The Good Mayor

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Extract

And Tibo did what he could for her. He was a kind and considerate employer. He was always polite, always asked nicely for whatever he wanted done, never made her work late, always made sure there were biscuits with her coffee and, sometimes, even a cake, never, never mentioned that he was crazed for her and wanted her past bearing. And, above all, he watched over her with devotion, whether that meant he had to get up from his desk a dozen times a day to open the door between their offices or run like a madman as soon as she left at lunchtime so he could stand on the tower of the Town Hall to look at her. Tibo did what he could. He sensed her pain. He recognised it as if it had been reflected from a mirror and, because of that, he watched over her.

And that's what he was doing that day at the end of summer when Agathe sat down at the edge of the fountain and accidentally knocked her lunch box into the water.

Look down now from the top of the Town Hall, as Good Tibo Krovic did that day, as he has done in memory so many days and nights since. Look at the square, full of people, some happy, some angry, some lonely, some loved, pretty girls and plain, that filthy old drunk with his broken, wheezing accordion hanging from one arm, the policeman coming to move him along, the dog on a string, the tram clanging past. Look at the day. It's a bright afternoon at the beginning of September, summer's last throw. The flowers in the window boxes are making one more brave effort, the hanging baskets are striving for one last surge of colour, one final glorious trumpet blast to outdo the municipal geraniums of Umlaut, the trees along the Ampersand are defying autumn, the geese among the islands have refused all arrangements for flying south. And all of them, flowers, trees, leaves, birds, dogs, drunks, shop girls, all of them chorus together, 'It will never be winter!' because there, in the middle of the square, sits the proof of it. Mrs Agathe Stopak, tall and buxom and creamy pink, sitting on the edge of the fountain, permitting sunbeams to kiss her.

Look at her sitting there. Look at her through the eyes of Good Tibo Krovic. Look at the shape of her, the curve and the line. Look at her foot resting feather-light on that flagstone, toes point-peeping from her sandals, the round arc of her heel, the nip of her ankle, the swell of her calf, the bight of the back of her knee and on, up

to where the polka-dot silk of her dress holds a promise of thigh and stocking-top and tense suspender clasp. Look at the slalom curve of her, hurtling downhill from her chin, round her throat, over breasts that would outdo the statuary of a Hindu temple, the sheer mathematical imp-oss-ibility of her waist, the swell of her belly, the buttocks that spread and settle and accept the fountain's marble edge. Look at her as she moves, the grace of her, the joy of her, shaking out that chequered cloth over her knee, a sedentary Salome.

She turns to reach for a sandwich from her lunch box, every joint in motion, waist and shoulder and elbow and wrist and knuckle, curve and line and angle, down to the very tip of her finger which now, for just a moment, brushes the lid of the box and pushes and begins to tip. And this is the moment that lasts forever. This is the moment when Good Tibo Krovic stands outside time, as far above the ticking of the clock as he is far above the square. For Mrs Stopak's lunch box is moving. It is slipping off the edge of the fountain. It is sliding into the water as slow as syrup in a winter kitchen and Tibo begins to run. Through the door beside the flag pole, a leap from the top of the four wooden steps, into the small, white room beneath with its buckets and its ladders and its dust sheets and its mole-heaps of crumbling plaster, a struggle with the lock and out on to the back stair as the door bangs behind him then, crashing and leaping and falling like a rock, down three floors past Licensing and Entertainments, past the Town Clerk and the City Engineer, past the Planning Department, into the terrazzo corridor outside his office, through the glass door and, before it's had time to bounce on its hinges, across the thick, blue carpet and down again, down the green marble stairs that lead to the front door and City Square where, just beside the fountain, Mrs Stopak is turning with disgust to fish her sopping lunch box out of the water.

Good Mayor Krovic pauses before he steps out into the sunlight. He tugs firmly down on his waistcoat, he shoots his cuffs, he pushes his fingers through his hair, he exhales deeply through his mouth and sucks air in through his nose with a whistle until his lungs are full, his breathing calmed. And then, in the very instant that the heel of his shoe lands on the smooth, grey flagstones of City Square,

the mechanism of his watch moves on, tick turns to tock and time starts again.

'I would be honoured if you would let me buy you lunch,' he said and, for some reason, God alone knows why, he felt himself compelled to fold in half, bowing like a hussar in some Viennese operetta.

