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# Dreams of Pursuit

Magda Szabó

Katalin Róbert

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> No Spanish translation exists. (Trans. note.)

<sup>2</sup> Apparently, the eminent scientist is here alluding to the predicted attacks from the Bavarian Club and the University of Ghana, (Ed. note.)

<sup>3</sup> Richards, W. T. *Samos and the Bedrooms*. Oxford University Press, 1964, Vol. II, p. 528ff.

<sup>4</sup> Lesfilles, L. *Le Pays aux Visages Impudiques*. Presses Universitaires de France, 1966, p. 328ff. (For obvious reasons, the work does not include photographs of the sculptures.)

<sup>5</sup> We are of course referring to *Samos and the Bedrooms*, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Lesfilles, L. "Dormir ou Forniquer?" In *Revue Scientifique des Hautes Etudes Archeologiques*, Paris, No. 128, Vol. XXXVIII, pp. 215-29, 1965.

<sup>7</sup> Lesfilles, L. *Le Pays aux . . .*, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Richards, W. T. *Fornication and Lesfilles: A Wrong Way*. In *Anthropology*, Vol. XXI, p. 67ff.

*Translated by Joseph Somoza*

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MAGDA SZABÓ / HUNGARY

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### Dreams of Pursuit

#### ONE

When he got back from the hospital Mrs. Tóth from the ground floor was lurking by the gate. She pretended to be gardening, pottering about by the flower-bed, but the professor knew that she was in fact waiting for him. From the way she looked at him, came up and put her hand on his shoulder, he knew that she must have rung up the hospital and been told that Valerie had not survived the operation. Mrs. Tóth whispered something, there were tears in her eyes, they shook hands. He hoped he could now finally get into his flat, sit down and sort out his thoughts, but he was not left alone. Mrs. Tóth saw him up the stairs, and as they stopped in front of the door she

took the key from him, opened the door and went ahead into the kitchen, where the professor could hear her clattering the cups and turning on the gas. She made tea for him, staying out in the kitchen while she was doing it, and then brought it in and mercilessly waited until he drank it up. He was hardly able to swallow. Freddie merely lifted his head as they arrived, without getting up, and remained lying like a piece of rug in the same submissive pose which he had adopted that morning, indeed ever since Valerie left home. The professor looked at Freddie and thought how limited were the possibilities of communication between man and animal; there should be some means now of explaining to the dog what he had lost, but his words would mean nothing to Freddie. Valerie should talk to him, Valerie would be the only person who could tell Freddie of her own death, she could always explain everything to this animal, even the fact that she had toothache and could not take him out for a walk or had no money and felt sad. While the dog eyed him with puzzled sadness from under his lowered lids the professor thought that as soon as the old woman from below was gone he would start packing, and the first thing to disappear would be Freddie's bowl, that horrid bowl which Valerie had so often left in the room, with Freddie's rug, his vitamins, his muzzle and lead.

But just now he could not start on anything. Though at length the old woman left, she must have gone right round the block of flats telling everybody that the widower was back—for the bell began ringing every fifteen minutes and someone came along from every flat to express condolences. The professor got up, sat back again, greeted them and thanked them for their sympathy; he kept opening and shutting the door the whole afternoon. Liptar came up too, led by the tenants' representative. Liptar said nothing but just cried. The neighbors were all so touched that they failed to notice how openly bored the professor was.

It was evening by the time he was left alone with Freddie. He had not put the car in the garage; it was parked in front of the house, and now he took the little suitcase he had brought back from the hospital and packed the dog's things in it. Freddie hung his head when he put the lead on him. Since Valerie went to the hospital Freddie had only been down into the garden when it was absolutely necessary, and had not been on walks at all, so the professor expected him to come willingly, but in the end he had to be dragged. It's all instinct, he thought, and remembered how Valerie used to say that Freddie could sense everything sooner and more accurately than they. Good for you, instinct, he said to himself, very good. So, let's go, boy!

The concierge's wife was polishing the door handle. She greeted them sadly and offered to take the animal for a walk for the professor—it must be difficult to go out after a day like this. He told her to do so from tomorrow and thanked her for her kindness but assured her that he was in fact longing to move about, it was unbearable upstairs. He was glad to have found

the word “unbearable,” that was the sort of thing the bereaved usually say. He had to order Freddie into the car. At other times the dog would jump in without encouragement and sit proudly and eagerly on the seat next to Valerie’s. Now he rolled up in a ball and whimpered. All right, boy.

