



Ace Anthony

A Peaceful Summer

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Аннотация

The summer of 1939, the last summer of peace before World War II. Helmut Krauss, a young German pianist, returns home after completing his education in Britain, only to discover that his mother has become an ardent supporter of Hitler. Far from sharing his mother's enthusiasm, Helmut applies for an American visa, but Frau Krauss doesn't give up easily – she believes that her talented son and German Reich are made for each other...

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Photograph Matt Hobbs

Illustrator Ace Anthony

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A PEACEFUL SUMMER

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A Peaceful Summer

by Ace Anthony

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Author: Ace Anthony

Contact: apeacefulsummer@gmail. com

Cover: designed by Ace Anthony

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The piano image by Matt Hobbs

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Chapter 1

‘Admit it, there’s nothing like Italian air. Especially at this time of the year...’

‘It’s still cold...’

‘No, it isn’t. Not for walks.’

‘Well, it is for swimming... The water temperature must be murderous!’

He was old, grumpy, wrapped in rugs and his sister’s shawl. She was sitting by his side, a plump woman in her sixties, flushed and smiley, determined to make the most of her holiday by the sea.

‘Don’t grumble, Berthold, you promised, remember?’

She surveyed the sparkling turquoise of the sea from under her old-fashioned sun hat.

‘Oh, look!’ she said. ‘Today even more people are braving the chill!’

‘What are these pups after? Pneumonia?’

‘They are young and healthy... They can do what they want.’

‘Your hat is ridiculous.’

She let the remark pass and leant over to the girl sitting next to her:

‘You look so pretty today, Irma. The sea air certainly agrees with you.’

The girl smiled. She was very thin, and her dress of bleached

linen seemed to have more colour than her skin.

‘Thank you, Frau Nolf.’

The woman was in a mood for talk:

‘Yesterday’s evening was magical, wasn’t it?’ she said.

The girl nodded.

‘Magical,’ the man grumbled. ‘What did you drink last night?

You’ve been giggling like an idiot ever since.’

‘You really should have come, Berthold. It was wonderful...’

‘Will you get me another rug, this one is itchy... If that baby doesn’t stop squeaking, I’m going back to the hotel,’ he said in a hissing whisper when his sister bent to tuck the rug round his knees.

She only laughed:

‘If I let you have a smoke, will you promise to stop grumbling for a change?’ She rummaged in her handbag and fished out his pipe roll. ‘Here’s your toy.’ He snatched at it eagerly and immediately lost interest in everything else. ‘Men are like children,’ she winked at the girl and moved her chair under the sunshade to join other women.

‘When did you say your husband is coming?’ she asked the mother of the whining baby.

‘Oh, he’s not coming... Some last minute change of plans, I’m afraid...’

‘Pity. He was so looking forward to it. May I?’ She took the baby and rocked him in her arms with the ease of someone used to it. ‘There, young man, if you behave like an angel, a little

mermaid will give you a precious pearl.'

She began to hum a tune, and the baby went quiet, listening. Everyone, except her brother, smiled and gasped with appreciation.

'For God's sake, Gabi, stop embarrassing people with your enthusiasm!'

She took a deep breath:

'I can't help it! Oh, there he is... Helmut, darling,' she beamed at an adolescent boy who was just going past their sunshade. 'What a lovely performance it was! We are all looking forward to...'

The boy didn't smile back, rolled his eyes as if to say, 'Do me a favour,' and walked past her without slowing down.

'Forgive him, he's still adjusting,' the boy's mother said.

'Oh, nothing to forgive! What a talent! That piece he played yesterday – what was it?'

Frau Nolf hummed the tune again.

'I'm not sure.'

'Dvorak,' somebody prompted.

'I remember him as a small child,' another woman said, looking up from her magazine. 'Is it true he has lived in England all this time?'

Helmut's mother didn't answer.

'He did the right thing to return now when he's still very young,' the old man mumbled, puffing at his pipe. 'In another year or two it could be too late – the German Reich wouldn't give

him a chance.'

'Don't listen to Berthold, it's his ulcer speaking. Germany will always welcome its great sons.'

They were all silent watching the boy walk into the sea and dive into the foam of a rolling wave.

'The weather will get worse in the evening,' the man grumbled.

The languid rondo of the mid-spring, middle-aged, middle-class holidaying was a living hell for the youth. The evenings were dull and had little to offer: the same film in the local cinema, wine-drinking on the terraces, reluctant dancing. Even older people had to admit that they could do with more entertainment, but the season hadn't started yet, and the resort town was still hibernating. So, it was no wonder that sporadic piano recitals given by a young tourist from Germany instantly stirred a bit of a sensation and drew a growing audience to the steps of the hotel he was staying at. Sometime after dinner more and more people strolled past the hotel, some of them sauntered back and forth, others nestled themselves at the tables on shaded terraces, sending waiters and children to make inquiries about the evening.

'Oh, wait a moment,' Frau Krauss would say. 'I'll go and find him.'

Sometimes she literally had to chase her son around the hotel and neighbouring cafes or search the dark inside of the cinema. This time she was lucky to catch him in his room.

'Darling, the people are gathering. What shall I tell them? Are

you playing today or not?’

‘I thought I made myself clear. I’m not playing any more. Why do you keep making promises on my behalf?’

‘But, Helmut, sunshine, they love you. It would be a shame if...’

‘We initially agreed upon one private evening for friends only. I have no intention of starting a career here... This isn’t funny, Mother. If it goes on like that, I’ll have to move to another hotel.’

‘It’s your fault,’ she tried a flattering tone. ‘You play so well...’

‘It was supposed to be a holiday. I’d rather have the evening to myself.’

‘Irma will be disappointed.’

‘Life is one big disappointment for Irma. It’s time she got used to it.’

‘Rudeness doesn’t become you, young man.’

He peered down at the terrace through the Venetian blinds. A few people were already flocking at the tables, sipping wine, casting glances in the direction of the hotel entrance. One of the women (Helmut recognized his most devoted admirer) beckoned an errand boy. He hurried over to her table and listened to her request, bowing and shrugging all the time. Helmut watched the pantomime curiously: an imposing, dignified woman and a fidgety little Italian trying to communicate with each other with the help of gestures.

‘Very well, then. Mussorgsky, I suppose. I feel like Mussorgsky today.’

The smile on his mother's face faded.

'Is he Polish?' she asked in low voice.

'Really, Mother, the world would be a nicer place if you refrained from commenting on music.'

'Why don't you play someone with a German name for a change?'

Helmut liked to think that steering away from German composers was his clever way of being difficult.

'It's either Mussorgsky or nothing at all.'

'Let me do your tie.'

'Leave me alone.'

