

PÉTER MOESKO
NEW YEAR'S EVE

Translated by Walter Burgess and Marietta Morry

SO THERE IS THIS PARTY, AND THEY INVITED ME. Okay, the third person plural is an exaggeration since it was only Blowing Bea who invited me. I was friendly with her before she was given the nickname, which means it was a long time ago—before high school. We lived on the same street, and we somehow started a friendship. As for me, I was fond of her for a while even after grade school, but she was given the nickname pretty soon, and she earned it. What's more, after a while she enjoyed being called that. At the November ribbon ceremony for the senior class, she was met with half a minute of whistling and applause when it was her turn to get her graduation ribbon. However, the party that was planned for after the ceremony started out badly because Kroki fell down the stairs and really smashed up his shinbone. And since he is one of the big mouths in the class, the others cancelled the party right away, saying they would make up for it by a kick-ass bash on New Year's Eve. Even if I had friends in the class, I wouldn't have liked one of those. Then, when the organizing got started during one of the recesses, the idea came up that there needed to be a few people at the party who stayed sober so they would be able to handle it if the neighbours called the police. Bea told the others: I think we can count on chubby. Then she turned and looked at me. You'll be coming, won't you?

Except that in the meantime, I got punished. An argument at Christmas dinner got out of hand, and I happened to say the last word that just hung there in the air. The punishment consisted of not being allowed to watch TV or go anywhere, especially not for New Year's Eve. I was not too bothered by it. I read, and I took our dog for a walk, as that didn't count in the punishment since no one else was willing to take him—not my older sister, not my parents, and not Granny, who had moved in with us half a year ago when Grandad died.

It's 1:30pm—the usual nap time in front of the fireplace. Mom and Dad have already dozed off, and Granny is doing a crossword puzzle. I go to the kitchen and turn on the tap as if I want to drink some water. I listen and watch how the water flows steadily into the sink. I cleaned it this morning and can still smell the scent of detergent on my hands. Suddenly Sister comes into the kitchen and stops for a second. She watches how I run the water into the empty sink. What are you doing?! I turn off the tap and quickly turn to her: nothing. Sister takes a bottle of kefir out of the fridge and goes back to her room. I wait a little bit and look at the tiny water marks in the sink. The drain gurgles for a time, and it sounds like the apartment's stomach is churning. When it stops, I leave the kitchen and knock on Sister's door. There is no answer, so I try again louder. She doesn't answer this time either, so I open the door. Sister stands there in front of the mirror in a bra and panties with her back turned to me. She is holding a tight top in front of her. When she notices me, she turns around agitated and clutches the top to her body. What do you want? She looks at me as if I had caught her at something. Can you help me a bit? This surprises her, and she even forgets that she is supposed to be embarrassed, which, by the way, is unnecessary because she has a beautiful body. I never ask her for help; in fact, it is usually the other way around when she needs to have something fixed on her laptop. Close that door, for God's sake. I stare Sister in the eye for a while. Then I close the door behind me and go back to my own room.

I stand in front of the mirror. Well, that's what you've got, I say as I look myself over. I was never a handsome boy, mostly because I am a bit chubby. I am the only chubby person in the family; everyone else is slim. We don't know how this happened. I tried dieting but never managed to lose more than one or two kilos. Mind you, I never put on more weight either; I just stayed at this level. I examine my face in the mirror. My features are round, which makes me look younger, or at least that's what Sister told me not long ago. Her previous guy used to call me Babyface. When my father heard this for the first time, he burst out laughing. After that, whenever the guy was over, he would call me that too. One time Granny tried to stand up for me and said, You will look more manly one day. Then she offered to cut my hair to make it look more masculine. The end result was that the whole family kept laughing at my hairdo, and Sister finally shaved it all off. Grandad was always decent, but unfortunately he passed away.

