

Looking at Lions

The stone lions at the foot of the bridge stared past me with their sightless eyes. A tour guide told me they were built and put there in 1852 by a sculptor who could not have been more proud of his work. Well after completion, it was pointed out to him they weren't anatomically correct. Their teeth and mane stand out in all the grand nobility intended, but the gaping mouths have a missing component: cats have very prominent tongues, and his creations do not. As the story goes, he was unable to fix the problem and flung himself into the Danube not far from where his life's work still stands.

It makes a nice story. I mean, if you like dark legends that end horrifically. Great artists put their soul on public display; it's easy for me to imagine the shock of being appalled by a mistake they have no answer for. Sensing their whole entire world to be an absurd mockery, they then make the hasty and brutal decision to end it all. As I moved past the monstrous heads toward the swiftly flowing water, a jump didn't seem like the worst thing to me either.

A kid on a bicycle nearly did the job for me, as I whirled out of his way and placed my hands over the railing and looked out onto the city. Just another local deciding not to share the sidewalk with a tourist. I couldn't blame them.

The wind pierced through my jacket, a black fleece zip-up given to me by a woman in Paris. I thought about calling her, then changed my mind. She was busy during the day. Usually either at work or finding time to rendezvous with the married man she was in love with. He bought her flowers regularly and sneaked away to see her every chance he could. But his wife had a kid on the way. The secretive pair knew that their days were hopelessly numbered.

I wondered if it was called anything other than the Chain Bridge. What a boringly literal name for a wide suspension of iron and rock. A lot of Hungarian words can be a mouthful to us foreigners. Someone told me it was a mix of Finnish, German and Mongolian. Not sure about that. Being in the landlocked center of Europe was, historically, a geographic vortex of empires. At least a half dozen conquering entities had claimed the land at one point or another. To think that the complex recipe of language can be traced rather simply to the clashing of swords.

Those tongueless lions have no use for speech. Even if they weren't made from a dead man's chisel, who's to say it's not a blessing to be mute? English is spoken everywhere in Europe, but not by *everyone*. I was in a basement bar drinking absinthe and Dreher when I met a portly old man named Attila. I wanted to ask why his mother named him after someone referred to as "The Scourge of God," but decided against it. He was pleasant, that fellow. His gregarious nature overpowered our inability to communicate. But he *was* multilingual. German, Hungarian, French, Italian. English held the least of his verbal prowess, much to my dismay. This disappointment was directed inwardly. How was I to blame someone who knew five different galaxies of human interaction, but was slow and inarticulate when it came to the *one* that I was stuck with? We got by. I bought him a glass of wine, which he graciously accepted. I had another absinthe, which felt like a corrosive substance as it melted through my chest. The liquids in front of us certainly didn't clarify our conversation, but they kept it moving.

A cruise ship went by underneath, and I began walking back to my hotel. Not for any particular want or reason. The wind was continuous, never failing to slice through everything I had on. It kept me from enjoying the view, mostly those famous parliament buildings and that imposing fortress sitting atop the cliffs on the opposite side of the river. I'd seen everything several times already. My restless boredom was at its peak. Looking at things had ceased to interest me.

Attila the Hun stood 5 foot 6 and most likely died from a nosebleed. Doesn't exactly jive with the image of a conquering warrior who helped take down the Roman Empire. I wondered if he was a Central European folk hero. Do they have statues of him? Is he on horseback, saber pointed to the sky,

mouth open in a silent scream of however you say *yeehaw* in Hunnish? Most importantly, did the designer of such an homage remember to place a tongue in his gaping, exuberant face?

I came back to the main thoroughfare and began heading east into the city, toward the Ferris Wheel I used as a landmark. My boots needed repair, but I could get another few hundred miles out of them before the sole completely dislodged. I felt eyes on me as I passed by a cafe, that familiar sensation of being examined and judged as an outsider.

“Christavo!”

I turned to see a man I’d met the other night at an Irish pub, smiling at me through the cold glare of November sunshine. Robi was his name. Those pale blue eyes were in a constant state of friendship, and his stylish wool hat cocked unevenly made me think of the Artful Dodger.

“You’re still here,” he said, motioning around him at the urban landscape.

“Until Friday.”

“Ah. And why not extend? Everyone does.”

“I have to be going. There’s nothing left to see.”

He scoffed with his tongue. “Then time to dig little deeper. You are still stuck to surface. Looking at lions.”

The last remark made me wonder if he’d been following me, but I put it off to some local saying. He placed his hand on my shoulder and asked if I wanted something, his feet pointed toward the door of the cafe.

“Could use a coffee, I guess.”

