

HUNGER

*I seem to remember the stars in your eyes
Through the veil of time, shining bright
Dazzled and mesmerized
I fell in love with those stars
Now I know, they were only Northern lights*

Early Sunday morning, an ambulance was called to the old Bluebell Chapel, where a jogger stumbled upon the body of a man lying on the ground with a gunshot wound to the head. The man was later identified as Silvester Dunai. The police have closed the investigation, as the available information suggests that the victim attempted to take his own life with his own weapon.

The sun's rays shone down fiercely on the small town. Its wide squares and narrow streets were deserted in the midday heat. Only the waterfront showed signs of life, where the restaurants were packed with hungry tourists. Beneath huge, stretched-out umbrellas, waiters moved with graceful ease, like foxes in the twilight, making sure to squeeze as much money as possible out of the guests. Everyone who could, took refuge in the shade to escape the heat. The ice cream vendor fanned herself wearily under the umbrella, while shopkeepers pulled their wares out of the blazing sun. The lángos seller sat on the back steps of his shop, slowly stroking his dog, who was panting listlessly beneath his shaggy coat. The beachgoers, too, had retreated under the beach's large willow trees. Mothers rummaged through cooler bags, children pushed squeaky toys around on checkered blankets. The hot dog vendor's cat lay sprawled on the cool stone behind the showers. Not even the sparrows taking noisy dust baths interested him; only his ears twitching now and then betrayed the predator within. The market was deserted as well. Only an old woman remained, seemingly unperturbed by the sweltering heat. With her wrinkled little hands, she slowly arranged her wares on the metal table. A few peppers, tomatoes, a wilting bunch of greens, the produce of her small garden. From beneath her black headscarf, dark, weary eyes gazed out at the world. Eyes that had seen suffering, war, hope, and betrayal.

I

Bea felt Silvester's body press against hers. Something was straining against the man's pants. Bea had an idea of what it might be, but that something was still a mystery to her; she was sixteen and a virgin. As Silvester held her close, he whispered softly into her ear how irresistible she was and how much he desired her.

Things had been going on between the two of them for a while. Bea had finished school a few weeks ago and had signed up for a summer job as an office assistant. She typed letters, ran errands to the post office, brought sandwiches, and made coffee. Whenever she had a little money left over, Bea always bought a bouquet of flowers. She loved buying flowers. The small office felt much cozier with flowers.

Silvester's administrator, Klaudia—a married woman in her late twenties—who enjoyed lecturing Bea on how a virtuous woman should behave, was off that day. Klaudia's dogmatic Catholic morals bored Bea on the one hand, but on the other, she almost enjoyed watching the woman's horrified face when she showed up for work in skimpy miniskirts. Bea enjoyed wearing her miniskirts, which nearly drove Silvester wild.

Silvester filled Bea with curiosity: he was the first man over whom she had power. Such power that his hands began to tremble just from her walking into the office. Bea's mere presence threw Silvester off balance. Once, during a meeting, he knocked over a glass of water and behaved so strangely that the client turned and remarked quietly, "Perhaps the typist is too pretty." His voice was serious, but his eyes twinkled mischievously. He smiled; this was the world of men, a silent brotherhood among them. On one side, the men with their secrets; on the other, the women with their fears and suspicions.

Bea didn't know much about men. Her father had died a few years ago, and she had no male relatives. In fact, she had no relatives at all. All her classmates had a bunch of cousins, but she didn't. When she asked her mother why she didn't have grandparents or cousins, her mother's usually calm face would grow sad, and instead of answering, she would just stroke Bea's hair with a distant look in her eyes.

Bea's father had died three years ago. A heart attack had taken him. Since then, her mother had gradually withdrawn further and further into her own world. She had smoked a lot before, but after her husband's death, she became a chain smoker. When she wasn't cleaning at the bank, she sat in front of the TV, smoking away her life.

Bea was often alone, but since she had no siblings, solitude was nothing new to her. She read adventure novels about distant and mysterious places, watched movies, and listened to tons of music. Like everyone her age, she was crazy about Duran Duran and Prince, and she followed the crazy fashion of the '80s: neon sweaters, huge plastic earrings, and absurd shoulder pads. Her absolute favorite, however, was Madonna. She had cross earrings, fishnet stockings, and a rosary (which she got from Livi, who had stolen it from her grandmother). Only one thing was missing: lace gloves. Bea left no stone unturned in her search for lace gloves, but it was impossible, and the object took root in the tiny corner of her tender heart where her young soul's unfulfilled dreams dwelled.

Silvester reluctantly let the girl go when the phone rang on his desk. While he was on the phone, Bea smoothed out her blouse and skirt with a little half-smile smile. She enjoyed how much Silvester was under her spell; this rich and handsome... married man. Klaudia had told her on her very first day

at work. Klaudia, who had worked with Silvester for years and knew the man well, had figured out very quickly what was going on between them. When Silvester wasn't in the office, she gave Bea little lectures on how a young lady should behave. Bea was bored by Klaudia's sermons. She didn't care one bit about what the nuns had taught Klaudia at the Catholic school, or how depraved and immoral Silvester was. She listened politely to the lecture, but Klaudia's opinion of Silvester's morals left her cold. Perhaps because she wasn't interested in his character, but rather in the exciting situation she found herself in.

Silvester was still on the phone when Bea grabbed her bag and pointed to the clock on the wall. It was four o'clock; her shift was over. She was about to step out the door when she heard the man's hurried footsteps behind her. Silvester grabbed her wrist and pulled her toward him.

"Wait! We need to talk!" he said in a hushed voice.

