# Prologue

*He clenches and unclenches his fist, takes a mouthful of lukewarm water from the bottle, and then lowers his eye to the sight. Every inch of the door’s flaky paintwork is familiar from a week watching, and waiting. Not long now.*

*At precisely 07:45 the door opens and the old man steps out. He turns inwards exposing his back to the street, as is his habit. There is a pop, the butt of the rifle kicks against his shoulder, and his victim falls face down into the open doorway.*

*He puts the spent firearm on the back seat, and drives off.*

*Right onto Route 38 towards* *Szabolcs following the road as it cuts a swathe through the national park. The park is a safe haven for a variety of bird and animal life, for locals seeking escape from the madding crowds, and for him also? He checks the rear-view mirror. No one’s following and, as far as he can tell, the road ahead is clear.*

*He cruises, keeping to the speed limit until he reaches Lake Tisza, home to the* *hydroelectric plant that powers the region’s electricity and much of its economy. He passes the main entrance and parks out of sight. Satisfied the car is secure he lights a cigarette and then joins the boardwalk that stretches out across the lake. Mist shrouds the lake so to anyone watching it would appear he's walking on water.*

*At the end of the walkway a man is waiting. His grey hair mingles with the mist giving him a ghostly air. By comparison, his visitor casts a dark shadow in black combat trousers, black shirt and cap. The only clue to his identity is the* *red lion on his lapel.*

*“Is it done?” asks the ghost.*

*Silently, the* *killer places an empty shell casing into the man’s open palm then he turns, lights another cigarette and glides back across the lake.*

# Chapter One: A council of war

There’s a whistling from the corner of the room, a wheee like a balloon letting out air. Propelled from his chair, Pops rushes to the stove, takes the kettle from the ring, and the whistling stops. He pours water into the waiting mugs, removes both teabags and then carries the teas to the table. One mug is for him, the other for *nagyi*. She blows at the steam, takes a sip, puts down the tea and sighs. Pops grins, rips a chunk from the loaf and sprays crumbs across the table. Florica makes a clicking noise with her tongue.

The routine is comforting. Familiar. His grandparents’ traditional tea dance, mother’s gentle scolding as she busies herself in the sidelines. Years from now this is how he'll remember her, fingers stained orange from the paprika, knife rattling across the chopping board, meat sizzling in the pan.

“Breakfast, Yoska,” she says.

He isn’t hungry but cuts some bread, dips it in the fat and then rolls it around and around in his mouth until it becomes a soft doughy ball, and then he swallows hard.

“*Tsk.* Have you finished your homework?" his mum asks.

"Of course, he has, haven’t you Yoska?"

“Yes Pops, all done.”

“Right hurry up, or you’ll be late.”

"Indeed,” says Pops. “You mustn’t keep the lady waiting."

Blood rushes to Yoska’s cheeks. He kisses his mother goodbye and then steps out onto Forget-me-not Street where Syeira is – as his grandfather had predicted – waiting. She’s wearing a thin cotton blouse and a long flowing skirt. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail. The ponytail is tucked in under her rucksack, which bulges with books. Yoska doesn’t offer to carry it for her, he knows better than to do that.

“Morning, Yoska,” she says.

“Hi. Have you been here long?”

“No. I just got here.”

Yoska looks around. The street is quiet. Quiet*.* But not deserted.Somewhere in the early morning shadows, he’s waiting. They’ve barely started walking when he yells out. Footsteps thump against the pavement edging closer and closer until Yoska can feel the breathy shallows on the back of his neck. Bavol rushes past and stops on the pavement in front of them, hops excitedly from one foot to another, a regular *Rumplestiltskin*.

“Syeira”, says Bavol, “Why didn’t you wait? I’ll walk you to school, anytime.”

“But you aren’t going to school.”

“It’s a waste of time.”

“Yoska doesn’t think so and he’s happy to walk with me.”

Bavol pinches Yoska’s bicep, which blanches and then turns red.

“Some protection he is,” says Bavol.

Yoska’s arms, like the rest of his body, are skinny and weak whereas Bavol’s are muscular, his shoulders broad from a year working at the factory. Above his top lip is a thin moustache, which Syeira says looks as if he’s drawn it on with his mother’s eyeliner but is, in fact, real. However, the biggest change is to his eyes, they look like the other men’s, like a horse whose spirit has been broken. In time he fears he will break hers, too.

“I don't *need* protection,” Syeira says.

Bavol steps aside to let her pass. Yoska follows. He feels Bavol’s eyes watching them to the end of the street and so waits until they turn the corner before rubbing his arm.

“Does it hurt?” Syeira asks.

“A little.”

“You shouldn’t let him treat you like that.”

“I’m sorry, I should have said something.”

 “Never mind,” she says. “C’mon. We’re going to be late.”

Syeira links her arm through Yoska’s, and together they walk the remaining ten minutes to Ady Street. She chatters as they go about her homework, and her grandfather who hasn’t been well. She doesn't mention Bavol, again, and so nor does he.

Eventually, they reach school, a grand, octagonal building with a roof shaped like a concertina hat, the type you see chinamen wearing in the movies. The house used to belong to a wealthy family called Vay. The children take the servants’ entrance round back where two whitewashed buildings sit at right angles to the main building, added long after the former owners had gone. In one of these is the children’s classroom.

Syeira places her rucksack on the teacher’s desk at the front of class, and rummages for her homework book, which she rests on the corner. Yoska puts his book on top of it, and they take their seats near the far left-hand side of the room. She chooses the seat by the window, Yoska the one directly across the row from her.

Soon afterwards, the door opens and their teacher walks in.

“Good morning,” says Kisné Fazekas. “One day, I’ll beat you to class and now, you’ll excuse me while I prepare?”

Of all the teachers they’ve had, he likes Kisné Fazekas the best. While the other teacher hide behind their desks reading staccato from textbooks, she talks without notes, rushing up and down between the rows of desks, and waving her hands wildly, and she likes questions, lots of questions. But the best thing is when she teaches you about the past, it's as if you were there. *Is that why he’s so nervous about the lesson?*

Outside, the quadrant is filling up fast. The younger children chase each other across the grass while on the sidelines, Yoska and Syeira’s classmates cluster in groups sharing stories that the two of them will never get to hear. A bell rings, and the children scatter towards their classes. The bread ball flips somersaults in Yoska’s stomach.

“Settle down please…” says Kisné Fazekas. “Today, we’re continuing our studies of Nazi Germany and will be learning about life in the concentration camps. This is a difficult topic and one that I expect you all to approach with the proper respect. And so, what were the socio-economic factors leading to the Nazi’s rise to power?”

Zsófia's hand shoots up.

“The depression, miss.”

“Yes. The depression was definitely a key factor. The effect of the *Wall Street Crash* on Germany was dire. The German banking system collapsed, and unemployment soared, but what has that got to do with Hitler and the Nazis? Yes, Kristóf…”

“Um… Hitler blamed the government for the depression…”

“You’re referring to the *Weimar Republic*, yes – go on.”

“Yeah well, Hitler blamed the republic, for signing the Treaty of Versailles.”

“You’re right. Hitler used the treaty to help justify his concept of *Lebensraum* as set out in his autobiography, that biography was called…Andrzej..."

“Mein Kampf, miss.”

“Correct. The title, which means *My Struggle*, is well known, but did you know that Hitler wrote two volumes of Mein Kampf? It is the second of these two volumes that concerns us. It is in this that Hitler ranks people based on their appearance. The ‘superior’ German man has fair skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes; he dubs them Aryan. He also describes an inferior race or *Untermenschen*; Jews, Czechs, Poles...”

“Sorry miss...” Andrzej again, “…but weren't the *gypsies* part of the underclass.”

He casts a sideways glance at Syeira and Yoska.

“You’re right. In *Hitler’s eyes*, the Roma were also deemed inferior. There were others, too, people with mental and physical disabilities…”

“But not us. Hungary was Hitler’s ally.”

Now it's Syeira’s hand that shoots up. Yoska glowers, but she ignores him.

“Did you want to ask a question, Syeira?” Kisné Fazekas asks.

“Not really, just checking *the facts*. Weren’t the Jews and the Roma German and Hungarian so actually, Hitler *was* killing his people, and those of his allies?”

“They were hardly *his people*,” says Andrzej.

Kisné Fazekas raises her hand, a sign for them to be silent.

“You are right, Syeira, the Nazis persecuted German and Hungarian Roma, and Jews and while some denied their Roma or Jewish heritage, a handful was defiant. Equally, there were German and Hungarian people who stood up to the Nazis offering shelter to the persecuted. Others sold out their neighbours out of fear. After the war ended the tables turned and those informers faced prosecution.”

“*Cowards*,” whispers Yoska.

“Easy for us to say that, Yoska, but for people living in Nazi Germany things were not as simple. Let me tell you a story, and today I don’t want any interruptions. Imagine…

“…It is 1944. Hitler's army is on the defensive. His elite military, the *Waffen-SS* has suffered heavy losses. The Nazis conscript men to the SS including some Hungarians. *One of those men was my father*."

Kisné Fazekas stands at the front of the class, arms behind her back, hands resting on the desk. She looks out daring someone to jump in.

No one says a word.

"As the war ends my father is captured by the Russians who beat him and then send him to the Gulag. He was only seventeen. Several years later we pick up the story, here, in Tiszalök. The Russians release the Danube Swabians but still they aren’t free. *Mátyás Rakosi[[1]](#endnote-1)*, the Stalinist prime minister for Hungary, puts them in a punishment camp[[2]](#endnote-2).

“They are used as slave labour to build the dam and the hydroelectric plant. For five years they work dawn to dusk, they are beaten, interrogated and placed in irons. It is revenge for the communists who died in the camps.”

Kisné Fazekas pauses and stares out onto the quadrant.

“Miss…” asks Syeira, “your father. What happened to him?”

“The last prisoners from Tiszalök were released in 1953[[3]](#endnote-3). My father came home but there were many who wouldn't forgive him for what he'd done, and so when my mother fell pregnant with me they moved away. My father died soon afterwards. The problem wasn't that others wouldn't forgive him, it was that he couldn't forgive himself."

“But you came back?”

“Yes, Syeira. I came back. I wanted to visit the punishment camp where the Russians held him prisoner. We all have stories to tell. They are what make us who we are, they connect us and together they form a broader world history.”

She pauses again. Thoughtful, and still, but it is only for a second. Then she jolts, picks up her pen from the table scribbles on the board, and then turns to face the class.

“Your homework for this weekend,” she says. “Each of you will research an historical story, but think about how it relates directly to your own personal history. And now, I think it is time for some math…”

Dust kicks up from the road and the exhaust belches out smoke. Bersch wipes the sweat from his brow and gently caresses the steering wheel. Like a lover, he's blind to the car’s faults; the holes in the bodywork and a suspension that bounces uncomfortably like a mattress needing to be re-sprung. Despite his six-foot frame being crammed into the back seat, Bavol is oblivious, fast asleep. Jeno rides upfront alongside Bersch.

“How about some music?” Bersch asks.

“You fixed the radio?”

“Not me. Bavol. He's good with electronics.”

Bersch pushes the button and the radio crackles. Eventually, he settles on a local radio station and turns the volume up above the rattle of the windows.

“They could use Bavol's skills at work," Jeno says.

"What?"

"Bavol's electronics skills, they could use them at the factory."

"Hah! As if they would trust us with anything like that," Bersch says. “But thank you. And, Yoska? Is he still at school?"

“Yes.”

“But, *why* Jeno?”

“To get an education.”

“At Ady Street?”

“Yes, at Ady Street. He likes it,”

“Really?”

“Things are different now.”

