

THE LITTLE RED VINYL DOG

Ildy Lee

It was a snowy winter day in December in a northern town in Hungary. I was a lonely teenager trudging home from school. Despite the impending snowstorm that darkened the sky, I took a long walk in the fresh snow, allowing myself to reflect on happiness, sadness and the possibilities of changing my tedious life. Christmas, (we called it “Karácsony,”) was around the corner, yet I didn’t enjoy looking at the window displays on the way home because they were same as always: dull and boring. Ordinary household items in those windows didn’t spark my interest: essentials like aluminum pans, brown sacks filled with groceries, ugly shoes, and posters of communist propaganda with slogans that we were forced to learn and recite on command. There were no Christmas decorations, no Mikulás, (our Santa Claus), no trees with colored lights and no illuminated festive windows, children’s books or women’s fashions on display. Clothes in the Soviet Bloc communist countries at that time had to be functional and simple. They came only in black, brown or gray. Everything in those windows was dusty, dull and dimly lit, mostly by a single, dangling, naked light bulb. Oh, how I hated those glaring light bulbs without fixtures swaying from a single wire! We had one just like it hanging from our stained and peeling ceiling. It screamed “poverty” to me.

I’d heard many stories of how lavishly people lived before the communists took over. I was starkly aware that ours had become a colorless black-and-white world. Mostly black, according to my mother.

When we needed to buy a pair of shoes or a winter coat, we had to sell one of the treasures my parents rescued on a movers’ truck when we fled our home after the war, such as a rolled-up masters’ painting, a sterling silver box or a crystal vase. Mother cried each time she had to part with one of her precious memories sold practically for nothing on the black market. “What will happen when we don’t have anything left to sell? Mother wiped her tears. “We practically live on soup and potatoes” she complained. “There are just so many ways to prepare them before you gag. Oh, dear God, have mercy on us!” she would say, while crossing her heart.

After crying, my mother always felt better. I didn’t like to see my mother cry. Each time she caught herself smiling or singing, she stopped suddenly, looking guilty. She was frightened of some mysterious retaliation for her undeserved happiness. She clutched her fingers, turned her eyes up to the sky and said, “I’ll be punished again! Each time I’ve been happy, bad things happened. Something horrible is going to happen again, I feel it!” Haunted by the horrors she lived through in the war, mother was truly afraid to be happy - terrified that the price she had to pay for it would be some impending, unspeakable tragedy, like the many in her past.

Strangely, my father who lived through the same exact experiences, was always cheerful, and nothing bad ever happened to him; unlike mother who was always sad, and had horrible things happen. At least, according to her. Therefore, I concluded early in life that it might be much wiser to choose to be happy, just like my father.

In my father’s library, alongside his thick law books, I discovered some oversized encyclopedias from long ago that he saved when we fled the war. The rich leather-bound books had engraved golden trims and looked opulent. They had beautiful glossy pages and the enchanting pictures had vivid colors, magnificent and vibrant.

In our colorless world, those shiny, colored pages looked magical. I didn't have the privilege to own beautiful storybooks because books were made of recycled, dirty paper, with few illustrations, if any, and always in black and white. Only the Russian books had some color in order to lure us into learning the language. The pictures showed a perfect world, with perfect people and spotless streets. Yet the colors were still washed-out and dull to save on the printing costs.

I never played with dolls as a little girl for we couldn't afford to buy one, if we could even manage to find one. Therefore, there was nothing to catch my attention in the dull Christmas window displays on my way home.

We never shopped for leisure, only out of bare necessity. Buying shoes was easy, there were only two choices: black or brown. They came only in two styles: one above your ankle, or slip-on. If they didn't have your size, you just had to take one that was close enough to it. I never wore shoes that fit; therefore, I had deformed toes just like many of my classmates. My father, who had practiced law in three countries and who spoke eight languages, walked around in leaky shoes that squished after he walked through rain puddles. The shoemaker wanted 50 Forint to mend the holes. That was my father's earnings for a whole week. We simply couldn't afford it.

But that snowy day as I walked home from school, I suddenly saw something in one of the window displays that stopped me dead in my tracks. It was a little red vinyl purse shaped like a dog. It even had ears and eyes painted on it. It was magnificent! I never saw shiny vinyl before, and the color red was vivid and sparkling like a vision from a fairy tale transported into our colorless world. I didn't know at the time how cheaply it was made. It might have been something that you would pick up in America today in a 99-cent store and it would probably disintegrate within a few months. But this shimmering, shiny new material, that glistened with the brightest red glow that I've ever seen, suddenly lit up my gray world.

I stopped, mesmerized, and stood there in the middle of the windy snowstorm staring at that magnificent red doggy purse. If I had one like it, I bet all my classmates would die of jealousy! And I would be the most popular girl at school. I ran home, and told my parents with excitement about the little red dog purse. "That's what I'd like for Christmas!" I blurted out. "It's so beautiful! You must come and see it for yourselves."

The next day, I dragged my parents to see the object of my dreams in the window display. Mom and dad looked at each other and shook their heads with a sad smile. Mother explained to me on the way home.

"Ma petite Ildiko, we would love to make you happy and buy you the little doggie purse for Christmas but unfortunately we cannot afford it. It would cost your father a whole month's salary! We would have to eat nothing but potatoes for a whole month, and that would still not be enough."

Even though I understood my parents' dilemma, I burst into tears. I wanted that little dog more than anything! I didn't mind eating potatoes everyday, as long as my dream would come true.

For the next few weeks I couldn't function at school. Sitting behind my desk, I looked out the window to the acacia trees frosted with ice and dreamed of the little red dog. Then came Christmas Eve. We all went to church - sneaking around in the dark so as not to be seen because churchgoers wound up

on the communists' blacklist. The glittering church, with the rich baroque-style golden ornaments, elevated our souls to the festive chords and arpeggios of a majestic pipe organ, similar to the one my grandfather played in the mighty cathedral of Ujvidék, my birthplace. As we joined in singing familiar hymns with the crowd, I felt close to my grandfather and close to God. Nothing ever topped those elevating, purifying moments.

On the way home, my brother and I laughed as we threw snowballs at each other. We had a special holiday dinner, and we even had a turkey that we rarely could afford. After dinner, we gathered around a beautifully lit tree and proceeded to open the presents. Most of the time they were only symbolic presents, or household items that we needed anyway; and Christmas was a good excuse to buy them, such as a bar of soap or wooden spoons for cooking, or a warm sweater. I was always disappointed opening those mundane items, but didn't want to hurt my parents' feelings, so I pretended to be happy and surprised. As I opened my present (that I thought to be a notebook for school), to my biggest excitement I was unwrapping the little red vinyl dog! I jumped up and down, screaming for joy. Then tears of happiness rolled down my cheeks as I clutched the little red dog and held it against my heart. This was one of the happiest and most memorable moments of my life.

And my daddy walked one more year in his weatherworn, leaky shoes...still wearing his cheerful smile.



Decades later, my award-winning photographer friend, Niki B, recreated the vinyl dog, from my description. When I saw it, emotions brought tears to my eyes. This is exactly what I saw as a young girl, in the Christmas display window in Hungary on that snowy winter day.

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