

2 NOVELS: THE PROOF, THE THIRD LIE

Agota Kristof, born in Csikvánd, Hungary, in 1935, became an exile in French-speaking Switzerland in 1956. Working in a factory, she slowly learned the language of her adopted country. Her first novel, *The Notebook* (*Le Grand Cahier*, 1986), gained international recognition; later work included plays and stories as well as *The Proof* (*La Preuve*, 1988) and *The Third Lie* (*Le Troisième Mensonge*, 1991). She died in 2011.

From reviews of *The Notebook* (reissued by CBe in 2014):

‘A stunning, brutal and beautifully written (and translated) book’ – George Szirtes

‘I found it profoundly disturbing, incredibly well-written, and very brave. And the fact that it was written by a woman – it has a startling brutality and ferocity about the style that I find very inspiring.’ – Eimear McBride, *The Believer*

‘*The Notebook* is a transfixing house of horrors.’
– James Tennant, *New Statesman*

‘In its odd, memorable, unique way, *The Notebook* is a masterpiece.’ – John Self, *Asylum*

also by Agota Kristof

FICTION

The Notebook

MEMOIR

The Illiterate

Agota Kristof

2 NOVELS

The Proof

The Third Lie

translated from the French

by David Watson and Marc Romano

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The Third Lie 135

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The Proof

translated by David Watson

I

On his return to Grandmother's house, Lucas lies down by the garden gate in the shade of the bushes. He waits. An army truck pulls up in front of the border post. Some soldiers get out and lower a body wrapped in a camouflaged sheet to the ground. A sergeant comes out of the border post and gives a sign, and the soldiers open the sheet. The sergeant whistles.

'It'll be a real job identifying him! You've got to be crazy to try and cross that bitch of a border, and in broad daylight too!'

A soldier says, 'You'd think people would realize it's impossible.'

Another soldier says, 'The people around here know that. It's the ones from elsewhere who try to get across.'

The sergeant says, 'Okay, let's go see the idiot across the road. Maybe he knows something.'

Lucas goes into the house. He sits on the corner seat in the kitchen. He slices some bread, puts a bottle of wine and some goat's cheese on the table. There is a knock. The sergeant and a soldier come in.

Lucas says, 'I was expecting you. Sit down. Have some wine and cheese.'

The soldier says, 'Thanks.'

He takes some bread and some cheese; Lucas pours the wine.

The sergeant says, 'You were expecting us. Why?'

'I heard the explosion. After explosions someone always comes to ask if I saw anyone.'

'And did you see anyone?'

‘No.’

‘As usual.’

‘Yes, as usual. People don’t come here to tell me they intend to cross the border.’

The sergeant laughs. He takes some wine and cheese.

‘You might have seen someone hanging around here, or in the forest.’

‘I saw no one.’

‘If you *had* seen someone, would you say so?’

‘If I told you I would, you wouldn’t believe me.’

The sergeant laughs again. ‘I sometimes wonder why they call you the idiot.’

‘Me too. I simply have a nervous disorder due to suffering a psychological trauma as a child during the war.’

The soldier asks, ‘What? What did he say?’

Lucas explains, ‘I’m a bit funny in the head because of the air raids. It happened when I was a child.’

The sergeant says, ‘Your cheese is very good. Thank you. Come with us.’

Lucas follows them. Pointing to the body, the sergeant says, ‘Do you know this man? Have you seen him before?’

Lucas gazes at the mangled body of his father. ‘He’s beyond recognition.’

‘You can still recognize someone from his clothes, his shoes, or even his hands or hair.’

Lucas says, ‘All I can tell is that he’s not from this town. His clothes tell you that. No one wears such elegant clothes in this town.’

The sergeant says, ‘Thank you. We knew that much already. We aren’t idiots either. I’m asking you whether you have seen him before or noticed him anywhere.’

‘No. Nowhere. But I see his nails have been torn out. He’s been in prison.’

The sergeant says, ‘There’s no torture in our prisons. It’s strange that his pockets are completely empty. Not even a

photo, or a key, or wallet. Yet you’d think he’d have an identity card, maybe even a pass giving him access to the border zone.’

Lucas says, ‘He probably got rid of them in the forest.’

‘I think so too. He didn’t want to be identified. I wonder who he was trying to protect. If by any chance you come across something when you’re out picking mushrooms, you’ll bring it to us, won’t you, Lucas?’

‘You can count on me, sergeant.’

Lucas sits down on the bench in the garden and rests his head against the white wall of the house. The sun blinds him. He shuts his eyes.

‘What do I do now?’

‘Same as before. Keep getting up in the morning, going to bed at night, doing what has to be done in order to live.’

‘It will be a long time.’

‘Perhaps a whole lifetime.’

The sounds of the animals wake Lucas. He gets up and goes to tend the livestock. He feeds the pigs, the hens, the rabbits. He rounds up the goats by the riverbank, brings them back, milks them. He carries the milk to the kitchen. He sits down on the corner seat and stays there until nightfall. Then he gets up, leaves the house, waters the garden. There is a full moon. When he goes back to the kitchen, he eats a bit of cheese and drinks some wine. He leans out of the window and throws up. He clears the table. He goes into Grandmother’s room and opens the window to air it. He sits down in front of the dressing table and looks at himself in the mirror. Later Lucas opens his bedroom door. He looks at the double bed. He closes the door and goes off into town.

The streets are deserted. Lucas walks quickly. He stops in front of an open window with a light on. It is a kitchen. A family is eating the evening meal. A mother and three children

around the table. Two boys and a girl. They are eating potato broth. The father isn't there. Perhaps he is at work, or in prison, or in a camp. Or else he never came back from the war.

