

Jela Krečič

THE BOOK OF OTHERS

1. Prologue: On How to Get Rid of a Debt at a Funeral

As he rode his bike towards the Žale Cemetery he could sense that the Earth had now obviously moved towards the Sun and any snow that happened to dare fall in mid April would not last. But the changing seasons were not something Klemen would really concern himself with.

He also didn't want to think about the funeral, though at this point it was inevitable. Unlike most people, collective forms of mourning did not get to Klemen at all and he wanted as little as possible to do with them – even when his father had died, he was not particularly upset. Funerals were a waste of time, he thought, serving only to anoint the human fear of transience and a desperate attempt to find meaning where there clearly was none. He saw nothing interesting in death, nothing that would challenge his spirit. To him the real question was how to optimise the circuit on the rescue robot so any possible nuclear accident – the eventuality of which was why they made them in the first place – would not destroy it or at least not before it managed to send important information on contamination to the base.

Clearly he was not attending the funeral because of the deceased woman whose relatives wished to say goodbye to in a dignified manner. After all Lovro's grandma was already a very old lady and he had had nothing to do with her. Well, almost nothing, if you exclude the summer of 1986. It was the first time he and his mates from the estate became aware of what the World Cup meant, the first time he actually watched all the matches and then tried to repeat Maradona's moves in their own street tournament, and, with Lovro's grandmother Kristina, also the first time he sensed how peculiar the world of adults could be.

Grandma Kristina would, just as they watched some broadcast of a match from the championships, like to start explaining about love. "You must treat a girl like a diamond, get that, boys? A woman is God, if there ever was one!" But it did not take much, perhaps just a phone call from her daughter, for her mood to change entirely, "Women are the lowest form of life that has still not reached the realisation that the mouth is sometimes also just as good for shutting up!" A gin and tonic later, however, she would also question this conclusion and decide, "Women so like to say that they get on better with men than with women, but my dear boys... I've come to the conclusion that there are so many good, beautiful, intelligent women and so few good men." If she added a little more gin to her tonic, she expanded upon her indignation with the world of men, "You are nothing, nothing

at all, and you should be glad if some woman *ever* takes an interest in you. And if one happens to, you should know that you don't deserve it!"

During that same World Cup Grandma Kristina also decided that twelve-year old boys were old enough to try their first beer whilst watching the match. "It's part of education to learn what kind of alcohol suits what kind of occasion. In our culture football is traditionally watched with a glass of beer. As I happen to be a person of more noble drinks, I never watch sports, at most opera or a play." And because in 1986 football, beer and even more noble drinks were usually accompanied by a cigarette, the boys also tried to smoke for the first time at Grandma Kristina's place. Despite her efforts to provide them with a good education, Grandma Kristina achieved the opposite effect she had hoped for. From that visit onwards the boys avoided beer, cigarettes, and for a long time also women – fortunately their love of football remained unaffected. Klemen nevertheless still smiled at the thought of Grandma Kristina running her thin, jewellery-clad fingers tipped with bright red nails through her auburn locks, veiled in the smoke of endless cigarettes. The end of an era, it occurred to him, but he soon realised that today's funeral was not the end of anything else but Grandma Kristina herself, once and forever.

But these early memories of Grandma Kristina were not the reason that Klemen was cycling towards Žale on this April morning. The reason was her grandson Lovro, his friend, schoolmate from primary and secondary school whom he had known all his life. Truth be told, he knew him less and less in recent years and were it not for Facebook, Klemen would not have had a clue that Lovro was a successful lawyer and now also a successfully married lawyer, and most recently a lawyer whose grandmother had just died. But to be honest, he was not going to the funeral either for Grandma Kristina or for Lovro.

He was going there simply out of sheer necessity. He had an old obligation, a debt, lying heavily on his mind. While they were both still at secondary school, Lovro had lent him a book that Klemen never returned. Lovro was enough of a bona fide friend to forget about it but Klemen was an altogether different kettle of fish.

It was not that he was particularly orderly or pedantic, in most things in life he was in fact a little negligent and also inept at communicating with people, so misunderstandings in life arose quite unnecessarily and in the most ordinary of interactions. He often forgot to eat if he was working on some plan or if he got carried away by the World of Warcraft computer game.

