



GYÖNGYI

Jonathan Schütz

GYÖNGYI

Gyöngyi ran, and as she ran into the night, she paid no heed to the remains of the week's dramatic events. Placards and banners leaned against walls splattered with slogans; she had to make skittish little jumps across the Budapest cobbles to avoid the shards of metal left from the shattered statue of Stalin, brought down days before by the excited students. Revolution was in the air, but Gyöngyi had only one thought in her mind – get away, get away, get away!

Was Pál behind her? Were those his footsteps she heard pounding along the pavement? A figure overtook her, running, muffled against the cold, a young man, not Pál, thank God! More figures passed her, eyes sparking. They were running without panic, running for the last tram after an evening of merriment, running to bring change to the world and tell the good news. They were not running for fear of a man.

Gyöngyi swerved, took a side-street, ran on. And when she could not run any more, she walked. The night had started out so well. Pál, even Pál, had been sharing in the optimism of the last days.

Not that he would do anything so vulgar as to carry a banner himself, cut the hated symbols out of the centre of the flag with his own hands, risk wetting his socks on a march through the streets. But he was content to sit in a warm corner, sip a rare red supplied under the counter by a friend from Villány, and share his opinions with a convivial circle of his colleagues. He had been expansive, expounding his various philosophies which challenged no-one and risked nothing. He welcomed the revolution, though he could not condemn those who held the reins of power, cloaked his thoughts in elegant phrases carefully turned and learned at the Economics School. And in this mood of benevolence born of the excitement of others, he had taken her home and made love to her, tenderly, with

a sweetness that reminded her of the first days, the days when they had held hands and walked alongside the route of the number 2 tram, the tram that they and hundred of others joked would whisk the finest from the school of economics along past Parliament and terminating at the Party's seat in the Party house. They had walked, holding hands, looking at the water sending up showers of light into their love-dazzled eyes.

And then he finished loving her, and they lay still, she hoping that all that was new would awake their love as it had been before.

Pál had dozed, while she watched the light shifting on the ceiling as cars rattled past. And then he had woken with the demons of four in the morning gnawing at his brain. He had shaken her from her reverie with a grip on her arm whose imprint she could still feel, and begun the inquisition, gently but with determination. Did she love him? Did she love him as he loved her? Would she die for him as he would for her? No, she wouldn't, she couldn't – he had seen how she had talked to Gábor – didn't she know that he was a seducer, a professional lover, someone who only had to smell a woman to set about trying to sleep with her, and he always got his way, always. Once Gyöngyi had asked him why, if he had such a low opinion of Gábor, he spent so much time with him, but the question baffled him. Gábor was an excellent man, in many ways his idol. How could he not be friends with him?

And Pál continued at four that morning. He had seen her talk to Erika, Erika hated him with a vengeance, probably because he had never made a pass at her like all the others, and she would do anything to poison Gyöngyi against him, to stop him being happy. She shouldn't listen to anything Erika said, it was all lies – better she should never talk to her, never!

And then the moment of danger came, as Pál thought on and remembered the rather ineffectual literature student who had sat at the back of the group and said nothing all evening. Gyöngyi had felt sorry for him – Pál had bulldozed his few attempts to contribute to the conversation – and so she had chatted with him briefly, quietly, so as not to disturb the others or draw attention. But Pál had noticed, and it was not just the implied rebellion that swelled his anger like a bright bubble of blood, but a profound certainty that some arrangement had been made, an understanding that would

undermine his position, cause her to slip out of his possession into those pasty, white, poetic arms... Gyöngyi protested that she didn't even know the unfortunate student's name, but Pál raged on, incensed by this evidence of her dissimulation. The bubble burst, he seized her, rolled on top of her as her love wilted and died, and in his frenzy of need, waiting for a reassurance that would not and could not come, he ignored her protests and took her.

And when it was over, he had slumped, and Gyöngyi had heaved him from her, pulled on her clothes and run, past the door where his parents slept the sleep of the unjust, past the tiny kitchen crowded with the pans she had used for yesterday's dinner, and out into the inner yard. She had slipped on her shoes, which clattered on the walkway and down the stairs, to the heavy door, which she had heaved open. She had looked both ways, and then fled into the night.

And now she was here. Which was where? It was somewhere around the Körút, that broad boulevard which circled the inner city like an artery, pulsating with life, even at this time of night. But not tonight – she had not recognised it in its stillness. But was it still? Something tickled at the back of her brain, something that was not yet a sound, but would become one soon. Gyöngyi knew it was something worse than she could imagine, something that would consume her, her fate coming to meet her, it was a devil summoned by Pál, it was Pál in his true form – and the sound that was no sound became a rumble, then a roar, and around a corner the tank came at her, gun stuck forward over tracks that gouged out the tram-lines, shaking the ground and almost throwing her from her feet. And after it came another, and another, each blazoned with a star, each part of a column lancing into the side of the city, and Gyöngyi knew that soon there would be blood. She turned and ran for home.

