THIS, TOO, I BLAME ON HITLER

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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by ADAM JANOS

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What becomes of those who survive? This collection of personal essays uses humor and reflection to explore the themes of inherited trauma and bicultural identity, finding sanctity in the unlikeliest of sources: irreverence. Whether reporting on Syrian refugees at the Hungarian-Serbian border, reflecting on his early experimentation with sadomasochism, recounting a botched haircut at the hands of his six-year-old brother, or translating a musical written by his grandfather in a Soviet Gulag, the author grapples with the question: how does one discover nuance in personal heritage under the Manichean weight of a global atrocity like the Holocaust?
DEDICATION

For the relatives I never met, and those to come that I’ll never meet.
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Putting the “Ha” in the Holocaust

“She must have thought you were Hungarian,” Bori said to me, in Hungarian. “She must’ve just been confused.”

“Wait, but aren’t I Hungarian?” I replied. “If she’s confused, maybe I am too.”

A firm breeze moved through the towering cypresses and up onto the roof deck, raising gooseflesh on our skin. We looked out onto the seemingly endless turquoise of Hungary’s Lake Balaton, where two-person dinghies and schooners bobbed over whitecaps below a cloudless sky. I had just finished with a sailing camp on this 230 square mile lake. I was the last person who should’ve been given command of a sailboat: fourteen years old, scrawny, no motor skills. Every day, I would capsize repeatedly and go back to camp praying that the next day’s lesson would be cancelled by rain.

I was unathletic, and I was afraid.

Unathletic, yellow-bellied, short, nerdy, awkward, desperate Adam.

“I mean, of course you’re Hungarian,” Bori said, giving me a playful bump with her elbow. “But you’re not Hungarian in the way she thought you were. You’re not Hungarian Hungarian.”

“Okay,” I said. “So I’m not double Hungarian? I’m just single Hungarian?”
I was being intentionally difficult—I knew she meant that I hadn’t grown up there—but she rewarded me with a laugh. Here in Hungary, unathletic, yellow-bellied, short, nerdy, awkward, desperate Adam was also funny. And that, it seemed, made all the difference with a girl like this. We were at her summer home, shoved together while our parents caught up on lost years over bottles of wine. I wasn’t complaining; not only was this a chance to flirt with a beautiful blonde ballerina; it was an opportunity to ask a local about the many mysteries of quotidian Hungarian life.

“You know what I mean,” Bori said. “She thought you were Hungarian the way we’re Hungarian.”

Earlier that afternoon, I’d crossed paths with an elderly woman whom I’d offended with an overly casual greeting.

“Szia,” I’d said. “Hello.”

‘‘Szia?!” the woman repeated, aghast.

I’d failed to use the honorific. In Hungarian, when a fourteen-year-old boy addresses an older woman he doesn’t know, the correct greeting is “good day,” or, more formally still, “I kiss your hand, madam.” I’d never even heard of honorifics, before giving this offense. The only people I regularly spoke Hungarian to were my parents, and they didn’t use them with me.

I looked at Bori: her hair drying in the sun to the color of straw, her blue
eyes staring back at me: kind, unafraid. She was too innocent to be self-aware.

She probably thought the same thing of me, given that I was the one accidentally offending old ladies and then asking her what I’d done wrong.

I could never get a girl like Bori in the States. Could never get a girl like Bori anywhere. I’d never even kissed a girl. We stuck our feet out over the balcony ledge and let them dangle.

“If our toes had personalities,” I told her. “I think my toes would be a lot meaner than yours.” I pointed with my foot at her dainty digits: bald of hair, nails healthy and unpainted. “Your toes seem like they just want everyone to get along.”

Bori laughed like quick hiccups.

“What do you think is the prettiest word in Hungarian?” she asked me later that night. “They did a survey in a magazine, and Hungarians all said it was love.” Szerelem.

“Love is okay,” I said. “I prefer shoelace.” Cipőfűző.

That night our two families danced in the living room to old Hungarian pop records until the early morning. I told Bori all the Hungarian words and phrases I adored: the bizarre slant rhyme in the question “How many times did you throw up?” (“Hányszor hánytál?”), the innocuous sounding name for the painful stinging nettles in her backyard (csalán)... and the word for popcorn,
which amazingly enough sounded like corn itself, reaching its microwaved climax. Pattogatott kukorica.

Bori, even more unexposed to Americans than I was to Hungarians, laughed at almost all my jokes. If I landed one particularly well she would lean into me, shaking, her face buried in the nook of her elbow. And for a second, it would sound like sobbing.

Rutgers—Camden

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I did not get the same kind of laugh from the National Book Award-nominee when I made my joke to her. But then, this joke wasn’t about Hungarian popcorn, it was about the Hungarian Holocaust.

She’d given a guest lecture at my graduate program which touched briefly on research done in Hungary, and afterwards, I approached her to discuss it. That segued into a conversation about my Hungarian ancestry. I asked her if she’d ever visited.

“I haven’t,” she said. “I’ve heard it’s beautiful. But no, never been.” Then after a pause she added: “I have been to Poland, though.”

“Oh yeah? I’ve never gone there,” I said. “But a lot of my family did.”

“Ah,” she said, and then we both went quiet.
It was rude of her, to not laugh at my joke, but then, a perfunctory chuckle would’ve been ruder still. This was a social zugzwang I’d created for her, a trap that with even a modicum of foresight, I could’ve avoided laying down. I imagine my decision to joke about the death of family members at Auschwitz was mostly about flexing my right to make such jokes in the first place. That, as a third-generation descendant of Holocaust survivors I was reclaiming some historical familial pain as my own, thus imbuing my family’s victim status with comedic power. Making someone else squirm was celebration of that power.

Dark comedy has a rich history with the Jews. In Elie Wiesel’s memoir, Night, he wrote about the gallows humor as it existed in the concentration camps:

“In Treblinka, where a day’s food was some stale bread and a cup of rotting soup, one prisoner cautions a fellow inmate against gluttony. ‘Hey Moshe, don’t overeat. Think of us who will have to carry you.’”

But even if those at the camps did make such jokes, what gives me the right to make them? Unlike those Jews, I never endured a continental genocide. I grew up in America, a white man. To say I’m using humor to reclaim power for myself, as a Jew in the American northeast, is disingenuous; Jews here are safe, fully assimilated: there’s no power to reclaim. A Jew telling a Holocaust joke in New Jersey as a way to overcome oppression is mimicry, an inauthentic echo,
like a small-scale Elvis Presley routine, only instead of appropriating rhythm and blues, I’m appropriating the rhetorical device of reappropriation— alluding to a pain of othering that I don’t actually experience.

Not that I was thinking about any of this when I made my joke. I wasn’t thinking at all. People who joke do so by connecting dots almost reflexively: that’s why so many funny people laugh at their own wisecracks; they too are hearing the jokes for the first time, same as the listener. So whether my Holocaust joke was right or wrong was tangential to its more core truth; that it had been a conversational tic, that I was taught how to make these kinds of jokes as a child.

**Stony Brook, New York**

**Summer 1988**

We were up in our room with the door closed, while downstairs mom and dad were doing whatever it is grownups do when they leave their children’s sight.

I had just turned five; my brother, Ben, was six. After years of bouncing around—from Hungary to West Germany to England to Canada—my dad had gotten a visa to America and a decent job on Long Island, where we would stay for the next several years.
Ben wheeled my chair out from behind the desk to the middle of the room. There was no mirror here, but I didn’t need to watch him work. He was a big boy. I knew he’d give me a haircut that would make me proud.

My very first haircut: I was going to be a big boy, too. Ben sheared through my soft locks with speed and precision. My golden brown curls tumbled to the hardwood floor, where we swept them into the dustbin. That big pile of hair looked like a chocolate cake, I remember thinking, even then: it was my first memory and my first simile.

Downstairs, my mother suspected trouble. We were being far too quiet. She came up and entered the room just as we finished sweeping. She had a funny look on her face when she pulled me into the bathroom, where, over and over, she ran her fingers through my brother’s masterpiece while peering closely.

“Oh,” was all she offered. “Oh.”

Ben thought it looked great; according to Mom it was a little uneven. The next day she took me to the barbershop, where the barber attempted to correct the problem through razed earth, his electric clippers eviscerating my remaining locks and bringing my head to military trim. Despite his efforts, there were still bald patches in the places where Ben had cut down to the skin.

My mother didn’t like appearing in public with me that summer. With my
coke-bottle thick eyeglasses, I hadn’t been the cutest kid even before the haircut. Now I was a walking display of parental negligence, my hair a neon “bad mother” sign affixed to my head. Even worse, this haircut fiasco had occurred a few weeks before my parent’s first trip back to Hungary with kids in tow. They’d wanted to show me off.

Hours after landing in Budapest, we walked into my grandmother’s apartment high in the Castle District, through the fecund courtyard and up the narrow white marble steps. The air in the building was cool; it carried that subtle scent all old buildings have, a sweet must seeping through the thick stone walls.

Mom knocked, and the heavy black wooden door at the top of the stairs opened. A slender middle-aged redhead with perfect teeth and a wide smile knelt to eye level with me and touched my patchy head, where, eyes twinkling, she offered:

“You look just like a little Auschwitz boy!”

My mother buried her face in her hands. My grandmother, Magda, giggled. I didn’t know what the joke was, but I giggled, too.

Letenye, Hungary

September 1935
Because the war so devastated my family, and because my family uses such irreverent humor, I’d always assumed a causal link: that the jokes were an imprint of the atrocities, like an arm tattoo. But when I interviewed my grandmother later, it was clear that my ancestors were laughing about hardship long before the rise of the Third Reich.

Take the story she once related to me about her grandmother, Irén Steiner, stealing from Magda’s grandpa.

They’d been shouting in German, so Magda couldn’t understand them.

They always argued in German when they didn’t want the six-year-old to understand. There was no other way; in their single-story redbrick house, Mór and Irén only had two rooms: the kitchen and the all-purpose den, each of which was in earshot of the other.

They were in the kitchen, in the golden light of the autumn afternoon, where Mór (tall, redheaded, attractive) always took his lunch break. The shop where he fixed watches was a short walk away. Irén had made a hearty soup from mushrooms she’d foraged by the river. While they bickered Magda’s hand trembled as she tried to lift her spoon. She’d been struggling to control the shakes in her right arm ever since her parents and brother had gone to Budapest to live in a one-room apartment two months prior, leaving her to the care of her grandparents in Leteye, a quiet village near Hungary’s southwestern border with
Croatia. The trembles in her hand would grow more violent over time, incapacitating her writing and eventually bringing her school year to an end.

After finishing his soup, Mór drank a glass of red wine. Then he drank another. Drowsy with pleasure, he left the kitchen and entered the den, dragging his chair with him to the bedside. He hung his wool overcoat on the chair back and lay atop the covers, putting his dirty feet onto the chair to avoid changing into his indoor-only clothing for the post-meal siesta.

When his breathing became steady. Irén crept up and slithered her hand into the jacket pocket, retrieving his wallet and removing the money she needed. She and her granddaughter looked at one another. With her brown hair tightly braided into a crown atop her head, Irén looked as beautiful as the Empress Elisabeth of Vienna. Magda giggled, and then covered her mouth with her steady hand. Irén burst into a broad smile, eyes laughing.

Later that fall, on Rosh Hashanah, Magda lit the candles and drew the curtains. She got to miss school that day, much to her classmates’ envy. Mór took the day off work as well, and the two walked together down the wide avenue that cut through the center of town. A gypsy who lived in the nearby tent city approached them with a basket of fresh grayling pressed under a protective canopy of leaves. Mór bought two and the pair headed home, where Irén cleaned and cooked their holiday meal.
Even after Magda reunited with her parents in Budapest, she would continue to return to Letenye for years every summer, even during the war: to see her grandparents, to feed the ducks, to pet the backyard rabbits that would tomorrow be served in stew. In the spring of 1944 it would all come to an end: Mór and Irén would be sent to a ghetto in the city of Nagykanizsa, then onward to Auschwitz where – deemed too old to perform meaningful labor – they’d be gassed upon arrival. There was no official notice of their deaths. They just never came home. Later, when people learned of the concentration camps, Magda, a teenager, put one and one together.

That was Hungary in 1944: where the trains spelled death, where the roads spelled death. The cities were blackened with bombshells, the bridges of Budapest air-raided into the Danube. The land a prison, only the rivers offered promise: invigorating and cold and full of life, rushing to some far-off sea, away from the problems destroying Europe.

Friendly’s Family Restaurant (Belmont, Massachusetts)

1997

“Can we have a look at the dessert menu?” the overweight American asked the waitress.

My father looked at the family of four at the table next to ours, then back
to us.

