

Blanco

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Helena was buried the day after All Souls.

A host of people who hadn't ventured out for days because of the heavy rain turned up with their yellow and white chrysanthemums. Victor had the feeling he was being stared at. The funeral, on one of the new plots next to the main gate, was like a stunt organised by the cemetery: pristine grief, especially for the latecomers, to ensure the appropriate ambience for their annual visit.

The four men took up the slack, adept at their trade. The oak coffin sank solemnly into the perfectly rectangular grave.

Evelyn, his sister, raised a handkerchief to her cheek.

Out of the corner of his eye, Victor noticed hesitation among the passers-by on the central path. Every now and then there was a whiff of perfume, strong and flowery, the sort children imagine themselves safe and secure in.

Helena's parents held each other's hand unnoticed as they stood in line, gazing into eternity. To the right, the priest closed his eyes and murmured to himself. He held a bible in both hands over his privates. He had fat fingers with hairy knuckles, one of which poked obscenely between the guilt-edged pages. Victor realised that this image would inevitably stay with him until the day he died. It occurred to him that a person's life was chock-full of memories imposed by circumstance.

The coffin came to rest at the bottom of the grave. The four men stood upright, at ease, and stepped backwards, respectfully.

There was silence for a moment as they waited for the priest.

Sunday heels on and off on the tarmac.

Victor leaned forward. The walls of the grave were perfectly vertical and it was at least two metres deep. Not the easiest of tasks. He knelt down to get a better look. The world would be a much better place if everyone were to do their job with such pride and dedication.

He felt Evelyn's hand on his shoulder. He heard her sobbing above his head, while he stared at the lonely coffin beneath him, unable to tear away his gaze.

Who could guarantee that this was Helena? He had seen her three days before in the mortuary, her face reconstructed, her hands piously folded, but not today, not in this coffin. Corpses had been misappropriated before, traded for all sorts of unimaginably sick reasons.

Victor turned to the elderly gentleman who had been leading the ceremony thus far. Just like his subordinates, he wore a dark-grey cap with black lacquered visor.

‘Are you certain my wife is in this coffin?’

The question took its time to get through to him; his answer limited itself to a gaping mouth. Arms appeared from behind his back, only to hang pointlessly around his body.

Evelyn knelt down beside Victor in the autumn leaves and embraced his head. She pressed her lips to his temple and his ear. She shushed him as if he were crying just as hard as she.

The restaurant was in the middle of a terrace of modest townhouses. The façade was unremarkable; apart from the tall plant in a terracotta pot beside the front door, there was nothing to suggest that the place was open for business. Victor couldn’t get rid of the idea that the shiny plant by the front door had been rented for the occasion.

The reception was impersonal and the dining room had the air of erstwhile grandeur. Helena’s mother, who had chosen the restaurant, stationed herself with her hands behind her back in front of the yellowing hunting scenes and the threadbare tapestries. She was the only one.

The courses were served under cloches. Once all the plates were on the table, the lady of the house joined the waiters to lift away the cloches simultaneously, but the big reveal was a disappointment and the food could have been warmer. A blushing niece at the end of the table had no gratin dauphinois. Bearing in mind the nature of the gathering, no one considered it necessary to make a fuss about it, except Victor. The girl’s eyes watered with embarrassment when the lady of the house removed her plate.

It took a few glasses of red wine before the conversations spread across the table. Evelyn sat to Victor’s left, Igor to his right. His son had hardly touched the duck, only the bundle of French beans was gone.

Victor took his hand.

The boy looked up, his face weary and pale. He rested his head against his father’s arms and asked quietly when they were going home.

After dessert, the chattering cacophony reached a level that was enough to put the non-chatterers to sleep.

Victor stared numbly out of the window.

On the opposite side of the street, a man in his sixties opened a garage door. Together with his wife they retrieved the shopping from the boot of a small Japanese car. They worked with a purpose, as a team, without exchanging a word. A white Maltese terrier watched tamely from the living-room window and disappeared just as the man closed the garage door.

Helena is on the ground, her head resting on the edge of the pavement. Her chestnut hair is tied back elegantly in a bun and surrounded by a halo of gossamer-thin curls. Her face has been stamped to a pulp by heavy boots and her neck is broken. The smell of scorched rubber hangs captive in the motionless night air.

Suddenly her tongue thrusts a bloodied morsel of flesh from her mouth that she had bitten out of the arm of one of the carjackers. She begins to laugh uncontrollably. Lights go on behind shaded windows. People in pyjamas peek through curtains and pick up their phones, ten of them at once! Helena holds her belly and laughs louder.

