

***PIG'S FEET***

**Tadej Golob**

**Translated into English by David Limon**

**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.

## Two

I kept stum because I also felt the need for more space. In that cave in Moste, where we had been until the one in Jama, I couldn't work because there was nowhere to put a table. There was no room for any kind of table apart from a tiny one that stood in the middle, between the bed and the wardrobe, and which you had to keep moving. If you wanted to get to the bed you moved it towards the wardrobe and vice versa. For instance, if I wanted some clean socks. There was no way you could move around without moving the table first, unless you were some kind of rubber-limbed Indian fakir or a Russian circus performer. They'd probably manage. Or Barbapapa, but not a normal human being. My writing table was standing on its side in the hallway, as if we hadn't quite finished moving in, or as if we were waiting to be able to stick it outside for the bin men to take away, but anyone could see that that wasn't the reason. That we had nowhere to put it. Though I didn't really care, to be honest, but now I had got some work and I needed it.

I knocked but there was no answer. I waited a moment and then tried again, but nothing, so I went in, as his name was written on the door. There was no one there, but it was obviously the secretary's office and she

had gone somewhere, I don't know where, in the next room, the boss's, there seemed to be someone in there, so I knocked.

"Yes," and then some mumbling and "come in."

I opened the door and there was a guy sitting there, underlining something on paper, which he was holding in place with his other elbow, while the hand held a banana.

"Hello," I said and that I was Jani Bevk.

"Aaaa, so you're the one!"

He stripped the banana to get to its beginning or rather end, as a banana grows from the bit we hold in our hand, from the stalk or whatever it is, when we peel it. Like a monkey, Simon would say, if he wanted his banana peeling so that the peel was still partly in place, so that he could eat it like the monkey he had seen in some cartoon. If he was in a bad mood he first asked for it to be peeled completely, then he would whine about it: "Like a monkey, I want it like a monkey!" Once when he did this I stuck the banana back in its skin and sewed it in place with a needle and thread. The kid looked and looked, stopped crying out of sheer surprise, and then: "Holes, I didn't want holes..." That was what he was like on a bad day, or more accurately a bad moment, because he could change in a flash, but if he had got out of bed on the wrong side, then that didn't matter, because you could count on something like that at some point during the day. If he was tired and so on. That was what I was thinking when this guy was stuffing himself with the banana, which wasn't a good thing to be doing, because it was confusing, but I couldn't help it.

"So you're the one," he said again, stuffing the rest of the banana in his mouth and, excuse me, hmmm, excuse me, he swallowed it and wiped his hands on a paper towel.

"Sit down, sit down. Can I offer you anything?"

I said no thanks, but he got up anyway and yelled through the door Majda, Majdaaa, so that the secretary appeared from somewhere and stood there looking awkward, as if I'd sneaked in between her legs. It was probably her who had called me the day before, when it said unknown number and I thought what shall I do, shall I answer or play dumb? Because unknown numbers are never good news. People don't usually call to give you something. But then curiosity got the better of me and I answered anyway.

"Hello, Mr Jani Bevk?"

"Yeh," I said and wondered what the fuck this would be and that I shouldn't have answered, and if they give your name and surname it's usually a bad sign, it's usually the police or someone you have not paid, the



nursery school or library or some such. But they don't say Mr, so perhaps there was nothing wrong.

She could have been his mother, this secretary, I mean of the director, and she had been there since socialist days, for sure. In these modern times most of them would have tried to get rid of her, or move her into some department where even the devil himself wouldn't notice, into some cellar to rearrange the shelves, move folders around...

"Coffee?"

Once in secondary school a schoolmate and I had been on work practice at the municipal offices and they stuck us in the cellar where the archives were. There was this guy worked there who we thought must be related to Hitler. He had the same black hair and moustache, the narrow type, and his face was as white as chalk. He was also the right sort of age to be him, or perhaps his older brother, and he moved around like a ghost. He suddenly appeared behind you, indicating with his finger what you should do. That folder there, take it out to the rubbish or somewhere. Even if he did say anything he was impossible to understand. If he was still alive he'd be a hundred, but he's not, for sure.

"Would you like a coffee?"

I waited for them to finish. The one with the banana wasn't showing any signs of concern, he wasn't bothered that he was being looked after by some old dear and not a young one in a miniskirt and jacket and clouds of perfume and a Brazilian wax and five foreign languages, so that everyone asks themselves if he's shagging her, because it's cooler and funkier to have a secretary from the old days, from communism, who has a Karl Marx bush. In that case it doesn't matter, what do you care, for instance, what your aunt's pussy hair is like. Of course, it was quite possible that he didn't think like that, that he saw her as a secretary who shuffled paperwork, answered the phone, made coffee and so on, and that I was nervous, so my thoughts were running away with me.

"Coffee?" he said again, and I thought it was odd he was repeating himself and then I got it.

"Ah, sorry. I didn't know you meant me."

"Who, then?"

"Well... Then I will, yeh, black, if possible."

"Black. Water for me, Majda."

Majda said of course and vanished.

“So it’s you,” he said and I was unclear what I was. Majda had only asked for me to call by, that it was about some work, that she didn’t know much more than that, and I had said that I could.

“The author of Superfucker.”

And then it was clear who I was. In my time I had done quite an assortment of things, including illustrations for children’s books, and I thought it would be something like that, not a comic strip. If they call you from a serious publisher that’s what you expect. I had drawn Superfucker three years and three months ago. I know that because then Simon was born and I didn’t draw any more comic strips, and even this one I thought only my friends knew about, no one else. I think they only printed a hundred copies, plus twenty, let’s say, however many it takes for the machine to stop. I said I was the one and that I was amazed, because I was.

