

László's Bear

Mari néni does not know what to say. The concrete black of the basement seems to harden around her, closing in on the tallow-candle with every second she stays quiet. She can just make out Mrs Gömori's pale face waiting for an answer. Mrs Gömori was a young bride when Mari néni first met her, holding together a glittering illusion with cheap sequins. Now she goes on wearing wealth in the tilt of her chin, but the sequins have come loose like fur from a tormented cat. She grips her son László to her side with sharp nails in his wiredrawn chest. The boy's head is bowed, as if offering himself up for lice inspection.

"He says he had it last night," Mrs Gömori whispers. "Then this morning it was gone. He claims to have looked everywhere."

László has lost his teddy bear. Mari néni glances around. The basement probably is 'everywhere' to an eight-year-old boy who knows what waits for them above. There are eleven of them down here, the seven others sitting in a half-moon of shivering shadows around the candle. László's little sister Livia perches on a cot – most likely brought down in an air-raid by the old tenants – at the edge of the semi-circle, hunched over her bare knees. She does not even peek at Albert, who is doing magic tricks for the twins, Nicolai and Jancsi. Péter Mendelbaum sits on the other side, his down-turned lips wrenched to the left by the monstrous bulge of his jaw. Mr Nagy and Kate huddle in the centre. Kate, once a teacher at the Dohány Street Synagogue, strokes and arranges her father. Mr Nagy pays her no mind, with no mind to spend. Before all this he beckoned music to his hands at the National Conservatory. Now the thick shelf of his eyebrows hoods his face, and a broken whistle dribbles from his lips. Perhaps he thinks he is still there, testing those gilt walls.

"It has to be here somewhere, Mrs Gömori," Mari néni says. "We can look in the morning, when it's a bit lighter. Everyone will be going to sleep soon." She smiles down at László. "Mr. Bear probably decided to go adventuring for the night, but he'll come back in the morning to tell you about it, I promise." László does not look up. "My Evie's doll used to march off all the time and we'd find her in the flowerbeds *kissing* the dog!"

Mrs Gömori seizes Mari néni by the arm. It is the first time she has touched anyone in the basement.

“We have to find it *now*.”

There is real fear in the young woman’s face, and more than fear: loss. Mari’s own son Moses refused to give up the baby blanket she stitched for him, eventually keeping it in his bed, aged sixteen, telling her that she *must not* tell her friends as a dinner joke. He did not take the blanket with him when his orders came up for forced labour service, only the yellow armband the recruiting officers ordered Mari to sew for him. The scrap of scarlet with its scratchy threads of gold now forms Mari’s pillow on the basement floor. If it were ever taken, lost – the thought squeezes her stomach, and she takes Mrs Gömori’s hand.

“Let’s ask the others if they’ve seen it,” she says.

Mrs Gömori’s lips twist one way and then the other, a screw top coming loose. “Thank you, Mari néni.”

She sounds like a drooping school girl and Mari wants to snap at her to quit with this ‘néni’ farce. Really, only Mr Nagy should be given the title, the honour held for their elders, their parents – at seventy-five, Mr Nagy is thirty years older than Mari. But on their first night in the basement Mari had found two empty paint pots, one to perch on, trying to keep your pee silent whilst the others pretended not to hear, and one to wash in – that was when she thought someone might bring them hot water. The main thing, she said, was not to mix the buckets up. “All right, Mari néni,” Albert joked. Mari did not say anything, only rubbed his arm with a soft laugh. *Néni* stuck.

“But I do hate to disturb everyone...” Mrs Gömori looks over her shoulder. “After all, it’s obvious who has it, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

Mrs Gömori’s hairline seems to redden, though it could be the guttering light. She jabs the air with her chin. Mari néni follows the gesture, out of the circle, into the darkness, to the silent man slumped against the wall.

‘Why would *he* have it?’

“Well, he’s not our – I mean, we don’t *know* him, do we?”

No, they do not know him. He is not meant to be here. It was never in their plan, as Mari néni is constantly reminded. *Their plan*, as if the situation is under control.

Rumours of the ghetto and deportation divided Yellow Star Houses between those who denied it was possible – denial still ripe even after the rumble of German tanks shook Budapest in March, even after months, years, of ever-shrinking cells – and those demanding they try and escape, resist, anything that did not imply consent. When a Gentile friend offered this basement they all said yes, these concert companions of Mari néni's, these socialist-poetry-and-coffee dates. They were edging out of Király Street in the silent frost before dawn, ready for the basement, when *he* staggered out of an alleyway before them.

