

Lugosi Viktória

Migratory Lobster

First Sketch

Mother made her stand next to the doorpost. Still just 116 centimeters. Test on stage at the music school. No escape. Teachers with their heads propped indifferently on their elbows at the back, proud parents at the front. Dark blue skirt, white blouse, have to get through it. Then more and more practice and josephtaylor. That's what they called him, the teacher, just josephtaylor. Can't imagine a more boring name. And the man himself, like a dried-up tube of toothpaste. Tall, thin, formless. Flaking away too, either dandruff from his head or dry skin from his hands. And the words plopping out rhythmically, *da capo al fine*, no surprises, always the same thing. Dressed in a grey suit from spring till Autumn, and grey shoes with holes in them and brown socks bulging at the sides in lumps, like disgusting little slugs.

“The best piano teacher! Was a student of Louis Vass!”

Mom did diligent research to figure out who she should take lessons with. She still had to go to the music school for solfege, but josephtaylor came to the house to give her private lessons. So the poor child won't be too overburdened, the poor child's mother said.

“Greetings! What lovely weather we're having today” (or what dreadful weather or goodness, this terrible rain or sleet or wind or frost or whatever), and then he bowed so low with his back so straight that you would have thought a yoga teacher had told him to do a half-standing forward bend, and so he remained until he had kissed mom's outstretched hand. He smelled like a musty drawer, as if he were just a button-down shirt left over from last season.

Josephtaylor was patient, but he didn't play around when it came to rhythm and fingering. For the most part, his students were boys, so he always borrowed his comparisons from sports. Piano is like karate, it's based on seamless gestures, and there is no emotion, no art, no triumph until these gestures have been learned. Every composition is an obstacle course, there are easier parts and harder parts, and anyone who doesn't save his strength will be left behind by a more disciplined runner.

The lessons were boring, but when the clock had reached the fiftieth minute, josephtaylor would play for five minutes and leave them spellbound. He would make you believe that if you would just play the stupid Czerny etude a hundred times or the dumbed-down version of the fugue then perhaps someday, assuming nothing came up in the meantime, you would be able to play like that on stage, the place would echo with applause, and you wouldn't be trudging up to the seventh floor to some cramped apartment full of bratty children.

At the sound of Bach or Chopin, mom would run in from the kitchen just as she was, in an apron, plop down in the polyester armchair, and while josephtaylor's fingers danced on the keys, the colors seemed to grow sharper, the framed poster of a painting by a medieval master more lifelike, josephtaylor himself more ethereal, and

the music seemed to have dissipated the old-man smell, the sense of liberation that no one ever thought would make it to the Eastern Bloc.

She had to practice everyday lest a more diligent pupil lure josephtaylor away.

Mother always brought in coffee at the beginning of the lesson, which josephtaylor drank standing up, his pinky finger raised, from a little porcelain cup, never failing to note that mother had put not only her heart into it, but also the coffee. How can you laugh at that the hundredth time?

When he thought she was ready, they played a piece for four hands, and from where he stood behind her, he pumped up the two lower voices so loud that the dinky little piano, the steel frame of which mother spoke about as if they had blown every last dime on a Bösendorfer for the children, resounded like never before.

