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the white king

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- Daily Mail

GYÖRGY DRAGOMÁN

About the Book

Eleven-year-old Djata makes sure he is always home on Sundays. It is the day the State Security came to take his father away, and he believes it will be a Sunday when his father finally comes home.

In the meantime, Djata lives out a life of adventure, playing war games in flaming wheatfields and watching porn in the back room at the cinema. But lurking beneath his rebel boyhood, pulling at his heartstrings, is the continued absence of his father. When he finally uncovers the truth, he risks losing his childhood forever.

An urgent, humorous and melancholy portrait of a childhood behind the Iron Curtain, *The White King* introduces a stunning new voice in contemporary fiction.

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The White King

György Dragomán

Translated from the Hungarian
by Paul Olchváry

For Mother

Tulips

THE NIGHT BEFORE, I stuck the alarm clock under my pillow so only I would hear it ring and Mother wouldn't wake up, but as it turned out I was awake even before it went off, that's how wound up I was for the surprise. After taking my nickel-plated Chinese flashlight off the table, I pulled the clock from under the pillow and lit it up: it was quarter to five. I pressed the button so it wouldn't go off, and then I took the clothes I put on the back of my chair at night and dressed in a hurry, careful not to make a sound. While pulling on my pants I accidentally kicked the chair, which luckily didn't topple over but only thumped against the table beside it. Carefully I opened the door to my room, but I knew it wouldn't creak, because the day before I'd rubbed the hinges with grease. I went over to the cupboard and slowly pulled out the middle drawer and removed the big tailors' shears Mother always used to cut my hair with, and then I opened the lock on our apartment door and slipped out, quiet as could be, not even hurrying until I reached the first turn in the stairwell, where I broke into a run. By the time I reached the bottom of the stairs and stepped outside our apartment block, I was warm all over, and that's how I went towards the little park, whose flower bed, next to the iron spout where people went for spring water, had the most beautiful tulips in town.

By then we'd been without Father for more than half a year, though he was supposed to have gone away for only a week, to a research station by the sea, on some urgent

business, and when he said goodbye to me he said how sorry he was that he couldn’t take me with him, because at that time of year, in late autumn, the sea is a truly unforgettable sight, a lot fiercer than in summer, stirring up huge yellow waves and white foam as far as the eye can see; but no matter, he said, and he promised that once he got home he’d take me, too, so I could have a look for myself. He just couldn’t understand how it could be that I was already past ten years old and still had never seen the sea, but that’s OK, he said, we’d make up for that along with everything else we’d make up for, no sense rushing things, there would be plenty of time and more for everything, because we had a whole life ahead of us. This was one of Father’s favourite sayings, and although I never did quite get it, when he didn’t come home, after all, I thought about it a lot, and that farewell came to my mind a lot, too, how it was when I saw Father for the last time, when his colleagues came to get him with a grey van. I’d just come home from school when they were about to head off. If our last class of the day, earth science, hadn’t been cancelled I wouldn’t even have met them. They were just getting into the van when I got there. They were in a real hurry and Father’s colleagues didn’t even want to let him talk to me, but then Father told them not to do this – they had kids, too, he said, they knew what this was like, five minutes really won’t make a bit of difference – and then one of his colleagues, a tall, silver-haired man in a grey suit, shrugged and said he didn’t mind, five minutes really wouldn’t make a bit of difference here. So Father then came over and stopped right in front of me, but he gave me neither a pat nor a hug, no, he just kept clutching his sports jacket all the while in front of him with both hands, and that’s when he told me about how he was needed urgently in the research institute, he’d be there for a week, and if it turned out the situation was really serious, then he’d be there a little while longer, until he’d put things

