



*Sándor Árkai*

**OUR STREET**

TRANSLATED BY  
JUDITH SOLLÓSY

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**SÁNDOR TAR**

**OUR STREET**

## UNCLE VIDA

The street is waiting for the mailman. His cheeks are ruddy and he has a moustache; he wears a blue uniform and a green cape with a small red ribbon pinned to it. Around here unruly horses get ribbons like this tied to the harness, so people should beware & not stroke them. The mailman does his rounds on a motorbike with a sidecar, and he doesn't have to be offered a drink anymore either, like before. Before, he did his rounds on a bicycle and people were expected to offer him a glass of pálinka or wine that he'd gulp down after a show of reluctance. And he'd take the tip, too, which came to twenty or thirty forints, a veritable fortune around here, with pensions being what they are. By noontime he couldn't sit on his bike, just push it along. Yes, ma'am, yes, sir, he'd holler when asked, tomorrow. You'll have it tomorrow! Fine, dearie, fine, but bring it in the morning before it gets as hot as it is now! If he staggered & fell he was dragged into a nearby house, rested a bit, then continued his rounds. In the afternoon he works as a hired hand, he plows the land with a horse, takes on shipments, prunes the vine. He's respected, because he's a hard worker, & nobody has ever stolen from him.

The street consists of thirty to forty houses on the village outskirts. At the upper end of the street there's a pub and a bus stop. Half the people are retired or live off of unemployment, how they manage nobody knows, least of all themselves. The houses are of varying sizes, some big, some small, each with a small garden. Some people even own a bit of land, but what's the use, Uncle Vida says, when regardless of what you grow, there are no takers. The state had the cows butchered, while those that kept theirs now have to milk them & feed them & spread the dung. As for the milk, nobody wants that either, and fattening a pig's not worth it, the fodder costs money, and then the slaughterhouse, they either take it or not, and for what? For peanuts. Besides, an animal's not like TV, you can't switch it off and go vacationing or to the movies or whatnot. The livestock's gotta be fed, Sundays & holidays included. Animals get hungry. Sunday. Every day. Several times a day. People don't think about that.

Uncle Vida is a well-read man, and sensible. He's just turned seventy. He owns five holds of land, a vineyard, a horse, a cart. He grows corn, sunflower, cabbage. He'd like to take his apples to market, too, but these days people won't eat anything but oranges & bananas, he says. He says that in the spring he buys cabbage seedlings for two or three forints a piece, and come fall, a head will fetch no more at the market than the seedling price, provided anybody wants it, of course, whereas it

needs tending year round, hoeing and watering and sprinkling with insecticides, and even so it either turns out all right, or not. It's the same with everything, Uncle Vida says. I can't eat it all myself, he says, and what I don't grow, I have to buy. Like bread. And shoes. And there's the electric bill, the water, taxes. Everything. Everything costs money. But where am I to get it, Uncle Vida asks. I don't have a pension. I wouldn't mind selling things now and then, he says, but who'd buy them? People don't have money. I don't know what's to come of this, he says.

This is Crooked Street, he says. It winds around, & that's what we always called it, crooked, even when it went by other names. It's been called Ságvári,<sup>1</sup> and now Radnóti,<sup>2</sup> except nobody calls it that, not even the mailman or the chimney sweep. Nobody. When anybody comes asking for it by name, people take a good look at him, then ask who he'd be wanting. People around here don't know street numbers, Uncle Vida says, not even their own. The other day Aunt Kiss said to the doctor, doctor, dearie, what do I have to know the street number for? I can find my way home without it.

This is a hillside. It used to reach down to the stream, but there's nothing there now except a thicket. It's dried up. My father and the others used to go fishing there. Things were different back then, Uncle Vida says. As for the street, it took shape just like all the others. A cart drove along, then a second, and then a third, the tenth,

the thousandth, each driving along the groove. There was plenty of mud for adobe. Today some houses have split levels. And there's even a concrete sidewalk, but only on the upper side. When it rains the water runs down to the side below, says Uncle Vida. For those that live there it's bad, he says, and there's lots of bickering, because the people living above dig grooves to divert the water and the hogs stand belly-deep in it and the rugs come floating out into the yard. But it's been some time since we've had that sort of rain, he says.

Our fathers and grandfathers could still manage to give a piece of land to each of their children, & a house, Uncle Vida says. We were expected to add to it, work hard so we could pass something on to our children, too. But that's not how it turned out. The co-op came<sup>3</sup> & the young people left empty handed to work in the mines or on construction sites, or at the foundry. Most of them never came back, Uncle Vida says. Then those that were born after them left, too. They went off to school, the factories, Debrecen, Pešt. Wherever. And now they're trooping back, hungry and penniless. They drink and loaf about. They play cards. They live off the old folk & wait for the mailman. Some wait for their relief, others for their pension. Money. They're all waiting for money. Then when the money comes, it's payback time, oh yes, each man what he owes the other. Misi's pub, the shop, Sarkadi, Pintér. Three houses sell wine and pálinka, Uncle Vida says, on credit, otherwise they couldn't get

rid of it. It's poor wine, it's bad wine. They make hedge wine from the rape and add it to the wine. By Easter it's pure mold. Then they skim the top off, add sulfur and sugar, and sell it by the glass or bottle. They ask a stiff price, but considering that people can't pay anyway, what's the harm? Strong, good looking young men stand around under this window looking out or idle about outside with nothing to do. Nobody wants to do the raking anymore, Uncle Vida says, or milk the cow, or feed the pigs. They won't sit atop a cart neither. They'd rather walk alongside or ride a bike. At home, they bicker with their wives or parents. They get divorced. There's all these handsome new houses, some with six rooms and split levels, burdened with mortgages, and the head of the household out of work, and there are children, too, they signed a contract to have them and got promised the moon,<sup>4</sup> and now there's nothing, just the shit hitting the fan. Then after a while the wife gets fed up and wants a divorce. That's how things stand today. And the houses, Uncle Vida says, they're up for sale. But whose gonna buy them, he says.

Uncle Vida's wife died four years ago, come Christmas. Every death and accident in the family happened on Christmas, Uncle Vida says, and he wouldn't mind if he never saw another Christmas as long as he lived. First it was his brother. He was shaving when all of a sudden he sat down & said, oh my god. But by then his head was blue, then it went black. He was gone just like that,

sitting on a chair. His leg, too, got broke on Christmas. The pig pressed it against the fence & refused to budge.

