

HOMECOMING, 1945

Smoke rises slowly from the locomotive's chimney, hissing from the valves and swirling in clouds over the front of the train. The locomotive heaves once more, then stops. A sweaty engineer in an official vest, his face covered with soot, appears in the window and scowls at the two carriages behind him – a passenger car and a boxcar – as if to persuade the passengers to get off faster.

With a cap pushed high on his head, the scruffy, perspiring conductor hops down from the carriage's steps into the fresh air, hoping to find some relief from the sweltering heat inside the train, but he can hardly tell the difference between inside and out. It's over ninety degrees, high noon on a muggy July day, seven hours after the slow train left the capital at dawn.

Only one figure is waiting on the platform. No one else can be seen, no one is coming, and no one is traveling here these days. He's only here because of his duty to fulfill the task. He expects clients recommended to him by the village notary.

The conductor can almost taste the pint of frothy beer that teases his mind. But according to the bill of transport, the freight has to be unloaded, and he's not free to go until then. Who knows how long that will take? He's already in a state. Well, he's not planning to pitch

in. Why help? The sender must arrange the unloading. He's a conductor, not a porter! But he'll stew for an hour if he doesn't help, and on top of everything else, they'll think that he has a grudge against them and that's why he won't lend a hand. They can think what they want! They're all the same. Suckers. All the more so considering what's happened. But they aren't budging from inside until someone unrolls the red carpet. Maybe they're praying in there where it's one hundred degrees and counting. In black suits and hats. Who on earth understands them? Do they always wear their best or are they all dressed up because they're observing one of their holidays? But they wouldn't be traveling today if that was the case. Even he knows that – no matter how mysterious they might be.

It seems odd that what happened to them didn't seem to be quite enough. They're coming back, back to where it happened. What an undeniably stubborn race, he concludes, and so pig-headed, too.

The conductor strolls towards the stationmaster's office to borrow a handcart. He imagines he'll be free that much faster if he organizes the unloading of their cargo in advance and doesn't let them mess about. How they fussed as they loaded in Budapest – as if every last thing they packed was glass. He asked if they were transporting crystal, because fragile goods require special shipping and handling, and an additional fee.

“Nothing fragile,” they said reassuringly, “But handle with care.”

If they want to scrimp and save, let them, the conductor thought. If something happens to the cargo, then they'll be responsible for the damage. That's how they are, always insisting on saving money. That's why they play tricks rather than take risks. And, indeed, they didn't leave him alone until he slammed the door shut.

Ten heavy, nailed boxes, plus a lighter one, had to be loaded onto the boxcar. They refused to allow any other goods or packages to be transported together in the same carriage with their cargo. They insisted on paying the full fee.

The conductor acknowledged their special demands with a shrug. It was none of his business. The transport certificate was filled out and signed accurately, they'd paid the fee to the main office in advance, and from that point on they could transport anything they wanted the way they wanted. He'd labored on the railway more than thirty years, seen everything, and had endured plenty of objections from bosses and crazy passengers, but he did have an opinion about these people here. About a year ago, he saw how they had been herded into each carriage, eighty or ninety of them at a time. He saw the hands thrusting between the window's barbwire and heard the shouts and pleas for water; he had posted letters tossed out before the border, for good money, and he was even compelled to feel sorry for the poor people who, in their despair, were trying to figure out where they were heading. He experienced a few sleepless nights after that. But after all that

had happened, he now found it repugnant that, according to the newspapers (over-reporting a bit, as others also had suffered plenty), they were trading with Germans – with Germans, of all people. They come and go through half of Europe with boxes sealed by the German Reich, proving once again that they'll overcome any challenge and they've no scruples when it comes to making profit. He had no doubt that the shipment must promise great rewards, considering all their special precautions.

These folks have learned nothing, he concludes. They're only interested in business and that's it.

Although he'd love to depart for the village to drink a cold beer, he trudges after the godforsaken handcart so they can't claim that he wasn't of any assistance. But then they should really get on with it. He won't help unload, that's certain. He's a conductor, not a porter.

He pulls the handcart to the carriage and then heads to the stationmaster's office.

A gray-bearded older man appears in the door of the passenger car wearing a black hat, a black suit and a white shirt. Behind him a younger man of similar appearance disembarks. This one doesn't have a beard, but thick black whiskers make his face more dashing.

He's in mourning; that's why he doesn't shave.

