

# **Eastern Passages**

**A Theo Huffman Reader**  
(internet edition)

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>They Call Me Sensei</b>	
-Small Town Aikido	<b>10</b>
<b>Three Nights in Berlin</b>	
-West Goes East, East Comes West	<b>14</b>
-A Dinner of Leftovers	<b>17</b>
- Dinner to the Right	<b>20</b>
- The Right to Dinner	<b>23</b>
<b>Budapest in Transition</b>	
- Some Urban Landscapes	<b>30</b>
- Change?	<b>35</b>
-The Tree of Knowledge	<b>38</b>
-Throwing It Away	<b>41</b>
- View from the Other Side	<b>45</b>
<b>I Began Missing You...</b>	
I Began Missing You...	<b>48</b>
<b>Three Short Stories</b>	
- The Ruling Class	<b>68</b>
- Flying on Instruments	<b>71</b>
- Hothouse Flowers	<b>76</b>



## Introduction

Perhaps the best way to introduce this little book is to explain why I am finally having it printed tomorrow, two months after I had intended to.

My Daughter Adrienne contacted me last April, after a seventeen-year absence from my life. I hadn't seen her since she was three years old. I'm not going to go into the details of how it happened that we were separated after my divorce from her mother, or why we hadn't seen each other for so long, but suffice it to say that it is one of the horrible things that can happen to a parent and a child in contemporary America. We corresponded regularly in anticipation of the time in October that she planned to visit me in Budapest while she was on her semester abroad in Florence, Italy. It was then that I conceived of the idea of culling those pieces from my written work generated over the last fifteen years that would help her learn who I was by reading about what I'd experienced and hearing what had occupied my thoughts. Originally I wanted to have the book ready to send to her before she made the trip to Budapest. I worked feverishly on the book - not only editing the pieces that went in, but also creating "new" material by reconstructing some articles I had intended to write about Berlin ten years ago, working from memory and sparse notes. I worked feverishly until the morning she arrived and realized on that morning that I'd never get done before she left again.

It was during her visit that I recognized I'd made a silly mistake. In her revolutionary, yet down-to-earth writing manual *Writing Down the Bones*, my hero Natalie Goldberg included a chapter called, "Don't Use Writing to Get Love". In it she says, "Writers get confused. We think writing gives us an excuse for being alive. We forget that being alive is unconditional and that life and writing are two separate entities. Often we use writing as a way to receive notice, attention, love." Yup! I'd fallen into the trap. I was trying to hedge my bets by making Adrienne love me for how well I wrote, and while she was with me I realized how silly that was. What mattered was who I was, not what I wrote.

The book didn't lose its utility, though. It will still help her learn about me, and it has taught me about myself to put it together. But waiting two months - it will now be a Christmas present - has transformed it from a timid offering to a young woman I hoped would love me, to a volume with which we can both celebrate our reunion; one of the happiest experiences of both of our lives, even without the book.

I'd like to add a few words of introduction to some of the pieces and sections in the book.

"Small Town Aikido" comes from a time when the martial art of aikido was the central obsession of my life. I trained for seven years straight until I came to Europe in 1992 and found that it no longer fit into my new life. It was also the hub of my writing life. I edited the newsletter "Aiki-notes" for over a

year, and wrote at least twenty book reviews and many other articles for it. "Small Town Aikido" was picked up by "Aikido Today Magazine", making it my first national publication.

"Three Nights in Berlin" is really the story of my reunion in 1990 with a country that has always loomed in the background of my life. I hadn't been to Germany since I was thirteen years old. After resisting the idea of studying languages in college during my freshman year, I realized by the end of that year that I loved languages and started studying German and Latin in my sophomore year. All through college and graduate school, I felt tortured by the fact that my mind was in Europe and my body was in America. I constantly had dreams at night of being in Germany, from which I would wake up extremely disappointed.

In 1989 the newspapers were constantly full of reports about East Germans traveling to Hungary and crossing the border into Austria, because the Hungarian government had decided it wasn't going to intervene. This brought on a crisis in East Germany, because the government realized that before long the only people left in the country would be the elderly and the uneducated. There were massive protests in the streets every night. Finally, the East German government made the desperate move to open the Berlin Wall.

I can pinpoint the moment I heard about the opening of the wall, because I happened to be writing in my journal and having lunch in a cozy dim little booth at a Chinese-American hole-in-the-wall called the Hong Kong Café, in Woodland California, when the "ABC Special Reports" started flashing on the screen of the muted television above the bar. I got the proprietor to turn up the sound just as the network switched to live images of the huge delirious party taking place in West Berlin. It was at that moment, shortly after noon on the 9th of November, 1989, I resolved to myself that I was going to Germany as soon as I could get there.

My plan was to be there for the first free elections ever to be held in the GDR, which ended up being the last. I had dinner on three successive nights with three different men, one planned, two by complete chance. Between the three of them one can see a spectrum of collective German experience.

"Budapest in Transition" is a collection of articles written for three different English-Language publications (The Budapest Sun, The Budapest Week and *A Jövő Mernöke's* English-language section) over a period of four years (1992-95), during which Budapest changed politically, economically and culturally at a dizzying pace. The "Urban Landscapes" appeared on the opinion page of The Sun. I refer to that weekly feature's intimate link with Rob Luke's and my friendship in the essay "I Began Missing You...", a piece my friend Marina Jancsik perceptively described as "A love letter to an old friend."

So now I have my perspective clear again and realize that the reason I am giving Adrienne this modest volume is not because I want her to love me, but because I love her and want to give her

something of myself. I ask that all who receive a copy of this book share in the celebration of our reunion.

Budapest

December 23, 1999



# **They Call Me Sensei**

## Small Town Aikido - A New Teacher's Perspective

In the imagery of my surroundings, I've become one of the larger minnows in a shallow slough. Specifically, I'm teaching Aikido under the auspices of the 4-H in a hamlet of the Central Valley. At present, I have 10 students, and we practice on the wrestling mats in the multipurpose room of Robbins School.

It's kind of odd how the class came about. Ever since my wife and I moved to Robbins, two years ago, I've made a habit of practicing weapons on the east end of our property. Since we live on the east edge of town, and everything east of here is zoned agricultural, that spot commands a sweeping view of the Sutter Basin, stretching for miles to the trees on the horizon, which outlines the Feather River levee. The space is good for training because of its exposure to sun and wind. I also liked that spot because the house and trees blocked out the view of town to the West. After living in a house in Davis, which was a literal stone's throw from six other houses, the solitude was very satisfying.

Then, about a year ago, I'd notice the sound of children's voices while I practiced. "It would be interesting," I thought, "to have some students in Robbins. There must be some kids who would want to learn what I can teach." But the thought would be dismissed as idle dreaming and a logistical impossibility.

If you wish for things, or even think about them, for very long, they become a reality. There was a chance meeting with a neighbor in which she told me a youth group was being formed in the area. Not long after that, the Aikido class was formed. It happened real fast!

Mind you, it didn't happen without work. There were phone calls, arranging for a demonstration, phone calls, designing a flier, phone calls, taking fliers door to door, phone calls, putting up posters at local businesses, and phone calls. But still, it happened fast. Tuesdays and Thursdays I find myself facing 10 young men lined up in the Japanese kneeling seated posture called *seiza*. They call me Sensei.

The elation lost its edge when I started teaching rolls. I'd forgotten how slow things can go when you're the only one in the class who isn't a beginner. Luckily, I had resources up my sleeve to keep the pace from dragging. Classroom experiences taught me to keep changing activities regularly and I had a repertoire of activities for kids that I'd learned from Mark Bartosh Sensei. Over a period of four years, he has adapted, derived, invented and developed techniques for teaching kids. I'm following his example by doing the same.

If there is any case in which straying from the "classical" techniques of Aikido (*ikkyo*, *nikkyo*, *shiho nage*, etc.) is justified, it's in the teaching of children. There are many factors that make the classical curriculum unwieldy for them: short attention span, immature or unstable neuromotor pathways,

adolescent or prepubescent motivations, and questionable responsibility with the more dangerous techniques. The curriculum can also take advantage of their strengths: fast reflexes, strong energy reserves, and relatively unprejudiced outlooks. The guiding principle in a creative approach to teaching Aikido is being mindful that each activity embodies a principle of the art, such as balance, extension or energy flow. Bartosh Sensei teaches that any technique which applies the principles and the proper spirit, is necessarily Aikido, but even a classical technique done without the principles and proper spirit is no longer Aikido.

This idea that Aikido is more how things are done, rather than what is done, puts excitement into teaching. Though students are instructed that they should “do aikido” off the mat (that is: live with the spirit of the art) as much as on the mat, the responsibility off the mat increases even more so for the teacher.

Natalie Goldberg wrote about the time she gave a workshop in a grade school, in a small Midwestern farm town. She ate an apple as she fielded the first questions from the class. One kid said he’d heard she was Jewish. When she said that was right, she realized she was the first Jew these kids had met, and everything she did was Jewishness to them. Jews eat apples, Jews are writers.

I am Aikido to this town of 100 souls. How they perceive the art depends as much - if not more so - on how I behave off the mat as on. I take care in how I treat parents, teachers, business people and community leaders, but not with the false front of the salesman. I have to be genuine. If, in your interactions with people, you don’t apply the Aikido principles of blending, extending, maintaining center, and protecting life, all you’ve learned are fancy acrobatics.

John Smartt Sensei, of Stockton, gets some credit for inspiring my 4-H Aikido project. He was expounding on the virtues of community involvement one day, when he remarked that if one can’t find a way to get involved in a community, one should look for a community one can get involved in. This burned in my conscience since my job was in Davis, my Aikido training in Sacramento, and my poultry and bird trade was done in an open-air market in Yuba City. My only involvement in Robbins was owning property on the edge of town.

Aikido has given me a way to interact with my neighbors, I still practice weapons in my yard, and I still relish sun, wind, and relative silence, but now the town on the other side of my house is something that I feel closer to. I don’t try to pretend it isn’t there.



# **Three Nights in Berlin**

## **West goes East, East comes West**

It's Friday, two days before the election and the train from Hannover to Berlin is packed like, well, like a jar of pickled herring. Every seat in the compartments is taken, the luggage racks are groaning, the passageways are congested with yet more bodies and more precious cargo. I can hear conversations in at least four languages at once: Russian, German, Polish and English. An American in our compartment is conversing in Russian with three Russians, who speak no German or English. He tells me that they're returning from a trip to France, that they've made several trips to France in the last few months. A Japanese couple quietly watches the other passengers.

As we approach the East German border, the West German border police board the train. The border police are a humorless lot. Every effort to be friendly is met with a cold, blue-eyed stare. Everyone's papers are in order until they look at the Russian passports. Mike, the American, has to translate between the police and the Russians. It seems one of their visas, the one I assumed to be the daughter of the other two, expired the day before. All requests for a little lenience are met with the official, cold stare. The Russians, the officer demands, will have to get off at the next station and go with him to headquarters.

At the station, the two women get out and the man hands them luggage through the window. Mike and I sympathize and help. It suddenly becomes obvious that most of the luggage in our compartment was theirs. A mountain of suitcases and bags grows on the platform. Now the officer is smiling. As I heft leather suitcases off the racks, I can feel the contents: boxes and other solid objects, not clothes. Two border policemen appear on the platform to inspect the luggage mountain. They ask what's going on. The officer says the Russians are learning a lesson about traveling papers. All three policemen are smiling. I should take a picture: I'll probably never see this again.

The train is moving again. I tell Mike what I'd felt through the leather of the suitcases. He thinks they're probably smugglers. He'd asked them about their trips to France and they never did give a good reason why they went there. They didn't speak French either. I look at the Japanese woman. She smiles innocuously. I wonder how much English or German she understands.

The train rolls through no-man's land and into East Germany. Despite the recent changes and the imminent elections, which are expected to make the communists a minority party, there is still something ominous about passing through East Germany on the Berlin route. The right of way is still hemmed in by concrete posts and barbed wire; guards with automatic weapons posted at regular intervals.

When the train finally arrives in West Berlin, there are hoards of people with an incredible amount of newly-bought electronic consumer goods: televisions, tape decks, VCRs, CD players, short-wave

radios, and everything else the western-world has to offer. Poles, Mike tells me. These newest of the world's entrepreneurs are taking advantage of the disparity between western Europe's and eastern Europe's standard of living. They buy western goods, take them back to the East and sell them at a profit in a market which has a scant supply to meet long-pent-up demand. Resentment is beginning to build against the Poles. Most of them don't speak German. Their presence in Berlin is overwhelming. One hears Polish being spoken everywhere. On the way to the hotel Mike points to an electronics store on the other side of the street. A mass of people is trying to crowd into the door. A line has formed outside the store, stretching fifty feet down the sidewalk. More Poles.

Later in the afternoon Mike and I go back to the train station to catch the S-Bahn, the elevated train, because I need to call someone in East Berlin. It would be too much bother to call from West Berlin, because the connections between the two cities are so bad. The natives tell me that, because of the election, it could take hours to get through. The man I want to call is only a few miles away.

Outside the station there's a lively black-market in session. My sense of thrift overcomes my sense of ethics and I buy a hundred East Marks at 5-to-1. Mike offers to hold on to most of it since he's staying in the West today, just in case I get searched. The bills look suspiciously new and they're sequentially numbered. I realize I have just become another Westerner taking unfair advantage of the vulnerability of the East. Almost all the money dealers here are also foreigners.

The S-Bahn platform is lousy with heaps of electronic gadgets in boxes and bags. Once we board the train, we stand armpit-to-armpit. Eastward again. My emotions take over as the car passes over the no-man's land between the cities. I tell myself there's nothing to be afraid of because of the recent changes, but reason is a faint voice in my mind when confronted with a vast stretch of barren land (it's been saturated with herbicides) and armed guards on guard towers. The pale, gray scene is illuminated by the deep-orange evening sun, straining to cut through the polluted air. I've had nightmares with more cheerful settings.

At the Friedrichstrasse station, I have to go through the line for non-Germans. The Germans are hustled through after showing their papers. I have to wait in line with the VCRs and pay five west marks for the privilege of being frowned at and getting a one-day visa.

I'm told the East German government put a great deal of effort into building up the area around the Friedrichstrasse station, but the first impression one gets is still one of drabness. The air, thick with the fumes from the antiquated cars makes me sick in minutes. That's saying a lot, coming from a veteran of several summers in the Sacramento Valley smog.

Because I only have bills, I go into a bakery to buy something, for the sake of getting change in coins. I ask about items I saw in the window, but it ends up that nothing is available besides these huge, unappetizing things that look like pecan pies. I make my way up the street to a cafe, go in and have a seat. It takes the waiter an eternity to get to my table, even though the menu has a preface

reading: "The members of our collective have dedicated themselves to the faithful service of our customers." After asking him for several things on the menu which they don't have, I finally think of asking him what they do have. He brings me the chocolate cake. It's an awful sugary, waxy cube.

In Germany, strangers are still seated together at restaurant tables. A woman and her five-year-old daughter seat themselves at my table. Henrietta, the little girl, strikes up conversation with me. I'm the first American she's ever talked to. She tells me about her father. He's a makeup artist in the theater down the street. Her mother is doing a bad job of hiding panic behind a polite smile. It's always been dangerous to talk to foreigners. Her daughter is volunteering too much personal information. You never know who you are talking to, or who might be listening.

I finally make my phone-call and set up an appointment for an interview the following night.

I know it's futile, since there are 6000 credentialed journalists in East Berlin for the elections, but I inquire about a hotel room on Friedrichstrasse. Not only are there no rooms, but nobody even thinks of suggesting a place to look. Service is something these people have yet to learn.

After wandering around, reading the campaign posters from the various parties running in this election, it's time to get back to the S-Bahn station. My visa expires at midnight.

Once the train crosses no-man's-land again, I feel a little relieved. Military tensions have lessened, but until economic disparities begin to even out, there will still be tension between East and West.

----I made several more trips into East Berlin after this piece was written. One time I did get searched for East marks. The law prohibits taking money out of East Germany. Though I had at least 80 marks in my wallet, I managed to keep them hidden.

The night after the election, although the new government wouldn't take power for a while, it was like a new country. The last day I was in East Berlin I tried desperately to spend my money. I couldn't find anything to buy. I came to understand that a currency is only worth as much as the things it will buy. On my way out of the city, I walked up to the same border policeman who had searched me the night before. I took a wad of money out of my pocket and plunked it down on the table and said, "here, it's a present."

He said, "Oh no. You can take it with you for all I care now."

I walked away and left the money on the table. As I turned the corner of the train platform, I saw three guards counting the money.

Political reunification may be some time away. Psychological reunification took its first steps the day after the CDU polled the majority of the vote.

## **A Dinner of Leftovers**

The phone lines between East and West Berlin were so tied up because of the elections, the only way to get through to anyone was to call them from the same side of the city. So I rode east on the S-Bahn, paid 10 marks for a one-day visa to East Berlin, and wasted a lot of time finding a pay phone, all for the sake of making a phone call to Heinz Strüwing.

I'd met Dr. Strüwing two months before, when he gave a lecture at UC Davis on the state of grassroots political movements in East Germany, in his capacity as an economics spokesman for the recently-formed "political party" The New Forum. I approached him after the lecture and mentioned that I would be in Berlin for the parliamentary elections at the end of March. He gave me his card and invited me to call him. I was inspired at the time. Dr. Strüwing told the audience tales of "people power": people armed with nothing but courage and truth confronting the power of the state, and winning. All very heady stuff. The day he gave his lecture in Davis, Strüwing was the picture of a man who had witnessed a revolution, and optimistically believed that everything would turn out for the best now that "the people" had wrested control of their own destinies. It was inspiring to hear him.

Two months after that lecture in Davis, I had Strüwing on the phone (I finally found a booth in the lobby of a hotel) and he was being a bit discouraging.

"Why do you want to talk to me?" he asked. "Haven't you been watching TV? You should be talking to people from the CDU, the SPD and the PDS."

I explained that he was one of my only contacts in East Berlin (a fib: he was my only contact) and I also was just interested in hearing what had happened since I last saw him. He agreed to come have dinner with me. He asked if six o'clock in the lobby of the Hotel Metropol would be alright. I agreed.

"I'll be wearing a dark overcoat and carrying a newspaper", he said, and I wondered if the recognition signs were a convenience for me, or a bit of cloak and dagger reflecting the residual paranoia of a GDR citizen.

It turned out, the next evening, the newspaper was a waste of time. I recognized him immediately when he walked into the lobby. We shook hands and then I asked where we should have dinner.

"I suppose we could eat here..." I began, fully expecting him to say that I shouldn't waste my money and that he knew of a wonderful earthy little place with great local specialties.

"Okay", he said and began walking toward the dining room.

We were seated and handed menus.

A word about the Hotel Metropol and what that meant concerning the restaurant. The Metropol was one of several Hotels in East Berlin built specifically for accommodating Western tourists. A place designed to make a good impression on tourists of a backward and underdeveloped country, while

keeping them all in one place where they could be watched by the secret police. It was also designed to make the tourists part with as much of their valuable Western currency as possible.

The prices on the menu were in West German marks. Converted into East marks at any reasonable exchange rate, the prices were outrageous compared to restaurants down the street.

That's when the organ player started playing. To my horror, the management thought that every Western tourist wanted to eat his dinner to the accompaniment of "Strangers in the Night" or "I Could Have Danced All Night" played on a miniature pipe organ. I thought how ironic it was that I had just bought a state-of-the-art microcassette recorder for capturing interviews in Germany.

Through a thoroughly unremarkable dinner that could have been re-heated from lunch, Dr. Strüwing told me about how his revolution had been hijacked.

"You know back in October when things started with the protests, we all knew that something had to change in the GDR, but none of us had any idea how quickly things would develop from there", he said.

He described how the people had slowly become more and more courageous once they realized Gorbachov would not bring the Soviet military into the GDR to protect the status quo. Eventually it became clear that the Soviet Union had been the only thing keeping the government in power. The government resigned and an interim roundtable government was formed. The people began organizing into citizens' initiative groups. The secret police (known as the *Stasi*) was disbanded. There was passion in his voice as he described events.

"We were sitting in a citizens' initiative meeting one night when someone came running in shouting 'We've discovered a *Stasi* weapons cache.' Everybody at the meeting jumped into various cars and went there. They got a couple of policemen to come along as witnesses, and they also found someone from the state prosecutor's office, and they convinced him to place his seal on the doors of the building, making it a crime to move anything out of that building. If someone had told us, only a few weeks before that, that we were going to have a *Stasi* facility closed down by the prosecutor, we would have told them they were crazy."

The whole idea that individuals had gained power over their own lives was intoxicating. He said the restriction of individual initiative was the greatest sin of the old system.

"Under a government like we had, the personality was deformed and suppressed. It had no way of unfolding. Creativity had no meaning. Ideas were only called for when they conformed with the ideological system. Individual opinions were not even desired. And the whole process of becoming a person, the process of developing one's own thoughts and ideas, the process of playing a constructive part in the development of the personality, this was all impossible. Everything had particular tracks that they were supposed to follow. The personality was destroyed by this. And this right to personal integrity was one of the main goals of [our] revolution."

But the smile on his face faded and the excitement in his voice dissipated as he described how events were manipulated out of their control.

