

**THE
CLUB
AT
EDDY'S
BAR**

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by

Zoltán

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PHÆTON

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The Club at Eddy's Bar

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This book is a work of fiction: names, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, or to persons living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The body should not give in to its appetites at the expense of the soul; but isn't it also true that the soul should not make demands at the expense of the body?

—Montaigne (1553–1592)

—Chapter 1—

TAMAS SCRAMBLED ONTO the airport bus, carried along by the rush of his fellow travellers. He had the papers of a stateless person in his pocket, the fear of death in his soul, and was on his way to a country unknown to him. Like the other passengers, he was glad to leave behind the dangers and the foetid dormitories of Traiskirchen Refugee Camp; but he could not share fully in the exuberant mood of the bus. His thoughts and heart were with his wife, Iren, and his two children who were still trapped in Eastern Europe. He had been forced to leave them behind when he fled across two borders, and now he could not stop worrying about them, and wondering when and if he would ever see Iren again.

His wife did not know the reason he had to run. No one did. He clutched tightly in his hand the thick child's notebook in which he had set down the awful story.

The big airport bus was the first step on his journey to a new homeland – Canada. As it pulled away, camp residents left behind gave a salutatory wave to the lucky group on board, now promoted to the status of emigrants. Tamas was touched by this demonstration of fellow feeling.

Leaving the bus at Vienna airport, they followed one another in single file, mostly young women and men; the few straggling children among them were constantly reminded to behave themselves and told how important it was to keep together. If they get lost, none of us can set out on this long journey, Tamas was thinking to himself. Without them the plane will not take off. His worries were echoed loudly by a short-haired young woman in a denim skirt speaking to her brood.

The motley group was being led by a fortyish man,

wearing a white shirt with a red tie and holding an overstuffed briefcase. Halfway between the bus and an office building he stopped and called for attention, loudly addressing this small island of humanity gathered around him. Even before he had opened his mouth his appearance spoke of a bureaucrat who was not going to tolerate dissent. His gestures were measured, almost theatrical. He scanned the faces in front of him with a piercing stare, taking his time as if he had nothing else on his schedule that day. He was silently taking a headcount while he waited for all talk to die down, until even the children were turning their startled faces toward him.

Only then did he beckon to all to follow him.

He led the group into the building and then to a conference room inside. Accompanied by the subdued conversation that had sprung up again in the meantime, they took their seats in the rows of chairs. Then suddenly silence returned. The man greeted all present in a ritualistic monotone. Gradually he slipped into a cadence of emphasizing every word and raising his voice at the end of each sentence as if wanting to put more weight into his instructions.

He explained the process that lay ahead, step by step.

Releasing the catch of his briefcase, he produced a large stack of manila envelopes. He opened the one on top and, tilting it upside down, spilled out a pile of documents. He picked out a brownish booklet that looked like a passport. He checked inside and read out a name. One of those present got up to receive his package. He was followed by the others, one by one.

When Tamas heard his name called, he rose from his seat and quickly made his way to the table to receive his bona fides. He wanted to say thanks, but the official's eyes were already on the next envelope on top of the stack. Tamas carried his documents like a cat its prey back to his seat and checked them: the passport, the immigration permit, the entry visa, the airline ticket, the names of

immigration officials, and the addresses of their offices at his destination – they were all there. Only then did he start examining the data entered into them, starting with the brownish passport.

His name had been typed without the accents.

Looking at his photo he felt a sour smile pucker his lips. It had been taken at the beginning of his stint in the foreign refugee camp. All the agitation was still vivid in his memory, the time when he was filling out emigration applications, always in a hurry – he had to run to the corner photography shop to get there before it closed. From the photo the sad eyes of a thin face looked back at him. And he could not help noticing the date of expiration on the passport: EXPIRY: JULY 15, 1983. Void in thirty days, he observed bitterly. Just in case I am tempted to return.

Next his eyes latched onto the line concerning citizenship: STATELESS. In block letters. Unmistakable. Reading it again, he felt he had been jabbed in the guts. To be fair though, what other word would you use to describe someone without a country? He swallowed the lump in his throat and repeated to himself: STATELESS.

He carefully scanned all the other documents, one at a time. All seemed in order. He separated the passport and the airline ticket from the rest and slipped them into an inside jacket pocket.

One by one, the envelopes slowly got picked up from the table.

‘Attention please.’ The official’s voice was firm and hard, ‘I want everyone to make note of the gate number on their boarding pass and to be there at least forty minutes before boarding time. Don’t get lost gaping at the duty-free shops; you might miss your flight.’

As if he had suddenly run out of words, he paused, took a deep breath, then clicked the briefcase shut before he started speaking again. His voice went back to its initial ceremonial tone.

'I wish you *bon voyage* and much luck and happiness in your new homeland!' He marched out of the room with his eyes focused on the floor.

The table, only minutes ago occupied by a mound of vital documents, was now empty except for a small pool of reflected light.

