

Hungarian Rhapsody

Gay Lynch

Lily placed the passport-wallet and phone flat on the girl's hennaed palm. Rhea clutched them against her chest, then tugged down the embroidered blouse that she'd bought that morning and hauled on straight over her dreads. She looked about sixteen. The younger guy – the one with the flute – could be seen running between the trees, turning only once to give them the finger. Lily and Rhea ran too, in the opposite direction, scanning the road for police. It had been a fucked-up day.

Earlier that morning, waiting on the footpath outside a cheap hotel for the Budapest City Tour bus, they'd eyed each other like the strangers they were. Look at me funny and I'll job you, Rhea's expression telegraphed, although they didn't know each other's names then. When Lily had stepped forward, the doors of the coach had screeched open and then shut, catching the sleeve of her coat. The bus surged forward until Lily screamed. There was a hiss and thump of rubber and steel before her head smashed against the windowpane, and she sensed Rhea leaping forward to prop her up and bang on the door, her thin hands smelling of patchouli, ylang-ylang, and body odour. Miraculously, the bus hadn't dragged her far, lurching to a stop almost in the same moment it set off. The driver turned, annoyance written all over his face. Rhea's head flopped hard against Lily's.

On board, they exchanged wobbly grins – Lily tried not to cry – and swayed along the aisle to the rear seats, where again they caught each other's eye. How could they place their faith in a driver drinking Borsodi from a can in the console?

Lily was reminded of how generally useless she'd felt before this trip: part-time carer, part-time tree feller, part-time accountant and full-time lonely person. The special offer on the Budapest tour had been posted on the local travel agent's window and had instantly brought back memories of the colourful *Magyar Posta* stamps in her childhood album.

Now her father was reaching his end game and she'd run out on him – to the other side of the world. Not that he'd know. Wouldn't know if the gun was loaded. Wouldn't know if she was killed in an accident. A nurse had phoned Lily as she boarded at the Tullamarine airport gate because her father had been on the wallaby again. The airline staff had admonished her for taking the call, threatening that if she held them up she would not be 'uplifted'. Dad had apparently been shuffling along the main street in nothing but his dressing gown and trackies, and had been escorted back to the nursing home by the police.

'Where do you live?' the nurse had carped at him.

'Ferret Farm,' he'd answered. No doubt his eyes were as clear and innocent of guile as a poddy calf's.

'No. You live here,' she'd snapped, 'at our nursing home.' The staff was sick of chasing him through the back yards of takeaway shops, where he fossicked in the bins for leftovers.

'They say that,' he'd said. 'But it isn't true.'

About then his eyes would have welled up and, against all common sense, like Lily, they would have felt sorry for him. One hand down the front of his pants, the other covered in sweet icing or chicken fat, he'd be tending to his most basic functions. He'd become next to useless, and in his sensible days he would have thought so too.

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Ten years earlier, during the week of the year twelve exams, her mother had died of a bowel intussusception and Lily had given up all ideas of moving to the city. Her father turned vague by day and pissed by night, and their small acreage rural dream began to fall around their ears. A perfect score in maths paved the way for a job crunching numbers – as a bean counter, tax consultant – for the accountant in the main street. Each day Lily drove fifteen kilometres into town and home again.

The first time a tree fell across their driveway she decided she'd morphed into Sleeping Beauty. Over the next 100 years would anyone come looking for her? She'd have to cut her way through the thicket to get to work. Branch by branch she'd snapped and dragged bits of the fallen tree to the side of the track. From that day, trees fell at regular intervals: on the driveway, on the fence lines, on the roof.

Newton's Three Laws of Motion taught her patience. Life was full of friction, heavy weights and dangerous sparks. She levered logs over fence-wire, rolled them down slopes, and drop-shot them like netball goals into the back of the ute. Pitting her small mass against branches that fought back with an equal and opposite force improved her strength. Putting spin on heavy logs, she propelled them through the air, watched them skid across the wood heaps to save carrying them. Before her father turned completely ga-ga, or perhaps because he was completely ga-ga, he taught her to chain saw.

