

LBRIS

We know
books

Flesh

DAVID SZALAY

I

When he's fifteen, he and his mother move to a new town and he starts at a new school. It's not an easy age to do that – the social order of the school is already well established and he has some difficulty making friends. After a while he does make one friend, another solitary individual. They sometimes hang out together after school in the new Western-style shopping mall that has just opened in the town.

'Have you ever done it?' his friend asks him.

'No,' István says.

'Me neither,' his friend says, making the admission seem easy somehow. He has a simple and natural way of talking about sex. He tells István which girls at school he fantasises about, and what he fantasises about doing to them. He says that he often masturbates four or five times a day, which makes István feel inadequate since he usually only does it once or twice. When he admits that, his friend says, 'You must have a weak sex drive.'

It may be true, for all he knows.

He doesn't know what it's like for other people.

He only has his own experience.

One day his friend tells him that he did it with a girl who lives on the other side of the train tracks.

The news is disorienting.

István listens while his friend describes, in some detail, what happened. He tries to work out if his friend is telling the truth or if he's lying. Though he would prefer him to be lying, he thinks

that he's probably telling the truth. Some of the things he says seem too specific, too surprising, for him to have made them up.

Then, a few days later, he says he talked to the girl and she said she'd do it with István as well.

'Seriously?' István says.

'Yeah,' his friend says.

István doesn't know if this means that the three of them will do it together, or just that he'll do it with the girl on his own.

He is too unsure of himself to ask.

After school the same day, they walk across the footbridge over the train tracks.

It's already getting dark.

They go down the metal steps on the other side of the footbridge and walk for a while until they arrive at a housing estate. It's not dissimilar to the one where István and his mother live, only here the buildings, although also made of prefabricated concrete panels, are taller. At the entrance of one of them his friend enters the doorbell number of one of the flats.

A few moments later, without anything being said, the door unlocks and he shoulders through it.

The lift smells of cigarette smoke.

István stares at the wood-effect Formica of its interior as it goes up.

It goes up very slowly, with a continuous creaking and a separate loud ticking sound as it passes each floor.

'You okay?' his friend asks him.

'Yeah,' István says.

'You look terrified,' his friend says.

'No,' István says.

They leave the lift at one of the upper floors and his friend knocks on the door of a flat. It's opened by a girl of about their own age. 'Hi,' she says.

'Hi,' István's friend says.

She stands aside for them to step into the entrance hall.

'This is my friend,' István's friend says. 'You know. The one I told you about.'

'Okay,' the girl says.

She and István look at each other for a moment.

'Okay?' István's friend says.

'Yeah,' the girl says.

The three of them just stand there.

The girl looks at István again.

He doesn't look at her.

'Okay,' István's friend says.

'D'you want to wait in there?' the girl says to him, indicating a door.

'Yeah okay,' István's friend says. It's possible that he seems disappointed, as if maybe he wasn't sure himself whether or not they were going to do it all together, and had been sort of hoping that they would be.

István is lighting a cigarette, having to work the lighter a few times to get a flame.

His friend makes eye contact with him for a second and smiles.

István doesn't even try to smile back. He feels something almost like panic.

He follows the girl along a short dark corridor and into a room at the end of it.

He doesn't really take this room in, except that there's a lot of stuff in it, including what seems to be a small animal in a cage.

The girl sits down on a bed that's there.

István sits on a chair.

'What's your name again?' the girl asks him.

He tells her.

She tells him her name.

'You alright?' she says.

'Yes,' he says.

They talk for a few minutes. She talks anyway. There are also long silences, during which the sound of the small animal moving in its cage is sometimes audible. She asks him where he's from.

'What's that like?' she asks when he tells her.

'It's okay,' he says.

They sit there in silence.

She lights a cigarette, maybe just to do something.

After a while, without saying anything, she stands up and leaves.

A few minutes later the door opens again.

István looks up and sees his friend.

He expected it to be the girl.

'What happened?' his friend asks.

'What do you mean?'

'What happened?' his friend asks again.

'Nothing.'

'She wants you to leave,' his friend says. 'What did you do?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?'

'Yeah.'

They leave the flat and in the corridor outside his friend says, 'Okay then, see you.'

'Aren't you coming?' István asks him.

'No she wants me to go back,' his friend says.

'Yeah?'

His friend nods. 'See you round.'

'Okay.'

Still not understanding what happened István takes the lift down on his own.

'She said you weren't sexy. That's what she said.' It's a few days later and his friend is explaining it to him, what happened.

