

## Jedrt Maležič: Dimorphs

a short story from the collection translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

### Only Fair

As I heated the water for Grandma's tea, before stirring the brew with the honey spoon, I stirred through my own thoughts. In no way focused, still murky and cloudy, I rolled them unuttered around my mouth. A task awaited me that I was not at all looking forward to. Eventually I said to myself, take your mind off it. *Stop thinking about it and come out with it.* You can't keep pressing the brakes and expect a step forward. I no longer thought about it.

'Gran, there's lots going on with me right now.'

Mhmmm, she drawled, glancing deep in thought towards the fruit tea melting the honey I had added to her mother's precious teapot. I had taken it out of the display cabinet especially for this occasion.

'You can tell me everything, Mousekin,' she said somewhat suspiciously, munching on the cake I had made just for this meeting. When you are on tenterhooks, you apportion a meaningful connotation to every such triviality.

I was most suspicious of the fact that she was not trying to guess. She always tries to guess, always, whenever I announce something important, she straightens up, hand raised, thinking she knows. Perhaps she needs an indication. It would make things easier if she were to guess. It is easier for me to nod than have to painfully elaborate on complicated details.

'You see, Igor, right,' I point the way.

'Igor?'

'Igor,' I confirm.

'Yes. No. What?'

*Stop thinking and come out with it.*

'The father of my children.'

Mhmmm, once again she drawled, her gaze seeking out the fruit brew in the teapot.

'It's a little dry today,' she commented on the cake.

‘Yes, like my life,’ I threw at her, expecting the hint would enlighten her.

‘You should know,’ she snorted, instantly returning the ball to my court.

‘Well, do you know?’ I passed it back to her as she normally knew how to outplay anyone. When you’re on the same team, you need to divide tasks according to abilities and my grandma certainly had a better way with words than I did. Grandma Maca must be on my side, a shooter on my team. This is crucial for me, I will find it hard to handle on my own.

I knew all along that, if I provoked her for long enough, Grandma Maca would burst into one of her instructive anecdotes. I just had to persist. Indeed, her reserve began to ease off when I – in her view of things *finally!* – poured out her tea and served her a triple shot of whisky with it. Yes, of course, she was not only waiting for the tea, so, like always, I put the entire bottle next to the whisky glass. The eighty-seven-year-old’s gold bracelets that she, as I had heard endless times, had inherited from her mother’s dowry, jingled as we toasted with our glasses, and the following second she downed in one the triple shot of a twenty-year-old Glenfiddich.

‘You want to separate, that much is clear to me,’ she said, once more flummoxing me with her directness. All I could do was nod flatly. That’s it, easy-peasy, as my youngest would say!

‘Yes. I will get a divorce.’

Pass. Goal.

It was the two of us against Igor, who guarded his goalpost as if his life was at stake, or something even more precious. As if it was about the fucking balls between his legs. As if the future of the universe and all its progeny depended on his tackle.

I reached for the bottle and filled her glass. Waited. For her to raise it and toast with me again. She didn’t. She folded her arms on the table, looking at me as if wanting to make a solemn announcement, as if it wasn’t me who had invited her for a talk.

She spoke. ‘Life has given me three daughters, three girls. I have always admired boys, their wisdom and cheerfulness. But I got three girls.’

It was clear to me that Grandma Maca was unhappy about this. My mother had also had only girls, two of us, and Gran is forever tormenting her over this ‘unfortunate’ coincidence. But my mother has never regretted the birth of her daughters. My sister Tatiana and I have long known that we are very different from

each other. One is always wading against the current, the other likes to roll around in stream pools. We both, however, start worrying when – usually toward the end of family gatherings – as we are all about to set out on our separate ways, the phase begins when Grandma Maca, already rather inebriated, brings up the canons of divine intervention. I am not sure what she will come up with this time, for she is still sober and there is no reason for emotional drama or self-pity.

‘Your late grandfather was a wonderful character. Clever to die for, and entertaining, oh, yes.’

