

Looking for Astronauts

THE FIRST DAY

The cab's interior reminded Warren of his middle school gym's locker room. It was probably the smell—musty and stale, like dried sweat. He shifted uncomfortably in the backseat. The driver was staring straight ahead, dark sunglasses perched on his long nose. He didn't speak much English; Warren had had to repeat the address to him five times over, stumbling over the foreign vowels. Eventually the driver had grunted in understanding. Or, at least, what Warren hoped was understanding.

After twenty bumpy minutes in traffic, the apartment building came into view. Warren let out a sigh of relief. It looked the same as it did in the pamphlet pictures he'd pored over for the past two months, except without the words *STUDY ABROAD IN BUDAPEST!* plastered across the face. Stone, with faded paint, flower boxes fitted in the windows. *Just a five-minute walk away from the university*, the pamphlet had boasted.

The driver threw the cab into park and climbed out. Warren hurried after him, catching his luggage as the man tossed it out of the trunk. Pulling some bills from his wallet—Warren was too flustered to do the conversions in his head—he thrust over a handful. “Is that enough?” he asked, even though he knew the question was pointless.

The driver's eyes widened as he tucked the forints into his shirt pocket. “Thank you, thank you,” he said, his accent thick. Then he hopped back into the cab, and Warren was alone. He allowed his eyes to close once, briefly, before shouldering his backpack and carrying his suitcases up the apartment building's front steps. He checked the numbers written on the back of his hand—despite having memorized them hours ago—and punched in the keycode. The door pushed open easily.

Inside, his footsteps echoed across the tiles. The foyer opened up into a kitchen and a modest living area, consisting only of two couches with sagging cushions, and a coffee table. An empty vase sat in the middle of the table, a piece of paper taped to the glass. Warren dropped his bags, picking up the note. *Make yourselves at home*, it read. *I'll be by in the morning to go over class schedules, and to answer any questions!* The message was signed by Ada Slate, an advisor Warren had already been in contact with.

All the lights were off, he noticed, as he taped the note back to the vase. He must have been the first to arrive. Checking his watch, he realized the displayed time wasn't accurate. In fact, he had no idea if it was even the same day anymore as it had been when he'd left Boston. The sun outside was still high, but Warren was exhausted. Summoning a last bit of strength, he lugged his bags up the narrow staircase in the back of the building. He picked a room, fell down into a bed, and slept.

"I think someone's in here," a girl's voice said, muffled from beyond the door. "You go ahead, I'll wait and see. Hello? Anyone?"

Warren jolted awake, startled by the lack of brightness in the room. He had no idea how long he'd been out, but there was a bad taste in his mouth. He swallowed, scrambling off the bed, and opened the door.

A girl stood in the hallway, her hair cropped short around her face. "Oh. Hi." She extended a hand, and then withdrew it. "Sorry," she said. "What kind of weirdo shakes hands? Anyway, we're all headed out. For food. Want to come?"

Warren had a headache. "Who—"

The girl laughed. "Duh," she scoffed. "My name's Edie." Then she recognized the confusion in Warren's eyes. "Have you not met anyone yet?"

He shook his head, pain shooting through his temples.

“Oh, my God, where have you been?” Edie said. “Come on. Let’s go down. I’ll introduce you.” She turned on her heel, disappearing back down the stairs. Warren followed, wishing he had a chance to brush his teeth first.

Downstairs, it was like a different apartment. Someone had hung a string of lights above the windows. New throw pillows disguised the bareness of the couch, bags of snacks littered the kitchen countertop, a lit candle burned. And there were people. Two girls stood by the front door, while another boy sat on a barstool. Warren froze as everyone looked to him.

“Okay, so this is—” Edie started, forgetting that she’d never asked him for his name.

He fixated his eyes on a spot on the far wall. “Warren,” he said.

A shock of black hair stepped into his view. One of the girls, her brows dark and her eyes even darker. “Ah, the mysterious last member,” she said, voice low. Warren stared. “Welcome. I’m Claudia.”

And then she stuck out her hand.

