

THE BEGGAR & THE HARE

EXTRACT

Chapter One

In which we learn how Vatanescu goes off to be a migrant worker, says goodbye to his sister and enjoys a barbecue

There would certainly have been other alternatives; our hero could have stolen cars, salvaged the copper from telephone cables or sold his kidneys. But of all the bad offers, the one from Yegor Kugar was the best. It guaranteed him a year's employment, transport to the scene of operations and even a job for his sister, with new teeth and breast implants as a bonus.

Vatanescu left a note for his ex-wife, promising to send her child support when he had built up some income. After the divorce, his relations with the mother of his son Miklos had grown somewhat envenomed – to the point where the pus came, though both he and his ex-wife were people of good will. But when love departs, the empty place is filled by many new arrivals: envy, bitterness, revenge, shrillness, arseholery.

Vatanescu sat down on the edge of the bed where Miklos was sleeping in his grandmother's folded arms. Vatanescu removed the sock from his son's right foot and with a crayon traced the outline of the sole on a piece of paper.

You'll get your football boots.

Dad is going to fix you up with football boots.



The rust-flecked VW Transporter left the South for the North. On the hills the gearbox groaned, on the dales the brakes threw sparks, and the passengers in the rear seats were tossed about. The 'terrorist van' was of the same generation as Vatanescu, the same generation as Total Football in the Netherlands, and to be exact the vehicle had been made in the same year that Vatanescu had seen the first gleam of freedom. For although each night the only television channel in his native land had showed the same speech by the same dictator, on one occasion the pompous spectacle was suddenly interrupted by a brief flash of Monty Python. What was happening, where had it come from, the hilarious joke about the Ministry of Silly Walks?

There had been a nipple in Vatanescu's mouth that night. Mama Vatanescu had stared at the television, and along with her milk a drop of the free world, free from reason, had flowed into her son.

Vatanescu held his sister's hand as she slept in the back of the van.

If I could, I would protect you.

First I must provide for myself.

You have always protected me.

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Klara Vatanescu had taken after her grandmother Murda. Brusque and efficient, in other circumstances she might have been a sturdy nomad or a foreign minister, but in the unique reality that was hers she was now joining the poorest of the poor, a woman who would have to rely on her only marketable goods. Unable to sleep, Vatanescu peered out of the rear window at the foreign church towers and remote villages inhabited by unknown people with their Teflon saucepans and digibox recorders, people who had special times earmarked for meals, for school, for sex, who had plans for the future, mortgages, visits to the orthodontist for their children, pensions, burial plots, obituaries, flowers on their graves, the whole package.

Vatanescu opened a tin. The transportation contract he had signed with Yegor Kugar included full board, which meant hammocks and corned beef. The year on the tins was 1974, and the country of origin stamped on their undersides was SWE. They had originally been intended for survival in the aftermath of a nuclear war, but to their purchaser's dismay that war had never arrived. In the nuclear-weapon-free North they grew old, so the Swedish army sold them back to the supplier it had bought them from. Who then sold them on to an international crime syndicate that used them to feed its hired workforce. The corned beef slid down Vatanescu's oesophagus, fermenting in his stomach for a while. It caused cramps that were followed by flatulence.

When Klara stepped out of the van at sunrise the following morning aeroplanes were taking off and landing somewhere far in the distance. Through the vehicle's thin walls Vatanescu could hear the engine of a luxury car idling, and he crept over to the window. Pudas, one of his fellow travellers, was complaining about the smell that floated in the van, so thick you could cut it with the tin-opener they used for the corned beef.

You can't stand the smell of a fart?

My sister is being taken from me.

They were on a stretch of derelict land. Beside the car stood some young men who, if one were to be perfectly frank, could only be called morons. Dark glasses, shell-suits of the kind worn by 1990s lager louts, their hair plastered with too much gel. The morons were trying to look like movie gangsters – in vain, for their true nature, their identity and their problems crossed all state borders. Petty dope smugglers from Poland, finger-breakers dismissed from the ranks of the Ukrainian army, playground bullies from Turkmenistan. Bullied Albanians, whom life had broken down into bastards.

Vatanescu saw one of the morons opening the door of the Mercedes. Klara leaned over to get into the back seat, and Vatanescu remembered the day he had learned to swim.

