

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Quaternity is the first chapter of a novel-in-progress entitled *Train Can't Bring Me Home*, and was published as an extract in the Hungarian literary journal, *Ellipsis*.

The novel is set in the Hungarian university town of Debrecen and concerns an affair between a thirtysomething American lecturer, Dylan, and a teenage Hungarian student, Erzsí, although the first episode deals with the callow English student, Rory.

As every character in the book is obsessed with literature and experiences the world through the voices of their favourite authors, it seemed right that the novel should be written in a variety of literary styles, from cod travel journalism to moribund essay, with a number of recognisable pastiches such as Burroughs, Calvino, Joyce, Stoker and others.

Andy Conway
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quaternity

First you must select the opening of your choice for this novel from the three following options:

Option 1: I found her first letter in the snow-topped mailbox on the fence last night; her off-white envelope covered in Burne-Jones blue maidens, telling me she'd cried briefly when I'd gone. And me riding away in the taxi, thinking how strong she'd been. Walked out again - pumping ten and twenty forint pieces into the battered old call box outside the Poroszlay supermarket. She wanted to know if it was good here and what the town was like but all I wanted to say was *I love you and I miss you*. Walked back through the snow, feeling the ache in my throat I felt on the first night here.

Option 2: Rory O'Cypher, weary of the torpidity of a Bachelor of Arts degree (with Honours) concurrent in the English city of his residence, upon a compunction, rare to one of his indecision, found himself committed to a semester-long exchange, which resulted in him agreeing to study in the Hungarian city of Debrecen, being the second city of that landlocked Central European country (by British standards a small university town), 30 kilometres from the Romanian border, 100 kilometres from the Ukrainian border, and 200 kilometres from Budapest itself.

Option 3: Falteringly, the student came to the top of the stairwell, breathing hard, halting and glancing back down the

stairs behind him. There were two doors there. He checked the number on the slip of paper in his hand. It was an apartment, like the others in the block.

The problem is that beginnings are so difficult. It's because they don't really exist. There *are* no real beginnings. But here he is: Rory. He begins. Four flights up an apartment block in a Hungarian city. He finds himself born, standing outside a door on the fourth floor, a piece of paper in his hand.

Address was right. Yes. This was it. Brushed snowbecomewater from his shoulders. Deep breath. Pushed bell. Rattle not chime. Four flights silent below. Trabants slithering past on *Egyetem Sugárút* below, the white become blackbrown heaped in the gutters. Weary traveller has trudged to sanctuary breathing grey clouds. Footsteps down the hallway. The door tugged inward. Would it be the one who spoke English?

Plump blonde in thick sweater, short hair.

He told her his name. A further sentence, unsounded, trailed off in his mind: a Hungarian sentence that he didn't know the Hungarian for. He stood there: embarrassed mute.

- Ah yes, she said. Come inside. Wait in here please.

She indicated the room just to the left of the hallway. Bright apartment. Narrow L-shaped room that contained a washing machine, a stool and a young woman working at a desk in the shorter part, with a bed covered in plaid blankets along the longer part, which connected to the office beyond it, where his English speaking lifeline had disappeared. He sat on the stool - he rests, he has travelled - and watched the other woman working. Little Jack Horner. She had long auburn hair draping over her shoulders, a navy blue jacket with shoulder pads. It exposed her delicate wrists. Trousers

with tights underneath. A young beauty. She smiled to him and then returned to her work. A woman's voice called through to her from the office, something in Hungarian. He didn't understand. The young beauty smiled and glanced at him.

A key rattled in the front door. Another woman entered the apartment. She was older, mid forties, and wore brighter clothes than the other two - dayglo woollies, gold necklace, legwarmers. She flashed by the doorway, handbag under arm, caught a glimpse of him. He turned away. Then suddenly she was on him, leaning over him, talking rapidly he didn't know what but with a smile like she'd found him under the Christmas tree. The young beauty smiled to herself at whatever it was the older woman was saying. Delighted mother brooding someone else's baby. Her own too old. Older women always fawned over him; it must have been his face. Merry widow. She left him and headed for the office he hadn't seen yet, chattering to the other woman in the same tone.

- You can sit on the bed if you like.

Her voice calling through. This was strange. Merry Widow delighted at Little Jack Horner.

- I'm okay, he said.

He sat on the stool, folding unfolding the note, scribbled address. The young beauty worked on, back to him. After ten minutes she came. Interpreter. He followed her into the office at the end of the corridor. The Merry Widow was at her own desk eating an apple, smiling. He sat opposite his Interpreter. Lifeline.

