[Snap Judgment]

**Glynn:** Okay, so sophomore year, Grand Valley State University, and on the laundry room bulletin board, I see a poster about jobs available in food services. And I write down the number to call. But when I finish my laundry, I can't read my own writing. So, I go back to the bulletin board, and the poster is gone. And that doesn't make any sense. I'm sure that someone just stapled another poster on top of the poster I'm looking for. So, I start excavating the bulletin board, pulling stuff off to see what's underneath. Missing dogs, chess club, party, tutoring needed. And I see half a sign. And it says "Apply Now, Fellowships to Asia." And I don't know why, but I look at that sign, and I do need to get out of Dodge. The likelihood is less than zero, but so what? I pull a tab from the side and I do apply. But I'm told to meet at the dean's office, and a man comes out and congratulates me on being chosen for the Asia fellowship, a yearlong trip. Whoa. "You will represent our school at a brand-new program in Japan. This is an extremely selective admissions process. You should be very proud."

Whoa, extremely selective. I was chosen. Picked? "Well, how many people applied?" "Well, that's not really important right now, what's important--" "No, no, really. How many people did apply?" "Well, in truth, you were the only applicant, but that doesn't change the fact we are proud to have you represent our university overseas." No one else applied. No one. Probably, because they posted a notice buried three posters deep on a random laundry room bulletin board. And truly, truly, that trip changed my life. Fate? Destiny? Maybe. But today on Snap Judgment, Kismet. Amazing stories from real people being directed by the fates. My name is Glynn Washington. Always remember, qualifications are for suckers, when you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

Now then, on the Kismet episode, when Elena first started looking for someone on the internet, she thought that an online romance would stay just that, online. Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

**Elena:** I remember the first time I saw Meg's profile. I think I remember glasses, and I kind of thought she looks geeky. She's trying to write her profile in Russian. She just translated the words that she wanted to use, and it came out very hilarious. But it was stunning. There was so much energy in that letter. We started writing back and forth. It was wonderfully easy. I have never felt that way ever in my life. We didn't play any games. We didn't feel self-conscious. We were so honest to each other. It was just mutual. We were mutually drawn to each other. I realized that she was on the other side of the world, that she was Canadian. And I was in Russia.

It was the very end of 2005. She said once in a letter to me that it would be great idea if we met in Kiev. Of course, I got scared. I absolutely couldn't imagine how me, how could I go to Kiev to see a woman? At the time, I was an architect working in a small town, I was 25. And I did not know almost anything about the world. I was not out.

[somber music]

I told her that simply my society will not allow me to be with her. She tried to play it cool. And she told me, "Well, whatever then. If we part, that's fine with me." And you see, the thing is because she said so, I realized if I let her go now, I will lose her. And so, I decided to go to Kiev. Of course, I had to do in secret. If somebody finds out in Russia that you are gay, your life turns upside down instantly. Children lose their home. If my mother knew that I was homosexual, I could end up on the street without documents, without job, without any money. But it didn't matter to me anymore. I knew that I needed to see this woman.

[somber music]

My mother knew that Meg was my pen pal, and she knew that I was writing to her. I think me and her were walking to work, and I told her that I have bought the ticket and that I'm going to see Meg, and that I was going to practice my English with her. She was cranky. She told, "Spend only two to three days and come back immediately."

[somber music]

Oh, how I felt that morning, wow. The most amazing thing I was going to happen in my life. I was going to see Meg, the person that I yearned for so long.

[plane passes]

When I landed in Boryspil Airport, I could barely walk and I felt like my legs are made of cotton. The first time when I saw her eyes, she wears glasses. I remember the first thought that hit me, she doesn't look anything like her pictures. [chuckles]

**Meg:** She recognizes me immediately, and she just gets this incredible grin on her face. She puts her arms around me and I put my arms around her and she's taller than I expected.

**Elena:** It's like lightning went through me. I was so excited that I was ready to drop unconscious there.

**Meg:** She was actually kind of shaking. I just remember holding her and I think what I said was that "It's okay now. It's okay." We get to the apartment, and there's Elena and I standing in the hallway. And just sort of almost take each other in. That was interesting.

**Elena:** Awkward. For me, it was very awkward. We didn't even know what to talk about at first. I remember thinking that I am obligated to kiss that woman. [laughs]

[lively music]

**Elena:** When we met for the first time, we both felt like there were so much expectations and there was so much pressure.

