

The Piano Room

by

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To my parents

Prologue

There was nothing before the snow.

There was nothing before the snow that he cared to remember.

Even this was fading.

His feet were bare, and the coldness crunched under them. Sharp aches darted through him, needling into his hands and feet. He couldn't tell yet if the pain was a positive or negative sensation; he had nothing to compare it to.

An inkblot moved through the dazzling whiteness towards him, melting into a familiar shape. He retreated away from it. Its face was a blur. The shape caught hold on him and pulled him forward, and he dug his heels in because this was the one place he knew that he did not want to be.

Heavy presences swept past them, their voices twisted by the wind. He couldn't see anything but he knew they were there, that they had always been there. They, like so many other things he used to know, were fading from his memory.

He couldn't tell if the blizzard was something or nothing. He decided it was Something; because he could still remember Nothing, even if only faintly now, and it hadn't been like this.

Mist escaped his panting mouth. Being dragged through the coldness did not matter; it mattered that the shape that pulled him filled him with dread. It mattered that despite how hard he fought, he couldn't escape its grip. It was solidifying with every step, becoming less abstract, more terrifying. He stumbled and fell and still it hauled him up and dragged him forward.

The towering form of a building emerged in the snow, a blunt thing with blind eyes. He gaped at it. His fear amplified, crushing him. Behind them were those things, those horrible things.

Something moved within the shadows inside the building. There was a person in the window of the building, looking out.

The shape who was pulling him stopped. It smelled the air and glanced around until it focused on the person in the window. It waved at the distant figure, a confident, challenging gesture. The person in the window disappeared.

Still being dragged on by the shape, he stumbled through the last steps.

Then he was left alone outside the building, wet, shivering, lost.

He knocked on the glass.

And then there was the warmth.

And then there was the shame.

And then...

Part I

1990

The entrance to the bar resembled a dark wooden panel pasted arbitrarily on the side of the alley. The light of the menu display was broken and the iron handle regularly stuck. People often thought it was closed until the door opened, and music and tobacco spilled out. Stairs covered in moth-eaten carpet led down to the dining area, a room of low arches and chipped brick, and a narrow stage where a rickety piano hid under faded cloth. The owner was Mrs Soltesz, a religious widow of eclectic taste in wine and questionable taste in food. Portions were large and cheap, and the place was an establishment where grizzled figures in drab raincoats and woolen hats could drink, eat, read the newspaper and smoke for hours on end.

On mornings like this, where clouds hung low above Budapest and a thin wet mist floated, the only commotion came from the routine deliveries of meat and groceries. The grocery boy was hauling crates of produce down the service door steps leading into the kitchen, while a gangly young man with a grave face was following the boy's muddy trail, mopping the tiled floor. His thick black hair, short and unruly, stuck to his temples, and the hands that clutched the mop were rough and clever. A thin gleaming scar traced the length of his cheekbone like a kiss, illuminating the side of his face and giving him an uneven, curious expression. He put the mop aside and set about unloading and putting the groceries away, handling each vegetable with care. Every now and then he would glance up at the piano through the open kitchen door.

The grocery boy caught his gaze. 'No good,' he smiled, gesturing at the instrument while piling up the empty crates. 'They never tune it.'

The man didn't reply, and dragged a sack of potatoes out of the way. The boy shrugged and disappeared through the service entrance. The man pulled out a large basin, filled it with

water and sat by the sink. He picked up a knife, twirled it pensively between his fingers, and started to peel. Slowly his eyes became vacant, his mouth relaxed and his mind went quiet.

‘Ferd Molnar!’

Ferdi jumped out of his reverie. A woman appeared in the doorway, still in her overcoat. The strands of hair sticking out from under her hat were damp.

‘Ferd, the meat is sitting on the counter! Why haven’t you put it in the fridge?’ He hurried to put the meat away, while the woman shook her head at him. ‘You’d never hear the end of it if she was here before me.’

Ferdi resumed his seat and picked up another potato. ‘Thanks, Erzsi.’

She sighed. He watched as she took off her coat and hat and put on an apron. She rubbed the numbness off her cheeks, leaving them scarlet and warm. ‘Did you mop up?’

‘Yes.’

She went back into the dining room and he heard her switch on the radio, then the knocking of chairs being turned upright. She started humming the words to the popular song currently being played.

‘Erzsi?’ he called.

There came a faint ‘Yes?’ through the scraping wood of the chairs.

‘Is the band really not playing here anymore?’

‘No. Emilian told me they found a better job.’

‘So who is playing these days?’

There was an exasperated sigh. ‘I don’t know, Ferdi. Nobody.’

‘What about the piano?’

‘What about it?’

He bit his lip. ‘Nobody has played it since I came here.’

‘Well, so?’ The knocking of the chairs paused. ‘Ferd, spit it out already.’

‘It’s out of tune,’ he said at last.

‘What do you know about pianos?’

He shrugged, and kept peeling. ‘It’s a waste, that’s all.’

