

It's Our Destiny, My Love

Vasyl Gabor

Everything had been agreed in advance and we were ecstatic at the prospect that we would at last make our escape from this accursed hell. The only thing that concerned us, perhaps, was that we had paid the people we were dealing with in advance and now they might not come to meet us at the appointed place.

We were not allowed to take anything with us, no possessions. In case we were caught, everything was supposed to look as though my wife and I and our child had gone for a walk in the woods and got lost. As if we had come out onto a country road, a truck had come by, and the driver, taking pity on the child, had picked us up to take us into town. He must have lost his way, and that's why we ended up at the airport.

It was actually at the airport checkpoint that our fate would be decided. If we managed to get past it, the way would be open to the plane, which was supposed to be waiting for us in a corner of the airfield. Afterwards, everything would depend on us alone, on whether we managed to reach the plane in complete darkness, since we had to avoid illuminated areas so as not to be spotted by a guard. We had learned the route to the plane by heart, drawing it in the sand a thousand times as we wandered along the deserted river bank. We were afraid to commit our secret to paper.

Many times we fell to thinking that our plan was scarcely feasible; everything depended on sheer blind chance. But we decided not to give up. We judged that we would stand a better chance of success if we flew out at night.

We are doing this for our daughter's sake, my wife said. If we are fated to reach freedom, God will be on our side, but if not, we will perish together.

I agreed with her, though I was uneasy about deciding our child's fate without her involvement. But then our daughter is still young, I persuaded myself; she can't understand the total hopelessness of the hell we find ourselves in.

Naturally, we had heard a good deal about courageous people who had longed to escape from here, but none of them had achieved their goal in the end. Those who returned faced a terrible life—total humiliation, misery, and the filthiest jobs. My wife and I often thought that they were intentionally not imprisoned, because they had dared to attempt escape and here they were, failures, and their mere presence was a discouragement to others. But these were not faint-hearted people—they were strong and determined. We

even knew some of them. We didn't possess a fraction of their strength, and we wondered whether it wouldn't be better to reconcile ourselves to our fate.

"No," insisted my wife. "We are not going to stay here. We will escape."

We prayed to God that we would get past the checkpoint, and we prepared ourselves for the appointed time: either the beginning of freedom, or our downfall.

We had heard a good deal about unsuccessful escape attempts. We had been told dreadful things. Some had attempted to escape from here across the impassable mountains. They were expert rock climbers, and in addition to the natural obstacles—sheer rock faces, ledges, and glaciers—they had succeeded in overcoming all kinds of man-made traps. These were activated by concealed devices, and many a courageous fugitive plunged into a black abyss or was crushed by falling boulders; many were killed by man-made avalanches. The greatest obstacle for the fugitives was Three Saints' Gorge, a kilometer in depth and twenty meters across. Many people who reached it fell to the ground in despair and burst into tears, losing all hope of achieving salvation. There were also those who tried to throw ropes across the gorge in order to reach the other side. Some even managed to get the rope across, but then incredible things happened. Some invisible force would burn the rope through just as the fugitives reached the middle of the gorge, and they would plunge to their death in the abyss. According to legend, only the Three Saints were able to cross this gorge: so great was their faith that they crossed the black abyss through the air.

We did not attempt to escape to freedom across the mountains with our child, although this seemed the safest route to us. Two other routes went across an ocean of sand and water, but we did not want to set off in these directions only to see our child die of thirst and heat-stroke before our very eyes, so we rejected them.

There were two more routes, through the forest and by air. In fact, many people had attempted to escape to freedom both these ways. These two routes seemed to be the easiest of all, but in reality they were the most difficult. They were heavily guarded, and it was here that people perished in the greatest numbers. Yet, knowing this, people still kept attempting to escape.

We had rejected the forest route right away. There was a prohibited zone in the forest, where packs of hunger-crazed dogs prowled. They devoured each other, which made them even more vicious. To negotiate a zone that swarmed with dogs was hardly an easy task, but the main challenge was still to come. Further on there were frontier zones divided off by barbed wire. There were several of these zones, and the last of them was situated above a gigantic ditch that people called the Subterranean Wall of China. That ditch seethed with poisonous snakes. Beyond it lay an unknown land, and everyone believed that on the other side there was a free country and eagerly sought to reach it, forgetting the danger.

