

Viktória Lugosi
KAZINCZY STREET

ALÍZ KLEIN, NÉE KUGELMANN, looked out of the window and liked what she saw. The boy must have been about nineteen, in thumping broad-sewn black boots, black trousers and t-shirt, a studded belt, and chains dangling at his sides. He was late again, but had arrived at last, and when you're seventy-nine, life's smallest blessings are enough to make you happy. And Alíz Kugelmann was often happy. She did not want to appear like those friends of hers she had left, who had turned into grouchy old women or who had shut themselves away from everything that might possibly have put them off feeling sorry for themselves. It didn't matter which way Alíz looked. Sári had gloom written all over her: the bitterness that kept her going ran along her wrinkles like rainwater along barren ground. Magdi, meanwhile, would in the mornings put on the "I am so wretched, I need help" expression on her face instead of powder: there was no way it could be wiped off before bedtime, and if anyone showed compassion for her or helped her, this only served to upset her equilibrium.

The boy stomped and slid at the same time, and from the rattling of his chains it was possible to tell where on the stairs he was. 'You can't exactly sneak around in that kit,' he had said to her eight months before when he came for the first time. The stairwell was dark, the plaster had peeled off back to the bricks, and it was only the hope of the sun peeking out that took him to the third floor, and the fact that he had no choice. Time had systematically packed layers of grey dirt on the dainty curves of the banister; dead flies had got stuck to the greasy dust building up in the bends.

The boy wiped his feet, and smiled: they had a past together in this shoe-wiping, just as they did in tea-drinking. The first time he had not even known where to begin with the porcelain cup, almost biting its lip, but he looked at the hand-painted red dragon with respect. He downed the tea in one, but only sipped at the beer he was given when his work was over. By then he had pocketed his money, and sat there calmly, playing for time.

When, that first time, the bell on the shop door had made the boy lift his head up from his work, and he had spotted the old lady making her way inside, who had stated, with no further ado, that she would like him to come to her apartment once a month, he thought she was crazy. She had some stupid little hat wobbling atop her head, every bit the small-sized Mary Poppins, she muttered something about paying for it, and that Petra, one of her students, had recommended him. Petra was hot, nice arse, he remembered her, she'd once been all over him for a good two hours, you don't forget that kind of thing.

He'd thought the old bird a complete loony anyway, and that she must just take him for an idiot. But she turned up again and again, as if obsessed about this stuff, weeks passed, and finally, on a grim afternoon, when no one came through his door at all, and Jozsó had travelled down to see Diósgyőr playing at home, he shut up shop and went over to the old girl in Kazinczy street. She was a nutcase all right, but she paid. She would tell him stories, really good ones, he liked that a lot. The clients he could stand the least were the quiet, muttering ones, who thought that for their fee they were getting the live Willy show thrown in, to boot.

The old girl was Jewish, but she was quite all right. She didn't mention this wartime whingeing stuff, she didn't give a shit about the past, she said there's no God, because if there were one, he wouldn't have let all those Jews be killed,

and if there is one after all, and he did let this happen, then she really couldn't give a stuff about a God like that. And that thanks very much, but she'd rather not be one of the chosen people.

Once he tried to get her to tell him about the ghetto and the concentration camp, but she wouldn't talk about either, she said she didn't think about these things, that she was over it all, and she wasn't going to be anyone's crying Jew-woman. There were so many of them at the time of the claims for compensation, there was no need for her, too; she hadn't made any claims, no one was buying her silence for a miserable thirty thousand forints. They could stuff themselves!

She had balls. Way to go.

'I've had cakes brought from the Gerbeaud,' she said, swaying slightly as she came out of the kitchen, a tray with plates clinking against each other and a little parcel in her hands. The boy swallowed, but his delight only lasted until she put the cakes down. A decidedly crinkled Gerbeaud wrapping, much used, was tied up with a ribbon in the Hungarian national colours, the home-made bow dangling limply on the side of the package.

She deliberately unwrapped it on the table, though you had to be blind not to see that she had folded the paper umpteenth times, and what she placed on the two porcelain plates bore an uncanny resemblance to the cheap cakes they had in the supermarket. She took a bite, closed his eyes, waited, motionless, for the cream to melt in his mouth, and, like a wine expert after the first sip, only commented afterwards. 'No way out of it, the Gerbeaud's still the old Gerbeaud.' Her drooping eyelids reminded the boy of a densely-lined page from a notebook.

Alíz Kugelmann liked to watch as the boy, once he had had his tea and cake, would take out his tools. He had fine hands and shy eyes: with her forty years' experience as a

teacher there was no deceiving her with all this black get-up, however wild it was supposed to be. His t-shirts hung off his body as if off some orphan; they had never so much as seen an iron, but his talents shone through the cheap cotton. This boy was open-minded, and this was as rare as a white crow. Most of them pulled down the shutters and let nothing in or out, but for this boy three meetings were enough for him to ask questions of his own.

She made it clear from the outset that he wasn't going to get anything about 1944. If he wanted the past, he could have it, but she would choose the period. She tried the ancient Hungarians, Attila, Saint Stephen, made little difference. The boy listened to her honourably, but she knew this kind of listening well, that consistent whimpering taking of breath which was the chaperone of boredom.

