

The Scarcity Shop

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THE SCARCITY SHOP

A Hiánycikkek Boltja

I

Jenő Bander started the trade while the war was still going on. Of course everything was easy then. For a while, his was the largest enterprise of its kind in the whole city, a kind of Father Courage; simply, anything that was needed, he could get. Afterwards came the changes and Bander had to tighten his belt, of course not so much, because while the iron curtain still stood, there were no real problems. Even after the regime change the problems didn't really begin until the lead up to joining the EU. You could forget about caviar, and Japanese silk, too. The new rules didn't really make it possible for someone to run a store with such a variable stock of merchandise. That's when Bander decided to try his hand at the illegal. The company officially went out of business and he took down the painted red sign which had been above the cellar entrance on Ó street—„Jenő Bander's Scarcity Shop, founded 1942"—and hung it behind the counter. Fortunately, by that time there was already a group of regular customers that would whisper the address of the store to anyone they encountered who couldn't find something deemed to be of vital importance. Thus, those whom he held in his employ were a notorious group.

Namely, Bander only employed professionals. His best people were deserters still in hiding from the war or the revolution, all frightfully experienced, madly cunning figures who, despite their greying temples and aching limbs, could cut across the continent in just days if one of Bander's customers had a craving for a forgotten Portuguese vintner's legendary wine, or could somehow find the only trash collection point in the city where, at that moment, a macramé toilet-paper holder fashioned in the national colors was being tossed out. Bander, of course, took orders too, although this activity was of minor importance and he treated it with a degree of professional contempt; anyone could order things, even from half-way around the world. What he was really proud of was when a customer found what he was looking for, immediately and on the premises, even if it were just some godforsaken knick-knack.

An Iranian carpet on which both the lamb and saker could be seen at the same time. Olives stuffed with paprika-tuna, in a cylindrical tin. Breton cider. A private edition of Attila Jozsef's psychiatric records, with a dedication by Flóra Kozmuca. A corkscrew

with a handle in the shape of Manhattan's Statue of Liberty. For a while there was a separate shelf for the emblems of past regimes, by then totally unobtainable relics, but that branch of the business was worn away by the unstoppable, breaking retrowave of nostalgia at the turn of the millennium. By that time there wasn't a hipster on the right bank of the Danube who didn't have a Trabant matchbox-car or a dog-shaped piggybank. If something began to be manufactured anew, it didn't interest Bander anymore. His web of connections was vast, containing networks of second-hand booksellers, flea-market sellers, knick-knack hunters, estate administrators, food specialists, bicycle couriers, hotel waiters and street kids, all awaiting his phone call, and occasionally a thief, too. He didn't differentiate between his customers, working equally for the highest and lowest among them. If someone found the cellar entrance through a friend or business connection and rang the buzzer, which had been modelled after Stalin's mausoleum, three times, he could enter.

If he didn't find what he was looking for Bander at first smiled despairingly and, practically offended, went back into the warehouse from which, for a time, only the sound of unintelligible yelling and the angry sounds of the telephone being banged around filtered out. Bander would return a few minutes later, his face serenely transformed. Then he would quote a price and the time required. In the course of the negotiations that followed the customer could reduce the delivery time, but the price would grow exponentially, and in parallel, so would Bander's irritation and zeal. Most of them did this. Bander had been living on tranquilizers for years. He took them when there were no customers or when business seemed to be running too smoothly.

I came into the picture when Zoli Winkler announced that he was moving to Basel for three years on a scholarship. At that point I had known for months that he worked for Bander and, as I had acquired a knowledge of the city's secondhand book sellers during my university years that few could rival, I had even helped him on occasion. Zoli Winkler was of course one of them; with his leaving I was not only losing one of my best friends but one of my biggest competitors too, and I knew I had to seize this opportunity. On his last day of work he accompanied me to see Bander.

We chained our bicycles to the barriers in front of a nearby school and Zoli rang the Stalin buzzer, as he called it, four times.

