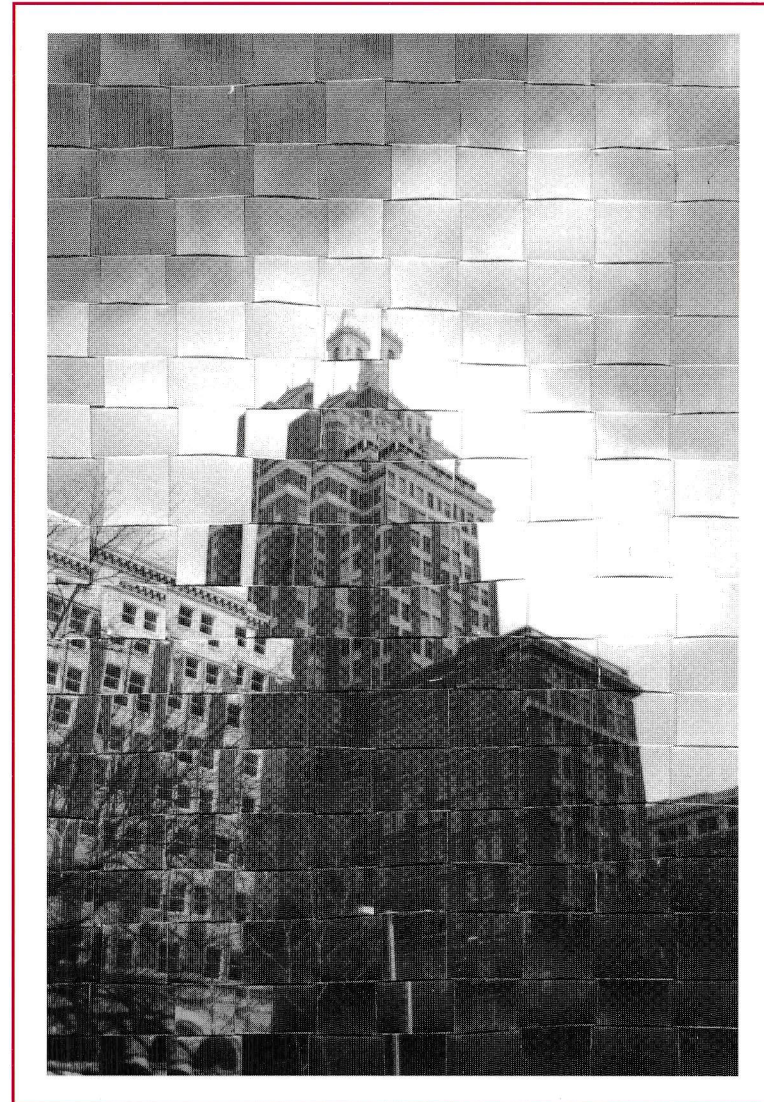


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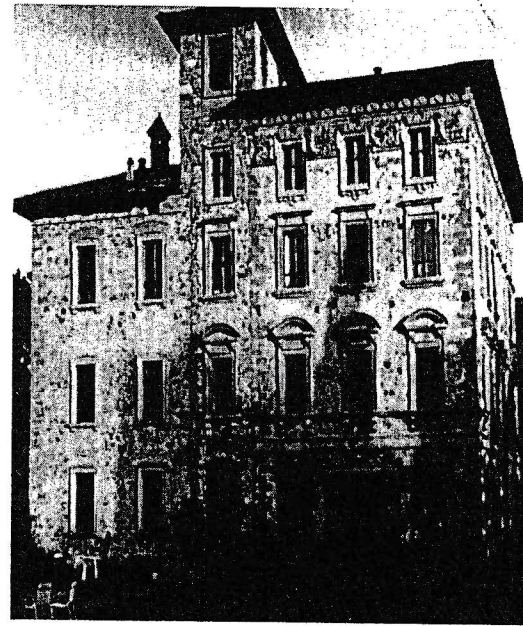
The City

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Trust and Estates

ALEXANDRA SHELLEY

"You cannot recognize it now," Lili says to Adelaide. "There were big trees, fir trees, here along the border of the garden. And so it was always pleasant in Buda, even in summer, because the fir trees held the cool from winter." They peer through a chain-link fence at a weedy yard crowded with debris — an empty chicken coop, a Trabant put out to pasture



on blocks, a pile of planks left to the elements too long to be usable. The place speaks of ambitious plans that never got underway, except for one cultivated corner, its borders so straight they could have been staked out with a protractor.

