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Journey by Moonlight

Part One

THE HONEYMOON

I'm factious, yet in general I obey;
What else? I'd take my pledges back again;
Made welcome, and by all men turned away.

—FRANÇOIS VILLON

1

THERE HAD BEEN NO TROUBLE at all on the train. It began in the back alleys of Venice.

Taking the water taxi from the train station, Mihály* noticed the alleyways opening to the right and left as soon as they left the Grand Canal to take a short cut. He didn't yet bother with them, however, because at first he was completely taken by how Venetian Venice was: the water between the houses; the gondolas; the lagoon; and the city's brick-red-and-pink sheen. For Mihály was now seeing Italy for the first time – at the age of thirty-six, on his honeymoon.

He had covered the map in the course of his long-extended years of wandering. He'd spent years in England and France, but he had always avoided Italy, sensing that the time was not yet ripe: he wasn't prepared for it. He assigned Italy, along with siring offspring, to the category of grown-up matters, and in secret he even feared it: he feared it the way he shied away from strong sunlight, the scent of flowers and extremely pretty women.

If he hadn't got married and if his intention hadn't been to begin his wedded life with the standard Italian honeymoon, he might have postponed the Italian journey until his death. Even now, he had come to Italy not on a visit but on a honeymoon, which is a different matter altogether. He could come now, in any case, because he was married now. By this point, so he thought, the danger that Italy represented could no longer threaten him.

The first few days passed peacefully amid honeymoon pleasures and leisurely sightseeing that didn't tax the couple overmuch. As befitting highly intelligent people possessed of enormous self-awareness,

Mihály and Erzszi* strove to find the proper middle way between snobbery and anti-snobbery. They didn't exhaust themselves attempting to accomplish everything Baedeker demanded, but even less did they seek to belong to those who return home and boast: "The museums... well, of course we didn't visit any museums!" – and then look smugly at each other.

One night they went to the theatre; and when they returned to the hotel lobby afterwards, Mihály felt that he'd very gladly have something more to drink. He didn't know what, exactly – perhaps what he most longed for was some sweet wine; and the unusual, classical flavour of Samos wine came to mind, and how he'd often spent time tasting it in a small wine shop in Paris, at number 7, Rue des Petits-Champs; and then it occurred to him that Venice is more or less Greece anyway, and assuredly one could obtain Samos wine, or maybe Mavrodaphne, because he was not yet au fait with Italian wines. He asked Erzszi to go up to their room alone; he'd come along soon, but he just wanted to have a drink – "Really, just one glass," he said with affected seriousness – for Erzszi urged him towards moderation with an identical affectation of gravity, as befitting a young lady.

Leaving behind the Grand Canal, upon whose banks their hotel stood, he arrived in the streets around the Frezzeria,* where many Venetians still promenaded at this time of night, with that unusual, ant-like behaviour typical of this city's residents. People walk only along certain paths here, like ants setting out on journeys across the garden path; the other streets remain empty. Mihály, too, stuck to the ant highways, thinking that surely the bars and *fiaschetterie** would open off the bustling streets and not in the uncertain shadows of the empty ones. And indeed he found many places selling drinks, but somehow, not one of them was what he was seeking. Each had some flaw. The customers would be too elegant in one and too shabby in another, and he couldn't associate the beverage he sought with either one: somehow, the drink he had in mind had a more clandestine

taste. Slowly he sensed that this drink would, without doubt, be sold at precisely one place in Venice, and that he must find that spot by instinct alone. That's how he ended up in the back alleys.

Impossibly narrow streets branched into impossibly narrow streets, and wherever they led, every one of these streets became still narrower and darker. If he extended both arms, he could simultaneously touch the opposing rows of buildings, those silent houses with large windows behind which, so he thought, mysteriously intense Italian lives must be slumbering. They were so near that it felt, indeed, like an intrusion to be walking these streets at night.

What was this strange spell and ecstasy that seized him here in the alleyways? Why did he feel like someone who had come home at last? Maybe a child might have dreamt of such things – the child, Mihály, who lived in a detached garden villa but was afraid of open spaces. Perhaps this adolescent wanted to live in such narrow confines that every half a square metre has separate significance, ten paces already mean a border violation, decades pass next to a rickety table and human lifespans in an armchair; but we can't be certain about this.

