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THE LAST HONEST MAN

by

Daniel Nyikos

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

Approved:

Dr. Charles Waugh Major Professor	Dr. Jennifer Sinor Committee Member
Dr. Christine Cooper-Rompato Committee Member	Dr. Byron Burnham Dean of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, UT

2009

ABSTRACT

The Last Honest Man

by

Daniel Nyikos, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2009

Major Professor: Dr. Charles Waugh
Department: English

Born to a Hungarian mother and a father of Hungarian descent, I have spent my life trapped between two worlds, never quite able to be entirely part of either. As such, it seems fitting that for thesis I chose to do a novella, an art form that is neither short story nor novel. The novella is, I argue, a form that is uniquely suited to the task of examining a single theme at length, which I do in my thesis. It is through this little-studied form of fiction that I create a story through which I examine my own identity and world view.

"The Last Honest Man" tells the story of Attila Molnár, a Hungarian shoe factory manager who comes to America to reconnect with his estranged wife. Along the way, he meets an old colleague, a former KGB agent who asks for his help in a scam involving the Y2K crisis. The novel explores the interconnected theme of identity and nationality in a world constantly shifting and changing politically and technologically. It addresses values of loyalty, friendship, family, and courage, each altered by time yet fundamentally unchanged.

(101 pages)

PREFACE

My novella *The Last Honest Man* began with a question: how can I reconcile my love for Hungary with my love for modern culture, particularly cyberculture? Starting with this question, I created a character based on my perception of the best of Hungarian culture and exposed him to modern culture, choosing the eve of the twenty-first century as the time that would best suit the theme of change.

Born in Germany to a Hungarian mother and an American father with Hungarian parents, I learned to speak Hungarian before English. I can remember moments of visiting Communist Hungary as a young child. My parents strictly instructed me to speak only Hungarian at home, and my father told me even in my earliest years to marry a Hungarian girl. One of my fondest memories of childhood is riding the train into Hungary and joyfully greeting the red, white, and green flag flying from the train station. My father raised me to what he called traditionally Hungarian manhood; anger answered for all strong emotions. I have spent years without crying; one of the few reliable ways I have to dig into my emotions is Hungarian poetry.

My first introduction to the Internet came at the local library in the mid-1990's, where the new computer network mesmerized me with the magical way it provided me with whatever I asked for after a few keystrokes and patience. Compared to hunting through a library's stacks for a brief mention of whatever truly interested me, the Internet represented a fundamental shift in the world. It was not until a few years after that, however, that my father bought a second-generation iMac and, with the squalling music of a dial-up modem, brought the Internet into our isolated country house.

I remember standing in the Hódmezõvásárhely market a few years ago, surrounded by gypsies and toothless women with their gray hair in red kerchiefs, and being dumfounded that only days before I enjoyed high-speed Internet and the World of Warcraft.

It is this contradiction that I seek to explore through fiction. Since I was a boy, I have been attracted to fiction, which moved me more truly than reality, which is random and meaningless in comparison. But my choice is much more than this; despite my aptitude for careers much better suited to fortune and comfort than fiction, I have chosen it because art seems the only activity with any real meaning; the rest merely perpetuate living, while art gives that life substance.

Leo Tolstoy, even in translation, framed the majesty and power to convey human experience of art far better than I could in his book *What is Art?*:

> As, thanks to man's capacity to express thoughts by words, every man may know all that has been done for him in the realms of thought by all humanity before his day, and can in the present, thanks to this capacity to understand the thoughts of others, become a sharer in their activity and can himself hand on to his contemporaries and descendants the thoughts he has assimilated from others, as well as those which have arisen within himself; so, thanks to man's capacity to be infected with the feelings of others by means of art, all that is being lived through by his contemporaries is accessible to him, as well as the feelings experienced by men thousands of years ago, and he has also the possibility of transmitting his own thoughts and feelings. (52)

I must turn to my own words to explain why I have chosen fiction as my preferred medium of art; although I could attempt to find some writer more august who has said it before me, it would be dishonest to say this thought is anything but a seed of my own mind. The power of art is magnified by participation, and the written word is unique in that it is the very act of reading which brings the writer's thoughts of life. Without a

reader, a word is a collection of scribbles; the story does not exist independently within the book, but must be brought to life by the reader's imagination. The reader shares in the creation of the story with the author, becoming both actor and scenery, filling in details of character, place, and action that the writer has omitted. Unlike the observer of a painting, sculpture, or film, the reader brings the written work into being.

My thesis takes the form of a novella because the form is singularly well-suited to my purpose. The story is centered on a central emotional issue of loss and the acceptance of loss: the loss of the Communist system and, with it, the main character's loss of identity. The novella does not provide a fixed solution; its purpose is instead to paint a representative situation that is part allegory. The emotional quality of the tragedy of Attila's loss is the central focus. As Mary Doyle Springer writes in *Forms of the Modern Novella*, "…novellas have in fact an emotional economy… which novels cannot match when they attempt the same kind of thing. … And the greater the length, the greater the stasis and risk of loss of emotional power" (157).

This element of emotional economy is essential to my story. In dealing with the issues of loss of identity, sentimentality is difficult to avoid, and it is therefore essential to limit the story in its emotional resonance. Although the characters are lonely, I tried to keep them from being pathetic, and emotional economy was essential to this. It allows the reader to encounter the characters without pitying them, while maintaining the emotional power of the piece. The story does not dwell on lost Communist system, but rather deals with what the loss represents for its characters. More than that, the hope that develops through the characters' relationships combines with loss to form the two central emotions

of the story, emotions which the brevity of the novella allows the piece to focus on without becoming tired.

The novella is the perfect form for the plot I had in mind for my story. According to Springer, the novella almost invariably takes one of a limited number of forms: "the serious 'plot of character,' … the degenerative or pathetic tragedy, … satire, … apologue, … [and] the example" (12-13). Following her definitions, *The Last Honest Man* most closely falls into the domain of apologue. Attila is himself a character blended from the ideal of Hungary that my experiences with the country and its literature created in me: honest, tough, and unhappily sentimental. His journey to America and the characters he meets are all symbolic. Into the category of the apologue, Springer places Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which in theme is closely related to my novella. In the category of the example, which she describes as a subgenre of apologue, she includes, Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and *The Gambler* and Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. It is perhaps telling that she also includes in this category Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which few would call anything but a novel, but perhaps her treatment of the novella has caused her to see them in more places than most.

Although Springer's work was published in 1975, it has proved impossible to find a more recent, definitive study on the novella. In "The Novella's Long Life," an article published in 2008, William Giraldi uses *Forms of the Modern Novella* as his most recent source for novella theory. He extensively discusses her theory about the novella's economy of emotion, reiterating that the length dictates the content and impact of the piece.

The novella has long been defined by what it is not; it is too long to be a short story and too short to be a novel, and hence is called a novella. Although too long to be easily published in a journal and typically too short to be published by itself, the novella is more than a middle point between the two. As Springer explains it, the common misbelieve is "that these works are condensations or digests of what might have been long novels if they have not ended as 'short novels'" (4).

To put it simply, the story of Attila Molnár required more depth than a short story could contain, but it also required a unity of effect that a novel would have been ill-suited for. To better understand the link between the form and effect of the work, I return to the Springer's theory of the novella. She identifies several elements in the genre of the apologue that also apply to *The Last Honest Man*. These include narrative distance from the primary character through reducing a character to few dimensions, as the novella frequently reduces Attila to his honesty and search for his wife (42). *The Last Honest Man* also contains repetition of words and images (45), in particular the images of shoes and the concept of honesty. Mass-produced designer shoes represent the throwaway, materialistic culture of America, while Attila's love for simple, domestically-produced boots reveals his own simple nature and nostalgia for a less complicated era.

As Springer writes, "What *is* the business of apologues is to enlarge on What Happens and To Whom until its significance can be emotively gathered into a general but precise statement" (49). Just so, the novella's purpose is not in its conclusion but in its exploration of themes. In the case of *The Last Honest Man*, that statement may be, "In the face of change, devotion to established perceptions becomes destructive."

In choosing to write a novella, I selected the form of fiction that I have had the least experience with both reading and writing. Unlike short stories and novels, which form the core of academic literature, novellas are comparatively rarely written and rarely taught, as the scarcity of critical theory about them shows. Paradoxically, rare novellas that I have read include some of the most often cited works of literature. It is difficult to say which particular work influenced or spoke to my own writing, as one work grows upon another in garden of the writer's subconscious, but the parallels between a few notable novellas and *The Last Honest Man* are worth noting, as they demonstrate the novella's relationship with the greater literary tableau.

The novella that comes to mind first when considering *The Last Honest Man* is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Attila, like Conrad's narrator Marlow, travels into a world unfamiliar to him. Like Marlow, Attila finds his destination savage, yet strangely familiar. He sees that the city of New York is fundamentally the same as most global cities when disassociated from the famous landmarks of the downtown city.

Heart of Darkness's symbolic journey into the human soul is the same as that of my own novella, where Attila travels from the simplicity of nostalgia into the chaotic, immoral real world, and thereby finds that even his own country is unrecognizable to him. Ultimately, he must face that he himself, although known for his honesty, is flawed and not as honest as would let others believe, having acquired his reputation by an act of violence caused by his temper rather than by his honesty.

Vassily Derevenko is Attila's Mr. Kurtz. Derevenko is originally from Eastern Europe, having been a member of the KGB and the Communist party. He has now adapted to capitalism, working in the dangerous world of corporate espionage. Far from

bringing the nominal values of Communism to America, he has barely altered his occupation, behaving as recklessly and greedily as he always has. Contrary to his nostalgic claims about the Communist era, his world was always one of self-interest, and he finds himself well-suited to life in modern America. He, like Kurtz, reveals the fundamental savagery of their location to the protagonist and the reader.

I purposefully created the protagonist of *The Last Honest Man* in the vein of central European literary characters. I particularly used Kafka to create an honest, diligent working man betrayed by the system he depends on for his livelihood, like Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*. The beginning of *The Last Honest Man* finds Attila facing unemployment as the Hungarian industrial system erodes without the backing of the Warsaw Pact's economic enforcement. Having dedicated his entire life to making shoes, Attila finds that, far from rewarding his honesty, the world has no further need of him.

Like Gregor's family in Kafka's novella, Attila's wife has abandoned him and wants nothing more to do with him. She is captivated by the search for material wealth and luxury; later in the novella, Attila discovers that she has become addicted to pornography, to the instant gratification and pleasure that America represents and promises.

In this novella, I decided to experiment with an ambiguous ending. I borrowed this technique from Hemingway, who uses it to strong effect in "Hills Like White Elephants" and, particularly, his novella *The Old Man and the Sea*. The old man does not die at the end, although he is very near the end of his life, and whether his struggle will serve any purpose, for him or the boy, remains ambiguous. The Americans who see the skeleton of the giant marlin think it is a shark. Attila is a lot like Santiago, hard-working

and unappreciated, and like Hemingway, I would like to imbue that character with dignity while leaving him in a tragic position. Like Santiago, Attila passes his trial, but happiness and resolution remain elusive after his enlightening experiences in America.

The novella *The Gambler*, by Dostoevsky, also influenced my decision to attempt an ambiguous ending. His love for both the fickle Polina and the addictive game of roulette slowly destroy the narrator. By the end of the novella, the dangerous allure of gambling has ruined his prospects, but he receives one last message that Polina still loves him, and he resolves to regain her, even though gambling still draws him back. In my novella, I attempted to create the opposite of this ending in which the protagonist wrestles with two inflamed desires and faces destruction by either: Attila has become stripped of his desires in *The Last Honest Man*, and it is his longing for a place to belong that draws him forward at the end of the novella.

Although I initially intended to make Attila the gregarious, loud-mouthed variety of Hungarian laborer that I frequently met through my parents, the novella partially dictated his personality for me. In the expository beginning of the story, Attila sits on a bench at the Szeged train station, and the novella introduces him through his observations and imaginings. This observant, quiet persona merged with the brash personality I had imagined for him; he became a usually quiet but forceful character prone to flashes of temper.

As is inevitable with seemingly all fiction, the protagonist took on other aspects of personality and history without my conscious choice to lead him in that direction. Attila's father, whom I had briefly sketched at first, became the source of the temper Attila still carries, mirroring my own father's influence on me.

The novella continues with exposition and begins to build conflict through rising action in Attila's trip to America, where he is introduced, although vaguely, to his mission by Vassily, and the two explore the theme of nostalgia set against change. A small moment of realization comes in the form of Attila's realization that, fundamentally, New York City's poorer districts are not so different from the cities he has known. As different as he always imagined the West was, America, even in the grip of technological and societal change, is not so different from Hungary.

Katya appears as a potential guide to America and modern culture for Attila, like Dante's Beatrice or Shakespeare's Ariel, but she is more interested in the faded world of Communist Eastern Europe than he is in modern America. By getting to know Attila and his world, she vicariously sees her father as a person for the first time rather than through the influence of her mother. Eventually, it becomes clear that her perception of modern America is not entirely accurate, and she and her counter-cultural friends are just as much minorities in America as Attila himself. She speaks about a new America in which young people redefine themselves as they like, but that is not the America that Attila experiences. This disconnect between the young tech-savvy generation and the rest of American culture is further emphasized by the character of Trent, whom Vassily introduces as a computer genius but proves to be a disappointment in practical matters of technology.

Attila has difficulty finding a reliable guide to America, further exposing the complexity that is the modern America: it is a different entity to everyone he meets. Irina treats America as no more than another place to live, expecting nothing more from it and living no happier than she would have in Russia. Katya experiences it through computers,

and she is as excited as Attila to suddenly experience the world through a human connection. For Vassily, America remains a land of excitement and promise, even though the fortunes and adventures he once sought exist only in his pursuit of them. Attila's America remains bound up with his thoughts of his wife, as unfathomable to him as her reason for leaving him, an honest man.

The novella ostensibly takes on the shell of a spy novel, although this emerges by intention: Vassily purposefully re-creates a Communist-era nostalgia for closed doors and secret deals. The deal, however, never materializes into anything but Vassily's almost childish attempt to re-live the old days. Vassily's paranoia prevents him from even being present, which only deepens the irony of the situation; it also underscores the fact that Vassily's careful illusion depends on not looking too closely to the moving parts.

Attila sees himself in the mirror at the club where the deal takes place. Having always characterized himself by his own reputation as an honest man, he finds that he is attempting to conduct not only an illegal deal but a shadow of one. He sees that he has allowed Vassily to draw him into the Russian's perception of New York, a city which promises to be anything the visitor wants. It is this wish fulfillment that draws Vassily and Katya; it will later prove, through Vassily's revelation and Katya's insight into it, to be the tempting influence on Attila's wife as well.

Despite this revelation, Attila continues to wander. He is changed; dependably solid, he proves to be a stabilizing force between Vassily and Katya, providing them with a mutual friend through whom to build an understanding. When the father and daughter meet, partially through Attila's intercession, they start to reconnect not by understanding one another's worlds, but by seeing the distance between them. They start to see

themselves through Attila's, and therefore through one another's, eyes. Vassily tries to play the part of the tough spy but has no reason to, and Katya finds her reason for hating him start to fade.

Katya's final conversation with Attila wraps up one of the thematic devices in the story, that of Y2K. Like the close of the Communist era in Hungary, the Y2K phenomenon threatened to change the world in ways none of the people involved truly understood. Like America's love for technology, Hungary's love for everything Western and American led in a few tumultuous years to a democratic and capitalistic system. With that system came not prosperity but more hard work, a slow change that replaced one set of complaints with another. Likewise, Attila's realization about Y2K reflects that the world never fundamentally changes; just as he continued to work at the same job after the system change, change revolves around the perception of things. So long as he continues to see things the same way, they will not change for him.

The climax of the novel comes when Attila realizes his wife doesn't want him. He slowly comes to this knowledge, but it fully dawns on him as he speaks with Katya. He also sees that he himself doesn't desire his wife the way she wants to be desired.

By the time Attila arrives at the airport in the falling action of the novel, he has lost his perception of himself as an honest man from a lost era. The airport, a traditionally liminal space, provides the setting for the open-ended resolution. He has come to terms with the loss of his wife and faces a world that he has begun to understand. His final act before leaving to choose a flight is to enter a shoe store. Although he decides not to buy the boots he finds, the feeling that he could buy boots from wherever he likes now brings him hope.

The novella's answer to the question that began it, then, is that asking how to reconcile Hungary with cyberculture is fundamentally flawed. In asking the question, I truly seek to reconcile my perception of both: my days spent listening to my mother's and father's conversations with their friends against the friends I have made through the World Wide Web, and particularly the way I felt about them then and remember them now. That perception, then, relies on my own perception of myself; it is my own invention that the two are incompatible. Hungary is just as much a part of the modern world as America is.

