HITCHHIKERS FROM COMMUNISM TOWARDS

DEMOCRACY IN EASTERN EUROPE

A TOUGH NUT TO CRACK

Krisztián Dombrádi

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Democracy in Eastern Europe

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2025 Szeged

The book is based on real events.

In some cases, it contains precise passages of conversations that actually took place and descriptions of real events and backdrops.

The names of the characters have been changed.

The events are narrated chronologically, but in order to maintain continuity, some fictional details have been added to the story.

I would like to dedicate this book to my beloved children, Zso'fi and A'da'm

TOUGH NUT TO CRACK.
Hitchhikers from Communism to Democracy in Eastern Europe

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PREFACE

HITCHHIKERS FROM
COMMUNISUM TO DEMOCRACY
IN EASTERN EUROPE

In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell and the beleaguered states on the far side of the Iron Curtain turned their weary but hopeful gazes to the West. The transition from communism to democracy hit harder than expected, however. Hungarian novelist Krisztián Dombrádi offers a portrait of this era of change from the perspective of the average person on the street. What makes this novel particularly engaging is that it sets aside discussion of political theories and focuses instead on the ways in which people adapted to a flood of new expectations and new rules in a country suddenly thrown into the global free market. The new political and social structures that emerged in Central Europe in the early 1990s created dramatic conflicts of values across generations. Dombrádi sets aside the almost innumerable political theories concerning the pros and cons of this transition and instead crafts a depiction of the era against the backdrop of the social conflicts that emerged as people grappled with the difficulties of everyday life.

The members of a small group of friends who began their university studies together are desperately seeking to discern the truths and unmask the fictions behind the new system, which has promised them an array of new rights and freedoms. Yet in their day-to-day lives, these friends find themselves burdened with more and more obligations and deprived of the assurances their parents had enjoyed. The political parties are more interested in posturing than policy, and to the young people in the novel, the new "democratic" system often resembles a screaming match between the self-styled "left" and the self-righteous "conservatives." Our protagonists gradually lose all faith in the system. One "lucky" girl among them gets a full scholarship to pursue studies in Missouri. She sets off in the hopes of learning everything there is to know about

laws and rights and freedoms but soon concludes, alas, that the world she has encountered in the West is really just a textbook example of a bad example. She returns to her homeland only to face the very problems she had hoped to flee. Dombrádi shows all too vividly how the transition to democracy in Central Europe did not go at all as planned.

The novel interweaves stories of the struggles and failures of deluded politicians, ambitious young professionals, and university students whose hopes are soon dashed against the realities of the brave new world around them. It is full of moments of hopeful anticipation followed by frustration and despair. The cast of characters includes, for instance, call girls who seek, in their day-to-day lives, to bear children and raise families and weary fathers who experience moments of freedom only in the tender embrace of a prostitute. This offers, perhaps, a suitable metaphor for the new democratic system described above.

Thomas Cooper

A world that destroys both heart and soul is brought to life through the story of a group of young people. Sometimes, they themselves laughed at the absurdity of their friendship, for they were very different. They bickered every day, the way puppies in a litter snarl and growl and later play. The story begins ten years after the fall of state socialism.

When these young people were mere children, the once proud cities of Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Sofia, Belgrade, and Bucharest were rotting under the neglectful socialist regimes like untended houseplants.

When? Before 1989. True, Budapest was a bit of an exception. "As long as you're not openly against us, you're with us." So the party hacks kept repeating, doing their best all the while to act as if anyone had a choice. The wearisome mantra sufficed to mollify the masses, and because of this little pantomime of freedom, Hungary won the name "the happiest barracks in the bloc." But it was all the same underneath. The apparatus propped up a state based on intimidation.

And then things changed.

Democracy arrived in Hungary in pants, not a miniskirt. With a condom in its pocket. And yeah, you had to bend over.

The Hungarians suffered and their fate and tried to shape their destiny. They were seeking a path to the Western democracies, trying to fill generations saddened by the past but nonetheless still proud with new vigor. A motley crew. The children of doctors, teachers, miners, bricklayers, the imprisoned, the tortured, the persecuted, the deported. And the non-descript elderly, of course. In throngs.

After the fall of the old regime, our young heroes, intoxicated by the thrilling possibility of change, came just a few steps closer to their modest goals in this modest little world, or in some cases, having sobered up, they turned their backs on these goals in frustration.

They ambled along the roadside happily, though a bit recklessly. Like hitchhikers.

Krisztián Dombrádi

1.

REBIRTH

A REAL BLONDE, FOR REAL

Natasha sat me down on the steps on the western side of the Szeged Cathedral. No spotlights on the spires, no long shadows reeling over us. She had thick ribbons wrapped around her upper thighs. Everyone in the city knew her. She was as intractable as a forklift. She had been making me do more and more dangerous stunts, always raising the stakes. She didn't speak much. Used her eyes to get her point across. I'd only been at the university for two months when I met her.

There was something loveable in her, underneath it all. And in me, too.

She looked and acted pretty much like a Hollywood star. That night, it was as if I were sitting next to Marilyn Monroe and Joanna Cassidy, Marilyn's plump cheeks and sex symbol smile clipped and pasted onto Johanna's non-stop body.

I was sitting on the steps of the church when put a curse on me, froze me, paralyzed me with her spirit and her beauty. She raised her arm on high, caught the glow of the streetlight, and waved as if she were pushing a star to one side. She laughed and twirled as she danced.

This was the last place in Hungary, the city of Szeged, where witches had been burned at the stake. In 1728, twelve of them. They named an island in the Tisza River after the murdered women as a kind of memorial. Boszorkány Sziget, or "Witch Island."

Natasha wasn't willing to go home from the square in front of the church on her own, so she called a cab. We

got out in front of an abandoned building that had almost burned to the ground. By the time we got to the third floor of the building with her place, I had started to regain my senses. Katie, her roommate, opened the door. She led us to a room at the end of a narrow hallway. There was an old mattress on the floor. Katie said goodnight and closed the door.

Natasha collapsed on the floor.

The phone rang, and I answered, just out of reflex. The conversation was short and abrupt.

"Who are you, and what the fuck are you doing in my room?"

"I'm a friend of Katie's," I said. "You know how she sometimes walks in her sleep. Well, she's wandered off again, and I've been looking for her everywhere."

It was a bad lie, but I kept my voice composed. And the guy didn't ask any more questions, just hung up. I lay down and fell asleep pretty much immediately. But I woke up soon to the sound of Katie moving restlessly. The doorbell had stirred her from her sleep. I got up and started for the door without making a noise, didn't even take a breath. No sooner had I managed to slip, half naked, from behind the door than the burly, surly, prison-worn tough guy bouncer of the little city in southern Hungary, already in his 40s, came plodding past me and collapsed next to Natasha in the space that I had so generously left warm.

I took refuge in the kitchen, shirtless, pants-less, and fearless, and waited patiently for the good man to find me, beat me to a pulp, and toss me out the window.

I saw Katie first, not the bouncer, but I still assumed I would not survive the night.

"I knew there was going to be trouble when you showed up," she said.

"I get that, but then why didn't you tell me to get the hell out!" I spluttered. "Natasha hasn't been able to utter a word for hours now. She's confused and unreliable. You of all people should have known it would be dangerous for me to stay!"

But Katie didn't bother to reply. She just hurriedly walked back to the bedroom, got my clothes, and brought them to the kitchen. I felt as if I had been born again. We chatted for the rest of the night like old friends. When morning came, I set out for home, but before leaving, I thanked her for saving my life.

After she got her degree in Hungarian literature, Natasha vanished without saying a word to anyone.

Much as, five years later, she showed up again without saying a word.

Turned out in the end that she was indeed a real blonde. Not a sandy blonde, not a strawberry blonde. A real blonde.

Bikini Line

We were freshmen. Claire came to the writing seminar with an issue of the conservative daily *Magyar Nemzet*, "Hungarian Nation," in her right hand and *Népszava*, "The People's Voice," in her left (the post-communist version, of course). She wanted to compare the two, but before she started, the teacher asked her, in a stammering voice, please to leave the class.

He had plenty of reasons for doing so, but there was no need to give any explanation.

Claire got up and quietly let the two newspapers fall to the floor. She left the room and gracefully set off down the narrow staircase, grabbing the railing as she spun round at the turns, and then merrily flinging open the main door when she reached the ground floor. The people pushing to get in stepped aside in awe. She went onward, still a burst of energy, all the way to the city swimming pool complex, cheerfully leaving the events at the university behind.

Her every movement had been planned, and everything had gone very much according to plan. Sure, the theatrical gesture of dropping the papers to the floor had not been part of the script. She had improvised. She had trusted that she would not have to use her sophisticated acting skills and get embroiled in a tedious debate.

She took a seat at the front of the bus and leaned her head against the window, which rattled in the dilapidated metal frame. She pretended to rest as the bus traversed the city.

As the virtually empty bus trundled across the bridge in the center of town, she gathered her strength and stood up. She thought of the shimmering sunshine and the peaceful solitude that was finally within reach. While dozing, she had devised the perfect escape plan, and as she put her foot

on the first step leading down to the curbside, she gave her plan a wakeful nod. She looked up. She could already see the pools.

At that moment, the splutter of the broken-down bus was suddenly interrupted by the sound of a mighty smack. Claire had given the door to the driver's cab a hard slap with her palm.

"Driver must have missed the stop," she thought. "Happens. And now I've broken my train of thought and the driver's cab door?"

Claire was trying all the while to make eye contact with the driver, but he had followed protocol and taken cover under the steering wheel, fearful lest some devious terrorist might now be plotting to hijack his vehicle (so many suspicious figures had crossed into the country after the fall of the Wall, one could not be too careful).

Seconds passed while Claire waited for guidance from some inner voice. No need for explanations, though. It was time to flee. While she scampered off, she imagined what the police report might say. A bitter smelling cloud hovered over her as she sprinted along. She went from fleeing to running, from running to walking, and eventually, she reached the swimming pool complex.

Among the many tasks she faced, the first was finding an adequate body-sized space to recline, where she would be hit at an obtuse angle by a good, strong ray of sunshine. A Xanax in her back pocket bore the promise of restful sleep. She wanted to leave everything behind. She wanted to relax.

Her overworked left hand deserved some kind of reward for the dutiful services it had rendered. For a week, it should not have to touch anything foul, filthy, or feculent.

Which meant that her right hand would have to do twice as much work, but maybe it would learn an important lesson.

She was just about to close her eyes when her gaze met the gaze of the lifeguard, who was looking intently at her bikini line. He nodded at her with a cocky smile.

Claire started walking towards him. She walked around the pool and, when she reached him, she gave him a good smack in the face.

Having seen to it that justice was done, she turned her back on everyone and dove into the water, far from the crowd.

She wondered if perhaps she had overreacted, and if she had, then why. What had been the real reason for the outburst?

If she hadn't been kicked out of class that morning, perhaps she never would have slapped anyone. The poor lifeguard would have gotten off scot-free.

