The Death of Mr. Kaffeemann

Dorit Paul

I had met Mr. Kaffeemann that summer in St. Moritz. At the Cafe Hanselmann, to be exact. I was spending that last summer before my Ph. D. in Europe, and was in St. Moritz visiting two Swiss aunts. We stayed at the Suvretta Haus, where my aunts always stayed. They were the type of elderly ladies, often met in Europe, who stayed at the very cheapest rooms in the very best hotels. One was a widow, the other a "maiden lady", though to look at them you could not tell which was which: they were both the prototype of the spinster aunt. The widow, Aunt Louisa, was always on the look-out for a suitor for the other, Aunt Matilde, and took it as her prerogative as a widow to speak on every occasion to strange men whom she considered suitable. Thus we met Mr. Kaffeemann.

We had seen him at the Cafe several times; Aunt Louisa always recognized a man she considered eligible, although I personally thought he appeared much too young for Aunt Matilde. One day, espying Mr. Kaffeemann all alone at a table, Aunt Louisa firmly steered us over to him, despite the fact that there were a few empty tables available. In due course, over her Eclaire, she started a conversation, and as she boldly and directly drew him out we soon discovered that the gentleman was a Mr. Kaffeemann, a bachelor, a bankier from Zurich, and that he stayed not in St. Moritz but in Celerina, the next town down the mountain.

"You see," he said, in his breathless manner, the words rushing after each other as if afraid if they lingered too long in his mouth they would be swallowed, "I have a slight heart condition, and the altitude in St. Moritz is really much too high for me. Now Celerina lies considerably lower, and I can sleep quite comfortably there. And in the afternoon, I walk over to St. Moritz and have my coffee here, and view the beau monde. Or rather, what's left of it these days in the summer."

Realizing he had made an unkind remark precipitously, he jerked up and reddened until Aunt Louisa assured him she agreed, that there was no one here these days but passing tourists.

"We have had nothing but trouble keeping our nephew here for only two tiny weeks," she confided to him, "not even the marvelous view and scenery here seem to help detain him, not to speak of us."

We met Mr. Kaffeemann regularly from then on, and he and I became good friends. He was in the early fifties, but like most Swiss magnificently preserved, lean, with a shock of black hair falling in his eyes much too boyishly for his age.

We became quite confidential one day as we were walking to the Meierei, a farm converted into a restaurant, which Aunt Louisa considered more romantic than the town cafes. I knew she looked with disfavor on our walking ahead, but she could not catch up with
his long, nervous strides, and was too dignified to call after us. I, for my part, was much too engrossed in our conversation to change the situation, and so we raced on ahead. I had asked him why, if he could not take the altitude well, he came here at all. He could not go on any of the mountain excursions, for which I had persuaded myself he was up here. Also, Celerina, after all, was not that much lower.

"Ah, but I am a Swiss," he stated, "and as such I feel an inner coercion, a kind of moral duty, to go to the mountains. Actually, I am afraid of them, "he whispered as if it were a heresy, "I am primarily a swimmer. I like the warm oceans or the large lakes. But of course, the water in the lake here is much too cold for me; I would get an attack if I went in, to be sure."

"But surely there are other places in the mountains," I said, and begged him to speak more slowly, as my understanding of German was beginning to lag behind his speech like my aunts behind us, "Wegen, or Gstaad, are only a thousand meters. And as I recall, there are pools.

He silenced me with a sweep of his hand. "I will tell you why, Richard," he said in a conspiratorial tone and took me by the arm. "I have told this to no one, but you Americans inspire confidence. I don't know why; you are a race apart. I once went to a dentist while I was in New York on business, and the first thing his nurse asked me was whether I slept with my mouth open. Who would ask such an intimate question here? Unthinkable! But I will tell you. It is the danger that attracts me here. A place that is low, and has just a pool—what is a pool for a swimmer?—would be so dull. Here there is always a chance, a risk for me. I might, one day, be tempted to go up one of these mountains, or into the lake, or one year even Celerina might be too high. You see, I am courting danger at every step up here. It adds, how shall I say, it adds life. And then, yes, why not admit it to you, I am a masochist. Basically I love the sea and hate the mountains, but it gives me a pleasure to come here and deprive myself as it were. It is all very strange, but no matter how reasonably I talk to myself, up here I go just the same. Every year."

