

New York, New York



I had been looking forward to kissing the soil of America when I arrived. But the dock in Baltimore was so dirty that I changed my mind. There wasn't even a gangplank to go down. I had to pin my skirt into a kind of culotte and descend by rope ladder to American soil.

The sailors gathered round to make their last farewells. Then Tibor and Ernest came forward, carrying flowers and candy. It was like being transferred from one set of loving arms to another.

Tibor apologized for his wife, Lee, who could not come because she had to work. Lee had a job with TIME magazine, he said. We were not as impressed as he had intended, because TIME magazine meant nothing to us.

We went to the train station and bought tickets for a train that left within the hour. That was all there was to it. No long waits. No standing aside for armed men. No desperate pleading with ticket agents or officials. No bribes. No showing of papers and waiting for hours or days with hands shaking and fear closing the throat. American trains even looked different. Instead of small groups sharing separate, semi-private cars, everyone traveled together. We could pick our own seat and sit down. Very sensible and democratic, I thought.

A few hours later, we were in New York. New York in those days was a much newer, cleaner, safer city than now. I had never seen buildings that reached into the sky that way, or known people to move with such briskness and energy. I could feel the spirit of

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the city stir within me and I loved it and wanted to be part of it.

A taxi took us to Tibor and Lee's apartment. Nick and I were astonished to find that they had vacated the bedroom for us. They were to sleep on the studio couches in the living room, while we had the bed. They had even cleared out the closets. Nick's thoughts were preoccupied with his reunion with his eldest brother, and all the memories it had evoked. Tibor, a very sensitive man of Nick's own age, had lost his entire family. They spoke of these things by the hour in Hungarian. Finding it unbearable and wanting to improve my English, I turned to Lee.

I found her to be one of the most extraordinary people I had ever met. She was a Southerner, descended from many distinguished persons, including the Confederate general, Robert E. Lee. Tibor Borgida was her second husband, and her mother would have had nothing to do with either of them if she had known he was a Jew.

It was beyond my comprehension how a woman so sweet of manner, so warm of heart, so soft of speech, so obviously brilliant, and so beautiful to look at, managed to get divorced every year or two. The secret, I discovered, was that she was fiercely determined to be herself and live her life to the fullest, and she had yet to find anyone who could keep up with her. (Eventually she did. Lee has been married to her present—and third—husband for many happy decades.)

I had never met any woman so energetic yet so caring. Lee never stopped thinking about what to show or teach me next. She explained that I must be particularly polite to the black woman who came in several times a week to clean, and do nothing to suggest I might be prejudiced. All this was news to me. Before my arrival, I had no idea that there was a problem for black people in America, or discrimination against anyone there.

My top priority was to start earning money at once. A friend's sister from Czechoslovakia had sent a message that a forelady in the tailoring department of Bergdorf-Goodman's was a Czech. I went to

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meet this woman and she recommended me to a Mme. Wilburn, who hired me as a finisher at \$20 dollars a week.

I felt lucky to have the job and found only one thing to complain about: Mrs. Wilburn kept calling me “Honey.” To my ears, this sounded like some reference to my Hungarian nationality. I wondered if Gizel was not too hard for her to remember, and asked Lee if I shouldn’t change it to something easier. She laughed till tears came, then explained what “Honey” meant. She also firmly discouraged me from changing my name, for which I thank her.

On my first day I ran into an absurd situation. In my feeble English, I asked where I could buy an inexpensive lunch. I misunderstood the instructions, and ended up at a place that seemed amazingly elegant. But what did I know? Perhaps in America working-class people ate in places like this. I had a superb lunch but almost fainted when the check arrived. Fortunately I could pay it, as Lee had advanced me enough spending money for at least a week. But it took every cent I had.

I found out later that I had been to the famous Stork Club. Ten years later, during my first trip back to New York, I went back to the Stork Club, this time prepared to pay. I found the opportunity to tell my story to the owner, Sherman Billingsley. He found it so amusing that he treated me to lunch on the house.

