

ESTHER'S INHERITANCE

Adapted for the stage by
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From the novel by
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and the English translation by
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

ESTHER (45)	unmarried sister of the late Vilma
NUNU (69)	elderly relative and companion to Esther
LACI (55)	Esther's brother
TIBOR (45)	family friend
BÉLA (30)	son of Olga (non-speaking)
OLGA (55)	housekeeper to Lajos
ÉVA (23)	daughter of Lajos and Vilma
GÁBOR (21)	son of Lajos and Vilma (non-speaking)
LAJOS (55)	brother-in-law of Esther
ENDRE (65)	family friend and notary

ACT ONE

The wide verandah at the rear of a rather run-down house in the Hungarian countryside, just before the first World War. There is a garden in front with a concrete bench downstage left. There is room for the actors to be seen as they approach down the left side of the house and come round into the garden.

It is Saturday afternoon in late September. Before the lights come up, we hear the orchestral 'sneeze' from the opening of the Hary Janos Suite by Kodaly, a traditional Hungarian warning that lies are about to be told. As the lights come up Nunu is seated at a table on the verandah peeling potatoes. A cuckoo calls several times and can be heard throughout the Act at the director's discretion. From the rear stage a bicycle bell rings twice. Nunu does not look up then, nor as Esther comes slowly round from the back of the house, opening a telegram and pausing to read it and gasp with surprise before she comes round and onto the verandah.

ESTHER: Lajos ... he's coming back.

NUNU (*after a long pause*): Well of course.

There is another long pause.

NUNU: When?

ESTHER: Tomorrow.

NUNU: Good. I will lock away the silver.

Esther laughs

ESTHER (*reading from the telegram*): "We will arrive in a car ... There will be five of us."

NUNU: Five people? Chicken, milk, cream.

ESTHER: "We'll stay until the evening."

NUNU: Dinner *and* supper! Ham then, and cheese, fruit, eggs, more potatoes.

ESTHER: Lajos and the two children, but who are the other two?

NUNU: Strangers.

ESTHER: He's bringing support.

NUNU: Lajos!

Silence for a moment.

ESTHER: I knew he'd come back sometime; but this time he doesn't dare to come alone. What does he want this time?

NUNU: There's nothing *here* anymore.

The two women sit in silence for some time. Esther takes the pan of potato peelings down stage right and throws them into the wings. Offstage hens cluck greedily. She walks slowly back to the verandah and sits beside Nunu. Nunu pats Esther's hand.

NUNU: Be careful not to spend too much time alone with him.

Esther nods and looks away. They sit in silence for a moment or two.

NUNU: At least there will be Laci here as usual ... and Tibor. Better invite Uncle Endre too.

ESTHER: Yes.

NUNU: He's always been a little frightened of Endre. Probably he owes him a lot. Come to think of it, is there *anyone* he doesn't owe?

ESTHER: It was a long time ago, Nunu. They've all forgotten.

NUNU: Pah! This is Hungary.

Nunu exits slowly into the house. After a long pause, Esther starts to weep silently. Over a background of Béla Bartok's 'night and insects' music, the lights slowly dim.

After a long pause, floorboards creak and, offstage, someone coughs. Nunu enters from the house, carrying a lamp. The music fades. Esther turns to Nunu and smiles.

ESTHER: Come over here and sit down Lady Macbeth! No, that's unkind, I'm sorry. You and I must stick together now. Mama's gone; Papa's gone; and Vilma; so long ago. (*Nunu crosses herself.*) And Lajos went away.

They sit in silence for a while.

NUNU: Have you had the ring looked at?

Esther looks at Nunu with surprise and then shakes her head.

ESTHER: Not since he ... I just put it away.

NUNU: Does Éva know you have it?

ESTHER: What do you mean?

NUNU: If she does, she'll know it used to be her mother's.

ESTHER: Have *you* had a look at it?

NUNU: Yes.

ESTHER: When?

NUNU: Years ago: that time you went to Pécs and left me the keys.

ESTHER: And so?

NUNU: I took it to the jeweller.

ESTHER: Ah!

NUNU: He'd changed the setting; white gold the jeweller called it; much cheaper than platinum; and he'd used steel for the clasp. And of course the stone isn't a diamond any more.

ESTHER: No!

NUNU: That ring you've looked after so carefully all these years isn't worth five cents.

ESTHER: That's not true!

NUNU (*with a shrug*): Wake up, Esther!

ESTHER: I know. Everything he touches becomes a fake. (*Pause*). Then why did he give it to me, with such a flourish ... straight after Vilma's funeral?

NUNU: Use your head.

ESTHER: You're right. He gave me a fake. Now when it comes time to hand it on to Éva everyone's going to think ...

NUNU: It's possible ... but everyone knows Lajos.

ESTHER: Lajos is not a criminal; at least not intentionally.

NUNU: Maybe he's not a schemer but he just *does* things. I expect he just needed some ready money. Vilma dying like that simply gave him the opportunity. He had to sell the ring but he wouldn't want to tell anyone.

ESTHER: So he had a copy made.

NUNU: Then he put it further out of harm's way when he gave it you.

ESTHER: It was such a wonderful moment. Everyone arriving straight from Vilma's funeral and his first gesture was to hand me the ring; the family heirloom.

NUNU: Humph! I suspected it as soon as you told me. That's why I had it looked at. It's a fake.

ESTHER: So it's a fake. Why did you wait until now to tell me?

NUNU: There was no need to tell you straight away. And you'd had more than your share of bad news regarding Lajos.

ESTHER: Perhaps.

NUNU: It was *you* he loved.

ESTHER: Perhaps. That's what he said ... before he married Vilma.

Nunu rises; kisses Esther on the top of the head and picks up her lamp. She starts to exit into the house, turning to speak just as she goes out of the door.

NUNU: Scratch the surface of your mirror with it. You'll see.

Nunu exits. Esther bows her head.

ESTHER (*with a sigh*): Oh Lajos! Oh Lajos! Oh Lajos!

During the change of scene, there is more music by Bartok.

The following morning. On the verandah, a breakfast of rolls and coffee is being tackled by Laci and Tibor. The music suggests an early autumn morning in rural Hungary. Down the left side of the house, Esther walks slowly forward, carrying a bunch of dahlias she has just picked. Before she is in sight from the verandah, Laci speaks and Esther, surprised by what he says, stops and is obliged to eavesdrop.

LACI: Why didn't *you* marry her?

TIBOR: Because she wouldn't have me.

LACI: Fair enough; but *why* wouldn't she have you?

TIBOR: She loved someone else.

LACI: Who?

TIBOR: Lajos, of course.

LACI: And you know he's coming here today?

TIBOR: I know.

LACI: What does he want?

TIBOR: I don't know.

LACI: Does he owe you money too?

TIBOR: Let it go, let it go! It was a long time ago. It doesn't matter anymore.

LACI: He owes *me*! And on top of that, he'd already borrowed Father's gold watch: said it was only for a week! That was ten years ago: no, wait, twelve. He still hasn't given it back. Then, another time, he came and took away the entire set of encyclopaedias. Borrowed he said, but we've never seen them since ... And once, he asked me for three hundred crowns, but I'm telling you I didn't give it to him: not a single cent.

TIBOR: Would it have been such a disaster if you *had* given it to him?

LACI: You think not! (*Pause.*) What d'you think then, Tibor? Does he still love her?

Pause.

TIBOR: I don't know. I really don't know. ... They say a doomed love doesn't die.

Esther, clutching the flowers to her bosom, stifles a sob and hurries back round the house and out of sight. There is another pause.

LACI: And then he goes and marries Vilma.

TIBOR: Because that was what *Vilma* wanted.

A silence, while Laci and Tibor sip their coffee.

LACI: Know what he said to me once? "I must exchange this quiet country life for the dangerous battlefield of life."

TIBOR: And Esther was one of the wounded he left for dead on the battlefield.

LACI: And then Vilma went and died and Esther had to go and look after her children.

TIBOR: She never did say why she came back six months later ...

Esther enters from the house with the dahlias in a vase which she puts on the table.

TIBOR: ... Ah! We were just wondering where you'd got to.

LACI: Did you know he's written to Endre?

ESTHER: Lajos? What did he say?

LACI: Just that he should be available and not go off somewhere today. That he needed him.

ESTHER: Needed Endre?

LACI (*to Tibor*): It's true, isn't it?

TIBOR: In his *official* capacity ... so he wants something ... Maybe he wants to settle all his debts, in front of a notary.

All three laugh and then fall silent. Esther sits at the table. Nunu enters with a pot of fresh coffee.

NUNU: Endre's sent word to say he will be here, but later.

LACI: The whole town has heard he's coming. Last night, Jacob the tailor buttonholed me – like tailors do – about his unpaid bill for a wedding suit and the town clerk was on about those concrete benches they ordered more than twenty years ago and even paid Lajos a deposit for. I reckon we have the only example here in this garden. Anyway, the rest never turned up.