Uncle Vida lives with his son, but everybody knows that it's his illness that brought him back. He used to work in Diósgyőr,<sup>5</sup> but after a time the fumes and the smoke ruined his lungs, but the real problem is that his wife walked out on him when he was taken ill, Uncle Vida says. His mind is sick, too, he says, it's his nerves, damn it, that's why he won't get well. They had a car & an apartment. Everything. And now he's just sitting there, Uncle Vida says, or lying in bed ill with nobody to talk to him, not so much as a handshake. He can't go out or visit people because he's got trouble with his lungs. He's not contagious, Uncle Vida says, they said so in the hospital, or they wouldn't have let him out. But even so. We took him everywhere you can think of, Uncle Vida says, before his wife left him. We paid through the nose. We gave money to them all in the hospital, even the elevator man. He can't sleep and he can't stay awake. At night he gags and coughs like the devil. I get up, go sit next to him, try to help him up. Then, half way in my lap, he dozes off like that, like a child. I took him to Doctor Szabó in the village, he's an old man, retired, to find out what's wrong. I'll give you ten thousand forints, I said, if you make him better, twenty if you tell me the truth. If you cure him, you can ask for the moon. Mr. Vida, the doctor said, don't waste your money. Your son won't ever recover. Give him whatever he wants. He hasn't got

much time left. Just like that. In short, we all got our cross to bear. Mine is this. I can still work, even at my age, but this, this I can't handle, Uncle Vida says. I kept telling my wife, look, we need two or three more children, that's the real thing. But no. She may have been right, of course. For all we know, she said, we won't be able to bring even this one up properly. It was wartime and I was at the front. There was no guarantee I'd be back, Uncle Vida says. And now, this. There's no telling, ever, what the future holds.

I don't take anybody inside my house, not even into the yard, I don't want people saying it was me that made them sick, Uncle Vida says. I wash and cook & clean. My house is as neat as anybody's. Inside and out. But people won't shake hands with me anymore either, Uncle Vida says. The Harap boy says to me the other day, don't take it to heart Uncle Vida, he says, but I got my child to consider. Fine, I say to him, you go do that, but you don't know who drank from your glass or bottle in the pub before you, do you? It could've been me. Or the Dorogi boy's horse, because that's his bit of fun.

Every day, I take my boy two liters of red wine from Mrs. Sarkadi, Uncle Vida says, because she sells good wine. To me, at any rate. What would you like to eat, I ask my boy. And drink. But he won't eat. Just the wine, the wine, that he forces down. And nothing else. I'd gladly bring him more wine, but he won't drink it. Sometimes he can't even keep the two liters down.

He won't drink my wine either, just this. Doctor Szabó said, too, that red is better for him. We get on nice and quiet, who knows for how much longer. If there'd be somebody that could pass his illness on to me and my life on to him, I'd kiss his hand. But there's no such man.

When he got married, Uncle Vida built himself a house out of mud and wattle & beams. Back then, his house was the fifth on the street. Nice dry walls half a meter thick, the partitions thinner, warm in winter, cool in summer. There was an oven, too, but he dismantled it when the local shop started selling bread and it didn't have to be made at home anymore. There was nothing to make it from anyway. You can climb up to the attic from the porch, but there's nothing there. A shed with corn, a stable, pigpens, a small garden in front of the house. In summer gladiolas bloom there, and other things, too, perennials that Uncle Vida's wife had planted. They come up by themselves every year. Outside, by the fence, there's a small bench. It's nice to sit there & smoke & watch the world go by. Everything's just fine, considering.

## JANCSI HESZ

I'm an Antall boy.<sup>6</sup> I used to work at the Bearings Plant, Jancsi Hesz says when the mood's on him. Sitting at a table at Misi's place, he sweeps the money into his palm and when it's his turn, he deals. The pub's got a proper name, but people on our street just call it Misi's, after the proprietor, who usually sits at one of the tables himself and is everybody's friend. His wife behind the counter gets aggravated sometimes. Misi! Misi, my pet! she yells, May the Good Lord slam the fuckin' graveyard door in your face. I asked you for five cases of beer. Who do you think you are? The guest of honor?

The pub doesn't get a lot of customers, but at least they're steady. The cassette player is blaring upstairs, the Misi boy is testing the volume. The pub, the garage, and the storeroom are on the ground floor. Up front there's a small patch of a garden with grass and a tall willow with tables under it. But Misi's customers don't sit outside, even in summer, because they don't want people to see. Jancsi Hesz is one of the regulars. Each time he comes in it's just for a quick drink, then he ends up staying, either because he spots somebody he knows, or hopes to. He waits and sips his drink. Sometimes he orders another round, or maybe a beer as a chaser. He chats with Misi's wife. At this time in the morning, Misi is busy slagging the furnace or packing stuff into cases in the storeroom.

He takes a swig or two from a well-hidden bottle. He's fuming mad. He hates the fact that it's morning again and would give his right arm to be out of a job, like Jancsi Hesz, who has nothing to do all day but wait for the mailman.

Jancsi Hesz is always short on time, but then he always ends up staying. I'll just win this one last game, he says, then I'm off. They're expecting me. He's short on time in the shop where he pockets a small bottle of pálinka, & he's short on time at Mrs. Sarkadi's, where he has his own glass, because he won't drink after just anybody, there's a consumptive in the street, though he won't say who, he wouldn't do a thing like that. Still, you never know... He's short on time at Pintér's, too; he's just dropped by for a quick drink, he says, it tastes like cod liver oil, but never mind, I'll have another. Let's see if it's any better. By then he's taken a seat, though, but just for a minute, he says, because of the heat. Then he goes back to Mrs. Sarkadi. She's a good listener, you can unburden yourself to her. But only when nobody else is around. If there's anybody around, he stops by the door, waiting, drinking wine, hoping they'll go away & then maybe he can ask her for a loan of two hundred forints. Or a thousand. Jancsi Hesz won't drink on credit. He won't have anybody put his name down in some damn book. He'd rather break in someplace. Whenever he stands in the door drinking his wine and smoking and not talking to anybody, Aunt Piroska knows that

something's weighing on his mind. If the others don't leave, he'll leave, then come back later and get it off his chest. I didn't want to, not in front of the others, he says, excusing himself, and his cheeks are on fire. Once he told Aunt Piroška that he loves her more than his own mother.

