Mathilde and Marie

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sample translation by Eleanor Updegraff

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MARIE

‘This time of year is so inherently beautiful – don’t you think, Marie?’

Thomas gestured expansively at the windscreen of his delivery van. While the arc which his hand described within the cab was presumably intended to indicate only their immediate surroundings – her direct field of view – the question echoed inside Marie. With every passing second, she was becoming more keenly aware of the many levels on which she agreed with his statement. And of how much this realisation stirred her head as well as her heart.

She felt a tide of warmth rising inside her.

Joy. Uncertainty.

An indeterminate feeling of happiness.

What was going on here?

She nodded briefly at Thomas, who responded by bestowing a warm, genuine smile on her. He was the kind of person whose eyes were chiefly responsible for such endeavours. Hemmed in by unkempt brows and the deep laughter lines of maybe three-quarters of a century, they radiated a natural goodness that was rare indeed these days.

For some time now they had been traversing a stretch of woodland that seemed to be never-ending. The narrow strip of asphalt wended its way through hilly terrain. The trees – species which, at that time, Marie couldn’t identify – grew many metres tall, lining the road on which they really did appear to be the only vehicle travelling. Nobody passed them in the other direction; no one followed behind. The prevailing brown tones of the landscape had already taken on a noticeable sprinkling of pale, sometimes even vivid green that heralded the onset of spring.

How right he is, she thought as the low sun flashed again and again between the thickly massed trunks. ‘It’s as though all the beauty in the world

belongs to this time of year.' At least, so it seemed to her here and now, with every one of her senses promising imminent transformation.

When Marie looked away from the passing scenery for a moment, her eyes met Jónína's pale-blue gaze in the rear-view mirror. The elderly Icelandic woman she'd met on the train a few hours earlier was seated in the back of the van as it conveyed the three of them through the Belgian Ardennes. Jónína, Thomas and Marie.

How exactly this had come about was still something of a mystery, even to Marie – in the way that all aspects of her present situation seemed somehow mysterious, if not downright miraculous.

The whole thing had started early in the morning on this day, the sixth of March, when, for the first time in many years, she, Marie Ledoux, had chosen to listen not to her head but to an indefinable feeling, and so had purchased a ticket for the TGV at Paris Gare du Nord.

Not having a particular destination in mind, Marie had bought a ticket to the first station that sprang to mind when she pictured leaving behind not just her hometown of Paris but France in its entirety, as quickly as possible. Thus she had opted for Brussels.

The resulting train journey was to serve one purpose above all others: to put distance between herself and what had happened – mentally as well as geographically.

And yet, shortly after arriving in the Belgian capital, Marie had realised that Brussels would only be able to fulfil the requirement of geographical distance. The noise and bustle of the station, not to mention the city's streets and narrow lanes, were abhorrent to her, and so she'd decided to travel onwards immediately, choosing a train that appeared both less fast and less modern than a TGV or Eurostar. For Marie, this was tantamount to an indirect promise that the train was bound for more remote destinations.

And indeed, the metropolises of Paris and Brussels, with their millions of inhabitants, were exchanged for stops at Ottignies and Gembloux, until Marie and her chance acquaintance reached the Belgian provinces. This was a region

where buses were so few and far between that she and Jónína had needed to be picked up from Libramont station. And now, here they were – somewhere in between collection and arrival.

Thomas, who was the person specifically responsible for this latter stage, had initially been introduced to Marie simply as 'the baker from Redu' – for all the world as though he and Jónína were on rather distant terms.

But the familiar silence that fell not long after had brought Marie to the swift conclusion that the pair were in fact of long-standing acquaintance. They were, perhaps, even tied by a bond of friendship, understanding one another without the need for many words. Looks and gestures were sufficient. Even a situation such as this one – Jónína turning up with a surprise guest in tow – appeared to fall within the remit of their wordless comprehension. The fact that Thomas had assumed the role of chauffeur and also waited patiently for the late-running train in order to collect Marie and Jónína seemed to be yet further proof of this friendship.

Marie closed her eyes for a long breath, then glanced once more in the rear-view mirror.

Jónína looked pensive, without having drifted completely away from the here and now – rather as though she were simply enjoying a moment of internal repose.

Her skin was etched with so many lines and folds that it could have been read as the cartographical impression of a long and no doubt very full life. The Icelandic woman's gaze was unusually alert and penetrating – and any time she began to speak, a gentle roguishness played about her mouth.

By this time, Marie felt a tremendous sense of warmth, gratitude and familiarity whenever she looked at Jónína – and this despite the fact that they'd known one another only a matter of hours.

