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Your Name Could Be Leda

Translated from Croatian by Mirna Čubranić

To Martina and you

Children are what we were; they are what we should become again.

Friedrich Schiller

In The End

We never took a taxi except when we went to a wedding. Father would impatiently turn the numbers on the black rotary dial phone. He'd ram his forefinger into the hole for the first digit of the taxi company phone number, rotate it to the metal stop and wait till it returned to its original position rattling like a stage-coach on a country road. Then he'd attack the dial five more times again, until the last digit. One had to be very careful doing it because a wrong digit meant starting all over again, and nothing was worse than dialling the last digit wrong. Several consecutive unsuccessful attempts sometimes led to a squabble between Mum and Dad. He would blame the designers, she his impatience, and in the end she'd say: Let me do it. You are short-tempered, that's why you can't get it right. Of course, Father would then attack the phone like a stubborn mule just to prove her she was wrong. When he finally managed to dial, I sometimes thought that we would have already been halfway to our destination, had we gone there on foot.

Busy! The line is busy! Those idiots do nothing but babble on the phone all day!

You try, he'd say angrily and hold out the handset to Mum, as if it were her fault that the line was busy. She'd reply she had to finish getting ready, and the handset would find its way into my hands. I almost always dialled the right number from the first try.

Give it to me! Father would snatch the handset the moment I said the phone was ringing on the other side.

Waiting for a taxi, he'd nervously go out onto the porch every few seconds to check if it had arrived. We were always running late.

If my four years older brother, my four years younger sister and I followed him there, he'd bark at us: Why are you staring, can't you see it's not here?

It was usually like that – tense and on the verge of an argument – but when a black Mercedes with the yellow roof sign and the word TAXI in black letters finally pulled up in our front yard, a smile lit up his face and everything was all right. We were a perfect family. He'd stroll out of the house as if he had all the time in the world, and we'd follow. Mum would lock the door and dash after us with her purse still open.

To the hotel! Father would say, stressing every syllable. Or more often: To the old community hall! To the hall in Vinica!

When we finally arrived, everyone was stunned to see us wriggling out of a taxi, because a taxi ride was inexcusable unless you were a mortally ill old person who needed a lift to the railway station, but didn't have a driving license or a tractor.

That’s what comes to my mind, but I don’t say it. Maybe I wouldn't have remembered it if we hadn't gone to a wedding last weekend. The psychologist sitting on the right side of the table is a young, friendly woman, but you never know. She could ask: Why did your father do that? Or, how did you feel? A question I will not know how to answer. So I talk about Christmas instead. You can't go wrong with Christmas. Especially when the social worker, a woman in her mid-thirties like Jana and I, has a little picture of Saint Anthony by her computer. Saint Anthony was Mum's patron saint, and I know he is the saint of lost things. That's why I think we are at the right place to find what we've been long looking for. For Mum found what she was looking for and used to work here herself. We are exactly where we are meant to be, that's how I see it.

Yes, Christmas is definitely the first thing that comes to my mind if I have to say what I remember most from my childhood.

At Christmas Eve the whole family always gathered at the house of my grandparents from Dad's side. My maternal grandparents were dead by then. There were over thirty of us and the house teemed with people. Granny would make a non alcoholic pear or mint liqueur for us children and pour it into the small glasses on the kitchen cupboard. We spent hours outside, firing carbide missiles from the empty paint cans we collected during the year. Sometimes we went to the midnight mass, and later everyone would come to our house for sausages and mulled wine.

I keep to myself that one year we boys jumped from the balcony into the high heap of snow in front of the house. My brother lost a stupid bet and had to jump dressed only in his pants. Of course that my cousins and I dashed down the stairs and locked the basement door through which we sneaked back into the house.

And you, what do you remember most from your childhood?

Jana talks about her grandparents, about cooking and tending the garden with her grandmother. The psychologist then asks if we are attending the pre-adoption training course, and my wife says we are.

We have attended only one session so far, and we liked it. The trainer is a tall blonde who knows what she's doing, which is not often the case. Relaxed and at ease, she created a pleasant atmosphere. The seven of us sat in a semicircle. One of our fellow participants was a single woman, and I felt sorry for her. I could only imagine how difficult it was for her to go through all that alone. At thirty-one she was hardly too old to find a husband and have a baby. But I guess she was old enough to have had her fair share of heartbreaks and give up on men and love.

