



some notes on

A LONG WEEKEND
IN PEST AND BUDA

Károly Makk, 2003

When did I begin to dream of falling?
Not when I spoke of you to the KGB
nor when you were imprisoned.
Not when you returned for a single night
and not when I was requested to find you again.
These thing I did for love; to save you.
No, I dreamed of falling when you left me
and the seed of your child was inside me.
It was only then that I betrayed you.

It's a testament to just how deeply the characters from *Love* entered me, that my first reaction on watching *A Long Weekend in Pest and Buda* – Karoly Makk's film made thirty years later with the same actors – was a feeling of betrayal. This was not how I had imagined these people, their stories and their lives together. This was followed by a healthy rebuke to my sense of conceit that I should presume to know their histories; idealising them and stripping out all the expediency, selfishness and compromises that give as much shape to any life as principles or pride. And then it's not even certain that they are the same characters from the earlier film. Even though flashes from *Love* are used to fill in their pasts, Luca has become Mari and Janos, Iván. The films are independent but inter-related; a viewing of one would certainly change your relationship with the other. Maybe Makk is playing a game with public and private ownership of a film's characters. In doing so he alters our relationship with a past experience as profoundly as he does his characters in *A Long Weekend in Pest and Buda*.

Betrayal, forgiveness and reconciliation with the past are in fact major themes of the film in which secrets are confessed and people brought into the light. For all the control in its plotting though, there is a restlessness and uncertainty that grows out of the film. It's there from the very first few nervy bars of plucked notes with which it commences. It's also partly to do with the seedy atmosphere of new capitalism in Budapest in which everyone and every service has a price. Characters are not settled. Sleep is often troubled, snatched on a hospital bed, broken by the rumbling of lorries through the night, or in the very first scene,

by one of the old methods of state fear, the middle of the night telephone call.

It is this telephone call that summons Iván from his lakeside residence in Switzerland to Budapest where Mari is in hospital, dying. The way he is filmed at his home accentuates a luxurious shallowness in his life – his slo-mo walk to breakfast with his wife looks like a particularly cheesy advertisement, for estate wine or coffee perhaps. Already things have changed for him though. As he makes polite conversation, flashes of memories (from *Love*) of the woman he knew decades previously impose themselves thoroughly on his mind. He returns (like some ‘hammy ageing actor’ as Mari later calls him) to a Hungary that he no longer knows how to negotiate, finding the place in the grip of a raw capitalist fervour. The taxi driver fills him in on how much to tip the doorman, the nurse, the doctor.

His dislocation is compounded when he reaches the hospital and experiences the shock of meeting a loved one, unseen for decades but of whom he has often dreamed in the intervening years, and finding her grey-haired, asleep on a hospital bed, attached to a drip, lit by the unforgiving hospital light of a fluorescent tube.

Mari comes round. She has her endearingly girlish giggle still.

This is a film of mirrors; sometimes actual, as with Mari making herself up or Anna trying on a gift of jewellery from Iván, and sometimes figurative, as with Iván, admiring his own younger self in a photograph. More than this though, each main character is a mirror for another and the person who looks into them is changed in some way, through reconciliation, atonement, acceptance of responsibility. Characters are claimed by others and these claims can no more be denied than those flashes of memory that invade Iván’s mind at breakfast, or the inner booming sound that ousts all other thought from Mari’s head. Each becomes a different person through their relationship to another, having been given a new set or reference points through which to live and die. These changes follow some natural law of equivalence in which all lose something or someone,

and all gain. The loss is the price of the gain.

If the past can change characters in the present, it can also be hidden, forgotten or smoothed over. Take those two distinguished and obviously moneyed gentlemen diners ordering fish in a restaurant at midday for example. On face value, there is little to tell between them now. Even a shared experience of prisoner and imprisoned can create some form of bond that may be incredible or even obscene to outsiders. Unless someone does the remembering, places change too, with no welcome to be found in an old family home.

When telling her story, Mari takes Iván up to the moment that something died inside of her, hope perhaps. This is the story he must now adopt, and which must now become part of him. It ill suits this blazered gentleman, his handkerchief smelling of lavender, his vanity ripe for a pricking.

The biggest gain to be had in the film is the balm of recognition. Just before he removes his shirt, embarrassed in the company of his daughter who is still a stranger, Iván has a look in his face very similar to that of Mari in her hospital bed, a look of defencelessness entirely at the mercy of another's will.

I preferred your hunted look
ghosting you from solitary.
You were hungry then
for life, for me –
they didn't beat that out of you.
In Juci's bed you fed me water
drop by drop from your mouth.
Now you have a child
who can look after for herself.
Look after her.