

Tadej Golob: Pig's Feet

One

It started in November. At least, I think it was November, so let's say that this milestone happened then. It was raining, I remember that, but that's November for you. That's how it is, because it's autumn and there's nothing you can do about it. Although in fact, November isn't the worst month of the year. Everyone says it is, that the day is so short, that it's cold and wet and that the weather is shit. But that's not it. The problem is All Saints Day, which is right at the beginning and really screws everything up. This is what it was like. We're all standing around the grave, first the one from mother's side of the family, then the one from dad's. We quarrel twice on mother's side, twice on dad's. There we wait for the old dears to sing, please lord hear our prayer. Grandad lies in the ground, silent. Obviously he's silent because he's dead and in the clay. I was really young when we buried him and I remember that the soil was reddish and elastic and that it was pissing it down. And that the old man was grumpy when he was still alive and how he sat in front of his house in Dolenjska with his stick in his hand looking grumpy, but in spite of that I was still fond of him. He was on a wooden bench, to his right a pear tree, some old variety, a must pear or something similar, a grassy slope below him and behind me, when I look up from this slope, a wooden shed for farming implements, with ploughs and such like, and a press for grapes and apples. I long thought that there must be a good reason why I liked the old man, but now, ever since I've had Simon, it seems to me that children have to like old people, especially relatives, and that was the reason. Although, perhaps he was alright, I don't know, he looked stern. We are cold, because as usual it is snowing. Then we go to the relatives on dad's side and mum acts stiff, because they get on her nerves. We eat *potica* cake. The grown ups drink wine and talk, the children drink milk or fruit cordial. I drank cordial because there was always a skin on the milk that I couldn't bring myself to swallow. The only milk I drank was long life, which had no skin or it was very thin or only appeared later. The other children were drinking milk and cordial, and eating sausages and *potica*, almost all at the same time. I was surprised they didn't throw up. I barely understood a word they were saying because they all had thick Dolenjska accents, but they were not cunts and we played nicely. We never got into fights and when we left I was almost sad to be leaving, as that was the only day of the year when I didn't have to be in bed by eight. As a matter of fact, I think it was only the first part of the day that got on my nerves, at the

graveyard, and that shit between my parents right through dinner when my mum was determined to start an argument, but at the time I kind of forgot about that because I was playing with that lot and I only remembered about it on the drive home. She sulked silently, always, every year; the old man stared coldly through the windscreen, purple faced, also because he'd been drinking, gripping the steering wheel. One day he's going to kill her, I said to myself; strange that she doesn't seem to see it. Usually that was around Višnja Gora, on the old road to Grosuplje, because of course there was no motorway then.

So, as far as that is concerned, it was not difficult to understand why many say that November is the worst month of the year for I thought, as I looked round the graveyard, that they were all equally fucked up and suffering from hidden traumas that would erupt precisely on All Saints, when those under the ground want to get revenge on those above it. As if they had not made them suffer enough when they were still alive. It must be something to do with the first of November, because if it was just a matter of the weather, December is no better and nobody grumbles about that.

But of course, once I start thinking about it it's hard to say with complete certainty that it began in November. That was only when it came to the surface, became visible, although that wasn't apparent immediately, but rather now, with the benefit of hindsight, and it probably began way back in the past. Thus it's possible that it didn't start this year, but when Simon was born, another such milestone, or when I started going out with Maja, which may also have set the whole thing going. That it was a fatal combination, which doesn't seem all that likely, or it was likely but in spite of everything I refused to think about it. In that case it is better if it goes back to when I was born, or even earlier. That I had nothing to do with it, nor Maja, which sounds alright because then I wouldn't be at all responsible, nor would she, and there probably is something in the idea that these things go from one generation to the next. That it began, for instance, when my mother was born or even her mother or even her great-great-great-grandmother. Some time during the transition from slavery to feudalism, or even before. When the first fungi crawled onto dry land and blossomed into orchids and from them the biggest surprise of all when they farted out enough oxygen to power the dinosaurs and other beasts. It could have been from the very beginning, it could be fate or something like that. It's perfectly possible that it started at the very beginning when matter fucking exploded. Boom, and from then on why-because-why-because from a mechanical point of view. Because if the whole thing had not burst forth in precisely the way it did and no other, not a fraction to the left or right, but directly as it did, then there would have been no me and if there was no me then there would not be this fucked-up mess. Because every effect must have a cause and every cause is a result of something and this cause-effect

shifting back and forth inevitably brings you to the proto-fucked up mess. The more you probe and ask when, for fuck's sake, when did it start to go wrong, the more you dig and beat yourself up for being so blind and nothing else. Which means that it is pointless working out when it started and whose fault is it and all that.

