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Taksim

Novel

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We were the only ones with those kinds of goods. Everyone else had new stuff. Chinese garbage. It was lying on plastic sheets on the ground. The wind was blowing, covering it all with dust. Just beyond the village there was a sun-scorched plain. The Chinese knockoffs heated up in the sun and stank of plastic and glue. It was all in piles of a dozen or more pairs; whoever was interested had to look for the right size on their own. But there were no takers. The sellers stood motionless with arms crossed, looking like meditative Indians. Jackets swung on hangers. God, these people still had camp beds where they put anything that couldn't be chucked directly on the ground. Like sweaters and track suits. But we were the only ones with fancy Paris-London-New York trash from Russia; we were the kings of crap. The merry-go-round turned and there was also salami and Tokay, and religious literature in a windy tent, and pastries in glass boxes mounted on bicycle wheels, and little clay roosters, and strings of red pepper, and ice

cream, and a shooting range; but only we had black leather jackets that still bore the faint smell of hundred-dollar perfumes.

Coaches stood in the parking lot up to their axles in dust. People were sitting about in the shade, eating hard-boiled eggs. Further on there were long rows of cars and at the very end, in a separate flock, a dozen or so ancient Dacias. They were so old you couldn't tell what color they were.

"Maramureș," he said. "See the registration?"

The plate bore the letters SM.

"Satu Mare. I was there a couple of times. There's nothing there. You're through the town before you know it, and then you have to watch out for donkeys and sheep."

"What were you doing there?"

"Nothing. Passing through."

We set up at the very end, though actually it was sort of in between. Not amongst the stalls, but not yet out in open ground; we were on the parking lot beyond the poor cousins of Renaults. The last one in the row had a flat on one of its front wheels. We took a few boards from the trunk, knocked together a counter, then we put the cases with the small stuff on the counter and next to it a single coat stand with five soft black leather jackets. The wind whipped up the dust and everyone was rubbing their eyes. We'd driven over sixty miles to sell garbage. No one even gave us a glance. The sound of monks singing came from somewhere in the distance. Everyone had gathered: Catholics, Uniates, Orthodox, Calvinists. Once a year they'd travel here by car or walk across the fields from the nearby villages; they'd congregate from the Carpathian mountains and the Great Hungarian Plain. In their wake came all the vultures with their stalls, and us too.

So then no one asked us any questions. We smoked, and the wind swept away burning strips of cigarette paper. It was then that they appeared. They came toward us

between the stalls and the tents. They were walking slowly down the dusty path, looking from side to side. First the men, then behind them the women. The guys were dressed all in black. They had silver chains on their chests, cowboy boots with silver fittings, and stiff black hats with broad rims. Four guys and five women. They had dark faces and sleepy eyes with heavy lids. In fact they weren't really looking to the sides, but still they saw everything—watchfulness circulated in their veins, mixed half and half with their blood. They moved as if in a slow-motion film, as if they were saving energy. The dust of the Great Plain settled on their boots. The women's high-heeled patent leather shoes had completely lost their shine. They sank into the dirt. But they—black-haired, erect, indifferent—were from a different world. They walked as if in a vigilant dream.

They bought everything. All the black leather. They lifted it up and spread it out; they asked the women and the women nodded. "*Zece mii forint prea unu*," Władek said, and they named their price and a commotion began, because their sleepiness instantly melted away and the numbers brought them back to reality. The men took out wads of banknotes, the women approached closer, felt the goods, grimaced with disgust and shook their heads. "*Zece mii*," "*Nu zece mii*," "Why not *zece mii* for fuck's sake! They're as good as new. They won't see anything this good in that Draculaland of theirs. Where we're from, one of these would fetch at least *douăzeci mii*! You follow me, brothers and sisters?" He started to take the jackets back from them; he tugged them out of their hands and piled them up, giving them to understand they should just piss off. They pulled the leathers back; they waved blue thousand-forint notes and stacked them together, spat on them, slapped their hands on them; it looked as though a fight was about to start. They yelled at each other in two or three languages and named sums I couldn't guess at; then in the end they seemed to run out of steam, because they fell silent and drooped like after a real fight. Władek tossed his black armful down on the counter, and one of the men,

