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I had to wait for Kunst, I had to wait for the medical examiner, I had to offer my condolences and I had to hand over the body for further investigation. Both the condolences and the body were received with a large measure of indifference. Kunst's indifference was part of his character and the medical examiner's was part of his profession. He carried it out as if he was reading a water meter, or rather he wanted to carry it out as if he was reading a water meter.

Kunst arrived first. As soon as I had offered my condolences, I instructed him to have his uncle's ID card and medical card ready (I had already put his suit, which was next to the bedding, on the bed). I had to remind him to put both items among the documents in the folder that I had already handed over to him when the contract was concluded. Surprisingly, he had not forgotten where he put it. The medical examiner appeared at the door some fifteen or twenty minutes after Kunst. Where's the deceased? he asked. In the room, I said. Have you got the documents ready? They're on the table. I watched with satisfaction how the chubby little man in a grey suit, wearing round glasses and smelling like a postman was deprived of the professional pleasure of harassing the bereaved.

The medical examiner mumbled something that sounded almost like a hymn or at least a funeral march. Meanwhile, he pottered around the bed on which the old man's corpse laid. When did he die? Two days ago, I said casually. What? Are you not aware? The medical examiner said in agitation. Of what? That there is a penalty. Penalty? I wasn't sure whether

the little man was looking at me or Kunst through his bottle glasses. For who? For you! Me? Don't you read the legislation? Do you even have a permit? What kind of permit? The fine is 83 euros and 46 c e n t s . What? What's that got to do with me? No, no, for you it's 835 euros and 59 cents.

The thing was getting out of hand. I was no longer following what the little man was saying. I'm sorry, but I think it would be better if we got on with what we're here for. I pointed to the body. Besides which, the bereaved is also with us. I turned towards Kunst, who was staring into space. Let me return to your question and repeat my professional opinion, which is also written here. I leaned over the medical examiner and pointed to the completed section on the form that I had handed to him, along with the personal documents, when he arrived – a section that until now he hadn't even looked at. The deceased passed away two hours ago. The medical examiner was not satisfied with this. He kept muttering and moving around the bed. And we can ascertain this also from the fall in temperature. So saying, I masterfully held up the thermometer. It probably shouldn't fall by more than two degrees. You will very probably find... I brought the thermometer closer to the medical examiner, who reacted as if I'd threatened him with a knife... That it didn't even fall by as much as 1.6 degrees (decimal points are a proof of expertise) The medical examiner cautiously moved away from the dangerous object and again went to the other side of the bed. Now he was emitting a cross between purring and throat clearing. Here, the certificate. This is for that gentleman. Kunst took the document from him. He held it with both hands, like a prize at a school mathematics competition. The medical examiner stood in front of him with his hand out, waiting for him to step from the stage. I couldn't help feeling good about the situation, if only for a moment. Besides which, it would be stupid to intervene. What could I say to him? Maybe he had the same kind of trouble with hand-shaking as I had with a medical bag? Maybe he had a rare skin disease? A trauma from childhood, when his father showed his strength and power through an iron grip? The medical examiner gave up just at the moment when Kunst

woke up and held out his hand. I was witness to one of those rare moments that show that some creatures, regardless of whether they are similar and belong to the same species, are out of sync and that lack of synchronisation is so marked that they cannot touch each other, even though they are adjacent to each other and contact is inevitable. In line with some law unknown to biologists, they slide past each other. The medical examiner finally took Kunst's hand and expressed his condolences, which was actually just a prologue to handing him his business card and recommending an undertaker, who was probably an acquaintance, a relative or even his brother. Medical examiners and undertakers are from the same family. A step up from jailers and executioners. Their favourite phrase is: someone's got to do it.

When the medical examiner had said goodbye and left, Kunst was still holding both documents in his hand, I swear that his mouth was also slightly open. At first I thought it was because of shock. The only one who was really in shock then was me. I gently took the business card from Kunst's hand. It was one of those glossy ones, done in relief, depicting a rose and in a kitschy font. It was for a dealer in death by instalments and a whole range of funeral services, which in addition to normal and religious funerals in a coffin or urn, also offered local and culturally specific innovations with regard to the processing and scattering of ashes. The company's innovations included an Edelweiss funeral, suitable for victims of falls into an abyss, climbers, and lovers of high mountain ski slopes. This kind of funeral was increasingly popular in the Swiss Alps, at between 1500 and 3000 metres above sea level, where that rare and protected flower thrives in its natural environment. For campers, day-trippers and alternative farmers the company offered a shepherd's and high pasture funeral, inundation in a rockslide triggered

from a distance and burial in an urn beneath a beech tree with a wayside marker, but also executable at a lower altitude. For melancholy and metaphysical souls in Adriatic ports, they recommended their sailor's funeral with ship's planks, in German ones scattering the ashes in the Rheine, and in French ones scattering from a hot air balloon. For lovers of fast food, they suggested a drive-in funeral, while sci-fi fans could request to have their ashes compressed into a small disc and blasted into orbit. For wealthy individuals there was available an increasingly popular extra service of being permanently transformed into an elegant fashion accessory – a pure diamond. For recycling enthusiasts, completely new possibilities were opening up, with a special process for transforming the deceased into scented soap or essential oil, known as Elixir for Eternal Life. I put the business card into my pocket and turned to Kunst, who finally spoke. Are there any other possibilities? Other ones?

