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Happy are those who have been endowed with the gift of memory.

Maybe God was too generous with us humans when He gave the gift of memory to his creations. We've forgotten why. We think of the original sin only when we are in a predicament. Some people – who managed to make investigations – say that certain animal species have also received this inestimable grace. Of course, it is quite possible but only moderately, in a way, according to the needs for survival. And if in the fight for survival some of them dig tunnels, or build fortresses or other defensive barriers for protecting themselves, they are not intended for deterrence or constructed out of grievances either. Such a wicked thought is out of question and can only flash into the mind of the wolf in the fable about him and the lamb, but even the child knows that in that sheep's clothing a future tyrant is hidden. We are all like him, and we are more than contented, for we have more of the goods of the mind in our satchel that was neither more beautiful nor larger than that of the others. In this respect, therefore, we have no reason to open our mouths for complaints, and, indeed, we do not do that. Instead, our bosoms swell with satisfaction, because our fellow-tenants, the inhabitants of the sea, the earth, and the air, do not even cast this disproportionate share up against us. That is why we can engrave with impunity the words of true or false reminiscence in stone, on the blades of bloody steel, on the skin of a weak bellied lamb for thousands of years already. Our inclination for selective remembering could have sprouted from this experience only, and being pleased with it, we ourselves sowed the seeds, thus it could have sprung up before our eyes, while we ourselves bred it to showy perfection.

And if anyone is not quite sure about it, let me put it down firmly: most of the historians belong also to this category, and therefore let us not

distress ourselves if sometimes the devil of partiality shoots out his tongue at us. A man of insight usually knows what is true, but what is the use of it after all? His recollections have the value of a memoir only, and it is just the collective memory that may interfere with the writing of history. But only in case, and in an exceptional situation, if he was able to tear a piece out of the time that was ploughed overhead, and thus to obtain permission for documenting the things that happened. So, the roles are also interpreted by them, the winners, and the literary property is also theirs of course.

And what shall be the consolation of the losers? Let them come to terms with the fact that the conglomerate of their life and experience will not become history. At best, it will become family legend, but after all that is not very bad either because if everything is all right, it still may become authentic and noble unwritten history. Oral tradition reminds one of the past, while educates and anchors one in the present, but it requires descendants who are willing to listen and grasp the legacy of their ancestors. But this is not so easy either. What we hear for the first time is usually filtered through memory already, and since most of the stories come out of everyday situations, they tend to meander back there, escaping attention. But we consider repetition the key to knowledge, so we should make use of it. Let the teaching be instructive and useful, and let attention be steady when the mouths of the old folks utter words that should be remembered. Of course, the linguistic ability of the speaker bringing the past events to life is not negligible either. If he/she can capture the attention of the listeners, he/she is halfway home. This statement is acutely true if the memoir is about the war, POWs or Gulag camps, but in the absence of a more prestigious tale it can be about the turns of one's life course, the admitted ugly downfalls of the family founder, or even his or her memorable rise, since after some time these episodes will be the cornerstones of many family histories.

While repairing the roof of my house some time ago, in the attic I came across a small cardboard box that had turned almost dark brown during the years. Under the lid covered with fine dust the personal papers of our long-departed grandparents and great-grandparents had been laid

down to perhaps eternal rest. A few palm-sized glass plates emerged from under the heaps of birth certificates, marriage certificates and et cetera displayed in stunning calligraphy worth to be admired. They must have been preserved for a cause as they were special for some reason. Who knew why? The plates were authentic negatives of old photographs. despite the fact that most of their surface was stripped of its silver compound coating, and however annoying it was they were irreparably damaged by the glass plates themselves placed on each other. Somehow, the person who put them away did not think of this possibility, for his only intention was to keep the fragile objects intact. But even so, old people, costumes, and parts of buildings could be discerned in the dark patches of the pictures, in the fragmented contrasting drawings. One of the negatives might once have depicted a full-figured man sitting, but his face was almost gone. His hands rested on his knees, perhaps at the photographer's behest, and in one of them he seemed to be holding a hussar's shako. It is possible that this was the case, because on his outfit there were a few strings of cord and a hilt of a hussar sword on his left side. Now it would be most appropriate if the sight made my heart beat faster. Were they the fragments of a portrait of a freedom fighter of the War of Independence in 1848-49? Based on the age of the glass negatives – according to the history of photography, they were used roughly until the mid-19th century – this was also presumable. But who could the enlisted man be? But you'd rather ask not, because anyone who could have known or guessed the answer can no longer answer that question either.

Another negative, also made in a studio, shows men playing cards around a table, and apart from a few minor scratches, it is in an acceptable condition. There is something odd about it, though. The well-combed gentlemen, whether I look at the person facing me or the one in profile, are perfectly identical. Oh yes, of course. Only one of the gentlemen shows his cards in the discreet studio light, a deceptive sight that praises the ingenuity of the skilful photographer, who this time played tricks with a mirror. And something is coming back to me: the scene is familiar. Not very far from our place there is a yellowish-brown end product of this shot. But let the picture speak for itself! The shot shows Lajos Hankovszki, a

master carpenter from Csonka-Bereg, an enthusiastic amateur actor. He was once the second husband of my wife's maternal grandmother, who had his figure multiplied for the card game that he intended to immortalize for his descendants. In this case, however, there is some problem with the time. According to the marking in the bottom right corner of the "masterpiece", the recording and the print were made between the two World Wars, or put it in our slang here, during the Czech times. It looks like the researchers of the history of photography were not yet sufficiently familiar with their own field when it came to glass negatives, but next to the unexpected lesson they should take comfort in the fact that such oversight might happen to others, as well.

Perhaps, the same could be said about us today and the way we relate to memory itself. We accept that, with a little imagination and some deduction, even very old photographs lacking important details or the most incomplete and obscured stories can be reconstructed. But we must never forget that when we think that we are hundred per cent sure of something that happened in the past in terms of space, time and actors, another witness may claim the opposite. About fifteen years ago, when I described an episode in my younger life that was a close shave, my mother responded curtly and very annoyed: 'You've got quite a chicken's head on you, son, if you can't remember that properly.' I know very well what her problem was with my writing. She had already come across a slightly twisted story of mine in print, a story she was unable to digest. But that's the freedom of a memoirist. Especially when there is nobody else alive to keep an inventory of a family's life or reconstruct how the generations lived together once. The memory-maker therefore feels free to recreate the past, but by virtue of his right to do so, he is also the guardian of the memories. And if something is then lost because of the carelessness of the guardian, he must be held accountable for that.

With all this in mind, I attempt to visit the past that is still accessible to me, and finally ask the seemingly useless but essential question to begin my story: does anyone else but me remember my grandfather's old apple tree?

The apple tree whose stately trunk and pendent branches made you stop and think. Because it was not just a tree. It stood out among the other

deciduous inhabitants of the orchard as if its companions were crouching around it, and if it per chance had been a building, it would have looked like a fortress among the more modest dwellings. Its large side branches, separated by a bastion of foliage, produced a good crop every year, but anyone who wanted to partake in its blessings, was forced to lay a siege as each bastion had to be climbed separately. The apple tree could not be harvested in its entirety, it merely allowed one to pick its apples only, as many as one could, hence further on it had disposal of its abundant remainders itself. The best of its produce was always offered to the birds, as the Creator intended, but it gave from its fruits also to the children collecting nuts nearby, and if the leaves moved here and there at dusk, we knew that hedgehogs having this practical instinct were saving their share from the approaching frost.

I know it from the one who told me this story that this tree also started out as a helpless little sapling, in the beginning of its time. It shuddered at the sight of an approaching disgusting caterpillar, feared death at seeing root-eating worms, and shivered in order to protect its tender shoots from every gust of wind. It was as if it felt that what is most terrifying, what we fear most, we must face sooner or later. And it was really so. A goat with a wicked soul stopped before it once and appropriated its beautifully flowering crown with a single bite. That wicked beast was twisting the tender twigs in its foul mouth, chopping them lustily with its teeth, when my great-grandfather Lajos of happy memory emerged from behind the stable. Horrendous rage flashed up in his soul, and as quickly as he could he stooped down to look for a fistful of stones or some other deterrent. For want of something better to throw, he picked up a large lump and threw it at the goat with all his might. "Oh, that dogs would tear your guts out, you fiend! Are you doing the wrong thing again? Did I plant that poor little apple tree for you, you beast?"

The bone-dry clod swung to the goat's notch. The stupid beast dropping the half-chewed branch in its agony leapt away with a squeak. But turning its head back it looked at its hateful assailant and gave a bitter bleat. There was so much reproach in that bleat, so much pain, that any indifferent heart would be moved to pity for it, but my great-grandfather would not give an inch. About twenty yards away from him, at the Illés

family house a bulky woman squatted among the vegetable beds. She was thinning out the thickly sprouting rows of parsley or mullein perhaps, and was doing her job silently until this happened. But hearing the weeping of the goat, she straightened her back up, and as if the dull thudding clod had struck her ribs, a complaint burst out from her, too. "Lajos, Lajos! For God's sake! You're killing my cow! What will I give my children if something happens to my Mici?"

Maybe her outrage was just, maybe not. Why didn't she teach some decency to her goat, why didn't she warn it that God might have other plans for that little apple tree? But she didn't teach anything to it because the tree wasn't hers, so she didn't really care. And the treacherous beast only knows one thing: if God had put it on the earth, He must have provided it with something to chew. That's why it has to chew everything that can be chewed and tastes good. Otherwise... even if that diamond axis of the world did not bend, the earth could easily become one big jungle, and what good could come out of that?

It took time for the apple tree to recover from the nearly fatal trauma. In that droughty summer it had neither the strength nor the will to sprout again, and it didn't grow another inch either. But what kind of a garden is it and what kind of order is it where goats can freely chew anything? And is there any point in making any further efforts? It is sheer fortune, divine fortune that the trees have been allowed to live in two nourishing environments, in two separate worlds. In the earth, which is the source of everything that is good, and in the God-given light above the earth. And what is still perhaps better that the heart of the trees does not beat in the green foliage. The Creator has hidden it in a safer place, in the roots... far from malefic hands and malicious teeth.

* * *

I am sitting on a stool in the middle of the dimly lit small loam-walled kitchen, staring at the once dark brown front door. The door opens into the hallway, almost into the open air, and is constantly

challenged by the bitter cold outside and the damp treacherous heat inside. If it's cold outside, the condensation inside drips down in long streaks on the wall, and if the Lord God orders a stronger chill outside, the mist inside, in an elusive yet instant way turns to a glittering white-frost. Then I grab it with full force, and try to pick out the tiny stars with the futile effort of my tiny fingernails. But now it's neither too cold nor too hot in here, there's no mist, no white-frost. There must be something, though, once I'm sitting here. There is indeed a reason, and however unusual, it is none other than the door of which I am speaking.

At the top of the door, glass plates put in two small cassettes let in the light. They are dirty, smudged, but after all they are the eyes of the house that look over the yard, the rest of the door is completely closed. The incomplete, here and there yawning tapping proves that everything here is the result of shoddy, post-war, post-flood bungle. Around the centre of one of the inserted plates, some time ago a wedge (called devil's nail in the local slang), as big as a thumb, marred the board until one fine day, depleted by dampness, frost and heat, it fell out. It never occurred to anyone that it could be put back into its place with the help of some glue or a pinch of paste. And how good it was that it didn't happen, because what would I do now if I couldn't study the sunlight streaming in through the slanted hole? If I stand next to the hole, the sunlight enters the house exactly at my chest's height. It pierces askew the semi-darkness of the kitchen at an angle and stops on the floor at the foot of the table. It's like a beam, but today I'd say it's more like an X-ray which was made visible. I have every reason to say that, for inside the drift of light a busy and most likely a joyful life is going on: millions of flecks of dust, many, many tiny flakes are dancing in the innate spotlight, or simply chasing each other swirling. And as no two flecks of dust are identical, no two tracks are the same either. It's chaos itself – I could state that later with a more mature mind, but for now, as a child who is said to be innocent, I am just sitting and staring at the microcosm I caught in the act, gathering knowledge and experience

whenever it is possible – daily, weekly, but for now only here, within the walls erected for my protection.

What lies beyond the door I don't really know yet, although I often longed to go out and to see. True, it was very cold last winter. At night, when they were unable to resist the frost, the walnut trees crackled alarmingly. The wind blew through the house, and my mother taught me to cover up to my neck so I wouldn't be afraid of the cold or the wrath of Auntie and Uncle Windy. "Up to my neck, eh, up to my neck?" I asked back so they could see I could take care of myself. Then in the morning, when grandfather came in from the world beyond the door, his eyebrows and moustache glistened with frost. I by all means wanted to know how to get such a thing, and I began to whine, then cry, then roar. – "Let him go, if he wants to," said Grandfather, and my grandmother put a kind of coat on me to wear, wrapped a shawl around my neck, opened the door and helped me through the threshold. "Go," she said, and closed the door behind me because she didn't like the chill. I stopped on the veranda, looked around, and, with nothing to see, set off in search of tracks in the snow-dusted yard. The fog was so thick that I could hardly see farther than the pigsty door, and the very fact that the trees were crumbling under the weight of the whiteness that had settled on their branches made me wonder. I would have kept on looking, but there was no one in the yard, not a soul in the neighbourhood, only the frozen silence everywhere. I felt the skin on my face tighten, the air I've sucked in through my nose pierced like a needle, my earlobes ached, and I had no idea why I came out of the nice warm kitchen. It was silly. There was no spring in my steps ...

The door opens with a squeak, and with the fresh spring air rushing in, my father enters, flushed-faced and walking tall. In his left arm he has a dough-basket made of reed-mace that he hugs with such affection as if it were me, and there are beautiful yellow-red apples in the dough-basket. Grandmother, who was struggling for days with Mrs. Nákó's worn coat, shiny with dirt and grease, lifts her head at the sewing machine and speaks up at the sight of the apples:

"Did you open the pit?"

"Yes, I did. It's just about time, don't you think, Mum? Now the weather's getting warmer, and it'd be a pity if all these precious apples went bad in warm weather."

And as he places the basket on the table, I can smell the delicious scent of apples that slowly fills the kitchen. My grandfather rises from the sofa and speaks at the sight of the apples:

"At Christmas they were still hard for my teeth, they couldn't take it. Since then, they've softened a bit I guess."

He reaches into the basket, picks an apple out at random, wipes it clean rubbing it against the side of his jersey and with tiny rapid bites of his front teeth begins to chew it.

"Yeah. Now it's good. It still tastes of earth a little bit, but that will go away if it gets some air."

"Sure. The best place for apples is just the pit in the winter," says Grandmother. "Green apples never become so nicely yellow in the air as in the earth in the straw. They only wilt on the top of the cupboard, and go bad in the sack. But they must not be wasted, once the Good Lord gave them to us. Even if not very much, but I've stewed some for several pots of food this autumn."

In the meantime, my father picks me a yellow-red ripe healthy apple, splashes it with a little water, wipes it with the dishcloth hanging on the door of the kitchen cupboard and hands it to me. It smells really good, and I sink my milk teeth into it. It didn't give itself up easily, but I'm stronger, the skin cracks, and by the second or third juicy bite I can already taste the special sweet flavour in my mouth. Pleased with it, Grandfather holds up the half-eaten apple as a proof, apparently for my father, looks at it and remarks:

"Bálint Török," my grandfather says. "He had planted this one."

"Didn't Endre Bulgár say last autumn that it was Sikolai? He's the only expert who knows how to plant apple trees!" My father tries to explain the origin of the apple.

"Either Bálint Török or Sikolai, who cares? But there are certainly no others like him around here."

* * *

Spring arrived nicely and properly in time, and you could feel in the house that the sun was also in a happier mood, and there was no need to make a fire in the kitchen stove in the morning. In the morning I got out of bed wearing just a light little shirt that reached down to my knees. My mother called it, I mean the shirt, Jewish shirt for some reason. I had nothing underneath because I had no sense of shame yet. My grandfather had already finished his chores around the animals outside, so he came in to have something to eat. On weekdays my grandmother didn't set the table as a rule, we were used to self-service since she, poor soul, had to do a lot after all. The old man poured himself some milk from a milk-pot placed on the edge of the credenza, and then piously lifted the bread wrapped in a tea towel. He took a good half slice of the home-made loaf that was barely started, made himself a place on the table, and offered it to me as soon as he saw me loitering there. I shook my head, I never wanted any, as I already had my portion of milk for breakfast. But the dog, I had no idea who had given it the silly name of Prince, sat at his feet and looked at him with pleading eyes. Its saliva dripped down slowly, actually it didn't drip, it was like a congealed thin clear glass thread running from the corner of his mouth to the ground. The old man broke off a small piece of the bread and put it in the dog's mouth.

Grandfather had not even finished three sips when Prince the dog lurched towards the gate, but he must have known whoever came, as he immediately fell silent. Sure enough, a few moments later, standing in the doorway with a black kirza[1]* bag in her hand, was Mrs. Buda, my grandmother's second younger sister. She muttered something under her nose instead of a greeting before she reached the threshold, and then, without waiting for any answer went in and sat down on the sofa as usual. She put her bag on the floor between her legs and stared at it silently. Five minutes must have passed without a word spoken. No one asked what she had come for, for it was already known to everybody that she had brought work for Grandmother: clothes to tailor. Aunt

[1] * Kirza - strong, black waxed linen, used in shoe factories to make the stems of soldiers' boots and the workers make strong, stitched bags for their own use.

Ilon herself could sew at home, but she was not good at dressmaking, nor did she want to be, people said, because that was not convenient. She did not learn the trade like my grandmother, and was trained as a "masamód"[2]* when she was not yet ten. She had picked it up on her own – on ground level – then learnt to operate a sewing machine from her sister Margaret, and also some basic manual operations, such as basting, tacking, hemming, cleaning, buttonhole sewing, and later she had to contribute to her pin money doled by her husband with that meagre sum she earned. Uncle Gyula made hardly any money at the railroad company, but they had a large family, and the six or seven children just had to be given something to eat. My grandfather is visibly nervous, he starts chewing more and more rapidly, because the table has to be cleared slowly for business. Grandmother stands up and puts everything not needed on the bed, then holds out her right hand to her sister questioningly. Aunt Ilon takes out the first piece of material and the notepad with the measures. She tells who it belongs to, what the customer would like, and makes clear all the other requirements. My grandmother measures the width and length of the material, and after thinking a little she tells what is possible or impossible, then the centimetre tape hisses, the chalk slides on the paper, and the scissors click lengthily. From the next material three pillowcases will be made, so it has to be spread out as wide as possible to see.

"What about making some room for us, old man?" Grandma says.

Grandpa says nothing, just takes his cane and goes to find something to do. I'm going too, Mrs. Buda won't say anything interesting to me. She can only sit without saying a word or mumble, and only from a notepad, to answer Grandmother's questions.

I go down the stairs, then pass the well which you're not allowed to look into because the old people say the devil lives there. But it is allowed to throw pebbles in it at least. So, I throw one. It takes a long time before I hear the splash. It would have been so nice to check, how

[2] * masamód: the meaning is 'seamstress' here.

deep it was , but I cannot lean on the concrete well ring as the rim is still too high for me. So, I go on my way.

As you step out of the small door, a vast bare area opens before your eyes. To a small child it is definitely humongous. Soon enough, I learn that this was once the famous market-square. The uneven, disturbed landscape, dug up at several places, is divided by a large ditch, ten to twelve metres wide, running from the Jewish cemetery to the Reformed church. Old people say that the Tisza River used to flow here. And if it flowed here, how did it happen that one fine day it found another route? Nobody here can say anything clever about this, its anyone's guess what might have happened. It must have been forced upon it, it must have been forced to choose a different riverbed, because sometimes man imagines himself to be God. But waters, like other sentient beings, remember exactly the old bends, the paths of the ditches. In the great summer rains, autumn deluges and spring thaws, all the water comes here and rushes again to join the real Tisza, and calms down under the Temple Hill, but then again starts running to the stone bridge on its path. Only three large holes never run out of water, which is why we have three small lakes on the market-square– in summer they are duck ponds, in winter, when they are frozen, they become skating rinks that we call "sikanyó." The former left bank of the dead river has been built in with a line of houses a long time ago already, but it was only after the flood in 1933 that the Czechs began to build something on the right bank but never finished. Even so, there are still three or four hectares of bare land left, which now belongs to everyone. From spring to autumn, pigs plough the grass, knead the puddle, eight to ten cows and steers graze here, four or five goats, hens roam outside, and there's water enough for ducks and geese. What is this if not a paradise created by necessity?

Jankó sits on the rickety bench in front of the house of the Jakab family munching on a big slice of bread spread with lard. Next to him is Gyuszi, who is leaping around to some silly tune, shifting his feet. "I have a rouble, I give it to Hershli, Hershli gives me syrup, and I will drink it." He bellows this, repeating it several times, as if he feared to

forget it, and at the same time he beats the nettle bush that is growing at the sides of the bench with a broken-handled whip. They pay little attention to my arrival. A few yards away, in a small clump of sand, two little girls, Jankó's sisters, are playing. The top layer of the sand is dry, you have to scrape deeper where the moisture has seeped down to keep the little hooded stoves formed from sand on their little bare feet from falling. I go to the little girls to help them scrape out more suitable material. As I squat, my little shirt curls up around my hips, and Jankó takes the bread from his mouth and, pointing the index finger of his right hand at my groin, sneers: "Yay, yay, there's his cock! The cock is showing!" He's so gleeful that he throws his whole body on the bench, and as he laughs, crumbs of the chewed bread fly out of his mouth. I look down in surprise, but I still don't understand why he's so gleeful. What I see there is what I pee with, and it is what my mum calls fancy, but maybe Jankó, who is a whole year older than me, knows better. The two little girls waddle up to me to see for themselves: is it true what their brother says that makes him look so cheerful? One of them crouches down in front of me, pulls aside the sagging hem of her grey underwear to reveal her own little pubic body, and shows me, to my consolation, what hers looks like. I'm looking at her, but only with as much interest as when I encounter something completely mundane. My blood does not yet stir at such things, so I wisely listen. Then she begins to press it with her fingers and opens her little labia, inflamed and red with piss and dirt, squeezes out a little secretion, and holds it up with a mischievous smile on her fingertip and says in an undisturbed way: "Milky." I can still be glad that she does not want me to taste it. Then I notice my mother coming from the Green Cross.[3]* I jump up and paddle towards my saviour.

"Mummy Márti, mummy Márt," I cry in a tenuous voice.

Ten more metres, then only five, and she bends down so I can land right in her lap. When her embrace gives way, she raises her eyes to me, shakes her head and asks:

[3] * Green Cross - a social health organisation and community health centre established in Hungary in the 1930s (and in Transcarpathia after the annexation) to alleviate rural poverty.

"Are you still like that, my little sparrow? No one to dress you? Let's go," she says as she takes me in her arms, and I can listen to her usual questions until we get home:

"Now tell me who are you to mamma? Her pearl? Her diamond? Her star?

"Her hatchling!" I reply almost shouting in her ear, because she always leaves that one out, but I like that answer best.

Mrs. Buda is already packing when we enter the kitchen.

"I hear you sew, too, Martha."

"Yes, I work in the shv*ájna*[4] in Szöllős."

"At least you make some money not like my daughter-in-law," she nods appreciatively, then, looking at me changes the subject.

"Oh, what thin legs this child has! Does he eat properly?"

"Just like two pipe stems," my grandfather says who by this time also came out.

"Yes, they are really thin, but at least don't smell so bad," my warm-hearted grandmother takes my side slightly.

Aunt Ilon had hardly left us when another guest, or customer, arrived. It was Mrs. Nákó, an elderly gypsy woman who was a cleaning woman at the Green Cross. Most likely she wanted to know how her coat was. But she was a great politician! She never came straight to the point, she had to say something flattering first. She was good at that too, she needed nobody's piece of advice for that.

"Well, Mrs. Fábján," she began her story, "your son-in-law is a very handsome man indeed. I saw him this morning, sitting in a cart taking piglets to the market. He's so handsome as the handsomest among us Romani!"

"He may be handsome to you, but I can only say that he's not a good man, for he drinks, and then he beats my daughter and the child. Well, I told Gizi already: 'If you can't stand him, come home, dear, there's room for you, too.' But I think you came not for that but for your coat. Well, come in, and see for yourself that there's not too much that I could do."

[4] * svájna - shortened form of the Russian svejnájá fabrika (dressmaker's shop).

"How come not too much?" inquired the woman raising her eyebrows.

"You see the lining is fringed at several places. And then at the seams, at the sleeves and the collar... Look yah, here we go! The fabric is also torn due to constant wear. Something has to be put under the material everywhere otherwise it's impossible to stitch. The whole thing isn't worth putting oneself out to do it. And it would have been nice if you'd washed it after you'd taken it apart, because even if I turn it inside out, it's still dirty."

And while my grandmother was stewing like that, the old gypsy woman already knew before the last sentence that she would come out on top. For Aunt Margaret, the seamstress of the poor, even if she had to spend a very long time on a piece of clothing, she still finished the job, and did not charge half as much as others, for instance the Rebenyák girls.

* * *

One dawn I was alarmed by a knock at the window. When I sat up, the light was already on, my father was nervously pulling at the handle of the window sash that did not want to yield, and my mother was fumbling for her glasses on the nightstand. The window finally opened, my father leaned out, and was instantly relieved to recognise the early visitor:

"Why, sis, is that you?" he asked and without waiting for any answer, he went to open the door.

By this time the old people were already hurrying towards the exit, and I followed them in order not to miss anything. In front of the house there was a horse-drawn wagon, and in front of the door a young woman stood with a bundle wrapped in sheet, and beside her a small child with a mouth curled up to cry. This is Sanyika, my cousin, I soon learnt.

"Did you come home, my girl?" I heard Grandma say in the darkness. "Feel free to come on in. We'll make some room for you too and then you'll be all right."

The owner of the wagon exchanged a few more words with my father, and then, raising his right hand to his cap like a soldier he indicated that if everything was all right, he would go.

In the well-lit kitchen, Grandma set about making a bed for the newcomers. There was only one way to do this. She shared her own plank bed, a crumbling straw sack long overdue for replacement, with her daughter and granddaughter. My mother, meanwhile, took care of the little boy, whose nose and forehead were marred by nasty bruises.

"What happened to you, Sanyika? Did you fall?" my mother asked, but the child hid his face shyly and did not answer.

"His father was drunk and pushed him into the ditch, and there was a big pile of stones in it. It was only a matter of a few centimetres that there was no serious harm done." Aunt Gizi said this in a muffled voice, or whispered actually, but I heard everything clearly, and the next day I repeated clearly and distinctly to the first customer who came to my grandmother's house and asked about the child's wounds that his father was drunk and pushed him into the ditch. But instead of praise Grandma snapped off my head: "Who asked you to butt in, are you a busybody? Speak only if you are asked to!"

My grandmother's unfriendly outburst hurt me very much and made me unsure of myself. I just wanted to tell the truth, the plain truth, so what was wrong with that? And what's more, it made Sanyika give me a dirty look, too. It took a few days for us to become good friends, but soon after that we had major changes in our lives. My Aunt Gizi, who was a very modest, quiet woman and tried to make herself useful in her parents' house, soon got tired of the cramped conditions. She seemed to forget in the new situation that not so long ago they had to squeeze together to get some room in the little house, and now she started longing to return to the place she escaped from recently. True, he had a supporter in this, her husband came to her, quite sober to boot, and he whispered in her ear and squeezed her hand until he finally lured her home. Well, I had a pretty blue-eyed Aunt Gizi once, but she's gone off again with that big brown-faced man. She must have liked him, too, for he could roll a cigarette with as much elegance and

patience as any man in the neighbourhood. When he ran his tongue along the straight edge of the newspaper, and with a single flick of his two index fingers turned it over the little cylinder of tobacco, it would have been really difficult to find fault with his move.

"You know, my daughter, it's your life," Grandma said, almost to herself, and went on working on her old Singer sewing machine.

"Well, God bless you all!" said the big brown man, and then they crossed the threshold with the bundle wrapped in sheet, and the large ironed wagon started to roll away with a whining sound. We watched them till they reached the road on which the horses' hoofs started clattering more rapidly and merrily. The two of them departed, but left Sanyika with us. Poor Grandma. In addition to sewing, the house and the cow, she was left with a grandchild to take care of too.

But how nice to have a smart man in the family! And how nice to have a nursery nearby, within sight! It's the Green Cross, that's how everyone calls it, and although it has some meaning, some people consistently call it yasli,*[5] which is a word I don't understand. Whatever it's called we had to go there, and the adults thought it was good for us. Auntie Zsuzsika, our grandfather's eldest daughter from his first marriage, worked there too, so at least she would be looking after us they said. Well, they were right about that, but I wish she had never looked after me! Because every time she saw us, she always said that we were dirty, and she was ready to change that situation immediately. She caught me by the arm, sat me down on a little stool, put me between her knees, spat copiously on the edge of her underclothes, and with that coarse linen, soaked with sour stale saliva, she rubbed my face and also my nose and mouth thoroughly. After such cleansing I always wished to be in the open air, and wanted to take the skin off my face. Happy was the child whose life had been spared from this disgusting procedure! Still, I could stand it, there were far more horrible ways of grandparents' love. But I will talk about that some other time.

[5] * Yasli – nursery in Ukrainian.

One warm day, as we were all running around in the yard of the *yasli*, I saw Grandfather approaching the entrance with his inevitable stick in his right hand. There was nothing unusual about it, he used to come every day, but now he held a brand-new tricycle with a handlebar. Even today, just thinking back on it gives me a thrill! My legs felt as light as if they had never been there, my arms were almost like wings, lifting and steering as I rushed towards him, to see that beautiful little thing closely as soon as possible. That it might not be mine was not even on my mind, I was just thinking how nice it would be to sit on it, to roll with it, whoever it belonged to!

"This is not yours. It was sent to Sanyika by her father," the old man explained briefly and matter of factly, and, lifting the little tricycle lightly into the air, he turned it away from me before I could touch it.

I thought at that time that everything was collapsing around me. Perhaps I felt even a little dizzy, and I looked at my grandfather with a look of incomprehension, as if not he, but some insensitive stranger was standing before me. But the world did not collapse, only something must have happened in my soul, because my guts began to ache unexpectedly. I turned away from Grandfather, as if I no longer wished to see him, and staggered into a deserted corner of the courtyard. For it was as if someone had been urging me to go there saying that it was high time to meet the first disappointment, and in view of the future to make closer acquaintance with them, those forthcoming defeats, that is.

My little life at that time was taking such a shape that I didn't have to wait long for the next time. Sanyika wasn't with us, she was taken home to Karácsfalva for a few days, and I was to be sent off to the yasli one morning alone. But I put up a fight, I cried and stammered and refused to go. Then someone, I remember Elvira from next door, waved me to come to her and, looking deep into my eyes, she began to reassure me with the following words: Don't cry, you don't have to stay there. You just have to take a note and give it to the kindergarten teacher, and then you can come home. I thought of the Note as something superior, a symbol of officialdom, so I suddenly stopped

whining and, after being handed a folded piece of paper, I left calmly. On entering the door, the first person I bumped into was my Aunt Zsuzsika, who was already buttoning my coat. At that moment I was sure that she would realise the mistake, she was part of our family, she should know, so I looked her in the face and said I would not stay, I had only brought a note, but to my surprise she refused to listen. She hung my coat on the rack, then took my hat off my head and put it on a higher rack. It was then that I began to panic. Standing on tiptoes I wanted to reach for my cap, but for that I would have had to grow, so in despair for being deceived I was left to cry as my only means of protest. Then the door opened, and Aunt Katya in her white cloak entered. I knew that she always had the injection equipment in her pocket, and I immediately fell silent at the sight of her. I lay in a corner for a long time, isolated from the other children, unable to cope with being so badly cheated.

* * *

On the left to our house lives a bitter-hearted old woman having a stooped back, who is forever at odds with the world. She is called Mrs. Ackermann after her late husband, but some of her neighbours, including my mother, call her Berzsi behind her back. Her only grandson, Béluka, is a thin-faced, constantly snorting, coughing, but lively little boy of ten or eleven. His father disappeared during the war or one of the infernos that followed, and his mother was forced into bed with lung disease relatively early, before the age of forty, and died early. Yet the old hag's words and Béluka's remarks tell me they still believe that she is with them. Her bed is made all the time, her clothes are piled up here and there, and the old woman at times mentions the shady things she had got into. Recently, Béluka drew my attention to a strange little flat metal pot lying on their porch.

"Do you know what it is?" he asked, whispering in my ear, almost mysteriously. I shook my head in denial, and he told me quickly.

"A spittoon. It was Mother's."

Apart from the spittoon I was more interested in the seemingly unending flow of other metal objects that Béluka had collected from the neighbourhood and kept in the ramshackle shed. I took special fancy to the rickety old rack, whose shelves were laden with heaps of old yellowed documents bound in small and large bundles

One day – now, who knows why –I slipped through the loose boards of the fence, wandered through the deserted courtyard and ended up in that particular chamber with the papers. I opened a bundle and then a few files, stared at the printed and handwritten scratchy writing with the stamps on them, then thought for a moment and took a bundle of papers home through the gap in the fence. My grandmother noticed my odd pastime, but she didn't pay much attention to it, simply she was pleased that I found something to do. A short time after, however, my father came home from the shoemaker's workshop and he bumped into me as I was sitting in the aisle in the middle of a pile of scattered papers. He crouched down beside me and began to ask unpleasant questions about the origin of the papers, and I, knowing that I was up to mischief, blushed and chose to remain silent. But my father, who was not a fool, soon found out where the papers had come from, for he stood up and stared thoughtfully towards Aunt Erzsi's house.

"Didn't you know that you shouldn't take away other people's things? "– My father asked looking for my hidden gaze. "Stealing is crime, a very bad thing, it's punishable... Well, never do it again." With this he tried to consider the matter closed and started to put the papers back in the bundle, but it was too late. The old woman came home, and at the sight of the open shed door and the lost papers, she burst into a desperate wail in her ridiculous Kraut accent.

"Uh, my *Got in Himmel*, my *Got*, haven't I been *ropped*? I hardly get out of my house and here comes a thief! I'm sure it *mussah peen* that scampish child, the Fapian kid. *It mussa peen'im*, no else comes here. And look, there're papers in *them* yard scattered all over the place!"

To this my father could not listen without saying anything. He hurriedly picked up all the papers and headed for the fence.

"Aunt Erzsi, God bless you, don't shout all over the street, here you are your papers, look, not a single one is missing. The child didn't even know what it was, he was just playing."

"Do you want me to shut up? Oh no! I will speak. Let all the neighbours know that yah teach yah kids mischief. But if I see him in my house again, I swear I'll *preak* his leg with a plank. How dares he? My grandson is an orphan, there is *nopody* to teach him good manners, but he doesn't ever go to *anypody* to steal."

My poor father would have liked to shut his ears, so that not to hear the cackling of the offended old lady, but I think he just protected me when he took me by the hand and led me into the house. It was fine that he came home, because he saved me from the revenge of the storming mad old hag, who might have broken my leg right then and there. But what made me sad was that I could not go over to Béluka's place for some time. But that's what happens if you are a thief. But what about the adults, it occurred to me? Are they allowed to put their hands on things that belong to other people? The other day, when my dear father saw me gazing longingly at Aunt Erzsi's greengage tree, he looked at me for a while, sighed heavily, and then started for the stable. He went up to the hayloft and through the circular ventilation hole in the board wall, he easily reached the apple-size plums glistening on the tips of the high drooping branches. He moved his hand towards them as carefully as if he were reaching into a bird's nest to avoid dropping a single one. I had a good bite of the delicious fruit and showed it off to Béluka that very day. He listened with interest to my detailed report, nodded his head in acknowledgement several times, but did not rush to his grandmother to snitch on me, he was not such a tightwad as his old grandmother, who locked away even the apples she had stored for the winter from her single grandson.

But one evening, a few days after the incident with those plums, Béluka came over to my father's house to play cards, and after a few games for matches or sunflower seeds, he showed his acting skills and played the plum-picking scene for my father without a single sound, just with hand and finger gestures and a talkative grimace on her face.

So convincingly did he perform it that I, in spite of being just a very little boy, understood everything. My father, as soon as he also grasped it, at first just gaped, then, blushing, jumped up from the table.

"You're a fool, my boy!" he said nervously, and as he paced up and down the kitchen, he kept looking at my face that looked quite innocent. He knew that I was the only one who could betray him. Seeing my father's embarrassment, Béluka smiled contentedly, and after a few minutes, as soon as my father sat down again and began to deal, he resumed his charade indicating that next he would dig a tunnel to our apple pit and take all the apples away. My father laughed.

"Then we're even," he said, and they continued their innocent card game.

* * *

This morning the kitchen is full of women again. Grandpa runs away from the house if they are there, but I feel very much at home in this company, where there is so much to listen to.

"And the other grandson?" - asks Mrs Moha, who came not to sew, but just to talk and idle the time.

"They took him home yesterday," says my grandmother, "but maybe they'll bring him back next week, because my daughter is with child again."

"Well, it's not easy for her either," someone remarks. "There's the farm, the garden and the two cows for her, and that beast of a husband beats her up whenever he gets drunk."

"My poor little girl," says Grandma. "That's her life. She was only a few months old, I'll never forget, and it was luck that we didn't have to bury her. We went to Bóbik for cornhusking. The older ones, Zsuzsika, Kálmán and little Elek, already helped us as much as they could, and the younger ones stayed at home. We come home, my old man turns the cart around, and Pista – he must have been about five years old – runs to us, and says happily: 'Mum, the baby cried, so I gave her some noodles.' I jumped down from the cart and ran into the

house. My Lord, my Creator, my little Gizike was all blue, her eyes are goggled! I get her out of the crib and pick out of her little mouth the noodles that the kid stuffed into it. Then she started gasping for breath, and only coughed…."

"Kids do all kinds of mischief," remarked Mrs. Moha. "We all know that. But your life wasn't that easy either, Margit."

Grandmother finished sewing the piece she had for the fitting, pinned the needle with the remaining thread into the collar of her own dress, and stood up to put the finished dress on the waiting customer. She marked with a piece of chalk where it had to be narrowed, unstitched it with the scissors, then re-stitched where it had to be wider, sewed on the sleeves, tried on the collar, and began to tell, for who knows how many times, the story of her life.

"My husband was a widower with four children when he proposed to me. The minister's wife I went to see to help her with this or that said: Margaret, don't be a fool! He's much older than you, and the four children... if you're determined to get married, you can find someone younger! 'Reverend Mother,' I said, 'please understand that I do not want to marry. I said yes to Elek Fábián because I want to bring up the orphans, and the fact that he is a Reformed and I am a Catholic should not stop me either...' When a few weeks passed, I felt that I had to cleanse my soul. So, I went to the parish priest. I told him: 'Reverend Father, I want to make a confession.' Reverend Árvay said to me: 'My daughter, you have left our mother church, you have married a Reformed man, and I therefore deny you the sacrament of confession.' 'Well, if that is so, Reverend Father, then God bless you,' I said. But then, I turned back to him and said: 'Reverend Father, if I have a child to be born, will you baptize it?' 'Of course, my daughter,' he said. 'An innocent child is not to blame for anything!' 'Now, Reverend Father, I must tell you that if you don't want me, I won't bring my child here either!' So, my children all became Reformed, but I have never been to church since, not even to the Reformed one."

No sooner had my grandmother finished her story, the women were hardly able to start nodding, when Eli, the neighbour girl from down the street, ran in, breathless:

"Godmother, hide everything, the treasury agents are coming!"

"Oh God, help me!" Grandmother stumbled around, paralysed with fright, she didn't know what to do – if only they wouldn't come in here! But Eli and the women who could think fast, they knew what to do. They quickly put everything away, folded it up and took it into the room! They covered the machine, picked up the small scraps of cloth from the floor. Aunt Ilon ran away with the things that had to be sewn. But the dog already signalled, the small door slammed. In the kitchen the silence froze, the flies almost stopped in mid-air. From outside, slow, shuffling footsteps could be heard, and instead of terror, relief and curiosity were on the faces. One could guess that these were not the footsteps of the rude and foul-mouthed servants of the government. Teresa, the old midwife, arrived with her giant stature, dressed always in black. Stopping before the threshold, she first poked her head through the door, wanting to know if the old man was in, for she knew well that he didn't like her. But how could he, when Rosman Teresa smoked a pipe as bravely as any man around here, and she shivered if she had no brandy. She said it kept her alive. 'Midwife Tersie, do you fancy a pint?' Bad egg kids on the street shouted to her. They knew that the old woman never sipped it, just sent the spirit down her throat in a gulp. Come to think of it, I wouldn't dare to be one of the mockers. For she was said to be a hex, and that she used to make angels when she was younger. I don't know what it meant, but a child feels somehow that both of these things are scary.

Terca, seeing that the couch is empty, calmly crosses the threshold.

"Don't worry, Margaret, I sent 'em away, she reassures my grandmother as soon as she enters the house.

The women understand what this means, but they look at her with their mouths open as if expecting an explanation.

"What are you looking at? Don't you believe it? Those scoundrels were just coming here, that all the lice would starve to death on their necks. We got to the gate together, but I looked that Józsi Zsigu straight into his eye. 'What do you want here, don't you have anything else to do?" I asked them. If you had seen how that stinking swine commie's

mouth trembled, but he didn't say a word, just turned around and went with his pal towards Pali Jakab, because they know that he also does some hammering in private. But they can go there, he's not afraid of them, for he's also a Communist.

Grandmother looked gratefully at her benefactor and offered her a seat. Mrs. Moha, herself an expert in superstitions, just lay low and hummed something to herself, but Eli, who must have been only twenty, could not keep her mouth shut:

"Come on, Aunt Terca, don't try to tell us that you used your science to persuade those sharks to go off to that other place."

"I know that you think that you're very smart, my girl, because you think that they teach you everything at that bukhalter[6]* school. But if you want it very much, I can tell you something that will make even your hair stand on end."

"Mamma's waiting, and I must be off," she said, and as quickly as she had come, she left. Mrs. Moha, on the other hand, began to stir on the edge of the bed, and tried to attract attention by little coughs, but the old woman pretended not to notice anything. Instead, she looked at me, who was sitting on a small stool in front of the cold stove, listening with downcast eyes.

"Is he Laci's?" she asked waving her eye in my direction.

Grandma nodded, and Aunt Terca, sitting up, started to talk about me.

"I helped this one to come to the world. Then I said to myself his dick was as big as that of his father."

"- "Well, how do you know how big his father's dick is?" asked Mrs. Moha laughing, so that she could also say something, but Terca ignored her and went on talking to me.

"Well, you've grown a lot. But why are you sitting in here? Why don't you go and play with the others outside?"

"I'd rather he be here underfoot than being up to no good outside," Grandma tried to justify my presence. "The other day... maybe three

[6] Bukhalter: from the Russian (originally German) Buchhalter, i.e. book-keeper.

weeks ago? He went into the room, fumbled there about or something, but as long as there was silence, I went on sewing calmly. And then all of a sudden, I hear a big rattle, but no crying. I ran into the room and there he was, lying on his back on the floor with the radio on his little chest. Didn't he pull it off the table? He took the tablecloth and pulled it on himself. His face was as pale as the wall. And he was so scared that he couldn't cry. He was still lucky that he was not badly hurt."

"And the radio? Did the radio work after that?" asked Mrs. Moha with roundabout eyes.

"I was more concerned about the child then. I put the radio back on the table as it was earlier, but I couldn't put the wire or the antenna or whatever back in place. Then I waited anxiously for my son to come home, because he always turns on the radio first. And so it was. Laci came home, didn't even eat, just went into the room, and I could hear him already turning the radio button, looking for Europe or something. And it sounded good, thank God, nothing happened to it. So, I took a big sigh and I told him what happened. He just shrugged and asked the kid if he had not broken anything.

"He'll be lucky," said Terca. "Maybe this one's got two hearts, too."

Grandma pretended not to hear, but Mrs. Moha had had enough, and opened her mouth to speak:

"Don't talk nonsense to us, Aunt Terca. Who ever heard of a man having two hearts?

"What!? Do you think this is nonsense?" The old midwife was indignant at Mrs. Moha being so incredulous, and with her big, bony forefinger she twice stabbed the doubter in the breast. "Well, then, listen to me. There was a man in Mátyfalva. I will not tell you his name, for his sons are still alive, and they do not like it to be mentioned. But your Elek and your sister-in-law Boris," said she turning to my grandmother," knew him. So this one, told his wife and children that when he closed his eyes for good, they should go to the Hill of Salánk and fetch a good strong linden-stick from there. They should sharpen it and before they put him in the coffin, they should turn him over on his belly and push that spear through his body under the right shoulder blade. He knew

in advance when he was going to die, as someone whispered the exact date to him while asleep. But until this is not done, let them make no attempt to bury him. Well, they listened, they promised, but when he really died, they forgot what he had asked for. They thought they would bury him according to all regulations, and the next day they prepared to do that. Only, when the priest bade him farewell, they put the coffin on the hearse, and the procession was about to start, but the two horses didn't move. The coachman took the whip and whipped the two horses properly, but they just looked back as if to say that even if he killed them, they wouldn't move an inch. Come on! Who ever saw such a thing? Then they brought two more horses, but they could not be made either to move. Everybody was aghast and nobody knew what to do, and even the priest was helpless. Then they argued and argued until someone advised them to unhitch the horses and put two oxen in front of the hearse. And lo, what does God will? They set off for the cemetery at once, as if they had an empty cart to pull."

So much was said by old Terca in a breath, then she reached deep into the pocket of her apron, took out a short-stemmed earthen pipe and looked round the house as if in search of something.

"Margaret, did Elek take the tobacco bag with him?"

"He must have," said my grandmother. "He never goes anywhere without it."

The old woman, however, would not calm down. She turned around and around until she saw the tobacco cutting board at the edge of the water-bench and some fine tobacco on it.

"Go, my boy, and fetch me a little tobacco from there," she said and pointed with her long bony finger towards the bench.

I jumped at once, for I was waiting for the story to continue while she was preparing the pipe for use. She shook the ash out into her left palm, then scraped the remaining tobacco out with something. Meanwhile, I was looking stealthily into her face, but I wish I hadn't! It was so ugly that if it appeared in my sleep, I would be startled right awake. So, I scattered the cut tobacco into her open palm as quickly as I could and scampered back to my seat. She filled the pipe thoroughly

with her bent hook-like forefinger, then lit a match, and after the third puff she blew out bluish-grey smoke already.

"Well," she said at last, "let me continue. The funeral was over, they went home, put the house in order, and about midnight they heard a loud banging from the attic. They lit a lamp, one of the boys went up to the attic, but saw nothing out of the ordinary, so they calmed down a little. But just before dawn, the woman woke up and felt some hard pressure on her breast. The next morning, they had to realize after all that the dead man's soul could not rest. In the evening, as is customary, they sprinkled flour on the windowsill, in the pantry, in the kitchen, on the table, so that to see what kind of mark the restless spirit would leave. Again, there was a terrible noise and commotion in the house all night, and when they were looking for clues, oh my Lord, they found hoof prints in the flour instead of bird prints. And it went on for about three weeks this way, they were distressed like hell and knew not what to do. But finally, the boys remembered that they hadn't done what their father had asked them to. Then they went out to the grave, dug out the coffin, and when they opened it, believe it or not, the dead man was lying on his stomach in it, and his body was still warm. One of his sons took the sharp cane, the skewer and stuck it through, as the father said, or asked, under his right shoulder blade. And now, after three weeks, they had come to believe that their father had another heart, for there was warm blood gushing from the wound.

Here she became silent for a moment, and with her forefinger squeezed the embers in the bowl of the pipe, and then, as if to seal the deal, she added the inescapable final sentence:

"And it is as true as I am here now sitting."

"And smoking your pipe," my grandmother quipped as if to make fun of Terca's words.

* * *

Grandma's youngest sister, Aunt Bözsi, lived in Budapest at 40 Mayakovski Street. I know this, as well as her name after her marriage,

Mrs. István Molnár, from the addresses of her letters, which she sent to her beloved sister with considerable frequency, as long as she had anyone to send them to.

"Here we go! As I see Bözsi Harsányi wrote again," said Grandfather bringing the envelope from the post-office. He began to spell the instruction given to the post written in small spiky letters on the veranda already: "To Margit Fábián, Tiszaújlak, Vásártér, Ugocsa megye." By no means "Szovjetunió, Kárpát-Ukrajna, Vinohradovói járás (Soviet Union, Transcarpathia, Vinohradovo district). Come on!

"If I tried to send a letter with such an address on it, the Bespeka[7]* would be here immediately to arrest me on the spot," my father snarled. "But who the heck is interested in an old ignorant woman for whom time has stopped at re-annexation."

Then one day the news that Bözsi Harsányi herself would visit us instead of her letters came to us like a miracle. We did not have to hire a cart to go to the railway station because we were not her host. But where would we have put her in the small earthen house with one room and kitchen where five of us had just arrived? Mrs. Anti Szilágyi, who was the next in the line of siblings in the large Harsányi family, was the hostess. It must have been spring or early spring when Aunt Bözsi arrived dressed in a plum-blue cloth suit. Grandmother, was just about to make doughnuts, jumped in joy when she saw her beloved sister, and in order to embrace her she had to drop the flour pot she had on her left arm which she did without hesitation. I gaped at her, for this not too old slim-waisted woman from Pest was quite different from my modest-looking, infinitely simple grandmother. My grandma walked barefoot in and around the house from St. George to St. Michael's Day, her feet often smelled of cow dung, and her dark satin dress, which was now and then shredded because she did her chores standing on the edge of the manure heap behind the door, sometimes smelt of stale piss. But this lady from Pest was a fragrant woman with a fine wavy hairdo who did not even speak the way we do. Instead of "Szervusz" for instance,

[7] Bespeka - the informal, colloquial name for the Soviet state security service (KGB) in Hungarian.

she said 'hello, brother-in-law' to Grandfather, but there was love in her voice, for when she, this lady who was dressed this beautiful, opened her arms to embrace her poor sister, who was much older, she held her so tight as if she could not let her go, and doing that – I could see from the slightly open door – tears glistened in the corner of her eyes. My grandmother made room hastily on the chaise longue, and all kind of things so marvellous came out from our guest's bag that I had never ever seen before: blue-red soap for Grandmother, black coffee and a dark flannel cloth, a real sheepskin fur cap and Csongor trade-mark cigars for Grandfather, and when she noticed me, too, at last, she bent down, stretched out her arms, looked at me tenderly and asked:

"Who do you belong to?"

I can introduce myself properly now, for it was a very long time ago, when I was still very little, that I could not tell anybody who asked my name that I was László Fábián, junior, or Lacika. But now it was not my name that the lady wanted to know because she asked who I belonged to. What could I say to this? It occurred to me that I was often confounded by a similarly silly question that sounded for example as 'Who do you love?' And when I said 'I love Mum and Dad,' the question was followed by another: 'And who do you love most?' To this I could answer nothing but thought it was asked because I said Mum first, and perhaps father thought that it was her whom I loved most. This "Who do you belong to?" sounded similarly silly to me, a sort of trap or something like that. Anyway, the question was not difficult to answer, because if this lady wanted to know who I belonged to, I could be round with her. To the man who was the biggest and strongest in this house:

"To Laci Fábián."

"Very well. So, if you are Laci's son, I have something for you too!"

And while her left hand was lightly holding my shoulder, her right was again searching the bottom of the bag, from which soon came a large piece of starch candy, but there might be something else, for she kept searching until she held out with a delicate gesture in her open palm a beautifully coloured oblong cardboard box to me.

"Take it, it's yours," she said affectionately. "Do you know what this is?"

How could I know what in that wonderful little box was hidden, but my heart beat so heavily that my soul almost jumped out of its place.

"No, I don't know," I said with my eyes wide open, but Aunt Bözsi was already opening the box and placing a small, heavy object wrapped in fine tissue paper on the palm of her hand. Then she opened the second wrapping and held out a shiny metallic object. She raised it to her lips, but without any licking she began to blow it softly, and the little tool made a lovely tinkling sound.

"A mouth-organ. Here you are, learn to play it."

"He is too small for that, he needs no flute yet," my grandfather protested and broke the spell of the moment that up-to now was so solemn.

I wasn't surprised at all. Whenever classical music was on the air, Grandpa always reached for the switch of the radio to turn it off, so I was already used to it. 'No, we need no flute, we've got plenty of them *co operas,"* the old man rebelled. It was not clear whether it was the opera music he really hated or the cooperatives, the Soviet-style collective farms in which all workers were made shareholders and had to pay regular dues.

But that was his business, not mine. Mine was to make this precious little instrument make a sound. I blew into it right in its middle, and it sounded even louder than when Aunt Bözsi blew it, but my lungs ran out of air quickly, and I wanted to have it again by not even taking the mouth-organ away from my mouth. And oh, good gracious, taking a deep breath the flute made a higher sound in the same place as before. I have rehearsed this over and over again without stopping and was so amused that I was not even interested in the conversation of the adults. However, I managed to catch a few unfamiliar words out of it, but I could not decipher their real meaning, and it was not possible to ask questions or to interfere with the grown-ups, nor was it worthwhile. No problem, daddy would come home from work, the shoe-plant, and would explain to me how Aunt Bözsi could work on the subway and

what kind of a conductor or ticket checker she was. When she cursed her husband out, I understood that as my Aunt Gizi's husband was a drunkard, too. But why it was impossible for her to stand up for herself was not clear to me at all. I heard the reason was that he worked as Dobi's driver, but who on earth was Dobi?[8] Nevermind, I'd rather go out to the street and show the boys my brand-new treasure.

I spotted Janko first, so I started towards him with playing the organ increasingly loud. But all of a sudden Ali, the old woodcutter's round-faced son, who was a scoundrel, came up to me and snatched the instrument out of my hand. I tried to resist desperately and reached for the flute, but it was all useless, because he was half a meter taller than me. But he made attempts to calm me down:

"No need crying! I'll give it back to you, but let me take a look!"

And he really started examining it, first spelling and then reading the inscription:

"Ko-hi-nor. What the hell? I've had a Weltmeister, a very good flute, but I've never seen anything like this."

And to examine it even more closely, he knocked the saliva out of it against his left palm, raised it to his big mouth, and started blowing it as a virtuoso. A familiar tune took wing, and perhaps I was no longer so sorry. Was is it also possible? And then he played it again with his right palm fully open. The sound was a little muffled, but he used his open palm and his tongue to deck out the tune, and then I heard music in the background too. Yes, I recognized it! Böske and Elvira Balogh sang that the other day: 'Far-far away' from the Csárdás Princess (Riviera Girl). The big boys, Feri and Jóska Balogh, joined it, but they mixed all sorts of nonsense into it. They sang that far-far away there was once a fox living on the tree. I don't remember more. The rest is mere oblivion. Then Ali stopped playing, rubbed the instrument several times against his sleeve to make it clean and observing the requirements of the business beat his spit out of it too.

[8] **István Dobi** (1898 –1968) was a Hungarian politician who was Prime Minister of Hungary from 1948 to 1952 and Chairman of the Presidential Council of the Hungarian People's Republic from 1952 to 1967.

"It's not bad, not bad. Don't yah want to sell it!" he asked looking keenly into my eyes to see if I was perhaps willing to accept the deal. "I'll give you a cool penknife for it."

Reaching into his pocket up to his elbow, he pulled out a worn old penknife with a rubber-handle and a much too often sharpened blade. I shook my head vigorously, he perhaps thought I found it too little, so he promised me two shiny soldier's buttons in addition. "They're from an officer's coat," he tried to inflate their value, but in vain, I just wanted my nice new mouth-organ back. Ali, however, must have been in a joking mood, for he offered it to me, but before I could reach it, he pulled it back, lifted it high, offered it again, let me take it, but he held it firmly, and again tried to persuade me for an exchange.

"Now, will you give it to me or not? You can't play it yet anyway."

"No, I won't, I got it from Bözsi Harsányi, give it back!"

"All right, all right, don't cry, I was only joking," the teenage boy suddenly piped down and letting go the flute he went away.

I myself was surprised by this sudden change, because I was prepared for a long altercation. My hat! There was my father coming with two brown loaves of bread under his arms. My feet were already in gear, and I rushed to announce that Bözsi Harsányi had arrived and to show her my latest treasure.