They both seem rundown and tired. They're about to summon the conductor, but they then see a man at the end of the platform who's already striding towards them.

The old peasant's wearing boots, baggy felt trousers, a worn, sun-washed shirt, a vest and a hat.

"Good afternoon," he says, greeting them.

"And to you."

"Coming from Pest?"

They nod.

"I'm your driver."

"Did you manage to prepare everything?" asks the impatient older man.

"Just the way you asked in the telegram. The notary appointed me and my brother-in-law."

"What do you mean, he appointed you?"

"Well, it's harvest. Most people are working their land."

"Everyone has land here?"

"Most."

"No one wanted the job?"

"Nope. But we need the cash. So my brother-in-law and I said yes, if that's okay with you?"

"What's your name?"

"Suba, sir." He tips his hat. "Mihály Suba."

"Hermann Sámuel." The older one holds out his hand, the younger only nods.

"Then let's get started, Mr. Suba."

The driver calls his brother-in-law from the other side of the stationmaster's office. He's waiting in the shade, next to their horse.

The conductor turns up and points towards the end of the ramp.

“It’ll be easier with the handcart. You only have to make a little detour, but it’s easier than unloading the boxes by hand. There’s a gate over there.”

“Thank you.” They nod.

“The documents should be signed that we’re done.”

“We’d rather wait. Until you unload.” The old man squints.

“Who cares?” the conductor says, offended, and ostentatiously turns away. He regrets being helpful, but there’s nothing to be done: the transportation is incomplete until it’s unloaded. I’ll wait, he thinks. I’ll wait, if that’s what you want!

The driver comes together with his brother-in-law. He tips the brim of his hat, mutters a greeting. The conductor points at the handcart again, as if it wasn’t obvious that it made the job easier. They go to the boxcar, he breaks the seal, and they pull the door open.

The boxes are intact.

The driver climbs into the wagon, pushes the boxes to the rolling door, jumps down and they lift the boxes one by one onto the handcart. One box tips in their hands during the rapid unloading. Hermann Sámuel and the younger man react together, their faces alarmed, but Mihály Suba regains his balance and the box falls into place atop the others.

“Gently, please!” the old man says, “There’s no need to hurry!” He clings to the younger man’s arm.

While they’re unloading, a messenger departs from the stationmaster’s office. He pedals his bicycle along a long row of poplars, silent and still, leading to the top of the village. His assignment is to inform the notary that they’ve arrived, together with their cargo, and that all they’ve revealed is that the boxes contain cosmetics.

“So they are coming,” the notary says. He sighs and loosens his tie. He steps to the window, opens it as if he were choking, but only the heat rolls from outside into the damp-smelling but cool office. He angrily pushes the window open.

“Go and tell my son to be patient. I’ll look in on him. We’ll wait to see what they’re stirring up. Tell me, is anyone from the village among them?”

“Nobody,” the scrawny boy says, filled with the excitement of the task.

“How many are they, anyway?”

“Two.”

“Only two now, but the rest’ll come later. What are their names?”

“There’s only one name on the transport bill. Hermann Sámuel.”

“He’s not even from here. He had nothing to do with...” He bites off the sentence.

He doesn't understand anything. Pollák was the pharmacist. Is it possible he'd made a last bequest? Or sold his business well before? He couldn't have. He'd have had to report it for the notary's approval and pay tax. And since there's no valid contract, there cannot be a new owner.

István Szentés thinks about his son Árpád who was an assistant in the pharmacy a few years ago. Then he was promoted to store manager, and later formally took ownership. Together with his family, Imre Pollák left the village in the summer of 1944 – the notary always puts it just so, if asked, but he's almost never asked – so Árpád continued to run the shop.

Can he breathe a sigh of relief at last? Because it would have been hard to find arguments against Pollák, who had always been so nice to Árpád. And he had no qualms about the others – none at all.

If the others are returning to claim Pollák's share, it means that Pollák cannot come in person. He yanks on his tie and groans. Life is a battle, and today's youth are weaker than his own generation. If his generation didn't hold them up, they'd simply fold.

“Go tell my son to calm down. I need to stay at the office for now. They could be heading here to sort something out.”

The messenger nods, jumps on his bicycle, and speeds along the main street to the pharmacy. He jumps off and

rattles the door but it's locked. He knocks, scratches at the window. No reply. He doesn't understand. Árpád never closes at noon and never ever takes a lunch break.

