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An Exclusive Love
(Eine exklusive Liebe)

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For my father

On October 13, 1991, my grandparents committed suicide. It was a Sunday, actually not the ideal day of the week to kill yourself. On Sunday, relatives call up or acquaintances want to come over and walk the dog with you. A Monday, for example, seems to me much more practical. But OK, it was Sunday. It was October. I imagine a clear Fall day, because the whole thing happened in Scandinavia, in a suburb of Copenhagen called Charlottenlund where my grandparents lived. All the houses have gardens and people call each other by their first names. I image that my grandmother was the first one awake that morning. She wakes up and her first thought is that this is the last morning she will wake up, that she will never wake up again, and go to sleep only once more. My grandmother sits up briskly, throws back the blanket, and slips her feet into the light-colored slippers she places side by side next to the bed every night. Then she stands up, a slim woman of seventy-one, smoothes out her nightgown, and crosses the few yards to the door quietly, so as not to wake my grandfather.

In the hall, she's greeted by Mitzi, tail wagging, a female Irish terrier, sweet, phlegmatic, and not particularly obedient. My grandmother and Mitzi get along well. She talks to her in Hungarian. "*Jó kis kutya,*" says my grandmother after quietly closing the bedroom door behind her, "good little dog." She has a man's bass voice, likely from all the cigarettes. Actually, she's a non-stop smoker. In my image of that morning, I could go back and place a burning cigarette between her fingers right after she wakes up, Prince Denmark brand, extra strong (ad slogan: "Prince Denmark is a man's thing"). Yes, as soon as she got her slippers on, she will have lighted up. So it smells of fresh smoke as she pats the dog's head in the hall while quietly closing the bedroom door behind her.

Somewhat later, the smell of coffee mixes with the cigarette smoke. And sensitive noses can detect a hint of "Jicky" by Guerlain. My grandmother has put on a dressing gown, a silk kimono my father brought her from Japan. She wears

it belted loosely around her waist while she sits at the kitchen table. She holds the burning cigarette between the fingers of her left hand. She has long, elegant fingers and holds the cigarette far out at their end, near her fingertips, as if it were some precious artifact. My grandmother waits for the coffee to finish running through the filter. A fountain pen and writing pad lie on the table in front of her.

Anyone who saw my grandmother at this moment could easily think she was bored. Her eyebrows are so far above her eyes that without the slightest effort on her part, they look like she's raising them. Heavy lids give her an expression of blasé weariness. In photos from her early years, my grandmother looks a little like Liz Taylor or Lana Turner or some other film star from that time, with long dark hair and prominently sculpted cheekbones. She has a short, straight nose and a small mouth with a curved lower lip. Only her eyelashes are perhaps a little too short to be perfect, and they point straight down.

Even on her last day, she's still a beautiful woman. Her skin is tanned by the summer sun, a deep, almost dirty brown. Her cheekbones seem to have climbed even higher. She wears her hair layered, down to the level of her chin. Over the years it has gotten as bristly as wire; it frames her face like a dense, dark gray hood. On the morning of October 13, 1991, my grandmother sits at the kitchen table. While she waits for the coffee to finish running through the machine, she writes down what needs to be done in her spiral-bound notepad. "Cancel newspaper," she writes. "Put the roses to bed for the winter." She's not wearing glasses. She doesn't need them, despite her seventy-one years. She's very proud of that. On the table in front of her, the cigarette glows in the ashtray. It crackles when the fire eats farther into the paper. My grandmother writes, "Mitzi." As she lays down the pen, a drop of ink leaks from the tip and spreads out in a moist, blue splotch on the paper, covering up the word "Mitzi." It doesn't matter. She'll remember anyway. She's been through it so often in the last few days that she knows the list by heart in any case. She turns on the radio, a little plastic portable next to the toaster. They're playing something by Bach. After all, it's Sunday.

