David Vajda

GEMS

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Someone had tipped the gravestone over. Or lain it down. It lay neatly on the grass under the tree, on the ground, not a scratch on it, not a crack. We stared at it for a while. None of us were capable of anger or astonishment, hadn't been for some time now. Ada said it looked quite nice actually, lying on the grass like that. She was right. There was something fitting about the way it was lying there. We tipped it back up and then it stood upright again as if nothing had happened. My mother had no enemies, only admirers and friends. Tennis coaches who fell in love with her. Greengrocers who remembered her, who told us to say hello from them. Benny can be theatrical and angry. And he had thrown vases and garden chairs and bottles out into the olive grove back on her last New Year's Eve in Italy. My father can be angry. And he runs up against things. Perhaps he leaned against the stone and it fell over. Ada is capable of anger too. And she does art installations and says things like 'materiality' and 'positions' and 'embodiment'. Perhaps she tipped the stone over, laid it down carefully for a photo. And then couldn't stand it up again. Nobody had suspected me. I was surprised no one thought I could have done it. I had filmed her for weeks, filmed my sick mother for weeks. But nobody suspected me. And nobody suspected Blondie. It can't have been Blondie. Blondie was sacred back then and still is. The grass underneath the stone was only slightly flattened, nothing indicated an impact. The question of the tipped-over stone evaporated with the virus and the vomiting and the orange faces, that Belgrade Christmas. *Chill, my friend.*

It rains at night. No wind in the morning. The sky pressing down, the ground sweating. We set off for a lake outside Belgrade, a former quarry, to escape the heat. My father calls it 'Balkan heat', as if the place had nothing to do with him. When we meet our father at the taxi stand, he's arguing with the taxi driver. 'This arsehole doesn't want to take us because there's five of us.' 'But there's four of us.' 'Ah.' He and the arsehole instantly make up and we get in the taxi. Shortly later, we're walking along the shore, looking for a spot on the gravel beach not blasted with Yugo-pop. We can't lie on grass, my father hates grass. 'Why do you hate grass, Papo?' 'I've always hated it.' He either loves things or hates them, there's nothing in between. He actually hates lakes as well because he loves the sea, but seems to be making an exception today. Benny and I talk about the 52-hertz whale, a whale drifting lonely through the oceans for decades because it sings too high for the other whales to hear it. 'You know what I love? Turtles, I love turtles.' My father has to take part in every conversation in his vicinity. We find a few sun loungers beyond the crowds. My father dives headlong into the water, reemerges, gasps and says: 'Magnificent.' Perhaps he doesn't hate lakes, after all. As he heaves his barrel belly onto dry land, he asks where Ada is. He has to know where his gems are at all times. Even if we're all in the same apartment but one of his gems isn't in the room, a 'Where are you?' will ring out at some point. 'She's getting coffee.' 'Ah, my girl. She loves coffee.' He loves it when we like

what he likes. My father didn't start drinking water until he hit seventy. Before that, only coffee or wine would do for him. 'Only fish drink water,' he'd say. If he hasn't dried out after fifty years of coffee and wine, he'll survive anything. We're so convinced of that, he often has to remind us that he's old, saying things like 'When I perish' and 'I'll have perished long before that'. He never dies in his words, only ever perishes. Perhaps he's trying to tell us he doesn't have much time left, but he doesn't look it. He hasn't aged over the past four years, as if his cells are refusing.

Ada arrives with the coffee. My father is lying on his back, his arms folded over his barrel belly, asleep. His mouth is half-open, his lips undulating slightly with his breathing. He sounds like a kettle just starting to boil. Worry seeps from his eyelids. This is what he'll look like when he dies, I think. In the background, a figure jumps off a crane towards the water. The bungee tenses, the figure flies up and down and dangles in mid-air, arms hanging. My father smells the coffee, stretches and makes the Dada sounds people make when they're stretching after a good nap: 'Mrrra.' Vvahh.' 'Ayayayay.' 'Where's Benny?' I point at my brother, sitting ten metres away in the water in the afternoon sunshine. 'He loves bathing…Mačak!' Benny turns around. My father waves at him. 'Hi Mačak.' 'Hi Papo.'

