

THE TALE(S) OF TWO KNAVES

The Tale(s) of Two Knaves

“The Laszlo & Laszlo Chronicles”

PART I & II

(49 Short Stories Covering 110 Years of
Adventures)

Andres Laszlo Sr. (Dad/Senior)

Andres Laszlo Jr. (Me/Junior)

Chicch Kadune (The Tiger)

To Jenny Bradley, José Janéz, Ladislao Vajda, and all the others who helped my father live a pretty amazing life: one worth writing about.

To Marilyn, Tahawar, Lotta, Chicch Kadune, and all the others who helped me live a pretty amazing life: one (I hope) worth writing about.

Andres Laszlo Jr.

As Andres Laszlo Jr. adapted and translated his father's short-story-collection *Solo El Paisaje Cambia*, he soon started to think: *Why don't I come up with 20 or so short stories of my own to match The Old Man's, and produce The Tale(s) of Two Knaves, covering 100 years? My first book was different from anything written before, and that was successful...* As he could find no reason good enough not to, that is what he did.

Andres Laszlo Jr., one of your three storytellers, will be your 'main I' throughout this book. He has translated and adapted his father's stories below, and as you come to the second part of this book, you will find his own stories. In addition to this, he will speak for *Chicch Kadune*, the tiger, claiming he knows its mind.

The short stories will be arranged rather chronologically, each introduced with a biographical/autobiographical paragraph or two. This will make it hard for you not eventually to get to know Senior, *Chicch Kadune*, and Junior rather intimately.

4. MY FRIEND IN THE PHOTO

1935. From the text, it seems that Senior now has gotten proficient at what was arguably his first ‘real’ profession: theater-directing. It looks as if he went from acting to stage-managing, to directing, to playwriting (*Doña Juana* is the only surviving text from his time as a playwright; if you have the original score, or know of any other early work, please get in contact). From playwriting, he went on to writing short stories (part 1 of this collection as well as, at least in spirit, *The Seal Castle* and *The Crab’s Rhapsody*), to finally go on to writing novels which were all turned into film scripts that he either wrote or co-wrote: *Mother Unknown*, *My Uncle Jacinto*, and *Paco Never Fails*. As he had worked both as an actor and as a stage manager before this, I would say the events described below could not have taken place much earlier than 1935 (when he was 25). I believe that he managed his father’s traveling theatre society, at least for a while – perhaps he even owned it. However, here it seems as if he works as a director-for-hire; maybe it is from the time just after he somehow lost control over his father’s company (actually, Grandpa Maximilian died in 1931, so maybe my assumptions about Senior running/owning the company are incorrect). Senior sounds a bit older than 25, but as he left Hungary in 1938, aged 28, he cannot have been that much older. The time seems very short, and if what he writes “autobiographically” in *The Seal Castle* and *The Crab’s Rhapsody* is to be taken at face value, too short. Around 1937, Senior might have gone back to the scene, this time allegedly engaging in serious-enough-acting-to-‘do’-Rosencrantz-in-Budapest’s-main-theatre. This story is the first time in *The Tale of Two Knaves* that Senior speaks as ‘I,’ and I believe that this ‘I’ really is Senior himself and that the experience is real, at least in part. The vampire-related aspect of this story must have come quite naturally to Senior, who, born ‘von Keller’ must have counted all sorts of allegedly undead or at least nocturnal creatures among his ancestors. Oral tradition has it that on the von Keller side we are related to the Draculas, and as the Berlin Wall came down (I was there with Hanne from Copenhagen), I indeed got offers of title and land. My father would always work late on his writings – well into the early hours of the mornings, just like I do today – and consequently, he would arise late. When I was a child, impressionable and fascinated by vampires, I remember turning this habit of my father into theories that displeased my mother in the extreme, especially as my father did nothing whatsoever to

discourage my surmises (he might even have encouraged them). The last years that he spent in Hungary, the years that followed the events presented in this story, must have been what inspired him to write his first (published) book, *The Seal Castle*: a book which led the Spanish critics (or at least Jose Janéz) to describe him as ‘a humorist of fertile imagination and abundant resources.’ The story of ‘the castle’ that is nothing but the Turkish Baths of Budapest, is seen from the point-of-view of the protagonist: Andres Laszlo Senior, an actor sleeping in the baths as a way of surviving on his unbecomingly meager income. *The Seal Castle* is the first of Senior’s two tragicomic period pieces, and its companion/continuation, *The Crab’s Rhapsody*, is set in Paris, which would become Senior’s next stop on his unorthodox journey through life, and the place where he would learn about antiques.

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A couple of years before the outbreak of the Second World War, I was staying in Nové Zámky in Czechoslovakia, whose ‘Magyar’ provinces had formed several Hungarian-speaking theater companies at the time. Here the owner of one such recently formed company had invited me to stage Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s mystery play *Jedermann*, a production that would later be performed across much of Europe. The opening night was quickly approaching, and as I had undertaken to have the play rehearsed and ready in less than a week, time was in short supply.

It was the night after a pre-dress-rehearsal performance, and I was just finishing off a cigarette in my office when someone quietly, and somewhat indecisively, knocked at my door. Considering the apparent lack of assertiveness, it seemed strange to me when a tall and scrawny man appeared before me without waiting for an answer, wrapped in a large cape held together with a very large and strange clasp in the shape of an upside-down cross and flaunting a Lavalliere necktie. Despite his young age – he could not have been much past his mid-twenties – his eyes were deeply sunken, with large bags hanging beneath them. His shoulders were as narrow as they were hunched, and in his bony hands, whose fingers looked like an eagle’s claws, he held what looked like a manuscript.

“I could have sworn that you didn’t recognize me,” were the first words to pass his thin, bloodless lips, and he said them like a greeting. “My name is Salgó, Bandi Salgó, son of the Salgó of the Golden Mills,” he continued, theatrically exaggerating his every gesture, as if he wanted to make sure I

understood that what he was telling me was great news indeed. As he spoke, he looked pointedly at the chair in front of my desk.

I had the time to offer him a seat, he sat himself down in front of me, and if I remember correctly, I apologized for being so unprepared.

However, the man did not seem to be offended, and he went on to congratulate me on what he was certain would become a great success, repeatedly insisting that the performance had provided him with the greatest artistic pleasure he had ever experienced. He also claimed that he had come to renew the friendship between us, and it took him very little time to ‘remind’ me that his father had once worked in my father’s theater company; an assertion swiftly corroborated by an old photo of our fathers, together with the two of us as young children, on the steps of a bandstand in some public park. True to tradition, he explained that he had followed in his father’s footsteps, as I had in my father’s, and just as I had become a theater director, he had become an actor. However, with a sad countenance, he also informed me that, “Although I may be traversing villages across the country with a small company as the leading actor, I am doing this more in the carriage of Talia, than in that of Good Luck.”

He told me, with no feigned modesty whatsoever, that he had a great talent which would doubtless be deployed one day in the services of some great theater company in Budapest. But he also confessed to me, with the most ruthless self-criticism imaginable, that he was no master in the art of self-promotion, and that, also, he lacked the means to represent himself effectively, a fact that he admitted only very reluctantly, as he considered this a most shameful shortcoming.

Slowly, and not at all without further detours, my old photo-friend approached the true motive for his visit. He invited me to the place where his company would perform in three days: a small town in the Cárpatos Minor where he would be playing Oswald in Ibsen’s *Ghosts*. He begged me to come and see him perform and then, assuming that I liked what I saw, help him find work in Budapest, since, in his words, “It would be as easy for you as lifting your little finger.”

Such a trip would not have been particularly beneficial to me, because, in addition to getting tired from the journey and the experience, I would be losing time. This was a time that could have been well spent fiddling with the details of my own play: changes to be made, reviews to be considered, critics to be smarmed, actors to be managed, an understudy-structure to be developed, local dignitaries to invite, etc. When I explained that unfortunately, it would be completely impossible for me to attend his performance, I thought that this would put a swift end to the matter.

However, it was soon clear that I had severely underestimated my photo-friend's perseverance and the resistance that he was capable of putting up, and I could not help but wonder why he had not used those powers of persuasion to talk himself into a better company.

He spared no detail in describing and elaborating on all the delights that would befall me if I spent a day in the village. He talked of the rooster's crow, the fresh air, the lovely scenery, and the homemade bread; he even promised to arrange for me a plate of bear stew. Once he had gotten past the delights of homemade moonshine and the firm and thin-waisted girls of the village, I had already realized that further resistance would be in vain. What seemed like an authentic tear shone in his left eye as I promised that I would come. Then, to finish it all off, he confessed that the performance was being held in my honor and that the only reason why he hadn't told me this earlier was that he didn't want to put any form of inappropriate pressure on me.

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In the afternoon of the agreed day, a miserable-looking old Tatra came along to pick me up at my hotel. It was already late autumn, and everywhere nature was starting to yawn, preparing itself for its winter slumber. We climbed up towards, onto, and then along the mountain highway, at every turn setting off legions of crows.

'We should get ready for a harsh winter,' my driver explained, pointing at some young tree branches. Many of them had already been nibbled off by rabbits or hares, giving the trees a sad appearance.

We then spotted two deer frolicking about in a clearing, as carefree as if they knew only the season that had passed, unaware of the oncoming winter. They did not stop playing even as we passed by them, a behavior that my driver took as an excuse to start complaining about the local wildlife. He complained about the foxes who, without any good reason, preferred chickens to rats or crows, about the wild boars who would dig up the roots of young trees and newly sown plants, about the deer who were too fast and clever to be trapped. He then went on to complain about the wolves who bit and killed and whose bodies, more often than not, seemed inhabited by even more malicious creatures. He then gave me a fright as he suddenly swerved off the highway and straight into Mother Nature for no obvious reason, taking a detour into the forest, dangerously maneuvering the vehicle through the trees. He later explained that he had done so because he had seen an owl in the forests and did not dare to drive straight past it, as doing so would have brought about something quite terrible, the exact nature of which he had

failed to remember. He figured it probably had something to do with the wolves, or even with vampires. It was only then that I recalled that we were crossing into the land of lore and that superstition was an integral part of everyday life to these mountain-dwellers.

