

Zoltán László

At the Top of the Ladder

(novel)

One | Privileged client status

Subject: Urgent memorandum to the League

Information has come into my possession that may provide a new basis for our investigation. Police have been informed of a death under suspicious circumstances, the deceased no other than David Auth, member of the committee for interviewing the envoys of Trans-Operencia. Without compromising my cover, I intend to investigate the case with special regard to possible ties to other groups.

I resolutely believe that this could trigger a chain of events that would forward our proposed objectives.

In light of the issue's gravity I request a free hand. Am standing by for further instruction.

sent from a Samsung mobile device

Harlan Karsa's adult life was aggravated by two notable circumstances. The first was his employment at the pathology ward; the second was suffering from bouts of amnesia. His workplace seemed altogether more troublesome.

He'd always presumed that a vocation also assigned one's position in society's complex framework of social structure; firemen, for one, were always considered tried and tested, or at least heroes in waiting—rescuers of old ladies from burning buildings. And teachers were those who nurtured the future generation, furnishing them with knowledge and humanity for their paths forward. And so forth. But what do people think of someone who works in a morgue, who's not even a proper doctor?

In moments like this one, however, standing in front of the ruin pub while the sky above the

streets gave way to a pale dawn, he wondered in bewilderment at all that had passed in the last couple of hours, and felt he might have to reorder his life's complications.

Réka was nowhere to be seen. Only a few hours ago they'd been sitting together at a garden table in The Tar Baby, and things were going far better than what passed for usual on first dates for Harlan.

"I work at Uzsoki Hospital," was Harlan's careful reply to Réka's query. This statement usually brought a sparkle to women's eyes, because for some reason people assumed that the only people who work at hospitals are doctors. Chiefs-of-staff, no less. Well paid, plus regular bonuses. Harlan sometimes considered leaving his companions with this erroneous assumption, but was then struck by waves of anxiety: what if someone at a nearby table had an attack of some kind, and somebody cried out for a doctor. Just because this was the kind of stuff that happened in movies didn't guarantee it wouldn't happen to him.

"Do you? Is it interesting?" Réka took a sip of her Coke through a long straw.

"Err. It's in pathology. You know, where they examine, um, dead people. The doctors do. I do the paperwork."

Réka released the straw from her lips and let it slide back into the bottle (a motion Harlan found just as attractive as the mole on her left cheek), and leaned forward on her seat. "Really? Tell me!"

"Well, as I've said, I only handle the paperwork. There's a lot of that; everything is recorded meticulously, because you know... next of kin don't appreciate their deceased being misplaced. It's hard enough for them, but if we cremate one when one should have been buried, it only makes it worse."

"But you get to see the corpses, right?"

"Mostly just their names. Their papers." Harlan wished he could tell her about the dismal sight of leftover IDs and death certificates, entire lives reduced to a few lines filled on hospital forms. But he resisted dwelling on it, lest the girl should think he was obsessed with dying.

"But you do get a look at them, don't you? At least the more interesting ones?" Réka asked, increasingly fixating on the topic death. Harlan realized that little details, like the girl being clad in black, and the names of bands she brought up, all were all starting to fit a disturbing pattern. Réka seemed to have a thing for Scandinavian bands with names that for Harlan evoked the scenario of a canceled gig on account of the failure to guarantee fresh pig's blood for the show.

“The more ...interesting ones?”

“You know, freak deaths. Ones that end up all weird after they die. Drenched in acid, underwater for weeks in the Danube, tried crawling over the top of a rail carriage on a bet and got fried by a live wire.”

Harlan got a sinking feeling that this was the first time he really had this girl’s attention.

“No. Not especially. Of course I’ve seen a few, which is unavoidable really, working in that department and all. But it’s not like they’re still human. I mean they look like mannequins. You don’t get the impression that, oh my God, it’s a corpse. It’s their personal effects that really get to me. Now take their IDs, for example...”

“You must tell me more,” Réka declared. “Your job is so intriguing. Mine’s a snooze.”

Harlan could have argued that, despite the fact that the girl worked on an elusive four-letter EU project, her job was, after all, about progress, something for the future. At complete odds with the essence of working in a morgue.

Anyhow, from thereon, the conversation reverted with uncomfortable regularity to his work, and he was only let off the hook once their food was finally brought: two thick burgers with the fries on the side served in little steel buckets. The enormous portion had Harlan at a loss. He was now sure Réka thought he was a wuss, seeing how she was cleaning her own plate methodically and with relish. Her black-shadowed eyes flashed enigmatically over her food.

Then the girl said, “Come on, let’s get properly sloshed.” By then Harlan was feeling at too much of a disadvantage to mention he had driven: his scooter was parked out on the curb. So they retreated into the depths of the ancient building that enclosed the garden, through a onetime living room that now housed foosball tables, through bedrooms retrofitted with bean-bag chairs, on to the kitchen bar where they ordered two shots, then topped them off with a couple more. They went to dance upstairs; Harlan wanted to think he was acting as coolly as he intended, all the while completely out of synch with the music pumping through the sound system. They headed for the bathroom in unison, and he paused so she could go first. Réka laughed out loud, and pulled him into a nearby alcove.

“How do you feel about death?” she asked, her peachy *pálinka* breath tickling his ear. He didn’t have time to reply before the girl ploughed on. “I think death is nothing. The only painful thing is how it hurts the living who are left behind. Once you’re dead, it’s no longer any concern of yours, there’s nothing more to feel. But others stay behind and have to make up for your

absence somehow, come to terms with the loss. So that would make death the most selfish thing ever, don't you agree?" she asked with a laugh. *She must have downed more pálinka than me*, Harlan thought.