„Four buzzes. Remember it. For suppliers, it's the code to get in. ”

He looked at me significantly and after the click of the door pushed it inward. In the half darkness of the store Bander's figure slowly took shape before me, at that moment

looking for something in the pockets of the vest he had been wearing forever. I could almost feel the irritation filling my temples, although there was no reason for this at all. Still, a strange feeling came over me, the source of which I couldn't locate. What made me even more nervous was the towering figure of Bander before me. He didn't even look up at us when yelped to Zoli:

„Have you got it?”

Zoli took a brown envelope out of his bag and slid it respectfully across the table.

„My last shipment. If I'm not mistaken, with this one I've broken the record.”

Bander clicked the stopwatch which was dangling from his neck and wrote something in the registry book and then, with lightning speed, freed the contents of the envelope and began to examine the book with the eyes of a professional.

„Excellent, excellent” he repeated and suddenly looked at Zoli over the rims of his glasses, while the books that Zoli had brought disappeared with such speed that I couldn't decipher the titles on their covers.

„I really don't understand you, son. You would have had a great future ahead of you and I don't know who I'll get to replace you. There's hardly anyone nowadays who reads and really understands the book market and yet customers are always pestering me with orders.”

„I know. That's why I brought a friend of mine. One of the best in the city” Zoli started to say and then stepped out of the way so that I could look the old man in the eye. I tried to appear sure of myself and extended my hand towards him.

„Tamás Daedalus. Aesthete, editor and bookworm. At your service.” My hand of course remained in the air and Bander eyed me suspiciously like a shipment of dubious quality.

„Outside of the work that you'll be doing for me I don't really care what you waste your time with. Tell me what you can do.”

Zoli glanced towards me, his eyes saying Now! Now!, but at first I could barely begin speaking. My head still felt like there were a thousand ants swarming inside and I could barely hear my own voice when I finally did begin to speak.

„Last year, in a single week, I was able to get Hegel’s three-volume Aesthetics three separate times. I repeated the same stunt a month later twice with his Phenomenology of Spirit. During the first week the new edition of Péter Nádas’s Book of Memories was available I got ahold of the first edition, in one volume, at a quarter the price. Later I did the same with Gadamer’s Truth and Method. A month and half ago I got Baudelaire’s The Flowers of Evil in French, for a friend of mine in less than four hours without, I needn’t add, even leaving the city. I put a copy of Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy in the hands of one of my classmates who was preparing for a University entrance exam, in under three days and a week before the new edition came out. My specialty is obtaining new works before they come out. Since my work makes me a frequent visitor to publishing houses, I also deal in the secret copying of manuscripts.”

Bander broke in and in a slow, measured voice and put the question to me:

„Have you ever stolen anything from a library?”

Here I think I turned a little red.

„Not yet sir, but I’m familiar with the techniques required for that kind of thing. Other than that I’m somewhat familiar with estate matters in the area of rare books, and with the book market in the subway underpasses.”

In the meantime Bander had lit up and was now annoyedly fanning smoke in our direction with a giant, outstretched hand, like someone demanding the end of a horribly boring performance.

„And I guess you’re also familiar with the history of renaissance poetry, the reception of conceptual art in France, Maurice Blanchot’s literary criticism, classical German idealism, the love life of Goethe, and from the look of you” here he again looked me up and down contemptuously, as if I were some cat carcass he had stumbled upon in the street somewhere „ probably have an exhaustive knowledge of homosexual and lesbian literature from antiquity until the present.”

„You’re not mistaken at all, sir” I answered, fidgeting a little, and albeit with little pride in my voice.

At the sound of my words Bander snorted, as if he has heard some amusingly bad joke and with this he disappeared behind the old posters covering the entrance into the warehouse.

It was then that I realized what, other than Bander’s undeniable rudeness, that had been annoying me to no end in that place. From speakers hidden somewhere I could hear Vivaldi’s Four Seasons transcribed for balalaika. When I put this into words Zoli just laughed.

„The Moscow Feel-Harmonics. Unobtainable.”

We stood in silence for a while in the stuffy cellar. I looked at him nervously, but he just hummed, like someone who didn’t know what to do with the situation.

„Well, I don’t know...” I finally began.

„I thought you liked to be humiliated.”

„Shut up.”