"The people who participated in the revolution had already come to the conclusion by January that their ideals were not being realized. They saw that what had been in the foreground - freedom, democracy, personal integrity - had been crowded out by the appetite for consumer products, by the desire to travel to the Canary Islands. It wasn't what they had thought would come from democratization."

And the West wasted no time in taking advantage of weakness and confusion.

"We watched as people like Helmut Kohl, Oskar Lafontaine, and their likes, came over to the GDR and made our campaigns into their election campaigns." And even worse: "Other countries were made uneasy about a re-unification of Germany because the West German politicians were using nationalistic rhetoric in an attempt to get the East to join together into one nation."

I asked where he would be the next day during voting and the counting of the ballots, at the New Forum headquarters? A faint rueful smile colored his face as he expressed that he was more or less retired from politics. He gave me the names and numbers of some people I could talk to at the headquarters. He would be at home watching television with his wife.

We went back out to the lobby and unostentatiously shook hands. He knew he might never be interviewed again in his life. I watched as he, his dark overcoat and his newspaper exited onto the street.

## Dinner to the Right

Through the miracle of exit-polling, only a few hours after night fall in East Berlin, it was already common knowledge that the CDU had dominated the election. Like so many others, I was softening the let-down of the anti-climax with medicinal doses of alcohol. *Kola-Wodkas* is what I had prescribed myself. After my third, it occurred to me that I hadn't eaten since breakfast. I went wandering across the vast Alexanderplatz in search of a restaurant, and almost an hour later stumbled upon the Berliner Kaffeehaus – still open, although it was after ten by now.

Only one of the small round tables was available, and as I seated myself I noticed another man searching for a table. I caught his eye and made a signal indicating that the chair opposite me was free. He made his way through the inebriated crowd --the better part of which was West Germans spending their illegally exchanged East Marks on cheap, subsidized food and spirits-- his impassive blue eyes scanning the crowd through the tiny round lenses of his steel-rimmed glasses. I estimated him to be about twenty-three.

"Is this seat available?" he asked in sharp clipped syllables.

"Yes. Please have a seat."

He swept his long navy-blue coat off his shoulders, revealing a neatly tailored, navy-blue suit, a white button-down shirt and a dark blue tie with an orderly pattern of white dots. His short, light-blond hair looked freshly cut.

The waitress came to take our order. My table mate and I went through the charade of asking for all sorts of things on the menu, which the waitress said weren't available. We eventually came to the point of asking what was available. We both ordered pork steaks *au four* and *edelkirsch* liqueur.

As we settled in to wait for our meal, I commented, "That's happened to me so many times in the last few days: whatever I've asked for from a menu just isn't available."

He leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest and continued to observe the people around us, a very disapproving look on his face. Without looking at me he replied, "that's just the way it is here in the east."

"Do you live in East Berlin?"

He glared at me. "Good Lord, no! I'm from Kiel, the North. I'm a student in West Berlin. And you?"

"I'm American."

He knit his brow and looked a little puzzled. "Surely you must be a German-American. Your German is excellent, for a foreigner."

"My mother is German."

He nodded and smiled slightly. "That would explain it."

"What brings you to East Berlin tonight?" I thought his reason must have something to do with the election.

"I just left the opera. They performed Wagner's Lohengrin. An excellent performance, too."

We sat in silence, watching: two spectators at the post-election festivities. Outsiders. I'll admit that my impression of the mood in that city is completely subjective, but there was an odd air to the celebration. To be sure, there was lots of drinking going on. There were those who drank to mark the occasion of the first free election in the GDR. There were mourners of lost causes: upstart parties buried in the balloting by major parties financed by the West. Of course many were drunk on the prospect of reunification and the economic prosperity promised by a CDU government. But there was something else on peoples' faces. You can talk about what you're going to do forever-and-a-day, but it just isn't the same as doing it. Afterwards, you have to live with it. The deed was done, and these were people who had never had to live with their conscience after they'd voted. I sincerely believe some drank as post-trauma therapy.

My table-mate broke the silence. "Have you heard anything about the election yet?"

I told him about the projections. He didn't comment.

I was curious. "Is that how you would have wanted it to come out?"

"It doesn't make a bit of difference, you know. Democracy is a bunch of crap."

"Oh? If not democracy, then what?"

"Aristocracy. The rule of the best."

My innocent American sensibility took a moment to absorb the fact that someone actually can believe this. He watched one of the revelers at a neighboring table – a young man with long hair and a trimmed-beard, wearing a skirt and carrying a purse – get up and slink by our table.

"What you're watching," he said, making a gesture at the cross-dressed man, "is the decline of western civilization. Democracy is nothing more than..." and then he said something I didn't understand. "That's Greek. It means 'tyranny of the mob.' You see I'm Christian, and as far as I'm concerned civilization reached its high-point in the middle ages, about the time of Heinrich the fourth. Now we have all these foreigners and foreign influences overrunning Europe. The culture has been hopelessly degraded. It's really hopeless. We're on our way to ruin."

I couldn't resist a Wagnerian reference. "You mean the *Götterdämmerung*?"

"If you like."

The waitress brought us our drinks. The aristocrat raised his glass to me. I returned the gesture. I guess this man drinks to mourn western civilization.

"You know," I probed, "there are those who say this is just the beginning."

He grunted his disagreement.

A very inebriated man at the next table saw we weren't quite with the spirit of things. "What a night, huh?" He shouted at my partner. He shouted a few more things, then turned his attention back to his own table. The aristocrat raised his glass to the drunk's back, looked sidelong at me, and raised one eyebrow while he frowned, as if to say, "See?"

"If a government were set up as an aristocracy," I probed further, "how would you do that? How does one determine who the best are?"

"Intelligence, education, breeding: the government would be run on the 'leader principle' (*das Führer Prinzip*)."

He evidently noted my surprise. "Calm yourself. There are very few people who think the way I do."

"I'm very curious. How do you vote? Do you vote?"

"Actually, that's none of your damned business." He crossed his arms over his chest again, and stared off into the distance. "No, I don't vote. I give my absentee ballot to my father and let him choose. How he votes isn't any of your business either."

Our dinner arrived. "Since you're so curious," he offered, as he picked up his knife and fork, "let me tell you where the last German aristocracy, the Third Reich, went wrong. Hitler, Bohrmann, Goebbels, Himmler: these men were all good Christians. The rest of the Nazis were all crazy men."

Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe it was this strange socialist city in a land waking up from a forty-year nightmare. Whatever the reason, this conversation seemed entirely surreal to me. I'd always heard that people with such attitudes existed in Germany, but to actually sit at the table with one, was more than I could believe.

I wanted to probe a little deeper. "So, what do you think about the so-called reunification?"

He frowned, "I could vomit. To these people it means Coca-Cola, Mercedes, sex-for-sale, and bananas. Not one cultural motivation at all. Just more 'decline of the West.'"

We ate in silence. He ate with ferocity. He finished before I'd eaten a third of my meal. He stood up abruptly and grabbed his coat up.

He nodded his head to me. "I wish you a further good evening."

I extended my hand. He seized the ends of my fingers and gave them a hefty jerk and was off. I looked around at the mob, and continued to watch them after I left the restaurant and as I walked to the train station. These people really did have something to celebrate. It wasn't just a bad economy they were conquering, or communist government. They were overcoming a centuries-old belief that a few well-educated, intelligent people have the right to tell the rest of the population what is right; even well-educated, intelligent people who are too short-sighted to see that nazism is no answer to the decline of Europe.

## **The Right to Dinner**

The demonstrators were gathering in the rusty evening light on the Alexanderplatz. A mass of youthful discontents, unhappy with the conservative landslide in the previous day's election, were protesting against what they saw as the sell-out of East Germany. Beneath a sea of red banners representing a plethora of far-left groups, young people --all of them dressed in black and sporting red scarves or other red accessories-- prepared for a march through East Berlin. "The campaign has just begun!" read one banner. Long shadows, a gentle wind waving the banners and a crowd of spectators lent drama to the setting. A man circulating leaflets passed by and I began reading it after he'd gone. The title of the piece read, "An Appeal to the People of East Europe, from the International Revolutionary Movement." The piece preached Maoism and warned that parliamentary democracy is just another form of government-by-the-privileged. I was taking note of the fact that this German-language document was published by a group in London, when I noticed a young, blonde mustachioed man carrying an attaché case, reading over my shoulder.

I pointed to the protesters. "Do you recognize these banners? What groups are these?"

"I don't recognize any of them, but I think most of them are from the West. Various Trotskyite and Maoist splinter-groups."

"I guess they're not happy with the election results."

"Their parents voted for the West-mark," he said as he studied the gathering.

"And you? How did you vote?"

"I voted PDS (the new name for the one-time communist party, which had had a monopoly on power)."

"So you're not too happy about the CDU victory either."

He shook his head. "And you? Are you happy with the results of the election?"

"My opinion about this election isn't that important; I'm American."

The crowd began following a van with loudspeakers mounted on top. The march had begun.

I pointed at his briefcase. "On your way home from work?" He nodded.

"Where?"

"I'm an officer in the border patrol. I'll bet you couldn't tell I'm a soldier." He paused a moment as he looked down a second and something occurred to him. "Listen! I think it would be very interesting for the two of us to have a meeting of minds. Maybe we could go have a drink together."

He saw me glance at the departing crowd, and then looked at my camera and bags of equipment. "You're a journalist, aren't you? I guess you want to cover this protest."

I looked at the kids in their black garb, then at the man standing in front of me. "You know," I said, "I really need to eat dinner. As a matter of fact, I had planned to go to this cafe, right here." I pointed

at the Berliner Kaffeehaus. (I had intended to take a picture of the place where I'd had dinner with a bizarre right-winger.) As we walked toward the cafe, I noticed he walked very upright, with his shoulders back, like a soldier.

Once inside, he checked his coat and briefcase. I got the impression that the woman behind the counter recognized something about him that caused her to be very deferential. She called someone over who found us a table for two.

We looked at the menu together and I told him about all the times I'd tried to order from the menu in East Berlin, only to find out that they were all out of the item I was after. That evening they were out of the chicken dish I wanted, and even the second main course I asked for. I ended up ordering the same thing I'd had the night before and an *edelkirsch* liqueur. Unlike the night before, the cafe did have coffee. "That's pretty good," he judged, "they have two of the four things you desired." He was dead serious.

I asked him if he had been a member of the party before "the change" (Germans always refer to the events immediately preceding and following the opening of the inter-German border as "*Die Wende*", the change, or the turning point). Yes, he had joined five years ago, when he was twenty-two years old. Why? "I wanted to serve my state." It came out in the tone of the trained response, like the catechism I learned in the catholic church. Later he admitted that he also joined because he wanted to advance his career. What did he think about the changes that had come about, in opposition to the party? "For the most part, it's been good. In the party, we saw that things were going badly, that the people were becoming very dissatisfied, but we had our assignments. In the army and in the party there's discipline."

We talked about discipline. I said that what he thought of as discipline, i.e. submitting to another's will despite the naggings of one's own perceptions, was only one understanding of the concept. I submitted that in a free society discipline was what kept the individual from...

That's all the further I ever got with this article back in 1990. When I got back to California, life was so hectic between work at my part-time job in Davis and taking care of our house and our aviaries out in the country, that I didn't get any more writing done based on the material I'd collected in Germany.

To be perfectly honest, the article has haunted me ever since. I shouldn't even refer to it as an article. It's an essay. I realize now that all the material I wrote about those days in Berlin were essays. Essays in the true sense of how Montagne meant the word: an attempt. An attempt to convey what I experienced during a short stay in Berlin at a pregnant historical moment. It was difficult enough when the experience was still fresh in mind to convey it. But I feel compelled to finish at this late date. The tools I get out of the box for this task are: 1) the three pages of notes in my journal, 2) vivid

memories of that evening, and 3) the knowledge of what that evening has come to mean to me over the years. What follows is the best retelling I can create with those tools.

You see, as the two of us cordially conversed over our dinner and drinks in the spacious and well-peopled hall of the Berliner Kaffeehaus; as minute details of my companion's story came out, something began to bother me. Even then I couldn't put my finger on the particular element of his narrative that didn't seem to fit. But slowly a vague suspicion began to form in my consciousness, and when I could no longer stand it I interjected a direct question in the middle of the conversation.

"Were you working at the border guard at the time of *die Wende*?"

He looked a bit surprised at this non sequitur question. He stopped eating for a moment, and looked like he was considering his answer. Finally he looked me in the eyes and, while barely shaking his head, replied, "No."

"What were you doing back then?"

He got a sheepish look on his face as he put down his knife and fork, dabbed his mouth with his napkin and cleared his throat. He leaned across the table toward me, cast a quick glance at the neighboring tables and in a near-whisper said, "I was working at the Ministry of State Security."

The situation had become nothing less than fantastic. There was an understandable pause in the conversation while I absorbed this new information. I thought of a new tack to take.

"If I were paranoid," I began, "I would suspect that because I had had dinner with a political dissident two nights ago, and have crossed into East Berlin four days in a row with cameras and a tape recorder, without press credentials, that you had been sent to find out what I was doing." I paused but he didn't reply. "But I guess that would be silly."

He smiled an indulgent smile. While chuckling good-humoredly, he nodded and agreed, "Yes. That would be silly. As we both know, the Ministry of State Security has been dismantled."

"But not completely absurd, right? I mean, speaking as a professional with experience in both the border guard and your... uh... other experience, isn't it possible that I could have attracted attention?"

He had put his cutlery down on his neatly-cleaned plate, folded his cloth napkin along the creases and placed it precisely next to his plate. I pushed my chair away from the table in order to get room to cross my legs, after which I lit up a perfectly ghastly East German cigarette out of the pack I'd bought earlier that day. We raised our glasses of *edelkirsch* to one another and took a sip.

"Alright", he said, "I'll entertain your theory as a purely hypothetical professional question.

"A man coming through the Friedrichstrasse passport control lines for non-Germans gets noted by a guard because he speaks German well. Not that uncommon, but worth noting."

As he said these things, it occurred to me that I had sat at a cafe table with two East Germans and made a telephone call on my first visit to East Berlin.

"The same man comes back the next day, and it is noted that he says he is a tourist, but he has a microcassette recorder with him."

I recalled a guard had casually asked to look in my bag. Though it was expressly forbidden to take recording equipment into the GDR, the guard said nothing. But on which day had that happened?

"At this point the individual becomes what we call 'interesting'. Indeed, it is possible that someone would be sent to follow this person, that the people he had contact with would be questioned, and if deemed necessary, that someone would be instructed to make contact with him. So I have to concede your point. Not absurd, but still not likely. One has to discriminate, or else we'd have to follow everyone around."

It is a documented fact that at least one in five citizens of the GDR were obligated to give reports to the secret police. But there was something about this man's warm smile and assured manner that made me feel I was just being paranoid, that it was just chance that brought us together on the Alexanderplatz.

"And besides all that; that's not the way things are done here anymore."

As a waitress passed our table, my companion gestured with his index finger at our empty cordial glasses and I nodded. He gave her the order for another round.

"So what do you think of the election results?" I asked.

"I imagine it should be obvious that I am not pleased, though by no means surprised. I voted PDS, because that's where my loyalties lie. But let's face it, the other side is in power now."

"The other side?"

"You realize, of course, that all of the State Security Service's records have been sealed and that they will be reviewed by the newly-elected government. I don't really think things will go that badly, but now the CDU will have the most influence in the handling of the investigations and the trials. It gives us cause to worry. There will be witch hunts. Some people feel they have scores to settle."

"Do you think you did anything wrong?"

As one would expect, he had to consider his answer.

"I'll say we sometimes had to do things we didn't like to do. But we did it for the party, for the state. You see, it was a big responsibility to be a member of the party. Its good work had to be protected. The party decided scientifically what needed to be done, and we carried out its will. That was what party discipline was all about."

I believe I have arrived at the crux of this retelling. You see, I believed this soldier of the party was being completely sincere. He wasn't pleading in front of a court, trying to save himself from jail. He wasn't trying to justify himself to his enemies. He was having dinner with an American, a stranger, who spoke his language, and it gave him the opportunity to try to make someone understand. He desperately wanted me to understand that he believed in what he had done. He believed in the party.

I had grown up in a politically conservative family during the cold war. The geography textbooks I learned from in my Catholic grade school gave Eastern Europe a really bad rap because of the suppression of religion. The city my grandmother was born in (Frankfurt an der Oder) was in the "other" Germany. I grew up with the impression that nobody in East Europe really believed in communism anymore, that it was a system run by cynics, for the benefit of cynics, and that all ideology was lip service. It was a surprise to encounter this man.

But what he believed was even more of a surprise to me. He repeated again and again how the party was able to scientifically determine the needs of the people and how it alone was able to fulfill those needs. All things I had heard in some form or another before, but they had a different resonance coming from the mouth of a human being, in the voice of my convivial dinner companion, and not from the pages of a book.

He continued to challenge my image of the apparatchik by showing me photographs of his wife and his little boy, and telling me anecdotes about family life. What had I always imagined communists did in their spare time? Read up on the latest torture techniques? Work on their Soviet stamp collection? Much has been made, in the wake of revelations concerning the character of SS camps guards, of the "banality of evil". But what I was not prepared for was the human face of evil. Because, make no mistake about it: the belief that some elite group scientifically knows the needs of the entire population, coupled with the belief that one has to follow all orders of that elite whether one feels right about those orders or not, is evil. I realize objections could be raised that I'm condemning the divine right of kings. But let me make it clear that I'm talking about political and cultural realities of this century. With tools such as radios, telephones, telephoto lenses, automatic weapons, drugs, modern psychology and biology, and high-speed transportation - not to begin to speak of the high-tech toys available today - such beliefs as described above inevitably lead to evil. Any system must allow for the operation of individuals' conscience and their right to act upon the dictates of conscience. People must realize that "I was following orders" does not absolve them.

"Speaking of family," he said at one point, looking at his watch, "I need to go home." I walked across Alexanderplatz with him, and as he enjoined me to admire the gigantic TV tower that can be seen from all parts of Berlin - East and West - he spoke nostalgically about the late sixties and early seventies in the GDR. "We had the West worried: America bogged down in Southeast Asia, riots in the streets of every western capital. Revolutions in Africa and South America. Our industries growing, our countries co-operating. It just couldn't last, though." And he sighed.

As we entered the S-Bahn station, I asked him what he thought was in store for him personally in the future. He stopped and looked up to the distant ceiling of the station and I could see him contemplating an era in which no all-knowing committees of comrades scientifically determined what was to be done for everyone and how it was to be done. Shaking his head, he softly said, "I have no

idea. I really have no idea." And looking down to meet my gaze, he said, "And that scares me more than anything else."

# **Budapest in Transition**

## Some Urban Landscapes

### I.

We've watched as the changing way of life has given the grande dames of this city a collective face-lift. The unseen hand has been snipping and tucking fast and furiously in the thirteenth district. And nowhere more than on Pozsonyi street, where every day, it seems, another drab state-owned store front window is papered over. When the bandages are removed months later--voila!--the transformed old crone struts forth as a chic Austrian women's wear shop, or a sexy, high-tech software emporium. Liz Taylor, eat your heart out!

One such old gal was, until very recently, one of those ubiquitous neighborhood bars whose unpretentious wardrobe only included one modest adornment: a plain block letter sign above the picture window bearing the legend ESZPRESSZÓ.

Sure, she bore some cracks and wrinkles in her aging plaster walls. And her barmaids always let strangers wait a while for their service, lest they get any mistaken notions they belonged there or something. But to the wizened old codgers and seedy homeboys in track suits, she was just the kind of matronly companion who'd nestle you to her comforting bosom while you downed a couple shots of *pálinka* with your pals. She never gave your basic proletarian-kind-of-guy any reasons to feel inadequate. The 2 forint pay phone, the shaky tables, the tinny-sounding black and white television made her the kind of woman who didn't expect you to shave or change out of your soiled overalls, before you dropped by for a quick drink.

Without warning she, too, gave in to the new vanity sweeping the capital. One day her door was locked, her face covered to the world. The sounds of the surgeons' hammers, chisels and saws echoed in Pozsonyi street.

Months later, the gauze was lifted, her door flung wide to the public. Through the miracles of cosmetic medicine, she had been recast as a colorful, trendy cafe.

That evening, we witnessed as the old gang came to pay a visit. They walked in and sat at one of the tables together. They ordered their libations from the adolescent barmaid they'd never seen before. While they waited, they shifted around uneasily in the contemporary, three legged chairs, suspiciously eyed the futuristic halogen lamps and the brightly painted plywood sculptures. After they were served, they only spoke to one another in occasional whispers as they inspected their old comrade's new patrons: a table of young business men in double-breasted jackets, a student wearing an expensive wool sweater and reading an English

novel, two young ladies who looked like they'd just stepped out of an Italian fashion magazine.

The men paid their bill and unobtrusively said good-bye as they shuffled out. They've never come visiting again.

## II.

An ancient European superstition holds that spirits, lost souls and supernatural beings gather at crossroads, which in turn made them popular hangouts for necromancers, witches and other dealers with the unseen world.

The spirits were flying that day at the Nyugati pedestrian underpass. The energies of Budapest audibly hum at the crossroads of the 4/6 tram, the Blue Metro, Bajcsy-Zsilinszky street, Váci street, the inner ring road and the main terminal for all Hungarian rail traffic with Central Europe. A crossroads par excellence.

