Die hellen Tage

(Bright Days)

By Zsuzsa Bánk

[excerpt]

[translated by Margot Bettauer Dembo]

Circus Girl

I've known Aja ever since I could think. I can hardly remember a time before she was there, or a life she wasn't part of. I have no idea what days without Aja might have been like. I was drawn to Aja from the start. She spoke in a loud, clear voice and knew words like traveling circus and tambourine. Among other people she looked tiny, with little hands and feet, and as if she had to make up for that in some way, she spoke in long sentences that hardly anyone could follow, as if she wanted to prove that she could speak aloud, without stopping or making mistakes. She moved to our town the year all of us kids thought nothing could be more fun than saying our names backwards, calling each other Retep or Itteb. But Aja was always Aja.

We found each other the way children do, without hesitation, without fuss. And from the moment we started playing our first game together and asked our first questions, we spent our days together, stringing them into an endless chain, considering any break that separated us from each other an imposition. When Aja came to my house, she would

open the courtyard gate soundlessly. It was a big gate on rollers and no one else could open and close it without making a sound. It announced every visitor before he had taken the last few steps to our front door. And we could hear the noise it made up in the attic and in the farthest back corner of the garden. Aja was the only one who could open that gate so quietly that nobody noticed or even knew that she was walking through our yard, and I was surprised at how quiet she could be and how she could come and go completely unnoticed.

It must have been summer when we met, a summer that surrounded Aja as though it and its light, its dust, its long bright evenings belonged to her She moved through summer as if through a large, light house whose doorless rooms all ran into each other and through which she passed -without a jacket or shoes, wearing a yellow hat she’d found in her mother’s closet.. We kissed and hugged each other quickly the way girls often do, even though Aja never did that with anyone else, not even later on. And we never left each other, although I don’t know why Aja picked me of all people, inviting me into her life, a life that was different from anything I had ever known. It seemed exotic to me, larger, and broader than mine, and took place somewhere without time or boundaries. I don’t know what it was that made her approach me, pushed her past others and toward me, binding her to me. I don’t know what it could possibly be that makes us choose one another. Was it the way I skipped through the meadows, threw a stone across the water, sang a song, or was it only because, at that particular time, at that place, there was no one else who could have taken up the spot next to Aja? Did we stay together merely because no one came later on who could have taken my place? I never asked Aja about it. And

today it's not important anymore. Today we are who we are, and we don't ask or search for reasons.

The strangest thing about Aja was her mother. She wasn't like the other mothers I knew in our little town, with their colorful cars and shopping nets, who lived, on the narrow streets around the big square, in the long, pointed shadow of the church spire, and who looked every morning into their mailboxes, while Aja's mother had the mail delivered to her door. What I first noticed about her were her painted toenails, because she'd also painted the skin. It was as if she wanted to be lavish with the nail polish and paint a purple stripe across her toes. She was taller than the other women, even taller than most of the men, and next to her Aja seemed to disappear. She had long, slender legs, which she said looked like wooden legs. And it was true; they looked a little like the legs of the kitchen table that she would carry out to the garden in the summertime, setting it under the branches of the pear trees that cast their web of shadows on the dirty tabletop. She kept chickens someone had once given her behind a chain link fence, and we'd be allowed to throw a handful of corn into the grass for them and to open the narrow gate every time Aja's mother, wearing flats, would go in, grab a chicken, and twist its neck. Then later slowly plucking it, she would let the white and brown feathers sail into the knee-high grass.

