

Miro Gavran

How Dad Won Mum

(excerpt)

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Lunch at Grandma's

Every Sunday, our family goes to my Grandma's for lunch. My Grandma is my Mum's mother, while she is my Dad's "living torture", the way he often refers to her. None of us like those Sunday lunches, but we go regularly, because that's the thing to do, and because we have to.

The Sunday I am going to talk about was very similar to all the Sundays which had gone before, and for that very reason was even worse than all the previous ones.

Just as we rang the front doorbell, and just as she opened the door to her large flat where she lives alone, Grandma immediately said:

-Antun my dear, you are so poorly dressed, this child is sure to get tuberculosis.

-He's dressed just as we are - said Mum.

-You have to look after a child better than that, if you have no feeling for children you shouldn't have them - snapped my Grandma.

-We've brought you some flowers - said Dad.

-You shouldn't waste money, Son-in-Law. I know you don't make much money but, if you do buy flowers, then at least buy something less garish, less florid. I would forbid people without taste to buy flowers at all.

Mama gave a slight cough, but that did not bother my Grandma one bit, and she said:

-Antun, your hands are dirty, as if you have been playing in a pigsty. Go to the bathroom at once, I won't have you sitting down at the table like that. I have laid a new tablecloth and I don't want any spots of smudges from dirty fingers. Do you understand?

-I understand, Grandma - I answered, and went to the bathroom, knowing that Grandma would be right behind me to check whether I was washing my hands with soap or without it. And sure enough, just as I put down the soap and started washing my hands the door opened, and Grandma's voice bellowed.

-Use the soap!

-I just put it down.

-Use the soap when I tell you, otherwise you won't even get any soup.

I obediently picked up the soap and once again, with Grandma watching, lathered up my hands.

Lunch had just started when Grandma looked at Dad and said:

-Son-in-Law, I don't like the way you are living, it's all far too bohemian the way I see things.

-Why? - asked Dad.

-Well, you still don't have a place of your own. You are living in thirty rented square metres. You are simply nobody at that factory of yours: chief storeman, simply pathetic. And your wife holds a master's degree in chemistry, doesn't it make you uncomfortable?

-Mama, please, don't talk like that - said my mother.

-Apart from that, when you married my daughter you said you would finish your studies in mechanical engineering, that you would get your degree, and you didn't even pass one exam since you were married.

-I didn't pass any exams because I don't have the time and there is nothing more they can teach me there. I have to advance and that is exactly what I am doing. I'm working on a new patent now which will...

-I am really not interested in your patents - shouted Grandma - I am not interested in the patents of a man who does not have a degree, I have no faith in such people! Nobody has ever bought any of your patents, which means they must be worthless.

-Nobody buys them because the management at our factory don't have a clue - said Dad.

-And you are the only clever one, cleverer than anyone else - said Grandma in a quarrelsome voice.

-Mama, please, we have to be patient. I believe in Joseph and I know that one day people will realise the value of his innovations. One day they will realise his real worth. Sooner or later he'll succeed, and then it will be no problem to buy a normal flat, then we'll find it easy to organise our lives.

-I've been listening to that for ten years. And nothing changes. As a master of chemistry you sells newspapers in a kiosk, because your husband can't help you to find a job in your profession. He works for a miserable salary and spends money on those idiotic patents. If I hadn't bought you a TV set, you would have no idea what is going on in the world. If I hadn't bought you a refrigerator, you would be eating spoiled food.

-Madam, if you prefer, I can leave - said my Dad.

-No, my dear son-in-law, I would prefer that you listen to all I have to say.

At that moment, I felt that the situation was becoming dangerous to the point of a real explosion, so on purpose I nudged my glass of juice so that it trickled out onto the tablecloth.

-Antun, be careful! - shouted my mother.

The juice was pouring onto the cloth, but like a panther my Grandma sprung forward, caught the glass at the last minute, preventing all its contents from spilling.

-O my God, you have ruined my tablecloth! My new tablecloth! This child of yours has no table-manners. As punishment, you will not get any of the ice-cream I have made. I would rather throw it into the dustbin. My new table-cloth!

Dad smiled at me, because he understood that the juice had not spilled by accident, while my Mum did not respond to Grandma's words.

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