Flesh

ALSO BY DAVID SZALAY

London and the South-East

The Innocent

Spring

All That Man Is

Turbulence

Flesh

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Jonathan Cape, an imprint of Vintage, is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies

Vintage, Penguin Random House UK, One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk/vintage
global.penguinrandomhouse.com

First published by Jonathan Cape in 2025

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Typeset in 11.7/16pt Calluna by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HB ISBN 9780224099783
TPB ISBN 9780224099790

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Flesh

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.

István smokes.

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.

He just nods.

Awkwardly he raises his hips from the sofa to help her as she pulls the trousers and pants down to his knees.

It's the first time that anyone else has seen him like this.

It feels strange, to have someone else there, looking at it.

She touches it with her hand, and then lowers her mouth to it.

To be comfortable, though, she has to kneel on the floor.

She kneels on the floor and takes it in her mouth again. He's looking at the top of her head, at the roots of her hair where the blonde, he now sees, is slightly mixed with grey. He wonders how it is that her teeth aren't hurting him, that her mouth is so soft. He feels himself already starting to come as he stares up at the ceiling, and then at the balcony, where the afternoon sun is glowing in the green glass panels, and then at the top of her head again, which is moving faster now. And now she's doing something with her tongue that just . . . It's almost too much, almost like pain, though not pain, the opposite of pain

He makes a small, startled sound.

Her head stops moving.

Her mouth slides off him. Her eyes are shut. So is her mouth – she inhales through her nose.

After a few seconds she stands up and leaves and from the kitchen he hears the sound of water in the sink.

He has this peaceful feeling.

For a minute or two he feels extremely at ease, just sitting there looking at the tidy living room, and at the balcony with the sun glowing in the panels of green glass.

On the balcony, in the sunlight, is a big jar with lots of small cucumbers in it, submerged in a milky liquid. Crammed in at the top of the jar is what seems to be wet bread.

She's making *kovászos uborka*, fermented pickles.

She comes back and sits down next to him on the sofa, and

seeing her he again feels confused and sort of ashamed that he is doing this with someone like her, with a woman who might be older than his mother, who makes *kovászos uborka*.

She's stroking his hair.

'Did you like that?' she asks.

He nods.

Afterwards he walks down the stairs and sits on a bench in the little park near the housing estate.

There's a man on the next bench who's smoking a cigarette.

István asks him if he can buy one.

'You can have one,' the man says.

István goes back to his own bench and sits there smoking the cigarette that the man gave him. Small movements of air make the leaves on the branches above him clatter softly.

—

She shows him her breasts. The nipples are weird – surprisingly big, and brown, and with these little things like warts on them.

When he first sees them he's slightly disgusted. But then later, thinking about them, he masturbates more than once.

He finds it strange how, at the same time, he can find them slightly disgusting and also be so turned on by them, or by the memory of them.

It's partly the way she showed them, he thinks.

He was sitting at her kitchen table eating *Somloi galuska* while she put the shopping away and then, when she had finished doing that, she asked him if he wanted to see them and he said yes, and she just showed them to him – standing there in the kitchen she took off first her shirt and then her bra. It's the memory of her doing that that turns him on, as much as what they actually looked like. What they actually looked like seems almost irrelevant. Or that they were weird

and slightly disgusting might even have had the effect of turning him on more.

When he had finished the *Somloi galuska*, they went to the sofa and kissed for a while and then she undid his trousers and sucked him off again.

Then he left.

The next time it happens she says, 'I swallowed it.'

'Yeah?' he says, still with that peaceful feeling he always has for a few minutes afterwards.

She nods, sort of smiling at him.

'Okay,' he says.

'Will you do something for me?' she asks.

'Okay,' he says.

She takes his hand and puts it between her legs. She lifts her skirt up to her waist – she is wearing black tights underneath it – and puts his hand where she wants it.

She presses it there firmly.

The place where she presses it is soft and yielding through the layers of fabric.

When he does nothing, she starts to move his hand herself.

She positions his fingers precisely.

'Like that,' she says. 'There. Like that.'

She lets go of his hand and he moves it himself.

There's something wrong with the way he is doing it though.

She takes hold of his hand again, and moves it energetically, pressing it into her. 'Like that.'

'Okay,' he says.

She shuts her eyes.

He keeps doing it until his arm gets tired.

'Thank you,' she says, when he stops.

—

On Sunday his mother takes him to lunch at the McDonald's in the new shopping mall. The McDonald's only opened a few months ago.

His mother watches him eat. She isn't eating herself. She has a paper cup of McDonald's coffee that she occasionally takes a sip from. 'How's school?' she asks.