Aja lived with her mother in a house that wasn't a real house, just a little cottage held together by boards and wires, a shack to which new parts would be screwed whenever there wasn't enough room, when it got too tight even for the few pieces of

furniture Aja's mother owned, the boxes and crates that she stacked up, and the shoe boxes she collected for the many letters she kept. Wires and duct tape ran like spider webs through the two small rooms, the tiny kitchen, and narrow hallway, for the lamps that were on even in the daytime when the sun was shining and light penetrated every nook and cranny of the house. Back then I knew nothing about houses, nothing about what they should be, what they should look like, and where they should stand or, that they needed to have a street and house number, and that it wasn't enough to say it's on the other side of Kirchblüt where the fields begin and the gravel paths intersect, not far from the signalman's little house, and it looks as if it were floating. I didn't know that you had to get permission to do hammering and to keep chickens; that there was someone who was in charge of deciding where and what Aja's home should be. And I had no idea of the mornings Aja's mother spent in the corridors of government offices. I thought Aja's house was a house that had everything it needed, even though it had no lock on the door, which is why Aja never took along a key. Aja's mother left the crooked garden gate as well as the door to the house unlocked. When someone asked her whether she wasn't afraid of burglars, robbers, and thieves, it made her laugh in that way she had, just a little too late, a little too softly as if she'd just now had to think of something that would never otherwise have occurred to her. What is there, she'd say, that they could possibly take from us?

Sometimes Aja's mother would fall asleep before finishing a sentence, before expressing a thought; and at night, when Aja woke up and went to the kitchen for a glass of water, her mother would be sitting next to the circle of light cast by the lamp as if waiting for morning. In any case that's what Aja would tell me. Her mother had scratches

on her hands, green stains on her knees and legs, and she looked funny with all the dirty band-aids and bandages made of rags. Peeling onions, she'd often cut herself with a knife that she would hang on a hook high up so that Aja couldn't reach it. She'd bang her head on cupboards, get tangled up in electric wires and drag stuff along that would then break, and she'd put those fragments away in a pail together with other shards and splinters that could no longer be mended. She walked through her house, her garden, and through all the streets of our little town as if there was nothing in her way, no obstacles, as if everything had to get out of her way and not the other way around. And it was as if she couldn't waste a thought on it, as if her thoughts were too precious, as if she had too few and had to be frugal with them.

In the evenings, before I got get ready to leave, before we separated in order to meet again the following day, the next morning, if not sooner, we'd do a cartwheel as a goodbye. The way other people shake hands or hug one another, we'd turn a cartwheel at the crooked garden gate, there where the grass had been trodden flat and dandelions pushed their way through the pickets – Aja and I both going in the same direction with the same quick movements, and Aja's mother between us, going in the other direction. Some evenings she would stay farther away, as if she might disturb us, as if she wanted to let us have more time, as if we hadn't had enough, as if we still needed this one moment, these few minutes before I left. By the time I'd walked down the narrow path and turned around at the point where I could see the signalman's little house, Aja had pulled herself up on the fence, pushing her knees between the pickets and waving to me with both hands, as if to say, "Don't forget to come back tomorrow."

Even though her house had no address, Aja's mother received letters in a fat package wrapped in brown paper on which, under her name, it said only "Kirchblüt" in small slanted letters. And the mailman delivered these to the door because there were always some letters for which she had to sign. And even after a metal box was hung on the fence with a slit into which he could have dropped the mail, he continued to hand her the letters, saying her name as if he had to make sure each time who she was, whether she really was the person for whom the letters were intended. It was one of the rare moments when we heard her whole name. The rest of the time Aja's mother insisted on being called Evi by everyone, not Eva, and certainly not Mrs. Kalócs. That's what they called her at the government office, she said, and that was enough, and the only other person she allowed to say her entire name was the mailman. Whenever, after leaning his bike against the post and pushing open the crooked gate, he saw a light in the kitchen and heard a clattering and banging, he would knock on the window and wait till Evi came the few steps to the door to receive her mail wrapped in brown paper. Letters in light-as-a-feather blue envelopes that she would then leave for days lying on the little table next to the screen door, where Aja and I picked them up many times, turning them this way and that. And because Aja thought she could tell by the smell where they came from, she sniffed them. She would hold one, first to her nose, then to mine, waving it around and fanning the air toward us, and when her mother discovered us and asked what it smelled like, the letter that is, Aja would say, Like America. It smells like America.