* * *

If I grasp the end of the table with both my hands and stretch myself a little, I can see all the table quite well, but apart from a few what-nots there is nothing of interest on it now.

But I can see Grandma's back hunched over the sewing machine. She unravels the folds of a garment in the making, then gives way, or rather narrows them, re-hemming, placing the parts to be joined under the slipper of the machine head, then steps on the pedal. The old Singer sewing machine that remained here after the flood rattles along with an unpleasant metallic sound. It must have been a long time since it got some machine oil last, but that's beside the

point now, I'm trying to find a correlation between the rhythm and duration of the sequences. What I have found is that when a longer section is put together, the parts work much harder. It's not a rattling anymore, it's more like a clatter. Not ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta, but prrrrrrrr-prrrrr-prrrrrr. I lift my right foot and let it swing like a pendulum, but I can't make it swing in tune with the rapid rhythm of the sewing machine. No matter, I can do other things then. Under the table, on the floor, I have the dog Prince showing its pretty red tongue, and it can be given these little kicks. Despite the hot summer weather, I have brown cotton stockings and high shoes on, but even so I can barely reach the fur of the dog with my legs. It's a clever animal, so peaceful and patient that it doesn't even growl at the naughty child. Instead, it moves inwards and towards the pot of broth, with potato and vegetables, that my grandmother has just taken off the fire and placed under the table to cool. My wicked little leg is determined to reach the dog, but then it gets stuck in the dangling stem of the ladle in the hot soup. The lid rattles ominously and my foot sinks into the hot food. I scream like a trapped vole, throw myself on the kitchen floor, kicking desperately with my burnt foot, but the excruciating pain still persists. My mother, who had been trying to rest after her night shift, rushes out of the room, her heart nearly bursting at the sight of her little darling on the floor screaming. Grandmother is there, too, stamping and circling helplessly, but my mother soon returns to reason and with trembling hands unties and loosens the laces of my shoe, which is slippery with food foam. As I was relieved of my footwear, the pain eased a little perhaps, but on the damaged surface of my foot the stocking became almost one with my skin, which comes down together with the cotton like the leaves from a stewed cabbage. I am horrified at the sight of my feet, and the sight makes me want to cry. My mother takes me in her arms, my grandmother makes room for me on the bed, and they put me there. They console me for a few moments sitting close to me on the bed, I'm whimpering and gasping for breath, then Grandmother becomes conscious and mentions albumen. My mother disagrees vehemently.

"God forbid. This foot must be cooled and disinfected. We need some medicine and not albumens."

"Well, if you are such an expert..." Grandmother spread her arms. "But all I know is that in the olden days we used to cure burns with egg whites."

"That was in the olden days, now we have medicine," my mother argued, and with a clean handkerchief dipped in cold water and lightly squeezed, she wrapped it around my wound.

The cold handkerchief did indeed soothe the burning fire for four or five minutes and made my misery less unbearable, but then the procedure had to be renewed. So, it was an hour and a half before the factory horn sounded and signalled the end of the morning shift.

"The factory's blaring, your father will be home soon," my grandmother looked at me consolingly, and went back to her machine to continue sewing.

My father came soon after. He stopped and looked at my foot, and did not even notice the bowl prepared for hand washing. Lunch was the farthest thing on his mind!

"I'll go to the chemist's and get something for that foot," he said and was immediately on his way.

"But don't go to Frid Jáki then, my son," Grandmother said. "Go to the pharmacy, to Rojko, who knows much more."

In the meantime, Grandfather also came home. My father had already told him that I had had an accident. He also stopped in front of the bed, patted my head, and then went to the credenza and turned on the radio, which was broadcasting folk music. 'I'd give that bird some sugar,' sang a woman with a voice that was still unusually high-pitched for me. I really liked this song. I couldn't even speak, when it was on the radio, my parents said I would raise a finger to warn the audience: 'Eh, bird!'

My father returned with some yellowish oily-smelling ointment and a few rolls of bandage.

"You should lubricate the wound with this twice a day and then wrap it loosely," he passed on to my mother the method of the treatment the pharmacist recommended.

"Have something to eat, sonny," Grandma told my father. "Martha, ladle him some soup and you too must have your dinner. It's true that the child's shoe had a bath in it, but we're not going to give it to the cattle for that, eh?"

After eight or ten days, my foot began to heal beyond expectations. The burn ointment helped to form a thin filmy skin, which was still red, wrinkled and very sensitive, but the constant burning sensation stopped, I have almost forgotten it. I was able to get out of bed on my own, especially when I felt I must, and I was allowed to stay in the house even if it came to the pinch during the day.

"Sitting on the throne, eh?" Grandpa asked when he saw me sitting as a mountain on the big white ceramic potty. What could I say? A nod of the head was enough, but when I finished, I knew, I was expected to clean up what I had produced in order not to make the whole kitchen stink. So, I pressed the heavy pot to my chest and walked to the door in the hope that somebody would take it from the other side somehow. I was walking with a stiffened forefoot in order to keep my new skin from tightening. But this and the impossibly high threshold proved to be my undoing. I sprawled out on the concrete floor of the gangway, the potty broke to pieces and its content slopped over my face. I wasn't disgusted by my own filth actually, but having fallen on a sharp piece of tile I cut my palm and cried in horror at the sight of my blood. Grandmother reluctantly stopped the sewing machine. "'Just leave him unattended for a moment," she started to lament, "and there we go!"

But seeing that I was again injured, she let off. She rinsed my bleeding hand with a little water, and tore a narrow strip from the felt of a pillowcase she was making, and while dressing the wound she tried to console me. 'Don't cry, my dear. You'll be all right by the time you marry.'

Just an hour or even less passed, when the loose bandage fell off my hand, and I saw no more blood. I knew what my duty was because I went to my dear grandma quickly and reported:

"Grandma, I married, it no longer hurts!"

She took off her glasses and looked at me.

"And who did you marry? You don't mean to say Klára Mikola?"

I blushed at that name I think, but not because I was impressed by hearing it. On the contrary, I was whole-heartedly mad with that silly little girl who followed me into our garden toilet shortly before my accident, she pulled down her panties though nobody asked her to, showed me her bare little underbelly and wanted to do something that I would never do. Grandmother was scrabbling around in the tiny vegetable garden nearby, and she must have heard that we were messing around in there, so that's why she mentioned Klári and wanted me to get together with that disgusting little girl. But it will come to nothing, neither my body nor my soul wanted a sweetheart yet.

So, I'd rather hobble out to the gate or the front lawn, it was so long since I was last outside. But look who I can see. Mama Teci, the other grandmother, is coming towards me. She approaches with a slow, wobbly gait, her short, stubby legs carrying her short, plump body with difficulty. As soon as she can see me, she beckons me to her with her arms outstretched: "Come here, my little darling, what do you think I brought you?" Now, I find that hard to understand: if she comes to our place, why should I run to her like I do to my mother and father, but how can a little child resist her call of 'what do you think I brought you?' So, I run, she bends down, grabs me with both her hands and wants to kiss me on the mouth, which I don't like very much, or rather not at all, so I want to turn my head away, but she is stronger. She plastered her old, wrinkled mouth to mine, and with her strong stout tongue parted my lips and pressed something sweet – a matchstick-long pencil-thick half-sucked candy into my mouth. However sweet and long that lozenge was and however sweet her saliva tasted, I didn't care, and wanted to neutralize the disgust I felt in my mouth. It is disgusting enough when some women spit on the edge of their dress and wipe a child's smeared face with it, but this one really took the prize as it was so repelling. I broke out of my other grandmother's embrace, went to the boys who were playing tag, and on the way, I spat out Mama Teci's present as far as I could. But this did not stop my disgust yet. I collected all the saliva I had in my mouth, and spat it out next to the bloody candy.

I spent an hour or so on the street, then went home, because my injured leg began to hurt more and more, the fresh skin was still tight, and besides I was also a bit hungry. I thought, I'd have a slice of greasy garlic bread, but I could see from the doorway that I didn'1t have to bother Grandma with such a trifle because the kitchen was full with women again. My grandmother Teri was sitting there, and although she had only a seat on the little stool she waited patiently and silently, nobody minded her now. As soon as she saw me, she wanted to take me in her lap, but to my luck mother came running from the factory, and as she was waiting for her, I was no longer important.

"Guess what I did the other afternoon," she began by getting to the point. "I am so ashamed that I'm afraid even to say it to you, but you will understand since you know that I am not in the habit of hurting even a fly, and that I do not even think of hurting anybody on purpose."

My mother was tired and hungry to boot, and she wouldn't have minded a bit if her mother had cut it short this time, and so she only asked her:

"Mum, who did you insult this time?"

"Well, you know," her mother replied, "Lenke, you know, the soda-water Hermus' wife walked over to me, in her apron she had a handful of those delicious crunchy cherries, because she knows I love them. And I, with my silly old head, ate one or two and said, that "I haven't had cherries this year yet" and then added that usual saying we often quote: "Health to my belly, illness to Jews!" But then I realized that I was a fool and slapped my lips. I didn't even wait for her to say anything, I corrected myself right away saying "illness to deuce!" But she just looked at me, nodded her head a little, and said: Yes, we know... we know. Then she turned and left me without a word. I was so annoyed at my own stupidity that I could hardly sleep all night. 'My daughter,' she looked at my mother with pleading eyes, 'you are friends with them, I know you used to go and play with them when you were a child. If *thou knowest* God, go to her place, spare some time for that and tell them I was sorry and a fool, because I saw she would not like to speak to me."

And my mother – because she must have expected worse – just laughed.

"Now, that's no reason for sleepless nights, Mum. Lenke is not that angry. But I'll talk to her if I see her. But Mum you should hold your tongue and think before you say anything to anyone."

"You see, you're right about that, my girl," interposed Grandfather, who was sitting on a stool in the hall listening to his co-mother-in-law's lamentations, "There's really no need to insult them. In the old days, when I was a child, people used to mock at them because they didn't speak Hungarian properly. But what they did to them during the war was too much, they shouldn't have done that.

"Grandpa," I joined the conversation unsolicited, "how did they mock the Jews?"

The old man was perhaps surprised by my interjection and looked at me for a long moment. Perhaps he just wondered whether I would understand at all his answer. Then he spoke up anyway.

"You know, my boy, when I was a kid, I used to read the *Borsszem Jankó*. It was a joke paper like the *Ludas Matyi* now. In it I read a funny story about a Jew whose wife eloped with another Jew, known as Yankef Tsviberes. And the cuckold spoke this way: *"Na I say, Yankef, that if you love Zali, give me six hundred florin and you may go with her to virgin Aymyrica. In it. An' you weiss that dumbhead tell me in answer to this empty speech? He got his paraphernalia, and spat at me with it, so that my back was as full of it as if it had been a tiger's foot on it, and a landische Aufstellung."*

"Well," Grandpa concluded briefly, "that's how they spoke then, but it was just a joke. But well, Hitler was no joke.

"Grandpa," I asked him again, "who is Hitler?"

The old man got up from the stool and walked towards the courtyard, but he just shrugged at my question.

"Ah, you're too young to know that. "

* * *

Grandpa brought a huge watermelon from the Bulgarian garden where he had been working since spring. The small pension he gets

from the railway is not too much, so he had to do some extra work, too. But even there the fence is not made of sausage, they barely pay anything for a norm. It's not worth going there every day, I often hear, even though the melon, which I'm tasting for the first time in my life, is very yummy. I bite the narrowly cut slices as if I were playing the mouth-organ that Aunt Bözsi gave me – from one edge to the other and back again, the only difference is that it doesn't sound so nicely because by the time it could have sounded, there is nothing left but the green crust. Grandpa eats it sitting at the table with a knife. First, he makes horizontal cuts in the red part of the melon slice, then he cuts it in half before slicing again. Then the resulting juicy bits are put on the tip of the knife before he inserts them in his mouth. Grandmother takes a triangular piece in her hand and goes towards the stool. Her eyes search for a cutlery and find a sharp old tablespoon. First, she scrapes the seeds with it, then uses it to dig into the flesh of the melon.

"Is Grandma already growing downwards and so eats sitting on a stool?" I asked astonished.

"Maybe," she responded shaking her head and laughing.

Oh, how human frailty can spoil even such rare idyll! The unpleasant croaking of Mama Zsuzsi breaks through the open kitchen window.

"Come out, Margaret, I want to talk to you!"

Grandmother, disappointed, stops eating the melon, goes to the gate, and I follow her because my hunch is that something unusual must have happened, but I wasn't prepared for a declaration of war from a neighbour.

"Is this your hen? Is this your hen?" asks Mama Zsuzsi gloatingly while bending down between her slow steps and holding our best-laying hen by its feet slammed it to the ground.

Grandmother became paralyzed as she saw her best little hen, which the neighbour found at a wrong place, dying, and couldn't stop her flowing tears. Still, she regained her composure, bent down to the hen, took its bleeding head in the palm of her hand, looked at her cursed adversary and said only:

"Why do you go to church at all, you Saint Deuce!"

I needed no more words! I've had enough to mock the old hag! So, I began to shout at her at the top of my voice:

"Saint Deuce! Saint Deuce!"

And then Mrs. Jakab's grandson, Jankó, couldn't stay idle either. He bent down, grabbed a flat stone good enough for throwing, and hit me in the chest so hard that I staggered, but there were plenty of stones in our yard, too, so I got myself together, seized some and fired with them furiously as a shotgun releases the shots. Almost at the same moment, the aggravated mood had rattled the nerves of our dogs. After a short growl and a snarl, our dog Prince leapt at Velvet, and rolling in the dust, tearing at each other's fur furiously, they opened the third front of what had suddenly become a war. Poor Mama Zsuzsi being obese could not stand for long the prolonged warfare, so she turned her back to us and staggered home slowly. But peace was still a long way off, for this Saint Deuce byname must have hurt her very much and remained in her elephant memory for good. For many days later, when I was just sitting happily on the bench of the Jakab family, she came out the yard with the inevitable shawl on her shoulder, and after looking around and finding the street quite empty, she grabbed my two ears and lifted me up from my seat. But I stood up on my own, for her old unkempt nails dug into the base of my ear and then she lifted me from my standing position twice, hissing as she growled:

"Will you mock me yet? Will you mock me again?"

The burning pain forced tears into my eyes, but it was all too little to make me cry, because I knew I deserved punishment, but she also deserved her byname! I looked into her eyes through my clenched teeth desperately, and seeing that she couldn't do anything with me she suddenly released her grasp and let me go. My knees buckled as I touched the ground, but I sprang up and vamoosed like a mouse from a mousetrap. In the evening, however, as my mother put stood me in the sink to wash off the dust of a day's tramping, she noticed the tear in the base of my ears. I had to tell her what happened, and it was far more humiliating than when the old witch held me in her pounce.

But not even three days later, Jankó and I were cup and can again, because at the end of the quarrel neither of us declared eternal grudge. And if, in view of the gravity of the offence, one of us did sometimes contemplate a vow, all that was said was to avoid the yard or the house of the other party only, or the grounds in front of the other house, especially if there was a clear injunction: do not set your foot in the yard! Or: do not let us see you in front of our house. However, we knew from experience that this was not to be taken seriously. However, Mama Zsuzsi was more persistent in this respect. We had to wait for her apology until the next communion, and when she went home from church, cleansed of her sins, in compliance with the pastor's instruction her first move was to come to our place, and rolling her voluminous torso over Grandma she tightly embraced her with the ample hoops of her arms.

"The Lord forgave me because I had repented for my sins. Forgive me, Margit, too, if I sinned against you."

"I was never angry with you, Zsuzsa. What is that good for? We have to live together here further on, we are people after all, are we not?"

Grandpa, however, always avoided the hypocritical neighbour's clasp pretending that he had something more important to do at that moment. Did he intend to hold a grudge? I don't think so. He was simply modest, I think. Or maybe no part of his body or soul wished to be touched by the big woman. And here I recollect his case with Terca Rozmán, when at first, she just sat down on the chaise longue but then she might have had some thought in her head and in a moment sprawled all over it. The old man jumped up with such agility, he was over seventy already, as if his pillow had just been set on fire. Among other things, that's why he did not like the old midwife, and I, looking back on it fifty-five years later, can understand it very well.

One Saturday afternoon, I was sitting in the sand pile in front of our house with Kincsa and Ilus, Jankó's sisters, while Jankó was bouncing a colourless old rubber ball to some nonsensical rhyme. "Zsunyu, Dénár, Jóni Károly! Zsunyu, Dénár, Jóni Károly!" he repeated the names that

I didn't know, each time slapping his palm against the bouncing ball. But he did this at least twice as hard when he said "Jóni Károly," at which the ball flew twice as high. I watched with interest to see if there were any more interesting developments in the game, but the rhyme was the same all the time. So, I turned instead to the girls, who placed a small pile of sand on their bare forefeet, flattened the top into a hump, and then carefully pulled their feet out from under it. We are making a 'hearth,' they informed me, but as the sand was not wet enough, the mouth of the little stove soon collapsed. Kincsa, to help the situation, pulled away one side of her panties and peed a little in the sand, then mixed it well with her foot. I helped her to mix it so that I could try to build my own stove, but my mother shouted at me and I had to obey. I left the girls and ran home, but my mother clapped her hands together in annoyance. You look like a rogue from Nyír! But then she said nothing more, only grabbed me and led me to the washbasin. Se washed my hands and face, then put the washbasin on the floor and put me in it to cleanse my body-parts from beneath too.

"Mum," I said unexpectedly. "Who were this Zsunyu, Dénár, Károly Jóni?"

My mother looked at me and asked:

"Where did you hear that?"

"From Jankó," I said proudly.

"You know there were once two beggars in the village," she said and looked at me seriously while explaining. "I can't recall their real names, everyone just called them Zsunyu and Dénar. One of them Zsunyu was a sort of a simpleton, but never hurt anyone. They always went out to beg together. It happened once that Zsunyu went begging without the other. Two or three days passed, maybe more, so that they asked him where Denar was. "He doesn't eat, he sleeps," Zsunyu said. So, somebody went to the old abandoned house in the outskirts of the village, where they lived in the attic, to see what the situation was. He climbed up the ladder, and then he saw the other one lying in the hay with pieces of bread and a broken mug full of milk placed at his side. The flies were buzzing already around him. Only Zsunyu, not

knowing himself what was the matter with his companion, could give no explanation. That's all I know."

The story, though I was small, got me thinking in a way. I think my mind was growing faster than my body, and that growth led to more and more questions. 'Of course,' I said to myself, 'that's why Zsunyu said he didn't eat, he slept, because poor Dénar was already dead, so he couldn't eat.

"And who was that Károly Jóni?" I went on asking my Mum.

"I don't know anything about it, I only heard it in this ball-playing rhyme, for that's what we usually quote," my Mum said and asked me to question her no more. She began to wash the shanks of my leg and then higher, too. Then she wiped me, and put a little white shirt on me, and a pair of shorts with bridles, then dressed my legs in white knee-socks with red tassels she crocheted herself, shoed my feet in in rough pigskin sandals, and put a crocheted white little cap on my head, and then she took me by the hand and walked with me towards the centre of the town. There we walked down the main street called the City along the yellow curb-stone pavement under the dignified row of shops protected by steel shutters, teaching me in the meantime the art of greeting people. Adults, aunts and uncles, she said, should be greeted with "csókolom" [9]*, so that nobody would think that I was uncouth, Mum said, but at the same time I heard her say: hi, Mancika, hi, Ilike, waving her hand in a friendly way, and to those across the street she also said simply hello. It's good that this trip ends sooner or later because this constant greeting is so uncomfortable, almost humiliating, and I can't even pronounce this "csókolom" clearly. Perhaps I was afraid that the person I have just greeted so would stop, take me in his arms and make me fulfil this frivolous promise. So, I ask my mother: "Why do I have to kiss the hands of people I don't know?" "Well, how many times do I have to explain to you that you have to say "csókolom" to adults, because that is polite, and a well-behaved child must not say 'Good morning" to an adult. That's how peasants greet each-other." I had no idea who the

[9] Csókolom is the truncated form of „kezét csokolom" meaning "I kiss your hand."

peasants were, but good morning or good afternoon sounded for me much more appropriate than "csókolom." After all my grandfather also used that phrase and never said "csókolom" to anybody.

Turning off the main road at St John's Chapel, we soon came to Hatház, Six Houses, the row of houses where Mama Teci lives. But she is not the only one who lives there. Sitting on the bed with her hair made up in curls, her lips painted red, her gown half-open, was Aunt Magda, one of my mother's elder sisters, and a short man with thick curly hair, his hair sticking out on both sides of his head, who had to be called Uncle Boris. There was a sickening stench in the dimness of the small room. It turned out that in one corner a little girl of about my age sat on the potty. She was called Alochka. The name Magda is familiar to me, but the other two ones don't ring the bell. I soon find out that I don't understand what uncle Boris says, because he is a military officer and a Russian. After that, I realise that the shiny buttoned uniform and jacket hanging on the rack, with the gold stars on the epaulets can only belong to him. I don't feel comfortable here, no one looks at me with love. My mother is talking to her sister Magda, the stranger is reading a newspaper, and Mama Teci is in the kitchen mopping the floor in front of the stove. After wiping her bottom, Alochka looks at me from under her curly hair that falls over her forehead, then moves timidly into a corner. The situation was awkward, but nothing like the quandary I had found myself under some other unexpected circumstances before.

* * *

If circumstances want to punish me, or if I have a writer's block I feel I have to go to the graveyard. Not with flowers or pious intentions, but rather with questions that were left on the roadsides, questions that only the departed would know the answers to. I go to a place near the dead, yet a familiar place, which I used to visit almost daily during the days of my happy childhood. I knew every footpath, every plot and every more notable grave marker of my acquaintances in the cemetery

of Újlak as the back of my hand, and since I was a schoolboy, I had kept track of the names written by death, too.

Immediately to the left of the entrance, one is greeted by a stately cast-iron tomb. This iron gravemarker is square in shape like a large chest of drawers. A small elevation in the centre of its top plate relieves the monotony of the flat surface while providing a secondary pedestal for the towering iron cross that stands on it. The cross, a symbol of the resurrection, now lies at the base of the monument, broken forever. The fancy pattern around the edges has been chipped away, and only a few small sections are left as a reminder at all. The cast-iron inscriptions have fallen away little by little, so that only memory can tell us that the tomb's owner, who died in 1851, was once called Ms. József Vachter. One should at least raise an eyebrow at this unusual name, because such a surprise in the history of language on such a level is becoming a rare moment. Ms. József must have been destined for a long period of undisturbed rest by her beloved ones, at least that is what the fragmented parts of the cast neo-Gothic iron fence still standing vertically around the grave indicate. Behind it was a similarly shaped memorial marker, the product of the same iron foundry, and slightly to the left lies an artefact having a flatter body, but also decorated with a raised cross. But its rivets got tired and loosened, and they both fell to pieces. A few iron crosses with lace-like decorations are still also visible around the entrance. Most of them grew out of a crest set into the concrete, bearing the now illegible details of the deceased. But there are not many of these left either, they are usually crumbling at the stem, and where the grave mound is still visible, they lie on it or parallel to it. No one disturbs them, for even the scrap metal collecting agents here respect the objects that belong to the province of death.

The central crucifix of the Roman Catholics stands in the middle of the road at the entrance. Here, the parishioners make the sign of the cross and stop for a short prayer, but even the Calvinists who abstain from worshipping a depiction of God pass by with their hats off. When you reach the chapel, the road splits into two and forms a ring around the cemetery,which is said to be seven hundred years old. If I turn to

the right, after a few steps I come to the big old weeping willow tree, which has always resigned itself to being tugged and pulled by naughty children who use its long crown of leaves as a swing. If my momentary mood makes me turn to the left, after a few steps I get to the common gravestone of my godfather and prematurely deceased cousin. A full-length statue of an angel, cast of artificial stone, stands guard over a mound called the silent chapel, where the inscription reads "Our father and dear Géza await here resurrection." I was about ten and my cousin sixteen when an electric shock killed him. I learnt that his name was Géza from the inscription only on the coffin, because from the point of view of his older sisters everybody called him Öcsi. His sudden death shocked the family. The father, full of vigour and ambition, running a butcher's shop, slid into a nervous and physical collapse and passed away after a year and a half following his only son's death.

But here rest the Harsányi, Puskás, Mikola members of our family, and now more and more of the Fábiáns. My dear and beautiful cousin Böske opened the line. Böske Balog, the daughter of my Aunt Zsuzsika, was no longer able to live under the same roof with her drunken, rude and jealous husband, so she fled to her death in 1965, at the age of 30. Next to her rest Grandmother and Grandfather, who both died during my military service, in the autumn of 1973 and the spring of 1974 respectively.

Twenty years after their deaths, the Hungarian Television would make a portrait film about me in a series called My Homeland. The director will also visit our house in Újlak to get to know my parents. During the fifteen-minute conversation, my father is both excited and happy, clearly pleased with his son. When I play him the film from a VHS cassette a year later, it is just the two of us sitting in the dim light of the room. In the cemetery scene, I sit on the concrete grave of my grandparents' gravestone, leaning my torso against their headstone, reciting my poem When the Child... from memory. My father becomes restless at the first words, starts to fidget in his chair, his hand anxiously seeking mine. I think that he wants to squeeze it, and with that intention I hold out my hand. He returns my handshake, but

that is not what he really wanted. Now he grabs my wrist and, guiding my hand to his forehead, he guides my fingers straight into the tear-stained sockets of his eyes. In this way, he lets me know that he, who never quite believed in my creative abilities, has now reached a state of catharsis. He would not say so, of course, for emotions overrun him. The point is that I have never received greater recognition from him, either before or since.

Since December 2003 he also rests here. His elder sister Zsuzsika, who preceded him in death by at least a quarter of a century, was buried close to her parents, so my father was forced to pull to the side. It is true that he had planned for this gap well in advance, and he announced his claim to it to me, knowing that the space to his left was already occupied. My mother took note of the exclusion without objection and did not make a fuss about it. After all, the earth is everywhere sacred, she said not only once.

And here, in this row rests my Uncle Pista, my father's younger brother, who, in terms of years, was not given as much on earth as his brother was. When my father arrived at his final hours, the spirits of the ancestors chose my uncle to lead his soul into the afterlife. I myself could hear my father clearly, distinctly call the name Pista, and in his state of transition from life to death he must have seen him, for he raised up on the pillow with his two feeble hands stretched out towards him.

Well, what can I say? Today, my dead loved ones inhabit the cemetery that, when I was a child, was for me a place of silence, tranquillity and a little mystery. If my grandchildren were to ask me what I was doing there every day when I was six or seven years old, I would find it hard to explain and give them an answer they would accept. If I started with saying that I only went there to pick violets from mid-March, they might understand, because they love flowers, too, and they also pick flowers as is due and proper. But daily for two weeks? For this a childish, but not easily understandable fascination with flowers had to be developed in me. This fascination died down at the end of the flowering season, but the following spring it reappeared with a new vigour. In the eyes of the kids of today who are increasingly alienated

from nature due to ever more sophisticated means of communication, this story is unworthy of attention. Let's try something else, then.

Sometimes I went to the cemetery with a sketchbook and a pencil. I would sit down on the concrete edge of a grave and start drawing the circular building of the chapel, the hemispherical dome or the more interesting grave markers. I sat there with no idea of perspective, but I tried very hard to give the impression of spatiality to my drawings. Shall I tell you that I wanted to be a painter at the time, even though my father wanted me to be an architect? Why? I don't know, he never told me why, but today I think that in his eyes the word engineer was then a possible synonym of secure existence.

The three sides of the square form cemetery once bordered the garrison barracks. Soldiers, if they had any business with the civilian population, passed through the gaps in the fence. I used to peer through these gaps when the barrack dwellers were exercising on the gymnastic equipment or had foot-drill. But the soldiers also watched from the inside, so they could notice the onlooker. We knew that the soldiers were mostly friendly with curious children. I too was approached once by a blond boy in a t-shirt, a boy from Lvov. I already spoke a little Russian. I could tell my name, what grade I was in and I could also tell something about my family. I don't remember his name, but he leaned down and asked me to stay there for a few minutes. 'He'd just run to the barracks,' he said, 'but he'd be back soon, so let me wait.' I didn't have to wait more than ten minutes. He came in full dress uniform, with a violin in his hands. Then he raised his instrument to his chin, looked at me with sparkling eyes and began to play. The dance of the bow on the strings produced Hungarian-sounding melodies at first slowly, then faster, then more restrained. I knew them well from the radio, so when I heard the first bars, I looked up with interest. He noticed that I was touched by his music and played with even more enthusiasm and good humour. When he finished, he bowed jokingly and announced that he had performed Brahms' Hungarian Dance No. 2. From that moment on, whenever I hear even a passage from this piece of music, I cannot help thinking of the master violinist from Lvov.

On another occasion, I was addressed in broken Hungarian by a soldier who offered me coloured cable ends. “Can you make a ring?” he asked, coming quite close to the wire fence. He tried to dispel my astonishment by saying that he was from Kőrösmező. Seeing that I was unfamiliar with the name of the village, he added that it was near Rahó and that there were Hungarians too. His name was Ivan Zelinski, but he added that he was also called Jenő. I met him several times, as well as the violinist, and if it was possible, I did not go empty-handed. Let them have their share, I thought, of the apples and pears that ripened in our garden from mid-summer, and then of those all kind of plums.

And once fate brought me together with a tall dark brown soldier with thick-eyebrow and ever burning eyes. His name was Izrail, he said, and then he added that he was Jewish. He could see that this did not surprise me very much, and after a few sentences he asked if there were Jews in the village. I think I understood at once that he wished to find people who were like him instead of the community he had left at home, and I readily told him that the Solomon House, whose owner is the director of the furniture factory, was situated on the main street, relatively not far from the entrance to the barracks, and there he could obtain further information. This put him in a good mood, and a few days later, on a trip out, he was lucky enough to find his people.

Then dictatorship went, democracy came, and the barracks let its inhabitants go without any particular sentimentality. The cemetery is an institution of a completely different kind, not accepting short-term tenants, but only visitors who come with flowers and are reconciled to death. The cemetery is built from and on the bones of the dead, because that is its nature, and therefore the tenancy of its inhabitants is for good. Well, in this way, in this complexity, the cemetery is for me both past and present. If I feel like asking questions about the past, I can go back in a millisecond and not only with the help of the environment, the buildings and the objects. I can come across people of my own age whom I have not seen for half a century. There should be no problem, as long as the aged faces, the owners of the changed bodies recognize

each other and at least one of them is a people person. But if, when meeting, one of the pair is forced to rack his or her brains to recall the name that belongs to the other face, it can be embarrassing for both.

* * *

The kitchen door was open during the day from spring to late autumn, and we only closed it at night in order to avoid unnecessary problems. If there are flies in the summer, a light tulle curtain is hung up in the doorway, and even the dog respects it and prefers to stay outside rather than wrestle with it if it sticks to its face, but it's not so easy for a small child to get through it either. I got caught in it now too as out of sudden curiosity I started for the exit, because there were noises and something unusual again in the neighbourhood. It was clear that something must have happened in aunt Erzsi's house. The old woman was wailing loudly, then aunt Mariska's voice was also heard from there. Grandmother is not much interested in what is going on in other people's houses, since all interesting news would reach her ears sooner or later. Anyway, we have a straight messenger, aunt Boriska's maiden daughter, her name is Elvira, who visits our place several times during the day.

"Godmother," she says instead of greeting, "don't you have some black coffee?"

"What for?" Grandma asked.

"Well, you'll hardly believe me, but Béluka got so drunk that he is almost senseless. He must sober up a little because it is impossible to put him in bed in such a state."

My grandmother looks surprised at Eli, but goes to the stove without a word, where a little black wishy-washy made from barley and chicory can be still found in a small darkened pot. As she carefully drains some of this into a bottle, Eli quickly recalls that the boy found the bottle with that one litre wine her grandmother had put away for Pali Rozmán for knocking down all the nuts from the tree, and Béluka drank it to the last drop. Now he lies on the stairs, whimpering, and

cannot even open his mouth when Elvira offers him coffee, but she keeps on trying and never gives up. She raises his head with her left hand and forces the cup between his lips. He protests, splashing the liquid, but at least he comes to his senses and says:

"Now, *lem'me* alone, *lem'me*!" he says shaking his head angrily and flailing his hands erratically.

"*Mein, Got, mein Lieber Got*, he's only a kid a and look what *he done* to me! Since my poor *Markitka* daughter died, there's no one to raise him because he doesn't listen to reson.

Aunt Erzsi expressed her embarrassment caused by the child's behaviour with these words, and then, somewhat relenting and forgiving the naughty grandson she took one of his hands and tried to persuade him to come round:

"Come on in, *Péluka, in*to the house, lie down on the *gouch* and have a rest there."

The boy, perhaps because he was getting tired of all the pestering, pulled himself together, stood up, put his right foot forward, carefully found the step below, stepped forward, but the next step was too quick compared to the first, and his skinny little body, losing its balance, swung ahead. Then he took three more long steps in quick succession, and would have taken more, but that was all he needed in order to make an unpleasant encounter with the old peach tree. Throwing his arms around the trunk of the tree, he began to slide down slowly, and by the time he was in a sitting position already with a pretty nice lump on his forehead, his eyes were closed again.

"Well, come on somebody, let's get him and take him into the house," said Elvira getting fed up with our helplessness. "Aunt Erzsi, you take a washbasin or a bad bucket to his bed, because he'll throw up later..."

Poor Béluka! He was orphaned too soon, and compared to village boys he became independent too early and turned into a precocious adult against his will to boot. But in compensation, he had immense freedom, which no one could limit. Whenever he felt like it, he would wander the grassy banks of the Tisza, carrying home the munitions

left over from the war or buried in the loose ground and dredged up by the current. What drove him to this dangerous passion of a collector, no one can tell today. He pulled a small cart of his own design, for iron is a heavy commodity, and although most of the various egg and other shape grenades were no longer live, he sometimes gambled with his life. Aunt Mariska's eldest son, Badé, a recently demobilized soldier, had not even taken off his flyer uniform with those blue epaulets, stopped him once and inspected the contents of the small cart. He frowned as he picked out an artillery shell from the scrap heap. His face was almost contorted when he vigorously gave a good dressing down to the careless child, and without further thinking he threw the egg grenades into the middle of the duck pond under the church. "That is the best place for them grenades," he added. "In the thick mire they'll hurt nobody!"

Béla was the first of the children in the street who got acquainted with the Russian soldiers. At first, he only went to the cemetery ditches where the soldiers of the signal corps battalion left the rubbish – worn-out, broken technical equipment or their accessories. He brought home a lot of useless things, such as reels of telegraph tapes, or magnetic tapes in bundles, but sometimes also more useful things. Bits of coloured cable, small accumulators, batteries with the help of which one could even light, various radio lamps, gutted or almost working radio sets, and things that had already stirred up my imagination– typewriters with Latin and Cyrillic letters, whose keyboards had been smashed with a hammer before they were thrown out. Adults would ask him where he had got them when they saw something more interesting. "From the military scrapheap," was the short but understandable answer. And soon, inspired by his example and his luck, I, but also Janko, Gyuszi and others went to that scrapheap and spent more and more time with Béla. He enjoyed being with us. The fact that he was five or six years older than us didn't bother him much, and he was impressed by the fact that we were around him, that we listened to him as a leader, and that we fulfilled his orders without hesitation when the situation of the game demanded it.

But with school which was still quite distant and unknown to me Béluka was at odds. The teacher came to pick him up at least twice a week, but the boy was never at home. What could aunt Erzsi say? She spread her arms and made all kinds of maudlin excuses. For example:

"I don't know, i*ch weiss nichts*. I send him to school every day, but I cannot order him to do anything."

One somber autumn morning, however, it was not the teacher who came for Béla, but two *druzhiniks**[10] with red armbands. The boy noticed them coming from afar and when they turned up from behind Mrs Bodó's house and made their way on the cart track towards our place, he did not have to guess their purpose. He didn't have to think twice but ran straight up to the shelter of his own designed lookout point. The trunk of this remarkable structure was a rafter, five or six metres high, dug into the ground, with flimsy little handholds like those of a hen's nest on which one could climb to a larger closed crate-shaped shelter. By the time the officials reached the courtyard, aunt Erzsi was already out to welcome them on the porch.

"Well, what do you want here please, who sent you here please?"

"Ask us not, Mummy who sent us here, you'd rather tell us where your grandson is," one of them bawled out at the old woman.

Aunt Erzsi, however, retorted unhesitatingly and stalwartly.

"For yah information please, I'm no Mummy for you. I've got an honest name and I'm a respectable widow. But if you want to see my grandson, look for him not here please, but at the school because he went there in the morning, I've prepared even a snack for him."

Aunt Erzsi could talk as much as she liked, the *druzhiniks* were not interested in her croaking. They just looked at each other, as they had once seen how Hungarian gendarmes did that looking, and then went on to inspect the inside of the house. Bálint Mikola simply pushed aside the old woman standing in the doorway and went into the house. The two living rooms, with their poor furnishings, were easy to check, and after looking under the bed he turned back quickly. Péter Petrus looked at the

[10] Druzhinik - volunteer people's policeman.

landing of the attic, but he was not bold enough to step on the rickety rung, nor would it have been of any use, for he saw that the latch was on the door from the outside. So, he did not hesitate any longer, and started for the stable. He had only taken a few steps when he caught sight of the spy post. He stopped under it and, looking up, soon saw that someone was crouching there, and it was not long before he guessed who it was.

"Eh boy, can you hear me? Come down here while you're still all right!"

But Béluka remained still and silent, as if he was not really there. But Péter would not budge.

"You come down, or I'll bring you down myself!"

And he already lifted his boot-clad foot to the first rung of the hen-ladder, but he did not really want to climb up on it, he was just trying it to see what this small contraption could bear. The small piece of lath, fastened with a weak rusty nail, was already twisting under the weight of the heavy boots, and the man pretended to be really angry.

"Damn this bloody gazebo, am I going to break my neck for him? I'd rather bring the whole thing down!"

And, straightening himself into a straddling position, he put both hands on the rafter. The loose ground gave way and the post leaned slightly. It seemed that two more pushes against it and Béluka's look out point would lie down on the ground under its own weight. Bálint joined his mate, and the two of them pushed the structure down, or rather brought it down safely to the ground, and pulled the frightened child out of his hiding place.

"Well, you see, there's no hiding from us! Even if you hide in a mousehole, we'll get you out from there, remember, my boy," Bálint Mikola admonished the youth.

"Well, enough of that!" said Petrus to his mate. "And you wash your face and everything, buddy, take your satchel and go to school," he urged the boy, for being a mason he had more important things to do than his community service.

The good for naught truant obeyed without a word, sniffling, to collect his things, and in half a minute he produced the torn second-

hand schoolbag, but old Mikola did not find his dressing faultless, and so he snapped at him:

"Are you a Soviet kid or what? Where did you put the red pioneer tie? Run and find it and tie that pioneer's tie around your neck, because I'm not taking you anywhere without it."

This was the way Soviet society looked after Béluka and perhaps many other children prone to aberration because it was feared that the school-shy pupils of the present would become the work-shy workers of the future, with whom the self-conscious Soviet citizen could not have common cause. But the case of Béluka with the druzhinists was already on the villagers' lips that day, and what it swelled into in a few days was a frivolously twisted version of reality. It was mainly the village idlers and the loud-voiced men playing cards on the Tisza bank from morning till night who knew Béla only by reputation and who were very good at putting a colourful spin on the events that had become public knowledge. They said and laughed at it for example that the kid had really got a good one over those druzhinists, because as soon as they discovered the observation post set up in the branches of the big walnut tree and got a ladder to climb up after him, he flew over to the other end of the garden on a concrete plane moving on a wire-rope, where he also had a hideout in a hundred-year-old walnut tree. Thus, when they tried to smoke him out, to the amazement of the red-banded servants of the village he flew back to his previous place. Isn't that boy a pure Tarzan, they thought. Indeed, there might be something common between the two, but as for the concrete flyer, the credibility of such an assertion made some people think again.

* * *

On a bright October morning, a cart pulled up in front of our gate. Grandmother's clear eyes lit up and she ran straight to her daughter. But this time, in addition to Aunt Gizi and Sanyika, there was a newly born infant wrapped in a white swaddling-cloth among the wagon's

passengers. He was the newly born Jánoska, whose arrival was so much anticipated in our house at Market Square.

"My daughter, aren't you tired because of the endless rattling and rolling on your journey?" Grandma asked but she hardly cared for the answer, she was much more interested in the swaddling-cloth and was already reaching for it.

They must have travelled well, it was certainly warm and comfortable on the fresh straw covered with blankets, they had hardly anything to be troubled by in that spacious and safe part of the wagon. Aunt Gizi, however, was pressing her palm to an area around her kidneys when stepping on the ironed flat piece of the harness in order to get down from the wagon. My mother and Böske, our cousin, a pretty and big girl, were already there in the street. There was much rejoicing, even Grandpa got up from the couch as they unfolded the swaddling-cloth on the table top and took a closer look at the latest member of the family.

„This one will be a professor that's what I say," Grandma exclaimed, and I had not the faintest idea what a professor was, but I was not interested at all in the question, so I didn't ask anything.

Then my Auntie Gizi settled herself in the kitchen's only armchair, unbuttoned the front of her shirt, and with a careful move pulled out her beautiful white breast. I involuntarily glanced at her and perhaps blushed a little. No wonder, it was a long time, if ever, I'd seen anything like that, but it was not the right time to sort this out. My aunt noticed my sudden embarrassment, smiled tenderly at me, and started to relieve the hunger of her impatiently mewling infant. I felt that I had nothing to do in a kitchen full with adults, and then Sanyika moved closer to her mother, too, instead of being with me. So, I left them confabulating and quietly slipped out of the house and headed for the garden in that instant.

The garden changed a lot since the time I was there last. Beyond the big apple tree, just for a few yards from here, began the lush ploughland, where at other times the tall sturdy corn patch blocked all view. But now, as when the sky clears after a long rainfall, wide landscape opened up before me: my eyes could soar through the barren gardens as far as

the Tisza. I could have counted, from the right, the long row of houses in the place called Village, with their gardens stretching as far as the brick-yard, and also the sunflower stalks left in the fields, but what really caught my eyes were the hills of stalks everywhere as if someone, being in fine mood, had built field-guard huts on the plain.

I set off at random through the sharp chumps of the corn stalks, and as there was no real path, I wandered for some time over the uneven ground stopping twice to examine two huge hills of stalks closely, and found that the slim sheaves, tightened with a willow string, were only adjusted to each other, one holding the other. 'Well, it' easy,' I thought, but when I got to the second one, I noticed that there was a large hollow between the loosely stacked sheaves. I bent down to see what was in there, but a big brown rabbit jumped out of it and I fell on my rear in fright, and a chump sliced my side. So, I no longer wanted to know anything about these holes. My only wish was to get out of the jungle of these threatening corn-cobs that reached up to my knee, but instead of turning back I went ahead where I could see a beautiful yellowing apple tree. The apples that fell to the ground were hard and sour. Going on, I came to a large unfamiliar yard, and through the open door I entered the large unknown house that was there. In the room women in dark headscarves were busy with doing something around a large white corpse. I stood in the doorway and then I understood that two women at once wash and wipe the dead with a wet linen. One of them noticed me and asked:

"Why, my dear boy, what are you doing here? Go on your way because you have no business here!" I turned round at once, for I know what I am supposed to do when am told, but then a softly speaking woman bent down to me and said in a sad voice:

"Can you see? Poor Aunt Piroska died, and so Icuka's got no grandmother any longer."

I knew Icuka, she often came to our house to get pieces of cloth for her dolls, and since grandmother didn't mind giving her all sorts of coloured pieces of material, I thought she was a relative. But this was the first time I saw her grandmother, and judging from her condition, also the last.

"I want to go home," I said to the dear old woman, and she escorted me to the door.

At home, nobody seemed to be in the depth of despair because of my absence. I was gone just for an hour and a half in total, and no one even noticed that I was out of sight.

"Where have you been?" someone asked, and I told what I had learned on my exploration –that poor Aunt Piroska, Icuka's grandmother, had died.

"Were you in there?" my mother asked.

"Yes, I saw them washing her."

"Jesus!" my mother exclaimed. "This boy was really there in that house where the dead lay! Come here quickly, let me wash your hands at least!"

When the factory horn sounded, my grandmother put the food left in the pot back on the stove to warm it up for my father. He came soon enough, but he looked somewhat excited. He came into the house panting and distressed, and now he didn't care a bit about his dinner because he went straight to the radio, turned it on and tuned it to the Kossuth Rádió. Then he turned to my bewildered grandfather and whispered something about a revolution.

It was just beginning to get dark when four or five adult men joined us. They glanced at each other with questions in their minds, their faces shone with uncertain smiles, or just a shadow of them, but I can't even tell – perhaps that was even some hope tamed with reservations. One of them, Feri Szilágyi, my father's cousin, had visited us on other occasions, but from that day on he came almost every evening. "You know what, Tentás (Inky)," he said to my father, "let's take the radio off the top of the credenza and put it on the table. That way we won't have to make it roar all the time and everyone will hear what it says."

Me and Sanyika, whom Aunt Gizi left in Grandma's care again, huddled in a corner where we just found a little space. Sanyika was tired from loitering all day and wanted to go to bed, but I was determined to watch every little detail of the preparations.

At first, the radio was playing some neutral music, and despite the wave-finder being passed back and forth, it didn't say anything worthy of attention for several minutes. But then it spoke, and the people were almost glued to the massive ARZ box. I would have liked to know what it said that was so important to them, but the fragments of sentences I caught were just floating in the air without meaning, and the names – Gerő, Antal, Dobi and János Kádár – I heard for the first time although they all stuck in my mind, they also meant nothing to me. But suddenly – and it came over the loudspeaker – the crowd roared, and the Hungarians shouted into the ether, ever more emphatically and sharply, "Russians go home!" The people in our kitchen looked at each other with blurred eyes and clenched fists, and whispered resolutely: Russians go home from here too!

And the next day, or the third, Béluka was already making leaflets. He cut half-inch, or maybe one-inch size letters into the smooth back of a rubber sole that had come off a boot, cut out the background with a razor blade as best he could, and printed the resulting cliché in ink-soaked felt and then on clean notepads. He was not sorry for the twenty kopek notebooks at all and sliced them up happily. Some of the leaflets scattered around the Market Square found their way into our house. I remember first and foremost the image of the uneven, bulging letters that came to life on my father's lips, and I also remember the adults' wide-eyed admiration for the work of a child's hand that was said to be a rascal.

"How could that child do it so professionally almost?" they asked, but then they read it over and over again, and the words, pieced together from clumsy letters, gradually came together in my mind, took on meaning, and when spoken, sounded like a demand whose implementation could no longer be postponed: "Russians go home for this land is our homeland and belongs to Hungary!"

Oh, but this hope was not even enough to makes us get carried away! Already in those very days, military trains were arriving at the railway station, and dozens of tanks rolled down from them at night, and then lined up by platoons, companies and battalions on the cobbled road. Their sickening rattle and crunching beat up the Town and the Village,

the men rushed out to the road in their scanty clothing and watched in stunned silence as the punitive army marched towards the crossing in Tiszabecs. It must have been a disorderly, undisciplined march! Around the station, the careless, negligent military people had left a lot of rubble behind. Béluka returned home with military clothing: a winter cap with a red star on it, a waist belt and short magazines loaded with cartridges, which he distributed generously among his mates. Seeing this, my father stopped him and reprimanded him sternly: "Eh, boy, aren't you afraid of anything at all? Take these back where you got them, I don't want to see them in your hands!" Then he told him to bring the leaflet-maker out, and when he got it, he threw it into the burning stove without thinking a minute. Oh, how beautiful it was, but look what it became: black smoke with an unpleasant smell coming up from the hole. "We'll need it no more," my dad said and stroked the boy's head with almost fatherly affection.

After a few days, I looked in vain for earlier rays of hope in the eyes of the people leaning over the radio. They bowed their heads acknowledging the measures taken to restore law and order, but when they heard the name János Kádár, they called him a a goddamn traitor. Then people talked of Elemér, who had been taken to Budapest as a Russian soldier, and now a telegram came with the news of his death. Elemér Fábián was a relative of ours, and everyone called him the brother of Füsti (Smokie). Füsti, the famous footballer, who worked the miracle in front of the goal with his head instead of his feet, was called István actually, only because of his dark skin, children and adults alike called him Füsti. He told someone in confidence that Elemér managed to phone home a few days ago, and the poor man said that he could now easily escape to the West, only he did not want to leave his old parents and the family. And now he was dead, and not even killed in street fights. As it turned out later, one of his comrades killed him in the military canteen with a short unintentional sequence of shots from his machine-gun, so the obvious murder was written off as an accident. So much for a life, and so much for freedom. And the radio had nothing encouraging to say. "Our army is still holding out?

Do they know what a murderous mass was set off against them? And the people shook their heads helplessly.

"Do you hear me, Tentás (Inky)?" Feri Szilágyi interrupted the bitter silence. "Shall I try to amplify the shortwave? Cause with this coil, we can't hear anything. The jamming is awful. Let's give it a try, I say, and see if the Radio Free Europe will finally say something encouraging?"

"Okay, go ahead," my father agreed.

Feri Szilágyi, it soon became clear, was always ready for a little maneuver. He took a soldering iron from his bag, took some supplies and looked around the kitchen. "I can't see any plug. No problem, I'll use the bulb," he said, and plugged his iron to the socket of the light bulb hanging from the ceiling. While it was getting warm, he took out small cylinders of different colours from the bag, held their tiny lettering under the bulb and examined them, finally settling on a small green part. "This will be okay," he said humming and rubbed the heated tip of the stick around the little wire legs of the cylinder. Then he removed the back cover plate of the radio, took a couple of lamps out of their sockets to make room for the procedure, took a pair of tweezers to the back of the little wave coil, and the operation began.

"Well, didn't it get much better?" asked the master proudly after the radio was turned on again and set to the desired short wave with a sharp beep and a rippling hum.

"I don't think it has become any better, but I hope no harm has been done to it either," my father said, but he kept his ear close to the source of the sounds.

What came through the disturbance was not comforting at all. The commentator spoke with bitterness of the despicable and unforgivable treachery of leaders who called themselves Hungarian. "Curse on them! Neither heaven nor earth ever offer rest for their bodies and souls!"

* * *

I've got a cockerel shaped clay whistle in my hand. The village gypsy gave it to me in the summer for those heaps of useless rags Grandmother

could not do anything with. Its beautiful painted surface was rather dingy already, but its sound remained as sharp as when it was new. I blew my whistle rhythmically, some passages were quite cantabile, and I walked in time around the kitchen table with soldierly steps. Sanyika looked at me enviously, there were almost tears in his eyes. "Give it to him, let him blow it," grandfather said and looked at me pleadingly, and I didn't want him to say it twice. I held the whistle out to Sanyika, but grandmother caught it in the air, and after wiping it with the lower part of her apron, and only then, she passed it over to her other grandson.

"Now you can blow it," she said, "but it'd much better if you did it in the street because my head is splitting into two even without your whistling."

We took her piece of advice, then thought a minute and went from the yard to the church to watch the trucks passing by on the road. You have to wait five or six minutes for one to come, and if it comes close to you, you pick up a small pebble from under your feet and throw it at it. When the next one comes, we quickly run to the other side before it, just to give the driver a reason to honk. The sound of the car horn is still interesting for us. An old-fashioned, wooden-cabin vehicle is now coming from the town, and Sanyika is already running in front of it, but I wait for it to come closer, and only then I start running. The driver steps upon the brakes as soon as he sees me on the road, the car skids across the cobbled pavement and just manages to stop in time. The driver almost rips open the cab door angrily and comes after us. We run a good distance under the row of houses, then head down the hill to the plain. I look back, then slow down: the driver is no longer chasing me.

We did enough mischief today, and the weather also turned murky, so we decided to go home. We hardly made a few steps, when I spotted a wide sheer ribbon on the thorns of a whatling street thistle (field eringo) bush, and I ran excitedly there to get it. Sanyika saw that and warned me desperately: "Oh, dare not touch it, it may be becharmed!" But it's too late. The ribbon is in my hand, I turn it. I think one of the

little girls lost it, they wear it in their hair. Sanyika shakes his head, he can't be fooled by such things anymore, he was well trained over there in Karácsfalva in how to ward off various kinds of spells. "You must not touch it." says he with unusual seriousness looking me into the eye for long. "I told you it was becharmed."

But I haven't got the least idea what 'becharmed' means, but I accept that he may know something I've never heard of, so I obediently hand him the ribbon. He touches it gently, but with his fingernails only. Then he waits a minute and beckons me with his eyes to watch him. He spits on it three times, then puts it back on the thorns from which I took it. "Come, let's get out of here quickly," he says, with an expression as if he feared that his counter-charm action had already some serious consequences. But no sooner had we taken a few steps than we noticed Ica and Katica coming from the road, looking feverishly for the abandoned ribbon. I became really angry with my cousin only now because of his stupid anxiety. If he had left me that pretty hair ornament, I could have given it back to the girls, and they might have invited me to play with them in return for my good deed. But now the situation was that they simply came back for the ribbon to take it off the thorns of the whatling street thistle (field eringo) bush, then turned back with a sigh of relief because they found it, and then went away while disappearing in the big, wide yard of their house.

"Now give me back the whistle!" I said standing in front of Sanyika demanding compensation. "Here you are! I need it no more!" He looked at me with contempt in his eyes, and throwing the cockerel shaped whistle to my feet he stretched his pointing finger towards me and quoted the well-known saying: "Gypsy gave it, then took it back, and now his soul is burning in hell's smokestack!"

The kitchen is now full of women again. Grandmother is ironing a thin textile dress and, as usual, keeps talking to the customers. She speaks about the war and the family's ordeals that I have heard at least three times, but Grandmother retells it so beautifully that I am always happy to listen to it again and again. And who knows, there might be

something I don't know and may hear that from the other women. They might have something interesting to say, too.

"Three of my sons were at the front," Grandmother started her story in her usual way. "We expected Kálmán and Árpád soon to be back, but we heard nothing about the youngest, little Elek, who was sent to the Don-bend from where we had hardly any news, and when I got some after six months, they were very bad. Then the town-crier drummed out that people had to go for this, you know, "malenkiy robot." Only Laci and Pista were still at home, but Laci, his father – saying this she pointed at me – was still young, he didn't have to present himself, but he did. Erzsi Petrus, the Communist judge, and it did her credit, knew him, and so she allegedly told him, "You're not yet eighteen, my boy, go home." But he, the fool, began to prove that he had become eighteen in April, and that he would not be afraid of some little work. Then the Russian officer, some captain, they said, who was sitting there and was as drunk as a skunk, just stamped his paper, so they took Laci away with the others. But our people from Újlak stayed all winter in Szolyva, they had been isolated from the others because of the typhus, and when it was possible, we visited them, brought them a little this, a little that, whatever we could. Well, a fat gypsy woman in a big coloured skirt joined us at Gát. She also went to her husband who was there in Szolyva, too. So, she also came. And as we got there, what we saw was that the woman threw down her bundle from her back, because she noticed her man, but not among the prisoners, but alone with a big long rifle with a bayonet on his shoulder, and a red armband on his arm. She cried out to him with joy (my grandmother then put down the iron because she needed both hands to show how the gypsy woman, astonished, spread her arms and then clasped her palms together). "Ye Ali, mah angel, star of Ukraine, didn know ye could be so trusted!"And here, at this last sentence, where others usually laugh, Grandmother gave a bitter smile.

"Well, yes, honestly, I don't want to offend anyone, but for these Russians, very often, a Gypsy was more reliable than a decent

Hungarian farmer, who supported his family with his hard work all his life," quipped Erzsi Badalovics.

"It is still always the same, not much has changed here in the past ten years or so," said Mrs. Moha, and then turned to my grandmother:

"Well, Margit, then tell us when your son Laci came home?"