'It's fine,' he says.

'At the parent–teacher meeting last week,' she says. 'They said you seem distracted sometimes.'

He shrugs.

'Your marks have slipped a bit.'

'Yeah?' he says.

'I wonder if it's that you're spending too much time playing those computer games,' she suggests.

'No,' he says.

'Then?'

'What?'

'I'm just trying to understand,' she says. 'Are you making friends?'

'Yeah.'

'Yeah?'

He nods, not looking at her.

'That's good,' she says.

He isn't sure if she believes him or not.

—

He and the lady walk to the supermarket. It's raining. He holds the umbrella over them both. 'I want to make love with you,' she says when they are in her kitchen again. 'I want to feel you inside me. Do you want to do that?'

'Okay,' he says.

'Is your mother at home?'

'No,' he says.

They do it on his bed. She insists on the window shutter being fully lowered – maybe because of what happened when she showed him her breasts, the look of slight disgust or whatever it was that she must have seen on his face then.

She puts the condom on him herself. He lies on his back on the bed and she lowers herself onto him. He just lies there while she moves her hips and makes quiet noises. He can't really see her in the near-darkness with the shutter down.

A few moments after he comes she stops moving.

He feels himself shrink inside her until his dick slides out. It feels like it sort of slides out sideways. It's a strange feeling.

She leans down to him so that he smells her breath when she says that he's a man now, and asks him how that feels.

He thinks it's strange that he doesn't feel any different, that nothing seems to have changed. He doesn't say that. He just sort of shrugs, still lying there on his back, and she moves away from him and starts to get dressed again.

'Are you alright?' she asks, when he doesn't say anything for a while.

'Yes,' he says.

'Okay,' she says. And then speaking to him out of the near-darkness she says that she feels honoured that he did it for the first time with her, and thanks him, and then she leaves, and he doesn't move for a while.

He has a shower.

In the shower he gets hard again and masturbates.

It takes him a long time to come.

When he finally does, he leans against the tiled wall and listens to the water pecking at the plastic shower curtain, still thinking that it's strange that he doesn't feel any different, that everything seems to be the same.

He takes the bus into town and has a Big Mac Meal.

It's early evening when he gets back. The street lights have just come on, all at the same time.

He meets her husband at the entrance of the building.

'Hello István,' he says. 'How are you?'

'Okay.'

'After you,' her husband says, holding the heavy front door open for him. It's made of metal with two panels of security glass.

István goes in first and they walk through the low entrance hall past the mailboxes and up the concrete stairs together.

'What have you been up to?' her husband asks.

'Nothing much,' István says.

For a few days he doesn't see her. He masturbates quite a lot, at least twice a day. Usually when he does that he's thinking of her, and of the things they have done together. Otherwise he doesn't think of her much. Except that he finds he does want to fuck her again. After a while he is unable to stop thinking about that, and the thought that it might not happen again is surprisingly difficult to deal with. Sometimes he wonders if he should knock on her door. Something always stops him.

Then, at the end of the week she knocks on his door. He pauses the computer game that he's playing and opens it.

'Hello,' she says.

He doesn't say anything, embarrassed that he already has a hard-on at just the sight of her standing there.

He puts his hands in his pockets.

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

'Okay,' he says. 'I'll put my shoes on.'

She nods.

They walk to the supermarket initially in silence as usual.

Then, as they wait at the traffic lights, she says to him, 'What are you listening to?'

'What?' he says.

'What are you listening to?'

He has his headphones on and is listening to music.

'MC Hammer,' he says.

'What's it like?'

He shrugs.

'Can I listen?' she asks.

He passes her the headphones, and she puts them over her ears.

'I don't like it,' she says, after only a few seconds.

'Okay,' he says.

When they get back he puts the shopping on her kitchen table. It's a warm day and his T-shirt is sticking to his skin.

She asks him if he wants some ice cream.

'Okay,' he says.

'Sit down then,' she says.

He sits and waits while she serves him some ice cream in one of those glass bowls she has.

'*Rákóczi túrós*,' she says.

'Okay,' he says.

'You like that don't you?'

He nods.

While he is eating it she sits down next to him. After just sitting there for a minute, she puts her hand on his knee.

'Is your mother at home?' she asks.

'No,' he says.

'Try not to come so quickly,' she says.

She twists and thrusts her hips while he lies there looking at the underside of the pine shelf on the wall above his bed.

Her movements become more urgent and he has a strange feeling that she's no longer aware of him.

Suddenly she stops moving altogether.

