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SATANTANGO

Translated from the Hungarian
by George Szirtes

With new passages translated by Otilie Mulzet



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THE FIRST PART

NEWS OF THEIR COMING

One morning near the end of October not long before the first drops of the mercilessly long autumn rains began to fall on the cracked and saline soil on the western side of the estate (later the stinking yellow sea of mud would render footpaths impassable and put the town too beyond reach) Futaki woke to hear bells. The closest possible source was a lonely chapel about four kilometers southwest on the old Hochmeiss estate but not only did that have no bell but the tower had collapsed during the war and at that distance it was too far to hear anything. And in any case they did not sound distant to him, these ringing-booming bells; their triumphal clangor was swept along by the wind and seemed to come from somewhere close by (“It’s as if they were coming from the mill . . .”). He propped himself on his elbows on the pillow so as to look out of the mousehole-sized kitchen window that was partly misted up, and directed his gaze to the faint blue dawn sky but the field was still and silent, bathed only in the now ever fainter bell sound, and the only light to be seen was the one glimmering in the doctor’s window whose house was set well apart from the others on the far side, and that was only because its occupant had for years been unable to sleep in the dark. Futaki held his breath because he wanted to know where the noise came from: he couldn’t afford to lose a single

stray note of the rapidly fading clangor, however remote (“You must be asleep, Futaki . . .”). Despite his lameness he was well known for his light tread and he hobbled across the ice-cold stone floor of the kitchen soundless as a cat, opened the windows and leaned out (“Is no one awake? Can’t people hear it? Is there nobody else around?”). A sharp damp gust hit him straight in the face so he had to close his eyes for a moment and, apart from the cockcrow, a distant bark, and the fierce howling of the wind that had sprung up just a few minutes earlier, there was nothing to hear however hard he listened but the dull beating of his own heart, as if the whole thing had been merely a kind of game or ghostly half-dream (“. . . It’s as if somebody out there wants to scare me”). He gazed sadly at the threatening sky, at the burned-out remnants of a locust-plagued summer, and suddenly saw on the twig of an acacia, as in a vision, the progress of spring, summer, fall and winter, as if the whole of time were a frivolous interlude in the much greater spaces of eternity, a brilliant conjuring trick to produce something apparently orderly out of chaos, to establish a vantage point from which chance might begin to look like necessity . . . and he saw himself nailed to the cross of his own cradle and coffin, painfully trying to tear his body away, only, eventually, to deliver himself—utterly naked, without identifying mark, stripped down to essentials—into the care of the people whose duty it was to wash the corpses, people obeying an order snapped out in the dry air against a background loud with torturers and flayers of skin, where he was obliged to regard the human condition without a trace of pity, without a single possibility of any way back to life, because by then he would know for certain that all his life he had been playing with cheaters who had marked the cards and who would, in the end, strip him even of his last means of defense, of that hope of someday finding his way back home. He turned his head toward the east, once the home of a thriving industry, now nothing but a set of dilapidated and deserted buildings, watching while the first rays of a

swollen red sun broke through the topmost beams of a derelict farmhouse from which the roof tiles had been stripped. "I really should come to a decision. I can't stay here any longer." He snuck back under the warm duvet again and rested his head on his arm, but could not close his eyes; at first it had been the ghostly bells that had frightened him but now it was the threatening silence that followed: anything might happen now, he felt. But he did not move a muscle, not until the objects around him, that had so far been merely listening, started up a nervous conversation (the sideboard gave a creak, a saucepan rattled, a china plate slid back into the rack) at which point he turned away from the sour smell of the perspiring Mrs. Schmidt, felt with his hand for the glass of water left standing by the bed and drained it at one gulp. Having done so he was free of his childish terror: he sighed, wiped his sweating brow and, knowing that Schmidt and Kráner were only just now rounding up the cattle to drive them west from the Szikes toward the farm byres in the west where they would eventually receive eight months' worth of hard-earned wages, and that this would take a good couple of hours, he decided to try and get a bit more sleep. He closed his eyes, turned on his side, put his arm around the woman and had almost succeeded in nodding off when he heard the bells again. "For God's sake!" He pushed aside the duvet but the moment his naked calloused feet touched the stone floor the bells suddenly stopped ("As if someone had given a signal . . .") . . . He sat hunched on the edge of the bed his hands clasped in his lap till the empty glass caught his attention. His throat was dry, his right leg was suffering shooting pains, and now he didn't dare to either get up or go back under the covers. "I am leaving by tomorrow at the very latest." He surveyed the vaguely functioning articles in the bare kitchen, from the cooking range filthy with burned fat and leftover scraps to the basket without a handle under the bed, the rickety table, the dusty icons hanging on the wall, and the saucepans, his eye finally resting on the tiny window and the bare

