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*The Martyrdom of Aunt Martha*

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

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I remember Aunt Martha for her pasta dumplings, her divine poppy seed roll and the best roast ham in the world, that every Easter, no persuasion needed, certainly had our family converted. The smell and taste of her food are imbedded eternally in my brain as an age-old standard of good grub. Never again did I have such excellent beef soup with noodles, or turkey brought to the table with such tasty, crispy roasted skin on its thighs. Her veal roast was scintillatingly soft and juicy on the plate, surrounded by sautéed potatoes and rice soaked in a light brown sauce. King of the table, however, was her capon with croquettes and lamb’s lettuce in pumpkin oil. Upon hearing the word capon, most people today sooner think of a gangster surname rather than the crown jewel on menus in the most distinguished European restaurants. Whenever I remember those meals, I envisage Aunt Martha in a Renaissance painting – the creator of all the delicacies, standing over the table, glowing with joy at the sight of our family’s voracious appetite.

Visits to Aunt Martha were organised by our mother. She got us kids ready, made sandwiches, packed juices and filled the thermos with hot coffee. In the days before our departure, Mother was particularly kind to Father. We all felt the immense pressure Father was under. In those times the two-hundred kilometre journey meant almost five-hours on winding roads, crawling behind smelly lorries that barely managed to drag their weight uphill. Five hours of driving with three small children in the car. Roads back then were built winding by default, and any attempt at overtaking was a game of Russian roulette. My father was a careful driver. He had his wife and children in his white Peugeot 504. He liked Mother and he liked us kids, but he adored to the heavens his white Peugeot 504 with wine-red seats. He would never allow anything to happen to his favourites, so the two hundred kilometres dragged on for what seemed like forever. On the way we children argued, fought, cried most inconsolably about a world full of injustices and were hungry and thirsty at least four times. We had to stop for a pee three times; the one time Mother needed to pee, she slipped and fell into the roadside ditch. Father put up with all this without saying a word. Well, he did ask Mother whether she was all in one piece. Actually, when he was driving, Father fell into a kind of trance. Now I know that that is a unique survival technique employed by men stuck in a car with a wife and three quarrelling children. Whenever we were returning home on a Sunday, we listened to the radio broadcast of the football game. To me it seemed as if Father was not in the car on such occasions. Although he was in control of the wheel, in spirit he was sitting on the tiers at one of our two local stadiums.

Our family’s ravenous hunger brought such immense joy to Aunt Martha because she herself also loved to eat. Her partiality to food resulted in a number of surplus kilos and she fought a lifelong battle against excess weight. The wonderful lunch and the sinfully delicious dessert that raised Father’s blood sugar for a month were inevitably followed by a discussion about new dieting methods from a women’s magazine that was the only one Aunt Martha read regularly and faithfully. The victim was always our mother. Aunt Martha greatly admired Mother’s slender figure. It was as if Mother knew the secret recipe for maintaining body weight. As far as I know, however, Mother never made the slightest concerted effort to stay slim. It was just how she was. Despite this, she was happy enough to engage in conversations on dieting. Aunt Martha would produce a plateful of the fluffiest cream puffs to help keep under control any excitement during the discussions of exotic slimming diets. On our way home, Mother explained the tragedy of our aunt’s endeavours to lose weight. Aunt Martha would endure her dieting fervour for five days and during this time lose just over one and a half pounds but, come the weekend, she easily replenished the loss. Even worse, she would manage to add an extra four pounds to her hips.

The last time we all visited her, Aunt Martha was especially excited. With poorly veiled pride she showed Mother and Father her picture on the cover of her favourite women’s magazine, explaining how the local health centre participated in some research where they took a sample of her fat and she had the highest results among all the participants. The caption under her picture read ‘World Record’. Mother stared at her in disbelief but said nothing.

I was happy that Aunt Martha was a world record holder even though her image did not really fit in with my idea of world record holders, for example ski jumpers or javelin throwers. But if the newspaper said ‘World Record’, then a world record holder is what our aunt must be. I was not interested in all the rest. Only years later did I find out the terrible truth behind the innocent article in that weekly magazine for women and mothers.

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It was early spring when Father called me to tell me that Aunt Martha had died. Father had had a stroke a few years earlier so he no longer drove, neither was he fit for a long bus journey. Both he and Mother were happy for me to volunteer as the representative of our family at the funeral. Via some distant lorry-driver cousin they sent me money for the funeral Mass. As far as Father was concerned, the matter was sorted. It always surprised me how old people stoically accept the death of their peers. When she died, what Father, who had a genuine fondness for Aunt Martha, was most interested in was making sure that the funeral would be conducted decently. That someone might not find something to stick their nose in and then people would start talking.