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea,” my father said, making no attempt to keep his voice down. “I mean, that family really doesn’t look like they need any dessert. I would say the last thing any of them need is dessert.” I choked back laughter by forcing my mouth down onto the straw of my soft drink. I knew that if I laughed I would give it away.

There were four of them at the table in question: ma, pa, son, and daughter: all jumbo-sized.

“They only make them like that in America, right you guys?” my father asked.

“I mean, sure, there are fat people in other parts of the world... but American fat: boy, that is something truly special.”

“What do you think?” he asked, shifting gears, directing his attention to me and my brother. “Should they get dessert? Yes or no.”

“Oh, leave it alone,” my mother said. “You’re being so rude.”

“Vera,” my father said, my mom’s name a complete sentence. He looked at her, and she tried to give him a stern look back, for our benefit, but I knew she liked this game, too. This is one of the few privileges they as immigrants had: to be able to use their mother tongue to make fun of the native-born.

Because when a Hungarian talks shit at a Friendly’s in Belmont, Massachusetts,
no one understands a single word.

A quick primer on the Hungarian language: it’s Uralic, which means it part of a linguistic family comprised of 38 actively spoken tongues, most of which are esoteric, all of which (save Hungarian) are located in far northern Eurasia.

Linguistically, Hungarian’s closest relatives are: Mansi, which is spoken by the 1,000 Mansi people who live in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug of western Siberia; and Khanty, which is spoken by 12,000 Khants. The Khants also live in Khanty-Mansi, as well as the neighboring region of Yamalo-Nenets.

Uralic is an uncommon language family in Europe; 95% of Europeans speak either a Germanic, Italic, or Balto-Slavic language, all of which fall under the larger Indo-European language umbrella. What this means is that nearly all Europeans (and one billion Asians, for that matter) speak something that descended from the Proto-Indo-European language, which emerged around 3500 BC on the Pontic-Caspian steppe. That’s a vast prairie land that crosses from Eastern Europe into Central Asia.

There’s much debate about who the Proto-Indo-European speakers were. Some archeologists believe they were a single nomadic tribe that conquered the steppe after taming the horse. Others believe they were a loose coalition of several peoples that interacted with one another across those prehistoric plains.

But while there’s room to debate whether this was one tribe or several,
there’s little doubt that they spoke a single common language, which was the antecedent to most of the Western languages spoken today. We know this because of the shared rules governing these languages: for example, from England to India almost all languages use what’s known as an “Indo-European ablaut”—words change grammatical form via differentiation in one root vowel (e.g. English: “ride, rode”; Spanish “viajo, viajé”).

So Indo-European languages overlap: that’s why the Portuguese can understand the Spanish, why Luxembourghish sounds a hell of a lot like German, and why everyone (including linguists) would swear that the Croats and the Serbs are speaking the same language, no matter how much patriots in those countries insist that it isn’t so. It’s also why an Indo-European speaker could be fluent in almost any other continental language within 6-10 months of immersion.

But Hungarian is not an Indo-European language, and the unfamiliar rules and vocabulary leave other Europeans lost. There are eighteen noun cases, e.g., “house” is ház, “from the house” is házbol, “my houses” is házaim, etc. The words also agglutinate: you can always make a word longer by cramming more ideas into it, like clowns into a car. That’s how you end up with words like “megszentségteleníthetetlenségeskedéseitekért”, which means “for your [plural] continued behavior, which is not desecrated”.
Not only is it difficult to learn, it’s of no use to anyone (save the Hungarians). There are 12-13 million Hungarian speakers globally, 10 million of whom live in Hungary, a middling Central European economy. An additional 1.5 million reside in Transylvania, a part of western Romania that was formerly Hungarian territory. There are a couple hundred thousand speakers in Hungary’s other bordering countries, and one hundred thousand and change speak the language in the United States.

More to the point, in my hometown of Belmont, Massachusetts (pop. 24,729), there were exactly four Hungarian speakers within municipal limits while I was growing up: my mother Vera, my brother Ben, my father Joseph, and I.

Since we were the only Hungarians speakers in Belmont—my home from age six until college—I came to see Hungarian as a language that only existed within the four walls of my house. It was the language of love, of intimacy, of making fun of people in public. And for the most part, that’s how it remains for me: a complex code that, when spoken, rings the Pavlovian bell for family.

This creates cognitive dissonance when I visit Budapest. Or, as I told my parents my first time abroad:

“I can’t believe it: here, even the taxi drivers speak Hungarian.”

It’s like sustained déjà vu, hearing the language on every street corner: as if I’ve always lived here, for centuries, across several past lives. There’s a version
of me who memorized these street names, who knows all these customs, who
never offends old ladies by failing to use the honorific.

There are other consequences to the mainstreaming of my mother
tongue: less romantic ones, more straightforward... namely, that I can no longer
comfortably talk shit in public.

There are several reasons for this. For one, I’m not as confident that
Hungarians won’t understand me: a lot more Hungarians learn English than the
other way around. But even if I knew for certain that the subject of my joke
didn’t speak English, I still wouldn’t feel right reveling in their obliviousness.

Because while I believe that it’s my right as a Hungarian in America to make fun
of Americans in Hungarian, I don’t believe those rights are retained in reverse
when I cross the Atlantic. For me to make such jokes about the dumb local
Hungarians would be a betrayal, selling them out to the more powerful empire
I’ve had the good fortune to become a citizen of. I’m not sure why I feel this
strong sense of loyalty, given that it was actually the Hungarian people that
betrayed me and mine, which is the reason I speak English in the first place.

Debrecen, Hungary

August 11, 2016

“This isn’t a cabaret,” my father said to me over the phone. “It’s the
Dad was frustrated. After a summer in Hungary, it was my last day before a flight back to the States, where my final year of graduate school awaited. My father had been in Hungary that summer as well, but he’d had to return to his home in New York City mere days before the season’s big event: a stumbling stone installation in the eastern Hungarian city of Debrecen.

The stumbling stone project is a Holocaust memorial created by German sculptor Gunter Demnig, who travels across Europe laying brass-plated concrete cubes into the sidewalk in front of the last freely chosen residences of Jews who were rounded up and killed. Each stumbling stone bears the birth and death data of an executed Jew.

It’s a decentralized memorial, meant to disrupt: pedestrians across 22 European countries (and counting) are regularly stumbling across reminders of the continent’s worst genocide. Like all good Germans, Gunter works in bulk, installing the stones one city at a time, en masse. He would plant nineteen stones that day in Debrecen. Our patrilineal line would receive six of them.

Dad was upset because due to his absence he had to relinquish control over the family speech, which would be made in front of his father’s childhood home. Speaking duties fell to his nephew, my cousin Gábor.

Gábor’s wanted to keep the tone of the memorial light: a little less
Holocaust-y, out of a fatherly concern for his two young daughters. Plus, he’d always been a clown: when I’d been a college student studying abroad in Budapest, he’d assigned everyone in the family Christian aliases, which we used with one another at the bars, where we pretended to be proletariat goyim. Now, despite being 42 years old—with a head full of grey and an ample potbelly—he still retained his sense of mischief. Earlier in the summer, he’d suggested we eat ecstasy and vandalize government buildings with slogans condemning the administration.

“You need to talk to him,” my father told me on the phone. “You’re a writer. He will listen to your feedback. He must be stopped.”

“I definitely will,” I told my father, knowing full well that I definitely wouldn’t.

I love my father, respect my father, but when it comes to the Holocaust, Gábor and I are of the same mindset: don’t be so heavy about it; it’s dramatic enough. On the morning of the installation, we even joked over breakfast about Gunter’s fee. The stones cost EUR 150 each to install, and we marveled at the thought of a German artist charging the families of people that other Germans had executed.

Our conclusion: that it was hard, as Jews, to knock that kind of hustle.
The circular saw whined as it penetrated the pavement in front of the enormous black wooden gate at 14 Heart Street. Behind the gate stood three small wooden houses and a shared courtyard. Several dozen Jews milled about, a smattering of news outlets documenting the action, two police cars bookending the block to make sure neo-Nazi protestors couldn’t get too close.

It was a pretty street: surprising, given how unsightly the rest of the city was. In World War II, 50% of Debrecen’s buildings were destroyed under artillery fire. Now there was nothing to remind Debrecen’s inhabitants of its former affluence save a smattering of churches, the rest of the city concrete Soviet tenements and cheap strip malls.

Gunter is a portly middle-aged man, with a trim white beard, a wide-brimmed cowboy hat, and a red bandana that he keeps choker-tight around his neck. He’s installed tens of thousands of stumbling stones since beginning the project 24 years ago and he doesn’t appear to be slowing down, despite his advanced age of 69. Talk about German guilt.

After he finished with the saw, Gunter moved on to the hammer drill, its blunt metal spike ripping and removing the top layer of the sidewalk in a single motion, like a child pulling off a scab.

Debrecen’s Jewry came and went in a blink. They were first allowed into the city in 1814 and within ten years had the right to purchase property. By the
beginning of the 20th century, they constituted 10% of Debrecen’s population.

My great-great grandparents, Simon Schön and Fani Kaiser met in Debrecen. By 1872, they had three children: Hermin, Sándor, and my great-grandfather Arthur. All three would be gassed at Auschwitz in their elder years: glovers and glaziers forced into early retirement by the Jewish laws of 1938, then onto cattle cars and into the showers in July of 1944, three months before the Soviets liberated the city.

Arthur had married Terez Engländér (my great-grandmother, also killed at Auschwitz) and fathered two sons, György and János. Those two were conscripted into forced labor, digging trenches for the Nazis on the eastern front with Ukraine. János died from exhaustion. György survived, got married, and continued the family line.

With a trowel, Gunter scooped up the shattered pavement his drill had broken apart and inserted the three stumbling stones: Arthur, János, and Terez, all in a neat straight row, tight as sardines. He tapped at the stones with a rubber-headed mallet, forcing them deeper into place.

“The little boy in the middle,” he said to me, in English. “The child always in the middle. You know why?”

I didn’t.

“For it to be like when he is walking with the parents.”
Gunter sifted hydraulic cement powder into the cracks between the stones, then doused them in water via the dirty white nozzle of a plastic gas can, repeating the steps several times until the cement began to set. The cantor sang, his baritone filling the street and intermingling with the rapid shutter of newspaper cameras.

I looked at my cousin Gábor, who gave me a tight smile.

“"I have dumplings," he said, and looking into his eyes I realized that this was the Hungarian equivalent of English’s "lump in the throat."

Gábor stood before the house and gave a choked speech, maudlin and humorless—my father would’ve approved. When he finished, his mother dropped white carnations on our stones and lit two votive candles in front of the gate of the family house. The homeowner, a square woman with a stern haircut, cried silently from a balcony window, then let us into the courtyard while the crowd dispersed.

“I won’t let anyone step on them,” the little plump lady told me, and she was so earnest that I didn’t have the heart to explain that people stumbling over these stones was sort of the whole point.

In the courtyard of the house, the lawn was green and patchy, and the homeowner told us the bits and pieces that she knew about my great-grandparents, secondhand hearsay: that they’d been the landlords; that Terez...
used to pick walnuts and peaches from their orchard and leave them in a basket for the tenants to snack on; that they’d made wine casks and mirrors in the basement; that they apparently didn’t mind so much if you paid rent well after the fifth.

The rest of my family continued on their way: with nineteen stones on the day’s docket Gunter was working at a breakneck pace, and it was tacitly understood amongst the families that attending only your own ancestors’ installations was in poor taste.

But I decided to stand, by myself, at the stones, away from the crowd, to try to feel them and the house in a deeper silence, to imagine my blood living here. The little square homeowner stood next to me, but she had the good sense to not get chatty.

The silence didn’t last long. A Hungarian man in his early thirties came up to us. He was tall, with short hair and a five o’clock shadow, blue jeans and army boots. He looked down at the candles while hand-rolling a cigarette.

“What’s this for?” the man asked the woman.

“They’re stumbling stones,” she said. “For the Jewish family who lived here.”

“A war thing,” said the man, nodding. “Did you know them?”

“No,” she said. “They died in the war. I just live here now.” Then,
indicating towards me, she added, “They were his family.”

“Do you live here, then?” the man asked.

“No,” I replied. I could hear my voice getting short, defensive. I didn’t like this guy, I just hadn’t figured out why yet. “My family moved to America.”

“The thing is,” the man said. “A lot of people think that all these Jews died in the Holocaust, but the truth of it is that only the poor ones died.”

The man licked the cigarette paper, zipped it shut.

“The people who lived here weren’t that poor,” said the woman.

“Yes, but they were, relatively speaking,” said the man. “I mean, rich and poor, that’s relative. You must admit, money is relative.”

“I suppose so,” the woman said.

