

## Cactus

She was always afraid of missing the beautiful and important things in life. She traveled a lot, but more often she panicked because she was stuck at home. For some reason she always imagined that real happiness and pleasure lay elsewhere. As a result she was forever thinking up new ways of stopping time and grasping that crystal moment when life becomes a dream or a fairy tale.

Suddenly, at the end of December 1990, she told me she longed to spend New Year's Eve on the island of Hvar with a bunch of people I didn't know. In her enthusiasm she managed to present her longing in terms of it being just a good idea. I was somewhat taken aback, but my objections only made her depressed, so I finally accepted the plan as if it were a joint one. We got together at Marijindvor the day before

New Year's Eve. It was early in the morning; the trams were not yet running. I was introduced to some rather decadent men and women in evening dress, which I tend to associate with late nights and drunken parties. A dozen of us, plus a load of suitcases and a more or less hyperactive boxer dog, squeezed into three cars. The convoy set off, with two VW Golfs in front and a wreck of a Citroën 2cv following behind. In the old banger were the two of us, a bald engineering student, his ugly fat girlfriend and the boxer dog. The car seemed to be held together by the sort of brown tape used to wrap parcels. Not surprisingly there was an icy draft blowing from all sides and our feet almost sank through the floor. As we crawled agonizingly along the road toward the south, the fat girl talked about French perfumes and the dog kept farting noisily. On each occasion I smiled fondly at my girlfriend and made some lighthearted remark, trying as hard as I could to make her think I was enjoying myself. The 2cv inched up the Ivan mountain at about ten miles per hour until Konjic, where it spluttered a couple of times and then finally came to a standstill. The flatulent dog broke wind once again and started to bark excitedly. We got out of the car and waited for the others who were in the Volkswagens to come to our rescue. Then we began to discuss strategy or, at any rate, how to redistribute the extra passengers among the two vehicles that were still on the road. Who was going to go where? It was impossible to decide. No matter which combination of humans, suitcases and flatulent animals was proposed, my girlfriend and I always ended

up being the odd ones out. And so when at last it had been decided who would continue the journey by train and who by car, I put my hand on her shoulder and whispered, “Why don’t we just go back?”

Unexpectedly she didn’t look at me in a reproachful way. She merely shrugged and heaved a weary sigh.

I said, “Who’ll tell them?”

“You do it. After all, you’re the man.”

“It’ll sound better coming from you. They’re your friends. Besides, if I say it they’ll only get the wrong idea and think we’re annoyed about something.”

I was right, of course, and in the end she made the announcement. She just said that we were going back to Sarajevo. It’s funny, I always had the knack of entrusting unpleasant tasks (and pleasant ones!) to somebody else.

We had to wait another two and a half hours before the train was ready to depart, and so we huddled together in the cold and empty hotel lounge, watching each other and swapping playful embraces.

“What a pity!” I lied.

She blamed herself for ruining my New Year’s celebration, but with my kisses and with other masculine trickery I somehow managed to convince her that nothing had been ruined.

“I’m sorry about the presents.”

I always like receiving gifts, so I insisted that we perform the ritual in Konjic. At first she resisted because the circumstances did not seem

festive enough. She was still hoping for that crystal moment. But I've already told you about my powers of persuasion.

She carefully opened her backpack and even more carefully pulled out a box displaying the logo of a well-known brand of cognac.

"Open it!" she said.

The box was light so it obviously didn't contain a bottle. That would have been a dumb kind of present anyway. Inside the box was a mysterious object wrapped beautifully in white paper. She gestured with her hand and so I unwrapped the gift, only to reveal a common garden pot holding a tiny cactus about the size of a newborn baby's thumb.

I had never told her that I hated indoor plants, mostly because they demand attention and routine. You have to think about them all the time and I can't even think about other people, let alone plants. I remember that when grandmother died all the plants in my room withered. I felt sad even though I hated them.

I smiled and kissed my girlfriend, uttering a few sentimental words. As soon as I had convinced her that I was sincere, I gave her my presents, a bottle of Chanel No. 5 (which, of course, I'd bought thinking of Marilyn) and a collection of essays by Susan Sontag about photography. I had to give her the perfume as well because she was always suspicious of my taste in literature, no doubt believing, and perhaps justly, that I was usually thinking of myself, instead of her, when I recommended a book.

I placed the cactus in a reasonably sunlit corner of my room, next

to the icon of St. Vlach and a pebble with a hole in the middle which I keep because they say it brings good luck. A few months later the war in Croatia broke out; the film about Špegelj, the conflicts at Plitvice, Borovo Selo . . .

I watered the cactus regularly at five-day intervals and was careful not to move it. Perhaps I remembered something that my grandmother told me a long time ago. She said that you should never move a cactus. It has to stay in one place – and only one place – not that it really matters what kind of place it is, or even whether it’s the best place available, just as long as it *belongs* there. In other words, I really looked after that cactus, which is to say, it kind of surprised me that I didn’t harm it in any way.

