

Long-Awaited Letters from Here and There

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The following two accounts have been selected from a series of letters written to students, colleagues, friends and family over a period of twelve months. The first one describes a trip to Las Vegas while the second relates the rather eventful story of my homecoming from the United States. I decided to keep the original form and translate everything almost word for word as I believe the letters give the impression of a perfect snapshot as they are with all the little insignificant but interesting details. They also capture the child-like curiosity, naivety and wonder that I saw the world with throughout my odyssey, and which enabled a lot of people close to my heart to experience my fantastic adventures together with me. Both these letters along with the ones I wrote in Hungarian are in fact a celebration of the generosity, kindness, courage, humanity, wisdom, verve and wonderfulness of all the people whose friendship life has bestowed on me, and who all these letters were written to and about.

1. Knock, knock, take her!

My Dearest Everybody,

When one of my colleagues at Pomona High School found out where I was going for the fall break, she told me that it was a place where one could indulge oneself in any of the seven deadly sins or even all of them at the same time if that

was what one wanted. Or if one had the imagination, one could even make up one's own personal deadly sin and put that into practice. With this guidance in mind, I set off for the entertainment capital of the world, the city of sin: Las Vegas. One of my first impressions of Las Vegas was formed by two young Mormon men

cycling by on the road, each wearing a pair of black pants and a white dress shirt, carrying a Bible in a leather belt-bag. The idea flashed across my mind that the Almighty Creator had trusted these young men with the hardest possible mission if He had sent them here, where people didn't often come for absolution from their sins. The situation seemed even more mind-boggling because Las Vegas is not a typical place to see bicycles. Taxis and mile-long, shiny, black or white Limousines, yes! But bicycles? But let's not rush things just yet. Let me tell you the whole story as it happened from the very beginning.

From the window of the plane an indescribably exquisite view unfolded before my eyes. As the plane ascended higher and higher in the night, the details of Denver became indistinct, and we seemed to be hovering over an infinite sea of glowing embers. Suddenly it occurred to me that if I were a movie director, I would definitely use this sight, say, in a sci-fi flick. I was actually quite pleased with this movie idea of mine. A few minutes later, it also occurred to me that I might actually have seen something similar in a movie. But which movie was it? I didn't know for sure, but I was positive that it must have been a science-fiction movie. I felt somewhat dismayed that somebody had stolen my movie idea.

After leaving behind the mile-high metropolis, and after everything was shrouded in blackness outside, I thought I would occupy myself somehow. Blood is thicker than water, and this is especially true for a teacher's blood. I had vainly made

a resolution to take it easy and to leave those bleeding papers alone this time: pangs of bad conscience soon started to torment me. I had set off for Las Vegas with a huge pile of students' papers in my bag, and after drinking my usual glass of red wine, I produced my red folder with the portrait of the young Yeats on it, and got down to grading some lofty essays on Miller's *The Crucible*. After a while I found myself being looked at in disbelief by the four chaps sitting in the same row as me. They probably found the idea of a teacher grading papers and that of a red-eye flight to Las Vegas incompatible. I had to agree that this WAS a little awkward, and so the next time the widely-traveled essays on Goody Proctor, Abigail Williams and the others saw red ink was only two weeks later.

According to ancient tradition, gambling starts even before the plane has landed. The cabin staff goes up and down the aisle and collects a dollar bill from each willing passenger. You have to write the number of your seat on the bill first. After that there's a draw, and if you are lucky, you win the jackpot. As odd fate had it, the chaps in my row, who had been looking at me somewhat askance, didn't have a pen to write their seat number with, and in their desperation they decided to turn to me for help. Subsequently, I gallantly offered the sole pen I had on me: the red one I used for grading papers. Then the moment of the draw arrived. Everyone on the plane was waiting with bated breath to learn who the lucky one would be. – Well, it wasn't me. No, it wasn't. It was one of the chaps in my row. This company of four was celebrating

with gay abandon, and with the plastic bag brimming with money (sixty-something bucks), they gallantly treated themselves not to one but two rounds of drinks. And they were beaming with glee at everyone around them including me. With this little incident, Dame Fortune, smirking in my face, gave me to understand that she would not favor me in my gambling endeavors. Unlucky in gambling, but lucky in love, as they say. Well, I'd rather not go into that...

I got to Las Vegas Airport safe and sound. Even though I had not booked a room to stay, I knew where I was going. The lady at the travel agency, who had been really nice and had gotten my plane ticket too, had assuaged my worries by assuring me that I would surely find somewhere to stay in Las Vegas. She told me that I should be careful about two things, though. First of all, I should make sure that my accommodation was not somewhere near the city jail. (A very interesting piece of advice, I thought.) And then if somebody tried to foist a really squalid room on me, I should make a move. ('What's squalid to her?' I asked myself. 'In Hungary, I had slept in extremely sordid dormitories that actually brought to mind the harsh circumstances of Turkish dungeons. And this was America! Come on!')

Traveling in Germany while still in college, I had found that international youth hostels were clean, safe and relatively cheap, too. To my surprise and infinite joy, I actually found one in Las Vegas. The whole thing sounded a little bit contradictory, though: a cheap hostel right on the Strip, the main street of the

city, in the vicinity of the biggest casinos. I brushed aside my suspicions, however, and decided that it would do.

I got into a taxi at the airport. Actually, it wasn't even a taxi: it was rather a hybrid of a taxi and a minibus: you had to let the driver know which hotel you wanted to go to, and he made sure that everyone reached their destination. When I told him that I was heading for the International Youth Hostel, he started to eye me with suspicion and snapped at me a hoarse 'I'll let you know' through the fence of his teeth. I failed to read the implicit sign in his response then. The minibus gradually filled with passengers, and we set off. As the palm trees swooshed by in the dark, the chauffeur entertained us with the latest gossip he had heard through the grapevine. "It's exactly a week since a man jumped off the roof of this hotel on the right. He had lost all his money on roulette." He called out the names of the fanciest hotels in Las Vegas, and in the most affable voice imaginable he took leave of his passengers one by one. Then suddenly, he changed his tone. He looked back at me, and with a touch of contempt in his voice and with none of the affability left, he barked the words 'International Youth Hostel'. (One would think that there are certain words or combination of words such as 'International Youth Hostel' which are impossible to be uttered with contempt. Well, he certainly shattered this theory of mine. Ever since then, if I want to practice my histrionic skills, besides repeating tongue-twisters such as *A big black bedbug bit the bathing badger's butt, but the bathing badger bit the*

big black bedbug back, I keep saying the words International Youth Hostel to myself – with as much contempt in my voice as possible.)