But do you let a guy get away with that kind of thing? And how far do you let them push it? And the slap, does it give you power or just make you look weak? It was tiring always to have to brood over right and wrong.

She had turned her back on politics for good back when, soon after having finished her first degree, she had been coming home from Lakitelek (which had been a popular place for the reform-minded opposition parties to host meetings in the pivotal years of the regime change) and had picked up a hitchhiker on his way to Budapest.

They had immediately started to chat.

The light on the entrance ramp had turned yellow, then green, and Claire had not given the car any gas. She had asked her passenger please to get out, because he reminded her too much of who she had used to be, and she had no desire whatsoever to talk with herself. When she had gotten home, she had immediately gone to the offices of the Soros Foundation on the bank of the Danube River. If they had

asked her, she could have told them the map of the St. Louis campus by heart.

She wanted to get away. Anywhere, didn't matter where, just away from here.

II.

THE MEETING OF THE RACES - PEARS AND PEACHES

WASN'T ME SHE WENT HOME WITH

A week later, I gathered the courage to approach a high school girl on the dance floor at the university club.

I pushed my way through the crowd, shoving aside anyone who got in my way. I pulled Aaron behind me by his arm. When I reached the girl, I could clearly see my own reflection in her dark eyes. I stretched out my arm and gently put my hand on her bare shoulder. She leapt back with a frown. I tried to shout a few words of explanation, but the kids around her had closed ranks. They were protecting her from an unpleasant stranger, executing well-rehearsed, familiar motions.

I started heading for the exit.

The crowd opened up in front of me as if I were some kind of leper. Dignity is easy to lose, impossible to regain. I was paralyzed by the thought that, no matter how badly I wanted a girlfriend, for some reason, I was fundamentally unsuited for it. At the exit, I made my way through the crowds thronging in.

They had just thrown some girl out. She was screaming something about how she was going to kill herself.

A couple of my friends pushed their way in. They gave me five as they passed, one of them shoved a bottle into my hand.

"You gotta come back in," he said, grabbing my left hand. "I'm gonna see if I can get myself killed tonight. This place seems as good as anywhere."

Then he found my other hand, roughly at pocket height,

and slipped a little blue pill into it. I swallowed it without thinking, and then the two of us went over to the bar.

He started talking about blue walls, about lights, about his own freedom.

"The stress has wrecked me. Everybody acts like they're gonna live forever. Hippocrates and those guys, they didn't treat people they couldn't cure, but now we never let anybody just die."

He rambled on for a while. I didn't pay him much mind. Wasn't worth it.

I was thinking about the girl with the dark eyes. I decided to give it another shot. She hadn't actually turned me down, just hadn't been the right moment. Maybe now she regretted having driven me off. Or maybe I'd stumble across another one just as good as her.

"I hate Marx," my friend said. "Not because of the communist bullshit or whatever, and not because his family was a bunch of Jews. Just such a stupid vision of utopia. The dumbest one. A bunch of fucking proles holding hands and singing folk songs and fucking paternity leave and health care for all. Yeah, right."

I slipped back into the crowd, looking left and right in the sea of heads.

Might help if Áron would just turn up again. He'd help me find her.

The Big Free-For-Some

Aaron and I lived in the little town of Lőrinc in a street bordering the park, one of the many neighborhoods ruled by aging widows. The days were quiet except around noon, when a horse-drawn cart came clattering down the street to pick up empty milk bottles. Every morning, the residents of the buildings would put the empty bottles by the curb with a little change under them to pay for the next delivery, and every day at noon, the cart would happen by and the empty bottles would be replaced with bottles full of frothy milk.

One day, Nick, my best friend at the time, dropped in on us and shared his vision of the future. He wanted to make money. His father, an agricultural engineer, could promise him little more than the customary daily bottle of plum brandy. Not much of a life.

Nick had a plan. When morning came, we would run down all the streets in the neighborhood and steal the money from under the bottles.

A few years later, during the period of free-for-all theft in the mid-1990s, the big socialist companies ended up in private hands and the restructuring of the economy began. I had talked Nick out of his little plan, though if we'd done it, in two weeks' time we would have been able to set aside enough spare change to buy a paper factory or a defunct warehouse or god knows what from the bankrupt state.

But even the smartest kids in our class missed out on the sale of state assets for far, far less than their market value. In 1990, the State Property Agency, which was responsible for privatization of state assets, had 1,859 state-owned companies on its books worth an estimated $26.5 billion. Just an estimate, of course. No reliable inventory was ever taken.

The Tales of Aaron

Five years after the regime change, everyone in Hungary was still chasing dreams.

Meanwhile, far from the hustle and bustle of public life, we were in paradise. I remember the moment I found out I would be able to study journalism at university.

The script for a whole new life was opening in front of me. I moved to Szeged and found a two-room apartment in a good neighborhood. I shared the bigger room with a friend who was always missing buses, trams, trains, and to whom our media history teacher owed a lot. My friend sat peacefully through all the nonsense that this quack preached in his lectures, and then, as we were getting ready to leave for the dingiest restaurant in the city, he would quietly whisper into the prof's ear, with suitable deference and respect, that he had read very different things about the Hungarian press in perfectly reputable sources. There wouldn't have been any point in a debate. My roommate was far more knowledgeable in the field than our professor. But the prof still had our respect. Not because every five years he picked out a new wife for himself from among his students. His unfinished work as a literary historian was what really impressed us. He should have launched his own lit class at the department.

We would spend the afternoons and evenings hanging out on the main square of the city. We would hammer one another into the ground with our debates, but we studied too. Social sciences, political science, life, everything.

"When you're traveling alone at night by train, get an upper bunk. Then if anyone hassles you, you can kick them in the face."

So said Aaron, who liked to talk about music subcultures

and female circumcision, which, he said, affected the lives of hundreds of millions of Muslim women the world over. He craved women like a heroin addict craves the next hit. When he looked at a woman, you could hear his thoughts.

Aaron had ended up in hospital at age three. His dad had taken him in with a high fever, and the doc had noticed a stiff lump in the muscles in his stomach.

He had spent the night under the cold, blue sheets of a hospital bed. His mother had covered her face in a blanket and sobbed on the floor of the children's oncology ward. The next day, they had been informed that the hospital would not perform the surgery necessary to remove the tumor growing on his kidney. The state health department would not cover the cost of the essential but costly procedure, as abnormal cell growths had also been found in the epithelial tissue of his lungs.

When the lunch tray had been rolled to his bedside on a rickety wheeled table, one of the nurses had hung a framed picture of the findings on his bed: a double biopsy. We don't know what the German doctor and committed socialist Fritz Lickint would have said, who claimed that smoking was the sole cause of lung cancer (and who fathered the term passive smoking).

Radiation and chemo, which did little more than give the impression of providing some kind of treatment, fueled his family's impotent rage. As treatments, they were useless.

Aaron's heart beat in his mother's breast, his mind suffered in his father's thoughts, and in the end, the rapidly dividing cancer cells gave up the struggle against the three of them. One day, Aaron sat up in bed, swung his legs over the side of the mattress, stood up, and set out for home.

Something's Going to Happen

You could barely even see Aaron's family's dilapidated old house because of the tall chestnut trees on the street.

We were playing soccer in the street. Aaron was dripping with sweat. His parents never came anywhere near the gang of kids in the street. They barely even came over to the fence.

In summertime, our band of urchins would get together every day. If we couldn't come up with anything better, we'd walk down the paths in the little patch of woods that began at the end of the street and ended at the concrete wall of the public cemetery.

One time, Aaron and I were kinda dragging behind the others, and while we ambled along, he started telling a story.

"Yesterday," he said, "my mom and my dad and I sat down at the table to celebrate my birthday. You know, when y'all were waiting for me outside. I had just asked my mom to get a bigger fork for the cake when the ball bounced over the fence. I could tell that something was going to happen. I jumped up and started walking towards the fence. And then my dad started shouting. 'No one actually knows who your real mother is,' he spluttered. And then he piped down and added, 'and if you're going out anyway, then bring me a bottle of booze from the store. You'll find my wallet by the mirror.'"

We had caught up with the others in the meantime, so no more talk about family. Aaron was on my right, Nick on my left, the three of us side by side. We started arguing about which path would get us out of the woods fastest. Our parents were waiting for us back home. If we were late, Aaron would get the harshest punishment. Everybody knew that.

It wasn't some hypothetical debate. The stakes were real.

III.

THE RISKS OF ADULTHOOD

A SUDDEN EXIT

Aaron was not loved like we were. When we misbehaved, our mothers threatened to give us to the Gypsies, along with any unneeded scraps of copper and rusty iron.

But they would have hunted down and killed any poor Roma soul who had taken them up on the offer.

But Aaron finally got something for his efforts. The girl with dark eyes went home with him that evening, not me.

Our friendship lasted for decades. His chest mimicked with meticulous precision, as a kind of natural phenomenon that remains inexplicable to me to this day, the diseases of my valves, my ventricles, my atria. He brought us both within an arm's reach of a sudden exit from heart failure. We resigned ourselves to the monotony and struggles of everyday life, which ultimately caused our slow, dragged-out decline.

I was a member of Aaron's wedding party and one of the signatories to his marriage license, as required by the state here in the east. The ceremony was monumental. Several hundred people were invited, they had an array of hotels to choose from, streets were blocked off.

I've got an old photograph from the night. Aaron is sitting on the bench in the hotel garden with his friends lined up behind him.

He's got the index finger of his right hand raised and his head turned towards me. The camera went click, and we've been staring at each other ever since.

A Tidy Yard Means an Orderly House

We were students the day I happened across an old, worn photograph in an antique shop on Dugonics Square. The image was faded at the edges, and there was mold on the paper.

"These pictures could help bring families back together, could add branches to family trees, could enrich our knowledge of history, in rare cases even disprove widely accepted facts."

I was muttering something like this to my friend Gary, but then my voice suddenly trailed off.

I had recognized, beyond all shadow of a doubt, a house with a familiar sign reading "A tidy yard means an orderly house." The movement had been launched in the 1950s by Géza Seres, a district doctor and loyal follower of the regime. It was an award, a recognition of sorts. Single-family homes, most of which were surrounded by modest vegetable gardens and flowerbeds forming various shapes, were dutifully examined by committees of experts with clipboards and glasses and pens and one was selected for this honorable distinction.

I also recognized the woman leaning, no, posing, topless, against the cherry tree: the mother next door to my childhood home.

The photo had other surprises. The woman's husband, for example, was standing behind the sheets drying on the line, adjusting his workers' guard cap. (The workers' guard was a kind of paramilitary organization which had been set up after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 had been squashed by the Soviets, who had kindly liberated the country at the request of Minister of State János Kádár. This corps had remained combat ready until late 1989, when

the regime fell. For the most part, it consisted of oddballs and convinced communists. They wore masks when on duty and otherwise lived their everyday lives as if they were perfectly normal people.)

