

The Secret of the Compasses

Time Courier series vol. 1

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1. The Tramp

You know, Sofe, I don't think I ever had a proper friend before Szeged. Before you. From the moment we met, it was like I'd known you all my life. Do you remember the day I was put in your class? I didn't want to go into the classroom, so you sat with me on the stairs, and we talked for over an hour. See? Right there on the first day you clocked up two unexplained absences because of me. :D

Szeged was the first place I ever felt really good. It's so typical we didn't get to stay there hardly at all. BTW, of all the places we've lived so far, Budapest has got to be the worst. You'd go right off your head if you saw it!

In the next room, Mum's *Dead Can Dance* CD started up for the third time. Hanna was sick to death of it. She jumped to her feet, kicked her chair away, and slapped her laptop closed. She could hardly hear herself think in that din, let alone do anything else. There was no way she'd ever be able to write an email. If she had to listen to that terrible racket one more time, that would be the end of her.

She didn't want to ask Mum to turn the music down, because that would only lead to one of her irritating 'talks'. Mum would instantly assume that Hanna was feeling upset because of the move, and she would insist that Hanna's 'aura needed cleansing'. This would involve, among other things, 'soothing music' and a session of that healing massage-type stuff Mum had learned recently at one of her classes. Hanna decided she'd rather give that a miss, so, shoving her battered laptop under her arm, she marched out of her room like a queen whose dignity has been offended. She stumbled through the mass of boxes, bags, boxes and smoking joss sticks, and headed for the part of the flat farthest away from the 'nice music', which happened to be the toilet.

The door to the toilet never shut properly the first time; you had to help it a bit with your foot. She hadn't meant to actually kick the thing, and she'd only made the tiniest noise, but of course Mum was there straightaway on the other side of the door.

"Is everything all right, Hanna?"

Stupid question.

"Sure, Mum."

What could possibly be all right? What could be all right about never managing to stay in one place for longer than a year? And never knowing when Dad would show up and say, "Get packing, girls, we're moving!" It was odd, but Hanna always knew ahead of time when she was going to hear those famous words. She sensed it somehow, from the way Dad walked in through the front door; maybe it was the sheepish smile he had on his face or the way he clunked his ugly briefcase down on the

kitchen table. And he always put it on the table, despite Mum telling him a million times... She didn't know what it was, but they would only have to look at each other, and Hanna would know that Mum was going to start crying, and she'd be starting to pack. She was so practised at this, by the way, that she was sure she could box up the contents of a flat, whatever the size, in under two hours. Okay, so she really didn't have that much stuff. She'd left off collecting things when she was still small. She didn't have any cuddly toys or dolls. She didn't like to have anything she might get attached to, as she knew it would have to be left behind if it didn't fit into a box. Perhaps that was the reason Hanna had no friends to speak of. Of course, Mum always made a fuss about this. Now too, she'd started straight in with what a good thing it was that they'd moved into a building with so many other flats, and how much easier it would be for Hanna to find some new "little friends". What a load of rubbish. Hanna never understood what grownups were thinking when they said things like that. Just because someone was the same age as you, it didn't mean you'd be able to have a sensible conversation with them. And anyway, the last thing she wanted to do was meet new people. It was Sofia Hanna wanted to be with. She missed her so badly.

She glanced down at the glowing screen of the laptop, at the email she'd started to write to Sofe. It was pretty long already, even though she was nowhere near the important bit. She read over the last paragraph again.

And the building our flat's in! They keep sticking things up on the wall, but I took some of them down so I could tell you the kinds of stupid things they say. :D

Listen to this one for a start:

"FOR THE ATTENTION OF PEOPLE DELIVERING LEAFLETS, PLEASE NOTE THAT THE MAILBOXES ARE RESERVED FOR RESIDENTS' PERSONAL MAIL ONLY."

How can anyone write a poster about the fact that letterboxes are only meant to hold letters? And then there was this one:

"STRICTLY NO SMOKING IN THE STAIRWELL. ANYONE NOT OBSERVING THIS BAN WILL BE REPORTED WITH IMMEDIATE EFFECT."

But my favourite's the one that was stuck to the door where the rubbish bins are:

"NO RUBBISH!"

I've got a feeling we won't be staying here for very long either. There's no way Mum is going to be able to stand so many rules. I guess Dad will manage; he always manages, until they ask him to manage somewhere else. I don't know. I might just be able to convince them to move back to Szeged."

"Are you really all right, sweetie?"

Mum's voice made Hanna jump.

"Sure."

"It's just that you've been in there for a good twenty minutes."

Hanna looked at her watch. There was no way she'd been in there for a second more than fifteen minutes.

"Are you feeling poorly?"

"Of course not, I was just reading, that's all!"

Hanna knew that she was now expected to make some kind of intelligent conversation. She suddenly remembered seeing Dad struggling with a wardrobe on the stairs. The wardrobe had been winning.

"How's Dad getting on with the wardrobe?" she eventually asked.

"They're still fighting it out. But he's managed to get it up as far as the first floor. It would be nice if you came out of there at last and lent a hand."

"In a minute," Hanna muttered, but without any sign of enthusiasm.

"When in a minute? You do know you can't spend the whole day sitting on the toilet, don't you?!"

Mum was starting to get all high-pitched. Hanna smiled to herself. It always made her laugh that Mum could get so wound up about things like this.

"Obviously!"

She quickly got back to her email, because she just had to tell Sofe that *important thing*. She sent the cursor to the end of the last sentence and carried on typing.

When we got out of the car, the whole street looked like some sort of flea market. For a minute, I thought that everyone was moving house on the same day, but then I realised it was the day folks put stuff out for the dustbin men that won't go in their bin. It's amazing what you can learn about people from what they sling out. Of course, Mum wouldn't let me have a nose around.

Hanna stopped writing. She suddenly felt a flicker of the same excitement she'd felt on seeing all those fascinating things. She still couldn't understand what had freaked Mum out so much. She'd gripped Hanna's hand even tighter than usual (if that were possible), despite the fact that Hanna had made it abundantly clear to her moments before that you don't hold your mum's hand on the street, not when you're thirteen!

