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We'll Meet When Everyone's Gone

Translated by Anthea Bell

Solitude is a drug. You don't really want it, but once you're used to it you can't do without it. That dawned on me only in the following weeks, I didn't know it on the day I buried Granny Kalomi. The Martins invited me to stay to supper and overnight, in fact as long as I wanted, and I really did consider it. On that November afternoon their house shone with the light of all the candles and little oil lamps, smoke rose from the chimney, and indoors it was fragrant with the smell of pine logs. Martin Martin wanted to show me his workshop and some kind of fiddly little device he was working on at the moment, his wife said she'd bake an apple cake, and I was torn both ways. Up in the mountain meadow there was nothing waiting for me but a cold little house with mice in the attic. I didn't really have any reason to go back. I could have stayed in Desna, thankful to have found people who didn't shoot at me on sight and weren't afraid of me, and I didn't have to be afraid of them either. But then I thought of myself chugging back up along the road home, I saw the branches heavy with fir-cones outside the windows, the view of the uneven line of the mountain crests behind the house and our meadow below it. I had a clear vision of myself running a race with Carmen to see who reached the little house first, I saw myself lighting the stove, and the two of us going to fetch water. Suddenly I caught the smell that welcomed me every time I stepped into the front hall, I thought of the patch of sky I saw from the window before I went to sleep, and remembered how good it was to hear the wind up there and not have to talk to anyone. I longed for my voluntary exile, that was it.

So I had to think up some kind of story. "That's very kind of you, but I have to go home to feed and milk the goat." Rosie had been gone five days now, and judging by the tufts of hair I found later at the edge of a deep ravine, not far from the forester's house, she'd probably come to a sad end. But that didn't stop me using her as an excuse now. I knew that otherwise the Martins would have persuaded me to stay, and I didn't want to. I promised to be back soon, thanked them for all they'd done for me, and drove away.

Martin Martin had been right – my driving skills were improving by the minute. I was no Michael Schumacher yet, of course, but I wasn't making a learner-driver's mistakes any more. Even Carmen wasn't so scared now, and jumped up on the seat beside me to get a better view. She watched the raindrops pattering against the windshield. Dusk was falling. The wind bent the trees as if they were cows' tails, wet leaves swirled through the air, and we listened to hot Latin American rhythm. It was one

of the tapes I'd taken from the supermarket where I went with Martin Martin, along with a small cassette recorder. Some kind of Caribbean band. I didn't understand a word of it, but I felt sure they were singing about the blue sea, the hot sand, beautiful girls and a carefree life. Carmen pricked up her ears and growled quietly, the way she always did when she was feeling good.

"I'll make you pasta with plum purée for supper," I promised. She'd always had a passion for pasta, and I'd loaded at least twenty kilos of it into the van. And as well as the plum purée she loved – she was capable of eating a whole dish of it at a go – I was bringing other delicacies back too: jars of fruit, bottled vegetables, condensed milk, canned fish, flour, rice, a whole heap of other preserved and non-perishable foods. There'd been utter chaos on the supermarket shelves, packaging was torn open, and the place smelled disgusting – but I'd found plenty of things we could use. Above all I'd stocked up well on candles, lamps, matches, litres of oil for lighting, powdered milk, and batteries. As for coffee, I'd searched the whole town, because there was only ordinary vacuum-packed stuff in the supermarket. It was worth searching around too: I discovered a little store which boasted of selling thirty-two different kinds of coffee, though I found only nine. The rest had been looted or scattered around the floor. As well as coffee I came away with a new coffee mill, because Granny Kalomi's was old and the little metal wheels were very worn. They sometimes let whole coffee beans drop through. I took some airtight tin cans too, so that the coffee would stay fresh and not go damp. Martin Martin could only shake his head over me.

"You're beaming as if you'd just found the latest Rolls Royce," he said. I told him the latest Rolls Royce would probably leave me cold. He stared at me, wide-eyed. We had very different interests. However, I tried to explain it through examples from his own intellectual world

"Who would you say made mankind?" I asked.