At the time I was just completing my internship at the main national daily newspaper. My mentor was a rather bulky man with an expressed aversion to any kind of work. He especially hated reporting from the field. Unless, of course, it involved some event that also included food. In that case he made sure he was included. He had no problem going to a premiere of a ballet performance or the opening of the new dairy farm by the local cooperative, as long as there was a tray of champagne and snacks somewhere close to him. It was the reason we got on quite well together. I instantly understood what he wanted and he was well aware what he could expect from my novice enthusiasm.

I thought of a way of covering some of the costs of going to Aunt Martha’s funeral in the place forsaken by God and the State. It was only fair: a short report from a part of the world where readers would never see my mentor, in return for half the daily mileage and meal allowance. “Damn it, intern, make sure you don’t just hang around the bar all day! Better get a move on and take a look around. The place has the best vintage velvety reds, so make sure you don’t bring back some sour plonk.”

He pressed into my hands a ten-litre plastic canister. This was new. Normally he would just take half the allowance. I was already at the door when he remembered the reason he was sending me out into the field. “Take a camera and film. Make sure you get some shots of the locals. Let’s say hunters with a trophy bear. Write about the damage bears cause to beehives! And don’t forget to call me when you are on your way back so I can wait for you at the station.”

The idiot! There might indeed be bears in those forests but how does he expect me to chance on a hunted one right in the middle of the village? He can’t be serious! He will wait for me at the station? In order to get my report straight to the editing room? Of course not, that was the last thing on his mind. He was exclusively interested in the ten litres of red wine. It was the wine that made him sign my travel reimbursement order, and it was the wine that he did not trust his intern with once I was back at the central station. It is not a simple matter, crossing town late in the evening with a canister full of red wine. Alright, this is something I cannot begrudge him. Anyone knows what might happen if one goes into town in the evening and happens to meet an acquaintance with ten litres of wine on their person.

I believe that a good mentor’s priority is setting an example for their trainee. In this respect, I am convinced that my mentor was the very best one could have – he was an excellent example of the kind of journalist I would myself never want to be. I once asked him where the house archive was and he just laughed cynically. “Damn it, intern, you either are a journalist or you aren’t, you can find out all you need to know at the bar, rather than skiving off in the archives!” I had enough time before the bus left to do some research on what else besides excellent red wine and bears I could expect to find in the remote rural area where Aunt Martha was to be buried.

To my surprise, the newspaper archives had a thick dossier on the place. A number of years ago there had been an environmental accident in the only factory in that part of the country. It had caused a lot of damage but fortunately nobody had been hurt or killed. Perhaps I could dig up the already rather dusty story about the factory and toxic chemicals. But that was not all. The same dossier also had a copy of a women’s magazine. Immediately I recognised the front page.

It all instantly fell into place. There had been a leakage of polychlorinated biphenyls at the factory, the notorious PCBs, one of those super-chemicals that initially accumulate in small fish, then large fish, and are eventually found in the fat of polar bears somewhere in the north of Greenland. Clearly not only in polar bears. Our Aunt Martha was a phenomenon. The level of PCBs in her fat was higher than had been measured in anyone else in the world so far. I remembered my childish deliberations about Aunt Martha as a world champion. Perhaps she did not throw the javelin or jump on skis but beside her cooking talent she must have had other natural gifts necessary for a world record. What I could never have imagined, even in my wildest dreams, were the complications that a tiny piece of fat belonging to my dear Aunt Martha would lead to.

After a torturous bus journey, I spotted the familiar church spire, village hall and pub. The place hadn’t changed since my last visit. Old-fashioned red tractors drove bovine manure to small cultivated fields at the bottom of slight depressions in the landscape. Everything unfolded in a slow, lazy manner, smelling of manure and damp spring soil. People in their battered *Zastavas* were returning from work. Most of them still worked in the factory a few miles out of the village where the chemical accident had occurred.

I intended to first sort out everything to do with the funeral so that I might have more time later for my report, for all the bears in the world, and for the velvety red, of course. The village church was in a rather sorry state. Not only was the crumbling plaster calling for a little restoration work, its sagging roof resembled the back of an old nanny goat. Long dark patches on the wall made it obvious that the gutters had long stopped serving their purpose. I went to the nearby rectory to arrange all that was necessary for the funeral mass.