During one of the usual Thursday afternoon lessons, josephtaylor stood a little bit closer to her and put his hand on her shoulder. She thought she must be slouching, since josephtaylor often emphasized that an artist must use his whole body when he plays. A long composition is tiring physical labor, one must breathe properly, regularly, and in order to breathe properly, one must sit up straight and keep the chest open and free. She knew that perfectly well at ten years of age. She'd heard it enough. But josephtaylor's hand was sliding lower and lower, onto her breasts, which had hardly started growing, though there were girls in her class who were already wearing bras, but this caress, there, precisely there, was not right, that was clear, but she didn't know what to do. She was gripped with fear, but she kept on playing the Bartók piece, josephtaylor said pay attention to the rhythm, keep it legato, but how could she pay attention when her face was on fire, she wanted to stand up, but his hands gently pushed her back onto the creaky piano stool, which they had bought from some old woman's bequest, it'll do for the moment, father had said, we'll see if this is just more money out the window. Begin from the beginning, and don't think about anything, josephtaylor said, and mother in the kitchen heard only this, if she heard anything at all. I should scream, she thought, but no sound came from her throat, she just felt the dry, white, wrinkled skin touching her underneath her blouse. She started the Bartók piece again from the beginning, of course it was a mess, josephtaylor helped with his left hand, but his right hand was still there, or rather it wasn't, good lord, it was sliding down, down under her red-checked miniskirt, to the crevice she was ashamed even to wash, and it moved, and he whispered what a good little girl she was and how clever and how well done, and her hands in the meantime had gone numb, but they were still there, hovering above the keys, and tears were streaming down her cheeks and she didn't know whether thirty seconds had passed or thirty minutes and then josephtaylor sat down next to her again, took out his handkerchief, which had the same musty smell he did, and began to wipe away her tears. There was a horrible grin on his pink face, and he was panting and he said let's change places, and though the lesson had not yet ended, he sat down and played for quite some time, something, the melody of shame, a hot, red, deep overflow.

She had to tell mother the what and where twice. She had to promise not to breathe a word of it to father, and in exchange, mother promised to be sure nothing like that would ever happen again.

She hoped that she would get a new piano teacher, someone younger, a woman, as she had asked mother to find, but come Tuesday there stood josephtaylor in the

doorway, what lovely weather, and he bowed, kissed mother's hand, gulped down the coffee, and paid attention to the legato passages. And mother sat on guard duty in the polyester armchair, no apron, reading something. And so it went for another four years.

"I'll watch over you like a tiger mother," mother said. "Yes," she said. But no, she thought.

The lessons with josephtaylor were brought to an end not by the mother, alas, but by the heart attack.

And so it goes. Music is like hurdle race. Mother put the three of them at the starting line, her, josephtaylor, and the music. And they lost in a dead heat.

Second Sketch

Nick called the ambulance. They took her away, and when she woke up from the deep sleep they had put her in forty-eight hours in the burn unit, bandaged up head to toe, they said her husband had come in too, with the ambulance, and when they had brought her out of the OR he had still been there, but when she came to, he was gone. And then her past was erased, and it felt like being in flames all over again.

The first weeks were white. The bandages, which covered everything, which pressed into the flesh, the starched blanket, which crinkled loudly in the silence, the cream in the hand of the nurse bending over her, which smelled like latex gloves, because latex was the border between her and the outside world, sheet and glove, washable and disposable, like her, a material malleable, with no clear edge, which is there and also is not there. What is definitely there is the beep on the monitor in the observation ward, the dense mass in her head, wakefulness intermixed with stupor. White images glimmer and proliferate, against a white background she looks for images of the future, bleached snippets of thoughts get caught on the cross fibers of the net of white gauze.

First comes the shock and then the screeching pain, which rules over all and erases all. She doesn't want anything, just to turn off, turn off for good, no, no need so restart, enough. She drifts in white dreams. Sleep provides temporary escape, but the horizontal cuts which peel the layers of dead tissue from her and the hands search for the first layer of cells intact, divine hands, the re-creation has begun.

The splotch on the ceiling caused by water damage looks like a monster with sharp teeth, and if she closes her eyes, the serrated jaw lingers on her eyelids for a time. She has been looking at pictures of the future for forty years, what will the wedding be like, the graduation ceremony, how will she solve a task, change a diaper, serve dinner, what will she say when she steps in through the door and all of a sudden there are no pictures. Cut. The film stops. The reel is spinning, and nothing. Without images, there is no imagination. No tomorrow, no day after tomorrow.

She does not know what lies under the bandages. What is she now, Lisa, who she has become.

There is an enormous slab of pig skin on her arm and her shoulder. They use it to replace her skin, the skin that was burnt. She knows that much. The pig-pickings of

her childhood and the images from operating rooms in films form a montage in her mind. A pig with quivering flab presses against her side.

