

Bus Route Number Five

Prologue

People are just obsessed with boxes. They get their first box right when they're born, an incubator or a hospital bed for new born babies that looks rather like a shopping cart, and proud mothers can easily find their cutest little package by looking at the labels on the boxes, just like when one goes out to see if there's something new in their mailbox.

Later, parents bring their babies home to their own big boxes that have hot and cold running water and the like. Favorably they have their own car to do that, another little box, and then kids are locked up in the big box until they learn to move or Mom takes them out to a park or playground or something, but sometimes for even longer. Locked up, naturally, for no one would like to have intermission just because there was a bastard, who came and fucked up your mail or took the meat out of your cart when you turned more attention to the dairy or something. No one would like that.

Blocks of flats are among the most fascinating things mankind has ever invented, maybe halfway between the baby dummy and the fire extinguisher. These quickly-attached boxes grant most people the fifty-something square meters that they can make their own home. But from the outside, they're really just some glass boxes in a laboratory, next to each other, and anyone who feels like being a scientist for a moment or two can step next to them and look inside; sometimes they don't even have to draw a curtain.

The funniest thing about these flats is that you have, say, a hundred of them in a middle-sized block, and though old Mr. Somebody, living on the third floor, could easily scratch the head of the neighbor's dog by extending his arm while he sits in an armchair and does crosswords, if there weren't the walls of course, or, just the same, pat the tits of the neighbor's wife while she is in bed and while just a few inches away, he perfectly knows, as the walls let

through most sounds and voices, that she is just making out with her husband or some other man, so in spite of all this, people don't have the faintest clue who they are living with in the same block, the same floor, not to mention those who are right next door.

Now people have these boxes and some others that they regularly visit, for that's where they work or where a relative lives or where the dentist works or where their relative who's a dentist lives. To get from box to box, the ones who are lucky take their own little boxes with four wheels, while some, who are less lucky, have to use something that's called public transportation. In that case they have to share a box, which, however, some of them can do just as effectively as sharing the same block, for example the one where Mr. Somebody lives on the third floor.

You see, this is how it works. And then, when they start to think about death, it turns out that people are also obsessed with trying to reproduce all the boxes they've had in their lives in order to design the housing developments of cemeteries. And the funny thing is that some babies who were neighbors in the maternity ward turned out to be neighbors in the same block in their lives, and then they could just end up to be neighbors in the cemetery's housing development also, and no one really knows that they lived their lives next to each other.

One

Balázs wore contacts. This was a big thing as it was 2008, and boys seldom wore contacts then, so he seemed to have perfect eye-sight. He didn't, but still, no one could tell.

Balázs's father was a cameraman, very keen on his perfect eye-sight, so Balázs tried to hide his short-sightedness for as long as he could. He was finally sent to an eye specialist by his teacher when he was 12.

There was quite a big fuss about it as the parents were not glad to hear from the teacher that their son could barely see the blackboard from the front row. They had been divorced for

ten years then, and this was an awkward thing to unite them for some time once again. Finally they decided to let their son wear contacts, and soon everything seemed to go back to normal.

At the age of 16 Balázs and his mother, an actress, moved into a housing development some 25 minutes distance from the city center by bus. Balázs, who inherited some of his father's obsession with sight, took the 7:12 bus on bus route number five to school every morning and watched the people in the bus around him.

Public transportation in Budapest saw changes at the time, the result of which was that on some lines buses were running only five times an hour. Bus route number five was a line like that, and although Budapest was a big city with quite a bunch of people living there, it was always the same people traveling together on the 7:12 bus.

As Balázs looked around every morning, he would see an older man wearing his gold-rimmed glasses near the tip of his nose, always doing crosswords, which were laid out on top of his suitcase, lying on his lap. His delicate trousers slid upwards on his legs, which made his colored socks visible, spreading around high above his ankles.

There was another man, looking no older than 35, who always lit a cigarette when all of them got off at 15th Március Square. He had longish hair and earphones always hanging out of his ears, providing him, most probably, with the morning pleasure of rock 'n' roll.

Two ladies were traveling separately, one of them looked a bit older than the other, but Balázs couldn't tell whether she was in her forties, fifties or sixties. The other, with long brown hair, looked extremely familiar, and was probably in her late thirties.

There was also a girl traveling on the bus, probably no older than 20, often standing at one of the doors and reading a book, not especially pretty or attractive; a small girl with her grandma, probably going to elementary school in the city center; and a rich-looking boy of 22 or 23.

Looking around, noticing all of them, Balázs sat in his seat, somewhat still asleep, letting his thoughts wander while his eyes examined all the minutest details of the inside of the bus that morning.

Balázs was raised by his mom after his parents separated, and saw his father only two or three times a month. However, he didn't see his mother very much either. Sára played in a repertory theater and was usually on stage five nights a week. Though, her theater was a ten-minutes' walk from Balázs's school in the city center, they never traveled together in the morning as Sára was usually still asleep when her son closed the door of their apartment on the fifth floor after him.

Balázs sometimes woke up at night when his mother arrived home with some man, probably from the theater. Then he tried to go back to sleep quickly, because he knew that if he waited for just five more minutes, the noises would start coming through the wall between his and his mother's bedroom, and then he wouldn't be able to go to sleep for a long time, and his teacher wouldn't accept his apologies for being late for the first class "because his mother fucked up his night's sleep again".

So he just tried not to listen to the noises.

He never saw the man, but sometimes he found his shoes lying next to his mother's in the hall next morning. Balázs was never able to tell by the shoes if it was always the same man. The walls didn't help in that either. Men can sound so alike sometimes.

Balázs's mother was an amazing actress and was trying to be a caring mom. In her circumstances, she might have been called one. Though, there was something she hated, and that was Balázs coming to see her in the theater.

She thought she needed to separate her onstage life from her life off the stage as much as possible to remain a mother in her son's eyes. When Balázs was younger, she kept saying that he was too young and the shows were not for him, neither for his generation. As time

passed, this argument seemed to be less and less plausible, so she more and more often chose to cling to the latter. But that March, around the time of Balázs's sixteenth birthday, she started to come up with the you're-too-young argument again.