"The Lord," he replied, just as he'd been taught.

"And who made coffee?" I went on.

He hesitated, but only for a moment.

"The Lord made coffee too."

"And who made the Rolls Royce?" I asked triumphantly.

He said nothing.

“Well, I don’t know, but if the Rolls Royce was really so important to the Lord, wouldn’t he have made it himself instead of leaving the job to mankind?” I said.

“So you don’t think there’s anything divine about cars?” he asked.

“Maybe to you. Certainly not to me.”

“I think I understand you,” he said slowly and thoughtfully after a while. “When you drink coffee it’s like praying.”

That floored me. But I wanted to get this nutty conversation over and done with, so I left it at that. Now I didn’t know what I’d been getting at myself. That happens to me quite often – I think up some kind of nonsense and then I notice that, astonishingly, the person I’m talking to takes it seriously. I really must pull myself together. At eighteen you ought to know what you’re talking about. I made several more good resolutions that day, and one of them was particularly important.

In the evening, when I’d put away all the provisions and Carmen was dozing by the doorway with a full belly, I opened a bottle of red wine, sat down in front of the stove, and dozed too, but with my eyes open. The stove door was open too, and I looked at the flames. The wine was imported from Chile. Martin Martin had assured me that he and his wife had drunk it and it was very good. Myself, I thought it tasted of cork and rather stale. The label said it was an excellent wine to drink with strong cheese and game, and should be served at a temperature of 18 degrees. Underneath it said jokily that *this sparkling crimson beverage will inspire you and is best drunk in congenial company*. I drank the sparkling beverage too cold, dozing off and on my own. But there must have been a little bit of inspiration in the bottle after all, because I suddenly felt like doing something constructive. Something that would last.

“But what?” I asked myself. Out loud. And as nothing occurred to me, I told myself firmly, “Think!”

I thought. Today, seen in all its aspects, struck me as important, and I decided it ought not to just fade away. I’d like to be able to conjure it up again somehow if I wanted to remember it. Never mind what way my life was going to work out, I thought, I’d probably be rather isolated, and just perhaps I might gradually lose my sense of the passing of time. So it wouldn’t be a bad idea to make some notes, only I’m not too good at writing. The moment I pick up a ballpoint my brain gets paralysed and everything that was in my head a moment ago evaporates. The only thing I can do is say what I’m

thinking out loud. I tried that. I sipped the wine, put a blank tape in the cassette recorder, pressed Record and cleared my throat.

“This is the beginning of my story,” I started. “It’s the evening of November the twenty-second. This morning I buried Granny Kalomi – I mean Mrs. Kalomova.” I wound the tape back so that I could hear if I’d recorded those first sentences properly. For a little while I just heard the wood crackling in the stove, then my voice came on, and I had quite a shock. It sounded really odd. So strange. If I hadn’t known it was me I’d never have recognized it, not in my wildest dreams. Back in Prague when I used to sing in the choir for Mario I’d been a tenor. Now I sounded like a baritone. Male and grown-up. It quite upset me. I was legally an adult now, yes, but that didn’t mean I necessarily felt adult. Far from it, I kept thinking and doing stuff you’d call definitely adolescent, even childish. All the same, the voice on the tape belonged to a grown man, no doubt about it.

“Mrs Kalomova died of cancer three days ago,” I went on. “She’s buried in Desna. The grave is on the left near the entrance, at the end of the last row but one, and it can be identified by the flowered cup with no handle standing on it.”

I gave these details in case anything happened to me. I wanted the facts about Granny Kalomi’s death to be known, just as her birth must have been recorded in a register office somewhere or other. Then it occurred to me that I’d forgotten something. I ought to have started by saying who I am.