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My neck aches from my uncle's too-tight hug. He always hugs his nephews extra-tight to apologise. And to show that he has feelings. I believe him. He just doesn't know where they are, his feelings, and especially not when they'll emerge. My uncle is sitting at the other end of the table on a rattan armchair. His face is that of a sad twelve-year-old teacher's pet who's been practicing piano in the dark for too long, his body that of a fifty-year-old personal trainer. It's as if his adulthood depended on his biceps and he knows it, and has been beefing them up with protein shakes for decades. He's listening to a wedding guest to his right, with a lifeless expression that imposes rather than suggests uninterrupted attention. His wife-to-be is sitting next to him, talking to a wedding guest to her left in her polished international-school English, adjusting the level of its eloquence depending who she's talking to. She looks like an Indian Disney princess, with the manners of a First Lady and the hardened intelligence of a scientist. Her grace is so on-target it's frightening. Every gesture, every word exudes a natural urge to make things pleasant and interesting for her conversation partner. 'Stop staring. Do you know when Blondie's arriving?' Ada says. 'Nobody knows.' My little half-brother Emil, who we only ever call 'Blondie', has a habit of arriving days late. He's already missed his flight once. It's not clear whether he'll make it on time for tomorrow's wedding. And if he does arrive, he'll act like he's been here all along, and no one will mind.

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The next morning, the a/c is off. The sun breaks into the room, dry as a bone. We wake up sweaty, have to rush. The wedding plan must go on, the wedding plan is sacred. Germans, Brits, Indians, Belgians, Swiss, French and Australians obediently board a coach to the SU Beach Club, where we're supposed to have breakfast, where we have to have breakfast. Vocal House blasting the entire

beach at eleven in the morning. People have to shout at each other over their Bloody Marys and eggs benedict, not seeming to mind. I play backgammon with the bride, trying to find cracks in her grace, but not even her perfect manners come across as unapproachable or cold. She dominates the game as she chooses, quickly calculates dice probabilities, is competitive and yet gracious enough to explain without smugness how I could have played a move better. When I do win one game, she says 'Well played,' to make me feel like a worthy opponent. 'Okay, hurry up. I still have to get married today.' I make a move, she kills me in her next and the game's quickly decided. 'Well played though.' 'Yeah, right.' 'No really, you're making progress.' 'Yeah, fuck you.' 'That's a bit harsh. Be the good loser you want others to be.' 'Who are you, Kant?' No, she says, she's an angel. A backgammon-playing angel. And she winks at me as a chunky pair of hands grab her from behind, hands big enough to tip over gravestones. 'Honey, we have to go. You don't wanna miss your own wedding, do you? See you on the jetty, buddy. Looking forward to it.' 'Me too.' And I wonder how long I've been his buddy and whether I'll ever be able to call someone honey unironically, and at once I feel sucked out, sucked totally dry, and I go down to the beach where Jean is sitting in the shallow water in a wet polo shirt, smoking a cigarette. 'How are you, Jean?' 'Good, thank you. How are you?' And waves at me from right up close. I ask him if he's seen any sharks yet. 'No. There are no sharks here. You were only joking. And your brother was also joking. And now you are also joking.' 'Maybe I am, Jean. Maybe I am. Why aren't you taking off your shirt?' 'Because I'm fat.' 'I don't think you're fat.' 'Yes, I think I'm fat. Look.' He pinches his belly and a small roll of fat appears. 'That's just bacon, Jean. From all the carbonara you've been eating.' He puts his hand in front of his mouth as if he's ashamed, as if I had said something I shouldn't have. 'You're joking again.' I spot Benny sitting next to a wedding guest a few sun loungers along, staring out at the sea. The sea calms him. By the sea, he always becomes tame and quiet. He won't make any attempt to introduce himself to the wedding guest, even though the guy is sitting a metre away from him and keeps looking over, expecting an interaction. Jean says his mother doesn't like him drinking Monster. Says she got the corner shop by their house in Geneva to put the price up for him so he'd stop buying cans. 'It costs ten francs now. But here it is cheap. So cheap.' 'Where is your mother now?' He points at an elegant woman with salt-and-pepper hair standing in the water, twenty metres away. She's wearing her jewellery in the sea, giving her an air of erotic severity. Jean waves at her. She waves back, a professional smile on her face as if it were her job to wave several times a day.