TIBOR: Maybe he's turned over a new leaf and wants to swear an oath to that effect in front of a notary.

Everyone laughs again.

LACI: He was always able to ask for a sub even after you'd had a row with him. Remember, [*to Tibor*] the last time you saw him? You had that great argument and called him a scoundrel to his face, and told him the harm he'd done to family and friends. You said he was the lowest of the low and he wept buckets, went round embracing everyone begging forgiveness, and when he got to you he asked you for two hundred crowns.

TIBOR: I don't remember.

LACI: Of course you do! And when you refused he rushed off in such a state; like he'd been sentenced to death. I mean we were all here in this garden. But then he stopped at the gate, turned about and came back very quietly, and calmly asked you for a twenty, "or at least some change" as he put it, because he didn't even have the train fare. And what did you *do*? (*Tibor tries to wave the question away.*) You gave him the whole two hundred! Was there ever such a man?

TIBOR: Yes, I gave it to him. Why shouldn't I have given it to him? After all, I never understand why people shouldn't give money if they have it. Besides, money wasn't the main thing with Lajos?

LACI: That's like saying the smell of blood's of no interest to a pack of wolves.

TIBOR: You don't understand.

LACI: What don't I understand?

TIBOR: You don't understand *Lajos*. I've seen him at close quarters. He doesn't *always* think about himself first. I can think of one occasion. He came to me one evening, pretty drunk, and asked for quite a lot of money and the next morning I discovered he'd given the lot to one of my clerks who'd got completely out of his depth. (*As Laci makes to speak, Tibor holds up his hand.*) No, wait a minute. I haven't finished. It wasn't just a case of him acting the philanthropist with someone else's money. He had even more need of cash than the clerk, with serious bills falling due. But the money he borrowed from me drunk that night he handed over stone cold sober in the morning to someone he scarcely knew. Now do you understand?

LACI: No!

TIBOR: Well I think I do.

NUNU: Be careful then. If it's money he's after, he'll come straight to you.

TIBOR: Not this time!

NUNU: Of course you won't: like the last time! Another twenty at least. He's a man to whom one must always give.

LACI: But why?

NUNU: Because he is the stronger: stronger than any of *us* at least.

Nunu exits into the house and Esther follows her.

LACI: Let's go down to the pond for a smoke.

Laci and Tibor exit downstage left. Music, perhaps from the Hary Janos Suite again, suggests the forthcoming 'garden party' for which the stage is now set with a Sunday picnic lunch on the table and enough chairs on the verandah and downstage in the garden to accommodate the company about to assemble.

As the lights come up, there is no one on stage. A car is heard arriving on the other side of the house. Car doors slam and there is the sound of voices. Laci and Tibor enter from downstage left.

LACI: They're here then. Where are the womenfolk?

TIBOR: Getting ready ... whatever that means.

Down the left side of the house comes a procession, advancing in single file, headed by a beaming Lajos, in a white linen jacket and matching summer hat. Behind him is the dapper, rather supercilious looking Béla, with an almost albino appearance and frizzy curls. He is wearing dark blue tinted glasses and does rather mince as he walks. On his arm is his mother, Olga, over-dressed for the country and over-made up, her hair piled high on her head under a large hat. They pick their way uncomfortably, unused to the terrain. They are followed by the two children of Lajos, his son Gábor who looks very ordinary in an ill-fitting suit. By contrast, his daughter Éva is a pert little madam in a modish suit with two fox furs round her shoulders. She is holding a small carrier bag. Laci and Tibor gaze open-mouthed. With no preliminary greeting, Lajos addresses Tibor.

LAJOS: Do you have a twenty, please? The driver needs to go and get some diesel oil and I have no change.

Laci silently gives Tibor a gentle punch on the arm. Tibor reaches into his jacket to bring out his wallet and hand a twenty crown note to Lajos who makes a slight bow in acknowledgement before marching back round the house again. Nodding silently to Laci and Tibor, Béla and Olga make their way past them and go to sit on the concrete bench. Gábor and Éva advance, shake hands and kiss Laci and Tibor on both cheeks before walking on across the garden, turning to look with admiration and vague recollection at the house. We hear the car start up and drive off as Lajos reappears and makes his theatrical entrance. As he rounds the corner of the house, Esther who has changed her dress and Nunu, who has not, enter from the house.

LAJOS: Aha!

Stepping onto the verandah as if going on stage, Lajos greets and embraces both women.

LAJOS (*gesturing at his children*): Behold the orphans!

Lajos conducts Esther down to the garden to greet and embrace Gábor and Éva. Esther, holding Éva's hand, makes her do a pirouette.

ESTHER: My, how you have grown and how pretty you are!

Éva goes to the verandah and greets Nunu affectionately. Gábor wanders downstage right looking out and lighting a cigarette. Esther gestures enquiringly towards Olga and Béla who are sitting on the bench, not looking towards the others.

LAJOS: Ah yes. This is Olga and her son Béla.

Hearing their names, the two turn and stand to greet an advancing Esther. Olga shakes hands but they do not embrace. Béla shakes hands with a little bow. Lajos chooses that moment to go back to Nunu, still on the verandah. Béla walks over to talk with Éva leaving Olga on her own. She lights a cigarette and gazes into space. Gábor mooches around, occasionally kicking at an imaginary football. Esther turns and goes after Lajos. Everyone except Nunu is constantly in motion, interacting with each other and reacting to Lajos.

LAJOS: And how is my delightful Nunu, the sub-postmistress of Felvidék. I have news for you.

NUNU: What news could that be?

LAJOS: You remember we talked last time ...

NUNU: Last time was so long ago ...

LAJOS: It might be. But I promised to speak to the Secretary of State on your behalf about your suitability for promotion to the rank of postmistress. I have kept my promise.

NUNU: You *have*!

LAJOS: He was deeply impressed by your record as a sub-postmistress over several decades and he has personally acknowledged my letter in which I urged him to give you an immediate appointment.

NUNU: I'm not sure I could still ...

LAJOS: I have his reply here with me.

As Lajos produces the letter with a flourish, the others, except Olga and Gábor crowd up to the edge of the verandah to be his audience. He puts on his spectacles and draws the letter from its envelope.

LAJOS: "The Secretary of State for Posts and Telegraphs acknowledges safe receipt of your esteemed communication of ... di-dum-di-dum ... diddley-dee-diddley-dee ... As regards your suggestion of her immediate appointment of to the rank of postmistress, he has asked the department to instigate an assessment and, in the fullness of time, he would hope to be able to advise you of a positive outcome, etcetera, etcetera. Now isn't that marvellous?"

He hands the letter to Nunu and the envelope to Laci. Esther crowds beside Nunu.

ESTHER: Official notepaper with the Secretary of State's seal!

NUNU: You were always so kind. *(She kisses him.)* But you know, I've been retired for twelve years now. I'm not sure I could even do ...

LAJOS: It's not too late. You'll see. You'll see.

NUNU: ... Never mind, it was so good of you to do all this for old Nunu. It's probably too late, but I am so happy!

ESTHER: There you are, you see. He kept his promise to you.

LACI *(aside to Tibor)*: Look at the date on the envelope. I wonder how long he's had it in his pocket ...

LAJOS: And I haven't forgotten you, Laci. *(From inside his jacket he draws a slim package which he hands over with a flourish. Laci opens it eagerly.)*

LACI: A wristwatch. Now that *is* very kind. Thank you. Thank you very much.

TIBOR *(aside to Laci as he fiddles to set the time and put the watch on then wind it up)*: Now you'll be able to tell the time. You must have really missed that gold watch!

LAJOS: And for you, Tibor, *(reaching into his breast pocket)* one of your favourite Havanas.

TIBOR: You're far too kind. What a treat!

LAJOS: Éva; let me have that bag now. *(She brings it to him.)* What have we here for Nunu?

NUNU: But you've already done so much.

LAJOS: I happen to have here two rare volumes of French poetry. I've taken the liberty of inscribing them each with a little verse of my own composition.

There are 'oohs' and 'aahs' all round and Nunu gives Lajos a kiss which he receives very gallantly.

LACI (*aside to Tibor*): But she only speaks Hungarian!

LAJOS: And finally ... I hope this will suit you, Esther.

He hands Esther a lilac silk shawl which she receives with a mock curtsy and drapes round her shoulders. She continues to wear it throughout the rest of the Act.

LAJOS (*to Esther*): And now, we two have to put everything right.

Laci gives Tibor a hefty nudge and a wink. With music accompanying the bustle on stage, Lajos offers his arm to Esther, who takes it and they stroll off. Nunu summons everyone to buffet on the verandah table. Olga gets up from the bench and makes her way to the verandah. While the others are helping themselves to the food and picking a chair, Esther and Lajos arrive at the bench. He gallantly hands her to a seat and stands beside her. The others chat and eat and move around, seldom still. Laci several times, looks at his new watch, shakes his wrist and puts the watch to his ear. All of them look over at Esther and Lajos from time to time.