Close to one hundred saffron-garbed, bead wearing, painted devotees of Sri Krishna had assembled at the center of the cavernous underpass, dancing and singing the chant that has made them famous: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare etc. They were going at it with exceptional zeal that day. One worshipper was dancing while balancing a portable amplifier/loudspeaker on his head, connected to an accordion and a microphone. A post modern touch was added by the saxophone player, laying down some sizzling jazz riffs to the glory of his lord.

But Krishna couldn't have this fertile ground to himself. Window dressers had chosen an Egyptian desert motif for the summer fashions display in the huge showcase opposite the metro entrance. As the Krishnas danced and sang, they were being watched by quietly confident, life-sized paintings of the Egyptian gods and Pharaoh.

The scene wouldn't have been complete without a shaman. The deranged street-person who binds flowers, branches and found-objects into a crown around his head and ties a plastic garbage bag around his neck for a cape was also there that day. He set up an impromptu stand on a box to sell the flowers he'd just stolen from a public park.

All the while, Budapesters on their way from here to there hustled through the commotion, stopping just a moment to observe the show and then moved on, shaking their heads a little and wearing practiced long-suffering faces. "Life isn't always easy at the crossroads of Europe," their faces seemed to say, "and occasionally a bit bizarre."

## III.

As my mind slowly and fuzzily rose into wakefulness that Sunday morning, his rich, melodious voice echoed through the man-made valleys between the beehive apartment buildings of Bekásmegyer. "*Krumplit vegyenek! Télálló burgonyát tessék!*" he sang into the crisp autumn air. I rolled over and made eye contact with Szilvi, who immediately understood my knit brow to mean, "What the hell is that?"

"That's the *Zsákos Bácsi*," she explained. His moniker is a Hungarian tradition, and refers to the sack he carries his potatoes in as he goes through the town selling them. She also explained that he functions in Hungarian folklore like the bogey-man. Hungarian parents warn their children that if they don't behave, they'll let the *Zsákos Bácsi* take them away. A fate worse than being grounded for life.

I walked over to the open balcony doors and looked down. Though his truck was a concession to modernity, in the back were the sacks full of potatoes from which he derives his name. He was the center of a hub of activity as people streamed from the surrounding tenements, bags and wallets in hand, to avail themselves of cheap spuds.

As I watched this time-honored ritual, I felt I was witnessing an incorruptible anachronism, which endured even in this sterile environment of socialist concrete towers.

That was last year, the fall of '92. Every Sunday morning after that until Winter finally took hold, the chant of the *Zsákos Bácsi* wove its way between my last dreams and the first golden rays of morning. He had become a part of what it meant to me to live in Budapest.

When the fall of '93 rolled around, the *Zsákos Bácsi* was late. Sundays passed by without a trace of him. Another tradition, I feared, had bit the dust. Then one Sunday morning I was ripped from the arms of slumber by a loud, tinny voice blasting into the apartment from outside. I raced to the open balcony doors to behold this sight: my living legend had acquired a megaphone. The *Zsákos Bácsi* has gone high-tech.

#### IV.

In the heart of the Lehel tér market, there's a stand which sells, among other basic Hungarian fare, some of the heartiest and spiciest *babgulyás* (bean goulash) in existence. A meal-sized bowl with a hunk of bread costs 104 forints. You take your steaming bowl of sustenance out to the ledge that runs around the outside of the building. You gracefully acknowledge the "*jó étvágyat*" (Bon Appetit) from the homeless man next to you who, no doubt, panhandled his 104 forints in the metro that morning and dig into the soup.

The *gulyás* is only half of why we come here. Then there's the theater. All of Hungary, it seems, is here: rich and poor, young and old, urban and rural, native and foreigner, and of course no Hungarian market would be complete without gypsies. It takes only a little imagination to turn the variety of people and the jumble of things from fruit to shoes to electronic toys into a street scene from some science fiction film noir.

Apropos the film noir setting, we have noticed these men at the market who walk around in pairs and groups, wearing green military fatigues, black combat boots and, more often than not, close-cropped hair. They often have night sticks dangling from their belts and are occasionally accompanied by Rothweiler dogs. It took us several visits to realize that these are the market security force, though their presence, oddly enough, makes us feel anything but secure.

One day we were contemplatively chewing some pork gristle (nothing but the best cuts in this soup), and observing two men haggle over a string of garlic when every head turned toward the sound of shouting voices approaching down the aisle. The crowd parted and three figures emerged: two shouting security men preceded by an elderly gypsy woman, bent over from the exertion of carrying two large, hastily bound bundles under her arms. She was silently trudging with her load, as quickly as her old legs could carry her, while the two hale young men shouted at her about some unknown offense which merited such an undignified expulsion. But that wasn't enough. When the woman slowed down too much for their tastes, they saw fit to motivate her with a sharp poke of the night stick, which would give even a young person a bruise. These young bucks are obviously in need of training in appropriate use of force.

Enough theater for one day, we thought, as we finished the meal with our eyes fixed on the soup bowl. Indeed, all of Hungary can be seen from this vantage point. All of it.

V.

You ascend from the bowels of the earth on the escalator at Moszkva tér, bear right after you reach the top and emerge from the exit onto the most free market of them all.

On your way to the 4 & 6 tram stop you have to walk the gauntlet between two rows of colorfully dressed peasant women in head scarves and Romanian Gypsies calling out, "*Tessék!* Get your track suits right here. At a special low price!" Or, "*Tessék!* Instant coffee. You'll never find it this cheap again!"

You make eye contact with a woman who's selling cotton socks. She thrusts a package of five pairs at you and says, "They're only 200 forints, sir!"

You're just about to inspect the wares when she hastily throws the package into the bag at her feet and quickly gathers up the other socks displayed on a bed sheet by picking up the four corners. Five seconds later she has disappeared around the corner. All the other peasants and Gypsies have either disappeared or are sitting or standing around next to sacks or closed cardboard boxes trying to look natural.

A pair of uniformed policemen stroll into view, one of them lightly slapping his night-stick against the side of his leg. They go up to a man standing next to a box--who was selling bottled spirits just a minute before--and one of the cops says, "Hey, didn't we tell you to quit selling stuff here yesterday."

"I'm not selling anything."

"Let's see your papers!"

"You saw them yesterday."

The cop stands there with an outstretched hand until the peddler relents and hands over a worn-looking Romanian passport.

"You know this visa expires in five days," the cop says.

"Thanks for reminding me."

The passport is given back and the cops leave the scene.

A few minutes later, the merchandise comes back out of the sacks and boxes. "*Tessék* ma'am. Look at these beautiful leather shoes." "*Tessék*, buy some chocolate Easter eggs."

## Change?

As we walked across Vörösmarty tér toward the entrance gate to the Budapest Wine Festival on that damp Friday night, a man materialized from the shadows and approached me and my wife with those familiar words, "Change? Change Money?" (Odd how they never notice that my wife is Hungarian.) I simply shook my head as we walked past him, but he persisted.

"I'll give you a good rate."

"No thanks," I said over my shoulder.

"How many dollars you want to change? Deutsche Marks are also..." I turned and looked him straight in the eye and said "No!" in a very stern voice. He shut up and, after a pause, walked away. It struck me how much things had changed. Mohammed, I thought to myself, would never have been so rude.

We paid our 200 forints each at the gate, got our wine glasses and drink coupons and wandered into the festival. Yes, indeed, things have changed alright. There was a time not too many years ago when Hungarians didn't make a big fuss over wine. It was white or red, sweet or dry, and that was it. Not any more. The square was filled with elaborate stands from which elegantly dressed men and women were serving wines to the public, and everyone was wearing rather serious expressions on their faces. I thought about how the simplest of people in California become snobs when they go wine tasting in the Napa Valley.

We ran into my colleague Tom, the Scotsman, while we were trying to figure out which stand to start at. He led us to a stand which he swore served the best red wine there, and which also happened to cost only one tasting coupon. We toasted one another with what, in my opinion, was a perfectly average semi-dry Kékfrankos (Blue Frankish). (Okay, I admit I've spent time at Napa Valley wine tastings, too.) Since Tom and Szilvi got into conversation, I shifted my attention to the pourer and said I wanted to try a touch of the 1993 Szekszárd Cabernet Sauvignon (dry, from Aranyfürt). I knew he recognized genuine interest, because he didn't ask for a coupon.

As the lovely stuff tickled my taste buds, I had to think of Mohammed again. Several years ago, I didn't always earn enough money to meet my expenses, as a struggling writer. So I'd have to pull some dollars off the very small stack I kept hidden under my dirty laundry and make an excursion to the Keleti train station.

The front hallway of Keleti was like a middle-eastern bazaar in those days. And though I was nervous the first couple of times I went there to change money, I came to realize that these people were actually very honest. They might try to bargain you down to a bad

exchange rate, but once you'd agreed on a rate, they didn't do things like hand you a stack of Romanian Lei sandwiched between two one-thousand-forint-notes, or any of the other tricks used by money changers in other parts of the city. If you treated these men with respect they returned the favor.

On one of my trips to Keleti I changed money with Mohammed. He looked like an oversized Pavarotti, though he was definitely a baritone and not a tenor. After he'd sold me forints for dollars (at a very good rate, I might add!) he smiled at me and asked, "May I buy you a cup of coffee?" I nodded and Mohammed turned to his colleagues and informed them he'd be "having coffee with the gentleman." They all bowed slightly, and that was when I noticed that they treated him a bit like a prince among their ranks. We chatted a bit over our coffee and when we'd finished, he tipped the *büfésnő* (the server) very well. As he shook my hand he said, "Bring your and your friends' business to me. I will treat you well." I had no doubt he was being sincere.

My wife and Tom shook me out of my memories to inform me that they wanted to go to another booth. Tom took a sip of my Cabernet and frowned. "It's a waste on me," he said. "Give me the kind that comes in four-liter jugs." I bought a bottle of the Cabernet and we moved on.

Several stands later we arrived at the Zwack stand. When the Zwack people saw a bottle under my arm they were willing to let me try anything. Tom and Szilvi left me alone once they saw I was into tasting again. It was the '93 Villány Cabernet that got me to thinking again, about the time when that wine was bottled.

I brought several people to meet Mohammed, and as he had promised, he treated us well. I'd even occasionally drop by the train station just to have a coffee with him. His colleagues all knew me and, because of my bespectacled and bookish nature, called me "the professor." I learned a little about his life. He had fled from southern Iraq when Saddam Hussein was persecuting the Shiite Moslems. He was on his way through Hungary to Germany when they wouldn't let him cross the border into Austria. He was stuck. The UN gave him refugee status, but that still didn't give him permission to work in Hungary. "So you see, my friend, this is the only work I can do."

But one day in the Summer of 1994, I walked into the front hall of Keleti and the bazaar had disappeared. Instead of dozens of men standing around there was only Mohammed and two others. When he saw me he just shook his head and said, "It's all over my friend." When I tried to ask what was happening he only, repeated, "It's all over. You should leave." His colleague nodded and agreed, "Yes professor, you should not stay here."

That was the last time I saw that dignified man with the deep voice and the sincere warm smile. The police cleared Keleti out.

I told the pourer that I wanted to buy a bottle of the Villány Cabernet. She remarked that it was a good year. "Yes it was," I sighed. "It was a special year."

When we walked back out the gates, a man emerged from the darkness of the square and whispered, "Change money?" I said no, but the rude man just wouldn't leave us alone.

## **The Tree of Knowledge**

I am reminded of "His excellency" every day, now that the horse chestnuts are ripe. There's a tall old tree I pass every day as I walk up the hill called *Naphegy* on my way to work. Each day, more of those brown prickly hulls are scattered all over the street, some of them split open to reveal the shiny, dark brown nut inside. Then my thoughts go back to six months ago when the trees were in bloom, and that makes me think of His Excellency.

*The golden-orange light of an early spring evening shone into the dim hospital room from outside. Framed in the window were several clusters of horse chestnut blossoms which hadn't quite bloomed yet. They resembled bunches of tiny white grapes. In contrast to the quiet room, the flowers and tree branches on the other side of the glass were rocking and fluttering in the breeze.*

It was the spring of '93 when I received an invitation to have dinner with Szilvi's family. It felt like I'd been summoned for an inspection. They wanted to know who this American man was their daughter was spending so much time with. I was somewhat intimidated at meeting her father, the lifetime diplomat and two times Hungarian ambassador. I'd known professors and actors and writers (lots of writers!) before, but never an ambassador. I dressed neatly and was received cordially and distantly.

*We had been left alone in the room together. I was, as I'd always been in his presence, at a loss for words. I was holding his right hand --the hand on the paralyzed side-- and massaging it. "It's a beautiful day outside," I said and pointed out the window. "Look, the chestnut tree is blooming." Because he couldn't talk since he'd had the stroke a few weeks before, we could never tell how much he understood of what we said, though we had determined he could still understand some English. But once he'd looked at the tree, he turned around, looked into my eyes, smiled and nodded.*

Her family made a bizarre impression. On the one hand, they are all very dignified and have a very classic sense of how to dress, what to eat, how to behave in a social setting, and what to talk about. On the other hand, her father's favorite drink was the *fröccs*, the drink of the Hungarian working class.

It started out as a sort of rude personal joke for me to refer to him as His Excellency. It seemed absurd to me that this honorific, created in a day and age when diplomats were noblemen and scholars, at a time when it reflected that an ambassador was truly the best the nation had to offer, was conferred on this man who was, as many communist officials were, a strange mixture of sophisticate and proletarian. "How is His Excellency," I'd ask Szilvi.

"And what does His Excellency think about that?" "Will His Excellency be coming this weekend?"

Perhaps this narrative has to lurch back a few more years to give it the full perspective it needs. One evening in the spring of 1990, I was sitting in a restaurant in East Berlin with a man I'd just met on the Alexanderplatz. As he and I drank and ate, it slowly came out that my dinner companion worked for the Ministry of State Security.

My mother was a post-war German immigrant to the United States, a Goldwater republican. My father was stationed in post-war Germany when he was in the army. Communism had always gotten a bad rap in my surroundings. Now I was shocked to realize I was actually breaking bread and sharing drinks with a member of the notorious *Stasi*. What's more, I was enjoying his company. He was a charming man and an engaging conversationalist. He showed me pictures of his wife and family. In the course of an evening he helped me understand why he believed firmly in communist ideology, helped me see why he justified working for the secret police, and mostly, forced me to accept that what I'd been raised to think of as the enemy was a nation of human beings. I also felt sympathy for him when he told me that he and his family would probably suffer once the witch-hunt got underway.

Three years later, I was sitting at the dinner table with another communist, as his guest, because I was in love with his daughter.

A bit of history: He was working as a mold maker in a Miskolc (city east of Budapest) steel mill in the early fifties when the party decided to pluck him out of there and train him for the foreign service. In 1956, he was serving in Bratislava, so he was lucky enough not to have to directly participate in the uprising or its suppression.

One of the most interesting parts of his story --to me at least-- was that he served as cultural and press attaché in Washington in the late sixties and early seventies. I always made jokes with Szilvi, saying that her father was a spy. She'd laugh and roll her eyes in a gesture that meant, "Oh sure he was." I wondered. What did he do in my country?

When the communists lost their hold on power, His Excellency decided to retire. The world had changed, and he was too honest to pretend he wasn't a communist. He felt ultimate contempt for those communists who suddenly called themselves Christians or democrats in order to grab a piece of power in the new order.

The longer I knew him, the more I wanted to ask him about the things he knew. About what he'd seen over the years. But in his presence, I just couldn't penetrate the diplomatic aura deeply enough to create the right moment to ask the questions. It slowly dawned on me

that he really was His Excellency. He was a diplomat down to his boot tips. Sophisticated, controlled, and impenetrable.

*He was having great difficulty breathing that evening. That and other signs indicated that his situation had suddenly deteriorated. When I took his hand and said good-bye, I was pretty sure it was the final good-bye. Outside the window, the chest-nut flowers had just begun to open.*

I never did summon the nerve to ask him what he thought about things. Maybe he would have told me. Maybe he wouldn't have. The best way to keep secrets: not even giving people the chance to ask about them.

*It rained at the funeral. Though I'd always known His Excellency as a loner, a man who kept to himself, an incredible number of his old colleagues from the foreign ministry had shown up and were standing under black umbrellas in the wet grass along with the family as the grave diggers shoveled dirt into the grave. A choir was singing a plaintive song, the chorus of which repeated the words, "Fáj a búcsú." ("Painful is farewell!") I looked up and noticed that the horse chestnuts blossoms surrounding the field had burst into bloom, filling the trees with splashes of white light.*

This summer a book was published by the man who had served as military attaché in Washington at the same time that Szilvi's father had been there. It tells the story of how the attaché spied for the Soviets.

On my way to work today, I'll pass the horse chestnut tree again. I'll think about how some things remain mysteries forever.

## **Throwing It Away**

"Almost every spring our journalists produce stories about two things: first the extraordinary magnificence and luxury of the gaming rooms in the casinos of the towns on the Rhine, and secondly, the heaps of gold that are supposed to lie on the tables."

--Dostoyevsky, *The Gambler*

"I lost 3000 marks last night", says my Hungarian pal, who goes by the moniker "the Beard". I shook my head. He smiled a gentle smile, shrugged his bear-sized shoulders, and took another drag off one of the Marlboros he chain-smokes.

I met the Beard over a year ago. Back then his gambling habit was only doing damage in the three-digit range. I thought the guy was crazy, but he could afford it because he's a freelance software-writer, specializing in accounting programs.

Mama told me it ain't nice to psychoanalyze your friends, but I can't help it sometimes. You see, the Beard got into computers years ago under the old system, back when differences in income were relatively minor in Hungary. But when the dam broke and free enterprise flooded into the society, the Beard suddenly found himself in fat-city.

Sudden wealth drives people to strange behaviors. The Beard started to gamble and got hooked.

He'd invited me to come to the casinos with him on several occasions, but I'd never had the least interest in gambling for two reasons: 1) any fool knows that you're sure to lose your money, and 2) crossing the street in Budapest is already enough risk for me. But finally, curiosity made me want to see what possesses rational, intelligent people to throw away thousands of dollars a night.

When we walked into the Gresham Casino on Roosevelt Square one evening at about ten o'clock, the doormen, who wear snazzy green uniforms with bow-ties and officer's hats, practically bowed and scraped at the sight of the Beard. Their sycophantry struck me as absurd, since the Beard is a very casual dresser who wouldn't be bothered if his socks didn't match.

Once the front desk had entered my passport number into their computer and determined that I wasn't wanted by Interpol (who knows if that's a plus or a minus in their book), we entered the gaming-rooms. The long room, lined in dark wood paneling, featuring six roulette tables, was astonishingly quiet. Not a bit like Las Vegas or Reno. No flashing lights, no music, and unlike equal-opportunity rip-off joints in the States, the man-to-woman ratio

here was at least forty-to-one. The croupiers (a horribly dignified word for "dealer") are immaculate in their black bow-ties and blow-dried hair-cuts.

At the far end of the room there's a bar, where about ten middle-eastern men were either sitting at the bar or pacing around watching the people in the roulette-room. I asked the Beard, "Are those guys money-changers?" He nodded. "And the casino", I inquired further, "lets them do that here?"

"As long as they're discreet about it."

At this he walked over to one of the gentlemen in question and they shook hands like old buddies. They leaned close together and after some talk, the man gave the Beard something. My pal cocked his head indicating I should follow him to a roulette table. He had ten 100 DM chips in his hand. Betting three or four chips at a time he lost it all within four spins. He smiled a crooked smile, shrugged and lit another cigarette.

This time, when he walked up to the man at the bar, just a few words were exchanged. The man pulled a fat roll of currency out of his pocket, peeled a 1000 DM bill off and handed it to the Beard. After he'd gotten chips, he said, "I'm gonna try my luck at black-jack." Off he went.

It was about midnight by then and the pace had picked up considerably. Though some people were placing conservative bets of 5 Or 10 DM on the roulette tables, it was amazing that not a few were betting several hundred marks at a time and, of course, losing most of it. Every time the ball dropped at the wheel, the house was raking in around a thousand marks. Each spin takes about two minutes. You do the arithmetic!

That's when I noticed the strangest behavior of all. There were several men who were walking up to tables, placing bets and walking off to the next table and placing bets, only to go to the next table. They would eventually make their way back to the first table and either pick up their winnings, or place another bet and then go on to the next table. They all had this desperate look in their eyes and this frustrated body-language that expressed that they just couldn't gamble fast enough. I was always surprised that after making the rounds of the room, each of these men always remembered what he had bet the last time around. As it got later, the bets kept getting bigger and bigger.

I found the Beard at a black-jack table. "How's it going?" I asked. "I've lost three thousand", he said, nonchalantly. After a few hands, the dealer had to shuffle. The Beard threw a bet on the table and stood up. "Play my hand if I don't get back in time. I'm gonna play a little roulette." I was sweating and praying he'd come back soon. The bet on the table was, well, half of a week's wages for me. She dealt the cards. My blood pressure shot up. All

faces at the table turned to me. I felt like fainting every time she gave me another card. There were hums and nods of approval when I hit twenty-one with the fifth card.

The Beard was pleased when he got back to see I'd won. The next time the dealer shuffled again, he dropped some chips on the table, and walked away. After a minor fit of nerves, I won again. Then something strange happened. I found myself waiting for the Beard to wander off and leave the cards to me. I was getting off on the thrill, the fear. And I got that irrational sensation that I was "lucky". The bug had bit.

