Part One

MY CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

"Death embraced the child even before his birth—he eluded it then, but the grim reaper will come and get him in the end for the second time!"

I was the "child" in question; I was spying on the speaker through a crack in the door. The wrinkled crone, with sparklingly beringued fingers and brightly rouged face, seemed like death herself. Sitting at a little ebony table, deftly dealing the cards, she was looking into her own future, but whispering about *me*; to whom, I no longer recall. But I can still see myself, eyes bulging with fear at the level of the doorhandle, lurking behind the half-open door, eavesdropping on the grownups' secrets. But this time it was *my secret*, the tragedy was my ill-starred start in life.

At the time the folk in our village were still prone to talk of what had happened "up at the manor." Ever since I could remember I knew they were keeping it from me, I kept trying to find the key to it; I got used to eavesdropping. Above all on Berta, the old tattletale.

She was a lady "who had seen better days," one of my widowed mother's live-in charities, who couldn't keep her mouth shut. I knew that one day she would let the secret slip. But now, when it finally did happen, I would have happily escaped it, had my feet not been glued to the ground from the sheer, cold horror of it all. There I shivered behind the door amid Berta's flood of words:

"His mother was three months pregnant with him, when the occupying Serb soldiers sawed through the great oak door of the hallway. There were nine of them, soldiers during the day, marauders at night. They were searching for money and jewellery. Nine of them, sneaking in on November 9, in 1919, *three nines in the date! And the fourth, they themselves, the murderers*! Do you know that the number nine is even more unlucky than the number seven? I miscarried twice, once on the 19th, the second time on the 29th!

I could tell you even more, but what's the good of it? Suffice it to say that nine of them broke in on the 9th in '919!

It was a frosty night, almost winter and a full moon. Did you know that more murders are committed at full moon?...They surrounded the house. Four of them remained outside as lookouts, the others sneaked in, none of the doors were locked, only the front gate that they sawed through. They reached the lady's bedroom; she woke to find armed figures with sootblackened faces surrounding her bed."

Carried away by the horrors, Berta flung the cards onto the table in order to emphasize the story with her two hands. Gesticulating wildly, her chignon undone, the white hair falling onto her shoulders seemed yellowish in the pale light of the kerosene lamp; the lamp drew a magic circle around her, the hag was even more frightening than the story gushing out of her.

"The young mother is startled from her sleep. Her only concern is that her husband, asleep behind the wallpapered door, shouldn't emerge unexpectedly. She'll be able to handle them somehow, she'll give them all she has....Where is master?—asks one of them in broken Hungarian. Where is money?—says the other, striking her with his rifle butt.

No more questions were asked, only blows rained on her, while awaiting an answer. They beat her poor pregnant body with their rifle-butts. And these blows smote not only her, but her unborn child as well. I'm telling you, the boy was also involved in the tragedy. The fetus, I know, doesn't think, but it feels, and when his mother was wounded, the blood she lost threatened also its life, the unborn in his mother's womb was a witness to the death of his father, his brother, the shooting, the blows struck it too, it heard the entreaties, the excuses:

The master isn't at home...the master is away...here are the jewels. And the little money....There is no more, who would keep money at home what with inflation, the lost war, an occupied country? It's all yours, just go....See, you've scared the little boy, he's barely four.... Don't cry, my darling, they're leaving in a minute....Take everything, just go!

But they didn't. The blows kept raining on her. They knew the master was at home, they expected more money from him, they struck her wherever they could...she clenched her lips that no sound should escape them...her little boy cried instead, oh God, only her husband shouldn't

see this...but the candle flickers, the concealed door opens. There he stands in his long white nightshirt, with his Browning in his hand...

Suddenly darkness...they blew out the candle, there was only the flash of the shots. Five Mausers against the small Browning...and outside four more gunmen at the four corners of the house.

