WHEN I WAS BETTER

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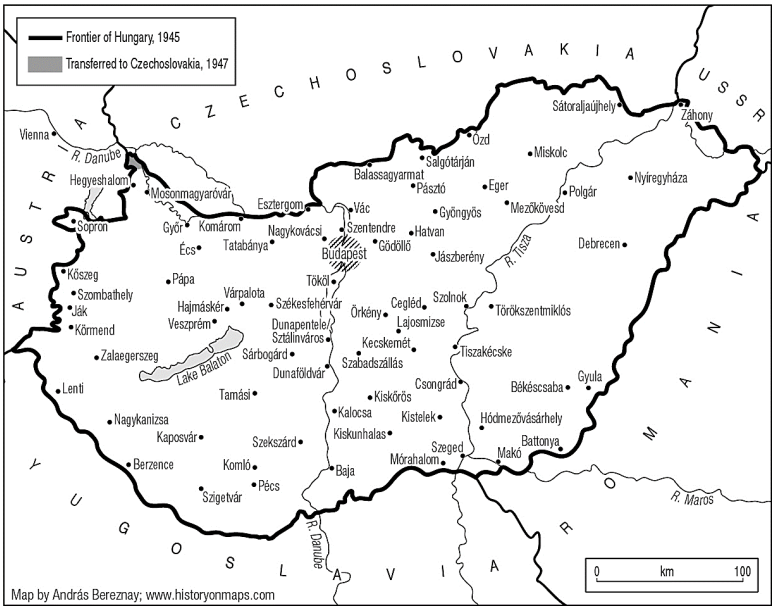
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To my beloved parents, Ethel and Steve

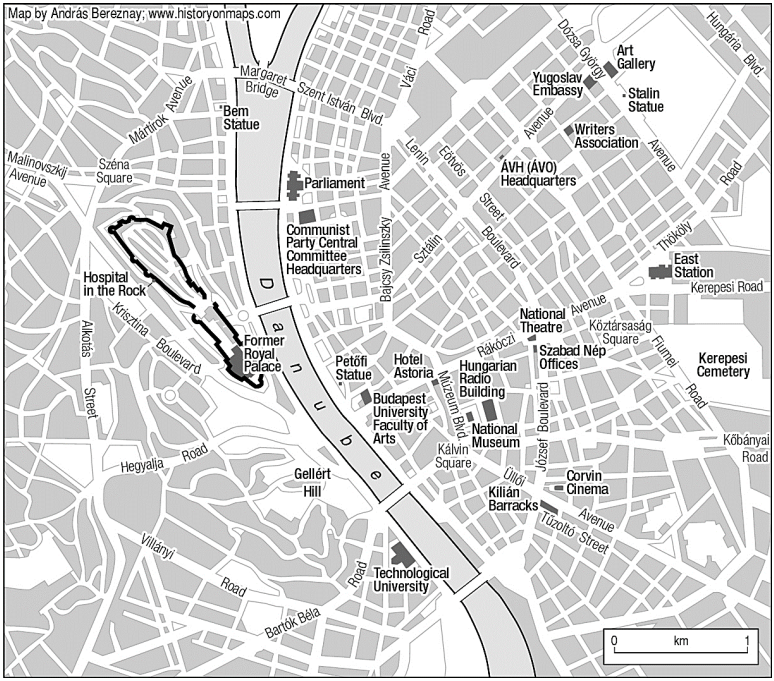
And to my beloved husband, Ken

And my dear friend, Adrienne K.

Hungary 1945



The Hungarian Revolution 1956



CHARACTER LIST

Teréza
István (her husband)
Zolti (their son)

Pista (István's best friend, also a voice in his head)

Anna, Gyuri (Teréza's parents)
Klára (Teréza's eldest sister, living in Budapest)
Elek (Klára's husband)
Ági, Juli, Kati (Teréza's sisters)
András (Teréza's brother)

Feri (István's stepfather)
Zsuzsa (István's mother)
Tamás, Lali (István's brothers)

Sándor, Péter, Laci (István's co-workers)
Barna (István's roommate in the refugee camp)
Varga (István's childhood enemy, later a turncoat)
Csoki (Hungarian soldier, István's friend)
Yvan, Bolochka (soldiers)
Németh (Arrow Cross commander, secret police officer, Varga's uncle)

János (Teréza's uncle)
Hermina (Uncle János' wife)
Hermus/Mrs. Stalin (Hermina's mother)
Anikó (old woman, distant relative)

Béla, Marika (István's friends, fellow refugees)
Ackermann (István's boss in Canada)

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"We forget that we are history. We have kept the left hand from knowing the right…We are not used to associating our private lives with public events. Yet the histories of families cannot be separate from the histories of nations. To divide them is part of our denial."