As soon as the first cool nights began to displace summer, a visitor arrived at Aja's house. He was coming from far away, Evi had said, by ship, train, and bus. And ever since he had written, for weeks already, Aja and Evi had been waiting for him without knowing the exact day he would arrive. Every Saturday Evi had thrown a chicken into the pot and then eaten it with us. She had painted her toenails, first red, then pink. In front of a folding mirror she had set up, she pinned up her hair with hairpins from a blue cloth, then, later let it down again. She had swept the dirt from the floor, washed the short curtains in a tub set out in the garden, hanging them up wet, and folding them into pleats. In the afternoons she had scanned the country roads and in the evenings she'd looked at the calendar, until one day, finally, someone was standing at the crooked gate. Aja and I could see him from the window, holding a dark suitcase in one hand and in the other a hat he had taken off when Evi appeared in the doorway; when she unfastened the screen door, put one foot on the step, brushing two strands of hair from her forehead, and then running across the loose paving stones to the gate, holding out her hands and placing them on his cheeks. Aja said it was her father, but her mother shook her head. And when Aja wasn't nearby, she said, a man who came to see her once a year could not be considered Aja's father. In the evenings during those weeks Aja would collect the ropes and balls she had strewn about the garden; she would eat whatever Evi put on the table, and after school she would go home right away and not do what she usually did, going with me and other kids across the fields and orchards to the lineman's little house where we would lie down in the grass and wait till the rails dipped and the rust-red cars of the freight train clattered past. Her father's name was Zigi. Aja called him that, so did her

mother, sometimes also Zigike or Zigili or Zigikém or Zig-Zig, and I wondered how anyone could be called that, whether it even was a name – Zig-Zig.

Zigi's hair hung down in his face, wild curls that grew in all directions and that he had cut only rarely. Two of his teeth were darker than the rest and were positioned one in front of the other, a little like people in a crowd trying to see past each other. He looked hungry, as though he hadn't eaten much recently, and because she thought he ought to make up for that in the weeks he was here, Évi hardly left her kitchen and put sausages and pretzels, sweet tea and sugar cookies on the table every two or three hours. Zigi kept a red handkerchief in his breast pocket that he used to blow his nose when he couldn't find anything else, and it contrasted with his dark clothes, which Evi said made him look as if he were going to a funeral. Zigi never wore socks and always the same pair of black shoes whose leather had rips on the sides and made his narrow feet look wider; and even though he didn't tie the laces, the shoes never dropped off his feet when he was walking. As easily as other people shoo away a fly or stir cream into their coffee, Zigi could do a backward handspring landing on his hands and then back on his feet and then backwards again landing on his hands, many times, over and over, as if he were flying through Evi's garden in circles that he drew in the air with his feet, over chairs and benches that never seemed to be in his way. Whenever he leaned against the kitchen window with his coffee, we knew that any moment he'd pull his knees up against his chest, and pass the little coffee cup under his feet from one hand to the other. Then standing up he would immediately empty it in one swallow, hand it to Aja, and bow low to us until his pointy

nose was between his knees and we could see the dragon fly that he'd had someone draw on the skin at the back of his neck with black ink and a thin needle.

We loved Zigi's stunts and couldn't get enough of them. Aja said that as soon as she woke up she would stand by the crooked doorway, still in her nightgown, waiting till Zigi threw back the blanket, put his hands on the floor, his legs up in the air, and walked like that with her into the kitchen. When I came over in the afternoon, Zigi would be among the pear trees balancing on a ball that he had fetched from under the tin roof next to the chickens, where Evi stored empty flower pots. When he waved his arms, when he rolled the ball with his bare feet over the mole hills, bending so far back that it looked as if he'd topple over and fall down, Aja would drag Evi's wicker chair outside and sit in it as if it were a throne, cross-legged, the high back extending far up above the part in her hair, her hands lying flat on her thighs, her knees under the arm rests. She would follow Zigi's every move, and when he began to move out of her field of vision, she turned her head to follow him with her eyes. Aja, who could say her name backwards without changing it or making it sound different, no matter how often we disassembled and reassembled it, no matter how often we took it apart and let it float around over us with the same ease with which Zigi sprang through the air in Evi's garden, back and forth under two trees, and when he lifted off, calling out that name, Aja.

