

Prelude

I saw the great man weep but once.

Never in all the time he'd poured out the billowing, black smoke of his momentous life had he truly cried. The odd moist eye and halting catch in the voice, maybe, but never streaming, silent tears. In the stillness of his private places Reuben could, I know, be overwhelmed, but in all the retelling the performer in him held his grief in check.

At least, until the full force of what was in the package hit him.

It had already been delivered to the Ambassador Hotel when the quartet arrived in Vienna to give a Schubert recital in the spring of 1968. The box was wrapped in nondescript brown paper and tied neurotically with far too much string. A note was taped to the top, his name inscribed on its envelope in a faux-Gothic script. Intrigued and impatient, he ripped it open and read the letter, scanning its formal German before translating aloud for my benefit.

Dear Maestro Mendel,

I cannot tell you my full name as the shame is a cancer eating me from within.

Like my mother before me, I am a keen amateur musician and have followed your career with much admiration.

My father died six months ago. While clearing his house, I came upon the enclosed hidden beneath some blankets in the attic. When I opened it and saw your name, I could scarcely believe my eyes.

'Vati' never spoke of the war, save to say he fought with the Wehrmacht in various places too traumatic to recall. But I see now that this must have been a lie, for there is only one way in which he could have taken possession of your property.

I do not beg forgiveness on behalf of the German people, Honoured Sir, but do pray that my children may not be tainted by any guilt. Telling them what their grandfather did was the hardest thing I have ever done. But secrets are corrosive, particularly when it is wrong to keep them. We must face this poisonous inheritance as a family or be destroyed.

Not for one second does this parcel make reparation, but some part of me draws comfort that at last you will be reunited with what was taken from you.

I hope I have done the right thing.

Yours with the utmost respect and with apologies for writing in German rather than your mother tongue,

Gretchen S, Frau, Munich

Reuben's mood darkened. I sensed that in some deep, dank corner of his being lurked an inkling of what might possibly lie, still boxed, before him. He seemed reluctant, torn between the need to liberate whatever it was and fear of the memories it might ignite.

"Would you like me to do it?"

"No. Thank you, but this I should do myself. In the suite, I think, not the lobby."

As we walked to the lift he seemed distracted, and I knew better than to talk when he was in reflective mood.

Soon enough we reached his room, and immediately after the porter had been tipped and left, he set about the string. He rushed to remove the old newspaper and straw that filled half the box, not caring about the mess he was making. Parting the last of the packing materials, he saw at last what they swaddled. And froze.

"No, no, NO! Not now, not after all this time, it cannot be!"

Slowly he reached into the box and withdrew its prize, tentatively as though it were a Ming vase of the utmost fragility.

"My violin! My violin! My violin!" he repeated over and over, cradling the case in his arms like a baby. Beneath his closed lids, the eyeballs were flicking to and fro as the recollection of the last time he'd held it came roaring back.

"I never thought to see this again. Nearly twenty-five years ago! All that happened, all that time." His voice was firm, but bitter salt was now streaming down his cheeks.

He gently stroked the case before placing it on the floor and gingerly opening the clasps. There the violin lay, burnished golden-brown hue exactly as it had been the final time he'd played it, just before they had embarked on the train.

He didn't take it out, nor even draw his fingers across the slack strings.

"This was the fiddle I told you about. The one I stowed beneath my coat when we reached the camp."

The violin that kept him alive.