

## Best Story

### Tea

#### Krzysztof Socha

Waking up, breakfast with obligatory porridge, a walk around the park, dinner, nap, afternoon snack, and the harmless poker for matches, sometime bridge or amateur theatre performances. Single white rooms with huge cast iron beds and lonely ferns in single windows. Quiet days, sometimes cigarettes smoked in secret, the smell of cafeteria dinner exactly at one thirty, quiet hours or just quiet. All like in an old people's home. Only Marek wasn't old but dead. He died of cancer when he was sixty something, he passed away choking on his own blood in a hospital bed, and then he ended up here. He came to this white, irritatingly calm home for the souls, run by angels wearing nurse gowns. During his life he believed there was something after death, but he rarely considered what it was. As an educated, modern man, he expected rather to disperse in light than to end up in a palpable place. He tied his shoes, put sandwiches in a bag, looked around and picked a bowl of pudding hidden under the bed. He gently placed the bowl on the bottom of the bag and left. He passed familiar people, all the faces looked not older than thirty, but they had all the wisdom gathered during the whole lives. All the bodies were fit, but not very fit, actually none of them seemed attractive. Marek passed angels also, tall, slim and usually blond nurses, who gave beautiful smiles to everybody, and sometimes talked in a ringing but artificial voice.

"Where are you going, Marek?" an angel twittered.

"To feed the swans".

He actually felt like saying he was going to rob and plunder. He could do it, he sometimes even did. Angels answered automatically "You're such a joker, Marek". But today he didn't want to risk that those youngsters dressed in white gowns would turn out to possess the power of biblical angels who burned Sodom. He left the building, he was going to meet a man from hell today. He carefully went past a group singing psalms outside. Some people are so used to it they don't even notice they're in heaven. What were they praying for? To have plum dumplings for dinner on Thursday? If he prayed, he would probably asked for a chance to leave this place, to go outside those cursed, blessed walls.

That's where he was going anyway, towards the brick wall, towards bushes grown probably to scare sluggish residents from going towards the border of the resort. He followed the overgrown, disappearing path. He turned around often, searching for angels. Nobody followed him. The stranger appeared suddenly, from behind thick bushes. He was dirty, with disheveled hair, mud on the face, ragged clothes. In the afterlife, everything apart from the bodies disintegrated like in real life.

"You have it?" the stranger asked.

Marek silently passed him the sandwiches, a bottle of tea and a bowl of pudding. The stranger started to hungrily devour bread with ham and cheese. He drank some cold tea, closed his eyes with relief and pleasure.

"Have some pudding," said Marek to break the silence. "I managed to steal it from the afternoon snack. I told them I would eat it in my room".

The stranger looked at him, there was something wild and mysterious in his eyes. He wiped his mouth and began to talk.

"It's strange. I know I won't die, because I'm already dead, but I still feel hunger. I wonder what would happen if I stopped eating for a longer time".

"I wanted to check it once, but one of the elements of the state we're in is the lack of strong will. Tell me how you got here and how it is out there".

“Yes, I’ve promised to do it in exchange for food. They serve breakfast at nine. Usually porridge, sometimes toasts. Free time till dinner. There’s a lot of gear for various games. You can play cricket or board games. Dinner at two. A quiet afternoon, watching the sunset”.

Marek listened with disbelief.

“So hell is no different from heaven”.

“It is different,” he answered. “There is no afternoon snack in hell”.