Every year Zigi brought things Aja and I didn't know what to do with, but over which Evi rejoiced more than anything else. This time there were remnants of wallpaper with winding roses which turned out to be just enough for one wall of her tiny kitchen.

One morning Zigi took down the shelf and watched as the paper money he'd sent Evi in an envelope she'd hidden behind the plates and cups came sailing down. Then he pasted the wallpaper around the window from which we could look down the path of loose stone slabs leading to the crooked gate. He didn't put down any newspapers, but spread the paste on the wall with a broad brush without dripping on the floor; cut the strips while standing, with short rapid movements, using one of Evi's sharp knives; and using only his eyes to measure, pressed them onto the wall with both hands, flattening them with the red kerchief that he'd previously taken out of the breast pocket of his black suit jacket and tucked inside his shirt. That evening Evi sat in her kitchen surrounded by red roses that smelled of nothing but were climbing there as if they wanted to grow up and out through the window into the open.

Evi considered her time with Zigi sacred, the few weeks he slept in her bed and ate at her table, when she could pretend they were a family like any other. Evi would pull back as soon as Zigi came to share the house and garden with them; and she spoke less as if she wanted to economize on the available phrases and not distract Zigi's attention, as if she must not deprive Aja and Zigi of any of their time together, time from which Aja had to draw enough to last for an entire year. When I walked along the fence, I would see Evi, under the low-hanging branches of a tree, leaning against its trunk, hands folded over her stomach as if wanting to hide and not able to find a better place. She believed that she herself should start talking with Zigi only in the evening after Aja had fallen asleep in his lap, her head resting on his chest. Anyway this is what she said – only in the late evening

hours and at night. As if Zigi and she could only get together then, as if at all other times he belonged entirely to Aja.

As soon as Evi began tossing plums into a pail, or carrying the laundry through the garden and out behind the sunflowers to hang up on the clothesline, Zigi would walk with us to the little lake in the woods, lifting us up over fences, bushes, and tree stumps; and sometimes he would raise his arms and spring over our heads in a backward flip. We spent entire afternoons arranging two sticks in a cross and watching Zigi twist through the air and land on his feet precisely before it. When he put Aja on one shoulder and me on the other, we would hold on tight to his head, put our hands over his eyes, and even then, even when Zigi couldn't see anything, he would walk on without hesitation, without stumbling, with the same quick steps. It was as if he didn't need his eyes for walking, as if he knew without them where there might be branches or stones in the way. As soon as evening flooded Evi's garden with the blue light of late summer, children would press up close to the fence, pulling themselves up on the pickets so they wouldn't miss anything when Zigi tilted his head back to balance a tray full of glasses on his forehead, walking along the fence, pouring Evi some red juice in passing, and handing the glasses over the pickets to Aja. Before lowering his head, catching the tray in one hand, putting it under his arm, and clinking glasses with Aja. In the schoolyard, or on her way through Kirchblüt, when they asked her, "Is that your father, the one who walks through your garden balancing glasses on a tray on his forehead?" she would say, "Yes, that's my

father." And she made it sound as if there was no one who fit better into her world, as if no one had a more established place in it than Zigi.

Zigi would start his exercises even when no one was watching, when he didn't know that Aja and I were hiding behind the curtains or a bush to watch him as he fetched the wooden rings from the shed behind the chickens which he would then set gyrating around his arms and legs while walking down the field path, eventually disappearing behind the corn stalks. Whenever Zigi didn't do this sort of thing, we'd feel anxious. When he walked like just anyone else, without doing a handspring, when he drank his coffee without raising his knees, when he sat down on a chair without having first tossed it up into the air, or when he just took a little pad out of the lining of his dark jacket and drew something on it with Aja's colored pencils, something no bigger than a fingernail, leaving the rest of the page blank.

