



Hungarian Dances



Jessica Duchon

Hungarian
Dances

Jessica Duchon

H

HODDER &
STOUGHTON

I

Air. Movement. Freedom.

Wood, four strings, the scroll. Beyond them, the fireplace and its rose-patterned tiles. When she closes her eyes she glimpses clouds on the horizon, the earth flat and cracked; peaked thatch passing, dust, grass and faraway mirages, the beckoning shadows of the forest, the minstrel. Her bow is his in an unbroken loop through the centuries. Horsehair, gut and metal, vibration. Her fingertips find the pitches of his storytelling; a slide, a flicker of pizzicato, the quietest harmonic she can manage. The minstrel whispers, through Marc Duplessis's music: who are you?

Wheels. Not his, wooden and creaking under a painted wagon. Smoothness. Familiarity. Routine. A twizzle of keys, footsteps in the hall, and Karina is back in her front room, holding her violin; her husband is striding towards her with his arms open, her son is bounding down the stairs and she knows where she is again, even if she isn't quite sure what she's doing there, in her own home.

'Karrie, darling.' Julian's wingspan curls round her. 'How's my little Gypsy? Playing with your toys?'

Karina kisses him and says nothing.

'Karina, are you free this morning? Your grandmother is having a bad day. We need you.'

Karina, clutching the phone, glances at Julian's mahogany clock in the entrance hall. Jamie's at school, and she doesn't begin teaching until four. 'I'll get the next train,' she promises her mother. She brushes her hair and sets off for Lewes station, quick and light on her feet, enjoying the scents of spring leaves and salt blown inland from the sea.

In Twickenham an hour and a half later, Karina finds her grandmother, Mimi, rambling from her armchair in furious Hungarian. Karina's mother, Erzsébet, holds Mimi's hand and tries to soothe her: 'It's all right, Mimi. It's all finished. I promise. Look who's come to visit.' Sometimes only Karina, Mimi's sole grandchild, true-hearted and comforting as a cup of cocoa, can bring Mimi back to herself.

Karina bends to hug her; Mimi's face transforms from scowl to beatific delight. She strokes back Karina's hair with hands distended by arthritis. These fingers used to coax magic out of a violin; the sight of them now causes Karina nearly physical pain. Mimi asks a long question in Hungarian; slipping into her old language on bad days, she forgets that Karina speaks not a word of it and has never set a toe in Hungary. 'Hush, Grandma,' Karina whispers. 'Everything's going to be fine.'

'It is Dénes's fault,' Mimi says.

Erzsébet, exhaling hard, glides away to the kitchenette to make tea. 'Is Dad teaching?' Karina asks her.

'At the Academy,' Erzsébet says. 'It's just as well.' Karina's father, Dénes, is a cello teacher, much in demand. Sometimes, watching Mimi rant, Karina wonders why a woman of ninety-one should turn on her only child like this. The stroke, perha'ps; though the doctor insists not. Dementia, Erzsébet suggests, but Karina doesn't believe this either. Perhaps it's sheer frustration that her body will no longer do her bidding.

'Shall I play to you, Grandma?' she says.

<

Mimi, with her distorted hands, has scarcely been able to play her violin for twenty years. She falls silent, her eyes caressing the instrument while Karina tunes the strings, then begins the Marc Duplessis Suite *Dans l'ombre des forêts*. Duplessis wrote the piece for Mimi in the mid-1930s. Five movements: 'The Minstrel'; 'The Fireside'; 'The Forest'; 'The Storm'; 'The Wedding'. Inspired by Mimi's Gypsy childhood - at least, as Duplessis, an ambitious young composer fresh from the Parisian bourgeoisie, had imagined it. Mimi listens, eyes closed. Tears glint on her lashes.

Until a year ago, Mimi had lived in a West End mansion block with solid walls and high ceilings that she said reminded her of

Budapest. She'd stopped giving concerts when the arthritis grew too bad, but never ceased working, inundated with requests for teaching, competition adjudication, master-classes. Her body aged faster than her mind. A knee; a hip; bladder trouble; then the stroke. Dénes had finally coerced her into moving to a sheltered housing complex with warden, helpline and community lounge, close to the Thames and her family. Her window opens on to the communal garden, and from front door to bathroom the flat has been adapted with specially designed railings and handles. 'Wasn't this a good idea of mine?' she declared, while the family unpacked for her.

'I worry about her losing her independence,' Karina told Julian.

'She's a survivor,' Julian said. 'If you have a hard life early on, you can take pretty much anything later. Not like us spoiled old softies.' Still, every time they meet, Karina senses that a sliver less of her indomitable grandmother exists. It's as if her image is fading away, pixel by pixel.

Mimi is still when the piece draws to its end. Karina glances at the photo on the bookshelf. Mimi in Paris, aged twenty-one; beside her is the composer - her composer - Marc Duplessis. Backstage at the Théâtre du Châtelet, after they'd given the Suite's first performance together, Marc in white tie and tails, Mimi wearing silk. That was 1936. Mimi's black eyes shine out, elongated, opaque. Karina has inherited Erzsébet's elfin face and small, pointed chin. But her eyes are Mimi's and her hair, too, is jet black: straight, simple and very long.

'We must let her have a proper sleep now,' Erzsébet whispers. 'It was good of you to come, Schnooky. Sometimes I despair, I don't know what more to do for her.'

'Sleep.' Mimi's hearing is as fine as a twenty-year-old's. 'I can't sleep. Rest, yes. But I do not need so much sleep, my dears. When I sleep, I dream.'

Karina kisses her goodbye. 'I'm coming to see Lindy on Monday,' she says. 'I'll stop in on the way.'

'Little blonde Lindy Rookfield.' Mimi smiles.

'She's neither blonde nor very little now. She runs a bookshop and dyes her hair.'

'Ach, Karina.' Mimi kisses her. 'You should play that violin, not