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Pataki

He was to meet Pataki by the corner of Attila and Sarlo. He had something important to impart, Pataki had said, and it couldn't wait.

It was a bleak afternoon, when he stepped out, and cold; a fussy, disappointing afternoon that had squandered all the promises of the morning, the sky looking like spoiled porridge and as he pulled on his gloves, Sebastyan couldn't help but feel that a request for money was in the offing. My God, Pataki still hadn't returned the twenty forints he'd lent him the last time they'd met. Not a good sign, all this skulduggery. Something was going to happen that couldn't show its face in the honest light of day.

He saw Pataki off in the distance, leaning against a lamplight (the only time he'd be on time of course – when he was hoping to put the touch on).

The man did seem down at the heel; his clothes looking as if they'd been good at some stage, today his trousers shiny at the seat, and his jacket fraying at the cuff. He had once been someone who'd taken a great deal of pride in his physical appearance, Sebastyan recalled. And now? Well now, something was slightly off – no, something was missing and just what it was Sebastyan could not say. Thinking things over, Sebastyan determined that he could likely spare Pataki ten forints or so, what could it hurt in the long run (well, money right down the drain is what it would amount to, but who was counting?)

He raised his hand in greeting.

"Ah, there you are." Pataki came forward and taking his arm, began to lead him down the street, his breath smelling of peach schnapps. "Now there my friend, I thought you'd never come." He wrapped his hand around Sebastyan's and walked him away from the main thoroughfare. The air was a cold crust that settled on the ground, their shoulders.

"My friend, my friend, my friend. I've been waiting for you for such a long time. I need to talk to you, you see." They wandered aimlessly down the street, Pataki talking all the while, leading him down into the Taban – greasy clothes hanging on the lines, the smell of fish on the wind.

"You know, no one understands me but you Sebastyan. No one else would have come to meet me, here on such a cold and dreary afternoon." He stopped, looked Sebastyan in the eye. "Only you."

Well, that was true. Sebastyan felt for his wallet.

"No, no. It's not that. I assure you. I've no need of that right now. I'm flush in fact."

They resumed their walk.

"And if you'd let me, I'd like to treat you today."

They stopped in front of a mud-splattered sign – The Blue Cat. Sebastyan caught the scent of offal, of day old bread.

"How magnanimous of you."

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Pataki smiled, opened the door. A few pale lamps sputtered in the gloom, giving off an oily light, heavy with yesterday's oil.

They sat down in a corner table in the semi-darkness. Pataki took out two white linen handkerchiefs from his jacket, proceeded to unroll them, handing one to Sebastyan. The waiter brought out some sweaty orange cheese, plates of food.

"Well," Pataki began, picking up a knife. "You must be wondering why I asked you to come here, especially at such a gloomy time."

Sebastyan sat back, took up a cup of coffee that had been plunked down sloppily in front of him – tiny rivulets of liquid flowing into the grains of the wood.

"I must admit to some curiosity, yes."

Pataki leaned conspiratorially forward. Sebastyan could see minute white flecks that had collected on the black collar of his coat (a swallow-tail – how long had he been wearing these same clothes?)

He took hold of Sebastyan's lapels leaned forward some more.

"Well it's about that story I wrote a little while ago, the one that nobody seemed to want to print for the longest time until that literary journal picked it up."

Sebastyan nodded, "Yes, what about it?"

"Well, it's started to unwrite itself."

Pataki sat back, watching Sebastyan closely. He moved his knife around on the plate, churning his food together, burying his peas beneath the mashed potatoes piling the meat on top of that.

"What do you mean – 'It's started to unwrite itself'?"

"Just that. In a little while it'll be gone. Every word I wrote, and everything those words related – gone."

Sebastyan sipped some coffee – tepid - studied his friend. How could such a mania have taken hold? How could a perfectly sane (or at least he supposed) perfectly sane human being come to believe such a thing? In the dim light of the tavern, he could see it – the yellow tint to the edges of Pataki's skin, and to the crevices and indentations of his cheeks, his temples, the crease just above his chin – a yellow fading like something losing its cohesiveness, parchment that had begun to crumble.

Pataki tore into his bread, the pieces ripping raggedly. He crowned each portion with a dollop of gravy.

His voice dropped to a whisper: "Very soon you, me, the Taban," He waved his knife in the air, as if to indicate the tavern as representative of the Taban (possibly it was). "will cease to exist." He leaned forward again. "And possibly, by inference then, even the entire world, will cease to exist."

"That supposes therefore, that you are the creator of the world."