There was an interesting character in the black-jack room. He sat at one of the tables for hours. He was wearing a lot of gold and he had a mobile phone on the table in front of him. Every couple of minutes one of the boys from the bar would walk up to him and he'd pull out his wad of currency and either make change, exchange forints for marks (or vice-versa) or simply take money from them or give them money. Draw your own conclusions.

The Beard lost everything again and went to get more money. "What does this guy charge you?" I asked him. It was a strange repayment system involving both Hungarian and German money, but as best I could calculate it, it came out to one percent per day. Yow!

Just before they closed down the black-jack tables at 2:30 two Romanian men at the next table were playing at 200 marks a hand. In two minutes one of them lost 800 marks.

In the last hour before closing time at 3:30, the betting got outrageous. A very stocky Gypsy, who was wearing an 18K gold cross that looked to weigh at least 5 ounces, was dropping 1000 DM chips on the table. When he won one bet, they pushed a 10,000 DM chip back in his winnings. Kiss all sense of proportion good-bye.

I thought the night was over, but the Beard hustled me into his Porsche and we flew across the Chain Bridge to the Várkert Casino. The first thing you notice about the place after all the dough that went into restoring the place (the decorating includes lots of gold leaf and crystal chandeliers) is that the staff is British. "When new places open up," the Beard explained, "they import their staff from abroad until they can train Hungarians to replace them." The majority of the gamblers there were the people who'd just left the Gresham casino. There was a comedy of errors because the croupiers couldn't communicate with the gamblers. One guy kept putting chips on the roulette table after the croupier had announced, "no more bets please," and had to be physically restrained. At one spin he was still trying to put chips on the table after the ball fell. One lady in the same group of gamblers kept trying to move the chips to a winning number after the ball had dropped. The croupier kept complaining to the pit boss. The pit boss smiled congenially at the gamblers and said, "That's alright, this is their last night in this house." The gamblers all smiled back at him and nodded.

The Beard's friend, István, couldn't stand to see someone not gambling and handed me a pile of chips. I played short odds on roulette and won 40 dollars and then, feeling lucky, bet it all and lost it. When they announced the last two spins of the night, people dropped thousands of dollars on the tables.

The sun had come up when we walked outside. The Beard offered to take me to the number 2 tram stop. We pulled up to the tram stop just as the tram doors shut. He hit the gas and we raced down the *rakpart* (quay street) flying past two cars and getting back into the right lane just in time to miss the next oncoming car. Perhaps the Beard thought losing 5000 marks wasn't enough thrill for one night.

## **The View from the Other Side**

"Why, " I asked for the fifth time that day, "do you want this job?" The young man's eyes searched the ceiling for the answer. After a few seconds he started to speak, cautiously and nervously. For the fifth time that day, I watched someone try to look and sound sincere, and say what they thought I wanted to hear. Meanwhile, I kept looking at the suit jacket he was obviously uncomfortable in, which didn't go well with his necktie. Every now and then my eyes wandered down to his canvas basketball shoes, and back up to his long black ponytail.

A little more than a month ago, my friend and colleague informed me that he was leaving town because his girlfriend had gotten a job in Prague. That meant we had to find a replacement for him at MTI Econews (an affiliate of the Hungarian Press Agency). We're copy editors, which in this case means native English speakers who polish texts that have either been translated from Hungarian or were written in English by Hungarians.

Since its creation in the late 1980s, Econews has always relied on the native-speaking editors to find their own replacements when they leave. This Hungarian practice of finding employees through personal connections has always struck me as rather "Asian", since the first time I ever came across the practice was when I worked in a Chinese restaurant in my student days. The dishwashers in the restaurant were the only Americans working there. When a dishwasher quit the job, the owner would never think of putting a classified ad in the newspaper, which is the way most jobs are filled in America. You had to find an appropriate replacement for yourself

My colleagues and I tried for days to think of someone who could take the job, but nobody came to mind. We also realized that we were thinking too much about who needed a job rather than who would be the right person for the job. That's when it struck me it was time to reform the system. I convinced the boss to take out classified ads in the English-language press, requesting applicants to fax us their CVs.

In the first two days after the ad came out we only got two CVs, both from journalists I already knew. I was afraid the boss wouldn't be too impressed with the results of the money he spent on the ads. But on the third day, the fax machine started spitting out Cvs every hour. And, Good Lord, were they impressive. People from all corners of the English-speaking world with good educations (American University, Duquesne University, University of Sydney), impressive work experience (Life Magazine, Citibank) and powerful references.

We called people and set up appointments for interviews the following day. That evening, as I went over the faxes again, I found that it disturbed me. Though I know I'm an educated

and intelligent man, I've somehow come to terms with the fact that I've been underemployed most of my life. But these people all looked like folks who should already have good jobs. I thanked the fates many times that I already have a decent job and that my CV wasn't sandwiched in between these.

The next day, as I mentally prepared myself for the interviews, the CVs kept rolling out of the fax machine: good CVs, qualified people. I wondered if I shouldn't, perhaps, schedule more interviews for the next day.

Meeting the faces that went with the faxes was a learning experience. I've lost count of the times I've been interviewed for jobs, but this was the first time I was the interviewer. They were all charming, intelligent, competent individuals. I wanted to give them all jobs. The same thought kept recurring to me: Why don't these people already have good jobs?

As I watched and listened, I had to think of the things I've said and done in interviews. I also had to think about the fact that my choice wasn't personal (or I may as well have skipped the ad and hired a friend) but I was choosing someone for the company. One fellow, though dressed very nicely, had huge red sideburns that stuck out ten centimeters on either side of his face. I knew my boss would have problems with that. Another candidate had difficulty concealing her anger when I asked her something she didn't know the answer to, and she knew it hurt her chances. One of them had only been here a month and couldn't speak any Hungarian, which disqualified him. But I liked him so much, I spent the last twenty minutes of the half-hour interview recommending places for him to look for work.

By the end of the day, I knew which one of the candidates had exactly the combination of skills and experience for the job and the right personality to get along with the other people at the office. To my surprise, he hadn't really dressed up for the interview. He came in a pair of cotton pants and a polo shirt.

When I go back to the office today, I'm certain there will be more CVs cascading from the fax machine: good ones, qualified people. I'm glad I already have a job.

**I Began Missing You...**

## **I Began Missing You Before I Walked Out the Door**

I wish I could say it was raining on that early December day when we said good-bye. I could play with the metonymy. I wouldn't have the burden of trying to describe my sorrow. I could let the backdrop be like a funeral in one of those Hollywood films in which everyone is wearing black raincoats and has to hunch under black umbrellas lest they get soaked by the tears raining down from the sky. It would simplify matters if I could dress Budapest in a gray sky and all her inhabitants in dark coats and umbrellas.

But the truth is that as I rode the 19 tram down the West bank of the Danube, on my way to Rob's apartment, shafts of golden-orange sunlight shone in the window from the winter sun hung low over Pest. It was the kind of day people pray for when they plan an outing, a picnic, a cheerful lunch on some hotel terrace overlooking the river.

But I was on my way to say good-bye to you, my closest friend.

How inadequate that term seems to describe what we'd become to each other: closest friend.

I can still recall the day we met. In my journal it's dated as Wednesday, January 9, 1992. I'd just gotten employed at the International Language School and was hanging out in the teachers' room, where a crew of guys were getting ready to go to lunch together. I asked if I could go along and there was an exchange of glances between the teachers. It was apparent from their behavior that they didn't want me to come along, but they were inhibited enough not to say it in so many words. I pretended I couldn't tell I was intruding. I felt I had to get to know my colleagues somehow. The crew consisted of: Chris, a smooth, tall blond Englishman; Nick, a bright-eyed mischievous Cockney; Todd, a happy-go-lucky black man from Sacramento who'd just started growing Dreadlocks; and Rob, a tall emaciated Australian.

We went around the corner to a restaurant called the Tüköry and took a booth seat. I was put off by the tone of the conversation. When they weren't talking about drinking or womanizing, they were slagging off Hungary and Hungarians. Besides that, I was made to feel as unwelcome as possible. Nobody helped me with the menu and nobody really addressed me. I was made to understand that I'd intruded.

I found Rob particularly offensive. In the journal entry for that day I wrote, “ I see a certain amount of cynicism, aloofness and callousness toward the culture that I don’t want to develop at any cost. There’s one teacher, whose name escapes me, who really rubs me the wrong way. He seems to have contempt for Hungarians, women, Americans, and seems not to care whether or not I drop dead on the spot. He and another teacher also seem to have a penchant for getting trashed on a regular basis. We’ll see. I wouldn’t be surprised if this crusty individual became my best buddy. Stranger things have happened.”

After that lunch, I weaseled my way into that gang (for lack of better company) and also started hanging out with them at their nightly watering hole, the Razzia. I must have really been lonely, because on February 12th I wrote in my journal that, “I’m really developing an attitude toward my British colleagues. For the most part, they strike me as arrogant young, insensitive pricks. That goes for the Aussie, too!” But I was an emotional wreck, trying to recover from being rejected by my wife of seven years. I found it very difficult to be alone for too long, or else I started brooding on the past. They were a bunch of insensitive pricks, but getting potted with them every night was good distraction from the thoughts that haunted me.

That was the routine in my first year in Budapest: teach English during the day, hang out at the bar and womanize during the night.

Womanizing! How can I even begin to describe the behavior we indulged in. I say “we” because I thought it was universal in Hungary, but the gang I hung out with was extreme. After that chapter of my life was over I began referring to it as my “Bad Boy English Teacher” phase. And the crew of English teachers who hung out at the Razzia were all bad boys. All girls and women were targets, anywhere, at any time. I still don’t exactly know how this behavior came about, either in me or among the bad boys. I know that part of it was a reaction to the “climate” here. For some reason, Hungary was the happy poon hunting ground in 1992 for English teachers. Feminism, as we knew it in English-speaking countries, had just never gotten a foothold in Hungary. To a great extent, feminism under state socialism meant that women had equal rights to become tractor drivers, but certainly not at equal pay. And there was no perception that in a two-wage-earner-household, the housework ceases to be women’s work. No, women were (and continue to be) objects and they spent an inordinate amount of energy on looking sexy and on finding husbands.

Perhaps it was also that the twentieth century had weakened Christianity to such an extent, women just didn't have some of the same built-in inhibitions that one comes to expect in America.

And, of course, being a foreigner gave one an exotic aura as well.

Anyway, it was just easy to find women to go to bed with who didn't demand some sort of commitment right away. And the bad boys took advantage of this atmosphere. The worst of the bad boys was Nick. He had boyish charm that he used to his advantage and often managed to screw a different woman every night.

And Chris was another type of bad boy altogether. Whereas Nick at least had a sort of air of innocence about him, Chris gave the impression that he was consciously cultivating evil. He was a plotter, a schemer, a shrewd teller of lies and sower of distrust. He loved to tell people that so-and-so had said such-and-such about them and then watch the sparks fly when the two people got together.

And Todd was Mr. Popular. He was taking advantage of the fact that the vast majority of Hungarians had never known a black man before, much less a black man with dreadlocks.

That's the company Rob and I kept in those days. The five of us, sometimes accompanied by a few other teachers from the language school, would sit around our tiny circular white metal cafe table and hold court in the corner of the huge high-ceilinged room which also served as the foyer of an art cinema. Often we would be surrounded by a flock of young people who wanted to speak English. And we would converse and argue and bullshit and drink.

Good Lord, would we drink! I was unaccustomed to the British custom of buying rounds. In America, if your glass is empty and you want another drink, you order one for yourself. The Brits take turns buying drinks for everyone at the table. Now, Nick and Chris and Rob could make fast work of a half-liter of beer. So when it came time for another round, I'd get another half liter plunked down next to the half-full glass still in front of me. They would empty half of the glass in front of them and I'd realize I had to get a move on and would quickly finish my half glass and get to work on the second one. It would be time for another

round by then. And I'd end up hurrying through the last half of another glass. Before I knew it, I'd be three sheets to the wind.

I occurs to me that I don't quite know why I'm writing this, or who I'm writing this for. Am I writing it for you, Rob? Am I writing it for an imaginary posterity? Am I writing it for the man heading for your apartment aboard the 19 tram that December morning?

I'm writing this out of need: the need to explain to myself what happened in my heart that morning. The need to express my encounter with a powerful example of a universal human experience: the parting of ways.

Lord, were my head and my heart on a roller-coaster in those first months in Budapest. On the outside I was in a country innocently celebrating its newly-won status as a sovereign nation. Hungary was no longer a satellite of the Soviet Empire and the one-party system had let itself be voted out of power. Such innocent times. Everyone was full of such hope and optimism. They were sure that any day they would wake up and Hungary would be as prosperous as Germany. At times it seemed like Budapest was one huge all-night party. The drinking and eating just never stopped.

But inwardly I was torn to shreds. My wife of seven years had asked me for a divorce with no warning at all and, being the non-communicative person she is, never really made me understand why. Within four months I had gone from being a married man who lived in his own house in the country in the Sacramento Valley, and who had a business breeding and selling birds and his own martial arts school, to being a rootless English teacher in post-communist Hungary, whose possessions fit into two bags. My life alternated between being amazed, amused and awed at my new surroundings and brooding by myself over coffee and cigarettes in my apartment, wondering how my life had fallen apart so quickly.

Ergo, the time spent with the Bad Boy English Teachers. Time spent getting drunk with them was time not spent brooding.

At that time, it was possible to find at least one of the gang at the Razzia almost any night of the week. It's a permanent image in my imagination: that small white circular table in the corner of the theater lobby. Nick picking up girls. Todd performing for his audience of English-teacher-groupies. Chris getting more cynical and insulting as the evening went on.

Rob telling stories about his travels in Asia. And Theo? What did I do? Hide. I drank in this circus and hid from the things which hurt.

One night Rob and I ended up alone at the table and somehow I began telling him about my writing ambitions. I told him that one of the reasons I'd come to Budapest was to further my writing career. I thought that if I remained in America I'd get caught up in the 9 to 5 grind and would never get around to writing. I wanted a lifestyle that would allow time for writing and new experiences to write about. I also got into the rap that one had to write all the time to hone one's skill and told him that I wrote a journal. Well, Mr. Luke thought that was all fine and well in theory, but what on earth would he have to write about? He'd wait until he'd traveled around more and finally settled down somewhere, like Portugal, before he started to write. Until then he wouldn't have anything to write. So, for the foreseeable future, Rob pretty much pictured himself traveling the world, teaching English for money and sitting in the pub at night drinking beer.

A traveler. That's how Rob saw himself and characterized himself to others. He always wanted himself and others to believe that he could have his backpack packed and be on the road at a moment's notice. Hungary was just one of his longer stopovers. "A traveler never accumulates!" Rob would say to explain why he hadn't bought any new clothes, or a hi-fi, or kitchen utensils or anything.

I recall a night on which Rob and I decided we didn't feel like hanging out at the Razzia, but would rather go to a Reggae bar called Jamaica Jammin', in pursuit of some ganja. We had just decided this and were finishing our beers before we left on our quest, when Chris showed up. When he heard what Rob and I were doing, he tried to get us to change our plans. He wanted us to wait a while and then go to some other bar with him. When we insisted that our minds were made up, Chris got real insulting. "I know what's going on here. You two just want to go off and fuck each other." We could only shake our heads in disbelief at the things that man would say when he was desperate.

A trolley ride later we were at the Reggae bar and hangin' out waiting until we spotted a likely suspect. An Englishman who'd heard the two of us speaking English seated himself at our table and introduced himself. Rob introduced himself and then I did. I don't know why it happened. Perhaps it was fatigue, perhaps it was the beers, but I ended up introducing myself as Don. I'd only been exclusively using the name Theo for about three or four

months, and it wasn't completely natural to me yet. Rob got a funny look on his face when he heard me say my name.

"I guess you heard what I said."

"Oh yeah. I heard. You said your name was Don. Look, it's cool with me. I don't care. You're Theo to me."

On that morning, riding the tram down the river with the deep golden December sunshine slanting in the window on my face, I remembered these stories and many more: the episodes of friendship, our common mythology.

When the Budapest Post started publishing, I went in with my meager collection of clips and talked to Sean, the features editor. I got an assignment to do an article on martial arts schools, which I, by the way, never wrote. Rob heard I'd been there and went to see the features editor himself. He landed an assignment to do a piece about Szent István körút (a busy part of the central ring road), one of Rob's favorite streets in the city.

Through sheer determination, Rob wrote one of the lamest articles ever to be tapped out on a keyboard. And after Sean added his efforts to spruce it up, it became one of the worst articles ever to appear in print. I wish I had a copy of it to blackmail him with.

But, having finished his project on deadline, Rob got another assignment. I lamented the fact that I'd chosen a bad project and couldn't really imagine how I was going to get it done. Rob encouraged me to go back to Sean and tell him that I changed my mind about the martial arts school article and then sell him the idea of taking a review of a Hungarian book translated into English, an idea I'd mentioned to Sean before. A few weeks later Rob and I appeared on opposing pages: Me with a review of Árpád Göncz's short stories, and Rob with a piece on why furs were still a popular winter clothing article in Hungary. I pinned those pages up on the wall of my apartment and captioned them in a broad tipped marker with the words "Today, the Budapest Post. Tomorrow, the world!"

I guess we can't leave me on that tram forever approaching your apartment and never getting there on that December morning. I have to arrive sometime in the narrative.

That's how it had seemed for the two months before you went to Prague. The impending day seemed to approach forever but never arrive. I consult my journal again and find a passage from Monday, October 9, 1995. "Rob told me last Thursday, that there's been a serious change in his personal circumstances. He only went so far as to say that it didn't have to do with The Sun before he said, 'We'll talk about this later.' Well when later came, we were at Rob's flat and Mike Comerford was there. Whatever it was that Rob wanted to say, he wouldn't say it in front of Comerford."

I found out later that week that Susan had been given the assignment to set up the Prague Business Journal. I don't have any record of the day you left, either in my journal or in my schedule book, so I can only say it was the middle of December. Two months. We had two months to pack up a friendship and get it ready to go on the road and survive as a long-distance friendship.

So I got off the tram that morning in front of the Gellért Hotel as I had on so many occasions before that, feeling nostalgia creep into every moment as I walked the short stretch from there to your flat. I passed the Nelson pub and recalled the times I'd met you there on "boys' nights." We'd have a beer before we hopped up to your flat.

I felt sentimental about the door buzzer on the street, the spiral stairwell, the courtyard. When you opened the door, my first thought was that you looked like shit. You did. Like that something that the cat drug in. The kitchen was a disaster. And once we got to the living room, I could see that was a disaster, too. It was around ten in the morning and I had no idea how you planned to catch a plane that afternoon. The guys who were moving in after you had quite a task ahead of them.

Pride of place was given to the long dark blue wool overcoat I had taken you to buy two days before that. And the dark blue wool suit jacket we'd bought was slung over a chair.

In our early days of writing for The Sun (I actually only got two pieces in The Post before it folded) you and I were like children again in our enthusiasm. And Sean raked us over the coals, too. The bastard. We'd bring him our stuff and he'd take a red pen to the hard copy like it was elementary composition class. "Cut this. Move this here. Expand that. And what you didn't include, but you should, is..." We had to, effectively, write every piece twice. I

bitched about him so much. But we learned a lot, didn't we? Eventually we knew how to write for the Sun and they hardly changed a word of our copy before it went to press.

It was during that time that we had a weekly standing appointment to have dinner together (wasn't it Tuesdays?) with our girl friends. I came with Szilvi, who'd been your lover only half a year before that, and you came with Ági, the shy first-year university student who had no idea that you'd been seeing Szilvi at the same time you started dating her.

Sitting in a booth in the dim, wood-stained interior of the Tüköry, you and I would show each other print-outs of our latest pieces (What innocence! What enthusiasm!) and bore the poor ladies to death as we talked about the English-language newspaper scene all evening. Can you believe we did that every Tuesday for over half a year?

And now that you don't drink anymore - can't drink anymore - can I talk about how I felt about your drinking? It used to frighten me how much and how steadily you could drink. But it didn't seem so out of the ordinary in the company that we first kept. Kind of like the plain girl who keeps an ugly girl friend around to make herself look prettier. Around Chris and Nick and some of the other characters we knew, nobody's drinking looked out of the ordinary.

Granted, I drank more in those days than I do now. It was a passing phase for me. I drank a lot when I arrived in Budapest to kill the emotional pain of my divorce, but as that began to fade, my drinking slowed down to where I can only drink one or two beers, or one or two glasses of wine, if I drink anything at all on a given day.

But your drinking did frighten me.

When did I begin to realize it was a problem? It was that late August morning in 1992. You and I had dropped acid at Kate's party the night before at that tenement near Árpád Híd. We walked out the door of her apartment each carrying an open bottle of red wine in our hands, taking a good slug off the bottle every couple of minutes. We rode the night bus with our bottles. God, the 42E night bus on a Saturday night after the metro is closed. It's so crowded with young people on their way home from night clubs, you could die on that bus and nobody would notice. Two foreigners swilling red wine from the bottle made no impression on that crowd.

You'd just come back from a trip to Holland, so we smoked weed and hash when we got to your place. And got cosmic. If only you and I could remember what we talked about. I do remember that I got into one of those states of mind in which I talk about God, the universe, destiny, and other such open-ended subjects.