They were rehearsing for a new show titled 'Blindness', and Balázs was resolute that as a 16-year-old man he would go, and finally watch his mother in the leading role.

"No way," said Sára, when Balázs came up with the idea. "You're way too young."

Balázs tried to explain that this was how she excluded him from their family life, never sharing anything with him because all she had was the theater and the roles and some nasty men that he didn't mention, but it didn't help. So he decided to sneak in for the opening night.

He could easily do that. His mother was not at home before the show to ask him where he was going, and no one at the theater recognized him.

He was sitting at the edge of the last row, trying to see but not to be seen. He was very excited. The play began. A man dressed into black elastic pants and a T-shirt of the same color and material appeared and started a long monologue about being a bat. Ten minutes passed before Balázs's mother stepped onstage – completely naked. A shiver ran through Balázs's body, starting at the back of his neck, running down his spine, being trapped in his thighs. From that moment on, Balázs could only see the swaying hips and the slender waist of this beautiful woman, even when curtain call had ended and people started to leave the auditorium.

Realizing that all the people in his row were waiting for him to move, Balázs, as if awakening from hypnosis, sprinted towards the exit, out of the theater. Though he knew that the cast and crew always had a party after the opening show, he got a cab to take him home as quickly as possible. He decided never to tell his mother that he'd seen the show.

Just five minutes after he went to bed, he heard the front door squeaking. He knew something was wrong. Sára, not caring much whether she woke her son, dashed into the hallway and threw her shoes against the wall. She was alone.

Balázs laid under the blanket, pretending to be fast asleep. He heard his mother entering her bedroom, he heard as she unzipped her dress, he heard the sound of something soft hitting the wall between their rooms, somebody arriving on the bed with a loud thud, he heard the screws creaking and a woman sobbing in his mother's bedroom. He wanted to get up, put Sára's shoes next to his, and comfort the woman sobbing in his mother's bedroom. But he just lay there, trying to forget the pain in his thighs, which was getting more and more intense with every sigh of his mother.

The next morning Balázs woke up with a headache. Because he couldn't get much sleep, he left home late and had to run to catch the 7:12 bus. He found a seat in the back, and half asleep, he automatically returned to the habit of examining the details in the bus. Barely knowing where he was, his eyes went from niche to niche, from passenger to passenger, unconsciously taking note of everything from the green socks of the old man doing crosswords to the curve of the back of the blonde girl standing at the middle door, reading a thick book.

The bus ran over a hump. He shivered. The figure of the girl leaped up with the bus, leaving a swaying motion to her upper body afterwards. Immediately, Balázs felt an unpleasant pain in his legs, as if someone was sticking several needles into his thighs. He closed his eyes. But with closed eyes he started to feel sick. He opened them again.

The girl turned a page. The pain got worse. He felt that he must do it, otherwise he would go blind with the pain. When the bus turned onto Erzsébet Bridge to get to 15th. Március Square on the other bank, he jumped to his feet and started towards the direction of the middle door. The pain was pulsating with every step he took.

When the doors opened, Balázs, not knowing what he was doing, leaped forward and reached out for the waist of the girl. She felt soft and warm, softer and warmer than Balázs expected girls to feel. She let out a quiet, somewhat surprised gasp, and Balázs immediately felt strong hands closing around his wrists.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” It was the rich-looking boy.

“N-n-nothing.” Balázs felt like someone awakening from a nightmare, all in cold sweat. “I just...” Then he started to run.

Turning in the first corner, he stopped and leaned against the wall of a tall building to get some air. Peeping towards the bus stop, he saw the girl shaking hands with the boy.

“Janka,” she said.

“Gyuri.”

“Thank you,” said Janka, still holding his hand. “Crazy kid. Scared the hell out of me.”

“Don’t worry.” Gyuri tried to reassure her. “He won’t do it again. How old was he? Fifteen?”

Janka laughed. A moment later they left the bus stop hand in hand.

Balázs sat on the pavement, next to the tall building, still panting. Then he slowly stood up to look at the building he was leaning against. A huge sign just a few feet above his head read ‘New Theatre’.

Two

Éva felt dizzy as the morning bus opened its doors in the bus stop and an intense smell of exhaust reached her fragile nostrils. It was a few minutes after seven. She had to take this bus if she wanted to arrive on time for her first class that day. She stepped inside the bus, and fell into a free seat close to the door. She closed her eyes and tried to forget the smell.

She had been sensitive to smells since she had arrived from the U.S. a year ago. She still remembers how it felt when after a year she opened the door of their flat again, and the smell of thick layers of dust punched her in the face. This was also the time when her menopause started.

Éva didn't like to recall that day. Having spent a year with her son in the States with a Fulbright, teaching Hungarian language and culture to the children and grandchildren of Hungarian defectors, now she arrived home alone, and the first steps in the dusty flat reminded her of why she left. Her husband died in that flat after months of struggling with testicular cancer just two years before.

Éva ran away from home, taking her son, who was a junior in high school at the time. She wished she never had to see the apartment again. She wished that some hooligan might come around when they were already in the air and set the whole block of apartments on fire.

But she found the apartment as she left it. There was no fire, no hooligan, no sign of break-in, nothing. The only change was that she was alone now. Her son graduated from high school in the U.S. and got a scholarship to a college there.

Éva tried to restart her life. She was somewhere between fifty and sixty but no one could really tell how old exactly she was. She looked ageless and eternal, like a statue - as her new students described her.

However, it was because of her age that she only got half status as an English teacher in an elementary school when she tried to get a job. Though Éva, who grew fat in the U.S., might perceived it that way after she rearranged it, the apartment didn't grow smaller, and she had to keep it up from her salary. This at first seemed impossible, but after a while Éva realized that if she cut down on eating, she would save enough money to pay the bills. Although, she was careful not to starve herself completely, after a while she looked not much better than an anorexic.

Even though she grew thinner and thinner, she didn't seem to realize it and kept moving among people as if she was walking with at least two other people on her side. She wasn't claustrophobic but she couldn't stand being in a crowd, being pushed up against strangers, feeling their bodies occupying the space that she reserved for herself around her skinny skeleton.