Most conversations with her son were like that: in the end she wasn't sure whether she had won or lost. But she couldn't help smiling at the sour face he pulled as he fumbled with his tie.

'I need some time to prepare,' he said rummaging through his music. 'Do you mind?'

'Of course not!'

She smiled again and tiptoed out of the room without another word. She had already forgiven his petulance and rudeness.

Helmut Krauss was easy to forgive. One was never sure why he was so irresistible: was it in spite of or rather because of his spiky manner. He had that rarest type of charm, the charm of a good-looking boy who genuinely didn't care how he looked. He frowned, smiled, pouted, grimaced – assumed countless expressions that distorted his regular features. He was hardly ever aware of that, and when he was, he never gave it

a second thought. His self-confidence was dazzling. Despite his average height and adolescent physique, he had an extremely powerful presence, and he managed it with the ease of an experienced public figure. To his English aunt's credit, he wore good clothes, and he wore them well, but it was more like an old habit which existed independently from its master. He never minded a bad photograph of himself; passing a mirror he never checked his hair or tie, he never posed, he never preened. His wit, energy, dry sense of humour, and easy attitude to his own radiant attractiveness could be enough to secure him the reputation of a likeable personality if it wasn't for his second natural gift – music – which had taken a serious toll on his character. Nobody seemed to be good enough for him; nobody remembered him holding a half-civil conversation. He absolutely insisted on being caustic and sarcastic with everyone, regardless of people's age and status. Mocking and teasing was his rule. Arguing when nobody wanted to argue was his signature. There was no way of pleasing him, and one was often left to wonder what he despised more: compliments or criticism. But, first, he was very young. Second, objectively and to say the least, he was a very solid pianist with a brilliant career in front of him. For these two reasons his bad manners were easily forgiven and put down to artistic eccentricity. Forgiveness he dismissed; reputation, though, he didn't mind, feeling quite snug in his aura of a difficult genius.

The next day he suddenly announced that he was going

to Florence to spend a few days with his paternal grandmother.

He waved aside his mother's concerns about the old woman's age and delicate health.

'Helmut, you visited her last week. You are tiring her...'

'Nonsense. She doesn't mind. In fact, she insists I visit her more often... Have you seen my black shoes?'

'Darling, the whole idea of coming here was to spend time together like families do. You seem to be looking for every excuse to run away...'

'With these daily public concerts it doesn't feel like a family holiday anyway...'

'Will you stop harping on your concerts? Just don't play if you don't want to...'

'Oh, it's my fault now! You were the one who spoilt it from the start, Mother!'

'I am surprised you still call me that...'

'Pathetic...'

'We are as good as strangers to each other!'

'Better leave it that way.'

'No sense of responsibility! No sense of duty to your family whatsoever!'

'Grandmother is also my family.'

'Liar! Hypocrite! You don't give a damn. You only care about yourself. And do you know what the most unsightly thing in the picture is? You're secretly relishing your small fame here! Your complacency is revolting! Who do you think you are? Striding

around like the world's greatest pianist... Just let me remind you that you are still a nobody!'

'I've had enough of that...'

A delicate knock on the door interrupted the scene.

'A call for Signor Krauss.'

Frau Krauss looked at her son sharply:

'Again?'

There was no phone in the room, so Helmut went downstairs to take the call.

'Yes?' He motioned to the receptionist to give him something to write with. 'Yes... What's that again? I understand... Do you have any idea how long it might take?... Right... I see... Any news about the other business?... Oh, I thought it... No, there can't be any mistake. Tell him to keep looking, it's very important... Yes. Thank you... No, there will be no need. I'll be in Florence for the next four or five days... See you there. Good bye.'

He went back to his room to pack his things. As he was passing his sister's room, he saw her sitting on the edge of her bed with her coat on.

'Irma. Damn it. I forgot. I'm sorry. It's too breezy for walks anyway.'

'It's fine really. Are you...?'

He was gone before she could finish the question.

His mother was still in his room. She was standing with her back to him, looking out of the window.

‘I’ll pack your suitcase for you,’ she said dryly, exhaling cigarette smoke. ‘Now, don’t be a finished pig and take her out for a walk.’

Helmut didn’t know which of the extremities was worse: thunderous quarrels with his mother or dead silence with his sister. Irma and he hardly knew each other. She was used to awkwardness in her presence and bore it with greater ease. After about ten endless minutes of silence she suddenly spoke almost giving him a start: ‘Do you remember the scarf?’ Helmut glanced at the piece of brightly coloured cloth wrapped around her neck. He didn’t remember. It must have been from Celia. Buying presents for Irma had always been Celia’s responsibility.

‘Yes, of course...’

‘I wore it for the Fuehrer’s birthday last year.’

‘How charming... I didn’t know you had been invited.’

‘No, silly! We went to see the parade.’

‘Oh, I’m sure he spotted you in the crowd and was blinded by your elegance.’

Irma didn’t mind jokes at her expense, she was glad she had managed to start a conversation.

‘It’s a pity we can’t see the parade this year,’ she said. ‘But Mutti was so determined to take you on this trip. We really wanted to do something special for you...’

‘I am sorry to be a disappointment.’

‘You don’t like being with us at all then?’

‘On the contrary, I’m thoroughly enjoying myself.’

‘Isn’t it too cold for swimming?’

‘It’s all right.’ A heavy pause. ‘Can you swim?’ he asked.

She giggled:

‘Helmut, I can barely walk.’

After less than a week’s absence he came back from Florence fresh and rested, and he came in peace. Frau Krauss had also changed her line of behaviour. She had probably expected too much from him in such a short time. It’s no use losing patience with each other. After all, her son has so many things to comprehend and accommodate – grandeur, large-scale things. Someone so young and short-tempered can’t do it overnight.

The weather had turned warmer. He swam a lot and with pleasure; talked little and almost politely. In the evenings he played Beethoven’s sonatas at the request of his ever-growing audience. Frau Krauss seemed to have every reason to be happy, but somehow she wasn’t. ‘Something’s about to happen,’ she thought. And then there were more calls from Florence, which she didn’t like at all. Something was building up. She watched her son closely but couldn’t see much behind his breezy calmness. ‘Shall I talk to him?’ She didn’t know how or what about. The denouement came soon enough.

‘I have to go back to Berlin,’ he said one day, with ill-concealed relief.

‘Darling, we are staying for at least another month.’

‘You are. I’m not.’

‘Helmut, what’s going on?’

She followed him to his room. Irma was in hers; she opened the door slightly and listened.

‘It doesn’t make sense to me. It never will.’

‘...’

‘Everything...’

‘...’

‘I betray nothing, Mother. You are the traitor here...’

Irma sneaked out of her room and stood in the corridor with bated breath.

‘Grandma has found two sponsors for me in America.’

