

The Sky's the Limit!

*A*s to what exactly are the limits of a person, that only transpires when you try to stretch them. But then it turns out that they're far wider than you'd generally think. There's a limit to how far you can stretch a muscle or how high you can jump. These limits exist in our minds. And then, if we stretch and strengthen our muscles every day, or exercise at jumping, we realise that the limits can be pushed. Of course, not infinitely, but certainly to some extent.

For some, the question arises, "Why should I push my limits? Isn't it easier to sit in an armchair? The telly shows everything anyway. It's quick, it's easy, it doesn't cost a lot and moreover is virtually risk-free. A home movie with a big screen. The only problem with movies is they're about the lives of others. Every evening, people in their millions watch the lives of others in their rooms, while their own ones quickly and quietly flit by like a floating magnetic train. That great leap, when a person feels in every fibre that they are alive, is left behind. And in this way a person is only half-alive.

There were two weeks left to the first night. Fourteen days and at least twenty hours practising. This is when the muscles hurt, one's patience wanes, and the brain switches off. Like a machine, a person practises the moves again and again.

“No, Reka! That’s no good! Try again,” commanded Tamara *néni**, “five, six, seven, eight and relevé**”, knees bent, arms high, spin and rond***. Let me see it!”

Reka repeated the combination of steps. Now the movements fell into place.

“That’s better, girls! Now then, let’s do the group choreography and then wind down. Come along, everyone in their place! Look lively, we’re running out of time!” Tamara *néni* urged them.

Tamara *néni* could be said to be a good teacher with a good pedigree behind her. She had attended dance college, done modern dance courses, jazz and countless choreographies, performances and produced promising students. Hanging arms and raised shoulders did not escape her, nor did unsuccessful spins. However, there was one thing she could not handle: Fear. Yes, here we are again, for Reka had yet to overcome her fear, to turn her back on it. Because if you feed it just a little, it will always return. Or tries to. Just when you’re relieved that you’ve left it behind, there it grows again and is more disturbing than ever. Tamara *néni* was unable to help Reka, because she had no good understanding of fear. Or rather, she didn’t confront it. Life had packaged her with entirely other matters with which to tussle. The lunch boxes were never exactly the same, not even the siblings’. Possible the crescent roll was a bit longer in one of them and somewhat shorter in the other, but to make up for that there was no maggot in the apple. Then, when everyone opened their own lunch box, they would peek over at the contents of the next and it would seem, hmm, this is not so bad, there’s nothing in there I don’t like, and on the other

*Literally, “auntie”, a form of address used by Hungarian schoolchildren toward their teachers after the teacher’s given name. It sounds less formal than the English “Miss”, which is followed by the family name.

**relevé: in ballet, rising onto the balls or toes of one or both feet

***rond: in ballet, a circling of the leg

hand there's plenty that I do. Except that with the contents with which they send us off on our way through life we can't swap the ham sandwich with the cheese sandwich in the break. Later, we discover this isn't necessarily a bad thing, because if we search into the depths of our lunch box so that we can examine all of its contents, it's not so certain we want to swap them. Instead, we'd rather make the best of what we've got.

Essentially, Reka couldn't complain of what life had packed for her. She was healthy, clever at most things, her family loved her, she had seen the sea and as a rule was satisfied with her general looks. Yet even so, in particular situations she was utterly paralysed with fear, one which suffocatingly defined her limits.

"What's up with you, Reka" asked Zoltan, as the two of them walked home together after classes so that Reka could take Pisti on his usual round.

"We've got a jazz ballet performance in two weeks. This year I'm dancing the solo."

"That's good, isn't it?" asked Zoltan.

"I'm not so sure," hesitated Reka. "I'm really worried. I just want to be over it."

"There must be a reason they chose you, don't you think?"

"Yes, but a performance is different. What if I muck it up? I'll cause disappointment."

"To whom?"

"Tamara *néni*, Mum and Dad, and all the others."

"Why? What are they expecting? Or have you promised them something?"

Suddenly, Reka didn't know what to say. She certainly hadn't made any promises, and none had been demanded of her. Her folks were always proud of her, whatever the outcome. Otherwise

why would they have bound all her drawings in a separate folder and shown them to all the guests? Who would politely look through all one hundred and thirty-nine, starting with her first tiger, done when Reka could just about hold a crayon in her pudgy little hands. She had made sure that the tiger should have five claws on each leg, preferably longer than the paws themselves, and that out from either side of the tiger's head there should poke four whiskers as long as a tiger's tail... which, sadly, Reka had forgotten about. Unlike the tiger's body, which resembled a black-and-yellow striped hot-air balloon, to which Mother Nature had attached the four legs as though they were ropes trying to keep the blown-up body on the ground. The picture was evidence that the animal had digestive problems.