branches of the acacia bending across the Halicses' house with its dented roof and teetering chimney, the smoke billowing from it, and said, "I'll take what's mine and go tonight! ... No later than tomorrow at any rate. Tomorrow morning." "Dear God!" Mrs. Schmidt cried, waking suddenly, and stared about her in the dusk, terrified, her chest heaving, but when she saw that everything looked back at her with a familiar expression she gave a relieved sigh and slumped back on the pillow. "What's the matter? Bad dreams?" Futaki asked her. Mrs. Schmidt was staring at the ceiling in fright. "Good Lord, really horrible dreams!" She sighed again and put her hand on her heart. "Such things! Me?! ... Who'd have imagined? ... There I was sitting in the room and ... suddenly there was a knock at the window. I didn't dare to open it, just stood there, peeking through the curtains. I only saw his back because by now he was shaking the door handle, and then his mouth as he bellowed. God knows what he was saying. He was unshaven and it seemed his eyes were made of glass ... it was horrible ... Then I remembered I had only given the key one turn the previous night and knew that by the time I got there it would be too late so I quickly slammed the kitchen door, but then I realized I didn't have the key. I wanted to scream but no sound came from my throat. Then I don't exactly recall why or how but suddenly Mrs. Halics was at the window making faces—you know what it's like when she makes faces—and anyway, there she was staring into the kitchen and then, I don't know how, she vanished, though by that time the man outside was kicking at the door and would have been through it in a minute, and I thought of the bread knife and dashed over to the cupboard but the drawer was jammed and I kept trying to open it ... I thought I would die of terror ... Then I heard him smash the door open and he was coming down the hall. I still couldn't open the drawer. Suddenly he was there at the kitchen door just as I finally succeeded in opening the drawer to grab the knife, and he was getting closer waving his arms about ... but I

don't know . . . suddenly he was lying on the floor in the corner by the window and, yes, he had a lot of red and blue saucepans with him that started flying about the kitchen . . . and I felt the floor move under me and, just imagine, the whole kitchen set off, like a car . . . and I can't remember anything after that . . ." she ended and laughed in relief. "We're a fine pair," Futaki shook his head. "I woke—to what do you think?—to someone ringing bells . . ." "What!" the woman stared at him in astonishment: "Someone was ringing bells? Where?" "I don't understand it either. In fact not once but twice, one after the other . . ." It was Mrs. Schmidt's turn to shake her head. "You—you'll go crazy." "Or I might have dreamed it all," grumbled Futaki nervously: "Mark my words, something is going to happen today." The woman turned to him angrily. "You're always saying that, just shut up, can't you?" Suddenly they heard the gate creaking open at the back and stared each other in fright. "It must be him," whispered Mrs. Schmidt. "I can feel it." Futaki sat up in shock. "But that's impossible! How could he have got back so soon . . ." "How should I know . . . ! Go! Go now!" He leapt out of bed, grabbed his clothes, stuck them under his arm, shut the door behind him, and dressed. "My stick. I left my stick out there!" The Schmidts hadn't used the room since spring. Green mildew covered the cracked and peeling walls, but the clothes in the cupboard, a cupboard that was regularly cleaned, were also mildewed, as were the towels and all the bedding, and a couple of weeks was all it took for the cutlery saved in the drawer for special occasions to develop a coating of rust, and what with the legs of the big lace-covered table having worked loose, the curtains having yellowed and the lightbulb having gone out, they decided one day to move into the kitchen and stay there, and since there was nothing they could do to stop it happening anyway, they left the room to be colonized by spiders and mice. He leaned against the doorjamb and wondered how he might get out without being seen. The situation seemed pretty hopeless because he would have