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THE LAST HONEST MAN

Attila Molnár sat on a bench with his large hands in his lap and watched the low clouds over the gray-green plains. Many years before, on first day he sat waiting on that platform, the horizon of lightly undulating hills flowed unbroken save for distant telephone lines and a lone, crane-like well pump rising into the gray sky beside a distant farm. He could still see that pump, its familiar shape now wedged in the gap between the spackled walls of a new growth of red-roofed houses sprinkled with snow, their fences already bowed and paint scarred. Szeged had becoming unrecognizable to him; there was simply too much of everything. The new supermarket, part of a French chain, stocked rows of everything he could imagine. He stopped shopping there after spending hours trying to differentiate between the bewildering brands, finally leaving empty-handed. He could think of only one way to wipe his ass, so why should he need more than one kind of toilet paper? He wore practical colorless leather boots, low-topped, with metal in the soles and tied with thick cloth laces.

Attila waited, his gray eyes dull with lack of sleep under his heavy brow unbroken save for his thick eyebrows. His bald head, uncovered, exposed what his sergeant had called his Neanderthal forehead. He wore no coat, and the cold air blowing away from the approaching storm plucked at the crumpled lapel of his too-tight white shirt. A few others stood around the concrete platform, facing the brown-rusted tracks and cracked wooden cross-ties mostly buried under gray stones.

A young woman with blonde hair read a fresh white copy of *Népszabadság*, the newspaper folded to a story about a millennial party on the Danube. She read with casual

attention, head lifting and eyes flicking down the line every few minutes. Attila pictured her in a small Budapest restaurant, sitting on the balcony with her boyfriend, sipping French wine and whispering to him the headlines. She wore Italian shoes, stylish and uncomfortable. Attila hated such shoes: wasteful and impractical, unlike the unassuming, black leather women's shoes he had made for two decades. No, he decided, after a minute's consideration. Not Italian: American knockoffs, but just as expensive.

Attila knew the bench well, the green paint curling away from the metal beneath, the familiar cold interspaced with air beneath his rear. He waited for the train to Budapest, which ran a full hour before the train to the factory. He squirmed against the cold, and the young woman looked at him, blue eyes rimmed by dark circles. He predicted she would do her mascara on the train when it stopped along the way. She returned to her newspaper.

A gypsy man dressed in a long coat with rat-chewed sleeves climbed over the edge of the platform, emerging phantom-like on the right edge of Attila's peripheral vision. The gypsy approached the girl, took something from his pocket with a smile that could charm birds from trees, and showed her. She held her *Népszabadság* higher, and the man turned away and looked at Attila, who returned his gaze, his thin lips set in a line beneath his crooked nose. He prepared his anger like a baker kneading warm dough, the way his father had taught him to before Attila could even speak. The gypsy moved down the platform, never saying a word.

An old woman shuffled out of the station building, her muddy black boot holding the door open as she wrestled several nylon bags filled with leafy vegetables out after her. Those boots had no brand or inner tag; they had been made by hand, the way Attila had

made boots in school. Shuffling down the platform, she sat beside Attila with a sigh. Her heavy coat came up to her ears, her face long and dominated by her nose, gray hair hanging limply from beneath the red kerchief tied around her head. “What time is it, son?”

Attila held up his left wrist to show her the cracked face of the East German watch he had worn for fifteen years.

“It can’t be ten already,” the old woman muttered, her lips curling over what few teeth she had left. He tried to imagine her as a young woman, but couldn’t.

“It’s broken,” Attila said, his voice thick with sleep.

“You should get a new one,” she returned, laughing breathily.

Attila nodded. Down the line, the train rounded the bend. The girl with the newspaper folded it and tucked it under her arm, stepping forward as though to beat a rush.

The old woman pulled a brownish-red stick trailing broken green leaves from her bag. “One carrot, thirty forints.” She knew the phrase well.

Attila shook his head. “Ten years ago, it was ten.”

The old woman had a ready reply, “This is thrice the carrot.”

Attila tucked his hands under his armpits and squared his broad shoulders against the wind, turning his head away from it. The old woman, turtle-like, sank deeper into her coat.

The train pulled up next to the station: A red hump-topped locomotive tugging mismatched gray cars, some with white roofs, some with gray. Hardly anyone got off. Attila stood and waited for the old woman to gather her bags and hobble to the nearest

stairs, separated by more than a foot of sharp drop from the platform. The blue-coated conductor, hands shoved deep into his pockets, blocked her way. “No selling on the train,” he said, nodding to the old woman’s assortment of bags.

“These are groceries,” the old woman protested.

The conductor shook his head. The woman looked around, helplessly.

Attila found his anger, still warm and soft. He let it expand, slowly rising and hardening. “Hurry the hell up,” he growled, rubbing his upper arms. “It’s freezing.”

With a sigh, the conductor used just one hand to help her onto the train, keeping the other firmly lodged in his coat.

Attila met the man’s gaze as he followed. Though almost the same height, Attila was twice the other man’s weight, most of it burly muscle. Letting his temper cool, Attila climbed onto the train. He stepped past the dull metal walls of the stairwell, the bathroom and an extra seat, and pulled aside the sliding metal door.

The old woman sat apart from the few other people in the car. Attila took a seat beside the window and put his feet up on the red plastic bench facing towards him, both benches otherwise empty. His arms still firmly folded, he stared out the window. As the train pulled out of the station, a low hum beside his ear became a soft whistle from where the warped window let the cold air through.

Weariness and the lulling clanking of the train’s wheels over the tracks lulled Attila to sleep. He woke when the conductor came through to check tickets. “Tickets or passes, please.”

Sniffing away sleep, Attila presented the pass from his pocket.

“This is a pass for the wrong line,” the conductor said, barely glancing at it.

Attila tossed the pass, which he had pulled out of habit, onto the bench and offered the ticket instead. The conductor punched it wordlessly and moved along. The pass danced along the bench with the vibration of the car.

He picked it up. Attila had offered that pass, or a version of it, three hundred times a year for almost two decades. Its form changed every few years, but he had barely noticed, buying a new one whenever the conductor reminded him. Now, he opened the window and sent the pass fluttering out the crack, turning his head to watch the scrap of paper cartwheeling past the rows of windows, buffeted in the wind of the train. He slammed the window shut again, as though he could force the edge flush with sheer force. It whistled despite him. Outside the window, a Mercedes overtook the train, racing it to a crossing. Beyond it, the flat prairie was yellow and brown, white snow gathering in the low places.

For fifteen years, Attila had worked as the director of quality in the Szegedi Cipõgyár, the Shoe Factory of Szeged. When the country pretended to discover the value of money in 1989, Attila received a letter promising a raise and a promotion if he "continued to do well," but neither had come. Instead, a new director came in, and another, and yet another, until no director came at all, and Attila's started getting phone calls addressing him as "interim director." He got neither a secretary nor a raise.

On Friday, the plant closed without warning, the gates already locked when he arrived and most of the workers already gathered, shouting and dragging at the chains. Attila demanded they go home, but no-one listened; instead, they seethed at people thousands of kilometers away, a company they never understood. He told them to stay away from the factory. At the height of the din, Attila pulled Fazekas Pista, a machinist

his own age with a voice like a mountain, bodily off the fence and shook him by the collar until it came off in his hands. He felt nothing against Pista, a man who had lost ten years and a finger to the machines, but anger at the company boiled like steam in Attila's chest until the valve burst. Three men separated them. After he calmed down, it took Attila several hours and dozens of threats to make the workers go home peacefully.

He heard about the closure the next Monday, in letters postmarked from the previous month. The company had been bought by a Russian multi-national, which had then determined the factory wasn't profitable. The very terms "Russian multi-national" confused him. The letter didn't say why Russians were interested—still—in Hungarian shoe manufacturing, or why they would buy an unprofitable factory. It did say everyone except Attila had lost his job. That night, he received a phone call from a woman with a Russian name but a perfect Budapest accent, telling him to come to a Budapest address, traveling expenses to be paid for, on Wednesday.

It was Wednesday. Attila went back to sleep.

At the Kecskemét stop, a woman ten years younger than Attila wearing West German—no, German, he corrected himself, even after ten years— shoes with four-inch heels got on the train. At least one person occupied every other bench, so Attila swung his legs down and nodded to her politely.

"Here is free," he said.

She looked at him, at his broad jaw and crooked nose, at his head with his remaining hair shaved off, and curled her nose. She walked the length of the car and

stepped out into the opposite stairwell, moving to the next car. Attila put his feet back up and tried to go back to sleep.

Before the changeover in the system, the momentous events of 1989, Attila's wife had learned English and Russian in University and had gotten a job teaching. In 1992, she moved to America. A publishing firm offered twice what Attila made in the factory to work translating documents. He had been shaving his head almost since then; his hair, he liked to say, left when his wife did. They wrote to one another every few months, and Attila learned English from books and the television. But she didn't return, and Attila didn't go to America. He made the same shoes he had for decades, except he no longer made Russian combat boot. His wife never invited him to come, and it was so much trouble to get a passport, a visa, an airplane ticket, luggage. The way she told it, her apartment would not fit both of them, so he would have had to rent a hotel room. She could visit him instead, he reasoned: his apartment froze in the winter and boiled in the summer, but at least they could live comfortably in the space he had. But she didn't come. He spent most of his day at the factory. When he came home, he listened to the radio or went to the movies. When he was young, they showed films from many countries. Now, they were almost all from America.

Someone heavy sitting down on the bench opposite him woke Attila. A boy sitting on the end of Attila's bench looked at least as startled as Attila felt when he sat up. Attila nodded sleepily to the boy and suppressed his surprise when he looked at the man who had sat down. The man's boots were steel shod, undeniably Russian, a ubiquitous army design Attila's own factory had produced, and he wore a heavy fur-lined coat which did not hide his bulk; he was as broad as Attila and obese, at least a decade older. His hair

had faded to steel gray and, having abandoned the top, hung long at the back of his head,. He wore a short, full beard badly trimmed and a half-grown mustache

"God damn this weather," the man said in excellent Hungarian when he saw Attila looking at him. The Russian accent came through in the consonants. "This winter is like a shrewish wife. 1999! may well be the end of the world." He produced a cigarette, also Russian, bare from his coat pocket. The man chuckled and lit it, his lighter buried in his hand, his knuckles hairy as a glove. Attila opened the window as the man blew bluish smoke at the ceiling. "If this train goes any faster, we'd catch our death of cold."

The boy looked helplessly at the nonsmoking sign next to the door.

"I said it's cold," the man said in a louder voice. Attila didn't look at him, but the man half-rose, sliding to the bench opposite. "I'm talking to you!" Then, louder, "You threw me out a window once."

Attila sat silently. He had recognized Vassily Derevenko, even without his hair.

"I tell you," Vassily went on, his voice a steady growl. The boy got up and squeezed onto the bench across the aisle, and the fat Russian put his boots up on the bench, blocking anyone else from sitting. "Socialism doesn't seem so bad now. These days, honest men have to be dishonest just to keep working. And the politics are worse than ever, all lies. No decent person could ever be a politician; they are all thieves or bandits. Am I right?"

"Yes, but now you can say so without looking over your shoulder," said Attila.

Vassily laughed. "Perhaps. But men like you and me never had to look over our shoulders, Attila. You are an honest man. The old system knew which men to value. Some writers and fools got sent to the Gulags, sure, but not men like us. I knew that if I

did as I was told, I would get by. Since then, things have been much more complex for me. I have known misery. You?"

"I lost my job. I think I lost my job. To tell you the truth, I don't know. They're calling me to Budapest."

Vassily raised himself up in his seat, grunting with effort. "You haven't lost your job. Why would they call you to Budapest just to tell you that? They send letters, make calls."

Attila nodded, then scratched the back of his head. "Yes, but nothing makes sense. Maybe they want me to run another factory, since I've been the director, more or less, of this one for years now."

"You either are the director or you're not," said Vassily. "You're not 'more or less' in charge. You handled the factory."

Attila nodded. "They paid me the same as when I was director of quality."

"God damn it!" Vassily swore with gusto. The boy across the aisle jumped. "Was I right? Thieves and bandits. This is what capitalism turns men into. And honest men like you lose their work, or end up paid less than a Budapest whore. What kind of system is this? And they say I'm nostalgic when I say at least everyone could buy bread ten years ago. A man like you should have a house on the Balaton."

"You have a high opinion of me, considering I threw you out a window the first time we met."

Vassily laughed. "I wasn't a factory inspector for very long, but I never met another man who was willing to throw someone through a window for suggesting that he use cheaper leather and fewer stitches. I've remembered you since then." The Russian

swung his legs down and leaned in closer to Attila, dropping his voice. “Even back then, I wasn’t just an inspector. I’ve always had friends. I think you’ know what I mean when I say I have been in the position to keep your career going smoothly. A lot of people lost their jobs after the change, Molnár.”

The two men looked at each other. A large woman pushed by on her way to the bathroom, and Vassily, annoyed by her sudden weight pressing against him, swore, “Fat whore!” He then looked back at Attila. The woman left the door open, and the clanking of the wheels covered their voices.

Attila nodded. “I hear rumors. I knew you must be involved with something, considering you were inspector of Hungarian factories though you hardly spoke Hungarian.”

“Don’t exaggerate. My Hungarian was adequate.” Vassily’s voice dropped even deeper. “If you knew what I was, why did you attack me? I could have had you taken to Siberia.”

Attila shrugged. “You pissed me off,” he answered, vaguely recalling the argument.

The Russian’s loud laugh swept away Attila’s hazy recollection and made one of the women sitting behind Vassily shush him. The fat man just waved a hand at her lazily, like a lord brushing away flies. “That’s what I love about Hungarians,” Vassily said, in the expansive tones of a world traveler. “The country has been shat on for five hundred years, and they suffer in silence. But if you annoy one of them personally, then the devil himself would regret it!”

Attila's smiled unhappily. "What business do you have in Budapest? I would have thought you'd be long out of the country by now. If I understand you right, people in your work, you were hated. Some secret police are still being murdered. Recognized by men they reported on as they're buying cigarettes, that sort of thing. I hear about it on the radio. I imagine things could be very dangerous for you."

Shaking his head, Vassily leaned even closer, his rough beard scratching the collar of his coat as his fat chin bulged over it. "I have a secret for you. Socialism, capitalism, it's always the same men in charge. They just learn to speak differently, to use whatever ideology the people like. The USSR is gone. I could have gotten a job with the FSB, but the world changed. My friends and I have kept doing the same things, you see, but now we do them corporately. Not always legally, but competitively. Like the black market."

Attila considered whether to watch the prairie in silence, then said, "Whom do you work for, then?"

Vassily stretched and folded his arms behind his head like a pillow, slouching lower on the bench. "No one in particular," he said, in the bored voice of one who doesn't care where his money comes from, although his boots were scuffed at the heel. "The people I work for deal with a lot of companies, and own quite a few of them."

Attila nodded. Vassily nodded back, and they sat in silence. The fat Russian sank lower and lower in his seat, until his rear slid almost completely off the bench, and finally he started to snore. Attila watch the buildings becoming taller and more numerous out the window.

When they arrived at the station, Vassily only stopped pretending to be asleep when most of the passengers had left the carriage. He rose laboriously to his feet and took Attila's hand in his, giving it a hard squeeze. "You are one of the few honest men I have ever known, Molnár. You threw a man through a window for the sake of good shoes. Watch out for yourself. Don't let the thieves and bandits take your life away."

Attila got off the train after Vassily, who had already mounted an electric baggage cart and buzzed off toward the other end of the station, plowing through noontime travelers. The *Nyugati Pályaudvar*, the Western Train Station, was a cathedral-like building constructed in the Nineteenth Century, its sloping walls crowned by massive windows which let in the grayish-white light of the unbroken clouds.

Attila rode the metro to the station nearest the downtown destination he had been given. The clean, old bricks of the ceiling curving in an even arch, recently washed, and a green trash can bolted to the cement already overflowed.

He had known the parent firm only by their letterheads on memos, never bothering to remember who signed them; the name always seemed different. The appearance of the corporate building surprised him. The colossal steel-and-glass building's unbroken glass front reflected a broad wash of white clouds looking appropriately, he thought, like concrete. The lobby, in contrast, proved small and austere, with gray granite walls and a single hanging plant that withered stoically in the half-light. A gray-haired woman sat typing on an old IBM computer, a model only slightly newer than the one Attila himself had used—had tried to use—in his office. She didn't move when he stepped up to the reception desk, a chest-high black plastic palisade between her from the lobby.

When Attila grumbled, “Good day,” she greeted him instead in English: “What is your business here, please.” Attila resisted the urge to crane his neck to see whether she really had work on the screen. Instead, he passed her the letter, crumpled, from his pocket.

