

The Invention of Love and Death

Three Rivers

Three Rivers. A row of snow-capped peaks hover in the sky. While I approach, blending into the horizon, it seems conceivable to reach them. There are bare orange groves behind the houses of the next hamlet; the road starts climbing, leaving evaporated lakes and crippled forests in its wake. The writer's house is sitting in a landscape made of parched scrub, bleached by the sun and sunk into the soil. Nobody heard the approaching car. I push the warped door open and follow the voices.

The word sounded familiar when George's friend uttered it in his dark restrained voice: Beloved. It had never occurred to me to think of its male form.

The corridor of the house is crammed with the treasures of a long life, paintings, books, trophies, polished eggs carved from semi-precious stones lying in earthenware bowls. The author sits in an armchair, surrounded by his audience. He talks about the thriller, his thriller, in the course of which he invented laser beams and micro chips sixty years ago. His eyes are dull and his veins coiled like snakes around his wrists. He has described brain transplants long before any organs were replaced. Occasionally, his German accent clouds his words.

"Every story we write is part of our own."

He has transplanted his own brain, and sometimes, he says, he looks out at the white peaks, thanking the assassins of his parents for the life he found here. I ask him about the Wolfman.

"The father is my father, of course; I am the son", he explains without looking at me. I am still hoarse. "That is all."

The son transforms himself into a wolf to escape the father. The novel was made into a Hollywood movie. The author's wife, sitting in her wheelchair, smiles, as if she remembers. I forget the end of the story.

It may be that my father did not want a third daughter. Perhaps I did not want to be the third. It must have begun like any coincidence, with a gesture, a touch. The skin was familiar, the scent, the hair curled on the chest. As the coincidences multiplied, I saw them ruling my life.

Next month, a stamp depicting the Wolfman will be issued, the German scholar claims, to mark the past success of the movie.

Somebody starts listing durable success: Mozart, Goethe, Citizen Kane. "My Wolfman", the author interjects from his armchair. Everybody nods. "Anyone", adds the old man, "has only one big story to write"

I sense Duncan's eyes resting upon me.

The Mexican maid looks startled as I come into the kitchen. She had not heard me coming and while she refills the jugs I brought, I look out into the garden. It may, at some stage, have flowered like an oasis in a desert, but it has shrunk to a skeleton, now.

I must be mistaken, I shall not find here what I am looking for. For an instant, I wonder if I should walk, around the house, to my car and return.

"Every person has his own perception of paradise", the German scholar says on my return carrying the filled jugs, his eyes resting on his colleague's cleavage.

"What was the bible's use during the past 2000 years?", the author asks, his hands raised.

The actor compares the gaze of his newly born daughter with the one of his dying father. I cannot say whether he uses his own words or quotes. He saw, he says, in both faces mirror images of another world. If he had a choice, the author says, he would rather live in this world for fifty more years, than partake in the bliss of eternity. His scalp is bare and speckled.

The German scholar says: "Every man wants to be immortal."

"Young people", the actor moans, "don't even know Marlene Dietrich, these days."

The author puts on a piano concerto, the composer of which he has forgotten.

His wife smiles in her wheelchair, as if we were old friends.

Later, we gather behind the house, surrounded by faded pot plants. The three rivers responsible for the place's name have long since run dry. There is not even enough water to sprinkle the borders, and the fence erected to keep the dog from running away has collapsed.

"Pygmalion", says the author with an inscrutable face, answering my question.

The others are out of earshot, observing the sunset. I remember the red volume in Philipp's shelf, "Metamorphoses", by Ovid.

Pygmalion found all living women unsatisfactory and, therefore, began to carve his own, from ivory. The statue turned out to be so beautiful that he fell in love with it. He brought her little presents, flowers, sea-shells, polished stones, and he clad her in vestments. He kissed her, laid her down on his bed. When the feast day of Venus arrived, Pygmalion offered his sacrifice before asking the goddess for a woman akin to his craven image. Venus at once understood his longing and inspired the statue with life.

"...mellowing under my touch, the ivory's rigour yields to the imprint of my finger..." I try to recall the scar on Duncan's chest bulging under my fingers.

"A miracle?" I ask, without any attempt to disguise my scorn.