“Like you,” said the man, returning his attention my way. “Your family is in America. So your family: they got away. They were rich.”

“Not really. My family left Hungary in 1980, well after the war.” I indicated downward, to the stones. “They did not get away.”

I bid the homeowner adieu and headed up Heart Street towards the main square, my face in my phone as I texted Gábor, asking how to get to the next site. He replied that he was in a car and would pick me up shortly. I walked briskly, but the man, I noticed, was tailing me. He caught me at the corner.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I don’t mean to be a bother, but do you have
some spare change?”

“I’m sorry?”

“A dollar or two,” he said. “It would help.”

“I don’t,” I mumbled, caught off guard. Then Gábor pulled up in his luxury sedan and I felt ashamed because the vehicle revealed my obvious truth: that it wasn’t that I didn’t have money, I just didn’t have money for him. And I wanted to explain that it wasn’t because I was cheap or heartless: it was because he was an antisemite, and even if he didn’t know that he was an antisemite, even if his antisemitism was born out of naiveté… well, it still didn’t change how I felt about it.

But I had neither the desire to get into it, nor the desire to give him my cash. So I just entered the car and exited his life, thinking: one more reason for him to believe that those cheap moneyed Jews don’t give a shit about anyone but their own.

Budapest, Hungary

June 2005

According to Bori, that kind of Hungarian Jewish ethno-class guilt stuff is overthinking it—some people just want to make a buck off of you, and it’s best not to get mired in the contradictory power dynamics when that’s your starting
It’d come up in pillow talk, after an hour of tender dry humping on the twin bed of my dorm room, from which my brother Ben had courteously sexiled himself.

It was the end of my junior year in college, which I’d spent at the Balassi Bálint Institute in Budapest. The BBI offers a tuition-free year for Hungarian citizens who grew up abroad. After intensively studying Hungarian language, Hungarian history, Hungarian literature, Hungarian everything, I’d passed my final exams and Bori and I were reuniting just in the nick of time, dispatching with our fidelity to our respective partners to indulge in some nostalgic last-minute snogging before my flight back to the States. We’d been doing some iteration of this dance for close to a decade.

After making out we took an amble amongst Buda’s leafy hills, towards Bori’s tram ride home. The trees were in bloom, and we found respite from the heat in the shade of a chestnut near the train station. I told her about a negative interaction I’d had with a gypsy, earlier in the semester, at the very same tram stop. The gypsy had asked me for a cigarette; when I told him I didn’t have one to spare, he’d said, “Well, you should; I’m a gypsy and you’re a Jew.” Then he’d given me the finger.

“Oh, he just wanted a cigarette,” Bori said, her cadence slow, sweet,
sensual. “You can’t take it too hard. It was just his way of trying to get what he wanted.”

“Maybe,” I said. “I don’t know.”

“I do. In my experience, that’s just the way gypsies are.”

Bori and I had never talked about the gypsies. We’d never talked about anything political.

“You can’t write off an entire group,” I said.

“I didn’t used to think so, either,” she replied, her voice petting me, smoothing my feathers even as her words continued to jar. “But then there was this one time when a gypsy woman stopped me in the street to read my fortune.”

She shared the anecdote, in which she was cheated out of a couple bucks.

“That’s when I realized that, as a group of people, gypsies have structured their entire culture around cheating and stealing from us Hungarians.”

I should have told her then that gypsies were Hungarians, just like Jews were Hungarians, that these ethnic minorities had lived in the country for several centuries and that anyone who spoke this obscure little language was self-evidently Hungarian… but I was too shocked to think any of this at the time, much less say it.
Her words hung in the space between us. She stared at me, her eyes still so kind, comfortable in the silence, the gypsy comment suspended like fruit that I was welcome to pluck, examine, consume. I wanted to be outraged but was aroused instead; it was like her bigotry was a vulnerability, which itself is always an aphrodisiac. I kissed her.

Oh, my Bori, my innocent racist Bori, my forever summer love. To me, your casual Hungarian racism does not matter. When you say it in that voice, whatever you say, it will always be childlike and clean.

I kissed her one more time as the mustard yellow #61 tram pulled up, then squeezed her hand and watched her slip away when the doors slid open shut, carrying her off to Moscow Square and her happy healthy right-wing Catholic life.

I walked back into my dorm and headed up to the third floor and into the kitchen. Four Australian-Hungarians were decorating a cake. They’d already covered it in chocolate frosting and were now applying additional red icing, making a neat necklace of crimson beading around the cake’s edge. On its face, they’d drawn a swastika.

“To celebrate the end of the year,” one of the Australian students said to me. He was a big guy, gregarious. We’d always gotten along. He seemed to be
searching my face for something. A challenge? Acquiescence? A laugh, to tell them I thought it was fine? I wasn’t sure if they knew I was Jewish. I was too exhausted to care.

“All right,” I offered dumbly, then headed back to my dorm room. Ben was at his desk, rolling a joint.

“Nazis,” I declared.

“Who?” he said. “Bori?”

“No,” I said. Then, after a moment: “Well, maybe. But I’m not worried about her.”

“Because she’s hot?” he asked.

“Well, partly. Also...”

“Because you think she might fuck you?”

“Right.”

“If I had to rank all the kinds of Nazis in order of evil, I think that’s probably the least offensive kind,” he said.

We walked to the Garden of Philosophy, a small green clearing up the hill from the school. It was a beautiful park, named for the bronze monument of five great thinkers—Abraham, Jesus, Buddha, Lao Tsu, and Akenaten—who stood in a circle around a small pool, their deep thoughts occasionally interrupted by Ben and I when we came their way to get high.
Ben sparked the joint, and as we smoked it we continued to joke: about the cake and casual racism, the arbitrary nature of it, the way baby-faced Ben could pass as goyim unless he went out in public with me: then he would become one of “them,” his cover blown.

“My big Jew of a brother,” Ben said. “I can’t take you anywhere!”

There was a beautiful view from the Garden of Philosophy, one that reminded me of why I loved the city so much, with clear sightlines to the oxidized copper dome of the Royal Palace in Buda and across the river to the twin Neo-classical bell towers of St. Stephen’s Basilica in Pest. In a matter of weeks, the semester would be over and we’d be free to return to America, where this kind of thing didn’t ever happen to us. Meanwhile, here we were: making jokes, waiting for the time to run out, laughing, trying to acknowledge the horror without being buried by it. Given the circumstances, it was the best we could do.
She texted me while the sculptor was sawing through the sidewalk. The pavement came up in chunks and my aunt wept silently as he hollowed out the ground while the children too young to understand laughed up the street.

I knew it was Bori. I was glad to get the text, not just because I loved her but also because it spelled a distraction from the ceremony. To my dismay, I’d been bored. Then I’d felt ashamed, being excited by the text, because it reminded me that I’d been bored, and a good Jew would not be bored, not even a little, on an occasion as important as this.

I was in Debrecen, Hungary’s second city. I’d come to attend a “stumbling stone” installation; since 1992, German artist Gunter Demnig has nestled approximately 50,000 small brass cobblestones into sidewalks across Europe, in front of the homes of Jews who perished in the Holocaust. Each one is a personalized monument, a “here lived X” for unwitting passersby.

I’m not a big Holocaust tourist, but I felt it my obligation to be in attendance. I had six dead Holocaust relatives getting stones placed that morning: my great-grandfather Arthur, my great-grandmother Terez, my granduncle János, my great-grandfather’s brother Sándor, my great-grandfather’s brother’s son László, and my great grandfather’s brother’s wife Mariska (who wasn’t related to me by blood, but had married into the family and was getting a stone alongside several people who were).
It was the summer I turned 33, between years at graduate school. I’d been reporting for The Budapest Times, writing on the rabidly intolerant right-wing administration running the country. The following day, I’d be on a flight back to the States.

The day was hot and humid with intermittent downpours and we all carried raincoats that we occasionally put on over our formal wear.

Bori, meanwhile, was on a beach in sunny Croatia, camping with her husband and kids.

“We need to talk,” she wrote. “You can’t just run away every time the conversation gets difficult.”

We’d known each other since infancy. Our parents had been colleagues in the 1970s, programmers behind the Iron Curtain. But whereas mine left the country in the early 80s and raised my brother and I in the West, hers had stayed behind. The moved panned out for both families—my parents prospered in the States and ended up with a white picket fence in the suburbs of the American northeast, a magical place where they as Jews were suddenly considered white. Her parents prospered too: in the early 1990s—when capitalism returned to Hungary—they raked it in.

A wealthy conservative Catholic Hungarian carrying on an affair with a leftist Hungarian-American Jew. We were an unlikely pair, out of step with the
times. Ever since the conservative coalition’s landslide victory in 2010, Hungary had been hyperpolarized. Hundreds of thousands of liberal-minded citizens fled the country while neo-Nazis became the third largest party in parliament.

But our love wasn’t political; it was nostalgic. We’d been at this for a long time now: the summer after eighth grade, we’d spent a week at her lake house and she taught me about the idiosyncrasies of Hungarian etiquette. Then, when we were sixteen, she came to America and attended high school in Green Bay for a year. She visited me and my folks that summer, and I’d almost gathered the nerve to kiss her late one night on my parents’ red leather sofa. In the years that followed, each subsequent encounter was more self-referential than the previous. Half of the time, we were just talking about how we were still doing this dance, all these years later, and do you remember that time, on the red leather sofa?

I wrote back.

“I’m at the stumbling stone installation. I can’t talk right now.”

Bori was upset with me. After decades of flirtation we’d finally fucked at a two-star hotel by the airport. She’d escaped from beneath her husband’s eye to “spend the night with mother.” It’d been awkward; at arrival, I told the hotel receptionist that we’d be checking out within three hours, and he shot me a look that I carried into the poorly lit room.
“Which bed do you want?” I’d asked and she’d said, “Whichever bed you’re in,” because Bori was always unapologetically earnest, a quality that’s endeared her to me more and more as I’ve grown jaded.

Later when I ran my hands over her slender body and entered her she’d started sobbing. “Why are you crying?” I’d asked and she’d answered, “Why do you think?” in her soft voice, the one that never lifted into rage no matter the stakes.

A week later, she was on her Croatian beach thinking about leaving her husband, and she wanted to know if I would be available should she pull that trigger. She wanted a guarantee. This was the conversation I’d “walked away from.”

“I’m sorry,” she wrote back. “Here I was, getting worked up about you and me, and I’m interrupting you, doing something so much more important.”

I didn’t see it that way, but Bori’s misperception reflected a person I wished I were, so I let the fiction lie. I wanted the stumbling stone ceremony to be more important than a love affair. I wanted to be the kind of Jew who listened to the cantor wail the Kaddish and cried along with the rest of the congregation. Instead I was the kind who’d sat through services at the synagogue grumbling about the lack of air conditioning.

I was envious of Jews who wept for the dead, Jews who felt the tragedy
deep in their bones, because they were more alive than I was. They were emotionally engaged and capable of seeing outside of themselves, while I was the Jewish equivalent of a dude-bro falling asleep at the opera.

I was bored of Bori too, bored of our love drama, while wanting desperately not to be.

I didn’t mind that she was married; I had no qualms about destroying another man’s marriage. All’s fair in love and war. But I didn’t like that she had two boys. They were young, three and one.

Earlier in the summer we’d gone to the beach at her lake house, and then afterwards to the supermarket. Her husband was in Budapest; I was going to cook the clan dinner, spend the night.

“Are you allowed to eat that?” she’d asked when I picked out a pork loin. I laughed because she was trying to be Jew-sensitive. Afterwards, on our walk back to her place—me pushing the stroller—she commented on appearances.

“Everyone must be looking at us and thinking, ‘There’s a happy family,’” she said, leaning into my shoulder.

I glanced at the infant in the stroller and the toddler on his trike. They had the same sandy blond hair as their mother. Meanwhile, I looked… well, I looked like a big Jew. No, people would be thinking, “Look at that nice beta man raising that pretty Aryan woman’s children.” And if I stayed with her they would
be right to think it. Their father—a prosperous judge in his early thirties—would be an eligible bachelor and thus allowed to further propagate while I politely removed myself from the gene pool to be his kids’ babysitter.

I know this is only one of many ways to see that situation—I could have also interpreted her betrayal and subsequent availability as proof of my masculinity—something to make me feel valued rather than ashamed. But I didn’t. With women, shame is always my lens.

With Bori, the boys—as people—weren’t a problem. Nor did I flinch at the prospective burden they represented. It was the shame of what it might say about me if I took that role—of where I would then sit in the world’s public pecking order.

After the stones were put into the ground before the old family house, my cousin Gábor gave a weepy speech about the deceased. To my perverse satisfaction I felt a lump in my throat. I’d been hoping for grief but had dreaded it wouldn’t come.

