

*A Tale of Two Coats (and Other Winter Delights)*



*MARCH 12, 2017*



“C is red. D is yellow. E is blue. F is purple. G is green. A is orange. And B is black.”

I am drawing colored note-heads on music paper and playing the corresponding keys on my piano. These are the last days of my first semester in sixth grade, and Clementina and I are seated in front of my black Bösendorfer, the King of Pianos, sipping hot cocoa; I had just come up with a new method of reading music, and am now experiencing the joys a scientist might experience when explaining a groundbreaking theory to a neophyte. It would help to say that Clementina is tone-deaf.



It's December, and the snow had been falling relentlessly for the whole of the past week. Early this morning grandma turned on the heat in the huge terra-cotta heater in the corner, and the room is warm and cozy, although not what you'd call excessively quiet: for one thing, the noises of cars and of people talking in the street are reaching us all the way to the second floor, somewhat muffled by the blanket of snow on sidewalks and roofs and tree boughs and other things which it would take too long to enumerate, so I'm not gonna do it now. There's also the occasional chirping of sparrows; and then there's the soft murmur of Mrs. Lenke's radio next door, which can be heard through the partition wall, but that doesn't bother us: you can count on Kossuth radio station from Budapest being a regular feature at 3, Queen Marie Boulevard; it normally wakes us up at six a.m. and sends us

to bed at 10 p.m., and anyway when grandma has enough of it she bangs her fists on the wall. In retaliation, Mrs. Lenke bangs hers (on her side of the wall, you understand) every time I practice my scales and sonatinas and stuff on the piano. I myself am of the opinion that her behavior is fully justifiable, as indeed it is: for ever since I can remember I believed in that old and valuable adage, of which I am a fearless champion: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a noise for a noise.

“But who decides about these colors?” asks Clementina. “Why does C have to be red? And E, blue?”

“Don't worry about that now. Focus on what I am showing you.”

“I can't focus unless you explain who is responsible for these colors. How am I supposed to learn anything if you ask me to take things for granted?”

“Fine. I decide about the colors. You came to me asking for help, and this is my way of helping you. I just invented this system for your benefit. Nobody's deciding about any colors at all. In fact, musical pitches are not colored, except I have to start somewhere and that's why I am assigning different colors to different pitches.”

“Yeah, but how do individual colors relate to individual pitches?”

“I am not saying they relate according to a prescribed rule. I chose the colors at random. I told you I just came up with this stuff to make you understand the difference between any two pitches. Use your imagination: once you associate C with red, every time you see a red note on the staff you'll know it's a C. If it's blue, you'll know it's an E. And so on for the rest of them.”



“OK, but I’ve never seen a colored score. There is no such thing in our music books. The ones we use at school, I mean.”

“Well then, it’s obvious no one’s had my idea.”

“But I don’t see red when you play a C. Or green when you play a G. Not in my mind, that is.”

“You don’t have to. The colors are just so that you can recognize the note shapes and be able to name the pitches. I told you I made up the whole thing. We’re not supposed to hear colors.”

She seems relieved.

Meanwhile St. Anne, St. Mary, Baby Jesus, and the cohort of chubby cherubs in the painting on the wall are walking in their garden of eternal splendors; it’s obvious they are enjoying not so much the snow outside, or my colored note-heads, as the gigantic rose bushes and exotic birds perched on the branches of some fantastic-looking palm trees of which there got plenty. I know for a fact that we don’t have palm trees in Romania (what I mean is, well, Transylvania isn’t now, and is not likely to ever be their natural habitat—although you could see some real ones at the Botanical Gardens), so on account of that, and ever since I was a little girl I understood the people in the painting belonged to a distant and mysterious world.

Clementina had been my first-grade bosom friend, and although we are now five years older, I can still remember her the way she used to look when we first met. Her hair, straight and blonde like a field of wheat in July had a striking feature: a thick, shiny, silvery strand above the forehead, on account of which I instantly thought she must be a natural curiosity of the most exotic and marvelous kind. That hair strand was truly fascinating: you could look at it for hours and never get bored; it made her interesting, it made her exciting, and, above all, it made her a very desirable friend—for how many people aged seven can brag about having a bosom friend sporting a white hair strand? She had skin of the color of milk; her hands were the plumpiest and softest I had ever touched, like tiny pillows filled with the finest down; and there was a little dimple at the base of each of her short fingers, except for her thumbs.