ESTHER: Sit down too, and tell me what it is you *really* want.

Lajos sits but he takes a while to speak, filling the time by putting a cigarette into long holder and lighting it before he looks round at Esther with a wide smile.

LAJOS: I want to put *everything* right.

ESTHER: *What* do you want to put right?

LAJOS: Everything that *needs* putting right.

Pause.

ESTHER: We're all happy to see you, the children and yourself, but as for everything else please just forget it. Let's not even *talk* about the past. You don't owe anybody anything. (*A silence.*) I doubt very much if that's the only reason you've come here.

LAJOS: No. No, that is the only reason. I had to talk with you one last time.

ESTHER: *Lajos!* I have nothing left.

LAJOS: I don't *need* anything anymore. Now it is I who want to give *you* something ... Look here, it's twenty years since we last saw each other, not two but *twenty*. There won't be many more such twenties left. This may even have been the last. We need to plan ahead. Over twenty years things become clearer, more transparent, and more understandable. I know now what happened; and even why. That's why the future needs to be sorted out.

ESTHER: That is ridiculous; totally and utterly ridiculous. Here we are, sitting on this bench: two people who no longer have feelings for each other, and you want to talk about the *future*. There is *no* future, of any kind, at least for us two, so let's get our feet back on the ground. You wouldn't understand it, but there's something we enjoy here which you are completely unaware of; and that something is dignity, uncomplicated by aspirations or possessions; the simple dignity of bare existence. We have nothing: we need nothing. And besides, I've been humiliated by you more than enough for one lifetime. Simply talking about it feels humiliating. So tell me now. What is it you really want? Why did you come here? Who *are* these strange people? You turn up one day out of the blue with a menagerie of people we've never met or haven't seen in nearly twenty years. Without any warning, you turn up here in the grand manner, spouting the same old platitudes and acting like you're answering a call from God! ... But people *know* you round here. People know you only too well.

Lajos does not reply. There is a burst of laughter from the verandah. Lajos studies his fingernails.

ESTHER: You have nothing to *give* me. You *took* everything we had. You ruined everything.

LAJOS: That's true.

Lajos stands and strolls back down the side of the house, looking closely at it. He looks up and down and then crouches to peer at the bricks at ground level. Then he comes back to the bench and stands beside it.

LAJOS: Your mother died there, didn't she, in that upper room with the closed shutters?

ESTHER: No, in the parlour downstairs that's Nunu's room now.

LAJOS: Interesting. I had forgotten ... By the way, I noticed signs of rising damp in the corner there.

ESTHER: We had that fixed last year.

A silence ensues and then Lajos sits down again beside Esther.

LAJOS: I've one question. Just one question.

As he puts his question, Endre is coming down the side of the house carrying a brief case so that he has reached the corner as Esther is reacting to Lajos's question.

LAJOS: There's no mortgage outstanding is there ...?

TIBOR (*seeing Endre*): Endre! Welcome! We've been waiting for you.

Esther jumps up and goes quickly to greet Endre, as do Tibor and Laci. Lajos strolls up to join them. Lajos stands as a spectator while Endre greets Esther first and then everyone individually. He greets each according to his relationship with them; embracing family and old friends but shaking hands and bowing to the others. There is spontaneous ad lib chatter by the company until Lajos and Endre are finally face-to-face.

ENDRE: So, Lajos, you've come back.

Lajos makes as if to give Endre a bear hug but Endre holds out his hand and Lajos has to shake it.

LAJOS: Back home! You have my ...?

ENDRE (*patting his briefcase*): Everything you sent me is here.

LAJOS: Then please do join the feast.

ENDRE: Just remember you're not the host. Not yet, anyway!

Lajos puts on a brief show of contrition. They enter the chattering group and make their way to the table. Nunu serves them and she and Esther are constantly going to and fro in and out of the house. From the scrum, Olga emerges and makes her way to the bench where she sits down again looking away from the others. Esther notices her there and comes over to the bench to see if all is well. Olga sees her approach and speaks without getting up.

OLGA: My dear Esther!

ESTHER: Madame!

Olga pats the bench as an invitation and, keeping her distance, Esther sits. In the crowd, Béla is paying attention to Éva who seems rather put out by this. Olga speaks but ignores Esther's responses.

OLGA: My son is in insurance. He works for a big company. They say he has prospects. He knows that appearances matter.

ESTHER: He's certainly very smartly turned out. We tend not to dress up here.

OLGA: Social life is very important to us, but one must always stay on one's guard. There are so many people who would like to take advantage.

ESTHER: Perhaps. We tend to keep ourselves to ourselves.

OLGA: Life has not been generous to me.

ESTHER: I don't think life is, by nature, generous.

OLGA: The municipal authorities are so inflexible. One can do nothing without a permit and no one seems to have the authority to issue one. The bureaucracy is corrupt and people like me are the always the victims.

ESTHER: Have you had bad dealings with them?

OLGA: And trades people try to cheat one all the time, giving you short measure whenever they think they can get away with it. I always count my change very carefully.

ESTHER: Very sensible.

OLGA: It was over money that my husband left me.

ESTHER: Dear me; I'm sorry to hear that.

OLGA: I wasn't sorry to see the back of him. He never gave me enough housekeeping and wanted to see receipts for everything. I told him I had to be left in charge of the modest amount he gave me and shouldn't have to account for every cent. It's better now with Lajos. He buys everything on credit. I've been his housekeeper for five years.

ESTHER: Indeed!

OLGA: Oh I think you know what he's like. I mean he tells me you were sweet on each other in the old days, before he married your poor sister. You missed your chance there! But who knows what the future may hold once everything is sorted out here. Isn't that so?

Esther stands.

ESTHER: Madame, we really don't know each other so perhaps we should not be speaking like this.

Esther turns and sets off towards the others.

OLGA: Dear Esther, we will have plenty of time to talk about it all. We are going to get to know each other, I feel sure.

As Esther arrives back at the verandah Lajos greets her. Gábor rounds up Olga and Béla and escorts them down the left side of the house. In a short time we hear the car starting and driving off.

LAJOS: Gábor is taking everyone off in the motor car to look at the church but, you know me, I need my afternoon nap. Nunu has put her parlour at my disposal. Shall we talk again afterwards? I cannot leave tonight until everything is put right.

Tibor, Laci and Endre set off and exit downstage left. Éva sits on a chair on the verandah and stares ahead blankly as her father exits into the house. Nunu clears the table and disappears into the house.

ESTHER (to Éva): I think I must go to my room. I need a rest before starting supper..

Éva does not reply.

ESTHER: It feels like a long day.

She exits into the house. There is a flourish of arpeggios on a cimbalom.

End of Act 1.

ACT TWO

Sunday, late afternoon. Esther's room. Stage left there is a window with shutters. A narrow single bed sits in the angle of the left wall and runs along the back wall to the door. There is a bedside table between the window and the bed. On the other side of the door there is a dresser and its surface has many small trinkets, souvenirs, a mirror and several framed photographs. Downstage right is a round table and a couple of chairs. Esther is sitting on the right hand chair. Her new lilac shawl is draped over the back of the chair.

There is another orchestral sneeze, a pause and then there is a tap at the door. Without waiting for an answer, Éva slips into the room, glancing back outside as she quietly shuts the door.

ÉVA: Esther!

ESTHER: Come in my darling. Have you had a rest? Where is everyone?

ÉVA: Lajos is sleeping in Nunu's room. Olga and the men have gone for a walk.

ESTHER: Sunday afternoon in the country. Well, well then.

There is an awkward silence that drags on to the point that Éva has to speak.

ÉVA: You really will have to help us! You're the only one. *(Then she turns her back and scrutinises the top of the dresser to cover her confusion.)*

ESTHER: My dear?

Éva picks up one of the photographs and, turning towards Esther, holds it at arm's length.

ÉVA: That's Mama, isn't it? How beautiful. She must have been younger than I am when this was taken.

ESTHER: Can you remember her?

ÉVA: Vaguely. Someone comes into my room when it's dark and leans over. I can still smell her scent. That's all really. I was only three when she died.

ESTHER: Three and a half!

ÉVA: Yes. Really I only remember *you*. You were always fussing over me; adjusting something; a ribbon, my hair. You were always in my room doing something. Putting away the clean clothes. Always something; always *there* somehow. Then you disappeared, quite suddenly ... (*bitterly*) Why did you leave me, Esther?

ESTHER: Hush, hush, my dear. You don't understand yet.

ÉVA: Yet? You're still playing the little Mama.

Esther turns away from Éva and covers her face with her hands. Éva comes to her and puts her arm round her.

ÉVA: I know it couldn't have been easy with Father, but you shouldn't have gone away.

ESTHER: I had to.