I didn’t write back to Bori until the following day. I didn’t believe the ceremony earned me an embargo from her complaints. It wasn’t as if I was at an actual funeral, for a family member I’d known—I’d been moved, but not unmoored. But Bori didn’t have to know that, and I was happy for the respite from the drama. I took advantage of a truth that I’ve long known: that as a third-
generation descendant, when I bring up the Holocaust no one can ever say shit.

* * *

There’s a photograph from the summer of 1940 of my grandfather, György Schön, stretched out in a dark bathing suit on a grassy knoll. He’s 26, clean-shaven, with a full head of short curly hair. It’s an old picture, but for me a new discovery—growing up, the only pictures of grandpa I saw were from when he was already middle-aged. When my father gave me a copy of the bathing suit photo I realized what should’ve always been obvious: that there’d been a time when my ancestors were younger than I am today.

György has no chest hair, a visible ribcage, and small dark nipples. He’s turned to his side and has propped himself up on his left elbow, cocking his head towards the camera, his eyes beckoning while a lit cigarette dangles in his right hand.

It feels discordant that he struck such a saucy pose while war raged across Europe. The Hungarian parliament had already begun passing Anti-Jewish legislation, a series of measures that would slowly and methodically choke my family off from resources, and then eradicate those who weren’t quick enough to escape the noose. For my grandfather the second anti-Jewish Law of 1939 was the most complicating—it limited Jewish physicians to 6% employment. Only ten years prior, 38% of Debrecen’s physicians had been Jews. I can only imagine
how frustrated he must have felt, watching that law get passed right as he
finished medical school.

From there, things only got worse. In 1942, the Ministry of Defense
mobilized all Jewish men of military age (21-39) into the Military Labor System.
In other Axis nations, Jews were denied entry into the Armed Forces as a means
of segregation. But the Hungarian Military Labor System converted the
government’s disregard for Jewish life into strategy.

György and his younger brother János went by cattle car to Ukraine,
where tens of thousands were dying at the hands of military leadership—some
marched across minefields so as to clear them for the troops; others starved on
bare-bones rationing. It’s hard for me to understand the rationale in drafting my
grandfather into the Military Labor System. If the goal was to exploit Jewish
labor for the war effort, it’s obvious that a doctor could be forced into more
strategically valuable work than digging trenches.

All told, more than 50,000 Hungarian Jews died in Military Labor Service,
or about 10% of the half-million who perished in the Holocaust. In my family
tree, two of our nineteen lost died performing labor on the front lines of Nazi
Europe. János was one of the fallen, succumbing to exhaustion in his older
brother György’s arms.

Their parents, my great-grandparents (Arthur Schön and his wife Teréz)
suffered a less protracted death: on July 1, 1944, when the Debrecen ghetto was liquidated, they were shipped to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where—deemed too old to work—they were led upon arrival to Bunker 2 with a group of 700 and told to disrobe for disinfection and de-lousing. The gates were locked and the bunker flooded with Zyklon B, a cyanide-based asphyxiant that, when inhaled, halts the uptake of oxygen into the cells by binding to iron in the bloodstream. Their breathing quickened, their heart rates slowed, and less than a minute later they were dead. Arthur was 65; Teréz was 52. The gas chamber is one of the enduring images of the Holocaust’s horrors, but when I think about the Military Labor System I can’t help but wonder if my great-grandparents weren’t lucky, compared to their younger son.

The word in Hungarian for brother is testvér, which has always struck me, because it’s a compound word—from test, which means “body,” and vér, which means “blood.” Body blood. It’s as if the word declares: See here, technically a different body, yes, but the same blood running through it.

Following János’s death, György embraced that idea of fraternal sameness and took it farther—after returning to Hungary to find himself without any family, he changed his surname to János. Now his name—those first words he’d give to new acquaintances in the post-war world—was an epitaph for the fallen body blood, to be repeated ad nauseam until he died of a heart attack at
the age of 65 several years before I was born.

Ah, but this photograph of György predates all that! Instead of freezing on the Ponto-Caspian steppe, see here how he simmers! One leg reaching out, grass pushing up from between his outstretched toes! A dark bathing suit pulled up at the inner thigh, subtly outlining a virile cock! So flirtatious, this snapshot!

So bold!

“I’m yours,” his eyes seem to tell the camera, full of dirty mischief. “If you’ve got the energy to keep up!”

* * *

I didn’t realize how much I loved my college girlfriend, Victoria, until she humiliated me. We started dating at the beginning of school—at first I’d taken her for granted. Sophomore year I tired of the relationship and dumped her, but then she slept with one of my best friends and the shock of being so easily (and publically) replaced reignited my feelings.

In taking me back she had to put aside her own pride as well, but in my mind our reunification meant that in the battle of wills she’d won. She even made me beg a little.

It was torture, but fitting; the relationship worked best when I spent a lot of time on my knees. A few months after we got back together she gave me my first sex injury—a first-degree burn at a bed-and-breakfast in Prague, where we
were spending winter break.

She’d tested the water on herself first, filling a small ceramic cup from the black electric teakettle, bouncing her finger pads against the steaming surface. My arms were tied to the posts of the bed, but these knots were symbolic: with some struggle, I could break free easily enough. She straddled my body, held my eyes with her own.

“Are you ready?” she asked, her eyes smirking, and although I made my voice so small (“I can be, if that’s what you’d like,”) I did not feel scared. This was my favorite kind of play because I loved the derision—how, in her defilement, she honored me. Victoria—my sweet paramour—poured the water on my inner thigh, the vapor rising like ghosts. I knew right away it was much too hot but instead of screaming I clenched my eyes tight, like at the dentist when they’re poking and my gums start bleeding but I know there’s no point making a fuss because it’s good for me.

“Is it too hot?” she asked, but I didn’t say yes, didn’t say stop, just worked from the vague affirmative, “It’s a little hot.” Like a good dominant she put the cup down on the bedside table and straddled my face to ride to orgasm.

The burn would redden and blister in the coming days. For years the hair wouldn’t grow and when I went out wearing shorts and a breeze came through
my inner thigh felt mentholated. But in that short-term rental in Prague none of this mattered yet, my pain consumed by my pleasure consumed by hers. My abusive goddess: grabbing my hair and twisting tight when she wanted me to lick harder, the entire weight of her body bearing down on my lips so that they cut against my teeth, my hand on my cock to time my orgasm with her own, which I always knew was coming when she began repeating “Mine.”

Oh, what sweet pain, to be your lover’s puppet! Sweet enough to carry us through four years of college, to reduce her defects to inconvenience—that pride! Those infidelities!—none of it kept me from inviting her back to my bed.

There was a shame to being sexually dominated, a self-reckoning that embarrassed me because it contradicted the way I otherwise saw myself: steady, in control, active, aggressive. That is not to say that the prior self-concept was an illusion, shattered by our erotic play—if anything, I felt stronger in public as a result of our sexual dynamic, as if the humiliation were an exercise, my muscles thickening as a result of workouts in surrender—feel the burn.

I realize now that this is my response to shame in all its forms—rather than drain me, moments of humiliation energize, pushing me towards self-improvement. For example, only days before the teakettle incident Victoria and I had been in Budapest, where I was studying abroad. Late one night, we were harassed on a municipal bus.
It was four am and the bus half-empty when the drunks boarded. They parked across from us; the largest of the three men sat opposite me and stared. I looked over: he wore tight blue jeans, laced up leather boots, and a black sweater with the Hungarian crest stitched onto the left breast pocket.

Hungarians always stare—it’s a staring culture—so I tried to ignore Mr. Skinhead’s gaze and continue my conversation with Victoria, when, in Hungarian, Mr. Skinhead said:

“You’re so fucking ugly, goddamnit.”

I looked at him. He sneered.

Victoria kept talking, but her words were now distant static. I tried to act natural—like a tourist, someone unaware they’d been insulted. Reeking of alcohol, Mr. Skinhead bellowed to his compatriots:

“God damn it: So many ugly motherfuckers in this city!”

I stared forward, my fear concentrated into a single point on my forehead, tunneling outwards at the blue plastic seatback in front of me. Victoria, sensing that she was now having a one-sided conversation, asked me what was wrong.

“I’ll tell you later,” I offered meekly.

“The worst part is his beard,” one of the men said. The other two concurred.

My beard: very black, very bushy. Being a college student, I’d let my
beard hit three months growth. But what was wrong with it?

I looked around the bus. The overhead white fluorescent light flickered bright dim bright dim. All the other passengers faced forward; no one seemed in a hurry to intercede.

I considered pulling Victoria off the bus, but was terrified of potential repercussions. Despite how much I hated our proximity to the men, the bus—as a public space—provided safety. They could only do so much on a bus, right? If we got off, what would happen should they follow?

Next stop: Budapest-Déli Railway Terminal. The skinheads moved towards the back door.

“Motherfucker,” Mr. Skinhead said one more time as the doors opened behind my seat.

Then he hit me.

It was an open-handed slap, but because he was behind me I was blindsided, and thus unable to gird myself. The force sent my head into the window with a thunk. I bit my tongue, tasted copper. Then they were gone, laughing into the night, leaving a vacuous silence in their wake.

“Adam,” Victoria said after a long pause. “Adam, are you there? Adam, say something.”

“I’m here.”
She began stroking my leg, holding my hand.

“As you’re so strong, Adam,” she said. She kept repeating this: my name and strength, like by pairing them together in a sentence she could will the feeling into existence for me.

That night I shaved my face clean. In the days that followed, I wrote music. I signed up for a karate class. I wrote a personal essay, in Hungarian, about the experience. The essay was my first published work.

Shame became energy became beneficial product.

I don’t believe that everyone’s shame works to their advantage like this, but I do think that the energized (and thus productive) nature of my shame might have been genetically passed on. There’s evidence that trauma can result in genetic memorization (or epigenetics): that is to say, that a son can be genetically steeled by his father’s hardship. Biologists at Tel Aviv University recently discovered that worms that have been starved and then returned to good health pass on Ribonucleic acid (RNA) to their progeny that makes those next generation worms better equipped to handle starvation.

If that’s true of worms, it follows that it could be true in humans. My grandfather, contending with the constant Jew-shaming that horsewhipped him through the war might have passed to me—via my father—a more productive use of the feeling. This could even explain why I am compelled by erotic
submission—psychoanalysts posit that the eroticization of pain can be a coping mechanism for resolving earlier trauma. For me, the Holocaust might be that trauma, regardless of the fact that it precedes my life by forty years.

This might seem like a stretch to those who do not live with these invisible ghosts, ghosts that poke their heads out at the most inopportune of times: which is to say, immediately before, after, or while getting laid. For example with Victoria I had been worried, before we even got together, about what she might think of my penis. This, too, I blame on Hitler. It was the first month of college, after we’d already started making eyes at one another but before our first kiss. She was in our dorm hallway with a fellow student talking about uncircumcised penises, and I overheard their conversation.

“From what I understand,” the other student said. “It’s a bit like peeling a banana.”

“That is too gross!” Victoria giggled. They riffed on the topic for a while, two beautiful women, segueing into a conversation about the hygiene of uncircumcised penises while I stood by mute.

I wanted to join the conversation, to tell them that there was nothing wrong with uncircumcised penises (or the men who sported them). I wanted to advocate for my fellow uncuts.

“The accumulation of smegma can be easily avoided, if one simply
washes once a day!” I wanted to shout. “And did you know that there are fifty thousand nerve endings in a foreskin?! And no, it looks nothing like a banana!”

Of course I said nothing because doing otherwise would’ve telegraphed that I was uncircumcised. But a few weeks later when Victoria and I began sleeping together the topic inevitably came up.

“There’s nothing wrong with it,” she offered carefully. “I just thought you were Jewish.”

“It’s a Holocaust thing,” I said, and although she didn’t challenge it I spelled it out anyway—that in Hungary Jews stopped circumcising their children after the war, because circumcision was a predominantly Jewish practice there and in the wake of genocide they didn’t wish to out their children.

In that sense, my foreskin is like my last name, János. György chose the name to honor his dead brother, but also because his name needed changing: the year was 1948, and it was clear to György that “Schön” was far too Jewish.

As uncut Jánoses, the thinking went, we might be able to assimilate, to pass as members of the ethnic majority.

And so you see: the legacy of the Holocaust lives on in my underpants.

* * *

György chopped wood in the frigid fog: stone pine and dwarf, cutting up the roots laid deep in the tundra, dragging the timber back towards the
barracks. They lived dozens to a bunk, filthy like rats, but the warmth of those bodies kept things tolerable during the long winter nights.

Unlike the Jews liberated at the camps, György wasn’t allowed to go home after the war. Instead, he was sent from the Ukrainian front to Kirov, a village on the sparse Siberian taiga, five hundred miles south of the Arctic Circle. He would continue to perform forced labor.

