

Master Walcha by Gideon Haran

And with the drop of poison slowly coursing through his veins to permeate his body, Doctor Robert stretched out in his chair, which was not his to begin with, and felt his body cooling and he recalled the warm, bonny gaze of his second wife, a cellist, and the kindness of Atalya, whom he had come to know as his last journey had been drawing to an end. He further recalled the mammoth frozen rivers, which he had witnessed back in the Russian front, where the flow would come to a near standstill during the harrowing winters, with the thick, hard layer of ice standing as barrier between the air, the ruthlessly cold air, and the pristine water beneath, and what with rivers all frozen, he could not tell where from or to they had been running.

Doctor Robert's blood ran boiling through his veins, mad as he was with himself for once again failing to perform the timely life-saving actions for those whose lives mattered to him most, and Doctor Robert knew all too well about the blood's course through his veins and troubled himself with questions of what his reply might be if he were to be asked, that very moment, with the poison hurtling away through his bloodstream like a faraway snow sled bound for the fingertips and toe-tips, and yes, what his reply might be to himself were he to be asked to take stock of his life. And he laughed to himself, for there remained just a single question unsolved, which would probably forever remain an enigma unless he answered it at once, as the drug was pooling in his heart and flushing his head, and a full halt was now imminent and he was forever to hold his peace and the unsolved question was to remain a mystery, at least for him, even after his death. To say nothing of the fact that none but him knew in fact that he had been grappling with that question over the years and taking stock of his life, and he wished to say that despite the fact that his, Master Robert's, lifelong undertakings had been mostly devoted to the common good, not least his taking Coda, Master Mouse's she-dog, under his roof following the latter's death, to cite but one such charitable instance, Master Robert was not without some dark sides that were better left untold, like that time when, as a military doctor in the Eastern Front, he would perform medical observation on Russian POWs without obtaining their consent.

As the war drew to an end, and with Doctor Robert himself a POW held by the Allies, he was very much terrified by the prospect of being snatched upon for a pack of American cigarettes only to be tried in the Allies' court martial for war crimes on account of these observations he had once performed on those hapless Russian prisoners. He therefore resolved that if he survived the POW camp unidentified by name with impunity, he, Master Robert that is, was going to be a reborn man with no trace left of his former identity, and he vowed to retire, for the second time in his life and once and for all, from his occupation as a doctor. And he made up his mind that this time, unlike the first time around, he would pursue his resolution and identity. He further resolved that he would no longer be bound by the Doctor's Oath and made up his mind to grow a beard to disguise his facial features. He moreover grappled long and hard with his name and wanted to change the first part thereof, as well as the last, then find himself new given names to reflect the change he'd be taking

upon himself. He finally resolved to keep his first name, but changed his last one to Walcha, Master Walcha being a renowned harpsichordist and organist, as well as a blind man who had learnt by heart and ear the entire Bach keyboard corpus. And so, without notes, Walcha would spend many years playing the organ at the Church of the Three Kings, Frankfurt, and it was none other than this Helmut Walcha who epitomised for him the sheer and absolute musical erudition, even more so that French César Franck, or French-German Albert Schweitzer or Franco-Flemish Guillaume Dufay. He generally found it hard to believe that a man like Helmut Walcha, as would dedicate most of his living hours playing Bach on the keyboard and never see the light of day, or any light for that matter, other than the light of his faith, would be capable of wreaking damage or inflict hurt. And so, immediately upon his release from the POW camp unscathed, and with impunity at that, he set out on a journey by foot, with no particular direction, leaving behind the madding, razed cities, and now had to provide for himself. For on the day of his release from the POW camp he had nothing to his name but a Laissez-passer document signed to Master Walcha and the tattered clothes on his skin and an old photograph of him and his son plus a pack of American cigarettes, unfiltered, which under certain circumstances could be of more value than human life itself.

Rejoicing in his impunity, Master Robert was nonetheless offended at the notion of his life's worth proving lesser than a pack of cigarettes, for none of the other POWs had taken the trouble to turn him in. And so, be it as it might, Master Walcha, with his meagre belongings and the knowledge still stored in his head took up all manner of workfare gigs that followed the war, like removing the ensuing rubble and identifying the bodies of fallen buried thereunder. At nights, before falling asleep, he would put pen to paper to write down his memories of the war, and of his late wife, later to go down as his first wife, and their mutual son. His notes were handwritten small and cramped due to paper shortages, and he would roll and stuff them into a small used army flask, which he in turn kept deep inside his knapsack. He further stuffed the flask with a photograph of himself holding his son in his arms, a relative small, rather tattered picture.

Master Robert would sleep in halfway camps and eat in soup kitchens organised by the Red Cross, and eventually, following a year-long or so of wandering, which saw him suffer largely from cold, hunger and toothaches to boot, Master Robert managed to amass some money and stumbled upon a valley of rolling vineyards and fields, far from the razed cities, where he promptly made his home. It was there that he started to work as a mailman and was very pleased with his job, which he assiduously pursued until just before the day when the poison permeated his body. Master Robert talked to no one about his past occupations, i.e. his serving as a doctor even before the war, a fact he shared not even with his second wife, who was, among other things, a beauty to behold and cellist. For all his considerable medical reputation, he, Doctor Robert-turned-Master Walcha, failed as a physician in saving his first wife and his only son, the product of his marriage to his first wife, and the death of both, i.e. his first wife and only son, was to some extent the result of his medical negligence, which made him despair of himself and vow to renounce his medical occupation and live as an abstinent recluse in a deserted train wagon.

Master Robert, future Master Walcha, spent a long time living in the deserted train wagon, eking a living by playing to public houses while fiercely guarding his cover and he would have probably carried on with his life had it not been for Justus, his childhood friend as well as a revered homeroom teacher for his subjects in the boarding school, who came to his aid. And so, thanks to Justus, he once again practiced medicine as the in-house doctor of the prestigious boarding school in which his good friend was teaching, a home-away-from-home for high school-age boys. And Master Robert, now once again Doctor Robert, served as the in-house doctor there at the boarding school until the day when all its pupils were conscripted into the war effort. He too was conscripted as a medical doctor despite having tired of the profession and notwithstanding his detestation of wars and his self-perceived pacifism. Master Robert further kept secret his paying his way through medical school by playing the piano in public houses and assorted brothels, and his past remained a sealed box, and nor would he ever discuss how his life had unfolded with the villagers, not least his second wife, a native villager cellist, in that valley that was steeped in superstition, where garlic and an iron horseshoe served to ward off bombings, sickness and curses from homes, better than any cement, vaccines or common civility ever could.

It was actually his wife, which had more than a hint of pastoral rural simplicity to her, who earned success as a solo cellist or playing with different groups, in the region as well as in far-flung cities. And her rural streak, which brought to mind the primal nature of the African tribes encountered by Dr. Albert Schweitzer back in Lambaréné, Africa, struck Master Robert as jarring with the profound spirituality of her playing, making him suspect that she too had a hidden past.

So engaged was he in overwriting his previous life that he ceased to smoke in public, even though in some distant past they would referred to him as “No Smoking”, not because he was a non-smoker, for he would smoke quite often, and not just cigarettes, but because the deserted train wagon – converted by Master Robert into his living quarters following the death of his first wife and only son – sported a large sign that read “No Smoking”, a vestige from its days as a second class car. Having succeeded in erasing all remnants of his past, including his past as a pianist of distinctive style, he nevertheless could not erase or deny his passion for music and playing. For all his love to his second wife, who, again, was a cellist, among other things, and for all the joy he derived from the peace and comfort of his new marriage and life as the village mailman, there in the valley nesting between the vineyards and fields, Master Robert felt himself to lead a double life behind the ear of his wife Maria Angela, who had some Italian heritage. For throughout their married years, he would secretly, almost nightly, having made sure his wife was asleep, convene with his immortal love – who had no shape, but abounded in sounds. His wife, if she did suspect, never asked any questions about the life he had lived before arriving at the valley and village, nor about what took place inside his ear.

Morning

And Master Robert became a postman and would rise for work early each morning, mostly in pitch darkness. During the winter days, with the valley all covered in white and the rocks and trees and vineyards and roads virtually indistinguishable, he would drive his car to the mail house, even before the snowplough had had the fresh snow cleared off the roads and the ice off the paths, and if that was not enough, he would take the long way so as not to drive past Master Mouse's place. Slowly, slowly would he drive, in second gear, all alert, holding the wheel in both hands and straining his eyes to see the outline of the road under the faint lights of the car, as back in the day, no street lights could be found in the valley.

And it so came to pass that on dark winter days the car lights with all their might would spread the glow of the coiled coil filament through the frozen glass envelopes and the thick fog, and the light would break as a wave then drop, exhausted particle-fashion, down to the snow, only to be finally trodden upon a moment later by the tires before it had the chance to cool down. It was not unusual for Master Robert to have to pull over by the side of the road and step out of the car to clear the windscreens, what with the wipers getting trapped in ice, and his shoes would soak in the snow and mud. What's more, Master Robert could not always tell the road from its sides, meaning he often had step out of the car to ascertain where he should drive, and at times he would have to park by the side of the road and while away the hours on end for a vehicle to pass by and rescue him or indeed for a snowplough.

This dark hour which saw him helplessly awaiting for his rescue was particularly punishing on Master Robert and not just because of the weather threatened to draw him in the cold or the fear lest his fingers and nose freeze, but also, and all the more so, because while at the Russian front, Master Robert, then Doctor Robert, had realised that of all the professionals there to support the fighters, it was the postman that stood out as their source of joy and comfort. In the harsh conditions of the war, a letter from one's family, more than a mere source of joy, stood for assurance for, or at least a prospect of, survival, i.e. for life, more than anything else, not least hot food to stave off some of the frost.

The medical services had fallen short, overwhelmed by the high number of casualties, the severity of their wounds and the absence of any medical equipment and drugs to alleviate some of the pain. Doctor Robert could remember all too well the soldiers holding the letters from back home in their hands as he would extract from their bodies, with no sedatives, shrapnel that would tear through their flesh, as if the letter held anaesthetic properties, a soothing, caressing magic touch. Some would bit the envelopes containing pictures of their golden-haired lovers as he would dress the fresh stumps. Some would roll the letters into

cylinders to be placed inside their trousers, believing it could maintain their body temperature. The all-but-desperate would torch the letters to keep themselves warm, if only temporarily, before freezing. And Master Robert therefore resolved that being an educated man and a doctor notwithstanding, he'd rather be an educated man and a postman –after all, he could not undo his education – as his work as the postman might allow him to benefit and comfort people on the one hand, while maintaining lacklustre anonymity on the other. You may say that Master Robert felt his occupation, which he defined as a veritable mission, to carry high responsibility, although he had never taken the Postman's Oath.

And Master Robert would picture his wife's bonny gaze and bask in the memory of her eyes and anticipate and hope for the snowplough driver to make an early start. His hopes would come true at times, with the snowplough driver rising in time to help Master Robert get his car back on the road, not before shooting him despising looks for his lack of skill as a driver, and only after expressing his anger at the delay in snowploughing caused thereby, but more than anything, the snowplough driver was vexed by having to leave the warm comfort of the snowplough's heated cabin.

And the snowplough driver would hitch the front bumper of Master Robert's car to the snowplough's rear and drag the vehicle back to the road as would a knights' horse the milkman's castrated horse. There were times when the wheels would dig into the snow, only to rotate incessantly in place, whereupon Master Robert would get out of the vehicle and take a shovel out of the boot to dig away in the snow so as to free the wheels and allow them, the wheels that is, to regain their traction on the road.

Master Robert's hands would freeze in the cold, only to lose all sensation, and he would struggle to get a grip on the letters, which would in turn drop to the mail house floor, and he endeavouring to pick them up he would get down on his knees, what with the suppleness of his back all but gone, rendering it stiff as a board, and he had to hurry and pick up the fallen letters lest the information on the enveloped was wiped by the damp floor.

And on some occasions Master Robert indeed set out in the midst of a snowstorm and the white snow would cling to his grey beard and on more than one instance the snowflakes had frozen onto the beard, making it heavy as a weight and seemingly pulling Master Robert's face downward. And it would seem to Master Robert that there he was battling again with the Erlkönig.

who was pulling at his beard and prevailing over him to take his son away.

And so it went every winter, Master Robert would be the first to set a foot outside, with the crack of dawn, and the first to arrive at the posthouse to open the heavy lock and glide in his car to the roofed parking, reserved for the post staff, and none of the post staff or the villagers down in the valley knew that it was there, of all places, deep inside the belly of the parking reserved for the post staff, that Master Robert had buried the used flask containing his history.

Back in those days, he would sort the mailbags arriving on the night trains before leaving to deliver them, on his bicycle, which was no easy task on days of rain and frost. And

Master Robert would be the only man of the whole village to be out for work before the snowplough would set out to clear the snow to the sides of the road, as he remembered all too well the hapless Master Mouse, who had jumped to his death off the fifth floor of the tower down in the valley, about a fortnight after receiving a much-awaited for letter, and wished for no other man to jump off their window following a letter held up in the mailbags for even another day. Master Robert believed that everyone were equal in the eyes of God and that the postman, baker and tram driver could at time prove just as important as the greatest scientist or highest judge, and the postman did hold a sense of deep responsibility for his work and believed that people's lives might depend on a letter, just as the lives of patients might depend on the surgeon's firm hand and discretion and the anaesthesiologist's alertness. Given this responsibility, and all the more so since the death of Master Mouse, Master Robert would leave the comfort of his home at night to start the car so that the radiator liquid did not freeze and the battery did not offload its electric charge under the frost and high humidity. And so it happened that he sat curled up in his car, in his pyjamas, in the dead of night, with no street lamps and not a glimmer of light from the houses' windows, with only the little blue light of the radio device shining through the winter nights like the lighthouse in the midst of the raging darkness and Master Robert would wait for the engine's block to warm up and for the radiator water to run through, that is, through the engine's block, so that they gather the excess heat of the engine and warm up enough to avoid freezing during the remainder of the night. More than once did he say to himself that his next car would be air-cooled so that with no water in the radiator he would not have to go out at night to start it and wait, wait for the battery to be charged with enough energy for the car to be started. And Master Robert would nevertheless sit in the dim, frozen, non-heated car even beyond what was requisite, for he loved to listen to the radio night-time shows, where they would play musical pieces for connoisseurs, that is, lesser known pieces than those played during the day and it was there, inside the car, in the dead of night, listening to the AM mono radio that produced the only ray of light in the valley thanks to a little blue indicator light, it was there, of all places, that Master Robert felt it to be safe enough to risk closing his eyes to indulge in enthusing listening, for in his distant past he had been a pianist.

Master Robert had once been considered a promising pianist and on weekdays, would play the piano to the conservatorium audience, and the pipe organ on prayers and holidays, to the church goers. He had further played in clubs and whorehouses for a living, as a student, but preferred to keep this bit secret. But it was actually in those small hours, where he should have been lying in the arms of his cellist wife or vice versa, that Master Robert resorted to the bosom of his real, incorporeal love. It was there, in the little car cabin, of all places, that Master Robert felt that he could be himself, for a change. And indeed, Master Robert did not know all of Bach's keyboard pieces by heart as Master Walcha had, but could play most of them and had earned, as a student, some prizes and scholarships. He particularly recalled the words of Edwin Fischer, who had reassured him of his stellar future as a pianist and believed a day would come when a night-time radio show would play him perform, as he had recorded some of Bach's partitas for the radio station and had never once heard the recordings since. On his car seat, gazing at the northern star on night, he felt that somewhere far away a man looking very much like him was sitting in a pail and watching him, just as he was watching the northern star.

More than once did Master Robert fancy his car as a wondrous horseless post chariot and the muffled horn as the post horn alerting of the imminent chariot coming through. On those nights where he would stay to work at the mail house to sort an influx of letters, Master Robert noticed that the snow had not been cleared off the roads by dawn. And on his way out of the post house, riding his bicycle, the roads would be covered in snow and no trace of the snowplough passing by could be seen, and in his heart he raged at the snowplough driver but did not let his anger be known.

Cycling became harder with each passing year and he would have to gear down going uphill, which he'd never had to do before, and more than once was forced to get off his bicycle and walk it. And in trails where he'd ride fast, he felt his power giving and his heart grew tired and he would start sweating and panting even going downhill and was mortified to see even the kindergarten kids effortlessly riding past and Master Robert did realise that his time to retire from his post as the mailman was coming, due to both his age and his health, and he knew not what he would do once retired. So consumed was Master Robert with his mission as the postman that he made no time for other stuff and no preparations for the days when he was idle and out of work.

Nor was it just his creaky bones or his aching, no longer supple joints, for his eyesight too was diminishing and no longer could he make do with his glasses to read the tiny letters on the back side of the envelopes, and he now required a magnifying glass.

With each passing day, he realised his deteriorating sight was more and more in the way of fulfilling his calling, and he began making his notes very large writ and would apply large stickers on his car radio so that he may tell the buttons apart.

In his night-time wanderings through the streets of the village down in the valley he would ask himself how many of the villagers were awake and how many were asleep and whether there was any of them who might from time to time be thinking of him, of Master Robert that is, known to them as Master Walcha, or whether any of them knew that he was a former pianist, among other things. He would further wonder whether any of the villagers knew that Mahler's Third Symphony featured a post horn, which looked every bit like the one painted on his postman knapsack and the post cars, and that this horn was not part of the regular rollcall of orchestral instruments and deploying it therefore conveyed a message.

Listening to Goldberg Variations as Played by Glenn Gould

Master Robert sat in a home that was not his own and was getting ready to listen to the new record he had borrowed without permission from another home, and he took the record out of its sleeve, which was embossed with thirty photos of a young emaciated-looking pianist and he carefully laid the record on the turntable plate and pressed the play button, whereupon the record started turning clockwise. First turning heavily, as if rudely awakened from a coma, the record then turned quickly, and Master Robert did lay the device's arm over the plate, so that the needle hovered over the record's rim, then pulled the lever to lower the needle onto the record and set it on its musical track inside the record's spiral, hundreds-of-meters-long groove, and the needle now rotated at a regular, angular speed.

And watching the needle slowly descend he mused about how he knew Goldberg Variations very well from Walcha's cembalo recordings, but he was unfamiliar with Glenn Gould and never heard the Variations performed on the piano. Master Robert was thinking of Master Walcha and of Doctor Albert Schweitzer and of himself and reached the conclusion that far removed though they had been, they were nevertheless close with each other. His thoughts then wandered to Bach and Goldberg, who would have been a boy at the time the Variations had been written for him, that is, too young to play a piece as complex, and he paused for a moment to wonder what his own son would be doing had he still been alive today, and whether he would have dedicated his time to the art of the keyboard and theology or rather set his sights on becoming a pianist and doctor like himself, or on another profession all together. He tried to conjure up the image of his son, wondering whether he'd look like him or like his mother, who had died at birth, and he further wondered whether his eyes would have been as good as his own, back in the day, or whether he'd have turned out as blind as Master Walcha, and whether or not he'd have had him vaccinated for he might have avoided it lest he grew blind like Walcha, and he eventually asked himself whether his son would have had a girlfriend by that time.

His thoughts then rambled on to Mahler, who had set to music Songs on the Death of Children by Friedrich Rückert, who had lost two of his children to scarlet fever, and little had Mahler known, while setting the music for those songs, that not long thereafter the songs would become his own lamentations for his daughter, also claimed by scarlet fever. And from Mahler his thoughts then turned to Schubert and Goethe and the Erlkönig and he pictured them coming for his own son, in a spacious carriage, hauled by eight horses, with two lights at its front and at least seven horsepower because you there's always that idle horse putting up a show, and a baggage case in the rear, locked like a safe. And it was a dark, cold night and Master Robert wondered whether this was an ordinary though plush, or a speedy post carriage, and recalled that the piano accompanying the singing conjured up the clip-clop of a single horse's hooves galloping along a path riddled with pits, just like a needle hurled to and fro in the record's groove.

Weighing those different propositions, Master Robert recalled that it was Schubert who had written of a post carriage, in his songs of the Winterreise, and it was actually a post

carriage that proved more suitable for him, for Master Robert that is, being a postman himself. He pictured the coachman sat in the cart, reins in one hand and the post horn in the other, which he blows hard, as Master Robert's satchel, where he carried the picture of his son, bore a drawing of a post horn, and Master Robert did recall that Bach too had composed a tune that conjured up the blast of the post horn in a farewell piece dedicated to his brother or at least to a man close to him.

And these thoughts drew in again to celebrate Goldberg, Bach's well-esteemed pupil, and just fourteen when the Variations bearing his name had been composed, and it remained unclear whether these had been dedicated to him, for it was unlikely that a fourteen-year-old could play them. Even his own pupils, those fourteen-year-olds in the boarding school where he had served as a doctor, had been very young, mostly succumbing to the war, served as they had been as cannon fodder and ferried along to the front on the carriage of their own parents' folly.

Master Robert recalled how back in Russian front, he had bumped into a group of students dispatched by the university, during their Christmas break, which they had spent helping him to operate on the wounded and tend to them, much to their shock at the intensity of the killing and horrors they had witnessed with their own eyes and the sheer futility and volume of the wretched screams and the pungent odour of gangrene-infested wounds and seared flesh and their own helplessness.

Master Robert would lend an ear, reassuring and explaining how a wheel had sprung off the cart, sending the train of thoughts hurtling senselessly, and some such students would go back home and start this miniscule movement of disobedience, inconsequential but for its actual existence, with the sheer purpose of calling out the obliviousness pervading the old world. And all those students who had proven of utility to Master Robert in battle had been of no good to themselves once executed for treason, with only the lucky few thrown out of school and spared death. And Master Robert did endeavour to figure out what his son might have studied had he survived his illness, and whether he would have thrown his lot with the oblivious masses or put up resistance.

Master Robert very much wanted his son to be a musician and maybe a doctor and theologian to boot like Schweitzer, and for him to travel far and aid people in Africa rather than stay in a dark village like the village down at the valley, only to recall that pre-war, he had not resided in the little village nestling among the vine yards and fields. And perhaps, thought Master Robert, his musings running away with him, contrary to Master Robert, who had failed to prevent the death of his son, his own son would have helped preventing the death of children, those boarding school pupils, and his mind turned back to Mahler's songs of the death of children and to the picture of his son tucked away in his postman satchel, embroidered with the post horn.