Not so long ago, Roma children were kept separate from mainstream schools, often being placed with those who had ‘special needs’. When the local council pushed for so-called integration, there were protests from non-Roma parents. Some wrote letters; others blockaded the entrance, spat at their children’s feet. If it was meant to deter them, it backfired. Those who had previously been cynical about the merits of mainstream education sent their kids in defiance. *Bersch even sent Bavol for a time*.

After a few months, Roma children began to drop out. It wasn’t long before only a handful was running the gauntlet at the gates. Bavol started work at the factory. The protestors left; by then there were only two Roma children left.

“Different, how? They’ll still wipe their boots on him. He could be earning now, helping you to support the family. Speaking of which, how *is* Krisztián?”

His grandson’s schooling is controversial but he’d rather discuss that than his son. Bersch seems to revel in Krisztián’s failings, of which there are many.

Jeno is still considering his answer when Bavol sits up and yells.

"Turn it up...The radio, turn it up."

Between the eighties soft rock and advertisements, the station plays half hourly news bulletins. One of these has captured Bavol’s attention. Bersch turns the dial as high as it will go and the three of them fall silent.

*"…A father and his son have been injured in a fire. The 28-year-old Roma man and his five-year-old son were at home in Tatárszentgyörgy when the fire began. It's not yet clear how it started..."*

"Not clear. Pah," Bersch says.

"Shhh, listen."

Bersch pulls the Lada over to the side of the road and cuts the engine.

 *“…The injured haven't yet been named. Police are not currently linking this to a previous incident in Alsózsolca…”*

“Bastards," says Bavol.

“It *could* have been an accident,” says Jeno.

“Accident. Pah. Someone set fire to their house, just like the others.”

"He’s right,” says Bersch. It's time we did something.”

“Violence, you mean? No good can come of that?”

“So we do nothing?” says Bersch.

“Mihaly will discuss our options this evening,” says Jeno.

“For all the good that will do,” says Bavol.

“Show some respect,” says Bersch… “Especially if…”

“If what?” Jeno asks.

“Nothing,” says Bersch. “We’d better hurry up or we’ll be late.”

He flicks the ignition and the car stutters back to life.



After math and then English it is break time. The others rush to the quadrant to catch up with friends or to have a kick-about. Yoska hangs back preferring to stay in the classroom but Kisné Fazekas ushers them outside to 'get some air'.

She stops Syeira as she passes the front desk.

"Good work this morning," she says.

“Thanks, Miss.” Syeira pauses. “I enjoyed hearing about your father.”

Once they’re outside, Syeira heads for a small clump of trees on the far side of the quadrant. She sits. And then opens her bag to remove a box of charcoals and a sketchbook. She starts sketching the outline of the old building, with its hat. She’s drawn it numerous times before, but claims she’s never got it quite right.

Syeira has books full of drawings of local landmarks, the church and *Forget me not street*. There are others, too, filled with buildings drawn from her imagination. It’s why she works so hard at math; architects need to know about angles and measurements. He prefers history and dreams that one day he’ll study it at Budapest University.

Syeira reaches into her bag, takes out two apples, and hands one to Yoska.

“Did you really enjoy hearing about Kisné Fazekas’ father,” he asks.

“Yes. Didn't you?”

“Her father was in *The SS*.”

Syeira takes a bite of her apple, and then replies.

“Yes but you heard what she said, the Nazis *forced* him to sign up.”

"Ooh, are you talking about Kisné Fazekas?"

They look up to find Andrzej looming over them. His ‘best friend’ Benjamin is with him; he leans down and plucks the apple from Syeira’s hand.

“I'm impressed,” says Benjamin. “I'd never have guessed her father was a war hero.”

Syeira stands and snatches the apple back. She takes a bite from the exact same spot Benjamin has just slavered over. Her eyes meet his.

“Her father was no hero. The shame of what he'd done killed him,” she says.

“Yes that part of the story did let him down, rather,” says Andrzej.

He grins at Benjamin, seeking approval. Benjamin is popular with everyone in the class and only let Andrzej hang out with them, because of who his father is. Andrzej knows it and so takes every opportunity to impress; it’s when he's at his most dangerous. Syeira shouldn't goad him, but it isn’t like her to back down.

“You don’t think killing millions of innocent people, is something to be ashamed of?”

“Depends on your definition of *innocent*,” says Benjamin.

He plucks the apple core from Syeira’s hand, takes another bite, and then walks off with Andzrej snapping at his heels. Syeira packs the sketchbook away, picks up her bag and rests her hand on Yoska’s arm. It burns, still sore from his encounter with Bavol. Silently, he hands back his untouched apple and follows her back to class.

Apart from the bubbling pan, there’s silence in the kitchen. Jeno went to work, Eva has retired to their bedroom, and Yoska is at school. There’s a dull ache in her chest as there is every day her son leaves. It is a glimpse of the day when he will leave for good.

She flicks on the radio to fill the void.

*Police have confirmed the identities of a father and son killed in a recent attack….*

She turns the heat down under the guylás, turns the radio up.

*Róbert Csorba and his four-year-old son Robika died after a fire broke out at their home in Tatárszentgyörgy. Police believe an improper, illegal connection to the power grid caused a short circuit, which led to the fire*[[4]](#endnote-4)*.*

Fear grips her chest and her legs buckle. She grips the worktop and as she does her fingertips brush the edge of the drawer. They tingle, at the thought of what’s inside. She glances at the clock – there’s the *csipetke* to make – but she has time. Inside the drawer is a red velvet cloth bound with gold rope. She takes is to the table, sits, and then loosens the knot to reveal the cards inside. The cards were a gift from her mother years ago and the corners are now well worn but she’d never change them.

She holds them in her palm, meditates for a few minutes. She shuffles the deck and then places a card face up on the table positions it as the first in what will be a five-horseshoe-spread. The first card is the *wheel of* fortune, one of the major arcana, and a card that appears in her readings often.

The card’s lesson is that there will always be good, and bad times, for without the bad – how can we appreciate the good? Positioned here in the spread, the card represents the ‘here and now’. It makes sense. The news story might claim that the fire started accidentally but she suspects otherwise, it is too much of a coincidence.

Uncertainty lies ahead.

She turns over another card. It is the *three of pentacles*, reversed. This suggests people acting in competition with each other, tension and a possible power struggle. The next card is *The Fool*. Upright. It denotes a time of renewal. Normally, she’d welcome this card but here beside the reversed three of pentacles…The pentacles suggest disharmony, The Fool a possible challenge to the status quo, *but from where?*

She deals again revealing *the three of cups*. It suggests thinking with the heart, not the head, and that emotions are running high. But all is not lost. Many a time, she has seen a reading turn on the final card. *The Hanged Man*, another of the major arcana, which reflects a need to suspend decisions. It’s what Jeno and Mihaly want, but there are others who are becoming impatient…

A noise from upstairs interrupts her thoughts.

She sweeps up the cards, taps the deck on the table and secures the cloth with the golden thread. She puts it in the drawer and returns to the stove just as Krisztián enters.

“Morning,” she says.

She has her back to him and doesn’t turn. Until she does, she can imagine the man she married. Hair loose, hanging in ringlets at the base of his neck, well-trimmed beard, and eyes that are the colour of the Mediterranean and every bit as inviting.

“*Mmpf*. What’s for breakfast?”

She turns and the spell is broken. Krisztián sits slumped at the kitchen table, head in his hands, there are dark circles under his eyes and his face is gaunt so that he appears older than his years. He’s wearing a grubby cotton shirt with a granddad collar, dark denim jeans with holes in the knees. The legs are frayed and covered in mud.

“There’s bread on the table,” she says.

He looks at the loaf but doesn't touch it. Krisztián's physique has always been slim but he was once muscular and strong. She remembers burying herself in his chest, muscular arms wrapped around her, feeling safe. Now his collarbone juts above the shirt collar, and the last time he held her? She can’t recall.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Cooking.”

“Cooking what?”

“Guláys and csipetke.”

“Guláys! How did you pay for the beef?”

“It’s for the meeting. Everyone chipped in, well most people have.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing…I didn’t mean anything.”

“I *know* what you think,” he says.

“So you can read minds now,” says Florica.

 “I don’t need to,” he says.

This is how their conversations go these days. He thinks she means the factory, but she knows he could be so much more if only he could lay his demons to rest.

“Will you be at the meeting tonight?” Florica asks.

“Perhaps.”

“Your father would want you to be there.”

“You think.”

“I *know*. He’ll need your support; it’s going to be a tough meeting.”

“Tough how?”

“There’s a fire. It was just on the radio.”

“Where?”

“Tatárszentgyörgy.”

“How many?” asks Krisztián.

“A father and his son, there may be more.”

He goes to the back door and picks up his boots. Mud from the soles sprays onto the stone floor as he pulls them on. He picks up his coat and walks out.



Krisztián walks out of town following the river northwest towards the floodplains. He walks for almost an hour across the fields. They are the same fields he dreamt he rode across, last night. He rode bareback on a draught horse; bay and white, and 17 hands high. Galloping through freshly ploughed fields, the air tasted sweet like *pálinka*.

Krisztián walks on until he reaches a large clearing; poplar is prized timber, and someone has felled the trees and sold them on. At the edge of the clearing sits a mature tree with a large decay cavity. The entrance to the hole is large enough for Krisztián to reach his hands inside. He feels around until his fingers hit plastic.

 He pulls out a large black bag inside which is a hoe, a small trowel and some gloves. Krisztián pulls on the gloves, picks up the hoe and continues to dig one of several deep furrows in the exposed earth. It is hard work and in places he has to cut around the roots the loggers have left behind. There he works on his knees digging with the trowel.

By lunchtime, his shirt is sticking uncomfortably to his back, and he strips bare to his waist. Earth clings to the sweat on his palms. He rubs them on his jeans as he walks down to the river where he refills his water bottle, drains it, and then fills it again. Thirst quenched he lies on the bank and peers into the river looking for a tell-tale hole, sinks his arm into the icy cold water but he doesn’t flinch, not wishing to alert his prey.

*Yes.*

*It’s there.*

In one smooth movement, he reaches into the hole and gently rubs the belly of an unsuspecting Tench. The temptation is to grasp at it, but experience has taught him otherwise. He waits for the fish to relax, and then he slides it out of the hole and flips it onto the bank. The fish fights for breath. Krisztián takes a rock and knocks it on the head. He sits for a second, in respectful silence, and then he guts the fish with a knife. He carries his prize to the patch of ground he’s been working on. Clearing the ground means removing detritus shed from the felled poplar trees, and so he has a ready-made pile of kindling. He takes a box of matches from the bag and soon has a healthy fire.

While the fish cooks, he works on, walking up and down the furrows sowing seeds. Spring is an optimum time for planting, and he’s confident they’ll grow well in the moist ground. Meanwhile, the fish smells good. He returns to the fire, pulls it out of the ashes, and then scrapes the flesh onto a carrier bag. He’s hungry and takes two large mouthfuls, washed down with fresh river water.

The Tench is silky soft with a muddy taste, which isn’t entirely unpleasant.

Krisztián pauses, feeling guilty about his comment about the guylás. He doesn’t begrudge them the meal, merely wishes he’d contributed to it. He’d like to take some of the fish home but then he would have to explain what he has been doing all day; besides it’s too far and the fish would be beyond its best by the time he returned home. He finishes eating and buries the remains away from where he’s sown his seeds.

Finished for the day, he is in no hurry to get home*.*

*For what;* the council, and Bersch lording it over him. That he can handle, but his father rushing to his defence… He puts the tools back in the plastic bag and puts it in the tree cavity, reaches deep inside removes a bottle, pops the cork and takes a long swig...