I hope my alleged ancestry will not become an issue.

As it grew darker, the car's driver stopped criticizing the forest and its inhabitants, and instead tried to entertain me with tales of the supernatural: miraculous events, wolf-men, ghosts, the living dead, goblins and evil spirits. The stories about these monsters – the least terrifying of which seemed to be the ones that drank the blood of horses or cows when the moon was full or under the cover of stormy nights – did not fail to entertain me. However, what struck me as odd was that my companion seemed to judge these creatures with much more leniency and respect than, for instance, rabbits or deer. What especially annoyed me was that the man seemed convinced that these bloodthirsty beast of the night weren't themselves aware of what they were doing when in bloodsucking or murdering "alter ego". I, however, despite feeling quite upset by the man's moronic statements, including his questions about my ancestry, prudently kept my opinions to myself, and as we finally arrived at the village, obeying my companion's expert advice, I got out of the car with my left foot first.

Mister Salgó was waiting for me, together with the gentleman who had the highest authority in these parts of the mountains: the walking-stick manufacturer in whose car I had made the journey. My first task, consequently, became to pay a visit to the local factory which gave work to some thirty or so machine operators, and thus was the most important source of employment in the region. We were then presented with some 'first-press' moonshine as an aperitif in his office before we set off for the theater. On the way, Mister Salgó apologized for not having accompanied me on my journey. He explained that he had been rehearsing day and night in anticipation of his big moment, for the sole reason that he did not want to make a fool out of himself in front of me. He then asked me to elaborate on the word '*vermoulu*,' a word used in the script: he wanted to know what it meant and how it ought to be pronounced.

Before he left to get into costume, he dropped, quite intentionally, a little piece of paper which had '*vermoulu*' written on it in wide, childish writing. He put his foot on top of it before swiftly picking it up and putting it back into his pocket. I looked at him, for a moment perplexed, but then I understood – or, remembered, rather – and an explanation was not required. Local superstition obliged every actor to stamp on a piece of fallen paper before taking to the stage, as failing to do so would condemn such an actor

to a catastrophic performance. “I’m not one bit superstitious!” he assured me, laughing. “You can ask anybody. We could all do excellently well without all this medieval foolishness – behavior behooving country folk, for whom it is their main source of entertainment. Hopefully, we shall see each other during the interval,” he added, and with that, he left.

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The performance was held in the large function room of the local hotel’s restaurant, at one end of which a makeshift stage had been built on top of a large number of empty barrels. On top of it, in the right-hand corner, there was a small padded bench. This was the only on-stage seating, and it had been built in honor of the walking-stick manufacturer who was the theater’s main patron – and in honor of myself. The bench creaked ominously as the patron – dressed in tails, with a beautiful white autumnal rose in his buttonhole – sat himself down on it next to me.

After the sounding of a high-pitched horn, the stage manager, dressed in an old combat jacket, lowered the wicks of the room’s two large gas lamps. Then, as the horn sounded a second time, the man – now holding an enormous torch designed to light much bigger things – began to light the candles that made up the stage lighting. He then left the stage, and as the horn was blown for the third time he raised the curtain.

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The arrangement of the audience’s seating surprised me because, instead of the usual parallel straight or arched rows, the seat-rows all emanated from the stage in a way that, viewed from the prompter’s box, formed six ‘rays’ that spread out in straight lines into the large room. I had been puzzling over what could be the reason behind this peculiar arrangement for a while when the patron noticed. My host told me in a hushed voice, “In a village as small as this one, costs can only be recovered if one can count on selling tickets to *all* of the local so-called ‘intellectuals,’ something that becomes even more important when the women of the village have boycotted a production, as they have on this occasion.”

The walking-stick manufacturer’s explanation had left me with two obvious questions, and as I answered, “Yes?” I did not know which he was about to answer.

“Well, you see, generally speaking, the patrons are more than happy to support whatever cultural events are being offered – happy to promise beforehand to attend one, two, or even several performances. However, for

such a generous patron to sit in the second or third row... They simply would not. So this is our way of creating six front rows. You know how we country folks are. Good people, most of us, very traditional, but, how should I put it? A bit too worried about appearance and our own importance.”

The applause at the raising of the curtain cued the entrance of Mister Salgó. With his painter's costume, and despite his English pipe, he looked more like a Persian poet than the Norwegian painter that he was supposed to portray. However, he soon made us forget about his somewhat inappropriate costume, and after his first few lines, I had no doubt whatsoever that my friend in the photo knew how to use his voice and that he was indeed the excellent actor that he had claimed to be. However, it was soon equally obvious that the talent and quality of his fellow actors did little to get the best out of him. Yet, the man's talent and potential – mainly dampened, but also in some ways enhanced, by his dismal fellow artists – was great, close to extraordinary, even.

I was unpleasantly affected by the way every actor was performing, not for the audience, but for me: they had learned their lines for me, for me they had ironed their best clothes, and because of me, they were wearing more make-up than they otherwise would have. It was at me – Mister-All-powerful-from-Budapest, the man whom they presumably had been told could get them a one-way ticket to the good life by lifting a finger – that they directed their every line.

As I reflected thus, the performance continued. Under our bench, in a seat right next to and below the stage, a man who looked like a local landowner was smoking his pipe. The man, who did not seem to be enjoying himself, had placed his large hat in front of him on the edge of the stage where Mister Salgó's character, Oswald, was describing his sorrows to his mother, with great enthusiasm and energy. I noticed that Mister Salgó was finding it difficult to move according to the choreography because of the landowner's greasy and quite appalling hat.

After a while, I realized that the plot of the play had been altered. Because of my visit they, of course, had wanted to make sure of a full house despite the women's boycott. To guarantee that (I assumed) they had gone in search of some ruse to attract not only the cultured patrons and intellectuals but also some of the superstitious villagers. Part of their success in this endeavor was of course due to the play's seductive title – *Ghosts*, and though I undoubtedly was their main target, they, of course, did not want to let their audience down. And, since the drama titled *Ghosts* did not contain a single one of the ghosts that the audience no doubt had come to see, the members of the theatre company were now obviously doing their utmost to compensate for this.

They did so by adding mystery through every means imaginable, including some rather low scams and subterfuges: colored lamps, wolf-howls, bat shadows, off-stage death rattles, and claps of thunder.

Let me give a summary of *Ghosts*, Ibsen's masterpiece: A young man returns home to his widowed mother and then, in a very short space of time, falls victim to two nervous breakdowns. Deeply saddened, his mother suspects that her son has gone mad – a reasonable suspicion it might have seemed at the time, as his father had died from syphilis. She then dangles in front of her son the possibility that the country air might cure him, and that the likelihood of this would be further increased if he accepted sexual abstinence, something she suggested could be achieved by sharing his bed with his sister. Oswald accepts these conditions and asks his mother, if she sees madness overcoming him, to kill him with a poison that he obliges her to carry at all times. It is a play about how the sins of the father are visited upon the son, and it is obvious that Ibsen believed that the disease was inherited rather than transmitted. As, in the times of Ibsen, the name of the father's illness was not to be spoken on stage, the author cleverly uses the word *vermoulu*. *Ghosts* is very much a play about taboo subjects: religion, venereal disease, incest, and euthanasia.

A wave of applause greeted the artist, who made his bow, took what best can be described as a 'mid-session curtain call,' and then accompanied us to the hotel's wine cellar, where we all were treated to what the walking-stick manufacturer referred to as a "cardiac tonic."

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In the second act, Mister Salgó continued to give the audience goosebumps in more or less every scene, and as we finally got to the last part of the drama, there was no reason whatsoever for the audience to be less than happy with what it witnessed, at least not with the acting of the star performer. The last act, in Oswald's great scene, took us through the dramatic conclusion of the piece.

Oswald is sitting in the living room with his mother. They have been awake and talking all night when the mother realizes that by now there should be enough light outside, and as their lamp thus is superfluous she turns it off. She heads to the window and opens the curtains, whereupon the morning light floods the room, violently startling Oswald, who slowly focuses his gaze and entire being on this deluge of light. Then, after what seems like a never-ending silence, he lets his lower lip hang down – stupidly, insanely,

letting there be no doubt that he indeed is mad – and he turns to his mother, saying, “I want the sun, mother. The sun. The sun.”

This is, and in a way ought to be, the last line of the play – followed only by the mother acting out the promised poisoning of her son – at least it is the last line in the version in which Ibsen suggests how the play ought to be performed.

However, Mister Salgó was not ready to allow a few missing lines to make his performance a lesser experience than he figured it ought to be. He was giving us his all, clearly showing us that he was not of a time but for all ages. He was proving that he was a man of action, improvisation, and good taste; that he was a man with whom one did not get one’s money’s worth but much more. He was no media-enhanced snowman-actor ready to melt when the heat got up. He was not acting dishonestly like the Yankees who camouflaged their lack of talent with what at best could be called stage presence, declaring their love with their hands in their pockets, or eliminating armies of gangsters single-handedly with no more than a handgun, chewing gum all the while. No, he was most certainly nothing like that. Rather, he was showing us how one should get lost in a scene without losing it. First, he began to gasp most prudently; then he made the unmistakable sounds of a death rattle. The exaggerated look in his eyes and the movements of his body made it appear as if he genuinely was struck with St. Vitus’ dance. In his movements, he skillfully combined the symptoms of epilepsy, rabies, and strychnine poisoning. He thus extended this great dramatic scene for several long minutes, repeating the words “mother” and “sun” over and over; words that he had not dared to change, probably for fear of offending me.

I don’t know how long he remained in this repetitive and convulsive state, but the man with the disgusting hat who sat just below us appeared to grow increasingly impatient, and after throwing some angry glances – first encouraging and later accusing – at the stage manager, who was preparing to lower the curtain, he decided that he had had enough. The landowner made a few grunts, got up, put on his hat most furiously and left, bumping into, if not deliberately kicking, several chairs on his way out. Thus concluded the performance, and I have to say in defense of the audience that nobody seemed happy or even entertained by the big-hatted man’s uncalled-for “*exeunt*”. Some even hushed the rude perpetrator of the disturbance.