The windows of the villa are open. From inside comes a sudden gurgling followed by the smell of espresso, which makes Adelaide think of many other places she would rather be now. She nervously fingers the tiny, unfamiliar coins in the pocket of her kahki shorts and wonders if she could talk the old woman out of this visit, offer instead a nice strudel at one of the Grand Hotels where the Austro-Hungarian monarchy is piped in with the waltzes and air conditioning. "Shall we depart. . ." or even politer, "Would it be agreeable to the auntie. . ." — she has to try on phrases now before she says them aloud, rummaging through the Hungarian of her childhood, an unsuitable collection of booboos and bunnies. And when she's managed to conjugate her respectful intentions, she still can't sink far enough into her vowels or get her 'r's to roll. By the time she turns to Lili, it's a moot point. The old woman is putting her hands over her eyes.

"I cannot look," Lili says dramatically. Her cane falls to the sidewalk. Viktor, who has been standing quietly behind them, picks it up. He takes a handkerchief from his jacket pocket, dusts the cane's head thoroughly, and presents it to Lili. "Here you go, *angyalkám*."

"Fir trees," Lili repeats.

"Thank you," Adelaide says to Viktor, wondering once again at his devotion, at the way Lili's indifference seems only to anneal it, at the way that even when he walks alone, he keeps his left arm crooked for the hand of a lady. He is wearing a grey suit, although this hot morning he has left off the vest.

Adelaide turns to Lili, "You must have been here since the villa was lost?"

"Nationalized," Viktor corrects.

"I *have* been back," Lili says. "But today I see it through your eyes, my Adi, and it looks so shabby."

"What does it matter now?" Adelaide says, more harshly than she meant to. She is curiously disappointed herself. Despite its turret, the family villa she has heard about all her life is nothing more than a stuccoed summer house in the Buda hills, a castle painted an egg yolky Hapsburg yellow and made comic by its drastic shrinking, like something you might find in a fish tank, or perhaps in that compromised reality of the Hungarian fairy tales that begin "Once upon a time, there was, where there wasn't, spinning on the foot of a duck, a castle. . . ."

Lili draws herself up. "It matters," she says, adjusting her brooch — a garish affair involving rhinestones and a red peony — so it is perfectly centered on her collar, "because soon the villa will be yours!"

Adelaide knows this gift is impossible; what shocks her is the generosity. Lili Farkas is her grandmother, but she is not kindly, doesn't wear a shawl, and has no moist tissue up her sleeve. Lili has never given her anything really, just halved birthday cards, the fronts torn off of those that Lili herself must have received. "An admirable old woman," Adelaide had gotten used to saying when friends asked after her grandmother in Budapest. "Still going out with the same guy. She'll outlive us all." This last part was a lie. Lili had never come to life for Adelaide in the first place: a handful of visits and her mother Flora's sadness when letters arrived from Lili, who in 40 years has not forgiven Flora for emigrating to New York. Lili is now convinced that Flora covets her apartment, her 94.7 square meters in a modern Pest housing block, with phone. This is why Adelaide has been sent clear across the ocean to make her, Lili, move into a nursing home — more specifically the *Jidó Közösség Szeretotthon*, which Adelaide can only translate with an odd literalness as the Jewish Community's Affection Home.

"I see you don't believe me," Lili says to Adelaide now. "But I've filed to get the villa back. I've filed for compensation. Nuh!" She is trying to contain her smile and the corners of her mouth twitch.

