

Chapter 36

MOUTH SONIA

FRIDAY, 9 JULY 2010

‘Scuse me, which country is this?’ I’ve never had to ask *that* before. Only idiots who don’t know what country they are in ask such stupid questions. The scenery has suddenly become industrial and blue-collar. The signs give no clue. And the service station attendant also looks clueless as she waves a finger.

‘Nein.’ Her frown deepens. ‘Eisenstadt.’

I’ve never heard of Eisenstadt. It sounds ... Austrian.

‘Austria or Hungary?’

She laughs. ‘Austria.’

Right, we’re still in Austria. Thought as much. In fact, all I have to do is drive three miles and we’ll arrive at the border.

A police officer in the road stops us with his palm. ‘Deutsch?’

‘English and Japanese.’

‘Passports, driving licence, registration documents, insurance.’

Since leaving England, this is the first time we’ve had to show ID and vehicle documentation. A few nervous, silent minutes pass until the officer trundles back to confirm clearance.

We roll into Hungary and out of the Eurozone with over 3,000 miles clocked. The landscape's drier here, scorched by the sun. Hungary must be having a hot, dry summer. Driving through farmland harvests of various crops and sunflower fields that stretch out on either side of the road, we soak up the scenery, watching as insects the size of corn kernels attempt to breach the Honda's windows. Instead, they kamikaze into the windscreen and chassis. The main road is a single-carriageway that passes through tiny towns and villages. Many houses are abandoned, and most villages run no deeper than the roadside. We hardly see any residents apart from a few old people riding equally old bicycles.

We soon turn off the main road onto one twenty-five miles long in the heart of the Hungarian countryside. The road is mostly deserted. I fear a breakdown in this remote landscape, and it reminds me of Nepal and the road to hell, albeit briefly. Sonia has some explaining to do. It's nice to have an empty stretch of road, nonetheless.

The tiny town of Heviz has nothing worth staying for, so we push on to Lake Balaton, a freshwater oasis home to a 197-kilometre shoreline with public and private beaches. It's the largest lake in Europe and Hungary's primary domestic holiday destination, meaning as much to the Hungarians as the Riviera does to Westerners. Something must have become lost in translation, as Lake Balaton is just as uninteresting as Heviz.

Budapest was once the co-capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire but dissolved after the first world war. After the second world war, Hungary fell under the political sphere of Stalin's Russia and became a socialist state led by a communist government. When the USSR collapsed, the Soviet Army began leaving Hungary in 1990, the last troops withdrawing in June, 1991.

Budapest has communism written all over it and stands as a testament to the Soviet era with its square buildings, rundown apartment blocks and ageing shops lining the main roads. Lada rust traps are everywhere, one of Russia's many footprints. But this is not a communist country anymore and is considered a great place to work, live and travel. Since it's not part of the Eurozone, it has remained cheap to entice new companies. Budapest is divided into two parts, but not by any Berlin-Wall-inspired concepts. The

Danube River serves as the divider, with Buda on the west side, where all the old buildings are, and Pest on the east, newer with more commercial buildings.

Zoltan Levai picks us up from HI Hostel Fortuna the next morning. I first met Zoltan in 2008 when he strutted into GEOS in formal clothes, carrying a briefcase. He looked like a salesman, not a student. The thirty-five-year-old skinhead is like the archetypal British hooligan. Appearances can be deceiving because, in fact, he's a gentleman, not a ruffian. And no longer a student. And doesn't work in sales. Having Zoltan around means we don't have to decide where to go and can let him take charge of our itinerary, a most pleasant change.

He takes us for lunch, consisting of meat, potatoes, gravy and a family favourite – red cabbage. A Hungarian-style roast. After lunch, he collects Andrea, his girlfriend, and drives to Gellért Hill. The view from the Citadel shows Budapest carved in half by the Danube River, which passes through nine countries and four capital cities – Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest and Belgrade.

Later, a riverboat takes us along the Danube, passing Budapest's most famous building, the Hungarian Parliament. Zoltan then drives us to Hősök tere, or Heroes' Square, two colonnades in a semi-circle and the Millennium Column between them. An open-air tent is close by, hosting the World Cup play-off between Germany and Uruguay. It makes me realise how much I miss football. I want to play again. It will help rehabilitate my weak knee and rid me of my Hindu curse. I also want to get back to work and have a disposable income without austerity. Suddenly, I'm feeling excited about starting afresh in Japan. I'm a little sick of travel, feeling obliged to visit all the sights. It's becoming a burden. I feel the time has come for me to root myself in one place long enough to bring elements of my life to fruition. First, I have to flush out this lingering travel bug so I can hang up my backpack for good. If I'm honest, these last few days have come close to, at the very least, scratching that itch.

We do all our driving during the day. It's an unsaid rule, but we limit road time to five hours. We average three on the days we *are* driving. We learnt from our mistakes in America.

Crossing the imaginary line that separates Hungary from Slovakia in the Carpathian Mountains, the third-largest mountain range in Europe, the miles on the clock strike 3,351, equalling the distance we covered between Washington and Los Angeles. It seems like we've done a lot more miles in Europe, but that's from driving daily and passing through seven countries on the world's second-smallest continent.

