

Zsuzsa Selyem

There's No Mom*

March the 3rd, Friday. Have found Mom's notebooks. Will show them to *Ádám*, let him read them, too. He'll say he's not interested, also that I should leave him alone. Always leave him alone. So easy for him, he's already fourteen and a boy on top of it. What can I do alone? Have tucked them away in my closet. Nobody is looking for them, anyway. They could have found them if they wanted, in Mom's stuck drawer, among old floppies, photos, postcards, things like that. Everything looks just the way it looked when Mom was still with us. I guess she'd be angry if she suddenly came home. She won't come. This whole place looks like a dirty museum, she'd say, also that she had known it would look like that, she had the cramps in her stomach for weeks at the thought of eventually coming home. I am always searching for this and that, and have finally found some scotch tape in that drawer, where those notebooks were. My birthday is next week, I will only turn ten, though. Mom will come on my birthday, for sure. I pray for that. I turn the light off and pray.

03.03. Mom's diaries have disappeared from the drawer. I have read them every evening so far and have copied a few phrases into this notebook. From now on I'll write my own phrases.

March the 4th, Saturday. Today I told *Ádám* I had found the notebooks. He told me it made no difference anymore and turned his music really loud. He always does it when he wants to avoid talking to me. I sat on his bed, shouting at full blast, so that he would hear it. COME, *ÁDÁM*, LET'S READ MOM'S STUFF! He shook his shoulder READ IT ON YOUR OWN IF YOU WANT I'M TRYING TO LISTEN TO SOME MUSIC HERE! WHO ALLOWED YOU IN MY

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ROOM, ANYWAY? He threw me out, me clinging to the edge of his bed in vain. ALLRIGHT, JUST TELL ME IF SHE COMES HOME FOR MY BIRTHDAY, PLEASE! But he shut the door in my face. I cried and took out the notebooks. I read from the violet one, that's my favourite colour. Mother writes about all kinds of things, I don't always understand. She writes about us, too. Sometimes the date is there, as it should be in regular diaries. This is an old notebook, from the time I was one year old. "Dorka says chugar instead of sugar and calls slippers flip-flaps. In the evening, when I put her to sleep in her cot, she tells me not to leave her room, because she's afraid of the wolf. In the end I give her the little pink sand-shovel and she puts in on her pillow to hurl it at the wolf in case it shows up." I'll start saying chugar instead of sugar and flip-flaps instead of slippers again.

04.03. No big deal, we don't give a shit.

March the 5th, Sunday. Dad took us into the woods today. It was kind of sunny but cold. The dogs ran hither and thither, mud got all over *Ádám* and me. Then we talked Dad into taking us to McDonald's for lunch. We switched toys with *Ádám*, but in the end he gave mine back as well. He said it was rubbish, of no use to him. Of course, he is already fourteen. We spent the afternoon at home. Dad lay reading for a while then he fell asleep. I turned to Mom's notebooks. Invented the tale about the beetle. Once upon a time there was a little girl. She was a seven years old little girl. She took English lessons at the pioneer centre. The pioneer centre was in the middle of a garden, by a very wide road. Four rows of cars rolling by on that road. The pioneer centre was a pioneer centre because this tale is a very old one, from the times when there was communism in our country. Communism, dear children, means there was an evil man, the Ceausescu, who gave orders to everyone, even to parents. Dads and moms were all his servants. Kids were his servants, too. That's why they were called pioneers. The seven years old girl was also a pioneer. She took English lessons at the pioneer centre. I had already mentioned that. Well, the centre was really far, the girl's parents took her to her English classes there and then back home. It was so far away. Her parents had an elephant-grey beetle, a VW, they drove her with that. The VW beetle has a tinkling sound, you know – of course you don't, I wouldn't either if my mother hadn't had told me. Its engine growls as if it tinkled. The English class was already over, the seven years old girl stood by the tall iron fence in the street.