In winter she wore a brown, lamb fur-coat just like mine, and, although she was a blonde and I had dark hair, I could swear that as far as the coats went we looked like twin sisters. Such fur-coats were known in our parts as *oursons*, and for the longest time I thought that meant they were made of bear’s fur, for grandpa once had remarked that *ourson* meant “big bear” in French. So we took to thinking of ourselves as The Two Little Bears, and that was really funny and it made us laugh no end.

On account of our identical fur-coats and identical chubbiness (although I was definitely plumper), and because we were constantly at each other’s house, grandpa used to call us Pacala and Tandala. That, too, was funny, for Pacala was a humorous character from a folk-tale, Till Eulenspiegel’s Romanian counterpart, and Tandala was his companion. It was understood that





they were inseparable characters, just like Clementina and I, but grandpa never specified which one of us was Pacala and which Tandala.

Now the truth of the matter—and I am the first to admit it—is that our *oursons* were nothing compared to Dolly’s. Dolly and I had gone to preschool together, and her father had brought back from Moscow an *ourson* the likes of which the town had never seen: first of all, it was provided with a hood; second, it had white fur inserts of a Grecian design, like the patterns I had admired in a book called *The Legends and Myths of the Ancient Greeks*. Those were geometric patterns traced on amphorae and plates, and on people’s clothes, but Dolly’s Grecian motives looked as if carved on fur. Her coat was amazing, and it was the envy of all preschool kids of the female sex on Red Creek Street and beyond.

Those had been the good old times, but now Clementina and I are both in sixth grade and the *oursons* are packed away in some obscure closet; gone but not forgotten.

But I digress. Our conversation goes on:

“There is more to it,” I say. “You’ll have to memorize the place of each of these pitches on the staff. A red note, which is C, is easy to remember: it looks like the planet Saturn. No problem.”

“I have a problem with that. Saturn has a ring around it, and your C has a line going THROUGH it. It’s not the same thing at all.”

“Never mind the ring. Just imagine Saturn’s ring is a straight line going through the planet’s head. And imagine that in music, that’s middle C. Do as I say.”

“But a line is not a ring. And a ring is not a line.”

“Yes, it is. A ring is a circle. A circle is a line that goes round and round and comes back to where it started from. That’s called a ‘point of departure.’ It’s also a ‘point of arrival.’”

“But a planet doesn’t have a head. It’s just a big globe and that’s all there is to it.”

“If you go on like that, I’ll never be able to teach you your notes.”

“OK. So C is Saturn, then.”

“Yeah. For the rest of them you’ll have to associate color and position: for example, E is always on the bottom line of the staff, and you should imagine it as blue. G is green for you, and it’s placed on the second line from the bottom. You get it?”

“I do, I do. So B is on the third line, and it’s black, right?”

“Right.”

“So what pitch is this?” I ask, pointing at a purple note-head and playing the fourth white key from middle C.



“F. In the first space. At the bottom of the staff.”

“And this?”

“It’s orange, so it’s got to be an A. In the second space.”

“And this?”

“It’s a different type of C, because, although red, it’s on the third space and doesn’t look like Saturn.”

She is of quick wit, my friend Clementina. The C I showed her is an octave higher than the planet Saturn, which is middle C. The only thing she can’t do is sing, for she is tone-deaf.