Her figure was small and bony in a masculine way; her angular bones were sticking out from under her skin here and there. But she kept denying her skinniness, and put on long, loose fitting clothes, sometimes layers over each other to cover it. Students never perceived her as someone particularly slim because of that, and this uncertainty that surrounded her about her age and shape contributed a lot to her students seeing her as a masculine eternal statue instead of a fragile mother figure. They didn't even know that she was a mother.

Éva never talked about her son, but whenever her students asked her to talk about America, she grew strangely ecstatic and excited, and her words followed each other in a flow of great nostalgia and longing. Sometimes the delightful memories were mixed with a bitter smell in her nose that soon stirred her stomach and made her break silent in the middle of her sentence. It happened more and more often as she grew weaker and thought of her son more frequently.

But she never admitted feeling weak or fragile. She was keen on maintaining her reputation as the eternal statue. Anyone who dared to shoot worrying looks at her and ask if she was fine got the same cold affirmative answer "Yes, I am." And she also believed so. She didn't need anyone's help, she was proud to pay the bills alone, she was proud that her stories amazed her students, she was proud that she managed to start from scratch again.

That morning, she opened the window on the bus, and tried to inhale the early April-morning sunshine.

"Everything's fine," she murmured to herself, and she looked around the bus.

A blonde girl and a brown boy were sitting hand in hand in the back; a small girl was chewing on some sweet chocolate she had just been given by her grandma traveling with her. There was a suspicious looking teenager sitting a bit further away with his eyes rolling around in order to examine every part of the bus but the back; there was another man smelling of tobacco; and another, older, smelling of sanitizer. He was even scarier than the teenager, because while he was seemingly busy with writing something in his lap, Éva once caught the glance he shot at her.

The smell of exhaust got stronger as the bus ran over the bridge above the Danube. The sunshine was reflected from the gold-rimmed glasses of the old man into Éva's face. It was sharp, as if piercing the dry skin over her skull. Her throat started to feel itchy, her tongue felt like an alien body that was thrust into her mouth.

"There's something in my mouth I can't swallow," Éva thought.

She tried to swallow. Her stomach gurgled in expectation. She tried to swallow again. There was something to be digested, the sound said, but no, there was nothing to be digested, Éva thought. Everything was fine, perfectly fine. The bus jumped and Éva's stomach jumped with it. Then completely unexpectedly, the world turned to black.

Éva was already unconscious when she hit the floor next to her seat. Somebody must have pulled the emergency alarm's handle because when few moments later Éva regained her consciousness, the bus was standing halfway across on the bridge. She was lying on her back and could see blurred faces towering round above her.

"Are you okay?"

"Is she okay?"

"What has happened?"

"Has she died, Granny?"

"Don't worry, sweetie."

“Don’t start pushing me!”

“I’m a doctor!”

“She will be fine.”

“I’ve never seen anyone dying.”

“Shut up!”

“How thin she is.”

Éva recognized the gold-rimmed glasses of the old man, who, in spite of his age, was kneeling besides her, holding her wrist. She completely panicked.

“Have you gone mad? What do you want from me?” she screamed. “Let me go, LET ME GO, I said!” She freed her arm from the man’s gentle hold, and got up by pushing her light body upwards with her hands, looking for a hold on the seats. Her handbag, half open, was lying on the floor next to her. She picked it up, and with a look of terror in her eyes, she desperately rummaged through it. When she found that nothing was missing, she strode towards the door in the front of the bus, which was opened to let in enough air for her. She got off the bus, and trying to balance her steps, she continued her way on foot towards that bank of the Danube with the city center, which she was resolute to reach, not looking back at the Statue of Liberty towering on Gellért Hill, behind her, on the other side.

Three

It was the day of the spring class excursion of the first grade. Emma was sitting on the morning bus to school that stuck in a traffic jam at the intersection of Attila Road and Alagút Street, with the latter leading to the tunnel running under Castle Hill. Emma looked out the window to her left excitedly and expectantly. Farther away, through the crowd of the cars at its entrance, she saw the tunnel, a mysterious orange-lit tube that swallowed the lights of cars as they were disappearing in its mouth.

This was the first time Emma could examine the tunnel, because this was the first traffic jam since she started traveling on bus route number five to her elementary school. Though she had been living in the city since she was born, she only saw those parts of it that her father or grandmother showed her, and the tunnel was not interesting enough for them to show Emma. However, she was taken by a strong desire to get closer to it. The tunnel seemed swirling and somehow still calm. After looking at it for minutes with unfocused eyes, Emma started to feel as if the world was wearing away, all the sounds of the traffic disappeared, the metal click of the long haired man's lighter, the delicacy of the young couple, the quick sighs of a brown haired woman and the loud quarreling of the brothers to her right. She felt as if a hook was drawing her closer to the tunnel, inviting her to get inside and enter its calmness. She couldn't have explained but she felt as if she was just about to doze off in hypnosis, and started wondering about what could be at the other end of the tunnel.

Having not seen the other end, the idea occurred to her that this must be the tunnel her grandmother talked about after she was brought back from clinical death. She looked at the long lines of cars waiting to enter it, envied their privilege for a moment, but then quickly shivered at the thought of death, pulled her spring coat high up to her chin, and turned to her grandmother sitting on her right.

The bus seemed to be getting into motion again, but pulled up with a short squeak coming from under the wheels. The silence was broken, and Emma's stomach sank when she heard the internal noises of the little box of the bus.

"FUCK YOU JEW!"

The younger boy to the grandmother's right started shouting at the older boy, his brother. They didn't look alike, but sometimes their mother traveled with them, and then every passenger could immediately tell that they were related. The older boy was big and fat, while the younger small and thin, but the mother was a perfect average. She was very

generous about telling her sons to shut the fuck up, carefully selecting the items of her narrow swearword vocabulary for her unstoppable flow of scorn.

“FUCK YOU!” shouted the bigger boy, and gave his brother such a punch in the face, that the small boy hit the window on the right side of the bus with a loud thud.

“OUCH! BASTARD! FUCKING JEWISH BASTARD!”

