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In those days, before Communism collapsed, few families had relatives outside Albania. Mine was one. It was my mother's uncle. We'd always had to whisper when mentioning his name, but as the dictatorship dwindled, everybody started talking about his story. During obligatory service in his late teens in the sixties, Uncle Vangjel was stationed along the Greek border. While on guard duty one night, temptation gripped him and he crossed over. Escaped. Some thought he might be dead. Nearly thirty years passed before he contacted any of us again, first with letters from America, then with pictures of his wife and son. The only thing of Uncle Van's in those early photos was his hand creeping into the shot from the margins, holding his wife's hand. After three decades, Uncle Van still dreaded being identified, evading Communist reprisal even in America.

As the dictatorship dwindled still, Uncle Van's fears ebbed and soon he sent us more pictures. Himself in them now. We'd crowd around the photos to get a glimpse of him, our American kin, marveling at his height, at his gray hair, at his thick, silver-rimmed glasses. At his brow puckered in the look of a man dignified by dissension and exile.

Then, in the early summer of 1990, Uncle Van sent another letter that said his son, Frederik, would be coming to visit for one week. Albania was still just emerging from decades

of isolation. Until then such visits had been strictly forbidden. We were elated.

Frederik would stay mostly with his uncles in another town, but also spent a night or two at his aunt's, my grandmother's. So a couple of days before he arrived, I went with my mother to visit her girlhood home and watched with glee the preparations her own mother and siblings made. Nana Daje, as it fell on me to call her, was always one of those hunched-up old women, a toothless bundle of traditional garb, something you might mistake for a pile of laundry, if not for the fly-swatter she held ominously over the flies at her feet. When I saw her this time, though, she'd somehow regained a full decade of youth. Her usually pale, gaunt cheeks glowed with hues of red and pink. Her eyes sparkled. Her frail, bony body trembled with fretful impatience as she waited for the day when her nephew was to arrive. At the same time she dreaded that the day was arriving too soon and the house wasn't yet ready. She bristled about with ferocious energy, ordering her four married sons and their wives and her unmarried daughter to paint the house room by room. Reshuffle the beds and the armoire and the dressers so that the nephew could have an empty room to himself. Redo the basement where they kept the pigs, and temporarily transport the pigs, and their awful stench, to a neighbor's basement.

It was a new house I found on that particular summer visit. Just as it was a new grandmother, new uncles, new wives of uncles, a new aunt. (The only thing missing was my maternal grandfather who'd been dead since my mother was five or six, so long ago we rarely spoke of him.) On everyone's tongue, the name *Frederik* rang with a kind of sweet tenderness of voice that some people used when talking about a saint, or about a deceased mother, or as other people did, about our late Guide, Enver Hoxha, the founder of the Albanian Communist

Party. I was soon instructed that I had to be careful how I pronounced the name Frederik. That I had to make sure my tongue did not roll out some harsh, offensive sound, but that I made an effort, to soften with my living breath, the many consonants in the name. His name was not to be spoken in or near the outhouse, in the midst of some vulgar conversation, or in any slanderous way. I was told, too, how to go on tiptoe when hugging him and offering him my cheeks to have them kissed. And everyone kept repeating, before he'd arrived, that Frederik was two meters tall, and handsome. That he was kind, decent. Though he was twenty and had never set foot in Albania, he spoke Albanian better than any of us. And that he loved each and all of us.

When he came at last, I remembered everything said about him and I trembled as I waited to shake his hand and offer him my cheeks to have them kissed. I was just a simple peasant boy, after all, and the line of cousins and family friends and curious bystanders was a kilometer long, with lots of hands to shake and lots more cheeks to kiss, there being two of each, that an hour passed before Frederik stood just four cheeks away.

The skin on my forehead went taut as though someone were pulling hard on my hair. Except, oddly, I felt no pain, only the tight pull. Though it was a hot summer day, I trembled as if from the cold, my fingers freezing. I jumped in place, jittery all over, and rubbed my numbed, icy hands or tugged at the arm of an older cousin standing next to me.

Soon Frederik was so close that when again I reached for my cousin's arm, it was too busy hugging him. He was tall, for sure; he had to bend in half to face my cousin. His smile was so serene. He was escorted by Nana Daje, who stuttered as she introduced the people, telling him now whose daughter my cousin was, before moving to me.

Here it was, my turn to meet our American cousin. What

did I do? First, I felt a violent urge to fling myself at him and hug him with all my might, so much I loved him suddenly. Then something beyond the limits of my pre-teen understanding, beyond my powers of self-control, something entirely alien and unfelt before, made me whirl and run off, cringing and crying as I went. I heard chuckles and imagined eyes watching me with astonishment. Later, I was told that everyone had turned to Frederik to see what he'd say or do, and Frederik had done what he'd been doing all morning: he had smiled serenely.

