Opening extract from

The Morning Gift

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played in the streets would halt her, and when she listened she seemed to turn pale with concentration, as children do in sleep. Her parents were sympathetic, she had piano lessons which she enjoyed, she passed her exams, but she had a need of excellence which she herself could not provide.

So for a long time she had listened with wide eyes to the stories about her Cousin Heini in Budapest.

Heini was a scant year older than Ruth, and he was a boy in a fairy story. His mother, Leonie's stepsister, had married a Hungarian journalist called Radek and Heini lived in a place called the Hill of the Roses high above the Danube in a yellow villa surrounded by apple trees. A Turkish pasha was buried in a tomb further down on the slope of the hill; from Radek's balcony one could see the great river curling away towards the Hungarian plains, the graceful bridges and the spires and pinnacles of the Houses of Parliament like a palace in a dream. For in Budapest, unlike Vienna, the Danube flows through the city's very heart.

But that wasn't all. When he was three, Heini climbed onto his father's piano stool.

'It was like coming home,' he was to tell reporters afterwards. At the age of six, he gave his first recital in the hall where Franz Liszt had played. Two years later, a professor at the Academy invited Bartók to hear him play and the great man nodded.

But in fairy stories there is always grief. When Heini was eleven, his mother died and the golden *Wunderkind* became almost an orphan, for his father, who edited a

PROLOGUE

Vienna has always been a city of myths. Before the First World War there was the ancient Kaiser, Franz Joseph, who slept on an iron bed, never opened a book, and ritually washed the feet of twelve old gentlemen on Maundy Thursday.

'Is nothing to be spared me?' the Emperor had asked – and indeed not very much was. His wandering, neurotic wife was stabbed to death by a mad anarchist on the shores of Lake Geneva; his son, the Crown Prince Rudolf, shot himself and (after a larger interval than was suitable) his mistress, in the hunting lodge at Mayerling. Tragic events, all, but the very stuff of legend and excellent for the tourist trade.

This was the Vienna from which thirteen nationalities were governed; the city of parades and pageants where the world's most dashing soldiers in blue and white and silver could be seen each night crowding the standing parterre at the opera, for every serving officer had the right to hear music free. The Vienna of

the Lippizaners, the city's darlings, stabled in an arcaded palace, who turned the death-dealing movements of war into an equine ballet and were followed by solemn men with golden shovels who scooped their noble droppings from the perfectly raked sand.

The carnage and wretchedness of the Great War brought this era to an end. Yet somehow the city survived the death of Franz Joseph, the abdication of his nephew, Austria's crashing defeat, the loss of her empire. And new myths, now, were assembled for the visitors. Professor Freud, on good days, could be pointed out drinking beer on the terrace of the Café Landtmann. Arnold Schönberg, the inventor of atonal music, gave concerts which might not be comprehensible but were obviously important, and while no one knew exactly what logical positivism was, it was understood that the philosophers who were inventing it were bringing acclaim to the city.

Leonie Berger's family had lived in Vienna for a hundred years and her myths were her own.

'Personally I never meet Professor Freud in the Landtmann,' she said to an enquiring visitor. 'All I ever meet in the Landtmann is my Cousin Fritzi with those spoilt children of hers running between the tables.'

Her father, descended from prosperous Moravian wool merchants, owned a big department store in the Mariahilferstrasse, but Leonie Berger had married into the intelligentsia. Kurt Berger was already in his thirties, a lecturer at the university, when he crossed the

Stephansplatz and heard, from underneath a multitude of hungry pigeons, the cries of a desperate young girl. Beating back the predatory birds, he discovered a scratched and very pretty blonde who threw herself weeping into his arms.

'I wanted to be like St Francis of Assisi,' wailed Leonie, who had bought six whole packets of corn from the old man who sold pigeon food.

Kurt Berger had not expected to marry, but he married now, and could blame no one but himself when he discovered that Leonie, so to speak, would never proffer one bag of corn where six would do.