The younger boy struck back after he banged back from the blow-resistant glass, leaving the rest of the passengers petrified. Even the long haired man forgot to flick his lighter for a moment. The brothers didn’t care if the whole bus’s attention was on them, it happened to them too often to realize anymore.

However, it seemed that the bus driver had had enough.

“GET OFF THE BUS IMMEDIATELY, YOU HOOLIGANS!” he thundered through the loudspeakers above the passengers’ head, and the first door of the bus opened.

“I WANT TO SEE YOU TWO GETTING OFF!”

And the boys did so, but their feet hadn’t even touched the pavement of Attila Street when the small boy’s ear was already caught between the big boy’s white teeth. The driver closed the door after them, but the cry of the big boy was still audible after he released the small boys ear from his mouth.

“YOU DON’T HAVE THE RIGHT TO TEACH ME, SONOFABITCH!”

“MY MOTHER IS YOUR MOTHER SO HOLD YOUR MOUTH OR I’LL GIVE YOU ANOTHER ONE!”

And the boys turned onto Alagút Street and started climbing the stairs up to the Castle next to the mouth of the Tunnel.

“What does ‘Jew’ mean, Granny?” asked Emma after the brown haired woman sighed again.

“It’s a group of people sharing the same descent, religion and culture. Sometimes just the descent,” said her grandma.

“Are they bad people?”

“No, sweetie. Jews are like every other people. Some are good, some are bad.”

“Why did he say it such a way then?”

Emma’s grandmother sighed.

“Some people don’t like Jews, honey,” she said.

“Why?”

“Mostly because some other people don’t like them either. Their parents for example.”

“Did Jews hurt the parents then?”

“No, the parents hurt the Jews.” Emma’s grandmother took out her handkerchief and started dabbing her nose. “Or the parents were jealous of the Jews. Many of them were very rich and talented. It’s easier to hurt someone if you first start hating him, isn’t it?” she said.

“Are you a Jew, Granny?” asked Emma.

“Yes, sweetie, but there’s no need to speak so loud,” answered the grandma from under the handkerchief.

Emma went back to whispering.

“Is daddy a Jew too?” she asked.

“Yes, he is a Jew too.”

“Am I a Jew, Granny?”

“Yes, you are.”

Emma put her hands in front of her mouth that fell open in surprise.

“I didn’t know,” she said.

“Honey, there was no need to know that,” said her grandma. “We don’t keep the religion. Neither the culture. We’re just born to be Jews. It doesn’t make any difference.”

“Aren’t you afraid that they will hurt you?” asked Emma.

“Who?”

“The parents who hate Jews.”

The old lady took a moment of pause, and after another sigh, she decided to go into it.

“They’ve already hurt me, and I am still here. It won’t happen again,” she said.

“How did they hurt you, Granny?” asked Emma.

Now, thought the grandmother, and she went on.

“These were very evil people sweetie. They were called the Nazis. They took Jews away from home. They kept them in camps. After a while they killed them. They took me too.”

“But you are here,” said Emma and drew closer to her.

“I was caught late,” explained her grandma. “We were hiding in tunnels and cellars under the earth, and at nice people’s houses; they didn’t find us for months. My mama and papa and me.”

“Did your parents survive too?” asked Emma.

The old lady answered softly.

“Mama survived. Papa was killed.”

Emma looked out on the window again, following the cars moving towards the tunnel with longing eyes until she felt dizzy.

“What happened to the Nazis?” she asked turning back to her grandmother.

“They were beaten,” answered the old lady. “That’s when we got home with Mama.”

Emma looked at the tunnel again.

“Do I have to hide, Granny?” she asked.

“Why would you have to?”

“I’m afraid of those boys. They always fight. Once they find out that I’m a Jew they will want to hit me.”

“No one will hit you as long as your granny and I am here to keep an eye on you,” said the old man sitting in the seat opposite to Emma, glancing at her above his glasses. “You’re a nice little girl.”

“Are you a Jew too?” asked Emma.

“No, I’m not,” said the old man.

“Then what are you?”

“I’m a doctor. A pensioner doctor, but still working.”

“What’s your name?” asked Emma.

“Ferenc.”

“I’m Emma. I’m a Jew.”

“Yes, I’ve heard,” said Ferenc “but don’t say that. Say that you are Emma and you like ice cream. That says more about you. You were born a Jew as you were born with black hair. Our decisions tell more about us than our given features, because we choose those. Do you like ice cream?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Me too. You see, we both like it,” said the old man, and at that moment the bus finally moved on.

Two hours later Emma was already eating ice cream on Castle Hill with her class. They had already seen the National Gallery from outside and Mátyás Church, from inside and were taking a rest before seeing the Museum of Military History. They were eating ice cream next to the Sikló, where there is a smaller flat area towering above a rotary of Clark Ádám Square. Emma was standing near the edge of the flat place. She saw the Danube with the

Parliament on the other bank. Looking down at the traffic that was flowing towards Chain Bridge at the bottom of the hill, she realized that the cars appeared, seemingly from the hill itself. When she couldn't find any explanation for how that was possible she turned to her teacher, standing behind her.

“Zsuzsa néni, where do those cars come from?”

“There is a tunnel under the hill, Emma,” she answered. “Do you know what a tunnel is?”

“Yes, tunnels are where Jews hide before they are killed,” said Emma. “My grandma told me.”

“No, Emma. Tunnels are built for people to make their lives easier. These cars that come out just under our feet are coming from the other side of the hill. With having the tunnel, people don't have to drive around the hill. They save time.”

“So tunnels are not dangerous? Will they not kill you?” asked Emma.

“No, tunnels don't kill people, Emma. You can be sure of that.”

At that moment a loud scream was heard. The girls and boys rushed to the edge of the flat ground. Emma turned there too with Zsuzsa néni at her heels. And she caught the last glimpse of it.

The body of the big boy from the morning bus was swirling between the wheels of cars. Horns boomed, wheels creaked, a car ran over the fat boy, and because of this lost its speed and was run into by the car behind. Loud thud, screams, Emma's stomach felt as if a hook pulled it up into her throat, as if she had fallen too. She turned back from the edge and saw the face of the younger brother from the bus with a bleeding nose, towering above her completely white-faced. Emma screamed “Dooooooooon't!” and immediately fainted.

