

BEETHOVEN

THE POISON THAT IS IN ME



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Beethoven: The Poison That Is In Me

By

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Acknowledgements

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Preface

It was the first orchestral concert I ever attended. I was sixteen years old. The main work on the programme was Beethoven's 5th piano concerto ("*The Emperor*"). I had never heard it before. I didn't book in advance and I didn't anticipate any problem in buying a ticket on the night.

I got to the venue around 7.00 pm. Throngs packed the foyer, the staircases leading to the balconies, the double doorways, and all the outside pavements surrounding the hall. Streams of people could be seen approaching from afar, from every direction. With difficulty and trepidation I made my way to the ticket booths. My request for the cheapest balcony ticket was greeted with a barely concealed incredulity. 'Booked out I'm afraid...' a sympathetic woman said, 'you need to book well in advance for the *Emperor*...'

I stood outside watching the masses and listening to the distinctly middle-class chatter. I felt rather sorry for myself, ticketless and alone. I was also curious. I reckoned that if a concert could generate this degree of enthusiasm it must be very special. A few minutes later, I noticed someone, a male, unaccompanied, seemingly coming straight at *me*. He came very close and said 'Hello...are you wanting a ticket?' He was a slim, tall, well-dressed man in his late thirties. He held a ticket in his hand. I was quite flummoxed but managed to say: 'oh yes...how much is it...?' I dreaded him telling me that it was more than I could afford. But he certainly didn't look or sound like a ticket tout.

'This was my wife's', he said, holding the ticket out to me; 'she's ill, unfortunately. Enjoy the concert.'

It was an expensive seat, the third row of the front stalls, four or five meters from the stage, and well located to see pianist and keyboard. Still overcome by the generosity of my benefactor, I sat back in gleeful anticipation. What was

it that I was about to hear? Why was the *Emperor* concerto so popular? I soon found out. The opening *fortissimo* arpeggios and torrents of notes surging high and low on the keyboard simply blew my mind!

Years later I began a life-long career in social work with a particular interest in child abuse. For more than twenty years I was a frontline worker, immersed in the conflicts and tragedies associated with the job. I wrote about my experiences. With colleagues I ran courses on child abuse and child development. I wrote pamphlets, articles and books on the subjects. I did the conference circuit, jointly presenting papers around the world. Inevitably I ended up teaching and researching in academia. Never could I have anticipated that this abiding interest in child abuse and child development would draw me back to the composer whose fifth piano concerto had blown my mind all those years ago.

Ever since that unforgettable night I set about listening to, reading about, and attempting to play Beethoven (his simpler pieces obviously!) His music was a wonderful antidote to a stress-laden job. Over time, I read many biographies of Beethoven. In each of them there was a section which intrigued me: about a family conflict revolving around his nephew Karl, the only son of Beethoven's brother Kaspar. Not too much space was given to Karl's story but what I read was barely believable and truly shocking: Karl endured emotional and psychological abuse to an horrific extent.

In May 1806, Ludwig's brother Kaspar married Johanna Reiss, an upholsterer's daughter, fourteen years younger than himself. She was five months pregnant and gave birth to Karl in September. From the very outset, Beethoven despised Johanna, not just because she was pregnant and had a criminal record, but also, because he was convinced she lacked the class, status and integrity that he considered a precondition for marrying into the Beethoven family. When brother Kaspar died of consumption in November

1815, Beethoven contested her parental rights in court arguing that Johanna was an unfit mother and that he should be made the child's legal guardian. Shortly after, the court inexplicably reversed its earlier decision to allow Karl to remain with his mother and granted Beethoven guardianship. Karl was taken from his mother. He was nine years old.

Beethoven was triumphant, congratulating himself on his *victory* in a letter to his friend Antonie Brentana:

*I fought the good fight to rescue an unhappy forlorn
child from the claws of his disreputable mother, and
I have won!*

He could not see what many of his close friends and associates could see: that far from rescuing a child, he was plunging him into grief and misery, chaos and insecurity. He was also taking on a challenge that he could not possibly meet: his notorious volatility and unpredictability, his hectic changes of accommodation (he would live in and move out of thirty-three different addresses in Vienna), his all-consuming preoccupation with music and composition and the fame and publicity that went with it...his friends and associates knew all this made Beethoven unsuitable to step into a substitute father-role to care for a child recently bereaved by the death of his father, and taken against his will from his mother. They were also aware that Beethoven knew nothing about the welfare of children or their needs. He was a prodigious writer and a keen observer of the world around him, but 'children' was one of the few subjects in which he seldom expressed an interest or wrote about.

This is not primarily however, yet another book on child abuse nor indeed, on Beethoven. It is the story of a child's resilience and survival. It is Karl's story. It is also the story of countless children subjected to the chaos, confusion and pain of marital conflict and custody disputes.

Karl was a frightened and helpless child when he was taken from his mother. Three years later he was anything but frightened or helpless. He quickly realised that there were aspects of Beethoven and Beethoven's world that he could exploit: his deafness, his delusions, his total absorption in his music and compositions; his chronic and debilitating illnesses; his forgetfulness. Karl's mother realised this too. With the help of sympathetic servants, mother and son were often able to circumvent the severe restrictions Beethoven imposed upon them. This was survival, but it was also corruption. Karl became of necessity part of a conspiracy that depended upon lies, subterfuge and disloyalty. He often enraged Beethoven, provoked him into violence, drove him to tears and to the brink of despair, and he punctured the great composer's hitherto unshakeable conviction that he was always in control of his own destiny. Beethoven never fully 'controlled' Karl; his farcical and delusional attempts to make Karl a musician and heir to Beethovenian greatness were doomed to failure; and he never achieved the objective that was as important to him as his music: gaining Karl's love and respect.

Beethoven: The Poison That Is In Me comprises fictionalized memoir, biography and documented facts. It focuses on the first three years Karl spent with his uncle, 1816-18, between his ninth and twelfth years. Karl is writing the memoir when he is in his late forties. He was by then, married, a father of five children, and a grandfather. The story relies on historical events, on diaries and correspondence, on recorded milestones in the lives of the main protagonists, and on court documents relating to the protracted battle between Karl's mother and Beethoven over guardianship.

No one knows whether or not Karl ever sought access to any of these sources, but no one has ever claimed that he didn't, or, that he was uninterested in them and made no

effort to see them. Considering the musical titan his revered uncle was, it seems plausible that as Karl reached adulthood, marriage and particularly fatherhood, he would have been curious at some stage about sources that threw much light on his own childhood years spent with Beethoven, on Beethoven's thoughts and actions during that time, and on the worsening conflictual relationship which evolved between them. In this work I am following the precedent set in previous publications: notably Jacques Brenner's *Nephew to the Emperor* (1959) and Luigi Magnani's *Beethoven's Nephew* (1972), both of which feature Karl reflecting on particular letters his uncle wrote. I have taken the same liberty in respect of other sources, notably the diary of Fanny Giannastasio. She was a highly significant woman in the early years of Beethoven's guardianship of Karl.

Karl was a nine-years-old child when his uncle took over his life, but Beethoven remained his guardian for more than a decade. In becoming his guardian, Beethoven unwittingly placed Karl at the centre of his world, his music, his fame, his triumphs, his deafness, his interminable conflicts, his multiple illnesses, his near-catastrophic breakdowns. There is no doubt that Karl's defiance and frequent attempts to break free exacerbated Beethoven's suffering, but nobody disputes the fact that it was Beethoven's mind-boggling ignorance of a child's needs combined with his volatility and cruelty that were at the root of his misery.

It is no small irony that we all benefit from that misery: Beethoven's biographers unanimously tell us that Karl's rebelliousness and the disintegrating relationship between himself and his uncle was the inspiration in some of Beethoven's greatest and most anguished work, particularly his late string quartets. Neither Beethoven nor his nephew suffered in vain.

Part I

Chapter 1

The year was 1813, a tumultuous time in our history. I was seven years old then, mesmerized by the constant toing and froing of our troops marching through the city streets: infantry, cavalry, grenadiers, militias...from all quarters of our Empire: from Bavaria, Hungary, Saxony, Italy; I had watched them pass by at various times before and often begged my father to allow me to accompany them to their destination, wherever that may be!

Now victory was in the air; Napoleon was on the run; our soldiers, so used to mockery and abuse, were being cheered from street to street. Wave upon wave of differing regimental uniforms approaching from one direction and receding in another provided a sea of colour that contrasted with the drab, bombed, boarded up buildings on either side. Some of the soldiers were smiling with relief or gratitude, some looked exhausted or cynical or shell shocked, but they all maintained their discipline and their faultless crunching rhythm, a solitary drum beat every fourth step. I wanted to be in one of those uniforms; I wanted to be marching with them.

Hours later I sat with my parents at the dining table in our home not too far from St Stephen's cathedral in the heart of Vienna. Our main course was thick goulash stew and crusty white rolls; nice but not nearly so nice as my favourite dessert, Salzburg Nockerl, light and delicate vanilla-flavoured dumplings served warm by our lovely maid Elina. It was an unusually peaceful and pleasant occasion, sharing a meal with my parents; they hadn't had an argument for some time and Napoleon's cannons had long departed our streets. I never could make up my mind which conflict frightened me more: the domestic one within our four walls or the other much noisier one outside which had decimated Europe.

My parents argued frequently about money. My father regarded my mother as untrustworthy and a spendthrift, running up debts and responsible for the threatening letters they often received. My mother believed she didn't get enough to maintain the way of life she'd been used to before they were married.

But all that was apparently forgotten now.

Suddenly we heard the front door opening and then slammed with a bang. Loudening footsteps came nearer along the hallway. My father pretended he didn't hear them. We all knew it could only be one person entering thunderously like that: my uncle, Ludwig van Beethoven. He was the brother of my father, Kaspar Carl van Beethoven; he was also a very famous composer in Vienna. He stayed with us a few times in between frequent changes of address; he once sought refuge in our cellar when the French were bombarding Vienna into submission, then again when Napoleon was departing the city with his usual farewell present of reducing the defensive walls to rubble. My uncle couldn't tolerate the artillery fire nor the resulting tremors in his third-floor apartment.

I looked at my mother and our eyes locked. I could see that the prospect of my uncle entering was having the same emotional impact upon her as on me: we were both anxious and fearful; but she understood the situation and I did not.

My uncle didn't knock at the dining room door or call out: he came bursting in as though he was the owner of the property and we were his unwelcome guests. He made straight for his brother. Only then did my father stir, a look of annoyance on his face as he turned to see Ludwig charging straight at him. I was petrified, but my uncle seemed to have no consciousness of my presence.

He had an exceptionally large head and a roundish, dark-red, pock-skinned face. His bluish-grey eyes had a wildness and intensity that often made me feel that he was about to pounce on me and obliterate me...in a flash! His nose was

slightly flattened and his forehead remarkably spacious. His grimly arched lips were shut tight, displaying his anger, and giving the erroneous impression that he did not smile easily. His fuzzy black hair sprang out of his head in all directions. He wore a shaded cravat, and stained waistcoat and trousers that looked as though they hadn't been changed for weeks.

He towered over my father who remained seated, and who was now having to strain his neck to continue looking up at him.

'Where are they?' my uncle yelled; 'what did you do with them?'

The silent seething expression on my father's face suggested that he didn't know what my uncle was talking about. Nor did my mother. I didn't know and I didn't care. I was too terrified to care. All I could think about was the threat he posed.

'You need to tell me what you're referring to', my father said, conveying both weariness and contempt. He raised and waved a hand dismissively.

It was that raised hand that my uncle understood. He probably didn't hear what my father said. He had been going deaf for more than a decade and he was very, very deaf now. I don't think my father spoke loudly enough. But my uncle certainly understood the hand gesture: 'Liar!' he yelled.

'My father stood up and raised his voice: 'What...what are you talking about?' He was a lot smaller and thinner than my uncle, therefore, I presumed, much weaker. But my father's weakness had nothing to do with his size or his weight: he was in the earlier stages of the consumption that would eventually kill him.

Their heads were almost touching.

'My manuscripts!' shouted my uncle; 'where are they?'

My father shook his head.

'You held onto them when you stopped working for me. You thought you'd hold onto them until I'd forgotten about

them, and then you'd sell them. Where are they? What have you done with them? Who's got them now? How much did you sell them for? I'll sue you! I'll sue anyone who attempts to publish them or use them!

'Get out!' my father roared; 'get out of my house and don't come back!'

I shrank into myself, wishing I could disappear. My uncle had no intentions of 'getting out' and I instinctively knew that no two grown men could shout at each other so aggressively in such close proximity without coming to blows. My uncle grabbed my father and persisted with his demand.

'Give me my manuscripts!'

'I haven't got your cursed manuscripts!' my father roared louder than ever, gripping my uncle's lapels.

It was my uncle who landed the first blow; it glanced off my father's cheek.

My father impulsively lashed out and hit him on his left ear. My uncle went berserk: each blow he delivered was accompanied by threats and insults.

My mother leapt to her feet and demanded they stop. But it was impossible for them to stop. She bravely burrowed herself in between the flailing arms and begged them to stop.

I could not stand it: my sick father being pummelled, my mother risking her life to prevent it; I let out a terror-laden scream and fell off my chair; I picked myself up and ran to the door, through the hallway, up the stairs and into my bedroom...running away from the expected carnage and my own helplessness in stopping it. I slammed the door tight; I threw myself on the bed and wept convulsively. I could now only hear myself crying and it drowned out the sounds of the conflict below. But it didn't alleviate me of my guilt in running away from an attack on my parents.

Occasionally I stopped crying in order to listen; I had to know if and when my parents had succumbed to the

murderous onslaught. Suddenly the sounds of physical assault ceased, but voices were still to be heard. My tears still flowed and my heart felt as though it was bursting; I got off the bed and stared at my bedroom door hoping and praying that the fighting really was over. If it was it had lasted only a minute or so but it had felt to me like an eternity. I opened my bedroom door and stepped out onto the landing. Sure enough they had ceased fighting, but my uncle seemed determined to prolong the row. He was still hurling accusations at my father as he paced up and down the dining room. My mother kept trying to pacify him, but that was futile because he had no respect for her; he hated her; he hated her so much he may even have thought she was in some way culpable.

