

New Fiction by Sándor Jászberény: “Honey”



1.

A rocket hit the village. I woke up to the sound of the explosion. My eyes widened, I jumped out of bed, put on my bulletproof vest, grabbed my helmet and boots and headed for the door. Another missile hit nearby. The ground shook and the wooden beams of the house creaked. I heard nothing but the beating of my blood in my forehead. My nostrils flared, my muscles tensed. The adrenaline was making me unable to think. I was ready to run out into the night in my underwear.

“Calm down, there’s nothing wrong,” said Petya from his bed across the room. He was a miner from Kharkiv. A hundred and twenty kilos of fat and muscle, with dog eyes and a raspy baritone voice. When he slept, the wooden building shook from

his snoring. It was like sharing a room with a bear.

"It's ok," he repeated. "They are randomly shooting the hill."

He sounded as if talking to a child who had a bad dream. Not that I knew how he talked to his son, but his tone suggested the whole Russian invasion was just a bad dream, with missiles thundering down.

My mind began to clear.

I knew if the place took a direct hit, I'd be dead before I could run anywhere, and if it didn't, it would be pretty pointless to run out into the night.

Yet this was always my reaction when the missiles hit too close.

Petya, seeing my confusion, got up, pulled his backpack out from under the bed, and took out a jar. "Come, have some honey," he said. His English was terrible, but I hardly noticed anymore.

I got up and walked over to the window that yawned into the night. Petya unscrewed the lid off the jar and drew his knife. I took my knife out of my vest pocket, dipped it in the jar, and ran my tongue down the blade.

There was thick, black honey in the jar. Not the sickeningly sweet stuff you get in the store.

"I was dreaming about my wife," he said.

"I wasn't dreaming about anything." I gripped the knife tightly so he wouldn't see my hand tremble.

"We were in little house in Ilovaisk, the one I tell you about. Her father's house."

"And?"

"The kids were in bed and she was in kitchen cleaning up."

"Do I have to listen to one of your sex stories? It'll give me nightmares."

"Did not get to sex. I was smelling her hair when the Russians woke me up and fucked up my dream."

"Too bad."

"They fucked up your dream too."

"I wasn't dreaming anything."

"You will if you stay here long enough."

"You know perfectly well this is my last day at the front."

"What time is it?"

"The sun will rise in two hours."

There were crimson hints of dawn on the horizon as we stood by the window. We sipped our instant coffees, smoked, and watched the sparkling shards of glass in the grass under the windowpanes.

2.

They had found a bunk for me in a ghost village with the 72nd Ukrainian Motorized Rifle Division two weeks earlier. The place was on a hillside next to a coal-fired power station lake. A narrow concrete bridge cut across the lake, the only way into the town on the far side. Wild ducks nested in the mud under its pillars.

Gray block houses stared at us from the opposite hillside. The Ukrainians had put the artillery units between the buildings, but there were still plenty of people living in the town.

In the evenings, the lights in the apartments winked out as

the village plunged into total darkness, with residents avoiding any signals that could reveal the soldiers' sleeping locations to the Russian artillery.

The cannons rumbled during the day, but the real show started after the sun went down. The Ukrainian anti-aircraft guns operated throughout the nights, intercepting at least one or two Russian rockets. It wasn't safe for the soldiers to stay consecutive days in the same house. The Russians seemed content to occupy ruins.

On the front, you swiftly learn to differentiate between the sound of your own artillery and that of the enemy. After two days, I had mastered this skill. While most shells landed kilometers away from us, if one hit closer, my lack of proper military training would instinctively lead me to throw myself to the ground, always providing the soldiers with a good laugh.

3.

A young boy took me from Kiyiv to Dnipropetrovsk in a camouflage all-terrain vehicle with no license plate. The closer we got to the front in the east, the more checkpoints there were.