“Tenth floor,” she said, her eyes flicking from the computer to the note and back again like a hummingbird among flowers.

“Thank you,” Attila said, in English, and stepped past the desk to the steel elevator doors. The spacious elevator smelled slightly of disinfectant and perfume. He pressed the button for the tenth floor and rode in silence, listening to the quiet rumbling of the gears. The doors opened into a windowless room surrounded by paintings of the sea. A little woman hardly out of high school greeted Attila with a smile, speaking in rapid Budapest Hungarian. She wore white German sneakers.

“*Molnár bácsi*,” she said, and Attila bristled. He couldn’t remember the last time he had been called that. She continued in Hungarian. “Thank you for coming. I’m very glad to see you. My name is Mariska. This way, please.” She led him to an oak door with a long, swooping metal doorknob that she opened with a turn of her wrist. The office they stepped into was bare of any decoration, and black drapes covered the window of the opposite wall, plunging the office into a dismal gloom which a single overhead fluorescent lamp struggled to dispel. Attila found no place to sit.

“Mr. Moll-nar. Come in,” said the handsome man behind the desk, dressed perfectly in a gray suit ruined by a hideous yellow tie. He spoke English in a flat American accent. Attila preferred being called *Molnár bácsi* to having his name mispronounced. “You do speak English?”

"Yes," said Attila, not at all used to speaking English. He only heard it on television and the rare times he went to the movies. He had last seen *The Matrix*, which made him wonder whether even Americans hated businessmen.

The man nodded. "Attila. Is that a common name here? When I see that, I just think Attila the Hun. You look like an Attila. How much do you weigh?"

"One hundred and thirty kilos," said Attila.

"Big man." The man nodded absently, as though he hadn't expected an answer. He opened a cabinet in his desk and took out a bottle and a glass. He poured himself a glass, which he did not drink. "Let's get right to it. I represent the interests that own your shoe factory. I am a man of business, Mr. Moll-nar, and I find it difficult to wrap my head around things that I can't quantify. Do you understand?"

Attila shook his head.

The man went on. "Figures. Numbers. If I can buy it, I feel like I can hold it in my hands. But there are things some men have that most others don't. Honesty, for instance. Do you know why you have kept your salary?" Attila didn't know he had. He didn't reply. "Because you have that. Dependability. I like men whose loyalty I can buy, because then I feel like I'm getting something I've paid for. But I also understand resources. We need men like you."

"Who are you?" Attila asked after a pause.

"Currently, I represent a Russian apparel conglomerate. Do you understand that word, 'conglomerate?'"

"No."

"Clothing. Shoes, for instance. I maintain our holdings in Hungary."

“You have more factories in Hungary?” Attila asked. It felt strange saying the name of his country in English; it felt like he swallowed the word halfway through and coughed it back out.

The man shrugged, the padded shoulders of his suit rising and falling unnaturally. “None that we’re running at the moment. But we do have a commercial partnership with American companies that want to sell their shoes in Eastern Europe. It’s very important for them to expand into this market. We make sure the market is right for them. That’s good for everyone.”

“What do you want me to do? I can’t run a factory that’s closed.”

The man shook his head. “I don’t want you running a factory. From today on, you are our honest man. That is what we want. Have you ever been to America?”

It took Attila a long time to answer. The man offered him America, full of movie stars and rock and roll, and his wife. He breathed deeply. “No. I have never been to America,” he said.

“Do you know much about computers?”

Attila shook his head. “Not much.”

“This should be interesting.” The way he said it, it may have been good or bad. “Get your things together, Attila. You’re leaving for America a week from today. If you still want a job.”

“It is an honest job?” Attila asked carefully.

The American smiled. “In a manner of speaking, yes.”

“Why should I do a job that is honest in a manner of speaking?” Attila started to get angry. He didn’t like being forced to stand.

"You always have a choice, Mr. Moll-nar. If I were you, I would ask myself, what kind of future does a man who makes shoes have in modern Hungary? A man of the old system. You were a member of the Party, I take it?"

Attila nodded gruffly, his thick eyebrows knotted. America had been a dream for so long that everyone he knew had dreamed it. He imagined his wife as he had seen her for the last time: standing on his apartment's doorstep, sneaking out to avoid goodbyes because she said they made her too unhappy. Attila had pretended to be asleep, and had missed his last chance to embrace his wife. It had been seven years since he last held her; he could have made it a day fewer, but he had let her have her way. He thought about it perhaps once every week.

The man took an envelope out of a desk drawer. "Take my advice. Go to America. Look around Times Square, maybe see a show on Broadway. We'll get you a room, and we'll be in touch. Maybe you'll work with us, maybe you won't. We already bought the ticket, so you have nothing to lose by going."

Attila looked inside the envelope, thumbing through the papers. He put it in his pocket and left the building. His boots crunched on flakes of broken concrete in the sidewalk, the envelope a palpable weight against his chest. He considered looking inside, but he didn't know what he wanted to find.

Lost in his thoughts, he walked down Andrássy Avenue, instinctively following a path he had walked only a few times before. The last time, it had been as a young man just assigned to the factory's management, remembering school trips to the city. He found himself in Hõsök tere—Heroes' Square—standing beneath the massive marble column topped with a winged figure. On either side of him, larger-than-life bronze

statues turned green by time stood in twin marble semi-circular arcades topped by bronze chariots. Around the base of the column, tribal leaders, kings, and leaders of a thousand years ago sat proud and vigilant on their steeds.

Speaking rapidly in a language Attila didn't recognize, a pretty girl led a group of Asian tourists around the square. Attila recognized names he knew well as she talked, spoken in native Hungarian intonation: Bethlen Gábor, Rákoczi Ferenc, Kossuth Lajos. Even those names sounded foreign, buried in words Attila couldn't understand. They wore shoes he couldn't place, which disconcerted him, although he recognized classical European lines in them. An old woman stood in front of Saint Stephen. Her shoulders still, only the lace handkerchief pressed alternately from eye to eye revealed her tears. For a moment, he felt he too would cry, but he was out of habit. A pair of clean-shaven young men in suits hurried through the square carrying their briefcases under their elbows, arguing about the metro times.

Attila stood in front of the pillar for many minutes. He then walked the ranks of the kings and heroes of Hungary, from kings to rebels and back again, but he saw nothing in their imagined faces but stoicism and time. By next week, he thought to himself, he would be in America, an entirely new country and continent. The statues, like the ghosts, would still be here. When he returned home, they would still be waiting, and they would resume watching over him. He would not recognize anything in America like these familiar statues—except, he reminded himself, his wife.

He stopped in front of the statue of Kossuth Lajos, whom the West knew as Louis Kossuth during his American speaking tour after the disastrous defeat of the 1848 war against the Austrians and Russians. He found sympathetic listeners, comparing the

Hungarians to the Americans in their own war for independence. The newspapers called him the Hungarian Washington, but he could find no help. He died in exile, sad and abandoned even by his fellow expatriates.

It hardly seemed worth it to go back to his apartment for a week, so Attila became a ghost himself, walking the streets of Budapest with the exceptionally fine eye of a man not at home, but in a place from his past. He still recognized most of the shoes he passed, but he didn't go into any of the stores to familiarize himself with the ones he couldn't. That would have taken weeks, and he only had days. Instead, he sat in expensive cafes without ordering coffee. A man sat down next to him at a tram stop and complained that no one had told him his granddaughter was pregnant. When the trolley arrived, Attila did not get on, and he imagined the man started the conversation with someone else. A woman with red lips and gray in her hair invited Attila to visit a club he had never heard of, but he didn't go, suspecting a scam.

On his last night in Hungary, Attila sat in a darkened hotel room he paid for with most of the bills in his wallet. It would save him the trouble of changing them to dollars, he thought, which he would prefer to do in New York, rather than allow the unspent *forints* to depreciate over his stay. He had never left his country, and visiting America excited him, but as he looked out over Budapest, lit by street lights and passing cars, he thought about his homeland. Twenty years ago, he could never have even stood in the hotel's expansive lobby. He had been a regional worker, after all, not a member of the ruling elite, and proletarian brotherhood would not even get him to the door. Now, they took his stack of crisp bills graciously, although not without a glance at his clothes.

He had worked in the factory for most of his life, but he could not remember the last time he saw someone he didn't know personally wearing a pair of his shoes. The factory and the world had split into different places. There was a lot he couldn't remember. He couldn't remember the name of his bunkmate in the army, or the names of the newest workers in the factory, or the color of his wife's eyes. He wanted very much to think they were blue, but he didn't know if they had been, or if he just wanted them to be, and it made him lift his chin and find something else to think about before he let himself dwell on it. He could not remember the last time he had gazed—truly gazed—into her eyes. He wondered if he ever had. Maybe they were green.

From his hotel room, he could see the Széchenyi Chain Bridge over the dark Danube in the distance, the bridge's broad pillars and suspension chains brilliantly lit by floodlights. Beyond the bridge, spotlights washed Saint Stephen's Basilica from below. Night curled in the crevices of the rest of the city, hiding from where cars lit endless avenues and windows burned in empty office buildings. It was impossible to keep his eyes on any building for long in the morass of color and light. He sat down on his bed after kicking off his boots, leaving the curtains open.

He thought back to the first time he met his wife. It was a memory he frequently rehearsed. The young soldier, poor and confused, returning from a military service of tedium and discomfort, more terrified of his sergeant than of the soldiers of the bourgeois imperialists perpetually preparing to invade. He had no job, only an offer that, years before, he had received from the shoe factory he had worked for as a student. He returned home to find his family's single-story house, already leaning when he left, tumbled down and overrun with weeds. His mother and father had moved to separate apartments; his

father later died of cancer, which ate through his liver and spleen, devouring his rage last. A few days after his return, Attila's mother took him by the hands and said, "I have nothing left to give you, Attila. I have nothing. Please don't come back." There were tears in her eyes. As he walked away, homeless and bewildered, carrying his possessions in a canvas bag and still dressed in his uniform, a girl from the University drove by in a car driven by another boy. Her voice was clear and fresh, capable of a perfect Budapest accent but happy in the rural Szeged dialect. "Hey, soldier, going somewhere?" More than anything, he wanted to be going somewhere.

Attila enjoyed being married. Even after an argument, his wife shared his bed. He asked her about children, but she worried what it would do to their finances. She could hardly afford new clothes with the inflation, and she encouraged him to ask for a promotion. Attila didn't want a promotion. He wanted to make shoes, just as he always had done, and he wanted a child instead of growing old alone with a stranger, making love with the lights off.

He clicked on the lamp on his bed stand and took the envelope out of his pocket. It was a plain white mail envelope, unsealed, and a pair of long, light blue tickets slid into his hand when he flipped up the top with his thumb. They were first class tickets with Lufthansa, one to Munich and the second for the connecting flight to New York. He would leave at nine in the morning and arrive at eleven that night. For a moment, such speed surprised him, to travel from Hungary to America in an afternoon, but then he remembered maps of time zones he had studied as a student: Moscow, Kiev, Budapest, London, and, after skipping four numbers, New York. Attila counted on his knuckles; the traveling totaled of nineteen hours, if he counted right, including the stopover in

Germany. That seemed more reasonable, although not even a day seemed right for the transition from Budapest to New York.

Inside the envelope, he found a check for fifty thousand *forints*. He also found a new Hungarian passport, prepared a week before with his photograph from ten years before taken at a military preparedness review. He squinted at his younger self, the wispy dark hair still clinging to his scalp, and frowned.

On the first night, Attila slept naked with the curtains open. His apartment window stood several stories above the pavement, and if anyone with a telescope really wanted to peek in on him, there wasn't much for them to see: a bald man who, although not quite fat, was no one's idea of sexy. The thought made him smile, his thick arms folded under his head as though the massive goose-feather pillows weren't enough. After that, he bought pajamas, and a sturdy leather suitcase to keep it in. He didn't buy new shoes. He bought a new suit. A short man with a very black mustache whose own suit made him look like an undertaker fitted it, cheerfully ignoring Attila's complaints that it was too tight mostly everywhere. When he was done, his wallet was nearly empty. In five days, he had spent a month's pocketbook and the check as well.

Although world travelers tell long stories about the differences between airports, Attila came to believe that all airports were fundamentally alike: busy, crowded, and strangely inhuman. The business of transporting humans like luggage required strangers gathering in one place and waiting to be carried to another: fundamentally unnatural. Trains had never bothered him because they ran through the towns, but airports were

removed from the cities they represented. Like battlefields, they bore names of cities that had little to do with their actual role.

By the time he arrived at the departure gate, his flight was listed as boarding. He showed the ticket to the young man behind the Lufthansa counter and began to ask a question, but the man just took the ticket, glanced it over, and handed him a boarding pass a few seconds later. “Go ahead and board now. Just show this to the man at the gate.” He was already looking over Attila’s shoulder at the man standing behind him. Attila wondered what it must be like for him to come to the same counter at the same airport day after day, when for everyone else an airport was a transitional place and soon forgotten.

A uniformed man stood beside the rope that sectioned off the invisible corridor leading to the mobile walkway. “Boarding pass,” he intoned, his eyes narrowing at Attila’s large hands and boots. When Attila passed him the card, the man’s expression barely changed, and he nodded and muttered, “All right” after stamping it and handing it back.

The corridor to the airplane’s door was empty and very well-lit. He hardly noticed the pilot standing at the oval door until the green-eyed man, dressed in a blue jacket and a tall hat, greeted him in German with, “*Willkommen an Bord*,” and a smile that made him seem much too glad to see him.

Attila’s knowledge of German was thin, but he managed to stammer, “*Dankeschön*.” The man had to step aside, toward the cabin, to let Attila pass, but made the movement seem entirely natural. He continued to smile at Attila as the big man squeezed his suitcase and self down the path between seats in First Class.

A Hungarian voice made him turn his head. “Would you like help putting your bag up?” asked a dark-haired young woman in a blue uniform who emerged from behind him. She had a beauty mark between her nose and her curling upper lip. Even at twice her size, he felt foolish tell her no, since she offered.

“Thank you,” said Attila, handing her the suitcase.

“You’re welcome,” she said cheerfully. Attila thanked her with a smile and a shrug he hoped was comical. The flight attendant took his suitcase and slid it into the empty compartment above his head as he settled into his chair. He leaned away to give the young woman space as she positioned the suitcase, her breasts uncomfortably at eye level. Through the rounded window, a Dutch KLM airplane was rolling with surprising dignity to a nearby gate. At this angle, the airport reminded Attila of the back of a warehouse.

“There you are. My name is Anna. Would you like a drink before the flight?”

Attila felt his cheeks burning again. She had his wife’s name. “Thank you, no,” he stammered. Anna smiled and walked toward the back of the plane, out of sight behind the curtain that separated First Class from the galley. Attila watched the mobile corridor connect to the KLM airplane, the tunnel unfolding like a turtle’s head emerging from its shell. Imagining hundreds of people arriving in Hungary, returning from across the continent after he knew not how long, Attila sat and watched, trying to glimpse the new arrivals through the window. It felt strange to think that they were ending the same journey he himself was just beginning, and that one day someone else would be watching him return to perhaps the same gate. He had never been beyond the former boundary of

the Iron Curtain, and it was all the stranger to him because no one else around him thought it strange at all.

A familiar voice beside him on the plane made Attila turn his head. Vassily Derevenko sat in the seat across the aisle. He had reclined his seat until he was lounging comfortably and was already holding a large tumbler of whiskey with ice. “What do you know about computers, Attila?” They spoke in Russian.

“Not much. They installed a computer in my office and told me to use it, but I can barely turn it on. I find books much more straightforward. I don’t trust computers. Where do my lists go when the machine is off?” replied Attila, trying to pretend the Russian’s unexpected reappearance did not confuse him. The meeting on the train fell into place. “That’s the second time someone asked me that.”

Vassily waved off Attila’s comment and went on. “Where do things go when we turn computers off? That’s a good question, and I’m not entirely sure. That’s the problem with computers: we all use them, need them, and yet we don’t really know how they work. Have you heard about this Year 2000 computer problem?”

Attila nodded. “A little. From the television.”

“I don’t really understand it, myself, but they say that computers don’t know the difference between the year 2000 and the year 1900, because they only measure the last two digits of the year. They say computers are going to stop working on January 1st because they are going to think it’s 1900.”

Attila rubbed the back of his head, feeling the stubble. “I don’t understand about these things. Is that a problem?”

Vassily leaned forward as another flight attendant squeezed past him on her way toward the cabin, then leaned back with a smug smile. “I know it has a lot of people worried, and that’s enough for me. I’ve been given the job of ensuring what they call in English *Y2K compliance*. You’re going to help me with that.”

“But I wouldn’t even know where to begin.” Attila frowned.

Vassily laughed. “It doesn’t matter if you don’t know a computer from a radish. Money is what really matters in the business world these days. I need someone I can trust, because a lot of money is involved in this. Millions.”