My father repeatedly asked my uncle which manuscripts he was referring to (he had to repeat every word louder than before). My uncle seemed to regard the question, and even more its repetition, as an insult, a stalling tactic, a proof that my father was lying. But my mother continually tried to reassure him that if they knew what manuscripts he was referring to, they most likely would find them. She knew my father had accumulated many of my uncle's discarded manuscripts, letters and papers during the years he had worked for him.

Eventually my father stormed out of the dining area and into the drawing room. My uncle and my mother followed him. They were all too preoccupied, too much in a hurry, to look up and see me on the landing, gripping the banister spindles as I stared down on them.

I heard my father hurrying over to the Biedermeier cabinet which stood in one corner of the room. It had four lower drawers with locks which were never used. The top section had two glass doors through which you could see a dividing shelf. Both top and bottom sections were stuffed with loose and bound papers, including much of the material my uncle had discarded. I could hear some of the

contents falling onto the floor when my father pulled open the glass doors. He rummaged through the fallen contents and then began searching through what remained in the top and bottom sections. I imagined my poor mother praying like myself for a successful find.

My father found the manuscripts. I could hear him throwing them at my uncle. He shouted as loudly as he could: 'THERE! NOW GET OUT...AND NEVER SET FOOT IN OUR HOME AGAIN!'

Silence reigned. It lasted for at least a minute. I feared it was merely a respite to be followed by something worse. But then I heard my uncle say quietly: 'I'm sorry.' He left the manuscripts where my father had thrown them, turned and hurried out.

If he thought his apology might placate my father, he could not have been more mistaken. 'DRAGON! NEVER LET ME SEE YOU IN OUR HOME AGAIN!' my father shouted after him.

I raced down the stairs and into the drawing room, again bursting into tears. My mother and father were just that moment withdrawing from a much needed embrace. They both looked at me. My mother tried to smile. My father was still too angry to smile. I ran to my mother crying out 'mama'! She stooped to envelope me in her arms and in her bosom.

'Uncle Ludwig's gone', she whispered in my ear.

'Is he coming back?' I asked.

'Of course not, darling.'

Chapter 2

Some may think there are sound reasons why I, Karl van Beethoven, the one and only nephew of the great Ludwig van Beethoven, should *not* attempt to write this memoir. Amongst those reasons, and probably the most common, is the assumption that the work can only be construed as revenge: an exposé of my uncle's frailties and failings, his volatility and cruelty. Suffice to say that the world has long known about these aspects of his character primarily because he chose to reveal them himself, honestly and repetitively, in his prodigious correspondence. For example, he once confessed to the Lord his abuse of my mother, curiously claiming that his commitment to me was the cause:

Thou seest into my inmost heart and knowest how it pains me to be obliged to compel another to suffer by my good labours for my precious Karl...

I believe I have a unique and compelling story to tell. I lived with him longer than anyone else did. As well as witnessing daily his often bizarre and irrational behaviour, I had access to his studio (in which I often roamed freely), to his scattered works, his diaries and sketch sheets; to his letters many of which the recipients had begun to reveal publicly even before his death; and I retained the letters he sent to me personally. I got to know his closest friends and associates, and, with no great enthusiasm, was often compelled to accompany them to musical events.

When he became profoundly deaf my uncle used conversation notebooks to communicate with people. I was about to live with him then (1818) and was one of the first people to write in them. At the time of his death he had accumulated hundreds of these notebooks. In 1845 they

were secreted away in the vaults of the Royal Library in Berlin. But I had access to them more than a quarter of a century earlier; indeed, conversations I had with my uncle were recorded in those books, and often it was me who was doing the recording at my uncle's request.

He regarded much of the content of the conversation books as private and confidential, but this is a story in which confidentiality is often breached; when individuals, including my uncle and myself, read notebooks and diaries that were not their own. Such items included the diaries of Fanny Giannatasio, daughter of the Director of the Institute in which my uncle enrolled me. Fanny was a significant person in my life and her diaries are full of detailed observations of some of the crises and conflicts which threatened to overwhelm me. Fanny herself once secretly delved into highly personal entries in my uncle's diary and recorded them...in her own diary!

I was nine years old when my uncle became my guardian. During the next three years, he and my mother fought in the court (and sometimes on the street) over the legitimacy and fairness of the guardianship. There is a wealth of papers relating to that battle available in Vienna's public records. I did what most adults who escape childhood misery do: dwell upon it for years then set about trying to understand why it occurred. I spent much time reading court documents and written testimonies. They provided fascinating accounts of the battles that raged over me, the thoughts and feelings, and biases and prejudices of the protagonists involved. Like all child custody documents they reveal nothing of the consequences of those battles for the child at the centre of them.

I read anecdotes and reminiscences which individuals who knew my uncle shared with the world in newspapers and public platforms for decades after his death. And then there were the books! They appeared so quickly one must assume some of them were begun even before he died.

Remembering Beethoven was an especially good one, written by his lifelong friends Franz Wegeler and Ferdinand Ries. I refer to it sometimes, notwithstanding the fact that I am barely mentioned in it (one sentence only) and then as nothing more than a distant problem, long forgotten about.

I had more access than anyone else to two other sources of information about my uncle: my parents. My father was his brother, agent and closest business confidante for many years; his voluminous papers, notes and letters were all made available to me. More significantly, I had access to my mother not only during the years covered by this memoir, but additionally, for another thirty years after my uncle died. As is well known, her relationship with him was a tempestuous one.

I want to tell this story from my perspective, but I sometimes relied on my mother who could recall the context and details of events that I, as a child, was unlikely to have noticed. She also helped fill gaps in my knowledge and understanding of how my uncle's actions impacted upon her. You may ask with some incredulity: how could *she* be relied upon for an unbiased testimony about someone who loathed her and caused her great suffering, someone with whom she engaged in a titanic struggle over guardianship? She was an even greater victim of Beethoven than I. Yet journalists and biographers must have believed her testimony was at least worth hearing because they took the trouble to interview her (I had the privilege of 'interviewing' her hundreds of times...anytime!). Despite what my uncle did to her, she never sought to besmirch his reputation after he died; nor, even though her financial circumstances were always precarious, did she attempt to exploit the pecuniary potential that her relationship with him gave her.

A more powerful motivator in wanting to tell this story however has little to do with the unique situation in which I found myself; rather, it's something that may be regarded

as entirely mundane and universally shared by millions. My life was transformed when I escaped from my uncle and fell in love, married, and fathered five children. I know how I suffered in childhood because of his actions, but it wasn't until I was married with a family of my own that I fully understood both the nature and consequences of what happened to me. The love and affection I had for my children and the commitment I made never to inflict punishment or distress upon them stemmed in part from my own experiences; just simply observing my children growing up normally heightened memories of my uncle's ignorance of children.

Which is why I decided to begin the book recalling that ugly confrontation between my uncle and my father. The incident has been briefly referred to previously, but no attempt has been made to explore what I was thinking and feeling when it was occurring. Such incidents were always viewed through the restrictive lenses of adults, seeing neither the impact nor the consequences on the child. Before that, nothing of my life apart from the date of my birth has been recorded by anyone, and the only reason the incident came to light is because I disclosed it to Alexander Thayer, my uncle's distinguished biographer. When he interviewed me, Thayer was obviously grateful that I remembered it, but as an esteemed biographer of Beethoven he was not likely to be interested in the fear and panic of the child at the centre of it.

I'm not sure my mother *could* see and feel what I was enduring at the time, but she was unable to protect me nevertheless. She was, despite her unhappy marriage, terrified by the prospect of my sick father being killed by his older and famous brother. She was smallish and slim and her courageous though futile attempt to separate them, admirable.

I can say with certainty however that my uncle was oblivious to me that day and incapable of realising the

impact his rage and aggression was having on me: surely a portent for the future! Contrary to my mother's reassurances when he had left us, he did return. He would return lots of times, not to pick a fight with my father, but with the intention of severing me from my mother and doing everything in his power...his considerable influence and power, to try to prevent her from ever seeing me again.

Chapter 3

A few weeks after my uncle barged into our home my father and I encountered him on the busy Ferdinandsbrücke bridge which spanned a branch of the Danube flowing through Vienna. There he was walking briskly towards us, his eyes fixed rigidly on my father. I froze for a second, fearing another ugly confrontation. Perhaps it was his unkempt appearance, his shabby threadbare coat and torn shirt that made me feel like that. The nearer he came to us the more I realised that his demeanour and expression were anything but confrontational. He was initially shocked on seeing my father, then his expression changed to an unmistakeable pity and concern.

My father's condition had deteriorated significantly. He looked shockingly thin, pale and melancholic, his clothes ill-fittingly too large for his wasting frame. He would stop occasionally during our walks to cough up the thick white phlegm which sometimes made me want to vomit. My mother was increasingly insisting that she or I, or anyone at all, should accompany him whenever he left our home.

My uncle clasped my father: 'Brother, my dear brother...what has become of you?'

My father stiffened as though he might repel this wholly unforeseen advance but he was too weak to do so. My uncle then put his arms around him and hugged him. I thought both men were on the verge of tears.

'Why didn't you tell me', my uncle pleaded; 'I would have come. I could have helped.'

My father shook his head. 'It's too late', he said softly.

'No! No!' my uncle cried out, full of remorse; 'I can help...you need a doctor...I know plenty of them...I'll pay! You will be cured. Forgive me brother...!' He hugged him again, and my father limply succumbed, barely able to withstand the physical pressure of my uncle's embrace.

Many onlookers had gathered around adding to my embarrassment and perplexity. Here was the man who had terrorised me by attacking my father; now he was almost in tears publicly begging my father to forgive him and indulging in a display of emotion which I thought was bizarre. I felt excluded from their 'reconciliation' though I was enormously relieved they weren't fighting.

He then ordered a carriage and for the duration of the short journey home he sat next to my father, his arm remaining around his shoulders. Unlike the previous occasion when it seemed my uncle was unaware of my existence, I could now see him glancing at me tellingly as the carriage trundled homewards. I would later learn that this encounter with my sick father was a pivotal moment in my uncle's perception of my needs: it was the occasion when he decided that he would become my guardian if my father died!

On the 12th of April, 1813, my sick father signed the following declaration in the presence of four witnesses:

Inasmuch as I am convinced of the frank and upright disposition of my brother Ludwig van Beethoven, I desire that after my death he undertake the guardianship of my son, Karl Beethoven, a minor. I therefore request the honourable court to appoint my brother mentioned to the guardianship after my death and beg my dear brother to accept the office and to aid my son with word and deed in all cases.

At first sight this may look like brotherly love and loyalty, the ultimate sacrifice in one family member taking on the parental responsibilities of another who appeared to be on the verge of death. What it really was would not be revealed for another six years in a Viennese courtroom.

In my teens I use to lie on my bed reflecting on this *agreement* between my father and my uncle. Anger and

resentment festered within me for years but it did nothing to help me understand why neither of them could not have anticipated the consequences of their actions on the child whose well-being they claimed to promote. Both are culpable for what happened: my uncle for instigating my removal from my mother, my home, school and friends...everything that was important to me; and my father, for acquiescing. But their motivations were dissimilar: in the shadow of death and with good reason to doubt my mother's prudence and dependability, my father's willingness to place me under the tutelage of brother Ludwig was understandable. My uncle's motivation was baser: a virulent hatred of my mother that manifested itself in cruel mental torment of her. It was beyond his comprehension that however much he loathed her, I still loved her and I needed her because I was a child and she *was* my mother. He never would understand that abusing her was the surest way of inflicting more lasting, damaging abuse on me.

Chapter 4

My father first met Johanna Reiss in late 1805, an incentive surely for him to depart the lodgings he was then sharing with Ludwig in the Theater an der Wein. He secured work as a lowly-paid clerk in the Imperial Department of Finance, and shortly afterwards was promoted to bureau officer for which he received a salary of 250 florins. It was also around this time that our unloved Emperor Franz II and a good many of the Viennese aristocracy, with as much booty from our impoverished treasury and their palaces as they could manage, fled the capital for Hungary. Little wonder: Napoleon's forces were on the rampage, ignominiously defeating our country at the battle of Ulm, encircling and occupying our capital, and achieving a stunning victory over both Austria and Russia at Austerlitz. Perhaps Vienna's populace shared an impulse for reckless abandon as well as a sense of desertion and doom: my father was 34, my mother, 20, the daughter of a Viennese-based upholsterer. They married in May of the following year. Four months later, I was born.

I don't recall my earliest years but I am vaguely conscious of my mother's face coming down onto me with sweet sounds, fragrances and tender touch. I look at her now in her sixties and I still see the same rounded head and a face beautifully proportioned. Her forehead was smooth, white and open - I never once saw her curled shiny black hair dangling over it. She had large beautiful nut-brown eyes, which, when I was a toddler exploring her face with my tiny fingers, fascinated me. Her eyebrows were generously separated, broader at the top and tapering off in descent; they were conspicuously though naturally distant from her narrow eyelids, as though they were permanently raised and she was sceptically awaiting the answers to her questions.

The announcement in Spring 1806 that my father was marrying the twenty-year-old pregnant daughter of an upholsterer drove my uncle Ludwig into apoplexy. His insults and fury did nothing to dissuade his brother from going ahead with the marriage; the more abusive and threatening he was, the more determined was my father in pursuing an independent life in which his now famous brother would play no part. It was also potentially a lucrative move: in marrying my mother he received a dowry, and when her father Anton Reiss died she inherited a property in Alservorstadt district, large enough to enable them to let rooms to a dozen families.

Ludwig knew a lot more about my mother than my father was willing to confide. She was reputedly flirtatious in an over-active social life, a characteristic which gained more credence when she married. She once told me that when she was a child, asking for money, her father declared that he would not give her any money, but that if she could manage to get his money without him knowing about it she could keep it. I've no reason to doubt my mother's words, and if it is true, her father was clearly corrupting her. When she was eighteen (possibly testing out her father's warped code of conduct) she stole money from him. The police were called. She accused the servant of stealing the money but eventually confessed. Her parents did not press charges. Nor did the police, leaving the matter to be resolved by 'domestic correction'.

In July 1811 just before my fifth birthday, my mother committed a more serious crime. Again, it may have had its origins in her father's corrupting challenge, but it was more likely to have been triggered by the threat of destitution which was to afflict our whole war-stricken country following the Ministry of Finance's devaluation of the currency. It wasn't until I was married and in my late twenties that I realised I was actually there when the crime was committed!