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We went down to congratulate Mister Salgó in his dressing room, where I assured him that despite the somewhat unorthodox prolongation of the

ending I had enjoyed what I had witnessed. In front of several witnesses, I promised that I would indeed try to get him an audition in Budapest. A little while later, glowing with delight, Mister Salgó accompanied us to the dining room.

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As not a single woman was present at the dinner gathering, I was placed at the head of the table, which had been assembled by the pushing together of several smaller ones as if for a banquet. At my side was placed the main sponsor, the walking-stick manufacturer, who was deploring the lack of female attendance which, as he admitted, indirectly accounted for the emphasizing of the supernatural. The manufacturer then informed me why – though my visit, of course, at first had caused a virtual revolution amongst the women of the village – things had not panned out as expected.

The sophisticated women – the main part of the village's social elite – constituted an audience which normally was more than happy to attend plays as long as the subject matter wasn't too risqué. This subject matter was pretty risqué, and that was unfortunately not the only problem, as my past had caught up with me, even out there in the middle of nowhere. My full name at the time Andras Emericó Leibrowitz von Keller, and according to some rumors, probably nothing more than malicious slander, the von Kellers had some grand-, grand-, grand- something who had married into a well-known and disliked line of alleged vampires. Thus, when my past had been added to the risqué subject matter, the women had decided to give the 'first night' a miss.

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The gypsy orchestra started to play a Strauss waltz as a stew made from smoked wild boar was served. Next to each dinner guest, carved chalices made out of deer's antlers were spreading the intoxicating aroma of moonshine so exquisite that it seemed certain to put heart and stomach in the best agreement imaginable.

The witty pharmacist started to enchant the table by telling entertaining stories, and the orchestra lowered their volume so that their music, rather than standing out, formed an integral and pleasing part of the meal.

The battered veal was brought out next, and I soon received the bear stew that I had been promised, after which followed several other dishes. As this region produces no wine, at least no wine worth mentioning, each dish was accompanied by 80 or 90 percent proof spirits. With the combined effects of

the ingredients described above, the dinner was turning itself into something more than just a meal: a wonderfully harmonic interaction of smells, sounds, moonshine vapors, aromas, and witticisms, all against the delightful and harmonizing background music of the gypsy orchestra.

The owner of the windmill modestly recited some of his poetry. Then the young parish priest announced that, in a recently received letter, he had been credibly informed that the father-in-law of one of his cousins in Prague had a friend in a high place who had made some rather compromising-sounding verbal commitments in regards to the village's long-held ambition of getting its own railway station.

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With a smile of complicity on his lips, the pharmacist came around to inform me that he had been reliably informed that we were to become witnesses to a hilarious joke shortly, as some not-to-be-named prankster had put mercury salt in the gypsy orchestra's drinks. I looked towards the stage, which seemed to be floating mirage-like in the haze of tobacco smoke, and I noticed that some of the musicians indeed had started to look a little pale. At the table, everyone pretended not to be watching, even though it was quite obvious that everyone keenly waited for events to unfold. The ingenious author of this hilarious prank – who of course was very well aware of the consequences of dispensing a laxative such as mercury salt in large doses – turned with great pomp to the orchestra and requested that a Liszt rhapsody known for its particularly long duration should be performed.

It did not take us long to realize that his time studying pharmacy at the university had not been wasted. The second violinist's face was already covered in sweat, and after only a few more minutes, the man quite undramatically left the ensemble. The face of the third violinist, a man of a naturally pale complexion, soon started to take on a greenish tint, and as he ever more convulsively squeezed his lips together, he went ever more out of tune. The first violinist, who was also the conductor of the orchestra, threw the third violinist some furious glances; it seemed the conductor did not have a clue as to what was going on. Shortly thereafter, giving up the battle, the third violinist ran out of the room, looking as if trying to impersonate a limping rabbit, leaving behind both his instrument and his dignity. So then, there were only three: the first violinist, the timpanist, and the double bass player. Seemingly undaunted, they set themselves to get to the end of the piece, apparently having no idea of how difficult a task this would prove to be. The timpanist was next; more and more frequently he began to hit the

frame rather than the skins, and soon he started to squeeze his legs and other parts of his anatomy together so hard and in such a strenuous manner that it became both painful and contagious to behold. Several of the guests felt that they too had to leave the table. The poor timpanist kept looking at his shoes as if he knew the inevitable outcome of what was taking place and as if he had already realized that it was only a question of time.

Meanwhile, and in consequence, the rhapsody had started to sound ever more like a gathering of sexually excited cats, and this enchanting masterpiece was indeed being deformed into something close to unrecognizable. This continued deterioration culminated with the timpanist's collapsing onto the floor while the first violinist helplessly scrunched up his nose until it seemed to blind him. Maybe it actually did, because something did cause him to start poking his one remaining functioning colleague in his face with his bow. Meanwhile, the timpanist had broken into tears – the pained variety rather than the lachrymose – and he had begun crawling towards the exit, accompanied by the merciless laughter of the guests. The stubborn leader of the orchestra, who finally must have realized what was happening and understood that he would not be able to see the rhapsody through to its end, tried to save what face he could. He put down his violin with a determined gesture, and although it was obvious that he had to muster all of his strength and willpower, applauded by the audience, he managed to walk upright all the way to the door.

Only the double bass player made it to the end of the piece, apparently without having a clue as to what had caused the strange behavior displayed by his fellow musicians. Then, as I would later be told, despite his advanced age – the man must have been well past seventy – for the very first time in his life, he became the orchestra's soloist. To congratulate him, the guests invited him for drinks at the table, only to discover that the man did not like alcohol. However, the old man did defend his colleagues bravely, explaining that he knew precisely what must have caused their sudden illness. Their cook had not made the sign of the cross before cutting the loaf of bread for breakfast. And if that wasn't the cause, then it surely must be that the aforementioned cook had kept a piece of that very same bread in his pocket to poison the neighbor's cat that was sneaking out of the area where it was supposed to stay to kill the cook's young chicks under cover of night.

By then – the smoke was so thick that it prevented me from seeing what was going on at the other side of the table, and even the walls and the tablecloth seemed to be seeping with alcohol – I felt I had had enough fun. I was tired, and I wanted to get back to Nové Zámky and my own play. They tried to persuade me to stay the night, but, seeing my determination, they

eventually got me a driver. Mister Salgó, who was in an exuberant mood, waved me goodbye. He offered to come along and assured me of his eternal gratitude, again and again repeating and writing down addresses on which I should be able to contact him if I wanted him to come to Budapest. I could sense that he was quite happy when I declined his offer to accompany me back to Nové Zámky.

The driver, who was not at all thrilled about the nighttime journey ahead of us, had a wolf's foot dangling from his rear mirror. He proceeded to fall back to his bad habit of elaborating on his beliefs as he explained that he considered it a much better talisman than the traditional rabbit's foot, especially when dealing with the undead, with whom we might very well find ourselves interacting unless I decided to postpone our journey until the next morning. Then, to fortify himself, as a moral tonic, he took a large swig from a bottle of denatured alcohol, which was the only drink that poor people could afford. With that, we set off into the night on what was to become a pleasantly uneventful return journey.

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After the premiere and some additional performances of *Jedermann*, all very well received, I temporarily left the play into the competent hands of the company's owner and continued to Vienna, where I evaluated and eventually purchased the production rights to two newly written comedies. I then returned for several more performances of *Jedermann* in Czechoslovakia, all very well received, and I was asked to stay on. Therefore it took quite some time before I found myself back in Budapest.

True to my word, I spoke about Mister Salgó to several directors of theater companies, and eventually, I indeed did find one who expressed interest and declared himself prepared to meet with him. I sent a letter informing Salgó of this to the address – or the addresses, rather – with which he had provided me, asking him to come and see me in the week before Christmas. At the same time, I informed him about the theater director, the details of the recommendation I had provided for him, and the texts he should learn. I was surprised when he did not respond to my letters, and as I figured that he probably had not received them, I wrote to the remaining addresses, the less likely ones. For a long time, I kept expecting him to show up. He didn't.

It was at the beginning of spring when, concerning something completely unrelated to Mister Salgó's failure to show up, I visited an old *cafe-cum*-restaurant that also served as a thespian recruitment office and a club for provincial actors who were trying to make it in Budapest. It was there that I

found an itinerant actor who knew what had become of my friend in the photograph and could tell me the reason for his absence and silence.

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It seemed that during a night's partying – I figured it was in all likelihood the very same night of partying as the one I had partly witnessed – some strange events had taken place. An educated gentleman – the itinerant actor who told me this believed that the gentleman was a pharmacist – who was also one of the patrons, had thought up a hilarious joke. The man had declared that he would buy a casket of moonshine for the actors if someone among them was prepared to pay a visit to the nearby cemetery and steal a cross. The man who told me the story believed this offer might have been made in the hope that this well-nigh impossible task would put an end to the partying, and thus to further expenses for the patrons. However, the man had not considered Mister Salgó's presence, or, if he had, he had not known that the man was not one bit superstitious. The celebrated young actor, who allegedly in all likelihood was soon to make his *début* in one of Budapest's leading theatres, had offered to perform the task himself, and Mister Salgó hadn't flinched when told that he would have to take down and bring back, not any old cross, but one from atop one of the tombs.

As he returned – carrying a cross that every villager recognized, as it was 'special' – he was greeted with amazement, veneration, and eulogies. He was also greeted with fear of retribution from those who were buried in the graveyard, especially those who dwelled inside the ancestral tomb from which this cross had been removed. Even more especially, the villagers feared retribution from the founder of the ancestral tomb, a man who allegedly had not died properly, or rather, had not been executed properly, and who was said still to visit the cemetery and the area surrounding it during the hours the sun was absent. However, all thoughts of such nocturnal creatures soon seemed gone, and nothing but cheers of joy could be heard as the opening of the promised barrel of moonshine was announced.