“My name is Mojmir Demeter, I’m Roma by origin, father unknown, my mother left me with a children’s home,” I introduced myself the way I was used to from school and any number of questionnaires. “I was eighteen on August the twenty-second.” I turned the recorder off for a moment, took a sip of wine and thought. I decided it would be a good idea to put all the important things that had happened recently into my story, so that it would be useful to future generations as a kind of historical document. After all, it wasn’t certain that the epidemic was really over. The Martins had said so, but suppose that was just their pious wish? They might yet fade away and die. So might I. In the end there could be just a few desperate people left in the whole world, capable of surviving but in no situation to tell their descendants what had happened. I felt this was my job – I’d be a chronicler for people in the future. I certainly wasn’t qualified for that kind of thing, but I guessed a poor sort of chronicle would be better than none at all. Anyway, I was enjoying myself. I pressed Record again.

“This is the story of a great catastrophe,” I announced. “If someone finds my tape – if it’s ever found at all – I probably won’t be alive any more. I hope this account will help you to understand what happened.” I took a deep breath. The introduction was the difficult bit. Once I had that behind me it went without a hitch. I described what the abbreviation EBS meant, when the first cases had appeared, and what, so far as I knew, the causes and symptoms of the disease were. I picked up an old newspaper and read bits out of it aloud, for instance the article by Dr. Svetlana Pasmatova which had impressed me so much at the time. As I read the piece, it struck me that I’d probably never know if she’d been right, and who had survived. Suddenly I saw before my eyes the confused expression on the school principal’s face when he shot at me on the railroad crossing. And then I thought of the Martins with their peculiar ideas about God and a vocation, and I’d really have liked to know if I’d made such a peculiar impression on them too. I rose to my feet, picked up the oil lamp, and stood in front of the bedroom mirror. In the flickering lamplight a tired gypsy looked back at me, with sad eyes and deep shadows under them. The stubble on my chin added a dissipated touch to my appearance. The lines around my nose and mouth, which had been there as long as I can remember, looked like the lines painted on a circus clown’s face. I looked tired and a bit vague, but I wouldn’t have said there was anything deranged or really unusual about me. Nothing to explain why I, of all people, had been spared.

“I’ve never watched a lot of TV, and when it came to the Internet I could take it or leave it,” I went on when I was back in the kitchen and had pressed Record. “As far as I can tell the other media haven’t influenced me much either. That would back up Dr. Pasmatova’s theory. If she’s right, then people like me, confirmed loners, individualists, or the just plain ignorant were the ones who didn’t catch the bug. If you want to know why you’ll have to look for the answer somewhere else, because I don’t know it.”

Suddenly I felt dead tired. I yawned, turned the recorder off and went outside the door. It was nearly midnight, raining slightly, and there wasn’t a star in the sky. Out in the forest an owl was hooting, otherwise all was still. The rain drowned out any other sounds. Carmen was curled up asleep under the woodshed roof. I drank the last of the wine. By now I didn’t notice the taste of cork that had bothered me at first.

“Well, you’re in a nice state, I must say!” I heard Granny Kalomi’s voice saying. She seemed to be cross. “Taking to the bottle now, are you?”

“I had to drink to you after your funeral,” I defended myself. “It’s what you wanted.”

She didn’t have any answer to that. She shut up and kept quiet until I dropped on the sofa. Only when I closed my eyes did she speak up again. “Close that stove door, or do you want the place to burn down?”

I didn’t. Of course there were more than enough empty houses on the entire continent now, but this one was mine. She’d left it to me with everything in it, even the rotten beam up in the loft. I hauled myself to my feet and closed the stove door so that my inheritance wouldn’t burn down.

The first time I saw Jessica was in Reichenberg Town Hall Square. I’d gone there just before Christmas to get batteries. There weren’t any more to be found in Gablonz.

“Don’t come any closer!” she shouted, aiming something at me. It looked like a small gun, a lady’s revolver. “One more step and I fire!”

I stopped.

“I’m not infectious,” I replied. “No one is any more. The epidemic’s over.”

“Who’s talking about epidemics? There are other dangers too.”

“For instance?”

“Like for instance you could be going to rape me.”

