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The Covered Wagon: To Paul Engle

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were as close to each other as at an accident. I felt disappointed. So he wasn't going to jump. I noticed a white overhang of snow above his head. The crowd was already so big that the cars had to stop. They were waiting in long lines. It gave me a feeling of satisfaction that they turned out to be so submissive.

The man in the window was in no hurry. He shouted out more rarely now but his movements had slowed down, were full of dignity. I got it. This was his last chance. For a moment I could see his tired old face. In just another year from now he wouldn't be able to draw such a crowd just by himself. But for the moment he was the most important one. The policeman was also watching. "What a smash that'll make! Christ!" a student behind me exclaimed. "Smash," I thought hopefully. We waited. The old man peered down. Just the way actors sometimes look at the audience in a theater through the curtains. Before the performance.

"Look out!" he yelled once more and that was the last cry of his ever to be heard on this earth by a crowd and probably also his first. He pushed forward with his hand. The snow fell soundlessly in a white cloud. We fell out in silence. The man on the ledge closed the window and disappeared for ever.

IMRE SZÁSZ / HUNGARY

The Covered Wagon

To Paul Engle

The student apartment building lay parallel to the road some distance from the town. It was twelve stories high, about six hundred feet long and housed at least two thousand people. It had been built only a few years ago; the aggressive angularity of glass and concrete was somewhat alleviated by the surrounding trees which gave the false impression of being the edge of a forest, just as papier maché and wooden façades pretend to be towns in cowboy films. One almost expected to hear the swearing of the film-hands from behind a clump of trees.

The Covered Wagon, as the building was romantically called, aimed at a new conception in student living. And indeed, with its comfortable modern

furnishings, plastic and aluminum luxuries and large metal desks, it was more a mixture of second-class hotel and institute for design than it was a student hostel. Its stillness, however, was that of a hospital. Not a sound could be heard coming from the rooms; the carpeted corridors smothered every footstep. Even that wing of the building where the foreign writers on grants were quartered was silent. Only occasionally could loud conversation be heard, when someone had bought several bottles of California wine from the only shop in town where drink was sold. At such times the literary disputes sometimes continued in the corridor after midnight—as far the next doorway at any rate. In the habits of the foreign guests you could still detect remnants of the nightly peripatetic discussions back home, though the savanna instinct of spirit and leg, like a lion in a cage, was confined here to a fifty-yard stretch of corridor. But those wine parties became less and less frequent; both the available funds and the initial big show of friendliness gradually dried up. By the end of the second week the Asians had grouped themselves loosely together, just as had the South Americans; the West Europeans had made friends, if at all, with one another, while the people from socialist countries had made friends with nobody, least of all one another. They had difficulty in making themselves understood; most of them spoke English rather poorly, and they dragged along with them in addition the voiced sounds and gutturals of their own countries. Carriers of some special linguistic disease, they seemed to withdraw into voluntary quarantine.

Thus there was normally no sound in the rooms but the sound of mechanical existence: the burr of the strip lighting and the air exhauster, the angry din of the waste disposal unit and the wail of the water pipes—almost human in its unpredictability.

Sunday evenings the corridors were even more silent than usual. The girls were not even using the washing machines and the driers, they were not sipping their Cokes on the floor of the washing room.

On one such dead Sunday evening Gábor Kéri was sitting at his typewriter in room 987 A. He had been sitting there since finishing his frankfurter and mustard supper and he hadn't been able to write a single word. He hadn't been able to write a single word for the whole month he'd been away from Hungary. He looked at his watch. Half-past nine. He drew his tremendous bulk up from the chair—which wasn't designed for his measurements—crossed the kitchen, glanced with slight distaste at the pile of unwashed dishes on the table and opened the door into room B where János Sobor the poet lived.

“Want to play cards?” he asked.

Sobor, smart as usual in a suit, was sitting at his desk with a sheet of paper in his hand. He was a few years older than Kéri and a good deal smaller.

"I've written a poem," he said. "Shall I read it to you?"

"You're shitting poems," said Kéri, enviously. This was in fact the second poem Sobor had written in the month since their arrival.

"I'm a second Goethe, I am. Want to hear it?"

"No. Let's play cards."