Everybody called that street Long street, though that name wasn't written on it. The sign spelt LIBERTY, EQUALITY, FRATERNITY. But this is too long. There stood the girl, ten minutes passed or so, in vain: her parents didn't show up with the beetle. It was summer, the girl wore white knee-length socks. And her pioneer clothes. Pleated indigo skirt, white shirt with pockets and shoulder-strap, with a light blue and a yellow strip on it, because the girl was head of class and a group leader. Well, and the pioneer cravat – the most important of all, it had to be worn even with the school uniform: a red synthetic kerchief with red-yellow-and-blue trim and a transparent ring holding it together in front. A man came and asked the girl: What are you doing in this out-of-the-way place, you little girl? The girl replied: I had my English class at the pioneer centre and am waiting for my parents to pick me up with the beetle. The man said: You are a cute little girl, why don't you come with me to Szentgyörgy, to have a pussywash? The little girl said: I cannot go, I must wait for my parents to take me home. The man still insisted: I'll buy you candies and chocolate and show you something you have never seen before. No, it is impossible, said the girl. She was afraid of the man, him being ugly and old, like a male witch. He kept sneering, showing his two teeth. The little girl drew back. The man drew closer. He went on talking about how beautiful the little girl was and about the pile of things he would buy her if she went with him to Szentgyörgy, to have a pussywash. He had almost grabbed the girl by her arm when she heard the tinkling sound of the beetle. She tore herself from the male witch's grip and crossed the street, running. The witch couldn't follow her, because cars rolled by so close to each-other on the four-rows road that only a seven years old girl could get through. Obviously the witch turned into a seven years old girl at an instant and ran after the little girl. He almost grabbed her, when the elephant-grey beetle showed up, the girl's mom popped out of it, she bent the back of the front seat forward and the little girl flopped in. Her mom slammed the door in the face of the other seven years old girl, so that a piece of her big nose got torn by it. A piece of iron. The beetle then spread her wings and flew away above the four rows of cars, above the pioneer centre, above the Statue of the Unknown Soldier, it flew and it flew and they went to a completely different place where the people were not servants. And kids were not pioneers. And that was the end of it.

(In Mom's book there is a different ending though, because the story there is not a tale but a true story about her being the

seven year old girl and when she crossed the street, her parents still didn't show up but the man did not follow her either and in the end she had heard that tinkling sound for real, and had no guts to tell her parents about what had happened because she felt ashamed and because her parents were arguing about something. Mom and Dad also used to argue a lot. In the end mom went abroad with the beetle – a year ago – and she doesn't even call us. My birthday is in six days. She'll come home, for sure, by then.)

03.05. Mother died a year ago. She killed herself. She sprinkled her car with gas in an out, and it all went up in flames with her sitting in it. We found the remains of the beetle on a forest road, twenty kilometres from here. We had been looking for her for over a week then. We told Dorka she went for a trip. At first we thought she really did. Dad made some phone calls, but people knew nothing about her. Then news came of a totally burnt down car. From that point on it was really easy, only few people had such beetles and the club knew about each. The only missing car was Mom's car. I think suicide is cowardly.

March the 6th, Monday. Kati says (Kati is my desk mate) Mother won't come for my birthday because she is dead. She also says she doesn't really see much of her Dad because he travels a lot but he always brings her loads of presents. Kati has cool things, not in my taste, though. Boys fancy her, they all want her for a girlfriend. Nobody wants me. I had a talk with Vali during the break. Vali is an orphanage girl, actually she looks like a boy, her hair is like a dog's fur, she can run really fast, and she can perform gym exercises very well. But she is a lousy pupil. I'd sit with her and help her, if she were my classmate. But she is only second grade yet. Today she told me how she ended up in the orphanage. Her dad died when she was three months old and her mother consigned her to the orphanage because she went to work abroad and her job is a tough one. I imagine living at the orphanage is everything but pleasant, even if Vali doesn't say much about it. She shakes her shoulder and kicks a pebble. I guess they forbade complaints there. I will make investigations about that. (I haven't mentioned it yet, but I have decided to become a detective when I grow up.)

03.06. Mom's notebooks were full of foreign sentences. Clever sentences to which Mother could never comply. Her own sentences were all about things he couldn't comply with. "There is no harm for sheer intellect" – this is a line from a poem by György Petri. "The suffering of guinea-pigs slowly

leaks into cleverly rescued human lives” (Péter Nádas). “We send our children to school to become as repugnant as grownups we meet daily in the street” (Thomas Bernhard). “One may sin in thought, but never do good” (Talmud?). This is how her sentences sound like: “I have no mother-tongue. It would be an orphan-tongue, if it were any.” Many phrases were in a foreign language, like English, French, German, Romanian. French phrases are best. I decided to learn French for 20 minutes every day.

March the 7th, Tuesday. I am so sleepy, there’s nothing to write, the day swam off.

03.07. I hate it when grownups quarrel. Grandma keeps telling Dad he should marry this or that woman. Because she helps as much as she can but she has only got one life to live and someone should mind these poor orphans. These poor orphans are us, Dorka and me. Well, she uses the French orphelins, so that we don’t understand. I didn’t hear much of them shouting, I closed my door and turned the music real loud. They are so boring, going over the same stuff again and again. Grandma saying she had known it would go wrong at the moment she laid eyes on Mom. Dad asking her to come to her senses and treat him like a grownup instead of poisoning his life like that. At the word poison grandma gets close to nervous breakdown. Then they grow weary, grandma makes a cake. Dad and I are crazy about her cakes, Dorka never even tastes them. I decided to give her the Porsche matchbox, which she has been asking for so long.

