



The Birthday

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RIČARDAS GAVELIS

RIČARDAS GAVELIS (1950-2002) was one of the leading writers of his generation and an author of a number of novels and collections of short stories. His highly acclaimed *Vilnius Poker*, sold 100,000 copies in just two editions when it was first published in 1989. Translated into English by Elisabeth Novickas, it was published by Open Letter in 2009.

Today was a special day, they sat at the table quiet, tense, with white napkins under their chins. They lowered their eyes briefly, then once again raised their noses and stared at her, contemplating whether they had impressed her or accidentally insulted her on such a day.

And she stood, painfully elegant with a black dress, wrinkled hands, with a graceful, calm face. Her hair was white as could be. She wanted to speak and spoke—hollow and sadly:

“It’s gotten cold. Markas, you’ve been here for thirteen years; however, there’s never been such a dreary windy evening on your birthday. Aurelijus, don’t look at me like that, you’re still too young to argue with me.”

Aurelijus retracted his head. Today one couldn’t even resist her in one’s thoughts, even though she might be wrong.

“I made soup, the one you like the most. Broth, with big mouthwatering meatballs in it. Aurelijus, I’ll give you more, you slurp them down so hungrily.”

Gradually, as if adapting to the rhythm of the words, she served the steaming soup. Margarita had already forgotten Aurelijus’s look and took a long time in choosing the best chunks for him.

“It’s like I’m your nanny. You know what a nanny is, don’t you? That’s a very caring and affectionate woman. When I was small, there were nannies at all the homes of our friends. But mine was the best in the world... But I don’t remember my father. He escaped to Paris—back then, everybody escaped to Paris. He was very fat and had many business cards. You do know what business cards are, don’t you?”

She was already sixty-seven, and for the first time after her husband’s death, she set the holiday table.

Markas looked at the wall, flooded with a faint light, thinking about his leg. Actually, for the last several days, it had become cold, and the rheumatism of old age once again gripped him like pincers. The leg seemed foreign, poorly stuck on, and it was uncomfortable to sit on a high chair with it bent. However, it wasn’t proper to complain about one’s own diseases on a day of celebration: During the years spent among the things getting older together with Margarita, he learned to respect family traditions. “I wish it would get dark quicker, so she wouldn’t notice,” he thought. Seeing it, she would only get anxious for no reason, try to console him, and become even sadder. Markas stole glances towards the window (his leg most likely wouldn’t bend now) and, like a true aristocrat, waited reservedly, until the host served all the soup.

Afterwards, while all of them ate in silence, Aurelijus pushed his spoon, lying next to the soup bowl, and felt ill at ease. He just could not get used to the celebratory mood, was a bit jealous of wise old Markas, and would have happily curled up on the sofa as usual.

In the twilight, the walls of the room seemed distant and somber—four even planes, four drops of darkness. Dusk had already slipped into the room, and only contours remained of the photographs and miniatures. Someday, they would

disappear for eternity. These things held meaning only for Margarita, her and her only in the whole world, so they had to die together with her.

"Vitalijus wouldn't sit at our table," she began to speak again. "He never wanted to celebrate after... He didn't even want to talk. But we're having fun now, aren't we? Me and you two. The whole time, I had two, just like you.

They hardly saw one another anymore, but they didn't hurry to turn the light on—like actors who have merged with their role, they could sit in the dark, or with their eyes closed, and nothing changed because of it.

Now they dug into the meat, and there was still pie ahead—like a big square piece of ice that never starts to melt. She didn't buy pie, because no one of the three liked cream; a celebration never passed, however, without a pie stuck all over with candles. Margarita, as usual, slowly played with the forks, cautiously divvying up the flavorful meat chunks in the soup bowls.

Aurelijus got used to it, but he was still weighed down by the preciousness, he couldn't find a place for himself or stop being amazed at Markas's dignified calmness.

"You're so sad... And I'm trying so hard. I'm not getting upset because of you. You're so fussy, you don't know what you want yourself. But what's the matter, Markas? You aren't yourself."

Markas simply croaked a little and secretly moved his leg. It was like his hip had come totally unglued from his body, hung in the air, and pulsed with foreign blood, asleep, dead.

"Don't get upset, old boy," she mused. "Twelve years already. No, wait, thirteen... You do hate unlucky numbers too, don't you?"

Markas nodded. Who likes disaster after all? But hey, people are strange, they get too wound up in their disasters, talk too much about them. He nodded again.

"You remember your first evening in this room?"

