

Zsuzsa Selyem

## Home? Where?

Imagine it like Michael Fassbender (80% Macbeth, 20% Shame). In the back seat of an yellow ochre Dacia 1300 car looking out of the window over the heads of Pali to the left and János to the right. Well that should be that, then. Not in such a good state at the moment of the grand farewell. Though who knows really?

While I'm sitting here squeezed into a Dacia that had been wrecked before it left the factory (another reason why I have to get out) it's a pretty straightforward scenario. But when this girl with the bun stops the car and points to the green border, I'll need my wits about me, I'll have to be alert and quick, one last bullet could come flying from anywhere, one last bullet from my dear homeland, which I'm now about to be unfaithful to.

I have had enough of it, it has become totally stupid, hopeless, tawdry, and it enjoys being like that. Just look around and tell me if there is a place as lousy as this in the whole of Europe. A place where uninterrupted paths of rubbish wind between two rubbish heaps, while they play the song, *Ours is a Lovely Land, a Beauteous Lovely Land*. Sure, some parts of it are still lovely, there are forests, little streams, playful foam; there is my mother's humble cottage and the outstretched arms of my beloved brothers and sisters who are crippled by this country that lies and forces them to lie, who see no other protection against it than booze and defencelessness. And sooner or later the booze is followed by my father's ranting and raving and my mother's silent, withering disdain. The muscles in my father's face begin to twitch and he hits – my mother, my beloved brothers and sisters, me. Well he doesn't hit me any longer; partly because I hit him back and I wasn't the weaker of the two, partly because I'm getting out of here in a way that means I'll never be able to return.

The bun girl's name is Bettina, in civil life she teaches mathematics at a vocational school in Oradea. She's divorced, chain-smoker, and a stalwart member of the smugglers' gang. She doesn't overdo it, one run a month tops, with aleatory intervals, varying routes and chaotic geometry. Her prosaic imagination is an added extra: she invents a story for every run, for instance right now the three blokes in the back seat (the one in the middle is somehow familiar), this pallid girl sitting next to me who looks like an undergraduate and I have been invited to a wedding in Biharpüspöki; obviously, due to our gaiety and local custom, we got a little tanked up beforehand and that's why there's a woman behind the wheel, is what I'd say if a copper or a border patrolman stopped us and asked what we were doing so close to the border. If we were spotted very close to the green border (which won't happen – I checked the time of every patrol when this whole thing was planned, though I'm prepared for there being a slight possibility for error, we are dealing with humans after all), well, if we were already on the dirt tracks between the fields, then the reply would be that we are coming back from a wedding and we've got lost,

which would not be surprising considering our high spirits, and I'd point to the blokes in the back, who, following my instructions, would be guzzling at the bottle of fake brandy which has been stowed at their fucking feet for just such an eventuality.

There's a garden in Biharpüspöki where, when I first went to the village, the old man there showed me a corkscrew willow tree. That's the one, he told me, or at least a relative of the ones that stood by the rivers of Babylon, they weren't weeping willows, that would have been taking things too far. My heart leapt at his every word. *Salix babylonica*, he added quietly. Well hello, *Salix Babylonica*, I greeted the corkscrew. It didn't even turn a leaf. And it was right not to, we do not greet each other when in a foreign land, we only long for home, but home where? Home where? The old man had only recently moved there himself and they had still found him, I had found him too. Of course it was typical that he had chosen the kind of place for his home where the corkscrew willow would remind him that it was not his home. When he was sentenced for twenty years, he removed his wedding ring and handed it back to his wife, don't wait for me, he told her, in vain, he knew everything about fidelity, sometimes I think that he wasn't even human, but then what else could he have been? He was human.

They were quite a few miles on from Biharpüspöki when two uniformed border patrol agents appeared immediately after a bend and flagged them over. Bettina was still cool enough to quickly calculate the probability of her being able to do a U-turn in the yellow ochre Dacia on that narrow road, but in view of the submachine guns hanging around the border agents' necks the answer to the problem was crystal clear – to pull over, stop the engine and wait. When she glanced into the rear-view mirror she even had to see that rather than tipsily fumbling the brandy bottle, her passengers were staring mutely ahead. Well, that's how it is, and if that's how it is, it's all up for the poor devils, concluded Professor Snakehead as she held out the identity cards she had carefully collected earlier to the border agent.