Jancsi Hesz has a grownup son and daughter, both married, two small grandchildren, a wife and a mother-in-law that lives on the same plot with them, though in a separate house with a room & a kitchen. But given half a chance, she's over at their place sticking her nose into everything, even how often Jancsi Hesz should sleep with his wife, because their little boy could use some mothering, too, now and then, she says. Jancsi Hesz's wife works in the co-op office, but what she does he couldn't say for sure. Only that they steal and embezzle. This is what he tells Aunt Piroška, but only when nobody's around to hear. Don't tell anybody, he says, but I'm ashamed. Ashamed of the goings on here. Now that the co-op is falling apart at the seams,<sup>7</sup> they're selling everything. They've turned half the countryside into a sand mine. They felled the trees, cleared the woods, sold the stables, even, for construction timber. Whatever they could get their hands on. They picked out the best machines from the equipment park and sold them to the engineer Kásás & three others, dirt cheap. Anyway, that's what the people in the village say. They also picked out two-hundred hectares of land. They're going to turn it into a private enterprise to grow melon. Also, now that

it's got an owner, it can't be given away as compensation land anymore.<sup>8</sup> Jancsi Hesz thinks that Kásás and the others are screwing his wife. What did you say, Aunt Piroška asks. She's not familiar with such words. They sleep with her, Jancsi Hesz says, his face burning with shame. Your wife, she's not that type, Aunt Piroška says by way of comfort, but she doesn't add what everybody knows, that Évike is so fat & ugly, Kásás wouldn't want her. Nor the others. Their daughter is another matter. She's a sight better looking, and younger, too, & she's working in the greenhouse, to be on hand. When they learned about her condition, they quickly married her off to a tractor driver, and the baby was born premature. But only compared to the wedding, of course.

Jancsi Hesz started working at the Bearings Plant as an unskilled laborer, but he was good with his hands, they tried him out here and there, and were satisfied. He became a locksmith, then he was transferred to machine maintenance, then he mastered engine mechanics. He was at the top of the heap. When he got laid off, they promised to take him back first thing. He shouldn't bother looking for work, they'll call him. He can hold steady till then. Jancsi Hesz hasn't taken off his work clothes since. He's still wearing them, as if he'd just popped out of the plant on a quick errand. When there's anything tricky, they always send for me, he tells Aunt Piroška, because she believes him. He doesn't socialize much with the people here. He's not like them.

When they play cards, he usually wins. It takes brains. He filled up somebody's engine with a hundred percent anti-freeze and by spring the stuff corroded the cooler, or so people say, but he says that that wasn't the problem, except he's not gonna explain, they wouldn't understand. Sometimes he hops on the bus to Debrecen. I gotta go, he says to Aunt Piroaska, they sent for me because they're in deep shit. Then he adds, it's the diesel. Aunt Piroaska nods. Sure, sure. Then she pours him another drink. Now go, she says, drink it & go. Just don't write it down, he says, I'll be back with the money. I won't, Aunt Piroaska nods, then closes the door. Then she takes out her small notebook and writes, J. Hesz 2 x 3 decis. That's around two thousand forints, including the loans. Aunt Piroaska sighs.

Over at Misi's, Jancsi Hesz gulps down a shot of pálinka. He's short on time, he says, the bus'll be here any minute. They're stuck, so they sent for him. I'll drop in on the way back, he says, & pay for everything. Behind the counter Esztike grimaces and says, I hope so, János, I certainly hope so. You owe us for yesterday, too. Don't worry, I'll be back, he says, and hurries off, because he's always short on time. Who could've come up with the rumor about him and Esztike, he's thinking. He helped her on the bus because there's an iron rail above the steps and Esztike's behind got stuck & he pushed from below so she could squeeze through. Some half-wit saw and told everybody he petted Esztike's behind on

the bus. That's what people here are like. His wife gave him hell and moved her stuff to the office, and for two months Jancsi Hesz lived on scrambled eggs. He didn't know how to make anything else. And to make matters worse, his neighbor Béres saw him over the fence one night go to his mother-in-law, who squealed like a stuck pig when she saw him approach in his underpants. Béres thought he'd go over to help him out in case he couldn't manage the old hag by himself, but he couldn't move because he was standing in the pigsty just then, and his boots were stuck in the manure. It was a good story and people had a good laugh over it at Misi's, and also at Aunt Piroška's and the shop, too, not that anybody believed it. You dreamed it up, Aunt Piroška told Béres. By that time of the night you're as drunk as my arse. Which was true.

In Debrecen, the bus stopped at the railroad crossing to let Jancsi Hesz off. From there the Bearings Plant was just a couple of minutes' walk. At the plant Jancsi Hesz always tries to get the janitor to let him in. He should call maintenance if he doesn't believe him, he says. He got an urgent call in the morning, because the diesels are his responsibility, he says. Or something similar. Go on, call Kulcsár. He's in charge. When that doesn't work, he says, fine, but somebody's gonna have to take the responsibility, because there's gonna be trouble. He's going home, he says, it's no skin off his back, but they better put it in writing that he showed up. And they'd better

remember to put down the exact time, too, because somebody around here is gonna be sorry. Then back home he tells Aunt Piroska it was nothing, just the feeder, it got clogged up. They don't know what they're doing. It barely took five minutes, so naturally, I wouldn't take the money. Then he asks her for two hundred forints, sometimes a thousand. Tomorrow they're bringing me a car to fix, he says. It's a big job. It's gonna pay well. Now that they know where to find me, they'll be coming and I'll break even, you'll see. Just don't tell the others.

Sometimes his mother-in-law Terka sneaks over in her rubber boots, darting looks right and left, making sure nobody sees. Their house is practically across the street, and Jancsi Hesz is always sitting by the window. Don't give him anymore to drink, she tells Aunt Piroska. He just smashed the glass door with his fist. He also tried to scratch my eye out just because I put kindling in the furnace. It's getting so I can't do anything. I have to sneak into the house to see my own daughter and grandchild. Well, don't meddle, Aunt Piroska says, why stoke up the furnace? You got a decent place of your own. Leave them be. They're young. Let them live their own lives. Sure, sure, Terka says, except they'll freeze to death. If I don't feed the furnace, nobody does, and that little boy needs to do his homework, if only he could. When she comes home from work, Évike also likes a warm house.

Lean and slightly stooped, Terka sneaks along the street like a thief, as if expecting to be yelled at. She

tries not to make any noise, but her outsized boots flap against her thin calves, and she smiles and nods right and left, because she knows that the others are sitting by their window, watching. Then there's only the yard to cross. She's hoping Jancsi Hesz won't spot her. Her small house is in the back of the yard, but when her son-in-law has one of his crazy fits, that short stretch of yard is the longest in the world. The dog leaps up at her. He's happy and wants to play, and it leaves big muddy lines down her dress. Get away, she whispers, get away from me, you goddamn dog, may the devil take you, with all the rest of them.

