

TIBOR DERY

*Odysseus*

(In the historic meeting of the Petofi Circle at the end of June, 1956. Tibor Dery, regarded as Hungary's foremost writer, denounced Rakosi, to whose subsequent fall this attack greatly contributed. One of Rakosi's last acts in office was to have Dery expelled from the ranks of the Party. In his short story *Odysseus (Szerelem)*, which Dery wrote in the days following these events, he spelt out the fate, and drew the figure of the Communist returning out of seven years' oblivion. B., the hero of our story, might be any single one of the many Communists who had not been met with since the time of the Rajk Trial, in 1949. The story appeared in *Irodalmi Ujsag (Literary Gazette)*, Budapest, on July 28, 1956).

The cell-door opened and the guard tossed something in.

"Grab it," he said.

A sack on which a number was painted fell to the floor in front of the prisoner. B. stood up, took a deep breath and stared at the guard.

"Your stuff," said the guard. "Put it on. They're gonna shave you."

In the sack were the clothes and shoes he had taken off seven years ago. The clothes were creased and limp, and the shoes mouldy. He smoothed out the shirt which was also mouldy. When he had dressed, the prison barber came in and shaved him.

An hour later they took him to the small office of the prison. Some eight or ten prisoners were standing around in the corridor all wearing their own clothes, but they called him in first - almost as soon as he reached the office door.

A sergeant sat at the desk, another stood before him, and a captain paced slowly up and down the small room.

"Com 'ere," said the sergeant at the desk. "Name? . . . . .  
"Mother's name? . . . . ." Destination? . . . . ."

"I don't know," said B.

"Whaddye mean?" asked the sergeant. "Don'che know your destination?"

"No," said B. "I don't know where they'll take me."

The sergeant made a wry face. "They ain't takin' y'nowhere," he said. "You can go home to the old lady for dinner, and tonight you can have a piece in bed. Get it?"

The prisoner did not answer.

"Destination?"

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"No. 17, Szilfa Street."

"Which district in Budapest?"

"Second," said B. "Why are they letting me out?"

"Y'got me," growled the sergeant. "They're lettin' y'out! Ain't ye glad to get outa this place?"

His personal possessions were brought in from the next room, a cheap wrist watch, a fountain pen, and a worn greenish-black wallet that had been his father's. The wallet was empty.

"Sign here," said the sergeant.

It was a receipt for the wrist watch, the pen and the wallet.

"This one too."

This was another receipt for a hundred and forty-six forints in wages. They counted the money for him on the table.

"Put it away," said the sergeant.

B. took out his wallet and stuffed in the paper money and the change. A musty smell clung to the wallet as well. The last thing he was handed was his letter of discharge. The dotted line marked "reason for arrest" was left blank.

He stood around in the corridor for about an hour. Then they escorted him, together with three other prisoners, to the main gate. Just before they reached the gate a sergeant came running out and stopped them. He picked one of the four and marched him back to prison, between two guards with tommy guns. The man's newly shaven face turned a sudden yellow. His eyes became glassy.

The three went on to the gate.

"There's the streetcar, get going," said the guard to B. when he had searched him and returned his letter of discharge.

B. stood there, staring at the ground.

"Whaddye waitin' for?" asked the guard.

B. was still standing, surveying the ground at his feet.

"Get the hell out," said the guard. "Whaddye hangin' around for?"

"I'm going," said B. "You mean I can go?"

The sentry did not answer. B. pocketed his letter of discharge and walked through the gate. After a few steps he wanted to look back, but he kept himself in check and went on. He listened, but there were no steps behind him. If I make it to the streetcar, he thought, and no one grabs my shoulder or calls out my name from behind, then, presumably, I'm a free man. Or am I?

When he reached the streetcar stop, he turned suddenly; nobody was following him. He poked around in his pocket for a handkerchief to wipe the sweat off his forehead, but couldn't find one. He boarded the streetcar that came screeching along. A prison guard with a pock-marked face was getting off the second car and, in pass-

ing B. on the first car, his small pig's eyes looked him up and down. B. did not salute. The streetcar started.