By the evening the bar was full, and the air thick with the scent of food and clothes steaming as the rain dried off them in the warmth. Ferdi’s sweat dripped into the hot dishwater and his shirt clung to his back. The crew were dancing round the ovens, ladles and sizzling pans in hand, and above the din Erzsi’s voice could be heard dispensing orders from the doorway. When at last it was time for a break Ferdi wrapped himself in his coat and climbed out into the alley. The service door, being further away from the street than the main entrance, opened to a quiet, sheltered spot. There he collapsed on a pile of wet crates.

The abrupt silence calmed him. It had rained in the afternoon, and the evening was fresh and cold. His breath fogged the air. The street was gleaming, peaceful and dim. From somewhere came the roar of cars. Two women with identically brushed hair walked past him, their heels echoing. The strip of sky between the apartment buildings was pink and gold.

Ferdi rubbed his hands and examined them. The palms were hardened; the skin around his knuckles was cracked and spattered with small scars. His nails were cut painfully short, and his fingertips were flat and square. He flexed them a few times. He couldn’t remember the last time he had played the piano. It could have been a decade.

He saw his reflection on the dark window of the sporting goods store across the alley: ghostlike, floating, his face lost in a blur. He moved and the ghost moved too. The feeling was familiar. There was a sharp pain in his left wrist, and he pressed it until the pain subsided.

The service door creaked open, and light and steam trickled out. The new head cook, a stocky blond man, walked out balancing a pack of cigarettes on a cup of coffee. He nodded at

Ferdi, put the cup on the crates and lit a cigarette with a mint-green windproof lighter. He offered him one and Ferdi took it, noticing a faded tattoo between the man's thumb and index finger. The cigarette paper was warm from the coffee vapors. It tasted very new, almost green.

The cook stubbed out the rest of his cigarette and sipped his coffee. 'Not really my break,' he sighed. 'I just needed a smoke. All that tobacco coming from the dining room, it makes a man weak. One thing I hate about kitchen jobs, you can't smoke.'

Ferdi nodded. The cook waved a fly away with his thick arm, releasing the smell of fried oil. 'What's your name again?'

'Molnar. Ferdi Molnar.'

The cook sized him up. 'I'm Dieter.'

'A German name?'

'Yes.'

'You speak Hungarian well.'

'My grandmother was from around here. Made the best walnut cream cake you'd ever tasted.' Dieter drank again, his face crimson from the scalding beverage.

Ferdi smoked with no particular pleasure. He liked the cook well enough from the couple of words they'd exchanged in the kitchen, and his cheery disposition was pleasant. Dieter chatted on, his sandy hair illuminating them both like a street lamp.

'It's like hell in there. Hot and cramped and it stinks.'

Ferdi took one last uncertain puff, filling his lungs until they prickled and burned, and threw the butt on the wet ground. 'It's not too bad.'

'I'm glad I'm here, don't get me wrong. But I've had my share of odd jobs and kitchens is still the one I hate the most. Ask me where I learned how to cook.'

Ferdi almost smiled. 'Where?'

Dieter winked. 'If I told you I'd have to kill you.'

They heard chatter, and a group of laughing young men and women appeared further down the alleyway. The group took no notice of them and stepped into the bar. One of the boys was wearing a crisp suit and a bow tie.

‘Music students. This city is filled with them. My neighbour is learning the bassoon, so I might kill him one day.’ Dieter chuckled, and his whole body shook. ‘Do you play? No, you’re the bookish type. I know them when I see them. You like to read, don’t you?’

‘I do. I also play the piano,’ Ferdi said, rubbing his wrist again.

‘Really? You don’t look like a music student.’

‘I’m not.’

‘What are you then? A teacher? An artist? No dishwasher is ever just a dishwasher.’

Ferdi glanced at the ghostly reflection floating in the dark window of the sporting goods store again. He shrugged and didn’t reply. Dieter downed his coffee.

‘Well, good talking to you, Molnar, whatever you are.’ He turned to leave, and paused at the door. ‘Do you know Erzsi? The head waitress? I’ve seen you two talk.’

‘Not much. We just work the same shift.’

Dieter’s face fell for a moment. He took his cook’s cap from his pocket and put it on: it was too small for him and made him look childlike. He grinned. ‘All right. See you in hell, Molnar.’

Then he laughed, pleased with his joke, and disappeared.

Ferdi walked home a little drunk that night, pressing his chest to smother the hiccups. He had left right when the revelry was reaching its peak, and Mrs Soltesz had grabbed him and sat him down next to her. She had poured him wine and refilled his glass until his eyes swam and all he saw was the swirling violet smoke. He wasn’t used to alcohol, and now and then he stumbled on the wet pavement. He kept hearing Dieter’s words, circling around his head like birds looking to perch. *See you in hell. See you in hell. See you in hell.*

He made a detour and headed towards the Danube to clear his head. The black river was bloated with rain, curving and ready to burst. He collapsed on a bench, inhaling air scented with gasoline. Sky and water were flecked with the amber of street lamps and stars. A boat restaurant was anchored close by, and from its bright deck came a cheerful din. The water swelled gently. He watched it until his eyelids drooped.