right, and then he got to talking about the sea, but suddenly that tall, silver-haired colleague of his came over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. Come on, doc, he said, the five minutes is up, now it's really time to go, or else we'll miss the plane, and Father then bent down and kissed my forehead, but he didn't hug me, he just told me to take good care of Mum and to be a good boy, because now I would be the man of the house, time to raise that chin up high; and I said, OK, I'd be good, and he should take care of himself, and then his colleague looked at me and said, dontcha worry, little guy, we'll take care of the doctor all right, and he gave a wink, and then he opened the side door of the van for Father and helped him get in. Meanwhile, the chauffeur started the engine, and no sooner did the door slam shut on my father than the car headed off, and I picked up my school knapsack and turned round and went towards the stairwell, because I'd got a new forward – one more button for my miniature soccer team where all the players were buttons – and I wanted to test it out on the oilcloth, to see if it slid as well on that as on the cardboard. So, anyway, I didn't stay there and I didn't even wave, and I didn't keep watching that van, and I didn't wait for it to disappear at the end of the road. I remember Father's face clearly, he was scruffy, he smelt of cigarette smoke, and he seemed really, really tired – even his smile was a bit crooked. Anyway, I thought about this a lot later on, but I don't think he suspected beforehand that he wouldn't be able to come home.

A week later we got just one letter from him, and in it he wrote that the situation was much more serious than they'd figured. He couldn't give details, seeing as how this was top secret, but he'd have to stay on there for a while yet, and if everything went well maybe he'd get one or two days' leave in a couple of weeks, but for the time being he was needed there every moment. After that he sent a few other letters, too, every three or four weeks, and in every

one he wrote that he'd come home soon. But then he couldn't come home for Christmas, either, and we waited and waited for him even on New Year's Eve, and before we knew it April had come, and no more letters were coming, either. Which is when I got to thinking that Father had in fact fled abroad, the same as the father of one of my classmates, Egon, who swam across the Danube and went to Yugoslavia and from there to the West, but they hadn't heard a thing from him since then, they didn't even know if he was alive at all.

Anyway, that morning on my way to the park I slunk along behind the apartment blocks, because I didn't want to meet up with anyone; no, I didn't want anyone at all asking where I was off to so early. Luckily no one was at the water spout, so I was able to climb over the chain and right into the flower bed where the tulips were. I took out the shears and started cutting the flowers, snipping their stems close to the ground, because my grandmother once told me that the lower down you cut tulip stems, the longer the flowers will last, and that it's best if you just cut the whole thing, leaves and all. At first I only wanted to cut twenty-five stems, but then somewhere around fifteen I lost count, so I just kept cutting one after another. Meanwhile my jacket was getting all covered with dew, and my pants, too, but I didn't bother about that. No, instead I thought of Father, of how he too must have done it something like this every year, he too must have cut the tulips like this every spring. Mother told the story lots of times of how he gave her tulips when he proposed, and that he courted her with bouquets of tulips, and that he gave her tulips every year on their anniversary: every April 17 he surprised her with a huge bouquet; yes, by the time she woke up, the flowers were there waiting for her on the kitchen table. I knew that this anniversary was going to be their fifteenth, and I wanted Mother to get a bouquet bigger than any she'd ever got before.

I cut so many tulips that it was all I could do to hold them right, and since the bouquet slid apart in my hands when I tried hugging it tight I laid it down on the ground beside me, shook the dew off the shears, and went on cutting one stem after another. Meantime I thought of Father, of how he must have used these very same shears, and I looked at my hands and tried imagining Father's hands, but it did no good, because all I saw were my own thin, pale hands, my fingers in the shears' worn metal ring; and then all of a sudden this old man shouted at me to get over there at once, what did I think I was doing cutting those flowers, he'd have me know he'd call the police and I'd wind up in reform school, which is where I belonged. But I looked up and luckily didn't recognize him, so I shouted right back at him to shut his trap, that stealing flowers wasn't a crime, and I pocketed the shears and gathered up the tulips with both hands. A couple of stems fell away, but by then I'd already jumped out of the flower bed, and I heard him shouting after me that I should be ashamed of myself for talking that way, but no matter, he said, he'd jotted down the ID number on my arm. I didn't even look back, though, because I knew he couldn't have, since I'd purposely come in the jacket without my school ID number sewn onto its arm, and so I ran right on home holding the flowers carefully in both hands so they wouldn't break. The flowers were smacking against each other and sometimes touching my face, the broad leaves were swishing and swooshing and flapping about, and the smell was like freshly cut grass, only much stronger.

