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**The Will**

JAKUB'S MOTHER WAS AN UTTER PESSIMIST. She claimed that the best life strategy was to settle for something small, what she described as 'realistic', rather than looking for pie in the sky. She learnt it first hand, by having an affair with her married boss, believing that he would leave his family and marry her, given that she was pregnant by him. But this hope was unfulfilled; after a couple of months of sharing her small apartment with her, he returned to his wife. According to his mother, this was because the wife of Jakub's father threatened to make his affair a public scandal and take all his money. He couldn't risk it, so he left Jakub's mother and practically forgot about her and their child. Yet, for a long time Jakub didn't begrudge his father for abandoning him, first because he was too young to question his fatherless upbringing and later because his mother found a surrogate father for him – his stepfather. He was a good man and tried his best, but Jakub's relation with him was superficial. On reflection, he personified his mother's diminished ambition – having a job with little responsibility and a personality corresponding to his low status. Although when Jakub's mother met her future husband, both she and Jakub's future stepfather were in their early thirties, they decided not to have any children together. Jakub's mother told him that this was to ensure that he had no competition from potential siblings and got the full attention of both parents. Jakub took this explanation in a good faith, but later he came to conclude that another factor, perhaps more important, was his mother's unwillingness to take risks, prompted by her fear of failing. She must have found a perfect match in her new partner, which was reflected in his surname. Practically all Czech surnames look like diminutive versions of their ancestors, but his stepfather's surname was literally 'A small name', which provided an unpleasant contrast to the surname of his real father, which was German and serious. It was also the name Jakub had to bear. Despite their cowardice, cautiousness or realism, tragedies did not spare Jakub's family. First, Jakub's stepfather lost his job and although subsequently he found a new one, this blow took a toll on his health and he died when he was in his forties and Jakub was fourteen. Then, Jakub's mother got depressed and never properly recovered from her condition.

When Jakub became an adult, he thought that the story of his mother's marriage could be seen as a metaphor for the history of his country, which always avoided wars, putting self-preservation above dignity, but usually got defeated anyway. Once he shared this observation with his mother, but she disagreed, claiming that this strategy proved advantageous to Czechs. Thanks to that Prague preserved its beautiful Baroque buildings during the Second World War, while Warsaw was reduced to rubble. Also, many lives were saved this way, including Czech Jews. And, of course, she said, there were many Czech heroes and martyrs in the history of their country, like the pilot Josef František, the highest-scoring non-British Allied ace in the Battle of Britain. Czechs just shunned the ostentatiousness of other Slavs or extremism of their western neighbours. For them, martyrdom was always the last resort and a means to an end, never the end in itself. Jakub's mother even gave him a book, which was meant to prove her point, but he found it boring and left it on the shelf after reading less than one third of it.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 14/4

Only when his stepfather died, Jakub started to enquire who his biological father was. His mother told him about this man reluctantly, claiming that it caused her discomfort to return to the mistakes of her youth. He understood this, yet it didn't quench his curiosity about who he was and why he didn't try to find out about his only son. Jakub's mother was evasive on this topic – she suggested that he was interested in Jakub, but there was, on one hand, his vicious wife and daughters, who stood in the way of their reunion and, on the other, Jakub's mother, who wanted Jakub to have a 'proper' father, because his biological father did not fit her definition of fatherhood. When she talked about him, she wrapped the word 'father' in quotation marks so tightly as if she wanted to strangle him.

Jakub met this man for the first time when he was already an adult. It was at the airport café, because his father was about to travel somewhere on business. His subsequent meetings with him were always in these transitional places: 'non-places', as some fashionable author described them, perfect places for 'non-meetings'. At the time Jakub believed that this was because his father, who by this point was a cabinet minister, was so incredibly busy that they couldn't meet, let's say, in one of the cafés in the centre of the city, which couldn't be reached by a car, such as the famous 'Ice-cream Castle', where most of his friends celebrated their birthdays when they were kids. However, later he realised that this was because he didn't want to be seen by anybody who might recognise him with his illegitimate child.