It started to rain. A good sixty kilometers from Budapest, just outside Redecs, he stopped the car in the middle of a wood, threw Freddie’s things out and took the collar off the dog. The animal did not want to get out and dug his heels in the seat. But the professor pushed him out of the car and immediately set off back home. By then it was pelting.

The professor managed to sneak back into his flat without seeing anyone. He rang Valerie’s doctor and thanked him for his help, then rang those few relations and friends whom they still kept in touch with, however loosely. “Yes, this morning. No, not at all, luckily, she didn’t even wake up. Yes, yes, if it had to happen it was better this way. Well, somehow or other. No, thank you, no. It’s better to get used to loneliness straight away. But it’s a sad day all round—Freddie got lost and can’t be found anywhere. I took him for a walk and the dog tore himself away, started to howl and ran off. Just as well that he did not suspect anything, yes. Just like a member of the family. Yes, I’ll do it tomorrow. In the morning paper. The dogcatcher? Him too. Let’s hope for the best.”

He was not feeling hungry, only thirsty. There was beer in the icebox so he drank a bottle. And once he was in the kitchen he tidied up there too. Valerie loved to keep things; the knick-knacks had been piling up on the shelves and in the drawers around her, she just could not bring herself to part with anything. He threw every superfluous thing in the clothes basket, and seemed to hear Valerie crying and resisting and saying: “No, please, no, they’ve all given us good service, Piroska used to cook in that little pan, my beloved Piroska, and the mortar was for Father to pound his medicine in, it’s an old porcelain mortar, a chemist’s mortar . . .” He was going through the stuff till midnight, selecting and discarding; he threw the bird food in the dustbin. When he was finished he had a bath and went to bed. It was neither worse nor better in bed than before, Valerie had slept in her own room for years. The night seemed to him much the same as any other night except it was more restful and quiet, there weren’t any of those little noises Freddie made in his sleep, and he could be sure that no one would ring the bell as there was no Valerie for people to wake up when they pleased.

## TWO

If it were me laid out in such a barbaric way, among all the wreaths, you would mourn me sincerely, feel unhappy and perhaps even pray for my soul. The thought would not even cross your mind that I had not been a good

husband, whereas I am thinking this very minute that you were not a good wife to me. Though the truth is that I wasn't a good husband to you, Valerie, because somehow you got on my nerves just like everyone else, and having trusted you so much I became even more unbending and taciturn when I found myself disappointed. You cheated me.

I married you because you reminded me of my mother, and I have always remembered her as someone who while she lived spared me every difficulty. I told you I wanted quiet in the house, there could be no listening to the radio, no noise while I work—and I am almost always working—and I also told you that only those could come whom I allow and only when I allow them. I must admit you did not thrust your family on me. I admit you never invited that stupid ill-mannered young woman who was your girlhood friend and for me you left everything that was part of your old world. But even so you cheated me, because when a new world formed around you in this house and people stretched out for you and claimed you, you did not refuse them, did not withdraw from them. You cheated me.

It is no use arguing that it was not your fault. It was all your fault. If you see a stray animal and it decides to follow you, you must leave it, or go away if it persists, even by getting into a bus or tram—but you must not bring the animal home and give it a place in the house merely because it has no owner or is ill or cold. You knew I hate untidiness and dirt and can only concentrate in a flat with absolute quiet. For a long time I was unable to work as I like in our flat because the place was full of dogs; pigeons, black-birds and tits came in to feed; anyone could ring our bell and the door would be opened and advice given. You were so good to everyone that I had to hate you for it, because you would go visiting all the people in this block and everyone could come here to see you. I felt you made friends with people who jeopardized my work: Mrs. Wein whose TV is always blaring and who never reads anything but comic strips, Liptar who can't even speak and whose intelligence isn't even on the canine level. Although they all sat down in your room I could feel their presence; as soon as a stranger entered the flat the atmosphere changed. It was no good forbidding you to open the door, you answered every time the bell rang, always saying there might be something wrong somewhere and someone might need you.