I open my closet. All of a sudden I feel that all my clothes are crappy. I

normally like them, until it's time to leave the house. Sister always tells me that black is slimming. I don't think I look any slimmer, but I don't have any better ideas, so I put on a black sweater with a navy-blue shirt underneath. I only have three pairs of jeans, which are all practically identical. In our class these days everyone wears tight jeans, including the boys, but I look ridiculous in them. Once I tried on a pair; it was pitiful. I look inside my underwear. The other day I watched the others after gym class. Quite a few of them shaved themselves around their cocks. I tried it once but didn't really understand what they saw in it. What's more, my skin was sore after, and I was worried that my parents would see the hair wrapped in a Kleenex in the garbage. By now the hair had grown back to the original length—not that I am all that hairy. It crosses my mind for a second to have another go at it, but that's exactly when Sister opens the door without knocking. The elastic in my shorts makes a louder than necessary sound under my navel. What's the matter, is it gone? she asks, snickering. While I put on my jeans, Sister sits down on my bed. If I sat down on hers, she would make such a fuss that the whole neighbourhood would know about it.

After the compulsory wrangling and objections, Sister finally says that she will help. The branches of the walnut tree are close to her window, and it was me who taught her how to climb out using them. For years she's been sneaking out by the walnut tree using my trick, so she owes me one.

It is around 5:15pm, and I hear my parents start to prepare cheese pastries. Mother mixes the dough loudly, and Father hums along with the radio. Surprisingly, there are still a few Christmas songs. Granny is watching Benny Hill videotapes in the living room. They used to be Grandad's favourites, and Granny has become fond of them ever since he died. She even learned how to operate the machine. Mother wanted to buy non-alcoholic champagne just for me. She's been doing this for years; that's what she bought last year as well. She said that she was quite aware young people start drinking early these days but that I shouldn't drink until I reached eighteen—at least not in front of her. She said this even though I'm not in the habit of drinking anyway. This year, on the other hand, when we went grocery shopping for Christmas at Penny and mother asked me to pick up two regular bottles and one non-alcoholic bottle of champagne, I told her that she should pick one up if that is what she felt like drinking. Mother told Father about it at home, and I could see in his face that he was about to slap me except that Granny was also in the kitchen, and she started laughing heartily when she heard

what I told Mother. This confused Father so much that I thought he was going to slap Granny instead. Stop laughing Mother, or I'll dump you outside like the cat when it needs to shit. With this, fortunately, everyone forgot about my insolence, and Mother spent the rest of the evening quarrelling with Father.

To make things less obvious, I go over to Sister's room, and she brings over my coat, scarf, and shoes. She is also getting ready to go out, and on those occasions she usually walks up and down the apartment. It's 6:30pm, and I'm ready to leave; all I'm missing is my hat and gloves. I can't find them anywhere, Sister says. They must be there! Would you look for them again? I'm telling you I can't find them. There's nothing I can do, so I take off without them even though it is bitterly cold outside. When I get on top of the table, mud falls from my shoes. Thanks a lot, Sister growls. Sorry. I lean out through the window, and I see a thin layer of ice on the branches of the walnut tree. The cold makes my hands turn red right away. By the way, where are you heading? After a short pause, I turn back in her direction: to Budapest. She almost starts laughing but then stares at me in shock. Seriously? Uh huh. The window is still open, and the radiator starts knocking. I try to enjoy the last seconds of warmth. You didn't fucking say anything about going to Budapest! And where in Budapest? Do you know where you have to go? And how will you get there anyway? As I look at Sister, it occurs to me that I hadn't seen her worry about me since I was a child. Chill out; I'll find the place. She still hesitates, but I start climbing out to the walnut tree. Text me or something!

I go over to the bus stop. I thought it was going to be busy outside, but I don't see a soul; there aren't even any cars on the road. Everything is motionless, and fortunately there isn't any wind. I want to look at the schedule, but the paper is torn. It takes more than fifteen minutes before a bus pulls up to the stop with a hissing sound; its wheels are unrealistically large, as if they belong to a tractor. Inside there are brown leather seats and a driver I've never seen before. Good day, I say to the driver, who looks at me with a blank face. Or rather, good evening, I correct myself. I would like a ticket to the terminal. He extends his palm, which is the size of a paddle and covered with black oil stains. Thirteen hundred and we're even. I didn't expect the ticket to be so expensive, but when I hand him the money the guy has already shifted into second gear and is turning onto the main road. There are only a few people on the bus, and fortunately there aren't any familiar

faces. The driver is not stingy with the heating. I take off my scarf and unbutton my coat right away. The window is fogged over, and I wipe it in vain. Within seconds, it is white again. I leave it like that, lean back comfortably, and wonder when my parents will realize that I've left home. I hope they won't blame Sister. Besides, what were they expecting? That, as an eighteen-year-old, I would celebrate with them? From what I've heard, Mother had a pretty wild youth. At least she should know how that works. And besides, I've never been to a party before, with the exception of the one time when there was one in my home.