The man seemed friendly, but somewhat too matter of fact and low-key, as for the occasion. He asked Jakub what he was studying and was dismissive when Jakub replied linguistics, telling his son that there would be no money nor satisfaction from such studies.

'Linguistics, as all humanities, is a passive subject. You learn what other people wrote or discovered, as opposed to discovering how to become a boss and make people work for you. You should aim for success, Jakub, not for writing books nobody reads,' he said. And then he quoted a fragment from Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*: 'What is success? It is an inner, and indescribable force, resourcefulness, power of vision, a consciousness that I am, by my mere existence, exerting pressure on the movement of life about me. It is my belief in the adaptability of life to my own ends.'

Jakub was thinking that it was a scoundrel's definition of success – of somebody, who would trample on other people's bodies to achieve what he wanted. No doubt Jakub's father fitted this description. And yet, this did not put Jakub off him, perhaps because they shared 50 per cent of their genes, which was confirmed by their close physical resemblance, or because some things about him appealed to him, including his Nietzschean elevation of 'will power', which other members of Jakub's family were lacking. This was reflected in his youthful demeanour, contrasting with his by then advanced age and his seemingly natural elegance. Looking at him, Jakub could understand why his mother fell for this man, despite him being twice her age.

In response to his father's argument that his studies were of little value, Jakub tried to convince him that he also wanted to discover things, in particular, find out how different languages reflect different cultures; transcend clichés like 'Eskimos have many more words to describe snow

## Wilderness House Literary Review 14/4

than English speaking people' and apply this knowledge to Czech language and culture. However, Jakub's father wasn't particularly interested, as proved by his blank, absent eyes and looking at his watch, then telling him that his time had ran out – he had a plane to catch.

'Shall we meet again, when you return?' asked Jakub.

'Sure,' replied his father, adding 'when time permits,' when he was already on the escalator, taking him to the departure area.

He was in such a hurry, that he forgot to pay for his coffee and cheese-cake, so Jakub had to do it, which frustrated him, as the price was more than double of what he would normally pay in a café.

Then they met maybe five times in intervals ranging from three to six months. Their frequency was decided by Jakub's father, who always postponed their meeting at least once, due to his conflicting schedule. The length of the meeting was also decided by father, as these encounters were squeezed between other meetings or took place before his journeys. Likewise, he was in control of their agenda, changing the subject from particular to general, whenever there was a danger of them venturing into the territory which would make father, feel uncomfortable. Obviously, the relationship with Jakub's mother was one such topic. However, during what turned out to be their last meeting, Jakub mustered the courage to ask how he could leave her with such a small child, given that he had promised to look after them.

'I didn't promise her anything,' he replied. 'She misconstrued my words.'

'Well, getting a young woman pregnant can be regarded as a promise of sorts,, especially when the man is twenty-six years older than her,' said Jakub.

'It was an accident,' replied Jakub's father.

'This wasn't what she told me. She said she wanted to leave you, and you tried to stop her by promising her a divorce and settling down with her. Apparently you two even lived together for a short period, before you returned to your wife who blackmailed you.'

'Things were more complicated than that.'

'So please explain. I'm prepared to listen to your side of the story and this way I'll find out about my past, won't you agree?'

'Fine, I will try my best next time, but now I have to leave. It was nice to talk to you again', said the old man and left, again without paying for his coffee.

He emphasised the word 'again,' which subtly suggested that they had already met too many times. Despite this, Jakub wanted to meet him again, to get answers to all the questions which gnawed at him, as well as to tell him that that as a father he was a failure – he was merely a 'father', not even a parody of the real thing.

Jakub phoned him several times, but his phone was always switched off. Eventually he came to the conclusion that father had changed his number to avoid being pestered by Jakub. So he stopped pestering him,

## Wilderness House Literary Review 14/4

but not thinking about him. In fact, he thought about father more than at any time in the past. Every disappointment he experienced, every problem he couldn't overcome, he attributed to being the son of this man, either through his neglect or inheriting from him some nasty personality trait. He knew that he wasn't right – he needed to stop looking to the past and focus on the future, but it was impossible without some kind of closure. Yet, father refused him this privilege which Jakub sometimes imagined as spitting into his face or hitting him.

