

A Painted Egg
Honorable Mention Scribophile Cultural Object Contest
August 2025
(442 words)

Amy reached into her backpack, dug around a bit, and then pulled out the assignment. She smoothed out the wrinkled paper on their glass coffee table. “Share your Culture,” the paper said. Though Amy’s grandparents came from Hungary, she knew nothing of the country or its people. She didn’t even know the language, not one single word.

“I need a cultural item for show-and-tell,” Amy said.

“What’s a cultural item?” Amy’s mother walked around the gray living room, wiping the TV with a pink dust cloth.

“A thing from our family’s history. Like a decoration or a toy.” Her friend Maria would have something cool, like a beautiful stitched blanket or a doll. She always had delicious enchiladas for lunch, and Amy, with her peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, felt terribly jealous. She couldn’t show up to show-and-tell empty-handed.

“Why don’t you take the photo of great-grandmother?” Her mother went to the picture wall and took the black-and-white photo of the sour-faced woman. Great-grandmother glared at the camera as if cursing anyone who dared to look.

“The teacher said no photos.” Amy already knew they had nothing that fit, but she wanted to pick at her mother for it. Her mother could have done something years ago. She could have learned Hungarian from her parents or kept some of her grandmother’s European knick-knacks. There had been an egg once, hand-painted paisley in primary colors, but they had tossed it long ago during a decluttering purge. Amy’s mother dusted the top of the large, framed painting of a single white duck that hung over the fireplace. The thing looked lonely in its misty little pond.

“Well, that’s a ridiculous assignment,” her mother said. “You don’t have a culture. You’re just white. That’s what your grandparents wanted.” Her mother went into the kitchen to make them dinner, and Amy was left alone on the plain gray couch. She grabbed her phone and searched for the Hungarian word for “white.” The search engine told her the language wasn’t even called Hungarian. It was called Magyar, and it gave her two words: fehér and sápadt.

Amy took a piece of paper from the printer and wrote the words on the page in black magic marker.

Fehér

Sápadt

The words made her feel hollow, like nothing, inside and out. She crumpled up the paper and threw it in the trash. Amy pulled out another piece and went to try again, but her heart felt so empty, she left the page blank. It was all that she was anyway.

She really wished she had a painted egg.