

**THE LITTLE
COMMUNIST
WHO NEVER
SMILED**

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Translated from the French by Nick Caistor



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How old is she? the chair of judges asks the coach, unable to believe her eyes. The reply – fourteen – sends a shiver up her spine. What that young girl has achieved blasts away any progression of numbers, words and images. It defies understanding. There's no way of classifying what has just happened. She tosses gravity over her shoulder, her tiny frame carving itself a space in the air.

Why did no one tell them that was where they were meant to look, protest the spectators, who miss the moment when, on the ten-centimetres width of beam, Nadia C. throws herself backwards and, arms outstretched, launches into a triple back flip. They turn to one another: has anyone understood? Did you understand?

The electronic scoreboard shows COMĂNECI NADIA, ROMANIA, followed by a 73, her competitor's number, but where her score should be: nothing.

They wait. Pale-faced, the Russian gymnasts come and go in the rest area reserved for coaches and competitors after they have performed. They know. For their part, the little Romanian girl's team-mates look on as if in despair. Dorina has her hands clasped in front of her, Mariana mutters the same few words over and over, another girl has collapsed, eyes tight shut. As for Nadia herself, standing slightly apart from the others, ponytail askew, she doesn't even glance at the scoreboard. He is the one she sees

first: Béla, her coach, arms raised skywards, head thrown back. She finally turns and sees the judgement: this terrible 1 out of 10 written in bright lights for cameras the world over to see. One point nought nought. In her mind, she goes over possible mistakes – perhaps the dismount after the somersault wasn't steady enough, but what can she have done to deserve this? Béla hugs her – Don't worry my love, we'll lodge a protest. Then one of the judges catches his eye. Look: the Swede is standing up. Look: he has tears in his eyes as he stares at her. And everyone will recount this moment over and over, so often that now she is no longer sure whether she actually lived it: perhaps she saw it on TV, perhaps the episode was written for a film.

The audience has risen to their feet, and eighteen thousand bodies unleash the storm. They stamp rhythmically on the floor, and in the midst of the din the Swedish judge's mouth opens and closes. He is pronouncing inaudible words, thousands of flashbulbs generate a shower of intermittent lights, she catches sight of the Swede: what's he doing? He's holding up both hands; the whole world films the judge's hands reaching out to her. So the girl stretches towards him, begging his confirmation... is it a 10? And here he comes, nodding gently, face hidden behind his raised fingers. Hundreds of cameras hide the child from him; the other young girls in the Romanian team are dancing round her – yes, my love, yes, that one point nought nought is a 10.

The scoreboard gyrates slowly from left to right, from the judges towards the audience, passing by the gymnasts, showing the number 1 that should read 10. A decimal point in the wrong place. Or rather, a decimal point that stubbornly refuses to be moved. A man is coming and going between journalists and judges. His official MONTREAL 1976 OLYMPIC GAMES T-shirt has dark patches under the armpits; he wipes his brow. The president of judges motions to him to come over, there's too much

noise, something made the machine malfunction, I tell you; the whistling forces them to lean close to one another – are you joking or what? The whole world is filming, it's the first day of the competition. Where is that damned Longines guy? The engineer who designed the scoreboards clammers over the journalists kneeling round the little girl to reach the judges' table. They're gesticulating: your system doesn't work! And the Longines guy tells the IOC representative, who has cupped his ear to hear him – it works in the other competitions, *it works*, the computer doesn't make mistakes, you've caused the malfunction. He points a finger at the judges but everything has shifted, they're no longer paying him any attention. The judges have become spectators, they weep and applaud the girl sitting next to her coach, her narrow back turned towards the senile machine that is still grumbling: one point nought nought.

They go into a huddle at the break. OK. Did the Romanian or somebody on her team have access to the computers? Could she have swallowed something that possibly sent the system haywire? You're off your head, man, making things like that up just to cover yourself. Quite frankly, it's almost unbelievable! They blame each other. During the preparatory meetings the Olympic committee told us 10 didn't exist in gymnastics, protest the Longines engineers, whom the press have dubbed 'team one point nought nought'. At 13.40, the verdict: the computer database failed owing to the input of unusually high scores. The young girl has defeated the computer.

They have until the next day to adapt the computer system to the child. They push buttons, compile programs. An extra number has to be added. The decimal point moved to the right. What likelihood is there that she could do the same again, do you think 'that' could happen again tomorrow? I don't know, says the English judge. I don't know, says the Czech judge. They

try to imagine exercises that would be worth 10 on the beam. Find it impossible. No one has ever scored 10 in Olympic gymnastics. They are asked a second time. Are you sure you weren't carried away by the spectators' enthusiasm? No, they reply. They really scrutinized the girl, trying to find any slip-up; there was nothing. No mistakes. More than that: some of the judges would have liked to go farther, to give her 11 out of 10! Twelve, says the Canadian judge. New numbers need to be invented. Or just abandon numbers altogether.

