

EVEN THE DEAD DREAM OF HEAVEN

by

Magnus Aspli

2010

General fiction, in homage to Zdzisław Beksiński.

Wordcount: 45900

1st draft
April, 2010
Magnus Aspli
magnus.aspli@aspli.no
www.magnus-aspli.com
Norway

0

"ATEH."

The index finger and the middle finger close, in a sign of silence, moving from the forehead to the chest.

"MALKUTH," his voice echoes in the room and he touches his right shoulder. "VE-GEBURAH."

"VE-GEDULAH," his hand leaves his left shoulder and he crosses his hands on his chest.

"LE-OLAHM," the words resonate slowly and clearly.

"AMEN."

1

"You and that Rick were a thing, right, Liz?"

Jenna looks in the rear mirror at Liz in the backseat. Her eyes tell Liz she's smiling. The tires screech as the red light turns green and Jenna grips the steering wheel tighter as the car roars, her eyes intense, staring straight ahead at the road. The rubber grips the asphalt, spins and shoots the dark blue '70 Mustang forward. The Audi A3 behind them is left in the smoke of burnt rubber. In the front passenger seat, Cory looks at Jenna with stern eyes, gripping her purse tight in her lap.

"D'you have to? You know I don't like it when you drive like this!"

"What?" Jenna smirks.

"You're speeding..."

"Oh, why, thanks for the information, Miss Police."

"Mom doesn't like y--"

"You should stop listening to mom, sis'. You'll end up boring."

"You're boring!"

Jenna flips Cory the finger, looks at her and grins, her teeth showing. Cory crosses her arms and tells her to grow up.

"Never ever," she smiles and looks at Liz through the rear mirror again. Liz stares out at the foaming river, wide from the heavy rain these last days.

"So, Liz... You and Rick?"

"Rick was an asshole," Cory comments while brushing her hands through her golden hair, fixing it in a pony tail with a silver hair band. "Good thing you dumped him."

"Let the little lady speak. I want to hear her version. Not your Barbie-take on the situation," Jenna uses the gears to slow down for the coming red light.

"You're such a bitch," Cory mumbles, applying pink lip gloss, studying herself in the mirror in the flip shade.

"Uhm..." Liz looks down at her black leather purse in her lap. "He was an asshole..."

"Told you..." Cory mumbles.

"All guys are," Jenna says, leaning down to clearly see the red light, her foot waiting for the green light, resting on the gas pedal. "Just so you know. It's a cliché, but that's the irony of the man-God upstairs."

Cory and Liz look at Jenna. She doesn't notice their uncertain faces.

"How'd you figure he was a jerk off? Kiss someone else? Show naked pictures of you to his friends?" she continues.

"He ain't taken naked pictures of me!"

"That's good... It's fun, but it's definitely not good. Trust me, girls," Jenna glances over at her little sister,

still obsessed with herself in the mirror, then at Liz in the rear mirror.

"So tell me what happened," Jenna's eyes wait expectantly in the rear mirror

"I... I didn't want to do it with him. And he was so pushy. All the time."

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" there's a touch of concern in Jenna's voice, as if she suddenly turned all mature and woman. The car rolls forward as the light turns green. No sound of screeching rubber this time. No tire tracks.

"No, no... Nothing like that."

"Then... Good. Any guy doing that shit should get his balls ripped off by a fuckin' silverback. After getting beat to a shit pulp, of course," Jenna's voice had left the mature world as fast as it arrived.

Liz smiles. Cory closes the flip shade, now finished enhancing her lips and eyes and cheeks in layers of cosmetic beauty.

"He wasn't all that, either. He was small," Liz blurts out, giggling.

Jenna laughs and the Mustang picks up speed.

"Liz... what...? You never told me," Cory laughs and turns around in her seat to see Liz' flushed cheeks.

"High five, girl!" Jenna still laughs. "So you gotta see him?"

"Yeah..." Liz' voice fumbles for the words. "He wanted me to... as he said, work the pipe," her cheeks turn red.

"Good god..." Jenna looks over her shoulder, laughing. "Was he like fifty or what? What a prick."

"I didn't. He got pissed," Liz smiles and explains the whole embarrassing situation.

"Best. Story. Today," Jenna brings the car in to a gas station.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Cory says. A hint of seriousness in her voice.