**Meg:** It was like one of those moments where you just stand in front of someone and you paint them with your eyes, you take in every minute. Wow. It's real.

**Elena:** The day before I left for Kiev, I have written my parents a letter and hid it on my desk. In the letter, I said to my parents, "I found the person I love. I'm happy now. We are going to meet." I simply wanted them to understand that there is nothing to worry about, and that was it. In fact, I remember even crying while typing it. It actually felt very invigorating, because I think obviously what it was, it was my coming out to my parents. I hid the letter in my desk before I left for Kiev. My idea was, when I was going to be in Kiev, I would phone my mother and I will tell her that that's where it is and that I want her to read it.

**Meg:** Once the letter was out in the open, let's just say the guano hit the fan.

**Elena:** She phoned pretty much instantly. Yeah, my mother told me that she wants to see me. She wants to come to Kiev to see me and Meg and to see that I'm truly okay. And then, I can just live my life the way I want.

[intriguing music]

I didn't want to meet with her. I didn't want to expose Meg to her. I knew there will be conflict. But I was trained like a poodle to obey my mother. I thought I have to.

I remember it was March 1st. I remember the date well when we came to the train station.

**Meg:** It's huge. It's gigantic.

**Elena:** We couldn't find her anywhere.

**Meg:** She's not there. We're looking around. Phone is ringing. "Where are you? Where are you?"

**Elena:** She was standing so far away from the building of the train station. And so, I kind of thought, "That's odd. Why won't you be standing there?"

**Meg:** She's standing on these platforms like quite a ways away, waving her arms up and down in slow motion. And the only way to get to them is there's these underground access tunnels.

**Elena:** And so, I'm rushing to my mother and pulling Meg after me.

**Meg:** She's heading toward her mother quite quickly, and it's dark. It's very dark.

**Elena:** And I realized, "Uh-oh, this is an ambush."

**Meg:** She told me something's wrong, and she actually literally pushed me back. Her father jumps out of an adjoining stairway and her parents grabbed her. Elena kind of sort of turns around and she's desperate. They were yelling at me, "Go away." They were yelling Elena to shut up.

**Elena:** I told Meg to go back to apartment and wait for me there because I knew that with Meg around, my parents are going to be-- they're simply going to be nasty.

**Meg:** She said, "It's fine. No problem. Just go, go." And she just wanted me out. Okay. So I did, I just left.

**Elena:** They brought me to the second floor of the McDonald's restaurant, barricaded me there with the tables to prevent me from leaving, telling me how awful I am, that nobody-- young people usually don't do things like that to their parents. And I was asking her, "What am I exactly am I doing to you? I just want to be with Meg." And so, my father slapped three train tickets back to Russia in front of me and said, "That’s it. You're going with us." I just imagined. I imagined me going back with them, and I realized I will never see Meg again. I'm not letting those people do this to me. I won't be with Meg, and that's what I told them. I told them, "I'm not going with you." I was trying to stand up and leave. They were not letting me go.

**Meg:** My phone my phone rings, and I hear kind of muffled banging and crashing. And then, I hear Elena. All she's saying to me is, she says, "McDonald's, train station, McDonald's." And then, she says, "I love you." She says that again, "Meg, I love you," and then silence.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Don't miss a moment. Snap Judgment, the Kismet episode continues right after this break. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Kismet episode. When last we left, one couple is desperately trying to communicate. Sensitive listeners should know, this story contains strong language and involves violence. Sensitive listeners, please be advised.

**Meg:** She says, "McDonald's, train station, McDonald's." And then, she says, "Meg, I love you." And then, silence. It was like I had been slugged in the gut. I couldn't believe that I had left her. So, I went back to the train station, I found McDonald's, I went up to the second floor.

I see half the upstairs eating area is filled with people, literally crammed up against one side of the restaurant, and the other half of the restaurant is almost sort of empty except for Elena. Elena is a mess. She's got makeup running all over her face, she's crying, and she's jammed against a wall in the corner. She's trying to stand up and her father shoves the table against her. I didn't know what to do. All of a sudden, a fist comes out of nowhere and just floors me. Her father, he was wild, and the guy had just slugged me. I looked around at the people dining and everybody's just sitting there munching on their McHappy meals. I just said, "Militsiya, we need the police." Nobody did anything. Her father then pulls out this photograph that I had sent to Elena. He's showing it literally almost around the restaurant and saying, "Criminal. Criminal. This is a criminal. Help us. This criminal is after us."