Eventually, however, the father reached out to his son, although indirectly and literally from a 'non-place' - from his grave, via a letter from his lawyer. The lawyer informed him that Jakub was not included in his father's will, on the grounds that he had only two legitimate children – his daughters. According to the will, they would inherit all his estate, which included his large house on the outskirts of Prague and his savings. However, according to Czech law, as the lawyer dutifully informed, Jakub had the right to contest his biological father's decision and seek his share, normally offered in such circumstances, which would be one third of what other members of his family were granted in the will. However, the lawyer advised Jakub against such course of action, claiming that it would be deeply immoral, given that their contact had been sporadic and not worth the effort, as the legal costs of fighting for such a small fraction of inheritance would likely exceed Jakub's legal costs.

In his typical way Jakub first thought that indeed the cause was not worth the fight, but then he changed his mind. The crucial factor was seeing a letter written by his half sister, in which she wrote that his birth was such a blow to her mother that she became seriously ill and perhaps even died because of it, albeit only twenty years after Jakub was born. She also added that the part of the inheritance which the law prescribed to Jakub, originally belonged to their mother, so it would be unethical of him to demand it. Finally, she pointed out that Jakub did not take care of his father when he became terminally ill. The arguments were so preposterous that Jakub decided to fight, especially as his old friend who recently got legal qualifications, agreed to represent him for half the normal fees. Jakub's mother advised Jakub not to use such an inexperienced lawyer, but he didn't mind. The point was really not about getting the inheritance, but to look into the eyes of his vicious half sisters, who would make Cinderella's siblings come across as generous.

When his anger subsided a bit, he got thinking that in English the common name given to the document which his parent produced before his death was a 'will', while in Slavic languages 'testament' prevailed, perhaps reflecting the pragmatic approach of the Anglo-Saxons, contrasting with the more lofty attitude of Slavs to the matters of death. But the word 'testament' didn't suit this document because it was all about father's will: his will to disinherit and humiliate Jakub, most likely for daring to challenge his 'will' with his own.

The trial, which took place three months after father's funeral, went better than Jakub expected. Not only was his argument recognized by the judge as perfectly valid, but she agreed that, given the circumstances, Jakub should receive one third of the entire inheritance – the uplift was meant to compensate for the years of unpaid alimonies and psychological

## Wilderness House Literary Review 14/4

damage inflicted on Jakub by his biological father. His half sister protested that she and her sister would have to sell the family house to pay Jakub off, but the judge said that it was their problem, which should have been envisaged earlier. However, they received six months to arrange the payment.

Before the trial Jakub was thinking what he would do with his inheritance and decided that he would blow it, at least a substantial part of it, because the money was not enough to substantially improve his life and he was educated to be cautious with money, in expectations that he would be never well off. Moreover, only such a plan cushioned him against the thought he might lose in court and get nothing. His plan was to travel to Cuba or Quebec, to check first-hand how Spanish and French language in these countries differed from Spanish spoken in Spain and French in France. First, however, he would go to the most famous ice-cream parlour in Prague, named 'Ice-cream Castle', as he loved ice-cream, but since he reached adulthood, he never permitted himself to visit this place, in part because it was very expensive and in part because he was ashamed to go there, as it was like visiting Disneyland on one's own.

Then the trial was over and he left the court and went to the 'Ice-cream Castle' on his own, as his lawyer had another job and they agreed to celebrate the next day. Apart from selling ordinary ice-cream, the place served ice-cream sculptures and most visitors came to buy this special ice-cream. There was almost a hundred of designs to choose from plus and one could design one's own ice-cream for extra, but this had to be arranged in advance. To make the visit even more exciting, there were things buried in the ice-cream, as if they were Christmas crackers. One could choose a small gift or a motto. Jakub asked for a motto, curious what it would be.

