

A story with a coco nut

My grandmother called on the phone and said she had a surprise for us and suggested we go and visit them. So much her style. She used to be a journalist. She has many connections and always manages to find something exclusive which she presents to us with aplomb. My grandmother is a woman of festivities, surprises, fireworks.

And here we are now – my mother, grand-mother, great-grand-mother and I – around the round table in her kitchen. My grand-mother is wearing one of her nylon dresses with flowers and has put lipstick on. We are sitting around the table and chatting about this and that. But we all know that my grand-mother is waiting for her moment. It seems that she had forgotten about the surprise but in fact it's all a prelude to it. My grand-mother is a real actress – she directs the moment, looks at it from every side, creates suspense and only then offers the culmination. I am wondering what it will be today. I remember how, when I was little and my grand-father was still with us, once in the winter she invited us, like now, to their place and took out a bunch of bananas. Then I didn't know it was a banana. I was watching with curiosity and interest this long fruit while my grandmother carefully removed its cover and solemnly gave it to me. I remember its softness in my mouth and the taste of plain joy.

. – You must have waited three hours for these bananas! – my mother exclaimed then, to which my grand-mother only winked and said:

- I have connections.

And I imagined how my grand-mother had spread her connections like shoe laces but much longer with the bananas being tied at their end.

Now I know about connections. They bring important things in life even though they don't mention them in school when they talk about the advantages and the greatness of the socialist system. I know too that not only bananas and books can hang from their invisible ends but also other intangible things – such as work. Or holiday in Sunny Beach.

What I am not clear about is whether the connections will still exist in communism where everything will be shared and free.

- Grandma, what happened with the surprise? – I cannot contain myself any longer. Content appears on her face. This is her moment. She is looking at me mischievously, as she is going to the fridge and taking out of it a small plate with a coco nut on it. I have seen coco nuts on TV. And oin pictures. But never live.

My grand-mother puts the plate in the centre of the table. We are silently looking at the coco nut, while she is looking at us, measuring the surprise on our faces. I think she is satisfied. She says with a solemn voice:

- It was not easy, not at all. But here it is.

And by giving us the coco nut, it is as if she is giving us the world. I can see the African jungle. I can see tall palm trees and coco nuts under their leaves. Monkeys are jumping from one palm tree to another, tossing them, playing with them, throwing them at the local people. I imagine the black people, who are collecting the nuts, are taking them to their huts, and are then eating them. And this one has ended up here; it has landed on the table in the kitchen of my grandmother in this obscure quarter of our capital. A piece of Africa, of the burning sun, from the other end of this big and unknown world. Where has it been, what is its story?...

Four generations of women are sitting around the table and contemplating the nut. Education of women has a solid tradition in our family. My great grandmother used to be a teacher. My grand-mother, as I have said, a journalist. My mother is a scriptwriter. And I study at an elite school and want to graduate from a university too and to become a journalist, like my grandmother, and to go to Africa. Curiosity about the unknown is typical for us. We are all very eager to know. And perhaps because of this not very practical. And now we have to move towards action. So that we can reach the treasures of the nut, hidden below its hard surface.

My grandmother is preparing a kitchen board and a cup, and is taking a big knife. The honour will be hers. She is trying to make a hole in the shell but it turns out to be difficult. We are staying silent and tensed from the expectation.

- Let me help you – suggests my mother.

But it is not working. In a moment she asks:

- Do you have a screw-driver?

Grandma goes to the attic to look through the old tools of my grandfather. She comes back with a triumphant expression on her face and gives the screw-driver to my mother. She inserts it into the small indentation they have made with the knife and starts pressing and turning. At last they break through, and a milky liquid pours from the little hole. Grandma grabs the cup and pours the liquid in it.

Then she takes the knife again and starts trying to cut the nut in the middle. After fifteen more minutes of effort, she manages and the nut splits into two. We can see the white flesh on the inner side of the shell. My grandmother cuts a few tiny pieces and puts them in the small dish. Then she takes the cup with the coco milk and gives it to my great grandmother since she is the oldest among us. She smells the liquid, wrinkles her nose and takes a sip. She smacks her lips slightly, swallows, doesn't say anything and seeing my impatience, gives the cup to me. The taste is peculiar.

Different. I like more the thought of this being the taste of Africa than the liquid itself. Then my mother. And at the end my grandmother. I stretch my hand towards the pieces in the little dish and bite one. They happen to be hard and tough, but otherwise the taste is the same as the one of the coco nut stirs on the Turkish delights which my mum brought to me last autumn from Istanbul. Then I liked it very much. But now the nut is too dry and it is a bit difficult to chew it. I can see that everyone else is finding it hard too. After we swallow the first mouthful, we stay silent and think how to formulate our sensations in the most precise way. I can almost see the thinking process of these three women who are so dear to me.

Grand-grand-mother clears her throat and says:

- If I see this on the road, I will kick it and pass it by.