‘What sponsors...?’

‘The people who have signed affidavits of support...’

‘I don’t understand. What are you talking about?’

‘One of them is Grandma’s cousin twice removed; the other is her friend’s husband living in New York...’

‘And why do you need their support, may I ask? Helmut, look me in the eye!’

‘You know why. They are helping me to get a visa.’

‘Is that what you’ve been up to all this time? I am your mother and you...’

‘I didn’t want to tell you until the American immigration office gave its approval. Well, now they have, and my decision is official. There’s a stack of immigration papers to be completed. I have to go to Berlin immediately. It’s good bye, Mother. And I can’t say that I am sorry.’

There was a shocked silence.

‘I should have known that she was up to no good. She almost ruined my marriage. And now she got her hands on you.’

Irma slipped into the room and sat in the chair by the door. Her presence caused another long silence. Frau Krauss lit a cigarette. Helmut was folding his clothes and putting them in neat piles.

‘It was my decision,’ he grumbled. ‘Grandma only helped.’

‘Oh, I bet she did. She’s always ready ‘to help’. Now hold your horses, son. We’ll hear what your father has to say on the subject.’

‘He already knows. Grandma has written to him.’

‘And all that is happening behind my back!’

‘It has nothing to do with you. It’s my choice, they are only helping me.’

‘Helping you? One can help someone who has at least some means and experience. You have nothing, Helmut, you’re a child. She’s ruining your life! What are you going to do? What are you going to live on?’

‘Father has promised to consider the question.’

‘Oh, damn your father, his mother, and their entire rotten family! They’ve done enough to kill me a thousand times, but I’m still alive, Helmut, and I’m not giving up now... Irma, girl, the holiday’s over thanks to your brother. We’re leaving together.’

‘I’m not going in your car, Mother,’ Helmut warned. ‘I’m taking the Rome-Berlin express.’

Frau Krauss asked Irma to leave and took her place in the chair.

‘One day you’ll realize how cruel you’ve been to me. Where’s

my fault, Helmut? What have I done to deserve this? You could display some semblance of fondness, at least for Irma's sake.'

'Oh, about Irma. You really shouldn't have dragged her all the way down here, not in her state of health, and not in a car.'

'Helmut, look at me!' her stern voice rang with indignation. 'I didn't drag her here. She wanted it. We did it for you! You hadn't seen your own country for years. We wanted to introduce you to your Fatherland, to show you the new Germany...'

'You mean the autobahns and the swastikas? I saw the picture, full-sized. I don't need to see it again...'

He called Irma and she came instantly, as if she had been waiting behind the door.

'Irma, would you rather go by train? Don't look at Mother, look at me. Would you like to go by train?'

Irma blushed and dropped her eyes.

'Leave the poor child alone, she wants to go with me.'

Frau Krauss rose and walked out slamming the door hard behind her.

'Just give it some thought,' Helmut insisted. 'You can rest on the train, meet new people. And we'll get home much faster...'

'Are you going to America?' Irma was on the verge of tears. Helmut turned away in annoyance – he hated dealing with crying girls.

'Not tomorrow. It will take another month or two to get a visa.'

'Could you at least stay until mid-September? To celebrate your birthday with us.'

‘I’ll think about it,’ he lied. ‘Are you going with me or with Mother?’

She didn’t answer.

There were six of them. Six tired, gloomy people heading to an unknown destiny in a shaky covered lorry.

One of them, Rilke, a young man with a stubborn look on his pock-marked face, was of a tougher sort. He rested his elbows on his knees, clasped his hands, and studied the ashy faces of his companions, telling himself again and again that he would never be reduced to their pitiful state.

His throat felt dry. He felt dust grind on his teeth. But the greatest inconvenience of all was the uncertainty. He scanned the blank faces again. The question on everyone’s mind, but not their lips: ‘Where are we being taken?’

‘Transported to another place? But why so few of us? To be killed? Why waste petrol to take us so far? Besides, we’ve been showered and given clean clothes... To work? Makes little sense. Only two of us are strong enough. That one is old. This one is too skinny. And the Red Cross is as good as dead.’

The Red Cross was the only person Rilke knew: they were from the same barrack. A sad man of few words, worse for wear, with that dejected look on his thin face that Rilke didn’t like in people. He had to make an exception for the Red Cross, though, because the man was kind, truly kind – clumsy, foolish – but kind. At the risk of being beaten, he often engaged

in negotiations with guards about medicines and blankets for sick people. This had earned him the nickname 'The Red Cross'. The man laughed when he first heard about it, and that was the only time he was seen laughing. He said his real name, but nobody remembered it. They just kept calling him the Red Cross. 'Good man,' Rilke thought. 'Good man... But spineless. By the looks of him he gave up a long time ago. People like him don't survive anyway. And he knows it. Pity, really...'

The lorry stopped for about half an hour. They could smell food and hear people chatting. Rilke's stomach groaned. He rubbed his aching thighs to help circulation. 'This has to end soon,' he said. No one bothered to make a comment.

Rilke tried to focus on happier things. It was a sunny day, judging by the bright light peeping through cracks and holes. They could hear sparrows chirp briskly. The noise was growing – it sounded like somebody was throwing bread crumbs around, and more and more birds raided the place to sample the treat.

'Unbelievable,' Rilke thought. 'A few millimeters of plywood separating me from normal life. Spring, freedom. Sunshine. Chats with friends over a beer or two. Flirting with girls. No, better not to think about it.' He caught the Red Cross's eye and pointed at the elderly man, as if asking, 'How is he?' All this time the man had been sitting with his face buried in his hands. The Red Cross touched his arm and said quietly: 'You can lean on my shoulder.' The man shook his head. Maybe he was praying, and as soon as Rilke thought about it, something biblical happened:

the back side of the lorry flung open, and a bucket of water was shoved in, a whole bucket of fresh, cool water. 'Hey, things aren't that bad,' Rilke said, splashing and cheering just like one of those sparrows. The Red Cross nodded, rubbing water into his scalp covered with thick jet-black stubble – the only convincing evidence of his young age, Rilke noted to himself.

The doors slammed and the engine started. The Red Cross supported the old man, who nearly fell off his seat. It was getting hotter. Their spirits flagged again and they were almost rocked to sleep when the lorry stopped with an abrupt jerk. No more than fifteen minutes had passed since the previous stop. Rilke thought it was strange. Perhaps, there was something wrong with the lorry. Then they heard hurried footsteps and barking reprimands: '... Supposed to have arrived half an hour ago...' Inaudible voices delivered explanations. The back of the lorry flung open again.

'Frankel!' the barking voice called.

'It's me,' the Red Cross said quietly. Five heads turned towards him.

They all sat in silence, not knowing what to think or say.