March the 8th, Wednesday. Women’s day, Dad and Ádám gave me a tame violet in a little pot. Violet, my favourite colour. In the afternoon, after homework, I secretly peeped into Mom’s blue notebook. It records her dreams. I also dream frightening dreams. But I remember them only in the morning. Then I turned to the violet notebook and read about me, being two years old and asking her to let me in her bed one night when I woke up. She asked me why did I wake up. I said I was afraid of the wolf. (The wolf, again!) The wolf sleeps at this hour, said Mom, he nestles with the little wolf and they sleep in their warm nook. I am the little wolf, said I, and fell asleep. Mom writes that Ádám, when he was younger, said he felt the angel caressing his head with cold hands. I don’t remember this, but it is there as well:
DORKA I have seen an angel.
MOM Where?
DORKA At the university.

MOM What was the angel doing?
DORKA Teaching. The big angel was teaching people.
MOM And the little one?
DORKA The little one sat there, listening.
Mom wrote down many of our dialogues.
DORKA Piss is a girl, poo is a boy.
MOM How do you know?
DORKA From Hungary.
I'll copy one more, it is important:
DORKA Mom, will you live when I grow up?
MOM I hope so.
DORKA Then I'll invite you to my puppet-show.
This is important because I might not be a detective when I grow up, I might own a puppet-show instead, presenting all sorts of good plays with my troop, good plays only, I will write them, or somebody else will, they will have to be very good in any case, meaning they will have to be funny. But not funny like all people will have to laugh at a certain time: everybody will laugh when they will feel like it. Puppet-shows were not invented to have kids learn and speak in chorus. My puppet-show will feature puppets and kids instead of boring old ladies. Old ladies will only be allowed if they pass my exam. The exam will consist of three tests: telling jokes, performing somersaults and pulling faces.
03.08. Maman n'existe pas. Maman est morte. Pourquoi voulu Maman mourir? Je haïs elle pour ça. Maman été seule. Non, c'est n'est pas exact. Maman été seule au milieu des gens. Je suis orphelin. Je ne suis pas seul, j'ai mes amis. J'aime beaucoup la musique. J'aimerais beaucoup Maman. Je ne l'aime pas plus. Je n'ai pas la possibilité. Parce que Maman n'existe pas.

March the 9th, Thursday. My birthday is in two days!! I'll write another tale today. The tale of the Good Officer. Written by Dorka Binder. Once upon a time there was a young boy. He grew up and was summoned to join the army. The boy didn't want to become a soldier because he rather preferred to read, listen to music and chat while smoking fine cigars. He was a refined boy, not exactly the military type, ready to plunge into a pond if ordered so, despite being smeared with mud all over, clothes and face an all. In vain was he against it, he had to join the army. Well, this is again a very old tale, from times when everybody, even women had to join the army for a while. One of his colleagues advised the boy to try to join the group lead by captain Mitrea and not the one headed by Verdet. This was all he said and had vanished, the

boy couldn't ask him how was he supposed to tell Mitrea from Verdet. Well, he was standing in line among the others. The two captains stood in the end of the big hall. A smiley and a surly one, with a face like a horse's face. He tried to move towards the smiley captain. The line proceeded quite slowly. Reaching the captain they had to present themselves in a soldierlike way and mingle with the group behind the captain. It was almost his turn when he heard it from the back: watch out, Mitrea is the other one, the horse-faced guy. He had time enough to slip to the other row. This step made his luck for good. Because smiley Verdet used to smile to everybody, especially to his superiors and always carried out orders to the letter, to be a good boy. He used to push his men to the limit. They had difficulties coping with him. The other officer, Mitrea, only cared for keeping up the appearances of carrying out orders with his squad. He drove his men into a forest, sent one to fetch some brandy and they quietly sipped it under the trees. They are still sipping their brandy there if they are not dead.

(Well, the tale comes from Mom's notebook, I only modified it a bit. She added: Why is life built on lies. She misspelt it, there should be a question-mark at the end of it.)

03.09. I bunked off from school today. There's no point in being there. I cannot tune in, I don't understand what's going on and say nothing if they ask me, or say something in a very low voice because it's rubbish anyway. I had a stroll downtown. Went to the movie, action movie. Pity I cannot go home, grandma is there. She'd have a heart-attack if she found out I'm skipping classes. At home I could do my own stuff. Computer, books, this and that. I could write poems. There's nobody out there before noon. Well, except Feri, he was on his way to an Internet Café, but why should I go there, then. In the end I joined him, we played some game. Today I didn't feel like learning French.

March the 10th, Friday. Tomorrow is my birthday. I won't put three exclamation-marks this time, as I've planned it, I'm not interested anymore. Mom won't show up. Because there's no Mom. Everybody has known it for a year now, except for me. Nobody told me now either, Kati's blahblah doesn't count, nobody's blahblah matters, because it is written in Mom's books she has to die.

03.10. I need money. Well, I could ask some from Dad, but that's never enough. Tomorrow I'm going to the carwash, I have seen boys working there, they might give me some work. One needs to lie all the time. This sounds like one of

Mom's phrases. But it's mine. I'll explain why do we always have to lie. Because nobody cares, what's the matter with you.

Translated by Noémi László