evidently the leader, collected the cash from the others and placed a pile of money next to the leathers. Władek counted it like a shot, made a resigned face and said: “*Bine*. I hope they bring you health. Don’t take them off even in bed.” He shook hands with the leader and the others resumed their sleepiness. They looked at us from a distance, from beneath their heavy eyelids, from another world, and slowly walked away.

And he shook his head and poured himself a shot, and we started to pack up. They’d left us forty-two thousand in blue banknotes. We put away the boxes with the small goods and dismantled the counter. The people selling Chinese trash stood there without moving.

We closed the rear door and we were ready.

“Time was, I’d have spent the lot on black shiny blouses with gold threads, and I’d have driven home via Záhony and Czop.”

“Through Ukraine?”

“Yeah. Well, through the Soviet Union, this side of the mountains. Dear God! The eighties. I’m telling you, those blouses. . . . You’d deliberately drive through the middle of nowhere, I don’t know, Strumikivki or Dubrynychy or Velkiy Berezniy or something, through the mountains, through the villages along both the borders, because it was easier there, there was less police, the only guard posts and barriers were in Uzhok on either side of the pass. Their border guards looked down on Poland from above, you could see for sixty miles on a good day. They were bored up there and they weren’t as greedy as other cops, because all that solitude and beautiful nature had a good influence. You needed papers and permits and what have you, but they’d let us through. For a blouse or two, you know. That whole area went nuts back in those days. You’d pull up in Rozluch and you wouldn’t even have to take the stuff out and show it to them; so long as the goods were in view through the window a woman would come along, then another, older

ones, younger ones, and pretty soon the entire female population of Rozluch would be standing round the car. It was cheap stuff, real crap, from India or somewhere; after you'd washed it a couple of times you could barely use it to blow your nose. But gold thread, gold thread on the collective farm. . . You'd buy them in Hungary by the sackload, then right across the border you could sell them for five, seven times as much. That's how it was. . . We did two or three runs, I forget exactly, without a hitch. I think it was in eighty-eight. . .”

His speech slowed as if his own memory was pulling him backwards. He gazed at the dusty square, at the stalls, at the cars sinking into the dirt, but I don't think he saw it all. The wind was blowing from over the plain, stronger and stronger. The sound of bells drifted from the village. The monks had fallen silent. The red sun was dropping toward the west. The shadows were already long and black. I could smell wood smoke and manure.

Then I saw her. She was walking along, huge and black, leading her young. The other people had spotted her too; they froze, then began to move to the side. I'd never see one that big. She was trotting along with her snout to the ground, nosing about. From time to time she paused, raised her head and smelled the wind like a hunting dog. She was leading six piglets. They ran about in every direction, mobile and fat, like balls of black mercury. Their snouts touched the ground like their mother's. They jogged onto the square with the cheap Chinese goods. The old one stayed on the main aisle between the stalls. The piglets, which were no bigger than medium-sized dogs, behaved like children. They were testing to see how much they could get away with. The mother was squealing, and it seemed they had her permission to go wherever they wanted so long as they could still hear her. They sniffed at the piles of knockoff clothing, pressing their noses among the heaps of jeans and jackets. They snorted and squeaked in their high children's voices.