"Why on earth would you want to do that, sweetie? Have you got any idea of how filthy that stuff is? And just imagine the awful energies that those things are giving off!"

Hanna managed to free her hand.

"Just because someone threw them out?"

"Of course. They still hold their owners' mana."

"Their what?"

That was a mistake. Mum took a deep breath and went into one of her spiels.

“We give our personal energies to the objects that we live with and the objects that we hold. We imbibe them with our spirit.”

Hanna said nothing, just rolled her eyes. Mum, on the other hand, was getting into her stride.

“We’ve no idea who their previous owners were. Or maybe you have that information?”

“But that’s the fascinating thing about it all!”

“It’s just rubbish, and that’s all there is to it!” Mum said, and the argument was closed.

“That still doesn’t make them radioactive!” Hanna snapped back.

Dad stopped struggling with a bundle of suitcases for a second.

“Do you think you two could give it a rest just this once?” The females of the family fell silent and carried on trudging to the new flat. But Mum couldn’t leave it without a final whisper.

“Your poor father, he’s tense enough as it is...”

“I’m not bloody tense!” Dad snapped.

“Why do you always have to push things that little bit too far, sweetie? Mum said with a whine. Then she stopped and announced with surprising volume:

“Now what did I tell you! This is a really rough area. Just look at the kind of people you get here!”

Wondering what riled Mum so much? Well, Sofe, I was so shocked that I couldn’t speak for a whole minute! An old tramp was rifling through the rubbish. Okay, I admit it, that’s not so very shocking, but I’d never seen a character like that before. For starters he looked like he’d just escaped from a museum or something. Like he’d been in a display cabinet! His trousers were tucked into his socks, and his socks were pulled up to his knees. He rummaged and coughed, then rummaged some more. Mum shouted something about TB, then started yelling at us to get a move on. But I couldn’t help looking back at the tramp as we walked past. And what do you reckon happened? The old codger looked right back at me. He looked right into my eyes. And I think he smiled.

Hanna shuddered. She could suddenly see his ancient face, wrinkles running across it like a thousand cobwebs. She looked to check the last thing she had written. That horrible face hadn’t been smiling. She thought about it again for a minute and realised that it had been his eyes. His eyes had been smiling...

She was startled out of her musings by an impatient knocking on the door.

“I’m going to count to three!” she heard Mum snap from the other side. “One....”

Hanna had to finish writing as quickly as she could.

Oops, Mum's starting to lose it. Gotta go!

“Two and three quarters....”

Ciao for now! Han xxx

“Three!”

Hanna opened the bathroom door and smiled at Mum as if nothing had happened.

“Yes?” she said, innocently. “What do you need me to do?”

A short while later, Hanna was walking down a nearby street with an assortment of embarrassing shopping bags over one arm, and a list in her other hand. It must have taken Mum a good hour and a half to write it. Hanna didn't mind; she actually enjoyed going to the shops. She'd been doing it since she was seven. It had been a burden at first, and she'd trudged down the street with her shoulders hunched as she tried to decipher Mum's scribbled handwriting, but now such errands gave her a sweet sense of freedom. She could let her mind wander wild and free. Sometimes she played war refugee: bombs whistled over her head, machineguns rattled in the background, and bodies fell to the floor by her feet as she ran for her life. The corner shop was the shelter, and it was a real challenge to stay alive until she got there. Other times she was a regal queen in long, flowing robes as she strode in solemn pomp to her coronation. The rest of the time she played being a foreign tourist, the idea being that she'd answer in broken English if anyone ever spoke to her in the street.

She was sad to admit that this had only ever worked out the one time, and even then it had backfired. The adult in question simply smiled and stroked her head. That kind of brazen insensitivity really pained Hanna.

Of course, she didn't play those kinds of games anymore. She was just happy to be out on her own, trying out new routes home, looking at the buildings, watching the people. In other words, she'd become an incurable wanderer.

This was the first time since they had arrived in Budapest that she felt she could really breathe. Suddenly, she was really seeing the city with its shabby but charming buildings as she familiarised herself with the “scent” of doorways and took in all the unfamiliar sounds. She made a mental note of all the shops she passed, taking special note of which were open until late, and what time they closed. Mum only ever realised after eight at night that they “could use a drop of organic milk, sweetie!” Hanna was glad to see that here she would have no trouble meeting such demands. She smiled to herself. This was the first time she had felt thankful to be in Budapest. By the time she'd bought everything on the list, it was getting dark. She had to get a move on. She wasn't afraid or anything, but she wanted to win a bit of extra time for herself. Because, quite obviously, she was still keen to have a rummage through the rubbish on the street.

The whole thing turned out to be much more exciting than she'd thought. She spent a good while wandering past various stacks of tat. And as she looked these over, she thought that the chairs with broken legs, torn paintings, filthy carpets, chipped china, cardboard boxes, and broken toys would

furnish a whole flat. A very, very miserable flat! Mum was right after all. The discarded clutter that littered the streets gave off a sense of intense sadness. Hanna stooped to get a closer look at something. It was an oddly shaped metal object, and it looked pretty old. She was about to pick it up, when she heard that rasping cough again. She looked up. Not far away, that old tramp was standing with his arms folded across his chest. Hanna could feel his eyes burning right into her. The blood in her veins chilled in an instant. She wanted to scream, but she couldn't make a single sound. She started to run. She ran as far as the next corner, then slumped against the wall, panting. She suddenly felt ashamed of herself. What had frightened her so much? An old man looking at her in the street. Super scary! Hanna turned around and realised that she really had no reason at all to be afraid. The old codger didn't seem the least bit interested in her anymore. He was too busy searching through the pile of things that she'd been standing next to a second before. But then Hanna saw what he pulled out of the pile. It was the same metal object that had caught her eye. She didn't know what possessed her, but she crept back over to take a look. The old tramp lifted his prize high in the air and stared at it, spellbound. He seemed to have forgotten about the world around him, so Hanna was able to get quite close without him noticing. She dodged into a nearby doorway and spied on him from there. But however hard she tried, she couldn't make out what the thing was, because the tramp took a red rag out of his pocket and wrapped it up with great care like it was a little baby. He was muttering to himself all the while.