Imagine the landscape as the poet griped about in his opus, *The Magyar Fallow*. Then add a few sparrows on the dusty road. Bettina's thin tale was not called upon anymore. Someone must have squealed on them, for the border agents were going about their business in perfect serenity, as if there was not even a shadow of a doubt about where these folks were headed or who the bun babe in the yellow ochre Dacia was. One of them scratched the details into his report book, all five of them mechanically signed underneath and before they knew it, there was the grey Dacia of the municipal police to take the travellers back to Oradea, to "Paris by the Pece Stream", to the City of Tomorrow.

They are waiting in an airless and dim-lit corridor, Mike (Fassbender, well, sort of), János, Pali, and the undergrad, until they are called one by one into an office. Name, address, occupation, father's name, mother's name, where travelling to, whose wedding, relationship with aforesaid, relationship with Bettina, relationship with the others. The police officer asks his questions from behind his hefty desk, the traveller, the migrant, rather, answers, to the side a secretary at a small table types the words that the officer repeats.

It's all the same whether they have informed on each other or not, the business at the police station is just to wear them out a little before they are handed over to the local police station. Up until now Mike had always thought that while an unbelievable amount of injustice could happen to a man, if he only observed, dodged, and struck back harder, everything would be alright in the end. Well yeah, at this point in time Mike has just turned twenty. When they snap the handcuffs on him, the pain runs straight to his heart, but the feeling that has prevailed all through his life thus far, that if anyone were to look at him, he would feel safe and filled with love (so do I! so am I!), well that feeling is still with him even when he is being roughly shoved into the armoured Black Maria. That feeling is so deep within him that he smiles to himself when he sees the gaping hole the rust has eaten into the van's door. Typical, he thinks, even the steel rots here.

While all this was happening, back on the Magyar Fallow Bettina was re-knotting her hair and fixing it with a pin, the cigarette of one of the border agents was slowly burning down to the stub, while the younger man, lower in rank, was buttoning up his fly before trying to wipe the unmistakable signs of a certain beatitude from his face. So someone did the dirty on us, thought Bettina, ergo I can count on a good few years of digging the Danube canal, and in this situation the least I can do is give these two boobs a blow job apiece. It might come in handy at the interrogation. It's not as if they don't know everything about me already. Ergo there's nothing else to do but cooperate, and this – Bettina glanced over at the satiated agents – was the sickeningly brutal evidence of my willingness to do so. (Imagine Bettina's new life thus: she is promoted higher and higher in the secret service, her salary greatly exceeds the 4000 USD she received for a smuggling run each month, she's getting ready to buy Claudia Schiffer's Monaco villa, but, to her misfortune, rioting breaks out and she is, as the saying goes, in the wrong place at the wrong time, a colleague buys the villa (name withheld by request) and Bettina has to be scraped off the pavement. Strands of hair from her bun will be found on the coats of the citizens of Oradea for years to come.)

At the police station, Mike is being interrogated by two detectives in order to form the classic equilateral triangle: good cop, bad cop and somewhere in the corner the typist. Mike sticks to the wedding story. But he's getting thirstier and thirstier. And he needs to go to the toilet. It's out of the question. From time to time, the good cop leaves the room, when he returns he whispers this and that into his partner's ear. This has been the choreography since time immemorial; in addition, in the next room János has coughed about everything: the escape plan, the \$1000-per-head, how he knew about the operation, who put him in touch with Bettina. Name, telephone number. The knowledge of all this begins to be reflected in the questions of the cop who stays in his place, but Mike keeps doggedly playing the innocent, this means he's been tricked, because he was on his way to a wedding in Biharpüspöki and when he was hitch-hiking out of the city and that yellow Dacia picked him up, the girl with the bun simply couldn't get over her surprise because they were going to exactly the same wedding, etc., etc. The cop who is always coming and going heaves a sigh and leaves the room, the other one stands up and continues his

questioning in a mounting crescendo. As he comes closer to Mike, he gets himself more and more worked up about the blatant lies, which he flings in Mike's face. They tricked you, huh?! Tricked you?! I'll show you a trick or two, right in your fucking bursting bladder! You think I'm completely stupid, hopeless and worthless and I enjoy it too?! He is screaming an inch away from Mike's face and whatever the boy says now, it's going to be answered by a fist, he loses his balance from the very first blow, he falls back, the guy starts kicking him, and screaming at him, at which point the good cop re-enters and says, okay that's enough for now, save something for tomorrow, his partner, of course, does not hear him, and the good cop finally has to yell: ENOUGH!