The party had thus continued, and as a result, renewed and improved intoxication had followed, whilst the cross lay abandoned on the alcohol-soaked tablecloth – disrespected, unacknowledged, forgotten even, yet menacing and quite possibly ready to wreak vengeance upon the living–. The main patron – the walking-stick manufacturer, who according to my informant had felt quite uneasy about its presence, and, probably pretty remorseful and unhappy not only about the pharmacist's prank but also about

Mister Salgó's choice of tomb – offered to pay for one last round if someone would return the cross to the place from whence it had been removed.

Mister Salgó had calmly finished off his drink and gotten ready to fulfill his obligation as the only truly non-superstitious man among them. He swept his large cape around himself and hoisted the cross onto his shoulder, and so, although now no longer very steady on his feet, he once more set off for the graveyard. The rest continued drinking for a while, though most of them had to do so with both their stomachs and the rest of their senses starting to rebel. Soon most of them had left, yet a few stayed behind, waiting for the return of their hero. However, it did not take them very long to get bored and leave; they would later all explain that they had assumed that Mister Salgó had gone straight to bed after completing his task. He had not because he had been found early the next day when the priest had been taking his daily morning stroll through the cemetery.

Mister Salgó had been found hanging from the cross that had been replaced on top of the grave – or the mausoleum, rather – from which it had been taken. Mister Salgó's bloodless face had suggested the sort of surprise that faces often take on right after their owners encounter something they did not believe they would encounter. Also, he had two puncture marks that ran from just beside his Adam's apple, all the way to the back of his neck.

"So he was attacked?"

"Probably not."

"So how did he die?"

"He bled to death."

"Could you explain!"

"If you let me."

"Well go on then!"

"Well, he must have managed to put the cross back on its place."

"Yes?"

"But then his cape must have gotten stuck between the cross and the mausoleum."

"Yes!"

"So he must have tried to lift the cross with one hand while releasing his cape with the other."

"And?"

"And as he had had a lot to drink, he must have lost his balance, topping over and getting hung by his cape."

"But you said he bled to death?"

"Yes, that too. The doctor couldn't decide."

"But there were bite marks?"

“No. I said there were puncture marks.”

“But not bite marks?”

“No. The hooked clasp that closed his cape must have dug into his neck, causing the puncturing and leaving the gashes.”

“So could someone have pulled him off the tomb from behind?”

“I suppose that could be one explanation but not a very likely one.”

I bought the man another glass of wine, thanked him, promised to try to find him some form of employment, and made ready to leave. But then, as I was about to open the door, he added, “But you know, some said the other one might have had, though others said his body was so messed up that it was impossible to say.”

“Have had what?”

“Bite marks on his neck and blood sucked out of his body.”

“And who’s ‘the other one’?”

“The driver; they found him the day after the play. It seems he had driven off the road while returning some theater director related to the Draculas who had been watching Mister Salgó’s performance, promising him work here in Budapest.”

“No, no. I know this director; he’s not that sort of a guy.”

“How could you possibly ‘know’ this guy?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, these guys don’t even know themselves what they’ve been up to the day after.”

PART 2. JUNIORS SHORT STORIES

The short stories that follow will be arranged more or less chronologically, and each will be introduced with an autobiographical paragraph. This will make it impossible for you not eventually to get to know *Chicch Kadune*, and Andres Laszlo Junior rather intimately.

Several stories are borrowed from the two first books in Junior's adventure series *The Caspian Connection* (*The Seventh Lot & A Question of Honor*) and his books on drug policy: *The Drug Problem & Illegality is a Scam*). This second part of *The Tale(s) of Two Knaves* is roughly the same size as Senior's, with the difference that the tiger-stories, especially those told from the tiger's point of view, more often than not tend to be shorter than Senior's tales, whereas Junior's stories on average are a little longer.

As for the dates, these are often approximations, and occasionally even downright lies, though when so, lies told with no intention other than to boost continuity.

27. AMERICAN GOOD

1967. Trees are rarely allowed to grow into heavens, and, sure enough, in 1961 my parents separated. Mother and I moved to Sweden, while Senior started commuting between Evry/Paris in summers and Torremolinos in winters. Mom finished her B.A. in Lund, and we went to Älgult for her internship, and even to me there was a noticeable difference between Älgult and Paris – actually, I do not think Marilyn would have enjoyed it – and after Älgult followed more time in Lund. For some of this time, I was sent to Växjö and my grandparents but I rejoined Mom as we moved to Malmö for her to finalize her education at the college of teachers – I started to play chess. By this time, I had, all by myself, managed to get expelled from at least two schools. The first was The Students' Children's Daycare Center at Tomegapsgatan in Lund. I got away with, "But I know what happened to Mister Jesus after that: the cross and the nails." However, contrasting the others 'Mary had a little lamb...' or 'Old MacDonald had a farm...' with 'Once in a blue moon, the moon is full...' ('full' in Swedish is ambiguous in that it also means 'drunk') became too much. And my observation – "But, Missis, look at this pencil: it falls to the ground because of earth's gravitational pull, so if God sits on a cloud, taking notes on whether we have behaved well or not, then surely he too must fall to the ground" – turned out to be too much for Miss Björling in Lund, who called my mother. "Your child is ruining the moral standards of the entire class; take the little devil away!" I had started school in France at the age of five, and as I turned ten – I now lived in Malmö on Limhamnsvägen 18 – I had never experienced being anything but the worst student in my class. I was not particularly well-liked – my only friend, Kenneth Malm from Lund, sniffed glue at 10 or 12, whereupon he borrowed a car, crashed it, and then remained in a coma for several years until he finally died – and life, generally speaking, was not particularly fun. Ladislao Vajda and his wife Irka had come to visit us in Lund, where they hired a Swiss babysitter, Heidi, who looked after me in our single-room-with-kitchenette student apartment so that Mom would have time to study. I had started to put on weight, and going from overweight to obese took me only a couple of years. Tomas, an older paternal cousin (yet not old enough to have been brought out of Hungary by Senior), came to visit, and he told Mom in Spanish so that I would not understand: "¡Dios mio, qué gordo eres!": "Oh my God, he is so fat!" At the age of twelve, I

realized, in addition to the fact that I looked disgusting, that I could speak Spanish, despite not having set foot in Spain (I think) after turning one (and I only started speaking at around two). This was a strange experience indeed, which has repeated itself with French, as today I speak it much better than a five-year-old ought to (I was five when I left, and I haven't really trained since). Senior turned out to share my cousin's sentiments as we visited him a year or so later at his antique shop in Torremolinos, as he too figured that I was unpleasant to behold. As he hoisted a – as I remember it, randomly chosen – little boy on the beach up into the air, he exclaimed, “Now this is my little prince!” I stopped being Andres Laszlo, Jr., and instead, I took my mother's maiden name to become André Cid, and only on the day that Senior died would I once more become Andres Laszlo. I had continued to play chess, and I had gotten myself a language-genius friend by the name of Hans Person whom I have lost track of Hans; if you read this, please get in touch. On New Year's Eve more smuggled-into-Sweden firecrackers than usual could be heard in our neighborhood, and when the police asked, “Who has sold you these?” the children answered with one voice. The police came to knock at our door. “Does anyone here answer to the name of André?” I hid, but I could hear the police officers explain to Mom that if I did not discontinue my clandestine activities, I would not be allowed to drive a moped on my 15th birthday. In consequence, I kept to the straight and narrow until 15 or so years later, when I would nearly get caught ripping pages out of telephone catalogs. Latzi came around once more, this time to do some filming on a lightship in Öresund outside Malmö, and we were invited to join. The crew nicknamed me ‘la machine diabolique,’ which is French and means ‘the lovely little boy’, and I was by now so obese that in a way I am glad that Senior was not there to see me.

— — —

My beauty sleep that night had not been what I would have preferred it to be. To be brutally honest, I am a bit of coward, especially as long as it is my own well-being, or, as in this case, my own life, that I believe to be at risk, and because of this, I had spent a virtually sleepless night. I had imagined myself hearing all sorts of strange sounds, and most of the time I had figured that the source of these sounds had to have been the little Wahhabi and his allegedly reluctant friends, whom he must have talked into accompanying him. I had finally fallen asleep, only to dream about whole armies of crazy Wahhabis bursting through the door and window of my room, mounted on

Arabian stallions. *I really should return to the truck, because, after all, they have not tried to kill me... Yet... At least I don't think they have.*

"Mahodand Lake: very pretty," said the local car owner who drove me there. The driver, in addition to "lake," "very," "pretty," and "dollars," also knew the word "taxi," and it was with some considerable pride that he repeated these words over and over again as we made our way up towards the lake, sometimes pointing at himself, sometimes at his truck. I tried to explain the difference between "taxi" and "taxi driver," but though he didn't get it, the price he charged was very reasonable, especially as I got it down from six dollars to five with only a minimum of haggling. *I'm off to a good start.*

Up by the lake, I injured my foot on a sharp stone as I was waded out to one of the many small pebble-islands that lay scattered in the shallow streams, but apart from that everything went very well until the second evening. As I returned from fishing, loaded with one ordinary and one monstrous brown trout – yes, I had figured out the little man's secret – I spotted somebody walking up the valley, beside the stream. It was the first person I had seen since I had arrived on the morning of the previous day, and I swiftly hid among some rocks. It was indeed Massud. The man was obviously looking for something, and I had no problem guessing what that something was. I remained in hiding until Massud had passed me and was out of sight. I then returned to my tent, which I had done my best to make hard to detect. I prepared the small fish – hanging what remained of it, together with the big one, from a high branch of a nearby tree – before retiring into my tent.