He was probably right, thinking that this place wasn't for him, given that all the adults there accompanied their kids, except for some Japanese tourists. The bulk of patrons were made up of fathers with young sons, maybe divorced fathers trying to make up for their absence in their kids' lives. Better nip this thought in the bud, before it poisoned his ice-cream, decided Jakob. Although he felt out of place, he ordered the largest portion available in the form of an ice-cream castle, with a motto, and a bottle of coke. He got comfort from the fact that nobody paid any attention to him; the kids' guardians were too busy keeping their children clean and in line. Moreover, soon there were no more free tables. The noise made by the children's voices and rough movement of chairs was in fact soothing, as was the colourful, almost psychedelic decoration of this place. The ice-cream was also very good; a perfect combination of form and content. The reputation of this place was thus well deserved.

When he was about to finish the last tower and start the main body of his castle, a young woman asked if she could join him, as his was the only semi-free table left in the entire café. He agreed and so they sat opposite each other, eating their giant fancy desserts; her being in a shape of a carriage pulled by six horses.

For a while they ate in silence and then the woman said: 'Not many single adults here. We must look like two grown-ups refusing to acknowledge it.' 'Indeed. I'm myself not a regular in this place. It is only my second visit in the "Ice-cream Castle"', replied Jakob.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 14/4

'What brought you here?' asked the woman, who introduced herself as Petra.

'I closed a certain chapter in my life. I can say that today I stopped being a child and so I came to celebrate it, by doing this childish thing – eating giant ice-cream,' said Jakub.

'With me it is an opposite. I came here to celebrate my re-entrance into childhood,' said Petra.

'So, perhaps we should congratulate each other,' said Jakub, with his typical slight smile that signified defeat, although he was victorious today. He noticed now how pretty the girl was. Too pretty for him, he thought, only to realise that this was how his mother trained him to see himself – to lower his expectations to such extent that there was practically nothing to expect except death.

'Congratulations! Now tell me what happened to you.'

Jakub told her about him fighting his disinheritance, and she reciprocated by explaining that she was dumped by her boyfriend of seven years. She mentioned that it was a huge blow, but after several days of mourning, she started to see it as a liberation, because the guy was high-maintenance and judgemental and all the years she worked hard to please him. This meant visiting the gym regularly and paying attention to what she ate, as he regarded glutenous women unattractive externally and internally.

'I'm sure it was not true, because it was romanticism which made me cling to him for such a long time: the romanticism of the glutenous,' she said.

Jakub laughed, as he found such self-depreciation charming. There was also a remarkable sexiness in the way she constructed her sentences. Clearly, she made the most of the opportunities of the Czech language.

'I can say a similar thing about my attachment to my father. The less he gave me, the more I invested in our relation, to "balance the books", if you want. It was very late when it dawned on me that if I continued on this path, I would become bankrupt. I feel like today I recouped some of my investment.'

'What will you do with your inheritance?'

'I don't know yet. First I thought about spending it on travel, but it looks like I inherited enough to buy myself a small apartment in Prague, so maybe will I do that instead.'

Jakub noticed that Petra was eating her ice-cream very fast and she had less to finish than him, although she started when he was almost in the middle of his. He wanted her to slow down, to prolong their conversation, but didn't know how to say it. Instead, she said:

'You eat your ice-cream very slow. Don't you like it?'

'No, on the contrary. I like it very much, therefore I want to relish it. Also, I paid extra for a motto and don't want to miss it,' replied Jakub.

'Me too', said Petra, who was just fishing out her piece of paper.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 14/4

'What's written on it?' asked Jakub.

'Carpe diem'.

'This means "seize the day".' he said and immediately felt ashamed for assuming that Petra did not understand this famous Latin proverb.

'I know. What about yours?' asked Petra, when Jakub was also about to open his.

'The same,' said Jakub. 'Looks like this is what fate wants to tell us today.'

'For me it is rather a sign they have only two or three mottos which they constantly recycle, but it hardly matters, as it is the best ice-cream in Prague.'

'Yes, definitely. Shall we meet again?'

'I don't know. The prices here are so high, that I cannot afford it, given that I have to live on my own now. You will have to pay for me, to make me come again.'

'I will.' said Jakub, then he took Petra's telephone number and walked her to the bus stop.