

Maša Jelušič

The Professor Is Dead At Last

an excerpt from the novel

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

1.

Until yesterday she had never, never ever, thought of murder. However, after the possibility had first brushed up against her mind this morning, by noon she had become obsessed with it. There is no doubt, she thought to herself that unusual afternoon, by evening she would fall asleep a murderer.

She stared motionlessly at the pale old face, the closed eyes sunk deep inside the bones of his skull. If she were to ignore the rasping sound and the barely noticeable movement of his chest, the man lying in front of her could quite easily be a corpse.

A corpse. The word echoed inside her head. *Is she really going to kill?*

She had once watched a TV programme about a famous American detective. He said that people murder only and solely for one of three reasons: money, passion and a desire for power.

‘Perhaps you wonder whether there is also a fourth category,’ this wise and experienced detective asked. ‘No, there isn’t. But what about jealousy, revenge, anger, you might deliberate. Ask yourselves the following: what causes those? There are only three possible answers to this question and now you know them.’

Of course other more or less qualified gentlemen followed with similar opinions. After all, men are experts in murder by their very nature, she thought to herself. Over ninety percent of all murders are committed by men and this is not counting wars and terrorist attacks which - she was certain of this - only strengthened this statistic. Later she read somewhere that some sociologist added a new motive for murder: love. This meant murder out of compassion, the murder of a severely disabled child, for example, a motive that is more common with murderesses than murderers... Could she also include self-defence in this? Loving oneself? After thinking about it for a while she decided that this was not important anyway. The murder that was stirring in her head had all the reasons. Even those that various experts added later, those who dealt with real-life crimes, and those who dealt with them only on paper.

She stared at the helpless, drugged old body towards whom she felt anger, a desire for revenge, jealousy... love? Wheezing on his back, head on the pillow, covered up to his beard in an old woollen blanket. Lying next to him, how very convenient, how very inviting, a soft, fluffy pillow, almost too gentle for her purposes.

Her thoughts returned to the detective’s words, ‘Even if we find a motive for murder, this does not mean that we can explain entirely the reason *why* someone

committed a murder. Experts agree that most of these *whys* can be reduced to three, perhaps four motives but finding an answer to the right *why*, that is to *why one person succumbs to these motives and others don't*, is almost impossible. We have all been consumed by uncontrollable rage, have craved an inheritance or a promotion at work, almost everyone has once loved, been betrayed but, despite this, most of us never decide to resort to murder. Despite everything, most of us never become murderers.'

But she was not 'most of us.' Never! Eagerly she grabbed the feather pillow. Shifting it for a while, as if trying to find the best position. Then, with a determined move, she placed it over the unsuspecting sleeping face.

2.

'Good morning!' a deep male voice, rather unwelcome at this hour, resonated from the mobile phone belonging to senior criminal investigator Katjuša Jakopič.

'Morning...' she muttered, her mouth dry, and rolled onto her back. A sudden powerful jerk to her elbow almost made her drop the phone. Rubbing against her arm was an orange ball of thick fur, with its short meows demanding, begging, yearning for breakfast.

'I know you are still on holiday and I know you are not on call,' the voice of the Head of General Crime Division of the Ljubljana Criminal Police Directorate, Dare Orel, was trying to sound apologetic. 'I'm sorry, but I really want you to take on this case...'

...and not those others, Katjuša completed the sentence in her head and gently pushed away the pestering cat.

Sometimes, due to the distinct specifics of a case, it would be assigned to a particular investigator. Either because they had more experience, or their approach was more appropriate, or the case was related to their previous work.

'It might be... ahem, a rather sensitive matter,' Orel cleared his throat.

With a single move she drew back the blanket, exposing herself to the coldness of April. It worked; she was instantly awake.

'I'm listening,' she replied putting on her slippers, thinking about what she had had planned for today. A morning walk up to the Castle – she was still not strong enough to run, lunch with Stojan – she would change it to tomorrow, reading on the sofa... She frowned, she didn't like changing her plans, however casual they were.

'Meooow!' came a reminding cry from the kitchen.

Mehko the cat was right, before her day's programme collapses, it's breakfast time.

'A murder in Rožna Dolina. A body was found in the ground floor flat of a large residential house, the body of Srečo Fink...' he paused briefly. 'Professor Dr Srečo Fink!'

Katjuša needed no further explanation, she merely focused her thoughts on her way to the kitchen. Srečo Fink was dead. It seems there is still some justice hiding out

there. If she could have herself chosen the circumstances in which she would hear the professor's name in connection with her work, reality seemed to be following her wishes very closely, this she had to admit. For such news, she would without any problem change her timetable for a whole month.