"Here you are at last, you naughty little things." His voice made Hanna shudder to her shoes. It sounded like a rusty door being forced slowly open. "You've been playing hide and seek with me, haven't you? But I've found you now."

And then the very strangest thing happened. The whatever-it-was *replied!* Hanna had never heard anything like it in her life. It started out like the grumbling rumble of a motorbike firing up and grew slowly quieter until it was like a breeze rustling the leaves of a tree. Mixed in with it were lots and lots of human voices, whispering incomprehensibly. Then it fell silent.

Hanna started to shudder. All she wanted to do now was run as far away as she possibly could. She wanted to get away from this horrible old man and get out of this awful city, but it was too late.

At the corner of the street, three men in suits stepped unexpectedly into view, and made a beeline for the tramp. The old man looked up with a start, as if he sensed some sort of danger. He looked frantically around like a wild animal caught in a hunter's trap, searching for a way to escape. As if obeying a silent command, the men in suits picked up their pace and the old codger broke away and ran for it. The three were after him like a shot.

Hanna crouched down in the doorway, her back against the wall. Her heart was beating so fast and hard she was sure they would hear it. She made a conscious effort to calm her nerves and was just scrabbling back to her feet, when she spotted something: the tramp's red rag! Hanna froze. She couldn't quite believe it: it was the treasure the tramp had wrapped with such loving care, the mysterious musical thing. Without a second thought, she stepped over, grabbed it and dropped it into one of her shopping bags. Then, as fast as her trembling legs could carry her, she made her way back to her new home.

"So this is Budapest!" she thought, as she hurried along. "It's a madhouse. I can't wait to tell Sofe!"

2. The Bleeding Monitor

Hey Sofo!

I see you haven't replied to the email I wrote last night yet. Okay, so I did send it pretty late. But I just can't wait for you to reply! Anyway, I had to come into my new school today. I'm in I.T. class right now, and pretending I'm editing an Excel spreadsheet. Today in one word: somewhere between nearly horrendous and horrendous, but I'll start from the beginning. This morning, Mum came in with me so she could talk to the school principal, but we only got as far as the deputy. God, that woman is awful! Picture drooling Mrs. Gál with blonde hair in a butter-coloured little suit, and multiply by three. This one is your original smiling serial killer, and she's got the eyes of a snake. Oh yeah, and she's called Mrs. Bujdosó

In her stiletto heels, the deputy principal was more than a head taller than Mum. Hanna felt that if they had to spend another minute talking to her, their necks would never be the same again.

“Thanks again, Mrs. Bujdosó. We're enormously grateful to you for taking in Hanna,” said Mum.

Mrs. Bujdosó made a sour face.

“Don't thank me, thank the principal. I myself am a believer in the entrance exam, and I don't hold with exceptions being made like this half-way through the school year, not one little bit. But the child's academic results *are* satisfactory, I suppose.”

Mrs. Bujdosó looked down at her visitors with distaste.

“And who am I to override a decision made by the principal, after all?”

“Please give the principal my regards,” said Mum with a smile.

Hanna was glad people in Budapest weren't yet familiar with this tone of her mother's. She herself couldn't help but grin at it though.

“I shall certainly do that,” said Mrs. Bujdosó tonelessly, and pressing her thin lips together, she looked Hanna up and down. Hanna sobered up instantly.

“The child will now come with me. I'll show her where her new class is.”

Walking down the tiled corridor beside Mrs. Bujdosó, Hanna felt like she had stumbled into a period drama set in World War Two and dubbed into Hungarian. Every tap of the deputy principal's stiletto heels was the equivalent of a shot to the chest.

“How can it be that even her shoes are so crazily strict?” wondered Hanna.

The machine-gun fire suddenly stopped. Mrs. Bujdosó had come to a halt in front of a door, but was blocking Hanna's way in.

"Now then. Before you go through that door to your class, I would like to make a couple of things clear. This here is the Jakab Sigray Grammar School, not a primary school in Makó."

"Szeged," said Hanna, hastily correcting her.

"I beg your pardon?" Mrs. Bujdosó raised her eyebrows. She looked as if she had never heard such cheek in all her born days.

"We came from Szeged, not Makó. And I wasn't going to a primary school there. I was at the Gyula Juhász School, one of the city's best..."

The deputy principal stopped the new girl with a single raised finger.

"That's immaterial. This is an institution with a great past. Year after year, our students achieve outstanding results in a range of academic competitions, our student theatre performs at prestigious festivals and our school newspaper is best in the country. Many of our old students have gone on to become famous actors or politicians."

Hanna suddenly wondered why the school had condescended to give her a place at all. She looked down at her shoes while Mrs. Bujdosó continued to hold forth.

"So, we expect you to set your sights high, study hard and behave well. And do not forget even for a moment that if you don't come up to the mark, this school can expel you just as easily as it enrolled you."

"Okay... Well, I'll try," mumbled Hanna.

"I would expect no less."

Mrs. Bujdosó opened the door, at which a deathly silence fell on the room. Hanna didn't feel this was going to be the best entrance she would make in her life. Luckily, the deputy principal didn't escort her into the classroom, so as soon as the door closed behind her, the usual hubbub resumed. Hanna was happy to see that no-one was remotely interested in her. She might as well not have been there at all.

If the kids in my new class are anything to go by, I can officially declare that everyone in Budapest is an idiot. There are these three girls, for example. You can't tell them apart, and they shriek at a frequency I've never heard before. They were obviously bats in an earlier life.

One of the three girls was blonde, and her clothes were very clearly unbelievably expensive. She was sitting on a desk and was just in the middle of telling a story. As she talked, she made sure that, from time to time, her T-shirt slipped off her shoulder. By accident, as it were. The other two girls looked a lot like the blonde one. Their hair was brushed the same way, they wore a similar selection of clothes, though a much poorer quality version of the same get-up. They watched the first girl's every move with deep respect. She was a like a queen with her ladies in waiting.