At dawn thirty-six bullets were found in the wall of the young woman's bedroom alone, plus two, one that had entered the little boy's stomach, a shattering dum-dum bullet, another that pierced his mother's lung. Thrashing, gunshot, loss of blood, and she still had enough strength to drag herself along the long, freezing corridor. That is where she collapsed, that's where their family doctor, Doctor Vilmos Kapolyi, found her. The first man to venture at dawn into this house of death, after the young groom alerted him. What a doctor! And what patients! They found the master at daybreak outside the village. His body wasn't cold yet, his tongue was still moving, he wanted to say something, but with six bullets in his body....The little boy died from only one next noon. The young woman knew nothing of all this, gunshot wound in her lung, double pneumonia, pregnancy, her body black and blue. She was the only one driven to the hospital in an ambulance towed by six oxen across the sea of sand surrounding the village, escorted by our doctor. And this doctor lugged an even heavier load than the six oxen when he saved the life of the woman and her unborn child.

Concluding her story, Berta's attention turned once again to the cards. Pinning up her hair, she flicked the cards, her rings aglitter, mumbling to herself whenever one of them bode no good. Her listener, whoever it was, kept quiet. And I trembled behind the door; ever since I could remember, I thrived on creepy stories, but not this one, it touched me to the quick. I wanted to weep, but anger took hold of me instead; a rage to pass on my panic. I flung the door open, bounding into the circle of light, staring into the old hag's face!

"Jesus Christ!" screamed Berta. "My God, the child! I should have known it was him....Eavesdropping again. Now he found out at last, how he came into this world. What do I care! He would have found out sooner or later anyway. The sooner the better!"

Berta snatched up her weapon, her gold-framed lorgnon, which in those days, the twenties, distinguished and would-be distinguished old women used for enhancing their failing eyesight as well as their view-

points. She lifted it to her eyes jingling her bracelets, to see what effect my life's beginnings had on me. I stuck out my tongue at her with all my might. The gesture came about automatically, it surprised even me. I was an overly well brought-up, polite little boy, but at that moment I needed to let off steam.

Berta broke into a grin, she swallowed what she was going to say: And not a word of this to your mother! She knew I wouldn't say anything, just as I knew she would keep mum about my rudeness. Lace and jewellery aside, Berta was a wicked old woman. And despite my immaturity I instinctively grasped the waggishness of the wicked. Why? Was it because I was taught a lesson from the start?

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The villagers called the house where we lived "the manor," although it was only a country house. It was built four hundred and fifty years ago, but never completed. Every generation stuck something on to it, or demolished a part of it. With its thick walls, burdened by a bulky roof, with its mistrustful barred little window eyes that my mother had had affixed after the murders, it was ugly but comfortable, like an old man's well-worn shoe.

Mother's innovation was the pillared covered drive: the "*porte cochère*," as she called it. At first four-in-hands used to trundle clattering on its asphalt surface. The single-story ancient country house took on a more distinguished air with its pillared frontage and, faintly though, began to resemble a mansion. It began to make Mother forget she had married below her station, when she moved from her childhood's grand chateau on the hillside to the lowland country house of tarot-playing landed gentry.

The distinguished drive received a twin, a wrought-iron gate with a shaded red-brick archway encircled by pillars. Far too splendid a structure considering the dusty village road leading up to our garden. This too the people labeled above its rank, calling it a "park."

Drávatamási, that is what our village was called, had a population of six hundred and forty-three; among its thatched cottages only a very few boasted a tiled roof. Acacias shaded its broad softly springy sand-covered road. Draft horses had to tense their tendons even when pulling

empty carts. Oxen were more suitable, there were also more of them around.

Our home was at the lower end of the village, a sentry line of slender pines announcing the start of the squire's sphere. The golden-yellow sea of sand continued past the vaulted wrought-iron gate. Next, nature itself ennobled the scene, a number of gigantic plane trees shading the long house anchored behind it. "If times ever improve, I shall have a second story built!" Mother used to say. Times did change, but in the opposite direction.

An orchard adjoined our garden and a pine-covered hillock. Beyond it the Dráva hurried on its zigzag course under its lofty bank. Here it was wider than the Danube at Budapest, opalescent or angry grey, sweeping along uprooted trees, dead bodies, occasionally the bloated carcass of a cow.