"So, yes, it was not easy to wait for so long. I tell you that these six months I cried so much every night because I felt that I was absolutely helpless! But I knew of course that tears were no good, they do not help! Prayer was needed, it was the only thing that could help! Yes, the only thing. Help may come from above, from Heaven... You know that I'm not a church-goer, but believe me I prayed to my God every night. Then one Friday afternoon, I cannot exactly recollect when, I went down to the little garden, knelt down at the base of the currant bush, put my hands together and said to the Almighty: "Oh, Lord, who can see my soul, you know what is my biggest sorrow. I pray to you, for I know that you alone have power over life and death. My God, it's been six months since I heard from my dear son Laci. God, there is nothing worse for a mother than uncertainty. I don't know if he is alive or dead. I beg you, my Lord, if due to your Devine will he lives, even if maimed, even if paralysed, help him home, for it was me who gave birth to him, I raised him, let me be with him in his misery. But if he is no longer alive, I will accept your will, too, my Lord; just say something and let me know."

Grandma paused here for a few moments, put the iron back on the stove, and looked around at her listeners. Her eyes became dim, and one could see on her face that the conclusion of the previous monologue was coming from the depths of her soul.

"When I sighed this prayer, I felt such a comforting calm that I had never felt before. I knew, I was almost certain, that I was about to receive an answer, but I said three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys and waited with my head bowed. And then the Lord Jesus appeared to me. I could see him as clearly as any of you in this kitchen. At first it was just Him. But then, slowly, the image of my son Laci came out from behind His body. At first, I only saw his form, then his face. He

was very pale, you could tell at once that he was ill. And the Lord, as he held his hand, said: "I will lead your son back home." That was all. And a week later, believe it or not, it was the end of June, I remember, Laci arrived, emaciated. And he indeed was ill. He can confirm this, because he was in the infirmary for weeks. He had such a severe tonsillitis that he could hardly breathe. Then, he said, a doctor came to him and broke a pill so big that even a healthy man could not swallow it, let alone an unhealthy man. But the woman insisted that he swallowed it at once. She even balled her fist to show that she would hit him with it if he didn't do what she ordered. So he obeyed and began to swallow with all his might. Well, that big, broken pill went down his throat just like that, splitting his swollen, inflamed tonsils. And immediately he felt that something began to flow. He was frightened, but he was lucky that it happened otherwise he would have been choked in the morning.

The women nodded their heads understandingly.

"Yes, life sometimes depends on such trifles," one of them said, but Mrs. Moha had another question to ask:

"Margit, tell us about Pista, your younger son, what happened to him?"

"Poor Pista, my other son, managed to escape the camps, because he was younger, but he was dragged away to the Donets Basin to do forced labour. He also suffered a lot, but at least he learned a trade there. He became a painter, a house-painter. Thus, he can make a pretty penny, because he has work from spring to cold autumn, but even so his wife is unhappy with him because no matter how much money he made, nothing would be enough for her. Well, I told him: "My son, Ica Károly is not your mother, but once it was her you picked, it is her you have to put up with." He came home the other day somehow, but I saw at once that something had happened between them, for he just sat down on the stool, put his face between his palms, and mourned. I think to myself, if it be not urgent to thee, I'll wait till thou art well and will start to complain. So, I went on minding my own business, went out into the yard to see who or what frightened the hens, and

when I went back, I saw that my son took of the lid of the pot I left on the stove and was devouring the potato noodles with the help of a humongous wooden spoon. Well, I think to myself, all the problem was that he was hungry. But at the same time my heart sank, and I felt so sorry for my poor boy that I was almost angry with myself, for instead of asking him if he was hungry, I let him mope there. So, I said unto him, 'my child, why dost thou not tell me when thou art hungry? Sit thou at the table, and eat as a man ought.' And when he had enough, his spirits returned, for he said:

Mum, my blood is Hungarian, isn't it?"

"Sure, my boy, sure, it is," I say to him, because if he had some wine, it is always that what he says, "but you'd rather lie down on the couch, and have a little rest."

That was all that grandma said about her son Pista. She could, however, say three time as much as that, and the jays would have listened to that with pleasure, but I'm not an ignorant kid anymore and know that there are family matters that the outsiders don't have to be made aware of if it is not absolutely necessary.

"But your son Laci, he who lives with you, is not a drunk, is he?" asked Mrs. Badalovics the next question.

"If only everyone was as sober as him! Then there wouldn't be all the trouble that drinking causes in families. I'm not saying that he doesn't have anything ever, the devil tempts everyone. When he started his working and got his pay, he also went to the *chayna*[*11] with his mates, and there he drank and played cards sometimes, but when he'd come home about half past two in the morning, he'd think he'd left too much in that bloody pub, so he'd light the lamp and started counting what was left in his pocket. He thought everyone was asleep, but I was just pretending, and when he saw that there really was something wrong, he couldn't help but kept saying, "Oh, damn it! Oh, damn it!" It really annoyed him very much that he had lost so much. But later he became much more careful with his pay, and it never happened again."

[11] Chayna (originally Russian) means tearoom, but it is a pub actually.

The women nodded again as a rule and then remained silent. The short silence was broken by the creaking of the room door. My mother, who had been in bed after a tiring night shift, had just woken up, or just decided to come out and say good afternoon softly and moodily. But she didn't stop to talk, and had no intention to get into conversation with anyone. It is also possible that she had heard everything that had been said about her husband and brother-in-law in the kitchen. So, what if she had? Every word, every statement, was true, but that was not what made her unhappy. She was in a hurry this time as she had to get ready for the new shift already. First of all, she wanted to wash herself, but since the kitchen was usually the place for personal hygiene, she had to find another solution. So she took out the basin from the corner, poured lukewarm water in it from the pot on the stove and returned to the place she had come from a few minutes ago: the part of the house called the Room.

* * *

Out of the three duckponds on the Market Square the biggest, and the deepest too, was the one next to the vineyard of Péter Petrus. In the autumn, this is where most of the water is accumulated, and when the frost sets in permanently, boys slide on its icy surface, mostly by taking a running start, or just slide carefully back and forth, almost all day. I must admit I was not fond very much of this running and jumping business, so I didn't slide. Those who do must be able to keep their balance during the whole stunt, and must not fall even if they have to stop suddenly on the rough, snowy ice, drifting to the edge of the polished ice-track. Some of the boys squat down for these six or eight metres to the edge, and take a fall only then when they reach it. I don't have the courage to do that either, I prefer to watch how the others do it. But I soon realise that the best sliders are those who wear leather sole shoes, which get really hard in the cold and make their owners almost fly on the ice. But the footwear must by no means have iron at the toe or the heel, because they would be forbidden to slide there lest

they scratch the silky smooth ice. The bigger chaps come to have fun with us, too, but they do that in their own style with wooden skates they have made themselves.

I take a look at a beginner's double-edged wooden skate, and I find that I could also easily have such a sporting device myself. So, I run home to Grandpa. The old man listens to my idea and then he's off into the woodshed. He examines the scrap wood left by the sawmill, and when he finds the right piece, he goes for his handsaw. I follow him everywhere, not wanting to lose him even for a moment. Trying to make myself useful, I hold the slat on the wood chopping board in order to stop it from moving when it is cut. One end of the two pieces of wood, sized to fit the sole of my shoe, is carved into a ship bow, so that when I slide it won't push the thin layer of snow frozen on the ice in front of me. Then he looks for a thick wire, straightens it roughly with a hammer on the smooth head of the axe whose edge is cut into the board, then fastens it to the prepared sole of the skate in such a way that first he bends the two ends of the wire upwards and affixes them tightly onto the wood. So, this is one edge of the skate, but to make it more stable for the child, he puts, parallel to the first, another edge onto the skate. If this is done well, if the two strands of wire fit tightly, almost hundred per cent to the sole, the skate is ready in principle, it can't be ruined. All that remains is to cut two wider leather strips from a worn-out shoe, fit them to the toe of the shoe and nail them to it in a semicircle so that they can be used for the given purpose. The only disadvantage is that you cannot walk or run with this little device on your feet like with a real skate clasped to the shoe-sole, because it would fall off at the first step. It can only be put on before you step on the ice, and in order to be able to move on it you need a good sharp stick, which you hold tightly with both your hands, then drive it into the ice in front of you and you swing forward as far as you can.

That's how the days pass, and when we get tired of skating, there are the hillsides, small and large, crowded with children who on homemade sleds can compete with each other. But freshly fallen snow is not good for sledding. The best is to wait for it to settle, and if it

settles a bit, the hillside will become good for sliding down. After half a day's use, however, the hillside becomes icy, and the bigger boys turn a few lanes into a regular flat sliding track. A slight problem is that the heavy use of the tracks can make black earth appear from under the ice, and it's not good if the mud is smeared on the ice. But at night when the place is deserted, someone pours a few buckets of water over the hillside and everything is perfect again in the morning.

I have no sled, not even a homemade one, but I don't really need it. Somehow it is too fast and the many crashes and tumbles make it look dangerous for me. If a sled overturns, it can slide four or five metres, and then another one coming down can easily sideswipe the fallen rider. So, I prefer to just watch, but if a group of four or five people get together to cling to each other and slide down, I'll join the end of the train, because I'm almost certain that I won't have a big fall on the icy hillside.

But as the days and weeks pass, someone the adults call Icebreaker arrives in our world. The sun comes out more and more often, and no matter how much we water the hillsides in the evenings, the mud gets even thicker in the morning. We return to the lake, but the ice bends and ripples beneath us as we step on it. It's interesting to see from time to time, because Béluka calls it rubber ice. Of course, it's rubber ice, because there is hardly any water under it, only the silt holds it for a while. By coming daybreak the water is already at the shore, and the thicker ice breaks in the middle. Béluka picks out a larger, about three square metre ice-float, gets on it and pushing it with a pole, paddles from one shore to the other. But if he can manage it, we can also try. The two of us get on one when it reaches the shore near us. We have to keep our balance, because if one edge sinks, we'll slide off. But we are holding on to Béluka who is standing firmly in the middle of the ice floe. And how good it is to have this Béluka! If he hadn't been with us, who could have come up with something like that? Because, after all, it takes brains to do it, and then the rest is a piece of cake.

This is what I think a few days later, when I go to the lake on a dull morning. I turn my head, but I cannot see a single soul around. Well, it doesn't matter. But who said that I can't mount an ice floe on

my own? There is one near the shore and invites me to ride it. I hardly have to stretch out to secure it with the peg stick I use for skating, as I pull it to me on the water. I step on it carefully, first just on the edge, then leaning on the stick I get to the middle. I spraddle like Béluka used to, and I push myself with the stick. Everything goes on exactly as I planned. The ice floats and I ride on it. If it slows down or is about to stop, I just push the stick into the mud on the bottom or even into the edge of an adjacent ice floe, which helps me to change direction. Wow, that's amazing! I am so happy that I look towards the shore. Can somebody see me? But there's noone around to share my great experience, so I decide to take my raft ashore and find a suitable companion for my newly found joy. Only this time, I'm heading for the shore with more vigour, and I don't realise that my raft has hit the wreckage of a bucket sticking out of the water. The sudden stop makes me stagger, still I can stay on my feet, but at the point of impact a crack is formed on the ice, it starts growing and splits the float into two. One of my legs is on one part, the other is on the other, but my body cannot be divided into two, so I have to choose. I instinctively step towards the shore, but under my weight the ice-float begins to wobble and I find that I am in the water. I don't sink, the water is not so deep at all, reaches to my chest only, and I try to get to the shore, but one of my boots gets stuck in the mud and I can't pull it out. I could make my foot free, but without the boot only. That's not a solution. My valuable little footwear, which my father had made especially for me, cannot be lost. So, I stagger for a while until I find something solid under the water with my right foot, place my weight on it, and with a smacking sound I free myself from the mud. I fall on the ice in front of me and try to crawl on it, but it breaks under my weight and I'm back in the icy water. My heart is pounding, I'm shaking all over, the cold is making my legs ache. I straighten up, thrust my stick resolutely in front of me and look around desperately. And then I see that I can be saved, for Gulliver, a big boy, who is not from our street, but we know him well, as he often comes there to play, runs towards me shouting:

"Lacika! Lacika! Hold out and give the end of your stick to me!"

I obey happily, and he, in order to grasp it, steps into the knee-high water with his boots on and gets hold of the stick's end. "Hold it tight and come out!" I hear his latest instruction. I do what he says, make a few steps and I am already out on the shore. Gulliver sees that this is not yet the end of rescue operation, he still has to do something for me, because he snatches my arm and runs with me quickly to my grandmother's house. Getting there, he pushes the door open, helps me to get over the threshold, and goes away at once to mind his own business.

Seeing me in such a miserable state of mind did not really shake Grandma. She realized immediately what had happened and she just clapped her hands together as always. "Come on, let me get that wet stuff off you." In the meantime, Grandpa came in, but he was not even informed of all that had happened, he was just given an order: "Listen, get the fire going, let it be warm in here, and prepare the sink too, this boy needs a bath badly. Look at him, he's all mud. It's good that we have still hot water on the stove."

And when my bathing was over, she dressed me in dry clothes, laid me down in Grandpa's bed, and covered me well with a bundle of feather-bedding. I didn't say anything, just lay there curled up, but Grandmother soon noticed that my teeth were chattering.

She must have been concerned because realizing that my forehead was hot as burning coal, she stepped from my couch to the stove and put water on to boil. When the water began to bubble, she took dried linden blossom from the credenza and threw it into the boiling water. He poured the tea from one cup to another to cool it as quick as possible, and when it was good for drinking, she made me drink that. She muttered to calm herself down: "Your mother will be home soon, and will take your temperature, lest you should have any more trouble."

Soon the sewing machine, because Grandma was always behind with the work, started to run again, and the monotonous rattling interrupted at times soon put me to sleep. I didn't know how to tell the time, as we didn't even have a clock, so I don't know how long I

slept, but I woke up with sweat dripping down the back of my head and forehead, and my legs were simply splitting. I kept quiet about it, thinking it would pass, but it did not, and when my mother, who had already been informed about my rafting accident, came home in a great fright, and catching her head in her hands went straight towards the bed I was lying in: "Oh Boy, can one never find calm?" she complained in a weeping voice, and instead of scolding me, which I could not have argued against, she bent down and kissed my forehead. "It was the Lord that was with him, and took him home," consoled Grandmother her daughter-in-law, but she, as if she had not even heard, minded only me. "Are you well?" she asked, bending close to me, and I immediately began to complain that my legs were very sore, and I pulled them out from under the blanket to show her the invisible pain.

"Didn't you become rheumatic per chance?" asked Grandfather sitting on a stool in front of the stove. "It would be quite early for you." But Grandma turned to him at these words, for she did not doubt him for a single moment. She suggested applying heat to my legs to ward off the pain. And so she went to the stove, took out some pieces of wood that had been put in to dry, placed first a stool and then a straight-backed chair close behind them, made room for me to sit, and wrapped my feet in rags and led me to the oven.

"It's no nonsense," Grandpa said approvingly. "When I was coming home in 1947 – it was a pretty cold autumn – with a cart of corncob from Bökény, the Tisza was already pretty big, but the ferry still worked. So, I took it because I had to get home somehow, eh? But at the middle somewhere the tide was so strong that the rope of the ferry broke, and the cart went into the water. By then I was up to my neck in water, and if I hadn't hung down the harness from the trace-block, the two horses would have followed the cart. But so, the horses could swim ashore, and I after them. But I thought I would die when I got home, I shivered so badly. Well, that's exactly how my mother cured me, my legs were healed by the fryer, too."

When the blessed warmth permeated my body and my two legs that were as thin as a pipe, I began to feel much better in front of the fryer.

The unwelcome pain stopped in a jiffy. It occurred to me that perhaps I should indeed give thanks to our dear good Lord, who, according to Grandma, guided me home. I know how to pray properly, but, somehow, I am still uncertain in my prayers, because neither the Lord's Prayer nor the My Good Lord God is applicable in my case. After all, I can't start with 'My Gulliver, my dear good Gulliver.' But... perhaps that would have been the right thing to do because that orphaned boy met a very unfortunate fate later in his life.

* * *

The good spring wind sheds not only water, but also dries the mud visibly. For now, the surface of the less-travelled dirt roads is still soft, the footsteps still leave a mark in the clay mixed with the black earth, but the unwanted heaviness barely clings to the soles of the feet. Even barefoot children enjoy this, because it's good to tread in the slushy, increasingly warm trail, and it's fun to knead the raw clay. The boys in small groups squat down to grip and shape the clay balls into concave slabs, then spit into them and slam them to the ground with a shout of "Wow, here we go!" The air pressed under it rips through the clay balls with a dull pop, and it's such a joy to repeat ad infinitum. Others cut a large stick from a peanut bush, knead a hen's egg size piece of clay on its end, lift it high, wave it, and then whip it well into the air. The clay egg flies off the end of the stick with a booming sound faster and farther than any stone. If it hits a house wall, a telegraph pole or a board fence, it remains flattened at the point of impact. That's real fun.

The women get out the lime bucket and the lime-brush, make the smoke-grey kitchen white again, give new life to the front of the house, then soak clay, collect horse-manure, plaster the kitchen floor where necessary, and after it has dried treat the whole area with diluted horse-manure and soaked clay. When it dries properly, it looks like enamel. It's a joy to sweep such a floor. True, the sickly smell of horse-manure stays in the house for at least a week, but then it dries out and is slowly forgotten. In our house white-washing was not a regular practice. Once

we had a professional house-painter in the family, my uncle Pista, he would do the painting of the two living rooms when it was time. Before he put the roller on the wall, he would always run it over the back of the centrally placed credenza for Grandma's approval. The plastering and painting of the house, however, was my mother's job, because Grandmother was too weak already to work on all fours, so it became my job to collect the fresh horse manure. At first, I squeamishly turned my head away from the warmly patted horse dung, but I had heard enough about the purity of the horse to easily overcome my innate disgust. But what was this compared to the suffering of Jesus, whose ordeal made even the bells fall silent?

Word soon gets out that the Jakab family will slaughter a young goat for the feast. They will stuff it as it is due, and then roast it in the oven, because that's the way they like it. First, however, they must persuade Pali Rozmán, the herdsman, who, in exchange for a little goat's milk and bacon, will do the work of an executioner readily. It happens that I pry again in front of the house of the Jankó family, when Pali clutches the poor little animal between his two boot-clad legs. He clasps his mouth with his strong hands so that he cannot hear its bitter cry, pulls its head up over his knees so that the neck would be tight, and then starts to wield the knife he took out of his uppers as if it were a violin bow. The life taking tool doesn't cut easily through the fine hairs of the neck, but the steel is hard, the man is cruel, and eventually the blood will gush out anyway, and then spurt out in a jet. By the time I remember to turn away, it's too late. My eyes go black, my legs became weak and I faint. Whether I was taken home or someone came for me, I don't know, but I wake up on Grandpa's couch again.

We only have stuffed chicken for Easter, which is enough for us, but that needs a man's work too. After my grandmother brought in the plucked and gutted chicken, she calls my grandfather. He comes obediently, takes the stalk off his pipe, blows it once or twice, and hands it to my grandmother, who puts one end under the neck skin and wraps it with thread to tighten it. Now comes my grandfather, for it is his tool after all, and it is for him to put it in his mouth. He blows

it as hard as he can, but he doesn't strain his old lungs too much, while Grandmother holds the hen and directs the air that lifts off the skin. It's coming up nicely, on the breast and at the base of the wings, as far as it will go, but there's another end of the hen, so the pipe stem can go to work there too. My mum makes the stuffing for it, the rest is up to her, meanwhile Grandma sifts the flour for the loaf in a mixing bowl. But at that very moment the door opens. "God bless y'all," I hear the familiar voice of Aunt Boriska. My grandfather would offer his sister-in-law a seat, but all the chairs are laden with something, so he sits her on the edge of the half-made bed.

"Well, did yah hear what happened?" the woman next-door comes straight to the point.

"What?" Grandmother asks as she looks up.

"Well, people say that some big iron fell off at the bridge, and it fell on Endre's brother-in-law, Pósa, and broke both his legs and his hips. He was taken away by the ambulance, but not to Szőlős, but to Beregszász, they say, to doctor Linner, because he is said to be the best."

"Oh, God Almighty, one can only hear bad news," Grandmother says commiserating. "How happy they were when he was taken on the bridge building crew, and now look what happens. Now they can wait until his bones will be all right again, and he isn't young either, and there he has this family too. What will they do?"

"There's my nephew Endre," grandfather says. "They live in the same house, don't they? He'll take care of them."

Then there was silence, but everybody knows that Aunt Boriska cannot be silent for long, she must say something. I'll keep an eye on her, and if necessary, I'll find out something. For the time being I just stare at the floor and start whistling. Now, if she had been wondering so far how she could pick on me, I gave her an idea deliberately, and indeed, she started at me at once:

"Stop whistling immediately, can't you see that the mother hen is sitting under the table? Do you want the chicken to drown in the egg? But it's almost Easter now, so tell me, have you learnt anything nice to recite?"

I know that Easter and poetry go hand in hand, and I learnt a verse last year already, so I nod, but then turn away quickly, lest it occurred to her to make me recite it. And then after all... what does it mean that "You, my little muse and weak rose?" It doesn't mean anything to me, it's meaningless, but what can I do if my mother didn't explain it to me when she taught me to say it? But luckily Grandpa speaks instead of me now.

"In the olden days, some lads with guts, if they'd drunk a little, would say some nasty little verse before sprinkling the girl: 'My coat is short, my dick is cold, and you'll wither I was told.' They were always in a hurry, because they wanted to sprinkle all the girls of the town. Now they're in no hurry. And if he makes court to a girl already, he will stay for long in the house, if the girl wills it. That's how it is today," Grandfather closed in on the topic briefly and rising from his little chair he started for the stable. I jumped up to be with him rather than in the house, where nothing interesting was going on.

The stable door is already open. It's warm, and the swallows can roam freely after they had rebuilt their old nests. Grandfather is busy with the cow, and I, for lack of anything else to do, listen to the turtledove on the walnut tree. 'Muru-ru-, muru-ru,' I'm trying to imitate the dove's call myself, when Grandpa puts his hand on my head, bends to me and says softly:

"Maybe that's what you hear, my boy, because you just think of some sweets perhaps, but shall I tell you what it really says? 'Murdered him, murdered him,' that's what it is crying about.

"Who murdered whom?" I ask with trepidation, because I take almost everything seriously that adults say.

"Don't you know? Our Lord Christ was murdered on Good Friday. He died on the Cross. It's Good Friday today, and that's what the turtledove wants everybody to know.

I think it over a little, or rather I try to put the newly learned bird talk into the mouth of the turtledove, try to match it with what I hear. 'Mu-ru-ru him, mur-de-red him!' Grandpa nods, then asks unexpectedly:

"Don't you want to see the little calf? It's already two weeks old."

Oh, of course, the little calf. How could I not want to see it? The only thing I didn't like about it was that when we were expecting it, Grandpa talked a lot of nonsense about its birth. At first, he said that the cow would cough and the calf would come out of its mouth. He could see that I knew it was nonsense, so he changed the story, but it was inconceivable that the cow would just poop out its offspring. But maybe there was something to it? It so happened that I could watch the calving from the beginning to the end, and no one told me not to watch it. Our cow Manci moaned and struggled, and Grandpa, as if he wanted to take the calf away from it forcefully, pulled it out of her with both his hands. I don't know how he managed to hold it when it was all slime and blood. It was not what I had expected, and the fact that I found no pleasure in it was nothing compared to the feeling that I wanted to puke all the time. But the mother cow was not disgusted, she licked her little heifer clean. From that time on it became beautiful in my eyes too, and when she was on its feet, I felt like stroking her. Grandpa says he's going to call her Fairy, but she's such a go-ahead little fairy that presently she would snap at my hand.

Well, if it is such a go-ahead one, let it feel a little freedom, let it get to know the world a little, let it take a walk in the yard in this nice weather. That's what Grandpa must have thought when he untied the little calf. The silly little calf was reluctant to move from its mother's side, and had to be gently patted on the bottom before it decided to move with his delicate little legs out of the pen. But maybe it was quite right, let Manci move a bit too. You didn't have to ask her twice. As soon as the chain was off its neck, it turned and with a short, thankful bellow went after its calf. The little Fairy was showing up to the hens, when its mother crossed the threshold of the stable, and seeing it began to dance merrily. It bent its knees, lifted its hindquarters, bounced left and right, then forward to Prince the dog that was lying on the stairs. When it was near the dog, it stopped in front of it, then lowered its head and poked the air in front of it signalling perhaps that the right of first choice belonged to the mother.

Seeing the glee of its calf, the cow must have thought out also something foolish, because it waddled around the yard once or twice, then wiggled a little, then just threw up its tail and started dancing so fast that the hens ran away from it promptly. Grandfather concerned with me already, pushed me into the safe wood-shed, but perhaps it didn't occur to him that something bad could happen to the cow in its wild mood. And there! It stamped its foot on the old board lid of the lime-pit under the mulberry-tree, and the old board gave way with a scrunch, and it was only the head of poor Manci that remained visible from the pit. The poor wretch immediately stood up on its two legs, and holding the edge of the pit with its front legs tried to pull its weight with its hind legs, but in vain, for it kept falling back. At the noise the women ran out, Grandmother ululated, and Grandfather... In vain did the skinny old man try to help, his dear cattle clawed at the edge of the pit with increasing weakness, and finally it flopped down completely, and only foam came out of its mouth. Zsiga Balla and Endre Fábián also rushed to the place, but they could not make it stand on its legs again. They watched for a while and racked their brain about what they still could do, and then Endre spoke, but he'd rather swallow his tongue at that very moment, because what came out of his mouth was a sharp knife into my grandfather's chest. "I say, old man, that this cow is of no use any longer, you take it to the slaughterhouse." Grandfather groaned, staggered over to the fence, leaned on it as if it were his mother's shoulder, and began to shake in his whole body. I didn't hear him cry, because almost at the same time the horn of the shoe factory sounded to signal the end of the workday.

Soon my father arrived, and then, about dusk, the big flat wagon came with two strangers. I heard that they said that they could neither load it nor transport the cow alive, so it had to be slaughtered on the spot, but I didn't have to see that. We turned on the light against the descending darkness, but the kitchen was silent, and the previous cosy atmosphere could not be restored even by the smell of bread on the chopping board.

I went to bed early that night, but sleep must have had more pressing business to do than mine because it failed to meet me. I could fantasise and recall the day's events, the whole world as it swirled around me. Of all this, I think it was the turtledove's words on Good Friday that came to my mind most powerfully, and left everything else behind. Our cow was murdered, yes, murdered. All former serenity was gone from our house, and this horror took hold of the whole day, and the turtle dove boomed and wept in my ears till at last I was lulled into beneficial sleep.

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Grandpa is sitting on the stairs with a dough-basket in his lap stripping and crumbling the corns. I am trying to do the same, but the cob won't give in to me, my skinny little fingers can't even undo the tightly embedded rows of grains ripened to steel. Seeing my efforts, my grandfather hands me a cob stripped of half of its grains, and with that I succeed somehow, with difficulty, but I can do it after all. The time passes meanwhile, the sun is shining hotly above our heads, and sweat begins to trickle from under my dark, bushy hair. Although my grandfather was sitting there for longer, and he has quilted trousers on, he's not sweating. How can that be, I ask. Them, these gouty feet of his, like it if it is warm, he says. Last summer he didn't take off her cotton-lined trousers ever. Even now, he just kicks off his rubber boots to let the sun warm and the breeze blow them. I wink my eye and notice that his feet are not as black as Uncle Saxon's at all, who, I've already seen, sunbathes his feet similarly when he sits at his house. Allegedly a woman next door asked him once if he ever washed his feet. The old man, in order to answer, took the pipe out of his mouth, spat, and acknowledging with satisfaction that this time his spit spread out also like a large, irregular star in the dust, answered briefly:

"Me, my girl, never!"

But my grandfather, unlike Uncle Saxon, washes his feet regularly, I saw that several times, but let's stop this meaningless talk here. Besides,

there's a change coming, because the magpie clicked on the walnut tree. Grandmother cheerfully asks from the kitchen: "Is there a guest coming?" Grandfather doesn't answer, because a normal Reformed man will not even hear such a silly question, but I get excited and I ask him: "What guest? How does Grandmother know that someone is coming?" Grandfather answers reluctantly: "If a magpie clicks and sways its tail, a guest will come to see the sale. It's just a foolish saying. Don't take it seriously." Foolish, or not foolish, the small door squeaks, and with slow waddling steps comes Jóska Ignatisin, the postman.

"Regards, Uncle Elek! There's a telegram for you."

"Good afternoon," replies Grandfather. "And what is in it, my friend?"

"That your son Árpád's coming."

"Can you hear, Margit?" says Grandfather in an excited voice to his wife in the kitchen. "Árpád's coming."

At the news, Grandmother runs out of the kitchen, grabs the telegram from the postman's hand and starts excitedly fumbling in her dress pocket.

"Oh, God, where are my spectacles, where have I put them?"

He rushes back to the kitchen, finds them on the side of the sewing machine, and comes to the window to read it.

"Well, it says we are coming on Saturday, the third. Árpád. What day is it, dear?"

"It's Thursday," says Grandfather, and, as if he still could not believe his ears, he adds shaking his head: Looks like the magpie was telling the truth this time."

But Grandma thinks ahead already.

"Thus, Laci can go to Chop to meet them there at least and help them with the luggage..."

My uncle Árpád takes after my father so much that Tácu, the carter, who was ordered to meet the train, calls out to him: "Laci, I'll take these two suitcases to the cart, and you bring the rest after me." But how he was astonished when the other Laci appeared on the platform, helping little Margitka and his sister-in-law Gitta from the train. "Oh,

then you must be Árpi," tried he to correct his blunder. "Remember me? Maybe not quite, because you're a few years older. And I'm the son of the Biri's," tries Tácu to clarify the origin of the acquaintance.

The joy is great at home, because it's been a long time, as I will figure out later, twelve years since they've seen each other. Grandfather had cleaned himself up, shaved and dressed for the occasion. He had changed his Russian-style quilted trousers for light smart trousers, and put shoes on his feet so that his son Árpád would not be ashamed of them in front of his more distinguished wife.

My Uncle Árpi is very much like my dad indeed, just a bit, by about a palm or so, is shorter and has no scar on his left cheek. I could already see on their wedding photo that he was shorter. The smart photographer made him stand on a stool so that he would not look too short at the side of his bride clad in a long white dress, whose turned back train loosely thrown over the small chair covers up this little deception. Aunt Gitta is really a tall, strong-boned, reserved woman, who does not bend down to kiss my cheek as other relatives do, her sympathy for me, if she feels any, is expressed merely by a compliment I cannot quite understand. 'You are a toughie , my boy,' she said and moved on. But what could I expect from her when she disciplines her little daughter with a glance, and walks among us bolt upright like a lady? And Margitka, whom I was looking forward to very much, perhaps even more than the others, I accepted almost immediately as my little sister. She was such a serious and well-bred little girl, who gave her hand to a boy when she introduced herself, and looked at our grandmother, whom she has finally met, with such true, childish love and affection, as if she feared that she might be torn away from her at any moment. Well, there you have it, another reason for me to get to love her immediately, and after the talks about my becoming a doctor when I grow up, I'm desperate to give Margitka an injection with the syringe my grandfather carved. But not in her arm, which she holds out so obediently, but in her belly, under her skirt, because what interests me most, for the moment, in the otherness of little girls is their beautiful white bellies. And while I hold the symbolically sharpened stabbing

instrument against her belly, I watch her eyes and face, because with my childish, sentimental heart I do not wish to hurt her, not for the life of me. I only sting her as long as she bears it patiently.

But soon the presents, the bottles of peach and cherry brandy, are brought out, and as the rest is no longer worth paying attention to, the men immediately wring the neck of one of them and have a drink to celebrate the reunion. And at this moment, as an icing on the cake, my brother Pista, the youngest son, arrives. Grandmother takes a very small sip, and the women drink too, and then the fresh ribs roasted for dinner are brought to the table, and the men take another drink to increase their appetite or as a sign of their affection for peach and cherry. At the end of the meal, Grandfather takes out the white wine he bought from Kövesdi, eyes sparkle, faces flush, and suddenly they begin to sing. My brother Árpi has a good voice. We listen to Hungarian songs, operetta excerpts, my father occasionally joins them, but then my uncle stops, has a gulp from his wine and proposes: "Now Daddy's song! Grandfather wags his head blushing, as if asking what is that hoo-ha for, but as soon as Árpád intones the old song, reminiscent of the bachelor days, he joins in:

If I go up on that mountain
Too high...
(My mother will buy me a hat,
With a ribbon, the wind will blow it.
If it doesn't, I myself will wave it,
And lure that little girl here.) [12]

But now I can see that my uncle Pista would like to be treated as an adult, to be taken into account as a human being, and that a little attention at least would be focused on him, too. 'When I was

[12] It is a word for word translation of the song below and is far from being perfect or even good (O.P.).
Vesz nekem édesanyám kalapot,
Fújja a szél rajta (j)a szalagot.
Ha nem fújja, magam is lobogtatom,
Ezt a kisjányt ide csalogatom.

in *Dobas*,[13] I learnt this from a lad from the Munkács region,' he says enthusiastically, and starts to sing a song as well:

Hey (but) give me copper money,
you dog of a Jew, not banknotes,
Cause banknotes are not good for a scamp.
Cause the scamp is either wet or cold,
And the banknotes will be soaked. [14]

At this, my father's face turns sombre, he turns to uncle Pista with gimlet eyes and protests against the song in a way that is understandable to everyone:

"That's enough! No need to hurt the Jews. Fate inflicted enough suffering on them unfortunately."

"Brother, but what did I say that was wrong? Besides, it's only a song!"

"And did you forget when you made that Jewish child eat frog under the bridge?"

"Oh, but that was a long time ago, under the Czechs. And if you want to know, I wasn't even in on that villainy, I just saw it from aside."

Aunt Gitta is now beginning to pay attention to the rankling conversation, and sitting down beside her husband began to question him:

"Will you tell me what that history with the frogs was? I'm interested."

"No big deal," says my uncle Árpi. "I wasn't there actually, I just heard that this Endre, who was called the King of Moustache in the street, then his brothers Gyula and Tibi, and also Laci Szilágyi were there, playing cards under the stone bridge of the road, and then a Jewish boy was kibitzing near them. I think he was the son of Hard Dick. Mamuka or something, who knows what that Jew's real name was?

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[13] The speaker means Donbass, i.e. the Donets-basin. (O.P.).

[14] The original runs as follows:
Hej (de) rézpénzt adjál, kutya zsidó, nem bankót,
Mer' a bankó a betyárnak nem való.
Mer' a betyár hun megázik, megfázik,
Oszt a bankó a zsebébe széjjelázik.

"He was, if my memory doesn't cheat me, one of the brothers of Lajos Gelb, the haberdasher. He was called Hard Dick because he had lots of children. Yes, his name was Gelb too," explained Grandma.

"Well, one of his scraggy kids was there under foot, and he was told that further on he could be with them only if he converted to Christianity. But the boy just grinned and shook his head. Then Tibi and Laci Szilágyi caught him, held him by both arms against the stone wall of the bridge and tried to get him to confess his faith. 'Do you believe in Christ, you motherfucker?' But he only shook his head. Then Gyula plucked a big green frog out of the water, took out his knife, cut it in four pieces on the stone, and held a piece under his nose and asked: 'Do you believe in Christ?' But the boy still said no. 'Okay, then it is your call," Gyula said and looked black as thunder. "But then swallow this, Bumi!"

But the boy clenched his teeth and refused to open his mouth. At this Gyula got mad and held the knife to his neck. The boy was so afraid that his eyes goggled, but seeing that they hold their ground he obeyed and opened his mouth a little, and Gyula quickly pushed the disgusting crap into it. But then the boy by no means wanted to swallow it, just turned it over in his mouth, but Gyula mercilessly put his palm on the boy's mouth, showed him his knife and made him swallow. He swallowed it obediently. Then Gyula asked him again: 'Now do you believe in Christ?' 'Go and fuck you!' cried the poor child trying to get out frantically of his predicament. But Endre had already brought the next piece of frog and pushed it straight into the boy's mouth. So, the Jewish boy changed his mind and said weeping, 'I believe, believe, but don't do this to me anymore, let me go!' Well, that's how it was.

Aunt Gitta sat in her seat staring at the floor for a while, then stood up, looked at my uncle, and then raised her eyes to her brothers-in-law. For a split second I managed to catch her gaze, and what I saw in it was deep disappointment. Then all she asked was:

"Do you think that he, that kid called Bumi, survived the war?"

My uncle Árpád and his brothers kept their heads down and were silent. Grandmother answered for them:

"Everybody was dragged away from here, they were also. They all perished. The whole family. But his uncle Gelb came home."

"Perhaps it's better that you don't have to see him and don't have to look him in the eye. You must know that the child's soul, his consciousness as it is nowadays called, records precisely all the harm done to him, all the violence committed against him, and it is up to him to decide later, if he has the chance, how he will respond: in the language of revenge or in the language of forgiveness. And do you know why? Because the soul is eternal and does not age with the body, but only grows nobler," said Aunt Gitta, and went towards the door as if she just needed some fresh air.

My uncle brother Árpi, as if feeling remorse because of the previous subject, as if wanting to lead the conversation back to the point where the case of the Jewish child had been raised, and this time, in order to leave the disgrace that the boy had suffered unmentioned, turned to grandmother and said:

"My God, how good it is to be back! True, the Market Square is not that it used to be, and many things have changed here too, but the Market Square still always lives in my soul vividly. I remember well that when we were very small children my father used to undertake carriages, and he used to bring us this yummy starch candy, and the delicious smells around the meat shack are not to be forgotten either. And there were all those craftsmen. The bootmakers, the tailors, the potters, you can't even count the number of tents, all offering their services! There were also showmen and balloon vendors, and where the mulled wine was measured, merriment got ground quickly, and the gypsy musicians also got a few pengos.

And as he recalled his memories, his timeworn complexion gave way almost to that of a child's face again.

"Daddy," he said suddenly to Grandfather, who could hardly keep up with nodding in agreement, "how did that incident with the ox farmer and the balloons happen? I've heard it many times, but I'm afraid I could never tell the complete story."

Grandfather smoothed his moustache, a smile was formed on his toothless lips, and started retelling.

"It was when I was a young man, not married, between the two wars, in peacetime. A farmer from Nagypalád brought four fine fat oxen to the fair, for he was going to marry off his daughter, and she needed a dowry. He had four beautiful oxen, and they were quickly sold, and in his joy, the farmer offered a drinking toast to the buyer, but as he came across a balloon vender, he thought about his little kids. He bought them five or six coloured balloons, and tied them to his purse, which he tucked into the belt of his trousers. And as the two drank, they warmed up to each other, and the farmer being a friendly chap as he was, made strong gestures while explaining something to his partner and did not notice that his belt was loosened and the balloons began to rise. Good heavens! By the time the farmer from Nagypalád came to his senses, the balloons with the purse were over the top of the church tower already. The man ran after the balloons shouting "oh, my, there're my oxen flying!" Everybody looked at him thinking he went mad. Well, that's how it happened."

I, huddled in a corner and listening to my uncle Árpi and grandfather, was not in the least excited by the interesting story. My mind was again on the Jewish boy, forced by my uncles to eat frog. I felt as if I had fallen asleep during Grandfather's retelling, and then someone suddenly spatted me on the neck saying "reveille". It sounded as if the "Swallow it, Bumi!" order had been given to me. After all, these were the words my mother used in order to boost my appetite further when she saw that I ate something with relish. So, now I know where it comes from, but I never guessed that such a cruel story was its origin. I decided that I would not allow anybody to call me Bumi in the future. I have an honest name of my own after all!

* * *

It's Sunday, a bright spring morning, the family is up and about. My grandfather bends over the washbasin in the hallway, sprinkling, soaping and washing his skinny, scrawny body. Grandmother works with a duck, its legs are bound, under the fully grown walnut tree in

the yard. She takes the animal between her knees, holds its gagged beak and head forward with a well-known move, presses it to her breast, begins to tear the feather at the back of its neck, then places a knife on the stripped neck and cuts and slashes with determination, spilling the blood that gushes from under the knife into a plate. The trickling blood is dark and mysterious, like midnight, only when it is spread out in the white plate does its real colour appear. My mother, noticing that I am becoming pale at the sight of the blood, takes me by the hand and pulls me into the house. But my grandmother pleads her: 'My love, if the water boils on the stove, bring it in please. I no longer move as easily as before with my aching back!' My mother grabs the pot with a tea towel and does what my grandmother asked her to do, but it's still no time to pour it into the basin. The thick feathers like snow on the belly, breast and wings of the bleeding poultry would be great pity to waste. Someone fetches already the bag of feathers with its mouth pulled together and the fine stuffing for the pillows gets into it. Then comes the hot bath! A heavy, disgusting fume from the scalded feathers rises from the basin. Grandmother holding the duck by the foot turns, then soaks it in the hot water for a few minutes, pouring cold water over the blood that is already coagulating in the plate, makes a cross with the tip of the knife on it, and, although she knows that I hate it she hands it to me: take it in, put it on the table, dog or cat must not reach it. I take hold of the two edges of the plate and, balancing myself carefully, make my way to the stairs. The contents of the plate are wet, but luckily my fingers are only wet from the water, the blood is already solidified. I go to the kitchen, and there, thanks to God, my mother takes the plate away from me.

A little later, a spoonful of fat melts and sputters in a small iron pot on the stove, and after a few minutes, the smell of the browning onions makes my mouth water. And that's only the beginning: a little salt and pepper, a little water is also needed to let it run through, to let it stew, if the duck's liver and the chopped gizzard are added. But my grandmother knows that well. After a while she turns everything over, tastes it, and finds that the gizzard needs some softening yet. She then

pours some of the water on the blood that has coagulated into a raw roundel, cuts it into smaller pieces, and adds them to the parts that are getting perfect in the pot. A little bit later the table is already laid with a chair for everyone around it. It's not much of a feast, it's not enough to satiate the whole family, but that is not the purpose. With bread it tastes heavenly, and we take cognizance of the fact that the poor silly duck could give us that much in advance of its immolated body.

After breakfast, Grandfather celebrates Sunday by lighting a Csongor cigar instead of a pipe, courtesy of his sons Árpád and Kálmán, who are now in Hungary. But how much more fragrant and bluer is this smoke than that of the sordid chibouk! He holds the cigar tenderly between his fingers, watches satisfied as it smoulders, and when he takes a puff, he holds his head high, enjoying the slight intoxication. Thus, celebrating in his Sunday best he lingers a little longer at the table, but then stands up, because they chime the church bell for the second time. He is the only member of the family who hears the bell. My father doesn't go to church either, not yet, and he knows very well why.

Elderly people come together on the Market Square. Some of them come from the gendarmerie barracks, some from the Jewish cemetery, but there are also some who come slowly from the nearby houses. My grandfather with a cane in his hand is also there.

"A God blessed afternoon to y'all!" greets he the people lifting his hat.

"The same to you!" replies old Gacsályi on behalf of all those who are present. Someone lights a cigarette, and after throwing away the used matchstick holds up the matchbox with the picture on it to the others.

"Can you see? It says that they have been here for forty years already."

People look at the picture on the matchbox. The dark shadow of a stylised warship is spread over a crowd of people gathering for an attack. Anyway, not this, but the two highlighted dates, 1917 – 1957, are those that are interesting.

"You just don't talk such idiotic nonsense to me," says old Józsi Gál incensed. "Are you at odds with figures? How long have we been

Russians, eh? What is written there refers not to us, but the country of the Soviets. There, yes, they have been in power for forty years, but they have been a burden on us for twelve years only."

"You say 'only'," the old Gacsályi exclaimed in protest suddenly. "They turned half the world upside down in twelve years, they took away everything from us. But not only from us. They can fool even the Americans because they're smart like hell."

"Smart you say?" Old Gál interrupted him. "Nonsense! I was in Russia several times, but I have yet to see a smart Russian. We built a huge cow shed in a village of about some hundred inhabitants and spent the whole summer there. There were so many geese there that the whole area was white with their feathers, the feathers and the fluffs were all gone with the wind, but they didn't have the brains to collect them, they plucked the hens instead and stuffed hen's feather into their pillows. Oh my! They plucked the roosters, too, they were simply disgusting to look at, with their two long legs. The poor hens didn't feel like crowing, let alone laying eggs! What can you expect from such people? They have done more damage till now than the Tartars once did, and only the Lord Almighty can tell what's in store for us in the future!"

"You're right, Sándor," my grandfather joined in the conversation. "God only knows why He sent them these Russians as a burden for us, and how long He's going to let them be here. But, just as the Tartars and the Turks did not stay forever, they too will go away once. But unfortunately, I think that it will be not us who will have to smoke them out. We are no longer able to do that. It's only the Lord who can straighten the world and let us see it straightened."

At my grandfather's words, the men started nodding hastily, and just then the bell tolled for the third time in the tower. So, no doubt that it was certainly God who also nodded saying that grandfather was right.

Grandma's Sunday dinners are memorable even today, but not because they were so large or peculiar. There was never enough for all of us to stuff ourselves, but after the sour soup meals and hominies with milk or jam of the weekdays, every Sunday dinner was princely.

But there was one small flaw in the chicken giblets which was eaten as a boiled meat after the soup, and that flaw was the same as that of the blood and gizzard stew with onion and paprika: it was too little for the family. But this problem was easily solved by an able cook and hostess. My grandmother, for example, prepared and served the various sauces with such love that even those who were not specifically fond of scrambled food had no heart to refuse. Poultry had to be taken with currant, sour cherry or apple sauce, and when cooked pork or veal was rarely on the plate, it was, as a rule, accompanied by onion, garlic or horseradish sauce. No, I'm not lying! Half a ladleful of sauce made everything different! Meat pieces off the bone could be dipped into it, giving that little bite a special flavour. And by the time the smallest one at the table was through with this meticulous work, his hunger was almost gone, leaving the golden-browned pieces of the duck to those who really loved them.

Grandma's weekly time off was only a few hours, and she had to cut it out of a Sunday afternoon. Unlike other old women, she did not work in the vegetable garden or go to the cemetery, as so many others did, but visited her old father and her ill brother Géza, who was crippled by typhus and meningitis in his younger days. When she was in the mood, she had only to say so, and I went with her willingly. After dinner she was getting ready as a rule. If there were some leftovers at the bottom of the bowl, stuffed cabbage, maybe a few meatballs, she was happy to take the snack to the old man, although he always repelled it modestly, without any mawkishness:

"Don't take the trouble, my daughter, I can take care of ourselves. It's true that I never make stuffed cabbages, but a little breaded haricot, fried pasta is no problem. And now I've got mashed beans with onion and lard, but it was not prepared as I like it. I told my daughter-in-law, Béla's wife, that I needed white beans for that, because it is best with that. But do you think she listened? Well, she didn't bring any. There was all kinds – colourful, white, black, last year's and even beans of the year before last. One of them was over-cooked, but the other is still hard. No wonder that this boy hardly touched it. "Aaah," he waved

with his hand dejectedly, and it was obvious that with this telling gesture he simply referred to his daughter-in-law.

My great-grandfather's, or as I called him, my very old grandfather's house, was situated in a flat part of Újlak, in Hajós Street, which wound parallel to the Tisza dam. All we had to do was to cut across the main road past the church, and down a relay platform-like descent we got to the big flat area. Only one side of the street was built in. It was just a cart track between the row of houses and the bank of the river, and only much farther it looked like a real street with rows of houses on both sides. There the plots wound towards the village, so that there was a yard for the houses and a little plot for the vegetable gardens, too. And I do not only think, but I know because I researched the matter and I found that this was the ancestral plot of the once populous Harsányi family, in which my grandmother Margit and her eight siblings were born. I went there several times without Grandmother. For example, well in the other day, when Sanyika and I ventured out on the road, the very old grandfather was just trudging home with a basket on his arm. We joined him, helped him with the basket and walked him home. Then he stopped at the door and began to think about what he could do to reward us. He took a crumpled Rubel banknote from his waistcoat pocket and gave it to Sanyika. Then he looked at me, puzzled, for a while.

"Well, and you? What shall I give you?" he asked himself rather than me, and then, taking a nut from one of his pockets, he handed it over to me with an almost solemn gesture.

At another time, when he was annoyed by the noise we made, he would raise his cane at me and wanted to chase me out of his yard. I would start to walk down to the gate offended, but one of my second or third cousins would remind him:

"Hey chief, he is your little grandson too! Don't you know him?"

"Really?" he asked amazed. "Who do you belong to?

"To Laci Fábián," I said, sniffling, and he opened his arms to give me a hug and called me back to play with the others.

A few houses farther in the street lived Mrs. Gyula Buda, more exactly, Ilon, the middle sister of my grandmother, and at the end

of the street, where the road started again, Róza, her elder sister, i.e. Mrs Anti Szilágyi after marriage. But a couple of very poor gypsy families settled down there too. In the summer they were busy with loam-cutting, and from spring to autumn they made a living from what they had gotten from the willows and the Tisza River. They knitted baskets, fished and tried to sell their goods or exchange them for food. Once, maybe twice, I witnessed wicked street urchins shouting after them from the safety of their houses 'You dirty gypsies, who live under the bank, and pick up dogs or cats to sleep with!' I honestly felt sorry for Terka and her little girls in their plaid skirts, because they were good people did no harm to anyone, and besides I never liked such stupid verses. How can you sleep with dogs and cats? Nonsense! But I understood why great-grandfather's street was called Gypsy Street by some people, and with reason perhaps. And then there were plenty of other people living there, too, who, sort of, also belonged to this ethnic group, but who were no longer happy to admit their origin. They simply referred to their place of residence as the Street without the condemnatory epithet 'Gypsy.' "Don't set foot on the Street!" people warned us.

But this street had something that no other public space in the settlement had. This gave the street a special rank, and a large proportion of its adult residents enjoyed an important, trusted status by this something. However prosaic, this surplus was the state border on the other side of the Tisza embankment which was inadvisable for any man to approach. It was said that between the thickly stretched barbed wire fence and the ploughland there were thin wires in the grass, and if some treacherous border intruder got tangled in them, flares would go up, but it was easy to imagine that the wire might set off the firing mechanism of a mine. To reinforce this rumour, armed border guards on horseback or on foot marched along the top of the embankment every day. They checked the integrity of the ploughing mainly, and at the same time they watched the passers-by. For those sitting at the gate or leaning out the window, it was like watching the ever-vigilant Green Berets on a movie screen.

Whether there were any major border incidents along this stretch at that time is not recorded anywhere, but the irresponsible rumour – on the Market Square, among people, influenced perhaps by the Soviet spy films often shown in cinemas – was that spies were constantly pursued and then successfully caught. Now, for example, the big news was that an American paratrooper was caught among the vines in the vineyard of Gyula Buda. This brave Soviet citizen tied him up with the help of his sons, who immediately informed the *zastava*.*[15] In our house, they laughed at it, because Mrs Buda comes to us at least twice a week, and if the story was true, she would have spilled the beans!

But it is plain holy truth that the adult residents of the street were called together once or twice a year for a little ideological training. Border guards, state defence officers and propagandists briefed on the complex international situation, warning of the need for increased vigilance and the obligation to report any suspicious-looking aliens lurking about. The majority of those who were thus instructed were open to this task and said yes without hesitation, because they believed that they owed everything to Soviet society and the liberators. It was the people's power that gave them work, that made them equal, that lifted them out of the social abyss of the previous regimes. Therefore, to summarise the situation in a nutshell, but keeping any exception in mind, these people, although they spoke Hungarian and sent their children to Hungarian schools, had no Hungarian national identity at all. But if you look at it closely, they had not any country affiliation either. At the same time, they were spectacularly addicted to Russian speech, they were fooled by Soviet pop music, they went to the soldiers' Saturday dances, and they believed that this entitled them to enjoy the support of the socialist system. In a word, they felt they had just enough power behind them to act bigger than they actually were. And this they did properly, unmistakably. If someone, for whatever reason, referred to his Hungarian identity, or, in a minor conflict, thoughtlessly denigrated one of them, they would self-consciously turn to him and

[15] Zastava – (Russian) border guards.

ask the question: 'Phew, are you one of those Hungarian nationalists?' And there was in this mocking question the unspoken warning, made clear by the tone and the look in the speaker's eyes: beware, you can easily get into trouble for your views. The law now is on our side!

The time will soon come, and I will learn – if possible, for life – that the high-handed tyranny of this social group, tolerated by the political system, works in the world of the adolescents, too. No one can be insulted, no one can be hit, with or without reason, because they no longer tolerate any harm done to any of them. Even the slightest offence is followed by retribution in broad daylight, the slaps are loud and those who deal them out are very pleased with themselves, and even more so with their exceptional position. They take pride in being able to do lots of dirty and shady things without consequence. But why not, when the judge, or rather the head of the village council, is one of them?

* * *

An old tree cannot be replanted – as an old wives' tale holds. But some people still try and prepare the place for replanting with great care. But all efforts are in vain, the noblest intentions are doomed to fail, for the experience is disheartening. Such is also the old human-tree that feels at home where his/her life was spent, and even if his/her mate fell, he/she has not strength enough to pull his roots out of the earth. My mother was not like that, she did not want to be alone, she did not feel safe at home. She found it hard to get used to her new place, and she did not know what to do with her free time. She went to visit, in turns, her co-mother-in-law, her neighbours, her granddaughter, and then she did something she had never done before: she started going to church. She didn't know much about how to behave there, she had no idea of the rules of the church, but she thought it was the place of every respectable village woman of her age. She thought that rightly, and if God had kept her in tolerable health for a few more years, she might have made up for her youthful failings. But who did not make any failings then? If I think back to my own childhood, if I take stock

of the religiousness of the closest members of my family, I very soon end up with an inventory of the deficiencies, and the outlines of the truth also begin to take shape. Grandmother, as we know, made a clean break from her Roman Catholic roots when she married, and she was unable to grow Reformed roots. But how could she, when she had tied her young life to a much older widow, left alone with four orphans? Then, in order to keep her sweet stepchildren from being bored, she gave birth to four children of her own. Although, the break with her church burned her soul for good, she could not hold a grudge against God after all. So instead of official piety she sought and found forms of spiritual life outside the church, whenever she felt so due to the command of her soul. She could fall on her knees before a currant bush even, because she felt instinctively that it was not the circumstances or the actual altar that counted, but the sincere desire to have a relationship with God.

As a rule, such "liberated" souls were targeted and approached by the soul hunters, who were sometimes encouraged to recruit members by their superiors in Brooklyn. I was six, maybe seven, when a strange woman began to visit Grandmother. She came not to sew, but to talk. She must have been about sixty, maybe seventy, and we recognised her from a distance by her snow-white thick hair. Mrs. Oláh, as she was called, was from Vári, and we could tell that she was a believer. I didn't really understand what kind of profession that was, because mostly she just sat in our kitchen when Grandma worked. But she did talk, sometimes at length, about things that were not talked about much in our house. 'It is written,' she said, 'that in the last days they who have the power in the world will speak about nothing else but peace and security. Now, tell me, Margit, is it not so now? That's all we hear on the radio and see in the newspapers, but we know that the Scripture promises the coming of the Saviour, that this is a sign of the Last Judgement. We do not yet know exactly when it will come, but the holy texts say that it will come to mankind like pain upon a woman in childbirth. What is certain, however, is that it is already here with us. And from then on, there will be only one fold and one shepherd. You'll see, Margit,

we all will get there. If you don't believe me, believe Petőfi, who was a great prophet. He too wrote that this would be Doomsday, the day of reckoning, and then life would start from the very beginning. But today one will not find this in his books, because in this 'world without God', when the Ten Commandments are brushed aside and are not observed, such verses are also persecuted. But I have them at home, I will bring them for you to read with your own eyes.'

