

# Blackbird Fly

FREYA COX

The tall green strips of corn were soldiers at attention against the oppressive heat. Then they peeled away to be replaced by yellow blankets of sunflowers, the rows of golden circular heads stretching on and on into the distance. Next came fields shorn so short that only stubbled spikes remained, punctuated by bales of cut hay, the sun glinting off their sides.

It was this very sun that streamed through the glass, heating up the inside of the carriage where we sat sweltering.

Eventually the fields were left behind, as the buildings racing past the window grew more numerous. The city, when it finally appeared, was a hybrid mix of old graceful buildings, white, yellow, or stone, with intricate carvings on their ornate facades, and new brutalist *panelház* built by the Communist regime. They were dark grey squares with rows of dull windows like eyes watching over the city.

I'd been relocated from the country, where I worked in the fields growing wheat, due to my age and the loyalty I had shown throughout my life. I wouldn't say I was loyal so much as compliant. I knew life could be better than this, but I also knew it could be much worse. I would keep my head down and plod along obligingly. I had been doing this for most of my life. And now, a 72-year old widower with two grown sons on the other side of the country, I intended to do it for my remaining years.

I was allocated an apartment in a large grey building, not far from Vörösmarty Square. The buildings surrounding the square were old and elegant like stately middle-aged women, thickset and decked out with lace and frills, sitting firmly in a circle. Dozens of arched windows lined creamy walls with elegant floral decorations. My apartment block sat further back from the square, a hurriedly and cheaply built interloper.

I arrived with my bag of belongings and climbed the stairs to the fourth floor, the rhythmic click of my atrophying knees upon every step. My small apartment was the second last

down the corridor. The walls were paper thin, a nod to their cheap craftsmanship. The neighbours' movements and voices carried through easily. These cheap walls served another purpose. They were a denial of the sanctuary of home, a mechanism by which unheard conversations could be heard and, if deemed worthy of investigation, passed on to the police.

However, this was a step up in life for me. Years of labouring in the countryside were paid homage to by the deep brown of my sun-speckled hands and face, by the deep ache in my joints at the smallest exertion.

I'd grown up in Budapest and worked there as a teacher, but my wife Hanna and I had been relocated to the countryside when Hungary became a socialist republic in 1949. Young and fit, we were considered more use there, where small farms were collectivised into large cooperatives in which many people laboured to produce a plethora of corn, wheat, potatoes, and fruits to feed the country.

Now, decades later, Hanna was dead, our sons worked in Pécs and Tatabánya, and I was being moved back to Budapest for a gentler life, or the remnants of one. My new job was at a desk in a bank, stamping papers and vacantly answering questions that I didn't know the answers to.

In the mornings I would look at the photo of Hanna next to my bed, her blonde hair and easy smile taking me back to when that was the face I woke up to every day. It was just my own face now in the bathroom mirror, grey hair that grew thinner every day, above a squarish face with sagging skin. The hair that was retreating from my head all seemed to be moving to my eyebrows, which stuck up in grey tufts like strange animals.

I shuffled through my job, assuming a disguise of usefulness. If I needed to buy food I would go early, before work, handing over my food tickets to the shop assistant in return for flour and dried meat. Many people left their jobs during the work day to go shopping, knowing the food tickets that had replaced wages would be given to them anyway, but not me. I couldn't decide if I felt loyalty to the system that fed and housed me, or simply didn't have the backbone to play truant.

In the evenings I sat alone in my apartment, eating a poorly cooked meal as my room fell into shadow.

The last apartment in my corridor belonged to a young woman called Katalin. I ran into her a few times in the corridor on my way to or from work. She was dressed in navy blue slacks for factory work, probably packaging or sorting goods. She had pointed cheek bones that were a little too sharp to be classically pretty and dark hair that she kept tied at the nape of her neck.

The jut of her chin and the unapologetic way she looked into your eyes made me think she had some quality I'd always lacked in my life. Grit, maybe. Katalin seemed to be the kind of person who looked the world in the face unflinchingly, without dropping her eyes, no matter what she saw. She appeared as a woman who refused the retreat to a polite smile and vacant nod even when it would have been safest to.

I'd been living in my new apartment a few months when I first heard it. The soft tones of a voice uplifted in song emanated from Katalin's room. It was opportune; it would have been a missed melody should I have been sitting anywhere but next to the open window. I was confused at first – how could a male voice with instrumental accompaniment come from my neighbour's room? Living in the countryside I'd had little exposure to the music young people smuggled into the county; western songs that were banned here and yet drew in the youth with some Pandorian allurements, a desire to listen to the forbidden. They passed these tantalising pieces around on secret recordings.

*Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away*

*Now it looks as though they're here to stay*

*Oh, I believe in yesterday*

*Suddenly, I'm not half the man I used to be*

*There's a shadow hanging over me.*

*Oh, yesterday came suddenly*

*Why she had to go I don't know she wouldn't say*

*I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday*

I knew what Katalin was playing was illegal, but I couldn't deny the song moved me. It was a resurgence of buried vignettes; the feel of Hanna's palms warm in mine, always dry from working on the farm. I uncurled my empty fist and stared at it, surprised by the sting in my eyes and the lump in my throat.

Over the next few weeks I'd sometimes hear the music playing after dinner. I kept my window propped open, even when the cold weather started to creep in, hoping I might catch more stirring strains of song.

Sometimes Katalin would sing along softly. I don't know whether she didn't think she would be overheard, or whether she did not care, but her singing kept me company.

*So let it out and let it in, hey Jude, begin*

*You're waiting for someone to perform with*

*And don't you know that it's just you, hey Jude, you'll do*

One evening, when Katalin finished, trailing off with a quiet *nah nah nah nah*, I raised my hands and clapped lightly, right by the open window, my claps soft pitter patters lost in the night bar the acute ears I knew waited at the next window along. The music stopped. I waited, eventually resigning to the silence. I wondered if I had frightened her as I closed the window. But the next night her music was back, and once again I clapped at the end of a song, craving the connection, the release. This time she didn't turn the music off, instead playing one more song.

*Picture yourself in a boat on a river*

*With tangerine trees and marmalade skies*

*Somebody calls you, you answer quite slowly*

*A girl with kaleidoscope eyes*

Sitting at my desk during the day I would sometimes smile thinking of a song I had listened to the night before. Listening to illegal music was something for the young and daring, not for old widowers. But, alas, it made me feel sprightly and alive again.

It was a Tuesday night when they came for her. I was in bed reading, red woolen bed socks on against the cold that insistently stole under my door.

I heard men's voices raised in anger first, loud through the thin walls like they were standing right by my bed.

'Open this door right now!'

'It is night time. What are you doing?' Katalin's voice retaliated, rising to clash with theirs. Their yells drowned her out.

'You are an enemy of the state! Come with us.'

There were a number of harsh crashes from her room. I heard footsteps retreating back down the hallway.

After waiting for ten minutes I pushed open my door and peered down the corridor. The door to her apartment hung open like a strip of flesh from a gaping wound. I wondered uneasily if she thought it was me, that I had turned her in to the secret police.

It was lonely without those songs to keep me company in the evening. I'd never been one to object to the goings on of the state. But I couldn't get Katalin off my mind. I was haunted by the vision of bruises appearing on her pale skin, her lips which sung so softly split and bleeding, her fierce eyes turning dull.

Before work on Thursday I left the apartment early, heading for the building where the secret police notoriously took people for questioning.

'Jó reggelt,' I greeted the man at the gate. 'I am looking for Katalin Oláh. I believe she was arrested on Tuesday.'

The guard frowned at me from under his green cap. 'Why are you looking for her?'

'She is my neighbour. I believed her to be a good upstanding citizen.'

'Show me your ID.'

I handed him my ID.

He scrutinized it, then gave it back.

'There is no one here for you to talk to today.'

I came back every day for the next week.

Everything in me railed against getting involved like this. But there was something deeper. Something that railed against leaving Katalin there.

Eventually I was granted a moment with a police officer. I sat in his office, with its battered metal furniture and books that didn't look like they had been opened in years. The officer pulled up my record. With a bored shrug he informed me that Katalin had been arrested because illegal music was heard coming from her room.

He shook his head in disappointment. 'I'm sure a loyal citizen such as yourself would be disgusted by this immoral behaviour.'

I don't know why I did what I did next. Maybe it's because I'm old, because I'm tired of living in a world without Hanna. Maybe after years of obeying I wanted to do something right before death beckoned. Maybe I wanted to be brave. Or maybe I was just too cowardly to face going back to that apartment and sitting in silence by myself every night for the rest of my life.

'You're wrong. It was me. I was the one who was played the music.'

As if to prove it to him I started singing. Watching the officer's face grow red with anger, I jutted my chin out and I sang what remained of my life away.

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night*

*Take these broken wings and learn to fly*

*All your life*

*You were only waiting for this moment to arise*

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night*

*Take these sunken eyes and learn to see*

*All your life*

*You were only waiting for this moment to be free*

*Blackbird fly, blackbird fly*

*Into the light of the dark black night.*