“Good day to you!” the priest must have only been a year or two older than myself. Pale and thin, he looked just as miserable as the building he worked in. “We haven’t met yet, I’ve only been here for half a year. Father Aegidius.” He shook my hand and invited me into a small office where he sat me down in front of a work table. “If that makes you feel uncomfortable, you can call me just Aegidius.” He offered me some biscuits that showed sure signs that they must have been the legacy of Aegidius’s predecessor. “I succeeded Father Eugene. He died last spring, God rest his soul. He had been ill for quite a while before that and looked after the church as well as he could.” We quickly sorted out all for Aunt Martha’s funeral. He made me a tea which, under the circumstances, I was unable to refuse.

“The church will need some maintenance work. I will arrange it as soon as I collect the necessary money.”

Why does this guy keep apologising for the state of the building? What business of mine is that? Surely he can’t believe that I am some religious enthusiast he might squeeze money out of until I drop dead, poor as a church mouse. That wasn’t it. The man simply wanted to tell someone about his plans. Alright, even priests need someone to confess to. I had nothing against that, especially since people’s confessions are the main part of our profession, just that we journalists are not bound to secrecy. The chap really was in a terrible quandary. His bosses probably didn’t even know where he was performing Mass. In this we were alike. Even less did they plan restoration work on an unimportant local church. “Since I arrived here, I have sent at least five letters to the diocesan ordinariate.” Disappointedly, he lifted up some folded pages that were still lying on the table. “I only received a response this morning. They very clearly suggested that I ought to raise the funds for restoring the church myself.”

How, poor chap, will you raise that amount of money? Certainly not from your one hundred and twelve parishioners on prehistoric tractors. Perhaps you could succeed if you robbed a bank, maybe the one in the Vatican. So you don’t do anyone any wrong and then have a guilty conscience. Or you can wait for a miracle. There is no other solution. Of course, I didn’t have the heart to tell him this to his face. But the priest was certain that he would succeed in raising the funds. “On Saint Stephen’s I will bless the horses and also the tractors, because there are not many horses left. Both are tractive forces, a horse can fall ill, a tractor breaks down, so a blessing is very welcome for both. There will be a fair as well. Let people come. It will all have its purpose. People also have more fun if they know that there is a purpose to their party. What is important is visual communication. I also thought about organising a concert. In the summer, out in the open, because we don’t have a large enough hall.”

Visual communication? An open-air concert? Come on, please, in this place there are all of nineteen people even capable of going to a party, all the others are old men and pre-school children. Who in their sound mind would drive for five hours to reach this forsaken corner of the Earth?

As I left, the man glowed with almost religious zeal, firmly convinced in the success of his endeavour.

How desperate people must be around here, if they turn to me for therapy.

I chose the local inn as a temporary information centre, the only place in southeast Slovenia that offers horse meat goulash and tripe, and also had three rooms they occasionally rented out cheaply to road and forest workers. For a ridiculously low price, I was offered food and lodgings, as well as, most importantly, the use of their phone. The proprietor, a man in his early fifties, was clearly bored out of his mind in the terrible mental desert of this place and would probably have also paid me as long as I was prepared to listen to him.

After the essential morning coffees and early shots of wormwood schnapps for his regular guests, we were left alone.

I was still trying to discern a more appropriate theme for my report, hoping that I might avoid having to photograph a dead bear in the centre of the village. “And how’s the bear situation around here? Have any hunters recently shot any problem-causing bears?”

“Bears? What are you taking about? I’ve no idea about bears. Never seen one around here,” the owner didn’t hide his annoyance. “What the hell do you folk in the capital imagine? That here in the periphery you’ll find dead bears lying in the middle of the road?”

“Hey, hey, nobody thinks that,” I tried to calm him and at the same time consolidated in my mind my opinion about my idiotic boss. “Anyway, what about that PCB pollution that there was so much talk about some years ago, how was that sorted out? Did it affect people in any way?” Suddenly the inn owner was back in a good mood.

“Of course it did,” he nodded emphatically and poured us out a spritzer even though I had not ordered anything. “Some people changed entirely. Like Martin Moškrič. We all knew him as a good man, a loner, long a pensioner, even though he is only in his mid-fifties. He lives in the ground floor one-bedroom flat in a block beyond the bus stop. He was always invisible and you would only see him if he was out in the hallway cleaning his shoes or when he came to the tenants’ association meetings to support the proposal for cable television.” His glass was almost empty so he clinked it against mine, an excuse to refill both of them. “Then, one fine day, I found out from the newspaper that a Green Movement had been founded in our village. And who’s its leader? The very same Martin Moškrič!” He was fiddling with a half-empty packet of cigarettes and now lit himself one. He was the kind of person who liked to dramatize a little but seemed like a good guy.