Florica hears the children before they come through the door. Yoska’s voice is low and serious. Syeira’s is lighter and more carefree, but not frivolous, never that.

“Hey, you two. How was school?”

“Fine,” says Syeira.

Leaving her rucksack at the door, she kisses Florica’s cheek.

“And you, Yoska, did you have a good day?”

He puts his bag on the floor with Syeira’s and sits at the table. Like his father he is secretive and distant, as if the school is a part of his life, he’s keeping from her.

“We had history,” Syeira says.

“Your favourite, Yoska.”

That much she does know.

“I guess.”

“You guess?”

“We’re doing the war.”

“The camps,” says Syeira, “Kisné Fazekas told us this amazing story. Did you know her father was conscripted by the Nazis at the end of the Second World War?”

“I did.”

“You *knew*,” says Yoska.

Florica nods. Kisné Fazekas visited some of the Roma families when she first came to Tiszalök. Florica admired her bravery, and her humility, even as a young girl as she was then. She wasn’t looking for forgiveness, merely for answers. Florica had read her cards for her and, later, the teacher supported the move to send Roma children to Ady Street.

“You’re disappointed.”

His mother’s right. He *is* disappointed in his teacher. He’s looked up to her for so long, it’s a shock to find out that her father was a Nazi, and for her to willingly tell the story in class. He’s not sure what to make of it. It is made worse by the fact that Andzrej and Benjamin seemed to look up to her more because of it.

“It’s not *her* fault,” says Syeira.

Yoska shrugs.

 “You do blame her father,” says Florica. “Oh Yoska, one day you’ll realize that life is more complicated than that.”

 When he doesn’t reply, Florica returns to the stove. Syeira offers to help.

“Thank you,” says Florica “but there isn’t much left to do...”

A knock at the door interrupts them. As Florica is busy, Syeira opens it. Her face breaks into a broad smile. She steps back from the door to welcome Aishe, her mother. As they embrace, she thinks what a beautiful young woman Syeira has become. Black hair shiny like freshly laid tarmac, skin paler than most.

She is like the Pica, clever and inquisitive.

“Aishe,” Florica says, “she looks more like you every day.”

“*Tsk*. My hair is grey, like an old witch.”

“You’re more beautiful than ever, and you know it. Can I get you something? A tea.”

“Thank you,” says Aishe.

“Yoska, why don’t you go upstairs and change?”

“Change?”

“Yes. The council is coming.”

Her son might be too young to attend the council meeting but as they’re hosting, she’s keen to make sure that he looks presentable. With Krisztián absent, and Jeno not yet home, *he* is the man of the house. Dutifully he heads through a door that leads upstairs. Left alone, Syeira picks up her bag, sketchbook, pencils, ruler and a setsquare, sits at the table and immerses herself in her drawing.

“She’ll go far, that one,” Florica whispers.

“You think.”

“I *know*. She’s determined, and besides life is different for her than for us.”

“Not *so* different.”

“You think she should settle for marriage,” says Florica.

“I would hardly call it settling,” says Aishe. “After all, he has a job to provide for her.”

She means Bavol to whom Syeira is *promised* by virtue of the dowry Bersch has paid to her parents. With Django - Syeira’s father - out of work they willingly accepted. The money rather than concern for their daughter’s future is behind the union, but it’s the wrong match; the cards say so, and Syeira knows it, too.

“Is Django on his way?” she asks.

“Yes, he was just behind…”

“Did I hear my name?”

 Aishe’s husband walks in with Tem, his son, and Syeira’s younger brother.

“Are the others here?” he asks.

“Jeno, Bavol, and Bersch are still on their way back from the factory. But, where are Mihaly and Jofranka? I thought they’d be with you…”

Django and Aishe live with her parents. As head of the council it is vital Mihaly is present for the meeting. Given he hasn’t been well, she’d have expected the others to have waited for them to make sure he arrives safe and sound.

“They’re not coming,” says Django.

“Grandfather. Is he OK?”

Syeira looks up from her drawing, genuine concern on her face.

“His hips are stiff, but he is well enough,” says Aishe.

“Indeed, you won’t be getting rid of me yet.”

“Grandfather!”

Syeira leaps up from the table and rushes into her grandfathers’ arms.

“Careful child. You will be the death of me.”

He’s laughing, and the embrace has taken years off him. It warms Florica’s heart to see the special bond that exists between them.

“We thought you couldn’t make it,” says Django.

“I caught the bus,” he says.

“*We* caught the bus,” says Jofranka, who’s close behind.

“Something smells delicious.”

“You and your stomach,” Jofranka teases, “Mihaly’s right, though.”

“It’s nothing special,” says Florica, “just guylás and csipetke.”

“Hah! Mum’s guylás is the best.”

Yoska has changed and run a comb through his hair. Beneath his floppy fringe, he has his father’s eyes; green like salt water but tinged with sadness.

“We can eat as soon as the others arrive,” she says.

“Did someone say food?”

Her father-in-law, like her, loves nothing more than a full house. He kisses Aishe, shakes hands with Django, and embraces Mihaly. The cousins’ two families spent several years travelling together when they were younger and so they are as close as brothers. Closer perhaps, without the spectre of sibling rivalry hanging over them.

“Cousin Mihaly. I am so glad you’re here.”

“It’s good to see you, Jeno. Tough day?”

“No more than usual.”

“Good. Now hurry and get clean and we can sample some of your daughter-in-law’s cooking. I think we’ll need our strength for this evening’s meeting.”

They’re interrupted as Bavol and Bersch blast in. Bavol rushes to Syeira’s side where he places a proprietary hand on her shoulder. The other he extends to Mihaly who shakes it without enthusiasm. Syeira edges closer to her grandfather’s side.

“That is no way to greet your husband-to-be,” Bersch says.

“He’s making my blouse dirty,” Syeira says.

“I’ll fetch you both some towels,” says Florica. “So you can clean up.”

“Yes,” says Mihaly. “Best clean up and then we can eat.”

Bavol does as he’s told but it’s clear he isn’t pleased.



The guylás warms Jeno’s stomach. It is piping hot with just the right amount of heat from the paprika. The rich sauce has soaked into the csipetke, which is not too heavy. Florica has been generous with the meat, which is sumptuous and chews easily.

The children stand, leaning against the kitchen worktop, eating their goulash from metal bowls. Yoska is pressed into the corner; Syeira is between him and Tem. The older family members sit at the table. Eva is at his side, but there’s a telltale gap between her and Florica. No one mentions Krisztián’s absence. Florica wrings her hands beneath the table. Gently he pats her knee and she takes a mouthful of the food to please him.

He waits until everyone’s finished and then taps his bowl for silence.

“I know we’re grateful for the delicious food we’ve shared but now we must leave.”

The other men rise to follow. Bavol puts his bowl down on the kitchen worktop and makes to join the others in the back room.

“Bavol is joining us?” Jeno asks.

If he is, it is news to him – and by the look on his cousin’s face – to Mihaly, also. There are no set rules but generally the men don’t attend council meeting until they are fifteen, and Bavol has over a year to go. It needs to be discussed.

“I think Bavol has *earned* his right to be heard,” says Bersch.

“Because he’s working, you mean,” says Django.

“Yes.”

“Would you exclude me from discussions?”

“That’s different.”

“Because I’m older.”

“Yes.”

“Enough,” says Mihaly. “Bavol, you are welcome to join us but only if we extend the invitation to Yoska, and to Tem. Are we all agreed?”

“Alright,” says Bersch.

Yoska hangs back, glances in his mother’s direction. He’s hoping that she’ll rescue him, ask him to help with the clearing up. He can think of all sorts of chores he’d rather do than follow Bavol and Tem to the meeting. But, his mother says nothing and so reluctantly he follows the others through to the back room.

The room is small. There’s a rusting log burner with a long black chimney. Nagyi lit the fire earlier but the flames are already dwindling, and there are no more logs left. On the far side of the room is a worn blue sofa. Mihaly eases himself down using his stick. Jeno sits to his left, Django to his right. Bersch sits at the end with Bavol.

There’s no more room and so Tem and Yoska sit on the floor, facing the others. Tem sits at the end of the sofa closest to Bavol. Yoska sits as close to the fire as he dare and still he shivers. The stone floor is cold, and he has the same uneasy feeling as when he’s waiting for the other children to come to class.

Guylás weighs heavy in his stomach and the paprika burns his throat.

“Welcome…” says Mihaly. “Now that we’re all here, we can start. For those of you are new, we should explain what happens. Jeno, perhaps you could…?”

“*I* would be happy to explain, father,” Django interrupts.

“Fine… Django.”

“As you *are* here, there are a few *rules* you must *respect*,” says Django. “We are here to discuss *important matters*. If you want to say something tell me, Bersch, Mihaly, or Jeno and *as senior members* of the group we’ll raise it. Everyone may speak but raise your hand, first. When everyone has finished our aim is to reach a decision that all of us agree on before we act. Where we can’t, well…”

Django’s voice trails off.

“…where there is no agreement the Council head decides,” continues Jeno.

For now that council head is Mihaly, and has been for as long as Yoska can remember, but he might not be well enough to carry on. What then? He’s heard mother and Eva talking about it when they thought he wasn’t listening. As Mihaly’s son, Django thinks he should take over. Bersch thinks it should be *him* given that his father, and Mihaly’s *older* brother, led the council before he died.

Mihaly wants to defer to Jeno in the interim. He trusts him but that would position Krisztián as his successor, and there aren’t many who think that’s a good idea. Nevertheless, he wishes his father were here for his first council meeting.

 “And so…” says Mihaly. “I am sure that by now everyone has heard the sad news from Tatárszentgyörgy concerning the Csorbas. For those who may not, they are brothers from our community who died this morning. Bersch, as it was you who raised it, perhaps you would like to start?”

“Of course,” Bersch, says. “You might have heard the updated version of *the story*. This says that the fire started because the Csorba’s had make an *illegal* connection from their house to the national grid. This reinforces the *lies* spread by the *Jobbik* party about ‘gypsy crime’ – now we are stealing their electricity...

“Should we believe these lies? Do *you* believe these lies? I for one, do not, for it is far more likely that this is another racist attack against our people. We know ‘unknown assailants’ have thrown Molotov cocktails at the roofs of our brothers, and sisters; and then shot them down like dogs as they made their escape.

“And so my question is what are we going to do about it?”

 “We could be there in a couple of hours in your car,” says Bavol.

He looks at his father who nods approvingly.

“Be there?” says Mihaly. “Why do you wish to go there?”

“To find the people who killed the Csorbas,” Bersch says.

“And if you find them. What then?” Jeno asks.

“We will make sure that justice is done,” says Bersch.

“Justice,” says Mihaly. “What form of justice?”

His voice is tinged with anger and an uncomfortable silence falls over the room. Finally, it is Yoska’s grandfather who breaks it.

“Have you forgotten *Olaszliszka*?” he says.

Yoska is too young to remember but his grandfather speaks of it often. A couple of years ago Hungarian teacher was driving through the town and a Roma girl ran out in front of him. Word spread that he’d killed her and some local Roma men surrounded the car and beat him to death. His own children watched. It was only later hat it emerged that he hadn’t even hit the girl much less killed her.

 “No,” says Bersch, “but that was a misunderstanding. How many of our people have they killed since? The shooting in *Galgagyork* in 2008; in September 2008, bombs thrown in *Nyíradony* and *Tarnabod*; two dead in *Nagycsécs*; in *Alsózsolca*, two more and now the Csorbas. Have we not paid the price for our mistake?”

“I agree,” says Django. “The time for talking is over.”

“No,” says Mihaly. Nothing good can come from *revenge*. I agree that there is a need for *justice* and to that end the police *are* investigating.”

“The police don’t care about us,” Django says.