The boy would pull up in front of the roadblocks, roll down the window, and shout the latest password, which was sent to the soldiers every day by the Ministry of War. We set out at dawn, and by afternoon we had reached the town. At a gas station, I had to switch cars. They put me in a car driven by two snipers from the 72nd Brigade. I shared the back seat with AKM machine guns and a hand grenade launcher all the way to Donetsk province. No one had to tell us we had reached the front. The continuous roar of the artillery made that clear enough.

For two or three hours, nobody bothered with the foreign correspondent. I took pictures of soldiers trying to fix shot-

up SUVs in the yards of the houses they had requisitioned. The sun had already set by the time a soldier in his twenties who wouldn't stop grinning came up to me.

"The commander of the Unit, Nazar wants to see you now."

He took me to a two-story wooden house. The ground floor was full of soldiers eating eggs and chicken with potatoes roasted in their peels. The men were sitting on crates of NLAW anti-tank rockets pushed against the wall. The commander who must have been about fifty, introduced himself, put a plate in my hand and gestured me to sit down and eat.

I had a few bites. There was an uncomfortable silence in the room, and everyone was looking at me.

"So, you are Hungarian?" Nazar asked.

"Yes."

"I know a Hungarian."

I felt shivers go down my spine. I sincerely hoped I wouldn't have to explain Hungarian foreign policy to a bunch of armed men in the middle of the night.

"Yes?"

"The best Hungarian, I think. The most talented. Do you know her name?"

"No."

"Michelle Wild."

The men in the room who were over forty laughed. The men in their twenties had no idea what he was talking about.

"She had a big influence on me too," I said.

"Are you talking about a politician?" asked a twenty-something

kid, called Vitya.

"No," Nazar replied. "Talented actress."

"How come I never hear of her?" asked Vitya.

"Because by time you were born, she already retired."

"I could still know her."

"You don't know her because you're homo and you don't watch porn."

"Yes I watch porn!"

"But you don't watch classic porn. Because you're homo."

"I'm not a homo!"

"Yes, you are," Nazar said, bringing the debate to an end.

"So what you come here for, Hungarian?"

"To film."

"Porn?" the kid asked.

"Yes."

"Welcome to Ukraine!" Nazar said.

Someone found a bottle of American whiskey, and by the time we had finished it, they had assigned me to Vitya, who would take me to the front.

The war had been going on for eight months, and we all knew that eight months was more than enough time for people in the West to forget that the Russians had invaded a European country. Ukrainian resistance depended on getting military support. The presence of foreign journalists was a necessary evil to secure arms supplies.

4.

I met Petya upon my arrival to the frontline. Nazar assigned me to one of the wooden buildings where his soldiers slept. When I first stepped into the room with my backpack slung across my back, a huge man with a shaved head was standing in front of me in his underwear and a poison green T-shirt. He looked me up and down:

"I warn you that I snore like chainsaw."

"It won't bother me. Actually, makes me feel at home."

"That's what my wife says."

"Does she snore?"

"I don't know. I never heard her snore."

"I snore."

"No problem."

I unpacked my stuff next to my bed, undressed, and went to bed. I listened to the night noises, the rumble of the cannons in the distance. The branches of the trees were heavy with fruit, and you could hear the wasps and bees buzzing around the rotting apples and pears in the leaves on the ground.

I had trouble falling asleep. Petya was wide awake too—I could tell because there wasn't a hint of his usual snoring. We lay quietly on our beds for a while.

"Do you have a family?" Petya asked from his bed, breaking the silence.

"A wife and a son from my first marriage. How about you? Do you have any children?"

"Two. Two boys. Eight and twelve years old. Do you want to see picture?"

“Yes.”

Petya stood. Stepping over to my bed, the boards creaking underneath him, he held up a battered smartphone displaying a picture of two little boys wearing striped T-shirts and enjoying ice cream.

“They are very handsome,” I said. Then I shuddered because a shell had struck maybe a kilometer or two away.

“Do you have picture of your son?”

I took out my phone and brought up a pic of my son.

“He looks just like you.”

“Yeah. Lots of people say I had myself cloned.”