“So, we were at Kata’s party, right, and Ervin was there too,” – here the blonde girl paused for dramatic effect. When the other two realised what was expected of them, they made shocked faces. “And the others said like let’s play ‘Spin the Bottle.’”

The ladies in waiting went wide-eyed.

“No way! Ugh! And?” said one with an excited shudder.

“Ugh! And?” parroted the other.

“And then I said... Levi, don’t you have somewhere else to be?”

Hanna never found out what else was said at the party in question, because a boy had crept up behind the girl on the desk, and he was very obviously listening in on the conversation. Hanna knew one name now at least. Levi was short and small-boned. His hair looked more like a haystack more than anything else. In less than a fraction of a second, he snatched an exercise book out of the hand of the girl on the desk and made off with it.

“Oh, is this your maths homework, Edina? So kind! You didn’t have to, you know!” he cried as he ran off.

“I did not give that to you! Levi! Give it back! Pleeese!” shrieked the blonde girl, who it seemed, was called Edina.

“Give it back to her, please!” came the chorus from the other two girls.

“Levi! Give it back to Edina!” said a boy a few rows over, getting to his feet. Levi tried to get round him, but the other boy was too quick for him. He snatched Edina’s exercise book out of Levi’s hand and tossed it casually behind him onto the girl’s desk.

One of the ladies in waiting looked excitedly at Edina and whispered to her, “Woah! Someone’s keen!”

Edina threw back her head and her T-shirt slipped off her shoulder again.

“Thanks, Kristóf” she purred at her saviour.

“Hey Edina, Kristóf still totally has a crush on you,” whispered one of the girls.

“Oh, leave off! He does not!” whined Edina.

“Does so,” nodded the other girl timidly.

Then they all looked at each other and suddenly started to screech. The sound they made was something like ‘nyeeeeee’. And they flapped their hands like they were going to take off. Hanna nearly jumped out of her skin.

At that point, Levi, who had apparently given up on the maths homework and was standing guard at the door of the classroom, suddenly leaned back and leaped from where he was standing up onto the nearest desk.

“Form teacher alert!” he yelled at the top of his voice.

Well, Sofe, this may be ‘an institution with a great past’ but at the Gyula Juhász School I think the last time we thought it was fun to glue the register to the form teacher’s desk was in third year. I should say that Mr. Gereben (Mr. G) the form teacher was not surprised at it.

“Good morning everyone, hi there!” said Mr. G grinning broadly at the children. “I hope you all had a good laugh. I know I did. And won’t Levi be amused when he has to stay here after the lesson to scrape the glue off the table! Hey Levi? Great, then let’s get on with the lesson. In case you hadn’t noticed, you have a new classmate. Her name is Hanna and she’s come here from Szeged. Would you like to say anything, Hanna?”

Hanna glanced around, and yes, everyone was looking at her. She thought for a moment, and decided she really didn’t want to say anything.

“Hey! Hi everyone,” she managed to force out.

Mr. G nodded at her kindly.

“Thank you, Hanna. Short but sweet. Please, have a seat wherever you can find one, or.... What about with Tibi over at the back? Is that okay? Wonderful. Levi, next time you’ll have to stick the pages of the register together too, because like this I can still see who I need to call up to the front to answer questions on yesterday’s homework.”

Mr. G seems okay. He teaches maths and P.E., a pretty funny combination. And even though he’s about two metres tall and growls like a bear, I just can’t imagine him with a whistle round his neck yelling at the kids. I’ll see soon enough, I guess, because we’ve got P.E. straight after I.T.. I can hardly wait.

:-P

BTW, in Maths, I tried to establish contact with the boy named Tibi sitting next to me. Utterly hopeless.

“Hi. I’m Hanna.”

“Uh huh.”

“So, you’re Tibi?”

“Uh huh.”

Tibi showed not the slightest interest in making conversation with Hanna. He just stared straight ahead and poked at his eraser. He had already drilled a pretty serious hole in the middle of it even though the lesson had barely started. Hanna looked at the hefty boy and wondered whether he knew any other words besides ‘Uh huh’.

“Will you show me where you are in the textbook?” she asked.

“Errr.”

This was reassuring. Tibi, it seemed, had a vocabulary of two words minimum. This meant the next couple of years might prove entertaining after all.

“Have you done surface area and volume?”

“Dunno.”

“And percentages?”

Tibi slammed his shredded eraser down on the desk.

“Give over!” he whispered raising his sad, brown eyes to meet Hanna’s.

She heaved a sigh.

“Okay, then just show me what page we’re on.”

So, that’s who I’m sharing a desk with. Typical... I’m sitting next to a mournful hippopotamus. In front of me, I’ve got Levi jumping around like a monkey. The place is a zoo, I’m telling you. Oh, and I haven’t even said anything about Bulcsú. At first glance he looks like a straightforward study nerd with a Superman pencil case, but he’s actually an extraterrestrial.

“Bulcsú, would you explain to us please how to calculate the volume of a cube if the edge length of that cube is 5 metres?”

“In cubic metres, you mean?”

“Why? Do we know any other unit of measurement?” said Mr. G raising his eyebrows.

“Assuming we’re using an Earthly unit of measurement, the British Imperial and United States Customary Systems offer us, for example the inch or the foot...” began Bulcsú, pushing his glasses back up to the top of his nose.

“I think we’ll stick to the Hungarian system, thank you Bulcsú.”

Bulcsú did not share this sentiment in the slightest. Before answering, he straightened up his pens and his books, being very careful all the while not to let his elbow come anywhere near Levi, who was sprawled out beside him.

“But it would be much more interesting if just this once we were to do our calculations in something other than Earthly measurements. In this case, I would recommend the more advanced Klingon units of measurement, or the more primitive ones employed on the forest planet of Endor,” he argued.

“If I were you, I’d be more inclined to make use of Earthly units of measurement, given you’ll be taking your leaving exams on this planet,” said Mr. G. smiling.