Not unlike that fearful father – who had carried his son in the post carriage, trying to reason with him and reassure him that the Erlkönig is a figment of his imagination, playing with his feverish mind, the son's that is – Master Robert was riding through the night and wind amidst the dark forest. And the horses running in full force and the carriage a-creaking, its wheels trampling the path and the two faint lights made the difference between a sense of

a successful journey and the abject loneliness of the forest. Neither did Master Robert want to stop the carriage, so as not to hear the sounds of the night in the forest and also for fear lest if he stopped, he could not resume the journey, and the father did feel his feverish son in his arms, and at the same time felt his body stone-cold and could not tell if the son was just imagining the Erlkönig, feverish as he was, or that the Erlkönig was roaming the forest notwithstanding. And the fog did stroke the boy's ruddy skin and the Erlkönig promised the boy that if he joined him willingly, joy laid ahead for him, with the Erlkönig's daughters to serve as his nursemaids, but if he did not, the Erlkönig would take him by force, which he eventually did.

The Erlkönig took Master Robert's son with no permission and without the father's knowledge and with the son unable to understand his enticement, being of such a tender age. And Master Robert further mused that Bach too had had children who had not made it past childhood and that of the roughly twenty children born to him, mere few had survived, and just like him Bach had lost his first wife, which was no consolation. He later thought about all those who had named their children only a year into their life, so to stave off attachment and the ensuing agony of farewell, should it arrive.

Master Robert wondered what a father to do once bereft of the soul of his son, whom he must carry in his arms like Abraham carrying his son Isaac, even though Isaac was not dead, and it was only the image conjured up Master Robert's mind that had it as a picture of death. What should he do after God, in his photo-finish camera, missed the blade slowly descending like the record's needle? And Master Robert thought that he, Doctor Robert, had experience the death of a child away from poetry and sheet music and resolved to quit medicine, failing as he had, for all his knowledge and stance as a young doctor committed to his discipline, to help his own son. He further wondered what he might have said to the Erlkönig had he and his son were to ride through the forest at night, surrounded by cold and drear, and he once again recalled Glenn Gould, born on the same date as Shostakovich, and deemed it a sign, as he could not play down the influence of Symphony No. 7, composed by Shostakovich about the battle of besieged Leningrad and its people's weathering the siege and Leningrad's influence on the war in general. And he also mused about him surviving the war, then about Shostakovich's son, who had become a conductor, doing plenty of justice with his father's pieces, and then about Glenn Gould, who had died in solitude, and he wished his son to do justice to his own memory too, only his son had died before he could utter a word, much less ward off the Erlkönig. Then the needle completed its descent upon the record to settle in its groove and Master Robert turned to listen to Glenn Gould.

Oda a la Coda

It was the eve of the fourth of June, i.e. the third of June, and come dinner time Master Robert and his wife sat at the table, and though it did not rain, being as it was just another dust-free valley day, Mrs. Robert asked her husband, who helped himself back inside through the back door, to remember to wipe his feet in earnest before he walked in. And Master Robert had a black streak across his trousers from the bicycle chain, and the couple sat at the square table loaned to them by the parents of Mrs. Robert, who had been busy all morning cooking one of the couple's favourite meals.

Mrs. Robert laid the table with a peach-pink, somewhat washing-faded cloth, and topped it with a pair of candleholders strictly for decorative purpose, for it was still early, the days being long and naturally lit enough at it was. Passing the salt to Mrs. Robert, Master Robert protested that he had more letters he had to deliver and that making out the addresses on the envelopes was becoming harder by the day. Mrs. Robert said, as she passed the blackeyed peas, how this afternoon she'd heard from the grocer's wife that over here too at their valley tragedy had struck, intoning the "too" as if to say that finally there was something of substance to be happening there, something to jolt the place out of its obscurity, which might in turn lend the village an inside page item in the region's local paper, catapulting locality and locals into a high-profile headline. And who knew, perhaps the village – its full name absent from the map for want of space, but also for its failure to come up with a miracle to show for, a or a locally-sourced saint, nay, a locally-sourced crucified, while even the local house of prayer could not be told apart from others – well, perhaps this village would garner some attention, with passerby slowing down to turn their gaze, or even downshift for the occasion.

The grocer's wife, so Master Robert learned, had further told her that Master Mouse, one of the valley's locals, a man whom Mrs. Robert knew only by name, had jumped off the fifth-floor window. The blood drained from Master Robert's face as Mrs. Robert looked up, and her eyes, which he loved so dearly, seemed to muse, what's happened to your appetite, to which he retorted it was nothing, and pouring the vegetable soup, which the neighbour had tasted only to find it lacking in cabbage, Mrs. Robert said she'd heard from the preacher that he, i.e. the preacher, had seen someone who looked a lot like Master Robert not far from the tower at the time of the incident. Master Robert's expression suggested this could be but one couldn't be certain for as the mailman he had been traversing the village, always with a sense of urgency and mission, and it seemed to him that not too long ago he'd delivered a letter bearing a French stamp to Master Mouse, which Master Mouse had evidently been expecting for quite some time. The neighbour further said that Master Mouse had never been seen attending a prayer, funeral or choir while Mrs. Robert wondered whether Master Mouse had any friends or relatives. Master Robert daubed the sweat off his forehead with a napkin, then shrugged his shoulders defiantly to the effect of how would I know.

He then noted that Master Mouse had a she-dog by the name of Coda, who would chase his bicycle, i.e. Master Robert's, and would often wedge herself between the wheels, thus

almost occasioning his fall. Master Mouse, went on Master Robert, would walk around the village calling for the dog to come back home, supplication in his voice, and though entreating her with terms of endearment such as Coda-girl and Kodak and Skoda and Skodak, he'd been obviously fuming to the tune of just-you-wait-till-I-get-my-hands-on-you-when-you're-back-home, and there was this one time when he saw him call her, scattering chunks of sausages to bait her back home.

Mrs. Robert gave Master Robert an I-dare-you-to-soil-this-napkin kind of glare, making the blood drain off his face and whatever appetite he had to vanish, and he could feel the vomit surging up his gullet and said that nor could you ever find Master Mouse at the inn, not even on those coldest of days where people would drink their loneliness away, and he himself could not recall seeing Master Mouse in one of those events attended by the valley's locals. Not even in during the grape harvest festivities could Master Mouse be spotted.

Master Robert got off his seat and headed to the bathroom, stifling the heaving and recollecting his first wife who would starve herself and get up during the meal to vomit on the rare occasion when she would eat, and her bodyweight had gradually diminished, requiring her to eat sugar as a staple so that she'd have nothing to vomit. The heaving dissipated as he was making his way to the bathroom and Master Robert returned to the table and asked Mrs. Robert how her practice had gone that morning. This question struck Mrs. Robert as baffling and ruffling for rarely would he inquire about her practice, and she got up and made for the stove to take out the casserole, musing that it wasn't Master Robert's habit to inquire about her morning practice, and she said the five-story building had always struck her as a bit peculiar and why would they build storeyed building in a valley that was not want for space, and that climbing upstairs was a dubious pleasure, only compounded as years went by.

She then remarked that the snowplough driver had told her that Master Mouse was not one of the tower's first residents and added that anyhow he had arrived from the city of Lübeck, whereto Bach had once walked for three weeks to hear Buxtehude and he had further divulged that the resident preceding him in the fifth-floor apartment was a sheep commonly referred around the valley as Mrs. Agnes, but she had long since moved into a house with a yard in a far-flung village, having amassed wealth during the war. The story went that she would hide people for cash, Mrs. Robert went on, only to finally sell them for parts.

It then struck Mrs. Robert that Master Robert was no longer eating and she asked that he made an effort for she had been cooking all morning, parallel to the her practice, and added that nothing ever came up to nothing over at the valley, not least someone jumping to his death. It could be, Mrs. Robert further indulged herself, that Master Mouse had left a letter, or maybe someone had driven him to take the leap, nay, downright pushed him. Mrs. Robert asked Master Robert to remind her to inquire at the barber's, and ask whether Master Mouse would talk about himself during his trim or recount the difficulties he'd experience, for at the end of the day, it was the barbers who knew the innermost secrets of the village folks, more so than even the priests with their confessions.

She then suggested the snowplough driver would be pleased to have dinner on Sunday, what with him being a lonely man, she explained, and Master Robert raised no objection though he was not in the least bit fond of the snowplough driver before ever knowing that a day would

come as to make him veritably hate the man. He suddenly recalled the apple pie he had taken earlier from one of the houses, then got up to take it out of his satchel and gently laid it on a plate and laid the plate in turn on the table cloth, at an exact equidistance between himself and his wife so that the crumbs wouldn't scatter all over as they had it, and there by the pie he placed two long spoons and he and Mrs. Robert had a taste and she even closed her eyes to savour it and wondered aloud if he, i.e. Master Mouse, had died on the spot and whether the head hit the ground before the legs. Master Robert, who had by then seen it all, put on a straight face, muttering how it didn't matter for after all, as his experience as an army doctor showed, the moment you died, that was it for good. His mind had by then wandered to Coda and he was asking himself what on earth she'd be doing all that while, and vowed not to remind his wife to drop by at the barber's.

At night, sitting inside his car, he wondered if he should address the radio station in a letter to inquire whether his recordings, those pieces he had recorded before the war, had survived. He then recalled the group of medical students who had been with him in the Russian front, some of whom accused of treason and beheaded, with him in turn subjected to no small amount of interrogations designed to find out what he might know about their plot, or what the others might have been thinking or saying, but he had known nothing and it would be years later before he'd learn about their fate. The sister of one of them students had been executed, so they told him. And as always, his mind conjured up his first wife and son who had passed, she at birth and he of scarlatina, with Master Robert powerless to save them, and once again his thoughts turned to Mahler, who had composed tunes for Songs on the Death of Children. The radio was playing a piece he did not know but liked, and he waited for when the female host would cite its title. it was a sonnet by Carl Frederick Emanuel Bach, and he wondered whether he could tell his own rendition should they play it on the radio, and consumed as he was on top of it all with the conundrum of whether it was the head or the legs that touched ground first and what with the rain starting to drizzle apace, it escaped him that the next day, the fourth of June, otherwise known as 35th of May, the birthday of Coda the she-dog, had already dawned forth.

Coda

And that morning it rained cats and dogs. Master Robert had his usual early start, and he walked out over to his bicycle, tied to the tree outside his home. It was not unusual to have one's bicycle tied to a tree only to forget the tree's situation, with the tree then growing ever taller and the bicycle still tied to it. Most trees are not as powerful as Attila the Hun and prove unsuccessful in breaking the chain, and so, as years go by, the bicycle become further away from the ground and the tree integrates with the chassis, growing through it. And Master Robert was therefore glad to find his bicycle firmly on the ground, and he checked the chain, brakes and the horn, then took a strong and long enough rope that he had found back home and coiled it around the handlebar, and put some pieces of meat, particularly aromatic and wrapped in a napkin, inside his post challis, alongside two sheet music books that were not his own, and he set out to the five-story tower down in the valley.

And Master Robert hoped he would not have to walk into any of the local villagers, and so it came to pass. Once at the tower, he propped his bicycle, not too far from the entrance, at a spot where grass was abundant, with some shade to shelter from the rain, and he started heading upstairs to the fifth floor. Nor was this an easy climb, and his legs ached while his trousers, soaking with rain, were very heavy and Master Robert knew not if once there, at the fifth floor, in Master Mouse's place, he would find she-dog Coda, and he eventually stood at Master Mouse's doorstep, with the door open wide, and he could feel a breath of cold wind against his face. Master Robert knocked on the door knowing full well there was nobody home and he nevertheless stood there waiting politely, familiar as he was, as a postman, with the prospect of surprises, like that time when upon opening the door to the snowplough driver's home, he had caught him red-handed next to a silhouette, that could, under certain circumstances, be his wife. And when he finally entered Master Mouse's place, he felt it to be largely unchanged or perhaps unchanged at all. But unlike his previous visits, he now paid more attention to its contents and various traits of the place, and could not find those garlic braids or horseshoes fixed on doorposts, common in many house in the valley. Nevertheless, signs of untidiness and neglect revealed themselves in every corner, which Master Robert found baffling. The floor was littered with books, which looked like textbooks rather than reading books, and two yellow chick dolls were placed on the dinner table. Coda was lying at the foot of the big window, which overlooked the entire valley, the very window from which Master Mouse had jumped to his death. It was still open, that window, while wind mixed with some rain was blowing in, and Master Robert walked over and saw the valley and the high snowy mountains that cradled it, and the goats grazing in the valley looking up to the snow-covered mountains and longing for the day when a hole might spring in the fence, allowing them to scale the tops and roll down the slopes and bounce to and fro and near and rear, by light or by shade, carefree and fearless, with no heed paid to the wolf lurking for them by dusk.

Master Robert could feel the cool wind against his face while hail shards scraped against his face, and his hand held the doorpost as he looked down, and growing dizzy with

the high altitude, he closed his eyes. His heart was pounding as he muttered “oh no” and shutting his eyes tight, he retreated.

His heart beating hard, he started musing on the thoughts that might occur to a man on his way down, and particularly of what Master Mouse might have been thinking falling down towards his sure thump against the ground. Master Robert was trying to guess Master Mouse’s heartrate and failed to reach a clear conclusion, as Master Mouse’s thoughts might have failed to mature into insights.

And Master Robert further thought about Coda, who knew him and his bicycle and would welcome him by running circles around him and the bicycle and sounding jackal-like howls whenever she’d spot his blue visor cap, and now, the same Coda who would chase him around was sprawled there in front of him like a lost, beached whale. Nor was she wagging her tail as he walked into the room, her black head dark as a shadow, eyes shut, legs and belly basking in the gloomy sun that twinkled in among the drops, her fur stained with pigeon droppings – and thus was Coda lying, like a dog given the stick. And there on the table, by the piano, Master Robert spied a familiar-looking envelope and a letter he had delivered to Master Mouse some days earlier, and it was from Lutetia and Master Robert shoved the envelope and letter down his pocket and told himself he would read it later, probably at night, in his car.

Master Robert turned to Coda smiling, his face radiating: “How are you, Coda-Cod? I missed your running there, when I approached the tower.” And he called her, “Come here, Coda, good girl”, but Coda stayed put. And Master Robert kneeled by her side, stroking and trying to endear himself to her with fond words, but she would not badge, with her tail stuck peg-like in the floor. With no other recourse, and as she was lying, half whale-like, half corpse, Master Robert grabbed hold of the rope and tied its other end gently around Coda’s neck, careful not to disturb her rest and lavishing loving, apologetic words to vindicate his actions, for Master Robert believed he was temporarily denying the creature her liberty. He then held his end of the rope and pulled her gently over to the door, not before issuing the two sheet music books from his challis and carefully laying them at the right hand side of the piano, from which he had taken them some time earlier, as if to avoid disturbing Master Mouse’s playing, knowing full well though he did that Master Mouse was no longer among the living. And Master Robert did hold the sheet music books for a brief moment before releasing his hold, as if placing a dagger back in its sheath and she, Coda, stood up and stared back at him with resolve, as if to say, “I’m staying right here.” Master Robert gave her a sympathetic smile to say, “I hear you, but if you stay here on you own, it will be the end of you.” And so intent on his gaze was Coda that she could read her own fears inside his eyes, and she wondered whether she was losing her modicum of freedom, as Master Robert feared, only to be transformed from pseudo-dog of some leopardine, cervid or cony origins into a domesticated canine who would never sit on a sofa, a dog that knows how to fetch the right morning paper.

His efforts notwithstanding, Coda wouldn’t badge and in her eyes, Master Robert could see Master Mouse ecstatically receiving from him the letter of invitation to the playing

competition in Lutetia, but little had Master Mouse known of Master Robert's exploits in respect to this competition, which saddened him now.

Master Robert reached inside the big challis, while looking Coda in the eyes, and like a magician producing a rabbit out his hat, he mused: "Let's see how you fancy that", and one by one, he issued the pieces of meat from the napkin, and slowly bring his hand up to her mouth so she could see and sniff, he went: "Coda, it's for you". and Coda, who loved her sausage, let alone her aromatic meat, looked him in the eyes and snarled, showing her blunt teeth, all worn and fearless, like the canines of yore, those canines that would lay waste to Master Mouse's furniture, now aligned in a castle with the dainty molars at the back and she laughed him straight in the pupils, saying: "I am not kidding and nor am I your poor man's she-dog, and I am angry with you indeed for not saving Master Mouse." Nevertheless, Coda ate the pieces of meat from Master Robert's palm, and licked his bike-greased fingers just as much as she did the meat and she wouldn't badge, telling it to his eyes that "she was not one to be won over by some morsels of meat, nor for pounds thereof, and she also demanded an explanation as to why Master Robert failed to help Master Mouse."

Master Robert had no other choice but to drag Coda gently, at first, as if to suggest that she joined him, only to then apply more force. She in turn pulled on him with commensurable power, though from the opposite direction, for Newton's Laws held true there too, in the empty rooms of Master Mouse's home. The rope stretched taut and Master Robert started dragging her, first to the door, then to the stairs, and before leaving Master Mouse's home, he tied Coda to the railing and taking brisk steps, he walked over to the window once again, looked down and muttered that they must head down from the deck to the stern, for the storm was coming, and he returned to Coda, untied the rope and together they started heading down the stairs, Master Robert willingly and Coda less so, and down there Master Robert's bicycle was waiting, like a horse grazing on the grass, indifferent to the rain.

And this descent down the spiralling staircase proved gruelling indeed, as on the one hand, Coda was putting up a fight, while on the other, she struggle to stand, as she could hardly put down one of her hind legs, and the tower did sway from side to side on the raging seas and Master Robert feared they might hit a whale or a glacier and he knew from experience that in such cases, most men would freeze to death in about half an hour and he was very much relieved to have carried on.

Master Robert believed he was doing the kind thing for Coda and moreover, for Master Mouse, who had left no will or wish behind and named none of the valley's locals or even suggested one who might take care of Coda once he'd be gone. Coda, as noted before, was not as light-footed as she had used to be, while her left hind leg was sore and even the hair under her chin, i.e. the beard, had grown white, and Coda carried within her the portion of meat and Master Robert held the rope tied around her neck in his right hand and walked the bicycle with his left one and all three proceeded together, in step with Coda, to Master Robert's home, as the rain washed Coda's fur.

Master Robert was preoccupied and knew not how Mrs. Robert would respond or how she would treat Coda, for the two had never met, while Mrs. Robert was unaware of her

existence, and with the exception of some gossiping whispers surrounding the death of Master Mouse, had hardly known of his existence to begin with. And Master Robert knew not whether his wife would agree to adopt Coda, Master Mouse's she-dog, and take her in, not least because he had not consulted her first.

Mrs. Robert was a lover of mankind but did not wish to have children of her own and found it her sole mission in this world to spread sounds. She would often tell Master Robert that their lives were happy and rich in content even with no children, and that the winter nights that she would spend playing with him listening were something she would not trade for all the riches in the world. Master Robert, who had never adopted a dog and knew not how to care for one, was happy that Coda had been spared the fate of those eastern front dogs, trained by the Russians with portions of fine, aromatic food to crawl under the Panzers, the German tanks, complete with explosive charges fitted on their bodies and a small detonator, which would protrude from their backs antennae-like. And the small detonator would rub against the tanks' belly and set off the explosives at the bottom, where the metal was relatively thin, and the dogs would be blown away to kingdom come without even receiving their last meal. And Master Robert indeed knew that Coda was untrainable and trusted that under similar circumstance, she would have mounted the tank's turret rather than crawled under its belly, and indeed be spared the explosion, though the gun and shelling noise would have tormented her, for Coda could not tolerate any piercing noise. Even the ringing of the cows' bell could startle her, so he had heard, and he felt her to be discontent with their co-walking and that rather than pulling his hand forward, as dogs would, she was pulling him back and making it hard for him to walk, not least as his left hand was holding his bicycle.

The rain poured down on the pair of them and Master Robert observed that Coda was not behind the bicycle, for a dog dragging along in the back signalled that fatigue or fragility and he wondered what he should do, for Master Robert indeed realised that sooner or later he'd have to loosen his hold on Coda. At the end of the rope in his hand, he could sense her wanting to run back to the tower, with its five stories, on all three legs, and swiftly climb the stairs to wait for Master Mouse at the foot of the big window facing the valley. And Master Robert was helpless on the one hand and cheered on the other, as each step made it closer and he brimmed with joy, for he found the enterprise of saving Coda a mission.

Not far from home, the three, Master Robert, Coda and the bicycle, could hear a young girl sitting at the porch outside her home, playing the guitar and singing in English a song that had yet to be written about a man walking down roads and a white dove sailing the seas and an answer blowing in the wind. And the song was unlike any he had known in English, which he was not proficient in, for Master Robert used to listen to lieder about the Erlkönig and the death of children, which were close to his heart, and he knew no songs that featured questions whose answers would blow in the wind to remain unaddressed, nor songs about the feelings of dogs, with the exception of Cerberus's singing in Orfeo ed Euridice by Gluck.

Master Robert stopped to stand at the foot of the porch and listened to the singing, which was unlike any other, and the voice did blow in the wind and rain and made it straight

into his ear, and nor was he required to think, for he could not fully fathom the lyrics or the hints, but knew that this tune spelled a new spirit, and that things were not as before, while last had now turned into first. Coda too was listening and the tune was much more pleasing to her ears than those sounds she had been accustomed to back at Master Mouse's, for Master Mouse could not get a single row of scores right, and she was even considering asking Master Robert to place a crown of flowers on her head, similar to the one worn by the singing girl.