I didn't understand much of it, but I remembered that there was something about it on the wall with the deer poster hanging next to Grandma's bed. For years I stared at the cheap painting on a roll of paper, unable to understand how the deer standing by the stream could be accompanied by a Bible verse prophesying the destruction of the Evil. But now– it was as if this woman had mentioned something similar: "All Evil will depart and be destroyed." Grandfather refused to listen to it calling this kind of religious propaganda silly preaching, and went out instead looking for something to do whenever Mrs. Oláh's grey hair, combed high, appeared in the doorway. Grandmother, on the other hand, listened eagerly, and after a few weeks, when everyone in the house had gone to bed, she cleared the table, took a notebook, pen and ink, and began to copy the sentences from a thin, worn, brochure. 'Your grandma went to school,' Grandfather would remark, half-jokingly, when someone mentioned this kind of her activity at night. And indeed, every week, if I remember correctly, on Saturdays, Grandma would put down her needle, thread and scissors and leave home for a few hours. After a while I heard, though they only spoke of it in confidence, that Grandmother was baptised as a Witness of Jehovah. From then on, minor changes came into our lives. No longer was the blood of the poultry prepared rich in fat, with onions, kidney and liver served at the Sunday dinner table. 'The soul of the animal is in its blood,' Grandma said, 'so it must be buried.' Similarly, the yummy blood sausage with dill and marjoram was also banished from the table at pig slaughters although we loved it very much. And soon Grandma felt strong enough to convert others to her faith. She enumerated to everybody who was willing to listen to her the signs of prophetical

fulfilments and the conditions necessary for gaining eternal life. Mrs. Moha and Ilon Badalovics continued to be among her eager listeners, and one of Grandmother's sisters, Aunt Róza, joined the army of Jehovah's Witnesses, too.

My father not only knew that cults were forbidden in our country, but feared even the shadow of suspicion. He warned the more distant, younger members of the family, Böske and her brothers, and Aunt Boriska's daughter Elvira, against joining. As an example of warning, there was the case of a young man from Keresztúr, in addition also named Fabián, who, as Jehovah's Witness, made a personal sacrifice for Christ by refusing to take up arms and serve in the army, for which he had to face trial and serve his sentence. But while prison is a deterrent to law-abiding citizens, it is the very thing from which the believer expects moral elevation in the eyes of their devout fellows.

My father and grandfather discussed my situation in this respect and decided it was time for me to start going to church. "He'll sit with the other kids up in the choir, where he can't learn anything bad," agreed Grandpa with the decision. And after much brooding, my father, to my grandfather's great satisfaction, decided that he would attend church services, too, because at that time, the Jehovah witnesses must have found out that the relationship between the state and the churches became less hostile. For not so long ago, however, it was enough for someone to report something on the priest, even if it was not true, my father mused aloud, and he, the priest, was at once taken away. Reverend Zoltán Kovács, with his walking staff, just pointed to a Komsomol[16]-badge depicting Lenin on a teenage girl's vest and asked: "Is it dearer to you than Christ?" What the girl answered is already immaterial, but on that very evening there was loud knocking on the door of the churchman. Later, when they charged the priest with inciting against the Soviet power, he (the priest) laughed, because he was sure that it was impossible to prove. But the little teenage girl who was called as a witness, when the accuser asked her what the priest

[16] Komsomol - Russian acronym for the Young Communist League (YCL).

had said about the badge of a Komsomolist,[17] testified. The reverend, whose back was turned to the witness according to the new trial order, suddenly turned around and asked, looking the girl hard in the eye: "Did I really say that?" The teenage witness began to cry, even to sob perhaps, but no one was interested. "The priest was grabbed from both sides and led away, so that he was never seen again," my father finished the story. But I remember it well that he recalled this story pretty often during his lifetime as a good lesson to learn.

He must have remembered it, too, when the Council of Twenty elected him treasurer of the congregation. He must have been ill at ease, since he didn't ever want any position, but he couldn't refuse this assignment. From then on, the monthly late-night treasurer's audits took place at our house. I can still see the cash register records being compared with the receipts written on small paper slips, the contents of the cash register, the large piles of change, being counted several times, and I will never forget old Józsi Gál's huge, hairy ears, which I used to pick behind his back with a thin twig that had fallen out of the sorghum broom. Maybe the old man thought it were the flies that bothered him and he tried to flick them away with his hand, and I had a good time until my mother noticed the impertinence.

As to my mother's religiousness, it would be – perhaps needless to say – interesting to look at her childhood and family background. My Puskás grandfather, who passed away in septic poisoning before I was born, was baptised in the Roman Catholic community, but faith could hardly find a home in his soul. If it had, he would not have become a Red Army soldier in 1919, and he and his brother-in-law and a few other vile thugs would not have surrounded the Castle of Nagyiday with rifles on their shoulders and scared to death its peaceful inhabitants. My maternal grandmother was born a Reformed, but her children, four daughters and a son, attended Catholic religious education classes more or less regularly. So, it is a miracle that her eldest daughter, Aunt Ilonka, became a godly person, but her marriage and the family tragedy

[17] Member of the Komsomol.

that befell them must have played a role in this. My mother told me just enough about their frivolous behaviour in church lessons to allow me to blame the lax parental discipline and the disorderly, unhealthy atmosphere in the Puskás family. For there was everything in that family – bickering, envy – but no love, and poverty is no explanation. How can a parent tolerate one of his children spitting in his brother's plate in order to eat it himself? No, my grandmother Teresa was not up to the task of performing the most basic maternal duties, not to mention the spiritual development of her children. True, she herself could not have had a very solid Reformed conscience if she had attended Catholic services. If she felt that anyone around her was upset by this, she would immediately refer to her aching feet, but I don't think many people believed the sincerity of her complaints. The real reason for her behaviour may have been that the St. Helena's Church was relatively close to them, and she regarded Sunday services as a duty to be done.

I don't think that my mother matched her religiousness to her mother's, because as far as laxity is concerned she surpassed her. By any reckoning, she was in church only twice as a young woman: at her wedding and at my baptism. But at the same time, I do not want to say that she was an atheist. In her daily struggles with life, like other women in her situation, she often uttered prayers, but I do not recall that they were ever from the heart. If she was frightened, if she wondered at something, it was the words of Jesus and Mary, but again, it was just a matter of habit. On the other hand, when she sent me to church, she made it a point to listen carefully to what the priest was saying, because she would ask me what it was all about.

At first, I really tried to listen to the sermon, but I could hardly understand the long explanations of the Word. I looked at one of my companions and then at the other, but their faces looked exactly as dull as mine. Getting bored with what I heard, I began to tear fluffs off my angora wool sweater, then I formed the light flakes into a ball of the size of a cherry, and with a gentle blow from the choir above I launched it into the vast space below. On the wings of puff the flake ball flew horizontally and then, coming into line with the pulpit, it

began to descend gently. It descended like a snowflake, and the priest himself was surprised, for it was only the end of October or perhaps the beginning of November. At the sight of the third flake, I stopped doing this, but I couldn't hide myself from the gaze of the reverend on the pulpit. Thinking back to my situation at that time, I cannot deny that the apple that was me back then did not fall far from its tree.

So, I lay there like an apple under my mother tree, waiting for something to happen. Later, an ill-bred dog got in my way, and after trying to provoke a fight in vain with its mate hovering behind the neighbour's gate it began to scratch and kick the ground near me furiously. Thus, after being struck by a loose lump I ended up at the edge of a small slope, and began to slip down and away from my tree.

* * *

Tündér (Fairy) grazes already on her second pasture. She grew into a nice strong heifer and became the pride of our little farm. Her reddish-brown coat, which Grandfather strokes so often, looks shining dark from her withers to the end of her horns. "Frosty brown," Grandfather says for the umpteenth time with satisfaction and for my edification, because I would have identified her as brown if anyone asked me. On returning from the pasture Tündér usually drinks from the trough at the well, but before heading for the stables, she steps onto the front steps of the house with her two front feet and gently stomps her way towards the kitchen. That's how she calls grandmother, who often offers her slightly greasy salty slop, and whose hand she likes to lick, because it tastes just as good. A beautiful animal in every respect, but with a slightly unusual horn position. The right horn's size is just average, but it points forward, ready for defence or attack, and its owner gains an unassailable authority in the community she grazes with. The other one, on the other hand, bends backwards, and its only advantage is that it can be used impeccably for scratching.

These days Pityu Buda is out with the cattle in the field, and as evening comes, Grandpa sits at the gate and waits patiently for the cow.

Tündér, however, is unusually restless this evening, but it turned out that she was the same in the field. *'She to jump all day,'* explains Pityu. *'My guess she wanna marry. Uncle Elek send quick for Karmacsi.'*

Karmacsi, our expert in artificial insemination, came the next morning. He rode a bicycle, and the news that he had come quickly spread around the Market Square, because wicked kids would follow him wherever he went, shouting "the fucker man, the fucker man," and who wouldn't hear that? That time I only dared to squint at him tremblingly. Is his nose really as ugly as they say? I can see that it is big enough for a big man, and pretty pitted, too, but still it would be hardly noticed if it wasn't as red as a turkey's head. "It's because he's fond of wine, but if he had none, he'd have anything instead, even pure alcohol," says old Gyula Rozman. "The problem with him is that if he's sober, his hands shake, and so he tends to spoil the job. As far as I can see, we don't have to worry about that this time, because he's full of spirits at present."

But Grandfather already leads the bride, and the other end of the rope, looped around her horn, is bound around the trunk of a young walnut tree in the yard. The man steps up to Tündér's back and lifts its tail slightly. He nods, then retrieves his tools from the bag strapped to the racks of the bike. Others also would like to know how it happens. Uncle Jani, Eli's spouse, is here, but Endre Fabián, out of sheer curiosity, also appears in the yard. And once he's here, he has to ask the master.

"What seeds have you brought, Jóska?"

"Kostroma. Nowadays we work with them."

"From Bakta?" Endre continues to ask.

"Yeah," replies the man briefly, and then goes up to the back of the animal with a large shiny something.

"Let someone hold the tail," he instructs the bystanders, and pushes the tin duck, as Uncle Endre calls the instrument, decisively in.

Tündér squirms a little, alternately lifting her hind legs, but Grandpa strokes its head to set it at ease.

"No fear, it's almost over. Here we go!" Karmacsi sucks up the prepared seeds with a glass tool that looks like a syringe and sends it through the tunnel opened by the tin duck into the right place.

"That's all," he says, and after having carefully removed the tool, he pats the animal's side in saying goodbye. "She can go to the pasture tomorrow."

April lives up to its reputation this time as well. All I've ever heard about it is that it's foolish and the month of fools. If it was just the vagaries of the weather, that would be fine, but what is the point of one making a fool of another on the very first day of the month by playing crude pranks by abusing the gullibility of others? This morning, Jóska Balog, the teenage son of my Aunt Zsuzsika, came to me with a large paper bag. "Come here, Lacika," he said to me with a smile, "I've brought you some sweets." I reached happily for the bag and opened it, but it contained raspberry seeds and pumpkin seeds. He grinned broadly and told me that it was April Fool's Day, and if somebody was without brains, he/she must be fooled. And then he started telling me that their mother had been fooled with an empty envelope. They brought it to her, saying, "Look, Mum, here's a letter from Dad, just delivered by the postman!" My aunt, who had already been treated in a mental hospital after her husband had been taken away, gushed into tears at her sons' insensitivity and, in a helpless rage, hit them with a broom. But it's not necessarily important that others make a fool of you in April, foolishness from carelessness comes, if it wants, just by itself.

Grandma gets up from the sewing machine and runs out to the barn, where an equally foolish cluck is sitting on goose eggs. The goslings were clucking since yesterday, a sign that they are ready to be born. Three beautiful fluffy little geese are brought in by grandma in her lap. No need for the cluck to see that she gave birth to side-slips, besides the goslings are sensitive and they may catch cold outside. Grandma wraps them up in a worn tattered woollen kerchief and lays them on the chaise longue where Grandpa usually lies.

"Hey old man," she warns her husband, who is approaching the bed. "Be careful, little geese warm themselves in that shawl."

"Really?" says the old man. "Glad to hear you say that," he says, and gently places the kerchief with the little creatures under his behind and

sits down. Grandmother jumps up and, in a manner quite unusual for her, exclaims:

"For God's sake! Are you plumb crazy? Do you keep your brains in your ass?"

The undignified death of the three little geese is annoying, but no use crying over spilt milk. Another problem is coming, it's already on the doorstep. Tündér, the queen of the stable is getting fat, will calve soon, her time is coming. Sometimes when she comes out to the yard, the old men look at her with satisfaction and speculate on the sex of the calf that will be born. Auntie Gizi's youngest son, the four or five-year-old Jánoska, is there among them, listens to every word they say. He glances at the back of the animal, and says, as a serious grown-up should: "Her belly is big, it will be a heifer." But no matter how serious and knowledgeable is the little boy's remark, Tündér's first calf was a bull.

A bull calf is given no name, because where it's going to end up no certificate of baptism is ever needed. Its mother could be happy for six weeks only. With a little sucking it collected enough meat for being worth taking to the slaughterhouse, but the little innocent victim, as a sign of forgiveness for his sad fate sent its liver to our house. The onion chopped into the fat is browned on the plate of the stove, the delicious supper will be ready soon. My mother, too, is hustling around the stove, and the smell of the frying liver reminds her of her childhood:

"When after the flood we were staying at the slaughterhouse, we ate a lot of liver! Doctor Róna gave my mother a big slice every week."

At the mention of the name Róna, my grandmother's eyes flashed and her face flamed.

"My dear, you'd rather never mention that name to me! I will never forget... My sister Anna's death is on the hands of that "doctor."

After that remark we heard nothing from my mother to say for most of the evening, and she did not even sit down to have dinner with us. She was not hungry, she said, and went into the room. She must have known that grandmother would sink into doom and gloom whenever her unmarried sister who died very young was mentioned; she must have known, and of course she knew; I myself heard Grandma, at least

twice, to lament her sister's tragedy, with her tears falling, when she spoke to women, who sat around the house while she was sewing.

"She came to me when she became pregnant," recalled Grandma. "She trusted me more than our mother. 'You see,' she said, 'that's what I was worth to him, twenty Czech korunas! That was all that he gave me to have an abortion. So let it be! But I swear by the Blessed Virgin that I can do that myself, without him and his money.' These were her last words. Then she jumped up, hugged me and went to the doctor's consulting room. I still made after her, 'Anna, Anna, don't do anything stupid!' But she didn't hear. They said that when she got there, she started cleaning and disinfecting the room, because she had to do that every week, then she took all the lye that remained and drank it all at home. She suffered three days before she could close her eyes. What a shame," concluded Grandma wiping the tears off her eyes, "she was the prettiest of the five sisters."

* * *

The night, or rather the dawn, brought warm and abundant early summer rain. Since such a nice weather continues the geese and ducks are joyful, because they got what they wanted at last: all the three ponds at Market Square are filled with water. But why do they make so much noise, as if all this were for them only? One can see that the shallow edge of the middle pond was already taken over by the swine: they squash and knead the mud, pee in it, and then dirty it with thicker excrement thickening the thin puddle. Well, they should not think too much of themselves either. For they are not the only ones who deserve the heavenly blessing in good weather. The grass is bright green on the higher banks, and only a few cows graze in it – seemingly on their own. But it is not so because everybody keeps a watchful eye on his or her cattle from the gate or the yard, and soon Laci Buda, Aunt Ilon's youngest son, who drove out their young cow Baby onto this fine field, also shows up.

My grandfather also lets out Tündér and hands me a long thin stick.

"Here we go, look after it, and keep your eyes on it. Though it's hot, you must not lie down, because if you fall asleep while herding, you are in for some trouble."

"What trouble, Grandpa?" I asked and looked at him inquisitively.

"I can tell you, if you want to know it so much," he said and looked at me with a mischievous smile under his moustache and started his story.

"Once upon a time there was a shepherd boy, he was about and around fifteen, who fell asleep while watching the cattle. He pulled down even his hat on his eyes, and spread both his arms. He looked precisely as a cross on the ground. The other boys spoke to him, tried to wake him, but he did not even move. Then one of them thought something, crouched down, pulled aside his wide trouser-sides, and cucked on his palms. On both. After having done that, he began to paddle the shepherd boy's nose with a long blade of grass, as if a fly was crawling on it. The boy grimaced and snorted, but finally he smacked his nose with his hand. Then he woke up and was just looking until he realised what made him stink so. Just imagine how shaken up he was."

"All right, all right," I reassure the old man, "I don't fall asleep in the field as a rule," I said and followed the track of Tündér, after all the others.

But cows don't need much watching after all now, they remembered well the darkness of the barn, the loads of tasteless stalks of corn they ate in early spring, and are grateful for being able to pick at the live green grass. It is perhaps an hour and a half before they become thirsty, and one by one, with heads held high, they head for the lake in front of the Jewish cemetery. By the time the last one had had its fill, Baby and Tündér were already walking along the dirt road that skirts the cemetery, as if they knew that beyond the inhabited area, near the Tisza, the pasture was richer and more varied.

It is true that the field, which is such an excellent pasture, had been used by the army and they sometimes hurt the land. Two years ago, for example, a large trenching machine was used to dig up the whole area. It left behind a trench about half a metre wide and a metre deep,

which the soldiers then shaped into a regular trench with spades and shovels, and a few days later they went into the trench in full marching gear, pretending to fight. Sometimes the guns crackled every day for a week, and when they stopped, we were allowed to go in and pick up the scattered shell casings. Now, since their time is over, they no longer use the trenches for anything. During the autumn rains they are filled up with water, their soaked, loose banks caved in, but it will be a long time before they are completely flattened.

Shortly afterwards, further changes happened at our place. Last autumn, a radio battalion moved in and their first job was to install a high-power antenna system in the field. They made fairly tall iron towers of traverse construction in the field, they were perhaps as high as thirty or forty metres, and had to support the antenna network built at a height. The people around them were shaking their heads at the proliferation of towers, unable to understand what it was all for. On top of a fifteen or twenty metre pine pole, for example, a structure made of copper tubes was placed, which I would say resembled an aeroplane, but others said that a potato masher. One of our neighbours, a slightly stiff cobbler, was asked about it as he stood outside his house:

"Well, uncle Laji, what do you think is that?"

The cobbler looked up at the top of the post, and though he had not the faintest idea of its function, a sudden thought struck him and blurted out the following short and definite answer:

"Why, if a spy plane comes and flies right over it, it pulls the plane down with the help of a magnet in it.

And he, as if he himself were that magnet, showed how it is done with his two raised hands.

"Oh, that's impossible. Do you know with what swing planes come?"- The enquirer expressed his doubts regarding the answer, and it was only much later, after a year or two perhaps, when similar devices appeared also on the roofs of the citizens' houses, and we learnt that this very mysterious thing was just an early type of TV antennae. But one could also guess from the whole installation that besides communication between the troops it was intended to serve

another purpose, too, and namely the jamming of Western radio transmitters.

Well, in this aerial forest, since the soldiers did not use any vehicles, the grass had the chance to grow tall, and our cows often went there on their own account to stuff themselves with the tasty grass of this earthly paradise. This might have been condoned by the corps commanders, but the cows, wandering among the guy-ropes of the iron poles, discovered that they could be put to more useful service. If they were lucky enough to get underneath, they could scratch lustily and for long against the twisted wire ropes, only this action set slowly the mast in motion, and the movement spread like a wave to the aerial net stretched high above. Imagine the disturbance that two or three cattle scratching at the same time must have caused to the surveillance specialists! They came almost immediately. With shovels and other long-handled implements snatched from their burgundy-painted fire shields, they beat and cut the unfortunate cattle wherever they could. At other times they were driven in and locked up, and then one of the more influential farmers had to intervene to free the cows. This happened regularly until the military fenced off the arbitrarily expropriated land, but there was always someone who, sometimes for this and sometimes for that reason, would tear down the wire fence and the story started all over again.

So, it's better to be always in the train of the cows to avoid unexpected things to happen. I try to follow the instructions of adults to the last detail, but now I feel I can keep an eye on the cattle even if I lie down in this silky fine grass. So, I spread out on the ground and support my chin with one elbow, as I saw Laci Buda do it, and take a long blade of grass in my mouth to chew. I look at the clouds as they travel on the sky above me in search of something, and then my eyes wander from the clouds to the tall antenna towers. I lean back so that I could gauge better their height and the receding clouds stay in my eyesight, but all of a sudden, I see the tower opposite me starting to tilt, and it leans towards me. I jump up quickly to run away, but then I calm down, because I realise that the tilting of the tower is just a sensory

illusion: the clouds, in constant motion, have caused the tower to move in the opposite direction in my eyes. My heartbeat slows down, I look around and see that it's time to look for the cattle, for our funnily horned Tündér is very far. She's heading for the embankment with the others, so we all in a hurry. But Laci Buda stays, because Baby, his cow discovered that the pasture where it is grazing is good enough.

Our cows, having crossed the semi-dry bed of the fork of the Tisza, were grazing in the grassy bushes at the edge of the row of Acacias, when it occurred to someone that they could drive them over to the Island. That was the lushest, most unspoilt pasture in the area, and the cows couldn't stray anywhere while we were kneading the fine grey-blue mud of the river's backwater to our heart's content. So, we let the cattle we had been entrusted with go into the small river and we followed them, but the current made it impossible for us to reach the gravel banks. A grown man could have easily crossed it, but I must have been five or six years old at the most, and the others of a similar age. Fortunately, Bálint Rozmán, who was eleven or twelve, was with us with his goats, and with his adult confidence he made us understand that we could count on his help. He really helped us, carried the younger boys, Öcsi, Gyuszi, then Feri, over; and I was the last for him to carry.

"Come on!" He called on to me, and helped me to get on his back by bending his knees a little.

Reaching over his shoulders, I clasped my hands under his chin, but in order to avoid just clinging on his neck I closed my legs around his waist. In the middle of the channel the water was up to his waist or so, consequently I was in the water too, but if he took five more steps, I could have reached the pebbled bank unharmed and got off. But unexpectedly he stopped in the middle of the strongest current and said determinedly:

"Get off!"

I simply didn't want to understand this and just held on to him still stronger.

"Don't you understand what I say? Who am I talking to?" He growled at me vigorously and started to swing and shake his upper body in order to throw me down.

My two legs slid off his waist, and the current would have dragged me away, but I still more desperately clasped my arms around his neck.

"Balint, don't put me down, Balint, get me out of here!" I cried desperately, but he pried my intertwined fingers apart with his two strong hands, and then with a more powerful thrust of his hips threw me off him.

"Oh, Balint, don't let me go, Balint, pull me out!" I cried no longer on him anyway, and when I reached the edge of his pants as a last straw, he slapped my hand and, having thus got rid of me went contentedly ashore.

This was the point when I should have seen that film of my life with my mind's eye. You know, the one about everyone who escaped from the jaws of death are wont to speak. It would have been high time for it, but the film had contained only a few scenes as the maker only set to work a short time earlier. It was beyond my comprehension, but now I am convinced that the director himself intervened, lest the carefully written script of my life be in vain, and entrusted my tiny body left without a guardian to the mercy of the Tisza. The water then measured me, spun me around, and after I had taken a few memorable gulps, it changed its mind and despite its predatory nature took me, its deliberate and deserved prey, under its protection. I flailed my arms, I would have clung even to a shadow, but I did not sink, the river allowed me turn on my back and ride the weakening current. It rushed with me for twenty or thirty metres, swung me properly, and then, leaving the broken down banks threw me off at the sandy shore at the bend before the row of Acacias.

I lay there for a while, as the castaways of my later readings usually do, but let's not exaggerate too much, I didn't stay there because of exhaustion. I could have got up, I could have run away almost immediately, but I felt immense gratitude to someone about whom I knew nothing, and about whom I could not write at least one unhesitating sentence even today. That feeling of gratitude rose up in me with a great suddenness and kept me on the shore with all its force. My forehead, my knees, my two palms sank into the sand, and the

sand did not want to take away my little life, it was obedient and warm, like a mother's lap.

How Tündér got home that day, I cannot recall, but my mother didn't care much for the cow when she went out in a hurry to find me, suspecting something wrong. Her movement slowed down, then stopped altogether in relief as she spotted me on the path home from the embankment, and immediately opened her arms to hug me. Her short lean figure rose in my eyes, and she was with her outstretched arms a stately roadside cross for me. I began to quicken the pace of my little feet longing to be in her protective embrace. Meanwhile I had a strange hunch suggesting that cross would always be waiting for me, and I would be one day its crucified Christ.

* * *

I sleep badly and little lately. Maybe it's due to the diuretics I take with the vasodilators, or maybe it's the repeatedly tortured conscience that wakes me up at three in the morning all the time. I stagger through the house, rid my body of excess fluids. Thus, unburdening my heart I tuck in my dear ones, turn off the abandoned TV, and lean back on my bed, dazed and listless. It's not easy to fall asleep again, with the events of the last few days rattling around in my head. I can still see the clock distinctly, I'm worried about the cold weather, I'm thinking about the early start at work, about leaving in the morning, and then about that it is time to replace the old rolling junk with something better, but my brain, having returned to its previous level of consciousness, wants to continue the vision interrupted by the forced awakening. The objects of the living space mingle with objects of the outside world, they form an unrealistic constellation, familiar and never-before-seen figures alternately pass in front of me, and then young and beautiful girls come to me in masses. I get close to one of them, put my lips to her naked breast and suck her beauty, her vitality, her youth in. I feel some tingle in my lap, the first signs of erection, and so I am comforted, benefited by the approaching dream after the daily struggle. But it seems I no longer deserve it either,

for something unexpectedly interrupts my vision. "Shame!" I would cry in frustration, if it weren't for the rattling on the window sill that wakes me up.

"Uncle Laci, wake up, uncle Laci!" someone shouts at the window and rattles the lowered blinds. I jump up, stagger dazedly to the window and open it. Karcsi, the night watchman of the nearby sewing shop, tired from running, panted: "Uncle Laci, come quickly, aunt Márta is in the yard, she has fallen, she is wailing and crying for help. I've tried to take her in her room, but she can't get up and I can't lift her alone."

"Oh, mother, my poor mother, what have you done again?" I ask myself, and while I'm putting on my clothes, I shout out of the window:

"I'll be there in a moment!"

There was little snow last night, but the stones on the pavement are slippery, and I take long strides so that the messenger man has to shake his leg to keep up with me. In the courtyard of my mother's temporary accommodation is a large pile of rubble stones, next to them a pile of gravel – the material and the remains of the construction work stopped in autumn and to be continued in the future – but to the left of them, from the steps to the woodshed and the outhouse, the ground is flat. If it was urgent for her to go out at night, she had to know that there is light in the yard and that the switch is at the front door. But if it was not, then why on earth did she walk between the pile of stones and gravel without a cane, with a plastered forearm in track? I don't have the faintest clue. Her teeth chatter so much that she can hardly speak. I reach under her arms from behind, Karcsi takes hold of her two legs and we take her into the house, where we sit her up in the armchair, cover her with a blanket, because her two hands are as cold as ice, and I pick the bloody thistles and seeds that got stuck in her hair and clothes. She must have got lost in the dark, because she can't see properly with her multi-dioptric glasses even if it is light, and so she fell at the stones. Who knows how long she was trapped in this helpless state? Minutes pass before she speaks, but she doesn't answer my question as to why she had to go out at night when there was a toilet inside, and I don't think she knows at all what I say. She just keeps saying that robbers broke in,

that they are still hiding here, but where is the militia, did anyone send for them? And she's wailing and fidgeting, and keeps saying that you can't be safe even in your own house, and that we shouldn't leave her alone because they'll come back, and then suddenly she starts screaming, shouting for help as if she were in danger again, as if we were not there. My partner looks at me baffled, not understanding what could have happened to my mother, whom he had spoken to several times over the fence, whom he had previously thought of as a perfectly normal old woman. "Thank you for helping," I say, "you just go ahead and go on with your work, I'll stay here with her."

At this very moment the door opens, my wife comes in to assess the new situation, to straighten out things that have gone out of joint, and she does all this as always with her infinite patience and knowledge. And she does everything with a natural sense of duty and calmness, which is the same as when she makes coffee in the morning, prepares breakfast for the children, goes to work, cooks, does the washing up and cleans. She asks no questions, only comes up to my mother, whose teeth are still chattering loudly, feels her hands and finding them rather cold gives orders immediately: "Boil water, lots of it! We must bathe her, for that's the best way to warm her up. And build a fire, too, the house is also getting cold."

I turn on the hotplate, pour water in the water-heater pot, and go with two empty buckets to the new part of the house. We built it for my mother, put the roof on it in the autumn, and will move her in there when it is finished. The water-tap is, in any case, in the house and works perfectly. Anyone who took water in heavy buckets from a draw well all their lives knows what a tremendous help that is. You don't even have to go to the woodshed for dry kindling to light the fire, it's there at the door. The brick stove, though its plaster is peeling here and there, and the inner patch around its door is falling out in several places, warms up quickly, especially if there is a fire in it every day. After half an hour or three quarters of an hour at the most, a little fire needs no more time, it gives off heat in abundance. In the meantime, while the water gets boiling, I bring in the big tub from the next room, let it warm up a little, and we start to take the clothes off her.

A few months ago, it would never have occurred to me that this could happen. But if I come to think of it, we should have guessed that cerebral atherosclerosis never comes unexpectedly. My mother herself told me that she was plagued by disorientation when she was out of the house at dusk. It took her half an hour to find her way home from the third neighbour's house, and that was also possible only because a passer-by helped her to go home. How did she get the plaster on her forearm? Quite recently she went out recklessly into the street and was run over by a cyclist who was as short-sighted as she herself. Se hurt herself badly – pelvis, ribs, arm –, so it is easily understandable that she had cause for despair. I know it's an unfortunate situation that we left her in that state, but we both work, we had no other option. I mean we could have, but it was easier this way. And so, the opportunity and time presented itself for her to reflect on her infirmity, and God gave her enough imagination to create a vision of her own protracted illness.

"I'm sorry only for you, my son," raised she her head from one of these deliriums not long ago.

"Why should you be sorry for me?" I ask. She answers, irritably, as if I ought to know why, but only this:

"Well, if I'm all in a plaster... you'll be the only one to look after me."

"But it's not your spine that's broken, it's just your arm," I say consolingly.

"Okay, okay... You'll see..." she replies completely dejected.

In the past, even if the topic of caring for the helpless elderly was sometimes raised, or it became a part of conversation between us, I had hoped that it would not happen to us. But there were signs of my mother's physical and mental decline even before my father's death. My father, when he felt that he had little time left in this world, expressed his concerns to me. "Don't leave your mother alone when I'm gone..." He said nothing more, just that, and so simply, so briefly. And he didn't add anything to it, he was convinced that I should understand what he meant, and then he just looked at me, and his eyes were very sad. Then, the eyes spoke, not him.

On another occasion, when he repeated this, he gave me his reasons too.

"I fear that she will soon be unable to help herself, and what awaits her here then I dare not think of. Y'all know that this place around here is dangerous. Rascals will beat an old man to death for a bottle of vodka or a piece of bacon. And then – her health... She's seventy-three, but she looks ninety, especially since she fell from the attic."

"Yes, I also remember," I spun further my father's yarn, "that she fell down from the ladder because she felt she had to dry the laundry in the attic. She hurt her back badly then, and her vertebrae must have been also injured, but she didn't go to see the doctor. Since then, she walked with a stoop, and she likes to lean on her cane."

"That's really so, but the problem is that she's got a more serious long-standing illness. You may remember this from your childhood years, when you were little, she scared you too, made you cry when she had a seizure. I could scarcely console you when she was almost unconscious in her sleep, and only cried in an ugly, distorted voice, like a retard. I could hardly shake life into her at such occasions."

"Yes, I remember several cases," I confirm my father's story, "which were probably mild epileptic seizures".

"Well! So, you are aware of that. Well, she did that in those good old days quite often. It's good that I was awake most of the nights, my heart kept me awake, because if I had not heard her fighting with her trouble, we would carry flowers to her grave by now."

"I know, I am well aware of that too. But don't worry, Daddy, we won't leave her."

And I think that about that time my mother also made an account of that last certain attack of her illness.

"You know, my son, my body became so light at once, that I just floated like a fluff, and then I saw myself lying on the bed. And I saw your father jump up from the iron bed, run quickly to me and start to wake me up and shake me. He shouted Márta, Márta, *wake up, and slapped my face several times, but I just kept on rising, and all at once I was already at the lintel of the kitchen door, I was supposed to go out under it, but then I changed my mind, stopped in mid-air, turned back, and just looked at your poor father, still desperately trying to wake me. If this is death,*

I thought, then there is nothing to fear of, but then I started to descend back to my bed, back into my body, and all I remember is that your father made me sit up."

Well, yes. She is convinced she had a near-death experience. Let her believe that. Maybe it will indeed be that easy and familiar once she gets there. For now, however, she is here among us, and needs lots of help and care. We put her in the bath-tub as if she were a child, only it takes two of us to do the job. I try not to look at my dear mother's naked mummified body. I hold her, lift her as if I looked into nothing, or the space. But even then, I must see her slim limbs and her elongated breasts. Klárika immediately discovers my embarrassment and with a bitter smile says only: "You'll have to get used to it, my dear. It seems that that's the order of things we shall have to face further on."

* * *

Sanyika was with us for a few days again. We can't really do anything in the small kitchen, so we go out into the yard. There's not much to see there either, but we have a good time in the shade of the mulberry tree. At least I like the space under its big canopy, and the mulberries are slowly ripening, too, so one can taste the windfalls. But Sanyika winks at the small mulberries smiling on the tips of the branches instead, and is already looking for a way to get closer to them. At the fence, he notices a light garden gate lifted from its corners, so he leans it against the trunk of the mulberry tree, and climbing up on the crossbars reaches one of the lower branches. He pulls himself up and throws his legs over the branch so skilfully as if he had been practising it all the time in Karácsfalva, and the next thing I see is him sitting safely on the branch. I don't go after him because I don't want to fall down again like last summer when I followed my mother up the ladder leant against the peach tree. My mother hadn't even reached a single ripe fruit when the branch holding the ladder snapped and the ladder started to go downwards. I immediately let it go and fell to the ground, and the ladder with my mother still on it fell on me. The shock and

fright kept me breathless for long seconds which was not pleasant at all. So, I climb no tree for the time being however beautiful the fruit on its branches may be. But I would prefer Sanyika to throw me some of the best of the best, but at present it looks like my cousin has got more important things to do, so he ignores me.

His attention is already drawn to the fluffy nest of birds swaying in a tripled branch not far above his head. He reaches out to get it when the little bird flies up from the nest, chirping and flapping its wings from a distant branch tip, trying to ward off the intruder. But the hand is already in the nest, and soon I can see three little freckled bird eggs in Sanyika's palm. I know that one has no right to do this, that one must not disturb the peace of the nest, and I try to ask him to put the eggs back. But he just laughs at me from above, and knocks one of the eggs against the branch, sniffs it, and then drops the contents into his mouth, satisfied. I cry, astonished and disgusted, and stutter, but to no avail: Sanyika drinks the other two eggs, too. I can do nothing, so I go back to the kitchen crying, but there are two strangers sitting there, and I don't want to share my grief with them, therefore I withhold my sniffle and curl up in the corner at the porch. Grandmother notices that something is wrong between us again, so she calls back from the sewing machine.

"What's going on there again?"

I don't really want to show my grief to others, but I have to answer something to Grandma's next question, which is 'why is that sniffle,' and I stammer out that Sanyika ate the little bird's eggs.

"Oh, did that wicked boy eat the eggs from the nest? But he was told several times not to hurt birds, God will punish him for that," says Grandmother, looking angry. Sanyika hears this and drops his eyes in a guilty glance.

Grandma gets up from the machine, now she has some work to do on the table. And she really starts to sew the cut-out top together, then raises her head and starts to speak as if into the air.

"I was still a little girl, when my father told me a shocking story. There was a Jewish haberdasher in Újlak at that time. My father said

that he remembered him well, and also remembered that when that Klein was an apprentice, he used to catch songbirds with a noose and a spatula, but he also paid the youngsters if they collected at least fifteen or twenty such birds for him. He liked the larks most, for which he would pay five crowns a piece. But he didn't encage them because he didn't want to listen to their singing. No, but with a small operating knife he reached deep into their mouths and cut out their tongues. After that he let the poor birds go."

I think I hissed at hearing such a cruelty, but even Sanyika was horrified at our grandmother's words. But one of the women impatiently interjected.

"And tell us, Margit, why did he do that?"

"Well, I don't know if it was really so, but my father said something about it, but he must also have heard it only, that the boy made some pâté or something of those tongues and ate it."

"Oh, my!" Clapped her hands the first questioner. "How could he do that?"

"Yes, only he could tell how. But what follows is something that should be remembered for ever. Because, as my father said, that Klein later married, and after a while his wife gave birth to a son. And the child was just growing and growing, but could not speak. They regretted it very much, but they thought they would have another child and that would be healthy. Time went by, and then the next one was born, who was a girl. She was also growing and growing, but God paralysed her tongue, too. By this time, they suspected that something was wrong and there must be some reason for such a divine punishment, and in order to pacify the Creator, they began to pray to Him and asked that their next child would be normal. After a couple of years, the third was also born, he was a boy, but he was born with three tongues. Well... it was as if he had three tongues in his mouth, one on top of the other, and he couldn't close his mouth even, so he drooled like a baby. But he, my father said, did not live long. What happened to the other members of that family is immaterial, but that much is enough, I think. 'So, you too,'

and Grandmother looked at us sternly here, 'think well how you treat God's blessed little creatures.'

In the meantime, Grandpa came in, and although he only heard the end of the story, he knew what it was about. He himself must have known it well, and to confirm the admonition he added his own thoughts.

"When I was a schoolboy, we learned this little poem from our spelling book: 'Zhiga! There's a snail under your feet, can't you see? So, look where you step, for it's also one who God's made!' And it's really so! A snail has a right to live, even if God created it just as a snail."

And lighting his pipe, he continued after the first few puffs.

"It happened once, that your uncle Árpi with his cousin Tibi, who must have been ten or so then, had to pay dearly for robbing a bird's nest. They went out to the Acacia row, to the backwater of the Tisza, in spring to raid jackdaw nests, because they also took to bird eggs. There were also some big poplars there, their branches full of nests, but their trunks were so beautiful and smooth as if they had just been made by a turning machine. But those two boys climbed them like cats. They marked when the jackdaws were away, and then they went for the eggs. They'd just pocketed what they could find, and they were on their way down. But out of the blue one of the birds showed up, and made such a racket that ten or twenty others from the nearby area flocked up almost instantly, and nipped and slashed the two boys. Tibi then started throwing the eggs to the ground, then the birds would rather go after them, so the boys could flee. The birds could gouge their eyes out if they stayed there, but they came home safe, though there was blood all over them."

Grandpa, having finished the story, glared at us with an eye. Perhaps he wanted to know if there were any signs of comprehension on our faces. I think there were because he smoothed his rough palm over each of our heads and said:

"All right, then go and have some mulberries. The best mulberries grow in front of Peter Petus's house, go and see it yourself."

I liked the offer, but Sanyika had objections:

"Grandfather, I was there yesterday afternoon, but uncle Peter had sent me off. I didn't know that mulberries were so dear in Újlak."

"Maybe he wants to feed his ducks with them," explained Grandpa. "There're white mulberries in old Endre Fábián's yard, go there then, your aunt Ilonka won't mind. There's also a swing there, and you can have a great time on it."

In the yard of Endre's family there all kinds of livestock. The gate is always open during the day, so that the small livestock, then the pigs and cattle could pass through it freely. It is also open to children, so no one has to ask for permission for using the swing. The rope of the swing is attached to a horizontally extending old branch of a large white mulberry tree, so there is no need to worry about its breaking down. Right now, a little girl from the street, Vira, is sitting on it, guided from behind by Icuka who sings a sweet little song that goes with the swing's sway:

A swing-and-sway,
Two swing-and-sways,
Three swing-and-sways,
...ten swing-and-sways,
Ten, ten, ten,
Clear water in the pan.
What's the clear water for?
For my little pina-for.
What's my pina-for for?
To grow in it pumpkins.
What's the pumpkin for?
To feed a pig.
What's a pig for?
To get its fat out.
What's the fat for?
To grease the pram.
What's the pram for?
To shuffle the child.
What's the child for?
To have a use-less mouth.

And at this point, with the change of melody and the lengthening of the last two bars, the sway of the swing becomes much more dynamic:

Fly my girl as high as ko-ko,

Or even higher-and-higher than ko-ko!

For a little girl like Elvira that was enough swinging for the time being. The girls saw that we also wanted to swing, so they went away to let us swing.

I needed no help to get going, I learned to propel myself by swinging my two legs rhythmically and forcefully forwards and then backwards. Sanyika stood sideways at first, then, coming up behind me he began to pick mulberries from a branch of the mulberry tree hanging down low, and I leaned back on the seat and talked to him cheerfully. I found it very interesting that, in reverse, the wind catching in my hair made my hair-roots tingle, and in swinging back I enjoyed feeling my hair with the same tingle to readjust itself.

Behind the swing, for about a metre and a half or two metres there was a large shed where, among other things, was a decommissioned agricultural machine, a sort of crop cleaner, possibly made during the Czech times, or even earlier. Its rotating part, a large metal cylinder with lots of small holes, was of some interest to us, but beyond that the whole structure seemed simple enough, built into a frame riveted from angle iron, which was also the supporting structure for the machine. With the more vigorous encouragement of my two legs, like a pendulum in accelerated motion, the swing flew beneath me with increasing momentum as long as it could. But I leaned backwards more than I should have done and hit my head against the metal frame of the machine like a bullet. If I hadn't bent so low, I would have caught the iron with my head or forehead, and then my skull would certainly have split, but this way the edge of the fork went right under my forehead, right into the bridge of my nose. The rhythm of the momentum was immediately broken, the swing stopped.

I don't even remember how I managed to stand up, but I fell forward from the seat, onto the ground, and for a few seconds I may have lost my consciousness. Anyway, I got up somehow and started to run home

without weeping or crying, but my eyes and face were flooded with blood and I was spinning around as if I had lost my head. "Oh, my God!" cried someone near me, and caught me in the arms and was running down the main street with me – seemingly for a long time. Then people were running around, wiping the blood from my eyes and face, and I was relieved because I could see with my eyes again. I lied like this for a few minutes, slightly relaxing, and then they sprinkled some powdered medicine on my crushed nose, put a swab on the wound, bandaged it or taped it, and then got me on my feet.

It was Juliska, the beautiful marriageable daughter of aunt Mariska, who took me in her arms and ran all the way with me so fast that she became almost breathless. After that, she just took me by hand and, relieved and without a word, she walked me home.

* * *

One evening, after I had been put to bed, my mother and father had a long conversation. Apart from the fact that they worked in different shifts, so we went to bed together as a rule on weekends, it would have been nothing special, but this conversation was about how to change our lives significantly. My mother, a little timidly at first, suggested that we move away from here and buy a small house at another place. At first my father was puzzled by the idea, but when my mother started to list the disadvantages of living with the parents – the impossible conditions, the shared household, the constant necessity to adapt – he nodded with increasing understanding, and after a few more arguments he agreed with her completely. "But to buy a house we need money, and we don't have any," tried my father to bring his spouse back to reality. At this mother lit the lamp, took out a worn leather wallet and opened and showed it to my father who couldn't hide his amazement.

"Where did you get it?"

"Do you remember when the boy had that problem and we had to take him to the dermatologist in Szőlős? Well, I didn't give the doctor the three hundred roubles I had got from you. I figured he needs it

not more than we do, so I didn't even take it out, and I've been saving up for three years. I put aside a hundred and fifty roubles from every salary. This is five thousand five hundred."

My father is silent, but his thoughts are spinning. Surely, compared to the five hundred roubles a month he earns, it's not a small sum. I can see on his face that he likes my mother's idea to save money, and now he tries to find out some way to make it even more effective.

"Maybe we will win at the next draw?" My mother's eyes light up, and it is perhaps my father only who understands that his wife is referring to the quarterly draws of the governmental loan bonds that are deducted from their salaries every month.

"You can wait for that. We've been collecting these bloody papers for eight years already, but none of them have ever been drawn."

"Maybe now?"

After a little more than a week, my father comes home with a newspaper, and in it, on half a page, there are numbers under each other. He came in time because my mother is at home, too, and she also wants to see the newspaper very much. She takes the bonds wrapped in yellowed newspapers from under the sheets in the wardrobe. They take one bond after the other and compare the numbers on it with the identification numbers published in the newspaper. It's true that I'm beginning to take an interest in letters myself, but I don't yet understand this operation. My attention is captured by the pictures on the bonds only – the pretty colourful steam engines, tractors, combine harvesters, smokestacks and aeroplanes. I like them very much. I could spend hours looking at some of them. But my guess is that I will see one of the hundred-rouble bonds in my father's hand not for long, because he held it so hard as if he never wanted to let it go. He places it on the number-line of the newspaper once again, and pulls even my mother to it:

"If I can see well, both numbers are correct. But you too look at it, dear," says my father and his face is lighting up.

My short-sighted mother leans closer to the newspaper, and when she also identifies the numbers on the bond, raises herself up, stares at it and says only:

"Oh, my God, is it possible that we've won?"

"We have, and do you know how much? Precisely four thousand roubles."

That was the moment in our life when the intention to buy a house became a topic of everyday conversation. My father became interested in houses for sale and often sat down with my mother to count money. Their eyes burned feverishly, and at the end sweats of concern appeared on my father's forehead because money was not yet enough. He stood up and paced the room nervously from wall to wall. Then they had a thought. They decided not to wait for years again, but would try something that was forbidden, but which was likely to bring some modest profit.

My mother, via a former girlfriend, started buying coloured leathers from the shoe factory in Szőllős, and sold them at home with a little extra charge. She could take two or three at a time without attracting attention, because that was all she could hide in her handbag. She usually brought home finer calf and goatskins, and sold them to her customers in Újlak who were mostly shoemakers in and around the town. These men too went on with their activity illegally as illicit artisans, thus were able to obtain raw material only secretly. They could be satisfied with the quality and price of the leathers, because they soon became regulars, and the pace of orders was such that my mother could hardly keep up with the demand. My father, while pleased with the increase in wealth, was constantly warning her to be careful. If a customer showed up after dark or early in the morning, the street and the house had to be watched carefully to make sure they were not caught by the police, but there was also reason to fear the voluntary informers. If word got out that a raid was about to take place, or that a cobbler had already been arrested, my father would quickly dispose of the few items of stock, but after a week or two things would usually fall into place and the trade would continue, because it would have been foolish to give up such a good income voluntarily.

The dream my mother and father built together was fulfilled in just a few months, in September1957. I think that was the beginning of

the happiest period of our lives. The tidy little house was close by, just a hundred and fifty metres from the parental nest, on the same Market Square where I was born.

And that is why it was useful that I always watched the words of the adults. I learnt well relatively early in my life that the great flood of 1933 washed away dozens of family houses and public buildings in Újlak. The Czechs with the future in mind built water resistant wooden houses of varying sizes and for different purposes in several parts of the town to replace those that had collapsed. At least this way the Tisza, the source of much terror, tears and sorrow, could play its part in the reconstruction. It repented for its earlier crimes by transporting loads of timber cut down for the construction on its own back from the Verhovina to Újlak. It was the river, too, that covered the travel expenses of the famous house-building gaffers who arrived on rafts themselves with handsaws, wide-mouthed hatchets and various sharp axes. It is true that the man of the lowlands is both industrious and skillful, there is no need to tell him anything twice. When it comes to building, he knows how to work with tile, adobe, brick, and stone, but he never built houses from logs. But the hominy devouring architects in moccasins had this craft in their fingertips and next to the spacious buildings of the gendarmerie barracks, on the more elevated parts of the Market Square they built seven other family houses which were considered absolutely neat at that time. Five along the road leading to the cemetery and two at the end of two other vacant plots. Well, it was now in this prestigious area that the Szikszó house was for sale. Two of its elderly residents, father and daughter, were just about to resettle in Hungary, and my father came to an understanding with them very quickly.

On a warm September or early October afternoon, I set off myself to take a closer look at our future house. I opened the little gate a little, then, not knowing what it was that made me distressed, I stopped. What if I meet strangers, what will I say why I came? But I couldn't turn back. I entered, shyly and uncertainly, and the sight of the neat and tidy courtyard made me forget to say even hello, and I just looked

shy and puzzled. To my relief, uncle Szikszó and aunt Mariska were busy in the yard, they recognized me and came smiling to me. They took me by the hand and led me inside. I could not help admiring the rose bushes along the little paved walkway, and then my eyes caught sight of the desirable fruit of the vineyard. Aunt Mariska plucked a fragrant bunch of Isabella grapes and handed it to me. "Taste it, eat it, it's yours already."

We moved in at the end of October, so one day was just enough to take everything over. A light little wardrobe, a single plank bed, two feather-bedding pillows, a table, a tablecloth, a few chairs were all my mother's dowry, but we managed to save a few hundred roubles from the house purchase, and she could still buy an enamel stove from Ungvár and a brand-new glass kitchen cabinet. Only its colour was against my mother's taste, but my uncle Árpi, my mother's brother, a carpenter-to-be, said he could give it another colour in half a day. We had enough furniture to furnish one room, but the other two ones were left empty because we had nothing to put there. They were called the Empty House for long. So, everything that we did not use or simply was underfoot was put there, in the Empty House. But there was room for more than all this, including my shaved wicker cradle in which I spent the first year of my life. But my parents didn't take it to our new house, leaving it there to decay, as if they had wanted to send the message to the world that our little family would no longer need it.

And to make things less complicated, my mother left the sewing shop in Szöllős and came home to work for the shoemakers. Here she could work in one shift with my father, but thus I became another problem. The morning shift started at five, because the Kremlin tower clock chimed already seven, and for Soviet people that was the time to clock-in. So, they woke me up at four in the morning, wrapped me in a wool-blanket and took me to Grandma. 'It's great that we are so close to each-other,' they said, and they were right. And that's how I remained my grandmother's son. My grandmother treated me as her own son, and as I grew older and cleverer, she entrusted me with different little tasks more and more often to have some use of me.

"Please, Lacika, go to Anti Vass and fetch me a spool of white thread. Ask for mark forty."

She couldn't have found a better courier than me, because she just handed me the money and I was back there with the thread in ten minutes. But then it occurred to her that she also needed black thread, but this time mark thirty, don't you forget, she said, and I was happy to fulfil the new task. The Anti Vass shop always stored all kinds of goods as a rule if they were not in the red. It happened once that there was a lady with marcel wave before me in the queue and she wanted to buy some butter.

"Unfortunately, my dear, I can't give you any. We've run out of it," said uncle Anti and spread his arms.

"Then how on earth are we going to catch up with America, Uncle Anti," a man in his thirties joined the conversation, "if we have run out of butter?"

"My friend, we left America behind a long time ago already, because we ate all of it!" was the catchy and ideologically appropriate reply.

On other occasions Grandma entrusted me with more serious shopping tasks.

"Here you are the money and the net-bag, Lacika, and please fetch from Burek a kilogram of pork, but mind you, it must not be fatty. Tell him I need it for stew (pörkölt)."

The butcher Alberger Burek was much further away than Anti Vas Anti's shop, but for my good and nimble feet that was no distance. Uncle Burek, a butcher of short stature, strong belly and perfectly smooth head, counted the money I had given him when it was my turn, and then threw a piece of meat on the shiny plate of the Berkel scale. The delicate pointer was still dancing merrily, but he reached for the goods, wrapped them in a piece of newspaper and handed them to me. Grandmother, when she had removed the soggy and stinky scraps of newspaper, angrily slammed the greasy, bloody piece of meat on the table, then picked it up again, turned it over, and, as the other side was as uninviting as the former, she slammed it again, then picked it up, slammed it down, and kept saying this in an angry and irritated voice:

"What am I supposed to do with this? What am I supposed?"

Then she stopped speaking and looked at me:

"Go back and tell that son of a bitch that if he can't give me a better piece of meat than that, then he should return the money."

Oh, my God, why did she want me to do that? She did not love me. Because if she loved me a little bit more, she would never have put me in this awkward, shameful situation. If I had once taken the goods, how can I now claim that I had not looked at them properly, and that this is not what I wanted?

Uncle Burek was just with another customer when I entered his shop with sadness on my face, but he noticed me at once and kept an eye on me all the time. When sniffing I put the meat down in front of him, he asked:

"What did your grandmother say she wanted?'

""Stew (pörkölt)," I replied, still sniffling but relieved.

"Well, let me see," he turned around at the counter and cut a piece off from the shining gammons hanging on a hook. The scales showed a few extra dekagrams, but he didn't reach for the knife, just waved and handed it to me in a piece of snow-white crispy greaseproof paper: "Tell your people at home that let adults come to buy meat next time."

* * *

"Dearest," my grandmother says to my grandfather a little more irritated this time than her usual way, "you'd better throw some fresh weed to the cow next time. Last night it came home from the pasture with a pretty flat belly, so it's no wonder that the pail was not full. You ought to know that you have to put more bait into the manger because the cow gives milk if it is well fed only."

Grandfather pushed up the peaked cap which he never took off and kept on his head even in summer, and scratching his head he turned his eyes to the little after-grass of alfalfa suffering from the drought in the arable patch at the end of the garden. His intention was to leave it for hay, but he could cut a row or two out of it if he had to after all, but on closer inspection he found it sparse and gave up on the idea.

"Let it get stronger," he said, or thought he said, and then he took out the sickle, and taking the canvas under his arm started to go, but then his eyes caught mine. "Here we go! Do you want to come too?" I didn't know where he was going, but it can't be bad where he was heading, I thought to myself, and nodded. "Then wait, don't come empty handed, you can help me to carry something," he looked at my face to see whether I was willing. I didn't know what I could carry for him, but my grandfather was a smart man and he must know, so I nodded again, and he untied a sack with something from the door of the shed and put it straight on my shoulder. Following him as close as possible I went out the small door, and then we turned to the right towards the Jewish cemetery. After leaving the cemetery we reached the pasture and I already knew that the Tisza was our destination. But after crossing the embankment, we continued our way not along the river, but along its tributary, to the Priest's Tisza.

The Priest's Tisza, as I later learnt from hearsay, was once the church's fishpond, but by this time it became a muddy swamp-like area. On its dark surface, extensive patches of water lilies floated with their large leaves, and among them, also floating on the water, were stunningly beautiful white and pink flowers. I couldn't go any further, I was mesmerized by what I saw. My grandfather was already a few metres from me going resolutely to his destination, but now stopped and looked backward to see why I was not going after him. He knew that I loved flowers very much and wanted to get each one that was available, so he warned me not to be so greedy. "You can't pick those anyway. You'd sink in the mud, and maybe the leeches would also sting you to death if you went in there to get them. They are only nice where they grow, they'll wither in your hands." I had no reason to doubt my grandfather's words, so I went, my feet carried me, but my eyes could stop looking at the lilies only when we had left the backwater and reached the large cornfields.

"Well, here we are. Note this is the Bóbik. Here until the Communists took away, we had a pretty large plot that was all ours, but it was always advisable to plant only corn here, for the Tisza used

to run over its banks even in early summer, and if there was wheat on the plot, it would be flooded. But for the corn, if it didn't stay long in it, water could be even useful, because good mud was fertilizer. We used to have so much corn and beans here that we could hardly take them all home."

And while he was thus teaching me, he laid the canvas on one side of the field, took the sickle, and, moving between the rows, began to cut the fine tender grass. With his left hand he grabbed a knee high bunch and slid the sickle under it with the other. 'That's the way to do it,' he said then ordered me to pick up the knots and place them on the canvas. When I had gathered a pile that covered the whole canvas so that the edges were no longer visible, I sat down on top of it, selected a nice healthy stalk, and carefully pulled the outer leaf off the stem. What was food for Tündér was play for me, I thought, and then I took it in my mouth and began to suck gently on the tightly clinging edges of the leaf. The air sucked out vibrated the membrane-thin edges, bringing forth a perfect birdcall. If I hastened it, the song was merry; if I prolonged it, it was like a lark's plaintive cry. Even Grandfather got a kick out of it, he liked the trick, then he stopped turning the sickle and started to bundle the cut-off grass. He found the opposite corners of the canvas, and to make the knot tight, he knelt on the rolled-up knot, and only then tied it tight. He did the same with the other two corners of the canvas, and when he straightened up, he kicked the sides of the bundle with his foot. He found it quite hard, and said it was at least forty kilograms. That didn't mean much to me, my imagination was more moved by the shape of the bundle. 'It's like a big cake filled with cottage cheese,' I said to myself, 'but it will be Tündér that will tell us what it is like.' 'Well,' grandfather turned to me, 'let's make a bundle for you too.' The sickle once again started to move, and soon my little bundle was also ready. Grandfather then hid the sharp tool in the greenish corner of his own bundle, then bending his knees he lifted with some difficulty the stuffed canvas over his head to his shoulder. After shaking it a little to balance, he reached down with one hand to help me take my little bundle on my back.