I can't swim, don't let go of me. I'm scared of water! Except... I can do it. I can swim!!!



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Vatanescu pressed the tips of his fingers against the window, and the Mercedes drove off. Yegor Kugar got back into the driver's cabin of the van. He rummaged in some cassette tapes, and a moment later the music of Scorpions was heard.

Do the memories of the good times stay good even in the bad times?



It was as if the Transporter crossed a sky of lowering clouds above a churning ocean where ships laden with containers full of goods and merchandise passed to and fro. As if through binoculars you could see the sailors from the Philippines, from Vestersund and Kotka, earning tomorrow's bread, that is, the interest on their mortgages, a large bottle of Absolut vodka, their alimony payments, or the extra grand that made it possible to take their families to Thailand. In the old days only perverts went to the beaches of Thailand – nowadays it was families.

The van's rear doors opened, and Pudas and Tadas were ordered out. Their place of employment awaited them in the metro tunnel of a Stockholm suburb, where an advance guard of Finnish migrants from the pre-bag-in-box era was already at work.

Now only Vatanescu and Yegor Kugar remained in the van. The silent pair sat in the driver's cabin; the satnav gave them advice on which lanes and turnings to choose at the intersections. Their destination was the sea terminal, where Yegor steered the vehicle onto the car deck of the ferry to Helsinki.

They stepped into the corridors of a world named VIKING LINE and descended in a crowded lift to the cheapest berths.

The berths in the cabin faced one another, and when Vatanescu opened the curtains a little way he saw that there was no porthole behind them. As they settled in there was none of that horny expectancy that every schoolchild remembers from ferry crossings. Perhaps they would also be spared the exhaustion that follows adventure, and the depressing knowledge that one's virginity remained intact.

Yegor Kugar lit a cigarette by the No Smoking sign, removed his shoes and stretched his ankles for a moment like a normal human being, like a fellow passenger who in spite of being a complete stranger, a malevolent-looking one to boot, also had his good points. Vatanescu climbed up to his own berth and tested the mattress under his buttocks.

Clean sheets.

A duvet.

The ferry moved away from the quayside with a grinding sound. There came the deep note of the engines and the beer-can-fuelled laughter of the teenage youths and girls in the next cabin, raucous and ringing. Yegor Kugar changed out of his designer tracksuit into a

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designer suit and checked his appearance in the mirror, but the expression of a highly dangerous idiot stuck there and remained.

Yegor announced that he was going to a business meeting on the upper deck, and reminded Vatanescu of the small print in his transportation and employment contract: if Vatanescu left the cabin, Vatanescu would die. Yegor would kill him, Yegor said, exposing the handgun that was concealed under his armpit.

Do I look as if I need to be threatened?

I can't even afford a cup of coffee.

Can I afford to disobey a Russian who has only one ear?

Vatanescu had always been in trouble with the authorities. At school his teachers had seen in his flashing eyes the look of a rascal. In time the flashing had faded or been forcibly extinguished. The boy had become a man, and it is rare for a man's eyes to flash at the age of thirty-five. Little Vata's father had brandished a whip when his son misbehaved, or rather when the boy asserted his true nature, which was that of someone who likes to take things apart and put them together again. But he could not bring himself to strike his son. Instead he threw the whip into the campfire and presented Vata with a mug of steaming coffee and some bacon rind grilled on the end of a stick, a wonderful delicacy that is no longer appreciated in the Nordic countries, as one must never be able to see that the food one puts in one's mouth was once alive.

The boy's mother pulled his hair, she boxed his ears, though she loved him dearly and knew that his flashing eyes expressed his desire for life.

As soon as the bell of Yegor's lift rang, Vatanescu stepped out to the corridor. A moment later he sat in a revolving armchair on the sixth deck. The clink of bottles in the duty-free store, the electronic beeps and cascades of coins from the game machines, the hissing and whistling, the squealing and bawling of children. Vatanescu failed to perceive the division aboard the ship, a division that was as clear as a bottle of vodka taken out of a freezer. Two sorts of people shuffled or pranced across the wall-to-wall carpeting: there was the solemn group with short legs and flat noses, where the children looked like their parents. They were called Finns. Then there was the cheerful group with long legs and pointed noses, where the parents looked like their children. They were called Swedes.