Suddenly, Master Robert was overcome with fears lest Coda exposed Master Mouse's secret, for as far as he knew, none but him and Coda knew that Master Mouse had travelled to Lutetia to participate in a music competition and it was only he, Master Robert that is, who knew how Master Mouse had managed to enter the competition without getting even a single row of the score right. Let it be clear that these were not just complicated pieces like the ones featured in the competition, for Master Mouse had fumbled even pieces for kids in their early days and played like a pupil at his first music class, waiting for the bell so that he could make a dash for the bathroom.

Despite her resistance and perhaps not least for it, Master Robert wanted Coda to hold him in some gratitude as well, as the only village local to bother to pay her a visit and inquire about her wellbeing, and even offer her a warm shelter and plenty of nice meals and reassure her that he had no intention of hurting her, though this would turn out to be a promise he could not keep. At any rate, he was still in two minds about whether he was doing her a favour or hurting her, and he wondered if Doctor Schweitzer back in Gabon had had a dog too, and he could not tell. All he knew was that over there in Africa, relatively wild dogs would hunt relatively large game in some relatively large packs, rather than get blown under the belly of those large creatures, some of whom fitted with a trunk rather than a canon, as had been the fate of some dogs back in the Russian front.

He could picture the dogs in Africa biting at the live, raw flesh of the neck and unlike dogs in the Russian front, getting their descent share of meat, uncooked though it was, by the end of the hunt. And Master Robert could feel the cold and damp in his cloths and beard, for that morning it had rained heavily and he was glad as they were nearing his home. He wondered for a moment whether Coda too was cold and damp, because when walking by a dog who was snarling at her, she failed to respond, but it could also be that she had lost her freedom to become, God forbid, a subjugated animal, with no trace of vitality to show for.

And further down the road, which was ridden with puddles, what with it heavily raining that morning, Master Robert recalled how he had once carried his sick with scarlet fever baby boy in his arms, powerless to help him, as recounted elsewhere, to be recounted elsewhere again.

Standing at the entrance to Master Robert's place, the idea occurred to him to dye Coda's grey hair black or even use shoe polish, to make her look like a puppy and spare her rejection by his cellist wife, who had never shown particular interest, fond or hostile, in animals. On second thought, however, Master Robert believed that in respect to Coda, it was deep fondness rather than indifference that his wife was going to show, as well as understanding. After all, Coda, much like Mrs. Robert, was a wild, free kind of spirit, with little regard for norms or rules.

Once at home, Master Robert poured some water into a soup plate, piling another plate with additional pieces of the aromatic meat, to make her feel loved and welcome, and he patted her fur with a clean, soft towel, and shut the windows and balconies so that she could not flee, for Coda had been known to pull off some human-height hops. Coda, meanwhile, lay down by the entrance door, lurking for the first chance to escape, or perhaps waiting for Master Mouse to come, angel-like, to her rescue.

Master Robert too was waiting for his cellist wife to come back, unable to foresee her reaction to the presence of the she-dog, and as each was waiting for their own tidings, on the other side of the door, Master Robert kept cosyng up to Coda, while treating her to a slice of Gelbkäse to boot and lighting the fireplace. Sensing that Coda had settled, Master Robert reached into his pocket and took out the letter found on Master Mouse's desk, and without waiting till tonight as he had planned, he started reading Master Lampel's letter to Master Mouse, which went as follows:

Dear Master Mouse,

I am afraid you have not passed the audition. I would normally make do with a generic notification for contestants who failed to make it in. However, let me note that even a deaf man could tell your letter has largely drawn Bach's Musical Offering Dedication, in what amounts to cultural uncouthness. With all due respect, you are no Bach and I am no Friedrich the Great, to whom the offering was dedicated. Furthermore, the recording tape you sent was less than compelling and it appears you have tried to leave your mark with pieces that are unusual and may be of value to the advanced musician (Connoisseur). And if that were not enough, your fingers are ungraceful, unseasoned so it seems, while your playing is like that of some parlour pianist, easy on the listeners, entertaining the jubilant and comforting the mourners and quick to finish his bit before rushing to relieve himself. In other words, a player who betrays the abstract mission of conveying the true meaning of the piece (Werktreue), while espousing an applied brand of music, as inferior as march.

Have you noticed anyone marching here? And if you have, would you like to turn those marching parties into a uniform ensemble, marching headfirst to battle with no thought paid to the purpose thereof or to the prospect of their safe return?

My question is, what is the point of a man's playing while looking over his shoulder, as if his playing were somehow tinged with sin?

You must be asking yourself, and quite rightly so, why I summoned you for the audition. Well, it was for the sport of it. Like a graphologist, I find it a challenge to compare my impressions of a recording tape to my impressions of the unmediated, face-to-face encounter with the person playing in real time.

I suggest you consider whether you should pursue your playing or take your fingers to the typewriter or better still, become a typesetter. Here is one to ponder!

Yours respectfully,
Master Lampel,

Celebrated music teacher, veteran educator, teacher instructor, thinker and keen-eared judge.

Mrs. Robert

Mrs. Robert was at a relatively advanced age when she first left the valley, having been sent to take music lessons in the district town. This notwithstanding, and thought unable to draw any comparisons, she was not particularly fond of the valley folks, whom she found to be career gossipmongers, steeped in superstitions and above all, narrow-minded. With no suitable teacher to be found in the village, her parents, being of relative means, turned to a private teacher from town. This was in fact a student, a penniless though gifted musician, who gave her daily lessons in return for board and accommodation. The teacher further followed her practicing and his employment came with the caveat that he, the poor sod, swear not to fall in love with his subject and maintain her honour, but he, alas, fell for her even before she pledged faithfulness to him and vowed to love him for all eternity, and in despair, he attempted hanging himself by her shoestrings only for them to tear promptly under his weight, being of a lowly Spanish make.

She too had her share of mishaps and there was in fact this one ceremonial concert in a hall packed full where such were her volume of surging excitement and inner cry that the bow in her hand went flying straight into the audience. No eyes were gauged indeed, but some of the present needed stitches. The orchestra nevertheless forged on, for Mrs. Robert strum on until her bow was returned to her, though none of the bowed string instrumentalists offered her their own. This performance earned Mrs. Robert a rapturous applause and raving praises and she played two more encores on top of her usual, and was by then telling herself that she had just come upon a new formula guaranteed to garner additional encores.

Since that day Mrs. Robert would practice her bow-throw, but more than anything she liked to play for Master Robert, who though professing never to have played, with the exception of some piano lessons as a young boy, proved to be her best audience. She found it baffling – and decided it was a heavenly sign and her detestation to superstition and black magic notwithstanding, she felt compelled, Mrs. Robert did, to see the coffee reader, and made up her mind to marry Master Mouse come what might.

In no time did Mrs Robert realise that there was much more to Master Robert than met the eye and that his past was sealed shut to her, and she wanted to crack his silence open, just as she did a still sheet music, bringing the black symbols to life.

Indeed, Master Mouse would bring in the mail each and every day, but she would never talk to him of that or this, let alone about his past, paying him the due respect. Thus, the first time the two exchanged actual words was while she was at home, practicing her cello. That day she was so immersed in playing the sarabande of Suite in C Minor that she failed to register the knock on the door, yet Master Robert did not wait long, for he would regularly make himself at home in locals' houses and routinely walk around, and this time he accordingly stepped inside to leave the letter on the chest by the door. Mrs. Robert was so taken aback by his presence at her home that she launched the bow straight off the cello strings into Master Robert's heart, who tumbled and fell down holding the letter, like a photographer holding on to his camera lest it breaks, fearing the letters might fade off the page. Taking his fall, Master Robert muttered something about dogs by the names Justus and Murmansk, then got up slowly, and smiling askance, retorted by asking why, of all suite movements, of all suites in the world, she should dart a bow at him during the one sarabande which had a single voice.

Mrs. Robert got it immediately and let out an awkward giggle and being as it was cold that day, she cordially asked him in, omitting to inquire into his presence there, and offered him coffee. Master Robert left his bicycle out by the stairs and walked in with nothing but a vest under his heavy mail coat. Once inside, Mrs. Robert's, however, it was very warm and he had to take off his coat and Mrs. Robert smiled at the man with the beard, standing there in his cap and vest, and Master Robert could not fathom her smile and inquired politely if she had any family in the district town, hinting at the multiple letters she was receiving from there. Taking note of his pleasant voice, she introduced herself as a cellist and thought he might have picked a finer question but nevertheless bore in mind how he nailed the suite, promptly inferring that beneath those mail service uniforms and behind that beard, he was in fact a fellow musician.

Answering his question of how she had ended up in the valley, she said she had been born there to an old family and had she not been sent to study, she would have had to join the family business, i.e. the little factory making jams from the valley's own fruits. In fact, she went, the business was on the brink of shutting with no one to step up and take the helm. Her brothers had been killed in the war and she herself wanted to leave the village, detesting as she did the place and locals alike. Momentarily letting her sensibilities down, she was about to tell him she was still tormented over a terrible thing committed by her and her friends as children.

And the way this incident unfolded was that little Mrs. Robert, along with some friends, had pushed up to the top of one of the mountains engulfing the valley a one of their classmates who would get around on a wheelchair. Once at the top of the hill, the posse had ordered the girl to get off her chair and start walking. The girl in turn had been at a loss to see what was there about the mountains and glorious views that should allow her to get off her chair and commence walking, a task she had hitherto been unable to pull off. Yet the children had blamed her, saying that she wouldn't-rather-than-couldn't, and worked a circle around her, pointing

their fingers and calling her names, thus reducing her to tears and pleas, for nothing would make her happier than getting up and starting to walk and run and dance.

Many years thereafter Mrs. Robert would revisit the very same spot, with the friends, all grown up by then, with their children in tow, and try to show them, i.e. the children, the do-re-mi ropes with her cello and recount the deplorable tale, and when asked about the girl's fate, she would recount how she went missing during the war and how she herself wanted no children of her own, only to then break out in tears and say no more.

Master Robert smiled and said a flying bow was no reason to cry and she laughed out crying and thought he was kind and had nothing further to add and Master Robert asked why she never replied to the letters she received, for he was familiar with both directions of the correspondence traffic, and she explained these were no letters but sheet music, requiring no reply. A short silence ensued before Master Robert asked if she would be so kind as to continue her practicing now that he was there, and he vowed to make no noise and say not a word or clap hands and Mrs. Robert agreed on condition that he sat at the far end of the room. And so Mrs. Robert sat on her chair and practiced Suite No. 5 again, while Master Robert duly sat at the far end of the room as requested. All the while, Mrs. Robert noticed that he was registering her every sound and expression – when she sped up, his face suggested please slow down, when her focus wandered off his face strained, and as she thought of the Coffee Cantata, he took a sip of his mug. They even argued, without a word, on matters of timbre and he bit his lips, although she played not a single mordant, and Mrs. Robert inferred that never had she met a better listener, even at the conservatory. She would take experiments while playing for a lark and would even blunder on purpose to see his response, how his expression might change, and felt that here was a sensitive man and a kind person to boot, albeit a densely-bearded mailman in a vest and good several years her senior.

With the movement drawing to an end, Master Robert took his last sips of the cup, looked up at the clock on the wall and realising it was midday, he got up off his chair, unprompted, and said he must resume work, as one could never know who was out there awaiting a letter or what a delayed delivery might precipitate. Having thanked her for her playing and making for to the door, he asked whence she had gotten the cello and she in turn said it was a relatively basic cello bought by her father from that destitute student. Master Robert said he found it a wonderful cello and walked out into the cold air to resume his work. She, i.e. Mrs. Robert, resumed her practice and wondered what Master Robert would make of the fact that men had some competition for her affections, and she grappled with whether or not she should tell him.

Master Robert waited for the moment when Mrs. Robert received additional letters so that he had an excuse to drop by, and it would be years before she would learn, from Master Robert himself, that he even considered penning her a fictional letter from an admirer anon, only so that he could come again and see her. Mrs. Robert would further hear from him that he himself would wait for the trains carrying in the mailbags, searching them himself for the big, light envelope brandishing her name, and would be disappointed when it had failed to materialise and reprimand whoever stood around him until he himself was reprimanded for senselessly hounding his fellow men.

After their matrimony, Master Robert would tell her that since that first encounter he would often return to her place, even with no letter to show for, and sit by her window and listen to her, and would spy in her playing tales of her childhood and her parents and assume that they were no longer among the living. On one such occasion, he believed he could actually hear her equate bicycle with a wheelchair and found it an interesting proposition, what with both contraptions having a seat and a pair of large wheels, and he would further recount that he had spied in her playing her thoughts regarding the book placed on the table, but he was still spare with his words.

On one of his calls on her, he would go on to tell, Mrs. Robert told him of herself in her playing, asking him quite a few questions, not least some that made him blush. Mrs. Robert wanted him to visit her more often and would ask her neighbour, whose husband was the village's own goat milkman, to go the mail place and have some letters sent from her to herself, whereupon she started receiving letters from the village in the valley and Master Robert was happy albeit failing to get to the root cause thereof, and nor could he figure out why Mrs. Robert was receiving envelopes containing blank pages, for nothing was written in them. And when, several meetings in, she asked if he would like to come over for dinner the next day, he replied, without a word, that he would love to. And it was only as he got up and started treading towards the door that he had asked about the time, and these were the only words exchanged between them that morning.

The Roberts were happy, for both had a musical instrument at work, and said whoever had chosen a little metal horn, rather than a cumbersome cello, for the mail workers, had made the right call. And each and every day Mrs. Robert would play him one of Bach's suites and Master Robert would listen. And she would be reading his face or under his beard to find whether her playing was to taste or otherwise, or whether she'd lost the thread momentarily, or actually played *comme ci comme ça*. With Master Robert quite a few years her senior, she would jokingly refer to him as Pablo, as in Pablo Casals, and asked that he addressed her as Marita, after Casals's wife, who was more than fifty years his junior, and a decent cellist in her own right.

And when he came to see her at the dusking of the next day, she made the living room table, where years later she was to leave the one letter she would ever write him, and laid a vibrant table cloth and lit some candles and made some soup of the valley's locally-grown vegetables and cooked some priest-choking type pasta and a meat stew and this was the first time they sat facing each other without the cello to buffer, apron-like, and it was indeed Mrs. Robert's impression that he had washed his person and dressed well and combed his hair and trimmed his beard, and the two did talk about the valley and the breadth of the railway trucks, and he told of the difficulties encountered by trains during the wars, forced as they had been to ride the Russian rails, with their different breadth.

Mrs. Robert told of her brothers, who had been killed in the war, and related her desire to earn fame so that she might leave the valley for good, and God forbid that she should work in the family's farm, and her last statement did betray deep contempt. Apropos the pasta, Master Robert said that even Martin Luther, a priest himself, had composed tunes and chants and played a string instrument too. Mrs. Robert was very surprised and asked how knew all that, to

which he replied that he had read it all in one of the letters he had ventured to open. Mrs. Robert in turn said that Bach too had composed a capriccio farewell to a lover, gone to a prince's court never to be back, and had used a mock post horn to signal that farewell.

And so Master and Mrs. Robert found themselves talking about the importance of having the address clearly indicated on the envelopes, and Master Robert could indeed tell that some clandestine correspondences were being held in the village, meaning he must hold his silence almost like a priest in a confessional. But every now and then he had the chance to read strangers' letters and even spellcheck them, and on occasion he'd even redact out whole sentences that were factually wrong, or otherwise add sentences, mostly recommendations, like how to conduct oneself during illness. And when Mrs. Robert inquired how and when he had become a mailman, he told her that before the war he would work at a school-cum-boarding school, but the place had been razed, with most of its pupils killed. Believing it at first to be a temporary job with no attendant mission, a sick leave had then made him realise how important his work had been for the village folks and how ominous a place he had come to occupy in their lives, making him decide to go to work come rain or shine. He further recounted that he got up every night to make sure his car started, and she laughed, saying she hoped his other halves were accommodating, to which he laughed too, saying it had been years since he had last had such other half, and Master Robert indeed wanted to ask how was it that she lived on her own, striking him so sprightly as she did, but to avoid unnecessary inquiries, he asked for a top up instead. Mrs. Robert was appreciative of his lack of prying into her personal life and divulged, unprompted, that living alone agreed with her. And she further said that engaging with the audience and press interviews was all she wanted for, as back home she preferred it quiet. Master Robert held back his smile with a napkin and wondered if that indeed all she wanted for.

Mrs. Robert was in two minds about telling him of her relationship with the neighbour, being as the latter, i.e. the neighbour, was married to the goat milkman and both wanted to have another man join in and watch each other while at it. And all the while the fuse candles under the pot were suffusing the two diners' faces with genial warmth, and in her heart of hearts Mrs. Robert did wonder what they were going to say in the village of the fact she had taken a man many years her senior into the bed she shared with the milkman's wife. She could already picture the postman and her good neighbour wallow in the whitish, sour drink.

Master Robert liked her laughter and held her cello-playing in great esteem, while Mrs. Robert felt that there he was, looking at her for the first time the way men would look at women, trying to figure out the body underneath the clothes. She relentlessly inquired how he had acquired such an insightful ear and time and again asked if at any point in his life he had taken music lessons. And time and again he would reply, with variations on some stock stammering excuses, that he had received lessons for a brief period while at primary school, but it is doubtful that Mrs. Robert took his word for it.

Having emptied the bottle of wine made of locally-harvested grapes from their valley of vineyards and fields, and as the clock struck half past nine, Master Robert excused himself, saying he had to call it an early night and thanked Mrs. Robert, and she saw him to the door and wondered whether she should shake his hand or wait for a peck or maybe lunge him

somehow. She therefore took a bow as she would following a fine concert and Master Robert did walk out and stepped into the path and as she called for him at her heart, he turned back and knocked on the door, which she duly opened stark naked and laughing, saying, I willed you back.

Master Robert Conducts an Observation

And every week, Master Robert would pay a visit to the war widow whose husband had died by a donkey bite, and it was not for the love of her cooking that he made it his habit to drop by, but because she was a war widow, for indeed the moment she would come out the dining room and turn to the kitchen, Master Robert would rush off his sit to the window, to chuck the contents of the plate as far as he could, all because he had once told her, on one of his first calls, that never had he eaten a dish so special as the one she had just made him. And so, the war widow would, time and again, make him the same dish, which amused Master Robert, for it was indeed special enough, though not in the obvious sense. And so he found himself chucking away the food, visit in, visit out, as he had no wish to upset her.

The war widow was a poorly woman to boot, and Master Robert would visit her often, only to find her health deteriorating, and she would almost invariably be sat facing her late husband's photo, which had been taken back in his days as a waiter up in a resort up in the mountains. The photo showed the husband on an ice rink, wearing skates and donning waiter tuxedo, a tray in hand, with champagne glasses on top. Days went by, seasons changed, but the war widow never left her home and hardly changed her sitting position. Despite his curiosity, Master Robert never asked the widow how come she had relatively fresh stock of supplies and medications.

And it so came to pass that one rainy day, as he rode his bicycle on his mail delivery round, he decided to give back to the widow, without being asked to, and without asking led her to her roofed porched, then brought a heavy blanket to cover her and sat by her side. Several silent minutes went by and he went back in and turned to the kitchen to make a juice of radishes, onion and some root, and the juice transpired as very pungent and invigorating, almost like whiskey or schnapps except it was alcohol-free and basically wholesome, and he poured about half a cup and tied a little towel around her neck, bib-like, and helped her sip to the best of her ability. He then made his third trip inside, whereupon he fetched a comb to comb her hair, making her at once look smarter than she had for ages, with hints of her lost youth shining in her facial lines. That morning, and by sheer luck, she was sporting vibrant, warm garments, with light-coloured jumper draped on her shoulder and Master Robert very much wished to read her a story and once again he ran inside and fetching the first booklet he could find, i.e. the thin one, he went back to the porch and started reading out from the middle:

“Dirty records may be cleaned to satisfactory degree by using a plastic pail (make sure that it is larger in diameter than the record itself), washing sponge, water and washing-up liquid. Fill the pail with cold water...”

Master Robert looked at the widow – on the one hand she did not seem to show interest, but on the other, his reading did not bother her, as far as he could tell. He therefore read on while emphasising the stresses of the words:

“Add several drops of the washing-up liquid to the pail, then put in the records, one by one, and rub gently...”

Master Robert once again stopped his reading and examined the widow. She seemed to relish his voice, or at any rate, so he told himself, and so he read on, not before he held her hand and gently stroked it.

“After rubbing, the records may be washed in the tub under cold, descaled running water and left to dry on a soft towel in a dust-free room, like the bathroom. Once dry, the records may be placed back in the nylon bag, without touching their surface.”

And turning the booklet to face the widow, he showed her the photographs:

The widow turned to him, saying that passersby had come knocking on her door, to complain about warm food flying out her window only to hit them and soil their clothes. Master Robert ignored her and read on, but after a page, the widow grew weary and looked around, while Master Robert observed that it was one of old age's trappings that one had more than enough time to look around. The widow said nothing, while he pointed out a tree of purple flowers and a bird capering around despite the rain, and he turned her attention to the big drops sliding down the leaves and to the gloomy colour of the sky. Beauty could be gleaned anywhere and in anything, and it was not just not just the sundown clouds that had beauty to them, but the garbage bin too, and he promised himself there and then that one day he would take photographs of garbage bins as an exercise in photography, with perhaps less than a whole film roll put into the endeavour, though no less than ten photographs. The widow remained silent.

The rain, though light, was nevertheless relentless, as a convoy of snails crossed the path leading to the house. It suddenly occurred to him that the custom of placing older people in sanatoriums, facing the view, for hours on hand, was not as deplorable as one might be led to believe and he wished he had time on his hand to sit like that, facing the elements.

The strong, bracing beverage he had made for the widow calmed her down, while her sitting laid back in the fresh air, tucked in a blanket, made her turn her head back to look at the clouds as they changed from grey to blue with the wind's direction. Master Robert studied the widow's face and watched as her calm made way for fatigue and there she was, nodding off, her mouth open. The fresh air of the rainy day washed her mouth down to her lungs and fought the moss in the left lobe, but could not clear it altogether, for this would require many an hour of work.