[...]

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MATHILDE

31 March, Day 147

And so, the unavoidable fête du livre *began early this morning. Thousands upon thousands of people will descend on our village over the next three days, filling the house not just with their noise but also the pervading scent of barbecued food. How I hate it!*

Today, the air smelled chiefly of charred sausages – unmistakeable indication that Madame Haydette was wielding the tongs at the grill to mark the start of the festivities. Our local MP has always known how to make herself the centre of attention and, naturally, an event as renowned as the fête du livre *presents a most welcome platform for grandstanding. Her taking her turn at the barbecue has traditionally been the press's most popular subject for photos – and, just between you and me, a guarantee of considerably increased profits for the drinks vendors.*

I don't even want to think about what other kinds of strange fruit this year's influx of tourists might already have yielded. The cars will doubtless be parked solid all the way up to the top of the west hill, where the brown-and-white cattle that graze the pastures there will be watching the hustle and bustle – no matter how great – with stoic equanimity. I find myself greatly envying cows for this ability, which at times tips over into total ignorance.

This year, no doubt, also, a few particularly resourceful visitors who consider the parking charge of three euros to be too steep will abandon their cars on the forestry tracks at Séchery and walk the kilometre and a half from there to Redu.

Time was that our schoolboys would take this as their cue to stick thumbtacks in the tyres of those illegally parked cars – they aren't long enough, of

course, to cause a puncture, but just big enough to give the driver a fright and serve as a note of caution for the future. Do you remember? Those were the days.

Now – well. But as if all the hubbub that goes along with the start of this three-day state of emergency wasn't bad enough, today I also played witness to an extraordinary leave-taking.

Regrettably, it wasn't that girl who left – the one whose departure I've been longing for since our first encounter – but instead her host, Jónína.

I hope so desperately that there's a good explanation for everything I managed to observe from my top-floor window. But thus far I haven't been able to make head nor tail of it, though I've been thinking of nothing else for hours.

It was early afternoon when Thomas drove up in the bakery's delivery van. He edged it towards the bookshop at a walking pace, but then, to my considerable surprise, didn't park in front of the Icelandic woman's property, but instead slightly off to one side, more or less directly in my line of sight. The wildly overgrown hedges taking hold of the garden down there protected his vehicle from view – at least from the perspective of the bookshop. Mine, however, was all the better.

At first, nothing else happened. Thomas remained sitting in the van, while I wondered about the meaning of this circus: how in the world could anyone think it a good idea to drive through Redu today, of all days? For the safety of visitors, the centre of the village is turned into a pedestrian zone for the duration of the festival. That, at least, is the official line.

Then, suddenly, things began to move. As soon as the little bell in the church tower had sounded the first of the four chimes that mark the full hour, Thomas got out of the van. He was slightly hunched: an unusual posture for him. That notwithstanding, his movements were fast and very smooth – all the more remarkable, considering his age.

On two, he shut the driver's side door; on three he was going through the garden gate; by the fourth chime he'd reached the front door.

And then, as the big bell rang out, the door was opened from the inside. On the second and final stroke, which echoed dully in the cast-iron body of the bell, Jónína emerged hesitantly from the house. She had both a large suitcase and a bag with her.

At that moment, I must surely have let out a cry of alarm, as I could neither believe nor understand what was happening down below.

Why wasn't Jónína working in her bookshop on one of the most important days of the year?

And where and why had she and Thomas worked out this elaborate two o'clock choreography, which doubtless even a bank robber would have looked on with respect?

The two of them glanced around cautiously. Jónína looked pale, almost bloodless. Her movements were hesitant and her manner was the complete opposite of what she has generally been known for: absolute certainty, and energy personified.

Thomas deftly stowed the luggage in the van, and at this point she veritably crumpled. The baker took her in his arms – very briefly, very firmly.

When Jónína freed herself from his embrace, I experienced another moment of shock: tears were running down her face, accompanied by a faint trembling of her entire body, which reminded me – God knows why – of a book I once read about natural phenomena, which explained how a volcanic eruption is announced by things like earthquakes and changes to the frequency of tremors. This, roughly, was how I imagined it to look.

Indeed, it's been a long time since I felt such empathy for another person. I almost went outside and took Jónína in my own arms . . . Imagine. Me! Fortunately, though, it all panned out quite differently: she fished a square white object from her travel bag and disappeared down to the far end of the garden, where I could no longer see her. After that, she and Thomas climbed into the van and drove off.