Markas cowered, even forgetting his leg. Even now, his hair stands on end just remembering it. He had never been so close to death before. He was just a small boy and a goofball; he ran through the field, chasing butterflies, and afterwards wanted to run to the other side of the street. At the time, running across the street was the most attractive and dangerous game. Like huge beasts thirsting for blood, cars hummed past, with their polished sides glimmering, giving off an acrid reek. Markas was amazed by them from birth: they moved ever so quickly, but the horrible silence of a dead person emanated from them.

Markas would jump off the sidewalk happily, youthfully. Right away, however, he was overcome by a primeval wild passion. He maneuvered between the colorful bodies, gradually giving in more and more to the strange desire to fool the cars that all smelled the same, until finally he only cared about one thing: to escape, to avoid the blow, to stay alive. He would come to his senses, already having ended up on the other side of the street, wet from sweat, with shivers running down his spine.

Markas was not able to get rid of the shivering all the time, and forgot it only when, again having latched onto a wild rage, he would take off across the street.

That time, everything was going nicely, but suddenly the world crumbled onto him, trampled and flung him into an abyss, pulled him out of it and once again put him on his feet. Markas staggered, not understanding a thing, he was overcome by fear and anger; the enemy had to be right here, the eternal enemy, which he needed to defend himself from. Markas was disheveled and growled; the vision disappeared, however, and he suddenly felt that he couldn't stand anymore, that all of his bones were broken, and he collapsed on his side helplessly. The sidewalk, the merciful sidewalk was right there, but people went on by without looking back.

"Vitalijus, look, that poor dog was run over. Maybe he's still alive?" A woman with her husband stopped next to him, and Markas lost consciousness.

Opening his eyes, he saw a pleasant face and a sofa with blue upholstery. Margarita was standing over him.

"You'll live, little guy. That's also what the doctor said. But maybe you'll be more careful when running across the street."

Markas had never thanked her. People don't like to thank others for saving their life, and he understood at once that, for Margarita, he was a person. She only blurted out "doggy" that one time.

Markas got used to it. He didn't wag his tail and even forgot to sniff other dogs. People didn't do that. Lunch at 3 pm, dinner from plates and long walks before going to bed became a necessity for him; he couldn't even imagine it could be any other way. Often, he didn't even understand anymore whether he really was talking with her or just imagining it. He

wouldn't sleep for long, and in the middle of the night, he would look at his own image in the mirror in the moonlight. Only when the immense desire to raise his snout and howl arose did Markas still feel like a dog.

Only once had Markas been besieged by pain and the unknown. That had been relatively recently, the night when Vitalijus — who had also lived at Margarita's the entire time and the entire time been quiet—had died.

That time, Vitalijus didn't get up the whole day, and Margarita didn't go for a walk in the evening. Markas went on his own, returned quietly, and slowly went to bed. He woke up in the night, tormented by a bad dream, and suddenly breathed in the smell of death. A spasm choked his throat, and he timidly stuck his snout into Vitalijus's room, where he felt, like never before, as if he were just a helpless white dog.

Vitalijus was lying on his back in a big bed, having put his arms together unevenly, and wasn't breathing anymore. The light was on in the room, and Margarita stood next to her husband barefoot; with her disheveled hair, it seemed as if she had just jumped out of her lair. A brown shapeless lump was rolling around on the floor.

"You see? It was just the fur that fell off. And I was so frightened." Her voice was very calm, void of feeling.

Slowly, she picked up the fur, covered Vitalijus and, as if feeling guilty, looked at Markas.

"That expression of his... He's probably very cold now."

Her eyes wandered around the room, and her bare feet shook on the cool floor.

"But I won't call anyone. It's so late."

And then Markas understood that she was afraid, afraid to be alone with Vitalijus, who had died.

He slowly went to his corner, cold as death itself, feeling guilty that he couldn't help her; that she was alone, even though he was right there; that life is immensely complicated; that you never know who you are and what place you occupy in it.

"Forgive me, Markas. I didn't need to remind you of that," the quiet voice interrupted his thought, and he saw that both were waiting for him.

There was no sense anymore in eating. Waiting a little bit, Margarita put Markas's plate to the side. Her slim arms appeared in the dark among the whitish plates.

Markas's leg felt better, and he looked around. Aurelijus's eyes gleamed, it seemed like he was swallowing his saliva while staring at the pie. Margarita shook the matchbox and started lighting the candles. The faces from the photographs on the wall looked at everyone who was sitting. She avoided those glances and instinctively covered the light.