It was the house itself that inspired the story that was first to disturb his indifference. They took tea in the old German armchairs by the little table, but the boy liked to sip his beer by the window. She let him be. He sat on the window-sill phlegmatically, but sat up when she told him that the house across the street was once a playing card factory. Her husband had been proud to live in such a well-known place, and this was why he had read up on József Schneider, the inventor of the Hungarian playing cards. She had had enough of Kazinczy Street reminding everyone of the wartime ghetto, she didn't want to be reminded how many people lived in each room, who was rehoused here, and which corner of the room was assigned to her, to her mother, and to her four brothers. Actually hers was where the commode with the silver candlestick stands. All right, silver-plated, but you can't tell.

The boy became a complete card freak. When he heard that it was here across the street that the deck of Hungarian playing cards was first made in 1835, that behind those little windows

three assistants and three servants were running around, he wanted to know everything. He wanted to know what a workshop can have looked like back then. For two weeks this took her to the library, even though in this heat her shoes would be too tight for her swelling feet, and she could only use these orthopaedic ones on account of her hammer-toes, and what's more her heart wasn't up to much, wasn't pumping the water out, she nevertheless trudged along there in case she found something.

She told him that only a few years had passed since they had got over the plague. Behind the little windows where the house opposite now stood, the assistants were bent over the cardboard sheets, and were painting with some sticky kind of carbon-like ink. At the front, they were selling hand-stitched slips in the lingerie shop, while on the other side they were measuring out milk with long-handled ladles. Butter and cream emitted their fragrances while the silence was at most broken by the cooing of the pigeons they bred under the roof. It was a quiet neck of the woods; it would be a generation before the peaceful sound of horses' hooves would in November 1887 be replaced by the rattle of the tram between Nyugati station and Király utca.

He said nothing of himself, but he questioned her no end. Why shouldn't she tell him that her grandfather was born in Kazinczy Street? That in the Grand Café Kohn she would get ice-cream for four krajcars, and that one evening she was beaten for running off to see the artistes in the Three Steps, Löffelmann's café diagonally across the street, from right up close.

What she liked best was that he paid attention. His hand moved about, he was concentrating, though the task, unlike his other commissions, was a routine, not artistic, one. This inquisitive attention became so valuable that she wouldn't have given up a single moment of it for the knowing look of her girl-

friends... For they are just waiting for the moment when they can interrupt: "Guess what, me too..."

She was sorry it was over for that day. But perhaps this is just what made these once-a-month meetings so valuable. Like a forbidden love, one knows from the first minute that it will come to an end. She knew when this would be, and had only to make use of the solace she would usually offer to her girlfriends: you shouldn't cry about it being over, but be happy how long it lasted.

She knew the boy inside-out by now. She kept a story in reserve for the last occasion, one that was easy to imagine, and it was not without effect. His rubber-gloved hand stopped in mid-air, he looked up, his mouth open wide, so shocked was he to hear that Budapest had only been a hair's breadth away from ending up like Venice. She told him how Ferenc Reitter had planned for the Danube to flow into the Great Ring. And that this only came to nothing because politicians were just as retarded as they are today, they didn't think about the future, either, only about themselves. The finance minister punctiliously calculated that the plan would throw the state purse 280 thousand forints into the red, and they scrapped it immediately.

The boy worked diligently; she was happy with him. He made eight visits before it was finished. He gazed at his work, her arm, in triumph. "They can stuff themselves," she told him, clenching her fist. "They can all stuff themselves!" They laughed, and could hardly stop.

It sounded stupid, the boy thought, but he was sorry to be finished, as the door to the long and dark entrance hall closed behind him. It crossed his mind to do Alíz's other arm, too. For free. Just the cost of the materials. Not even that. She was really cool. Told really good stories. The things she told were like a comic strip. Didn't matter whether she was telling of playing card makers or coffee houses, she told a story as if it

were a film. She was a teacher, but not a loser like his teachers had been. Instead she was cool, really cool. She had taught him something, no doubt about that.

If she so much wanted him to fall for this Gerbeaud story, why not play along, let her be happy. Didn't matter either way: *ganz egal*. He even watched her stupid budgie as she let it fly about, let it land on his shoulder. Once it flew up above their heads and shat in a broad arc on the leather case holding his tools, yes, then he lost control, but as she reached out anxiously and, just as children pick things out of their nose, wiped away the droppings with her index finger on the carpet – dead cert it was Persian – just to make sure his stuff wasn't dirty, well, he couldn't help but laugh. Then she wiped her shit-ridden finger in the cloth napkin. First he thought it was a kitchen cloth, but it was too good for that, while too small to be a tablecloth. It transpired it was a napkin that was ironed after each meal. Sometimes he would get it dirty on purpose, but next time he would get a clean one again. Good old Alíz would never rip him off.

He was walking round the big bend at the other end of Kazinczy utca by the time he came to his senses: charity doesn't buy you a thing at the supermarket, and it's a time-waster, too. With the time it would take to tattoo this many numbers again, he could imprint dragons and butterflies on paying customers. They were all fucking normal, and even if they don't all know what tattoos they want, at least they know what they want from life. Alíz no longer wanted anything, but knew fucking well what she wanted on her arm, and she got it. It wasn't an everyday job, but at the end of the day it wasn't any more stupid for someone to want fifty six-digit numbers tattooed on their lower arm than some Chinese character. The total of fifty numbers made the whole thing like something out of the Matrix, nothing to be ashamed of.

He was already passing the synagogue, and he sensed that he couldn't go all the way down Kazinczy utca in peace until he went to visit her one last time. Whenever he thought back to this job, he didn't like the fact that that one row of digits in the middle of her lower arm was so faint, so much lighter than the others. Didn't fit. Alajos Klein's wife, born Alíz Kugelmann. He would retouch it for her. And they could stuff themselves. They could all stuff themselves.

(Translated by David Robert Evans)