Every year Zigi inspected Evi's little house, passing his hands over the wood, along boards and moldings, the crooked window frames, the deep cracks through which in the summer the ants would come crawling in. He would tie his red kerchief around his right pants leg and use it to carry a hammer with which he pounded in nails that had come loose, or raised boards that had slipped. Before he moved on, Zigi wanted Evi's house to be tight for the winter. He was afraid Aja and Evi might be cold, that during the long dark months following a too-early autumn the cold might creep in through the screen, under the door. And we soon got used to hearing the hollow sound he made when pounding on the rain gutter, one clamp at a time, a sound that told us Zigi was checking on the house.

Just as summer was turning into autumn, he knocked down a wall in Evi's room with an ax, punched out the window frame and installed a glass door he had strapped onto a cart at a junk dealer's place on the road on the other side of Kirchblüt and then dragged along the path that bordered the cornfield, so that Evi would not have to climb through the window whenever she wanted to go to the chickens behind the house. Even while she was still calling him Zigilein and Zig-Zig in gratitude, Zigi brought brushes, shovels and a pail and started to plaster the stones and paint the wood so that it would be finished before the first frost came, by which time he would already have left. We could see, on the other side of the windows, his feet in his dirty shoes dangling from the ladder which he kept pushing along little by little, hour by hour, till he had gone around the house twice. In the evening when Zigi left the ladder standing there, we would climb up on it, and the following day when he climbed up, we'd go out into the garden to watch him apply the stucco, because he did it differently, because even the scraping and daubing and hammering looked different when he did it. We watched his slender ankle bones that pointed sideways like arrowheads, as if they might shoot off any moment. Zigi didn't take off his black trousers even when he was applying mortar with a trowel, nor did he take off his shoes that were covered with dust and stayed on his feet despite the untied laces.

As long as the autumn weather permitted, Aja and I would sit afternoons in a large blanket that Evi had suspended between two trees. She and Zigi would be talking together in their language, laughing softly as if they wanted to keep it secret from us, while we swung back and forth and the shadows lengthened and darkened until they

covered everything and Evi forgot to send me home and Aja to bed. Then she'd walk up the few steps to the screen door and disappear into the house with Zigi. We could see them on the other side of the glass door in Evi's room when they touched hands, shoulders, when Zigi raised his arm, turning Evi, when they danced with quick steps through the narrow hall without music, brushing against coats hanging on the hooks, Zigi grabbing his hat and putting it on Evi's head. And Aja and I, swinging back and forth like that and watching, we firmly believed, we knew, back then, that this is the way it had to be and this is how it would also be for us one day.

Weeks later, Zigi would depart, leaving behind nothing except damp stucco that wouldn't dry because of the weather, and the wallpaper full of roses striving to get out into the garden. He left unannounced one day, although Aja and Evi knew already that the day would come once Zigi started hammering on the gutter, going from clamp to clamp all the way around the little house he had painted off-white. At the latest they knew it when Zigi drew a bus, a train, and a ship on his pad. They knew it at least from that point on. They took him to the bus stop where he boarded a bus to the train station; there he got on a train that took him to another train, which arrived that evening in the city, where the ship he was to board by way of a broad stairway was anchored in the harbor. It was a flight of steps he did not go up quickly and easily but which he took time to climb. That, in any case, is what he wrote in a letter that Aja read in secret after the mailman had brought it weeks later, but the first sentences of which Zigi had begun right after the ship had cast off. When the bus first came into sight under the horse chestnuts at the end of the street, Evi took Aja's hand, and when the doors opened she drew Aja close

and put her arm around her shoulders while Zigi tossed his suitcase with his meager belongings into the bus, jumped up the steps, and holding the hand rail with one hand, leaned back as if he quickly wanted to touch the asphalt with the part in his hair, one leg stretched out in front, his back bent far back; and so, holding his black hat he waved to them one last time.