When I got up to the fifth floor I stopped in the hallway in front of our apartment, crouched down and put the flowers carefully on the doormat, and then I stood up, slowly opened the door, stepped over the flowers and just stood there in the dark hall, and listened. Luckily Mother wasn't yet awake, so I carried the tulips straight into the kitchen and put them all on the table. Next I went into the

pantry, got the biggest empty pickle jar out from under the shelf and took it over to the tap, where I wiped it clean with water and set it down on the middle of the kitchen table. Then I went right to work stuffing the tulips into it, but there were so many of them that they didn't all fit in the jar. About ten stems just didn't fit, so I put those in the sink, and then I went back to the kitchen table and tried my best to set the bouquet right, but it didn't work too well, what with all those leaves the tulips were really tangled up, some stems being too short and others too long, and I knew I'd have to cut the stems the same length if I wanted the bouquet to look decent. But then I thought that if I got the big washtub from the pantry all the flowers would fit in that, and maybe I wouldn't even have to cut their stems, so I went back to the pantry door, opened it, bent down, and pulled the tub out from under the shelf, which is when I heard the kitchen door open and Mother's voice. Who's there, she said, is there someone in here? She didn't see me yet – I was behind the pantry door – but through the crack in the door I could see her standing there in her long white nightgown. She was barefoot and her face turned pale on noticing the tulips, and she leaned with one arm against the doorjamb and her mouth opened. I thought she was about to smile, but instead her face looked more like she wanted to cry out or shout, as if she was really angry or something was really hurting her. She bared her teeth all the way and she scrunched up her eyes, and I heard her taking really deep breaths, and then her eyes began scanning the kitchen, and when she noticed the open pantry door her hand came off the doorjamb and swept the hair away from her face. She let out a big sigh and asked, Son, is it you, dear? But I didn't say a thing just yet, no, I first came out from behind the pantry door and stopped beside the table, and only then did I say that I wanted it to be a surprise, and I begged her not to be angry, I didn't want to do anything bad, I said, I did it only because Father

asked me to be the man of the house while he was away. Mother was straining to smile, but from her eyes it was obvious that she was still really sad, and now she said in a deep, raspy voice that she wasn't angry; no, she wasn't angry, she repeated, thank you very much, dear, and as she said that she stepped over and gave me a hug – not her usual sort of hug but a whole lot tighter. She held me really tight, the way she did when I was sick one time, and I hugged her back and held her tight, too, and through my clothes and through her nightgown I could feel her heart beating, and I thought of the tulips, of how I'd knelt there in the earth in the park, cutting one tulip after another, and I felt Mother hug me even tighter, and I hugged her even tighter, too, and my nose was still full of the tulips' smell, that thick green smell. Then I felt Mother shudder, and I knew she was about to cry and, I knew, I would start crying, too, and I didn't want to cry, but I couldn't let her go, I could only hold her tight. I wanted to tell her not to be so sad, everything's OK, but I couldn't say a thing, I couldn't open my mouth at all, and at that very moment someone pressed the buzzer on our apartment door; they sure did press it hard, because the buzzer buzzed really loud and long, once, twice, three times, and I could feel Mother letting me go. Her whole body seemed to turn cold all of a sudden, and then I also let her go and I told her to wait there, I'd go and see who it was.

On my way to the door I thought it had to be the police: that old man in the park had recognized me after all, he'd reported me and now the police were here, they'd come to get me and take me away for vandalizing public property and cutting tulips, and I thought that maybe I'd better not open the door after all, but the buzzer just kept buzzing, really loud, and by now there was knocking, too. And so I reached out a hand all the same, turned the lock and opened the door.