The people selling the Chinese clothing stood without moving and watched ever more closely. There were three men and one woman. Vietnamese more likely than Chinese. Who can tell them apart. But there was a time I had a lot of dealings with both of them, and the Vietnamese had more delicate faces. In any case they looked more like white people than the Chinese did. Though I could be wrong. They stood there and watched. They'd come west, to the edge of the Great Hungarian Plain, from the East, just like the Hungarians themselves a thousand years ago. The Hungarians had needed grass for their horses; these folk were looking for new markets for mass-produced clothes made in China. One of the piglets grabbed a jacket from the pile in its teeth and dragged it along the ground. Its brother or sister immediately joined in the game. From thirty yards away I heard the sound of ripping material. At that point one of the traders set off toward the animals, reached them and started doling out kicks. He was wearing a dark blue jacket like the one being mistreated, jeans, and white sports shoes. The young piglets began a piggy lament. Their sharp high-pitched squeals rose over the square. At this moment the mother moved into action. I saw her out of the corner of my eye. She pushed a couple of onlookers out of the way and gathered speed like a small warmed-up machine. As she drew closer to her target her strides got longer and longer. Finally she leapt into the air and knocked the Vietnamese guy off his feet. The two of them fell to the ground several feet away. The man was completely immobilized beneath the sow's huge black body. He disappeared from view. All I could see were his white Chinese shoes. They kicked once or twice, then the heels dug into the dirt and stopped moving. The mother pig had stomped him into the ground and ripped his throat open. Now it was lapping at the place and making smacking noises. The piglets ran up and stood in a tight circle. At this point not even the sports shoes could be seen. We were in a second ring of gawkers, which was gradually closing in. The animals were eating noisily with soft, warm, whimpering

sounds, and all of a sudden the woman began howling in a voice like no one there had ever heard before. She moved forward with her fists pressed to her ears and approached the family of pigs as her voice rose higher and higher, the kind of voice they say can break glass.

The mother pig raised her soiled snout. The woman was still walking and howling. The animal moved a couple of steps away from the man and started to observe her, then took a step back and tensed, evidently unafraid of anything. We were all breathless from fear. We wanted the pig to stop looking about and go back to what it had begun. Twenty or thirty men and almost as many women were thinking: Keep eating the slant-eyes and leave us alone.

But the pig couldn't make up its mind. It looked at the diminutive woman with her fists at her temples and stepped back as if preparing for another attack. Finally it set off and started to gather speed like an illustration of some law of kinetics. We were all standing fifteen yards away. And then there came a whistle. Long and piercing, as if someone were pulling a thread between your ears. The sow dug its trotters into the dirt and came to a stop. The whistle had come from the leader, the guy Władek had shaken hands with. The animal moved its head, looked at the woman once again, then turned round and headed back, headed for where it had come from.

The man who'd whistled was standing not far off in his black suit and his hat. He watched the pig family go. He shaded his eyes with his hand and looked across the plain into the sun.

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We didn't say a word. I drove as fast as I could. We'd left right away. We were afraid of cops. We didn't want to get involved in any questioning. I kept the left wheel on the center line. You could have said we were running away. Some of them were probably still standing there staring into the dark. In Nyíregyháza we took a wrong turn, but he muttered that there was no point in backtracking, we could get back this way too, it would just take a bit longer. The road narrowed. Almost all the signposts began with "Tisza"—Tisza this, tisza that. Muggy air came in through the open window. It smelled of marsh. You could tell there was a river. We crossed a bridge. We came into Tokay, but we bypassed the downtown. Everywhere they were black-painted barrels with billboards and signs: Bor, wine, Wein, vin, wino and so on, even in Japanese and Arabic—why not. People were sitting in gardens under umbrellas. I could see them lifting their glasses. Thirty-five miles away a black pig had ripped open a man's throat, and they were sitting drinking white wine. Coaches and automobiles lined the roadsides. We drove onto a viaduct. The highway buzzed down below. But it all ended right away. The buzz, and the movement, and the lights. The road became bumpy. The sky was still a shade lighter than the night, and it formed a backdrop for the outline of the hills. We passed a village. A few lights showed up yellow in the gloom and were extinguished. I turned on the full beams. The road climbed in gentle bends through woods. I shifted into third and glanced at the temperature gauge.