He meandered along the alleys this way until he realized that dawn was already breaking and he was on the far side of Venice, on the Fondamente Nove, from which one could see the cemetery island* and, beyond it, the mysterious islands – among them San Francesco del Deserto, which at one time had been a leper colony – and the houses of Murano in the far distance.* Here lived the poor of Venice, at the fringe of the tourist trade where its benefits trickled down only in lesser measure; the hospital was here, and the funerary gondolas set out from here. At this hour, some residents were waking up and heading to work; and the world was as immeasurably barren as the feeling one has after a sleepless night. He found a gondolier who took him home.

Erzsi had already been worried sick and dead tired for a long time. Only at half-past one did it occur to her that, all appearances to the

contrary, one undoubtedly must be able to telephone the police even in Venice. And so she did, with the help of the night porter – and naturally, without result.

Mihály was still behaving like a sleepwalker. He was dreadfully fatigued and unable to produce intelligible answers to Erzsi's questions.

“The back alleys,” he said, “I had to see the back alleys at night, just once – the way, I might add, that others also used to do.”

“But why didn't you either tell me or take me with you?”

Mihály had no reply to offer, but crept into bed with an offended expression and fell asleep, feeling most bitter.

“So this is marriage,” he thought. “Can she really misunderstand so badly – is every attempt at explanation really so hopeless? I admit I don't understand it, myself.”

2

BUT ERZSI DIDN'T FALL ASLEEP: she lay with furrowed brow and arms crossed under her head for a long time, thinking. Women can generally sustain wakeful vigils and thinking better than men. Erzsi found it neither novel nor surprising that Mihály should do and say things that she didn't understand. She concealed this incomprehension successfully, for a while; wisely, she refrained from making enquiries and behaved as though from time immemorial she'd had no doubts at all about everything to do with Mihály. She knew that this silent show of superiority, which Mihály regarded as a woman's innate, instinctive wisdom, was the most powerful means to keep hold of him. Mihály was full of fears, and Erzsi's role was to reassure him.

Yet there's a limit to everything; and besides, they were a married couple now, on a proper honeymoon, and to be out all night on such an occasion is unusual, no matter how you look at it. For an instant, the natural female suspicion arose that perhaps Mihály had been entertaining himself in another woman's company, but she rejected it instantly as an utter impossibility. Even aside from the absolute impropriety of such behaviour, she well knew how shy and cautious Mihály was with every unfamiliar woman, how much he feared diseases, how much he hated to spend money and, in any case, how little women interested him.

But in actual fact it would have been most reassuring to know that Mihály had merely been with a woman. This uncertainty, this completely blank darkness, the utter impossibility of imagining where and how Mihály had spent the night, would cease. And Zoltán Pataki came to mind: her first husband, whom she'd left for Mihály. Erzsi always

knew which girl from the office's pool of typists was his lover of the moment, even though Zoltán was compulsively, blushing, touchingly discreet – and the more he tried to keep something secret, the more Erzsi could see right through it. Mihály was just the opposite: he strove to explain his every action with painstaking conscientiousness; he sought maniacally to enable Erzsi to know him completely; and the more he explained, the more muddled things became. Erzsi had long realized that she didn't understand Mihály, because Mihály had secrets that he kept even from himself – and Mihály didn't understand her because it never even occurred to him to take an interest in the interior life of anyone besides himself. And nevertheless, they got married, because Mihály decided that they understood each other perfectly, so that their marriage would stand upon entirely rational foundations and not on transient passions. “How much longer,” she wondered, “can this fiction be sustained?”

ONE EVENING A FEW DAYS LATER, they arrived in Ravenna. The next morning, Mihály rose very early, got dressed and went out. He wanted to see the famed Byzantine mosaics, Ravenna's main attractions, alone, because by this point he knew that there were many things he couldn't share with Erzsi, and this was one of them. Erzsi was much more educated and sensitive than he was as far as history of art was concerned; she had even been to Italy before, so Mihály generally let her decide what they would see – and what they would think, having seen it. Paintings interested him only rarely, randomly, like a flash of lightning: one in a thousand. But the mosaics of Ravenna... these were the monuments of his own past.