It wasn’t the police standing there in front of me but Father’s colleagues – the ones I saw him leave with on that day a while back – and I was so surprised I couldn’t get a word out, which is when the tall silver-haired man looked at me and asked if my mother was home. I nodded, thinking Father must have sent a gift with them for his and Mother’s wedding anniversary, and I was just about to tell them to come on in – I wanted to say, my mother will be really glad to see you – but before I could get a word out the silver-haired man snapped at me. Didn’t I hear him, he’d asked me something, and I said, yes, she was home, and then the other man, the shorter one, snarled at me too. Well then, he said, they’d just come on in, and he pushed me away from the doorway and both of them did come right in. They stopped in the hall and then the shorter one asked which room was my mother’s, and I said, Mother is in the kitchen, but by now I was leading the way, and I called out to Mother that Father’s colleagues were here, that they must have brought a letter from him, or maybe he’d sent some gift. Right then Mother was drinking water from the long-eared mug we usually used to fill the coffeemaker, but her hand stopped in mid-motion; she looked at me but her eyes then fixed on Father’s colleagues, and I saw her turn pale behind the mug, which she then lowered, and, I saw, her mouth turned to stone, like it did whenever she got really angry. And then, in a really loud voice, she asked Father’s colleagues what they were doing here, and she slammed the mug on the counter so hard that all the water inside splashed right out, and she said to them, Get out of here, but by then both of them had followed me into the kitchen. The tall silver-haired man didn’t even say hello; instead he said to Mother, What is this, you haven’t even told the kid, and then my mother shook her head and said that it was none of their business, but the tall, silver-haired man said, well, that was a mistake, because I’d find out sooner or later anyway. Best to get this sort of thing over with from

the start, he said, because lies breed only lies. Mother gave a laugh and said, Yes, of course, you two gentlemen are the guardian angels of truth, and the shorter one told Mother to shut her trap, and Mother really did turn all quiet. Then the silver-haired man stepped in front of me and asked, Hey, son, do you still believe that we're your father's colleagues? I didn't say a thing, but I felt my body turn cold, like in gym class after a timed run, when you have to lean forward because there's no other way to catch your breath. The silver-haired man then said, I'll have you know that we're not your father's colleagues, we're from the state security service, and your father's been arrested for conspiring against the state, so it'll be a while before you see him again – a good long while at that, because your father is shovelling away clear across the country at the Danube Canal, which they're digging to shorten the winding Danube. Do you know what that means, he asked. It means he's in a labour camp, and as scrawny as he is, he won't be able to take it for long. He'll never come back from there ever again, maybe he's not even alive any more, who knows. And as he said this Mother took up the mug from the counter and flung it on the floor so hard that it broke to pieces. The officer then got all quiet, and for a moment you couldn't hear a thing, but Mother then said, Enough of this, stop it right now, if you want to take me, too, then take me, but leave him alone. He's a child, understand, leave him alone, and tell me what you want, tell me what you're doing here.

The shorter man said they'd just been passing by, and since they were here, anyway, they figured they'd look around a bit, maybe find something interesting in the doctor's room.

Mother asked if they had a search warrant, and the tall, silver-haired man smiled at her and said they didn't need a warrant for every little detail; there was nothing wrong

with them looking around a bit, he said, and besides, he didn't think we had anything to hide.

Mother now said really loud that they had no right to do this. Get out of here, go, she said; if they didn't leave right this instant, why then she'd go to the city hall and stage a sit-down strike. Yes, she'd publicly demand her husband's release – what is this, keeping him locked up for half a year already without a trial and without a sentence? Be this country what it may, she said, all the same we had a constitution, we had laws, searches still required a warrant, so they'd better show one or get out of here, now.

The silver-haired man then smiled at Mother and said that this scrappiness really looked good on her, and no doubt my father down there on the Danube Canal must really miss her, for she was truly a beautiful woman … Too bad they'd never meet again.