Four

Anna inhaled. Exhaled. Inhaled again. Exhaled. Inhaled. Exhaled. In, out, in, out, in, out, she kept repeating to herself. This went on now nearly every morning and before she could fall asleep. Sometimes she panicked that she won't be able to continue this cycle and die in her bed.

She looked around. There were only a few people on the bus. A blonde girl and the woman who once fainted and then thought that they stole her things were talking at the back of the bus. The old man who tried to help the hysterical woman was sitting in the front. Another guy was sitting near him, listening to loud music, and flashing his lighter to its rhythm. When she was sure no one was looking, she put the inhaler into her mouth and pushed its end downwards. The drug spread in her oral cavity, and her breathing went back to normal again. This morning it was just an average attack. Probably it was running after the bus that triggered it. After ease came, and Anna laid back in her seat on bus 5, she immediately started regretting the whole running misery: the bus got stuck in a traffic jam on the corner of Vérmező. She could have easily walked to the next stop and waited for it. Not much of fresh air to inhale on the way though. But no one could possibly expect to get some fresh air with this congestion.

Living systematically was crucial for Anna. Keeping order in life made her feel safe, content and strong. She loved if things were in their place, because then she was in her place too. Any time she questioned if she was present in life at all, this was what made her believe that she was there, alive, being a part of the big machine, being a small cog-wheel attached to all these things, her alarm clock going off at 6:30, the 7:12 bus, her morning coffee in Café Prága, checking her e-mails and the new uploads of critique, the circulation desk at the library where she worked, coffee accompanying the sandwich for lunch, green apple at 4:00, the five-

o'clock tea in Café Prága, the 5:44 bus in the afternoon, saying good-bye to her husband at 6:30, waiting for him to return in the evening, not having sex with him at night.

This spring things seemed to be slightly out of their place. Anna put the inhaler back into her pocket, placed her hand on her belly and thought about this slight change. She has been having the attacks since March parallel with returning childhood asthma. She called them the 'cycles of fear', because 'panic attack' sounded too categorical. In one month, she got to know their nature, learned to overcome them, and managed to integrate the encounters with them more or less into her routine. Still, they could make her feel quite uncomfortable and scared for some time, because their occurrence was unpredictable.

Anna thought if she gives them names, it makes them more easy to accept, so any time she managed to overcome an attack, she named it after a child she could not bear. Robi, Julcsi, Andi, Jani, Andriska, they were drifting away one by one after an attack was gone.

Still holding her belly, she started to delve into her mind, searching for a memory, when she or her husband, Tamás suggested a name for the baby they were planning to have together. She was sure that the attacks would be gone if there was no such memory remaining.

She went through all her favorite books several times, listing characters, thinking back to all the shows Tamás wrote critiques about, including the ones they saw together and even the ones Tamás had just told her about. She had taken account of all the Lulus and Lolitas, all the women a play was written about, but still, the attacks continued.

That morning she kept repeating the names in her head again that she would possibly have never given to her child, hoping to find the one which the attack could be named. At this point, her mobile phone rang. It took her a minute to realize that it was *her* mobile phone, as she never got calls this early in the morning.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi, it's Jutka," said her cousin in the phone.

“Oh, hi, what’s happened?” Anna asked.

“This is exactly what I was about to ask you.” Jutka was a chatty type.

“What do you mean?”

Jutka was usually quite straightforward about what she wanted, but now she sounded hesitant.

“Your family. Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked after a moment of silence.

“Jutka, I’m sorry. I’m not over it yet. They just told me a month ago. We really wanted to... you know... spread.” Anna felt uneasy. She didn’t plan to talk about this with Jutka this early.

“What are you talking about? I meant your husband.”

“He says he still loves me. We just, you know haven’t been doing it for a while. He says he needs time to accept the changes. In the circumstances.”

“I saw him today. Guess where,” said Jutka.

Anna was surprised.

“I didn’t know that you’re in Pécs,” she said.

“Honey, stop pretending,” said Jutka. “I saw him in the hospital.”

“Jutka, are you teasing me?” Anna felt even more uneasy. “Tamás is in Pécs. He went to see ‘The Imaginary Invalid’. The show just opened on the 4th. Critique must be already online. He’ll be at home in a few hours.”

“No, he won’t. I’ve just said that I saw him in the hospital. I went to see Sára, you know, my friend I had told you about.” Anna didn’t remember. Jutka loved talking about her friends, and since she considered everybody she once talked to a friend, she had quite a few of them. “She’s broken a hip. Terrible. She has to lay for months. No stage, nothing. Which is sad because she was just about to make a career with this new stuff, her name has just started to spread among filmmakers.”

“Jutka, what has happened?” Anna was scared now.

“Now we are back at square one. Just kidding. I really thought that you didn’t want to tell me that... She had an accident. Yesterday. Went about with some man, and then she said, there was this kid falling down from the skies... I’m not making this up, she said it. A kid falling on the man’s windshield. Literally out of the blue. The kid rolling down, they couldn’t stop, they were in the rotary, ran over him she says, and then another car running into them from the back. I’m glad that I wasn’t there, it must have been... ugh... terrible... Even talking about it gives me the shivers.”

In spite of the shivers, Jutka seemed to enjoy talking about this.

“Then please stop.” Anna wanted to cut this short. “This is terrible, but I meant Tamás. Is that really him you saw? Is he OK?”

“OK in a hospital? Are you kidding?” Jutka might have realized that she’d gone too far. “Hey, don’t worry, he seemed pretty fine, especially compared to Sára. I mean plaster, infusion, the average stuff. I didn’t go to see him. I didn’t want to make him feel uncomfortable, since you seemed to handle this in a pretty secretive way.”

“Jutka!” Anna said this so loud that some people turned their head towards her on the bus.

“Hey, sorry. You know me. I’ll stop. Promise.”

“Which hospital is it you said?” Anna asked.

“I didn’t say. Szent János,” said Jutka.