I might have needed you, but for you the *unprotected* were more important. "But they need help," was always your argument against all my objections and complaints. You just looked at me, sometimes bursting into tears, stood in front of me, fingering your apron, holding in your hands that impossible cup in which you mixed medicine for the dog or food for the birds or took meat broth down to Mrs. Tóth, always spilling a little of it in the hall in your haste. All the sick and stray animals of the neighborhood were brought to you, you were asked to translate foreign languages by those who

could not read them, people whose phones had gone wrong came here to use our phone, and everyone with a grievance came to cry on your shoulder. Sometimes the neighbors asked for money and you would give them some or you would go with them to the solicitor's office or the law courts. How stubborn you were, my God the number of times you tried to convince me that you were right and I was wrong, brought me that miserable cur in your lap, showed me its eyes, what a lot of loyalty was in them and how much intellect. You stopped Liptar on the stairs as we were coming home once and made me talk to him, forced me to say something, anything, because it would make his day to have a word with me, he would feel it such an honor to have been spoken to by such a great man . . .

If you knew who I was why did you not find me unprotected too? I asked nothing from you but quiet. Absolute quiet. You did not give me it. Now I shall punish you for this and the punishment will be that I shall forget you as if you had never been my wife, as if you had never lived. You are dead, not only for others. For me, too.

### THREE

The woman laughed and said no.

The professor laughed too, because he did not believe her.

### FOUR

It started with the pigeons and tits.

The window ledge where Valerie used to place the seeds had long been empty and immaculate, and the hook on which the hunk of fat used to hang every winter had been removed by the cleaning woman. But the pigeons still came to the window and looked in and the songbirds also flew by just as before, landed on the ledge for a minute, their tiny eyes shining in the panes.

The birds were waiting.

When he opened the window and shoed them off with his handkerchief, they just moved off to the plane tree and peeped over from there to see what he was doing. He had the feeling that the birds were not afraid of him, they just did not seem to understand what had happened nor did they realize what the white thing was in his hand and what he meant by signaling with it. As he closed the window there they were again back on the ledge looking inside and sometimes making noises—he had never noticed before what strange deep voices the pigeons had and what a strange soprano counterpoint the songbirds provided.

He had to get up from the table five or six times to clear them off and by the time he sat back his thoughts had wandered.

Winter came back, it was snowing heavily. The birds huddled among the branches, drew in their necks, puffed up their feathers. They looked unbearably miserable and the professor was especially annoyed by their stupidity, the incomprehensible stubbornness with which they just sat, sat on the tree and did not look for cover or protection. He had the feeling that they did not move from there because they were hungry. He bought some bird food with the idea that if they were fed the birds would disappear as soon as they had had enough to eat and so at least the greater part of the day would be free of them—they would not have to sit either in the tree or on the ledge gazing at him with that inexplicably strange animal stare. He swept the snow off the ledge and tried to pour the seeds out of the paper bag, but his hands were stiff and clumsy. He fetched a wine glass from the kitchen, dipped that in the seeds and spread the food with it, successfully this time, though he looked with a shudder at the dirty glass that had been meant to serve such a different purpose. The birds' eyes were fixed on him, then they began devouring the seeds, scattering them everywhere, squashing and beating each other with their beaks to get more food than the next. When the seeds were gone they all flew off at once, as if they had heard a command inaudible to the human ear, coming from God knows where, and the professor did not see any of them till the following morning.

Then Freddie appeared.

Freddie's arrival was preceded by a cacophony of loud voices. Freddie did not simply arrive, he stopped under the balcony and barked. He was borne up in a triumphant procession of neighbors who had all seen him from their windows as he got out of Mrs. Tóth's son's car. Mrs. Tóth had been visiting the country, staying with her son, who brought her back in his car through Redecs. Mrs. Tóth noticed Freddie in the yard of a house on the outskirts of Redecs; he had a chain on his neck but it was impossible not to recognize him on account of his comic pattern of black and white. The new owner handed Freddie over to Mrs. Tóth whom Freddie immediately recognized, licking her hands and face with gusto. When he was admitted into his old home he bounded joyfully up to the professor for the first time in his life and yapped out some strange message which he could not understand. It embarrassed him all the more because he could feel that Freddie was delighted to see him, just as delighted as he used to be with his mistress, and he also felt the dog had forgotten what happened on that particular night and was happy to be home with him and see him again. Behind Freddie the whole block seemed to come through the open door led by a laughing and breathless Mrs. Tóth. They sat down, looked at his books, while one woman whose name he did not even know dashed into the kitchen to see if there was anything in the fridge to give the poor animal.