At that moment - from the split second onward when he did not salute the guard and the streetcar started - just then, the world broke into sound. Much as in the cinema, when something had gone wrong with the projector and the film had been running silent for a time and, of a sudden, right in the middle of a sentence or a word, the sound blasts out of the gaping mouth of the actor. Then the theatre, a deaf-mute space, in which the very public seemed shorn of its third dimension, on an instant impulse is rocked to the rafters with vibrant song, music and dialogue. All about him the colors started exploding. The streetcar coming from the opposite direction was yellower than any yellow B. had ever seen, and it raced by at such speed past a low, shimmering gray house, that B. thought it would never get under control again. Across the street, two horses, red as poppies, galloped in front of an empty cart. The enchantment of its rattle made the fairy clouds dance in a mackerel sky. A tiny garden, bottle-green, with two sparkling glass globes and an open kitchen window undulated past. Millions of people milled about the sidewalks, all in civilian clothes, no two of them alike and each one lovelier than the other. Many were amazingly small, only knee-high, and some had to be carried. And the women!

Since B. felt that his eyes were swimming, he went inside the streetcar. The woman conductor's voice was sonorous and very tender. B. bought a ticket and sat down on the first seat at the end of the car. He shut off his senses. If they remained open, he would lose all control. At one moment he saw out of his window on the sidewalk opposite, before the brewery gate, a man caressing the cheek of a young woman. He felt again in his trouser pocket for a handkerchief, but there just wasn't one to wipe the fresh beads of sweat from his forehead. A worker sat down on the empty seat opposite, with a half dozen bottles of beer in his open brief case.

The conductor laughed.

" Won't it be a bit too much?"

" I'm a married man, sister," said the worker. " My wife likes to watch her old man have a few."

The conductor laughed.

"Just watch?"

" Sure."

" Is it dark beer?"

" Right."

" But light beer is nicer."

" But my wife likes dark to look at."

Again the conductor laughed.

" Why don't you leave me a bottle?"

"Dark?" •

" All right, dark."

« What for?"

" I'd take it home for my husband."

" What good is dark to him if he likes 'em fair?"

The conductor laughed. They came to a stop. B. got off and hailed a taxi. The taxi-driver clanked down the tin flag.

"Where to. please?" he said after a while, since his fare said nothing.

" To Buda."

The taxi-driver turned and eyed his passenger.

"By which bridge?"

B. looked straight ahead. Which bridge indeed.

" You a stranger here?" asked the taxi-driver.

" By the Margaret Bridge," said B.

The cab started. B. sat erect, not leaning back. The sunlit street's dust smell, petrol fumes, the clanging bells of the streetcars rushed through the open cab windows. The sun blazed down equally freely on both sidewalks and the shadows of the pedestrians, streaking by their feet, seemed to double the volume of traffic. The awnings of a candyshop had orange stripes which shed russet light on a young woman who sat smoking. Further on at the corner, a small chestnut tree was budding, gathering underneath it a minute patch of lacey, exhilarating shade.

" If you could stop for some cigarettes somewhere . . ." said B. to the cab driver.

They stopped at the third door. B. looked out of the window: they were directly opposite the open door of a small shop with bundles of red radishes, mounds of green lettuce and red apples in a heap. Beside the shop was the narrow doorway of a cigar store.

" I'll get 'em for you." the cab driver said, turning around. " What brand?"

B. was looking at the radishes. His hands trembled.

" Would it be Kossuths?"

" Yes," said B. "And a box of matches."

The taxi-driver got out. " Don't bother," he said, " we'll put it on tefare. One package?"

" Yes, please," said B.

The driver returned. " Won't you have one now? My brother-in-law was also in for two years. First thing he did was pick up some cigarettes. Smoked two Kossuths, one after the other, before he went home"

"Can you tell?"