* * *

On the morning of October 13, 1991, my grandfather heaves a rattling breath and jerks wide awake. He gropes for his glasses lying on the night table and glances at the alarm clock. Nine a.m. He knows what today is. He hasn't forgotten. From the kitchen, he can hear the sound of someone trying to be especially quiet while they empty the dishwasher. And, softly, Bach's violin concerto in A minor. Is it Menuhin's recording? He remains prone for a few measures, then sits up, which is a struggle for him. Every movement exhausts him. Once he's sitting up, he needs to rest for a bit. Then, as if to pull himself together mentally, he runs both palms over his head, smoothing his hair into place toward the back and at the sides. And very slowly, he stands up.

People who visited my grandparents in their small, cavelike, cozily overstuffed and smoky house in the last weeks of their lives either didn't see my grandfather at all because he was sleeping, or they found him on the sofa in the living room, weary and very thin. In just a few months, his weight had dropped from 155 to 125 pounds. He looked shrunken. He sat there, propped up on pillows, and didn't get up to show visitors to the door. He had problems with his heart. The muscle had become weak, a symptom of old age, perhaps a late consequence of the typhoid fever he had contracted during the war. The doctors gave him only a few more months to live. Recently, they had installed an oxygen tank next to his bed so he could fill up on air.

For as long as I'd known him, his hair had been white. A distinguished man: side part, mustache, prominent chin with a dimple. He always wore a dress shirt, often a silk scarf around his neck, and his eyebrows were long and bushy and wandered off in so many directions that they seemed to lead a life of their own. I have a photograph that shows him in a mask and O.R. gown, but you can recognize him immediately by his eyebrows, jutting out over the top of his glasses. He was an orthopedic surgeon, a specialist for legs and feet. When I was a child, he diagnosed me as having flat feet, but in such a nice way I thought it was a compliment.

To others, he may have looked like an ordinary, white-haired older gentleman with bushy eyebrows. My grandmother may have made the impression of an ordinary older woman who – if you paid attention to details – carried herself exceptionally well. My own impression of them was more or less the following:

Enter my grandparents from Copenhagen. An elegant couple emerges from a cloud of perfume and cigarette smoke. They look like they've just stepped out of a vintage car parked around the corner. They have the deepest voices I've ever heard. They speak German with a foreign accent and they talk to me as if I were a little adult. Do you like the ballet? Are you interested in opera? Do you think extraterrestrial life is possible? It would never in a million years have occurred to my grandmother to crawl through the nursery on hands and knees with us grandchildren, looking for a lost Playmobil hairpiece that had to be around somewhere. Instead, she took us to the opera. And when I was five years old, my grandfather let me puff on his cigar. I started to cough uncontrollably and he got a terrible scare and quickly bought me an ice cream. They seemed like movie stars to me, attractive and mysterious, and the fact that they were my relatives, my ancestors, made the whole thing irresistible.

* * *

Cut to a lovely landscape in Austria, near Linz. Gentle green hillsides. The former concentration camp Mauthausen stands there on a hill like a toy castle. Today, it's a museum and looks harmless, like a miniature model of something that is actually much bigger, as if the scale had slipped. You can take in the extent of the place at a glance. Two little crenellated towers, a heavy wooden gate. If a river flowed past, you could easily imagine a drawbridge, but there's only a footpath winding up the hill to the gate, which is wider than it is tall. A small door, cut into the right side of larger gate, stands open. Anyone may pass through it: it works in both directions, going in and coming out. Sometimes there are brief backups when too many visitors arrive at once, but everybody who enters will come out again. Once outside, you go back down the slope a ways,

past signs that say “*Todesstiege*” – stairway of death – everything meticulously displayed. You descend a few steps, past the main entrance, to the parking lot, where from mid-day on, a lot of busses are parked. You pay your parking ticket – it’s so easy now with the euro – and then you drive home: relieved, moved, exhausted, and where’s that bottle of water and can we stop at a gas station with bathrooms and how long is this toll road transponder good for, anyway?

I’m here with my father. The night before our visit, I dreamed that guest books with the names of former inmates were on display at the concentration camp. In my dream, I was leafing through them and suddenly, among all the other entries, I discovered my grandfather’s handwriting. “*Mit kap a kutya. Kakilni, pisilni,*” it said in Hungarian – What does the dog get? Shitting, pissing. – and his signature.