It's horrible, to have that said to him, and about him, and yet he doesn't know what to say in answer to it. It seems unanswerable.

'She said you didn't seem up for it,' his friend says.

'I was up for it,' István says.

'She said you didn't seem to be.'

'I was.'

After that things aren't the same with his friend.

They spend less time together.

His friend starts to hang out with other people.

István spends more time on his own.

On Sunday he and his mother visit his grandmother. It's her birthday. He sits there, bored, in her living room while she and his mother talk.

His mother asks him to fill a vase with water for the flowers they brought.

He goes to the kitchen and does that.

The windows are open. It's a warm day for the time of year.

'And how are you?' his grandmother asks him.

'I'm okay,' he says.

He stands on the small balcony wishing he could smoke.

In the distance, and further down the hill, he can see the part of the town where he and his mother live.

His mother is telling his grandmother how well he's doing at school.

His grandmother takes some money from her wallet and gives it to him, apparently as a sort of reward.

His mother tells him to say thank you.

'Thank you,' he says.

His grandmother smiles.

She has these travel books. They're lined up next to each other

on a shelf near the TV. Italy, France, Czechoslovakia, the USSR, West Germany, Great Britain. Out of boredom he looks at them while his mother and his grandmother talk. The books have pictures in them, mostly black and white, and a few colour ones too. The colours in them look unnatural somehow, they don't look like the colours of things in reality.

There's a lady who lives in the flat opposite them. Soon after István and his mother moved into the building, the lady asked his mother if István would be able to help her with the shopping sometimes.

'What does that mean?' István said when his mother told him about it.

'She wants you to go to the shop with her and help her to carry the stuff upstairs.'

'I don't want to do that,' he said.

'She's been very helpful to us,' his mother said.

'I'm not doing it,' he said.

'I told her you would,' his mother said.

'You said I'd do it?'

'Yes I did.'

'Why?'

'She's been very helpful to us,' his mother said again. 'And her husband has some sort of heart problem. I'm not going to argue with you about this.'

Since then, once or twice a week, he goes to the supermarket with the lady and helps her to carry the shopping home.

After arriving home from school he drops his backpack on the floor of the flat and then leaves again and knocks on the door of the flat opposite.

It's opened by the lady who lives there and she tells him to wait a minute, which he does, with his hood up and his headphones on, looking down the first flight of stairs to the half-landing,

where there's a line of plants in pots on the floor next to the window. The window is set oddly low in the wall. In fact it extends below the level of the floor.

'Okay,' the lady says, locking the door of her own flat.

She has her coat and hat on now and they start down the concrete stairs together.

'Is it cold out?' she asks him, as they walk down the stairs.

He has to lift the headphones from his ears to hear her.

'Is it cold out?' she says again.

'Yeah,' he says.

They pick their way among the puddles on the uneven pavement and wait at the traffic lights.

It seems very light inside the supermarket after the wintry darkness of the street.

The lady frees her hair from her hat and loosens her scarf.

He follows her around pushing the trolley while she puts things into it.

They don't speak.

Afterwards they walk back to the building where they live, and up the stairs. There's no lift in the building and their flats are on the fourth floor.

'You're very strong,' she says to him, as he puts the heavy stuff down on her kitchen table.

He doesn't know what to say to that.

He just nods, and she asks him if he wants some *Somloi galuska*. Sometimes when they get back she offers him something to eat, something sweet like *Somloi galuska*.

'Yeah okay,' he says.

'Sit down then,' she says.

He sits at the table.

The *Somloi galuska* is in the fridge and she serves a large helping into a glass bowl and puts it in front of him, with a spoon.

'Thanks,' he says.

While he eats it she puts the shopping away.

He's becoming aware that she feels a sort of affection for him, or something. It embarrasses him, and he also quite likes it in a way, even though he doesn't feel any affection for her.

He doesn't feel anything for her.

She's just this old woman, maybe even older than his mother. It's like she hardly exists.

'How is it?' she asks, putting things away.

'It's nice,' he says.

He eats it quickly, partly because it's delicious and partly because he wants to be out of there as soon as possible.

When he has finished it he stands up, making the chair scrape loudly on the floor.

'Okay then,' he says.

'Can I kiss you?' she says.

She's standing in front of him.

The question is so surprising that he doesn't know what to say.

He doesn't even know what she means really.

When he doesn't say anything she kisses him on the lips. It's nothing – her lips just lightly touch his for a moment.

'I'm sorry,' she says, immediately afterwards.

He just stands there.

'I think you should go now,' she says.

Still without saying anything he leaves and walks across the landing and lets himself into his mother's flat.