All you can do is identify the moment after which the whole thing seemed irreversible, or the moment when you saw things going wrong, and it was November when we started renting that apartment.

Although I know that now, with hindsight, I didn't know it then. Which means that this is also pointless.

So, it was raining because it was November and so on. The estate agent, Maja and myself, bringing up the rear, went down the slippery steps to lower ground level, where there was a cellar or utility room with a boiler, although I didn't know that yet. For when things went bottom up I went, or rather Maja did, I looked after the little one, to the municipal offices to see where we stood. Some old dear who lived in the catacombs between the shelves of paperwork pulled out those thingies for our apartment or rather our rented apartment:

"You shouldn't even be living there, it's a utility room."

"And what now," asked Maja, "that we are living there?"

"I don't know," she replied, "you shouldn't be."

Simon slept in the car. It was the only place he wanted to sleep, nowhere else. Once I calculated that getting him to sleep cost me about five Euros. Twice around the Ljubljana ring road, about fifty kilometres, and that if I drove very slowly, at eighty kilometres. I'd do that in any case, even forgetting about the petrol, because if you're trying to get a kid to sleep the key is time, not speed. If I could, I'd crawl round Ljubljana at sixty, but all the others would go spare, especially the lorry drivers. Even now they were flashing at me to get out of the way. You also need to consider that although the speedometer trembled around eighty, that it was in reality seventy and that is certainly not fast. Then the fuse went and the speedo packed up altogether, it didn't move at all, although it did still tremble, but now around zero, and by that time I had developed a feel for approximately eighty. It also became clear that we soon wouldn't be able to afford this, for one such sleep a day came to one hundred and fifty a month, and when I worked that out I was horrified. That was more than nursery, and there you got breakfast, a mid-morning snack, lunch and another snack, dance class... Okay, dancing was extra, just like

English, three days on a farm, skiing and such like. In short, everything except food and child care.

"This is it," said the estate agent, "a three-room apartment. Spacious, light, but above all extremely good value."

He walked behind us, giving us the spiel, while we explored the cramped space. The hell it was light, as a visually educated person I already knew that or could see. That we would need to have the lights on most of the day. But I didn't say anything, there was no point. It wouldn't make it any lighter.

"... so, basically it has everything you could want..."

An open-plan kitchen with dining area and living room which according to some screwed up logic of his meant a room-and-a-half although it actually looked like one, a pantry, a toilet and bath, plus another room that didn't really qualify as a room as it was so small, but he kept going on about three rooms: "and all this for only three hundred Euros a month. You won't find such a rent even on the outskirts of Ljubljana. In the inner suburbs it'd be five hundred, wherever you look." He wasn't bullshitting about this, I knew, because we'd looked everywhere. Even Fužine, where most immigrants from the south live. I'd even been there first because I'd thought it would be cheaper. But there wasn't much difference, only the apartments were in worse shape, especially the parquet. You might not even notice that if you weren't looking closely, if you'd never helped a parquet specialist to sand and varnish a floor so that your head hurt for a week from the poisonous fumes. Fužine folk put carpets over it and damp gathers. The carpet sucks and suck, from the air, from stuffed cabbage, from socks, from everywhere, but there comes a moment when it can't take it any more and surrenders. When the people leave all you can do is change the parquet, there's no point sanding and varnishing.

"You know, son, clever buggers usually think it can be done, but it can't," explained the master of the wooden lozenges, I forget his name, but I do remember that he didn't put on a face mask for even a moment when he was varnishing and it was surely a medical miracle that he was still among the living. On the palm of his hand lay a rotten piece of parquet, like a dead bird. "Look, rotten through and through," and he held it under my nose. "If it's rotten all the way through, there's nothing you can do, there's nothing to sand, it crumbles at the edge like rubber and the varnish doesn't hold... You see..." I took it to keep him quiet.

"Aha, right."

It really was damp, you could feel it.

"You can't sand that, lad, because..." and so on.

I stuck it out for two days. The third day started with him saying he would roughly cut a few pieces of wood with a chainsaw for a corner which would in any case be covered by kitchen cupboards. But anyway, I was supposed to hold the wood while he went broom broom. So I'm looking at him. Okay, some people know what they're about and maybe I would even have held the block of wood, a little bigger than a Rubik's cube, while he shaped it, maybe that's the usual thing, because at a fairground when you go on some fucking ride and it goes at breakneck speed, you know it's not a smart thing to do, but you trust and you get on and usually you don't throw up or fly off into space, or when you go for an operation of some kind, let's say for kidney stones, and the doc in a white coat nicely explains how he will pull them out through your arse and there's no need to be concerned because that's the way they do it now, you say okay and clench your buttocks, but I'm looking at him, this wood man and, as I say, I would have taken hold of the wood if he hadn't had on one hand, the right, only three fingers and three on the left, but one of those was immobile, stiff, it stuck out at an odd angle.