"What's that?" hiccupped Aunt Marika, an elderly distant relative of Dad's, when he opened the folder of drawings before her in chronological order, starting with the aforementioned tiger. It was impossible to tell whether it was the abstract drawing technique that caused Aunt Marika's eyes to cross, or the industrial quantity of coffee liqueur that she had licked her way through. Various adjectives also made their way through the same mouth from time to time – "wonderful", "lovely" – but these might also have referred to the drink rather than the drawing. Aunt Marika was most grateful for the former, but when she reached the last drawing she still took her revenge. She took her smartphone from her bag and concentrated hard so as to be able to select "gallery" On the third attempt she finally succeeded, which meant an endless progression of pictures of her grandchildren in every pose imaginable inherited for posterity.

"Now, darling, I must be off," she mercifully uttered at some point. I see Uncle Laci and family have arrived and I want to ask about their daughter's wedding."

“Come along, Reka,” said Zoltan as he opened the entrance door. “I know someone who can dance really well. Maybe she can help you.”

“Elza! I’ve brought along a child struck with stage fright! Would you take a look?” Zoltan shouted toward the kitchen.

Reka repeated every detail about her performance.

“All right,” said Elza, “maybe I can help. There’ll be no-one here on Thursday, we’ll be left in peace. If you’d like to, I’ll be expecting you, bring your gear and the music.

Meanwhile, someone else was equally anxious about the performance, even though he wasn’t going to be on stage. He was trying to get a ticket. At any cost.

“Mum, do you know the Fodors’ number? There’s that list the parents use to write to each other. Is it on it?”

Fodor was the surname belonging to the Christian name that Nandi’s mum had noted. She didn’t mind at all that her son looked up to somebody; she just trusted that he would choose better than she had when the time came. Sometimes she wondered what had happened to the nice boy with whom in the previous millennium she had hitched around half of Europe, slept in tents, and built a castle in the sand on every beach they visited. Then the years passed, and Nandor did more and more overtime, got an ever higher salary and increasing responsibility. He hung his sense of humour up on their coat stand, and it had been hanging there ever since, like some article of clothing one only wore every ten years on special occasions. His nerves were tense to snapping point, nothing was good for him, you couldn’t say a word to him because he exploded at a moment’s notice. Nandi’s mum often asked herself, had it always been like this, only she hadn’t realised it? The strangest thing of all was that she still clung to him. Maybe she secretly hoped that one day Nandor would change back to what he once had been. Perhaps it wasn’t entirely impossible. Recently

Nandi had changed, too, and shared more and more things with her. There was no way of knowing whether this was thanks to his new teacher called Zoltan, or the girl called Reka, but in the end it didn't matter. What did, was that the comic book had found its way to the depths of his drawers and been replaced by the real world.

“Yes, I've got their number. I'll put it on a bit of paper,” she replied to Nandi, as though nothing had happened.

“I think it's time Reka got a phone,” said Mum to Dad at the supper table that evening. She didn't wait for Dad to ask, with some justice, why. She was too upset for that. So she continued.

“A boy was calling your daughter on our phone!”

When something happened to do with Reka that Mum couldn't at first accept, Reka temporarily became *his* daughter. Exclusively. Not many such instances had taken place of recent years, but Mum required time to digest today's telephone call. The trouble wasn't that a boy had called. It was that the years were not just passing, they were rushing by. They brought with them little wrinkles that dangled around the eyes and mouth, and one or two deeper ones furrowed into the forehead. For as long as your child is small, somehow you feel young yourself. But when it turns out that your child is no longer quite a child? And all of a sudden she's a pretty young girl? When you look at your child in that way, you simply feel endless tranquillity. There's no reason to feel bitter about ageing. The body gets older, but beauty remains. It doesn't disappear, it's just not us who will be caring for it. We hand that over to our daughter; she'll pass it on to our grandchildren, and so on. For a moment, Reka's mum felt relieved; she sensed that after all this was how it should be. Then, in the space of a breath, another thought entered her brain at breakneck pace, a hundred times more nightmarish than ageing: any moment now she would be a

grown-up with a family of her own! A year or two and she'll flee the nest! And then give birth to a child! A little baby! A baby! Of a sudden, Reka's mum became fired with enthusiasm. She would pamper it to death, that was certain. She'd cook all its favourites, make pancakes at ten o'clock at night, if that's what the child wanted, and bring it breakfast in bed. Because the grandchild would be allowed to do what no-one in the family had ever been permitted – eat in bed. Nursery furniture, baby clothes, baby blankets and baby carriers made their way into Reka's mother's head, colouring the future in pink and light blue.