**IT'S MORNING**

Aunt Piroska is a good soul, she knows how to portion out the early-morning wine. She gets up at the crack of dawn, which is another good thing about her; by five she's tending to the chickens out in the yard. Béres is waiting outside the front door, shivering with cold. You're up already, the old, gray-haired woman comments, then lets him in. I've been up for hours, the tall, bony man says. His face is heavy with stubble, but he hasn't shaved for weeks and won't until the trembling stops. Aunt Piroska takes out a three-deci glass and pours him two decis of wine. Béres usually drinks three decis and takes a liter home with him. But in the morning that's not how things work. Aunt Piroska turns her back, puts kindling on the fire, or goes to the pantry, while Béres gets hold of his glass with both hands, and tries to bring it to his lips. These are difficult moments; he has to lean down to it. Even his legs are trembling. Aunt Piroska pretends she doesn't see. She keeps busy, tells him things, pours the dirty water out of the washbowl, then fills up the bottle for him. Meanwhile, Béres manages to drink his wine, and he doesn't even spill much. He gets two more decis in his glass, and this time has less difficulty drinking it. Hesz is standing around outside in front of the door. He won't go inside with a cigarette, he'd rather smoke it first. Nobody else would be this thoughtful.

Sudák is approaching from the lower end of the street. He's wearing a leather coat with a two-liter bottle hidden under it. This makes him hold his hand in an odd way, as if people didn't know he was going for wine, and on credit, too. Jancsi Hesz waits for Béres to finish his business inside, but it takes time, so Aunt Piroska calls out to him to come in and not wait outside. This early in the morning, the choreography is tight. Béres out, Jancsi Hesz in, Aunt Piroska sizes him up, then pours, filling his glass either all the way or halfway, depending. Sometimes Jancsi Hesz also needs both hands to bring the glass to his lips. By the time Sudák comes in with a resounding hello, Jancsi Hesz is on his way out. He's got no time to spare, but he lights up again outside, telling Sudák not to go in with his.

Sudák tries to keep up with the fast pace of events. He knows that people have things to do in the morning. His hand to his heart, he apologizes for his presence right, left, and center. At one time he was a folk dancer. Nobody around here has ever seen him dance, but that's neither here nor there. There may be something to it, though, because he's let his hair grow, and he even has a mustache. Getting ready for Parliament?,<sup>9</sup> Dorogi asked him once, your hair's like a toilet brush. Sudák snaps his heels together & has a refined way of talking. He never swears, he just says things like "I'll be darn doodled," or "Beelzebub take you!", then hastens to apologize. He's occupied, not busy, like the rest of

the people around here. I was in Pešť, he explains, with the troupe. We danced in front of ministers and generals. They must've been fuckin' shit drunk, Dorogi once said, 'cause they haven't seen you dance neither. Dorogi always had a big mouth on him. You got a big mouth on you, Sudák has said many a time. If you don't mind my saying. You mustn't talk like that in front of Aunt Pirike. A brother, he says at other times, you're like a brother to me, and he puts his hand to his heart. I swear. Isn't that so, Aunt Pirike?, he asks. She couldn't say why, but Aunt Piroška doesn't like being called Pirike. Still, she says nothing. Go on, get out, she says when she's had enough of her customers, finish your drinks and go. It's late, and I'm sleepy. Time to disband.

In the morning, though, it's not a problem. They just drop in and are gone. The small shop next door opens at seven. Aunt Piroška is the first one in. She buys bread and milk and gets rid of all her change. She charges twenty forints for a glass of wine. Pintér charges twenty-five, but he fills each glass to the brim, and that comes to more than three decis. Still, nobody goes to him in the morning. Who could lift a full glass to his lips so early in the day? Pintér serves pálinka, too, but there's no knowing what's in it. He's got no fruit trees & no grapevines, or barely any; still, he's never short of wine. That's what's making all of you sick, Aunt Piroška tells her customers, that damned pálinka. Pintér also sells salt sticks & you can play cards and chess, but he often cheats on the

bill because he drinks along with his customers and gets muddled about how much people drank, so he rounds it off. He's dull-witted, Jancsi Hesz commented once, that's his problem. And also, he drinks.

At home, Sudák rehearses in front of the mirror. He raises a glass of water to his lips and practices, even though wine, that's different, of course. He holds out his arm. Good. But when he takes one sip at Aunt Piroška's, his hand shakes so bad, he practically drops the glass. Also, the shaking won't stop, so he's got to steady the glass with the other hand. That helps. He's grateful the old woman isn't looking. I can't drink it all at once, he says, putting his hand to his heart. I'm sorry. Something got caught in my throat. Meanwhile, Uncle Vida is waiting outside. He wants to take wine home for his son, but he won't drink any himself, it's too early in the day for that. Also, he's not about to drink out of a glass, he won't have people saying he's come to infect them with his son's disease. He's got his own wine. Still, he wouldn't mind having a drink someplace now and then, and chat and smoke a cigarette and pour his heart out. He's got plenty to complain about. Once Sudák is gone, he tells the others that his son is so helpless, he's got to be bathed and scrubbed down. All over. And also, he had no idea till now what tuberculosis is like. When he gives his son a rubdown with warm water, it stands up straight as a pole, poor boy, when there's hardly any life left in him! He barely touches him with the washcloth, and it

stands right up. Aunt Piroška's stomach turns at hearing such things, and she says so. Please don't say things like that. It's awful. Just like that? Just from the warm water? Uncle Vida could tell her a thing or two about that, and other things, too, but Aunt Piroška won't have it. It's disgusting. They're more or less the same age, not that it makes any difference at their time of life. Aunt Piroška is hoping he'll leave soon because Dorogi's coming, and so is Veres, and it's best if they don't find him here. Sudák is standing outside the shop with a cigarette, waiting for it to open.