Váci Street was alive with tourists, most of them seated outside of cafés and restaurants. Talking, drinking, smoking, laughing. A jumble of languages filtered in and out of Warren’s ears as he stood apart from the group—Claudia and a redhead named Roxanne; Edie and the other boy, Seth, had gone off to find a table—scuffing a toe against the cobblestones. His headache had mostly gone away, but the screeching laughter of the women behind him was threatening to bring it back.

“Nice job fucking up the language,” Edie’s voice carried over to Warren as she walked back towards the group with Seth. “Everyone around here speaks English, you know. The guy was looking at you like you were crazy.”

“Hey, it doesn’t hurt to try,” Seth said.

Edie rolled her eyes, waving the rest of them over. “Table’s this way, guys.”

A host led them to a table at the edge of the restaurant’s overhang, and there was a moment of fumbling over who sat where. Finally, Warren ended up at the end, facing the other side of the street. Claudia on his right, and Seth on his left.

“Are these real?” Roxanne leaned forward, inspecting the flowers that poked out of the table’s decorative vase. “I think they are. Fancy. We need some flowers for the apartment.”

Claudia hummed in agreement, flipping her hair over one shoulder. Warren got a whiff of citrus. “So . . . What are everyone’s majors?”

There was a pause. Warren looked up from his menu and realized Claudia was waiting on an answer from him, her dark eyes trained on his face. It was unnerving. “Me first?” he said. “Oh. History. European, specifically, so—”

“You must be *thrilled* to be here, then,” Edie said.

His gaze focused on the gift shop across the street, snow globes displayed in the windows. “Yep. Pretty excited.”

They ordered—Seth attempted Hungarian again—and settled into the night. From the outside looking in, the group didn’t appear so different from the others crowding the street. They fit right in, just another circle of friends enjoying each other’s company and a nice meal. That was what Warren told himself, although he didn’t even know anyone else’s last name at the table.

“Look at these portions!” Roxanne said. “So small.”

“No,” said Seth. “Back home everything’s abnormally large.”

“You should really take that off,” Edie said, pointing to Seth’s baseball cap. “Gives you away. Big, dumb, American alert.”

Seth shrugged, but a couple minutes later, Warren noticed as he removed the cap, tucking it under his leg.

Conversation hopped from one topic to the next, and—although he was still aware of the hard pit of anxiety in his stomach—Warren felt himself warming up, the words flowing more smoothly from his mouth. Maybe it was the wine they'd ordered for the table, or maybe the four thousand miles that stood between him and home no longer seemed so far. This was his chance to actually make some friends; so far, college had been nothing less than alienating.

"Yes, it's true," Claudia said, after plates had been cleared and wine glasses refilled. Warren had taken note of the way she'd merely pushed her noodles around her plate, rarely ever taking a bite. "You're looking at a failed beauty queen. Miss Indiana's runner up."

Roxanne snorted. "I'd hardly say you're failing in the beauty department."

Claudia smirked, and then glanced at Warren. He looked away, hyperconscious of her fingers tapping on the table, so close to his arm. "You know what we should do?" she whispered. He panicked, but then her voice rose again. "Take a trip. At least one. I mean, we do have three months to kill."

"Yes!" Edie said. "There are so many cool cities nearby I want to see."

"Vienna is close," Warren said.

"What was that?"

He cleared his throat. "Vienna. It's not far."

Claudia tilted her head, and then raised her glass. "I can get on board with Vienna."

"Vienna it is," the rest of them agreed.

"Now," Claudia continued, "can we pay? I'm not drunk enough yet."

She seemed drunk to Warren. Her eyes were glassy, cheeks glowing. Even the reflexive way she tapped her fingers had become slurred. Warren was convinced he was always the most nervous person in the room, but he wondered if she was nervous, too.

“You read my mind,” Roxanne said, already pulling out her wallet. She tossed some bills into the center of the table. “It’s time to find a bar.”

Warren placed down his own cut of the check, and then shook his head. “I might just head back to the apartment.”

Claudia seized his arm. “No! Stay,” she said. “We could have so much fun. We could *dance*.”

“I don’t—”

“Come on, man.” Seth prodded his other shoulder. “I’ll buy you your first shot.”

“No, that’s really okay,” Warren said. He turned back to Claudia, who was still clutching at his sleeve. Her eyeliner was smudged at the corners, and most of her lipstick had rubbed off, but Roxanne had been right. Claudia was probably one of the prettiest girls Warren had ever met. He *wanted* to go with her—with them—but he was terrified. Of himself, mainly, but of her, too. “I’m sorry. I’m just tired.”