We went to the shop in the basement, where a box of photos was waiting for us. The mother from next door again posing for the camera, sometimes garbed in a see-through slip, sometimes hiding in the shadows. Her ungainly stabs at modeling were a desperate attempt to find some escape from the dull neighborhood on the outskirts of town, which was home to old women and secret party members. Whenever the question of who was a member of the Hungarian Communist Party came up back home, my father always fell silent.

I already knew one of the pictures. I knew people who hid behind masks.

I had gotten my hands on it back in school. The woman next door had a blond son, Chris, fat, a year older than me, and the two of us had often walked home from school together. He had waved it at me one day.

"Would you pay twenty forints for a picture of a naked woman?" he asked.

"Sure," I nodded, "but I'll have to dig up some change somewhere. Don't have any money now. Who's the woman?"

"Don't worry, nothing too crazy, nothing you'd get in trouble for," Chris had said. "Just my mom. You can get me the twenty next week."

He thought he had made a good deal.

The photograph must have had quite a journey before ending up in an antique shop in the small university town.

Seventeen years later, it was still for sale, and the price hadn't changed. Twenty forints, for any picture in the box. So we bought them all.

Chris had taught me how to play poker, and I remember his mom had come into the living room once doing something, and she had grabbed a light nightdress from the wardrobe. She had smiled at us and then walked out with her head held high. I traded an ace for king. Chris looked up at his mom from behind the cards like a farmer who was satisfied with his workhorse.

"An ace for a king?" he said. "You're a slow learner."

The photographs, several hundred of them with scenes and people we recognized, the little episodes of our shared history, were a story worth telling. Then and there, their value increased.

Good Thing They're Beautiful

Hanna had been taking rhythmic gymnastics since the age of five. She had inherited a graceful, proportionate body from her mother, and her love of sports gave her beautiful, supple muscles. Everyone marveled at her, including her mother.

Her mother had a reputation of her own because of an unusual routine that she faithfully kept. Every morning, she would quietly creep out into the stairwell without making the slightest noise. In the yard of their rented place, she would scamper down the walkway lining the parking lot. She would politely wave down men her age or younger, and then she would pull up her shirt and show them the tattoo under her breasts.

The doorbell in their apartment would ring loudly whenever a guest arrived. Hanna's mother never accepted money unless forced to. One time, Hanna came home early from school and opened her parents' bedroom door at an inopportune moment. Her mother was kneeling on all fours with her back to the door. At the sound of the door, she turned around.

"Get the hell out of here," she shouted.

It was hardly surprising that Hanna linked the concept of cheating to emotional bonds and not to physical infidelity. As an adult, she would often say, "you don't have to be all protective of your cunt. Not like it'll wear out."

When she had run around in her grandmother's garden with her two sisters as toddlers, her grandmother had been overwhelmed with joy at the sight of three such lovely little beauties.

"Have you ever seen such adorable little girls!" she had said, turning to her burly son.

"Good thing they're beautiful," her son had replied, himself overwhelmed with fatherly pride. "What the hell would they live off later if not their bodies? Not like they're going to find any decent work here."

No One Staring At Her, No One Telling Her What To Do

In the lobby of the hotel where the wedding was being held, Hanna's pose (she was sitting with her legs in a split) left me feeling pretty uncomfortable. As an actress, she was known as "Larus For Ever" to her global audience of lonely men. Dozens of stares ran up and down her tights, from thigh to ankle.

She never spoke unless she had to, and she avoided eye contact.

Her body came to life only sparingly, when she propped herself up against an old tree in the churchyard while working or when they pushed her into some abandoned crypt for some lurid scene.

But it lived on as an everlasting memory in the minds of a few lucky men. Attentive fathers would turn sideways in their marriage beds and tuck a pillow in the middle, so that, in this artificial solitude, they could relive the fleeting moments when sweet love and freedom had fallen into their laps.

None of Your Business

Hanna's father died suddenly, tragically, in his early forties. In their last exchange of messages, he asked her to forgive him for having abused and molested her as a child.

The first time she spoke about it, Hanna had wiped away her tears and pulled her phone out of her pocket. With a peaceful smile on her face, she had shown me the only picture of the three of them together, her and her two sisters. Only they could know the pain her father had caused and what he deserved.

"What happened is between me and my father!" she warned her friends. "Don't ever dare confront him about it!"

The list of actors and actresses in the running for the 2000 AVN Awards (the Oscars of porn) had been on everyone's lips for days. That year, the jury of experts was also giving awards for the best girl-on-girl sex, the best anal, and the most exceptional oral. Hanna had been nominated in the "complex female character" category.

When she heard the news, Hanna had immediately leapt into a cab. She could hardly wait to tell someone about the honorable distinction which might well be conferred upon her.

One of my little sister's friends was sleeping at our place that night. When the cab pulled up in front of our house, breakfast was being made in the kitchen. Hanna paid the cabdriver, jumped over the fence, and raced in through the open door. She wanted to talk to someone, anyone.

Greta, my sister's friend, was holding her pajamas in one hand and the fork she had gotten to eat her crepes in the other. She waved the fork at the intruder.

Hanna introduced herself and then turned and, like an impatient mother, started walking towards my bedroom.

My little brother was just getting out of my car. I drove him to the bus stop every morning. My phone rang.

"Hi, I'm lying in your bed," she said. "I'm getting one of the porn Oscars. When are you coming home?"

"I wonder which one she got it for," I wondered, and I started rummaging around in my memories.

Once, in the garden of a hotel in Palma de Mallorca, she had emerged from a pool with a champagne glass in one hand, and all eyes had suddenly fallen on her. She had been able to move up the industry ladder without having made any surgical enhancements to her natural body, something that was always met with undisguised admiration. She longed to pursue a career abroad, to break away from her detractors, from the judgmental gazes of those around her. She had no one she could turn to, no one she could rely on. Just herself. She could not apply for scholarships.

Our relationship was hard to describe. It was not based on love, not on respect, but on mutual acceptance without judgment. For just once she wanted no one staring at her, no one telling her what to do.

There was something loveable in her. And in me.

Without Anesthetic

Hanna had not been invited, she had volunteered. The reference photos were ready.

The girl who had once run merrily in her grandmother's garden could still hear her father's words, "a body like yours is worth more than gold." When asked, she would say that yes, she loved her job, despite having to use Lidocaine injections to relieve the pain.

Later, when anesthetics became a scarce commodity, she felt the time had come to leave the studios.

She bought some of the famous Hungarian gray cattle and built herself a farm. She often said that, in the end, "the need for a change of climate had led her to the right decision."

She would nimbly jump over the fence that had been set up in the yard, 130 centimeters high, on her thoroughbred. When the hooves hit the ground and her rump hit the saddle, she no longer needed any anesthetic. She no longer felt any pain.

Hanna lived on the outskirts of Szeged. She acquired the dubious reputation of the great love of respectable fathers who sometimes snuck out to get a little on the side.

When she made the decision to address a clear need on the free market, she forced herself into a world of secrecy, shame, and contempt, and in the end, she came to hate herself more than even her fiercest critics hated her. She spent the days hatching plans to change professions. Every day, all day.

When, in moments of solitude, she realized how utterly abandoned and helpless she was, she would burst into tears. She believed that she would never live a normal life. She wanted a little boy who had never been born.

We hatched dreams together too, but truth be told, I never bickered with anyone as much as I did with her, and I never fell in love with anyone over and over again as many times as I did with her.

The soft hair on her thighs, those invisible strands, which vanished only on her kneecaps. Never had the blade of a razor touched her exquisite skin.

One day, she wrapped her arms around me tightly in my sleep, and then when morning came, she quietly got dressed and we never saw each other again.

IV.

NEW FEARS, NEW OBSESSIONS

NEO-LIBERALS OUT OF OLD-HACK MARXISTS

In the summer of 1987, the occupying Soviet forces generously looked to one side when the so-called Hungarian Democratic Forum, or MDF, the political party that would go on to win the first free elections in 1990, was formed in the garden of Sándor Lezsák's house in the otherwise irrelevant little town of Lakitelek. Lezsák, the chair of the party, who also had graduated from the university in Szeged as a teacher of literature and history, began to break with the party line in 2004 and became noticeably closer to the so-called Alliance of Young Democrats, or FIDESZ. In October, he was kicked out of MDF, and in 2006, he became a member of FIDESZ, which would later rise to power after the socialists bungled about everything that could be bungled. As part of FIDESZ, he created the "National Forum." According to his credo, "we live in a time of war without a declaration of war." Today, FIDESZ, the governing party, presents itself as the defender of national sovereignty against the European Union.

In the labyrinth of political ideologies, liberals, conservatives, and former communists often crossed paths in their search for a way forward. As a consequence of these encounters, the truth about the crimes committed under the old regime is probably lost forever. Political justice was never done, and the change of regime and the fall of state socialism did not put wax wings on the outstretched arms of those eager to escape the maze.

The men and women who had risked their lives and careers in silent opposition deserved a humble show of

respect, and many were disappointed to find that "those who once professed to be Marxists had now become neo-liberals." This oft-cited statement became something of a mantra and, in the end, a pithy summary of the willingness of certain people to make expedient, nay, opportunistic compromises which cast ominous shadows of doubt on the promise of the regime change.

Maybe you should have launched a real revolution. So said József Antal, the first freely elected prime minister and head of MDF. The inner-circle, radical elite of his party was frustrated to see the country squandering its pivotal opportunity. Politics was descending into a destructive, ideologically bipolar shouting match, in which the neo-liberals, nationalists, and former communists were taking ever more rigid, belligerent positions.

After having made a few important tweaks to their political stance, the neo-liberal, formerly radical members of the opposition began to say more and more frequently that it really was not worth creating an enemy out of the Hungarian Socialist Party, which had been formed by the ex-communists. The liberal intellectuals and the Alliance of Free Democrats became increasingly open to cooperation with these former communists, and it began to seem virtually inevitable that they would form a coalition government after the second free elections in 1994.

The Monday before history class on the day after the election, Aaron wrote "THEY'RE BACK!" on the blackboard, but our history teacher erased it.

Aaron left well enough alone, though he had personal memories of communism, so it was not as if he had just pulled the idea out of thin air. The tens of thousands of people who had suffered persecution under the old regime shared his sentiments.

The social scientist and doctor Mária Kopp and her husband Professor Árpád Skrabski were fighting an ongoing battle against loneliness, distrust, self-destructive tendencies, and anxiety in Hungarian society, which was struggling to get back on its feet. They launched an array of initiatives, including the "Save the Men" movement in the first years of the new millennium. Almost sixty percent of men in Hungary do not live to the age of 65 because of chronic anxiety, isolation, and abandonment. And young people were suffering from social dysfunctions, agoraphobia, and post-traumatic stress, and they were also showing symptoms of chronic despair.