to pass through the kitchen and he felt too decrepit to clamber through the window where he would, in any case, be observed by Mrs. Kráner or Mrs. Halics who spent half their lives peeking through their curtains to keep an eye on affairs outside. Besides which, his stick, if Schmidt should discover it, would immediately betray the fact that he was hiding somewhere in the house, and if that happened he might not receive his share at all since he knew Schmidt did not consider such a thing a joking matter; that he would promptly be run off the estate to which he had rushed seven years before in response to news of its success—two years after the estate had been set up—at a time when he was hungry and had only a single pair of ragged trousers plus a faded overcoat with empty pockets to stand up in. Mrs. Schmidt ran into the hall while he put his ear to the door. “No complaining, sweetheart!” he heard Schmidt’s hoarse voice: “You do as I tell you. Is that clear?” Futaki felt a hot rush of blood. “My money!” He felt trapped. But he had no time to think so decided to climb out of the window after all because “something has to be done right away.” He was about to open the window catch when he heard Schmidt moving down the hall. “He’s going to take a leak!” He tiptoed back to the door and held his breath to listen. Once he heard Schmidt close the door to the backyard, he carefully slipped into the kitchen where he took one look at a nervously fidgeting Mrs. Schmidt, silently hurried to the front door, stepped out and, once he was sure his neighbor was back inside, gave the door a good clatter as if he were just arriving. “What’s up? Nobody at home? Hey, Schmidt!” he shouted as loud as he could, then—so as not to leave him any time to escape—immediately opened the door and blocked Schmidt’s way out of the kitchen. “Well, well!” he asked in a mocking voice. “Where are we going in such a hurry, pal?” Schmidt was utterly at a loss for words: “No, well I’ll tell you, buddy! Don’t you worry, pal. I’ll help you remember all right!” he continued with a deep frown. “You wanted to make off with the money! Am I right? Gussed

right the first try?” Schmidt still said nothing but just kept blinking. Futaki shook his head. “Well, pal. Who would have thought it?” They went back into the kitchen and sat down facing each other. Schmidt was nervously fiddling with objects on the stove. “Listen, pal . . .” Schmidt stuttered: “I can explain . . .” Futaki waved him away. “I don’t need any explanations! Tell me, is Kráner in on this?” Schmidt was forced to nod. “Up to a point.” “Sons of bitches!” Futaki raged. “You thought you’d put one over on me.” He bowed his head and thought. “And now? What happens now?” he eventually asked. Schmidt spread his arms. He was angry: “What do you mean: what now? You’re one of us, buddy.” “What do you mean?” Futaki inquired, mentally calculating the sums. “Let’s split it three ways,” Schmidt answered reluctantly: “But keep your mouth shut.” “You won’t have to worry about that.” Mrs. Schmidt was standing by the range and gave a despairing sigh. “Have you lost your minds? Do you think you can get away with this?” Schmidt acted as though he hadn’t heard her. He fixed his eye on Futaki. “There, you can’t say we haven’t cleared it up. But there’s something else I want to say to you, buddy. You can’t rat me out now.” “We’ve made a deal, haven’t we?” “Yes, of course, there’s no doubt about that, not for a second!” Schmidt continued, his voice rising to a plaintive whine. “All I ask is . . . I want you to lend me your share for a short time! Just for a year! While we settle down somewhere . . .” “And what other part of your anatomy do you want me to suck?!” Futaki snapped back at him. Schmidt flopped forward and grasped the edge of the table. “I wouldn’t ask you if you yourself hadn’t said you wouldn’t be leaving here now. What do you need it all for? And it’s just for a year . . . a year, that’s all! . . . We have to have it, you understand, we just have to. I can’t buy anything with the rags I’m standing up in. I can’t even get a plot of land. Lend me ten at least, eh?” “No way!” Futaki answered: “I don’t give a damn. I don’t want to rot here either!” Schmidt shook his head, so angry he was practically crying, then began again, obstinate but ever