"It's . . . grand." Adelaide jollies her as best she can. "What will I do with such a place!"

"You will marry a proper Magyar and have proper Magyar children and put them in it," Lili says impatiently. "And then I will come to live with you." Adelaide stands there on the sidewalk, her hands hanging empty at her sides. She has just turned thirty five and has no good answer for Lili when she asks, "Don't you have a steady boy there in New York?" Adelaide is too independent, too even-tempered, too *fortunate*, she thinks, to inspire the kind of devotion that Viktor imposes on Lili. But by six or seven at night she finds herself lingering at her desk, awaiting a call from a senior partner, relieved if she has to work late so that her evening will be billable. Perhaps I'm too old to be who I

planned, she thinks, wondering when the givens of her womanhood got so iffy.

"Compensation!" Viktor says to Adelaide in a stage whisper. "We talk and talk about compensation, about getting the villa back." He always uses the "we" conjugation when referring to Lili. "THIS is the compensation law," Viktor continues. "It applies to those whose property was stolen by one regime or another — in other words, nearly everybody. They get a piece of paper that they can redeem for something, perhaps a loaf of bread. And now these compensation notes are traded on the stock exchange, as if our loss can be turned into, whatever you Americans call them — garbage bonds."

Standing at the garden fence and seeing how pride has suffused the old woman, Adelaide finds herself hoping Lili will die before this redemption. "How about if we leave now?" she says to Viktor.

"When I was growing up," he goes on, blinking rapidly in the too-bright sunlight, "I never would have associated with your grandmother's type. I hated them. We were not showy Jews, my family. And now, strange days, Lili and I are each other's consolation."

Lili is already moving towards the gate. As soon as she reaches out for it, two pieces of shadow detach themselves from beside the chicken coop and tumble toward them, barking in high pitch. Their tails slash back and forth as they throw themselves at the fence.

"Cut it out, boys!" calls a man's voice from inside the house. The door opens.

"I am Mrs. Samuel Farkas," Lili shouts over the ruckus.

The man shoos away the long-haired *pulis* and opens the gate. "They miss the Great Plain, the sheep," he apologizes. "This makes them peevisish. Mrs. Farkas. . . ?"

"Mrs. Samuel Farkas. The old owner."

"Ah?" He seems to expect some further explanation, but none is forthcoming.

Lili walks past him, pulling Adelaide by the wrist. "This is my Adi, my granddaughter, and he is my gentleman friend." She points at Viktor and then sets off down the broken flagstones of the garden path with her small, quick steps, forgetting to use her cane. "Here were the fir trees," says Lili.

"They died, the firs, when they widened King Béla Street," says the man, who introduces himself too hastily for them to catch his name, but adds, as if it were a formal title, "retired mathematician." He is wearing new blue jeans. The creases have been ironed in.

"And when we lived here there were fifty fruit trees," Lili persists. "What happened to those?"

"The soil got depleted," he explains, appealing with a glance to Adelaide. "And I don't like to use fertilizer," he adds faintly. Apparently he is the one who has untangled the neat corner of the garden.

"And there were roses. Full of roses," says the old woman. "Can you imag-

ine?" she asks, looking only at her granddaughter as if they are as alone as Adam and Eve packed up and leaving.

"No," says Adelaide. The vanity, the exigency of that vanity, she thinks, as she follows Lili, who is now jabbing her cane into the dirt as she walks. Lili has survived two wars and two revolutions without learning to cook an egg. It is this stubborn vanity that makes everything the old woman says suspect, inadmissible as evidence. Adelaide isn't sure if Lili suffers from nostalgia or dementia or perhaps some fundamental truth that nobody else has yet come to. What she does know is she has less than a week to decide this before she flies back to New York.

"Here you go! Here are the roses," says the retired mathematician, gesturing triumphantly to his plot. "Robin Hood," he says to Adelaide as he twists off three pink flowers. "A hybrid. I planted them when we moved in." He flicks the thorns off with his thumbnail and then hands the bouquet to Lili. She accepts it without looking at him, as if this is the very least he can do for her.