Well known in Viennese social life as the daughter of commercially successful parents and grandparents (her grandfather was the Burgermaster of Retz) my mother was approached by a friend Frau Kojowitz acting on behalf of herself and two other people, Elisabeth Duchateau, and Josef Gessward. They offered her a commission if she could sell a three-stringed pearl necklace valued at 20,000 florins. My mother agreed. She was quite dazzled by the pearls, but covetous too and so much in debt that she concocted a plan to steal them by faking a burglary in our home. She firstly confined me to my room and my toys, then set about smashing open chests and drawers and creating all the mayhem one expects to see when criminals invade one's property. Occasionally the noise would impact upon me, then I would remember her stricture that I remain in my room, which puzzled me.

When my father returned home that day he immediately contacted the police. My mother must have been terrified. As soon as the police arrived she told them she believed Anna Eisenbach, our former maid, was responsible. Anna was arrested, along with her brother who was thought to be implicated; they were interrogated over a number of days, then released. The police were convinced by that time that they had nothing to do with the *crime* and suspected that it was faked.

They arrested my mother six weeks later only to find, incredulously, that she was wearing some of the pearls. She was interrogated over the next few days and confessed to the crime, telling the police that she had handed the remainder of the pearls to a trader to dispose of for the sum of 4,000 florins. All the pearls were eventually recovered. She was remanded in custody for six weeks, but on the 7th of August my father made an application to have the investigation halted and my mother freed. It wasn't halted but she was released from remand a few days later.

Her trial began two days after Christmas. The prosecutor had gathered additional evidence of her criminality and profligacy. She was heavily in debt. She testified that her difficulties and her crimes were due to inadequate financial support from my father. The court was unimpressed. She was convicted for the crimes of embezzlement and calumny. She was sentenced to one year's *severe* imprisonment, reduced to two months for mitigating circumstances. 'Severe' meant that she would be placed in leg irons, made to sleep on bare boards, restricted to a diet excluding meat, compelled to fast for a day each week (given only bread and water) and not permitted to converse with anyone but her jailers.

During the next few months my father made monumental efforts to have the sentence reduced or quashed. He applied to the Appeal Court; he petitioned the Emperor; he made every effort to exploit his position as an employee of the imperial government. He succeeded, and on July 10th 1812, *His Imperial and Royal Majesty* remitted the remainder of the sentence she'd already commenced serving.

How could such disastrous events go unnoticed by their only child? Well, actually, they weren't. When the police made their first visit and questioned my mother, I'm sure that my father suspected she was the thief, because I have some recollection of the atmosphere in our home darkening considerably. I was often sent to my room which ensured I didn't hear enough to understand what was happening, but I could not be protected from the pervading toxic mood. I could not connect the various strands of the developing crisis but I knew and felt that something was dangerously wrong. My parents argued ceaselessly, my mother consistently lying to conceal her debts and both of them hurling abuse at each other. They exhausted themselves and an uneasy calm descended. I was not calm. I cried hysterically listening to them. When the police arrived a

second time to arrest my mother, my father could not restrain himself; he probably would have seriously injured her had the police not been there (he nearly did on one occasion, threatening her with a knife: he pierced her arm which left a scar that she would carry to her grave).

Then suddenly, my mother was gone! I was barely five years of age. I pined for her. I was scared. I cannot remember what my father told me, except that it wasn't the truth. And he kept reassuring me that she would be back 'soon'. I'm grateful he *didn't* tell me the whole truth: I could not have coped with the magnitude of her crime or the image of her lying on hard boards in her dark airless prison with leg chains on. But when I was of an age to explore these events for myself, it was something other than my mother's crimes and the law's retribution that pained me: it was the consequences for our former maid Anna Eisenbach.

Anna was a generous, fun-loving, gentle girl, a good worker, impeccably upright and honest. My mother's calumny subjected her to a nightmarish ordeal from which she probably never fully recovered. When she and her brother were released from interrogation, she condemned my mother, accusing her of lies, of spending money as though it were water, and having an affair with one of our lodgers. Whatever the truth of the matter, the thought of Anna and her brother imprisoned and interrogated over days (and I dare not think of what form the interrogation took) deeply affected me. The only relief was to learn that she did not buckle under duress; she didn't confess to a crime she didn't commit, which, due to her lowly status, would have led to a longer and severer punishment than that meted out to my mother. The maid who served my mother's parents in 1804 must have suffered a similar fate as Anna, being accused of a theft she knew nothing about.

I often wondered what happened to Anna in the months and years ahead, and whether or not my mother ever felt

guilt or remorse for the consequences of her actions. I never felt brave enough to ask her. I'm sure my uncle neither considered nor cared about the fate of a servant girl, but he must have been incandescent with rage and embarrassment as the unedifying details of my mother's crimes were publicly recalled in the commoner's criminal court. How gratifying for his many critics and enemies, and what a source of gossip and innuendo amongst his associates. He may understandably have feared that some of his aristocratic patrons would disown him! The prospect of someone whom he regarded as nothing more than a common criminal, a *disreputable, opportunistic, promiscuous, profligate hussy* barely out of her teens joining the Beethoven family filled him with shame and loathing.

Confronted with the court's revelations about her profligate spending and the accumulation of debt my father must at times have conceded that Ludwig was a shrewd and better judge of character than he and that the prospects for his marriage were bleak. Pride would not have allowed him to admit that, but the crisis must surely have sharpened his focus on the disparities in their two lives: Ludwig's seniority, confidence, conviction, musical genius, wealth, fame, influence and social status; my father, married to a woman who had humiliated and shamed them both, and whose profligacy permanently threatened him with financial ruin.

Ludwig had long decided that in the event of my father's death he would remove me from my mother. I have no doubt that he was concerned about my welfare and moral upbringing but he was also driven by hatred, always conscious of the humiliation and shame she had inflicted on him. Perhaps his fury and hatred prevented him from considering other consequences of *saving* me: not knowing for instance, what to do with me or how to communicate with me. He was unaware of the magnitude of change he

was about to inflict upon both of us and incapable of mitigating its worst effects.

Chapter 5

My father recovered from the consumption which afflicted him in 1813 but as usual for stricken survivors it returned with a vengeance. Shortly before his death in November 1815 (when I was nine years and two months old) he incorporated the declaration he and my uncle made two and a half years earlier into his last will and testament. Under clause five of the will, it read:

I appoint my brother Ludwig van Beethoven guardian. Inasmuch as my deeply beloved brother has often aided me with brotherly love in the most magnanimous and noblest manner, I ask, in full confidence and trust in his noble heart, that he shall bestow the love and friendship which he often showed me, upon my son Karl, and do all that is possible to promote the intellectual training and further welfare of my son. I know that he will not deny me this, my request.

In clause eight, he wrote:

I appoint my beloved wife Johanna...and my son Karl, heirs general to all my property in equal portions...

If my father hadn't the courage or the foresight to discuss the earlier declaration with my mother then he surely wasn't going to find it easy to share with her these two particular clauses in his will. He is in effect proposing in clause five to break her heart by removing me from her; the phrase *my beloved wife* in clause eight could therefore be easily read as cruel irony. It wasn't intended as such, but my father could not have been under any illusion, given his

knowledge of Ludwig's perception of my mother, what guardianship would mean: not just my removal from her, but severe strictures on any future contacts with her.

No one knows what my father was thinking in the days and weeks preceding his illness. He must have known the likely impact on my mother hearing of the declaration and seeing the will. Perhaps as death came nearer he hoped that his suffering would evoke some pity in her, restraining her, maybe even enabling her to see that what he had done was as much in her interests as he believed it was, in mine.

I remember returning from school on that day my mother saw the will for the first time. I can imagine him handing it over to her with trembling fingers and bated breath. I could hear my mother screaming at him even before I reached our front door. I dashed up the stairs and stood on the landing outside the sickroom, knowing I could not enter unless I was invited and accompanied. I looked through the keyhole. The contrast between how I'd left them that morning, with my mother and our maid taking turns to cool my father's fevered brow and encouraging him to sleep, could not have been more stark.

My mother was hysterical. She was waving the document in the air and yelling at the top of her voice: 'How could you do this to me...he's my son...I carried him in my womb...you're going to hand him over to an old deaf man with no children...who has no time for children...who doesn't know anything about children...I won't let you...I won't let you!'

Each word, each phrase must have seared through my father. I could hear his weak moaning protestations: 'For pity's sake...my love...it is best...my brother will take good care of him...'

'Your *brother* doesn't even know him! He ignored his birth and never came near him! And since he was born, how often has he seen him? Even in our home...has he ever spoken to him? Laughed with him? No! He's avoided

him...he wouldn't know how to speak to or laugh with our son!'

It is hard to imagine what my father was thinking during this onslaught. He must have felt that his worst fear was being vindicated, the fear of mentioning the declaration he signed two and a half years before. But then he may have convinced himself that any mention of it would have been futile: she would have reacted precisely as she was doing now. How could it have been otherwise?

'Why did you do this to me?' she asked, surprisingly soberly, as though she now actually did feel compassionate about his plight, his sheer helplessness.

'I did it for the best, dear.'

She was silent for quite a few moments, a pregnant silence, as if she was going to explode again. 'The best...?' she asked incredulously. 'Do you really believe that taking my son from me was the *best*? For whom? Taking him from me and...and...Oh God!'

Her voice had risen again.

'How do you think our son will feel?' she asked derisively.

My father made no attempt to reply.

'I know what he feels *now*...about your brother. How he's always felt...frightened! He's scared of your brother! Scared! Do you hear me? You're taking him away from the mother he loves and you're placing him with an ugly pock-faced monster who frightens him...who regarded him as a bastard when he was born and his mother...a whore! And you say it's for the *best*?'

I didn't know what 'bastard' or 'whore' meant but everything else they said was crystal-clear. Whatever my poor father was feeling I could feel only anger and fear. I could contain myself no longer. I burst into the room screaming: 'Papa! Papa! Please! Please! Please! Do not send me to my uncle...I do not want to live with my uncle...please Papa...!'

My mother gasped and came running towards me, the will falling from her fingers. She bent over me: 'Oh darling, darling! You poor thing!' I threw myself into her arms and cried sorely. I wanted to repeat myself again and again, but I quickly choked up and could not utter another word. She whispered: 'It's all right, darling...it's all right.' I looked over her shoulder and feeling the strength and love of her embrace I stared into my father's eyes, both pleadingly and defiantly. He reached out to me in anguish and sorrow, then he fell back onto his pillow. He was barely recognisable, his face shrunken piteously, yet his eyes were bright and watery, and his cheeks were grotesquely rosy. I dared not leave my mother's arms and she dared not permit me to go near his disease-laden mouth. However pained he had felt listening to her onslaught, the sight of his panicking child's fears allayed only by his mother's embrace must have burdened him even more.

He stared at the ceiling above for a few moments, then stretched up again, and gesticulated to my mother that he wanted her to hand him the will. He slowly and painfully added four words at the beginning of the first sentence of clause five: *Along with my wife...*

He changed the last word of that sentence from *guardian* to *co-guardian*. It was an addition of only four and a half words yet it brought an instant change to my mother's mood: a relief and satisfaction that she somehow had to suppress. I knew my father had changed his mind and that I had played no small part in him doing so. He summoned me later that evening and told my mother and our servant that he wanted to speak to me alone. He was propped up on numerous pillows to enable him to do so.

As I stood awkwardly at his bedside, he turned his head towards me. The movement of his eyes was slower and he had difficulty focussing on me. For the first time I thought about the pain and discomfort he was enduring; it made me feel more awkward than sympathetic.

‘I have done what is best for you, son’, he said. His voice was barely audible, and unrecognisable: wheezing, gasping...it had always been a clear voice, strident at times, but variable, often full of irony.

‘Thank you, papa.’

‘Your mother and your uncle Ludwig will take good care of you.’ His focus fell away from me as he spoke.

I felt obliged to say: *I know they will, papa...*but something held me back. Perhaps the fact that he wasn’t looking at me, and therefore wasn’t expecting me to say anything. Or maybe I doubted what he had said or sensed the ambiguity in it. I only wanted to know one thing: ‘Will I stay with mama?’

He struggled to look straight at me. There was an agonising pause before he replied. ‘Yes, son...yes.’

‘Thank you, Papa.’

His head fell back onto the pillows and he closed his eyes. I waited until I was sure he was asleep and then I left as silently as I could.

Two days later, my uncle Ludwig arrived. He had been visiting frequently since learning about my father’s relapse. As usual he never spoke to either my mother or myself. I was permitted to be absent from school because my mother had told the principal about my father’s impending death; she didn’t tell him what I suspected: that she was using me as a crutch during my uncle’s visits.

My mother and I always vacated my father’s room when he arrived; neither he nor my father would have tolerated us being there. My mother suggested we have a walk. It was a typically cold and wet November day though the autumn sun was progressively breaking through grey clouds. We were both relieved to escape the silent tension and embrace the chilly air. We had been walking and intermittently talking to neighbours for nearly an hour when suddenly she stopped and drew in a deep breath. ‘The will! Where did I leave it?’ she cried.

‘In the bedroom’, I said, with all the certainty of the memory of a nine-year-old. ‘It’s sitting on the mantelpiece.’

‘Oh Lord no!’

That could only mean that her brother-in-law might see it. I didn’t realize the significance of that possibility but my mother obviously did. Her response was so dramatic and her fear so genuine that I began to fear the worst; that somehow my uncle could ignore the assurances my father had given me and proceed with his crazy plan to take me. I began to tremble and cry in panic and my mother stretched down to me and clasped me and told me everything was going to be okay, but I did not *feel* that everything was going to be okay.

We made our way back home. My uncle had gone but the house seemed ominously silent. Without removing her shawl hat and coat my mother hurried up the stairs into my father’s room; I followed her, ignoring the convention of not going into his room without being asked to do so.

My father looked worse than ever. The bedclothes and the pillows were scattered about as though he had been enduring great agitation. Yet there was still life in his countenance, animation...expectancy, and not a little anxiety. He held the will in his hand. My mother approached him and requested to see it. He held onto it.

‘My...my...my dearest love’, he stammered; ‘I...I...I...’