“That isn’t true,” says Mihaly. “I heard Chief Bencze speaking earlier today. He has over 100 men and women looking to find those responsible.”

“A hundred people. *Pah!* You believe him?” says Django.

“Lies,” says Bavol.

For once Yoska agrees with Bavol, and without thinking, he raises his hand.

 “Yoska,” says Jeno, clearly surprised.

“At school today…”

“*Pah!* What’s school got to do with anything?”

“You’ve had your say Bavol,” says Mihaly. “Now let Yoska speak,”

“Yes, I for one am keen to hear what he has to say.”

“Krisztián,” says Bersch. “How good of you to join us.”

His father stands in front of them; boots caked with soil, as are his trousers, and his hands. He smells of stale pálinka and rotten fish?

“Bavol make some room,” says Mihaly.

Reluctantly, Bavol moves to the floor, where he sits next to Yoska; too close for comfort, but he daren’t move. Instead, he watches his father stagger forward and collapse on the sofa. Bersch shuffles away from him. To think, earlier he had wished his father were there for his first meeting, now he is embarrassed, and ashamed.

“Yoska, you were about to say,” says Mihaly.

 “We’re studying the war,” he says, “the *second world war*. The Nazis killed tens of thousands of Roma and people did nothing about it. My teacher’s father worked in a camp near here. Anyway, I was thinking about it while you were talking about the Csorbas. All that time and nothing’s really changed…”

 “*Stöpszli* has a point,” interrupts Bavol. “They’re still killing us off, one-by-one.”

“I agree,” says Bersch. “What happened in Olaszliszka wasn’t our fault.”

“We *killed* an *innocent* man in *cold blood*,” says Jeno.

“But we didn’t *know* he was innocent.”

“His *children* watched him die….” says Jeno.

“There were many innocent Roma in the camps who watched their loved ones go to the furnaces and never return,” says Krisztián.

His grandfather smiles looks to his grandson and then the ashes of the fire.

“How long ago was that, Yoska?” he asks.

“Um,” Yoska thinks for a second, counts backwards figuring it out. His math is not as good as Syeira’s is. “More than sixty years ago,” he says.

“Sixty years. And what does your mother say?”

“She says it’s complicated.”

“Complicated, how?”

Yoska shrugs.

“What about your teacher, Kisné Fazekas. You like her?”

“Yes,” he whispers.

“And has what you learned about her father today changed that?”

“I guess not.”

“Indeed. You forgive her?”

“I guess so.”

“I disagree,” says Mihaly.

Everyone bar Jeno looks at him with shock.

“You *don’t* forgive her?” asks Bersch.

“No,” says Mihaly. “I think, as I know Florica does, there is *nothing to forgive*. It happened a long time ago, the world was different then.”

“You think things have *changed*,” says Django. “We are still not equal. The factory is full of scientists, and marketers peddling pills to the masses, while you are left to pack them on the floor, and to hump boxes to the warehouse.”

“We don’t have the skills for those other jobs,” says Jeno.

“Maybe not, but they couldn’t do their work without you,” says Django.

“They treat us well enough,” says Jeno.

“Pah!” says Bersch. “They pay next to nothing; look down their noses at us.”

“We have work,” says Jeno.

“*Some* of us do,” mumbles Krisztián.

“Have you *looked*, son?”

“The factory is not for me.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” says Mihaly.

 “‘Beggars’ is the right word,” says Django. “I went to the hydroelectric plant every week for over six months asking for work, every day the answer was no.”

“*He* will never give work to us, you are wasting your time,” says Bavol.

“Enough!” says Mihaly. “Yoska, you are right, there is a long history of violence against our people, but what is happening to us, now, has nothing to do with the war but everything to do with what happened in Olaszliszka. You call it a mistake but the truth is that a group of men – our men – surrounded that poor man in his car and killed him. He hadn’t done what people thought he had done, which shows that we were too quick to jump to conclusions. In that sense are we so different from the Nazis?”

“B, but…” stutters Bersch.

“But nothing,” says Mihaly. “This ends here, and if anyone takes matters into their own hands they will no longer be welcome in our community.”

“We should, at least, take a vote,” says Django.

 “Mihaly has made his decision,” says Jeno.

Bavol and Tem exchange furtive looks across the floor. There’s a rush of air in the pipe, and then the fire flickers and goes out.

# Chapter Two: a better Hungary

The bus drops Andrzej off by the pond beside his house. He looks up to wave to Benjamin and the others. They’re staring out the back of the bus, hoping for a glimpse of Party members but as there’s no sign of anyone they turn back. People *are* here judging by the boots in the porch. Andrzej adds his to the pile and rushes through to the kitchen, where his mother is preparing food and drinks for the meeting. He dumps his school bag, grabs a glass of juice from the fridge and downs it in a single gulp.

“Where’s father?” he asks.

 “In his office,” she says.

 Pulling one strap of the rucksack over his left shoulder, Andzrej walks down the hallway to his father’s office. The door to the office is closed. He presses his ear against the door but he can’t hear anything, which either means father isn’t there, or he’s alone. He tries the handle, and the door opens. His father is shocked; quickly it turns to anger.

 “Andrzej! I’m in a meeting.”

Face red with fury, his father opens his desk drawer and brushes something in, locks it and then pockets the key. Standing between them is a man dressed all in black. He says nothing, and he doesn’t turn around.

“Excuse my son,” says his father before turning to Andrzej, “Leave us.”

“B, but…I only wanted to see you before the meeting.”

He tries to hide his disappointment but his voice breaks and his chin wobbles.

“Wait in the front room with the others,” his father says. “Change out of that school stuff, and make sure you’re not blubbing when you come back down.”



Andrzej leaves the room quickly so his father won’t see him choking back the tears. He should never have walked in on him but he’s desperate to learn more about the party. He’s asked his father but he says he’s not mature enough. At least, he’s letting him go. He rushes upstairs and changes quickly into black jeans and a red t-shirt and then he flies back down the stairs where he almost crashes head-on into another boy.

“Sorry,” mumbles Andrzej.

He’s a little intimidated by the boy who’s obviously older than he is, twenty maybe, but definitely too old for school. He’s wearing black jeans, skinny ones with holes in the knees; his t-shirt has a picture of a bird standing on top of a shield with its wings spread wide. *An eagle?* There’s writing above and below it.

“No worries. What’s the hurry?” he says.

“Um, I…I didn’t want to be late.”

“You’re here for the meeting?” he asks, looking surprised.

“Yeah. I live here. My Dad is Zoltan Balczo.”

The man whistles, and Andrzej scowls.

“Seriously, man. I’m impressed. Nice house, too. My name’s Gergely.”

He holds his hand out and Andrzej shakes it as firmly as he can.

“Cool t-shirt,” he says.

“You like *Romantikus Erőszak*?”

Andrzej shrugs. The band isn’t one he’s heard of before.

“So who *are* you into?” Gergely asks.

“Galloping Coroners. Tamás Pócs is the best guitarist ever. You know them?”

The band has formed in 1975, practically the Dark Ages, but people still talk about them. They were like nothing that had gone before.

“They’re pretty cool,” says Gergely. “But you should definitely check out Romantikus Erőszak. Their album 100% Magyar is amazing. They’re the reason I’m here, actually...”

“How come?”

“I met some people at one of their gigs. We got talking and they introduced me to the party. Your Dad helped start it didn’t he, that’s pretty cool.”

“I guess.”

“You don’t think so?”

“We fell out. He was in his office with a man and I walked in on them. He looked pretty mad. I’m not supposed to interrupt him when he’s in a meeting.”

“He’ll get over it.”

“Maybe. Sometimes…I’m not sure if he wants me here at all.”

“I’m sure that’s not true. So shall we go in?”

As Gergely opens the door people turn and stare, but quickly go back to their conversations. There are people on the large sofa that dominates the living room and on the dining chairs; on the floor, between the ‘L’ of the sofa, sits a group of younger members. A girl waves them over.

“*Szebb Jövőt*, Gergely,” she says. “Who’s your friend?”

“Szebb Jövőt[[5]](#endnote-5) Andrzej, this is Szuszanna. Szuszanna is studying politics at Budapest University. This is Andrzej. He’s Galloping Coroner’s biggest fan, and Zoltan Balczo’s son.

 “Cool,” she says. “Good to meet you.”

Andrzej smiles back. It seems Gergely and his friends seem to like him as much because of the music he enjoys as they do for who his Dad is. He likes that.

 “Hey, there’s Gábor,” he says, spotting his Godfather across the room.

“You mean *President* Gábor.”

“*Uncle* Gábor to me,” says Andrzej.

No sooner has he said it than he regrets it. It makes him sound young, and he’s saying it to show off, trying to impress his new friends. Gergely laughs but not unkindly. Gábor waves back then keeps talking to the party’s secretary.

“You can introduce us, later,” says Gergely, “…but where’s your Dad?

The door opens and his father walks in with his mystery visitor. The stranger stops at the back of the room, stands in the shadows so it’s hard for Andrzej to see his face.

“Right on cue,” says Gergely.

“Yeah,” says Andrzej, “but who’s that with him?”

“Who?”

“That man, he's the one who was in Dad’s office.”

“I don’t know but from the way he carries himself, I’d guess he’s Guard.”

“Guard?”

“Yes, The Guard, Magyar Gárda? Surely you know about them. Gábor founded The Hungarian Guard to support Jobbik and to help to defend Hungary.”

“Defend how?” asks Andrzej.

“Gábor registered The Guard in Buda Castle as a *cultural* organization to re-awaken the consciousness of the people. If you’re serious about getting involved with the party, The Guard’s a good place to start…”

He stops as Andrzej’s father walks through them. Zoltan doesn’t look down, nor does he acknowledge his son. Instead, he walks across the room and embraces Gábor. They chat briefly. His father stands upright, coughs and then…

“Welcome everyone.”

The room falls silent, and he carries on.

“It’s great to see so many of you here. As you know we’re entering a very exciting time for the party, and for our country, which we are all striving to make great again. And so, it is with the greatest of pleasure that I give you your President Gábor Vona.”

The room erupts in applause, some of the youngsters sitting beside him on the floor whoop and cheer but as Gábor steps forward they all fall silent again.

It’s a different type of silence to the one that greeted Andrzej’s father. He is the sort of person that people respect out of fear, whereas Gábor has presence, like a wolf howling at the moon, seemingly alone but confident others will heed his call.

“Thank you, Zoltan. Our vice president is right. It *is* an exciting time. We are on the brink of winning the largest number of parliamentary votes since we formed in 2003...”

A few people clap, but Gábor interrupts the ripple by holding up his hand.

“But, we must not underestimate our task. We face an uphill struggle to return our country to the Great Nation it once was. Many of you were not born when the plunder of our wealth began, for it was in the late 1980s that we began to lose the illusion of freedom, of independence, when we lost our national wealth, and our economy.

“No! Lose is the wrong word, for we did not lose our wealth or our independence, rather The Communists stole them from us; communists who, on Monday, preached Marxism to the masses, and by Friday sought only Capital. They *sold us out*. They closed down our factories to create markets for inferior, foreign products. They deprived honest Hungarian workers of their rights, made them work for pitifully low salaries...

Andrzej is almost crushed as Gergely and his friends leap to their feet, but Gergely grabs his hand and helps him up as Gábor continues. He doesn’t know if he’s following all of what Gábor is saying, but many times he’s heard his father talking about how he’s lucky that the plant, where he works hasn’t been sold off to foreigners and Jews who have taken over Hungarian businesses without paying the taxes they should.