"The very mention of death freaks people out, so they become really patronizing, and try to force all their life goals onto you," Réka said, suddenly growing sullen. Harlan was thinking that the magical moment had left this sheltered recess, a the building's former bathroom most likely, as the lights flashed overhead and music thumped on through their lungs – when Réka kissed him. Her lips were hot and slick, and Harlan's thoughts took a divergent paths: first, the girl might be doing this for either him, the appeal of his work, or possibly on account of the booze; and second, that if they carried on like this they surely couldn't avoid falling in love. Death rant or no.

And that's about as much as Harlan could recall of the whole affair. Now he stood before the blackened, World War II-bullet-pocked façade of the building, clothes filthy, side mysteriously throbbing, and a thirsty stupor upon him, as he pumped the bouncer on the door for information on Réka.

"There was quite a crowd here tonight," the doorman said. He frowned, and stood aside to let a group of stragglers by. He was a hulking man, his black linen shirt could sail a whole pirate schooner.

Harlan rubbed his temples. "Well, she must have found her way out past you. Réka, she's the girl I was with. Straight black hair, black blouse, black mini-skirt. Black stockings. Kind of a Goth style, I guess. Quite striking, in fact."

"I don't remember every single guest. They come, they go. You know." The bouncer squared his massive shoulders as far as his bulky neck allowed. It was the thickest neck Harlan had ever seen. "You shouldn't have had so much to drink."

"I didn't drink too much. I took a scooter here. It's parked right over..."

Harlan was dumbstruck. His scooter, the little green Honda Cub, was no longer parked beside the lamppost where he left it.

"Gone too, is it? Not your lucky day, *pal*," the bouncer sympathized.

As if Harlan hadn't yet drawn the same conclusion by then.

Harlan called the police from the night-bus stop to report the theft. It rang for a while before somebody picked up. The operator spoke to him as if he had roused her from the most

blissful of dreams, and then managed to subtly imply that the unfortunate incident must have been the caller's own fault. Filing Harlan's complaint, she then asked him to stop by to submit a report. "Of course we'll do all we can," she said, and for the first time her voice betrayed a hint of amusement.

The bus stop was thronged with youths in various stages of drunkenness, some singing, others huddled together giggling, only Harlan stood alone and brooding while one bus after the other pulled up to the curb and continued on. People got on, got off, and though the crowd gradually subsided, Harlan's bus was nowhere to be seen. He glanced in vain over the schedule affixed to the stop's post. Either the bus was running incredibly late, or had arrived early at some point before he'd made it to the stop. A bitter wind of a May daybreak stirred, and Harlan wasn't dressed to be idling in the street. His jacket was stashed in the scooter's rear case, along with his crash helmet, both now long gone.

The crowd had thinned down to three girls, two red-faced, middle-aged men no doubt on their way to work – and stealing furtive glances at the girls – and a homeless-looking woman in a wheelchair, plus Harlan. As the street lights clicked and blinked out, all at once the colors turned blue and cold.

The three well-dressed girls took a cab, and Harlan considered doing the same, cost be damned. Then finally another bus pulled up. Harlan missed the sign on the front, and there was no number on the side.

"Is this the 907?" Harlan asked some nearby workmen as the doors folded open with a snap, but they just stared back at him.

"What?"

Harlan huffed impatiently, then leaned over to the little woman who was steering her wheelchair toward the nearest door. "Excuse me, is this the one to Zugló?"

As the small figure looked up at him, Harlan realized he'd been mistaken: the knitted cap crowned the fragile face of an adolescent boy.

"Would you give me a hand, young man?" the kid asked in reply. His voice was surprisingly deep.

Harlan looked up at the steep bus steps, back the chair, and finally shot a glare towards the workmen who took no notice of them whatsoever, twisting the caps off tiny bottles to kick off their workday. The ache in his side throbbed. "I don't know..." he mumbled uncertainly as the

door buzzer rattled in warning.

“I’m not that heavy, really!” the boy guffawed, somehow growing less and less childlike. “Don’t expect the driver to help, he won’t. You only ride if you can get on board yourself.”

Harlan was past the point of asking what else could possibly be in store that night, so he surrendered himself to taking hold of the back handles of wheelchair, and was surprised by how effortlessly he lifted it. It was as if there was nobody sitting there; in fact, from behind the chair it seemed as if an empty coat and a couple of crumpled rags lay strewn on the seat.

Loading the chair up, he clambered aboard and was totally unsurprised when the driver closed the door on his suit. Like one resigned to his sentence, he stayed put on the bottom step, and made no effort to free himself.

The kid rolled himself deeper into the bus, and then turned the chair around, looking back at Harlan with a sparkle in his eye. “Don’t you worry, mister, it’s all going to get better, faster, and sweeter, just let it happen!”

Thanks for the pep talk, Harlan thought, and nodded politely, then tried to look somewhere else; he’d had enough conversation with weird homeless kids for one day. Only then did he realize that they were the only passengers on board the bus. *Must be a service run.*

But the kid wouldn’t leave him be. “One good deed deserves another, so says the law. If you ever need help, stop by Pesthidegkút. I live by the old well, but anyone around there can tell you where old Virág lives.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

The bus picked up speed and they rushed past one stop after another. Through the graffiti-covered window Harlan tried to make out where they might be. The neighborhood seemed oddly unfamiliar.