Do you feel comfortable sitting in a semicircle? the trainer asked.

I do, I said when she looked at me. It helps me open up. We sat like this at the Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

Although I said it as a joke, she stopped for a second. God knows what scenarios were running through her mind, but considering the kind of people she deals with as a Family Centre social worker, her reaction didn't surprise me.

I was just joking, I said, and she waved her hand dismissively. They were not anonymous.

The psychologist says the evaluation has been completed sooner than she expected, and their opinion is positive. They just have to check the conditions we live in, and that will be it as far as the Social Welfare Centre is concerned.

Your test results worry me, she said earlier, when she was closing the door, and I stifled the smug smile threatening to erupt on my face. They are too good.

One lies in those tests, but that's what you are expected to do. They are put together so you would lie. When you take them, it seems that the most important thing is to guess where you should lie, and you never know if you got it right. That is why I decided to give a roughly equal number of true and false answers. And to lie answering the seemingly harmless questions. Not just those such as: Do you suffer from a buzzing in your ears? Buzzing would be small potatoes compared to the cathedral bells ringing in my head. Jana, of course, didn't admit fainting from time to time.

Were people drinking at your birthday parties and Christmas celebrations? the social worker now asks.

Always, I say and we giggle.

Then the psychologist joins in again, as if cross-examining us. She wants to know if we have talked with someone about the tests and known what to expect. We say we haven't. I just add I was relaxed because I've taken similar tests before.

At a job interview?

No, for Mensa.

And how did you do?

Fine, I say. She has taken the bait, and I want to come across as modest.

Did you pass?

I was close, I say, but I wasted too much time double-checking every answer. For when she entered to tell me I had two minutes left to finish the test, I was only halfway through the questions. But I had enough time to photograph the test so Jana and I could compare the answers at home.

Of course I liked going to weddings. I liked the moment when I wriggled out of the car after my brother, mother or sister, and everyone was already there. Each time I tried to crawl onto the back seat first, so I could sit by the window, but since I was younger and smaller than my brother, I always had to sit squeezed between him and Mum who held my little sister in her lap. The car would glide down the street, and I was happy. Nobody else in my class ever drove in a taxi. I thought it would last forever, but of course it didn't. Gozo, the best man at my aunt's wedding in the community hall in Vinica, took all the fun out of it. We the kids played *Twin Peaks* outside. We told scary stories about the missing people and heinous murders until we began to flinch at every sound, when we heard a scream. A woman ran out of the building, glanced to her left and right, and went back inside. Then Jura dashed out, looking for us in the dark: Guys, you'll miss the fight! Seriously, I'm not kidding you! We didn't react because we didn't want him with us, but when he turned around and ran back inside, we ran after him.

The room was quiet, except for the strange muffled sounds coming from the left, where the wedding guests were standing in a circle. When we got there, we saw Gozo sitting straddled on top of a man, pinning him down and holding him by the throat with both hands. I rooted for him until I realized that the other man was my dad. He was clearly defeated, but he squirmed like a squished bug. His lip was broken, and he was bleary-eyed from alcohol and the blows he'd received. Two men pulled Gozo off him, and he remained lying on his back on the floor. He looked pathetic and I was ashamed of him.

Music! someone shouted.

I saw the musicians sitting unperturbed at their table. To them, drunken brawls were nothing new and nothing to be wondered at. My aunt stood nearby, crying inconsolably with her hand over her face, oblivious of her mother and her groom who were trying to comfort her.

The best man returned to his seat at the table. I wanted to hit him or, even better, to do what agent Dale Cooper would do, and dig up some dirt on him.

The musicians started to play, and several couples came to the dance floor.

We went home. Uncle Slavek drove us.

The psychologist gazes back and forth between us and the screen of her computer. Leaning forward with her elbows on the desk and twisting the pencil in her hand, she seems a little embarrassed – or it is only my impression because that is how I feel. She smiles, runs her hand down her slicked-back ponytail, presses her lips together and even before she says a word, I know what she is going to say.