"You're mother's had it," Reka's Dad told her.

"Sorry?" asked her Mum, returning to the conversation.

"I've just asked you for the third time, who's the boy?" Dad gave it another try.

"Oh, Nandi Kertesz," answered Mum, utterly at peace with the world. She noted with satisfaction that her daughter was now taking her first steps into independent adulthood, beginning with a mobile phone and culminating in ten or twenty years with a grandchild. Or several grandchildren. All the better.

And so Reka ended up buying six tickets for the performance. Two for her Mum and Dad, two for Elza and Zoltan, as they'd spent so much time on her, and two for Nandi and Freddy. The last of these insisted on giving her the price of the tickets.

Late on Thursday afternoon Reka knocked on the door of the Szalontay flat, complete with dress, shorts, foot thongs, music and fears. Elza opened the door; everyone else was out. Kristof was training, Lelle at dance lesson. Evelin was spending time with Aunt Hédi on the canape, while Zoltan and Pisti amused themselves in exile in the nearby park. The point was that there should be no-

one under their feet while Reka and Elza were in need of peace and quiet.

“Come in,” Elza invited Reka. “You can change in the boiler room.”

Zoltan’s family home did not contain an industrial engineering unit. Their flat was quite normal and average. Kristof had nicknamed the mini dance stage converted from one of the rooms the boiler room because Elza always entered it dry and came out dripping wet. Meanwhile Reka changed.

“I’m ready!” she called out to Elza.

“Then we can start warming up,” said Elza, and attached her telephone to the player. As the first sounds rang out, she stepped before the mirror, took a deep breath and let out the air. At the next breath she began to move, and in the same moment everything else in the room ceased to exist. There was such a presence in Elza’s movements that it was simply impossible to observe anything else. She switched off the music about half an hour later.

“The stage is yours, young lady,” she told Reka, and sat in front of the mirror.

Just as Reka positioned herself in the middle of the space, regular as clockwork that cursed trembling came upon her. Now as always it brought with it a massive lump in her throat.

“Reka, what’s troubling you so much? What are you afraid of?” asked Elza.

“I’m afraid that I’ll start trembling again when I go onstage, and it won’t let me dance.”

“Did you hear what you’ve just said? Because I did. You’re afraid that you will be afraid.”

At that point Reka understood that it was fear that she was afraid of.

“Fear can only get to you if you let it. You decide. If you want to free yourself of it you’ll have to step out from your own shadow.

Why do you dance?" asked Elza, putting the question to her.

"Because I love dancing and I want to be a good dancer."

"And what do you think makes a good dancer?" Elza continued, not letting Reka escape the questions, even if they started becoming uncomfortable, like a shoe one size too small after two hours of walking.

"Somebody like you!" Reka cut back without thinking.

Elza left the room and then, after a little while, returned with a photo album in her hands. She opened the third page, out of which a little girl aged seven or eight stared Reka in the eye. The little girl was clinging to a ballet rail in her ballet dress and stockings.

"I promised her I would dance, that it was more important than anything," she said, showing Elza the photo. "Being the best didn't matter, not even being any good. Only one thing counted, and that was to be as close to the dance as I possibly could. So much so, that I wouldn't be a dancer, but the dance itself. The two are two different worlds. If you're a dancer you tire, you feel sorry for yourself, or jealous that someone else got the part you wanted. You constantly doubt whether you're good enough, you're forever striving to do your utmost. You strain not to ruin things, because you don't know that essentially you can't. If you're the dance, only the music and the movements exist. A bird doesn't stop to think whether it can fly. It doesn't carry unnecessary burdens. If it did, it would plummet back to earth. Do you know the grand jeté*?"

"Yes," answered Reka. "We've learnt it, it's a very difficult leap."

"Many people think it's difficult," Elza agreed, "and so it seems. You have to be strong so that you can kick away, relaxed, so that you can do the splits in the air at the same time, and have great balance for when you return to the ground. But these things don't really count. Anyone can do them if they practise hard enough. You just have to take a deep breath, run for it and take off. And

*grand jeté: in ballet, a great, flying leap resembling the splits



then, when you reach the ground, breathe out again. You just have to remember to breathe; your body will take care of the rest.”

