

Excerpt from *Picnic in Darkness* by Markus Orth

Translated from the German by Lucy Jones

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Darkness, all-engulfing, complete darkness. No matter where he turned, Stanley couldn't see a thing. He had no idea where he was or how he'd got there. He screwed up his eyes as if trying to focus, but anything he might have been able to see was shrouded in the deepest pitch black. The darkness was so thick, dense and impenetrable that he had the feeling he was breathing it in, that it was seeping slowly into him from the outside. Stanley stretched out his arms and hoped he would come up against something that would give him support and direction: but there was nothing there. His fingers stuck out like feelers into empty space. He sank to his knees and swept his hands over the ground: there was a flat, even floor, man-made to the touch and as smooth and cold as steel. Stanley searched for some grit, dirt, fluff or dust, but there was nothing except for the eerie spotlessness of the bare surface as if it'd been smoothed out with a spirit level. He stood up again and patted himself down: he seemed to be wearing a coarse suit, perhaps the brown one he wore in films, as well as a shirt, waistcoat, shoes, socks and a bow tie, and his bowler hat. Although his film partner Oliver Hardy had died years ago, and Stanley knew that Ollie couldn't ever answer him again, Stanley felt the need to call out his friend's name. He immediately gave in to this impulse and shouted: 'Ollie! Ollie!' which sounded strangely muffled and dry like a crow cawing. He listened to his own voice in the bizarre hope that he'd hear a reply – one of those answers he'd so often heard in their films together, whether Ollie excitedly hissed "Pssst! Pssst!", or said his favourite catchphrase: 'Well, here's another fine mess you've gotten me into.' No, Stanley had no idea what fine mess he was in right now, but when his voice came back to him, unintercepted and unanswered, that's when he knew that he was alone in this fine mess: completely and utterly alone.

The longer he stayed where he was, the heavier the darkness felt, and Stanley had an inkling that it wouldn't disappear as long as he stood there. He had to and wanted to get away from here. His first

step was shaky. Stanley flailed his arms and swayed, then turned all his attention to the ground beneath his feet: the uncertainty of where to step made his chest tighten. Although Stanley only made very slow progress, it seemed as if his thoughts were trailing even further behind. He had a strange, pillowy feeling behind his temples, just as if his mind was buried in feathers. He managed to quash the questions crowding in on him, and it only occurred to him with a delay that he should turn left. He abruptly turned left. Five paces later, his fingers brushed a wall, and the wall was just as smooth as the floor beneath his feet. Stanley ran his hands over the wall for a while: to the side, up and down. It arched slightly above his head. He stood on tiptoe but couldn't reach the ceiling. Not even if he jumped up with outstretched arms.

'Hello?' he called out again and banged his fists against the wall, first gently, then more and more violently, but his hammering could barely be heard.

'Is anyone there?'

No answer.

Stanley pressed his ear to the wall: nothing, not even the slightest noise. He rummaged through his suit but only found a pocket-handkerchief in the outside top pocket and a ballpoint pen in the inner breast pocket. Leaning against the wall, Stanley stood and thought for a long time before taking a breath and slowly feeling forwards from the wall. After a few paces, his hands grazed a second wall. He took off his bowler hat and scratched his scalp. So, it was a tunnel. Perhaps four or five metres wide. An even floor. Probably a ceiling above his head. He seemed to be in a tube cut in half and everything lay swallowed in darkness without the tiniest glimmer of light.

Stanley put his bowler hat back on, fumbled with his bow tie, raised his eyebrows, grinned and spread his arms in a gesture of utter helplessness and bafflement. He was imitating his film character, Stan: *I don't know anything, haven't the foggiest what's going on here, not now, nor in life in general. But it doesn't matter, because uncertainty always calms me down a bit.*

He was surprised that he didn't feel more afraid. But not only were his thoughts muffled; his emotions were too, like an echo, a shadow or an aftertaste, lacking the full strength and reach of real feelings. But one thing was sure, or so he thought: *If I keep walking, I'll surely reach the light! If I keep going forwards, sooner or later everything will become clear. Anything else is inconceivable.* He briefly contemplated which direction he should set off in, narrowed his eyes, turned back and forth, could not discern a difference, shrugged, placed his palms on the wall to his right and set off.