" Well, maybe a little," said the driver. " My brother-in-law also had such a sick-lookin' color. Of course, you might come from the hospital, but they don't crease your clothes like that. How long y'been in?"

" Seven years," said B.

The driver whistled. " Political?"

" Yes," said B. " A year and a half in the condemned cell."

" And now they let y'out?"

" Looks like it," said B. " Does it show a lot?"

The driver shrugged up both shoulders and let them fall again.

" Seven years !" he repeated. " No wonder."

B. got out of the taxi at the cable-car station, and walked the rest of the way. He wanted to get used to moving about easily, before he met his wife. The cab-driver refused to accept a tip.

" You'll need your money, comrade," he said. " Don't spend it on anything except your health ! Get yourself some meat every day, and half a bottle of good wine. That'll put you on your feet in no time."

" Good-bye," said B.

Sideways across the street he saw a narrow mirror in the window of a clothes shop. He stood about in front of it for a while, then he continued on his way. Since the Pasaret Road was full of people, he took a footpath up the hillside, past a tennis-court, to the Hermann Otto Road. But there was too much open space all around him here, with empty lots facing the range of hills opposite. He grew dizzy and sat down on the grass. His wife wasn't expecting him anyway, he thought, so he had time to sit on the grass for a half-hour. Facing him was a fence, and behind it stood an apple tree in full bloom. B. looked at it for a while, then went over to the fence. The waxy, shining white flowers were so thick on the boughs that looking up from below into the snow-white dome, one could hardly see the stark blue plane of the vibrant sky. Each flower held at the centre of its large round petals a rose-colored whiff - a tender touch of color for its bridal splendour. So many bees buzzed in and out of the petals, that the tree seemed to have a veil over it blowing in the wind. B. stood listening to the tree. He found two boughs through which he could look into the sky, while far away a downy cloud looked like yet another apple tree in bloom. He gazed at the two, through the attainable to the unattainable, till he blacked out.

He had forgotten to wind his wrist watch and didn't know how much time had passed since he had left his taxi, so he turned and started for home. After a few steps, he went behind a bush and vomited; he felt relieved. After another half hour's walk through narrow sunlit streets that criss-crossed a hillside of fruit trees in bloom, he arrived at the house. They lived one floor up. In the garden, to the

right and left of the front door, stood two white lilac bushes. He went up the front stairs.

No one answered the bell. There was no nameplate on the door. He went downstairs to the janitor's apartment and knocked at the door.

" Good morning," he said to the woman who opened the door. She, too, looked thinner and had aged.

" Are you looking for anyone?"

" I am B.," said B. " Is my wife still living here?"

" My God!" said the woman.

B. looked at the floor. " Is my wife still living here?"

• " My God !" said the woman again. " So you've come home?"

" Yes, home," said B. " Is my wife still living here?"

The woman let go of the knob and leaned over against the door-frame. " You've come home," she repeated. " My God ! Of course she's living here. And didn't she know that you were coming home, either? My God ! Yes of course she lives here."

" My son, too ?" asked B.

The woman responded. " He's fine." she said. " He's in fine shape, strong and healthy. Good God!" B. said nothing.

" But come right in," said the woman, her voice shaky. " Come right in ! I knew you were innocent. I knew you'd come home some day."

" But they didn't open the door." said B. " I rang three times."

" Do come in," said the woman again. " There's no one home. The other people are also away."

B. said nothing. He looked at the floor.

" Your wife is at work, and Gyurika is at school," said the woman. " Won't you come in? They'll be home in the afternoon."

" Are there others in the apartment?" asked B.

" Very decent people," said the woman. " Your wife gets along very well with them. Good God, so you did come home !"

B. said nothing.

" I've got the apartment keys," said the woman after a while, " perhaps you'd like to go upstairs and rest a little before your wife gets home."

On the wall two keys were hanging on a nail. The woman took one and shut the door behind her.

" Perhaps you'd like to go upstairs and rest," she said.