“That’s five years away, Mr. G! They could easily come and get me before that!” Bulcsú shot back.

Sofe, I'm telling you, I'm going to go crazy here. I miss my old class so much! Even Gál the Drooler, I swear. Tell everyone I love them! Okay, maybe not the Drooler. Got to go, bell's gonna go any second. I'll write more when I get home. XXX

Hanna's school-related sufferings came to end at two in the afternoon. Thank God her parents hadn't thought to sign her up for after-school supervised study. Though when she got home and saw her mother wearing a spotty headscarf, she wasn't so sure that was a good thing. Supervised study suddenly had its attractions.

"Girls' night in, what do you say? We're going to get this place clean!" cried Mum excitedly when she saw her daughter.

Hanna sighed. Every time they moved into a new place, Mum would get like this. Fixated on girls' nights in. These consisted of yoga sessions, jogging and watching soppy films together, but mainly cleaning. Luckily, this time Mum's fervour fizzled out pretty quickly. Having passed Hanna the vacuum cleaner, she realised the spotted headscarf didn't go with her cleaning outfit and went off to get changed. But then she found her pendulum, even though Hanna thought she'd managed to hide it in a super safe place. Hanna was still staring vacantly at the vacuum cleaner when Mum came bursting into the living room.

"Hanna! Jesus! Hanna!"

"Yes?"

"There's a water vein under your bed!"

"So?"

"You haven't been having nightmares, have you? Dreaming about hanged men, men with scythes or owls?"

"I've been sleeping fine."

Mum rolled her eyes.

"You're just like your dad. No feeling for the spiritual. You'll be sleeping fine, then one day you'll realise your aura is all mucky. Oh Lord, now I'll have to purify your room of all that negative energy!" she said, rummaging around fretfully, and pulling out some incense sticks.

"Come on Mum, it's going to stink!" Hanna burst out.

"Then clear off!" shot back Mum.

"Can I use the internet while you're driving out the negative energy?"

"You must be joking! Go out and get a bit of fresh air!"

So, Hanna went out onto the *gang*, the walkway round the building's inner courtyard, and for lack of anything better to do, stared at the neighbours. She had chosen a good moment as there was quite a ruckus going on. The caretaker of the building, a short, bald man with a huge beer belly, was pulling the wheelie bins through the courtyard, over the cobbles. This made such a rumbling and banging, it was like an earthquake had struck. A door opened onto the walkway opposite, and the Impossibly Hunky Guy came out. At precisely the same moment, the door of the flat next to Hanna's was flung open. An old woman hobbled out.

"Andriska! Andriska! What's going on? Is there a fire?" she shouted to the boy opposite.

"There's no fire, Jolánka! Everything's fine!" the boy shouted back.

"Then what's that all that noise?"

"Just the caretaker! Csongor! Moving the bins!"

Hanna looked from one to the other, wondering how long they would keep up this yelling.

"Well, thank Heavens! I was sure there must be a fire! Csongor's been a bit funny, you know Andriska, ever since those geraniums fell on his head from the fourth floor in '62!"

Csongor, hearing this, looked up at them.

"What's up, you old witch?" he roared up at the old lady.

"I know, Jolánka, you've told me before! Bye then!" shouted András, giving a big yawn.

"I'm off in too, Andriska! Say hello to Emma for me!" shouted Jolánka.

"Who?" said András turning back.

"That little fiancée of yours, who always says hello to me so nicely. The one with nails in her face!"

"Piercings. And they're in her nose," András corrected her. "And she's not my fiancée."

"Pardon?" said Jolánka, all excited.

"We're not..." began András, but thinking better of it, he just made a dismissive gesture.

"What did you say? I don't hear so well in my right ear, you know!" said the old lady, still curious.

"Doesn't matter!" shouted András.

The lady wouldn't let it go at that, though.

"Say that again, will you? I didn't hear what you said!"

András took a deep breath and yelled to her across the courtyard, "WE'RE NOT TOGETHER ANYMORE, GOODBYE!"

Hanna started to laugh. That was great: at maximum volume!

Just then, another door opened. A thickset man as big as a wardrobe stood in the doorway, sporting at least three days' worth of stubble. His face was bright red, and he was breathing like Darth Vader.

“What’s with all this yelling? Some of us are trying to get a bit of kip!” he thundered.

Behind him, a little, fragile-looking woman appeared and blinked apologetically at those assembled around the courtyard.

“Leave it Feri! Think of your blood pressure!” she twittered.

“You stay out of it! Get back inside!” yelled Feri the wardrobe. “I been driving fares around all night. The least I can get is a bit of peace when I’m trying to sleep.”

Then he turned to Jolánka.

“What’re you looking at, you nosy hag?”

“You should be ashamed of yourself, speaking to that poor woman like that!” said the old lady, shaking her head.

The little woman started to pull gently at her husband’s shirt.

“Leave it now. Come in. Coffee’s ready.”

“Coffee! With my blood pressure?! Are you crazy?” said the man, his voice starting to rise, but they went in all the same.

Hanna felt she had seen enough. She thought Mum must surely have wrestled the owls and the grim reapers out of the flat with her incense sticks by that point, so she went back into the flat. She wanted to check on her messages, not to mention that metal thing she hadn’t really had a chance to look at yet. She managed to creep past her mother, who was meditating on the floor surrounded by smoking incense sticks, and slipped into her room. Quickly switching on her laptop, she threw a pillow on top of it to muffle the ‘boing’ it made as it geared up. She didn’t want a half-hour lecture on the ‘electrosmog’ emitted by computers, the sole purpose of which was to pollute the human soul.

She went onto Skype. Almost immediately, up popped Sofia’s picture in a chatbox.

Sofia: Finally! I thought I was gonna go crazy! Go on then! What’s happening?

Hanna: I wrote you a message.

Sofia: Yeah, I saw it. But you didn’t get to the point.

Hanna: The point? Oh, yeah! There’s an unbelievably cute-looking guy living in our building! He’s got this reddish-brown hair, a little beard and green eyes, I think, though I’m not sure about that.