II

When we stepped out of the cellar into the early spring sunshine, the hand in which Bander had placed the note was still shaking. „Italo Calvino: If on a Winters Night a Traveller. The eyes of the world are upon you.” That was all that was written.

„An assignment for a professional” Zoli looked at me as we walked towards the bicycles. I had to admit he was right, that book hadn’t been reprinted since the 1960’s. When years before I had needed a copy for one of my classes I had finally been able to turn up a copy, which had since been stolen, at the National Library. Now between steps I quickly cursed myself for it not having been me who had stolen it. I looked at my watch. It was four o’clock Friday afternoon. Most secondhand book shops are only open until six, so I had to hurry. If I couldn’t find the book today I could at least cross some of the more obvious sources off the list. The map of Budapest suddenly came into my head

and as I was struggling with the lock on my bicycle I had already planned the route. I said goodbye to Zoli Winkler – I wished him a pleasant trip and he wished me good luck.

„If you happen to have bad luck today, it's good to know that Bander keeps the store open till eight and on Saturdays it opens at ten. But don't get too worked up over the impossible; he understands the difficulties involved – if you get it within four or five days then working with him in the future is practically assured.”

These were Zoli's last words before he took off in the opposite direction.

I started with the place located on the corner of Andrásy Street and after went down a few streets to come out below at Anker Lane so I could quickly run down Múzeum Boulevard before closing time. Thoughts were flashing through my mind: the names of the shop assistants in each store, when they get new shipments, how to get into the warehouse spaces, if necessary. After failing at the most obvious places I started to widen the circle, intentionally leaving my secret, favorite shop for last: the second hand book shop next to the Mexikói Street underground stop, where I had been able to put together the Hegel volumes. At these times a good book hunter's thoughts run in two parallel lines: zig-zag in and out of shops at the cities most distant points, ask, answer, further describe the volumes to the shopkeeper, bully, flatter, threaten, arouse pity if necessary and, at the same time he searches his memory with even greater intensity: all the places in one's head where its possible to find books – places already visited in the course of one's lifetime – the one giant, labyrinthine library begins to take shape – corridors, cellars, levels, entrances, galleries systemized into a network, the shelves of which have already been gone over a thousand times in one's thoughts, always looking for different books; now the pictures flash through one's mind, themselves curious if the sought after, little, slim, red volume, which at that point seemed so unimportant and neglected and which is now more important to find than anything, hasn't already been seen somewhere by chance. For the true bookhunter the real search is here in these hundred different places, drifting in the scattered collection of this giant thrown-together library, the building of which is a lifetime's work and in which one, if not careful, can get lost in the blink of an eye. By now I had barely half an hour to get to Mexikói Street. The majority of the booksellers on Múzeum Boulevard, those to whom the title and author meant anything at all, merely laughed.

„Put in a request on the internet, young man, and pray that it gets to you before you die” said one as he dusted his books, so amused by the impossibility of my quest. As my bicycle whizzed down Andrásy Street I came just short of causing an accident when I

suddenly decided to turn into one of the streets next to the Opera so I could give the bookshop next the Opera a try before making it, at the last second, to the door of my secret, favorite place next to the last stop of the underground. I had good reason for doing this. It was here, near the Opera that I had found, almost by miracle, the aforementioned Nádas book, and in my experience, where wonders once occur, they are more likely to happen again. Not to mention that I couldn't have known whether Bander was testing other candidates for the job at the same time, sending me and unknown others shooting through the city after the same book. In this case I couldn't allow myself, above all, to miss any chances that should fall in my path. When I entered, the shopkeeper was at that moment organizing some old photographs on a table.

„Tamás... I haven't seen you in ages. Tell me what it is your up to these days. You look pretty troubled.”

„I've got every reason to be” I answered.

„I'm looking for Calvino's *If on a Winters Night a Traveller*. I'm really in a hurry so please be quick and be honest with me.”