Victor jumped to his feet. He had lost all sense of time and place. The reading lamp was still on. He quickly recognised the bedroom, the charcoal winter landscape, the wicker chair with discarded black clothing, the book in his hands.

The sudden recall of his own life was like a slap in the face.

‘Daddy?’

The door creaked slowly open.

‘Daddy, why are you screaming?’

Igor had been crying hard and there was a sob in his voice.

‘Come here.’

Igor quickly closed the door against the darkness in the hall. He skipped over the cold floor and jumped on the bed with an involuntary smile.

‘Climb under the blankets.’

The boy hesitated to lie down in his mother’s place but Victor held up the blankets and winked encouragingly.

Victor left the reading lamp on until Igor had fallen into a restful sleep. Afterwards he stared at the winter landscape that shimmered above the foot of the bed. He listened to the night. He tried to empty his thoughts but his imagination refused to let him.

Victor is awakened at eight fifteen by the doorbell. The light in the room is faint, probably a miserable day outside. He lies motionless in the same strange position he had adopted in his sleep, pins and needles in one arm from lack of blood.

Only after the bell rang for the third time did he dress quickly in the mourning apparel lying on the chair and shuffle down the long corridor towards the intercom.

Evelyn.

She hugged him fondly. She gazed searchingly into one eye and then the other. 'Have you had any sleep?'

'I think so,' said Victor. 'You?'

Evelyn shrugged her shoulders and heaved a sigh.

'Is Igor asleep?'

'No,' rasped Igor.

'Does he have to go to school today?'

'No school yet. They can do without him for a couple of days.'

Evelyn took off her jacket in the kitchen and set about making coffee. She had bought a wholegrain loaf, flavour and health in a single package. She opened cupboards and drawers in search of breakfast cereals and the like. Igor had spent the last few days with his granny and grandpa. Evelyn apparently thought it was now her turn to look after them.

'You don't have to do this,' said Victor as she made a start on the washing up.

'You're my brother.'

Her response was so rapid that it sounded rehearsed, as if she had already decided to use this simple and genuine argument, against which he would be lost for words.

She glanced quickly over her shoulder. Her make-up was heavier than usual, but not enough to hide the bags under her eyes.

Victor thought of the past, when they would fight at the drop of a hat, an awful period of jealousy and bitterness that coincided unsurprisingly with her puberty and her studies. Things gradually improved after that. Aware of the kinship between them, they grew towards one another, opened themselves to one another and respected each other's differences. All this happened with a minimum of words, binding them all the more closely in a bond that would probably never be broken.

Evelyn was now thirty-three and alone, eight years with the wrong mister right behind her. Victor was thirty-six. Helena was less than twenty-four hours in the ground.

The radiator ticked, the eggs bobbed against the side of a pot of boiling water.

'I'd still prefer you didn't come tomorrow,' said Victor calmly. 'Not like this.'

Evelyn nodded, continued to dry the dishes and stacked everything carefully away. After breakfast she gave Igor a shower and laid out his clothes. She vacuumed. At eleven-thirty she drank her last cup of coffee with Victor. She held onto his hand at the kitchen table.

After three days residing in the relative silence of the fifth, Victor found himself nailed to the spot on the pavement that morning. It was eight o'clock and the city was careering around like a headless chicken.

Igor jerked him afloat and took the helm.

Once they had joined the stream of pedestrians the pressure subsided, gentler on the eyes. The temptation to protect his ears from the noise of restless traffic that echoed piercingly between the city facades remained.

They marched side by side with the same people the entire length of the street. On the other side of the street the masses moved in the opposite direction. He had once picked up from a magnificent documentary on the characteristics and behaviour of large groups that this sort of thing happened automatically, that starlings, flamingos, herring and people were all subject to the same tendencies to organise themselves when warranted by circumstances.

Victor was the only one with a child in hand in the immediate vicinity. Most people were rushing to work. Lots of school children. He was surprised by the fact that they were such slaves to fashion: much too baggy trousers everywhere, candy colours and spiky hairdos full of gel. Although he didn't doubt that the boys and girls on their way to school considered themselves unique, Victor had the impression they were wearing a school uniform.

He turned left at the second crossroads. Once they had left the main road into the city centre things calmed down.

A shabbily dressed man was reading the paper in a doorway while he gobbled disagreeably on a sandwich. He was lying full out on his side and leaning on his elbow, more like on a sofa than on the icy cold floor.

Igor suddenly jerked Victor's arm.

'There.'

He pointed to the tram stop beneath the church tower a hundred metres down the street.

'There it is.'

Victor sensed that Igor wanted to let go of him.