I will always associate New York with the thrill of my first paycheck. I had worked as a slave, but I had never before worked for money. The idea that I could support myself filled me with peace and pride. Time and again, I blessed the memory of my mother, who had insisted on my learning to sew.

The first thing I wanted to buy was some American shoes. I had already picked out a pair in a store window—shiny black pumps with high heels. They were \$3, but their elegance was worth the price, especially compared to the handmade shoes I had brought from Czechoslovakia. As usual, Lee helped out. She offered to buy my handmade shoes for whatever I paid for the new ones. I thought

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she was doing me a charity but accepted the offer anyway. It was quite a while before I understood that handmade foreign shoes were actually more valuable in her eyes.

Both Nick and I had relatives in America. The eldest of the six Grosz sisters from Ramocsahasa had gone there as a bride. She was now very old. Her son was preoccupied with his own life, but her unmarried daughter, Rose, who still lived at home, was as generous as her limited means would allow. Two of Nick's father's sisters were also living in New York. One of them had two children, now in their 50s. These people were very well off but seemed determined to avoid us. They would not even let us meet their mother. They apparently viewed us as poor relations who would prove burdensome with the least encouragement.

I was shocked. Back home, we would never have treated family members in this way. As I remembered, those who had always shared with those who did not, whether it was money for a new roof or a morsel of bread in the camps.

Life in America was different in a way I could never have imagined. Family bonds were weak. Ultimately, they could depend on no one but themselves.

Six weeks after I started working for Mme. Wilburn, I left her to go to work for a Mr. Dobbs, who owned an embroidery business. Instead of \$20 a week, he paid \$30, plus a commission for each embroidery design accepted for dresses. Mr. Dobbs asked me to design, and I ran around the city looking at architectural features, hoping to find ideas that could be adapted for embroidery. I submitted designs, but he turned them all down. Then I realized one day that he was using my ideas without paying the promised commission.

Once again I was shocked. I would not have expected this to happen.

I quit on the spot and found a job sewing linings into coats. It was a union shop, where we were paid 40 cents a lining. I liked piecework because there were no limits on potential earnings.

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Within 10 days, I was top producer. Then a strike was called, and it took all of three hours before the owner let me know I was the cause. I was working too fast and the other 25 workers resented me. So I quit that job too, again on the spot.

I took real pleasure in being able to quit jobs. It made me feel free and dignified. After all those years of taking abuse from soldiers, guards, officials, ticket conductors and the like, I was now in a country where I did not have to put up with degrading conditions.

My next job was working as a sample worker for Ceil Chapman, then a leading designer. She paid me \$60 a week, three times what I had earned only a few months before. This was a very comfortable wage in the mid-Forties, allowing me to support myself decently and still send money to Nick at dental school. I remained with Ceil Chapman until I left New York to join Nick. Under slightly different circumstances, I might have stayed on with her and made a career in the fashion industry.

Working, studying English, exploring the city and making new friends left me little time for painful memories. It was not that they had gone away. But for the time being, I kept them closely confined to one dark chamber of my heart.

Nick, meanwhile, was having a far more difficult time of it. English came harder to him, and it would be at least three years before he could resume his profession.

Nick's specialty had been maxillo-facial surgery, for which medical and dental degrees were both required. He held them both from the German University in Prague, but could not practice medicine in America unless he took a yearlong internship. Aside from that, he also had to repeat two years of dental school, then pass two State boards, one each in medicine and dentistry, after his internship.

All this was highly discouraging. How was he to get into a dental school, he brooded, not to speak of passing highly demanding written examinations in an unfamiliar language? Nick had still

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not recovered from his ordeal, which had been longer and even harder than mine had. And he was 10 years older—37 years old.

With Tibor's help, Nick applied to every dental school in America. All turned him down. They were swamped with applications from war veterans, who rightly had top priority.

We were close to giving up and trying to imagine alternatives. Then, on the first of September 1946, a telephone call came from a dental school in Kansas City. An opening in the junior class had appeared. We found out later that a third-year student had been killed in an accident. Nick had been the only applicant with the background to begin as a junior.

He flew to Kansas City on the next flight. I stayed behind. We agreed that both would progress more rapidly with English if we were not speaking to each other in Hungarian.