At times it built a mile-long sandbank during the night, at others it washed away the regular island. Each dusk we walked to its banks to watch the sun drown itself in the Dráva. I was always led there by the hand, because of its murderous reputation. The river had snatched two young girls from our own family, Father's sister before her wedding, who drowned in it with her bridesmaid, right before Mother's eyes. She never got over it, dreading the swift neighbor. She resented also that each year the Dráva pinched a few inches from the Hungarian riverbank, just where our ploughlands lay. It deposited its loot on the other side, swelling the Trianon-created new country Yugoslavia, as if it were not big enough already!

From the window of our enormous attic you could see a corner of the Dráva: it shimmered among the green foliage, just like a mirror, luring the watcher. But as I was not allowed anywhere near it, I sneaked up to the attic, peeking at it from there. Mind you, the attic itself was pretty scary. In its darker nooks bats hung in bunches. Near the southern window large suitcases stood in line, like so may coffins. That is what they actually were, sheltering the garments of our dead: frock-coats, striped trousers, blue hussar uniforms, red riding breeches, sky-blue hunting jackets, trailing evening gowns. All of them reeked of mothballs, although their locks hadn't been touched for years. On those rare occasions when itinerant actors came to the village, they borrowed some of the attic's treasures. Mother, who jealously guarded the relics

of my dead father's not overly-cherished family, opened the treasure trove for the sake of these troupes. She lent them pieces of furniture as well, and bought a row of tickets for the staff, but she herself never attended any performances, never giving a reason. She merely sent her regrets and good wishes with the costumes.

The north window of the attic opened onto the village. Onto its straight-as-an-arrow only main street. Where the row of thatched mud-brick houses ended, stood the hamlet's only real hill, that is where the village buried its dead. Sinking graves, crumbling wooden crosses. Some gravestones adorned with crosses and photographs of the deceased. Our family occupied pride of place here too, in the crypt built on the flat top of the hillock. An exact replica of the African fort defended by Gary Cooper with his Foreign Legion comrades in *Beau Geste*. Limestone walls, small cross-shaped windows, just like embrasures. Its roof was the open sky, cypresses and two pine trees cast their shadow on it. Below them six graves framed by concrete searched the sky between the branches.

Each and every tomb had several inhabitants, at least two, like the outermost one, where Father and my four year-old elder brother rested together. Entry to the crypt opened from the nearside of the stone wall. As soon as the occupants arrived, they were immured; instead of a door, memorial plaques showed where they had disappeared, their names, dates, and family crests adorned the plaques, announcing who was who, whom they married, when they left the realm of the living. I was to find out much later that places were kept in father's tomb for both Mother and me.

The inscription under the coat of arms on their plaque didn't make any secret of their brutal passing:

"They died on the night of November 9, 1919, murdered by Serb soldiers."

Father's and Endre's final home, the fort, was visible from the northern attic window. Their antenna, which they used to communicate with their old home was the pair of pines towering above their grave; when the wind blew, they murmured messages to the ancient house and their pine-paladin brothers guarding it. The distance between our house and the crypt couldn't have been more than a couple of kilometers. Each week we visited our departed. Mother kept the key of the crypt's barred

door in her handbag, next to it in the same chamois case was a larger key, that of the house. The key of the replacement for the oaken door sawn through by the killers.

Once night fell, Mother locked each and every door of the old eyre. And before she retired, she herself made the rounds of the entire house, rifle on shoulder, kerosene lamp in hand. She peered under the beds, behind the furniture, opened wardrobes, making sure no one was hiding anywhere. She checked whether the windows and shutters were secured, twice turning the keys in each lock. Lying in my little brass-bed (the same one in which my brother Endre had bled to death), I listened to Mother's steps and the clicking of the locks with bated breath, before falling asleep. Nighttime was frightening in our house, each night we tacitly realized that perhaps tomorrow we too would move to the other end of the village, onto the top of the hillock.

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If I received lessons about death earlier than other children, the same applied to history. One of the first names that etched itself into my mind was *Trianon*.

That ominous treaty was signed shortly after my birth. It caused the Dráva to become the country's border. The larger portion of our property was on the other side, a ferry line connected the two parts; not only was the far side larger and the land more fertile, that is where the better part of the stud farm, the cattle and farm equipment were kept. After father's death, his best friend took over the management, a Croatian nabob, Count Aladár Jankovich, Ata, as he was known to the family.