In a flash he saw Helena standing there at the front door with a sad grin on her face. She had told him that Igor felt he was too old to still be holding his mother's hand. In full view of the people at the tram stop he pulled himself free and ran a couple of metres ahead.

Victor grabbed Igor firmly by the hand.

'Stay here!' he growled.

'I only wanted to show you where it was,' the boy said.

'I can see for myself.'

They said goodbye beside the glass shelter. Igor threw himself round his father's neck and kissed him on the cheek. Victor could smell drinkable yoghurt on his breath, which moved him to the core. He insisted that Igor promise solemnly that he would pay attention at school.

Victor turned and waved no less than three times. The facial features of the blond haired boy at the tram stop grew vague. Finally all he could distinguish was a hand poking out of a quilted jacket waving back courageously.

For the next twenty metres or so, Victor carefully observed his own footsteps and the sound they made: he succeeded in suppressing the heave of emotion.

The sun broke through the clouds. The black suit he had been wearing every day since the funeral devoured the light and warmed his shoulders and back.

A greasy ball of paper marred the pavement just in front of the doorway. The vagrant had finished his sandwich. Blobs of mayonnaise stuck to his moustache and beard, reminding Victor for a moment of a dog, a dumb but dangerous dog watching someone long and lazy then suddenly lashing out in a frenzy for no apparent reason.

Victor was about to pass the doorway when the vagrant grinned at him. Strange, he thought, turning the corner, back in the flow of pedestrians: the man's teeth were perfect, sparkling white.

Maybe the man had only recently encountered misfortune.

Maybe he had made a conscious choice to be a vagrant, to liberate himself from an affluent and hectic existence.

At home he made coffee, stood at the window lost in thought. The sky was solid grey, here and there a swiftly passing trail of lighter cloud. Four playful seagulls hovering in the wind swooped giddily after one another and hung in the air once again, solemnly still.

Perhaps the man was not a vagrant after all.

Perhaps he had more sinister intentions, had disguised himself as a vagrant to avoid attracting attention, to be able to do his thing undisturbed.

Victor sensed a contraction in his belly. Why in God's name had the man grinned at him? Why him of all people...?

His raincoat was still draped over a chair.

The lift was in use. Victor waited for a moment.

He punched open the door to the stairwell and vaulted downstairs, four, five steps at a time.

On the third floor he pressed himself to calm down. The banister was ice-cold; the plain walls echoed his presence. What am I doing? he thought. Why don't I just go back upstairs?

The lift was no longer in use. His fingertip wavered over number five but pressed zero.

Victor made little headway on the pavement; too many people. He took to the road, dodging cyclists, sprinting. He still had a distance to go to the end of the street when his chest caved in like a bellows and his legs felt as if they were full of sludge.

He could see people at the tram stop in the distance, but not immediately a ten-year-old boy in a quilted jacket.

The doorway was empty, the grimy ball of paper gone. Had the man tidied up after himself, wiped out the traces, his business done?

As he got closer, he examined the people waiting at the tram stop one by one. To his relief none of them seemed familiar. Igor had probably got on the tram right after they had waved goodbye. A possibility Victor realised, not a certainty.

At the edge of the silent group, at the very place he had left his son behind just a moment before, Victor caught his breath. He groped in his jacket pocket for his mobile, but it would be pointless to call the school this early.

He called a taxi.

Two minutes later at taxi screeched to a halt on the cobblestone road in front of the glass shelter. The woman on the phone had clearly kept her word and insisted to the driver that it was urgent.

Victor got into the taxi, blurted out the name of the school and slammed the door closed. 'Best take the circular,' he said, 'There'll be less traffic.'

The driver, a shy sort, cowering in the comfort of his surplus kilos, grunted affirmatively.

The journey took twenty minutes. They whooshed past enormous billboards with enticing women, drove for a moment side by side with a train filled with new cars. The man steered the entire time with his left hand, the right resting on his thigh. The smell of the toilet freshener stuck to the dashboard made Victor nauseous.

The entrance to the school, a wrought iron gate, was unmanned and all he could see in the immediate vicinity were parents and children, arriving, depositing, and departing. On the opposite side of the playground tumult he noticed two teachers chatting, uninterested in what was going on around them. He couldn't disentangle Igor from the mess. Victor decided to pay a visit to the school secretariat where a lady in a pageboy hairdo listened to him with immense sympathy. She thought for a moment and then looked at the school clock above the door. In three minutes the bell would ring and the children would assemble per class. She didn't need to inquire about Igor's class; recent events meant she knew it by heart: 4d. She offered him a chair and coffee. Victor thanked her but preferred to go back to the playground.