"You should have a wife to look after you," I foolishly suggested, unnerved by the sudden unloosening of the floodgates of his reserve. "Ah, but I am not a lady's man," he retorted. "Even your Aunt Matilde, violet-like as she is, has noticed that. And my life is sufficiently complex: there is no room for women in it anymore. But come, don't worry so," he said encouragingly, mistaking my thoughtful expression for one of pity, "in September I shall go to Lugano, and swim all day in the lake. You see, I am not so bad, really; I come here only a few weeks each year, and then I compensate myself for it. In September I shall lose myself in my love, the Lugano See, like some fool would lose himself in a woman. Only," he added in a lower tone, "it is much easier to leave a lake."
We had many more confidential talks. I was, at that time before my emergence from the groves of ivy into the forests of the world, in great turmoil as to life, as to what one was to do with it. The subject naturally led him to emit his views, as if, once the barrier between us had been lowered, there seemed no way or need ever to raise it again.

"Life," he expounded on our daily walk in the maze of paths between Celerina and St. Moritz, "is dull, it goes its way, asking to be let alone, and leaving you alone, also. Your aunts, for example, accord with this perfectly. But if you have the courage, you can pick life up and forge it, and make it do what you wish. It is indifferent, and will ignore you if let alone; you have the choice to attack it or not. Every time I go to the mountains I attack it, I challenge life to do something to me, and whether it does or not, just the challenge is a glorious thing. By doing that I live, as you Americans say, in capital letters. At home I am a bankier; but not one of those glamorous figures you read about, who regulate the foreign market and fix prices, but a plain, ordinary banker, hardly more than a teller. That is something, is it not, to live in the capital of the international money market, and be a bankier, yet not have a thing to do with it? But that is life, unless you attack it, and frankly, on a daily basis, the fight is too hard for me. So I reserve my challenges for the few weeks in the summer that I come up here. You think it sad, really, do you not, you think I am an old man with stupid illusions? But I am not: I am a realist. Otherwise I would not tell you the things I do, for I could not see them, I would delude myself, tell you I am here for my health, when, you see, I am not. Not really, as you know."

He ceased and wiped his forehead, for the conversation together with the uphill walk had left him quite heated.

Once again, but delicately, I led the conversation to the subject of women, and asked him why he had never married.

"But how can you picture me married?" he asked incredulously. "What kind of woman could I get? Some dull, ordinary woman, who shudders at life like I do for eleven months of the year? And what would I do with her during the one month I really live? Or, if I took an adventuress, a woman exotic as heady perfume, what would she do with me once we came home? No, I can never marry. One kind would strangle me with her incapacity ever to live, the other would rub me against life until I was quite erased. And women fall either into one category or the other, quite unconsciously, they are not aware of it: they are much too busy being women to notice the difference. So you see, I am a bachelor, and amuse your aunts, and give them unfounded hopes that perhaps life can change for them without their raising a finger to challenge it."

The next day after this conversation he left, as he had planned. Naturally we exchanged addresses, and I knew this was one summer acquaintance whose name I would not merely write in address book and then forget. I even took the name of his hotel in Lugano, in case I should change my mind and go there.
So he left me to ponder on what he said. I had realized by now that the reason he challenged life, or thought he did, was to be admired, to be thought of as a person apart, a person aware. I believe what he really aimed at, and just lacked the courage for, was to do one glorious thing, to build a mountain of his own, as it were, which he could leave behind him as a monument. He had been living with this for a long time now; I wondered if he would reach this step of awareness, and when he did, if he would do his glorious thing, and really take life into his forge and fashion it. Although it might prove disastrous for him, I hoped he would.

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After a few days the woman began to disturb me. She had not impressed me very much at first. I could not, and still do not, think of her as a person, a separate entity. The more we became acquainted, the less individuality she assumed. I could see Cybele as nothing but the emblem of sex. And I could see, too, the fascination which held Mr. Kaffeemann; I was beginning to feel the same, and it disturbed me.