'If Comănesci were competing against an abstract standard instead of human rivals, could she still be given a perfect ten?' someone asks Cathy Rigby, a former gymnast who now works as a commentator for ABC. 'If Nadia were doing what she's been doing, all alone in an empty room, I'd still have to say that she would get the perfect ten,' replies Rigby, after thinking hard about the possibility of inventing an abstract standard more abstract than perfection.

They attempt to downplay what has happened. The following morning, the Olympic committee demands that Nadia take three additional drug tests. A debate rages: are we witnessing the emergence of a new generation of baby gymnasts, or is she one of a kind? It's a geopolitical earthquake. The Soviet coaches are taken to task: you mustn't let Romania humiliate us, Comrades. Ludmilla will save us! But that afternoon, Ludmilla finishes her floor exercise with a tragic, statuesque pose, a performance greeted with polite applause. Ludmilla rushes to sob into the arms of her coach under the Romanian's impassive gaze.

The elements are invoked: is she swimming in an ocean of air and silence? The sport itself is called into question: it's too brutal, almost vulgar compared to what is happening. They start from scratch: she doesn't sculpt space, she is space, she doesn't convey emotion, she is emotion. She appears – an angel! – just look at the

halo all round her head, the glitter of hysterical flashbulbs, she rises above and beyond all laws, rules and certainties, a sublime poetic machine that blows everything apart.

Her routine is discussed: yes, it's true, there was already a foretaste of it with Olga at the 1972 Munich games, but now, with Nadia, it's the whole banquet in one go! Grace, precision, the sweep of her gestures, the combination of risk and power, and yet all of this seemingly effortless! It's said she can repeat her perfect routine fifteen times in a row. And that bone structure of hers... bones like silken threads. Morphologically superior. More elastic.

They search, play with words like these, then change their minds, try to encapsulate her. The little communist fairy. The little communist fairy who never smiled. They cross out the word 'adorable' because it's been used too often over the past few days, and yet that's what it is: painfully adorable, unbearably precious. And, obliged to look at her from our position as adults, yes, we wish we could slip inside her arduous childhood, stand as close as possible to her, protected as she is by her immaculate leotard, on which there is no sign of perspiration. 'An Olympic Lolita weighing barely forty kilos, a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl with the body shape of a young boy, who submits to everything demanded of her,' they write. We would love to anoint ourselves in the shower of sparks she gives off like a magical, boisterous toy. Tear ourselves from our sluggish, hormone-encumbered organisms. The little girl claws at our desire, we want it, oh, the desire to touch her, to be near her, a spiralling desire that is ever more urgent, and it's already over, the exercises on the beam lasted ninety seconds. Her fame spreads like an epidemic. For the finals, the ticket touts run out of the sixteen-dollar tickets they are charging a hundred dollars for; everybody wants to watch her, see her launch into her routines, so light you fear she will never come

back down to earth. And when she sprints into her somersaults her elbows give her even more speed, the absolute firmness of her flesh squeezed into the white costume, she is this shooting mechanism wonderfully freed from her sex into a marvellously frictionless and higher childhood.

Things no longer look the same. Nadia is where it all begins. The other gymnasts are mistakes, the ideal deformed. The weight of years separating her from those who are beginning to be called 'the others', those who, the moment this child returns to the arena, nervously pluck at the fabric covering their buttocks. To hide away the flesh, hide what suddenly seems too much, incongruous, ridiculous even. Their leotards now seem too low-cut, too tight perhaps to contain the flattened chests of young women, chests that, as they run towards the vault, quiver imperceptibly. All that – breasts, hips, as a specialist explains when the event is retransmitted – slows down the twists, weighs down the leaps, spoils the figure. Ludmilla is 'terribly womanly'. In a photograph in a daily newspaper, next to the Romanian nymphette she looks disproportionately large. As for Olga, frankly it's almost embarrassing. The camera lingers on her, livid after the coronation of her Romanian rival. No, she isn't *tired*, she is *worn out*: she is twenty, almost – and you can hear the laughter of the other journalists in the studio – almost an old woman, she has too many miles on the clock, doesn't she?

Others knit their brows, let's be fair about this. A lady, yes, that's more like it, this Ludmilla is a *grande dame*. And after all, once upon a time Olga was a fairy too; one day Nadia will be going through what she is going through now. At the same moment the image freezes on the Romanian with the tiny face, the way she is nervously chewing her thumb, and a journalist murmurs to himself: 'Such small thumbs...'

Replay

The sound on the video seems to have been added later. As if someone had amplified the creaking of the bars she pounds with millimetric precision. They have been lent an echo that makes them an anguished, repetitive punctuation for her body as it folds itself around them. The little girl's lips tighten with the effort; her shoulders scarcely tremble at the impact when, after letting go and rotating on herself in midair, she catches the other bar. She balances for a moment on her hands on the higher bar. A triangle, a moving rectangle that becomes an isosceles and then an i, a line of silence, breath held, the geometric exercise is coming to an end, Nadia signals her dismount, her back hunches, knees tucked up to her chin for a double somersault only boys can achieve; until then it was as if you had been watching a sylph evolve, but now she's borrowing from the men and giving them the hiding of their lives. A woman's voice, a cry of insane joy, escapes from the mass of eighteen thousand spectators. It punctuates the feet in their white gym shoes that land on the floor without the slightest waver. Her arched back is a comma, rising to the tips of her fingers when she tickles the sky, she salutes. And the computer scores 1.00 again, as she runs towards Béla, who is holding his arms out to her.