After the armistice, the Soviet army had taken several hundred thousand Axis soldiers captive as prisoners of war, bringing them to 476 Gulag labor camps sprinkled throughout the USSR. There were four million incarcerated, and in their wide net of capture, Stalin’s troops took the Hungarian Military Labor Servicemen as well, the unarmed Jewish Hungarians treated no differently than infantry. That meant my grandfather got to trade teams but had to keep playing the same game: that of being held captive not for what he’d done but for who he was. Luckily, unlike in the Nazi camps, the primary purpose of the Gulag was economic exploitation and not ethnic eradication. Russia’s economic system depended on the slave labor of the Gulag—they produced much of the country’s coal, timber, and gold. It was more cost-effective to keep prisoners alive than it was to kill them.

There was still plenty of death, though. On winter nights, temperatures would drop to -30° and prisoners sickened, died.
György carried the bodies with the help of two other men, dragging them just outside the barracks to a pile fifty yards away. They stripped the dead man of his clothing and left him with the others: more than a dozen lined up in a row, head to toe, preserved like meat in the deep freeze. In the spring when the sun came out and the marshland thawed, they would dig a pit and throw the bodies in, but until that day came the land was too frozen to open up.

When he didn’t have to work he took modest meals: hard bread made from watery dough that was blue from the buckwheat flour, thin gruel peppered with rotten salted tomatoes.

And then, when he was fed and resting, György wrote a play.

My cousin Gábor told me of the play one night in Budapest, but he talked about it as if it were forbidden treasure. He’d long wanted to read it but his mother wouldn’t give him permission. But when I asked my father if I could read it, it was in my inbox the next day.

“Don’t go passing this around,” he told me. “Your aunt… I don’t know… she doesn’t want the whole world to see it.” Then, he added: “It’s not very good.”

It was a .pdf scan of yellowed paper and faded purple pen. Even as a digital facsimile it felt magical. The idea that György would have spent his free time in the Gulag penning a play baffled me: not just because of the harsh
conditions, but also because of what I’d assumed about him based on the children he raised. They were the only hint I had as to who my grandfather was. It did not suggest playwright.

My dad is a large man—although he seems to get shorter every day, both because his spine contracts in the winter of his life and because I’m now better capable of scaling the world to myself and have realized that he was never big to begin with, I’m just exceptionally small.

Still, he’s an intimidating 5’9”. When I was growing up he worked from a home office, and occasionally he would talk to a colleague on the phone, conversations that regularly devolved into my father shouting: “This is bullshit! This is total bullshit!” his thick Hungarian accent making “bull-” sound like bool. When I asked my mother who my father was talking to—whether it was a boss or an underling—she would tell me that it didn’t matter, that his rage always trumped office politics. He yelled at everyone: at employers, at employees, at my mother, at my brother. Never at me though. Because his anger didn’t invoke mine, our fights sputtered out quickly. With mother, in the kitchen, it was like twisted music: his voice soloing over her seething silence until she exploded and then it was a vicious duet: alto and bass-baritone, screaming over each other in long strings of garbled Hungarian.

It wasn’t that he was a demon; he just didn’t have the emotional
intelligence to express the feelings he was having as he had them. And given that plays often rely on emotional, self-aware dialogue, I was surprised to learn that my grandfather had written one. I didn’t think that was the stock my father came from.

* A Két Tulipán, read the title on the first page: underlined, bold.

Translated literally, that meant The Two Tulips, but that clumsy repetitive “two-tu” is absent from the Hungarian and I wanted to strike it from the translation.

What would be better? The Pair of Tulips? The Tulip Duet? The Brothers Tulip, in a nod to the dead sibling and the Russian setting where he wrote it?

I decided I wouldn’t be able to translate the title until I read past the title line, so I let it go.

Play by György Schön.

Kirov, 1947: May 20 – October 5.

He’d been 33 years old when he wrote this play. He was the same age as I would be, reading it. I skimmed through the document: 69 pages. I decided to translate the whole thing.

An allegory, I thought, as I began to read: an allegory about flowers. The garden grew around me and my grandfather opened his mouth to speak.

*The Two Tulips*

*Scene 1*

*Setting: A garden*
Two tulips, one red and one blue, downstage right. Upstage, the garden: flowering fruit trees, promenades, roads, trellises. It’s a beautiful garden, like those you see in the fairy tales. There are various bushes and plants growing around the tulips: including a bushweed, a nettle, and a sunflower. They’ll all be playing roles in this story; the other plants in the garden are silent.

The morning comes with the first musical number, calling forth the dawn: roosters crow, birds twitter, the morning dew... the curtain parts completely and the tune gives way to a second musical number. At the song’s bridge, an old gardener enters, singing tenderly while he wanders about watering the plants. The flora sing the choruses.

By the song’s end, the gardener has finished watering the flowers.

I couldn’t believe it. My grandfather hadn’t just written a play—he’d written a musical. And rather than include the musical numbers in the piece, he’d left space for them, presumably because he was not a musical person and couldn’t write the tunes himself. But I do write music. More to the point, I’ve written half a dozen musicals. It was like my grandfather was calling out to me from beyond the grave offering collaboration.

Scene 2

Red Tulip (Calyx only half-open, shakes his/her head and begins speaking to Blue Tulip:)

Look: here comes the dawn, and wild flora arise
Only you are still lazing, and I, by your side
Come open your petals to the miracles awaking
The ten thousand bird songs, the joy of day breaking
The sun has begun with its earthly migration
The crickets in the reeds play their sweet orchestration
The bell on the Lily-of-the-valley rings to you
While the carpet of grass shines with glistening dew
The sheep cloud the sky as they swim cross its lake
While the busy bees buzz ’cause they’ve got work to make
The nightingale’s song is still echoing from the gloam
And of what have you dreamt?

Blue Tulip

Of my far away home.
The tulips spend some time discussing that distant homeland, and agree that it’s a bad lot, being stuck in this garden, but one made easier by the camaraderie they’ve found in each other.

*Blue Tulip*

"Your joys will be richer, your sorrows made poor
When the one who’s your friend awaits at your door."

Friend? The word in Hungarian is barát, but that’s also the word for lover. Which use was this? Are the tulips friends, or lovers?

*Blue Tulip*

"When the wind’s blowing strong but I have you at my side
It doesn’t hurt much, because in pain we confide."

The Red Tulip gives a brief monologue about inter-tulip friendship, the meaninglessness of color, and about how the only real truth is that which is felt.

My grandfather’s Gulag held Estonians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Hungarians, Italians… and, of course, Germans.

*Blue Tulip*

"But this can’t be all life is. There’s still something uncharted.
I can feel that it’s absent, that it leaves us small-hearted.
We’ve got calming friendship, and the hands of the gardener
which nourish and care for us (though they don’t make us smarter)
I’ll ask from the trees, and the moon high above."

*Red Tulip*

"Or I’ll just tell you myself: what you thirst for is love."

I flipped back to the first page, rechecking the date on the manuscript.

*Kirov, 1947: May 20 – October 5.*

I quickly did the math: within a year of writing his play, György would be
released from the Gulag, meet my grandmother Éva, marry her, and impregnate her with my father József (named after Éva’s brother, who died in the camps).

I’ve always felt alienated by the Manichaean treatment of the Holocaust. There’s such a clamor by the well-meaning to turn the victims into the Holy Innocent: the photographs of wide-eyed bald angels at the camps a tsk-tsk at the Nazis, and by extension at all of us, so that we may remember how evil man can be to the undeserving. As a young boy I went to the New England Holocaust Memorial and read Holocaust survivor Gerta Weissman Klein’s quote carved into a tower of glass:

“Ilse, a childhood friend of mine, once found a raspberry in the camp and carried it in her pocket all day to present to me that night on a leaf.

“Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you give it to your friend."

It’s like these dead Jews have to be supernaturally sinless in order for the atrocity to be cranked to eleven. And it’s a touching quote, but my problem is that I can’t relate to stories like that. In my backyard growing up, there’d been a raspberry bush. My brother and I ate raspberries every day all summer. We had problems, but a raspberry shortage was not one of them. And given that all I knew about Gerta (and all I know about most Holocaust survivors) was that suffering, how could I relate?
I imagine most goyim feel about the Holocaust the way I feel about atrocities that didn’t happen to the Jews—it’s heartbreaking, but not burdensome. For me, though, the Holocaust brings mythic pressure: eat all your peas, your grandparents were in the Holocaust. Lovesick!? You know what’s really sickening? Auschwitz. It’s more than just a tragedy: it’s a legend to live up to.

I struggle with that sanctimony. I can’t connect. Footage of Auschwitz’s liberation is boring. I’d rather watch a romantic comedy.

Which is what made my grandfather’s play so astonishing. It dealt, almost exclusively, with romance: two tulips try to get a butterfly to shut up and pollenate them already. But the tulips are friends—awkward! And so as they try to sleep with this butterfly, they’re also trying to keep peace in the garden. It is a story written for an audience like me.

The hardness of my grandfather György’s life did not diminish his most basic human desire: to seduce, to love, to mate.


*   *   *

Her cock was a disappointment. Like the relationship itself, it had seemed like a great idea on paper, but when theory was put to practice the results were pedestrian.
“Whoa,” she’d been repeating from behind me, over and over, in that far away voice of someone going inward, no doubt overwhelmed by being asked to perform the masculine role after a whole sexual life spent learning to receive.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

I was. In my free time, when my girlfriend Alexis wasn’t at home, I’d penetrated myself two or three times with the dildo in preparation for this moment. By cutting my partner out from those first vulnerable steps, I’d reduced the chance of something going awry.

I turned around to give an encouraging look. Her long brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She wasn’t sweating. I looked at her ample body: those curves, that softness. Her brown eyes met mine and she gave me a polite smile. Such distance, given how deeply buried into my ass she was. It wouldn’t occur to me until months later that she too might find our sex underwhelming.

It was named “The First Mate,” appropriately enough. A 7” vanilla-colored dual-plastic silicone tube. Unlike me, the First Mate was circumcised, which I reasoned was fine because the strap-on could detach and get thrown into a closet should the Nazis come by.

Alexis was ambitious, beautiful, well to do. She was Jewish, too, although our shared “faith” mattered a lot more to her than it did to me. But I was proud to date someone who made me look like an adult. With Alexis I was more than
just an aspiring writer—I was a sophisticate. My creeping doubts about our compatibility highlighted what I feared about myself—that I was a dilettante, incapable of committing to anyone or anything, incapable of going deep. I pushed those feelings down, and the relationship continued: weeks, months, years.

But by our three-year anniversary my discontent was deafening and I put Alexis on notice. Our sex life had grown stale: always the same sequence, the same foreplay, the same position, and then afterwards, the same streaming TV series. We tried to spice things up, headed to a sex shop. I thought the First Mate would give us new energy.

The pegging she gave me was forgettable. It was neither rough nor tender, neither prolonged nor hurried. I don’t know if she finished me with a reach-around, or if at some point we just disconnected and did something else. It was C-minus sex like all our sex, which meant that we barely passed the class again and unenthusiastically soldiered on.

Without humiliation, there was no arousal. It had never occurred to me that this might happen—the act of being penetrated by a prosthetic penis seemed self-evidently humiliating. But instead, it happened from a disappointingly safe remove. It was only afterwards that I came to appreciate the capriciousness of sexual shame, the integral role of shame’s interpreter—feel no
shame, and there is no shameful act.

It’s obviously not as simple as that. If it were only a matter of agency, there’d be a lot less shame in the world—rarely do people invite it into their lives. On the night bus in Hungary where skinheads assaulted me, I would’ve much preferred to have my experience shame-free. It was only in the bedroom that I wanted to be shamed, because it fueled my libido. And yet, when I tried to generate shame with Alexis it remained frustratingly frozen at the edge of my experience, like a sneeze refusing to release.

But why? In the straight-laced “men are men, women are women” cultures I’d grown up in (both heteronormative Hungary and “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” 1990s New England), a man being anally penetrated is emasculating, which should, in turn, be shameful. And yet, the First Mate deep inside me, I felt none of it. Inhibition, maybe: but not shame.

The missing ingredient in my erotic humiliation, I’d realized, was praise. With Victoria, feeling humiliated reaffirmed my love. But you can’t be shamed by someone whose respect you don’t need, and since I wasn’t worried about losing Alexis’s respect I felt numbness instead of submission. Months later, we would take a walk around brownstone Brooklyn, where she pointed out houses for sale, talked about the way our lives might look in each of the buildings.

“The ground floor would be the common space. A nice floor-through
kitchen and dining room,” she said, her arm hooked into mine, gazing at a limestone Italianate. “We’d sleep on the third floor, because it’s quiet and it gets nice light.”