The stupor slowly comes to an end. The world acquires contours. New morsels of information, new images, in some laboratory somewhere her skin is growing, just a few hundred cells, but still, Lisa's skin, her own. She imagines the place, equipped with test tubes and Petri dishes from father's and Calderright's lab, she sees assistants with weary faces bent over microscopes, one of them with a pair of tweezers in her hands in which she holds so and so many square centimeters of her skin, a living creature entirely independent of Lisa, multiplying for Lisa. And she sees the woman who scrambled up onto the tram, half asleep, that morning, who took off her worn-out shoes in the lab and traded them for slippers, who has some bills to pay that afternoon, and who has to buy some hair dye, cause she can't afford to go to a hairdresser's, but now she is putting the skin onto the culture medium, and then she will put it into a large metal chest, where the temperature is suitable for cell growth. The intro for the TV show *Delta* shimmers, and the stupid music plays, but three weeks later, when her hair has grown out again and the bills have collected next to the TV again, she'll open the chest and take out a big, thin membrane, and this reticulated tissue will be her skin, Lisa's skin, delicate, brand-new. Then they will put islands on her back, her shoulders, her neck using little pieces of skin, she can even see it, beautiful green tufts of grass spread across Margaret Island, a little girl tossing seeds from her basket onto the meadow, and every morning the dogs who scamper hither and thither find bigger and bigger patches of grass, oh dear, let's hope they don't trample on it! And by time spring comes, the whole meadow will be green, and she will have beautiful pink skin on her neck, good night, children, sweet dreams!

With no images: you have become discount merchandise, end of the season, seventy percent off. She repeats this to herself again and again.

The past. You'll see, someday you'll cry to have it so good. That's what grandma said about everything she hated, carrots, pork lungs, a wooly sweater. And she was right, she did cry. Though the tears burned. They seeped under the bandages to where the burnt skin on her face once was, and she had to clench everything, her throat and her eyes, to hold them back. In vain.

The pain. They say she suffered burns, but that's not true. The skin didn't burn, because if that was all that had happened, then she would still be there, healthy, under the wounds. She burned up, the burns sucked her up, vaporized her. A black hole. Once there was flesh, now there is no flesh. Space, of which her body had claimed a slice, had now won back a few cubic centimeters.

"Like milk to a blind man," her mother used to say when someone couldn't understand what she was trying to explain. White. But what does that mean? Sweet? Fatty? Thin? Runny? Is that what white means?

Like milk to a blind man, that's what she was like to herself. Ever since she could begin reading again and could use one hand to turn pages, she learned everything there is to know about the regeneration of collagen fibers and the formation of scars. She welcomes the unbearable itching which has replaced the pain as a familiar acquaintance. The pruritus, the eschars. She's up to speed.

She classifies those around her based on how much pain they cause her. The wounds have to be cleaned over and over again. Huge surfaces have to be bandaged

up, and in the absence of skin, the bandages stick directly to the flesh. First, they put her to sleep, then they soak the bandages, but it still seems like they are tearing something from her, and everything comes off with the bandage, everything raw.

The nurses contend that it's better if they pull it off quickly, because the pain is intense, but short. But only she knows how long they are, the early mornings spent gripped with terror.

She will be her own donor. How's that for recycling! Have you lost the button from the neck of your shirt? Then you use one from the bottom, where no one sees it anyway. They cut a big piece from her thigh and use it to replace the skin missing on her arm and shoulder. Clearly because she won't need her thigh. She can hide it, like tucking the bottom of the shirt into her skirt. She envisions a potato peeler, the Great White Savior calls it a Humby knife. He says they can use it to remove the skin just like that, and when she wakes up, true, there will be two wounds instead of one, but that's a good thing, that means the healing has begun. And one morning, he is standing next to her bed in his starched white gown. He puts his hand on her good wrist. She is filled with a lukewarm sense of calm. It flows from her chest to the tips of her fingers. This is what they have been waiting for. To remove the bandages after the last operation and see, after so many miserable months, what has become of her. The last moment of hope, from now on it's just truth, reality. Would be nice to wait just a bit, just a few more minutes, his hand on her wrist, the bandage still on the wound, he will be the first to see what remains of her under the layers as he removes them. The sense of calm has now flowed from her fingers, she hears her own heartbeat. And she sees the Great White Savior smile with relief and shoot a satisfied glance at her above his gold-rimmed glasses, yes, yes, all's well, everything's fine. Phew.