Sister once organized a party when my parents went for a wellness weekend on their wedding anniversary. I was almost thirteen, and Sister was fifteen. She started organizing the super-secret party two weeks in advance. She tried to get me out of the house, but since I had no idea what a party was like, I protested and tried to convince my parents that the two of us would manage fine at home. Eventually Sister gave in because she realized that this would reduce the chance that I would tell on her. Three boys and five girls showed up, filling the whole apartment. They brought a lot of booze. Sister fretted about how on earth she was going to get rid of so many beer bottles and how they could've at least brought them in cans. They started drinking right away to make a good dent in them. Sister agreed that I could stay in the living room with the others as long as I stayed quiet and behaved. I was never a chatterbox, so I had no idea what she was worried about. I just sat there in the corner and talked to one girl or another, or rather I listened to them. They kept offering me beer. I didn't like it at first, but after a while I got used to the taste and accepted it from everyone. The boys paid no attention to me. They kept pawing the thighs of the girls, who pretended not to like it. Something changed in my sister after a few beers, and from that time on she started to be extremely sweet with me. She sat down beside me and told all sorts of stories about me to her girlfriends. She boasted about how I won a chess competition, how I would do her math homework a lot of the time, and how nice I was even this time by covering for her with our parents. These accolades took me so much by surprise that I turned red and drank even more beer. Then all of a sudden one of the boys took my sister's arm, and she followed him into her room without a word. The other two boys rolled joints and tried to talk the girls into taking drags, but it made them cough, so they preferred not to have any. One of the girls landed in my lap and looked like someone ready to fall asleep. Moaning

could be heard from my sister's room soon after, which roused the girl in my lap out of her slumber, and she smiled at me. Do you know what they are doing? I lowered my eyes and nodded, although I didn't know for sure. I bet you don't know, the girl said as she started moving around in my lap. The others were watching YouTube videos, and one of them had already fallen asleep on the floor. The girl grabbed my arm and pulled me to my room the way the boy had done with my sister.

She got into my bed right away and pulled off her slacks. Aren't you coming? I went over and sat down beside her on the bed. Have you done it before? I was so dazed that I didn't catch her meaning right away and asked, What? This made her laugh, and she patted my face. Are you trembling? That's so sweet. Then she got up, pulled down my trousers, and put my cock in her mouth. She kept licking it until it got hard. Then she made me lie down on my back and leaned over me. I would have liked to ask what she was about to do, but I was scared of her, so I just lay there and tried not to tremble. She licked me some more and approached my face. It was almost pitch dark, but I could tell she was smiling. Do you have sperm? I said yes, but then she asked again if I really did or if I was just saying it. I confessed that I didn't think I did. She said it didn't matter, and then she guided my cock into her pussy. It was a strange, somewhat off-putting sensation. It felt as if some goey slime stuck to me; I didn't like it. The girl started sighing and said, Well, considering . . ., but she didn't finish and kept moving up and down. It didn't take long before I had the sensation that I wanted to pee. Listen, I kept saying to the girl, but she didn't answer and just kept moaning louder and louder. I was about to speak up again when she said, if you do happen to come, pull it out. I tried to pull it out, but she kept pressing down and caressing my face and hair, which only made me more nervous. My cock was still hard, but the more intense movement made me feel as if it was being burned. I didn't know what to do. I told the girl that I needed to pee, but by that time she was so excited that she didn't listen to me. Can you hear me? I really can't hold it any longer. What are you saying? she finally asked. It's coming, it's coming, I answered. Then pull it out! she screamed. I felt it slide out, and then in the next moment I started to pee. I tried to hold it back but didn't succeed. The pee gushed out in a dense stream. What the hell are you doing? she asked, stunned. I told you, I needed to pee. Only then did I notice that I was crying. There were a few moments of silence, and I realized that I probably hit the girl as well. What the hell are you doing? This time

she shouted angrily and jumped out of bed. Are you fucking sick? You're out of your mind! She grabbed her clothes and stormed out of the room.