Mother's face turned all red and her whole body tensed up – I thought she'd go right on over there and slap that silver-haired officer, I couldn't remember seeing her that angry ever before – and then she really did move, but not towards the officer. Instead she went straight to the apartment door, opened it, and said, Enough is enough, *out*, get out of this building at once, because if you don't, I'll call my father-in-law. They knew full well that he was a party secretary, she said, and although he'd been sent into retirement he still had enough friends in high places to arrange, on account of what they'd done here, to have the two of them transferred to the traffic division, so if they knew what was best for them they'd better get out right this instant. Mother said this so firmly I almost believed it, even though I knew full well she would never call my grandfather's home of her own free will, because ever since my grandmother said to her face that she was a screwed-up Jewish slut, yes, ever since then Mother wouldn't give her or my grandfather the time of day. But from the way she spoke now, you couldn't tell that at all.

The shorter officer now said that if she thought the old man had any clout left, especially now his son had been taken away, well, she was quite mistaken. My grandfather could thank his lucky stars he himself hadn't been interned, but if my mother wanted to pick up the phone and complain, why then, she could go right ahead. He stepped over to the counter, took the silverware drawer by the handle and yanked it right out, with such force that although the drawer itself stayed in his hand, the knives, forks, tablespoons and teaspoons flew all over the kitchen, and the officer then slammed that empty drawer back down onto the counter, so hard that its back edge tore right off; and he said, There you are, now you'll have something to complain about, but this is just the beginning, that's right, just the beginning. He bared his teeth, and I knew he was about to knock over the table, but then the silver-haired man put a hand on his shoulder and said, Take it easy, Gyurka my boy, take it easy, let it be. It seems we misjudged the lady, we thought this was a missus with brains, we did, we thought she knew when and with whom she has to be polite, but it seems she doesn't have the sense to recognize her well-wishers, it seems she's dead-set on getting herself all mixed up in trouble, too. Fine, then, let it be, just like she wants.

The officer called Gyurka now flung the broken drawer to the floor, where the silverware was all scattered about, and he said, Fine, then, Comrade Major, let's do as you wish. Let's go. He now looked at Mother and nodded, and then he turned and looked me square in the eye and said, fine then, they'd leave, but only because he saw that we liked flowers, and anyone who liked flowers couldn't be bad. As he said that he stepped over to the table, and I thought for sure that he was about to fling that pickle jar to the floor, but all he did was pluck out a single tulip. He held that flower to his nose, gave it a sniff, and announced that the only problem with tulips was that they had no smell,

otherwise they were really lovely flowers, and then he left the kitchen. Let’s go, Comrade Major, he said, to which the silver-haired man didn’t say a thing but only waved his hand for him to go, and the officer called Gyurka began heading out, and on reaching Mother he held that tulip out towards her and Mother took it from him without a word. The officer called Gyurka said, A flower for a flower, and he turned towards me again and looked me square in the eye and gave a wink, and he went out the door and right down the stairs.

The major then also stepped out into the hall, and Mother was just about to slam the door on him, when he suddenly stepped back over the threshold, put his foot in front of the door so Mother couldn’t shut it, and said, nice and calm, You’ll come to regret this, lady, because when we return we’ll yank the floor right up, we’ll gouge the putty right out of the window frames, we’ll look under the bathtub, too, and into the gas pipes. We’ll take apart the whole place bit by bit, and you can be sure we’ll find what we’re looking for, you can be sure of that, he said, before falling silent, turning round and heading down the stairs.

Mother slammed the door, but before it closed all the way I heard the major say, See you around, and then Mother turned and sank against the door. She just stood with that red tulip in her hand, looking at the pieces of the broken mug, the silverware thrown all about, the drawer broken in two, and her mouth winced before slowly hardening. She now squeezed her lips tight and looked at me and said, quiet as could be, Go and get the dustpan and the broom, let’s pick up the pieces of the mug. And I looked at the tulips on the table in that pickle jar and I wanted to say to her, It wasn’t true what those officers said about Father, was it? He’d come home, wouldn’t he? But then I turned towards Mother and saw that she was sniffing at that single tulip, and her eyes were glistening so much that

I knew she could hardly hold back her tears, so instead I asked her not a thing.