“What’s on the second floor?”

“Well, eventually, I think that could be where the kids sleep.”

“That sounds like a prison,” I said, and a few weeks later she dumped my ass.

* * *

My first major stumble with the translation was that I couldn’t tell if the tulips were male or female. In Hungarian, pronouns are gender neutral, instead separated into the animate and inanimate: living things are Ő (him/her), nonliving thing are azt (it/that).

This is a huge headache for native Hungarians trying to learn English (e.g., common Mom mistake: “I really like your friend John. She’s so nice.”) But as I translated Papa György’s work, the shoe was on the other foot. At first, I thought the flowers were male: my grandfather was a male writer, and he was setting two tulips up to be his story’s protagonists. Most male writers don’t center their stories around female characters. But then again, it’s hard to imagine a more explicit symbol of the feminine than a flower.

Maybe it didn’t matter, I decided, what gender these flowers were.
Maybe that was one of the advantages of writing in Hungarian: that you could write about a romantic talking flower, and not get hung up on if it’s a girl or a dude.

*The Two Tulips*

*Scene 16*

**Red Tulip**

*I’ve dispensed of my pride, that train long left the station*

*For him/her I’d endure about any humiliation.*

*It’s just that he/she has made problems occur.*

*I can see it quite clearly: I’m in love with him/her.*

*If he/she were here, I’d send him/her away*

*If he/she were to leave, I’d want him/her to stay*

*We talk and those talks are both torture and bliss*

*We lock eyes and I’m lifted, yet pushed into the shit*

*He/she ran wildly to salvation in clasps:*

*Oh the smell of that body, the sound of those gasps!*

*Now trapped by my love and without any key:*

*That’s the fate that awaited my love-blind he/she.*

*Scene 10*

**Butterfly (speaking to Red Tulip):**

*You said that you love me, and now wait for my answer:*

*Your petals all tremble, the quake in your anthers.*

*Your eyes floating upwards, in flickering fire*

*Your breath wet, your face flushed; a chalice of desire.*

*We are one now, my sweet; I don’t need to divine.*

*I don’t ask if you love me because I see how you’re mine.*

Grandpa György had obviously had some passionate sex in his youth, before the war had taken him to his seven-year nightmare abroad. I felt affirmed knowing this was what he spent time thinking about in the Gulag. I’ve always believed that there’s something superficial and anti-intellectual about sexual desire. I don’t like that I elevate sex above other considerations when appraising a romantic relationship—but that is how I prioritize. And since I also believe that
romantic human connection is what gives life meaning, it makes me wonder why
I bother sharpening my mind at all. What’s the point of reading and writing, if
what I’m most looking for is connection via viscera? And can I be a good person,
if my primary focus is on maximizing sexual satisfaction?

My grandfather was modeling an answer. Grandpa György: Holocaust
survivor and doctor—an unassailable angel—had spent his time in the Gulag
writing a play all about getting laid. He was an intellectual, he was moral, and in
his darkest days he wanted the same thing that I do.

“Go have some really filthy sex!” his play said to me. “Think of all those in
the camps who wanted to but couldn’t!”

And if this was what he’d most yearned for, I wondered while reading if
after the war he’d successfully found a mate to satisfy that dream. I thought
about my grandmother, and if their lovemaking was the ecstasy that vindicated
all that bleakness.

According to my mother, probably not. As their daughter-in-law looking
in from a remove, György’s marriage to my grandma Éva appeared to be more
practical than passionate. They were both Debrecen Jews and had known each
other from before the war. Both ended up in forced labor, and both resettled in
Budapest by the late 1940s, where they found each other. In a rush to get
started on the next chapter in life, they quickly mated. Éva was pregnant with my
father two months after György’s release from the Gulag. After their children grew up and moved out, they started sleeping in separate bedrooms. One evening, my mother asked Éva if it bothered her that they didn’t share a bed.

“Why would it?” Éva asked. “We have feet.”

A funny joke, but I doubt it was the “chalice of desire” my grandfather had dreamt of in his play. But maybe I’m being harsh—maybe “clinging to one another every night” is an unreasonable bar to set for a thirty-year marriage.

Still, it’s possible that György and Éva were never that hot and heavy: family apocrypha is that both had had other lovers who perished in the camps, suggesting that this had been a marriage of convenience—that György had married the first acceptable Jew he met, and the long run revealed the cracks in their compatibility. It’s bittersweet to imagine that after all that misfortune my grandfather’s final prize might’ve been lukewarm companionship. On the one hand, I’m hearted by the thought of a love born from grief, resilient to the pressures of quotidian incompatibilities. On the other, reading my grandfather’s play, I can’t help feel he deserved the steamiest sex possible.

But then, maybe György had gone about his search all wrong. In 1945, a few months after he arrived at the Gulag, some of György’s fellow prisoners made him a “Memory Book” for his birthday: it was a forest green-and-red notebook, filled cover to cover with well-wishes in the same purple ink he’d
write his play in.

There was a lot of warmth in the notes: one prisoner alluded to György’s wellspring of compassion; another, Dr. Pista Rózsa, wrote remarks in rhyme—

György had apparently already established himself as the camp’s rhyming poet.

But there was one note in particular that caught my eye.

Dear György: - the note read –

I haven’t celebrated someone else’s birthday feeling as happy as I do today since before the Military Labor Service began. That’s because my survival, I feel, I owe very much to you. Your picture will sit on my desk forever.

János

Who was this other János, and why did he owe his survival to my grandfather? Had my grandfather shown some medical attention to János, or was it emotional support that helped him survive? And was it significant that his first name was the same name as György’s brother, the name that would become my family surname? And even if György had been a good doctor, why did that merit János leaving the photograph forever on his desk?

Had my grandfather had a gay lover in the camps? And if so, how long had the affair lasted?

Perhaps this János was simply a warm-hearted man prone to hyperbole.

And a reader with even a rudimentary knowledge of psychology might note that
my probe into György’s sexuality could speak more to my own struggles in adhering to a heteronormative and vanilla male sexual identity than it does anything definitive in György’s work. That is to say: maybe what I’m doing is seeing myself in my grandfather here, rather than vice versa.

But I also feel an instinctual repulsion from exploring any deeper into my grandfather’s past, from trying to find clues into his sexuality, for much the same reason that my father and his sister had reservations about me publishing what they saw as a mediocre play: out of fear of disgracing his memory. If I were to misrepresent him, it would be a transgression of the accepted story of my grandfather—one of tragedy and triumph. And that’s taboo: because he’s dead, because he’s family, and, perhaps most importantly of all, because he was a Holocaust survivor. Duty compels me to gloss over any complexity in his biography, the places that might be a source of discomfort or shame to the imagined ghost.

The tragedy is that a legacy whitewashed of its shame is incomplete, because the shame we experience is not just an unpleasant part of being alive, but also integral in how we relate to each other. It’s seeing the humiliation of others that makes us most capable of sympathizing with them. The bedrock of empathy is flaw—and how can you love a flawless ghost?

An atrocity like the Holocaust robs three-dimensional ancestry—first by
the perpetrators who vilify their victims, but then again later by the sympathizers in their well-meaning attempts to beatify them, to turn them into ghosts of grace. As a result it’s the atrocity that goes unforgotten, rather than the thing that was taken. What a shame.

The Two Tulips
Scene 25

The gardener enters.

Gardener

And with that I too will bid you adieu
The hour has arrived, you must find something new:
To go to the places your hearts find their power,
So I must say goodbye now to all of my flowers

(Turning to the audience)

And so we arrive at the end of the play
A dance and a song is all left here today
But before this here curtain comes down upon you
Oh gentle audience – my compliments are due.
You’ll clap and the author, unburdened, will sigh
And announce his desire, from within his mind’s eye:
that this story’s farewell will not be a dream
and that from this stage, walking, he’ll enter new scenes...

Scene 26

(Eleventh musical number: an enormous, broad chord from the band, and the flowers’ hopeful farewell chorus begins. After a stretch the singing ends but the music plays on: the butterfly ballet begins. The butterfly dances a solo, and the ballet comes to the end on the butterfly with the flowers sandwiching him/her; they’re bowing deeply towards the crowd, the butterfly in the middle, the two tulips at both side: on the butterfly’s left arm the blue one, on his/her right, the red. The chorus sings again, the orchestral ensemble swells louder. Windy terse chords: gorgeous, colorful. There’s singing and dancing, and the whole ensemble forms a tableau as down falls the

CURTAIN
Pulling the plug didn’t feel good but it felt necessary, like strong antibiotics.

“The difference between us,” Victoria said, after I explained my rationale for breaking up, “is that you want to lead the most interesting life you can, whereas I want to lead the happiest one.”

We were in Tivoli Bays, a swath of protected land abutting our college campus. It was night and the winter had finally ended, but the gravel path was still soaked through with snowmelt. We’d stopped at felled logs covered in foxfire; the fungus glowed up against our faces. She was always stopping to take in nature’s many spectacles, something that both charmed and agitated me. Like everything good about college, Victoria’s love was so easily earned that I couldn’t see it would one day be spent. When we arrived at the bay’s overlook, we stared out to where the mudflats met the Hudson and the trains rumbled through on the other side and I told her that our time was through because I didn’t want to date long distance.

I loved Bard. I smoked weed every day. I attended all my classes. Victoria and I had sex every night. My parents paid for my room and board, my wallet containing nothing but a room key and a meal card. There was no good reason to leave. But that was the problem: stories need conflict, and Bard College offered none. It was indulgent, like ice cream for dinner. The few challenges that
I faced were easily surmounted: when I wanted to be a comic, I joined the school comedy troupe. When I wanted to play basketball, I tried out for the team, and then—to my surprise—made the cut, despite being slow, scrawny, and 5’6”.

The lack of struggle frustrated me, and so my parents persuaded me to take a break from the “shortcomings” of college to enroll junior year at the Balassi Bálint Institute, a university in Budapest offering free rides to members of the “Western Hungarian diaspora.” My older brother Ben signed up as well.

I don’t regret going abroad, but my decision-making was in need of further development. I thought at the time that to live memorably, you had to be self-destructive, that if the present was underwhelming you had an obligation to raze it to the ground. Then, once gone, the corpse of a happy past could be turned into a shrine—a memory to worship, even though it was willingly left behind. My nostalgia kicked in on a much shorter timeline than it does now—that’s because my recent past was full of great things prematurely abandoned.

I spent so much of my youth trapped between nostalgia and expectation. I’d be dissatisfied with my happy present, dreaming of an even brighter future. Given how well things were going, I could only imagine more roses ahead. Then, when the future turned into the present it underwhelmed me—living up to
neither the anticipated paradise nor the romanticized past.

Between high school and college, I spent a lot of time in Hungary, especially after giving up on one thing or another. Hungary advances in a circle. Revolutions are regular: the boulevards and plazas changing names, new statues of forgotten heroes going up, old heroes becoming new villains once again. It’s timeless, neither past nor future: a recurring palate cleanser in my multicourse meal. That’s why I’m drawn to it—for the chance to return to a photograph, to live again in my diary, to step forward into a life I might’ve lived once before. And when I arrive from the airport, I am lost, because, as always, everything is both different and the same.

*   *   *

We were staging Macbeth, thus courting disaster. When the supporting crossbeam over the stage split, the program coordinator arose and lumbered over to hold it in place.

There are a lot of superstitions in the theatre world about Macbeth. For instance it’s considered bad luck to say it’s name—instead one refers to it as “the Scottish Play.” Legend has it that during Shakespearean times cast and crew regularly died in productions: prop knives replaced with real ones, fires burning down theaters. But most of these mishaps are unverified, and so I paid
no mind to the *Macbeth* dos and don’ts. After all, it was just a bunch of adolescents using prop handguns in a Central Harlem housing project. What was the worst that could happen?

Save the stage’s near destruction, the show went perfectly. When Banquo’s bloody ghost shouted at the king from the aisles, audience members jumped. When Macduff kissed Lady Macduff, people howled with delight. And when the show was through and the houselights came back up, the cast received a standing ovation.

I was 27 and working as a theatre teacher at the Harlem Children’s Zone, a charter school in New York. It was the first job I’d actively pursued rather than simply taken as a means to support myself. *M.O.E. (Macbeth Over Everything)* was my shining accomplishment.

My students and I reimagined the Shakespearean play in the same housing project where the performance was staged. The three weird witches were replaced by three crackheads, the porter who Macbeth frames for the king’s murder in Act II with a food delivery guy.

Coordinating more than a dozen high school actors is difficult. When those high schoolers live in a high-risk community, the complications multiply. One of my students, Khalid, would regularly get into fights with his classmates, derailing entire rehearsals. Another, Daquan, showed real talent but joined a
gang, got shot in the leg, and was expelled. Porshaya got pregnant and had to leave program. Shaniyah stopped wearing her hijab and so couldn’t go home. And yet, amongst all this chaos, our theatre class shared creative energy and made collaborative art.