^*^

A biting December day. Gyöngyi rubbed her hands as she left the Party house, trying to keep her circulation going. She was lucky, she realised, to have a job, she was lucky to be alive. Soldiers were everywhere, and although many of the workers were still on strike, although no-one talked and the spark had gone out of the eyes of the passers-by, and there was a state of emergency and curfew, she

managed to take some solace in the thin sunshine. She was lucky. She had a job. She had been able to shut herself in her small room with no windows in the Party house, typing up the reports which meant nothing, not to her, not to those who wrote them or those who read them. She had Pál to thank for this job, which gave her enough to buy food and keep her off the streets, allowed her not watch as the bodies were cleared, defaced flags torn down, glass and plaster and shattered dreams swept up, loaded onto wagons and dumped at the city's edge.

For two weeks she had not seen Pál, she had seen the tanks roll in, and she had stumbled to a street corner where a man in a scarf and overcoat with a knotted belt hurried her into the barracks. The soldiers had thrown it open, and were passing out rifles and ammunition to the people. Gyöngyi was given an impromptu lesson with a woman she recognised from a florist's shop near her home, and a group of boys, the youngest only twelve, hardly old enough to brace the rifle against his shoulder and still reach the trigger.

She positioned herself in a window overlooking the street and kept watch for hours, and although she heard gunfire, she had no call to use her readied rifle. But that evening, a young man, Józsi, younger even than her, came to her and told her she had to take up a new position – they were being driven back. Each day for two weeks, she was driven further back, without firing a shot.

Except once. A tank rumbled into the square below her. A tram had been toppled onto its side to block the road, but the tank pushed it aside with relative ease. She crouched, pulled up her rifle, clamped it against the window frame to steady her aim. The tank paused, and swivelled its turret, searching for a target. Finding none, it started to move on, lurched and stalled, leaving the street silent for a moment. There was a cough and a cloud of black diesel smoke, but the engine did not restart. Twice more, then silence. The driver was trying to let the fuel drain through. Five minutes later, Gyöngyi's arm was beginning to shake with the tension. The driver tried to start the engine again, and again only sent out black smoke. And then the hatch opened. Cautiously a head poked out, looked out, before the driver hauled himself out. He shouted something, and then ran for a doorway. Gyöngyi fired, missing him. She readied the weapon again, as a second man climbed out – as he clambered, she took a shot, and another – both missed. He reached the safety of the

next road, running. Then came a third, the last, hauling himself through the hatch. Gyöngyi fired a last time, and he looked up, straight at her, in surprise, before letting go and falling back down through the hatch.

The first soldier, the driver, had drawn a revolver and he fired up at her, but she didn't move, the frozen moment of the other man looking up at her, his blond hair gently lifted by the breeze of the passing of the bullet which struck him, before her eyes. A group of heavily armed civilians in long overcoats swarmed through the square, and the tank driver turned and ran.

Gyöngyi stared at the hatch of the tank for a long time, willing the man she had shot to move again, to come back out, to let her shoot and miss, to make his escape with the others. He did not come.

She was still sitting there when Józsi came and told her they had to move back again. And so they moved back and back, until it was over and they had had to abandon their weapons – except for Józsi, who was shot on the last day, and Gyöngyi had run and run, leaving him and her rifle behind.

Pál had found her at home two days later. He had been kind, he had apologised for his behaviour, he had been worried for her, how she had been these last days. She started to tell him what she had done, but before she could begin, he interrupted. He had news – he was already working, it was a leap up the ladder, really. He was part of the new government. The new old government. And he was going to get her a job as well. That way she could stay out of trouble. And Gyöngyi was content to let him arrange her life. Give her work, occupy her mind. A new old life, where nothing changed and nothing mattered and hope was irrelevant.

^*^

And suddenly it was Spring. The sun drove away the lingering brown snow from the roadsides, coats could be left home, packed away for another year, and everything turned green. Gyöngyi found herself taking walks along the Danube, further and further. She would stroll the edges of Margaret Island during her lunch break, watching the city-dwellers taking the first sun. It was the first time

that things felt normal. She started to feel some warmth in her veins, to look around her and see the world afresh.

At weekends, she was expected to dine with Pál's parents, and this she did dutifully, complimenting the cooking, helping with both the preparation and the clearing up, while the men, Pál father and son, and Pál's younger brother Imi, argued over the events of the week earnestly. Pál would tell them how much he had achieved, and how important he was becoming, and the others would nod and take his opinions seriously, and ask for advice. And as soon as she reasonably could, she would disappear. Or Pál would go fishing with Imi, and she would be free either way. She would walk much further: often out to the great Kerepesi cemetery, where all the great, dead heroes lay, calm and quiet, the torment of their warrior and poet lives past.

