Unicum

Like most unsatisfied people, my father has a habit of repeating himself. He often reminds me that there is no use in telling anybody but yourself of what you used to be. This statement is always immediately followed by the long and poetically tragic list of what he used to be.

It goes like this: He used to be a poor boy from North Carolina. He used to go to Princeton on scholarship. He used to study literature and music and theater and go to parties with other people who studied those things. He used to be a frequent tourist in Budapest when it was still so easy to travel until he decided the food was better and the operas were cheaper and he would be just as poor in Budapest as he was in America. He used to be an English teacher at the local high school until he got laid off. He used to have a cottage out in the country that he would fix up in the summers. He used to drink herbal liqueur before going out to dinner, but now he drinks bottom shelf sherry and stocks bottles of Unicum on the shelves of the duty-free store of the airport.

Most of these things ended before I was born, some of them after. The one thing he omits is my mother-- a love he had but couldn't keep, run off to Switzerland with some tourist when I was two. Never came back, never wrote.

The Hungarian half of me is somewhere deep in the Alps. The American half of me is back in a small flat we once shared in North Buda. I am in a suburb of Albany and have been for a year now, working as an engineer. I won't go back and he won't visit me. It's something we have in common, the fear of the place we came from.

For some reason, I think about him the most often when I am with Maggie, even though she has never asked about him. It's what I immediately liked about her. She didn't question my accent, she didn't ask about what I used to be. I like the way my name sounds coming from her American tongue: Peter, pronounced as if the "T" were a "D."

Today, my father's warnings are especially present in my mind. Maggie is in the kitchen, just home from work, reheating something for dinner. I sit in her living room, anticipating the end of it all.

Since we've been together, nearly a year now, this has always been the routine. During the week, I work and nine-to-five and she does the graveyard shift at the 24-hour diner nearby, so it's only ever the weekends we spend together.

It is easy and impersonal. We ask little of each other and give little back.

Each Saturday, I arrive in the evening, we watch television, have sex or not, and then sleep in her double bed somewhat comfortably. Most nights I sleep well here, but once or twice I have lain awake watching the turns of the wicker ceiling fan, same one as in my apartment six floors below.

Today is different. As I entered, she told me she had to ask me something, and I felt certain she was done with me.

Maggie is not talkative and neither am I, so as I wait for her, I am left alone with the sounds of the building. Since I moved here I have wondered about the way sound moves through this apartment complex. The way some things echo and the way others seem to get cut short. The cries of children, the sounds of soap operas I can hear through the smoke and

ammonia scented halls. But mostly it is quiet here-- the sound of a few hundred people hidden behind their closed doors.

"Do you like it here?" she asks as she enters the room, a bowl in her hands.

My first year in the United States plays through in my head, the monotonous routine of my work as an engineer, the solitude of my mornings and evenings. The gray days and empty nights of Albany. Park Place, the overly ambitious name of our Albany suburb out in the middle of a field, was not what I had expected it to be. Its dozen or so identical high rises, circling one another are surrounded on all sides by a parking lot. This was not the America that was marketed to me growing up in Budapest.

"The apartment, I mean," she says, reading my apparent confusion.

"I like it fine," I say. Park Place suited my lifestyle well enough. Work was ten minutes away, coming home to a television, my first large purchase in the United States, and watching a few American movies until I was tired enough to sleep. I was content enough with this life, however solitary and contained.

"Well," she says, "My lease is up soon. I've lived here since I graduated college and it's just been so much of the same. Each year I know fewer and fewer people, they all move away, and the longer I'm here the less people want to introduce themselves to me. The ones above me grow tomatoes on their balcony and sometimes they get too ripe and fall off the vine on my balcony. Sometimes I clean them. Sometimes I just wait for the rain to wash them away. But they never come down to apologize or say anything about it. Everybody in this place. They're just ghosts."

She looks me straight in the eye, a kind of ferocity I've never seen in her. She's never asked anything of me.

"Basically, I was looking at apartments that are too much for me by myself but would be cheaper than the rent here with two people. And it would be so much nicer than this shit hole."

I'm silent for too long and she looks worried. Thoughts of my Zsofi and my father race through my mind.

"I don't know if I need more than this," I say. It wasn't the money; I lived cheaply and managed to save. "I feel like I just moved."