I’d become a drama teacher because I wanted to make use of my short attention span. I have little patience for gradual growth—I’m better suited for being consumed by projects and then discarding them completely. High school plays—with their ramped-up rehearsal schedules and short production runs—seemed well matched.

But my attempt to avoid gradualism through ephemeral art only worked for so long: with M.O.E., I’d conquered the mountain of high school theatre. New productions felt like reruns of old successes. I grew restless and quit. It was disappointing to disengage—when I’d taken the job, I thought that I’d stay in the field for twenty years. I burnt out in two.

I spent that summer in a quiet cabin in upstate New York, near the hamlet of Margaretville (pop. 596). One day I drove to town and picked up a copy of the Hudson Valley News, a small-circulation broadsheet. It was full of banal revelations: community board politics and low-stakes crime, the kind of stories that only small town newspapers can get away with.

I imagined a future me working as a reporter. Not the boring kind, but
the comic book kind: going to the world’s hottest conflict zones, covering drug barons, running from the paramilitary. Jumping into a river with a thumb drive in my back pocket while behind me a building explodes. Every day a new story, a new adventure.

* * *

**Low Ability/Low Challenge: Apathy**

The morning bell rang at 8 am each day, and although we only had to stagger down two stories from dorm to classroom it was still a struggle to make it on time. “I’m not going today,” I’d tell my brother, and he’d say, “Me neither then.” This annoyed me: we were in the same small class, and his truancy exposed mine.

I’d have attended class more readily if I’d seen a point to doing so. Mostly, though, the classes were for learning Hungarian, and to the best of my knowledge I already knew Hungarian. Worse, I didn’t have anything in common with my classmates. Half of them were non-Hungarians who’d chosen bravely (and bizarrely) to learn the language: Egyptians and Koreans and Poles, all stumbling over Hungarian’s eighteen grammatical cases, which Ben and I understood intuitively because we’d been hearing them around the kitchen table for years.

The other half—those diasporic Hungarians who’d won the same
scholarship as us—were also of little interest. Most knew one another already from cserkészet, a Hungarian youth group. It was like Boy Scouts for Hungarians who grew up elsewhere. To me the cserkészet students of Balassi Bálint seemed both uncool and exclusive. They bonded immediately, and I couldn’t tell if they’d met at various conferences and camping trips earlier in their lives or if they were just cut from the same square cloth. I resented the cserkészet because their Hungarian identities threatened the legitimacy of mine. In America, where virtually no one speaks Hungarian, that I spoke any at all automatically made me the expert in most circles. Then in Hungary it was my mastery of English that set me apart. I liked always having a bank of knowledge that others didn’t. But the scouts spoke English as well as I did, and many spoke Hungarian better. While they had grown up going to Hungarian weekend luncheons, my brother and I had been code-switching to English from a young age. We had American accents. We didn’t watch Hungarian TV. We knew nothing about Hungarian soccer.

As a result of my comparatively lax upbringing, there were huge gaps in my knowledge. Terms that had never come up in conversation with our parents became academic stumbling spots. I had to learn the honorifics: there are three levels of formality in Hungarian, and my parents had only ever addressed me informally. Then there was vocabulary: in history class, the teacher would lecture
about the importance of árpa in early Hungarian agriculture, or how you could always tell who, in a medieval Hungarian painting, was king, based on his possessing a jogar.

“What’s a jogar?” I asked my older cousin Bálint, who had grown up in Budapest.

“It’s that gold stick,” he said, and while I felt some satisfaction of having expanded my vocabulary, I also didn’t get why I needed to know any of this.

*   *   *

I found the state senator at the back of the ballroom, where we watched an eight-piece high school band perform a high-energy cover of Tears for Fears’ “Mad World” from a short stage while local politicos stood around white wooden tables and boozed on cheap cocktails.

“Quite an event,” I said and the state senator said, “Oh yeah” in that smooth-but-removed tone I would come to recognize as typical of his ilk. Then I said my name and outlet, and took out a pad and a pen.

It’d been a surprisingly arduous climb, but after three months of submitting resumes and writing samples I had my first reporting gig—the Greenpoint Gazette of North Brooklyn offered me $50 to go cover the 25th anniversary celebration of a local nonprofit.

My first story, and state senator Daniel Squadron would be my first
interview. I’d written down all my questions ahead of time, and started with a softball: “What does a nonprofit like this mean for this community?” but even though there was no way to mess this answer up (correct answer: “A lot”) the Democrat representing New York’s 26th district chose his words with care.

He was young—only 32—and although his name screamed derring-do he seemed nervous.

“A community changes,” he said, weighing each word carefully, seemingly considering how I might snip, misquote. “But throughout all the changes here, St. Nicks has been a bedrock, doing the comprehensive work that’s needed.”

It was strange to make Squadron squirm, a power I hadn’t asked for nor considered one of the “perks” in the job.

“Is that it?” I asked.

“In a community that risks becoming fractured,” he said on a punctured exhale. “An organization like St. Nicks Alliance serves as a psychological counterpoint.”

Then he took a sip of his gimlet and recused himself.

Squadron’s nervousness surprised me because it reflected stakes I didn’t appreciate. Put another way, Squadron treated the Greenpoint Gazette like a real paper, whereas I thought it was the kid’s table.
My editor Jeff showed North Brooklyn newsgathering the same humorless reverence Squadron did. His expectations of me were likewise exacting: when I tried to write bigger stories about national events (e.g., the impact of Hurricane Sandy on New Yorkers’ views of the Green Party), he told me I was overreaching. “Every new journalist at the Greenpoint Gazette wants to make a big splash and write national,” he said. “But we’re a weekly paper. The dailies always have us scooped on that stuff.”

Another time, when I wanted to write about the campaign finances of our local council member and how her backers created a conflict of interest in her upcoming vote on neighborhood waste management, he told me to back off. “It’s a small community,” he said. “We need to keep the lines of communication open.”

Which isn’t to say it was his particular editorial judgment that I resented—it was that he felt the right to direct me at all. Given the money Jeff paid and the degree to which he restricted my scope (and thus joy), the work was textbook worthless. My dream of international reporting felt thousands of miles away.

Jeff detected my resentment and told me as much. Still, our partnership remained a good deal for us both—he got cheap labor and I got a foot in the door. I found interesting stories where I could: at No Lights No Lycra, a pitch-black dance party for sober hipsters. Then more work came, at other community
newspapers. I wrote about Katz’s Delicatessen’s pastrami eating contest, where second place finisher Matthew “Megatoad” Stonie, aged 21, meditated on the virtue of patience in his quest to conquer the competitive eating world. He’d eaten 21 pastrami sandwiches, four fewer than reigning champ Joey Chestnut.

“It's like lifting,” Stonie told me. “You have to train your muscles, train your mind.”

I found it hard to relate to Stonie’s patience—my first year on the job I’d made just over $10,000 and was frustrated at my lack of progress. Nor could I appreciate Stonie’s feat—Katz’s pastrami sandwiches, at $19.95, were beyond my price point.

That summer, for my 30th birthday, I went camping in the Berkshires with Ben and my mom. I’d spent all of my 29th year telling people I was 30 because I wanted to deemphasize, for myself, the official turn of the decade. But despite these efforts, the celebration filled me with existential dread and I surprised my brother in our tent that night when I burst into tears after he asked my plans for the future.

“I just feel like such a failure,” I told him, and he hesitantly rubbed my back, unsure what it was an adult male brother was supposed to do here.

*   *   *

Low Ability/High Challenge: Anxiety
I wasn’t worried about not knowing jogar—the Hungarian word for “scepter”—because it was about my comprehension, not about my ability to be comprehended. I figured my vocabulary would expand through osmosis, and that if I didn’t learn a word (or if I forgot one), it’d be because the word wasn’t of service. But when I realized that due to my accent there were people who couldn’t understand me, I started studying harder. At this point in my life, I wrote a lot more than I read. I talked a lot more than I listened. I couldn’t stand imagining my ideas getting lost in a conversation just because they weren’t enunciated properly.

Plus it was embarrassing to sound like a foreigner.

As is often the case, the embarrassment was preceded by a desire to impress. I’d met up with Bori, my childhood Hungarian crush. Class had been in session for several weeks, and I was adjusting to my new life as a Budapest resident. It was different than vacation. On shorter visits, my relatives always gave me the VIP treatment, reserving me days in advance for festive home cooking and nights out on the town. Now that my brother and I were in the country for an entire school year, the enthusiasm had been set to simmer. I didn’t have any friends, and loneliness was starting to creep in. Bori looked elegant that evening, and I hoped to make a good impression, to plant the seed in her mind that we might date.
We met in Buda’s Castle District, taking in the polished marble of Fisherman’s Bastion, a gothic promenade with views down to the Danube and the spires of the Parliament building on Kossuth Lajos Square. The parliament, completed in 1904, was barely one hundred years old but it had been built in a neo-gothic style to resemble 12th century architecture: the present romanticizes the past, then becomes one with it. We sat on the wall of the overlook, knees touching.

“To think,” I said. “A world a kings and queens. I love the Castle District.”

“I’m sorry,” she replied. “You love what?”

“The Castle District.” The vár.

“The what?”

“The vár.”

“Ah,” she said, smiling politely, but I could tell she still couldn’t understand.

It was that Hungarian R. The letter R (known to linguists as the “rhotic consonant”) has extremely varied pronunciations across languages. In English, you make your R sound by pulling your tongue back, fattening it up in the middle, and keeping the tip away from the back of your teeth. In the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which is a system of notation that covers the full breadth of sounds in all spoken languages, it’s written as ɹ.
In Hungarian, the R is voiced with either an alveolar tap (IPA: ɾ), in which the speaker touches the tip of his tongue against his upper front teeth, or – in the case of a double “r” – an alveolar trill (IPA: r), wherein the speaker directs air over the center of his tongue while it sits behind the front teeth, with the air creating a vibration that sounds—if you squint your ears just a little—like a cat’s purr.

After my interaction with Bori, I became aware of my accent’s limitations. Hungarians mostly understood me, but every time I used an R my pronunciation of that letter was unintelligible, which could collapse comprehensibility of the word, or even the entire sentence.

To roughly illustrate: if someone were to say, “I love youx cat,” you would be able to infer that “youx” meant “your,” and the conversation would continue unimpeded. But if they said, “I love heaxing youx cat xoax,” you might struggle.

(Marta, a Hungarian-French classmate of mine, wrestled with the Hungarian R too. She told me that I had it easy because “At least it’s not in your name.”)

I started practicing the R in the mirror, trying to will my tongue’s reformation. In the weeks that followed, I’d pause midsentence at each one—a conversational stop sign—before proceeding with caution. And although my speech was more understandable than it had been before, talking was stressful
now—painful, even—the Rs coming out like teeth being pulled.

*  *  *

It was a one-line email.

*When are you available next week?*

And just like that, the road forward was revealed. The New York Post was looking for a street reporter. They paid $25 an hour.

I wondered how they’d decided to interview me. Given the email’s brevity, it looked as if my resume had been hastily grabbed from atop a digital stack. The interview proceeded accordingly. Dan Greenfield, an editor with the Metro section, called me into his office and pulled up some of the clips I’d sent in when I’d applied. I watched him as he skimmed.

“Do you have a car?” he asked after a beat, looking up from the screen.

I didn’t.

“Do you speak Spanish?”

I did.

Soon thereafter the interview was over.

He wrote me within a few days inviting me to “tryout”; the Post was doing a story on Obamacare, which had just passed into law, and the editors (known within the industry as “desk”) wanted me to talk to young people about the individual mandate.
I went down to Union Square with a photographer (known within the industry as a “photog,”). I started out by interviewing a diverse cross-section, before the photog—a blond Brit named Jeremiah—redirected me.

“Can I just offer a quick bit of advice?” he asked. “Interview the white girls with big tits.”

I laughed, assuming he was joking. I stopped when his expression didn’t change.

“They just said to interview young people at Union Square,” I said. “They didn’t say anything about a tit requirement.”

“Look,” Jeremiah said. “This is the New York Post. It’s… it’s a visual paper. Do you read the New York Post?”

“No.”

“Of course you don’t,” he said. “I didn’t read it before I started working here, either. But… I mean, if you look through it… I mean, bloody hell, it’s not the most… sophisticated stuff in the world.