There was one question you left unanswered the last time you were here, she says. You said you'd think some more about it.

To be honest, I was just trying to buy some time. I knew nothing would change. It was our first meeting and I wanted us to leave the best possible impression. In the time between that meeting and today, I never even once thought about it.

Would you adopt a Romani child?

At the pre-adoption training course in Čakovec, the trainer said something beautiful: Our job is not to find the right children for you, but the right parents for those kids. It sounds nice, but it is an utter nonsense, because those kids can choose only among the people they are offered to choose among. Otherwise they would choose those they have been abandoned by or taken away from. We are just backups. In most cases they can choose when they are younger than two or three years of age and when they are not Gypsies. When they are twelve or thirteen, they can only stand in the yard and curse the tear-eyed, complacent couples who believe they have just saved someone's life, and they can hate them and all the others like them, who passed them by without stopping when they were little and chose someone else.

We went to the wedding reception on foot; it was held by the brook, near our apartment. When we decided to call it a night, we considered calling a taxi, because Jana's high heels were killing her. In the end, like always, we chose not to do it. You may find it hard to believe, but after that unfortunate incident at my aunt’s wedding, I have never again sat in a taxi, at least in Croatia.

We walked out into the mild night and strolled down the empty road. We hadn’t gone far when we heard the sound of a car engine behind our backs. We moved to the curb and when we turned around, we saw a green and white car with an illuminated TAXI sign on the roof driving towards us. In a big city that would be nothing unusual, but in our little town it was nothing short of a miracle, especially at four o'clock in the morning.

Straight home, my dad would say. Braća Radić Street. And the driver would nod, as if he had forgotten where he had picked us up.

We never talked about that evening. About why we took a taxi when we went to wedding receptions. I used to hate Dad because of that, but as I grew older, I tried to understand him. Maybe he wanted to show us that there was a different life. Or that certain moments simply must be different, more special than others. Someone once said that he had started taking a taxi after his car failed vehicle inspection one wedding Saturday. It could be true. I asked him about it.

At our station, not even an Austro-Hungarian locomotive would fail the inspection, he said.

Without thinking, I raised my thumb, ready to say: straight home. The driver slowed, but he drove by without stopping.

I was not angry. I watched the red rear lights disappear in the dark and I felt it was meant to happen. And that everything would be all right.

In the end, as we are standing up to leave, the psychologist asks: How will you tell your child they are adopted?

Miklinovec And Some Other Things

For my father's fiftieth birthday, Mum wanted to surprise him with the gift of his family tree. She started drawing it on the kitchen table long before November 14. It was not a tree that went many generations back – families like mine, families of farmers and peasants, never remember further in the past than their great-grandfathers. There are families with distant relatives in distant countries, the figures of legend whose accomplishments are, usually after a couple of drinks, passed on from one generation to the next, but our family is not one of them. Therefore Mum started with my grandfather and grandmother who came to Podravina after the Second World War. The task she set herself was far more demanding than one would expect, because although families like mine had no past to celebrate, they had the future to look toward – Dad had ten brothers and sisters. Đurđica died at only one month of age in 1959, and Martica at twelve years in 1960, so only nine names remained in the little *boxes* from which the line could continue. Or rather eight, because one brother was a priest. 26 cousins with me among them found themselves in the row below, the row for grandchildren. But the tree branched out further. Although it was almost fifteen years ago, some of my cousins already had children; Tomica, Tina, Branko, Kristinka, Kamo and Dodo. Dodo had a fourteen-month-old son, and Mum simply loved being with him. The tree grew spreading its branches, and she had to be very careful not to forget anyone.

It was the oddest birthday party ever. Birthday parties in our family were always a big affair, no matter whose birthday we celebrated. With over fifty attendees, they were always noisy and cheerful. Grownups sang, and children ran around the house, jumped in the hay in the barn, trapped each other in the huge corn basket, played football kicking the ball so hard that it broke a window or two, argued and fought, and then played hide and seek around the cars parked at the fairground. Dad was always somewhere near with his Yashica in its black leather case. The sofa was always too small for all of us children to huddle around the cake and keep the smiles on our faces while he carefully arranged us for a group photo.

