Edina Szvoren

The Best Headsman in the Land

(Short stories, 185 pages, MAGVETŐ Publishing, 2015)

Should we really be surprised at being overcome with elation if the best executioner in the country moves in next door? How does a mother feel if she can only meet her child for breastfeeding – a child who lives with the blind father? Is it possible to live with a tailor's dummy?

Reading Edina Szvoren's latest stories, the reader is overcome simultaneously by dread, sympathy, and surprise. In spite of not being able to get on the right wavelength with our parents and children, of being tugged by desire away from our partners, or being hopelessly attracted to them – we still manage to get on in the world. We are foreigners in our own stories, yet this is where we have to settle down. We can't get used to all this actually fitting together.

The Best Headsman in the Land manages to show the claustrophobic familiarity of our relationships, while there are sparks of a dark humour with hints of the absurd.

Edina Szvoren

Edina Szvoren was born in 1974 in Budapest.

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This is her first book to be published by Magvető Publishing.

Previous books
Pertu [On First Name Terms] (Palatinus, 2010)
Nincs, és ne is legyen [No and Let There Not Be] (Palatinus, 2012)

Edina Szvoren is a WINNER
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The Best Headsman in the Land
Excerpts

Working Name: Person

Today my face is Gothic. A turquoise bracelet dangles on my fingers. My translucent Brigitte Bardot glasses are like a swollen cheekbone: the grease-mark on them is a week old, or a month. If I take them off to wipe them, my head starts to ache. My grey incisors are overlapping roof tiles. I turn away from the cafe mirror, and in the scissor of my legs raise the chair opposite until I get tired. Pick it up, put it down. A waiter eyes me from the cover of his hunched shoulder. There are shapeless white stains on my nails. My fortune could be told from them – maybe it should. The ring finger, say, is my son's life. (He won a competition reciting a poem by Ágnes Nemes Nagy.) The index finger is my literary life, and the middle one the head teacher who flirts with me. I look up. Well, well, mother's here, hardships and all, as if she were constantly being beaten. But she's proud all the same.

This tall, ointment-smelling woman actually sits down. Like an ocean liner, she can only pitch, she can't bend. Her hair quivers in strong, flexible curls, as she shakes her head disapprovingly. She leans her bag on the chair leg, and for several minutes the long shoulder straps stand uncompromisingly upright. As usual, her shoes form part of the Mercedes logo under the table. The shoes are a gift from Ffather. The Indian bag is a gift from Ffather. The gold-plated spectacles chain is a gift from Ffather. Since Ffather disowned me because of a piece I wrote, I've been meeting my mother in cafes.

This stiff-busted social security official carried me in her womb for nine months. Now she gets out the sixteen-year-old yellow plastic pocket with a clover embossed in the lower right corner. Her open hand offers me pens. Her skin glows but her complimentary pens are cold. (Her thermometers used to freeze my armpits.) She has a political pen, a cholesterol one, and one from the Jehovah's Witnesses. I pick one, and pull my upper lip over my teeth. Mother shoves the lottery ticket in front of me and with a crooked index finger jabs at Ffather's numbers. She has bones like the steel insets of working shoes. Seventy-nine and eleven. I've gone along with this idiocy for sixteen years. I only get money if it's a winning ticket. I hold mother's pen (the cholesterol one) and place my x's far from Ffather's numbers, in the second line. Twenty-six, twenty-eight. Not always the same numbers. Priority always goes to Ffather, then me, and last mother, because she makes do with just one x. It's like a dinner in the 1950s. I look at the paper and swing my legs: the plastic tags on the end of my shoelaces brush together. Ffather's two x's are spidery and protrude from the box. Mother's is like a handlebar moustache. 'Your grandchild,' I say. So as to talk to her. (My parents know more

about the Qahatika Indians than about my son.) '...Won a poetry recital contest. It's on Youtube. Mother sits with a straight back, like first violinists do. She replies: 'You, at that age.' Yes, at that age I made a train from Ffather's size ten shoes on the double bed: I stuffed them with cuddly rabbits and dogs as passengers. If I didn't remember playing trains, I wouldn't be the same person (a working name).

Mother, whose usual number is eighty, beckons the waiter, asks for the bill, and says goodbye. She'll pay even if we win. It doesn't occur to me to upset things, to push things too far – I'm pleased that in sixteen years we've had two threes and six, maybe seven times, a two. Then, beside my cup mother slips an envelope from the bank. Her eyes are shiny polished window ledge. 'Last week we had a three. You can get your teeth done at last,' says this creature whose every sinew exudes morality. (I prefer not to mention that her favourite word is *lightyear*.) She pulls her Indian bag up onto her shoulder, and goes. Like a marine methane bubble bursting free from the captivity of ice, she tries – always – to find somewhere better, more open.

