

a lighted city



story and pictures by Emily P.

Even with mundane, everyday expectations, I attempt to anticipate what will happen. What will the first day of school be like or the grade I get on my algebra test. However, as I prepared for my first trip out of the US and into Europe, I didn't know what to expect. I had many ideas, many romantic notions of small villas surrounded by sunflowers or thriving cities with old ornate architecture. Much of my experience of culture had come from Hollywood where even the coldest of places could become welcoming and pleasing. The world was the movie industry's oyster and so could be turned into pearls or consumed and forgotten.

Hollywood could only impress me so much. As I carefully laid out clothing, I mused (between folding socks and picking what shoes I needed) about the sensations and experiences I would partake in. My father and I boarded the plane a couple days later. Brushing through clouds and stars, I fell into a light sleep already engaged in the vision of what I would encounter.

I dreamed that quaint houses huddled closely together would line the city and in the winter cobbled streets would be covered by blankets of snow. It was all I could do to fight my way inside and peel off from swollen fingers snow caked gloves that dripped the rest

of the night by the fire. Once inside my hands throbbed smartly and after warming myself, I roamed those narrow city streets glancing into houses radiating soft heat that gently witnessed the falling snow. The winter scene changed to August, the month I was actually traveling. My vision would turn to cool cast iron chairs that rocked whenever I shifted as my feet, slipping, over parched stones. The awnings took on their own shape and texture like the little cafés they protected. People sat close but relaxed chatting between sipping iced creamed coffee and gazing at other

cafés nestled between theirs.

After I awoke and left the plane, I held onto those little visions as we raced through mountain valleys by train onward to Slovakia's capital, Bratislava. As we passed clumps of villages and small towns with striking churches, I saw my first castle born out of the top of a hill overlooking, with ancient prominence, its contemporaries of the valley. What romantic notions would have animated that splayed stone warrior hundreds of years past? My mind drifted (but not for long) as we traded train for car to go to



Bratislava proper. We arrived diving into the city passing people absorbed in the moment of a busy workday. My eyes tripped past little shops and dozens of trolleys swollen with riders. Restaurants spread out modestly among the avenues augmenting new smells into the street. My eyes took it all in.

Suddenly, my mood changed as I frowned looking towards the skyline. My sense of contentment turned to bewilderment as my eyes rested fixedly on clumps

ours looked at me, amused, as I stood on the balcony of our hotel that evening exclaiming my agitation at this sight.

"No Em, everyone lives in those buildings," he replied.

"Oh," was all I could breathe out biting my lip. He smiled and continued talking lighting a cigarette and using it to point.

"The communists occupied after World War II up until 1989 and those are the legacies. Their ugly, I know but they are filled with the city's life and do not come cheap despite their façade."

I didn't know what to say

“What romantic notions would have animated that splayed stone warrior hundreds of years past?”

of cold hardened silhouettes that depressed the sky. Hundreds of massive building complexes sat on the perimeter of the city. Twenty story houses with bases in pre-cast concrete panels rose to define the reaches of the city. I was surprised that they had such presence and multitude in their masses. These well-worn beaten mammoths that bled gray into my dreams of a city encroached by countryside, instead felt overwhelming and constricting. I had no idea the poorer section of Bratislava was such a presence. Our guide, a family friend of

and I felt suddenly sheltered by my ignorance. I knew this was a second world country but my romantic vision didn't account for this influence. Despite what I had read all my life of history and its might, it never had an impact on me until I stood before it with my senses peeling back the layers. I considered the communist doctrine and the influences before it, and suddenly I could see how it all seemed to work. Even the most awkward idea has a place within its history. Time was simply representing another concrete idea with the sureness that it had presented with others. The old city, filled with my visions of endless cafés,



was juxtaposed with the collection of housing projects, with plastic potted plants. Both were bathed in the beliefs of their respective eras by people who believed that these structures were what would bring a better tomorrow. In my reverie of proportions I couldn't help but admire human kinds role in this game we call life. I couldn't despise these building because they didn't fit into my imagined reality. They were just another creation and experiment on humanities way to an endless fulfillment.

Towards the end of my trip I passed through Bratislava again and stood on a hilltop memorial looking down upon the city. The sky caught fire that

evening as the sun set, overwhelming the valley and basking it in light that gently unified two eras of development, each standing proud in their testament to the abilities of human invention. I realized then as I stood upon myriad's of stone holding in centuries of conflict that even the sureness of this reality was not made to last. For the first time though I didn't feel overwhelmed or lost as I gazed upon the lighted city, but proud that our human creativity and nobility would carry us forth developing continuously for our dreams and desires of a perfection that we seek in all of us.



Kristen and Scott (photograph) - *Heather A.*

comeback

Now here I stand like a wall of stone
Please take my hand so I will not be alone
Please come back to me
Because I just cant see
How could I just let it be
It's just not the same
Not hearing your name
Thinking all of this is just some game
But now you're looking down on me from above
With lots of love you gave
But it was you who I could not save
Taken away from this place
Never again seeing your face
To the end as we go
Please don't go
A great life you could have had
Thinking you lost your chance makes me sad
Please don't be disappointed if I give up
For I have lost hope that's why I have given up
Now as you lay to rest
My life turning into a reckless mess
I guess you can't come back to me
I guess I just have to let it be

Your friend,
Scott L.