The next morning, you served coffee and loaded the pipe. I couldn't really smoke much.

I just wanted my head to clear up. I felt so fuzzy.

You had a date for a picnic in the Buda hills with Ági that afternoon. Since we'd only woken up around ten o'clock, you were pressed for time. I can still see you hurriedly trying to pack everything up you'd bought the day before in a backpack, while drinking straight out of a bottle of red wine you'd opened that morning. I couldn't really believe it. It was bad enough how you looked from drinking and smoking and tripping the night before and getting very little sleep, but to show up to your date reeking of wine! I really wonder what she thought.

After slaving away for a number of months writing book reviews, I felt used and underpaid. I knew the reviews were a popular item in the paper. It was so hard to keep in touch with the English-language book publishing world in those days and so hard to find out what to read about the region. When that new English-language paper, *The Hungarian Times*, was getting ready to launch, I approached them and got an offer for better money and guaranteed weekly publication. You caught wind of it after I'd already agreed to do the first piece for *The Times*. You were really upset. "This is a real mistake, Theo! You shouldn't do this. These people are going to lose their shirts. Go to Jim Michaels and tell him you got an offer. You have to at least give him the chance to make a counter-offer. God! Please don't leave the paper,"

And counter offer he did. He gave me the title of Books Editor on the masthead and a weekly salary. Not long after that you became Sports Page Editor. What heady times.

I remember when the paper came in from the printer on Wednesday afternoons, you and I'd pack a couple of copies in our bags and end up at your flat. We'd sit in that vast living room of yours and peruse the paper, commenting on each other's pages and on the various sections and on people's pieces. We loved what we did. We had such a good time at it.

That living room was such a waste on you, a man who basically wanted a roof over his head and a bed to sleep in. You could have easily been happy with my tiny flat. We should have swapped.

The things I could have done in that living room. How big was it? Sixty square meters? And it had that wonderful bay window at one side. That room was large enough to easily accommodate thirty or forty people. I could have held martial arts classes in that space, or put on short one-act plays.

And that massive wooden desk. You never worked at it. It was obvious by the pattern of the clutter on it. The only thing you did at that desk was make phone calls and stuff bank notes in the drawers. I would have sat at that desk with my laptop computer and relished the delicious space spread out in front of it. And the desk also had a commanding view of that huge art nouveau bronze-cast chandelier in the center of the room. What a room! And you just occupied a corner of it.

In the Autumn of '93 I went to the States for a visit. When I returned to Budapest, Szilvi told me that Ági had broken up with you and that you hadn't taken it well. That was an understatement. You took it very badly. You needed a lot of companionship for months to come after that. It wasn't easy to watch you. If you'd been cynical before, your cynicism took on a serious edge after that. If you'd drunk heavily before, after Ági left you your drinking became absolutely suicidal. As I said: it was almost unbearable to watch. You looked so worn out and ragged most of the time and you'd often give off wine fumes early in the afternoon: what I referred to as "*borozó* breath" in my conversations with Szilvi. (A *borozó* is a cheap cellar bar that serves only wine).

I've been at this project for three weeks now and I'm not sure where I'm going. No, that's not true. I know where I'm going. I've maneuvered myself into the living room of your apartment on the morning of the day you left Budapest, and I've painted a certain amount of the background to the event. Where I'm going is quite clear to me: I want to show that I began missing you before I walked out your door. I want to talk about the friendship that has meant more to me than any other in this life, though some have been much longer, and in ways more intense. I know where I'm going. I just don't know what ground I still need to cover before I get there.

I quit The Sun in November of 1994. Times had changed and as popular as my section of the paper had ever been, as the paper grew and changed, it faded in importance. I had to acknowledge that my “day in the Sun” was over. The features editor had relegated me to a low priority and the pay was getting worse and worse since they wouldn’t keep it up with the (at that point) 30% inflation. The Sun wanted mainstream American-style reporters now, not the gifted-amateur writers that had made the paper popular in the beginning. It was time to gracefully bow out.

One more word about my days at The Sun. The story just isn’t complete without mentioning the Urban Landscapes. That quirky little unsigned space that appeared over the masthead on the opinion page was, oddly enough, one of the most exciting things to happen in our creative lives. When Jim Michaels launched that section, you and I didn’t know what the fuck he had in mind with it. Unfortunately, neither did the staff. Some of the most senseless, meandering, lifeless, idiotic prose to ever disgrace the English language appeared in that space. Until, one day, Jim himself wrote a brilliant little piece that made the light bulb go on over your head: Stories! He wanted little stories! Take a little scene of life in Budapest, package it in a couple hundred words and really make it sing. You got an idea and whipped one out one week. When I read your piece I caught on, too.

Up to that point the old skin flint had depended on his full-time staff to write the Urban Landscapes, but they were reporters and had reporters’ habits. You can’t write a story in pyramid construction, ready to let the editor cut from the end. It has to hold together as an integral piece, with a beginning, a middle and an end. The hacks just couldn’t get the idea. Jim broke down and offered you and me money to freelance them.

You and I took that as a challenge. And it also turned into a friendly competition between us. Who could write the best Urban Landscape? For the better part of a year, you and I pretty much traded off from week to week. Our first challenge was writing them in such a way that Jim wouldn’t change the subject of the sentences to the “editorial we”. Then Jim kept cutting down the size of the space because the right-wing diatribe in the editorials above it were getting longer. That only made us get more precise. Not one wasted word. They became little 200-300 word gems. People commented on them. I really got the impression that it was a part of the paper readers turned to.

It was odd, too, that they appeared on that knee-jerk what's-good-for-America-is-good-for-Hungary opinion page. They had such humanity, such sensitivity. You once referred to them as "a piece of poetry in a mine-field of right-wing propaganda."

But, as I said, the days of someone like me were numbered at The Budapest Sun.

You, on the other hand, blossomed as a reporter. The Sun never had such a lucky combination of virtues: intimate familiarity with the city (including the seamy underside), a very broad background (unlike the others, who'd seen life from the inside of a journalism school and then from inside a newspaper), and (a real rarity around The Sun as time wore on) an ability to write. Eventually there wasn't a section or a subsection of the paper you hadn't written for.

When did I begin wondering how long it all would last? Mind you I don't want to give the impression it was all a bed of roses. I lived in serious poverty most of this time. But there were times I thought you and I were almost having too much fun.

The autumn before you left was when I had "the ultimate writing gig." What a scam. A writer acquaintance gave my name to the editor of an English-language supplement to the Technical University's student paper. Do you remember what a wonderfully socialist name the paper had? "The Future Engineer." I had a weekly column in "The Future Engineer" and the editor didn't really care what I wrote as long as I had a few synapses firing while I did it. Frankly, I think I blew her out of the water. She never expected to get material of the quality I gave her. But the reason I thought it was a scam was because I was being paid to write the kind of thing I loved to write. And not even paid badly, by Budapest standards.

Boy's night had settled into Tuesdays by that point, which was also my copy deadline. When you and I met at the Nelson Pub, the floppy disk with the article would be burning a hole in my briefcase. After we'd had a beer, we'd walk upstairs to your place and as soon as we'd gotten into your flat I'd make a bee-line for your Mac Powerbook and transfer my latest work into a file on the desk top entitled "Theo's Stuff." I felt so honored to actually have my own file on your desk top. You usually couldn't wait and would read it right then and there. Then we'd retire to the octagonal table under the bronze chandelier in the middle of that cavernous room and talk about the piece and about writing in general while we smoked hash

and drank beer. The rest of my life, I'll always think of those as some of the happiest times in my life.

We made those last months of boy's nights into feasts. I'd buy a loaf of some good dark bread that afternoon, and we'd get some sardines or something else to eat it with. Good conversation, good smoke, a few beers, some eats, and sometimes we'd even turn off the lights and light candles.

I guess writing isn't all we ever talked about, but it was a recurring theme. Hell, we talked about Hungary, about women, family, politics, economics, technology, and about our Japanese students.

I began missing you before I walked out your door. I began missing you the moment you told me you'd be leaving town. I began missing you the moment I suspected the gods would become jealous of our Olympian friendship. I began missing you as soon as it became clear to me that young members of the educated gypsy professions (teaching, journalism, diplomacy, the military) rarely get to stay in the same place together for more than a few years.

Maybe that's one of the things that made the friendship so precious to both of us. We both knew that sooner or later one of us would leave Budapest and we'd never get the opportunity to pal around the way we did in "the old days." Charmed moments are just that: moments. The moment may last seconds. It may even linger on for months or years. But sooner or later it's over. The wise ones realize that there is only now. Live now! There may be no later.

So there we were on the morning of your departure. Your new long navy-blue wool coat hanging nearby as our witness. Your new navy-blue blazer draped across a chair as our drinking companion. You offered me a bloody Mary. I normally don't drink before lunch and even then will usually only drink one drink before the sun goes down. But this was an occasion that called for a bit of anesthetic. Months of preparation and I still wasn't prepared. We "repaired" to the kitchen, as they say in old novels. And we mixed up a couple of good stiff ones with a good dash of hot pepper sauce in them.

Back in the living room I wandered over to that massive desk, glass in hand, and began examining a huge pile of coins heaped up at its center, the detritus of all your wanderings about Europe. You stopped packing and came over to join me.

“Ever seen one of these?” you asked me and held one of them up. “It’s one of the old Zloties before they knocked all the zeroes off. And here” you continued, picking up a five D-mark note next to the coins, “They don’t make these any more. Here. You can have it. As a matter of fact I’ve got shit loads of American coins here. You’re more likely to go to the States before I do.” You began pulling dimes, nickels, quarters out of the pile and we put them in a plastic bag. And every now and then you’d come across some treasure in the pile, some memento of a backpacking trip. And we’d admire it and throw it back in the pile or put it in my bag. You figured I’d probably go to Germany before you did, so we threw the German coins in the bag, too.

That was what we had left that morning. Only a few hours together before I had to go to work. Your plane left in the afternoon and I couldn’t take time off from work to see you off. We were down to the small change of friendship. A couple last drinks together. Collecting some cast-off spices from your kitchen, some orphaned books from your library. Me playing Polonius to your Laertes, trying to mutter some last bits of platitudinous wisdom to help you in your life’s journey: “Now look, boy, neither a borrower nor a lender be. Ya got that? Why not? Search me. It just sounds like good advice. What else? Uh...uh... Oh yeah! To thine own self be true. Sounds pretty profound, doesn’t it? Oh, and then what I’ve been wanting to tell you for years now. Quit drinking!”

If I’d only had the courage to say the last. But no. Here I was drinking a stiff bloody Mary with you before I went to work. I’d felt guilty as hell for I-don’t-know-how-long because I’d never had the nerve to just tell you that I thought you were destroying yourself. It never seemed the right moment. I never thought you were in a frame of mind in which you would accept it. So I continued to watch while you punished your liver and your stomach with cold beer in the early afternoon before you’d eaten anything at all. I watched as the color drained out of you day by day. I watched as your behavior became darker and more cynical when you drank. I stood by as your body odors signaled that something was going wrong inside you. I knew. I knew something bad was coming for you. Something was going to go seriously wrong with you if you didn’t change your ways. I knew. I’d known for a long time. For years. And I just didn’t know how to tell you.

I guess I had a small victory when I convinced you that drinking spirits was the superhighway to devastation. You conceded that point quickly and didn't touch spirits for months. Maybe even a year or more. It was an improvement. But I knew beer and wine would kill you in the long run, too. And now you were drinking vodka again.

The phone call came out of the blue that March evening, three months after you'd moved to Prague. Hearing Steve Watsky's voice on the phone was like having a telegram delivered to my door. I knew it was something bad right away. "Rob has cancer," he said, and while I was still trying to believe what I'd heard, "Let me walk you through this." He told me how you ended up in the hospital with a large bleeding tumor in your colon. A condition that has a rather terminal sound to it. He also told me that you wanted to see me badly before you got shipped off to Australia, where you were entitled to free medical care. I was on the night train to Prague 24 hours later.

Just a few days before you left Budapest I took you shopping one morning to buy a dark-blue wool blazer and a long, dark-blue, wool top coat. I tried to get you to look at trousers and shirts, but you'd already gotten shopping overload for one day.

We went to the Adam Sörözö after shopping to have lunch and a beer. It was there that you told me you took inspiration from my example. Over the years, you said, you'd watched me evolve from a penniless English teacher who spent his time hanging out in pubs and womanizing into a well-dressed married man who takes good care of himself and was about to become a father. "You've become a real person. And I figure if you can do it, so can I." You said you planned to start eating well, and leading a more home-centered life with Susan when you got to Prague. It was a new beginning and you were really excited to make the change.

I remember the look on your face when I walked into the hospital room in Prague. You were happy to see me, but your joy was mixed with an odd expression of embarrassment. You looked embarrassed that you'd gone off on a quest to transform yourself, and now I find you in a hospital bed.

But the amazing thing was that a transformation had occurred. Not the one you thought would happen. No, the disease had forced you to change your fundamental attitude to life.

You knew you had to quit drinking (because of the tumor they'd discovered on your liver) and you knew you had to focus every gram of your being on healing yourself. But you were determined you were going to live. Whereas a year or two before, it seemed it didn't really matter enough to you that you were alive.

It was actually only four months later that I saw you in, of all places, St. Joseph, Missouri, to be best man at your wedding. You'd already had your first surgery and your first round of chemotherapy. Besides being very skinny, you looked good. The wedding was amazing. I've never seen such an expression of support for the union of two lives before. It was as if everyone was willing you to live. "You have to live! This marriage is too important to all of us." After that week in Missouri, I knew you would survive. The positive result of your next surgery and your final scan after the chemotherapy didn't surprise me.

But it wasn't really my intention to talk about your recovery from cancer, though I knew this tale wouldn't be complete without an allusion to what happened after you left. As I said earlier: I knew something bad would eventually happen, and I knew it long before you left town, years before. The only surprise to me was how soon it happened, and how severely.

That's why the feelings were so mixed the day you left. I was pleased that you were moving on from the Budapest Sun and attacking new territory as a journalist. You were so excited about that, it just had to be good. I was also pleased that you had finally committed yourself to that good woman you hadn't been taking seriously enough before. I was very pleased that you intended to improve your lifestyle. But we were drinking bloody Marys. You looked like shit. I wondered if I was seeing you off to certain disaster. I had all the hopes in the world for you. It could turn out great. I was scared silly for you. It could all go down the tubes.

And there was, of course, the strongest feeling of all dominating that day: I was going to miss you. There was going to be a hole in my life. You weren't going to be around to see my son grow up. My hot-house existence as a foreigner in Hungary was going to be just that much more isolated. I was going to miss you. I already missed you. I had dreaded that day for months. We both had.

The time had, however, come. I looked at my watch and realized that, even by the lax reckoning of the Hungarian Press Agency, I was late for work. I put on my coat, picked up

my briefcase with the spices and the books and the plastic bag of coins and we slowly headed for the kitchen.

At the door, there was no more time for words. We embraced. And that's when I realized that I'd been concentrating on how much I'd be missing you, but hadn't really been thinking about how much you'd be missing me. You were shaking all over. You were scared. A new life ahead of you. Without me. We let go and felt awkward looking at one another.

"Listen!" I said, "You get your e-mail act together up there right away! That's our best means of communication now. Alright?"

"Yeah. I'll do that."

"Well,...uh...take care."

"You too."

"Good bye."

"Good bye."

And before I knew it I was on the other side of the door on the 1st floor walkway around the courtyard. It had happened. That strange feeling that accompanies the realization of long-anticipated events: actually receiving a college diploma, actually picking up the suitcases and walking out the door to start a vacation, actually saying "I do" at your wedding, actually seeing the face of your child when it's born, actually saying good-bye to your closest friend. The moment in which a long-anticipated event is realized is so disorientingly real and unreal at the same time. "It's right here in front of my face and I can't really believe it's happening."

I emerged onto the street into that inappropriately sunny day and looked at the piece of paper label next to the door-buzzer button. I'd always wondered when that piece of paper with "Luke" scribbled on it would finally give in to the punishment it had been getting from the elements. But there it was. It would need to be torn off.

I got on the 18 tram at Gellért tér and stood in the crowded vehicle, vaguely aware of my neighbors and the scenery going by. Then I noticed that a young woman dressed and outfitted like a student was staring at me. I'm sure she had never seen a man my age cry.



## **Three Short Stories**

## The Ruling Class

"We're like the Chinese, you know."

Syd looked up from his plate, where he was intimately involved with the last of his chicken *paprikás* and squinted across the table at Warren. As he chewed, the Aussie worked the question through his mouth, "Wha' was that, mate?"

Warren placed his elbow on the table, supported his chin on his hand and watched a drop of water roll down through the translucent condensation on the window next to their booth. This late-winter rain had been falling all day, just like it had yesterday, and as the daylight dimmed, it threatened to continue all night. Not being able to walk the streets of Budapest made him feel more isolated than usual.

"We live like the Chinese," he said.

With the fork in his right hand, Syd picked up the beer mug in his left and took a swig. He screwed up his face and audibly sucked at his teeth for a second. "I don't quite get wha' your tryin' ta say here Warren."

"We Anglophones live in isolation in Budapest, just like the Chinese do in Asia. When they move to foreign countries, they have their own shops, their own restaurants, their own everything. They just go right on being Chinese."

Syd mopped sauce off his plate with a piece of bread. He glanced at his philosophical, American friend, who was still watching the drop make its stop-and-go journey down the glass, and then turned and peered at the back corner table, where eight middle-eastern men were eating dinner. He looked away quickly, figuring it was wasn't wise to watch too closely.

The entourage at that table was in constant flux, but two particular men sat in the same chairs every night. Syd didn't know from beans about clothes, but even he could tell that the tall, thin gentleman with his back to the corner wore suits that you just don't get off a rack. The muscley guy who answered his mobile phone for him didn't dress too shabby either.

Syd and Warren had been coming to this restaurant several times a week for more than a year now, so they'd had opportunity to observe this guy. He never talked on the phone himself. His "assistant" always consulted with him and then passed the message on to the caller. And though men came to this table to either deliver or pick up money or small packages, the gentleman never dirtied his hands with any of it. His man handled everything.

Syd shoved his plate aside, took a swig of beer and pulled a pouch of tobacco out of the backpack on the seat next to him. "If you ask me, Warren, this sounds like imperialist guilt. I see absolutely..."

"I forget that even though you reap the benefits of an English-speaking world, you don't need to take responsibility for raping it, like we Americans and Brits do. Must be nice."

"Touchy today, aren't we?"

"I'm trying t' to make a serious observation here and you're getting ready to bore me with another one of your CIA conspiracy raps. Spare me. While you're at it, would you roll me one of those?"

Syd licked the paper on the cigarette he'd just rolled and contemptfully tossed in onto the table in front of Warren. "You can be a real lazy cunt sometimes."

"We imperialists are like that, you know."

After Syd rolled a second cigarette, Warren struck a match and the two men leaned toward the center of the table and lit them simultaneously, in an obviously well-practiced ritual of camaraderie.

They'd only had time to relish a puff or two of their Dutch tobacco when an eight-year-old blonde boy appeared at the side of their table, chattering in rapid-fire Hungarian and shaking a clear plastic bag of unidentified objects at them.

Syd blew a lungful of smoke at the boy, and sneered, "Well, well! An enterprising representative of the rising merchant class. Fuck off, ya little twat!"

The boy's intelligent, blue eyes--which made him look like a midget in children's clothing--quickly gave Syd the once over. Giving him up for a lost cause, he turned his attention on Warren.

"Twenty forints, mister!" he said and extracted a few of the colored plastic objects from the bag and laid them on the table. They looked like miniature baby pacifiers with overgrown nipples.

Warren picked one up and examined it. "What are they?", he asked the kid.

"Twenty forints, mister." the entrepreneur repeated.

Syd spat a shred of tobacco onto the floor and said, "They're a rip-off is what they are. The urchin probably stole them ten minutes ago. Didn't cha?"

Warren chose a red "thing" and gave the kid twenty forints.

Syd rolled his eyes. "God, you're a soft touch. What the hell'a ya gonna do with that thing?"

The boy turned his back to their table and scanned the room for his next customer. He made a bee-line for the table of Arabs.

Syd called after him, "Yer playin' with fire there, bucko!"

The boy walked right up to the elegant gentleman and started babbling. The only thing Warren and Syd could make out was, "thirty-five forints, mister." They gave each other a surprised look.

"Damn!" Warren shook his head. "Nervy little bastard, isn't he?"

One of the Arab men took the bag and started handing out the trinkets to the entourage. They started loudly clowning around with them: sticking them in each others ears, sucking on them and making pouty baby faces, etc. The boy, looking distressed, backed off a few paces from the table. He didn't understand what was meant by these antics.

The gentleman barked something out and there was sudden silence at the table. He cast a severe look around the table and then gestured to the boy to step closer. The boy was visibly shaking, but set his jaw and defiantly walked up to the man. The man's face slowly waxed into a smile. He reached out, patted the boy's cheek and said, "*Jó üzletember vagy!*" ("You're a good businessman!") His eyes still on the boy, he said something in Arabic. His assistant reached into his inside, jacket pocket, pulled out three one-thousand-forint bills and held them out to the boy. The boy snatched them out of his hand and bolted for the door. A collective roar of laughter burst from the table.