Now she is pirouetting on the beam, illuminated by the flashes of crazy fireflies, a dancing light. The child seems to hold everyone's breath. She finishes with a double twist punch and, with a

snap of the fingers – her dismount is impeccably stable – she sets them free, as if the volume button has suddenly been turned up from mute, and the public roars with a delight mingled with relief that she hasn't fallen. Then they all rush for the press room, the telephones, *10, 10*, make sure you get that, *she's perfect*, reads the headline in *Newsweek*, it's never been seen before, perfection is of this world. 'If you're looking for a word to say that was so beautiful that it was impossible to describe how beautiful it was, say it was *nadiesque*,' writes one Quebec editorial writer. The judges are obliged to ask Béla exactly what exercises she performed, they were too quick for them to follow.

It is midnight in Onești, a town in Romanian Moldavia to the north-east of Bucharest. On the screen, the child runs, a small, aggressive machine driven on by all those encouraging her to obliterate the beautiful Soviet ballerina, whose movements in comparison seem soft, lascivious.

Stefania has hidden under the dining-room table, burying her face in her hands, shuttering her eyes as a precaution; Grandma and Gheorghe tell her to stop her nonsense. A furious wave of sound engulfs the television set, the saturated noise invades the room, and Stefania, cheeks bright scarlet, is desperately anxious: What is it, Gheorghe, tell me: did she fall, tell me, did she fall? Her husband kneels down gently beside her, takes her hand to help her stand up and murmurs: Look, look. In slow motion, their child's frail body slices through the air, dislocated, the lunacy of her leap dissected moment by moment. Stefania sobs and stretches out her hand towards the tiny silhouette which, back turned, salutes a crowd of thousands of weeping adults.

Mission accomplished

They are waiting for her. This first press conference is packed out, all five hundred seats and more on the ground, there is no room anywhere. The walls are covered in embroideries of flowers. When she finally arrives, dressed in the Romanian team's tracksuit with blue, yellow and red bands and the hammer and sickle on her chest, her coach lifts her and carries her at arms' length to her place; the doll she is clutching is wearing the same tracksuit and their hair is done up in the same way, with two bunches tied up with red ribbons. Above her head, a portrait of President Ceauşescu.

The journalists can ask Nadia any questions they like, announces a friendly young woman with a strong Romanian accent. At her feet – there are no more chairs – these adults adjust themselves to her level. Do you like chocolate, Nadia, a few words in French, please, in French! Bravo! Do you play Monopoly, Nadia, do you have a boyfriend, Nadia? It looks as if they might start sucking their thumbs at any moment, when they spot her cute pointed canine teeth (could they be milk teeth? No, she's fourteen). Again, Nadia, again, as she mimes the judge who, seeing her distraught at the one point nought nought, holds up his ten fingers. Ten! *Great!* And now she has achieved perfection, what does she want to do next? I can do better, she promises seriously, clutching her rag doll to her, under the watchful eye of her coach, a big, affable-looking fellow with a thick moustache. That

no doubt means she'll have to invent another sport, they say to themselves. Are you surprised at scoring 10, Nadia? She shrugs her narrow, straight shoulders and chirrup in Romanian, 'I know it was perfect, I've already scored ten, it's nothing new.' Could it be she misunderstood? They ask her again. Are you astonished that you won everything? She shakes her head. Do you feel sorry for Olga and Ludmilla? She repeats firmly, No, not sorry. They try another tack. 'How did you celebrate your victory last night?' Almost annoyed, she purses her lips. 'I didn't celebrate anything. I was sure I would win at least one title. I went to bed.'

'Which is your favourite exercise?'

'The uneven bars, because I can do skills the others will never be able to do!'

And... Couldn't she smile a little? She sighs. I'm sorry, but if my foot touches the edge of the mat after a diagonal of saltos, even by only three centimetres (she raises a hand and holds up her thumb, first and middle fingers) I lose points. So yes, she can smile, but only when her mission is accomplished. Laughter breaks out in the room, followed by applause: it's so cute to call it a mission, Colonel Miss. An English journalist maintains she is merely emulating Olga K.'s technique, but he is immediately interrupted by the coach. 'We represent the Romanian school, we don't copy anyone.' Some of those in the room try to calculate how much of a child she is. Her expressionless face when she performs, her coolness: as soon as she saw her score, she put on her tracksuit, a mini-functionary of acrobatics! And the other morning I ran into her in the Olympic village, she was having her medical, her eyes didn't blink once, no expression. What does she have to tell us? She likes yogurt and doesn't eat bread. Great. She's a forty-kilo communist robot. Sure, she does have a certain grace, but it's a metallic, efficient grace, a long way from the lyricism of the Soviet girls, oh no, forget swans and Tchaikovsky, these