Another elderly woman is making her way towards them from the house. "It's Mrs. Samuel Farkas, the old owner!" the mathematician calls out to the newcomer as she pads bedroom-slippered into earshot. Her bun is fraying and her blue eyes are faded by cataracts. But for a moment her vague glance hardens into recognition. Her hand goes to the base of her neck, as if the breath's been knocked out of her, and when she takes it away Adelaide notices that over her housecoat she is wearing an endearing necklace of seed pearls.

Lili looks at her blankly and then asks her name. "Mrs. Crane. . ." Lili pauses on it. "Crane. Ya! You are the caretaker."

"I am not the caretaker any more," says Crane. Her voice is sharp and precise as a child's. "But I still live here."

The mathematician, who had seemed much relieved by Crane's entrance, begins to look uncomfortable again.

"I was the caretaker," the blue-eyed old lady turns to Adelaide. "Now I am not the caretaker." She is very tiny and fragile but she says this with vehemence. Adelaide feels suddenly lost, the way she did as a child the time her mother brought her to the opera, where everyone took a long time to die. A hot wind crawls up the mountainside from the trafficy Pest bank of the Danube below, its breath of asphalt and exhaust mixing with the smell of pine, and Adelaide feels the sweat running down the insides of her thighs. The roses have been recently watered, she notices, wondering what it would taste like to lick the drops off a petal. Probably not as sweet as you would imagine.

Lili giggles. "I was twenty one when my husband first brought me here. And now I'm eighty nine," she laughs again, as if her life is too long for even her to believe.

Suddenly she sobers and looks down at Crane. "And Mr. Crane? Jozsi? What's with him?"

"Jozsi died." Crane's voice sinks.

"And do you live in the same apartment?"

"Yes. But we expanded. We took over the bathroom by the pantry. Then we did not have to use that stinking outdoor shade-chair —"

"This is my Adi, my big granddaughter from America," Lili interrupts, throwing Adelaide a stand-up-straight look. "Flora left in '56 because she wanted to go to America and now her daughter has come back to see me. She is a lawyer. And soon I will have great-grandchildren." Adelaide knows at least part of this is untrue. After the revolution her mother and father and their friends landed in Vienna with no idea where they would go from there. They sat in the coffeehouses reading the front pages of papers from all over the world until one day the Australian papers headlined a visit by the British Queen Mother, young Prince Charles' haircut, and a convention of sheep farmers. The refugees decided then that this country, peaceful and trivial, would be their new home. Flora agreed. But her husband said where there was turmoil there was opportunity, and so the two of them ended up in New York, where Adelaide was born the child of her mother's unrealized dream. A boy child would have been named Sydney.

The two old women are anteing up progeny and Lili is winning, brutally: the university degrees, her son-in-law's business ventures (she doesn't mention that most of them have failed), her daughter too busy at her job to come to Hungary — easily outdo the Crane boy (now fifty-four years old), single and childless and working in the Unicum liquor factory. "He's going to fix up the Trabant," Crane gestures vaguely toward the wheel-less car and grins. She is missing a tooth. As Lili continues her attack it stirs in Adelaide a fondness for this frail widow. She has an urge to cup Crane's chin in the palm of her hand and stroke her hair, trace with her fingertips the few blond strands left in its parchment.

"America? I have a friend in Cleveland, he lives near the automotive museum," the mathematician is saying to Adelaide. "Perhaps since you're a born-outside Magyar you don't know," he continues eagerly, "'Farkas' is the Hungarian for *wolf*," he barks out this last word in English, *vulf*. "Farkas means *with tail*. You would never say *wolf* outright because it might summon the beast itself — but of course you know this."

"No," Adelaide says.

By this time more pensioners have emerged from various doors, down stairs, up from the basement. A man with a skull cap and patchy beard lumbers by. These strangers all live in the Farkas house now, growing ragged like the garden.