My mother stretched out her hand and removed it from his enfeebled grasp. She opened it quickly. She knew the page she wanted to read, the clause that, before she had it changed, had provoked her to such fury. When she found it she stared at it in horror. My father looked on with a guilty anguish written all over his withered face. The crucial words that he inserted under pressure from my mother and myself had been crossed out. The opening sentence had been restored to its succinct, unambiguous declaration:

I appoint my brother Ludwig van Beethoven guardian.

I waited in dread, sensing that my mother might erupt again. But she took me by surprise. She moved closer to my father, bent over him and wiped his feverish brow. She smiled at him and said softly: 'you need to rest.' My father's head collapsed abjectly onto his pillow and he closed his eyes. She wet the flannel and cleaned off the horrible coagulated spittle that had gathered at the corners of his mouth. When she was sure my father was asleep, she beckoned me to follow her out of the bedroom. She ran down the stairs so fast I could not keep up with her.

'Stay with him', she said in the hallway; 'I'll be back in a short while.'

'But mama...?'

'I'm going to get help!'

I presumed she meant a doctor, and there was nothing more I could say; I wanted to say: 'don't leave me...' but that didn't seem right. I returned to my father's room and stood staring at him, hoping he would not waken and struggle to speak to me.

My mother returned three-quarters of an hour later; I rushed out of the bedroom and down the stairs to greet her. She was accompanied by someone whom I instantly knew was not a doctor; he didn't have a doctor's black, instrument-laden bag; he did however carry an attaché case. They passed me by on the stairs, my mother saying only: 'thank you, darling...we'll not be long.'

They were over an hour.

Somehow within that hour, they managed to compose a codicil to the will and persuaded my father to sign it:

Having learned that my brother, Herr Ludwig van Beethoven, desires after my death to take wholly to himself my son Karl, and wholly to withdraw him from the supervision and training of his mother, and inasmuch as the best of harmony does not exist between my brother and my wife, I have found it

necessary to add to my will that I by no means desire that my son be taken away from his mother, but that he shall always and so long as his future career permits remain with his mother, to which end the guardianship of him is to be exercised by her as well as my brother. Only by unity can the object which I had in view in appointing my brother guardian of my son, be attained, wherefore, for the welfare of my child, I recommend compliance to my wife and more moderation to my brother. God permit them to be harmonious for the sake of my child's welfare. This is the last wish of the dying husband and brother.

I don't know if my father willingly and consciously contributed to the codicil other than signing it. He was literally within hours of death and may not have had the energy nor the clarity of mind to have been actively involved. But there are elements of this testimony which ring true for me, and nowhere more poignantly than in that penultimate sentence: *God permit them to be harmonious for the sake of my child's welfare*. He probably didn't write that; he wouldn't have had the strength; but as his life ebbed away and it was read out to him, surely no man would have better understood it. As he digested *his* written plea to the Almighty for harmony between my uncle and my mother, two ghastly realities were unavoidable for him: firstly, he himself and my mother more often than not lived in disharmony, frequently frightening me by their constant fighting and arguing; secondly, given the implacable hatred his brother felt towards my mother, the degree of conflict between them had to be infinitely greater than that between my parents. How therefore would my uncle and my mother exercise joint guardianship over me without my uncle's hatred manifesting itself in ways from which I would not be able to escape? My father's signature to the codicil was probably an expression of hope that my mother and my uncle could be reconciled,

but for me in retrospect, it read of desperation, hopelessness, a despairing acknowledgement that my uncle was not going to change.

Four witnesses living locally gave their names to the will and codicil. My mother then dashed off with her lawyer who needed to get to his office to finalise all the relevant papers for submission to the court. I was left alone again too scared to return to my father's bedside for fear that he would die. I felt utterly miserable and full of guilt. I knew that I was at the centre of all this turmoil, and that it must be crucifying my father even as he lay dying.

My mother had been gone well over an hour and I was certain she had returned when I heard the front door open. But I heard no voice nor the familiar sound of her unrobing. My uncle's unmistakeable footsteps could be heard passing the drawing-room in which I sat. My heartbeat quickened. I knew he would not enter but would make his way up the stairs to my father's room. I waited until I heard him closing the bedroom door and then I followed him. I stood outside the door and listened. My heart was thumping painfully now, whether or not because of the fear of being caught out, or the anticipation of what my uncle might do; surely my father could suffer no more!

I have often dwelt on that moment imagining my father's predicament: with only hours to live, he hears the steps on the staircase, the bedroom door opening; he looks up and sees his brother standing there. Knowing that he had twice succumbed to pressure to do what was certain to provoke Ludwig's wrath, he awaits the final reckoning. My uncle later described his return to our home and what he found, when he testified to the High Appellate Court:

something had been added to the will which he [my father] had been coerced into signing. He pleaded with me to get it back from the lawyer immediately!

My father did nothing of the kind. He could barely speak. The notion that he could somehow find the energy or even the inclination to change his mind again within only two or three hours and re-join the battle in cahoots with my uncle was risible. I think he was half asleep when his brother entered, or more likely drifting in and out of consciousness.

The first voice I heard was that of my uncle. He demanded to see the will. I could not hear what my father said in response because his voice was so weak; he must have somehow managed to convey that the will was with a solicitor and that a codicil had been added, because I heard my uncle snap at him: ‘did you sign it?’ Again I could not hear what my father said in reply (if he said anything) but he must have gesticulated in some way that he had signed the document because my uncle then exploded: ‘YOU IMBECILE...! WHY DID YOU DO THAT? WHAT DID IT SAY?’ At the same time I could hear him ransacking the room searching for the codicil, pulling open drawers without closing them. It must have felt like a battering ram to my father, crushing the precious little moments of life left in him. My uncle continued in the same vein for some minutes: insult and interrogation, interrogation and insult, to none of which my father could give any meaningful response. Then my uncle changed tact; in a more constrained voice, he asked my father for the name of the lawyer. There was quiet for a while. I trembled and strained with my ear to the door trying to hear what my father said. I heard something unintelligible and presumed that he had managed to provide the information. I immediately sensed danger and dashed down the stairs. Seconds later, the door opened and my uncle hurried down the stairs after me. Although I was still trembling I stood my ground and watched him approaching. I do not know what was in his mind when he saw me except that he was in a hurry to get past me. I think he suspected that I had been listening and had heard him insult and harass my father. Perhaps that’s why he made no attempt to look at me

or speak to me. How strange: to be a battering ram against his dying brother whom he professed to love, yet barely able to look at his brother's child whom he was determined to *rescue*!

I don't know what he could have said to me. He never knew what to say to me. But he did do something worse: he tried to smile at me. It was an unforgettable sickeningly insincere smile making me *feel*, as nothing else could ever do, that he and I were from two different planets; we had nothing in common, we were unable to communicate with each other, and he was utterly oblivious to my apprehensions and my fears.

With the help of a neighbour, Anna Wildmann, he spent the remainder of the day trying to locate the lawyer, without success. He was unable to prevent the will and codicil being deposited in the court. When my mother returned I thought she looked a lot less tense than I had seen her over the last few days, but when I told her about my uncle's *visit* she was furious and genuinely sorry for having left me to face him alone. 'We'll get the locks changed so that he can't come again', she said, as she made her way to my father's room. She didn't mean that but I believed her; it was a reassuring utterance that I needed to hear during those awful days.

How could she lock Ludwig van Beethoven out of our home when his brother's death was imminent?

Chapter 6

My father died in the early hours of the next morning, 15th November, 1815. Some have written that he died with *sudden unexpectedness*, but I think it's a miracle that he did not die sooner, given the chaos and chicanery to which he was subjected and for which he himself bore some responsibility. I did not have a strong emotional bond with him as I did with my mother, but I regarded him as a necessary and powerful figure in my life; his demise could only exacerbate my uncertainty and vulnerabilities.

My mother did not discuss with me any aspect of the guardianship issue, even though, a week later, on the 22nd of November, the *Landrechte* (Imperial Royal court of Nobility) decreed that she had been appointed guardian and my uncle, co-guardian. It would be his responsibility to determine and oversee my education and all financial matters pertaining to me. But much more important was the stipulation that I remained with my mother in our own home and that she was still my principal carer. This information she *did* share with me, and her relief was infectious.

It all seemed right and proper then, a resolution for both of us and most certainly welcome after the bizarre events surrounding my father's death. But my mother could not avoid some troubling questions: what was my uncle thinking now? what was he doing? how was he coping with a humiliating defeat at the hands of someone he loathed? He stayed away from our home thus depriving her of any opportunity to answer those questions. He never came near me to discuss whatever plans he had for my education, suggesting that he perhaps hadn't given the matter too much thought or was still bitterly consumed with the court's decision.

It would be some time before she learnt what was really on his mind: he believed she had poisoned my father! He

spread rumours to that effect. He asked his physician friend Andreas Bertolini to examine the body of his brother. Bertolini did so and reported back to my uncle that his suspicions were unfounded. My uncle did not wholly relinquish this *poisoning* allegation, nor did his determination to demonise my mother abate. On the day of the court ruling he wrote to his friend Ferdinand Ries:

My poor unfortunate brother has just died; he had a bad wife...

Had my mother been aware at the time that he believed she was a murderess she would have known that my uncle had no intention of accepting the court's decision, graciously or otherwise. A week later, on the 28th November, without her knowing, he submitted a petition to the court seeking to transfer the guardianship to himself alone. The court responded immediately by ordering him to attend a hearing. He told the court that he could provide good reasons why my mother should be excluded from the guardianship. The court ordered him to produce those reasons within five days. His first reason was her embezzlement and calumny convictions in 1811. He applied to Vienna's Stadtmagistrat (Civic Magistracy) the court dealing with political, civil, and criminal cases of commoners for a copy of the charges and sentence made against her. The Stadtmagistrat court refused, infuriating my uncle, but it agreed to disclose the information if the noble *Landrechte* court itself requested seeing them. His second reason for excluding my mother was what he regarded as undue pressure on my sick father to add the codicil to the will: it was, he believed, sheer opportunism on her part during his brief absence from our home. He didn't mention that he had applied similar pressure when my mother and I had left our home for an even briefer period.

When she found out about my uncle's intentions my mother's mood drastically changed. From the outset, she must have been uncomfortably aware of the esteem in which he was held. For the past couple of years he had been experiencing unparalleled success and fame throughout Europe, accoladed by Emperors and monarchs, musical publications and societies, universities and city councils. Even the day after my father died he was awarded Honorary Citizenship by our city authorities. He was a towering internationally recognised figure acclaimed for his stirring compositions that resonated with the national mood of triumph over Napoleon. He was a highly respected philanthropist who gave time, effort and money to the poor and to charities attempting to cope with the thousands of veterans maimed and injured during the wars. And he was also famous for his indomitable spirit and fortitude in coping with his deafness.

My mother knew this well-deserved fame gave him access to influential people amongst royalty, aristocracy, and court officials: they were certain to support his *case*. Apart from some public, mostly female sympathy with her plight, she had no one supporting her. Both her parents and her rich burgomaster grandfather were dead. Yet despite all that, she still hoped my uncle would realise how onerous becoming my substitute father would be, how disruptive to his frenetic lifestyle, his creativity and never-ending commissions. She was not the only one who thought like this: his friends and associates believed it would be folly to apply for the guardianship. His life-long friend Stephen Breuning strenuously attempted to persuade him against it. My uncle ignored the advice.

During the next few days I watched my mother seeking help and solace from anyone prepared to listen to her. She told me what was happening and no matter how sensitively she tried to avoid upsetting me, she failed. I sensed her gloom and pessimism and overheard her explain to some of

her neighbours that no matter how just her cause my uncle had ‘friends in high places’ and was determined to get his own way.

I sank into despair. I also fell to my knees and prayed: ‘Oh Lord, do not let my uncle take me...’ But this is exactly what he was going to do, and two bullies in my school Lucas Eckhel and Maximilian (Maxi) Haider were determined to remind me of it. Their parents were amongst some neighbours my mother had spoken to. They lived near us. Their boys were three and two years older respectfully, taller and stronger, and came at me from behind one afternoon as I made my way home from school. They were talking intentionally loud enough for me to hear.

‘Have you heard about Carly? His uncle’s taking him.’

‘Where to?’

‘A dump...in the Bastion.’

‘Why’s he taking him?’

‘Doesn’t like his mum.’

‘Why not?’

‘Thinks she’s a tart.’

‘Is she?’

‘Everybody says she is.’

I ran away and they burst out laughing. I didn’t know what they meant but assumed it was an insult. I reached home hoping my mother could comfort me. But I sensed her anxiety as soon as I got through the door. I think it was my arrival which triggered it: a recurring thought in her mind of the possibility...or the probability, that I would soon be leaving. I didn’t mention Eckhel and Heider, but I tossed and turned throughout the night unable to sleep, hearing their taunts over and over again. As she was seeing me off to school the next morning, I couldn’t stand it any longer; I asked her outright: “Mama...is Uncle Ludwig going to take me?”

She was horrified that I asked, even though she probably knew that her behaviour and her words in recent days had

implanted this awful thought in my mind. She didn't know what to say, which hardly reassured me, but then she felt the need to digress from the brutal certainty she knew was being fomented as we spoke.

'The court said you remain with me, darling,'

But that's not what her eyes or her voice said; she knew now that her initial triumphal announcement of the court's decision had been premature.

'I don't want to live with him!' I said, resolutely, yet conscious even at the age of nine, that my opinions and feelings probably counted for nothing in my uncle's eyes.

'I know you don't...nor do I.'

"Why does he want to take me...away from you?"

I'm sure the first answer on her lips was that he hated her and wanted her to suffer. I could see her struggling to restrain herself, biting her lip and tightening her enfolded arms. Something maybe told her that it was wrong to implant terrible aspersions about someone in a child's mind, particularly about a blood relative. She would quickly learn that my uncle had no such inhibition.

'He may not want to take you from me...he may just want you to go to a better school; he may just want to teach you the piano...'

I yelled at her: 'I don't want to learn the piano! I don't want to go to another school!'

'But Karl...we must wait to see what happens.'

I stared angrily at the kitchen floor and she came and put her arms around me. Perhaps my love and loyalty and my need for her provided a crumb of comfort, but I could still feel her tension and her helplessness. I began sobbing: 'I don't want to leave you, Mama; take me to court...I'll tell them...I don't want to leave you and you don't want me to go...will they not listen?'

