

Linz 1905

Monocled men and women wrapped in muslin sat in velvet chairs around marble-topped tables as they met for a late Sunday afternoon rendezvous. They sipped their coffee, chattering bon mots in each other's ears. Laughter circulated softly in the smoke-hazed room. This is how Vienna must feel, I thought; the place I longed to be.

I could have ordered the house specialty, the Linzer Torte, but no, I had chosen the Viennese Sacher Torte instead, as today was my birthday. My sixteenth birthday. When the stars had aligned sixteen years ago, I wondered, had they predestined my life? My life, and my fate? Had the stars created the 'me' within me? Had the heavens decided I would be a musician? I didn't know. But what I did know was that music came effortlessly to me; any time I heard a melody, I could sit down at a piano and pick out the tune much as some people could naturally sing and stay in key. I yearned to be a trained, working musician. If only . . . if only I could attend the music conservatory in Vienna! I sipped my demitasse contemplatively and gazed out of the arched windows that framed the promenade leading to the Landhaus. As I did, a farmer and his wife lumbered down the street like a pair of packhorses hauling a cart. My Viennese fantasy shrivelled instantly, and I was reminded of where I was: Linz. Everything outside this café was just so unspeakably unsophisticated. I glanced around the room, and at that moment, I made a vow to myself: I swore to be as urbane as this café's clientele. After all, I was a sixteen-year-old gentleman now. I was old enough to have my own Viennese style. From now on I would remain impervious to the barrage of insults my brutish, unenlightened father launched at me. As I thought about it now, it almost seemed a compliment when he sneered and called me a pompous fool.

A young man entered the room. He was no older than I but was dressed as though twice my age. He wore an expensive charcoal business suit and a blue and black striped tie framed by a high starched collar. A slate-grey derby perched deliberately askew shaded his features. For a moment he was faceless, a shadow of the life I longed to lead. His wiry build was strangely familiar. A curious aura surrounded him, making my heart quicken. But no one else in the café paid him any notice. No heads

turned, no eyes followed. To them, he was one of their own. Laughter flitted across both rooms of the café. A woman concealed by her fan was hitting a high C; even the chess players looked up. She must have been privy to something deliciously depraved. For a moment, she had been transported from the backwaters of Linz. For a moment, she too had been in Vienna. The stranger moved among the tables and waiters with the graceful elegance of a matador. His brown hair was perfectly trimmed and slicked back. I was irresistibly drawn to him, yet intimidated by him.

Who was he?

He ambled towards the periodicals, hanging like slack sails from their wooden holders. Each reader who picked them up and read them sailed away to exotic shores, where outrageous ideas thrived and taboos were broken. Every radical thought from evolution to feminism to anticlericalism was displayed here like available but forbidden fruit. The afternoon light silhouetted the young man's profile as he plucked a paper from the rack with an air of arrogance, and I glimpsed the masthead of *Der Hammer*. He leaned over to see what else was there for the taking, and then grabbed a *Neues Wiener Tagblatt* and *Unverfälschte Deutsche Worte*. A Communist, a German Nationalist and a Liberal Jewish paper. A truly eclectic choice. He came to sit at a window-side table no more than twenty feet from me, and began to read. The waiter's back was towards me as he approached the young gentleman, who had just lowered his paper. His eyes squinted as the waiter recited the array of pastries and cakes on offer. His eyebrows rose and he ordered with measured nonchalance. The waiter seemed to recognise him. Probably the young gentleman spent his days here, not slaving away at a job he loathed as I did. I wondered who he might be: the son of a wildly successful industrialist? The cousin of a prince? I imagined him living in a luxurious mansion with spacious hallways full of exquisite portraits.

The young man raised his newspaper again. He flicked it open and folded the pages over with his manicured fingers. They were long and white. They could easily span a full octave on a piano. He had the immaculately groomed hands I coveted. I looked down at my grubby labourer's hands. How could they ever do justice to Chopin? It was a concern for which my father had no sympathy whatsoever. He was adamantly opposed to me studying music in Vienna. I examined my hands: they were

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stained from horse-hoof glue, and my fingernails were discoloured from emptying and re-stuffing sagging mattresses. My father constantly harangued me with his plans for me to take over his upholstery business so he could retire. I looked across at the stranger behind the newspaper. He was perfect; I was not. Maybe he was a musician. A professional. An artiste. But if so, what was he doing here in Linz, in this pitiful backwater? I tried to make out his face but it was concealed, nose-deep in one of the papers. Did I know him from somewhere? He was a stranger, yet familiar. His fingers gripped the edges of the newspaper with what seemed to me a menacing force. There was something about those hands; I could easily envision them strangling someone. This is absurd, I thought: the caffeine has gone to my head.

