ANITA HARAG

FORTY OUT OF FORTY

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GRANDFATHER USED TO PLAY SOCCER as a fullback, as did father, but he was not grandfather's son. Grandfather only had daughters, who were not interested in soccer. One of them played handball, the other basketball. When mother met father, grandfather didn't object. He was speechless with happiness when he learned that father also cheered for Fradi and played on the Rojik team. "Rojik is what the field is called," he explained to his father-in-law, whose eyes teared up when he heard the words "soccer," "soccer field," and "fullback." He didn't tell us that on the soccer field he was called "The Snail."

If he were to tell his life story, he would start by saying that he was born in 1928 and that he joined the Törekvés team in 1946. He worked as a lathe operator for the Hungarian State Railway (HSR), where he was the supervisor of a few women at first and then later of forty women, including stockings, patent leather shoes, permed hair, and everything. At one time forty-two women worked under him, to be exact. Grandfather never counted them, but grandmother did. Grandfather went to the HSR works (to the women, his wife would add) and played for the Törekvés team for over forty years. He put on the shorts, jersey, and soccer shoes in the locker room, although the shoes probably didn't look like the ones he wears nowadays, which are more like slippers and are not for soccer. I cannot visualize the kind of shoes Törekvés players wore in 1954, but for lack of anything better I imagine them as ordinary Adidas. When he talks about Törekvés, grandfather never talks about the uniforms he wore. I could ask, but these days he can't even remember the location of the corner store where he bought bread for over fifty years, and I don't want to embarrass him. If I ask grandmother about Törekvés, she always talks about the minimum forty and maximum forty-two women, and she never tells me where the field was, how often

they practised, or on which days. I get a bit cross because this way I cannot properly visualize the scene of grandfather walking through the gate of the Törekvés stadium, which is wide enough to accommodate a car, with a perhaps red, blue, green, or striped jersey in his knapsack. Grandfather, who is the first to arrive because he hates to be late, turns on the light in the locker room, goes onto the field dressed to play, and helps the coach with the balls and with setting up the net. They practise two or maybe three hours, return to the locker room all sweaty and out of breath, take a shower, and go to have a beer in either Patak or Csöpögő, three blocks away.

Grandmother waits up for her husband in a nightgown that reaches down to her ankles and is buttoned up to her chin. She's been sleeping in the same two nightgowns for fifty years. The children are still awake. They have been waiting up for you, she says when he arrives, pushing the two sleepy daughters in front of him. They look as if they have just been dragged out of bed, and it is past eleven by the time they get to go back. Then grandmother turns toward the wall and pretends to fall asleep very quickly, although she keeps kicking grandfather under the blanket, as if in her sleep.

Grandfather is eighty-six now, but these days he says that he is over a hundred without a hint of a smile. He washes his grey hair once a week with soap that grandmother had bought in bulk years ago in the CBA store. His face has hardly any wrinkles. The rays reflecting from Hármas Lake permanently marked a line above his running shoes, where his skin does not fade even in winter; grandfather is very dark. In the old pictures he looks like a movie star. Old pictures make grandfathers look good. Grandmother, too. In her wedding picture she looks like the doll I got for Christmas at the age of seven. She wouldn't let me give her away and placed her on the small table by the TV, where no one was allowed to touch her. Her hair has lost its colour by now, but she still stares at the world with her big blue eyes. She stares so hard that she hardly blinks. She only closes her eyes when she goes to bed to be able to pretend to be asleep while gently kicking her husband.

Grandmother gets immersed in recounting how they met. Sometimes she stops the story and turns to her husband. "That's right, isn't it, dad?" she asks, but grandfather does not even look at her. Our voices seem like background noise to him, and he cannot distinguish the speakers or hear any of the separate lines. He is not willing to use his hearing aids. He does not even look at grandmother. He is not going to learn to read lips at this stage.

They met at a street dance. Grandmother went with her mother and

her eldest sister. At first grandfather did not dare approach them, but he gradually summoned up his courage. The evening was winding down, and people were starting to go home. He knew it was now or never. Who knows if they would ever meet again? Grandmother was not pretty, but she was strong. Grandfather thought that this woman would be able to hold his life together with her arms. Men liked her, and she danced with several of them that evening. Even then grandfather was jealous of all the men who asked her to dance. Then, when he went over to them, her mother chased him away. Those who come late miss out, she said, and they left for home. It was months later, during the next street dance, when they met again. This time grandmother came just with her mother, and he went over and asked her to dance as soon as he spotted her. He told her that, if she said yes, it would apply not only to this dance but to all the dances of the evening. Grandmother linked arms with him.

She was only seventeen, so she needed her parents' permission to get married. Great-grandmother became very fond of grandfather, and she did not take much prodding, but great-grandfather could not be found. He used to come and go as he pleased. Sometimes he showed up, climbed into great-grandmother's bed, and got her pregnant again. Later on great-grandmother began to put one of the children between them so there would be no more children. She could not take care of more than six, and she had already lost a pair of twins. Eventually the visits stopped. Many years later she received a letter in which he begged great-grandmother to take him back. By that time the wedding had already taken place, and the daughters had been born. Great-grandmother did not intend to take him back or to reply to his letter. When her children persuaded her to do it, their father was no longer alive. They had missed the opportunity.

