

Agata Tomažič: Bumblebee Gully

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

1.

There was silence in the kitchen, complete dignified silence. The three hands lifting spoonfuls of beef soup with noodles to their mouths did so silently. Without clinking the cutlery, without slurping, befitting for finer families.

All of a sudden, the silence is interrupted by a neighing sound. It was coming from outside, there was no doubt about that. A few moments later someone also knocked on the glass door that led from the kitchen out onto the terrace but was still shut due to the cold, winter weather.

Two pairs of eyes first turned to the direction of the knocking, then back to the head of the table where she sat. Vera – an elderly woman with beautiful features and a well-proportioned oval face, barely a wrinkle on it, framed by thick grey hair tied up in a bun at the back of her head. Vera Flajs, owner of Hotel Flajs and head of the family. A widow, dressed always in black. The Matriarch – this was not how she was referred to and seen only by the members of her own family of whom her daughter Vlasta and grandson Jan were sitting at the table, but by all the residents of Strmčnik, the idyllic mountain village in which Hotel Flajs was located. Strmčnik, the once hard-to-reach village in an alpine valley surrounded on all sides by high peaks, far from any road or other connections. Strmčnik, that even inhabitants of surrounding settlements only a few decades ago saw as nothing but a dead end at the end of a rough dirt road that, for much of the year, was only open to vehicles fitted with snow chains. Until, that was, at the hands of Vera Flajs, almost as if she held a magic wand, it was reborn into a bustling ski resort. One that in recent times has become somewhat fashionable, something reflected in the prices – only members of the upper middle class could afford a holiday here. And this brought Vera Flajs immense satisfaction.

The neighing and knocking continued. She didn't appear at all concerned with any of it. A stoical expression upon her face, she continued to spoon the soup and carry it with grace to her mouth. Only when the silhouette of a rider on horseback

appeared right against the glass door of which Vera from her place at the head of the table had a clear view, did she show a kind of mild annoyance and put down her spoon. Not a single muscle twitched in her pale, almost waxen face. The only movement she deigned to make was a slight nod with her head directed at Jan, indicating he should go and open the door for the visitor. Then she continued to stare straight ahead with a stern air of command, affirmed by the muted shine of the pearl earrings attached to her earlobes.

Jan nodded, moving his chair back in order to carry out his grandmother's orders. Then it occurred to him who it was that her face and her entire appearance reminded him of. For a few moments he stared straight at her, unable to take his eyes off her. It was as if one of the *Regentesses of the Old Men's Almshouse* from the magnificent group portrait by Frans Hals had materialised before him.

'You have probably never heard of Hals but he was one of the great masters of the Northern Renaissance, the second best portrait painter after Rembrandt. Or perhaps Rembrandt was merely more notorious,' their tutor on his Art History course had told them. One of those better tutors who tried to illuminate a piece of art from all angles and instil a seed of doubt and curiosity in his students that would make them set out to discover additional details. 'Be careful, the *Regentesses of the Old Men's Almshouse* are by no means wards of the home for old people as some of you might have imagined from the painting's title,' the professor, whose voice Jan recalled every time he picked up his notes to revise for his exams, told the class in a slightly mocking tone. 'The painting depicts the nurses at the shelter for old men, the benefactors who looked after them.'

Indeed, the old women in the painting appeared frail and helpless only at first glance. Anyone taking a closer look at the portrait of five ladies, would not miss the hint of a cheerful sparkle in their eyes. Yes, they sat in a serious pose, even solemn, for the opportunity of being immortalised in the new fashionable medium, oil on canvas, was a unique one. But delving deeper into that long-ago moment that the portraitist has forever frozen in time also reveals a sort of sophistication, the kind of spirituality that volunteers and other shepherds of the soul like to envelop themselves in. These seventeenth century ladies who belonged to the wealthy or emerging bourgeois class of Haarlem, could also afford an emotion that is nowadays

condemned: haughtiness. They gaze at the painter in an unashamedly patronizing and self-satisfied manner, spurred by their awareness of their own moral superiority. Perhaps in their thoughts, rippling behind those high foreheads and head coverings, they linked this superiority with the wealth that their merchant husbands managed to amass?