Up to this point I hadn’t looked at her very closely, but now I inspected her. Of all the people I’d come across since Granny Kalomi’s death – maybe fifteen in all – she was most like the people I knew from before. She hadn’t run away from me in panic, she didn’t have a look of fear on her face, she hadn’t cowered against some wall looking like a ghost, and nor did she smell of that mixture of dirt and sweat typical of people who’d given up. On the contrary, she smelled very nice. I was more than five metres away from her, and I could still catch the fragrance of expensive soap and some kind of face cream. Or it could have been shampoo. Her fair hair fell loose over her shoulders. The wind was blowing it away from her face, so you were bound to notice her heavy make-up. Her long, curving lashes reached almost to her eyebrows, there was lilac eye shadow on her lids, and she wore dark brown lipstick. The girls in Prague always used to make themselves up like that when they needed to look older than they were to get into the disco, which didn’t let you in under eighteen. But now we were standing in the empty

Town Hall Square in Reichenberg, no disco anywhere around, and except for me, Carmen, and a couple of crows watching us from a snow-covered window sill there was no one there to admire her lavish make-up.

I shook my head. "I never touch girls under fifteen," I said. Not that I really took her for that young, but I thought it was the way to find out her real age. She made a face and clutched her red fur collar around her neck with one hand. She was still aiming her gun at me with the other.

"Very funny, dog-eater," she said. To my own surprise I flushed. I really felt the blood rise to my face, and there was nothing I could do about it. White girls never used to call me "dog-eater". I don't know why, but somehow they mostly seemed to like me. Now and then I'd even exploited the fact a little – back when things were normal. I'd heard a lot more racist remarks from the male half of the population.

"You must be mixing me up with someone else," I said. "My name's not dog-eater, it's Mojmir. Mojmir Demeter."

I took two steps forward and offered her my hand. She retreated and pressed the trigger. She really did fire that disgusting, filthy stuff right in my face. Carmen barked and I screamed. Everything around me went first dark and then, slowly, red. I thought I was going blind. The pain was incredible. As if my eyes had caught fire from inside. I pressed my hands to my face, and the tears burned like lava. I tried cooling my eyes, picked up handfuls of snow from the ground and buried my face in them. It felt a little better, but it was still forever before I could open one eye even a crack and peer ahead of me. I saw Carmen jumping up at the closed door of a building, barking furiously.

"Stop that!" I shouted. There were fresh tracks in the snow ending at the door. The prints showed a narrow heel and a long toe. There was no doubt whose they were.

"The hell with that little tart! She's not worth it, she was second-rate anyway. In the old days I wouldn't have given her another look!"

I hoped she could hear me inside the building. I was seething with anger. My face was burning and my eyes hurt horribly. Carmen finally stopped barking and came back to me, hanging her head and squinting at me unhappily.

"It'll be OK," I tried to comfort her. "It'll be gone by Christmas."

I made my way painfully back to the car. It was a black jeep that we'd picked up two weeks before in Hejnitz. Martin Martin had taken me there to show me the basilica – he'd worked on its restoration. It was a monumental structure. Once, I'm sure, crowds of

tourists and pilgrims used to stream in. Now there were snowdrifts in the porch, and the only tracks in the square outside had been left by animals. A half-wrecked ice-cream van and a jeep that looked OK were parked outside.

“Look, that’d be just the thing for you,” Martin Martin had said. “You could go a long way uphill in that.”

He knew I’d had to park the Avia down by the stream since the first snow fell. It couldn’t make it up the slope. Not that the snow was very deep yet, but it had frozen, and the higher you went the more slippery it was.

“Would you like it?” Martin Martin persisted.

“How does it feel to drive?” I asked.

“Easy as pie,” he assured me, trying the door. It wouldn’t open, but when I’d knocked the snow off the windows I saw the keys in the ignition and the internal security catches on the doors pushed down. There was a pile of clothes in the back. Martin Martin and I looked at that pile of clothes for some time, then we looked at each other.

“I’m not so sure I do want it,” I said.

“Don’t make such a fuss! Whoever your Avia belonged to is in the next world too.”

“But he didn’t die behind the wheel. Or anyway, I didn’t find his pants on the seat and his sandals on the pedals.”