Mária Kopp's parents had been kicked out of their urban middle-class apartment in 1951. They had left all their valuables behind, taking only some of their books and records with them to their holiday home in the little town of Szentendre, north of Budapest. Mária's mother had spent two hours a day teaching Mária and her seven siblings foreign languages, art, music, and literature. The children had learned about the most important works of world literature. They were already adults when the working class, which had been stripped of any sense of moral values or ethics and which regarded lack of education as a virtue, tried to rob them of their faith, isolate them, and destroy any power they might have had to make some creative contribution to society.

Their everyday lives resembled the lives of people living in exile, and they suffered daily humiliations of various degrees.

Only a few retained, through all this, the inner strength to survive, and of the few who might have had the wherewithal to do something, most fell silent. They took refuge and for the most part lived behind masks.

His Dad Wasn't a Nazi Officer After All

Three brothers on Hungarian Television (1966): the title of the show is "Plus One," the host is György Szepesi, who was the Hungarian commentator for the famous 1953 soccer game between England and Hungary, when Hungary shocked the world by beating the English six to three. The architect-turned-actor arrives at the recording session with a cigarette in his hand. He and Szepesi stand in front of the camera. The "king of Hungarian film" shines with a love of life.

"My little brother's always late," he says with a smile, but this time, he's wrong.

Enter Károly Frenreisz. He's been making music on five different instruments since the age of seventeen.

"If the two of us couldn't handle it, we'd get István," he says, cutting to the chase. At the sound of these words, a hefty man in sunglasses bursts into the studio from the right (as planned). (The middle brother's face showed no trace of anxiety or self-doubt.)

"What? Is something wrong?" he asks, ready to act. The trained economist-turned-actor has come from the Film Factory.

Latinovits, the oldest, the iconic actor, shares his recollections: "They needed a big, burly, stupid guy for Félix Máriássy's film *Crash*, a hooligan type. That's the only reason István ended up becoming an actor."

Cut, and the brothers burst into song.

"Don't brood and mope 'bout everything, just tap your feet and pluck the strings." And the refrain of the song: "the world is what it is!"

Sometimes in songs, sometimes in the ideological jargon, sometimes just as a blunt way of summing things up: the

world is what it is. And it ain't gonna change, whether you like it or not.

The three brothers clowning around became part of our collective memory: five minutes of high spirits in an otherwise dreary day. When they were taken off the air, the euphoria in the happiest barrack in the Eastern Bloc vanished for a while from the television screen.

"Depression or at least what I took for depression made me lazy, completely soft," Latinovits said. He died on Sunday 6 June 1976 at the railway station in Balatonszemes. To this day, we do not know whether he committed suicide. István Bujtor, his brother, died of a pulmonary embolism, at least according to his medical records. Frenreisz suffered an unimaginable sense of loss, of course.

My father had piqued my curiosity, and after a little searching, I found the Latinovits interview. I watched the video. I could not help but wonder why those five sixty-second black-and-white clips that had been recorded some forty years earlier were so important to my father. I went outside and found him looking for shade in the garden.

"I gotta go," I said. He had sat down.

"If you're sitting on a three-legged stool, sometimes everything leans to the left, sometimes to the right. This new world is a heap of shit."

He grumbled a little and continued.

"Leans this way or that, but somehow the truth always falls to the ground."

The Historical Justice Committee, which was established in 1988, just before the regime change, later organized the reburial of Imre Nagy, the martyred Prime Minister of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, but they never went any further than that. Enough said. They bore a great deal of responsibility for this failure to act, which caused our sense

of self-esteem to shrivel up. So my father mused. I never really knew what he meant, but he tried to help.

"My little brother's always late. That's what the king of Hungarian film said, remember? And then came Frenreisz: 'If the two of us couldn't handle it, we'd get István.' Today they've all died out, the burly hooligan types. We need them. Badly!"

He could recite their lines word for word, easily. And he laughed with a bitter smile.

But I still didn't know what he meant. I was pressed for time, so I wasn't eager to start interpreting the poetry people wove on the city outskirts. I took my farewell. It's enough if we see each other once a week. He said something as I left.

"Keep in mind, son, memories are not about the past. Not even about the present. Just take care."

There was always some kind of implied punch line to anything he uttered, usually because of something shameful he had said a moment or two earlier.

The Israeli MyHeritage software has done a great deal to compensate for corrupted or missing birth certificates, marriage certificates, death certificates, and old photographs. The company has also used DNA databases to determine genealogy and establish family ties.

Elsa Spiegel's son was born on 18 December 1941. Shortly afterwards, the new mother was taken to a concentration camp near Minsk, and given the lack of proper records, the circumstances of her tragic death remain unknown. Jakob Jona was deported from an orphanage to Theresienstadt when he was only nine months old. After three years of imprisonment, somehow he was still alive. As an eighty-year-old cab driver in London, Jakob Jona learned that his ancestors were from a territory known as Burgenland in

what had once been the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. His father, Adolf Kornfein, a tailor who had been much older than his mother, had been born in 1894 and had had a tender, loving relationship with Elsa Spiegel.

Jona Jakob was given the opportunity to reassess his origins, to ease his pain. Researchers informed him that, contrary to what he had previously been told, his father had not been a Nazi officer.

We did not use DNA tests to support our argument, and we took only a hasty glance at the work of the renowned Professors Aleida and Jan Assmann on the culture of remembrance. But we used our own tools to defend the fallen and the vulnerable, whether they were in the minority or the majority.

We valued standing up for one another and even for helpless strangers more than anything else. This was one way to soothe our pangs of conscience, which cut pretty deep, for various reasons.

Post-Communist Journalism

The young democracy offered hasty sketches of two competing world views. In one, the "Horthy-ists" (a term coined to refer to fans of the late Miklós Horthy, who according to Nobel-Prize winning American author Elie Wiesel, had been responsible, as regent of Hungary before and during the war, for the deportation of some 600,000 Hungarian Jews to death camps), pointed accusing fingers at the liberals who had decided to cooperate with the former communists. The former communists, in turn, labelled the Horthy-ists anti-Semites. This label was the political equivalent of a murder accusation. Public figures began defaming their enemies in the pages of the various newspapers, each of which had decided to take one extreme side or the other. They threw tantrums that one might reasonably assume would have ended in strokes.

A journalist friend of mine told me that he used to have knots in his stomach when he read the morning papers and watched the debates on TV.

He was terrified. He would read the papers through and through, even the obituaries.

He felt vulnerable. Tossing whatever newspaper he had had in his hand to one side, after having suffered through the television shows, he would repeat out loud, like some kind of mantra or chant, his replies to the various arguments, his voice always shaking with passion and despair. It was only when he arrived at the newsroom that a false sense of collective security, fueled by the fears of his colleagues, finally mollified his anxieties.

Easy Enough to Come up With a Dirty Story

One morning, I ran into my editor, David, at the main entrance. As usual, he was twisting his long black mustache in his fingers.

"I'm sorry to hear that you and Petra are getting a divorce," I said, stopping in front of the door.

He lit a cigarette. I doubted he would say anything in reply.

"I heard she got around a bit, so maybe you're better off," I continued.

"What do you mean by got around?"

"Well, right, yeah," I said, stuttering a little. "I never actually met her myself. I just heard that she was more alluring than most. You know, Old Testament style."

"Look pal," he said, confirming my suspicion that he did not know my name, "once we're divorced and Petra picks up some other guy, every day will be like Christmas for him, trust me."

He then pressed the glowing end of his cigarette to the wall of the building, tossed the butt to the sidewalk, and went inside.

"Easy enough to come up with a dirty story," he said in a barely audible voice when he realized that I was following him in.

He weaved his way through the tables, stepping gingerly over the bundles of cables, tossed his jeans jacket over the arm of a chair, and sat down in front of a computer monitor.

He had changed from prey to predator: he highlighted a statement on the front page, rewrote a "cowardly" lede, and changed the image in the column on the left. He had convinced himself afresh that he was fighting the fight for himself, not for others, a fight which was more about politics

than it was about meeting the standards of his profession.

The daily political game was determined by the ongoing efforts of the opposing sides to arm themselves and triumph in their continuous media warfare, fought with dueling newspaper articles in rival newspapers. All this was in stark contrast to Jürgen Habermas' conception of democracy, according to which we should always strive, before reaching a collective decision, to give all those concerned an opportunity to express their views and to yield, if need be, for the sake of the common good. Thus, we would arrive at rules which were the product of open debate and which represented everyone affected.

Habermas' naïve principle of rational-ethical discourse proved weak, however, compared to the hatred that had long been simmering in Hungarian society.

The goal of the Hungarian regime change was to introduce Hungary to the written and unwritten rules of democracy, but alas, for the most part, the many efforts to learn the rules of the road were in vain.

Evergreen

After nearly a century, the conflict between the slick urban intellectuals and the more traditional small-town writers and poets, the self-styled safeguards of conservative values, had been reignited.

The good country people, the poets and local intellectuals who guarded the traditions of rural Hungary, found themselves confronted with the plans hatched by the urban, liberal bourgeoisie, who scorned tradition and called for rapid reform.

The irreconcilable struggle between these two worlds consumed every forum of Hungarian public opinion. The self-proclaimed intellectuals on either side blathered on until they had wearied anyone and everyone with a bit of common sense and sapped every last drop of tolerance.

All hope of consensus and cooperation was gone. And at the same time, as living standards deteriorated, nostalgia for the security provided by socialism gained ground. And no wonder. In seven years, quality-of-life indicators had dropped by thirty percent.

The Marshall Plan-style aid expected from the West was not forthcoming, and the redistribution of state wealth allowed the high-ranking bureaucrats of the fallen regime to do generous favors for one another.

The "loot and plunder" period of the privatization of state assets was in full swing. And the new institutions of justice were little more than feeble onlookers.

V.

UNOFFICIAL METHODS OF DISPENSING JUSTICE

FAST ENOUGH FOR YOU?

These words were spoken, or rather shouted, by Gary, an active member of our political discussion group, to taunt his pursuer. He thought he had reacted perfectly reasonably when he had kicked the mirror off the car that had driven through the pedestrian crosswalk without bothering to brake.

The car stopped and the driver got out.

"You kicked my mirror, you piece of shit!"

"Sure did, fuck face."

"I'm gonna kick your head in," our new friend said, and the chase began.

Gary took off.

"Fast enough for you?" he shouted over his shoulder, letting his pursuer know he could easily keep up the pace for hours.

The chase had been going on for some time when Gary decided to jump over a small fence on the corner by a ten-story block house. The weary man huffing and puffing in his wake wasn't quite able to make the leap. His foot caught on the fence, and he toppled to the ground and probably hurt himself pretty badly.

Gary pulled his hood over his head, shifted to a slow walk, and pondered going back to kick the other sideview mirror off the car. He had discovered a new method of dispensing justice.

That Faggot Ain't Gonna be no Teacher

Gary and H. were both taking the seminar on "Philosophical Aspects of Linguistics," a confusing class where they debated questions of modern linguistics. We were able to watch the early stages of H.'s career from up close, though we only learned about the last days of his life in remarkable detail from the newspapers.