And then they started all over again. Elza followed Reka. The movements fell in line with the breathing pattern. When they were greater, they breathed in; when they diminished, then they breathed out.

“That’s good, Reka! Now, pay attention to your arms! Move as though your arms don’t end at your fingertips, but much further. As though you could touch the audience with them. Turn as though the wind was attacking around you, and you could drag them in with your spinning. The boundaries of a dancer always extend beyond the body.”

It was late evening before they were done, but despite all the work Reka was not tired. Now, for the first time, she was excited about going on stage. Where nothing else exists, only the movement and the music.

The people started wandering into the auditorium. Several made a diversion to the bar to charge their batteries before the performance began. Not that you needed much energy to sit and watch, but then one never knew.

“Hi, I mean Good evening,” Nandi called out to Reka’s parents in the queue to the bar. He proceeded to poke Freddy, who was loitering alongside him, not to miss out on the greeting. Looking at the future, Nandi felt that it was crucial to cultivate good relations with Reka’s parents, which began with him attempting to compensate for his father’s earlier behaviour by being extra polite. However, in the present situation any judgment upon or popularity of Nandi was not in the least influenced by his father’s manners or lack of same. Nandi wanted to hover around Reka, and for this he was Enemy Number One in the eyes of her father. Who had no intention whatsoever of cultivating any good relations. Or any relations at all. He knew what was going on in this boy’s head, or what would be in a couple of years’ time. But he wouldn’t be getting any, that was certain! He’d make sure of that. Perhaps if this boy were simply to disappear. He must have a price. Any other solution would involve serious criminal consequences, and anyhow Reka’s father hated violence.

“The boys have just greeted us,” hissed Reka’s mum, who was trying to counterbalance her husband’s strange behaviour in the form of a not particularly natural smile.

“Hi there, guys,” said Reka’s dad and extended his hand to Nandi. He was somewhat surprised when Nandi squeezed his hand as firmly as he had the boy’s. “Perhaps the lad’s not so bad after all,” he thought to himself. Even so, it would be best to keep his eye on him. From then on Reka’s dad cast his gaze upon the nape of Nandi’s neck, where it remained all evening, and would have even longer had it been possible.

“Leave that poor child be!” said Reka’s mum once the boy had moved away. “He’s not doing any harm.”

“Maybe not now, but I know what this is all leading. I was young myself once.”

“Yes, I remember,” smiled Reka’s mum. “My father found it very difficult to be friendly to you.”

“That was different! I had honourable motives!”

“Oh, sure,” Reka’s mum laughed to herself.

“Elza Endrei’s in the audience!” announced an excited face in the doorway of the dressing room. “I saw her with my own eyes!”

“What on earth is she doing here?” several of them asked in chorus. Some went out to the curtain in their gowns to take a peek.

“It really is her!” they whispered, jostling. “Show me, let me take a look!”

“Aren’t you coming, Reka?” one of them asked, as they returned to the dressing room.

“No,” answered Reka, and then to herself, “I know why she’s here,” and felt very lucky.

“Girls, you’re on in five minutes and then it’s Reka’s solo,” said Tamara *néni*. “Is everything all right?” she asked.

Everyone looked up for a moment from their bends, mental steps and straightening out of buns:

“Yes, fine!” they replied.

“You too?” This was to Reka. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” said Reka, though this wasn’t entirely true. There was still one thing to do. She went out to the corridor, leant against the wall and closed her eyes. In her mind she was climbing up a tall mountain with a rucksack on her back. When she reached the top, she opened the sack, screwed Fear into a ball, and tied the string tight. “I don’t need you anymore,” she said, lifted the rucksack up and

cast it over the precipice into the fast-flowing mountain torrent. Due to the vast pull of the current the sack disappeared relatively quickly around the next bend, and Reka never saw it again. She knew that the water would never bring it back. Rivers never flow backwards.

She only took onto the stage what she truly needed. When the music sounded, she took a deep breath and began to move. Everything flowed together: the air, the sounds and her own movements. She had almost come to the end of her solo when...

“Good lord, what’s she up to?” whispered Tamara néni faintly from behind the curtain, as she realised that Reka had departed from the choreography. She’d simply stepped away from it, so that she could turn and run into something quite unplanned. The grand jeté. The great leap, when a person feels in every fibre that they are alive. In those few moments Reka flew like a bird in the sky.