"Let's not. I'm sick to death of cards. We play every evening. Change your shirt, you smell."

Kéri shrugged:

"I haven't got a clean one. Why don't we go down and play the pinball machines? I'll take you on at ten cents a game."

Sobor put down the paper.

"Okay," he said after a slight pause, "If you've got plenty of money to lose."

He swept a heap of small change into his pocket and stood up:

"The teams file out for the World Cup final. Brazil up front in yellow shirts, behind them in cherry red, Hungary. Who do you want, Brazil or Hungary?"

"Brazil," said Kéri. "Wait while I grab some cash."

Jenny was coming down the corridor, the only girl in the whole place whose name they knew. She had a spotty face and thick nose, but quite a good figure. That was all they knew about her, apart from the fact that whenever they ran into her she greeted them with a shy and automatic smile.

"Hi," she said and smiled. She passed them slowly, almost hesitating, as if she wanted to ask something. She always came down the corridor with those slightly shuffling steps, as if ready to stop at any moment, like someone who finds the question marks of curiosity too heavy to carry. They'd never seen her in the company of another boy or girl—not even on campus if they happened to come across her.

Sobor looked round after her:

"Would you screw her?"

"In this war-time economy, certainly!"

"I haven't screwed anyone for a month."

"You'll have to learn English, old man. There's no sex these days without language."

They went down by elevator and wandered along to the snack-bar where the pinball machines were. The snack-bar was in darkness.

"It's shut," said Kéri dismally.

They walked across to the huge lounge which was as dead and deserted as a village football ground back home on a Monday afternoon. Only in the corner, almost in hiding, a few boys were sitting with indifference, television watching. Kéri and Sobor stopped behind them and had a look too. It was some sort of a talk show. They didn't understand a word of it.

"Come on, let's go," said Kéri after a few minutes. In the corridor he went sluggishly over to the Coke machine, put in fifteen cents and the can came crashing out. He tore it open and took a long swig.

"God, how I loathe this drink," he said.

They ambled back to the elevators. The right one happened to be the one so up they went to the ninth floor.

"Shall we play cards?" asked Kéri.

"No, I'm sick of cards. Wash your shirts."

"While you write another poem? You can't really want to write another poem?"

"A Goethe always wants to write another poem."

Kéri went over to the spring door of the garbage chute, opened it and chucked the empty Coke can in. It fell clattering down nine floors.

"It'd be nice to throw a bomb down here," he said staring into the dark hole.

Sobor laughed:

"Where are you going to find a bomb here at ten o'clock at night?"

"If I'd been a bit better at chemistry," sighed Kéri. "Apparently you can make bombs out of sugar and vinegar and . . ."

Sobor roared with laughter.

"Sure you're not thinking of French dressing, you ass? You just need a bit of oil and mustard . . ."

"I'm quite serious," said Kéri, offended. "I read somewhere that you can make bombs out of sugar and vinegar or alcohol. They threw one in the London airport."

Sobor wasn't listening.

"Hey," he said with sudden inspiration, "why don't we play elevators?"

Kéri looked at him, annoyed; he was still thinking about bombs.

"What do you mean elevators? I'm not a child."

"Listen. If you press the call button, you don't know which elevator's going to come first. You take the first guess, I'll take the next. A dime a go."

Kéri was still peevish:

"You can hear which one's going to come."

"No, you can't. Come on, we'll try it. Press the button. Okay, which one?"

"The right."

The left elevator came and spotty-faced Jenny got out of it.

"Hi," she said smiling.

"Hi. Bless your little bottom," added Sobor in Hungarian. Kéri didn't say a word. The girl walked off slowly down the corridor.

"Away we go!" said Sobor brightly. "Brazil starts."

"Right," muttered Kéri. He won.

"Now for the famous Hungarian attack," said Sobor. He lost. After he'd handed the fifth dime over to Kéri he said:

"Spend it on doctors!"

Along came Jenny again. She smiled at them. Sobor pressed the button. "Left," he said. They waited; the right elevator door opened. Jenny got in and held the door open expectantly for the two Hungarians.

"*Nem*, no," said Sobor. "No luxury cruise for us, we're working," he added in Hungarian.