Gary had heard the instructor shout at H. one day during one of the exams they had had to take as first-year students. "No way I'm letting a faggot like you become a teacher," he had spluttered, condensing the essence of his antipathy into a single sentence with impressive linguistic clarity.

A few days later, H. stopped us in the corridor and shared with us his vision for dispensing justice. On his way home, he would wait for the instructor at a corner and then would knock him to the ground with a firm kick to his knee. The instructor would plead for mercy, of course, but H. would simply kick him in the face. It had occurred to him that his victim might not survive the attack, since the instructor himself had spoken about the dangerous knot of twisted veins in his brain that he had to live with every day, whether on the way to work in the morning or to the liquor store in the afternoon.

H. was convinced that the kick would cause arterial bleeding, and the good instructor's genetic abnormality would prove fatal.

The authorities would insist on doing a forensic autopsy, of course.

No investigation would be launched, however, once the genetic abnormality had been discovered, and the authorities might well assume that the death had been caused by an unfortunate fall. The knee injury might

arouse some suspicion, but H. was confident that only an "obsessively dedicated" detective would bother to pursue the case any further. We all gave his plan a supportive nod, though we also supported his more modest idea for revenge, which was simply to report the case in precise detail to the university and then start a petition to have the instructor removed.

H. submitted his written complaint that day and then spent the rest of the week wandering the hallways and reciting the story to anyone and everyone who would listen, thus taking the first steps in his future political career.

The instructor did indeed disappear from the institution, and H., the German-English major who had so diligently collected signatures, became a teacher at the grammar school in Barcsay Street in the seventh district of Budapest. Most of the kids at the school thought he was unpredictable and sneaky. It certainly did not help his image when one of the third graders recognized him from the distinctive tattoo on his neck as a masked character in a porn film.

Unsurprisingly, the news spread like wildfire, and H. soon submitted his resignation. His story was now in the news. He wrote ballet reviews for a time, blogged, and then joined a political party. News of his death came from Italy, but to this day, the authorities have not clarified the circumstances. We know only that he was relaxing by a swimming pool when the curtain fell, his state of euphoria was brought to a close, the dopamine and serotonin levels were disrupted, and he died of sudden cardiac arrest.

A few people claimed that H. must have been an "advocatus diaboli" who compromised his political enemies by passing on damaging information about them through a tangled network and thus forced them to resign.

In That Case, I'll Have to Vandalize It

The next day, Aaron was running a fever.

He got out of bed and went to the phone booth on the corner to call his parents and let them know that he wouldn't be coming home for the weekend, but the phone just swallowed one of his three coins. He walked down the street to the next pay phone, but it just took his other two coins. He called the emergency number on the side of the phone and told the dispatcher to send someone out to give him his money back because he needed to call his parents.

The voice on the other line assured him that someone would be right out. He waited patiently for a time, but then he dialed the number again, and the operator informed him that technicians would be sent to fix the phone on Monday, but he would not get his money back.

"In that case," he replied calmly, "I'm afraid I will have to vandalize this phone booth."

He then tore the receiver from the cable.

"You can't just let people steal from you like that," he had told Anna, his roommate, who had been practicing baroque compositions on her cello.

Anna was utterly indifferent. She was only jolted out of her altered state of consciousness when Aaron launched into another tale about a series of scams that had caught the newly capitalist world of Hungary by surprise.

The protagonist in Aaron's latest story was a crafty university student who had been one of the first people in the land to launch a phone sex service after the regime change. Back then, the phone company and the phone sex operator split the per-minute revenue 60-40. The more people who called the number, which was advertised in tabloids and sports mags (accompanied by pictures of

strikingly attractive women), the more the guy made.

Business was going well, but the money really started pouring in when our hero, who was the true epitome of the inventive entrepreneur, bought a phone card with no max limit on the black market for 10,000 forints. He then went around to every public phone booth in the city calling his phone sex number.

We finished university in 2000.

Had the last five years meant a damn thing? By the time we were in our second year, we had pretty much ditched our classes. By our third, we had ditched campus. By the fourth, we ditched one another. And in our fifth, we ditched the city.

VI.

BUNDLES OF MONEY IN THE BALANCE

IMMUNE-DEFICIENT DEMOCRACY

SENSITIVE INFO

When Aaron spoke, everyone fell silent. He had no one but himself to thank for his personal magnetism. He loved to experiment. He was always restless, distracted, on the move. He would wrap his arm around the person sitting next to him without any prompting, not out of kindness, just on the assumption they would be flattered that he had taken interest in them, even if the interest was feigned.

Aaron wore an electrical device under his shirt, fastened to his back by a strap and buckle running under his arm. The device recorded his blood pressure every day and gave a precise picture of his arrhythmia. It was uncomfortable as hell in the summer heat, and his sweat-soaked shirt often made it give incorrect readings.

Every workday was a hard day at the place where Aaron worked. Yesterday's mistakes were corrected the next morning. The company owners regularly called people to account for any blunder that was seen as a consequence of clumsiness, and Aaron did not take kindly to being faulted.

The owners were right, though. Only an efficiently run business would be able to cheat the masses out of the spare cash they had kept hidden for decades at home.

From One End to the Other

"Take advantage of our special offer?" he shouted indignantly. "If the packages go out with this on them, you might as well just bankrupt the company, for fuck's sake! Fix it! 'Don't miss out on this one-time offer!'"

Everyone quickly corrected the text on the envelopes.

"Who the hell would buy this shit anyway?" he sighed, and it was clear from the tone of his voice that no one was going to go home on time today.

"You're already a winner! 15,000,000 forints!" So the letter inside began, and the force of this statement was not diminished by the fact that the rules of the game were printed on the inside of the envelope. In black against a black background.

The original idea had come from Anna de Gal and Baron Claude de Velancourt, co-owners of the Hungarian company Topsailing Ltd.

Only the tragically fated Gabriel de Nizza (who was not actually from Nizza) had a better grasp of the company's affairs than Anna and Claude.

He had been entrusted with the task of maximizing company profits at all costs. Operational affairs were handled by Aaron.

Gabriel de Monaco's family had been the jewelry supplier for the Monaco royal family for generations. Over time, he acquired a minority stake in the lottery company. A few years later, his wife, a redheaded Polish model, shot him in a fit of jealousy in the bedroom of their Venice apartment.

The shots had been fired in their baldachin bed, which was decorated with real gold and silver.

When Gabriel fell to the bed, he buried his face in the pillows, as if knowing that his handsome face would only

be spared if the bullet shot from the hunting rifle wielded by his enraged wife hit him on the side of his head. Alas, a strip of one ear was still torn away, and the bullet ripped through the zygomaticus, a bundle of muscles responsible for facial expressions. No great loss. Gabriel never smiled anyway.

When I spoke, in the company's dying days, to the owner of the largest share, he laughed as he recalled Anna de Gal, Grace Kelly, and Prince Roamer of Nizza.

The flood of money into the small Hungarian company, fed by the boundless gullibility of easily duped Hungarians, had taken Anna by surprise. On hearing of the unfathomable profits, she celebrated with the owners at a chic Monaco bar.

She used an upholstered chair as a prop to step up onto the table, and she then walked at a leisurely pace from one end to the other, laughing as she gracefully strode above the plates and glasses. When she reached the far end, she fixed her gaze on Claude de Velancourt, and as if to bring her performance to a dramatic end, she fell into his arms, only then to slip spryly from his embrace a moment later and return to the chair she had used as a stepping stool. She repeated this until dawn. The alcohol gradually deprived her of the ability to speak intelligibly, but she did once mumble something that sounded very much like "Budapest."

More Pressure on the Heels

Aaron, who had taken a second job at the company, hadn't known what he was getting into.

The profits at this business fluctuated between a lot and a hell of a lot.

The impressive results gave his voice an even more assertive tone when he briefed the collective.

"The magic talismans we send will give our customers the protection they deserve from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," he said, and his voice resounded with an almost unabashed certainty that the words he spoke were actually true.

"We have an ethical obligation to help the sick, the needy, and the unfortunate who have lost their livelihoods," he continued. "That is our philosophy."

He really seemed to believe in the good luck charms.

"Our success depends on the continuous refinement of our business practices, our ability to dodge the objections raised by the Competition Authority, and the quality of our products," he proclaimed. "And at the same time, we devote equal attention to preserving the values of the society and world in which we live."

At the time, the workplace really was bustling with joy at the thought of the company's success.

As the day wound to a close, Aaron even spared a moment to share the story of Anna and Claud de Velancourt's joyful dance.

Then, he unexpectedly leapt to his feet so abruptly that he sent his chair flying out from underneath him and straight into a table behind him and started rummaging through the pile of papers on the adjacent table.

"We're waiting for the income we're going to make off

150,000 letters," he said. "The product is good, and our media presence is strong."

He sat down on the chair in the center of the room, took off his socks, lifted his legs, and gently placed his feet in the hands of the masseur sitting across from him.

Once the masseur had finished Aaron's left foot, he fidgeted briefly with his hair, swapped his left foot for his right, and watched his brother enter the office. His twin brother emerged from a side door that looked like it opened onto a bathroom. He was clutching crumpled-up 5,000 forint notes in both hands. Aaron slid his right foot a little closer to the masseur's body and asked him to apply strong pressure to his heel. The masseur avoided his brother's gaze, and his brother certainly avoided his.

His brother was no fan of massages. Instead, he was thinking about what the traffic would be like on the highway. He was headed for the restaurant Cklarisse in the humble town of Tura, where Otto Mészáros worked as head chef. The guy who had been sent from Onyx, the fancy place in Budapest that had gotten a Michelin star.

When booking the table, Aaron's brother had chosen the yellow tomato mascarpone gingerbread from the menu, but he still wasn't quite sure what he should order to drink. Sometimes he allowed himself to be vain and whimsical.

He was halfway there when a call came in on his company cellphone, but he silenced the call with a quick flick of a finger.

Alienation of Affections and the Resulting Change in Direction

To make the interior of a restaurant on a charming little street of downtown Budapest sufficiently impressive, they had made the floor deeper. In apartment number two on the second floor of the building, right above the restaurant, lived the widowed Jenő Boros (88) and the widowed Mrs. József Lipták (79), formerly the wife of the deceased Dr. József Lipták. Mr. Boros and Mrs. Lipták were life partners.

During the renovation of the restaurant, Topsailing Ltd., the primary investor, had found a working well, the sort of thing medieval peasants had drawn water out of. With the opening of the restaurant, they had begun to expand their profile.

According to Mr. Boros and Mrs. Lipták, the work being done in the space below their apartment had a direct impact on their relationship. They noticed, for example, that their desire for physical contact had decreased significantly, which might well mean that they would depart more rapidly from this world, and this thought caused them no small measure of alarm.

Mr. Boros and Mrs. Lipták eventually filed a criminal complaint against the company that had commissioned the renovation of the restaurant, arguing that the alienation of affections that they had experienced in their relations as a couple had begun at the same time as the discovery of the well.

The plaintiffs supported their position with some 5,000 pages of heavily cited scientific articles, mainly from medical journals, on behavioral science.