Here and there voices started mumbling, and soon the small conference room was echoing the repeated phrase: 'Thank you, thank you, thank...'

There was already a long line at the security gate when Tamas ambled over there. His imitation-leather bag contained little in the way of personal possessions – a very few items of clothing and toiletries, a copy of Goethe's *Faust* given to him as a birthday present in the camp, and, most important of all, the thick notebook he had decided to put inside the bag before going through security. If questioned about it, he would say it contained a novel he was writing, which was true in a way, as he had changed the names of everyone in it, and it read like fiction.

At security, however, the notebook attracted no interest. The quick-eyed woman checking his papers raised an eyebrow as if to say: so you're homeless, you good-for-nothing! At least that was the message Tamas read on her face.

Then at passport control, the uniformed border guard remarked loudly enough for others behind Tamas to hear: 'Sir, I assume you know this passport only entitles you to enter the country of your destination. It is not valid for re-entry into this country!'

Tamas knew that to be untrue. There had been cases of would-be emigrants returning after a few weeks with expired passports. He had witnessed just such an incident the previous autumn.

It was about noon on a Saturday when the police shoved a young man with short blond hair into the mess hall. He was wearing a leather jacket and was in handcuffs. He had big, gold-rimmed sunglasses that he

placed on the table in front of him. According to the police escorting him, he had arrived from overseas.

At first the boy looked scared and couldn't say a word. He just sat there with his head bowed. By the evening though, he slowly perked up, asked for bread, ordered beer, and began to tell his story. The words came pouring out of him about his experiences overseas. On one occasion in America he had to work twenty-four hours without sleep. None of the workers had the courage to push the on/off button of the coffee-packing machine, even though they started having visions by the twentieth hour of non-stop work. They were laughing at one another at first, pretending to collapse. At the end they stopped paying attention to the machine; instead, they were helping one another stay upright. The coffee packages were falling on the floor, making a sizable mound by the time the owner walked in.

It turned out that the boy was returned to the camp in handcuffs because he had re-entered the country with an expired passport.

As this episode flashed across Tamas's mind, he stared bashfully at the floor. He did not respond to the official's admonition. He did not want to cause trouble. He merely nodded in acknowledgement.

The next step was easier – walking down a long, wide corridor, lined by brightly-lit, inviting shops, the ones he had been warned to avoid. However, it was early yet, and he felt free to make-believe he was a regular there, a transit passenger at leisure between flights, and if he should find some knick-knack that caught his eye, he had the money to buy it and he had someone at his destination to buy it for. He stopped in front of the window display of a stationery shop. He looked wistfully over the fountain pens of various shapes and colours, the marking pens, the retractable pencils. After a while the young saleswoman came out of the shop with an eager

smile. 'Can I help you at all?' she asked. 'Are you looking for anything special?'

The young man said in German he was just looking, but following her with his eyes as she walked back into the shop, Tamas noticed a board in a corner with inexpensive ballpoint pens hanging from it. He bought one of those, with red ink. He did not expect the purchase would impress the young woman. It was the cheapest pen in the shop, although it still cost twice as much as it would have in town.

He headed toward Gate 10, which now had a red sign over it: ALIA FLIGHT 414 TO TORONTO, DEPARTURE TIME: 11:30 A.M.

* * *

Before settling himself in his allocated window seat in row 24, Tamas took his notebook out of the bag that he stowed in the overhead compartment.

In the detention camp, Tamas had almost filled that notebook with his small script, but his writing had been hurried, almost unthinking. He had re-read nothing. Now, armed with that expensive new red biro and on his way to Canada, he felt able at last to look at the whole story from the beginning.

He had fictionalized every name in the notebook, and he had been careful never to describe his own family, so that if the notebook should be lost or seized, no one reading it could know that the story of Vilmos was his own story, his account of the grotesque events that had turned him into a fugitive – a refugee. Of course it was also true that he did not have enough information to write about the events as non-fiction. As an innocent bystander, he was not privy to all the facts of the case; although as a novice newspaperman, he had heard more about it on the grapevine than most. But he did – unfortunately – have almost exclusive knowledge of the true and unhappy

ending; he too had been unwittingly drawn into the vortex that shattered the lives of the main players.

He liked to think that the book would be published sometime, but only when Iren and the children were safely out of the country too. For now, he just wanted to set down a record of those sordid events, and then clear them out of his head. When he had reached his destination, he planned to put the notebook safely away. Once there, he needed to immerse himself in the English language and forget about the past until he got himself established and reunited with his family. He wished he had learned English. He was fluent in Romanian and Hungarian, somewhat conversant with Slavic languages, and, of course, German. But neither Hungary nor Germany was far enough for a safe haven. To feel safe, he needed to be in another continent, either North America or Australia, and that meant learning its language.

The tentative title of the story he had put in his notebook came from a newspaper headline of several months ago about the events that had led to his fleeing the country: *MURDER IN HOTEL ODÉON*.

He opened to the first page.

