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Vera

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# 1.

It was uncle Jakub who spilled vermouth on the crimplene two-piece. Not on purpose, as Vera could see when she happened to glance that way and caught this man with the funny name just as he was saying something. Auntie Eszter gave a laugh and said “Jakub!”, and then the man laughed too, but only after she was tickled by something he’d whispered in her ear. They laughed out loud, together, as he gazed at her, his eyes narrowed in lust and not paying enough attention to his glass, and so spilled his drink on the crimplene jacket draped over the arm of the chair.

By then uncle Béla’s birthday party had become inordinately noisy and the flat was filled with smoke. Vera would keep stopping up her ears, or ask Sári if they could escape to her room, but her friend didn’t want to go and hide with her, which was exasperating, incomprehensible, as they were the only children at the party. There was no air in the cacophonous apartment, the end-of-the-summer heat was trapped in the courtyard and in the outside corridors that ran the length of the block. Sári’s parents had invited far too many people: Vera couldn’t understand why it never occurred to them that they wouldn’t all fit in, or even be able to sit down. But this obviously didn’t seem to bother anyone else.

They were all drinking and shouting, even Papa, who had taken off his tie and unbuttoned his shirt at the neck, his cheeks getting more flushed by the minute, and he was smoking, too, which he never did at home, or at least Vera had never seen him do such a thing.

The only one not being shouty or reeking of sweat was Mama. She was her usual self, or perhaps a touch more subdued: the slightly mischievous laughter lines around her eyes had disappeared, and somehow she looked older. Her dark blue blouse gave her too serious a look; when it was so hot she would generally wear a flowery blouse, with a V-neck. Her curly, red, wool-like hair was in a tight bun today, so you could see her elfin ears, pointy and sticking out. She gave off an air of sadness, the corners of her mouth drooping as she gave Papa a pained look. After a while Vera didn't even bother to ask when they'd be going home. She knew what Mama would say:

“Soon, I hope.”

Vera, too, looked over at Papa: he'd now embraced Sári's daddy, and was singing that *The sun would soon rise*. When the song came to an end, they put the needle back on the record and played it all over again from the beginning; the people in the room laughed raucously, but as soon as the song started up again they joined in, singing along with uncle Béla and Papa, though the two of them couldn't be outshouted, because they were belting out the song at full blast, lurching about as they held on to each

other but sometimes flailing their arms about as they roared out the line *Just you wait!*

Auntie Eszter sometimes looked their way, gave a wave of her hand, laughed, then continued whispering with the man with the funny name.

Uncle Jakub had arrived at the party the same time as they had. Papa knew him from his army days, so he had introduced him to auntie Eszter and uncle Béla. It was quite an amusing thing to perform: Vera had long ago been told by Papa how to introduce herself but she'd never actually had to do it before, so it would have been nice to have given it a try now. She would have liked to give her name and also to have an opportunity to mention that in just a few days she would be in the fourth form, the top class in the junior school, something she would have added because grown-ups had a habit of forgetting, or simply not even being aware of, this kind of thing. But although Papa had explained in detail how to behave in such situations, she simply forgot everything she'd been told. This made her feel bad, but she soon got over it and began wondering how anyone could invite a total stranger to their flat. She did in fact ask Papa, but all he said was that uncle Jakub was the new concertmaster.

Here Papa seemed to have neither the time nor the patience to talk to her: Vera had never seen him in such a state, in a tizzy even after they'd arrived, he kept looking round this way and that, repeatedly smoothing down his hair even though it was combed back, slicked down, and gleaming black with hair cream, though usually it was all over the

place, as dishevelled as a clown's, wavy and hanging into his eyes. He seemed to have shrunk, though even so he was tall, but now his legs didn't seem as long as usual, nor his hands as huge and shovel-like. He kept biting his nails, though that wasn't something he ever did, not even Mama was allowed to do that, and he kept turning round and round: wherever Mama went he would suddenly stand with his back to her. Vera counted how many times he dropped the breadsticks – three – and he was guzzling down his wine quickly, one glass after the other, draining each at a gulp, while keeping an eye out for who was coming in. He welcomed every newcomer in a booming voice. Vera could see that Mama was annoyed, even though she kept whispering to him quietly and gently:

“Take it easy, Gábor, or there'll be trouble!”

Vera inquired what a concertmaster did; she was thrilled by the word, which made her think of travelling circuses with big tents, the concertmaster travelling with them from place to place, but Mama said uncle Jakub played the violin, that was all: he was a noted violinist. Vera found this disappointing; she'd already had to sit through concerts with a swarm of violinists on stage, playing for what seemed like ages, but hadn't noticed any one of them being more important than the rest. But she did like the fact that uncle Jakub had flaming red hair like Mama, which was even a little curly, too, looking a bit like Mama's, though his was like a crash helmet, as if he had a funny red hood covering his head.

Uncle Jakub had such an unusual name, as if someone had got its pronunciation wrong, because he was Polish.

Eventually they managed to escape into Sári's room. Vera loved that room, with its cabinet of wonders: long-legged dolls that could cry and be dressed and undressed, and even one that could be fed, and then there was Lego, which was terribly exciting, something that Vera loved and envied the most, because you could build anything with Lego, even bridges of the kind Papa built, and Sári's daddy had bought her several huge boxes of it from the dollar shop, because that was the only place you can get Lego; it was no use asking for even a much smaller box for herself, just enough for a smallish bridge, as Papa always said they had no "hard currency", which was not only exasperating, as Sári's family obviously had some, but also incomprehensible, as for the dollar shop surely you needed dollars and not "hard currency".



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