On his way past their table, the kid stopped a second, gave Syd the finger, and spat on his shoes.

## **Flying on Instruments**

Dexter Smith shifted his gaze from the computer screen to the mysterious people on the other side of the glass wall that divided the familiar world of the Hungarian Press Agency's English language service from the uncharted territory of the domestic politics section. It was only a thin membrane, but may as well have been the border between two hostile countries. The citizens of this land stayed on this side of the glass, and the natives of that one kept to their own soil.

He scanned the familiar anonymous faces in that sea of desks and computer terminals. But where was she? Dex searched the whole room but couldn't find the woman he'd come to think of as The Raven, at her desk or anywhere else.

He rubbed his strained eyes and looked back at the screen. This article was definitely in the running for the most boring load of crap he'd had to edit that week. "The minister of agriculture expressed his commitment," Dexter read, "to solving the pig export subsidy problem, when he met with the pig breeders' association."

He sighed and consoled himself by considering that even if it was boring it was safe. Ever since his boss Laszlo had disappeared a week ago, he welcomed something as unambiguous as pigs. Straight story. Export statistics that looked genuine. Government statements that looked reasonably truthful.

It didn't take long for Dex to realize that despite six years of democracy, journalism still worked a little differently here. There was the time George Soros had offered to buy the majority of the largest government-owned bank in Hungary, and reactionaries were quoted in the press as calling Soros everything from an Israeli agent to a Hungarian-American carpetbagger. While Dex was working on that article, Laszlo, the pin-striped editor in chief strolled up to Dex and in a hushed tone said, "Don't send that out on the wire yet. Let me see it first. It's, uh... sensitive, you know." When Dex looked at the article that went out later that day, he noticed huge holes and slants that hadn't been there before.

He turned his head toward the glass just in time to see Raven in procession to her desk. Like most of the men he'd ever discussed the subject with, Dex thought Hungarian women were a perfect race apart from the rest of humanity, but Raven even more so. She had those typical dark brown eyes with the subtle oriental turn, as well as the ubiquitous straight dark brown hair in a Cleopatra haircut. Even those long legs which she displayed in a mini-skirt on the coldest winter day were standard equipment in this country. But she exuded something regal, charismatic and authoritative. Dex swore people bowed their heads

as she passed through the room. Before sitting down at her desk, for the briefest of moments she looked straight at Dex . When their eyes met, she hastily looked away. Dex was embarrassed at being caught in his voyeurism, and stunned, because neither she nor anyone else on the other side had ever looked at him before.

He tapped at his keyboard a bit before he became lost in thought again. The covert censorship at the agency only irritated him. The same went for the propaganda and ham-handed boosterism. But office life began penetrating his soul when he was called to write the fairy tales.

About three months ago Laszlo summoned Dex into his office and closed the door behind him. "I want you to edit something very, uh...sensitive," Laszlo said as he gestured that Dex should take a seat at Laszlo's desk. "Don't just copy-edit, as you do in the news room. Give it power. Make it poetry." Dex wondered if the whole thing was a joke when he saw the title on the screen: "How the Fox Caught the Rabbit." He almost slapped Laszlo on the shoulder and told him what a practical joker he was until he saw the deadly serious look in the boss' eyes. Laszlo nervously smoked three cigarettes and watched over Dex's shoulder during the twenty minutes it took to sort out the four paragraphs. Before Laszlo opened the door to let Dex out he stood with his hand on the handle. "Not a word to anyone about this. Understand?" He pulled an envelope from his pin-striped jacket and handed it over.

Dex went straight to a secluded stairwell to examine the contents of the envelope. A hundred thousand forints. The equivalent of a month's pay for twenty minutes of work.

The moment he finished counting the money, he felt what he thought to be someone touching the back of his neck. He jumped with fright and the money shot out of his hands. The twenty orange five-thousand forint notes sprayed into the air and snowed down the steps. He turned to confront whoever had snuck up on him and found himself looking at an ivy vine. He felt foolish when he realized he'd noticed this vine before.

The agency is housed in a ten-year-old glass and metal building, designed in the anal-expulsive style that displays the heating ducts, electrical conduits, elevators, stairwells and other infrastructure to the outside world. ("It's a metaphor", one of Dex's colleagues had told him. "Don't you get it? The media is transparent. No secrets to hide.") This flight of steps was obscured by a rather dense growth of ivy on the outside of the building. One ambitious vine had managed to work a tendril between a glass pane and the rubber lining holding it into the metal frame. Dex had noticed the intruder almost a year before, when he had come down this relatively unused stairwell -it led to the underground loading dock- to smoke a cigarette and be alone with his thoughts. On subsequent visits he'd watched it grow and wondered how long it would take until someone finally removed it. Typical of a class-

conscious and authoritarian society, nobody thought it was their job to remove it, and nobody was going to touch it until they were given official instructions to do so. By this point it was over a meter long, consisting of several branches flush with foliage.

The next week, Laszlo had Dex secretly edit a piece called "Rabbit Gets his Petty Revenge".

One day, when Laszlo called Dex into his office and sat him down at his computer, instead of standing behind his young employee like he'd done before, Laszlo pulled up a chair beside him. Dex got a powerful whiff of the boss's cologne. Laszlo lit a cigarette and after sucking very deeply from it began talking while he exhaled the cloud of smoke. "We're going to work a bit differently today," he said and pulled a sheet of paper out of his top desk drawer. "I'm going to give you a little more...uh...how do you Americans put it?...elbow room. This is the rough draft of a story to be called 'The Fox was Underestimated.' As you can see, there are places where we've indicated that sentences must remain verbatim as they are on this sheet. The other text you may change for style's sake, as long as you don't change the essential meaning. And you'll notice there are places where the content of paragraphs is just outlined by a sentence or two. There you can allow your creative genius free reign."

Dex set to work while Laszlo smoked cigarettes. Every now and then Laszlo would murmur "Ah, that's very good," or "brilliant," or "I like that a lot." After his third cigarette Dex was about one-third through. Laszlo rose to his feet and said, "I can tell I am making you nervous. I'll leave you alone to work for a bit. After he went out the door, Dex heard the dead bolt click shut. He was locked in.

Dex paused to look out the window that was one wall of Laszlo's office. It faced an adjoining building that also housed press agency offices, where he could see dozens of people working at their desks. He'd been over there before and noticed that, although he could see into his own news room, Laszlo's windows were covered with a kind of reflective plastic. It was a bit like wearing dark sunglasses and knowing people can't watch you watching them.

Dex was finished when Laszlo returned. Laszlo printed the story out, lit another cigarette and sat down at the couch on the far side of his office, gesturing that Dex should sit in one of the armchairs opposite him. As he read, Laszlo nodded and smiled and made appreciative grunts. "This should work very well."

Almost every week after that Laszlo had him polish another tale, encouraging Dex to "give it life, make it a magical spell." And each time there was a fat envelope on the way out the door.

He told himself he was doing it for the money. But the truth was that he loved everything about the fables: the secrecy, the praise from Laszlo, his unknown readership. He felt a real electrical charge go through his body every time the boss signaled that he should come to his office. It was a challenge to make each story better than the last. And Laszlo gave him more leeway each time. After days of editing dull economic pabulum, the tales made him feel like a hunting dog unleashed in a vast meadow.

Surfacing from his memories for a moment, Dex realized he was staring at the pig article without reading. He looked up again, and distinctly saw Raven quickly look away when he turned toward her.

Two weeks ago he found a floppy disk that smelled of patchouli in his mailbox when he came home. When he put it in his computer, there was only one file on it, which contained a plot outline for a tale to be called "Rabbit Becomes King", and the injunction, "Write a masterpiece. We know you can do it."

Dex worked on the opus until 3 in the morning. There was a knock at his apartment door the moment he turned the computer off. He handed the disk to the man waiting in the hall and the man handed him an envelope. Dex almost fainted when he saw how much money it contained.

That was two weeks ago. Not a word about anything since then. No strange editing jobs. No explanations from Laszlo. And that's when Laszlo disappeared. Nobody seemed to know what happened to him. One day his office was empty and everyone was reluctant to talk about him.

In the next room, Raven was gathering things into a briefcase. She took one last furtive glance at Dex and headed out the door.

Dex grabbed his briefcase and followed. He took a detour by Raven's desk and as he passed, noticed the scent of patchouli and a sheet with three paragraphs on it entitled, "Rabbit Holds Court". He followed her down the hill and got into the back of the 18 tram when she boarded it. They got out at Moscow square and he followed her up the hill to a cellar wine bar. When he went down the steps, he saw her sitting at a small dim table with a pitcher of red wine and two empty glasses. She beckoned him to come sit with her.

"Are you expecting someone?"

"You," she replied.

Dex sat down as she poured two glasses of thin Cabernet.

She raised her glass and he returned the gesture. "To your health," she said.

"Do you have another story in your bag for me?" Dex asked, then drained his glass.

"No," she said, with a gentle smile and a shake of the head, as she refilled the glasses, "No more tales. It's finished. You did very well. There will be no more tales."

"But what did I do?"

She looked him straight in the eye. "Does it matter what you did? You were what we needed and you performed beyond our wildest expectations. 'Rabbit Becomes King' caused quite a stir in certain circles. You can be proud of yourself. And now we're rid of that bothersome fox. Using his own secret weapon."

She poured two more glasses and after finishing hers got unsteadily to her feet.

"Of course", she said, "you'll have to leave now," and placed an envelope on the table as she exited.

The envelope contained \$2000 and a ticket to New York on the morning flight.

Up on the hill, in the glass stairwell leading to the agency's underground loading dock, a worker in blue overalls placed the blade of a pair of tree pruners on the ivy vine, as close as possible to where it had forced its way through the window molding. He cut through the woody finger with one squeeze of his hand. Another worker standing on a ladder outside the glass tore the remainder of the offending growth from the building.

## Hothouse Flowers

Daemon couldn't imagine who would be ringing his doorbell at this time of night, whatever time of night that was. He rolled over in the semi-darkness, reached over the sleeping form next to him (What was her name? Zsuzsa. That's right.) and groped around on the night table for the alarm clock. After he'd found it he lay back on his pillow, put the clock in front of his face and squinted at the dim luminous face. Two-thirty. At the moment it was silent. Daemon lay motionless and stared at the rippling light on the ceiling, reflected from the Danube outside his glass balcony doors. Perhaps he'd just imagined the doorbell. But then it rang again.

Zsuzsa rolled over, asked incredulously, "That's not your doorbell, is it?"

Daemon got out of bed, descended the steps from the loft into his living room and walked into the entrance hall. Without turning on the light he pushed the intercom button.

"I hope for your sake you have a good reason for waking me up."

A man's voice answered in Hungarian. It was Peter, the taxi driver. He had a message from Mrs. Chiba. He needed to bring it personally to Mr. Dietrich. Daemon pushed the lock release button and hustled back up to the loft to put on a robe. He heard the motor of the ancient elevator kick on out in the hall.

Zsuzsa rolled over. "Who is it?"

"A courier," is all Daemon said as he slipped the dark-blue silk robe on. Then he hopped back down the steps.

He turned the light on in the entrance hall and stopped to check himself out in the full-length mirror. He'd just had his hair cut yesterday. His neat blond hair, together with the sharp features of his thin face presented a focused countenance. Despite the rings under his eyes, he didn't look a day over twenty-five. Most Hungarians were amazed to find out he was thirty-two. They weren't used to how young Americans often look. Mrs. Chiba had given him this robe at the onset of winter, when he said his apartment got drafty. Her tailor had made it. It was ankle length and the silk was lightly quilted. The thin light blue piping had the effect of emphasizing how tall he was. His eyes wandered to the little embroidered dragon and Japanese characters above his heart. It wasn't an Asian dragon, but rather European, copied from a medieval illumination. She'd said, "You are a European dragon. You keep yourself hidden in a dark cave and jealously guard your treasure from those you consider unworthy."

There was a discreet knocking at the door. Daemon opened it and invited the middle-aged graying taxi driver in. He was wearing a white shirt and a tie under his black leather jacket. A familiar face. He, for all practical purposes, was her driver. Peter handed Daemon an envelope, said, “She told me to wait.”

Daemon went back to the living room, sat down at the desk and turned the desk lamp on. He carefully slit the envelope open with his letter opener -another gift from Mrs. Chiba, a Japanese *tanto* in miniature, razor sharp- and pulled out a single sheet of rice paper containing two hand-written sentences:

Sensei,

Please come at once. I need you.

Yumiko Chiba

Daemon looked through the glass balcony doors at the reflections of the lights of Buda in the river and wondered what this was all about. When he realized he was staring out of fatigue he popped up from the desk chair and returned to the entrance hall. He signaled Peter to follow him into the kitchen where he handed the driver a canister of coffee and pointed at the espresso maker on one of the stove burners. Peter nodded with a faint smile and Daemon left again.

Back in the living room, Daemon opened the wardrobe and began to dress. He chose a black and white tweed jacket, black wool pants, a salmon-colored shirt and a silk paisley tie in various shades of red and green. He was tying the knot in the tie when he noticed Zsuzsa leaning over the railing of the loft without a stitch on her.

“Where are you going at this hour? Who’s in the kitchen? And why are you dressing like that?”

“I’m going to see...” he hesitated for a second “...a friend. There’s a taxi driver in the kitchen. And I always dress like this. Look. I don’t know when I’ll be back. Help yourself to anything in the kitchen and let yourself out in the morning.” And as he left the room, “Sleep well,” hoping she wouldn’t ask if he was going to call her. Daemon never called the next day. Never.

In the kitchen Peter was pouring the coffee out into two thick Hungarian coffee glasses, shunning the delicate French porcelain demitasse collection. Daemon pulled a carton of milk out of the refrigerator and held it out toward Peter, who just shook his head. He likewise turned down the sugar. A purist.

The two men silently drank their coffee in red-eyed camaraderie. When they’d finished Daemon got his navy-blue greatcoat off the hook in the hallway and gestured to the front door with a jerk of his head.

Down on the street the mid-January chill went straight through the greatcoat and the tweed jacket underneath when the wind whipped off the river. Their shoes crunched loudly in the frozen slush on the sidewalk. Peter opened the back door of a late-model Mercedes for Daemon. Minutes later, they were gliding through the silent city scenery toward the Margit Bridge.

Yumiko Chiba became Daemon's student the same way the other Japanese housewives had: he was passed on by word of mouth.

Shortly after arriving in Hungary in 1990, Daemon had the good fortune of meeting an English professor from the Eötvös Lóránd University -Hungary's most prestigious liberal-arts university (known affectionately to Hungarians as ELTE). They met at a dinner party at a mutual acquaintance's apartment. When the professor started to talk literature, Daemon was in rare form and delivered a passionate thesis on "the search for identity in F. Scott Fitzgerald." The professor was so impressed that he called Daemon up the next day and invited him to come have coffee and conversation with him at his office. Daemon thought this was just another Hungarian looking for a chance to brush up his conversational English, but when he arrived at the professor's office, the man gathered two other professors from down the hall and the four of them went down the street to a cafe.

It was a fine spring day: tables were set out on the sidewalk and there were lots of beautiful Hungarian women passing the cafe as they sat and talked. Coffee and brandy was ordered all around and the men began to talk about everything and nothing. Soon the conversation turned to literature and before he knew it, Daemon was holding forth about "narrative voice in the stories of James Thurber." He became suspicious when he realized he'd been talking for several minutes and none of these learned men had attempted to interrupt for a comment or a counter argument. Learned men usually can't keep their mouths shut in a sand storm.

The professor turned to his colleagues and said, "See what I mean? He's a natural. Not only that, he's a handsome young fellow. I can picture the lecture hall packed with adoring young ladies hanging on his every word as he inspires them with his passionate insights." The learned men all nodded.

So Daemon became a lecturer in American literature at ELTE. To his amusement, and later to his distress, Daemon realized that if the professors had wanted some more impromptu lectures he could have possibly given them "disgusting dead bodies in Hemmingway" or "bizarre shit in Tom Robbins," but the truth was that Daemon didn't know much about American literature. True, he had had a few English and Foreign literature

courses in his time, but his masters degree was in history. He was informed that he was to give a series of lectures on the 20th century American novel in the following autumn. Daemon spent the next five months reading American authors and chasing down as much secondary literature as he could find in the libraries.

He applied himself to his work and became a good academic. His lectures became quite popular. He enjoyed the job. He had an enormous amount of prestige as an ELTE lecturer. But he was still poor as dirt, and had to teach private English lessons on the side and do other odd jobs to make ends meet.

One day, a friend who worked in a language school told Daemon he was going to offer him the private-teaching gig of the century. Through language school connections this friend had been approached by the wife of a Japanese executive for private English lessons.

This friend, it turns out, already had several Japanese students and his plate was full. He'd remembered that Daemon was in dire financial straits, so he decided to pass this student on to him. Daemon took the student when he heard the obscene rate she was willing to pay to have a teacher come to her house.

Budapest was full of young Japanese executives carving out a niche in Central Europe for their companies and, consequently, full of Japanese housewives with too much time on their hands while the children were at school. Once Daemon had one student, she mentioned another "friend" who was interested in English lessons and that woman also had a friend. Pretty soon Daemon had the best of two worlds: a part-time lectureship that gave him intellectual satisfaction and respectability, and his private students allowed him to live a comfortable lifestyle.

One day, Daemon was drinking a cup of coffee with Mrs. Tanaka. Coffee was always served as the warm-down period after the lesson, during which the students could practice some relaxed conversation. Her husband was the president of a major automobile manufacturer. Like many Japanese executives, the Tanaka's rented a house on a hill in Buda with a commanding view of the city as it spread out for miles onto the Carpathian basin. The two of them were seated at a picture window facing northeast. They could see the Danube winding north from Margit island. After a bit of small talk, she said she had a friend who was very interested in having English lessons. Daemon curtly replied that he was booked and couldn't possibly take on any other students.

"Oh, that's too bad," Mrs. Tanaka said, "She's very, ... um...special."

"Oh? Special?" Daemon had gotten so skilled at the art of drawing conversation out of reticent students that he often told himself he should become a shrink.

“Yes. She’s from...,” Mrs. Tanaka struggled to think of the appropriate word, “from ‘high’ family.”

“Do you mean from an important family? Or a rich family? Or a powerful family?”

“Yes.” Mrs. Tanaka smiled broadly.

Daemon pursed his lips and thought a moment. He’d also become accustomed to Japanese answering yes to questions with *ors* in them. “All three? Her family is important, rich and powerful?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Tanaka nodded vigorously.

“Why is her family important?”

“Her great-great grandfather was an important...” she quickly punched out a word on her electronic dictionary, and pouted, trying to figure out how to pronounce the word she saw on its liquid crystal screen “...nobility in the Emperor’s house. And they still own many land in Japan.”

Daemon wrote noble, nobility and nobleman on the vocabulary list, then said, “Land is uncountable.”

Mrs. Tanaka thought a second. “They own a lot of land. Some of it in downtown Tokyo.”

Daemon was intrigued, but as he sipped his coffee and looked at familiar landmarks in the city below, he realized that he really had no business taking on another student. “No, I’m very sorry. I’d like to teach your friend, but I really don’t have the time.”

Mrs. Tanaka said she understood, then slid a calling card across the table. The card was made of high quality paper with a marbled pattern. In the center it simply read “Yumiko Chiba” and in the two bottom corners were an address and a telephone number. Daemon was even more intrigued. He’d never come across a Japanese housewife with a calling card.

The next week Mrs. Yoshita informed Daemon at the end of their lesson that she’d have to discontinue taking English lessons.

Because Mrs. Yoshita’s husband was the commercial attaché at the Japanese Embassy, they lived in a diplomatic housing apartment complex. The dining room had a view of a well maintained lawn and garden, at the far end of which was a little playground. Mrs. Yoshita’s daughter was sitting on the edge of the sandbox along with her baby-sitter.

“I’m going back to Japan in two weeks,” Mrs. Yoshita explained nervously, “and I be there three for weeks.”

Daemon looked away from the daughter and baby-sitter and raised his eyebrows, indicating that he’d heard a mistake. Mrs. Yoshita was clueless. He made a gesture pointing straight ahead of him, meaning: future tense.

“I’ll be there for three weeks. After that I be very busy.”

He made the gesture again.

“I’ll be very busy.”

“What will you be busy with?” The women were used to him grilling them with questions for the sake of making “conversation” so he could hear them talk.

“With the Japanese Women’s Club.”

“Oh!” Daemon looked back out the window. Now the child was on the swing and the baby-sitter was pushing her. He took a sip of coffee and bit into one of the decadent Swiss pralines she had put on a plate for him and thought to himself that this sounded like a lie.

It wasn’t the first time he’d caught a Japanese student in a lie. He’d come to understand that Japanese have different ideas about speaking “the truth” than Anglo-Saxons do. He’d even realized that they didn’t really think of it as lying. They think they are obligated to spare you and themselves from the unpleasantness of the truth. In their eyes they are being polite.

So Daemon wasn’t insulted as much as he was paranoid. Was she unhappy with the lessons? Had he insulted her in some way that he’d never figure out? He knew the last thing he should do is let her know that he knew she was lying. Everyone loses face in that situation. He thoughtfully took another sip of coffee, popped the other half of the praline in his mouth, then turned to face Mrs. Yoshita.

“You’ve been very kind to me for the last year. I’ll miss your company on Wednesday mornings,” Daemon said, inclining his head slightly.