'This is not the way to ask a woman out,' thought Tibo. 'Not a married woman – not a married woman who works for you! Good God, Krovic, what were you thinking?'

The big heart of Good Mayor Krovic sank because he knew the mistake he had made. She would reject him, mock him, accuse him in the middle of City Square, point at him for the townspeople to laugh at and that would be the end of it – he'd have to resign. He'd be hounded out of town. His life of service would end in disgrace when she exposed him as a pervert and a philanderer. But she didn't. She didn't. Mrs Agathe Stopak turned to him, squinting in the sunlight and giggled like a girl and said, 'I would be honoured to accept.' And then she curtsied – a gesture just as foolish and mechanical and overblown as his had been but done with such a twinkle as to set the clumsiest suitor at ease. She tossed her dripping lunch box back into the fountain as if it meant nothing, as if it was no more than a tin box full of wet bread, and she took his arm and moulded her body to his as they walked out of the square and over White Bridge and Tibo melted.

But something changed in Agathe too. In that single instant when she saw Tibo standing there and reached out and took his hand, something changed. Her sadness lifted. She found herself suddenly wanted and desirable again.

Here was a man, not just any man, mind you, but the Mayor of Dot, Mayor Tibo Krovic himself, who had taken the trouble to ask her out to lunch. And why not? Why not? She was a good-looking woman, pleasant company, why not? What harm could there be? There was nothing in it. Nobody could possibly object or take exception. But, even so, Agathe felt a strange thrill in it. She felt almost mistressy. Not wifely or secretary-ish but almost mistressy and, if truth be told, even a little bit naughty and, above all, changed.

She pressed herself close to Tibo as they walked together up

Castle Street – probably too close. For a moment, she found herself asking, 'If it was Stopak who was asking you for lunch, would you walk this way with him?' But a little voice in her head answered quickly, as if it had been waiting for just such a question, 'If Stopak ever asked you to lunch, would you be walking with the mayor?'

They walked together, side by side, through the square across White Bridge and up Castle Street, Agathe stepping out in her heels in a wide, comfortable, hip-swinging roll. She jiggled deliciously beside him in a thin, white dress with big black polka dots on it and wafts of scent rose up from her as the top of her head brushed his chin. When she walked, she wiggled and, when outraged conscience complained, 'Stop that, Agathe Stopak! You are a respectable married woman!', it was all she could do to stop from purring and rubbing herself on Tibo like a cat against a table leg. She felt her hair brushing his chin as they walked. She wondered if, with him standing so close, he might not be looking down her dress. And then she realised she didn't care. She wanted him to look down her dress. In fact, she would be downright offended if he didn't. She glanced up quickly to see if she could catch him at it and turned her eyes down again, satisfied.

The heavy scrolled doors of The Golden Angel swung shut behind them and it was only then that Mrs Stopak felt the brief squeeze of panic close round her heart. If this had been a Stanley Korek picture, this would have been the time when the piano player stopped playing, the room fell silent and all eyes would be on them. But that sort of thing doesn't happen in respectable cafes like The Golden Angel. They don't have piano players in The Golden Angel and, if, at any time, a valued and respected client like Mayor Tibo Krovic should choose to honour that establishment with his custom in the lunch hour, whether that be in the company of his secretary or anybody else, then he can be sure of only the most impeccable service.

Cesare was an obsidian statue behind the counter – black suit, black tie, a bramble-gleam of black hair, carefully shaped black eyebrows mirrored below his nose in a blue-black moustache but, for just a fraction of a portion of a moment, the iron cast of his face shifted. Agathe saw it. She spotted it as she came through the

door – a tiny flash across the face, a microscopic hiking of those eyebrows, an all-but-invisible twitch of the lips, a look in the eye that said, 'Mamma Mia, the mayor again, twice in one day and with a woman, too. Unbelievable. Incredible!' before he regained his self-control and dispatched a waiter to greet them with nothing more than a swift-swivelled glance.

'For two, sir?' the waiter smarmed and urged them to a shadowed alcove against the back wall.

'I think I'd rather sit in the window, please,' said Tibo, 'if that's all right with you.' He turned to Agathe with a questioning smile and she nodded.

The window seat – on full view to the whole of Dot. Now how could there possibly be anything scandalous about that?

The table was set for four and, as the waiter cleared away the extra places, Tibo and Agathe settled themselves.