She said nothing but held me more tightly. I thought to myself: if I go to court and cry my heart out, and beg them not to remove me surely they *will* listen. But it didn't work

that way. And as I sobbed, the court was probably being subjected to all the influence and manipulation my uncle could muster. My mother had nothing to combat that, and all I had were tears, in which neither judges nor my uncle were interested in or cared about.

It was a gloomy Christmas despite my mother showering me with presents. I would have much preferred it if instead of presents she had answered my questions. The main question remained: am I going to be taken? In the days leading up to Christmas, I indulged myself in the luxury of thinking my uncle had changed his mind, because nothing was heard from the court. Perhaps he had not got what he wanted from the court! But the greater the silence, the more visible and audible was my mother's anxiety. She dared not let this notion that all was well take root: 'courts are very slow', she told me. Then I wanted to know *where* he was taking me; would I live with him? I had often overheard my parents and others talk about his lack of hygiene and the chaotic conditions in which he lived. My mother's standards of hygiene were very high and I was hypersensitive to homes whose inhabitants substantially deviated from them. I could not forget Heider and Maxi's amusement saying I was going to a 'dump!' and when I thought of it a wave of claustrophobia swept over me, imagining the worst kind of dump. The prospect of me living with my weird, unkempt, deaf genius of an uncle was a frightening one.

Chapter 7

My mother had not sat passively awaiting our fate. She had enlisted the support of my school head-teacher who would testify that I was well settled there and that any move away from her, my school and my friends could jeopardize my education. She visited our local priest but all he could offer were prayers! Her lawyer friend said he could do nothing while the court was making up its mind about my uncle's appeal against its original decision. On Jan 9th 1816, it did make up its mind: it reversed the decision it had made six weeks previously by removing the guardianship from her and conferring sole guardianship upon him; it apparently had accepted the case he had made against her.

How did this happen?

The court probably did accept my uncle's main argument for denying her the guardianship: she was a felon, and that in itself, according to our General Civil Code, sufficed. But the Code should have also barred my uncle from guardianship for equally serious reasons clearly stated in its pages: his chronic ill-health and his inability to manage his own affairs which, throughout his life, he always admitted and consistently lamented (in a letter to his friend Countess Erdödy in June 1817, he wrote: *as I have never been able to care for myself or my wants, I am today even less able to do so*). The weightiest reason for not granting guardianship however must have been staring judges and advocates in the face: paragraph 193 of our Code states that persons *who have lived notoriously at enmity with the parent(s) of the minor...* cannot be considered for guardianship. My uncle had been doing that for years: *living at enmity* with my mother, trying to denigrate her, particularly since the day she had been awarded guardianship and he was made co-guardian. Paragraph 212 of the Code states that as a co-guardian he had to *solemnly vow to promote the good of the*

minor and he must for this purpose assist the female guardian with his advice. In contesting the court's initial awarding of the guardianship to my mother my uncle had no inhibitions in revealing his antipathy towards her; the notion that he would *assist her* in any shape or form was laughable. The noble judges must surely have sensed that granting guardianship to him and excluding my mother entirely was not just in contravention of our Civil Code but was sentencing me to a life of misery caught up in the mutual antagonisms between the two most important adults closest to me.

But why did they do it?

On January 19th my uncle listened to the noble judge in the *Landrechte* pronounce that Ludwig van Beethoven was now the sole legally appointed guardian of his nephew Karl. Two days later, he wrote to his friend Count Nikolaus Zmeskall von Domanovecz, an official in the Hungarian Chancellery and a keen cellist with whom he often played: *I shall visit you today with my nephew*, he told him, *because I have been appointed his guardian.*

I no more wanted to meet Zmeskall than he wanted to meet me! But after the bitter struggle with my mother and its outcome, I was a prized trophy that needed to go on display, an embodiment of his new-found paternal status.

Zmeskall was an older man, richer, and like my uncle, a life-long bachelor. He lived with his servants in his opulent residence, his entire life neatly divided between his work at the Chancellery and his music. A formidable life-sized portrait of him hung in the drawing room, obviously painted when he was much younger, taller, moustachioed, dressed in the splendid attire of his noble office, and seemingly staring down on me no matter how I moved. But this did not look like the Zmeskall I met, his hair receding and a vast forehead, clean-shaven and double-chinned; aged and slow-moving with considerable bulk, a slight squint in his twitching green eyes.

The two men greeted each other enthusiastically, and, despite my uncle's deafness, they continued in an incomprehensible mutual banter from which I was excluded. I think Zmeskall needed this intimacy to relax before having to converse with a nine-year-old, a challenge he may never have had to face before.

'How are you, young fellow', he just about managed to say.

'I am well, thank you, sir'.

The stilted nature of the exchanges which followed did nothing to make me feel at ease. My uncle beamed with pride clearly unaware of his friend's difficulty in engaging with me, not dissimilar to his own. Zmeskall soon gave up, turned to my uncle and said something that I didn't understand. My deaf uncle must have understood because both men laughed. They then resumed their exclusive chat as I stood there watching them, my tension rising and my fingers tightly locked.

On the day after I met Zmeskall my mother was served with the relevant papers. That was the day she finally snapped. Up until then, she had, entirely for my sake, played out an elaborate charade, not very successfully it should be said: she felt she had to conceal from me the extent of the turmoil and the suffering she was enduring; she had to keep a lid on a boiling cauldron of anger and fear stirred up by the mere thought of her only child being taken from her and of the brother-in-law responsible. But when the wax-sealed envelope containing the court's reversal of their original decision to award joint guardianship arrived, she could contain herself no longer. As Amelia our servant and I looked on apprehensively she read only half of the first page and then threw the lot to the floor, yelling out that my uncle was torturing her. She looked up at the high ceiling venting her wrath on the God she could not see or understand. 'Is this your punishment or is it *his*?' she yelled contemptuously, her face unrecognizably grotesque and

defiant; ‘yes...I have sinned...but have I not suffered enough for my sins?’ She railed against judges and court officials who were responsible and the ‘deaf ugly bachelor’ who had seldom in his life ‘spoken to me and never played with me’ but was now allowed to drag me away from a loving mother and home. Then she saw the futility of it all (apart from making me more miserable and scared). She let out a huge sigh and fell back onto the nearest armchair. She looked up at me, her flushed face full of anguished resignation. She beckoned me to come close to her. ‘I’m sorry, darling’, she said.

I instinctively put my arms around her but I didn’t know what to say. She was right to have tried repeatedly to prevent me knowing what she was thinking and feeling, because now that I knew, I felt worse, more confused and more helpless than ever. I didn’t understand everything she had said, but her outburst made it unmistakably clear: a cruel decision had been made, inexplicable to both her and I, and she was resigned to the inevitable. She seemed to have implied that God was implicated, if not in sending her the papers, then in not preventing them from arriving. I didn’t see much point thereafter in getting on my knees again to pray. I didn’t particularly believe that God had had a hand in all this, but if he was going to be verbally abused by my mother, it was highly unlikely he was going to listen favourably to the pleas of her son.

Being uncertain about God and being cared for by an embittered and fearful mother who knew she would not be caring for me for long, made me miss my father desperately. I was more acutely conscious than ever that it was his illness and death that had brought this situation about. Whatever disputes and rows he had had with my mother, his presence was by and large, predictable and reassuring. I derived more than a little confidence and certainty from him; I looked up to him; I adopted some of his mannerisms and speech in my relations with others. I was beginning to think and act more

independently, always knowing that should I put a foot wrong and blunder embarrassingly, both he and my mother were there to fall back upon. I was beginning to understand *right* and *wrong*. I had disagreements with my parents; I had begun to resist them and argue with them; I never won an argument and seldom got my way, but I was beginning to learn about irony and the subtleties of language, about when and how to mask my thoughts and feelings. I later watched my own children confidently achieve these milestones with varying degrees of mischievousness, but my father's illness and death and all the subsequent turmoil ensured that I would not be so fortunate: I was confident and certain about nothing now. I was anxious and fearful. I didn't expect nor did I want my uncle to explain why I had to leave my mother and my home: that would have necessitated a certain closeness and intimacy in discussion and I didn't want him coming anywhere near me. But he was not likely to, nor even less to *explain* that I had to leave my home and my mother because he regarded her as evil and hated her so much!

Perhaps *she* should have attempted to explain why. She could have told me about her criminal convictions (reason in itself but by no means the only reason he hated her). But I am not so sure that that *enlightenment* would have made my departure any easier or made me less resentful. Nor can I be sure of what it would have done to my relationship with her. Would I have been horrified to learn of her crimes? Would I have been disgusted, mortified, ashamed? Would I have reacted with rage and disbelief? I was about to embark upon a journey I dreaded - leaving her - and it was important that when the journey began I retained the image and the perception of a good mother, a loving and dependable mother. Despite her crimes, flaws and weaknesses and my uncle's hatred of her, those would be my only memories when I did leave her. Far from reality I know, but they were precious and necessary memories for me nonetheless.

My uncle remained unaware of the turmoil I was undergoing. He clearly wanted the severance from my mother to be expedited as quickly as possible, deluding himself that the sooner it occurred the more rapid would be her diminishing influence over me. He didn't realise that the manner of our separation would intensify my pining for her, and that my increasing awareness of his hostility towards her would burden me.

I had two weeks left with her during which she tried to assure me that although we were separating she would see me regularly. I could not articulate to her just how painful this 'reassurance' was. For a start, the reassurances she had given me about us *not* being separated had turned out to be worthless. And how could she be so certain about seeing me if he was determined she wouldn't? Or if he took me far enough away to make it too difficult or expensive for her to see me, which, according to one letter he wrote a few weeks later, was what he intended to do.

However miserable I was during this period I could hardly avoid being aware of the worse plight of my mother. She may have felt somewhat liberated with the end of an incompatible marital relationship, but she was exhausted by the daily obligations of attending to my dying father and by the rancour of her struggle with his brother. Now she would have to cope with the profound loneliness inevitable for any woman losing her only child a few months after losing a husband. She had lost her mother whom she had depended upon a great deal only two years before; she had few friends left since the publicity surrounding her trial and imprisonment; she was heavily in debt; and, in no small measure due to my uncle's ceaseless character assassination of her, her reputation was not going to ease her passage back into any form of normality. When I look back on this period my heart goes out to her, and the injustice done to her seems all the more outrageous. At the time I was too self-preoccupied to be able to think in terms of justice and

unfairness to anyone other than myself. Yet I was of an age at which, while sensing something of the magnitude of loss to be inflicted on her, I was unable to reach out to her and comfort her in the absence of my father. I was too much gripped by apprehensions and fear.

These memories stir in me passions which do not easily subside. I can never entirely rid my mind of the contrast between the influence and power of my uncle and the sheer helplessness of my mother. Her attempts to shield me from the reality of what awaited me, by false reassurances, by digression, by making excuses, caused me greater anxiety, and additional burdens of guilt for herself. The impending sense of doom that she must have felt usually offloaded itself through tears. I heard her cry often as I passed her bedroom and when she emerged the hollows of her eyes were always darker and redder. How near to insanity or suicide these events brought her I will never be able to tell; suffice to say had she gone mad or killed herself, I would most likely have done something similar, because the abiding thought and feeling which kept me sane and alive during the next few years was that my mother was alive too, and that no matter how callous my uncle was in enforcing our separation, we would somehow keep in contact, and eventually be reunited.

Chapter 8

A week after the guardianship was conferred on my uncle, he arrived at our home with a friend, Karl Joseph Bernard, and summoned me to accompany them to a private residential Institute for boys which had been highly recommended to him. He never discussed that prospect with me, but, thankfully, he had been persuaded by others not to take me into his own cluttered residence in Sailerstätte to live with him.

‘Good morning, *little fellow*’, he shouted out from the carriage; he never acknowledged my mother who had tearfully hugged me at our front door. The *little fellow* title he gave me was one that he and his friends and associates would use for years to come. I felt it was an odd phrase to use; there was little genuine affection in it.

‘Good morning, Sir’, I said, not forgetting my mother’s instruction to be courteous and respectful at all times. I stepped into the carriage and he directed me to sit opposite him; I should have sat adjacent to him to avoid his piercing proud stare and his barely constrained grin. I’m sure it pleased him enormously to have watched me walk away from the woman he loathed. Now I was sitting in his carriage, in effect, locked in, and scared. His friend Bernard, superiorly dressed, an ornamental stick with tassels in his hand, occasionally glanced at me inquisitively, but still hadn’t spoken to me.

‘I’m taking you to a fine Institute’, my uncle said.

‘Thank you, Sir.’

I don’t think he heard me; my voice was soft and weak.

‘But you must work hard every day...it is what your father would have expected.’

I hadn’t the nerve to remind him that my father hadn’t wanted me to be taken from my mother and had given me a solemn commitment on his deathbed that I would *not* be

taken from her. But I said nothing. I couldn't think of anything at all to say to him. Fortunately it was a short distance to our destination.

The Institute was owned and managed by a Mr Cajetan Giannatasio del Rio, ably assisted by his partially invalided Italian wife and two daughters, Franziska (Fanny), 25 and Nanni, 23. Smallish and stocky, Giannastasio had a cheery disposition. His family lined up to greet us in the foyer, and it was evident from their expressions, particularly of the daughters, that they regarded my uncle as royalty: their focus remained fixed on him, irrespective of who spoke. He introduced Bernard as a dear friend (who was already assisting my deaf uncle with communication). When he introduced me, the family seemed genuinely warm and welcoming, but I could detect that they were still awestricken in the presence of my uncle, hearing his voice, and being at his service. Fanny curtsied to him much more exaggeratedly than her younger sister; she then gazed up at him through beautiful brown eyes and smiled helplessly. Her mouth remained open and she occasionally felt the need to moisten her dried lips with the tip of her tongue. She seemed almost in a trance. When my uncle looked at her, I thought she was about to swoon.

Very quickly the whole party was in discussion, but not about me or my education; in fact, they appeared to ignore me. This was an enormous relief: I was tense and anxious about being spoken to because I was still in a daze; I feared having to answer questions about myself. Eventually, my uncle and Bernard were invited to join Mr Giannatasio in his office. His wife approached me with her arms outstretched: 'Welcome Karl', she said; 'we look forward to having you.' Her hands clasped my upper arms and her soft blue eyes lit upon me. But she didn't seem to be expecting a response; she knew how tense I felt and was merely wanting to put me at ease. 'I'm going to get us some refreshments, she said, 'Fanny will take care of you.'