“What difference does that make? Whoever drove this jeep is with the Lord. He’d be pleased to know it’s still useful to someone,” explained Martin Martin with his own brand of logic, as he picked the lock of the door with a wire he kept in his pocket for all eventualities.

“Who’d be pleased?” I asked. “The driver or the Lord?”

“Both of them,” he replied, trying to open the door. It gave way. Martin Martin crossed himself and reached for the clothes inside.

“Watch out, they could be infected,” I warned him.

“Nonsense, that’s impossible,” he said. “Don’t go repeating that TV garbage. Haven’t you realized that pants or shoes can’t catch a virus that affects the mind?” I didn’t have any answer to that. He went toward the cathedral with the clothes. It was a strange sight. There he was, trudging through the snow in the super-expensive Canadian hiking shoes that he could never have afforded in normal circumstances, and now he had two pairs. He’d organized them from a store for mountaineering equipment. He walked

slowly with his head bent as if he were praying, and he looked strangely small in front of the gigantic basilica with its towers reaching to the sky. He disappeared through the porch and stayed inside for a good ten minutes. I wondered what he was doing in the cold, empty cathedral. Probably saying some kind of requiem mass. When he came out he wasn't carrying the clothes any more. He must have laid them to rest somehow in there. I'd been standing by the wall at the side of the parking lot all the time, looking at the white mountain peaks. They seemed such an improbable sight this freezing December afternoon. In fact the whole landscape looked strange – a huge virtual world. I was sure it could all disappear at any moment. I was the only real part of it, oh, and the red squirrel that came running up. Carmen was kind enough to tolerate the squirrel because she was too tired to chase it. She'd been running after a fox only a little while ago. There were more and more foxes around these days, and Carmen chased them away when she could, but she never caught one. They were too clever for her – they could always manage to outwit her and get away. Every time that happened Carmen came back with her head down, and an expression in her eyes that said: don't let's mention it, right?

“Great tires,” said Martin Martin when he came back to the jeep. “Bet you there's a lot of power in there!” He patted it like a horse, got behind the wheel, and told me, “Do up your seat belt!” There was a wealth of meaning in his tone.

He started the engine, let it run for a while, and then he raced away. I don't remember too much about the next fifteen minutes. I know we'd lowered the windows, the keen wind was blowing in our faces, and we were both shouting with enthusiasm – and in my case partly with fright. First we drove over the square in tight curves, then we did a slalom through the trees, we suddenly reversed, turned right again, then left, performed pirouettes, and finally Martin Martin drove us out of the city along a steeply rising road. We drove effortlessly higher and higher through the snow, and soon we'd left the whole Hejnitz valley behind us. Up in a village graveyard we just managed to avoid a stag and a roe deer standing motionless by the cable railroad waiting for their ski-lift to arrive, then we shot straight back to the basilica, where Martin Martin stood on the brake with a violent jolt.

“Aaaameeen!” he finally shouted, doubling up with laughter. I don't know why, but I was shaking with laughter too. The speed, the cold air, my fright – they'd given me an adrenalin rush I'd never known before. We were in positive ecstasies.

“So don’t go telling me there’s nothing divine about cars! If that wasn’t a little thanksgiving to the Lord I’m out of my mind!” Martin Martin was still over the moon. His beaming eyes caressed the miraculous vehicle. “Well, how about it, are you taking it?”

