

*A short memoir of my grandmother's visit to Budapest in 1968,
at the time, she lived in the Soviet Union.*

Cinnamon and Stars

Pale, elegant spires pierce the skyline of the most beautiful city in all the world. There is not a single city like Budapest— where the scent of cinnamon waltzes through the cobbled streets, where the sky is akin to the Greek gods and goddesses of old, refusing to bleed anything but lavender and gold. It's here, in this peculiar city, where my story truly begins.

Though I was thousands of miles away from home, and my mother, they still had a way of worming themselves into the deepest trenches of my mind. The grand city of Budapest was constantly overshadowed by my mother's beguiling Paris. I have never visited Paris, nor have I ever wanted to. Unruly rodents and even ruder civilians are commodities I do not dream of seeing. To be perfectly frank, there is nothing elegant about gloomy puffs of smoke condescending upon crooked, sickly alleyways. Which is exactly why I love Budapest. Elegance and class seeps out of every nook and cranny within that enchanting dreamscape of a city. And you can certainly trust me, for I've seen it all with my own two eyes.

Luckily, this gorgeous city was the first place I'd ever traveled to alone. Indeed, I had never slept in a room that was not my own— it was a bizarre experience to be sure.

Awaking to a posh, pristine place was an oddity in itself. The depressing curtains and equally disinteresting couch of my home were long forgotten memories as I absorbed the essence of the room. Stepping out of bed, I ventured forth through the foreign hotel room, attempting to locate my suitcase in this jungle of color and cotton. The mission at hand was all too easy— its bleak, lifeless form stuck out like a sore thumb. The poor thing looked like a casket at a wedding reception, embarrassingly out of place.

The corpse within the suitcase wasn't any more exciting; just a gray miasma of wool and all too many wide-legged pants. Suddenly, in this glamorous room, I was hit with a sense of embarrassment. The clothes were perfectly acceptable: professional, simple, and boring. Law abiding— that's what they were; but then why were they suddenly so undesirable?

A banging at the door threw me out of orbit, "Hello? Mila!" Said a familiar female voice— it was Katiya— her jubilant tone whisking away my insecure thoughts, "It's time for breakfast! Let's hurry!" A few other voices I couldn't perfectly recognize chimed in, probably spurred by their grumbling stomachs. "Alright, alright! I'll be out soon!" I exclaimed as I sprinted toward the bathroom, trying to get ready as quickly as possible.

Now one might be wondering why these young hooligans were hollering at my door at the crack of dawn, and I must say I too was mildly surprised. Even though this bunch of Russian youths were simply people I was assigned to stick with, we all got along fabulously. The lot of us were young professionals around my age, each of them here in Budapest to represent the company they worked for. This unique trip was also a way for young professionals to network and experience other areas of the expansive USSR; most importantly though, it was free (thanks to the government)!

After my groupmates' abrupt wake-up call, I flew through my morning routine. In a snap, I was strolling along Budapest's scenic streets migrating towards our selected breakfast spot. It was a warm, homey cafe not far from our hotel, its wood accents reminding me of the grand mountains that resided over my quaint home town. Even its color pallet looked as if it had been transported straight from home, with an array of majestic, earthy tones.

The cafe's mysterious fragrance, though, was as foreign as it was fitting— its scent as tender as a mother's embrace and yet as intricate as the hand-sewn rhinestones of a privileged woman's dress. Not only that, but it also had deep, earthy qualities married to a bright undertone as thin and sharp as a needle— which pricked one's nostrils upon contact. The unknown fragrance overwhelmed my senses, so thoroughly that it left me utterly and completely breathless.

Keeping this torrent of emotions to myself, I calmly walked into the magical cafe before me. Filing in behind my other groupmates, I gawked at the menu— elegantly scripted on the massive chalkboard behind the barista. It was as if the wonderful fragrance had seeped itself into the cafe and even its barista, giving both a soft, comforting aura. Approaching the counter at last, I sheepishly asked the doll-eyed barista about the decadent aroma of the cozy cafe. "Oh, the smell?" She chirped, her Hungarian accent brushing against her words, "It's just the cinnamon from the buns. Yummy, isn't it?" I nodded, already whisked away by a train of thought...