I had observed some animal tracks outside my tent, and my previous day's catch had gone missing overnight. I had not been all that scared when I found out, even if the fish thief's prints had seemed pretty big; however, as I went to bed, I did feel quite uncomfortable. *Big animals and murderous Wahhabis are lurking out there in the dark, just waiting to pounce. What can it be...?*

*

I had not even gotten close to falling asleep when there was a noise outside. *Tiger!* was my first thought, but then suddenly the tiger began to speak in a human language that I could not understand, and soon it was joined by other voices. Too frightened to face my visitors, I swallowed hard. However, it was not required of me to decide whether to open the tent or not; somebody

was already doing it for me, from the outside. *So, Massud got his friends to tag along after all.*

The flap was opened, the zipper was undone, and a bearded face looked into the tent. The face, with its huge beard, looked seriously surreal in the light, and as I flashed my torch on it, another bearded man stuck his head into the tent under the one already there, making me recollect a childhood tale about a cock a pig, and... I had forgotten what the third animal was. In retrospect, I realize that it looked quite funny, but at the time, I was in no mood to appreciate it.

Deciding to take the bull by the horns, I crawled up to the entrance and squeezed past my visitors and out into the open. "Hello!" Nobody seemed to understand, so I continued in French, "Do you speak French?"

There was no sign that my guests understood French.

The visitors looked rough, very rough indeed. *These guys are no amateurs, no amateurs at all; I would have my work cut out to get the better of just one of them.*

The men, all three of them – because there was indeed a third man (*a cow: I am sure it was an ass, or maybe a horse*) with a much smaller beard – looked at me with suspicion. Finally, the man who had opened the tent – the one with the biggest beard, whom I figured was likely to be their leader – spoke: "Chai?"

Though I did not understand their language, I understood *Chai*, tea, and as none of the men spoke English, I figured that they were probably not in the tourist trade, and thus that there was a reasonable chance that they were not accompanying my sworn killer.

The likely leader repeated, "Chai?"

I was delighted. *No Massud, no swords, and I have plenty of tea bags: I even have some fresh milk.*

"Chai?"

This is good; actually, this could be exactly what the doctor ordered. Not only were they probably not accompanying my sworn killer, but also these guys, though they looked rough and murderous indeed, might actually serve to protect me from the little man. *I bet Massud won't try to kill me as long as they are around, so if I can just befriend them and get them to stick around for a while... Maybe I can even make them stay the night, or at least join me in a late supper...*

There were indeed just the three of them – each of them bearded, and each carrying an AK-47, which seemed a bit strange – and on the ground stood three big green sacks which they must have been carrying. I assumed that whatever they contained was likely to be something dodgy, and quite

possibly the reason why these men chose to make their way through the valley at this late hour rather than during the daytime. *Probably drugs.*

“Chai?” repeated the likely leader, now in a slightly irritated tone of voice, “Chai?”

“Sure,” I said, making my way towards the fireplace. “Of course, I’ll make you a nice cup of chai; I’ll do it right away; have a seat.” I then turned to the man with the smallest beard, handed him the kettle, and pointed towards the stream. “Will you go get me some water, please?”

The small-bearded man immediately copped on, took the kettle, and started to walk towards the water.

I infused some fresh life into the dying embers of the fire over which I earlier had prepared the smaller of the two trout.

Strangely, it seemed the likely leader had not understood what I was up to, because he repeated, now in an irritated tone of voice, “Chai?”

“Sure, I’ll make tea; your friend is getting the water. It’ll be ready in ten minutes.”

“Chai?” the likely leader repeated, now in an angry tone of voice, gripping his rifle and raising his eyebrows as if having second thoughts about my hospitality. “Chai!”

“Yes!” I exclaimed – nodding my head and pointing at the small-bearded man who now was returning with the kettle – probably not at all managing to conceal how frightened I was, “Chai, yes! Yes, chai! Yes!”

The likely leader watched with suspicion as his returning companion handed me the kettle, and it was only as I placed it over the fire that the penny finally seemed to drop. The likely leader lowered his rifle.

I realized that the big-bearded man – apart from being exceptionally thick, stoned, or both – probably didn’t know one word of English other than “yes” and presumably “no.”

“Good!” said the likely leader, immediately proving me wrong. “Chai good!” With that, he left his place next to the fire and walked over to the tent, where he started to inspect my belongings. “Chai good!”

I – starting to wish it had been my sworn executioner who had come to my door – pretended not to notice the big-bearded man’s activities as I proceeded with my domestic chores.

The tent seemed to meet with the likely leader’s approval, and he looked at me as if expecting it to be given to him. As it was not, he continued to inspect the rest of what he obviously figured was up for grabs.

I was frightened, sure I was, but with both Massud and the fish thief lurking about out there in the dark, I was not ready to give up my tent, at least not yet.

Fishing gear, toiletry, food, backpack, flashlight, and blanket: everything was taken out and scrutinized, but each time the likely leader shook his head in disappointment. Everything – even the shortwave radio and *The Problems of Philosophy* – met with his blatant disapproval. Again and again, he shook his head, and he kept on shaking it until finally, as he tossed the rejected sleeping bag back into the tent, his eyes fell on my state of the art thermo-mattress, which he rewarded with a loud grunt of approval.

With a big and probably very frightened smile – for the first time in my life I reflected that having a beard might be advantageous even for someone who did not need to camouflage a receding chin or proclaim his faith – I walked across to my guest, and I gently removed the thermo-mattress from the big-bearded man's hands. Then – after making a few gestures designed to seal the transfer of ownership – I handed it back with a disarming smile.

The likely leader nodded his head in approval as he pointed at his present. “American?”

After consulting the manufacturing tag, without removing the mattress from its new owner's hands, I nodded. “American, yes.”

There was too much beard to tell for certain, but I sensed that the likely leader was pleased. Then, as he started back towards the fire, he stopped under the trout that were hanging from the tree about seven feet up in the air, looked at them for a few seconds, and then he put down the mattress and signaled that I should pull them higher.

I raised them as high as the branch would allow but as that was not enough, I took down the fish and slung the rope around a higher branch. Not until they were a good twelve feet above the ground did the big-bearded man signal that it was enough.

I shrugged my shoulders, reached out with my hands, palms up, and put on an expression of incomprehension.

Strangely, this time the big-bearded man seemed immediately to understand, and he started to jump at the fish, reaching out with his curved fingers while hissing ferociously.

“Tiger?”

The likely leader – who apparently had understood “tiger” – shook his head, stroked his beard, hissed, and grabbed his rifle. “Bang!” he said. Then he reached for his wallet and took out some small-denomination notes at which he pointed.

I didn't understand what sort of beast the big-bearded man figured would come for my trout, but, even if it wasn't a tiger, the fact that it took twelve feet to put the fish out of its reach left unpleasantly few non-life-threatening possibilities.

As the tea was ready, the guests were served in cup, kettle, and worm-can, which I had given a quick rinse out of sight of my guests. I figured I was adhering to local decorum by giving the can to the man with the smallest beard.

We all sat down around the fire, and after a few minutes spent in silent meditation, the conversation started to pick up.

The likely leader pointed at me. "American?" I thought he smiled.

I smiled back. "Swedish."

The likely leader reached for his AK-47, pointed it towards me, and then asked, in a voice indicating that I might well have been mistaken as to his smiling, "American?"

"French," I answered, realizing that the likely leader of course had never heard of Sweden, "and a little Austro-Hungarian."

The likely leader pointed his rifle at my stomach, and with a voice suggesting that he was not smiling, he repeated his question: "American?"

"Tent?" I am not the Russian roulette type of person, and I decided to try the middle road by attempting to fob the big-bearded man off with what had earlier seemed to catch his fancy. "Tent? Good tent! Very good tent! Tent better than a mattress! Tent, yes?"

The likely leader seemed to release the safety catch, and he put his index finger on the trigger. "American?"

Of course, I had heard "think so hard that it hurts," but I had always thought of it as an inappropriate expression: as abusive and downright unintelligent use of language. I had thought so because I regarded, and still regard, thinking as being a source of pleasure, personal improvement, and enlightenment: at that time I also regarded it as something that couldn't possibly cause pain, except perhaps in the realization that there can be no such thing as certain knowledge and of what is the customary faith of new knowledge. I had been wrong.

A "yes" or a "no" would have to come out of my mouth the next time I opened it, which had better be soon. My answer would determine whether I'd live or die; saying nothing at all would in all likelihood produce the same result as an incorrect answer. *Adventure? How could I ever have longed for it?* As I looked for a clue, my thoughts automatically turned to *The Problems of Philosophy*, and I tried to be analytical. This part of the world had a lot of oil, and where there was oil there was, generally speaking, bad American behavior; that clearly indicated a "no," but did Pakistan really have oil? I was just about to say "American, no," when I remembered that these men probably were carrying drugs; people carrying drugs during the night in a remote Pakistani valley were probably on their way to either a refinery or a

wholesaler. Somebody like that would probably be looking forward to being paid for his labor. If and how well he was paid would, at least in part, probably depend on how well the business went with the importers, including America. It was touch and go. I wished I had had more time, but a glance at the man's irritated-looking beard told me I had not. Then I recalled that the likely leader had seemed pleased that the thermo mattress had been American, and I made my choice. Vaguely aware that I would have preferred some other last words – even “A nice theology-chat” – I smiled and answered the big-bearded man, “Yes, American, yes.”

The likely leader's beard moved in a way that seemed to suggest a smile.

I smiled back.

The likely leader lowered his rifle.

I had given the right answer, and death was not – at least, so it seemed – imminent.

“American good.” The likely leader repeated this several times while pointing at me, “American good.” Then, a little later, as they were about to depart, he took a generous measure of sticky opium resin out of one of the sacks – the drug policy expert in me valued it, once turned into heroin, at a New York street-value of about \$5,000 – and gave it to me. “American good.”

As the men left, I went back to my tent, where I soon started to shiver uncontrollably; this unexpected call had simply been too much for my already radically disturbed equilibrium. I was lying atop the thermo-mattress that the big-bearded man, quite surprisingly, had forgotten, and as I collapsed into my sleeping bag, I was sobbing in a sort of hiccupy way that I could not recall ever before having experienced. This was not what adventure should be like; it was cold and dark, and there was a mad Wahhabi out there, who had probably taken a holy oath to execute me and he was quite possibly accompanied by an army of... Also, there was something that could reach nearly twelve feet into the air prowling about in the vicinity, ready to devour me at any time, and now there were these guys; it was simply becoming too much.