Vatanescu revolved in the chair. Past him walked emaciated women and their fifteen-stone children who got out of breath on the stairs, drank lemonade and pestered their parents with constant demands. Vatanescu kicked the floor lightly with the ball of his foot, the chair spun round another forty-five degrees. Restaurants, discotheques, then the duty-free store. Vatanescu got up to look at the sea. It was getting dark. The waves had white edgings, there were lights on the archipelago. And



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here he was, inside this ship that was a combination of shopping centre and suburban housing estate.

Vatanescu slipped past the headwaiter who stood at a table studying the lists, and helped himself to a plateful of what everyone else was having. Salads in mayonnaise dressing, salmon in all its forms, roast meat, cold ham and cheese, sausages.

He sat down in the first vacant seat, facing an elderly couple, Pentti and Ulla or Holger and Agneta; why group them into this tribe or that, for more than their names, it was their gaze that mattered. They picked at peas with their forks and smiled sweetly, conscious of the meaning of their lives and of their approaching deaths. They existed only for each other: when one departed, the other packed bags and followed. There, today, they were the sum of their journey and their past, the sum of all the days they had been together since the spring of 1938. Their happiness, which they had paid for with their lives, was symbolised by their prawns, their slices of roast meat and their small glasses of wine.

If Miklos were here he would take the sausages first. He would remember how many he ate for years to come.

Ketchup and more ketchup. He would thank me with his eyes and I would promise that we had plenty of time to pass through the children's play area, the race car simulator and the duty-free store on our way back to the cabin.

After the Swedish nuclear-war survival rations Vatanescu's stomach was unable to cope with the superabundance of pan-Nordic fare. A few minutes later the too-quickly reconstituted protein reserves of his body and mind would be discharged in a flood of diarrhoea. He nodded politely to Pentti and Ulla or Holger and Agneta, and then made a dash for the cabin.



If Yegor Kugar had taken a breath test he would have been well over the legal limit. So he asked Vatanescu if he was able to drive. The latter nodded, aware that the less one says the less likely one is to say the wrong thing.

Vatanescu slowly eased the van out of the mouth of the ferry into the shimmering brightness outside, from which he felt excluded. Following Yegor Kugar's instructions, he chose the green line, nothing dutiable, nothing to declare, just things to conceal, and great difficulty in changing from second to third gear. Yegor Kugar tapped the destination into the satnav, which said it was just under a mile away.

Driving behind them out of the bowels of the ship were Pentti and Ulla or Holger and Agneta. In a Nissan Primera that was always punctually serviced, and whose driver, front-seat passenger and even the

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car itself knew where they were going. If Pentti were to have a heart attack and die, the car would take the dead man to the driveway of his home, an oil-heated house in a rural location where each piece of furniture had occupied the same place since the Helsinki Olympics of 1952. The only object that changed position was the women's magazine that each week got moved from the television table to a bundle of old newspapers tied together with string and donated to the local junior football team's recycled paper collection.

Vatanescu drove along streets he didn't know with a man he didn't know. The sun struggled through the dirty windscreen, it was hard to make out the traffic lights, and as he focused on them he forgot to focus on anything else.

Suddenly a hare bounded out into the middle of the road.

'Go faster, run it over, kill it!' Yegor shouted.

Vatanescu turned the steering wheel the other way, the hare disappeared, and all that remained was Yegor Kugar's indissoluble rage at the fact that someone had defied his orders.

You don't run life over, you go round it.

On the corner of a street between the Art Museum and the 'Sausage' building, Yegor ejected Vatanescu from the van and threw a sheet of cardboard and an empty disposable coffee cup after him. Then he gave him a quick rundown on the terms of his future employment.

There was no question of sick leave, and he could forget about paid holidays and earnings-related social security. Yegor believed in doing things the American way. From now on Vatanescu would be on his own. Eyes down during working hours. The attitude and expression of a whipped dog. If a beggar had a smile on his face it robbed him of credibility and showed up as reduced cash flow. If you made people feel pity and guilt, one got mercy. Mercy was money, mercy was the biggest thing in Protestant religion and life in social democracies. In the Nordic countries people had such a low pity threshold that their coins burned a hole in their pockets.