My mother had suffered my shameful act publicly. Her family asked her to run after me. Discipline was suggested. And eventually, my mother found me hiding under the canopies of straggling hedges at the foot of a hill about a hundred meters from the house.

"Come out, you brat," she said, her body bent forward, her hands on her knees, her furious face toward me. "Come out. I'm not mad."

"You'll beat me."

"I won't beat you, although God-knows you deserve it for what you have done. What is Frederik to think of you, disrespecting him like that? What is Uncle Van to think? Don't you want them to send you jeans or sneakers from America, or maybe a boombox?"

"I do," I cried. "I do, I do."

"Well, you don't even deserve gum for acting like that. Now come out of there."

A cold shiver ran through my skin at that, and I rubbed my hands with more intensity now, thinking of all the things I'd deprived myself of by running away. But how could I convey to my mother, or anyone, what I'd felt when I myself did not understand it.

"You'll beat me," I only repeated.

"I won't beat you."

"Will you swear it?"

My mother put her right hand to her heart. "I swear it," she said. "On my head, I won't touch you."

"No," I said. "Swear it on Frederik's head."

"How dare you?" she snapped. She crawled like a wild beast into the hedge and wheedled me out by my hair, my arms scraping against the thorny bushes. Once outside, she gave me ten bulky slaps with three sideburn pulls and four ear twists to cry about.

When the red prints from my mother's fingers faded from my cheeks, and when my tears dried from the overflow of emotions and from my mother's palms, I was brought to Frederik to resume our introduction. Then, I imagined, to be pardoned for my act. I awaited the verdict with the dignity of a martyr. Not because I was all that brave, I admit. But because I'd been tipped off by my cousins who, having sat in Frederik's presence for nearly an hour, swore on their own heads, as well as on the heads of their fathers and their mothers and every living kin, that Frederik radiated nothing but humility and kindness. Despite this reassurance, my heart still thumped away as I shook hands with my beloved cousin and waited. But there was no bad verdict. In fact, I didn't even have to go on tiptoes to be kissed. Instead, he leaned in. And nothing, absolutely nothing, would have prepared me for what happened next. Frederik pointed his finger at me, and, smiling with that kind of serenity that made people rub their eyes in disbelief, he said: "And you, I don't think I'm going to forget you."

All my cousins—all my young cousins, that is, all those who'd earlier tipped me off—grew jealous suddenly of the favor bestowed so unjustly on someone other than themselves. They launched into improper acts of their own. They picked their noses. They stood on their hands. They giggled as Frederik asked Nana Daje permission for everything he did except breathing. They got no favors in return only sharp looks and slap-threats from their mothers and fathers until someone was

made an example of and thrown out.

Meanwhile, I was invited to sit right next to Frederik from where I could enjoy everything that Frederik was enjoying. There was nothing Frederik wasn't enjoying. Or maybe nothing he was. Except probably having his face fanned by my uncles' wives who were using cute Japanese hand-fans Frederik had brought as gifts, taking turns as their hands got tired. Seated by his side, my shoulder brushing against his, I wallowed in the humility that pulsed like a living bubble around him, and I could feel my chest expand while my heart swelled. My eyes swelled, too, as I stared at all the delights on the *sofra* before me. There were baklava, *ravani, llokum, kadaif,* and *petulla* with bowls of honey here and there, Turkish sweets we had mastered from centuries under Ottoman rule.

Again I found myself rubbing my hands, but this time not from the cold or from any kind of anxiety. I was in a predicament, wavering between the desire to reach for something and the obligation to appear grateful for being where I was. But my stomach stormed, my fingers tingled, and my mouth salivated like a puppy's. I was probably wagging something, too, since I couldn't make myself sit still despite my mother's death stares.

Finally, tired of the salivating, I sent a brigade of five wiggling fingers toward a plate of *llokum.* I managed to get far, nearly touching one of the plates, when someone smacked my hand in midair. I didn't have to look to know it was my mother who never spared her palm in the name of proper manners. Nor her sharp voice that yelped: "Don't touch!"

All the sweets had been prepared for Frederik, of course. But since he wasn't eating them, nobody was either. So I was sure now that I'd blown it. Sure that was it. Any moment and my mother would lift me up by my ears or hair and fling me at the door. But I had underestimated my position, doubted the power of Frederik's presence. His arm went around my shoulders, embracing me to him. He looked at me with calm

amusement for a moment, then at my mother. Then he stretched out his hand toward the plate of *llokum*, and, looking up at Nana Daje, he said: "Dear Aunt, may I give him a bit of this?"

"But of course, Dear," Nana Daje told him.

Frederik picked up the plate and brought it toward me. I looked eagerly and expectantly up at him as he nodded at the plate and gestured for me to take a cube of *llokum*, which I did, smearing my fingers and lips with soft powdery sugar. It amused him, my bashful gorging, and he pointed now at the baklava. I nodded furiously. He looked up again at Nana Daje. "Dear Aunt," he said. "May I give him a bit of this here, too?"