"I dunno... I just did, didn't I?"

"Girl's gotta have some secrets. Good thing you dumped that ass," Jenna turns the key, and the rumbling and gurgling V8 engine dies.

"Told you it was a good thing," Cory looks at Jenna. "What are you doing now? We should've been at Fred's house already."

"Relax, Barbie. I just need a pack of cigarettes."

As Jenna swings the car door shut, Cory calls her a bitch and reaches for the CD-player, skipping a track. Band of Horses' *The Great Salt Lake* comes on and Cory turns in her seat, sitting on her knees, looking at Liz who's correcting her bra under her blue t-shirt. Her mint green jacket is lying next to her in the back seat, together with a bottle of wine and something of the size of a blue-ray disc wrapped in gift paper. Rain starts blurring out the windows of the car.

"He hasn't sent me a message since this morning," Cory almost asks, flipping up her phone, then flipping it shut again. "Do you think he's coming?"

"I'm sure he is... It's Fred's birthday. I reckon Bob'll be there for his best friend's birthday, don't you?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Do you think Rick will be there?"

"He won't. I told Fred not to invite him, or I'd tell Lisa about that late football 'practice' he had."

"You're so mean..." Liz smiles at her and she smiles back at Liz.

"Hey! I'm doing it for you. I'll always be mean if it helps you."

"Not sure if that's a good thing."

Cory laughs.

The front door suddenly opens, and Jenna curses as she gets back in the car. Her dark wavy hair wet and fluffy from the rain.

"Shit, now I'll smell like a cow all night..." she mumbles as she tries to dust off the water on her black leather jacket.

"It's raining?" Cory asks before thinking, as she turns to sit correctly in her seat again.

Jenna turns the key and the engine comes alive. Then she looks at Cory with raised eyebrows.

"Nope, little sister. It's definitely not raining. There was a shower in the gas station, operated by a blue midget elf and I couldn't resist stepping under it, dancing with joy."

Jenna stares at Cory, who's too embarrassed to look at her and instead gives her the finger.

"You'll end up on Lamebook, smartass," Jenna smiles and steps on the gas pedal and the car screeches off the parking space and onto the road. Liz smiles at Jenna in the rear mirror and covers her mouth, trying not to giggle.

Several minutes go by without anyone saying anything. Jenna drives hard, turning the suburb corners with great precision and speed. Cory doesn't dare to say anything, still regretting opening her mouth the last time. Liz is watching Jenna's arm. The leather jacket creaking as Jenna shifts gear and creaks again as she moves her hand back on top of the wheel. *The Great Salt Lake* ends and the V8 gurgles through the soft rain up towards the Hills and Fred's house. His parents gone for the weekend.

"So late..." Cory mumbles disapprovingly.

"Fashionably late, girls. What everyone should be," Jenna tells them. "Right, Liz?"

Liz smiles at Jenna in the rear mirror. A moment passes in silence again, before Liz dares to break the steady roaring of the engine under the dark blue hood of the Mach 1 Mustang.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Me?" Jenna asks, yet knows the answer. "Yeah... I do. I got an asshole," she smiles.

"I think Brad's cute," Cory comments.

"Alright. I got a cute asshole boyfriend," Jenna corrects herself.

"So he's an asshole too...?"

"Of course he is, Liz. Everybody is. You just gotta find the cute ones, you know," Jenna smiles reassuringly as she glances over her shoulder. There's a moment of silence where Liz doesn't know why she asked and doesn't know how to continue. Jenna notices and continues.

"He's military, so he'll go back to the base after the weekend. I'm driving up to his house after I've dropped off you two princesses."

"How old is he?"

"Like me. Eighteen. But you should pick them older. That way you get more social intelligence on the bargain. Usually."

"I'll write that down in the *Jenna's hints & tips book*," Liz smiles.

"Hey! Are you making fun of me now?" Jenna looks in the rear mirror, trying to look angry.

"No."

They both laugh and Cory rolls her eyes, smiling.

"Take a left up here. It's the second house to the right," Cory instructs her sister.

"I know. I've slept with your crushy crush Bob in that house."

"Fuck you," Cory stares straight ahead.

"Relax. I'm joking," Jenna grins.

