

VI.

THE PARTY HAD STARTED AT THE GERBEAUD AND THEN ROLLED INTO A restaurant, the Hungarian name of which was slippery now, burrowing slickly under the surface of John's memory as he lay on the still-folded sofa bed.

Emily had sat squeezed between two of Scott's students, at the far splinters of the long wooden table. Hungarian folk musicians careened in and away, so John could rarely hear her, but a visionary director had framed her with Hungarian diners and wandering waiters and posters of caped horsemen and garlands of smoke and the noise of foreign talk and foreign music, and every time he raised his eyes, she had just discovered some never-before-seen and heartbreakingly charming gesture or facial expression. She leaned back laughing, caught him watching her, and waved, the first of many times.

"So what was our Scott like when he was boy?" a student asked John.

"I was six hundred pounds," Scott replied before the same answer could be given seriously, and the crowd laughed at the impossibility. John would have protected him, resented the unnecessary maneuver.

“He was like a god to me,” John said, watching Emily. “Like a god of war, unfortunately.”

“Right after I was born, I urged my mother to have her tubes tied, but to no avail.”

Charles explained to Scott’s Hungarians why their country was doomed to eternal poverty, conquest, betrayal, and the students nodded and mashed out their cigarettes and rolled new ones and absolutely agreed, liked Charles for understanding how things really were, despite being American. “Oh come on, *no*,” Emily insisted, and John’s heart spun on its axis. “Don’t you listen to that kind of talk.” Hungary had an opportunity it had never had before, a totally new and unique moment in human history. John seconded her, happy to share with her Charles’s and the Hungarians’ condescension.

There had been a peculiar salad, lettuce tossed with a mixture of unlikely or unrecognizable components, then the ubiquitous paprikás and vineyards of Hungarian wine. Gábor simply kept ordering more. It wasn’t bad, and only 118 forints a bottle, somewhere under two dollars, a price John found more and more hilarious as the evening progressed. He discoursed on the uncanny symbolism of Americans taking advantage of post-Communist exchange rates to drink too much Hungarian wine. The significant details of that symbolism, insightful and amusing to his drinking audience, subsequently grew wings and escaped, could not be recaptured. Later, at A Házam, a nightclub, Mark had called John a genius, but it was not clear why.

Now, in his new apartment, as he lay for the first time on the old man’s sofa bed, and horns and motors vibrated the air from three stories down, John had no recollection whatsoever of the dance club, could only recall that Emily was with them for a while and then was not. He had a vague notion that Mark had walked him home, had made him take two aspirin and drink an entire glass of water in a single go. John had slept fitfully, spinning a few revolutions on his way in and out of slumber, to which he now returned.

He dreamed of the woman on his bedside table. She stood in front of her tree, and Hungarian folk musicians were visible off in the distance, in an open field. She rocked a bundle of blankets in her arms and smiled at John with infinite tenderness and love. He knew that all was well in his life, knew his life would be happy and satisfying forever now that it was beginning at last, and he walked to her, each step marking an irrevocable commitment and commencement. She inclined her head to the blankets. “*Amerikai. Für sie*,” she said. “*Igen*,” John said. “*Ja*.” She handed him the bundle. Carefully cradling it, he parted the

blankets at the head, but found he was holding only the photo of the crying baby. He was surprised that he was not greatly surprised. He tickled the chin of the child in the photo and rocked the bundle lovingly, though he wondered if his actions would make the woman love him less or more. He was nervous to look at her lest he discover that all was not still well in his life, but finally he could not put off the moment any longer. He looked up, ready to kiss her, but she had left.