Yes, cheaper ones. Of course, you can choose a free funeral. Kunst's eyes lit up. Or maybe the glint was there because I had an answer ready for his next question. You can leave the body to science. Science? But the deceased must agree. The deceased? This time, Kunst's stupid repetition of the word was justified. The procedure is that your uncle should have expressed the wish that after his death, his body should be left to some institution. But can we sort that? Sort it? It depends on you. On me? I can help you prepare the necessary documentation, which will show that it was your uncle's wish, and in that way there shouldn't be any difficulties or additional costs, which you would like to avoid, if I understand you correctly. Kunst nodded and I set about falsifying the old man's consent to have his body handed over to medical students. I could already see how the lucky man would be embalmed, then sliced and diced by those fortunate enough to get to the medical faculty, how they would probe him with tools, and then watch his kidneys and liver slip through their plastic-gloved fingers. I thought how much easier it would be for all concerned if anatomical theatres were once again open to the public. And also that it wouldn't be a bad thing and certainly cheaper if memorials were no longer graves, on earth or in space, but objects that were dear to the departed and were the only thing that could really remind us of that person. I recently read that the Chinese, who burn ghost money at funerals, have been doing something similar for thousands of years.

But actually, my attention was drawn by something else. How could Kunst accept his uncle's death with such equanimity? He looked as if he wasn't touched by it at all. And his indifference was most disturbing in the presence of the old man's body. He was following my instructions as if we were dealing with a lost object and not a human being. I

couldn't understand his lack of interest regarding what would happen during anatomy lessons to the body, which lay beneath the sheet while we filled out the consent form for its donation to science on the work desk. I was expecting that at least in that moment he would snap out it, like everyone does, that he would be overcome by some small detail, that I would spot on his immobile face some sign of sadness, pain, or relief. When he bent over the page and signed it in his uncle's name, my trained eye discerned nothing. Nevertheless, I had an unpleasant feeling that he knew what was going on.

Later, it must have been around midnight, on the terrace of a closed bar, I put together some questions as well as a working hypothesis. I decided that I had to get to the bottom of the matter. At school, or actually on the second-class course put on by the local society for assistance and care to the dying, which I had to take part in, along with a group of menopausal volunteers with Virgin Mary smiles, they kept repeating that the main virtue of carers and relatives of those facing their own death was compassion. Did Kunst – as cold as ice – believe exactly the opposite, that compassion towards the dying was the main cause of a shortened life-span, and of the high rate of suicides among doctors and medical personnel who were in constant contact with the dying? (Very probably, otherwise he would not be avoiding any kind of contact with this uncle, he would have responded to the alarm, he would have replied to my questions about his condition, he would have stayed beside him.) Did he think that death was contagious? (Doubtful: it was true he did not linger in the same room as his uncle, he left the apartment, but he wouldn't have grabbed hold of my bag and wouldn't have brought an infected bed.) Was that why he had got in touch with carers, mediums, mystics, grieving experts and other charlatans who heartily believe in their compassionate mission? (Undoubtedly, otherwise he wouldn't have hired me.)

Evidently completely immersed in my thoughts, I didn't notice that Katarina was sitting beside me. Are you not going to answer me? Answer what? She got up, angry, but too tired to argue. What should I say to her? Should I show her the notes? Out of the question, she's already convinced I'm an oddball. I have the feeling that sometimes she even fears me, but doesn't say it. Then she gets up and goes. Is that why she's been with Gerbič for so long? Gerbič is a predictable, safe haven. I am not. What nonsense! What kind of haven? I closed the notebook, put it in my bag with my pen, and looked at the castle.

Translation by David Limon

ROK TRAJANJA

Stvar je izmakla kontroli. Više nisam pratio što mali čovjek govori. Žao mi je, ali mislim da bi bilo bolje da se posvetimo onome zbog čega smo ovdje. Pokazao sam na tijelo. Osim toga, s nama je i ožalošćeni. Okrenuo sam se prema Kunstu, koji je zurio u prazno.

Dopustite mi da se vratim na vaše pitanje i ponovim svoje stručno mišljenje, koje je također ovdje zapisano. Nagnuo sam se nad mrtvozornika i pokazao na ispunjeni dio obrasca koji sam mu predao zajedno s osobnim dokumentima kad je stigao – dio koji do sada nije ni pogledao.