As for Leonie, she adored her husband, who in turn became Professor of Vertebrate Zoology, a Director of the Natural History Museum and Adviser to the Government. She orchestrated his day with the precision of a Toscanini, herself handing him his briefcase and silver-handled umbrella as he left at eight, serving lunch within five minutes of his return, stilling the servants to silence while he took his afternoon nap. The amount of starch in his collars, the movements of his intestine, were known to Leonie within millimetres; she guarded him from importunate students and carried his favourite mineral water to their box at the opera in a silver flask. None of which prevented her from also attending to the ailments, birthdays and love affairs of innumerable relatives whom she entertained, visited and succoured, often more than once a day.

The Bergers lived in the Inner City, on the first floor of a massive apartment house built round a courtyard

with a chestnut tree. The Professor's aged mother was hived off in two of the twelve rooms; his unmarried sister, Hilda, an anthropologist who specialized in the kinship systems of the Mi-Mi in Bechuanaland, had her own suite. Leonie's Uncle Mishak, a small balding man with a romantic past, lived in the mezzanine. But, of course, they wouldn't have been truly Viennese if they hadn't, on the last day of the university term, departed for the mountains. For the Crownlands of the old Habsburg Empire were left to the Austrians: the Tyrol, Carinthia, Styria . . . and the rain-washed Salzkammergut where, by a deep green lake called the Grundlsee, the Bergers owned a wooden house.

The preparations for the 'simple life' they lived there involved Leonie in weeks of planning. Hampers were brought up from the basement and filled with crockery and china, with feather beds and linen. City suits were laid up in mothballs; dirndls were washed, loden coats and alpen hats brought out of storage and the maids sent on by train.

And there, on a verandah overlooking the water, the Professor continued to write his book on *The Evolution of the Fossil Brain*, Hilda composed her papers for the Anthropological Society and Uncle Mishak fished. In the afternoons, however, pleasure erupted. Accompanied by friends, relatives and students who came to stay, they took excursions in rowing boats to uncomfortable islands or walked ecstatically across flower-filled meadows exclaiming '*Alpenrosen!*' or '*Enzian!*' Since a number of doctors, lawyers, theologians and string

quartets also had houses along the lake, some extremely high-powered conversations often grew up between one clump of flowers and the next. Midges bit people, splinters from the bathing huts lodged in their feet, bilberries stained their teeth – and each evening they gathered to watch the sun set behind the snow-capped mountains and shriek '*Wunderbar!*'

Then on the last day of August the dirndls were put away, the hampers packed – and everyone returned to Vienna for the first night of the Burg Theatre, the opening of the Opera, and the start of the university term.

It was into this fortunate family that – when the Professor was already approaching his forties and his wife had given up hope of a child – there was born a daughter whom they called Ruth.

Delivered by Vienna's most eminent obstetrician, her arrival brought a posse of *Herr Doktors, Herr Professors*, University Chancellors and Nobel Laureates to admire the baby, poke at her head with scholarly fingers and, quite frequently, quote from Goethe.

In spite of this roll call of the intelligentsia, Leonie sent for her old nurse from the Vorarlberg, who arrived with the wooden cradle that had been in the family for generations, and the baby lay under the chestnut tree in the courtyard, lulled by the sweet and foolish songs about roses and carnations and shepherds that country children drink in with their mother's milk. And at first it seemed that Ruth might turn into just such an Austrian *Wiegenkind*. Her hair, when it grew at last, was

the colour of sunlight; her button nose attracted freckles, she had a wide, sweet smile. But no goose girl ever clasped the sides of her cot with such fierce resolution, nor had such enquiring, life-devouring dark brown eyes.

'A milkmaid with the eyes of Nefertiti,' said an eminent Egyptologist who came to dinner.

She adored talking, she needed to know everything; she was an infant fixer convinced she could put the world to rights.

'She shouldn't know such words,' said Leonie's friends, shocked.

But she had to know words. She had to know everything.

The Professor, a tall grey-bearded and patriarchal figure accustomed to the adulation of his students, nevertheless took her himself through the Natural History Museum where he had his own rooms. At six she was already familiar with the travail and complications that attend the reproductive act.

'Sex is a little bit sad, isn't it?' said Ruth, holding her father's hand, surveying the bottled wind spiders who bit off their partners' heads to make them mate faster. 'And the poor octopus . . . having to hold on to a female for twenty-four hours to let the eggs go down your tentacles.'

From her unworldly Aunt Hilda, who was apt to depart for the university with her skirt on back to front, Ruth learnt the value of tolerance.