“Reading the graffiti tags? Each one marks an act of faith.”

Harlan stared at the scrawl, but the letters were in some unrecognizable script. Perhaps the young hoodies could make these out, he thought. “Where does this bus go to?”

“Wherever it needs to go. Just there.”

Harlan glared at the kid, wondering what the proper behavior was when in the company of stoners or boozers. In any case, Virág had an odd pair of eyes on him, mismatched with his fragile childlike face. Harlan let loose a sigh: it must be tough living on the streets. Perhaps his parents turn him out day after day to go begging with his wheelchair. No wonder he’s precocious.

“Good morning, and have you bought your tickets for this ride?” A lean, side-burned ticket inspector seemed to have appeared from thin air. Harlan was sure it had been just the two of them aboard the bus until now.

“I have my pass, just give me a second,” Harlan said, and reached for the inside pocket of his suit. The kid didn’t even look at the inspector as he said “I have my lifetime ticket already.”

The inspector nodded in approval and gave Harlan a thorough looking over, without taking any notice of his bus pass. “Don’t give me a pass, my good man. A pass is no good for this bus. What, I wonder, would you give to pay for your ride? A golden pheasant feather? A silver straw?”

“That sounds overpriced, doesn’t it?” the kid asked innocently from his wheelchair.

The inspector snorted. “Well?”

Harlan concluded he had fallen victim to some kind of scam. Perhaps he’d been mistaken for somebody else. And there just wasn’t anywhere the inspector could possibly have traveled so far unnoticed, unless it was in the driver’s cabin. And how could two people squeeze in there?

“But I have a pass. What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s no good. You should know that, if you boarded this bus.”

“Well, this is my pass, it’s valid.” He cleared his throat and tried to look assertive. “So just leave me be. Your superiors won’t be pleased to hear that you’ve been stuffing your own pockets at the expense of legitimate passengers.”

The inspector leaned in close, his lip dangling from his stubbly face. “Which superiors are that, now?”

“His suit!” the wheelchair kid yelled in a shrill voice. “Judging from the smell of it, and I’m rarely mistaken, he’s been into this and that last night.”

“But this is really too...” To Harlan’s utter astonishment the inspector’s face pushed yet closer, and with flared nostrils he proceeded to sniff his jacket. “So it is!” With a metallic snip, an inch of sharp steel appeared in his hand, and in a flash, the topmost button of Harlan’s suit dropped silently into the man’s palm.

Harlan couldn’t have gotten away if he wanted to; he was still ensnared by the door. “Just what the *hell are you doing?!’*”

“My word, it was an Animator!” the inspector grumbled in satisfaction, ignoring Harlan’s outrage. Stepping back, he gave a bow. “Your fare is settled!”

Harlan shut his mouth once he realized that not only was he in an insanely bizarre situation with two madmen – armed ones – no less.

“I just... wanna go home,” he mumbled.

“You are there,” the inspector said pacifyingly, pointing at him.

The bus squealed to a halt, and with a heaving puff the door released Harlan’s suit.

The bus was parked in front of his building.

Harlan gave a vague nod, then, squeezing his arms tightly to his side, with a final stab at dignity he disembarked, determined to get home to a decent rest.

Harlan’s home was in a newly built, semi-detached apartment complex in the suburbs, close to the Rákos stream. All blame for the sorry accommodation could have been put down to the neighborhood: if the developer hadn’t picked this plot in the trendiest district of Pest, it might have turned out differently. For one thing, they might not have squeezed a six-unit project into a street of respectable family homes, and maybe skipped some of the creative ploys they thought up to make up for the high cost of the land. But since all had happened just the way it did, on summer nights Harlan had to put up with the sight of his neighbor, a retired doctor, wearing boxer shorts and tank top to water his vegetable patch only an arm’s length away.

Harlan needed a shower. And sleep. Perhaps all that had happened would be nothing but a bad dream by tomorrow.

He opened his front door and went through the usual dance routine to flip on the lights. The switch was behind the door (in fact, all the doors opened over the switches, and they had stuck the fuse box right in the middle of the longest stretch of bare wall, perhaps to go easy on the wiring). He flung off his soiled clothes, hissed as he probed the enormous purple bruise on his side, and then took a shower. He refused to acknowledge the water seeping from under the shower pad, despite stepping into a spreading puddle with his clean, dry feet. Dragging himself into the tiny bedroom, he dropped onto the bed and pulled the duvet over his head. Sleep at last.

The following day he dug up his bank’s customer service line, and even though it was Saturday, he tried to get through. When finally a lady’s voice answered, he cautiously probed her on what were to happen if, for the sake of argument, somebody stole his used scooter, on which he still owed more on in installments than its street price. And being a 50cc machine, had no

number plate. He found the lady's replies thoroughly unsettling.

Harlan sat on the couch wearing a t-shirt and a worn-out sweatpants, and for a while he just stared at his Ornamental Column (which it wasn't, but for some reason statistics indicated there had to be a reinforced concrete brace exactly there: Mr Szabó, the building contractor had gushed on about the decorative potential this lent the room, but all Harlan could appreciate was how he had to pull the couch all the way to the balcony door if he wanted a view of his TV screen). He couldn't summon any memory of how the bruise on his side got there, or how his clothing got so dirty. Where did he go, what did he do after he lost Réka at the party? Hopefully nothing too scandalous.

Perhaps he should try calling her. Provided she would talk to him at all.