Ata was panic-stricken because of Versailles and Trianon, he sold everything, his own estates and those of ours on the Yugoslav side, to the first buyer offering cash. The deposit was received, but after that, good-bye Charlie, there was no more! We could chalk up our losses along with those of Trianon.

The remainder of the farm—according to our family doctor, Doctor Kapolyi—resembled Vienna, the imperial capital: an enormous head on Austria's truncated body, too large to keep its balance. The granary, a two-story building at the center of the farm had been constructed in my

grandfather's day for a two thousand acre estate, it was as imposing as Mother would have liked the house to be, but it stood half empty, a measly three hundred and fifteen acres now growing the wheat, rye, and oats. But there was a weighing-house and a stable for draft horses, gaping emptily: eight pairs of horses were shivering in it instead of sixty. Only seven of the fourteen stalls boasted occupants in the livery stable. A single racehorse, aptly named Lonely, remained in the seventh, living up to its epithet; no one would ever race against it again. He was sold later on, Mother grieved for him.

The barn, where the corn was kept, was airier than necessary, it wasn't even half full, just like the hayloft, the pigsty and the sheep-fold. The countless buildings were too great a burden for her, but Mother stubbornly had them renovated with the motto: "By the time my son grows up I want to leave everything to him the way it was when I took over."

Poor soul, she hadn't "taken over," everything was thrust upon her. Her father-in-law, my paternal grandfather, put an unexpected full stop to his sixty-seven years in the room next door: he shot himself through the heart. Mother found him, made all the arrangements in the absence of my POW father, had him buried. Count Ata managed the estate until father's return. After that he administered the property for four months on his sisters' behalf as well. Then Serb soldiers extinguished his life and that of his son Endre. Ata became my guardian, then Trianon came and the estate on the far bank vanished, as did all of Ata's fortune. I vaguely remember his last visit, but possibly the recollection sprouted from reconstructing oft-told stories. Ata informed Mother that Trianon had gone to the head of cash buyers, all we possessed on the other side we could kiss goodbye, together with all of his. He himself, responsible for the sale, feels hopelessly miserable, and sees nothing for it but either to emigrate to America or blow out his brains.

"Not that!" protested Mother. "We'll manage somehow and, of course, we'll sue. Truth is on our side!"

"America or the bullet!" Ata insisted. He chose the pistol a week later, because it was closer to hand than America. Mother, who had barely got out of mourning, once again donned her black dress, black pearls and veil, and helped bury Ata.

And we continued to live on our dwindled domain. Father's sisters received their due, I, his heir received the inner farmstead, the imperial

capital, with the house, the park, the apiary, orchard, servants' quarters with superannuated retainers, pensioned-off horses and a speck of land, with three hundred and fifteen acres—large head and truncated body. Trianon's doing, repeated the relatives, the retainers.

At dusk, when my nanny Marika and I bade farewell to the sun and the Dráva, she pointed to the other side from the high riverbank, where the hills of Yugoslavia loomed in the distance: "Do you see all those fields, paddocks, houses? They all belonged to you. And to Hungary. Evil people stole them from us. But when you grow up, you'll reclaim it all and you'll punish them. You'll seek out those who murdered your poor father, and then they too shall receive their just deserts....When you grow up, you'll make a good match, and the estate will once again be large, and this mutilated country will also be large, when you grow up, we'll take back what was stolen from us...."

I heard this litany not only from my nanny, but from so many others that, in contrast with most children, I didn't want to hasten the passing of childhood. I was apprehensive of all the expectations pinned on my obscure future.

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My nanny, Marika, was a young widow from the village. She had lost her husband early, like Mother, but for her the world hadn't come to a standstill, life went on, full of promise, expectations. With her thick dark hair, velvety brown eyes, full, ever-smiling mouth, Marika was sunshine incarnate. The first lesson she taught me was: the world is your oyster, seize it: "let's go quickly, get washed and dressed, soft sunlight is awaiting us outside...we can roll around in freshly fallen snow, the entire park is painted white...look at that fog, let's throw ourselves into it, two steps, and we'll be lost, what an adventure!"

