

## The Building in the City Center

*Vasyl Gabor*

I kept walking but I couldn't reach my family home, because it seemed to be retreating from me, so I started to walk faster, but the house too began to move away faster, and I broke into a run, but it began to run away from me even faster, and I began to despair of ever reaching it and seeing my parents again.

So I have been very distressed lately.

You see, more and more often I get the feeling that my parents are dead.

At times like this I write them a letter.

I don't have any newspapers or magazines delivered, so I'm used to the mailbox being empty all the time.

And when I'm waiting for a reply from my parents, I feel a cold draft coming from the mailbox, and I have an almost physical sensation that with every passing day, with every passing moment, they are getting further and further away from me.

At times like this I call myself dreadful names. I reproach myself for being a worthless son and resolve to visit them without fail.

But then a letter comes from home—my parents always write that everything is fine and that I shouldn't be concerned about them, then they go on to list everyone who has died in the village and to inquire mournfully whether I am still living alone in that big, strange city—and I calm down and stop worrying about them, and my resolution to visit them goes right out of my head.

At other times, though, wandering aimlessly through the narrow city streets, I see in my mind's eye my birthplace, my home, and again I think of my old folks.

As was the case today.

In the past I used to get tired and irritated in the narrow, crowded streets of the city.

Now I'm used to them.

I mingle with the motley stream of people carrying me along goodness-knows-where, and I don't care where. I walk amid the noise and the laughter, amid bright cheerful eyes and dull sad ones, among exuberant girls

and old folk bent by the burden of poverty; I walk amid the powerful aroma of fine perfumes and the stench from sewer drains and befouled gates, I pass by old buildings and churches, past stone lions with eyes just as dull as those of the people. As I walk along I feel calmer, at peace with myself.

And I wander around the city like this every day.

But today, I suddenly stopped in amazement in the middle of the street at the sight of a certain building.

How could I have failed to notice it before? After all, how many times had I passed by this three-story, burnt-out building in the city center that had stood in disrepair for several years, with its boarded-up windows and doors?

Casually I surveyed its blackened outlines, experiencing no curiosity or surprise; nothing upset the regular rhythm of my heartbeat.

I recalled that I would occasionally wonder when the municipal authorities might get round to restoring it, but then would immediately forget all about the building and its restoration.

Today I saw it with different eyes.

At the age of thirty-three I often felt myself to be a complete ruin, but I had hardly ever seen what a ruin looked like.

I stood by the road and couldn't take my eyes off the burnt-out building; it gradually began to seize hold of my imagination and finally captured it completely.

I told myself that others would probably find my perception of the building ridiculous or primitive—but then I don't wish to share it with anybody in any case.

Yet the longer I stood by this building, the stronger was my impression that there was somebody living and hiding within its walls.

That impression grew to such a degree that I felt drawn to peep through the gap between the planks boarding up the front door.

Eventually, that is what I did.

I saw a hallway soiled by feces and strewn with litter, and I was filled with disgust for the things people do.

I set off for home, and I kept thinking about the burnt-out building.

My curiosity was getting the better of me. If I got in through a window, would I find anything in the empty rooms? For some reason, I was convinced that I would find broken old chairs.

Someone was coming at night, sitting on these chairs, and calmly talking about the past.

That's right, the past—because that's all there is to people's lives.

When it rains, the whole building must leak, and those who go there must keep moving the chairs around, trying to find some drier spot.

Perhaps some retrieve broken umbrellas from under the chairs and open them up with smiles of satisfaction.

The next day I went straight back to the building.

I walked unhurriedly around it, observing the blackened walls and the

clumsily boarded-up windows and doors.

It occurred to me that if I had a ladder, I could easily get in through a window.

Then I thought, what's the point of aimlessly wandering about? Wouldn't it be better to go home and fix the lock on the door that always annoys me when I'm in a hurry to get to work?

Then I realized that being here, by this building, was very interesting for me, because even though it was a complete ruin for me it had a certain charm, and it was a great pleasure to imagine its empty rooms, full of useless objects, with litter all over the place.

I wandered through the rooms, trying to imagine what their former occupants were like.

It seemed to me that I was floating away on a river of people, going goodness knows where, and this had a calming effect on me.

Suddenly, I glimpsed Maria in one of the rooms.

She hadn't changed a bit since the day she left.

She was sitting in a chair, smiling kindly at me.

We did not speak, but our silence was enjoyable and I was loath to interrupt it.

I recalled how Maria once told me about a dream she had had.

"We're going to visit your parents," she said.

"We're traveling in a very old, dilapidated bus," she continues.

"I remember the way to their house very well, so I'm surprised that we are going through a jungle in the land of the Incas.

"Oh Lord, the Carpathian mountains and the land of the Incas are worlds apart, I tell myself.

"And then, is there a jungle in the land of the Incas? But there must be, if we are traveling through it.

"All around there is bright green foliage and fabulous birds. The bus puffs and groans as it strains to make its bumpy way along a small narrow road that looks like a tunnel.

"Endless and mysterious.