more helpless, his elbows propped on the kitchen table that rocked each time he moved as if taking his part, begging his partner to “have a heart,” hoping his “pal” might respond to his pitiful gestures, and it wouldn’t have taken much more effort since Futaki had almost decided to give in when his eye suddenly lit on the million specks of dust swirling in a thin beam of sunlight and his nose became aware of the dank smell of the kitchen. Suddenly there was a sour taste on his tongue and he thought it was death. Ever since the works had been split up, since people had been in as much of a rush to get away as they had been to come here, and since he—along with a few families, and the doctor, and the headmaster who, like him, had nowhere else to go—had found himself unable to move, it had been the same, day after day, tasting the same narrow range of food, knowing that death meant getting used to, first the soup, then to the meat dishes, then, finally, to go on to consuming the very walls, chewing long laborious mouthfuls before swallowing, slowly sipping at the wine rarely enough set in front of him, or the water. He sometimes felt an irresistible desire to break off a chunk of nitrous plaster in the machine hall of the old enginehouse where he lived and to cram it into his mouth so that he might recognize the taste of the *Vigilance!* sign among the disturbing riot of normally ordered flavors. Death, he felt, was only a kind of warning rather than a desperate and permanent end. “It’s not as if I’m asking for a gift,” Schmidt continued, growing tired: “It’s a loan. You understand? A loan. I’ll return every last cent of it in precisely a year.” They sat at the table, both of them worn out. Schmidt’s eyes were burning from exhaustion, Futaki was furiously studying the mysterious patterns of the stone tiling. He mustn’t show he is afraid, he thought, though he would have found it hard to explain what it was he was afraid of. “Just tell me this. How many times did I go out to Szikes, all by myself, in that intolerable heat where a man is scared to breathe the air in case it sets fire to his insides?! Who got hold of the wood? Who built that sheepfold?! I have

contributed just as much as you, or Kráner, or Halics! And now you have the nerve to touch me for a loan. Oh yes, and it'll all be returned next time I see you, eh?!" "In other words," Schmidt replied, affronted, "you don't trust me." "Damn right!" Futaki snapped back. "You and Kráner meet up before dawn, planning to make off with all the money and then you expect me to trust you?! Do you take me for an idiot?" They sat silently together. The woman was clattering dishes by the stove. Schmidt looked defeated. Futaki's hands trembled as he rolled a cigarette and got up from the table, limped over to the window, leaned on his stick with his left hand and watched rain billowing over the rooftops. The trees were leaning with the wind, their bare branches describing threatening arcs in the air. He thought of their roots, the life-giving sap, of the soaked earth and of the silence, of the unspoken feeling of completion he so dreaded. "In that case tell me . . .!" he asked in a hesitant manner, "Why did you come back, this once . . ." "Why? why?!" Schmidt grumbled. "Because that's what occurred to us—and before we could think better of it we were on the way home, and back . . . And then there was the woman . . . Would I have left her here? . . ." Futaki nodded understandingly. "What about the Kráners?" he asked after a while. "What's your arrangement with them?" "They're stuck here, like us. They want to head north. Mrs. Kráner heard there was an old neglected orchard or something there. We'll meet by the crossroads after dark. That's what we arranged." Futaki gave a sigh: "A long day ahead. What about the others? Like Halics? . . ." Schmidt rubbed his fingers together despondently: "How should I know? Halics will probably sleep the whole day. There was a big party yesterday at the Hor-goses. His highness, the manager, can go to hell on the first bus! If there's any trouble on his account, I'll drown the sonofabitch in the next ditch, so relax, pal, relax." They decided to wait in the kitchen till night fell. Futaki drew up a chair by the window so he could keep an eye on the houses opposite while Schmidt was overcome by sleep,