The coach carts us back to the hotel. The wedding plan is tightly packed, the wedding plan is sacred. We wash the salt off our bodies and get dressed up. 'Casual, summery and flowery', the invitation said. I lend Benny a shirt. He's only brought one, the one he wore yesterday evening. He doesn't care what he wears, as long as he doesn't stand out.

My uncle hugs me tight, looks me up and down and says I've found the perfect mid-point between 'classic' and 'fashionable', which isn't easy, but I know he's saying that to apologise. For so rarely seeing his sister with the scars on her head. For telling us to take good care of our mother when he did pay us a brief visit. For perhaps saying that out of awkwardness, not knowing what else to say. For letting the surgeon in cowboy boots cut her open again. For not inviting our Aunt Eleonora to his wedding. There were things he couldn't forgive her for, he said. And he didn't understand her

anymore. I don't understand her anymore either. Since my mother's death, she's been living in a remote Italian forest with her dog and her mint-green Jaguar, only talking about stars. I haven't seen her for four years and I'm glad she's not here to talk about stars. But she did visit her sister with the scars on her head, although she spoke very little to her and spent a lot of time drumming and called herself an alpha woman and gave commands. She was there and called on the anniversary of her death and sent astrological greetings and energy candles and emojis on her birthday. Anger evaporates too quickly. I need to watch out.

When we arrive at a wide pontoon running parallel to the shore, we are put into position. I have to go on the right and manage to drag Ada along. Benny ends up on the left with the best man. My uncle stands in the middle waiting for the bride, wearing a tight shirt with an extreme cut away collar, tucked into a pair of pale blue unbelted suit trousers. His two best men are wearing the same tight shirt and pale blue unbelted suit trousers. The collar makes them all look strangulated. The band, flown in from London, comes down the stone steps to the jetty playing 'Wonderwall'. They're short with neatly trimmed beards ending at their jawlines, wearing dress shirts with no jackets. They play Amy Winehouse, Michael Bublé, Adele and Bruno Mars, seeking eye contact with the guests, nodding at them, dancing at them, animating the crowd, floundering and thrashing about. My uncle waves at the Greek photographer and shows him where to stand to photograph the band. A tall young man with his mother's big blue eyes and white-blond hair beneath a pink cap walks down the stone steps behind the band, disappointing the wedding guests by not being the bride. He beams gratefully at everyone as if their presence were a gift, his feet encased in hefty beige suede Birkenstocks with Velcro straps, which he calls his 'croissants'. Emil, Blondie, or sometimes: the Brush. I give him a hug, surprised that my little brother is so much bigger than me, take off his cap, run my hand through his thick upright hair and kiss him on the cheek. 'Running a bit late, Brush?' And put his cap back on. 'Nonsense, my friend. Perfect timing.' He points at the bride, descending the stairs to 'Hey Jude', followed by her bridesmaids. Everyone applauds, my uncle's chunky hands clapping especially hard. Blondie says: 'Sweet as sugar.' And it's hard to contradict him. And it's hard to describe the bride's entrance without ending up in an American romcom, but she's simply luminous, as are her silk dress and the flowers in her hair. And in the midst of this whole clumsy production, she manages a slow but not portentously slow walk to the altar. And she's not annoyed by her husband-to-be still clapping and flapping his hands at the photographer to get into a better position. And she doesn't necessarily like him looking strangulated, but she'd never say so because it doesn't matter to her, and maybe it really doesn't. She takes one last slightly bouncy step and lands on the jetty. The band stops floundering and the island's mayor moves up to the microphone with a girl of about thirteen. He reads aloud long passages in Greek, she gives a very free, very short translation. 'Are your names the following names?' 'Do you have any unlawful children you want to register?' And finally: 'Do you want to take Natasha Kumari as the one legal wife?' 'Yes, I do.' 'Do you want to take Maximilian Naumann as the one legal husband?' 'Yes, I do.' 'You may now give the bride one kiss.' It's a heartfelt kiss, really heartfelt. Applause, the band starts floundering again, we stand around in the setting sun sweating and drinking champagne, but not for too long because we have to form two lines up above the jetty, and the wedding planner gives us confetti to throw at the newlyweds, who walk between us followed