Pataki shook his head emphatically. "No, no, not me; don't you see? But the story, my story is the creator of a world, contains a world, which

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soon will no longer exist." He took a paper from his pocket, containing, presumably, the offending story.

Sebastyan pursed his lips. The man was too far gone, he could see that clearly. His collar too large, circling loosely around his neck like a bangle three sizes too big for a child's wrist. When was the last time Pataki had eaten? Sebastyan hadn't seen him eat any of the food that had been brought to him, the whole time they'd been sitting in the tavern. He'd just stirred his food together into an unholy mess, making sure frankly, that it would end up inedible. Who could say how long he'd been starving himself, obsessing over this mania of his?

Had to get him home – a warm bath, some hot broth, a day or two of undisturbed rest and Pataki would be his old self again – if that was actually preferable.

Course it was.

Anything was better than this.

Friendless and solitary he may have been, muttering to himself in dark corners, but at least he wasn't like this.

Something would need to be done.

"You could be right." He slipped the paper from beneath Pataki's fingers, looked it up and down. "Yes, yes, I can quite see what you're getting at."

Pataki yanked the paper from between his fingers. "How can you know what I'm talking about? Only I have been able to detect the changes, infinitesimal as they are, a period here, a semi-colon there; the words 'the', 'and' or 'but' – all disappearing."

The paper seemed to hang in the air stiffly a moment, before Pataki slapped it down onto the table, his hand flat on it, as if trying to keep it from squirming away.

"Of course, of course." Said Sebastyan. "I only meant I understood what you're getting at, what a destructive problem this is."

Pataki blinked in the gloom, apparently satisfied. He smiled for a moment, before wiping his hand across his forehead. Sebastyan watched him, Pataki's thin fingers like brown twigs as they moved across his clammy skin. He seemed to be shrinking, sinking into himself, dissolving before Sebastyan's eyes, as if there would soon be a pile of sand on the floor, or some other powdery substance - whatever the inner stuff was that went together to make up Pataki - the only thing that remained of the man.

Had to get him home, get him to lie down, close his eyes for a moment. Then get a doctor.

"You do see. I'm glad, I'm glad."

"Our task, of course, is to decide what to do next. Who should know and who should be protected from knowing."

"Yes, yes, you're right." Pataki picked up his cup of coffee, put it to his lips, but did not taste. "We need to find a way to warn everyone." He said into the mug.

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Sebastyan stood. "Of course, of course." He put a soothing hand on his friend's shoulder.

"First things first, of course. Why don't we go to your place? We can go over the story word for word, find out exactly what's missing." He dropped some money onto the table, then eased Pataki into a standing position, began to steer him toward the door.

"More will be gone by now."

"Yes, in all likelihood." They stepped out onto the road, the sky utterly without character at this time, and nothing to comment on.

But it was still cold and Sebastyan tightened the collar around Pataki's neck, did up the top few buttons of his jacket. The man grasped his hand tightly, started to lead him onward, as moisture collected in the corner of his eyes.

"You know, I never thought anyone would believe me." He kept saying over and over, dabbing his eyes.

"Of course, of course, it'll be all right."

They went down Attila, a string of drying laundry blowing in the wind – dingy shirts with arms raised, pleading to the sky. Then turning sharply they headed off down a side street, wandering along through the labyrinth of the Taban. Sebastyan had no idea where they were going, and it was clear Pataki didn't either, despite the tight grip he had on Sebastyan's hand, the resolute look on his face. Soon, they'd be in parts of the district that no one should go through at any time of day, let alone in the semi-darkness.

He pulled back on Pataki's hand, came to an abrupt halt.

"You know, I think I know a faster way. If we go along Krisztina Blvd. it could save precious time. We really don't have any time to spare right now."

Pataki stared at him, blinking away in the gloom, a horned owl. He offered no resistance however, and let Sebastyan lead him back out stumbling along Krisztina Blvd.

Soon they reached Pataki's building, or what used to be his building evidently, standing in front of a boarded up doorway, broken windows staring blindly down at them.

"You don't really live here anymore, do you?" Where *had* he been staying these last few days – weeks?

Pataki offered no answer and Sebastyan saw that it was becoming desperate with him. They left the Taban and hailed a hansom, Sebastyan taking Pataki back to his own flat and putting him to bed on the sofa.

The next morning Dr. Balogh arrived rather later than expected. There had been an appendicitis case, and also a pair of twins. He'd come as soon as he could, he said however, and it wasn't long before Elek Pataki was a passenger in the doctor's own car, and was off, heading to the Lipotmezei Asylum on Huvosvologyi St.