"A gift", the old man replies without a trace of guile. "In the evenings", he continues, "racoons come out of the scrub to feed from the bowls we put out for them. They are so docile that Henrietta can pat them, sitting in her wheelchair." I can feel my tears welling up. The author's eyes stray over to his wife. The inviolability of age has clad her beauty with a veil.

"The best thing I ever did", he says, "to marry this woman". Her gaze is empty. I fold my hands, as if the touch alone could preserve the memory.

As we leave, two buzzards circle the mountains and a rattlesnake basks in the evening sun like an old garden hose. I follow the actor's white convertible for awhile, then I turn south. When the vineyards appear beside the road, it is dark. Duncan's skin smelled of damp wood.

Regina

We fly west with the dusk. Behind Montreal we glide for a while over streams and lakes covered with milky skins of ice. Then the earth is brown. The noises of the engines weave themselves into a rustling sound. I turn the hands of my watch back; in the blue field behind the numerals the moon moves over a star-covered sky.

When the outlines of Regina appear in the distance they tremble in the air. Jack had explained in his letters that it used to be a camp on the river bank, when they started to build the town. They

first called it after the pile of bison bones found there. The ground between the wooden sidewalk planks must have been muddy when the snow melted in the spring and dusty in the summer. With their houses' wide porches they tried to protect themselves from the immense sky.

When the plane lands it is dark. Jack stands in the centre of the baggage hall - there are no barriers here. The smile doesn't leave his lips while we wait for my suitcase to appear on the carousel. Then we drive through avenues past the illuminated parliament building. Every tree here is planted by humans, and there is a man-made lake somewhere.

The hotel seems a velvet-lined palace lit by chandeliers when we enter after the reading. One of the listeners had asked if the characters in my books were invented. All of the students had assembled as Jack had promised. I gave the names of abbesses and kings, Jews, preachers, Angelus of Florence the pharmacist, and their imagined faces passed before me ... Duncan's ear resembled a shell. It moved me when I saw it first. I could have whispered words into it, and maybe they would have hatched in his thoughts and spread their wings.

The ice crackles in the glass the barman puts in front of me. Jack talks about his students. When we get up I glance at a newspaper left on a table, the picture of a woman. I know her - Megan, I think, how did Megan get here? But then I see the headline.

"That wouldn't have happened here", Jack says. It is the dead woman from the guesthouse.

"They still don't know who she is ..." Why are her features so familiar to me?

"... and who has done it."

Jack's words echo in my head.

"She was shot. Didn't you know that? The police are looking for her murderer."

I cannot detach my eyes from the newspaper photograph.

"She was about your age", Jack remarks, "and the long hair, the European face ..." I nod. She looks like me, like Megan, like a woman who lived four hundred years ago. Below the picture is a list of telephone numbers.

The hands of my watch show half past two when I wake up. The ringing lasts longer every time. My heart is beating in a hollow space. How will Philip's voice sound after all this time?

As I reach for the receiver and say my name the line goes dead. An electrical stroke, a kiss, a spell - I looked at Duncan's round, somewhat too large chin, the lower lip pushed over the upper in his sleep, his closed eyelids. Didn't others succeed in giving life to the imagined, for a moment at least, under cover of night?

When the hotel was built the town was already called Regina - in Queen Victoria's honour. At the station the trains of the Canadian Pacific Railway joining the East and West coasts stopped, and people who broke their journey here were brought in carriages through the muddy street to the hotel.

The escalator lined with imitation Gobelins glides leisurely down through the floors. Jack is waiting in the hall in front of showcases with old newspaper clippings. The Morning Leader dedicated a special edition to the opening of the hotel in May 1923. It even described the automatic potato peeler, the egg boiler precise to the second, and the pipe system of the in-built vacuum cleaner.

I notice them approaching from the corner of my eye while I look at the fading pictures, a couple with broad faces, he somewhat taller, she bigger and I'm not surprised when they address me. Having confirmed my name they show me their badges. Jack looks from one to the other. We sit down in the empty bar. The officers put their questions politely, awkwardly. Yes, I know the

guesthouse - I was there - that night.

"In the room adjoining?" the woman asks again.

I nod. Jack gasps.

"And did you -" the woman becomes solemn "- hear anything that ..."

