

*JM Huscher*

**November 1991: Waiting for the 14.**

**I**n 1991 the Soviets retreated from Eastern Europe, taking with them the rigid state-enforced atheism, leaving the door wide open for Bible-believing missionaries like my parents. My brother, sister, and I packed our suitcases alongside them, and the five of us moved to Budapest in August of that year, ready for the sort of thing that no one can prepare for at all. In what was later explained to us as an effort to gain credibility, and thereby a means of sharing the good news about Jesus with the locals, my brother and I were enrolled in a public elementary school. We faithfully attended classes in spite of not being able to even say “I don’t speak Hungarian” in a language that anyone would understand. Teachers would put their hands in the small of our backs and push us around the school. We were broken machinery. We were awkward furniture.

By November, the newness of it—whatever it was that sometimes made this feel like more of a vacation than a real life—had worn off. It had been another long day of confusion. A slow tornado of strange syllables and words I couldn’t have even tried to spell. I was tired. I always felt tired. The last bell rang. I found my brother. Mike walked next to me toward the bus stop, wearing his backpack backwards over his stomach. We had become closer in recent weeks, mostly because he was the only other person in the school I could talk to. He laughed hard and patted his book belly. “I’m pregnant!”

“No you’re not.”

“Yes, huh. Looka here. Look at it.” He held the sides of the bulge and waddled with his legs wide.

“Quit it.”

“I can’t just quit being pregnant.” He leaned in toward his belly as if he could listen to it.

“Knock it off.” I tried to stare at him menacingly, but I wasn’t able to pull it off. Not even a little.

He widened his stance and started to groan, squatting right there in the middle of the sidewalk. “It’s coming!” He yelled. “Get me to a hospital!”

“Everyone’s looking. Stop! Stopit, stopit, stopit!” I clenched my teeth. No one even knew what he was saying. An old woman with a long shawl over her head paused to look at my brother.

He was doing La Manse breathing, which we knew about because of a Bill Cosby comedy album. “Chee-chee-choo! Chee-chee-choo! Puuuush!” He dropped his math book on the ground between his legs. “Oh, Doctor! Is it a boy or a girl? Is it beautiful?” He patted his forehead with the back of his hand.

I grabbed the book before the old woman with the shawl could figure out what was going on and ran with it toward the bus stop. Mike followed, laughing all the way. “Wait! Wait! I think it might be twins!” he yelled, but I didn’t turn around.

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I ran straight to the bus stop, where I planted my feet firmly and stared down the road toward where the number 14 would come, lumbering up the hill throwing plumes of black smoke out of its tailpipe and into the cold air. I clenched my teeth.

"You didn't think that was funny?"

"No."

Mike realized something was not quite right. I wouldn't even look at him. I just kept staring at the hill, trying to pull the bus up and over it, trying to get myself home sooner. "What happened to your pants?"

"Nothing."

I imagined an old woman with a shawl, sort of like the one from before. This one was crawling onto the bus somewhere where I could not see her. She was barely moving her legs. The bus driver was getting annoyed. He was going to be late to pick up the two strange foreign kids who wait by the school.

I tried to look down at my pants without looking down at my pants. It didn't work.

"What happened?"

"Nothing," I told him. In my head I said, everything.

I imagined Judit, the girl who slapped my ears when we lined up for lunch. She called me names I could not understand, and then laughed when I tried to repeat them in broken Hungarian. What is this... pussy? I would ask, and the whole class laughed with Judit, who only had to explain it to the bewildered look on my face to keep them going.

"You are," she would say, swinging an open palm at my ear. It sounded like a gunshot. It felt like a hammer. Once she hit me so hard I heard a high note ringing in my ear. Sometimes on the bus ride home I would daydream about going deaf. I was sure she was going to slap me once and there would be the thunder clap and then nothing. I tried to keep my hands up near my ears sometimes. I didn't like doing that. I felt small when I did that.

You must know about Judit and her open-handed ear boxing to understand what was wrong in the bus stop. And it had almost nothing to do with my ear. On the day my brother decided to treat his backpack as a pregnant belly, I forgot to go to the bathroom before school started. Judit had been standing near the door and already had everyone around her laughing. I was too easy of a target. Her arms made an X across her chest. Her hands were tucked into the folds of her jacket. I tucked my chin toward my chest and walked straight into the classroom to sit down. I didn't worry about it until History class, late in the morning.

There were words on the board that I could not read. The teacher kept underlining one of the words, talking louder and louder, while I was squirming in my desk. I had to pee so bad. I try to think of the word for bathroom. I didn't know it. I never learned it.

The teacher turned to the class and asked a question. He didn't even look at me. Not even after it was clear that no one knew the answer. He

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asked the same question again, but this time annoyed. I knew the words were the same, but I don't know what any of them were. What. I think the sentence started with the word "What."

I pushed my fist down on my crotch. I crossed my legs. I couldn't raise my hand and ask in English. I couldn't. Just make through another thirty minutes. My stomach felt like it had been sliced open with a dull knife.

Don't do this. I told myself. How do I say bathroom in Hungarian? Is the word toilet the same? Can I raise my hand and say "Toilet"? I imagine asking in English, being asked to repeat it, then resorting to standing up and pointing at my crotch. I didn't want to be that kid. The kid who danced in front of class and pointed at his crotch and yelled unintelligibly in a weird language.

There were years up on the board. There was a book open in front of me with pictures of ancient armies. Judit raised her hand to answer a question, and my ear got warm. The hand meant she understood things I could not. The class pretended I was not there. I was barely a body in this room. My novelty had worn off, and I was just a deaf mute boy, now. A deaf mute boy with a bladder about to burst.

My eyes were clenched shut so tightly and I could feel the sweat forming on my back. Judit's voice entered the classroom. I heard numbers. I could recognize numbers. A seven. A three. More words I did not understand. Roman. I think that word meant Roman. I remembered Judit standing at the door of the classroom with her arms making an X. I hated her so much. I couldn't help it. I finally let go.

It was warm. Almost hot. I held my hand down over it and there was no sound, just the smell of urine slowly coming up, the wetness slowly running down my legs. No one was looking at me. No one said anything. I wanted to cry, but I didn't. I sat there in my own piss for another three hours until the end of school. I didn't move an inch. I imagined that every conversation was about me and the small puddle of urine under my desk. Then I imagined that every conversation wasn't. Math class. There were numbers. The teacher covered and erased the board three times. My classmates wrote furiously the whole time. Literature. The teacher explained something for the entire hour, her thumb and middle finger pressed together, her arm extended forward at the ends of her sentences. The bell rang.

Judit said something to me as she walked out the door, I didn't know what. Her hands were in her pockets as she left. When the classroom was finally empty, I tied my coat around my waist with the back of it draped over my damp crotch. My pants felt cold and wet. I walked slowly to the front of the school to find my brother, waiting there, swinging his backpack around before quickly picking it up and putting it on backwards.

We walked out of the school together.

He pretended to give birth to a math book.

There was an old woman with a shawl.

We stood in the bus stop.

My legs were freezing, and my teeth rattled in my mouth. I clenched

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my teeth so I wouldn't look cold. I wondered about this God who would have me standing there on the sidewalk with my legs and feet soaked in urine. Had he seen the whole thing? Was He going to let one of us share the good news about Jesus now? It seemed like too high of a price to pay for something like that. I wondered about whether or not these people were worth trying to save. I thought about Judit, and about how I wanted her to go to hell. I wore all of it on my face.

"Nothing happened," I told Mike, and the bus doors opened with a shriek. We stepped on, one foot after the other with our eyes to the ground and our chins pressed against our chests.