

Zary Fekete

Children's Clinic

As I walk out the front door of my apartment building I wave to my downstairs neighbor. He's trying to fix the fence out front. He's retired, probably in his 80s. He has a wooden leg. I asked him about it when I first moved in to the building. He said he lost it when he was 12. He and some friends were trying to hop onto a tram downtown, hoping to ride for free. He said that he slipped and that was all it took. There was no ambulance available in those days. A firetruck took him to the hospital. That happened in between the wars.

I live in Budapest. I've been here for four years.

There's this cheese tasting thing happening today in my book club. Our group thinks that because it's a nice day maybe they'll have it in the garden. Last month we finished up *Heart of Darkness*. Nobody liked it very much. I guess this week we're supposed to pick a new one. So we're going to eat cheese and pick something else to dislike.

I'm walking there now. Our group is held in the Jacksons' flat. They live four blocks from me. I'm an English teacher living in Budapest. I live in the 11th district which is considered the best district for families...lots of wide boulevards and leafy parks.

Our group is mostly other expats who have gravitated to Budapest for one reason or another. There are a couple of other teachers. One guy works for the government. There are two married couples...I think they work for a church.

I actually really don't care for our group. They remind me so much of myself that it makes me sick. We all live here ostensibly to be altruistic. But when I talk with the others it kind of feels like we all took advantage of an opportunity to live abroad while being paid American-level wages.

I'm very privileged to live here. I have more money than most of my neighbors. I don't have to be terribly selective in what I buy at the local grocery store. This makes me both happy and sort of miserable because I feel like I haven't earned the right.

I'm thinking about this as I walk. I turn a corner. I'm two blocks away from the Jacksons' now. I think about my neighbor back there fixing the fence. He is often doing odd jobs around the building. Last week I told him that if I had time I might help him. I said that but I knew that I probably wouldn't. I should feel guilty. Do I? Maybe I'll...

And suddenly, just like that, I notice the vacant lot.

I supposed I've passed it dozens of times. I pass it every time I visit the Jacksons. But today I really see it.

It is overgrown with brush and there are piles of scrap lumber piled here and there. The entire lot has a rusty fence around it. It has an old, crumbling structure at the center...something official-looking. There are no signs, but there is a cracked and fading cameo fresco on one of the outer walls showing two Soviet-era schoolchildren walking...holding hands and carrying pails. I assume that it used to be a national children's clinic.

My downstairs neighbor had told me once that in the mid-twentieth century these kinds of clinics had operated in every district of the city. The government wanted to make sure that everyone had care, and this often applied as much to the parents as to their children. Nurses would call on you shortly after you returned home from the hospital with your new child. "Everything ok?"

Next to the structure are two benches. They face a small grove of trees in one corner of the lot. The benches must have been meant for patients in the clinic (the children) to take a seat in between treatments, to have a small moment quiet in the fresh air. Looking at nature must be helpful for patients who are... well, they don't usually finish those sentences.

Suddenly and quite urgently I want to sit there. The lot is choked with weeds; there is rusty barbed wire around the top of the fence, and the benches themselves are broken and splintered. I...yes.

Before I can talk myself out of it I am reaching up and lifting myself over the fence. The wire tears a small rip in my shirt. As I lower myself into the lot I feel as though the sounds of the city fade just. I'm sure it is my imagination. Gingerly I pick my way through a few patches of nettles. I approach the benches, and I sit.

For the first few moments I feel nervous. Somebody might notice me in here. Is this trespassing?

Then I feel the gravity slowly pull against my legs. I feel the rough wood at my back. I start to notice a few more things. There are several small flowers dotted among the weeds. I see a bee. There are mosquitos, but they are leaving me alone. I can hear their soft wings. Sort of like they are asking little questions as they search.

I look back at the street. It's a bit darker now. How long have I been sitting here?

I stand. I decide to go back home. My group can wait. I'm going to help my neighbor with the fence.