I had been sobbing away by myself for what felt like less than five minutes when once more there were noises from outside the tent.

Whatever fate had in store for me – tiger, Wahhabi, opium-carrier, or something else – I was simply not man enough to face it, and Andres Laszlo, Jr., went into denial. I put my head deep into the hood of my sleeping bag, and I pretended not to notice my executioner's arrival.

I pretended not to hear how the tent-flap was brusquely opened and how the zip was undone. I pretended not to notice how the ground beneath me

began to move as somebody started to pull me out of the tent, feet first. I was not prepared to face what was about to happen, and I would have been pulled out of the tent except that a sudden jerk sent me tumbling onto the plastic canvas of the floor and the side of the tent, nearly causing it to collapse.

I just lay there. I would not move another inch. I could not have moved another inch even if offered the Orrefors Paris Goblet. I was no longer ready to fight, not even to defend my life. Andres Laszlo, Jr., had accepted that he was about to die, and he just hoped it would not be too painful. *This was not a good idea. I was getting good at Swedish art glass. I should have continued doing what I was...*

Then, as the last part of the mattress was pulled out of the tent, there was a voice from outside.

“American good!”

I realized that maybe it was not time to die just yet. I wished I had not thrown the opium into the stream.

It had taken me a good quarter of an hour just to stop sobbing, then another quarter or so to stop shivering, and finally what felt like half an hour to regain composure enough to start thinking anything useful. *It might not be a tiger. Massud might not find me – the bearded guys might have scared him off, or he might not plan to come around until the morning. There might be no more opium-guys around.*

However, deep down I realized that none of these assumptions, possibly apart from the fish thief not being a tiger, came with a particularly high probability attached. Massud in all likelihood was still out there, and as to the likely leader and his crew, there were probably more of them out there too, and their visit had probably turned me into a bit of a sitting duck. *Yes, Massud must know where I am by now.*

I tried to collect my wits and to prepare myself for another challenge. *He will be here, and I will have to deal with him.* I decided to try to sort myself out by logically and analytically reasoning things out aloud.

“If I had been an analytic genius – like Bertrand Russell, or Sherlock Holmes – how would I have gone about this? Well, I feel distinctly uncomfortable here,” the thus-created multiple-personality-person admitted aloud, hopefully to nobody but itself. “There’s a mad fundamentalist armed with a knife or a sword out there, who by now more likely than not knows where I am. Then there is something eating my fish: probably not a tiger, but definitely something with sharp claws and teeth that is capable of reaching

close to twelve feet up in the air. Finally – at least, I hope it’s “finally” – I appear to be parked in the middle of a bloody opium-route: a route where the next bunch might refrain from shooting me only if say I’m not American... Or shoot me whatever I say.

“Now, logically and analytically considering every relevant aspect of the situation, my resolution, and the time – which, by the way, I don’t have a clue about – what should I do? That’s not a very difficult question, and even an intellectual lightweight such as Andres Laszlo, Jr., could have answered that; obviously what I should do is to get the hell out of here, and I should equally obviously do that as bloody soon as possible.”

“However,” Andres Laszlo Jr. added, regaining a little of his composure and deciding that he no longer needed the assistance of his multiple personalities, “I will not break my promise unless it’s absolutely necessary, and therefore ‘as soon as possible’ means after I’ve done what I’ve set out to do, which is to stay here for three days. So far I’ve been here virtually two full days, so if I leave tomorrow, however early, I will have complied with what I’ve resolved to do. It’s true that I had intended to stay a little longer than until early morning of the third day, so by leaving then I might not have complied with my resolution as well I intended to, but I will, by definition, have done what I set out to do, and in an emergency like this, that’s enough.”

After another hour or so of reasoning – rationalization, wishful thinking, projection, self-deception, word games, and other forms of contemporary Western thinking/philosophy – I had succeeded. I had convinced myself that it must be well past midnight already, or at least that it would be so before I’d leave the area and thus by definition leave Mahodand. *So, actually, it’s all right for me to leave right now.*

I started to pack, but just as I was about to take the tent down it dawned on me that walking over twenty miles with nothing but the light of the stars to guide me would be scary. Actually, it would be even scarier than staying in the tent, and quite possibly more dangerous. *Massud could well be following me, and meeting the fish thief out there in the dark seems a distinctly unattractive idea. It would be cheating to leave right now; leaving now would, to be quite honest, be to give in. By staying put here until dawn, however, I will have complied with my resolution properly and honestly.*

A few minutes later, there was a rattle outside, which soon turned into a cautious, somewhat apologetic, and distinctly human noise. I lit my flashlight and opened the tent flap. The little man, who was looking me straight in the face, seemed blinded by my torch – a bit like a dazzled rabbit. My executioner had arrived.

I shall not kill him immediately. First, I will explain why he must die, then I shall allow him to convert to Islam, and not until then shall I execute him: clinically, unemotionally, and very ceremonially. Massud was decided, totally, and relentlessly decided: the infidel had to die, and there was absolutely nothing the big man could say or do that would make him change his mind. That the big man might choose to oppose him – that he might have any objections or choose to put up some form of physical resistance – had never crossed Massud's mind. Massud had never killed anybody or anything before, apart from fish, birds and one of the biggest rabbits that his brother Parvis had admitted that he had ever seen, and though he didn't look forward to the task that lay ahead of him, he took great pride in the knowledge that he was about to fulfill his obligation as an instrument of Allah and Muhammad ibn Abduk Wahhab. Maybe they are watching me right now.

The infidel opened the tent.

Massud was blinded by the big man's torch.

The infidel seemed delighted to see him and offered his hand.

Delight was not the reaction Massud had expected, and he assumed that the sudden bright light must somehow have caused him to mistake remorse or horror for happiness. *Maybe it's repentance... Maybe he has consumed alcohol... Or opium...*

He could see the big man looking into the dark behind him while keeping his hand outstretched.

Massud, after some hesitation, took the hand, only to find his own being gripped and shaken with a power he had never before experienced; a power that, at least, so it felt, could have crushed the bones of his hand. *He is very strong.*

The big man then played his torch on the surrounding area, as if to make certain that he was alone, and again the infidel seemed delighted, even more so than before. *It's not repentance.*

"Come in, Massud; you look much more frozen than murderous."

"I must talk to you."

"Of course you must; now come in and sit down."

Massud entered the tent quite tentatively and sat down on the ground. "It's very important."

"You look frozen; don't you have a tent?"

"No."

"A sleeping bag?"

"No."

“Take this blanket.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” The big man smiled. “My home is your home.”

“I have come to let you convert to Islam, and then to execute you.”

“In my home?”

“It’s just a tent.”

“It’s still my home.”

“All right, I’ll execute you outside.”

The big man – again failing to look even vaguely frightened or repentant – answered with what nearly looked like a smile, “And your friends?”

“I asked them to come along; I wanted them to help me explain.”

“Explain what?”

“Why what you’ve said is wrong, and why you must die.”

“Right...”

“But they wouldn’t come.”

The big man nodded his head and pouted his lower lip in what looked like a gesture of sympathy and understanding.

“They don’t understand,” Massud continued. “They just think of the publicity – of how the news of your death will affect tourism – when what they really should think of is how best to defend the faith.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, but, to be quite honest, that is the direction that things are going; monetary considerations are increasingly dominating our world and everything that’s in it, including our worldviews. I call it the sneaking economic reason or moneyfication, and I feel that the fact that ever more can be had for money, and that money is becoming the measure of ever more, is...”

“I have a weapon!” Massud exclaimed, vaguely starting to suspect that the big man was making fun of him. “I have a knife!”

“You do?”

“I do!”

“Not a sword?”

“No, we don’t have one.”

“But it is an old ritual knife, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“May I see it?”

Massud proudly and with great enthusiasm opened his jacket to show the dagger that was fastened to his belt.

“It’s beautiful!”

“And the rubies and emeralds are real.”

“And you...” The big man seemed unable to take his eyes off the dagger.

"I what?"

"... you will kill me with that?"

"I will."

The big man moved much faster than Massud would have thought he possibly could, given his size. He pushed Massud backward, nearly collapsing the tent while pulling the knife from his belt. "No, you won't."

That had not been part of Massud's plan, but he swiftly regained his composure. "When you sleep, then I will kill you."

The smile left the infidel's face, and for the first time in his relation to the big Westerner, Massud felt physically threatened.

A little later, Massud found himself unhurt but tied hand and foot, dangling high up in the air from an oak tree a few yards outside the entrance to the tent; he was hanging right next to the remains of the big man's supper, and also to a fresh trout as big as any that Massud had caught, almost. *I should have set fire to his tent.*

*

Finally, things are starting to look up, I thought, feeling wonderfully well, and for a few fleeting but delightful moments, I even managed to visualize the crew from the sailing boat hanging up there beside the little Wahhabi.

"When I get down, I will kill you."

"And what if I choose not to let you down?"

"Then my friends will kill you."

"Those same friends who refused to join you?"

"Yes."

"Wouldn't that be bad for tourism?"

"My brother and his friends will kill you, even if it's bad."

"Your brother said I would have his sympathies, whatever I did to you."

"He said that?"

"He did."

"He said you could kill me?"

"No, everything except that; if I killed you he said he'd kill me, but tying you up, he said, was okay."

"Good; he's a good brother, but he doesn't understand about Islam."

"He said I could break your arms if you didn't promise not to kill me."

"He's still a good brother, but I'm a better angler than he is."

"He said that, too."

"He did?"

"Yes."

After listening to the little Wahhabi's groaning for an hour or so, I began to get over the creepy feeling which had followed his threat to kill me in my sleep, and I started to feel pity for the pathetic and probably rather harmless little man.

"This will not be like being executed by a Western executioner; this will be good for you, and if you just let me down I will explain why."

