

Behold the stork!

by Daniel Nagy

I feel as though I'm upsetting the village and its quiet, elderly community by picking my feet on the pavement where even dogs drag themselves sluggishly, as if to mimic their owners. But even though the sun is scorching down on me, boiling my head and roasting my skin, I still can't slow down. My heartrate is increasing with every step and I'm not sure if it's due to the combination of power walking and mid-July heat, or the anticipation of a potentially curious conversation. Either way, thinking about my objective of learning more about my mother's odd predicament makes me excited. The sky is clear, and I find myself – shamefully – missing skyscrapers and semi-natural clouds to offset the sunshine. The houses in the village, by essence, all seem the same, but due to their age, and the various modifications done to them over the years, they look different and even unique as individual homes at the same time. Stork families nest on top of tall poles along the road – not something I would normally note but given my mother's state of compulsive staring at a stork nest from the comfort of her living room, I do wonder if I underestimated the significance of these birds over the years. I focus on the right nest at the right time and catch a glimpse of a stork taking off. It elegantly flies off and disappears into the horizon. I know it'll come back, and I want to tell it not to. I think about the things I'd say to it and realise I've stopped walking, and now sweat is running down my back. I'd love to stay longer and daydream about talking to storks, but city life has engrained in me the compulsive need to be in a hurry. I am, after all, on a mission.

I wipe warm sweat off my forehead and wonder if it really is this hot, or perhaps I've reached the dreaded age of change. To test it, I sniff the air, then take a quick, deep breath through my nose. The intense inhalation of hot air irritates my nose, like in a sauna. It must just be

extremely hot, and in the absence of tall buildings, escaping the sun is a challenge. I'm still walking, but now looking down at my feet, and wondering if the asphalt will start melting soon. Focusing on the changing background under my feet, I hesitate as I step into a sort of cool darkness. I move ahead, and slowly look up as I let my body enter the shadow of an enormous walnut tree. I must have reached my destination as I know that the tallest walnut tree of the village belongs to the old electrician. He's the man that spoke to my mother before she suddenly changed her state from miserable to vegetative just a few days ago. I don't remember his name, but now that I'm standing under this giant of nature, I do recall a great deal of fun I had here as a child. A memory of my mother sending me off to climb the big tree as she wipes tears off her face and buries her whole head in a pillow enters my mind. The memory fades quickly, as they always do, and what remains is a sense of connection I had with a tree, not with my mother. I move close and touch the skin of the tree as if to say hello to someone I used to know very well before I left here and grew up.

The door creaks open, and it's so loud that a family of sparrows are released from within the bushy top of the tree. A pale, old face pops out, blinded by the sun, looking like a vampire chasing a parcel delivery. My heart skips a beat – that happens when I'm reminded of the awkward nature of human life. The man I used to call ladder, because he would throw me up onto the first big branch, has faded and shrunk into but ruins of paper-like skin and fragile bones.

'Can I help you, darling?' he asks in a friendly manner, though he doesn't seem friendly enough to expose his whole body to the sun for me.

I'm not sure whether it's a product of living in the city or coming from a village, but I prefer to keep some distance, so in the comfort of the shade, I introduce myself to the old electrician. I tell him whose daughter I am – the response is a gentle smile. I tell him I'm here

to talk about my mother – the response is the revocation of that smile, like we've just entered the realm of bad news. An old lady falling into sudden dementia in the peculiar style of unresponsively staring at a stork is bad indeed, and I should feel empathetic more than curious, but I can't help it.

'Come in, darling. It's much cooler in here.' He says and turns around before I could respond. I smell the leaves of the tree one more time, then follow the old man into his house. It's only inside that his whole body becomes visible to me. Knowing what he used to look like, I could see myself get sombre out of sympathy, but all I feel is an appreciation of time, and a slight envy for the walnut tree that will grow forever.

The interior of his house looks near identical to that of my mother. It smells of old oak and medicine, the lack of plastic odour is refreshing for my nose. Framed photographs of a woman suggest what I presumed: he's a widower.

'Have a seat wherever you like, darling. Can I get you some water?'