The dark blue car pulls into the drive way of a large three story house. A few teenage boys, all dressed in slacks, wide t-shirts and baseball caps, are standing on the porch about to enter the house. Music is booming out from the open door. A blonde handsome boy in jeans and a blue deep neck shirt comes out onto the porch after having let the other boys into the house. Behind him a tall dark boy leans in and whispers something to him.

"There's Fred and Bob. Remember the present, Liz," Cory says excited, before the car has stopped.

"How old are these pricks supposed to be?"

"Sixteen," Liz and Cory say simultaneously. Liz smiles, putting on the mint-coloured jacket. Cory is opening the door, about to step out, but Jenna touches her arm, still looking at the two teenage boys by the door.

"Jesus," Jenna mumbles.

"What is it?"

"Girls. No liquor. No puking. No kissing. No dancing. Okay?"

"Shut up," Cory gets out of the car, smiling to Liz.

They walk up to the two boys who are still whispering to each other.

"That's one badass ride your sister's got there," Bob hugs Cory, but can't take his eyes from Jenna sitting in the car.

"It's a car, Bob. Just a car," Cory says plainly.

Liz hands Fred the present and gives him a hug.

"Happy birthday. From me and Cory."

"Thanks," Fred takes the present and glances at the Mustang again.

"Hey, girls!" Jenna has her head out the window.

"Remember... they're all assholes!" she flashes the headlights and steps on the throttle, backing out of the drive way, tires screeching. Liz and Cory looks at each other, smiling.

Bob frowns and looks at Fred.

"Cute assholes," Cory whispers to Liz as they walk inside, into the booming music of the party. Mixing drinks, the smell of vomit from the downstairs bathroom, guys dancing on the table, their shirts off, moist with beer, tossed on the floor and two drunk girls making out and Liz hangs around Cory, who's trying her best to get Bob's attention and he finally kisses her and Fred and Lisa argue in the kitchen and she leaves and Liz has to comfort Fred and there's a broken window and Cory and Liz finds a taxi and the police arrive at the same time to end the party and Liz and Cory giggle all the way home to Cory and they surf through handsome guys on Facebook before they fall asleep and the night is eventually quiet.

7

A girl awakes, but her eyes stay shut. She feels her body moving, but it's not by her own accord. Someone is carrying her, holding their hands under her feet and neck, like one would carry a corpse or someone wounded, carrying her away with slow steps. The air smells dry and calm, yet feels like outside. She feels a fluid seeping down from her hair and clothes, but it doesn't feel fresh like water, more like dry mud, liquid by some chance. It's neither warm nor cold, and her clothes feel thin and ragged. She hears feet threading out of water and onto a dry and crispy ground. In the distance, muffled, as if through walls, come weak moaning, cries and harsh whispers.

She tries to remember where she might be. There's nothing she can place. A few glimpses of a room and a dark sky are all that stays. She concentrates harder. Still nothing to hold on to. She opens her mouth and wets her lips with her tongue, but it all feels dry like fine sandpaper. The arms holding her seem thin and bony, yet strong.

"Open your eyes," a whisper.

The girl tries to open her eye lids, but for some reason they stay shut. She tries again, harder, then brings a hand up to help. She forces one eye open, then the next. Pale light rushes at her, and she blinks for a second, squinting as her

eyes slowly gets used to the dim grey-yellow light. The shapes around her a blurred. Her fingers, the person holding her, the sky. All vague and unrecognizable. After a moment blinking and squinting her fingers become clearer, sharper, distinct. She moves her hand around slowly, bending and touching fingers with fingers. They look more like dry twigs than fleshy fingers and a sudden rush of fear seizes her, like the peak of a nightmare. The final rush that sends one out from the world of dreams and back to reality. Not this time.

The girl tries to speak, but stays her tongue as she sees the figure carrying her. The clothes ragged and torn. Several thin layers, though they seem heavy on the thin, skeletal body. The face hidden behind several grey veils. As the figure walks the contour of the face behind the veils reveals feminine lines. The girl swallows.

"Wh-- What is happening?"

The figure looks at her slowly, but raises her head after a moment, threading on. The girl stammers, but doesn't know what to say. A few more steps. The figure kneels down gently, lowering her down to the ground.

"I have carried you out of the river."

"What...?"

The figure stands up and is about to turn around and head down to the river again.