Premинуli je umro prije dva sata. Mrtvozornik s tim nije bio zadovoljan. Neprestano je mumljao i kretao se oko kreveta. A to možemo utvrditi i padom temperature. Rekavši to, majstorski sam podigao termometar. Temperatura ne bi smjela pasti više od dva stupnja. Vrlo vjerojatno ćete otkriti...

Primaknuo sam termometar mrtvozorniku, koji je reagirao kao da sam ga napao nožem... Da nije pala ni za 1.6 stupnjeva (decimalna točka kao dokaz stručnosti). Mrtvozornik se oprezno odmaknuo od tog opasnog predmeta i opet otišao na drugu stranu kreveta. Sad je ispuštao zvuk negdje između predenja i kašljanja.

Evo, potvrda. Ovo je za tog gospodina. Kunst je uzeo dokument od njega. Držao ga je objema rukama, kao nagradu na školskom natjecanju iz matematike. Mrtvozornik je stao ispred njega s ispruženom rukom, čekajući da side s pozornice. Nisam se mogao ne osjećati dobro u toj situaciji, makar na trenutak. Osim toga, bilo bi glupo intervenirati. Što

sam mu mogao reći? Možda je imao isti problem s rukovanjem kao ja s medicinskom torbom? Možda je imao rijetku kožnu bolest? Traumu iz djetinjstva, kad mu je otac svoju snagu i moć pokazivao željeznim stiskom?

Mrtvozornik je odustao baš u trenutku kad se Kunst probudio i pružio ruku. Bio sam svjedok jednog od onih rijetkih trenutaka koji pokazuju da su neka bića, bez obzira na to jesu li slična i pripadaju li istoj vrsti, nesinkronizirana i da je ta nesinkronizacija toliko izražena da se ne mogu dodirnuti, iako su jedno pored drugoga i dodir je neizbježan. Prema nekom zakonu nepoznatom biologima, oni klize jedan pored drugoga. Mrtvozornik je napokon uzeo Kunstovu ruku i izrazio sućut, što je zapravo bio samo prolog za predavanje svoje posjetnice i preporuku mrtvozara, koji je vjerojatno bio poznanik, rođak ili čak njegov brat. Mrtvozornici i mrtvozari dolaze iz iste obitelji. Korak su iznad zatvorskih čuvara i izvršitelja smrtnih kazni. Njihova omiljena fraza je: „Netko to mora raditi.“

Kad je mrtvozornik rekao zbogom i otišao, Kunst je i dalje držao obje isprave u ruci, kunem se da mu je i usta bila lagano otvorena. U početku sam mislio da je to zbog šoka. Jedini koji je tada stvarno bio u šoku bio sam ja. Nježno sam uzeo posjetnicu iz Kunstove ruke. Bila je to jedna od onih sjajnih, utisnutih, s motivom ruže i u kičastom fontu. Bila je za trgovca smrću na rate i raznim pogrebnim uslugama koje su, osim uobičajenih i vjerskih pogreba u lijesu ili urni, nudile i lokalne i kulturno specifične inovacije u pogledu obrade i rasipanja pepela.

Među inovacijama tvrtke bio je Edelweiss pogreb, prikladan za žrtve pada u ponor, planinare i ljubitelje visokih skijaških staza. Taj je tip pogreba sve popularniji u Švicarskim Alpama, na visinama između 1500 i 3000 metara nadmorske visine, gdje ta rijetka i zaštićena biljka uspijeva

u svom prirodnom okolišu. Za kampere, izletnike i alternativne poljoprivrednike tvrtka je nudila pastirski i visokogorski pogreb, zatrpavanje kamenim odronom aktiviranim iz daljine i ukop u urnu pod bukvom s putnim znakom, ali i izvedivo na nižim nadmorskim visinama. Za melankolične i metafizičke duše u jadranskim lukama preporučivali su pomorski pogreb s palubama broda, u njemačkim lukama rasipanje pepela u Rajnu, a u francuskim rasipanje iz balona na vrući zrak. Za ljubitelje brze hrane predlagali su pogreb drive-in, dok su znanstvenofantastični fanovi mogli zatražiti da im pepeo sabiju u mali disk i lansiraju u orbitu.

Za bogate je bio dostupan sve popularniji dodatni servis trajne transformacije u elegantni modni dodatak – čisti dijamant. Za entuzijaste recikliranja otvarale su se potpuno nove mogućnosti, sa specijalnim procesom pretvaranja pokojnika u mirisni sapun ili eterično ulje, poznato kao Elikzir vječnog života.

Posjetnicu sam stavio u džep i okrenuo se Kunstu, koji je napokon progovorio.
Ima li još neke mogućnosti? Neke druge?

Translation by DSP