After a day at Accounting Solutions, she chopped and slashed; she cried and railed at the wood heap of her life. At least they didn't have to pay for firewood. In the summer, she feared the house would burn down in a bushfire; in the winter, because of his pyro-maniacal dementia. For ten years her eyes narrowed and her shoulders bent beneath these grievances. Not thinking about them seemed the only solution. Spooning soup into her father's dribbly maw, she dreamed of rescue. She'd never had a chance at a normal life.

Why hadn't she married? It just hadn't happened. No prince had come along to cut through the undergrowth and awaken her. Once, on an impulse, half urgent, half careless after the day-long accountancy Christmas lunch, and after she'd drunk at least one bottle of sauv blanc, she'd found herself in an almost empty car park at dusk, moving rhythmically beneath Accounting Solutions' best client, on her ute bonnet, him clutching his pants in one hand and his keys in the other, his wife home with his children. She deserved a holiday in Budapest.

After Rhea rescued Lily they climbed on and off the tour bus, photographing sights of Buda and Pest: a girl on the banks of the Danube, holding a palm frond for Liberty; a local playing Liszt at Matthias Church; a cowed bronze monk glowering beneath a Gothic castle named Vajdahunyad. At one stop, they saw bullet holes from the 1956 revolution in walls. Between camera shots they sat side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder, making spartan conversation. Rhea had packed shelves at a supermarket in Nowra to pay for her flight to Hungary. Rhea had to get away from her father, literally to save her life. Lily told her why she needed a break from *her* father. No further questions. Lily wondered how many Hungarian women had experienced the Liberty suggested by the statue. She and Rhea touched hands and went quiet.

At the end of the tour, Rhea mumbled something about cheap dumplings and lifted her hand in farewell as she floated across the road and into a shabby park. Lily took the lift to her hotel room to unpack her shopping. It was a lazy Sunday afternoon but she found herself hurrying. From her window she could see boys dribbling a ball back and forth in the park while people appeared and disappeared on the far side, in sunlight filtered by plane trees. One minute you saw several at a taxi rank, the next the space was empty. The grass looked uncared for, shat upon by fat and shameless pigeons; the stone perimeter wall was crumbled, the flagged path twisted towards the railway line. Rhea was slumped against a bench, fingers dipping in and out of a

plastic tub. Over the honk and wail of traffic and beyond the park Lily could hear music blaring. Why wilt in a hotel room feeling sorry for herself? After this holiday she might never get another chance to be part of anything. She would catch up with the girl.

Slamming the door shut behind her, she took the lift to the hotel foyer, paced across the unkempt park and jiggled down subway stairs, pinching her nostrils against the sharp stink of urine, before crossing two lanes of throbbing traffic. Rhea had left her rubbish on the seat. Lily caught glimpses of her moving between wire fences and statues on plinths. It was not her job to pick up after her.

Straining towards the music, she passed three women, their legs and cankles splayed below a cast-iron bench. One looked old-world European, her thinning hair gathered up in a pearl shell comb, her fingers pressed against full, terracotta lips. A winsome breeze stirred the air, flapping the awnings of small stalls selling gingerbread and strings of chilli peppers. Perhaps the women were supervising from a distance, their sons and daughters-in-law selling produce? Were they stuck? Like her?

Drawn by music that was definitely not bohemian rhapsody she followed Rhea between two buildings, arriving at a scene which reminded her of Eastern European movies set between the world wars: a civic square paved with uneven grey flagstones arranged perhaps by a drunk. A crowd bobbed near a temporary stage under a canvas canopy strung between buildings which proclaimed *Óbudai Nyár*. High-tech sound equipment and lighting gleamed with promise.