“Dollars?”

“Of course.”

Attila rested his head on his seat, finding it surprisingly cushiony and comfortable. “And this isn’t honest work.”

“It’s work that needs honest men, Attila. That’s why I chose you.”

“Because I threw you threw you out a window. Do the people you work for know you’re hiring someone with no expertise at all?”

Vassily’s eyes were mismatched, one green and one blue, and rumor had it that one was glass, as the original had frozen solid in Siberia. Looking into those squinted, shining eyes, Attila could not guess which would have been real. He could usually tell immediately; he had several workers who had lost eyes to the machines. “I don’t work for them. It’s a job.”

Anna, the flight attendant with the beauty mark above her lip, smiled as she stood in the aisle and started talking about emergency exits and seatbelts. Attila was surprised to see that the airplane was moving; the airport turned away in the window even though

he could barely feel the motion. It was nothing like being on a train. When Attila's eyes fell on Anna, she smiled at him. Vassily was pointedly ignoring her and flipping through the newest copy of the Russian business magazine *Ekspert*. The headlines warned of stock market instability in the coming months.

As Anna began to demonstrate how to properly fasten the seatbelt, Vassily muttered into his magazine, "If you can't figure that out for yourself, you don't deserve to be on the airplane."

Attila was surprised to find that he and Vassily were the only two in First Class. He listened attentively to Anna, his cheeks flushed at the thought that she was performing the pre-flight routine solely for his benefit. When she was finished, she passed between them and disappeared behind the curtain.

"They'll give us real food and a movie on the way over the ocean," Vassily said as he lounged, his arms folded behind his head. "They probably have peanuts or crackers or some such chicken feed for us now." Then, because Attila was studying the mail-order magazine, he went on. "I reserved this whole row so we'd have this space to ourselves." Attila turned his head to look at the Russian, hearing his tone lower. "Years ago, I could have chartered an entire flight. And I had to pay for this with my own money." Judging by the Russian's voice, Attila guessed Vassily had sacrificed too much money for the gesture.

Attila blinked at the fat man, who was scratching at his beard and frowning. "It's very comfortable," he said slowly, to which Vassily waved a hand, as though such comfort was beneath what he was used to and hardly worth mentioning. His eyes smiled.

After Vassily seemed to fall asleep, closing his eyes and folding his hands over his chest like a child, Attila stared out the window. The clouds rolled lazily by the airplane, and Attila found it difficult to believe they were moving as quickly as the pilot, speaking English and German, said they were.

Attila did not see much of Munich. Vassily hurried him through the airport, leaving him with images of dozens of complicated signs and clean carpets, until they were both seated at a round wooden table in the remarkably well-decorated and equally remarkably cramped VIP lounge. The waiter, the only other person in the room, brought them excellent Russian vodka.

Vassily said, “I’ll explain everything about your job when we’re in America. Don’t worry about that. It’s all very straightforward; all you need to do is follow my instructions. You’re going to like America. The whole world likes America.”

On his third drink, Attila asked, “Will you help me find my wife?”

Vassily did not pretend to be confused. “I’ll do what I can because we’re friends now, but that’s not my area. I never understood women. I have had more women in more countries than most men dream about. They all love money and power. Even fat, ugly men can find women if they have that. But to keep a good woman? Now that’s a mystery to me.” And he took another drink. Vassily’s face became serious, and he put his hand on Attila’s shoulder. “Let me give you a piece of advice.”

Attila nodded, his stomach knotting.

Vassily’s expression slowly spread into distant recollection. “When I was young, I wanted very badly to be a world-class weightlifter. I was a strong boy. In those days, they came through the schools and tested the strong boys by dropping a broom handle to

see if the boy picked it up using proper technique. I was chosen for training, and it consumed me for years. To tell the story in a few words, I was never good enough to compete at the top level."

His face took on a pained expression. "I put all of my energy into it. It was all I thought about, and I dreamed about it at night. I wanted to be in the Olympics. I wanted them to play the national anthem when I stood on the podium. To shake hands with Brezhnev." He lowered his voice. "When I was still in school, I was recruited for the you-know-what. Some of the people I was training with competed in the West, and they wanted to know who was in danger of defecting. I listened carefully. I betrayed the boys I trained with for years because I was jealous of their success. Some of them were sent to Siberia because of me. I've worked in that world ever since."

"This is your advice?" asked Attila.

Vassily nodded. "There are some things in life that, no matter how much you struggle, you can't have. Sometimes, even if you want something so badly it almost kills you, you can't have it. There's no use being hungry when there's no bread on the shelf. It's the way of the world. I want you to remember that."

The vodka made the flight from Germany to America quite a bit quicker, his cheek pressed against the soft cloth over the headrest. Midway over the Atlantic, he woke and watched *A Bug's Life*, which left him questioning his tentative mastery over English. Vassily snored through most of the flight. When he woke in turbulence, he complained loudly about his stomach to Attila until a flight attendant brought him a tiny bottle of whiskey.

"Did you ever hear this one?" the Russian said, examining the label on the bottle held in both hairy hands. "Kádár, Brezhnev, and Nixon together find a magical lamp. The genie says he will grant them three wishes, so each of them gets a wish. Nixon, being Nixon, goes first, and says, 'I wish the entire Soviet Union would be destroyed.' 'Done,' says the genie, and the USSR is gone. Brezhnev goes next, of course, and says, 'I wish the entire United States would be destroyed.' Once again, the genie says, 'Done,' and it's gone. The genie turns to Kádár, who is waiting patiently, and says, 'Well, what do you want?' Kádár smiles and says, 'Well, now I think I'll just have a beer.'"

Attila, who had indeed heard it, chuckled anyhow and said. "Along the border of Hungary and the USSR, two border guards find a chest of buried treasure. The Russian says, 'We'll share this like brothers.' The Hungarian says, 'No. Let's split it 50-50.'"

Vassily grunted. Attila tried again. "Do you know what they used to say about the border defenses between Hungary and Austria? It would take NATO ten minutes to break through. One minute blowing them up and nine laughing hysterically."

Both men laughed, but suddenly the Russian's face altered completely into stern disapproval. He held out a hand and demanded, "Your papers, comrade."

Attila was startled by the sudden change, and he laughed only a second after Vassily did. The Russian laughed harder, then went back to sleep.

As they stood in line to present their passports, Vassily told Attila, "Don't worry about finding a hotel. I've taken care of all of that. Times have changed, but I still have some pull here and there."

Attila handed his new passport to the graying man in the glass booth at the front of the line. “You speak English?” the man asked, looking remarkably like a specimen in a glass jar.

“Yes.”

“Business or pleasure?” The man had already closed his passport.

Attila thought about his wife, and about Vassily. “Business.”

The man handed his passport back to him. “Anything to declare?”

Attila shook his head, and the man shooed him away, waving the next person in line closer.

Vassily led Attila through the airport lobby. The fat Russian had no baggage at all, it seemed, as he passed by the baggage claim and walked to a man holding a laminated sign reading, “Derevenko.”

Attila had learned from films that New York cabbies were talkative, but the glum man in brandless black sneakers with shredded laces hardly spoke a word. Maybe this man wasn’t a cabbie. He drove cautiously, like a man unused to handling the Mercedes town car. Vassily sat in the passenger seat but soon regretted it, groaning as he turned his bulk to point out landmarks to Attila. Attila had difficulty distinguishing one titanic building from the next, and he soon abandoned trying to get any idea of place in the city’s vastness.

Sitting in the back seat of a car in New York City made Attila very nervous, and his thoughts wandered from Vassily’s haphazard tour to the wife Attila knew was somewhere in this unbelievable city. As the plane banked toward the airport, he could remember seeing New York stretching to the farthest horizon, the ocean and parks the

only parts of the planet uncovered by the endless buildings. He marveled at the thought of finding one person in such a city; he imagined, for a ludicrous moment, hunting through a phone book the size of the single-volume encyclopedias he had seen in public libraries. He imagined never-ending lines of trucks bringing in the food the city needed from all across the country.

The car pulled up in front of a tenement. The flat cement wall painted an entirely unappealing yellow, the tiny balcony allotted to each apartment complete with bare steel railings, the heavy metal door that only opened with a key or by remote all could have been plucked from a street in Hungary's bigger cities. For a moment, he had the sensation that he hadn't left home at all, and New York City was nothing but a worldwide conspiracy, created to keep Hungarians dreaming of an impossible place across the ocean. The airports and airplanes through which he had moved in a haze might have been a mesmerist's trick or a computer simulation. In his mind, the computers exhibited curiously magical powers, as he saw in movies and in the news. It seemed impossible that he, a shoemaker, would be asked to involve himself in their world.

Attila was a practical man, and the brief illusion was nothing more than a moment of indulgent fancy, his imagination heightened by the strangeness of being suddenly so close to his wife. When he focused his mind on finding her, his jumbled thoughts about the impossible city and the vague new job faded into the old ache of separation. For the first time, he felt a real sense of betrayal beginning to color those thoughts, and he tried to put it out of his mind as he followed Vassily up the apartment's steps. The floor layout and the peeling flowery wallpaper, even the designs on the doors, felt familiar.

Vassily pointed up the gap in the stairwell and said, “Fourth floor, room 403. I would come along, but my doctor says I shouldn’t climb stairs.” He dug in his pocket and handed Attila a scrap of torn paper with a telephone number on it. Attila wondered how long he had kept it prepared. “Hang around for a couple of days and try to stay close by. I don’t want you stumbling around the Metropolitan Museum while I’m trying to call. Try not to go to sleep until it’s dark; that helps with the jet lag.”

Attila was breathing heavily by the time he reached the fourth floor. The woman who was standing at the open door was perhaps Attila’s age. She might have once been beautiful, but her mouth turned down at the corners and she wore too much makeup, looking as though she had tried to make herself into a doll. She was skinny in a bad way, her skin loose, dressed in a green dress patterned with shapeless yellow floral designs. Her long hair was unevenly dyed an improbable shade of red. She wore balding slippers coming apart at the heel, the kind of thing he had only seen dangling from cardboard hangers in supermarkets.

“So you’re Attila?” she said in a Russian accent Attila could not place. It was thick and badly intoned, and she blinked at him sleepily as though she half-expected him not to understand.

Attila felt his face flush. He wondered whether Vassily had billeted him with a whore, perhaps one the Russian had patronized in her youth. He nodded carefully, his face hard. “That’s right. Attila Molnár.”

“Come inside,” she said, and entered the apartment without looking back at him.

He stepped into the room to the right of the thin hallway with torn carpeting that chewed at the heels of his shoes as he set his suitcase down. The living room was hardly larger than his own, and dirtier. A stack of TV Guides stood on the coffee table, its smooth finish at odds with the peeling wallpaper. A television twice the size of his squatted on a pile of plastic milk crates. He took a seat on the leather sofa, feeling it give a little under his weight. He struggled higher as the woman came in from across the hall where he presumed the kitchen to be. She carried a white and blue china cup in each hand, and set one in front of Attila without a coaster. He could see several rings already formed on the new furniture.

"Let's get this clear first," she said, hauling a wooden chair from beside the metal dining table to face Attila across the coffee table. "Vassily wanted me to clean the other bedroom before you got here, but you can tell him that I keep my house the way I choose. Don't you break anything in there. That room belongs to my daughter, Katya, and it'll be just the way it is when she gets back. I'm not her maid, and I'm certainly not Vassily's wife."

"It must be fine," he said, "to live in America."

She only shrugged and held her teacup in both hands, her eyes like a raven's. "It's better than Russia. I have my own apartment, a television, but I can't pay for the cable with movies. When I find a man with some money, I'll move out of the city."

Attila took off his suit jacket. When the woman did not take it, he draped it over the arm of the sofa. "Where is your daughter now?" asked Attila, trying to make conversation. The tea was cold and bitter.

The woman narrowed her eyes at him. “Don’t you think about her. If you touch her, I’ll shoot you. I have a gun. They’re not so hard to get here.” Looking at her, Attila doubted she did, but he also did not want to show that her threat was meaningless to him. The idea that he would do such a thing unexpectedly angered, Attila. He could feel his temper rising, dangerous, but at least he was in control of that, like a firebird held in his hands. He had never struck a woman before, but the thought swelled in his head. He had no illusions of chivalry and got into the occasional drunken argument at the pub, but the occasion to hit a woman had never presented itself to him. His wife had never made him shout the way his mother had his father.

At the beginning of his relationship with Anna, Attila let his youthful joy at finding someone to love carry him into marriage. What passion there was between them died soon, and they settled into mutual tolerance, like friends who shared little in common apart from a home.

When she saw that he did not reply, the woman continued. “My name is Irina. Vassily told me to show you around the city and make sure you have something good to eat, and then to make you sit by the phone. I’m not a good cook. I can give you some dollars to buy your own food. How good is your English?”

It was certainly better than her Russian, Attila thought, but he felt better speaking Russian than English. “Fine,” he said.

“There’s a pizza shop just down the street. I’ll show you.”

Attila nodded, and she led him back down the steps. She propped the door open with a fragment of cinder block there for just for that purpose. She stepped onto the sidewalk, squinting into the afternoon sun and pointing down the street. Her fingernails

were long and red. She was still wearing her slippers. “Turn a right after one corner,” she said. “I’ll be gone when you get back. Take a key.” She passed him the key and a few creased bills, then headed back into the apartment, kicking the block aside. Attila understood why her slippers were so scuffed.

The window of the pizza restaurant advertised cold beer and hot food. Attila pushed through the front door and took his time looking around the establishment, a low-ceilinged single room with pool tables in the back. Attila liked the room’s rough ambiance: the dirty windows and heavy tables, wooden and sturdy, with low benches instead of chairs. A group of teenagers gathered around one of the pool tables, arguing about rules, and groups of large men and women Attila’s age hunched on benches, their shirts rising over their pants.

Attila only stepped forward when a man with a thick beard wearing a pristine apron called from behind the counter, “Hey, you want some food? Beer?” The man’s accent was almost as thick as Attila’s.

“Sure,” said Attila. He had seen enough American movies to know what to ask for. “Large. Pepperoni. And a coke.”

“We only serve Pepsi here,” said the man, without writing anything down.

“Okay,” said Attila. “Pepsi.”

“Fifteen twenty five.”

Attila counted bills, and the man gave him change and said, “I’ll call you when it’s ready.”

Attila sat on the solid end of a crooked bench by the window and watched the teenagers at the pool table. They wore an assortment of sneakers, Adidas and Nike and

imitations of both. One of them had on a pair of low-topped shoes with thick rubber soles that Attila hadn't seen before. They spent more time arguing and laughing than playing the game, and were in no hurry to eat or drink anything.

The pizza proved too much for him to eat in one sitting, so Attila sat brooding over it and contemplating the remaining pieces until the same man suggested a box. White foam box in hand, Attila walked back to the apartment and found that, although the key pushed into the lock with a little effort, it would not turn. A little girl in pink plastic sandals sat on the bottom steps inside the building. She watched him, her wide eyes registering first suspicion, then alarm, but she stayed sitting and staring back into his face. He pocketed the key and turned back onto the sidewalk, taking a stroll around the block with his hands in his pockets.

Attila had always imagined New York City as vast and hive-like, a hyper-sized version of Budapest, and the overhead view from the airplane supported his impression. These streets felt familiar and intimate, the streets quiet and the sky open overhead. The bedraggled apartment buildings had a quiet charm to them, a calm cleanliness that extended to the cracked sidewalk and gray streets with faded lines. Nobody aspired to living in such apartments, and yet so many did.

As he passed a pair of old women sitting on a ground-floor balcony, one of them called out to him in Russian. "Hello, son. Do you have any cigarettes?"

"Sorry, mother," Attila replied. He fished a bill from his pocket and passed it to her across the railing.

"Bless you, boy," the woman said. As Attila walked away, they talked and laughed loudly about him.

When he returned to the apartment building, he studied the paging panel carefully, looking for an apartment listed under Irina's name. Before he found it, the front door opened, and a young man hurried out. Attila caught the door before it closed.

Attila climbed the stairs. It was a little more difficult after his dinner, but the key worked on the door. As he removed his shoes, Attila inspected the shoes laid out in front of the door in a line: they were all cheap leather, plastic, or fake fur, and all showed heavy signs of use. He found his suitcase where he had left it in the hallway, and carried it with him down the hall.

He stashed the foam box in the green refrigerator beside a jar of margarine and a half-eaten sandwich on a paper plate. The door was filled with liquor bottles, most of them almost empty. Attila, who only drank the cheapest Hungarian brands, didn't recognize the labels.