Jump

SZABI AND I figured out pretty fast that chalk doesn't give you a fever at all, that it's just a legend, because we each ate one and a half pieces of chalk and nothing happened to us. We even tried the coloured chalk – Szabi ate a green one and I ate a red one – but it did us no good waiting under the bridge by the school for an hour and a half, nothing happened to us except we peed in colour. My pee was on the reddish side and Szabi's was greenish. As for the thermometer trick, we didn't dare try that, either, Mother caught me red-handed the other day sticking the end of the thermometer to the cast-iron radiator, and two weeks earlier, before our maths exam, Szabi had even worse luck: he held a thermometer up against the bulb of his little lamp and the mercury got so hot in no time that it exploded right out of the end of the thermometer, and his father gave him a whipping with the buckle end of a belt. So the thermometer trick was out of the question, but we had to come up with something all the same.

If we didn't manage to fall ill by the next day, we knew, that would be the end of us. The other kids at school would knock our brains out, because that's when they would find out that we'd accidentally let those slot machines wolf down all our class money – the money we were supposed to use to buy materials for a flag and for the placards we had to make to carry along with us in the May Day parade. Yes, it would turn out we'd spent all of that money on those machines in the cellar game room off the side of the Puppet

Theatre building, because Feri lied that every third player wins on those new automatic machines. That's why they're automatic, after all, he said, and the first time we tried, we really did win, we won a ten, but from there on in we only lost, and in the end we just wanted to win back the money. We broke the third hundred banknote only so we could win back what we'd lost. It almost worked, too, but then we couldn't get the proper rhythm; right when we pressed the button the flash turned from EXTRA SUPER BONUS to nothing, and so we lost all the money. And then it didn't do any good telling the cashier it wasn't our money, so he should give it back. He just laughed and said, That's a game of chance for you. If we went on shooting off our traps, then he'd see to shutting them up for us, and if we didn't want to play any more, we should get the hell out of there, because we were only taking space away from paying customers.

Anyway, when we got out to the Street of the Martyrs of the Revolution, Szabi and I looked at each other, and both of us knew we were in for it. Szabi said it would be best if we went out to the station and stowed away on a freight train and rode it to coal country and became miners, because kids could work there, too, so he'd heard. You didn't get asked a thing when you went to sign up for work, because the coal mines always need workers. I said he could go if he wanted but I was staying put, because I wasn't in the mood to die of silicosis. Let's get sick instead, because if we go about it properly then we could get out from under the May Day mess altogether. Szabi said, All right, and that eating chalk gives you a fever, and so we tried it right away, but it wasn't worth shit, and even pissing that reddish pee did me no good – it didn't look bloody at all, and even its smell was all wrong – so we knew we had to think up something else. Then Szabi said it would be best if we went to the water spout and tried to drink as much as we could stand, because if we gulped down that ice-cold spring water fast enough we'd be

guaranteed a decent case of pneumonia, and that would mean at least three weeks in the hospital, not to mention that everyone would feel sorry for us, so the money would be the last thing on their minds, that was for sure.

There was hardly anyone at the spout; only four people were standing there, and while they filled up their jugs one after another Szabi and I climbed up the pedestal of the statue that was missing, on account of it being stolen, and we took turns pretending we were the Torchbearer of the Revolution. The main thing was to stretch out your right arm in front of you as far as possible, like you were really holding a torch, and you weren't supposed to move at all, while the other one of us was allowed to throw only one tiny piece of gravel at a time at the one playing the statue, but not at the face, and the statue who could take it longer would win. I happened to be up there being the statue when the last person in the queue filled up her jug, and Szabi then scraped up a whole handful of gravel and flung it all at me, and he said, Let's get going, we still have to catch a little pneumonia, and I replied, OK, but that he should go first, seeing as how it was his idea and because he cheated at playing statue, and he said he knew I was chicken, all right, but he'd show me how to go about it.