Aunt Piroška's house stands on one corner, the shop on the other, and between them a narrow dirt path leads down to the stream. The stream is dried up. Even in rainy weather there's nothing in it but mud and frogs. This time Uncle Vida leaves through the front door just as Dorogi enters through the back. A great big hulk of a man with a thick voice and a red face, he starts by asking, was that Vida? Yes, Aunt Piroška says, why do you ask? Why is he sneaking around like that? Isn't the door other people use good enough for him? Aunt Piroška says nothing, she just wipes the door handle instead, so they can see. All right, come on in everybody, she says. His son's got cancer, not tuberculosis, Dorogi announces after a while, then sits down. Except these retards think it's tuberculosis. Lungs! Lungs! Veres says nothing, he remains standing, & he drinks. I wouldn't know about that, Aunt Piroška says. Still, I told him it'd be best if

he didn't come. I give him a bottle, but never a glass. People won't drink after him, and if I'm not careful, they'll stop coming. Dorogi says he's told everybody the truth, but people are like Aunt Piroska says. As if that weren't enough for him. He's gotta be bathed, like a child. Is that so, Aunt Piroska says, as if she was hearing it for the first time. And when I think how bullish he was when he was young, Dorogi goes on, he'd do it to a fly in mid-flight! In mid-flight! And now, just look at him. His father holds him in his arm and strokes it with his soapy hand. But I better not say anymore, though I see everything from next door, through the back window. They fall silent for a while, what's there to say? Then Veres also asks for two glasses of wine and says, that's life. From the outside, all houses look alike. A fence, a yard, and so on. But what's inside the fence, you don't know unless you live there. Then they finish their drinks and Dorogi says, okay, let's get moving. Time waits for no man. For some reason, they're all in a sour mood. Just outside the door, Sudák lets out short brief coughs. The shop isn't open yet, he explains. I thought I'd come back for another round. Don't drink so much, Józsi, Aunt Piroska says, you'll end up kicking your wife again. And slapping her around. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Who? Me? Sudák asks innocently. Aunt Pirike, you have no idea what she does! She empties the washbowl in front of the house, when I keep telling her not to. I swear. All right, drink & have

done with it, Aunt Piroška says. Don't play the gentleman with me. Wait until you're home.

Outside, a boy is herding a sow down the road. Where're you takin' that sow, Laci, Dorogi calls out to him. To the boar, the boy says. Why're you pestering that poor animal for, herding her down this bad road, Dorogi says, can't you help her out yourself? The men laugh, & so does the boy, though he says nothing. Then the shopkeeper shows up with his cart and opens the lock. Jancsi Hesz is beating the side of the boiler with his fist, you can hear it all the way to the pub. Aunt Kiss opens the gate and her husband drives through it with two horses, some young people are coming from the bus stop, then when Sudák leaves, Aunt Piroška closes the door. So much for the first contingent. Now it's the shop, to buy pálinka. They'll drink that, too, then eat something, provided they have anything to eat. Then they'll lie down and sleep till noon. Then in the afternoon, it'll start all over again. There'll be five or six men bickering at Aunt Piroška's, making fun at each other's expense, or they'll pick on Béres or Sudák. Each one will repeat, for the hundredth time, what a good hand he was at the factory, and still, he got laid off. Aunt Piroška feeds the chickens, then the dog, then washes up and boils water for tea.

There's a small patch in front of the shop. From time to time a car stops, then the Csige boy blasts off with the big Ifa, people shout at him, Sudák and the others drink

pálinka by the glass, then chase it down with beer. Béres goes up to them timidly, and somebody buys him a beer. He'll soon be asking for wine, too. Aunt Piroska has a bite to eat, then looks through the small glass insert in the door. They're still out there, leaning against the wall. Dear, dear, they're not gonna be of much use to anybody today, she thinks with a shake of the head. Then the youngsters start off to school, but first they stop in front of Aunt Piroska's place for a bit, some of them go inside the shop to buy rolls or bread or chocolate, then off they go. Béres will be the first to open the garden gate, Aunt Piroska thinks, then Jancsi Hesz, and then the rest of them. And so it goes.

## JÓZSEF SUDÁK, FOREMAN

Attila is the best looking boy on the street, and everybody knows it. He's an adolescent now, he's in eighth grade, but when he was little, everybody wanted to eat him all up. In summer he wore tiny shorts, and he went from house to house, and if the gate wasn't open, he'd bang on it and shout. Wherever he went, they picked him up, pinched his cheeks, & stuffed him with candy and cake. Sudák did, too. Once he sat on the ground in front of the boy and kept gazing intently at him for a long, long time. Then he asked the child, tell me. How in God's name did you turn out so well? Hm? That's when something must've gone off in his head, because something definitely went off, except it didn't show at the time. He was living with a tall woman back then, an alcoholic, and it's a good thing he didn't marry her, he later said, just shackled up, because he'd have been fleeced, with the woman taking half of everything. What that everything might have been he didn't say. He pushed her out the gate, bolted the door, and good riddance. She tried to move back in two weeks later, but the new woman poured dirty water on her, just like that, from a wash-bowl, over the gate. Jolán Árva stood there in her suit, with a cigarette, necklace, wristwatch, and the sudsy water running down her. I can't believe it, she said, aghast. That deaf bitch poured water on me! Because the new woman was a deaf-mute.

A thing like that can be kept under wraps for a while, of course. Sudák had brought her from a ways off. She had a pleasant face and a fine figure, except people noticed she wouldn't go out, not even to the shop. Sudák said she's not the gossiping kind & prefers to keep her council, and others would do well to follow her example. If anybody went past her, she gave a nod and smiled and muttered something as if in greeting, then moved on. She wore pretty dresses, smelled nice, had rings on her fingers, & at Misi's Dorogi even said once how he'd like to doodle her, out of curiosity, if nothing else. Then after two or three weeks he said, boys, that woman is deaf. You're kidding, they said. She can't be. Deaf as a post, Dorogi said. There I was outside the gate shouting to her to send Józsi out, but she went on hanging the wash, her back to me. I was shouting so loud, half the neighborhood came to see what was up, but she kept throwing the wet clothes on the line, I swear.

Sudák once said he's the overseer at the Plastic Works, but the card players at Misi's countered it out of hand. Hey Sudák, they said, don't push your luck. So it's foreman, Sudák said, and stuck to it. Jancsi Hesz looked into it and said, you're nobody there, Józsi. You're a janitor in the yard. Sudák didn't answer him. As far as he was concerned, he'd put an end to the discussion the other day. Besides, he'd made up his mind that he'd have a child and let their jaws drop in amazement, the whole lot of them! He was already dismantling the old house,

planning to put up a new one in its place. He'd knocked together a small room and kitchen at the back of the yard, that'll do till then. The yard was gradually filling up with gravel, bricks, and beams, and it didn't matter anymore that the new woman was a deaf-mute, the street had taken a liking to her. She was neat & clean, and Sudák had changed for the better, too, thanks to her. He didn't drink in the shop anymore and stopped going to Misi's, except for an occasional shot of pálinka, then he went on his way. He preferred to buy his wine from Mrs. Sarkadi now and drink it at home with his new woman.