“So, I mean, of course they’re not going to directly tell you to interview the white girls with the big tits. They’re probably worried they’d get sued or something, if they told you that. I’m just telling you, I’ve been working here for several years now, and when they say ‘man on the street’, what they really mean is ‘white girls with big tits.’”
Had I been with the paper longer, I might’ve pushed back. As it were, I made a course correction. After several hours, when I’d collected what I thought was enough material, I told Jeremiah I was going to a Starbucks nearby to type up my story (known within the industry as “copy”).

“You can’t just write it on your phone?” he asked.

I couldn’t.

“Okay,” he said, voice more incredulous than disdainful. “I guess… I guess just get it done as quick as you can.”

Less than five minutes after I sent in copy, desk sent an email back. Brief, again.

_We can’t use this. Please do whatever you need to so you’re not sending files with obvious holes in them._

I called desk up.

“Bruce,” the voice on the other end said. In the industry, you don’t say hi, you just answer the phone with your name.

“I don’t understand what you need,” I said.

“Is this the tryout?” he asked. Bruce sounded irritated.

“Yes, it’s –”

“Look, I don’t have time to explain your job to you. The notes are full of holes, what part don’t you understand? We’re on deadline. Get better stuff.
Without holes."

Then he hung up on me.

Better stuff how? What kind of holes? I spent the next several hours conducting interviews. When someone told me she was worried about not being able to see her doctor anymore I asked for the name of the doctor, the name of the disease, the name of the medicine. When someone told me he took probiotics I asked since when, and which ones, and what did probiotics look like. When someone said he paid out of pocket, I asked how much, and because I no longer felt sure about what I did and didn’t know, I asked what “out of pocket” meant.

I was certain I’d failed my tryout, but they called offering me the job the same week. I felt like Pinocchio: a real live writer boy. Never mind that it was a tabloid: after a year of scraping by on wanting checks from community papers, meaningful income had arrived.

But while having the job was exciting, doing the job was stressful. The workday started when I called into the switchboard the morning of a scheduled shift and told the operator I was ready. Then I would sit by the phone, and when desk had figured out how to deploy me I would get a callback and be told where to go. On a slow news day I’d get no callback, but I’d still be paid for the time. Even though I lost those days sitting on my hands, I always hoped for no
call. No call meant no chance to mess up. When calls did come I spent most of my workdays playing defense, straining to avoid egregious mistakes. At major news scenes, the media gather in tight gaggles, and whenever I’d go to the hospital where the victim was being treated or the jail where the perpetrator was being held I’d find the crowd of reporters and I’d join them, hoping to disappear into the back of the classroom. At night, I’d return home exhausted and famished—I felt there was no time on shift to grab food; if I missed the big moment and the other news organizations got it, desk was sure to yell at me.

* * *

High Ability/High Challenge: Flow

“I want a sört!” I shouted from the stage. The audience laughed. Someone in Hungarian shouted back, “How many?” and my cousin Bálint responded “A lot! The whole band wants a sört!” Laughter again.

The joke only works if you understand that the Hungarian word for “beer” when cased into the accusative noun form is a homophone with the English word “shirt.” Hilarious, I know.

We were at the Frank Zappa Café in Budapest, at the tail end of my year abroad. I switched over into Hungarian and began rambling at the crowd while my drummer Roland laid down a heavy beat. “We so happy to be here,” I said, deliberately thickening my accent and again the audience laughed. For an
American, there’d be nothing inherently funny about someone speaking English with an accent. But for the Hungarians watching my band perform, seeing a foreigner speak their language brokenly was, in itself, foreign. People in Budapest are either Hungarian, and speak with native proficiency, or are not Hungarian, and don’t speak at all. But accented Hungarian? A foreign cabaret act bantering drunkenly in broken Hungarian? That, to them, was novelty.

I was drenched in sweat, my clothing sticking to my skin. Under the glare of bright gel lights, I removed my dress shirt as Bálint’s bass came in. I licked my index fingers, touched my nipples, and pointed at the crowd. They pointed back.

Did they attribute my kookiness to the Hungarian-American cultural gap?

I knew that gap liberated me to do anything from the stage. Hungarians who criticized my behavior would be opening themselves up to appearing provincial. I spotted Bori three rows deep in the crowd. She had a boyfriend, I knew, but he was nowhere to be seen. After we finished our set she hugged me, kissed me.

“I had no idea you had such a voice,” she said, and I was flattered to receive her attention, as I always was. I’d wanted to master Hungarian in part because after my embarrassment in the Castle District I’d wanted to impress her. But whereas before I’d wanted Bori to distract me from my lonely life, now I had
a band that played out, teachers who were enamored with me, and in the lengthening days of spring an accent so slight that I could have an entire meal with someone before they realized I wasn’t native. I had reached a level of mastery that gave me joy. My need to impress had waned.

*   *   *

“I used to go as a boy,” said Damien Miller, a 46-year-old welder. “But now, maybe with drinking and the things I do, I feel guilty about going. I still speak with God and say my own prayers, but I don’t want to be a hypocrite.”

I jotted down the quote in shorthand. Miller wasn’t a public official and there were no other reporters present, so I didn’t need to get it 100% verbatim. Ordinary people (i.e. those who aren’t media-trained) don’t give print-ready quotes anyway: had I gotten Miller on tape, I’d have been stuck transcribing sentences full of unseemly “buts,” “likes,” and “ums.”

I was back at Union Square, the spot of my tryout with the New York Post nearly a year earlier. This time I was covering an organization giving out ashes curbside for Ash Wednesday, writing another “man on the street” story, only I was working for The Wall Street Journal now, where I’d learned to call them “vox populi” stories. Vox Populi is Latin for “the voice of the people.” The Journal uses Latin because they’re classy like that; none of the staff there ever said a word about tit size.
Getting a vox populi story to work is, first and foremost, a matter of filtration. An interviewee with too much guard up isn’t worth wrestling for a quote—there’s no shortage of people in New York, so just pick another. But interviewees who are too talkative are also problematic—they can’t be steered with follow-ups to give the hole-free colorful details a lean newspaper article needs.

I’d learned to treat my notepad as more than a tool—it was also a prop. If it came out too early when I was still building trust it scared people away. The pen likewise had functionality beyond its design: when a subject ignored me to get on their soapbox about something irrelevant to the story I’d stop taking notation so to remind them: I am the journalist, not the publicist. I’d learned when to ask another question and when to let a silence hang, thereby pressuring a subject to fill it with information. I’d learned when to type out a story in full, and when rough notes were preferable because editors needed the breaking information quickly.

The Journal had learned how to use me, too. Whereas some reporters were better sourced with cops or were more facile at translating complicated legalese, I was the team member who knew how to drag colorful stories out of ordinary folk, or confessional interviews from those who were vulnerable. When a train crashed into an SUV in Valhalla, New York—killing five passengers and
the driver—I sniffed out the contact information for Michael Dirks, the father of
36-year-old victim Robert.

“This is Adam Janos from The Wall Street Journal. I’m so sorry to call you
under these circumstances, I’m sure you’ve been through so much. The reason
I’m calling is because we’re doing a story to honor the life of your son, and I
thought if you wanted to share with me, for a few moments, what made him so
unique, that it would really help us humanize him, give a real version of him to
the world. Can you talk?”

I delivered some iteration of this speech so many times that it was almost
automatic. Which is not to say robotic—on the contrary, I reveled in the
intellectual and emotional complexity of my job. On long days, I’d come home
full of life. I’d go running. I’d cook dinner. My dreams became more vivid, and I
began to keep a log of them, in the hopes of going lucid. It felt invigorating to
harness my own consciousness; I wanted to harness my subconscious as well.

* * *

High Ability/Low Challenge: Relaxation

The summer cicadas were singing and the air was heavy with the fragrant
bloom of milkweed as I made my way through the tall brown grass to the
campsite, where sixty tents clustered under towering alders. The refugees had
strung their laundry atop the barbed wire, the border fence a massif of
alternating chain link and thick blue plastic glowing in the summer sun. In the
center of the refugee camp, an ultramarine dumpster overflowed: with
cardboard boxes, with UNHCR blankets, with winter attire that had months
before been crucial for surviving the night but had now become deadweight. A
group of small children played soccer by the dumpster, and just beyond them a
middle-aged man washed his arms from a waist-high rusty water pump.

Four years had passed since I’d fantasized one summer afternoon of
becoming an international reporter dodging danger in service of the public
good. Now I was on assignment with The Budapest Times in the Hungarian
village of Röszke at the Serbian border, where I’d evaded border control to
interview Afghan and Syrian refugees about rumors of Hungarian police
brutalizing those who’d tried to cross into the country illegally.

The refugees shared stories of walking thousands of miles: through the
charred crumbling remains of Aleppo, up the punishing peaks of the Taurus
Mountains, into the remote valley of the Vardar River. Of catching their breath in
Belgrade, where they’d met smugglers at Republic Square and paid the going
rate (150-200 EUR each) to be taken through the home stretch into Western
Europe. Their feet were falling apart: toenails cracking, soles blistered and
peeled, legs pockmarked in the brambly brush and stained iodine yellow. They
wrapped those aching feet in soft white gauze. Everyone wore purple Crocs,
which an NGO had sent to the camp in bulk.

Munir Darwais—a 17-year-old Afghan asylum seeker with a shy smile and a round face—took me into his tent. It smelled like human. We sat with an older woman—a high school biology teacher who wore a long black dress and a baby blue hijab. She fed porridge to an infant.

“I hate to go with smugglers,” Darwais told me. The Hungarian police had caught Darwais as soon as he’d made it across the border on his first attempt. They forced him back to Serbia, and eventually he ended up at the camp.

“At first the police didn’t beat me or nothing. But then they came with the three big dogs,” he said.

Another Afghan, 22-year-old Shakrullah Behbodi, called me over to his hammock. He offered me a clementine; I took it, ate.

“They bring you food every day?” I asked.

He nodded. The camp atmosphere was agitated, not desperate: food was plentiful, but with nobody cooking and everyone eating the same bulk donations (first rice and peas, then chocolate bars, now tangerines) there was a mechanical joylessness to their consumption, the alimentary equivalent of required reading. I asked Behobi if he’d thought about trying to smuggle himself through illegally.
“It’s too difficult,” he said. “When you go illegally, they punch, they spray. There’s no other way to do it.”

“And how long have you been here?”

Three months.

“Do you ever think of going back?” I asked.

Behbodi peeled his clementine, throwing the orange skin onto the baked earth below his hammock.

“I can’t,” he said with a sigh. “Bombs. ISIS. Kidnap.”

We sat for a minute, looking at each other.

“At least it’s summer, right?” I offered, cutting the silence. “It’s got to be a relief, knowing that the weather isn’t hazardous. And that there’s plenty of food. So, no real danger at least, right?”

He sighed.

“I’m not an animal, to be staying in the jungle like this,” he said. “This is not for man.”

I banged out copy on my train back to Budapest. I knew that my shorthand notes would only be of service for as long as I could remember what they meant. By the time I got off at Budapest-Nyugati Railway Terminal, I had a full story of the refugees’ testimonies. The next morning, I sent it to my editor from my grandmother Magda’s kitchen table, heart full of pride for a job well
done.

The editor wrote back with nitpicks: I was using American English when the paper’s style guide called for British. I’d failed to explain what an immigration agency did. We gave the story a headline, and wrapped things up by 2 pm. The story was filed. It would appear in print and on the web the following day.

All was quiet and the dark in the Budapest apartment that afternoon—Grandma Magda was down at Lake Balaton and I had the place to myself. There was no air conditioning, so I kept the shades drawn until nightfall, when the windows could open and the home could breathe again. I wanted to celebrate, but there was no one to celebrate with: my brother was in the United States, and all my cousins had grown up and started families. All of them, that was, except for Bálint, who was flying in that night.

It’d been more than a decade since we’d played music together during my study abroad, years since he’d moved to Germany in the hopes of finding a better life than the one he had in Hungary. For Bálint, Budapest had turned into a land of ghosts, but when I told him I’d be in town for the summer, he booked a flight home.

I decided to return the favor by meeting him at Ferenc Liszt International airport. My iPhone told me to take the M3 metro to Kőbánya-Kispest, then the
200E bus. Everything is easier with smartphones, I thought, as the 200E bus lurched out from its spot at the terminal. When I’d lived here during my study abroad, they’d called the airport Ferihegy International. I’d had to ask people for the way to it, for the way to anywhere, and there was no single right answer for how to get from point A to B: it was just a matter of chance, dependent on who I asked on that particular day.

I was always lost, and so always in need, and so always connecting to others.

It was refreshing that technology had empowered me in my journey through the city, that I was automatically oriented. But it also made me wistful to have navigation dictated to me: the way it deemphasized the chance for discovery, the way it limited possibility. As I rode the bus I kept my eyes down on the screen, down on the route, down on the little blue dot, representing me: a perfectly flattened circle making its way across a mapped-out snippet of digital string.