He woke up with a start. A heavy hand was on his shoulder.

‘Hey, you. You can’t sleep here.’

Ferdi rubbed his eyes. The hand retreated. ‘I was on my way home,’ he mumbled. He turned to look but there was nobody. Ferdi shuddered, wrapped his coat tighter around himself and sneezed. His hair and neck were wet: it must have drizzled while he was asleep. The music from the boat restaurant had died down. A waitress passed him while taking out the trash, and glanced at him with curiosity. When Ferdi met her gaze she hurried to look away.

See you in hell, Molnar.

Ferdi scratched his scar, picked himself up and walked along the embankment, taking his time. His mind was rejuvenated with sleep and he relished the river air against his clammy skin, the comfort of the shoddy shoes on his tired feet. It was a beautiful night, soft, as if it could be molded by a skillful hand into pleasant shapes. He trapped gusts of wind in his mouth and sucked at them. They had the vague alcoholic taste of rotting fruit.

He thought of Sandor at that moment, with a tightening of the stomach and a sinking of the heart.

He thought of the perpetual darkness of the gun room at the Esterhazy manor, the damp walls, the rough towel drenched in icy water. The thirst, the hunger, the silence. Skulking against the wall of the house, jumping through the window into the warm piano room. The glossy piano lid, the crisp hiss of the music sheets. The taste of milk.

Sandor towering above him, his knuckles dusted with blood.

Dragging an impossibly heavy body through the forest, with twigs stabbing at his sides.

The images dissolved. Ferdi focused on the reflections dancing on the wet ground, following the ripples of the blues and the oranges. He began to translate the lights into a melody, adding or shedding a note here and there, until his stroll became a distracted lullaby. He was hungry, and he needed to shower. The melody kept playing in his mind, and his fingers danced inside the pockets of his coat.

He dreamt of the Esterhazy mansion that night. It was crumbling, silent. Books were rotting on shelves. Closets sat agape, their contents caked with dust. Unmade beds, windows dark with dirt, peeling wallpapers streaked with mold. The piano's innards showing, its chords silent like tendons. And the keys broken and immobilised with dirt, sticking out and abandoned mid-song, still pressing down a note into infinity.

It was blissful to have a routine: the creaking of the water pipes in the morning, the sound of water boiling in the pot, the slice of bread and jam washed down with instant coffee. Finding the communal lavatory down the corridor from his room clean, misty with the eye-watering smell of bleach. He was off just as the city was beginning to stir, and he could glance at the wilting magazines at the newspaper stands, dodge the sweepers' brooms and peek into the bread-laden trucks.

A tram line stopped close to the bar, but he only took it when there was rain or snow: Ferdi preferred walking. He liked to watch people go about their morning while the crisp air stung his skin, and the blood thumped reassuringly in his limbs. He would open the bar alone before the deliveries began and Erzsi arrived, enjoying the feel of this darkness that was saturated with alcohol and tobacco. As Ferdi would then set about his chores, he would be accompanied by the silent reflections of himself on the floor and the varnished counters.

On that day the butcher's assistant was one Ferdi had never seen before: a densely built teenager, nineteen or twenty perhaps, with close-cropped hair and a thin mustache. A flimsy orthodox cross slipped out from his collar when he leaned in to let the parcel fall from his shoulder. Ferdi watched both boy and meat with fascination. There was something horribly alive about the animal leg, still intact to the hoof, and as the boy turned it over it seemed about to kick. The tip of the boy's left ear was stained with blood.

The boy's hands moved fast, separating and counting the cuts. The skin of the pig, lined with white fat, was the same hue as the arm that had handled it. The fingers left deep prints on its flesh and Ferdi had the same sensation of being prodded. He imagined his mind bearing the same marks, and within the round indentations a residue of human contact left, like the oils of a fingertip. The boy wiped his hands on his apron, saw Ferdi watching and grinned, revealing a row of sharp pearly teeth. Ferdi wrapped the meat again and carried it to the fridge, careful not to touch any part of the animal.

There was still an hour of solitude left. Ferdi stepped into the dining room. On the stage, the cloth draped over the piano seemed to be billowing softly. He walked up to it, paused and then pulled it off. The wood was lustrous and amplified the low light, sending reddish puddles of it around the brick walls. Ferdi was relieved: he had half expected the piano to be derelict and useless like the instrument in his dream. He opened the lid. The hinges were stiff with rust, and the keys were covered with a strip of green felt older than the piano itself. On it the words *Dieu vous garde* were stitched in yellow thread, with the faint unevenness of something handmade.

Ferdi touched the keys and felt their stiffness. He pressed down a chord, and the echo jumbled around the room. There was a grainy quality to it, as if someone had brushed their nail through the teeth of a comb. As his fingers traced the keys he felt the same erratic indentations

forming in him by this touch, just as he had when the butcher's boy had been poking the fresh meat.

He played a short tune. The sound was coarse. He flexed his hand once more and contemplated it, then tried a different tune: a swirling piece from a folk song. The twang of the lax chords enriched the melody with a strange vivacity. Ferdi smiled, repeated the tune and filled it up with gusto, until the cacophony worsened and reduced the music to a rattle. He straightened his back and gave the piano a satisfied look. A chuckle escaped him.