Then there were other, seemingly unimportant things, which at certain moments attracted all of Klemen's attention. When, for example, the keyboard on his computer became covered in dust, he would completely disassemble it and clean each and every part of it so thoroughly that you could carry out open-heart surgery on it. Various objects and activities had his excessive care that many

would characterise as obsessional neurosis. But he was incapable of tackling matters that bugged him in any other way. It seemed becoming that he was also obsessional about his obsessions, so he devoted the necessary time and all his attention to each one of them.

It was only a matter of time before, in the drawer under the bed that he had otherwise forgotten about for many years, he would find Lovro's book. From the moment he recognized the book as something not belonging to him, he could not stop thinking about it. It was not important that its title rang no bells, even less so the author, and it was also not relevant at this moment that all those years ago he had only read a few pages – perhaps not even that. He now simply had to return the book.

Grandma Kristina's death notice could not have come at a more appropriate time and came as a great relief to at least one person. All these years later, decades even, Klemen did not hesitate, he knew instantly what he had to do.

Expectations, however, of a new life without the burden of an annoying obligation never work out as one imagines. A funeral, after all, is a funeral, a social ritual with precisely defined rules that demands a certain amount of resourcefulness, perhaps even tact, in how one approaches the mourners and how, in this sombre context, one produces a book that – at least for the mourners – has nothing at all to do with everything. Clearly Grandma Kristina would know how to handle such a situation far better than Klemen, but this should not be a reason for wavering.

When he reached the Chapel of St Francis where Grandma Kristina was lying in repose, he clumsily extended his hand in condolence to the bereft family. He did not recognize most of them; he shook hands with a chubby lady in black who sobbed quite loudly, then a gentleman who looked like he was there quite by mistake, and it was most difficult to shake the hand of another guy who kept looking at his phone. Only then did he reach Lovro and his family. Lovro barely recognized him but when he did, he embraced him warmly and briefly introduced him to his wife Sonja. Then he gave him another hug and said emotionally, "You came!"

"I have, and this time I didn't forget!"

"Forget what?"

Klemen triumphantly smiled and pulled his curse from his bag, "The book!"

Lovro was genuinely confused, so Klemen explained, "Don't you remember? Well, I totally forgot about it too. You lent it to me just before graduation and I never returned it to you. Then I found it at the bottom of the drawer the other day and here I am."

All Lovro was capable of uttering was, "Klemen, this is a funeral."

"I know," Klemen said proudly. "And that didn't stop me from settling this!"

Lovro continued to stare at him in shock and confusion, saying, "Can this wait until the end of the funeral?"

Klemen did not like the suggestion but realised in time that saying goodbye to his grandmother was probably an emotional ordeal for Lovro, so he smiled magnanimously, "Alright, but only until then."

After this he removed himself into the background. The whole thing didn't take long, Grandma Kristina was not religious. The ceremony was brief and decent, some people said a few nice words about her, others tried in a dignified manner to intercept their tears, the throwing of flowers into the open grave also went quickly and in a similarly solemn manner. It was not that Klemen followed what was happening with any eagerness, he preferred to stare at the line of trees nearby and ponder on how long the trees in question took to grow to the size needed to create such a glamorous shade and how many people at the cemetery tend to them so they grow so successfully, and how many gazes of strangers paused upon them as they attend the funerary activities.

In the crowd of people, activities and his own absurd thoughts Klemen somehow lost track of Lovro, all he heard was that the funeral guests were invited to a repast at a nearby inn. Of course he did not feel like doing this additional detour but he had no intention of giving up now that he was so close to concluding his task. A huge crowd had gathered at the inn and most of them stood in between him and Lovro. Relatives and friends of relatives entirely surrounded his childhood friend. To begin with he had no intention of staying on for the lunch, but it seemed that he would have to eat before he could properly rid himself of the weight of his obligation.

He sat at the far end of the table where there were a few empty chairs. He did not recognize anyone but others recognized him. A blond-haired man smiled at him, "Klemen, where've you been, pal? Haven't seen you in a hundred years."

Klemen focused his gaze trying to remember where he could possibly have known this man from but the attempt was unsuccessful for he rarely remembered a face.

"I've never seen you before," he eventually smiled vaguely in embarrassment.

"How typical of you!" he heard someone say to his right and turned round, recognizing in the tiny figure with dishevelled straw-like hair a school friend from secondary school.