I'm not sure if it's dehydration or the neighbourly spirit of the village rubbing off on me, but I kindly accept some water even though I'm notorious for being that good guest who politely declines everything. As the old man disappears into the kitchen, a middle-aged man shuffles out of it, like an inferior magic trick performed at a dementia ward. He hops down into the chair in front of me and says nothing. He has a pair of binoculars hanging from his neck, which tickles my interest. His clothes are stylish and neat, and he's wearing designer glasses. *I feel like the village-dweller all of a sudden.*

He tells me that he's the old man's nephew from the West. Judging from his accent he's an alien, not just a foreigner – it's the way he utters words, like he borrowed someone's tongue and installed it the wrong way. I'm hot and thirsty, and facing this strange man I feel I can't trust my senses. If I don't get that water soon, I'll attempt to poke this man to make sure he's

not a mirage. Luckily, the old electrician finds his way back into the living room with a glass in his hand.

‘There we are!’

I feel the water hydrating every cell of my body – I am soaking it up like a plant, and as it happens, my mind clears up. I’m still in an oasis of vintage furniture and portraits of soon-to-be-forgotten ancestors. But the nephew is no mirage, and he still has his eyes focused on me. And I still wonder about those blooming binoculars resting on his chest.

‘Look at that photograph, darling! You should know those people.’ The old man says and points towards the wall. It’s a black and white picture of a group of young people. I stand up to get a closer look. There are three couples all cuddled together, all sharing the same kind of energetic smile only youth and innocence could stimulate. It doesn’t take me long to identify the old electrician and his late wife. I recognise my parents but seeing them smile and touch one another is unprecedented. Even as a child I thought I’d have to see into the past to witness such a phenomenon. I’m taken aback by a memory, an old fear, that my existence brought misery into the lives of that couple. Suddenly, I’m a little girl whose tears of guilt water the ever-growing walnut tree.

‘That photograph is the last of those. As are your mother and I.’ The old electrician says then stretches his legs, sinks deep in his chair, and begins talking about the picture. His memory seems to serve him well and his insight is uncanny. I find myself sitting tight as if I were watching a Hitchcock film. The old man’s rusty voice, bygone vocabulary and lively remarks create vivid images and a healthy flow of narrative that takes me with it. I’m lost in a world that preceded, then surrounded me.

The old electrician recalls a world where newly found power had erected a wall to stand between East and West. Conflicts of the wall stretched and rippled far enough to affect

even our little village – lives and fates of individuals could blossom within restricted bounds in our East. My father was a young teacher aspiring to further his career and work in a university. My mother was an avid reader of anything that allowed her to experience life beyond the village. She would go to the capital and spend most of the money she earned as a shopkeeper to buy books. By the elders' standards she was lazy while her peers regarded her a bohemian character with vivid imagination and grandiose dreams that, simply by their nature, could not be interpreted as goals to anyone in the village. The natural order of that world would not allow the likes of her, scruffy village girls, to sing, dance, or act in a theatre West of the wall. The struggle to be herself resulted in isolation and tendencies of deep depression. The handful of friends she had are displayed in the photograph.

A month after the picture was taken a revolution broke out in the capital and people from all over the country fled the East in hope of a brighter future. Cars and trucks unloaded families onto ships like they were exporting sugar. The old electrician and his wife stayed despite fear and hesitation, but their circumstances, and the degree of their ambitions, allowed them to have a content life in the village. The old electrician's brother and his wife, the third couple in the photograph, were on one of those ships. One of their children grew up to become an avid bird watcher.

My parents had some spaces arranged on a truck that was to collect them early in the morning. But the night before my mother fell into a deep sleep of exhaustion following a harsh panic attack. The old man reckons such an endeavour was simply too much for a fragile mind like hers to take. She was unable to wake up, and my father was unwilling to wake her. Dreams found their way over the wall, human fates stood in a long queue, waiting to be altered, and my mother slept in her bed in the village.

A few years later, around the time I was born, my father worked as head teacher at the

local school, in a country where a revolution had been crushed by tanks. He ordered the school hall to be decorated with our national flag and traditional symbols for a Christmas fair as opposed to the usual oversized portraits of a rotten man. He was fired the next day, our house was taken away and we were made penniless within hours. This is where the old electrician ended his story – out of courtesy, as he knew the rest was my story.