On the neon sign only two letters were working: n and o. Defying all possible danger - come what may - I entered. At reception, a college student welcomed me warmly, and in responding to her query, I decided to take a somewhat more expensive private room instead of just a dorm bed. Only when I stepped into my new quarters did I realize what the travel agent had actually meant by a squalid room. First of all, there being no private access to my room, I had to fumble my way through a dark dorm hall. Once inside, I found the place fairly dismal. A stained, torn and patched green rag hung over the small prison-cell window from two crooked and rusty nails. There were two single beds – both battered beyond imagination and creaking as if in unspeakable agony. By the door there was a pale yellow stool with the paint peeling off, and in the corner there was a suspicious-looking fossil of an electric heater. It was dangerous even to look at it, let alone touch it. Luckily, I had private access to the only shower and toilet in that part of the building, which I shared with the occupants of the dorm hall. The hygiene was somewhat questionable, of course, but I'd rather not mention in what ways. The washbasin was an imitation of fake marble. When it was cast, they added some gold dust to the dollop, and if you were lucky enough, you could still see it glistening through the filth as an indication of the fact that you were in Las Vegas, after all. To top it all off, over the headboards of the groaning beds two posters

hung of the King himself in *Viva Las Vegas* and *Jailhouse Rock*. Resigning myself to my fate, I picked the bed under *Jailhouse Rock*. (Speaking of jails, I still don't know where the city jail is situated in Las Vegas, but I fear it is better not to find out.)

Before going to bed, I decided to take a walk and maybe have dinner. When I got back, the dorm hall was full of men trying to have their dream of dreams, and I had the honor of hearing them wheezing and snoring loudly. I felt rather relieved to have opted for the private room, but I seriously considered looking for a better place to stay the following day. Until then, I decided I could put up with the wretched circumstances of the place.

The next morning I set about exploring the city. As I marched across the dorm hall, I noticed that the average age of its occupants was about 65. Outside the hostel, I made sure and checked, but they didn't have the word 'eternal' before 'youth'. 'What am I doing here?' I left my luggage at the reception and told them I would be back for it later.

Walking the streets of Denver, you come across some funny little containers on the sidewalk. They serve as newspaper dispensers, something we don't have in Hungary. You have to insert two quarters into the coin-operated version, and subsequently you can help yourself to the daily newspaper you long to peruse. There are dispensers that work for free. You just have to open their door as you open the oven in your kitchen and grab a copy of an advertising publication for real estate, job opportunities or entertainment. Walking the streets of Las Vegas, I came

across the same funny containers. I was quite heartened by their presence as I was hoping to inform myself about running variety shows, not-to-be-missed cultural events and once-in-a-lifetime attractions.

Accordingly, I went up to the first one that came my way, and I opened its door exactly the way I open the oven in my kitchen and helped myself to a copy of the publication lying there. It was a lively and colorful brochure. According to the glaring lettering on the cover, if I still had not found the one and only, I was bound to just by leafing through the little booklet. I felt a natural urge of curiosity to open it. And here's what I found. Inside, women of all sorts and persuasions in rather scanty outfits – or sometimes even dispensing with their meager attire – posed in rather inventive postures and cast yearning glances towards me from the pages. The parts especially meant for a gynecologist's eyes were discreetly masked by small solid black heartlets. (Very discreet and very small.) The other dispensers held similar publications. This was the moment when I actually understood what my colleagues meant when they declared Las Vegas sinful, and what the words 'job opportunities' and 'entertainment' denoted here.

With night approaching, this particular branch of service industry is in full swing on the Strip. Solicitors flank the sidewalk about every two feet, trying to find prospective customers for the girls. This procedure takes the form of a special repetitive rite. First of all, in one hand you hold a stack of the publications mentioned above, and in the other you take one copy and fold it lengthwise. If a man (i.e. an adult male of any age) passes you, you

knock the folded copy against the stack twice, and you reach towards the would-be customer and offer it to him. Don't get too frustrated if he doesn't accept it. Maybe the next one will.

The solicitors can be men, women and even children. It feels as if young and old stick together to make the career of the only gifted child in the family. Knock, knock, take her. Knock, knock, take her. And the solicitors are indiscriminate: you can be walking down the street with a knock-out of a girlfriend hand in hand, and you still get your own copy. You never know. Can you feel the rhythm of the night in Las Vegas? Knock, knock, take her, knock, knock, take her, knock, knock, take her...

I was wondering what it was exactly that these good people sold. Prostitution is forbidden by law in Las Vegas, after all. (Outside the city limits, once you are in the middle of nowhere, you find yourself a nice cactus, and you are free to do whatever you wish and whoever you wish to do it with.) Well, they strip. For \$250 they go and see you in your own private quarters and they take off their clothing while dancing an erotic dance especially for you. And nothing more. You even have a choice: if the artist is not to your liking, after proper introductions have been made, you can send her away without paying. Well, this is the official story, of course. But, as always, there are other stories, too. Well, I hope you appreciate my intrepidity and the fact that I have found out about so many interesting things!

Anyway, I was in search of other forms of entertainment, and so I made my way to a casino. I was well aware that these

dens of sin could be found in the lobby area of the big ritzy hotels. What held me back a trifle was the fact that I was not quite accustomed to sauntering in fancy, red-carpet hotels. I was afraid that people would eye me suspiciously because of my not too elegant appearance and my improper touristy manners. I felt these fears absolutely justified after my little affair with the bus driver. Well, I needn't have been vexed. A formal appearance or gentlemanly behavior are not indispensable in this environment. The only thing that counts is your money, and nothing else. No matter how much money you can sacrifice – just a few quarters or millions – the most important rule is that everybody HAS SOME money that they can spend.