He systematically scoured the swarm of children.

Igor was not there.

The bell sounded dictatorial; the playground emptied in the wink of an eye. They passed through corridor after corridor, where coat-racks groaned under the weight of heavy winter jackets beneath the classroom windows. Teachers were calling the roll just about everywhere he turned. They ascended a broad stairway without speaking a word. In 4d, the teacher was writing a sentence on the board. There was commotion in the classroom, everyone in search of the right jotter. Victor stopped the woman from knocking the door just in time. Igor was sitting in the second row, calm, almost serene, his fountain pen at the ready. Once the teacher had given the signal, he copied the sentence carefully into his jotter, the point of his tongue protruding between his lips.

Victor meandered through the supermarket, still shaken. He deposited the groceries in the basket without paying much attention to what he needed. The succession of filled shelves had a calming effect.

He suddenly came to a standstill next to a tower of cornflakes and his body only started to move again after he had solemnly promised himself in his head that he would always accompany Igor to school and back.

The apartment welcomed him with gratifying warmth. He put his shoes in the cupboard and hung up his coat. He felt exhausted and decided he would eat lunch there and then, even though it was only ten past eleven. He fried up an omelette with tomatoes, but the smell of the eggs robbed him of the little appetite he had.

He paged through the newspaper in the living room.

The husband of a day-care lady had been fondling kids of three years and less. The woman turned a blind eye. A bungalow, red brick, low roof with grey-green patches of moss. Unsuspecting neighbours.

Later Victor lay stretched out on his bed, hands folded behind his head. The sunny spells were getting longer and longer. The sun glided slowly across the wall, growing dim and brightening blindingly. Somewhere high in the sky he could hear the feeble drone of an airliner.

He stared at the winter landscape above the foot of the bed.

Helena had bought it just after they moved in to this apartment.

It was touching in its simplicity. Paper and a stick of charcoal, a couple of well placed lines suggesting a downward sloping hill with a path leading to a tiny village in the distance. Two figures halfway, two black specks, thickset, numb.

Sometimes it looked as if they were heading towards the village, other times as if they were walking in Victor's direction. Sometimes a man and a woman, sometimes two children singing a song in spite of the biting cold. Sometimes two men, silent, bent double under the news they carried.

Sometimes it was as if they were standing still, not knowing what to do.

'Meatballs in tomato sauce!' hollered Evelyn through the intercom. When she was inside she proudly held two bowls aloft: 'With mashed potatoes!'

Igor leapt enthusiastically out of the sofa and followed her into the kitchen where they put the food in the oven.

'All home made,' she said loudly. 'I was suddenly in the mood to cook something old-fashioned.'

Victor was grateful: Igor could do with a healthy meal. At the same time it annoyed him that she had turned up unannounced.

He heard her interrogate Igor, hushed. How was he, how was school, how was dad? Igor told her his dad had been collecting him from school. Yes, he thought it was a bit strange too, but no, it didn't bother him.

Evelyn started to set the table in the living room as if she were the lady of the house. She switched on the standard lamp and asked him for candles. Victor didn't respond. He stared sullenly at the television screen. Didn't she understand?

Five minutes later she set the plates on the table without a word. His mouth watered at the fabulous smell but he kept staring at the television. He had decided to stay where he was on the sofa and to let her to eat alone with Igor.

Jesus! What did she expect?

What was she thinking?

Then she came towards him and kissed him on the cheek. 'Enjoy,' she whispered. He didn't move a muscle. Her face remained close to his. She gave him another kiss, patted Igor on the crown of his head and left the apartment.

The table had been set for two not for three. Igor smiled rosy cheeked, knife and fork in hand ready for the next mouthful. Victor rushed to the toilet and wept silently into his hands.

Igor felt sick in the middle of the night and had to throw up twice. Bent double over the toilet, Victor rubbed the boy's back; he could sense the nausea approach its climax in the tension in Igor's shoulders.

When it was over he washed his face and forced him to drink a glass of water. Igor was totally exhausted. His eyes were closed before the glass was empty.

Back in bed, Victor tossed and turned from shoulder to shoulder. Later in the night he dreamt of a mad cow. The poor creature quaked and quivered on its scrawny legs in a frantic search for balance. The farmer followed its every step, held open his arms in despair. The beast collapsed, smashing its head against the muddy concrete floor, got to its feet again and continued on its way, unsure, shuddering. It seemed to take an eternity. It was clearly a well looked after animal, its hide gleamed. Above its wild gaze blood was now gushing from its head. Sometimes the cow remained on the ground, shaking, its front legs folded and its hind parts in the air, but the moments of rest were short.

