

# BLACK MASKS

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# BLACK MASKS

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## ‘YES, I DO LIKE BRAHMS’

I ASSURED, I reassured my uncle. Who used to wear full Highland dress around the house, his eyes glinting for deer in the front garden: his ghillie’s spyglass is on my table now, from Dixey’s of New Bond Street. An instrument of infinite extension, but through which, for many years, I have seen – nothing.

‘Uncle,’ I would ask, ‘tell me of your memories of something that didn’t happen to you.’

And he would tell me of his days with the Red Cavalry, of herding buffalo, dressed in leather and with a long wooden lance, in the swamps of the Maremma. Then we would go and play together on his old Winkler grand, bought new in Dresden during the great devaluation.

‘Not so much as a pair of trousers, this cost,’ he would say, twirling the controls on the double piano seat.

We used to play Brahms’s *Autumn Landscapes*, lullabies of his grief, or sorrow – or was it pain at all?

‘Can I play the wolf notes, Uncle?’ And I’d try to keep the left hand full of sound, full as the grapes in the Salzkammergut as Brahms must have seen them, as he walked about, trying to find his appetite for lunch, and dinner.

‘Brahms was a one for salmon mousse,’ said my uncle, making his deadfish eye. ‘Keep on the wolf notes – I’m feeling that sabre cut in my left knuckles.’

And I toiled and rolled away.

Uncle was worried about the Great Crash. How it always came back, never bottomed out.

## *Black Masks*

‘Will you get a pair of trousers for the Winkler?’ I asked, faux naïf. I remembered what had happened to the Winkler factory – carried off to the East, what was left. And when I got to my room, I clipped my coupons for a silk shirt with flared cuffs.

My father was away fighting, perhaps for his life, perhaps for something more precious, like Brahms fighting for his liver. He sent me postcards – postcards he had not posted himself, perhaps not even written – with big, bright stamps. The stamps were bigger than the message. Always from the ‘Landscape’ series – spring and autumn. Perhaps buying himself two packs of postcards when he had arrived. Seeking out the postcard tout, doing a deal, bleary off the train. Bottoming out. Noble tramp. Expensive bundle.

Brahms was the last one to have real experiences, eat real salmon, grow real cancer spores. ‘Imagine,’ I tried to thrill my listless uncle, ‘he actually *wrote* classical music.’ My uncle looked bored. ‘Gave me a little case he had, for schnapps. Drank in the afternoons. Cried. A melancholy man.’ He did not add that Brahms bored him, sailing like a maudlin swan on heavy oil-paint ponds, amidst the most beautiful convolvulus there’s ever been.

‘Yes,’ said my uncle, ‘perfect in his way.’

Perhaps Brahms would have gone on to play in the jazz combo, first delicately for the tea-dances, then madly, moussed with schnapps, seizing the trumpet’s bowler-hat mute and cakewalking on the Sachertort. And by this time, quite, quite black.

Transmuted, turned into a postage-stamp like my father, who’d ask, ‘Who now remembers Adenauer?’ He’d loved the old man. If Adenauer had died and just become a corpse, my father would have taken mementoes, planted them like forest lines wherever he went. A sprig of Heimat, pines along the Tigris, saddlebags made of Konrad’s eye-pouches.



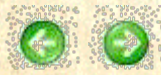
*'Yes, I Do Like Brahms'*

'Don't trivialise,' snapped my uncle, as I dragged out the wolf notes. 'Repetition must always improve on the first time. That way nothing is ever the same twice, but much much longer, or shorter. Or a different colour, or happier, a different nationality. An upward path to perfection.'

I thought of Brahms toiling upwards for his tea and the Kaiserin Elisabeth Hotel. Popping black bombers with the grooms, sniffing it up in the intervals at the English Tea Rooms. 'I dedicate these lines to my faithful horse Athos', wrote Count Stahremberg, winner of the Berlin–Vienna dash – that is, his horse was the winner, black and perfect in his way – and five short years later, Brahms was dead. At least, *that* Brahms; perhaps all of them – volley of shots over the grave, masked honour party – a wreath from old Harlem, a black funeral cake from the Winkler Piano Co.

Uncle had never recovered from the Depression, his great depression. On the other hand, my father's postcards came to an end. Perhaps he too, somewhere in Africa: turned blue, or simply walking off, into our destiny, following that high, rooty-tooting Brahms – black as his clarinet, weaving through the dunes like a sand-devil. Making that thing *sing*, and a farewell to melancholy.

Though not, it seemed, my uncle's.



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