"Heda!" he called out, happier with the fact that he remembered her name rather than actually seeing her, though he had nothing against the girl. They shook hands enthusiastically and Heda gave him a mischievous look, "Well, at least you haven't forgotten the vocalist from your school band."

"Well, it wasn't my band, I just played the drums!"

"You played the drums unforgettably, Klemen," she smiled. "And if you look carefully you will recognize Oton here as the bass guitarist."

Klemen once again focused his gaze, looked at the blond guy and shook his head, "Well, perhaps it really has been a hundred years."

He felt a little embarrassed for not having recognised the man with whom they had shared a passion not so much for rock music (that was more a matter for Lovro, the lead guitarist, and Heda, the vocalist) but for then-not-yet-so-popular computers and particularly computer programming and gaming. How Oton managed to change that for teaching acting or drama or whatever he does at the Faculty, Klemen could not quite understand but even during their school years he soon recognised the signs of this theatrical deviation when he was so keen to contribute lyrics to their band's songs.

"Yes, a hundred years," said Oton. "Nice of you to come. You know, Lovro noticed your absence at his wedding."

"Oh, I wouldn't be here today either if it wasn't to settle an outstanding matter," the forgotten friend said frankly. Heda patted Klemen on the shoulder with understanding, though of course she did not know what he was talking about, "What matter?"

"A very old debt," Klemen was sparing with words.

When the food arrived at the table the company fell silent. The discussions at the far end of the table were much livelier, though quite incomprehensible.

"Lovro's brother is trying to establish when he will be able to get his hands on Grandma's inheritance," Heda quietly interpreted what was going on at the other end of the table.

"What inheritance?" Klemen was interested.

"A quite considerable one, apparently," Oton replied. "Grandma Kristina invested in some kinds of funds over recent years."

"A flat, a car, considerable savings, jewellery, a lot of jewellery," Heda promptly added.

"Oh, Lovro will probably be quite happy with the jewellery," Klemen said seriously and the other two just smirked.

"Indeed. Sofia, Lovro's mother, does not hide her fondness for the younger son," Oton commented.

"Well, it's good they waited with all this until the end of the funeral," Klemen established without irony.

Once again they ate in silence but at the central table the discussion was becoming more and more lively. At one point Lovro, clearly fed up with every one counting the dead woman's pennies, stood up and joined his three friends. Without any further greeting, he began,

"God, how difficult my family is. Sonja will never forgive me for just withdrawing while my mother is telling her how special Grandma's jewellery is. Oh, poor Grandma, if she was here she would be so offended that anyone needs convincing about the exquisiteness of her jewellery..." Lovro took a sip of wine and continued, "But I think she'd have liked her funeral."

"No," said Klemen. "I think she would have wished for something more glamorous. A jazz

band that would play a few songs in her memory perhaps. And she would resent you for not choosing a photo in which she looked younger...”

“You know what, Klemen,” Lovro objected. “She said herself the ceremony should be simple.”

“Everyone says that,” Oton sided with Klemen.

“Not everyone,” Heda protested. “I couldn’t care less what my funeral will be like. It’s all for those left behind. After you die you at least no longer need to worry about how they spoilt your funeral.”

Lovro did not like the sentence. “Well Heda, no need to exaggerate. I wouldn’t mind at all if they were to show a brief documentary about my life at *my* funeral, where those closest to me would say a few words about my qualities, my known and hidden talents. Or I can imagine a classy artistic programme with a serious performer of the Andrea Bocelli type. They could sing an operatic rendition of the songs we wrote and performed together – I still have our demo recordings and have written up some of the songs into proper scores. As well as this, Sonja could prepare a selection of photos: me in my office, me running the Ljubljana Marathon, me fishing, me cleaning the fish, me grilling the fish...”

“Don’t forget one of you composing music,” Oton teased him.

“Funerals are a genre, a bit like horror films or comedies,” Lovro protested. “And the more you stick to the genre, the more things are planned and realised, the greater the effect, not to mention how much fun it is for the director, I mean organiser, of the funeral. Just look at how my mother glows today for having buried one of her parents successfully.”

“You’ve almost convinced me. Perhaps there really is nothing worse than a badly organised funeral,” said Heda with a roguish grin that most of the men missed.