Cinnamon. Its name was as romantic as its aroma. With no hesitation, I ordered their glorious cinnamon buns, plus the thing called 'Espresso' on their menu— because why not? If these delicacies could be as attractive as this phenomenal spice, I just knew I had to try them all.

"Mila!" The sweet barista exclaimed, a tray with my order in-hand. Thanking her, I sat down in a rush, already salivating over the treats that lay before me. I smiled down at the two treats, my giddy anticipation sending shocking slivers of lighting straight to my fingertips. I was simply over the moon with ecstasy! Gently, as if it was porcelain, I brought the puffy cinnamon roll to my lips. Its holy fragrance filled my nose, as I sunk my teeth into the tender morsel, drinking in its magical essence. Its ichor tasted like nothing else I'd ever feasted upon, while earthy undertones caressed my tastebuds. The sickly sweet frosting overwhelmed my senses, as I enjoyed this foreign, forbidden fruit— devouring every bit of its pale, pillow-soft flesh. It felt so wrong that I was confident I'd be banished from Eden. Or was this homeland, this Republic of so-called equality, a beguiling prison?

After our delightful breakfast, we headed towards the building of the government-run organization who was sponsoring this trip to meet up with our assigned tour guides. Together we were a fresh, lively group numbering a dozen total— eight eager, wide-eyed Russians and four jovial Hungarians as our guides. Seen as all of us were young adults, we traveled quickly, with a bounce in our step as we set off for a bout of sightseeing.

It's a funny thing, sightseeing. We meander around things so much bigger and grander than us, awe-ing and ooh-ing at the picturesque sights. I simply don't understand it. Yes, the structures are pretty and all, but what about the culture, the environment? A truly beautiful city is one that is beautiful on the outside and inside— a beauty that's reflected in its people and general buildings. My mother always said Paris was the most romantic of places; we disagreed on a lot of things. Of course, the Eiffel Tower will forever be alluring— but the city itself? Quite the opposite. Paris should honestly become synonymous with 'smoky tourist trap' instead of 'love'. The alleys are dirty and shallow, just like the people, for how does one expect a city to gain the title 'The Capital of Pickpocketing' while having lovely citizens? I refuse to fall for that beguiling mirage of a destination. Meanwhile in Budapest, the shops and such aren't absorbed by touristy fakes but genuinely sell the most gorgeous of wares. Gone are the drab, mass-produced garbs from Russia— my heart now sung for those garments of whimsy found only in boutiques. Thus, while everyone was marveling at the grandeur of the Statue of Saint Stephen within Halaszbastya church, I was itching to return back to those cobbled streets from before. The stone of the monuments was dead silent, while the vivacious spirit of the city whispered in my ear like

the Serpent himself. On the fringes of this red Eden-republic, the tree of good and evil was all mine for the taking.

We strolled around the statue, quietly chattering amongst ourselves as we soaked in the peace and calm of the church. Falling into step next to the main guide, I innocently asked about the schedule, as the day was still quite young and naive. Turning towards me he quickly recapped the day's schedule: sightseeing, free time, lunch, more sightseeing (this time the Parliament building), and then dinner. I'm sure there were more intricacies to it, but the object of my current obsession was undoubtedly those boutiques we'd passed by. Their glass storefronts reminded me of an expensive jewelry box, the kind with a dancing ballerina figure in center. It was a novelty I had scarcely laid eyes on, for the only glass boxes I'd seen were the ones in grocery stores back home. They were used to cover and 'protect' the produce from hungry customers, as if all of us were filthy criminals that couldn't even be trusted with a sack of potatoes. The people were a thing to be feared.