And one day she took a different route, to the large, green, untended island where the boats were built. She walked along its edge, past the boatyards, past the summer houses of the privileged not-so-good and not-so-great. Around a corner, out of sight of all the buildings she found a spot in the sun where she could sit. She relaxed, and stared out over the river, as the occasional boat passed, some carrying passengers, more often goods. Here it was possible for her to forget the last months, the fighting, Józsi, the tanks and soldiers, her finger on the trigger, the young Russian soldier, the surprise on his face.

With a start, she opened her eyes, as if something had passed between her and the sun, and she didn't know what. She looked around, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. She closed her eyes again.

When she awoke, there was someone sitting near her, staring out over the river. A young man with an intense face. She recognised him, it seemed to her, but she had no idea from where.

'You're awake,' he said.

She sat up straighter and assembled her thoughts, rejoining the waking world again. A barge was passing, its load all battened down under covers, a small cabin doubling as a tiny home, washing strung out over the rear deck, bicycles propped against the cabin

wall. A flag fluttered at the rear as the boat slowly drifted down towards Yugoslavia. The boatman laughed at something, caught his breath and coughed uncontrollably for a few moments.

'You're Gyöngyi,' said the young man. She started to reply, but he carried on. 'I don't think there's any name more beautiful.'

She stopped what she had been about to say. The young man had still not looked at her. The boat had almost passed and the boatman had his coughing finally under control.

'I know you,' she said, but uncertainly.

'But you don't remember. Don't worry,' said the young man. He looked at her directly for the first time. 'I have that effect on a lot of people.' His eyes were unswerving, grey.

'So...?'

'Last winter, just as the revolution was happening. You were with your boyfriend. The one with all the opinions.' He smiled. 'You talked to me.'

Suddenly she remembered. This was the ineffectual literature student she had taken pity on. It seemed centuries ago.

'Are you still with him?' he asked.

She nodded. He shrugged. 'Pity.'

Gyöngyi looked away. Her arms felt as if they were bound tightly to her body, and she couldn't breathe.

'What are you doing here?' she asked, in a gasp. He took his eyes from her, and she felt her breath returning.

'Oh – I live here.' He gestured behind him carelessly. Gyöngyi looked in surprise at the houses of the rich, the political elite. The student didn't seem to belong to that world.

'Up there?' she asked.

'No, no. Behind. In the woods. Come on – I'll show you.'

He jumped up. When she hesitated, he bent and took her hand, and raised her to her feet. 'Come on,' he said again, and he led the way into the woods. The air was cooler among the trees, and the light shafted down in bands, striking the ground and sending up little puffs of earth.

They walked for some time – Gyöngi had had no idea that there was so much space on the island. She wondered if the young man was taking her round in circles. Only later did it occur to her that maybe she should have been scared as they walked further and further. Instead she felt a detachment from the world that was almost pleasurable.

'Where are we going?' She laughed aloud at the absurdity of the walk they were taking.

'We're going to my home,' said the young man, who had not spoken as they walked.

'Your home?' Gyöngyi found this even more absurd. 'Here?'

'Oh yes,' he replied, seriously.

And then she stopped still. Between the trees, she saw a tarpaulin strapped tight between two trunks, and draping down to the ground, forming a tent.

'This is it,' said the young man. 'Home. For the last few months.'

Gyöngyi stepped forward a pace or two, somehow not daring more yet. There was something strange here, but only in the sense of something unexpected in the air.

'Since the police came for me,' said the young man, behind her. She turned round suddenly. He had taken off his spectacles and was polishing them on his shirt. He inspected them and put them back on, and saw her expression. He smiled a half smile. 'They didn't catch me, though. I saw them before they saw me.'

'Why did the police want you?' Gyöngyi looked at the young man. He seemed so harmless. What could he possibly have done wrong? He stepped past her, towards the makeshift tent, and a thrill went through her – she felt that some injustice was being done to him, and she needed to console him, take him in her arms and shield him from whatever it was. With a start she came to herself, and turned round.

He was holding up a corner of the tarpaulin, and she bent to enter. It was dark, but he folded up more of the tarpaulin, and the light flowing in made her gasp at what she saw.

There seemed to be much more space inside the tent than outside. It was as if she had entered a study. The central space was taken up by a large wooden desk, and a heavy, round-backed chair with arms stood next to it. There was a typewriter on the desk, and an old tin can with about twenty sharpened pencils in it, some of them coloured. Papers were stacked in piles, scattered across the desk. The other side of the desk were a pair of armchairs, on a sideboard coffee cups as well as one or two bottles of spirits. There was a full ashtray on the arm of one of the armchairs. And all around the tent walls, shelves full of books. Books were piled on the floor, and some lay open, face down on the desk.