“Well, with a funeral, the director’s job is easy,” Oton added with a similarly impish smile appearing in the corners of his mouth. “All the audience’s emotions are already present, no need to create them, all you need to do is correctly guide them through to the finale, to the catharsis so that those present can finally succeed in forgetting the relative they had wept over only a few moments earlier.”

“Precisely!” Klemen affirmed. He did not pick up on the ironic gist in the conversation of his old friends and did not care much for relatives, dramaturgy, funerals or catharsis.

“Enough of these morbid themes,” said a slightly bewildered Lovro who was no better at comprehending who was joking and who not, and rapturously patted Klemen on the back. “Come on, you tell us, how are you? I can’t tell you how happy I am that you came. When you didn’t come to my stag night and not even my wedding, I thought you were lost forever.”

“I am lost forever,” Klemen replied. “I mean certainly for society. I lead a very peaceful existence, and I don’t think I’m in want of anything at all.”

“Oh, come on, please, everyone has something they want!” Oton said with dismay.

“Well, to be quite honest, there is something!” Klemen admitted.

“Good that you’re being honest, mate,” Lovro patted him gently. “Everyone needs a little love in life, a little enjoyment with good company, a break from one’s self.”

“Oh, no, that’s not what I was thinking about at all. I don’t need anything, in fact there is one thing I need to get rid of.”

Once more he pulled the book from his bag. The others gave him a suspicious look, Lovro held his head in disbelief.

“What book is that?” Heda was interested. She took it from him, carefully stroked its cover and began browsing through it. “Hmm, interesting, interesting. Can I borrow it? I think it would be an excellent distraction among all the obligations that await me.”

“No chance!” Klemen shouted.

Heda stared at him in astonishment. “Sorry, I would return it to you,” she took offence.

“That’s what it’s all about. The book isn’t mine. I’ve been returning it to Lovro for over ten years now, twenty perhaps, and I can no longer live with this!” Klemen became upset.

“Oh, I see,” Heda nodded and turned to Lovro. “Lovro, can you lend me this book please?”

“Of course, Heda.”

“I promise I’ll return it earlier than in twenty years’ time,” she smiled.

“Hang on, hang on,” an unsettled Klemen interrupted. “There’s one thing we need to clarify here first. Lovro, I’ve returned the book to you. Declare, swear before these witnesses present that I owe you nothing else and that it is now up to you who you lend the book to and how and when you get it back.” As he was saying this he took the book from Heda and ceremoniously placed it in front of Lovro.

Lovro smiled at his friend’s eccentric ardour and ceremoniously passed the book on to Heda again. “Of course, my dear friend, I solemnly swear we’re quits – and will never need to see each other again!”

“That’s what I wanted to hear,” Klemen sighed with relief.

They all laughed, Heda got the book, and Klemen once again found peace in his life.

2. On a Young Man Who Knew Too Much and Came To His Senses Almost Too Late

Heda could not be bothered to go to the cafe in the museum gardens. After all, the message from Gorazd, her friend, or rather old acquaintance was somewhat enigmatic. Something about wanting to share something with friends. She pondered whether he had been given the assistant professor post or whether he had finally fallen in love or out of love with one of his numerous boyfriends – or should she call them lovers? How long did two people need to spend together to call them lovers, how many SMSs, how many phone calls must they exchange to become a couple, when can they stop exchanging messages on Facebook – as proof that their relationship has become more meaningful? Heda didn't have a clue, after all she had ended her own relationship with her husband before Facebook and YouTube. She just prayed that Gorazd would not bring some new friend of his to this meeting. She considered herself a fairly open-minded woman but certain examples Gorazd had brought into their company under the title of eccentric and exotic boyfriends had undermined, not so much her love towards the gay population, as her love towards human kind in general.

Heda often dreaded social occasions – who might come, who might cause her to be embarrassed or, even worse, who might, with some naïve question or observation, inadvertently cause embarrassment to good friends and acquaintances. Her only comfort was that Oton, her old friend, colleague, professional compass, reader and reviewer of her texts, would also be there... Good old Oton, who mostly left his mark in their company by knowing how to stay silent. She could always rely on Oton featuring even worse than herself on the social life front. Many things connected her to him, after all they had spent a lot of time on this Earth together, their youth at school, the school band, studying at the university.