Sofia: Hanna!

Hanna: And he was wearing a Yoda T-shirt. (F emoji)

Sofia: HANNA!

Hanna: What?

Sofia: That wasn't what I meant.

Hanna: What then?

Sofia: You know.

Hanna: No, I don't.

Sofia: Hello? You *have* thrown it out, haven't you?

Hanna: Thrown what out? That rusty thing?

Sofia: No, your paper handkerchief...

Hanna: D

Sofia: Well?

Hanna: Not yet. But don't worry, I will.

Sofia: It could totally be dangerous. Good thing your mum didn't find it.

Hanna: Oh, she won't. I put it in my P.E. bag.

Sofia: Are you crazy? You get some rusty bit of metal off a loony tramp. You tell me it talks, and I don't know what else, and you put it in your P.E. bag!! You have most definitely lost it, girl.

Hanna: Relax, I'm going to get rid of it.

Sofia: You swear?

Hanna: I just want to take a closer look at it first. In case it's valuable or something. Maybe that's what those guys in suits were after yesterday, and not the old man.

Sofia: Another reason to lose it ASAP!

Hanna: Okay. You're right.

Sofia: Go and drool over that boy from the other flat instead! (F emoji)

Hanna: I wasn't drooling!

Sofia: If you say so. (7 emoji)

Hanna: How did you do that?

Sofia: Do what?

Hanna: That angel thing.

Sofia: Oh, just type in the letter ‘o’, colon, hyphen, and close brackets.

Hanna: o:-)

Sofia: Nope. Capital O!

Hanna: (angel emoji) Wow!! Great!

And then something strange happened. The laptop started making a strange grumbling sound, and the cursor began to skip all over the screen. Hanna tried to catch it with the touchpad, but the cursor was scuttling round the desktop icons like an ant gone crazy, and they were all opening of their own accord. Hanna’s blood ran cold. Little by little, words were appearing on the screen, coming more and more into focus, then turning blood-red.

HAVE YOU GOT SOMETHING THERE THAT ISN’T YOURS?

Horrified, Hanna stared at the letters, which were trickling down the screen like they were bleeding. Then the screen went dark.

3. Mismatched Eyes

“Hanna! Have you taken the *Mercurius Solubilis* I gave you?”

Hanna quickly hid the laptop under her duvet.

“Course I have, Mum.”

“And are you drinking the tea?”

“Yes, Mum.”

Mum walked briskly into Hanna’s room and flung back the curtains. The spring sunshine was so bright it almost hurt Hanna’s eyes, and she had to clap her hands over them. Mum came over to her bed and stood there, shaking her head anxiously.

“Right now, we’re going to get all better. First, we need a change of position. Up you sit, no more lolling around.”

“I’m not lolling around, I’m lying down,” muttered Hanna.

Mum paid not the slightest attention.

“Sitting up tells our bodies that that we’re not going to wallow.”

“I don’t want to get up!”

Hanna now really wished she hadn’t complained of a stinking headache when her Mum had woken her up for school. And that she hadn’t put on her Oscar-winning fake cough. And... that she hadn’t rubbed the thermometer till the mercury went up. But she just couldn’t go to school after what had happened the evening before!

“Breathe from your stomach,” Mum told her. “Feel the air flowing in, flowing out, flowing in, flowing out... What is it that hurts, anyway?”

“Errr...” Hanna thought for a moment. “My ear,” she said at last. Mum looked at her hard, frowning.

“You haven’t had that for a good while now. What is it you don’t want to hear?”

“What do you mean?”

“If your ear’s hurting, it’s obvious there’s something you don’t want to hear. Maybe someone said something hurtful to you?”

Mum raised her eyes to the ceiling dramatically.

“Oh my God! It wasn’t me, was it?”

“Oh Mum, don’t make such a drama out of it!”

“Breathe!”

Hanna breathed. Meanwhile, Mum sat down on the edge of her bed, and stroked her daughter's hand.

"You can tell me. I can handle it," Mum said, in tones which made it abundantly clear would not be able to handle it at all.

"So should I breathe, or should I talk?" asked Hanna.

"Can't you do both at once?"

Hanna had just taken a breath to say something clever in reply but found her mind had gone blank. Someone must have been watching out for her, luckily, as just then the doorbell rang.

"Who could that be *at this hour?*" grumbled Mum.

"What do you mean *at this hour?*" said Hanna, pulling a face.

"When you're ill, I mean. And less of your cheek, please!" shot back Mum, putting an end to the conversation and hurrying off to answer the door.

Hanna pulled the laptop out from under the duvet and switched it on. It whirred and after the usual start-up beep, one after another the desktop icons popped up on the screen. It was working, thank goodness, and there was no sign of those awful words anywhere on the screen.

A man's voice was booming from outside the flat. Hanna jumped out of bed and peeked into the corridor. The stubbly, wardrobe-sized guy from the flat opposite was filling the doorway.

"Bubkó" he announced, belligerently.

Mum was trying to make some sense of this, but clearly without success.

"I'm sorry?" she said.

"Feri Bubkó, from number fourteen," rumbled the man.

"Aha," said Mum, nodding. "And can I help you with anything?"

"I want to know if you've got a dog."

"A dog? No, we haven't."

"And does it bark?" snapped back the man, tensely.

"No. It doesn't bark, because we don't have one."

"Well make sure it doesn't, because I drive a taxi at night, and I need to sleep in the day. And I've got two kids screaming in my ear all day long. That's as much as I can take."

"Ah, you're the twins' father?" asked Mum, her eyes lighting up.

"Gerda and Feri Junior, that's their names," Bubkó nodded morosely.

"They're very sweet!" enthused Mum.

“I guess. And noisy.”

Mum frowned.

“They’re still tiny. Babies cry a lot at that age. They haven’t arrived in their bodies yet.”

“Say what?”

Hanna exploded with laughter. The man pulled a face like a flatfish.

Yup, thought Hanna. Mum takes some getting used to.

Just then the man’s wife turned up, peeking over his shoulder. She stroked his arm.