I took it. From then on I drove all around the countryside. From Zittau to the border by way of Friedland, Falkenau, Leitmeritz, Tauba, all the way to Turnau and Hohenelbe. That was my area, and I didn’t go exploring any further afield. My driving skills were still improving, but I was saving up Prague for the spring. Not that I wouldn’t have liked to go back. I felt badly homesick, but the more I thought about it the more scared I was of what I might find there. Also, the days were getting shorter now and I was afraid I might not get back before nightfall. Not much snow had fallen yet, but all the same I always had snow chains, shovels, and sand in the back of the car, in case I got stuck. The rifle lay on the seat beside me, ready to hand for any emergency. Wild dogs were roaming the region, and they were hungry, which made them dangerous. And wolves had come over the Polish border. You heard them mostly at night, howling in competition with each other. Then I found their tracks on the meadow behind the house in the morning. They once left the remains of a fawn right outside my door. I made a habit of bringing Carmen indoors at night, just in case. Sometimes, particularly where the road ran through the forest, a whole pack of wolves would cross in front of the hood of the jeep. You couldn’t call them exactly timid. I chased them away by hooting loud and long. I’d acquired a whole collection of old-fashioned car horns from the Reichenberg Veteran Car Club. The sort where you have to press a rubber ball behind the horn, and when I felt under any threat I simply pressed the entire lot in turn. They made a frightful noise in all kinds of different keys, and the stupid wolves ran away.

I wasn’t afraid of people. Those I met were more or less harmless. Sometimes a marksman out on his own would fire a shot my way, but only into the air as a kind of warning. In most cases I met loners, usually men, going around stores. As soon as we spotted each other we stopped and talked from a safe distance. What I learned from these remarks exchanged among rotten potatoes and spilled flour was nothing new. People repeated the same thing the whole time. They all assured me they were healthy, they all described those they’d lost and how they themselves had survived the epidemic. Many of them told me how cunningly they’d avoided the hygienists, how they’d barricaded themselves in or hidden away somewhere, and how they were managing now. Finally

they usually asked what it was like in other parts of the country, where could stocks of provisions be found, what would happen now, who would take up the government of the country, and indeed who was responsible for the whole thing. Almost all of them had their own theories, on a scale reaching from diabolically well-organized Islamist terrorists to extra-terrestrials, from crazed bosses of business and industry intent on reducing the earth's population, to an international conspiracy of doctors experimenting with new viruses. Soon I knew all their questions and theories by heart. Jessica was the first not to ask or explain anything. She was the only person who gave me the impression of being in a hurry, and didn't look as if she was just wandering aimlessly around. It was more as if she was expected somewhere and was already late, chasing off to her appointment rigged up in the latest trendy fashion out of some women's magazine.

"Who could have been waiting for her?" I asked Carmen as we were leaving Reichenberg. I drove slowly, and I had to keep rubbing my eyes because they were still streaming. "Who had she dolled herself up for, with all that heavy make-up?"

Carmen looked at me through her lashes. She always did that when she realized that I felt I had to talk out loud.

"Did you see that crazy coat and those smart shoes?" I went on. I couldn't get Jessica out of my head – at the time, of course, I didn't know that was her name. Even if I tried to stop thinking of her I kept seeing her in front of me. "And did you smell her perfume?"

We reached what had once been the marketplace. Ragged awnings hung sadly from the framework of the stalls, like the flags of wrecked ships. One of the stall roofs had collapsed and was blocking the road. I had to stop to clear it out of the way. "She flew off the handle like an idiot, but you have to admit she has good taste," I explained, to be fair to Jessica. Carmen wasn't contradicting me. I put my gloves on, climbed out of the car and went over to the fallen roof structure. It was wooden, with large numbers of rusty nails sticking out of it.

"And most of all she had beautiful legs," I said to myself as I dragged the thing out of the road. I'd had time to notice Jessica's legs in her soft, supple boots before she sprayed that filthy stuff in my face. If I had to describe them I'd say they were perfect, not too short, not too long, with beautifully rounded knees and well-shaped calves. Thin, stick-insect legs aren't what I like, maybe it's to do with my profession. I like things to be well balanced.

“I thought you were a sportswoman,” I said over supper recently, remembering my first impression of her.

“What sport?” Jessica shook with laughter. “Football, maybe?”

“Not football, you’d have had bow legs. I was thinking more of track and field events, I thought you could be a runner or a jumper or something ...”

“Hadn’t you ever seen legs like mine before?”

“Yes, but I didn’t know whose they were.”

She looked at her legs with satisfaction.

“Well, now you do, don’t you?” she said. “These are a dancer’s legs.”