In the end he is just about able to stagger to his cell, bunks, a pisspot, by now Mike has forgotten that he needs to urinate, he looks around cautiously from left to right with his loveable face, but it seems that no one has even noticed that he is there.

I'm gonna fuck you tonight, at least that's what he thinks he hears from behind his back. Mike turns, there is a man of around thirty, shorter than he is but bulging with muscles, lying on the lower bunk with drooping eyelids. I must be imagining things, thinks Mike and he scans the cell for an empty bed. He takes a step or two towards it, but one of the others blocks his way:

Don't you be in such a hurry if you don't know how things work here, my little prick. Before you stretch out for your tiny rest, you've got to empty the pisspot and then scrub it till it shines like the evening star, understood?

Mike shrugs his shoulders and walks on with one phrase going round and round his head: "common criminals". Once upon a time he wanted to study Law, where were those days now? Common criminals, common criminals, those two words will not leave him alone, in the meantime he does what he must: he empties the pisspot, turns the hose on it, he doesn't react when his trainers get covered in liquid shit, it's better if you don't imagine the stench, let's move on quickly.

The night would be dark if the cell wasn't illuminated by a neon strip, Mike is holding his arm tightly over his eyes, even though he's dead tired he can't fall sleep, his muscle-bound cellmate's promise flashes as a picture of the immediate present amid his speculations concerning the future (he'll escape, work out a foolproof plan and escape, maybe others will join him, he'll escape, or the other possibility: his father pulls all the strings he can, he escapes, and tomorrow the two detectives will be standing there quakingly begging his pardon, he escapes, to which he'll say he has got nothing to do with his father, and he escapes, and he does not wish to receive any preferential treatment, and –

His muscle-bound cellmate is suddenly on top of him, clamping Mike's mouth shut with the palm of his hand, turning him on his belly in one swift movement, whispering into his ear: My angel, now I'm gonna bury my hatchet and if you dare to give so much as a whimper, you're

done for. He is split in two. The tears flow until morning. And then the shame, the shame and the rage and the protestations.)

The immediate future, that is Tomorrow, starts with doors slamming and men yelling, and continues with interrogation and another beating, and so evening falls, a night bug buzzes, all of a sudden Mike smashes a right hook into his muscle-bound cellmate's face so that it bounces off the wall, the guy reels, but Mike can't hold himself back, the others blink their ashen eyelids for a while, but the noise won't stop and there's not a guard in sight, so slowly they surround Mike's bed, their desiccated faces are lit by the neon strip in the ceiling, there's no story, just some kind of familiar pummelling, Mike's father flashes into his mind, but he still can't stop, the guy is a bloody mess, he doesn't move, nobody moves, until a guard appears from somewhere, his mouth gapes ready to bawl them out, but then he sees the body on the floor, he says nothing, he runs off to fetch help.

You can thank your father for our letting you off this time, says the good cop, handing Mike his documents, but don't you forget for a second that we've got our eye on you. Now it's time to go home, your parents are waiting for you at the station, in tears, they'll fling their arms around you, they're going to stuff you full of fried chicken, but you'll have to report to your local police station every Tuesday. For a year. Just so that you don't get any more silly ideas. Escape, lad? Where could you escape to?

Mike isn't aware of this monologue laced with rhetorical questions, but he does react to the hand that reaches out towards him, he slips his identity card into his pocket and lets himself be escorted outside and put in an unmarked car. The car radio is playing. *By the rivers of Babylon,* sing the disco stars of the seventies, *there we sat down, ye-eah we wept...* The driver keeps glancing back at his passenger, but nothing can be read from Mike's expression. He's staring out of the window, they are singing.

*Translated by Paul Crowson*