Mari néni noticed his feet first. He hobbled out of the darkness on hams wrapped in butcher-paper. He only had seven toes. Whenever she catches him in the corner of her eye now, she thinks of his feet, and the mirrored walls around her heart crack, just for a moment, letting him in, a muddled projection. She thinks of his feet and imagines they are hers too, imagines she is a woman with broken toes who must walk anyway, even with the knowledge that each step takes her bones further from ever healing. She will never be normal again. She will always wince; always swell where she took so much weight, as will he. This is the season of irreversible marches, and she will walk the basement, a mouse in a maze, towards the trap at its centre.

But then she looks in his eyes and thinks she will never know or feel what he has seen, what her husband and son might be seeing now, what her friends and family on the surface are seeing.

“There’s something wrong about him,” says Mrs Gömori. “He smells wrong.”

“Don’t we all?”

“You *know* what I mean.”

Mari néni had insisted they bring him to the basement. The others in the group said no. She looked at them, a nearby engine coughing into the silence, while the city she loved peered over her shoulder, telling her she must not stand here too long. After a minute beneath her stare, Péter and Albert picked the man up. In the basement, Mari néni had approached him with hands spread. A crown of wild, thorny curls and a thick beard almost hid his full, storyteller lips from view. Eyes like broken cataracts poured unstopably from his face, which was so thin, so hollow, his skin snapped over the high knifepoint of each cheekbone. Gaze focusing on her, he shot backwards, fists going up. His growl was that of a dog trying to speak. He has not spoken since, only

sits in the scribbled black and watches, reminding her of Moses' heavy silences after Báltki – after Báltki.

Perhaps it is this that stops Mari néni from lingering on the silent man. Or perhaps it is the welts printed on his skin. She had vowed never to let go of her husband and son's call-up notices to serve as forced-labourers, in case they work like pawn slips, and will one day recall them from Ukraine. But, studying the man, her fingers score the soft paper edges in her pocket. She wants to ask him: *where are Báltki and Moses now? Have you been where they've been? Have you seen what they have seen?*

Now, Mari néni says, "He hasn't moved from that spot, Klari." It is the first time she has used Mrs Gömori's first name. The young woman stiffens. "Let's join the others."

Bullying a smile onto her face, Mari néni sits down next to Mr Nagy. Little Nicolai and Jancsi trip over Albert to get into her lap. Their weight is a muscle memory she wants to push away. She pulls them closer. László slips free from his mother's side, hovering near his sister, who does not look up. She argued with her mother yesterday, Mari néni remembers. Mrs Gömori sits down slowly, taking time to arrange her skirts. The circle is finished. Beyond, Mari néni can just make out the man ducking lower to the floor.

"László can't find his teddy bear."

Mr Nagy releases a loud whistle. Mari néni manages not to flinch, instead laughing as she presses Mr Nagy's hand, feeling his marble knuckles, the soft hair.

"I know, I know, we should have such problems. But László's teddy bear *is* missing. He had it last night, and now can't find it anywhere."

Péter turns on the twins. 'The boys must have it. Come on now. Quick.'

"They wouldn't take it without asking," says Albert.

"We *don't* have it," says Nicolai. "László never lets us even touch it"

"I'm sure they're telling the truth, Péter," Mari néni says.

The man just looks at her, fingers smoothing the flattened hinge of his jaw, the socket dislodged by an Arrow Cross thug's boot. These Hungarian Nazis, they seemed to need to prove their viciousness, forcing men and women whose apartments they raided to do anything they could think of, strange directors in an even stranger play.

They would beat the flesh off a man's backside with their truncheons, or force cripples to hurdle bollards and benches in the street, beating them when they failed. They took radios and money and people. They would make a man lie prostrate on the floor and call himself a Bolshevik pig again and again, shouting it into the floorboards while they squared their boot exactly where they wanted it, while they lifted their leg, while they brought it down – this is how Péter's wife described it, Péter's wife who is now... Mari néni looks away from the man's jaw.

"I'm sure we'll be able to find it in the morning," says Kate. "You probably just put it down and forgot László."

Mari néni hears László choke.

"He says he didn't," she says, "and we all know László is very grown up. So let's just all look and –"

"What are you saying?" Péter interrupts. "If he didn't *lose* it, then someone *took* it. Who are you to accuse –"

"No one is accusing anyone. We will all search together."