Gabor continues:

“…but The Communists aren’t the only threat to our nation. If we are to be great, again, then we must first tackle the problem of the gypsies, for while our people fight desperately for those few remaining jobs, the gypsies willingly accept hand-outs from a misguided government, money they spend on cigarettes and alcohol…”

The crowd around Andrzej is becoming agitated. They jostle against him clamouring to get closer to Gábor. Some are shouting ‘yeses’ and ‘here, here’s’ in support of Gábor’s description of the gypsies, while others are punching the air with their fists. He’s heard the same words from his father but it’s exciting, and exhilarating to finally be part of it.

“…We must rid our country of this parasitism. We must tackle the problem of *Cigánybűnözés*. We must produce an environment in which gypsy people can return to a world of work, laws and education, or there is always prison.”

The room erupts. People are clapping and stamping their feet. Gábor waits for the room to settle and continues.

“Despite its mutilated state Hungary is still great. We have good soil, a good climate, and we work hard. *You* work hard. Those people have who led the country didn’t want it to thrive. They don’t love this country. They didn’t honour this land. They didn’t want our freedom, our dignity, or a better future. Those who love the Hungarian people and who love their Fatherland should lead this country. *Jobbik* should lead this country.

“We can, and we will win our country back. The rich will be dispossessed. We will make them give back what they have stolen from us, and there will be no more need for austerity, and our young will have a brighter future. You will have a brighter future.”

The room erupts in applause. Around Andrzej, people are hugging, the girl Gergely was talking to earlier might be crying. They crowd around shaking his hand. He looks up hoping his Dad is watching but he doesn’t seem to have noticed him at all, and so as Gergely takes his hand, Andrzej leans in and asks: “How do I join The Guard?”

# Chapter Three: history lessons

The weekend has a different routine. His mother is at the farmer’s market albeit with a smaller budget than usual after last night’s feast. Eva is in the garden out back. It’s tiny, but she’s raked it over and has planted a handful of potatoes, some carrots, and green peas. Jeno catches her eye, makes a ‘T’ sign with his hands. Meanwhile, Yoska is at the kitchen table staring at an empty page in his homework book. Try as he can, he can’t think of an historical topic he’s passionate enough about to focus on for his essay.

“How’s it going?” *Pops* asks.

Yoska groans.

“It isn’t.”

“What’s the problem?”

“I don’t know what to write about.”

‘What’s the topic.”

‘History,” says Yoska.

“But, you like history,” says Jeno.

“Maybe I don’t like it as much as I thought. We’re supposed to pick an historical topic, which relates to *our* lives, and I can’t think of anything.”

“That’s easy,” says Jeno. “I can tell you one of the old stories,” he says.

Last night, after the meeting, they took turns telling folktales as the fire withered and died. Jeno told a story about the crucifixion. Some believe gypsies forged the nails used to pin Jesus to the cross. Others say that as Jesus made his way to the cross a gypsy woman stole a nail so he was crucified with three, not four, nails. And so it was that the gypsies were given permission to steal once every seven years.

Pops told the story well. So well that images danced in Yoska’s mind’s eye; images of his people as murderers or thieves. So, *no*, he isn’t interested in the old stories. He’d considered writing about the camps as while most people know that the Jews perished in the camps but few know, much less care about the Roma who met the same fate. But to write that would be to label his people as victims, and he is sick of being a victim.

“No thanks,” he says.

“You don’t like the old stories?” Jeno asks.

“They’re not *real*,” he says. “You know I love history but, well…”

“What’s troubling you,” Jeno asks.

“It never occurred to me but in all the history we’ve studied, none of it seems to have anything to do with *us*. The migration of the Magyars, The Habsburg Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Alliance, Hungary’s role in the first and second world wars…We hear nothing of the Roma, unless you count sending us to the gas chamber. What’s *our* history?”

“Ah,” says Jeno, I see. He thinks for a while and then asks, “you like music?”

“You know I do,” says Yoska.

“Then let me tell you a story that *directly* relates to our history, and to Hungary’s… But first, what do you know about the music we play?”

Yoska shrugs.

“C’mon,” says Jeno, “you can do better than that, think of the instruments.”

“The fiddle, you mean? Mihaly and Django play the fiddle.”

“*Exactly*. We have a long history of playing the fiddle be it gypsy jazz, village music, the schmaltzy music of Hungarian gypsy orchestras; *Magyar Nota,* which is more like a modern-day pop song, dance music. And then there’s the music Mihaly likes to play….”

“With singing,” says Yoska.

“Singing yes, but there is more to it than that. For him, what’s important isn’t the type of music but *how* he plays. When he was young, he played with a passion that brought listeners to a state of ecstasy. Perhaps that’s why during the *Reformation* the church sought to turn people against music, seeing it as a form of ‘sinful enjoyment’.”

“It was a sin to play music,” Yoska asks.

“In some people’s eyes, yes. However, after the *Reformation* opinions changed and a gypsy fiddler was an essential part of any nobleman’s entourage. By the eighteenth century many aristocrats had their own gypsy orchestras,” says Jeno.

“Like a status symbol…”

“Yes,” says Jeno “but not all saw us that way, there were others who were drawn to our music out of a genuine respect for our playing, and a love of the music.”

“Like who?” Yoska asks.

“You have heard of the nineteenth-century composer and pianist Ferenc Liszt who is one of Hungary’s most famous sons. From the age of five his father gave him piano lessons, but while he learned technical skills from his father, his inspiration came from the music of the church, and from the music he heard The Roma playing.

“When he returned to Hungary in 1840, his first trip since he was a boy, it rekindled his love of our music. Without it, he may never have written the *Hungarian Rhapsodies* some of his most loved pieces. He called himself ‘half gypsy, and half Franciscan monk’, although one of his contemporaries said he was ‘*Mephistopheles* disguised as a priest’.”

“Mephistopheles?”

“A demon featured in German folklore. The reference is perhaps appropriate given the fiddle’s long association with the devil, at least since the Renaissance.

“So people saw Liszt as ‘demonic’ because of his love of Roma fiddle music?”

“Maybe, but Liszt didn’t. In the mid-nineteenth century, he wrote a book celebrating ‘gypsy’ music, and his pursuit of what he referred to as *God’s Divine plan* within it.”

“I see,” says Yoska.

“You don’t seem impressed,” says Jeno.

“I am but… it sounds a little patronizing, he may have loved the music we played but it sounds as if he diluted it to make it acceptable for the nobility.”

“I don’t see it that way at all,” says Jeno. “At least Liszt recognized our music as a form in its own right unlike others who claimed we *stole* fiddle music from the Hungarian people. In the mid-1900s, Bartok claimed ‘gypsy’ music lacked authenticity...”

“So who’s right? Liszt or Bartok?” asks Yoska.

“There is truth in both versions,” says Jeno. “It isn’t a case of *stealing* more that our music influenced Liszt, just as our people were influenced by the music of Hungary; the country we have adopted as our own. Do you think you could write an essay about it?”

“I guess,” says Yoska. “It’s enough for my essay but I want to know more.”

“About the music?”

“No. Not just the music. I want to understand where we have come from. Will you teach me? Perhaps then I will understand why people hate us so much.”

“You think people hate us?” says Jeno.

“The killings tell me they do,” says Yoska.

“I see… Then yes, I will teach you, but for now, finish your homework.”



Andrzej’s mother is in the kitchen tidying up after last night’s meeting. There’s no sign of his father who is either still in bed recovering - he likes to have a drink or two after the party meeting - or in his office. If he’s in his office Andrzej is in no hurry to interrupt him again. He looks out the kitchen window, where Gábor is smoking a cigarette, slides back the patio door and joins him outside.

“Hey squirt,” says Gábor.

“Don’t call me that,” says Andrzej.

Gábor inhales smoke deep into his lungs, holds it for a couple of seconds, and then he exhales and looks at Andrzej.

“You’re right,” he says. I forget how much you’ve grown.”

“Tell Dad that will you. He thinks I’m still a child.”

“You’re wrong. He brought you to last night’s meeting.” says Gábor.

“He let me come. He didn’t ‘bring me’.”

“Semantics. So, what did you make of it?”

“I liked your speech…do you really think you’ll win in the elections?”

“Of course, the party is popular, especially among the young.”

“I met some of your supporters from the University.”

“I saw you with Gergely. Is that what you wanted to talk to me about, Jobbik?”

 “Kind of…I was going to ask Dad, but I think he’s in his office.”

“What is it you want to know?”

“It’s my homework. We need to write about something historical, but it needs a personal angle. I wanted to write something related to The Party, but I’m not sure what.”

Gábor takes another long drag on his cigarette. He looks at Andrzej who’s wearing the same black jeans as last night, but with his favourite *Galloping Coroners’* t-shirt. It depicts a white winged horse in a golden headdress and a night sky full of astral figures.

“I used to like them,” he says. “Tell me, did you talk to your new friend about music?”

“He told me he likes *Romantikus Erőszak*, which is how he discovered The Party.”

“…and what did you think of *his* t-shirt?”

“I liked it,” says Andrzej.

 “And the bird on the front.”

“The eagle?”

“Is that what you thought it was? That’s no eagle. The bird is the *Turul*, a mythical creature with strong ties to Hungary’s history, to The Party, and to the *Magyar Gárda*.”

“The Guard. Gergely told me about them.”

“He did…what did he say.”

“He said, that there was a youth movement and that I could join.”

There is a whoosh behind them as the patio doors slide open again. Both of them stop and turn. It’s Andrzej’s father. Gábor takes the packet of cigarettes from his pocket and offers one to Zoltan. Zoltan glances over his shoulder, and gives the slightest shake of his head. He rarely smokes and never in front of his wife who’s watching.

Gábor stubs out his existing cigarette, helps himself to another and lights it.

“Am I interrupting?” Zoltan asks, looking at his son.

“Your son says he’s thinking of joining the Youth Movement,” says Gábor

“He’s a bit young, isn’t he?” says Zoltan.

“We have many members of his age, you know that,” says Gábor. “And the movement will help him to mature. Besides, he needs to do it, for his homework.”

Gábor winks at Andrzej and blows yet more smoke into the air.

“His homework?”

“Yes. The meeting inspired him to write an historical story relating to The Party. I was talking to him about the *Turul* bird, and what it means to Hungary, and to us.”

“Andrzej, is this true?” his father asks.

“Yes, father. It’s like Gábor says, *The Party* means a lot to so many people but especially to the young. Who knows if I tell my story in class maybe some of my friends will want to join The Youth Movement of The Guard as well.”

“Maybe you *are* old enough,” says Zoltan.

“So I can go?”

Zoltan checks over his shoulder again, his wife is no longer watching them.

“Yes,” he says. “You can go.”

Andrzej hugs him, and when his father doesn’t hug him back he doesn’t even mind.



The smell of black pudding wafts through the house. As well as the black pudding there is toast, cream cheese and coffee. Her father takes a mouthful, and then bites into one of the rounds of black pudding. On the table is the Saturday paper, *Magyar Hírlap*, another of his small luxuries. He can’t read it himself, and so she’s waiting for her cue.

Her father swallows the last of his black pudding, and wipes the plate with his bread.

“What are they saying, Syeira?” he asks.

She pushes her own plate to one side and opens the paper flat on the table, scans the headlines. There’s no mention of the Csorbas on the front page. Gently, she shakes her head, turns the page. The table is silent as they watch her turn the pages until, buried on page five, is a short story referring to the latest attack.

**Suspicious fire**

A man from the Rom community and his son, were killed in a fire. The fire broke out in the Csorba’s family home in the early hours of Thursday morning.

It’s thought the fire started because the Csorba’s had illegally tapped into the grid’s electricity supply causing a short circuit.

“That’s it,” says Django.

“Yes, father,” she replies.

“Is that all we are worth to them? A couple of paragraphs. It days nothing about the other ‘fires’, or the shootings, or even acknowledges someone else might be responsible.”