Gradually I also became aware of what made Mr. Kaffeemann appear so changed. Previously he had always talked with great verve but done nothing. Now the passion of his speech had seized his whole body. He was constantly active. We never just walked, as in St. Moritz: we always went someplace. We took the lake excursion, we sailed over to Campione, we drove to Villa d'Este, to Ascona, to Locarno, we went in the funicular up San Sebastian. And when nothing else was planned, we swam strenuously in the lake. Mr. Kaffeemann seemed a man consumed by fever, attended by the woman like a slow shadow from another world.

He did all this not only because the fire of his life which had so long been smoldering placidly was now enraged to flame, but also because he wanted to show off before the woman. I was aware of this because I also caught myself trying to show off for her. I did not consciously want to steal my friend's mistress, but I found myself talking louder than he, walking faster, and swimming longer and further out. It was as if I was compelled to prove my greater virility by such devious acts since I could not do the one act my senses longed for.

How much Cybele was aware of this I don't know; she wore her eternal smile like a sphinx. It infuriated me that Mr. Kaffeemann knew the answers to her riddle, and I did not. What he thought of the competition I don't know either. He may have been too much in love to see it clearly; at all events his manner towards me did not change.

He often talked of her. One day, out of pure hatred for the unattainable, I dared to criticize his liaison. We were in his room changing into our swim trunks.

"Are you really sure Cybele is good for you? You seem to become more and more submerged in her."
"My dear Richard," he said incredulously, "am I sure that I am living? Never have I known life before. I had touched it sometimes perhaps, by daring the mountains, but I never seized it, never held it in my hands, really, and forged it to my liking. With Cybele my life has assumed stature. I was a little puddle on the ground; now I am grown into a very mountain." He was silent a moment to savor this revelation. "Yes, a mountain. My life is about to become a monument. With Cybele I shall achieve great things—I feel it. As to being submerged, this is the very first time I am not merged in with all that is commonplace, in the nothingness that results when life is indifferent. Cybele to me is all I want. Not all there is, you understand, but everything I want. There, you see, lies the difference. By getting what I want, I become a man of action, a doer of great things. Thereby I live, as distinct from exist. No, Richard my friend, I am not submerged; I submerge everything unto me. Oh, I could talk to you about this miracle forever. All I do now has purpose, leads upward, leads to fulfillment." Intoxicated, he paused in rapture. It took him some moments to return to earth. Then his tact asserted itself.

"But come, we can talk of this some other time. You are waiting to go swimming, and it's getting late."

We went downstairs. Cybele was waiting for us on the hotel porch which overlooked the little beach. She never went swimming with us, but watched from her chair. She would move it close to the railing, so that she looked either to the right or left of the hotel. Whichever direction she faced was the one in which we swam. Today she was turned to the left, towards town.

"I'm sorry we kept you waiting," Mr. Kaffeemann said.

She smiled. Her smile was not a quick movement of the mouth that revealed a flash of teeth; it was an expression that spread over her face, illuminating, not jarring, her dark features. "I never mind waiting for you."

"Then watch us swim. To-day I shall swim out for you further than ever before," Mr. Kaffeemann said exultantly.

"As you wish," she murmured. He kissed her on the forehead, and then ran down to the beach.

It was already late in the afternoon, and no one was in the water but us. Mr. Kaffeemann was already far ahead of me. I turned back and took one of the little paddle boats and decided to soak up the last of the sun.

"It's foolish to try and show off for her," I thought, "she's completely indifferent to it anyway."

I paddled off in the opposite direction from Mr. Kaffeemann. I was angry and lost in thought. Suddenly I was startled by a long, foggy whistle. It was the afternoon steamboat from Campione. I had noticed it in the distance when we first went into the water. Now it was already beyond me, heading for the dock.
The dock was near the hotel, towards town. Abruptly I realized that the steamer did not toot until it was practically upon the dock, and that Mr. Kaffeemann must be somewhere in its path. I turned the raft around and saw with horror the splashing in the water in front of the boat. I shouted “Mr. Kaffeeman! Mr. Kaffeemann!” but the whistle drowned my voice. The boat veered off course, but Mr. Kaffeemann had changed direction also. His bobbing dark head was so pitifully small next to the black hull of the steamer. It was too late for him to turn again; he would have to cross in front of the steamer. The boat was slowing down and raised a great turbulence in the water. I saw the spot that was Mr. Kaffeemann on the side of the boat. He seemed to have cleared it. But no! The braking of the large paddle wheels had created a backwash, a small whirlpool. Into this he was sucked relentlessly, and the last I saw of him was a small dot, disappearing in the confusion of the churning water by the monsterous wheels. Then the steamer resumed its course and proceeded to dock.