He brewed some strong coffee, and whipped up a sandwich from a dried roll and cold cuts. Then it dawned on him how unhungry one felt when one's whole life – at least in a material sense – lay on the edge of ruin.

And in a non-material sense, come to think of it.

Harlan Karsa couldn't be said to harbor high expectations of life. Growing up in a state orphanage, you learn to take what you can get, and he'd done pretty well considering. He had a job, not a bad one, despite people thinking he was a creepy necrophile. He was up to his neck in loans, but had a home and a scooter. Or, more like, *had* a scooter.

He could have gone for a simpler, cheaper moped, but the Cub had retro lines that held him entranced, as it stood in the bike dealership's far corner, all brown leather saddle and chrome-plated side mirrors. This must have been the world's most popular motorcycle design – Harlan figured that sixty million customers can't be wrong, so he made the most sensible choice. And look where that got him. He couldn't help thinking it must be some kind of divine punishment for not having settled for a Chinese scooter. Nobody would have stolen one of those.

Suddenly the doorbell chimed.

The entry phone wasn't quite working, so Harlan donned his slippers and scurried downstairs to get the door.

His visitor was a short stocky man, the kind to comb his last longish strands of hair across a widening bald spot. His crumpled tie was probably last in vogue at some 1978 social function.

"You are one Karsa... Harlan, is that right? I am Károly Vágó, from the Head Department of Property Registries and Authentication. May I come in?"

“The scooter?”

“I took public transport, but the issue is irrelevant to this matter. Largely.”

“Are you from the bank?” Harlan asked, and lowered his gaze to the bureaucrat’s tattered pigskin attaché case.

“We are partners to various banks and financial institutions, that is absolutely a matter of fact. May I come in now?”

Harlan stood back from the door, and waved to Mr. Hsun from ground floor unit No.1 as he rolled his brand new Mercedes SUV from the front driveway. Mr. Hsun stared back with a wooden expression; maybe waving back to neighbors wasn’t something you did in China, or perhaps they thought it brings bad luck.

Harlan watched the car drive off. Mr. Hsun and his large boisterous family made for highly odd neighbors: they acted strange, ate strange things, and brought their children up strange. Earlier on – and especially after having seen Men in Black – he often caught himself on the lookout for any giveaway signs of their true identity.

Vágó didn’t give the car a passing glance. He just huffed his way up the stairwell as Harlan directed him to the entrance.

“Would you like coffee?” Harlan asked the guest, who sat himself on the couch and wiped the sweat from the nape of his neck using an enormous linen handkerchief. Harlan hadn’t seen anyone use one of those in many years. Nor had he met anybody with comparably bushy jet-black eyebrows. As if Vágó’s lost hair had been somehow reincarnated as eyebrow.

“Thank you,” the official said, and just as Harlan was plodding toward the kitchenette, added, “but no.”

Confused, Harlan sat down on the beanbag chair, which closely matched the couch in color. He was pleasantly surprised that the bank had someone call on him so quickly, far sooner than he would have expected.

“The scooter, a green Honda Cub, was stolen sometime last night from Jókai street, despite the fact that I used a quite formidable Abus lock to secure it. The rear case held my helmet and jacket that I wear for biking. Uhh, do you need to see receipts for those items?”

“It always helps to show documentation, Mr Karsa. People tend to underestimate the importance of documents.” Vágó gingerly lowered his case to the floor beside his leg. “As for myself, I am not here on account of that particular business.”

“You’re not?”

“Decidedly not.”

The bureaucrat stared at him poker-faced, seemingly absent for a few moments, leaving behind a mere caricature of a human face.

“...You were saying?”

Vágó raised his authoritative eyebrows, which lifted like curtains over his beady eyes. “Do you remember your childhood?”

Harlan was taken aback. “My childhood?”

“Precisely. When, legally speaking, you were still a minor. Or, to put it another way, living your developmental stage.”

“What’s childhood got to do with this?”

“It has everything to do with this. Our matter at hand. Well, you were raised in a state orphanage up to... Let me see now...” Taking the attaché case onto his lap, he produced a dog-eared manila file, and proceeded to pull out an untidy bundle of papers. It looked to Harlan like a bunch of printouts.

“From before the age of six, so they tell me,” said Harlan helpfully. “I’m afraid I can’t remember any of it. I had amnesia when they found me wandering the streets. Nothing was ever found out about my life before that.”

“Don’t remember. I see.” Vágó clicked a ballpoint pen and scribbled something on a form. “Your biological parents never came looking for you?”

A stab of pain shot through Harlan. “Not that I know of. But may I ask why you want to know this?”

“All in good time, Mr Karsa, protocol must be strictly observed. So, first you were a resident at the Bakonyoszlop Elementary School and Children’s Home, then transferred to Hűvösvölgy Children’s Home.”

“Are you asking me this?” Harlan was losing his patience. “If you have it there on paper, why the questions?”

“Sadly, there’s no way around the identification procedure. Harlan... now what kind of name is that?”

“I have no clue,” Harlan snapped irritably. He’s been asked that often enough: whenever he told anyone his full name, there was often some confusion as to which was his first or last name.

His teachers had been quick enough on the uptake, lest somebody suspect a crack their all-knowing authority. So they all called on Harlan during their lessons, but couldn't recognize the faces of common names like Kiss and Hegedűs. Harlan was never comfortable with his name.

"There's that American science fiction writer, Harlan Ellison."

"Will you tell me what this is about already?"

"Though I am only an official, with a narrow sense of imagination, I would note the coincidence, and quickly conclude, were it me, that I might have escaped from an isolated science fiction commune as a small child."