It's an incredible sight when you first enter a Las Vegas casino. There are literally hundreds or even thousands of gambling machines covering the area of several football fields. I'm not exaggerating. There are flashing lights and multitudes of people thronging everywhere. You hear constant tinkling, chinking, jingling, beeping and tintinnabulating everywhere you go. Further inside, countless roulette, blackjack, poker and craps tables await both the knowing and the unsuspecting visitor, and almost each of them is surrounded by players or curious onlookers. It took me at least half an hour just to get through the first casino.

After some dithering, I made up my mind to try my luck at a fruit-machine. First, I won a little, and then I lost a little. After an hour of pushing buttons, I began to understand why people spend hours in front of these wily machines. With just a

little bit of investment, I was occupied for a couple of hours myself. (I guess it goes without saying that the balance of my gambling spree was negative in the end.) Fortunately, I'm the type who gets easily bored with cards and other gambling games so I left. This way my money was safe, and I also stood a good chance of seeing more of Las Vegas than just a battered one-armed bandit.

I took to observing people in the casino. Who were the types that risked five or even ten bucks on one bet, and who were the types that pecked away at the quarter machines? And also who were the types that snatched down with gusto on the really popular nickel machines once they had spotted one that was not being used? Do I need to say that I belonged with the latter group? There were a few one-cent machines, too, but there was just no way of worming your way close to them. I watched people win, and I watched them lose. I watched families clinging to plastic receptacles brimming with coins, and I watched elderly matrons taking their fortune in their hands by clinging to their personalized gambling cards. I came to some really fascinating conclusions concerning the bond between man and machine, and man and money, which I will share with you – perhaps another time in another letter. (You can't wait, I know!)

I moved on. The same kind of atmosphere awaited me in the lobby of the next hotel. And in the next. And the next, too. No wonder, as there are over a hundred hotels in the city, and each lobby abounds with fruit machines, one-armed bandits, and other devices designed to

bring about one's financial ruin. You've seen one, you've seen them all, I thought to myself, and I found myself wondering what I should do next. Looking around a bit more seemed a good enough idea.

After what felt like hours of aimless meandering in the jungle of gambling machines, I chanced into the yard of a hotel, where I saw a rather improbable sight. I found myself in the middle of an oasis with palm trees, a pool, domes and sand-colored walls typical of African architecture. I was half expecting a dromedary to emerge suddenly with a sheik wrapped in a white sheet. I can't stress enough how improbable the whole situation was. It felt as if I were someone else and in a dream. Bedazzled, I figured out how to get out of the hotel to identify it. It was the Sahara.

Improbable is the right word: Las Vegas is a rather improbable place. First of all, it lies right in the middle of the desert, where no one would normally go to have fun. In the beginning, it was only gambling that attracted fun-craving crowds. Later on, people were forced to realize that there were too many casinos, and the lure of losing your salary was just not enough. Somebody had a bright idea, and they built the exact replicas of the world's greatest tourist attractions. Thanks to this ingenious plan, from the oasis in the Sahara my way led me right to the Forum Romanum. I was dreadfully impressed by the genuine Roman aqueducts, which ran along the promenade. Two blocks away I had the chance to marvel at a perfect if somewhat shriveled imitation of the Eiffel Tower right in the vicinity of the Arch of Triumph. Further

on, across the street, neat little canals separated the maze-like alleys and wings of the next hotel, and there was no shortage of gondolas, either. While exploring this wonderfully spurious copy of Venice, I stumbled across a cherubic serenade delivered in a captivating baritone from a gondola. Inside, fleecy clouds hung from the bogus Venetian buttermilk sky above an unrivalled reproduction of Saint Mark Square.

I highly recommend Las Vegas to everyone! It is an ideal destination especially if you long to go on a world tour but lack the financial means. You only need to scrape together the fare for one flight, and then you will literally have the whole world at your feet.

There's something else. Most people will want to go shopping when they travel, and for their sake the forefathers of this metropolis dreamt up a perfect combination of cultural delight and consumeristic pursuit. The cultural input has been successfully minimized: it's absolutely enough to cast a passing glance at a noted edifice from the outside. When you go in, you don't have to bother about dull, dull, dull museums and art galleries. What you have inside is infinite rows of swanky boutiques and souvenir shops, where you can spend your money to your heart's content.

Seeing this miracle of a city, I felt somewhat sorry. It seemed such a waste of money and time to have visited some of the world's greatest attractions one by one. I even regretted buying a plane ticket and arranging to fly to New York for the Christmas vacation. There was no

way back, though. I couldn't get a refund, and I was dead sure that I would be feeling very bored now that I had seen the Statue of Liberty and the fake skyscrapers. I had learnt my lesson, though, and I was sure about one thing. If anyone ever tried to chuck at me a trip to Rome or Venice in the future, I would turn them down flat. What would I want to go there for? I had seen the entire world in Las Vegas! (This shouldn't stop you from chucking trips like that at me, though. Go on and test me! ☺)

I'm serious! Test me!

There's one more thing that's really great about Las Vegas: you can get to places that no travel agent will take you to. Take Treasure Island, for example. Walking down the street, you notice an ark with a Jolly Roger flying at full mast. You also notice some cave dwellings with real cave-dwellers in them. Only closer inspection reveals that they are cleverly camouflaged windows of a restaurant busy with people. The whole hide-out, of course, is surrounded by a fordless moat, at the bottom of which lost treasures of failed buccaneers lie: intricate plates and jugs, subtle gold jewelry, swords and daggers with fine hilts, along with the small change thrown in by the tourists for good luck.

Or take the castle of Camelot. (Strangely enough, it bears the name Excalibur here.) It is a real castle from a real fairy tale. Once inside, and once you forget about the sea of slot machines, everything works to create a real medieval radiance. There's the torches. There's the

dragon-head decorations and knockers on the doors. There's the gargoyles. And there's the hotel staff dressed in medieval costumes. There is also a gigantic banqueting hall where they serve food so typical of medieval times: stuffed turkey and mashed potatoes. And while the dear guests eat, the knights in the arena whang each other unconscious according to the strict moral rules of jousting. The whole event is commentated by none other than the great sorcerer himself, Merlin. Isn't it just fabulous?