I know, I remember him, a very sweet man. Bald with a big belly, short and always smiling. When he fell ill, I was no longer allowed near his bedside. They were protecting me. And eventually, only much later, did it become clear to me how all these women of his idolised him. They served Grandpa Berto front and back, ate out of the palm of his hand when he occasionally patted them, he even liked to pinch Grandma’s arse, making her squeal. It was funny how they got on like that, for Grandma Maca was an elegant woman with pearl necklaces and a set of gold bracelets who liked to smile coldly, dropping the occasional bitter remark to greatest effect, whereas Berto kept making jokes and had an exaggerated presence everywhere. He would bend over backwards for us, his daughters and grand-daughters, but when it was time for his snooze, there was no joke. If I as much as squeaked, one of the others would instantly silence me. Grandpa Berto never even flickered an eyelid to keep us in order – he didn’t have to, we effectively kept each other in order ourselves.

‘It never even occurred to him to fool around,’ Grandma continued with her standard repertoire. She adored her husband, thought the world of him, there was nothing he could do wrong – dead boring and at the same time so annoying.

I knew it all off by heart. After Grandpa’s death Gran was forever repeating these stories. At first to herself, then to her three daughters, to us, her two granddaughters, and the whole world. All her life she had idolised one man and one man only. Forever.

‘Apart from that one time during the war, eh, Gran?’ I smirk but this time I give her a more ominous look than usual. *Why the hell is everything always, absolutely always forgiven?!*

I know what she will say now as well. *Oh, that one provoked him, and he was a man. He told me as soon as he returned.*

But Grandma Maca has not said anything yet.

Grandma Maca has been quiet for rather a long time.

‘Mousekin, let cheap whores roll in the mud they brought upon themselves.’

I think, take some more cake, then think again. In my thoughts I am forced to admit that it wasn’t just that which was decisive. That Igor had been a particularly bad companion in other ways as well. Indeed, I had to be constantly on my guard to make sure that nothing else apart from his gaze wandered away, but that wasn’t the deciding factor.

‘You see, Gran... You probably want your granddaughter to at least get a little...’  
It is harder to broach these topics with your own grandma than I thought.

‘Oh, come on. I am sure he respects you,’ she said, drank the whisky and then took a sip of the tea. ‘I’d swear on it. The guiltier they feel, the more they respect you,’ she reasoned in her own way with a definitive air, as if to say, facts are facts, and my Gran knows the facts. For good measure and to my surprise, after another shot of whisky she added, ‘Fuck him!’

‘What I wanted to say was, to at least get a little... *satisfaction.*’

In an instant, Grandma Maca’s face settles into what could be a grimace but not quite a frown, it literarily extends into a revelation that lets me know she was not ready for this ambush. She was not used to going over these matters, not even with her daughter, and now her granddaughter has attacked her with the directness of millennials. A little too fiercely?

‘Huh,’ she says.

‘No, seriously,’ I say.

‘Sex?’ she asks.

I nod. Sex.

I wouldn’t want to describe it to her in detail, that would be too much stress for her, but sod it, Gran, my dear, sex with Igor has for years been a clumsy torture that as a rule, halleluiah, would never last very long, praise be to the Lord, inshallah and kumbaya. I have not experienced anything quite as unfathomably repulsive in a long time. No feeling, just carnal gluttony.

'Huh,' Maca repeats, a woman of her time, born before the Second World War, ongoing and stubbornly elegant, strong and self-redeeming, someone nobody in their right mind would provoke because she would simply crush them. She really would.

I maintain a dreary silence, finding it hard to admit to myself that I have screwed up. Hardest of all.

There is something happening on her face. Out of the shadow that cast over it momentarily, something unquestionably stronger is rising, something is sprouting, something that is about to prevail. Finally, Maca sits up straight, extends her neck and her hair, tied in a bun, glistens in the light of the chandelier as if she had just experienced nothing less than a revelation right there in my kitchen.

'You know, Mousekin, your grandpa wasn't into this stuff either.'

This time astonishment probably threw its shadow over my face. All of a sudden I am no longer convinced I can handle this subject.

'To be precise,' Grandma Maca continues despite me shaking my head, 'he was at least as incompetent in bed as he was clever at work. And he was certainly clever. Are you getting what I mean?'

I nod because I don't want to know. I do not want to get lost in unmarked territory where disappointment masked as hope lurks at every step. Maca's ever-exalted lifelong relationship with my grandfather had always given me a great sense of hope, was a point of reference I could always rely on.

'That's why the separate bedrooms. Get it?'

'But Gran... You always said that was because Grandpa snored.'