by the band, and I don't throw the confetti up so it rains down on them, but firmly and directly onto their heads, as if to say: *Not like this.* The bride gives me a knowing look.

The two lines join and we follow the band to the restaurant, where waiters await us with trays of finger food, cedar rods burning on the trays to ward off wasps, which circle their gelled heads instead. We're allowed to briefly admire the sunset from up here and drink champagne and raise our glasses to love, but not for too long because then along come the dancers in folkloric costumes and everyone is easily swayed by authenticity and they clap along to the rhythm of the sirtaki, faster and faster, in time and out of time. And then the dancer with the bobbles on his knee socks holds out his hand to a guest who holds out his to another one and that person to the next and the *Come on, don't be like that* of a group activity weighs heavy and languid among the guests and they spin and spin in circles and Blondie right in the middle with his pink cap. Maximilian holds out his chunky hand to me, I decline with a gesture and go over to the table at the very back, where Ada, Benny and Jean are smoking and watching the dancing circle in silence. Blondie does a skilled sidestep into the middle and back and gives a grateful and generous smile and is really having fun, swinging his right leg to the left and his left leg to the right and I wonder how he does it.

Already stale by May, the sun shone into our Munich apartment. An apartment that by then only represented the blurred contours of a home, as if we were all very short-sighted. I had managed to persuade Ada to come to the living room and stay there. I couldn't explain why she absolutely had to come to the living room because she wasn't supposed to know, she wasn't supposed to have that image in her head. She just nodded and lay down on the big linen sofa, face turned to the cushions, eyes closed but not sleeping. Blondie was reading in his room and I had to make sure he came to the living room too before they arrived. Benny was lucky he wasn't in. Before he went grocery shopping, he said: 'There's already a whiff of decay around her bed,' and I didn't want to know and resented that statement's brutality. My aunt had insisted on her lying in the room for two days so her *soul had time to take its leave from her body*, and so there she lay, all illness passed from her face, girlish, as beautiful as before, as beautiful as ever, the red hat over the crater in her head, hands folded across her midriff like dead people in every movie. When I try to remember her healthy face, all I see is this, her dead face. Ada had chosen her clothes, a grey silk shirt and a blue cashmere skirt, and had said in a fragile voice that they looked 'nice' and that she would have liked them. The undertakers were busy and ended up coming on the third day, hence the very slight scent of decay around her bed. And my aunt had told me the coffin wouldn't fit in the lift so they'd be coming with a bag. I asked why they didn't just take the stairs, and my aunt said, *Sweetie*, *that's just how it is*. And I didn't want my brother and sister to see her disappearing in a body bag like a murder victim, and I went through the dining room to my little blond brother, who was lying on his bed reading *On the Road* with tired eyes, like the teenager he was. His room was painted pale blue. When he was at primary school, my mother had stencilled dolphins along the wall below the ceiling, because he liked dolphins. I didn't know if he still liked dolphins, but he was never embarrassed by them in front of his teenage friends. 'Blondie.' 'Yes.' 'Come to the living room.' 'Why.' 'Just come.' 'But I'm reading.' 'Do it in the living room. Ada and I are hanging out.' 'Okay.' And I shooed him through the dining room because it was two o'clock and they