“Yes. You guess. You know well, my friend.”

We stepped inside and ordered. Racing steam and electronic music shouted at us. The place was filled with businessmen in suits, an old married couple, and a young woman with a baby in a stroller standing in the corner with a magazine in her hand. English speaking tourists had seemed to grow sparse. I had seen fewer and fewer of those Americans who stand out everywhere in Europe, their voices carrying as if to announce their nationality.

They brought me my Turkish coffee in a ceramic demitasse with a small metal spoon cradled elegantly between the cup and the plate. I looked at the strong potion and breathed in the fumes before taking a test sip. My mouth recoiled at its boiling strength. Even a tongueless lion would have to wait a minute for it cool down.

Robi put his hand on the table and developed a wicked gleam in his irises. “The woman from the other night. She, how you say, felt fancy on you.”

“At the time. We were with a group. I tried to call her a couple days later but got no answer.”

“Ah. Maybe in the day she is looking for husband. Try calling at night.”

I laughed. “Once is enough. If I don’t hear back, that settles it.”

“What you got to lose, Christavo?”

“She works as a chemical engineer. Which means she’s intelligent. Smart enough to ignore me.”

His smile began to feel weaponized, as if to massage my lonely boredom and dance around in it. I sensed his mischievous form of compassion, his abundance of mirth for people. He was young. Barely into his twenties. There was plenty of time for the magic of others to reach dilution.

“And you. Where will you be going from here?”

“When I leave Budapest?”

“Yes. Where is next?” He gently slapped his hand on the table, punctuated by a clack from the metal band on his finger.

“Are you married?”

“This?” Robi let out a disarming laugh. “Was belonged to my great grandpa. Good man. Killed a hundred Nazis.” The declaration carried, and I felt several eyes turn toward us. One hundred seemed

like a very large number. I wondered if it was picked at random or started out much lower, before time and retelling made for massive embellishment.

“I’m flying to Spain. For a few days. Then back home. My grandpa is sick. He’s also a good man, though I doubt he’s ever killed anyone.”

“Sorry to hear this. I hope he get better.”

I looked down at his long slender glass, the clear liquid bubbling up over the ice. He took a drink, and before I asked what he had ordered got the distinct whiff of rotten Juniper berries. Robi lifted it towards me, as if it needed further visual explanation. “Gin and soda. You try?”

“Nah. No thank you.”

“Too early for Christavo?”

“Not lately. But this black syrup I ordered is plenty strong on its own.”

He jingled his ice around in a circular pattern, wondering what to say next. I didn’t feel bad about allowing him to carry the conversation. He was good at it. It suited the nature of his personality. If we were playing chess his pawns would be all over the board, while I was putzing around in the corner moving my knight back and forth.

“Listen, my friend. You not find what you looking for over here.”

My eyebrows raised. “Oh?”

“No. You have adventure here. You talk to people. What you *need* is already back home.”

I smiled. The street philosopher was coming out. All it took was a belt of gin.

“Go on.”

“Yes, I see this. Woman from other night wants Hungarian man. Not you. Nothing against Christavo. No. And you. Just be here now. Drink and dance. Eat the food. Forget rest of your life.”

I was grinning now. His youthful energy was finding its way into me. Or maybe it was the onslaught of caffeine.

“Listen to me. Not everyone has money for travel. So when you travel: *enjoy!* Who cares, man. Forget her from other night. Don’t worry about sick grandpa. Go out and fucking dance tonight, Christavo!”

He concluded this motivational speech by knocking back the last of his drink and setting it on the table. “You hear what I tell you?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

He began to stand up. “I have to go home for sleep. Was up all night with new lady.”

“Sounds fun.”

“See you at pub later?”

“Maybe.”

“Go. I will be there.”

“Have you ever heard the story about the guy who carved the lions on the bridge?”

“How he jump off? Yes. Since child. A story of great mistakes. How you think mother try make me be good?” He laughed in a boisterous way, his warm eyes shining like wet glass. “Never work. I am bad man still!”

Robi fell into me, a firm embrace that lasted all but a second. Then, straightening his coat, he headed out the door. His head turned and those eyes went searching up the boulevard as he walked along the window’s length and out of my sight.

I sipped at my dark brew, staring at the white saucer before setting it back down. The kid was right. In all my yearning, there was an emptiness caused by my own dour attitude. When you set up a feast at the table of wishes, it’s cheating yourself to pick and prod at the appetizers.

Silent figures shuffled around me. Voices blended into one another speaking words I didn't understand. I got up to leave, thinking about my upcoming flight. My thoughts murmured to one another as I went back to the hotel.