Today my face is Gothic, and my calves Romanesque. I push my sunglasses up onto my forehead, and look in the envelope. I hold the banknotes and thumb them: it must be more than nine hundred thousand forints. I pull my lips over my teeth, and pout. The waiters whisper together behind the nickel trays. My hand-bag is in the middle of the round marble table. A couple of teeth in the zip are broken. It opens into a deformed – human – smile. There's a dent in the wine list. The impression of mother's hand. Her willpower presses ancient ferns into stones.

The Best Headsman in the Land

The married couple next door had a baby: a little devil with a priestly double chin. The wife is a housewife, the husband is a punishment officer – actually, since they've introduced the death penalty, he's the best executioner in the land. He called a locksmith to reinforce the locks on the door, and to fix security bars (with a graceful swell toward the bottom) onto the windows. But that's only natural, if you wake up one day to find you've got something to be jealous of. We can't have children, and we're almost envious of their concern.

We seldom see our neighbours. My husband is perhaps even a little ashamed that we look up to them so: to their respectable happiness, their humility. The only problem in their carefree life is that in their one-and-a-half roomed flat they can't put up the woman's childhood friends from the provinces. The best chance we have of greeting our neighbours is from the balcony, when after work we laze around in the deckchairs, which still have the stains of my late mother's sun cream. We often see the man leaning on the balcony railing in a corduroy dressing gown as, armed with binoculars, he examines the behaviour of the crows nesting in the park. He writes his observations in a notebook. He once showed us the entry that was born on the day their child was conceived. He passed the notebook over balcony railing. We leaned together, and humming and hawing read the three lines framed with felt-tip pen. We were touched: the crows built a nest that day too. We knew this was one of the solemnest moments of our lives.

Now and again we hear the priestly, chubby little devil wailing. If I put my ear right against the living room wall, I can hear the mother's encouraging cooing. Sometimes I beckoned my husband over to listen. 'This wall's stone cold,' he would say, and I'd lay my warm hand on his face. Anyway I've forgotten what he said God's punishment was the other day. My husband is the only person I know who believes in heaven and hell – and he can't get his head round why I call the neighbour's child a little devil.

The man has more free time since his job has changed. And he is mature in character, accomplished: the imperturbable calm that surrounds him is now almost part of the building – like the trees in the courtyard, and the hamster wheel in the front garden. And what belongs to the building belongs to us too. He seems to be older than all of us. We get a sense of security from him accepting a position on the building's residents' committee. He started researching the history of the local neighbourhood, and in the afternoons he knocks things together in the cellar: a wooden bracket for a bookshelf, a cover for the rubbish bins, or even a bird feeder. He doesn't ask for money. Nor does he brag about his helpfulness. The other day, standing on the balcony he said he'd like it if other birds nested in the trees, not just crows. Rare songbirds, ones able to give a faithful imitation of a car alarm or a baby's crying. I sincerely hope his wish is fulfilled.

Sometimes the neighbours take the baby out onto the stairs and let me hold its hand. Meanwhile my husband holds out his arms with feigned concern either side of the baby. Our neighbours are tactful folk. They don't ask which of us is unable to have children, and they encourage us to try bioresonance. As if they can't see that we're too late. My husband once blurted out: 'You're always hanging around that wall.' I'm moved when I hear a baby cry. I told the neighbours it wasn't emotion. I just wanted someone, not them, and not even me, to pick the baby up. I felt nothing was

more important than consoling the baby. I dug my hands into my pockets so the neighbours wouldn't notice I was chewing my nails again.

The executioner has an astonishing understanding of the human soul. I sometimes get the impression he sees through every living and dead person. He thinks this ability developed when he was working alternate shifts as a corridor monitor and prison officer, before the death penalty was introduced; but I suspect that someone is born with this insight, or it develops in them very early, and this is what makes them suitable for that kind of work. For instance: he says that in extreme situations, we're all the same. Terror dilates the anal sphincter, and we shit ourselves. I'm put out that he uses the plural, which encompasses me, my husband, and those on death row, all together. And weirdest of all: him too. When the annual clear-out time comes round, and everyone puts their junk on the street to be taken away, we are forever ashamed in front of the neighbours. In thick garden gloves they carry down their pristine dust-free objects (mostly appealing children's toys unsuitable for intellectual development, which the wife's girlfriends from the country heap upon them every year), whereas we, little by little and with a guilty conscience, carry down my mother's furniture, from which emanates the smell of mortality. Every year just a few pieces, as if we had something to hide in connection to her death. We threw out the carpet bearing the impressions left by the legs of the night-stool ages ago, but the armchair that mother clung to almost obsessively, with the springs sticking out through the upholstery, wouldn't be thrown out until the next clear-out. The neighbours never met mother, because they moved into the building in that year of trial and tribulation, when she had already been bedridden for months. Just to provide evidence of my respect for the executioner's intellect, standing by the junk I try to recall and apply to mother what he last said about extreme situations and how humans are all the same, but I soon get confused, and the executioner's sharply contoured, harsh sentences disintegrate into their constituent parts and scatter within my mouth. He pulls off his garden gloves, throws them onto the junk, then as a belated gesture of sympathy he pats my shoulder. 'Clearing junk is the perfect opportunity to take stock, and compare the days before the death penalty with today,' he says.