It’s early in the morning; we’re among the first visitors. At first, my father and I stand around on the former parade ground where roll call was taken. It stretches away for almost 400 yards in the bright sunshine. A brilliant day. Hot. Not a cloud in the sky. Now and then, a fly buzzes by. It has something of a summer camp about it, it’s so peaceful. The birds twitter, the sun shines. We don’t know exactly what we’re supposed to do, and decide to start with a documentary film being shown every hour on the hour in one of the barracks that encircle the parade ground. The film is shown in a room that resembles a classroom. There are rows of old movie theater seats. They’re wooden and squeak when you fold them down. They soon prove to be uncomfortable. The film is projected onto the front wall. It’s a bit old, with a crackly soundtrack and low-contrast footage. Sometimes, it’s hard to make out the images.

We see a quarry. Hundreds of men in striped prison uniforms are dragging heavy blocks of granite up a steep set of steps. The speaker explains that this is the so-called Stairway of Death on whose steps untold numbers of people died, partly from exhaustion, partly from beatings by the SS guards. Mauthausen was a category III camp. Category III meant “extermination through work.” On the screen now, there’s only a precipice to be seen, an almost vertical rock face a hundred and fifty feet high. The SS called it the “parachute jump.”

They pushed prisoners to their deaths, a thousand on a single day in March 1943, when Himmler was inspecting the camp.

Pictures of the dead hanging on the wires of the electric fence. Recorded voices of eyewitnesses: “You can’t believe it if you haven’t seen it with your own eyes,” a man with a strong Austrian accent says. “Many people think it’s made-up. Nobody can believe it.” Then they tell the story of 500 Russian prisoners who managed to escape in January 1945. Only eleven survived the hunt organized by the SS and civilians living near the camp. They used dogs. Eleven of five hundred. The Americans liberated Mauthausen on May 5, 1945. In the film, one of the American soldiers, now an elderly man, tries to tell about it, but keeps breaking off to wipe away his tears.

The photos from the day of liberation show skeletal men in striped uniforms with the Star of David on their chests. All their heads are shaved bald; they have over-sized eyes and nostrils, pencil-line mouths, and long, skinny fingers. They differ only in height. Out of the corner of my eye, I see my father reaching under his glasses to wipe his eyes a few times during the film. When it’s over, we have little to say, and our tone is cautiously off-handed. I didn’t know there was a gas chamber in Mauthausen, I say. No, says my father, neither did he.

Afterwards we join a tour through the camp. Our guide is a young man in sneakers, shorts, and a polo shirt. The metallic-silver lenses of his sunglasses mirror the parade ground where we’re standing. It’s covered with gravel. The heavy stone roller with which the prisoners had to level it out is still here. By this time, we have been joined by a number of school classes. They are loud; they’re laughing and sending text messages. Are they aware of where they are? Does it interest them? Is it just good that they’re here at all? I feel anger start to rise up in me, fury at these ugly teenagers with their hair dyed black and low-riding jeans.

Our guide rattles off the facts in his Austrian accent. “You see the barracks over there? That’s where they removed organs from prisoners – living prisoners, if you can imagine it – to see how long they would survive. Most died

a miserable death. If you would now look to the right, please.” His bored tone robs the terror of its force. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? I don’t know. I’m glad that I’m not in danger of starting to cry. I was afraid of having to cry in front of my father. But now I’m standing here in the sun, thinking I should have brought lotion with a higher protection factor. I wonder if I can get a Coke Lite outside the gate. Meanwhile, I’m hearing about the terror that was ever-present in my mind without my being able to put a precise name to it. Standing here, my main thought is: my grandfather managed to survive this – he survived.

In a museum in the basement, the medical experiments are documented. “Here in this barracks, organs were removed from perfectly healthy individuals, and then they measured how long they survived – without kidneys, for example,” our guide rattles off. “They died quickly, in horrible pain. Now, if you would please follow me.” A few yards farther along, he tells how the tattooed inmates had their skin removed and made into lampshades, as one has heard about from Auschwitz. In the display behind him, there’s a picture. The group jostles up to see it: a blurry black-and-white photo of a lamp shade with a little anchor on it. I leave the group now and then to get a closer look at the photos in the display cases, ready – no, hoping – to recognize one of these skinny figures as my grandfather. What did he experience in Mauthausen? He never talked about that time. Did he work in the quarry? Or as a doctor? What did Jewish doctors do in the concentration camps? Whom could they have helped to do what?