ÉVA: You should have known you were the only one how might have helped him. Not just him; there was Gábor and me! You left us to our fate, like you were abandoning us on the doorstep of some strange house. Why did you do that to us?

Esther shakes her head and sobs silently.

ÉVA: Shall I tell you why you did it? You did it out of revenge. (*Esther reacts to this accusation.*) Don't look at me like that. It was wicked and so it must have been revenge. You were the only woman who could ever make Father do anything. (*Brief pause.*) You were the only woman he has ever loved. That much I know as well as you and Father do. I wish someone would tell me what happened between you two. I've had my entire childhood to think about it. I haven't thought about anything else.

ESTHER: I'm sorry.

ÉVA: And you had better believe me: it wasn't a happy childhood. Do you know anything about it? Do you *want* to know? (*Esther slowly shakes her head.*) Well I am going to tell you anyway. And when you know it all, I want you to help me. That much you owe me.

ÉVA: Anything! I'll do anything to help. (*She stands up.*) Look, my dear: your father is a charming and talented man but all these things you are talking about have become more than a little confused in his memory of that time. You must be aware that he's very quick to forget anything inconvenient. Please don't be upset when I say that. I'm not criticising him. It's just the way he is. He can't help it. That's his nature.

ÉVA: I know that! Father never remembers reality. That's because he's a poet!

ESTHER: Yes, an unpublished poet but a poet even so. So reality for him becomes confused and you shouldn't trust his recollection of events.

ÉVA: Yes, but what's your recollection? Can it be so different?

ESTHER: I remember that time. I remember it well. It was the most difficult and the most unbearably painful period of my life; and unbelievably complicated. You say revenge! What sort of a word is that to use? Who could have taught you to think that? You know nothing of that time. *Everything* your father says about that time is pure fantasy. But *I* can remember the reality. I can remember what happened and, Éva dear, I owe you nothing at all.

ÉVA: But I've *read* the letters!

The women stare silently at each other.

ESTHER: What ... letters?

ÉVA: *The* letters! Father's letters: the ones he wrote to you at the time. You know, when he used to visit your house and he and Laci were such friends. You know very well he was obsessed with you, saying you should elope together because he couldn't go on living without you: saying that he wouldn't be able to keep up appearances and couldn't cope with Vilma any more. He told you – you knew anyway – Vilma was so much stronger than him and she hated you!

ESTHER: Hated me? Why?

ÉVA: Because you were younger, or more beautiful, or more real. Only you can answer that.

ESTHER (*taking hold of Éva and shaking her*): What are you talking about? What letters? What is this nonsense?

ÉVA (*jerking free and distancing herself*): You're lying!

ESTHER: I have never lied.

ÉVA: But I've *read* the letters. They were lying in the cupboard for ages.

ESTHER: What cupboard?

ÉVA: Where Mama kept her underwear; in that rosewood box. I only found them last year.

Esther sits.

ESTHER: You've read them. Tell me what they say.

ÉVA: You *know* what they say.

ESTHER: Call me a liar; think what you like but tell me what's *in* these letters.

ÉVA: I don't understand you. I'm talking about the letters Father wrote you when he was engaged to Mama; three of them. He was begging you to release him from his emotional prison because you were the only one he loved. He wrote the last one just before the wedding. That's the one where he says he can't speak to you face-to-face because he no longer has the strength and because he's so ashamed of what it will do to Mama.

ESTHER: He said that?

ÉVA: He's probably never written a more sincere letter. He said he was a crushed, injured man; that he trusted no one but you; that only you could give him back his self-respect. He was begging you.

ESTHER: Begging me?

ÉVA: Begging you to elope, to abandon everything and flee abroad. He was putting his life in your hands. He was in total despair. It's impossible you don't remember. You just don't want to admit it or discuss it. Maybe it's all too painful on account of Mama or you want to keep me in the dark. But it's too late. I've read these letters now and I see Father in a whole new light. Whatever his faults since then, for once in his life he was striving to be strong and good. It wasn't his fault he failed. Why didn't you answer him?

There is a silence during which Esther slowly shakes her head.

ESTHER: And what should I have answered?

ÉVA: What! ... My God! How should I know? But you should have answered *something*. It's the sort of letter you get once in a lifetime, if ever. He wrote he would wait until the morning for your answer but if you didn't reply he'd know you too lacked the strength. He'd know then he had to stay here and marry Mama. He didn't have the courage to come and speak to you because he felt sure you wouldn't believe him. He'd lied to you so often before. Esther, I don't have the right to ask but why didn't you answer him? Because from then on, everything went so terribly wrong. Well it's all over now; but I do hold you partly responsible.

ESTHER: When did your father write those letters?

ÉVA: The week before the wedding.

ESTHER: Where did he address them?

ÉVA: Where!/? Here, to this house. You lived here with Mama!

ESTHER: You found them in a rosewood box?

ÉVA: In the cupboard under the underwear.

Esther picks up the photograph of Vilma that Éva was looking at earlier. She stares at it silently for a moment or two.

ESTHER: Vilma. Oh Vilma. How could you?

A silence, then Éva takes a cigarette out of her purse and lights it.

ÉVA: Look, Esther. Father will tell you how things have been for us, all these years. While you've been asleep here in the country, a great deal's been happening to us and not much of it pleasant. After you abandoned us, we had a series nurses and nannies. Those nannies ... I mean Father wasn't too choosy. Some of them ran off with our things and some of them we had to run away from because Father owed them too much. Later on, when things seemed to be going well for him, we stayed in hotels but he would go off, sometimes for *months* at a time. We might seem to be living a respectable life but were like a nomadic tribe in the desert.

ESTHER: You poor children.

ÉVA: I mean you could say that possessions never mean anything to Father but, you know, even at the worst of times, he always had to have a car, even if he had to drive it himself. It was like he would wake in the morning, and like a hunter-gatherer he'd set off for his hunting grounds. In his case it was the city. He'd sniff the air, staying on the alert and hunt down a suitably large banknote, roast it and offer us all a bite but then, until that banknote was all eaten and not even the smell of it remained, he lost interest in hunting. Are you laughing at me?

ESTHER: No, I'm not laughing at you, but you paint a fascinating and yet all too believable picture. Do go on!

ÉVA: Don't misunderstand me. I'm not complaining about Father. I love him dearly and I think he was nicest to me when he came back from his longer trips. He'd be completely exhausted and utterly broke, and looking as if he'd been fighting wild animals. Yet those times were the best of all. On Sundays he'd take us to the museum, then to the sweetshop and afterwards to the cinema. In the evening, he'd ask to see our homework, clip on his monocle and talk to us about our schoolwork. Father as a schoolteacher: can you imagine?

ESTHER: Not very easily. I don't know who to feel sorry for. Him, or you and Gábor.

ÉVA: Actually, we didn't have too bad a time of it until, one day, that woman arrived.

ESTHER: *That woman?*

Éva jerks her head to indicate what woman.

ÉVA: You know how it is with Fate. She just happened to arrive at the moment when everything else had been tried and failed.

ESTHER: What moment?

ÉVA: The moment Father began to show his age. The moment when Lajos the Hunter discovered his eye was not so bright, his sense of smell not so acute ... that his hand was trembling as he took aim. And that was the day Father took fright.

ESTHER: What was he frightened of?

ÉVA: Of himself; of old age. Once the leader of the pride loses his self-confidence then anyone at all can take advantage of him.

ESTHER: But what has she done to him?

ÉVA: She controls him ... We owe her money ... And have you heard? I'm engaged to *him*.

ESTHER: Her son?

Éva nods twice, hanging her head.

ESTHER: Do you love him?

Éva shakes her head vigorously.

ESTHER: Then why are you marrying him?

ÉVA: We have to save Father.

ESTHER: Does he have some hold over you?

ÉVA: He holds some of Father's bills. He could put him in prison.

A pause.

ESTHER: Do you ... do you love someone else?

Éva avoids the question, admires her pink fingernails then answers pertly.

ÉVA: I love Father. I think there are only two people in this world who love him: You Esther, and me. Gábor doesn't count. He lives in his own little world.

ESTHER: You don't want to marry her son?

Éva shakes her head.

ESTHER: And there is someone else then? Someone you love and, if it were possible to sort things out, you'd like to marry.

Éva nods and tears well in her eyes. Esther goes to her and puts her arms round the seated girl.

ESTHER: If things could be arranged ... I mean, it wouldn't be easy. Laci, Nunu and me, we're all three of us poor as church mice now but ... well, there might just be someone who could help you.

ÉVA: Oh, you could help, all right.

ESTHER: Ssh!

She peeps out of her door to see if anyone is within earshot then goes and closes her casement window before returning to Éva.

ESTHER: You must *tell* me! If you want to escape, you and your father, from these people, then you must tell me if there is someone who can look after you, someone you love ... and if money can help ... well then I can always ask ... What is it you want?

ÉVA: I want to save Father.

ESTHER: From them?