- You don't speak any Hungarian then? she asked.

I don't speak any Hungarian now, he thought.

- No, I'm afraid not.

He shrugged. She seemed to be wondering why. Wasn't it obvious? Because he was English.

- And you are from the university? Are you a lecturer?

- No. Student.

- And you will need this apartment by tonight?

- No, no. I already have an apartment, but I need one for myself. I share with a student. One room.

- And you need it for tonight?

- No, he said. There's no rush really. I want it by later, after Easter because my ... wife comes then to visit. I just want my own place.

Can't rush into it. Rent arrangements to be made.

The Merry Widow said something to him in Hungarian. He looked to the Interpreter. She looked back at him as if she expected him to understand.

- I'm sorry, what did she say?

- She said we can get an apartment for tonight for you without problem.

Big problem.

- Well, I couldn't move in straight away. You see, I have an arrangement with a Hungarian student. We've swapped accommodation. He's now in England. But he's paying my rent here. I'm paying his rent in England.

The Interpreter continued to look at him with glazed eyes.

- So ... as you can see. I have to get in touch with him first to find out how much rent he's prepared to pay...

His voice trailed off unconvincingly. The Interpreter still gazed through him.

- So, I couldn't give you a definite decision if you showed me apartments now. You see?

Her gaze didn't change.

He had to explain to her again. She listened calmly, gave no expression, and then translated to the Merry Widow. The

numbness of his face was thawing now. Every building seemed to be tropical inside. The Interpreter did some more paperwork. The Merry Widow's eyes gleamed at him. She wanted to take him home and put him on the mantelpiece.

His room had been arranged for him at the last minute by his exchange student now in England, at some point between the last exam and catching the plane: bungalow, shared bedroom, wallpaper a dull yellow; swirling shapes like Munch's waves of air, sonorous vibrations of a frozen scream. Flatmate a young computing student called György. Played computer games most afternoons and snored loudly. Every night the race to fall asleep before him. Then the sound of an outboard motor being tugged at repeatedly but never starting. Groaning in his narrow bed, wishing the motor would start and György's bed would sail off into the night. All other times very polite and generous. Cakes, fruit and eggs from his mother in Kecskémet and a few English phrases shared. Once, homemade wine, cloudyyellow from a misty glass, poured like syrup from a used 7 *Up* bottle.

- You find it cold here?

He was surprised. Her first pleasantry, said with her head still bowed over the paperwork.

- Yes, he said. But we have bad winter's in England too.

- Our summer's are good, she said. The town becomes brighter soon, with the spring. You are learning Hungarian here?

- No, English.

She looked up.

- You come to Debrecen to learn *English*? Why is this?

- It was really so that a Hungarian student her could go to my university.

- And you are not learning Hungarian here? she asked.

- Er, no. I'm hoping to pick some up. I'm here till June.

She continued writing, then she talked again with the Merry Widow. They debated something for a few minutes. How long had he been there? Longer than he'd planned. Give them your details and don't be rushed into anything. The Irish poet, Bob, who'd come last week. Taken him for lunch in the university canteen and talked for an hour or more. The poet had managed to get his life story out of him. There *is* such a thing as culture shock, he'd said. But it passes. Bob had used him as an example of uncertain national identity in the seminar that followed: Polish father never met; English mother with an Irish name.

- We can show you an apartment now, she said. It is close. On *Egyetem sugárút*.

She was putting her coat on and so was the Merry Widow. He rose and zipped up his thick black jacket. They filed out and the young beauty came with them, draping a scarf round her neck and putting her wrists into her thin pockets. Merry Widow chatting excitedly, the Interpreter locking up the office. An outing. Down the flights of stairs past residents' front doors, their names on brass or plastic plates, the whole stairwell bright from the huge windowfront.

Cold air a knifeblade to his badly shaven cheek. The street grey, late afternoon, wind hoarse and sharp, they trudged down the ice cobbled pavement along the row of apartment blocks. The face of the university should have been just visible far down the boulevard, but it had been spirited away, lost in mist. The Merry Widow was skipping and chattering gaily. She linked her arm in his, joking in Hungarian. All he could do was smile. Free air. He could walk away now. But something held him; he was powerless. They all entered another apartment block a hundred yards away. They rang a bell on the first floor.

- This belongs to a professor from the university, said the Interpreter.