He'd originally come from Debrecen, & people said he was divorced. He got off the bus, saw Misi's, went inside and asked for a small glass of Unicum bitters, at which the pub fell silent. What was that, Esztike asked, Unicum? Can't a fine gentleman like you make do with nothing else? The fine gentleman took the hint. Sudák's hair came down to his shoulder even back then, and his moustache drooped to his chin. He gulped down a shot of pálinka, then asked if there was a house up for sale. There was. Even back then, the regulars at Misi's knew everything. There's old man Koda's, they said, he just died, and his son doesn't want it. They even said who he should talk to, he's right here, except he'd gone outside to the loo. It's got everything, they told Sudák, furniture, bed sheets, flowers in the window, flypaper. Even a dog lying in front of the door, because it won't leave the house as long as there's chicken to catch.

Then the Koda boy came back. He was drunk as a skunk, but manageable. The others helped steady him while he signed the bill of sale, and Sudák laid out the two-hundred thousand forints. He didn't even go see the house. He'd be seeing it plenty now that it was his, he said, and why don't they have another round of drinks? But he'd like the key, please, because he's not going back to town. What key? There's no key. The door's secured with a piece of wire. In these parts, people don't go around thieving.

It was a real bargain, the talk of the street. Sudák paid for everybody because Esztike took the Koda boy's money away. You shouldn't walk around with all that cash, not in your state, she said. Come back tomorrow. I'm putting it on the shelf behind the peach brandy. In front of everybody. You can fetch it tomorrow. And now, go on home. In the meanwhile, Sudák let everybody know that he's a gentleman. He never lived in a village, only in town. He also told them how he'd sunk so low. It was a sentimental story, so nobody liked it very much. Then came his adventures, by which time Misi, the proprietor, had appeared with three cases of beer. Sudák was showing them dance steps, how you need to bend your knee at every step, it's not easy, springing up and down like that. He said that his cap was like the cap of the Spanish volunteers. Nobody argued, as the people of the street had never seen a Spanish volunteer. Still, Misi commented that he thought it was just like the beret he kept in the cellar, except it's on crooked.

That man lies through his teeth, he said to his wife Esz-tike, but he can't be all bad if he's got money. Later Jolán Árva also showed up, and she could also do folk dances, and by closing time Sudák asked for her hand, and she gave it. What celebration! After the pub closed, the people trooped over to the house with a case of beer. This guy doesn't fool around, Misi said to his wife. He came with the four-thirty bus. Now it's eleven, and he's got himself a house and a wife. As for Dorogi, the following day he said he couldn't remember who slept with whom in that rumpus, but in the morning the dog climbed out from under Sudák and it was growling something awful.

People could've gotten used to Sudák's flights of fancy and his strange manner of speaking and dressing, if only his money hadn't run out. Jolán Árva was a great help to him in this, because she took it into her head that she'd have to put on airs and wear nice dresses now that she's hooked up with this handsome man with the dancing feet. She stopped being on a first name basis with people, and started smoking like a chimney. They didn't get married. It was so old fashioned. We love each other just as is, she told people. They went to a dentist in town, but only when they needed a tooth pulled, that's all they could afford. Consequently, Sudák's lips shifted on his face, while Jolán's stretched. This may have also played a part in their relationship turning sour, but the main reason was that Jolán Árva took to the bottle and refused to have children. Except by then Sudák was hell

bent on having a child. There was Attila to remind him. He wanted a child as pretty as Attila, except a girl with long, curly locks, and dark blue eyes.

It hadn't even occurred to him before that he didn't have a child. Before, his entire life was taken up with various culture groups, dancing, and pranks. He worked in Barcika, then Pešť, then Debrecen, where he began to suspect that he'd never become a professional folk dancer. His ex-wife had changed, too; she got old, kept breaking her legs, then gave up dancing altogether, whereas you should've seen the two of them dancing to the song that went, on a starry, starry night in spring. In Palkonya the prison warden even made a special point of congratulating them. He said it's not even dance, it's art! You can practically see those stars sparkle, I swear! Jolán Árva was a far cry herself from sparkling, and she didn't want children either, that was the source of all their troubles. She said she couldn't. Sudák took her to see a doctor. I took her to the bee farm, he told the men at Misi's, and they gave her a physical from head to foot. Then they couldn't stop laughing. What's so funny, I ask the doctors. Nothing much, they say. Except, half of your wife's lungs have got to go. Her lungs? I ask. What for? To make room for her liver! Just like that. It may not have been true, but everybody had a good laugh over it. Sudák had shacked up with the new woman by then and was planning a new house, a garden, and a family in earnest. There's gonna be palm trees growing in the yard,

he announced, the likes of which this place has never seen. And then some. A swimming pool! A glass roof! And monkeys, somebody said. Two at the very least.

In 1989 he was waiting for the change in regime like spring rain. The Magyars, their time has come, he announced. At last! Magyar music, Magyar dance, Magyar bread! In 1990 he was laid off, because almost always it was the morning shift that woke him. He was a night watchman and they got fed up. For months he got no money, and bit by bit he sold the gravel, the bricks, and the beams from the yard. Also, Katóka still didn't bear him a child. At times he thought it might be too late. Meanwhile, next door, Attila was growing into a handsome adolescent. As time passed, Katóka divided off a part of the room with a curtain, because when Sudák was drunk, he was unaccountable. He'd dance & sing in front of the mirror, then slap Katóka around, or kick her in the shin.

Sudák had wanted to be many things in his life. A dancer, a partisan, an actor. When they started broadcasting ice skating shows on TV, he even took up ice skating, and in his dreams he was the happy father of little Attila and a beautiful baby girl. Now he took it into his head that he's going to be the mayor. But only a couple of people know about it, just Jancsi Hesz, Dorogi, and Aunt Piroska. He stands in front of the mirror, practicing his acceptance speech. He is fifty-five years old, and his hair has turned gray. Just you wait & see, he says to the mirror, just you wait & see.