‘Thank you, ma’am’, I said, noticing she had a slight limp on her left leg as she left us.

‘Come Karl’, Fanny said, taking me by the hand and leading me around the Institute’s premises. I could cope with Fanny’s questions because my uncle wasn’t near me. Her smile and her hand were reassuring, as was her genuine interest in the answers I gave her. I preferred her to her younger sister Nanni, who was taller, more fashionable and seemingly less interested in me. As I would quickly find out, they *did* have something in common: they were both musicians, Fanny by far the more accomplished, and they both believed my uncle’s music was divine!

I was with Fanny for nearly an hour before her parents, along with my uncle and Bernard, emerged from the office. There seemed to be something different about them all now: the way they looked at me, their voices. Mr Giannatasio tried to engage me, asking me similar questions to those his daughter had asked. Neither of them inquired about my mother, or even mentioned her. I later wondered were they looking at me with sympathy, as a result of what my uncle had told them about her.

On returning home my uncle wrote to Giannatasio. Impressed by the Institute and the family running it, he nevertheless was keen to let them know he was also thinking of the future:

[Karl’s] future education would be more effectively served if he is far away from Vienna, in Mölk perhaps or somewhere similar...there he will hear and see no more of his bestial mother; everything around him will be strange; there will be fewer people for him to depend on, and it will be a place where he can gain respect and love only through his own courage.

In a second letter posted on February 1st, he let Giannatasio know how reassured he was to visit the school

and meet his family, so much so that he was removing me from public school immediately, and that I would start in the Institute the following day. He cautioned Giannatasio:

Moreover I beg of you again under no circumstances to permit the mother to exercise any influence now or when she may see him; all this I will talk over with you tomorrow.

He instructed me to write at the end of this letter:

I am very glad to come to you and am your Karl van Beethoven.

When I first read those letters nearly forty years later, they took my breath away: to refer to my mother as *bestial* in a formal letter to the principal of the Institute that I was about to attend...to look forward to the day when I will neither see nor hear her...to enlist the help of those to whom my uncle was about to entrust my care in order to ensure that she would have no influence on me whatsoever...was he aware of what he was saying? And what was I to make of his desire that I be removed from her and submerged in *everything that is strange* and unsupportive to me, enabling me to *gain respect and love only through my own courage*? I was nine!

I read the letters repeatedly, sometimes in the company of my own children running around me, happily playacting, giggling, shouting, arguing. Their joyful ordinariness made the memory of misery more acute. My uncle had no awareness of that misery, nor of what was motivating him: much less my well-being than an implacable hatred of my mother. Of course I could not think like that at the age of nine; I just felt terribly unhappy, disorientated, and sensed that something bad was happening to both my mother and myself.

I wondered what else my uncle told Giannatasio all those years ago, when they spoke privately: that my mother poisoned my father? That she was a spendthrift who made him bankrupt? That she had been unfaithful to him even as he lay dying...?

I'm sure Giannatasio was taken back by all this bile and hatred, but there was much more to come. The allegation that she had been unfaithful to my father was to be embellished in the defamatory title my uncle gave her: *Queen of the Night*, a reference to the character in one of his favourite works, Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. He would use the term repeatedly in his letters and conversations, and his intention could not have been clearer, or more topical: to label her a prostitute.

Prostitutes were everywhere! Even I and my school-friends could not but be aware of the brazenness in our thoroughfares and alleyways. But that was hardly surprising in the aftermath of our wars which had raged for fifteen years: the deaths of tens of thousands of our soldiers, leaving their poverty-stricken widows to rear and feed hungry children; the savage devaluation of our currency which impacted so devastatingly on our whole population. The year-long Congress of Vienna which aimed to redraw the boundaries of Europe after the defeat of Napoleon, brought thousands of male delegates to our city, many of them rich, anonymous, increasingly bored and libidinous. Who could criticize destitute lone mothers driven into prostitution?

As my uncle well knew, however, a prostitute was not the character Mozart had created or was trying to project (otherwise my father would not have taken me to see the opera). Twenty years earlier Mozart himself delighted in taking his own son (also called Karl) to see it, knowing better than anyone else that despite its gravity and complexity it was, in another sense, a genial fairy-tale in the form of a quest, to be enjoyed by children like me and

generations of young children ever since. But the title *Queen of the Night* served my uncle well in his determination to defame my mother. In a letter to Giannatasio shortly afterwards he wrote:

Last night the Queen of the Night attended the Artist's Ball and remained there until 3 0' clock, exposing not only her mentality, onlookers whispered, but also her body: she could be had for 20 gulden! O heavens Lord...can we surrender our priceless treasure into those hands for one moment? No! Never!

You can almost feel the gleeful hatred as he writes. None of my uncle's contemporaries or biographers, none of his friends and none of his enemies have even hinted at, or provided a shred of evidence that my mother, whatever her many faults and frailties, engaged in prostitution. Yet here he was slandering her mercilessly, burdening her with a notoriety that she would carry for decades.

What did the Giannatasios make of it? They were a loving, God-fearing family that provided a good upbringing for their daughters and a reputable education for their pupils. They surely had never encountered anything like this before, about a woman they had never had the opportunity to meet. And the person sharing this character assassination with them? Their music-discerning daughters would have reminded their parents that he was the great Ludwig van Beethoven!

In normal circumstances, hearing such allegations and condemnations from *ordinary* people would have caused some discomfort if not alarm amongst the Giannatasios. At least two questions would have arisen in their minds: can the mother being spoken of really be as bad as that...*bestial...evil...a whore*? And why are we being told now? Why are we being drawn into this cesspit of a family feud just when the child is about to start in our Institute?

But these were not normal circumstances and the guardian was no ordinary person. What my uncle had told them and repeated in his letters, despite being sensationalist and defamatory, was believed by virtue of his fame and status. He must have emerged from that first meeting with Giannatasio feeling confident that a valuable new ally had joined his cause; he had to let him know:

because we wholeheartedly agree on the subject of Karl's mother we can mutually decide on the mode of his education.

I started at the Institute as my uncle proposed, on the 2nd of February. There was no preparation; no formal departure from my public school nor from my friends; no discussions between my uncle, my mother and the school's staff. 'Be brave, darling', my mother had repeatedly urged me earlier as I waited in dread for the carriage to arrive. I felt that she was specifically asking me not to cry. Yet the tears rolled down her own cheeks as she embraced me. I did not want her to let me go. My single brown leather luggage trunk was loaded onto the carriage. Its contents were mainly my mother's choice: clothes, footwear, toiletries, my favourite books and toys, and some music, which I had no intention of playing. No discussion had taken place between her and my uncle about what I should or shouldn't take with me; my uncle expressed no interests whatsoever in the contents of the trunk. My mother had also enclosed a little note saying how proud of me she was and how much she loved me.

I entered the carriage, stretched out of the window and waved; I could see that she was heartbroken and I then cried convulsively. I fell back onto the seat but still kept her in view. 'What are you crying for, little fellow?' my uncle said, as the carriage trundled along and my mother was now out of sight. The tone of his voice combined genuine

perplexity and irritation. He put his arm around me. It felt like a dead, deadening weight. If only he had known that I really did wish that I was dead.

It was left to Fanny to cheer me up before I joined my peers. She knelt to take my hands and looked into my sodden eyes. 'I want to go home to mama', I sobbed. This must have sounded incomprehensible to her in the light of what she had been told about my mother. Beethoven, she probably thought, was my salvation; he was not just a great composer but also a saintly rescuer of neglected children! She released my hands and dried my tears. 'It'll be all right Karl...we will take good care of you...and your uncle will be visiting you often'.

So, the architect of my misery would be *visiting me often*, and the woman responsible for helping me settle in intentionally avoided my plea to be with my mother. Fanny was a generous and compassionate woman who could see my pain, yet if something (such as the image of my mother's *bestiality* implanted in her mind by my uncle) was precluding her from acknowledging the source of that pain, then her efforts to comfort me were limited. She would never understand nor be able to encourage me to talk about my mother.

Here I was, then, nine years old, having lost my father only ten weeks before, now severed from my mother who was implicitly made unmentionable. When I reflect upon this period, all the memories of how Fanny reacted to me whenever I pined for my mother came flooding back. She was embarrassed and she pitied me...pitied *that poor innocent child who had no idea just how evil his mother was!* How could I tell her that her awkwardness and embarrassment exacerbated my suffering? Or that she seemed indifferent or uncaring (which she certainly was not); or that it was doubly cruel letting me know even at this very early stage that the subject of my mother was taboo. Fanny had unwittingly become an instrument of my uncle's

goal to banish my mother from my life. Undoubtedly, his fame and assertiveness overcame whatever doubts she may have had about the veracity of what he was saying. But I still can't help pondering the question: as a woman whose task was to educate and care for the children under her charge, did she never come to realise that labelling my mother a social pariah was hardly likely to encourage her to behave as a loving responsible parent. My uncle certainly wasn't aware of that, but he would have been euphoric in being told that that was the inevitable consequence of his actions.

Chapter 9

If my mother had known that my uncle had slandered her in his conversations and letters to the Giannatasios, how might she have proved him wrong? One possible answer is that if an opportunity arose for her to be in the company of that family, for example, in the Institute in which they lived and worked, she would simply have to present herself as an honest, hardworking, dedicated parent demonstrably supporting the school and staff, and expressing her appreciation for all that they were doing for her son. But my mother was in no fit state to do anything like that: she had been appointed guardian of her child, and then inexplicably, inhumanely, that decision had been reversed in favour of the brother-in-law who despised her. She was bereaved and distraught. She had no one to console or advise her. In the hours after my departure, I reckon she must have cried for the remainder of the day, paced up and down in desperation, tossed and turned on her pillows throughout the night, and then, regrettably, decided that she could stand it no longer...she had to see me!

It was during the lunchbreak on only my second day at the Institute. I was standing alone against a brick wall watching all the kids playing and feeling utterly miserable and scared. Some of them had earlier made strenuous efforts to engage me without success and left me. My mother appeared at the open gate of the enclosed play-yard and shouted out my name. I instantly recognised her voice and began running even before I could see her. I threw myself into her arms and she clasped me tightly.

‘Oh darling...darling...I’ve missed you so much.’

I sank one side of my head in her breasts and my hands and wrists were locked around her neck. When our cheeks joined I was nearly overcome by her soft skin and the fragrance of her perfume. I cried: ‘Take me home, mama.’

‘No, no! Karl...I can’t, but I’ll come to see you...I’ll come to see you every day.’

And she did.

She never arrived without a gift: sweet-meats, biscuits, games. In my second week in the Institute she brought me a book, but it was confiscated by staff even before I had time to open it; they gave it to my uncle who gratefully acknowledged the action in a letter to Giannatasio:

We must be vigilant. This book was given to my nephew secretly by you-know-who...

Her arrivals could hardly go unnoticed especially when her stays lengthened beyond the time allocated for lunch and I missed some parts of the first afternoon lesson. She began taking me away from the school for lunch elsewhere, and then, more audaciously, she would send an emissary to collect me and take me to see her at another location. I didn’t care; I just longed to see her, and the fact that we had been permitted to reunite like this on a daily basis convinced us both that we could do it forever.

Not so. This was a parent who, however badly done by, was behaving irresponsibly: this was a very bad example to other parents and their children; this was impeding my settling into the Institute and my studies. So much so that Giannatasio invited my mother for a *friendly* chat during which he attempted to enlighten her about the risks she was taking. All my mother wanted to talk about was the injustice of losing her child and of being prevented from seeing him as often as both she and I desired. Giannatasio obviously didn’t hold out too much hope of my mother reforming, because on that same day, he wrote to my uncle insisting that he be given immediate authority to prevent her from taking me away from the premises. If it can be shown, he suggests, that I am being harmed in her company, then he and my uncle must ensure that she does not see me long

enough for this to happen. This is a drastic proposal, Giannatasio admits, that will cause my mother much distress, but it is for the sake of my education and the maintenance of order in the institution. Furthermore, he believes that preventing her from visiting me too frequently can benefit me in other ways: I will be spared the tears I shed each time she departs, which makes it very difficult for me to adjust to my new classroom surroundings and routines, and the different path of life chosen for me.

My uncle must have been pleased to get this letter: now he had a valid reason for ensuring she had virtually no contact with me; now the Giannatasios would have no difficulty in believing all the slanders he had made against her; they would know what an obstacle she had been to his attempts to provide an orderly stable upbringing and education for me! He instantly replied, informing Giannatasio that he was seeking legal advice, and in the meanwhile, to prevent any contact between my mother and myself by keeping me indoors and telling her that I was engaged in essential schoolwork. This Giannatasio duly did, though delegating the task of delivering such bad news to a junior member of staff. Pity him: after being fobbed off like this for a few days, my mother erupted, verbally abusing the poor fellow and demanding to see Giannatasio, who refused. She hung about the school at all hours in the hope that she might just see me again. My classroom friends (with relish) kept saying to me they had seen her arguing with staff. She then resorted to disguising herself as a cleaner in order to get inside the school; but she was quickly exposed and sent packing. She used my friends to pass clandestine notes to me, reiterating how much she loved me and how utterly miserable her life was without me. But the secrecy could not be maintained and my friends turned on me when they were disciplined with the loss of privileges. There was only one thing left for her to do: to confront the person she regarded as the cause of all her misery. She

awaited my uncle outside the school gates after one of his many visits. Before he had time to retreat back inside she unleashed all her pent-up fury, demanding not for the first time an explanation, a reason for taking her child from her, for preventing her from seeing him; then she screamed at him: ‘Why do you hate me so much!’ But she was wasting her breath: in a later letter to Giannatasio he wrote:

the Queen of the Night...who is never weary of hoisting the sails of her vindictiveness against me...I will never submit to render her any account of my actions.

I imagine her at that moment, yelling insults at him, barely able to restrain herself from physically attacking him, and all the while he stares at her in silent contempt, awaiting the attention of school staff who come running to see what all the commotion was about, and when they see her and listen to her vile language, probably shake their heads and say something to the effect: ‘not her again!’

My uncle wrote to Giannatasio that night, strategically consolidating the bond between them by emphasising that my mother verbally abused both of them:

The Queen of the night took us by surprise...and also delivered a ferocious diatribe against you; she showed her usual disrespect and malice toward me and startled me for a moment.