[siren wailing]

**Elena:** After the attack, we got taken to the police station nearby. Being with police was a torture. It was so stupid. I was there for so many hours.

**Meg:** I believe they couldn't find anything to charge us with. And, of course, I'd also paid the bribe, which is why I'm sure they let us go.

**Elena:** A few days later, obviously, I checked the bag, the passport was gone. Of course, I knew that my mother took it. We went to Canadian consulate.

**Meg:** Got to the embassy and we spoke to one of the staff members. And when she was basically telling us that, "You're cooked in Kiev. You need to get out." She said the police were corrupt, that they would know where we were and that we should not go back to the apartment, that her parents would be dangerous. Her official position was, "Let us get you on an airplane and get you out of here." Canada would officially help evacuate me from Ukraine without a passport. They couldn't do anything for Elena.

**Liz:** Why didn't you just leave Elena? You just met. You don't owe her a single thing. You could have just left and been on your way.

**Meg:** Why didn't I do that? Well, I loved Elena. There was no way I was going to feed her to the jackals. The only way she could make it was with me. I knew what we had to do. First of all, get out of Kiev where they could find us. And second of all, then get out of Ukraine and find a way to Canada.

[dramatic music]

**Elena:** We had to find a way to get me to Canadian soil on our own, and nobody else would help us but ourselves.

**Meg:** There was only one other option, and that was to go underground. I had no idea what we were doing. We were like the Marx Brothers. We switched clothes, we had colored our hair. We hung around the train station, and Elena approached women who looked like her, and said, "Hey, do you want to sell your passport?" We thought about stowing away on a freighter, buying an airplane, hiring people smugglers. The ideas that we were coming up with, they were simply outrageous. But we were looking for any way out of this mess.

**Liz:** Why can't you go back to Russia and just get a visa there? You can go to a different city, you can apply for a visa and then just fly out.

**Elena:** I think what people don't understand what it actually takes for a Russian citizen to get a visa. I would say it's about 20 documents you have to provide. My parents tried to kidnap me, part me with the love of my life and why don't I just go back home and collect all those documents for visa? How stupid is this? I mean, I was actually manhandled by this people.

**Meg:** She's sort of saying, "Well, what are we thinking of doing?" And then, it just kind of hit me. "How about let's buy a boat? We can get a sailboat and we can sail it down the river and out into the Black Sea," and then she's like, "Okay, yeah, yeah, okay." And I realized she doesn't understand a thing.

**Elena:** I really had no idea what she was talking about.

**Meg:** From Kiev, we took a taxi to Odessa. From Odessa, a plane to Turkey. In Turkey, they only let Elena have 60 days in the country. So, there was no stopping. We had to go on.

**Elena:** We went to take a look at potential boats we could use to get to Canada. We took the boat out of the Marina to see how it sails. So, that was the time when I realized, "Uh-oh, I'm going to be really screwed now." I really had no idea what the ocean is like. I realized, "Oh, this bathtub is going to take us all the way across all those oceans and seas to Canada." I physically was sick. I was terrified. I couldn't believe I'm going to end up in this environment. I couldn't believe Meg was so damn happy buying it, and she was standing on the helm all shiny and happy. And I thought, "My God, this woman is crazy."

**Meg:** Elena has got no money. Everything she's got is tied up by her mother and she doesn't have two kopecks to rub together. So, there was no other choice. I mortgaged my house. We needed the boat. I think we needed the boat more than we needed the house. Our ultimate destination was Victoria, British Columbia, which is where I lived. We thought we were going to go from Marmaris nonstop to the Straits of Gibraltar. We would see if we could get into the Panama Canal. We would then come up all the way through the Pacific Ocean to Vancouver. I estimated the trip would take probably eight months or so.

**Elena:** We knew it was pretty much impossible. We had a small boat. We wouldn't be allowed to ask a Coast Guard for help. We were not going to be allowed to dock at any country on the way. We absolutely knew that we could die.

**Liz:** Did Elena understand what a greenhorn you were at this?

**Elena:** [laughs] Yeah, interesting question.

**Meg:** I don't think so. [laughs] I put on a pretty good act. I mean, I figured okay, I had flown over a lot of ocean and I had looked down at it.