Where were all these memories coming from? All of sudden, jerkily and without warning? Silver fireworks exploding in his head. Stanley let out a sigh because these memories gave him a sense of relief; yes, he well and truly clung to them, as they gave him a velvety feeling of familiarity, of coming home. He abandoned himself to what passed slowly before his inner eye: images, experiences, thoughts and moods from distant times. His lifelong passion for pulling faces, for example. The hours spent tirelessly practising every day in front of the mirror for one reason alone: to make people laugh. Or his role model Charlie Chaplin, and the actor's lovable tramp who roamed through a world turned upside down, getting into farcical situations and exposing life's absurdity, countering it with nothing but pure goodness. And then how young Stanley imitated Chaplin, playing in England and America, getting people to laugh by impersonating someone different from him, and the way Stanley eventually shed his Chaplin cocoon, eventually stood in front of the camera as himself, and looked for his own means of expression, an inimitable character that would immortalise him, just like Chaplin. Stanley too would have loved to have been a clown who made people smile even just by seeing him; he too would have loved to have put a smile on people's faces, to lift them out of the monotony of their lives, like a twist in a dance, to make them forget, if only for a brief moment, life's poisonous barbs. But Stanley couldn't find an inimitable character. All the ones he played were too different. Stanley didn't stick in people's memories. His face faded away with the closing credits like a strange, easily forgotten scent.

He was tormented by his failure as a mime artist, and, devastated at his lack of success, he gave up acting, chased by a stale joke made by the black-and-white film producer, Hal Roach: 'Your eyes are

too blue for film, Mr Laurel.' And Stanley escaped behind the camera and became a gag writer. An inventor of jokes. Wasn't that an even bigger talent? Thinking up funny scenes, with a feel for timing and setting up a gag; creating all kinds of situation in which people could bump into each other at high speed, have cream pies thrown in their faces or take part in endless tit-for-tat – yes, the orderly work as a gag writer and director gave him a way out.

And Stanley's name would have probably faded forever into the background of closing credits, had it not been for an unexpected event. His friend Oliver Hardy had told the story so often that it had long since become one of his own memories and he could picture it vividly: Oliver Hardy's wife was hiking in the mountains of Santa Monica in the Laurel Canyon, of all places, when she saw a rattlesnake, tumbled head over heels and rolled several times down the steep track, tearing the ligaments in her right leg, making her bedridden and needing crutches for quite some time, which in turn meant that Oliver Hardy had to take over the household work and, while roasting a leg of lamb once evening, he slipped as he was taking the crispy joint of meat out of the oven, in a grotesque anticipation of his later slapstick performances, and the hissing oil burned his thumb through the oven glove – because the oil really was hot oil, not cold, greasy water like on the film sets – which meant that Ollie wasn't able to act in the film that was due to be shot shortly afterwards.

And that changed everything.

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Stanley stopped. He thought he had heard a noise. He listened out: no, everything was quiet. There were no nuances to the darkness, nothing about it that his eyes could get used to. It wasn't the kind of darkness that got the slightest bit lighter after a while. No, the darkness remained impenetrably dark. Only now did it occur to him that he might have gone blind. Stanley wiggled his fingers right in front of his face until they touched his nose. But it made no difference. He couldn't see any lighter or darker outlines, whereas the blind could make out light reflections behind their eyelids, such as

shadows and sunrays. Stanley, however, saw absolutely nothing. Just darkness, all-engulfing, complete darkness, which came from the outside, not from within. Suddenly his hands jerked upward as if of their own accord: his fingers spread across his forehead and his thumbs blocked his ears, and now Stanley could neither see nor hear. He shuddered, quickly took his thumbs out of his ears again, clapped and breathed a sigh of relief, comforted to hear the dull sound his hands made.

And the memories? Had he been trying to distract himself? From the long path ahead? From uncertainty? From the darkness? From the question: How had he ended up here in the first place? In this room lacking any light whatsoever? What the hell was going on here anyway?

He had to think. Take his time. Like in *County Hospital* when his character Stan entered the ward in which a nightgowned Ollie lay in bed, his plastered leg winched into the air by a grotesque apparatus.

Stan: I brought you some hard-boiled eggs and some nuts.

Ollie: Now you know I can't eat hard-boiled eggs and nuts.

Stan raised his eyebrows; every thought seemed to have been swept away, and because he didn't know what to do and because there was nothing he and his friend could talk about, Stan reached into the brown paper bag and took out one of the eggs, sat down, took his time, and peeled, salted and ate the egg, and that was it. The egg-peeling and egg-eating routine was torturously slow, taking almost two whole minutes, and Stanley told the director that comedy in everyday situations had to be developed at leisure, had to be savoured. The director shook his head and called Stan a bloodsucker and exploiter. No, said Stanley, the slow pace was necessary so that you could switch up the tempo at some point to the breakneck speed of slapstick. Slapstick was a truncheon, the jester's cudgel in a Punch and Judy show. 'The jester doesn't keep on bashing his stick. He has to take a deep breath now and then, you see?'