Dusk was falling, and suddenly it occurred to me that I had not taken care of tonight's accommodation. True, the MGM palace was close enough to tempt me, and I also saw the silhouette of a bona fide Sphinx in the distance, but I was getting really tired. And I was getting really worried too, as I had not found somewhere else to stay that night. I decided to head back.

As I was trudging along the street, a rather unusual notice caught my eye:

The volcano erupts daily every 15 minutes after dark until midnight except in inclement weather. The red flashing light denotes inclement weather.

When I saw this sign, it is so typical of me that the first thing that should come to my mind was the thought that I was faced with an idiom here. *The volcano erupts daily* must be a bleeding idiom that I have not come across in my seventeen years of studying English. That is surely the reason why I don't understand what this important message is about. I felt rather ashamed.

I saw people gathering with expectant

faces and decided to stay and make sense of this mystery. Within five minutes the earth started to rumble threateningly under our feet. Silence ensued. And then, another rumble followed, but this time it was more powerful. The subsequent silence was even more frightful. The third time the rumbling was almost unbearable, and it gave way to some spectacular volcanic activity. They had everything you need for a proper eruption. They had a volcano, lots of fire and lots of water, too. The water babbled down the side of the volcano while will-o'-the-wisp-like flames danced madly on the surface of the pool that girdled the fire-spitting rock. This perfect picture of an eruption could have been spoiled by the lovely statue of a pair of frolicking dolphins in the pool, but by now I was wise enough to ignore certain factors for the sake of perfection. After ten minutes, the whole calamity was over, and people went about their business imperturbably.

The night had fallen by this time, and I was about three or four miles from the International Youth Hostel, where I had left all my luggage. To my horror, it started drizzling. Naturally, I had not expected it to rain in the middle of the desert, and so I didn't have my mackintosh or an umbrella on me. I quickened my footsteps, but there was no help. Within ten minutes it was raining cats and dogs, and I got absolutely drenched within seconds.

A rickshaw boy joined me in my haste in the night. A substantial puddle was collecting on the red fake-leather seat, and he, too, looked like a drenched poodle. After a brief tête-à-tête, he

declared that I was a certified case to tramp miles in the pouring rain. That's what he thought, but I think it was a clear case of the pot calling the kettle black.

I spent at least another hour traipsing in the cold and callous downpour. Much as I love a fine summer mizzle, I felt compelled to revise my position on the subject. For some strange reason, I was in no mood for dancin' and singin' in the rain. Not now. In addition, I gained a personal insight into the condition of the city's nonexistent street guttering as the swooshing limos left me covered in a mixture of rainwater and dirt. As I was nearing the hostel, the road beside me swelled into a regular stream until the carriageway couldn't be seen at all for the rolling river. In order to approach my destination, I had to ford this perilous-looking watercourse. I didn't want to douse the only pair of boots that I had with me, and which I was intending to wear the following two days so I took them off, tied them together by the shoelaces and hung them around my neck. I tucked up my pants half way up my thighs (!!!) and set out to cross the River of No Return, which reached up above my knees.

In the middle of the rushing river I stopped, and I thought to myself in disbelief: this is exactly the kind of fun I envisaged having in Las Vegas. What a perfect way to paint the town red!

At long last, I arrived home, and without a second thought I rented the same sweet suite I had had the previous night. Shivering with cold and heedless of all potential danger, I grabbed the electric heater and plugged it. Thank God, it was

working. True that it gave out a little bit of smoke, made strange noises and had two legs missing, but it did work. Within fifteen minutes, the place felt warm and cozy, and I acknowledged that I had never been to a room superior to this one.

On Sunday morning I set off again, but fully encumbered this time. I had found out that the prices of even regular hotel rooms soar sky high on certain days. However, they plummet on others (on Sundays, for example), and even an earthborn mortal like myself could afford a bit of ostentation then. My hotel of choice was the Circus Circus. The sharpness of the contrast was rather conspicuous: my room there had two (!!!) large double beds, a television, air conditioning, at least eighteen immaculate snow white towels, complementary items, a breathtaking view and no creeping sense of danger. It was pretty hard to get accustomed to my changed circumstances. I had to twist my own arm. But I eventually managed to, somehow.

Food is reputed to be very, very cheap in Las Vegas. I agree. Sometimes, you can have a buffet meal and stuff yourself full until you are ready to burst for just as little as seven or eight dollars. In fact, there are people that specifically come to Las Vegas for the grub and not for gambling. I happened to meet one of them in the person of a Philippine bloke, who I shared a table with. Our discussion was very instructive: I learnt an awful lot about the history and culture of the Philippines, which I will share with you – perhaps another time, in another letter.

I roamed the Strip for hours on end, and I saw many a fascinating sight including a

dazzling fountain show in front of one of the eminent hotels. The shooting darts of water danced a frenetic choreography in perfect harmony to the rhythm of the well-known song *Big Spender*. Interestingly, this fountain show had been the first thing to come to my students' minds when I had asked them about their experiences in Las Vegas.

What I have written so far goes to show that Las Vegas is a very strange place. But besides the volcano that was scheduled to erupt every fifteen minutes or the Roman aqueducts, there was something else that embodied this quality of strangeness.

I know it from my own experience that cars are not only part and parcel of everyday life in the USA, but they are also indispensable. Innumerable services have evolved in order to satisfy the needs of busy drivers. While drive-in cinemas have taken root in Hungary with more or less success, a much wider variety of services is available and really popular here. Take fast food restaurants for example: you just croon into a microphone whether you want chicken parmesan or lasagna, and by the time you turn the corner and drive up to the service window, your order will be waiting for you, and all you need to do is pay. Well, this is not so strange, all in all. A somewhat more unusual form of this service is the drive-through pharmacy: you just croon into a microphone whether you want two bottles of laxative or an arch supporter, size 10, and by the time you turn the corner, your order will be waiting for you. And that is all right, too. But what I saw in Las Vegas is beyond all imagination...

Las Vegas is a place where you can marry the man or woman of your heart's choice without much ado. At the ceremony, they never ask you any awkward questions, only ones that you can answer with a simple 'I do'. In order to meet customers' needs more efficiently, they have also introduced DRIVE-THROUGH CHAPELS. They have the microphone, and they have the service window, too. Unfortunately, I didn't have a chance to witness such a ceremony in person so I can only rely on my imagination as to how they proceed.