Susan Griffin, *A Chorus of Stones*

PROLOGUE

1964

THIS IS WHAT DYING FEELS LIKE

1964, February 28.

Sign language. If Teréza missed a signal or a cue she would be lost. Her heart raced, and she clutched her passport to her chest. The last person she and her eight-year-old son had spoken with was the unfriendly *Malév* stewardess from the substandard Hungarian airline. Here, in the bustling Brussels airport Teréza felt like a speechless toddler. Her world had transformed into a place of gestures and facial expressions, making her feel more vigilant now than she had ever been under Communism. No one understood her but Zolti. Already she ached for her language and the family she left behind.

In her bewilderment, Teréza felt energized and diminished at once. The representative from Sabena, the Belgian airline, beckoned to them with long thin arms sheathed in white gloves as she ushered them through the terminal to customs. Lush plants stretched skyward to the sunshine pouring in through the glass ceiling. Pastel colours fused pleasantly with the scent of croissants and café au lait.

Everything in the West seemed bright and cheerful. If only István had chosen to settle in Brussels instead of Winnipeg when he fled Hungary without them. But he was always such a contrarian.

Teréza kept pace with the woman's long stride and pulled Zolti along as they passed by boutiques where well-to-do women shopped for diamonds and lace, items that were impossibly out of her reach. But here in the midst of the indecipherable announcements Teréza could hear only one thing: their last conversation in person, hers and István's.

"I'm going today," he'd said one morning seven years ago.

"How can you do this to us? We could have escaped, together! As a family."

"They're coming to arrest me."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

That was the last day she saw him, when his son Zolti was but a babe-in-arms.

★

István woke at dawn, with a new set of worries. What if Teréza wasn't on the flight? What if the authorities didn't let her out of Hungary? What if she had decided not to leave?

He lay on the sofa bed in his friends' Montreal living room and through the window watched it snow again. He tried for hours to fall back to sleep, but his tossing and turning kept twisting the sheets around his ankles, pulling him down into nightmares.

In fits of lucidness, he thought of the day he fled seven and a half years ago – thirty-two years old – the last time he set eyes on his baby boy, lying motionless on the day bed.

He'd asked Teréza, "What's wrong with him?"

She replied, "What's wrong with you?" He had no answer.

István reached over to his neatly folded pile of clothing on the chair, and from his overcoat pocket pulled a tinted photograph taken a half-year ago. Mother and son. The last one she'd sent from Hungary. She was almost thirty-four now and István was pushing forty. Such a pretty woman, with a warm smile and skin that always looked clear and bright. When Teréza posed for photos she had a habit of tilting her head to the right, as if trying to improve her appearance, to make life more pleasant somehow. But photos betrayed appearances. This benign bearing couldn't hide the side of her personality that believed existence was beyond repair. She often said, even of good photos, "I hate this picture of myself."

Studying the photo, István was fascinated by his son's features. Something troubled him about the boy. He leaned against his mother like an unstable shack, the walls and roof sliding one way, its base clinging to the earth. Years ago, after István reached the refugee camp, Teréza had sent him a picture, taken when Zolti was just fourteen months old. In it, the toddler's eyes were fixed on something or someone, off camera, much taller and bigger than him. He looked worried, startled even, with his button mouth turned downwards. This most recent photograph showed his son's eyes fixed in exactly the same direction with the same startled look. The boy was almost eight, but his expression hadn't changed.

Put it all behind you, István. Begin again.

"Pista! Back from the dead!" István laughed aloud. "My dear friend, are you speaking to me from heaven? When you died you stopped being my advisor."

Everything comes to end, Pista replied. *Have you reason-*

able regret?

"I do. I do," István replied.

Well then?

István closed his eyes. The image of wife and son burned itself into the backs of his eyelids. Once he opened them, he would fit back into their lives again.

★

In a cozy corner, a businessman dictated a letter to a typist attired in a pale pink pullover and green pumps. Teréza wanted that job in this important glass palace. Mesmerized by the glamour in the terminal, Teréza barely paid attention to her son who rushed to keep up with his mother.