Harlan blinked. "Come again?"

Of course he had come up with many varied scripts for his origins himself, during the long, lonely, and loveless hours of the children's home. Most of these involved a wealthy family, and his parents showing up to take him home to a house where the eves were decked in Christmas lights all year round, and he had his own room. But as this never came to pass, he gradually gave up on his daydreams, so the fantasies about a father on the run from the mafia, or a mother who was an Indian princess, faded from his mind along with other such childish dreams.

"I don't know, Mr. Karsa. I'm just doing the math. Here's all these fantasy books on your shelf, for one thing..."

"It's what I like to read."

"...that could be evidence of where that interest was first sparked. Perhaps your parents, unlike you, weren't capable of leaving the commune to go looking for their runaway son. Maybe you have an uncanny knack for getting out of a jam, a special power of some kind. Like you got away from the Animator's assault this morning. For instance."

Harlan coughed, then nodded. He stood. "Mr Vágó, please leave. Please."

"But we've only got as far as form 12.6!" the bureaucrat objected. His eyebrow took on a life of its own at such insolence. The sight would have been funny, had it not looked as if each little hair was stretching itself upward, like the tentacles of some deep-sea creature.

"I don't know whether you're confusing me with someone else, you and those two on the bus, or if this is another elaborate gag pulled by that Dr. Kamondi from Pathology, but, honestly I don't even care. Just get out. Or I'm calling the cops."

"We wouldn't want that, now would we?" Vágó remarked, staring at his paperwork as if he were counting how many times the letter 'e' had been used. "But the law enforcement agencies,

and their employees who'd be dispatched to the scene, they'd be even less pleased. Think of their families. And all the work you'd have to do to clean up after. This furniture deserves better."

Harlan paused. "What's that about the furniture?"

Vágó stood, his pride visibly injured, and swept his papers into the folder, which he sunk into the leather case. "Perhaps you're right. I still have much to learn about customer relations. Conflict management and all that. And currently you enjoy a privileged client status, unlike most of those I, umm, come in contact with in my official capacity." Once more he pulled out his handkerchief to wipe his forehead. "So I am indeed leaving."

Harlan nodded and fought the urge to apologize to the official. Causing others annoyance always disconcerted him. But dammit, he *was* in the right!

As Harlan opened the downstairs exit for Mr Vágó, he tried to stand tall, both in privileged and civic capacity.

"Let's only hope, Mr Karsa, that until our next meeting you shall retain your special privileged status," the guest said, taking his leave. "In the meantime, think about what you've heard and in case you feel you need to learn more about your family and this mysterious commune, don't hesitate to contact me. I left my card on your shoe-rack. Goodbye."

Harlan sighed and closed the door.

The retired GP called up from the garden, "I guess you heard their sound system blasting away till the crack of dawn again, up in number two! Just isn't music, if you ask me. And smoking on the balcony, laughing! It's gone all quiet now though. Knocked themselves cold, no doubt. What a way to go on, whooping it up every night!"

Harlan made the mistake of shrugging his shoulder. "I wouldn't know; I only got home this morning."

The GP's wizened face fell dark, and he left without another word.

Upstairs, Harlan looked out the balcony door and saw the doctor standing in the middle of his garden, revving up a yellow chainsaw and giving it long bursts of gas. There wasn't a single scrap of wood in the yard. The doctor grinned maliciously.

Harlan latched the balcony door and tried to make sense of what his official visitor could have been after, when it occurred to him that there was an odor bathing the room since Vágó had left; it was reminiscent of something specific.

Like thermal waters. Sulphur or brimstone.

Harlan could easily have written off Vágó as insane, yet any hope of learning something of his past, however small a scrap, nagged him. He had no idea how such knowledge would change his everyday life, but it would at least be something to hold on to.

Madness.

It gave him the creeps how all the nut cases seemed to have found him in these last twelve hours. Like they were all in on a conspiracy. And he still had no clue what had happened for most of last night. In those books he liked reading, this would have to mean his memories had somehow been altered in the past, and the fabric that concealed his galactic secret-agent personality was starting to give.

Still greater madness.

As it were, Harlan had time enough to accept – if not quite to cope with – occasional memory lapses, even with years passing uninterrupted by the problem. One thing was for sure: these lapses occurred at frightening times in his life. Whenever he was in a fix, just as his guest had stated. All that stress must have altered his brain in some way, furnishing him with a sort of protective mechanism for the mind (he'd read up on these matters on the net), but, still, bad feelings arose when he thought too much about it.

The most unsettling of these incidents had occurred in his adolescence, and went beyond mere amnesia. Around age eleven, he became a target for some older bullies. It's the same old story in every children's home: perhaps he was too quiet, perhaps it was because he preferred reading to playing soccer, or because at that point he had a tendency towards chubbiness. Regardless, Joci, Ottó, and Karesz spent six months torturing him in various ways: they flicked his ears in the lunch line (and he shrank away, letting them pass him, though he probably should have stood his ground); they covered his locker with toothpaste, and soaked all his clean clothes during the night. Then Ottó and Joci ran away from the home. They were brought back only a few days later, but the from then bullying only got more brutal, culminating in the day when the three of them cornered him in the bathroom. Karesz and Ottó grabbed him and were preparing to dunk his head in the bowl, as Joci, the guffawing leader, had instructed them.

Harlan recalled nothing of the hours that followed; he recovered his memory later while crouching in the bushes at the back of the gardens. All three older boys were in the infirmary with some particularly ugly bruises and sprains.