Jenny let the door go, and, puzzled but still smiling, disappeared.

"She does nothing but grin," said Kéri as the elevator door closed on the spotty-faced smile. "What about my dime?"

Sobor fished a coin out of his pocket.

"Fat men like you usually have their strokes at an early age. Do me a favor and have yours right now, will you?"

Sobor had already lost four dollars by the time Jenny stepped out of the elevator again with a carton of milk in her hand. This time, as if fortified by the milk, she stopped and asked Sobor with a smile:

"What are you two up to?"

"What does she want?" asked Sobor, whose English was even worse than Kéri's.

"She wants to know what we're doing, I suppose."

Sobor smiled at the girl, went over to the elevators and pretended to press the button, pointing first to the right elevator, then to the left. "Which?" he asked, summoning up all his English knowledge. Then he pointed to the right elevator: "This." He waited a moment, took a step back. "No!" he said deeply disappointed, fished out a dime, handed it to Kéri, hastily taking it back again before Kéri could pocket it.

The girl looked bemusedly from Sobor to the two closed doors of the elevators.

"You might have learned Hungarian, sweetie," he said to her reproachfully in Hungarian. He turned to Kéri: "Would you mind if the Hungarian team signed on an American player?"

"Okay by me," Kéri shrugged his fat shoulders arrogantly. "You can sign on the whole UN for all I care."

Sobor took the girl's hand, gave her a dime, pressed the call button, and, pointing from the right elevator to the left, asked her: "Which?" Then, because she didn't reply immediately, he repeated urgently: "Which?"

The girl pointed to the left side. The left door opened.

"Hurray," shouted Sobor. He took a dime from Kéri and pressed it into her hand.

Kéri lost his turn and Jenny won hers again. Sobor put his hand on his heart and bowed in front of her. Then he kissed her hand. Slightly embarrassed, Jenny laughed; she was obviously happy to be one of the gang. Sobor, completing his antics, gave her a broad grin.

When she had won for the tenth time Sobor fell down on his knees before her with a rapture of a mediaeval knight.

"She's an angel! An angel from heaven! A goddess!"

Jenny got the message even though she didn't understand the words, and smiled at Sobor. Kéri looked at them in disgust and irritation.

Sobor jumped up, brushed off his knees and with a grandiose gesture offered Jenny his arm:

"Come, lady." Then, to Kéri in Hungarian: "I'll screw her. Where did you put the schnapps?"

"It's in the fridge." He gazed sourly after them as they paraded off down the corridor, Sobor humming the Wedding March from Lohengrin.

Kéri went over to the elevators and pressed the call button. Left, he thought to himself, but the right elevator came. He went down to the first floor, looked into the lounge where the same few boys were still stuck in front of the television, loitered there helplessly for a couple of minutes, then went back into the reception area and threw a provocative glance at the blonde girl reading at the desk. She didn't so much as raise her head from her book. He walked past her to the main entrance, opened the door, went down the steps, crossed the road and the small field and started to walk down the footpath beside the river. It was pitch dark; only the elongated and watery reflection of distant lights gave the impression of some sort of illumination. After all, I won four dollars off him, he thought. Four dollars is something. Good we stopped when we did, my luck was on the turn.

He was gradually approaching the edge of the town; the windows of the houses at the other side of the field were lit, the footpath wound between trees and bushes. I've got altogether twenty-five dollars left for this month, he thought. I shouldn't have brought my money with me. They say you shouldn't walk around in this country with cash in your pocket. Especially in deserted places like this. Two tough kids come along, hold a knife against your stomach and grab the money.

He decided that if someone attacked him and asked for his money he'd defend himself. Two hundred and forty pounds; the mere weight in itself would be an advantage. He used to tell them in the coffee house back home that he'd boxed in his youth, but it wasn't true. Still, two hundred and forty pounds, and he moves relatively easily and quickly, perhaps you can tell from his walk that there's muscle here. Those two skinny kids with their switchblades would think twice before . . .

All the same he clenched his cigarette lighter in his pocket like a knuckle-duster, and, glaring at every bush, advanced along the sandy footpath. There wasn't a soul on the river bank and, apart from the chirping of a cricket, there wasn't a sound either except distant strains of rock music coming most probably from the open windows of the Pi Beta Epsilon fraternity house.