"Come, Zolti. We can't fall behind," she said, turning to look at the *Chanel* perfume counter they passed. It was only then that she realized she had no money in her wallet. Nothing. Even if the Hungarian security officials hadn't relieved her of her forints, they would have been worthless here.

"But I want to look at the telephones." Zolti locked his knees in the middle of the bustle and refused to move.

"You'll have one in Canada. Please?" Teréza's expression was a mixture of pleading and apology. She glanced towards the Sabena representative who was well ahead of them now.

Zolti quickly conceded, sensing his mother's anxiety.

The stewardess motioned for them to take a seat.

The waiting lounge was full of French businessmen. There were very few families and less than a handful of couples. Teréza was the only single woman with a child. She was troubled to see a very large group of Turkish men in the terminal carrying rucksacks. Rural men who wore old, loose-

fitting clothing. *The conquerors*, she thought, her mind taught to remember the hundred and fifty-year occupation of her people. A Sabena stewardess politely ushered the group to the waiting area. Wasn't she afraid of them? One of them – likely the same age as Teréza's father – pulled a colorful prayer rug from his bag and with a gracious gesture handed it to the stewardess. She declined until he lightheartedly tucked the rug into the creases of her arms, playfully bending her forearms and hands inwards as if wrapping the rug in a package.

Zolti watched them. "That's a kind man. Is my father kind too?"

"Yes, he is," Teréza heard herself say through the lump in her throat. She thought of all the times István had forged ahead and created a home for her. Other men thought it the job of the woman to make the nest. It was another way he was different.

A new world was changing her view of the old one, for the third time in her life.

An announcement crackled over the public address system in French. Some passengers stood. Teréza looked around, worried, understanding only one word.

"Come Zolti. We're going to Canada." She felt disembodied, as if part of her was floating in reverse, homeward.

★

Two hours before the flight's arrival, István paced the spacious corridors of Montréal-Dorval International Airport, retracing his steps when he hit dead ends. He was familiar with the terminal; he'd landed here the day before, from Winnipeg.

He'd kept alive the hope that there would be one moment in life when his best intentions and deepest desires aligned. When fear and failure transformed into love and acceptance and these new states remained effortlessly balanced within him. He yearned for the miraculous transition when fate switched over from loss to triumph, that distant region that held freedom, and promised him immunity from pain. István had no proof this place existed, but he had hope. He convinced himself that day would be today.

At arrivals, he watched the automatic doors swoosh open, swoosh closed. Shortly after, a small dog outsmarted its owner, darted straight for István's legs and ran frantic circles around him, binding him in the leash. The mutt nipped at his ankles. Close to losing his balance or swearing at the thing – he hated yappy little dogs – István summoned his composure when he realized, to his amazement, that the dog belonged to a very important-looking woman wearing a snow leopard coat. Elizabeth Taylor! She was waving to a tense looking man to *get the dog*! All István could do was marvel at Ms. Taylor while the dog choked itself trying to get loose. The man, presumably her assistant, apologized for the mishap and unwound the hysterical animal from István's legs.

"It's no trouble," István lied.

Surrounded by bodyguards, Ms. Taylor offered her lips and the dog obliged, licking them. She had been married four times; one of her marriages caused a scandal when she stole another woman's husband. If she had done this in the East bloc no one would have cared. Thievery was to be expected. He wondered if she couldn't be loved enough, if they shared the same affliction. In the blink of an eye, the movie star disappeared through some secret door.

István found a newsagent and read front-page captions of

English language newspapers. "U.S. President Announces New Jet Airplane." He tried to sound out impossible words in the French journals. He imagined how he would greet his wife and son. He didn't know how best to prepare for this. He'd never hugged his boy before. Who should he embrace first? Would his son run at him and jump into his arms? What if his son didn't recognize him? He remembered his wife's fantastic reversals. At first she offered understanding, then later, unexpectedly and with unabashed fury came her real feelings. Anger always came after forgiveness. He wondered how long it would take this time.

★

On the second flight, from Brussels to Montreal, Teréza reclined in her seat, her stomach uneasy, her head spinning. She steeled herself. With her head thrown back against the headrest, eyes closed, she placed a hand on her forehead and a narrow white paper bag on her lap.