“That in itself would not really be newsworthy, were it not for the fact that the man has totally lost it. He organizes demonstrations on an almost daily basis. The other day he was protesting against our old-fashioned tractors, claiming that they totally pollute the air and how that is the reason that so many older people in the countryside die so young. Another time he fell out with all the cows and bulls because they release harmful gasses when they belch.” Momentarily he fell silent, took another sip, constantly watching me to check whether I have managed to get the picture on the nascent local green fundamentalism.

“A few days ago a neighbour who is a chemistry teacher complained to my wife. Within the scope of the school science day, the children went to the local stream and dipped thermometers into the water, measuring whatever school kids can measure in the school lab. Moškrič was instantly there and when the teacher explained that the water in the stream was hard and has a high pH he instantly went on the offensive. The following day he demanded from the mayor that the water in the stream should be softer and contain *no* pH whatsoever.”

“And why should the water in the stream not be hard?”

“I haven’t got a clue why that bothers him. Perhaps so that ducks landing on the surface don’t break their legs.”

“Thanks for the information, this Moškrič guy sounds deplorable.”

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The procession with Aunt Martha’s coffin set off from the house of mourning towards the graveyard. The mourners waved their handkerchiefs and made a point of displaying their sorrow, in the front rows a couple of old ladies were even crying while at the back end the discussion concentrated more on the funeral meal that would follow.

Moškrič’s followers were clearly well prepared for a diversion. Outside the cemetery we were met by a cordon of protesters armed with posters and all the other equipment needed for such occasions. In front of this living wall stood Martin Moškrič, his legs spread defiantly. In his green uniform with golden buttons, wearing high brown ankle boots and a billed cap on his head, he looked like some hunter-fireman. Or fireman-hunter.

The mourners had no idea what this state of siege at the entrance to the cemetery was about and initially simply wanted to walk past, as if the demonstration had nothing to do with them.

“Stop!” Moškrič shouted at the top of his voice.

“No more PCBs in our place!” the demonstrators shouted in unison.

The funeral procession stopped. Aunt Martha was not exactly light, so the coffin bearers put her down on the ground.

What do these people here want? I was not sure what was going on and was just as surprised and confused as all the other mourners.

“Martha is full of PBCs! All the world knows that! Six hundred milligrams per kilo! Martha is hazardous waste!” Moškrič was waving about the copy of the women’s magazine with Aunt Martha on its cover.

Now, at this point my blood pressure began to rise as well. It is clear what a person needs to do if someone insults his favourite deceased aunt by publically accusing her of being waste. Such an occasions calls for no mercy. I jumped towards Moškrič and was about to punch him in the face but the inn owner got there first and did the job instead of me. In doing so he saved my article and probably also my career. After the punch, Moškrič momentarily fell silent, touched his swelling lips and checked the state of his teeth, which gave me just enough time to compose myself and realise the uniqueness of the moment. What luck! I would never have forgiven myself if I had at that moment gotten into a fight with Moškrič and compromised my work as a journalist.

What followed was a scuffle between the mourners and the demonstrators. People at the back were wondering what was going on and were especially concerned what would happen with the funeral feast. Soon a police car, blue lights flashing, sped onto the scene. An elderly policeman, short and rather bulky around his waist, was clearly in charge of the police intervention unit. He spoke, while the younger, lanky, spotty-faced policeman did not say a single word, merely standing next to his colleague like a candelabra of misery.

“We will not allow the disposal of hazardous waste in our cemetery!”

“Moškrič, don't be such a fool, can't you see that this is a funeral. Show a little human sensitivity and wait for the deceased woman to be lowered into the pit. Then you can demonstrate all you want!”

It was interesting to observe the older policeman trying hard to use a psychological approach. The notion of demonstrations was still relatively new at the time, only two years earlier standard police practice had been to rush in with their old-fashioned cars and vans, use their batons to impose order and only talk to those arrested the following day. It was so touching to see the poor policeman pleading with Moškrič, appealing to him to put reason and piety before his constitutional rights. Without doubt we can anticipate a great State.

The policeman trying to persuade Moškrič was interrupted when a fight broke out between the women from the funerary party and those from the civil initiative movement. During the intervention, the younger policeman came off worst, first being bitten by a redhead from the protest group and immediately after that receiving a knee kick under the belt from a younger brunette from the funeral procession. Later there was talk that the policeman was not the victim of violent protest but merely jealousy. In his report the bitten and kicked policeman wrote that the incident was simply a case of accidental injuries which occurred when trying to separate the quarrelling sides.

During all this Moškrič howled about the future, about our children and about the poor polar bears that will, thanks to Aunt Martha, be full of PCBs. The more they tried to calm him, the louder his calls for the inspector from the government environment agency to come to the scene.