Although the company was under no legal obligation to provide any compensation for the inconveniences the

renovations might have caused, it offered Mr. Boros and Mrs. Lipták a free lunch every day from the daily special for the rest of their lives.

Jenő Boros, regrettably, died a mere two months later, before the renovations were complete. Mrs. József Lipták (79), however, survived another eight years, so for another eight years, the cooks diligently prepared her lunch every day.

Every time Mrs. Lipták opened the door to her apartment, the stairwell echoed with the sound of a loud creak. She would stand in the old wooden doorframe, elegantly dressed, her lipstick, eyeliner, mascara, blush all flawlessly applied, and wait for her lunch.

Or more precisely, for the waiter bringing her lunch. After all, she was not an old woman. Why shouldn't she enjoy all that life had to offer? Her husband's death hadn't dulled her appetites, culinary or otherwise.

The scientific articles on the unhealthy effects of alienation of affections made their way back to the shelves of the local library, and Mrs. Lipták ate her fill every day.

A Risky Private Conversation

The Hungarian Competition Authority set up a separate division to investigate the business practices of a joint Swiss-Hungarian enterprise. The company had complied, in its everyday dealings, with Hungarian regulations, but it may have been taking advantage of a blind spot in Hungarian law for years.

The company had always remained one step ahead of the authorities, though the laws, which were occasionally tightened, had cut more and more into its room for maneuver, until eventually charges had been brought against it.

The day before the trial, the Prime Minister himself declared to the public that there could be no "disproportionate profits" in a market economy. In the first round, the company was found guilty of wrongdoing and the prosecutor was promoted.

"Surely you yourself don't believe that stroking the underside of these trinkets brings you luck?" the judge asked Aaron.

"If it's not impolite of me to ask," Aaron replied, "what religion do you belong to?"

"I am Catholic," the judge replied.

"I only ask because I am a Mormon. Are we really going to debate questions of faith in these hallowed halls?"

The judge immediately ordered the defendant to appear in her chambers for a private conversation.

She had not even had time to sit down when her guest entered the room. She suddenly remembered other entrances, and the intimate moments that had followed between them in less formal settings.

"If you knew how I felt when you walked in," she began. Her modest office was furnished with only a tiny little desk and

a single empty bookshelf. Despite the austere surroundings, she was still hoping for some physical contact.

"You're pretty brave, Claire. You're putting your job on the line just to chat with an ex-boyfriend. Is this an apology, or are you asking me out again?"

"Does it really matter?"

"We're duping people, so what? It's everyone's God-given right, in a democracy, to be an idiot. We're not delivering packages for free. Everyone does their own cost-benefit analysis and acts according to their own calculations. They buy a chance to have a bit of good fortune from us, but I have nothing to do with their decisions to make these purchases. This is entirely legal according to Hungarian law, and you know it."

So said Aaron.

"I never loved you," the judge replied, badly stung by his indifference. As far as she was concerned, the conversation was over.

"If you ask me, you're the biggest criminal here," Aaron said, turning his back on her and slamming the door behind him. But he won the case. And that was the important thing.

Sacred Crosses – On Posterboard

Aaron got in the car, dropped off the "independent" legal expert fourteen minutes later, and gave him a little sack of good luck crosses decorated with glitter and colorful stones as a gift for the road.

He sped through all the yellow lights. He could hardly wait to get the thousands of crosses on their way to the Vatican, where they would be photographed being ritually blessed by a soon-to-be-defrocked priest for the marketing campaign.

"We'll need photos that radiate joy and faith for the ads," he thought. Back in the office, he gave the workers packing up the crosses instructions in short, crisp sentences. He figured that with two vans and two stops on the way, if they kept a good pace, the shipment would arrive in Rome by lunch.

"We're putting hope for a better life on the market!" he said with a wry grin as he counted up the anticipated profits from the new project, and he figured he'd earned the right to celebrate with a little Japanese whiskey today.

Aaron had long given up finding a cure for his heart arrhythmia, and for his loneliness.

He pushed open the door to the basement office and entered the conference room, which was cluttered with stacks of money. His childhood friend was sitting in his chair.

In the heat, he slipped off his purple moccasins. The huge, lockable suitcase was waiting at his bare feet.

"What are you doing in my chair?" he snarled in a low, wheezing voice. At me, his only friend.

"Are you kidding? You're rushing everything, and you're also screwing up more and more. You shouldn't be giving

me a fucking hard time! You're a different person every day, as if you were in rehab or something."

I gave the suitcase a little kick as a sign of my displeasure.

We had to hurry. They weren't going to keep that crazy rate at the currency exchange office for long. There was no time to bicker. We stuffed the money into the bag, and the driver waiting outside kept the growing line of cars at a standstill in the narrow downtown street.

In the end, everything fell into place. I got the good exchange rate, 262.01 forint for one US dollar. The Arab man was obliging and polite, and it looked very much as if we'd be able to rely on each other in this whole Vatican business when the moment came. It was time for a well-deserved celebration.

Poppy was waiting.

VII.

OFFERED A DRAW

Poppy, the cult piano bar, was celebrating its fiftieth birthday. It was located on the ground floor of a four-story residential building at the base of a steep hill on the Buda side of the Danube River.

The staff at Poppy, which later changed its name to the Red Champagne Bar, was almost grateful to those who avoided the place. It had a crowd of regulars. It didn't need any PR. Lots of people sought the place out to hear old Gabriel Feldman's soul-soothing pianistry. The place would come to life in the evenings when he started tickling the ivories, and that was pretty much what we were expecting to happen that day too.

But Aaron and I had arrived early. We were wondering if we'd get in at all. We hadn't reserved a table. The elegant Imre met us at the door. He asked us to be patient.

Half an hour later we were given a small table. Without it, we wouldn't have had a chance.

Evening fell. The place was full, and they had stopped letting people in, even the regulars.

From just behind the door, we could see everyone, and we tried to figure out who was coming from where, where they were going, and why they were here.

"We're pretty out of the way here," I said in praise of our modest table.

"I didn't mention it, but the first time I came here, they put me at this table."

"Maybe you didn't mention it because it's meaningless

info," Aaron said, knocking back the first double, which had the word "SIN" written on it.

"Funny," I said, pointing at the word, "Good thing I proclaimed myself cured."

"Cured?! We'll be sick forever. It's some consolation that you'll always be my best friend."

This remark surprised and disarmed me. It was a rare gesture of kindness from Aaron.

"There was always something in you to like, and something loveable in me," I said, continuing in the same sappy tone, though when we started to praise each other, we usually overdid it.

Now we just needed a plan. We needed a new project, something that would be fun, something we could use to prove that we were fundamentally good people. Something we could use to disguise the insatiable thirst for money that our French partners had instilled in us.

"Don't moan and groan over your sorry fates here," Imre said, pausing for a moment by our table. "Especially not after 4:00 in the afternoon."

He then continued on his way, casting a glance over his shoulder and giving us a friendly smile.

Big Man on the Line

A little while later, a lonely chap who'd been sitting by himself slid his chair closer and then turned to me with a fake smile on his face. He must have overheard a few words of our conversation, something about databases, expected profits, campaigns, "open theft," and the like. His little smile seemed like a lame attempt to establish contact.

For a minute or two, I figured he was gay.

And a little later, we were in his car, heading for the Balkans.

We had had a quick chat before setting out on this journey, which resembled a hasty getaway. A few minutes after having introduced himself, our fancy new friend changed gears entirely.

"The Big Man's on the line," he whispered. "Got something to say to you."

A voice with an accent came from the other end of the line. He expressed himself very precisely, though he hesitated and searched for the right word from time to time.

"Good evening," he said. "I assume Thomas has told you who I am. I would like to ask you to help us with our political campaign. Communication in the interests of so-called mobilization, personalized communication drawing on information in databases. On which, if I have been informed correctly, you are the experts. The rest we can discuss in person."

And we set out.

An AM booty call

We started to realize the absurdity of what was happening when we took our seats in the back of a spacious BMW, but since we were on a real AM booty call, we didn't worry ourselves too much about the consequences.

At 6:00 AM, we went through the only twenty-four-hour border crossing into northern Serbia, where to this day there are a lot of Hungarian-speakers who can vote in the Hungarian elections. In the meantime, we called everyone we could.

Somewhere along the way, two black cars passed us, and they remained in front of us for the rest of the trip.

Forty minutes later, we turned off the main road and stopped in front of a new five-story building. A political party headquarters, we were later told.

Only then and there did I realize that, without Imre's and Thomas' help, the Big Man, who was on good terms with the French and, more importantly, the aristocrats in Monaco, would not have reached us and thus would not have had access to the skills we had, which were rare skills at the time.

They wanted to win in the upcoming Serbian elections, and they knew very clearly that the game we had developed based on the French license could be of considerable use in reaching their base and getting them to vote. Our new approach and the experience we had garnered held out the tantalizing promise of success, in sharp contrast with older campaign methods.

A few hours later, everyone knew of our arrival. That might be an exaggeration, but we felt as if we had every Hungarian speaker in Northern Serbia protecting us, two Hungarian oddballs who'd been to Nice and Monaco. And at the head of the crowd was the Big Man, who was already

an icon in Hungary. His hefty build, powerful voice, and commanding appearance, like that of a warrior-statesman who had trained on the battlefield. He had won fame for speaking out in defense of the Hungarian minority in Serbia, the second smallest of the Hungarian minorities, which had shrunk now to some 300,000 souls and which was always under siege of some sort.

Paid Without Asking a Single Question

He said he'd need us to deliver five mandates, for which he paid Aaron and me thirty thousand Euros each in advance without asking a single question. For six or seven mandates, which the old man knew perfectly well we'd never manage, he promised fifty or sixty thousand.

He said this and then stood up from the table in his small, puritanical office overlooking the courtyard garden, turned his back to us, and started to philosophize about the unexpected twists and turns of life.

And also about the untapped potential of Hungarians who lived beyond the borders of the motherland, who had been forced by the circumstances of history to compromise and become part of mixed marriages. He spoke of their naïve, trusting ignorance, and of the importance of setting up a new call center. The Hungarian minority that lived in what had been northern Yugoslavia, in the little province that had been cut from Hungary in the wake of the Great War, was in a state of constant threat.

He was confident that the Hungarians would show up in big numbers this time. At least as many would come as had thronged to the polls in the last election, a memorable event in which 65 percent had voted for the national minority party, giving them significant leverage in the Serbian parliament.

I knew he was right, but the door-to-door method was, first, hardly a magic bullet, and second, Hungarians were happy to vote for any party that called itself democratic. The results were predictable, no matter how fancy and frilly the campaigns, or how compelling the speeches.

He didn't even notice when we accepted his secretary's offer of two mugs of weak coffee, which you could only enjoy

with a generous helping of cream and sugar. By then we had stopped listening to his monologue.

Never would I have imagined that our efficiently-run, highly profitable economic venture back home could be used to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people across the border.