This time nobody sang, and glasses were almost shyly brought to the lips. Half-whispered conversations sounded like confessions. They talked about her, of course.

We gave Dad a watch as a birthday present. He thanked us and put it aside. Then we had our picture taken. To mark the end, I guess. Because it was the end of a life. We buried our lives too, and carried on changed inside.

I can still see it as if it were yesterday: I heard the gate creak open and Mum cooing to Borna. I stood up from the bed and went to the window. The wild chestnut trees across the road had not yet shed all their leaves. The grass on the fairground was flattened by the rain. It was cloudy and Mum had her raincoat on. She closed the gate behind her and slowly pushed the pram with Dodo's son in it.

Shall we go for a coffee? I called to her.

Tomorrow, she answered.

It was the fifth of November. She died in the early morning hours of the following day.

Finally someone had one too many and laughed in a low voice. Someone else joined, and the conversation became more animated. Almost like at our most joyous family gatherings, when uncle Zlatko threw violets out of the little vase and filled it with brandy, or when Dad asked us all to move from the living room to the kitchen, and godfather Zvonko fiercely replied that nobody had the right to tell him he couldn’t sit on the chairs he had sat on for thirty years.

We just waited for it all to end, so we could go to sleep.

Only much later, when our new lives have grown a little, did I realize: Mum's present was meant to root him where he was, ours to urge him on. But where could he go?

It was a stupid present, a cheap substitute for the present Mum had planned for him, when we should have made an effort and finish the family tree.

But one day I will finish it; I will add your name to it and connect it with Jana's and mine. Maybe this is how I'm doing it.

Jana doesn't know I'm writing this. I’m keeping it secret from her not because she wouldn't love you or want you, but because she is afraid that if we start looking for you, we'll stop looking for her or him we've been looking for so many years that I can't remember the time when that quest was not a part of our lives.

You know, I’ve told her once that one day we will not remember the time when we weren’t a couple and almost all our memories will be the memories we shared together. After ten years, that day is near. We’ve shared so many beautiful memories in our decade together, but what marks them most is the search for which I don't have much strength left in me.

She is lying in the living room full of hope. Sometimes some of her hope rubs off on me, and I believe everything will be fine. I lie beside her and imagine how it will be. I put my head on her belly and see the three of us.

I don't know how old you are. I don't know what colour your hair and eyes are. I don't know your smile. I don't even know your name. Your name could be Leda. I don't know what you like, what kind of music you listen to and what you would like to be when you grow up. I don't know if you are born yet. I don't know if you are a girl. I imagine you are. I imagine you as a four-year-old girl with dimpled cheeks. Your hair is usually chestnut brown and wavy, but not always. Sometimes it's darker, like Jana's. She and I are dancing embraced to a song by Kenny Rogers, maybe to *Silbermond*; we are daydreaming, snuggling up to your little body between us.

Maybe you think this is stupid and don't want to waste your time reading it; maybe your generation doesn't read, but I feel I must put it all down on paper right now, because who knows if fifteen or twenty years from now I will be able to describe with the same accuracy or the same words how we felt and what we were going through. I'm afraid that time will blur my recollections of Mum and Dad, Boko and Dado, grandfather and grandmothers, Jana's parents and everyone else. I'm bound to forget something and I want you to know everything, every little detail about what has made us who we are and what we can give to you.

I think you are sixteen. I don't know for sure how old I am, but I can't be younger than fifty. That makes me sad. I wish we had met you sooner so we could have more time together. But I'm happy nevertheless; if you are reading this, it means that we've got you and that we mean something to you. And that is more, much more than we could hope for.

I know you are not eighteen because I know myself. It would be pathetic to give you this on your eighteenth birthday, and besides, eighteen seems too late. You will be a grown up, fully formed person by then, and you will need these words earlier in life. Questions will come earlier. Who are you and what are you? Where are you from? You will have known you are adopted, but you will be curious and you will want to search. I think I'll let you do it, but I can't promise it won't hurt. You, Jana and me. Still, I'll go with you if you want me to. But before we go, I'll ask you to read these words to see not where you've come from but where you've come to and what you mean to us.