A woman in her late fifties answered, greyblonde hair thinning, spectacles dangling on heaving breast. They all greeted each other warmly and stepped inside. The carpets talked to him when he entered, telling him all about the people who'd lived there before. The woman showed them round the apartment. A coffeebrown huddle of rooms; shabby, frayed, muted by the years. One living room with two of the usual bedsocas, a kitchen with a connecting box room as another bedroom.

Play a game. Look around at these people in this town, especially the older generation, and wonder which ones were involved in the old regime. Look hard at one person and picture them as a Stalinist bureaucrat now keeping their head down; then picture them as a former dissident who doesn't need to look over their shoulder any more. They could all be either; it works both ways. They could all even be neither. Walk the corridors of the university and imagine what it felt like then, how different the air must have been that everyone breathed. Stroll the streets and imagine that ineluctable feeling of being observed; a quotidian oppression. Rory plays this game a lot. He's been reading too many European novels. He's been watching too many Cold War TV dramas. Eventually he will look around and just see people.

After the tour they all sat in the living room. There was a lot of Hungarian talk. He sat and looked expectant.

- She is a Physics professor, said the Interpreter. So do you like it?

- It's ... okay, yes, but I couldn't make a decision now.

- She says you can move in straight away.

He explained again the complications with his exchange student. The Interpreter translated to the Professor and the Merry Widow, who were sat together on one of the sofas. They seemed like old friends. The young beauty was on a wooden chair by the window which gave the only light as the afternoon dimmed. After more conversation the Merry Widow asked him a question. He looked to the Interpreter. She said nothing.

- I don't understand what she said, he said.

- She asks how long before you know?

He explained he had to write to England asking how much rent his exchange student was willing to pay, and then await the reply. Five days each way.

- The post takes three days, she said.

They talked again and it seemed the young beauty was the subject, though she herself said nothing.

- She has been wanting to rent this apartment, said the Interpreter. She is looking for a place and she likes this one, but she needs someone to share the rent. This place is for two people.

He was surprised she was keen on the place. Couldn't imagine her living in it. But what was going on? He saw himself, alone in this tired, dark room, waiting for her, his love, to come to him, and the young beauty alone in the box room; the polite smiles in the kitchen; disturbing her in the bathroom. He mentioned again that there was no rush because he didn't urgently need a place till Easter when his 'wife' was coming. They weren't married but he didn't want to say 'girlfriend.' He was in suspended animation without her. Slowly consumed by forgetfulness. Only ideas and sensations touched him. She would come and warm him through. At night he put on headphones and listened to that speaking in tongues voice singing *the love that loves to love*

the love that loves that... Aching pain in him that wasn't yet the fear of loss.

The Merry Widow seemed to realise something and looked amused. She said something about the young beauty and about him. The young beauty blushed slightly. The Interpreter kept asking him the same questions, prompted by the Merry Widow, and he kept giving her the same answers. He was through the looking glass.

Then the Merry Widow talked for a long time with the professor. It seemed to be the talk of a mother and daughter, discussing old times and family news. The other three sat watching them, only two of them understanding. The room grew slowly dimmer. He was uncertain of the time. Late afternoon. Getting dark. Why didn't he leave the place?

- Could you not telephone England for this information?

- There's no telephone there, he said.

When it seemed they could go no further with the questions they rose and left the professor with warm farewells, returning to the office. There was more paperwork. He would leave his details and they would suggest apartments when he knew his limit. The young beauty had returned to her desk in the L-shaped room.

Two young American men entered the office in woolly hats and heavy quilted jackets. He watched them as they spoke Hungarian in Bible Belt accents. Students? Businessmen? Clean cut looks. Marine Corps cum Methodist. Been here before. Know the staff well.

- Their Hungarian is good, said the Interpreter to him.

What was it he'd heard? University gossip: visiting American lecturer having an affair with eighteen year-old Hungarian student. One of these? They did their business quickly and left. He'd not spoken with them.

- Things have changed very much here, she said. Before the changes we never had unemployment. Now it's very big. It is a surprise to us.

The comment had come from nowhere. He'd never yet heard anyone talk of the new life without reservations. He finished the paperwork and there was nothing more. He said goodbye to them. The Merry Widow shook his hand and made another joke he didn't understand.

- You should learn Hungarian, said the Interpreter.

His face was aching with the smiling. He stepped out into the fresh air, blinking like one unbewitched, his frosted breath in a cloud around his face.