Through a room dedicated to the memory of the victims – photos of prisoners displayed with names and dates, most of them Italians. My grandfather can’t be found here, either. – we proceed to the gas chamber. It’s not very large and has a low ceiling. I just want out. Close on our heels, the voices of the next group can already be heard. Girlish giggles invade the gas chamber. Suddenly I can feel emotions rising within me; I don’t know exactly what they are: anger? mourning? Somehow, it’s just all a bit much now and I wish I were alone. On the way out, we pass through one more small room where a gallows stands. However, most people in this room were killed with a shot to the back of the head, our guide explains. It was more practical that way, “if only because it was

quicker.” Then he gives a brief lecture on neo-Nazism in contemporary Austria, telling us that swastikas get scrawled on the walls of the gas chamber almost every day and have to be removed. He says that it shocks him, but he says it in the same disinterested tone he’s maintained the whole time. “This is the end of our tour. Many thanks, and I’ll be happy to answer any additional questions . . .”

* * *

My grandfather has put a robe on over his pajamas and is wearing a pair of dark leather slippers as he enters the kitchen. His walk is more of a shuffle. The radio is still on. Now they’re playing the Bach concerto for two violins.

“Good morning.” His voice is even deeper than my grandmother’s, a deep, rumbling bass.

“Good morning,” says my grandmother. “Did you sleep well?” During their entire life together, they’ve addressed each other in the formal second-person, which was extremely unusual even among Hungarians of their generation, especially between a married couple.

“No, I didn’t sleep very well,” says my grandfather. “And you?”

My grandmother makes a deprecatory face.

My grandfather sits down. (13)

“Have you fetched in the newspaper yet?”

“It’s Sunday,” says my grandmother.

“Oh, that’s right,” says my grandfather, as if it were just occurring to him.

My grandmother is a little tense even if she doesn’t admit it to herself. The dog Mitzi is sitting at her feet and looking up at her adoringly. He’s probably expecting to get something to eat, which could in fact happen any time, since my grandmother is against authoritarian training methods. But perhaps his dog brain is completely empty. He’s not an especially intelligent animal, and even when he’s smart, he knows how to hide the fact. So he sits at my grandmother’s feet, looks up at her steadily, and my grandmother gives his head a brief scratch, stroking back the short wiry locks between his ears, just as Mitzi likes her to do.

“When are you going to Inge’s?” asks my grandfather.

“I’m supposed to be there about noon,” says my grandmother.

The radio crackles. My grandfather adjusts the antenna, moving it left and right and finally slanting toward the window. Then he takes the pot and pours himself a cup of coffee, spilling half of it on the saucer and table.

A sigh escapes my grandmother.

“Oh,” he says, when he notices what he’s done. Lately, such accidents have been happening often. He has trouble calculating distance. He assumes it’s because of the medications.

My grandmother stands up and tears a paper towel from the roll hanging above the kitchen counter. She lays it on the puddle of coffee, and it quickly turns brown. She balls it up, wipes the table once more, and throws it into the wastebasket. Then she sits down again and fills his cup.

“Thank you.”

He takes a swallow. His favorite passage is just coming on the radio. The first violinist has a warm, melting tone. It could be Oistrach, thinks my grandfather, but he wouldn’t want to bet on it.

“Did they say who the soloists were?” he asks.

“I wasn’t paying attention,” says my grandmother, lighting herself a cigarette.

For a while, they listen to the music without talking.

“I’ll come with you, if you don’t mind,” says my grandfather, once the last measure of the second movement has died out.

“It only takes ten minutes,” she says.

“I’ll stay in the car.”

“Be reasonable. You haven’t been outside for days.”

My grandfather is silent.

“It will tire you out too much,” says my grandmother.

My grandfather still doesn’t reply.

“It would really be better for you to rest.”

For a while, neither of them says a word.