But in recent years they also shared a study at the Faculty and all the fleeting meetings that this arrangement brought. Ever since Oton had met Sandra a few years ago, however, their friendship had become one of superficial exchanges and ever-rarer moments of confidentiality. Oton only ever appeared at social gatherings in Sandra's company, which meant the essence of their friendship as well as his friendship with everyone else had begun to weather away. Heda understood Oton and his devotion to a woman like Sandra, just as she knew why she herself could never accept women like her. Sandra was a beauty of almost exotic features – dark skin, long slender limbs and black curly hair. She would nonchalantly tie it up, almost as if by accident, into a ponytail or a bun, but her apparently careless approach to her hairdo was carefully planned just as her outfit, simple, as if chosen by chance, was always carefully thought through down to the last shoelace on her sneakers. She was one of those women who knew how

to carry their beauty and at the same time never miss a chance to show how intelligent they are. She lectured at the History of Art Department. Her speciality was the study of how great art institutions, the art system and market operate, and she viewed this world as some kind of special and rather unfathomable tribe with its own laws, value system, special forms of socializing and forming groups of influence. Heda was jealous of her theoretical self-confidence but that was not the reason why this woman would never be close to her. If she could give a reason for why Sandra always filled her with a slight unease, it was her calculating reserve. No, this was not malice, not even arrogance or a stance of superiority, it was simply her disinterest in a world that she did not see as her own. Heda most certainly did not fit into her world. On the other hand Sandra would be prepared to kill for her work, her career, her publications and her Oton. At least Heda thought that she was very passionate, loyal and unrelenting with these things – anything beyond them was not her concern. When Sandra fell for Oton she took upon herself all care for him, his diet (without carbohydrates), his career moves (as little as possible socialising with friends and family). She even improved his style of dressing, but simply did not care for other people close to him. She allowed herself to see Oton's entire social network as something non-binding and particularly as something without which she and Oton could get by much better. She won herself the luxury of treating anything that was not her own choice of love and from which she had no direct benefit as necessary evil. Nobody else knew that Heda did not like her and that she never could like her – Sandra through her indifference, Oton because he did not want to know, and others close to them because they considered Heda as a slightly eccentric weirdo anyway. Heda was not exactly a master of relationships but what she did know was that there are dimensions of relationships between women, were anyone ever to report on them, that a man, unless particularly sensitive, would never pick up on, even less understand, or – if she was being honest – would at least pretend ignorance.

Three people that accompanied her in her thoughts on the way from the Academy to the coffee shop were there already participating in a lively debate. But as she feared, next to Gorazd was a man of unknown origin, and this made Heda's heart beat a little faster and her step slow down.

“You're late again!” Gorazd smiled at her.

“Well, I'm here now. What's so urgent, what's the big news?” said Heda as she gave Oton a friendly pat on the shoulder and afforded Sandra a superficial smile. She expected that Gorazd would now introduce the stranger as his latest amorous acquisition that she would, for the hundredth time, have to fake enthusiasm over, but Gorazd surprised her.

“Nothing, it's summer!”

“Oh, I see,” she replied although she was still confused.

“Summer, the time when people leave their houses and start living outside,” Gorazd began to explain as Heda awkwardly sat on the chair and tried to find a place to put her handbag that seemed to chose its moment to keep sliding here and there, threatening to tip over out of sheer defiance.

“Aha, aha,” she kept shifting in her chair. “It sounds somewhat familiar.”

“This usually happens once a year, it lasts for a couple of months, but last year the weather was so fickle and cold. Perhaps you’ve forgotten how bad my nails were through lack of vitamin D all year. This will soon change, I’ll soon be back to perfect.” he smiled. Heda gave Oton a surprised look but he was already looking towards Sandra for her reaction so she had to share her astonishment over Gorazd’s celebration of the current time of year with the stranger. He returned her ambiguous gaze and raised his eyebrows, “Don’t look at me, I’ve got nothing to do with his nails!” he eventually explained.

“You could have,” Gorazd smiled at him provocatively.

“I’m Heda,” she offered the stranger her hand.

“Oh, how negligent of me, I thought you two knew each other, Heda, this is Ariel, Ariel Kosmač, you know, the writer guy you so like to criticize.” With Gorazd one could always rely on his indiscretion. He liked nothing more than watching people being embarrassed.