There was no logic to my mother’s admittedly foolish actions, no guile or common sense; she was driven entirely by yearning, fear and hatred. Sadly however, in the state she was in, she was incapable of knowing that all she was doing was digging the deepest pit for herself, every shovel-load fuelling my uncle’s loathing for her, strengthening his and Giannatasio’s resolve to prevent her seeing me.

The lame excuses my teachers gave for keeping me indoors convinced me that contact with my mother was at an end. But I wasn't having it: I screamed! I hurled insults; I refused to work; I refused to eat. With bottomless patience, Mrs Giannatasio tried to reason with me; her husband chose a sterner approach but he succeeded only in convincing me that he was conspiring with my uncle. I'm sure he held only one person responsible for this behaviour: my mother, just when I was beginning to sense that the only person really responsible was my uncle. Eventually my rebellion subsided and I cried; there was no anger or aggression left in me; I was too exhausted.

My uncle must have felt that his victory over my mother was near completion, and, as I would learn in due course, each time he felt like that, he couldn't resist talking about it. For the first time he felt confident enough to come and see me, ostensibly to inquire about my *progress*. I assumed he knew about my rebellious outbursts and I was apprehensive about how he might react. I still had vivid memories of when he lost his temper in our home and I feared I might not be able to withstand a similar onslaught. But when he arrived he was all sweetness and light. The burden of my *disruptive* mother was being lifted from his shoulders. The esteem in which he was held by an appreciative staff had increased substantially. He was my one and only guardian now with absolute authority over me, and he could concentrate on ensuring the Institute did everything it needed to do to mould my character in the way he demanded, and reduce the time it might take to help me forget about my mother completely.

We met in Giannatasio's office and were served with coffee and biscuits which I didn't even try to eat.

'My son...how are you? You look well', he said.

I gave the slightest of nods, knowing I did *not* look well. I looked and felt miserable. In contrast, he looked very well. He had a beaming smile which I suppose his *victory* entitled

him to. His pock-marked skin was darker and swarthier than I had remembered. His bluish grey eyes pierced through me. His use of the word *son* struck me as much as the loud, celebratory sound of his voice. He had been getting progressively deafer over a period of twenty years now and he sometimes compensated for it by speaking loudly. It seemed particularly louder to me because I was for the first time alone with him in a silent room having my very first conversation with him about matters that neither he nor anyone else had ever discussed with me. My voice was still slight and boyish, and I dreaded him shouting at me, demanding I speak up.

‘Mr Giannatasio has told me about...her’, he said, his expression and tone changing from cheerfulness to gravity.

I had to think for a few moments about that pause and his use of the word ‘her’. Was this my mother he was talking about?

‘She will not be allowed to come and disturb your work again’, he said resolutely.

He really did believe he was delivering good news! I stood there immobilised and incredulous: he could not see my anger nor my pain. Eventually I plucked up the courage to look him straight in the eye and to ask him: ‘Will I see my mother?’ Having to speak slowly and as loudly as I could made my voice tremble.

I don’t think he heard me, but I’m sure he understood me. He stared at me coldly. It was the one question he did not want me to ask. It dawned on me that moment that any reference to my mother would make him hate her more, and make him more determined to ensure she would have no contact with me.

‘I had to take you away, Karl’, he said; ‘do you understand?’

No...of course I didn’t understand.

My focus shifted from his face to the floor. I stared at it rigidly.

‘Now you *will* make progress,’ he said, after a long pause. ‘If you work hard, you will be a great scholar...and I will make you a great musician.’

It was too difficult to tell him that I had no interest in being a scholar or a musician. Surely he could read that in the dismal expression on my face. But he actually couldn’t! He had said something which he thought was significant and would please me; it certainly pleased him!

‘You must write to me...write to me often and let me know how you’re doing; will you do that?’

I couldn’t think of a more unappealing task, but I nodded resignedly.

‘You will?’

His focus locked onto my lips; he so clearly wanted me to speak to him. I nodded again without looking at him; I could sense his disappointment. I assumed that anything he might say to me now would be just as tiresome and ridiculous as everything else he had said.

After ten minutes or so gabbling to himself about the privileges he had bestowed upon me and the splendid future that awaited me, he prepared to leave. Now I felt obliged to say: ‘Thank you, uncle.’

He seemed touched by that. He came close to me, put his hands on my shoulders and stared down on me, into my eyes, unnerving me: ‘My son...together at last!’

He smiled curiously and then his eyes welled up, as though he was about to cry with joy. He had refused to answer the only question I needed to ask: *Will I see my mother?* I thought he was mad.

About ten days later Fanny was told by another boy that I was crying on my bed just after my uncle had left. She came to my room and pleaded with me to tell her why I was crying. But my uncle had sworn me to silence.

His euphoria in triumphing over my mother had not lasted long. When Giannatasio told him I was still in the

depths of despair, inattentive and distractive in class and achieving very little in terms of my studies and my music, he had summoned me during another of his visits to the school. His dark stern face was full of anger, his small lips closed tight. His wildish eyes unnerved me with their coldness, certainty and impatience. He sat where my teacher usually sat, his two arms leaning on a large desk.

‘Why do you behave in this way?’ he began purposely, without a greeting.

I stood awkwardly and unsteadily a few yards away from him, frequently shifting my weight from one leg to the other. ‘I’m sorry, uncle’, I said. It required real effort to speak slowly and as loudly as I could to ensure he could lipread me, when I so much wanted not to have to speak to him at all.

‘And so you should be.’

I barely nodded.

‘I brought you to this Institute for its many benefits. Can’t you see that?’

No...I couldn’t!

‘What is it you want?’ he asked, ironically.

It was the question I would ordinarily have begged for, yet knowing an honest answer would have provoked him.

‘You must forget about that woman’, he said determinedly; ‘she is the reason why you are here. Don’t you understand that?’

I only knew and understood that I was here because he brought me here. And he still didn’t seem to be able to grasp that I was miserable simply because my mother and I were separated. His hurtful words and his threatening tone suggested that he had become more emboldened in criticizing my mother to my face. This was the second time in mentioning her to me, he had not referred to her as *my mother*; on the first occasion it was ‘...her...’; now it was the contemptuous ‘that woman’. Later, he would repeatedly refer to her as *the widow*,

‘You need to be far away from her; she is a bad influence.’

His voice got louder; maybe he needed to speak louder as his comments about my mother became more explicit. As each second ticked away, I was gaining a clarity of vision that I had previously lacked. I always knew there was something wrong in the relationship between him and my mother, but I had been too young to attempt to rationalise it; I was simply burdened by it, sometimes overwhelmed by it. Now the reality was beginning to dawn and it frightened me: my uncle really *did* hate my mother; he hated her so much that the very thought of her agitated him, brought a glint of malevolence to his eyes. He couldn’t stand me yearning for her. I sensed that when I did yearn for her he would blame her and hate her and insult her all the more...and punish me accordingly.

‘If I’d permitted you to remain with her’, he said, ‘only the good Lord alone knows where you would have ended up.’

Anywhere...as long as it was far away from you! I didn’t feel I needed to say anything to him, but that was okay: he didn’t want me to speak at this moment, just listen, and not dare challenge him, no matter what he chose to say.

‘She is a woman who knows no shame’, he said; ‘she does everything in her power to prevent you from progressing.’

The thought of having to listen to these condemnations of my mother for years to come made me want to yell out.

‘Why have you not written to me?’ he asked.

There was no answer other than that I had no motivation to write to him. Even when Fanny encouraged me to do so and I said I would, the intention quickly dissipated.

‘I forgot’, I said, the first deliberate lie I’d ever told him.

‘You forgot!’

I remained motionless, hoping he would press the matter.

‘Has *she* told you not to write to me?’

I shook my head.

He looked thoroughly frustrated. 'I expect you to write to me within the next week; do you understand?

'Yes.'

'And your work and behaviour have to improve; do you understand that too?'

I wanted to run away from him but my legs felt like lead; I was scared of him, forever conscious of the everyday reality that people all around me revered him, regarding me as exceptionally fortunate in being *rescued* by him!

Fanny tried to console me as I lay on my bed weeping, at the same time hoping I would relent and tell her what had happened. But my uncle's parting words had sworn me to secrecy. She gently stroked me and kept repeating her questions: 'Did your uncle say something to annoy you...was he angry with you...did he say why he was angry with you...?' Fanny had always tried to treat me kindly and sensitively, so too had her mother, but she was probably the last person to be able to help me at this particular moment. As I lay there, I was indifferent to her compassionate stroking, because, like everyone else in the Institute I knew that she revered my uncle and believed that her relationship with him was special. Eventually I would understand that Fanny was madly in love with him and hoped to marry him (a forlorn hope; an unrequited love), but at this point I knew that if I told her how my uncle had treated me only an hour before, that he bullied, intimidated, and humiliated me, she would not believe it and would make every effort to convince me that I was horribly wrong; that my uncle loved me and regarded me as his *precious son*. I had heard all that before from her father and from my teachers.

Another cause of my distress (which I could not have articulated to Fanny) was losing sense of who and what I was, made worse by the realisation of my helplessness in doing anything about it. In contrast, my uncle appeared to be very much certain who he was and what he had become:

my father! “I now regard myself as his father”, he would often tell people, as well as repeatedly referring to me as “my son”. This caused me much confusion. I don’t think I had a strong sense of identity as a child, but now that I was conscious of losing it I also felt that I was losing my mind. When Fanny had left me and I dared to contemplate my future I cried again knowing that nothing would change, that my uncle really did own me, knew nothing about me, and was incapable of understanding what he was doing to me. How could I even attempt to explain that to Fanny or to anyone else?

Chapter 10

My uncle and his friend Bernard went back to the *Landrechte* court which had awarded him the guardianship. There they met Joseph von Schmerling, a senior court official. How fortunate that was for my uncle: Joseph was the brother of Leopold von Schmerling, who was engaged to Giannatasio's elder daughter, Nanni (my uncle composed a song, *Hochzeitslied* for their wedding in 1819). Schmerling was sympathetic to the request for help and my uncle immediately wrote to Giannatasio informing him of the decisions agreed upon: under no circumstances was Karl be taken from the Institute without the permission of his guardian; his mother must not visit him there; if she wishes to see him, she must make application to the guardian, who will make arrangements for her to do so.

The four men, my uncle, Bernard, Schmerling and Giannatasio, met at the Institute as planned and worked on a submission to the *Landrechte* requesting that these decisions be authorized. They also asked the court to grant the guardian plenary authority to exclude my mother and her agents from all or any direct communication with me. This was granted on February 20th, but with a proviso indicating that some court officials were uneasy about the extremity of what was being requested. The proviso stated that my mother *could* visit me in my leisure hours without disturbing the course of my education or the domestic routines in the Institute, but her visit would have to be:

in the company of a person to be appointed by the guardian or the director of the Institution.

This supposedly *compassionate* gesture towards my mother was delightfully seized upon by my uncle who reinterpreted it in his next letter to Giannatasio:

The Landrechte has given me its decision with respect to visits to the Institute the mother of Karl may make, and to her attempt to take him from the Institute. Absolutely nothing can be done that I have not myself determined, assented to, and approved, and that any arrangement and decision in these matters is at all times left to me. Hence the boy's mother need only to address herself to me if she wishes to see him, whereupon if I am satisfied I will in my discretion decide when and how and whether it may take place.

Giannatasio was relieved and more than willing to be guided by my uncle. He wrote to my mother on the 8th of March, notifying her of the draconian restrictions to be imposed upon her, but by that time she had already received her own copy from the court. Giannatasio's letter is more brutally frank; he leaves her under no illusion about the abject servility she is now facing. Quoting from the court's stipulations, he tells her she has to apply solely to my uncle as to whether, how and when, she can see her son, and therefore:

I request that you will not take the trouble again to come to my home because, I must warn you, you may then expose yourself to the most unpleasant situation.

What was she thinking and how must she have felt on reading those words? The humiliation each time she had to *request* to see me...and how easily my uncle would conjure up some excuse for saying *no*. If he said *yes*, it would only be after interrogating her and haranguing her mercilessly.

Not for the first time do I reflect on the hopelessness of her situation. The four men concocting this severest of punishments all had influence, status and authority in abundance; my mother had nothing, basically, and she was alone. She was a young single mother with a criminal record

and seemingly endless debt, bereaved of her husband and bereft of her son, and now labelled by my uncle as a common prostitute. I still fume when I read that letter sent to her on the 8th of March and when I think of the four of them preparing their submission and arguing for a retribution so extreme that Schmerling's own colleagues felt compelled to modify it. In the end, the court conceded to her seeing me for one hour per month at the Institute and supervised at all times by a member of staff, or my uncle, or one of his chosen friends. It was a miserly amount of time, in an unnatural environment where she had often made an exhibition of herself. How would she now feel approaching and entering the building, aware that everyone, including my peers, would be talking about her notoriety?

She protested, argued and pleaded to have additional contacts in a different location, but was refused on the grounds that any contact at all was disruptive, as proven, they said, by my waywardness in the hours following each contact I had with her. Predictably, I became more *wayward*, and Giannatasio became disillusioned with the meetings taking place on his premises. He wrote to my uncle demanding it took place somewhere else. My uncle wrote back, again holding my mother entirely responsible:

As to Karl's mother, I have now decided that your wish not to see her again in your home shall be acceded to. This course is far more judicious and safe for our dear Karl, experience having taught me that every visit from his mother leaves a root of bitterness in the boy's heart, which may harm but never can benefit him. I shall attempt to arrange occasional meetings at my house, which is likely to result in everything being entirely broken off with her.

My uncle wasn't being especially prescient in making such a prediction: he was in control of all matters and could

easily make it happen! I suspect he looked forward to their encounter for that very reason: he had all the authority and power he needed; he would be able to see, if not hear, what went on when my mother and I were together; and he could disrupt or terminate anything he disproved of.

At 3.0 pm one afternoon he called at the Institute to take me to his home; my mother was due there thirty minutes later. Fanny encouraged me to take some school material for her to see: my reading and arithmetic books, my music and artwork. She believed parents should have some idea of the curriculum (even a parent she had wrongly been led to believe would be uninterested); and also, that the material could at least be a source of conversation between us. When my uncle and I met in the foyer, he was inquisitive as to why I was taking my school satchel and what was in it. I emptied it for him; Fanny explained why she had suggested it.