"Sorry," I said, withdrawing my hand.

"What are you afraid of?"

"I'm sorry... I don't know..."

"What?" he said revving the chainsaw in my direction.

"I'd rather not..."

"But what's to be afraid of?"

And I didn't. The old guy was disappointed, took hold of it with the two-and-a-half fingers of his left hand and somehow got rid of the excess and until break time he didn't speak to me again. Then I escaped. Sooner or later he'd try again, you could see it.

So that now I first took a look at the parquet. Nice large pieces of light coloured wood. Maple or something similar. And I found a metal plug of some kind, a round one, in the corner, but I couldn't be bothered to ask what it was for, because at the end of the day we weren't buying the place, in fact I was thinking we wouldn't even rent it. But what if we did, I mean, what could get all that much worse in six months? Because if you are only renting, you don't care, I mean, if something goes wrong, you get out, you don't give a shit. As far as I was concerned it could all be full of metal plugs. Just that it wasn't too bad now, that there weren't any really serious problems. In any case, I was looking so that I was doing something, so that Maja would think I was doing something, that I was studying the situation. And I was wondering if this was

maple or something else and looking smart and thorough. Then I discovered plugs in the corners of all the rooms.

"This is maple, isn't it?" I asked, tapping the floor with my foot.

"Oh, I don't know anything about parquet," he said, starting to blink. As if he'd got something in his eye. "What I do know is that this was one of the more expensive ones. You see how it looks like new? And it is proper parquet, not laminate."

Maple, beyond a shadow of a doubt.

We went into the bathroom, where the tiles were quite expensive looking, Italian, an indefinite sort of colour, something between grey and brown, easy to clean, as ugly as sin, and finished in the living room next to the table of the same colour as the floor, and I was wondering whether to ask whether that was also maple, but I didn't, because it would have seemed as if I was taking the piss, but I think it was. We stood around the table, awkwardly, me the least, as I had already switched off. Then Maja asked how much did he say the rent was and he told us again and Maja was yes, hm, okay, and was there any chance of getting it a bit cheaper...

"You know how it is, for that money you won't get anything anywhere... And you also have to pay six months in advance, otherwise there's no chance. Because it's so cheap. That's a condition."

I already knew that we'd have to do this because he'd told us before the viewing, so we were prepared, otherwise we would have been gobsmacked. I mean, what sort of dirty trick is that, six months in advance? Two months, maybe, okay... If it had been me on the phone I'd have said something, but it was Maja and she just carried on regardless. She just nodded and yes, yes, we'll be in touch.

"That's almost two thousand," I said when she told me, "and in advance, thrown away. Is he mad?"

"A bit less," and okay, it wasn't easy, but you handed it over and then you could relax, they weren't going to interrupt you in the middle of lunch...

"...or when you're having it off."

"...and there's enough room to breathe and for your table."

Okay, that was all true, but I still thought she was kidding, because where would she or even me get two thousand Euros and I thought nothing would come of it. Two days later she calls him again about a viewing and we go there, Jama it was called, on the edge of Ljubljana, on a farm.

"You could call it an elite location, far from the city hubbub..." bla bla.

He forgot to tell us there was no bus service either, because the village was in no man's land. The city bus routes ended at Gunclje, and then Stanežiče, a couple of kilometres further on, and then another kilometre to Jama, and then nothing until Medvode, where there was a bus service again. I realised this later, when the windscreen wipers on the Hyundai packed up and it was raining and I had to walk. We hadn't used the Mercedes much recently. Okay, on that occasion we were still driving it and I said to myself that I should go so that she can't say that she has to do everything herself, that I don't make any effort, even though it was pointless in any case because we didn't have the money.

Simon was still asleep when we drove off. The car started first time. I parked in a covered parking space, even though it had a number, but fuck it, it was raining, so the cables would stay dry.

"Where will you get the money?"

"Borrow it from my folks. We'll return it each month, it's all the same if we have to pay in advance."

Great, I thought, as if they don't have a low enough opinion of me already, but I didn't say anything, because what could I say?

"I'm fed up of having no room and that toilet, and I don't even have a mirror, or a washbasin..."

She spent about five minutes enumerating what she was fed up of. I kept stum, because I couldn't be bothered to argue and because it was all basically true, and because it was also getting on my nerves a bit and so I preferred not to think about it at all.