**Liz:** Did you know how to sail on the open ocean?

**Meg:** No.

**Liz:** And what's the longest that you had ever gone sailing at all without landing?

**Meg:** Few hours.

**Liz:** What's the extent of all the research that you've done to really see that this is possible?

**Meg:** I read a book that I found at the Frankfurt airport. So, I read that book.

**Liz:** Okay, so you read one book. [chuckles]

**Meg:** Oh, it's a pretty big book. I mean, it's pretty long.

**Elena:** We packed everything we can think of.

**Meg:** We packed over two metric tons of food.

**Elena:** Tons of milk, tons of juice.

**Meg:** Over 100 rolls of toilet paper.

**Elena:** Canned vegetables.

**Meg:** Almost 100 gallons of UHT milk.

**Elena:** Cookies, rice, pasta.

**Meg:** I don't know why we had this, but we had literally great big bags of sealed kalamata olives.

**Elena:** There was the strange feeling that we can do anything. I realized that I can be master of my own life. And the fact that it was going to take just one year to get to Canada, it didn't bother me at all. I was not afraid anymore.

**Meg:** When we were leaving, we only had one Turkish tradesman come to see us off. And it was because there was some last-minute welding to do. His name was Kamil, and he's this great big man. And he was so worried, he was so worried about things, and he didn't speak much English. And he was checking things on the boat and tugging at things and saying, "Good. Strong. Good." And then he'd pull on something else, "Good. Strong."

The sun was setting, so the sky was all orange. The air was perfectly still. Heat is just starting to sort of settle down. Everything starts to almost refresh at that point, and everything is incredibly quiet. Only the sound of the engine. And he gives us hugs and he helps push the boat out. We're disappearing toward the breakwater in the marina, and he's standing there on the dock. He's holding these tools in his hands and he's just standing there. And we can see that he has tears in his eyes.

**Elena:** I remember mostly leaving the harbor when I remember I was sitting in the cockpit, and I was eating cookies with milk. And I was pretty upbeat and I just couldn't believe. I thought so special, I thought, "Oh, my God, I'm just this little Russian girl who was supposed to be sitting at home, raising babies. And here I am, having this amazing journey with a woman I love." You see those two things, the person that I love, an amazing journey, I thought it would never happen in my life. And I felt so invigorated. I felt so, so happy that I even forgot to be scared.

And later, when the sun went down, Meg went down below, and then there was nothing but moon. I was completely alone sitting at the helm, looking around me and realizing, "Wow, I'm sailing away from land on this stupid boat." That was, I think, one of the scariest moments of my life. I hated the world then, because I realized I was saying goodbye to literally my entire life, and I realized that I was losing it all.

We were there a single day and even our little spending on the boat, we both were becoming more confident. We were learning how to sail. And I think fear eventually was going away, even for me. The boat is 46 feet. The funny thing is it's actually does not feel that big at all when you have to live in the thing. A small boat with smaller rooms and a lot of bruises.

**Liz:** Did you guys get on each other's nerves?

**Elena:** Yeah. Meg is the messiest person in the world.

**Meg:** She goes into the bathroom to wash her face and it's like a water buffalo blew up in there.

**Elena:** Yeah, the boat, it's actually indeed is very boring. Not much to do. I guess what saved us is having computers. They were entertaining us. I think we had some games. It was Sims. I don't know if you played it but it's actually quite a nice game. It allowed us to have a life among people and on land. I guess my favorite thing was just to create a home, like you have to build a house and then choose the furniture, that was wonderful. And I also loved to feed her, that character. I liked to order pizza. [chuckles] I remember I think we actually had Meg character too in the same village. And we would meet together and have fun. I think mostly what we were doing there in the game was watching television together and cuddling. Yeah, it's a hilarious game.

[sailing]

**Meg:** I would say it could be November. We left at the beginning of July. By this time, we're pretty seasoned sailors. There's not much wind. We're basically drifting along. We're not used to seeing other boats, except freighters and they might sort of come and go kind of thing and it's very light winds, barely moving and it's a quiet morning. And this target starts showing up on the radar. I don't know what it is because it's not moving like a freighter would, and it's moving fast and it's coming straight at us. I'm scanning the horizon with binoculars, "I don't see it, I don't see it." Finally, it's about seven miles out and I start to see this little thing on the horizon. But what I see more than anything is this big cloud of smoke behind it, and it's not changing course.