Take a white Limousine. You get in the right lane, drive up to the microphone, roll down the window, and you croon in an overwhelmed voice that you want to tie the knot with this bloke/bird in the passenger seat. You say your name and your fiancée's/fiancé's. You spell them out, if necessary. By the time you turn the corner and drive up to the service window, your marriage certificate will have been completed for you. But before the newlyweds should get it, they are supposed to show their driver's licenses to prove their identities. You force the wedding rings on each other's fingers, and then Friar Lawrence asks you if you mean this marriage seriously. The bride mutters 'I do' in an awed voice, and the groom with a radiant smile on his face and leaning over the bride from the passenger seat, follows suit. Finally, Friar Lawrence gives his blessing, and the newlyweds are ready to drive off to the drive-through rice automat, which probably does not exist, but should be invented.

I bet you don't believe me that they actually have drive-through wedding chapels! But they do, I swear. I'll show you the pictures when I get home.

If you have a preference for more traditional ways of getting hitched, you can, of course, get it underway at a more conventional wedding chapel. They have quite a few of those, too. Even if conventional, you can still feel the difference: you can have Elvis sing for you while you walk up the aisle or you can have neon lights flashing outside the building announcing this important event in your life. I would be very embarrassed, for sure.

I had got a ticket for a variety show at one of the top theatres in the evening. I had wanted to make sure that I got a good seat, so I had bought a ticket at the airport, and I had had to pay through the nose for it. The show itself was fairly entertaining: a little bit of dancing, a few acrobats, the occasional comedian and oodles of glamour. It only lasted an hour, not one minute too long. I sat next to a young couple in the audience, and we struck up a conversation, as usual. They claimed to frequent Las Vegas regularly, too, but it was not the food they were in for, but gambling. He said she had the golden touch, and they had actually won a thousand dollars that day. She had just spun the wheel of fortune once, and they were ready to grab the dough. (Why am I always seated next to lucky people and never have luck myself? I guess I need to do some ruminating on that.) This young couple of extraordinary fortune informed me that they hadn't had to pay for the theatre ticket, either. They merely went to a product promotion, and in exchange they got complimentary tickets for the show. (And I paid FIFTY dollars for just one ticket! ☺)

The conversation turned to my adventures in the City of Sin, and they I asked me if I had been to the city centre. I assured them that I had, and bragged that I had almost looked at all the big hotels and casinos. I actually started enumerating them one by one, but they stopped me after the fifth name. They enlightened me that what I had seen so far was just the outskirts of the city. The city centre was further to the north. I also learnt that it was better to gamble there because they actually let their customers win more, for they hadn't had to pay for all the kitschy ostentation.

"Great!", I thought to myself. "I have been running off my feet for two days, and it's only the outskirts that I have seen. That's my luck!" With some resignation, I decided to go downtown the next day.

As for the rest of the evening, I wanted to surmount my growing frustration, and I decided I was in the mood for a bop. However, I had no idea where I could go so I just picked a place because I liked its name. The dance club called *The Gypsy* was a long way away, but it was worth the hour's walk. The two-hour drag show was utterly amusing, and I didn't even have to pay for it.

The taxi driver's wife had squandered away the family fortune two years before, and they had been struggling to repay their debts ever since. If I had been him, I would have taken my wife and forsaken Las Vegas a long time before. But I didn't think I knew him well enough to give him advice like that.

When I got back to the hotel at four in the morning, I was surprised to find the same hustling and bustling activity as you

would normally find during the day. The lights were the same. The crowd was the same. And you got the same constant tinkling, chinking, jingling, beeping and tintinnabulating as any other time. I learnt that this was one of the tricks that casinos applied. This way people didn't feel the passing of time or the passing of days, as a matter of fact.

The view from my window was truly magnificent, and everything was perfect, except for one thing. One of the letters was not working on the neon advertisement of the hotel. Instead of *Circus Circus*, it said *Circus Cicus*, which is the Hungarian for *Circus Kitty Cat*. Strangely enough, I somehow felt addressed by that, and feeling honored, I hit the sack.

For the last day of my stay in Las Vegas I planned to do only one thing: to explore the city centre. I also felt that I couldn't forgive myself if I didn't at least once experience the tingle of playing in big money. I only had a quick look-around: this old-fashioned part of the city didn't have much new to offer me. I must hand it to downtown Las Vegas, though, that it certainly boasts a more elegant and tarnished atmosphere. I went into a casino, and after much browsing and pondering, I decided on a black croupier. There was only one player standing next to the roulette table with an impressive pile of chips in front of him. Though the clock had just struck ten in the morning, the glass of whisky in his hand and his wobbly gait were two tell-tale signs that it wasn't the first shot he was about to down. I handed over a twenty-dollar bill to the croupier, and he pushed my chips

in front of me with professional aptitude. In the meantime, the befuddled guest was observing me with a combination of keenness and distrust. He turned to me and said, 'I don't like look of you, at all.' 'The feeling's mutual', I thought, but I ignored him, and made every effort to concentrate on the game. I tried to pretend that standing by the roulette table couldn't be more natural to me as even at a very early age instead of a pacifier I had sucked on chips in my cradle. Unfortunately, this image of a smooth operator was disastrously destroyed when I placed my first bet. With absolute confidence, I laid one single chip on my favorite color, which gave rise to unanimous indignation among those playing and looking on. You're supposed to put at least four chips on red, I learnt. 'Sorry! I just forgot.' I knew they knew I was a greenhorn. Anyway, I got the hang of it very quickly, and enjoyed myself thoroughly for half an hour. I won some on one spin, and I lost some on the next. In the end all my twenty bucks were lost, of course. Relieved, I got up from the table, shook hands with the croupier and my whisky-loving rival and took a gentlemanly leave. I was very proud of myself. I had managed to squander away my money with style, after all.

After taking in the old city centre, I decided to go back to the 'outskirts' of the city in the hope of some more thrills. In one of the big hotels I noticed an advertisement for a 3D movie show. As I had never seen a 3D movie, I felt somewhat tempted to give it a go. However, I was rather taken aback when I saw that it cost 50 bucks to see six five-minute movies.