But when she sees what had caused the doctor (whom she trusted from the outset) such a sense of relief, well, that was the second shock. No oil, dry. And for months and months she tries to get it through her head that the operation was a tremendous success, indeed it could not have gone better, it's just that they forgot to inform her that the new skin, the beautiful, adhesive skin is not quite like a baby's bottom, as she had imagined it, fresh and pink. Because it's not. Rather, it's exactly like the skin of someone who has been burnt to cinders, red and rough, wrinkled little sausages on a brown field, a dirty shoelace on a slice of raw liver. Horrifying.

She has become an émigré. She no longer belongs to her old skin, and she will never be at home in the new.

Got through the first operations, but still wearing a mask over her face and stuffed full of painkillers, but no longer in the ICU, red has replaced white. The blood, the wound, and the anger. The scars bring brown, the skin becomes smaller than the body, and she has to huddle up inside to fit. She must learn humility. There will be scars everywhere, and then come the images of the long-sleeve summer dresses and the thought that she will never be able to strip in front of anyone again. Perhaps a blind man, but no, he would feel the bumps.

The scabs contract and pull at the skin. There is less space. When you move, if the new apartment is smaller than the old, you have to throw something out. But what? What makes a human? The body or the soul? The soul can make the body fall ill. And the body? Can the body kill the soul? Because she will not let her body kill her soul. A little pepper changes the taste of the food. A pinch of salt softens the meat, but how

much will the wounds and the scars harden what lies in the depths of the flesh, the meat?

Six months is a lot, even six months of vacation is a lot. And this wasn't relaxation, it was work, sixteen hours a day without a single day off. She noted that when she was lying down, relaxing, she did not let go for a minute. As if she were driving a truck, just driving and driving and driving but the highway never ended, and she never arrived anywhere.

They put her face back in order. The neck, shoulder, arm, there's plastic surgery for that, for that she just needs a rich, altruistic guy whom she knocks off his feet with her dazzling personality.

She cries. Though it no longer hurts to laugh.

And counting soothes her. She seeks to understand everything in quantities, and she relies on precise measurements, distances, and periods of time. If she lives to be eighty, for instance, which is not unusual for an educated woman living in Budapest, then the whole thing really only messed up one one-hundred-and-sixtieth of her life, which isn't all that tragic. If she doesn't lick her wounds and tries instead to look to the future, then the six months weren't nearly as bad as, say, having had to serve as a peacekeeper in, say, Afghanistan. One one-hundred-and-sixtieth. Less than a single floor in the twin towers. As if a dog with an average life were to die twenty-two days earlier. As if the Chain Bridge were two meters shorter, or four people were to move away from Balatonakali.

She googled it once and learned that you're twelve times more likely to get hit by lightning than you are to die in an airplane crash. Twenty-thousand times more likely that you'll get driven off the road than be in a plane that's hijacked. And a transportation accident in Namibia is twenty-five times more likely than a transportation accident on the Maldives. So yes, with those numbers, either she starts going to church, and fucking soon, or the hell with numbers.

Though at the time, numbers came before words. Between two operations, in the hospital she told Anett that she actually had had it pretty good, because that was one-hundred-eighty times she had not been asked when she would be coming home, at least one-hundred times she had not had to hear the refrain why so late, and at least fifty times she had not had to put up with the being asked when she would get around to cleaning up her room. And at least forty-eight times she had not asked Zoltán why he couldn't just drop her a call once a week. Though now he was calling every day, not that she had wanted to pay quite such a high price for the extra attention.

New skin, new home, new job, new life. When Nick left her, she had looked in the mirror several times a day. She had had to see that she at least looked like the woman she had once been. The knowledge that in everyone else's eyes she looked just the same as she had looked before made her believe that, sooner or later, she would find herself, find her way, if not back, then to a new, stronger Lisa. As soon as she got out of the hospital, she had sold the house, under market value, true, but to the first potential buyer. She could not have gone back there, not even for a single night. She had stayed with Bori's family for two months.