## THE RETURN

Old man Veres's son is dark and lean, and he can fix just about anything. He's got the tallest house on the new row, because the old row across the way is higher up, and he didn't want the rain to flood him. And besides. Jancsi Hesz just laughs it off, he's from the mountains, these people reckon everybody there lives on top, he keeps saying. What's wrong with one house being higher up than another? Nobody cares, except here, on the Great Plain. It's an ugly house, no plaster, no fence, the barren yard runs down to the field and the wind sweeps garbage over it. It's the best Laci Veres could do before his money ran out, all of it, and his strength and willpower with it. Down in the cellar two piglets squeal all day long from hunger, but at least the kitchen upstairs is fit to be lived in, and that's where the Veres boy eats, drinks, and sleeps. The rest of the house has gone unfinished, and his wife, too, left and took their child with her. She said she's had it. Laci Veres was a welder in the factory before he became redundant, but that's where he got all his know-how, because there was all sorts of work there, plumbing, gas fitting, machine repair. Anything to do with ironwork was right up his alley. But he could fix anything, as long as they gave him the tools. There was nothing he couldn't fix. Except the money, the money's the problem. The only money he's getting now is what the mailman brings, and that's precious little.

He got married in Debrecen. He married a woman from town, but he soon came to regret it. Everything about Laci Veres is oversize, his nose, his ears, his feet, his hands. If he stands in front of them, the women look right past him. Angéla was the exception. She figured she'd get used to it. They lived in a rented room in an old house, it was damp and chilly, and then the baby came, whereas they didn't want one yet. But since it came they had to do something, and so Laci Veres joined the Party, except it didn't help. Six months later he joined the Workers' Militia,<sup>10</sup> where they were glad to have him, there were hardly any workingmen in the detail, just department heads, engineers, chief accountants; they were on a first name basis, hi there, hi there; during drills and in the lecture hall they ate and drank, they sang, then the men got in their cars, while he and three comrades were left behind to wait for the bus. The others called them the physicals, though only behind their back, of course, but they were on to them. They didn't much care, though Laci Veres once said, I'm gonna fling a hand grenade right in their midst, and then we'll see who's a physical. I hate every one of them like my own shit, he said to his wife back home. But what can I do? Maybe something will happen. On the other hand, when he had a hangover or some business to attend to, he called up the platoon commander who promptly wrote out a temporary transfer request and he stayed home from work. But apart from that, nothing.

He then tried to organize the welders into a brigade, something nobody had managed before him, but he managed it. Welders are a different bunch in every factory, but he convinced them that the brigade would bring in some money, and they didn't have to do anything to get it, so why not? He became the head of the brigade. He gave speeches and participated in debates, made sure to talk big everywhere, & took personal charge of the brigade diary;<sup>11</sup> they got recognition after recognition and the money that went with it, and as a matter of fact, they didn't have to do anything for it, and they liked that. You're not half as dumb as you look, they told him, so keep up the good work! In return, the men in the brigade taught him welding, adjusted the voltage on the converter for him, handed him the proper stick, and as for the rest, it took care of itself. It was smooth sailing all the way. The brigade became socialist, which was no small matter. Laci Veres requisitioned the factory bus and they went on an excursion to celebrate. Before they set off they got so drunk in the pub next door to the factory, they hardly had to replenish at all and were well disposed all the way, and later he wrote in the brigade diary, "After the breathtaking beauty of the countryside, we arrived in Tokaj." Truth is, nobody could remember, but it must've been true. At this point Laci Veres was sure that the time had come and they'd give him an apartment, but he thought wrong. The apartment was not forthcoming. No problem, he said to his wife,

I'll wait a bit longer. But then there's gonna be hell to pay. They were sitting on the side of the bed & had run out of anything else to talk about.

When he slept on the couch, he poked his legs between the bars of his son's playpen, which lay at the foot of the bed, and the little boy kept grabbing and biting his toes, and it felt good, and they laughed a lot. Once he had a bad dream, or something happened to him, & around midnight he kicked the playpen with the child in it all the way to the wall, and he said he's had it. What's the matter, his wife asked a hundred times, if one, but he said nothing, just sat on the side of the bed, his back to her, drinking his beer. He later swung his huge paddle hand behind him and flicked his wife off the bed, as if she were some bug. Come morning, Angéla packed up, and taking the child with her, went back to her mother, but he didn't particularly mind, she'd done it before, & she always came back. Laci Veres didn't say anything now either. Let her go if she wants to. In the morning he called his detail commander and said he's got something to see to and asked him to write out a transfer request for two days, then drank beer with vodka. He found a bag of frozen chicken wings in the freezer, he thought he'd cook it on the stove but must've done something wrong, because the wings got stuck together, they burned on the outside but remained frozen on the inside, cold, inedible. Still, he ate some of it, sprinkled it with salt and pepper, then threw the rest in the garbage.

He remembers everything clear as day, he says when he tells his story, even that he pulled on his Workers' Militia uniform, gun & all, then he went five houses down the street to threaten that scumbag Molnár, because he's perpetually drunk and beats his family and carouses. He said that unless he mends his ways, he's gonna shoot him. They just stared, nobody spoke, even the dog forgot to bark, then he put the gun away and walked out. He visited four families that morning and told all of them that from here on in things are gonna be different. He's gonna come check up on them. Every day. He said the same in the pub, and also to the cashier at the shop. There's gonna be trouble, he said, if they try and shortchange their customers. Also, three beers and two small bottles of pálinka, that's as much as they can give anybody. Who are you, the manager asked cautiously. Workers' Militia, Laci Veres said. In case you haven't noticed. But now you have. Yes? Yes. Good.

Then seeing how he was into it anyhow, he figured he might as well go to the factory, too, to the Party secretary's office, place the gun on the table and ask what the fuck else is he supposed to do before he's taken seriously? That's when Halász, the Party secretary, decided that he'd have a hidden alarm button installed on his desk for just such eventualities, and at home, too, because this is crazy. He said something encouraging, then sent word that Veres should be demobilized without delay because he's threatening people with a gun, and he ended up in

neurology, then the psychiatric ward, and later, on the street. He might've been thrown out of the Party, too, he can't remember. But he remembers that while he was in the hospital, his wife Angéla gathered up her things again, canceled the lease, took their son, and moved back to her mother. Later his father came for him and he was discharged, because psychiatry, you can't just walk out of there on your own.