As a conditioned reflex, Mrs. Yoshita bowed her head and replied, “I miss your lessons, too.”

And the future tense will miss you, Daemon thought.

That afternoon Daemon delivered an inspired lecture on “the passage of time in William Faulkner.” Afterwards he was unwinding with a beer and reading the Herald Tribune in a small bar around the corner from his apartment, when an article about Japanese art collectors losing their shirts on overpriced French impressionist paintings reminded him of the card in his pocket.

He fished the card out of his wallet and examined it once again. Simple and tasteful: attractive paper, simple font, name, address, phone number. On an impulse he stood up and walked over to the pay phone on the wall.

The voice on the other end of the line answered, “Moshi moshi”. Daemon asked for Mrs. Chiba.

“This is she. And who might you be?”

“My name is Daemon Dietrich and...”

“Ah, Mr. Dietrich the professor! I’ve been expecting your call for some time now.”

No mistakes so far, he thought, and she can even use the present perfect continuous.

“I was told you are interested in taking English lessons.”

“Yes I’m very interested, as a matter of fact. When can we start?”

“Don’t you want to talk about my rate? About your and my schedules?”

“I know what your rate is and I’ll pay it. I have all the time in the world on my hands, so you just have to tell me when you’re available.”

“I have time Wednesday mornings between ten and noon.”

“Wednesday morning happens to be my free-est morning.”

“Then I’ll see you on Wednesday morning.”

“Yes. I’ll be expecting you.”

“Good-bye.”

“Bye-Bye.”

Daemon sat back down at his table and contemplated the card while he replayed the conversation in his head. She hadn’t made one mistake. Not one. Grammatically or stylistically. Over the years Daemon had learned that these women didn’t take English lessons only because they wanted to learn English. They didn’t come to this alien European capital with its obscure language by choice. Their husbands’ jobs brought them. They were bored. They were lonely. And hanging out with other Japanese women just wasn’t enough. So they hired private teachers. They took piano lessons, tennis lessons, Hungarian lessons and English lessons.

Daemon played the role of teacher, friend, psychologist, confidant, entertainer, and link to the outside world. They were intensely interested in his life and what he did. How did he spend his time? What were the women in his life like? Where did he buy things in the city? It gave these very sheltered women vicarious pleasure to hear how someone else lived. He often thought that he was more a male geisha than a tutor: a paid cultured companion.

So he was used to the fact that the English side of English lessons was sometimes secondary. But at least there was some context for pretending. The situation with this new student looked like it might be absurd.

He found the address on the card the following Wednesday with some difficulty. It was perched high on a hill in Buda in a very new neighborhood - a neighborhood full of houses built in recent years by Hungary’s emerging nouveau riche. Hers was built like a

mock turn-of-the-century Hungarian villa, with good attention to detail, down to the yellow and white paint on the exterior and the ornate wrought-iron railings on the balconies.

He was surprised to see that there was only one door bell and one name -Chiba- on it. He'd never come across a Japanese family who rented a whole house instead of an apartment.

The door was answered by a uniformed maid, also a novelty in Daemon's experience.

"You must be Mr. Dietrich."

Daemon nodded, mutely, unable to adjust to this inconsistency. He began to wonder if he was dreaming.

"Please come in."

In the entrance the maid asked him to take his shoes off and placed silk slippers on the floor in front of him. "It's a Japanese household, you know."

As he followed the maid through the house, he noted it was filled with priceless Empire style furniture and the classicist style was followed all the way down to the painted frescoes near the ceilings.

She finally led him into a room he would call a parlor or a salon. Mrs. Chiba was seated on a couch, which was a massive wooden object with wooden arm-rests, a green satin cushion and gilded brasswork sphinxes. She was reading a small, hard-bound Japanese book. The moment she saw the maid and Daemon coming in she put down the book and got to her feet. In her gray skirt, white blouse with ruffled collar and dark-blue blazer she looked very formal for the occasion.

"Professor Dietrich, so good to finally meet you. Please be seated." She indicated a chair across the table from the couch. "Marion. Would you please bring coffee?" Marion silently left the room.

Once both of them were seated Daemon said, "I'm not really a professor, you know. I'm just a lecturer."

"Then I'll just call you *sensei*." After a pause, "So, how do we proceed, *sensei*?"

As Daemon was getting a notebook and pen out of his briefcase, he replied, "I always start by carrying on a little conversation with the student and determining how good their English is."

"Well, by all means then, Sensei" she said with an amused smile, "Let's converse."

He looked at the notebook on his lap and the pen in his hand and realized this was going to be a pointless exercise, but he took a deep breath and took a stab at it. "This," he started, "is an amazing house."

“Yes. It was a stroke of luck that we found it. This place isn’t even a year old. It was built by a count who fled Hungary in 1948. He went to America where he built up a successful chain of dry cleaners and became very rich. His wife never completely adjusted to life in America and when the communist regime fell she persuaded him to retire and move back to Hungary. They had this house built and traveled all over Europe to collect the furniture. No more than a week after moving in, his wife died. The man couldn’t bear to live in the house without her. He went back to America and had the place rented out.

“When my husband and I came to Hungary we couldn’t find a house that we really liked and then one day the real-estate agent told us that this house had come onto the rental market. I loved it at first sight.”

Marion came in with a silver coffee set on a silver tray. She placed them on a sideboard and spread a white lace cloth on the table between Daemon and Mrs. Chiba. Then she placed the coffee set and a pastry on the table and left.

As she poured the coffee Mrs. Chiba asked, “How do you take your coffee?”

“Cream, one sugar.”

When she handed him the cup and saucer (a very old Herend design, he noted), Daemon decided to give up all pretenses and placed the notebook and pen on the table. He knew he wasn’t going to hear any mistakes.

“So tell me: where did you learn to speak English so well?”

“Thank you very much for the compliment. My father was aware of the importance of speaking English in today’s world, so both my brother and I were raised by English nannies.”

The last statement raised so many questions, Daemon didn’t know which one to ask first. But after a few questions and answers he learned that Mrs. Chiba was, as Mrs. Tanaka had said, from a noble family. At the end of the second world war they didn’t have anything left but their land and their houses. Her father started an import/export business and became hugely successful.

“My father’s family were very traditional. Though it was rarely done anymore by that time, my father married a woman who’d been chosen by my grandparents. She was also from a noble family. She was the oldest of three girls. Since their father was deceased, my father became the head of their family. The marriage brought more land into the family. Some of it in downtown Tokyo.

“I was born two years after my brother in 1955. My mother died of cancer two years later. People believe it was because she lived on the outskirts of Nagasaki at the end of the war.”

She paused. Daemon felt that unease many Americans feel when the Japanese talk about the bomb. After a while, he ventured to break the silence.

“Is that when you got the English nanny?”

“Yes, it was. My father raised us with a strange mixture of traditional and progressive methods. On the one hand we had an English nanny. Emily Sloane was her name. And on the other hand he insisted that I learn flower arranging, tea ceremony, calligraphy and other traditional arts. My brother had to learn martial arts. Our lives were full of lessons and teachers. My brother graduated from the University of Tokyo and joined my father’s company. I also graduated from the University of Tokyo, and also worked for my father.

“Those were very happy times. I loved my brother and it was good to spend so much time with him. My father was very pleased to have us around him as well. But it didn’t last long. My brother died in an automobile accident. And shortly after that, my father arranged an introduction for me to Haruho, the eldest son of the Chiba family. The Chiba’s are an old samurai family and they own a bank. I married Haruho to please my father.”

She looked straight into Daemon’s eyes to see how he reacted to the confession of such an intimate detail. Daemon knew the proper behavior was to stay poker faced.

She looked into the coffee cup in her lap and smiled a faint sad smile. “I don’t know why I’m telling you all this. You only wanted to know why I speak English so well.” She silently ran her finger around the rim of her cup and then suddenly looked up with a cheerful expression. “You haven’t touched your pastry. The cook baked them fresh this morning.”

Daemon pulled the plate toward himself and examined the *mákos rétes*, a poppy strudel. He picked up his fork and had a bite.

“This is amazing. Your cook is a genius. The dough practically melts in your mouth. I assume you’ve tried it.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“You should.” He took another bite and looked up to see that, beneath the controlled exterior, Mrs. Chiba was taking vicarious pleasure in watching him eat. “You’re aware of the fact that you don’t need English lessons, aren’t you?”

She pursed her lips and looked him in the eye. “Yes, but I want lessons nonetheless. Mrs. Tanaka told me about you and I thought you sounded like a good teacher.”

“That may be so, but what would you propose we do for two hours each week?”

“You would teach me, of course.”

“What?”

“The things you are able to teach me. The things I am capable of learning.”

Daemon had made jokes about being a male Geisha to these Japanese women in the past, but this was getting a little too close for his tastes. He was trying to think of a tactful way of getting out of it when she said, "I'll pay double your usual rate."

Ouch! He was particularly weak on this front that day because his rent had just been raised the day before, for the second time that year. Inflation had been 30% over the last year and his university salary was still the same it had been a year earlier. And he needed some new brown shoes. And he had to pay a visit to the dentist. And...

"Does your cook make this pastry often?"

"Every week. I give it to Marion to take home. I have her sworn to secrecy. The cook is under the impression I love it."

"Why haven't you tried it?"

"It looks so... strange. Isn't poppy what they make heroin from?"

"Well your first lesson is that you need to call Marion in here and have her bring you a piece of this *rêtes*. And another for me, while you're at it. You have no idea what you've been missing."

"Yes, *sensei*."

She rang the bell for Marion.

And so it was that Mrs. Chiba became Daemon's student, a very willing and industrious student at that. He brought her history books and she devoured them. She also had him bring her the same books his literature classes were reading and asked him to give her the same lectures. She listened intently and asked intelligent questions. She began keeping a journal in English and she read him passages every week which included her reflections on all the topics covered by their tutorials and more.

Mrs. Chiba's generosity toward Daemon was unbounded. She took note of any chance mentions of favorite foods. Marion would bring in his favorite cakes and pastries freshly made by the cook. He would sometimes be invited to stay for lunch and his favorite dishes would be served. Special occasions never passed without gifts. He received antique leather-bound books, silk ties, a new briefcase. Occasionally he would answer his door at home and be surprised by the delivery of something Mrs. Chiba had just bought at a store: a sweater, some bottles of wine, music CDs. When he asked her why she did this, she simply said in Japanese it is traditional to take good care of one's *sensei*.

Daemon began looking forward to Wednesday mornings. They were a combination of good company, good conversation, and good food.

Six months later a Mrs. Sato, who had lessons on Mondays, went back to Japan. Mrs. Chiba bought up the lesson (at her own rate, of course). So Daemon was going to the

Chiba manor on Mondays and Wednesdays. Then Mrs. Tanaka's family went home. Another Japanese housewife, who'd heard of Daemon asked to have lessons on Tuesdays, Mrs. Tanaka's day, but Mrs. Chiba bought that day as well, (once again, at her rate) and gave it to Daemon.

"You're going to pay me for the day, but I don't have to give you a lesson? Why would you do that?"

"I pay you to be intelligent and well-informed, and interesting. You've told me about the projects you'd pursue if you had the time. Now I'm giving you the time. Work on one of your projects in that time. Let's just call it a private grant."

The same thing happened when Mrs. Ikeda, his Thursday student, went back to Japan: Mrs. Chiba bought the day and gave it to Daemon.

For many months they went on this way until one day they were discussing art history. Daemon was illustrating his point with a painting in the Hungarian national gallery, but Mrs. Chiba said that she'd never seen the painting.

"Oh, that's too bad," Daemon said. "Then it doesn't make sense for me to keep talking about it."

Daemon considered for a moment as he took another bite of his Eszterházy cake and a sip of his coffee.

"What would you think of meeting me at the national gallery on Wednesday morning? We could have our next lesson there. I'll show you the painting."

They met at Trinity Square in front of the King Mathias church in the castle district on a brisk late autumn morning. Daemon had taken pains to be fifteen minutes early to be sure he was already standing there when she arrived. She emerged from the taxi wearing a long low-cut dark green silk dress and high heels under a raincoat, not her usual conservatively cut wool suit.

Daemon felt it only natural, as the escort of such a fine lady in such a regal setting, to extend his elbow out from his side to offer her his arm. She hesitated a moment, then smiled and slipped her hand through it. It was the first time they had ever touched one another in any fashion.

As he slowly led her, he pointed out various landmarks and told her the history of the castle district.

"That bird is the Turul," he said, pointing to an oversized sculpture. "It's a mythical creature. The story is that it led Árpád and the Magyars to the Carpathian basin. I guess people need that, don't they?"

“Need what?”

“The belief that destiny led them somewhere and that their lives aren’t one big accident.”

“Do you need to believe that?”

“Well, yes I do. I’m a big fan of destiny. I don’t really understand how scientifically minded people manage to maintain a speck of motivation if they think things are just random occurrences. I couldn’t get out of bed in the morning.”

“God.”

“Pardon me?”

“You’re talking about God. A western notion.”

“If you mean an old man with a long gray beard watching the world from the sky: no, I’m not talking about that. If you mean order in the universe, a purpose or meaning or sense to it all: yes, I’m talking about God. And now it’s time to see the paintings.”

The visit to the museum broke the idea of a “lesson” wide open. It was agreed that Daemon would meet Mrs. Chiba twice a week, but they didn’t insist it was always at her house, in the salon, under the watchful eye of Marion. At each “lesson” they would agree on where they were meeting the next time. Soon it got looser still: meeting once one week, four times the next week, and twice the week after that.

They met at the Gerbeaud cafe, at Heroes’ Square, at museums, in art galleries, on river boats. They saw films together, went to the ballet and they had season tickets to the opera.

One afternoon on a river cruise up the Danube he broached the subject of her husband.

“Does your husband ask you where you’re spending all your time? Doesn’t he get suspicious or jealous?”

“If he asks I tell him where I go. He doesn’t often ask. He’s too busy to care. Sometimes he even asks who I was with. I tell him I went with my English teacher.”

“And that doesn’t bother him?”

“Think about it, sensei. Has it ever bothered the husbands of your previous students that you were meeting their wives at their homes, alone, unsupervised?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Because their husbands can’t imagine their wives would be interested in having an affair with a white boy?”

“They don’t care whether their wives would want to or not. It doesn’t matter in the least to them how they feel about another man. They just know they wouldn’t scandalize their family by going to bed with another man. That’s enough.”

“And your husband knows you wouldn’t.”

“That’s right.”

“No matter how you feel.”

There was a short silence as she contemplated the vacation houses passing by on the shore line. Her eyes met his and lingered longer than was comfortable for Daemon.

“No matter how I feel.”

As much of a presence as Mrs. Chiba ever became in Daemon’s life, they maintained a certain distance between themselves. For instance: even after she’d been his student for over a year, he had never been in the upstairs of her house, where he assumed the personal quarters were. Nor had Mrs. Chiba ever been to Daemon’s apartment. He had the feeling she even steered clear of his entire neighborhood, because when he asked her if she’d ever been in this store or seen that landmark, the answer was always no.

He lured Erika home from The Irish Cat pub one Friday night. The moment he opened the door she looked down at the Persian rug in the entrance hall and her jaw dropped.

“That’s real isn’t it?”

“Yes it’s a real rug.”

“You know what I mean. Don’t be flippant. I spent four years in Iran when my father was a diplomat. I know a Persian rug when I see one. That’s a very nice one, too. Did you buy it in Budapest?”

“It was a gift from a friend.”

“An extravagant friend!”

He led her into the living room and her eyes fell to the huge Persian rug that covered most of the floor. She pursed her lips and Daemon could see her decide not to say anything.

“Would you like a drink?”

“What have you got?”

“Everything.”

“Everything?”

Daemon nodded his head. “Everything.”

“Such as...?”

“Red wine, white wine, vermouth, port, champagne (though none cooled at the moment), Tokay, sake, bourbon, scotch, vodka, pálinka, ouzo, ... You can stop me any time now.”

“I’ve been drinking wine this evening. Is the Tokay dry or sweet?”

“As dry or as sweet as you like.”

“I’ll take a semi-sweet Tokay then.”

When Daemon came back from the kitchen with the drinks he found Erika leaning on the bookshelf. She had a leather-bound volume of Basho open in her hands.

“Do you like Japanese poetry? You have a lot of it here.”

“I look at it occasionally. It’s really out of my ken.”

Erika looked at the book, then at the collection of expensive volumes of Japanese poetry and knit her brow a touch. She slid the book back into its place on the shelf. Daemon handed her one of the glasses of Tokay. They clinked glasses and took a sip. Daemon felt the timing was right. He slipped his left arm around her waist and leaned forward to kiss her. He met no resistance. She put her left hand on the back of his neck and gave him a long kiss that communicated a promise of things to come. She looked into his eyes with an expression Daemon couldn’t identify. Intrigue?

Puzzlement! That was it. There was something she couldn’t figure out. What was it?

While Erika drifted toward the balcony doors, Daemon turned off the overhead light and switched on a pole lamp that bathed the room in a soft orange glow. He went over to where Erika was looking out the balcony doors at the lights on the river and stood behind her. He put one arm around her and pressed himself into her back.

“Quite some view, isn’t it?” he said, and then kissed her neck. He could feel the heat drifting up her body against his face and smelled the combined fragrances of perfume and warm skin. He even thought he could smell a touch of nervousness in her perspiration, and that excited him. She let him kiss her neck and smell her long thick black hair, which was gathered up in a heap on top of her head. When he slid his hand up her abdomen and took hold of one breast she turned her head and met his lips in another very promise-laden kiss. Then she playfully slipped away and walked over to his desk which stood against the wall, turned the desk chair sideways and sat down. Daemon sat at the couch on the opposite wall. The desk and chair, the couch, one armchair and the pole lamp were the only furniture in the one-room apartment besides the numerous bookshelves.

Daemon watched her inspect the detritus on the surface of the desk. There were a number of journals with slips of paper as bookmarks stacked on the desk, as well as books

and notebooks and pieces of paper with scribbled notes on them. She picked up one piece of paper and read it out loud.

“You have to emphasize the uniqueness of Steinbeck’s approach in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The way his narrative steadily shifts between the story of the migrant family and a broader, shall we say journalistic, voice was a bold experiment at that time.’ Are you writing a paper on Steinbeck?”

“Uh-huh. I think it’ll be called ‘The Influence of Hemorrhoids on John Steinbeck’s Homophobia.’”

“I didn’t know Steinbeck was a homophobe.”

“He wasn’t, as far as I know. That was a joke.”

“Oh. Do you like writing this sort of thing?”

“As my mother used to always say: ‘it beats digging ditches.’ I prefer writing other things.”

“Oh? Such as what?”

“I’m writing a book on ... uh... philosophy is what I guess you’d call it.”

She looked over the papers and books on the desk.

“But that’s not your subject is it?”

“No. It’s a project a friend encouraged me to follow up on. I talked about it a lot and she said I should write a book about it. So I started a book. I might be writing it for the drawer.”

“What kind of philosophy?”

“I’m not quite sure it’s philosophy. It’s about what the transition of Central Europe has taught us, what it ultimately means.”

“That’s a big subject.”

“I know. Big enough to get lost in. I just work on it. I don’t really know what it will become, or if I’ll ever finish it.”

Daemon walked over to her, took her hand, pulled her to her feet and kissed her.

“Let me show you the rest of the apartment.”

She looked over her shoulder at the bedroom loft.

“I think there’s only one room I haven’t seen yet.”

When he awoke at 3am, she was sitting up in bed watching the rain lash against the balcony windows. Lightning lit the apartment, freezing an image of Erika’s face in profound contemplation. A few seconds later a rumbling echoed off the Buda hills.

“What’s on your mind?”

She startled slightly because she hadn't realized Daemon was awake. But without any introduction she recited:

"Light breaks on secret lots,  
On tips of thought where thoughts smell in the rain..."

"That's Dylan Thomas, isn't it?"

"Are you a fan?"

"Not really. I think that's the only poem of his I've ever read, to tell you the truth. You memorized it?"

"Just that line. I remember good lines."

"I feel like a whiskey. How about you?"

"I'll have a whiskey, too."

Daemon returned with a bottle of whiskey, a bottle of water, two glasses and a box of panatelas that had come by courier that afternoon. After he'd poured drinks, he took a cigar from the box. Erika helped herself to a cigar.

"You smoke cigars?"

"Not until now."

The conversation started at Dylan Thomas and veered wildly from subject to subject. For once, Daemon did most of the listening.

The next morning Daemon got out of bed before Erika awoke and went to the kitchen to make coffee. He was standing in the silence of the new day when he heard soft footsteps behind him.

"This is really an amazing robe."

He turned to see her wearing his dark-blue kimono. Though he had to concede that she looked great in it, it always made him feel funny that women took the liberty of wearing it when they found it. Of all the women who'd worn it, not one had asked about the Japanese characters embroidered over the heart. It was a haiku composed by Mrs. Chiba.

Wise man crossing bridge  
River flows to suit itself  
Lessons in his bag.

Mrs. Chiba assured him the subtleties were lost in the translation.

"How do you take your coffee?", he asked her.

"Just some milk."

They went out to the living room. Daemon sat at the desk, Erika on the couch. He began to shuffle around the papers on his desk. He was to meet Mrs. Chiba in a few hours at the Café Remiz, where they were having lunch. They were going to talk about a Melville

story -- "Bartleby the Scrivener"-- and Daemon realized he hadn't seen the anthology it was in for days.