From then on, the threesome steered well clear of Harlan, glowering fearfully from a safe distance, but never again accosting him. Whatever took place in that bathroom, they never revealed to soul. And Harlan knew better than to ask them. Someone must have stepped in, probably one of the teachers, and, going against staff policy, put a final stop to the bullying. Still, whenever he was by himself and daydreaming, Harlan would fantasize that it was some hidden superpower of his own that had surfaced.

Like Superman. Or, more disconcertingly, Mr. Hyde.

This was the only memory lapse during he may have brought harm to others, to the best of his knowledge.

(This wasn't entirely true. There was the Accident, when he was nineteen. Which he stubbornly refused to think of ever again.)

Anybody attempting to give a description of Harlan Karsa's appearance would undoubtedly include features such as his height, the unruly hair, year-round pale complexion, and the cautious anxiety in his movements, as if he were constantly on guard of being assaulted.

This youthful vulnerability exerted a considerable magnetism over the opposite sex, far exceeding his confidence, but still not up to his dreams. Such a divergence of opportunity and expectation unavoidably leads to repeated failure, as Harlan found out soon enough. This was all exasperated by the fact that he never seemed to notice when a female made herself available – the chronic disadvantage of not having friends who get another round of beers and nudge one over to a girl who is expressing her attraction so mysteriously that the whole world seemed to notice, except him.

But since he had no real friends, Harlan learned on his own to cope with the kind of situation in which a strange woman rang his doorbell and leapt into his arms.

The doorbell rang. Harlan went downstairs to answer it, and saw a twenty-something girl, standing by the garden gate.

"Are you Harlan Karsa?" was her first question. Her voice was high and melodic. An enormous suitcase lay at her feet. She wore a denim skirt and a conservatively cut, unfashionable blouse that lent her a gray and anonymous choirgirl appearance. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail. This pristine composition was only disrupted by a pair of full, sensitive lips; and this made her unwholesomely attractive, like a demure, lusty nun from one of those porn flicks that

Harlan would occasionally come across while channel-surfing.

“Yes?” Harlan didn’t yet open the door.

“My name’s Emese. Emese Maróti. Remember me? From the home?”

Harlan’s forehead wrinkled. “Yes?”

“Don’t say you don’t remember me! I sat behind you up to second grade; we took classes from Tormás. I’m here passing through Pest, and I thought I’d look up one of my old school chums while I’m in the neighborhood.”

Harlan hummed. He remembered his teacher, Tormás, all right.

“They gave me your address at the Home. Get this: the headmaster still has that turtle, August! God, how old that animal must be by now.”

Harlan nodded, opening the door. “Yeah, the turtle. Now I remember. Come in.”

The girl stepped inside and, indeed, practically leapt into his arms. “It’s so awesome to see one of my old mates!”

The hug was definitely not bad, though Harlan was too timid to hug back.

Upstairs, the girl plopped down on the couch and stood the heavy-looking suitcase by the armrest. “Can I have a cup of coffee? I’ve been on the road since dawn. I started from way out in Borsod. If you can believe it, I met my mother there. We’re not really close yet, and she has a serious drinking problem, but God, you know, she is my mom. And you? Ever find out about your folks?”

Harlan just shook his head as he fiddled with the coffeemaker in the kitchenette. “Not a hint or a lead.”

He shook out the grounds and packed in the fresh coffee into the coffeemaker as the girl chattered on behind him. “Oh, you poor thing. But you had the weirdest past. Amnesia and all. I mean, they never really gave up on you, not like they did with the rest of us. They just lost you. So you never even got close to a lead? Never asked anyone to do some digging?”

Harlan focused carefully to keep the water from spilling over the rim of the coffeemaker. Twisting the lid in place, he flicked on the switch. “Nope. You know, it just seemed pointless after a while.” Turning back around, he noticed something lying on the coffee table.

Emese was now standing in the hall near the door. Her smile was gone. “That’s great. Now let me show you something.”

Harlan was about to tell her to please move that steak or whatever it was off the glass

tabletop – it would leave a mess and he wasn't in the mood to be introduced to any wonderful new products, not even for old time sake – when the girl spoke to him in a foreign tongue. It was something like Latin – except that this would have been an ancient language back when Latin was commonly used. It made the hair on his arms rise.

“What is all this?” he was going to ask, but the piece of meat, or whatever it was – something like a twenty-pound head cheese, bulging with veins, and what may have been the body parts of tiny animals, obscured beneath a translucent filmy surface – suddenly moved and expanded, as if it was taking a deep breath of air.

“Jesus, there's something in there!” shouted Harlan, and leapt to open the balcony door, so as to chase away whatever was squirming in the meaty pouch.

“Don't bother,” said Emese, a sublime and choirgirly expression her face. Her hand fluttered gracefully. “And I mean, *don't lift a finger!*” With that, she continued chanting, and there seemed something compelling about her exotic words, like they were commands to execute some inevitable and sinister action.

Harlan's limbs felt suddenly heavy, as though they were strapped with weights. His knees quivered, his legs buckled under. He hit the small of his back on the glass door as he fell to the floor. He wanted to scream, but felt too sleepy; it would have taken too much of an effort. Blinking numbly, he watched the thing on the table throbbing as if someone was pumping it full of air; it expanded with a wet panting sound. It sprouted thick appendages, and then swallowed them back into itself as it kept growing bigger, radiating new tentacles that writhed and probed. The ever-expanding thing quickly spilled over the coffee table's edges, and oozed right on down to the carpet. For a minute it looked like some bizarre coffee table from a contemporary art design exhibition, before the creature's ooze crept farther still.