Later Evi had to keep telling Aja and me how she had watched as the bus carried Zigi away, doing this last stunt he had saved for his departure. And even though Aja herself had seen it, she wanted to hear it again and again from Evi's lips. We never found out how Zigi persuaded the driver to leave the doors open, whether he was paid for doing it or whether he felt sorry for Evi and Aja who were left behind alone in the autumn, and that was why he didn't close the doors until they came to the next turn in the road, after which Zigi put on his hat, took his suitcase, got off, and continued on foot because the bus was going too fast for him, so he wrote later on, and he didn't like going away so quickly from the bus stop where Aja and Evi stood for a while longer as if they didn't know where to go, finally walking hand in hand with small, hesitant steps along the narrow path back to their off-white house standing under the pear trees, and on which, during those last days he was still with them, Zigi had nailed two or three boards in the hope they would keep away the winter.

Zigi had left behind – in addition to his personal smell that would fly away as soon as Evi opened the windows – a pile of drawings among the morning coffee cups, and Aja took several of them to her room. There she hid them in drawers under her socks and shirts or wedged them into the window. Evi stuck them up over her bed with pins so that she could see, lying on her pillow, what Zigi had left for her on white paper – a tiny

bunch of yellow flowers, a tiny circus trailer, a tiny attic window and under it a tiny child lying on a tiny sheet. As time went by the pictures disappeared. They were gone from the hall, the kitchen, and Aja's room. They fell down and slipped under the stove, behind cupboards and beds, and pretty soon Evi and Aja no longer made the effort to pick them up.

Evi didn't let on how she felt after Zigi disappeared, saying goodbye until he would come back in a year. When he left her behind with Aja in a house he had set on a few rocks, building it with pieces of wood and fat nails and which, maybe because of that, looked as if it were floating. For Evi life went on, even though it must have been hard. Even making coffee seemed to require effort. And for Aja, too, life continued, after a short, quiet interval, as soon as Evi had shooed the children away from the picket fence because Zigi wouldn't be jumping through the air anymore and balancing glasses containing red juice on his forehead and as soon as Aja realized that Zigi wouldn't be sitting at night in the kitchen under the yellow light drawing crooked figures that she'd be allowed to color in the next morning. Now, when we walked through the house, there'd always be something sticking to our socks, and it would take a while before Evi recovered enough to notice how much dust and dirt was sticking to our feet.

That entire winter Aja held on to Zigi's letters and to the drawings he enclosed in each envelope. Drawings of little men with arrows that were intended to show her the maneuver he was just then practicing, and which we immediately tried to perform too. Aja took the letters along in the pockets of her pants and dresses and would pull them out

whenever we were going somewhere and stopped on the way by the stream behind the lineman’s little house. Zigi hadn’t made any effort to remember my name because, so Evi said, he never remembered names anyway because it seemed unimportant and silly to him, and also because his name wasn’t his real name, but rather one that he had chosen for himself one year that seemed so far removed for Evi. It was the year Zigi boarded a ship for the first time, a ship that bore him across the ocean and tore him away from all that had surrounded him before, so that he could balance trays on his forehead under a circus tent on the shore that the ship reached a few days later. But when he wrote letters closing with, “Hugs to you, to you and your little girlfriend,” then I knew he meant me.

In the spring, when warmer weather put the first green into Evi’s garden and lured us across the fields to the nearby woods, it was suddenly easier for Aja to be without Zigi, and even easier in the summer which brought with it mild nights and cast its bright sky over us, when Evi would sit in her basket chair under the pear trees or roam barefoot by herself through the grass as if she were waiting for someone. Zigi had once told us that it didn’t snow only in the wintertime, but all year ’round. You just couldn’t see the snow. So on those summer days we would lie down among dandelions and buttercups looking up into the Kirchblüt sky, and if the blanket of clouds seemed thick enough, Aja would say, Look, it’s snowing.