“My babies not look like me, good thing. They like their mother.”

“Lucky for them,” I said with a grin.

“You’re not most handsome man in world either, Sasha.”

5.

During the day, I toured the Ukrainian positions with Vitya and conducted interviews. I grew very fond of the kid very quickly. Once, right before we went to the front, I saw him wrestling on the ground with another soldier. He teased everyone relentlessly, but no one took offense at his rough jokes. Vitya belonged to the generation born into war. War cradled his crib, and armed resistance against the Russians was his first love. He graduated from the war. At the age of twenty-three, he was already considered a veteran among the frontline soldiers. Nazar had instructed that I shouldn’t be sent to the active front until he was confident in my readiness.

About ten kilometers from the front, I interviewed the medics

of the battalion or the guys returning in tanks. Several times, I was assigned to kitchen duty. This meant I had to accompany one of the soldiers and assist him in hunting pheasants at the edges of the wheat fields. The birds were confused by the thunder of the mortar shells, so they would run out to the side of the road, and you could just shoot them. There was always something freshly killed for dinner. During the two weeks I spent at the front, the soldiers shot pheasant for the most part. I managed to bag some wild rabbits once. Everyone was overjoyed that day.

I usually chatted with Petya in the evenings. He was stationed at the Browning machine guns. The Russians would shell the hell out of the Ukrainian positions dug in the ground between the stunted trees and then try to overrun them with infantry. There were more and more unburied bodies in the wheat fields under the October sky.

On the third night, Petya asked if I had a picture of my wife.

"Yes."

"Show me."

I showed him one of the pics on my phone. He looked at it for a long time.

"Too Jewish for me."

"Jewish cunts are warmer, you know."

"My wife's cunt is hotter. Want to see picture?"

"Of your wife's cunt?"

"No, idiot. Of wife."

"Sure."

Petya stepped over to my bed and put his phone in my hand. On the screen was a pic of a natural blond, a stunningly

beautiful woman."

"She's my Tyina," he said.

"Poor thing, she must be blind."

"Why you say she is blind?"

"She married you."

"What do you know about true love?"

"Everything. What the hell does she see in you?"

"I don't know. We met at May ball of steelwork. She was in bright yellow dress, so beautiful I could not breathe."

"What did you do to trick her into talking to you?"

"Nothing. I knew her father from factory. He introduced me. It was love at first sight. I dated her one month before she let me hold hand. No one had ever kissed me like."

"Gimme a tissue so I can wipe away my tears."

"Her kiss was sweet like honey."

"You were born to be a poet, Petya, not a soldier."

"After one year, I married her. The wedding was in Ilovaisk. And then came Petyaka and then little Volodya."

"You think about them a lot."

"I do not think about anything else."

"When was the last time you saw them?"

"Seven months ago."

"That's a lot. Do you talk to them often?"

"Yes. Every day."

6.

In the evenings, Petya talked about his family. He told me what his children's favorite food was, how his wife made it, how they kept bees at his father-in-law's place, twelve hives in all. I'd been among the soldiers for a week when Petya came to dinner one night with a bandage on his hand.

"What happened?"

"It's nothing."

He ate, drank some whisky, and went to bed. I played cards with the others.

"The Russians tried to break through today." – said Vitya when he got bored of the game.

"Did you have to give up the position?"

"Yep. Fifty rounds left in the Browning. Can you imagine?"

"What happened to Petya?"

"He's the only one left alive. A bullet went through his hand. We had to shout to get him to leave the post. He grabbed the gun, just in case."

Petya was already snoring when I got back to the room. I went to bed. I was awakened by his moaning and swearing.

"What happened?"

"I rolled on hand. Stitches are torn, I think."

The bandage was dripping with blood.

"We should go to the hospital."

The hospital was about twenty kilometers away. I knew this, because I wasn't allowed to take any pictures there. Anywhere but there. The Ukrainians wouldn't let us report their losses.

"Fuck it," he said. "Just bandage it up again."