When we learned to mine people's personal data, to make money using statistical methods, it was as if we were using some kind of secret weapon, though our methods were actually quite simple.

In the Hungarian courts, the prosecution lost a series of cases against us. Our wonder-working baubles, the holy images, had not been given to their recipients free of charge, after all. We had merely grouped our potential customers into different categories according to their profiles, and then we had diligently kindled in them a desire to make purchases, a hope for immense wealth at a single stroke of fate. We teased them onward not with the promise of a secure, predictable life, but with the prospect of becoming rich. Though clearly the actual chances of becoming rich were null. And clearly we undertook all this with the most self-serving motives: to amass fortunes of our own.

How many of our cherished customers returned the holy icons, amulets, necklaces, and other assorted gifts costing no more than a few thousand forints? A negligible number. The very precisely defined target groups tried their luck again and again. Our customers were really fortune hunters who decided time and again to order the miracle-working talismans by post in the hopes of winning tremendous wealth.

Hardly surprising, then, that the political community was interested in this this well-nigh fanatical devotion to a belief, this insatiable yearning for a chimerical good.

Driving Blind

I must have been a strange sight, sitting in the party headquarters building, garbed in a meticulously pressed suit, and talking about the useful data we could get if activists start ringing doorbells and asking people about their political orientation, their monthly earnings, their perceived social status, their number of children, and so on.

Truth be told, I didn't believe a word of what I was saying, but they had paid for the work, so I couldn't really do an about-face. In time, the explanations became wearisome, but the consultants remained both bombastic and haughty until the end of the campaign. And we managed to stir the waters.

As the presentation wore on, the volunteers used their feet to slide thick ashtrays under the chairs towards whoever's cigarette had more ashes dangling from the butt. The ashtrays scraped across the worn stone floor, and a cloud of thick, gray dust rose to roughly knee height, sometimes as high as one of the kids' chins, but everyone was gradually getting used to the feeling of suffocating.

On the way home, Otto got the right side of the divided highway mixed up with the left. It took us a few minutes to realize that we were going the wrong way. Otto didn't even notice that he was going against traffic. I had to plead with him for a good half hour to stop the chain smoking. You couldn't really see anything apart from the contours of our faces. We were driving blind.

Wrong Place at the Wrong Time

On the main square, the crumbling facade of a small money-changing shop just opposite the town hall was waiting patiently for the local government to provide funds for its renovation. On that day, 2 July 2007, the sun was supposed to set at 20:44.

As evening fell, a sturdy, dark-haired young man suddenly kicked in the locked door of the money-changing office and pushed the stout old woman standing in front of him to the side.

The woman, who was wearing compression stockings, lost her balance and fell over. By the time she hit the floor, she was bleeding from a stab wound. Her shopping basket had landed under her body, and the little pin worn by devout Orthodox Christians had fallen from her chest and rolled far, far away. The old woman whimpered quietly for a little while longer.

The murder took place three days before the official opening of the election campaign, and it was only natural that everyone in the city immediately began to speculate that the crime had been motivated by nationalist hatreds. According to the police report, however, the woman was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. The young man had only wanted to rob the money-changing office. It was the first time he had tried his hand at crime, and it was also the last. He's been sitting in the Sremska Mitrovica prison ever since.

They Didn't Hide or Take Cover

The findings of the official investigation notwithstanding, of our eighty people, seventy were too spooked to come near the party headquarters. They feared that the murder would have unforeseeable consequences. We won't be able to contain the outbursts of ethnic hatred against Hungarians, they said. The team decided to take refuge at a nearby lake popular among fishermen. The hosts had built a small playground and a pond next to the terrace under the boughs of old, regal trees. The guest house had an excellent kitchen, and the upstairs had been divided into four rooms furnished with everything one might need. They even had en suite bathrooms, with folded hot towels on the countertops.

Women went up by the back stairs, men entered through the restaurant.

Florian, one of the owners, was a beloved member of the community. Very few people commanded more respect. He was the eldest of three brothers, and together with his younger siblings, he had worked hard to build and maintain their empire. When Florian was distracted from his work from time to time by the authorities, who never tired of harassing him, he was compelled to leave management of the day-to-day tasks to his brothers, but even then, they were always happy.

This must have been the primary source of the three brothers' popularity. Their presence exuded strength and faith, and the determination they demonstrated gave the members of the Hungarian national minority in Serbia, who were under constant threat, a sense of self-assurance.

They did not hide or take cover. They lived and prospered.

The Most Beautiful Girls in Europe

We could hardly wait to have lunch on the terrace of the restaurant on the main square, which had a huge garden for outdoor seating. The owner was a highly respected Hungarian businessman. The restaurant was known far and wide for the Boss's outstanding cuisine, and we apparently were known far and wide because of our friends. The minute we walked in, everyone knew who we were. They knew why we had come and who we were working with in the city.

As everyone's gaze fell on us, I pulled Aaron closer to me and pretended that we were gay. The waiter spoke to us in Hungarian, which seemed natural enough, though most of the people sitting around us were Bosnians and Serbs. Some of the most beautiful girls in Europe.

We were the first to be served. We tried to get comfy, but it wasn't easy. Shortly afterwards, a bunch of men sat down at the tables around us. But the whole place was slowly filling up, as if they had set some kind of trap for us. We couldn't eat. The crowd seemed menacing and unpredictable.

I couldn't help but wonder, in the meantime, how much thirty thousand Euros weighed. I should weigh it. I smiled cynically at the thought. And the next moment, someone yanked my chair out from under me, my fork almost got caught in my throat, and the house wine spilled all over my plate.

And suddenly a chair to my left tipped to one side and the gentleman who had been taking cover in the crowd laughed and took a seat between us.

It was Florian.

"There's still some blood in your cocks!" he said, laughing. "Next time, let me know! I eat around 2:00 o'clock too, and if you want to go for a walk, I'll get a couple guys to accompany

you. What do you say? You up for it?"

We thanked him for his concern, I stopped sweating from all the stress, and my throat opened up enough to have a few sips of wine. His smile gave me the courage to pull my chair back underneath me, sit up straight, stab the strip of salmon swimming in elderberry sauce with my fork, and start eating. We finished quickly enough. He neither ate nor drank. He only asked that, on our way out, we walk around the scattered tables. Out in the street, he opened the door to his Range Rover for us and then drove us down a narrow back street to the party headquarters.

We got out, shook hands, and he mumbled something about how, when all this was over, he would show us a mill for sale and a printing press, new, with eight working presses. Five minutes away.

In Praise of Dissimulation

We did no more or less than what was expected of us.

Never before and indeed never since have I felt that the few skills I had were of such immense value to others. We started to feel as we had longed to feel back in Poppy. That people valued us. That we were useful.

We filled the imaginary sacks that our clients had spread out in front of us with our ideas. They made warm, endearing shows of gratitude. Never before had I seen anything like it in Hungary.

The experience had an almost healing effect for a while, but then slowly we lost faith again. No one really cared about our decline. Even our closest family members were not interested in (or had not noticed) the act we were putting on, which we used to mask our ever more burdensome depression. We had big families, yet we were alone. Slowly, we started to pursue our business practices separately. We finished what we had started and then each went our separate ways. We never suffered any real want, even in this dicey world. But the love we got from our children was the only thing that gave us any stability, that gave life any meaning.

It was roughly then that I practically knocked Claire over one day when I stepped out onto the sidewalk from the stairwell of our downtown apartment. All I knew about her was that she had lived in St. Louis after college. A city that was closer to us than I would have thought.

VIII.

EASTERNERS IN THE US ON SCHOLARSHIP

Language Skills

Fancy as fuck to study in the States. That's where every East European kid wants to go.

In Hungary, Russian was taught as a compulsory subject before the fall of communism, but after the commies fell, it was just an elective in secondary schools and universities. At first, English came in second in the popularity contest after German, but by 1994, more than twice as many people were choosing the lingua angla than had a year earlier.

Back then, if you wanted to get a university degree, you had to have an intermediate level language certificate. Knowledge of some 2,000 active words, a bit of grammar, and the ability to engage in at least a little basic street chitchat sufficed to give examiners the (false) impression of proficiency.

When it came to foreign language skills, Hungary ranked dead last at the time among the countries of Europe. Hungarians were basically unable to cobble together a sentence in a foreign tongue. But now, this year, of some 215,000 students, 5,900 are majoring in English at the 89 higher educational institutions in Hungary.

Cause She's Hot

Claire had woken up by the tracks at the Szeged train station once or twice.

When she was coming home from Budapest on the early morning train, she'd lie down on one of the benches and fall asleep. She'd often have strange dreams that were hard to forget. Like one about Marilyn Monroe's famous proclamation to Arthur Miller: "I can't fight for myself anymore." Or about Miller's heroic stand, when he was sentenced to a $500 fine or 30 days in jail for contempt of Congress for having refused to reveal the names of "certain dangerous individuals" to the House Un-American Activities Committee.

One time, in her sleep, she had rolled off the bench and woken up with a start on the ground. She had grabbed her Walkman headphones with both hands and put them back on her head. A line from a Doors song was playing, "spades dance best from the hip."

She wasn't sure she understood all the words, but she was sure about one thing: she wanted to learn American English.

Which was the real reason why, in the end, she had applied for a scholarship to go to Saint Louis, a scholarship which, much to her surprise, she had gotten.

Claire, a wide-eyed university student with a passionate love of freedom, had not won this sought-after distinction because of her remarkable language skills or her grades. Rather, she had stood out among the applicants because of a Platonic love affair that had not lasted more than a minute and a half.

Corruption was rampant in Hungary at the time. Out of thousands of huddled youngsters yearning to breathe free,

only a few were actually permitted to travel, and these few were chosen by the Soros Foundation.

Claire knew this, but she had gotten lucky. Gret, who at the time had worked at the Foundation and had been in charge of organizing the language exams and selecting the scholarship recipients, had underlined her name on the list when he had laid eyes on her at an administrative meeting. As far as he was concerned, life could hardly have offered a more delectable morsel.

Sodomy with the Witness

"The Southwest plane was on the edge of the city, above the Gateway Arch, the tallest monument in in the United States. I leaned over an Irish guy from Boston who had the window seat. It was worth it for the view. I couldn't believe that I had made it to the most beautiful city in the US, a city I would never be able to leave."

So Claire said, retelling the events years later.

"I arrived in Saint Louis in the middle of the night. A Ford Crown Victoria taxi rolled up next to me. I was given a room on the first floor of the middle building on the University of Missouri-Saint Louis campus. There were three of us in the room, me and two girls from Brazil. They had a sweet scent that was a little strange to me at first, but I got used to it. It wasn't that they didn't shower or anything."

"On the afternoon of my first day, I went for a walk. Just as I walked out of the building, an old woman crossed the path right in front of me, pushing a shopping cart full of rags. I unfolded my map of the campus and started looking for the Diabetes Center in the block of medical buildings, or rather the Mason Eye Institute, which was in the old building next to it. The Brazilian girls had told me that was where the cafeteria was. I got thoroughly lost."