“Árpád! Árpád Szentes!”

No answer. It's dark inside, but the “closed” sign's gone. He knocks at the window of the house opposite and asks if they've seen the young pharmacist.

“He was here in the morning, he opened on time,” an old woman answers. “We haven't seen him since then, but honestly we weren't really paying attention,” she says.

The boy rides back to the notary's office with the news: the store's closed.

“He's not there?”

“Not a trace, sir.”

István Szentes can't believe it. You can say plenty of bad things about Árpád, but he's responsible and precise. He'd open his store even if Gypsy children poured from the sky. It's inconceivable that he's not there. He knows very well that they're arriving today.

The notary clammers into his buggy. He likes driving and no one else in the village has a buggy that handles so exceedingly well. It's nimble, even with a single nag harnessed to it, moving as if pulled by a thoroughbred. If he hadn't hidden the beast when the Russians marched through the village, they would surely have confiscated it, but he'd tucked the horse out of sight, and since then he appreciated it more than a new one.

“Go about your business!” he says to the messenger, turning from the courtyard to the main street. The boy rides back to the post office, happy to be free for an hour.

István Szentes drives fast, fanning the animal with his whip and foaming with rage all the while. Where could Árpád possibly be today, when he should be standing at his post, rooted in place? What could have happened on this cursed day that led him to simply abandon the shop? István had gone over his duties with him, although he himself had secretly hoped that today would not happen, that perhaps there'd be a miracle and they wouldn't come after all, in spite of the letter in which they announced their impending arrival and asked for assistance. He could have refused, saying the notary office isn't a cargo company, and they would have to arrange the transport alone. Even then the boy seemed scared, scared of meeting them. He's a mama's boy, completely dependent. He doesn't understand politics, money or horses. And women even less. If this wasn't disgraceful enough, he was exempted from serving in the army, too. What a reckless waste of a youth. Books were all that interested him. Novels and poems. Just like his mother. With her sick lungs, too. He was a bookworm, but he ran the shop fair and square. Whatever was available in the county store was always available in his pharmacy. His heart was in the business, even if his mind wasn't.

God damn it! He cracks the whip. He's thinking of that forsaken store as if it was over. But it's not over and it

won't ever be over. They're trying in vain, and we're going to be lucky for once!

He jumps from the buggy in front of the pharmacy and knocks.

“Are you here, son? Árpád, answer if you're here!” he says to the glass door, above which hangs the new company sign of his own design. He hears some noise from inside, the clinking of crucibles and bottles. “God damn, son! Open the door now!”

He doesn't answer, although István Szentes knows that his son's sitting motionless on the other side. Just like him. Ridiculous.

“Árpád! Get moving, for heaven's sake. I don't want to repeat myself. I swear, son, I'll break this door down if you don't open up,” he says. He muffles his shouts. “Don't be silly, Árpád! Act like a man. Just this once. Finish what you've done!”

Árpád Szentes despises his father now. “What you've done” rings in his ears for a long time. His father was the one who encouraged him to take on the business, to lend his name to the enterprise, and who then encouraged him to carry on the business as if it were his own. At the end of the day he does have a note saying the pharmacy belongs to him. And it's true, the work came in handy and he could run the place effectively: he knew his way around the store, it enabled a modest living, and his father stopped pestering him for being a layabout – that

he'd never be able to stand on his own two feet. All that's for nothing now; he's shouting at him again like he was a snot-nosed kid. Árpád slowly rotates the key in the lock and, cracking the door open, he stands tall. He isn't quite as lanky as the man standing in front of him, destined by fate to be his father.

"You can go, father" Árpád says firmly. "I'll take care of my own things."

If they knocked, he was prepared to snatch his linen jacket and straw hat from the coat rack, let them into the shop and say, "Kind sirs, I've saved the pharmacy for you. I did what I promised. And now excuse me!" With that he would doff his hat and bow a little, tilting his head forward and to the side, and then scurry away.

His father seems to read the thoughts in his face. He jerks the door and steps into the shop, blocking the exit. Father and son stare at each other fixedly.

"You'll take care of a big fat nothing. You don't think that we'll just give up what we're owed?"

"What are we owed, father?"

"A contract's a contract. A paper says the store's yours, right?"

"But what kind of paper was it? Father, you know."

"A paper's a paper. They can sue us if they like."

"I won't go to court."

"What will you do then?"