“I just passed next to it with the bus fifteen minutes ago.” Anna had to control herself not to cry out loud again. “Thanks, Jutka, I’m going back.”

“Tell him I say hi.”

Jutka could really be too much sometimes.

“Guess what,” Anna answered. “I will. Thanks again. Sorry about your friend. Bye.”
And she hung up.

As soon as the bus stopped at Döbrentei Square, Anna jumped off. All that was going through her mind was Tamás Tamás Tamás, she forgot about the attack and the children never to be born. She took the first bus coming from the opposite direction, and for the first time in her life was very grateful to the traffic jam that kept her closer to the hospital. Everybody was heading to the city center, so there was no congestion on the way back, and Anna was at the hospital in ten minutes.

After she was ensured that her husband was not in critical state, she was shown the way to his room. Tamás produced a bitter smile when he saw her.

“Hi, Anna.”

“Hi. How are you?”

She drew a chair and sat down next to his bed.

“Both legs broken. A knee completely shattered. I have felt better in my life,” Tamás said bitterly.

“What has happened?” asked Anna.

“Had a crush on... my way. Did I say crush? A crash, I mean. I’m sorry Anna, the car is... a wreck... I’m sorry.”

“But you’ll be fine,” she said encouragingly.

Tamás hesitated.

“Anna, I lost a testicle,” he said.

Anna looked shocked for a moment.

“Hey, it’s... really... you lost one... so what, I still love you.”

“You’re too kind with me. Really. I don’t deserve you.” He turned his face away.

“Forget about the car,” said Anna. “We don’t have it anymore, but we have each other.” She laid her head next to Tamás’s.

“You really still love me?” asked Tamás.

“Of course, honey. You’re my husband.”

Tamás freed a hand from under the blanket and drew Anna so close that his eyelashes brushed Anna’s and Anna could feel something wet running from them down on her face.

“You remember what I told you after we first met?” he asked. “That whoever I marry, my first daughter’s name will be your name? But now I realized that I don’t need another Anna, because I have you.”

Anna still heard these words echoing in her head when she left the hospital and started going down the stairs in front of the main entrance. She felt as if a huge balloon that had been inflating her chest now burst. The inhaler slipped out from her pocket and went bumping down the stairs until it reached the bottom and stopped in the grass next to a litter bin. Anna didn’t pick it up. She knew she wouldn’t need it anymore.

Five

It was a day in early May. The morning sun was shining from the Pest side of the river, sending a yellow shaft right through the open window of bus five, drawing a yellow line into the crossword Ferenc was doing, as if marking the line of squares that contained the answer.

“The real answer,” Ferenc thought, while turning his head to see what the rest of the passengers were doing.

Ferenc had been traveling on the 7:12 bus ever since he started working at the clinic, and that was now more than fifty years ago. He knew the people on the bus, because he watched them day by day over the rim of his glasses.

He happily noted that the thin lady had some color in her face and that the teenage boy had returned to the 7:12 bus after not showing up for nearly half a month. He saw Emma, the little girl who loves ice cream too. She was sitting in one of the back seats and holding the hand of a man in his forties, who must have been her father. Right after they introduced themselves to each other with Ferenc in April, Emma was not on the bus for a week at least.

When the man realized that Ferenc was watching his daughter, Ferenc sent a small smile towards the pair of them sitting in the back of the bus. The man turned to Emma, and silently asked her if she knew the old man. Emma, who was looking out on the window to the right with a stiff upper body while they passed Horvát Garden, now turned back to his dad, looked at Ferenc, and shook her head stubbornly.

Ferenc slowly turned his head back. He noticed a little flashing lighter in the lap of the rocker man to his right and caught some words of a nearly silent argument going on between the rich-looking boy and his blonde girlfriend.

He looked back onto his crossword again. The yellow stripe of sunshine was now dancing on the lower right corner of the paper, where the little squares were yet empty. Ferenc readjusted his glasses, and looked at one of the definitions in the right corner. It said “THREE IN GERMAN”. This is easy, thought Ferenc, and put the letters D-R-E-I into the four empty squares. Now he moved to the column that received the E of DREI. The definition said “WHAT YOU CRAVE”. Ferenc removed his glasses, and looked at the crossword from closer. The definition still read “WHAT YOU CRAVE”.

“Strange question,” thought Ferenc. “What is there to crave after all.” He closed his eyes to close the yellow light out that was cutting his eyeballs as sharply as a scalpel would. Or a laser ray, thought Ferenc, like in those eye operations that he never dared to try.

He was a medical surgeon, having all his trust in his colleagues; still, there were things he felt too old for, and laser eye surgery one of those few things. He was 76, but his hands

were as steady as a forty-year-old surgeon's. And he needed them indeed. He was working in the hospital as a pensioner, as most of his colleagues did too.

His work was valued, his work was indispensable. They still needed him.

"Career," he thought, his eyes still closed. "What is a career one dreams of if not this."

He had everything he craved as a young intern. There were thousands of people leaving his operating theatre with better chances for survival. He touched thousands of suffering bodies to relieve their pain. "Like Jesus Christ. What is a blessing if not this."

Money was never exactly flooding in, but he never felt the need for more. They could get by with his small family without millions. He and his wife and daughter. He was a father of a healthy girl.

"And she followed in my footsteps," he thought. "What can make a father more proud. Even if she moved to Switzerland," he thought. "But now everybody is leaving. That's why I'm still there. If there was someone younger for my place... Marika says that maybe once we will be sent to a sanitarium in Switzerland. When we are old and sick. Will that ever happen, I doubt it. Most of my patients are younger than me now. Young people can go away. They can die. Will I ever, will I ever. What would happen with the ward. There's no one to replace me. One morning I just wouldn't show up. How irresponsible. Or we could do just something together with Marika instead. We would sit together on the couch, and I would ask her, Marika, five letters, what you crave, what is that. I don't know. Marika, draw the curtain, my eyes hurt, five operations today, there was this girl, just over twenty, suicide they said, I tried everything, she looked so familiar, Marika, the sun shines so bright, let's just sit here in the dark, five letters, what is that, I don't know, look at me, she said, what do you work for, five letters, what is that, I don't know, will you ever have some time, five letters, for yourself, I don't know."