He bangs his fist on the table causing Tem to jump and almost spill his glass of milk.

“Django!” scolds Mihaly.

“Sorry father, but it’s true.”

“I know son. It isn’t enough to honour a life,’ he says. “But what words could?”

Her grandfather sits upright at the table in a chair built for him by Django. He has a gift for shaping wood and the chair is the perfect height for Mihaly; it has strong arms either side that curve around him in a semi-circular hug.

“It’s lies…” says Tem, spraying black pudding onto the table.

“Tem!” says their mother.

“Sorry,” he says, swallowing. “But, they *are* liars. It says the police are investigating and I don’t think they are; they don’t seem to be doing anything,” he says.

“What makes you say that,” says Mihaly. “The police are doing everything they can, why on the radio Police Chief Josef Bencze promised a 50 million Huf reward for people delivering information leading to those responsible.”

“Enough,” says Aishe. “You can talk about this later. Saturday breakfast is family time and I won’t have it ruined with arguments, however important the topic.”

“Healthy debate,” says Mihaly. “But Aishe is right. It is for another time.”

“Then can I please be excused?” asks Tem.

He’s finished the last of his breakfast and gulps down the remains of his milk.

“Why?” their mother asks.

“I have stuff to do…”

“Okay. If you must.”

Her brother places his plate on the side and disappears into his bedroom, a small room at the back of the house. The door slams behind him, Aishe sighs.

“I hope he isn’t going to hide in there all morning,” she says.

“He’s young,” says Django, also resting his plate by the sink. “He can come with me, later.”

“Where are you going?” asks Aishe.

“To see Bersch.”

“Why?”

“He wants me to help him with the car.”

Her mother rolls her eyes and then winks at Syeira. She thinks Bersch loves the car more than he loves Mala, his wife. However, working on it gives Django a sense of purpose, which is good for him. The downside is it’s a reminder of the money Bersch has from working, and which he hasn’t.

“Make sure you wear something old,” says Aishe.

Django kisses her forehead.

“All my clothes are old,” he says, smiling.

He hands her his plate and walks out.

Aishe stands to clear the rest of the table and Syeira also rises to help. Her mother rests her hand on her shoulder and nods to the books on the table.

“Homework,” she says.

It’s just her and Mihaly now. He won’t budge before lunchtime despite her mother nagging him that he needs to move for his joints. Today she’s pleased he’s staying put, she needs his help. She’s about to ask him when there’s a knock at the door.

Her mother answers, and then looks over.

“It’s for you Syeira,” she says.

Bavol strides in and brushes Syeira’s cheek with his lips. Her skin burns as if fire ants are attacking her body. If Bavol senses her recoil, he hides it well.

“Syeira,” he sings, “I was hoping you’d be in.”

“Oh really. *Why*?”

“I thought we could, *erm*, walk out.”

She smiles. Bavol is often mean and cruel, but he can also be clumsy and shy.

It’s endearing.

*Almost*.

“I can’t.” she says. “I have homework.”

“You can do it later,” says Bavol.

“Grandfather is helping me,” says Syeira. “He’ll be tired, later.”

“Right,” Bavol says.

“Tem’s out back,” says Syeira. “*He’d* be happy to see you.”

“Oh, okay.”

Dejected, he turns and makes his way through the kitchen. Mihaly doesn’t speak until he is gone, then he looks at her quizzically.

“Homework?” he says.

“It’s true, I *do* have homework, and I *do* need your help.”

“With what?”

“I have to write an essay.”

“You’re far smarter than me, I’m not sure how *I* can help you with that.”

“We have to write something historical, but it needs to mean something to *us*. You’re always telling stories. I thought you could tell me about those, and share one that will mean something to *me* so that I can share it with the class.”

Syeira reaches for a notebooks; a freshly sharpened pencil is poised.

“Many of our stories would seem nonsense to an outsider,” Mihaly begins, “But they are part of our history. Some *Gadjee*[[6]](#endnote-6)have tried to collect them like trophies stolen from a race they consider a novelty at best. These people think the stories create a map of how we migrated across the world because of the similarities between the stories we tell here in Hungary, and those told in England, France in North and South America, in Romania, Russia, Scotland, and Wales. And it is true, there *are* common themes.”

“What themes?” Syeira asks.

She looks up at her grandfather.

“We Roma have always survived on our wits. The stories we tell play homage to that. We might not all have gone to school as you do, but we’re clever. Street-smart, you’d call it today and we are master craftsmen, and gifted fortune-tellers like Florica. In addition, we are chameleons all. Wanderers with a strong sense of self, freedom and individuality, yet as we have wandered we have adapted to the places that we have come to adopt as home. Perhaps that is why transformations feature so heavily in our stories.”

“Tell me one,” she says.

“A story.”

“Yes.”

Mihaly looks pensive as if his mind is flipping through an encyclopaedia of oral histories, searching for the perfect tale. A smile indicates that he’s found one.

“Comfortable,” he asks.

Syeira puts down her pencil and notepad and rests her head on the table.

“This story is called *The Snake who became the King’s son-in-law*[[7]](#endnote-7)*.* It is a demonstration of wit over strength, but I’m getting ahead of myself, and so, I will begin. …Once there lived an old couple. They’d never had any children. The woman scolded her husband, *'Who will look after us when we grow older*?'”

Mihaly affects the voice of an old lady, and Syeira laughs.

“'Well, what am I to do, old woman?' asked the man. So she told him to go and find them a son. In the morning the old man arose and with axe in hand he journeyed until mid-day when he came to a forest. For three days he searched and found nothing by which time he was hungry and could search no more. He turned for home and on his way back he found a little snake, wrapped it in a handkerchief and took it home.”

“A snake?” Syeira questions.

“Yes a snake. He brought it up on sweet milk and in a week and two days he put it in a jar. When the snake was as big as the jar it said to its father. ‘My time has come to marry. ‘Go to the king, and ask for his daughter for me.’”

Now, Mihaly lisps the snake’s words, sticking out his tongue. Syeira smiles.

“When the old man heard that the snake wanted the king's daughter, he smote himself with his hands. ‘How can I go to the king, for he will kill me.' But the snake told him to go and not to be afraid for the snake would give the king what he wanted. And so the old man went, and greeted the ruler, ‘all hail o’ king’.

“The king thanked him, and he explained he had come to form an alliance by marriage for his son. This shocked the king, as the man was a peasant.

“However, the man did as the snake had told him and promised anything that the king’s heart desired. And so the king showed him a forest and told him to fell it to make a field, to break the soil and sow it with millet, and by morning to bring a cake made with sweet milk.

 “The old man went weeping to the snake. When the snake saw his father weeping he said, 'Why weepest thou, father?.' 'How should I not weep, darling?’, the man replied. ‘For see what the king said, that I must fell this great forest, and sow millet; and it must grow up by tomorrow, and be ripe. And I must make a cake with sweet milk and give it him. Then he will give you his daughter.'

“The snake told him not to worry and that he would do what the king had asked. And so the snake arose and made the forest a level plain, and sowed millet, and he thought and thought, and it was grown up by daybreak. When the old man got up, he found a sack of millet, and made a cake with sweet milk to take to the king.

“The king marveled but he had another challenge, and said 'my old fellow, hearken to me. I have one thing more for you to do. Make me a golden bridge from my palace to your house, and let golden apple-trees and pear-trees grow on the side of this bridge and then will I give you my daughter.' As before, the old man wept, and returned home.

“Again, the snake asked him why he was crying. The old man said, 'I am weeping for the miseries which God sends me. The king wants a golden bridge from his palace to our house, and apple and pear-trees on the side of this bridge.' As before, the snake said, 'Fear not, father, for I will do as the king said.'

“The snake thought and thought, and the golden bridge was made. The king arose at midnight; he thought the sun was at noon and scolded the servants for not having called him in the morning. The servants said, 'king, it is night, not day'; and the king marveled.

“In the morning the old man came and the king told him to bring his son so that they might organize the wedding. The man told the snake of the king’s request and so the snake told him to fetch the cart and the horses and take him to the palace.

 “When the king saw the snake, he trembled as did all of his lords but there was one who told him not to run for the snake had done as the king bid him, and if the king did not keep his promise then there was a danger that the snake would kill them all and so he should give the hand of his daughter.

 “And so the king gave his daughter to the snake. And he also gave him a house for the pair to live in. She, the bride, trembled but the snake said, 'Fear not, my wife, for I am no snake as you see me. Behold me as I am.' He turned a somersault, and became a golden youth, in armour clad. The maiden, when she saw that, took him in her arms and kissed him, and said, 'Live, my king, many years. I thought you would eat me.'

“The king sent a man to see how it fares with his daughter. When the king's servant came, what he sees is the maiden fairer and lovelier than before. He went back to the king. 'O king, your daughter is safe and sound.' Then he called the people and held the marriage, lasting three days and three nights, and the marriage was consummated.”

“That’s it?” asks Syeira.

“Yes. You seem disappointed,” says Mihaly. “But why? The story encapsulates much of what we spoke of earlier… The old man goes out *on a quest* to find a son. He *uses his wits* in collecting the snake. The snake uses *his brain* to *tend the land*, and builds a bridge between two worlds – isn’t that a form of *assimilation*, then there is the *transformation*.

“Tell me child. What is it that has disappointed you?”

“The Princess,” says Syeira.

“What about her? We barely meet her in the story,” says Mihaly.

“*Exactly*,” says Syeira. “She is nothing more than a *prize* for the snake, slash, king. She has no say at all in the wedding, or whether she even *wants* to get married. The ‘snake’ has no love for her but wants to marry her because she can advance him socially.”

Mihaly smiles whimsically.

“I knew it was the right story for you,” he says. “It is the same with many of our folktales; few feature women, or girls, and where they do they are witches, bad mothers, or wives or princesses. Maybe it is time we made new stories.”

“You’re right,” says Syeira. “It’s the perfect topic for my homework. I can tell people about the old stories, but write a *new* one of my own.”

She kneels up, and kisses her grandfather on the cheek, and then she stands and picks up her notebook and pencil, sits at the table. Before long she’s scribbling furiously.



“Hey!” says Tem, his voice rich with excitement.

Normally, the attention would cheer Bavol, but he’s bruised from another of Syeira’s brush-offs. She *tolerates* him because of the dowry; a match his father made because he thinks it will help him to succeed Mihaly as council leader. Bavol didn’t object.

When he’s around her he feels so awkward. Like just now when he asked her to ‘walk out’ with him. Perhaps, if they had time alone he might be able to show her how he feels. But she always seems to be spending time with Yoska. What does she see in *him*?

“What you doing?” he asks.

Tem is sitting on the bottom of a pair of bunk beds he outgrew long ago but are all that will fit into the tiny bedroom at the back of the Holomek’s house.

“Not much…actually, I was thinking about last night.”

“The meeting.”

“Yes.”

“What about it?”

Tem glances over Bavol’s shoulder, towards the closed door.

“They can’t hear us,” says Bavol. “They’re doing your sister’s *homework*.”

“Good,” says Tem. “It will keep them busy. Anyway, what I was thinking was we should go to Tatárszentgyörgy. We might be able to find something out.”

“Like what?”.

“Like, maybe who’s doing this?”

Tem glances again at the door then he takes out a book from under his pillow, a map.

“See, it’s a couple of hours to Budapest, and then we skirt around the Capital to Tatárszentgyörgy; maybe another half an hour or so.”

“By *car*,” says Bavol.

“Yes, by car.”

“And where are we going to get a car?”

“Your Dad,” says Tem. “My Dad’s working on it with him, now. We can ask them.”