One time on a Christmas Eve, they were looking at these mosaics together: Mihály, Ervin, Tamás Ulpius and Éva, Tamás's younger sister. They gazed at these images, in a big French tome at the Ulpius home, with nervous and inexplicable fear. Father Ulpius was alone in the enormous adjoining room, pacing up and down. They stared at the pictures, propping their elbows on the table, and the gold background of the images glimmered at them like some light from an unknown source at the deep end of a mineshaft. There was something in the Byzantine images that stirred up the dread sleeping in the very bottom depths of their souls. At a quarter to twelve, they put on their greatcoats and, with benumbed hearts, headed off to midnight Mass. That was when Éva fainted; that was the only occasion when Éva's nerves gave her any trouble. After that, everything was Ravenna for a month, and even up until this day, Ravenna remained an archetype of indefinable fear for Mihály.

All of this – that entire, now deeply submerged month – now emerged within him as he stood there in the basilica of San Vitale, in front of the fabulous mosaic with its light-green tonality. His youth struck him with such intensity that he reeled and had to lean against one of the columns. But it only lasted an instant, and then he became a serious man once again.

The other mosaics didn't even interest him any more. He returned to the hotel, waited for Erzsi to get ready, and then they went to see and discuss every sight together, dispassionately. Of course, Mihály didn't tell her that he'd already been to San Vitale that morning. He sidled into the church a bit sheepishly, as though something might betray him, and he declared that the place wasn't even all that interesting, in order to compensate for his morning shock.

The following evening they were sitting on the small piazza, outside one of the cafés; Erzsi was eating a gelato; Mihály sampled some bitter drink he didn't recognize but disliked, and he was racking his brains trying to decide what might wash the bitter taste away.

"This smell is awful," said Erzsi. "You can smell this odour wherever you go in this town. This is what a gas attack must be like."

"It's no wonder," said Mihály. "This town stinks of corpses. Ravenna is a decadent city, decaying steadily for more than a thousand years. Even the Baedeker says so. It had three golden ages, the last one in the eighth century after Christ."

"Really, you silly boy," said Erzsi, smiling. "You're always thinking about corpses and their smell. Whereas this stink arises precisely from life and plenty: it's the chemical-fertilizer plant that causes this odour, the factory that provides all Ravenna its livelihood."

"Ravenna lives on chemical fertilizer? This town, where the tombs of Theodoric the Great and Dante stand, this city, compared to which Venice is a parvenu?"

"Absolutely, my boy."

"Revolting."

At this moment a thunderous motorcycle rumbled into the piazza, and the begoggled and extraordinarily bikerishly clad man sitting on it sprang off it as though leaping off a steed's back. He looked around, saw Mihály and his bride, and headed straight in their direction, leading the motorbike beside him like a horse. Reaching their table, raising his goggles like a helmet's visor, he said: "Hello, Mihály. You're the man I'm looking for."

To his utmost surprise, Mihály recognized János* Szepetneki. Caught off guard, he could think of nothing to say, but: "How did you know I was here?"

"At the hotel in Venice they said that you'd come to Ravenna. And where else can one be after dinner in Ravenna than on the piazza? It wasn't hard at all. I came straight here from Venice. But now I'll sit down for a bit."

"A-a-ah, I say... let me introduce you to my wife," said Mihály nervously. "Erzsi, this gentleman is János Szepetneki, my former classmate, about whom... I think, I've never yet spoken to you." And he blushed violently.

János looked Erzsi up and down with undisguised distaste, bowed, shook her hand and, from that point on, took no notice of the woman's presence. He spoke not a word except to order some lemonade.

After a very long time, Mihály finally spoke up. "So, tell us. You must have some reason to find me here in Italy."

"I'll tell you later. Mainly, I wanted to see you because I heard that you'd got married."