'Frankel! Out!'

Frank rose carefully, bending his head. He took a few seconds to balance his tall, thin body, then shuffled to the exit and jumped off the lorry. For a moment Rilke thought he was sitting in a dark cinema and watching a film. The bright rectangle in front of him showed a sad man, a glimpse of grey road behind him, dusty

bushes. The man looked around, blinking and shielding his eyes from bright sunlight, then slowly walked out of the frame. The camera didn't follow him. The film finished with a howl of rusty hinges. It was dark again. The engine roared, and Rilke finally came back to reality. It felt empty. He wondered if the remaining four men felt the same. Nobody said a word. 'I didn't even have time to say good bye,' he thought.

Chapter 2

Frank was now sitting in the back seat of a car. He was still none the wiser as to where he was being taken, or why he had been separated from the group. He knew he was in no position to ask questions. He didn't even dare to lean back in the seat. He was sitting stiffly, looking at his coarse, heavy hands lying on his lap. He noted with some dull resignation that he didn't want any answers. Not now, not yet. This intermission was too precious to be wasted. Every pore of his being was soaking up hungrily the fragmented glimpses sliding past him.

What a beautiful day it was! It looked just as beautiful as it had sounded through the walls of the lorry. Frank knew he wasn't supposed to see or enjoy it. Out of the corner of his eye he stole glances at the ordinary scenes of ordinary life. Life. A man repairing his car by the side of the road. His little son squatting nearby and hitting a stone with a spanner. Two girls pedalling away on their bicycles. One of them shouted something to the other over her shoulder. She had blue ribbons in her pleated hair and a lavish bunch of wild flowers balanced between the handlebars of her bicycle. As the car overtook the girl, the buttercups glided past Frank, bobbing their bright heads cheerfully. Then there was a dog chasing a group of screaming children, two women hanging up their washing. Lovely pictures that had no idea how lovely they were. They flashed by, far

too quickly for his disabled senses to take them in. He was stringing them hurriedly like beads. Later – if there's still any 'later' for him – he'll be savouring each, rubbing their bright colours between his fingers, imagining their smells and sounds. Forbidden joy, stolen or borrowed. Surely there was a price to be paid. 'I'll soon find out...'

The car sped on smoothly, purring like a well-fed cougar. The scenery was changing in the meanwhile. The countryside was left behind. It was a landscape now, fresh and cheerful in its spring attire. The green leaves, yet untouched by heat and dust, glittered brightly, and he imagined he could hear them rustle in the wind. The day began to wane, he noted; the shadows stretched and swept across the moving car like a cool, loosely knitted shawl. Houses peeked through the thick canopies and quickly slipped out of view. Just as he wondered again when and where this bliss was going to end, the car turned off the main road, slowing down slightly and then gaining speed with a soft pull. He swayed back and the leather seat obediently took the weight of his reclining back. He could almost hear his shoulders, spine, legs moan gratefully and he was suddenly in so much pain he could barely breathe. Fortunately, the fit soon subsided, and trickles of air started seeping into his contracted lungs. He opened his eyes and looked stealthily at the driver, who apparently hadn't noticed anything. In a couple of minutes the car pulled into a driveway. Still feeling a little giddy, Frank stepped out onto the warm gravel and looked around to see a white villa of exquisite

Neo-Renaissance beauty, half-hidden behind lush lime trees.

He was led inside through the back door, along dim corridors. The air was cool, fragrant of citrus fruit. He could hear a lively commotion somewhere in the house and as he walked, the sound grew louder and louder until he reached its source and was left to wait at the entrance to a large sunlit room.

It looked like the end of a family dinner. About half a dozen of children were chasing each other around, enjoying the fun they were allowed to have and doing so reasonably, knowing that the adults might be busy with their conversations but not too busy to tolerate the noise if it got too loud. The table had already been cleared. The adults were sitting at the far end of the room, sipping their drinks, talking. The radio was mumbling in its corner, sullen and forgotten; its monotonous singing was drowned out by the animated conversation and bursts of laughter.

Frank stood still, mesmerized by the scene and the sound of a dance tune played on the radio. He hadn't been noticed yet. Maybe it was the slightly hazy air sliced by the slanting rays of the evening sun that did the trick. For a moment he considered going back to the corridor and wait there, but he couldn't move. He thought that if he stirred, the magic would dissipate and he would become visible.

A woman in a white apron came in through the opposite entrance, carrying a tray with lemonade. The children surrounded her, clamouring and pushing each other. One of the women got up from her chair, put down her cup, and helped

to hand out the glasses. ‘Children, quiet! Erich, be a darling, switch off the radio. Erich!’ Erich didn’t bother, and the radio remained on. A group of men suddenly laughed in unison at something a large man was saying. He looked very pleased with himself, his fleshy face was red with excitement. He leant back in his armchair, gesticulating with his cigar and trying to speak over the laughter.

The maid collected empty cups and glasses and headed for the door almost bumping into a teenage boy who had just entered the room. He stepped aside to let her pass and lingered by the door instead of joining the company. ‘What is it now?’ ‘Your parents wanted to see you about something...’ His face was bored and sour. He thrust his hands into his pockets and leant against the doorpost. In the cheerful family scene he stuck out like a guest on a reluctant courtesy visit. And he meant it: he was wearing a crisp shirt, a tie, and a new suit – a perfectly fitted jacket and knee-length trousers. His wavy blond hair was neatly cut and parted on the side. Fresh suntan, peeling nose – a splendid picture of healthy Arian youth. When he saw Frank, his blue eyes widened and stared.

Frank turned around as he heard a woman’s voice behind his back.

‘I knew you’d be surprised, dearest. You remember Robert Frankel, your early teacher. He is here to mentor you again.’

Frank recognized the woman immediately – Frau Krauss, thinner and older than he remembered. ‘And her son is... He

can't be...' Frank turned to look again and was slightly startled to see that the boy was now standing right in front of him.

He grabbed Frank by the arm and spoke in a brisk, categorical tone:

'It's bedlam in here. We are going to the garden.'

'There are rules, young man...' a man's voice warned loudly over the noise of laughter and chatter. 'Magda, tell him...'

'Your father is saying that Herr Frankel is not a guest...'

'Have a nice squabble, you both,' Helmut said dragging Frank away. 'I think I'll miss this one.'

The French window rattled as he closed it behind him.

'Sorry about that,' he said in English. 'That's the only manner of speaking they understand...'

A gust of warm wind threw the maddening smell of lilac blossom into Frank's face. Had he heard right? Could it really be true that the ultimate purpose of his journey was to play music? Or was it just another cruel dream? That and everything else around him – the garden, the sun, the warm, fragrant air, the dandified boy walking beside him, kicking the grass.