"Who are you?" the girl asks weakly. The figure leaves her.

"Where am I?" she shouts, now scared, not being held in the skeletal arms.

"Don't leave me..." she whispers. The figure stops and gazes over her shoulder.

"Patience, young girl," the skeletal veiled lady whispers and heads down and into the river.

The girl boils with a thousand questions but just getting an answer feels so reassuring that she doesn't say anything. Her eyes have adapted to the strange place and she watches as the lady figure wades into the dirty water of the river, looking more like moving, floating patches of dirt. The river is vast, and instead of an opposite embankment there's a dense fog, blurring out the horizon. Gazing up or down the river is the same. Never-ending water, never-ending grey indistinctness. Far away down the river there are what seems like people crawling out from the water and onto shore. Some stagger on, some slump down like shadows onto the dirt, lying there - maybe catching their breath - or simply giving up.

Suddenly the consistent groaning and voices in the background of her mind pushes forth and she slowly turns to see a dark tall structure where the sounds are coming from. The structure reaches up into the fog, or clouds, several hundred feet in the air and stretches down the embankment as far as the fog lets one see. The structure seems like a building, but the walls are indistinct and she cannot make out the curves, creases or depths in the blurry dark texture.

She's still sitting on the ground and stares up at the structure for several long moments. The sounds and voices are multi-layered, and she can only make out a few familiar words from the whispers and groaning and pleading. After listening to the voices and sounds for some time the monotonous flow blends into nothingness and she closes her eyes, wanting tears to roll down her cheeks, but they don't and she breathes heavy and shivers. She looks down at her hands, so strange, knowing they have looked different before, but cannot tell how, or place where before was or what before means. Her bony fingers touch her hands, up her arms and over the ragged and torn coat she's wearing, trying to feel something familiar. Feel something tangible. There's something inside the girl that tells her the coat should be wet from the river and instead it's flaky and dry, with dust and sand falling off like crumble and rocks from a rumbling steep volcano. Her mind travels. Sand and dirt. Her fingers dig into the ground. Dry dirt and sand. Volcano. Mountains. Tall, into the skies. The skies. Sun. The sun. The bright and warm sun. She looks up into the grey and bleak sky with a touch of yellow. There's no sun visible, no light source, just paleness. She touches her face, feeling the protruding jawbone, the hard cheekbones and the tiny nose. Her hair is sticky, yet crispy dry and not as long as she somehow expected. She runs her fingers through the dry hair and a memory pops up, but the image is so weak and vanishes before she can grasp it. She buries her face in her

hands, sobbing lightly. The air is silent, except for the monotonous voices from the dark structure. Then something hits her. A memory. A name. She chokes her sobs and waits a moment before saying it aloud, going over and over it inside her mind.

"Li-- Liz," she utters faintly.

"Liz."

"Eliz..." She opens her eyes slowly.

"Elisa... beth."

"Elisabeth. Elisabeth!" she speaks up.

"My... name. My name is Elisabeth," she whispers. "I was called Liz. Liz..." her spirits increase as she finally finds something familiar to grasp. An image of her face, of Elisabeth's warm, full and smiling face, appears in her mind and a faint somber smile creeps over her shaky, dry lips.

Suddenly she hears the staggering footsteps of a man, steadied by the veiled lady, coming out from the water and onto the shore. She holds him upright as he slumps beside her, dragging his feet forward. Liz's weak smile fades as the two figures approach her. The Lady steadies the man down on his knees next to Liz. He falls forward and steadies himself on his elbows, breathing in sobs.

"Wh- whe- where...?" he shivers faintly. Liz looks at him, frowning nervously. The Lady starts walking up the embankment.

"Hey! Lady..." Liz says louder than intended. The veiled head turns slowly.

"I... I remember my name..." she stammers.

"Then you can tell me your name, young girl," the Lady's voice is distant, yet sounds sincere.

"Elisabeth..."

"Welcome, Elisabeth. Now, I must go."

"Wait! Who is he?" Liz looks at the man who's trying to steady himself on to his knees with his hands.

"I do not know. I brought you out of the water together, for I sense a bond."

"What bond?"

"I cannot tell. You two will find out."

"You can't tell, or you don't know?"

She senses a smile under the veil, but the Lady says nothing and continues to wander.