"Maybe if you see the place you'd understand. Would you at least consider it?"

"Yeah, of course. Send me the listings, I'll think about it," I say. I reach and place my hand on her knee, too far away to rest comfortably.

Luckily, Maggie decides the conversation is over and turns on the television. It's a comedy with a laugh track about people living in an apartment and we go on with the rest of the night in our normal quiet.

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Today, Sunday, Maggie spends with her family to celebrate the holiday early. Tomorrow is Memorial Day, a day myself and seemingly everybody has off from work except Maggie. I stay inside until the evening, watching the first half hour of a few movies but ultimately finding nothing worth finishing. When it gets dark and I assume nobody will be around, I leave the maddening white walls of the apartment and walk to the center of the complex.

It's been a year since I've seen Zsofi, but night is when I remember her best. Every night during the summer before I left, we'd sit out on her cement block back porch. She'd press her

bare feet into the damp grass, and we'd smoke two or three cigarettes until the neighbors turned off their porch light. The old set of windchimes, made with bottle caps by her younger sister, sounded lazily above us.

She's a world away in Budapest right now but still answers the phone. I sit at the edge of the communal pool, closed for cleaning after heavy rains. I found the gate unlocked and I doubt anybody will come kick me out.

I can hear all of this through the phone-- the windchimes, her smoking. Her rhythmic inhales and exhales, the click of the lighter. Today I am struck by a longing to be there with her that I haven't felt since I moved. We have been friends since grade school. In some ways talking to her feels the same as it ever has, except I am here and she is there and it's uncertain when and if we'll see each other again.

"It doesn't seem like a bad idea to me. You'd probably end up paying less than you do now," she says.

"I know that," I say, swishing my legs through the water, drowned leaves circling my calves. Through the lens of the water my legs look a distorted corpse-white. "What do I even need the money for though? I'm already saving."

"You could pick up a drug habit. Fund some petty crime."

"Great idea. I'll get started right away. What do you suggest first, amphetamines? Or go straight to heroin?"

"It's not just saving, Peter," she says. She always has a way of drawing me off topic and then chastising me for it. "You'd have a nicer apartment. You work hard, you deserve it. I don't know why you insist on living in squalor like that."

A dog bark echoes and I can't tell if it's coming from my side or hers.

"Why are you taking her side on this?" I glance around to make sure the balconies are still empty. Though there is a comfort in speaking Hungarian with her, I always feel conscious of the way it may sound to the people here.

"Oh, alright. I didn't realize it was like that," she says, as if she caught me in the act of something.

"Like what?"

"I didn't realize this was an issue that has sides. She's just asking you to move in, Peter. It's not a battle. It's a yes or no question."

"I just thought I'd start feeling more strongly at a certain point."

"About her?"

"Yes. But everything, too. Being here."

I know I shouldn't come to Zsofi with these problems-- she has enough of her own to deal with and she would give anything to be in my place.

We made the mistake of transitioning our long-term friendship into a relationship of sorts last summer, hanging out as we always did but now occasionally in bed. It wasn't that we suddenly saw one another differently. It felt like nothing more than a poorly timed inevitability, born not out of passion but the intricacies of knowing one person so well for so long.

It was almost a relief when I left and that part of our relationship ended. It always seemed to me like something that needed to end eventually or we would go on with it half heartedly for years, maybe forever.

It's only rarely I think about being with her, uncomfortably tangled on her bed that was too small for the both of us, our bodies moving efficiently and quietly on one another. These memories are rarely pleasant to me.

"We all get in ruts sometimes, Peter. Maybe you just need to try something new. Not heroin."

"I am. I'm at the pool."

"A full year there and you've never mentioned this pool to me. I thought you hated swimming."

"I don't hate it. I've just never loved it like you do."

The public swimming pools in Budapest always gave me anxiety, even as a child. They were always too crowded, sun-beat pavement burning bare feet. There was no room to swim or float, just standing waist deep, elbow to elbow, milling about in a direction dictated by somebody uncertain.

"I should really get going," she says, "You should consider what your intentions are with her. She's all you have, right?"