'How did he die?' she asked with a professional voice, trying to hide the tumultuous reaction brewing inside her. She took a bag of cat food from the cupboard, something with chicken, or at least that is what the label said, and, hands shaking, squeezed it into Mehko's dish.

'I'm not sure you will like it,' said Orel, once again clearing his throat. 'I mean, he didn't suffer. Classic suffocation with a pillow in his sleep. He was found by a neighbour, a doctor.'

'Motives, suspects?' Katjuša asked eagerly, putting water to boil. She wasn't going to give up her Turkish coffee. Not because of Srečo Fink.

'Nothing on the horizon.'

'Are you sure you want me on this case?'

The moment he had uttered the professor's name, she knew why he had chosen her. It was obvious. A woman's hand investigating the murder of professor Srečo Fink, one of the main but due to lack of evidence and will of the court never convicted actors of the #MeToo affair that with a year's delay also reached Slovenia, would in the eyes of the public most certainly appear more effective and eager to resolve than the approaches of her male colleagues.

'Zofija and Rok have already been informed, and...'

'...you knew I wouldn't turn it down, didn't you?'

'Katra, between us, we both knew you were dressed and at the door the moment I told you who was murdered! You need action! To forget all this damned shit!'

Shit indeed. And truly *damned*. So this was what Orel called the recent attempt on her life – connected to the Kolpa case... It is probably not far from the truth. She stared at Mehko, envying his blissful ignorance. He buried his snout into the delicious chunks of meat, curled his tail and ignored all his surroundings.

'You know yourself that you will never get over this...well, as I said, damned shit, by lounging around in spas'

'You're probably right, yes,' she sighed, thinking her own thoughts. Had the professor died a day or two later, she would not have minded a few more days off, but as things were now... *was she really looking forward to going back to work?*

'I also took the opportunity and warned our kid to be a little more discreet and not go about the investigation like some costermonger.'

Orel was talking about the newcomer to Katjuša's team, the young cockerel with the standout tautonymous name Rok Rok and soft blond curls that he was forever running his hand through. His parents were Orel's family friends and Dare had brought him under Katjuša's wing in return for – of this the senior criminal investigator was

convinced – some kind of favour. It was all supposed to last only a few months, a year at the most, just so they would see whether he was made of the right stuff before a transfer somewhere into the General Police Directorate.

‘Do you really believe that he is the one who spilled the beans on the Kolpa case?’

‘I think not, but I can’t be entirely certain.’

‘He knows something, that’s for sure,’ said Katjuša, adding a heaped spoonful of coffee to the boiling water. The aroma filled the kitchen. ‘But I am not sure what. Would you not, just in case, take him off Fink’s case?’ she suggested.

‘No way!’ Orel said firmly. ‘No way! You know very well that he would, in the eyes of all the criminal investigators, be branded a snitch that we cannot officially reprimand. No, he has to stay on this case, but keep an eye on him!’

Truth be told, she too didn’t believe Rok was the person who had passed on confidential information to journalists. She had her own theory about the matter but still needed to analyse and check it. As always, she needed a plan.

‘Just take care not to get the political or economic elite of our dear country involved in the Fink case, and everything will be OK!’

‘Yes, of course, and if the murderer happens to be the Prime Minister, blame me!’ she joked.

There was an unusual silence at the end of the line. She had uttered the two words Orel was most afraid of.

‘Hello, Dare?’ Katjuša asked, taking a sip of hot coffee. ‘Are you still there?’

‘Katra, be careful, please,’ he said eventually. ‘With his case, I mean,’ the tone of his voice suddenly changed. ‘If you come across... anything... ahem, sensitive... please let me know immediately.’ A moment of silence. ‘Immediately!’

Katjuša frowned. Ever since, three years ago, the right-wing government had slid into power quite by chance, one had to be careful about many things. Not just a mention of the prime minister. Everyone was suspicious, everything was unusual, everything had to be monitored... were the thoughts of Righty Dare, as they called him behind his back at the Crime Division. She was used to her boss being suspicious and merely took note of his comments.

She didn’t think it was very likely that politics were involved in the murder of Professor Fink. Not at this stage.

...

Katjuša took her mobile from her pocket, checked the time and indicated to Zofija that it was time they moved on. To the last interview of the day, Dr Marjana Marinšek.

‘Have you been here before?’ Katjuša asked when they arrived at the glittering glass facade of one of the most prestigious medical centres in the country.

‘I haven’t won the lottery yet,’ Zofija replied.