I started to feel that maybe I was overreacting. It was not Massud who had first threatened to murder me in my sleep; it had been the little girl... *His brother is probably right; he's a whacko, but not a creep.*

"Before I kill you, I will let you convert to Islam; that way all your sins will be forgiven, and as you'll have no time to commit any new ones..."

For Pete's sake, this weird creature actually believes himself to be doing the right thing... And though I'm twice his size, he has come all this way to kill me, without... He's got more guts than I have.

"And that will be very good for you."

This guy is starting to resemble that Duchess' brother Senior liked so much... I started to feel that what I really ought to do was to cut the poor fellow down, take him into the tent, give him something to eat, and maybe have a chat. *He'll probably catch a cold hanging up there and with neither tent nor a sleeping bag...*

"On Judgement Day – a day that will be coming much sooner than you believe – you won't have to wait very long; you will be found guiltless, you'll fly over the bridge that crosses hell, and you'll go straight to heaven."

I decided to see if there was a compromise to be had.

"Since you will be free from guilt – and since you will have no time to commit any more evil deeds between your conversion and your death – you'll go directly to a very high level in heaven."

"If I cut you down – if I let you sleep in the tent, and give you food and a blanket – will you then be a good Wahhabi and not try to kill me?"

"No."

"Will you promise not to kill me until the sun comes up?"

"I'd never kill a man who's sleeping."

"You said you would."

"I... I didn't mean that."

"So why did you say so?"

"I... to frighten you."

"Why?"

"Because you didn't look as if you were afraid."

"So will you promise?"

"I'd never promise anything to an infidel."

"All right then, sleep well, and stop groaning; if you don't, I'll put a sock in your mouth, then I'll duct-tape it."

"You wouldn't."

"Try me, and don't think I'll waste a clean one."

"Wait."

"Yes?"

"There are animals here."

"What animals?"

"Leopards, even snow leopards."

"You can't harm them; you're tied up, and I've got your knife."

"There's a fish next to me."

"Yes, it's a pretty big one, wouldn't you say?"

"It's dangerous."

"Don't worry; it's dead; it won't attack you."

"The leopards."

"Good night."

"Wait!"

"Yes?"

"I promise."

"What?"

"Not to kill you when you sleep."

"And not until the sun comes up?"

"And not until the sun comes up."

"And not until I'm awake?"

"And not until you're awake."

"Fully awake?"

"Fully awake."

"And not until I've had a cup of coffee?"

"Why can't I kill you before you've had a cup of coffee?"

"Because I'm not fully awake until I've had a cup of coffee."

"All right, and not until you have a cup of coffee... Do you have sugar?"

I started to lower the little man down. "I do, and fresh milk."

*

Before I lowered him to the ground, out of the corner of my eye, I could see how Massud sort of measured the size of the big trout in disgust.

I gave the frozen man a blanket and served him some fish.

"I would have thrown a fish that small back."

"Of course you would."

Massud looked angrily at me, then at the trout.

“Eat; you need some energy if you are to kill me tomorrow.”

Massud ate some, lay down, turned around, and immediately started to snore loudly.

I did my best to sleep, but attempting to do so shoulder-to-shoulder with a man intent on killing me was hard. Lying shoulder to shoulder with a man intent on killing me who was also snoring loudly – quite possibly to keep me from sleeping to make it easier to kill me later – made it well-nigh impossible.

Lying there, tossing, turning, and unable to sleep, while my would-be-killer was snoring away happily – quite possibly gathering his strength, and apparently feeling perfectly all right – was obviously not in my best interest. Cutting Massud down had not worked out as I had anticipated, and, as putting him back up did not feel like an option, I decided that enough was enough. *Time to call it a day.*

*

Massud, pretending to be asleep and snoring, watched how the infidel rose, brushed his teeth with something that sounded as if it had an engine inside it, and started to gather his things; it was obvious that the man was preparing to leave.

The big man – having cleaned a wound in his foot and then finished his packing – turned his attention to the dagger.

Massud could sense the big man contemplating what to do with the beautiful and ceremonial weapon that only a few days earlier had so dramatically “spoken” to him. Massud was a realist, and he understood that the big man wouldn’t just hand it back to him. *He knows I’d use it to execute him.*

The big man held out the dagger in front of himself.

Shit!

It was obvious that the infidel was admiring it.

Even in the faint light of the candle, Massud could see how the stones and the precious metal shone beautifully. *It was meant to kill him.*

After no more than a moment’s hesitation, the big man put the dagger into an outer pocket of his backpack. Then the infidel took Massud’s shoes and put them in a plastic bag that he tied onto his pack.

Shit!

The big man turned around towards him.

Massud only just managed to close his eyes in time.

“Hey! Wake up! No more sleep!”

Massud pretended to be asleep.

The big man shook him with much more violence than would have been necessary.

“Okay, okay, I’m awake!”

“Good, now get out of here.”

“Why are you taking my shoes?”

“Because... So... So you’ve been watching; you’ve just pretended to be asleep, and you snored just to keep me from sleeping.”

Massud did not answer.

“You’ve been awake the whole time, haven’t you?”

Massud still did not answer.

The big man unceremoniously pushed him out of the tent.

“Why are you taking my shoes?”

“That was dishonest: your brother was wrong when he told me you’re not a creep.”

Massud, as he was manhandled out of the tent, chose not to answer.

The big man rolled up the tent, attached it beneath his backpack, lowered the trout, and left a blanket on the ground next to it. “There’s a blanket, so you won’t freeze to death, and some food.”

“Where are you going?”

“Lahore, Kathmandu, and then Oxford.”

“Oxford?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“To get some proper education, to make English my written language, and to become an athlete, among other things.”

“I mean, why are you leaving this place?”

“Because there is no airport here.”

“I mean, why are you leaving in the middle of the night?”

“I’m leaving in the middle of the bloody night because I’m getting bloody sick and tired of you, and everybody else around here, trying to kill me without an even vaguely appropriate reason.”

Massud felt he had nothing to say, so he just watched as the big man removed his second-hand fishing gear from his pack and left it next to the big fish.

“You might want to try your luck.”

The big man had a heavy backpack and a sore foot, and he was obviously short on sleep. *If I could just get my shoes back, I might get a second chance.*

“Goodbye.”

"I have no shoes; do you expect me to walk barefoot to Kalam?"

"No, Mister Massud, I expect you to... What you do is your own business."

"But I want to talk to you."

"You just want to kill me."

"But first I want to talk to you."

"Now, that's not my problem, is it?"

Massud looked sadly after the departing man.

The big man had walked maybe thirty yards when he turned and called, "And, Massud!"

"Yes."

"I know how you catch the big browns."

"I know..."

"If you follow me I will tell everybody."

"Christian dog!"

"Goodbye."

"My shoes!"

"I'll leave them under the bridge just before town."

"The knife!"

"It's a very nice knife."

"Give it to me."

"Why? You'd just use it to try to kill me."

"We will use it to buy Kalashnikovs; it's valuable."

"Then I will keep it as a token of your repentance and generosity."

"You can't do that."

"All right, I'll give it to somebody."

"Whom?"

"Sotheby's. I might send you five percent."

"Who is this Sotheby?"

"You wouldn't understand; it's Western stuff."

"Who is it?"

"An auctioneer."

"Thief!"

"Murderer."

"Infidel!"

"If I see Parvis, I might give him the knife, or maybe I'll put it beside your shoes."

Massud knew that there was one thing that all infidels had in common; they all disregarded spiritual wealth, and instead, they craved material things.

He was far from certain that the big man would return the dagger. “I will kill you one day’!”

Just before the big man vanished into the night, he turned around again, and shouted, “If you don’t try to follow me, I’ll put the knife beside your shoes!”

Massud felt depressed, seriously depressed, as he watched the big Westerner disappear into the night; this had not at all turned out as he had anticipated. *If he takes it, I’m in deep shit, really deep shit.*

28. BIPEDS AND HONEY

1973. Though I did become a reasonable moped driver (and chess player), it seemed obvious that I was worthless as a student. I had the third-worst grades in my class as I finished elementary school, even though I am pretty sure that I studied more than most. Instead of continuing to high school, I did what Senior had been sent to jail for not doing: I enlisted – maybe partly as a protest, I don’t remember – but one reason that I did so at a young age was not to ‘lose’ too much time. Despite my stated desire to get in-and-out of the military as quickly as possible, I was recruited as a so-called PBS, a path that would have turned me into a low-ranking officer. The only way to escape my thus allocated mandatory eighteen months of service was to ask for a more physically demanding duty. I applied to become a parachute commando despite my 287 pounds – they must have gotten my data mixed up, or simply disbelieved their eyes – and I ended up at Vaxholm outside Stockholm as something akin to a Navy Seal. Things, quite predictably, did not turn out very well, and I got kicked out without even having been allowed to participate in the legendary ‘commando march’. I was not Seal material, although I managed to impress myself by swimming more than forty meters underwater (I think it was fifty but that sounds too good to be true). I smoked at the time, so in the military, I started to play poker to finance my disgusting habit. As I finished my military service – I had lost several stones, and looked sort of nearly ok – Mom awarded me a ski trip. She sent me off on my own to Zell am See in Austria where I learned how to say ‘I love you’ in Flemish and came to understand that there were other reasons to chase girls than to pull their hair. My first civilian job was as a cleaner, and even though I became a foreman by day two – thank you, Tibor Rebeneck: Hungarians have tended to show great kindness towards me even though I do not speak a word of Hungarian – I soon realized that life as an employee was not for me, and I quit after three months. Working as a tour guide, taking tourists around Europe on a bus, was much more enjoyable and rewarding, but working for someone else still wasn’t my cup of tea, and it would become my last job, except for six months of teaching.

“Screamer” – or “Chicch Kadune,” which in local lingo means “the little screaming wimp” – is the name that “our” tiger will eventually acquire, so let us call him that from the very beginning. It could well be that Screamer was not sired by a dominant male, but by an older tiger which used to be a dominant male and lived on the southern side of the tigress’s domain. This is corroborated by the mother’s behavior. She reared her cubs in the southern part of her domain, away from its border to the dominant male’s, and right next to the older tiger’s domain.