When our neighbours had tickets for the operetta, they asked us to babysit. I could hardly conceal my joy. The wife brought over the little devil. She wore a trouser suit, make-up, and fiery red high-heeled shoes. We were given nappies, toys, nappy rash cream and two flavours of baby food – the same one, incidentally, that we fed mother in the weeks before she died. Baby had a four-armed mobile to hang up, with musical planets dusted in coloured glitter that orbited when we twirled the arms. On it was written: 'Milky Way'. My husband went to all lengths to find a place for it in the living room while the wife wrote down a few guidelines for us. When the door closed behind her, I told my husband: 'We're on our own with an eight-month old baby.' We put him down on the carpet, and walled him in with green cushions with gold lace, to stop him crawling off. 'I wonder if we've

deserved it,' I asked snuggling up to my husband. 'Yes,' he replied. 'Life can't all be about going without.' We bent the angle-poise lamp over the baby. My husband had fixed the Milky Way onto it with a cable tie. When we twirled the toy, and the heavenly bodies began to orbit, sparkling and clanging on their way, the baby waved his arms towards them in abandon. 'The baby's hot,' I said, and peeled of his bee-patterned sleepsuit. His hair was soft and blond, like the silky styles at the end of a cob of corn. There was a row of raisins on his feet. I squeezed and kissed all ten of them. His ear was like a newly burst bud. When baby tried to sit up, bundles of puppy fat gathered in the crook of his arm; when he fell back, little bubbles formed on the tip of his tongue. I massaged his limbs gently, and my husband ran to fetch the camera. He wanted me to unbutton my blouse and act as though he were really ours, as if I were breastfeeding him. We nearly rowed over this tasteless idea. Finally my husband understood that only in a fully buttoned blouse would I appear in a photo with our little baby. The colour glitter came off the musical planets while they were spinning, and drifted onto the little priestikins' head. We did our best to pick them all out of its hair before the neighbours got back from the operetta, so all would be in order. I gave baby back the bee-patterned sleepsuit, and with a paper knife my husband cut through the cable tie that held the mobile in place.

For those who experience it, it is almost impossible to get used to being close to something monumental day by day. Take that mother for instance, who only a few folk in the building recall. Years ago she dropped a switched-on hairdryer into a bathtub of water containing her twins. She got life, because there was no death sentence then. When it transpired that for years the woman was doing time in one of the prisons patrolled by our neighbour, I could hardly sleep for excitement. I planned to grill him about her. I had to accept that though the executioner could utter fine wise words about the prisoners in the women's section, since their child was born he never spoke of the hairdryer mother in front of his wife. It was no use me willingly admitting out loud that the hairdryer woman and I, and maybe all mothers – even those who like me have no children – that we were birds of a feather, just like those on death row and prison officers are in extreme situations. He would cast a dignified gaze into the distance, or wiped the binocular lenses with a deerskin rag. It borders on a miracle that the executioner wasn't bothered by how close by these criminals were, and he always knew what was right.

We hope the neighbours were satisfied with us, and this won't be the only time we spend a few hours with the baby. Perhaps they'll go to the theatre, or visit relatives. Until then, I have the restrained photo we took while minding the child, and press my ear to the living room wall. I hear the baby cry when he's teething. I hear when he sneezes. I hear when the executioner winces with irritation because just before he sets out the baby vomits on his indigo uniform, cleaned in the state laundry. I hear when they tip the baby's toys out for him, or when he is terrified by the shape of the curtain billowing in the breeze, and screams – like mother screamed when she lost her sense of

security along with her memories. I can hear as the husband saws down to size the criss-cross wooden screen he wants to fix on the balcony rail so that the unswallowable building bricks don’t fall into the garden. I think anxiously of the day when the best headsman in the land gets a pay rise, and in spite of his promises, sooner or later he'll get fed up with the one-and-a-half room flat on the first floor, which is too small to put up his wife’s friends from the country. If what I fear actually happens, and our neighbours move out, then we'll be left with no little devil, just this lifeless rushed photo, with my blouse buttoned up to the neck – and a life without confines or quality, where the death penalty seems not to exist.

Translated by Richard Robinson