"Thugs, where are you?" he said out loud. Then, louder, "Come on, switchbladers, here I am!" Then shouting: "Hey, Al Capone, what's keeping you? Hey . . ." he stopped, he couldn't think of a single Mafia leader's name though he'd read about them recently in a Budapest magazine. "Up the Hungarians," he yelled instead.

He stood still. Someone's bound to come with all that row, he thought, but there wasn't a movement, there wasn't a sound. He shrugged his shoulders, took out his lighter, and, lighting a cigarette, sat down on a stone at the water's edge. Here the oblique reflection of the lamps made pleats of light on the water, but even the subcutaneous play of muscles of the undercurrent was powerless to associate the texture of light with anything living.

The stone was damp and cold and he soon got up and walked back to the Covered Wagon. The girl at the reception desk was still reading.

He went up to his room, switched on the light, paused for a moment, then went into the joint kitchen and stood there, shamelessly eavesdropping. He could hear faint sounds of movement coming from the other room. On the table, beside the pile of unwashed dishes, was a carton of milk and the last of the schnapps they'd brought with them from home. They didn't leave me much, he thought. He rinsed out a glass under the tap, filled it up and emptied it in one gulp. Then he filled the glass again, sat down, lit a cigarette and slowly sipped the schnapps. He looked at the dishes. At least he could have got her to wash the dishes. In the intervals. He's got nothing to do in the intervals anyway since he can't speak English. He can't exactly carry on a conversation with her. He's got to go on doing non-stop gymnastics so she won't get bored. And he's no twenty-year-old.

The idea pleased him and he went on maliciously sipping his schnapps. Of course, it's not his turn, that's why he didn't get spotty-face to do the dishes. Okay, let him exert himself. It serves him right. He got up, opened the door of the fridge, took out a frankfurter, ate it in two bites, sat down and drained the bottle. He drank slowly and dreamily. . . . If I were home Edit would bring me a coffee, Tibi would be asleep by now, after our game of toy football. In fact he hadn't seen his son a single Sunday the whole summer. He went out in the morning, had lunch in the Hungaria and then went off to the races. After the races he played poker in the Artists' Club till midnight. Now he felt he'd played button football with his son every Sunday evening.

He finished the schnapps, got rather shakily to his feet and went back to his room. He stopped dizzily in front of the notice board on which a map of the town, a timetable, themes for short stories and diary notes were stuck through with pins like butterflies. At the upper corner of the board was the home telephone number of the professor, the dean in charge of the troupe of foreign writers, offering help in case of emergency—like the number of the police or the fire brigade.

He went out to the elevators and pressed the call button. Left, he muttered to himself. The left elevator came. Down in the reception area he put a dime into the pay phone and with a slightly shaky finger he dialed.

At the fifth ring someone lifted the receiver. "Hello," said the professor. His husky voice was even huskier now that it was dazed with sleep.

"I want children," said Kéri to the husky voice. He had to tell someone how much he was missing his son.

For a moment the professor was indignant.

"At this time of night? Who is it?" Then, as he pulled himself together, he was immediately able to diagnose the peculiar linguistic disease. "Gábor?"

Kéri, as if from a sunk submarine, bubbled into the telephone:

"Yes . . . I, Gábor. I want children."

"You've got one in Hungary."

"I want children here."

The professor's voice took on a certain animation:

"Well, adopt one. I suppose you don't expect me to make one for you?"

That was too much for Kéri. He tried to unknot the sentence. Make children. That can only be one thing. What the hell does he mean, make children?

"I not make children," he said finally. "János makes children in room. To Jenny."

A hoarse sigh broke from the receiver:

"Oh, my God!"

"God, yes, God. And children. Children of God. I want to be children of God." His eyes swam with tears.

"We all do one way or another," said the professor soothingly. Kéri didn't understand but he didn't care either.

"But is no God," he shouted passionately and, for the sake of effect, he repeated it in Hungarian too.

He put down the receiver. To be God's child when there is no God. That's great, that's East European. And he went back to his room somewhat happier.

Translated by the author with Elizabeth Szász