'I can't offer you coffee,' said the young man. 'I don't have any. But tea I do have.'

She nodded, and he set about firing up a small paraffin stove at the door of the tent.

She stepped around the desk. She had never seen anything like this. She picked up a pile of papers next to the typewriter. The one on top simply contained one word, centred, like an island in a vast sea. 'Love.' She lifted the page – beneath it lay a hundred others, all filled with typed words.

Feeling eyes on her, she looked up. The young man had placed a metal jug onto the flame, and was passing the time until the water boiled by watching her trying to assemble his life.

'It's a novel,' he said. 'Not very good, I'm afraid, but They somehow got word of it.' There was no need to ask who 'They' might be.

'Apparently there are some things in it They aren't going to like. One of the privileges of having a father who's one of Them.'

He busied himself with finding cups for the tea.

'So I came out here. It's been two months already. I must say I really rather like it now, though at first I couldn't sleep much.'

Gyöngyi replaced the novel's front page carefully.

'Should you tell me this?' she said. 'I work for the government now. In the Party house.'

'Oh, I have a good feeling about you. I don't think you're interested in all that.' He brought her a cup. 'I think you're interested in far more important things.'

They sat in the chairs in front of the desk, and talked for a while about life in the woods. Gyöngyi found herself envying the freedom, but not the solitude.

'Yes,' said the young man, 'Being alone's hard. But it does have a good side. I can be inspired. If you're in a crowd, even a crowd of two, it can block you. But a *memory* of company, even of a glance, that can unlock the words like nothing else.'

He put down his cup and picked up a pile of papers, which he started to go through hurriedly. He smiled nervously at her. 'I know it's here somewhere.'

Gyöngyi watched him in a light surprise. Until now he had seemed so self-possessed, but now he was unsure of himself, ill at ease.

'Here it is!' he exclaimed. He held a single, hand-written sheet, and cast his eyes over it, a little greedily, as if it were a map leading to treasure. 'This is something that is far more important than that novel.' Impulsively, he held it out to Gyöngyi. She took it carefully. It was a poem. She looked up at him, to find him sitting on the edge of his chair. He nodded her on, and she started to read the poem.

As the words started through her mind, she scarcely noticed as the world around her became dark. Everything faded, the walls of

heavy cloth, the books, the desk, the papers and the tea, the young man, and even the chair she was sitting in; and there she was, in her own sunbeam in a world that had become completely dark, and as she read on, there was a sudden fluttering. From nowhere, as stream of birds flew through a chink in the darkness which must have been the gap in the tent that served as a door. These birds flew fast and straight, and by rights in the dark she should not have seen them, but they were all made from flame, true, firebirds no bigger than her hand, their wings flickering as they passed.

In a moment they were gone, and the world was back. She raised her head – she had finished the poem.

'I wrote that one for you,' he said. 'After you talked to me that night.'

Gyöngyi's heart was racing, her eyes still full of the fiery wings and blazing eyes of the birds. He took the paper out of her hands.

'Oh – can't I keep it?' she cried.

'Better not. Safer. And anyway – you've read it, now. Once is enough.'

There was a moment's silence.

'I'd better take you back,' he said, looking around. 'It'll be dark soon, and you don't want to be out here at night.'

He held out his hand, and they walked, and Gyöngyi had no feeling of laughter in her this time. And before she was aware of walking, they were near the road. The reality of the city started to grow on her, and she felt a certain weight pulling on her limbs. She started away, then turned and looked back for an instant.

'My name's András,' he said, before returning to the woods. 'Remember it for when you come back.'

'I'll remember,' she said, but he had already gone.

Back in the city, it was dark, and when she arrived home, Pál was pacing the living room. It smelt of smoke – he had recently taken up

smoking, and was devoting himself to the task with characteristic thoroughness.

'Where have you been?' he demanded.

The argument was brief – and he soon left, for a meeting with colleagues. Gyöngyi sighed with relief as the air was lightened by his absence.

As she drifted into sleep that night, a lone firebird perched for an instant on her window, before fluttering off again.

^*^

The weather closed in next day, and it rained. There were brief, unseasonable bursts of cold wind, and grey, heavy skies. During these days, Pál made a point of requiring her to partner him to various dinners. They would sit in otherwise empty restaurants at reserved tables, while the public at large walked by without even trying to ask for a place. Their companions, red enamel badges glinting in the light of dusty chandeliers, laughed a great deal with Pál, and every one assured him that he would go far. A few waiters served them attentively, while others lounged to one side at the empty tables, exuding a sense of perpetual closing time.