"I'm not a doctor."

"Just bandage the fucking thing. I will go to hospital in morning."

"Okay."

"First aid kit is on vest."

I unzipped the pouch marked with the white cross and took out the tourniquets. The gauze and iodine were at the bottom. I used the small scissors to cut the bandage on Petya's hand. The stitches had torn badly. A mix of red and black blood.

"Clean it out."

I wiped the wound with iodine and even poured a little in it. Petya was constantly cursing. English has a limited number of curse words compared to the Ukrainian language. In any of the Slavic languages, you can continue swearing for hours without repeating yourself. I couldn't catch everything he said, but it seemed to involve the insertion of pine woods, John Deeres, and umbrellas into the enemy's private parts. When his wound looked clean enough, I started to bandage it up.

"There you go," I said. "But you should take better care of yourself. You've got your family waiting for you back home."

"They will have to wait a little longer."

"There's no telling how long this war will last."

"It lasts while it lasts. We will be together in end anyway."

"I sincerely hope so."

"You don't have to hope. We will be together for sure. But not now. I still have some Russians to kill."

"I hope you get home soon."

"You are a good man, Sasha."

7.

While playing cards, Nazar said, "Tomorrow you can take the Hungarian out after the attack has started." When I asked what attack he was talking about, no one said a word, not surprisingly.

It later turned out that, contrary to expectations, the Ukrainian forces had launched a successful counterattack at Kharkiv. Nazar thought that this would be the perfect opportunity to send me to the front lines and keep me safe at the same time. The offensive would distract the Russians enough to reduce the artillery fire on their positions.

We were cutting across fields of wheat, with the sun shining resplendently in the sky above us, when the Russians started shelling the position we were headed for. Two shells hit right next to our car, and it felt as if someone had pushed my head under water.

Vitya drove the car into the woods, mud splashing on the windshield from the shells. He stopped the car next to the trench where the Browning guys had dug themselves and ordered everyone out. Two other soldiers were in the car; they knelt to the ground and listened, then ran to take cover in the trees, dragging me along.

Dusty earth and mud. The trenches were like something out of a World War I movie. Petya was grinning as he came up from underground.

"Want some coffee?" he asked.

We did. I glanced where the barrels of the Browning machine guns were pointed. The Russians were less than a kilometer away on the far side. You couldn't see the dead bodies because of the tall grass, but I knew there were a lot of them lying unburied in the field, because when the wind shifted, it brought with it the sweet smell of decay.

I had a cup of coffee in my hand when I heard the shriek of the mortar shell. I lurched to one side and splattered the whole cup on Vitya.

"That was more than ten meters away," he said after the mortar struck, and he pulled me up off the ground. I couldn't control the shaking of my hands.

The biggest problem with modern-day artillery is that you can't see it at all. The legend that 82mm mortar shells were deliberately designed to whistle before impact is widely held. It's nonsense, of course. No engineer would design a weapon so that the targets would know before it hit that it was about to strike. Mortar shells whistle because they cut through the air and leave a vacuum behind them.

But you only hear the whistle of the shells that God intended for someone else.

The Ukrainians knew when the Russians were firing missiles. I guess the front was close and they could hear them launching. Though I'm not really sure. I only know that on the way back to the car, Vitya suddenly grabbed me and pulled me down into a hole.

The ground shook. I heard a big crash, then nothing.

When Vitya pulled me to my feet, I was totally lost, didn't know where to go. He steered me towards the car. My ears felt like they'd exploded, but my eardrums weren't bleeding. Silence stuck around until we hit the ghost village. When my hearing kicked back in, every explosion made me feel like I

was getting zapped by electricity. Trying not to hit the dirt took some work, but I held up okay unless the hits got too close.

8.

Nazar told me that there was a car leaving for Kiev at eight o'clock, and I would leave the front in it.