“Feri, my love! Come back in!” she said gently.

“Give me a second here! And don’t shout!” Feri roared.

The little woman looked at Mum apologetically and introduced herself.

“I’m Angéla. I hope you soon feel at home here.”

After they had gone, Mum stood for a while at the door, deep in thought.

“Strange things, names. Angéla... That woman really is a bit like an angel, isn’t she?”

Then, looking Hanna up and down, she added, “Of course, she didn’t have any slippers on. And what a horrible man that Bubkó is!” she went on. “Poor little woman! How does she put up with it? I would have jumped out of the window long ago.”

Mum was always jumping out of windows, theoretically at least, when the topic was horrible men. This time, however, she didn’t get a chance to warm to the theme because the doorbell rang again. It was the old lady Hanna had seen earlier. Relentless as a tank, she had barged into the flat before Hanna had time to blink. The old lady talked non-stop.

“Oh, my dear. I’m so glad I’ve finally managed to find you at home. I’m Mrs. Jánosi from next door, but just call me Jolán. Oh, it’s lovely here, and so kind of you to invite me in, Mrs... er... what did you say your name was?”

“Niki,” grunted Mum.

“... Viki, dearest,” said Jolánka nodding with satisfaction.

Mum stared at the old woman for a moment, then corrected her.

“Niki. Nikoletta.”

But Jolán wasn’t listening, her attention having moved to the kitchen cabinets.

“Viki, my love! What a pretty kitchen you have!” she shrieked appreciatively. “This isn’t the previous owner’s. Theirs was a hideous light green. Did you have this put in? Or did you buy

it ready-made? Or maybe you brought it with you? Was it dear? Everything's so expensive and shoddily made these days."

Hanna was thinking that she ought to record Jolánka on her phone so she could put her on a loop when she couldn't get to sleep at night. Barely a couple of minutes had passed, and the old lady was already making herself comfortable on the sofa and starting to sound off about the neighbours. Meanwhile, she had picked up one of Mum's incense stands and was distractedly turning it around in her hands. Hanna wondered when she would notice she was handling the god Shiva and the goddess Shakti, entwined in a loving embrace.

"That Feri Bubkó – as God is my witness, I don't like using such words – but that man is a IDIOT!" she pronounced.

Mum, would most likely have agreed, if the old lady hadn't cut in, "And there's that poor little wife of his struggling with those kids."

"But..." Mum tried again, but Jolánka clearly hadn't come over to listen to her.

"Luckily, I'm not bothered by the sound of babies crying. Of course, it wasn't easy at first, as it takes me so long to fall asleep at night. And, you know if anything does wake me up, well, then it's 'Good morning and how do you do!'"

"How do you do!" repeated Hanna caustically.

Jolánka kept right on.

"Hello there, my dear," she said without batting an eyelid. Then, lowering her voice, she turned to a more exciting topic. "Now then, have you both seen that young man who lives in the flat opposite?"

"I haven't had time to introduce myself to people in the house. The move just wiped me out," said Mum, pressing a hand to her forehead. It looked like the old lady's chattering was bringing on one of her headaches, the type that hurt on both sides.

"His name is András," said the old lady, her voice coming over all sentimental. "My goodness what a rascal! But a really good-hearted one. If it weren't for those blood-sucking women! One after the other. Blondes, brunettes, redheads. I can't keep track of their names anymore!"

Jolánka shook her head despondently, "Poor boy!"

Much to Hanna's disappointment, no further details about András's love life were forthcoming because once again, the bell rang. Mum let go of her forehead and looked at Hanna, incredulous.

"Unbelievable!" she said.

"I quite agree," said Hanna, nodding, though more in relation to the old lady.

Jolánka waved her hand condescendingly to Mum.

“Feel free to answer it, Viki, my girl.”

“Niki,” said Mum over her shoulder from the door.

This day was turning out to be much more entertaining than Hanna could have anticipated when she had first got up. She waited, curious to see what kind of nutcase would come trotting into their living room next.

“Good morning, madam,” she heard from outside. “We’re from the Health Security Agency. May we come in?”

Jolánka jerked up her head like a war horse sensing danger. Hanna had her suspicions as to why. Even she knew that when the Health Security Agency sent out people in Ghostbusters outfits it meant there were rats in the house, or bird flu.

“Can’t we deal with it out here? I prefer not to let in strangers. My daughter’s not well and I’m looking after her,” said Mum.

“Not well, eh? Since when?” came the answer.

“Since early this morning.”

“Madam, in your own interest and that of your family, please let us into the flat.”

Three men came into the living room. Hanna had to struggle not to laugh when she saw them. They were in one-piece body suits like the neighbours’ twins, and they had a strange contraption on their backs which, presumably, had the disinfectant in it. They didn’t take their boots off. Mum nearly fainted when she saw this, but she was so frightened by the whole thing that she didn’t say anything about it.

“Take a seat.”

“Thank you,” said one of the Ghostbusters, and plumped down on the sofa. The other two took up position at the door and scanned the flat.

“How can I help you?” asked Mum, alarmed.

“I’m sure it hasn’t escaped your attention that over the last few days the district council has been conducting a collection of outsized household waste,” the man started. But he hadn’t reckoned on Jolánka, who interrupted, clucking and crowing.

“I should say it hasn’t! I’ve never seen the like of the stuff people put out in this street!”

The man gave her a look, and Jolánka fell silent.

“That is precisely the purpose of our visit” he said.

“How so?” said Mum, knitting her brows.

“It has come to our attention that a very hazardous, contagious object found its way onto the streets during the waste collection drive.”

Mum slumped onto a chair.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” she whispered.

“Lawdamercy!” wailed Jolánka.

The man went on without batting an eyelid.

“We are therefore conducting a search for every object local residents may have brought up from the street. Is there anything of this sort in your flat, by any chance?”

Mum was wheezing and pressing her hand to her heart.

“Oh my God! The world’s spinning,” she said.

“It would be enormously helpful, madam, if you could oblige us by answering the question,” said the man. He himself sounded very far from obliging.