‘What does it mean?’ she shouted to a green-haired sprite with a nose ring. ‘The sign.’

‘It means Old Budapest Summer,’ the girl yelled back over the music.

Goodwill swamped Lily’s heart and she leant into the grinding, rocking crowd. At the front a barefoot woman in fringed leather danced with a man who had set his wheelchair in dreamy rotation. This wasn’t tourism. This was the weekend, just like home.

She stared at the singer at the mic who was wearing a dress that swung around her knees as she belted out songs. The woman was slightly overweight but looked happy in her body, and her voice was low and crackly, as if she smoked a lot. She punched the air with her microphone. Lily wished she could be more like her, and she angled her head in wistful incertitude.

She scanned the whitewashed buildings, the broken tiles on their hip rooves creating a curvy line over attic windows. They looked like the houses she had drawn as a kid: windows for eyes, a door for a mouth, a roof for a hat, a chimney-pot brooch, smoke for a feather. She spotted Rhea moving sideways along the walls, trying to pass two women who were holding their stilettos overhead as they rocked to the music, faces ducking together to kiss, and a dark-haired thirtyish guy pushing a bicycle with a flute in the basket. He was conversing with an older man who had angled his peaked cap over his acne-scarred face, and as Rhea passed, both men lifted their tankards in mock salute, like cuckoo- clock characters.

The girl cocked her head as if they weren’t on her radar and withdrew under the portico of a fancy civic building, perhaps the Town Hall, thought Lily. It was signed *Városház*, and a red and white flag fluttered from a pole. Croatian, she decided. Must have something to do with the big screen behind the singer, and the European Soccer Cup.

The heat slammed down. Lily slid between green Soproni umbrellas to get a better view of the men pursuing Rhea. The one with the bicycle briefly stopped, supporting the bike between his legs, while he tried to get Rhea’s attention by offering her a cigarette. Eventually she took one and let it droop from her lips. He played something on his flute. It might have been a riff on the rock piece but Rhea stood stock still. Perhaps he would pipe her into the Tatra Mountains or into the squat, Soviet-style buildings with satellite equipment on their rooves, beyond the square. The sun went behind a cloud and the mood of the crowd quietened.

Why should Lily bloody well care about someone she'd just met? Rhea was younger but probably twice as tough. Ridiculous. Tragic, in fact. Twenty-eight years old and Lily was having a weird, empty-womb wobble. Rhea was not her kid. But hell, after all the girl had been through, someone should be looking after her.

A restaurant waiter waved Lily on: no table, no food, no drink. Fully booked. She stepped down to the square to buy light ale in a plastic cup from a friendly girl with long straight hair and prominent teeth, who grinned back at her. She walked on, sipping, as she kept half an eye on Rhea. Nothing better than beer on a stinking hot day. It was golden and yeasty, as wet and welcome as April rain. As Lily neared, Rhea lifted the scabbed cigarette dangling from her fingers in greeting but continued walking along the path leading back to the park. Flute guy pushed his bike beside her, glancing up at Lily in a measured way. Damn! Lily rocked on her heels to the music, sucking back the rest of her beer. Why should she care? Because she owed her one, that's why.

Through the subway and across the road Lily followed the couple into the park. It took a moment to work things out: Rhea was seated on a bench, next to the guy, who was now stroking his flute against his cheek, every now and then casting glances over his shoulder but not playing. The older man from the square was walking towards them.

Lily edged past a stand of trees until she was in earshot.

The man approached the bench with something in his hand and shouted at the younger guy. 'Passeporte! Poliza!'

Peering around a small tree, Lily strained to understand. Without argument, Flute-guy sat up, fished in his pocket and handed over his document wallet. The man barked again, presumably repeating his instructions, waving a badge and a handgun at Rhea, who peeped from behind her phone like a startled bird. Her head swung towards her new friend's face. He jumped up, miming that he'd protect her, urging her to hand over her bag.