There is an easy isolation in the way the land is here, completely unlike the cramped North Buda neighborhood Zsofi and I grew up in. Huge empty green spaces are only broken by strip malls and chain hotels that are abundant here. The pool is surrounded on all sides by the buildings, their balconies looking over. They hold plastic toys and lawn chairs, bicycles, hanging laundry and towels. Some have been done up with all the luxury the small space would allow with upholstered chairs that get brought in when it rains. Others are filled with clutter and debris, signs of neglect.

Though I have spent all day trying not to think about him, my father comes back to mind. I want to tell Zsofi, but I've been complaining about my father as long as we've been friends. I fear one day I'll reach her limit for compassion.

"How's the museum been?" I ask.

She sighs, perhaps in relief. "Just fine. So few people come in. I read all day."

"Doesn't sound too bad."

"I don't know, I can almost feel myself getting tired of it. Yesterday I just sat there for hours staring at the door. Book right in front of me, a good one too. I just couldn't make myself pick it up."

I don't know what to say. We are hopeless in different ways and I can't help her. Our lives have never been more different than they are now and they're only getting further apart.

"Sorry, Peter, I should go. I have an early shift tomorrow. It'll turn out alright, okay?"

I say goodnight to her and that we'll talk soon. We used to say we missed each other on these calls.

In her absence, the parting words of my father echo too clearly in my head. He had driven me to the airport, the same one he worked at most days, and we sat in the parked car in front of the terminal. He had been quiet the entire day, deep in thought. I knew that he was piecing together what to say to me. He is a man of theater and the arts, or at least used to be, and always relished in the opportunity to be dramatic.

"You know," he began at last, his words over-annunciated yet mournful, "I came here when there were still bullet holes in the buildings in the castle district. But I saw something here. Maybe it's just because of where I was in my life, maybe I was just at the bottom of something

and looking for any kind of light, but it seemed to me that things here weren't going left or right, socialist or fascist, but up! It seemed only correct, it was the only place to go. Down wasn't possible. I believed it. But look at us now. Look at me. Back then, that time in my life," he looked down with placid eyes at his feet, as if remembering something not all-together terrible, piecing together the words to describe it, "That time in my life when there was so much more ahead of me was so brief and tedious and beautiful. And I didn't know it at the time."

I had internalized enough his repeated stories to picture this clearly: His early years in Hungary, long wiry hair not yet fully gray. Days spent teaching English, evenings spent giving private English and violin lessons in the small flat with big windows he shared with my mother before she left. She listened to him teach from her work desk in the corner and waited for the last student to finish, gently brushing the dog's ears with her toes. When the lessons were over they would drink Unicum--he had slowly learned to love the bitter taste, the way it cleared his thoughts--and go to dinner with a buzz and glow. At night they fell asleep to an old record of baroque music, woke, and did it all over again. It seemed so certain they were working toward something.

These stories were told to me so often they feel like a memory. A comfort. Soft and worn like an oriental carpet. They smell like green glass. When I think of an apartment, this is the one--though entirely imagined--that comes to mind. Though the place Maggie wants is better than Park Place, it will never compare to this image.

"Thirty years here--thirty years working, and not just any job. A respectable position. Thirty years working and nothing to show for it. Nothing saved. Nobody with me. Everything I

have now is less than I had then. I still don't know if these things were taken from me or if I threw them away. The answer is probably both."

He looked at me then-- I remember this well, the heaviness in his eyes.

"All I ask of you, Peter, is that you don't repeat more of my mistakes. You need to be careful about what you center your life around. Who you center it around. Where. Things can break from the center. Did you know that? And when they do, nothing can remain whole."

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The holiday passes noisily, footsteps and shouts constantly through the walls throughout the day. It seems like the one day that the citizens of Park Place come out of hibernation, break their routines of working and sleeping and working again. The smell of charcoal and meat cooking drifted through the halls.

I stayed inside. I know no one but Maggie. I had intended to meet more of my neighbors when I moved in, but my anxiety around my English stopped me.

Today, after the country is done celebrating, Maggie and I drive to Stonegate Manor in a warm rain. The humidity is the kind that makes your skin feel soft and vulnerable.

It's a rare Tuesday off for her. We've almost never seen each other like this; during the day, outside of Park Place, her wearing something other than a uniform.

It's a short drive, 10 minutes across town past a few strip malls and office parks. Maggie points to the diner where she works as we pass it, the same one that she used to frequent in high school.