**Elena:** I experienced the boat approaching us so fast.

**Person:** Please identify yourself. This is vessel [bleep]

**Meg:** Whatever. And it was always just silence, silence, silence. There was no way we can outrun this thing. Nothing we can do. I had a fire extinguisher. That was the only thing I could think of as a defensive weapon. So, we both go up and we sit in the cockpit and we wait.

**Elena:** And I think we were absolutely still statues frozen on the bench. I don't think we made a sound. I don't think we moved. The only parts of our bodies that moved were head and eyeballs.

**Meg:** And this vessel comes over the horizon and it's making just this ungodly racket. So, it's this big steel patrol boat. It's probably 50 feet long. It's got lots of rust all over the place. And it cuts its engine, it slows down and it starts circling us. On the front of it, it's got a tripod mounted machine gun with a guy standing behind it. There's other guys standing on the deck with various weapons. And they're not saying a thing. They're looking down and they bring this boat back to an idle and they circle us slowly. Just a diagonal chug, chug, chug, chug, chug, chug, chug, chug, chug, chug. And our little boats bobbing away in the waves that they made. They didn't say anything. We didn't say anything. Everybody just stared.

Circled us two or three times. Somebody from the flybridge, I assume it was the captain. He also was carrying a gun. He just snapped something. The engines on that boat revved up and it just tore off and just went back across the horizon and left us alone. We just went below and I think we crawled into bed and held on to each other and just shook.

[suspenseful music]

**Elena:** We are in the North Pacific. We're almost there. We were two weeks away, and out of 10 months of hell at sea. I would say water was boiling. It was nothing but black.

**Meg:** We're basically thousand miles off San Francisco. We're not supposed to be there. Nobody is supposed to be there. Certainly not in a little boat. And we're climbing north, climbing north. It's one gale after another and they're relentless. They go on for days. We were making 10 miles north and 5 miles back, 10 miles north and 5 miles back. We know something's going to happen. We know the cold fronts are coming down on us like freight trains and we know there's a Pacific storm just waiting for us.

[suspenseful music]

[wind howling]

**Meg:** The wind picked up. It got to over 55 knots and it overwhelmed Elena. She lost control of the boat. The boat goes over on its side.

[waves crashing]

**Meg:** Basically, being dragged sideways through the water and all of this stuff is on top of my books, clothes, tools, whatnot. And I wake up and I sort of hear this muffled screaming through the headphones.

[suspenseful music]

**Meg:** I make my way to the cockpit, and Elena is hanging onto the wheel. There's water coming up against the deck. The cockpit is full of water. Everything's crashing and falling. She's screaming. Water is coming down through the companionway and we're dragging more of it in and I know the heavier it gets the further into the water, it's going to sink. Elena was frozen solid on the wheel. She was terrified, she was paralyzed. And she sort of comes to.

**Elena:** I realized that I cannot turn the wheel. My strength is not enough. I guess at that point in time, I thought, "Well, this is it. The water is very close." And that's probably the end.

[suspenseful music]

**Elena:** I think I kind of got stuck in this situation, in this thought, and I was just staring at the red compass. There was a compass right there behind the wheel, and I don't know for how long I was staring at it.

[suspenseful music]

**Meg:** I jumped for the wheel. I grabbed it, wrenched it out of her hands. Basically, once again started squaring at it, "Get the sails down. Release the goddamn mainsheet. Get the wind out of it now or we're going to die."

**Elena:** And I was ripping the cloth. I was pulling it down to me and I remember my knuckles hurt so much, I think I actually bled them. How I got it down, I don’t know, but I did. We turned back. I went down below and I was staring at the blue flames of that heater we had. I think Meg was in the cockpit for a while and I remember sitting there crying like crazy. And I was completely wet, and God, the boat was in shambles.

[suspenseful music]

**Meg:** There was a foot of water down below, the floorboards are soaking. And the electrical system is shot. Everything is-- literally, we were wrecked at that point. We're just talking, and the decision was we're going to die if we keep going. And yet, we're not going to make it if we turn around. I told her, "I thought we could." And so over the next few days, we slowly put the boat back together, and we turned back into that wind, and we made it.