And then, some days afterwards, the weather cleared and the Spring was Summer. Gyöngyi went through her clothes and found herself something light and liberating, something she had worn a year before, which seemed like a different lifetime to her. One or two heads turned as she made her way to work, and she smiled to herself, as if she had regained something she had thought lost forever. For just one moment as she approached the front door of the Party house, she wondered if her summer dress was appropriate, and she wished at least she had brought a jacket to cover her shoulders. But the moment passed, and as she progressed to her desk, only one or two faces looked at her in a way she could only attribute to surprise.

She herself felt no surprise at all to find that when she left she didn't turn towards home, but instead found herself heading along the road to the boat-builders' island. She found her way quite easily

to the tent and András was sitting outside when she appeared through the trees.

'I've been writing more poems,' he said, without preliminaries, as if they were simply taking up the conversation after a pause of a minute or so.

'Can I see?' Gyöngyi asked.

'These?' he waved a small packet of papers. 'Of course, soon. But before, there's this one.'

He held out a single sheet, and she took it eagerly. Without even sitting down, she threw herself into reading.

As she read, she heard the pounding of a horse's hooves from behind her. A heavy horse thundered past her, then pulled back at the edge of the clearing, wheeling, rearing slightly, under the control of a figure clad in metal, a sword at his side. His armour caught the sunlight, which was mirrored in his blond hair. He shot a burning glance somewhere over Gyöngyi's shoulder, and drew the sword with a flourish. He and the horse launched themselves towards her, vaulting over her so close that the paper was almost torn out of her hands. The horse's trailing hoof brushed improbably gently against her hair.

Gyöngyi turned the page to read the reverse. The horse walked slowly past her again, with the man in armour wearily trailing his sword. The horse halted under a tree, and lowered its head, with scarcely enough energy to pull at the few blades of grass which grew there. The rider slid from the saddle, the sword slipping from his fingers. His armour was covered in blood, blood which could only have been dragon's blood, as it swirled with flame, a flame which slowly turned and went out as the blood dripped from the armour to the ground. The man sank to a seated position, buried his head in his hands, and started to weep.

András was waiting with tea. She smiled at him uncertainly, then gave him back the paper in exchange for the cup.

^*^

Over the next weeks, Gyöngyi went out to the boat-builders' island whenever she could. Each time she went, András had another poem for her, and it would bring a new wonder. One time it was butterflies which perched on her, covering her like a second dress, fluttering and shimmering. Another time, strangely, it was frogs – or at least, just their sound, filling the air. Once she was in a garden, rich with flowers she had never seen before, another time in a ruined temple with mountains behind and a woman bent in unspoken sorrow beside a tumbled pillar.

'Give me another,' she begged, when she had finished one poem. But he shook his head.

'Just one at a time,' he said, taking the paper from her reluctant hand. 'It's enough.' And for an instant, his face became so sad, she almost wanted to cry.

If the weather turned bad, she would sit and stare out of the window, willing it to change. Sometimes she would be expected to work late, even though she could see no point in what she did, and even less in doing more of it as overtime. And sometimes Pál would surprise her with a visit, whisking her away from the work that was otherwise so important; her superiors would shake his hand as if it were a saintly relic, and Pál would graciously pass on. He would then take her to another of those fawning dinners, or worse, to an interminable meeting, where those on the podium would applaud themselves and prizes for excellence in mediocrity would be handed out. How she hated it all – and how she longed for new miracles in the woods.

And then she would be able to go again to the boat-builders' island, and she would find herself walking through the streets of ancient Pompeii, while the hot stones and boiling ash rained down, setting wooden roofs ablaze and extinguishing them at once, while the inhabitants ran for their lives, not knowing where to go, or cowered in doorways, waiting for the inevitable.

'Why are you never there?' she asked András over tea.

'Where?' he asked, looking slightly mystified.

'You know – where I go, when –' she hesitated, seeing his face growing more perplexed. 'It's your poems – what happens when I –' She broke off.

'They're only poems,' he said. 'That's all. Words in rows.'

'But they're magic. They take me places.' She felt suddenly foolish, as if she'd said too much.

'Just words.' He gave a half smile and looked away. 'Thank-you, but just words.'

She never referred to the miracles again – but still she came, as often as she could, and the miracles never stopped. She seized each poem as it was offered – one at a time – and each one was as rich and new as the last.

It was late Summer. She had met Pál for lunch – alone, for once – and they had argued again. Pál said nothing for the first part of the lunch, then he launched into a tirade over the little lumps of the flesh of the bread he had pulled apart and rolled into pellets. Who was he, he demanded to know. Who was this other man? Gyöngyi started, and this little, uncontrolled inflection of movement was as much as a confession of guilt to Pál. She was more and more distant, he quavered, and there could only be one reason for that. And he needed to know who it was, he had to know. Gyöngyi simply denied everything; she had been through this kind of thing many times before, and always she had been able to look him straight in the eye and fight fire with fire – after all, he was surrounded by young, ambitious, amoral women, every day, and there were his friends, the ones he met every week at the Turkish baths, the ones who locked antlers in showing off the week's conquests. His was not a faithful nature or a faithful world – but his woman was to be faithful to him. And now, for the first time, Gyöngyi could not return his outraged gaze, and she averted her eyes. After a few rounds of wounding words, the argument petered out in coffee and silence.