After parking, we walk into the rental office and I linger by the door while Maggie retrieves the key from a receptionist, a bored looking girl with ripped jeans.

We walk past the first two units, the same kinds of lawn chairs and laundry lines and plastic out on the balconies. The buildings themselves are smaller than Park Place, three units in one instead of more than a dozen. The landscaping they had displayed proudly online seemed flattened by the rain, Queen Anne's Lace plastered to the building's cement foundations in a pitiful way.

"This place seemed nicer online," she says. I don't know how to comfort or reassure Maggie. I've never had to.

"It's better than Park Place, at least."

When we arrive at the unit, the top floor of one of the nondescript buildings, Maggie opens the door. It looks the same as it did in the pictures, all that space still with nothing of my own to fill it with. We wander through its rooms for a few minutes, pretending to inspect the fixtures. The large window in the living room overlooks the parking lot, just like at Park Place, and when Maggie asks me what I think I tell her that it's nice because that's all I can think to say that won't upset her.

I can't tell her that it seemed to me like a home without a future, a place without a chance of gaining history or memory. It is not a place that can or should be loved, or somebody can be loved in. It's not a place where people can dance to old records at night and drink Unicum. These aren't memories that are meant to be made here. The cold, dark floors that don't creak, the precise angles of the rooms-- no life can take to them and grow. There is nothing here to lose.

Maggie tells me she's tired when we arrive back at Park Place and we go our separate ways. I can tell that something about the apartment upset her. I only hope that I didn't contribute to her sadness.

I call Zsofi and she doesn't answer. It's past midnight in Budapest but she normally stays up well into the night even if she has work in the morning. I've never known her without dark circles around her eyes.

It's normal for Zsofi not to answer her phone-- she could be busy with her family or asleep, but the sound of her voicemail puts me into a panic. I go to call her again and stop myself. Every time this happens, that gnawing guilt returns to me-- the idea that she is finally done with my complaining, done with me, angry over the way I left things.

She had been the only one to question me when I announced that I was emigrating to the United States. It had made sense to everybody else: moving abroad was simply what those with engineering degrees did. Even though my father wasn't happy, he didn't say anything to discourage me.

Zsofi had acted as if nothing were going to change until the last day I saw her. We walked along the Danube together with no real destination, flicking cigarette filters into the gray waters and watching them float away until we couldn't anymore.

Though she was more talkative than usual, even, asking me about my flight, the details of the job, the new city, I could tell that there was something else beneath the surface. Her questions began to grate on me.

"What's with this interrogation?" I said after she asked me if I thought the local food would be any good, "You don't say a word about me moving before and suddenly you want to know every detail."

I knew as soon as the words left my mouth that it was too harsh. I looked over at her, the sun beginning to go down over the hills of the castle district on the other side of the river. Instead of the hurt look I expected, she had something of a wry smile on her face, looking down at her toes.

"I don't know, Peter. I'm just trying to figure it out. We can stop talking about it," she said, and lit another cigarette.

"Did you hear Marja's getting married? To some old guy with a kid. Not a bad move at this point, I guess."

I was thrown off by her calm demeanor, the way as though she acted as if she knew something I didn't.

"What exactly are you trying to figure out?"

"Do you really want to get into this? I was hoping for a pleasant last night."

We had begun bickering more over the tiniest things in the last few weeks, where to get coffee, what bus route to use. It was unlike us. In the near seven years we had known each other we hardly ever disagreed. Though the last few weeks in Hungary, our quasi-coupleship, was unlike us as well.

"I would like to get into this, yes. What are you trying to figure out?" I ask again.

"If you insist," she said, exhaling, flicking ash into the river, "I can't really fathom why you're doing this. Uprooting your life to some strange country. For what, money?"

In my anger, I stopped walking but Zsofi kept forward and I was forced to chase after her.

"Are you really saying you wouldn't do the same if you were me? Since secondary school all you've ever talked about is getting out of Budapest. You know how miserable it is here."

"I didn't mean to upset you, Peter, really. I only wish you were going for the right reasons. You life here is comfortable. There are people here who care for you. America isn't the answer to your problems. That's all I'm trying to say."

Since this evening I've tried and tried to think of some response to this. Something insightful and cutting, but still I come up as blank as I did that August evening. Then, in my silence, instead of pursuing her point she took my hand in hers. She took one more drag of the cigarette before tossing it, still burning, into the murky depths of the river.