When it became obvious that there was nothing at all, not even milk, three people ran out for food and three fed Freddie on the very carpet which had not been soiled by anyone for weeks.

When Liptar too appeared, the professor knew that he had lost.

The cleaning woman usually finished by midday and left after lunch, and he was always alone in the flat in the afternoons and evenings. He disconnected the bell, never answering the door for anyone although he knew if someone was standing outside from the low growling noise Freddie would make on such occasions as he stood up, padded to the door and looked back from there at the professor to await further orders. The dog was no longer afraid of him but rather pursued him with his affections, always wanted to be near him. While Valerie lived she would receive the mail, but now this was done by the concierge, who signed for it in the book and later pushed it through his letterbox. The professor in most cases forgot to see if there was anything in the box and it often happened that he missed important meetings because he had not found his invitation. The concierge thus did not prove a good solution. He decided he would open the door from now on if the bell rang; perhaps it would be someone bringing a telegram or an invitation.

Three times it was indeed the postman who called. But when he went to the door for the fourth time and opened the little window in the center he saw Liptar standing outside. They stared at each other. In the small quadrangle of the window he could only make out Liptar's eyes and a little bit of his nose and moustache. They were near to one another, he seemed to feel the other's breath.

"What can I do for you?" he asked Liptar. The other did not answer but went on staring at him and moved his lips. His heavy warm breath was puffing out his moustache. The professor shut the window and tried to get back to his work but he could not settle. The bell rang again and he went to answer it; once more Liptar was standing there looking in patiently. Then the professor grabbed his coat and fled. Liptar tried to catch up with him but was too slow. He only returned late at night, and first he peeped all round to see whether anyone was waiting for him, but the corridor was empty. He sneaked into his flat like a thief.

Liptar tried again two or three times a week, and then the tenants' representative came instead. The professor let him in. The representative looked with awe at his writing desk, littered with closely typed pages, and found it difficult to say what his mission was. When he brought in Valerie's name, so long unmentioned, Freddie lifted his head and looked at him.

"It's about Liptar, professor," he said. "Val knew how to treat the poor chap. He is missing Val. That's why he rings your bell."

The professor did not answer, he puffed at his cigarette and looked at the man. He had the feeling that what was happening to him was really



beyond comprehension. Freddie was there close to him, pushing his nose against his knee. He stroked him mechanically under the ears, as Valerie used to do.

"If you could let him in sometimes," the representative asked. "He knows full well that Val is no more, poor dear, he mourned her for ages, but this flat consoles him. He likes to be here. He is quite harmless, a good fellow. It was the war that made him like this, you see. Val knew that, she understood. He obeyed her like a child."

The professor looked at the representative and the cigarette between his fingers seemed so heavy that he could barely hold it.

"He knows that you are Val's husband, professor. He understands that. If you would not mind letting him in when he rings and sitting him down in Val's room, he does no harm, only sits and looks. And if you could manage to say a few good words to him, that will set him right. He didn't use to disturb Val more than once every three weeks or so."

The professor saw out the representative who asked to borrow one of his books. Then he stood by the window. The wine glass was on the ledge; he kept it there now. Freddie was asleep, wrapped up in some escapade; his whiskers were moving and his legs twitching. "Dreams of pursuit," the professor thought. "What's it like to dream of pursuit? Like pursuing a dream."

Later he calmed down sufficiently to do some work and to reflect. He turned over in his head how much the flat would realize if he sold it and how he could organize a move, which firm to turn to. He had nine thousand books—who would pack those? When they had moved here it was Valerie who had done the packing.

He walked past his bookshelves and imagined three porters squatting on his carpet as he handed them the books, while Liptar just stood harmlessly in the background nodding and staring, Freddie barked at every stranger and scratched himself and somehow the birds joined in too. Later he decided it was not worth it. The idea that he was long dead and Valerie still alive had only seemed unusual to begin with.

*Translated by Katalin Róbert*