"Or notice anything?" her colleague cuts in.

For a moment I feel laughter rising in me, it sounds so unreal.

"No." I shake my head thinking of the steps stopping in front of my door. "Nothing."

The officers look disappointed.

"There was only ..." I imitate the intonation of witnesses in movies and they stare at me "... a clapping sound, like the closing of a suitcase - only louder ..."

She nods.

"The shot" he says - the slipped crochet cover, the hand turned outside ...

"He used a nine millimetre", the man explains to Jack - I think of the matte metal butt of the pistol.

"He?" I ask.

"Or she" the officer concedes, examining me.

"And there was nothing else? No sound, no observation, unusual ..."

"No" I cut into the list of the female officer.

"And nothing when you arrived or the following morning?"

Jack's light blue Lincoln is parked outside the hotel in the sun. Reaching beneath the steering wheel he releases the handbrake and I wince. I have seen this movement innumerable times. The officers want to know how long I intend to stay in town and if I would come to the station when necessary to repeat my statement. The traffic lights turn green as soon as Jack's car approaches.

"A coincidence" I say and see the head wound of the dead.

Jack nods and smiles at the lights.

Have the police called Phillip to locate me? The organizers of the readings had my Irish address, most of them knew that I am married and some knew Phillip. I remember the call at night.

The land is flat like a sheet. We follow mile-long fields. Where the ground is not watered by man, Jack explains, it turns to desert. Suddenly, a gully opens before us carved by a river into the plain. The road leads down. The valley resembles a cast in the ground, a negative of a mountain range. On the slopes dishevelled shrubs are growing. Jack drives across a bridge and then up the hill on the other side. On some fields the stubble of the last harvest remains to hold the snow that blows over the plain in winter; the others are ploughed. In a few weeks they will be sowed. Jack turns into a lane leading to a farmhouse painted red. From the enclosures pregnant cows watch us, mothers with calves.

"Verstönd ehr mich?" the farmer asks in an old fashioned dialect and takes his hat off. The band

has left a groove in his forehead. I nod. Twenty years ago he came with other Hutterers to the North to buy land and build a village where they could live in the traditional way. I ask him about the white letters on his barn, and he shakes his head in disbelief when I talk of the castle in Ireland with the same name.

Philip wanted to know what I had written. He was used to following the word's traces into reality, and he did not believe me that I had invented everything. At night he twitched in his sleep beside me. There must have been glances, touches; he demanded that I remember.

The next riverbed is wider and the water is dammed up to form a lake. In a month the pelicans will be here. Jack stops and we leave the car. On a warm afternoon, he says, they circle high in the air without flapping their wings. In the distance a buffalo herd is approaching the bank and Jack starts to take pictures. The clouds are sliding over the land as if looking for a grip. In summer, Jack says, sometimes you can see the Northern lights from here. On the pages Philip read I had also described the shiver that ran through my body when I saw Duncan for the first time.

The two officers are sitting in the bar when we return to the hotel and I realize that I had forgotten them. They grin in embarrassment. They often have a drink here after work. Jack insists that we join them.

"A shot in the head", the man explains in confidence after the next round is placed on the table - the blood marks on the pillow, on the slipped crochet cover, the face ...

"And you still don't know who she was?"

The man shakes his head.

"But somebody must know her, she must have come from somewhere" Jack wonders.

"Sometimes it takes years", the female officer explains. Years, before somebody starts to search, Miriam, Philip. For some time he will follow my way from a distance, then, hope will fade, anger ...

"And the murderer?" Jack asks.

The woman shrugs.

"Not even the weapon they have found. Many of these cases are never solved" she says " and even if somebody gets convicted for the crime at the end, it doesn't mean the files contain the truth."

Her colleague waves at the barman. The woman and I decline, and he orders beers for Jack and himself. For some time the officers discuss calibers, bullet holes, which hand had held the weapon. The murderer entered the room, the bed was to the left of the door. He stood exactly beside her. The muzzle touched her above the ear. Maybe the coldness of the metal woke her, she twitched and therefore the shot went askew -

"It's never possible to find the truth" the female officer remarks resigned.