„I have to disappoint you, Tamás. The last time I saw that book was three years ago when a young man like yourself bought it. Only he was quite a bit taller than you and had green eyes” – Zoli Winkler. I would have bet my life on it. But I didn't have time to get into details about his description and left her without a word, jumping on my bike again so that I wouldn't miss the day's last opportunity across the city park. At the end of Andrásy Street I cut across Hero's Square, passing by the museums, the zoo and the circus, and the baths. All institutions copied from Rome and somehow stuck here, I thought for no reason and within no time I was at the painfully tasteless complex of shops at the end stop of the underground, five minutes before closing. To my hastily gasped question I received a negative answer. At these times there are two kinds of negative answers, and success usually depends on being able to differentiate between the two: in the first case the shopkeeper actually knows what's in the store, even what's in the warehouse space. In the second case, however, they're tired or lazy or spiteful or even all three, and even if they do know they may not be willing to think about it and so come up with a lie on the spot. When this happens, you have to pretend that you're looking for other books, too, and that you want to be left alone to browse. In my case the shop keeper was obviously preparing to close the shop and thought that as such he could justify shortening my stay there. I acted as if I had no clue about the shop's opening hours or even about the passage of time and began to pan intensely the shelves which surrounded the room, looking as if I had all the time in the world. A few

minutes before my rational side had already admitted defeat, but for some reason the rest of me didn't want to believe that today I wasn't going to find the book I was looking for. My eyes obsessively ran over the shelves dismissively towering above me again and again, like when someone has lost something terribly important and doesn't want to admit it, and so empties out his pockets again and again as if it were possible to find a new, forgotten, unsearched pocket where the sought object lurks. I too hoped that if I concentrated hard enough on the shelves that maybe a hidden shelf full of books, among them the one I desired, would fade into the picture before me. But it didn't. I was forced into disappointment. I dejectedly barged out of the shop, the glass door slamming angrily behind me.

Today there was only one thing left for me to do: go to the Ervin Szabó Library and if by chance I found the book, begin preparing for the heist. I only wanted to do this as the last option; it wasn't the act of stealing that troubled me – as a bookhunter it gave me pleasure to act in the service of Hermes, making information thought to be unobtainable accessible to others, reviving books doomed to the shelves of second-hand book shops, delivering them from their sad, gray dreams into the hands of would-be readers. On the shelf in a shop a book is like a corpse, having only size and weight. The amount paid for it is like an obolus paid to Charon to return the dead on his unsteady boat to the land of the living, I thought as the park whistled by. The difference being that the book is suddenly revived in the hands of the reader, giving off scent and taking breath again. A library book though is just a body in suspension; if it remains in its place it can be revived again and again in more and more readers' hands.

Booom. Krrrr. Ratatatam-pooof. I'm thinking too much.

A girl's face above me. And pain in my left leg. Dizziness.

„Have you gone completely crazy? What are you doing in my lane? Are you ok?“

A girl's face, and within a wonderfully, deep brown pair of eyes. I turned my head away a little on the asphalt and closed my eyes. I struggled to find my way back to reality as a sign in large red letters blinked ACCIDENT in my mind. Probably not going to make it to the library today.

Fortunately my wounds weren't too serious, though blood did stream out of them. My knee had sustained a serious abrasion from the asphalt. My bicycle, however, wasn't in such good shape and it looked pretty hopeless that it would be worth riding again without serious repairs. The girl with whom I collided came through with just a few cuts and scrapes and seemed more concerned about my state condition than her own.

„Well, it's pretty ugly... wait... I'll bandage it" she said as she bent down towards me so that she could cover the throbbing patch of blood on my leg with the scarf that was hanging around her neck. For a moment a thick, swinging cascade of brown hair obscured the world in front of me. After some struggling she pulled the bandage tight and I screamed.

„Calm down. It's not going to kill you. Can you stand up?"

„I can make a feeble attempt..."

„Now, let's see."

She finally helped me up and we dusted ourselves off. The few passersby who had until then stood frozen watching us then wandered off. The last rays of sunshine flashed through the trees on Andrassy Street and the afternoon heat could only be felt on the heated up asphalt.

„I live two blocks from here. If you can make it that far, I'll fix you up."

I looked irritatedly at my watch. I couldn't really get on the underground with my wreck of a bicycle and it seemed that the speed at which I could move in my present state didn't really matter anymore.