But the longer Stanley remained in the darkness and took his time, the more he lost all feeling of himself. If he stood still, the darkness advanced on him from all sides, encroaching on and encircling him. No, standing still in this place did not feel good, and Stanley slapped himself across the face a

couple of times, struck his thigh with his fist, just so he could feel himself, to check that he was still there and the darkness hadn't completely swallowed him. No, anything was better than standing still: after a while, there was a swampy quality to the darkness, as if he were being slowly and noiselessly sucked in by warm mouths.

Stanley felt his way forward. The wall at his side gave him support and a feeling for the space. He thought of taking off his shoes and socks so that he could feel the floor underfoot, but who knew what pointed things were lurking on the dark path. No, Stanley kept his shoes on and shook his head at these strange thoughts. Then he whistled some ditty that went through his head, a silly tune, a children's song in the night. This calmed him down a little: whistling, his shoes scuffing along, his hand on the wall, his other arm swinging by his side. With each step, his courage grew. What choice did he have? He had to walk, keep going and hope to reach an exit.

Perhaps, he suddenly thought, it would be good to switch up the tempo here too, from slow to fast, just take a risk, why not? *If I run*, he thought, *I'm sure to reach the light sooner*. He gave himself a little shake and set off at a run. Stanley didn't sprint and didn't jog: he ran at the same speed and heard his panting steps. Although he kept one hand on the wall and stretched the other one out in front to prevent him from crashing into possible obstacles, his new hurtling speed had something unstoppable about it. Stanley simply rushed headlong into the blackness. His eyes didn't get used to the dark in the least, but the longer he ran, the more Stanley got used to his situation and soon he'd lost his initial worry that he might trip over something in the way.

But all of a sudden, that's exactly what happened: Stanley tripped.

His knee bashed something hard, large, gigantic even, on the floor in front of him close to the wall. Stanley got caught up and fell forward head over heels, broke his fall with his hands and rolled over his shoulder onto his back. That's exactly how stuntmen had taught him to fall properly. Now he was lying on the floor. His bowler hat had come off. Stanley felt for it, quickly found it and put it back on.

Neither his knees or his palms hurt. He sat up and dusted off his suit – cleaning off dust that wasn't there.

'Hello?' he said to the thing he had tripped over because he sensed that the thing was a person.

Stanley didn't receive a reply. He heard breathing.

On all fours – no, on all threes, because he held one hand out like a feeler as he crawled – Stanley approached whatever it was. Finally, he found it. Stanley felt a leg, a knee stretched out under some kind of nightgown. So there really was a person crouching in front of him. Stanley jumped back.

'Who are you?' he asked.

No reply.

The other person was sitting against the tunnel wall, quietly sniffing. Stanley was powerless to resist: rather than being afraid, he felt irresistibly drawn to this other person. Someone who shared his fate, someone who was stuck in here with him, someone who meant that Stanley was no longer alone, whom he could talk to and who might be able to reveal where they were and what was going on.

Stanley sat down very close next to the giant. He could literally feel that this person was fat. It was strange, hunkering down next to someone he couldn't see. The sound of breathing changed a little. Perhaps the other person had turned his head towards him? Stanley listened out and his own breathing changed to suit the other's; for a while, they both breathed in time, in and out, strangely synchronised.

'I'm Arthur Stanley Jefferson,' said Stanley at last. 'Better known as Stan Laurel.'

Nothing.

'I only got here a few minutes ago.'

No reply.

'At least I think so.'

Silence.

'I mean, it feels like that.'

Not a sound.

'Do you understand?'

When there was still no reply, Stanley held his breath, stretched out a hand, felt for the body again, found a huge shoulder wrapped in a cloak-like garment, a head covered in a smooth cap pulled up to the ears, a broad face as flat as a pancake, a stubby beard (a man!) and then he inched even closer, ran a hand across the other man's chest and felt the immense bulk of his body. Then the other man grabbed his lower arm with a firm, steady grip and Stanley didn't move until the pressure eased and the fingers let him go. He felt the man's eyes on him in the dark.

Stanley pulled back slightly.

The other man no longer reacted.

'Ollie?' Stanley asked. 'Is that you, Ollie?... Where are we? ... Why won't you say anything? ... It can't be you, Ollie ... I'm sorry ... I couldn't come ... to your funeral ... I was ill at the time ... I don't know why I'm thinking of you ... right here ... of all places.'

No, Stanley thought to himself, the man next to him couldn't be Ollie, it mustn't be Ollie, no way, it had to be someone else. Anyone, just not Ollie. Because if Oliver Hardy was sitting next to him, Stanley would be stuck in the same fine mess as his friend, and this mess was nothing other than what was commonly called *death* and Stanley didn't feel like that at all, he could do without it. Very well, in fact.

Nothing else happened. The other man remained silent. So did Stanley. He just squatted there. And through the silence, memories wafted. Like bright, gentle veils in his mind.