The doctor assured Sebastyan, as he cleaned his glasses with a soft

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pink cloth, thread hanging from the edges, that this was by far the best thing for Pataki and it was entirely possible that his friend would be out and himself again before anyone knew it. He also said that although it was a sad case, it was by no means a hopeless one and that he would be well looked after. Pataki had been clutching the crumpled copy of his story as he'd gone.

Sebastyan shook his head, clicked his tongue. A story that unwrites itself.

There was then a missing place in the Blue Cat, an empty chair where Pataki had once held court, fresh notebooks of paper kept at the ready in case a new and startling idea should present itself to him, already half-written, in the middle of his marrow and toast. But soon enough chairs were rearranged, the bench moved over and the place where Pataki had once been became the seat where Krudy sat, a role of papers beside him.

It wasn't that they'd forgotten him; it was just that the scenery had absorbed his absence and now Pataki was no longer recognized as part of the furniture of the Blue Cat. No, now Pataki was seen as belonging to room 13C at the Lipotmezei Asylum located at Huvosvogyi St., and he would be there possibly indefinitely. His acquaintances looked for him no more at the tavern.

Sebastyan, however, continued to visit the man on a weekly basis, and found Pataki's progress promising. In fact, after a week or so the unfortunate creature finally left off sitting with his story clutched in his hand, not daring to take his eyes from it in case a word or two should slip off while he wasn't watching. After that the story moved its position from its place by the window, to sitting atop a pillow at the foot of the bed, and then from the foot of the bed to the dresser. At last, after about six months, there was no sign of the story at all. Maybe it had successfully unwritten itself.

Approximately a year later, Pataki was pronounced miraculously cured. Sebastyan had just been coming to visit him when he saw his friend, bags packed, a travelling coat on, stepping into a waiting car. He was heading off to the country, he said, and was planning about three months out there in order to relax and recuperate.

Sebastyan nodded, waved him on and headed home.

This definitely seemed to be good news and possibly he could put the whole thing behind him – Pataki, the terrible incident, everything. Certainly, when he thought of his friend now it wasn't as an inmate of some cheerless institution, it was out there in the sunshine of the Pushta, possibly riding a horse (if Pataki ever did ride) or sitting by a country stream with a fishing rod in his hand. Sebastyan sighed, this was quite a different scenario, one that he could wish for anyone and possibly Pataki was out of his life for good now (he certainly hadn't stopped to talk much before leaving), but if he was safely tucked away in the country somewhere then this would be alright.

That's why Sebastyan was quite taken aback when he found his friend on the street one day.

At least he thought it was Pataki – it certainly was a Pataki-like being,

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albeit one that was greatly changed. No longer thin and shrinking into this own clothes – a brown suit fading at the edges. No, this was a Pataki marvellously transformed (if indeed it were him) a rejuvenated and revived phoenix in a camel hair jacket with a canary yellow homburg. This apparition was walking in the opposite side of the street as Sebastyan and was carrying several bundles under his arm, each one wrapped in brown paper and tied with a white string. He also had a bamboo walking stick with a blue knob handle and a pair of goldenrod-coloured gloves to match his hat. His hair was cut shorter (why wouldn't it be?), but Sebastyan was certain this was his friend.

Sebastyan stopped, raised his hand in greeting, but the creature walked on, vanishing into the crowd without a nod or bow.

Possibly he'd been mistaken. Yes, he must be. Pataki was in the Pushta. What he'd seen just now was someone else. The man couldn't have returned so soon. Not when he'd planned to stay away for so long.

All this made the most sense and Sebastyan put Mr. P. out of his mind. He did have a performance tonight, had to be at his best. And as he walked over to the theatre, a strong wind picking up from the river, he went over his lines, rehearsing in his head what he'd rehearsed so often before, all in preparation to be someone else for a few hours.

And that's when he saw him once more – yes, he was certain this time – it was Pataki. There was no question about it. He was standing on the damp grass, hat in hand looking out over the river. And what's more Pataki turned and he saw him, Sebastyan was sure of it, he'd seen the recognition flashing in his eyes. Dressed as he'd been before (or as he was dressed now) – a fashionable suit and jacket, his hair freshly cut and combed – he was a new man. That must be what he wanted, to be a new man and leave his past behind him.

He looked at Sebastyan for a moment, just a moment only; then walked off down the river bank, his cane slipping deeply into the spongy soil. And Sebastyan watched him as he walked away.

Would this be the last time he would see Pataki? He assumed so, the man making it quite clear that their friendship was at an end.

So be it.