired, I’ll stop somewhere along the road and take a nap.”

“Eh, good thinking. That’s what I always tell Jure. But you could still use some coffee. It’ll wake you up.”

“No, Vjera, thank you. I’ll get going. I’ll have one along the way.”

“Let me at least make you a sandwich. There’s loads of things left. Huh, what do you say? Some cheese and prosciutto?”

“No, really, it’s not necessary. I’d rather get going.”

“Well, it’s for the road. Come on.”

She didn’t wait for him to answer. She washed her hands with a couple of drops of detergent and began taking wraps with leftover food from the refrigerator.

“But, Vjera, it’s really not necessary.”

“Yes, it is.”

Pero laughed. Vjera laughed too. With her head bent she placed prosciutto and cheese between two slices of bread.

“What can you do, he’s like that. You know that yourself. His late mother used to tell him... But what can you do, he doesn’t listen to anyone. And I can’t say anything to him.”

“It’s ok, Vjera, let it be. How are you?”

“I’m fine. I did get a bit tired, but now that’s over too. Everything passes and so will this.”

She didn't lift her head. She ripped pieces of paper towel from a roll and carefully wrapped the sandwiches. Then she wrapped them in aluminum foil, they freezer bags and then in a plastic bag with handles.

"There, now you can go," she said handing him the bag.

"Eh, yes, it's time. Kiss the kids for me."

He took the bag with sandwiches in one hand, and the bag in the other. Vjera quietly opened the kitchen door and he followed her just as quietly to the exit. She opened the door for him and offered him her hand. He let the bag slip to his forearm so he could free his palm and shake hands with her.

"Uh, fuck," she said as she pushed him through the door, "it rustles."

They were standing in a narrow, dark hallway of the building. She held the door open with her back. Petar put down the suitcase and carefully placed the bag on the floor. They shook hands. Vjera wouldn't let go of his hand.

"Do you see your kids? How are they?" she asked.

"I do, every weekend and on holidays. They're good, they do good at school. Especially Ema."

"And her?"

"Here and there... when I come to get them."

"Kiss them for me."

Petar put his other hand on Vjera's wrist.

"I have to go. You should go back inside, it's cold in here."

Vjera covered his hand with hers.

"Who cooks for you?"

"Go inside. I have to."

For a couple of moments she held his hands. After she pressed and shook them once again, she let go of his hands and pushed hers deep in the pockets of her bathrobe.

Petar bent down to take his suitcase and the bag.

"Drive safely," she said resolutely.

"Thank you. Well, who knows when we'll see each other again..."

"I don't know, there's no one left to die. Only him."