ÉVA: Yes.

ESTHER: And you want to save yourself too?

ÉVA: If possible.

ESTHER: You want to get away? Where to?

ÉVA: Abroad. Far away!

ESTHER: And there's someone waiting for you there?

Éva nods.

ESTHER: Yes! Oh Éva, then I do want to help *you* get away. At least *you* must get away. Tell me, what can I do?

Éva still seems upset and wary.

ÉVA: Father will have to tell you what it is that *he* wants. He has ... well, he has a plan. He'll tell you. That's between you and him. But you could help *me* right now if you want. There's something in this house that's mine. As far as I know, it's mine ... This is very difficult to talk about.

ESTHER: I don't understand.

ÉVA: I need money, for myself. I need money to get away.

ESTHER: Yes, of course ... I'll get hold of some money. I'm sure I can. Maybe I can talk to Tibor, or even Uncle Endre. Nunu and I have nothing. Even so, I don't think that what *we* can raise will amount to all that much.

ÉVA: I don't want your money. I only want what's mine; what my mother left to me. (*Suddenly, she becomes desperate.*) Father said you were looking after my inheritance. That's all there's left of my own mother. Give me back the ring, Esther. Now, immediately!

Esther backs away from Éva.

ESTHER: When did your father speak of the ring?

ÉVA: Last week; when he told us we were coming here.

ESTHER: Did he talk about the value of the ring?

ÉVA: Yes. He had it looked at once. After mother's death, before he gave it to you, he had it valued.

ESTHER: And what is it worth?

ÉVA: A lot. Thousands. Maybe even ten thousand.

ESTHER: Really! (*There is a brief silence*) Well, you are not *getting* the ring.

ÉVA: Why not? Because you don't have it or just that you won't give it to me?

ESTHER: I'm not going to answer that question.

Very quietly at that moment, Lajos steps into the room.

LAJOS: Leave us alone, Éva. I have some business with Esther.

Éva looks suspiciously at both of them in turn and then, reluctantly, walks out of the room and closes the door. Lajos smiles at Esther and rubs his hands together in a rather self-satisfied way. He starts to look and walk about the room, heading first for the dresser and its various objects.

LAJOS: I've had a very restful sleep. And I feel as if I've come home at long last.

Esther does not answer him. Lajos takes her arm and politely ushers her to a chair.

LAJOS: Now at last I can take a good long look at you. Time has really stood still in this house. You haven't changed at all.

Esther does not reply and looks away from him. Lajos paces round the room picking things up and looking at them. He comes to the table and picks up a Venetian drinking glass.

LAJOS: This was a present from your father as I recall. For your birthday, wasn't it?

ESTHER: When did you sell the ring?

LAJOS: The ring? *(He looks up at the ceiling and shakes his head then lights a cigarette.)* I can't remember.

ESTHER: A likely story! Think back. I'm sure it will come to you.

LAJOS: The ring ... the ring ... really now, when did I sell the ring? You know I really do believe it was a few weeks before Vilma died. We were so short of money at that time, what with doctors, our social life, and so on ... yes; it must have been that year. But tell me; why are you so interested in the ring?

ESTHER: And then you gave the copy to me. Remember?

LAJOS: I gave it to you? ... I suppose I might have. Did I really give it to you?

Lajos smiles at her. Esther gets up and walks to the dresser, pulling open a drawer and taking out the ring. She holds it out to him on the palm of her hand.

ESTHER: You *still* don't remember?

Still smiling, Lajos takes the ring and squints closely at it before holding up to the light and then handing it back.

LAJOS: Yes; now I remember.

ESTHER: You sold the ring. And then, when we all came back from the funeral, you made a big performance of handing it to me, saying it was Vilma's bequest, the one family heirloom of any value; saying it was my inheritance, something I really had to have; that I alone should have. You took me completely by surprise and I even protested. Surely you remember. (*Lajos shrugs.*) So then I accepted it but I promised I would look after it and, when the time came or when she needed it, I would pass it on to Éva.

LAJOS: You promised that did you? Fancy! Well then, give it to her if she asks for it now.

ESTHER: Lajos! Last week you told Éva for the first time I was looking after the ring for her. And now she needs money and she wants to sell the ring. But the moment she goes to have it valued, they'll tell her it's a fake, and naturally, after what you've told her she will believe I am the one who had it faked. This is all your doing.

LAJOS: Why? Why should it be you? It could have been someone else; Vilma, for instance.

They stare at each other for a moment then Esther speaks quietly.

ESTHER: How low will you sink?

Lajos pauses before answering.

LAJOS: What sort of a question is that?

ESTHER: Everyone has some kind of threshold they won't cross; some sort of spirit level that tells them what is good and what is bad. Everyone has a moral compass that guides them through their relations with other human beings. Everyone: except you!

LAJOS: Words; just words. Thresholds, spirit levels, compasses. Good and bad. Mere words ... Have you ever thought that most of what we do is done on the spur of the moment, without any reason and to no purpose. People do things without calculation; without asking themselves if it will bring them gain or joy. Look back on your own life and you'll soon see you've done a good few things even though, a moment before, they seemed impossible.

ESTHER: That's all too high-flown for me, Lajos.

LAJOS: High-flown? Not at all! Just uncomfortable to admit, my dear. You have to understand there comes a time in one's life when you grow tired of everything having to have a point. That time came early for me and I've always loved doing things that seem pointless; things for which there seemed no reason at all.

ESTHER: But what about the ring?

LAJOS: The ring; the ring! Let's not go on and on about the ring! Did I tell Éva you were looking after it for her? I might have. Why would I tell her that? Because it seemed like the thing to say at the time; the simplest, the most reasonable thing to say. Really! Here's you bringing up the ring, and Laci has been going on about some bills. I mean to say, what do you all want? That's all in the past. And the past no longer exists. Time destroys everything it touches. It's impossible to live a life burdened with guilt for what's in the past. And besides, what soul is as innocent as you seem to think? Even the law understands the statute of limitations; the concept of obsolescence. It's only people like you who try to deny it.

ESTHER: You are being more than a little bit unfair.

LAJOS (*with a shrug*): Maybe. But you were the one who talked about moral spirit levels and mental compasses. I don't admit the existence of such things. Listen, I might have said something to Éva. I might have made a mistake yesterday, or ten years ago, or whenever. Something to do with money, or rings, or words. The thing is that I have never in my life resolved in advance on any course of action and, ultimately, people are only responsible for the things they *consciously* decide to do. So *actions* are simply instincts that take you by surprise. You stand there and watch yourself acting and it's a complete surprise to you. There was no prior intention; and it's intention, not action, that is the source of guilt. You see, my *intentions* have always been honourable.

ESTHER: In your case, it might even be true. Your *intentions* might have been honourable ... but your *actions*!

LAJOS: I know! I'm a misfit in this world. But is now the time to change; in my fifty-sixth year? I've never wanted anything but good for others but the chances of really doing good in this world are precious few. So I try to make life more beautiful, otherwise it's unbearable. That's why I said what I said to Éva. The possibilities consoled her at the time. That's why I promised Laci fifteen years ago I would repay him. That's why I promise people all kinds of things on the spur of the moment even although I know, as soon as I tell them, I will never do as I have promised. (*Pause.*) That's why I told Vilma I loved her.

ESTHER: *Why* did you tell her?

LAJOS: Because that was what she wanted to hear. Because she'd staked her whole life on my telling her that. (*Pause.*) And because you did nothing to stop me from saying it.

ESTHER: I? What could *I* have done?

LAJOS: Everything. That's all: everything! *Why* did you not answer my letters? Why did you not answer my letters when you still could have? And why did you even forget about the letters and leave them behind? You know Éva found them.

Lajos has come close to Esther.

ESTHER: Have you seen these letters?

LAJOS: Have I *seen* them? ... Esther, I don't understand. I *wrote* them.

Esther nods, accepting that, this time, Lajos might just be telling the truth. She stands up and turns her back on him. Lajos leans against the dresser lighting another cigarette.

LAJOS: Now. Let me tell you something. One cannot remain silent all one's life about the most important things. Something happened between us that we can no longer settle by simply not speaking about it. Some people stay silent all their lives about the really important things. They even die in silence. But now and again there comes a moment when one *has* to speak; when it would be a sin to remain silent. I even think that kind of silence might be the original sin the Bible's so full of. Sit down please and hear me through.

Lajos pushes a chair towards Esther and gallantly invites her to sit.

LAJOS: Esther, for twenty years we have been talking at cross-purposes. Things aren't as simple as you seem to think. Yes, you've read out your list of charges against me and they are indeed faults and they are all, I admit, perfectly true. You talk of rings and lies, of promises I didn't keep, of bills I never paid. There is much more you know nothing of. But there's no point in listing everything because I will make no excuses for myself, and details like these will not affect my future ... Yes, I've always been weak. I *would* like to have achieved something in the world. After all, I wasn't devoid of talent. But talent and ambition are not enough. I know that now. To be genuinely creative, one needs something else ... some special inner strength or self-discipline: they call it character ... And that particular quality is something that simply isn't in me. It's like being tone deaf. When I met you back then I hadn't realised what I'm telling you now. I didn't know then that, for me, you represented character. Do you understand me?