Claudia released him.

Warren couldn’t sleep. Snippets of conversation floated through the glass of his window, along with the occasional rush of a car. It had to be past three in the morning now, but he’d forgotten to reset his watch, so he couldn’t be sure. The rest of his roommates had returned to the apartment about an hour ago; Seth was snoring loudly across the room.

Rising from his bed, Warren folded over his blankets and tip-toed into the dim hallway. He was halfway down the stairs when he realized he wasn’t the only one awake in the apartment.

The kitchen lights were on, and he heard a cabinet shut, feet padding across the tile. For a second, he contemplated returning to his bedroom, but then decided that was the far more childish option.

Claudia was in the kitchen, eating dry cereal out of a bowl. Her hair was piled up on top of her head, her face clean. When she saw Warren, she smiled. “Forgot to buy milk,” she said.

“What are you doing?” he asked, hanging back.

She squinted at him, shoving another spoonful into her mouth. “Eating?”

“No, I meant—” He couldn’t ignore the bags under her eyes, the lines around her mouth. “Aren’t you tired?”

“Jetlagged, I guess.” She sighed. “Honestly. You can come into the kitchen. I won’t bite.”

Warren compromised and sat down on a stool, on the other side of the counter. “You didn’t eat much at dinner earlier,” he said.

“Well, maybe I didn’t have much of an *appetite*,” she said, clinking her spoon against the side of her half-empty bowl. “I don’t like eating in front of people. Unladylike.”

“You’re eating in front of me right now.”

“You kind of ambushed me, though, didn’t you?”

“I *live* here.”

She grinned, revealing crooked front teeth. “I like you, Warren. You’ve got a little fight in you. But not too much.”

“Is too much a bad thing?”

Her lips pursed. “Yes. Too much is bad.”

THE LAST DAY

Warren watched as Claudia teetered on the bridge's railing. He wanted to go stand underneath her, to catch her if she fell, but he knew she would rather do it alone. She reached up, gripping the ledge of the statue's platform—a stone lion, one of two that guarded the entrance to the Széchenyi Chain Bridge—and kicked off. He saw the tremble in her arms and took an instinctive step forward, although Claudia didn't allow herself to hang for long. Before he knew it, she had lifted herself onto the platform, leaning her body against the stone lion's massive head.

Seth whooped. "Hell yeah, Claudia!"

The tightness in Warren's chest loosened, but then he glimpsed over the railing. There was a long drop between Claudia and the Danube below. One misstep was all it took.

Claudia posed as Edie snapped her picture, the harsh wind whipping her hair into her open mouth. She and Warren hadn't spoken in a couple of weeks. Even now, perched so high above everything else, he couldn't tell if she was looking at him or through him.

The click of the camera's shutter faded. Edie leaned over to show the two boys her photos, but Warren kept his eyes on Claudia. She was facing the river now, rocking back and forth on her heels, one hand stationed on the lion for stability. Her lips were set, firm. For a reason he refused to name, Warren felt queasy.

Claudia lifted her hand.

Warren was already pushing past Edie when he heard the scream. Claudia was screaming—one long, clear note—her voice carrying across the water, through the city. Chest puffed out, fists balled at her sides, cheeks flaming red. A handful of tourists paused at the display; some snuck photos. Warren stood at the railing, staring almost straight up at her, too afraid to even blink.

After a few seconds, she stopped. Collapsing against the stone lion, she started to laugh. Normally, Warren loved her laugh; throaty and musical, it always made him smile. But not now. Now, it sounded out of tune, pitched too high.

“What the hell was that?” he called up, knuckles white as he supported himself against the railing. He felt the need to catch his breath. He’d been prepared to go over.

Claudia just shook her head. “Help me down, would you?”

She clambered down the statue, cheeks still flushed, squeezing his hand until she made it back onto solid ground. And then, without a backwards glance, she let go, wandering off with Edie to see the photos. Warren realized that had been the first time he’d touched her since Vienna.