"We didn't come this way," I said.

"No. But it makes no difference," he answered. "Twelve miles through the mountains, and then it'll be on the flat and we'll almost be in Slovakia."

He lit a cigarette and reached into the glove compartment. We'd reached some hairpin bends and I had to drop into second. A campfire was burning down at the side of the road.

“Woodcutters, probably,” he said. He drank his shot, screwed the cap back on the bottle and put it away. “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“Like what?”

“A pig killing a man. It was a Mangalitsa.”

“A what?” I asked, because I wasn’t sure.

“A Mangalitsa. The pig. It’s a kind of breed. They have a thick layer of lard. They’re often left free to feed on their own. They wander wherever they want, whole herds of them together. There was a time I lived in the country in Hungary. They’d come right up to the window, poking around looking for food, but they never hurt anyone. They had big ears. Like elephants.”

“What were you trading in in the countryside in Hungary?” I asked.

“Nothing. I was just living there. I’d been selling Austrian coffee in Romania. I’ll tell you one of these days. I can’t stop thinking about that sow. I’m not gonna be able to sleep.”

We got back soon before midnight. We’d forgotten about the candies. He took out the plastic bag, looked at it in the beam of the flashlight and shook his head. I watched him as he walked with a slight hunch down the deserted sidewalk. He was going to meet his own destiny in the form of a sleepless night on the fifth floor.

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Soon snow’s going to fall and everything’ll turn blacker. The road, the asphalt, the trees, and the fringes of the town with their dog kennels and their scrap heaps. The air smells of cold and coal smoke. Snow’s going to fall, tomorrow or the next day. It’ll fall in the night. In the morning the place’ll be quiet, as if something had changed or was about

to start again from the beginning. Snow on branches, on balustrades, on fences. Angular white patches of roof and smoke rising from chimneys. In the quiet of early morning there'll be the sound of shovels on sidewalks. At those times I lie in bed and listen. Through the window I can see the wild apple tree covered with white fluff. It all lasts for a while. Then the snow melts and falls and a racket can be heard from the bridge.

But that'll not be for a few days. Right now it's gray, and the temperature is around freezing.

I was in town today. I'd made a bird feeder and I went to get sunflower seed. You can buy it at the pet store. It's a bizarre place. You take three steps and instead of the cold drab street you have an imitation version of the tropics with their heat and their stench. Parrots screech in cages. Exotic fish swim back and forth in greenish aquariums. The place is shrouded in gloom. The customers are far from exotic. They speak more softly than usual, as if the subtropical atmosphere intimidated them. Old women buy food for parrots and cats, minors look for accessories for aquariums. Fish are handed over in plastic bags filled with water. From time to time someone buys flea treatment, or sawdust for a hamster, or a dog collar. But they're all somehow lonely and quiet. They have still, sad faces and it feels a bit like a doctor's waiting room, or the hospital when a relative is dying.

I bought the sunflower seed and left. It occurred to me that the store has existed in the same place ever since I can remember. One day I arrived and it was already there. Everything else was in change. Something new was forever appearing, only to vanish again soon after. Stores, restaurants, photo labs would pop up then disappear without a trace. The one would be transformed into the other, but an air of failure hung over the whole lot. They were selling pants in the salad bar now. The salad bar had existed maybe a month, and I never saw a single soul in there. Two young assistants would sit staring

out the window, but no one was coming and no one ever came, so they closed as quickly as they'd opened. Now there were pants there, and a young blonde was staring through the same window. She was watching the narrow street that no one was walking down. New places materialized but they were unneeded. Sometimes I think about the people who start all those things. They get up in the morning, they have courage and energy, and then they watch as the thing they've made falls apart. Then afterwards they begin all over again. As though they were fools, or heroes. In any case they were indestructible. I admired them. They opened cafes and stared at the unoccupied tables. They opened stores, came to them at dawn and gazed at the emptiness. The only thing that lasted was this repository of sawdust, cat food, rubber bones, and flea powder.

