

The Puppet Theater

György Dragomán, translated by Otilie Mulzet

Olgi says she's going to take me somewhere and show me something I've never seen before. We walk through a door into an inner courtyard, then from there into another one, then into a third one, where there is a wire fence. Olgi knows where the fence can be lifted, she picks it up, holds it, I slip through, then I hold it up while she slips through the fence.

We are now in front of two large iron doors. No matter how much I ask Olgi where she's taking me, she doesn't answer, all she says is that I won't regret coming. We are about to see something we've never seen before. She places the palm of her hand on the iron door painted blue and beats out a rhythm on it, not haphazardly, but with three long and two short beats; she repeats this many times.

Nothing happens. I want to suggest that we leave, or if she doesn't want to, then I'll go, but suddenly I hear the clattering sound of a bolt pulled on the other side of the door, then a second and third. The door slowly opens a crack, a fat face with a quivering double chin, a stubby nose, and angry eyes looks out at me, the voice is harsh and raspy as it speaks to me, saying, What are you doing here—but before I can speak, the face changes, a smile spreads across it: Olgika, is that you? So you came, welcome, come in quickly, before they see you here.

Olga greets her, I kiss your hand, Godmother, then she says that she's also brought a friend. The fat woman nods, Fine, Olgika, that's fine. She opens the door, she leads us into a fluorescent-lit space smelling like mint tea, then she quickly closes the door behind us, pushes the bolts back in place, and at the same time murmurs in a raspy voice: Oh, but it's so good that you came, my little Olgika, you have to see this, the opening will be on Monday, but everything's prepared already, everything's in place, she says, all while leading us through a labyrinth of crates and boxes piled up on top of one another.

The air is full of strange scents: mint, washing powder, plastic, earth, fresh paint, all mixed up together—it's nauseating and cold. The fluorescent lights hiss and vibrate, I know that my head is going to start aching in a moment, as if we had already been winding in and out of these crates and boxes for a long time. From above, from the direction of the ceiling, there is a soft creaking sound, and as I look up I see that high above, meters above the crates

and the boxes there are huge puppets hanging down—paper birds with outspread wings, an owl-headed horse with red wings, a many-headed dragon, a violinist with a green head and a black coat, a sun, a moon, stars, clouds, a tractor, a cat wearing gardening pants and a miner's helmet.

I nudge Olgi to look up. She does and is so surprised that she bumps into one of the crates, which then makes a rattling sound. The fat woman looks up as well, and she croaks, Yes, these puppets are still here, and a few of the old stage decorations, too, but don't worry about that, because this hasn't been a puppet theater for a long time, it's something much more fantastic now. The whole place has been transformed, the front hall, the theater, everything.

We come out from among the crates, walking alongside a wheelbarrow, then we reach another door, as the woman pushes open the double-leafed door, there is soft music, I recognize it, "The Blue Danube," it's playing in some kind of extended electronic version, the woman says, Look at this, you've never seen anything like this before. She grabs our shoulders and shoves us through the door.

The sharp white light blinds me for a moment, I look around, squinting, I see that Olgi and I are standing in the middle of a large self-service department store. Everything is packed with gigantic shelves, the colored boxes nearly tumbling off, I see large, thick bars of chocolate, packs of chewing gum piled up in heaps, bags of candy, cake boxes, canned goods, one-kilo tins of coffee, huge packages of laundry powder, cigarette cartons, and there are ten, one hundred, one thousand varieties of each item, and fruit juices—orange, apple, lemon, grape—in enormous boxes.

I look at everything, I can't move, I hear Olgi snort next to me as if she has suddenly been hit in her solar plexus, I, too, sense that I can't catch my breath, I feel that all these items will collapse on me any moment now, they'll bury me, but at the same time I think about going over to one of the shelves, the first one I can reach, the closest one, grabbing a bag of candy, ripping it open, and snatching up its contents, not to eat, but because I want to see if there's really candy inside, and if there was really candy inside, then I would rip open another one, and one after that, all of them, and I would unwrap all the chocolate bars, and the chewing gum, everything, all the boxes, all the bags, even the ones filled with items I don't recognize, I would open up every single package and rip out the contents.