“Is she okay, do you think?” Warren asked Seth, trailing behind the girls as the group began their walk across the bridge. A cyclist zipped by on their left, weaving through the crowd of pedestrians.

“That’s just Claudia. Come on. You know how she is,” Seth said, elbowing Warren. “You would know better than anyone, huh?”

Warren grimaced, and a thought struck him. “Were you friends with her before this?” he said. “Like, did you know her back home?”

“Well, no,” Seth said. “But why would it be any different?”

The bass pounded in Warren’s ears; he could feel the vibrations in his teeth. It amazed him, how loud the music needed to be in clubs. He supposed it was to drown out everything else. That was why all these people were here, wasn’t it? Smashed against each other, barely any space to move. It was a haven of sorts, where no other obligations existed outside of dancing and drinking. Warren preferred one over the other.

Roxanne came up behind him, flinging an arm around his shoulders. “I’m going to miss you!” she yelled. Her breath smelled like peaches. “I always thought you were cute, you know?”

He shifted out from under her arm. “Thanks.”

She shook her head. “You’re too quiet! I never know what you’re saying!” A grin on her face, she melted back into the crowd, leaving Warren by the bar. This was usually how these things went, and by now, he was used to the routine. Go out, drink, stand in a corner. His friends had accepted his reluctance to fun, to recklessness, but it didn’t stop them from dragging Warren with them anyway, night after night.

“What did she want?” Claudia was suddenly next to him, and Warren noticed how, in the same instant, the beat of his heart gathered speed, outpacing the tempo of the music. He glanced over at her—skin lit up red from the lights, beads of sweat glistening along her hairline.

“Nothing,” he said, remembering to raise his voice. “She’s just drunk.”

She laughed. “So am I.”

He nodded, staring down into his cup. Lately, Claudia was drunk often.

“Hey,” she said, and grabbed his arm. “Let’s dance.”

“I don’t know if—” he started, but she was already pulling him towards the writhing horde on the dance floor. He managed to reach back, setting his cup down on the bar, before releasing himself to her completely.

Elbows jabbed into his back, feet stepped on feet, a girl’s ponytail struck him on the cheek. But Claudia held onto him, leading him into the center. Here, the music was even louder; Warren’s fingertips went numb, his shoulders tense. Bodies surrounded him, closing in. His breaths became shorter and shorter, as if his lungs had shrunk.

“Warren, you’re not *moving*,” Claudia said, standing inches in front of his face, arms over her head.

He blinked at her, the strobe lights distorting his vision. One second, she was smiling. Another, she seemed in pain. “I don’t like dancing.”

She sighed. He couldn’t hear it, but he saw it. Her hands landed on his shoulders, her lips so close to his, but he felt caught, frozen. “Do *something*,” she said.

He stepped backwards, immediately bumping into someone else. There wasn’t a part of him that wasn’t in contact with another person. He needed space, he needed air. He wanted something clean and open, not sweat and closeness. Claudia was looking up at him, her eyes liquid dark. “Kiss me,” she said.

“You’re not—” He shook his head. “You said you were drunk.”

“So? Didn’t stop you before.”

“That was different. We were both—” His throat constricted. He didn’t like thinking of the way they’d left things in Vienna. Then again, the thought of picking the pieces back up didn’t exactly thrill him, either. Claudia confused him, and when she wasn’t confusing, she was worrying. “I’m sorry,” he said, and turned away. Her arms dropped from around his neck, hanging dead at her sides. Warren didn’t look back, shoving his way through the bodies, so many bodies, until he found the exit, opened the door, and stepped outside, where he could breathe.

An hour later, Warren lay on his bed, tracing the cracks in the ceiling with his eyes. His suitcase was open at his feet, most of his clothes already stuffed inside. It was just past midnight; no one else had returned from the club yet. One last hurrah, that’s what they’d all agreed upon. But, despite this pact, Warren found himself alone again, struggling to decide whether he cared or not. The quiet was comforting, until it wasn’t.

Outside his open door, he heard the footsteps—a pair of them—ascend the stairs, sloppy and loud. Someone tripped, the other giggled. He recognized the sound of Claudia’s voice, her words indistinct, running together.