'Your English has improved,' Frank said cautiously to cover up the fact that he had been barely listening.

Helmut laughed.

'Thank you,' he said. 'To think only I couldn't say 'Tea for Two' once without making five mistakes... I lived in England with my relatives for seven years. I only moved here two months ago. This place is awful, nothing like Leipzig. It doesn't really

matter, because I'm going to New York soon... But first I need to reclaim my German to explain to my family what insufferable idiots they are, and how much money I need.'

He glanced at Frank sideways and said after a moment's hesitation:

'I thought you were in New York.'

'I was. I returned home about two years ago.'

'But you did very well there. They talked about you even in London.'

'You're exaggerating, of course...'

'I'm not!' Helmut protested, getting more and more excited. 'I knew many people who admired your band and sought out your records... And I have quite a collection of magazines I bought in London – I read everything there was to read about jazz... I've watched the films you wrote the score for, about a thousand times each! Your 'Matilda' is an absolute masterpiece, by the way, we must play it here and now. Oh, you'll never guess! I have your recording of Chopin's E minor Concerto. Can you believe it?'

Frank was surprised and touched. He also felt deeply embarrassed because he didn't have much to say in return.

'I couldn't always follow your progress, Herr Krauss, but I've heard from my colleague about your successful debut in London...'

'Herr Krauss?! You don't remember me at all then? Frank, it's me! Call me Helmut. Or just Hell.'

Frank was trying to tell his age. 'I'm twenty-six,' he counted,

‘that makes him, what, seventeen or eighteen?’

Helmut looked younger, maybe because of his medium height, or maybe because of that healthy thinness and springiness about him that suggested he had been routinely exercising since an early age. Swimming and tennis, Frank remembered. And of course he remembered everything else. Good old days in Leipzig. Frank was studying at the conservatoire then; Helmut was a small boy, spoilt, ill-bred, but distinctly talented. They practised duets for almost two years, very successfully. In fact, they were inseparable then and simply adored each other. Frank smiled at the memory of that time. But he just couldn’t project that dear funny face on the features of the stranger standing in front of him.

‘How long do you think you could stay with me for?’

Frank’s face fell again.

‘As long as your family will have me here, I suppose.’

‘Really?!’ Helmut jumped and grabbed Frank’s wrist. ‘But, Frank, this is wonderful! Think of what we can do together! And we don’t have to stay here in the first place. We’re going to America. We’ll rise to dizzy heights, you and I!’

Frank didn’t know where to begin.

‘I can’t go anywhere, Helmut. I’ve been in a camp. Strictly speaking, I’m still a prisoner.’

Helmut hesitated then raised his eyebrows understandingly:

‘Ah... The camp...’

‘I think your parents were trying to say that I’m not allowed

to leave the house.'

'Nonsense... You are with me,' Helmut said slowly and bit his nail.

His mother's little plan sank in at last.

'You are with me,' he said again, resolutely, shrugging off some unspoken thoughts. 'We start tomorrow, and today you play Gershwin for me. Please,' he remembered to say. But he forgot to ask whether Frank was tired or hungry.

Chapter 3

When other inmates dreamed out loud about all sorts of miracles that could change the bleak course of their fate, Frank only smiled and said nothing. A coup. A new law. A powerful friend... He thought he was the last person to have a chance, and the Krausses were the last people he was expecting that chance to come from. In fact, he was ashamed to admit that he had almost forgotten his little Helmut.

‘How could this have happened? When I lived in America, I thought about him all the time. I wrote stacks of piano music imagining I was writing for him. But when hard times came, I never once remembered him... Our music lessons, our friendship... How could I have forgotten all that? A passing thought about that bouncy child would have been enough to get me through any misery.’

And there had been a lot of misery to get through. His story wasn't extraordinary. After receiving the news of his father's arrest, he hurried home to seek any help he could find to get his father out of prison. He knocked on every door, appealed to all the authorities. Some friends tried to help, but there was little they could do; others simply advised him to sail back to New York without delay. He kept trying to save his father, but all his attempts failed, and it wasn't long until he himself was arrested. A mistake, he still hoped. Just as it was with

his father. A ridiculous misunderstanding. 'It will clear up soon enough.' It didn't. It only gained momentum downhill, and before he knew it he was no longer himself. Music – his life and soul – was something alien and distant. His past, filled with playing and composing, was now a chapter from somebody else's biography. It was only a short matter of time before his physical death. He resigned to the idea the way he had resigned himself to everything since Sachsenhausen had become his home. As the camp routine dragged on, he found it increasingly difficult to attach any emotion to what was happening to him. When he came down with pneumonia, he wasn't afraid of dying; when he recovered a little with the arrival of spring, he wasn't happy to be alive. 'I won't survive another winter in this place anyway...' And he had thought about it only yesterday.

Today he was standing in a sunlit, spacious kitchen and waiting for Frau Krauss to speak. It was late in the morning, past breakfast time. The dishes were already washed and dried, the staff had been sent away. An untouched cup of coffee was steaming on the table. She smoked slowly, avoiding looking at him. She had aged.

'So, Herr Frankel. We meet again.'

Her eyes swept over him, up and down, down and up, and finally rested on his face.

'You remember Helmut?' she asked calmly. 'Answer.'

'I remember him.'

'He hasn't changed.'

She took her time, sipping her coffee leisurely.

‘How long have you been in Sachsenhausen?’

‘A year and a half.’

‘And you belong there, you know. You belong there...’

She shivered and reached out for another cigarette. The pack was empty.

‘Are you married?’ she suddenly asked.

‘No.’

‘My husband is worried that you might run away. Or do something stupid. Like make a call to somebody. Or put some ideas into Helmut’s head.’ She tore open a new pack of cigarettes. ‘If you do run, you’ll be caught of course. And sent back to the camp.’

Frank said nothing. She looked him full in the face.

‘If you compromise this family, you compromise Helmut, is that understood?’

‘I understand.’

‘You’d better. You wouldn’t be standing here if it wasn’t for him.’

‘I understand.’

She leant back in her chair and gave him a long stare. Her face, Frank suddenly realized, expressed curiosity. Satisfaction and curiosity. She almost smiled.

‘Once you said he had a great future, and you wanted him to be happy. Do you still feel that way?’

‘I do.’

‘So I told my husband.’

She rose.

‘Follow me. There’s something you must see.’

They left the kitchen and went up a short flight of stairs, through a narrow corridor and a sun-drenched entrance hall to the part of the house where they had first met the previous day. The dining-room was cool and dim.

‘Open the curtains.’

Frank did as she said, turned around, and stood dead still.

The long dining table was paved with glittering rectangles of photographs. She watched him closely, savouring the effect.

‘Come here.’