I don't know how the girl told the story to make it embarrassing only for me and not for her, but she must have found a way. She told everyone at the party, and they passed it on to a lot of other people. I was scared that my parents would find out too, but when everyone was finally gone, Sister washed the bed linen for both of us without a word. Then we cleaned up the apartment in silence. It took a whole afternoon, but everything was eventually in order. Sister made scrambled eggs in the evening, and after hours of silence she said that Roxi was not one hundred percent and small wonder that she had failed a year twice. She knew she shouldn't have invited her. We ate scrambled eggs in silence, but even though I tried to bend down my head I couldn't hide my crying. Sister tried to pat my arm, but I pulled it away and went to my room. She never mentioned what had happened again, but by the time I got to high school almost everyone had heard the story in some form or another. In the first year the boys made fun of me in class by giving me a folded piece of paper with a few threads of pubic hair and a note inside: Do you know what this is? We will lend you some if you don't have any. Another time they left some white stuff on my chair; it wasn't actually semen, but they found some fairly realistic substitute. The whole thing subsided after the summer break, and they only stuck to the chubby business, even though I slimmed down a bit after reaching puberty.

I look at my watch, which says it's almost 8pm. I haven't even noticed that we've been driving for more than an hour. Perhaps that's because we haven't stopped once since I got on. I look around surreptitiously; most of the people are looking out the windows, but the view is covered by dense condensation everywhere. It's possible that they are asleep, since the bus makes a mesmerizing hum and almost all the lights are turned off. From what I can make out through the windshield, we're driving through dark, uninhabited areas. In theory, sister sets off at 8, and dinner is usually at 9. I wonder how they are going to react. It's possible that they won't. They will see that I've escaped and then spend the rest of the evening talking about how to punish me. I can hardly wait to move into residence next September. Sister is fond of saying that's where real life begins, but I haven't the foggiest idea where she got that from, as neither she nor her girlfriends ever lived in residence.

Sister was accepted to a teachers' college, but she didn't enrol. Instead,

she works as a nail technician in the neighbouring town. She is waiting for her guy to suggest moving in together. I hope he doesn't do it for another six months; it would be awful to be the only one of us at home. Granny doesn't like to live with my parents either, but she can't support herself, and Mother and Father can't afford to give her money. Sometimes she likes to joke that when I move to Budapest she'll come with me, and the two of us will rent an apartment together. We always have a good laugh at this, although I'm a bit scared that she is serious.

I feel nauseous. The sensation strikes me with such force that I have to swallow it back. I put my scarf and jacket back on, walk to the front, and ask the driver to stop, as I want to get off. He looks at me but doesn't give the impression of wanting to stop. He doesn't even reply but just looks back at the road and keeps a steady speed. Would you please stop, I repeat. Then, more quietly, I'm feeling sick. I'm a bit worried that he'll start making fun of me, but all he says is that we'll be there in half an hour. I stand there hesitantly and then I say: Please stop, I have to throw up. He doesn't reply to this, but in two minutes he pulls over at a bus stop that is so small that the bus doesn't really fit. I get off, go to the sidewalk, and stare at the driver through the open door; he stares back. I keep clutching the remaining 700 forints in my pocket and think of my classmates. Faces flash through my mind one after the other. Then, unexpectedly, they mix with the faces of my parents. Finally, all I see is the giant tire of the bus, and I start vomiting as I hang onto it. When I have completely emptied my stomach, I realize how cold it is compared to the heated bus. It feels good.

The driver is waiting, but I can tell that he's had enough. Are you getting back or what? I look at the windows, which are no longer fogged because of the open door, and I can see all the passengers looking at me. I somehow expect to find a familiar face, but in vain; all I see are strangers. I shake my head. I wouldn't be able to get back onto that stuffy bus. The driver waits a few more seconds before closing the door with a loud hiss and then driving off.