He stood, crossing the room to peer into the hallway. There she was, hair mussed and lipstick smeared, with a man Warren didn’t know. His stomach flipped. She swatted at the man’s chest, tugging him by the collar, their lips meeting. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Warren and smiled against the man’s mouth. Then, with urgency, she pushed the man into her room, moving to shut the door behind the two of them. Before she did, she turned to Warren, rooted at the other end of the hallway, and placed a finger to her lips, still smiling. The door closed.

Warren returned to his own room, repressing the overwhelming sting of betrayal. But Claudia hadn’t betrayed him. If anything, he had betrayed himself. Back at the club, he had given himself away. He wasn’t what she wanted, and he didn’t know what parts to change so she would. He flopped down onto his too-narrow bed, balling up his pillow and exhaling into it, emptying his chest. He didn’t scream, for that would draw too much attention.

He was jostled awake. Rolling over, he saw Claudia standing over him, brows furrowed. She was wearing different clothes now—pajamas—with a glass of water in one hand.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

Warren was lying on the couch downstairs, a blanket pulled tight around his shoulders, eyes bleary from sleep. Beyond the windows, he saw that it was still dark. “I *was* sleeping,” he said. “What time is it?”

“Why are you down here?” she said, settling herself next to his legs. “You almost gave me a heart attack. I thought someone had broken in.”

“Seth snores,” he said. “So I sleep here sometimes.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that.”

Warren picked up his watch from the coffee table, checking the time. Four in the morning. His plane took off at two; he wasn’t sure when Claudia was leaving. “Have you packed?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I guess.”

There wasn’t enough light to read her face, and Warren was glad. It was hard enough to have her sitting so close. She’d showered recently, he realized, as the familiar scent of citrus hit him. Seconds passed, and silence settled. He didn’t mind it, but he knew lapses in conversation bored her. “Is that—” His mouth was suddenly dry. “Is that guy gone?”

She scoffed, and he could tell she was rolling her eyes. “Yes, he’s gone. No need to go defending your territory.”

He sat up, the blanket creasing across his knees. “I’ve never thought of you as territory.”

“I meant the apartment, dumbass.”

His cheeks flamed, but she wouldn’t be able to see. “Right. I didn’t mean—” He sighed. “You just haven’t talked to me in a while. Really talked to me.”

Her fingers tapped against the glass, a steady rhythm. “Look, I know you think you figured me out, or something, in Vienna, but you didn’t. It’s not that easy.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

“I don’t know what you want from me, Warren.”

She was confusing him again; she always did. “I don’t want anything,” he said.

“Everyone wants something.”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t know.” Her fingers sped up. “I don’t think about it much.”

He tried to find the words—the comforting ones, the healing ones—but they drifted off, out of reach. The silence crept back in, her fingers tapping while his watch ticked.

“It’s all an act, is that what you want to hear?” she said, fast and flat. “I have a fucking headache almost every morning. Back at the bridge—I felt like I was going to throw up.”

“Then why do you do it?”

“They want a spectacle. They want a show.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Warren, you wouldn’t—” She paused, sucking in a shaky breath. “Everyone likes you. Because—God, it’s so easy.”

His whole life, he thought, had been a testament to the opposite. “It’s not easy for me.”

“People like you. You can’t tell me they don’t.”

“I think . . . we’re all pretending,” he said. The idea made sense to him, in a way it hadn’t before. “We each just pretend differently.”

“Are you pretending right now?”

For once, his mind was clear. “No, I’m not.”

Claudia’s voice broke. “How can you tell?”

Without thinking, he closed the distance between them and drew her into his arms. She went limp against him, her forehead pressing into his chest. He had never seen Claudia cry, but she did now, soundlessly, her tears falling into his lap.

The sun lay dormant beneath the horizon, but he knew, come morning, Claudia would revert to her version of normal, and he’d revert to his. He would brush his teeth, change his clothes, gather his suitcases and call a cab. She would do the same. They would exchange cordial hugs with each member of the group, all promising to stay in touch. And maybe they would, but likely not. Years later, Warren might come across an old photograph, of a girl smiling next to a

stone lion, and he would remember the way she cried and broke his heart but nothing more. He knew this—he accepted it, with surprising ease—and so, for now, he was content to stay exactly where he was. Holding Claudia, loving her from behind a veil, in a home that wasn't his own, and never would be.