There were plenty of resourceful people among the courageous

fugitives. Some of them, the most dexterous, crossed the prohibited zone by making their way from tree to tree with the aid of a rope thrown round the trunks. They had to judge every move carefully, as they were followed all the way by enraged dogs barking crazily and clawing at the trees. If the rope was incorrectly aimed or not firmly attached so that it came away together with the fugitive, a terrible death awaited that person. Even before reaching the ground, he would be torn to pieces by thousands of razor-like jaws.

Then there were the frontier zones to be negotiated. Among the fugitives were people who managed to make strong cages out of wooden poles as thick as a man's arm. They moved along enclosed in the cages, lifting them just off the ground with wooden crossbars. All around them, dogs went wild, rushing at the cages and gnawing at the poles. The adventurers kept them at bay by stabbing them with knives through the narrow gaps between the poles. The wounded dogs yelped in pain and leapt back from the cage; then their brethren, smelling blood, pounced on the wounded and instantly tore them to pieces.

Occasionally fugitives managed to reach the last zone, above the snake pit. They thought they could cast a rope across it, but they couldn't, for one simple reason. The ravenous dogs would not leave them alone even for a second. Time after time they pushed the fugitives and their cages into the pit if they approached it too closely. Blinded by hunger, they themselves plunged into the pit after the people. Nothing remained of the adventurers, and the dogs, too, soon perished from the venomous snake bites.

We could not understand why this hell was so closely guarded, or why it was created. Or why we were obliged to spend our short human lives in it.

To be killed by dogs or to see them tear our child apart—we did not want that either. We were told other amazing things about the dogs. Apparently no other creatures had been bred in the zone beyond the forest for a long time, so the dogs were obliged to eat one another. Sometimes they tore apart unwary bitches and their blind newborn pups who had just come into the world on open terrain.

The dogs aroused disgust in us, and we focused on escaping by plane. Yes, of course, there had been plenty of others just as clever as we were. The first of them had attempted to build flying machines themselves in order to escape to freedom, but they had been mercilessly destroyed in the air. Others had tried bribing pilots—a whole industry had sprung up in this sphere, for there were many entrepreneurs hungry for cash. They were able to make arrangements in the appropriate quarters, and people were willing to pay large sums of money as long as they could fly away.

Frequently everything seemed to be working quite well. The escapees reached the aircraft and took off, rejoicing in their anticipated freedom. But everything ended up very mundanely. The planes landed in open airfields crowded with inquisitive citizens who roared with laughter as the fugitives disembarked and returned to their homes.

They immediately joined the lowest strata of the population, losing all their possessions and their last hope of salvation. We were certain nothing like that would happen to us, as we had arranged that there would be no one on board the aircraft besides the three of us and the pilot. My wife and I had discussed our further plan of action down to the minutest details. Most important for us was to evade the checkpoint, find the aircraft, and take off. But my doubts had begun to grow more and more.

"No," I said to my wife. "It's madness to fly out from here. After all, people have tried to escape by plane before us, but no one has ever heard of anyone managing to do it."

"But if some courageous people did manage to do that, how would anyone find out about it?" my wife inquired, and I had to agree with her. We continued to wait patiently for the appointed hour.

And once more I began to doubt whether our plans could succeed. That final step that we had decided to take if we failed did not seem to me to be a means of salvation. For suicide does not liberate a person. We would not be free even if we perished together, for our bodies and our souls would forever belong to that space from which people could never break free.

"You are faint-hearted. We will break free. Just wait and see," my wife insisted.

I was inspired by the strength of her faith, and I began to convince myself that it would come true. At night I would dream that the appointed time was approaching and that we were being picked up at the agreed place. We successfully avoided the checkpoint, reached the plane, and boarded it. The pilot started up the engine and slowly taxied the plane out to the concrete runway. Then, suddenly, all the security spotlights blinded us, and even above the roar of the engine we could hear the shouts of the guards and the shots they were firing, the barking of dogs and the clatter of steel-capped boots. They were pursuing us from all directions, and we begged the pilot to take off more quickly, but the plane just could not get off the ground. At this point I always woke up and for a long time could not calm my racing pulse.

I didn't tell my wife anything about my dreams. I always recalled the Three Saints, whose faith was so strong that they crossed the gorge through the air, and I kept thinking that we would only ever escape from this space if our faith was like theirs, for my wife's faith alone is not enough. I knew one thing for certain: even if we are destined to remain here, we will always keep trying to escape, however many times we fail in the attempt.

Translated by Patrick Corness and Oksana Bunio

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