

Petőfi Bridge

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All around people's ears were filled with the surface din. As the old lady made her way from Mester Street onto the Ring road, this noise became louder and louder on her eardrums. Eardrums that were tired and deadened by her lifetime, eardrums which in any case often could not hear the radio turned up until it was howling. The noise did not go away, even when she stopped for a rest next to the statue in Boráros Square. It was May, the sun shone down with the warmth of spring. The old lady had thick clothes on; people of her age could not dress lightly, as one cold breeze would be enough to make her ill. She would be stuck in bed, and then who would look after her? She could not count on her neighbour; Mariska already had enough to worry about struggling with her own health. She would not have enough strength to worry about someone else's health as well. On the other hand, her children would not have enough time; they already had enough on their plates with raising their own kids, and sorting out their working lives, so they could get their hands on some money.

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It has to be said, these days finding a job is no small matter, especially a good job, and once you've found one, should you ever lose it you would certainly never find another like it.

So she had to be careful, she even told the person sitting next to her there on the bench. She was also an old lady only around ten years younger than herself; she had a dog, such a cute little dog. The old lady would have gladly kept one like it herself, if she were not so old, and if she were not afraid that if she fell ill then somebody would still have to look after the dog. If she were to die, well, what would happen to it then? It would be put down, or it would end up in a dog pound. Just thinking about it was bad enough. The lady with the dog said that she too lived alone, and that is why it was good for her to have the little doggy. At least she had a bit of company, other than the radio, company she could actually talk to. Her husband was no longer alive: that is just the statistic, it logically follows, you lose men relatively early in life. As long as they have not already ran off, in their fifties, with some younger bird. That was what she called the other woman, a bird. Yes, the old lady

agreed, and hers had died on her too, but not so long ago, in fact, barely two years ago. She gave the exact date. But in her situation, now that he was no longer there, it was of course, absolutely irrelevant that hers had lived longer. At this point the lady with the dog said good bye, saying that the dog did not want to stay in one place any longer and that it was her daily exercise taking the little doggy for a long walk. This made sure she was still in such good shape. The old lady said that she too tried to look after herself, but without a dog of her own it was harder to motivate herself, when the only aim was her own exercise. She did have a few difficulties moving, she told the lady with the dog that with her stick she could only move extremely slowly, and without it she would not be able to move at all. The lady with the dog shouted over her shoulder that you always have to set yourself a target, and then go out and do it.

The old lady sat there, and thought about how much the noise covered over the pain she felt, (for example the pain her loneliness caused), so it no longer reared its head, maybe it did not even bother her anymore and this was how it should naturally be. Yes, that must

be it! She sat there, looking at the far bank of the Danube and the new buildings. She could not see clearly, even with her glasses on she had trouble seeing, but it was no longer something really worth worrying about, as these glasses would do her for the short time she had left. I'll cross the river, she thought to herself, that is exactly what this bridge is here for, so people can get across to the other side. I'll go across to the Buda side, she mumbled to herself.

As soon as she managed, through the surrounding din, to find this resolve, her hand immediately moved, and with her hand her stick, after her stick her foot. She stood up with difficulty. Her shoes were an off-brown colour, with several lumps where her bunions stuck out around the toes; the colour had faded where the leather had become misshapen, and it was still visible even though the old lady tried to cover over these patches every morning with shoe polish.

The old lady started towards the steps at a speed that did not fit ordinary categories such as 'fast' or 'slow', but can only be described as 'exactly just as fast as the old lady could move'. This, she thought, was the hardest part: the stairs because the rest is pretty

much level. At most the bridge arched slightly, but that was nothing, with her tiny steps she would not even notice it. She climbed the steps, using her stick to support herself, then every three or four steps she would stop and puff, while she caught her breath. That is when she noticed huge lines of paint on the side of the bridge. Delinquents, that is what people who spray paint on public buildings get called on TV. But the old lady was not thinking about what reporters said; actually, she quite liked the strange faces and English words like 'fuck you' and 'kiss', which were unintelligible to her anyway and at least gave her something to look at during her pauses. This was how she reached the pavement leading to Buda on the left hand side of the bridge. Even from there she had a great view, and even if she only managed to come this far and did not take another step further it would still have been worth it, she thought, because from here she could look down on the Danube and the lower banks; further upstream she could see the old bridges. But the old lady still had enough strength left in her, so she set off for the other side at her own incomparable pace. She took such tiny steps that Achilles would certainly not have overtaken her, in the

