

Let's rewind

Two Childhoods, One Lesson

Whenever I talk to my grandfather about his childhood, I come to realise how completely different it was from mine. So different, indeed, that I can hardly picture it. My grandfather, who was born in 1955, in a small village under the Velebit mountain called Krasno, grew up in a world with no electricity, no television, no radio – at least until the first radio appeared in the neighbourhood. And that radio, he told me, came like a beam of sunshine – suddenly the house was full of life, laughter, and music, but also the deep desire for everything that was out there, far away from a small stone house below the threatening mountain giant.

His childhood was harsh. He was the youngest of thirteen children, out of which four died at an early age. Ever since he could remember, he worked in the fields, with the cattle, and around the house. When he was around eight, he earned his first day's pay as a real scythe mower. He walked to school, crossing six kilometres in one direction. Imagine that little frail boy during harsh, cruel winters full of heavy snow, while the cold wind lashed without mercy. So small and vulnerable, he was ploughing his way through the snow while listening to the howling of the wolves from the nearby forests to finally arrive at school frozen to the bone. There, he would warm up, learn, and spend time with others, only to set off once again through the snow, back to his poor stone house, where work was waiting for him again. Only in the evening, by the candlelight, would he do his homework together with his sisters.

Unlike me, who walks to school for hardly ten minutes, listening to music or chatting with my friends, then comes back home and relaxes for a bit, has a delicious lunch and does my homework in a warm, cosy apartment fully equipped with high tech while my grandfather grew up in the world where every item was valued endlessly because it was gained extremely hard.

When I asked him what the hardest thing was, he found it difficult to single out one moment because every day was a struggle. Yet there was one event that was a turning point in his childhood – one that meant both an ending and a new beginning. When he was eleven and a half years old, his father died, and his world changed. It became harder, heavier, and his responsibilities grew. Contrary to what I might have expected, my grandfather did not feel sorrow at that time. His father was a man hardened by

survival. His death brought both peace and burden, but also a silence that no longer felt threatening. My grandfather became the man of the house then, though he was only a child.

My grandfather's story is somewhat similar to mine. When I was eleven and a half years old, my dad passed away, too. But my dad was nothing like my great-grandfather. My dad was kind and gentle, full of love and tenderness. He was my refuge, my anchor, my whole world. Losing him felt as if the sky itself had shattered. And when my grandfather told me his story, when I heard that he had felt peace in his father's death, and all I felt was pain I thought it would never end...it was only then that I realised something utterly important. The change happened to people as well. Today, life is easier; even my grandfather admits it, but in his childhood, despite the heavy burden on his tiny shoulders, people depended on each other more. They spent time together; children would play with rag balls, climb the nearby hills, and dance at the village fairs. They would sleep on the same mattress, covered with one shabby blanket, because in the houses full of humility and modesty, there wasn't any place for luxury. Although children didn't have a room of their own, their homes were filled with warmth, and family members were bound by closeness and togetherness. Today, I have everything. The internet, a smartphone, music within my reach, learning just one click away – and yet, sometimes I wonder – am I missing something that my grandfather once had? He knew how to rejoice in a single orange for Saint Nicholas' Day, one that his grandmother somehow managed to obtain by a small miracle. One orange. Meanwhile, I often walk past fruit without a second thought, forgetting that tomorrow I might not have any. More than that, I sometimes forget about it entirely and end up throwing it away once it has spoiled. I don't think about the things I take for granted. I do not struggle with time, darkness, or cold weather. I don't marvel at the light of a candle, because I have electricity.

My grandfather once told me that his childhood feels like the age of dinosaurs compared to mine. And he is right – but he added something I hold on to. Not everything modern is better. Not everything easier is more valuable.

That is why this is not just a story about the past; it is a reminder. A reminder to remember how little was once enough, how people knew how to be happy despite it, how they valued what they had, and every moment they shared.

Perhaps that is why, sometimes, I, too, long for a rag ball, a single candle, and my own Krasno, just as he once had his.