Instead of dying, as you’d expect of your average cute plant that is brought out by shopkeepers for special occasions, the cactus began to grow, spreading its spikes, which were soft like a baby hedgehog’s, getting fatter and tilting at the sun. The heliotrope was no longer the size of an infant’s thumb, and so whenever my girlfriend came to visit me in my room, she was pleased to see that the cactus had not suffered from my usual negligence.

“It’s beginning to look like you!” she said.

“The cactus?”

“Well, not like *you* exactly, but like a part of your anatomy.”

I must admit that such a comparison had not occurred to me. But from that moment onwards I couldn’t help seeing things from her

point of view. The cactus became a pleasurable detail in our lives, the sort of detail that makes a love affair worth remembering.

In the days when Vukovar was being destroyed, I felt something like icy breath down my neck. Life became a very serious matter, different from anything that I had known before. I felt that any mistake could prove fatal, although I didn't know how or why.

At the end of April I moved into the cellar. A mortar bomb had struck the crown of the apple tree. My windows were shattered, a piece of shrapnel, no bigger than a grain of rice, smashed the Austrian antique mirror on the dressing table next to the cupboard. The glass cracked in a pattern that was as regular as the lines of longitude and latitude on a map of the world. But the phones were still working and so I tried to tell my girlfriend. She didn't understand what had happened. She probably thought I'd gone a little soft in the head.

Every five days I would go upstairs to water the cactus. It was now leaning toward the Chetnik positions. I often glanced nervously up at the sun, expecting a bullet at any moment. In the cellar, however, it felt safe and warm, even though it was damp and, let's say, intimate. There was always a smell of rotting potatoes, and the coal dust made your eyes smart. But I couldn't have been cosier in the womb.

My girlfriend came to believe that death only happened in Sarajevo. She became increasingly sentimental and almost distant. She asked me if I wanted to emigrate with her to New Zealand. I replied that I was happy in the cellar and that, in any case, New Zealand was a long

way away, and I didn't think I'd be happy Down Under. She never asked about the cactus. I didn't like to mention it.

People change when they're alone in the dark. It happens imperceptibly. I heard a story about a man who went to bed as usual one night and by the morning his hair had turned completely grey. Yet he didn't remember having a nightmare or bad dream. At the time I lived in desperate fear of the cold.

One morning – it was day five – I woke to discover that all the water in the flat had frozen up. Only then did it occur to me that cacti have difficulty withstanding the cold. I took the plant downstairs and placed it in the cellar opposite the stove that we used to stoke with coal dust. Not too close, not too far away. In the precise spot that I reckoned would suit both a cactus and a human being. The next day it was drooping over the side of the pot. How was it drooping? Well, put it this way, the tip was pointing downwards as if the sun was under the ground. I watered the cactus for the last time but I realized that it was too late. The end was nigh!

The war has taught me how to calm my emotions and nerves artificially. Nowadays, in conversation, whenever somebody raises a topic that I find upsetting, I have a sense of this tiny red light automatically switching on inside me, not unlike the one you press to remove the background noise on a tape. And after that, I don't feel anything. But when I think about that cactus, the light refuses to come on, and nothing else helps. It's a minor consequence, like a bitter cyanide capsule.

But – do you remember? – many years ago lots of people got upset because they found out horses died standing up. By contrast, I get sad just thinking about the way a cactus dies, like the boy in Goethe's poem. It's not important, mind you, except as a warning to avoid detail in life. That's all.

## Theft

In our garden there was an apple tree whose mouth-watering fruits could be seen from the upstairs window of the house next door. Our neighbors, Rade and Jela, used to go to the market to buy apples for their two young daughters – but it was no use. However delicious, other apples were never as tempting as the ones that were visible from the family’s window. Each morning, as soon as Rade and Jela left for work, the girls would jump over the garden fence in order to pick the overripe fruit. Usually I chased them away by throwing mud or stones at them. In other words, I defended my property, but as a matter of principle and not because I was particularly tempted by these or indeed by any other apples. Seeking revenge, the younger girl told my mother that I had got an “F” in math. As a result, my mother paid an

unexpected visit to my school and was able to confirm the truth of my enemy's allegation. She spent the next few days torturing me with quadratic equations. All those  $x$ 's and  $y$ 's made life intolerable, so I decided to get back at our next-door neighbors in any way I could. Here's what I did: I found myself a hiding place and spent the whole day waiting for the thieves. Eventually they turned up, as I knew they would, and that's when I jumped out of the bushes and grabbed my enemy by the hair and began to drag her toward our house. I planned to lock her in the pantry until my mother returned home from work in order to punish her. But the little girl resisted fiercely, screaming and struggling. In the end she escaped, leaving only a handful of hair and a tiny piece of scalp in my hand. I was furious and ran inside, locking the door behind me. A short while later, I heard Rade screaming under the window that he was going to kill me. He must have repeated the threat to my mother, because she responded in kind. Predictably, they spent three or four hours trading insults at the window. My mother called Rade a gangster from Kalinovik. He called her a shameless hussy.