'I'll be damned! You've never laughed before.'

Erzsi was standing at the doorway, dripping with rain. She applauded.

Ferdi drew back. 'I didn't hear you come in.'

'I didn't know you could play. That's what all this was about yesterday?'

Ferdi replaced the cloth on the keys, shut the lid and pulled the cover in its place. He felt Erzsi step closer. The bar's garlicky smell had seeped into her clothes. 'Don't be embarrassed, Ferdi,' she said.

'Please don't tell anyone about it,' he replied and fled into the kitchen, re-emerging with his apron on.

Dieter seemed to have decided in the meantime that now he and Ferdi were perfect friends. Whenever their eyes met he gave him a grin or a wink. Once he slapped his shoulder to congratulate him on the fast removal of a brimming pot, and the blow made Ferdi's bones clatter. The tall, sandy-haired cook was more heavysset than excessively muscular, but seemed to have no control over his strength. Glasses broke, towels ripped and toes were crushed in his wake, but his goulash was the finest that had ever been served in that questionable establishment.

When Ferdi stepped out for his break he found Dieter already there.

‘I heard you met Petar today,’ the cook said, while the coffee worked its way into their system. ‘I went over to take a look at their meat and met him. Looks clueless, doesn’t he? But he gives us the best cuts, and Holy Mother has never been happier.’

‘The boy from the butcher?’

‘Yes, he’s Yugoslavian. Have you seen his cross? Apparently they drink wine with their communion. If I’d known that I’d have been an Orthodox years ago! Good kid. I took him out since he’s new here, and he ate, drank and bled me dry. Then I took him to one of those nice places full of university girls and he clammed up like a schoolboy.’

The service door creaked open and Erzsi’s sweaty head appeared, reflecting the copper light of the street lamps. ‘Ferd, can you spare a minute? I need to fill the carafes and everyone’s busy.’

Ferdi glanced at Dieter, who was contemplating his coffee dregs. ‘Sure.’

She disappeared. Ferdi finished his coffee and got up, stretched his legs, and was met with Dieter’s sheepish grin.

When work was finished and Ferdi returned home, the caretaker had closed up and retired to his radio, so Ferdi had to push the heavy door with his shoulder to slip into the reception corridor and through to the open courtyard of his apartment building. This small rectangular atrium got little sunlight and the ground was perpetually green and slimy, with a puddle of stale rainwater. As Ferdi crossed it and climbed the open stairway a couple of cockroaches darted away from him, and the smell of old cooking oil clung to the back of his throat.

He took out his keys and heard a familiar cough in the darkness. A sliver of light fell on him and widened as someone opened a door into the hallway.

‘Good evening, Miss Ilona,’ he said.

She peered back at him. Her long grey hair was side-plaited and fell over her flannel dressing gown. From her apartment came the smell of roasted peppers. ‘Mr Molnar! I thought you might be a thief. It’s late.’

‘It’s only half past eight. Did you have a nice day?’ She shot him a suspicious look and nodded. ‘Well, goodnight then.’

He was about to close the door when he saw her step out. She put two nicotine-stained fingers in the pocket of her dressing gown and took out an envelope. ‘This came for you. Your box in the front hall is unmarked, so the postman threw it in mine. You should fix that.’

She handed it to him and he took it with the tips of his fingers. He glanced at it and then at Miss Ilona’s amused face.

‘What do I do with it?’

The corner of her mouth twitched. ‘Open it, I hope. Goodnight, Mr Molnar.’

She shuffled back inside. Ferdi placed the envelope on the table that took up most of his little room. There was no return address. He hung his coat behind the door and put on water to boil for tea. The kitchen consisted only of the small stove, a tiny sink, a cabinet and a stumpy fridge, along with a green stain on the ceiling from the lack of ventilation. The rest of the furniture was just as sparse: a single bed in the far corner, a wooden table with mismatched chairs and a wardrobe. A deep window with double panels overlooked the atrium.

Ferdi sat at the table, poured his tea and opened the letter. There was only one page, written in a steady, upright hand:

Dear Mr Molnar,

I have been informed that you reside peacefully and unobtrusively at this address, to my great pleasure and surprise after Sandor’s vanishing, and you having disappeared from my sight for

so many years. I am very curious to hear from you. What would you say to us meeting and exchanging stories over a pleasant cup of coffee? On the evening of the 30th of October I will be waiting for you at the café across the street from the Opera House, at 9pm.

Do come.

Until then, I remain,

Your oldest friend.

There was no signature. Ferdi's first thought was that he would have to get a calendar. His left hand began to shake uncontrollably. He clenched his fist and clutched the hot mug until the tremors subsided.

Petar was the first person he met the next day. When Ferdi asked him about the date the boy told him it was the twentieth. In his bloody butcher's coat and that moustache he looked like a horror film poster.

'Did you miss your girlfriend's birthday?' he grinned.