It was like a dream. I was still paddling away on my raft, and kept on to the dock. A minor official met me there. He whisked me away from the debarking passengers, who appeared to have been completely unaware of the tragedy. I overheard someone remark on the inept landing.

The minor official conveyed to me in a mixture of excited Italian and German that the whole incident was very regrettable, very regrettable indeed. One could not really blame the captain. A swimmer is such a small spot in the water, and besides, he was way beyond the safety markers. He had no business there, and had to look out for boats himself. Would I please keep my mouth shut and come to the company’s office in the morning; in the meantime they would send out a motor launch immediately to see if they could find anything.

I went with them on the launch. We cruised around uselessly until it was dark, but found not a trace. Mr. Kaffeemann was submerged totally in the calm waters of the lake.

They told me the police would come and dredge the area. The minor official again asked me to be quiet. This had never happened before, and might give the company a bad name. They let me off near the hotel and I had to swim the rest of the way.

Cybele was still waiting on the porch. She had not seen what happened, she had only noticed I went to the dock. With mild curiosity she inquired where Mr. Kaffeemann was.

I told her, while I stood wet and shivering on the porch. I told her in every minute, cruel detail.

“I see,” she said tonelessly and did not smile. Then she sent me upstairs. I did not see her the rest of the evening.

The next day we went to the police. They had found the body very quickly. He would now have to be buried on land, instead of lying softly in the waters of the lake.
At the steamship company we were again told it was very regrettable, but not really their fault. There was nothing they could do now. At Cybele's insistence, I left it at that. On the way back to the hotel she gave her one judgement of Mr. Kaffeemann.

"He was a very foolish man, but a very good one. He believed in himself."

I left the next day for Zurich to make arrangements for the funeral. Cybele did not know yet if she ought to go herself and meet his family. We said we hoped we would meet again. Thus was the death of Mr. Kaffeemann, builder of monuments.

Beyond the Wall

John Robert Foutty

"Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question."

Paul sauntered down the street, kicking the clumps of grass growing in the cracks in the pavement. He wished that he lived near the schoolhouse, and he wanted to run home, but he was afraid the others would notice. Several children shouted behind him and he winced, digging his hands deep in his pockets the way he did when everyone chose sides during recess period. The schoolbooks slipped from under his arm, and he wanted to let them fall, leaving them there on the sidewalk. He straightened the books with his free arm and walked on. The sidewalk was almost obscured by weeds so thick they seemed to grow from the cement. The other children had all turned into their homes, and Paul relaxed, stopped peering at the sidewalk, and gazed at the giant sycamore at the end of the street. Grey clouds filtered the light through jagged gaps, and the patchwork bark peeling from the trunk of the tree gave glints of white, purple, and gray in a shifting haze. The branches seemed to be great arms lashing out from the heavy body of the trunk; as if in pain from the great flesh-colored fungus encircling its base. He stepped from the last broken slab of the sidewalk and moved toward the tree, shivering as the tall grass brushed against his trousers.

The clouds became thinner and broke up into uneven shapes as Paul walked into the shadow of the tree. A milkweed snapped in his path, and the juice ran down the shattered stalk like thick white blood oozing from a severed vein. He reached up and stripped the last gray leaves from an overhanging branch, uncovering the winter buds beneath. They were red and smooth, like the spurs on a bird's leg. The branches appeared to be gigantic rough claws now that he had revealed the buds, and as he heard a rustling high in the tree, he dropped his books and ran, stumbling over the uneven ground.

"If I can only reach the fence," he thought. "Then I'll be safe. Can't even see my house from here."

Bushes tore at his clothes, and his jacket and trousers were covered with mud where he had fallen, but he kept on until he saw