Later that afternoon, flowers arrived. Pál's apology. Gyöngyi unwrapped them, and admired them by the window. Her office colleagues – she had never made real friends with any of them – looked on with curiosity. She sighed, then turned back to her

desk. She dropped the flowers in a waste-bin as she passed. Soon the day had finished, and she was hurrying down the road to the boat-builders' island.

^*^

Plants twisted out of the ground, blindly seeking the light. They curled, twined and patterned, unsupported in the air. Ripe buds bulged at their tips, and they bound themselves around her body, tightly, squeezing the blood through her in a rhythm which made her dizzy, breathless and excited. She strained with them towards something unseen and yet desired, impossible and yet essential for life.

The tendrils dropped away, and she was with András again. She breathed heavily, and he took the paper from her, folding it. There was something not quite right with him – he seemed listless.

'That was – beautiful,' she said, not only to praise him but also to draw him out.

'Hmm,' he said noncommittally.

'Come on – it was.' She touched his arm, and he looked at her.

'It's just a poem,' he said.

'It's a lot more than that,' she said with an internal twitch.

'Just a poem, just written for you. It's not the novel. That's written for everyone, It's written to make a difference. These poems are just entertainment, they're never going to change anything.'

'They're changing me,' Gyöngyi thought, but she didn't say it aloud. Instead, she said, 'What's wrong, then?'

He shook his head. She went to his desk and looked at the pile of papers that were his novel. She flipped through them.

'Why are these pages hand-written and not typed?' she asked.

I was typing, and someone came through the woods. I heard them, and stopped. They called out to see if someone was here, but they didn't find me. But it's too dangerous to type now. There are too many people in the woods at this time of year. But it doesn't really matter – I throw away as much as I write, anyway. More. I'm not writing anything worth reading now.'

She went to him. 'That's not true,' she said, laying her hands on his head. He looked up at her.

'I should stop feeling sorry for myself,' he said.

'Yes,' she said, with a smile. 'You need to get back to the world,' she said. 'How can the words on a page hidden in the woods change the world?'

'I can't go back, though,' he said. 'But I'll keep writing.'

'And keep writing the poems,' she asked.

'They're not important,' he said.

'They are to me,' she said.

'Then I'll keep writing them,' he said.

And the next times she visited him, they hardly talked. He would give her her poem, and then return to his writing. She would emerge from her miracle to find him still writing, but a cup of tea would still be waiting for her. His smile was rapt, and she would leave without disturbing him.

And then there was a time when she found herself in a darkened world of empty buildings and dry dust. The ground heaved and split, revealing molten rock in the cracks. And when she looked closely into the orange light, she could just make out figures moving, a whole people living in a world of lava, her vision shimmying in the rising air so that she could not make them out.

She blinked and was back in the woods.

'That was the last one,' he said. 'I don't have any more now.'

'No more poems?' she asked, with a small, internal shudder.

'No,' he said. 'I've had no time.'

András had a sad face, and she went over to him. On an impulse, she kissed him. He kissed her back, and in a moment, they were holding one another in a tight embrace that nothing, not even time might have the power to break. Gyöngyi was made afraid by what he had said – and she didn't want to think that there might never be more poems. And they made love.

Afterwards, she opened her eyes. András was leaning back, a strange expression on his face. It was not just the end of the poems.

'What is it?' she asked. He paused a moment before replying.

'It's finished,' he said. 'I'm done.' He held the papers in his hand, the packet fatter than ever. It was his novel.

'That's wonderful,' she said.

'Is it?' he asked.

'Of course it is,' she said.

'But what use is it? It's here. No-one's going to read it, are they?'

'I'll read it,' she said.

'It's not enough. I want everyone to read it. It's the most important thing I've ever done. It's the *only* important thing I've ever done.'

The self-pity filled his voice, and Gyöngyi had had enough. 'You've spent all your time out here – what do you want? You put yourself apart from people, and now you want everyone to see what you've done? You can't have it both ways.'

András looked at her. 'What do you suggest?'

She took the bundle from him. 'I'll type it. I'll copy it, and make sure it gets passed around.'

'But –'

'But it's not for free. You have to do something for me.'

'What?'

'You have to write a poem.'

'I can't. There are no poems left in me.'

'That isn't true. You're a poet. If you want me to do this for you, you have to write me a poem. Just one. It's a trade.'