'One must not judge other cultures by the standards

of one's own,' said Aunt Hilda, who was writing a monograph on her beloved Mi-Mi – and Ruth quite quickly accepted the compulsion of certain tribes to consume, ritually, their grandmothers.

The research assistants and demonstrators in the university all knew her, as did the taxidermists and preparators in the museum. At eight she was judged fit to help her father sort the teeth of the fossil cave bears he had found in the *Drachenhöhle* caves and it was understood that when she grew up she would be his assistant, type his books and accompany him on his field work.

Her little, bald-headed Uncle Mishak, still grieving for the death of his wife, led her into a different world. Mishak had spent twenty dutiful years in the personnel department of his brother's department store, but he was a countryman at heart and walked the city as he had walked the forests of Bohemia as a child. With Mishak, Ruth was always feeding something: a duck in the Stadtpark, a squirrel . . . or stroking something: a tired cab horse at the gates of the Prater, the stone toes of the god Neptune on the fountain in Schönbrunn.

And, of course, there was her mother, Leonie, endlessly throwing out her arms, hugging her, scolding her . . . being unbearably hurt by an acid remark from a great-aunt, banishing the aunt to outer darkness, being noisily reconciled to the same aunt with enormous bunches of flowers . . . Carrying Ruth off to her grandfather's department store to equip her with sailor suits, with buckled patent leather shoes, with pleated

silk dresses, then yelling at her when she came in from school.

'Why aren't you top in English; you let that stupid Inge beat you,' she would cry – and then take Ruth off for consolation to Demels to eat chocolate eclairs. 'Well, she has a nose like an anteater so why shouldn't she be top in English,' Leonie would conclude, but the next year she imported a Scottish governess to make sure that no one spoke better English than her Ruth.

And so the child grew; volatile, passionate and clever, recommending birth control for her grandmother's cat, yet crying inconsolably when she was cast as an icicle instead of the Snow Queen in the Christmas play at school.

'Doesn't she ever stop talking?' Leonie's friends would ask – yet she was easily extinguished. A snub, an unkind remark, silenced her instantly.

And something else . . . The sound of music.

Ruth's need for music was so much a part of her Viennese heritage that no one at first noticed how acute it was. Ever since infancy it had been almost impossible to pull her away from music-making and she had her own places, music-places, she called them, to which she gravitated like a thirsty bullock to a water hole.

There was the ground-floor window of the shabby old *Hochschule für Musik* where the Ziller Quartet rehearsed, and the concert hall by the fruit market – the Musikverein – where, if the janitor had been kind enough to leave the door open, one could hear the Philharmonia play. One blind fiddler of all the beggars that

German language newspaper, was always working. So it was decided that Heini should continue his studies in Vienna and be prepared there for entrance to the Conservatoire. He would lodge with his teacher, an eminent Professor of Piano Studies, but his spare time would be spent with the Bergers.

Ruth never forgot the first time she saw him. She had come in from school and was hanging up her satchel when she heard the music. A slow piece, and sad, but underneath the sadness so right, so . . . consoled.

Her father and aunt were still at the university; her mother was in the kitchen conferring with the cook. Drawn by the music, she walked slowly through the enfilade of rooms: the dining room, the drawing room, the library – and opened the door of the study.

At first she saw only the great lid of the Bechstein like a dark sail filling the room. Then she peered round it – and saw the boy.

He had a thin face, black curls which tumbled over his forehead and large grey eyes, and when he saw her, his hands still moving over the keys, he smiled and said, 'Hello.'

She smiled too, awed at the delight it gave her to hear this music in her own home, overwhelmed by the authority, the excellence that came from him, young as he was.

'It's Mozart, isn't it?' she said, sighing, for she knew already that there was everything in Mozart; that if you stuck to him you couldn't go wrong. Two years earlier she had begun to attend to him in her daydreams, keep-

ing him alive with her cookery and care long after his thirty-sixth year.

'Yes. The Adagio in B Minor.'

He finished playing and looked at her and found her entirely pleasing. He liked her fair hair in its old-fashioned heavy plait, her snub nose, the crisp white blouse and pleated pinafore. Above all, he liked the admiration reflected in her eyes.