ESTHER: No.

LAJOS: It's so simple. It was you: you were what I was missing. You were my character, my very being. A man without character is, morally speaking, like some sort of a cripple. There are people like me, people who are in every visible respect normal but for something missing like an arm or a leg; only, in *my* case, it's character. Forgive the analogy but you could have been like an artificial limb to me; a moral prosthesis. (*Esther reacts.*) Have I offended you?

ESTHER: No. But I simply don't believe a word of it. There's no such thing as a moral prosthesis. You can't graft the moral character of one person onto another. I'm sorry but that's all talk.

LAJOS: I tell you it isn't. Moral character isn't something you are born with. You acquire it. The morals of wild animals or the morals of children are nothing like the morals of a circuit-judge in Budapest. People acquire their moral character in the same way as they acquire their mannerisms, their language or their culture.

Esther shakes her head.

LAJOS: Of course, some people are more adept: moral geniuses, like some people are musical geniuses. *You* are such a moral genius – no, please, don't deny it. I feel it in you. That was why I needed to be with you; or at any rate the chief reason, I think.

ESTHER: I don't believe it; but even if it were so, you can't expect someone to act as a sort of moral nanny to all sorts of morally defective beings. A woman can't play moral nursemaid all her life.

LAJOS: A woman! A woman! I'm not talking about *a* woman. I'm talking about *you*!

ESTHER: I know perfectly well you mean me but I've had enough of being the model for your false view of life. Get that into your head at last. You might be right we can't remain silent about this forever but after this there's no point in going over it again, ever. I don't believe in your *ideas*. I believe in reality. And the reality is that you deceived me. Once upon a time people might have dressed that up in flowery, romantic language and said I was your plaything, someone you chose to flirt with. But you're an emotional gambler: you play with people and their passions like others play with cards. I was just one of the queens in your hand but, at a moment of your choosing, you simply discarded me. Why? I think you were bored. You'd had enough and simply walked away. That's the truth of the matter. That's the terrible immoral truth. (*Lajos is holding up his hands and shaking his head which provokes Esther into a more emotional outburst.*) Lajos, you can't discard a woman like a playing card simply because you've discovered other passions; just by saying it's in your nature or that you're ambitious and everything and *everyone* has to serve that ambition. That might be the

way with cards but not with human beings; not with a woman. That's dishonourable, the lowest of the low. There's no excuse for it. You abandoned me! Can't you understand that?

LAJOS (*very quietly*): But I called you. Esther, I called you. Don't you remember? Yes I was weak but, at the very last moment, I came to my senses and I knew that only *you* could help me. I called you: I begged you. Don't you remember my letters?

ESTHER (*becoming angrier as she speaks*): What letters? I have never seen them. It's all lies. The letters are a lie, like the ring; like everything else you've ever said or ever promised me. I know nothing about the letters. I don't believe in them. Éva has only just told me she found them – in the rosewood box that Vilma took from me, like she took everything else. I don't believe you. I don't believe her either. I don't believe in the past. It's all lies, conspiracies, pure theatre, stage props like letters and false promises. I don't *go* to the theatre now. It's fifteen years since I was inside a theatre. I scarcely go out, but I know the *truth!* Look me in the face, you liar. I ... am ... old! We're at the end of life as you so grandly declared. This is the end and you are the reason it's worked out this way, so empty, so false, with me never going out, living here alone like an old maid who has been so economical with her emotions she's finished up adopting a cat and a dog as companions. But you know full well I never used to hoard my love like that. You know that I used to shower my love on human beings, especially you!

LAJOS: True ... but dangerous.

ESTHER: Very dangerous, for me. (*She slumps in her chair.*) Let's drop the subject, shall we?

LAJOS: Would you like a glass of water. Should I call Nunu?

ESTHER: Call no one. It's not important. My health isn't what it was ... Lajos, even if one doubts the other's words or feelings, it's still possible to build some sort of life, some sort of relationship with them; even if it's on boggy ground or shifting sands like it says in the Bible. You know very well that, one day, it may all come tumbling down but, even so, it has the air of something real, something human through, in the end, mortal. But anyone so cursed by fate as to try to build on *you* must endure the cruellest of all outcomes because they are building on thin air, on nothing at all. Some people lie because it's in their nature, or because it suits them to do so, or simply on a whim. But you; you lie like falling rain, without rhyme or reason. You lie with your tears. You lie in everything you do. It can't be easy. You must be an absolute genius – a liar of genius. You look me in the eye, you touch me; you have tears in your eyes and I can feel your hands tremble – but I *know* that you're lying, that you've always lied, right from the start. Your whole life has been a lie. I think even your death will be some sort of lie.

LAJOS: So be it! ... Anyway, you'd better have these. After all I did write them to you.

Lajos draws from his pocket a slim packet of three letters tied with a ribbon and hands them to Esther. She cannot help giving a gasp of astonishment. She looks at the envelopes of each in turn, peering at the franking and the handwriting. She shakes her head in disbelief.

ESTHER: Twenty-two years ago. Your handwriting! The week before you and Vilma were married!

She tosses them onto the dresser beside the photograph of Vilma. From this point, the light very gradually dims.

LAJOS: Don't you want to read them?

ESTHER: No, why? ... I believe they say what you told me they said. It's of no importance. *You* can even make facts lie.

LAJOS: You never received these letters?

ESTHER: Never.

LAJOS: Who stole my letters?

ESTHER: Who stole them? Who else? Who else would have benefited from doing so?

Lajos only mouths the name "Vilma".

ESTHER: Yes. Vilma.

LAJOS: Of course! It couldn't have been anyone but her.

Lajos goes over to the dresser and picks up the letters in one hand and the picture of Vilma in the other. He looks from one to the other and gives a little appreciative laugh before putting them down.

LAJOS: She made a good job of it! *(He turns and walks towards her.)* But, in that case, what can you have against me? What was my crime? My debt? The great *thing* I somehow failed to do? Where is the lie? It's all just words, words, words. *(He takes a deep breath.)* But there was one moment when I wasn't lying. There was a moment when I put out my hand to you; a moment when I felt giddy, like a tight-rope walker, and you *did not* help me. You didn't lift a finger! So what did I do? I wobbled on as best I could. A man of thirty-five doesn't want to fall from a great height ... The thing is, I'm just not the sentimental sort, right? I'm not even a man of passion. It's *life* that interests me; the risks involved; the game as you called it. I'm not; I never have been a

gambler where women are concerned, staking everything on passion or sentiment. So it wasn't some unstoppable passion that propelled me to you. I can say that now because I'm not trying to make you cry, or make your heart melt. No, that would be ridiculous. I didn't come here to beg. I came to demand. Now do you understand?

ESTHER: To demand? Well now, that's interesting. Go on then. Demand!

Lajos acknowledges the instruction with a polite, deprecating bow.

LAJOS: I'll try anyway. It's not something I could put on paper or litigate about afterwards but, as you well know, there are other kinds of law. Perhaps you have never realised it but, besides the moral law, there are other kinds of law, just as valid, equally binding. Maybe you've figured it out already but some people are very unwilling to admit this to themselves. It isn't only words, vows and promises that bind people together or the natural feelings and sympathies that form the true nature of their relationship. There's something else: a law that's firm and severe. A law that determines whether one person is bound to another or not. That law has bound me to you. Even twenty years ago I knew about this law. I knew about it as soon as I met you. Maybe you still don't acknowledge it even now. Maybe it's me, the one who ran away, the one who has been consistently unfaithful, who has understood this iron law that you'll find no trace of in the law books or in the statutes but which is, nonetheless, the one true law ... The law of life is that once something has begun ... it has to be finished.

He pauses so long Esther is provoked into speaking.

ESTHER: Go on then!

LAJOS: The law means we have no control over events. Nothing happens when you expect it. When you've spent your time and your substance preparing to receive an important gift, life gives you nothing. That can cause you years of grief. Or we think someone is just playing with us; but, one day, we see clearly everything is working out exactly as it should, exactly when it should, in perfect order, in perfect time.

Esther shakes her head in complete incomprehension.

LAJOS: It is impossible for two people to meet even one day sooner that they are meant to. They meet when they are truly ready for that meeting, like the inexorable laws that govern the movements of the stars in the vastness of space. They are destined to collide but *they* don't choose the moment. No, I don't believe in *chance* meetings; not between men and women ... Forgive the apparent indelicacy but I have known a good number of women.

ESTHER: I am so glad you have come back after all these years to tell me this.

Lajos holds up his hand, enjoining her silence.