And Master Robert could tell that her hold on the seat's armrest was letting up, with even her fingers straightened, and he felt her there to be whispering a name and he put her ear against her mouth and got up only to realise that it was her husband's name, as appearing in the bottom of the photo in the main room, and he went back to the porch and wanted to stroke her head but recoiled at the last moment. He hoped that she was communing with her husband, the pair walking hand in hand or sipping champagne in a plush café, and he adjusted the blanket to cover her all the way up to her shoulders and turned back to look at the view around and the rain that kept drizzling, forming little rivulets waving through the village homes.

And while at it Master Robert recalled a wonderful recording of secular songs composed by composer Guillaume Dufay in the cathedral of Cambrai back in the 15th century. The recording took place in basilica of moderate size, on a stormy winter day, with the singing voices and gentle accompanying instruments and the portative, i.e. portable, organ, all heard in

the background, as well as the thunders and rain lashing down on the basilica. And Master Robert mused that the sounds of thunder and showers must have been a regular feature, though not scripted, and he pictured the listeners sat in their slightly damp clothes, in the relative dark, notwithstanding the grand stained glasses, as these only allowed faint light to filter in.

From the cathedral, Master Robert's thoughts then wandered to his occupation as the mailman and the beautiful days he and his circle would waste on their work, for the most colourful, diverse spectacle in the village could be enjoyed if one just looked up. Out there in the distance the goats were bleating, hopping up across the mountains, and he wanted to go back to his wanderings among the village homes, but was reluctant to wake up the widow and afraid to leave her on her own on the porch, and therefore kept his eyes on the view and spying shapes in the clouds, he recalled how he and his friends would try to spy shapes up in the sky as kids, while he himself had foreseen the shapes of things to come and spied the outlines of a tank up in the clouds, lying upside down like a discarded piece of scrap, having probably gone off, its turret blown away, and now too Master Robert was seeing an upside-down turret just like back in the day and he realised that his imagination was leading him to those harsh scenes he had witnessed back in the eastern front and he wanted to take his mind off and recall a tune to complement his sitting with a widow facing the view and wished to trace a common thread between the widow staying at home and the rain, whereupon Debussy's piece came to mind, titled *Jardins sous la pluie*, or gardens in the rain, and by rain it meant a stormier kind of rain than the one facing Master Robert and the widow. The part playing in his mind drew on a children's song called *Nous n'irons plus aux bois*, meaning "never shall we go to the forest again", and Master Robert found it could describe the situation of the widow, on account of the innocence of Debussy's take on this world and by no means was it apt, he mused, to describe the rain coming down on the eastern front for days on end, inexorably, a ruthless rain of no grace and he rejoiced, for he found just what he had desired, a tune to complement sitting with a widow facing the view, in itself a name of a piece that was yet to be written for sure, that is, *Sitting with a Widow Facing the View*.

And the rain storm from Vivaldi's Four Season although went through his head, but the thought mortified him, eventually, and as Debussy's record was not within his reach, he sang to her a song about the bird humming that he had once learnt, the song of the lark, and albeit knowing only several words of the lyrics, he commenced singing:

Réveillez vous, coeurs endormis Le dieu d'amour vous sonne,

which meant, as he vaguely remembered, "awake ye, dormant hearts, for the God of love is ringing the bell for you."

Having gone through the song quite a few times and having stomped his feet, the widow finally opened her eyes and he walked her to her room and sat her in her place, opposite the picture of her late husband, and he set to leave the room, but she called him and told him something he could not fully understand, about a donkey, and he mused that old age was ugly people's own revenge.

The Tapes

And Master Robert did not know Master Mouse, for the latter would hardly receive any letters at all, and nor was he in the habit of sending letters, with the exception of some tax-related exchanges. Besides, it was Master Robert's custom to gossip about the man, and the valley's folks too largely kept their noses out, with the exception perhaps of Master Mouse's meddling female neighbours, who would talk behind his back while feigning concern. And so, when Master Robert met Master Mouse, holding the letter there at the foyer of the five-story tower, his curiosity got the better of him, knowing from experience that letters were sent for a reason, not least if the sender or addressee were outside, waiting for the postman to come. And so, holding the letter in his right hand, before taking it out of Master Mouse's, Master Robert asked Master Mouse if he might be as bold as to inquire to whom the letter was addressed, and to what end. Hesitating for a moment, Master Mouse whispered, confiding in Master Robert, that the letter was bound for Lutetia, for Master Mouse was trying to enrol in a keyboard playing competition, and he went on to explain that the letter was addressed to Master Lampel, a famous talent scout and one of the most important performers of his time. And these were the first words Master Robert had ever heard uttered by Master Mouse. His curiosity therefore grew further and he longed to hear Master Mouse's playing and very much wanted to find how he measured up to him. And he regretted not being able to participate in the competition himself, for fear lest he blew his own cover by letting someone recognise his signature style, recalling those pieces recorded for the radio before the war.

Master Robert himself could tell the playing style of his contemporaries, say Glenn Gould or Maria Yudina, even blindfolded, and he took the letter, his hand shaking and recalled how as a student, he had excelled through his first year, yet his application for scholarship had been accidentally left on the secretariat's desk, in an mishap that would force him to play bars for a further year to eke out a living. Having obtained the letter, Master Robert tucked it, to Master Mouse's astonished eyes, into a chamber designated for food and drink and fastening the satchel on both sides, he patted it lightly, reassuring that the letter to be in good hands.

By evening, he returned home and waited for Mrs. Robert to turn in so he could walk out, as he would each night, and settle into his car. But this time, Master Robert took along Master Mouse's letter, which was left inside the satchel rather than handed for delivery. And starting the car, he opened the envelope carefully by the tailpipe, as he had seen done in spy movies, and issued the letter, which read as follows:

A musical sample

To the venerable professor Master Lampel, in his residence at Lutetia

Humbly, Master Mouse

5th floor of a five-floor tower

In a valley nestled amongst vineyards and fields

Dear, gracious Master Lampel,

To you Master Lampel is dedicated herewith this tape, which indeed proceeds from your life experience and the knowledge imparted by you to your disciples over the years. I can still recall, with warmth ebbing in my chest, how in the course of my last visit to Lutetia your grace condescended to play the cembalo to mortal players like myself, while demonstrating new ideas and themes to play and exacting your punishing standards on your subjects. I remember how you demanded that we opened up our horizons and venture to play forgotten pieces and master them right there and then.

I rose to the challenge at once, but it was awhile before I succeeded in applying your learnt teachings, which illuminated the road ahead, our very own pillar of fire, in music as in philosophy, education and language acquisition, to cite but few. It is therefore that I deign to ask that your grace spares some of his precious time and listen to the tape enclosed, where two pieces are burnt in: Couperin's The Mysterious Barricades, that is, Les Barricades Mystérieuses, and The Three Hands, that is, Les Trois Mains by Jean -Philippe Rameau, as I have yet to make up my mind which of the two may better glorify thy name in the audition, or which can betray some of the gleaming light that speaks to all that you imparted to us, my contemporary instrumentalists and I, who long to be called your pupils, in your presence or otherwise.

Humbly, your pupil, servant and armour-bearer, Master Mouse.

Master Robert held the letter at a distance and was fit to choke, for it was obvious that it had been Bach's letter to Frederick the Great, his dedication to the musical offering, that served as inspiration to Master Mouse. And so his sentiments for Master Mouse swung from aversion to pity and back again, with a touch of anger at the lame, painfully obvious stab at imitating Bach, though deep inside, Master Robert also found that Bach's own letter, the dedication introducing his musical offering to Frederick the Great, king of Prussia, was not without its ingratiating touch, following the composer's failure to pull off a six-voice fugue on the spot, at the king's behest and by a musical theme composed by himself. It was Bach's powerlessness back in the day to tell the king that a six-voice fugue could not be dedicated to just any theme that most enraged Master Robert.

Alongside the letter, the envelope contained a small recording tape, the kind commonly found in home recording devices, and Master Robert put the tape inside his pocket and folded the letter along the appropriate lines then placed it gently in the envelope and went back inside, arousing no suspicion, as Mrs. Robert was accustomed to him nightly popping outs to start the car, and that particular night Master Robert fell into a deep sleep and dreamt of seven tapes emerging from the frozen rivers of the eastern front and he asked himself, there in his sleep, when might he be able to listen to that tape inside his pocket. He did not know the first piece by name, and might only be able to listen to the tape at the house that stood at outskirts of the village, where they had, if his memory served him well, a tape recorder, for he had ruled out the prospect of listening to it at Master Mouse's home for fear lest the neighbours snitch to Master Mouse about a stranger hanging around at his place listening to music, and doing it in the home of Mrs. Robert, which was also his own, was out of the question.

The next morning, halfway through his day, he arrived at the house in question and facing the tape recorder, threaded the tape, set its speed and started listening, at which

performance both the ears of every one that heareth it should tingle. And his ears indeed tingled and all went dark, for unlike a tune, which was meant to sound consistent, what emerged was a mumbled sequence somewhat reminiscent of a typewriter's clickety-clacks, or rather the anti-aircraft guns heard in Wanda Landowska's famous tape, or the low moan of drums of the wild tribes back in Lambaréné, Gabon. Master Robert's ears told him that not only were the notes all off, with attention paid to neither scale nor registers, but the tempo would shift as much as to pay put to the very notion. At moments he wondered whether Master Mouse was completely deaf or might he have been playing in the dark and who knew, his fingers might have been broken or perhaps he had been playing with his toes.

The performance was so strident that he wished to have it deleted, actually deleted. If it were not for the wall being built of wood, he would have feared cracks, so horrible was the playing, and Master Mouse did feel for the tape recorder and feared lest a fuse burned and strange thoughts there occurred to him. Accordingly, he conceived of a contestant who might have replaced the piano's chords in the dead of night and further suspected that the sheet music was placed upside down, as suggested at Bach in the Well-Tempered Clavier, and he resolved to check if he had indeed threaded the tape the right way around and set it to the right speed, yet a further check revealed that all was in place. Mortification mixed with pity overcame Master Robert as he nevertheless listened to the first musical bit and head it out while throwing up other scenarios.

Listening to the veritably horrendous performance of Master Mouse, Master Robert recalled the Russian POWs screaming during the medical observations he had performed on them, and it suddenly dawned on him that here was a prime opportunity and he decided there and then to make some amends to the horrors he had wreaked on those wretched Russian POWs, in a fanciful notion that was not without its charm. Master Robert suddenly hoped that he could leave behind something that might benefit humanity or even make a change, but most of all, here was a chance to put his virtues to the test and send Master Lampel the same pieces performed by himself, by Master Robert, that is.

And he soon realised this would be no easy task, for he would have to obtain the scores from Master Mouse's place and transport the recording device over to a house with a keyboard instrument in place, say, a piano or a cembalo or even a clavichord, but the realisation came with a resolution and Master Robert stepped up to the challenge and decided to set out on the mission, not least because the thought of having to spend a night sitting in his car listening to his own performance kind of impassioned him.

That night he struggled to fall asleep, thinking of the seven tapes freezing in the cold waters of the Russian front, his mind preoccupied with plans that largely concerned pooling together the scores, the recording device and the instrument under the same roof. Despite having never been inside Master Mouse's place, he assumed the sheet music could be found around the piano and realised he could not play there, for Master Mouse's neighbours would immediately spy the different level of playing, if Master Mouse's banging could even be called that, and the more he thought about his plan, the happier he felt with himself and mused that there he was, paving Master Mouse's road for glory, which could offer some consolation for all that he had done back in the day during his observations on the wretched Russian POWs.

Nor was he oblivious to the prospect of the potential benefit for himself, for he too would stand to gain a hint of glory and have his performance commemorated as Master Mouse's own shadow player. If the performance ever made it to the radio, he would find his sins redeemed, though why should he really?! He struggled to answer this one. Perhaps because the entire world would realise he was not as cruel as they had them believe and indeed possessed the acutely sensitive soul of an artist.

On his day off, and having no other option, Master Robert did pack Mrs. Robert's own portable tape recorder in his postman satchel and set out on foot to the five-story tower. Approaching the tower, he sat on a nearby bench and waited for Master Mouse to go out for his morning walk with Coda. Once he saw the pair stepping out of the building, Master Robert went up the stairs, whispering some prayers he had cobbled together with some incantations he had picked up, and beseeched whoever it was to spare him an encounter with any meddling female neighbours of Master Mouse. The prayers and incantations were heard, as no door was opened by any neighbour, allowing Master Robert to make it by foot to the fifth floor and enter Master Mouse's flat unhindered, only to be welcomed by the odour of neglect.

He nevertheless wasted not a second and immediately set out looking for the scores of the pieces in question. His hands rummaged through tens such sheet music books, including some pretty complex pieces, and the fleeting thought did occur to him that Master Mouse might be married to a Mrs. Mouse, who was the better player of the two, for Master Mouse could not get even a single bar right. He first found Rameau's piece, then Couperin's, and wondered whether he should take both sheet music books or only pull out the required pages and decided to take both books, leaving them intact, to return to Master Mouse as early as possible, though no specific date was set for the return.

With the sheet music books in his satchel, alongside the tape recorder, he started climbing downstairs. Stepping outside the building, he could hear Master Mouse counting out loud: ta -fa te-fe, and he bid him hello and walked on towards the house at the outskirts of the village, which was normally empty during the day and had a piano in place. Master Robert was well acquainted with the place, as he would practice there occasionally, and he plugged in the recorder, placing it near the piano, then threaded the recording tape in the hole's notch and he wound it around, and began performing the first piece, which was far from simple. The score sheet was scrawled with notes, probably taken by Master Mouse, which were unclear and beside the point, appearing like marks from African mud rugs or broken quotes from Sufi poetry. Following several attempts, Master Robert became pleased with his performance, for not only was it spot-on, but he felt that he had tuned in with the piece's own flow and spirit, and he had three precise recordings down for each piece, which could be told apart by mood and tempo, and decided to select the most suitable ones later.

Once back home, he placed the tape recorder and sheet music books taken from Master Mouse among Mrs. Robert's own sheet music books and felt assured that he had done a good deed and completed a worthy endeavour and had only to select the best recording and enclose it with Master Mouse's letter, to be sent to Master Lampel, which was indeed to be the case.

The Letter

And that evening too Master Robert took the long way home, avoiding as was his custom the five-story tower where Master Mouse had lived and from which, through the wide window facing the valley, he had jumped to his death.

Master Robert had been riding his bicycle nearby only to witness the fall, his bicycle shaken by the thump and blast of crushing bones. He had also witnessed the immediate thronging around Master Mouse's body, the ensuing helplessness, and kept riding rather than interfering or rushing to his aid, despite being better fit for the task than others or perhaps for this very reason, for Master Robert could tell that other than picking up the body and carrying it to the morgue, nothing could be done and once home, he had parked the car outside the main door so as to avoid the potential tumble when he would set out in the dead of night, in the pitch darkness, to start the car.

Slipping into his slippers, he fancied seeing, outside his window, the snowplough parked outside the front, but did not give it a second thought, his mind by now delighting at the thought of Tuesday night's dinner – a meat roast of which he was particularly fond and which was on of his wife's specialities.

. So fond was Master Robert of his roast that he'd call it a day early with excitement, then perch himself on a bench at the edge of the village and wait for it to be time to go home, at roast time, as he referred to it.

That night, the door, though closed, was left unlocked, which was unusual, and he knew indeed that Mrs. Robert dreaded the evil winter winds, particularly mid-week, yet Master Robert did not despair and called out his wife's name time and again, and time and again his call went unanswered.

The place was relatively dark, while even the radio, which his wife would turn on before he'd be back home so that the tubes would warm up, was off. Nor did the roast scent waft about, possibly due to the fact that no roast had been going, while the only smells were the odour of the wall, giving off the humidity and mildew taken in during the winter, and there was Coda's unreconciled smell too. Master Robert sat at the kitchen table, fiddling with his beard and trying to figure out where the hell his wife could be at this time, also known as Roast Time, and he wondered whether or not he should be concerned for her wellbeing. Just before sitting down, he had spotted there on the writing desk, at the end of the kitchen, a white envelope and a metal-hued container, not unlike the wartime military flasks, only Master Robert was used to have letters scattered around and made nothing of the fact. Long minutes passed before he realised the quiet place meant his wife was not in.

Master Robert tried to recall an occasion when he'd been back home only to find his wife not in, but no such incident came to mind. Coming home, it would always be his wife, her rather than Coda, who would leave whatever she'd been doing to welcome him with a smile.

The place was very still, with neither the blowing wind nor the rustling leaves heard around, and for a moment there he fancied himself inside a submarine with its engine turned

off and all members of the crew holding their breath to avoid detection by the enemy's sonar, hovering overhead. Master Robert looked around and the lamp, perched on the chest, seemed new to him and he could not recall how the one preceding it looked like. For a moment he thought it was a bit wobbly and he laughed to himself and wondered whether a ship was indeed hovering over the house, and it was only a quarter of an hour later that his consciousness registered the fact that never had an envelope so purely white been seen at his home and that it was out of place. Master Robert was trying to make up his mind, trying to decide if he should get up and see about the envelope or set out to look for his wife, who could have gotten herself into a spot of distress.

Finally, Master Robert got up and walked over to the writing desk to study the old flask, which he couldn't quite fathom at first glance and which seemed out of time, like the surplus military equipment that he had not seen in years. He reached a hand to the envelope and turned it over to see the sender's address, but none could be found. He then turned it back, his eyes searching for the stamp, but no stamp could be found either. Nor could an addressee address be found, with only five words showing there, in his wife's handwriting: To Master Walcha, my Beloved. Upon a further look Master Robert could see the envelope was not sealed and registered the carelessness, as the letter could have fallen out at any moment, and he had witnessed letter-less envelopes by the thousands over the years, and read quite a few envelope-less letters and the empty envelopes, like the naked letters, seemed to him like the refugee children hurled from one place to another.

With the letter in hand, Master Robert returned to the table, where he carefully took out of the pure white envelope a letter, also bearing his wife's unmistakable handwriting, though untypically tidy and meticulous. He knew her handwriting all too well from the sheet music books, with the notes she would scribble inside and those doodles that would drive Master Robert mad, believing as he did the sheet music and Bach's Six Suites in particular to hold something of the Scriptures in them. Master Robert realised the letter was addressed to him and had yet to find it unusual or ominous as he commenced reading:

Dear, indeed dead, Master Walcha

I am sorry, dear Master Walcha, for it is indeed not my wish to make you sad, but the following lines will make you realise that I am leaving you, and in fact, these miserable house, valley and village, with its inconsequential small people, on my way to a faraway country, with my lover. Yes, I've had a lover for the last couple of years, whom I do not love at all, known by everyone as the snowplough driver, and we are leaving together, for I am sick of this place, with its outlooks, its inhabitants and most of all with you, dear Master Walcha. This is not to say that I do not love you, but you do pace the house, and are out and about, as if you've been hiding something from me, like you have these secrets you wish to keep.

I have never asked you about your past, nor demanded explanation for your refusal to talk about it, out of respect for your wish to leave the past sealed, but truth be told, you're hardly much of a partner either. Always tuned in to tunes on the radio rather than listening to anything I have to say, and never listening to me at all. Yes, you have acquired this facility for nodding by cue, but you are all captivated by the radio, as if

expecting this encrypted message, like those they had during the war. Or perhaps you have been waiting this concealed transmission to announce that your own private war, dear Master Walcha (or Master Robert, apparently), is over, and until such transmission arrives, which is never, you have resolved to withdraw, furtive as a spy.

Let us assume for a moment that I can handle this furtiveness, but this life of celibacy is not the sort of life I hope for. When you finally turn off that radio for me to have you for myself, you touch me like a doctor performing resuscitation, whispering in my ears: I love you, then kissing me twice, stroking my breasts five times over and back you go again until such moment comes when you decide it is time for us to come in union again. I find this drill altogether unpleasant and far from intimate. It is in fact a travesty, at once revolting and pitiable. It is actually with the snowplough driver, who is not half the wise, kind man you are, that I derive pleasure as I have never done before.

Indeed, you are an honest, decent companion, but altogether unbearable. Even the village's children laugh behind your back as you ride by with that long beard and postman fedora hat on and the bag with the post horn painted on it, and they call you the bizarre from the bazaar, for your clothes are tattered like those rags bought from the traveling bazaar that comes here twice a year. Some of the villagers can even swear they have heard you playing bizarre tunes on the piano, and in other people's homes at that, but worst still are those nightly excursions to your car. I can see you through the bedroom window sitting at the wheel, in the radio's little blue light, leaning your head back and conducting over the music like some local Bruno Walter, as if you weren't that the little mailman whose world is no bigger than a stamp. I envy this little radio in the car, which brings out the best of your feelings in a way I can only dream of. It has always baffled me how you manage to trace each slip or affectation in my playing, being just a mailman as you are, and indeed, as far as you are concerned, I have always had this sense that there was more to you than met the eye, you've always been this enigma for me, an enigma that's at once compelling and repelling, and it was this enigmatic essence that had me under your spell when we first met, for many had been impressed by my playing, but only coveted me and wanted to stand between me and my cello, whether you really got to the bottom of my playing on the one hand, while denying any understanding thereof on the other. I now realise that you are not a mailman born and bred, you have had piano lessons to show for and you even served as a military doctor during the war.

You made me very happy with that cello you bought me, it has such a marvellous sound to it and I have played it every day since, always trying to perform for you, as the sounds of Bach's suites scattered around the home and had it sanctified just like the incense scattered around the house of prayer. By the way, I have yet to figure out why it is that you avoid the five-story house in the valley, as you used to enjoy riding the path leading down to it until Master Mouse, an eccentric man by all accounts, took his own life due to his unrequited love for a she-cat living at the tower, as the story goes.

We've had our fine times and nice memories that no one could ever take from us, like that day when we set out to the mountains with a small tent, just the two of us, and ran

to and fro like two gazelles and drank water from the pristine streams and made promises as we looked up to the sky. Or that birthday, my birthday, when you bought me the record box, those 78 RPM records, of Casals and Horszowski playing Opus 69 and Opus 102 by Beethoven, and I thought I could live for many years by your side, until the day I died, to be precise, notwithstanding my occasionally dalliance with the plough driver who ploughs me a path out of boredom with his philistine ways, and I came to terms with your shortcomings, until a few days ago, when one of the post staff came knocking on the door to hand me the flask, currently placed on the writing desk, with a letter inside that you must have written to yourself many years ago, only to forget all about it.