András seemed uncertain. 'It could be dangerous,' he said. 'I don't want you to have any trouble.'

'Just write me that poem,' she said, as she put the papers into her bag.

'I'll try,' he said, giving himself over to the inevitable.

'Good boy,' she said and turned to go.

'Be careful,' he called after her. 'It's the only copy.'

As she walked back into the city, she felt a lightness to her step. She had a sense of purpose, for the first time in a long time.

Over the next days, she spent extra time at work, staying late, slipping aside sheets of paper, spending her lunch hour transcribing. And as she typed, she read. The story did not speak to her as the poems did, and she was disappointed, but she knew it was important to András, even though she didn't see how it could change the world, or indeed anything at all. The story seemed laboured, the characters unnatural and their dialogue forced. Above all, there was a tone of lecture about the whole piece, as if a finger was wagging and pointing.

But while the main characters struck Gyöngyi as being cardboard cut-outs, there were several minor characters that she recognised. These were corrupt officials, politicians, party members, prominent Russians, Czechs, Bulgarians – and above all, Kádár, who had betrayed the uprising and been installed as the country's leader. These characters were thinly disguised, viciously lampooned, dismissed with a violent disgust that could only have had its root in the utmost familiarity with that world. Gyöngyi began to understand what András was hiding from in the woods. He portrayed a world so ridden with hypocrisy that even hope turned around and laughed in the reader's face, mocking life itself. Gyöngyi found it hard to reconcile this black, bleak work with the fragments of beauty András had shown her in his poems.

And soon it was done. It was late evening, and she gathered up the words and the sentences and the pages, and started for the door, once again the last to go home. Suddenly the doorway was filled with Pál. He seemed swollen with an inner fury, the like of which she had never seen before. He had always seemed to calculating for such a passion. He also clutched an envelope. For a moment they faced one another. Fear mounted inside her, greater than any she had yet felt in his presence, a terror that transcended even her fear that he might hurt her physically, a fear that Pál was going to do something terrible, that he had set a train of events in motion that she would not be able to stop, that would carry everything in its path, wrecking everything as it went. Her hands clenched around András's novel.

Pál stepped towards her, so that there was only a desk separating them. His eyes were fixed on hers. With a dramatic gesture, he pulled some photographs out of the envelope and threw them onto the desktop. Every one had a ministry stamp on it. Every one of the pictures was of her, clearly taken unawares. They showed her walking along the street, alone. She seemed to be hurrying. They showed her on the river bank on the boat-builders' island, a picture taken from the water – obviously aboard a boat, then several from on land, partially obscured by leaves. In the last of these, András was also sitting next to her. There were pictures which showed her walking through the woods. And there were pictures of András's tent, showing him at work, her reading, her leaning against a tree with a far-away look on her face, both of them talking, laughing, drinking tea. Some of these showed András looking at her with

an expression she had never been aware of in his presence, an expression which now nearly broke her heart. And the last pictures showed her and András in an embrace, holding tight. Gyöngyi was fascinated by this picture, and she almost forgot where she was; she turned it around to study it better. Her eyes were closed in the picture, and she seemed to have found an ultimate calm that she now could hardly believe was ever possible.

Pál took hold of the envelope containing András's novel, which Gyöngyi was still clutching. Her fingers tightened, but his pull was inexorable, and she let go. He opened the envelope and pulled out the paper, and riffled through it. Triumph glinted in his eyes, and Gyöngyi rediscovered the fear that had gripped her moments before.

'Thank-you for this,' he said. 'It's what we wanted.'

'You mustn't –' she started.

'Let's go,' Pál said, gathering up the photographs from the table and putting them together with the novel. 'Let's see what you've done.'

He grasped her arm, and half dragged her out of the building. A car was waiting for them, and he pushed her into the back, and climbed in with her. The car set off along the riverside street and another car followed. In a few short minutes they had covered the distance which Gyöngyi had walked so many times that year. The cars crossed an iron bridge, then along a narrow road that went down the side of the boat-builders' island. With a sudden wrench of the wheel, the driver pulled the car off the road, throwing Gyöngyi against Pál for an instant, before she could right herself. The car bounced for a few moments between the trees before drawing to a halt. The occupants of the other car leapt out, leaving the doors open, and hurried off; Pál turned to Gyöngyi.

'Acts have consequences,' he said. 'You should know that.'