Holding hands, we walked the rest of the way to her home in silence. A hug, brief and stiff, on that cement block back porch. I could tell, looking at her in the dim light, that she wanted me to say something. I didn't know what. Everything felt inadequate. I only said "goodbye," my head hit the wind chimes as I walked away, scattering a cloud of moths.

I call her again and she answers this time. Instead of hello she tells me to hold on and I hear the screeching of the metal back door closing behind her.

I apologize for calling so late, but she insists she was up anyway. I tell her about seeing the apartment, how it is indeed nicer that Park Place.

"Well then, are you going to do it?" She asks.

The idea had been growing more concrete in my head-- the comfortable silence I'd share with Maggie at Stonegate Manor.

"I think it would be a good idea. I just don't know for certain."

"Then just go ahead and move, what's keeping you?"

"I don't want to end up like my father. If I say no, I feel like I'm going to lose everything."

She sighs. She's heard this before.

I wait for her response but none comes and there's only our breathing. I suddenly feel compelled to say what I should have a year ago.

"I'm sorry, Zsofi,"

"Excuse me? For what?"

"For the way things happened before I left. The way I said goodbye to you," I say. A year of preparation for this apology and the words still come out choppy, ineloquent.

She laughs in a way that's almost manic, surely attracting the attention of her neighbors.

"Please don't do this on my behalf, Peter. I accepted the way things were a long time ago. And you know what? This is the first time I've thought about that stuff in ages. I'm not seeing your ghost in the mirror, I'm not waiting for the phone to ring to hear about the problems you should be talking to your girlfriend about. If you're going to apologize to anybody, apologize to her."

I can hear the click and exhale of her lighting a cigarette, and for the first time in awhile I wished I had one.

"To lose it all you have to have something first. You have nothing. Even if you move in with her you'll still have nothing. She'll have nothing, too," she says, filling the silence I created.

Words feel impossible and I sit still. Zsofi has never held back with me, but she's also never been so angry with me. She begins to speak again and I almost expect an apology.

"You can be so cruel, Peter."

She hangs up the phone. In the absence of her voice I begin to hear the sounds of the complex again-- a quiet thumping above me, a car door slamming in the lot. A robin's incessant song. I sleep and dream of nothing.

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A few days later, Maggie and I stand on her balcony. We had hoped to catch the sunset over the parking lot, but the sky is thick with clouds, threatening rain as night comes. It is the first time I have seen her since we went to Stonegate Manor.

With the toe of her boot, Maggie nudges the fallen tomatoes to the edge of the balcony, lining them up next to one another.

"It wasn't always like this," she says after a period of silence, sliding a third tomato in line with the others, "There used to be more people like me here. But after awhile it just became more and more families and got more and more run down. I never expected to stay here this long. I don't think anybody ever plans to."

She gives one tomato, the one that is still the most whole, a light nudge and it tips off the balcony and falls onto the cars below.

"But it's all the same everywhere. Just with a different view. I don't know what I was thinking with moving."

"It's a fresh start, isn't it?" I ask, surprised by the disappointment I feel welling up in my chest, weighing down heavy. As the night comes, a chill creeps in the air, causing the metal railing of the balcony to be cold to the touch.

"Moving here after college was a fresh start for me. It's been six years since then. I'm starting to think they don't exist," she says, kicking the last tomato from the balcony. "At least not here."

I put my arm around her, shoulders sharp and cold. We fall into that same silence that has become so normal between us. It is a silence that is more bearable than the now never-ending ringing of the phone when I try to call Zsofi, more bearable than the lump that forms in my throat when I hear wind chimes or a screen door closing.

There have been times, especially in the past few days without word from Maggie, that I have thought about making a return to Budapest and continuing my life there-- in a flat much smaller than here, perhaps with Zsofi if I can reconcile with her, drinking Unicum in the evening and struggling toward an unpromised goal of some kind of security in life.

I have never gotten far enough into this impossible fantasy to actually consider attempting it. I am always stopped too soon by the fear of losing Park Place and all of its ghosts-- Maggie, footsteps in the stairwell, the songs that bleed through the walls with words I can't make out, knocks on doors that are never mine.