I didn't feel like going back home so I took a roundabout route through town. From time to time someone said hello. I nodded back and walked on. I had nothing to say. It was noon, but it felt like dusk. A perpetual November hung over the rooftops. I walked past the last houses. At the bottom of a small embankment there was a muddy square. Traveling merchants stopped here. Once a year the Transylvania Circus would set up its tents, and twice a year there was a Slovak funfair. People said it had always been that way. As far back as they could remember. Outsiders had always camped on that scrap of no man's land. In early fall Bessarabian trucks would pull up loaded with watermelons. The sellers had archaic spring-operated scales that they hung from the only tree growing on the square. They sold some of their goods and drove on northwards and eastwards. I remember Ukrainians selling scrap iron, tools, sandpaper, plastic pistols. They also had pure alcohol. They'd bring it in canisters, dilute it with water from the river, and bottle it. This river vodka was cheaper than the cheapest wine. One day one of them was shot. He'd been dealing in carpets, cut glass, and young girls. I saw his car. It was hard to tell what make it was because it was covered in carpets and cut glass. A Merc

maybe, or maybe one of the old Volgas. Someone came up to him from behind, put a gun to his head and fired. That was what people said. They heard the ping of the ricochet, because the bullet went through and through. They never caught anyone. Everyone saw the death, but no one saw the killer. The police may not even have looked for him. After all, it was just one Russki killing another—that was what the people at the market ground said.

Romanians brought halva. They laid it out on newspaper, in two-pound blocks wrapped in greasy paper. They also had sweetish Balkan brandy in brown pint-size bottles. And nothing else. They stood there, solitary, swarthy, melancholy. They may have been Gypsies. Actually they probably were. I saw them a few times till in the end they went away just as they'd come—silently and without a trace. Afterwards I missed them. I myself was a stray just like them.

I looked down on the square from the embankment. On the other side, far off, up on the hillside there was a neighborhood of gray five-story apartment blocks. That was where he lived. Despite the distance and the poor light I could make out his window. I imagined him standing on the balcony, smoking and gazing at the neon lights of the funfair. It came in the fall and the spring. A handful of caravans would form a semi-circle, the middle occupied with the rides. A big wheel, a merry-go-round, a toy railway, an electric swing in the shape of a large boat, the immortal bumper cars, and that was it. During the day it looked like a bombed-out factory or an immense broken patio umbrella. At dusk the lights were turned on and the tangle of rusting pipes and rods and metal sheeting turned into a colorful mirage. Kids came, tipping their heads back to follow the fiery circles made by the big wheel. Shaven-headed toughs came and didn't know how to behave amid the uncommon scenery, so they stomped around in the mud and cursed in loud voices just in case. But they stuck together. The Slovak hands operating the

machinery looked like mariners who'd sailed the globe many a time and were no longer afraid of a thing. They had tattooed arms and expressionless faces. They turned on the merry-go-round for two or three giggling teens, smoked, and stared into space. A ride lasted about half a cigarette. There were three of them—the biggest one, the middle one, and the small one. They wore track suit pants and tee shirts. Władek knew them. He said they were brothers. He would walk across the square and say hello to each one. They'd each exchange a few words with him: *ahoj*, how's it going, it's OK, *maj se dobre*, that was all. From time to time he'd sell them cheap cigarettes from across the Ukrainian border, so they'd have something to smoke during their stops, while they were waiting for their underage clientele to gather.

He came to see Eva.