Ferenc's glasses fell onto the crossword from his hands.

He opened his eyes. The world was blurred. He found his glasses, put them on, and looked around. He was still sitting on bus number five, but knew no one around him. He looked out of the window. The bus just passed Horvát Garden again. The sun was high. He checked his watch. 10:34. He slept for more than three hours. He must call the hospital.

He reached to open his suitcase lying on his lap to get his cell phone out. His eyes caught a glimpse of something in the crossword which was lying on top of the suitcase. He closed his eyes, then opened them again. The letters were still there. He took off his glasses and raised the paper so close to his face that he could smell the odor of the paper and graphite mingling in his nose. He was not hallucinating. The only column filled in in the lower right corner contained the five letters P-E-A-C-E.

Six

It was around half past four in the afternoon when Janka finally stepped out from the Registrar's office at the Faculty of Humanities. She left the campus, crossed Múzeum Road at the nearest crosswalk, stopped by a McDonald's to buy a coffee, and then set herself down in the grass of Károlyi Garden, just across the street from the gate to the Faculty of Humanities.

She looked at the children playing around her in the small park that also served as a crowded playground in the sunny hours of the year. She took a gulp of coffee into her mouth and kept it there until the taste of toothpaste and the American style water-based coffee blended into a strange new taste. The mothers of the kids were sitting on the benches edging the orange gravel road that ran around the park. Janka started looking at them one by one but after a while she got bored.

Slowly sipping the coffee she opened her bag, and pulled out two folders to organize the sheets that until now she carried tucked under her arm, and now were lying on the grass.

Both folders were of the cheaper kind. One of them was made of red paper and a small piece of paper glued on it said “MISC”. The other was made of weak black plastic and it was labeled as “OFFICIAL”.

Janka opened the “OFFICIAL” folder. There were dozens of papers in it already with a smaller slip of paper confirming the claimant’s eligibility for the F-1 visa on the top. Janka slipped the Academic Transcript she just got at the Registrar’s office into the black folder. She opened the “MISC” folder as well and slipped her last exam’s paper into that one. Then she put the folders back into her bag.

She still had some time as her next appointment was for 6 pm. that late May afternoon. She laid down on her back in the grass and looked at the bird-less sky. After all these hectic days, this was the first time that she found some time to just do nothing. She had already purchased the plane ticket online and packed most of the things she wanted to take away with her, and now, she had finished all her exams and had the proof in the black plastic folder that she was working two damn years on her BA degree that she will never receive. But receiving it wouldn’t have made any difference either. She was a member of the first grade that began their higher education studies in the Bologna system, and one year before the graduation of this grade still there was no one able to tell whether the BA degree would be useful for anything else but wiping your rear end with it.

There was only one task remaining, thought Janka. However, this might turn out to be the most unpleasant of them all.

After drifting away in her thoughts for a couple of minutes, Janka sat up in the grass, rearranged her dress, took her bag up, and walked down to the bus stop at 15th Március Square. As she wasn’t going home yet, she had to take the bus only to Korlát Street. Standing at the rear window of the bus she watched as her reflection on the glass and the image of the shrinking city center melted together while the bus ran from Pest to Buda on Erzsébet Bridge.

She got off at Korlát Street, where exactly six month later, just across the road from the bus stop, they reared a memorial for the poet Mihály Babits. Of course, Janka, who had been a Hungarian major until that afternoon, could not know this when he stepped to the door of a grey house in the bus stop, and hesitantly pressed button 22 labeled “TENKES-DENT”.

Gyuri was helping out his father that afternoon in the family business they both hoped that he would join after getting his degree. It was a dentistry ran by Gyuri’s father and uncle. The business was flourishing, and they earned nice sums of money from it year after year. Gyuri had always known that when he finally grew up, he would be the third pillar in this project, and thus he had a stable sense of future from his early childhood. This sense was even more nourished when he was admitted to the University of Medicine to study dentistry.

He was always happy if he could help his father out in his surgery, and now that his next exam was scheduled for a week later and Janka had some other things to do, he was standing next to his father in white sanitized clothes and with pale sanitized hands.

While waiting for the last patient for the day, they cleaned and organized all the little metal instruments they used for their work.

“Are you sure that she’s coming?” asked Gyuri at 5.57 when they’ve been waiting for the last patient for at least five minutes.

“She has an appointment for six,” said his father. “She would call if she’d lost her way.”

The patient has never been there before, but said in the phone, when she made the appointment that she knows her way around in the district.

It was 6.01 when the entry phone rang. Gyuri was in the restroom. The dentist automatically pushed the “OPEN” button on the receiver, and waited for the patient to get up to the second floor where the flat they used as the dentist’s surgery was.

Janka put on a smile when a fat man dressed in white opened the door.

“Good afternoon,” she said.

“Good afternoon,” greeted her the man. “Do come in. This way. My name is György Tenkes.”

“Janka Schwarz.”

Janka was led into the surgery room, where the dentist seated her in his chair.

“What are you complaining about?” he asked probably for the several hundredth time in his life with the intonation of those people who keep repeating a sentence so many times that for them it already loses its meaning and remains just a bunch of syllables glued together with saliva.

“I’m leaving for the United States next week, and I want to make sure before I leave if there’s anything that should be extracted. And as a matter of fact, I came to talk with your son too. Is he here by any chance?”

When she made the appointment, Janka had been a hundred percent sure that Gyuri was going to be there, and now she was afraid that she was mistaken.

“Do you know my son?” asked the man while he took up his little mirror.

“We traveled on the same bus a couple of times. Once he mentioned that his father has a dentistry in the house next to the bus stop. I knew his name... it wasn’t hard to find you.”

“He must be back in a couple of minutes,” said Dr. Tenkes.

Janka knew that Gyuri hadn’t told his parents about their relationship, and though she was angry with him because of this most of the time, now that it was all about to end, she felt grateful.

It didn’t took much time to conclude that Janka’s teeth were completely ready for the journey, and meanwhile Gyuri also returned to the surgery.