slumped over the table, and began to snore. The woman brought the big iron-strapped military trunk out from behind the cupboards, wiped away the dust, inside and out, then wordlessly began packing their things. "It's raining," said Futaki. "I can hear," replied the woman. The weak sunlight only just succeeded in penetrating a jumbled mass of clouds that was slowly proceeding eastwards: the light in the kitchen dimmed as if it were dusk and it was hard to know whether the gently vibrating patches on the wall were merely shadows or symptoms of the despair underlying their faintly hopeful thoughts. "I'll go south," Futaki declared, gazing at the rain. "At least the winters are shorter there. I'll rent a little land near some town that's growing and spend the day dangling my feet in a bowl of hot water . . ." Raindrops were gently trickling down both sides of the window because of the finger-wide crack that ran all the way from the wooden beam to the window frame, slowly filling it up then pushing their way along the beam where they divided once more into drops that began to drip into Futaki's lap, while he, being so absorbed in his visions of faraway places that he couldn't get back to reality, failed to notice that he was actually wet. "Or I might go and take a job as a night watchman in a chocolate factory . . . or perhaps as janitor in a girls' boarding school . . . and I'll try to forget everything, I'll do nothing but soak my feet in a bowl of hot water each night, while this filthy life passes . . ." The rain that had been gently pouring till now suddenly turned into a veritable deluge, like a river breaking over a dam, drowning the already choking fields, the lowest lying of which were riddled with serpentine channels, and though it was impossible to see anything through the glass he did not turn away but stared at the worm-eaten wooden frame from which the putty had dropped out, when suddenly a vague form appeared at the window, one that eventually could be made out to be a human face, though he couldn't tell at first whose it was, until he succeeded in picking out a pair of startled eyes, at which point he saw "his own careworn features"

and recognized them with a shock like a stab of pain since he felt that what the rain was doing to his face was exactly what time would do. It would wash it away. There was in that reflection something enormous and alien, a kind of emptiness radiating from it, moving toward him, compounded of layers of shame, pride and fear. Suddenly he felt the sour taste in his mouth again and he remembered the bells tolling at dawn, the glass of water, the bed, the acacia bough, the cold flagstones in the kitchen and, thinking of it all, he made a bitter face. "A bowl of hot water! ... Devil take it! ... Don't I bathe my feet every day ...?" he pouted. Somewhere behind him there was the sound of choked-off sobbing. "And what's bugging you then?" Mrs. Schmidt did not answer him but turned away, her shoulders shaking with the sobs. "You hear me? What's the matter with you?" The woman looked up at him, then simply sat down on the nearby stool and blew her nose like someone for whom speech was pointless. "Why don't you say something?" Futaki insisted: "What the hell is wrong with you?" "Where on earth can we go!" erupted Mrs. Schmidt: "The first town we come to some policeman is bound to stop us! Don't you understand? They won't even ask our names!" "What are you blathering about?" Futaki angrily retorted: "We will be loaded with money, and as for you ... "That's exactly what I mean!" the woman interrupted him: "The money! You at least might have some sense! To go away with this rotten old trunk ... like a band of beggars!" Futaki was furious. "That's enough, now! Keep out of this. It has nothing to do with you. Your job is to shut up." Mrs. Schmidt would not let it rest. "What?" she snapped: "What's my job?" "Forget it," Futaki answered quietly. "Keep it down or you'll wake him up." Time was passing very slowly and, luckily for them, the alarm clock had long ago stopped working so there wasn't even the sound of ticking to remind them of time, nevertheless the woman gazed at the still hands as she gave the paprika stew the occasional stir while the two men sat wearily by the steaming plates in front of them, not touching