The lights are on in the classroom, strip lights on the ceiling in translucent plastic boxes. The boxes contain a fair number of dead flies – blurred little shapes that he sometimes stares at while the teacher speaks. Only a few people are even pretending to listen to the teacher, who's reading aloud from a book. 'In broad terms, individuals that are more "fit" have better potential

for survival. However, modern evolutionary theory defines fitness not by how long an organism lives, but by how successful it is at reproducing. If an organism lives half as long as others of its species, but has twice as many offspring surviving to adulthood, its genes become more common in the adult population of the next generation.' It's the last lesson of the afternoon.

Afterwards he walks home.

He's taking the stairs two at a time when suddenly she's there, in front of him, holding a small plastic watering can. She's watering the plants on the half-landing between the floors. He hasn't seen her since the last time they went to the supermarket together, when they kissed afterwards. 'Hello István,' she says, without stopping what she's doing.

'Hello,' he says.

He just stands there a few steps down from her, still panting slightly. To see her again makes it even stranger to think that he actually *kissed* her.

She asks him if he can come to the supermarket with her.

'Okay,' he says.

As usual, they don't speak to each other while they do the shopping.

It's only when they're back in her flat that she says, 'I'm sorry about what happened the other day.'

It surprises him that she should say that. It makes it sound like she did something *to* him, whereas the way he's been thinking about it, it was something that they did together.

'It's okay,' he says.

'Is it?' she asks.

He's not sure what he's supposed to say.

He doesn't say anything.

'Did you tell anyone?' she asks him.

'No,' he says.

He hasn't told anyone. He has no one to tell. And even if he

did, what would he tell them? That he'd kissed someone old and ugly like her?

The next time they get back from the supermarket and she asks him if he wants some *Somloi galuska*, he hesitates and then says, 'Yeah okay.'

She tells him to sit down and puts a bowl of it in front of him, with a spoon and a folded paper napkin.

'Thanks,' he says.

While he eats it she puts the shopping away.

He has just stood up from the table and is wiping his mouth with the paper napkin when she says, 'Can I?'

It's obvious what she means.

'Okay,' he says, after a few seconds. He doesn't know why he says that. Some part of him seems to want to.

Her lips lightly touch his for a moment, just like the first time.

'Thank you,' she says, not looking at him.

'That's okay,' he says.

Still not looking at him, she waits for him to leave.

When he understands that that's what she's waiting for, he walks across the landing and lets himself into his mother's flat.

After that they kiss every time. It becomes part of what they do when they go to the supermarket. She offers him something to eat, and then she lightly touches her lips to his for a moment, and then he leaves.

One day she suggests that they sit on the sofa.

He has never been in her living room. He doesn't really take it in, except that there's a balcony at one end, like there is in his mother's flat, with a balustrade made of panels of green safety glass.

They sit on the sofa.

'Have you ever kissed anyone properly?' she asks.

Embarrassed that the answer is no, he pretends not to be sure what she means. He doesn't say anything anyway.

'Do you want to kiss me properly?' she asks.

'Alright,' he says.

His heart is unexpectedly thumping.

'Yeah?' she says.

He just nods.

He can hear a clock ticking.

She touches her lips to his, like she's done in the kitchen a few times, only now she keeps them there, and presses them more strongly against his.

Something about the angle at which they're turned to each other is awkward and they shift their positions slightly.

She moves her lips to his again, and this time she opens her mouth and he feels her tongue on his lips and then opens his own mouth and her tongue goes into it.

He shuts his eyes so that he doesn't have to see her, so that he only feels her lips, and her tongue inside his mouth.

'Was that nice?' she says.

He nods.

'Do you want to do it again?' she asks.

'Okay,' he says.

They do it again and while they're doing it one of her hands brushes against his erection, which is pushing out the fabric of his trousers.

He was hardly aware of it himself until her hand accidentally brushed against it.

As soon as that happens, he feels her tense up.

Embarrassed, he pulls away from her.

'What is it?' she says, trying to take his hand.

He's already on his feet.

'What is it?' she says again. 'It's okay.'

It's not okay, he thinks, looking down at her.

She disgusts him. Without saying anything else, he leaves.

He goes down the stairs and out of the building and walks around for almost an hour without really knowing where he is or where he's going.

When he gets back she's waiting on the landing.

'Are you okay?' she asks.

'Yeah,' he says.

After that he's sure that he isn't going to kiss her again. Then, a few days later, when she asks if he wants to sit on the sofa with her, he finds that part of him does.

'Do you want to?' she asks.