LAJOS: I have met beautiful women, high-spirited ones, even some who had a hint of sulphur on their breath. I have known the kind of heroic woman who would trek across Siberia with her chosen man; remarkable women ready to help me and, for a while at least, share with me the terrible loneliness of human existence. And I even discovered that a leave-taking could be just as mysterious and as exciting as a first meeting. Yes, I have known all this.

ESTHER: This is becoming a catalogue.

LAJOS: I'm sorry but you need to know that my coming back here, revisiting someone I loved, is not to be compared with 'returning to the scene of the crime, driven by some irresistible compulsion' like it says in detective stories. Esther, all my life I have loved only you, not out of any whim but because of the inexorable law of life! And then something happened ...

ESTHER: ... *something* happened? Vilma?

LAJOS: Not Vilma; not the letters Vilma stole. No! It was the fact that you did not really *welcome* love. Don't deny it. It isn't enough to be in love with someone. You have to love them so courageously that no thief, no previous plans, no law at all, whether made on earth or made in Heaven, can come between. We two did not love each other courageously enough. And that's *your* fault because ... (*Esther reacts to the accusation but Lajos holds up his hand and she does not speak.*) ... because a man's courage in love is pathetic. Love is a woman's making. And that is where, somehow, you fell short, and as you failed so did everything else, everything that might have been, all that was *meant* to be, the whole meaning of life. It's not true that men can be held responsible for this or that love. It was you who committed the worst sin a woman can commit, you took offence and you ran away. Now, do you believe me?

ESTHER: But what does all this *mean*? What does it even matter whether I believe, or confess ... or resign myself to what's going to happen?

LAJOS: But that is why I have come. I want you to know people cannot *end* something simply by wanting it to end. Nothing can end before it has run its course ... You know you are a part of me, even now, when time has annihilated all we once had together. Don't you understand yet? You are every bit as responsible for everything that has happened in *my* life, just as I – in my fashion, my man's fashion – am responsible for what has happened to you. I'm sure you've always

known that. Now listen to me: you must come away with me ... with us. We'll take Nunu too: for once you have to believe me. What possible advantage would I have in telling you anything but the truth, the whole truth, the last mortal truth? Time burns everything away that is false in us. What remains is the truth, and what remains is that you are a part of me even though you ran away; even though I was what I was, and am what I am, dangerous and unreliable. People don't change. And that means *you* are still absolutely a part of *me* like you have always been. You can't deny it. Look at me. Lift your head and look at me! Wait. I'll turn on the light. (*Lajos goes over to the door where a light switch would be and tries to find it in the dark.*) You *still* have no electricity? (*He goes over to the window, looks out and then shuts it before turning towards Esther.*) Why won't you look at me? (*Esther does not respond.*) If you are still so convinced that you are in the right, why won't you look at me? I have no kind of power over you. I have no rights. And yet, there is nothing you can do to me either. You can send me away, accusing me of anything you like but you must know that you are the only person in the world before whom I am completely innocent. And it is *I* who have returned for *you*. Let's have no false pride between us now; between two people who are bound to each other by Fate ... Listen to me. You are coming with us. We'll arrange everything. What will happen then? We will live. Maybe we will find that life still has something in store for us. We'll live very quietly. The world has forgotten about you and me. You'll come and live there with me ... with us. There's no other way ... There's nothing else I want from you except that, just this once, for the last time in your life, you should obey the iron law that is the meaning and the content of your life. (*Pause.*) *Now* do you understand?

ESTHER (*tonelessly*): Yes.

Then Esther begins to laugh quietly – a weary laugh of resignation in the face of the inevitable; Fate that she cannot seem to avoid.

LAJOS: Why are you laughing?

ESTHER: It's nothing. Do please carry on.

LAJOS: Then do you agree?

ESTHER: Yes, but to what? No matter, of course I agree.

LAJOS: Good. In that case ... Now look, you mustn't believe that anyone is against you or wishes you harm. No, it's just that we need to arrange our affairs simply and honourably. You're coming with me; and Nunu – perhaps not straightaway – but soon. Éva will get married to her secret admirer. But we have to, as it were, redeem her, and me too. I'll spare you the details right now but do you trust me?

ESTHER (*very quietly*): Of course I trust you.

LAJOS: That's most important ... Don't imagine that I will ever betray your trust. I don't want you to make your decision here and now. You need a witness so I'll go and call Endre; as a notary so he can do it in his official capacity. You should sign it in his presence.

ESTHER: Sign what?

LAJOS: A piece of paper. A contract that authorises us to arrange everything, and to have you come and live with us.

ESTHER: With you?

LAJOS: With me ... with us ... *near us.* (*He gets up and heads for the door.*)

ESTHER: Wait a moment ... before you call him ... before I sign ... clear up one point for me. You want me to leave everything and go with you. I understand that much. But what happens after that? Where ... *near you ... will I be living?*

LAJOS: What we were thinking ... what we were thinking was that it would be somewhere near us. Our apartment, unfortunately, isn't suitable ... but there is a home there where single ladies ... it's really quite close. We could see each other ... quite often.

ESTHER: Some sort of hostel, then?

LAJOS: A hostel! What an idea! A home, I said, for ladies of good upbringing. People like you ... and Nunu.

There is a brief pause then Lajos blunders over to the table, finds a match and lights the lamp in a clumsy, unpractised way. Then he takes a single sheet of paper, folded in four, out of his pocket, opens it out and places it on the table in front of Esther, smoothing it out. He takes out his fountain pen and opens it before placing it beside the paper.

LAJOS: Think it over. Think carefully. I'll send Endre in. Think hard and read the contract before signing it. Read it *very* carefully.

Lajos smiles, bows and then slips out of the room. For quite some time, Esther stares at the sheet of paper then, abruptly, she picks up the pen and signs the contract with a flourish. She replaces the pen on the table and then, slowly but visibly, crumples in her seat. After another pause, Endre taps on the door and enters slowly, carrying a lamp which he puts on the dresser before going over and sitting down at the table opposite Esther. She smiles at him. He nods at her and there is a moment of silence.

ENDRE: Lajos has told me all about this. Esther ... it is my bounden duty to warn you that Lajos is a scoundrel.

ESTHER: Yes ... he is.

ENDRE: It's my duty to warn you that both the terms and the intentions the contract he has sprung on you without warning are dangerous; and would be so even if he followed them to the letter. Thanks to Nunu and her productive garden, you two have enjoyed a modest but untroubled existence here, and I have to say, even to a third party, Lajos's plans would seem more than a little ... sentimental. But I know him. I know him well. I have known him for twenty-five years and I have no faith at all in his intentions. Lajos is not the sort of man, the sort of character, who can ever change.

ESTHER: No. You're right. He says so himself.

ENDRE: *He* says so? ... Well, well; but it doesn't matter *what* he says. Did he sound sincere? Deeply sincere? (*Esther nods.*) It means nothing; nothing at all. I have had many *sincere* meetings with him. Indeed, twenty years ago, if you recall ... oh dear, how shall I put this? For twenty years I have kept all this quiet but now is the time to tell you. Twenty years ago, when *old Gábor* (*he stifles a slight sob*) ... forgive me, he was a good friend; really a very close friend ... twenty years ago when your father died it fell to me, as both his friend and as a notary, to undertake the bitter task of sorting out and winding up his estate. It turned out that Lajos had forged the signature on certain bills in Gábor's name. Were you aware of any of this?

ESTHER: There was some talk; but nothing was ever proved.

ENDRE: It *could* have been proved. There was documentary evidence of the forgery. If I hadn't looked into it properly, this house and the garden would not have remained yours. Now I can tell you, it was no easy matter ... Suffice to say I endured a 'sincere' interview with Lajos. I can remember every detail of it. Indeed, it is graven on my memory. So I repeat: that man is a scoundrel. I was the only one at the time who did not fall under that magician's spell. He knows that; and he knows that very well, which is why he's afraid of me.

ESTHER: Nunu thinks so too.

ENDRE: So now, when he drops in out of the blue and, to all intents and purposes, seems determined to rob you of everything that remains; to rob you two castaways on your modest little island of your very peace and tranquillity; it is my duty to warn you of the consequences. He doesn't seem to be using fake bills any more. He's being more careful. But he seems to have been cornered somehow and can't think of any other way of getting out the corner without coming here and robbing you of every last thing.

ESTHER: I think you are right.

ENDRE: If you do sign over the house and garden to him, there will be nothing I can *officially* do for you. Nothing anyone else could do. But ... I could put an end to this ... if you wanted me to.

ESTHER: What can you do?

Endre looks anywhere but directly at Esther. He seems to be very embarrassed before he begins to speak.

ENDRE: Well then ... I have to admit that, back then, I was foolish and saved Lajos; saved him from many years in prison. How? Well that doesn't matter any more. If you were to remain in the house, the bills had to be paid. It wasn't him I wanted to save, it was ... Say no more! The bills were paid and you stayed on here in peace without having to worry. Meantime, I let that crook run free; but I put all the bills and the other evidence of his crime in my safe, under lock and key. Today, as far as the law is concerned, the evidence is no longer valid. However, Lajos knows full well that although he has escaped the clutches of the law he is still in my power.