"But of course, Heart," Nana Daje answered, chuckling nervously.

Frederik brought a plate of baklava toward me and I grabbed a moist, sticky diamond-cut piece and shoved it in my mouth, feeling a rush of sugar go to my head. He did the same with the *petulla*, first asking Nana Daje if he could give me some and Nana Daje saying, but of course, Dear, he could, and I grabbed a *petulla*, dipped it in honey and ate it all in one bite. Then came the *kadaif*, which I used a spoon for, then the *ravani* and the *llokum*. As if he had been the one eating, Frederik leaned over now and whispered to Nana Daje if he may use "the needed room," he called it. Nana Daje gestured frantically for her sons to get up immediately and escort Frederik to the needed outhouse.

With Frederik gone a moment, I found myself the center of attention, like I were the guest of honor and all those sweets had been put there for me. I could see all around me tongues licking lips, hands on the verge of movement, eyes begging me to share. Who to offer, who to deny? It was too much for me. So I pretended I didn't see anything. I only kept my eyes on the sweets before me, while I gorged and gorged and gorged some more.

Money for everything had been sent beforehand by Uncle Vangjel. After every expense was taken care of, there was hardly any left. The visit came to an end, too soon for us, and Frederik returned to America. His departure cast a somber gloom over all of us that he'd kissed, the places he'd touched. Nana Daje's house returned to its dismal ugliness, with its old, worn rugs on the floor and the furniture all where it had been before. The pigs were brought back to the basement one by one where they grumbled with hunger as always, their evil stench wafting up again through the spaces in the floor boards.

By the time my mother and I had to leave, return to our village by the Buna River, it was the old house once again. It was the old Nana Daje once again. The old uncle, the old aunts. The old me. Well, maybe we weren't our old selves again. Maybe something of our new selves had remained. It was there in the way we continued to speak about Frederik long after he had left, still careful about how we pronounced his name, although we had abbreviated it to Rik now; we'd earned the right. Over and over again, we reminisced about how Rik was two meters tall and therefore handsome, about how good-natured he was, about how divinely respectful, divinely humble, which no doubt he must owe to his being born in America. It was there in the way we clung to the gifts that Rik had brought us. The girls to their butterfly hairpins, the women to their Japanese fans with butterflies on them, the men to their watches, the boys to their jeans or sneakers.

There was a boombox, too, a gift for my grandmother's entire family and we all crowded around it now to record our voices, feeling surprised and a little disappointed afterward that our voices did not exactly correspond to the voices we heard in our own heads. Still, however, we decided to record a cassette and send it to Uncle Vangjel. In the cassette, we introduced ourselves one by one, and one by one we said a few words of thanks in our odd-sounding voices for the gifts Uncle had

brought us and for having sent Frederik.

Nana was the last to speak. With her flair for melodrama, it took her at least seven tries before she could complete a sentence without breaking into sobs. By the seventh time she was still sobbing, but she managed to say the words she'd longed to say to her brother these past thirty years. About the anguish of having feared that he was dead, tempered only by that flicker of hope that perhaps he'd fled. What joy to know that he was alive and in America. What joy to receive pictures of him and of his family. What joy to have him send Frederick, whose love and kindness had touched us all.

And she thanked her brother, too, for her own little present that he'd gotten her. It was not a fan or a hairpin, but an ornamental piece. A small porcelain vase, about the size of her palm, glossy and pink, in the shape of a heart. Nana Daje held it to her breast as she said how beautiful it was, like a precious jewel she had found only after a long search. "How it's tormenting me, dear brother," she went on, trying to sneak a laugh between her sobs. "It's so beautiful and so fragile that I don't know where in the house to put it. On top of the TV it might be knocked over, I'm afraid. Next to the radio it is dark and hidden, and, in my room, it is likewise hidden. On the dinner table it does not belong." With that tone halfway between crying and laughing, Nana told her brother not to worry, assuring him she'd get her sons right away to carve a nook on the wall for it.

Nana was our link to America, our link to the world, and, as she spoke, a bundle of garb stirring with sobs, we clung to her and to our gifts. My uncles had the correct time on their wrists and frequently reported it, even when no one asked. My aunt made friends with the mirror and her hairpins. My mother and the wives of my uncles kept their faces cool with their new fans. My younger cousins paraded about with jeans or sneakers too small or too big for them. I hugged my own

gift, an official-size soccer ball I let no one play with, or even
on my care, I remembered that I'd received another gift. One
no poor Albanian boy had ever received. I'd sat next to our
American kin as his favorite. I'd felt firsthand what it meant
to be born abroad, to know all that went with it. All the bak-
lava and the *petulla,* the malleable *ravani* and the *llokum.* The
sweetness of them was still in my mouth.