There's a moment of tension.

Then something happens.

She goes limp.

She puts her arms around him and lies still for a minute.

He feels the sweat on her, and on himself. It's hard to say whose sweat it is. There's a slippery layer of sweat between them.

Outside the sun is shining. The shutter is down but there are some small holes in it which let a bit of light through, enough to see her as she dresses, now that his eyes are used to the semi-darkness.

She has pubic hair, and a track of hair on her belly.

In porn none of the women have pubic hair, or not that much anyway.

None of the women have weird nipples like hers.

As long as no one knows about it, it's like it isn't really happening.

It's like it exists in the same way that his fantasies exist, as something he's just imagining.

That's how it seems to him sometimes.

He doesn't see her at the weekend, when her husband is at home.

He just wanders around the town.

He spends a long time in the second-hand shop looking at the computer games, the crate of cassettes in scuffed plastic boxes. The games are pirate copies, with badly photocopied instructions.

There's pirated music too, all the latest stuff from the West – Vanilla Ice, Madonna, Guns N' Roses.

He leaves the shop without buying anything.

The weekend seems to last forever.

On Monday they do it twice. In between they just lie there on the bed. There's the sound of the rain on the window – they can hear

it sometimes but they can't see it because the shutter is down. After they have been lying there for a while she starts to suck him and he quickly becomes hard again. 'Do you want to take me from behind?' she asks.

'Okay,' he says.

She turns, and he sort of kneels on the soft mattress trying to find the place.

The rain patters on the window.

'No not there,' she says.

She has to reach back with her hand to help him.

She's already extremely wet.

It feels different from that angle.

She worries, afterwards, that they didn't use a condom the second time.

He isn't sure why she's worrying – he assumed she was too old to get pregnant.

'How old are you?' he asks her.

'Forty-two,' she says.

'Do you look at pornography?' she asks him.

'No,' he says.

'Don't lie,' she says.

He wonders how she knew that he was lying. He doesn't say anything.

'Do you have some?'

'Why?'

'Do you?' She laughs and asks to see it. 'Please,' she says.

He goes to his desk and opens the lowest drawer and feels with his hand on the floor underneath.

The magazine is starting to slightly fall apart.

'Are you embarrassed?' she asks, as he hands it to her.

'Yeah a bit,' he says.

'Why are these pages stuck together?' she asks.

'Why d'you think?'

'Oh,' she says, and laughs again.

Prising the pages apart she looks at the pictures. They look at them together. There's something about doing that that he likes. The window shutter isn't down. They leave it open now. 'I've never seen anything like this,' she says. 'The women all shave their . . . you know.'

'Yeah.'

'Do you want me to do that?' she asks, looking up at him.

'No,' he says.

'Be honest,' she says.

'I am being honest.'

'You don't want me to shave it?'

'No,' he says.

'So you like my hair?' she says.

'Yeah,' he says.

He doesn't know if that's true or not.

'Your mother will be home soon,' she says.

She gets up from the bed.

'This is my favourite bit of the day,' she says. 'I don't mean when I leave.' She moves around, picking her clothes up from the floor and putting them on. 'I mean when I'm here.'

Still lying on the bed, he watches her.

She's nearly dressed now.

'What's your favourite bit of the day?' she asks.

'Don't know. This I suppose,' he says.

When she leaves he thinks about what they did. He tries to kind of hold onto the reality of it. As soon as she isn't there it seems slightly unreal.

‘Do you think about me when we’re not together?’ she asks.

‘Sometimes,’ he says.

‘I think about you,’ she says.

‘Yeah?’

‘Yes,’ she says.

‘What do you think about?’ he asks.

‘This mostly.’ She takes his dick in her hand. She laughs. He laughs too. He likes it that she says things like that. He has never talked to anybody the way he talks to her, the way they talk to each other.

She puts baby oil on her breasts and he fucks them. She has a weird expression on her face, trying to look at what’s happening and lifting and squeezing her breasts together at the same time. The veins stand out in the middle of her forehead. When he comes it goes on her face and she shrieks with excitement, almost as if she’s coming herself.

Then some of it goes in her eye. ‘Oh,’ she says. ‘That stings. It really stings.’

‘Sorry,’ he says.

With her hand to her eye, she laughs. ‘It’s not your fault.’

She goes to the bathroom to wash her eye out.

When she gets back her eye is very red.

‘Is it okay?’ he asks.

‘It still stings,’ she says.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says again.

‘It’s okay,’ she says.

She joins him on the bed.

He likes lying there naked while she touches him.