"Promise me you won't give yourself to some young guy who doesn't deserve you! Promise me!"

His voice had turned almost pleading, and for a fleeting moment Bea thought she saw a glimmer of genuine despair in the man's eyes. The moment passed, Silvester's gaze hardened, and his grip on her wrist became almost painful. Bea looked at him in surprise; the pressure on her wrist was just grazing the threshold of pain.

"I don't know yet. Maybe yes, maybe no!" she said with a quick laugh and pulled her hand out of his grip.

Bea giggled to herself the whole way home. She found it funny that Silvester imagined boys were lining up to take her virginity. She'd never even had a boyfriend. When she was 11, she'd kissed a boy under the school stairs. For a long time, she thought her love life had taken off. But she wasn't lucky with her looks: she looked much younger than she actually was. While other girls had already started wearing bras in elementary school, her feminine curves had only begun to develop last year.

As usual, Bea found her mother in front of the TV.

"János Kádár has died," her mother said in an emotionless, flat tone.

Bea remembered that when Brezhnev died, the whole country was plunged into mourning, and as a young schoolgirl, she had to watch the funeral broadcast twice at school. If Kádár had died years earlier, there would have been a national grief day with black flags, but it was 1989. Everything had changed.

Neither Bea nor her mother had anything else to say, so they ate dinner in silence, both lost in their own thoughts.

On Saturday, Bea met up with Livi, her former classmate. They'd known each other for years, but they hadn't always been good friends. Livi was different from Bea; wild, and sometimes strange. When they were kids, Bea didn't like Livi's wildness, but lately she'd found the girl's quirks appealing. Maybe because all her other girlfriends could talk about was getting married and having babies. Not Livi. Livi just wanted to have fun and act crazy.

They met at their favorite pastry shop. As always, Livi did most of the talking. Livi loved to talk, and Bea loved to listen to her. Bea was never a chatterbox. Even among her friends, she was always the one everyone could tell their secrets to, because Bea was quiet and didn't gossip. In contrast, Livi chattered away, was entertaining, and never followed the trends that others did. She dyed her hair wild colors and designed her own clothes.

“But seriously!” said Livi, leaning back in her chair with a dramatic flourish.

“I’m sick of still being a virgin! I’m almost 17 already! I need to find someone!” she sighed in frustration.

“That’s so embarrassing! Ildi’s already over it. She told me herself that she picked up some good-looking, tall guy at a house party, they got pretty drunk, and that was that.”

“And what did she say?” Bea looked up. “Did she say what he was like?”

“She said the only thing she remembered was that her socks were still on her feet,” Livi giggled. “That’s all she could think about the whole time they were doing it. That her socks were still on her feet.” And Reni. Remember when she said back in May that she was still a virgin? She just admitted she lied. She lost it last year. She said she lied because everyone else was a virgin and she didn’t want to stand out. She’s already on her second boyfriend. And I’m going to die a virgin! But at least you’re still a virgin, just like me.

“Did I mention I have a job?” Livi sighed, slowly pushing her chair back. “I stock shelves and stack baskets in a grocery shop all day long.” “I hate it,” she grimaced, “but my father said if I don’t study, I have to work. Mom said I’m too young, so father started yelling that he’d kick me out, and Mom replied that he should find me a job then. I don’t know where he got this crappy job, but now I have to do it. I know father wants to get rid of me. I’d gladly go, but where? Believe me, he’s an animal.” Livi’s expression twisted. “He’s drunk almost every day, and he beats my mom. Then the next day, they both act like nothing happened. You know what happened two days ago?” Livi moved closer to Bea. “He was so drunk he passed out. You know where? In the bathroom doorway. I had my headphones on so I wouldn’t hear the yelling, when I heard a thud, and then my mom came in. ‘Livi, help! Your father passed out,’ she said.”

So I went out into the hallway, and there was my father, wedged between the bathroom door and the hallway wall, in his piss-stained pants. My mom told me to help pull him out, and I said, “But how?” “You pull his legs, and I’ll push his head,” she said. But no matter how hard I pulled, nothing happened. He was stuck. I was pulling like crazy: nothing. Then Mom started laughing, and then I did too. By the end, I was in tears, I was laughing so hard. Mom pushed his head, and I pulled his legs, and finally we managed to drag him into the room somehow. Of course, the next day I had to act like nothing had happened. He just paced back and forth, looking miserable, and held his head. He said he didn’t know why he had a big bump on it. I think Mom dropped him a few times, just for a laugh! I had to laugh into my pillow so no one would hear! Livi squealed, but then she looked around and continued more quietly:

“Mom always says that if my brother, Tomi, were here, he’d protect us. Tomi moved out because father was always beating him, too.”

“I didn’t know you had a brother,” Bea said quietly.

“I was nine when he left. Father was beating Mom while drunk, as usual, when Tomi had had enough and punched father in the face. Mom started screaming for him to stop, and father yelled that if he didn’t get out of there right away, he’d kill him. Tomi packed his things and left. Mom said he moved in with my father’s sister. I haven’t seen him since. Ever since then, whenever my parents fight, my mom yells at my father that he ruined his own son, that he’s worse than an animal, because at least animals care about their young.

Bea knew that Livi had had a turbulent childhood; she often went to school with bruises or without food. Almost all of her classmates suffered from family problems. Some were lucky, like Bea, but most were not. Like Heni, who was beaten by both her father and her older brother, or Rita, whose mother had died, and when her father remarried and later divorced, he left Rita with her stepmother, who treated her very badly. Children who had suffered since they were very young, with parents who had suffered themselves and passed that suffering on to the next generation. Children who had to learn to cope with everything life threw at them.