Over the next twenty years or so, the two of them never even said hello to each other, though I have to say neither of the sisters ever came to steal again. Each year, August and September would come and go, and the apples were no less beautiful and tantalizing, but the two families continued to live side by side without exchanging so much as a glance. Our parents grew old without forgetting the insults.

In time the two girls got married and moved away, but otherwise everything remained the same.

A few days after the war began the police searched Rade and Jela's flat and found two hunting guns and an automatic rifle. The neighbors were understandably frightened. Indeed, they began to speculate about whom Rade was planning to kill, and how. For many years he had stopped coming out of his house. Was he hoping to lure his victim into a trap? Jela continued to go to the market in order to fetch the humanitarian aid and water until one day a shell exploded ten yards away from her, blowing her arm off. The tragedy had the unfortunate effect of driving Rade into the open, so to speak. For the first time in ages, the neighbors got to see Rade in the flesh, although he seemed to have aged preternaturally in the last few months and looked a hundred years old when he finally emerged from his house with a little saucepan of soup and three shrivelled lemons. He visited the hospital once a day, keeping his eyes fixed to the ground, apparently terrified by the prospect of catching somebody's eye.

During that war-torn September our apple tree produced riper and tastier fruit than ever before. My mother joked that the last time such delicious apples had been seen was in the Garden of Eden. I climbed the tree, from whose uppermost branch I had a good view of the Chetnik positions on Trebevič. Hanging in the sky, I picked dozens of apples with the enthusiasm of Scrooge McDuck when he's in his vault throwing money in the air. As I reached out for one particularly juicy apple

that was growing only half a yard from Rade's window, I couldn't help spotting him in the back of the room. I froze on the branch but eventually Rade shrank back a few inches. I don't know why but I didn't want him to go.

"How are you, Uncle Rade?"

"Be careful, son, it's high – don't fall . . ."

"How's Auntie Jela?"

"Well, she's hanging on, with her one hand, to what remains of life. The doctors say that she'll be coming out of the hospital soon."

We talked like this for two long minutes. I held on to the branch with one hand, and gripped my bag full of apples with the other. I was overwhelmed by a sudden feeling of nausea that was infinitely worse than anything caused by exploding shells and by guns that have or have not been found in people's houses. It was as though, hanging from the top of the apple tree in front of Rade's window, everything I knew about myself and other people had become meaningless.

Rade continued, "You know, son, when you lose an arm you continue to feel it for a long time. It's something psychological, as though you deceive yourself into thinking you still possess the missing limb. Every day I cook a little something to take to my wife, but there is no life in it. I look at the beans or the thin soup, and then I look at her and I say, 'Jela!,' but she doesn't respond. Then she says, 'Rade!,' and I don't respond. D'you understand, son? We're alive just enough to see each other and to conclude that we're not alive any more. That's all. Some-

times I look at these apples and marvel at the life in them. They don't care about all this. They don't know. I daren't even mention them . . .”

I stretched over to the window and passed him the bag. He looked at me, rather surprised, and then began to shake his head. Suddenly my throat became tight and it was as much as I could do to move my lips. I was paralyzed for half a minute; if the Chetniks had been looking at me they would have been very confused. Rade was trembling like a man who had nothing left. He was reduced to shivering like an unhappy, frightened animal. At last he raised his arm but he still couldn't say anything.

The following day Rade knocked on our door with a hundred apologies for disturbing us. He gave us something wrapped in newspaper and then left in a hurry, so I didn't get a chance to speak to him. The parcel contained a small jar of apple jam.

Soon afterwards Jela came out of hospital. The husband and wife continued to live behind their closed window, and Rade only ventured out to collect the humanitarian aid. One day, standing next to my mother in line, he whispered “Thank you” to her. She turned around just in time to hear him say, once again, that the apples were full of life.

In the next few months a handful of men in uniform came for Rade twice, took him away somewhere and later brought him back again. The neighbors watched these mysterious comings and goings, twitching at lace curtains, sometimes peeking through their keyholes.

Feeling guilty perhaps, they couldn't help reminding one another of the hidden guns. Half a dozen gossips went back to the idea that Rade must have wanted to kill somebody. Others remained silent, as if the mere act of talking about their neighbor was enough to cause pain. The obvious solution would have been to hate Rade, but somehow it wasn't possible.

Nobody knows who killed Rade and Jela. They just disappeared one day without fuss or explanation. Perhaps it's wrong to say what I am going to say, but I only remember two things about poor Rade – his apple jam and the remarkable fact that he never once, not even in the dead of night, reached out of his window to steal an apple.