Screamer had been born a couple of months earlier, probably in some area of dense vegetation, but his mother had taken him up onto higher ground just twenty or so paces from one of the many channels that drain the forests and feed the rivers.

The waters of the delta – muddy gray in the morning, silvery reflective in the middle of the day, and lushly green in the afternoon – presented many dangers to a tiger cub, and that was probably why his mother kept him up on the high ground and out of the way of crocodiles and sharks. Hills, though nice and dry, might not be the best places to raise cubs in most parts of the world, but in the delta, there are not that many dangers on dry land to threaten a tiger cub which has survived its first few months: only snakes, male tigers, and men. This particular hill was well camouflaged as it was crowned with phoenix palms. Phoenix palms look like dwarfed near-ground-level date palms, and the tigers of the Sundarbans favor them. Maybe this is because resting beneath them is more comfortable than resting in other forms of undergrowth, or maybe it is because of the striped leaves of the palms which will camouflage a tiger excellently well, even in bright sunlight. Yet, in the Sundarbans, “hill” does not really mean all that much and even a mere ten feet of elevation is enough to qualify as a hill, unlike up in the north, where the Foothills, and the Himalayas, rise high to reach into the skies. This hill, however, was a little higher than ten feet, and consequently a little nicer and dryer than most other places.

Screamer had a sibling when Tigertooth, the local forest officer, first spotted him along with a much smaller sibling, likely a sister. Then one day the sibling just disappeared, yet fortune smiled on the remaining cub because Screamer had the luck of being born at a time when food was abundant and bad cyclones absent. Also, he had the luck to escape poachers and the blessing of a mother both able and willing to provide for him.

Yet, something bad must have happened to Screamer during his first months because his left paw somehow got injured, and that was what would eventually give him his name.

The people in a nearby Hindu village called his mother *The Noisy Lady*, as she gave out a bloodcurdling roar whenever somebody got close to her or her cub. Tigresses get noisy when they want to attract the attention of a male, but once the mating is over, they normally quiet down. Screamer's mother had not quieted down, but it must have been another sort of roar, because no males came around – or, if they did, they did not kill the cub. The Noisy Lady was a name given more in affection than resentment because, although a tiger's roar can be quite frightening, people in the delta by far prefer to be informed of a tiger's whereabouts by its roar than in any other way.

The tiger cub, suckling and occasionally trying a bit of meat, grew stronger by the day, and, apart from having nobody to play with – a problem that the cub solved by attacking and playing with his mother's tail – Screamer's life started well enough. His prospects looked quite promising in the beautiful forest of the Sundarbans.

*

The Noisy Lady was not at all comfortable with the situation, because even though she roared angrily, her cub simply would not take the hint. It was not so much that she wanted to part with him, but rather that there were stronger feelings than separation anxiety brewing inside the tigress. The Noisy Lady was getting ready to mate again, and it was thus definitely time for herself and her cub to go separate ways. However, her cub would not do as he was instructed, and it all ended with Screamer taking over the domain of the Old Male Tiger who lived south of them and had recently failed to survive a confrontation with the Dominant Male.

Screamer thus conveniently got his mother as his next domain neighbor as a sort of buffer between himself and the Dominant Male, who seemed to enjoy bullying him, and against whom could not have put up much of a fight.

Screamer's mother would have preferred her cub to find himself a more remote domain, but eventually, she gave in. Her decision to not chase her cub away had nothing to do with motherly love though; her cub, even if young and inexperienced, had grown so big and so strong that he was second in size only to the Dominant Male, and confronting him simply did not seem to be a good idea.

The good care Screamer had been given – together with an abundance of food, and an absence of serious cyclones – had helped to make him large, strong, and well-built. As they parted ways, Screamer was, over curves (from the tip of his nose to the tip of his tail) more than a foot longer than his mother, and he was still growing. However, he walked with a slight limp

caused by an old wound, and perhaps also by his quick growth. Nobody knew the nature of the wound, nor how he had gotten it. Yet, though it gave him a slight limp, it seemed to give him no pain except when forced to carry something, jump, or accelerate quickly.

To avoid the pain that came from accelerating, leaping, and carrying, the young tiger had developed alternative ways of making his kills: camouflaging, stalking, and ambushing. This approach to life, and maybe some good genes from his parents, helped Screamer develop into one smart tiger, and he soon achieved a kill rate well beyond the one in ten or twenty that is considered normal for the Sundarbans' tigers. However smart he grew, he could not always find ways to avoid the final burst of speed, and as Screamer continued to grow, so did his pain, his lung capacity, and thus the power of his scream. Every time he leaped at his prey he screamed out in agony, and the locals nicknamed him "Chicch Kadune", or "the little screaming wimp": the visiting trophy-hunters named him "Screamer" His scream signaled that some poor animal could well be about to go the way of all flesh, and it was often followed by the barking of deer or the high-pitched squeal of a wild boar. As he left his mother, a continued abundance of food had allowed Screamer to continue growing into a formidable beast.

Then, with a particularly devastating cyclone, the years of plenty came to an abrupt end; conditions went from plentiful to harsh virtually overnight, and soon the villagers would cease to enjoy the young tiger's scream. Soon they would ask themselves how they could ever have laughed at that terrifying sound. Soon they would cry out the names of their loved ones in horror when they heard the scream of the giant tiger; soon they would tremble with fear at the sound of his now quite paradoxical name.

On an early spring evening towards the end of the honey-gathering season, Sting, the old honey collector who chose to work alone, laboriously trudged along the river on his way back to the Hindu village next to Hiron Point Forest Station. Attacked by a snake up in a tree, he had been forced to throw himself to the ground, and the wound had never healed, though it no longer gave him any pain. As an unusually heavy load of honey weighed him down, his limp was more noticeable than usual.

Sting was not a very careful honey collector; in addition to insisting on working alone, as almost no one did, he refused to wear a mask on the back of his head. The old man recalled the last time somebody – his eldest son,

actually – had argued that he ought to wear a mask, and the boy had even offered to buy him one.

“Why won’t you, father? Will you explain that to me?”

“I don’t want to offend Bon Bibi.”

“Why would wearing a mask offend the goddess of the forest?”

“Doesn’t the mask depict a mustached man?”

“It does.”

“And is that not how Dokkhin Rai, her demon brother, walks the forest when he does not take the form of a tiger?”

“It is.”

“Now, how do you think Bon Bibi would feel about somebody, especially a decrepit old man such as myself, walking her forest dressed like her arch-enemy?”

The boy had just stood there, gaping like a fish, unable to come up with anything to say.

Sting had a way with words, but everybody, including his eldest son, suspected that he simply did not want to wear a mask. Though masks help keep flies, bees, and other naughty things (such as tigers) off one’s neck, they tend to get quite sticky and uncomfortable, especially when it gets hot, or when one gets honey on them.

Chicch Kadune had seen the old limping biped often of late, and he recognized it from afar; the limp made it easy to do so, and Chicch Kadune felt aggressive towards whatever limped. The limp was not the only reason why Chicch Kadune recognized the honey-collector. In his youth, during one of his first excursions away from his mother’s protective care, Chicch Kadune had come across the limping biped high up in a tree next to a bee-home. Chicch Kadune had never seen a biped up in a tree before, and at first, he had assumed that it was a big monkey and thus something fit to eat.

The biped up in the tree had spotted him, and it had begun shouting at him for a long time; it then threw the entire bee-home at him. The bees had stung Chicch Kadune, and they had followed him in his flight, stinging him all over his body until he jumped into the water. Later, he had returned to see whether the biped was still up in the tree, and he had found it gone, just like the bees. However, some of the bee-home had remained, and Chicch Kadune ate it; that was his first encounter with honey, and he had liked it, though he hated bees – even more than flies. Yes, the limping biped was one of the very few bipeds that Chicch Kadune recognized.

*

The next evening Chicch Kadune, not having eaten since he last saw the limping biped, was hiding among the phoenix palms right next to the river, not twenty meters from where he expected the limping biped to pass. Chicch Kadune, who knew that nobody would spot him under the palms (certainly not a biped) and had decided to look upon the limping biped as food and to eat it.

Chicch Kadune recalled some biped parts that his mother had brought him; though they had not been all that fresh, they had been tasty. The problem was that bipeds seemed so different – somewhat dangerous and almighty, even if normally rather small – and then their eyes...

As the biped approached, Chicch Kadune could feel his resolve weaken: it was not as dark as it had been the previous day, and as the limping biped approached its eyes were looking straight at him.

Chicch Kadune had virtually given up, but then it passed him and he could no longer see its eyes because it was not double-faced. Chicch Kadune felt less frightened. He mustered his courage, but then, as he crouched to attack, he made an uncharacteristic mistake by stepping on a dry stick.

Sting heard the crack, and he turned around as quickly as his load of honey permitted, facing, but not seeing, the tiger.

The limping biped's staring eyes and its quick movement frightened Chicch Kadune, and he decided again that he was not hungry enough.

*

Two evenings later, Chicch Kadune, who still hadn't fed, waited once more under the phoenix palms right next to where he expected the limping biped to turn toward the village.

Sting came walking along the path just as the sun was setting.

Chicch Kadune could hear the biped long before he could see it.

Sting had had an excellent day; he was sticky with honey, and he was looking forward to washing himself.

In the village to which Sting was returning, the tiger's scream was heard loud and clear,

"That's Chicch Kadune; I say it's a deer," somebody said with a smile. "The wildlife is coming back."

Others nodded in agreement.

Bipeds and Honey

Then, as Chicch Kadune's scream was accompanied neither by a deer's distress call nor by a wild boar's squeal but by a human cry of distress, the smiles on the villagers' faces vanished.

Everything in and around the village stopped dead.

Then, after a second or so, every man in the village rushed for his bamboo stick; then they all hurried towards the direction of the scream.

There was nothing there except fresh blood and the tracks of a big, limping male tiger. Strangely, much of the honey was gone too, which suggested to some of the villagers that Screamer might be something more than a tiger.