'I musn't disturb you,' she said.

He shook his head. 'I don't mind you being here if you're quiet,' he said.

And then he told her about Mozart's starling.

'Mozart had a starling,' Heini said. 'He kept it in a cage in the room where he worked and he didn't mind it singing. In fact he liked it to be there and he used its song in the Finale of the G Major Piano Concerto. Did you know that?'

'No, I didn't.'

He watched the thick plait of hair swing to and fro as she shook her head.

Then: 'You can be *my* starling,' Heini said.

She nodded. It was an honour he was conferring; a great gift – she understood that at once.

'I would like that,' said Ruth.

And from then on, whenever she could, she settled quietly in the room where he practised, sometimes with her homework or a book, mostly just listening. She turned the pages for him when he played from a score, her small, square-tipped fingers touching the page as lightly as a moth. She waited for him after lessons, she

took his tattered Beethoven sonatas to the bookbinder to be rebound.

'She has become a handmaiden,' said Leonie, not entirely pleased.

But Ruth did not neglect her school work or her friends, somehow she found time for everything.

'I want to *live* like music *sounds*,' she had said once, coming out of a concert at the Musikverein.

Serving Heini, loving him, she drew closer to this idea.

So Heini stayed in Vienna and that summer, preceded by a hired piano, he joined the Bergers on the Grundlsee.

And that summer, too, the summer of 1930, a young Englishman named Quinton Somerville came to work with the Professor.

Quin was twenty-three years old at the time of his visit, but he had already spent eighteen months in Tübingen working under the famous palaeontologist Freiherr von Huene, and arrived in Vienna not only with a thorough knowledge of German, but with a formidable reputation for so young a man. While still at Cambridge, Quin had managed to get himself on to an expedition to the giant reptile beds of Tendaguru in Tanganyika. The following year he travelled to the Cape where the skull of *Australopithecus africanus* had turned up in a lime quarry, setting off a raging controversy about the origin of man, and came under the influence of the brilliant and eccentric Robert Broom

who hunted fossils in the nude and fostered Quin's interest in the hominids. To avoid guesswork and flamboyance when Missing Link expeditions were fighting each other for the 'dragon bones' of China, and scientists came to blows about the authenticity of Piltdown Man, was difficult, but Quin's doctoral thesis on the mammalian bone accumulations of the Olduvai Gorge was both erudite and sober.

Professor Berger met him at a conference and invited him to Vienna to give the Annual Lecture to the Palaeontological Society, suggesting he might stay on for a few weeks to help edit a new symposium of Vertebrate Zoology.

Quin came; the lecture was a success. He had just returned from Kenya and spoke with unashamed enthusiasm about the excitement of the excavations and the beauty of the land. It had been his intention to book into a hotel, but the Professor wouldn't hear of it.

'Of course you will stay with us,' he said, and took him to the Felsengasse where his family found themselves surprised. For it was well known that Englishmen, especially those who explored things and hung on the ends of ropes, were tall and fair with piercing blue eyes and braying, confident voices which disposed of natives and underlings. Or at best, if very well bred, they looked bleached and chiselled, like crusaders on a tomb, with long, stately noses and lean hands folded over their swords.

In all these matters, Quin was a disappointment. His face looked as though it needed ironing; the high

forehead crumpled at a moment's notice into alarming furrows, his nose looked slightly broken, and the amused, enquiring eyes were a deep, almost a Mediterranean brown. Only the shapely hands with which he filled, poked at and tapped (but seldom lit) an ancient pipe, would have passed muster on a tomb.

'But his shoes are handmade,' declared Miss Kenmore, Ruth's Scottish governess. 'So he is definitely upper class.'

Leonie was inclined to believe this on account of the taxis. Quin, accompanying them to the opera or the theatre, had only to raise the fingers of one hand as they emerged for a taxi to perform a U-turn in the Ringstrasse and come to a halt in front of him.

'And there is the shooting,' said Ruth, for the Englishman, at the funfair in the Prater, had won a cut-glass bowl, a goldfish and an outsize blue rabbit and been requested by the irate owner of the booth to take his custom elsewhere. And what could that mean except a background of jolly shooting parties on breezy moors, disposing of pheasants, partridges and grouse?

