

## Johanna Adorján, *An Exclusive Love* (Text, 2010)

There is no mystery about what happens in the course of this memoir: the author's Hungarian Jewish grandparents killed themselves, on 13 October 1991, in their own home in Charlottelund, Copenhagen. Instead, this is an attempt by Johanna Adorján to understand her grandparents themselves, and in the process discover why they might have decided to undertake death so deliberately together.

Her grandfather, István or Pista, was suffering from cardiovascular disease and had not long to live. But her grandmother, the impressive-looking, intimidating Vera — 'She was both feared and admired. When she entered a room full of people, they all took their tone from her...' (25) — was a healthy woman for a seventy-one year old. Adorján speaks to friends of her grandparents as well as family members, gleaning small pieces of information about them.

She alternates these sections with a fictional reconstruction of the last day of her grandparents' lives, which, while necessarily speculative, gives the reader a brilliant picture of the devoted couple and their personalities. They are no longer any old couple that might be described in a newspaper report, sketched out thinly and remaining anonymous. The author has a gift for the telling detail, the clear description of quirk and individuality, and this gives the memoir its flavour. Her encounters with people she interviews are also drawn with similar vividness, like the elderly distant relation who 'looks a little like my grandmother, the same hooded eyelids, the same eyebrows looking as if they were painted on, the same short lashes' (57) and whose home was filled with dolls:

I am sitting on the very edge of a chair that I share with a gremlin doll the size of a baby, seated behind me and claiming the back of the chair for itself. It has oversized ears like a bat's and brown plastic feet, and I try not to touch it because, to be honest, I find it a bit disgusting. (59)

Pista was an orthopaedic surgeon with 'long and bushy' eyebrows, and his wife was a multilingual housewife who in her latter years gave exercise classes to the elderly and 'made her way along pavements as if walking over a red carpet that no one else could see' (25). On their last day, Adorján imagines her grandmother baking and cleaning and gardening, while her grandfather sleeps or plays the piano or prepares the pills. They both go to drop off their small dog, Mitzi (to whom, we learn, Vera speaks Hungarian) at a friend's house 'for a few days' while they went away. We learn that Mitzi 'always gets completely out of breath during a drive, evidently under the impression that she is covering the distance on foot as the surroundings outside the window move past' (88). The author takes the reader right up to the last moment, when Vera and Pista are in bed after taking the mixture, and they thank each other, and 'darkness falls'. Her depiction of these two devoted, cranky, loving people is undeniably moving in its simple, spare prose.

Adorján muses on her own identity and personality, and during one interview she discovers that she and her grandmother shared a personality trait. This is a revelation for her, 'as if Erzsi [Vera's friend] had given me a treasure' (50), and helps her understand why her grandmother did not want to live without her husband. She

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learns that there was a history of her grandmother speaking of killing herself if her husband died, and that Pista ‘wouldn’t let you get very close to him’ (79), a fact which the author shows clearly in her portrait of him in this book.

The author’s Jewish identity is also explored in often funny passages about a Jewish dating site, or more seriously in her visit, with her father, to Mauthausen where ‘swastika graffiti have to be removed almost daily from the walls of the gas chamber’ (12). Her grandfather, she notes, never spoke of his experience in the concentration camp, and she gleaned what she knows of it through interviews with others. Although her grandparents ‘acted as if they were not at all interested in their own Jewish identity’ they ‘showed a lively interest in that of other people’ (82), and wondered why their son had to marry a German girl.

Johanna Adorján has written a relatively short book about a huge subject, but she has done it with humour, grace, imagination and dignity. Her grandparents are brought to life in their last day with the living, and their decision is not such a mystery after all. Her writing is clear and concise, funny and poignant, but I acknowledge the obvious gift of the translator, Anthea Bell, who has enabled the writing to read so fluently.

**Sue Bond**