They turn to look at the man in the corner. He gives no sign of hearing, so Mari néni stands up. Her movement scatters the circle.

"We'll find Mr Bear," she says. "Don't worry, László."

The twins clinging to her, Mari néni sings in a thin, scratched voice, the old nursery rhyme, '*Boci, boci tarka, sefüle, se farka...*' as she turns over empty boxes. Her limbs burn and darkness swims around her, no limits, no time, swelling as her stomach shrinks. The basement is small, with the door barricaded and a street-level window choked from existence by paper and rags.

When the building was still occupied, the wooden partitions dividing the basement into lots for each apartment were broken down and piled into a corner to make more room for air raids. Mari néni tries to shift the boards now to see if the teddy bear is hiding between the slats, but the pile is too big, too many apartments, too many tenants, half evacuated, half deported. The basement is no longer any use as a bomb shelter, the building on its last legs. The next air raid may bury them alive. Mari néni finds a shovel in a mound of rubble in the corner. How are you going to dig yourself out of this one?

An empty bottle of rum spins from her shoe, clanging on something metal. She finds a box of swaddling in the bottom of a wardrobe and a smashed typewriter in the desk and the perfect skeleton of a rat big enough to attack a baby.

“Damn,” says Albert, peering over her shoulder. “We could have eaten it.”

László had introduced his teddy bear to her only yesterday: *Mari Néni, this is Mr Bear; Mr Bear, this is Mari Néni*. The teddy bear had stiff limbs stuck asking for a hug, big listening ears and a splodge nose. Straw poked from a bullet-size hole between its startled glass eyes. He was the size Evie had been when Mari first held her to her nipple, her slick, mottled body lying across Mari’s stomach, tiny feet kicking at her hand, pushing at this next container as she would continue to do, always searching for more space – as she had been that day, dashing along the bank of the Danube.

When László offered Mari Néni Mr Bear’s paw, his mother snapped: “*László, grow up.*”

They are running out of places to look, but Mari néni goes on, waiting for someone to laugh, announce, *oh, here it is*. But the only voice is László’s, the boy finding it in him to protest that he *had* Mr Bear yesterday, he did *not* lose him, he doesn’t *know* where he is. Mrs Gömori shrieks at him to stop, turning on Péter when he exhorts her to be quiet, calling him an old hen, a deformed imbecile. Mari néni thinks she might be sick. The man in the corner does not stir, but she feels like he is watching them bump into each other, and that somehow László’s crying is coming from *him*, not the little boy. She wants to ask him: *have you seen it? Can you help us?* But she does not breach the darkness around his still body, instead disentangling the twins to put her arms around László. The sharp stairway of his ribs digs into her side. She kisses his head. Mrs Gömori covers her face.

“We can look in the morning,” Mari néni whispers, clasping Mrs Gömori’s elbow. ‘I know how upsetting this must be, losing László’s toy. But really, it’s so dark now, we can’t ask everyone to keep looking.’

“It is *not* a toy.”

Mari néni falters.

Mrs Gömori had not wanted Mari néni to touch the bear.

Mari néni steps closer. She finds the young mother’s fingers in the dark and remembers a flash of rings.

Mrs Gömori had not wanted anyone to discover Mr Bear's bellyache of jewels.

"Your valuables are hidden inside it?"

Mrs Gömori is no longer breathing. László's head worms lower still, exposing the knot of bone at his nape in the half-light. Mrs Gömori jerks him closer, her whole body elasticated, responding to the force of the nod she now gives: *yes*.

A twitch buries beneath Mari néni's eye. Mrs Gömori's valuables – jewellery and money and God knows what else. Money, at this time. What could it possibly buy now, in the basement, or anywhere? What in God's name could it matter, when Mari néni has nothing, *nothing*? When everything she tried to save has been stolen from her, and from every person down here, so that even if they had mirrors to look in (if they could bring themselves to look), they would see nothing. None of it can be bought back or replaced by anyone's melted gold. There is nothing left to salvage. Valuables – values. They are worth less than the smoke sighing from the candle down here.

But afterwards, when it is over – that eternal whisper, *when it is over*. Money might buy your way to a new land, with your children. If you still had them. If you had not lost them already. Mari néni watches the quick rise and fall of László's wheezing, breathing body.

"We don't have to tell everyone, do we?" says Mrs Gömori.