Ever since I read your words I feel I cannot live with you for a second longer, my dear Master Walcha, and that our home has been overtaken by ghosts that even the hoof of a race horse or a thousand suites by Bach may not dispel. I can hardly believe I have slept by your side all those years and made love to you on a virtually daily basis, if this can be called love, and it is therefore that I am leaving you.

And if you cannot recall which of your exploits I am citing now, or what makes me dump you to kingdom come, you are more than welcome to read about your “observations”, to use your own words. I leave you our home and the marvellous cello that I thought you had bought for me, but alas turned out to be stolen. Stolen!!! And I am taking all our savings too: hush money, damages, if you will, for I have no intention to expose your past to anyone, no one would believe me at any rate, to say nothing of the fact that I actually love you.

If for any reason you wish to have the snowplough to yourself, be our guest. And I will have you know that the owner of the plough is nothing but a beast and neither of us means to return, together or alone. We are off together to a sunny warm country where we intend to spare no effort making up for that programmed love you foisted on me, and to make love wherever possible. But first, I intend to sleep through a whole night, with no one to go out and start the car only to spend hours sitting there listening to music, aggravatingly elevated. You might be in a temple when listening to music. Another thing I plan to do is sleep with the snowplough driver, whose body is warm, nay, steaming, when I am on top or below it and in any shape or form, whether missionary, secular, catholic, Calvinist, or Lutheran and in any of the rooms in our future home, not least the cellar and attic, on top and under every table and chair and even in the staircase cabinet, if we end up having one, and in the lavatory of the train out of this place, or in an eight-handled burial casket, and in the coal storage and inside a bath with decorative flowers floating on top and in the stable, and as I ride the snowplough man wearing a cowboy hat, my legs in spur boots, with steam blowing from his nostrils and ticks dancing across his neck, his body naked like a newborn child, with horseshoes to his feet and the scent of hay wafting from his mouth, all of which set to make up for the drudgery that was life with you, and your hollowness, which had me hollowed out too...

At which point Master Robert stopped reading the letter, not least because the tears streaming down from his eyes had the paper wet, while the spreading splotches of ink seemed like the mouldy patches on the wall. Coda stood by and laid her head on his leg, as if to say, I am here to comfort you, and he put his hand on her head but did not stroke her ears as he normally would. Long was the letter, written in dense handwriting with no corrections and spanning many pages, which Master Robert refused to read on.

And Master Robert did muse that his wife, so to speak, had gone over the top with her resentment of him and that at the end of the day he loved, nay, admired her at times, and endeavoured to the best of his ability to make her life pleasant. And they had had other nice days beside those cited in the letter, like that day when she had surprised him on his delivery round, standing by the road with a basket-load of delicacy galore. Master Robert had called it a day there and then and taken her on his bicycle outside the village to settle at the banks of the steady stream, where the power of the water had the old mill with the large spoon wheel spinning around. Mrs. Robert had spread a blanket on the ground, laying the basket on top, and they had feasted on her delicacies, with him holding the mailman satchel and blowing towards the post horn embroidered on it, while playing the entire first movement of Britten's Tenor, Horn and Strings, unaware that he was betraying singing and rhythmic facilities uncommon among run-of-the-mill postmen and paying no heed to the fact that it was only by spending time among English POWs that one could become familiar the serenade composed to give English pilots a pleasant send off before they'd set off on their missions.

Mrs. Robert would never inquire into how he'd come to know the serenade, unfamiliar with it as she naturally had been, but she had inquired about the composer's name, at which Master Robert started faltering, his reply trailing off, and they could both remember that moment, where a facet of Master Robert's secret had been revealed, though it was not clear what it was exactly, and at any rate, neither would ever mention it thereafter.

Having read quite a few letters by other people, like those that would dangle from unsealed envelopes or the ones he had been driven by curiosity to open, Master Robert knew that others' lives too were fraught with problems and that at least half of the non-official letters were rife with contents that had to do with his-hers relationships and more than once had he read of illicit, veritably deviant liaisons, concerning people whom he knew, and he felt humiliated by the fact that his wife's lover, the one making love to her, that is, was the snowplough driver, which used to mock him whenever he'd get stuck in the snow. If it were up to him, he'd have chosen a different lover man, nay, woman, for his wife, but alas, he had no say in the matter.

After several broody minutes, Master Robert looked up at the flask, which suddenly appeared like just an aluminium bottle resembling a flask, and he got up and walked up to it, and studying it realised that the metal was rather cheap and somewhat misty and the iron cladding rusty at the occasional spot or trodden and stained with earth clods. He opened the vessel carefully, as if wary lest it was booby-trapped and fit to go off in his hands, and there inside he found rolled pages, in his handwriting, as well as a picture of him in the snow with the shade of a burnt down tank in the background, and another one of him standing by an organist in a big church, than a picture of him and his first wife, and a precious picture of

Master Robert holding his son in his arms, with a pendulum clock in the background. Master Robert could not recall what it had been that instigated him to write to himself a letter as such at a given point in time. The details felt alien, while his handwriting seemed different than it was at present and the date too seemed very far, a relic a different world, a different time.

The envelope where he'd just found the letter from his wife also yielded her wedding ring, decoupled from its diamond, which rendered it of no value, and the watch with the fancy strap that he had gifted her on the day of their registration as a couple in the valley's council. A Tissot watch it was at that, invested with cutting-edge clever features and the knowledge gained by the Swiss while designing and manufacturing fuses for the cannons and bombs dropping out of planes during wartimes.

Master Robert wore the watch on his wrist, but did not wind the spring, as it is better to let the gentle grease therein to warm some before the mechanism is set in motion, and he was mad with his wife and the rumour, in which she had been complicit, whereby Master Mouse had jumped to his death on account of unrequited love, and he felt slighted on behalf of Master Mouse, and figured that none but him knew of the actual motive that had propelled him to that fatal leap. Master Robert could feel the onus of responsibility placed on him as he set out to his car and started it, and despite the season having changed, with a pleasant summer evening outside the car, he took out the post horn, and rather than turning on the radio, blew it for dear life until the car's windows shuttered off. Overcome with confusion, he mused that without the sounds of Bach's suites, his home was destined to be cold and barren as the cave of the prehistoric man.

He then went back inside and rolled his own letter, having decided to read it at a later date, for he had had his fill with the letter from his wife, if she could still be called that, for he had not read that one through either. Having settled down a bit, he wondered whether there were village homes where people knew that Bach had composed a piece about an imposed breakup, which also sounded the post horn, and he recalled asking himself that same question before, and the next day he burned the contents of the flask with the exception of the picture of the smiling baby wrapped in several layers of clothes and donning a woolly hat. This picture was very small, placed inside a ragged white frame that could fit into an average wallet, and he held it close to his heart and his head and his lips and put it to his ear to spy any residue of his son's voices. And having heard nothing, he walked up to the mirror to look at his face, which was twisted with anguish and he wished to watch himself cry, and to bleed his pain with tears, and be burnt alive, and he shook the picture like a thermometer, in hope the baby's fever may climb back the green safe zone, at which the baby might wake up and start to move outside the frame, but his son remained contained within, still as the mercury in its globule. And Master Robert tried to cut his flesh on the picture's ragged edges and bashed his head against the mirror, and whatever he had just failed to burn he picked up and tossed inside the bin.

In memory of **Amnon Assaf**, who passed away at around the time of writing this story.

Time Capsule

And Master Robert kept his wife's letter in his trousers' pocket, moving it from one pocket to the other every morning. He'd rather have it moved from one pair of trousers to another and back, but it was not his habit to change trousers all that often, for reasons known only to him, and he made sure to keep the letter intact, but never resumed reading it. He had tried on more than one occasion to read on, but whenever he would pluck up the courage and work out the necessary resolve to forsake all other engagements and sit in an isolated quiet spot, then carefully issue the letter from his pocket and stretch out the pages, he could feel his wife's eyes piercing him as she rode on top of the snowplough driver, with hexagonal, frozen sweat flakes flying off her body, working their way to lodge into his face. And his wife's gaze staring back at him from the page would drill into his cornea torpedo-like, notching up the inside of his skull with short dashes and dots like the Morse signals in the submarine he had never set a foot in. And the signals would deliver his wife's sentiments of contempt and disillusionment with him, as well as the empathy she had for him, and all the while the plough driver's low, lowly voice echoed in the background, poking fun at him.

The three Morse-coded voices would interweave with Master Robert's inner voice, to become Bach's BWV 878 fugue, while the theme thereof, also known as Thema, was Master Robert's being a travesty in his wife's eyes, whether you said it the right way around, travesty, or back to front, ytsevirt, or sideways, crab-fashion, or as a mirror image or any other way, nay, in a different language. And Master Robert mused that if one could code a three-sound strong message letter based on Morse code's dits and dahs, it would be nice to have whole pieces coded one of those days, even pieces that have yet to be composed, say for three voices, or pieces by Brahms in noughts and ones.

And while musing his musings and calculating his calculations, Master Robert felt ashamed in himself for his misgivings, as reflected by his wife's words, and more ashamed still for his childish cowardliness and his inability to confront the written content.

There he was, the man who had faced the death of his first wife and son, and witnessed horror incarnate itself in the Eastern front and seen countless men in distress and had more than once played Battleship with the angel of death, and it was him, of all people, who could not face the dread cast on him by the cutting words of his cellist wife. For he was no stranger to the power of the written word, having read, authorised or otherwise, all those letters, and yet he could not read through this one letter addressed to him.

As a matter of fact, and under his wife's coded gaze, Master Robert was overcome with fear, like the fear overcoming sailors upon hearing inside those submarines the sonar scanning them. Some of those sailors would get so scared as to wet themselves and Master Robert feared lest he too would wet himself, despite having never set a foot inside a submarine, and he tried to go back to his wife's letter with deliberate swiftness, that is, by opening the letter and ironing out the page, only to refold and capture a mental image thereof.

And Master Robert noticed that whenever the letter was pulled out of his pocket, Coda would get off her couching place and rush to the bedroom to crawl under the bed. He further noticed that she'd only do so when he in fact intended to open the letter, rather than just dabbled with the idea, and he knew not what to make of that information he had accrued during his observations. And while musing about the letter, which he would not read, he mused of a different letter altogether. A letter addressed to him by himself, such as he had

penned on previous occasions, to make sure this would be no offensive letter, let alone a degrading text with unfathomable sentences such as: to make up for the years of drudgery by your side, to contend with this emptiness within you. Master Robert had a letter in mind that would replace the one placed inside the time capsule, i.e. the flask, while such letter would only gain further importance over time, for Master Robert estimated that as years went by, the elderly and young Master Robert would only grow further apart, to the point where the elderly of the pair would not understand the motives of his younger counterpart or the underlying reasons to his behaviour, which might drive him to demand from the latter answers even he could not give.

And if that were not enough, Master Robert wished to write himself a reassuring letter about his reluctance to fight his own body, a letter which might brace him for the different ailments ahead, ailments he had come to know during his internship as a physician. And while the letter from his cellist wife was placed in the back pocket of his trousers, and with his body seared by his inner fire, as if he were sat on a coal stove, Master Robert conceived of his journey, a quest to redeem the blood of Master Mouse while exacting justice upon Master Lampel.

And having now emptied the time capsule and burnt its contents, Master Robert got up and resolved to act, thus taking the typewriter off the shelf, as he wished the contents to be imprinted indelibly on the paper, tattoo-fashion, just as his cellist wife's letter had scorched into his flesh and seared it, tender veal-like. Master Robert further wished for his words to be interpreted by his very own Rosetta Stone, to decipher the coded factions of his memory. He planned to type little by little, weigh each and every word and avoid verbosity or unclarity, as he fed the paper into the typewriter and adjusted the margins, and dragging a very low seat, like the one Glenn Gould would sit on, he commenced writing:

Dear Master Robert, former Dr. Robert, the one-time Master Walcha, i.e. me, or in other words you, or at any rate, the You who is writing you the letter...

And leaning back he looked at the one and a half lines he had just typed down and notwithstanding the jumbled keys, beamed with satisfaction, for the first step was often the hardest, not least given that sitting at the typewriter would remind him of the fact that his world was a much broader one than that of the average mailman, pace mailmen, and for a moment there he felt himself to be the medical student he had once been, reading, among other things, philosophy, history and ethics and typing his assignments.

It had been a long while since he could see the fruits of his mind there before him and for a moment he felt the printed page itself to be much more pleasing to his eyes than that torpedo launched at him by his wife, and he tried to envisage how scared elderly Master Robert would be to find that there was a paper out there, a record, whereby Master Robert, the one-time Dr. Robert, used to be Master Walcha. The very thought made him laugh, for if elderly Master Robert should panic and have a cardiac arrest, which might well happen, and dropped the paper and fall down and hit the floor, people would have a hard time deciding whether this was a murder or rather suicide, for these were virtually two strangers. And he further mused that the alarm clock he would set at night forced him early the next frozen morning to do stuff he did not want to do, and he enthused at the budding letter and unleashed the jumbled keys and pursued his writing, captivated by the endeavour.

Thus engaged as he was , he started telling himself of his own observations, typing the following words: And I had this arithmetic notebook where I would make calculations and the table of... and before he could finish the word, a knock on the door gave him a start, his fingers still ready at the machine, and confused, he figured that the notebook must have fallen down to hit the cold snow or that maybe he had been caught rummaging, unbidden, the home of one of his mail delivery recipients, while she-dog Coda barked, uncharacteristically. But once on his feet and looking in the mirror, he realised it was actually him, in his home attire rather than his mail uniforms, whereupon he regained his composure and realised he was at home and also recalled that the bin and the grand piano shared in common their pedals and a lifting lid.

Master Robert opened the door. There at the threshold, side by side, stood two grave-looking policemen, one wearing glasses, the other wearing none, both in heavy coats despite it being not particularly cold, nay summer, as noted several pages earlier, and from one moment to the next, the pair barged in, unbidden, and sat facing each other on the two living room's armchairs. One looked at Master Robert, asking: "Master Walcha, please specify to us how long you have been a widower," and the first thing that came into Master Robert's mind was the moment had come, his secret had been exposed and even these two strangers knew he had been married, his first wife having died on him giving birth to their son.

Master Robert knew he had confided in no one about these facts and being as so, how could these people possibly know that he was the extension of Master Robert the doctor-turned-Master Walcha? And Master Robert replied feebly that it had been a long time ago and he had since been leading a different life, as the other policeman banged his fist on the armrest, telling him to stop rambling, for his wife, known as Mrs. Walcha, had died two days before, which was not that long ago, and Master Robert wondered whether he had just exposed the fact of his first wife, and tried to figure out what they were talking about, for his wife had just run off. Following a short deliberation, he said that his scum of a wife, now no longer his wife, had not died but left him for the snowplough driver and added that she had left a letter behind, which he could not bring himself to read through, for she had left for sunnier shores, and he issued the folded letter from his back pocket and handed it to the policeman to see for himself, at which the latter said that the snowplough driver had disappeared, while Mrs. Walcha had been found dead, and these were no natural causes, meaning, again, that as of now, he was a widower.

The pair got off their seats and having promised to be back, they asked Master Robert not to get too far from the place and remain available for a telephone call or a mail office telegram, on account of the investigation. But just before they left, the one with no glasses stopped, in true detective form, and said, as a half-minded aside, or more like a snake feeling obliged to bite, that it had hitherto been unknown, "dear Master Walcha, that you've been married before, which could shed some light on the investigation." Master Robert noticed that the officer's glasses frame was not unlike his own, and could not make up his mind if that was a disturbing, or rather a reassuring, sign.

The pair now gone, Master Robert could not resume writing the letter destined for the time capsule, while the thought of the time capsule led him to ponder a flask and submarines and the immense strain applied on the side panels, to the point where the contents of the container were fit to tear and crush its future, and he knew not whether he was happy or sad, relieved or stricken, and wondered if the death of his first wife too could be ruled unnatural or what natural death was to begin with, and had it really been natural for his wife and mother of his son to die so early into her life? And he also wondered about her share of the savings that

Mrs. Robert had taken with her and where was Mrs. Robert to change her money in that sunny country, and given all these questions, he turned to the pantry and took out a bottle of fish oil, which he started to swig on, only to spit the oil to the floor, and he walked over to the cupboard at the other end to open then close then open then close the door and back again and he knew not what he was doing, and he observed that the bin was more clever than the piano as the piano's pedal did not lift the lid, and he deemed it necessary to think clearly and calm down and in order to calm down, so he figured, he would have to turn to the bathroom and wash his face.

On his way to the bathroom, he walked past the hallway window and ducked, recalling there were always snipers out there, come winter or summer, and after all, he had already been hit by a bullet, positively identified by the letters etched into it as shot by the gun of the most renowned she-sniper in the Russian front. And with the coast now clear, he realised that he was at home, rather than back in the battlefield and he straightened up, only to have his head hit the lamp, which fell down to the floor, short-circuiting the power, at which point the home grew dark, with Master Robert panicking lest the submarine's engine shut down, only to immediately recall that these were actually diesel engines.

Amidst the darkness set on the place, Master Robert recalled all those Russian prisoners sent to him for observation, and the games he would play to dare himself while conducting those observations. He made his way to the bathroom in pitch dark and took care to avoid turning on by accident the hot water tap, and his caution paid off, as he turned on the cold water tap and stood in the dark, hearing the water run, but could not recall why he had gone to the bathroom in the first place. Being as so, he figured there was a fissure in the submarine's side panel and that any moment then the water might flood him and short-circuit the torpedo's fuse, thereby precipitating its detonation in the belly of the submarine. Master Robert repeated to himself that he must not lose his calm, as he made for the kitchen to release the gas and ballast containers and force the water out. And it immediately occurred to him that he must salvage the enigma machine, as dictated by the wartime instructions, for the machine equalled million soldiers, and he ran back to the living room, and in the pitch dark at that, and kicked the chair's leg, distracted, then fell headfirst and writhed with pain on account of the toenail breaking and digging into the flesh, and he grabbed the typewriter and tossed it out the window and straight into the rolling sea, so that it might sink to the bottom thereof, only to have it land on the snowplough's roof. And the machine thereupon rested peacefully, almost as peaceful as Eveline McHale, who had jumped from the 86th floor of the Empire State Building to land on the roof of a car, looking peaceful and mellow as one caught up in her afternoon nap but for her legs, which had tangled as typewriter keys and torn the ink belt unit.

Master Robert finally regained his composure and closed the ballast containers in the kitchen, and he flipped up the main switch to resume the power current, and made sure the letter was still inside his pocket, then excruciatingly cut the toenail and a bit off the surrounding flesh, so as to allow it to grow. Being a doctor who had served in the front, Master Robert knew how to treat such injuries, even with no anaesthetics, and he recalled all those limbs amputated and gone. He had recently witnessed a car accident and albeit seeing the passengers crushed in the car and despite their shrill cries, would not rush to their aid, unable as he had been to blow his cover and expose himself as a doctor, and their cries did haunt him... to make up for the years of drudgery by your side, to make up for... and your emptiness... to make up for... his wife's letter throbbed inside his head until he fell asleep, but just then, he resolved not to have his future trodden down by the water pressure, for he

had to complete the letter for the time capsule, as he invested immense importance in producing a confession of his deeds, if only for himself to see.

Come night, he set out to his car, as was his custom, then entered it, not before making sure there were no a multi-story building or a bonny maiden lying lifeless, but apparently at peace, across its roof, as if sprawled on the lawn during her lunch break from work. First he started the vehicle, turning on the radio, but in no time he walked out across the road to the snowplough, with the engine of his car revolving round and round, and he took the typewriter off the roof of the vehicle, unaware that one key had been broken, and he fancied hearing the two policemen knocking on the door over and over again. For a moment there he thought about the desperate scuba divers forgotten outside the time capsule and knocking on the submarine side panel from the outside, and he wanted to hear Bach playing and was not too particular about which piece, and he feared that the next day he would struggle to ride his bicycle to work due to his foot injury, and mused that he would have to see the doctor for his sick day to be approved.

And Master Robert was very apprehensive about the two policemen's call and its ensuing implications, not least the prospect of the whole business of his wife's death taking up the time required to compose his time capsule confession. As such, he resolved to record himself play one of Bach's four-voice fugues and bury the tape inside the time capsule, just as they had once sent Glenn Gould's tapes to space, etched on a round record made of gold and shaped like the great Rosetta in the Frankfurt cathedral, where Helmut Walcha would sit, playing the pipe organ.

And Master Robert thought about his wife and of her being his second wife to lose, and much as he resented her for having left him, and with the snowplough driver at that, he felt a shiver overcoming him and a sense of loss, for she had been his one and only friend those past few years. In fact, he was very much taken aback by her departure, and he wished upon her every evil in this world, not least that her death would not be her final suffering and that her life after this death be bitter and wretched, and Master Robert further conceived many more thoughts and only came around once he recalled that the fuse at the torpedo's end was not electrical, but rather comprised a time fuse, like an egg boiling timer, combined with an impact fuse, which would only detonate once the torpedo hit an object much harder than the back of his skull.

Master Robert Embarks on His Journey

The morning after the policemen's call, Master Robert woke up earlier than usual, due to an unbearable pain in his toenail. He would have screamed with pain but for there being no one there to hear him, and he looked at his foot and realised that not only was the wound not crusting over, but it was oozing pus. The clock showed a time that was even earlier than his normal early hour for getting up for work, and the pain had Master Robert focused on his overall situation, particularly the following implications of the two detectives breaking into his home the other day.