The brigade was hard at work. All the equipment had to be moved to a new location because the Russian missiles were getting closer and closer. Old flatbed trucks were rolling down the dirt roads, loaded up with fuel, rocket launchers, and ammunition. They drafted me to lend a hand, so I was lugging boxes too, muttering all the while about how nice it'd be if the Russians could please not fire any fucking rockets for just a little while.

The new headquarters was in a granary. It was a concrete building from the Cold War era, with bullet holes and boarded-up windows. We were still hard at work when a green all-terrain vehicle pulled up in front of the entrance.

"What about you?" I asked Petya.

"I am coming with you."

"See, I told you you'd make it home," I said, giving him a slap on the back. "I'm good luck for you."

There were five of us in the all-terrain, and the trip back was a good twelve hours. Wasn't exactly first-class. I was longing to get a shower and finally take a shit in a toilet, but most of all just to stretch my legs once we reached Kiev.

But that was out of the question. Nazar and the others

insisted that we get a round of drinks.

In the city center, we went to a pub called Gorky's. It was in a cellar, with heavy wooden tables and a bar. We could barely get a seat. I was shocked by the bustle. It felt as if we had arrived in a different country, a country that wasn't being ripped apart by war.

The guys ordered Ukrainian vodka and beer. The waiter brought dried salted fish and five shot glasses.

Nazar filled everyone's glass, and when he was done, he raised his own.

"A toast to those who gave their lives."

He lifted his glass on high, then poured the vodka on the ground and threw the glass on the floor with all his might. The others did exactly the same thing. The place fell dead silent, and everyone looked at us.

"Is there a problem?" Nazar asked the bartender.

"Glory to Ukraine!" the bartender replied.

"Glory to the heroes!" the soldiers said, and everyone in the pub echoed their shout.

New glasses were brought to the table. Nazar filled them.

"And now a toast to the living," he said, and he knocked it back in one gulp.

We drank quickly, and a lot.

"And now," Nazar said after the second bottle of vodka, "we go to see the patriotic whores."

Since the offensive began, downtown brothels gave a 20% discount to frontline fighters due to an 11 PM curfew. Keeping the places afloat and showing patriotic devotion played a

part, but “patriotic” became the buzzword.

I was dizzy from alcohol and fatigue. I didn’t want to go, but I couldn’t get out of it. The whorehouse was in a four-story building. We went on foot. Nazar rang the bell, and the door swung open.

The women were on the fourth floor. Two old, moderately spacious apartments that had been turned into one. There was a big Ukrainian flag on the wall in the hallway. A woman who must have been about fifty and whose cheeks were caked with rouge walked over to us and sat us down on the sofa.

She and Nazar started haggling in Ukrainian. It took me a while to realize that they were arguing about me. I was not a soldier, she was saying, and so I did not get any discount. I cast a glance at Petya, hoping he could get me out of the whole thing, but he was just staring at the wall. Eventually, Nazar must have reached some kind of agreement with the woman, because she walked over to the counter, picked up a bell, and gave it a shake.

The three doors off the hallway swung open, and soon six women were standing in front of us with business smiles on their faces. They were dressed in bras and panties.

“Take your pick,” the woman said, and even I understood.

I also understood the silence that fell over us. When it comes to committing a sinful act, no one wants to go first. Several seconds of silence passed, several unbearably awkward seconds.

And then Petya stood up. He had a bleary look in his eyes. He walked over to one of the brunettes, a girl who must have been in her twenties.

“Let’s go, sweetheart,” he said. She took his hand and led him into the room.

The other two soldiers immediately followed suit, chose a

girl, and then left. I stared in shock.

"What?" Nazar asked, lighting a cigarette. "You look like you have seen a ghost."

"No," I replied, "I'm just a little surprised. Petya was always talking about his wife. I never would have thought he'd sleep with another woman."

Nazar took a drag on his cigarette, grimaced a little, stubbed it out in the ashtray, and stood up.

"Petya's apartment in Kharkiv was hit by a rocket the day after the invasion started," he said. "His family was killed."

He then walked over to one of the girls, took her hand, and withdrew with her into one of the rooms.