In his book *Where Main Streets Meet the River*, Hodding Carter quotes the words he has heard from a wise woman: *There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of them is roots; the other, wings.*

I hope we have given you roots to keep you grounded and wings to soar high.

You think you are safe and protected, and that everything will last forever, but childhood lasts for a blink of an eye and it is not a granite fortress, not even a limestone one – it is rather a sand castle, the remains of the summer that slowly crumble under the attacks of putrid autumn.

The outlines of the life you knew and considered the only possible slowly disappear. The people who held you in their arms and sang lullabies to you disappear. Then you have to decide and become a man. It is your turn now. Your turn to be someone's whole world, someone's granite and sweet toffee of childhood.

You slowly begin to realize that you can't be what you thought you'd be and wanted to be, and that realization hurts and keeps you awake at night. You are no longer a charming and irresistible little boy with all the possibilities open to him. No, the doors close, and what do you do? First you just stand in front of them for a long, too long time, and then you shyly knock on them one after the other, heedlessly looking for a way out that would bring you serenity and peace. Childhood is gone and life with it.

Nobody knows it better than you and all others like you, who are alone from the day they are born. Who know that you will have a home, not a real home but shelter and food, until you come of age, and then find themselves in the street, because that is the law. I saw an interesting discussion on the Internet the other day – I'll never understand why kids at school have to pay for the mid-morning snack, and criminals in prison get it for free?

Her head is on my chest, as if everything were fine. I stroke her hair. I can't take my hands off her, can't stop touching her, because it would mean that I'm on my own, and night can be horrible when I'm on my own – it whines in my ears and roars in my temples ever since Mum died, when I was twenty one.

We are in bed watching a movie. Candles are burning in the shiny, glass candle holders filled with corn kernels. Their orange gleam fills me with the sense of serenity, despite everything. She is warm and she smells of childhood. Nice, isn't it?

I met Jana a little less than ten years ago. I said *met*, but it would be more accurate to say it was then that we became close and started dating. Because this is a small town where everybody knows almost everybody else and greets them with at least a nod of their head. My whole life unfolds in less

than ten streets. I don't have to tell you that we were practically neighbours, living less than a half kilometre away from each other.

One drink with her was enough for me to know she was the girl I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. From the very beginning we met every day and talked for hours. Mostly about travels. She was only twenty-four but had already travelled half of the world, while I only dreamed about all the places I wanted to visit. But when she spoke to me about Paris, I felt like I'd been there myself and saw us together walking down the streets she mentioned and on the Pont Neuf. My Paris was a hundred and fifty years older, drawn by the pens of Hugo, Balzac and Zola, but when she described hers, I understood perfectly what she was describing.

One day it will seem to us that there hadn't been a life before this one. Except this one. By then almost all our most cherished memories will be the memories we share together, her childhood will be mine, and I will believe that I've known her since she was three years old, like in that photograph where she is dressed in the yellowish cardigan and brown corduroy trousers, with her gaze away from the camera and her little arms at her side.

I've told her about you. Many times. My words moved her to tears more than once. We'd embrace and hold each other in silence, thinking about you. I told her about you at the very beginning and I guess it was easier for her to imagine it all then. It was far and it was... I don't know the right word, so I'll say *sequel*.

I know you didn't imagine your life like this either. I just hope that you are here, that you are real and ours, and that there is a possibility you are reading this.

Her name is Jana, but you already know that. I hope you call her mum. She hasn't given you her belly, her womb and the umbilical cord, but you can be sure she'll give you her whole self. She'll give you all the time and love she has.

It was *our* first summer and we were lying on Šepurine beach on the island of Prvić. The sun was like one of those too ripe tomatoes sold near the water well in the centre of the village by an old woman dressed in thick layers of black clothes, and the beach was empty except for us. We were lying next to each other, watching the setting sun, and I told her I would like her to be my wife. It was not a marriage proposal. It was simply something I wanted and was sure would happen. We checked the

calendar on her cell phone and knew we'd get married in less than two years, on the Saturday of my birthday, name day and the anniversary of our first date. I can't explain it any better. I can't explain it at all. Sometimes you simply know that’s it. That it must happen. The same was with you.