"God, help me!" It was a familiar plea that left his lips and he set off on the smoothly trodden path towards home. At first, I wobbled under the load, my unsteadily placed feet kept entangling all the time, but after eight or ten steps I followed the old man confidently. After crossing the embankment, we passed by the pits where Terka Gobány and one of her daughters were making stacks of the dried loams.

"Mr. Fábián!" the old woman, whose face was tanned to black by the sun, said to my grandfather. "Didn't yah save some good tobacco for me per chance?"

"Come into my house if you happen to pass by, and we'll see."

"I'll see you tomorrow then, Mr. Fábián, and God bless you!"

Even if I hadn't had canvas over my head, I would have passed Terka with my head low down, because my conscience was not clear. But how could it be when not so long ago Sanyika and I got hold of her tobacco box, sprinkled pepper into it, moreover salted its sticky brown content. I don't think that the old gypsy woman could suck the small galls made from this mass with pleasure, but she never complained, never mentioned it to Grandpa. And how respectfully she speaks to Grandfather even now! It's certain that I'll never do anything like that again, and I'll tell that to Sanyika too.

And as I'm vowing so in my mind, I don't notice that Grandpa slows down, then stops for a rest, and I almost hit him from behind. 'Let's take a breather,' he says, 'this bundle is not grown to our backs.' I take the weight off my shoulders and sit down on it, as he tells me to. 'It will be noon by the time we get home,' he remarks, gazing into the distance. I look at him, and he notices the question on my face. 'Look,' he says placing his cane into the cleft of the road. 'If the shadow points exactly to the peak of the Salánki mountain, it is twelve o'clock sharp. Now it is a little before it.' This is such a simple and understandable observation drawn from century old experience that I just nod as if I had been born with this knowledge. But let's keep moving, because our stomach also indicates that time flies. And as we turn left at the corner of the Jakab family house, we can see our home already and hear the sound of the noon bell coming from the radio through the open kitchen window.

One of Grandmother's large pancakes with cottage cheese would have been enough for my queasy stomach, but my blessed grandmother talked me into a second one. With that, I made my way leisurely towards the garden, to the haphazardly built shack under the big apple tree. It serves its purpose, provides shade and peace for those who seek it, but it's not very strong: a windstorm would easily blow it to pieces. But let us not always think of bad things only. Here, for example, is this great pancake, with a few raisins in its yellowish filling, truly deserving of a dignified passing away from this world. I take it into my hiding place in the shack and make it disappear with pleasure in no time.

But how good it is that I have this little shelter here! I saw several similar one- or two-person huts of field-guards before, and it just occurred to me that I also needed one. It wasn't an impossible dream after all, but I had to get Grandpa's support and, above all, his expertise. He agreed easily, as soon as he understood what I wanted, but it took him a whole morning to build the shack because we had to go to the Tisza bank to do it. Grandfather measured and sawed the willow poles with forked ends for the frame, and I collected willow rods and reed for the roof. There was still last year's hay in the barn for a comfortable bed, and Grandma provided the little shack with a washed-out rag rug. So, I had a little hut of my own. I always went straight there if I wanted privacy. It was the one summer Paradise of my childhood.

That afternoon, however, something disturbed the tranquillity of my little Paradise, leaving a nasty wound in my sensitive soul that was difficult to heal. Nothing happened, except that a boy from the street, younger than me, Gyuszi's brother, found out that Aunt Erzsi had left the house for some official matter, and that her grandson Béluka was not at home either. In the famous garden, it happened in July or early August I think, the finest fruits were ripening, and while I was just looking longingly at the beautiful pears and the apple trees with their juicy sweetness, this good-for-nothing kid, who looked like quite a handful as my grandmother said, squeezed his way through the rickety fence from the other side of the garden and began to shake the branches of the pear tree with the tip of a rod for knocking down the

pieces. I can't remember what thoughts I had in my mind, but I had to come out of my shack at hearing the fall of the heavy ripe fruits. Endre looked at me indifferently, not particularly embarrassed. As if nothing had happened, he came over to the fence and offered me two of his first prey, two magnificent pears. 'But don't tell it aunt Erzsi!' he warned me, and I nodded in agreement. And indeed, why should I, for without those few pears the old woman would not become poorer after all.

But hardly half an hour passed, I could hardly enjoy the reward of my silence bought so damn cheaply, when I heard loud women's hassle from the street. I ran up to the courtyard, and from there I could see very well that Aunt Erzsi was gesticulating with great fervour, indignantly explaining something to my mother, who was coming home from the factory, but I could not understand a word she said because of the distance. Not even suspecting the worst, I headed for the little gate through which my mother had just entered. Her eyes flashed foreboding evil, and with a sudden anger she headed straight for me, her hand rising and swinging as she went. Her palm slapped my face at least four or five times. She struck me with such speed and force that my arms, raised in defence, remained in the air, while I heard her say. 'Am I raising a thief? Don't you get enough at home that you steal from others'!? Is it that what your shack is for, to scheme evil things?' Then I suddenly realized what had happened. That deceitful Endre, who, perhaps in spite of my word of honour feared my treachery, therefore changed his mind to divert suspicion of his own little villainy by accusing me with stealing pears from the old woman who was just then trudging home through the fairground. And after that I defended myself in vain, sobbing into my mother's face that it wasn't me, that it was Endre who had knocked down the pears with a rod, she did not even hear, let alone understand my words.

If innocence had a banner at least for once, just for this single occasion, and I could have raised it above my head, then perhaps between two blows if she had looked at me, then, perhaps, my mother's anger would have dissipated somewhat. But no... Tired of my beating she stopped for a moment, and when she came around, something must

have hurt her too, for she burst into tears and started for the kitchen. Seeing this, and forgetting my offence, I began to worry for her. Was I, after all, guilty of causing her such suffering unwittingly? And there I remained, blubbering, standing on two legs, feeling miserable and defeated with a dreadful bitterness in my throat.

* * *

Oh, my salad years! Why is it that everything that I lived through in those years comes to my mind so easily? For instance, I still always remember that no one could come and go as smoothly as Aunt Boriska, my grandfather's sister-in-law, with her dark shawl over her shoulders. She came like a spirit. I was spooning the bread soaked in my coffee with milk that I, as a rule, had for breakfast, and only then noticed that she was already there and sat down. Only then she said 'good mawnin' and got to the point of what she wanted to say. She mentioned, as a matter of fact, that if she hadn't had enough to do so far, now she would, for old Mrs. Pákh fell ill, and as she was not likely to get up again, someone would have to look after her. And as Aunt Berta had no closer kin than her, it could only be understandably her.

"After burying her husband at the end of the summer, there was the flood and she had no one to live or care for, thus someone had to be there with her. She said she would leave everything for the person who would look after her provided she would be satisfied with him/her. I have the time, then why not take it on, eh?

"You'll soon be needed at home too," Grandma joins in the conversation. "Then I hear you've taken on bedlinen washing in the bee keeper training school for the kids. Of course, it's only once a month, but fifteen or twenty sets are pretty much, and now winter is coming, and it's not easy to dry them, and they need ironing too. You'll have lots of something to do, dear."

She responded: "I may say thanks to her, this Eli, indeed for this washing business. She organized things so that I get it, because she's a

bookkeeper there or something, but she says no need to worry because they'll pay for it well."

"But I also hear," Grandmother continued, "that your daughter Eli is pregnant again, she'll have to mother a child soon, so she can expect a little help from you too. Don't you think so, Boris?"

"Well, what's true is true. It looks like this this guy Jani is always ready for a little hanky-panky with my daughter, and she is not very much against that either. 'My daughter,' I told Eli the other day, 'it beats me why you're in such a hurry to bring into the world that next little one. Couldn't it wait after all?' But I told my son-in-law that I understood why he was so keen on that little something, because this happened to others as well, consequently they persist in ploughing, but I don't think that it is absolutely necessary to sow then too."

I had no idea what Aunt Boriska had lumped together about that ploughing and sowing, for as far as I knew uncle Jani didn't even have a horse or a plough, but Grandma must have understood, because she said something to her sister-in-law that even if she had become as old as that, she should know that seeds could get into the earth unintentionally too.

"I see, I'm no fool," says Aunt Boriska, "but this is the third already. Don't you think that you have to raise'em too? It's not the same world as it was in our time. Then one child raised the other, and now... they send them to creches or nurseries, I don't know... cribs are no longer enough, the child needs a baby buggy. What's that little dough my son-in-law brings home from the Tiszastroy?[18] It's a good that he likes fishing, and the fish he catches is added to the food bill.

"And you, Boris, don't cast anything up against them!" Grandpa joins the conversation sitting at the stove. "Did you forget that you gave birth to eight children? If a child wants to come, let him come, God gives him, it cannot be refused. Your people are young, let them love each other And your daughter also has a job, she didn't learn in vain. Her pay also adds to the family budget, eh? And if Mrs. Pákh

[18] Tiszastroy - Russian acronym, the name of the state company established for the construction and repair of the Tisza-river dams.

kicks the bucket, methinks she will sooner or later, you'll end up rich, for there is no other house like hers in Újlak. It was still built by Balog, and there was no better mason than him in the whole vicinity.

"Oh yes, that's true, it's a nice big fine house, not as huddled as these wooden houses all over the street."

"Well, as a matter of fact," says Grandfather and raises his eyebrows, "they're not as bad as that. I can still recollect how finely those Hutsul[19] masters worked. He would just stand over that big log, then would cut span-long pieces into its side with his chiselling axe, then he would take off what was not needed and then he would turn right to the other end. After this its surface was so smooth and even, as if it had been cut with a saw. And I just brought them a good piece of bacon and some milk, and put all the good woodchips I could carry on the cart. I made a good deal, and so did they," said Grandpa contented.

But now all of a sudden my grandfather's facial muscles start twitching, and with them his moustache. He can laugh so quietly that anyone who isn't looking at him doesn't notice. Only a low, ragged hiss escapes his lips, but Grandmother, although sitting with her back to him, notices.

"What's that, old man? Isn't it your angel that you can see?"

"No, I was just thinking of the old Hutsul," he said, and continued to laugh.

"Is it the one that wanted to be king?"

"Yes," responded the old man. "There he was sitting on the log after he had had his lunch, stretched himself nicely then started daydreaming. 'If I was just a king once!' The others looked at him and wanted to know what then would be. And then he continued: *'I to eat butter, drink grease. Every mawnin' I to put on a new moccasin.'* That was how he said it," laughed grandfather trying to imitate the old Hutsul's broken Hungarian speech. He laughed again and added for

[19] The Hutsuls are a Ruthenian (Rusin) ethnic group living in the western part of Ukraine, in the Hutsul region (also known as Hutsulland) in the present-day Trascarpathian, Ivano-Frankivsk and Chernyivtsi regions of Ukraine. Some of its communities also live in the Maramures region of present-day Romania. Their number is about 30 000.

an explanation: "He thought the king was like them just a bit more well-to-do."

The serenity of the kitchen was disturbed by Jánoska, my aunt Gizi's lesser son running in from the yard.

"Grandmother!" he started complaining. "Uncle Jani is teasing me."

"Why? What did he say?"

He said 'Jancsika, the pot is full with *puliszka*'[20]!"

"And couldn't you tell him that then he could lick it out?"

But Jánoska had no time to follow the advice, because Uncle Jani was standing in the doorway already.

"Regards," he said grimly. "I was just looking for you, Mama," he said to Aunt Boriska, who was his mother-in-law. "How come I didn't guess at once that you were in here gossiping. Well, come on home, because Eli has to go to the Green Cross, and I'm about to leave to work, so you can look after the little girl, because there's no one to leave her with."

"Well, can you see? That's all I am good for," said the old woman and started after her son-in-law.

As soon as the field was clear, Grandpa took out his neat meerschaum pipe that he got from his son Kalman and filled it well from the pig's bladder bag. It had place for at least twice as much cut tobacco as the faded earthen pipe, which was full of holes from all the picking. But as soon as he reached for the match, I began to fidget, because this curiosity for lighting a fire for days got the better of me.

"Grandfather," I said, suddenly, "give me the match, and let me light it this time."

The old man was astonished at my determination, and though he was incredulous, hesitant, or perhaps doubting my ability in lighting the fire, he handed me the box, and then watched me out of the corner of his eye to see if I could manage. I had seen this operation just enough times to set it alight with a single movement and hold the matchstick

[20] Puliszka means hominy, mash or samp in dialectal Hungarian.

to the pipe's mouth. And when the upward flame struck the tobacco on the first puff and caught it on the second, my grandfather took the burning matchstick from me with a nod of approval.

"All right, now give it to me, because you'll burn your hand," he warned me and reached for the matchbox, but I was already trembling with the irresistible urge to keep it.

"Let me have the matches with me this time, and if you want to light the pipe again, grandpa, I'll have them and I'll light it for you. Is that all right, grandpa?"

What could the old man do but shrug his shoulders and leave it to me, but I wish he hadn't, for the devil was already putting the pieces of my plan together. A pipe is only a pipe, it will not catch fire, but how does a well-dried corn-stalk burn in the garden? But I won't let it all burn, I'll just light it a little, because I want to see it catch fire, and then I'll put it out quickly. And at an opportune moment, as if I had something to do in the hall, I slipped out of the house, and, looking back and forth, I strode down into the garden, straight to the cobs around the big Jonathan apple tree. It was a cool, dry autumn, and the leaves rattled at the slightest breeze. When I opened the box, I looked back again to see if anyone had followed me. Relieved, I took out a matchstick and drew it along the edge of the box. It sparked and caught fire, the flame igniting the dry leaves of the cobs. I think I trembled with delight for the first few seconds, but when I decided that enough was enough and it should be extinguished, I was no longer in control of the seemingly overpowering flames. I watched helplessly and alarmed as the fire devoured the winter feed of our cows, and the sudden heat made me jump backwards, frightened.

Grandmother soon discovered the fire through the glass door of the kitchen, and she was the first to rush into the garden, but her eyes and arms were already cursing the sky. My grandfather hurried after her with a cane, sloshing water in a bucket, and the neighbours ran after him: aunt Boriska, uncle Zsiga, aunt Mariska, Eli and Jóska. The bucket and the chain went down quickly into the well, and the water pots passed from hand to hand. Someone sent the sheaves flying with

a stake, but there was not much left to save. There was nothing left to extinguish, and no one cared for the apple tree's trunk, which was catching fire and smouldering, for all eyes were on me.

"Margit, at least whup-ass him well with a stick!" aunt Mariska encouraged my grandmother.

"No, I won't touch him, he'll get what is due from his father when he gets back from the factory!"

At the end of the morning shift, my father ran through the Market Square as if he knew what he was coming to. He didn't even come into the house, ran down to the garden and, after looking around the crime scene, headed straight for me, who was standing in the porch waiting for my fate. He said nothing, but unbuckled the frayed belt of his trousers from his waist, looked me reproachfully in the eye, and raised the instrument of punishment above his head. What could I do but flee to him, hugging his legs over his knees, and guiltily awaiting the comeuppance that I merited? I could not have counted more than three lashes, even if I had been at school, and I had forgotten the searing pain and the red marks caused by the strap. But when he bent down to hug me, and hot tears fell from his eyes onto my cheeks, I could only fall down in crying. This was my real punishment.

* * *

I am up at six even today, as if I had to rush to work, whereas my bed would not come apart under me if I stayed in it for an hour more. The consoling great situation is that I have the whole morning free. Five or six hours of rest is enough for me, if I sleep more than that I just find it harder to wake up. So, I'm off to the bathroom, then to the kitchen. I turn on the radio to learn what's going on in the world, then I make coffee. We're so used to this little stimulant that the day probably wouldn't start without it. I also boil half a litre of milk, pour half the coffee in it, sweeten it and take it to my mother for breakfast. On the way, I run into the little shop by the house and buy two crispy croissants because they go with the fragrant latte. After only a few minutes, I'm in front of her door,

which we lock for the night, because you never know: she might wander off again. Anyone who has to knows that the key is on a nail on the post of the porch near the door, and strangers have no business being there.

"Is that you?" she asks as she turns to the light shining towards her as I open the door.

"Good morning, Mum. Yes, it's me. I've brought you your breakfast."

She rises slightly on the bed, props herself up on one elbow, and looks for her glasses on the chair beside the bed. She clings to them out of habit, she can't see too much more with them on either. Sooner or later, she'll forget that, too, just like she forgot the cigarettes.

"What have you brought this time?" she asks me sitting up on the bed.

"You'll see if you taste it. You'll like it, I can tell you that, you won't take it away from your mouth like the cabbage noodles. Can you feel its aroma? Isn't it fine?"

"I don't know,' she says quite confused, and as soon as she sees me sitting next to her on the bed, she opens her mouth like a little hatchling when its mother gives it a good bite.

She eagerly swallows her first spoonful of latte, her face shows that she likes it very much. I'm not surprised. Over the last few decades, her body become accustomed enough to caffeine to welcome fresh, boiled milk enriched with aromatic Omnia, which bears no resemblance to the barley and chicory brews once consumed as coffee. I put the next spoonful into her mouth with a large piece of soggy croissant, and when she swallowed, I ask again:

"Well, Mummy, did you manage to discover what your breakfast was this morning?"

"Little scissors."

"Now, now, nonsense. Don't you know what you're eating?"

"Oh, what did I say?" she begins to explain her blunder as if she herself were annoyed by what she has just said, but now wanted to correct it:

"Thimble... No... needle," she says, naming the props of her former trade, and she touches her forehead nervously, showing that she is now completely confused.

I question her no more, I just feed her, nourish her body, perhaps it gets strong enough to realize one day that it's too early to give up. Her hand was six weeks in plaster and during that time she forgot what it was for. She refuses to take up the mugs and spoons, but she can hold on with it to something very well. If she feels comfortable in the tub, if she doesn't want to get out yet, she can grip the rim. But now she wants to say something.

"The dirty bucket," she says turning her head into the direction she wanted me to look. This is the name given by the old women of the village to the bucket, which is no longer fit for any other purpose, and which they use as a chamber pot because it is not pleasant to go out to the outhouse at the back of the yard at night.

"There's poo in it," she adds quietly and with a wink.

"Do you mean shit?" I ask in a slightly raised voice.

"Poo!" she corrects me strongly offended because as an educated man I use improper language.

"Small children poo," I argue in favour of the legitimacy of my choice of the word. "For adults it is named with the word I just gave to the end product of digestion." Seeing that there's no one to argue with, she shrugs:

"I don't care."

I take the bucket out, empty it into the pit behind the toilet, then put kindling and chopped wood in a basket with ears, and build a fire in the whitewashed brick stove. The dry kindling catches fire easily, the wood soon starts to crackle, and in a quarter of an hour the bricks are giving off the heat. But there is no winter without cold weather, it's only February, and although the weather is getting warmer, snow and frost may still come in plenty. So, I have to add more wood to the fire to make the simple little stove do its duty. Then I sit down, at least for half an hour, and start talking to my mother, who is suffering from increasing cerebral atherosclerosis, to make her exercise her mind a little.

"Mum," I begin very seriously, as if asking for her help in clarifying some important question, "I can't recollect, but you, Mum must know..."

"What?" she turns her time-worn withered face to me questioningly.

"'Well, could you tell me please that when my uncles Árpád and Kálmán came to visit us for ten days or two weeks, how we managed to have enough space in the two rooms of the little house in Market Square? There were five of us with the old man and woman, then three or four guests, eight or more people in all, and we had –if I remember it well – at most four beds in the small house with its kitchenette."

"Oh, my boy, you have the brains of a canary if you don't remember that. The men slept in the hay in the barn, and we huddled together in the house somehow. Later, when we had a separate house with two rooms, the guests slept at our place."

As a matter of fact, I could have thought of that myself if I'd racked my brains a little, but at least I can see that my mother's head is in order as far as older memories are concerned. I'll give it another try anyway. A series of images from the very early days of my childhood now came up in my memory. I'm still so small that my father carries me in his arms, and we arrive at the health centre in the Roykó mansion and enter from the garden. It is summer, and from my father's lap I can see that the branches of the carob trees are already covered with knife-length thorns. We come to an arcaded corridor with round columns through the courtyard, and beyond that to a room where we are seated in a high chair. A woman in a white coat emerges from somewhere, rubs some pungent liquid on my head and starts pulling at my hair with tweezers. I ask Mum what it was.

"Oh, I'm not surprised you don't remember that," she says. "You were hardly more than a year and a half old at the time." And here she stops, raises her left hand to her face, shows that she has no wedding ring on her finger.

"Did you take it off?" I ask. "Where did you put it?"

"If I knew," she says, annoyed.

But she does remember something, for she is lifting the quilt and groping everywhere nervously. Then she sits up on the bed quite independently, scans the other end and in a crease in the crumpled sheet she notices a small gold ring that became quite narrow due to

its wearing for so long. She used to lose it as a young woman, too. Sometimes, while washing, it slipped off her flimsy finger and she spilled the symbol of her marriage onto the yard. We searched feverishly for it, she promised even ice cream to the one who found it. I didn't get much of that ice cream, but it is not important anymore. What counts is that she found it then, and she still has it.

"Now will you tell me at last what was the problem with me then?" I try to give the thread of our earlier conversation back to her, but she just looks at me as if she were a few bricks shy of a load.

Well, yes. Now she was in a totally different mindset, so I have to help her.

"It was this something with my hair. Why did they have to pick it with tweezers when I was that little?"

"Because you had fungus on your head. Your grandfather worked with calves back then. When he came home from the farm, he'd sit you in his lap and he'd probably stroke your head, that's how you might get it. Your hair would fall out in flecks that were as large as five kopek coins... but then it grew out again."

Yes, now I remember, I had thick, very thick hair when I was young. It wouldn't obey the comb or the scissors. My father used to say "you have wire hair, my boy." It would be nice if at least the stems of that dark hair would grow out again! Now my head is like a moon, with a greyish-white belt around it.

But something comes into my mind again. Something happened to my wife and me at the beginning of our life together, which – from wherever we look at it – is still unresolved. It is a real mystery, which I will now make one last attempt to unravel. If I don't get an answer now, I never will.

"Mum!" I call her again.

"Did you say something?" she turns her head to me.

"Yes, I did," I reply. She looks with her eyes that look strange and blurred without the glasses at me.

"Mum, can you remember our wedding day? I ask her the question that I always wanted to ask.

"Oh, that was a very long time ago!"

"Yes, so it was. But what I would like to know very much is that who of those present at dinner had smeared Klára's wedding dress with blood? Do you remember?"

Her face twitched at the question.

"Yes, I do," she replied.

"Who did it and why?" I go on questioning her. There weren't many of us there, we checked everyone, no one had any bleeding injuries, so it couldn't have been an accident. Someone had smeared it deliberately, with a malicious intent to do harm. The contamination was blood, that was certain. After all, we could get it out of the material in the bathroom in five minutes. Paint would have not come off. If you know something, tell me, so that I could learn at last who could be so wicked."

But my mother turned to the wall, covering her eyes with her palms as usual, as if she were going to sleep.

"Very well, if you do not want to answer, do not answer. Your silence is enough for me," I say resigned to my failure. "If you know anything, you'll take it with you, I guess."

"Sure," comes the answer off the top of her teeth. "And soon."

"I see. I'll bring you lunch today," I say instead of just saying goodbye. Yes, I am a sore loser again. I mean someone who complains, becomes upset, or otherwise reacts very negatively when fails or loses at something competitive. But still before putting my hand on the doorknob, I turn on the radio for her to have something to listen to and to show that I'm not angry with her.

On the street, I meet Juliska Vas, the erstwhile elementary school teacher. She turns her eyes sharply on me, signalling in advance that I should stop for a few words.

"How is your Mama?" she asks emphatically, with the stress on the Mama, and it is clear from the look in her eyes that she waits not for the usual reassuring answer, but for a more detailed report.

"Not so well," I reply briefly. "It's her memory that's failing her more and more."

She comes quite close to me, looks deep into my eyes, and gives me a nice piece of advice:

"It's because she misses the family," she tells me quietly.

Juliska Vas is probably right. If someone does, my mother really knows how maddening loneliness can be, I'm sure that she knows very well where the root of the trouble is to be found.

* * *

The wind carries loud songs from the military barracks in the evenings. "Now they are going to have dinner, and they have to sing as they go," explains someone whom we know, but not so well. I can't understand why, because none of us sings before or after dinner as a matter of fact. And as I'm racking my brains on it, another platoon joins in and starts singing, but it is already a different song and tune, and the boots beat the dust on the ground as they march also to a different rhythm. It seems to me as if the two chants collide in the darkness and try to tear each other to pieces with the intent to penetrate into the other's medium. I must have heard these singings for a long time, but it's only quite recently that I've started to pay attention to the increasingly familiar marching songs, and suddenly I find that I involuntarily form my mouth and tongue to pronounce the Russian word I managed to catch. The singing parade lasts for five or ten minutes at the most, and then it stops and everything is quiet again. Grandmother tidies up around the sewing machine, puts the washed-up dishes in the bottom of the credenza, but the day is not over yet.

In a corner of the cowshed, separated by stakes, two huge ganders were kept alone for some time. During the day they mostly live on water, but in the evening, they are obliged to have a hearty meal whether they like it or not. Grandfather takes one of them in his arms, brings it into the kitchen and lays it at the feet of Grandmother, who is now sitting on a stool prepared for stuffing. She lifts her two old, varicose legs with difficulty, puts them over the goose's back and, with slow, deliberate movements, takes charge of it. A battered aluminium bowl of soaked

corn drizzled with a little oil stands near her. The oil is just to make the corn slide down more easily in the goose's throat, but a handful of crushed charcoal is also added to aid digestion. Grandmother reaches calmly and steadily to the goose's head with her left hand, with two fingers opens its big beak with which it has frightened me so many times this summer, and with the other hand begins to feed the goose through the open mouth. If the goose isn't particularly keen on having its dinner, Grandma uses her thumb to help the food down, then closes the wide yellow beak, lifts it up if she sees fit to aid swallowing, and starts feeding again. Sometimes, of course, the unwanted food may get stuck somewhere halfway. In this case the goose's neck is treated with slowly massaging the corn towards the maw, but this is a real sign of the fact that the poor animal is fed up. Somehow, the goose says no just like a human: it shakes its head bitterly. All right, if it is full, it can go back to its place. Grandmother lifts her leg off the goose, it wobbles to its feet, shakes itself, and in order to say thanks to Grandma for the unwanted hospitality, spills a generous greyish-green puddle in the back of the kitchen floor. It can be forgiven for that, but it must not happen to the precious food. That's why after the meal the goose has to wear a necktie, so that it doesn't throw up the excess. Grandfather lays two smoothened corn leaves next to each-other, twists them into a very clever tying device, and ties it around the goose's neck. The tie cuts perhaps too deep in the delicate neck, for the goose is panting for breath. To save it from suffocation, Grandfather loosens something on the tie, then lifts the goose up on his lap again and carries it to the fresh straw bed. While he returns with the other one, we decide the fate of the geese in the house.

"I've been stuffing them for three weeks already," Grandma says. "Let's see if they can stand that for another three. I reckon the one that's gaining weight faster may be slaughtered in early November, and the one that can still be fattened I give to my sister Bözsi for her name day, when she goes to see her daughter. Her sister Róza will prepare it for them."

"We'll manage to do something with these two, I'm not afraid of that, but I remember that Mamuka once stuffed ten at a time," my father, who was moodily fiddling with the radio, joins the conversation.

"That was different. In those days, Mrs Zeisler ordered two geese in a month, and Mrs Klein also. Then we didn't stuff them for ourselves, but for them. True, we had some ourselves also, and we ate them for a week, but nothing is so delicious let me tell you as fried goose liver.

My father nods at it in approval, but the door opens and Grandpa brings the other goose.

"Well, we won't wait for that," says my father and puts his warm palm on my head. "We go home, because we have our own house now, don't we, my boy?"

Instead of answering, I just look up at him and nod my head in consent, because I can also feel that it is pretty late. Once we reach the street, there is singing again, but this time it is not the soldiers. It is the boys and girls, the Gypsy Street dwellers returning home from the sawmill and the shoe factory. They sing because they feel it impossible to go silently along the dark footpath that runs under the two cemeteries. Maybe they sing because they are afraid of the spirits who come up from their graves and walk in the street in the dark. But if they believe in the existence of bad spirits, can they frighten away those who are up to something no good? This is hard to believe, for the slow lulling melody of the *Podmoskovniye vechera* rather lures than frightens them away. Or do they just encourage themselves? Or do they just want to show off with their good voices? One thing is true: the above-mentioned melody sounds not better from the gramophone in the club at the soldiers' Saturday dances than from these people. And if it were accompanied by an accordion to boot, the performance would be absolutely perfect...

In the morning, I am again in my grandparents' house, and I notice Béluka hammering something on the veranda of their house for some time. The noise is not too loud and not disturbing at all, sometimes it even stops, but after a while I can hear the sound of the rail used as an anvil again. There is metallic clinking and dancing on the surface of the steel rail he's been working on, but the sound of it is a colourless rattle, nothing more, compared to that of the anvil. I only listened for a few minutes, but with each passing minute I become more and

more curious, because for street urchins like me, it is always worthy of attention what Béluka does. So, I go to his place. I can open the rickety gate with difficulty, because its post tilts toward the street and I need all my strength to open it, but the good thing is that it closes on its own. I stop on the stairs and squint at the boy, for I must first find out how he takes to my approach. For some reason, I feel it's important that he would not send me away. Béluka straightens up from his squatting position, smudges the thick snot that descended on his upper lip with the back of his hand, and looks at me.

"If you came here to help me, I don't mind. Wash them – and he squints with his eye at the cans at his feet – in this bucket and dry them up."

I'm happy, maybe even my eyes light up, that I was given a task, and as I crouch down by the smeared greasy tin cans, I start having a rough idea of what Béluka is up to. Well, I can see that he has already taken the tins apart with scissors, cut the edges off the folds, and is using the hammer on the anvil to level the useful material. But I notice something else, too: the dismantled and also straightened parts of a battered little toy car. And as I wash and dry up the cans waiting for their turn with a cloth, I watch the work with one eye. Now it turns out that the dismantled factory car is a model for the new one that Béluka is in the process of manufacturing. He presses the parts of the original model onto the shiny tin sheet, like Grandma does with the patterns, draws a well-sharpened nail around them, cuts out the windows and gaps with a bolt cutter, and then marks the lines of the bends to be made. He then cuts out the resulting shape with scissors, taking care to cut the small tabs that will join the elements together. Both the cabin and the nose, or bonnet, of the car are in two parts. The cargo area, or crate, is relatively easier to prepare, but the frame is much more difficult to build. Béluka makes the parts from strips of tin folded rigidly into a bevel rule-like shape, and by late afternoon it turns out that they also have to be riveted together. Once the ladder-like frame is complete, the axle, sawed from two bicycle spokes, will fit into it, the nose section, the cabin and the box will be mounted on, and it looks as if the car is

almost finished, only its wheels are missing. But they are also arranged, and Béluka has already made a tool for this purpose. This is a 25.4 mm diameter iron tube with sharply ground ends. He places this on a worn rubber sole, which he has previously laid on a section of logs he has set up, and with a single hammer blow cuts out the first regular round, and then the rest as the material yields. But these wheels are not yet finished, the treads must in fact be serrated, and he performs this finishing touch with a razor blade.

The little car is finished, and all that's missing is the paintwork to make it look like it was made in a toy factory. But the Béla models, because of the many variants that later appear among the ones that children living around the Market Square possess, remain unpainted.

At the beginning of winter all the shiny cans disappear from all the rubbish dumps in the village, but the greatest treasure trove is still near the soldiers' kitchen. From here, Aunt Erzsi's grandson brings home three or even five litre tomato or marmalade cans, and we, five or six of us, are happy to help him in any way we can. But in addition to the easily cut and shaped tin, other materials are also accumulating: from the increasingly abundant litter of the shoe factory God orders high-quality rubber waste for the production of wheels, so that we no longer have to cut the worn torn soles of ragged and dirty shoes. The tools will be much improved and refined between now and spring, but the small models of vans and lorries will also be of ever higher quality and variety. The cabs have a steering wheel and seat, the doors open, Béla fits a bumper to the front of the nose section, and above the bumper, as is well-known, there are ball shaped buttons imitating headlights. Their maker also takes care to make the models look like the ZIS-s[21] one sees in real life, and like the American-made Studebakers that we've seen in war movies only.

By early March, Béla had come up with a neat little model of a fire engine. True, he didn't paint it red either, but his ladder, which is meticulously made, can be rotated and doubled in length. This was

[21] ZIS - acronym (Závod Imenyi Sztáliná - product of the car factory bearing Stalin's name).

not made after a pattern. I also had a small fire engine with a flywheel from Hungary, but it had no movable ladder, Béla developed it entirely on his own. But that was not all: he will soon be building an excavator with a rotating cab and a bucket on articulated arms that can be operated by means of interlocking wire gears. A second small handle can be used to lift the bucket up and move it in the desired direction, while a third can be used to open the bottom of the bucket to empty it. Soon he will start making a crawler tractor, and he will do it on his own design, because he has never seen a similar factory model. I remember that for cutting out the tiny elements of the tracked tractor in series, because they had to be exactly the same, he had a friend make a pattern from knife steel, and he also worked out the way the links were joined. But he only made a single model, as the chain links were not successful enough. Their only fault was that they kept slipping off the guide wheel when rolling, but apart from that, all the other mechanisms, every single car, worked perfectly.

As soon as the spring winds had dried up the mud, we tied ropes to the vehicles and took them to the streets to show them to the real world. There wasn't a passer-by who didn't stop for a word or two of appreciation. Word of Béla's talent and deft hand soon spread. One day, after all the rumours the school principal came to see him in person. I was not present, but I was told that he stood and gazed at the many small masterpieces, not expecting such a big selection. Then he chose a superbly crafted car from the set and took it with him. "They're going to send it to Szöllős," he said, "for an exhibition." And so it was that the perpetually scolded, shamed, truant teenager became the pride of the school. But Béla was not the least bit impressed. He was much more impressed by the fact that all the children of the Market Square were competing for his friendship, eager to listen to his every word, happy to be part of his team.

One of the customs at the Market Square was that a parent, if he/she wished to see his/her child, would stand in front of the house and shout the child's name two or three times, loudly and in a well-drawn-out voice. It was customary to answer and to hurry home as

quickly as possible, for it was easily imaginable for the child who had escaped from parental attention to find a cane or a belt waiting for him at home. Perhaps that's why Béla didn't call the boys by name, as they were out in the open from dawn till dusk anyway. The call was a particular sound signal, which, as the popular Tarzan films of the time proved, was a great success. But it was not the familiar o-áááááá-o-áááááá-o-áááááá, but a more original cry, something like this: Ipááá-lipáááá-líííííííííííí! It didn't make any sense, and we didn't care, because nobody cared. Very soon, we accepted it, and whenever we heard it, we gathered in the courtyard of Béla. But Aunt Erzsi was not always in the mood to see us, and on such occasions just with a wink of the eye she could send home anybody. If this happened, we waited in the street, and at Béla's first word we took the small cars entrusted to our care, lined up, and at the signal, set off for the town on the smooth, asphalt pavement. There, with a faster pace, a terrible rattle and an almost endless roar of "Ipáááá-lipáááá-líííííííííííí!", we marched along the main street to the Roykó drugstore, and then turned back. After such an adventure on a Saturday afternoon, one of our family's well-wishers, but I think it was my Aunt Magda, told my mother that she had seen me there in the Béluka gang.

When, not suspecting anything, I went home at around dusk, Irmi, my mother's friend from Szöllős, was also there, but my mother's intention was not in the least deterred by her presence, and directed her first anger at me: "Is that why I send you to your grandmother, is that what you learn there, am I supposed to be always ashamed because of you, eh?" And she hit me. The slap was not into the side of my face, which wouldn't have been so humiliating, but she struck me with her fan-like spread fingers, and hit me right between my eyes, so that I felt the tips of each finger separately. "Well, what were you doing in town, speak!" But I didn't speak, for how was I supposed to know that what I did in the company of the other children was a blatant sin in my mother's mind? 'Grown-ups are so incomprehensible,' I thought, but gritted my teeth, and my guts quivered like hell. My behaviour surprised my mother most of all, because she did not expect that, and

helpless she burst out in tears herself. 'Oh, what a bitch of a mother you have!" She turned her anger against herself, and after a little hesitation, she left the house. Irmi beckoned me to her, and, laying her hand on my head, said only this:

"Well, aren't you a tough boy, eh? But you're right, a man should never cry."

* * *

The sky has been crying for the third day already, and the heavens turned grey in this bitter listlessness. The hens perch under the pent-roof, our rooster, the loudmouth king of the dunghill dejectedly stares under the gutter as its proud tail feathers are drooping hopelessly.

"I wouldn't mind if it stopped for a couple of days," says grandpa indignantly, "so that I could hoe that little maize at least for it is not visible at all in the weeds."

"It's no use waiting for that, my dear brother-in-law," says Aunt Boriska, "because on Medard's day it didn't just rain, but poured, so just wait patiently for another forty days."

"We would be all fools to think that superstition is true! Everything will happen so as the Almighty wills," declared wisely Grandpa's sister-in-law.

And she was right. Soon a small wind rose, and when it picked up strength, it dislodged the clouds which looked as if they wanted to settle down for long, then drove and herded them on like a sheep dog minds an unruly flock. The sky became blue in patches, the sun showed its face in these clear spots, and people began to smile again. I too would like to be free of the captivity imposed on me by the rain, but for the moment I do not know where to go or what to do.

But help comes quickly. One hears Béla's voice from the street – lipááá-lipááá-líííííííííí! – calling the team to come together. On hearing this the boys leave the sleepy atmosphere of the stale and tight rooms and head for the street, where most likely very important events are waiting for them. It is not yet known what they will be, but it is certain that it

would be a crime to miss it. So thought also the boys in the street who lined up along the ditch that runs through the square and is dry for most of the year, watching with interest the water coming down in abundance from the Jewish cemetery. The rainwater from the higher suburban areas of the settlement found the former riverbed this time too, and tries to run away on an escape route under the stone bridge of the highway towards the culvert built into the embankment of the Tisza.

But let it not try so much, because we're going to stop it for a while. Béla is just supposed to order, and lo, the spades and hoes come in a jiffy.

"You-boy-hoe-spade-go-fetch," shouts Béla, and one of the boys immediately rushes to fetch the hoes and spades, because everybody understands Béla's slang worked out for special occasions.

I can also understand it, almost immediately, because I just need to get the idea, the technique of how to put together or invert words or syllables, because that's how it works, but I can't speak it yet, I need more practice. But when I hear Ci-la, I am all ears, because it's me who is being addressed, and I try to answer in that language, too. "La-bé, Ko-jan!", I turn to Béla and Janko, and then, with effort and stumbling, I provide them with further pieces of information which is a sweat for the time being.

"Stone-bricks, stone-bricks!" comes the next order, and we all take the nearby stones and rubble bricks to Béla. After half an hour, the dam line is marked by small and large crop stones and bricks. The water still flows over them, but the foundation is ready, and now everyone can see where the earth, gravel and sand are needed. And there are no interruptions, the material arrives at a rapid pace, the dam is built, and the flow of the wide stream slows and then stops. It would be all right if no more water came, but it does, the new supply comes in, and after a few minutes the stream widens, skirts the obstacle laterally, and still moves towards its destination. Clearly, the dam needs raising, so let another layer of earth, sand and gravel come, and then a row of turf bricks on top of it all. Janko uses a shovel to cut the dense turf into an almost regular square, then he uses the shovel to cut it below and

it can already be taken to the top of the dam. Soon a grassy path of a good half metre leads across the stream, and people returning from the morning shift at the shoe factory can walk across it comfortably. Some people praise our efforts, but those heading towards the town from the Jewish cemetery have to tiptoe on the footpath at the fence of Mrs Németi's house, because the water, which was thus restrained, went there. More passers-by arrive, but the rising water makes them spring back. A woman with pillows and eiderdowns, her name's Nina says Janko, when she looks around more carefully for a drier path, discovers our activity, which is far from being blessed and suddenly bursts out in a fit of rage:

"Let lice eat your necks, you filthy kids, don't you have anything better to do? Is that why your father brought you up, to make a mockery of the poor?"

Then Dandi arrives with his cart, says something to the woman, who first puts her bag with those pillows and eiderdowns in the cart, and then gets up on it herself. Then Dandi takes the reins in his hands and directs the whole cart at us. We hardly have any time to flinch, he stops his horse right in front of us, then jumps off the seat, brandishing his strap whip over our heads and swears foully. We jump away from his whip and watch from a fair distance as he wades into the water in his knee-high rubber boots and destroys the results of our hard work. First, the largest stone is kicked out of its place, and the water rushes through the opening in a powerful jet. There is no need to do more. The force of the flow moves the turf bricks, and the water itself destroys all the other parts of the dam. But somehow, no one among us is sad, because to see the water rushing by so forcefully is a pleasure in itself. True, it does not last long. The group disperses, and I head for the lake by the church.

There are also four or five children doing something diligently by the water. They float paper boats and boats with paper sails, which (the boats) are made from thin pieces of plank and have pointed noses. Vitya, Sura's son, however, dazzles the company with a very special little boat, whose operating principle I understood only years later. Around

the middle of the light little tin tub, of the size of a palm only, there was a flat tank with perhaps a two-millimetre-high head, from which two small pipes ran towards the stern. The end of one was slightly bent and plunged into the water, the other, that looked like an exhaust pipe, ended above the surface. Under the tank a stub of a candle was stuck to the bottom, which, when lit, heated the tank, which sucked in water, and the heated water, turning to steam, escaped through the other pipe, pushing the boat forward. The small boat, once released, with a nice steady putt-putt crossed the not-so-small duck pond without changing direction.

Suddenly I have the urge for a small boat like this, and I run all the way home. My father, after work and dinner, lies on the couch, maybe even asleep a little, but I wake him up.

"I want a small boat like Vitya's," I say stubbornly. "I want it."

"All right, you'll have it," my father mutters, turning in towards the wall.

But I insist.

"I want a small boat. I want it too! Let me have it!"

"Let me rest, please, I'm tired."

Seeing my father's indifference, I was desperate. A feeling that this was the end of the world has overcome me and I thought that I would perhaps die if I don't get that little steamer. For I had never asked for anything before, and this was the first time I have ever wanted anything so badly. My heart began to ache, sort of, my guts began to shake, and I fell a crying loudly. My father jumped up from the couch, grabbed his coat and hat and ran away angrily. An hour, two, maybe three passed before he came back. He handed me a small parcel wrapped in coarse wrapping paper, which I began to open, excited and curious. Out of the package emerged a small rubber boat in red and blue, prettier in appearance than Vitya's, but what it could do on the water had to be yet revealed. I rushed to the ditch to try it out, and I didn't mind that the street was all empty and so the boys couldn't see me. The water was also calm, with only a slight current at the middle of the stream, but it was not strong enough to carry away my little boat. I crouched

down and put it gently on the water. It turned to the right, then to the left, and then, wobbling precariously, started to float forward. But the water, seeping in at the loose joints in the small hull, tipped it sideways, and when it reached the current it struck a protruding stone and fell over the side and sank. I went after it, shook the water out of it, and went home downcast.

"Go, Lacika, and take a look who's coming!" Grandma orders.

I take to my heels and shake a leg, but at the well I see only Vomnadtsat, the old beggar, shuffling in. I let him in, he nods and goes. He stops in front of the kitchen door, takes off his hat, bows his head and makes the sign of the cross, then begins his unintelligible speech. This is where his name came from, that is, for want of a better idea we named him Vomnadtsat, because we thought this was the word or part of the word sounding like that in his Rousin plea that we heard. Grandmother stands up, takes out a loaf of bread wrapped in a clean kerchief from the credenza, cuts off a piece and hands it to me, so that I could learn what mercy is and practised it. The beggar bows and accepts the alms, while I can admire on his bald head the bump, the size of a potato, the origin of which the boys on the street and I fantasised about long enough. The old man thanks us, turns around, swaying slightly, and all we can hear is the sound of his cane in the gravel-strewn yard. Then Mrs. Badalovich says:

"Margit, why do you give this old fool that bread? He throws it to the dogs. I saw that, not once..."

Grandmother gives her a reproachful look, and replies

"Come on, Ilon, aren't we humans?"

"Now I don't really understand Grandma. What would we be if we were not humans? And if we are, why do we need to emphasise that? Or does Aunt Ilon think that a Hutsul is not a human? And as I search for the truth, I remember a story my mother told me not so long ago. In it, the youngest prince shared his dinner with the little mouse, even though the mouse is not human. Yes, I got it. A good man can't let an animal starve, so how can he let another man starve, even if he is a mouse? How good is it that I found that out for myself! Perhaps

even my face flushed with joy. Or is it just me who feels so? Anyway, I ran after Vomnadtsat to see if the neighbours also think he is human?

The old man is just coming down from Aunt Erzsi's house with five or six pieces of fragrant muscatel plums in his hat. Oh, how delicious they are, I know. They ripen just after the early cherries and only grow in Aunt Erzsi's garden here. The beggar notices me staring at him, and to keep me from coveting the plums, he holds out his hat to me encouragingly. I don't dare touch it, I shyly say no. Then the old man shakes his head, mutters something, and goes on his way. He is greeted by an angry barking of dogs in the courtyard of Gyula Rozmán, so he doesn't even try to go in, but the door of the Mariska aunts' house is open and they never let anyone leave empty-handed. I only have to keep an eye on the entrance for a few minutes, and I can see that Vomnadtsat is just coming down the stairs, contentedly munching on some delicious scones. I am pleased to see his satisfaction, and I am also satisfied. We, the Market Square people are all humans.

But can I call myself human? What kind of a child is he that disturbs his father in his well-deserved rest? He was out for hours to get that wretched little boat for me, which, as it turned out, was not good for anything. I would deserve to be made to stand in the corner for that, and I couldn't say a word against it.

* * *

We did not have time to enjoy all the conveniences of our new home properly even when around mid-October we had a visitor. His name was Záboly, as I will have found out later. He spoke at length with my father, talking him into something, and it was about an hour and a half before my father said yes. Then they got up from the table and went into the empty room. The visitor ran his eyes around the floor, the walls, decided that the place was great, and left. My mother was at first perplexed and helpless, but then was relieved and said it would be all right. I mean the eighty roubles that the old man and woman, uncle Varga and aunt Varga would pay for the room as tenants. They wanted to leave their own

house, I think in retrospect, because they were in their son-in-law's way. My father's monthly earnings at that time must have been about six or seven hundred roubles. Eighty roubles meant that time that one could purchase ten kilo sugar, three kilo meat, and bread for a whole month. So, we were looking forward to getting really rich.

Moving the two old people took not more than an afternoon. They brought in a bed, a table, two stools, a dark-coloured nightstand, then some clothes, bedding and small kitchen items from the cart, and then uncle Varga and his thin soft-spoken spouse started to arrange their new home. The old man, who was in his seventies, a bit plump and balding, and whose name was also his trade,[22] first put his low workbench under the window overlooking the street. He put a few worn-out lasts, scraps of leather, a hammer, a few tins loaded with wooden and metal nails, a fistful of pitch, a ball of yarn on its top, and to the right, on nails driven in the wall in a horizontal row he hung pliers and various knives. As soon as he had arranged his workplace, he began to rummage in a baby-sized package wrapped in an old blanket, and he took out a cuckoo-clock. He looked for as prestigious a place as possible for it, and then he chose the area above the workbench. After hammering the nail into the wall, he stretched to hang the old timepiece in its place, but he must have done something wrong because the antique mechanism fell with a crash onto the workbench. "Oh, damn!" he said, and this strange curse that slipped out of his mouth surprised me, but didn't shock me at all, because the old cobbler became all of a sudden so pitiful and helpless as he bent over the cuckoo-clock that went to pieces so ingloriously...

Hardly had three days passed when the first customer came to the old cobbler. Poor soul, I wish she hadn't! Bobi, our watchdog that we inherited from the Szikszós was always on the chain, but it could have smelt the poverty of the huts, and it must have made it very nervous. Róza Birkés's elder daughter had just passed the dog, when standing on its two legs Bobi rushed at the girl biting her all over the place.

[22] Varga means cobbler, shoemaker in Hungarian.

I was standing in the gateway, and as I never thought that our dog was capable of doing this, I was simply paralysed by what I saw. Uncle Varga, on hearing the girl's bitter wailings ran out of the house and with a stick he had picked up on the way frightened the frenzied animal back. It immediately retreated into its hutch, from where it growled at the old man's threatening fist and angry curses.

"Mr. Fábián, this cannot go on!" were the words which uncle Varga greeted my father with who was coming back from work. "If this dog stays here, if it keeps scaring away all my customers, how shall I make a living, tell me please?"

My father, who had already learnt the bad news on his way home, was sweating at the thought of having to explain the affair with the dog to the local authorities. If the Birkéses go to the *komitat* [23] to complain, and they certainly would, then he would have to do everything, he perhaps thought at that moment, to appease the old man.

"No need to worry, uncle Béla," my father said looking guiltily into the old man's eye. "'I promise to make this dog disappear from here in a week. If no other solution is possible, I'll have it shot."

Anyway, it was not necessary to have Bobi shot. I think he promised everything to Tom, Dick and Harry just to get rid of the dangerous beast. Then one afternoon my godfather Gyula, who was a butcher, came, put a collar on Bobi and took it away. "Well, at least that beast will have a cushy time there," said old Varga somewhat assuaged. And he was right which was confirmed by the good news that came of the dog. So, we were also relieved, and the customers were now safe to come in on each-other's heels to see the old cobbler.

The old man piled up considerable heaps of worn, dirty shoes beside him as a rule. Some of them had to have three patches sewn on to keep the wearer's bunion from getting visible, but then the soles and heels had to be also trimmed with a patch at least. When the repair was done, he covered the whole shoe with a blinding black, quick-drying paint, and having it on his palm like some elegant gift handed it to

[23] Komitat- executive committee of the town's council.

his owner. Here you are, as good as a new pair. Those who were more demanding did not take footwear with torn tops to the master, because it was already for the fire. On the other hand, if the sole of a shoe that still kept its shape was worn down to paper-thin but the owner didn't want to tear it off completely, he generously ordered half soling. For such a customer, Uncle Varga would select the right leather for the sole on the spot. He tapped and bent it to prove its suitability and quality, and finally asked: "Will it do?"

It would have been all very well if the winter hadn't been so hard, besides it turned out to be a very long one too. The two old men's rooms had to be kept warm by a brick stove, but without a decent fire it was impossible. So, the old man put a sack on his shoulders, wrapped a rag on his footwear in order not to slip on the icy road, and set off somewhere at a guess. A nearby resident took kohlrabi that got rotten and dried-up in his dry cellar to the street garbage, and the old man found it and began to pick it up. He shook off the snow off one, and, as if considering whether it was dry enough, raised it to his eyes and examined each one separately.

"What are you sorting there, uncle Béla?" asked Mrs. Kékesi coming out of the neighbouring house.

"Hornbeams," answered the old man with a broad grin holding the piece in his hand. Did he grin because he was happy? Hardly. More plausible that he was just miserable and embarrassed. Other times he'd get a heap of straw somewhere, and he couldn't have wished for a better firelighter. It would set on fire the rags, useless footwear, any combustible rubbish, and the brick-stove would become all merry due to that and emitted warmth all over the place. During the day they were still getting on well enough, but at night, when the stove also rested, they must have been shivering a lot, since because of their age and their waning spirit they could no longer warm each other.

Then I could hear, there were rumours, that the old man started smelling strongly of urine which was not easy to bear. But if only that were all! Soon it turned out that the straw sack was to blame, it was swarming with fleas. And the old man was getting just weaker and

weaker, staying in bed more and more, with no chance of recovering from his physical deterioration. This sort of thing gets known, of course. The customers became fewer and fewer, and then they stopped coming altogether. No wonder that the rent was not paid. My dad at first grumbled when my mum got upset about the matter, but then he made up his mind somehow and went to see the old man's grown-up children. They came immediately the next day. They brought a sack of firewood, heated the room up, gave their father a bath, put him into a clean bed, but they didn't stay with him. Well, it was quite understandable, all people have families, their own business to do, and everyone has their own problems. But we experienced it closely, we could hear with our own ears at night that the old uncle Varga coughed more and more, and then, when he had stopped coughing for a while, he would croak and spit blood for half an hour. Spring that was approaching did not help him either, although the dear sunshine did its best to cheer him up. I now think that he himself did not really want to recover, and was stubborn enough to give everything up without any resistance. I happened to witness him once staring up at the sky for a long time. I think he was trying to address the Almighty in heaven, but the try remained just a try. But then he did start to speak. I could not understand his words, but I know that his head was jerking with nerves as he raised his right arm in a fury and threatened the heaven with his feeble fist. His sleeve was curled back to his elbow, and his arm was white as death.

Towards the end of February, there were still frosts at night, but the second half of March was much better. The good winds and the blessed warmth of the sun soon made the mud disappear, and by the end of the month it was almost pleasant to walk barefoot. At the same time, the situation in the house was horrible. The sudden warmth made the fleas so many that the women swept the hungry bloodsuckers off their bare feet with the palms of their hands. On the advice of one of our neighbours, my mother brought flea powder and sprinkled it all over uncle Varga's straw sack and the area around his bed, and then sprinkled it also on the floor of our room and under the beds. But this

drove the little beasts so wild that I also felt their sting although they had never loved my blood before, and our cat, in order to show that it also suffered, jumped up and meowed finicking at every bite. But we soon got over that, too.

In the afternoons the old man would venture out into the yard, take his little dirty saddle with him and sit on it. It was obvious that he enjoyed the warmth of the sun, but as soon as he saw my father, his whole mood turned sombre. He did not wait to be reminded of his debt, it must have weighed on his soul anyway, so he said it himself:

"Don't worry, Mr. Fábján, I do not forget that I owe you. Soon I'll pay you, and you'll see, everybody."

"I know, uncle Béla, I trust you," replied my father with feigned calmness, for he no longer took the old man's vows seriously.

But on that very day, just as it was getting dark, Uncle Varga took his cane and shuffled out the front door. He went out as if he were only curious to see the world outside, but half an hour passed, then an hour and a half, at this time he usually was in bed already, and the old man was still not in the house. Aunt Mariska came over to our place wringing her hands, her eyes full of worry and fear:

"Oh, help me God, what shall I do, where could he have gone? Please help me, dear Mr. Fábján, if you believe in God, please give me a piece of advice who to turn to, for I have a bad feeling."

"Come on, aunt Varga," my father began to reassure the old woman,"'he will turn up, you'll see. He must have gone to see his daughter, for he hasn't seen her for weeks. But it's also possible that he stayed there, so they put him to bed."

"You know that's what I can't imagine to happen. Nobody knows it better than me. He would never go to his daughter, never, once she could do this to us. He's prouder than that."

"All right, aunt Varga, I'll go out and take a look around here. After all I must find someone who saw him, a man by no means can disappear without leaving a trace."

So, my father went away looking for the old man wherever he could, he went to the Záboly house even, and it turned out that the old man

had been there. But he went in for a few minutes only to see them, then said goodbye and left, they thought, for home. When they heard that he was not at home, they were very upset and went to look for him, too. In vain. The next morning, however, someone came to tell them that they had found his boots and clothes in the Acacia row. The poor man thought perhaps that he no longer wanted them, but that someone might still use them. But the real turning point came on the third afternoon. Menyus Szilágyi, the unlucky fisherman was out at this time by the lake next to the Acacia row. His hook suddenly got stuck on something. At first, he thought it would be a nice big perch or pike, but then he curled his lips uncomprehendingly because the prey didn't take the line at all. But when it did, it was the old Varga's body that he pulled ashore.