The farmer could barely look on as his cow suffered. He started to hit it, on the very place its skull had burst open from a fall. He raised his stick behind his back with both hands and struck the bloody wound as hard as he could from deep in his loins. The animal was exhausted and stood still from time to time, like a newborn calf up on four unsteady legs, while the sobbing farmer attacked its skull unremittingly. The cow didn't even blink an eye as the farmer's stick hit home again and again. After a further fall, the animal finally seemed to give in. The farmer poked deep in the gaping wound and, at the last, in the bulging black eye that stared at him all the while, astonished.

It was almost six o'clock when Victor was liberated from his nightmare. He lay staring into the dark for a while, dazed, groggy. Outside, the city was waking up.

A truck reversed slowly with its beeping warning signal and unloaded three trolleys on squeaky wheels.

Victor decided to get up, to start the day early. He pressed his ear against Igor's bedroom door in the corridor and listened: long drawn-out breathing, close to adult snoring.

When he lifted the toilet seat he saw, to his disgust, lumps of meatball still floating in the bowl.

They arrived at the school by taxi. Victor had studied the public transport timetables: without leaving home a lot earlier, it would be impossible for him to get to the laboratory on time by bus or by tram.

Once again Victor realised that school security around the gate was completely lacking. Any freak on the loose could just walk in or out unimpeded. Was a school with more than four-hundred pupils not legally obliged to take a minimum of security precautions? Or was that what the two nattering teachers on the other side of the playground were about?

'You don't hurt anywhere?'

'I feel fine,' said Igor rubbing his belly.

'If you don't feel well just call me. OK? Where are the numbers?'

'In my trouser pocket.'

'Are you sure?'

Igor reached into his trouser pocket and showed Victor the card.

Father and son waved until they were out of each other's sight.

The old Ministry of Health building was hidden away in dense woods on the outskirts of a residential area behind the station. The dark brick walls always seemed to sweat, as if the building had the flu all the time.

The same cars were parked in the same spaces; only his was missing.

Victor had the impression that the gravel was a little greener in his space. Without giving it a second thought, he stepped into the rectangle, positioned himself in the middle and turned on his axis. He closed his eyes involuntarily and as if in so doing he had fulfilled some occult ritual he was drifting a moment later between closely parked German cars in a cold corrugated iron warehouse. He approached the light and noise in the farthest corner. A transistor radio, music and static. There was the Saab; a man in a lumberjack shirt, on his knees, with his head buried in the driver's leg space. Victor noticed his heels were worn. He leaned over the man, inhaled his body heat. He had small ears stuck flat against his head, like a fighting dog. There, there it was, in the passenger seat: her right shoe.

A gust of wind through the leafless treetops, a hailstorm of clattering branches. His surroundings forced Victor back to reality. He yanked the weather-beaten post with their number plate from the ground and tossed it into the bushes.

The blue light scanned his right hand. As of old the lock buzzed open. Apparently he was still the same man.

Eve, the secretary, a lonely girl, forty-four, had washed her hair this morning. She did that every other day, and then she would pin up the moist tresses, exposing the terrible birthmark on her neck and cheek. From a distance it was as if some sickness or accident had eaten away at her flesh, while her head stayed miraculously upright. There must have been a man at one time or another, Victor figured, who had convinced her that it wasn't because of the marks that he didn't feel so attracted to her, that he actually found them beautiful, that they gave her personality, character, and it wouldn't surprise him should the majority of men think that way.

'Good morning, Victor,' she stuttered while she fixed her gaze on his chest. 'I... we in general, we're pleased you're back... not pleased, but happy to see you. Not happy, of course.'

'Thank you,' said Victor solemnly.

Time congealed. His black suit held him prisoner like a leaded harness and Eve frankly didn't dare get on with her work out of respect for the deceased.

It was different with Etcetera, his boss, Herman Standaert in the real world. He received Victor in his office with what was close to exuberance. He squeezed his hand firmly, offered him a chair and called Eve for coffee. Once the cups had found a space in the chaos on his desk, he tilted backwards in his leather chair and said: 'So.' He pushed the palms of his hands together and balanced his chin on the tips of his fingers.

Victor was briefly overcome with anxiety that he would have to give a report of what had happened the last couple of weeks. But then the boss said, with something of a frown, as if concluding an annoying rundown: 'Condolences et cetera... But is there anything I can do?'

In the lab, three fellow research assistants shook his hand, without words, apologetic expressions.

Others hailed him from a distance.

Victor preferred it that way.