"I thought you were still angry with me," said Mihály. "The last time in London, when we met at the Hungarian embassy, you left the room." Seeing that János wasn't going to respond, he continued: "But of course, now you no longer have reason to be angry. One becomes serious. Everyone becomes serious and slowly forgets why they'd been angry at someone for decades."

"You talk as if you knew why I was mad at you."

“Well, of course I know,” said Mihály, and blushed again.

“If you know, then say it,” said Szepetneki pugnaciously.

“I don’t want to, here... in front of my wife.”

“She doesn’t bother me. Just be brave and tell me. What do you think is the reason I wouldn’t speak to you in London?”

“Because it occurred to me that at some point I thought you had stolen my gold watch. Since then, I’ve learnt who stole it.”

“See what an ass you are. *I* stole your gold watch.”

“What, you stole it, after all?”

“Of course it was me.”

Erzsi had already been fidgeting uneasily in her seat because, thanks to her knowledge of human character, she had long since read János Szepetneki’s face and hands and deduced that he was indeed the sort of person who would occasionally steal a gold watch. She anxiously held her reticule – which contained their passports and traveller’s cheques – tight to her body. The fact that Mihály, otherwise so tactful, would bring up this watch business astonished and aggrieved her, but the silence that now set in – the sort of silence that occurs when one man tells the other that he’d stolen his gold watch, and then both remain without speaking – was unbearable. She stood up and said:

“I’m going back to the hotel. The gentlemen have certain matters to discuss, that...”

Mihály glared at her in exasperation.

“Just stay right here. You’re my wife now, so now everything concerns you too.” And with that, he turned on János Szepetneki and shouted at him: “Well, then, why did you refuse to shake my hand in London?”

“You know perfectly well why. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t be so furious now. But you know I was right.”

“Please be so kind as to talk some sense!”

“You understand how *not* to understand people just as well as you understood how not to find those who’d disappeared from around

you, and whom you didn't even bother to look for. That's why I was angry with you."

Mihály was silent for a while.

"Well, if you wanted to meet me... seeing that we met in London..."

"Yes, but only by accident. That doesn't count. Besides which, you know very well that it's not about me."

"If it's about the others... I would have looked for them in vain."

"And that's why you didn't even try, right? Yet, maybe, all you would have needed to do is extend your hand. But now you have one more chance. Listen here. Say, I think I've found Ervin."

Mihály's expression changed instantly. Anger and consternation gave way to joyful curiosity.

"You're joking! Where is he?"

"I don't know yet, exactly, but he's in Italy, in one of the cloisters in Umbria or Tuscany. I saw him in Rome: he was in a procession with a lot of monks. I couldn't go up to him: I couldn't disturb the ceremony. But there was a priest I knew there, from whom I learnt that these monks are from an Umbrian or Tuscan monastery. This is what I wanted to tell you. Now that you're here in Italy, you could help me look for him."

"Yes. Thank you. But I don't know if I should help. I don't even know how to. And besides, I'm on my honeymoon now: I can't traipse through every cloister in Umbria and Tuscany. And I don't even know if Ervin has any interest in meeting me. If he'd wanted to see me, he could have informed me of his whereabouts a long time ago. And now go away, János Szepetneki. I hope not to see you for another few years."

"I'm going, all right. Your wife is a most disagreeable woman."

"I didn't ask for your opinion."

János Szepetneki mounted his bike. "Pay for my lemonade," he shouted over his shoulder, and he vanished into the darkness that had fallen in the meantime.

The couple remained where they were and said nothing for a long time. Erzsi was annoyed, and at the same time she found the situation comical. "So this is what happens when classmates meet... It seems that these matters from his student years touch Mihály deeply. Some day I should ask him who this Ervin and this Tamás are... even though they're so unpleasant." In general, Erzsi disliked the young, and anything that was half-baked.

But in fact, it was something entirely different that irritated her. Naturally, it bothered her that János Szepetneki had found her so displeasing. Not that the opinion of someone like him was of the slightest importance... such a dubious creature. Yet there's no more fateful thing in the world for a woman than the opinion of her husband's friends. Men are unbelievably suggestible when women are the topic. True, this Szepetneki was no friend of Mihály's. Or rather, he was not his friend in the word's conventional meaning, but they nevertheless seemed to share some very strong connection. And in any case, even the most scurrilous man can influence another in such things. "The devil take it, why didn't he find me pleasing?"