As I sat there, sneaking furtive glances at him, he read all three papers. He ate his pastry, drank his Kleiner Brauner and stood up, carefully positioning his hat on his head, and then cutting a path between the tables. At the entrance, he caught the front doors as they swung open out on to the street and was gone. My chest heaved with relief: just watching him read the papers had exhausted me. Through the window, I saw him stop amid the pedestrian traffic and turn west down the Promenade. His walking stick pushed him along the pavement and he disappeared into the grey shadows of late afternoon. I felt compelled to record the whole disconcerting incident, of which I had evidently been the sole observer, so I took out my leather-bound diary and began to write.

I had spent an agonising afternoon in my father's workshop repairing and stuffing a cheap rococo-style sofa, and I reeked of glue and sweat. I hurried home to wash, eat and dress for that night's performance of *Tristan and Isolde*. It was imperative that I arrive at the Landestheater early to secure my favourite spot in the Standing Room Only section. My preferred position was in front of either of the two wooden columns that supported the Royal Box above; that way I had the luxury of leaning back during the performance. Having procured my favoured place, I rested against the pillar to watch Linz's coifed, erudite set file down the aisles and into their seats. In their midst, a raven-haired lady glided down the aisle with a fan in her hand. The fingertips of her escort, a gentleman in a black velvet jacket with tails, guided her by the elbow to her

seat. I gazed down at my mustard wool suit and loathed the person I was. Would I ever amount to more than a petty manual worker?

My eyes shifted to the pillar across the section, and there he was again, whoever he was: the Sunday afternoon phantom of Café Traxlmayr. Right across from me, leaning against the other column with a cape draped around his shoulders. His gloved hands held his top hat and cane. Suddenly my collar seemed to choke me. The uneasiness I had felt that afternoon crept up my spine; my heart pounded and my palms perspired. He spotted me studying him and we acknowledged one another: one opera lover to another. I could feel the sweat start to bead on my forehead just as the lights mercifully dimmed, quieting the audience. The first lingering notes of the overture soothed my flustered nerves. Gently and invisibly the notes wandered through the hall, and the stalls rang with the death throes of love. I wondered whether I would ever fall in love, and if I did . . . Would it end tragically like Tristan and Isolde? The music stands in the orchestra pit were illuminated, the light catching the brass and reflecting golden rays across the rows of heads. The music ebbed and flowed with my thoughts. Who is he? I thought, as my eyes wandered back to the figure leaning against the other column. Why does he make me feel so uncomfortable? Where do I know him from? I closed my eyes and racked my mind.

Who was he?

The violins and woodwinds complemented each another like male and female. It was Tristan's and Isolde's last night, and the music struggled to cling to the darkness and resist the inevitable dawn. Tristan and Isolde peered deep into each other's soul like refugees seeking to escape their impending doom. Why was it all so tragic – life, love? I looked across and saw him engrossed by the music and the drama. His eyes glistened with rapture. His hands hovered, keeping time; dancing to the music that swirled around them. The tips of his right index finger and thumb lightly touched as if catching the musical notes in the air. His hands were playful, yet exuded strength: a strength that could kill. God, there was that thought again. Where was it coming from?

At the end, Tristan and Isolde were separated forever. The curtain fell and the lights went up. The audience blinked its way back from orchestrated fantasy to

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spectators' reality. People rose and stretched their backs. Some checked their watches, some yawned. A number of the ladies flicked open their fans to revive themselves. The stranger across from me stepped away from his column, his eyes still glazed by the spectacle. I was about to head past him towards the exit when he took a step in my direction. My throat squeezed tight, then tighter still with each step as I approached him; with the crowd at my back there was nowhere for me to escape. We brushed shoulders and regarded each other face to face.

'Excuse me,' he mumbled, still captivated by the music.

My eyes glanced down to his cane, where his hands were squeezing the ivory handle. Then I looked him in the eye, and I knew I had looked into those eyes before. I had stared into those eyes as those hands had gripped my throat. Suddenly I realised who he was: I remembered him from primary school: we had played at Boer War and he had made me a Brit; an evil, imperialistic Brit. He had been as tough as a real fighting Dutchman defending his South African territory. 'You British scum!' he had screamed in my face. His eyes had flashed and his teeth had been clenched as his thumbs pushed down hard on my throat. I felt my hands begin to sweat as I recalled it.

'Martl!' he exclaimed merrily, remembering me too.

We laughed. As children we had both lived in Lambach.

'Doflerl,' I said, 'You must forgive me. I can't quite remember your surname.'

'Hitler,' he said. 'Adolf Hitler.'