They went home in silence, got off the bus, then headed for Misi's, where they came to a decision. Laci must move back to the village, because it's no good the way it's been. You belong here, the others said, too. Dorogi gave him pálinka, Béres repeatedly tried to shake his hand, but couldn't quite manage it, while Sudák said, your place is here with us, Sanyi boy! Laci Veres drank his beer and pálinka in a daze and was soon drunk, because he was still weak. Then after a while he went up to the counter & kissed Esztike's hand, just when Jolán Árva showed up. Her eminence, my wife, Sudák said, introducing her. I say it like it is. Isn't that right, Esztike? Then Misi, the proprietor, also made an appearance, patted Laci Veres on the shoulder repeatedly, then showed him the house, the cellar, the storeroom, the garage, the pub, the apartment upstairs, the garden, everything. Out on the balcony Laci Veres felt a bit dizzy, but as soon as he'd relieved himself of the mixture of beer, Lithium, Noveril, and Andaxin, he felt a lot better and decided he'd build a house just like Misi's, & he'd build it here,

among friends. With these two hands, he said to Jolán Árva that night in bed, because they'd all been drinking, and afterwards everything got all confused. Sudák danced some sort of folk dance with Jancsi Hesz, then without Jancsi Hesz, then ended up sleeping on an old cot in Misi's cellar. They must've locked me in, he concluded when he started awake in the middle of the night. I can't get out, he said out loud, and wet his pants. He felt better by the morning and he saw cases and more cases of beer in the gloom and couldn't stop drinking from sheer amazement.

In the morning his father took Laci Veres home so people wouldn't see him in this state. At home he ate something and talked a pack of nonsense, he was in a grand mood and said he'd build a house bigger than anybody's on the street. He's gonna show them! He drank pálinka, but he gave his medicines to his mother to lock away. He didn't even want to see them, he said. Then he went to bed but couldn't sleep from anticipation, his brain spinning like a wheel. He even remembered that he'd slept in the same bed as a child, right here under the window, with a big down comforter to cover him against the cold of the unheated room, and he used to pee in bed. There was nothing wrong with him, he just didn't feel like climbing out from under the warm comforter and going to the back of the yard, and he waited and waited until it was too late. And then it was morning already, there were people stirring outside, ɛ when

he looked out the window he saw the same thing he'd seen back then, the pump well in front of their house that rarely drew any water, but people kept pumping it just the same, tinkling the empty tin cans, and further off an old locust tree and the large pothole in the road. I'm back, he sighed as a nice, familiar warmth flooded his body down there, just like in the good old days.



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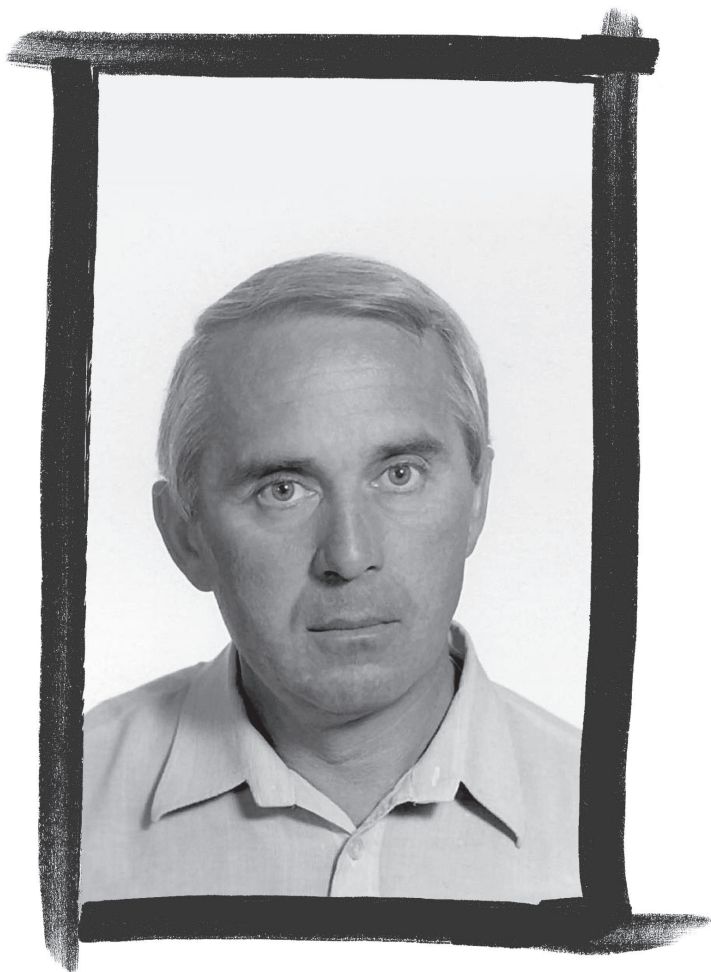
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Robert Kelly, *A Voice Full of Cities*  
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Federico Fellini, *Making a Film*  
Robert Musil, *Thought Flights*

## SOME FORTHCOMING TITLES

- Jean-Luc Godard, *Phrases*  
Maura Del Serra, *Ladder of Oaths*



**SÁNDOR TAR (1941-2005)**



Photograph by Tibor Zsitva © 2015.

## JUDITH SOLLOSY

Judith Sollosy is the translator of Sándor Tar's contemporaries Péter Esterházy, Mihály Kornis, & Lajos Parti Nagy.

*Our Street*, Sándor Tar's fifth book, is comprised of thirty-one stories centered on the inhabitants of Crooked Street, the tail end of a small village in southern Hungary bounded at one end by a down-and-out bar where most of the characters find their consolation in alcohol, banter, sex, yearning for love, and recounting far-flung tales. Each story of *Our Street* reflects on and extends the next, whereby a gallery of memorable characters emerge to reveal even more, an incisive portrait of a society in disintegration.

Honing in on each character's struggle to salvage their self-respect after the demise of communism and the 1989 regime change, Tar dramatizes the difficulties of survival as the people of Crooked Street face the loss of their jobs, the soil from under their feet, & their hopes. This gallery of distinctive characters includes Uncle Vida, an old man who grows vegetables he cannot sell, the always proud Mancika, who is found lying on the tracks waiting for a speeding train, and the reverend Márton Végső, who tends to the needs of the villagers with an equanimity that springs from resignation rather than moral or spiritual resolve. Through these and other figures, one is drawn into a world both captivating and harrowing. Yet the stories are told with such humor, understanding, and sympathy that the book reaffirms the characters' humanity and endows them with dignity.

*Our Street* takes us into terrain that most would not have known were it not for Sándor Tar. As the first translation into English of one of Tar's books, Anglophone readers will at last come to understand why many contemporary Hungarian authors have expressed unreserved admiration for his writing.

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