'We help to make it easier for them,' Yegor explained. 'The donor ends up with a good conscience. I take seventy-five per cent, you get twenty-five.'

On the sheet of cardboard there was a description of the beggar's wretched living conditions, his impoverished poor children, his deep religious faith and his aspirations, which were rather modest. Yegor explained that one needed stories; stories breathed life into goods that would otherwise be lifeless and lacking in history. Stories brought the product closer to client, buyer and donor.

'Keep your smile up your ass, not on your face.'

Vatanescu began to feel pain instantly; he found it hard to keep his back straight. Time slowed down; the minutes were hours and the



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hours were the length of a whole generation. Now and then a coin fell into his disposable cup. Vatanescu would have liked to smile and say thanks, but the trick was to remain poker-faced, sad and fearful. It was best if you were able to look ugly but in a touching way.

When the daylight failed and evening arrived, Vatanescu nodded, then dozed, then lapsed into a state between sleeping and waking, and finally sank into a snoring REM slumber. There he saw pictures of things whose origin he could not account for. Firewood being chopped, logs floated, bridges under construction, a busload of people on their way to a mass suicide. Determined men of a northern land for whom everything was possible as long as they showed themselves to be persevering, creative and unyielding. The strange dream came to an end when Yegor announced with a snarl that Vatanescu had just spent his lunch break asleep.

On his first official day of work as a Romanian beggar, Vatanescu had earned five euros and eighty cents, a toy car and four cigarette stubs. Added bonuses were cold, hunger and ankylosis. He folded up his cardboard sign, put the money in one of his pockets and the begging cup in the other. In his inside pocket were the work roster Yegor had given him, a map and a tram timetable.

The metro map was just a straight line, so he managed to find the company housing before midnight. A windswept field, Caravan Number 3. Inside the caravan, somewhere in the middle of a somnolent fug, a cigarette glowed on and off. Vatanescu put his bag on a vacant bunk together with the last tins of corned beef. The smoker introduced himself as Balthazar, but Vatanescu was already asleep.



Vatanescu shook the last drops of morning urine on the gravel and prodded his memory in an effort to understand where he was and why. Which of the recent events were part of a dream, and which of them were to become reality. Around him he saw caravans, dubious electric connections, a shack and a spherical barbecue grill. In a brazier burned a fire on which a coffeepot was heating; on the horizon the city was dimly visible. Balthazar, too, now appeared in his true dimensions, and not as a mental image formed on the basis of a disembodied voice. The old man lacked an arm and a leg.

Balthazar replied to the question Vatanescu had not asked. He said he had left his arm and leg somewhere along the way, just as people always leave something behind: some forget their watch, some their heart, others leave their coat in the cloakroom. Then he thrust a bundle of newspapers into Vatanescu's hands and explained to him the importance of layers. You had to cram as many newspapers and



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bits of cardboard under your clothes as you could, until you could hardly move. The toilets in hamburger joints were good places for getting warm, but Yegor's men reported any unauthorised absences to their boss. There was one toilet break a day, and if you broke that rule you would have to wear nappies. If you had the money you could buy wool, quilting and down, but if the donors could see them under your rags they would feel cheated. A beggar could afford no anachronisms or breaches of style, and below a female beggar's ragged skirt there must be no flash of Manolo Blahniks, or even of fancy trainers.

Vatanescu sat in the metro, stood on the escalator, sat at his place of work. Today and from now on it would rain; autumn was here, which out in the country meant clear bright air, red and yellow colours everywhere, and rubbish burning in gardens. In the city, however, autumn was a colder, wetter and greyer affair. Vatanescu tried to empty his mind, but some advertising image or passer-by or sound always brought him back to reality.

If one forgets about the knee pain, the need to urinate, the homesickness and the shame, this is the most boring job in the world. A conveyor belt job in which neither the conveyor belt nor the worker moves, but the world does instead. How many building workers enjoy their work? How many briefcase-carrying men and suit-wearing women?

They do their share in order to obtain their share.

Don't worry, Miklos, you'll get your football boots.

When a coin fell into the cup you had to express your gratitude by an imperceptible movement of the head. Not a word, especially not in English, Yegor had instructed. You had to keep playing your part, which was that of a person who came from nowhere, understood nothing and was capable of nothing. You had to stay at arm's length, the length of two cultures. Beggar and donor had to be strangers. Any familiarity would end in acceptance, mutual understanding and a solution. Bad for business.