ESTHER: Now I see ...

ENDRE: My dear friend, I beg you: empower me to talk to Lajos, and to give him back this ... this sheet of paper ... and to send him and his people packing. Believe me; they would go if I insisted.

ESTHER: I believe you.

ENDRE (*rising*): In that case ...

He reaches for the document but Esther gently puts her hand on it.

ESTHER: I believe you; and I am most grateful ... It's only now, this moment, that I understand, but I am in no position to thank you. I realise now that everything; everything that *remained* after Father's death, is thanks to you. But for you, twenty years ago ... there would have been no house, no garden, nothing at all. Everything would have been different, including the past twenty years of my life. I would have had to live elsewhere; in some unknown and unimaginable place ... That's the truth, isn't it?

ENDRE: Not quite the whole truth. It wasn't just me alone. (*He wrestles with his conscience for a moment.*) Perhaps I can tell you now. Tibor forbade me mentioning it before. He helped too. As a friend of old Gábor he was only too happy and keen to help. We were all part of it ... (*He looks down at his boots, covered in embarrassment.*)

ESTHER: Tibor too! So that's how it was. I seem to have lived in ignorance, not knowing that something bad was going to happen to me and that something very good happened instead. I simply do not know

how I can show my thanks for all this. But, somehow, that makes it even more difficult ...

ENDRE (*baffled*): To send Lajos away?

ESTHER (*in a monotone*): To send him away. Yes ... that will be very difficult now. I don't mean he won't set off immediately with his children and those strangers. They'll set off all right, to get to the main road before it's completely dark. Yes, he will go ... but as for the house and garden (*She holds up the paper.*) I have given it all to him. (*Endre shakes his head sadly.*) Yes, I have signed the contract ... but I want to ask you to do something for me ... look after Nunu. That's the one promise he must be forced to keep. Everything you say about him is true. His promises are not worth anything, so you must arrange matters in a proper legal manner so that there's no way he can wriggle out of it. Some sort of contract that will hold. A proportion of the sale price must be set aside for her. She won't need much, not now. Can that be done?

ENDRE: If the matter is put in my hands, we can do all that. But what about you? What will become of you?

ESTHER: Yes; that's an interesting question. What will become of me? He's suggesting that I leave this house and go and live somewhere *near* him ... not exactly *with* him ... he didn't go into detail, but that's not the important thing.

Endre makes to speak but Esther gently raises her hand to silence him.

ESTHER: I will *try* to explain this to you; to you and to Tibor, and of course Laci, to all of you who have been so kind to us. I shan't need to explain it to Nunu; she will understand. She's perhaps the only one who understands that *everything* must be done today precisely as it really should have been done twenty years ago. You see, dear friend, only a woman could really understand; the kind of woman who is ... no longer young ... no longer expects anything from life ... a woman like Nunu ... a woman like me.

ENDRE: I don't understand.

ESTHER: I don't *need* you to understand. (*Esther takes one of Endre's hands in hers and with the other strokes his grey-bearded face then lets him go.*)

ESTHER (continued): You're a man, Endre! A splendid, true man! But being a man, you are always obliged to think rationally, to behave according to the way that the law or custom or reason wisely dictate. But we, we women, cannot be wise or rational in the same way. This is not simply our affair ... Twenty years ago, if I had been *truly* wise and true to myself, I should have gone off in the night with Lajos: with my sister's fiancé; with Lajos the swindler; with Lajos the liar; with Lajos

the dregs of humanity as Nunu called him. If I had been brave enough, that is what I should have done. If I had been honest with myself; that is what I ought to have done twenty years back, on the eve of Vilma's wedding. (*Endre sits down heavily on his chair, mouth open.*) What would have become of me? I have no idea. I doubt if it would have been particularly pleasant or cheerful. But at least I would have obeyed a law of nature and fulfilled an obligation that is stronger than any of the laws of reason. Do you understand now? I do, but I have only just begun to understand. I understand it all now, to the point that I am giving Lajos the house because I owe it to him; and to Éva. As for the rest ... so be it.

ENDRE: Are you going to *leave*?

ESTHER: I don't know yet. I haven't worked out what should happen to me. In any case, you can give him this piece of paper – yes, I've already signed it – but I want you to add that irrevocable and binding clause to make sure that he can never get his hands on the pitiful amount that will remain to Nunu. Can you promise me that?

Silently and sadly, Endre picks up the paper, folds it and puts it in his pocket.

ENDRE: I understand nothing of what you have just told me: but it will be done as you instruct.

ESTHER: Do forgive me, my dear true friend, but no one in the past twenty years has ever asked me about it. Not you; not Tibor ... and maybe I have never been as certain as I am now. In one thing, you see Lajos is right. There is some invisible order in life that requires that whatever one has begun one has to finish; as and when ... Well now that's done with. (*She stands and smiles at Endre.*)

ENDRE: Yes. It's done now. It goes without saying that should you come to regret this ... either now or in the future ... we are always here, Tibor and I.

Esther embraces Endre fondly. He takes his lamp and exits. After a moment, Esther extinguishes her own lamp. The Bartok night music fades up and runs through into the next scene.

It is approaching midnight. Esther, her hair down, is lying propped up in the narrow bed wearing the lilac shawl round her shoulders. The window and shutters are open. After about a minute, the music fades, there are 'night' noises and the sound of a wind blowing outside. We hear the creak of approaching feet and Nunu's cough. Nunu enters, carrying a candle.

NUNU: Not asleep then? *(She slowly makes her way over to the bedside table where she deposits her candle and then sits on the bed, half turned towards Esther.)* You know they've even taken the jam.

ESTHER: No!

NUNU: Well, not everything; just the peach: all twenty jars. Éva asked for them specially. *(Pause.)* And they took the flowers from the garden, the last of the dahlias ... Never mind. They would have gone over by the end of the week.

ESTHER: Who took the flowers?

NUNU: The woman.

Nunu coughs again and folds her arms across her chest. Esther leans forward and takes her hand.

ESTHER: Let them take what they want.

NUNU: Of course, my dear. Let them take it; if there's no choice in the matter.

Another pause.

ESTHER: I just couldn't come down for supper. They didn't expect that of me, did they? Did anyone say anything?

NUNU: No one said a thing.

They sit in silence together. Esther rubs Nunu's hand with hers. They look at the candle.

ESTHER: Nunu darling, will you close the shutters. I feel a little cold. But leave the window open.

Nunu gets up and very slowly closes the shutters but does not 'lock' them. The wind can still be heard blowing round the house.

ESTHER: And over there on the dresser; can you see three letters. Would you bring them to me, please?

Nunu again sets off at a slow pace across the bedroom to the dresser where she finds the letters and brings them back to the bed. She hands them to Esther and settles herself on the edge of the bed again. Esther takes her hand again.

ESTHER: You do understand, don't you?

NUNU: Yes, my dear, I understand ... I understand.

Esther lets her head fall forward. She is silently sobbing.

NUNU: You're tired. *(She stands and gently helps Esther to lie back, her head propped up on the pillows.)*

ESTHER: Yes. I'm very tired. This has all been too much. I think I want to sleep now but would you be kind enough to read me the letters?

She hands the letters to Nunu who takes them and then sits on the edge of the bed again, placing the letters in her lap. Then she reaches into her apron pocket and brings out wire-framed spectacles. She puts them on carefully before picking up one of the letters and looking closely at it.

NUNU: From Lajos!

ESTHER: You recognise his handwriting?

NUNU: Have you only just received them?

ESTHER: Today.

NUNU: When did he write them?

ESTHER: Twenty years ago.

NUNU: And was this the fault of the Post Office?

ESTHER: No. Not the Post Office.

NUNU: Then whose fault was it?

ESTHER: Vilma's.

NUNU: She *stole* them?

ESTHER: She stole them.

NUNU: I see. I never did like her. *(She crosses herself.)* May she rest in peace!

Nunu places two letters on the bedside table and then draws the first letter out of its envelope which she carefully places on the bedside table too. She slowly unfolds the letter then pushes her glasses up on the bridge of her nose. She starts to read.

NUNU: "My one and only darling, life is playing such extraordinary tricks with us but all I have to say is that I have no other hope in this life than, having found you, to be able to keep you close to me for the rest of my life."

Nunu stops reading and, with a wide smile, she pushes her glasses up onto her forehead and looks happily at Esther.

NUNU: He could certainly write a wonderful letter.

ESTHER: Yes. He had a brilliant way with words. Do go on.

But the wind, which has been growling and whining outside all this time, now, suddenly, forces open the shutters, and scatters the letters from the bedside table before, finally, extinguishing the candle.

THE END