Having weighed his overall life circumstances, including his age and accomplishments so far, as well as apparent trivialities, like the risk of him being bogged down by snow in the coming winter, with no one to have him rescued, or the resounding echoes in his empty home, or the deserted cello left behind by his cellist wife, and the rotting garlic and onion that could hang from his bedroom's doorpost had he been married to another local woman, and the stock of bland food supplies he was to leave in the pantry, Master Robert realised he must set out on his journey, his quest for redemption, without delay, and that if he was to clear his consciousness once and for all, he had to ensnare Master Lampel before the enemy drop their death charges on his home and raze it off the face of the earth. He knew all too well that the policemen's call might turn out to be the beginning of persecution quest that was only going to be compounded if his real identity and past were uncovered, and he would sooner have another kind of quest, like the journey he was about to embark on.

Master Robert had his share of interrogations and degradations, having spent a stint in a PoW camp, as an ordinary PoW, with interrogations by the different war crimes commissions, and he was therefore grateful to have the two policemen's call as an incentive to conclude that part of his life and leave his home in the valley for good, to pursue revenge on Master Lampel before the policemen could stand in his way of fulfilling his duty, lest his soul be left tainted for the rest of his life.

Being as so, he asked himself what Odysseus or the Kon-Tiki sailors might have taken on their voyage and decided his mailman satchel, i.e. the one with the post horn embroidered on it, would do, along with what little money his wife had left. He wanted his departure to arouse no suspicion and therefore left the blinds up, or down, as they were at that moment, and did not lock the door or do the washing up, though he wouldn't normally leave the place with a sink full of dirty dishes, and he even left his car parked at the front of the house.

He then opened his mail satchel to make sure no undelivered letters were left there, for he knew all too well people's anticipation for a letter and realised the power of the written word, and he accordingly discovered two letters inside, and collected what little money he could find at the house and made himself a sandwich with local jam and local bread, and he placed the picture of his son, with the ragged-as-stamp's edges, inside the inner wall, attached to the post horn embroidery, and further slipped into the satchel a small metal box, like a sardine box, wherein were carefully packed four little ampules made of extra-fine glass, and he sat outside the home as he had done each morning for several years, come sun or frost, and he turned to the snowplough left there by his wife and the snowplough driver, to complement her mockery of him, and he climbed it just like the god Thor had once climbed his goat-drawn chariot.

The plough was heavy and cumbersome, but Master Robert nevertheless managed to start it and embark on his journey. And all the horse powers there growled aloud, emitting black smoke, but shortly thereafter, before even left the village, he pulled by the side of the road, as he had learnt to do during the war, for traffic axes must be left open, and he switched off the engine and descended off his chariot of snow and issued the two letters from his satchel and slipped them down into the box, wishing his successor good luck.

Master Robert wondered whether the local villagers would be taken aback by his departure and whether they might figure his cellist wife and he had taken flight together, which would erase the stain of disgrace. But mostly, he was thinking of all those locals he would call on every week to help with their housekeeping and their ailments and loneliness. And he looked back and rather than climbing the plough, returned home by foot, which was no walk in the park, what with his toenail sore and the fear lest passersby inquire about his limp.

It had been his home for years and yet he felt like a stranger, just as he would when entering the local villagers' home to deliver the mail. And before taking Coda out, he turned to the tool cupboard, took out a fine hammer and a thin, tapering nail and drummed three small, imperceptible holes into the back of the cello, just in case, and only then did he let Coda off her leash and collar, and she stood there on all fours and looked him straight in the eye and could see no pretty mental pictures of compassion, whereupon she started baring her canines. Master Robert could see her face, but not into her eyes, and he wanted to say he was letting her go, and that it might be a while before they met again, as had been the case with Odysseus, but she shot back a stare that meant – I can't find even a trace of goodness in you, if anything, I can tell you're already up to something horrible, and maybe it is actually you who's behind the disappearance of the snowplough driver and the death of Mrs. Walcha.

And Coda could smell the blend of odours coming from Master Robert's clothes and sensed the wafting concoction of compunction, and she darted a ray of light into his pupils, saying, "Dear Master Walcha, I Coda the she-dog do blame you for all that befell Master Mouse." Master Robert looked at her, his nostrils dilating like a bull's, his eyes growing sallow like the hawk's, and he reached for the satchel and searched for the tiny box, his yellowed eyes piercing her, and issuing a small glass ampule, he skilfully broke off the tip, without crushing it, and he produced his sandwich and tore a bit of bread, which he rolled into a small ball, spitting on it to make it tender, and he doused it with the ampule's contents.

Coda had no idea what he was doing, but was overcome with fear and passed water there and then, looking Master Robert straight in the eye as he served her with the bread, doused with the ampule's contents, and she sniffed his palm, while Master Robert started to paw the ground like a bull in the arena, impatiently signalling to Coda to receive the ball of bread of his hand and spare them both the awkwardness. As she failed to oblige, he turned to her as Master Mouse would when he'd try to have her go back home, and went: "Coda, Coda-girl, here's some for you, you damned bitch." Coda gave him such an intent look that white smoke started to issue up from his eyes, with black smoke shooting out of his ears, and she walked over to bite his healthy leg, at which he grabbed her by the neck, strangling fashion, and shoved the ball into her mouth, whereupon he forcefully clutched her elongated mouth, as she mumbled: "Oh no, I am Coda and I don't give up without a fight. Oh no, you're not getting off lightly. Oh no, give me half a chance and I'll bite your hand. Oh no, it'll be the end of the day before I give up. Oh no, you'll never get me out of your head."

Coda fought him with all her might until they fell as one to the ground, with him tightening his hold and her trying to scratch him with her back paws and wriggling in his

arms, trying to wrestle herself free of his grip. Master Robert found himself face down with sand cleaving to his lips and sweaty forehead, and it was only when he pressed as hard as he could that Coda relented a bit, only to finally collapse, motionless. Her eyes lost their focus, darting to and fro, as she further grumbled, in protest, "It's not fair, it's no match, it's evil, it's suffocating," and she finally fell flat, listless.

Master Robert slowly started to loosen his tight grip, at which point Coda mastered some last bits of strength in the tips of her legs, and trying to break free again, said: "My name is Coda and I don't give up, I don't give uppppp witttt ooooooy aaaa fiiiiiii" and Master Robert grabbed her once again, lavishing some comforting words onto her ear, "I'm really sorry, Coda-girl, but I have no choice," and he waited several moments longer and let go, as he got up on his feet and looked around to scan for potential witnesses, then tidied his clothes, spat out the sand in his mouth and wiped off the froth cleaving to his lips, and returned to the snowplough.

Perched on his haughty seat up on the snowplough, Master Robert felt sorrow tinged with pain, and resolved to turn back and collect Coda, so that he might give her a proper burial. He recalled the two policemen, or maybe detectives, who had precipitated an unnecessary disaster on the one hand, yet prompted him to set out on his righteous journey, and at this point he set out. He had learnt of Master Lampel's current address from a forthcoming book to be published in due course, entitle The Return of Master Lampel, which would lay out in great detail the renowned teacher's place of residence, the tree-lined boulevard leading to his abode, their exact number, his neighbours and particularly the weather vane up on his roof, which turned hither and thither.

And Master Robert regretted the loss of the sandwich and ampule, as he was now left with just three of them. And he tossed Coda, eventually, into the bin, mumbling bits from Dies Irae, which opened the mass of the dead familiar to him in its musical versions by Mozart, Verdi and others, and he felt mortified for his actions and even repulsed at himself, and he struggled to see the sense of his actions and was startled at the evil he had just shown a living, trusting, helpless creature.

And Master Robert wanted to wash his hands, but had no water and soap, and he recalled how he had left Coda's leash and collar by the doorway, and there was no doubt in his heart that if someone put their ear to the bin, they could hear the livid voices still crammed in Coda's head. As for her laugh, Master Robert knew it would take residence in his own head for eternity now, where she was going to live on for many years to come, as this pure creature who had never harmed a single soul, human or beastly.

And Master Robert started to feel a tad hungry and regretted forgetting the sandwich at the doorway, while Coda, discarded in the bin, pricked up her tail, like those periscopes you see on submarines.

Master Robert Heading to Meet Master Lempel

And by the time Master Robert ran out of fuel, he was thankfully at the outskirts of a village where houses had red roofs and decided to ditch the snowplough, for not only was said snowplough cumbersome and inconvenient for the long haul, but it also guzzled fuel and blew black smoke. People stared at it, cursing Master Robert in silence, for its handling along the main road and dirt roads was slow, blocking the traffic. Others would laugh at the sight of the snowplough, what with its rocking back and forth as a boat upon the waves, while more than once guys in jeeps would take over Master Robert, yelling how they'd had enough. The bumping was upsetting for Master Robert himself, sending him back to that wooden horse he had had as a child, but most upsetting to him were the deafening noise and the fear lest his earring and thereby his playing were affected.

And the days were clear, the sun twinkling across the elongated blade that pushed away the snow on both sides, all bells and whistles. And Master Robert fancied the plough as a dragon, groaning and blowing fire, smoke coming out his nostrils. In fact, Master Robert knew not how to operate the plough or integrate the special power gear that allowed sweeping progress across the snow, and nor did he know which of the iron handles by the wheel should be pulled or pushed so as to integrate the transmission that operated the plough blade.

And the plough did remind him of the tanks he had seen back in the front, which would be fitted with a bulldozer bucket in the front to remove landmines, obstacles and the scrap-iron of impacted armoured vehicles. Being special, leading the way as they would for the column of armoured vehicles and trailblazing the path for those in their wake, those bucketed tanks would be the first to take hits. Which was also why no one had wanted to be part of their teams. All had known that their days on earth were numbered, even more so than those of their fellow teams behind. Some fighters in the bulldozer tank teams would sooner shoot themselves in the leg, and risk the ensuing anaesthetic-less amputation, than spend time in the bucketed tanks, which would be set ablaze and blow in all directions. The lucky ones would be those who'd been blown away, while the unlucky fellows would be survivors, their bodies mangled by burns, succumbing to the ensuing infections, their spirit mired in grief, given that what the little morphine available had been taken as loot reserved for the top brass, lest it be wasted on ordinary soldiers.

At the outskirts of the village with green blinds, not far from where he had just parked the out-of-fuel snowplough, Master Robert met a music box operator, which, true to fairgrounds' type, was a barefoot, tall, sturdy man, dishevelled as a homeless bum in his rancid tatters, the lesions on his body infected, with cheap, nay, non-distilled alcohol wafting from his mouth. The man was actually Italian-actor type of handsome and wild like Attila the Hun, as he introduced himself as Zampano. And Master Robert stood by and listened to him playing and tried to tell the tune emanating from the box. And the player held the silver handle in his shaking hands, turning it fast and thus winding the spring. And the music box sounded its voice, muffled by the racket of the ruthless barks of dogs with no names, like

Faust's hound, as they stood across the road. And the dogs were baring their canines, while the player Zampano stood there with his back to them, seemingly in self-defence. Once concluding his number, he invited Master Robert for a morning drink.

Master Robert and Zampano sat at the bar of the tavern, with virtually not a soul inside but a child and two adults. Sitting upright as a wooden board, a knapsack on his back and a box of food in front of him, the child ventured to pick his nose, to no avail. On his one side sat a jovial man, rubbing his palms together like a cunning fox, while on his other side sat an older man, who seemed like a conniving wealthy merchant. Master Robert and Zampano, the music box man, their mouth filled with laughter, each jokingly admitted having no money to treat the other for the round. Nor could they understand what a nice boy like that was doing with these two adults, in this place, at this time. And while they sat chatting in the village's tavern, where potted plants were hanging from every lintel, Zampano recounted his tale of exploits. He first stated that as a music man eking out his living at the edge of the village, he would meet many nomads, not least some who would take to the road in the heart of the winter and talk in despair of their unrequited love, and of skies where two suns shone, and of the day when the mailman would hand them a letter from their faraway lover. Meanwhile, he, Zampano, listened to their story and turned the music box handle round with his shaking hand, awaiting his tips.

Master Robert said he hoped they tossed at least one coin and added that he was a doctor, offering to diagnose his new friend's shaking hand, as it was his estimation that this was not down to cold. And Zampano further told about the severe deterioration of his eyesight due to his excesses with cheap alcohol, and following a strongman trick he had performed in one of those street shows, where he would tear iron chains wrapped around his chest with his bare pectoral muscles, thereby straining his eyes. Master Robert in turn told him of a pipe organ player by the name of Helmut Walcha who had been blinded as a child following a dose of vaccine, yet had nevertheless known by heart, nay, in excruciating detail, Bach's comprehensive keyboard literature, and once a week, would play the pipe organ at church.

Zampano, who'd never heard of Bach, humbly confessed that it'd been years since his last visit to church, at which Master Robert added, like a parent disciplining his child, that he must watch his cheap alcohol consumption, a poison for all intents and purposes, and that as a doctor in the eastern front, he had treated many a soldier poisoned by such cheap liquor, produced from potatoes, shoe polish or even grease. And the music box man turned to Master Robert, inquiring how and why would a doctor drive a snowplough, and a sickly, dragon-like, fire-blowing plough at that, to which Master Robert replied that it was complicated, for it was his misfortune that the lover of his second wife, who had passed away recently, had been a snowplough driver, which led to suggestions that he was a murder suspect. Fortunately, he added, better a snowplough than say a lawnmower, which was much slower, at which the two men laughed.

But Zampano had yet to be satisfied, and he further inquired whatever had made Master Robert embark on his journey. And Master Robert explained to the music box man that he was on a journey for redemption in the name of justice, a quest to make amends for

the gratuitous death of a man he had once known, and perhaps even vindicate his own insult. Zampano was at a loss to see how a death of a man could be amended, and nevertheless told Master Robert that he owned a motorcycle, a tricycle to be exact, which was more suitable for the road ahead than a snowplough, and he offered to swap vehicles. Zampano swore to Master Robert that this was no ordinary motorcycle, boasting of its American engine and American carburettor and American timing chain to boot, and said that at one time he would ride it from town to town to put on his street show, which involved, among other things, tearing an iron chain with his bare pectorals.

And Zampano referred to his travels in search of livelihood as quests of charity, verging on missions, in the name of none other but God, and he started relating a tale that Master Robert could not see the end of. And it so came to pass that one such day Zampano had met an old, ignorant widow who on top of everything, had lost her husband in the war and been left to provide for many a child, with some, particularly the adult girls, presenting a peculiarity of sorts, on top of being wretched, and being of no help to the poor old women in earning their keep and performing domestic chores, they had posed a burden in their own right. Nor would the two adult daughters have any marriage prospects, with no elementary life skills, though with some effort, they could be made to look rather comely.

The old woman herself, Zampano went on to tell, had been worse for wear, what with her strife to provide for the household and her missing teeth to boot, and if that were not enough, one day scoundrels had come knocking on her door disguised as apostles for the church or Vatican novices, with news of a treasure in the field adjacent to her home, and all that jazz, and before too long, had run off with what little savings she had kept. Worst still, her salvation had proven her devastation. Her only recollection of the rascals had been a big gold ring, worn on the right ring finger of the scoundrel masked as bishop. Her story would touch Zampano, prompting him to hand the elderly woman and children all his savings, so they might buy cheese and meat and assuage their hunger.

Zampano had further taken along her eldest daughter, so as to relieve her elderly mother and train her in a profession that would never fail her. In order to make a decent woman out of her, he had taken her as his wife and taught her, true to his promise to her mother, some easy tasks and parts in his circus show, but rather than show gratitude, the girl would one of those nights walk out the rear trailer hitched to the motorcycle, which served as their sleeper, and with Zampano still asleep, she'd disappeared. Found though she'd be two days later, in a nearby field, she had by now been lifeless, and judging by the injuries to her person, it had obviously been a rape and murder. Following the harsh incident, Zampano had vowed during the burial ceremony which he had held with no invitees, at the edge of the field where her body had been found, that albeit a widower, he would henceforth take better care of his wife, even if that meant tying her to the motorcycle as you would a goat. He had a good reason, Zampano, to believe his late wife to be a saint, if not in life than surely in death, for once he had removed her body from its spot in the field, a pure water spring had emerges forth, slowly growing into a cool stream.

Following excruciating deliberation, Zampano had returned to the old woman to bring her the news of her elder daughter's death and request, given her ever-deteriorating financial

situation, to marry her second daughter, who had turned out worse and more peculiar than her elder sister and posed a heavy burden on her mother, what with her loitering around the beach, or her swinging to and fro, scarecrow fashion. Even children many years her junior would laugh and mock her for her peculiarity, calling her straw-maned wooden horse. And she'd hardly talk too, while her hair, which must have been cut by a blind, one-armed barber, would lay matted on her head like some copper saucer. And the mother, weeping for the death of her eldest daughter, had nevertheless rejoiced to have Zampano, big-hearted Zampano, proposing to take her daughter as his wife and thereby free her of her presence and redeem the daughter herself of her own peculiarity.

For the former and latter alike, the mother would be grateful to Zampano, the music box operator. And true to his promise, Zampano had married the second daughter and taught her to prepare soup and please her husband in the back, the trailer that is, of the motorcycle, which was a tricycle with an American engine, its dimensions shown in inches, rather than centimetres.

Nor would the second daughter prove hard to tame, slow though she had been and prone to fritter her time away on exercises in futility, like sowing tomato seeds, despite the pair traveling from one place to another and never having the chance to relish the fruit of the earth. But her shortcomings notwithstanding, his second wife had succeeded in learning some words by heart, and even recited a short poem, and she could pull off a pre-show drum roll and offer a captivating announcement by calling the show's name and sounding a basic trumpet blow. And though very slow to learn, the second daughter had eventually mastered a brief trumpet sequence and managed to move some people, who would hear her play the only tune she'd known. Even hard-worn nuns, upon listening to her play, could sense, between the off-key trumpet sounds, her loneliness and her pining for redemption, and would shed a tear for the doomed soul.

Zampano and the second daughter had spent a long while traveling on the motorcycle, with its American engine and sleeper, and over time had joined the circus and pursued their chain-breaking show as interludes, between the monkey riding a bike and the hypnotic artist.

Let us not forget that circus clown, who had tried to exploit the innocence of Zampano's second wife and entice her to fly together and start a different life, which would entail ditching him, Zampano, that is, and the clown's scheme had relied on some unscrupulous means, like comparing the wife to a jewel that would befit no crown, as if anything, even the most trifle, should have its moment of glory, a part to play in this world. This would force Zampano to push the effusive clown away from his wife and he had even gotten himself into that unavoidable brawl, which left the clown inadvertently killed by his feast, following a blow that wouldn't normally kill a fly. But it had so happened that it knocked the pants off the clown, to the point where Zampano would have to slick the body, lest his wife be implicated.

That day would make Zampano realise he could no longer be there for the second wife to lean on, and would have to let her receive help elsewhere, whereupon he had placed her, sound asleep, by the roadside, with that sorry trumpet of her and the drum and

drumsticks, and not because she had ceased to be of use, but for her own good, meaning he would part ways with her, notwithstanding the many efforts invested in this woman.

Not long thereafter, word would reach him that this wife too had passed, and anguished at being a widower two times over, he had also been tormented by the death of that second wife, notwithstanding the lacklusterness of said jewel, but more than anything, his heart had sunk at the prospect of having to be the bearer, for the second time, of such hard news for her mother. Zampano, for no real reason, had felt himself to have betrayed the mother when the latter had tendered her third daughter, but becoming a widower for the third time would not do for him, forcing him to decline. Nor could he be bothered to pursue his show, and so great had been the crisis befalling him, that one day he would fall asleep drunk by the beach, the high tide almost undertaking him.

Ever since, as Master Robert figured, Zampano had been wandering aimlessly on his motorcycle that had become his home, taking him as it would from one place to another with his two wives, begotten by the same mother, though not necessary by the same father. Every so often, he'd be overcome by guilt for failing to tie his second wife, as one would tie a goat or at least a donkey, to the tricycle, and he'd regret his refusal to marry the third daughter and relieve her poor, elderly mother.

After a while, which was neither short nor long, he had settled down at the entrance to the red-roofed village, having bought himself a shoulder-slung music box, which he played for visitors and present parties to enjoy, thereby landing the odd hot meal and some occasionally generous handouts, and he also dabbled with this dream of selling his life story to a Hollywood director, and if Master Robert joined along, they could both stand to gain from the prospective deal.

And Master Robert heard Zampano's story and wished to say that he too had lost two wives, though in circumstances altogether different, not least as his wives had been very talented and no element of charity had been involved in the marriage. And yet he mused that some similar elements could nevertheless be found between Zampano's story and his, as both had failed to protect their wives and in both cases the first wife had met her preventable death, while the second had vanished from their life for good, even though Zampano's wife would die eventually, so the rumour went, which could also be said about Master Robert's second wife.

And having each had their cup, Master Robert asked Zampano whether he'd still like to trade the motorcycle for the snowplough, for the motorcycle, or tricycle, would allow him to proceed on with further ease, while the plough could be of use to Zampano if he learned to integrate gears, a skill that Master Robert had failed to master: after all, winter in the region saw some heavy snows. Zampano agreed, having wished for a while now to get rid of the battery-less tricycle. For a moment there, it occurred to Master Robert that he could invite the music box operator to join along, but he dismissed the idea, given the mission of avenging Master Mouse's death, a journey he had to go alone, to face Master Lampel, who had written to Master Mouse, but had him, Master Robert, in mind when stating "I suggest you consider whether you should pursue your playing or take your fingers to the typewriter or better still, become a typesetter."

And Master Robert bade farewell to Zampano, then bought a second-hand battery in good condition and off he was on the second leg of his journey, this time on a tricycle, to travel through villages, where he would offer medical relief in exchange for a hot meal and some gas, and gradually, like riding a bike, the notion of some ailments came back to him, afflictions that he had taken his mind off over the years, and he acquired new skills and would cure mainly war widows and patients who had despaired of the care of their local medicine men. And the patients seeking his care multiplied by the day and his reputation transcended villages, and he could once again feel like some Albert Schweitzer introducing western medicine to the far-flung villages of Gabon. And Master Robert would prescribe prescriptions, while also concocting quite some homemade medicines, which proved a great success. And people would wait for Master Robert by the roadsides for hours or even days on end, a memorable instance being the father practically standing in Master Robert's way, pleading with him to help his invalid daughter, who relied on crutches.