"The whole summer they made apricot jam, can you imagine?" Lili says, flitting faster and faster amongst the memories now. "There were so many fruit trees — what's with the fruit trees?"

Perhaps the softness of the earth under her high heels feels familiar. They are the same pine forests, although riddled now with the modern palazzi of boutique owners, smugglers, software developers. It is the same, the cough cough of the cog railway that for a hundred years has taken picnickers to the

top of Swabian Mountain with slow deliberateness despite the rush of dogmatic geography that turned Swabian Mountain into Liberation Mountain and back into Swabian Mountain again.

And even King Béla Street has remained King Béla Street, much to the surprise of the taxi driver who brought them here. "Maybe it's because poor King Béla was deaf," Adelaide had said.

"Not deaf," Viktor had said. "Blind."

But the fruit trees! Lili leans close to her granddaughter's ear and says rather loudly, "To tell the truth, I don't much care about the fruit trees. The problem is Crane is still here!"

"For twenty years we summered here," Lili turns to the audience at large. "But after the war it was nationalized. Now we'll see."

Lili is heading for the front door of the villa and the mathematician has no choice but to invite them inside. "Here was the bathroom," Lili announces. "Here was the piano room. There was a Beidermier set. *Somebody* sold it. . . ." Adelaide finds herself comparing the villa to her New York City studio apartment, which sometimes seems no bigger than the perimeter of her own head. To have all those rooms, for different moods and guests and lovers, and, later, children and grandchildren, to have one room with no particular function at all, maybe just a chaise longue and some fashion magazines on the floor beside it.

But Budapest has become a city of hermit crabs and she doesn't want anyone's used shell. She's seen a synagogue where the Army fencing team practices, a chapel in a cave deep in Gellert Hill which the Paulite White Monks had already wrested back from the secret police — a legal nightmare. Residential property has yet to be returned and no one knows where to draw the lines of redress: Do you start with confiscation by the communists, or the fascists before them? Why not go all the way back to the Turks, the Mongols? Even her firm's whole Trusts and Estates department wouldn't be able to untangle this. . . this what? Denationalization.

Lili has made her way to the veranda. It's enclosed in glass and has been heated by the morning sun and the flies buzz only half-heartedly as they pluck themselves against the windows. The floor is tiled with Zsolnay porcelain in blues iridescent as trout's scales. As in much of Budapest, Adelaide senses in this room the traces of beauty emitted when graciousness decays. She follows the fissures in the cracked tiles, black with the dust of a century, back to a vision of their original elegance during Sunday lunch, the hub of the family's week, as Lili holds a spoonful of chilled sour cherry soup out to her daughter Flora, who considers eating a waste of time. The girl is wearing her Red Cross nurse uniform — the war has already begun but it is still far away — and is needed on the front, which is in the vicinity of the garden tool shed. Lili isn't sure how to coax her daughter's mouth open since, except for Sunday, this job is reserved for the fraulein. Lili's mother-in-law looks up from the tureen, the ladle poised for a second, and says, "Oh, let the girl go. No one in this family

has ever starved to death —" and before she finishes her sentence Flora is gone. The aunts and uncles and cousins have already turned back to their food as she runs across the garden, past Jozsi Crane, who is picking Japanese beetles off the Comte de Chambord roses and cracking them between his fingertips, spritzing the bushes with a mixture of whiskey and water and looking around to make sure no one notices when he takes a sip. Flora disappears into the tool shed where she's set up the first-aid station for her dolls. Their heads are bandaged with black silk, swatches of shrouds from the Farkas textile factory. . . .

The mathematician leaves the room and returns carrying a Polaroid. He suggests, if it would please the aunties, taking a picture of the two old friends. "With Crane? Together?" Lili asks. She looks startled.