B. glanced down at his feet. " Are you coming, too?" he asked.

" Of course." said the woman. " I'll show you in which room your wife lives."

" In which room does she live?" asked B.

Well, you know, the other people are four all together," said the

woman. "They have the two rooms. Your wife moved into the maid's room with Gyurika. But they share the kitchen and bathroom."

B. did not answer.

"Shall we go on up," asked the woman, or would you rather wait here with us, till they come home? Just come in and stretch out on the sofa till they come home."

"They share the kitchen and bathroom?" asked B.

"Yes, that's right, they share them," said the woman.

B. raised his head and looked right at the woman. "Then I'm allowed to have a bath?"

"Naturally," said the woman, smiling and putting her hand on B.'s elbow convincingly, "of course you can have a bath, why shouldn't you? It's your apartment, isn't it, and as I said, the kitchen and bathroom are shared. I'd be glad to make up a fire for you to warm the water, since we have a little of the wood left over from the winter in the cellar, but for all I know the others keep the bathroom locked in the daytime."

B. said nothing. He glanced down again.

"Shall we go upstairs, then, or would you rather step in at our place?" asked the woman. "Do come to our place, I'll be in the kitchen and won't disturb you at all. You can lie down on the sofa and maybe even have a nap."

"Thanks," said B., "but I'd rather go upstairs."

The maid's room was tiny and faced northwards, as maids' rooms usually do. The window looked out on an ornamental tree and to the left you could see a dark hilltop covered with pines. The foliage in front of the window made the room seem dark green. As soon as he was alone and his breathing had quieted down, he recognised the fragrance of his wife. He sat down near the window and breathed in. In the tiny room there were, all told, a worn white cupboard, an iron bedstead, a table, and a chair; to get to the bed you had to push the chair out of the way. He did not lie down on the bed. He just sat and breathed. The table was piled with many things, books, clothing, toys. There was also a small hand-mirror. He looked into it; it showed what the one in the shop window had shown. He put it back on the table, facing downwards. He didn't disturb his wife's things on the table. A child's rubber ball with red dots rested on the ash-tray. His wife's fragrance lingered over the table too.

He had hardly sat down when the janitor's wife came in with a large jug of milky coffee and two thick slices of white bread. He ate it as soon as he was alone. Soon afterwards, the groundfloor tenant's wife rang the bell. She also brought coffee, bread and butter, sausage and a red apple like the ones he had seen in the small shop in the

street. She put the tray on the table. His eyes were moist and she left after a few minutes. When B. was alone, he ate it. He still hadn't wound his wrist watch and didn't know how long he'd been sitting near the window. The window looked out on the back garden where there was no one. The tree had leaves with white borders which rustled lightly in the wind, and the afternoon light glowed on the white-washed wall of the tiny room.

When he had breathed in so much of his wife's fragrance that he didn't notice it any more, he went down into the street near the garden gate. Soon afterwards his wife turned the corner with four or five little boys around her. She came towards the gate, her steps suddenly slackening. She even stopped short for a second, then ran towards him. B. also started running without knowing it. As they neared each other the woman slowed up, as if uncertain, but soon ran forward. B. recognised on her the long-sleeved gray striped wool sweater he had bought for her in a down-town shop just before his arrest. His wife was a wonderful blend of air and flesh, unseen and unheard of before; unique. She surpassed everything he had treasured about her for seven years in prison.

When they separated from each other's arms, B. leaned against the fence. A few paces behind his wife stood four or five little boys, with curious, if somewhat perturbed faces. They were about six or seven years old. There weren't five, but really only four. Leaning against the fence, B. looked at them, one by one.

"Which one is mine?" he asked.

At this point she began to cry.

"Let's go upstairs," she said, crying.

B. put his arms round her shoulders.

"Don't cry."

"Let's go upstairs," she said, sobbing openly.

"Don't cry," said B. "Which one is mine?"