“You heard what Mihaly said, if we take things into our own hands, we’ll be ostracized by the community. He meant it,” says Bavol. “Dad won’t go against him.”

“Once we get the reward, I’m sure they won’t complain.”

“What reward?” Bavol asks.

“Grandfather says the police are offering a 50 million Huf reward.”

“50 million!”

“So now can we go and ask your Dad about driving us?”

 “No,” says Bavol, “…and don’t mention it to your Dad either. *I’ll* drive.”

“You?” says Tem, “You can’t drive.”

“Dad’s been teaching me. I’ll get the keys but we’ll have to go early.”

“When?” asks Tem.

“Next week. We’ll need some time to plan,” says Bavol. “Now let me see that map…”

# Chapter four: The road to Tatárszentgyörgy

Staying abreast of public affairs is part and parcel of being an Member of European Parliament. There’s a department responsible for sending a daily bulletin of local, and foreign news. However, it’s likely she’s the only one who’s paid attention to the Csorba’s story; as soon as she read it she’d had her doubts about the so-called ‘electrical fault’.

Last night’s call confirmed her suspicions. A local council contact of Viktoria’s gave her number to Robert Csorba’s widow, Renáta. Renáta’s voice was calm as she asserted that the police hadn’t secured the crime scene properly, and had failed to interview key witnesses including a neighbour who claimed she’d heard several shots fired.

Viktoria waited until she’d finished and then asked her to get hold of a camera. As soon as she hung up she made arrangements to visit the scene.

It’s dark as she drives into Tatárszentgyörgy and the streets are quiet. Peaceful. She shivers, imagining the night before. *What sounds and smells would she have experienced if she were here ten hours earlier?* She imagines the Csorba’s panic as they fled the burning house, Renáta’s cries of realization as her husband and son perished in the fire.

The house is easy to spot with its cheerful yellow-painted exterior, and because there’s no roof left. There’s minimal damage to the house next door. It’s here that Renáta is staying, with the same neighbour Viktoria hopes will act as a witness in helping to prove that the fire was no accident. A burly Roma man opens the door, looks her up and down. Consciously, she’d avoided a suit, wanting to blend in. Clearly she’s failed.

“Viktoria Mohácsi,” she says, holding out her hand.

“You’re from…”

“I’m a Member of the European Parliament, but that’s not why I’m here.”

“Boldo,” he says. “Still can’t believe it. They’re through the back.”

She follows him along the hallway, into the kitchen where Renáta and her friend are sitting at the table. Renáta is staring into a mug of tea; there’s no steam, it is cold and untouched. Some comfort comes from her friend who is holding her hand.

Her intrusion goes unnoticed at first and then Renata’s neighbour looks up, puzzled. Aged 29, Viktoria’s appearance has changed little since she came to the media’s attention nine years ago. Five foot nothing, and slim. It’s not what people expect of the Roma’s unofficial ambassador. Suddenly, the spell is broken and the neighbour leaps up.

“Welcome,” she says. “It is so good of you to come…Mrs *Mohácsi*.”

“Not at all, and please I am Viktoria.”

“Viktoria, yes. Peanna. Peanna Márton. Can I get you something?”

“No, thank you... I wonder if I might have a moment with Renáta?”

“Of course.”

Renáta finally realizes that her hand is no longer clasped in Peanna’s, and that someone else is there. Viktoria walks to the table, takes the neighbour’s place.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” she says.

The words are cliché, but for now they will do.

“It’s so good of you, to come,” Renáta says.

“Not at all. I am glad you rang.”

“Ion said you’d listen.”

“I will.”

“I, I don’t think it was an accident,” she says.

“No,” says Viktoria, squeezing her hand. “I don’t either. Take your time.”

“I was out. Not for long. I only went to buy some milk for the morning, and when I came home… The roof, I would never have imagined it could be so fierce…”

“The fire started on the roof?”

“Yes, is that important.”

“It might be,” says Viktoria.

She doesn’t want to coach Renáta, but it’s already beginning to sound more and more like an assassination than a ‘short circuit’. In the other attacks on the Roma, the fires started when Molotov Cocktails were thrown onto the roof.

“Please, go on,” she says.

“Robert was upstairs putting Robika to bed. It gives them time together when he comes in from work. When I came back with the milk…there were people everywhere. I pushed my way through and there they were, lying on the floor. Their clothes were sooty, black – you know – but their faces. I’ll never forget their faces. Red. Hot, you know, but not burned, not really. I didn’t understand.”

Viktoria nods.

“There were so many people; police, and men in uniform. They seemed to get there quickly, and they started to move people out of the way including me. I, I wanted to be with them. Why wouldn’t they let me go with them?”

“Procedure,” Viktoria says.

If it is, it’ll be one of the few that the SOCOs *have* followed.

“I need to bury them...”

Viktoria squeezes her hand again to show her that she understands. The issue is an important one for the Romani. They believe until the body is buried, the soul of the deceased cannot enter heaven.

“There’ll be a post-mortem,” Viktoria says. “To confirm how they died.”

“How they died! I *know* how they died. Someone shot them.”

This is what Viktoria wants to talk to Renáta about, but she has to approach it carefully, and take her time.

“You’re sure?” she says.

“Yes. You don’t believe me? Peanna *heard* them.”

“What? What did she hear?”

“The shots!” she says, breaking down.

Viktoria rubs her arm and they sit that way, in silence. She has met enough people in Renáta’s position to know words can’t heal the pain she’s feeling. She has also learned not to underestimate the power of human contact and so they sit in silence, and mourn.

Finally, it is Renáta who offers a simple “thank you.”

“I’m sorry to ask,” says Viktoria. “But the camera, did you find one.”

“Yes, Peanna’s husband borrowed one. She took the pictures, I, I *couldn’t*.”

“I understand.”

It’s time for her to invite Peanna and her husband back into the room. She wants to hear their recollections of the night before. She opens the door to where the others are sitting in a small living room. They stand as soon as they see her.

“I wonder,” she asks. “If you’d join us?”

Boldo hangs back as his wife leads the way back to the kitchen. There Peanna removes the cold tea from in front of Renáta, places a kettle on the stove, and lines up four mugs ready for tea. Viktoria doesn’t object. Boldo waves his wife away, stands awkwardly at the stove, so the three women can talk. Peanna is holding a camera.

“It’s film,” she says.

“Indeed,” says Viktoria. “I’ll get it developed, and make sure your friend gets any other pictures we find on there. Please, tell me what you heard, and saw.”

“I, *we*…were sitting in the front room,” says Peanna. “I heard this noise, like a loud pop, two or three of them. Then we saw it, the flames and the smoke. And Robert, he was running out of the house with Robika in his arms. Boldo rushed to the door. There were some more loud bangs and then Robert fell.”

She stops, and looks to her husband to pick up the story.

“Robert fell on top of Robika, and he wasn’t moving. There were a few other people on the street and someone was calling the fire brigade. The heat, it was so hot, and there was a lot of smoke but I managed to get to Robert and turn him over but they, neither of them were moving; there was a lot of blood.”

“Blood,” interrupts, Viktoria. “You’re sure.”

“I’m not likely to forget it,” he replies.

“Could you show me,” she asks.

“Sure.”

Outside, the street’s still quiet although the sun’s risen. Now you can see the extent of the damage. Where does Renáta go from here? Rebuilding the house is one thing but can she rebuild her life? Boldo waits as she surveys the ground around the house. It isn’t even cordoned off, another sign that the police aren’t yet treating this as a crime scene. Light glints off something lying on the ground and she bends down for a closer look.

“What is it?” asks Boldo.

“A bottle. Probably what’s left of a *Molotov cocktail*,” Viktoria replies.

“What?” Boldo asks.

“Petrol, or another flammable. This was no accident,” she says.

“It’s not true, you know,” Boldo says, “what they’re saying about them stealing electricity. They didn’t have a lot but they wouldn’t do that.”

“I know,” says Viktoria.

“But it said it in the paper,” says Boldo.

To date the newspapers have ignored the attacks, or their reports have been full of inaccuracies, laying blame at the Roma’s door. The *truth* is being written before the National Bureau of Investigation finishes its inquiries. For the *real* truth to come out, they need evidence. She takes a photo, wraps the bottle’s remains in a carrier bag. She needs to get back to Budapest and fast, make some calls. The longer the ‘official’ version of the Csorba’s story going unchallenged, the more ingrained the falsehood becomes.

“I have to go,” she says.

“Already,” says Boldo.

“You’ll give my love to the others?” she says. “Tell them I’ll be in touch.”

She drives away leaving Boldo standing alone, and disappointed at the side of the road. She checks the rear-view mirror, feeling guilty she hasn’t said ‘goodbye’. But, the best way she can help them is to kick-start the investigation. Secretly, she’s also relieved to leave and desperate to get home to her own children, just to hold them.

# Chapter five: A cultural excursion

The weekend passed in a blur of household chores; sweeping the fire with his mother, tending the small patch of garden with *nagyi*, and of course writing up his homework. His father was out all day returning with hands covered in dirt. In the evening, they sat in front of the fire eating open cheese sandwiches and listening to Jeno. He’d spoken about when he and Mihaly were young and travelling in caravans drawn by horses.

*No one mentioned the Csorbas.*

It was good spending time together and yet he is relieved to be walking to school with Syeira. As they walked, she told him how Bavol had surprised her with a visit. She’d persuaded him to spend time with Tem, which was a relief but they’d spent so long locked in Tem’s room that now she is worried. She thinks Bavol is a bad.

 “So, who would like to share their homework,” asks Kisné Fazekas.

Zsofia’s right hand shoots up. She holds it aloft, left hand gripping the elbow of the right so it is as high as can be. Zsofia is always keen to speak first. Benjamin and the others tease her and call her a swot. She’s certainly conscientious but she is also kind and is one of the few to talk to both him and Syeira.

“Zsófia, perhaps you’d like to kick us off?”

“My story is about a writer,” says Zsófia. “I chose it because I love writing, and I believe it can achieve good things. The writer’s name is *Péter Veres*. He was a poet, and a peasant, and also President of the Hungarian Writer’s Association in 1956.”

“It was the time of the revolution although my story begins slightly earlier, in July 1956. Polish workers were protesting against the government. It responded with violence but *Wladyslaw Gomulka* still negotiated more autonomy for the Polish people. When Hungarian writers heard of this, they planned to march to the statue of Polish-born General Bem on October 23 and to lay a wreath as a way of showing their support.

“A group of students at the technical University heard of their plans and decided to join in. The students drafted a sixteen-point resolution. Among their demands, they called for Soviet troops to withdraw from Hungary, and for freedom of the press. On the day of the march Peter Veres read a proclamation of independence to the 50,000 people gathered at the statue, and the student’s 16-point resolution.

“I don’t know *exactly* what he said,” says Zsófia, “but the crowd clapped, and cheered.... They sang the Kossuth song and the Marseillaise. However, the next day – October 24 – everything changed. The Soviet’s sent in tanks. Many were shot. They say you can still see bullet holes on some of the apartment buildings.”

“It’s true, you can,” says Kisné Fazekas. “Over 3,000 died. I’m sorry, go on.”

“Imre Nagy was made Prime Minister. He released the political prisoners but still there was fighting, and over 200,000 people were deported or fled. Many who fled were the best-educated people like Veres. In 1958, Imre Nagy was arrested and executed. The communists remained ‘in charge’ until 1989 when the Iron Curtain fell…erm, that’s it.”

“Excellent,” says Kisné Fazekas, leading the others in a round of applause. “An interesting story and you also explained what it meant to you. Who’s next?”

Unexpectedly, Andrzej’s hand shoots up with Zsófia-like enthusiasm.

“Andzrej…” says Kisné Fazekas, “you would like to go next?”