"The Good Lord took me by the hand and saved me from death by starvation, however, because all of a sudden Devonta Bagley appeared. Smiley-faced Devonta, who wore a nicely ironed button-down shirt and tie, told me politely and carefully exactly how to find my way, with the same clarity and firmness he used later that very night when he had held a gun to the head of a Russian kid here on a fencing scholarship and raped him, right in front of his roommate, who was frozen in terror. Devonta chose

his target well. He knew the foreign kids were lonely and isolated."

By the time Claire had gotten back to her dorm, evening had fallen. She had been so exhausted that she hardly knew whether she had walked a mile or run a marathon. When she entered the building, she didn't hear the fencer kid whimpering in pain. Even Bagley's muffled grunts didn't disturb the peaceful silence of the hallway.

Bagley, the perpetrator, was known on campus for taking his Great Dane for a walk every day. In his spare time, he liked to browse the books he had gotten for his major in Criminal Justice. After Bagley left, the fencer's roommate managed to call the police. The cops responded pretty quickly. They found Bagley in his room, where he had gone to get some sleep after his exertions. He was angry that they had woken him up after a tiring evening.

The victim of the rape did not die in the attack. His roommate had watched the events unfold without uttering a word, pressing himself against the wall and not even shedding a tear. The Russian kid spent the next few years sitting in his room for the most part, staring at the wall. He didn't have anything to say about what had happened. The roommate didn't fare much better.

There were lots of things Claire never mentioned to her parents. She never mentioned the filth and grime in the streets, the dozens of homeless people, the continuous sense of fear, anywhere, everywhere. There was no need, she felt, to mention anything about the rape or the boy who had been raped. The kid who had come from the former Soviet Union to the free world, who had accomplished amazing things as a scholarship recipient, who had found new friends, made a new home for himself, and yet still had always been seen as and treated as a foreigner.

For the university students from the former Eastern Bloc, a degree from a university in the US was like a life insurance policy. Even if life in the brave new world soon shattered their self-confidence and any hopes they might have had for their futures. And not just life in Saint Louis.

They all saw themselves as the next potential victims in the dispassionate headlines.

The various "alerts" that were sent out over email became matters of everyday routine: "Please consider the following Safety Tips: Be aware of your surroundings. Be suspicious of people asking for directions, change or giving out flyers. At night, walk in groups of at least two and stay on the main walkways. Familiarize yourself with the locations of the emergency phones. (Call 314-516- 5155 for an escort if you do not feel safe walking.)"

In Our Parents' Dreams

"The everyday brutality to which we were exposed, the inhumanity, the complete lack of any sense of safety for the sake of the common good shaped our lives and held us back in everything we were there to do. It destroyed our self-esteem. None of us ever could have explained it to our parents. When the sound of gunfire rang out in the middle of a class on economics or someone was stabbed in one of the parking lots we just kept our mouths shut and waited for the next act of violence. The only thing that mattered was fulfilling our parents' dreams."

Claire didn't get much news from Hungary. Democracy was just beginning to come to life back home, even if it had been a good fifteen years since the Soviet tanks had left, the Russian soldiers had packed up and gone home, and the nuclear silos had been gutted.

Claire had fled to the United States in the hopes of escaping the oppressive state of social vegetation in Hungary, the despair that was fed by loathing and continuous recriminations between left wing and right, a despair against which she had felt quite powerless. Her longing for peace drove her from her homeland. Whatever they were building in Hungary, democracy or whatever you wanted to call it, they could do it without her.

She left in the hopes of learning valuable lessons about law and order and western democracy. In Missouri, however, all she got was a taste of a very old world that was quite incapable of self-improvement. Missouri and Saint Louis were textbook examples of a bad example. Not at all what she had been expecting.

"I was dealt the shittiest card in the deck. The place I went to university wasn't the real USA."

Claire wanted to be sure everyone understood this when she got back to Hungary.

Never Fucking Ever

In the semi-security of the university, behind the locked doors of the dormitory rooms, she put in a VHS tape of Ridley Scott's Bladerunner. She watched actor Rutger Hauer utter character Roy Batty's last words, the longest improvised scene in film history. She even teared up a little when Sean Young said, in what was to be the role of her life, "I remember piano lessons.... but I don't know if I took them or Tyrell's niece," and Harrison Ford, playing Deckard, moved closer to her and, with their faces almost touching, whispered, "you play beautifully."

Life in the dystopias seemed more human than life in the callous real world outside, which was nothing but fear, indifference, and the constant risk of a deadly attack. And then she heard the melody of Bohemian Rhapsody from the next room. Freddie Mercury performing at the Live Aid concert.

Mama, just killed a man,
Put a gun against his head,
Pulled my trigger, now he is dead (...)
Mama, life had just begun
But now I've gone and thrown it all away…
…
I don't wanna die
I sometimes wish I'd never been born at all.

"The Southwest plane was flying over the edge of the city, over the Gateway Arch, the largest monument in the US. I was on my way home with my diploma in my carry-on bag. I leaned over a Boston Irishman sitting by the window. It was worth it for the view. I was a little shocked to realize that

I never fucking ever wanted to see the Gateway Arch again for the rest of my life. I returned from the shining city in the hill. My friends were waiting for me back home."

IX.

BEFORE THE "WAR"

THE PEACEFUL LIFE OF A PEACEFUL STUDENT

Under 40

Claire came home. We hugged, even smiled at each other. We'd never done that before. And then we sat down on the bench across the street from the door to our place.

After the usual "so, how are things going?" she started telling me about what had happened to her in the US, but first she gave me some crumpled-up sheets of paper. They looked like something you would just toss in the trash; it was actually an essay on Darwin. She had felt so dismally depressed that she had come up with a laughable theory about religion.

"I wanted to squeeze out a fart and I ended up sharting," she said, but I could tell from the look in her eyes that there was more to what she was saying.

"I'm glad to be home," she said. She was clearly in better spirits.

"Nothing's changed here, trust me," I said. "I just got back from a trip down south. I've broken all ties with Aaron. I don't even know if my son is actually my son or if I've got some other guy to thank for him. That's the kind of blow you can't really shake off."

I paused for a sec.

"Sometimes I go to Bimbó Street to hear a few honest words. Truth hurts, but I don't care. To old man Imre in Poppy. Ten people from my graduating class died this year. All of them under 40."

I paused again to gauge her response.

"I work so that I'll have money for health care when the time comes, you know, the natural shocks that flesh is heir to," I continued, trying to add a note of humor.

I was 30 years old when I started waiting for everything in the house to quiet down, the kids to fall asleep, so I could stick a pillow between me and my wife to make absolutely sure we wouldn't touch in the night.

A Full Bottle of Sedatives

One night, the cell phone under the pillow rang. The volume was set halfway down. I looked at the screen. It was blinding in the dark.

A brown-haired girl huddled against a bench and dripping in her own vomit was calling me. Her left eye and her right eye were staring in different directions as she lay, utterly miserable, on the side of the road. The next day I received a video version of the scene from a friend I've since lost touch with, this time with the sounds of the laughter of those around her.

I recognized her. She was the girl who had torn my jacket off me that winter in the Buda castle. I had tried to run away. She had caught up with me. My driver had been waiting patiently for me. She had thrown open the door to the Audi, climbed in next to me on the back seat, and stared at me with tears in her eyes.

I didn't bother answering the phone call. I just rolled over to my other side. The sight of a full bottle of Rivotril in the medicine cabinet, 2 mg doses, was soothing.

After my wife and I divorced, I threw the little pillow out.

Every morning, we hastily apply something to the wounds we suffer from the passive-aggressive blows we give to and take from our family members, and then we dutifully scurry off to work.

We ply to windward as we try to navigate our everyday lives and somehow continue onward against the gusts of uncertainty, isolation, corruption, and the ever more shocking gulf between rich and poor.

The Hungarian Competition Authority had been in operation for five years when, in 1996, I was almost thrown out of a kitchen window and, thanks to a fortunate

constellation of circumstances, I was reborn.

Years had passed. The institution which had been established to protect free market competition proved a weak opponent for our parcel-selling company, and the masses continued to send us their savings in exchange for miracle-working trinkets. When we started using kitchen scales to measure our profits, I noticed that we were forgetting to smile and say hello to people who were used to us always greeting them warmly.

The way we made money wasn't just unethical, it bordered on the illegal. We knew that if we were too bold, if we overtook the state, we might well end up in prison.

When he got back from Nice, about a year after having set up the joint venture, Aaron started wearing a portable EKG under his shirt. We had him to thank for one of our most valuable intellectual products, the simple statement that, "with our work, we are collecting funds for future medical care."

Not only were we forgetting to smile and say hello, we gradually forgot the very meaning, the very essence of the antisemitism and irredentism that had always been so fashionable among the urban elites, -isms that at various times had had the power to incite murder, both small scale and large. The clamor and yammer of the various political alliances and the journalists and talking heads who loyally followed them hardly made it to the shores of the French Riviera or the banks of the Missouri River. We could have followed our homeland's miserable political decline. We could have tasted the sting of a cyanide capsule in our mouths. But it was always easier to be greedy and naïve than to wait, either with the executioner's sword in your hand or with your head on the chopping block, to die in a democracy that had just been set free after fifty years of captivity.

Her hesitancy to speak reminded me that I had always talked more than she had.

I knew her story not thanks to our chance encounter, which was the last time she and I were ever to see each other. I knew it rather from a letter which had been sent from one of the neighboring apartment blocks.

Good old Claire, who had made her parents' wildest dreams come true and then had dutifully returned to Hungary, I never saw again.

Hanna loved to walk along the banks of the Danube with her daughter, who would stare with her ponderous brown eyes at the shimmering waters of the river. One day, Hanna happened to look up and see the new girl, who was wearing not a miniskirt but pants with a condom in the back pocket. She remembered: the girl felt more at home in the middle of the city. They don't much take that route these days, but when they do stray down that way, her daughter always bursts out crying.

Aaron was one of the ten who died before he reached the age of 40. Got out of his car on a hot summer day and collapsed before he could close the door. Just a quiet heart attack.

Don't remember much of my student years anymore. I was the only one left in the end. I then spent the next several years dodging volleys of friendly fire.

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2025. Budapest.

In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell and the beleaguered states on the far side of the Iron Curtain turned their weary but hopeful gazes to the West. The transition from communism to democracy hit harder than expected, however. Hungarian novelist Krisztián Dombrádi offers a portrait of this era of change from the perspective of the average person on the street. What makes this novel particularly engaging is that it sets aside discussion of political theories and focuses instead on the ways in which people adapted to a flood of new expectations and new rules in a country suddenly thrown into the global free market. The new political and social structures that emerged in Central Europe in the early 1990s created dramatic conflicts of values across generations. Dombrádi sets aside the almost innumerable political theories concerning the pros and cons of this transition and instead crafts a depiction of the era against the backdrop of the social conflicts that emerged as people grappled with the difficulties of everyday life.

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