“Janka,” he said.

“Hi,” said Janka as soon as she could use her mouth again.

Gyuri kept playing the I-know-your-name-but-what-do-you-want-from me game. His father was very polite with his patients, but he was sure that György Tenkes senior would find it ridiculous that he was going out with a Hungarian major no-name-girl, who doesn’t have roots and doesn’t have prospects to be a root for her offsprings.

“Mr. Tenkes, would you please excuse us for a couple of minutes?” Janka asked.

Dr. Tenkes was now a bit more suspicious, but finally returned back to his surgery while his son and the girl were standing at the door.

“Gyuri, I’m going away,” said Janka.

“You are kidding, right?” said Gyuri.

“No. I’ve already told you that I can’t live this life any longer.”

Gyuri became extremely nervous.

“But howwhatwhy?” he stammered.

“I have no sense of future here. I’m working hard but who knows if I’ll ever get a job. And I hate this atmosphere. You can’t meet anyone who wouldn’t see you as a rival from the moment you first meet. Oh, she is cleverer than me, oh, she’s nicer than me, oh, she’s more attractive than me, oh, she’ll take my job away, she’ll take my boyfriend away, she’ll be the reason that my name remains unknown, I’m fed up with this! I’m not even clever or attractive.”

“You are!” blurted out Gyuri.

“Please. I know what you think of me. Good for sex only, yeah, that’s what you think. Don’t think that I don’t know. Why wouldn’t you introduce me to your parents otherwise?”

“Honey, this is not that easy,” said Gyuri.

“Don’t honey me. And yes, it’s that easy. You people terribly overcomplicate things. I’m leaving. I have the ticket. You can’t make me stay.”

“What are you going to do there?” asked Gyuri still with doubt in his voice.

“Anything. Get a job. Study some more. I got a transcript from the uni, I have all my exams for the first four semesters. And you know what? If I like it, I won’t even come home.”

“Janka, please,” pleaded Gyuri.

“No. I said no, and don’t start whining here, because your daddy will hear it, and then his incy wincy son has to tell him that he actually hooked up with this humanities girl, oh no.”

Gyuri shot a hateful look at Janka.

“I really don’t want to make a fuss about this break-up,” said Janka “and that’s for your sake, not mine. I loved you once, but now it’s all gone, and next week I’ll be gone too.”

Gyuri was still silent.

“So anyway. I just wanted to say bye,” said Janka placing her hand on the doorknob.

Gyuri first just wanted to help her open the door, but God knows how, finally he ended up embracing the blonde girl.

“Damnit, Gyuri,” said Janka, trying to hide the tears in her eyes. She pushed him away, and rushed out from the surgery-flat.

Gyuri stood at the open door for some silent moments, watching as the elevator’s light change from white to red and back to white again. After a while his father’s face showed up in the surgery’s door.

“Did she pay?” he asked.

Gyuri didn’t answer. His father might have sensed that there was something going on.

“What did she want?” he asked with a touch of suspicion in his voice.

Gyuri slowly closed the front door.

“Credit,” he said.

Seven

Ádám sucks one more from the cigarette. Just one more. It is his morning ritual, sucking just one more before he gets on the bus. What follows is twenty five minutes of pure hell. No smoking on the buses of BKV. No smoking. He has to get ready for that.

He sits down above one of the rear wheels. To feel that we move, he says to himself every morning, when he is lucky enough to find that seat empty. To feel that last stop is getting closer, the next cigarette is getting closer, he thinks, and puts his headphones on his ears to suppress the screaming of the lack of nicotine in his empty throat.

Ádám hates the bus rides, new challenge every day, he feels weak, too weak to overpower nicotine. His fingers are nervously twitching. He doesn't want to understand why this whole is happening to him every morning. He works on constructions in the city center, building huge glass boxes for hundreds of new offices. He can smoke as much as he wants there. In the afternoon he walks home. Everything is so fine and free and easy when he's not on the bus.

First he hates the 7:12 bus with all its passengers, but when they all get off, this whole changes. He realizes that they are all nice people. They just don't know how to live, he thinks, and sucks finally one more, always finally one more from the cigarette.

And this early June morning he is sitting on the bus again. His seat on the rear wheel was free, they are moving, they are moving. There is that old man in the front, who said that he was a doctor. He's looking at Ádám. Again. Why doesn't he just ignore him, why. There is the lady who once talked on the phone so loudly that he couldn't hear the Rolling Stones. And this young boy, the little pervert, Ádám thinks to himself, and starts fidgeting with his lighter in his lap. The little girl, who freaks out every time they drive past the Tunnel. Her dad, who cannot restrain her. The hysterical woman who once told the blonde girl the whole lot she saw when she was in America. The whole lot. Who cares what she did there? Ádám doesn't.

Where is the blonde girl? She's not there. But there is that guy she used to go out with. What the fuck. Did they break up? Anyway that guy is such a jerk. She was right she left him. Such a jerk.

The wheels of the bus keep jumping as they drive on the bridge, Ádám is all nerves, fucking morning, fucking bus box. The lighter is flashing madly, there's smoke coming from somewhere. Ehh, hallucination, the lack of nicotine, no smoking on the bus. Now everything is flashing. They are right above the flowing water. Flames are licking Ádám from all sides, an orchestra is playing in his head out of tune, violins scream, horns shout, somebody keeps punching Ádám's eardrums, the whole bus is flashing, all the assholes, Ádám thinks, pure hell, that is it, please, let the last stop come, please, just one more, just one more, finally one more.

Epilogue

A bus caught on fire yesterday morning on Erzsébet Bridge, the driver and the eight passengers, among them two children, died. First investigations show that the fire was caused by a lit lighter that belonged to one of the passengers. Experts say that the fuel tank exploded. Lately Budapest has seen an increasing number of such accidents, but this is the first time that there have been deaths. Authorities are still investigating if there was any nonfeasance and who is to be called to account for the tragedy.

The newscaster puts his paper he has just read the news from aside with no expression on his face and takes up the next one. I can hear the neighbor in the next flat shouting.

“Turn that fucking TV off, I want a private life!”