“Yes,” he says. I think there is a connection between my story and Zsófia’s.”

 Benjamin looks at Andrej with surprise and suspicion, but Kisné Fazekas looks genuinely pleased; Yoska hopes she doesn’t regret it.

“Okay,” she says.

“My story,” says Andzrej, “is about the *Turul* bird. This mythical creature is one of the most important symbols in Hungarian history. The Turul visited a woman called Emese in a dream; she became pregnant and gave birth to Álmos. As a man, he led the seven Hungarian tribes to their homeland in the Carpathian basin.

“In another story, the leader of the Hungarian tribes dreams that eagles attack their horses, but that the Turul saves them. The dream was a sign that they should migrate and when they did, the Turul led them to Hungary. This second story is about how the Magyars took back their rightful inheritance from Attila The Hun’s empire.

“The Turul resembles a golden eagle or a falcon. It is widely regarded as a figure of strength and features on the coat of arms of the Hungarian Army and the Office of National Security. It also appears regularly in popular culture; for example, I first saw it on a friend’s t-shirt promoting the band *Romantikus Erőszak*. It was through the band’s music that my friend became interested in the work of the *Jobbik* party.

“He was at a meeting at my house of the party, of which my *father* is *vice president*. At this same meeting, I heard the president speak, and he talked about how *the Communists* ruined our country and brought unemployment. Interestingly, when they ruled, the Communists banned people from using the Turul in their iconography but since 1989, it has been making a comeback, like on my friend’s t-shirt. That’s it.”

“Thank you, Andzrej. Very interesting. There is a lot more we could talk about relating to the iconography of the Turul bird, but I think we will leave that for another day. Now, I think we have time for one more...” she says.

Syeira raises his hand as he had hoped she would. She’d told him about the story she’s written on their way in and he can’t wait to hear it.

“Miss, my story, like Andrzej’s involves myth and legend so I’d like to share.”

“Please…go on”

“My grandfather is a gifted storyteller. The stories he tells have been handed down through generations of Romani; they are part myth, part legend, but preserve common themes relating to the history and identity of our people.

“The story he shared concerns a snake that wanted to be king, however, it begins with a married couple. The couple can’t have children of their own and so the woman sends her husband to find them a child to care for them in their old age.

“After several days travelling, he finds a snake in the woods and takes it home. They feed the snake and adopt it as their son. Once it has grown, the snake speaks to its ‘father’ asking him to go to the king and to ask for his daughter’s hand in marriage, in return, the snake promises that whatever the king asks for, he will deliver on it.

“The king sets the man a series of challenges. First, he asks him to fell a forest, plant millet and to bring a cake made with sweet milk all in one day. The snake thinks hard, and fells the wood, and makes the seeds grow, and the old man bakes the cake.

“Next, the king asks the man to build a golden bridge. Again the snake uses the power of its mind to finish the task and so the king gives him his daughter. The daughter is afraid at first until the snake transforms into a golden youth, clad in armour.”

Syeira pauses, takes a breath and continues.

“That’s the story my grandfather told me,” she says. “In many ways it captures some common themes of the stories traditionally told by the Roma; it has a transformation - symbolic of how we have adapted to the culture of the countries we call home. It is also typical in that it treats the daughter as a mere ‘prize’ for the snake and for that reason it is not the story I want to tell you. Instead, I’ve written one of my own.”

“My story is inspired by real events in Hungary’s history but it is also about what I want to do, as well as one day being a wife and a mother…”

“…once there lived a young man and a young woman of Roma birth who were travelling across Europe. She, a talented fiddler, was highly valued by the nobleman who was her patron; her lover tended the horses of another nobleman travelling with them.

“The noblemen were returning from a visit to Austria where they had pledged allegiance to the Habsburgs in return for local power. As they reached Hungary, one Lord returned to a province in Pest in the east; the other to Buda in the west, and so it was that the two lovers, found themselves divided by the great River Danube.

“Neither Lord would release them from their patronage and it all hope was lost. To ease her sadness the young woman, when she was not playing for the noblemen would walk in the hills, alone but for her fiddle. One day while walking she came across a large cave. Thinking it was empty, she decided to enter and sit for a while.

“She had intended to stop just inside but a blazing light inside the cave piqued her curiosity. There on the floor was a blanket of gold; gold plates and goblets, jewellery encrusted with emeralds, sapphires, and diamonds. Others may have lost their heads to greed, but the Roma girl who was humble and wise stood quietly by.

“There was movement and a dragon arose from the gold. It had scales the texture of mother of pearl, translucent and shiny reflected in them were all the colours of its treasure trove, emerald, ruby red, and gold. The dragon pulled itself up to its full height, wingspan touching the ceiling of the cave, claws like an eagle but a hundred times bigger and the woman marvelled at its magnificence. In turn, the dragon eyed her with rage.

‘You would steal from me,’ it roared, nostrils aflame.

“No,” said the Roma woman. “I bring you a gift that is more precious than gold.”

“‘More precious than gold,’,” said the dragon, in disbelief.

“’Yes,’ the girl replied.

“She took the violin from her back, placed it under her chin, and lifted her bow. At first, the music was dark, sonorous and rough, notes echoed from the cave walls, and then the tempo changed and the music was sensuous, and it was as if she had given the instrument a voice; a voiced that soared through the opening in the cave to the heavens. The dragon watched transfixed until finally she lowered the instrument.

“‘You are right,’,” he said, ‘that is indeed a gift more precious than gold. I feel I must repay you. Please will you take something from me?’, he said gesturing to the gold.”

“‘It was my pleasure to play for you,’ said the woman, ‘and I have no need for riches but there is something you can do for me.”

“‘Name it,’,” said the dragon.

“He bent his head low to hear the request that she whispered in his ear,’ and if dragons can smile then that would be the expression that she saw on his face. And so it was that the pair emerged together from the cave, the young woman astride the beast. Such was the difference in their stature that if you were watching from the ground you would not have noticed the woman, and yet few could have missed the great dragon as it flew low over the Danube, its wings causing ripples in the water below.

“Eventually, they reached a point where the dragon rested. He stretched his body across the breadth of the river, the tip of his tail rested in Pest, head on the side that was known as Buda. The young woman thanked him, climbed down from his neck and went to visit her lover while the dragon promised he would wait for her return, and sure enough when she came back a couple of hours later, the dragon was there.”

“He offered to carry her back safely to the Lord to whom she was tied. The woman asked if he would like to hear another song, first, for she had another favour to ask. The dragon gladly accepted for the music was enchanting and unlike anything he’d heard before, and so once again the woman played her fiddle the mood shifting from haunting, low tones as black as the cave he called home, to lighter ones that soared just as he flew.

“‘Beautiful,’ the dragon said, once she had finished playing. ‘How can I repay you?’

“‘I wonder,’ said the woman. If you might spare me a small trinket of gold?’

“The dragon’s nostrils flared. He was disappointed for he had warmed to the young woman who had shown such a lack of greed, but his anger was short-lived when she explained why it was that she was making the request. Once he had heard her plans he took her to his gave and gave her the riches before returning her to the Lord’s province.

“It was another week before the woman was free of her duties. When that time came, she travelled to visit a man whom she had heard was especially gifted when it came to designing and building great structures. She offered him the dragon’s gold to build a permanent crossing over the Danube between Buda and Pest. He accepted.

“Over time, the man created the Chain Bridge, which at the time of its construction was considered one of the wonders of the world. The suspension bridge was the first permanent stone-bridge connecting Pest and Buda, and only the second permanent crossing on the whole length of the river Danube. So it was that the young woman and her lover were able to travel freely between Buda and Pest, as were many others.

“There were a few who would not cross it for they claimed that on one occasion they saw a terrifying dragon perched atop its structure. The tale prompted the addition of two stone lions either end of the bridge to guarantee safe passage. That’s it.”

Syeira finishes her story and there is spontaneous applause from the class without Kisné Fazekas’ needing to do anything. Yoska claps enthusiastically despite the disapproving looks of Andzrej and Benjamin in the back row.

Their teacher waits patiently for the applause to finish before she speaks.

“Thank you, Syeira,” she says. “A creative story that is beautifully told. I am guessing that how it relates to you is through your passion for designing buildings?”

Syeira nods. Her face is red from the attention.

“There are also some interesting parallels with the *true* story of how the Chain Bridge came to be constructed, and I wonder if that was deliberate and, if so, if you would be willing to share some of that story with the class?”

“You’re right,” says Syeira, “My story was inspired by the real history of the bridge – as well as the stories of my grandfather. In the winter, the Danube froze and people were able to travel across it but there were times when the weather changed abruptly and people got stuck on one side or the other – in Buda, or Pest.

“In 1820, this happened to Count István Széchenyi, who was forced to wait a week to get to his father's funeral, and it was this experience that led him to realise that there was a need for a permanent bridge. He was a major advocate of the project and even founded a society to finance and build the bridge.

“The chief engineer’s name was Adam Clark, who was a master builder from Scotland. He completed the bridge in 1849. It was the first permanent stone-bridge connecting Pest and Buda, and only the second permanent crossing on the whole length of the river Danube, and at the time of its construction, the Chain Bridge was the suspension bridge with the second-largest span in the world.”

Syeira’s eyes are bright as she talks about the construction of the bridge, but she stops there even though Yoska is sure she could talk about it for hours.

“Syeira, you have clearly researched the bridge well. How would you like to see it?”

“See it?” asks Syeira.

“Class, I have an announcement. We are going on a cultural excursion.”

“A what?” Benjamin asks.

“A school trip to Budapest when you will see the chain bridge and other landmarks.”

The class erupts in noise. People are talking loudly to their neighbours, excited about the trip, several of Yoska’s classmates are holding their arms in the air, others are merely shouting out questions to Kisné Fazekas’ ‘*miss, when is it, how long will it take to get there, where else are we going, are we staying overnight…’* The teacher allows a few moments more of excitement and then holds her hand up for everyone to be silent.

“Right,” she says, “I will answer your questions one at a time.”

“The trip will be next week, Monday. We’ll go by coach, and it will take us some three to four hours to travel from here to the heart of Budapest. We won’t be staying overnight, but it will be a long day. We will begin with a trip along the River Danube, which is one of the best ways to get a view of the city – of both side – the side that was once known as Buda, and the other formerly known as Pest...”

She pauses, smiles at Syeira.

“…However, the highlight of our trip will be a visit to Heroes’ Square. There is no better place to learn about the history of our country. Heroes’ Square sits in front of the City Park at the end of Andrássy Avenue. The square is home of the millennial monument, built in 1896 to commemorate the one thousandth anniversary of the arrival of the Hungarians to the Carpathian Basin, which I think featured in *your story*, Andzrej.

“The monument consists of two semi-circular arrangements. Decorating the niches are statues of kings, governors and famous characters of the Hungarian history. At the foot of each statue a small relief depicts the most important moment of the life of the personality, and so it the monument acts as a visual representation of our history.

“Each of you needs to take home a permission slip for your parents to sign, and you will need to bring a packed lunch. There will be a small charge to cover the cost of the bus, which will pick you up from your homes. Thank you to those who have shared stories this morning, but I look forward to reading everyone’s homework...”

1. <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Matyas-Rakosi> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.ustrcr.cz/data/pdf/konference/zlociny-komunismu/COUNTRY%20REPORT%20HUNGARY.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.swabiantrek.com/?page_id=70> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Violent attacks against Roma in Hungary, Time to Investigate; Amnesty International, Time to investigate racial motivation (first published 2010) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Meaning ‘a better future’, this was a common greeting among Jobbik supporters [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Person of non-Romani origin [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Taken from Gypsy Folk Tales, by Francis Hindes Groome, [1899] [↑](#endnote-ref-7)