Hungary has Ladas. Slovakia has Skodas. I've counted twenty already. Some of the old models Opa, my grandfather, used to own. The Skoda 105L, the 120L M-II, the Rapid 011 and the Favorit 136, the last one he drove before he died. Skodas have been bad-mouthed over the years, but they will always have a place in my heart because they remind me of Opa, who seemed to take great pride in flying in the face of fashion.

The winding roads lead us through towns and villages, most with a tiny church as its centrepiece. Temperatures again reach the mid-thirties, and the Honda is a mobile sauna. Even Sonia seems to be affected by this heat. Lowering the windows has little effect and just lets the insects in, causing Momoko epileptic fits in the passenger seat. We really should get this AC fixed. Why haven't we?

We pass a truck that has rolled off the road down an embankment, stopping dead on its side. The truck's contents are scattered all over the field, reminding me of Nepal again. Half an hour into Slovakia, we're forced to turn back because of a roadblock.

'Recalculating. I don't understand what's going on. Re ... re ... recalculating.'

Sonia is in a stew and can't figure out the new route. I gamble on a road parallel to the blocked one, and she finally detects an alternative route. *'Oh, nice one.'*

She also can't find the coordinates to Chalet Slovakia, so I have to guess the way. The Chalet is somewhere in the High Tatras, a mountain range stretching for fifteen miles.

'High Tatras? I've, like, never heard of them. Are they big? Recalculating.'

She starts to malfunction. It could be heatstroke. Perhaps her wiring is faulty. Either way, she's going to feel the furry side of my hand in a minute. She has a very punchable interface.

She goes into another tailspin when roadworks and diversions on a bridge cause her further confusion.

'Recalculating. Recalculating.'

She's doing my head in. I don't care if her regards are warm. When we reach the High Tatras, I'm going to toss her off the highest peak, then run the daft dictator over on my way back down.

'Recalculating. Recalculating.'

'Shhhh!'

We pull into a quiet residential area where I, not Sonia, find Chalet Slovakia. I park the car in the drive of what is essentially a bungalow, but Sonia proudly exclaims we have arrived at our destination as if she had something to do with it. If there's one thing she needs, it's shooting.

A woman cradling a young baby opens the door to find us there, my hand poised to knock. 'You found it okay, then?' the British landlady says as she steps out and heads down the side of the house towards the garden. 'Come, I'll show you to the room.'

The room is more a small apartment in a flowery garden, separate from the bungalow and very homely.

We stroll into the centre of Liptovsky Mikulas and find an American pub called Route 66, of all names, with pictures of the mother road. I look at them with nostalgia and a smile, embracing fleeting memories of Rosie and Mr. Schwab, Mount Olive and Cadillac Ranch.

The World Cup final is streaming live on TV. After five hours of hot, sweaty driving, I reward myself with reasonably priced Pilsner. By the time Spain beats Holland in a subpar World Cup final, Momoko and I have watched the month-long tournament in ten countries, but I'm not as drunk as you think I look.

Momoko is nervous about white-water rafting. I've done it once before on the Tully River in Australia. I think the real reason she's nervous is that whenever I persuade her to do something against her will, something goes awfully wrong, ending with her leaking tears on my shoulder or her *giving* me the cold shoulder. I suppose she has a point.

The boat almost capsizes a few times, and if Momoko falls in, she will panic and, if she doesn't drown, will probably never forgive me. But it's *my* foot that slips out of the strap, and it's *me* falling side-long into the river, most of my body hanging off the raft with only my twisted left foot hooked

under a strap stopping me from going overboard. The back of my head is knocking against the rocks under the gushing water, and I can't pull myself up, no matter how hard I try, because apart from being arched right back, the raft is being sucked into a vortex caused by the cascading waterfall. Desperate for assistance, I reach out, and Momoko grabs my wrist and pulls me up. I'm a little shaken, with water streaming from my lips and nose, my vision blurred by the water. Just when I gather my composure again, the Polish girl in front drives her paddle into my face when the boat dips into a whirlpool, a solid whack that makes my eyes water, blurring my vision again. I press my hand against the socket and inspect my palm for blood. 'Do I have a black eye?' I ask.

'No,' Momoko says.

'Blood?'

Strangely, she doesn't seem too concerned. If anything, I'd describe her expression as barely suppressed manic glee. 'There's a tiny scratch on your nose.'

Momoko enjoys a massage back at Chalet Slovakia, and I'm feeling a little shortchanged. I'm the one who got beaten by a paddle and almost drowned. Cue the outrage.

Before the sun sets, we bike to Mara Lake, about forty minutes away. I relish in a quick swim in the lake, wary of vortexes and swinging paddles before we cycle home to Liptovsky Mikulas with a town centre that reminds me of Bexleyheath in Kent, where my grandparents lived for sixty years. The houses look similar, and even the local school resembles the one my mother attended. With enough Skodas to have my grandfather salivating, I'm transported back to those special childhood days spent on Inglewood Road.