She began renovating the new place by taking down all the mirrors. She still needed the image of herself based on her memories, and this was the only way she could conjure it. In the end, she explained to herself, it's easier to build a new house on the

site of a demolished one than it is to try to modernize something behind an old façade. But while the renovations were underway, she learned to paint her eyelashes without a mirror.

Third Sketch

Three days later, Antal fulfilled all the hopes which had been pinned to him. The little old man with his little old hat, whom no one had ever seen on the streets without suit and vest, proved a good choice. He was every bit as predictable and without frill or fluff as his vests. You don't need to see the back to know it's made out of silk.

In the funeral oration, he managed to preserve both his own dignity and the dignity of the departed, and that was no small feat, for almost everyone in the hotel business knew his father well. Everyone respected his knowledge of his profession, and everyone unanimously hated him.

"Clever," this was the ne plus ultra of acknowledgment from him. The word, which was like the sound of a wink, with which he honored those who had succeeded in playing the system as he had played it. And they had used their wits not simply for the money, but for self-affirmation, as proof that they were shrewder than the rest. They were players in a kind of game played by all the peoples of the world in which the artful thinkers, the very best of the best attained their goals, while the others collapsed somewhere along the long road. Father, who sometimes was so wily he even fooled himself, in the end had become the Great Guardian of the Money Hat. And he didn't content himself with that. He also insisted that everyone show him fawning respect. He had worked hard for his nimbus, and he had succeeded, as he succeeded in everything that he got into his head. People were afraid of him. Very afraid.

The gentlemen at the funeral parlor, who were stooping under the weight of their black jackets and hats, had put in several decades next to Mr. Maros. Most of them had worked alongside him back in the day as porters, but only he had become the chief concierge in the luxury hotel envied by all, where you got more than just kavod, you got money, and not just money, foreign currency!

As if the bier were tipping to the side. The bulky cloth jackets on the men's side were pulling it down, the heavy Karlsbad shoes, which had been polished to a shine. He looked at the men wearing them, and he was quite certain that the minute they got home, they would put the shoe trees back in the shoes. When these men, all wrapped in black, move on, with them dies the last generation of hatted shoe-tree men. Much as the generation of little old men who even in the worst heat still strutted in their grey summer suits and their gray leather shoes with laces moved on and turned their places over to the retirees who did their grocery shopping in Bermuda shorts and slippers with ankle-high socks. That's how the old men with the rabbit's wool hats pass on, the men who, back in the days when everyone was a comrade, everyone called sir, cause it would have been absurd to have called them comrade, to have talked down to them like that! Today, they are the only ones left who remember what it means to clean a hat, and with a smile of self-derision they mention the closet of old, in which pink

slips of paper crinkled between the ironed shirts. Their wives just give a dismissive wave of one hand, that's all the past now. And they shed a tear for the miserable years when the delicate wash at the cleaner's was even less than the cleaning lady's hourly wage. Cleaning lady? The sweet joys of socialism.

Antal was prepared. He had brought a kippah with him, so the attentive cautionary measures proved unnecessary, he too had grabbed one from his father's supply, lest he, the speaker, have to embarrass himself by wearing one of the paper ones passed out by the entrance. But Antal could have been the very model for the statue of reliability.

"Laci, or as everyone called him, Mr. Maros, was a man strict but reasonable. As a boss, he was fair. ("No one liked him," he translated to himself.) He knew his profession, and he loved his family. (Rhetoric, filler, formula.) He was blessed with an incredible capacity for hard, focused work. He kept a close eye on everyone around him, and if anyone had a problem, then they always knew they could turn..."

Etcetera, etcetera. So a workaholic with no friends. Like the phrase "cozy terrace" in an ad for an apartment means there's room for one chair at most and "the apartment needs a fresh coat of paint" means the plaster is crumbling from the wall. If you could measure the temperature of words, these would be below the freezing point.

So that was his dad? A decent boss? Whose cozy terrace was big enough for the two of them at most, him and his mother. Too bad he often locked them outside in the cold. He knew what had made him so cold, so distrustful, but with his words, which seemed innocent, he provoked such fear that mere acquaintanceship, on its own, proved inadequate ammunition for the affairs of everyday life.