Passers-by who all looked the same, coming and going, never stopping. A child pointed at Vatanescu, asked his parents, 'What's that?' and received a tug at his sleeve in reply. A middle-aged man spat at him. An old woman blessed him and handed him a religious newspaper.

The average daily wage was one and a half euros, of which one euro belonged to Miklos. Vatanescu was tormented by hunger. In the stores downtown you were lucky if fifty cents bought you two sticks of liquorice. A hungry person was cold all the time, a cold and hungry person caught flu. And a person who was hungry, cold and suffering from flu did not perform well at work. The darkness repeated itself, one's head became filled with gloomy thoughts.

Why would anyone ever have wanted to live in a climate like this?

The wind is torture. The sleet penetrates one's skin.



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Vatanescu had calculated that the nuclear-war survival rations were enough to last a month, but one day Balthazar finished them off. He excused himself by saying he could not control his hand and mouth, otherwise he would never have swallowed such crap.

Hunger, the beginning and end of everything. Vatanescu sat in the buzzing metro and stared at a child several seats away, especially at the hamburger the child was munching.

Just as Vatanescu was about to lunge in the direction of the French fries, the train stopped at a station above ground where he noticed a large open-topped container in the back yard of a building.

He got out and headed for the container. People were climbing up into it. A moment later they jumped down again with full plastic bags in their hands. Vatanescu also swung himself over. The container was like something out of a children's movie, a world made of chocolate discovered in some gloomy forest. There were steaks, sausages, cartons of fruit juice and milk, cold cuts of ham and cheese, loaves of bread, oat-flakes. There were spices, strange pies filled with rice pudding; there were candy bars and condoms. Someone was throwing it all away because its sell-by date was the same as the one on the calendar.

Vatanescu did some hunting and gathering, and that evening he barbecued a kilo and a half of corn-fed pork shoulder on the spherical grill. With Balthazar, he chopped the peppers and the meat, added cream, and spiced the whole dish as only the inheritors of a rich gastronomic tradition know how. They ate it all in silence, scraped the grease and gravy from their paper plates with crusts of white bread and smiled. Everything seemed better with some food in one's belly. Next batch onto the grill, and party up!



The drinks for the pig-feast came from a cruise ship. For old Balthazar knew that the passengers on ferries from Estonia were particularly careless, and so, behind a pillar in the sea terminal, he had got his hands on three boxes of red and white nectar.

Intoxication sharpens the senses and slows the passage of time, so Balthazar and Vatanescu quietly filled their begging cups over and over again, engaging first in small talk and gradually moving on to more serious matters. Balthazar talked about the neo-Nazis in Hungary who had used baseball bats, and he talked about an old Danish passer-by who had put enough money in his cup to support him for a year, with neither demand nor explanation. He talked about his family, whom he had not seen for so long that he did not know if they were still alive, or if his wife had found another man to change the light bulbs.

The fire crackled, and the wine warmed Vatanescu's stomach and mood. Balthazar muttered that of all the people in the world the one

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he missed most was his mother, that ugly old witch with whom he had never stopped quarrelling.

Every day my son learns something I ought to be there to see.

Every day my son fails to learn something because I'm not there to teach him.

'Don't make life into a romantic problem,' Balthazar said. 'There's no shortage of things to complain about in everyday life. Even the owners of three-storey mansions have grievances. So do prime ministers, consultants and charismatic leaders.'

Then he opened a pack of meatballs. After that there were grilled steaks with peppers and spicy butter.

Balthazar was afraid that his career as a wandering beggar would never take him home again. He had embarked on his foreign mission in the early 1990s, as soon as the borders were open, or rather as soon as the shrinking employment and social security options at home had forced him to cross them. He had always thought, I'll spend the autumn, winter and spring up here, and then I'll go home. But now was not the time to fret about it; today was harvest day.

Someone produced an accordion, and Balthazar played 'Mad Solsky's Polka'. He played the end of 'Summer of Tears'. He played and played, until Vatanescu lost his memory and Balthazar his sense of balance and they lay in the gravel with their arms around each other's necks, surrounded by a wasteland that had been turned into a diabolical mess.