"Are you teaching a class today?"

"Uh... yes, I am."

"Would you like me to leave so you can get ready?"

"I mean... well...you should relax and finish your coffee first." He considered whether he could cancel the lesson, so he could spend more time with Erika, but decided not to when he remembered how much Mrs. Chiba was looking forward to this lunch. He decided to quash this unaccustomed impulse before he did something stupid like ask for her phone number.

She stood up and walked over to within inches of him.

"I'll leave you to your work, but first I'd like to say my proper good-byes."

She went to him, sat on his lap and began kissing him. He was again overcome by the mixture of body heat, the scent of skin and perfume. Daemon's eyes kept wandering to the volumes of Japanese poetry, the Persian rug, the kimono, the silk tie lying on his desk. For a moment he almost felt guilty, as if he were cheating on Mrs. Chiba.

The taxi drove through the near-abandoned streets of Budapest, crossed the Margit bridge and began the climb up the Rose Hill. Daemon was tempted several times to ask the driver if he knew what this was all about, but he was sure that Mrs. Chiba would never say anything to the driver.

When they pulled into the driveway the yard was brightly lit by all the lights on in the house. The driver came around the car and opened the door for Daemon, then silently got back into the car and drove away.

Marion met him at the door. It was rather odd to see that, despite the hour, she was in uniform, though outrageously tired looking and red eyed. She led him through the house and, to Daemon's surprise, up the staircase to the private quarters. Although he'd traded his shoes for slippers at the front door, when they arrived on a landing at the top of the steps he was instructed to take those slippers off and to step into another pair waiting in a row where one stepped up into the hallway.

Marion didn't follow him. He was met in the hallway by a Japanese woman he'd never seen before, wearing traditional clothing. She bowed deeply to him and said, "I am honored to meet you Sensei. Please follow me."

He pierced the veil into another world. Up here there was no European furniture nor European artifacts of any kind. They'd gone to great expense to obscure the walls of the hall

with paper shoji screens, which were gently back-lit. The floor was covered with tatami mats. He was led through a series of traditional rooms separated by sliding shoji doors until one door was slid open to reveal Mrs. Chiba kneeling on the floor in a white kimono.

After Daemon stepped through the door it quietly slid shut behind him. Mrs. Chiba was staring blankly at the floor, but after a few seconds she lifted her gaze, looked at Daemon and smiled weakly.

“Sensei. I’m so glad you could come.”

Daemon just nodded to this, sat down on the mat across the table from her and waited.

“Would you like some coffee? Tea? Sake?”

Daemon simply shook his head and waited again. Mrs. Chiba stared distractedly at the floor. On the table was a thin volume of Poe’s poetry. They had visited a bookstore together earlier that day. When he’d seen the verses of Edgar Allen Poe, he had raved about the beauty of the language and the amazing control of form in Poe. She had bought two and given one to Daemon. A large section of his personal library was a carbon copy of hers. She’d asked him what to read and amongst others he told her to read “The Bells.” The volume was open on the table to “The Bells”. The English book looked strangely out of place in this setting.

She cleared her throat and took a deep breath.

“An aunt of mine -my father’s sister- called two hours ago. She has never been away from Japan and has no concept of time zones, so she had no idea that she’d woken me up at one o’clock in the morning.”

She had said all of this while staring at the table in front of her. She paused a moment and then looked up at Daemon.

“ My father died of a heart attack today.”

Daemon mumbled the appropriate, “I’m sorry to hear that,” and she nodded to acknowledge that she’d heard it. There was another long silence in which she stared through the table.

“I am...” she began, “I ... I feel ...” she took another deep breath, but kept her eyes on the table. “I’m alone. All my life I’ve been conditioned to think myself above all the people around me. I grew up without a mother. My brother was my only friend when I was growing up. And now I feel like I really only have one person left in the world.”

“Your husband.”

She freed her eyes from the table’s grip and looked at Daemon. “No, you.”

Daemon wasn't sure what the appropriate reaction was. Not that he could have successfully masked his surprise anyway.

"I know what you're thinking," she continued. "What you and I have is simply a business relationship: I pay you and you provide a service. What a sad little woman who needs a hired companion. What a sad little person I am, living in a foreign country with a husband I don't love and who doesn't love me. I spend my days in the company of my servants, or shopping alone, or with my teacher, who gets paid generously to tolerate my tedious company."

"Look, perhaps it would help you if I explained how I feel," Daemon started, finding himself wondering what he was going to say, since he himself didn't know how he felt.

"At first ours was purely a business relationship, just as you say. But it didn't stay that way for long. I look forward to every one of our lessons. They're really the happiest time of my week. I enjoy talking with you more than anything else I do. I have missed you terribly on the occasions when you've been away. I would continue meeting you several times a week even if I weren't getting paid. As a matter of fact: stop paying me now! We'll go on meeting as before, but as friends,"

A smile slowly dawned on Mrs. Chiba's face and the radiance spread to her entire being.

"I knew it would help if you came, Sensei. It would already have meant enough to me that you came at this ridiculous hour, but to offer me your services out of friendship is the kindest thing anyone has done for me in years. Of course I could never accept. Being generous to you is one of my few pleasures in life. No, I will go on paying you, but thank you very much for your kind offer."

Her gaze became transfixed on the table once again and the radiant smile clouded over.

"Tonight I am reminded how alone I really am. Have you ever wondered why I don't have any children?"

As a matter of fact Daemon had. A Japanese marriage without children was like a restaurant without food. It was the whole point of the exercise. Extending the family is the primary Confucian duty of children to their parents. Daemon didn't say anything. Mrs. Chiba looked up to examine the expression on his face.

"Of course you've wondered. But you are far too discreet to ask about such things. That's one of the things the Japanese women like about you, you know. You've never been to Japan, but you have an intuitive grasp of how to behave around Japanese women. What one doesn't do is as important as what one does do."

“I don’t know why I don’t have any children. Neither do the doctors. Both my husband and I have been thoroughly examined. They say there’s no reason, as far as they know, why we can’t make babies. Adoption is out of the question in our case since we need to create an heir. My husband blames me. It’s only a matter of time before he divorces me and marries a younger woman. Then I will be a rich, middle-aged Japanese woman with no family. I can’t imagine a lonelier existence. So I must take pleasure in the moment. As long as I am in Hungary I have the pleasure of your company.”

She paused and waited for a response that didn’t come.

“Are you sure you don’t want anything? You look like you could use a drink”

“I don’t know what I’d rather have, some scotch or some coffee.”

“Why not both?”

“That’s an excellent idea.”

She put her hand under the table, leaned toward it and spoke a few quick sentences in Japanese. Within a few minutes the “upstairs servant” appeared carrying a tray. She knelt on the floor next to Daemon and placed a coffee pot, a cup and saucer, a milk pitcher, a sugar bowl, a silver spoon, a plate of savory rice crackers, a tumbler, two coasters and a bottle of 12-year-old single-malt scotch whiskey on the table. She placed the bottle and the tumbler on coasters, poured a cup of coffee, stood up in one graceful motion, and noiselessly left the room.

While Mrs. Chiba busied herself with putting cream and sugar in the coffee, Daemon inspected the bottle of Scotch. It was a brand he’d never heard of. He was sure that was because it was totally beyond his means.

As he poured himself two fingers, he asked, “Why do you wait around for the inevitable. Why don’t you divorce him?”

As she stirred the coffee, the corners of her mouth twitched out into a feeble grin.

“I should take back everything I said about your discretion. There are those moments when you are typically, but charmingly, American.”

She touched the tip of the spoon to the rim of the cup and watched the drop of coffee slide down the inside. Then she carefully placed the spoon in the saucer, slid the cup across the table to Daemon, put her hands in her lap and sighed.

“It probably sounds like a lot of superstitious nonsense to you, but I can’t divorce my husband because it would dishonor my ancestors.”

Daemon took a sip from his glass and was not surprised that it was the best whiskey he’d ever tasted.

“I steer clear of making critical remarks about anyone’s traditions.” He took another sip, then looked at the amber liquid in his glass. Indeed, tradition had a lot to be said for it.

“It’s the strangest thing,” he said to Vera, as he tipped the ash of his corona into the ashtray on the bed. “That paper was never meant for publication.”

The lights were out in the room, but everything was visible in bluish outline from the city lights coming in the balcony window, with some rippling reflections from the river adding movement. Vera was lying under the blanket and held a glass of red wine on her chest. Daemon was at a right angle to her, propped up against the wall with a pillow behind him. His lower half was under the blanket, his legs woven with Vera’s.

“Then what,” she asked, “was the paper intended for?”

Daemon drew thoughtfully on the cigar and blew out a billowing ghost into the city-glow of the room. He took a tiny sip of the twelve-year-old scotch (six bottles of which had been delivered earlier that day) and sighed.

“It started as a kind of joke. I was telling a ... a student about how easy it is to parody the stuffed-shirt style that academic papers are written in. I said that you could take the most absurd theory and pretend to treat it seriously, back it up with all the right references, argue it with all the accepted modes of logic, and come out with a publishable paper.

“Well she -my student- challenged me to do that. We decided on ‘the symbolism of the raincoat in the cold-war spy novel.’ We ended up writing it together. We scoured the used book stores for LeCarré, Leon Uris, Graham Greene and any other cloak-and-dagger writers we could find. We read the books and took notes on any passages useful to our purpose. We came up with a hilariously laughable argument that the raincoat was a symbol of the divine presence. And then we even found quotes from respected critics that we took completely out of context to support our argument. We had a really good time putting it together. We laughed ourselves sick during some of our work sessions.”

Daemon took another drag, another sip, and watched the sparkling city lights in the river.

“So I sent the finished piece to a journal and really didn’t think about it again until two month’s later when I got a letter saying that they’d decided to publish it. They said it was a brilliant parody of contemporary literary scholarship and that the jury had all had a good laugh.”

Another puff, another sip. Beneath the blanket he stroked the underside of her thigh with the upper part of his foot.

“But the best part came the next day. I got a letter from a colleague of the journal editor at the University of Kentucky. She’d seen the article and she was interested in having me come read my paper at a conference. She said these affairs could always use some comic relief.”

Daemon shook his head in disbelief, then looked over at Vera. She was a nice enough girl, as far as he could tell from the three hours he’d spent with her since they’d met at an acquaintance’s party. But he found himself wishing he was telling this to Erika. Why hadn’t he asked her for her number? Why hadn’t he asked for her last name?

“It was all meant as a joke and now I’m flying to Kentucky next week to present this paper.”

It was in the spring of their third year of “lessons” that they began taking walks on Margit Island every week. Daemon would walk out to the middle of Margit bridge on Monday morning and Peter would drop her off at the curb. From there Daemon and Mrs. Chiba would walk down the bridge jutting northward from the middle of Margit bridge onto the island. They would make a circuit around the island on all its paths, through all its fields and gardens and three hours later Peter would pick her up from the same spot on the bridge.

It was on such a walk that they were discussing the impact of Daemon’s newly published book. They had just walked halfway up the path along the eastern embankment of the island and taken a seat on a bench in the sun.

“I wasn’t even sure I could get it published. I certainly didn’t expect it to become popular,” Daemon said as he untied the backpack. They were both sitting sideways tailor style on the bench. Daemon began handing her things from the pack.

Eventually they had all the supplies and implements for a civilized late breakfast spread out between them: a thermos of tea, mugs, a linen-lined basket of pastries, two plates, silver spoons and cloth napkins. Daemon poured them each a cup of tea and noted the sunlight playing off the moving liquid, just like the sparkles off the Danube to his right. He grabbed a *túrós táska* from the basket and started tearing a piece off it.

“I know I’m biased,” she began, sitting with her hands wrapped around the mug to keep them warm, “but I had a feeling the book was something really big when I read the manuscript.”

The book they were talking about was “Voices of the Diaspora”. Daemon had stumbled upon the idea for the book quite by accident. One night he had been in a bar with an American salesman who, after a few drinks, began talking about the early days after the borders to Hungary opened up and foreigners began moving there. The man began to talk in

a very philosophical fashion about the initial experience of Eastern Europe in those days, of being confronted with one's subconscious; a meeting of "the other". As the man talked, Daemon recalled the feelings and experiences he'd had years before upon his arrival in Hungary. It was just as this man was describing, only he'd forgotten as he slowly became familiar with the country and as Budapest slowly became like any other cosmopolitan European capital.

He asked the salesman if he minded being recorded and, after a little hesitation, he agreed. He'd become quite well-to-do through some of the deals he'd made, and even set up a business of his own in Budapest, but his conscience was bothering him a bit. He'd never expected to see the society get so severely divided between the rich and the poor as it had.

Daemon listened to the tape and realized it was dynamite. He made himself a list of questions and went out to the watering holes frequented by Americans and plied people with drinks and got them to wax confessional. The stories people told of the Hungary they'd found and the experience of watching it change made for some fascinating history if they were prompted well. Daemon wove these stories together with quotes from some of the great expatriates of this century (Hemmingway, Sommerset Maugham, Orwell, etc.) and with passages of philosophy and psychology dealing with the relationship between the self and the "other".

He found a publisher faster than he thought he would. And then came the real surprise: it became a popular book. We're not talking best-seller list, but it went into a second printing and then into a third. It got a good review in the New York review of Books.

Mrs. Chiba poured him another cup of tea. He pulled a *kakaós csiga* from the basket and began nibbling it contemplatively while watching a barge labor up the river.

"I got a job offer in the mail yesterday."

"From whom?"

"A small college in Pennsylvania."

"Are you going to take it?" She'd asked this quite casually and then took a sip of her tea and watched two joggers pass.

"No."

"Why not?" Again, almost suspiciously casual.

Indeed, why not? The professor who'd written to him made a very attractive offer. A minimum amount of teaching, a maximum amount of writing time, a salary which was an astounding multiple of his current salary. Why not? He watched her daintily eating a *pogácsa* and realized it was because he didn't want to leave her.

"I don't think it was really a serious offer."

“Oh.”

A very warm evening shortly after that found Daemon walking home from a lecture with his jacket over his forearm and his tie loosened. The weight of his briefcase was straining his shoulder, and he wondered why he carried so many books.

He was about a hundred meters from the front door of his apartment building when he noticed a tall woman with long black hair in a short black dress standing by the entrance and searching through the names on the door buzzers. Even with her back to him, he recognized it was Erika. He stopped about twenty meters away. Her index finger came to rest on his name plate, but she just stood there without ringing the buzzer. After a minute she quickly turned around and began to walk away, when she spotted Daemon.

“If you were looking for me, you just found me.”

For a second she looked like she was going to turn around and run, but then she took a deep breath and composed herself.

“I guess I can’t deny I was, can I?”

Daemon pursed his lips and gently shook his head.

“You don’t have a phone.”

“By design.”

They stood there looking at one another, trying to read the other’s thoughts.

“You’re here now. You may as well come upstairs for a drink.”

He walked past her and without checking to see if she’d followed, pulled out his keys and opened the lobby door.

As he walked through the lobby he was pleased to hear her footsteps on the marble behind him. He held the elevator door open for her. On the ride up they watched each other: tension rising in the silence. Along with her short black dress she had on black, spike-heel shoes with no stockings. Her long black hair was heaped on top of her head, just as it had been the last time he saw her. He loved the look of the short loose hair at the base of her neck.

Once again, he held the elevator door open for her and they emerged into the hallway in front of his door. While he was getting his keys out he noticed the peephole in Mrs. Iványi’s door opening. He waved a finger at her and the peephole quickly shut.

Once inside Daemon wasted no time. He dropped his briefcase and tossed his jacket at the coat rack, and missed. He seized her with both arms and they kissed. He was about to begin undressing her when she slipped away to the living room. Daemon smiled to himself.

A little cat-and-mouse always livens up the day. As he picked up his jacket and put it on a hanger he called after her: “A glass of wine?”

When he brought the wine (a dry ‘93 Villányi Merlot) and two glasses into the living room they toasted one another, then Erika turned her head slightly and narrowed her eyes at Daemon.

“Who is she?”

“Who is who?”

“The woman I feel in this apartment. The woman whose presence clings to you like perfume. The woman who seems to be a part of everything you do. The woman you’re always thinking about.”

Daemon turned the desk chair to face the couch and sat down. This conversation was taking a turn he didn’t like. He never spoke about Mrs. Chiba with anyone. She was his inner world. And he didn’t feel like starting now.

“She’s... She’s..., uh... Wait a second! What makes you think you can ask such questions? This is only the second time we’ve ever seen each other.”

“Curiosity. That’s what brought me here. Ever since I walked out your door I’ve wondered what’s going on here. You’re an intriguing story. A mystery. Not only that: I don’t like not having a man’s full attention. I consider that a challenge. And today I got the nerve to rise to the challenge.”

With this, she stood up from the couch and began advancing toward Daemon. He was expecting her to start unbuttoning her blouse, but she pulled a wrapped present out of her purse, placed it in his hands and then walked through the entrance hall and out the door before he realized what she was doing.

When he unwrapped the package, it was a hard bound copy of Dylan Thomas’s *Collected Poems*. Inside the cover was a piece of paper with her name and number.

They had spread a blanket between them on a shady patch of the lawn in Margit Island’s rose garden. It was only 9 o’clock but the summer sun had already burnt off the dew. It promised to be a hot August day.

Mrs. Chiba had just poured Daemon another cup of tea from the thermos. He began to reach for another pastry but when he saw the hot sun beating down beyond the shade they were hiding in, he thought the better of it.

“I got another job offer in the mail yesterday.”

“From whom?”

“Bryn Mawr believe it or not.”

“And are you going to take it?” failing to suppress some eagerness.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were trying to get rid of me.”

There was a long silence. Daemon watched Mrs. Chiba stare at a rose on a nearby bush. She was obviously preparing herself to say something, so the only thing to do was wait. Bees were buzzing around in the rose bushes and the city beyond the island made itself known through the dull roar of traffic.

“My husband is being transferred back to Japan.”

Another long silence while Daemon absorbed this news. Neither of them bothered to chase away a bee that had discovered their last piece of pastry.

“Are you going back with him?”

“Of course I am.”

“You don’t have to. You have other options. Just for a second, stop being so traditional and think about the other choices you have.”

“What options? What choices?”

“Well...” Daemon couldn’t believe he was about to say the sentence that was forming in his mind. No, not his mind, his heart. As he considered the source of this impulse, he realized it came from his gut. How long had it been there, waiting for him to express it?

“You could marry me. I don’t know why I hadn’t thought of that before.”

He put his tea mug aside, got on his knees and took her hand in both of his.

“Marry me! I’ll take one of these jobs and we’ll go to America together. Marry me!”

As he watched her face, looking for some sign of her answer, her eyes became watery and a tear ran down her cheek.

“I’m pregnant.”

He let go of her hand, got off his knees and sat tailor style again.

“Congratulations,” he said, almost in a whisper.

“Thank you.”

“I was too late again, wasn’t I?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m constantly thinking of the right thing to do when the opportunity has passed. You would have married me if I’d asked you to earlier, wouldn’t you have?”

She bowed her head and hid her eyes. “How am I supposed to answer a question like that? Either answer will hurt you.”

“You should answer it honestly.”

She raised her face and met his eyes. “Yes, I would have.”

Daemon picked up a butter knife off the picnic cloth and walked over to one of the rose bushes, where he chose a red rose and cut it off the bush. He walked back and handed the rose to her, then turned and walked away. He never saw her again.

October was a cold month that year and the heating still wasn't turned on in the building where he had his office. It had been a long day, starting with early morning meetings and finishing with a lecture from his new course "The Cold-War Spy Novel". He was sitting at his desk, wearing the thick homemade Transylvanian cardigan he called "the office sweater", watching the swaying branches of the chestnut tree in the golden autumn afternoon and listening to the sound of the wind whistle through the leaky window, when he remembered the envelope he'd plucked out of his mailbox on his way out of the apartment building that morning. He was in too much of a hurry to open it then and he'd already forgotten about it by the time he was on the bus a few minutes later.

He retrieved the envelope from his suit jacket hanging on a hook on the wall and sat back down at his desk. He spent a minute examining the stamp, the cancellation and the return address: Kyoto, Japan.

He pulled a letter opener from the top drawer of his desk (another miniature Japanese *tanto*) and was about to slice the envelope open, when he hesitated. He held the envelope up to the light and saw that it was one of the sort lined on the inside with opaque paper that doesn't allow you to see the contents. It was light and thin. No more than one sheet of paper. What was it? He went through all the possibilities in a second: a note saying she'd changed her mind and was coming to him; some sort of apology; a check for an unimaginable sum. He put the *tanto* and the envelope on the desk, then turned himself in his swivel chair to face the window. He crossed his arms across his chest and leaned back. He watched the chestnut tree dancing with the wind, the golden sunlight reflecting from its leaves, listened to the lonely sound of the cold air whining through the window.

He took a deep breath, turned back to his desk, picked up the envelope and methodically tore it in half, then quarters, then eighths, then dropped them in the garbage. He pulled a cigarillo out of his desk drawer and lit it. As he blew the smoke at the high ceiling, a satisfied smile spread across his face. He pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of his wallet, picked up the receiver of the phone and dialed the number from the piece of paper.

"Hello, Erika? This is Daemon. Listen: what would you think of going to dinner and seeing a film tonight?"