Father. His suit jacket rested on his shoulders as sleek and impeccable at midnight as it had at 8:00 AM, the material doesn't lie, he would say, raising one finger, if someone mentioned it, and if he had to come out from behind the counter for an important guest, the shoes from Vienna shone immaculately, and later he got them from the Altwien factory, the Vass model, hand sewn. Even his shoe-fetish pal Arthur nodded in acknowledgement.

Father sat in the Chesterfield armchair whenever he held an audience. And they didn't sit down in the hall (the lobby, as he insisted on calling it), but rather came before him. And he didn't invite them, he summoned them. With his chubby fingers he would point at the bellman or his middle-aged concierge colleague, and whoever it was he had summoned would suddenly tremble (oh dear, what did I do wrong?) and then heave a sigh of relief if Maros was just giving him another task, another something to do.

Antal was just saying that, "Laci kept a close eye on everyone around him, he never had to raise his voice, he made a simple request, but it had the ring of an order."

That's true, he thought. Fair, one could say. He had noticed this many times in the lobby, cause he hadn't spent much time at home. If he had something to say, the simplest thing was to go in and find him. Eye contact wasn't his strength. He didn't really look at him. He kept watch over his employees like a camera in a factory, and if work came up in conversation, then the sentence always began with, "in MY hotel." As if it actually had been his. In his hotel, the bellhop stood attentively waiting for the guests with his shirt buttoned up to his chin even in 40 degree heat. He combed his hair every hour. He packed the suitcases onto the cart either standing straight up or at

right angles. He knew his father might whip out the little ruler with the right angle and he wouldn't have to say a word, the withering look would suffice. The bellhop spoke at least two languages, but if it ever came out that he had spoken to a guest without being spoken to first, he could leave his uniform at the back. Much as it never occurred to anyone not to throw any tips he got into the jar. Nothing escaped the boss's notice, not even the dollar bills slipped into an open palm in one of the rooms. And the stories about the boys who had tried their luck and gotten fired years and years ago were still passed on. The hotel with the best name in town paid well, and anyone who managed to survive his father would find an open door at any of the other hotels. Much as he too had started his career in the doorway, the best of the best in the profession believed that the boys who had worked every post, every station would later make the best managers. He was the best training officer.

You needed connections to get in and a strong constitution to stay in. His father did two shifts every day, and he would pop in at night too, anytime. He could do just fine on four hours of sleep, he said, even if he got it in two separate stretches. He retained the right to make all decisions. There were rooms which were under his exclusive oversight, and though directors came and went, none of them dared call his vested rights into question.

The guests were grateful if he deigned to speak to them. They knew which way the wind blew. At the reception desk, only he was allowed to tell jokes, and it was advisable to laugh, unobtrusively though, no guffaws. He didn't tolerate people being overly familiar. He demanded affability, but also polished manners.

He schmoozed with bigwigs in the Chesterfield, and his cigar buddies often appeared on TV. He insisted that anyone who had been at the place once address him by name next time at the reception desk. His astonishing memory for names and faces was legendary, and a half sentence was more than enough for him to humble and humiliate anyone who slipped up. To be sure they didn't slip up, the doormen devised a method of self-defense. Whenever a shift ended, the people going home left a chart for the next shift in a place they thought was secret. The chart had a complete list of the guests with little ticks indicating how many times they had stayed and when the last time was, and if necessary, they added comments in the notes column listing any special requests or habits, and they mentioned particular little passions, like fruit baskets or a bottle of whiskey or black girls with long legs or antiallergenic pillows and so on. The doormen arrived a few minutes before the shift started to memorize the chart. It never occurred to them for a moment that Mr. Maros did not know about the double leaf on the wall behind the key to room 328, but the parlor game held steady, even in the age of Excel spreadsheets. They didn't type the comments into the spreadsheets, though that would have been the obvious solution. Maros expected them to remember them.

He knew what he was doing, cause everyone obeyed him, even tried to curry his favor. They never questioned his authority or the tools he used to enforce it. Never seemed to occur to anyone that someday a time would come when he would no longer be the master of life on death on the bank of the Danube River. He held steady, like socialism.

Translated by Thomas Cooper