The girl's bedroom was as messy as Irina had promised, a beige computer with a boxy CRT monitor half-buried under paper on the small desk in the corner and the floor strewn with a young lady's clothes, underwear scattered over the back of the chair and the rails of the bed. The sheets, at least, were new, although the bed had no pillow, the pink tasseled pillow having been thrown onto the chair. That was not for him, and he preferred it that way.

He took his suitcase into the bathroom and carefully changed, putting his dirty underwear and shirt into a plastic bag, which he tucked into the suitcase. He draped his trousers, the only pair with him, over a the back of a wooden chair in the hallway. Instead of the girl's room, he chose the living room sofa, the metal boards digging into his shoulder as he stretched out on it. He slept in his new pajamas, soft and comfortable. It

was a relief, since the sofa was both too narrow and too short, causing him to sleep curled on his side with his knees hanging off. Sleep came easily, despite the sounds of the city streaming through the cracks in the single window in the wall by his head. A radiator under the window, lead gray beneath flaking white paint, banged irregularly through the night.

In the middle of the night, the door opened. Attila's eyes opened, but he remained where he was, feigning to be asleep. He assumed it was Irina, but then a younger female voice exclaimed in English, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Attila sat up. A switch clicked on, and Attila squinted against the sudden yellow light of the lamp. The girl facing him was a little shorter than Irina and a little plumper, her hair black, eyes army green and muted gold in the bad light. She wore a tank top and baggy black trousers covered in pockets. Her full upper lip stuck out farther than her lower lip, which made her girlishly pretty. She stood barefoot, her toenails unpainted. A bit overweight, broad-jawed, dark-haired, she reminded him of himself, younger and female. His eyes weren't green like hers, but maybe his wife's had been. Green or blue.

Attila took this in during the uncomfortable silence. He struggled to think of a way to explain why he was sleeping in this stranger's apartment, but he found his thoughts occupied by a wish to be wearing proper clothes, the pajamas uncomfortably close around his crotch. He wondered why she was allowed to come home so late. He also thought about where Irina might be.

At last, he was able to say, "Vassily Derevenko told me to stay here." He felt like a petulant child. The girl had her arms folded over her chest, and after a few seconds she slowly lowered her hands.

"Vassily is a dick," she said, speaking the name with more venom than even Attila could have managed. "This is my apartment. It's not some sort of hotel. I guess that's your suitcase?" Attila nodded. "All right. Well, I'm not sticking around anyway. I just wanted to grab some clothes and some other stuff." She went to her door and Attila followed, feeling hollow, his frustration refusing to slip from Vassily to the girl, like a sulky cat too fond of a lap. He watched over her shoulder as she looked around the room as though seeing the mess for the first time. "I guess mom never washed any of my old stuff. Anyway, I have some money in my desk. Did you go through my stuff?"

Attila shook his head. "No." He wanted to explain to her how awkward and sorry he felt, but he could not think of the right English words, so he tried Russian, his temper rising with humiliation. When his father couldn't buy meat, fury filled his stomach instead. He fed Attila on it, raging and cursing everything in his mind. Attila struggled to restrict his anger to the Russian, to spare this green-eyed stranger with pretty lips. "I'll talk to Derevenko and move into a hotel."

The girl took a step back to stand in her room, looking at him, surrounded by her clothes and computer equipment, as though putting herself purposefully into context for him. She watched the way boys watched lions at the zoo, torn between fear and fascination. He felt too big for the apartment, his shoulders too wide, out of place beside stitched floral curtains.

Without another word, she closed the door, presenting him with the glittery star stickers scattered over its faded white paint like acne. He could hear her stumbling around, balancing between heaps of clothes. He went back into the living room and sat down on the sofa, smelling the sleep, the stench of his sweat.

He felt her watching him from the hallway after she came back out, and then she went away; he assumed she went back onto the landing. Attila put his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes, his arms braced on the couch cushions to keep him from tumbling to the carpet.

“I don’t speak Russian,” the girl said from the foot of the couch. She was still barefoot. “Can we try English?”

It took Attila several seconds to stand up. “You called the police?”

She shook her head, her eyes growing with protest. “I don’t have a cell phone, and the only phone is in the corner there. I figure you’re some friend of Vassily’s, and I don’t want you to tell him I tried to run you off. Mom would kill me. I’m not supposed to be home, either. So, how come you’re not in a hotel or something?”

Although he imagined he spoke good English most of the time, it was almost impossible for Attila to think of the words to explain his situation. “Vassily said your mother’s apartment would be better than a hotel.”

She snorted into her hand, visibly restraining her laughter. “I’ll bet.”

Holding his suitcase in front of himself, he said, “Molnár Attila.” He remembered to put his family name last in English, and corrected himself. “Attila Molnár.”

“Attila,” said the girl. She paused for a moment, then smiled and said, “You would be. I’m Katya. Everyone calls me Katie.”

“What do I call you? Katya or Katie?” said Attila.

She thought for a moment. “Katya, I guess.” They shook hands. Hers was warm and soft against his rough skin, and she held his hand for a few seconds.

“You are in college?”

The girl shook her head. “I was studying programming, but I got kicked out because of my grades. Don’t tell my mom. She’d freak out. That’s why I came back in the middle of the night; I figured she’d either be out or dead to the world. I didn’t think I’d bump into Attila.” She smiled every time she said his name, and pressed him, “So, how come you’re friends with Vassily? You known him long?”

“He’s not my friend. I threw him out a window.”

Katya suddenly grabbed Attila by the upper arm, her face pinched earnestly. “Why’d you do that?”

“He was inspector of my factory. He didn’t like the shoes I made. Too much work, he said.” He smiled. The memory made him proud.

Katya raised her eyebrows even as she walked down the hall to the door in front of him. She sat down with a thump, then pulled a pair of yellowed socks from inside a pair of black leather boots. They had thick soles and entirely too many buckles. She saw him looking and waited for him to say something.

“I have never seen boots like those before,” Attila commented. He wondered whether she would still be fastening buckles when he was done changing out of his pajamas. He hoped she would be gone.

“Cool, huh?” Katya returned.

She had one boot on and one off, crumpled beside her leg. He picked it up and put his finger along the edge of the sole, feeling it bite, the stitching thick and sparse. He frowned. “I used to make boots. Like these.” He nudged his boots with his toe, not quite knowing why he told her. “They’re good boots. Comfortable. You can walk around all day in them.”

“Really? Cool.” She was being polite.

Attila ducked into the tiny bathroom with his suitcase and put on the first clothes that came to hand. When he stepped back out, he closed the door behind him. Katya was sitting on the floor in front of the door, holding an ancient computer between her legs, its case yellowed gray partially covered in ribbed black plastic. Attila put on his boots. It would have felt odd to wear his suit jacket, so he decided to go without. It was a warm night anyhow.

When he stepped out of the bathroom, the girl was gone. Attila picked up the telephone on a side table in the living room. The receiver was yellowed and scratched, lighter than it appeared. He dialed Vassily’s number and waited, listening to the droning rings. Even the sounds of the telephone were unfamiliar to him in America. At last, Vassily’s voice, speaking English and thick with sleep, rang hollowly in his ear. “Who is this? Is somebody dead? Who the hell do you think you are, calling at this time of night?” His voice sounded mechanical, too tired to be properly angry.

“It’s Attila,” he said, in Russian. His aggravation made him bold. “This place is unacceptable. The woman’s kid walked in on me at two in the morning.”

Vassily coughed loudly into the phone, forcing Attila to pull it away from his ear. “What, were you naked?”

“No.”

“Were you jerking off?”

Attila’s lip twitched with irritation. “No. I was sleeping.”

Vassily managed to shake off sleep enough for his voice to raise with ire. “Then be a man and get over it instead of calling a man who never did you any harm at this hour!”

Attila shook his head, his voice level even as he felt his own anger rising to match. “No. Get me a proper hotel.”

“Damn it, Molnár!”

“I can’t do your job sleeping in a stranger’s apartment.”

“Fine. I’ll get you a room at the Pickwick Arms, not far from Grand Central. You’ll love it. Just show them your passport when you get there. I’m going back to bed.”

Attila frowned. “After you make that reservation.”

Vassily shouted into the phone, “Don’t tell me how to do my job, Molnár!” The line went dead before Attila’s anger took him.

Katya was standing in the open door. The lights were off on the landing. “That cheap bastard Vassily didn’t even buy you a cell phone, huh? So, you got a new place to stay?” she asked.

“Yes.” Attila replied curtly, in no mood to talk, and he didn’t notice until he was in the street that the girl had followed him down the stairs. “Are you following me?” The streets were remarkably empty and forlorn in the darkness, the pale yellow light of street lamps barely enough to walk by. A cold wind blew down the long street, smelling of shoe polish.

“I’ve got no place better to be. It’s not every day you find a guy like you sleeping in your bed,” Katya said. “Don’t get me wrong. You’re a weird bald Russian dude. But I don’t have a job in the morning and I definitely don’t want to go back to the crappy

apartment I've been staying at. I can hear rats eating the wall. And you threw Vassily through a window. Hey, where are we going, anyway?"

"I'm not Russian. I'm Hungarian."

"Well, you're from that same world? Boris and Natasha?"

Attila didn't like the idea of a girl who looked barely old enough to smoke leading him through half-lit city streets, but she knew the city better than he did, and that was enough of an excuse to bring her. Why she came with him puzzled him, but he would work through that later. He didn't admit to himself that there was a deeper reason he let her come along; he had never felt as lonely as he did in New York City, surrounded by uncounted millions, none of whom knew his name. Attila was a simple man not given to sentimentality, but the cold impersonality of the city bore down on him like a weight.

They walked through the city, and Attila noticed the details that, the previous day, had seemed strange, but now seemed unremarkable. Grass grew between the cracks in the pavement. The trees squeezed out of rusted grates designed for the purpose, concentric circles around the trunk. Ovals of chewing gum were stamped into the sidewalk. A stray dog took a long look at them from beside a dumpster, then climbed inside, unhurried.

Attila looked at her, feeling a crease between his thick eyebrows. "Your mother won't saying anything about you being out so late?"

She just smiled. "No. She doesn't really care what I'm doing, so long as she's not bailing me out of jail. You're not the weirdest person I've talked to. And anyway, half my friends are older than me. It doesn't really matter how old you are on the Internet, just how old you seem, and I can spell and punctuate." She laughed.

The subway felt nearly identical to the one in Budapest: still busy at the late hour, ridden mostly by homeless who looked like old soldiers in shabby green coats, students and teenagers out too late, tourists and travelers heading toward early morning flights. Grand Central Station came and went without Attila taking much notice. The monumental architecture was secondary to his need for a warm place to sleep.

Attila had seen Park Avenue before on television and in movies, but it seemed quieter and smaller in real life, just another street in a city of endless streets. His head bowed by fatigue, he didn't bother looking at the lights glaring from all around him. He recognized a few landmarks in the distance and felt oddly uncomfortable, as though he had always expected them to exist only as part of a movie set. Illuminated signs blazed patiently at him. Colored lights and neon figures lined the streets. Decorations in store windows announced the arrival of the year 2000. Christmas interested the city more than doom did. Something was changing, but the change felt electric and satisfying.

It still seemed strange to remind himself that he was in New York City, *the* New York City. A shady Russian had arranged for his stay and he had less than ten dollars in his pockets. Some day soon, he would see his wife.

"Where did you buy your boots?" They must have been getting close to his destination, and he thought it would be best to have a conversation with her before they got there. It would make it easier to say good night without feeling awkward.

She shrugged. Although she wasn't thin, her shoulders and upper arms were smooth. "Hot Topic. I guess they don't have this kind of thing in Russia."

"Hungary," Attila corrected. "Maybe young people wear them. They don't look... hmm… comfortable."

Katya laughed. “They’re not,” she said, giving him a nudge to cross the street although the crossing light showed red. He felt a thrill at breaking the law. “That’s not the point. I wear them to show who I am, you know?”

“And who are you?” Attila asked. She walked ever closer to him, unconsciously using his body as a shield against the winter wind .

“I guess they’re not doing a good job,” smiled Katya. “You know, kind of goth. Kind of punk. Kind of like I don’t fit in where everybody else does. I do my own thing. I don’t want society to put a label on me, be a slave to the government and the media.”

He found himself searching for words, trying to piece together meaning with the words he knew. “Is that why you are not going to school?”

Katya laughed again. “What’s with the questions, Sherlock Holmes? Yeah, I guess that’s why I dropped out, more or less. I got sick of taking these stupid classes that had nothing to do with computers. I mean, what the hell does the US Government have to do with anything? I don’t need to know how the Judicial Branch works to write a decent program. I figure I can get the same kind of education from a community college or something without having to go through all those hoops. Did you know Bill Gates dropped out of college?”

Attila shrugged.

She chewed her lip between sentences. “I learn all kinds of things just tooling around with computers, you know? My friends are into the same kinds of things. We’re talking about maybe getting together and writing a video game or something.”

“They live around here?”

She shook her head. “Nah. We only talk on the Internet. Instant messaging, forums, chat rooms, e-mail, that kind of thing. You know what I’m talking about?” She peered closely at his eyes.

He shook his head. “Not really. You never saw them? Heard their voice?”

She didn’t answer for a minute. “So, you ever see someone get hauled off by the KGB?” Her earnestness surprised him. “Well, I guess you probably wouldn’t have seen it, but did you know anyone who got shipped off?”

“I heard stories,” Attila said. “There was a man in my building everyone said was an informer. They said he used to climb the stairs after dark and push a cup against your door and put his ear against it. My friend’s father got arrested. Things were never so bad for us. My father was from a family of farmers, so we were very… *proletár*, friends of the state. There was food, and when there wasn’t meat, we saved grease and spread it on bread.”

Katya stuck out her tongue. “Holy crap. Did Vassily have to do that, too?”

He shook his head. “He was an athlete. They gave him what he wanted, I think. They loved gold medals.”

“Did you protest during Vietnam?” She had the questions ready, and he had a feeling she already knew the answers.

“Yes. I remember marching through the streets a boy chanting. They let us have the day off from school and told us to chant, ‘Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh.’ It made me feel important.” Attila chuckled. “I don’t think anyone in America or Vietnam cared.”

“And Vassily?”

Attila smiled. “He probably organized it, wherever he was from. He knew how to talk their language, how to make them notice him.”

She smiled. “Things are better in a democracy, huh?”

Attila shrugged. “Things aren’t worse. Why don’t you ask your mother these things?”

Katya shrugged. “She doesn’t like to talk about it, and the old people who live around there will just complain about things I really didn’t ask about. I hate hearing old people talk. They just want to tell you how awesome they were back in the day and who they knew, and too bad old what’s-his-name died last year, and wouldn’t it be nice to go visit. Half of them don’t even speak the language any more. And she doesn’t talk about Vassily.”

He had spotted the overhang of the hotel from down the block, and he found the glass door unlocked, to his surprise. The desk clerk looked up from the magazine he was reading. “Are you Mr. Molnár?”

Attila was mildly surprised to hear his name pronounced correctly, and almost responded in Hungarian. “Yes,” he said after a beat.

“Here’s your key, sir. Please dial zero from your room if there’s anything more we can do for you.” The man handed Attila his key and gestured him toward the silver elevator doors, then returned to reading his magazine. Attila glanced over the counter to see the spread; tanned American beauties decked out in swimsuits smiled up at him. The clerk ignored him.

“Good night, Katya,” Attila said as he stood waiting for the elevator.

She smiled a little. “I haven’t talked to anyone like this in a long time. Not out loud, anyway. It’s nice. Like we’re friends.”

He didn’t know what else to say.

The girl looked disappointed, but she nodded politely. “Good night, Attila.”

He wondered why she followed him. He must have seemed strange, but he reminded himself of the grandmothers speaking Russian from the balconies. He couldn’t have been a novelty to her, and yet she followed him across the city.

The room proved much smaller than Attila had expected. A flat-panel television hung on one wall hardly wide enough for it. A sign on the door reminded him that the bathroom was shared, and he was in no mood to discover what, precisely, that implied. The bed, all smooth lines and planes, with no headboard or posts, nestled under a heavily curtained window that revealed a fantastic view of the city full of lights.

Attila woke to the sound of an argument coming through the wall. In the quiet hours of the night, he had failed to notice the thinness of the walls. He could make out every word as two people argued back and forth, a pair of newlyweds on their honeymoon in New York. The husband wanted to do the same things Attila had first planned for himself: see a Broadway show, go to the major museums, perhaps even get a ticket to a baseball game. The wife protested that it would be too expensive, and she wanted to do more than just “tourist things.” Attila smiled to himself; some things, such as men and women, were universal.

He discovered a phone book in his bedside table, but found no Anna listed under Molnár or Fazekas, her maiden name. He had not expected to find her in a Manhattan directory anyhow; no matter how well she was doing, he doubted someone who had come from Hungary with little more than a college education, a passport, and enough money for a month in a hotel could have afforded an apartment in the most upscale parts of the city. Too many of his schoolmates and colleagues had died trying to swim from Yugoslavia to Italy, or had disappeared on the border to Austria, for him to still believe fortunes in America waited for Hungarians like mothers watching for teenagers to come home.