Tibor and I took Nick to the airport. Someone overheard us speaking Hungarian and mentioning Uzhorod and Kansas City. He introduced himself, to say there was a man from Uzhorod now living in Kansas City. Upon arrival, Nick contacted this man, whose name was Nathan Price. Nathan Price directed him to a Mr. Polavski, who had a furnished room to rent. So that problem was taken care of right away.

Nick was also befriended by the Dean of the Dental School, who was of German origin. As Nick wrote me, Dean Reinhard literally took him under his wing. He put an arm around Nick and led him everywhere with his arm around him. Speaking German, he explained the schedule, toured Nick through the classrooms, translated the orientation instructions, and did everything possible to make life a little easier for this very bewildered Jewish doctor, now a student. Fortunately Nick, like myself, had no hatred in him, and was able to accept this man's friendship.

I stayed in New York three more months, until Nick assured me that he could get by in English. Then I left Ceil Chapman and joined him in Kansas City. Later, we moved in with a Presbyterian

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minister and his family, baby-sitting their children in exchange for our room. A Hungarian doctor introduced us to an interesting circle of professional people, many of them doctors. Another Hungarian doctor recommended me for a job at the local hospital as a maternity ward nurse's aide. The pay was bad but it was happy work being surrounded by new mothers and babies. I always came to work wearing a flower in the buttonhole of my uniform. It became my trademark.

Kansas City was hardly New York. Life was cheap and the choice of jobs was narrow. Even so, I had to find something that paid better. The wife of another student was making good money as a manicurist, so I went to beauty school at night. Taking a crash course, I got my license quickly and began working on women's nails in a hair salon. Then someone told me there was more money in manicuring men, so I moved on to manicuring men.

I soon learned that if I let my customers flirt a bit, and especially if I let them press their knees against mine, I got bigger tips. I hated taking tips in the first place, because they hurt my pride. Even so, it seemed that if I must take tips, I might as well take big ones. I talked this over with Nick, who felt uneasy. Somehow, that made up my mind. "It's nothing to make a fuss about," I decided. "I can't get pregnant from it, so why worry?"

One of my customers was named Mr. Farth. I could not distinguish between th and t, so I called him "Mr. Fart." I learned on his first visit that he sold Ford cars and I told him we would soon be buying one from him. After he left, my distressed co-workers told me what I had been calling him and bet that he would never come back. He did, and eventually I did learn to pronounce his name.

Life was very pleasant in Kansas City. We were the first camp survivors in town and people went out of their way to be kind. New York had been exciting, but here things were restful. Nick and I had the leisure to get reacquainted, and to learn to communicate with each other in English.

Little as I earned, we always saved. Each morning, Nick went

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off with his lunch in a bag and 25 cents. Twenty cents were for car-fare and five cents were for a Coke. Any time he walked or got a ride or did not buy his drink, he returned the money in the evening and we saved it. I budgeted myself similarly and saved everything I didn't use.

As our reserves slowly mounted, we began to feel safer. We decided to sell the diamond we had been saving and buy our first car. To increase its value, we had the stone set in a ring. One day, the minister's family had some guests and we were invited to join them. We asked someone how to go about selling a ring, and the next thing we knew we were showing it around. Thinking that a minister's visiting friends would be entirely trustworthy, I put it down on the mantle before going to bed. When I went back for it in the morning, it was gone.

We never saw the diamond again. Flossie, the minister's wife, merely said "Too bad" and did nothing about it. Perhaps she felt embarrassed about confronting her friends or relatives. It never entered our heads to go to the police. Police weren't people who helped you, but people who threatened and tortured you. And so, after these many years, the diamond disappeared from our lives, and we had to postpone buying a car.

Oddly enough, I was not particularly troubled. I had lost more valuable things. And now that I felt confident about earning money, I no longer clung to symbols of security.

The following summer, however, a frightening experience occurred, one which threatened to rob us of all our precarious gains. Because of it we were suddenly plunged back into all the nightmares we thought we had left behind. It was just ahead, and it proved to be a turning point for both of us, especially for Nick.