“All right,” my grandmother finally breaks the silence. “If you insist.” She takes the dog by both his ears. “But you’re going to be exhausted.” The dog, who doesn’t like his ears pulled, twists out of her grasp and backs under the table. My grandmother stands up. She puts her cup into the sink. “But you’ll have to put on something warm,” and with these words, she leaves the kitchen.

My grandfather sits there like that for a moment, just listening to the music. After the last measure of the third movement, there’s a storm of applause in the radio. Now will they say who was playing? Lately, he sometimes waits in vain to hear who the performers were. More and more, they just say what’s coming next.

He takes a flat sliver case from the pocket of his robe, opens it, and takes out a cigarillo. He gets a lighter from his other pocket, the kind that’s supposed to work even in a windstorm. He lights the cigarillo, probably his favorite because it’s the first one of the day. He takes a couple of strong puffs and a column of smoke rises from it. Ah, listen closely now, the applause is dying out. “*Det var dobbelkoncerten af Johann Sebastian Bach, spillet af David Oistrakh og Yehudi Menuhin,*” says the announcer in Danish. “*Nu kommer et stykke af György Ligeti.*” “György,” my grandfather says, correcting his pronunciation. He says it as one syllable, with a soft G at the beginning and the end. “Ligeti György.” Taking a deep drag on his cigarillo, he shakes his head. Wouldn’t the Danes ever learn to say it right?

* * *

We don’t know much about the time my grandfather spent in the camp. We don’t know anything about it, actually. He never talked about it, and if you asked him – which each member of the family did approximately one time – he answered, “We don’t talk about that.” If you asked my grandmother, she said the same thing. “We don’t talk about that.” So then how did we know that he had to learn to sleep while walking? If he had fallen or sat down, he would have been shot. This was the one thing we knew. That is, my aunt and I know about it, whatever “know” means, because my father, for example, can’t remember ever

hearing this story. Who told it to whom? And when? Is it even true? There were times when I was jogging and couldn't keep going. I would motivate myself with the thought that I was the granddaughter of a man who could sleep while walking – because he had to, because his life depended on it. It always worked for me. Pretty banal, isn't it?

My father calls up. Among my grandfather's papers which my father keeps in a drawer in his house, he has found an affidavit stating that my grandfather arrived in Mauthausen in 1944 and was liberated from the Gunskirchen camp, 35 miles from Mauthausen, in 1945. This is a surprise. We had thought he was liberated from Mauthausen. In the Internet, I find reports about the so-called death marches on which prisoners were sent from Mauthausen to Gunskirchen in the final weeks of the war. I read that anyone who collapsed from exhaustion or stopped walking for a moment or even just bent down to tie his shoelace was shot on the spot by the SS men. Children, women, men – it made no difference. Whoever couldn't keep up was shot. Without exception. Thousands died on those marches. Of course I'm appalled, but I'm also relieved: I really am his granddaughter.

* * *

They were introduced at a private recital in Budapest in 1940. The war seemed far away from Hungary. Everything was still peaceful. Opinions differ as to whether this recital was at the home of mutual friends or at the house of my grandmother's parents. In any event, it was the Budapest Jewish middle class. I know it was a piano recital and that the pianist was named István Antal (Hungarians would say Antal István, of course). But I like to imagine that there was a violinist as well, a young man with a face like Kafka's, and that they played Kreisler's "Liebesleid," because there's something so fin-de-siècle Austrian about it, the melodious melancholy of a lost era. I picture my grandfather, sitting tall in one of the front rows at this recital, looking straight ahead, and that the first thing my grandmother saw was the back of his head. His hair is said to have been dark brown at the time. He was certainly sitting very straight, for that's how he

always sat. Perhaps he was wearing a dinner jacket. That's the kind of man he was.

Someone will have whispered in my grandmother's ear that the man up in front was a young surgeon, and maybe that's when she first became aware of him, this handsome man – or rather, this man with the attractive back of his head who was sitting there ramrod straight listening to the music. There would have been an intermission with everyone glad to be able to finally move around, have something to drink, and chat with each other. Everyone, that is, except my grandfather, who loved music more than almost anything else in the world. And then someone or other introduced them: Veronika and István, Vera and Pista. She was twenty; he was thirty-one.