The water flowed out of a thick, horizontal iron pipe from the wall under a memorial plaque to Yanku Dzhanu, the famous outlaw, protector of the poor, who relieved his thirst at this very spot when fleeing from the posse that was out to hang him. The plaque also said that this was medicinal water, and that pregnant women and nursing mothers were not allowed to drink it, so when Szabi bent over towards the pipe to begin drinking, I said, Stop, slow down! Haven't you read on the plaque that pregnant women aren't allowed to drink this water? But now Szabi didn't laugh at all, though other times he always had; he even told me not to kid around, because this was dead serious business. First you had to stick your mouth on the

spout to keep the water from flowing out at all, and then you had to start counting until you reached at least one hundred, and when the pressure was so great that you could hardly stand it, you had to suddenly open your mouth, which was when the ice-cold water would shoot down your throat and your gullet really fast. It would fill your gut all at once, and your insides would cool down so much that pneumonia was as good as in the bag, and if you did it right you'd faint straight away, but the other one of us shouldn't go slapping you but only splash cold water in your face, because then you'd come to on your own right away. And I said, OK, but don't talk so much, get going now: we should take advantage of no one coming by for water at the moment, because if anyone saw us, they sure as hell wouldn't be happy about us trying to block off the spout with our mouths.

Szabi said I was right, and that he'd begin immediately, and he crouched right down in front of the spout and pressed his mouth against its end so not a drop of water could flow out. I started counting out loud, so he could hear it too and would know how long to keep the pressure up. Szabi's cheeks turned red nice and slowly, at first only as if he was blushing from all the kidding around, but then his face got redder and redder. I hadn't even reached fifty before his face was beetroot red, then it started slowly turning blue. He shut his eyes and I saw that he was now holding the spout with both hands and his face was completely blue, and I was only at eighty-five when all of a sudden he let go of the pipe, and the water came gushing out so hard that Szabi reeled back. His clothes had got sopping wet but he was still trying to drink all the same; his mouth was wide open and he was gulping down the water, but all that pressure must have sent some of the water up his nose, because when he wiped his face with the sleeve of his school shirt he said this wasn't worth shit, this was a load of crap, because he didn't feel anything at all in his

lungs, which should have been hurting by then. So this method wouldn't do the trick, he said, but if I wanted I should go ahead and give it a try, maybe it would work for me, but I shouldn't let the pressure build up so much in the pipe: it would be enough if I just pinched my nose shut and drank as much water as I could stand.

OK, I said, and crouched right down in front of the spout, pinched my nose shut and used the palm of my other hand to direct the rush of water into my mouth. I began swallowing the water, which was pretty cold all right, but the less air I had the warmer the water seemed to get, and by the time I stopped it seemed burning hot, that's how little air I had left in me. I too nearly fell back, but Szabi caught me and helped me stand up, and we went over to one of the few benches that still had a back and a seat left on it, and we sat down. I was dizzy and my head was buzzing a little, too. Szabi said he felt awful, but he thought this was only because of the water, because we drank so much of it so suddenly, but that this water wasn't cold enough to cause pneumonia, after all, at most we'd just get diarrhoea, and that wasn't worth shit. And, sure enough, my belly then began hurting and I had to press my palm against it, but when I hunched forward the pain slowly went away, and then I said to Szabi that this pneumonia trick was a bunch of bull, nothing would come of it, and if we wanted to get out from under what we had coming to us we'd have to think up something else, something that was sure to pan out.

Szabi said I was right, it would be best if we went and broke our legs, and I told him he was completely bonkers, you couldn't fake a broken leg, and he said you sure couldn't, but we weren't out to fake pneumonia either and if we really wanted to get out of this mess about the money, then faking it wouldn't get us anywhere – not even the chalk was worth shit: instead we should go up to where the woods began, to that abandoned building site where they'd

not only dug a ditch to put pipes in but had already laid a thick concrete pipe, and if we jumped on that pipe our ankles would break for sure, and it’s at least a week until you can walk even with a cast. But I said it was too dangerous to risk breaking your leg, it could lead to serious trouble, at which Szabi started laughing and said I was chicken, his leg had got broken twice already and one time his head was broken, and he’d have me know that it wasn’t even so bad. The only thing that’s not so good is when they set the cast, he said. It’s so hot when they do that it’s like you’re on fire, but afterwards there are advantages, like how great it feels to scratch yourself with a needle under the cast, and you can get out of all sorts of things: if it rains you don’t have to go to school, and you can avoid running in gym class for six months because it’s bad to strain your leg. If I didn’t do it he’d tell everyone what a chicken I was, that I was afraid of breaking my leg. At this I said, Listen here, I’m no chicken, and then Szabi said, All right, we’ll talk it over after jumping, and we headed off towards the building site.