same way he could not overtake the turtle in Zeno's paradox: it did not matter how fast he dashed forward, the tortoise would have moved forward by then as well. Achilles definitely did not overtake her, but a few young people who knew nothing of the Greeks, let alone Greek philosophy, and had certainly never heard of Zeno's paradoxes, definitely did. They just walked straight past the old lady. They were hurrying to class in the natural sciences faculty on the far bank; the same buildings the old lady could not make out clearly in the distance. The people overtaking her were the maths and physics students. They were all so well dressed, that the old lady thought they must be business people, and the buildings in the distance must be banks, as such big, modern-looking buildings usually are. Then a little later, around midday, the sociology students appeared. Their classes are held a little later to make sure they get enough rest after all the partying of the night before. They could go out every night; they did not need to be constantly crunching numbers in their heads. They were dressed completely differently to the earlier students. They wore such baggy, tattered rags that the old lady took them for poor orphans, or unemployed people, who

were going to collect their benefits, or beg in front of the banks on the far side. These days banks mean the same to people as churches did in the past, she thought, everybody goes there, if they appear to have come into some money, well that is where they would tell them that they had received a payment for something or other, then surely they could give these unfortunate people a little money.

In fact the old lady was very poor herself. She lived off very little money, but she did not think that she should be angry with anyone because of this, or that the rest of the world had conspired against her and others like herself. Her monthly pension was not very much, but she did not really need it for anything anyway; she got by on a very small budget. If she were to receive more money now it would only complicate things. Deciding between different products would just frustrate her. This way at least she could buy the same things every time: the cheapest and simplest foods.

By now she had reached the middle of the bridge, she stopped and looked over the railings: a cruise boat just happened to be gliding under the bridge and happy people were waving, maybe they were

Hungarians but they could have been foreigners, these days it is so difficult to tell the difference between who are Hungarians and who are tourists. She would have waved back, because she liked their cheerfulness, she even thought to herself: I'd wave back but I don't dare let go of my stick or the railings, but the din all around her just stopped the words from coming out of her mouth. She turned herself back in the direction of the Buda side and carried on with her tiny footsteps. There were cyclists coming the other way. They were wearing really funny clothes. The old lady smiled because she had only seen clothes like those on TV before, on the Orion space ship, and now here they were right in front of her on the street. How is it that some people can imagine what the future will be like so accurately, the way in which we will dress for example? Cars zoomed past her, and a bus as well. The passengers looked out at the the old lady moving among the pedestrians at a speed that wont get you anywhere these days; but they swept past so quickly their thoughts did not break her resolve or even reach her.

She was getting really close to her goal now, which was essentially the stairs at the other end of the bridge, actually the top of those

stairs. She did not want to go any further than that; she did not want to have to do the stairs again, she had already done enough of that at the Pest end. She thought about how she would have to do the same all over again on the way back, exactly the same distance, except this time with less energy, so you could say it would be further. As she got close to her goal she began contemplating how she could motivate herself to make the return journey. She was a little worried that the weather might turn cold, that a wind might start to blow. Once while sitting on a bench a homeless person had told her that the wind on the bridges was the coldest wind, unbearably cold. Crossing the bridge on foot after a winter's night was tantamount to suicide, this was true in the warmer seasons as well, because the wind and the water, apparently, cool the air down terribly. The old lady was a little frightened by this May coolness, and that other than this she might not have a reason to make herself go back. She could not say how many people had passed her by while she walked across the bridge. Well, a hundred, easily that many. A hundred was a huge number to her; it was the size rather than accuracy, that made her think of this number. Maybe a

hundred, then she hazarded a guess: maybe it would not be exaggerating to say several hundred, perhaps even a thousand. She felt a thousand was something of an exaggeration and because of that sounded a little false; she did not like to tell lies, she had always been like that. She had never deceived anyone, not even her husband, well except for that one time, when she did not say anything about the cancer. Yes, that one time, when she had said it was just a stomach ulcer, which they could cure completely these days. And when they took out half his stomach, and the doctors told her that unfortunately the problem had not been localized, as they had discovered the cancer had spread. Then, she had not told her husband that, because of this, something would have to come to an end and that he should prepare for this 'farewell'. No, she reassured him that he would get better, and, that only those people get better who want to. And he did want to get better, but at the same time the cancer wanted to stab him out, and in that struggle the cancer had come out on top.

The old lady stood at the top of the steps, on the Buda side of the bridge. She could now see, up close, the large buildings; all the people coming and going and the cheerful hustle and bustle in the park. She liked everything about this place, and that she had been able to see it like this once more. Then nice and slowly, a little awkwardly, like a large lorry in a tight space, she began to turn around to face the Pest side again. I'll tell her, she thought to herself, I'll tell Mariska: today I saw Buda.