The hand that fired the shot must have been covered with tiny blood marks. The bar pianist plays Chopin. At the next table a young man explains to two girls the meaning of Rosebud. Somewhere a phone is ringing. After some time I could remember the shiver in my body as if I had felt it.

Summer - Newfoundland 1628

Baltimore's summer in Newfoundland did not proceed as peacefully as he had hoped. He had only just settled in the Manor with his family when two English cod ships were captured by French

pirates in a bay to the North. Baltimore manned his own ships with all available settlers and the French cut their lines when they saw the enemy coming. Their loot they left behind on land with part of their crew. Baltimore took them prisoner. The pirates attacked once more, and again Baltimore chased them in vain. After that he formed an alliance with the captain of a man-of-war cruising off Newfoundland and sailed south. They captured six French fishing boats and sent them to England with their cargo of fish and cod liver oil. In August he wrote embittered: I came to builde, and sett, and sowe, but I am false to fighting with ffrenchmen.

Duncan brought back a feather for her. A French prisoner he had cured of wound fever had given it to him. The feather was green, shimmering in all colours in the sunlight. Duncan explained that the bird came from the sky, lived on dew, and never touched the ground. The French had seen its plumage without feet. Bird of paradise he had called it. Megan put the feather into her prayer-book. She knew that Nicolas could find it there, but to hide it was to lose it again. She does not look at the feather very often, but every time she sees the prayer-book, she thinks of the green shimmering between its pages.

The settlers did not believe Baltimore when he told them they would chase the French away, but when the pirates took flight they did not hesitate to sail with him south in order to recoup their loss from the countrymen of the attackers. Meanwhile the women kept working in the huts between barrels filled with rotting cod liver. Now and then they poured off the oil. The crews of the cod ships talked of returning home when they brought the new catch into the harbour. The drying fish covered the beach of the bay and the southside of the headland. The men said no other part of the coastline was as suitable as this one with its flat stony shore. In a few weeks the summer would be over. With every barrel of salt-fish they paid for and took along the chances of the settlers surviving the coming cold improved.

Megan wondered if Duncan had brought a feather for his wife as well. They met as often as they could in the hut to the south. Once the blankets were rumpled when Megan arrived. They always took separate paths, and when they met in the settlement they avoided each other. Duncan was not as carefree as he was at the start. If somebody found out about their meetings, he said, his patients would stay away. But Megan knew that he thought of the children. Duncan's father-in-law was an official at court. Surely, he had not approved of his daughter marrying a Catholic who could only practise his profession on an island off the New World. The grandfather would know how to protect his grandsons. Duncan's wife had hired a girl for washing and cooking while she herself sat in the Manor with Lady Baltimore. "They leave again" Hanna said, "as soon as she finds a reason." Megan shook the rumpled blankets and arranged them again without telling Duncan. Maybe it was just an animal.

Time stretched like a loose rope between the meetings with Duncan. In the first days after, Megan used to be full of confidence and at times she even thought she didn't need to see him again in order to be happy. Then she started to miss him, to doubt. During sleepless nights she wondered how she could reassure herself about him. A few words would be enough. She could have taken them with her in her head like a token. She pushed notes under his window - wishes, requests - but he did not answer. When despair took over, she imagined knocking on his door, confronting him in the street, but she never did. During the last days before the reunion the fear suddenly vanished. She did not know if he would come and it was not important anymore. She would wait for a while in the hut before she would return to the settlement. All these years she had lived without him, she would continue to do so.

And then, this too passed. In Duncan's presence the doubts, the fear that had tormented her for weeks were only the aftertaste of a bad dream. She was sure -

I cross out the last words. It is calm when I leave the house. In front of the bay there is a boat, the sea is flat, and the headland stands out like the back of a giant fish.

While I walk along the beach I wonder how the salt was taken from the sea. In one of his letters Wynne wrote that their salt was some of the best he had seen. Did they draw the sea water into salt ponds and let it evaporate? Was the sun ever strong enough here? Or did they pour it into shallow wooden troughs set up on the beach with covers to protect it against the rain? Or was

this also invented like so many other things Wynne wrote in his letters: the mild climate, the fertile soil, the lush meadows.

(Translated by M. Alioth from: "Die Erfindung von Liebe und Tod", Roman, Nagel & Kimche, Zürich 2003)