Ferdi shook his head and put the parcels away. He calculated the time he had left until the meeting at the café, and realised he would be working; he would have to switch his day off with someone. Behind him Petar was washing his hands, humming a pop song. On his right forearm was the tattoo of a ram skull. When he saw Ferdi looking he flexed his muscles.

'Fearless,' he bragged.

Ferdi paused. 'Can I ask you a question?'

'Fire away.'

'What would you do if you only had ten days left to live?'

Petar blushed to the roots of his bristly hair. He dried his hands on his coat avoiding Ferdi's eyes, and stood silent for a while. 'I'd forget about the consequences,' he said at last. He walked out and slammed the door behind him.

Ferdi thought the shock of the letter would numb him, but he went on with his work with newfound alertness. He couldn't understand why he wasn't simply quitting, packing his few possessions and leaving the city. It struck him that he didn't fear much for his life: surely it was too unimportant for anyone to hold it hostage.

Shuddering despite the heat from the stoves, he allowed the fragmented memories of the snowstorm to pass through his mind undisturbed, like some dangerous animal. The memory was blurred, but still so potent that he could forget to breathe.

'Hey, Molnar, where's your mind?'

Someone walked into him and Ferdi huddled at his post. He sank his hands into the dirty water where the pots soaked. The sheen of filth and grease on the water had a soothing, grounding effect, and the rough wire brush diverted his focus to his fingers. As he squinted through wafts of steam he was aware of his scar, stretching the skin under his eye.

And where had Sandor disappeared to, all those years? They hadn't lain eyes on each other for such a long time. At times Ferdi felt an inexplicable pang of incompleteness without him around. He dreamed about him occasionally, about the two of them young and sitting in the piano room as they used to. In those dreams Sandor was kind and friendly, and he watched Ferdi with pride from the side of the piano. But the guilty sweetness the dreams would bring made waking up to the harsh reality of Sandor's cruelty even worse. On those mornings Ferdi's loneliness was so pervading it made his bones ache.

The scar was smarting again, and his throat had closed. Ferdi breathed deep and counted each scrub until all the pots were clean.

Dieter came over. 'You get off work around seven, don't you, Molnar?'

‘Usually.’

‘Let’s go for a beer tomorrow. It’s my day off.’

‘All right.’

‘I’ll pick you after your shift. Do you have a car?’

‘No, I don’t drive.’

‘Somewhere close, then. By the way...’ Dieter glanced nervously at the door leading to the dining room.

Ferdi caught his look. ‘You can ask Erzsi yourself,’ he said.

Dieter deflated a little. The sight amused Ferdi. ‘You know her better,’ Dieter complained. ‘Ask her. You’d be there too, I mean. Like friends.’

Ferdi shook his head. ‘Incredible.’

‘What?’

‘That someone so big can hide behind me.’

Dieter turned pink. He began to laugh, leaned in and gave Ferdi one of his fearsome slaps on the back. ‘You’re right, Molnar! I’m sorry. Let’s just go the two of us. I’ll figure something out.’

Ferdi rubbed his aching shoulder. He liked Erzsi, and he liked Dieter. And it was unprecedented being involved in other people’s lives.

‘I’ll ask her, if you’re decent about it.’

‘I’m not half as decent as you’re turning out to be.’

Ferdi found Erzsi in the dining room, piling plates on her arms with the apparent improbability of a magician’s act. Her freckled face was glistening. She didn’t notice him until he spoke.

‘Do you have any plans tomorrow night?’

She glanced up in alarm. ‘No, why?’ One of the plates teetered on her wrist.

‘Dieter and I are going out after work, if you’d like to come along.’

She exhaled. ‘Oh, all right. Sounds nice.’

Ferdi returned to his post, and caught Dieter watching him before hurrying back to his frying pan.

Later that night Ferdi watched the cars pass on the far bank of the river, their headlights blinking like fireflies. Bicycles sped past him. A group of girls dressed for a night out were sitting on the ledge and laughing, and as Ferdi passed they paused and stared. Ferdi was conscious of the cooking smells clinging onto him, of his old coat and messy hair. He tried to slow down his breathing. It was a busy night, perhaps a Friday or a Saturday. He could only remember that it was the twentieth, and that he had ten days left.

What was it that Petar had said?

I’d forget about the consequences.

The next day, there wasn’t much Ferdi could do to look presentable: he combed his hair, put a sweater over his stained T-shirt and brushed his jeans with a wet towel. Last of all, he took off the signet ring which hung round his neck and put it back on his finger. It was made for a bigger man, and sat a little loose on him. He dusted its green bloodstone on his sleeve and the crimson flecks gleamed cheerily. The cold weight of it on his hand gave him confidence.

Stepping out he saw Erzsi in the ladies’ bathroom, applying her brown lipstick with care. Her hair, usually tied up for work, fell thick and wavy round her neck. She glanced at him through a frizzy strand and smiled. Dieter was waiting for them by the service door, wrapped in a blue pea coat that solidified him into the shape of a wardrobe. He had left his hat behind to preserve his neatly combed hair, which shone. He flashed them both a wide smile and they set out together.