‘They also do reduced rates, depending on what is bothering you.’

At the reception they showed their badges and a young nurse with heavy make-up pointed them in the right direction.

Most of the clinics were hidden on the first and second basement levels, the ground floor had only a waiting room, a few offices and toilets. Everything was white, lit by bright lights from the ceiling, under the benches and as guiding lights along the wall.

‘Someone has just cancelled their appointment, I have a few minutes.’

Bright red hair, a perfect smile, attractive cat-like eyes, all drew attention away from her wrinkles. A successful doctor who with her own hands and knowledge, had built up by far the most successful clinic in the wider area.

The two investigators sat on the chairs offered and pulled out in synch, one of them a blue notebook, the other a tablet.

‘Živa, coffee please! Can I get you two anything?’

They nodded. Black, plain black.

‘Do you know how often people cancel their appointments? Or are late? It is a Slovene national sport. There is no price high enough that I could charge people like that! When I was still working in Austria, it never happened! But here? And such idiotic excuses!’

‘I believe you,’ Katjuša nodded. ‘We get them as well, excuses with which they try to avoid official interrogation!’

‘Cancelling an appointment should be a criminal offence!’ the doctor added in a totally serious tone of voice.

Katjuša glanced around the office. Here too everything was white. Cupboards, walls, even the chairs and the table lamp. The only thing softening the all-encompassing whiteness were a few framed photographs opposite the door. Mountains, rock faces, climbers.

The doctor noticed where her visitor’s eyes were lingering and explained. ‘The one with the bronze frame is for the eight-thousander Broad Peak, the twelfth highest mountain in the world, in the Karakorum range in Pakistan. Over twenty years ago. I never again attempted anything like it. I was not hooked like the others. I stick to the Alps.’

‘A mountain rescuer?’ Zofija asked not hiding her admiration, pointing to one of the framed newspaper articles with the doctor’s name in the title: *Mountain Rescue Team Saves Pregnant Woman with Children: Marjana Marinšek, Goran Sajovic and Blaž Koritnik*.

‘I am still holding on to my air mountain rescuer licence in Slovenia, yes. I also used to be active in Austria. Last year I took part in thirty-one interventions; we’ll see how things go this year. So far I have only been on three. An injury...’

She briefly lowered her head, her red hair hardly moving, then looked back at the photos.

‘When I was young, I worked in A&E, my friends and I were nuts about the man in charge there. We were active mountain climbers with a desire for adventure that youthful madness of course disguises as a wish to help people. I am not saying that this doesn’t also come into it, but mostly one gets into this business because of the adrenalin, pure self-love... which you only realise when you are old...er,’ she quickly corrected herself. ‘During all the action, you think only about the patient, your own problems sink into the background. Helping a fellow human being is a divine feeling... except, of course, when things go wrong...’

She stared at the black and white photograph in which two young women were sitting in front of a helicopter. It was not hard to recognise the doctor; the perfect smile, high cheek bones and huge eyes were not affected by her age.

‘...and after a while the lustre fades. As with everything that is too shiny.’

She turned away from the frames towards the empty whiteness of the room. ‘I almost got carried away. Better not ask me about the mountains, my injury means I almost never go out on rescue missions, but the memories stay. And sometimes, with attentive listeners, they become restless... Tell me! What do you want to know?’

‘We have come because of the murder of your neighbour, Srečo Fink,’ Katjuša explained.

‘A strange man.’

‘Did you know him well?’ Katjuša asked.

The doctor swayed into the spacious seat of the white leather armchair and once again looked at the photographs. ‘Did you know that Srečo Fink was also a keen mountaineer in his day?’

The investigators shook their heads.

‘I met him on a ski touring trip. Many, many years ago. He was an acquaintance of my then partner,’ she explained. ‘Later he invited Fink into our group and he also became a rescuer. But to answer your question, no, I didn’t know him well, I never socialised with him. He was...’ she picked up a white biro from the table and fiddled it between her fingers. ‘He was... to be honest, I was kind of afraid of him. And believe me, I am not someone who is easily afraid. When he resigned from our team, we all breathed a sigh of relief.’

‘Did he harass you?’ Katjuša asked.

The doctor leaned forward, her elbows on the table, 'The best way to explain this to you is with a story... which, at least in as much as I know, did not happen only once.