My grandmother claims to have known right away at their first meeting that this was the man she would marry. At least, that's how she often told the story. And how things took their course between them is also well known in our family. It's one of those stories that have been told so many times that eventually, it couldn't possibly have happened any other way than exactly like that. A family legend: they agreed to go for a walk together. And because they liked each other so much, they agreed to another walk. And then another. Each thought the other loved going for walks better than anything else. They were both wrong. When the misunderstanding was finally cleared up, both of them are supposed to have been mightily relieved.

They married on August 7, 1942. A small celebration: the families and a few friends were there. In the wedding photo, she's turning toward him with a cheeky smile. She has a white blossom in her hair and is holding a bouquet of white calla lilies. He's a head taller than she and gazes proudly down at his beautiful bride, the brand-new wedding band on his left hand. They had only a civil ceremony, since neither one believed in god. Did they promise the magistrate to stay together "until death do us part" (or, as they say in Hungarian, "until spade, rake, and big bell" parted them)? Did they already know then that they wouldn't wait for that to happen?

* * *

What do people do on a morning they know will be their last? I imagine them straightening up, taking care of things, taking out the garbage, filing away last month's telephone bill, folding wash. My grandmother gives the folded wash a last smoothing with her hand before putting it into the closet – for the others who will see it. I imagine that two people who know this is their last morning would do things separately so as not to be looking into each other's eyes all the time, because what was there to say? I assume they had discussed it all weeks and months ago. Or perhaps years. Maybe they listen to music, nothing too sad, Mozart rather than Wagner. I imagine my grandfather sitting in the living room in the armchair next to the record player, smoking cigars, the little thin ones, and coughing repeatedly, a deep, bronchial cough. He's still wearing his robe. There's a packet of papers in his lap to be gone through and sorted, but he's not doing it. He doesn't move. His eyes look off into the distance at something only he can see. His breathing is labored. Perhaps he's simply tired.

My grandmother comes into the room with several ashtrays in her hand. She has gotten dressed in the meantime and is wearing a dark red velveteen shirt and a bib overall dress, over which she's tied an apron around her waist. And she's wearing closed shoes because she just took the dog for a walk. She has combed her hair and it's standing out from her head in individual layers. If you painted it, it would have the shape of a pine cone. Right behind her, the dog appears in the doorway. He's sticking close by her side this morning.

"Pista?" My grandmother sounds irritated as she says it: Pishta, the nickname for István. It hisses when she says it.

My grandfather turns his head toward her. He looks surprised. He hadn't heard her. Then he smiles. His wife – his beautiful wife.

"I asked you something."

"Sorry?" he says.

"Did you take your medicine?" she asks.

My grandfather briefly squeezes his eyes shut, which my grandmother takes for assent. She goes to the kitchen to wash the ashtrays she's collected

from the guest room and the hall. Everything should be neat. She doesn't want to cause any fuss. No one should feel incommoded by their decision.

The telephone rings.

My grandmother wipes her hands off on her apron and goes back into the living room, where the telephone stands on the secretary. My grandfather looks up and turns down the music.

My grandmother lifts the receiver to her ear.

"Yes? . . . *God dag*, Sebastian. How are you?"

It's my cousin.

"Tomorrow? No, we can't tomorrow. We already talked about it. How long will you be in Copenhagen? . . . No, tomorrow isn't possible, not in the afternoon either. We'll be at the hospital all day. Pista has an appointment . . . Yes, I'm sure. It always takes a long time . . . Yes, it's a shame, but you'll have to come visit us again . . . Yes, I'll tell him. So long. Yes, you too. Yes. *Farvel-farvel.*"

She hangs up, stands up, and returns to the kitchen.

"What did he say?" my grandfather calls after her.

"He wanted to come see us tomorrow," my grandmother calls back.

"And what did you tell him?" calls my grandfather, although he's overheard the whole conversation.

"I said we had to go to the hospital."

"Tomorrow?"

"I said they had to examine you."

"Good."

"He's in Copenhagen. He wanted to come by tomorrow. I told him it wouldn't work."

"Good."

My grandfather turns the music back up.