He showered and dressed in his last clean shirt. Attila was surprised to find someone standing at his door when he opened it. He hadn't heard a knock, but judging by the young man's expression, he had not been waiting for long. He looked hardly old enough for the job, growing his first real mustache and dressed impeccably in a respectable but not fancy suit. "This came for you, sir," he said, and handed Attila a manila envelope. His name and room number were written across it in large letters with blue pen.

"Thank you," he said, and the young man stood long enough to remind Attila to give him a few of the bills that still remained in his pocket. He had seen the room prices as he checked in, and he imagined that any hotel that charged more than a hundred dollars a night should afford to pay its attendants enough. As the man put the money into his pocket and turned to go, Attila wondered, suddenly guiltily, just how long the man had been waiting. He must have heard the sound of the shower because the walls were so

thin. He could have been patiently standing there for five minutes, maybe more. Attila felt a little less cheated.

He closed the door and examined the contents of the envelope. He found a stack of heavily worn twenty-dollar bills and a note.

"Molnár,

"I have thought over your situation and I have decided that it's best if you stay in the hotel. I admit that it was a mixture of sentimentality and nostalgia for the old days, when putting up a friend with another friend was the best way to get them a decent place in New York City. I think you'll understand. Regardless, the job will happen tonight. I'll send a car to pick you up around 8. You can spend the rest of the day looking around the city, only be at the hotel when the car arrives.

"Derevenko"

With the rest of the day to do as he liked, Attila sat on the edge of his bed, feeling the firm mattress mold to his shape. He pulled one of his boots from beside the door to the foot of the bed with his toes, tugging it by a shoestring, and then picked it up. He held it in his hands and turned it over, running his thick fingertips over the leather, along the damp cool of the sole, rubbed the tongue between his fingers. He had worn the same boots for years. His own stitching was visible along the instep of the left boot; his fingers found it before his eyes did, and he smiled.

Attila turned on the television, flipping channels without paying much attention. Crawling in the back of his mind, his fears would not allow themselves to be silenced, and his mind wandered back to the factory. He imagined it vacant, silent, and dark, the

heavy machines resting like tired behemoths leaning on each other after a lifetime of work.

He had once thought he knew about shoes, but then he discovered boots he had never seen before. Katya said she wore them to show who she was. Attila was no stranger to the idea, and memories of the rich, colorful folk dress of the different regions of Hungary came to mind, the tall, polished boots and tunics embroidered with red thread into the shapes of birds and flowers. To him, they had always represented tradition and cultural values, tied to national pride by the cultural revival of the last decades before the fall of Communism. What culture wore boots like that? What formed such a culture, kept a culture with no tradition, no past together? Had the youth in Szeged started wearing the same things without him noticing? For the first time, he realized how little he knew of them.

He stopped on a news station. He recognized the term “Y2K” at the bottom of the screen, and turned up the volume. A bearded man who looked nothing like the computer experts in movies was talking very seriously about the threat of the problem. Attila was forced to smile to himself; “Y2K bug” sounded cute. He listened, his eyebrows furrowing.

“A computer is a very precise instrument that, unlike a person, has no way of judging whether the data it receives makes sense or not. If the computer is told that it is the year 1900, it will act as though that is a fact. Imagine bank accounts, credit scores, payment information, stock prices all suddenly moving *backwards* a hundred years. Imagine what will happen to insurance when they don’t know how old their clients are. If only a tiny fraction of the computers in the world are affected, the damage to the banks

and stock markets will, in the best-case scenario, cause major problems for the world's developed nations. Governments have to take steps now to make sure things aren't any worse."

The interviewer laughed, although there was a nervous edge to it. "But we have reports here from banks and major companies who have tested their software in simulations by adjusting their system clocks to January 1st. They say that there were very few problems, and the real problem is if people get scared and start taking their money out. What do you say to them?"

Attila nodded silently at the laugh, feeling wise even though he didn't understand the technical terms. He got the scope of the expert's claims, and they made his own worries tiny. If the world as he knew would end in a few days, it would not matter whether he had a job, and if the world somehow survived, that in itself would be something to be thankful for, even though he had not even been aware of the threat the previous year.

"Well, of course they'll say that. But I know that many major banks and insurance providers have made plans to print out thousands of pages of records in late December just in case." Even the mustache of the expert seemed to smile, as though the impending disaster was delightful to him. He, like the wise mother in fairy tales, was prepared to have been right all along.

"Thanks for coming in, Dr. Kinsey. You've been very informative," the interviewer said, smiling mechanically. Attila turned off the television. He remembered when computers were merely tools, machines and nothing more. When had the world changed so much?

He spent the rest of the day walking the streets of New York City. It felt right to be just another tourist in the throng. He allowed himself to follow the groups of people exploring the city, adding himself to the pedestrian flow with no camera or destination. He ate what he suspected were very overpriced hot dogs from a congenial vendor he imagined mostly sold to people exactly like him, eager to get a taste of authentic New York City hot dogs.

Thinking about his wife, he bought a map of the city from a magazine vendor and unfolded it carefully a few feet from the tin-sided stand, holding it map like a newspaper. He tried to remember where the Hungarian Quarter was, from what friends hoping to emigrate had told him, but he folded the map without finding it. He could have bought Hungarian food and curios just two days ago had he wanted to, and he felt no urge to do so. His wife didn't have a reason to feel nostalgic for home, so she wouldn't be there anyhow.

She waited near the doors to the lobby, pretending to read a new copy of *Computer Gaming World* at a newsstand. She dropped it onto the counter when she saw him. "Hey, Attila," she said, hurrying to catch up and standing between him and the door. "The clerk told me you were out. He's kind of an asshole. What are you up to?"

She wore the same thing, all the black out of place in the sunlight. He wondered if she had slept at all. She wore fresh makeup, dark red lips and something even darker around the eyes. "Looking around the city. What are you doing here?"

She shrugged and rubbed at the ground with her toe. Attila frowned. It would break the rubber and wear down her sole. "I don't really have anyone else to hang out with right now. I figured since you don't have any friends in America, we could do

something. It would be lame to be all alone in this city, and I thought it would be cool to show you around."

When he didn't reply, she went on. "I was thinking I could show you the Internet. Who knows, maybe you'll have fun. If you're not doing anything else."

He had expected her to offer him a tour, but it didn't matter so much. He wasn't doing anything else, and the girl looked like him, except with green eyes, and his wife's eyes might have been green. "Sure."

She took him to a tiny library that looked even shabbier than many of the libraries he had been in, a single floor filled with bookshelves above a bakery. Many of the books had price stickers on them, but he wasn't sure if they were for sale or had been recently bought. Emptiness filled more shelves than books did. The sole other occupant, a young man behind the desk near the door, hardly looked up from the pulp paperback in his lap as they came in. A computer waited near the back of the library near a shuttered window, and Katya slid into its wooden chair familiarly, angling the monitor away from the librarian's desk.

He peered at the computer as she typed in commands, only half-seeing the boxes filled with English and pictures that disappeared as quickly as they appeared. Finally, Katya brought up a page that was almost entirely text divided into several windows. "This is a chat room," she said. "My friends and I talk here sometimes when I can't log on from home."

One of the boxes started to fill with sentences, bottom to top. From what Attila read, they didn't seem at all connected, but his English reading was slow and laborious.

“Look,” she exclaimed. “Fred is on.” She pointed to a list of words he assumed were names, although none looked like “Fred.” “I told him about you. He says I live a pretty wild life, finding bald guys on my mom’s couch.”

She typed furiously at the keyboard. Even the boy who installed Attila’s computer and tried to show him the programs hadn’t typed like that. She looked up at him with a smile. “He says he doesn’t believe you’re real.”

Attila frowned. “What do you want me to do?”

“I’ll tell him you said hello.” She sucked on her lower lip. “Say something in Hungarian.”

“*Jo napot kívánok*.”

“What’s that?”

“Hello.”

She scoffed at his choice. “How do you spell it?”

He couldn’t remember the names of letters in English, so he gestured to the keyboard. She stood. He started typing. Before he was done, she nudged him and said as she slid into the chair, pushing him out with her shoulder, “Never mind, they’re talking about something else now. I’ll type for you. What do you want to say?”

Attila had never been good at talking to strangers, let alone strangers he couldn’t see, people whose conversation was quickly disappearing into the top of the screen as new text messages appeared in the message box. He had no message for the anonymous world of computer users. There was nothing he could imagine saying that they would want to talk about. He couldn’t imagine what common interests they might have shared. “What do you talk about with them?”

"Oh, you know," Katya said without looking at him. She was writing to them, but too quickly for Attila to follow, so he wasn't sure which of the rising messages were hers. "Just stuff. Whatever's on peoples' minds. Yesterday they spent three hours fight about if cake or pie is better. People like to complain about their problems. Right now, they're talking about *Seinfeld*. Do you know that show?"

"No. Is it good?"

She made a face. "I never really watched it. My mom never got into it, so I didn't get the chance to see it. They ended it last year. They're talking about one of the episodes. I told them it was pretty good, but not one of my favorites."

Attila cleared his throat. "But you haven't seen it."

"I guess. I don't want to drop out of the conversation, though." She laughed a little as she wrote something and tapped enter. "I asked them if they wanted to ask you anything about Hungary." She wrinkled her nose at the screen, waiting with her fingers resting lightly on the keyboard. "Huh. I guess they don't." She sounded resigned, a little disappointed. Among the messages, "Fuck Hungary" rolled slowly up the screen.

Katya clicked out of the screen, then sat tapping her fingernails on the beige keyboard and picking at her teeth with her fingernail. "Yeah. You want to go watch a movie?"

They found a theater that looked like it had once been an actual theater, elaborate carvings ringing the glass doors. While they stood in line for tickets to *Any Given Sunday*, she continued to scuff her shoes on the ground.

He felt he should say something, so he tried with, "Have you seen his other movie? I don't know its name in English. He's a gangster."

"You mean *Scarface?*"

He nodded. "Yes."

She smiled and returned his nod. "Yeah. I really liked it. 'Say hello to my little friend!'" When he blinked at her, she blushed. "I guess you saw it in Hungarian."

"No. In English, with the words on the screen. But he was the bad guy in it. He is an example about wanting too much." He didn't understand her enthusiasm for the villain.

"Oh, yeah. Sure. But that's the idea of the movie. It makes you want to be him, and then he dies. Makes you think. 'Make way for the bad guy.'" She had a point, and they both laughed about her impression.

The projection screen hung over a real wooden stage. After the film, they looked at each other. "*Scarface* was better," he said. They laughed.

She put her hand on his shoulder. "You know, I had a weird thought when we were sitting in there. We sat next to each other for two hours and we didn't say anything, but we were there together. You were in the seat next to me, hogging the armrest, and we saw everything on the screen happening together. Online, if you're chatting with someone and you don't say anything to each other for a while, it's like you're not there, not really together. The other guy could be on eBay or looking at porn or something. He'll won't even be thinking about you while you're just looking at the chat window and waiting. Does that make sense?"

He shook his head and gave her a little smile that made her laugh.

"See you later, Attila," she said. She shook his hand before she left.

The sun was starting to descend when he returned to the hotel. He took off his clothes, piling them neatly on the single chair beside the bed before taking a long shower and brushing his teeth. He then lay down on the bed in his underwear, resting his head on his bicep and staring at the wall, trying to picture the people whose voices he could barely hear muffled through the wall. When Vassily finally called, the job would probably take him most of the night, and he tried to nap to preserve his strength. He tried to imagine what time it must be in Hungary. The middle of the night, he decided, but he felt restless, as though his body did not know what to make of it all.

Attila came fully awake to the ring of the telephone beside his bed, and only then did he realize that he had fallen asleep. He was unsurprised to hear Vassily's voice in the receiver, and he nodded mechanically, although the Russian could not see him. He dressed in his suit and put on his boots. A few minutes later, he met Vassily in the lobby, where the Russian was waiting with a boy half Attila's age.

The boy wore baggy black jeans and a T-shirt that almost reached his knees. His facial grew in patchy, as though he had never shaved. Paint flaked from the backs of his trampled heels and the laces of one shoe hung to the ground. The desk clerk watched him closely, eyes squeezed under heavy brows.

Vassily indicated the boy, speaking English. "This is Trent. He's going to be our expert for the job. Trent is a wizard with computers. Three years ago, Trent wrote a virus that completely disabled the networks of three colleges and showed up in thousands of computers around the world." The boy blushed and squirmed. A stern attendant walked purposefully toward the three men, and Trent was the first to turn towards the rotating

door. The uniformed attendant stood at the door and watched until they started walking away.

After a silence in which the three men strolled along the street, Trent spoke, his voice weak at first but gradually growing in confidence. “The problem with finding a way to make all computers Y2K compliant is that the problem is in the software that controls the most basic parts of the system. It’s also deeply embedded in a lot of the other software they use. It’s very hard to fix all of those problems, particularly if you don’t want to screw up the whole thing.”

Vassily cleared his throat. Trent ducked his head and continued. “That’s why we’re not going to try to fix it ourselves. We’ve found a bunch of guys who say they have a program that will safely make most programs Y2K compliant. We’re going to go check it out, and if it’s legit, we’re going to give them the money and walk.”

They crossed a street, locals weaving nonchalantly between them. Attila said, “Why sell it to us? Then they don’t have it. Don’t they need it, too?”

Trent turned down a side street, then looked at Vassily before explaining slowly, “It’s just a copy of the program. They’ll still have it, but we’ll have it, too. That’s the way computers work.”

As they stepped to the right to avoid a half dozen older women in an assortment of high heels completely inappropriate to the weather, they brushed past a tiny restaurant with a cloth sign in the window announcing, beside a pair of foreign characters, “Chinese Restaurant.” The boy unexpectedly pushed open the glass door, and Vassily and Attila followed him mechanically inside. Stylized tigers and bamboo hung suspended on

wrinkled wallpaper, a huge mirror for a wall making the space brighter and more claustrophobic, as though the room was halved again from what it should have been.

An Asian woman with a mole on her cheek, her skin a healthy brown, gestured them into a booth with a dirty white table flanked on either side by a blue faux-leather bench, yellow stuffing emerging through rigid cracks. As though to acknowledge the passing of seasons, someone had taped a string of plastic garlands along the top of the mirror.

Trent sat first, scooting to the wall, and Vassily sat next to him, which made Trent shift until his shoulder pressed against the wall. Attila sat across from them. The woman returned and wiped down the table with a gray rag, leaving streaks of lint on the table, then passed each of them a single-page laminated menu and a fork. She came back a few seconds later to set a clear plastic cup of water that was mostly ice in front of each, then spoke for the first time. “You know what you’d like?”

Trent spoke up. “Yeah. We’ll all have the Kung Pao Beef with fried rice and egg drop soup.”

Vassily said, “I don’t like beef. It makes me clogged up,” but the woman was already gone with the menus, and he didn’t move, as though determined to be Trent’s jailer.

The Russian sat pointedly looking out the window. Attila studied his hands.

“So, Attila, how long you been in America?” said Trent.

Attila looked at his watch. “Two days.”

“You like it?”

He shrugged.

"Why'd you come?"

Attila looked at Vassily. "I'm looking for my wife."

"Mail-order American?" Trent grinned.

"No. Hungarian. Lives in America." Attila shook his head.

Trent smirked. "Come on, man. She's American. We're all from somewhere, but we're all American here."

Attila looked at Vassily, but the Russian sat staring at the table and scratching a beardless spot on his chin. They waited for their food to come. Attila took a drink from his plastic cup. It tasted like tap water.

"I still don't understand. What's wrong with computers?" Attila asked, mentally comparing the Russian's baldness to his own.

"See, it's like this," said Trent, idly pinching gray lint into stacks on the table, his fingers wet from his glass of water. "A computer doesn't really know anything except exactly what you tell it. If you see one tree, and another tree, and another tree, you'll think to yourself, 'Oh, look, three trees.' But the computer just sees thing A, thing B, and thing C, and it won't call them trees unless you tell it, 'Look, this thing over here is a tree, this thing over here is a tree, and this one is a tree, too.' You follow me?"

Attila shook his head.

"Well, anyway, the same thing goes for the year. Computers are really good with numbers, but they don't know what any of them stand for. So you take, say, a computer that's supposed to tell you how good your credit's been over the last twenty years, right? But now all of a sudden the computer thinks yesterday wasn't yesterday but a hundred years in the future, so it gets really confused and things break down. Right?"

Attila shook his head again and took another drink of water.