Grandfather had to report for military service right after the wedding, and they were not able to have a night together—that is how grandmother put it—because they drank so much that they fell asleep on top of each other. Grandfather did not get leave because his commander hated him. According to grandmother, that piece of shit took a fancy to her when she visited the barracks.

Her daughters were already in their teens when her husband began to come home later and later. He said he had to go because they were getting ready for a big match and needed additional practice. Grandmother had not been going to his games for a long time. She had gone to them with

her daughters when they were still small, but for five or six years she had stopped sitting in the first row near the field, taking grandfather's hand on the way home, and telling him how good he was at defence that day. He had not been coming home in time for dinner for three months, and the big game had still not taken place. Then one day—grandmother thinks it must have been a Thursday, which was less chaotic because whatever they didn't finish they could do on Friday, when they were not receiving clients—she went to the Törekvés soccer field. She walked through the gate, which was wide enough for a car, and some of the cinders stuck to her shoes, as it had rained without stop the day before. She wanted to get out her handkerchief to wipe them off but was surprised by the voices. She was surprised that there were no voices. She was standing by the soccer field, and there was no net in the goal or team on the field. "How was practice?" she asked her husband when he arrived home at ten that night—the same time as their two daughters, who were allowed to stay out until then. "It was good, the usual, we worked our asses off," he answered. "Wasn't there a lot of mud?" "No, or maybe just a little." "I'll go wash off your shoes," grandmother said, but grandfather waved her off. "Don't bother, I'll do it later." He put down his knapsack in the entrance and went to the washroom. His wife walked over to the bag and pulled out the shoes. They were clean with not a trace of new or caked-on mud.

A couple of days later she went to the soccer field again, stopped at the side, and looked at the net and the jerseys. She saw Isti, Pőré, and Vajda, but not her husband. She sat down in the second row, leaning her elbows on the backrest of the seat in front of her. Perhaps he is late, she thought. Work may have dragged on. It can happen. One of the forty, maximum forty-two, women may have asked him a silly question while thrusting out her hips and accidentally touching her husband's arm now and then. She got the shivers and pushed the backrest of the seat so hard that there were two small indentations that took three days to disappear. Vajda waved at her at the end of the game and rushed up to her. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "And when is your husband going to recover? We haven't seen him for months." "I only came over to catch a bit of air and thought I would sit here and watch you guys," grandmother said, blushing from her ears all the way to her chest. Vajda kept calling her for months after that.

That evening grandmother was so angry that she sent the girls to their room and told them it was an early bedtime. They could do whatever they

wanted as long as they stayed in their bed because she was going to talk to their father. They pushed their ears against the wall when he got home. I don't know how the discussion progressed—grandmother always skips this part—but after she called him all sorts of names and demanded to know who was the fat-assed woman, which of the forty or forty-two it was, grandfather replied that she had it all wrong. He had been visiting his mother for months because she was not well. She was even getting regular treatments for depression. He didn't mention it because he didn't want to upset her—she had enough on her plate—and he asked her not to visit his mother, as she wanted to be alone and could only tolerate his company. She should ask his brother, as his mother didn't want to see him either. On top of it, she was ashamed that there was basically nothing wrong with her, yet everything was wrong, as she didn't use to be that way. Grandmother didn't say anything to this. She just lay down beside her husband and didn't sleep all night. There was no way she was going to ask János when he last saw his mother, as they hadn't talked for ages.

The next day she left work early, caught the two o'clock bus, and within an hour and a half was standing in front of her mother-in-law's blue door. She held a lemon-flavoured friendship loaf in her hand, "Friendship Loaf" it said on the package, which she knew her mother-in-law liked a lot. The package was moist, as it had still been warm when it was wrapped, and she opened it a bit to let it air. Then she knocked, and her mother-in-law opened the door. She was rosy-cheeked from baking, and the scent of freshly baked turnovers enveloped grandmother. "Ever since then I can't even look at turnovers," she says when she gets to this point in the story. Her mother-in-law invited her to sit down, took the loaf, sniffed it, and said how nice it was that it was still warm. "I'm going to the club this evening, and it's my turn to bring dessert," she said, "so I'm just in the middle of making turnovers, some with apricots and some with cottage cheese." She only noticed then how pale grandmother was. "I hope everything is all right," she said. "What has happened?" "Hasn't Laci been by?" "Laci? No. Let's see, when was he here last? When you came over for Easter and took home that nice big ham. I haven't seen him since."

When grandmother gets to this point in the story, grandfather completely melts into his green armchair, and his skin, hair, fingernails—every part of him—turns green. Or, if she is telling the story by the lakeside, he turns dirty brown like the lake water. He is trying to be as invisible as pos-

sible and disappear among the reeds. “I never found out which of the forty or forty-two women she was, so it was as if he had gone to bed with all of them, complete with stockings, patent leather shoes, permed hair, and everything.”

Grandmother has a recurring dream, in which she is standing bare naked in the middle of the empty soccer field. She has no arms to cover herself with, and everyone is staring at her—grandfather from the first row, Vajda from the second row, and her daughters, girlfriends from work, and her boss scattered around. Her mother is the coach, who rushes over to her, asks her to put something on, and blows into the whistle hanging around her neck. Those mornings she feels as if someone has been blowing a whistle in her ears for hours.