"Occasionally one wall of the tunnel disappears, and then there's a black, bottomless chasm beneath the wheels of the bus, and I hold you close, my love, afraid to look down because it makes me dizzy.

"At the same time I feel happy, because you're beside me, and this calms me; I'm no longer so afraid of hurtling down the steep slopes into the valley in this dilapidated old bus that bumps and shakes so violently that you think it's going to fall to pieces at any moment.

"Then the driver, a young Indian—or he might be of mixed race—tells us that there's only one more slope to negotiate and the worst part of the journey will be behind us, and he asks us all to fasten our seat-belts.

"The road down the last slope is so steep—it's almost a vertical wall—that the people look at each other in terror.

"Can you really drive down it?" is the unspoken question.

"Isn't there another way?"

"There is," says the driver, as though reading their minds, "but it means a journey of several years."

"He acts as calmly as if he were driving down a bank just a few meters high, as he smokes unhurriedly and hums a cheerful tune.

"Well, my friends," he calls to them after a short while, flashing a white, toothy grin, "as Gagarin said, off we go!"

"His grin is somewhat reassuring, but at the same time I'm wondering how, out here in Peru, he's heard of Gagarin.

"We hurtle downwards at breakneck speed, the wind whistles past the windows, the trees and the lianas merge into one sheer wall of greenery, and the roar of the engine is deafening.

"Suddenly, the bus hits something and shatters to pieces—yet all the passengers survive and laugh gleefully, as though they have hurtled down into the valley to end up rolling in soft, fluffy snow.

"I know of a village nearby," you say, "I'll get over there and bring people to help."

"I ask you to stay, not to go into the jungle, because it's full of danger, but you just smile, hold me tight, and kiss me.

"Don't worry, my dear, I know my way around here very well and I'll be back in no time."

"And I'll bring us something to eat."

"And you go off into the dense green wall of the jungle, disappearing beyond the trees and the liana, and my heart is in my mouth.

"Well then, my friends," says the driver, "we can't just hang around. Let's start putting the bus back together."

"We set to work, but I'm so careless.

"They ask me to hand them a particular part, but I bring something quite different.

"You are on my mind all the time, and I just keep watching the place in the jungle where you disappeared.

"The people put the bus together quickly.

"But you, my love, are still not back.

"The driver says we aren't going to wait for one person; he wants to set off.

"But he went to get help for all of us," I say in your defense. But the passengers support the driver and I burst into tears in despair.

"I tell you what, friends," says the driver, "let her sit up on top and keep a look-out from there. If she sees her husband, I'll stop to pick him up."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, my love, about the strange way we rebuilt the bus.

"Now it had no roof, and the seats were arranged one above the other like a strange sort of ladder, with the top seat above the level of the tree-tops.

"With a good deal of trouble I climbed up into it and started to search for you amid the sea of greenery."

"But you were nowhere to be seen, and the realization began to dawn that it would be impossible to find you and that people couldn't find their way out of the jungle on their own. I started to cry because I had lost you, but then, suppressing my choking sobs and fighting back tears, I kept calling you and calling you.

"The echo resounded from the jungle with a roar that sent shivers down my spine.

"And I woke up in the night, and when I saw you next to me, I hugged you so very, very tight.

"For nothing, nothing at all can take you from me."

How well I remember Maria telling me her dream.

At the time I thought, "Oh, good Lord, how much she loves me, even in her dreams," and I kissed her.

But I didn't actually say this aloud to her, and now I want so much to call her to me, so we can at least spend a little time together.

I even want to bring her to live in this building.

Can the human soul actually find sanctuary in the wilderness?

I wander around the city, but it reminds me of a desert. I wander about the burnt-out building, thinking of Maria and my frail old parents.

Maria wanted a son.

She told me what a fine boy he would be and how she would love him.

"Let's not talk about it," I said.

"Don't you want to have a son?" she asked in surprise.

"I don't want to bring children into this world so they will suffer," I replied curtly.

"You just don't want me to give you a son."

I didn't know what to say in reply, because while still a young boy I had dreamed of my future son.

When I married Maria, I very much wanted us to have a son and not a daughter.

I reasoned that our son would pass on our name to his son and so our whole family would live on, whereas with the birth of a girl it would immediately disappear.

But then a name is just a sound, I thought a while later, and children—I see it in myself—are not much help to their parents.

And I realized, too, that if the Virgin Mary had not given birth to a son, he would not have had to endure such terrible suffering. So why should our son suffer so much in this life?

Now, in my loneliness, I wander through the busy streets, pausing for a long time by the burnt-out building in the city center, recalling Maria and my frail old parents and my son. They capture my imagination, that imagination which I often have difficulty distinguishing from reality.

And Maria's words still ring in my ears:

"Don't you want a son? Really?"

I am so exhausted by life that I still don't know how to reply to her, my unforgettable Maria.

I wish for only one thing: to be dissolved in this world, to be extinguished.

But something is keeping me from departing into that endless expanse; something is keeping me back.

*Translated by Patrick Corness and Natalia Pomirko*

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