—Chapter 2—

MURDER IN HOTEL ODÉON

—I—

A FOUR-STOREY APARTMENT HOUSE near the city lake had collapsed during the night. Vilmos was awakened by his next-door neighbour with the news. The old man was yelling through the half-open window, his voice hoarse from excitement. In the produce market he had heard about a catastrophe. That was all Vilmos was able to get out of him – only that one of the buildings in the housing development constructed about a decade earlier suddenly fell into total ruin for no obvious reason.

When he had dressed and stepped out of the building the old man was still hanging about; apparently the sensational news had got the better of him, and he didn't know what to do with himself.

'Go find out all about it, and hurry back to give us a detailed report!' he yelled after Vilmos.

It was a twenty-minute walk to the scene. The picture waiting for him was shocking, the kind of thing he would see only on TV News about an earthquake in a far corner of the world.

The apartment house was nothing but a pile of rubble, as if smashed by a giant hand. The scene was closed off by the police and firefighters. There was a lot of confusion, emergency crews were coming and going. As he burrowed his way through the crowd he recognized, in a small group beyond the yellow police tape, the designer of the complex, who it seemed was being questioned by the police. He had worked with that engineer and now started out toward him, but the security guards would not let him into the cordoned-off



Zoltán BÖSZÖRMÉNYI

THE AUTHOR

The author, Zoltán BÖSZÖRMÉNYI, was born in 1951 in the Hungarian community of Arad in Transylvania. He studied for seven years at a ballet-oriented high school in Kolozsvár (Cluj), historical capital of Transylvania, then finished school in Arad, where he published two books of Hungarian-language poetry. The second of these resulted in his arrest and interrogation by Romanian security officers. He fled across the border (via Yugoslavia), spent seven months in Traiskirchen refugee camp in Austria, and was admitted to Canada, where he learned English and graduated from York University in Toronto. After the opening up of Eastern Europe in the 1990s, he returned to Romania, setting up a successful lighting company there. Now retired from manufacturing, he is editor-in-chief of a Hungarian-language daily journal and a monthly journal based in Arad, Romania. He has residences in Canada and in Arad.

In 2009 he received the Gundel Arts Award for the Hungarian version of *The Club at Eddy's Bar*, and in 2012 he received the József Attila Award for Hungarian literature. He is married, and has two daughters.

COVER ILLUSTRATIONS

THE COVER ILLUSTRATIONS of this book are by Ferenc MARTYN (1899–1986), a notable Hungarian artist of Irish ancestry. The front cover illustration *Kávéháiban* [*At the Café*] was drawn in Paris in 1927, and the back cover shows an excerpt from his *Párizsi látkép* [*Parisian Scene*] of the same period.

Born in Kaposvár in southern Hungary in 1899, he grew up in the house of his relative, the portrait-painter József Rippl-Rónai, after his mother's early death. In World War I, Martyn served in the Austro-Hungarian army on the Italian front. After the war, he studied at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest (under, among others, the Transylvanian artist, István Réti). In 1926 he moved to Paris (as Rippl-Rónai and Réti had done some decades earlier) where he developed a cubist and expressionist style of painting and joined the *Abstraction-Création* group of artists in 1934. In 1940 he returned to Hungary, settling in Pécs where he spent the rest of his life as a painter, sculptor, graphic artist, and illustrator (of *Madame Bovary*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and *Don Quixote*, among other works), and became the foremost exponent of Hungarian abstract art. He died in Pécs in 1986, where his work is seen in the Janus Pannonius Institute, and on permanent display in the Martyn Ferenc Múzeum.



FERENC MARTYN
SELF-PORTRAIT



ULYSSES

He is the great-grandson of Peter Martyn who emigrated in 1790 from Galway (where the Martyns/Martins were one of the fourteen medieval families called 'The Tribes of Galway' >), and who joined the Austrian Imperial army as a Second Lieutenant Cuirassier, advancing by 1812 to the rank of Major in Kleanu's Light Cavalry Regiment; in 1822 he retired and settled in Hungary, where he died in 1827 at Arad – the birthplace of the author of this book.



ENSIGNS OF THE 14
TRIBES OF GALWAY

Ferenc Martyn married twice but outlived both wives, and in his final five years was cared for by Marianna, a former music teacher and a personal friend of the poet Paul Sohar who collaborated closely with author Zoltán Böszörményi on the translation into English of this novel. She recounts that '*Lovag Martyn Ferenc*' often mentioned his Irish ancestry.

A murder story like no other, with a startling plot twist.

In the last years of the Cold War, the club at Eddy's Bar is a magnet for the élite of an Eastern European city. They keep one another's secrets, even the truth about a brutal crime. When a young journalist learns too much, he has to flee the country.

From a refugee camp, he is admitted to Canada, where he struggles to start a new life, without family, money, or language.

A gripping murder mystery, this is also a deeply preceptive tale of power and wealth, of fidelity and infidelity.



Cover drawings by Ferenc MARTYN [front: 'Kávéházban'; back: detail from 'Párizsi látkép']

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