Naturally, I felt discouraged. As I was contemplating what I should do next, the guy at the ticket booth came out, and tried to talk me into the deal. When he saw that I was more than reluctant, he divulged to me that for about another twenty minutes there was a special offer, and I could see the same show for half price. He said I should hurry up because time was almost up. I still found the price a little too dear, and chose to leave. Well, he came out of his booth again and said that for a personal special price of fifteen bucks, I could see four of the six movies. I accepted the deal.

The 3D movie theatre consisted of a screen and an 18-seat auditorium. Naturally, everybody got their 3D glasses, and for a fuller experience they even made the audience quake with the help of a hydraulic device.

There was an elderly lady sitting next to me in the audience with her partner by her other side. As the first movie commenced, as is typical of me, I wasn't concentrating on what I should have: that is, how virtual reality actually felt. I was more interested in imagining the above lady as the heroine of the movies that were being shown. She completely gave herself over to the new experience, and apparently she was deeply absorbed as she kept screaming really loudly whenever something dangerous happened on the screen and the hydraulic auditorium gave a big jerk. I know it wasn't very nice of me, but I found her very amusing as she navigated her spaceship into a huge meteorite for the third time or as she slid down the hair-raisingly steep inclines of the Rockies on her snowboard or as she

rode her dirt bike through a cemetery at night while demented and livid zombies thrust their chainsaws towards her.

At the end of the fourth movie some people left, and some people stayed. No one wanted to see my ticket or asked me to leave, so I stayed for the other two movies, both of which imitated rollercoaster rides. Out of the six movies, they were probably the truest to life.

Afterwards, as I was sauntering down the Strip, near the New York, New York Hotel a sudden, uncontrollable whim overcame me. What if I tried a real, dangerous-looking rollercoaster and not just in 3D? I carefully considered the pros and the cons, but had no difficulty persuading myself. Near the rollercoaster train, a girl in her early twenties gave her boyfriend a kiss as a goodbye. Then she got on, and I was seated next to her. She told me that her boyfriend was too scared to join her, but she couldn't help loving rollercoaster rides. Then she went on to ask me if it was my first time.

My heart was pounding with trepidation as nicely and slowly the train started to ascend. I looked to the left, and in the windowpanes of the fake skyscrapers I saw ourselves creeping higher and higher. And then suddenly we were so high that there were no windowpanes to see ourselves in. I looked forward, and to my great horror, I realized that there were no tracks in front of us. That was when it all started. I felt my heart thumping in my throat and I was gasping for some air as we dove right down into a regular freefall. The events of the ride sped up even more, if possible: a sharp bend to the left, an unexpected turn to

the right, some more free fall, and then up and down. There was only one thing that was worse than not seeing the tracks in front of you: it was when you did see the tracks. That was when you knew that the whole train was going to turn upside down within a second, and it was going to stay that way for about half a mile. That was only if you were lucky. If you were not, then it was going to spin around in a mad spiral and centrifuge the living truth from you for what seemed interminable seconds. Towards the end of the journey, I couldn't help myself any longer, and I let out a few desperate cries. Then I noticed a sneer on the girl's face next to me. She was sneering at me the same way I had sneered at the elderly lady at the 3D movie theatre. Well, it was very rude of her, I thought.

With quaking knees, I got off the train and sincerely regretted not having gotten a pass for the whole day.

Well, folks, this was my big adventure in the City of Sin. I hope you were not bored to death reading it. If you were, just let me know, and I'll take you off my mailing list. Or if you were really annoyed by it, I would be similarly annoyed and cross if you took revenge by writing me letters of similar lengths. ☺ Two-sentence notes will do, too.

I miss so many of you and so many things from home!

Take care!

Jozsi / Sir Joseph

Afterthoughts:

1. I've counted it all up. I have flown twelve times in my life, and I am enjoying flying more and more. I am very grateful to those who have made this possible for me. Once unimaginable, by now it feels just natural to look for the counter of a particular air company, to check in and to head for the security check. I've also learnt to undo my shoelaces in advance because the guards always find me very suspicious for a strange reason or if not, the metal detector will surely go off, and I will have to take them off anyway for an x-ray check. I also know now that I am not supposed to put my nail clippers, my baseball bat or my pig-killing knife in my hand luggage as people won't be too happy about them. If at all possible, it's advisable to leave my collection of plastic bombs at home, too. After a thorough overhaul, I can head for the plane. I always ask for a window seat in order to be able to admire the fantastic view from up above. Before the plane takes off, the cabin staff will smilingly but mechanically explain what we are to do in case of emergency. This always reminds me of 9/11. I look around, and I just can't help myself picturing the terror, the chaos and the end the way it could have happened on those very flights. It's always some insignificant detail that grabs my attention and sets my mind going. Then I'm forced to realize that it's not a good game, and I make myself think of something else. Luckily, one of my fellow travelers strikes up a conversation with me by then, or the air hostess comes, and

I order red wine. I always order red wine. The two things go together. Flying and red wine. Red wine and flying. Red wine goes with an awful lot of things.

2. I guess some of the bigger news from here gets through even to Hungary, but here's a short summary for you, just in case. In January two planes crashed in mid-air over northwest Denver; in February a student started shooting outside his high school in Denver, but no one was hurt, fortunately; Michael Jackson is being ripped apart by the media once again; a fire in a Rhode Island club and a panic in an illegally operated Chicago club killed dozens of people; everybody is buying duct tape, plastic sheeting and a three-day supply of bottled water and non-perishable food in preparation for a terrorist attack...

3. I guess you also want to know what I have been up to lately. Well, I have been exposed to some really exciting stimuli. I was invited to a real western Rodeo by a friend. I got a short introduction into cowboy poetry. I had the honor of listening to the music of some outstanding contemporary musicians. I went snowshoeing in the snowcapped mountains with a bunch of really nice people, and two weeks ago a friend visited me from the Netherlands, and we went to explore Utah's Arches National Park by car. We both were really amazed to see that such miracles actually existed – but I will let you know about all of the above in detail – hopefully in the near future. At the moment I am faced with a great dilemma: I am in two minds

about where to travel over the one week of the spring break. Shall I go to Chicago or New Orleans? If you can help me make up my mind, please let me know.