“I was in the comic shop the other day, having a look around and I came across it,” he said. “I almost died laughing.”

Once more ha, ha, ha and I also smiled, although Superfucker wasn’t supposed to be funny. I wanted people to be disgusted, offended, but these days that’s hard to achieve.

Communist Majda brought coffee, black, sweet, and I don’t like sugar in coffee. It’s better than white coffee, which makes me sick. Sugar destroys the taste of coffee, makes it watery, I don’t know why people drink it like that. But at least it gives you something to do with your hands and I gratefully picked up the sweetened cup and waited for him to tell me what he wanted.

“Is the coffee alright?”

“Yeh, great,” I said and was angry with myself immediately, because why did I have to say great? Yes would have been quite enough, but that’s how it is when you behave as if you’re not used to something, you come out with things just like that.

And then he began talking and I tried to follow him, but you’re screwed if you’re thinking of bananas and pussies and this and that, coffee and sugar, but anyway, something about their publishing house setting up some kind of subsidiary or something like that, because they wanted to publish different things to what they were doing now, and I said aha, because he had stopped again.

“I used to play punk,” he began and asked if I’d ever listened.

“To you?”

“Not to me, to punk.”

I said that I had, although I'd been a bit late for that as I'd been born later, in the period of Majke and Motorhead, as far as rock goes, and before that Boney M, but then, when I was still little and they came out with Nightfly to Venus. If I think about it, punk was still around then, but I was still a brat and I preferred Brown girl in the ring, sha-la-la-la-la, and By the rivers of Babylon, where we sat down ... and such like. But I said, yeh, Pankrti and the Dead Kennedys, because these were the only ones whose names I knew. He said a bit more about punk and such things and about his job, while I drank the coffee and watched it disappear and wondered then what and at the same time tried to pay attention.

"Anyway, I've been here quite some time actually and I'm a bit tired of being... respectable, if I can put it like that."

"Aha ...

And that this alternative publisher, his idea, would deal with the production of odds and sods, also comic strips, including filthy ones. Those little, provocative diversions that the times now called for. Something like that. And there I was out of coffee. I only had the glass of water left, but the problem was that coffee you can take in small sips, you put your lips on the rim of the cup and sip, sip, sip, but water you can't drink like that, because coffee is in any case thicker and clings to your teeth. Of course, you can take sips of water but it still goes quicker. One, two, three and there it goes.

"And I'd like... Your comic strip, something like Superfucker... a book, a comic strip, some bloke with a guitar..., a gig... and as a supplement to some newspaper and so on. And if anything comes of it, fine, if not, then okay."

A short pause. And the water is also gone. What did he want? A comic strip?

He opened the drawer and pulled out a picture book and turned it towards me and I saw it was that Slovene classic Martin Krpan. Then he was silent and I was silent because I thought he'd continue, but he didn't and I had to say:

"Sorry, I'm not clear..."

"I was thinking that you could illustrate Martin Krpan."

"I don't follow," I said. "What am I supposed... I mean, how can I illustrate it when it is already illustrated?"

"Take a look at it, read it and illustrate it how you think it should be. In colour."

I took the book, flicked through it, and there is Krpan lifting his horse out of a ditch, and another of him arriving in Vienna, which is empty

and with black flags everywhere, and then breaking weapons, some lances and swords, and then cutting down a tree, and some broad, the empress if I'm not mistaken, holding her head... I knew that anyway, everyone knows that.

"There's no need to use the same themes, although it might be good because they're established, well known. Or perhaps not. Imagine that instead of Krpan, there is... I don't know, one of your heroes who does things his own way. But I don't want to suggest anything. It's up to you."

I said aha, although I didn't know what I would draw. I mean, it was clear to me what my superhero would do in this book, but I still didn't know if that's what he meant, what he had in mind. My Superfucker would lift the mare from the ditch, but not with his hands, if you get my drift, and I didn't really know who would publish that, because I had done Superfucker for a joke, for friends...

"But," I said, but when I'd said it I didn't know how to continue and I stopped so that he would continue, but he didn't and so I had to. "But how hard core could it be?"

"I don't know..."

He doesn't know?

"Shall I do it like I did... in that comic strip?" Fuck me, I was embarrassed to say Superfucker and I was the one who wrote it. "As far as I remember, I mean... like that?"

"If you have to hold yourself back, you mean?"

"Yeh," I said, "I mean, who is this for?"

"No, you don't have to... if you think that is the right thing to do."

I thought a bit about what he had said, because I still wasn't sure what he wanted.

"I don't know. You're the commissioner," I said.

"I don't know either. We'll see. It depends on you and them out there," and he pointed out the window. I followed the line of his finger and it wasn't particularly clear to me. There was no one special in sight. A street like any other, with a newspaper kiosk in front of which two guys were standing waiting for, I don't know, cigarettes or the newspaper...

"Let's say you show Krpan having intercourse with, let's say, the empress or someone like that," and he emphasised in-ter-course so that it was clear he was joking, "and we put that in the bookshops, what do you think will happen?"

"I don't know," I said.

“Levstik’s..., Slovenia’s... Martina Krpan, who is, for instance, screwing,” and he emphasised the verb, “let’s say, a princess or, god forbid, her highness the empress herself?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“See, neither do I.”

“Aha...”

“Yeh.”

Then we fell silent for a fraction of a second.

“But that’s not your problem. I’m the lightning conductor... If anyone, I’m the one who’ll pay the price... What can happen to you? Have you been working a lot recently?”

“Not really,” I said. “I’ve got a kid, and so on...”

It was clear that the bastard knew I’d had nothing.