Mari néni almost laughs. After a few days down here everyone piled together their silver candlesticks, the salt pots and bracelets they had left, as if for a bonfire. The treasures wait now in a part of the wall loosened by a bomb. All they own in the world would be lost or reclaimed together. But Mrs Gömori had not taken the bear clutched so tightly to László's chest and explained what was inside. How will they react now?

"Perhaps we could just, well, search that man...?"

In the beat left by her silence, Albert interrupts, closer than Mari néni realised. "Why would anyone steal László's teddy bear?"

Péter smacks a broken flashlight into the hollow of his palm. "Steal? What are you saying?"

"No one is accusing –"

"It has *everything* in it," bursts Mrs Gömori. "My money, my husband's eternity ring, my wedding ring, everything!"

“Why didn’t you put it in the wall with the rest of us?” says Péter, pushing between the two women. “Or didn’t you trust us?” His jaw lodges and his bones grind, bricks rubbing together. He spits the words out of the corner of his mouth: “You would never have even *talked* to people like us if this hadn’t happened, living like a princess in the Buda hills!”

The blackness cramps.

“Mrs Gömori was scared,” says Mari néni. “Keeping their inheritance safe was the last thing her husband made her promise to do, and I’m sure we can all understand that. Can’t we?”

Péter clicks his jaw back into position. It sounds like a wishbone snapping. “Then what are you going to do?” he says. ‘Search our bags? Would you like us to strip too?’

‘*Péter.*’

He glares at Mari for long seconds, cupping his cheek.

“What if we do find it in someone’s bag?” asks Albert. “What do we do, reward them with a breath of fresh air?”

“No,” says Mari néni quickly. “No one is leaving the basement. We’ve already decided that.”

“*We?*” says Péter.

Laughter. Mari néni grabs for the children before realising what it is. She looks up at the blocked window. Two men are walking past, their feet shuffling through what sounds like ice or grit, exchanging a joke. She listens to it drift away, out of her reach, leaving her with only this –

We’ll have to search our bags.

The words beat at the roof her mouth.

We’ll have to search our bags.

Mari néni shakes her head.

“We’ll look tomorrow,” she says, “when it’s lighter. It’s past the children’s bedtime. Perhaps in the morning it will – show up.”

With that, she picks up the twins and carries them to their nest of blankets, László trailing behind her. The useless shuffling of the others makes her want to scream, but she keeps her voice soft, and soon Kate and Mrs Gömori come to help. For

the past few nights they've been telling stories to the children, words instead of food, each adult taking a sentence, passing it on whenever they reached the next *and then...* Tonight everyone is already lying down, as if an angry mother has sent them to bed. Mari néni keeps her hand on Mrs Gömori's back, stroking windmills, as she eases László beneath a blanket. Livia is crunched up on her side, refusing to move. Mari néni feels faint. She tastes blood on her teeth. The few steps to her corner of the basement feel like stepping over mountains. She folds to the floor, pressing her face into Moses' blanket. It does not smell of him anymore.

Someone blows out the candle.

A child cries.

Mari néni squeezes her eyes shut.

"There's a rumour going around the village." Albert's voice shapes the darkness.

"What?" Péter's grunt.

"It's a joke," says Albert. "There's a rumour going around the village: a Christian girl has been found murdered nearby. A terrible beating. Scared of a pogrom, the villagers gather inside the synagogue. They hide there until morning, shaking and terrified, talking about what could happen. Will the Gentiles come? What will they do to us? Finally the sun rises, and the rabbi runs in, crying: *Wonderful news! The murdered girl was Jewish!*"

Péter snorts. Kate tells Albert not to make such jokes. The sweat cloying to Mari néni's body turns to ice. *Wonderful news. The murdered girl was Jewish.* She turns her back on all of them, hugging herself. Her husband used to fold the blanket around her, from her cold toes to her chin. They would talk in bed, all the things they would not say in front of the children, innocent things – that dress made me want to... or, do you think Moses' handwriting will improve? – to everything not innocent, everything covered in fear. Moses and Evie used to appear in their doorway on Saturdays, practising the polite greeting they learnt in school, a chorus of '*Kezeit csokolom*'. I kiss your hand. Mari néni smiles, spine slotting into the bumps of her marriage bed, until whispering tosses her back into the basement.

It is Péter and Albert. And, Mari néni realises, Kate, who is talking to Mrs Gömori in low tones. Mari néni raises herself on one elbow, trying to pick out the man in the corner. She finds his outline: his head is raised now, as if he is listening too.