**Liz:** Tell me about the moment you landed.

**Meg:** The actual moment we landed was in the middle of the night. It was intensely quiet. It was absolutely surreal. I couldn't actually believe it. And your brain is telling you something's wrong. And I'm looking out the windows. And I'm seeing lights, I'm seeing streetlights and I'm seeing stuff. I'm actually hearing traffic noise. We could see the lights of Victoria, they're all spread out. I mean, that's it. That's my hometown. It's just like, "Wow." I figured, "No matter what happens now, we're good."

**Elena:** Finally, after so many months, I smelled something. It was land and I think it was dirt. We tied it to a dock. I jumped on it. I made a few steps, and the dock was moving under my feet. Only then I realized, "This is it. I indeed got here." It's strange. More than anything, what was strange is to see the boat from a distance. And so, when you actually walk away from it and look back, it stunned me. It looked small, and I couldn't believe that this thing got us all the way to Canada. I feel a lot about this boat. It's my blood, sweat, and tears. And this is really my home.

**Meg:** And we're still on the same damn boat.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Very special thanks to Elena and Meg, who are still traveling on their boat. Elena has written a book about their adventure. It's called *Talking to the Moon*. She and Meg also have a website where they've mapped their journey to the smallest detail. Find out more at *snapjudgment.org*. The original score on that story was by Leon Morimoto, the piece was produced by Liz Mak.

[upbeat music]

When Snap Judgment returns, you always hear about the people who are going to change the world with art, but what if someone actually does? When the Kismet episode continues, stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Kismet episode. My name is Glynn Washington. And today, we're exploring those remarkable times in life when things seem a little bit too fixed, too plain, too faded. Our next story is about music, but don't put on your dancing shoes quite yet. A Hungarian composer dreamed of changing the world with music. Please note, this story does allude to some mature content. It contains strong language and involves suicide and violence. Sensitive listeners, please be advised.

[somber music]

**Laszlo:** I remember when I was five, my dad was playing the piano in the next room from my bed and I heard that beautiful melody that just touched me immediately. The next morning, "What was that song that you were playing yesterday?" And he said, "You are still little. So please don't even think about. Forget it. When you will be adult, it will be okay. But now it's not."

**Davey:** That's Laszlo Marosi, a Hungarian music conductor. He's talking about a song composed by Rezso Seress in the early 1930s.

**Laszlo:** Rezso Seress was growing up in a very poor Jewish family in Hungary. But he didn't go to school to learn the piano. He himself just was sitting in front of the piano and would write and started to discover the keyboard, what kind of sound is coming from what note.

**Davey:** There's not much known about Seress' early life except that he aspired to become a famous songwriter. So, he did what other aspiring songwriters did. He moved to Paris.

[jazz music]

**Laszlo:** Paintings, arts, theater, everything, Paris was the center. He had his girlfriend with him, so he thought that the doors of life are opening for him.

**Davey:** In Paris, Seress composed many songs, many of them now unheard of. He was trying to live the life of a big-time composer. But there was one problem. He was not a big-time composer.

[jazz music]

**Laszlo:** Everyone thought, "Who is this amateur?" He didn't really succeed in Paris. He did not succeed at all.

**Davey:** His girlfriend nagged him constantly, telling him to give up his dream. "Get a 9 to 5 job," but he wouldn't have it. Either he'd become a successful songwriter and change the world, or he'd live out on the streets.

**Laszlo:** When she saw that he didn't become famous, he didn't get money, he didn't succeed the way how she expected, she just said, "Okay, bye-bye."

**Davey:** And bye-bye went the love of his life. The day after their breakup, which happened to be a Sunday, Seress found himself alone in his apartment. Like the many fruitless times before, he started tapping away at the piano, trying to capture the emotions from the fresh breakup.

[thunder rumbling]

**Laszlo:** In that moment, in that gloomy afternoon, on that Sunday, a sad and mysterious melody started to appear in the mind of Seress.

**Davey:** Inspired by the melody, his poet friend helped him write the lyrics. They would call the song *Szomorú Vasárnap* or *Gloomy Sunday*.

**Laszlo:** The beginning of the song, a beautiful inviting dark sound with this ascending aperture of the minor chord.

[*Gloomy Sunday* playing]

**Laszlo:** Altogether, the melody, the phrasing, the text that he uses there to describe his pain and his sadness is just so lovely. And it's a very sympathetic way, he stated everything. No complaining, still offering the love. "I know that she left me. I know this all, but please know that I love you forever and my love can't be stopped even if I'm dead. Don't close my eyes because my love will still go through my dead eyes." [laughs] Beautiful.