"We've just had our hair done," Viktor reminds her. "We look lovely." She sits down slowly on the dining table bench. Crane draws her housecoat closed at the neck. Lili carefully centers her brooch, from which the electrolyte plating is chipping off. ("Good jewelry is not for wearing," she had instructed Adelaide as she dressed this morning. "Tell no one where it is kept and switch the hiding place regularly.") The two old women sit stiffly on opposite ends of the bench. They assume the poses they were taught as children, when photography sessions required prolonged demureness: hands laid atop one another on the lap, chin raised just high enough to be coy but not haughty. "Cheese!" the mathematician says in English for Adelaide's benefit. "Cheeseburger. Whopper!" he adds.

"You know I looked that up in the English dictionary," says Viktor to no one in particular. "And it said 'Whopper: A big lie.' How about that?"

The mathematician takes the picture, then holds the camera out to Adelaide. The snapshot drops into her hand. It is cool and damp and she balances it on her palm as the figures emerge slowly, the details miraculously surfacing until she can see how slender her grandmother's ankles are compared to Crane's, puffed out of her slippers and mapped with purple veins. She admires Crane for the meals she cooked, the geese she force fed, the sheets she washed in the tub. "They made apricot jam," Lili had said, she who could hardly boil an egg. What was Lili's job? Lili was there to be delighted.

"Excuse me, I must go check on the children." Lili stands and patters out of the room before anyone can follow.

"I'm sorry," Adelaide says. "She — she sometimes wanders." Is there enough rationality left in Lili, she's thinking, to convince her to go to the Jewish Community's Affection Home? Wouldn't she be better off? This morning when she picked Lili up at her apartment in Pest, Adelaide had taken careful note: the filthy glasses in the cupboards, lipstick shards still on the rim; the stockings hanging limply, dripping, from the hot water pipes — fire hazard; the one room cluttered with all those Louissomething commodes and tippy endtables and the piano that no one had played for at least four decades, since the death of Mr. Samuel Farkas; and the smell, the smell of a room where someone has just woken from a fitful night's sleep — wax, damp wool, sweat. And there

was Lili, waiting in her high heels, as if practicality were a form of defeat.

"Oh but Mrs. Farkas is very lively, very sharp. . ." says the mathematician, listing a few more euphemisms for old people who are unpredictable and garrulous. "I wasn't ready to retire myself," he confides, "But a law is a law. Of course you would know, as a barrister —"

"I don't practice personnel law," Adelaide heads him off. She holds the snapshot until it seems to be as developed as it will get and is about to pass it around when she notices that in the fraction of a second of exposure, Lili had turned towards Crane with a look somewhere between disbelief and hatred, her lips drawn into a thin line. Adelaide slips the picture into her back pocket.

"My mother-in-law bought this house in '16. And there were fifty-five fruit trees," Lili's voice enters the room before she does. "Of course apple. Apricot, almond. . ." she spits out this list. Everyone seems to be looking forward to saying goodbye. But Lili props herself stiff-armed on her cane in the doorway. "And berries, raspberries, strawberries. Roses, rows of roses. And an avenue between pines — in other words, it's unrecognizable now."

"Unrecognizable, yes," comes a surprising echo. It is Crane. She stares vacantly for a moment. "But the tiles are the same!" she announces, stamping one bedroom slipper noiselessly on the veranda floor.

"There is good reason why everything changed and we moved in," says the mathematician. "It changed —"

"— so there would be places for everyone to live after the war," Adelaide finishes, trying to compensate for Lili's accusations.

"The housing stock was twenty-seven percent destroyed," adds Viktor.

"And we love it up here," says the mathematician with nervous enthusiasm. "The air is so much cleaner."

But those two are no longer listening.

"They took everything. But for all that. . ." says Lili.

". . . we are still here," finishes Crane.

In the back seat of the cab, Lili starts to cry. Her fingers knead the newspaper that the mathematician wrapped around the roses. "It's not the house I miss. It's the children. The children grew up here. Every summer." Then her voice stops shaking. "And that was the one who stole everything. Everything! During the war, we went away. But they stayed here."

"What are you talking about?" Adelaide asks wearily.