The colour pictures were her greatest pride. She showed them first. ‘You don’t feel the truth unless you see it in colour. The way we, German people, see it.’

The bright pictures showed a big celebration in the centre of Berlin. ‘May 1st,’ she explained. ‘I took them last year.’ The streets and avenues were bathing in the blood-red drapery of the Nazi regalia. Frank recognized the Lustgarten Park, the Stadtschloss, Friedrich Wilhelm University. There were many other streets and parks that didn’t look familiar.

He was drawn to the photographs of people’s faces. She noticed his interest and became more excited and talkative. ‘I knew you wouldn’t miss these. I took them during the parade. Look carefully, they are very important.’ Nicely dressed women carrying flowers. Cheering children. Close-ups of grinning faces.

Families, companies of friends, many were not aware of being photographed. Moments of carefree joy, triumph, togetherness.

Their eyes met for a second. Hers were shining with infinite pride.

She motioned for him to go to the other side of the table. 'The new Berlin. The Berlin of the future,' she announced and pointed at a large laconic building: 'This one was completed not so long ago. You haven't seen it of course.'

'No,' Frank thought. 'But I might have made bricks for it...'

'I like the clean lines. And the proportions,' she said. 'I like the simplicity of the new architecture.'

Then there were idyllic scenes of the countryside.

'Bavaria,' Frank recognized the landscapes. She nodded.

'Our friends invited us last autumn. I had planned the trip as a welcoming present for Helmut, but he stayed in England for another year, so we went without him.' Frank looked at the pictures of ordinary people doing ordinary things: a woman digging in her garden, a vegetable vendor chatting with a postman, a family picnic by a lake. A small Kneipe. A group of rejoicing elderly men raising their mugs of foaming beer to the camera. That one came out particularly well. The wrinkled faces expressed roguish, schoolboy camaraderie, and each in a different way – a curious display of human characters. Frank smiled.

'I don't know these people,' she said, 'but at the same time I know them very well. My fellow Germans. Over the years we've

been through thick and thin.'

She took a pause before introducing the next series.

'The Olympic Games. The only time in seven years that Helmut came to stay with us.'

There was indeed a picture of Helmut with a stadium in the background. He stared past the camera with a sour, toothache expression on his face.

'The best picture I managed to take of him that summer. You can always count on him to spoil a holiday.'

The remaining photos were of Hitler youths standing in rows and doing some sort of drill. The same group having a rest in the shade, chatting, eating their snacks. Then they apparently agreed to pose: the last picture showed them lined up in front of the camera and performing the Nazi salute.

'Helmut could have been one of them.'

She walked over to the central window and straightened the curtains.

'I blame the Auldriges. It's their fault. He could be a completely different person if he hadn't insisted on staying with them. They never disciplined him. He always did what he wanted. Had he been in the Hitler Youth, he wouldn't have turned out like that... He needs to be reminded that he is German, Herr Frankel.'

She had visibly softened. Her face was relaxed, her movements were calmer. There was no trace of mockery in her tone now; she put 'Herr' in front of his name with emphasized

politeness.

‘He has been brainwashed by his uncle. He has been told lies about this country – his own country. And he has some preposterous ideas about our Fuehrer and his policies. He refuses to see that we are a young state surrounded by enemies. He... he sides with these enemies. It hurts to even say that.’

She offered him a cigarette.

‘Thank you, Frau Krauss, I don’t smoke.’

‘Helmut does. You must tell him to quit.’

She opened the French window and they stepped outside. It was the beginning of a warm, sunny day, but the terrace was still in the shade of the house. Frau Krauss shivered with chill and leant on the railing.

‘There are many cures for arrogance. Alfred says a Hitler youth camp is still the best option; a few months of discipline and training will knock sense into him. But I don’t think it’s that simple, Herr Frankel. It’s what on Helmut’s mind.’

She plucked a dry leaf and chucked it away.

‘Has he told you about his plans to go to America?’

‘Yes, he has.’

‘I hold you responsible for that.’

She narrowed her eyes, looking at something in the distance. She had long curly eyelashes and a beautifully carved profile.

‘You are responsible for a lot of damage, Herr Frankel. It’s time for you to make amends to this family... You’ve been to America. Now look me in the eye and tell me what prospects

my son might have in that country.'

Frank stared at the ground, unable to move or say a word. His insides cringed, breathing was painful again. The question caught him off guard. He could only wish he had more time to come up with a helpful answer.

'Helmut... Helmut doesn't fear the unknown,' he stammered. 'Quite the opposite: it thrills him. I heard him play yesterday. Your son is a very talented and accomplished musician, Frau Krauss, but I'm sure you have been... told that many... I mean... America holds a wealth of opportunities... Everything's possible there...'

He stopped in the middle of the sentence; he simply knew that whatever he said didn't matter. She waited, smiling a condescending smile.

'You finished?' she said after a pause and raised her head proudly. 'Germany is the country where only one thing is possible – common well-being. You've been in a labour camp, you have first-hand knowledge of what the modern Germany is about. Hard work. We all work hard here, Herr Frankel, to raise the country to the heights of unrivaled power and prosperity. Make him see that. He may go, but one day he will come back – just like you did – and he will regret every minute wasted away from home. Because Germany will be a completely different country: an immense power, towering over the world. Imagine how disappointed he will be when he realizes he has contributed nothing to the common cause. He will have matured by then...

But right now he's young and stubborn... He doesn't understand many things, he refuses to understand. The future of this land rests on the shoulders of the boys of his age. He must take his place in their ranks and do his duty. He is German, Herr Frankel and he is rooted here, in German soil.'

She shivered again. Before he knew what he was doing, he picked up a shawl from the back of a chair. She declined his gesture with a dismissive shrug.

'Let's just walk a little,' she said abruptly.

He muttered apologies and put the shawl back.

They stepped off the terrace and took a path along freshly trimmed bushes. Frank got goose bumps when he felt the sun on his skin and smelled the unripe aroma of cut twigs.

'I understand that the Auldridges' influence was very strong,' she was saying. 'I don't expect overnight changes. You may tell him that I don't mind waiting. But little by little he must reconsider the lies he has been told and agree to give Germany a chance.'

His silence was beginning to annoy her.

'He should be back any time now,' she said, finishing her cigarette hurriedly. 'We must put the photographs away.'

Frank followed her back to the house, feeling helpless and awkward. Fortunately, the tension thawed when she started sorting through her photographs, providing detailed comments about each. This time he tried to respond and ask questions so that they could have some semblance of a conversation.

The Hitler Youth series had a special place in her heart. 'Fine young men, very industrious, very respectful. The Fuehrer's pride and joy.' When she asked Frank directly about his opinion, he told her the truth: he thought she had the perception and skill of a professional photographer.

She was silent for a moment.