The reality was different. Quin's mother died when he was born; his father, attached to the Embassy in Switzerland, volunteered in 1916 and was killed on the Somme. Sent back to the family home in Northumberland, Quin found himself in a house where everyone was old. An irascible, domineering grandfather – the terrifying 'Basher' Somerville – presided over Quin's first years at Bowmont and the spinster aunt who came

to take over after his death hardly seemed younger. But if there was no one to show the orphaned boy affection, he was given something he knew how to value: his freedom.

'Let the boy run wild,' the family doctor sensibly advised when Quin, soon after his arrival, developed a prolonged and only partly explained fever. 'There's time for school later; he's bright enough.'

So Quin had his reprieve from the monotony of British boarding schools and furnished for himself a secret and entirely satisfactory world. Most children, especially only ones, have an invisible playmate who accompanies them through the day. Quin's, from the age of eight, was not an imaginary brother or understanding boy of his own age; it was a dinosaur. The creature – a brontosaurus whom he called Harry – stretched sixty feet; his head, when he put it through the nursery window, filled the room and its heart-warming smile was without menace for he ate only the bamboo in the shrubbery or the moist plants in the coppice which edged the lawn.

An article in *The Boy's Own Paper* had introduced him to Harry; Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* plunged him deeper into the fabled world of pre-history. He became the leader of the dinosaurs, a Mowgli of the Jurassic swamps who learnt to tame even the ghastly tyrannosaurus rex on whose back he rode.

'I must say, you don't have to spend time amusing him,' said his nurse, not realizing that nothing could compete with the dramas Quin enacted in his head.

From the dinosaurs, the boy went backwards and forwards in time. He read of the geological layers of the earth, of lobe-finned fishes and the mammals of the Pleistocene. By the time he was eleven, he was risking his life almost daily, scrambling down cliffs and quarries, searching for fossils embedded in the rock, and had started a collection in the old stables grandly labelled 'The Somerville Museum of Natural History'. As he grew older and Harry became dimmer in his mind, the museum was expanded to take in the marine specimens he found everywhere. For Quin's home looked out over the North Sea to the curving, sand-fringed sweep of Bowmont Bay whose rock pools were his nursery; the creatures inside them more interesting than any toy.

Quin would have been surprised if anyone had told him he was 'doing science' or becoming educated, but later, at Cambridge, he was amused by the solemnity with which they taught facts which he had learnt before his eleventh year, and the elaborate preparations for field trips to places he had clambered up and down in gym shoes.

He got a First in the Natural History Tripos with embarrassing ease, but his unfettered childhood made him reluctant to accept a permanent academic post. Financially independent since his eighteenth birthday, he had managed to spend the greater part of his time on expeditions to inaccessible parts of the world, yet now he fell in love with Vienna.

Not with the Vienna of operettas and cream cakes, though he took both politely from the hands of his host-

ess, but with the austere, arcaded courts of the university with its busts of old alumni resounding like a great roll call of the achievements of science. Doppler was there in stone, and Semmelweis who rid women of puerperal fever, and Billroth, the surgeon who befriended Brahms. In the library of the Hofburg, Quin spun the great gold-mounted globe which the Emperor Ferdinand had consulted to send his explorers forth. And in the Natural History Museum, he found a tiny, ugly, pot-bellied figurine, the Venus of Willendorf, priceless and guarded, made by man at the time when mammoths and sabre-toothed tigers still roamed the land.

When the university term ended, the Bergers begged him to join them on the Grundlsee.

'It's so *beautiful*,' said Ruth. 'The rain and the salamanders – and if you lie on your stomach on the landing stage you can see hundreds of little fishes between the boards like in a frame.'

He was due back in Cambridge, but he came and proved an excellent bilberry picker, an enthusiastic oarsman and a man able to shriek '*Wunderbar!*' with the best of them. If they enjoyed his company, he, in turn, took back treasured memories of Austrian country life: Tante Hilda in striped bathing bloomers performing a violent breaststroke without moving from the spot . . . The Professor's ancient mother running her wheelchair at a trespassing goat . . . And Klaus Biberstein, the second violin of the Ziller quartet, who loved Leonie but had a weak digestion, creeping out at midnight to feed his secreted *Knödel* to the fish.