were supposed to arrive at two, and as I closed the living-room door behind us the doorbell rang and I hoped my aunt, smoking cigarettes in the kitchen, would understand, and she did and buzzed them in. When they came up, my aunt put on her finest manners, as if the undertakers were important people, and said ‘Guten Tag’ and ‘This way please’ and ‘Did you find it alright?’ and I found it hard to stomach how nice she was to the undertakers, how chatty she was, and didn’t want my brother and sister to hear it, and I thought she might say ‘corpse’ or ‘body’ or ‘deceased’ or ‘my beloved sister’ at any minute, and I wanted to cover Blondie’s ears with my hands. Instead, I turned on the record player. Lucio Dalla sang about Caruso. Blondie said he couldn’t read with that on. Ada was still lying motionless on the linen couch facing the cushions, because she understood. ‘But I can’t read with that on.’ ‘Yes, you can. I want to listen to music.’ ‘Turn it down, then.’ ‘No. You have to learn to read to loud music.’ ‘Why?’ ‘Because it’s important.’ And I hoped we wouldn’t hear them heaving the body into the bag, hoped the undertakers would stay silent and not say something like ‘Thanks’ and ‘Have a nice day.’ Instead, I heard the buzzing sound of the zip, which they fastened slowly, too slowly. ‘I want to go back to my room.’ ‘In a minute. Just wait a bit.’ The parquet creaked beneath the undertakers’ heavy footsteps and my aunt thanked them ‘for coming’ and I was glad they only said ‘Auf Wiedersehen’ and didn’t wish anyone a nice day. I opened the door a crack. Too soon. Through the front door, I caught sight of the bag being carried down the stairs by two men gripping two handles. The bag was black and looked more like a stretcher with a bag on it than a bag. If they were taking the stairs anyway, they could have brought the coffin up. I wanted to ring all the neighbours’ doorbells and shout through their letterboxes not to leave their apartments, because I didn’t want them to see my mother being treated like a murder victim. I wanted to walk one floor ahead of the body bag and shoo them all back into their apartments. I wanted to block off the street so passers-by wouldn’t see the bag being heaved into the back of the hearse. Blondie squeezed past me and went to his room. Ada stayed on the linen sofa like someone had dumped her there. A man came through the just-closed front door, a man I only recognised at second glance as my father. He was holding a white rose. ‘They just left.’ ‘*Jebiga*.’ He turned and ran down the stairs. I went into Blondie’s room. He was still reading *On the Road* with tired eyes, as if compulsively trying to stay a teenager. I opened the window wide. Birds tweeting, horse chestnuts blossoming. At least they had a proper hearse, one of those whale-like Mercedes estate cars from the 90s. At least they had grey hair, as they ought to. And at least one of them was wearing an undertaker’s hat. They were just closing the back of the car when my father ran panting onto the street. ‘Stop! Would you mind waiting, please.’ He didn’t know whether to command or request, uncertain what was appropriate in this situation. He laid the rose inside the coffin. Later that day, she was cremated along with the coffin, the red Jacques Cousteau hat, the silk shirt, the cashmere skirt and the rose on her lap. She had decided shortly before her death to be cremated. Perhaps to get rid of the crater in her head. I closed the window, went over to Blondie and kissed him on the cheek, because I thought it was called for at that moment. ‘Leave me alone.’ ‘Okay. Okay.’ He knew I wasn’t in any condition to console anyone and he turned his tired eyes back to his book. I went back to the living room and dropped down on the sofa next to Ada, my head resting on her feet, very tired all of a sudden. Ada had to tip her chin far onto her chest to see me at the other end of the sofa without sitting up, looking slightly mad. ‘Is she gone?’ ‘Yes.’