I watch the disappearing bus for a while. When I can no longer hear anything, I look in the opposite direction. There is a row of simple houses on one side of the street and a vast snow-covered field on the other with only a few shrubs showing here and there. There is no one on the street, and the houses stand there unlit. There are streetlamps, but only every third one is on. I listen carefully for any sound to find out if I can still hear the bus, but

I'm surrounded by frozen silence. I take out my phone; it is 8:45pm, and there is no signal. I try to guess where I might be, but I don't know which route the bus took. The best I can think of is to start walking.

Now that I take a more thorough look, I notice a mountain towering behind the houses. There are a few fences, but they are low, so it is possible to look into the courtyards. There is thick, untouched snow in each lot, as if it had fallen recently, but the road is clear. I find a bench in front of a house right under a window. I look around and sit down. My trousers get wet right away from the dew, and I feel that I need to pee. I wait a little longer, and the cold air really feels good. This settlement has a different feel from ours. The smell of smoke is missing from the air. Now that I think of it, there are no smoking chimneys. I take out my phone again, but there is still no signal. I find half a Snickers bar in my pocket and quietly eat it. It only makes me notice how hungry I was or rather still am. I try to block out the thought by turning around and scrutinizing the house. It has a nice simple wooden fence, although it's just symbolic since it only reaches up to my knees. Then I turn to the window but lurch back in surprise because an old man with glasses is staring me in the eye. I lift my hand as if to wave, but he closes the curtain. I shuffle for a while in front of the house and then, without thinking, stagger back to the road. I'm about to take off when I hear the door of the house open. I turn back and see the old man coming out. He takes a few steps and then stops in the snow. He looks directly at me but doesn't move. I realize that my breath is quickening and that there are no vapour clouds in front of him the way there are in front of me. I wait a while for my heartbeat to slow down and make a few steps toward him while saying good evening. He doesn't answer and just stands there motionless. All he is wearing is a thin pair of pyjamas. I think I should be doing something, but I don't dare to get any closer. I stop by the fence and greet him again. There is no reply this time either. I think it best to leave him alone, so I turn around and start off on the sidewalk, almost running.

I reach a larger building, at least larger compared to the houses, where I sit down on the stairs for a minute. I need to pee more and more, but I don't want to do it between the houses in case some resident notices me. I wonder what type of building this could be. There are no advertisements or store signs anywhere. At first glance it could be a community centre, a supermarket, or perhaps a restaurant, although it would be a surprise if such a small village had a restaurant. It's too big for a tavern, not that I've been to many

taverns. After a while I want to move on, and I soon reach the end of the village. There is a sign with a red cross-out, although it is not possible to see what the red is crossing out, and underneath is a wooden plank that reads: Come again soon. I take a few more steps, but there are no more lights beyond the sign. This is where I should pee. I stop and pull down my zipper, but the dark bothers me. I strain for a while but can't squeeze out a drop. I start back and reach the unidentified building again. Now that I approach it from a different angle, I notice that a side door seems open, or at least it is wobbling a bit even though there is no wind. I go closer and the door is, indeed, open. I decide to go inside but first look around the small courtyard. In one corner there is a hopscotch pattern painted on the concrete. For some reason, the snow has been completely cleared off. A bit farther away, there is a basketball hoop whose backboard is almost rotted away. I examine the courtyard for a while and suddenly realize our elementary school looked exactly the same, both the building and the courtyard, with its hopscotch in the corner along with a basketball hoop. And the side door could only be closed with a key, not with the handle.

The building is empty, but the doors are open. I look into a few rooms, and it is indeed a school that looks very much like mine except that everything is quite a bit smaller, as if it had been shrunk to scale. I even enter some rooms and walk around the desks. The posters and signs on the walls are the same as the ones we had. I never thought I'd remember them, but at the moment I'm overcome by a sensation of familiarity that makes me feel warm, and I unbutton my coat. The letters of the alphabet are written in a beautiful script, and right beside them are two patriotic poems and a portrait of our famous poet Sándor Petőfi. Sandbox Petőfi: that's what my deskmate called him as a joke, and it earned him a black star. Five minutes later, I got a gold star for my reciting even though I made two errors: our teacher was so upset by Sandbox Petőfi that she didn't notice. Father said I got a gold star because my achievement was not quite good enough; had it been perfect, I would have earned a real mark of excellence. In first grade we didn't even have marks yet, only stickers. Stickers? Father was indignant. What are you, a girl?