„Are you in a hurry?"

„Not anymore."

We picked up our bicycles and slowly but steadily made our way towards her apartment. The pain shot through my leg with every step, but what was bothering me even more was not being able to figure out what I found so unbelievably attractive about this girl. She carried herself in a sure, manly stride beside her bicycle as her torrent of

brown hair followed her pace in a rhythm of even coils. I didn't really know what it is that men find attractive about a woman, but this girl didn't seem to offer any clues. She hardly had breasts or behind, her face conveyed the impression – as well as I could tell – that it was some small assymetry that made her face more intersting than beautiful. I was roused from my thoughts by the girls voice and the screaming wound on my knee.

„What's your name, by the way?”

„Oh, yeah. I'm Tamás. Tamás Daedalus.”

„The blog writer?”

„Well, yeah.”

If anything, I hadn't counted on this. The discovery made me feel both awkward and a little proud. It was a strange feeling to meet a girl who, thanks to my diary on the internet, knew my thoughts inside out. What I didn't know was whether that increased or diminished my chances with her. Not to mention, chances of what? The situation had started to grow complex and its awkwardness drained my strength.

„What I don't understand is that for someone who writes as much as you do, why not publish somewhere? Are you really so afraid that sometime someone serious might read what you write?”

I didn't know what to say to this. Everyone bothers me, I thought to myself. Although I had created the problem for myself. I tried hard to change the subject.

„And what's your name?”

„My name's Nóra Jónás. And before you ask, I haven't got a nickname.”

„Nice name. Nóra Jónás, just like Norah Jones, isn't it?” Such an idiot! If you can't say something worthwhile, at least shut your mouth! – screamed the part of me which a few minutes earlier had blinked the word ACCIDENT in my mind. Luckily Nóra didn't answer and by that time we had arrived at her apartment. And luckily she lived on the ground floor so I didn't have to lug my now useless hunk of iron bicycle up a few flights of stairs. Thinking about my earlier difficulties I almost bumped into the door when, like lightning,

the reason for my unexplainable attraction to her became clear to me: this girl undoubtedly smelled like old books. That's why I felt so comfortable around her in spite of my lame conversation and bad jokes. I made a mental note that, should I get the chance to more closely examine this scent again, I've got to determine whether it's the smell of a secondhand bookshop or that of a library. If I were lucky, I'd be able to pinpoint the exact place – my guess at this point was that came from the philosophy reading room at the Ervin Szabó Library.

„Is the door really so heavy?” I asked her when I saw she was opening the door really slowly and carefully.

„You'll see” she condescended, and then we were inside.

There really was reason to be careful: namely, the door opened into an apartment where every vertical surface, from floor to ceiling – including the door itself – was covered with bookshelves. I couldn't believe that I'd ended up here. Outside Nóra chained her bicycle and my wreck to the bars on the window, threw her backpack on the table and then said to me:

„Have a seat on the bed and I'll look for a bandage.” The rest I heard from the bathroom on the far side of the kitchen.

„I guess the offering here is hardly appropriate to your tastes.”

So, she had dismissed me as an irredeemable snob because of my blog. But ultimately what could I say? She wasn't mistaken. As I stumbled to the bed and sprawled out on it relieved, I wasn't really able to give the place a more thorough look. Now that I'd finally limped into a more relaxed state of mind I set about taking stock of the books I could see from where I was. Nóra was undeniably right. The wall to wall shelves were nearly caving in from the cheap love stories, penny romances and rose-color bound trash that was on them. The entire works of Sidney Sheldon and Vavyan Fable fell in line behind one another in soldier like order, directly above them were bound together booklets of Harlequin, and countless books of authors unknown to me. The Pages of our Love. Lovers on the Sea of Japan. Manuelle Iskaré, My Love. Siberia, My Love. I read a few titles at random from the shelf next to me. Titles which I would usually dismiss with the contemptuous glance of the high culture elite, not even deeming the blurbs worthy of skimming over. I could cross the philosophy reading room off the list.