"I'll walk out and leave it all behind."

“God damn it! You’re not leaving anything! You must stay! Be a man for once in your life!”

Both of them suddenly are thinking about the same episode. About a girl, Eszter Hórusz, from the neighboring village, whom Árpád courted over a year ago, and whom he still loves, even though she’s engaged to another boy. Árpád Szentes keeps sending her letters, and poems, too – this especially annoys his father – but they go unanswered. Since then Árpád hasn’t been his usual self. That’s the saving grace of the store: as long as he works mechanically, he can distract himself, but in the evenings he’s broken and buries himself in books.

Father and son glare at each other. Both wish the other would eventually recognize their mutual feelings, even if they’re aware that they’ll never understand each other.

The son turns away cautiously and arranges the supplies on the counter, while his father lowers himself into the chair next to the small table where the pharmacy’s older customers often rest.

They wait together.

The unloading nears its conclusion at the railway station. Even if one must navigate a much longer way with the handcart, it’s still easier and faster than transferring the cargo by hand. Only once all eleven boxes are loaded is Hermann Sámuel willing to sign the documents, and the conductor can go about his business. He has a good four and a half hours before the train departs again. He’ll go to the pub, he thinks, and meditate over a few beers.

He borrows the stationmaster's bicycle and rides under the fiery sun towards the village. The saddle practically smolders under him and he can already picture the sparkling mug of beer with beads of sweat growing on the glass.

They're about to leave the station when the conductor steps into the dimmed bar, slumps down at the table closest to the damp, cool counter, and lifts a foamy beer to his lips.

The driver and his brother-in-law climb on the buggy, after offering places to the two strangers.

"It's at least a half-hour walk from here to your village," they say, but the gray-bearded old man just shoos them away.

"There's room next to the boxes. Try sitting there," they say. They urge the men, but there's no reply, just a pressing wave indicating that they should leave.

The sun is shining at its zenith as Mihály Suba clucks his tongue and flicks his whip. He owns the harnessed nag, and uses it for deliveries if there's anything that needs sending.

You can say a lot of bad things about them, he thought, after István Szentes ordered him to his office and offered him the job, but you can't say they don't respect their dead. After being away for over a year, their first order of business was the cemetery – even though it was a big enough step to return home and start the business again – and

this gesture of respect means a lot to Mihály Suba. But the dead are dead, he thinks, and nobody helps the living with their challenges.

The cart moves slowly and they stride behind it, next to one another in their hats and black suits, unruffled by one hundred degrees of July heat.

At the end of the row of poplars they turn for the village road, which merges into its main street, just as the conductor, now leaning against the counter, finishes his beer.

“They brought eleven boxes,” he says in a moderate voice.

“Eleven?” the bartender asks. “Not much for goods, a lot for luggage.”

“Well, that’s how many they have. They had to be handled gently, like crystal.”

Seven other villagers occupy the pub, five of them feeling the pits of their stomachs sinking. They’ve an urge to dash home and warn their families about the trouble. Because if *they’ve* come back, then *more* might be coming. If the others are coming, there’ll be even more, and sooner or later they’ll reclaim what they know or suspect is with someone else – whatever was handed over for safekeeping, whatever disappeared.

But only one of them stands up, pretending that he has to go home: a farmer, now a disabled pensioner whose right hand was removed by a faulty machine in the sum-

mer of 1943. He didn't take anything from the homes abandoned last year, but like other people with big families, he requested a house. In consideration of his health, his own crumbling home, his five children and a son who died a hero on the Eastern front, he was granted a house and could move in.

The farmer pays wordlessly, his face tense, and departs for home. There's no justice on earth, he thinks, ashamed that he'll have to move away if the original owner returns. He has no issue with them, except the envy he always felt for their prosperity, their easy lot, and the future they secured for their children. He never did anything to claim their possessions, but since fate willed that their houses remained empty, he felt little remorse for moving into a house with clean, whitewashed walls.

The villagers who remain in the pub know why he chose to leave and they're also startled by a vague fear.

It'd be good to know who has come and who else might join – purely from a practical standpoint.

“The older man's called Hermann Sámuel, but there's also a younger man with him,” says the conductor. He sympathizes with their difficult situation and wants to help.

What a relief. The name's unfamiliar. At a loss, they stare at one another.

“Maybe they're from a neighboring village. But what are they up to here?” someone wonders aloud.