The blob soon crawled up the couch and the beanbag chair, and engulfed them too. The pulsating, expanding thing towered over Harlan. The girl kept up the chant, her voice gaining strength, her sensual lips curled in a wild smile. There remained nothing choirgirlish or even remotely sexy about her.

Harlan reached up and pawed for the balcony door handle – then realized he had only imagined the movement, or possibly dreamt it. A nap, inexplicably, seemed an excellent idea right now. The girl's voice, like a stormy wind, continued to fill the room. She was almost completely hidden from Harlan's view by the throbbing mass rising between them. It had reached

the floor lamp and engulfed the Ornamental Column, swept the DVD player off the TV rack's bottom shelf, then swallowed the whole TV, rack and all.

The coffee maker hissed as the steaming liquid sputtered into its pot.

The front door opened behind the girl, and in stepped Vágó. As the bureaucrat took a look around, his eyebrows lifted high, and a smile spread across his face.

Then the face itself began to spread, morphing into something altogether different, all fangs and spikes. Mostly fangs.

Vágó took out a long and evil-looking knife from his case, then, stepping behind the oblivious girl, deftly slit her throat from ear to ear in a single tidy motion. Her neck gaped open like parting red lips, and the chanting bubbled into silence.

Harlan leapt to his feet as if his muscles were coiled springs, and fell promptly on his face, a few inches from the enormous quivering amoeba, which now seemed to pause. In the blink of an eye, Harlan's mind cleared. Ripping the balcony door open with one arm, he turned to look back for only a moment. The gigantic pulsating fleshy hulk still impaired his view of the others, so all he saw was Vágó crouching on the floor beside the body, probing about with his knife, then neatly tossing aside a flurry of pink-gray stuff that may have been Emese's viscera.

And then he remembered no more.

Mrs. Majer's apartment looked like a museum exhibit on lifestyles, one that displayed the artifacts of bygone glory days that had somehow slipped into a newer, flashier housing development. The floor plan more or less matched Harlan's apartment, even the Ornamental Column held the same position, yet it all seemed so crammed full, what with the tarnished dark chest of drawers, inlaid wardrobes, display shelves and glass showcases, antique armchairs, and a varnished black upright piano. The walls were decked with ancient family photos and gold-framed handicrafts, while horizontal surfaces were adorned with intricate embroidery. China figurines lined the shelves, looking down in astonishment at what had become of their familiar turn-of-the-century world. Evidently it was slipping into something far more plastic-framed, laminated-tile floored, and all-in-all more confined than the old Buda bourgeois apartment Mrs. Majer had moved from and given over to her niece three years earlier.

Harlan sat huddled in an overstuffed armchair, waiting for Mrs. Majer to pour tea into one of her ubiquitous flower-patterned china cups. He listened to the severe tick-tocking of the

grandfather clock in the corner and tried to gauge the reality of what had just happened to him.

The chances that this was really happening were almost nil, but dammit, he saw that meat-thing growing, and spikey-faced Vágó slitting Emese's throat. Like something from a Clive Barker novel.

"Mr. Szabó warned us to mind the rail," Mrs. Majer grouched quietly as she laid out a tray of Linzer cookies from a biscuit tin. "I hardly go out on the balcony at all, so I don't really mind, but I guess this is a tad out of the ordinary. No real craftsmen about like in the old days. At home we used to have real wrought-iron railings; held out through the worst of the bombardment of '44 – just after Christmas it was – and not a scratch on them, not like old Encz and theirs got, back when the Soviets were raising a ruckus the streets."

Though Harlan had no memories of his escape, he must have clambered over the balcony railing to leap down into the garden. Mr Szabó, the contractor, hadn't failed to point out that the rail wasn't so much for leaning on; it was more a symbolic, aesthetic divide between the balcony and the great outdoors. Harlan's weight must have ripped the flimsy grating clear of its screws and sent Harlan falling onto the little old lady's balcony below.

On any other day he would have beat himself up for bungling such a simple getaway, but now he was occupied with more pressing matters.

"Something really weird happened in my apartment. I believe I was going to be eaten," Harlan finally declared. Put that way, even to his own ears, it sounded preposterous.

"That's right, get a bite to eat, young man," Mrs. Majer said, putting on her reading glasses. She was also somewhat hard of hearing. The massively thick lenses magnified her eyes, lending her the appearance of a slightly bewildered owl. "Would you like a nip of rum in your tea? Just the thing for a nasty fright. Used to send a flask or two out to my poor old husband when he was serving on the front. To tell the truth, I never knew if he got them in the end. Never mentioned it in his letters, then again, he may have been more partial to moonshine than baking rum. Not that you get much choice in the trenches." She whipped out a flat two-deciliter bottle, the kind where under the big block-capital RUM was finely captioned, "Flavored Alcoholic Beverage." The granny poured a generous amount into Harlan's teacup, then frugally spiked her own tea as well. She always figured that regular alcohol consumption numbered high among the secrets that led to a long life. And even if that weren't the case, she had lived this way so long that a change would surely be deleterious.

“And there’s a body up there. Are you following me, Mrs. Majer? A dead person in my house!” Harlan squeezed his mouth shut for a moment, suppressing something that could have been a scream or incoherent gibberish. “But it may be that I imagined it all. Did you hear any strange noises from upstairs?” He checked the grandfather clock: it was going on early afternoon. He couldn’t account for several hours. “Sometime this morning?”