‘You look pretty,’ Dieter blurted out at Erzsi.

She smiled, tying her scarf. ‘Not as pretty as Ferdi. Did you see the ring he’s wearing?’

As he turned his back to her to look, Erzsi yawned and rubbed her eyes. When she saw Ferdi looking her way, she brought her finger to her lips.

‘Molnar, what’s that about a ring?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Oh, boy. Did you find that at the flea market?’

Ferdi held up his hand into the light and the bloodstone shone. ‘It’s a family heirloom,’ he said.

‘Is that a crest?’

Ferdi glanced at the Esterhazy coat of arms and gave the ring a couple of nervous turns.

‘I’ve seen you make that gesture many times,’ said Erzsi, ‘I don’t think you know you’re doing it. My grandmother used to turn her wedding ring just like that.’

Dieter laughed. ‘I know, there’s something about Molnar that smacks of old folks.’

They reached a shiny new bar. Boys and girls danced lazily and gathered in clusters, where hands glided casually to rest on secret spots. Dieter guided them to a table and they sat under a blue light that made their faces seem two-dimensional. On the wall above Erzsi’s head was a mural of flying fish. The three of them ordered beer, and Ferdi sat so that he could look at the dancers. The music was deafening. He didn’t notice anyone talking to him until he felt Erzsi’s hand on his own.

‘It’s a bit much,’ she shouted, and he nodded. They watched for a while, as young men and women collided drunkenly like boats in the harbour. Several couples were kissing where they stood; a group of boys were shouting and making obscene gestures; a girl was dancing alone to the pop song; another girl slapped a man who had put his hand where he shouldn’t.

Ferdi turned towards Dieter and Erzsi. They were discussing something inaudible, absorbed in one another. Their beers sat almost untouched. He sipped his own and, having little else to do, it went down fast. He got up and sat against the counter, feeling no hurry to return to the table. He looked up and for a moment terror rushed through him before he realised that he was standing across from a mirror. He turned his back to it and drank. Dieter and Erzsi were still talking, sitting so close that their shoulders touched. Ferdi finished his third or fourth bottle.

Across the room someone was watching him. Ferdi thought he recognised the familiar face through the shifting lights. Could it be? How long had Ferdi been sitting there drinking, being watched? The face disappeared in the crowd. Someone close to him blew out cigarette smoke and his vision blurred. He slipped down from his stool and tried to cross the dance floor, while elbows hit him from all sides and warm bodies pressed against his. He pushed through, stumbled towards the other tables and fell against one where two young women were sitting. One of them reached out and caught him. She asked if he was feeling all right and he nodded, trying to regain his balance.

‘I thought I saw someone,’ he said, but his voice was drowned in the noise.

The woman eased Ferdi onto a chair while her friend laughed. His rescuer put her glass of water in front of him. The familiar face appeared once more across the room, among the people watching the dancers. Ferdi tried to focus on it, but it was proving difficult. The face smiled and vanished again. He leaned towards his hosts. ‘Did you see it? Did you see the man watching me?’

The woman who was laughing ruffled her permed hair. ‘Sure, darling.’

A shadow fell on the table and Ferdi twitched. Dieter’s sandy head glowed above them. He put a hand on Ferdi’s shoulder. ‘Has he been bothering you, ladies?’

The girls laughed. Dieter pulled Ferdi to his feet. ‘Sorry, Molnar. We abandoned you.’

Erzsi appeared, carrying his coat. ‘Why don’t we go somewhere else?’

Ferdi rubbed his eyes, and followed them outside. The cold cleared the fog from his brain. As they walked away he glanced back, but the only people outside the bar were a young girl crying in her friend's arms.

Erzsi turned back at him and said, 'See you in hell, Ferdi.'

He stumbled. 'What?'

'I said, you look like hell. Do you need to vomit?'

'I'm okay.'

'Should we take the tram?'

Erzsi put a hand on Dieter's arm. 'It may be better for him if we walk. Not too far though.'

Dieter agreed. His flustered manner was gone, and Ferdi wondered at this newfound intimacy.

Eventually Ferdi vomited, and it made him feel better. His body shook with alertness, hollow and strong. He felt aware of the entirety of his skin. *Let him come*, he thought. *If it was really Sandor just now, then let him come and try what he want. I'll fight. I'll fight until I'm dead.*

His eyes were burning. He counted with his fingers. Nine days left. He hadn't seen the man in the tuxedo since he had dragged Ferdi through the blizzard all the way to the Esterhazy manor, all those years ago. And now he was hallucinating visions of Sandor. The wind brought the scents of Erzsi and Dieter as they walked quietly ahead of him, touching elbows. Onions, cigarette smoke, hairspray, green soap. He could disappear right now. They would never know. He could turn into that alley and never look back, and that would be that.

You're a monster, Ferdi.

He turned his ring, one, two, three, four times. A fine, elegant signet ring bound in silver, bearing the same coat of arms imprinted on the custom-made music notebook he carried round.

He kept turning – one, two, three, four; one, two, three, four – but Sandor’s voice kept returning.

I wish you never existed.