“Thanks Gorazd, this kind of indiscretion builds long and beautiful friendships.”

“Why, what did I say?”

In the meantime Ariel was already squeezing Heda’s hand as he smiled at her slightly. “No worries, I also often polemicise with myself.”

Heda was indeed shaking his hand but she instantly decided that she would not allow herself to be deceived by his charming manners. Ariel Kosmač was a film theorist, writer, journalist that she loved to hate too much – as you might say. He was a brilliant writer, wonderful with words, wrote film reviews for numerous publications, some of them unfortunately also quite well read, had access to a few foreign magazines with a guaranteed international readership and in Heda’s opinion these did more harm than good to film in general. She thought they all had too much film and too little film theory. As if Ariel was to know what thoughts were whizzing round her head, she shot at him, “Sorry, but the experimentation with direction itself does not do anything for me, the author flexing their muscles is quite unnecessary. Besides, I don’t know whether you have noticed that in the name of these great directional experiments we are sold a bunch of debatable premises. And you always affirm the most conservative, moralizing, pathetic films just because some artful director has handled

them.”

“You’ll have to be a little more specific, I’m afraid I’m not following you there,” Ariel said indifferently.

“Well, let’s take *Ida*, for example.”

“An excellent film!”

“Rubbish!” she cried out. “It’s a film about how the best Jews are those who convert to Catholicism, the best women are nuns and the best communists are dead communists.”

“No, it’s a film about facing up to the past, both of family and society, and about searching for your own mission that, once you find one, can no longer be jeopardized. Don’t get me wrong, I’m a true Marxist and have no need to defend the Church or Christianity, but the ethical dimension in this film is convincing to me and that is why I don’t even see it as a film about any specific religion...”

“Yes, but why was it Christianity and why the Catholic Church that were chosen for this ethical message!” Heda became agitated.

Gorazd coughed loudly and affectedly, “Now that’s enough! We’re here to celebrate summer!”

“But your boyfriend here...” Heda began. Ariel choked on his beer and Gorazd burst into laughter, “Darling, dearest, silly Heda! To my great disappointment Ariel does not even have the g of gay in him, he is simply my childhood friend, so just calm down.”

“That’s not the point, it’s what he writes that...”

Now it was Sandra who interrupted her, “Heda, forget about it, this is not an occasion for arguments, today is a time for triviality.” Heda did not overlook that she gave Ariel a seductive smile as she said this – so typically Sandra, always trying to draw the attention of any men in their company that she did not consider stupid and that also enjoyed some kind of social status – but to Heda’s delight Ariel remained unsusceptible to Sandra’s charms. So Heda eased her tone and added, “I think that every occasion is suitable for argument, but whatever, today I will try hard to sing praises to this summer of yours.”

So they raised their glasses to the season that for some would be a mixture of work and holidays, for others a time for writing articles or a chance to meet new young gay men, for others a time of film festivals that they would follow through the media or in person, for others an adventure that they could not have anticipated even in their worst nightmares.

Heda made her way home with mixed feelings. She was looking forward to reading a little more James Harvey in bed. He knew how to express insightful thoughts about great films in such simple language. Yet she felt an unease she was unused to. There was something about

tonight that was eating away at her, something bothering her. No, it was not Otto's silence, his contentment with stroking Sandra's hand whenever she, for example, used a juicy metaphor for the Prime Minister of Slovenia. No, it was also not Sandra, even though she seemed to have become the greatest expert on the war in Syria and on European xenophobia towards refugees. Heda was not in the mood for polemics, not about liberty, or equality, or fraternity – all these are hard not to agree with and that is precisely why they are so meaningless. Liberty, equality and fraternity exist so that people like Sandra can feel superior for being so enlightened sitting in bars on such pleasant summer nights. No it was not Sandra who bothered her even though she was probably particularly self-righteous tonight. This time Heda did not even resent the fact she sensed this was a woman who glows, who through her appearance and diction allows people to know she feels good the way she is and there is thus nothing that she has to face in this world that can really throw her off her tracks; she appeared to be a woman happy with all her choices in life – a feeling Heda herself had not experienced in a very long time.

excerpt from the novel translated by Gregor Timothy Čeh