I imagine how all these things would flow between my fingers, the colored wrapping papers ripping open, making crackling noises, the snap-snap of the cellophane tearing, and

all the while I hear Olgi's godmother murmuring behind us, saying that this is a real hypermarket, the very first one in the city. There's everything here, everything that exists under the sun, everything, but really everything, thirty different kinds of toothpaste, eight different kinds of butter, fifteen different kinds of cheese, sausages, salamis, hams, and so many types of soap that even if we used a different kind to wash our hands every day, we would still have enough for at least two months until we had tried them all, and there is much more of each item, not just what's displayed on the shelves, but an infinite amount, transported here on trucks packed to the gills.

She talks about the jams, the toilet paper, the tinned fish, chocolate creams, There is everything, and there will be everything, because from now on there will always be everything, she pronounces these words as if they were a prayer, as if she didn't even believe them herself, as if she were trying to persuade herself of something nonetheless true, in a hoarse voice, to the tune of the Blue Waltz, she sings of the milk in boxes and the vacuum-sealed coffee, before she could never have even imagined that such things exist, she sings of cocoa powder that already contains milk and sugar, you only need to add water and it's ready to drink, she chants how she thinks all of this plenitude did not come into existence only recently, but that it always existed, even when we couldn't get any of it, even when the shops here were completely empty, and you could never get anything, people were ready to murder each other just for the one kind of plum preserves and tinned fish that you could get, she doesn't want to think about it, but she can't think of anything else, that's why she wanted us to come and see it for ourselves, because she has been among these shelves for almost two weeks now, she stacked them with her own hands, but never will she be able to grasp the entirety of it. Perhaps she's already too old for this, perhaps it's too late for her, because all she can think about is what it was like when there was nothing, when you had to steal and cheat and lie for a bit of cornmeal, and as she says this, suddenly she begins to sob, she sobs loudly, blubbing like a child, nearly choking on the tears, she says that she did it all for us, she did it only for us, so that we could have all of this, so that all of this would be ours.

She steps over to Olgi and embraces her, with her thick arms she squeezes Olgi into her, Olgi embraces her back, she's crying now, too, tottering, they stagger in front of the shelves, there is a large bar of chocolate in the godmother's hands, she rips off the lilac-colored paper and the foil, breaking off large pieces and shoving them into Olgi's mouth, Eat, my little dove, eat, she blubbers, she, too, bites into the chocolate, I see

half-eaten currants and hazelnuts in the chocolate, the marks of the godmother's teeth, they eat the chocolate, clutching one another, tottering.

I turn my back to them, and I walk among the shelves, I'm standing in front of cans of pineapple preserves, there's also apricot, mandarin, and mango. I reach over and take one, I let it drop, I reach for another one, and I let that one drop as well, I think of the teacher with the red hair who took us girls into the city once, and we stood in front of a small shop, and for the first time I saw shelves full of items, and the red-haired teacher pressed a fiver into everyone's hand, and she said we could buy whatever we wanted, I bought a package of big chocolate balls for four, I thought there'd also be chocolate on the inside, but then when I bit into one, it turned out that on the inside there was sweet pink-colored cotton candy, it was sweeter than anything I'd ever eaten, so much so that my tongue and my entire mouth began to ache, and the candy was so dry that I could only eat one—now I feel the exact same sweetness in my throat, the exact same unbearable sweetness. I let the tin cans drop, I will only take one can of orange preserves, I think of the horse puppet with its owl head and its wings that I saw flying above the boxes, I want it to come for me, to put me on its back, to take me away from here. I open my arms wide, and I think that I'm not here, I run on the white-tiled floor, among the rainbow-colored shelves, full to the point of nausea.

—Translated from the Hungarian by Otilie Mulzet