I know, thought Ferdi.

He was terrified that Dieter and Erzsi would glance back and see the tears in his eyes. One, two, three, four turns.

It had been a beautiful spring morning when he had taken the ring, when he had woken up in Sandor’s bedroom. Even though the night had been spent digging with his hands he had hardly slept, because the bed had been so much softer than what he was used to. So he had sat, wrapped in a blanket. He had watched the sun peek between the treetops, a bloody, shapeless chunk of light. He had been consumed with the desire to keep a memento of that morning, a reminder that it had been real, but he hadn’t dared take anything from Sandor’s room. When the noises down the corridor had died down, he had tiptoed to the master bedroom. Salomon and Karolina’s bed was still unmade and warm. He had found the ring with the green bloodstone in a writing desk drawer. He had put it in his pocket and only then noticed the filthy state of his fingers. The nails were chipped, lined with dirt and blood.

‘This looks nice. Look, Ferdi, they have a band!’

‘Molnar?’

Ferdi looked up from his hands, where he could still see the blood. He glanced round, recognising the street. They were close to his home. The place Erzsi was talking about was an open door down a flight of stairs, from where the din of a cheerful violin floated out into the wet night. He heard himself reply that yes, it looked nice, and he followed them down the stairs.

This time they sat him between them, but there was no danger of anyone disappearing in here: the room was wide, low and softly lit, with only a few patrons. Onstage a middle-aged woman was playing the violin, next to a man at the cimbalom. They had that vaguely similar

look of people married to each other a long time. Behind them was a covered piano. Ferdi let his body relax. On the violinist's long dress a snake made of green sequins circled her legs, and when she saw him looking at it, she winked. The wine was a light red, and Ferdi finished a glass without noticing. Erzsi and Dieter were getting silly telling work stories, and soon he too was sharing his own in a low, even voice which betrayed intoxication only with its long pauses.

The music ended and everyone applauded. Dieter was unable to keep the volume of his voice under control, and his words echoed round the stone arches of the room. The glasses rattled. Erzsi was laughing until her eyes streamed, and Ferdi let himself be swept along in the merriment. A full bottle of wine magically substituted the empty one, and a cheese-and-sausage plate manifested in front of them.

The lights were lowered, more patrons arrived and then somehow the violinist and the grizzled cimbalom player were sitting with them and partaking of their wine. He was a former professor of musicology and she a retired biologist, now touring the country at her leisure. They later returned to the stage and by the third bottle the three of them were giving standing ovations. The owner sent over some complimentary cherry brandy which ate away at the last of their inhibitions, and soon Dieter had met everybody in the bar and people were bringing in chairs. Now everyone was one rowdy company, and Erzsi's hair was beyond salvation.

Eventually the performers retired and joined the assembly, and people started arguing about what music to put on. Some complained that they wanted to hear more live music, and the argument was taken up. Then Erzsi rose from her nook under Dieter's arm and nominated Ferdi. All eyes turned to him.

Ferdi's mind was gone in a reckless, wine-induced euphoria. He barely offered a half-hearted protest before standing up. He took a moment to steady himself while everyone laughed, and then walked onto the stage. He pulled off the cover of the piano in one tug, like a magician. There was a burst of applause and some more laughter as there was no piano stool

and he had to bring a chair. He opened the lid, threw away the red felt covering the keys and sat.

And then, Ferdi's mind went utterly silent.

The tip of his finger landed on the cold ivory key and muted the world. There was nobody else in the room. The first note wormed itself into the base of his spine. His reflection in the varnish of the piano blinked, no longer terrifying. He fished from his memory a piece he was putting together during his walks. It was unfinished, but this quiet, still world wasn't urgent. Time did not matter.

Ferdi straightened his back and started playing. He was climbing up a steep mountainside while the air thinned and icy blades of grass collapsed under his heels, and he was reaching ever higher spots while grasslands unfolded far beneath. Then he was sitting by the shore of a still lake, wetting his toes while mist rippled on the surface. He didn't know how he could feel these things; he had never been to a mountain or a lake.

Gradually, the world began to exist again. The room behind him was eerily peaceful. There were a few whispers. He couldn't see what was happening, and didn't care. His hands were moving on their own. Sweat stung his eyes.

Images and sensations burst through. The cold glass against his outstretched palm as he pushed open a window. The mirror with the two identical faces. The dark woods. Dragging a warm mass through the undergrowth, thorns stabbing at him, nettles stinging his fingers – and the man's body weighing Ferdi down, its head lolling forward, exposing the crushed skull...

The melody disappeared, Ferdi's hands floundered and the sound was destroyed. He jumped to his feet pushing the chair back, and it rolled off the stage with a crash.

There was a moment of silence, and then everyone started applauding. Ferdi looked at them without seeing. Astonishment sank in as the low ceiling reverberated with cheers. Erzsi's eyes were red, and Dieter sat unusually quiet. Hands led Ferdi back to his seat, patting him on

the back, filling his glass. Now that the rush was leaving him, drunkenness flooded back. In an instant his head was throbbing again.