There was another thing that could be discerned from the faces of these old bats. That their effusive sense of superiority is also rooted in the simple fact that they are there. *Still* there. That their time has not yet come, that, despite their age, they are hale and hearty. That they will personally send on their last journey all their wards whose woes they now alleviate. Did they fancy that when Death would swing his scythe on their own doorstep they would be able to ward it off with a pouch of gold coins? Had the teachings of the medieval frescoes of the *Danse Macabre* already been forgotten? Had the women also become insolent because they were well-aware that they would delay paying the portraitist until they were entirely satisfied with his product, until they would shine from his canvas in all their self-perceived dignity, beauty and wealth?

Now that he finally realised who she reminded him of, Jan could not take his eyes off Vera.

The knocking at the door was becoming impatient.

'Jan, what's keeping you? Can you open the door for him please!' the matriarch became exasperated.

He lowered his head, submissively stooping into a stance taken by a dog when its master berates when it is caught doing something it is not allowed to. Where it is not entirely clear whether the dog actually regrets the act or has simply learnt over the years to act out a guilty conscience, understanding that doing so pleases his master. After more than twenty years, Jan knew very well what put his grandmother in a bad mood and what made her happy.

Vera was not one of those kind and generous grandmas who spoil their grandchildren, buy them ice creams, press banknotes into their hands and take them on trips to the zoo. Vera was not benevolent and generous even when her grandson

justly deserved her praise and gifts. She never even rewarded him for good marks at school and Jan only found out from a classmate from whom he often borrowed money that his family was in fact rather wealthy. He had insisted that that could not be true, that his grandmother was constantly worried whether they would be able to pay all the bills. 'Well, you do own a hotel and half the village!' his school friend Andrej eventually cried out as they sat on the edge of the pavement outside the school, each attacking their giant mortadella sandwich for which Andrej had had to once again lend Jan the money.

Their hotel was indeed not very big or luxurious; with twenty-five rooms it was one of the smaller ones in Strmčnik. It did, however, have something that no other establishment in the area could boast of: the longest tradition and a proven history that, led by the Matriarch, had defied all social changes. Hotel Flajs was one of those small, delightful family hotels that every tourist desires, one of the places where you are usually welcomed by some nice, friendly grand-mère figure. Even more genuine if a guest crossing the threshold also gets to meet the children of the family who owns it, for example a little boy holding a rattle crawling from behind the counter at Reception. If the guest just happens to be female, the joy is complete: at the sight of the child, the woman softens, bending down to pick up the child, wipe the child's runny nose. Of course, the parents have their hands full running the hotel and cannot keep an eye on the children all the time! The guest gives a sympathetic nod to the lady at Reception, undoubtedly the boy's mother, and everything is clear.

Jan never crawled around the hotel. Had he done so, he would certainly have remembered it because Vera would instantly sanction any such behaviour from the child. She would probably step on his fingers. Punishment should be of a type that will remain in the mind of the person concerned, especially if a child. Were you to ask Jan, he would dismiss the whole notion of family warmth and closeness as a huge delusion. That Hotel Flajs was fully booked, first in the winter season but more and more also during the summer, was certainly not thanks to any warmth or closeness in their family. Instead, the place was famed for its orderliness and cleanliness. And this was thanks to Vera. Vera, whose lips almost never turned up at the corners into a smile and were most often tightly pressed into a straight line that looked more like a slot on a money box. As if she was afraid that by breathing out the air escaping

through her mouth she might also let go of something precious that would be better retained a little longer, used or utilised in some way.

‘Yes Grandma,’ Jan said and hurried towards the door.

‘That damned horse breeder,’ Vera snorted disdainfully and gave Vlasta a meaningful look. ‘I cannot believe he is still riding around on a horse. Did you know that Vlasta? Who does he think he is? Does he fancy himself as one of the Partisans riding into the capital at the end of the war, littering the roads with horse droppings so the whole town stank?’

She shook her head. ‘The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,’ she concluded and then pulled a face as if the mere sound of the horse had annoyed her so much it had put her off her food.