Everyone was shocked by the news, and my father rushed to the scene without thinking. I knew the way to the Acacias well, so I went after him alone. There was already a dozen or so people there, including a militia man in a dark blue uniform with a folder in his hand, all standing around the bloated corpse. I stood a little further away, but I could see what I shouldn't have seen, and it didn't even occur to me that I could go nearer. It was so unbelievable, so unreal that the man who was always in pitchy black now was so white.

That night sleep refused to find me. I had this obsessive feeling that I was not alone in the room. Perhaps the spirit of uncle Varga is here to say goodbye to the house, or perhaps the Grim Reaper sent someone instead of Him. I tossed in my bed and kept all the time thinking until my heart was broken and I fell a cry because of the old cobbler's fate. I cried at first silently, but then my heart sank and began to sob loudly. My parents heard me, and, frightened to death, pushed the door open. The knowledge that I was no longer defenceless calmed me a little, but I couldn't answer the questions for another half a minute because of my blubbering. But after a while, gasping for breath, I spoke:

"If mum and dad get old... and they die one day... and I get very old and die... then... then who will bury me?"

My mother buried her face into her palms and started to cry loudly:

"Oh, Virgin Mother, how could such a thing ever occur to such a little boy like him?"

My father soothed her gently, then bent over me, sought my hand in the dim light, and when he felt the trembling in my body calm down, he spoke to me:

"You know, my boy, that will be not now, but a long time from now. You see, I am still very strong, I work and can take care of you for a long time still. The time will come of course when we will grow old and die, but you will be grown up and just as strong as we are now, and you will have a wife and children who will think of you when you are old, and when the time comes, they will bury you properly as it fits. But don't worry about that yet, there's still lots of things that will happen to you and with you in life. You'll see... you'll see, everything will be all right in the end."

My father's words had an effect at that very moment, and if there was some stray and violent fear in my heart so far, it disappeared immediately. How come it did not ever occur to me? But no problem, what is important is what daddy says because he knows everything... And now I also know. So, anyone can say anything after this, they can gibe at me, they can call me a lover of girls, a sissy devil, and I won't say no if anyone asks me if I have a lover. But one thing is sure: it won't be Klári Mikola. Or maybe her name will be Klári, but it will be a very different Klári. The youngest of my godmother's three daughters is the one I like most. She's two years older than me, but what does it matter? Those two years must be no disadvantage for a girl with such light brown, shining, shoulder-length beautiful curly hair.

* * *

For some time now, few younger men, otherwise not very busy with anything else, dicker with muslin shawls and silk stockings at the Market Square. Why not, if there's a chance to earn some easy money? The Russian soldiers going home from Austria bring dozens of fashion items that are only known by reputation here, and the new-

sprung dealers take them over and pass them on, because they have instinctively realised that finer merchandise is beginning to be popular here, too. Once or twice a week they knock at the door of houses where they suspect a young lady or a young girl lives, for what beauty would not crave for a little something that would make her even more beautiful? Excitedly they take it in their hands, open the little parcel, the size of a mere envelope, pull it gently over the back of their hand, and hold the stocking up to the light, their eyes shining with delight. One pair of stockings is body coloured or nude-stockings, the other has a slight shade of smoke, the third looks black at first glance but is magically translucent when pulled on the leg, and each is as light as breath. My dad buys at least two pairs, because one isn't worth much. They are very delicate wares, tear easily. It is enough to scratch it at a place carelessly and a hole appears and who knows when other pairs will be available again! But my father will also get a red, green and blue muslin scarf too, so that my mother's joy could be more complete. And a week later, when Senator, Nina's son, also comes in with a small stock of goods, my father briefly informs him that he needs nothing because he has just made a deal a few days ago. Senator, however, is not that sort of a lad you can just send off. Once he's in the house, he's got to make some business after all.

"Uncle Laci," reaches Senator into the inside pocket of his jacket, "you're an educated smart man. Wouldn't you like a fountain pen like this? It writes as smoothly and evenly as the finest pencil.

I have little idea of how to use a writing instrument, but as soon as Senator puts three neat little pens on the table, I think I wouldn't mind having one. My father just squints at them, but until he learns the price, he says nothing. He just picks one up at random. It is a dark green plastic pen with fine marble patterns and gold-coloured reinforcing rings where it can be unscrewed. Pulling off the cap, he sees a golden yellow tip inside.

"How much is it, son?

"Fifteen roubles, but just for you, uncle Laci."

"That's too much. But if you're satisfied with ten, I'll take it."

"This pen for ten roubles? Oh no! Give me a piece of paper," says the dealer in an irritated way, but while my father is looking for something, he picks up a newspaper from the bed and on a part with some white surface tests the writing instrument. With the same momentum of his hand he imitates writing and draws a wavy line, but the blue ink thickens visibly and smudges on the paper.

"Can you see? It's not even worth that, but if I had said ten, then let it be. I don't want to go back on my word"

"Okay, okay. Give me ten then even if I lose on it. And I'll never do business with you again, uncle Laci..."

So that's how our life was going on: with small events, quietly, and before we got bored, something else would always happen again. On one occasion, my father came home with the news that we were going to have tenants again, but this time by special order from above. The problem was, he explained, that not only soldiers were coming from Austria, who sold muslins and stockings, but military officers as well with wives and children. We must accept that they cannot be sent to barracks to live. The workers were summoned to a rally at the factory, and there a councilman tried to persuade all those who had more living space than was absolutely necessary to share their house with soldier families for six to eight months. That's all the council can really do, and then the council will pay some rent for them, which also counts after all.

We had to give up the other room for a family of three. I don't remember their names, as we didn't have much opportunity to interact with them on an informal basis, but what stuck with me forever is that the head of the family first brought an object wrapped in a wool blanket into the house. There, after looking around, he took a framed portrait out of the blanket and tried to find a place for it on the wall opposite the window. I didn't like very much the picture of the man in the silver frame with his thick moustache, whose piercing eyes, it seemed to me, followed every move of those who were in the room. However, the captain, as my father called him, was fond of him much more than me. If he came home drunk, he could stand in front of it for half an hour. It must have been his house-spirit, for he would sometimes talk to him,

and I once caught him kissing the portrait weeping. But the Russian officer had still more frightening habits than this.

On one occasion he brought home a strange, small suitcase-like device, some kind of gramophone or something, and ceremoniously placed it on their table, opened the lid, then placed a black disk on it and wound it up with a small handle. Then he turned something on, the disc started spinning, and some majestic music flowed from the disk accompanied by a steady hiss. The captain then stood at attention and began to sing loudly, and looked sternly at my father, for he was not doing the same. My father, since he had been in a Stalinist forced labour camp, must have known the Soviet anthem, but he pretended to hear it for the first time and shook his head in denial. The Russian then reached for his revolver case, unloaded the gun on the table and looked at my father steely-eyed demanding him to sing more loudly. My mother drew me to her in fright, but I could not take my eyes off my father, who was then standing obediently, and singing la-la at the familiar tune in an attempt to please the officer. For our tenant, however, it was not enough. He stopped and then restarted the record, and repeated the first line syllable by syllable to my father (later I also had to learn this by heart): *So-yuz ne-roo-shi-miy res-poob-lik svo-bod-nikh...* And overcoming his bitterness my father repeated the syllables after the officer, singing it in broken Russian just in order to keep us out of trouble.

I can hardly recollect what the Russian woman was like, but the fragile little figure of their four- or five-year-old little daughter still shines through the decades. When her mother had to do something outside the house, she would escort Tanya to our room, and although we didn't understand each other's language, we could perfectly understand each-other in the joy of play. In this we were joined by our cheerful nice cat, that, although it was not customary to give a cat a name in those days, was nevertheless my most faithful companion, at least in the house. I considered it my absolute equal, and to make it see me as its equal in the game, I lay down on the floor covered with blankets and took up the position from which my cat used to attack

from the other corner of the kitchen. I crawled backwards as if I was very afraid of it, and the cat must have been interested, for it cowered close to the floor, watched me, measured the distance, and then with two deft leaps jumped to me and delivered a gentle slap on my head with its soft paw. We played this little show to introduce ourselves to the little girl, who laughed long and heartily.

That's how my father found us, in this intimate atmosphere, when he came home from the factory. He placed a bag of fruit-flavoured sweets in front of us, wrapped in newspaper, and was obviously pleased with his son, who easily took the Russian girl into his confidence. His joy could only have been more complete if the captain had been there to see this joyful, friendly togetherness. Did he really feel that way? As far as the little girl was concerned, I might say perhaps, but beyond that he played only a part, for he abhorred even the shadow of being suspected with being a dissident, and for the 'why' only he could have given an exhaustive answer. All I know is that, by the age of thirty, life had taught him, or rather forced him, to do this perfectly well, and to teach him the lesson clearly, it sent him signs. One, so that I didn't have to go back far in my memories, was delivered at that very afternoon.

We made ourselves a nest under the table with Tanya and then, lying down, leaning on one elbow, we began to pet the cat. We bent over it as if it were a child, and the animal purred contentedly in acceptance of our affection. But after a while I got bored, and with a tumble I rolled out from under the table. The little girl was delighted with my stunt, and indicated that she would try it herself. The somersault, however, went a little wrong, she finished on her side, and as she tried to get up, she suddenly began to cough and choke, and gasped for air as if she had not enough. 'The candy!' I exclaimed shocked, but my father jumped up already from the radio and slapped several times the child's back with his palm. For a brief moment, it seemed as if her windpipe had cleared, but the child suddenly gasped for air and sipped the candy back. She had another choking fit, but had no longer enough strength to cough. My father shook her by both shoulders, began to pat her back again, but it seemed in vain. The girl's eyes goggled, her neck and face began

to turn blue. My father cried desperately, shouted something like, "Oh Lord, don't let her die in my arms!," but then he took her up and ran out of the house with her, hoping to get help from the neighbours, perhaps from the Green Cross, but he slipped on the damp stairs and fell with the child. He landed on the stairs, but Tanya's little body rolled out of his arms to the last step. "My God, why do you punish me with this?! Must she be put in coffin with broken bones to boot?!" he burst out horrified, but by the time he got up holding and tapping his waist, the little girl was already sitting and showing the half-sucked, guilty piece of candy keeping it between her fingers.

Years later, my father still recalled this unpleasantly memorable, yet fortunate incident. "Only God could have been my witness that it was not me who caused her death, but then again which Soviet court would have asked just Him to testify?" he used to say.

* * *

I believe I have not mentioned yet that the Russian family had hardly left us when after a few weeks we got another tenant. It looks like my parents could not feel comfortable unless the room they called empty house was rented permanently. I can't exactly recollect where Margit Bilak, the slim-waisted pretty maiden came from, but I remember that she had no relatives in Újlak. At the same time, it is also certain that a happier life, a real spring-like cheerfulness moved into the house with her. She, like most of the people in Újlak, worked also in the shoe-factory, so she had no problems with paying the rent. I don't know when exactly it was, a few weeks, maybe two months after she had moved in, that a good looking handsome young man with fine manners came to visit her. I think his name was Vojtek, and was perhaps of Czech descent, like Margit, who seemed to write him letters before, and even called him a cousin. If he was not a cousin, then she simply wanted to avoid gossip, because their relationship seemed to me closer than that of between cousins. And indeed, it must have been, for he felt comfortable with Margit, and stayed with her for days, or perhaps

more than a week. One night, however, strange sounds, moans, and small and then more violent screams came through the locked door between the two rooms, but somehow, they did not scare me, for there was no alarm or fright in them. But they would not let me sleep, so I went over to my father and mother's bedside to get an explanation of the sticky situation and the screams I heard from Margit. "Pull the duvet on your head and sleep! Margit is all right," came the reassuring answer, so I returned to my bed, ignorantly, and did what my parents suggested. The next day, however, I decided to mention the nocturnal noises to Feri Fornosi, the boy who was a little older than me, but he only shrugged. "Maybe they fucked!" he replied in a matter of fact way and thus took the unworthy question off the agenda. But the strange word, still incomprehensible to me, continued to echo in my mind, and I kept racking my brains on its meaning ...

A few weeks ago, we got new neighbours on the right, a family moved into the wood-house of the same size and layout as ours. We were told they rented it. Husband and wife work in the shoe-factory, too, and we get acquainted quickly. Of their two children, the boy is the same age as me, his sister is perhaps a year and a half or two years younger. We are often together in the street and the yard, but the women meet in the house, either theirs or ours, and we have water from the drawing well in their yard as before. To make carrying water easier my father cranked a small door into the low fence between the two houses, thus making communication still more simple. Slowly we began to relate to each other as if we were one family. Aunt Manci, if she goes to the market or has something to do, brings the little girl over to play. Since my mother sometimes sat down at the sewing machine, we had no shortage of colourful pieces of fabric, so the child could play with a doll as much as she willed.

However, this kind of affair is not for me, my favourite hideaway is the space under the big oak table left behind by the Russians, where it's great to lie on the double layered rugs. But the cat is there too, and it, as a rule, huddles under my arm, and I like to admire the big oval black stamp on the bottom of the table-board which says: WIEN.

But I am not alone for long, because the little girl comes to me and curls by my side at once. She lies on her back next to me, rests her little head on my cushion and looks at the bottom of the table adjusting her position to allow me to stare at the ugly black stamp. The cat doesn't feel so comfortable with the two of us so close to each-other anymore, and prefers to go away. The little girl next to me is motionless, but her whole being radiates that we are now here like adults. Yes, that's exactly how I feel. There's something in me that is stirring, urging me to speak to her. I tilt my head towards her and she does the same, our foreheads meet, our breaths join. There's not a soul in the house but us. I decide to say something great, but my voice trembles when I speak:

"Iluska, shall we f...?"

The little girl sits up and bending over my face flashes her two beautiful blue eyes at me. Her mouth opens like a ripe cherry as she lets out a gasp of encouragement.

"Yeah," she says. Her face shines and her two hands slip under the elastic waistband of her teddy bear pants, pushes it down slightly and looks into my eyes questioningly: she wants me to go on.

Now I'm embarrassed, perhaps even blush, because I was in for a penny, but I have got not the slightest idea about how to be in for a pound. So, I think I'd better give it up for the time being. I put my head on the pillow, and pretend that I didn't say anything. Iluska's dear little face is full of disappointment. She stands up at once, picks her belongings, which are the scattered doll's clothes, and I am informed icily that she must be off.

Half an hour later, my mother arrived, followed by Margit and her friend, whom I had stored in my memory as Vojtek only. In Margit's hands was a heavy bag, and in it, packed in white linen cloth, a few kilos of sugar. They start preparing something excitedly, and a little later it becomes clear that they want to make pálinka. I, who is used to looking up at all kinds of factory-made products that were only available in shops, just gape at it, because in my grandmother's house such things like this were not even mentioned, and I had no idea that pálinka could be made at home. It looks like it could, and from now

on I don't take my eyes off Margit's boyfriend, because I can see that he came up with this idea and he is in charge of its execution. My mother brings in firewood from the pantry, makes fire in the stove, pours water into a large pot, and when it boils properly, the sugar is soaked in. Aunt Manci from next door, who is also well versed in this kind of practice, comes over to see what is all that hoo-ha, and it is already her who mixes the yeast in the syrup. "This," she says as an expert, "has to stay so for a few hours." But to make sure that they do not mope, they go out for a long walk. But first they must have a drink. Vodka sweetened with chocolates is brought from Margit's room, and everybody drinks. My mother, as she drinks, moves the fingers of her other hand contentedly in the air. This is her way of letting those around her know that she likes the drink.

Spring rages beyond the small door. Warm weather, sunshine and all. We head for the paved road, crossing it and descending the small slope beside the Burek house to the plane. Between the main road and the embankment, the cultivated plots of the shoe factory workers look dark. Between them, the plough left narrow paths, and we start walking in a line towards the embankment. There, spring flowers are blooming in the lush grass, and I can't pass by them heedlessly. Grandfather calls that flower with its milky stem and star-shaped petals on its branches a soap-flower, but I find the name too vulgar. I prefer to call it a starflower, it sounds much better. I crouch down and pluck it. Margit's friend, with a little smile, points into my direction. Margit glances at me and nods approvingly as if to say: yes, he is like that.

It seems that the sun and the spirits united their forces, because it became warmer and warmer. The women take off their long-sleeved sweaters so that the white of their arms could be caressed by the sunshine, their skin was teased, through the gaps in their blouses, by the wind. The footpath at the top of the embankment is dried up already by the sun, and at the given moment it looks like it would be much better to walk in the shade of the gallery forest that faithfully follows the winding Tisza, but it doesn't reach this far. And even if it did, the finely graded plough running under the embankment beyond,

the thick barbed wire fence would make it stop. Vojtek points to the border and explains something to the women, who stop for a moment, watching the very thin copper wires running through the grass inside the barbed wire. He says that it connects mines, and if an invader stumbles on it, he can learn to fly, the only question is in how many pieces he will land. I already heard about the wires, but what I heard was that when they are pulled, they shoot out signal flares. But that's not what's important now, we came out to walk and have a little more fresh air. It would have been a shame to miss this. And as we walk, we get to the beautiful new iron bridge built recently, at which I can admire the painted concrete statues of two Soviet pioneers: a boy with a trumpet and a little girl saluting. Then we turn back, because those men in uniform with their guns guarding the entrance to the bridge let no one enter without official permit to do so.

Meanwhile at home, the stuff must be ripe, and Margit licks it and winks with satisfaction at the others. The mash is then poured into a large enamel pot, two well-washed bricks are placed at its bottom, and two others are placed over them crosswise. Now these stand well out of the mash, so that the wide enamel pot can be placed safely on them, into which, as I later found out, the distillate will drip. Finally, a large dishpan is needed, whose bottom fits snugly into the mouth of the large pot, the dish is thoroughly dabbed around with flour-paste, the bowl is filled with cold water to the brim, and then the fire is lighted. When the mash is boiling, presumably, the process goes on at a slower flame, and then only the temperature of the cooling water is monitored. If it is deemed too hot, it is cooled a little. That's all the witchcraft, and you just have to wait for the result. Well, maybe the result is important for the adults, but for me it makes no difference, so I go out to the street, where there's always something to happen. Right now, in front of the Green Cross, the Fornosi boys took possession of the place: they have a big rubber ball and try to head it into a goal.

I can't yet hit the ball strong enough with my forehead to send it straight to the goal. If I throw the ball up for myself, it falls to my feet and not on my head, and if it's thrown at me, it hits me in the face or

nose, and it hurts, so for now I just watch the bigger boys play for a while. I can throw stones pretty well, though, and I can pick out a lone grazing goat as a target. But then I change my mind, because there's a large plum tree in the yard, and it's just about to ripen so I'd rather throw a piece of brick I have found here at the bird's nest on one of the branches. The thrown brick is too big, and before it reaches the nest it hits a thicker branch, bounces and falls back feebly but straight onto Istvan Fornosi's head. He is the oldest of the brothers, and the lankiest, but the brick hits him hard on the temple. He stays standing, but when he discovers blood on his fingers, his tears start running from his eyes, he shows up his bloody fingers and says plaintively:

"Can you see what you have done, eh?"

His brothers look at me in shock. Perhaps it crossed their minds that it would be all right if they gave me a sound trashing, or complained to my mother, and I would not have minded at all if it had happened, but they did neither. Istvan with his hands on his head started home quickly, and the others went off after their smashed headed brother, while I just stood there on the scene of the crime in the crossfire of their reproachful glances.

In our house, I can hear it on the stairs already, everyone is in great spirits. The freshly made pálinka liberated not only the spirits, but as the flushed faces of the women show is a good fuel, too. Margit is the first to notice that I've entered, and she put a glass in my hand.

"Try this little weak chocolate poison."

I am looking down because I'm not used to it, but as my mother doesn't say no either, I raise it to my lips and take a sip of the sweet lukewarm drink, but I almost puke.

"It tastes of yeast," I say trembling with disgust and push the glass away.

"The taste of yeast will go away after a while," tries Margit to defend the reputation of the product, but still, I wanted no more.

The grown-ups, however, did. They drink, they laugh, the nasty jokes become nastier, they giggle a lot. Suddenly Vojtek reaches under Margaret's dress from behind and is in no hurry to take his hand away.

"Well," I think to myself, "Margaret doesn't like that sort of thing, she'll give him a slap on the face." But no. Margit willingly turns her head back and offers the unruly boy a kiss. And the kiss was so long that my mother and Aunt Manci couldn't bear to look at it, but they, Margit and Vojtek didn't care. They were almost stuck to each other as they staggered into Margit's room. Aunt Manci, if only I knew why, was so upset that her hands began to tremble. She took out a cigarette and calmed down after a few puffs. She blew the smoke high above her head and– who knows why – looked at it angrily.

"Béla will soon be at home," she said a bit later, then stood up and went home.

My mother stared around for a while, then started to clean up the traces of the homemade still. But she didn't have the heart to pour out the good lukewarm cooling water, so she poured it into the basin and prepared to wash, but this time she didn't send me out as usual. Half-naked, she bent over the wash-basin and began to water and soap her body. I tried to stare out of the window at the street, but once or twice I looked back out of the corner of my eye. Her breasts were hanging down into the basin, almost detached from her chest, and because I did not find it a pleasant sight at all, I turned my head away defiantly. My mother noticed my sulking and spoke up:

"Hey, you used to suck it, now you don't like it, eh?

I was just about to refuse my mother's harsh thoughtless words when, in the inner room, Margit began to moan loudly and lustily, just as she had done the other night. I turned involuntarily in the direction of the sound, but my mother, perhaps to distract me, or rather driven by her own primitive instincts, sprang to me, and before I could get my palms in front of me, she pushed her wet breasts twice to my face.

"Well, snatch it!" she said with a teasing intent, as if she were egging the dog Prince on. I desperately fought back her advances, and, perhaps not quite accidentally I hit one of her breasts. That brought her to her senses and she returned to the washbasin to finish cleaning up.

"Turn away!" she said to me harshly, and I understood that she wanted to wash herself from below. I lay on my stomach on the bed,

and turned away like a hedgehog, ignoring the world. But after a minute or two I had to listen to my mother's raised voice.

"Look, still he is offended! One cannot even joke with him anymore!"

I could not let this go unanswered, so I suddenly sat up and said:

"I don't like your jokes, Mum. I'm no longer an infant who is mewling and puking in the nurse's arms! Why do you do that to me?"

"Look, he's still mouthing off to me! Note I'm your mother! You're small and penniless, who shits in his pants still and pisses in them! Did you get it? I can do anything I want! Even if I just fart right under your nose, all you can say is that well, thank you, mother, thank you."

Her rude words almost hit me on the back of the head. The house turned around with me, my eyes were dimmed. I wanted to scream: No! No! But I had simply no wind and instead of crying just an incomprehensible whimper left my mouth. But I soon recovered and fled from the house not wanting to see my mother anymore. Our courtyard was small, I could not go far, so I sat down on the bottom step of the stairs, my poor, disconsolate head seeking refuge in my own lap. But a little later, I could hear the squeak of the small gate separating us from our neighbours. I raise my head cautiously, and looking up I see a familiar little fairy skipping along on one leg, coming towards me. On her two shapely little ears there is a twig of cherries, her smiling little lips are red like cherry, and she holds out the red juicy fruit in her smudgy little palm. The tension suddenly disappears, my hand moves towards Iluska almost unwittingly. Yes, the world begins to make sense again.

* * *

By the Green Cross, at the entrance to the cemetery a solid phalanx, striplings who know each-other well come together. Their *kelebels*[24] are loaded with nuts, so they look almost like pregnant women. The rattling nuts are arranged around the waist of one of them in the form of

[24] *Kelebel* or *kebel* - in the Upper Tisza region, the gap between an outer garment (shirt, jacket), which is constricted at the waist by an elastic band or belt, and the body, which can be used as a storage space.

a life-belt, and it makes everybody laugh. But still more boys are coming from the town. They must be from the quarter called Diós (Walnut), too. Nut-knockers were there a few days ago, but they must have been working not so very hard, because they weren't crazy enough to break their necks for a few kilos, so they left pretty much enough of those nuts to the pickers. There were nuts left abundantly, because one can see they bring their loot in the upper part of their clothing. Pityu Buda and his younger brother Laci, Antika Harsányi and Guliver are coming.

"Shall we then play?" the obligatory question is soon asked.

"Let's start with ten. Is everyone for it?" says Guliver setting the terms of the game.

From here and there the answer is yes, so all that remains is to find a suitable empty field without grass where the nuts roll well. The smoothly trodden pavement under the Green Cross fence will do everybody agrees. The first thing to do is to choose the head, or the *clapper*. Everybody checks his own stock to find the largest, most shapely round nut he has, and when it is found, this is set up first, then ten soldiers to the right of it, four to five cm-s from each other. The best nut for soldiers is the jackdaw-mouth shaped nut, which can stand well on its flatter end, and so the game begins. The roll is made from a line drawn about five or six metres away, and each person chooses a spherical nut that is the best to roll. A nut that is too dry or empty is not suitable for this purpose, as it can easily change direction or may not come to the finish. The one who knocks the clapper out takes the whole set, but it's risky to play it. If he doesn't hit it by the time he can roll again, the others may win before him gradually. Therefore, everybody, as a rule, wants to knock out one of the soldiers near the clapper and then all the other ones to the right of it. But that's not easy either. The distance between the nuts makes it hard to hit more than one at a time. So, lot depends on the shape and weight of the nut chosen to roll, but even more on a good sense of direction and experience. A skilful player can triple his own stock in half an hour, but for this the *kebel* is not enough. One has to take off the top, tie the ends of the sleeves and fill every cavity. Sometimes it can be more than

ten kilos, and with that amount a kid can go home proudly with the knowledge that he deserved his dinner.

Small groups of older women and adolescent children pass by the playing striplings. There are bitter-smelling cut or eradicated chrysanthemums in the handbaskets, and different tools in the hands. This procession to the cemetery was going on for days, with All Saints' Day and the Day of the Dead approaching.

That summer I also visited the cemetery often when my grandfather and two other men with him were mowing the grass between the graves. It was then that I met old Bálint Magyari, who guarded the garden of the dead and tended it as best he could. He told me things that only he knew. That there wasn't a single spot in the cemetery where bones wouldn't be found if one started to dig. The people of Újlak have been buried here for seven hundred years already, and the cemetery did not grow by a single foot since. If the digger turns over skulls and bones, he puts them in one place and buries them in a corner of the finished grave before the new burial begins. He, who was a gravedigger for thirty years, knows only what honour and respect demand, but he is now old and can only serve his ancestors in the ground as a graveyard keeper. He fell silent, then pointed to a very old double grave site protected by a wrought-iron fence. "I've cleaned the whores' nest over there" he says, looking at me to comment. I walk over and remember that a few days ago that grave was still overgrown with hops and wild grapes, and that it was indeed possible to hide from prying eyes under its shelter. But who those whores were, my six-year-old mind had no clue then? But it could have, if only I had known the background of the story. Enough was said about Mari and Rózi, who didn't despise the friendship of the soldiers, but who cared? Not me, that's for sure. Or should we have to know how the discarded slimy condoms, which we stretched out to half a metre at each end and used as a string to play the violin with a stick, had served its original purpose? But we didn't know, and the adults, seeing what we were doing for fun, walked past us, giggling. So old Magyari had his reasons for shaking his head at my ignorance, and smiling mischievously under his great white moustache.

"I'm looking for a place for myself, that's why I go to the cemetery so much, but I don't find any," he changed the topic again. "I don't know what the Almighty plans for me... For I was in front of Him once, but then He told me to go back. 'My son,' He said, 'your time hasn't come yet.' Then I asked Him to let me stay... 'To stay there, in Heaven, because I met my wife there, and we enjoyed being together again so much as never before in our lives. We were young again, we held hands, we picked flowers... but it was in vain, I had to come back, like it or bulk it. Then the neighbours found me, broke in and brought me back from my three day's apparent death. Now I'm almost eighty-five years old, but I'm not afraid to die, because I know where I'll go."

When I was at home, I was keen to tell and discuss with my father my meeting with uncle Bálint as an extremely important matter. I asked him whether what the old man had said about his own death and the Heaven could be true. My father, with his uncertain cautious faith, only said that it was quite possible, because the old man spoke to many people about his near death experience and said always the same, there was no change in his tale. But a believer must have no doubt at all. "We must believe in God and in the afterlife," he continued, "because if we die unbelieving and then there we stand before the court of God, we are in great trouble. But if we believe and pray all our lives, we can safely await His judgment. If, on the other hand, there is no afterlife, if we meet no one or nothing after death, let us be satisfied with the fact that we lived as Christians and had a decent life and thus we lose absolutely nothing."

The next afternoon, Béla and Guliver brought a whole heap of sunflower stalks from the gardens and settled down on aunt Erzsi's rickety little bench. They cut some seventy- or eighty-centimetre-pieces from the straight part, more exactly from the thicker part of the straight part, rubbed the rough surface smooth with the blade of the knife, and then began to scoop out the thicker part. I was watching for minutes, but could not figure out what they were up to, but soon it became clear.

"If I'm not mistaken, then you'll have a torch-lit night tonight," said aunt Mariska who was on her way to draw some water from our well.

Béluka was in the habit to give names to all the street people lately. Now he gives aunt Mariska the stink eye and makes up a new name for her on the spot:

"Mrs. Buckster. Because one can never see her without a bucket in the street."

Gulliver, named with a "pseudonym," as well laughs and then eventually decides to notice me there.

"Shall I make one for you too, Lacika? Will you come with us to the cemetery tonight? These are the torches that we will light with."

I nod happily. Of course, I want to go with the big boys. I dare not even think of the possibility that my parents won't let me go. So, as it's getting dark, I run home. My mother is just getting ready for the night, I don't even have to mention that I'd like to go as well. She prepares the warmer clothes for me without being asked to.

As soon as we step out of the small door, the relatives come: my godmother Ilonka, my aunt Manci, their spouses and children. We walk together towards the cemetery, where thousands of candles are already burning. I have to stop for a moment, because I have the feeling that all the stars of the sky descended to the earth, and the door of the chapel is open not in vain. Inside, there is a little crowd of people, candles burn everywhere, smoke is rising, and with it the air is saturated with a thick odour not experienced so far.

There is a smaller crowd around the central crucifix, but the newcomers must be given room. They come, kneel, make the sign of the cross, and light more candles at the base of the cross, where there is already a whole forest of candles. They have just begun to burn, but the tallow is already thick on some of them, and some other ones, melting to the ground, are extinguished with a loud, audible crackling sound. When I look up at the cross, I can see the head of a tin Christ tilted to one side, and I can read from His face that He fainted for good. No weeping or singing can bring Him back, no fragrant smoke can daze Him, and the prayers are not for Him either: men fold their sinful hands for their own sake.

In front of the chapel, the narrow walkway and then a turn to the left leads to the grave of our Grandfather Puskás. A small group of boys

come towards us, holding their flaming torches in front of them, so I can't see their faces in the bright backlight. My heart starts to pound, but I take a better look and calm down. This is not yet the Guliver team.

My grandfather's grave is clean, not a weed on it. Someone has placed a cross made of tiny white chrysanthemum heads on its surface, loosened with a rake and hoe. Candles come out of the handbags. My mother and the aunts put them around, frame the flower cross, then place one in each corner, and while the burning matchsticks make contact with the wicks, a ceremony for the repose of the dead and the mercy of God begins under the nearby Orthodox cross. I'd rather watch that, because from there I feel the same familiar odour of smoke as at the chapel. I can see now that the smoke is coming from an incense burner dangling on tiny chains, and as I watch, I realize that I must instinctively follow the chant that rises with the smoke, sometimes in a slow rhythm, and sometimes in a long, drawn-out chant.

Near the cross another group of torchbearers gathers. Yes, that's them. I can see Janko and Gyuszi next to Béluka and Gulliver. I immediately feel like going, I've had enough of these boring family performances. My mother would let me, but aunt Magda, who got to our group in the meantime, hisses in her ear not to let me go: 'Let him learn that he must stay with you, don't let him knock about with hobos!' My mother seems to listen to her, and holds my hand tightly, but I keep twisting and pulling, whimpering until she finally lets me go.

"Well, I don't mind, go, but just stay close by." That's enough for me, I run to the torchbearers. Gulliver looks at me and hands me a small torch. "This is small but will do." He shows me the thicker part, which is filled with tallow and the stubs of fallen candles from the graves. Then he helps me light it, and shows me how to hold it so that the melted tallow would not spill out and burn me or others. He also hands me a ball of tallow to lubricate the burning part below in order to feed the flame as it melts. We start down the road, then head for a darker corner of the cemetery, where there is hardly any light. Just two or three candles flicker. The small path leads past a lonely concrete tomb possibly housing the remains of a family where a few thicker, surely shoddy tallow candles

struggled to subsist. A middle-aged man talking nearby, a relative of the people buried in the grave, calls after us: "Lads, if you touch the candles, I'll castrate you all." But his threat is useless. He does not notice that Béluka, without looking, turns his half-burnt torch, already empty-ended, on a thick candle-stub and lifts it out of the ground.

With this we move further to see what happens in the chapel area, where the Roman Catholics light candles, pray and consecrate the graves. There we can also collect a few scoops of tallow to lubricate the torch, because the night is still long. The Orthodox priest and his entourage also go from grave to grave, waving incense, as most families wish to consecrate the resting place of their beloved ones. The lyrics, in some places monotonous in tone, in others accompanied by a sudden rise and fall of melody, evoke the One who descended to hell and will unbind the shackled. "Have mercy, oh Lord, have mercy, Lord, have mercy!" the chorus is heard more and more clearly, and by the time my family and I meet at the big cross at the entrance, the tune and the lyrics of the songs are all mine and stay in my ear for good.

* * *

We also reached that point at last when the reorganization of the production order at the factory made my mother and father work in the same shift again. Most likely it was good for them to spend the rest of the day together after work, but it was not so good for me, because I had to be woken up shortly after 4 am, taken to Grandma's place and put into bed again by father. During the day, I'm more and more intent to stay in the house, listening to the talk of the grown-ups, and besides it's getting cold outside. A few days ago, the postman came in and asked if we wanted to subscribe to Hungarian newspapers in addition to the *Kárpáti Igaz Szó*. 'Cause we can do that,' he says, 'from the New Year lots of other papers will be available for subscription.' Grandmother's eyes light up, she asks Jóska Ignatisin to sit down, and enthusiastically begins to tell him that before the war they read the magazine *Koszorú, a*nd that there was so much good stuff in it, but it was not available

anymore. Well, if there was at least something like that, she wouldn't mind. Uncle Jóska had never heard of the *Koszorú,* but he mentions some new ones, like the *Nők Lapja, Ország-Világ*, which he definitely can recommend because he knows them. Grandmother says yes, and they agree on the two weeklies, which from now on will be delivered on time. Since then, Grandma's customers, if they have to wait for fitting or for each other, browse through the papers, and when I see from their faces that reading gives them lots of interesting information, I feel an irresistible desire to learn the letters myself.

I take an issue of the *Kárpáti Igaz Szó* in my hand, because it has big letters on its pages, and ask one question after another. But I'm only interested in the big letters, I don't pay attention to the rest. When I recognise quite a few, I take a pencil in my hand and copy them onto the white space of the newspaper, repeating their pronunciation. And the day will come when I will open the Bible, look at it for a while, then sneak over to the sewing machine and read the syllables Mo-ses out loud in Grandma's ear. Grandmother looks at me surprised, then at the open Bible and exclaims: "Oh my, can you read already? Then you'll go to school next year."

So, I took my first steps into the world of letters, and as soon as my parents got home from the shift, Grandma gives them a detailed report on my progress in reading. My mother is not particularly impressed. She says she noticed before that I began to get to know the letters, but she doesn't want to send me too early to school because there I'll make only mischief. Just now she worries more because of the sparkles in my eyes and the warmth of my forehead. 'Don't you run a fever?' she asks, and she is almost certain that I do, moreover she knows even the reason why. She looks into my mouth, and I confess that something stings in my throat and I find it hard to swallow.

She takes me home, makes me the bed in the kitchen, takes my temperature, but by then I already shiver. 'Thirty-eight and five,' she says, but she doesn't bring me the antipyretics yet. First, she builds a fire to make the house warmer, makes tea, and only then does she get out the *Norsulfazol*, which I am unable to swallow. She knows it very

well, so she makes me take it with sweet tea or with a small spoonful of jam, but the attempts are mostly in vain, because it's enough for me to feel the large tablet in my mouth as it falls out of it. Then she scares me with an injection, which I'm afraid of, so I swallow it somehow, retching and choking. I fall asleep quickly, but after an hour I wake up soaking wet. My mother brings the thermometer again, and a few minutes later she is relieved to discover that the medicine worked, because my fever is not so high anymore.

She is getting ready for going to bed too, but she doesn't go over to my father, she lies down next to me to help me if I need anything. She takes out two storybooks, and because I took my medicine in nicely, she says she'll read me a story. But which one? One from the Russian or the Hungarian folk tales? I prefer the latter, and although I know them all almost by heart, I think I would like to hear János the Iron-Hatter again. She takes a seat on the edge of the bed, begins to read, and gently scratches my head with her free hand. I understand her intention, she wants me to fall asleep as soon as possible. Having already slept in the afternoon, I am now wide awake and follow every moment of the story. My favourite part is when John the servant emerges from the ancient stone well with the bell on his head and sets out on his journey to do justice. But it is at this point that Mum stops reading for a moment and suggests a role reversal. She says she'll continue reading, but now let me fiddle with her hair. And to make me even more interested in this primitive pleasure-seeking, she promises me a rouble for every clump of dandruff I find. My heart leaps at this incredible offer, for if I have one rouble, uncle Anti will give me candy for that. My hand moves immediately, I am already scratching her head, but she stops me and teaches me to do that slower, more delicately. Only with my fingertips, she tells me, I should use my fingernails if I find a clump of dandruff only. I can't say that I was too happy to rummage in my mother's greasy hair. Then the dandruff bundles, of which I found more than ten in an hour or so, all ended up under my nails, but who cares when I was promised a whole rouble in the morning. I was so glad that I stopped counting and just went on fiddling with my mother's hair on her head,

and a little later, when sleep had overcome me, my hand wandered from her head to the splash-cloth and kept tinkering it mechanically.

I wake up at around four in the morning. My father crouches in front of the stove in the light streaming in through the half-open door of the room. He kindles fire quickly in the stove, and in a few minutes the tea water is boiling. My mother comes too, for they must have breakfast first. My father's breakfast is scrambled eggs, and my mother makes French toast for herself. Before leaving she makes two sandwiches and a cup of tea for me. She pats my forehead and, finding me all right, tells me to lie still and wait for aunt Manci who will come over to see me and take care of me if she has to. I don't need anything, I'm not a little kid, I think, but I don't say anything to mother. My breakfast is on the table for me already.

When it gets lighter, I turn on the radio. The morning news mention Nikita, and I immediately start listening, because in Russian folk tales a hero has the same name. Perhaps it is about him. But the longer I listen, the less I believe the story, because I don't understand what they speak about, and if it has nothing to do with the story, it's no use bothering about it. But I'm not going to turn it off just yet, so I listen a little. I don't mind music either, as Grandpa does. He'll go and turn it off if an opera broadcast is announced. 'I need no *kopera*!' he says. He apparently rebels not against classical music, when in fact he has an irreconcilable grudge against cooperatives, the Soviet-style collective farms. Bu if the *Kállai duet* is played, his knees move vertically even when he is sitting, and he hums along with the singer, but only softly, barely intelligibly, the familiar lines of the song. Somehow, I wouldn't want to hear that now either, but I'd like to hear some nice radio play that I always like to listen to. However, plays like that are broadcast in the afternoon as a rule.

I take the thermometer, turn it in my hand, and I can't imagine how it can show the temperature. I can't see anything on it. But what can I see if I have no temperature? On the edge of the stove, however, there is a kettle with a pot of hot water. I know I'm up to mischief, so I turn my head to see if there is anybody to see what I do, and then I put the thermometer in the water. Something pops quietly in it, and when

I take it out, I can see tiny balls of mercury scurrying around inside, in front and behind the scale. When I hold it vertically, the shiny particles fuse into a larger ball, which, when moved, scurries around inside the unusable thermometer. But that's not enough for me. I grip it, shake it violently until one end of the glass tears off and the little balls scatter all over the floor covered with *kliyonka*.[25] A sticky situation. So I have to kneel down on the floor and try to save what I can, and I am amazed to see that the mercury does not mix with the dust and dirt. It deserves to be collected, I think, and then I slowly collect the particles that have rolled further away and unite them with their brothers and sisters. I try to lift the resulting large ball with my fingers, but the slightest touch makes it disintegrate. I can see that this won't work, I'll have to find another way to catch them. Here we go. I place a plain sheet of paper next to it and gently roll the balls onto the paper, and from there I find a safe place, a tiny medicine bottle for them. It's a good place there, I can take the mercury balls out of it at any time, but I put the stubby little cork back in the bottle to keep the mercury balls safe.

My parents also have to come soon, the second shift starts in the early afternoon, but Grandpa came at least half an hour before them with the nougats and poppy seed rolls wrapped in a tea cloth. The odour of the cakes excite me very much, I want to taste them, but my mother says that only after dinner. We eat something anyway, and then, I don't quite understand why, they send me to Grandma's. Just for a little while, and when it gets dark, someone will come for me, till then they will do what they have to, and I would only distract them.

So, I go, even if not with pleasure, but those few hours just will pass somehow. Maybe I'll listen to the radio with the old people. But Grandpa's not really interested in the news the radio broadcasts right now. He sits on the little stool, fills his pipe and scrapes a tiny ember from the stove. He picks it up with two fingers, flicks it around in the palm of his hand, and puts it on the tobacco in his pipe. He takes a few puffs, the tobacco glows, and Grandpa puffs out the smoke

[25] Kliyonka (Russian) oil-cloth.

contentedly. “It’s Christmas Eve,” he says almost to himself, “I must have a shave I figure because I can’t go to church service with so much hair on my face.”

It was quite dark when my father came to pick me up. We left my grandparents’ house with peace. Father took my hand, then lifted me to his shoulders and we set off for home. At home, he put me down at the door and knocked softly. We waited a little till a beautiful bell rang inside. The door opened of its own accord, and behind it, as if it were not our kitchen but heaven itself, was waiting for us to enter. But I just stood there, with my mouth agape at the brightness and the glitter, even though the light was not on in the room. Only a few candles were lit on the pine tree, and silver stars the size of palms were swirling around in the pleasant warmth, as if their only job was just to strengthen and diffuse the little candlelight. ‘Merry Christmas!” my mother said, then leaned down and kissed me. From under the Christmas tree, she picked up a small box tied around with a red ribbon and handed it to me. “Little Jesus brought it for you while you were not here,” my mother said. Inside the box, divided into compartments, was a bunny-shaped soap, a toothbrush, tooth powder, and a small bottle of scented cologne.

I stood there with my box a little hesitantly because, except for the soap, I had little experience in how to use them. ‘You know, my boy,’ my mother encouraged me, ‘you’ll go to school next year, and you’ll have to learn how to clean yourself, brush your teeth and look after yourself when we’re not there.’ What could I say to this? After all, I wanted to go to school and I didn’t, just as a man with healthy instincts is not always eager to get acquainted with unfamiliar circumstances and sticky situations. I listened with downcast eyes, as I often did in my early youth. I’d rather shut myself off when I am in a situation where I have to talk about myself, about my inner problems in front of people I didn’t fully trust.

* * *

There was no snow so far, but the late November frosts are here already to discipline and control the living nature and then us, people, too. No

problem because for adults and children alike, there's this *pufayka* or *fufayka*, or whatever the name is of this Russian type quilted coat, which is a nice warm wear, we just didn't manage to learn its name properly yet. So let the finger-thin ice of the waters outside fatten and strengthen, for now it's crunching at our first step, and time is needed to make it possible to step on it. So, with nothing else to do, we stumble around in front of the entrance of the Jakabs' house, more or less helplessly. From the cemetery, a drunk man's loud singing is heard on the road, so there's no need to guess who he is. It's true that for the time being he just sent his voice ahead, it will take him a few minutes to turn up at the corner of Mrs. Németi's house and lean against the fence as he is wont to do. He fidgets for some time with his fly, then he pisses uncertainly against the wooden slat. Having done this he stands for a while, turning round two or three times, and wobbles. Then he realises where to go next, so he puts both his hands up to his elbows in the big pockets of his trousers, thrusts his chest forward, lifts his chin high and starts off again with a new melody. *"Po dolinam i po goryam..."* He blows the march that still haunts him from the Soviet civil war era hoarsely, but with true proletarian faith. Janko, who was no more mischievous than an average kid near the Market Square, shouts from behind the small door as loud as he can: *"Bob and Mary, stud and link, Andriy Kotro has a drink!"* We were waiting for somebody to start this, and now we all join Janko, because who doesn't know this rhyme, and who doesn't know Andriy Kotro? Rumours have it that he volunteered for the Russians when he was forty-four, fought in the Soviet army, was wounded and demobilized and as a hero he came to Újlak to live. But now Andriy stops and listens trying to find out where the mockery comes from. Béluka, who knows a lot more about him than we do, has other ways of mocking him. *"Andryusha geroy*!" he shouts at him. "*Boom-boom*!" But perhaps he shouldn't have done that, because the mentioning of war drove Andriy almost stir-crazy. Fury made him clench his two fists and they almost tear up his trouser pockets, then he raises his head high in the air and begins a sophisticated, and incomprehensible but for me strange curse: "Oh damn you Siberia!" he shouts to the sky,

says it at length, then starts straight towards us. We look at each other frightened, and think it's time to run. Béluka and Gyuszi head for the church, Janko and I find shelter behind the barred little door.

Jankó, although his parents are alive, is raised by his grandmother Zsuzsika Illyés. His grandfather, the old Pali Jakab, is a sullen, taciturn man who spends the better part of his life at his low workbench in his small workshop that smells of pitch and greasy leather. What his nature was like when he was younger would be hard to tell now, but if it was his cautiously moving more than hundredweight wife, who ruled the family all the more firmly, that made him so quiet and almost invisible, then it can be easily understood. Now, however, he is whistling as he examines a pair of shoes in need of a thorough overhaul. It wants a half-sole, and now the master is just looking for a suitable piece of leather. I watch as he squeezes the shoe to his knee with the stirrup, as he breaks down patiently the old torn sole and then cuts it off, as he removes the rusted nails, and with his bent awl and needle he sews the upper part to the hard sole lining called *branzol* in his jargon. Then he notices me watching. He might think I'm interested in his craft, so he sends me a friendly wink:

"Well, Buddy, don't you want to be my apprentice? I'll teach you everything you have to know. Yeah, your father also has some inkling to it, but that's not too much. He'd just saw this and that at the plant."

I don't know what would be the appropriate answer to this question. I don't understand the meaning of the word 'apprentice' either, therefor I just blush and turn my head down. But Jankó is glad that his grandfather is in a sociable mood and takes over the lead without thinking.

"Grandpa, how did you become a master? You were an apprentice, too, were you not? Tell us what you told me when Béla's father was here... and Olga's mother. You know, that story with the boots.

"You heard that several times."

"But let Laci hear it too!"

The old man must have really been in a talkative mood. Out of the corner of his eye he blinked at me and seeing sincere interest on my face, began to speak.

"Well, as a matter of fact I was an apprentice in Szolnok for almost four years. I was fourteen when my father sent me away to learn the profession. At first all my job there was to do the work around the house almost every day. I was ordered to sweep the workshop, the yard, clean the house and feed the pigs, which was not easy, because, well, there were all in all three or four servants, two assistants, and then the master, his wife, his mother-in-law, and four children, thirteen persons altogether. Well, with so many people, there was plenty of washing up, to collect the waste from the kitchen for the pigs, and lots of stoop labour... It was then when I learnt the song that said *'I was a young cobbler and had to work too hard, so I take the shamrock and prink the master in heart.'* But we only sang this song when the master couldn't hear us... And so, we played our parts. After all it was not as bad as that and later it was still better. Sometimes the master let me do the soling, and later the heeling, and when he saw that I'm good enough in it, he gave me more and more work to do. So, I got a little money already, too, but the work was boring and hard, and four years are long time after all, and still I was an apprentice only whereas I wanted to work on my own as a master. So, just before Christmas I asked my master: 'Sir, when are you going to release me?' 'Well,' says he, 'the stationmaster is coming this afternoon to order a pair of high boots. Take his size, ask him what kind of boots he wants and you've got three days. And if I'm satisfied with your work, then well, I don't mind, I'll give you your certificate and you are free.' 'Very well, sir,' I told him, 'I'll do as you say.' Soon the gentleman arrived, the master's wife asked him to take a seat, offered him tea and cakes, and I asked him what kind of boots he wanted. Soft or high and hard? Well, he said, when he is in service, he wears the uniform of the Hungarian royal railways and elegant shoes, but, he says, he's got a farm near Karcag, and when he goes there, he puts on a farmer's rig-out as a rule. With that rig-out, you know, hard high boots are the best. "I see, sir,' I say, 'as you please, sir, you'll have those boots.' But there was a little problem, I took his size, and it turned out that he had this very throaty feet, and I saw at once that it would be difficult to find

a good pair for them. No problem, I thought, I'll solve it if I can get the right size of the foot. Next day, I started my work and began at the upper to fatten the last with small scrap pieces of leather to get the shape of the man's foot. Now, I won't tell you the rest, but suffice it to say that I sewed the upper part neatly, hardened the shank with linen, hard paper and chestnut flour paste, soaked it in water, put it properly on the last to dry in the necessary shape, and after two days I took the finished boot to the master. He looks at it, turns it to see from all sides, reaches into it, but it's smooth everywhere, feels it, takes it to the window, examines it thoroughly there, but it's as smooth as a mirror everywhere, not a single deficiency at all. 'Well, my boy,' he says, 'nice work. But where is its pair?' he asks and looks at me cow-eyed. 'Well, you see,' I say as suave as hell, 'it is your turn sir, to make it! And good-bye, I don't need your certificate either.' With that I turned to take my luggage for I had packed that in advance and went away. So that's how it was," said the old man, rounding up his story. Then feeling his waist, he stood up from his stool.

"It's getting cold in here, let's make a fire," he said to himself, and went to the sawdust stove to light it.

Sawdust is a very economical and rewarding fuel for those who take the trouble to use it. It was economical because it was free at the sawmill and furniture factory, and grateful because if the stove was properly filled with it, it would give heat for half a day, and, it goes without saying, it kept the stove warm. True, it needed some preparation. If the sawdust was too dry, it was gently sprinkled with water so that it would set a little, and then a cylindrical piece of wood about ten centimetres in diameter was placed along the entire length of the firebox, and the fuel was gently compacted under and around it. For this operation, the plate was sometimes lifted off to fill all the cavities and form the the passageway for the smoke . When this was done, the plate was put back in place and the cylinder was carefully pulled out by turning it back and forth. If the stoker had done his job properly, on the place of the cylinder a regular tunnel was formed. This was the soul of the stove, the essential passage for the air needed

for combustion. Uncle Pali now placed a few dry chips and a piece of paper before it, and after lighting it and lifting the ventilating ring on the middle of the plate he put it aside, and then, having still lots of other things to do, he left the workshop.

On the top of the stove, hoping for a little warmth from the proximity of the chimney, a small kitten was napping. After a few minutes, however, sensing the warmth of the plate, it began to squirm. Another half-minute passed before it felt that too much good may be also harmful, therefore it stood up and snatching its soft paws hurried spectacularly across the warming hearth and leapt from the edge to the floor. Janko nimbly reached out, picked the kitten up and put it back to its starting position to repeat the stunt. The cat, as was expected, snatching its paws in panic and, reaching the edge, landed with a short hop. I then picked it up so that I could have my own share of fun. Now it had to run on the iron, and when it reached the end, it landed on the ground again. This time Jankó reached for it, then me again. The little animal got tired of the joke, got nervous and would have kicked and clawed its way out of my hands, but I dropped it on the heater with a clumsy move. The poor little thing took just three steps and was swallowed by the open mouth of the stove. Its horrified cries were heard from the inferno, smoke and sparkling flue-ash billowed out of the ring. The little animal condemned to tarnation accidentally flung itself with such a force that the heating plate was also lifted for a moment. It sent a chill down my spine, for it was like a message from the other world. I had to scream, to scream out the physical pain of the kitten, but no sound came out of my throat. But fate was kind to me, for the rickety tin door of the heater suddenly burst open, and the thin half spirit of the kitten that lost almost all its hair flew out like a fiery buoy. It was no longer crying, just fleeing with such elemental force that no eye could perhaps follow. It hit the wall, the door, but wanted to get out through any little opening. Yes, out of the house, out of this cruel world! Only then I could get rid of the lump in my throat, only then it struck me that I had done something terrible, and I fell down at

the hearth, and burst into tears of relief. For this I would have really deserved that my father hanged me up by my feet and gave me a good thrashing with a belt.

* * *

For a few days, or maybe a whole week, Grandma has not been well. She was taken to hospital, and since then Grandpa hardly says a word. The house is empty at last, and there is peace and silence, as he always wished when all the silly women's talk drove him up the wall, and yet he is moody now. The customers do not come with their colourful materials, nor do the neighbours appear. Then who should he talk to? My parents are at work, I'll be with him for a while only, because I'm going to school in September. 'If God helps us, maybe they'll let Margit home soon, and then everything will be good again,' the old man says, but my father is rather concerned, because he noticed that even the pipe was no pleasure for him anymore. I urge grandfather to say something about the old days, to let me drink in his words as before, but he only shrugs and buries his face in his palms. His head and upper body shake, and I see that he is weeping, weeps without a sound. But after a quarter of an hour, he braces himself up, looks at me, and his face seems to be more cheerful.

"What about cooking something?" he comes out suddenly with the idea.

I'm surprised because for as long as I can remember, Grandfather had as much to do with the stove as most men in the village. He would prepare the lightwood in the evening, carry out the ashes in the morning, light the fire and then keep it going. If the wood was still wet, he would put it in cages around the hearth, but minding that it would not catch fire from the heated pipe. But I have never seen him using kitchen utensils or meddling with Grandmother's matters, so now I look at him astonished.

"Do you like potato stewed with paprika, don't you?"

I nod, and from now on I'm looking forward to learning something about the art of cooking myself. I don't want to say that I never stood

by the stove before when my grandmother made the thickening to soup, but only because once she made me lick the flour that she fried in the fat until it got light brown, and then I took a liking to accept the wooden spoon if she held it out to me. But now, if I understood correctly, I could help Grandfather too, but doing what?

"Can you peel potatoes?" he asks, and knowing that I have never had the opportunity to do that, he hastens to add: "Now you can learn it." Then, I realise that it's not so difficult, because you hardly have to scrape the skin of a freshly cut new potato, it peels off easily, almost by itself. While I'm busy peeling, Grandpa lights the fire in the stove, chops onion into the pan, fries it in fat over a slow fire until it turns yellow, then pulls the pan to the side of the oven in order not to burn it, then sits down next to me to help to peel potatoes.

"Now the paprika and salt may follow," he says, as he chops the potatoes and mixes half a tablespoon of ground red pepper in the bottom of the pan. Into this goes the chopped potato, and the salt, then he pours in one or two tins of water.

"That's all the science that you have to master. And now just wait till it is cooked."

And as the food cooks and slowly simmers, he continues to talk.

"The shepherds added a little tarragon to the soup, but then they had to add more water, because the tarragon would sip it up and then it would become very thick. But it's not good if it's too thin either. Sometimes, if we still had smoked sausages, we also sliced it into the tarragon, then it was really good. But where can you get sausage nowadays?"

After a quarter of an hour of cooking I can smell the inviting aroma.

"Well, I think it will be good without sausage too!" Grandpa says after stirring it gently and tasting the juice with a wooden spoon. "But let it cook a little more."

When it had cooled in the plate and we were only taking careful bites, Grandpa started talking again.

"When I worked for the railway company, I was on the road a lot. Your grandmother knew when the train would stop in Újlak, and she

would send me a meal with Pista or Gizi. I couldn't get off the engine because there was work, I had to shovel coal during the stop, too. The engine-driver would take the food and I would eat it later when I had time. Well, on one occasion your grandmother cooked this very potato stewed with paprika, but it was full of delicious smoked sausage on top of it. Where could she get the sausage, I wondered? But indeed, there was so much sausage in it that I couldn't eat it all. When I was at home, I asked: why did you put so much sausage in the food, Margit? 'What sausage? I don't even know when I saw sausage last!' she says. 'Well, am I crazy?' I thought to myself. Then I realized that it was the engine-driver who tricked me, because he must have looked in the pot and thought the food was a bit thin. What's true is true: he was a good man."