Master Robert, though unappreciative of the father's aggressive gesture, was nevertheless touched by his willingness to stop at nothing to help his daughter, and therefore pulled up the motorcycle, got off and walked over to the daughter, who was about twenty and of an agreeable face, though very emaciated, her eyes bloodshot. The father recounted how she had contracted Polio as a child but despite her illness, had shown an incredible willpower. However, a while ago, some apostles with the church had arrived at their home and conned him of all his money, while planting the false belief in the daughter's head that it wouldn't be long before a miracle happened and she would heal and walk like anyone.

Since that day, went the father, she had not been herself. Morose, she would spend her days crying for hours on end, and he feared she had lost her taste for life and that if he were to let his guard down for a second, she could wither to death like a flower with no water. Master Robert looked at her, and recalling Zampano's story, asked her if the head priest had worn a giant gold ring on his right ring finger, at which the daughter nodded. Master Robert realised there and then that he could not make her walk, but might restore her taste for life. He told her that back in the day, he had been a doctor at a boys' high school boarding school, where instilling honourable conduct, integrity, scholarship and above all, friendship and loyalty, had been the most upheld values. Far more so than any grade or achievement. The 1936 Winter Olympics had been held in Garmisch, not too far from the school, and two of its pupils had run away to watch the games, and even managed to see the ice hockey finals, where Britain, winning the gold medal, would interrupt invincible Canada's winning streak, an event that would be remembered for years to come. A short while thereafter the pupils had been traced, while one of the boarding school instructors would travel to fetch them back, and as they had disembarked off the train, one pupil had slipped, hurting his back to never walk again. Many in the boarding school management would wonder what fate might have befallen the boy had the instructor not travelled to retrieve the two, or whether the disaster might have been averted.

Later, most of their hapless' school mates would enlist in the army, with the boy left behind in the boarding school, disabled and guilt-ridden. Eventually, however, only a handful of pupils would survive the gratuitous war, while he would be in effect be spared. Which went to show that you never could tell if whatever happened at a given moment was for the

best or worst, making it perennially advisable to seek for all that was good and fine in life. Beauty was everywhere, even in the rubbish bins, said Master Robert, as he failed to produce further instances of beauty that lied in wait within the unsightly, if one only knew where to look.

Master Robert never told the girl with the crutches that the pupil in question had eventually been killed too by the end of the war, during the Allies' bombing of the home front, which would bury him under the school's rubble, just beneath the chemistry lab, with an extinguished Bunsen burner lodged in his head. And Master Robert sat down with the daughter, listening to her story and wishing to tell her that her substantial disability did not mean she could not enjoy her life, but the words wouldn't come out. Eventually he said that unlike the many wounded he had come across during the war, her body had not become her enemy, and that from now on it was all up to her, and she could have a good life if she so desired, and going on and on as he was, he failed to notice it was now evening, whereupon he excused himself, telling the girl and her father that he must carry on his way, as he was expected at the other end of the woods, and he set off on his tricycle, despite the late hour.

Avoiding though he normally would traveling by dark, this time he resolved to carry on his way, straining his eyes and fighting off sleep by occupying himself with all manner of thoughts, like whether there was a sunrise pig to Joni Mitchel's sunset pig, and so he rode forth till the break of dawn, feeling as he did the Erbkönig staring at him and appealing for him to turn off the motorcycle lights and ride in pitch darkness. And Master Robert could sense the Erbkönig's hand on the lights' switch, and grappled with the Erbkönig, mumbling all manner of mumbles, and he bit on the glass casing of the light, thus bringing the bulb back to life.

And Master Robert was preoccupied with efforts to synchronise the motorcycle's chirps, i.e. the noise of the pistons, with the vanishing rate of the white lines running through the middle of the road, which was no mean feat, what with the motorcycle lagging behind the throttle's change, despite its American engine.

And as the hours went by, Master Robert did wonder if, come the day when someone write a song about the sun coming, the studio would ensure to have the sunrise recorded from left to right, as in most paintings and stained glass pieces in them churches where Master Walcha and Doctor Schweitzer would play, or whether they would go right to left rather. And Master Robert further occupied himself with arithmetic exercises, like multiplying and dividing, and some chemistry conundrums to boot. Accordingly, he pondered what might happen if he were to mix sodium with chrome, all so as to ward off sleep.

All of a sudden, sound came from afar, of a guitar and harmonica playing, which harked back to the Gypsy tunes he knew from those Italian films. And he saw a gang of youngsters, half-walking, half-dancing their way down the road, and evidently revelling, for the tune was a jovial one. The young revellers, some of whom embracing, were dancing around a young woman in a black dress and a skimpy chequered coat, her hair dishevelled, her face dirty, perhaps even battered, and Master Robert stopped the motorcycle and switched off the engine, uncertain though he was if he could start it again. And muttering something to the Erbkönig, lest he presumed him to be defeated, he followed the band, which moved from

right to left, while a relatively older man walked along, camera in hand, recording them as they danced around the woman, letting out cries of joy, or completing seven rings on their mopeds, with a young man playing the accordion and pulling funny faces at her, or even barking like a poodle named Charlie.

And Master Robert was struck by the gloomy face of that tormented female figure, with her heavy gait, and was all the more astonished to see how in a matter of some dozens of steps and quite some sounds, a shadow of a shadow of a smile there appeared on that rueful expression, while the gaze of this bonny though untidy figure was slowly transforming, from a woman seemingly lost, to one that was gradually filling up with hope.

Master Robert believed that there in front of him a revelation of light was unfolding, foretelling the sunrise ahead, and he descended the motorcycle and started to walk towards the radiant figure, only for his legs to prove stiff as sticks, on account of the protracted ride, while his gait was constrained. Eventually, he approached her to say good evening, introducing himself as Doctor Robert and inquiring for her name. He invited her there and then to join him, so they might proceed together, and even suggested she could assist him in his work, feeling that his life depended on her consent and more excited than the two times he had actually proposed to his two wives. The woman accepted his offer, saying they must hurry, before the Fine caption showed on film, and they walked together towards the sunrise-bound road, not hand in hand, but rather hands in pockets, understandably, given the cold. The motorcycle seemed accustomed to carry a male and a female, with the overhead canvas's seemingly tailored for her size, and she went in and out the sleeper trailer in leaps and bounds, as if familiar with it for several lives over.

Atalya, that was the woman's name, like the Old Testament queen, which resonated to him like the sight of Attila, also known as Zampano the music box operator, whose motorcycle they were now riding, and Master Robert viewed it as a sign, while Atalya wouldn't tell him her story beyond the grim end of her relationship with her fiancée, and the boyfriend before him, both of whom vowing eternal love and happy married life, only to forsake her once they had plundered her money, and in fact, she had no home, money, relatives or steadfast friends in this world captured by camera.

At first, they slept apart, Atalya in the motorcycle's sleeper trailer and Doctor Robert on the ground, to the right of the vehicle. But with nights growing colder and with the advent of rains, Atalya would sleep in the sleeper trailer under the canvas, while he slept on the ground, to the motorcycle's left. It was only when snow started to fall that they slept together in the sleeper. Shortly thereafter, Master Robert realised that she had no education at all, just like the locals in the village down in the valley from which he had come, and could not tell antibiotics from antiphon, but she had her joie the vivre with light surrounding her, aura-like, blinding Master Robert and defrosting his soul. The two would sit around the camp fire at night, then lie on their backs side by side, looking at the sky, and Master Robert wished to tell her of his son, and one night he could not help himself, and took out the picture of his boy, which she studied by the pale light of the fire and by her own light, and said the boy was very bonny and looked like Doctor Robert. Having further studied it, she said the wall clock at the backdrop seemed old-fashioned, with signs or letters, which she could not recognise, rather

than numbers, and Master Robert snatched the picture from her hand and noticed something for the first time, and he promised himself that one day he would get a magnifying glass and try to figure out what that was about.

He later inquired about her childhood and she said could not remember much, for she had had to leave her family at a young age and provide for herself. In the course of her different jobs, she had gotten to learn about humans, and reckoned people were like onions, with many layers to them, and sometimes it could only take a scratch to produce tears. She further said that she derived her strength from faith and hope that one day she would meet someone who would lift her of her sorry life. She wanted to go on and tell him of her different jobs and encounters with people, but parts of her past were in blur and anyway, she could not get into the details that were missing from the script.

Every so often Atalya would inquire where they were actually heading and for what end, and Master Robert explained that they had both lost their partners twice over and remained destitute, and added they were going to confront a man named Master Lampel, who was responsible, one way or another, for the death of an acquaintance of his by the name of Master Mouse, who had defenestrated himself off his apartment in the five-story tower. The same Master Lampel, went on Master Robert, had dismissed his own piano performance, audaciously, haughtily, referring to it as the playing of someone in a rush to make it to the lavatory.

Not being particularly educated and unaware as she was of where Lutetia was in the first place or how many lines a staff comprised, Master Robert felt that there he was, after years of want, having his voice heard and his particularities accommodated.

And Atalya and Master Robert would travel around – the right way around, and slowly but surely the purse began to fill, while Atalya served as a nurse and assistant and Master Robert would minister as a doctor, but the warmth of her heart seemed to be a more potent remedy than the drugs prescribed by him, and while he appealed to the patients' body and symptoms, she would go straight for their eyes, putting a smile of hope on their faces. Nor did Atalya minister to human patients alone. One of those days, she asked Master Robert to treat a run-over fox lying on the road, supine, legs up, with eyes devoid of cunning and filled with sadness, and the fox seemed to be seeking grace as Master Robert tried to help it, to no avail. Nor was her smile of any good, as the fox met his end on the road, but received burial in the nearby wood.

The road drew nearer to its end, with hints of the linden trees near Master Lampel's abode, carrying Master Lampel's name, as described in the book called **The Return of Master Lampel**. And as Master Robert announced to her that tomorrow they were to meet Master Lampel, she grew solemn and told him the moment had now come where the Fine caption took over the screen, and added that in another world, she was married to this Italian film director, which meant she had to return home before the film ran out. And regretting though he was her departure, he was not in the least bit embittered, but rather happy for the time they had shared, and he offered her half of his savings as he wished her well, then push-started the motorcycle and carried on his way in the dark.

As Time Goes By

And evening came to pass after these things, with Master Robert overcome by an urge to be back in a public house, of the kind where he would once play the piano for a living, as a medical student, and if that were not enough, he had this need to consume some hot, greasy food and wash it down with a cup of chilled brew. And as he stepped into the public house, he could sniff those acrid odours that would cling to his clothes, and notwithstanding public houses' bad reputation, particularly those offering rooms by the hour, Master Robert would muse that not only was his work essential for his living, but it was interesting to boot. For sitting by the piano, he could scan developments around him, just like an anthropologist conducting observations of the tribal people in Africa, as they revelled themselves into stupor.

And he first sat at one of those round tables and waited for the waitress to come over flirting and affectionate, so that he might order more drinks and thus secure her a lucrative tip. And for some reason the equation came to his mind, if youth for money, and he mused that it, i.e. the equation, had been around before earth had completed its first orbit, and several drinks in, Master Robert came to feel more familiar with the waitress, asking her permission to play a couple of numbers on the piano. The waitress in turn called the publican to see if Master Robert wasn't just one of those drunks prone to telling tales, and he in turn suggested he played a song as a trial.

Master Robert got up and felt himself somewhat weighed down by the drinks, but he also felt to have lost control of his speech and wondered whether he should visit the urinals to relive himself, but he was still at a loss and he walked over to the piano, where he laid his cup, then skilfully placed his lit cigarette on the shorter tip of the piano lid, that is, outward-facing, so the ash didn't fall on the keys, and he lifted the lid with a single stroke and for a moment there gave himself a start, having failed to check if it was rigged, like many deserted pianos back in the Russian front, and he began playing one of his more familiar numbers, We'll Meet Again, and with no intermission, moved on to Bach's Keyboard Toccata in D minor, though not because it was suitable audition material, but rather because he remembered it better than other pieces and trusted it to play itself out, and he shut his eyes and let his hands play without interfering or opining. And as his hands played, he recalled how his mother would enjoy slamming the lid shut on his fingers whenever he'd make a grave error, and according to his estimates, the toccata was number 911 in Bach's oeuvre, a number of intriguing symmetry that might become, should anyone desire it, a flash sports car or an emergency service number or maybe a calendar date where, of all places across the sky, aeroplanes would decide to fly between multi-storied buildings that scrape the sky.

Having finished playing, Master Robert looked the publican in the eyes, and the latter gave his approval for him to continue, notwithstanding his face, which expressed some concern, suspicion, nay, uneasiness vis-à-vis Master Robert. But Master Robert opted to turn

a blind eye, because for the first time now, he was playing publicly, legitimately, rather than surreptitiously, as he would back in the village homes, like a wretched thief who gets nothing stolen, even though his present listeners were drunken strangers. Being as so, he decided to dedicate the next number to Master Mouse, but figured he might first play *Les Barricades Mystérieuse*, and he adjusted his hands, about to commence, only to then hear a woman's voice say, nay, demand: Do play As Time Goes by, at which Master Robert turned his head to find a pretty or rather very pretty lady, not unlike Ilsa Lund, who had fled Lutetia on the day of the city's conquest, and he turned around to say, "You must be confused, for I am not familiar with As Time Goes By", whereupon she smiled a kind smile, which reminded him of his first wife, and bleary-eyed, as if her spectacles' lenses had been rubbed in Vaseline, she said it was her pleasure and that she did not know his name but would love to have him play it again. Embarrassed, Master Robert replied: "You must remember that a song is but a song, but the world will always welcome lovers, as time goes by," and he further said that he could replay the toccata if she so willed. At which she, i.e. the pretty woman, retorted, "What a shame, thus passes a wonderful friendship."

And Master Robert turned his gaze back to the keyboard and mused that it had been a while since his last wonderful friendship, with the exception of Justus maybe, his friend from back in his student days, who had arranged for him to work at the school, and as he played on and felt that there he was, at liberty to perform any piece without fearing lest his style betrayed his identity. Having played some of the good old songs, he got up, just like back in the day, and called upon the audience to make a toast to honour the life of Master Lampel, who was going to meet his maker soon, and paying little attention or otherwise not reading too much into the end-of-life thing, the patrons cheered and joined the toast, and Master Robert continued playing many more songs and had no wish to get off his seat, as he became besotted with this wonderful audience love. But with bladder pressure increasing by the moment, Master Robert realised a decision had to be made, and he nevertheless continued to play the audience pleasers, interspersed with the odd parts of other pieces, like the Sonata in C major, K.308 by Scarlatti, and short though it was, midway through, he could feel that somewhere in his lower abdomen, a volcano was fit to burst forth in huge surges, and Master Robert feared lest whales fly before he could tell, to bounce against the wooden ceiling, followed by squid and fish, and he tried to focus his thoughts on arid deserts, with no water or flora, as he had seen in films, but instead of yellow, sun-beaten dunes, he envisioned white ice dunes in the Russian front, which he knew all too well. He could see frozen lakes and frozen rivers where, despite the harsh cold, a little rivulet was ebbing, balmy and tranquil, warming his foot down at the piano pedal, and he opened his eyes to realise he had failed to hold back the floodgate, whereupon the publican threw Master Mouse out, not before muttering that this was no place for a player who sounded like he was bursting for it.

Transfigured Night

And Master Robert was fairly close to Master Lampel's place by that point, and even got a whiff of the Tilia trees, and realised his journey had almost come to an end, as by the time he met Master Lampel, the next morning, he would execute his murder plan, the very plan that had prompted him to embark on his journey, but with all the traveling and diversions, he struggled to remember the reason that might justify such murder. He mused long and hard and asked himself what it was in fact that had propelled him to leave his home, his peace and quiet, to set out on a one-way road, and he took a piece of paper and wrote down the possible motives for taking the journey and it was these very words that Master Robert penned at the title:

Possible reasons for my leaving the quiet, cosy home with the purpose of meeting Master Robert and kill him by means of a poison ampule... But after some hesitation and inner dealings he replaced the verb *kill* with *punish*, wishing as he did to stress that it was a just deed, a veritable mission, in fact, nay, a righting of a wrong, and he continued:

1. I set out to avenge the death of Master Mouse, who jumped of the window of his fifth-floor apartment in the five-story tower at the valley, on account of his failure to enter a music contest in Lutetia and the ensuing humiliation at the hands of Master Lampel during the audition.
2. I set out on my journey so as to repent for my own actions, as the village's mailman, against Master Mouse, i.e., my replacement of Master Mouse' dreadful tape with the tape recording my own performance, and my sending this competent (only humility stops me short of declaring it exquisite) tape to Master Lampel, pursuant to Master Mouse's wish to audition for Master Lampel, and by so doing, I gave rise to Master Mouse's hopes and illusions, which were better left unroused.
3. I set out on a mission to take my revenge on Master Lampel for disgracing me and for disparaging, with malice concocted (as in Concoction) with ignorance, my own musical talents, so as to make him an example for anyone as insolent as to lash out at a musician like myself.
4. I set out on this crusade so as to make amends for my actions during the war, i.e. the observations, thus hoping to create a better world.
5. I embarked on my Odyssey so as stave off boredom and earn eternal fame, should a book be dedicated to my story.
6. I set out on the pilgrimage, so as to provide content for the book that will surely be written about me.
7. I fled so as to avoid reckoning or even punishment for the murder of Mrs. Walcha.

These could be the reasons, or perhaps just some of them, as surely other reasons existed that were perfectly justifiable, but Master Robert could not recall them at the moment, preoccupied as he was with the preparations for the following day, when he would inflict death on Master Lampel, and engrossed with thoughts of purification for the occasion, as if it were his own salvation or a ritual of human sacrifice, which had been the custom in the tribe found an excruciating ten day's walk away from the hospital of Doctor Schweitzer in

Lambarene, Gabon. And he resolved to leave this question open until such day as someone would put the story of his journey into a book, and he told himself that the points he had just made, in writing, would assist that writer if ever such were to be found, and he thrust the piece of paper into his shirt pocket, close to his heart, as soldiers would the letters to their sweethearts, and Master Robert further mused that the list he had just prepared might also be of help come the day when someone sipped of his special cup.

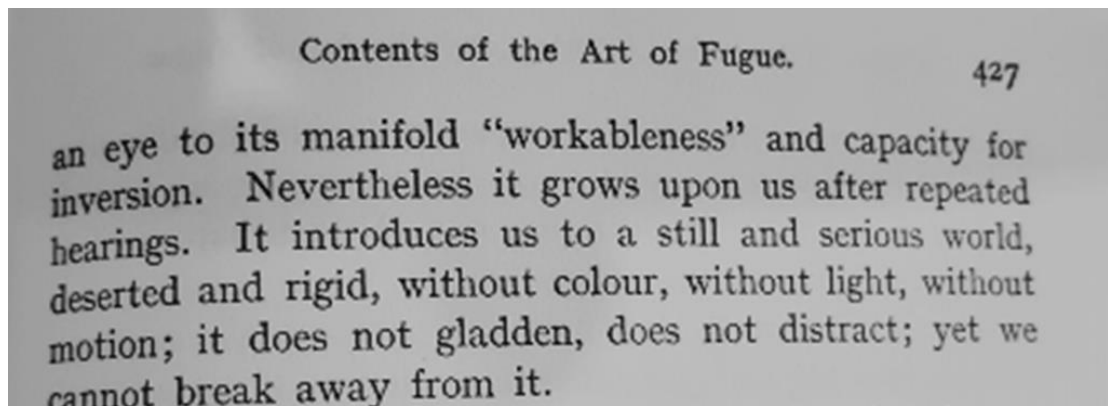
And the wounding words of Master Lampel – your fingers are ungraceful, unseasoned so it seems, while your playing is like that of some parlour pianist, easy on the listeners, entertaining the jubilant, comforting the mourners and quick to finish his bit before rushing to relieve himself – still resonated in Master Robert's ears, buzzing like a gnat inside Titus's head, and he mused that motives notwithstanding, there he was, about to relieve this world of a haughty, cold-blooded, evil man, who, if he were a protagonist of a novel or a novella, readers would surely wish him dead, and breathe a sigh of relief as he vanished from the book's pages.

With his thoughts thus running away with him, Master Robert stopped his motor trike at the edge of the orchard by the side of the road, not far from Master Lampel's abode, where he read out, by memory, the words of Émile Zola – *La vérité est en marche, et rien ne l'arrêtera* ; and he could not agree more, and as he switched off the motor he examined the motorcycle given to him by Zampano in the bargain of his lifetime, with the same affection extended by an Eskimo gazing at his Husky dogs as they brought him back home by the end of a long hunt in the frozen pole, and Master Mouse took the aluminium pail, which he used for washing, and he soaked a cloth in the motorcycle's petrol tank, then started a small fire and filled a saucer with water from the stream conveniently running along the road, and he heated the water, so that he might shower.

Unlike previous times, this time he had triple the volume boiled, to have plenty of hot water to mix with the cool one. For Master Robert had a thorough kind of wash in mind and he spared no water, whether cold or warm. And he filled the pail to the brim, true to the Archimedes' principle, so that the moment he stepped in, water overflowed, and having settled inside, he started scrubbing himself, as if about to perform surgery, not sparing his fingernails and ears and even behind the ears, and he plucked his nose and ears, and having recalled that as child, his mother would scrub his back and scruff, he took the branches he had prepared in advance and gently beat them against his back, for a moment there pretending to beat thorny branches selected for him by Franciscan friars, and the green sap did sting his flesh, and he perform the act with full intent, scrupulously, as if purifying himself for his own death, rather than Master Lampel's. He then leaned on the pail's wall to look at the gloomy sky, where the moon projected light on the clouds, and he waited patiently for them to clear, so that he can see the Northern Star, just as he would back in those frozen night in the Russian front, with white snow all around, amidst the odour of grilled flesh wafting from the burnt tanks.

Yet the clouds did not clear and the desolate white moon reflected in the white soapy water of the pail, but the water surface gradually expanded like the frozen snowy fields, and Master Robert recalled what Albert Schweitzer would write one day about Bach's art of

fugue, namely, that the more one listened and delved into the different voices – which at one moment intermingled, only to grow distinct at the next – the deeper grew one's appreciation thereof, and it seemed to be at once the beginning and the end.