It was summer... just under thirty years ago. A sunny, cloudless morning. Which, in line with issued warnings, changed very quickly. As happens so often, there were also this time mountaineers who had not checked the forecast. A family. The father, mother, and their teenage daughter. During their descent they were separated when lightning struck. The mother managed to continue and called for help. When we arrived at the scene, we realised that the matter was not that simple. We decided to split up, three of us went to rescue the father and daughter, Srečo and Niko stayed to look after the mother and deal with her injuries. She had burns down her left side and was in shock.

I probably don't need to tell you that these are tense and emotional times. The mother waiting for news of her child and husband. Helpless, full of adrenalin... I don't have children of my own but I can easily see myself in her skin...'

The doctor paused for a moment and thought, then she continued. 'What Srečo did in the next few moments...' she shook her head as if she still could not believe it, 'what Srečo did then, is to this day something I find inexplicable...'

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22.

Early morning, the day after the murder was discovered. Second floor of the Ljubljana University Medical Centre. Gynaecology department. After seven minutes of waiting for the lift, Rok Rok gave up and used the stairs. He turned towards the nurse at the reception counter, telling her he had an appointment with Dr Marinšek.

'In relation to your wife, your mother?'

He showed her his badge. 'Criminal investigation, I have a few questions.'

'The waiting room is down the corridor on the right,' she replied indifferently, as if a visit from the police was something completely normal. 'Sit down and wait. He is currently in the operating theatre.'

He sat next to a woman the age of his mother, holding her handbag in her lap, staring blankly in front of her, without either mobile or book. Sitting opposite was another woman, young, busy with her phone, her foot trembling nervously. He didn't like the department. Worn furniture, an acrid smell, no windows, a feeling that time had turned back to the years before he was born.

Suddenly he heard a cry. A short, painful cry, as if someone was being played alive. And again. Neither of the women in the waiting room did anything that would indicate discomfort. Rok couldn't take it. Before the third cry had the chance to pierce his ear, he stood up and walked towards the light coming from the next room along. A window! Lots of windows. A bright, uninhabited corridor. A little further along he noticed

a pair of large doors. The kind of doors that promise that something important is going on behind them. Operating theatre, he read the sign. He shuddered and turned towards the dirty windows when Dr Marinšek and a female colleague appeared round the corner.

‘By the end of the month I will have done over two thousand procedures. If Goran hadn’t snitched a few of my latest patients, I would already be celebrating...’

The woman next to him rolled her eyes, patted her colleague on the shoulder and turned in the opposite direction.

‘Oh, Mr Rok, what brings you to our department? I had arranged to speak to Ms Jakopič.’

‘She sends her apologies, she couldn’t come.’

They turned towards the corridor with the flickering lights.

‘She couldn’t, I see?’ he said deep in thought, pulling off a glove and smoothing his dark hair. ‘Alright, tell me how can I help you? Is there any news on the investigation?’

‘Could we perhaps move to a calmer corner, perhaps an office?’

‘Of course, of course,’ he said, opening the first door they came across, checking it was empty, and they walked into a consulting room.

A gynaecological examination table with metal leg rests, shiny, sharp tools of terrifying shapes and sizes. White tiles to the corner sink, a tap with two handles, one blue, one red, remnants of a bygone age. To one side, a changing corner with a torn curtain and the lino flooring coming unstuck. A consulting room that had served its term, Rok thought to himself, but then noticed a fresh red stain on the crumpled paper cover... He remembered the cries earlier and shuddered.

‘Sit down, please, do sit down. Dr Marinšek pulled a small round stool from under the desk and offered it to him.

Rok sat down, turned away from all the tools, took a notepad from his pocket and explained, ‘We just need to briefly clear a few matters. There seem to be certain inconsistencies in the various accounts of the events. You said that you were at work yesterday between five and seven in the afternoon.’ He checked his notes. ‘To quote you: *At half past one I came home, had something to eat, then, a little after three, I went back to work. I only returned after nine in the evening, you can ask my wife.*’

‘I said that? Ask my wife?’ he laughed.

‘We would need some kind of proof, a staff login card, a statement from your colleagues, patients perhaps who would confirm that you really were at work all afternoon.’

The doctor smoothed his beard, staring at the young criminologist. Tapping his finger thoughtfully on his lips he said calmly, ‘I am afraid that won’t be possible.’

In the next room along something metallic fell to the ground.

‘It won’t?’

‘No, it won’t, because I actually wasn’t here.’

‘You mean to say, you weren’t at work?’

‘Yes, I am telling you, I wasn’t at work,’ he raised his voice slightly.

‘And you were where?’

‘I was attending to a private matter, if you really have to know. And I was stood up.’

‘Do you have a witness that could confirm where you were?’

‘Didn’t I just say that it was a *private* matter and that I was stood up? Ghosted, or whatever you call that?’