Vassily leaned across the table. “It’s all the records. When the computers read 1900, they’ll reset everything in their memory to 0, as though everything between then and now didn’t happen, because they’ll think that whatever happens on January 1st is going to be the first thing that’s happening.”

Trent looked at Vassily with his mouth partly open, and finally said, “That’s really not it. All that information will still be in the database, it will just be out of order.”

“Stop confusing me. You’re like a child!” said Vassily, slamming his hand on the table. “That’s just what you told me before!”

The Russian breathed heavily and audibly as the woman returned carrying a black plastic tray. She set three identical white plates and bowls of soup on the table, not bothering to distribute them, then asked, “You want more water?”

Attila nodded, and the woman returned a few seconds later with a plastic pitcher that sloshed more ice into his cup, replacing what had melted. She left again, and the men began to eat, Vassily pushing the lumps of gooey beef to the side of his plate.

Trent interrupted the silence. “I’ve been in here a dozen times and I’ve never seen anyone else eating in here.”

“What’s your point?” snapped Vassily.

“I think it’s a front for the Triad. They move money through here. How else would they stay in business?” He grinned at the thought, his ears turning red.

“Maybe they deliver,” grunted the Russian.

“Yeah, sure,” snorted Trent. “You think mama-san drives a white van?”

"Molnár," said Vassily, pushing aside his plate and scratching his chest between buttons. "I want you to handle this deal."

Attila swallowed the food in his mouth all at once. "I don't know anything about it," he returned. He could feel the soft knot of food halfway down his gullet. "What do you want me to do?"

"Just make sure everything goes okay. You're going to be giving them the money for the program, and that's all. The money's not mine. It belongs to the company I'm doing this for. If you lose it, we're all in deep shit. But if you make it, and we can sell this program, we'll each buy a house on the Balaton. I can't go in there. I have a bad reputation with these people. It's personal; they say they worked on the other side back then." Vassily's rough trousers dragged audibly over the cracked fabric of the bench as he shifted. "You remember the black market. Give them the money and don't ask questions. It's the same thing; the same old world that you and I are used to, just a little changed. A little more American, is all."

"Will they have guns?" Attila asked. Trent leaned closer.

Vassily shrugged. "But that won't come up. I'll make sure you're well paid. Very well paid. And I promise I'll find your wife."

Attila shook his head, feeling a hot twinge below his gut. "No."

The Russian's fist tightened on his fork until the hair on his knuckles separated and stood up. "You could have gone to Siberia when you threw me out a window. I still can't sleep on my back. And I know people who can find your wife by tomorrow."

"You threw him out a window?" interjected Trent, his voice rising an octave.

"I'll do it," said Attila.

"Finish your food. You'll need the MSG," said Vassily.

"What's MSG?"

"I don't really know. It's in the food."

After they finished eating, Vassily paid with cash and placed a call from a pay phone as Attila and Trent stood with their hands in their pockets.

"Is it this cold in Hungaria?" said Trent.

"Hungary," corrected Attila. "I don't know. It was cold two days ago." He blew and watched his breath curl above his head. "Do you really believe computers might….?"

"Suddenly stop working or fuck up utterly as everybody's popping champagne? Nah. Besides, we're going to get the last of it. I figure if things go pear-shaped for the Japs, we'll figure something out by the time it rolls over here."

Attila snorted. "Really?"

Trent laughed. "Yeah, man. But hell, this beats college, am I right?"

Vassily hung up the phone and pushed his finger into the coin return but found nothing. He shrugged toward a small clothing shop, its windows and storefront decorated with Stars of Bethlehem and shedding wreathes.

Attila was almost too broad for the narrow aisles, his shoulders brushing through clothes on circular racks, metal hangers scraping. He found the shoes at the side of the store under a laughing Santa Claus poster. He lifted a black leather boot from an upended box and tugged the crumpled newspaper out, prying under the sole with his thumb and running his fingers over the stitching. He squeezed the leather toe with the heel of his hand and frowned.

“Would you like me to find that in your size?” a woman in a fuzzy green sweater asked. She was wearing red bells for earrings.

“No,” said Attila. He added, dishonestly, “Thank you. I’m still looking.” She smiled and backed away as Vassily bumped his way through a tiny wooden nativity set for sale at the end of an aisle.

“Come on, Molnár. Car’s here.”

Trent, Attila, and Vassily left the store and climbed into a maroon van stopped across the street beside a fire hydrant.

There were two rows of seats in the van behind the cloth-covered screen which shielded the driver and front passenger from view, with the front seats turned to face the rear ones. Trent sat down in the rear seat opposite the sliding door. A man in his thirties sat beside the boy, wearing blue jeans and a camouflage jacket. He was wearing sunglasses and had his chin resting on his chest; he could have been asleep. The van settled lower as Vassily and Attila climbed in, taking the rear-facing seats. Vassily did not introduce the other man.

Trent tucked a brown-wrapped package into his pocket and sat taller. “Hey, Attila. If you get your wife back, you should send me a picture, just so I know she was worth it. You know how to use e-mail?”

Attila scowled and looked out the window. When he was assistant director of a factory, no boy half his age would have talked to him like that. Even the young man who had first showed him how to use the computer in his office had spoken to him deferentially. He glanced at the man sitting in front of him, but he had not moved, his

chin still on his chest. Only the tightness in his brow showed that he was watching Attila. It made him look away again.

They drove for several minutes without speaking. Attila felt self-conscious staring out the window with the silent man watching him, but the sights of the city proved irresistible. The van pulled into the dirty alley beside a basement club under an apartment building. They climbed out of the van, which groaned and bobbed on its springs. The alley stank of urine and garbage, and the trash bags piled against the side of a dumpster had been torn open by animals or vagrants. It was just like the alleys back home. It took Vassily a minute to wrestle a half-full duffel bag, its top lolling like a broken neck, from the trunk over the rear seat.

Vassily took Attila's hand firmly, squeezing instead of shaking. "Trent is going to check the program. If it works, just give them the money. My friends are already looking for your wife. They'll find her." Attila hefted the bag onto his shoulder, feeling the contents tumbling. He turned it so they fell toward the mouth and saw dollars in tight packs pressing against the black metal clasp.

Attila stepped past the bouncer and walked down the shortest corridor he had ever been in to a second door, which opened to a room that stank of beer and vomit. It might have functioned as a green room for visiting rock bands: there were mirrors above a counter against one wall. Opposite, a cabinet with a broken door half-covered a Nirvana poster that had been ripped almost straight down the middle. A folding card table had been set up in the middle of the room, and two people were already sitting there opposite Attila. One was a woman with flame-red hair and green sunglasses wearing a leather jacket. She sat with practiced cool, her pelvis shoved to the edge of the green plastic

chair, the jacket covering her belt. The other, a young man perhaps Katya's age, wore a Pantera T-shirt. Attila had never seen anyone look so uncomfortable in slacks. Shadows drenched the room, and shadows under the table swallowed their shoes. A life-sized poster of a man in a top hat playing a guitar covered the door opposite the one Attila had come through. There was no name on the poster; he assumed he was supposed to know who it was.

Attila couldn't imagine how these two would have been on the other side during the war. The woman maybe, but the young man would have been reading comic books and skipping grammar school.

The young man, whom Attila subconsciously named Pantera, hoisted a laptop computer onto the table and opened it. He spun it half a turn and pushed it across the table, which wobbled on uneven legs as the weight shifted. Trent pulled a stool to the table. He perched and read what appeared to Attila's eyes to be a text document. He fiddled with a tiny nub in the middle of the keyboard, scrolling the text.

No one had spoken since Attila, Trent, and the nameless man walked into the room. Attila cursed Vassily silently. He knew nothing about the people he was working with, neither his own team—if they could be called that—nor the other two watching him expectantly. Pantera's smug look did nothing to make him more comfortable, and the woman's face could have been poured from plastic. Attila had the uncanny sensation her eyes were locked on his face, and had been since she saw him.

The nameless man standing behind Attila broke the silence. "How long is this going to take?" His voice was higher than Attila expected it to be, with the sloppy s's of a man who had once lisped. It explained why he hadn't spoken before.

“Well, this is really long,” said Trent, and Attila immediately knew something was wrong. It was the voice his employees used when a mistake damaged the machines: torn between telling the truth and protecting themselves. “You don’t have this on a CD?”

Pantera answered, “The program is too big to fit on a CD.”

Trent scratched at the sparse hair on his chin. “That’s going to make implementation difficult.”

Pantera shrugged. “That’s not my problem. It’s a workable fix. It goes through all the software and replaces two-digit dates with four-digit ones, and it changes all the year coding to match. That’s the hard part, but that’s what you’re paying us the big bucks for. It should last until you get to the year ten thousand.” He smirked without humor. “That’s what we promised, and that’s what we delivered.”

The woman spoke up, folding her arms slowly over her chest, her hands hanging at the hem of the jacket. “Something wrong, kid?” For a moment, Attila imagined his wife as her, a frigid professional.

Trent looked back at Attila, panic sparking from his blue eyes. Before the boy could speak, Attila said, “I need to talk to my friends.” Pantera looked at the woman, who nodded only after a beat, and Attila pulled Trent into the corridor. The lisping man stood in the doorway and closed the door behind him.

“What’s wrong?” said Attila. Trent looked as though he wanted to bolt out of the club, but Attila blocked his path, and there was no patience or mercy in his expression.

“The program is bullshit,” said Trent.

“What?”

“I can’t figure it all out, but it’s pretty obvious it’s not some magic bullet. They’re trying to sell you a tinfoil turd by calling it a diamond.” Trent was frantic, panting like a thirsty dog.

Attila frowned. “How do you know?”

Trent chewed the corner of a fingernail. “That’s what you hired me for, isn’t it? I don’t have a whole lot of experience with this language, but I can read enough to know.” He took the brown package from his pocket, and Attila saw steel as the boy started to unwrap it. His hands shook, tearing the paper. “I just know that Russian is going to shoot us if we fuck this up.”

Attila put his finger close to Trent’s face and he stopped. “What if you couldn’t read it? If it’s in the wrong language, you can’t tell, right? Program might work, might not?”

The boy shrugged one shoulder. “I guess.”

“Stay here.” Attila pushed past the boy into the room and set the briefcase down on the table with a clang, pushing the computer forward with it. He left the case locked as he stared wordlessly into the eyes of Pantera and the woman. Both returned his look expectantly, their mouths pressed into straight lines.

“We can’t read your program. We can’t buy it from you now. Let’s talk.”

Pantera rose to his feet. “This is bullshit, man! Do you know how much of a risk we’re running coming down here? We’ll lose our jobs if they find out we’re selling this to you. The program works fine; just look at the system. It’s been set to 2003, and everything runs smooth. What do you want!”

Attila shook his head, holding Pantera's gaze steadily. "We can't buy it if we can't be sure. But we don't want hurt feelings. Let's make a deal." He did not even know how much money was in the duffel bag. For a moment, he considered what he would do if it had no money at all. He could feel his temper threatening, a drowsy beast showing its teeth by yawning. Finally, he unlatched the duffel and opened it, keeping the mouth between himself and the other two.

Attila reached in and pulled a stack of bills, thumbed through it. They were all one hundred dollar notes. He placed the stack on the table, then added another beside it.

"That doesn't look like a million dollars," said the woman, her voice showing emotion for the first time, the pneumatic hiss of a snake. She slowly unzipped the leather jacket; Attila could hear every tooth releasing. He wasn't surprised to see the edge of a leather case tucked against her left breast, but he still felt his stomach clench. "We work for one of the biggest companies in Silicon Valley. They're going to sell this thing for millions when everyone's desperate. If we give it to you, they're going to lose a lot of money. A fucking lot. They know we stole it. We're not about to leave without enough money to justify that kind of risk. So how's this going to be, big man?"

If she had a gun, she could kill them both and take all the money. Attila took a breath and pushed away thoughts of his wife again. He could see himself in the mirror. He imagined how the woman looked at him, through the eyes of the professional who could have been his wife: an overweight bald man, middle aged, who knew nothing about computers. The four of them looked ridiculously serious in the disused dressing room. He noticed where someone had skillfully written "FRODO LIVES" backwards near the ceiling opposite the mirror. The temper drained out of him, leaving rough nerves behind.

He ran a hand over his head, feeling the hair that had begun to grow since he left Hungary. It made him wince to feel just how bald he had become.

He sucked on his teeth and made the gamble. “Take this money. Keep the computer. We’ll get someone who can read it and pay you the rest. If not, you get the money, sell to someone else.”

“How about this?” said the woman. Pantera reached for a stack of bills, but she took his wrist and pulled it back, moving her hand like a snake striking. “We keep this cash for the inconvenience, and you get us another full million when you get someone who can read that. Do we have a deal?” She was looking not at Attila but at Pantera, who was rubbing his wrist and looking at her with wide, hurt eyes.

Attila felt his rage growl again, but helplessly. “Deal.”

The woman released Pantera’s wrist and took one stack of bills. Pantera took the other stack and closed the computer. They left the room by the other door.

Trent was gone from the alley where Vassily’s van still waited, smoke puffing from the pipe, engine purring to keep the interior warm. It was probably best for the young man. Attila’s anger sniffed for a target.

Fog misted the edges of the van’s tinted windows as the man in sunglasses strolled away without looking at him. Attila wondered whether he was in on it, but then shook his head. It didn’t matter.

Attila found the sliding door unlocked. “I lost some of the money.”

“That’s fine. It was all fake anyway.” Vassily sounded tired. The Russian read *The New York Times*, bending forward into it.

"So there was no company backing you?"

Vassily shook his head. He looked sad, old, and very bald. Even his beard looked worn, like an old coat. "I thought I could pull one off. Everyone is making so much money on computers these days. I guess it's just not for me to figure out."

Attila took a breath, feeling his muscles slowly loosen. "What would you have done if the program was real?"

Vassily looked over the paper at him. "Do you think I have a million dollars lying around?" He patted his coat, and left it at that, but it was an empty gesture, no real bravado. "They called me on the phone and told me they could sell me a program worth a lot of money. I was an idiot to listen."

Hefting the duffel in, Attila climbed up where Trent had sat, across from Vassily.

"Your wife is in porn." The car started with a jolt, the city as bright as during the day, lit from below rather than above.

"What?" The response was automatic, and Attila spoke over Vassily as the Russian started to repeat himself. "How do you know?"

Vassily stopped mid-sentence to re-order his thoughts. He didn't look up from the paper this time. "On the Internet. I've seen the site. She has a camera in her bedroom. People all over the country pay a company to put their videos on the web, live, and people can talk to her while she's making them. It's not that bad, but it's porn."

Attila took another breath, pushing it from his mind. His anger had unexpectedly dropped into shame. He had to face explaining what had happened. Even with bad materials or a broken machine, Attila felt shamed when he admitted he had not met his quota at the factory.

Vassily anticipated him. “I spoke with Trent. I know about the job. You did all right. I have no one to blame but myself, really, for trusting in this sort of thing to work, but what do I know about computers? I thought I could make some easy money. Nothing is so easy these days. I had a feeling the thing was a scam. We tracked your wife’s address through her bank account. We also traced a few payments from a group we never heard of. That’s how we found out about the porn. She’s got it set up through her computer. Her bills show she keeps canceling and reactivating the service, the company that helps her sell the stuff. She has a problem. Some people do.”

Attila sat in silence. “Do you have a wife, Vassily?” A stupid question, but he had nothing else to say. For a moment, he considered sweeping her up from it, but the clouded window reflected his bald, brutish head. What could he do?

The Russian folded the newspaper in half and dropped it on the empty chair beside him. “No, I don’t have a wife. Maybe better that way.”

They sat in silence.

“You didn’t tell me you met Katya,” Vassily said. Attila turned the heating vents, but they barely warmed his hands. He pulled his jacket tighter. Vassily went on, “Irina called me, in a panic about where you had disappeared to. She thought you were wandering the streets like a lost child, the country boy from Europe in the big city. She worried about you. Russian hospitality!” He laughed, but only for a brief second before it vanished, and Attila remembered the jokes over the Atlantic. “Katya called me about an hour ago. Irina gave her my number. I didn’t expect that of her.” He fell silent, watching the traffic.

"I met Irina in Smolensk. It wasn't hard for me to get women. I could give them chocolate, nice dresses, new shoes, even silk stockings. That was part of my game; I always wore jeans and listened to Rock and Roll, and I told the worst jokes about Stalin and Lenin. And if anyone laughed too hard," he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, "off to the gulags. She was attractive back then, but not by Western standards. Never beautiful. Good legs." He fell back into reminiscing. Attila knew he was trying to piece the story together to some effect, but it was becoming jumbled in his mind with thoughts of his wife. He searched his memory, trying to recall everything his wife had written in her letters, for hints that she was "in porn". He would not allow himself imagine what that entailed.