And as he gingerly made himself comfortable inside the pail, pacing his breath to the water temperature and the overhanging mist of steam, and he fancied himself the captain of a ship looking at the horizon through a pirate telescope, water and fog all around him, and looking up only to see there, on the Northern Star, the village's lights shining, with the little blue radio light flickering like a single blue paintbrush stroke on a pencil drawing. And the big grey pencils varied in thickness and in the letters H and B embossed on them, like the initials of Heinrich Bach, a relative of the great Bach, who had lived with him for about seven years.

And Doctor Robert pictured himself, there in his own mind's eye, quietly leaving his home to open the car door and settle comfortably into the seat, where he would listen to the radio receiver, and he could see himself appreciating Bach's English Suite No.2, and he could not understand why it was this piece, of all Bach's keyboard pieces, that he loved so much, and he indulged the assumption that the answer lay in the fierce and oh-so-telling vocal mark as early as the first three notes.

Come to think of it, perhaps it was Goldberg Variation 25 that he preferred, its acuity beyond anything Chopin or Schumann could even dream of, and he wished he could play one of those pieces he knew himself to his son, and engaged himself in trying to decide which such piece he would have chosen for his son, in the heavens above or down in the belly of a submarine, had he had to send him one, and he was loath to get carried aloft by the pathos of the unfinished fugue from the art of the fugue, preferring instead something shorter, forthright, which said it all.

And Master Robert spurred himself on, as if his time was rationed, and eventually opted for Little Prelude in D minor, one of the six little preludes, number 935 in the list of compositions by Bach, a short, unassuming piece, and he was amazed at how the very thought of a prelude, as he sat inside a pail, fancying himself to be listening to the radio inside a car that was now far away, moved him so, and Master Robert remembered his years of keeping secret his identity as a doctor and he struggled to make sense of his self-enforced banishment from the medical profession, as if he deserved a punishment for failing to save his wife and son, and couldn't see why he would keep his love concealed, like a secret lover, and bury away the fact of his marriage, or why he wouldn't have a picture of his dead son

framed and placed on the chest by the dinner table. And he further recalled how he had become a bicycle-mounted mailman and mused at how he had been as sanctimonious and inane as to betray himself, just like Albert Schweitzer accusing Bach of betraying the musical traditions by indulging the influence of other cultures (see photograph of the original French edition, 1905, page 104)

//Inconsciemment, le maître s'est rendu coupable de **trahison** vis à vis du génie de la musique allemande. Accepter les formes étrangères, ce n'était pas seulement porter préjudice à son œuvre à lui, mais, encore, arrêter la musique allemande dans la voie du développement possible. //Que les talents ordinaires se laissent entraîner par les tendances de l'époque: il n'importe. Mais, quand les grands génies com-

Nor did Schweitzer shy away from wielding the word *trahison*, or treason in French, only to retract it in later editions, possibly scared by his own self, and opt for a less blatant kind of phrasing. While Schweitzer had blamed Bach for betraying the German tradition, with Wagner as its culmination, and letting himself be influenced by the likes of Vivaldi and Rameau, he, Master Robert that is, was blaming himself that back in his days as a military doctor going by Doctor Robert, he had let himself be influenced by his surrounding circumstances and performed his observations, in breach of traditional, moral ethics, as expected of a doctor. He remembered all too well his expectations of himself and his colleagues, answering to him as a doctor, as well as the standards exacted by his teachers in his days as a student. And nor could it be clearer to Doctor Robert that he must tend to every sick and wounded man, be that an enemy soldier, and he had realised in real time that he was betraying himself and his values as a doctor, just as great Bach had betrayed his country's tradition of the choral and mass.

Master Robert was struck by how he would sit, night in-night out, come rain or shine, inside his car, waiting for the unlikely prospect of the radio playing pieces performed by him, and he was suddenly overcome by longings for Atalya, who had left him to return to her world, but had nevertheless brought him such joy as could never be taken away, and he felt himself to be stronger than ever before or thereafter, whereupon the ocean inside the pail began to send waves and he had to make an effort to maintain the link between the blue light beam, darting away from the village, and the Northern Star, and up ahead in the distance he could see a U-boat submarine, with only three torpedoes left to its name, as it drew its racks shut, getting ready to take a dive.

And the waves raged on, and the carps did leap off the water to drop on the vessels' deck and the ocean grew rough, with whale tails beating against the waves, and the submarine tilted on its side, air and sea becoming one on account of the air filling with briny spray and soap bubbles, and the U-boat was set a light by the petrol-doused cloth, and the sailors did hop off the submarine's deck that was yet to go under the flaming water, while some sailors went ablaze, as others drowned or were preyed upon by sharks or otherwise by their own mind.

It would not be long before the submarine plunged deep underwater with all the crew in its belly, to finally rest on the ocean floor and get down to playing Scat or Battleship until the double chequered sheet ran out, and Master Robert clutched on the carp charred by the burning diesel fuel, and before long the hurling grew intense, while the plug used to drain the water popped out and took off to the heavens and the breaking glass made its faint sound, as the blue light turned off.

And in the ensuing silence, the long, hard bark of Coda could be heard, and Master Robert slid down the pail to the draining hole, which sucked him in, as he held a flailing carp, his head and body rotating on their axis like water draining down the sink, and the pair plunged into the ocean's vast expanse of water, as the fish's eye expressed horror and perhaps pain and some discontent to boot, and the fish made a last ditch effort to extricate itself from Master Robert's grip, to no avail. And the two dove deep down, and with their open eyes they did spy a faint beam of light, which grew brighter the closer they got, until they finally stood facing a vast oblong window alongside the body of the submarine.

Master Robert looked in to find multiple sun-deprived pallid faces staring back at him, bearing beards, and Master Robert started to gasp for air, his eyesight growing bleary and the soap now burning his eyes, and mastering what little strength he had left, he pulled his head out of the pail water, which had cooled by now, and got up with difficulty and tried to regain his balance, as he poured hot water to the pail and looked up again at the stars up in the sky, and he mused that once the deed was done, he would have to make up for all the listening time missed over his journey, and he couldn't recall if he had just cleaned the gaps between his left toes, and wondered whether they had ever heard, back in the tribe, ten days by foot from Lambarene, the pipe organ playing, or whether they had ever sipped cool water or whether the English indeed had ice as green as tea.

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The Blue Light

And the blue light on the radio receiver had been forgotten behind, and Master Robert recalled instead that somewhere over in faraway Canada there was a little girl with golden hair walking to school and a day would come when she, i.e. the girl, was going to write of the wish to skate away in her skates, skate away on the smooth rivers where it didn't snow, over to another life, and on her way to another world, reindeer chariots, decorated fir trees and jingle bells would unfold before our eyes.

And Master Robert did remember, apropos Canada and skates, the two students who years earlier had run away from school, and so outstanding had the incident been in the school's chronicles that renowned author Erich Kästner would have to look into, then agree to render it in a story.

On February 12, 1936, at the Winter Olympics in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, the two boarding school runaways had won two windfall tickets fair and square to attend the England-Canada hockey finals. Hesitating not a moment, the two had made themselves comfortable in the finest, priciest seats reserved for nobleman, as the youngest viewers in the audience, and watched the puck careening to and fro and the Canadian and English skaters effortlessly gliding round and round the rink and witnessed the surprise goal to land the English team its victory, defeating the Canadian world champion.

Master Robert pictured the player's sticks bump into each other with a bang and feared lest they cracked and burying his eyes in his hands he could see the puck slip away through the player's legs, while two players, one of each group, popped up from behind the goal in a bid to beat each other to the fast puck, only to then clash head on, with one falling flat on the ice, of which he was lifted on a stretcher, while the other turned two circles on his own axis just as he, Master Robert that is, once had as a child.

And it so came to pass that one of those Sundays, when his father would take him to skate in the huge skating hall downtown, little Master Robert turned two rings around himself, neither falling nor able to stop, and he thought he could not stand in the way of revolution and better calm down for at that moment, it was beyond his power and he fancied himself encircling the world in slow motion, against the grain of the 78-RPM records he had back home, as he would go spinning around the rink, hands stretched wide, then shift to reverse skating, to the envying eyes of all, and he looked straight ahead like a cheetah fit to charge off the tip of Matterhorn.

One day, aged 13, little Master Robert was gifted his own skates, one of the finest pairs ever to be seen on the ice, made of shiny, choice leather like that of the seats of Hispano-Suiza cars, and the blade was tempered steel, finished with special polish to make it bright and cutting. And the curved front of the blade had been wrought in double-action press brakes after a secret Swiss geometry that allowed to brake the swift start and perform a whirl around one's own axis, without the blade screeching and making such racket as would precipitate an avalanche.

And the geometry – cutting edge for its time and perfected after watching the Toblerone production process – would eventually be wielded by the snipers, taking their positions ever so still and waiting for the those leading Russian soldiers whose numbers had come up in the mortal lottery.

Little Master Robert would practice light leaps across the ice and his father would take pictures of him leaping and hung up in the air, limbs spread to the sides, while in the background, by sheer coincidence, the church there stood, later to be destroyed by bombings. Proficient in an all-manual camera, with neither light meter nor rangefinder, his father put the photograph up in the kitchen, which would also be destroyed later, during the war.

As a child, Master Robert would spend every weekend away at ski resorts with his school. And the bus drivers would know where it had just snowed or where the snow was soft or face-powder-like, or where the roads had yet to freeze over, and the bus would struggle up steep roads or along winding ways and the mighty effort would make the clutch smoke. Back in the day, a giant iron wheel was fitted at the rear of the bus, gathering speed downhill and helping the bus uphill. The driver had to pull the giant, heavy lever to engage the wheel in time, and unassisted by the engine, the steering wheel was heavy, and little Master Robert would marvel at the driver in an action befitting weightlifters rather. With a skilled driver, knew little Master Robert – who wanted to get to the ski resort as early as possible, to get as much skiing action out of it – it was possible.

During the Christmas holiday the school would have a ski excursion organised, with the interested children sent for a week-long stay at a ski town up in the mountains, and little Master Robert liked those ski holidays very much, though unlike the skates bought for him by his father at 13, which were delightful to behold, that ski gear, all old and tattered, had to be borrow, as he looked on in envy at the finer kits of the other kids.

At the small hotel, a room for two was assigned for each three students and it came to pass that the third slept on a mattress on the floor. And little Master Robert was such like third student, and his roommates, the first of which named Thomas and the second Beanpole, for he was likewise gangly, would pick on him and bury stuff and leftover food under his covers. Their harassment notwithstanding, and as fate would have it, it was little Master Robert, of all the school's students, who came second in the trip's final ski contest, while Thomas came first, which made for a sweetish revenge, for it so turned out that he was slower than one yet faster than the other, i.e. Beanpole, and it would be another year before he was faster than both. But sadly, even once he would bit them both, the harassment was to continue, and he'd be given a name – Pig.

He would get to school by tram, in a school uniform comprising a cap, necktie and socks climbing all the way up to his knees, and he would find it highly enjoyable to ride the tram, with its swinging from side to side on the tracks. In the wintertime, they would have small gas heaters to keep their legs warm and one day he, Little Master Robert, boarded the tram, through the front door, and failed to greet the driver as expected of a schoolboy, and the driver in turn stopped the tram and dropped him off out there in the street, but little Master Robert could not care less. He felt proud actually, rather than reproached, and was very happy to

remember that the name of the linkage – diamond-shaped and transmitting power current from overhead powerlines to propel the tram – was pantograph.

Little Master Robert loved playing football, yet only had a pair of simple shoes and would hence slip in the mud, and there was this one time when he played a match against another school and the shoe ripped apart and off his foot due to the mud, with him tripping and smeared in mud from head to toe, but that is beside the point.

And little Master Robert very much wanted to tell the tram driver that it was actually the English who had bit the Canadian to the gold medal, which had come as a surprise for it was the Canadians who had been poised to win, being the world champions and winning virtually every international match, and little Master Robert had, like everyone else, believed they stood no chance, what with the English accustomed to green ice rinks on account of tea, which had made it all the more surprising.

The two rogue students, who had gotten themselves tickets to the game, knew that punishment lay ahead, but few punishments could deter them. Astonishingly, though, their homeroom teacher, admired by all his subjects for his integrity and the sense of mission coursing through his veins, decided to argue before the school management that the two having the audacity to skip school meant it must be the school, rather than they, that was at fault and furthermore that the two should be commended for their daring and fearlessness, true to the spirit upheld by the school itself. Importantly, his intervention would stop the school management from suspending the two, nay, even expelling them, while mainly saving the skin of Master Robert, their accomplice.

It would never occur to the two students that several years later they were to meet those once-victorious Englishmen in an actual battlefield, first on French territory, then over in England and finally along the motherland's roads.

Master Robert recalled the names of the students, most of whom, if not all, culled in the harsh battles, few of which, notably the artillery battles, Master Robert had witnessed himself, as he and his medical team would be standing right next to tanks in flames, thawing their hands and bodies in the knowledge that there inside, young men, like the students he had known, must be burning to death.

And the school too had virtually been razed to the ground in the air raids, while even the gymnastics hall, and the little chapel with the organ, had been wiped off the face of the earth, just like the church where Helmut Walcha would sit, and even the chemistry lab had not survived the bombings, and Master Robert mused that there on the skating rink he had found a circular track of inexorable descent, feeling agog at the realisation.

When Master Robert Met Master Lampel

And the sun also rose on time that day, and Master Robert was up very early and did not feel tired, though he hadn't gotten much sleep the previous night, and he put the pail back where it belonged, in the rear of the motor trike, and was pleased for having settled for the night not too far from Master Lampel's place, within a walking distance in fact, and he carefully put on his best clothes, which were not unlike any other rag he would normally don, and he took the satchel with the post horn embroidered, and placed the ampule for Master Lampel the inside right pocket, while putting the little, time-worn picture of him holding his son, with a pendulum clock in the background roughly the height of a person, the kind of clock that would grace every self-respecting home. And before he closed the knapsack, he took out the ampule and once again confirmed its integrity and mused, just like Tolstoy, that all intact poison ampules looked alike, but it was actually the broken ones that were all broken in their own way, and he put the ampule back in place and closed the bag, then stood by the motorcycle and gave it a long look, then threw the set of keys as far as he could, thus consigning the motorcycle with its American motor to a fate similar to that of a wild Mustang horse who had one of his legs broken during a high-noon chase.

Master Robert started walking over to Master Lampel's house, and ambling through Champs Danlidar he mused how that very moment, another mailman was setting out on his post delivery round over in the pretty valley nestled amongst vineyards and fields, and once at Master Lampel's house, he entered the staircase and examined the mailboxes to confirm which floor Master Lampel occupied and the apartment's number, and he could see letters inside the boxes, some envelopes placed stamp turned upward, while other had it turned downward, and he thought he would never have had them slipped down like that, and distractedly reached his right hand to flip the letters, only to be stopped by his left hand, and he smiled to himself and mused that never would Doctor Robert be a mailman again.

Climbing up the stairs, he heard the clanking of a sewing machine with a paddle to set off the mechanism, as in rubbish bins or pipe organs, the motor being a later addition, and he tuned into the tempo and felt himself carried upon the wind, effortlessly climbing up, and he knocked on the door, where a small sign was fixed, which read Master Lampel, Teacher and Educator. And with the door failing to open and no sound heard from across it, Master Robert tried to enter, and glad to realise the door was not locked, he was hit in the face by such pungent odour, that for a moment there, he thought he had just opened a can of sardines past its sell-by date, rather than Master Lampel's door.

Master Robert, as one might remember, was a seasoned unbidden guest in other people's homes and out of courtesy, called out Master Lampel's name, and receiving no answer after that many times, Master Robert stepped into the living room, where the stench overflowed, with the smell of dirty seas and defunct fish blocking his nostrils, as some piece by Debussy or one of Britten's Four Sea Interludes was playing in a loop. Much to his astonishment, Doctor Robert found Master Lampel, having yet to decide whether it was he appraising him or the other way around, lying supine on the floor, like someone who had only moments ago reached the end of his life, and the phone's handset was tucked between his

shoulder and ear, while the chord itself was disconnected. Without thinking twice, Master Robert started performing different resuscitation actions, as he would back in the day with Russian commanders whose death warranted some putting off for investigative purposes, with some painful pinching, punches and bites, like that mordent ornamenting Bach's Inventions, all the while exercising the uttermost caution, lest those Russian officers were rigged. And the doctor felt Master Lampel had not yet cooled down completely but nevertheless had ceased breathing, and he was very sorry for being late to arrive, and was overcome with anguishing feelings of a missed opportunity and failure that could never be redeemed.

As a doctor, Master Robert felt it his duty to care for Master Robert and bring him back to life, so that he could kill him with his own bare hands, but this time too, as with his wife and son, Master Robert found himself helpless, failing to save the life of a person he knew by name and trade, and he felt the full grief for his wife and son surging back and he feared he might drown, even in the absence of water, then stumbled and nearly fell down, grasping at Master Lampel's hair like a tree grasping at its roots, while Master Lampel gave neither response nor resistance.

Once Doctor Robert realised there was nothing he could do by that point to improve Master Lampel's situation other than picking him up and sitting him on a chair – to balance him so that he didn't fall and bump his head to shatter his skull and have it incur wounds that might otherwise be fatal –he sat him on the chair.

Doctor Robert then headed from the living room to the foyer, where he sat at a table and very carefully laid the photograph of him holding his son, and he issued the poison ampule from the compartment of his mailman satchel, and noticed a small mirror poised for some reason at the edge of the laid table. Doctor Robert picked up the mirror and saw his own self there, but the eyes were those of Master Robert of the pretty valley nestled among vineyards and fields, and very different were indeed the eyes reflected than the actual eyes. Being as so, Doctor Robert winked with his left eye and realised that the man in the mirror did not wink in turn, both his eyes still open, and Doctor Robert, quick to regain composure, offered Master Robert across the mirror a game of rock paper scissors and declared that the loser must have the first sip of the ampule. Master Robert accepted the challenge and the two held their respective hands at the ready, and looked each other in the eye, as if well-familiar with the chinks in each other's armour, and Master Robert laid into Doctor Robert, as would a wrestler up on the arena just before the gong sounded, that he, Doctor Robert that is, was a doctor who had failed his duty, particularly where his nearest and dearest were involved. Doctor Robert, giving as good as he got, retorted that even with ten fingers, Master Robert could not play Ravel's Concerto for the Left Hand, and Master Robert swallowed back and laid into Doctor Robert, saying that only a human scum would perform observations on prisoners, which Doctor Robert countered by declaring Master Robert a serial traitor, oh yes, having betrayed himself and his playing, and the memory of his first wife and his son, and even the village locals, whose letters he would read and edit as he'd seen fit, and he had betrayed the wretched she-dog Coda, and Master Mouse, and his second wife, naturally, more than once, and now he was foaming at the mouth, like a rabid horse.

And after all that had been said, Doctor Robert declared out loud that there was no time for dilly-dallying, and counting *Ein Zwei Drei*, he issued some scissors that had once cut the paper flaunted by Master Mouse. And Doctor Robert smiled and broke the ampule, as he had skilfully done so many times before, with no glass shards dropping in, and he served Master Robert under his watchful eye, as the liquid drenched the mirror and failed to infiltrate through to the image reflected, and he emptied the remaining contents of the ampule into his mouth and put on this innocent smile, as if he had just sipped on a fine whiskey. Later, Master Robert stretched out in his chair, which was not his to begin with, and was transported back to those mammoth frozen rivers he had seen back in the Russian front, where the flow would come to a virtual standstill come winter time, and he felt the substance coursing through his body and recalled the question that he would grapple with on more than one occasion – i.e., was it the custom to disinfect the skin when administering the poison shot to death row inmates. And he leafed through the pictures of his life, asking himself how he would like to bid his farewell to this world, or what he would like to take along, and what he would miss, and he wasn't certain if he had told others of this idea he had had, of setting up a sandwich stand in New York, but not those garden variety sandwiches sold in delis. Oh no. The sandwiches envisioned by Master Robert would change flavours while eaten. That is, herring on one side, for example, and brie cheese on the other, with the flavours coming together in a divine bite at the middle.

The music played on repeat grew ever louder and he regretted being fated to having the same section played over and over again during his last moments. Master Robert, reflected across the mirror, put his tongue out and tried to lick the poison drop, to no avail, while Doctor Robert was suddenly aware of Master Lampel's glasses, placed on the table, which he used as magnifying glass to examine the photograph, studying the child's face and the pendulum clock, at his back, whereupon he noticed, for the first time, that rather than digits, it had letters in the Israelites' script, and he couldn't understand how Hebrew letters could suddenly materialise in his grandfather's home, and he dedicated his last thoughts to the conundrum. And Doctor Robert remembered that his grandfather had had a long, full beard, like them bodies he had seen back in Babi Yar, while the victims, before their death, had murmured a sequence of words, this code, probably common among the Israelites, something along the lines of *Zma Israel*, and he wondered whether his grandfather or even he himself belonged to that strange people, whose members, for some reason, would murmur those words he could not understand.

And Doctor Robert wanted to tell his son, who had not had the good fortune to live, that had he grown up, he, his father, would have most probably told him every day before bedtime that he loved him and was very proud of him, and that he, i.e., the son, should never forget that.

Doctor Robert started to lose sensation in his hands and legs, as a jumble of thoughts about letters with two different addresses on the envelope, or Spitfire aeroplanes proffering sweets, began pumping his head. He even mused that as Schweitzer would have you believe, Bach had betrayed unknowingly, while he himself had done so knowing full well, and he

could vaguely see his bonny-eyed, heated-gazed wife mud-wrestling with Atalya, while his eyesight started to grow dim, just as had happened to Master Walcha, and he very much wished he could see a green field and the flowers of the valley one last time, or the picture of his son, and he muttered to himself *Zma Israel Zma Israel*, then opened his eyes for the last time in his life for a fraction of a second, and saw his son's fingers in the palm of his hand, while over in the background, the weather vane on Master Lampel's roof kept turning, its squeaking faint.