"Hey! Aren't you going to help those people as well?" Liz points down the river at the faint figures crawling their way out from the dirty river.

"Help? You certain it was help now...?" the sound of the Lady's voice is close, even though her figure wanders away from them, towards the fog. "See you at the oracle, troubled ones."

Liz and the man gaze after the figure now diminishing up the river, eventually disappearing into the fog. She looks at the man, who's looking at his skeletal fingers and hands, his face bewildered.

"I'm... I'm not me," he whispers, touching his bony face.

"Are you okay?" Liz gets to her feet and a dizziness stays for a few moments.

"I... I..." he looks up at her with a pleading smile. "I don't know."

"I'm Elisabeth, but you can call me Liz," she extends her bony hand and he hesitates before shaking it lightly.

"I..." he frowns, looking back at the river. "I'm Gast... on. Gaston. Yeah. My name is Gaston."

"You remembered it, too," Liz smiles. "What else do you remember?"

"Uh... nothing, I think. I don't know. It's all blank," he stares up at her as if awaiting some reassuring explanation for all this. There is none.

He looks up into the hazy clouds.

"Where are we?"

"I have no clue," she looks around.

"What did she mean 'the oracle'?"

"Dunno."

Gaston closes his eyes and staggers to his feet. Dust falls off his heavy torn coat as if he'd been sitting on his knees for several years, like an antique statue, hidden away in a corner, gathering dust. He looks down at Liz, trying to sound positive.

"An oracle... is a person, or deity or spirit or - anything, really - that has answers."

"Okay...?" she gathers her tainted, black coat tight, looking at him.

"I certainly have many questions," he looks around. "So I think we should go there."

"I want to go home," she says blankly, without thinking.

Both of them freeze for a bit as the word stays in the air around them, lingers in their minds. Gaston stares at the dark structure with an empty expression, thinking of something completely different than the looming threatening wall.

"I remember..." he whispers. "I remember... home. I had a wife. Her name was... it was... Sh... Sheila. Sheila. Her name was Sheila and... and we had a daughter. Our daughter. Mary. Mary..." His voice breaks and he takes a deep quivering breath.

"I don't know why I use the word 'had'. I... I..." he frowns with sad eyes and a sigh escapes him. Liz doesn't dare to say anything. Doesn't dare tell him she cannot remember her home, her family. If she ever had a home, or a family. Yet 'home' feels so familiar in the back of her mind and she feels a lump in her throat rise, but tries to quench the first sob.

"Come... we must go somewhere, we can't just stay here," he suggests weakly after a few moments. He takes a few steps towards the dark structure and she follows behind, not knowing what to really do or say. They come up to the wall and the texture is dry and patchy, as if it might crumble any minute. The wall surface doesn't feel anything like wood as he brings his palm over the rugged material.

"It's not wood... but it's organic, I think," he says over his shoulder. Liz comes up next to him and traces her finger along some protruding lumps and creases. Dust and bits fall off like ash from burnt wood.

"It's like ash," she looks up at Gaston. "But these parts are solid," she knocks lightly on the protruding creases and bulges. The groaning and voices have melted into their minds a long time ago, and none of them really take any notice of them.

"Looks like bones," he says and removes his hand. She quickly retracts her fingers.

"Ewwh!"

"Listen," he gazes up at where the structure mixes with the foggy clouds.

"Yes, I know," she says.

"They're inside. The voices. They're coming from inside," he takes a few steps back, searching for an opening on the huge wall. Liz looks at him, her face revealing her fear, and she backs away from the wall.

"What is this place?" she whispers.

"I don't know."

"Where are we?" her voice trembling. Gaston looks at her.

"Let's follow the river. There has to be an opening through the wall somewhere," he places his skeletal fingers on her shoulder and tries to smile at her, ease her fear.

"Okay..." she whispers and they start walking down the shoreline, staying a few meters away from the dark looming wall.

"I think we are dead..." Liz says softly after a few moments.

Gaston looks down at her, trying to seem amused by the assumption, but a dread fills his mind as the words echo in his head.

"We're dead... and this is Hell," she says, looking straight ahead.

"Or, we're in paradise," he suggest, managing to smile down at her. Ironically, a weak smile form on her lips. They walk on, with faint smiles in their bony faces. Two strangers in a strange place.