Vassily continued, speaking more slowly, letting himself get into the storyteller's rhythm. "For me, bringing girls to America was a joke, something to get into their beds. I crossed the borders all the time, or that's what I said, and I talked like it was easy. I used to say I had a woman in every republic. It made me feel powerful. But then I found out Irina was pregnant, and she wanted me to make good on my promise. We all loved America back then, but I've never met someone so smitten with a place she'd never been. Women." He shook his head. "So I did. It was hard. Even in the '80's, it wasn't something you could just do, but I arranged a fake marriage between her and my American identity. Katya was born right here in New York City. She doesn't know who her father is, if Irina kept her promise. I've met her a few times, but we've never really talked. She probably suspects, but Irina says she doesn't want a father."

Vassily looked at Attila, searching for something, but whatever it was, he did not find it in the Hungarian's face. "Would you speak to her again for me?" Vassily said.

Attila sighed. “What would you have me say? It’s for you to tell her.”

Vassily thumped his hand on the wall, frustrated. “At least tell her that I’m not as bad as Irina makes me out to be. I made her life in America possible. She’ll listen to you, Attila. You’re the only honest man I have from those days, the only honest man I know.”

Attila started to say that he would, if Vassily took him to see Anna, but then he stopped himself. He had nothing to say to her. He had come to America chasing a wind he had felt years ago, and it had long since blown away. “What can you tell me about my wife?” he said.

“She is assistant editor at the publishing firm. She edits books translated into English. She’s doing well; her apartment cost more than most houses do, even in America.”

“Then why does she…?” Attila could not bring himself to finish the question.

Vassily shrugged one shoulder and looked at Attila. Both of his mismatched eyes looked glassy. “I am not a young man any more, Molnár, but I don’t pretend to know much about women.”

Attila didn’t answer.

The Russian smiled a little at the corners of his mouth. “We’re getting old, Attila. We don’t have enough hair between the two of us to cover one head. It’s a terrible thing for a man to be old with no family, no one to smile when he comes home. I’d like to meet her tomorrow. I want you do be there. I could arrange for your wife….”

Attila’s stomach twisted. “Don’t.” The van slowed to a stop outside the Pickwick Arms.

“But you’ll come?”

He nodded and got out. The desk clerk didn't look up as he walked to the elevator.

The next day, Attila and Vassily sat in the Russian's car two blocks from Katya's apartment. The gray Mercedes idled fitfully, the engine periodically letting out an impatient growl that made something in the dashboard hum. A crumpled paper bag emblazoned with a generic hamburger logo slumped on the armrest between the front seats, and Vassily held a sandwich by the wrapper. He hadn't taken a bite in more than a minute. He would have to get out of the car after he finished the sandwich. Waiting, Attila picked lettuce from his teeth with his fingernail.

"Okay," Vassily said at last. He wrapped the sandwich and put it in his coat pocket, then opened the door and pulled himself heavily to his feet by the handle. He stood in the street until Attila got out and started crossing.

The apartment building reminded Attila of a shipping warehouse, balconies stacked atop each other connected by steel railings.

"Does she know we're coming?" growled Attila, and Vassily shrugged.

"I called Irina. She'll tell her."

When Vassily lagged behind on the cement stairs, puffing more than he needed to, Attila stepped forward to knock on her door. She came to the door a few seconds later, pulling a shirt down over her belly, makeup smudged over her face like a raccoon.

"Hey, Attila. Is… oh, I see him." She stepped barefoot into a pair of formless gray sneakers and tugged up on the heels, swinging the door shut behind her. "How do you like where you're staying, Attila?"

“I’m not staying,” Attila said. Vassily stood at the top of the steps and looked at them with an expression he couldn’t read. “I don’t know. I only came to America to find my wife.”

“You could stay,” said Vassily, looking entirely at Attila. “I could find you jobs.”

“Honest jobs?” Attila asked, feeling the echo of the question he asked the businessman in Budapest. Vassily shrugged one shoulder. They climbed back down to the street started down the sidewalk.

“How is school?” Vassily said after they walked a block in silence.

“I dropped out.” Katya turned bitter when she asked, “How come Attila threw you out a window?”

Vassily frowned and massaged his neck. As he spoke, something started growing in Attila’s mind’s eye. “He was using too much material to meet his quota. I told him he should use less leather and fewer stitches.”

Attila shook his head, creasing his brow, the memory still hazy. “You called my mother a whore. You said you wished the tanks smashed Budapest in ’56, and it was no wonder the world didn’t care, because Hungarians are all shit and they don’t understand about commerce.”

“I don’t remember that.” Vassily scratched a red sore at the corner of his mouth. “I have a temper. So do you. We all drank too much back then.”

The fire of his humiliation, his rage on behalf of his country, leapt in Attila after twenty years. He walked in silence, feeling it pressing against his ribs. He walked in front, so Katya couldn’t see his face.

A group of boys sat on the steps in front of a gray apartment building. The youngest wore a white undershirt so loose it showed his clavicle. One of the older boys, wearing a striped black tie and a Marcus Allen jersey, turned up the black boombox as they passed. What sounded to Attila like techno banged from the speaker, muted by the peeling duck tape over the left grill.

Vassily turned toward the boys, but before he said anything, the boy in the jersey stood up and scowled at him. Neither spoke.

One of the other boys, perhaps fourteen, scratched at the acne on his chin. “Hey, man, you got a problem?”

Vassily rolled his shoulder forward, his thumb creeping along his coat’s zipper. Attila stepped in front of him, his arm hiding the bulge in Vassily’s coat. The Russian bumped past him and continued down the street.

“You shouldn’t live in a neighborhood like this, Katya,” snapped Vassily, no longer paying attention. “Don’t you and Irina have enough money to buy things?”

Katya frowned and shrugged. “Yeah, if you count the booze.”

“Do you drink?” The note of anger in the Russian’s voice sounded fatherly to Attila.

The girl shrugged again, both shoulders. “I guess I got to do something Russian, huh? Not like I can speak the language.”

Vassily’s voice turned half joking, half bitter, very Russian. “*Na zdorovye* means ‘cheers.’ She didn’t teach you that?” They turned into a park, past a flowerbed with gray snow in one corner, husks of brown plants lying in the wet earth.

Katya smirked. "*Na zdorovye*. I'll try that one." They walked on in silence. An old man covered in a dog blanket was curled under a bench.

Attila started to drop behind, letting the other two go on ahead, but Katya called back, "Come on, Attila. You're not that old." Vassily gave him a look and gestured with his head, and Attila quickened his steps.

"Look, Vassily, I know you're my father, and I'm pretty pissed you didn't tell me, but I guess I see why now," she said.

Vassily and Attila exchanged looks. "Why?" said the Russian.

"It's the reason you brought Attila over here. I guess I'm supposed to see that we're from different worlds, and you're still living in yours so you can't come live in mine."

"That's not what it's like," Vassily said. "I wish I knew you, but what the hell do I know about computers? You talk to people you never see, never hear. Never know their names. Never see the house they grew up in."

She laughed. "Computers aren't that hard to figure out. They make sense. Even you could probably get friends on the Internet. You pick and choose what you want it to be. People talk to you like you matter online. You can be whoever you want."

"You think we could have dinner and talk more? You can tell me about the Internet. I want to know." Vassily sounded eerily earnest. Attila blinked in surprise at the Russian, almost stumbling in the wet leaves.

The girl took out a crumpled tissue and blew her nose. "I don't know, Vassily. You pretty much abandoned mom, and it's not like you ever really cared about me. You'd always just kind of show up and talk about Russia." She rubbed self-consciously

at the streaks of dark mascara on her face, speaking with the familiarity of a daughter to her father. “I guess that was your way of trying to get to know me, but you could have at least taken me to a movie or something.”

Vassily nodded. “You were such a little child. I don’t know how to speak to children.”

Katya frowned at him, but then her brow smoothed, leaving read marks where the wrinkles had been. “I guess people like you are used to trying to figure people’s secrets. Kids don’t have secrets. They just want you to care about them, make them feel like you like having them around. I guess they’re pretty stupid that way.”

“I wanted you around, Katya,” the Russian said.

She sniffed into a scowl. “You had a crappy way of showing it.” She said it like she wanted him to prove him wrong.

Vassily counted on his thick fingers. “I give her two thousand dollars a month. I paid for your school; I don’t know what she did with the rest. After she came to America and had you, she wouldn’t have sex with me any more.”

“Hey, T.M.I.!” Katya sighed. “I guess there’s two sides to everything, huh?”

Attila felt an ache, almost physical. He had never wanted to have children, afraid that he would shout at them and see his father looking back from the mirror. Vassily and Katya, in that moment, seemed right. Not happy, but solid.

“Maybe I should go,” Attila said, finding frustration in his voice instead of the soft emotion that threatened to blossom in his gut, like a machine that could only produce one product, however long it ran. He would think about it later.

"No." Vassily put his hand on Attila's arm. Attila felt an envelope push against his hand, and he pocketed it, feeling the bills inside shifting under his fingers. "It's enough for the tickets to Budapest and Szeged, at least," Vassily said in Russian. Attila felt as though he hadn't heard the name of his hometown in years. "Thank you. I knew I needed an honest man to talk to her for me, so that she would understand. It was worth the money. The deal would have been good, but I was a fool to trust them. That was my fault. As for Katya, I'm going to go have a word with Irina." Before he was out of earshot, Attila heard the Russian say, his voice coarser, "Keep my number. Just call, and I'll help you find a place in New York. My New York. Your room is booked for the next week, and besides, if you stay for New Year's Eve, you and Katya could watch the countdown me. I've got some caviar from a friend in Sevastopol. Everyone needs a friend for New Year's."

Attila rubbed his neck, digging between soft rolls of skin. "I'll think about it. But if I say no, I want a job in Hungary. You owe me that much, Derevenko. I could have been killed over this. You can call in any favors you have left in Hungary. You won't be going back. It's no longer the Hungary you mean when you speak about it." He realized he was speaking about himself as well. "I don't care if it's not the best job, so long as I can make things with my hands. An honest job."

Vassily stood against the tree not like a KGB agent, but like a smiling, gray-haired fat man. He nodded like he knew Attila wouldn't stay and walked off.

Katya turned to look at Attila. She had cleaned off most of her makeup with a moist wipe, which she tossed into a trash bin beside a bench.

"Hey," she said.

"*Privyet*," he said.

"Hm?"

"Katya," Attila said, on an impulse, feeling very big and foolish, "Why do women do porn?"

She leaned away from him, folding her arms. "What?"

"My wife," explained Attila. It took him a few seconds to think of the word, and she looked into his face expectantly. "She is addicted. She doesn't need the money."

She sucked her teeth. "You think I know porn?"

Attila touched her shoulder. "No. You're a woman. The only woman I can talk to right now. That's all."

She thought for a moment. "I don't know. I think everyone wants to feel sexy. There's the money, but I think it's all about someone wanting you. All our lives we hold it in, and when you're in a porno, you can show it off."

"Maybe I never wanted her the way she liked." He tried to see something in the face he remembered to suggest she wanted him, but he could not even remember the color of her eyes. Maybe they were green. When he got into her car for the first time, he had wanted just that.

"I guess." Katya shrugged again, raising her hands.

"But why my wife? We did not even have the Internet in Hungary."

She scratched her front teeth. "Maybe that's why. It's new. It's flashy. It's America: all pleasure, all the time. Makes you think you want something, then gives it to you. Maybe that's what she's addicted to."

He nodded. "Maybe."

"You know, I've seen that kind of thing. Some of it's not really that bad. That's what I guess I like about computers; you get what you want from them. Sometimes I feel like I live online more than I do in real life sometimes. Kind of sad, when you think about it. I don't even know their real names, for the most part."

"What do you think will happen on January 1st?" Attila asked.

Katya rubbed her chin and compressed her features. "Look around. Everyone's getting ready to celebrate the new millennium. They're going to have parties all over. The whole world is going to be partying all at once, all happy for the whole thing. For just one day, nobody's going to need an excuse to have a smile on their face. It's going to be twenty-four hours of just being stupidly happy and being happy to be happy. Computer bugs or no, we're all going to enter the new millennium grinning like idiots, all six billion of us, for no better reason than we all managed to make it to two thousand years past a random point in time, and we all came here together. And I think that counts for something."

"I don't understand it," Attila said, shaking his head. "Why would a computer stop working just because it thought it was 1900? When it's Monday, I put on my clothes and go to work. I don't care what the calendar says. I do my job so long as they let me because it's good to work, to make things. Why would a computer stop working just because it doesn't know the day?"

Katya laughed. Attila smiled, and she smiled back and said, "I think you have something there, Attila."

"You don't think this 2000 thing is a problem?"

Katya curled her nose and shook her head. “Nah. I think people are just scared because they don’t really know how computers work. For the first time, they’ve noticed how much power they’ve given to something they don’t really understand.” She scratched her nose. “Now, some people have all their friends go away when they turn the box off. People you talk to all the time but can never touch.”

“You should tell that to Vassily. Maybe he will listen.”

She smiled and nodded. “I guess maybe I will.” Katya stood up and patted him on the arm. Her hand felt insignificant against his muscle.

“It’s not the end of the world, right?” he said with a smile.

“No, that’s still a few days away,” Katya answered, returning his smile. “Hey, you know what I really think should happen on New Year’s Eve? You should come have New Year’s with us.”

“With you and Vassily?”

She shrugged like it was obvious. “Sure.”

Attila rose laboriously to his feet, and Katya stepped away. “Do you still hate Derevenko?”

“He’s still a dick, but he’s my father.”

“My father was a dick, too. Vassily isn’t so bad. I think he loves you.”

“That’s good.” She patted him on the hand and got up to walk with her father. “Thanks.”

Attila stayed on the bench for a few more minutes, then stood to return to his hotel. As he walked, he looked at the pictures of women in advertisements, their beautiful bodies and softly lit faces as they twisted, all curves and smooth muscles, dancing under

waterfalls of colored light. He could not imagine a man lusting in such a way after his wife.

A light snow was falling as he left the hotel the next day, the envelope of cash in his jacket pocket. The wool lining of the jacket kept his chest warm, but his ears and nose were numb in a few minutes.

He found the underground station, bought a ticket with some of the money, and rode in silence, listening to the wind rushing by outside the cab. He stood because there was not enough room to sit, and he swayed back and forth to the rhythm of the train.

The floor was covered in uneven tiles ranging from white to dark gray, the dark rubber showing beneath the occasional cracked tile. The before-Christmas crowd parted from each other fiercely; Attila could hardly see a face that wasn't smiling or crying. A lit poster showed two young people kissing fiercely under mistletoe. It advertised a perfume or cologne; Attila couldn't tell which.

A duty-free clothing boutique caught his attention, its walls painted a soft yellow by the overhead lights. The gray-haired man filing his nails behind the counter was reading *Esquire*. A young woman in a matching yellow outfit that looked to him like a track suit stepped from somewhere inside, her look of amazement replaced by a smile. "Can I help you find something?"

"Yes. I'm looking for boots."

She put her hand on his arm and pointed toward the back of the store. "Right this way. Where are you from? Let me guess. I'm good at this. Russia?"

Attila smiled. "No."

"Poland?"

He picked a pair without looking much at it. "These are American?" He felt the smooth leather under his thumb and imagined that he could touch it every time he put on or pulled off his boots. The thought gave him a quiver in his throat like a brewing cough, but warm.

"Yes." Then, more softly and sweetly, "Well, the material is American leather. They're stitched in Mexico."

"Do you have them in size 44?"

She smiled again. "I'll go have a look." Frowning, he left before she returned. With his factory closed, he could buy boots wherever he liked now.

He rode the elevator to the huge room that housed the ticketing terminals. As the flow of departure swirled past him, he walked slowly up and down. Round lights the size of his fist watched him, evenly spaced in the ceiling. A group of women cried loudly, taking turns embracing the tall one dragging a suitcase on wheels.

He stopped in front of a glowing television screen scrolling through the Departures. He couldn't find a direct flight to Budapest, but several went to Central Europe, and he was in no hurry. His hand slipped into his jacket, rubbing the dollar notes together to remind himself that they were still there, waiting for him to make up his mind. He stood there for many minutes, thinking about what he would do.

He had inherited the dream of America from his wife, from the radio, from the movies. He heard about it from friends who risked their lives to come to the West. But he had not found that America, the movie stars and the mansions, the freedom and wealth. He had found Irina, who did not give him a bed to sleep in but worried about him when

he was gone. He had found Vassily, who needed someone else's intervention to be able to speak to his daughter. He had found Katya, who had no friends she could touch.

Attila turned and walked back towards the snow. He would stay for New Year's, because Katya and Vassily wanted him to. He wanted to stay. He wanted someone to celebrate the new year with, wanted them the way they wanted him. But then he would go home.