‘Molnar, you sly bastard!’ Dieter’s hand fell on Ferdi’s shoulder like a breezeblock. ‘You never said you were bloody Mozart! What are you doing peeling potatoes and washing Holy Mother’s greasy pots?’

Ferdi rubbed his eyes. The green snake uncoiled as the violinist appeared next to him, and took his hand.

‘What was that piece you just played?’

He tried to think. ‘I’m not sure.’ The memory of the crushed head resurfaced and he tried to take deep breaths. The cimbalom player stared at him.

‘Was it yours? What else can you play?’

Ferdi nodded absentmindedly, without taking in his words. His body was too heavy. He shrank and shrank until he was curled up on the chair. People shifted around him. He smelled Erzsi’s hairspray. ‘We should be going,’ she was telling them.

More murmurs and goodbyes, more hands patting him on the back. Erzsi helped him stand up and put his coat on, and Dieter hauled him up the stairs. It was pitch black outside, and he had no idea where he was. Someone tied his scarf for him.

‘Come on, Mozart. Time for bed.’

The sunlight woke him up. It sent an instinctive jolt of dread through his body and he groped for the alarm clock. He was late for work.

Ferdi sat up with a groan. Something heavy was rolling round inside his head, knocking against his skull whenever he moved. He waited for the room to stop swaying and got up. He

saw that he was still in last night's clothes, reeking of wine and cigarette smoke. His shoes were placed neatly by the bed. There was a note on the table, written on a paper napkin.

Good morning, Mozart!

Don't worry about work. Erzsi will open up and you can make it up to her sometime. Drink lots of water. It was fun tonight! You'll probably regret it in the morning.

Dieter

Ferdi yawned, and tried to piece together last night's events. There was a bar with blue lights. There was a girl holding him up. There was a restaurant, there was wine, the jingle of a cimbalom. A snake woman. Then? He rubbed his unshaven face, drank some water, put some more on to boil for coffee. Then it struck him. He had been exposed. He had walked up on a stage in front of people, and he had played the piano. One of his own pieces, no less. Embarrassment rose in him and for a crazy moment he considered running away instead of having to hear Dieter calling him 'Mozart' again.

When he stepped out into the hallway on his way to the bathroom, he came face to face with Miss Ilona who hovered by her front door, smoking a cigarette. In the daylight she was almost mellow. She smirked at him.

'Someone had a late night.'

'Good morning, Miss Ilona.'

'Your friends woke me up when they were carrying you upstairs.'

'I'm sorry about that.'

'It's all right. The big German fellow offered me a smoke.'

He realised that she wanted to tell him something more and waited, shivering in his T-shirt, his towel slung over his shoulder.

‘You didn’t fix your mailbox, Mr Molnar.’ She dug round her pocket and his heart jumped, but she only took out a handkerchief and wiped her nose with it.

‘I’ll get on it. Nothing else came for me?’

‘No. But someone rang for you.’

‘Rang?’

‘At the caretaker’s desk, this morning. You should get a phone line, if you can.’

‘What did they say?’

‘Oh, Mr Polyak said they asked for you, but he thought you were out. It was this morning.’

‘Did they leave a name?’

She extinguished her cigarette in a plastic cup on the floor and shook her head.

He arrived at work just as Petar was parking the truck. Erzsi was setting up the dining room. The boy threw him a strange look but said nothing. Ferdi held the door open and Petar lingered, undecided, then walked past him with a scowl. Ferdi waited until the boy climbed out again.

‘Did I upset you the other day?’

Petar scoffed and threw the pork over his shoulder. This time, his left ear and the hair on his temple were both lightly coated with dried animal blood. Ferdi remained standing by the entrance so Petar had to walk round him.

‘You’re a funny one,’ he muttered.

That night as he walked home, exhausted, lights caught his eye – light beams from the glass loft of an abandoned art-nouveau building by the riverside, flashing in arbitrary motions and drawing whirling patterns in the night fog. Ferdi stood and watched, yawning. His mind slowly emptied. Time relaxed and swashed against his feet like water. When he blinked and

resurfaced, he had no idea how long he had been there. The lights had disappeared. There was a strange echo in his ears, as if someone had called his name, and he peered into the night. A shadow stood across the street, merging against a wall. Ferdi couldn't see but sensed that he was being watched. He shifted a little, and the figure moved too.

They stared at each other. Ferdi stood up slowly, and the figure stepped back. He moved forward to cross the street but a couple of cars passed, and when he looked again the figure had disappeared.

He tightened his scarf and headed home, keeping his gaze straight ahead. People passed him, taking no interest. The fog made his eyes smart. Through the night hum he could make out the sound of the footsteps around him: of high heels, of worn rubber soles and crisp new shoes; purposeful or lazy, aimless, shuffling, scraping, hurried, uneven, limping. And among them the slow, long paces of quiet soles, whose rhythm matched his own.

He slowed down. The footsteps slowed too. He turned, pretending to check the name of the street, and something in the corner of his eye darted away. He kept walking. When he finally arrived home and frantically unlocked the front door, the street behind him was empty.

