



Strangers in Budapest

Jessica Keener

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In Jessica Keener's *Strangers in Budapest*, it's 1995, and the tech bubble is swelling. The *Wall Street Journal* is reporting unprecedented opportunity in Eastern Europe, and three Americans—Annie, Will, and their 4-month-old, newly adopted son, Leo—ride that tide of optimism from suburban Massachusetts to Hungary. Soon, they'll discover what Hungarians have always known: behind the city's "preserved exterior hid[es] a darker, rundown interior—beauty and ugliness coexisting, each one vying for dominance."

Will is chasing an entrepreneurial dream, and Annie is following along, happy to escape the prying eyes of their adoption agency for the chance to be a regular family. But after several months in Budapest, they're spinning their wheels. Each is furtively casting about for something to fill the growing void when a letter from old neighbors—themselves Hungarians—send them to a small apartment to check on Edward Weiss, an elderly American ex-pat who's clearly in poor health but insists that no one should know he's there. Will's dismissive, but Annie can't let this haunted man go.

Annie's a runner—literally and figuratively. As she circumnavigates Budapest, she's also circling a past she'd like to leave behind. All that's unresolved inside her pulls her toward other people's tragedies like iron filings to a magnet, the "pull of 'helping' drawing her." And there are plenty of people for her to snag against. Budapest's an ominous, atmospheric city that resists—foreign development, easy communication, gentrification—all the can-do, progressive insistence and positive facades of the visiting Americans.

In Keener's *Strangers in Budapest*, the city is as much a character as any, and as Annie and others begin to cave under its crumbling weight, what's revealed where East meets West is a story about the implacability of the past—present, progress, and denials notwithstanding.

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