Rok patiently asked, ‘And how do you suggest we might verify your *personal* alibi?’

‘Simple. I was on the motorway at the time. Ask to view footage or whatever you do and you will see very clearly how at the time of Fink’s murder me and my Passat are driving in the opposite direction from the crime scene,’ he said in a tone indicating he was satisfied with himself, half expecting to be praised.

Stop kidding me! Rok thought to himself. Everyone wants to rely on cameras.

‘Which motorway might that have been, and when?’

‘The coastal road. Went down it at about half past four, returned at around eight.’

‘And when exactly did you leave home? When did you get into your car?’

‘Exactly? I am afraid you are expecting too much from my memory. At the time I didn’t know I would need that information later, did I? And believe me, my thoughts were totally elsewhere!’ he chuckled. ‘Goodness me, this is a real interrogation, as if adultery was illegal!’

‘Adultery isn’t, Doctor Marinšek, but lying about it in a case like this is. Why did you lie at our first meeting?’

‘Lie, lie, I didn’t lie. Just... Are you married? Do you have a girlfriend? Oh, it’s not important, you’re too young for these things...’ he glanced at Rok, trying to figure him out. ‘You know, we gynaecologists know women inside out. And with this knowledge comes great responsibility. Towards them. Their emotions. I admit that I could have told you at the beginning that I was on my way to Izola for the weekend, but I knew you would also speak to Marjana and... to be honest, I didn’t trust your boss. She might have spilled the beans, you know how it is, women tell each other everything. Especially if they see that they can hurt each other’s feelings by doing so.’

And I really do not want to hurt Marjana’s feelings, not now when her business is down on its luck. On the outside such a sparkling clinic, the books all in the red. I told her to find a business partner, me for example, told her that she would not manage on her own. A stubborn woman! Now she has it! Whatever. There!’ he slapped his thighs with both hands. ‘You have my confession. I was in Izola. Supposed to go for the

weekend. I lied. To protect my own wife. I hope that will be enough. Please tell as little as possible about our conversation to Marjana and your boss, right?’

‘Our conversation is on record, Dr Marinšek, and I have no influence on that.’

‘Well, but of course you do, young man, just write that I went to Izola on business, no? The rest stays between the two of us. You would do well to get used to this kind of trick sooner rather than later. Women are ruthlessly taking over the world and we all need to defend ourselves as best we can!’

He was about to wink at Rok but something fell into his eye. Rubbing his eyelid, he asked, ‘You knew when you arrived that I wasn’t at the clinic, didn’t you? Might I ask how you found out?’

‘Your neighbour.’

‘Neighbour?’ he asked cautiously and stopped rubbing his red eye.

‘Patrik Rant saw you close the garage door, get into your car, and drive off.’

‘Rant?’ he repeated to himself, wondering.

‘Downstairs neighbour. A psychology student.’

‘Oh, I know, the guy with dishevelled hair. He saw me at the garages, did he? I never thought... well, I certainly didn’t see him, I’m sorry. I hope he doesn’t want a reciprocal alibi.’

There was a knock at the door. ‘Dr Marinšek, Mrs Boc is already waiting for you in the waiting room.’

‘Of course, of course, tell her I will be with her right away. We are in the middle of an important investigation and...’

‘Alright, Dr Marinšek, I have no further questions for now,’ Rok interrupted. ‘If any further issues come up, we will let you know.’

‘Thank you, and once again, I apologise,’ said the doctor feigning regret. ‘I could have told you the truth, but your boss rubbed me up the wrong way... Women really should not work for the police!’

‘Really?’ Rok was surprised. ‘I would rather say that there aren’t enough of them. Especially in leading roles!’

‘You’re still young,’ said the gynaecologist, waved his hand dismissively and stood up. ‘Believe me, when you get to my age you will have changed your mind. For now you still find them cute...’

He turned towards the door and called out, ‘Marta, tell her to come in, I will conduct the examination here.’

Looking at the young investigator, he nodded towards the exit.

‘Dr Marinšek, haven’t you forgotten something?’

The doctor gave him a puzzled look.

‘The blood. You forgot about the blood,’ said Rok calmly.

‘The blood?’ Dr Marinšek asked with surprise, taking a slow step back like a cat on the prowl.

‘On the paper sheet! I doubt it would inspire confidence in your patient.’

The doctor glanced towards the examination table. ‘Marta, send her to room two, room one has not been cleaned yet!’

‘Goodbye,’ Rok left the room swiftly, utterly thankful that never in his life would he need to visit a gynaecologist.