A hairy head peeked through the door. The man was out of breath, clearly he had ridden here fast because the news he was bringing was important. He opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted before he had a chance...

‘Do you not think that you could ring the doorbell and enter at the front door like all normal, civilised people?’ said Vera. ‘And if your horse tries to relieve itself in my garden, you will jolly well clear up the mess and take it away with you!’

‘They found... they found... the car!’ the arrival uttered, out of breath even when he was finally allowed to speak.

Vlasta, as the only person at the table who had not spoken at all so far, produced her first sound – it was caused by the spoon that fell to the floor under the table from her hand frozen mid-motion. She left her hand hanging limply by her side, then, as if suddenly becoming aware of it, swiftly rested it into her lap. She placed both hands over her stomach and looked at the plate of soup. In contrast with her mother, her appearance was unsightly to say the least. In her youth Vlasta had had beautiful features but at fifty she looked unhealthily pale and skinny. A little like many of the women in portraits by Egon Schiele who look as if some disease has grabbed them by the throat and was now vampire-like sucking them dry. Like the Spanish Flu that had wasted Schiele himself.

Vlasta dyed her hair black to make it shinier but, because it was long, this had, at best, the opposite result. It sprouted from her skull like hay, thin and brittle, tangling into pitiful knots. Her face didn’t improve her general appearance either;

the expression that had settled permanently upon it was one of not only physical weariness but a kind of lethargic resignation. Over the last few years it had grown into a general hatred of the world, Jan thought to himself. Most of all, Vlasta also never failed to direct the venom of her sting at her primary goal: herself and her messed-up decisions. The women stayed silent. Only Jan looked around in confusion.

‘What’s going on? What car?’ he eventually managed to ask.

‘The car that Miran buried in the snow last autumn! And announced a reward for it! Now some skiers have found it, they found it in Bumblebee Gully!’ the bearded man explained.

‘Stojan, excuse me, why do you think that this would be of any interest to us right now? Can’t you see we are having lunch? You’re interrupting our meal!’

‘But... but inside the car... they found... Roman!’

There was more clattering of cutlery falling to the floor – this time Jan’s.

‘Whaaat? Isn’t he in Thailand? Or in...’ his mouth fell open. Instinctively he looked towards his mother who was no longer where his radar had last detected her. She had stood up, sped towards the stove where potatoes were being sautéed on the gas hob.

‘Yes, they found Roman,’ said the man, lowering his voice. ‘He is dead, his head covered in blood,’ he added as if listing the details of a product.

Vlasta, who had been stirring the pan now pushed it away from her with such force that pieces of potato and onion arched to the floor. Grabbing her stomach, she ran out of the kitchen, past Reception towards a door signed ‘Toilets’. In her headless rush through the foyer she almost knocked over a pair of guests in full skiing gear.

‘Hello, could we please get the keys to the room we have reserved?’ said the woman. ‘Quickly, please, we are in a hurry to get out on the snow!’

Vlasta nodded without saying anything, stepped behind the counter, reached for the mouse and stared at the computer screen. For a moment she thought that she would throw up the contents of her stomach there and then, all over the hotel reception, the files, or even right over the two guests leaning on the counter, staring at her curiously. She kept telling herself that she was not feeling sick, that what has

happened isn't really that bad... Reaching with her hand behind her back she automatically grabbed the key. From the only slot that still had one.

'Here you are, welcome to Hotel Flajs. I wish you both a pleasant stay!' she uttered and collapsed into the chair, pale as the powder on the face of a circus clown. When a tear also rolled down her cheek, she became even more like one.

'Vlasta!! Come and finish your food,' Vera's voice came from the kitchen. 'The soup has almost gone cold! And surely this is no reason to throw away the roast, even if the potatoes met such an unfortunate end!'

Jan had a bad feeling that his stay at Strmčnik, where since enrolling at university he only came occasionally for the odd extended weekend, would this time become unexpectedly drawn out.

2.

'But you knew where, didn't you?' said Jan and with a quizzical look on his face turned towards Alma who was shaking her head.

'There, can you see it?' he tried to use the burning joint as a laser pointer on a slide to show her the unfortunate location: Bumblebee Gully.