**Davey:** Seress went to many different publishers to try to get his song recorded. They all turned him down saying that his song was just too emo. But finally, he got his break and it was recorded by the top Hungarian pop singer, Pál Kalmár and many others. The rest is history.

[Pál Kalmár singing *Gloomy Sunday]*

**Laszlo:** The lowest level of society to the top, everyone loved that song, everyone was singing it. The radio played it in the '30s almost every day, everywhere where we went. There was no one social gathering that the *Gloomy Sunday* was not the song.

[*Gloomy Sunday* playing]

**Davey:** *Gloomy Sunday* resonated all around the world. People in England, Germany, France, America, they were all singing it.

**Laszlo:** You will forget all your pain and you will be just sad, very sad, but it's a beautiful sadness and you can cry, and those tears will clear your mind. It's beautiful. I love that.

**Davey:** Seress' dream of becoming famous had finally come true, and perhaps now, he could win back his girlfriend's love. But that's when it started to happen.

**Laszlo:** People started committing suicide.

**Davey:** There's a story of a Hungarian shoemaker who left a note at the scene of his suicide quoting some of the *Gloomy Sunday*.

**Laszlo:** In Vienna, a teenage girl drowned herself while clutching a piece of the song's sheet music.

**Davey:** One man shot himself after telling relatives he couldn't get that song out of his head.

**Laszlo:** A woman in London overdosed listening to her records of the song skipped over and over and over and over.

**Davey:** A young shopkeeper in Berlin hung herself in her apartment, the sheet music to *Gloomy Sunday* in her bedroom.

**Laszlo:** We don't even know the exact number because not everyone was discovered.

**Davey:** At least 19 suicides have been linked to the song, although many claim hundreds. We'll never know. Others say the Great Depression had a role in the deaths as well. Soon, the song became widely known as the Hungarian Suicide Song and was banned on BBC Radio. When asked about his infamous song, Seress said--

**Laszlo:** "I stand in the midst of this deadly success as an accused man. This fate of fame hurts me. I cried all my disappointments of my heart into this song and it seems that others with feelings like mine have found their own hurt in it."

**Davey:** So, the story goes Seress tried finding his ex-lover who had inspired him to write *Gloomy Sunday*. But to his horror, she too had taken her own life with poison.

**Laszlo:** And she had the music of *Gloomy Sunday* with her. Basically, he, the composer says that "I'm ready to die for you because I love you so much. Even if you don't love me, I have to tell you that I love you more than you can imagine because I'm ready to die for you." And I think the girl killed herself. She demonstrated that she's the same as he stated in the text. It's a very, very good Shakespearean topic.

**Davey:** Many years later, after World War II and disappearing from the spotlight, a heartbroken Seress finally surrendered to the curse of his song, as proclaimed in the climax--

**Laszlo:** "My heart and I have decided to end it all." He jumped out of the window of his apartment, but he survived. But while recovering in the hospital, he choked himself to death.

**Davey:** Was that really necessary?

**Laszlo:** Why do you think? Did he have a choice? If he wrote that song, this was the only way how he could demonstrate that he was serious. He wouldn't be faithful to himself if he wouldn't have done that. He needed to do that. And he knew that and he did.

**Davey:** Seress may now be dead but his song's haunting legacy lives on. *Gloomy Sunday* has been recorded over 80 times, covered by Billie Holiday to Elvis Costello to Björk.

[*Gloomy Sunday* in different versions]

**Davey:** Although they've tacked on an extra verse to make the song PG, apparently, the death mentioned in its lyrics was just a dream.

[Björk singing]

**Laszlo:** Oh, no. It's cheating. You can't say after Romeo and Juliet, "Oh, sorry. I was just kidding." Wait a second. You were not kidding. It's part of the human life. You can't have everything happy ending. He should come back and just tear those pages to pieces.

[Björk singing]

**Davey:** What about you? You're a Hungarian musician. What does this song mean for you?

**Laszlo:** What it meant for me, something beautiful. This is that came to my mind. Not the sadness, not the drama, but beautiful, beautifully sad. If I would have the chance to die, I would do that. Commit suicide with this song, put it on. And I just haven't decided which day. Not yet.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Thank you so very much to László Marosi for telling us that story. That piece was produced by Davey Kim.

[upbeat music]

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