The rest of the day feels somehow fake compared to this. It feels like a less intense sort of reality. It feels unimportant.

The important part of life happens with her. That’s how it feels.

When she goes away for a week to visit her mother his life seems empty.

He drifts through the days at school with a sort of indifference to everything.

Without that hour in the afternoon to look forward to, there is nothing to give the days any sense of purpose or meaning.

When she gets back the summer holidays have started. He's at home all day, and for the first time they do it in the morning.

'There's something I'd like to do with you,' she says.

'What?' he asks.

She tells him.

'Would you like that?' she says.

There's a lake ten or fifteen kilometres from the town, among the hills to the north. They take a bus there, first having to take one into the town centre, where they wait for a second one that goes to the lake. Once the bus leaves the suburbs of the town it takes about half an hour to get there, mostly on a road through the forest where it has to keep slowing for sharp turns.

It's almost empty by then. It's the middle of a weekday and there aren't many people going to the lake.

When they arrive she says she knows a nice place, where there won't be anyone to disturb them.

'Okay,' he says.

The lake is surrounded by steep green hills.

They walk on a forest track under the trees.

As she said, there's no one else around.

It's pleasant in the shade under the trees.

She says she's already wet and asks him if he wants to check for himself.

He's not sure what to do.

She has stopped. He stops too.

'Do you?' she asks.

They're standing on the track under the trees.

The track is made of dried mud that has taken the imprint of tractor tyres in places. In deep hollows the mud is still visibly damp.

The wind is shaking the upper branches of the trees.

'Yeah okay,' he says.

'Go on then,' she says.

He lifts her dress at the front up to about the level of her navel and puts a few of his fingers into her panties.

'See?' she says.

Again, he isn't sure what to do.

His fingers are still in there.

'So do you want to . . . ?' he says uncertainly.

'What?'

'You know.'

She laughs. 'Not here,' she says.

'Why not?' he asks.

'I know somewhere else,' she says.

The trees end and there's a sort of meadow near the top of the hill.

They do it there in the long grass.

They eat *lángos* while they wait for the bus back to the town. She's worried that they'll meet her husband, or his mother, when they arrive back at the housing estate – it will be about the time that they both get home from work. So she says that they should arrive separately. At the bus station in the town she tells him to wait and take the bus after her.

'Okay,' he says.

When she has gone, though, he feels something painful and confusing.

'I love you,' he says to her, the next day. They're lying on his bed.

'Don't say that,' she says.

'Why not?' he says.

'You don't know what that means,' she says.

'Yes I do,' he says.

'You don't,' she says, stroking his hair.

It makes him angry, the way she does that. He moves his head away.

'Why do you say that?' he asks her. 'Why do you say I don't know what that means?'

'You don't love me,' she says.

'I do.'

'Please,' she says. 'Stop saying that.'

'Why?'

'If you keep saying that we'll have to stop this,' she says.

The next day she tells him that they have to stop it anyway. 'I'm sorry,' she says. 'I really didn't think this would happen.'

'What?'

'How you feel,' she says.

'That I love you?' he says.

'You don't.'

'Yes I do.'

She puts her hand on his face. 'Well I don't love you,' she says. 'I'm sorry.' She looks tired, as if she hasn't slept much, as if she was awake for most of the night.

'Do you love your husband?' he asks her.

'What difference does that make?'

'I just want to know.'

'It doesn't make any difference,' she says.

'Yes,' he says.

'Why?' she asks.

'Do you love him?'

'Yes I do,' she says.

'How can you say that?' he says.

'I don't think you understand the situation,' she says.

'I think I do,' he says.

'No you don't,' she says. 'I don't think you do. I'm sorry. I'm sorry,' she says. 'Please don't cry. I'm sorry.'

—

He spends a lot of time hanging around on the stairs, waiting for her. It seems impossible to him, after what they have done together, that what she says is true – that she doesn't love him, that she loves her husband.

He waits for her on the stairs. When she sees him there she hesitates, as if wondering whether to step back into her flat.

He's on the half-landing, where the stairs turn and her plants stand in a line next to the low window. Hot afternoon sun slants in.

'What are you doing here?' she says to him, without stopping.

They have already met on the stairs a few times.

Following her down, he says what he always says. 'I want to see you.'

'I'm sorry,' she says.

'Please,' he says.

'No,' she says. 'I'm sorry.'

'Please.'

She stops on the first-floor landing and says, turning to him, 'No. You have to stop this.'

'What?'

'Waiting for me like this.'

'I want to see you.'

'No.'

She continues down the stairs and leaves the building.

She looks angry to see him still there when she returns nearly an hour later.