Meanwhile Nóra came in with the bandages and sat down next to me on the bed so she could get a better look at my injuries. As she pressed the iodine soaked cotton onto the abraded part of my knee I couldn't decide if I was crying out from the pain or from the stupefying quantity of accumulated sentimentality around me. What I found the strangest was that despite the books, in neither the furnishing of her apartment nor in Nóra herself could I find any sign that she would be interested in such things. Not in her clothes, her bedding, the covers of the armchairs nor the curtains was the rose color of the books around us reflected – Nóra's presence suggested anything but a romantic nature.

„If you take a better look around, you'll maybe find something you like.” She murmured to herself as she wrapped gauze around my knee.

„In the upper left corner there's a complete series of Ferenc Herczeg, for example. And behind your back there's a bunch of Colette, George Sand and Françoise Sagan.”

„Aha” I said, slightly relieved that the bandage had finally found its way into place.. Though as I tried to turn my head to get a look at the shelves behind me I was suddenly caught by a terrible dizziness, as if the world had exploded into thousands of tiny shards. It looked like I'd hit my head harder than I had thought. After an agonized whimper I finally layed back on the bed and closed my eyes. By this point I couldn't say whether I had lost consciousness from my head injury or just fallen into sleep from the tiredness which broke over me from racing around all afternoon. The only thing I remember is that for a time a series of ghastly pictures swirled through my mind. I saw Jenő Bander, the frightful form of that enormous, ancient old man, dancing the tango in the Scarcity Shop with Sidney Sheldon to the Moscow Feel-Harmonics unbearable balalaika pieces, all the while barking at me:

„I thought you were a reliable person Tamás, but look at you! Lying around the apartment of a woman you don't even know instead of looking for the Calvino book! A real bookhunter hasn't got time for a love life. Am I the one who has to tell you that?”

Then I saw myself, standing in front of Bander and wearing Zoli Winkler's clothes, which were two sizes too large; dumbfounded, I tried to begin speaking:

„Mr. Bander, since women to me aren't even...”

By the time I got this out Bander and the others had disappeared behind the door into the warehouse which had now changed into the form of the grinning mouth of a dragon, and then I was tearing madly up and down a baroque reading room in search of the Calvino book, opening books which were all missing their letters. In the next image Nóra Jónás was dancing with Sidney Sheldon to slow jazz in the cupola of the St. Istvan Basilica, this time wearing a rose colored lizard skin dress and could say „spare-ribs” in at least fifteen languages. I started to despair when I found that in place of my legs were two rickety piles of books and so with every movement the risk increased that I would simply fall onto my nose and have to drag myself along by my hands to get out of this apparition’s frightful bookshop.

What happened after this I would only dare to put together a few days later, seated, worn out and broken down, in one of the comfortable armchairs in the silver salon of my favorite library. I must have woken up sometime around midnight to the TV, quietly humming in the corner. Sitting up on my elbows I could make out CNN on the television and Nóra Jónás seated in one of the armchairs munching on something.

„What are you watching?” I asked, stretching, deeply breathing in the faint scent of vanilla and the unmistakable scent of old books. Outside the city had become practically silent, I could hear only the occasional siren from afar.

„The pope is dying” answered Nóra without turning towards me.

The only light in the room was coming from the TV and Nóra’s profile was cast in flickering blue-white spots.

„The whole thing is being broadcast live.”

I could now clearly hear the commentator analyzing with great expertise the latest statements from the Vatican press office about the state of Karol Wojtyla’s health. If I understood correctly they were now speaking about a bladder infection and septic shock.

„And you care?” I said before thinking through the possible consequences of the remark. Fortunately Nóra didn’t turn out to be a Christian fundamentalist.

„Why? You don’t think it’s all so strange? In the history of the world no one has ever died under such public scrutiny.” „Bizarre.”

„Yeah, but come to think of it, you’ve got more experiences with public suffering than I do.” My diary again. It seemed that Nóra enjoyed my being forever troubled, perhaps presuming that she could set me straight with a few insights, if she felt like it.

„There’s quite a difference between the two” I grumbled, rubbing my head.