"Were you, Grandpa, an engine-driver too?"

"By no means no, I was no engine-driver. I was a stoker. A certified stoker. We commuted between Ungvár, Királyháza and Szatmárnémeti, but sometimes we went as far as Karánsebes. But I shovelled a lot of coal into the belly of that four-and-twenty-four! It would be enough for the whole Újlak for the winter.

I start meditating on this a little but continue to eat the potato stewed with paprika. I understood, of course, that a steam engine needed coal to work and that grandpa was a stoker, but what does it mean that "certified?" So, I ask him the question.

"You know, my son, when we became Hungarians again in 1939, I was already over fifty. But with the help of my brother Béla, who was much cleverer than me, I managed to get a job on the railway, and in six weeks I learned the trade. They even gave me a paper, a certificate. I retired from the railway, so it sends me two tons of coal every year.

"And before that we were Hungarians, who were we? And what were you, Grandpa, before you became a certified stoker?"

"Oh, my boy, you want to know too much at a time. *Whacha gonna* be when you grow up, a lawyer?"

Somehow, I don't understand everything that Grandpa says. I don't know what a lawyer is either, but I don't mind it very much because I can see in Grandpa's eyes that he wants to go on speaking. He's

scratching the top of his head as if he would like to find a good answer to my question, without circumlocutions, in plain words that even a child like me could easily grasp.

"Well, how can I put it," started Grandpa, but I can see on his face that words don't come easy. "Now, you see we've been Russians for more than ten years already. That is, we, you and me and our family and relatives are all Hungarians as a matter of fact, but now you have to say Russians, because now they are in charge. But before, as I said, we were officially Hungarians, and before that we were Czechs. Before we became Czechs, we were also Romanians for some time in the year 1919. When the Romanians came in, I was a farmer like all the people in the village. I had a small farm, two horses, cows and pigs, and I had to work hard to make a living and a little profit, because my first wife, Róza, had died not so long ago, and I, a widow, was left with four little children. So, the Romanians came and the very first thing they did was to ask me to give them the cart and the horses, because they wanted them. I asked what would be with us without the horses, how would I put food on the table for the orphans? Well, that was not their problem they said. They drove the two horses down to the yard, and then they unhitched the cart. But there's more! Three days later they came to my house with a stamped paper saying that I was supposed to go to the Romanian magistrate in Szöllős. I woke up at dawn, as usual, fed the cattle and went in on foot. Why did they call me, I ask? They told me that I was punished for disobedience. I got fifteen blows on my back. It hurt like hell, and I could hardly crawl like a snail home. The next week, I had to go to the town for my next portion. But the third time I put my foot down and decided not to go, I had enough of them Romanians. Well, it was most clever of me I didn't because they went away by then.

The recollection of the unpleasant experiences discouraged and silenced the old man, but I had the next question already on my mind.

"And did they not return the horses and the cart?"

"Why would they? They needed them, when they were on their way out, they carried all the stolen goods on them the carts. Later I had to

purchase a horse and a cart, for I could not manage without them. I married for the second time in 1920, it was your grandmother. Then the children were born. Árpád, then your father, Pista, and the third was your aunt Gizi. I had to work a lot, so I took on all kinds of work. I went to the forest of Salánk to fetch wood, because they cut oak tree there, and lots of good wood chips remained which I brought home for fire. But I also often went to the Orthodox Saint's-Days with the pilgrims to Pócs[26] where they have a humongous church there. You can't see anything like that over here. They got around it several times on their knees on these days. I was not sure if they had any skin left on their knees after that.

My Grandpa's story reminded me that I was also made to kneel a few times when my mum thought I'd done something wrong, but only in the corner, and the punishment lasted only until I said I was sorry. But this what Grandpa was talking about was quite incomprehensible to me, so I went on asking.

"And what could those people have done that they had to crawl around that big church on their knees?"

"What? Well, as a matter of fact only they could tell what their sins were. Anyway, my idea is that this was the way they tried to get God to listen to them... But that's not what I wanted to tell you, my boy. If I mentioned Pócs already, I have to tell you something that also happened there but makes me laugh every time I think of it." – This was the way for my grandpa to swing the conversation into another direction, and the familiar naughty smile was already being formed under his moustache.

"It happened once, if I can recollect correctly, that I took a group of pilgrims to Pócs for a Pentecostal Mass. We got there in time, the mass had not yet begun, but the people were already coming with church banners, singing and praying, from all over the place. I had never seen

[26] Pócs. The speaker means Máriapócs which is a small town in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county, in the Northern Great Plain region of eastern Hungary. It lies near Nyíregyháza. It is an important place for pilgrimage. It has a Greek Catholic church, which houses the Weeping Madonna, an enormous ornate iconostasis that now takes pride of place above the altar. This icon is not the original, but an 18th-century copy. The original one is kept in St. Stephen's cathedral in Vienna. (Tr.'s note).

so many people in my life, and so many beggars neither. Some had only one leg, some none, some limped on one crutch, some on two. Some of them were blind, led by a child, and all of them tried to find a good place for themselves, as close as possible to the entrance. At first, they just pushed each other in trying to get the best position, but then the crowd was so pressed that the beggars began to use their crutches for beating each other's backs and heads. Only when the priests in their nice vestments began to march in did they calm down a little. When all the priests went in, one of the big beards said turning to another who was one of the noisiest: "Look, what a show-off he is! He has just become a beggar! My grandfather was already a beggar!"

And Grandpa laughed. It was a childish and sincere laugh as if the beggars were fighting just before his eyes, and he not only repeated but interpreted the last sentence, whose primitive sincerity he could not get enough of: his grandfather was a beggar already! He inherited the beggar's cane as a king inherits the crown!

I laughed, how could I not laugh at the professional alms-gatherer's quip, but I became sad at the same time, for I thought almost immediately of the physical misery of our poor beggar Vomnádcat and Endre Borsos, the other panhandler from Újlak, whom I could not imagine as fighting with each other with their crutches. For me, however, it was more the cheerfulness and liberated joy of Grandpa that enticed a permanent smile on my face.

* * *

By September 1958 I was mature enough for school, perhaps a little bit more than mature. But it was particularly useful to have that little intellectual boost to understand the essence of the parental discussions about my enrolment. At first, I only picked up their words not exactly minding what they meant, I mean the words, but when they started to mention the Ukrainian school, I looked at them terrified. But then an angel must have come down from heaven, my angel of deliverance, and what he whispered into the ears of the adults made them both more

sober. They understood that they could not decide my fate without my consent. My father, sitting at the kitchen table with his eyes downcast looked up into my eyes suddenly then and asked if I wanted to go to a Ukrainian or to a Hungarian school. I didn't hesitate or consider a moment, because I immediately and courageously chose the only possible answer. Thanks to this my father, most likely, got rid of' the heaviest burden of his life because he gave a great sigh of relief. If he had then sent me to a Ukrainian school, listening to the opinion of his farsighted and calculating colleagues, the voluntary proctors of the official language, he would have sealed my fate for good and he knew that. And for me that would have been equal to being disowned. But this way, we both were reassured.

But before I started school, my parents agreed that it might be better if my mother stopped working in the factory for a while, so that the start would not be very difficult for me and I would always have someone at home when I came home from school. The income she will inevitably lose this way can be replaced by sewing at home. And thus she did. About at the end of August she asked for dismissal from her workplace.

More than sixty children lined up on the first of September to take on the challenge of gaining knowledge. The teacher, who had to be addressed as Ella Karlovna, called the roll and explained that hence we were the A form, then headed off to the classroom followed by thirty-four frightened children. It took some time for the boys and girls to get acquainted with each-other, to get used to the school order and to realise that they had duties from then on. But when later they line up in front of a camera at the end of the first form in May, the children are visibly together. The girls in white aprons and ribbons in their hair sit around the teacher, behind them is another row of girls, eight boys squat at their feet, and in the fourth, which is the last row, there are still more boys, more exactly ten in number, but only their heads are visible. You can see me there, too, between two gypsy boys, because it was already then that I didn't try to manoeuvre for position. But what does it matter where you stand at the age of eight and how much

of yourself you can see in a yellowed photograph? With my excellent marks I had no problem with being among my gypsy classmates either.

We start the second form with Ella Karlovna again, but we are now in the main school building. There's a canteen there where we can buy notebooks, pencils, pencil nibs, ink, erasers and coloured pencils, but the most exciting item is the hot tea for twenty kopecks, a little *bulochka* [27]for thirty and a big one for sixty kopecks from the canteen lady, aunt Iluci. This is enough to get us through till lunch at home, although for Károly Kovács, the gypsy boy, who is by a head and a half taller than us and was flunked more than once, it is far from being enough because he is always hungry. The other day, I had a loaf of French bread during the big break, he stood by my side and was drooling over it. I could have thought of giving him some myself, but I didn't. Then, as quickly as lightning, he snatched the bread out of my hand, bit into it twice, and gave it back to me. I could not continue to eat it heartily anyway, so I gave it back to him. Kovács has been a friend of mine since, and I offer him this and that sometimes because he deserves it. He's only just joined us at the beginning of the school year, but he's already the best in the form in arithmetic. His sister Erzsi, who is not even in our form, but only accompanies her brother, is totally different. She doesn't like to learn or write, and her brother often beats her even during the classes. Erzsi screams like a banshee in such cases, but after a few minutes they sit silently again next to each-other.

In the second form we also learn calligraphy, because it makes a difference what your letters look like once you write them down. "If we write beautiful letters on the paper, the writing will be also beautiful," says the teacher. But for this not only skill and patience are needed, but also a good quality nib. Two or three types are available, but the best is the one with the star on it. It holds the ink well, and only gradually dispenses it, and if you treat it skilfully, it will leave no ink-spots. When the long notched tip is pulled downwards and opened with the right pressure, it draws the vertical elements of the letters beautifully. But it

[27] Bulochka: bun in Russian.

also matters what ink you use. If you try to dilute it with water, you're doing it a disservice, because it will run on the notepaper just the same as on the newspaper. And then the colour must be also uniform. Right now, we use violet ink, pour it into the glazed ceramic inkwells and take it to school in a small, draw string satchel. It's very uncomfortable, though, and you have to be careful with the ink, because it can spill and damage your book, notebook or clothing.

And you have to be careful with your clothing. Too much elbowing does it no good at all, it will leave its traces on the sleeves of a shirt or any kind of outerwear after a while. This is a big problem, because it is rather difficult to replace a tattered garment with a new one. So, what remains is mending, because needle and thread is still available in every household, and what is additionally needed is just the skilful hands of a woman. Some women are really good at mending their husbands' trousers and sleeves, because the darn with its wrong side out is almost invisible. And then, if you start thinking of it, what is there to be ashamed of? A darned garment is as good as a new one if it is clean. But it's better to protect it from unnecessary wear, especially the elbows of an outerwear, and so a new fashion, or rather a revived old fashion, has come into vogue. It is the elbow pad. So almost each of us takes an elbow pad to school, just like the officers or clerks of the old offices. But my elbow pad once, because it was assigned a much more menial role than protecting my cloth, deceived me badly.

My cousin in Miskolc had a high neck sweat-shirt with a zipper. I only saw it in a photo, but I liked it very much, though I never thought I would ever have something like that. It happened, however, that one summer my uncle Kálmán and his family came to see us, and I got the sweatshirt that I had wanted so much, but it was already ragged at the elbows. My uncle's wife handed it over to my mother saying that perhaps it could still be good for something. Then I think I gave up the idea of wearing it. But later, at my mother's insistence, I put it on with its tattered sleeve covered with an elbow pad. But I wish I hadn't done that! I got into a fight with a boy from the B form at school that day, and as we wrestled, my elbow pad slipped

off, exposing the shabby sleeve. This surprised my opponent the most, and he immediately released me from his grasp, and the boys around us, who not so long ago were still so noisy, stopped also fussing. 'God, if only that had not happened!' regret flew over in me, but as if some devil had bewitched me, I cried out loudly, and fell on the boy: 'See? You tore my sweater!' He said nothing, but just looked at me and in his eyes, there was a silent question: 'are you seriously saying that it has been just torn?' The teacher, who was on duty in the courtyard, and could perhaps see everything, stepped forward, but he didn't say anything either, and shamed me thus more than if he had told me off for my silly accusation.

Why did this have to happen? After all we were not so poor as not to be able to afford a new piece of clothing. But money had to be saved, money had to be in the bank, and there were those elbow pads for a child to wear. Sometimes it happens that my mother cannot get me decent clothes, but then she is in another, more serious trouble. After all there are those brown or grey duffle teddy bear suits in the shop, the everyday wear for boys, but it seems that my mother wants something special for me. She takes the band, measures me, approximately, then runs to Gelb, the haberdasher, and in half an hour she comes back with the purchase: a loosely-woven, navy-blue textile with black checks. Now she takes a closer look at me. She measures my legs, waist, shoulder and arms, and then begins to cut the material. She smooths rolled-up paper patterns on the table, makes notes in chalk, then snaps the scissors and demonstrates her skill in tacking. Then fitting-on is coming. She lays the elements of the upper part on me, adjusts them here and there with needle and thread, puts the collar and the sleeves in places they are supposed to be, and when all this is done, she takes off cautiously the whole stuff from me. Then come the trousers, but that's much easier. By the time the sun is down, my suit is ready, and my seamstress mother is just picking the tacks out of it. Then the real fitting-on comes. The two trouser-legs are wide as those of a pantaloon, the waist is elastic, and it has also two lined pockets. The top also has side pockets that can be buttoned. The lapels and the cuffs, the collar and the waist are made

from the dark grey baize of a dismantled old coat, and the neck part is closed down by three buttons. The next day at school, the boys and girls alike stand around me groping my beautiful new suit and asking where we bought it. I tell them that it was my mother who made this suit for me, but they don't want to believe it.

That day, we are visited by Magdalina Vasilevna, the head of the school's pioneer organisation, who tells us that on top of all this, we second form children will become little Octoberists. We learn from her that the Soviet Octoberists are the forerunners of the Leninist pioneer organisation, and yes, we are little kids, but there is much that we can do in demonstrating how we will live later as adults. For the time being, all we have to do is to wear a little red star on our chest, because that is what distinguishes the true Octoberists from other children. She then shows us one, such a little red star, then tells us that the Soviet red star is a five-point star, and then gives us the task to make one at home with the help of our parents or older brothers or sisters. It is advisable to cut out the star, she explains, from hard, but not too thick cardboard, and then, using needles and thread, cover it with a thin red material, preferably without wrinkles. Then everyone realizes that this operation is not as simple as that. It's still fortunate that Grandma is a seamstress, but I need my father's help to draw and cut out the star. The next morning, I head off to school already glowing: I am a proud Soviet Octoberist... And from then on, the school day begins with monitoring. Who doesn't have a star yet? Everyone has different, but mostly acceptable excuses. I haven't got it ready yet. It got dirty, and it got ruined in the wash. My mother cut it off because she had to wash my jacket and she doesn't know where she has put it.

And so, it goes from day to day, week to week, but one day Magdalina Vasilevna visits us again and announces enthusiastically that Octoberist stars that can be pinned to the clothing will be on sale soon, and so everyone will be able to buy them for just a few kopecks. She brought one to show us and says that it is of the same colour as that of the ruby star that glows on the Kremlin tower, but in its centre

there's a portrait of Lenin as a curly haired child of the Ulyanov family. For the time being this badge is not yet easy to purchase, but there will be enough of them later, enough even for the children in Cuba.

The name of Cuba is often mentioned lately. It's mentioned on the radio, and I hear at the school that there was a revolution there too, which is something to be happy about. A man in military uniform came to our school the other day and told the teachers in the courtyard something about Cuba and the war that was about to start. But he also told the classes that lined up in the courtyard that there would soon be an alert in the village, that the entire population would have to find shelter, and that it would be forbidden for anyone to remain in the streets. We barely understand any of this, but by the evening it is being talked about at home. My father, because it's likely that at the shoe-factory civil defence preparations were also made, mentions nuclear attack and points to the small vegetable cellar under our house as a possible shelter. I am instinctively opposed to any kind of preparations and I don't want to believe those people who frighten us with wars. One afternoon, however, uncle Apay, the town-crier appeared at the Market Square, and, after a long roll of his drumsticks, he summoned the inhabitants of the surrounding houses. When he had ten or fifteen people standing around him, he took a sheet of paper out of his side pocket and began to proclaim. He read the proclamation aloud in a pompous, overblown portentous voice, almost without taking a breather. "First: The Council of Vilok Settlement informs everyone that on Friday, from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Moscow time, a general civil defence alert will take effect in the settlement. One hour before the alert, everyone should turn on their wired radios and listen to the instructions on the radio. Secondly, it is advisable to set up a shelter in each house during the alert period, the best place for this is the cellar. Thirdly, after the drill, all adults, including school-age children, should prepare for watching a film, which will start at 9 p.m. Moscow time on the football pitch." After announcing all this, he rolled up his paper and put it away, and as a farewell he made his drumsticks dance a little further on the drum's surface.

Then Friday arrived, and at the appointed time the air-raid siren did indeed sound. Red-armband wearing messengers on bikes carried it along the deserted main street. They stopped at intersections and in squares and gave it a good spin. The booming sound from the depths grew louder and louder, rising to ever higher pitches, spreading in all directions and penetrating even into the quiet of summer kitchens and poultry yards. Instead of retreating to the family shelter I and some other kids from the Market Square followed the cyclists, but they soon went away, and the deserted street was no longer of interest. After an hour or so, the alarm was cancelled and we could get ready for the film.

The football pitch was all open for the people of the settlement. At the far end of the open space, a large white cinema screen was raised, and in front of it, young people were chatting. Other young men with the soldiers brought in benches, and by the time the spacious club room of the garrison was emptied, the line of seats took half of the field. But by then people were coming already in neat little groups, taking the seats quickly.

When it became a little darker, the showing began. On the screen, as I later learnt, images of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima flashed for the audience. Scores of corpses, a city razed to the ground, burnt and crippled wounded everywhere. And then, I deduce years later, the message of what I have just seen: the devastating effects of the A-bomb, the nature of radioactive radiation explained by learned men in white coats. Then came the essence: the lesson taught to the civilian population explaining possible ways of how to be protected against a nuclear attack. Numbers were used to show how much radiation is reduced if one is hidden behind earthworks, bricks or concrete walls. We see big city shelters, huge basements made to house people, and then men in gas masks dressed in rubber suits washing transport equipment and military technology. They show us frightening things, I move closer to Karcsi Kovács sitting next to me, and he embraces me with his left arm. Behind us adults talk, and I catch one or two sentences unwittingly: 'Do you know what the best defence against

an A-bomb is? You take a wet sheet, put it on your back and you crawl slowly to the cemetery.' I'm still small, but I already know that what the man says is gibberish.

* * *

In the school, among the many teachers and still more children, I noticed a little old man with a moustache who always showed up with his box of tools. He fixed door locks, replaced fence rails, swept the yard, took chalk to the classrooms, put water into the hand wash, he was the school's handyman. He was not very articulate, and his speech was a little strange. For example, he said 'shoap' instead of 'soap,' and he called Mr. Szabo Mr. Shabo, i.e. he always said 'sh' instead of 's'. Later I realised, or rather tried to justify this little speech impediment, that it was more or less deliberate on his part, the only reason for which could be his name. On one occasion I witnessed him introducing himself to some official person who was looking for the headmaster. He threw back his shoulders, looked the person in the eye, and then said his name, Nándor Fash-binder, emphasizing the 'sh' carefully so that no one would accidentally take it as 's' and then pronounce it as Germans would.[28] People always tried to pretend that they thought about nothing wrong when they heard the little old man's name, but instinctively, because everybody is naughty in a way, they repeated it as Germans do, with 's.' There were, however, ones who, when addressing him, did not wish to mispronounce this unusual and strange name, and simply called him uncle Binder. Soon this short moniker became so popular that it replaced the old man's real name.

Uncle Binder knocked on our classroom's door one day with a message. He didn't come in, he just said something to the teacher through the half-open door and hurried away. It couldn't have been a very good message because Ella Karlovna turned a little pale and her voice was agitated. "Children," she gave us the order, "we will put away

[28] 'Fasz' in Hungarian, pronounced with 's' at the end of the word, has a vulgar connotation. (The tr. note).

the Hungarian exercise-books and take out the Russian language book and exercise-books instead. If someone comes in and asks what class we are having, everyone will say 'Russian.' Do you understand? Let's put away all the unnecessary things from the desk and carefully copy what I'm about to write on the blackboard into the notebook." But there were footsteps already on the corridor, and two strangers, accompanied by the deputy headmaster, entered the room. To welcome them, the class stood up and we said the well-rehearsed greeting: *Zdrav- stvuy-te*! The inspectors nodded in return, exchanged a few words with the teacher, and then one of them stepped forward and said in Hungarian.

"Children! I can see that almost all of you are Octoberists. Great! But I can also see that not all of you have badges. Why? Do your parents not allow it? Where is yours, for example," he pointed to Feri Márkus. The kid, whom we called Pumpkinhead for he was not exceptionally clever, kept his head down. He was usually silent on other occasions as well, and it was difficult to get a sensible sentence or any kind of answer out of him, but now Ella Karlovna encouraged him.

"Speak up, Feri, no need to fear, why don't you have a star? Pumpkin looked at the teacher, then at the inspector, and spoke in a barely audible voice, mumbling under his breath.

"We couldn't do it. And... and my mother said that our star was in the sky."

The inspector turned to the teacher and the vice-principal with briskly nodding his head.

"Unbelievable! A Soviet schoolboy has his star in the sky! All right, if it's there for him, let it be there. But let's see what we still have!" - he said, or asked, and was already also flushing, and began to walk between the rows of benches.

Then the inspector asked the following: "Can anybody tell me who does what on Sunday mornings, what you usually do when we have no classes?"

Well, this question is not difficult to answer, many of us perhaps thought, and hands were raised here and there. "I help my mum peel vegetables for dinner," said a little girl. "I go to the cinema," said a boy.

"I go to the puppet theatre," said another. "I do my preparations for the Monday classes," says another with a face beaming.

"Yes, you all gave brilliant answers, you're very, very smart and nice children. But the activities you have listed for me take at most an hour and a half, maybe two hours. But the Sundays are long, so you can do much more during the rest of the day. Do you go anywhere else?" the inspector inquires and looks around with an expression on his face that shows he is not satisfied with the answers he has heard so far.

But no more hands are raised, my classmates seem to have run out of answers, and now they wait with downcast, yet attentive eyes to see what all this means. Well, if I was silent so far, now it is time for me to speak, for they have surely come to get the one right answer and leave satisfied. So, I raise my hand, one of the inspectors notices it and asks me to speak.

"I usually go to church with Grandpa on Sunday mornings,' I say confidently looking at the man who asked straight in the eye.

As if he had really come to our school just for this answer, he turned to Ella Karlovna with a mocking smile, but what he said to her we could not understand, because that was already in Russian. Then he turned immediately and headed for the exit with the other stranger followed by our deputy headmaster ashamed. The door closed, and as soon as their footsteps were no longer audible, the second act began, and the teacher started towards me ominously. Her face was contorted with a fury hitherto unknown to us, her eyes were stormy mad, and she raised her right hand as she was approaching. I was slapped in the face, but not from the side, but straight between the eyes. My head snapped back and I hit the wall so hard that I almost fainted. Then she wanted to hit me again, but her hand stopped in the air, hesitating, and she staggered back towards the table with her face flushing. I could not understand what happened, I only felt that I was the victim of some terrible injustice. If I had burst into tears, I would have asked only one question: why? But then I couldn't cry, and there was no time to think about things like that, because another act followed, the third.

Ella Karlovna sat at the table meditating. She must have thought that the slap could have been effective only if it had taught me a lesson. Perhaps two or three minutes passed, and then she rose from the table and looked around in the class.

"Mancika Kiszelovics!" she called the name of her little pet who was always the most obedient little creature in the form. The little girl, in a starched white apron and with an impeccable Octoberist badge on her chest, stood up and waited for the question. Then the teacher asked her: "What do you do on Sunday mornings?"

"Well," the little girl said beginning to answer the question correctly and exhaustively. "Well, I go to the cinema or the puppet theatre on Sunday mornings, and if the teacher or the pioneer leader says that I have to come up to school because there is some extra work I am supposed to do, I come up to the school."

While Mancika was talking, the teacher was watching me intently, and when the girl sat back down, she asked me the question:

"Did you get it?"

I nodded and said yes, I did.

"Then repeat it."

"So, was the slap not enough? Should I be ashamed to boot?" Perhaps I would have asked this question if I had been at least a bit taller and a little braver. But I had neither enough determination nor any other spiritual support to strengthen my absolutely humiliated self, so I repeated word for word, letter for letter, the words of that little girl who was the embodiment of excellence.

I don't know exactly how many more nights I had to sleep, how many more times I had to go to school, but it was barely two weeks more when Ella Karlovna stayed in the school. Rumours had it that she had gotten a job in her village. That was the last that we heard of her, and from then on we were tutored by an old man named Yuri Ivanovich, and finished the second form with his guidance. The big, gruff man was not especially mindful of teaching. He was old enough to get tired before the end of the lesson, and from then on, his only concern was to pass the time. But he always gave us work to do independently,

and then for the rest of the lesson he was napping. If the noise got too loud, he would beckon the noisiest kid to him, and with his two fists, imitating the grinding millstones, he would shout: 'Hey, you, I'll grind you, I'll grind you, I'll grind you!' Yet he never ground, nor even slapped anyone, because he was too lazy and too kind-hearted. In fact, he hardly knew any of us, only very rarely did he manage to guess anyone's name. This weakness was exploited by a classmate called Jani Orosz. On one occasion, he came up to him with this:

"Yuriy Ivanovich, Jani Orosz ran away!"

"But who's that Jani Orosz?" he asked and looked questioningly at the boy. "Well, I'll box his ears, just let me catch the scoundrel!"

He taught us no poem, no history, no grammar. All I remember is just a little song we had learned from uncle Harapkó, but I will never forget that because, that as later I found out, was written by the great Sándor Weöres, the master poet himself. So, it is no wonder that it stuck to me like a thistle. And let me not forget: our teacher once brought a violin to a music class, and with that he acquainted our ears with the melody too:

Bóbita Bóbita dances
Round her angels are sitting
Frog-swarm playing the flute
Locust-swarm on violin [29]
(Violets blossom in a green forest,
The pine boughs hide me well.
What is that branch for?
Come, the world is wide open!
Violets blossom in a green forest.)

* * *

Looking out of the window of our house, I can also see the playing field over the blackened boards of the football pitch. I can see the players

[29] Here is an original version of the verse in tune in Hungarian: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CsCd2-Vszg

in their garish jerseys, the referee running up and down, and I can hear the excited roar of the crowd, but I can also sense the discontent when they protest against the referee's decision with loud boos and jeers. If the kids want to see more of the game, there are enough holes and gaps in the fence for them to sneak through into the stadium area and mingle with the spectators. However, I am not that crazy about football. If the boys want to watch a game, I'll go with them for the fun of it, but no matter how beautiful a goal is, I can't be that loud enthusiastic football fan who claps his head off if his team scores a goal. So, I don't mind a bit that between the pitch and our row of houses the foundations of two large apartment blocks are going to be laid. I hear that army officers with their families who are now leaving Austria will have apartments there when the houses are finished. It is true that then we will not be able to watch football matches from our window. But that's beside the point.

The foundation works began as the snow started melting, and in March most of the masonry material was already put in place. A military construction crew was sent here from somewhere and they must have been real professionals, because the walls were quickly rising. Then came the carpenters to raise high the roofbeams. They measured and cut the quality timber, and we took home nimbly the ends of the beams and rafters, the smaller pieces of lath, the larger chips. They made it really easy to light a fire for lunch. Thus, we had daily contact with the soldiers, spoke broken Russian to them, but at the same time also learnt a lot. When they were thirsty, we brought them fresh water from the well, and the soldiers' friendship and trust gradually spread over to the adult population, or more precisely – and I say this with a little blush – towards our women. In retrospect I have to admit that sometimes without any difficulty or hindrance even.

One of the men in uniform, a certain Anatoly, was once offered water by the young pretty woman with marcel-wave living next door, but who knows what kind of water it could be, because it made Anatoly only thirstier, and inevitably made him take to our aunt Manci's charms. He came to her house as often as if it were part of his duty, and

when the conversation between friends turned to their affair, the young woman did not even protest. Why should she? There was, for example, only a few houses away, an envied rich lady, who kept a laundress and a constant boy-friend coming to her house regularly, and the husband, the best-known shoemaker in the neighbourhood, because he was all the time busy, simply took cognizance of the fact and accepted it. Their relationship was discussed daily, it was talked over in all possible way. The most incomprehensible side of the story, however, was that nobody knew what it was that Ibolya liked so much in that bachelor who was older than her husband and had tuberculosis to boot. Was it that he had a luxury car, or that he really knew something that the other men didn't? Since as far as I know there is no confidential and reliable information related to this matter in the public domain, the answer remains a mystery to me. No problem, the days went on unchanged and the building of the officers' quarters continued uninterrupted. And at such a tempo the painters were able to inspect the site at the end of August, and at the beginning of September they took possession of it.

The painters were civilians, all local young men. One of them was my father's cousin, who was a house painter, but I didn't know him. Jóska, nicknamed Kopek, always was a footballer in my eyes, a popular forward in the shoe factory's football team, and it didn't ever occur to me that he had other skills besides those of a football-player. But then I understood that besides football he was as much of a master of other professions as some of his peers too. To dissolve lime and paint, to soak the colouring matter and make it a fine consistency, and then to let it through a filter, is not a great art, but to paint the walls with a lime-brush so that there would remain no stains on them (the walls) after drying, that is a science, and the boys, as the results showed, knew their craft.

But how interesting is human nature! We could make friends with the soldiers very quickly, so why couldn't we get close to the painters? They were also people, as all the others, and if they got thirsty at work, they were also allowed to drink. The women from the neighbourhood would come in, have a drink of vodka or of a little something, and

once or twice I even noticed them huddling over some old tattered book. What could it be that interested them so much? I was eager to know, and when I discovered that they had found a suitable place for the book on the top of the kitchen cupboard, I got up on a stool when nobody was there and took it down. There was no cover, no title page, but the first sentence, which started with "When I did not even know what a dick is…", sort of stung me. But I had to close it and put it back quickly, because I heard footsteps coming from the outside, and later I had no opportunity to read it further. Someone must have taken it.

One day I came home from school to find Jóska, alias Kopeck polishing our new kitchen cupboard with sandpaper. It occurred to me, my mother mentioned it once before, that she didn't like the rough factory paint, and that she would prefer a subtle apple green instead of the dark green on the doors. Apparently, I thought, it was now time to implement her idea. And indeed, it became beautiful. I liked the repainted kitchen cabinetry, and I was pleased with the cleaner, lighter colour of the stools that were to come later.

After a few days, however, on entering the house I heard my parents fighting like hell. My father's recurring outbursts of agitation and despair foreboded evil, and my mother's angrily thrown responses only reinforced this ominous feeling. Unable to listen to their bitter row, I went out and sat dizzily on the stairs. The reason for the quarrel was not clear to me then, but I had the unusual feeling that my childhood was over. The world around me was in turmoil, it was about to change, and certainly not for the better, but against me. After half an hour, they both quieted down. My mother came out of the room with a bag full of clothes, took my hand and walked with me towards the exit. I didn't understand anything, but I pulled my hand out of hers. I thought I was a big enough boy, I should not be led by the hand. I'll go willingly, I'll follow her as she wants.

In twenty-twenty-five minutes, we arrived at the Hatház. It looked like my grandmother Teréz expected our coming. Grimly, sighing heavily, she welcomed us without delight in the cramped summer kitchen. And while the two women stood aside to discuss the situation,

I sat on the armed bench and awaited further instructions. A little later my uncle Árpi came home from work.

"So, you are here, you stupid floozy!" attacked he immediately his sister. "Did your man kick you out from the house?"

"I don't mind!" I hear my mother's placid reply, but I can see on her face that she was rather put out by her brother's blunt interrogation.

Dinner was served, and my grandmother allotted us a rickety-legged couch for sleeping. I didn't sleep much that night, but my mother, lying next to me, also tossed and tumbled in bed all night. The next day, instead of school, I wandered in the yard or in my grandmother Teri's small garden picking the slowly yellowing bunches of grape vines at my will. But there was also something to discover, something to look for in the drawers of my grandmother's old black cupboard. Inside the chest, I found a gaudy gallimaufry of old dresses, feathers, and sequins. But I also found here my grandfather Puskás's bronze and silver medals he had gotten in the First World War for his bravery and which Grandma thought had been lost.

"Wow, where did you find them?" she asked unusually kindly.

"They were here in the drawer, and I just wanted to see what was written on them," I said shyly as if I had committed some indecency.

"And I had already given up on finding them, I thought my grandson Béluka had taken them all a long time ago, there were about ten of them. Well, you know what? As they say, finders are keepers, so I give them to you."

On the second day, when it was getting dark, my father came unexpectedly, but he didn't come into the house. He only brought my satchel and books, so that I could go to school, and once he was there, he asked my mother to come out with him to the gate. "No need to be so cramped and badly off here," he said briefly. He encouraged us to go home in peace as he had decided to move himself. I don't know, I didn't hear what my mother answered, but we spent the night there and I went to school from there the next morning.

I was prepared for upbraiding, reckoning and for taking a bawling out as the two days' absence was an unprecedented delinquency, but

aunt Elvira just looked at me with pity and said nothing. From this I understood that my situation was worse than I realised, and my mouth almost curled up into crying which would be a big mistake, I thought, and I stubbornly forced myself not to do that as my classmates were already standing around me inquisitively. They perhaps just wanted to know why I was absent for two whole days, but I also had the feeling that they looked at me as someone who was totally different from the boy that they knew three days before. Karcsi Pongo grinned into my face and asked: "What's up, Fábián, have you got two fathers?" The others didn't laugh at this silly question, which Karcsi, together with the others, must have thought to crack as a joke. The class, nevertheless, remained quiet instead and wanted to know first what our teacher would say. She, however, had no appropriate words to describe my situation, but looked at Karcsi very reproachfully. I think she was also relieved like me when the bell rang, as I ran to my seat.

After school, I did not go home to Hatház, but to our own house. But hardly had I reached the end of Szobor utca when I, as some freak, was again surrounded by a curious group of schoolmates, two or three years older than me. They wanted to hear from me the answers to questions that gossip-hungry adults asked each-other. It was from them that I learnt that on that particular afternoon Karcsi, alias Kopek jumped out of the window of our house in his pants only, and my father gathered up his clothes and shoes and hid them somewhere, refusing to give them back, even though his mother had asked him to. 'Don't you know where your father hid Kopek's clothes? Didn't he tell you for how much he'd give it back to him? When is your father going to petition for a divorce?' I was bombarded with unexpected and cruel questions. And Crooked Neck, Józsi Maceda's elder son said that when my mother was asked how she could do such a thing, she told them that she could only be proud of herself for having been able to seduce such a handsome young man, and that anyone who didn't like it should just keep on being jealous and go where the sun don't shine. I protested desperately, for every word stabbed me to the quick, and the accusations that were made were so convincing that

they were believable to me too. 'I don't know anything, let me go!' I shouted crying and tearing myself away from the wall of shame I ran home. Yes, now the story in which I was the suffering hero was slowly becoming clear for me. They tried to keep their meetings a secret, but soon neighbours began to whisper about their trysts. Then everyone started to talk about them. But how long must I, who is not guilty, walk with my head turned down?

My mother was preparing something for dinner, and she put some wood on the fire just as I entered. Seeing the open door of the stove, I remembered that I opened it some time ago for something, and in the firelighter that I had prepared I found some disgusting, elongated and slimy rubber, which, I realised afterwards, should have been burnt by now, but someone forgot to light the fire. And how good it was that I did not touch it, did not take it out, for I now suspect that the ugliness of it had something to do with my mother's shameful affair. I now firmly resolved that whatever she offered me, I would not take it from her hands. But that was out of the question for the moment, because she had just ordered me to go to Grandmother's place and tell Daddy to come home and have dinner.

My father was lying on the couch, but as soon as he saw me, he turned on his stomach and put his arms around his head. Did he not want to see me, or was he afraid I would look him in the eye? I couldn't decide what the point of all this pointless behaviour was, but I could pretty much tell that he was struggling within. But Grandmother wanted none of his antics.

"Come on, son, brace yourself up, be a man! The kid's come for you, he must have something to tell you."

But my father didn't say anything, and his upper body shook as if he was sobbing silently And indeed, he was really crying, crying silently. But Grandma didn't let him do that, she shook his shoulders.

"Now, that's enough! Time to wake up!"

My father supporting his chin with his elbows looked at my grandmother as if I were not there at all and said:

"Tell me, Mum, how could she do this to me?"

"Calm down, my son. You know she was not the first and she won't be the last." My father had to agree and he nodded, but that was not enough consolation for him, for he uttered a cry of pain.

"I feel now, Mum, as I have never felt before. As if my soul had been torn out. Look, Mum," my father said and flapped his chest, "there's nothing in there!"

And his birth mother had to see as the tears of pain were running from her son's eyes.

And I stood there confused greatly, staring out of the window like someone who thinks he knows a lot, but the case was that I hardly understood anything. But if I'd been born two or three years earlier, I would have had something to see and process as well. I couldn't find an answer to how my once proud and strong father could collapse in just a couple of days. Years later, I found possible explanations after his reappearance in my nightmarish dreams and subsequent related events. After all, if you tear out the man's soul, the body will soon follow as well.

* * *

Some people keep time by counting days and weeks, others by the coming and passing of holidays and seasons, and I, paying attention to this and that, suddenly realise that my father had been dead for five years already Five years can bring visible changes in one's life, five years drag a considerable burden with them, yet it is not so easy to get used to the fact that he is not with us. Although I am not necessarily a man of spiritual beliefs, I often get the feeling that he may miss us, too. These days he often appears via the tunnels of dreams. Recently, well after the middle of the night, I was alarmed to find myself short of breath. Jumping up from my bed, I gasped for oxygen as if I had just come up from under the water, and when I got myself finally together, I saw my father standing at my bedside. It was him who woke me. But now I am reminded of the approaching Easter, for the resurrection this year falls on his birthday, the eighth of April.

Such worries do not prey upon my mother any longer. Her advanced cerebral atherosclerosis has taken all the burden off her shoulders and made life easier for her. She has got no more plans for the near or distant future, no longer sets for herself or for others short- or long-term tasks, only her physical necessities remained with the inescapable instincts of nutrition and metabolism. Whatever the heart may suggest, or reason may advise, she must come to terms with the fact that old age is one's second childhood, mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans everything!

It is Good Friday, a day of mourning and preparations. The grandchildren come and go, the bronze jar for wax melting is taken out, members of the family who have some of this enterprising spirit prepare for egg colouring. My mother-in-law comes, and although she finds it more and more difficult to walk, she can't sit at home with her hands folded. She says she saw a car in front of my mother's house and she thinks Árpi has come to see her sister.

I hurry out and go to have a few words with my uncle. It must be only a hundred meters, but when I got there, the car was not there any longer. I open the door of the house, but for some reason I can only open it a little, just enough to get in, but the sight makes me feel hot all over again. The movable furniture is all over the place, one of the armchairs is pushed in front of the door, the rags covering the floor are strewn all over the place too, and on the floor, in some stomach-churning dirt, lies my insane, half-naked mother. I reach for her hand to pick her up, but on her hands, arms, and even in her hair, as well as on the chairs, on the table with its legs turned up, on the walls, there is something brownish that one refuses to identify, and the room is thick with the smell of human excrement. Foul Air! In her younger days, my mother herself used to call this kind of stench stale, but this is a more severe version of it. Now I don't wonder that Árpi fled from the sight, though he may have had his share of it, having been used to it long before. My grandmother Teréz passed away in a similar way from this world of shadows, and my mother, whenever she visited her, could not stop moaning about her birth mother's nasty illness. "My son, put me out of my misery if I'm like that," she used to say, and now I could remind her of this, in case she would come to her senses,

but, anyway, she wouldn't understand. It is more important to get her out of this filth and dirt and put her to bed. I'll tuck her in, light the coals in the stove, put wood on the fire and then I open all the windows in the room. I am full of bitterness and anger, I could ask how we came to this, but who could I pose the question to? Only the Lord God Himself! I snatch at water and rags, and though I could not have imagined it before, I am now wiping and cleaning the disgusting waste of the human body, while my wife's earlier words come to my mind. Yes, we have to get used to this now.

She may be right. I admit that she is the stronger of the two of us now, and I also admit that there is more understanding love in her soul. A few years ago, when the cardiologist in Beregszász no longer saw any point in my father's hospitalization, I brought him home to have some rest in the warmth of our house for a few days. He could use the bed left empty by our daughter then away in the dormitory. That time he had no urinary or bowel problems yet, but physically he was very weak. He made his way when he felt the need to the toilet opening from the terrace, but he fell over the door and what he feared perhaps most of all happened there and then. 'It is the end,' I read in his eyes, and I have never seen him so helpless and defenceless. Then we put a bedside lavatory next to his bed, but he couldn't use it either. The next day we saw with our own eyes that he tried to approach it with his pyjamas down, but he did not come to sit on it. He leaned against the arm of the chair, and soon wailed, because his tired, sick bowels started already emptying, his sphincter muscles released themselves against his will, and the nasty end product of digestion, the faeces, flowed out of him, and continued to flow onto the carpet. When he noticed us standing there, he began to wail bitterly, ashamed. 'Klara, my daughter,' he said in despair, and he begged his daughter-in-law to forgive him with every flash of his eyes and weakening muscles.

As this picture shows, my mother does not let her conscience bother her in a similar condition. She responds to nature's call wherever she is. Although she has strength and energy to get out of the bed to flip furniture or block a door with a chair, she refuses to sit on the toilet or pick up and use

the cutlery. Does she think that she is still in a body cast, as she imagined, and that the rest of her life is a vegetative existence? It is quite possible that she still has this state of mind, and the screen that separates her from the real world is only perceived by her alone.

But I hear footsteps on the stairs, and the door opens. My wife takes stock of the situation, gives a long sigh, and nods vigorously.

"We'll have lots of work to do, I see," she says, nodding again at the sight of the water boiling in the big pot. "I can still understand"– she tries to analyse the situation – "that she instinctively does the job when there is a must, but why does she have to scatter and spread the fecal matter all over the place?"

"Because she wants to get rid of it," I say giving the explanation that seems plausible. "Because she doesn't feel comfortable with that matter running between her legs, it bothers her there. Do you remember the public lavatories in Ungvár in the Soviet era? You can't remember, you weren't even in those places. They were whitewashed at least twice a year, but every square inch of the white walls was covered with brown stains made by fingers used for wiping out the rectum. And as disgusting as it is to talk about it even, you have to accept that an unprepared man is forced to clean himself with his hands, with one of his most precious limbs. We work with it, we stroke with it, we eat with it, so when we get dirty, the instinct to get rid of the filth at all costs is subconsciously there. I think that's exactly how my mother thinks, and that's why she scatters and spreads the excrement all over the room."

"Bravo! You explained that very smartly, but I wonder what would you do if you found yourself in that situation? Then how would you argue?"

"You mean me being a situation like that?

"Yeah. As you know an apple doesn't fall far from its tree, and genetically you have a chance to get into a situation like that."

'Certainly, she was right again,' I thought, and to come up with something very original and completely out of the ordinary, I said something stupid:

"If it happens to me... there would be a gun under my pillow."

"You only think that you'd be aware of your situation and that you'd know when and how to use your gun. Do you think your mother knows what's going on around her? You can see very well for yourself that no, she doesn't!"

Not expecting such a turn of events, I had to capitulate and so I just nodded in consent.

"Nah, can you see? Go and fetch the bathtub, so that we could wash her thoroughly. For there's work to do at home too.

What else could I still say? I brought in the tub, poured hot water into it, added a little cold, and sat my mother on her bed so we could get all the rags off her. We pulled her up by her arms and started her towards the tub, but she refused to touch the floor with her feet. She just pulled both her legs on the floor and had to be carried like a helpless child. But she liked the warm water, she felt quite at ease in the tub, and she wanted to lie down in it as soon as she was there.

"Hold her by the shoulders so that she doesn't fall in the water and I could wash her properly," my wife ordered.

I was happy to follow her every instruction, because it was a comfort to know that I had someone by my side who took on the heavier part of the burden of caring for my mother without a second thought. She dripped shampoo on her dirty hair, cleaned her body with terrycloth gloves, and after rinsing her hair with lukewarm water, she beckoned me to come to help her. I had to assist her stand up, for my mother must have felt so comfortable in the water that she would have lifted it with her by grasping the two edges of the tub, and so I had to wrench her fingers off them. On the bed, however, she already sat calmly wrapped in the bath towel, content to let her daughter-in-law, who she was never fond of very much, comb her hair and clip it with scissors from her eyes. I myself, however, took it upon myself to trim her nails, and now I remembered my father, who was very astonished when I once used a small pair of wire-cutting pliers to remove the extremely knobby, thickly layered and overgrown nails from his toes. "I never cut my father's nails," my father admitted feelingly with a mist in his eyes.

"Now, look at her. Doesn't she look like a doll?" my spouse pointed to her mother-in-law, who was reverted to her human form, and while I cleaned the tub and tidied up the work area, she sat calmly on the edge of her bed swallowing with taste the delicious croissant soaked in latte.

* * *

Time passed in its bountiful tranquillity while the grains of my intellect were also promisingly rounding and growing one after the other. More and more often and louder I had to hear that we lived in the best, greatest, the most peace-loving and free country in the world, that we were the bastion of world peace. One late autumn day, aunt Elvira gave us the task of writing an essay about the capital of our country. True, she gave us some briefing on the sights of Moscow, and then we could start working on our own. I started off by saying that the capitals of the world, like Rome, Paris, London, were all great and very beautiful, but then something flashed through my mind and I entered a state of exaltation I had never known before and wrote down the following sentence: "The most beautiful city in the world is our Moscow." The teacher, walking between the rows of desks, peeped into the works the children were writing, poked her index finger at the spelling mistakes she detected and moved on. As soon as she stopped by me, I let her read the page of my notebook, but after half a minute she looked at me in disbelief. "Did you write this?" she asked looking into my face. "Yes, I did," I answered as a matter of fact calmly, and met boldly her gaze, which became hesitant, misty, and then for a few seconds she stared into nothing. Then she raised her eyes to me again, but this time her look was a very different one, I think, and I knew that hence she would always cast this different glance at me.

My father knew a lot of poems, he knew some of them by heart, and when he felt like it, he would just start reciting them without being asked. I was always grateful, perhaps his most grateful listener, and he noticed it too. It was also quite frequently that he would start to recite a poem just for me. Then, one cold and inhospitable autumn evening,

he pulled me to his bed to tell me a long story in verse. He spoke about a "bright" boy who began to ask questions from his father about the concept and meaning of homeland. The child was already familiar with geographical concepts, but he did not understand how land and nature could evoke such extreme emotions in adults. "When you grown-ups talk about your homeland," he says, "your eyes, I saw, are drenched in tears, then it catches fire, it flames, it sparks fierily..." And here, to clarify the question, the father began the story of an anonymous hero who was dragged away to a foreign country by the enemy and then forced to renounce his homeland. The story tells us that ten or twenty years later, we see the anonymous man as 'he runs around with princes and bows in the shining court of a foreign king. Thanks to merciful God he was doing so well that a whole army of servants was at his command all the time. But the great man, being intoxicated by wine and his own greatness, in a toast wished his homeland to blazes again. 'Long live wine, steeds, drunkenness, cards, dice... Long live everything in the world, but my homeland! Let it perish!' And as he says this, he goes pale, starts trembling, his eyes roll, his dazed brain reels, and as if he wanted to part from his wits, he laughs out loud and then his tears fall like a shower." Being ten I didn't quite understand, just surmised perhaps, what caused the sudden turnaround of the story's hero. But I was sure, or rather I sensed, that this was where the work reached its climax, as the following lines confirmed. "The image of the despised, mocked far-away homeland strikes his heart as a fiery lightning, and kindles a mad love towards the country that he had hated so much and wished it to blazes!" we have our certainty, and from here the plot really turns towards the expected end. And, strange as it may seem, the death of the wanderer kissing the ground of his country gave me a feeling of happiness accompanied by tears instead of sadness. In retrospect I think that I could never have gotten a more vivid and powerful lesson in patriotism from anyone.

Thus, our days passed, peace and quiet seemed to return to our house. However, sad peace of human apathy and resignation descended on Újlak, because things could have gone better and at a more leisurely

pace, if only the damned chimney of the shoe factory had not polluted our daily air more and more often and with increasing intensity. But what could we do when the chimney was in the mood to spew smoke? Apparently, the managers of the plant could no longer cope with the accumulated amount of waste of greasy leather and rubber, so they set them on fire. Let the boiler roar, let it at least heat the production halls, and let the black and yellow smoke pour through the big iron pipe over the village. But it was not the colour that was the problem. When the weather was cloudy and foggy, and there was no wind, the smoke was in no hurry to leave the settlement. It drifted comfortably along the main street, choking or nauseating passers-by as it pleased. People scrambled on their feet as if a storm were approaching. Croaking and spitting, they tried to get out from under it as quickly as possible, but even if they found more consumable air, they could not escape the soot of coal and sulphur precipitating from it, which they carried home on their shoulders. No one would have thought of speaking out or complaining, everyone knew it was useless. The people resigned themselves to it and, remembering the many floods that had devastated the town, they began to refer to it as Woe-lak[30] again.

It was in this smoky atmosphere, in an increasingly disillusioned mood, that the monetary reform due from January 1961 hit us. What it was needed for, we did not really know or guess, but when it came into effect, it decimated people's small reserves relentlessly. My father's salary of eight hundred roubles was immediately reduced to eighty, and we were told in vain that it was worth the same, we just felt that we were robbed. And one shock followed another. When my father found that our neat little house, for which we had paid fifteen thousand roubles, was now worth only fifteen hundred, my mother became desperate. And going from bad to worse old Gacsályi, when they wanted to pay to him at the end of the month for the milk he produced at home, did not want to take the three roubles that was due in accordance with the revalued money. If that was all his labour and freshly produced milk were worth,

[30] The term is a Hungarian pun, replacing the first part of the town where the protagonist lives, Újlak, meaning new dwelling, with the word woe, meaning suffering.

he would rather give it to the piglets, and her ladyship, as he called Mrs. Peleskei, could go to the market every morning. And it was useless to declare that the value of the kopeck was ten times higher, because it was not the people who profited from this business, but the financial institutions, since the change, or more precisely the yellow coins known as beggar's money, had been withdrawn from circulation well in advance. In short, the people were badly shocked, and Yuri Gagarin's space flight, heralded as a world sensation, did not change this either.

As spring was coming, Jóska Salamon, the furniture factory's manager sent trailers loaded with production waste to the Market Square, and the waste was quickly dumped in the duck ponds and other flat places. Some of the neighbour women were still pleased, for they quickly took apart the bundle and happily took home the slab and lath pieces that were very good for fire. Fire, they reasoned, was necessary in summer too, and they could not have had a better kindling. The more ingenious housewives persuaded the tractor drivers for a few roubles to hide a little more firewood under the sawdust next time, and to dump this fodder directly in front of their gates or in the yard. Of course, apart from the money the tractor drivers made, no one minded that the Lenten winds picked up the sawdust and filled the area with it.

But the best was yet to come. Jóska Salamon's ingenuity thrilled the Mordovian Yerakin, the manager of the shoe factory. He also ordered to take the trash that was used as boiler fuel in the winter to the Market Square. The leather and rubber waste did not stay there unused for long either. Part of it was also taken to generate heat and twice as much smoke in the kitchen stoves. On the other hand, this trash still contained the tiny grains of leather and rubber dust produced by the grinding machines, and if you poked your hand to the bottom of this garbage, you could feel that there were quite a few tiny nails left. But the Market Square, polluted or not polluted, remained the same, and we didn't look for a new place to play. Moreover, I think that our behaviour slowly became as rude as the polluted environment. Thus, the mouth of a circular deep pit filled with water was covered with a thick layer of rubber shavings, and we thought that someone

might perhaps step into it and that would be fun. But I had a much more feasible idea. I asked Lacika Peleskei, a fine boy who was a few years younger than me, if he could get into the middle of the circle marked with the rubber shavings with a flying jump. Lacika was sure that he could and immediately wanted to show his skill and jumped as I thought he would. But I didn't think that he would disappear in the hole completely and that the boy who would come out of it would not be Lacika. Because the one who came out of it, gasping for air, from head to toe was a black ghoul. His face and clothes were covered with scaly rubber shavings, but Lacika didn't even think of shaking himself as dogs do, but immediately started running straight home. This will be some problem, I thought, aunt Ibi or uncle Sanyi will be here soon, and then we will pay for our cruel joke. But this time we got away with it, none of the parents came.

The day of Medard, however, soon came, and as it was written some time ago, the sky was full of clouds. It rained, it poured, as tradition has it, for perhaps more than forty days. It was a good day when once a week at least the clouds were exhausted and having done their job they left the scene. On such occasions the sun was graceful enough to show its face so that we might not forget it, and if it cast its eyes over the Market Square, it would be quite pleased to see the low lying places filled with water again. The evening drew on, the herd peacefully walked home, and the cows, thirsty as usual, stopped for a gulp. Passing the Jakabs' pit, our Tündér also stopped, bellowed a greeting to my grandfather waiting at the gate, and lowered its head to the pond. Good old Grandpa understood that the cow was not patient enough to wait for the trough at home and wanted to drink as soon as possible. I stood beside Grandpa and could see that he did not like the water, and I could see that he was right, for I would not have wished for it either. But then the cow blew, and the rubber powder on the surface split and formed a circle. Now it could drink. At the evening milking Tünder still gave its pail of milk, ate the fresh fodder and went to rest.

"The cow is sick," Grandpa said when came to see us the next morning. "It doesn't want to get up just moans. I can't imagine what it

could have eaten in the field, because what I gave him at home that was all right. Has Laci left already?" asked Grandpa referring to my father.

"He's at work," my mother answered, "he won't be at home till two. But I'll see him at noon in the *tsekh*[31] and I'll tell him."

In the early afternoon, my father came indeed, and went straight to the cow shed. Tündér was still lying there and it was really sick. Healthy cattle are wont to chew their cud, but this one only complained with its eyes in which there was pain and suffering. My father did not even eat his lunch, but went straight to Pali Nagy. An hour later they came back and uncle Pali went to see the sick cow.

"It's not flatulence," he said immediately after having looked at it. "Tell me, my friend," he said turning to Grandpa, "did the cow drink from the rubbish pit by any chance?"

"Yeah, it did. It was just last night that it drank from it until it was full."

"I see," said the vet. "Well, let's get it up and take it out into the yard, because it's quite dark in here. Tie it to a tree and I'll be right back."

He was back in less than half an hour. He took a rolled rubber tube from his bag which ended in a metal cylinder slightly wider than the tube. 'Will you come here please,' he gestured to my father, 'and lift the cow's head.' My father did as the vet asked, and then came the next order. The poor animal would resist, but it was weak enough and my father easily got the upper hand of it. The vet, meanwhile, was calming the cow by stroking its forehead. 'Now, darling, swallow this probe, and you'll feel better in no time.' And he began to push gently the device down the cow's throat. 'Hold its tongue,' he said to my father, and with slow movements he pushed it further. 'It must get into its stomach,' he explained as he was guiding the probe's path from the outside. When he found that it was in place, he began to move it slowly inside, and after a few minutes he said: 'I think it will suffice for the time being, and now we'll take it out. But keep a good grip on his head, because it may stick to its esophagus.' I watched every move,

[31] tsekh (Russian): workshop.

listened to every word of the adults, and could not understand what it was that could stick to Tündér's throat. But the tube slowly emerged from the stomach, then from the esophagus, and when the end of the tube popped out of the mouth, we were amazed to see the tiny steel nails sticking out on the surface of the metal cylinder. They were like spikes on a hedgehog's skin. Not ten, not twenty, perhaps more than a hundred. Pali Nagy carefully lifted and held up the probe. "Can you see, uncle Fábián? This was the problem. Be more careful next time, don't let your cow go to the rubbish pit. It's dangerous."