Mum looked up at him.

“We haven’t brought anything up here. You haven’t either, have you Hanna?”

Hanna wanted the ground to swallow her up. She had no idea what to say. In the end she took a deep breath.

“No, me neither,” she said firmly.

The man looked at her. There was something very unpleasant in that look, but Hanna couldn’t decide what it was.

“Are you completely sure about that?” he asked. Then, softly, almost as if he were trying it for size, he added, “Hanna...”

Mum jumped to her feet. She couldn’t take it any longer.

“Please, you’ve got to tell me her illness has nothing to do with this!”

“We hope for the best, sincerely we do,” said the man, still keeping his eyes on Hanna.

This was too much for Jolánka. She leapt up and waddled to the door, moving surprisingly quickly for her age.

“I think I’ll toddle home too,” she shouted back. “No need to see me out, I know the way!”

As the door slammed shut behind the old lady, the man also got to his feet.

“Well, in that case we won’t disturb you any longer either. Thank you for your help,” he said, and gestured to the other two men to move off. “Don’t trouble yourself, madam. The little girl will see us out.”

A bad feeling came over Hanna. Especially when the man suddenly stopped at the front door, and, leaning very close to her, looked deep into her eyes. She was startled to see that his eyes were not the same colour. One was brown, the other green.

“I hope you were telling the truth,” said the man.

Hanna tried to hold his terrible gaze.

“I don’t make a habit of lying,” she replied.

The man with the mismatched eyes smiled to himself.

“That wouldn’t be a good idea right now,” he said and walked out of the door.

Hanna’s head was spinning. It was clear as day to her that the three men were looking for the metal thing still hidden in her P.E. bag. Now she also felt she must get rid of it. The only question was when and how. Hanna’s mind worked feverishly. She knew it would be impossible to slip out now. Mum would be watching her every move. She would have to wait.

It was already getting dark by the time Dad got home. He threw his bag down on the dining room table, planted a kiss on Hanna’s forehead, and looked around, grinning broadly.

“What’s for dinner?”

Instead of a prompt answer, all he got were sullen looks. Mum, who had been sitting by the kitchen window for hours, rose balefully to her feet to tell him everything that had happened in the afternoon.

“We have to move, Gábor. It’s over.”

Dad frowned anxiously.

“So soon?” he asked.

“The old lady next door will have trumpeted it all round the house that we’re plague-ridden,” replied Mum.

“But why?”

“We had a visit from the HSA.”

Hanna marched loudly off to her room. She had no interest in seeing what would happen next. And yes, as she closed the door behind her, Mum was already crying.

Well, that takes care of them for a while, thought Hanna, grimacing sadly. No-one asks me how I am, of course.

And then something occurred to her. But this is great! It’s now or never!

So, she jumped to her feet and tipped her P.E. stuff out onto the floor. She grabbed the thing that was wrapped in the red rag, quickly pulled on her coat, and slipped out of the flat.

Her plan was to take it to the recycling bins, which stood not far from the house right next to an abandoned playground.

When she got down to the street, she was dismayed to see that a nasty, sticky fog had descended. However, she was cheered by the thought that if she hadn't had a cold before, she'd be sure to catch one now. This way, at least she wouldn't have to go to school tomorrow either.

She was roused from her thoughts by a harsh voice.

"Excuse me, got a minute?"

A teenage boy span in front of her and grinned right in her face. There were big, dark rings under his eyes and one of his front teeth was missing.

"My phone's out of juice, and I need to call my mum to tell her she can start warming up my hot chocolate."

There were whinnies of laughter behind her. Hanna turned round. Through the fog and drizzle, she saw two other boys: one a gangly beanpole and the other with bleached hair. Alarmed, she glanced around, and saw that the street was completely empty.

"Come on, get your phone out while we're still asking nicely!" said one of them, leaning closer.

"I haven't got it," said Hanna.

"Yeah right..." said the one with the bags under his eyes, sniffing loudly. "Of course you haven't."

"I really haven't!" shouted Hanna.

"What's that there then, all wrapped up?" asked the one with the bleached hair.

"Nothing... Just rubbish."

"Let's have a look!" said the one with the bleached hair, grabbing for Hanna's hand.

"No... I can't give it to you... It's dangerous!" said Hanna, snatching her hand away.

"Dangerous! Now that sounds interesting!" said the one with the bags under his eyes, catching hold of one of Hanna's hands. The boy with the bleached hair grabbed her from the other side. Hanna took a deep breath ready to scream, but just then a voice came from behind them. It was a man's voice, grating and hoarse.

"Let the girl go! Now!"

Hanna's knees gave way. It was the old tramp.

"Are you deaf, boy?" the old man asked, calm as you like.

“Don’t you tell me what to do, dirtbag!” fumed the boy with shadows under his eyes, but Hanna noticed he wasn’t gripping her arm so tightly any longer.

The other two boys started moving towards the old tramp. But then they suddenly froze. Hanna couldn’t see why, as the old man hadn’t moved a muscle. He was just standing there and looking at them. And again, it was like he was smiling. The boys stood for a moment staring at him in bewilderment, as if they themselves couldn’t understand why their courage had suddenly abandoned them.

“Leave it! I’m not going to dirty my hands with the likes of him,” said the boy with the bleached hair, and turned to go. The boy with the shadows under his eyes let go of Hanna.

“Next time you won’t be so lucky, old man,” he said. “Let’s get out of here!”

The boys moved off, making a big racket as they did so. A bit further over they kicked a dustbin to pieces, perhaps so their retreat wouldn’t so much like a defeat, but in the end they were swallowed up in the milky, swirling fog.

“Now young lady, see how those battered old compasses are always getting you into trouble? Wouldn’t it be better to get rid of them?”

Hanna couldn’t speak. So, not for the first time or the last in her dealings with the old tramp, she decided to run for it instead. The old man’s voice saying ‘those battered old compasses’ went round and round in her head. So, it was a pair of compasses.

There’s a secret lurking somewhere in all this, I’d bet my life on it, she thought. And I won’t let it go until I know what it is.