Nóra stood up and sat down next to me on the bed, the peculiar, piercing deep-brown gaze in my eyes, like my first memory of her.

„Of course there is. You just talk incessantly about death and suicide, but you’re too weak to do anything about it. In fact you don’t even suffer. With you it’s just an affectation.”

„So why do you read it?” I asked her, nearly offended.

Nóra smiled at me like at a little boy. She’s going to kiss me, I thought suddenly. „Take a good look at my books. You think I don’t like affectation?” Bullseye.

From her surprising answer my mind went blank, as it had so many times when she started to speak. I couldn’t defend myself. I couldn’t stop thinking how many times a similarly cliché situation had transpired in the books lined up on the shelves around us. The protagonists suffer some accident together by chance, the heroine brings the poor hero back to her apartment and under the guise of nursing him back to health, she seduces him.

It was like Nóra Jónás had countless times rehearsed the moves that followed, and was now just waiting for the right moment to put the well practiced script into action.

She kissed like a man. I liked it. Definitely.

I didn’t know if was the unexpectedness of the situation, the pain which was still hindering my thoughts, or the effusive, irresistible scent of books coming from Nóra Jónás that helped me get over my aversion to the female sex, but in any case, I gave in to the power of inescapable circumstance and let control slip from my hands. Tomorrow I could again put on the intrepid disguise of the big-city book hunter, I thought in passing. The apartment was still lit only by the pompous, blinking CNN on the screen. In these moments the whole world watched as an unlucky old man died in an apostle’s palace in a far away city, none of them having any idea that this live broadcast was

serving as mood lighting in a hidden away Budapest apartment barricaded with romance novels.

The next morning I awoke to sunshine streaming in through the window. The sounds of birds floated in on the wind from somewhere, perhaps from the rows of stunted trees on Andrásy Street. The sleep did me well and seemed to have totally healed me from the consequences of yesterday's accident. Well, not all of them, I thought to myself as I looked into the eyes of Nóra Jónás, lying next to me. She'd probably been watching me for quite some time without my realizing it.

„The reason I dared to bring you into my apartment was because I thought I knew you, because of your blog, but in reality you're really much more impressionable.”

„Should I take that as a compliment or should I take offense?”

„I'm provoking you.”

„Aha.”

„I'll bring some tea.”

Nóra got up, caressed my face one last time and went out into the kitchen wrapped in a blanket. I gazed unconsciously at the TV which had been left turned on. The Pope was still dying in Rome. I had so many things to think about. In my carefully constructed and until now pleasant world, what should I do about this woman – who apparently feels secure in the situation and undoubtedly wants to make the decisions, even if they're regarding me? What had happened the night before hadn't left me with any unpleasant misgivings, but how long could this innocent and enchanted state last? And could I picture myself again in this apartment, surrounded by these books. I looked around the room as if, based on this, I had to decide between two fates. There was a small desk directly next to the bed and up against the window, on it a beat-up looking computer surrounded by some writing implements, a mug, hairclips, a few unopened letters, classified ads, a camera, a pencil-sharpener, a dog-shaped piggy bank, a few pieces of nondescript-flavored candy, and, in the center of the table a thrown down bundle of books which were situated in such an obvious place that my panning, searching eyes missed them. Among them however, as if incidentally, a copy of Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. Mother of God.

If until this point I had felt like the hero in a penny romance novel, I now felt the unknown forces in an American spy film playing with me, my fate at the end of a bobbing string. The protagonist, sent on a secret assignment, now faces a moral dilemma: Should he sacrifice the budding relationship on the altar of work or leave everything behind and escape the life and death situation with his love to some God-forsaken Caribbean village to live happily ever after, making their living from fishing and frog farming? Or could the protagonist reveal to her his assignment and its importance? Undoubtedly not, since it would seem like work was more important than to him she was. I couldn't help thinking about Kierkegaard.