I open the door to the washroom and feel that I cannot hold it any longer. I start peeing, but it makes such a loud splash that I look around worried, even though there is no one there to hear it. It feels as if I am peeing into something several metres below. I can hardly see anything, but judging by

the sound I miss now and then. At home everyone would do it sitting down, including Father. Before the age of ten, I was not allowed to close the toilet door to make sure I was not standing up and splattering. I will never clean another toilet again, Mother said when she gave notice. She started out as a secretary but was pushed out by the boss' current girlfriend and demoted to a cleaning woman. I pull up my zipper and turn on the tap, but all I hear are low gurgling sounds from the other side of the wall. The rumbling is getting louder and louder; I can't help myself and lean closer to the tiles. At that moment someone touches my shoulder, which makes me almost collapse with fright. I see the bus driver leaning over me, and it takes me a while before I understand what he is saying. This is the terminal, young fellow. Right away I realize I've wet my pants. I stare first into space and then at the driver and wonder if he can smell the pee. Let's get going, he says impatiently but also tiredly. I still have to go back. By reflex I reach into my pocket and take out my money, hoping that it didn't get completely soaked. I would like a ticket to return. The guy looks at me stunned, and I can't get rid of the thought that he must have smelled the pee. I'm sure he smells it; it's impossible that he wouldn't. Finally, he breaks the silence: the bus does not go as far on the way back, I hope you know. Before I can answer, he reaches for the money. When he takes it, he gives me the name of a village I've never heard of. I ponder for a moment and then say: that's fine. He opens his mouth, as if he wants to say something, but he doesn't say anything. He just moves back to the steering wheel, muttering to himself.

This time only a handful of people get on the bus, and they all get off before we reach the terminal. After about an hour we arrive at the small village. Again the driver pulls over at a bus stop that is so small that the bus doesn't really fit. I get off, go to the sidewalk, and stare at him through the open door. He lights a cigarette and looks at me. I'm waiting for him to say something, but he only blows out smoke. I'm about to leave when he calls after me: I'll leave on the first run at 5:20am. I turn back and nod. Don't you want to stay on the bus until then? No thank you. He shrugs his shoulders and butts out his cigarette. If no, then no. See you in the morning. After that, he closes the door, steps on the gas, and steers into a narrow street. I soon hear that he's turned off the engine. There is a row of simple houses on one side of the street and a vast snow-covered field on the other with only a few shrubs showing here and there. There is no one on the street, and the houses stand there unlit. There are streetlamps, but only every third one is

on. I listen to find out if there is anything happening, but I'm surrounded by frozen silence. I try to guess where I might be, but I don't know which route the bus took.

Now that I take a more thorough look, I notice a mountain towering behind the houses. There are a few fences, but they are low, so it is possible to look into the courtyards. There is thick, untouched snow in each lot, as if it had fallen recently, and I discover a path in the snow leading up to the mountain. As it turns out, it is more like a hill, and it only takes me twenty minutes to reach the top. I see flickering lights in the distance, which must also be small villages or towns. I wonder how my classmates' party is going. It is almost midnight, and the whole group will clink glasses and celebrate New Year's Eve together for the last time. It occurs to me that I should also celebrate the new year somehow. I take out my cell phone and am surprised to see that there is a signal. Then again, it doesn't show any unanswered calls. I sit down in the snow and soon lie down on my back. It's hard to believe that I still remember the constellations I learned about in astronomy club when I was eight. I look at the time; it is 11:59pm. I decide that my way of celebrating would be to take a deep breath and only let it out in the new year. I'm quite proud of my idea, but then I see the date switch. Well, I missed it. I watch the stars and listen to find out if I can hear some festive sounds from the streets or the neighbouring settlements. I don't hear anything.