The oasis is starting to turn into an oven, my forehead is arbitrarily releasing droplets of sweat and I'm getting lightheaded. Will I actually die before my mother? Of an unprecedented menopause attack, no less? My head is a steaming pot full of memories of screaming, shouting, plate-throwing at drunken fathers mixed with images from my history books of teenagers standing in front of tanks. The old electrician has now sunken even deeper in his soft seat. He has a grin of satisfaction on his face like an old dog that managed to bark a cat away. The nephew looks at me with eyes of sympathy and takes my hand into his palm. Although gentle as a gesture, his cold skin touching mine hits me like the first drops of a cold shower. It drags me out of wherever I've been and the temperature I feel within normalises. We're holding hands, we're two ends of a man-made bridge. I become calm, and he becomes human in my eyes. Even his binoculars stop bothering me, but I still have to ask:

‘What's with those things?’

‘I came here to see storks. We do not have them back home. I told your mother about them, too. That was the only time I ever spoke to her.’

‘What did you tell her?’

‘Storks migrate South every autumn and return when it gets warmer.’

‘We all know that here.’

‘Storks do not go North because they do not know what is beyond the sea, and they assume it is significantly colder, which is a fair assumption. They are genetically wired to avoid what is not known to them – it is a sensory fear they cannot escape. Of course, they are not aware of the Gulf Stream, no one has told them about it. And so, their destinations almost never include the Northern parts of the continent where I am from.’

‘And?’ I release his hand and break the bridge. Our connection remains in place, though. In fact, now I understand it has always been. It is inevitable, like two sides of a wall.

‘That is all I told her. She seemed to like it. I thought I was entertaining her – she even smiled.’

Without a word, I move closer and kiss him on the cheek. The corner of his glasses pokes my forehead, but I feel no pain or discomfort. As I slowly get up from my seat, I focus my eyes on the old electrician who still has a smile painted on his face. The only moving parts in his sculpture of tranquillity are waves of wrinkles circling his mouth, and his blue eyes fading in colour as time moves forward. I wish him well and thank him sincerely. I head to the door and feel no need to say anything more to the nephew. I can still feel him in my palm and on my lips.

On my way to my mother’s house, I think of the good times. Now I don’t have to dig deep or shake through therapy. The sound of my mother’s voice reading to me seeps through cracks in a wall. I don’t recall any stories, just an old sense of liking the theme of gift, and the clever utilisation of one. The hero is gifted with a useful tool to aid them on their journey. The gift of knowing sits in my invisible sack and already lightens the burdens I carry.

I step into the house and head to the living room with a mind clear of judgement for the person I’m about to see. I think about kissing her on the cheek, too, and I shamefully realise I’ve never actually done it. The smell of the living room hits me first, and ironically, I now

think about the old electrician's house. But the armchair is empty, and the sofa is empty. The only people here are some soon-to-be-forgotten ancestors locked in wooden frames on the wall, and a woman who has come home to mourn her mother.

Rain was to be expected that day, as it was on any day. But instead of showers of cold water, clouds decided to cover their world with thick, misty fog. Waves exploded against the giant cliffs like cannonballs of liquid, one after another. The beach was too grey and eerie for people to be interested in going to the pier, never mind the water. A group of seagulls cried and fought over rubbish they had managed to scrape out of a half-melted bin. The loud process of distributing the catch was becoming the start of just another violent episode for the seagull community. No human being would have been able to interfere, not that they would have wanted to.

One of the seagulls broke free from the fight, having sensed the arrival of something big, perhaps an elder, or yet another group of scavengers hungry for human leftover. But what emerged out of the foggy sky was neither. The rest of the seagulls, like machines connected to the same operating board, shifted their attention from their petty fight within an instance and gazed up at what they perceived to be their maker, a unique creation of nature they only ever dreamed to witness.

The seagulls, out of instinctive respect, lined up along the road, their tiny but ferocious heads pointing up in a triumphant salute. In their language of despicable noise, they chanted:

Behold the stork!