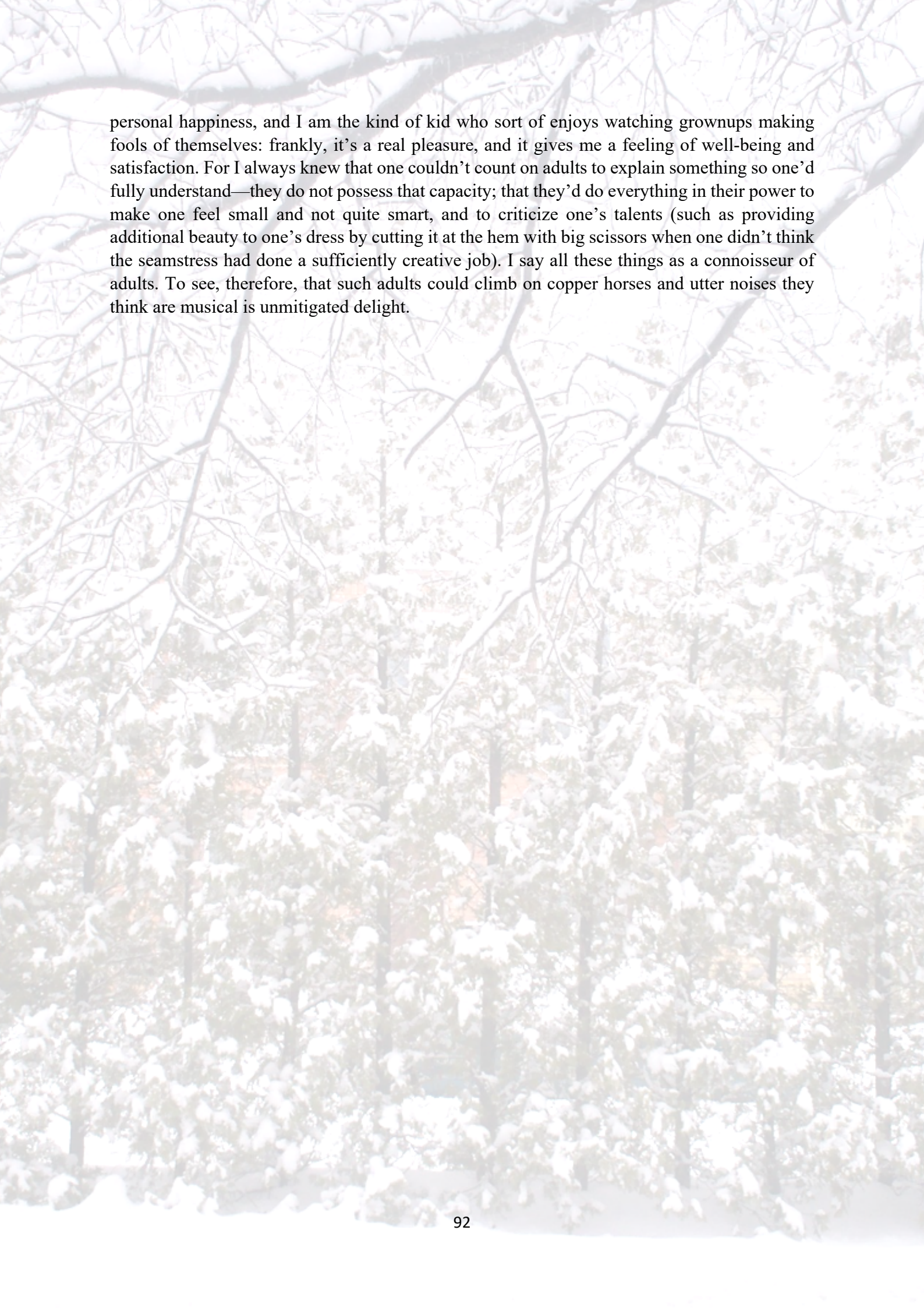


“Are you coming to my house tomorrow?” she asks.

“Yes. After school, around six o’clock.”

And so I do. Returning from school at five thirty, I pass through Liberty Square and see King Matthias seated on his copper horse in the usual stately posture, the crown of copper laurels still affixed to his head. But three or four locals, inebriated from consumption of too much *Ursus* beer (a local brand, much loved) and enflamed with patriotic sentiment had climbed on top of the horse, behind the King, singing at the top of their lungs; I stop for a little while to take in the sight—then: bah, that’s nothing I hadn’t seen before, and, in fact, it is to be expected every year on the celebration of some glorious day in the history of our nation; or on no glorious day at all, just like the present one. After all, I think, the citizens of our town have a right to pursue





personal happiness, and I am the kind of kid who sort of enjoys watching grownups making fools of themselves: frankly, it's a real pleasure, and it gives me a feeling of well-being and satisfaction. For I always knew that one couldn't count on adults to explain something so one'd fully understand—they do not possess that capacity; that they'd do everything in their power to make one feel small and not quite smart, and to criticize one's talents (such as providing additional beauty to one's dress by cutting it at the hem with big scissors when one didn't think the seamstress had done a sufficiently creative job). I say all these things as a connoisseur of adults. To see, therefore, that such adults could climb on copper horses and utter noises they think are musical is unmitigated delight.