Eva sold tokens for the rides out of a cramped yellow hut. Sitting there in the rectangular ticket window, she looked like a beautiful naive painting. She looked a little like a saint, a sleepy saint, a saint who'd just woken up a moment before. I couldn't tell how old she was, and I never asked him. He may not have known himself. Twenty-five? Thirty? Thirty-five? At the time I don't think it even occurred to me to wonder. Her face, her figure made questions of that sort irrelevant, because her life went on as it were a little outside of reality, a little removed from the everyday. When she spotted him she'd smile from a distance and instinctively straighten her long dark hair. If there wasn't a line—and there never was—they could talk, and they'd always try to. But her shyness, her sensitivity, and precisely her sleepiness meant that the conversation kept flagging; she'd fall silent, and they'd end up just smiling at one another, separated by the idiotic ticket window with its narrow counter that he'd try to rest his elbow on, but it was too low, so he'd stand there in a ridiculous half-crouching position. Her name was Eva and she wore tight colorful sweaters. I'd bet my right arm she got them in cheap clothing-by-

the-pound stores. Green, yellow, red, turquoise—all garish colors, with stretched sleeves and threadbare.

One day he just said: “I want to show you someone. I mean, I want you to meet someone,” he corrected himself a moment later.

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The funfair would stay for two weeks or so. In the spring it would continue north, then in the early fall or even late summer would return south. They’d cross Slovakia and spend the last warm days in Erdőhat or on the border between Maramureş and Szatmár. People in those parts didn’t have much entertainment or much money. To pay for a ride on the merry-go-round or for a trip skywards on the big wheel they’d bring eggs, smoked lard, salted cheeses, and slivovitz. Everything would end with the arrival of the first rains. The brothers would hitch the caravans and trailers to big red Zetor tractors and head for their wintering grounds.

Their brief presence in the town had something of a sad carnival about it. The sheen, the sham splendor, the fake opulence would light up the black sky over the muddy square. In the evening it was the brightest place in town. Grownups came there too. They stood at the edge of the darkness and watched. The town was turning into a specter, the life slowly draining from it, while here, on its outskirts, a shameless fata morgana had appeared all of a sudden, creating meaning out of what was impermanent, illusory, and lifeless. They may not even have wanted to swing and rock and spin on the rides, but they were oppressed by the notion that at any moment everything they saw could be dismantled and packed up and could depart for God knows where, leaving them the mud-filled square as a memento and a consolation.

We stopped trading when they came. We took a break. At least that way we had no losses. I'd tinker with the van. I'd look for rusty spots, scrape them off, clean them, fill them in, then polish them and spray them more or less white. If I'd left the thing on the street with the door unlocked and the keys in the ignition it'd probably have stood there till the day of judgment. The tires were the biggest problem. You could see the canvas lining from under the rubber. I was afraid of the cops. In the town and round about he knew them all so we were more or less OK. You'd make that slow, weary gesture of greeting and be on your way. He knew them, that was all, just like he knew the town, of which he was a part. But a few miles further and it was no quarter.

I stared across the river at the gas station with its dozens of used cars, and I thought about used tires. They were all over the place in the outskirts and along the roads leading out of town. The Visegrad Co. had a chain. Heaps of tires lay on the ground in chain-link fence enclosures. The salesmen worked out of old caravans. In the winter they kept warm with gas heaters. In summer they'd put their chairs outdoors because the heat inside was unbearable. They watched the passing cars and waited. They'd look in turn at the main road and at their little portable television sets. Some of them were lucky enough to have a tree in their wire enclosure. They were able to sit in the shade. He knew them too. We'd get a totally treadless set in exchange for a bottle. I had to put them on on my own. Sometimes it would take me the whole day. We'd do a thousand, fifteen hundred miles on them and we'd have to throw them away. Actually they were pretty much useless from the get-go, but we'd pretend that we were trying, that we weren't giving in.

Once a year big trucks would arrive, load up the worst crap and take it away somewhere to make room for new shipments of trash. Maybe they took it to Russia, maybe Africa. Some of it for sure ended up being dumped at night on the waste grounds

along the border. Afterwards someone would set fire to it and from the hills above the town you could see columns of black smoke.