'The menu, Madam, Sir. Sir, the wine list. I will bring some water.' And the waiter withdrew.

They were suddenly awkward. Agathe asked, 'Would you prefer this chair so you could look out the window?'

'No,' said Tibo, 'I'd rather look at you.'

Agathe looked down at her twining fingers and resisted the temptation to fiddle pointlessly with the napkin.

'Would you like something to drink?' said Tibo, opening the cream-coloured folder that held the wine list.

'Better not. What will the boss say if we go back to work squiffy?'

It was such a stupid thing to say, such a lame joke, and she looked so girlish and naughty when she said it that Tibo couldn't help laughing at her.

'We'll stick to water then,' he said. And things went better after that.

They spoke about everything, starting with the outbreak of nits at the Western Girls' School. 'They say the little devils only live on clean heads but that's not true. There's always one filthy head where they start. I was in the chemist's the other day and they told me there was not a jar of nit powder to be had in the whole of Dot. Makes me itch just to think of it.'

Tibo promised he would contact the Sanitary Department and make sure that something was done.

Then they moved on to that scandalous performance with the hypnotist at the Opera House last week. 'Well, I'm no prude,' said Agathe.

'No more am I,' said Tibo.

'Oh, good,' she thought. 'Oh good!' But what she said was, 'And I enjoy a laugh as much as anybody but you heard what happened when he got Mrs Bekker up on stage?'

'I heard,' Tibo nodded gravely.

'That poor woman teaches Latin at the Academy. How is she supposed to hold her head up after something like that? How is she supposed to keep order in a classroom when half the town has seen her drawers? I've heard,' Agathe glanced over her shoulder to see who might be listening, 'I've heard that the Licensing and Entertainments Department was about to step in but money changed hands. The Opera House is selling out every night and palms were greased.'

Tibo's face clouded. 'That had better not be true. Everybody in the Town Hall knows I'd have their jobs for something like that. This isn't Umlaut, you know!'

The waiter returned and hovered, smirking. 'Ready to order?'

They held the menus in their hands, unopened, leaning close over the table, heads almost touching in an open incitement to nits and they looked at each other and, for some reason, they burst out laughing again.

'I'm sorry,' said Tibo, 'we haven't really chosen. What's good today?'

'It's all good every day, sir,' said the waiter.

Tibo wondered why the man's face didn't bulge from the constant exercise of supercilious eyebrows. 'Well, what's especially good today?'

The waiter gathered the menus up in expert hands. 'The sole is fresh off the dock this morning, sir. Picked it up myself, so I did, and it was still flapping in the boxes. And sir will be wanting the Chablis with that.'

'Oh, why not?' said Tibo. 'You're only young once.'

Agathe looked at him in feigned horror and pressed a fluttering hand to her chest as if she was about to swoon away.

'Stop fussing,' Tibo grinned, 'I'll square it with the boss.'

The waiter brought a basket of bread. They ate it with a glass of wine.

The food came – soft, creamy, delicious fish and crisp vegetables. They ate it. They drank the second glass of wine. It sparkled on their tongues, it filled and refreshed them, lifted and restored them. They laughed a lot.

And then, over coffees, she told him about Sarah, the pretty girl who takes the money in a glass booth in Dot's second-best butcher's. 'She has been unlucky in love,' said Agathe.

'Sarah?' asked Good Mayor Krovic.

'Sarah,' said Agathe. 'I was in there on Saturday and she looked like death and I said to her, "My dear, are you really quite well?" and she said, "I feel terrible – I haven't had a wink of sleep and I have a broken heart and you are the only one who has even noticed. Thank you." And she gave me my change.'

'Sarah?' said Tibo in wonderment. 'I was in there on Saturday and she sold me half a kilo of sausage. I didn't notice anything wrong.'

'I noticed,' Agathe said with a sigh. 'I recognised the symptoms.'

When she said those words 'I recognised the symptoms', the great weight of sadness that Agathe had dumped in the fountain along with her lunch box suddenly came rushing up Castle Street and forced its way into the cafe to sit at the table beside her. 'I recognised the symptoms' – what an admission. It was an acknowledgement of a broken heart, a damage report, but not yet a flag of surrender.