'I am glad you said that,' she said slowly. 'Not because I am flattered. I am not a professional and that's the point. You are looking at Germany through my eyes, Herr Frankel, the eyes of an ordinary woman who lives in this country. Nothing's staged or beautified here, this is the truth. Look at these people. They are not posing in front of important-looking journalists, they are completely sincere. Look how happy they are. There was a time when they had no jobs, no prospects, no means to raise their children. It has changed. Germany has changed, it's a new country now... Remember you said that Helmut deserves a great future.' She swept her arm encompassing the table: 'Where is a better place for him to have this future? He is German. He belongs to...'

She broke off, thinking she had heard Helmut come home. She was mistaken.

'He doesn't like my hobby,' she explained. 'He thinks that photography is a form of taxidermy... It would be best if he didn't know about this little exhibition. Give me that folder, please. We'd better hurry...'

But Helmut was back earlier than she expected. His bright

voice blasted outside like a signal flare:

‘Where’s Frank?’

The incoming tide of his brisk step flooded the hall and corridors until he stormed into the room with a strident ‘There you are!’ His smile vanished in an instant, he surveyed the scene with distaste.

‘Jesus, Frank,’ he drawled. ‘She’s been showing you around her cemetery, hasn’t she? Come on. My father bought you a violin. The best I could find in such a short time.’

Frank jumped to his feet, then looked at Frau Krauss hesitantly. Helmut let out an impatient snort.

‘Let’s go,’ he said in English and grabbed Frank’s hand. ‘You don’t need my mother’s permission.’

Frank could barely keep up with him as they were marching through rooms.

‘Has she been lecturing you?’ Helmut asked loudly. ‘About the mercies and bounties of Adolf Hitler?’

‘Helmut, please,’ Frank mumbled, already out of breath. ‘If we don’t play something here and now, I’ll drop dead.’

‘Something? I’ve been making a list of the things we must play,’ Helmut waved a piece of paper like a signal flag and crushed it in his fist. ‘It doesn’t make sense. Because we must play everything.’

He still didn’t see – or didn’t want to see – Frank’s bruised hands with broken nails, his haggard face, and unhealthy thinness. He appeared to remain endlessly unaware of his

shuffling step and ill-fitting clothes; his perfect ear was deaf to an occasional tremor in Frank's voice or hoarseness in his breathing. As it was usual with Helmut, it was hard to tell whether he was demonstrating concern or its complete absence, but Frank was infinitely grateful for whatever it was. The last thing he wanted was to talk about his ordeals and wallow in his sorrows.

When they entered the library, Helmut quickly closed the doubled doors behind them and slid an old telephone receiver through the handles – a habitual precaution by the look of it. 'To ensure privacy,' he explained. 'My family tends to think this is some kind of concert hall and they can come here at will...'

Frank stared at the gleaming shape of the violin lying in its open case.

'No, not right now,' he said, starting to feel panicky. 'Trust me, you don't want to hear me play. Not today. Perhaps we could...'

Helmut cut short his stammering excuses:

'Just go ahead, Frank. You never know with my mother. She might send you back to the camp first thing tomorrow morning.'

That was convincing enough. Frank picked up the light body of the instrument and passed the bow across the strings. The sound, to his tearful relief, came out clean and forgiving. 'The violin... It's perfect...' he said. 'Helmut, thank you... Thank you...' The words quivered as they came from his constricted throat; he blushed and smiled, clearly embarrassed at how overwhelmed he felt. Helmut went on with his forthright, no-nonsense strategy: he nodded, barely acknowledging Frank's

expressions of gratitude and attacked his own warm-up routine with iron-hard confidence.

Frank hesitated another moment and tucked the violin under his chin again. The plain sound of exercising quickly did its work and brought order into the world. It felt like waking up on rocks after surviving a shipwreck: his body was bruised, his soul was shattered, but there was life to be lived and work to be done...

He quickly sorted through the sheet music that Helmut had prepared and picked Mozart's Violin Sonata in F Major, K 547, the most obvious and merciful choice. The decorous, mellow discourse between the piano and the violin developed smoothly, like breathing, and the notes glittered like tiny gems, lining the path to the most refined ends of expression that no words could ever reach. What a wonderfully aching feeling it was, what a delightful walk home through the enchanted forest of Mozart's music. It was an absolute, primal peace that had never known turmoil, or suffering. Liszt's language, on the other hand, was the language of revelation: it voiced human emotions and disturbed Frank's memories, inviting him to release his painful experiences musically.

Together they chose Liszt's Consolation No. 3, arranged for piano and violin. First Helmut played the original version for piano solo, and he played it exactly the way Frank liked it played. The piano sang, pleaded, whispered – the lyrical nuances and confessional intonations were breathtaking. Their first attempt at playing the duet was also decidedly successful. Frank didn't

have much time to dwell on what was happening. Perhaps the very fact that he had been out of practice for a long time was deeply meaningful in the context of that piece: the piano, in every sense of the word, accompanied the diffident voice of the violin, wrapped the sorrows with its soothing flow, and carried them to the moonlit bay of peace and tranquillity.

The telephone receiver rattled in the restraints of the door handles: 'Helmut, darling, dinner's ready.'

Frank came back to reality with a shudder. It was already evening.

'We're busy,' Helmut snapped.

'Darling, you haven't eaten today yet... And your father wants to see you.'

'Tell him I'm busy,' Helmut shouted again and then rose impatiently. 'What the hell, I'll go and talk to him.'

'I... I'd like to thank your father in person... For the violin... For everything...'

'Don't bother. You don't owe him anything. I just wonder what he has to say... We need a break anyway. You must be starving.'

They didn't play after dinner. The magic simply wasn't there anymore. After talking to his father Helmut was in the right mood for committing a murder.

'Is it because of me?' Frank asked.

'Oh, no, never mind. It's the same farce every day.'

He threw himself on the sofa and covered his face with a cushion.

‘Shall I close the curtains?’

‘No... But I wouldn’t mind some jazz.’

Frank sat down at the piano and after some thinking played a jazz improvisation of Consolation.

The evening light gilded the furniture, the piano, the carpet, accentuated the shadows, and gave the place the mysterious air of tastefully arranged theatrical scenery. Frank realized with a jolt of surprise that even though he had spent most of the day in the room, he hadn’t really seen it yet. He looked around curiously. Taking advantage of the asymmetry of the house, the library was a brighter, happier, and more spacious sister of the dining room. He liked the old-fashioned bookcases soaring to the ceiling, the semicircle of large French windows that let in plenty of light... Helmut explained that the books had been left by the previous owner, nobody in the family read them: Doctor Krauss had his own book collection, Helmut still felt more comfortable reading in English, Frau Krauss preferred magazines... She had even been planning to refurbish the library and convert it into an art studio. As soon as Helmut heard about it, he installed his piano there and claimed the territory for himself.