"Crane!" Lili cries. "During the war the house was empty — except for Jozsi Crane the caretaker and his family. . ."

Adelaide is on her guard now. Her mother didn't talk about the war. Her mother's silence was unassailable. Flora once said to her daughter: "Nothing happened to me before I came to America. My memory is a windshield wiper." Adelaide was grateful that her mother's silence protected her from the scorch of Hungarian history, the belligerent melancholy she had heard as a child when, gathered on the Upper East Side at Magyar House to mark some holiday, her parents and their immigrant friends sang the anthem: *Bring, God,*

happy years to those whom misfortune has for so long ravaged. This nation has already atoned for the sins of the past and the sins of the future. Even the men cried. Meanwhile the kids took drags off each other's cigarettes in the basement bathroom, taking full advantage of the blank check of atonement.

"I don't think you should be telling me this," Adelaide interrupts.

"Why not?"

"My mother never did." Adelaide sounds petulant to herself, but she can't think of any other reason. "I'm sorry. Even if I tried I couldn't imagine," she adds. Crying *wolf*. Here it isn't merely alarmist, she thinks. It has the power to summon the beast itself.

It was true that whenever Adelaide visited Budapest, she roamed the city looking for opportunities to be emotionally devastated. It could be something so simple. A photograph of a ten-year-old Jewish boy taken in 1941. A walk along the Danube quay where they were tied in pairs to save bullets. A long unused rug-beating rack in the still air of a courtyard. But this kind of voluntary remembrance was not so intimate, so inescapable. She always basically thought that history happened to someone else.

And now the villa, and Lili's insistence on reclaiming it for her, has implicated her as well. It could have been hers, something to own, something to fill up. She realizes that until now she's lived in the comfort of knowing that everything she has is rented or portable. She carries her own skills and wiles on her back. Her whole estate fits neatly in a U-Haul, and not the largest one either. Before this villa business, she had nothing to lose.

"One has so much to say and nobody is around to hear it," says Lili — she who in eighty nine years has learned to speak four languages and listen in none of them. For a moment she slumps forward, as if she's collapsing from inside. Her vanity lands in a heap around her ankles. It leaves her hunched and slack-lipped. Her fingers twist together with the torque of imposed silence.

"Never mind," says Lili finally. "Afterwards, after the war, I went up to the villa to bring some things back to the apartment. And nothing was left," her voice rises and she claps her hands together once. "Not a piece," she says, then quietly. "It was quite empty."

"Where are our things?" I asked Crane the caretaker. He said, 'I don't know, Russian soldiers made off with them.' But under the Cranes' bed, there we found a suitcase filled with our summer dresses. Then I looked for his relations, who lived all over the neighborhood. And everywhere I found a piece from our life. I hired a car and brought away the piano. And I went to check just now and it's true what the Crane woman said. She took over the bathroom, with the lovely Zsolnay sink. And didn't you see? Little Flora's pearls. . . . Instead I will leave you this brooch. Not the real one. The real one was 'privatized' by the Cranes."

"What we have to leave you," says Viktor from the front seat, "are these acts of theft."

They are crossing to Pest. The Danube is sluggish, the warm breeze stirring

a smell of decaying fish from its depths, and swirling a flock of sea gulls who make their living from a sewage pipe under the bridge, along with old women supplementing their scant pensions by selling cups of mineral water from the hot springs that they promise will cure everything from lumbago to industrial disease.

Lili uses a black silk handkerchief to dab her cheeks where the tears have made rivulets in the powder. "There were sixty fruit trees," she says absent-mindedly. "And roses everywhere. Can you imagine?"

Back in Lili's apartment, Adelaide finds a greasy saucepan in the kitchen cupboard and puts some water up to boil. Lili comes in to see what she's doing. "Okay, if one day you don't feel well enough to go out for lunch?" Adelaide says to her. "Take a pin. You prick the end so it won't crack. Now drop the egg, like so, into the boiling water."