In the kitchen, my grandmother leans briefly against the sink, supporting herself with both hands, then she pushes back up and takes an ashtray out of the dishwasher to dry it.

No, wrong. That's my sentimental imagination. My grandmother didn't need to support herself. She had made a decision, made it a long time ago, and if she had been sentimental, she'd still be alive today. On that October day sixteen years ago she was a completely healthy seventy-one-year-old woman.

* * *

After her death, we emptied out her closet – my aunt, my mother, and I. I took a jacket that looks like it's made of snakeskin but is really plastic. The material looks so genuine that more than once, I've been accosted by animal rights people when I was wearing the jacket. My grandmother sewed it herself. By now, the plastic has worn away in a couple of places on the collar and the green lining shows through, but I still wear it with a funny kind of family pride. To be sure, only on cool days, because it makes you sweat pretty much, which my grandmother never let on.

She was an extravagant dresser. She wore the plastic snakeskin jacket with pants made from the same material, and the fact that she managed not to look like she was wearing a costume, but simply looked great, was due to her innate elegance. Everything looked good on her. She could wear whatever she wanted – and she did. She had a weakness for showy jewelry and daring colors, wore combinations of leather and knits, velour and corduroy. She tied all sorts of things around her slim waist and in the summer she wore a floor-length yellow terry cloth skirt and sun glasses big enough to hide behind.

The one thing that never seemed to go with the rest of what she had on were her shoes. We found them all neatly arrayed side-by-side in a separate closet. There was something wrong with my grandmother's feet, probably bone spurs, although I never saw them and hardly anyone else did, either, because she was careful never to show her feet. She was slightly pigeon-toed and wore only sturdy flats with granny soles of light-colored rubber. Which had no effect at all, however, on her proud, upright posture. She walked along the sidewalk as if down a red carpet invisible to others – a queen.

Her personality was so powerful, so compelling, that when she entered a room full of people, everyone adjusted to her mood. She was feared and admired. People were relieved when she smiled. If she was tired or, God forbid, in a bad mood, the general atmosphere would turn gloomy. If she couldn't stand someone, she simply looked right through them and did it so thoroughly that for that person, the ambient temperature must have cooled by several degrees. She acted as if the person didn't exist, even if they were standing right in front of her. She simply looked through them, as if she could look through their head and see that nothing special was happening on the other side of the street.

I don't think that my grandmother was conscious of the impression she made. I think she thought of herself as an elegant, interesting, intelligent, sympathetic woman who liked to cook and bake and go to the opera. But what can we really know of our grandmothers?

* * *

It is a hot summer day in Budapest, and the petite woman sitting across from me on a curved Biedermeier sofa was her best friend. She's 87, the same age my grandmother would be today. She is a bit stooped, like a twisted tree, but at the same time still quite girlish. She's wearing bold, bright-red lipstick. We've just met for the first time. Fate took her as far as Charleston, South Carolina, where she has lived for many years. Now she's visiting her Hungarian homeland for a few weeks, and assumes that this will be her last visit. Travel has become too difficult for her.

She's dressed idiosyncratically, as is sometimes the case with older people whom the decades have made indifferent to whether anyone else shares their taste. Little white Eiffel towers are doing round dances across her black, sleeveless blouse, and her glasses are so disproportionately large that they are much wider than her face. The skin on her upper arms has long, soft folds. I recognize her ring at once. It's the same Cartier ring my grandmother wore: three slender, intertwined circles in different colors of gold.

After we sit down, Erzsi lights the first of many cigarettes. She smokes Marlboros. She sits there on the edge of the sofa with her knees apart, leaning forward and resting her arms on her thighs. She looks at me through her gigantic glasses and says, "Okay, what do you want to know?"

* * *

The Germans occupied Hungary on March 19, 1944, fairly late in the war. Within the next few months, they deported nearly 600,000 Hungarian Jews, an unheard-of organizational feat. Within two months, about 430,000 of them were sent to Auschwitz alone. The new arrivals from Hungary were an unusual sight in the camp. Well-nourished (because they had been protected for so long), healthy, and in such great numbers that the murderers could hardly keep abreast of their work. But the Germans proved up to the task after all. By May, 1945 – within a year – they had killed two-thirds of all Hungarian Jews.