They're standing in her kitchen, facing each other.

She's quite tall, nearly as tall as he is.

'Okay,' he says.

He follows her into the living room and they sit on the sofa and start to kiss again, with tongues.

This time, when her hand finds his erection, she seems deliberately not to do anything that might distress him. She just keeps kissing him in the same way and leaves her hand there, on top of his trousers. Then, after a few minutes, she starts to move it slowly up and down. She pushes her tongue further into his mouth so that it's almost too much, so that he instinctively moves his head away and she slightly withdraws her tongue. Her hand is still moving slowly up and down in a way that he likes, although it's moving much more slowly than he would move his own hand, and maybe because of that, because it's moving so much more slowly than he would move his own hand, he realises too late that he's about to come.

The sound he makes is like a gasp of pain.

A moment later he's aware of the wetness inside his trousers, and then the smell of it.

It feels like a disaster, what's happened.

He has no idea what to do, no idea if she will even understand.

She seems surprised too.

She has stopped kissing him.

He isn't looking at her. He's looking at the floor, at the fringed edge of the rug.

If he looked at her he would see that she was smiling at him. But he doesn't look at her. He doesn't want to see her. He is ashamed and also sort of horrified that he is doing this with someone old and ugly like her.

'Go on,' she says, and he stands up and leaves.

A little later there's a knock at the door of the flat.

It's her.

He wonders if she wants to talk to his mother, who's still at work – maybe to tell her what's been happening, an idea that makes him feel something like terror.

Actually it's him she wants to talk to.

'Are you alright?' she says.

She says it in a soft, kind voice that surprises him.

'Yes,' he says.

'What happened before,' she says. 'I just want you to know – it's okay. If you were embarrassed or I don't know. You don't need to be. It's okay.'

He doesn't say anything.

'I just wanted to say that,' she says. 'That's all.'

'Okay,' he says.

'Okay,' she says, and he shuts the door.

Sometimes at the weekend he works on her husband's allotment. Her husband pays him to do that.

The thick mud sticks to his shoes so that after a while his

feet feel heavy in them and start to look like lumps of mud themselves.

The lady's husband says that he can't do physically demanding work any more.

He has heart trouble, he says.

He has to take pills.

István isn't really listening. The days are getting warmer. He pulls off his jumper and hangs it on a fence post.

'You're a good worker,' the lady's husband says, offering him a cigarette. 'Don't you smoke?' he asks when István doesn't immediately take it.

'Not really,' István says. His mother doesn't know that he smokes and he's worried that the lady's husband will mention it to her.

'What does that mean? Do you want one or not?'

István takes one.

'For me they're basically free,' the lady's husband says, and explains that he works at the cigarette factory.

'Okay,' István says.

He stands there in a damp T-shirt enjoying the smoke and the feeling of the cool air on his sweaty forehead.

There's the sound of the main road, which isn't far away.

When they finish work that day, after they have washed their hands at the standpipe, the lady's husband asks him if he wants a drink.

'I think we've earned one,' he says.

The place he takes him to is a sort of wine cellar, in a side street not far from the allotment, down some steps from the pavement. The lady's husband seems to be well known down there. Half-drunk old men say hello to him as he moves through the smoke.

The woman at the bar says hello to him as well and they exchange some chat as he orders the drinks – two white wine spritzers.

The woman lifts a lid set directly in the zinc bar and dips a ladle down there for the wine.

‘This is István,’ the lady’s husband says to her as she does that. She just raises a painted-on eyebrow.

‘He’s helping me on the allotment.’

‘That’s nice.’

She adds soda to the glasses from a hose. There’s something suggestive about the way her hand holds the hose, István thinks, about the way the soda shoots out when she does something with her fingers.

‘Bit more,’ the lady’s husband says.

She shoots another slug of soda into the glass.

‘Thanks,’ he says.

He offers her a cigarette, which she takes.

‘For me they’re basically free,’ he says.

She nods, as if it’s something she’s heard before, and lets him light it for her.

With the cigarette in her mouth she takes the spritzers, one in each hand, and holds them out for them.

‘I think we’ve earned that,’ the lady’s husband says, as they take their seats at a table.

He lifts his glass towards István for a moment and then drinks half of it in one go.

István starts on his more cautiously.

He doesn’t really like the taste of the wine.

‘How you settling in?’ the lady’s husband asks him. He knows that István is still quite new to the town.

‘Okay,’ István says.

The next time they sit on the sofa, she stops kissing and draws away from him. He opens his eyes. ‘Can I?’ she asks, looking at him. She has started to undo his belt.