While the adults were drinking toast in the corridor, I was in the kitchen and just opened Grandma's Bible. It struck me very much that already the first sentence in the Genesis said that in the beginning, when God created the Universe, the earth was formless and desolate, and the spirit of God was hovering over the water. I found this statement a very profound and beautiful thought, and it immediately reminded me of the filth and trash floating on the waters of the ponds in our Market Square. How much more beautiful it would be, I thought, if the power and spirit of the Lord returned to our place, for, in contrast to God's power, this great blackness that we can see all over here can only be the work of Satan.

* * *

There is a pigsty in the back of our yard, and three pigs for store have grunted there since spring. We bought them from the back of a lorry at the beginning of March, which brought them from a pig farm of one of the kolkhozes, collective farms, in the vicinity and offered for sale. My parents bought two good-quality roasts cheaply, and the third one was given almost free, for a very ridiculous sum, eight roubles if I remember correctly, as an extra. It was as thin as a greyhound, and part of one of its ears was also missing, and had no tail. We did not really think it would survive, but it ate so well that it grew visibly stronger and fatter day by day. Up to now, the pigs were fed with the fodder made from the standardized flour people bought by sacks, but for some time even we

do not seem to have enough flour, and Zsiga Kóródi now sells it only to his favourite customers. So, let's feed the squealing mouths with what we can get: cheap, poor-quality bread. Because we hear all sorts of everything nowadays. Among other things, there are rumours that, after cattle, other four-legged animals will also be subject to restrictive regulations, because the population does not need all the milk that the farms produce, nor does it need any meat of uncontrolled quality and origin. According to communist propaganda, milk will soon flow from the taps like drinking water, supplied through pipelines. And there will be meat for every family, because one of the basic principles of communist society is that everyone should have his/her share of the benefits of the society in accordance with their merits and needs. But no one takes this seriously, even if the promises are made twenty years down the line, because milk, as is inherent in its nature, would spoil by the time it reaches the consumers in pipelines.

That's why everyone sticks to the so-called obsolete way of production, and for the time being we still produce our own meat. Although it is true that it becomes increasingly difficult to buy black bread every day. For one rouble for instance six loaves (bricks) of bread are given to each of us, and this, multiplied by a few boiled potatoes and a little dish-washing water more or less covers the daily need of the three cattle. However, bread is no longer freely available for purchase recently. It is distributed to the population as special favour, so the queues are just getting longer. Those who make no efforts, who do not get up on time, are often have to return home without bread. In the light of this, the sellers have reduced the quantity of bread they give to four loaves per person, but the demand remains, so that the reduction in rations means that another member of the family has to stand in the queue.

This is the school that I myself now attend, and I see daily how long waiting, and then often each-other's unwise pushing creates its own cruel laws. You have to leave at least two hours before the distribution of bread, so that by the time Pityu Kálló arrives with his big green covered wagon, the queue, or the *ochered* as we learned from the Russian-speaking village magistrates already stands. There are

always one or two men who help carry in the bread in flat crates and the women who help the vendors quickly place them on the shelves. When they have finished and the vendor has signed the delivery note, the volunteers always get the first few portions, and after they have left, the ones who are left block the entrance with a table. If all these people were let in at once, there would be such a mess that even God couldn't sort it out. That's why we need a table where the next in line hands over the pre-calculated money, gets his ration and leaves satisfied.

At the beginning of the breadline now a light-hearted little debate has started which, apart from me, few people pay attention to. The cobbler Kovács's older son, also called Evil after his father, stands behind Lajcsi Huszti's daughter who studies medicine, and with a wry grin holds her waist as if he wanted something from her. The girl turns around, puts him in his place, but the boisterous lad just opens his mouth even wider:

"Come on, Kató, my cat won't jump, I didn't do anything! Can't you see that they're pushing me from behind? Or are you mad with me because I have just touched you?"

"If you knew what the phrase 'my cat won't jump' means, I think you would not use it with me," sounds Kató's stern response to the loud mouth.

But they calm down quickly, because the people behind are impatient. Of course, they are, when they see that the privileged ones as they show up just hand over the bag and get their ration. So, the people at the back press the queue once or twice to fill the gap at the front so that no one could get to the door from the sides. Those in the front are squeezed by the pressure, and those who are not strong enough, do not hold on, or are already on one of the steps, are easily pushed out of their place. Then you have to be very clever to get back to your previous spot. I already know that the pressure from the back is multiplied when you reach the middle of the line, so you have to dive backwards and push forward to get ahead in the line. Now, however, there is a woman or whoever behind me who seems to be offended by my pressing my back and buttocks against her, so she grabs me by the

collar with one hand and throws me back so hard that I fly two metres or so off the stairs and into the ditch that borders the pavement. My head hits the kerbstone, my eyes emit sparks, and then the rest is mere oblivion and silence.

The next I know is that I'm lying on chairs in the barber's shop not far away from there, and someone reaches under my back and gives me to drink a little water. I'm shaking in every part of my body and I have a bad pain in the back of my neck. 'You've got a hard head, kid, it's a wonder it didn't split open,' a woman says and shakes her head, and then asks me to give her money and the bag. A few minutes later she comes back with four loaves of bread and offers to walk me home. I don't know her, but I trust her and, still a little dizzy, I walk along the pavement with her. When I reach our house, she would leave me alone, but my mother, as if she had suspected that something bad must have happened, stands there at the gate and the woman informs her briefly of what happened.

"Oh, my Lord!" she says wringing her hands. "How can I let him queue up again!"

When asked who it was who had thrown me out of the queue, the woman gives a name.

"It was Margit Sarkadi. You know, Márta, the one who always wears men's clothes."

"The minor? Oh, let both her hands shrivel up for touching my son?" my mother says in a trembling voice and takes me to bed where she puts wet cloth on the back of my swollen head that aches like hell.

Soon, half asleep, I find myself in the bread-line again, but this time Ili Fábián, one of my father's distant relatives does the distributing. When it's my turn, she doesn't even ask the money, just hands over the four loaves and dismisses me with the promise that she'll visit Grandma soon. On my way home, her only son, Gyuri Sitka, who used to accompany his grandmother, the old Matilda, when she went to see us, joins me. Gyuri now throws a stumpy pitchfork without a handle at me. 'Watch out!' he shouts as he throws, but I didn't jump away in time, and the tool, which once served as an anchor too, hits my bare foot.

The blow makes my foot bleed, but as Gyuri warned me in time, I can't blame him for that. He may be right, and I don't complain to anyone, as I am all alone in the house when I wake up. I think over the breadline scene again, touch the back of my aching head to be sure, and ask God to be my guardian and support in the queue if I have to go again...

Jánoska spends more and more time at Grandma's. Not just days, but weeks, and we soon learn that his mother, who was given a job as a cook at the orphanage organized at the Nagy-Iday's farm, enrolled her younger son in the kinder-garden in Újlak. The old people have neither the time nor the patience to take the child to and from the kindergarten, so this task is mine mostly. On the way to and from school, I take Jánoska, in a pram. It's a bit worn, though, and served probably several children. One of the wheels often falls off, and while I'm fixing it, my little nephew slips away and plays with the mud on the roadside. It's not easy to make him sit back in the pram again so that I could take him home and tell my people that I can't handle him. The child is quite manageable, though, and radiates happiness, but he needs to be watched. He often disappears in one of the rooms, and when he reappears, he chews and crunches something with the greatest relish.

"Hey, boy, what are you eating?" Grandma asks him.

"The wall," comes the terse reply, and when Grandmother looks in disbelief, it turns out that the boy is telling the truth, crunching on the broken pieces of plaster under the window.

"He has a lime deficiency," Elvira says. Other children pick up chicken shit and stuff it in their mouths because that's where they find what they need.

Other times, Grandma's scissors disappear. She looks for it in vain, she can't find it.

"Jánoska, where did you put the scissors? You were playing with them," she asks her youngest grandson.

"In the corn" says the child briefly, and Grandmother orders Grandfather to go and find them:

"Go, dear, and look for them in the garden. The boy says he left my scissors there."

The old man goes out, looks for those scissors among the tall corn stalks, but returns with nothing and seemingly annoyed.. So, Grandmother again asks her grandson:

"Show me, Jánoska, where did you put the scissors?"

The child stops his play and goes obediently towards the pail full of corn seeds. He reaches in, his tiny hand almost lost in it, and takes out the tool, which is so essential for sewing.

"Well, it was not lost, it was here in the house," says Grandmother, clasping her palms together and strokes her clever little grandson's head.

Besides Jánoska I have other cousins, for instance over the Tisza in Forgolány. Róza, my grandfather's daughter from his first marriage, married Sándor Molnár, a thick-browed, garrulous farmer from there. That he is well- spoken, I can assess that myself. If he visited us, which was not very often, I would not be without his company, not even for all the tea in China. If he lit a cigar after a glass of wine and began to talk of the war, I was all ears to hear his stories told in his most fantastic rich idioms. He said that his life had been in danger more than once, but God was always with him, otherwise he would not be here to tell all that happened. On one occasion, the Russian artillery fired persistently at their positions, and they dug themselves into the ground as deep as they only could. Suddenly a German scout showed up as a ghost from nowhere, removed him by force from his one-man cover and hid in the hole himself. What else could he do, he crawled and rolled to find another hole, and when he looked back from the safety of his new position, he saw that just then a shell struck straight his previous cover. On other occasions, they repelled the attack of the Russian infantry from the well-built defence lines of the Carpathians. The machine gunners had a perfect view of the winding road below them, and the enemy fell like reaped spikes. Then suddenly they stopped the attack and a hastily erected cross rose up on the Russian side. They all understood, of course what they did, that they were asking for a cease-fire, for they wanted to bury their dead. After half an hour, their scouts came back with a Russian POW. Some of the Hungarian soldiers were of Russin origin, who understood Russian, and they asked the

prisoner why they were marching, at all costs, to certain death, why they would not turn back. They could not turn back, said the Russian prisoner, because then they would be all shot down by their own punitive squads. And here the speaker observed a short meaningful silence to watch the astonishment on his listeners' faces.

Brother-in-law Sándor, as my father called him, dared to beget eight children to my aunt Rózsika, while the other six Fábián brothers all strove towards civilization and had only ten offsprings.

Even if not very frequently, but from time to time my Aunt Rózsika's sons visited their grandparents in Újlak. Sándor, the eldest, once stopped in front of the house with an ox-drawn wagon, but Elemér's brother, when he had business here, drove a tractor. The younger ones, Karcsi, Elek, Laci and Endre, come by bicycle as a rule, because public transport is almost non-existent. Endre, in view of the exceptional nature of the day, comes to our place by a mechanised bicycle, or, according to the more informed, dumbledore, because of the sound it makes. We never saw anything like that, so we, the street kids from the Market Square stand around the high-pitched buzzing device with a curious mind. Endre arranges with my mother to take me to Forgolány for a few days, so I can meet the relatives there. Very well, my mother agrees, but good behaviour, she insists as always, is a condition.

The seat is not very comfortable on the rack of the dumbledore, but the speed, the wind cooling my forehead and ruffling my hair offer a compensation for the inconvenience. It must have been half an hour when Endre turned off at the Tivadar junction onto the road to Forgolány, and I go on my own two feet already up the sloping yard, where my Aunt Rosy and cousins welcome me.

I learn quickly what it's like to live in a real big family. Although Sándor, Elemér and Ilus have already their own family nests, five boys still live in their parents' house. Karcsi goes out with the herd, Elek and Laci are machine operators in the kolkhoz, while Endre, who is a handyman, studies at the technical college and wants to get a university diploma, and János, who is barely younger than me, is busy around

the house and in the yard if it is necessary. But I soon realise that this exemplary family harmony cannot always remain untroubled either.

One evening, Karcsi comes home with the bad news that a calf among the cattle he was entrusted with has got urinary sepsis, urinates blood (urina sangvinis), and the farm manager will deduct the price from his wages. The bad news is received by my relatives with much humming and sympathetic nodding, but someone has to make a decision after all. After a few minutes of reflection, the head of the family puts an end to the silence. The next evening, sausage made from the sick calf is put on the table. 'The meat was clean,' my cousin tries to inspire confidence in the food, and even though it's dinnertime, somehow no one is hungry. I just twirl the roast in my mouth, trying to get the bitter taste out of it.

* * *

All the neighbours heard the news that the Manajlós gave up on renting further the house next door. And why not, when they were given a much more comfortable communal flat by *the komitet*.[32] My father, since the departure of my mother's beautiful, easy-going friend, visibly calmed down. 'She set a bad example anyway, she'll have a better place in Orosz utca,' he once whispered confidentially to someone, but I heard it too, and it made me think about it for a while.

The house next door did not remain unoccupied for long, it got new owners soon. My father knew the head of the family, uncle Tibi, from long ago, but his second wife, aunt Margit, was from a distant village and a stranger. Their little girl, Bözsike, was about four years old, and with her came the big boy Jóska from uncle Tibi's first marriage. The friendship between the two families was quickly established, as we still fetched water from their well, so there was no point in pretending that we were above them or they were below us in intelligence. The head of the family was a cobbler, like so many men in Újlak, and in addition

[32] Komitet: the executive committee of the settlement.

to the obligatory work in the factory, he made shoes at home too. They were not as nice as, say, Sanyi Peleskei's, but he worked cheaply and quickly, and as far as I know, there were no complaints about his work. His wife was a little crabby, moody, but attractive young and dark woman who seemed to be always bored of everything. If she had nothing to do at home, she often came to see my mother, but she never spoke much.

Maybe because of aunt Margaret, maybe not, but my grandmother Teresa's brother, uncle Béla, whom my mother called Báttya, came to visit us frequently, almost every week. He was in his seventies, but he refused to let his brown hair and his good spirit part with him. He wore his hair combed back and after shaving he used strong-smelling aftershave. On his way to or from church, he often stopped by. He would ask us how we were, and from me personally he would always ask jokingly how I was. He expected no answer, for his eyes were already sampling the young woman, who, leaning back on our kitchen iron bed, with her back against the cushions, served up unwittingly all the female charms to the ever-hungry male eyes. Her tartan flannel dressing-gown was pulled up over her knees as a rule, and Báttya's tiny hunting eyes were hungrily fixed to the point where the lower buttons of the gown were undone. 'Oh my!' he said excitedly, turning his head nervously toward the lady. It must have been only my presence that bothered him, but he could not stand it for long because he sat beside the woman and bent over her.

"Now, what do you want from me, old rake?" protested the woman, pulling up her knees in front of her.

"What do I want, what do I want? You know very well, girl, what I want," answered the old man panting, pressing his face to her bosom and clasping with his left hand the part of her thighs that was not covered by the gown.

I was beginning to feel uncomfortable. I thought that perhaps I shouldn't see this, that I should go outside, but the situation was resolved quickly. Aunt Margaret pushed the unwanted beau away from her decisively and he fell to the floor. Shaking his head in shame,

Báttya pulled himself up onto a stool, while for several minutes his heart, agitated in vain by the beauties of the young woman, made him breathe heavily.

In the early afternoon, when my father was already at home, Aunt Magda, my mother's younger sister, quite unexpectedly, came to see us. As a matter of fact, I did not like her very much, because I experienced already that her appearance almost always had unpleasant consequences, and I should thank God if it was not me who gets the short end of the stick after her visits. In the winter, for example, she came to my mother's house on one occasion only to complain about me and make her, that is my mother, teach me a good lesson. If she had a reason at all for doing that, I could understand, but she had none, because if I tell somebody the story about it, they don't understand it either why she was so mean. She saw me and my schoolmates frolicking in the freshly fallen snow from the courtyard of their communal flat next to our school. She and her family could have a flat like that only because of party connections. We had a PE class just then and we would have had fun if she hadn't interfered. But she was mad like hell because of something, and she took our PE teacher, who by the way did not mind our romps at all, to task as to why it was that he condoned our frivolous behaviour. Petro Lukich suspected that my aunt picked a quarrel with him because of me only, so he just looked at me and put his index finger to his forehead showing that the boy, that is me, was a fool. My dear aunt needed no more! I was not even at home to have my lunch, when she was already there to complain about me to my mother. My mother shook her head, and would have settled it with a slight slap into my face, but her sister insisted on punishing me on the spot and before her. And my mother obediently hit me, for she was always quick in giving me a good slapping.

This time, however, she came to see us because of her husband, uncle Boris, and started to lament lengthily, tearfully. She summed up the story of which we had already heard much, and namely that my mother's Russian brother-in-law collected money from the workers pleading that he would provide them with cheap and good building

materials, roofbeams, rafters, planks and the like, at a discount. However, the money was soon guzzled away or who knows where they disappeared, and the people, who had waited in vain for the promised building materials, reported him to the authorities. 'The money must be repaid now,' Aunt Magda moaned, 'or Boris will be in serious trouble.' I remember exactly that we had five hundred roubles in the *sberkassa*[33] that time, and aunt Magda, as the head of the municipal savings-bank, knew this very well, and came to ask for the five hundred roubles. My father just mumbled, and glanced at my mother questioningly, but being already ill at ease, she could blurt out the usual 'I don't mind' whenever feeling helpless she could not say anything definitely. So, my aunt, taking my parents' indecision as an agreement, got the money. I immediately remembered that about half a year before, one of my father's cousins had also tried to ask us for a loan to buy a piano for his daughter. He was not as lucky as my Aunt Magda, because my father categorically refused to part with the money he was so tirelessly saving. Here, however, the circumstances simply made it impossible to say no. It was a pity that my mother's dwarfish brother-in-law could not be saved with our money either. The court was not at all mindful of the war record of the accused or even his party membership. He was sentenced to eight years in prison, five or six of which he served, and our money would have been lost completely if my carpenter uncle Árpi had not paid it back instead of his beloved sister, five or six years later, from the price of a bedroom furniture.

Speaking of courts and prisons let me mention here that the Soviet justice system had quite a lot to do then. It was not only the fraudsters and embezzlers who were sent to prison, but also the honest, hard-working craftsmen who, in the Party's view of that time were labelled as people working under the table. Once, on returning home from school, I found aunt Margaret crying in the company of my mother. I could see at once that this was not physical pain, but something much more serious. I was not allowed to interfere in the affairs of adults, or

[33] Sberkassa: Russian acronym meaning savings-bank.

to ask why she was crying, but no one forbade me to listen. From the questions and half-sentences that were dropped, I learnt in seconds that uncle Tibi was taken away. Moreover, there was a house-search and a bag of finished footwear and semi-finished products, along with all the material found in the house were also taken away. There was no news of him since then, and they lived in total uncertainty now. The grandparents took their granddaughter to their home for the time being, as they could see that all the weeping and worry would spread to the child too. When my father was there already, he put his hand on the neighbour woman's shoulder consolingly and tried to calm her down.

"Don't worry, Margit," he said quietly, "you'll see, everything will be all right, and then we're here too, you won't be left all alone."

"It'll be all right, but when? And what will happen to us till then?" she asked, but to this she could hardly expect any consoling answer from anybody.

As soon as Aunt Margaret went away, my father sort of searched the house himself, and in a quarter of an hour he packed a bag full with boot top-leather, two light brown calfskins, and a few pairs of leather soles. 'I don't want these to get into their hands again. I'll take them away when it's dark,' he said making a decision on the fate of the materials. 'God forbid them to come in here. I don't want to get into their hands once again.'

Uncle Tibi's criminal case was closed in a few weeks, the district court returned its verdict. He was sentenced to five years in prison, and the people of the area were relieved to hear the news. They thought the treasury agents would make no further investigations, and they would be satisfied and that there was no reason to fear of raids in the near future. And from then on, Aunt Margit stopped crying and only sighed, but rumour had it that she didn't cry very long. One of the prominent detective officers, it was said, took pity on the weeping widow and took her under his wings. I never saw or met him, but I know that a Bobik[34] occasionally parked nearby. That certain guy did

[34] Light military all-terrain vehicle.

not park in front of aunt Margit's house, but a little farther on, at the fence of the Green Cross, so that one could believe that the owner of the car lived somewhere in one of the officers' quarters. My father was also worried by the news. It is not impossible, he reflected, that the protégé might be questioned by the detective about her neighbours, and that the silly woman might tell him what her neighbours do in their free time. But I think my father was more afraid that the neighbour woman's behaviour might lead my mother down the wrong path again, and he sometimes expressed his fears. 'I wouldn't mind if you stopped being friends with her once and for all. You're not linked together.' At other times he would say, 'Let her come if she wants, for I believe she longs for company, but when I come home from the factory, I don't want to see her here. Do you understand?'

I don't like to listen to conversations like this, for fear that they might get out of hand, and then I might look for a corner again where I could mope to my heart's content. My father sees my confusion, and since the short autumn break has begun anyway, he encourages me to go and relieve my grandfather in pasturing the cow, because Grandpa, says he, increasingly suffers from gout. Of course, I'm happy to do the herding, I can't offer any other kind of help for the time being, so I'm happy to follow the tracks of Tündér.

In the scrub behind the Jewish cemetery, although it is late October, there is still plenty of grass for grazing, and the weather is also holding out with its several hours of sunshine a day. Laci Buda is also out there with their cow Baba, waves to me as soon as he notices me and makes me a place close to him on his soft quilted coat. The others just lie on the lawn in a circle, with their heads towards the centre of the circle. It strikes me that almost everyone but me is an adolescent, and although I have not yet experienced it myself, I am beginning to sense that the two or three years of advantage have already brought about major changes in their lives.

This time we have a girl tending sheep among us. Zsuzsika, who is Mrs. Marinka's daughter. She must be twelve or thirteen, and now she, and not her brother is entrusted with the task of taking the young

bullock to pasture. She's got a stick in her hand as is due, and she's dressed like all the other boys. As they all, she also lies on her stomach among them in her rubber boots and her light coat taken off from one of her sisters and adjusted to her waist with a scarf. Her head is wrapped in a shawl, and only the twinkle of her eyes reveals the little teenage girl in this cloth. Sanyi, the boy lying next to her, must have a good eye, for he notices this twinkle, and to feel its warmth, he draws closer to those dear eyes. On one of her fingers, he discovers a cheap little ring that lost its golden colour, and this is reason enough to catch her hand. Is it the ring he wants, or has he got something else in mind? Anyway, Zsuzsika's heart is in the right place, because she resists and wrestles. Sanyi is a strong muscular boy, but at the same time he instinctively feels that such an opponent must be beaten with grace. When he presses down her upper body and both her arms to the ground, he moves up a little and asks with a laugh in his eyes, 'Well, who is stronger?' 'All right, all right,' the girl says giving the fight up, 'but now let me go.' Sanyi, however, has no intention of letting her go. Instead, he presses his body on her and his hand reaches under her coat searching for Zsuzsika's budding breasts. The girl blushes, throws her body up and down, flails her legs desperately. Meanwhile, the scarf that holds the jacket in place, is untied, one of the suspenders is released, and the whiteness of a beautifully shaped thigh flashes, perhaps more beautifully than Zsuzsika's eyes. Sanyi can't see it of course, his palm is already on the mound throbbing over the heart, gripping it with a clouded look. Zsuzsika shouts and screams in a low key, but Sanyi worms between her tense legs, squeezes her down, soothes her useless flurry. Perhaps from exhaustion, perhaps for some other reason, but they are both panting, and when Sanyi finally lets her go, I am surprised to see that the little girl didn't take offence to the boy's rude action as I at first thought she would. Moreover, there was neither anger nor contempt on Zsuzsika's flushed face. Who understands this? But I immediately think of our old tenant, Margit, who was too loud at night, and uncle Béla, who would have liked to do something similar to the woman next door if she hadn't thrown him off her vigorously.

I'm confused, and I don't know where to put all this yet, but I sort of start to understand that these not too rough, theatrical fights have something to do with love about which I also think sometimes in line with a little girl.

* * *

My father and mother got quarrelsome again. I can hear the impulsive questions involuntarily, and I can't shut my ears in order not to hear to the answers. I only need to hear a few sentences to understand that my father has got a friend. He doesn't deny that he sometimes goes to the village to see a young woman who is bored because her husband is away, but he does this just in order to restore his shattered reputation, to be the same who he was in the eyes of the people earlier. My mother feels she has no right to protest more vigorously, but I sense from her words I managed to catch that she would like my father to stop taking delicious hazelnut chocolates to Mrs. Lánci and to end his relationship with her for good. I have the feeling that my father prefers peace and after meeting halfway they trust each other again. With such a trust that my father was touched and begins to sing. I can no longer remember the melody of the operetta excerpt, which was unfamiliar to me, but fragments of the lyrics still come back to my mind sometimes. 'I wasn't sober last night, I cheated on you yesterday, but I cried when you left me, yesterday I lied.' The refrain, which is in fact a question tantamount to an apology, is sung by the two of them, huddled together: 'Golden flower, will you be mine? Golden flower, my heart is alive.' My father's voice is still acceptable, but my mother, I have always known, has no ears. At her singing the cat sitting at the door starts meowing, and as the singers pay no attention to it, I get up to let it out. Anyway, I must be off to the other room, as I have to do my homework. I do my writing exercises quickly, in a haste, then I open one of the textbooks, but I can't pay proper attention to what it says, so I give it up and close the book.

When I'm alone by myself, I think more and more often of a little girl who is one of the most diligent, most serious pupils in the class. Her

name is Kato, but I would call her Kati if I dared. Well, how can I let her know of my affection for her? Perhaps I'll write it down, or rather I'll make a stamp with the help of my manual letter-press I received as a gift from Hungary, and I can make it manifold. It will be written there in my big printed letters that 'Katika, I love you!' The next day, when the girls sing in a circle at the interval, I'll throw the little packet up in the air and let the little messages fall like flyers in the movies. The girls will pick it up, humming and laughing. The recipient will also have one, but after reading it, she will drop it and will run back to her classroom. Someone will take a copy to aunt Elvira. After the bell, she keeps it in her hand and watches me while the class is waiting to be seated. It would be nice to know what she's thinking while she's doing it, but she decides not to reveal my name to the class, but then again, she'd rather wants to forget the whole thing, so she starts the class instead. Working independently, I look around cautiously, my eyes searching for Kati. I am very surprised to find that she is doing the same, so our eyes meet. We are both surprised at this and turn our heads back, blushing. I imagine that if we could really love each other, I would hold her hand and we would sit side by side, daydreaming together and be happy. But I find it repulsive and reject sincerely, with all my heart all that the boys speak about on doing this and that to a girl. No and no, by means no! I'd never do that to my Kati!

A few days later, I share my feelings with Béluka and ask him to take a photo of the girl in the schoolyard or on the street, if possible, in secret, for me. There's no need to ask him twice, he likes the idea. The next day he comes up to the school and in the interval when the girls go to the newsstand to get their weekly, the *Pajtás*, I show Béluka my little sweetheart. My friend raises his *Smena* camera to his eye, but while he tries to find the best position, Kati discovers the plot against her, turns and starts running. Béluka lowers the camera and says loudly laughing: 'The little bird flew away.' Then he repeated this and pointed his index finger to the running girl. So, we failed with this, I think, and only later do I realise how much I have lost. Kati avoids me for days, does not want to look at me even.

Our last class today is a teacher's lesson, and the topic that Aunt Elvira comes up with is a real surprise. She starts by saying, it was already discussed at the parents' meeting, that boys and girls should be seated next to each other in order to improve their academic progress. Perhaps the boys will then do less talking to each other, pay more attention to explanations, and learn a bit of order and courtesy. Some pupils chuckle, others blush, but listen with interest to the teacher's reasoning, but some are already pondering the outcome, wondering who they will be paired with. I find myself among the latter. God, if I had to sit with Kati, I don't know what I'd do! How happy I would be! But I soon calm down, because I get a little freckled girl with bangs and pigtails for a desk partner, who is even distantly related to me.

At first, we do not have much in common with Gabriella, aka Gabi, but as time goes by, we get to know each other better. She writes down the timetable and the topics of the lessons in my notebook, and I help her write compositions. But when she notices that I'm writing another girl's name in pencil on the green surface of the bench, which was painted in the summer, and besides I press it well into the wood so that it is visible, she immediately raises her hand and tells the teacher what I'm doing. Aunt Elvira comes over, gently pushes my hand away from what I had written, and, shaking her head, says softly: "All right, I'll seat you next to her, you'll see." I take her words for promise, and I am happy as a lark, but the promise remained a promise and was never fulfilled.

Two years later, when we no longer sit next to girls in a desk and different teachers teach us different subjects, I get to know Gabi better. We chase each other down the corridor during a break, and her little pigtails sway in front of me. And when she suddenly turns into the empty classroom, I rush after her without thinking. She glances back once to see if I'm following her, and when I'm almost there, she ducks under a bench in a corner. But I'm already there myself, I catch her hair-braid, and when I have one of her arm in mine, she suddenly sits up in the desk. I reach for her, grab her waist, but she, as if she really wanted to get free, makes another half turn with her upper body. My hand slips under her sweatshirt, slides up

the surface of her light blouse, and sticks in a small, warm and elastic pile the size of a tennis ball, and then slides right over her. I can't even think for a moment, I just feel that it's the most pleasant thing I've ever felt in my life. I wouldn't let it go for anything. My hands immediately caress its smooth softness. But alas! Two fingers of a strong man's hand clasp my ear, and while he pulls and lifts it with me into the sun, Pavel Yuriyevich says in his heavy Russian accent: *'Shto ti delayesh,* my boy? Are you gonna get a'married?'

My father increasingly urged my mother to chuck her friends whom he, my father considered my Mum's bad spirits. In this he was almost obsessed. And life, or one may call it fate soon played into his hands. One afternoon Grandfather came to see us. First, he just sat on the stool with his cane in his hand and stared at it for a few moments. Then he looked up and down in the kitchen to see if he was getting enough attention, and after a little encouragement he came up with his problem.

"Neighbour Berzsi wants to sell her house," he looked my father in the eye. "She argues that she's old, she doesn't know what will happen to her if she falls seriously ill, so she's going to resettle in Hungary to her daughter. She takes her grandchild there too."

"It's not as simple as that. You have to apply first for a passport, and it may take a year to get it," my father said. "But if she has the patience, let her go."

The old man could not have expected such an answer, for his face grew even more gloomy, he began to stir and move in his chair, and prepared his cane to help his departure. Seeing his confusion, my father came to the old man's assistance.

"And tell me, Daddy, why is it bothering you that aunt Erzsi is leaving? It may be bought by someone who will fix that old and neglected lodge."

"That's just it!" jumped Grandpa at the question. "There's already someone looking at her house. A gypsy. Do we have to live at our old age next to a gypsy?

"So, that is the problem?"

Grandpa did not answer. He was looking at the exit with a disappointed expression, and my father was thinking.

"We will have to do something," he said thinking hard with his palm on his forehead. "We will have to come up with something. And we will," he added resolutely, and his eyes showed that he had already an idea. "So, please calm down, Daddy."

Next evening, we had a visitor. It was Endre Fábián, my father's second cousin, who usually came just for a talk on a little something or a little on politics, which I loathed very much, for it was rather boring for me and besides I hardly understood anything of it. But this time his intention was different.

"I hear your father is going to have a new neighbour," he began. "Old Murzsa went to see aunt Erzsi for the second time yesterday. It seems he's serious about leaving Gypsy Street, because he may think he deserves to live with better neighbours."

"It's quite possible," my father replied. "But you can't complain either, for he'll be living for two houses from you too."

"Well, his bark is worse than his bite," replies uncle Endre promptly. "I'm not going to let it. And you had it also better if you racked your brains a little on what we could do."

"I'll be frank with you," my father said to his relative more seriously. "My dad was here yesterday to complain about the changes that may happen in the neighbourhood. He's pretty despondent, but I'm helpless. I don't have the dough to buy that house."

"If that's the whole problem, I can lend you the money. Buy it, if you think so, and then my brother Elek will be also at ease!

My father's eyes vaguely glistened and he believed his cousin this time spoke the way he meant.

"But I don't even know how much she wants for it."

"I'll tell you that as well," went on Endre poking his forehead with his index finger. "Because there's a catch in here! I made inquiries. Aunt Erzsi wants two thousand five hundred roubles in new money, but I think Murzsa would not give that much for it either."

My father bowed his head in disappointment.

"Does she want my three-year-earnings for that pile of rubble? Isn't that a bit much? The house we are having now cost only fifteen hundred, and it's a mansion compared to that."

"It's up to you. In any case, check it out, talk to aunt Erzsi, make some inquiries. Find out what she thinks and how much she's willing to bargain. And if it gets serious, if you manage to make an agreement or something, let me know, I'm a man of my word."

* * *

It was just a little over the middle of the winter in 1964, when aunt Erzsi's daughter came home from Budapest. She didn't come alone, she brought the whole family, as she usually did in summer, but this time she had a specific purpose which was to give a hand in her mother's moving. We didn't know when they arrived, and what they did or did not do on the first day, but the next day Manci and her mother were already on our stairs beating the snow off their feet.

"Well, Mr. *Fapian*," "began the old woman in her well-known Kraut accent. "Now we are here to learn whether you want to *puy* or don't want to *puy* the house. It's okay for me if you changed your mind and don't want to *puy* it, *put* then it will *pe* Murzsa who will *puy* my house."

"Well, I told you, Aunt Erzsi," my father replied, "if you give it to us at a price that we can afford, we'll buy your house, but if you insist on two thousand five hundred, we don't have that much money, give it to whoever you want."

"Look, *Mr. Fapian!* I'm not the one who likes to beat around the bush. If you *att* one hundred roubles to the sum you and Endre promised the other *tay,* I'll *kive* it to you."

My father was relieved to hear that but he hid his joy behind a poker face as he played with figures in his mind then he continued in a seemingly indifferent way.

"So, aunt Erzsi, you say you'll give it to me for two thousand two hundred? I heard yesterday that you would give it to anyone who would give five roubles more."

"Oh, Mr. *Fapian*, *ton't* take me for such a miser! *To* you know me as such?"

"Very well, aunt Erzsi, if you agree, then it's a bargain. We can go and sign the contract in the office tomorrow."

"*Put* I'll *ko* with you only," the old woman was as bright as a button at once, "if you *kive* a downpayment to me. *Pecause* how can I be sure that you won't change your *mint* till tomorrow?

"That's no problem, aunt Erzsi, if you sign a receipt for five hundred roubles, okay?"

"Oh, *tear* me, *put* here's my daughter as witness, and I don't want *purdon* her with all these papers, why do you need that receipt?"

"Because that's what should be done. You know that very well, aunt Erzsi, don't you?"

When they left, my mother burst into tears. My father expected this, sort of, so he didn't even try to stop her crying. He had a guess that the impending change would bring it out of her. Seeing my mother's state of mind, I became also moody. Knowing that our healthy, warm house was to be abandoned, that we would soon move into a hut without floors and electricity, I did not kick up my heels understandably. After all, there isn't even a decent door or window on that house, and the yard is just a dump full of all sorts of ramshackle outbuildings! Even the fact that the cherries ripen there first, and the muscatel plums and apricots soon afterwards, did not cheer me up either. But I don't mind if all the muscatel plums, apricots, early wine-flavoured apples, wasp-sweet apples will be offended, because I don't want them at this price. The pears with those butter and blood coloured insides, the huge apples, and even the London pepino may go to the waste, because I won't even look at them. My father, to calm us down a little, explained that we didn't have to move immediately, that our house wasn't for sale yet, that we'd stay here at least until spring, but who could be fooled by such a tale?

But grief did not burn our souls for long, for there was another knock at the door. Béluka and his cousin Jani from Budapest came to see us. They didn't want anything in particular, but since the deal was

done, they thought they'd come to celebrate this with a good little chat, but maybe they just wanted to warm up, because they both shivered for a few minutes, and not because of the frosty atmosphere that invaded our house. Béluka, the eternal prankster, sensed it immediately and tried to break the ice. He began to tell us how five of them had slept in the room of their little house last night, but the snow fell in through the cracks in the bad windows, and in spite of the thick blankets and feather-beddings their eyes "regelated" in the morning. Well, if this was meant to pick us up, it did the opposite, for it only stoke the fire of my mother's bitter mood.

And in order not be in lack of surprises the next day, in the morning, before my father left with aunt Erzsi to the notary, we had a visitor we did not expect at all. Old Murzsa and his two sons pushed into our house fervently. They didn't even say good morning, they just laid into my father.

"How's it, Mr. Fábián? Do you think that you can put one over me? Why did you have to interfere in my business? Don't you have a nice house? What business do you have in Erzsi Rozmány's house?"

Although my father could have been knocked down with a feather as surprised he was, still he gave the visitor the most appropriate answer.

"But Mr. Murzsa, you have been negotiating with Mrs. Ackerman for two weeks already, so why didn't you give her what she wanted? This house could have been yours already."

"Mr. Fábián If I had as much money as you do, I would have bought it long ago. Unless I had been so sure, then I would not have sold my house in advance! What shall we do now? We can't go to the street after all, eh? But do you know what, Mr. Fábián? I tell you that I'm not going to let this slide. Let's go to the *komitet* and see Bandi Szabó. Let him do justice to us. One man can have two houses and the other poor man none? There's no God who'll let this happen!"

How could that sly old man know that my father could be frightened by nothing more than the authority? At the mere mention of the *komitet*, militia, inspection, he felt uneasy and began to sweat at once. There must be no authority, no inspection, he

thought, and in his desperate situation he made the most cowardly possible decision.

"Look here, Mr. Murzsa," he turned conciliatingly to the old cymbalo player. "You are now without a house, are you not?"

Murzsa clung to my father with all his nerves, waiting and wanting to know what will come out of this.

"I say, Mr. Murzsa, here's our house for sale, why don't you buy it?"

None of them expected this. The old man and his sons looked at each other, then at my father.

"Are you serious, Mr. Fábián?"

"Yes, I am."

"Then let's shake on it."

Standing on a table, my mother brushes the black attic plank darkened by smoke and grease with alkaline from a pail. By the time the water flows down her arm and reaches her armpit, it gets cold. In early March, in an unheated house this must be pretty unpleasant. No one can therefore expect her to be cheerful, for stretching her body to do the work is punishment enough in itself. But what is this compared to the torments caused by the knowledge that this hut, this environment will be our home for good? People already spread all kinds of gossip if it comes to the topic of our house swapping deal. Some say that this Laci Fabián went mad. He may have saved his father from a neighbour with a lower social standing, but he caused unexpected annoyance to the Sitkas and the Markuses. And there are also rumours that old Murzsa is the first to escape from the gypsy street, and that he got a much more prestigious house than he hoped for. It's no wonder he kills himself laughing.

My father has been working in the yard for some days already, but there is no visible result of his effort yet. It's incredible but there is not even an outhouse in the yard. I have no idea where the old woman and Béluka went when nature called. But my father found a deep square pit, on the bottom of which, there's no way to know why, Béluka began to make passage way on one of the sides but left it unfinished in the autumn. My father carved a wreath-like foundation from some old

bolts and he placed the cornflower-blue wardrobe that was left here by the Russians going home from Austria on it. The finishing touch was the floor and the seat that he had to add up to it still.

And, as I have already mentioned, we had no electricity either. 'Misha will do it for you,' my godmother said to console her sister, 'and for free at that, you'll see.' Misha, the handsome Rousin lad from Sasvár, became our relative thanks to eloping with my beautiful cousin. Come to think of it, he was absolutely right, since my Aunt Ilonka refused his proposal to marry her middle daughter, even though he asked her most nicely but in vain. A few days after the abduction, however, like it or lump it, there was a wedding, which I missed unfortunately because of my tonsillitis.

Misha came one weekend, shortly after lunch. He had a colleague with him, and the two of them brought a three-metre-long roof iron, a small coil of aluminium wire for air ducting, insulated wires in the wall, light switches, sockets, cartridges, and they went straight to work. By dusk we could put the kerosene lamp aside, because our house was already lit by a light bulb. When the bottle of vodka as drinking toast was emptied and the cooked sausage from the butcher's was gone, my father asked, just in order to be polite, how much we owed. Misha with downcast eyes was silent, but his colleague said without thinking: 'The roof iron is seven roubles, and the work is forty-seven.' My father was a little surprised, but didn't say anything just gave him the bills with the Lenin-heads on them, and after the fitters had left, he muttered a bit resentfully, with a hint on the promise of the relative, to my mother: 'Well, this 'for free' was my half a month's salary and me, being a wastrel.'

By the electric light the cracks in the walls, the painted layers of lime, and the mouldy corners resulting from decades of dampness became all visible. The very next day my Uncle Pista came to show off with his great knowledge of making our new house more habitable.

"First of all, we'll wash all this with soap," my uncle said, "because if we go over it with a lime-brush only, the walls will be so ugly that even three layers of lime won't make it look better."

He immediately asked for two whole bars of washing soap and a file, and handed them to me.

"You're big enough to do this work alone, don't stare at us unnecessarily. And I'll put the water on the stove, let it get warm till then."

Yes, but I had to go for water too. Not far, though, just to my grandfather's yard. All the neighbours, or almost all of them go there, then why shouldn't we? I put the soap down and ran with the buckets, but by the time I got home, half of it was sloshed. Seeing this, my uncle Pista remarked to my father.

"Brother, why don't you cut a door in that fence? You could shorten the road by a third if you straightened it, it would be easier to carry water."

"You are right," nodded my father, "it's a good piece of advice and I will take it."

Hard as my uncle tried to paint, soap and whiten, especially at places where repairs were made, despite that the windows were all open, the damp plaster did not dry easily, and the March winds were not of much help either. On the third day, despite the dark spots that remained on the wall, it was the turn of the roller. So, the two small rooms were nice, but my mother didn't like the courtyard, it was a pile of stones, she said. Weeds were everywhere around the house, and snakes pushed through from the two old collapsed stone wells, and they, the snakes were so big that my mother was afraid to go out into the yard.

But soon the Catholic feast, for which the Reformed people also feel respect, came. It was Annunciation Day. The courtyard and the garden were dressed in a white and pink floral froth. My father came home from the factory that day with a colleague from Újhely, who had a short pruning saw, a pruning knife and other tools in his bag and started to graft the young plum trees. My father had only to point to a certain, already strong plum seedling, and the master quickly cut the trunk to insert the carefully prepared ring-plum or peach grafting twigs, gently wedged in the middle, into the splitting. If the patient allowed, the operation was carried out on both sides, and after

removing the wedge, it was only necessary to dress the wound with raffia and wax. Observing four or five operations was enough for me to try the grafting myself the next day with the unused grafting twigs of the man from Újhely. 'You have nice hands,' praised me my father when he saw that out of the grafts more twigs had been born. And after the noble twigs had grown strong foliage, I was overcome by a never before experienced feeling of creation.

* * *

In the gap, which is an incomplete week between Christmas and the New Year, we could finally relax a little. There's no pig-slaughter or other urgent activity in sight that could not wait. We're still in bed, we've had our first cup of coffee, and because the TV broadcasts all kind of happy nonsense, we keep an eye on the screen while we talk. From the street, however, there is an unexpected rattle on the window.

"Klárika, Klárika!" someone calls to my wife.

It would take time to hurry to the door, but we don't want the person who is rattling to wait, so we open the window.

- "Klárika," says the young woman who knows my wife, "go quickly to Zádor. I saw from the street that your mother is not well. She's kneeling on the terrace, clinging to the rail. I'm sure she's fainted, because she didn't answer my call and the little door is closed.

"My God!" my wife snatches her head. "I'm on it!"

We rush to get dressed, run as fast as we can. We open the lock, and we can see Mama kneeling on the terrace, and we replay in our minds how she collapsed. She would have clung to the rails, but even though she could not keep her sick body from falling. Well, that was all the time heart failure needed to defeat human will. She wanted to have no business with doctors or drugstores, and, in spite of being very weak she refused to be in bed all the time. Perhaps now she wanted to let the hens out, and maybe she brought them some lukewarm water, but she was not strong enough to go back to her room. When did it happen? A half an hour or an hour ago? It would be useless to run for the doctor, her hands, arms and face were

already cold. We take her into the house, lay her on the bed, and look at each other. My wife's eyes are full of tears. I start crying too, but we must go on, for a decent arrangement of a human being's departure requires a series of urgent and indispensable tasks.

"She must be washed and dressed before she is completely cold," says my spouse. "It's my job, let me do it alone, she was so modest. But first go and tell Miklós to come, he must establish the time of death."

The doctor is out to visit a patient, but I return with the promise that his assistant will let him know and send him as soon as possible. In the meantime, I go to the other side of the street to my mother's place, turn on the stove, make her breakfast. I try to open the door quietly so as not to startle her. She lies facing the wall, everything in the house is just as we left it last night.

"Good morning, Mum," I say to her.

"Good morning," she replies in a perfectly clear voice. "I thought you were at work."

"I don't have to work now, I'm on winter holiday," I say to her. "But if it had not been so, I wouldn't be able to work."

I go to her bedside, lift the duvet to see if her diaper is not very wet yet. It seems to be okay.

Do you know what happened this morning?" I ask her. She turns to me without her glasses on. Her eyes are blurry.

"No," she says moodily.

"'My mother-in-law died."

"Poor thing," she remarks regretfully. "Was she ill?"

"Yes, very ill. But although she could hardly crawl, she got out of bed to mind herself. She could not bear anyone to look after her. Like this morning, she tried to attend to the hens and chicken, but she got unwell." I try to make her realize her own situation, but she doesn't have the intention to react.

"He was old," she says instead. But what will be with your father-in-law now? Who will take care of him?"

"Never worry about my father-in-law, Mum. Don't you remember that we buried him two years ago?"

"I didn't know," she says and stares at the ceiling.

I don't answer to that, I go to the stove. I remove the ashes and make the fire. After I light it, I wait a little to see that it burns properly, then I add some more wood to it.

"I can't stay any longer, Mum, because I have lots of work to do yet, but I'll bring you breakfast, and one of the neighbours I asked to take care of you will come with me. You must accept Emmuska's help and try to be on good terms with her, for I can think of no better solution for the time being. You must understand that we both have to work."

Emma said that she would not mind to be with her in daytime. She would feed, wash and clean her for the money my Mum gets as old-age pension, but she would not be with her at night, she has a family too. So, we think it's all right, and we can relax a little, as long as the funeral ahead of us allows us to do that. How could we have known that our peace of mind would be so short-lived? Indeed, it was just enough to bury Mama and to get the official matters going because Emma terminated the arrangement by the end of the first week of the new year. She refused to give any reason or explanation as to why she had changed her mind. However, her quick shake of her head and a look on her face said to me that she was not willing to spend even an hour more with this old woman. I would ask my mother what the problem was between them, but it is useless to expect help from her in the last few months. She is silent now, as in all other cases when she feels guilty.

So, we return to the previous practice: sometimes I visit my helpless mother, sometimes my wife. When it's time for a bath, we both go, and sometimes we're both weak to attend the patient properly. It's still luck that since the weather has turned colder, she does not crawl around in our absence, nor does she turn the house upside down or freezes to death on the floor, because she by no means finds her way back to her bed. She instinctively feels now that it is better to be under the covers. She has that little sense still, and when I see that, I can't be angry with her.

But my soul or conscience does not give me any rest. Sitting now in my chair, my father's words come to my mind. Now I really realise that his admonition concerning Mother, that we must not leave her alone and

must look after her, was more a testament than a request. My God, how easily, how confidently I promised then! Of course not, we would never abandon her...! How could Dad think such a thing that we would! But now I just repeat the lesson that was taught to me that vows are easy to make until the insurmountable difficulties appear. I had no idea that it would be such an excruciating challenge to grant my father's last wish. Where was I brought up? When did I fail, how could I have missed the classes that say that there are particular commandments that demand sons to persevere and not only to love and respect their parents? Happy can be the one who does not have to experience all this, and even happier that one who can look back with love on the last word and gesture of his birth mother. Forgive me, my Lord, I cannot do that!

But I know that every word that leaves my lips now is conceived in sin and shames me, but still, I can't help it. So, I'd rather keep quiet for a time enough to recite the Lord's Prayer and let my dead father speak for me. "My son, I have forgiven your mother's youthful indiscretions! I have forgiven her because she cared for your grandmother with patience and love before she died. She cleaned her up, wiped the feverish sweat from her forehead and body, gave her drink, fed her with a little spoon because she could not open even her mouth properly. With difficulty, I forgave her when she and the woman living in the neighbourhood followed me all the way down in a KGB officer's car. I was not a criminal, nor was I an enemy of the Soviet country. Just then I was led to another woman's house, where I sought solace only because of her, your mother. I tell you, I have forgotten all the insults she hurled at me, for which, I know, you grieved a lot at the time. So now I ask you to forget it too."

Thank you for this confession, Father, and thank you for the wisdom you lent me. It helped me a lot. Yes, it did. Mom also considered it was important to recall Grandma's last days to me. "I was with her during her last two weeks. It often occurred to me that now I could make her remember her famous saying: 'My daughter-in-law is not my daughter.' I could have asked her then where her daughter was, but she had lots of pain, she was suffering horribly, so there was no point in making her suffer more. Because she really suffered like hell when the injection didn't work.

I had to change her shirts all the time because she was sweating so much. There were no more dry shirts, so I gave her your pyjama top. You were in the army then as a soldier, and I thought you didn't need it then. And she, poor thing, stroked your pyjama as if it was you, and talked to it. 'Lacika, Lacika,' repeated she your name. 'My God, I only wish I knew what would become of Lacika. Then I would die much easier,' she always said."

Is it right that inherited memories should also hurt? I guess I'm not completely numb after all. But how can I feel that way when our losses are more and more and just multiply as if competing with each other? Death has become a returning guest, and we can't even tell it that it had better to find a place elsewhere. Death was able to come for Eszterke, our first-born granddaughter. It came down like a cruel predator on our family from the highest heaven, and shortly before it took my father, then my father-in-law, and now, lo and behold, it all of a sudden hunted Mama down. No, it did not retreat. Here it waits in the perceptible vicinity, I can sense the pungent ozone smell with my whole being. I close my eyes, and see a dark cloak hovering before my mother's bed. The inside of the hood is dark, there are no hands hanging from the sleeves of the cloak, no fingers, no feet. Yet the cloak is not empty. It is filled with an anthropomorphic substance, and it floats and wavers over the patient as if it was its duty. But there is no need to try: my poor weak-eyed mother does not notice it either. Or does she not want to? I think she must feel something. Well, she rises from her bed and stretches her hands forward, and in the same idiotic voice she used in her nightmares, she calls to my father. I believe him that he must be here somewhere. He has come to help his spouse to get to the other side.

There are beads of perspiration on my forehead, I go numb from the waist down. I am in absolute fear of death. I am sure that it, this monster sent it to me, it turns like a robot, and now it is coming towards me. It just pulls the sleeve of its cloak at my eyes, and this makes me fall into a heavy, oppressive sleep. I see the sickbed of my Puskás grandmother, and my mother and my aunts are wringing their hands in front of her. Mama Teci's two arms are tied, for she is throwing herself about with devilish strength, and her mouth is foaming. My mother looks back uncertainly

and, as if we were already there, speaks to us. 'My child, if I am like that, do not hesitate. Go ahead and knock me down at once!' This message wakes me up, I look around in the room. What does it mean? In response, death looks into my face and orders to take immediate action. It directs my eyes to the small axe used for cutting the firelighter and kindling for the fire in the stove. Strong is the urge, but I don't move. 'Aha, I see,' the death remarks, sort of to himself. 'Mr. Teacher still has an aversion to blood. Never mind!' he says, and as he gives me a bigger flick with the sleeve of its cloak, I rise from the armchair and turn towards the stove, floating. 'Close the hatch please!' he commands loudly. I can still feel that I can resist, but the next command is already whistling: 'I repeat: close the hatch!' My numb right arm rises against my will, I touch the lukewarm metal plate, but I am unable to move it. 'Okay, that'll do,' it says, slowly turning behind me. In the next minute, a huge blow hits my shoulder. A large suitcase loaded with bedding falls from the top of the wardrobe. I bang my head on the corner of the stove and my right hand, which is holding the sliding door, lets it go. But it doesn't want me yet, so lets me free and I fall to the floor. It remarks cynically on my fall: 'Can you see, Mr. Teacher? It's as simple as that.' "Lord, who can by all means see through me," I gasp for breath, "it was not me, was it?"

I have a terrible headache, I feel dizzy. No, this is not wakefulness. I'm sitting in some third-world, primitive, dirty railway station. It seems I am about to go somewhere, and so is the crowd seemingly made up of refugees swaying around me. The train we are waiting for is about to arrive, but I have never seen a train like that. The carriages were interconnected with medium cargo areas, and the passengers sit on the open platforms carrying their belongings from who knows where. I find a seat for myself between a wardrobe and a rabbit hutch, and after the strange train has started, I ask the people sitting around me where they and this train are going. They look at me as if I were from another world.

"Don't you know, Sir, that all trains are now being diverted to Újlak?"

"And why there?" I continue asking.

"Why, why... Well, all the trains go to the Market Square. Now everybody takes and puts up their souls for sale there. People come from

all over the place, middlemen alternate each-other, and they take souls over for a pretty good price."

"And if all the souls are sold, what will people do in the world without them?" I ask looking horrified at the speaker.

"Who needs souls nowadays? There is no land nearby which we could call home, there are no villages or people who would welcome us. What could we do with our degenerate, emaciated souls?

"Come on!" I try to protest." And they who buy those souls, what will they do with them?

"You know, there are rumours to be heard more and more often that a new world is being created somewhere. And if so, it must be populated. But how? It's not as simple as that. These entrepreneurs are well aware that without souls, it would be utter nonsense. But they, let me tell you, have never been in such a relationship with the Creator that they could order souls directly from Him, so they try to find loopholes to solve the problem without Him, because they don't want to acknowledge that something is impossible. So, this is why to sell and buy souls is a good idea nowadays. And we, having got rid of our souls, can go freely anywhere, where our eyes lead us. And those who have more pressing business can race with the wind.

It would be worth reflecting on what I have heard, but I have so much gobbledygook, so much clutter of useless thoughts in my head that I can only think of one more simple question.

"And how long will it take to get to Újlak?"

"Half a day perhaps. That's my guess. But it depends on how we can stand the difficulties. But soon, about in an hour, you can also take your seat in the saddle, Sir."

I nod and close my eyes, leaning against the rabbit hutch.

Someone shakes my shoulder, I wince. My wife is standing in front of me.

"My love, wake up! You're snoring so loud that it can be heard even in the street."

I wasn't just snoring. I couldn't breathe for a few long seconds, so now I'm gasping for breath like someone who was being strangled with two hands.

"Oh, sorry, I had a very bad dream," I apologise for snoring and feel my forehead with both of my hands.

"What did you dream that so cracked you up? Will you tell me?

"No. Not now. Perhaps later... Later perhaps."

"Okay, you know. Then come and feed your mother. She must have her lunch."

My mother lies quietly and calmly. Or is it just me who thinks so? I take the stool to the bedside, place the tray on it, and squeeze a seat for myself on the edge of the bed. But my mother just keeps sleeping, does not react to my words. I touch her, then move her shoulder, but there's no reaction. My wife and I look at each other terrified. I grab my coat and run for the doctor.

"It's her heart," says Miklós. "It slowed down very much. Looks like she doesn't have much time yet. But we can still try an adrenaline shot."

But the injection doesn't trigger any reaction in her body.

"Well, this is a coma," says the doctor nodding sympathetically. "There's not much we can do."

I see Miklós out and we shake hands at the gate. Feri Seres comes by on his bicycle, but when he sees the doctor leaving, he slows down and stops.

"How is your Mama?" he asks looking deeply in my face.

"Not well," I answer. "She fainted and hasn't come to yet."

"Oh, I'm sorry... Then nine days. That's all what she has left."

I'm going back. My wife is standing at the bed as if praying. My mother's breathing is barely perceptible, but did not stop yet. At the corner of her mouth, the accumulated saliva bubbles weakly and foams precariously.

THE END