‘It’s a nice room,’ Frank said quietly.

Helmut’s voice droned through the cushion:

‘You should have seen the music room in Lady Agatha’s house.’

‘Do you miss your life in England?’

‘Missing is a useless feeling.’

‘Why did you come back to Germany?’

‘And why do you think?’ Helmut sat up. ‘I only have my mother to thank for everything... A friend of hers, a journalist, was involved in some sort of campaign aimed at luring German expatriates back to Germany. She somehow talked him into writing about me. Together they made up a story about how unfairly I was treated by the British public. The article made it sound like was being ‘pushed aside, overlooked, and underrated’ because of my German origin...’

‘Did your mother really do that?’

‘It’s a war, Frank. A never-ending war between me and my mother. She doesn’t even care about music, the man who wrote about me had never heard me play... Apparently he just read a few critical articles my mother had cut out of English newspapers.’

‘And what did they say?’

‘I’d only just started and the reviews were generally positive. But I also had a rival – who doesn’t? Howard was older, bolder, and the critics enjoyed arguing about him... My mother’s friend bathed him in so much dirt that the stench immediately reached London.’

‘It wasn’t your fault. You had nothing to do with that publication.’

‘Nobody said I did. But Howard died of tuberculosis shortly afterwards. And things started to look and feel different.’

‘It was a coincidence.’

‘It certainly didn’t feel like one. As if I were partly to blame... People just wouldn’t forget that stupid article.’

Politically, things were developing faster than he could follow. One day he simply realized that he had grown and so had the relative weight of the fact that he was German.

‘The Auldridges supported me of course, every step of the way. My uncle kept telling me not to worry... I thought it was time to move on, that’s all. And it was an easy decision to make because I had no intention of staying in Germany anyway.’

‘You don’t have to. You should go to America as soon as you get your visa. I’ll be all right.’

‘Of course you will. I’ll find a lawyer to look into your case. Surely something can be done. It’s going to take time and effort.’

‘You have no idea, child,’ Frank said warily.

He was longing for Consolation with all his being, he wanted to play. Instead he had to listen to Helmut’s daring plans verging on fantasy. ‘It’s important not to rush things... We’ll have to seek legal help first... And then you’ll need to get a visa. Difficult but not impossible... We’ll contact your friends living in America...’ He talked and talked – well into the late evening. There was one thing Frau Krauss was right about: Helmut was a stranger in his own country. Too young to see things as they really were, too impatient to listen. ‘He doesn’t understand that our paths have crossed only to separate again, perhaps forever. We have no time to waste. How am I supposed to explain that to him? We must play every day, every minute, play everything we haven’t played

over the past seven years, everything we'll never have another chance to play.'

Frank's eyes roamed around the room and kept returning to the piano; the remnants of liquid of gold poured by the setting sun were quickly melting on its black surface. He listened for the sounds coming from outside the library. The house hadn't gone to sleep yet, it wasn't too late to play.

'Frank! Are you even paying attention to me?'

'Of course,' Frank nodded. 'Of course. I'm listening...'

It wasn't just the futility of Helmut's plans. Frank gradually gave in to the feeling he had had the previous day: grown Helmut was the final proof of the irreversibility of time. Nothing could bring together the pieces of the life Frank used to have – his childhood and adolescent years spent in Leipzig, the years that had forever defined happiness for him. Nothing can turn back time. 'Except for music. Music can bring back memories. This boy has changed beyond recognition, but the formula of his musicality is the same – the formula of life potion... The memories he stirred earlier today when he was playing Mozart... What was it if not a miracle? It felt like being at home again, I caught a whiff of my mother's favourite perfume, saw a glimpse of that freckled girl with golden-brown hair – my father's piano pupil I had fallen in love with as a child... Music can bring back memories, at least some of them... I'd be happy with the tiniest reminder of what life used to be like. Besides, Helmut needs it as much as I do. Before we go our separate ways, we

need to close the chapter and seal the past.’ He followed this line of thought, completely forgetting that he indulged in the same weakness he had criticized Helmut for – clinging to fantasies and turning a blind eye to reality.

Frank stretched out on the narrow bed and stared up at the night sky through the slanted roof window. Every inch of his body ached with dull pain, and lying in bed didn’t help. He now often had difficulty falling asleep even when he was very tired. His thoughts roamed aimlessly, waking him up again and again.

‘Robert!’ he heard a familiar voice and felt somebody touch his elbow.

‘Morning, Herr Meisinger! Sorry, I didn’t see you.’

They were both in a hurry. Herr Meisinger was chairing an examination board that day and was already in danger of missing the start of the exam. Frank was to meet with his friends to discuss the new musical play they were working on together. He was running terribly late: Kurt and Lotte were waiting for him in a café on the opposite side of the street showing every sign of impatience. When Kurt saw Frank stop to talk to an old gentleman, he rolled his eyes with irritation and pointed at his watch.

‘How is your health, Herr Meisinger?’ Frank asked politely, casting an apologetic look at his friends.

‘Fine! Never felt better, my dear boy. What are you doing tomorrow evening?’

‘Nothing that can’t wait.’

‘Oh, good. I’m giving a lecture on Bach for the Hermeneutics Society. You probably heard me talking to your father about it the other day. Now the thing is, I need you to play Toccata and Fugue to open the evening and create the right mood. You won’t have to stay for the rest of the lecture if you are busy. I know it’s short notice, but that useless Rudolf has come down with a cold again...’ and he eyed Frank’s light coat disapprovingly.

‘Don’t worry, Herr Meisinger. I’d be only too happy to help. Tomorrow evening I’ll be at your complete disposal.’

‘Excellent!’ The old professor glanced at his pocket watch and began to edge past Frank. ‘In that case, I’d like you to play a few more pieces during the lecture to illustrate my points.’

‘Of course.’

‘... And perhaps something to round up the event. I’ll give you a call later today, we’ll discuss everything in detail.’

‘All right.’

Frank nodded to his friends meaning, ‘I’ll be right with you.’

‘Oh, one more thing!’ Herr Meisinger turned around abruptly... ‘You remember my pupil, little Krauss?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Remember we saw each other last week at a party at the Kaufmanns’? You played four hands with a little boy...’

‘Oh yes, of course! L’enfant terrible...’

‘You do remember then. I’ve been thinking, Robert. Perhaps could you practise duets with him.’

‘Duets?’

‘Yes, duets. The boy is very talented, but I’m already worried about him. He hates four-hand pieces. He refuses to play with other instruments. He doesn’t even want to try.’ He shook hands with a passing colleague: ‘Morning. I’ll be in a minute.’

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