Markas lowered his head. He knew what Margarita was thinking. In one photograph two young blonde men were smiling. The photograph was old, faded, but now, lit in a strange way, it was like it had come back to life, the faces had regained their color. Four deep eyes gave a pleasant look, as if the young men had gotten ready to sit right at the table.

Markas knew them well, though he had never seen them in the flesh. Margarita spoke about her sons on a number of occasions. When Aurelijus played around too exuberantly, Markas, overwhelmed by an old fuddy-duddy irritability, sometimes wanted to tell him the entire story—everything from beginning to end: how the station looked, how both sons stood, not knowing if they can promise their mom that they will really return—and what two gray pieces of paper mean, in which "killed in action" and "missing in action" are written in a crooked handwriting; and how much a person can cry without stopping; and why Vitalijus, while he was alive, did not say a word at home. The irritability would pass quickly, however, and Markas would think to himself that it wasn't worth saying anything to such riffraff as Aurelijus.

Margarita began pouring sweet tea from a little slender pitcher. Markas thanked her by nodding his head, while the absorbed Aurelijus scarfed down his pie—for him, it was all the same. Margarita poured the last for herself, sunk into the soft armchair and lit up a cigarette. Her graying hair shined; her look was bleary, just her eyebrows rose from time to time.

Perhaps she remembered what had already passed.

Generally, she didn't like to rummage through her memories. What was, was already past, and you can't repeat it again. All events remained somewhere beyond the border of time and did not touch her anymore. Only papirosy linked her with the world—Margarita smoked two packs a day. Five years earlier, she had said goodbye to her native city, leaving her memories and friends there, taking only her dogs and fading pain. She almost never spoke to anyone about herself, but all of her neighbors complained about their lives, tangled with details, and complimented her on her dogs. Only one young man, who in the summer sometimes sat in the yard on a little bench, didn't pet her dogs. (How could you pet them!) And when she spoke, when she said, "You are still young, you probably don't know what people are like," he would just smile sadly. Perhaps that's why it seemed he understood everything.

When Margarita would start to think, her thoughts most often wandered back to childhood, old strange dreams came back to life, where everything was soft and beautiful, where there was a lot of sun and nothing from the forgotten past.

But this evening, perhaps, she remembered more than usual.

The death of her nanny, the trickle of blood, slowly winding its way on the floor, when the nanny was shot by accident by horrible dirty people. They drank a lot, threatened everybody, and sang noisy songs. All she understood was that they wanted to kill the whole world. Then others came, shot at the first ones, and explained that they wiped up the bourgeoisie. They didn't touch her, just broke up the parquet in the rooms, lit it, and warmed their feet. She was already seventeen, but she didn't understand anything, didn't know how to do anything, and knew nothing. Everything frightened her: the word "revolution" and those people who came into her bedroom without knocking, who never in their lives had business cards.

"Girl, this isn't the place for you. Run before it's too late, because you'll get killed, without ever knowing why," a gloomy bearded man said to her once, smoking a pipe and wrapping smelly rags around his legs.

She immediately obeyed, seeing only the balls of smoke from the pipe—that was the only advice, for her the only sentence that she had waited for so long much. Margarita ran where her eyes took her, got lost on dark streets, where armed men went on rampages, and perhaps would have frozen in the stairwell of some building, if she had not been found by Vitalijus, who had just come from work. She was not in the least surprised that he invited her to live with him; she took care of his sick mother for a year and a half and, once again not the least bit surprised, married him. No one taught her to love, he was the only person dear to her. Or, perhaps, the only one she knew at all well.

Perhaps Margarita remembered how she brought the first dog home, a black bitch almost frozen into ice, and Vitalijus looked at her quietly like always; how at night she embraced the little body close to her and how both would shake, having heard a sound, similar to a shot; how Kleopatra, having turned from a cute little creature into an old toothless bitch, couldn't swallow anything anymore and had deteriorated for a long time; and how she asked that young man sitting in the yard to put a chloroform mask on Kleopatra, because she couldn't do it. After that, she couldn't sleep the entire night, ultimately got up, ran to the little shed and, for some reason, once again pressed the cotton soaked in chloroform on Kleopatra's nostrils, though her little body was already stiff. And there was much more she could remember, sitting in the armchair and smoking cigarette after cigarette.

When Margarita got up and went through the room, it was already late; Aurelijus was sleeping, curled up on the chair.

Quietly jumping on the floor, Markas thought, "It's difficult for us old people to remember everything." He mumbled "Goodnight" and hobbled to his corner.

But she stood at the window for a long time and watched how a lame white cat was slowly pattering around the yard, as if she was not able to pull free from the narrow strip lit by the moon.

Translated by Jayde Will