Lily moved crabwise along the edge of the patchy lawn.

Something felt very wrong. Almost in the same moment, the older man snatched Rhea's woven bag, and eyed her phone. Then he grabbed that too and dashed away. Rhea seemed stunned. She stood up and then sat down again, as if oscillating between fight and flight. Flute boy sprinted after the man, as if to reclaim his belongings and perhaps Rhea's. Both men were running across the grass towards a metal rubbish bin and, ironically, towards her. Oh God, she thought: too late to zone one out as she might in a game. The older man drew what looked like a passport-wallet from Rhea's bag before dumping it in the bin. Lily ducked back behind her tree but as the men ran towards her she saw that they were pissing themselves laughing.

In a spurt of fury she bent to lever a loose wedge of concrete from the crumbling public wall, and held it close to her body. Employing angle and spin, she put her full weight behind it, and hurled the chunk of stone. She watched it rotate with the power of a log unloaded from a trailer, and watched it smash into the older man's groin. Momentum and its nemesis, gravity, finished the job. Cradling his balls, he dropped the stolen goods with a groan.

Flute boy jumped forward but Lily had the advantage of surprise and, helpfully, Rhea began to scream, attracting the attention of passers-by. He slipped in the grass as Lily scooped up the passport and the phone and ran after his friend who was now hobbling towards the subway stairs.

Lily and Rhea exchanged shocked looks. My God, they were tourists and Lily had assaulted a local! Maybe not a cop but ... and they didn't speak the language! How on earth would they explain themselves to authorities? Luckily, it hadn't come to that.

'Awesome!' Rhea blurted as they bolted for the hotel, falling into a hug in the foyer. They soothed each other over double shot coffees and a plate of stodgy gulyás, followed by sweet őszibarack.

'I would have been fucked without that money,' Rhea said. 'I don't own a credit card.'

'Who would you have rung?'

'No-one.' She hung her head. 'I have to get to my aunt's in Krakow but she's poor. I'd have asked the hotel if I could work off my bill.'

'Your aunt would have helped you, if you'd rung her,' Lily soothed.

'I hope she'll tell my father to leave me alone.'

'Do you have to live with him?'

Rhea shrugged. 'For a while.' She began to describe how her father beat her when he'd had a skinful of beer. How last time he'd broken three of her ribs. 'It's just while I'm studying youth work. It's better if I come home late. After he passes out.'

'Why not be a youth worker?' Lily quieted. Stirred cream into her coffee. 'You'd be good at it.'

Rhea looked pleased. 'I could put a lock on my door.'

'Or report him to the police.' Lily knew there were no easy answers. 'They could help you leave.'

'I will go. Soon as I can.' Rhea rubbed cake crumbs between her thumb and forefinger. Looked determined.

For a moment, Lily felt inspired. Maybe she should leave home too, for a flat behind the main street. She'd be mad to ever go back to felling trees. She could sell the chainsaw on eBay; she could sell the bloody house. What was the point in keeping it when Dad was never coming home? Even his doctors said so. Once a week, she'd invite him for afternoon tea on the cedar table retrieved from their chook-house – the one that she'd stripped and polished herself, the one that reminded her of the wood she'd cut and sold and burned – and she'd serve it on the creamy, lace-edged cloth embroidered with sprays of Hungarian pimentos that she'd bought that morning in a small village market. Then she'd walk him back to the nursing home again. Poor bugger.

In the morning Lily walked with Rhea to the train station and bought herself a ticket to Krakow. Stay seven days and let her hair down over the ramparts, she told herself, see who climbed up. Classier than a ute. Forget Sleeping Beauty and give Rapunzel a run. Next year she'd reactivate her university application – to study what? Physics, online: inertia and torque and all that because she'd already done the practical. She examined her hands, abraded from heaving the paving stone, and shoved them in her pockets. No one could stop her. If a little spit of a thing like Rhea planned to step outside the frame, then she could too.

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