The woman in row eight continued to gag. In solidarity, Teréza vomited too; her Hungarian anti-nausea pills proved useless. When the plane reached cruising altitude, the stewardess gave her real ones.

Her son pressed his face against the window, his fingers suctioned to the glass, white with fear. She smoothed Zolti's hair, brushing it off his forehead. His skin was moist, his cheeks were flushed and he looked like a shiny plum. The world didn't appear to move, and the roar of the engines scared him. "We're going to fall out of the sky! We're going to fall out of the sky!" Zolti shrieked.

"Please don't be silly, Zolti. The plane's not going to fall out of the sky."

When she wasn't calming him with fairytales or dozing in and out of a medicated sleep, Teréza prayed. When she ran out of fairytales, she told him the joke about the fox, the wolf and the rabbit, something she would never have shared with him in the homeland.

Zolti made Teréza tell it over and over again. "But why do the fox and the wolf keep beating up the little rabbit?" he asked every time.

"Because under an oppressor there is never a right answer," Teréza whispered. "Without God, men are animals. And Soviets don't believe in God."

"Will there be Soviets in Canada?" Zolti asked.

"No, my darling. But there will be Liberals."

It continued this way for the next seven hours, her son in a state of mild terror, pressing her with questions, while Teréza's head bobbed helplessly back and forth between the past and the future.

Teréza imagined her István. Remembered how soft his skin was, pure white, almost translucent. She knew he had been working hard to prepare a home for them, that he had promised to be a different man upon their arrival. 'I have the freedom here to be a good man for you,' he wrote in his last letter.

The edge of the Atlantic Ocean came within reach. Vast, unmoving blue. The white noise of the airplane sedated and aggravated Teréza in equal measure. As she dozed, her mind grappled with complex thoughts. What use was life if everyone lived in their own reality as her husband did? Wasn't that the loneliest place on earth? The isolation of the mind? She'd never had this thought before, and now she grew anxious from the anticipation of seeing István. She didn't know what his life was like anymore. She didn't know his

mind anymore. What if he'd grown more taciturn over the years? What if he could express himself only through letters? Would they be passing notes to each other in a soundless house? What a ridiculous idea, she thought. He spoke not one but two languages now. Four if she counted the Russian he resented and the German he admired. But whom did he talk to in the seclusion of his Winnipeg home?

Teréza finally dozed as the plane began its descent. It was in her dreams that she heard her son's ceaseless cries. "We're falling out of the sky!"

"We're not falling out of the sky." Her words were drowsy, her mouth dry.

"Look, Mama! Fields! The ground is rushing up!"

"My sweet child." Teréza put her hand gently on his. "Planes don't just fall out of the sky. It's our spirits that can fall at any moment."

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the back of her seat. "Be a good, brave boy for your father. Worlds have collapsed for him," Teréza said, already sleeping. The plane plunged. Zolti screamed.

★

István rechecked the arrivals board. On time. Only forty-three minutes were left of the seven years they had spent apart. Last minute he decided to re-park the car so it would be closer to the door. Along the way he found a flower shop.

"When I was better I didn't brag," István answered the French Canadian shop girl who asked him how he was. She'd looked as perplexed as most people did when István answered this way.

He chose white carnations. Swiping the coins off the counter, he pocketed his change. He observed a tall, lean,

older gentleman with spectacles, a tidy suit and a cane, walking from the arrivals area, making his way towards a taxi exit. The gentleman had the look of someone who either by choice or by circumstance had been without a spouse for an arduous length of time. Resignation and indifference, that could have been me, thought István.

The first passengers trickled out as István quickened his pace back towards the waiting area. More passengers emerged in clumps, staring dumbfounded and bleary-eyed into the crowd. Were they from the Brussels flight? Or from a previous flight? The waiting made him somber. The doors opened, then closed halfway, then opened again, but no one walked through them. A long pause ensued. The doors closed. A few people around him lit cigarettes. Then no one came for what seemed like twenty minutes. He stopped checking his watch. A few last passengers surfaced and then he found himself alone in the waiting area holding the carnations upside down by his side.

Did he miss them? Did they not make it out? He'd have felt reprehensible if, after coming out to the airport so far in advance, his wife and son had walked out searching for his face, and found nothing.

Like a magic act, the doors swooshed open again, and no one was there. The doors closed again.

He thought, this is what dying feels like.

TRAPPED

1956-1957