Fundamentally, Erzsi was totally unaccustomed to this. She was a wealthy, attractive, well-dressed, good-looking woman; men found her alluring – or at the very least, appealing. Erzsi knew that the fact that every man spoke appreciatively about her played a major role in Mihály's devotion. Often, she had gone so far as to suspect that Mihály didn't even look at her with his own eyes, but with the eyes of the others. As if he were saying to himself: "How much I'd love this Erzsi, if I were like other men." And now this cad showed up and didn't find her attractive. She couldn't resist bringing it up.

"Tell me, please: why didn't your friend the pickpocket care for me?"

Mihály's face broke into a smile.

"Oh please! It's not you that he didn't like. What he doesn't like is the fact that you're my wife."

"Why?"

“Because he thinks you’re the reason I’ve betrayed my youth, our shared youth. That I’ve forgotten about those, who... And that I’ve constructed my life on the basis of other connections. Yet, well... And now you’ll probably also say what fine little friends I have. I could reply to this by saying that Szepetneki is no friend of mine, which of course is merely evading the issue. But... how should I put it... people like this exist too... Stealing the watch was merely a childish exercise, a warm-up. Since that time, Szepetneki has become a highly successful con man; at a certain point he even had tons of money, and at that time he forcibly thrust various amounts on me that I couldn’t repay because I had no idea where he was spending his time; and he’s done time in prison already, writing to me from Baja to send him five pengő^s.^{*} And he pops up from time to time, and he always has something terribly unpleasant to say. But I tell you, there are people like this too. In case you didn’t know before, now at least you’ve seen it for yourself. Tell me, please, it is possible for us to get a bottle of wine somewhere around here that we could drink back in our room? I’ve grown bored with this public spectacle we’re performing here on the piazza.”

“You can get some in our hotel, since it has a restaurant too.”

“And won’t they object if we drink it in our room? Is that allowed?”

“Mihály, you’ll drive me to the grave with your fear of waiters and hoteliers.”

“I’ve already explained. I told you that they’re the most grown-up people in the world, and that I particularly don’t want to break the rules when abroad.”

“Fine. But why this need to drink again?”

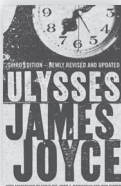
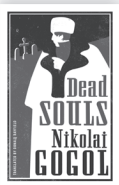
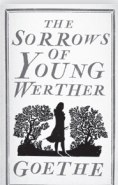
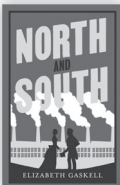
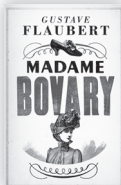
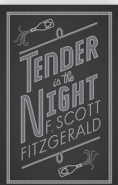
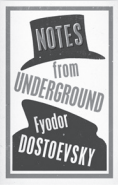
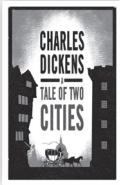
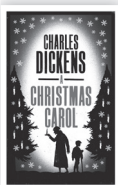
“I simply must have something to drink. Because I want to tell you who Tamás Ulpius was, and how he died.”

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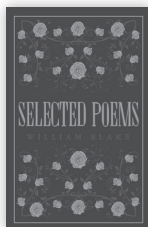
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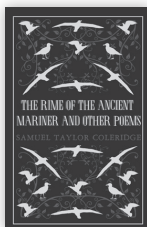


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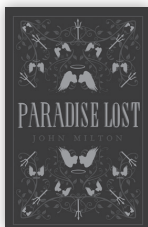
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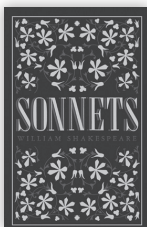
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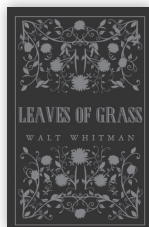
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- 432 Anton Chekhov, *Three Years*
- 433 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Uncle's Dream*