When Germany occupied Hungary, my grandmother had just entered the third month of her pregnancy. Six months later, on September 26, 1944, at the time of greatest danger, she bore a son – my father. We know that she hid him in a drawer for the first few months. But how did she hide herself? Where was this drawer? How was she able to escape the ghetto and the concentration camp? We know that she had forged papers. Why her, but not my grandfather? How did my grandmother survive the war?

* * *

"It was a crazy time," Erzsi says. We speak English with each other, me with a German accent and she with a Hungarian one. Her eyes are wide awake behind the big lenses. A crazy time. There was so much to do, so many needing help. She says it cheerfully, almost in high spirits, as if it had all been one big adventure, even though she's Jewish too. How did she survive the German occupation herself?

"Forged papers," she says off-handedly. "My husband was in the resistance and we were able to obtain a lot of forged papers. It was a wonderful

time – of course it was a terrible time, but I was in a manic state twenty-four hours a day. It was a fabulous feeling to be able to help. I was young. I probably didn't realize how dangerous it was. I just ran around the whole time, providing people with forged papers and feeling like a good angel."

But if it was so easy, why did her best friend's husband, my grandfather, have to go to a concentration camp?

"He was drafted into a work detail of Jewish men and from there, they took him away. There was nothing we could do. Your grandmother had forged papers. She wore the Star of David for one day only, then she took it off again. But I don't know where she lived. We didn't have very much contact at the time."

Erzsi says that back then, my grandmother suspected her of collaborating with the Germans. All around her, friends were being sent to the ghetto or just disappearing, yet Erzsi was running around unchallenged, completely fearless, and in a splendidly good mood. That struck my grandmother as suspicious. Besides, they had already been going their separate ways for a couple of years, because of their husbands, she says. Neither friend had been married for long and both were so much in love that there was no time left for a woman friend. But she did visit my grandmother once in the hospital, a few days before the baby was born.

Was my father born in a hospital?

"Yes, because she had forged papers. Her mother was with her when I visited. Vera was in a terrible mood."

Erzsi laughs, and then she tells how they met each other, she and my grandmother. They became friends in school and did everything together: homework, ballet class, smoking. They became best friends because they didn't have many other friends, and I imagine them as the prettiest girls in the class, prettier, more intelligent, and probably terribly stuck-up.

* * *

After their wedding, my grandparents moved into a splendid apartment near the opera, right on the Octagon, one of the busiest squares of the city,

where four streets come together and you can transfer from the streetcar to the metro. The house is still standing. Today, there's an illuminated advertisement mounted on the roof. At night, you can see the word "Rolex" from far and wide, written in green letters with a little golden crown above the L. It's one of those southeastern European apartment buildings built around an inner courtyard. A stairwell connects one floor with another and the balustrade makes the floors look like the balconies of a theater. There's an elevator for lazy people, its iron door opening with a rusty squeak.

My grandparents lived on the third floor. One floor down and across the stairwell lived my grandfather's older brother with his wife and child. He died in the Sixties in his new homeland of Australia. In photos he looks like a runny watercolor sketch of my grandfather. Where the younger brother had pleasantly regular features, those of the older one looked like they'd slipped. His face was narrower and his eyes encircled by dark shadows. His name was József, they called him Dodo, and he was a lawyer. A detailed account of how he survived the war has been passed down in a letter he wrote to a former schoolmate in 1946. He tells how he escaped the grasp of the Gestapo more than once and hid out in the apartment on the Octagon during the final weeks of the war. His gentile wife had been able to hang on to it.

In the same letter, he writes the following about my grandfather, "My immediate family are still alive. Pista got married in 1942. In late September 1944, they had a boy – magnificent timing. His wife and the baby hid out with forged papers during the difficult time. Pista was sent to Poland with the Work Service. From there, they were marched – with a detour to avoid Budapest – the entire way to Mauthausen and later to Gunskirchen. I assume you've become acquainted with the names of those towns in the meantime, thanks to their tragic rise to fame. In any event, they're in the western part of Austria."