If I examined the problem from the point of view of ethics, I would have to give up the success which was within arms reach. So I had to find the point where I could teleologically suspend the ethical and escape with my innocence intact and the book in my hand. The tragic hero sacrifices his own interests and those of his beloved in the interest of the greater good, I said to myself, and thus if I undertake the role of the tragic hero and cast myself into the pose of eternal resignation, giving up my relationship with Nóra, then I'd be saved. But really to what degree could I consider the orders for the Scarcity Shop to be the greater good, commandments outside the ethical? Does Jenő Bander command such importance and eminence that I could cast him in that role? I couldn't think for long since Nóra would soon finish preparing the tea and by then it would be too late.

The movement with which I reached towards the table really did seem infinite, and I carefully slipped the book – which was so warm from the sunlight coming in through the window that it seemed to burn my hand – into my backpack. I leaned back and thought what right do I have to apply this situation to my own life, when Kirkegaard considered the idea only in connection with the sphere of Art? The key to the solution came from the peculiarity of the situation: the moment it happened I felt that I was a character in a story and that this was simply a twist in the plot; nothing of importance had really changed.

Nóra came into the room with two steaming cups of tea in her hands, the heavy blanket trailing behind her, and she marched through the small room and sat down in the armchair across from me so as to place herself in the sunlight streaming in through the window. Suddenly I found her unusually beautiful, but at the same time endlessly far away, as if I were seeing her the way I would later remember her when I'd already brought the sale to an irrevocable close.

Nora just stared at me and then burst out laughing.

„What are you looking at? I can practically see the sentences flashing back and forth in your mind, about how you're going to write about last night, right?”

I realized that surprisingly and sadly there was no longer even a trace of yesterday's pliable indecision within me. She could have said anything, her malicious comments simply bounced off me.

„I'm not going to write about last night” I finally got out, and the hidden overtones of offense in my voice probably hurt me more than her. I don't even need to mention that at this point the usual There's still a way out sign started to blink inside my head, but by that point I no longer cared. I felt sorry about all of yesterday afternoon, about how this sentimental story had started and about how it couldn't continue. I also had the feeling that I wasn't writing this screenplay and so tried hard to play the part imposed on me as well as possible.

„Are you leaving?”

„I've got to work.”

„When will I see you again?”

As I put on my clothes one after the other I no longer dared to look at Nóra. I let out a heavy sigh before I stepped out the door.

„Maybe if the Pope ever dies.”

I only carried the wreck that remained of my bicycle two blocks before chaining it to a nearby bench. I'd come back for it later, perhaps in the middle of the night so I wouldn't accidentally run into Nóra. I walked on the shady side of the street to the nearest underground stop. Without my wheels I felt like a broken-winged Hermes. After crossing so many sunlit streets it was disappointing to go down under the ground and into the bored and spiteful crowd, but I couldn't do anything about it. Jenő Bander's shop would open soon, and I had to be there since I'd already made the decisions that I had been permitted to make.

The story ran jaggedly through my head again and again and I thought: I can still escape from these absurd forces and out of this situation, the only question was whether the writer of this story would attack my way out, in which with one infinite

movement I could change from the knight of infinite resignation to the knight of faith before I got to Bander's shop.

When I turned into Ó Street every single step seemed to span kilometers. The life of the city was its usual self, children were running through the streets and I had to be careful not to collide with the bicyclists zig-zagging this way and that on the sidewalk. Pigeons fluttered here and there in the streets narrow path, as if they wanted to peck their day's food from the crumbling walls. I stopped in front of cellar door cowering in the dark before me and took out the book. I spun the book around on my finger as if I were saying goodbye to Nóra for the last time, almost not noticing the little folded up piece of paper that fell out from between its pages. I bent down for it and unfolded it with an uneasy feeling, at first I thinking yesterdays head injury was causing hallucinations.

The note was written in the unmistakable, oafish handriting of the owner of the scarcity shop. „Italo Calvino: If on a Winter's Night a Traveller. Good Luck.”

I hadn't even considered that Bander might employ women, too.

The early spring sunlight blinded me on a Saturday morning that smelled like dogshit. The pigeons at my feet careened back and forth. I decided not to give myself time to think. I took an envelope out of my bag and wrote on it „In hope of continued, fruitful cooperation. Respectfully, Nóra Jónás”, and then slid everything through the gaping letter slot.

By half past nine that night the pope was dead.

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