4. Thanks to my friend Lisa, my winter break was another rather memorable experience. We spent three days in New York and a week in Wallingford at her mom's house, and then another week ensued in a nice villa on the ocean shore in South Carolina. Once again, that's something I am going to write about in another letter. My situation at the school is getting better and better, and I have got accustomed to the system at last. Now I am enjoying teaching at Pomona High immensely. My classes seem to be more attentive and respectful than last semester, which makes my job much easier. My dear colleagues still continue to be incredibly helpful, and the English department is simply... - I simply can't find the right superlative to describe them. I'd sooner tell you a story instead:

Financial cuts in education are just as much in fashion in the States as in Hungary, and schools are, of course, cut to the quick by ever-diminishing resources. Members of the English Department got a trifle discouraged at the news of having to tighten the purse strings. A little later one of them came up with a brilliant idea, however, and we have been working on the following project for about two months now. We have

resolved to raise the money missing from the budget by our own means. Similarly to the famous firemen of the FDNY, teachers on the department are going to publish their own erotic charity calendar. The models will be none other than the teachers themselves, of course. This will be the token of our success among students and teachers alike. In addition, many believe our fame and success will exceed the framework of the school, and we can expect a great deal of attention not only in Denver, but also at the national level. Details still need to be worked out, but I know one thing for sure: I shall be appearing as an illustration of July, which happens to be the month I was born in. According to our plans, private parts will not be masked by little solid black heartlets, but strategically well-positioned books that constitute the body of the Language Arts curriculum. We are still debating who should get which book (candidates include *The Great Gatsby*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*), and where exactly each model should place it. The possibility of the international distribution of this publication has not been ruled out, so preorders are welcome at the address above. ☺

2. The Red-Carpet Reception

Dear Friends,

I got home safe and sound about two weeks ago, and this is how it all happened.

As my plane was nearing Budapest, I was trying to picture what kind of reception I would have at the airport. Naturally, an ancient Hungarian tradition came to my mind: when a distinguished guest of honor and of high rank arrives in Hungary, he is usually received with various forms of pomp and circumstance. Such festivities include a loaf of freshly baked bread tied up in a ribbon of the Hungarian tricolor, served with a pinch of salt and maybe some paprika, too. This delicacy is usually presented to the respectable visitor by girls in pretty dresses, who invariably present bunches of flowers to the honorable traveler, and who, as a sign of their welcome and admiration, kiss the guest on the cheek. Well, I thought to myself that even though this kind of formality would be perfectly in place and suitable in my situation, I just could not expect my friends to go to such lengths. And then I thought that even though a red carpet leading to my Szeged-bound private aeroplane or a marching band would be really nice, I decided would not insist on either. By the time my plane was ready to land, I had finally made up my mind to feel ineffably elated if just TWO of my friends or relatives showed up to meet me in the arrival hall.

I picked up my luggage, went through customs and was very curious to see who those two people would be. Well, there

was only one person waiting for me: one of my best friends' husband, Attila. He was really sweet: he gave me a very warm welcome. He had four white balloons in his hand to greet me with, and he informed me that he had had a red one too with golden stars on it plus an inscription saying "I'm waiting for Sir Joseph", but it burst in the very last minute. He was really crestfallen because of that, which made him look even sweeter.

We got into his car and started our three-hour journey to the southern city of Szeged. We talked. Or to be more precise, he did most of the talking all throughout the journey, and somehow, I could hardly get in a word edgewise. After an interminable hour of listening, I was beginning to realize that this must be what smart people call reverse culture shock. When coming home from a long journey, you are filled with lots of adventures to talk about, but you rarely realize that the people who stayed home have lots of adventures of their own, even if they seem somewhat dull to you compared to the REAL adventures that you had. I took the advice that the smart people gave in this article I had read, and I was patiently listening and nodding agreeingly as Attila was droning on about recent changes in taxation, the latest traffic regulations or the inconsistencies of Hungarian law concerning real estate. I think he also touched on several laws of physics, but I just cannot recall which ones with utter clarity.

We had been "conversing" in this fashion for about two hours, when there was a phone call. It was his wife and my true friend, Ildiko. After talking with her

for a couple of minutes, he asked her if she wanted to talk with me, too. Apparently, her answer was in the negative because to my great shock, he just hung up without handing me his cell phone. And there I was thinking to myself: 'WHAT? I'm coming home after being away for a whole year, and not even my best friend wants to talk to me? What's going on? I shouldn't have come back at all. I should have stayed where I was. I have no home, I have no roots and I have no friends. Is there anyone who loves me or cares about me?'

Then, Attila gave me to understand that Ildiko was somewhat worried and vexed because he was still not home, and it was about time to take their son out to the playground, which they usually did together. This time it really seemed that she would have to do that on her own. He also assured me that I shouldn't worry because it was not such a big deal: even if he missed playing with his son, they could give him a bath together, for he would surely be home in time for that.

I'm not sure if I can describe how bad I felt at that moment. In addition to being frustrated, disappointed, and a little bit bored too, I was beginning to feel guilty. "Here I am separating this poor man from his beloved wife and child. How can I be so ruthless? What a heartless bastard I am!" By the time we drew up at the gate of my castle (for the building I live in resembles a real castle), I was really looking forward to a nice and quiet and somewhat depressed evening by myself in the solitude of my cozy little room.

And that's when things started to get really crazy.

The car stopped, and I spotted a familiar face near the gate. It belonged to one of my colleagues. Not having learned from the strange events of my arrival, I involuntarily waved at him as I was really happy to see him. When he acknowledged my identity, he just looked away. He was wearing an elegant suit and had a very serious expression on his face. Again, I had to interpret the situation for myself: "Maybe Pista is translating for some business people in the neighborhood, and so he is not supposed to chat with friends." I would have gone on with my twisted interpretation of the situation, had there not been a swarm of young people rushing at the car, banging on the windows and demanding autographs. They were demanding autographs from ME. My colleague, the one in the suit, came to my rescue, cleared away the crowd, opened the door of the car for me and ushered me through the gate.