And when nothing happened, when everything was depressing and appeared hopeless, the Fairy took charge of our amusement. Marika led me to the huge walnut tree, where the Fairy had buried red foil-wrapped candy for us among its massive roots.

Marika was not only a ray of sunlight, she was story-telling personified. Tales gushed out of her, of witches, fairies, robbers, hanged men, devils, buildings that suddenly sank into the ground and disappeared forever, treasures hidden in the woods; her tales were full of

sudden turns, with love and revenge, and in the end the wicked ones always received their comeuppance. In Marika's mouth even our family tragedy became a story: father was murdered, he went to Heaven, I shall take my revenge, and all will be well. Marika's story was different from that of Berta's. My frightening genesis was eerie, but as it ended well, all was well. I told Marika what I had overheard from Berta: that I would die twice.

"The old witch!" cried Marika passionately. "She shouldn't have... she shouldn't have told it *that* way. But how would a witch know? It isn't true that you came into this world condemned. It was the other way around: you brought help, you helped your mother overcome the spell cast upon her!"

"What spell, Marika?"

"The one she had been cursed with, because she left the grand chateau, she moved here against her father's wishes, and chose the one she loved, your father."

According to Marika, Mother had been the princess of a grand chateau, towering upon the hill, with innumerable rooms and innumerable servants. She, Marika, knew this, as she had been there herself. She had seen with her own two eyes what a mighty lord my grandfather was.

Yet my mother left everything behind in defiance of her father's orders. And his second wife, Mother's stepmother, the Baroness Tilda, was a witch, who cast a spell on her:

"Let your happiness be short-lived, lose everything dear to you," said the witch according to Marika. "And it seems that it all came to pass. The Great War came. Your father was a very brave man, he volunteered, won many a medal by his valor, but to no avail. The Russians captured him, he was away for years until finally released. He walked across half the world to get home, here to Hungary, where his young wife awaited him and a beautiful little son, your brother, the firstborn. They would have lived happily ever after, had the witch's curse not worked,...then came the tragedy."

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Once again Marika and I were watching the September sun from

the banks of the Dráva, as it immersed itself into the greyish-pink spume, its last rays painting the Croatian hills a violet hue. Tiny horses were pulling a minuscule cart on the ribbon-like road on the far side. "That too must have belonged to us," sighed Marika, who rarely missed an opportunity to chalk up our losses.

Thunderous noises reached us from the house, as a carriage trundled onto the asphalt of the pillared drive. Our dogs bolted from us, welcoming it with loud yelps.

"It's only the doctor!" said Marika. "It's Wednesday, that's his day off. That's when he comes to visit, to give his horses a good run, gulp down his tea, and pinch me a bit, the dirty old lecher!"

We too ran all the way home. It was indeed the yellow hansom from Barcs with its two prancing black horses, their shiny bodies covered in foam. Doctor Kapolyi loved speed. He sat on the driver's seat, flinging the reins back to János, the coachman, who, with his ostrich-plumed derby, polished brass-buttoned dolman, always managed to make our kitchen-ladies' hearts beat faster. Our doctor leapt off the tall driver's seat with such ease, as if he too were but a lad, and not a corpulent middle-aged gentleman.

"What does lecher mean?" I whispered to Marika gasping for breath. "And why dirty? Doc is always elegant and well-groomed."

"Well, I just said that," murmured Marika. "Forget it. I didn't talk to you anyway, its all nonsense. He is a good doctor, and did you a lot of good. Don't ever forget, it is thanks to him that both of you are still alive."

Doctor Kapolyi noticed us, and instead of going towards the steps, turned in our direction. We met at the avenue of lime trees, and he shook my hand.

"Hello, my friend! Grown a bit again since last week, eh?" exclaimed our jovial district doctor, "and the pretty nanny is even prettier, if that is possible. I've never prescribed anything better than her."

He doffed his panama hat, performing a courtly half circle with it, rapped me lightly on the head; by then my hand was already reaching into the pocket of his khaki suit where, as ever, the little blue box of bonbons was waiting for me. Marika also received something from him, his beringed chubby hand energetically patting her rounded derrière.

"Get those hands off me!" snapped Marika, repressing a smile.