Lucas walks past the noisy bars where, not long ago, he would sometimes play the harmonica. He doesn't go in, he keeps on walking. He goes down the unlit alleyways behind the castle, then follows the short dark street leading to the cemetery. He stops in front of the grave of Grandfather and Grandmother.

Grandmother died last year of her second stroke. Grandfather died a long time ago. The townspeople used to say he was poisoned by his wife.

Lucas's father died today trying to cross the border, and Lucas will never see his grave.

Lucas goes back home. He climbs up into the attic with the aid of a rope. There is a straw mattress, an old army blanket, a chest. Lucas opens the chest, takes out a large school notebook, and writes a few words. He closes the notebook. He lies down on the mattress.

Over his head, lit by the moonlight shining through the gable window, the skeletons of his mother and her baby hang from a beam.

Lucas's mother and little sister were killed by a shell five years ago, a few days before the end of the war, here in the garden of Grandmother's house.

Lucas is sitting on the garden bench. His eyes are closed. A horse-drawn wagon pulls up in front of the house. The noise wakes Lucas. Joseph, the market gardener, comes into the garden. Lucas looks at him.

'What do you want, Joseph?'

'What do I want? It was market day today. I waited for you until seven o'clock.'

Lucas says, 'Forgive me, Joseph. I forgot what day it was. If you like we can quickly load up the produce.'

'Are you joking? It's two o'clock in the afternoon. I didn't come to load up, I came to ask if you still want me to sell your produce. If not, just say so. It's all the same to me. I'm only doing it as a favour to you.'

'Of course, Joseph. I simply forgot that it was market day.'

'It's not just today that you forgot. You also forgot last week, and the week before.'

Lucas says, 'Three weeks? I didn't realize.'

Joseph shakes his head. 'There's something not right with you. What have you done with your fruit and vegetables for the last three weeks?'

'Nothing. But I watered the garden every day, I think.'

'You think? Let's take a look.'

Joseph goes behind the house into the kitchen garden. Lucas follows him. The market gardener bends over the beds and swears.

'Jesus Christ! You've let it all rot. Look at those tomatoes on the ground, those overripe beans, those yellow cucumbers and black strawberries. What, are you crazy? Ruining all this good produce! You ought to be shot! You've destroyed this year's peas, and the apricots. We might just save the potatoes and the plums. Bring me a bucket!'

Lucas brings a bucket, and Joseph begins to gather up the potatoes, and the plums which have fallen into the grass. He says to Lucas, 'Fetch another bucket and gather up the rotten stuff. Perhaps your pigs will eat it. God almighty! Your animals!'

Joseph rushes down to the farmyard. Lucas follows him. Joseph wipes his brow and says, 'Thank God they're still alive. Give me a pitchfork so I can clean them out a bit. By what miracle did you remember the animals?'

'They don't let you forget. They cry out as soon as they're hungry.'

Joseph works for several hours. Lucas helps him, following his orders. When the sun sets they go into the kitchen.

Joseph says, 'For the love of God! I've never smelled such a stink! What on earth is it?' He looks around and notices a large bowl full of goat's milk. 'The milk has turned. Take it out of here and throw it in the river.'

Lucas obeys. When he comes back, Joseph has already aired the kitchen and washed down the tiles. Lucas goes down into the cellar and comes back with a bottle of wine and some bacon.

Joseph says, 'We'll need some bread with that.'

'I haven't got any.'

Joseph gets up without a word and fetches a loaf of bread from his wagon.

'Here. I bought some after the market. We don't make our own any more.'

Joseph eats and drinks. He asks, 'You aren't drinking? You're not eating either. What's wrong with you, Lucas?'

'I'm tired. I can't eat.'

'Your face is pale beneath your tan. You're all skin and bones.'

'It's nothing. It will pass.'

Joseph says, 'I suspected there was something bothering you. It must be a girl.'

'No, it's not a girl.'

Joseph winks at him. 'Sure, I know what it's like to be young. But I'd be sorry to see a fine boy like you let himself go because of a girl.'

'It's not because of a girl.'

'What is it, then?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know? In that case you should go and see a doctor.'

'Don't worry about me, Joseph. It'll pass.'

'It'll pass, it'll pass. He neglects his garden, he lets the milk turn sour, he doesn't eat, he doesn't drink, and he thinks he can go on like that.'

Lucas doesn't answer.

On his way out Joseph says, 'Listen, Lucas. So you won't forget market day again, I'll get up an hour earlier, I'll come and wake you, and we can both load up the fruit, vegetables, and any animals you want to sell. Is that all right by you?'

'Yes. Thank you, Joseph.'

Lucas gives Joseph another bottle of wine and accompanies him to his wagon.

As he whips the horse, Joseph shouts, 'Take care, Lucas! Love can be fatal!'

Lucas is sitting on the garden bench. His eyes are closed. When he opens them again, he sees a little girl swinging on a branch of the cherry tree.

Lucas asks, 'What are you doing there? Who are you?'

The little girl jumps to the ground. She fiddles with the pink ribbons on the ends of her braids. 'Aunt Leonie wants you to go to the priest's house. He is all alone because Aunt Leonie can't work any more. She's in bed at home, she won't get up again, she's too old. My mother doesn't have time to go to the priest's house, because she works at the factory like my father.'

Lucas says, 'I see. How old are you?'

'I don't know exactly. The last time it was my birthday I was five, but that was in the winter. Now it's already autumn, and I could go to school if I hadn't been born too late.'

'It's already autumn?'

The little girl laughs.

'Didn't you know? It's been autumn for two days now, even though people think it's still summer because it's so warm.'

'You know a lot!'

'Yes. My big brother teaches me everything. He's called Simon.'

'And what are you called?'

'Agnes.'