Anyone who has ever skied at Strmčnik knew the place. In fact, anyone who has ever visited Strmčnik must have heard of it, even if they didn't come for skiing but just for a visit, to stomp around in the snow close to the final station of the ski lift. It was known for the thickest layer of snow and the slope there was almost vertical. The terrain was shaped into a kind of funnel and was as slippery as a bobsleigh piste, very dangerous and suitable only for the most experienced skiers. Bumblebee Gully was classified as a black run. Of course people tended to overestimate their abilities, so there was always a snow rescue sledge propped up against the wall at the end cable car station at the top of Bumblebee Gully. Partly as a reminder and warning, partly in case it was actually needed. Falls would happen quite often, especially during the spring when by midday the snow was already quite soft and skiers using the carving technique would soon dig through the top layer to expose the sheet ice underneath. And because the slope really was exceptionally

steep, anyone who fell could not stop their fall and usually rolled down the side of the mountain, curled up into a ball like some fat bumblebee.

None of these accidents, though, were the reason why the run got its name. Bumblebee Gully was an old local name that had been in use for a long time. If folk etymology and the oldest villagers were to be believed, the steep slope named as such because it was a place where, in the summer, meadow clary and other honey flowers bloomed and it was habitually visited by bumblebees, at this altitude often the only pollinators.

‘Oh, yes, I see it!’ Alma cried out. They were standing on the roof of the hotel in the dark, and above them a clear moonless night sky.

‘Aha, yes, there it is – Bumblebee Gully!’ she repeated, nodding as she did so, so Jan would not doubt for a moment longer that she really did see where it was.

Of course she couldn’t see it. It was hard to tell the difference between all those rugged folds in the mountains above Strmčnik where most of the slopes had been converted into ski runs. She lied because she still found it hard to admit to others that she didn’t know how to ski. In Strmčnik, a person who didn’t ski was looked upon almost as an invalid.

To locals, ice and snow were not merely their natural environment but what they made their living from, and in everyday chats with them, at least throughout the winter season, it was not possible to avoid comments relating to the elements such as the thickness of snow, wind speed and temperatures at the highest terminal of the ski-lift. This was why, if possible, Alma preferred to avoid such chatting altogether, and when she really couldn’t get out of it, her contribution to these conversations would mostly include nodding, smiling, and most often simply keeping wisely silent. As a foreigner, she had to be careful anyway. Not only was she not from Strmčnik, she had been born in Slovenia to migrant parents. This though only became obvious whenever she had to introduce herself with her full name and surname: Almedina Purić. In Strmčnik this made her even more foreign. But now she was standing on the roof of the hotel, smoking a joint with someone whose family was one of the most influential in the village; he knew how to ski, yet he too felt at least partly like a foreigner in this place. And that was enough.

‘Well, come on then, pass me that joint!’

Jan grinned and passed her the spliff without taking his eyes off the snow-covered slopes above Strmčnik. One of them was floodlit, tiny ant-sized figures skiing on the night run. Down the hill, then back up the hill. How pointless, how obviously mad and wasteful. One of the reasons Alma had never let herself be lured onto skis was because she failed to see the charm of this sport. To her eyes it was a mere waste of time and energy; first you wait in line to get onto the chairlift, then your turn finally comes and after a few long, cold, terrifying minutes of hanging mid-air at a height of up to twenty or thirty metres, you reach your destination at the top of the hill, all you do is jump off and hurry back down again. The whole descent lasts far less than all the waiting and climbing the hill, and as soon as you are down, you join the queue at the ski lift once again. In between you can complain about how crowded the ski slope is. And this goes on all day. Where is there any joy, enjoyment, happiness in all this?

This was the official, smoothed-out version of her answer to the question as to why she didn't ski. It was what she dished out to people who were persistent enough in their inquisitiveness. And naïve enough. She never tried it on Jan, of course. It was very clear to both of them why he had more or less skied from birth and why she didn't and probably never would. The answer to this question was similar to the answer as to why, despite her apparent dislike of skiing and obvious aversion to the snow and cold, she kept returning to Strmčnik season after season: money.