The woman swung open the garden gate and went running between the two lilac bushes to the house. She disappeared in the entrance. She was still as slim as when they had parted and she ran with the same long, elastic strides as once, when she was a girl she had run away from a cow, with uncontrolled fear in her legs. But when B. reached her upstairs in front of the apartment door she had calmed down; only her girlish breasts heaved under her gray sweater. She was no longer crying, but her eyelids were still moist beneath the tears she had wiped away.

"My dearest," she whispered, "my dearest."

When she whispered, each word could almost be taken in one's mouth as it hung in the air.

Let's go in," said B.

" There are other people living in the apartment too now."

" Have you been inside yet?"

" I have," said B. " Which is my son?"

Once inside, the woman knelt on the floor and put her head in his lap and cried. White threads glistened in her light brown hair with an alien lustre. " My darling, I waited for you. My darling."

B. stroked her head. " Was it hard?"

" My darling," whispered the woman.

B. kept stroking her hair. " Did I grow very old?"

The woman clasped his knees and drew him close. " You are the same as when you left, for me."

" Did I grow very old?" asked B.

" I'll love you always, as long as I live," whispered the woman.

" Do you love me?" asked B.

The woman's back trembled. She wept openly. B. took his hand from her head. " Can you get used to me?" he asked. " Will you ever get used to me again?"

" I've never loved anyone else," she said. " I love you."

" Did you wait for me?"

" I was with you every day," said the woman. " There wasn't a day that I didn't think of you. I knew you would come back. But if you hadn't, I would have died alone. Your son was you all over again."

• I know," said B. " Let's go in."

" Do you love me?"

" I've never loved anyone else." she said. " I'd love you, no matter how you've changed."

" I've changed," said B. " I've grown old."

The woman wept, she pressed B.'s foot close to her. B. stroked her hair again.

" Can we still have a child?" she asked.

" Perhaps," said the man, " if you love me. Please get up."

The woman got up.

" Shall I call him?"

" Not yet," said B. " Let me stay a while longer with you. He's still a stranger. Did he stay in the garden?"

" I'll go downstairs to him," said the woman. " I'll tell him to wait."

When she returned, B. was standing at the window, with his back to the room. His back was slim and awry. He did not turn. The woman stood in the doorway for a moment. " I told him to pick some flowers for his father," she said, a little hoarse with emotion. " The lilacs are in bloom over on the next lot, and he should pick a big bunch for his father,"

" Do you love me?" said B.

The woman ran up to him, clasped his shoulders and nestled in close. " My only one," she said.

" Can you get used to me?" asked B.

" I've never loved anyone else," said the woman. " I was with you night and day. Every day I talked to your son about you."

B. turned around, he embraced the woman and looked closely at her face. In the rays of sunset that fell through the window, he saw with some relief that she, too, had aged, though she was more beautiful than the image he had recalled every day for seven years. Her eyes were closed, her mouth partly open and her hot breath touched B.'s cheeks. Thick eyelashes covered the pale skin under her still-moist eyes. She was meekness itself. B. kissed her eyes, then tenderly moved her away from himself.

" Love our boy, too," she said, with her eyes still closed.

" Yes," said B. " I'll get to know him and love him."

" He's your son !"

" And your's," said B.

The woman clung to his neck. " I'll wash you," she said.

" Good."

He stripped. She made the bed, laying her husband's naked body on the sheet. She brought warm water in a tin pan, soap and two towels. She folded one, dipped it in the water and put soap on it. She washed the whole body down to his feet. Twice she changed the water. B.'s hand still twitched now and then, but his face was at peace.

" Can you get used to me?" he asked.

" My darling," said the woman.

" Will you sleep with me tonight?"

" Yes," she said.

" Where does the boy sleep ?"

" I'll make a bed for him on the floor," said the woman. " He sleeps soundly."

" Will you stay with me all night?"

" Yes," said the woman, " every night as long as we live."

*Translated from the Hungarian by Ilona Duczynska.*