'What are you doing?' she says.

'Waiting for you.'

'Why?'

'I want to talk to you.'

She won't let him take the shopping from her.

He follows her up the stairs.

'I want to talk to you,' he says again.

She ignores him.

'You have to stop this,' she says, finally speaking to him again when they arrive at her door.

'Please,' he says.

'No.'

She starts to unlock the door.

'I love you,' he says.

'No you don't.'

'I do.'

'Stop saying that.'

Seeing that she is starting to hate him, he decides not to try to see her for a week. He hopes that if he does that she will eventually agree to see him again.

After only a few days, though, it's unbearable not to see her at all. Not to know where she is or what she's doing. Even her hatred and anger would be preferable to that, is what he feels, and it's with that feeling that he knocks on the door of her flat one evening. He isn't sure exactly why he's doing it, or what he will say. He just wants to see her.

He has to knock for quite a long time.

Finally her husband opens the door. 'What is it?' he says.

'Is she there?' István asks him.

'What?'

'Is she there?'

'What are you talking about?' her husband says.

'Is she—'

'*No*,' her husband says, already shutting the door.

Instinctively István pushes it open again.

Her husband puts out a hand to stop him. 'What do you think you're doing?' he says.

Sure that she is there and that her husband just wants to prevent him from seeing her, István tries to push past him into the flat. Her husband tries to stop him.

There's a scuffle on the landing.

Mostly it's just pushing and shoving.

And then her husband falls down the stairs. He tries to hold on to the metal handrail but he isn't able to and there's a strange loud sound as his head hits it further down, and then he's lying on the concrete floor of the half-landing, next to his wife's plants, and he doesn't get up.

István waits for him to get up.

It's very quiet suddenly.

He hears voices from somewhere down in the stairwell.

When it's obvious that the man isn't going to get up, István starts to walk down the stairs.

His legs are shaking under him. They're shaking so much that it's almost difficult to walk.

He passes the landing where the man is lying – and where a few of his wife's plants have been knocked over, spilling soil onto the concrete – and keeps going down.

On the floor below the doors of the flats are open and some people are standing there. He passes them without saying anything, and they don't say anything to him. It may be that they think he has nothing to do with what happened, whatever it was. They heard something, shouts and maybe the loud noise when the man's head hit the metal handrail. They're looking up the stairwell as if they're wondering what happened.

He walks past them down the stairs and out into the warm evening.

It's still quite light outside.

He walks away.

He doesn't know where he's going.

He just keeps walking.

He doesn't know how long he walks for, only that it's already dark when a police car drives slowly past him on an obscure quiet street and stops up ahead, near a small store on a corner, and two policemen get out.

When he tells them his name they put the handcuffs on him and one of them says into his radio that they have him.

There are some oldish men outside the small store who watch the whole thing. They watch in silence as the police put the handcuffs on him.

And then one of them says, 'What did he do? Steal a litre of milk?'

And one of the policemen says, 'No he killed someone.'

When the policeman says that the whole situation feels even stranger.

Later, at the police station, another policeman, a more important one, tells him directly that the man is dead.

He just stares at the policeman when he says that, and the policeman, who's not wearing a uniform, who's wearing jeans and a T-shirt, says, 'You don't have anything to say?'

Probably he doesn't even seem surprised and the policeman says, 'You knew he was dead didn't you?'

He shakes his head.

And the policeman asks him why he left the building then, if he didn't know that the man was dead, why he didn't call an ambulance.

'I don't know,' he says.

'You don't know?' the policeman says. 'You don't know why you didn't call an ambulance? People might think that if it was an accident you would have called an ambulance.'

It's at that moment that he understands for the first time what the policeman thinks – he thinks that he deliberately killed the man.

And in a way he starts to doubt his own memories of what happened.

He starts to wonder if he is remembering it right or not.

He wanted the man dead.

He *did* want him dead.

'You wanted him dead, didn't you?' the policeman says to him.

And he doesn't deny it. He doesn't say anything.

And when the policeman says that he pushed the man down the stairs with the intention of killing him, he starts to wonder if maybe that actually was what happened.

He starts to have this feeling that he wanted the man to be dead, and then the man died, and that in some sense that went beyond the purely accidental he had killed him.

He *did* push him down the stairs.

That's why the man fell down the stairs.

He pushed him.

And it's hard to say what his intention was.

It's hard to say what his intention was when he did that, when he pushed the man and he fell down the stairs and hit his head on the metal handrail and then lay on the concrete floor of the half-landing, next to his wife's plants, and didn't get up.