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A LEXICON OF GREAT HISTORICAL MOMENTS

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I came to live with Dunja, my uncle's daughter, when I was six years old, after my mum died. When my stepfather's new wife and her son wanted to send me to an orphanage a month after mum's death, I ran away from home. On the bottom of the base of the telephone, my neighbour found Dunja's father's number which my mum had pasted there. He found me in a water mill in the neighbouring village, where I was wont to hide as a child when I wanted to be alone. When I was a little girl, he was visiting a lot more often. Then he moved to his wife's farm, a few dozen kilometres away from us. Mum said he could now live his own life.

We were too little and too lonely to not become like sisters: from initial sulking to unconditional love in only a few weeks. Somewhere in her irises I found the colours of my mum, of me, of my nan. She was a stranger to me, so every day I tried to recognise something of my own in her. In our room in the attic, we sprouted into one another, our limbs grew over the short childrens' beds, our retinas, and cigarette embers much later, sparkled on the tiny open window.

"Knock-knock."

"Who's there?"

"Sleeping Beauty."

"Sleeping who?"

"Sleeping Beauty, your bum is sooty!"

The atmosphere was solemn in the house, at the table, always. My uncle and his wife were on conspicuously cold terms. The kisses they doled out to each other were a pantomime of habit, a discrete signal of putting up with one another, or of a loveless alliance.

When she was not with me, Dunja would mostly sit with her father, who would read to her from a book called "A Lexicon of Great Historical Moments." Dunja and my uncle were inseparable. The nature of their attachment pushed, in an almost physical manner, everyone out of the room, and Dunja and her father were alone most of the time.

My first summer at Dunja's was at the same time my first summer with a family. Dunja, uncle and I would go to the river together, I would swim while Dunja would mostly sit by her father on the grass. We would return at night, tired and dripping under Mejra's smouldering gaze behind the kitchen curtains. That summer I fell in love. That summer I ripped the Egyptian cotton sheets, Dunja's parent's wedding gift, off my bed, bloodied by my first period, and buried them in the meadow.

"Knock-knock."

"Who's there?"

"Keith Richards"

"Keith who?"

"Keith Richards has got good weed."

One winter, when we were fourteen, snow fell three and a half metres deep and we were all shovelling great shiny crunchy piles of ice in front of our houses. Days, short and cold, flickered like stars in the deep, dark winter. We didn't even go to school. Uncle shovelled for two days, then he started complaining about his injured knee and stayed in the house most of the time. He was darker, more troubled. As early as last autumn he had started saying that the local school wasn't good enough for us, especially for Dunja, and that she should read more if she wanted to go to university. I felt that my arrival had reminded him of the fact that Dunja would leave home someday. That she would love other people, too. That she would live her life.

"Knock-knock."

"Who's there?"

"Quiet."

"Quiet who?"

"Quiet, I'm sleeping!"

Round ten o' clock every night, just when Dunja's mother would go to bed, my uncle would knock on the door of our room, or he would tap his ceiling with something, which was a request for Dunja to come down.

I would stay and listen to myself breathe in a hive of warm light. I'd fall asleep when the squeaking of our door ran down my legs like shivers.

One night, however, Dunja walked in and squatted in front of my bed. I kept my eyes closed, tears were boiling under my eyelashes. I got up and I didn't cry. I pretended to have seen everything I'd been seeing on that night only. I pretended to know everything I'd known only because she'd told me. I pretended that I heard, and thought, and feared, and dreaded and cried on that night only.

Sitting at the table in the following days, months, years became unbearable. I ate

alone in front of the telly with the dog, Dunja's mum gave up on her intention to force me to sit at the table. She fell ill. She stopped cooking. Slowly, Dunja and I took over the household. In addition to talking less and smiling less, Dunja became a demon of peace. Her face hewed itself into a sculpture of weary determination, her eyes turned dark, her movements lost their sprightliness and her long woollen skirt rocked on her hips like a tired bird. Uncle was angry and loud in the moments when I was able to muster up the strength to look at him, and my gaze was as heavy as a shame that wasn't mine. The whole hose turned into a monument to the silence in which his voice rang out. In time, he started to go to the inn after work and would return home later and later.

The years which followed seemed like a vacuum, like a notime and noplace in which we dwelled, gazing into the obscure, hazy horizon which we may have made up.

Four winters passed, as did two tonsil removal surgeries, two A-levels exams, sweaty nights spent over a book, acrid smell of morning coffee, while our plans were budding in the grass, white, tiny, bold and fragile, like the first meadow flowers from the wet, cold soil.

Dunja's mother died that spring, eight days before my eighteenth birthday. The funeral day was white, ironed out, cold, yet resolutely bright. Dunja and I went home after the funeral, stepping on the muddy paved path between the graves. Some papers, books, money and my mobile we rustling in my bag. Uncle went with his friends to get drunk. I saw him turning around as we were getting off the main road and onto the path leading to our farm.

We didn't say a single word from the time we got back in the house to the time we went out again. We had dinner and then went up to the attic to have a nap.

"Knock-knock."

"Who's there?"

"Forever."

"Forever who?"

"There's no forever for you."

At supper time, Dunja played a Bob Dylan LP. I went upstairs, and then back down with a canister full of heavy, pungent, sharp, liquid stink, which set off a festival of bizarre joys in my head and woke up the senses I didn't even know I had. Three times I went back to the attic, emptying five canisters of petrol all over the old house. Round midnight, as the province slept, we tossed two matches which ignited a path of soaked grass leading to the porch. The house caught fire, and long would the white flash remain our only childhood memory. Dunja wrote into her father's "Lexicon":

"On 13 April 2012 Azra and Dunja left their family home. Flames swallowed the small village by the river on that Sunday night. They never returned."

Translated by Mirza Purić.

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