All that was left was me – and a few unanswered questions:

What was the reason behind all this? Where had they gone? How long would they be away? And what exactly had Jónína taken down to the end of the garden?

Perhaps I should go down and take a look. If only it wasn't for all those people, whom I abhor even more than Madame Haydette's absolute inability to cook anything on a barbecue . . .

[...]

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'This time of year is so inherently beautiful – don't you think, Thomas?'

Jónína sat in the passenger seat of the delivery van, from where she could see perfectly clearly how the baker's lips lifted in a gentle smile almost as soon as she asked the question.

It appeared, then, that he too was thinking of that memorable day a good six months ago now, when the three of them had driven through the forests of the Belgian Ardennes. Today, they were on exactly the same road again, and had even set off from the very same place: Libramont.

Only Marie was missing; she was holding the fort in Redu, and by this time had no doubt recommended a number of books as well as handing out just as many keys. Who would have thought that six months ago?

The ageing delivery van wound its way round the tight bends and laboured up the steep slopes of the hills, before the narrow, potholed road began to emerge from the cover of the woods for brief interludes. At this height, they had an impressive view of the autumnal forest, transformed by the new season into a brilliant canvas of colour. Jónína allowed her gaze to travel over the vast expanse of landscape. In the sky above, a buzzard wheeled in solitary circles.

'Hand on heart, Thomas: would you ever have thought it possible that our village and all its people would undergo such a transformation? Or, to put it another way: would you ever have thought we'd get another chance to experience something like that?'

'Mhm,' murmured Thomas, a little uncertainly. 'I don't think so.'

'Well, at least we still have you and your taciturn ways,' laughed Jónína, leaning her head briefly against Thomas's shoulder as though to underline the fact that this stirring of emotion was an expression of friendly affection and not one of mockery.

'No, no,' the baker began to protest. As he did so, however, he seemed to realise that he wouldn't be able to add any substance to this attempt at objection,

and so he broke off abruptly to formulate a question instead. ‘Hand on heart, Jónína: that day, when the three of us were driving along this road, would you have thought it at all possible that Marie could undergo such a transformation?’

Fresh amusement showed on Jónína’s face, appreciating Thomas for his quiet yet humorous finesse.

‘That’s a tricky one,’ she finally replied. ‘I’d say that the answer lies somewhere between yes and maybe.’

‘Really?’ Thomas asked, astonished.

‘Does that surprise you? I always had a vague feeling about Marie, that there was something very special hidden inside her. Something she herself had no idea of. But that her coming to stay in Redu would lead to such massive developments, for her as well as for the rest of us . . . that was something I neither knew nor expected at the time. At most, it was something I secretly, silently hoped for.’

‘Well, perhaps that’s enough,’ mused Thomas. ‘Perhaps it only takes one person to believe in the possibility of change, or at least to secretly hope that something like that could be possible.’

‘Hmmm . . .’ Now it was Jónína’s turn to think intensively about what he’d just said, as the delivery van made its way round the next serpentine bend. ‘I’m afraid that isn’t the natural way of things, though. Just because someone is hoping for something, doesn’t mean things will change automatically. That would be nice, but it doesn’t usually happen in reality. All the same, I think there should always be at least one person everywhere who keeps a little spark of hope alive. As long as there’s at least one person who still believes in goodness, the possibility of change will never be entirely lost.’

Thomas nodded in satisfaction, before suddenly giving a blast of the horn. Two loud, slightly hoarse notes filled the air, tearing Jónína from her thoughts to look at the road ahead. Some distance away, just beyond the next bend, a group of squirrels scattered. The animals were foraging for extra food at the moment and seemed to have been taking a brief rest in the middle of the road. The sound of the horn made them scamper swiftly to either side of the asphalt.

‘At any rate, I’m glad it turned out this way, Jónína. Glad and grateful that little spark became a fire that eventually set the whole village ablaze. And that you’re back in Redu again . . .’ Thomas fell briefly silent and looked out of the window, where the forest was passing at the speed of the van.

‘Then again, I did hope for that,’ he finally expanded, in quiet tones. ‘Every single day.’

Jónína sensed a light, almost unnoticeable trembling that began somewhere between her heart and her throat. It seemed as though the words Thomas had just uttered had set something moving inside her. With every breath, the feeling spread further, permeating Jónína with a warmth that felt unusual at first, but then, with every passing second, gave her an ever deeper sense of well-being.

The pair continued without speaking for a few minutes, until Jónína broke the silence. ‘Would you stop for a moment up there, Thomas? Just very quickly, so I can look at the view.’