“I heard nothing, young man. But you know, my hearing isn’t what it used to be. My eyes still serve me, but the ears... It’s not much fun growing old, you know. You’re still young, lucky you. Just mind you don’t watch too much TV. The shows on all the channels are all cockamamie these days.”

“Do you think I was imagining the whole thing?”

“I wouldn’t know, young man. You seem a bit off color, that’s for sure. Perhaps you bumped your head a bit when you fell down here. You were out for a good hour and a half before you came to.”

Harlan shook his head. The whole thing was just too vivid and real.

“So many weird things happened in the last twenty-four hours, Mrs. Majer. Maybe there’s something wrong with me. A tumor or something.” Harlan had a remarkable talent for diagnosing himself with terminal illnesses, but deep inside he knew it was only his imagination. Yet for a long time he imagined that having a verifiable inherited illness would somehow provide a lead to finding his parents. A high price for knowledge, but one with the tragic appeal of heroism.

“Oh, don’t say that!” said Mrs. Majer, chomping into a cookie with her dentures. “You’ll have time enough to get ill later.”

Harlan wanted to tell her that it wasn’t quite out of the blue. That whenever he was in Mrs. Majer’s apartment, from the corner of his eye he always saw the figurines move in their display case. Not when he looked directly at them, just from his peripheral vision. Only, until today, he thought it was an idiocy confined to his imagination, precipitated by the noon sun, radio reports, passing cars, or his workaday routine. He further explained it away by the subtle curvature of the display case glass. These old glass sheets warp and shift with time – he’d read in a story somewhere about how glass is actually a liquid flowing downwards at an extremely slow rate.

He drank, but the tea bypassed his sense of taste. He stared down at the carpet. “I must have been drugged somehow,” he uttered to himself, his tortured mind presenting that one possible explanation, after dismissing other options: alien abduction, flaw in the Matrix, parallel

dimensions. “The university students from number two! They’re always puffing grass, the smoke blows straight over my balcony. Maybe they were into something hallucinogenic.”

This, of course, failed to account for last night’s events. But perhaps the stuff had messed up his memory, too.

Mrs. Majer just stared at him furtively, and then she pursed her lips. “The world is by all accounts more than those hi-fi-blasting hooligans reckon. Who of us can say to have seen all of its secrets?”

Harlan looked up at the old crone, who was busily arranging a lace coaster on the side table from her armchair. “Whatever do you mean?” he asked.

“Take my poor departed husband, for one. Not that I’d know what he went through when he was captured. I certainly can’t imagine what the Cossacks did to him in the camp, or his ordeal trying to get home from Siberia. How far did he get? What did he see on the way, walking through that enormous snowy land? I see many things, but none of what he saw. Still, it was real.”

Harlan felt the generic rum taking effect. He perceived how his heart was beginning to function as a real heart should. He didn’t really have any friends, and now that he thought about it, the one who came closest was an eighty-four-year-old woman from the apartment below his. Somehow things tended to fall into place here in her abode. Possibly because he never had a real grandmother.

“Perhaps I should go back upstairs.”

The old woman nodded. “Perhaps I should have gone to Russia and seen with my own eyes, whatever it was my poor husband saw.”

“Mrs. Majer? If I go up now, and don’t show up in an hour’s time, would you call the police, please?”

The figurines in the showcase – the brooding shepherds and ballerinas – remained motionless one and all.

On the landing before his apartment, Harlan peered over the banister. His front door was slightly ajar. No noise or body fluids seeping from the crack.

Perhaps he should come back with the police, he pondered. But if there was even a slim chance he had been seeing things; that was an embarrassment he would rather avoid.

He stole up the last flight of stairs, stopped to listen, then eased the door open just enough for him to get his head through and look around.

He was expecting something sure enough, but the sight still shocked him.

The floor, his couch, his beanbag chair. The TV rack with the cheap DVD-player. His shelves lined with sci-fi novels. The lone aspidistra, a gift from his colleagues, which had stood by him intrepidly, shedding many a leaf but keeping alive the whole year... All was intact and apparently undisturbed.

The boy sighed, entered, and slammed the door shut behind him.

He touched the couch cover with his fingertips, then the flat of his palm, before he allowed himself to plop down onto it.

For some time – and a longer time than it may have seemed to Harlan – he just sat and stared blankly. Then he stood up, turned the coffee machine off, switch still glowing amber yellow. He hoped it hadn't been damaged by being left on. He had no idea if there was any kind of safety device to cut the power from the heating coils after a certain amount of time, in case someone had forgot, or, say, gone out, or fallen asleep, or had to run for dear life out a balcony door.

He scanned the sci-fi shelf, his gaze falling on a row of books by Philip K. Dick. Isn't this how one of those usually started out? Breakdown of reality and all that?

Dick was, of course, deranged. Paranoid. Which isn't saying he was wrong.

Shaking his head, Harlan set his mind to finding the user's manual for the coffee machine. He took his time in finding it, though he knew well enough it was in an Adidas shoebox on the top shelf in the wardrobe, along with a few old love letters, loan agreements, and school report cards. He paused to read everything he got his hands on while he looked: from the DVD setup guide, old bank statements, to the specifications of defunct a mobile charger, all the while blocking from his consciousness the pervasive smell of disinfectant, and the touch of that instantly evaporating slime that he'd found on the furniture after he'd entered his home.

(...)