An hour and a half later the agency did indeed send one of its inspectors who merely complicated matters further. The man must be the most miserable being in the entire world. Everyone in favour wanted him to sign and everyone against also wanted him to sign. He was the only person who was against signing anything. When he mentioned that, in theory at least, Moškrič had a point and that, at least according to the law, due to her high PCB content, Aunt Martha was indeed hazardous waste that should not just casually be buried in the ground, the whole scene turned chaotic.

The coffin with Aunt Martha was carried off into the church and placed somewhere in the vestry.

A scandal broke with full force. In an exclusive article I overdid myself. This was followed by a number of longer articles for the Saturday supplement, I even commented on the events for national TV. All the media wrote about Aunt Martha, to all I was the first point of reference. I was sorry that Aunt Martha never saw all the articles in women’s magazines where her name was printed in bold.

In the meantime, the environmental protest reached a stalemate. Nobody knew how to proceed. The result of the inspector’s findings that the only legal way of removing Aunt Martha from this world was by burning her body in a special-waste incinerator was that he too received a punch in the face.

It was Father Aegidius who found a solution to the mess. As he was praying for the soul of my dear deceased aunt, a beam of bright white light came through the ramshackle roof and enlightened him. The ray apparently inspired the priest with an ingenious solution, more or less triumphant for all affected parties. That same morning he called in to see me at the press centre. Instead of herbal tea and biscuits with archaeological significance, we had two large spritzers in front of us as we waited for a small portion of tripe for me and a sausage with mustard and a large bread roll for him.

“If we cannot bury Aunt Martha, we will have to find some other solution. We don’t have much time.” I raised my brow as I looked at Aegidius, waiting for him to explain why we were here, both waiting for our morning snack and drinking large spritzers this early on in the day.

“The Church also has a solution for cases like this. After all, Aunt Martha is an environmental martyr.” Aegidius leaned across the table and whisperingly explained his plan on how Aunt Martha would find her peace without this leading to civil war.

The day after all the media pomp and exclusive reporting on the incident at the cemetery, I received a call from the chief editor at the newspaper, telling me that my internship was over. I was dumbstruck, which had clearly been his intention. Well, after a moment of cold silence, he told me that there was a contract for the post of assistant editor at the chronicle section of the paper waiting for me at human resources. What could have been better? This also meant that from the following week, I was also my former mentor’s superior. The first measure I took was to appropriate the ten litres of velvety red. I love my job as a journalist!

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I only returned to the place of Aunt Martha’s now legendary funeral on the fifth anniversary of her death. I had to see for myself the results of Father Aegidius’s idea. I almost did not recognise the church spire, the village cooperative and the inn as I had known them since childhood. The place was simply glowing. There were new pavements along the roads, the houses were newly plastered and the cooperative had on its wall a huge fresco of a merry tractor driver driving off into the sunset. Parked in front of what used to be the inn but was now called a motel, were three busses with Italian, Austrian and French number plates and the rest of the parking was also completely full. The entire place was different, changed, though to me it still felt as if as recently as yesterday small, old-fashioned tractors still chugged along the only asphalted road. Now I barely managed to find a parking space for my humble Daihatsu. The motel was totally full, so the owner invited me to stay at his home, a new house where he had plenty of space in his guest room.

I wished to see Aunt Martha as soon as possible. Father Aegidius was waiting for me at the rectory door. In a splendid black cassock and Italian shoes, Ray-Ban sunglasses on top of his head with combed back, brilliantined hair. As if he had just stepped off a Milan catwalk.

“Greetings, Aegidius, I can see you have managed to successfully restore the church and rectory.”

“That’s the least we can do for Our Martha, our first Eco-Martyr, and of course for the crowds of pilgrims who come to visit her. As you can see, we have become a major pilgrimage centre and this brings with it great responsibility.”

“I can see that business is booming. What happened to Moškrič? Is he still protesting?”

“Oh, no, Moškrič has changed entirely. He now runs a successful tourist agency. He organises group pilgrimages to visit Our Martha. I do pride myself that all businesses here work together very correctly. I think it is best you go in right now, we are just on a break, in fifteen minutes’ time the church will be filled with a large group of pilgrims from France, and there is a busload of Italians coming right after that.”

The open casket with Aunt Martha’s embalmed body was placed under a glass dome in a church niche to the right of the altar. Her face was illuminated with a faint light. I must admit that the master embalmers did an excellent job. Aunt Martha had finally found her peace, dozing with a slight smile on her face. My dear Aunt Martha, the best cook, world champion, and environmental martyr.