Thomas didn’t reply, but instead came to a halt on the road’s narrow shoulder.

‘Thank you. I won’t be long. Or would you like to come too?’

The baker appeared to understand that this question was of the rhetorical sort, because he answered by shaking his head.

‘All right, then. Back in a minute!’

Jónína passed through a small section of forest and emerged from the undergrowth into the very clearing she’d had in mind, which extended outwards from the hillside like a narrow terrace. It was hemmed in by brambles and young hazelnut bushes, while on all sides tall beech, oak, spruce and birch trees towered overhead, their foliage radiant with autumn colours.

A small flock of cranes – the first Jónína had glimpsed this season – flew slowly over the treetops. In the distance, she could hear a jay calling, while a blackbird searched for food in the thicket directly in front of her, making the bushes rustle.

Down in the valley lay the village, just as it always had done – and yet it was no longer the same. Jónína closed her eyes for a brief moment and took a

deep breath. The air was cool, clear and fresh, as though the gentle breeze that blew at that moment were carrying away all the heaviness. At the same time, Jónína had the impression that she was absorbing the scenery with every breath she took. She felt the peace and bracing freshness of the natural world, but also a sense of transformation.

She thought back to the day she had stood up here with Thomas and Marie and had spoken about the stillness which never seemed oppressive but had always been a natural part of life here. She thought, too, of how she'd left Redu without knowing what would happen to the village – let alone to herself. She thought of the inner turmoil she'd felt on the way to the airport with Thomas, and of the troubling thoughts that had so often plagued her in Iceland.

And finally, she thought of the relief she'd sensed when Thomas had told her about recent developments in Redu. When she herself had come back, she'd felt such deep happiness to find a flourishing village community. Once again, she let her gaze drift across the landscape and come to rest on the village that lay quietly, peacefully, in the valley. Nothing in the scene before her even hinted at how much had changed here in recent months. The church tower still rose crookedly from the centre of Redu. Its clock still stubbornly showed two different times – and yet, Mathilde had laid her own stubbornness aside.

It wasn't an outward change that had taken place, but an internal transformation.

The same was true of Jónína herself: she had returned and had found, to her relief, that there was still a place for her here. If it were up to her, though, it would be a more peaceful, less energy-sapping place than before. Something familiar and yet new. The same as was true for large parts of the village.

Before Jónína turned to make her way back to the van, she reached into her inside coat pocket. Her fingers closed round a metal object and she pulled it out, steel winking in the sunlight.

It was a key, which Jónína had had cut and engraved in Libramont. Gently, she ran her forefinger over the inscription etched in narrow capital letters on the head of the key:

LA LIBRAIRIE DE

MARIE LEDOUX

This was her ‘invitation to experience, discover and invent stories’. And, at the same time, the most wonderful second chapter Jónína could imagine for her bookshop.

AFTERWORD

If you visit the book village of Redu yourself one day, the chances are pretty high that you too will fall immediately under the spell of this place. That's exactly what happened to me around ten years ago, the first time I went to the *beau village* in the middle of the Belgian Ardennes.

The warmth of the people, the seclusion of the village and the beauty of the surrounding countryside are not of my own invention. Certainly, you will also come across further parallels which you'll have considered completely far-fetched until you go there. The crooked church tower, the clock that shows the wrong time and the lack of mobile internet are just three such examples.

Mathilde and Marie, the two eponymous protagonists, are, however, (almost) exclusively the product of my imagination. The same applies to all the other characters in the novel. Any similarity with real people is therefore entirely coincidental and unintentional.

Even if the descriptions of Redu that come into this story and build a picture of the village were inspired by real events, this story is entirely fictional. Please don't be surprised, then, if you visit that beautiful place to find it doesn't look exactly as described in the novel. It is also important to know that Redu has been undergoing a process of continual change for many years, and that the book village has reinvented itself several times. In this sense, Redu stands as an allegory for the many places that constantly have to find new and individual answers to changing circumstances.

Sometimes, in this context, it only takes one person, idea or initiative to precipitate the kind of lasting change that can enable entire communities to revitalise themselves.

It is no doubt presumptuous to imbue one's own writing with specific wishes. Nevertheless, at this juncture, I'm going to do just that: if I have one hope,

it is for more togetherness. Appreciation for people and places as long as they are still there. Care for the natural world in all its fascination.

If each of us were to keep in mind how important empathy is in our daily interactions with one another, then a transformation of the kind described in this novel could take place anywhere.

And Redu could be everywhere.

Thank you so much for reading, and all the best!

Torsten Woywod