He leant across her and opened the door, and half pushed her out. She stood still, where she was, and he joined her, waiting. They did not wait long. The men from the other car returned quickly, and András was between them. He was not being forced along, and he seemed almost relieved. As he climbed into the car, he looked

at Gyöngyi and smiled. All life had drained from her limbs, and she could not move, but she could feel Pál's tension beside her. The doors slammed, and the engine started, but the car did not move. Pál turned to Gyöngyi, his quivering just visible. She flinched, waiting to be grabbed, bundled back into the car, taken away. But Pál just looked at her for a moment, then twisted and got back into his car. Both cars moved off and disappeared between the trees, leaving Gyöngyi behind. She staggered, as if released, and walked, almost from habit, through the trees, and found herself by András's tent. His books were strewn around, and the typewriter was upside-down in a puddle. She stood and looked at the wreckage, and wished she could cry, wished she could feel anything beyond the dull sense of responsibility she felt.

She turned around, and noticed something stuck to a tree. A piece of paper. She went up to it, and looked at it. It was a poem, and 'Gy' was scribbled at the top – he had left it for her. She took it down and started to read.

This time, she was not transported, there was no miracle. She read the words, and the words were fine, and as she read, she seemed to hear a trumpet on a distant hill, so faintly she could hardly say she heard anything.

And then she left the woods on the boat-builders' island for the last time.

^*^

Later she would see her grandchildren, but now she was content just to walk along the river-bank away from the tourists and from the fast cars.

A recent election had left posters on every available surface, losing their colour and tattering quickly, as cheap as the politicians themselves. Gyöngyi smiled, even when she saw among the faces that of Pál, now with a heavy moustache and a staged smile. She had only seen him once after that day on the boat-builders' island. It had been a few days later, as she collected her few things from her desk. He had been cool, simply nodding to her as they passed by chance in the corridor. He no longer seemed filled with the fury she

had seen before, and the triumph was also gone. He was just there, and then he was gone. She was surprised at how little she felt.

She had tried to find out what had happened to András, but she had been met with a bureaucratic wall of denial of any knowledge of his existence, let alone his whereabouts. So she thought about him when she could stand to, and remembered some fragments of phrases from his poems and sometimes in a dream she visited some of the miraculous worlds the poems had taken her to. And when she dreamed these dreams, she would wake up with tears streaming down her face.

And so she had given up her job, of course, and for some while had expected some kind of retribution. Arrest, interrogation, prison – at the very least, that she would have found it impossible to find any decent work again, but it was not the case. Later, she realised that, for some reason she did not quite understand, Pál had protected her. Actions did not always have consequences, it seemed. In some way, he must have loved her, she supposed.

Gyöngyi noticed that someone had defaced one of Pál's posterred images. Now, such things were possible in a world that had changed. Even if the defacing was rather unsubstle, she smiled.

So much had changed, but when she looked out over her beloved Danube, it became clear to her that nothing ever changed in this city. It was what it always had been, and she was convinced it would always be this way. History could come and go, but Budapest remains, an eternal Spring day, the river wending slowly through.

A gentle cough from behind her stirred her from her reverie. A man about her own age was standing there, looking at her looking at the river. She didn't recognise him at first, but he took a step nearer, and she adjusted the glasses she now wore most of the time. He leant on the rail next to her and together they watched a fast boat from Vienna speed past, trailing two plumes of white water. She wondered where she knew him from – and then he glanced at her sideways. She caught a flash of still-strong grey from his eyes, and he spoke.

'Hello, Gyöngyi,' he said. It hit her – this was András. He was still alive. After all these years. She didn't know what to reply, so she

kept still. He fumbled in the pocket of his overcoat, a coat that a few years ago would have tied him down to being a foreigner or a Hungarian from abroad. He brought out a piece of paper.

'I –' she began, but he interrupted her.

'Don't worry,' he said, dryly. 'I have that effect on a lot of people.'

He pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket. He looked at it affectionately, like an old friend he had just encountered, and knew he would never meet again in this life.

'Here,' he said. 'One more poem. It's the last one, the one I always wanted to give you, but never could. I wrote it down while I was in prison. I've kept it with me, and now I can give it to you.'

Gyöngyi quivered. The ghost of something that could have been trailed a cool shadow. 'I'm married, I have grandchildren,' she said.

'I know,' he replied. 'I'm married, too. This poem is still for you.'

He pressed it into her hand.

'And now I have a plane to catch.' He smiled at her, and turned to go. She caught his hand again.

'Goodbye,' she said. 'And thank-you.' They smiled, and he left.

She felt the paper in her hand. It felt old, warm, a little dry from the years of waiting. She opened it. It was called 'Pearl' – her name. She began to read it, and as she read it, sparks flew up from the water. They turned, coalesced, filled the air, reflections reflecting on nothing, rotating around her, diving, swooping, pure, joyous flakes of light escaped from dark confinement for a second, twisting and weaving like a swarm of fireflies before falling back into the river.

She folded the paper gently and felt it tenderly, then let it slip into the river, which carried it quickly away.

'I've read it now,' Gyöngyi said quietly to herself. 'Once is enough.'