"What on earth is going on here?", I thought to myself. (Those were not the exact words that I actually thought, but I am aware that sometimes one just has to censor one's mental comments. My friend, Walker, might know the very words from our last Hungarian lesson.)

At the gate I was met by a lady wearing an elegant dress suit. She introduced herself, and she assured me that I shouldn't worry about a thing: everybody was aware that after staying abroad for a long time, one could easily forget one's mother tongue, and that was why she was there: to translate for me throughout the ceremony. Then she led me along the corridor to the courtyard of the building. Do I need to say

that there was a red carpet all the way?

As I entered, I couldn't believe my eyes and ears: some fifty people were waiting for me to arrive, and when I did, they burst into a round of unbridled applause and happy cheering. The crumbling walls of the neighboring building had been decorated with huge symbolic posters: one had the word Denver on it, the next had barefooted footprints on it, and the third simply said Szeged. There were flowers, Hungarian flags and banners everywhere.

As the rejoicing died down a little bit, a delegation of three approached me, and I was presented with what I hadn't even dared to dream about on the plane. The freshly-baked bread tied up in a ribbon of the Hungarian tricolor was sitting on a red, silk cushion. Girls in pretty dresses explained that my job was to break off a piece and to consume it with a pinch of salt. Instead of the good old Hungarian paprika, however, they had something else: chili peppers. They explained that they wanted to ease the transition from culture to culture for me, and the similarity between chili peppers and paprika was so striking that it seemed a perfect idea to link the two cultures this way, for I must have eaten lots of Mexican food on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Next, a gentleman in a dinner-jacket and a bow-tie invited me to sit down in a comfy swivel chair, which along with the red silk cushion appeared oddly familiar: accessories from my apartment. He went on to announce the first number in today's celebratory show. The large window of the staircase, which overlooks the courtyard, had been transformed into a temporary

stage, and my good friend Eszter appeared in it wearing a very formal and very ugly outfit of the old socialist times and a matching outrageous hairdo. Very unlike her. She began reciting a famous patriotic poem by the renowned Hungarian poet Endre Ady. In it, the poet compares himself to a piece of rock thrown up in the air, which inevitably falls back on earth: just like the way the poet feels compelled to return to his home country whenever he leaves it to go abroad. Eszter's rendition of the poem was sensational: she got transported with emotion several times: in one of the stanzas she actually got transported twice.

Next came a long, long speech delivered by one of my dear colleagues, Csaba Magyar. (Note the name: the word Magyar is actually the Hungarian word for Hungarian.) He addressed me and the crowd from the crumbling window in a very formal manner, and among other things he compared me to none other than the great Christopher Columbus. Everybody was rather expectant when the MC announced the next number in the show, an aria from the famous Hungarian opera *Bank Ban*, which was based on the very first Hungarian play ever written. To our great disappointment, however, the singer of the aria had not arrived yet as he could not get away from the studios of the local television channel. This news was sad enough as this particular excerpt would have elevated the patriotic overtone of the evening to even newer heights. However, something even sadder was in store for me and everybody present: the MC announced that to conclude the

ceremony, the great traveler himself, Sir Joseph Andoczi would be making an eloquent speech to impress his audience as he usually does. Well, at this point I must tell you something else about my friend, Eszter, one of the main organizers of my welcome surprise. She knows me much too well, and so she also knows that I simply suck at making extemporaneous speeches. Consequently, she grabs every chance to put me in a situation where I have to make a speech of some sort in front of a throng of attentive and (always!) well-meaning people.

So there I was again, sweating blood and saying the dumbest things one can imagine. Fortunately, after each specimen of verbal stupidity, the rather appreciative crowd of friends cheered or applauded loudly, which was really funny. After four minutes of torture, I managed to finish my miserable delivery, and the MC thanked me for the profound thoughts I had just shared with them.

And then, something rather unusual happened. Everybody lined up in a long line, and a very strange ritual commenced. One by one, my friends, my students, my colleagues and my family came up to me, and after giving me some flowers and kissing me, they each tied a piece of string, cord, ribbon, wire, rope or something of that sort on almost every conceivable projecting part of my body. By the end of this peculiar rite, I probably looked like a quaint little maypole. Among countless others, I had little red hearts around my ankles, a golden ribbon around my head

and even a pair of broken earphones round my left wrist. No one really bothered to enlighten me on the significance of this strange act, but I guess they thought that I was smart enough to figure it out for myself. Well, I think they were trying to tie me to themselves and to my home symbolically so that I wouldn't leave them for such a long time again, and this was probably a way of saying that they had missed me. I was moved to tears.

But this was still not the end of it. A television crew appeared on the scene (a small one), and they interviewed me right there on the spot in front of everybody. I produced about the same quality of performance as with my speech, of course, but I was beginning to enjoy the situation in a strange, perverted way. Besides interviewing many of my friends, the crew also interviewed my father, who talked about what sort of a child I was a long, long time ago. He was really sweet. And then there was champagne and lots of delicious cake provided by my sister and my father's girlfriend. At long last, I got to talk to my friends under less formal circumstances, and they told me that they had been planning this little get-together for a month, and they were not really happy with the way some of the things had turned out: they had wanted to contact and invite more people, and had actually planned a marching band, but they ran out of time. What a bummer! I also learnt that Attila was actually playing a part in the car, and he was very well aware of the emotional states he was putting me in. What an incredible actor he is! He does

not know, though, that I have resolved to take revenge.

As for the soloist, he showed up two hours late and joined some of my closest friends, my sister and me in consuming the divine stuffed cabbage that my sister had prepared for the occasion. Yummy! Despite our incessant entreaties, he would not sing his aria before such a small audience.

Well, I have about two more weeks before school starts, and I have been spending my time unpacking, sorting out photographs, seeing my wonderful friends and telling them about the wonderful friends that I made in the States and the ones that I had the chance to see again in this life.

I know one thing for sure: I am so lucky

and blessed to know you.

Please remember that if your paths should happen to lead to this part of the world one day, I would be more than happy to be your guide. Also, I always have a mattress or two for you to sleep on in my apartment, or if you should need something fancier than that, we can always think of something.

Take care of yourselves, and please keep in touch.

Your friend,

Sir Jozsi