Tibo put out his hand to hers. It was only a small table. They were sitting close and, for a second or two his arm and hers lay together there, his fingers reaching almost into the crook of her elbow, hers brushing the sensible tweed of his jacket and then a kind of pressure down the length of her arm to where their hands met and clasped for a time, finger to finger, a reassurance, a touch from Tibo that said, 'I recognise the symptoms. Me too. I recognise the symptoms.'

But, more than that, it was a touch – the first time a man had touched Agathe with affection for . . . well, for a long time and it felt good to be touched. A woman like Agathe needs to be touched.

She drank in those few moments and stored them up. The joy of it disappeared into her like drops of rain on a parched field and, deep down, something that had seemed dead began to swell and blossom again.

'You and Stopak . . .' Tibo asked, 'things are not happy?'

'No – things have not been happy for the longest time.'

'The baby?'

'Yes, I suppose she was the start of it. I suppose. Little mite. Wee soul. God bless her. No day passes . . . you know.'

'I know. I know. You'll see her again.'

'Yes,' said Agathe. 'Yes.' The empty 'yes' of the bereaved. She was suddenly stricken with a runny nose and sniffed it away – rather more loudly than she would have hoped. 'Not for the longest time,' she sighed.

'Do you want to . . .' Tibo was having trouble finishing his sentences but, somehow, it didn't seem to matter. They understood each other.

'No,' Agathe shook her head. 'A trouble shared is a trouble doubled, my old granny used to say. Thank you, Mayor Krovic, but it wouldn't do any good. There's nothing to be done for it and what cannot be cured must be endured.'

'You are very brave,' said Tibo.

'I'm not brave at all. Sometimes I just want to run away. I have read about the coast of Dalmatia. It's warm there.'

'But it's warm here,' said Tibo, who had never imagined that anybody, let alone Mrs Agathe Stopak, could hanker for a life beyond Dot. What possible attraction could there be in that? Dot had a river as pretty as other rivers, nice ducks, beaches not far away, historic monuments – they were all in the pamphlets on the front desk at the Town Hall.

None of that seemed to have occurred to Agathe. 'It's warm here now,' she conceded. 'Today it's warm. But it can't last. Nothing lasts – I've found that out – and, in a little while, it will be freezing cold again. Snow on the streets for weeks, dark by lunchtime.'

'Oh, hardly,' said Tibo.

'Well, nearly. And it goes on for months. On the coast of Dalmatia, it's warm all year long and they have castles and rocky beaches and lovely old towns where the Venetians used to sail.'

The Venetians . . . Tibo went back in his mind to the exhibition at the Municipal Gallery and that image of the beautiful, naked Diana, with the forest pool unfolding in ripples at her feet.

'Sometimes,' said Agathe, 'I buy a lottery ticket and then, all month long, I carry the coast of Dalmatia round in my purse. My own little house, by the sea, on the coast of Dalmatia. For me. No Stopak. Me and a good man who loves me and reads me Homer and brings me glasses of wine and good bread and dishes of olives while I lie in a cool bath.'

'Oh, God,' thought Tibo Krovic. 'Oh, God. Oh, St Walpurnia. Mrs Agathe Stopak lying in a cool bath. Oh, God.' He suddenly recalled the postcards tucked in a paper bag at the back of his drawer. 'Oh, God. Oh, St Walpurnia.'

'Do you like olives?' he squeaked.

'If I win the lottery, I will learn to love olives and I will learn to love Homer.'

'Then I would bring you olives.'

Agathe laughed. It seemed like the right time to pull her hand away from his, when there was a smile to cover the gesture so it would seem as ordinary not to be touching as it had seemed ordinary to touch.

'I would,' Tibo insisted, 'I would bring you olives.'

'You are a good man, Mayor Krovic,' she said.

'And I like Homer. I seem to fit.'

She smiled at that and she was still smiling when Tibo went to pay the bill. He seemed to fit. A good man who liked Homer. But this was Tibo Krovic, the Mayor of Dot. Surely he wouldn't, he couldn't, he couldn't possibly mean . . .

'Ready?' asked Tibo at her shoulder.

'Yes, I'm ready,' said Agathe. 'I'm ready.' She noticed that he left the bill lying in the saucer pinned down by a few coins. This was not an allowable expense to be claimed on the council's accounts.

They walked together down Castle Street in the sunshine, over the bridge across the Ampersand and into City Square, still arm in arm like before, still as close as ever, only, this time, going back, it felt different.

'I should leave you here,' said Tibo.