When freetime rolled around, I decided to break off from the group and explore the city on my own. It was a bit reckless of me, but I didn't mind a bit— for that was the price of complete freedom. Wandering through this forest of cobble and brick, I followed the Danube River with a single goal in mind: to find the perfect boutique. But did such a thing even exist?

After searching around for an hour, I had found the crown jewel of my wildest fantasies. Its exterior was just as gorgeous as the others, but its heart was what drew me in. While many of the other boutiques were realms of grace and whimsy, almost disengaged from the world, this particular spot was sleek and ultra-modern. The boutique's glassy eyes were tinted over, adding a glint of mystery to their murky depths. Like a moth with a streetlight in its sights, my feet moved on their own, gliding straight through its front door with no hesitation. Inside, my attention frantically fluttered around the shop, the reality of my limited time crashing down on me. I needed something beautiful but restrained, something unique but also legal; this woman surely didn't want to get thrown out of Eden. Pausing, a thought slithered into my head: perhaps, I was just another cog in the machine, molded by the government. It made sense, after all we honestly looked identical in our bleak, conservative garments. Unsurprisingly, they reduced crowds of individuals into one homogenous, gray blob; the general public, looking as if it had been manufactured in an assembly line. The great government was probably hoping the machine would run smoother with uniformity on its side. We were forced to dress a certain way, act a certain way— for what? Why does a government get to decide that for its people? What kind of twisted Eden was this republic?

The psychological dam that held back all of my questions and doubts shattered into smithereens— thoughts flooded my mind, drowning everything else out. I suddenly despised my suitcase and everything inside of it; my own clothes felt as if they were burning into my skin like a brand, painful reminders of the confusing place I called home. It hurt, but I knew I couldn't leave— this republic was my home after all, and I couldn't imagine leaving my family and friends. And rebelling? My heart skipped a beat at the thought of such a dangerous act. I knew all too well that opposition was futile, the only things gained would not be freedom or liberty— but simply a shattered dream and a broken body. We the people were weak, defenseless sheep with no way to control the very monster we had welcomed in. Truthfully, no matter how upsetting the government was I wouldn't dare to stand in its way. That would surely be suicide.

A deep sigh escaped my lips, the depressing thoughts weighing heavily on my mind as I sullenly browsed through the once-magical boutique. It was as if my joy had been mercilessly vacuumed up, transforming the store into a dry husk of its former self. I unenthusiastically

scanned through the store and turned to leave, my drab shoes screeching to a halt when I saw the piece of art displayed next to their counter.

A bottomless umbra, that's what it was, consuming every ray of light that dared to even get close. The boutique melted away as I got lost in this dress's obsidian depths. It was akin to staring up at a clear, moonless sky— its inky depths enveloping my eyes in a peaceful, timeless embrace. A smattering of stars blessed this obscure night sky with elegance and otherworldly class. Their rhinestone bodies heavily populated the bottom portion of the dress, becoming scarce past the waist. The dress itself was simple but powerful— like using one classy word to describe a plethora of complex emotions. Its elusive fabric clung to the wearer's top half, exposing their curves in a minorly risque but elegant way— with an extended collar and long sleeves to match. I had to try it on.

Now clear as day, my mind organized itself. Rule follower— that's what I was. My intention wasn't to suddenly rebel like an imbecile, I simply desired to carve out my own individual existence, however risqué or odd that was. Gazing upon myself, clad in this midnight masterpiece, I realized there was a way to find harmony between both my individual wishes and the government's oppressive will. It was the perfect balance: monochromatic, no cut-outs, and dark coloring; but also tight, posh, and just slightly bejeweled. This dress wasn't a compromise with the government— this was my personality— it took advantage of the gray space provided. New dress in hand, I flew out of the boutique, back into the shining streets of Budapest, glimmering with the confidence of a thousand stars. This was my story to tell, my future to build— and most certainty— my dress to wear.