'That I could have survived,' she says in a documentary cut and dried manner. 'But there was something unbearable about how he would sometimes, all hairy, stick to my chest and start gasping away like some specimen from the neighbour's barn from my childhood... Brrrr,' she shudders, her whole body shaking so her gold bracelets clattered as if his skeleton was turning, protesting from beneath the ground. I can't listen to this anymore, I want to escape these vivid images.

I nod. We both stay silent for a long time. I almost wish Grandma Maca would go home.

A little while later her bracelets clatter again. Her hand reaches across the table. I think she is about to pour herself another drink, I would have one too. Instead,

she reaches across to me. I was staring at the tablecloth. She grips my chin firmly, almost pinches me, and lifts my semi-anxious face up towards the light.

‘It will all be fine.’

‘But, Gran, you did have three children with him.’

Around her darkly painted lips that nobody would guess had already seen eighty-seven springs, appears something that looks like a smile. It is more a response to me, to my naivety, than a sign she was really having fun.

‘Well, let’s count then. Surely you also experienced a few minutes of discomfort three times in thirty years. Am I wrong? It’s not too hard, enduring a few thrusts from a man I loved?’

And after a while. ‘They were the three best decisions of my life. Without them you wouldn’t be here either.’

I simply cannot believe that my ever-emancipated role model had succumbed to a man all her life without pleasure. I would never have expected that from her. Until today, I would have sworn blind without an iota of doubt that Grandma Maca – if anyone – knew how to look after herself. And that all these years later she is still describing my grandfather as a mighty mind, a bestially handsome alpha male, was simply too much for me. Totally inconsistent with my role model. I will need to re-evaluate everything in retrospect, all memories, family anecdotes and stories.

Then another dimension occurs to me.

‘Gran... did you perhaps ever have anyone... on the side?’

The dark brown lipstick parts for Maca to reveal her expensive dentures.

‘Hah! I wouldn’t dream of it! Who do you think I am?’

Oh dear, it’s even worse than I thought. That Grandma Maca, subscribed to every women’s magazine available, would not know what an *orgasm* is?

No! This is almost as sad as the story of the woman who died of a cancerous growth on her breast measuring eight by eight centimetres and bleeding, and her husband neither felt nor noticed it in six years. No, Gran, no, please don’t tell me that during your entire happy marriage you never climaxed even once?!

Perhaps this is the turning point that various women’s magazines go on and on about. The moment when you realise that at an exact place and at an exact time it is you who are the responsible person.

‘Gran, now seriously. I want to ask you something.’ I give her a sharp look and fill her glass, just in case. The tea is almost cold, just right for me to down my own whisky.

‘Fine by me, go ahead,’ she says as if unsure what else I could possibly be interested in.

‘Gran, are you at all familiar with anatomy... well, I mean, do you know what a woman’s genitals look like?’

She looks at me blankly.

‘Did you know, for example, that the clitoris is up to five centimetres long?’ I am trying, trying very hard, not to put her in an inferior position or at least mask doing so very well. I don’t want her to feel, proud as she is, that I am patronising her.

‘Listen kid, this conversation is over,’ she says and downs the Glenfiddich. ‘If you want to get divorced, get divorced, just don’t meow about it being because you didn’t get rose-coloured bedding that smells of violets and a golden watch and yellow feather stuck into your spoilt arse.’

Now all the black and white photos flash before my eyes, the loving portraits of Grandpa with his sleek hair and Grandma smiling. And I think about how feigned they must have been even as they were being taken. Essentially I am a descendent of repressed female desire and premature ejaculation! How could this have been revealed over tea and cake? Surely it should have been left unsaid. I know it is probably the same in every family. But other families at least don’t drag it out into the open. If they don’t talk about it, let them stay silent forever, not like Maca, who just has to know best at all costs. It would have been better if we had not wandered down this path. I don’t know if I will be able to see her with the same respect I had for her before. There is something else. I outright *resent* her. She has taken her role model self away from me.

Putting on her patent leather shoes as she is leaving, she lifts one up in front of her face and waves the heel at me. With a covert aggression – it occurs to me that we are probably both quite pissed – she snaps at me, ‘If you will let Igor dictate your life, there’s no helping you! Look after yourself, and that’s it, *basta*. I didn’t conceive your mother so you’d now have to put up with some jerk. I’ll break your legs if you give in.’

And, fuck it, she seriously means it. Grandma Maca always means everything bloody seriously.