We couldn’t go very fast, our bellies were still so full of water; mine gurgled with every step I took, and one time we stopped because Szabi had to take a piss, and another time because my belly was so upset I almost puked, but finally we reached the building site. Szabi knew where we could get across the tall wooden fence, because he’d been there once before to get some PVC pipes for blowguns and carbide for fireworks, so he told me not to be scared, no one had lived in the guard booth for a long time, and, sure enough, finding that ditch with the pipe in it wasn’t hard, because the earth was thrown up high on one side. Szabi went first and we climbed all the way up to the top of the embankment, from where we looked down into the ditch, which already contained separate sections of thick concrete pipe that hadn’t been cemented together yet.

Szabi said he truly regretted how we had left our school comrades in the lurch like this: yes, he was really sorry that on account of us the others wouldn’t be able to take part in the placard competition, especially because the class that made the nicest placard would win a two-week seaside trip. I said I was sorry, too, because I would have also really liked to get to the sea, but then I looked again at the sections of concrete pipe and it occurred to me that nothing would ever flow through them, neither water nor sewage, because this new complex of apartment blocks would never be built, and I told Szabi he shouldn’t worry himself about it, we wouldn’t have won the competition, anyway. Some class from School No. 3 would win it for sure, because School No. 3 wins everything, since that’s where the children of party activists go, and as for our own class, there was no reason to be sad, because it just couldn’t happen that the class wouldn’t take part in the placard competition or in the parade if it’s been told to do so. Our head teacher would no doubt get enough material from somewhere, I said, and they’d make a placard after all, because he didn’t want to get in trouble either. Szabi asked if I was sure about that, and I said, You bet I’m sure, and let’s jump already, because if we stand around here too long we’ll get cold feet.

Szabi said, OK, let’s count out loud and jump on three, and then we both peered down into the ditch one more time, and it looked pretty deep. From where we stood it must have been at least ten feet for sure. We both started counting at the same time, but Szabi stopped at two and said, Let’s shut our eyes and start again, and so we shut our eyes and started again, and then it suddenly occurred to me that if we both jumped and really broke our legs, then we wouldn’t be able to climb out of the ditch, I wanted to tell Szabi to wait, but by the time I said it he had already jumped, and I opened my eyes just in time to see that he’d jumped so far forward that he’d almost cleared the ditch,

but his jump still wasn’t long enough, no, his shoulder struck the opposite wall and he fell straight into the ditch and on to a section of pipe.

Szabi let out a piercing cry and reached both hands towards one of his ankles. He was lying there on his side beside the concrete pipe, and he kept on holding his foot, and he was screaming my name really loud, he was wailing and crying. I called down to him to wait, because I’d climb down there right away, and he looked up, his face full of tears, and he told me to fuck off and that I was a chicken-shit for letting him jump alone. But then I told him to shut his trap, because I’d seen full well that he had wanted to clear the ditch and hadn’t intended to jump in at all, and if I didn’t have more brains than he had there wouldn’t be anyone left to go and get an ambulance. Szabi just kept swearing and saying again and again that his foot hurt like hell, and I called down to him again, saying he deserved it for wanting to play me for a sucker, and to wait right where he was, because I’d go and get an ambulance even though he didn’t really deserve it. Even as I started running back towards the apartment blocks, I knew what I would say the next day in school: that the reason we didn’t have the money was that I had to give half of it to the ambulance crew, so they would take poor Szabi to the hospital, and the other half to the doctors, so they wouldn’t set his fracture without anaesthetics.