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Aprád listens to them talk about him, these faceless bastards, as if he is deaf. They don't know the ear it takes to be a plainsman. They don't know he can take horses up into the damp foothills and still hear his mother calling from the endless swaying green below. Or maybe they don't care if he hears their accusations: that he would steal a child's toy. It is the only thing the boy has, that teddy bear. Aprád has watched him sit in deep conversation with it, nose-to-nose. Once the boy raised the bear's paw to him. The boy didn't think he was an idiot or an ingrate. The boy and the bear waved to him.

"We'll search him in the morning."

"I'm not sure Mari néni would like that..."

"Who gives a damn what that woman *likes*? It's time we stopped this *néni* rubbish, for God's sake."

"What if he, you know, puts up a..."

"Well there are enough of us, aren't there?"

No there are not. There are not enough men left alive to make him sit quietly and allow them to touch him, to scrape away his flaking flesh, to dip their hands into his open body. Aprád shakes his head, tugging on his ears. Not enough men left alive.

The little boy is crying in the dark. He used to do that in the farmhouse when he dreamt of monsters; and then later in the camp where he would clamp his hand over his mouth, trying not to step on their naked, twisted bodies, but that was impossible, nudging voided men and women apart with the shovel-tip.

Mari néni does not want to hear this any more than he wants to remember it, he is sure. But he has said it now – no, only remembered it in her presence, polluting the air – and she will have to live with the image in the seconds between blinking.

Or not. Here, undo it, undo my words, horsemeat reverted to unsteady foal: undone. She never heard him utter it, for he never voiced it. Impossible for him to be here, surely, impossible for him to have escaped; but possible, maybe, for him to wrap

the smell of it in words and deliver it to Mari néni? No. It does not work that way. If only, if only, then he would give her every detail of how we come apart, and let her be buried in it instead of him. Would he? Yes. As men climb to the top of the pit and mothers crush babies, yes.

This is his haunting; yes, he is sure of it, for he cannot really have walked all the way to Budapest? This is his haunting, and he cannot be free of it, but no longer cries. No salt. They would like him better, these city arseholes, if he cried. They would understand him if they could comfort him, pat and feed him, like that Mr Nagy. And if he will not cry then he ought to be a man like them, a man they can recognise, instead of this broken mirror for what they cannot stomach in themselves. Oh, he knows their stubbornness, their blindness, and in that blind insistence they demand he whine like a child, or stand like a man.

No sir. He is a horse now, on the great stretches, free. He isn't down here in just another living tomb. He isn't here with more people, more human faces to try and learn-forget, wondering, *when will the time come when I will never see your face again*, until all he sees is his own face in theirs, wondering, *when will the time come when you will never see my face again?*

No, he cannot hear them plan who will approach, who will hold him down. He cannot feel his body itch and burn and tear. He is shaking his mane in the mountain air, such a clean feeling it is like galloping through spring water. He crests the hilltop and soars into a dawn as beautiful as Mari néni's eyes.

He has caught Mari néni's eye, once, twice, across the basement. Eyes like his Mama's, grey slate, resilient but gentle, inviting softness from him, promising to be careful with any gentleness he can still offer. These other bastards don't *see*, really *see*, Mari néni's eyes, just like they do not hear the tiredness in her voice when she drags up another piece of herself and gives it to them. She'll never get it back. Aprád's Mama hadn't: years of turning soil and eking out stock and mucking stables. The last time Aprád saw his Mama she had the same lines gouged around her eyes as Mari Néni has now.

The last time he saw his Mama, she had been holding his hands on the platform. They had been put on different trains because he did not hold on tight enough. That's what it came down to.

He knows what takes place next. None of these fools can know, and so they hate him for shaking the earth loose into their circle. Bodies shovelled into great pits until the earth is too full and only their heads are visible: upturned faces with blood running down their necks, and sometimes one man might still be alive and stroke the body next to him.

He knows that is how Mama died, or is dying, or will die, tomorrow, or the day after that, without even him to bury her, as he lies here, doing nothing.

He can see this death in Mari néni's eyes.

"Damn it, let's just search him now."

They aren't going to touch him. No one has touched him since that day in the pit, or was it a field in snow-white blankness undoing the world to start it again? A hand pulling him away, the red on white of blood, his friend shot in the back. Yes, blinding hill-snow when he ran and staggered and crawled his way here, with his arm burnt from his friend's last touch, or was it the graze of a bullet, or the touch of something else, and then grubby city-snow when he finally fell down, his skin still burning. He came here because they said the ghettos had not been emptied yet, Budapest was safe, but they were wrong, and he would have been swept up if he had not fallen in front of Mari néni. But he did, and she saved him, set him free, wild, and they will not catch him – or he will stampede into the snow that is still falling, through the basement ceiling, stained red. He will pour red all over them.

They are getting up. He can hear it. They are coming closer.

"What are you doing?" It is Mari néni's voice; it is his mother's voice on cold mornings when he slept in.

"We know you've got it, so just stay still."

"Wait, what are you – everyone stop –"

They are coming, legs and arms and fists and Aprád dances on his hooves, rearing up at them –

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Péter, kicking the man. The children crying. Mrs Gömori screaming. Mr Nagy singing at the top of his voice. Péter punching, shaking, roaring. The man clawing, snarling. In

it all, Mari néni can hardly hear herself shouting *no* over and over again, screaming: '*We are not animals!*' She tries to grab Péter but Albert pulls her back, saying she mustn't, she mustn't. She begs but they will not listen. Péter is stamping on him and the man is shouting out for his Mama. Mari néni hears a loud crunch and then the man screams like Evie did when she saw the dead body floating in the water, drawing the soldier's gun on her.

'Stop it!' someone shouts. 'Stop it!'

Another *thud*: Péter's boot.

'Stop!'

Mari néni looks around. Livia is crouching behind her, holding something up. It looks like a deformed baby.

Mr. Bear.

'I have it! I have it!'

The kicking stops. Slow, heavy pants fill the room. There is a hissing sound and the candle sputters to life under Kate's hands. Mari néni stares at tiny Livia and the bear held akimbo in her offering arms.

"I just wanted to hold it..."

Mrs Gömori rushes to her daughter, snatching the bear up and hugging it to her breast, crying into its squashed head.

"I'm sorry."

Mrs Gömori lowers the bear, rocks back on her heels and slaps Livia so hard it echoes.

The basement turns around Mari néni. She twists with it, looking between Péter and Albert's sagging bodies to where the man lies on the floor.

Blood flows from a cut on his head, through his curls and into his eyes, which blink, showing white only, a dreadful semaphore. One hand hugs his ribs, and the other is held aloft, fingers like snapped matches. Teeth litter the floor. His breathing comes in gasps.

Mari néni pushes through the men and drops to his side, lifting his head gently onto her knees. He remains stiff for a moment, and then seems to deflate. Mari néni gathers up her skirt and uses it to wipe blood from his eyes. No one speaks as next she

turns his head to one side, pouring thick blood from his mouth into her lap. She pats his back as if burping a baby.

“I need bandages, quickly.”

Kate begins to shred a blanket. The ripping sounds count off the seconds: one, two, three, with Mari néni cradling the man’s head, trying to catch the words now tumbling from his lips. She bows over him but still cannot understand; only hear the word ‘Mama’. She undoes his torn shirt, probing his ribs as she sings in a small voice, “*Boci, boci tarka, sefüle, se farka...*”

“I didn’t mean to...” Péter breathes above her. “I could never do such a thing. I thought he had the bear. I could never do such a thing.”

Albert has retreated to the other side of the room. Mari néni watches Péter yank his jaw from side to side, the click of the sockets filling the room. She reaches for him. He stares at her, spewing uncontrolled spit, and then struggles from his thin coat, making frantic strips of his sleeves.

The man does not react, only gives the room a long sweep from where Mr Nagy hums uncertainly to the twins crying in Kate’s arms, stopping finally on Mari néni’s face, with eyes that seem to be watching from somewhere beyond the basement. She sees Evie fade into the Danube as he fades. She was too late to call or pull her daughter away, arriving only in time to watch the ice swallow her. She presses her forehead to the man’s forehead, her lips to his lips.

Silence. Mr Nagy has stopped whistling. Mari néni glances up at him. He is standing with his head tilted to one side, as if trying to identify a distant melody. She wonders what he can hear. Waves lapping at an English or Australian beach, perhaps, new shorelines that would give them sanctuary, new buildings without children to call home. Boots on the basement steps one day, soldiers following a tip to this door. Or maybe just the man’s breathing, so quiet, always so quiet, never contributing a sound to the basement before now, and Mrs Gömori’s rushed prayers, clutching the teddy bear to her, with the clink of the future inside.

Mari néni does not know. She can hear nothing beyond the basement.