My uncle's home in Sailerstätte was a two-bed-roomed apartment on the second floor of a rather lofty, narrow house. At the rear it looked over the old city wall and moat, across the Glacis. The little river Wein channelled its way towards the Danube canal, past the suburb Landstrasse, which would be the new location for the Institute in a few weeks' time. The staircase was smelly, dingy and dark, and his studio and living quarters, dominated by a huge upright piano, were grossly cluttered. I couldn't help thinking how fortunate I'd been in not being made to live with him there.

He took me into a much tidier kitchen area, and there, to my surprise, a young female servant stood over the sink, washing her hands. She was attractive, but visibly anxious; she never even glanced at me but bowed her head to my uncle apologetically. He looked at her severely.

'I told you to be gone by the time I returned!' he shouted.

'Please master...I'm sorry master...'

Her voice was penitent and her feared expression suggested she just wasn't capable of speaking any louder.

‘I was about to go...’ she continued; ‘you asked me to remain a little longer today...you remember...? To receive the fuel delivery...to make sure it was taken to the cellar and the bags checked...it has been done...only five minutes ago...I was just washing my hands...’

I don’t think he heard a word of that. ‘Oh damned woman...be gone!’ he roared at her.

‘Yes master...’ She ran her hands across her pinafore afraid to take the time to dry them properly. She then hurried out of the kitchen and as she passed me our eyes met for a split second, yet long enough for us to register a mutual sense of fear.

A small table and two chairs had been placed in the centre of the kitchen. He beckoned me to sit but didn’t speak. The prospect of seeing my mother, embracing her, talking and laughing with her had always filled me with joyous expectation. but in this, well...yes, this tension-laden *dump*, having watched his bullying dismissal of a servant, I wasn’t at all sure. I became increasingly apprehensive thinking about the three of us being in the same room at the same time; both my heart and my head told me this could not end well. But my uncle too seemed much less confident than when we left the Institute; maybe he was now regretting choosing his own home as a meeting place, to be face to face with the sister-in-law he hated alongside her son whom he regarded as his own. Maybe he hadn’t anticipated, until it was too late, how difficult it might be to *supervise* us.

When I heard her knock on the door my heart leapt. My uncle hadn’t heard it. I got off my seat and shouted ‘she’s here!’ I thought he may have given me the pleasure of welcoming her, but he beckoned me to stay put, left me alone in the kitchen, and unhurriedly went through his main living room/studio and onto the hallway. I’m sure it was a pre-emptive move, to dampen any exuberance when mama and I saw each other and embraced.

I strained to listen but I could hear no words between them, except my mother's tepid 'thank you'. I imagined what expression she had seen on his face, convinced it couldn't have been a friendly one. She later told me that when he opened the door he purposely avoided looking at her. Her spirits must have sank then.

He led her into the kitchen area where I sat. Though a warm June day, she was covered from head to foot, looking the epitome of modesty. She carried a small reticule in one hand, and a parcel in the other. We looked at each other and instantly I could see how much of an ordeal she had endured in preparing for this journey, and how insufferably inhibited we both were now that we had arrived and he was standing between us. We didn't embrace. We didn't even touch. We just about managed to greet each other: 'hello...darling', she said. She usually said '*my* darling'.

'Hello mama...' I said, rising from my seat.

Whatever satisfaction my uncle gained from our inhibitions he nevertheless looked awkward and unsure. I had endlessly speculated on how he might handle this; I was right to think that it would not be an occasion of cheer for him, but I did think...and hoped, that he had mellowed somewhat. How could he not have mellowed if he had agreed to her seeing me in his home? He looked at me pointedly and said: 'You have one hour'. He didn't look at my mother. 'I'm going to leave the two of you...for *one hour*', he repeated, with emphasis. And still he didn't look at her. 'I'll be in my studio.'

We were speechless. We had not expected to be left alone. As he walked towards the door, mama and I looked wide-eyed at each other, each of us visibly shedding the oppression of his presence. We stared at the door for a few seconds after he had closed it. Our mood was instantly transformed, lightened, relieved and full of joy, yet both of us had a niggling suspicion that it might just be a ruse, and that he would spring back into the room at the very moment

we least expected it. Much to my mother's sudden alarm, I moved to the door he had closed, put my ear against it, and heard him shuffling around at the far end of his studio. I looked back at her and smiled, a clear signal that we could at last embrace, kiss, hug and laugh. I laughed aloud. She put her finger to her lips: Shsssss', she whispered.

'Why?' I asked.

'We don't want to annoy him...we don't want him coming in...'

'But he's deaf', I said, confidently.

'Oh! Yes!...I forgot...how stupid of me!'

'We can make as much noise as we like', I said.

We smiled mischievously at each other.

It was the first time I took advantage of his deafness. It felt liberating.

'How are you', my darling?' she asked, as though this was an entirely new scenario in which we needed to begin at the beginning.

'Good mama', I said. Had she asked me that at the Institute in the company of staff, I would have had to lie and say I was 'all right'. But here, I was actually feeling much better than I had anticipated. I was feeling good not just because he had left us, but also, about myself: I was in control and had been able to relieve her of her anxiety.

'I've brought you a present', she said, handing the parcel to me; it looked and felt like a book, a children's story-book I presumed.

'Thank you.' I tore at the packaging with gusto, took the book out of it, turned it over, and smiled broadly. It was *The Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Suddenly the smile left me.

'What is it?' she asked concernedly.

I looked up at her, realising she had again forgotten. 'A book...? He didn't allow me to have the first one you gave me.'

'Oh Karl...that's when I was trying to see you at school and they wouldn't let me. They did that to discourage me

from going there. This is different. We're not doing anything wrong.'

I wasn't sure I understood, but it was confidently stated, and her beautiful face and smile were reassuring.

Unlike the previous one, I recognised this book. It had been published only four or five years before. I wasn't a great reader of children's books, and I certainly wasn't a scholarly child, but like most people I had heard of it. I presume my mother bought it not because it might enhance my reading skills, but more likely because it was fashionable to buy a book that had become so popular. But I treasured it and committed myself to reading it from start to finish. I threw my arms around her and kissed her cheeks: 'Thank you, mama.'

'Why can we not have more time together?' I asked, forgetting that neither of us was trusted, that we had often conspired to thwart arrangements which the Institute and my uncle had made when they were in a more generous mood.

'Let's not worry ourselves about that now', she said; 'just let's enjoy it.'

'Could we not go outside?'

She hesitated. I'm sure it was something she had already thought of. 'We need to ask', she said.

'Are you going to?'

'Maybe...but not today; maybe next time; let's see what mood he's in.'

'I'll ask', I said, wanting to impress her.

'No!'

'Why not?'

'He'll think I put you up to it; that would make him very angry.'

I couldn't argue with that. And if he refused, I would have been miserable and uncooperative, and he would have held her responsible, possibly making it an excuse for ending our measly one-hour contacts altogether.

He returned on the hour and eyed the contents of my satchel now stretched across the table. I was grateful for Fanny's suggestion that I brought all my schoolwork with me: previously, both my mother's legitimate and clandestine visits to the school had been laden with tension and she never really learnt anything about my work; here, in the home of my uncle of all people, she had been genuinely inquisitive and relaxed enough to converse with me on the whole range of subjects I was studying.

He made no comment on my work, and my mother and I tried as best we could to maintain our conversation. The atmosphere rapidly reverted to the tenseness and inhibition of our initial meeting. He could do little about that because he never indulged in pleasantries and small talk; his countenance betrayed his belief that he was only there out of sufferance. He still hadn't looked at my mother, and he most certainly wasn't going to engage her.

As she prepared to leave, she put her arms around me and pulled me closely to her; I think she was preventing me seeing her trying to hold her tears back.

'What's this?' my uncle said, lifting *The Grimm's Fairy Tales* which sat conspicuously amongst my school material. I thought initially that it was a genuine expression of interest, rather than a convenient interruption of our embrace which might have been embarrassing for him.

'Mama bought it for me.'

He stared at the title for a few moments and then flicked through the pages; he read some of them. I could see the disapproval spreading across his face.

'This is not a book that will cultivate the mind', he said, still reading it.

I didn't know what he meant, but my unease was deepening to alarm, worrying about what he intended to do about it.

My mother hastily dried her tears. 'It's...it's a book of fairy tales!' she said, exasperatedly.

He ignored her and looked at me. 'Your education is my responsibility', he said, authoritatively; 'I will read this in due course and then decide.'

My mother was incandescent and I feared she might explode. He left the room with my book, put it down somewhere in his studio and returned to see her off. I watched him with a scowl on my face. I was bristling with anger and resentment.

My mother somehow managed to contain herself. We embraced again, feeling each other's flushed cheeks and unspoken pain. She left, and I had no opportunity to reassure her that this was not the end of the matter, that I was not going to take this lying down. I knew that that's exactly what she would be doing when she got home, *lying down* and crying her heart out. But she *had* behaved impeccably; she hadn't lost control; she hadn't given him an excuse for denying us future contact.

'We must go now', he said; 'we'll call into my favourite café and get some refreshments.'

He hadn't offered my mother any refreshments.

I put all the school material back in my satchel but purposely left the buckle undone. I no more felt like accompanying him to a café than I did returning to the Institute.

He removed his cape from a rack and placed it around his shoulders. He then left the kitchen to relieve himself. I watched his exit and glanced at my unbuckled satchel. My heartbeat quickened. I rushed to the door of his study, opened it as quickly as I could, though not silently, and saw my precious book on an old and shredded armchair. I rushed over and grabbed it, dashed back to the kitchen table and stuffed it into my satchel. I buckled it and stood listening. I could hear only two sounds: my panting breath and my uncle urinating. I wanted him to urinate for the rest of the day. By the time he had finished, my heart was still beating unnaturally fast, but not so fast as to prevent me gaining

some composure. My cheeks still remained flushed but I knew he was not going to notice that.

There, I've said it! In June 1816, three months before my tenth birthday, a sudden impulse made me react to a blatant injustice. I've never regretted it. I wasn't aware at the time, but within those few seconds my relationship with him had changed irrevocably; so too had my sense of self. Slowly but surely in the months and years ahead I would begin to see and to feel that I was not as helpless as I had always believed, and that he was not as powerful and crushingly dominant as his behaviour towards my mother and I suggested. I had done something as daring as it was dishonest. For the second time within an hour, I had exploited his deafness. As I got older I would get more daring and dishonest and he would become deafer and sicker. It wasn't a solution to my problems but it might make my life more tolerable and interesting.

I told my mother what I did and gave her the book for safe-keeping. I still have it and all of my five children have read it, or listened to it being read to them. My uncle, laden down with a thousand preoccupations, notoriously absented-minded and living in a perpetual chaos of his own making, never mentioned my book again.

Part II

Chapter 11

My father, long before I was born, strove to follow in the musical footsteps of his brother, Ludwig. At some point he must have realised such an ambition would never be fulfilled. He did well enough though, to qualify as a piano teacher. My mother once told me that even before I was born my father could not resist sharing with her his conviction that I, my uncle's only nephew, must inherit at least a little of his musical genius. While they waited for my birth, she said, my father's piano teaching seemed enlivened with a new spirit of enthusiasm, as though he was anticipating that he would be the first to see and hear the indisputable signs of greatness as soon as I was old enough to sit on a piano stool unsupported. I don't remember how old I was when I managed to climb up and onto the stool, but I'm sure I did nothing different to what my own children would do thirty years later: batter the notes meaninglessly until their fingers were sore.

But my father, still hopeful, was prepared to wait and to do whatever he could to nourish the gift, he believed, was bestowed upon me. He taught me to play scales and exercises, and read music, and by the age of seven I had learnt to play some popular pieces of the day. He talked a great deal about music, and took me to concerts, recitals and opera, most of which bored me; I much preferred making my own way to our municipal bandstands where I was certain to hear military music.

My father eventually accepted that I inherited nothing from my uncle. A sure indicator of this is that he never asked my uncle to come and hear me play, nor did he ever attempt to manufacture a *coincidence* whereby I was playing on the rare occasions my uncle was around. Having accepted my limitations, his interest in my musical education waned. That was never a cause of disappointment

or resentment to him (or if it was he certainly didn't express it to me); I cannot recall a single occasion when he ever bullied me into playing, or harangued me for not playing to his satisfaction. One possible reason is that he probably never forgot how Ludwig was mercilessly bullied to play at any time of the day or night by their drunken father.

My father was not the only person who had initially believed that I might have been heir to my uncle's genius. Everyone seemed to believe the same, until that is, they heard me play! Wherever I went, any adult to whom I was introduced and who was told that I was the one and only nephew of Beethoven, inevitably asked my parents: 'And does Karl play the piano too...?' Even before they got an answer they'd already made up their mind that the answer had to be 'yes', because my father taught piano-playing and my uncle was Beethoven! How then could I not play the piano? And how could I not be other than brilliant?

People gathered round me with great expectations; then after I'd stumbled my way unfeeling through a simple minuet or mazurka, they would congratulate me, unable to mask their disappointment. When I started at the Institute, Fanny could not wait to hear me play. But the stakes were much higher for her; she was besotted with my uncle; I was a gateway to him. She assumed I think, that if he was my fiercely protective guardian whose principal objective was to ensure my musical education, he must have already started teaching me; she probably thought she would detect his divinely inspired influence as soon as I had begun the opening bars of whatever I might play for her. With the music in front of me, I played the first movement of Mozart's piano sonata in C for her. It was one of the best known and most popular piano pieces at that time, and a great favourite for piano teachers choosing works for their more mediocre pupils. I actually liked it and enjoyed playing it, though not for such a discerning critic as Fanny.

‘Oh how beautiful, Karl’, she said. But she never asked me to play again.

Before I was enrolled at the Institute, only one significant person in my life had *not* asked me to play, and that was my uncle. His real thoughts and feelings about me becoming a musician have always mystified me. Not only was he a great composer but he was also the severest critic of musicians generally. In later years I would witness him excoriating excellent, professional, well-established instrumentalists and singers whose performances were less than he demanded. Some of them were unable to bear his criticisms and demands and walked out in the midst of rehearsals in tears. His letters and the reflections of his friends testify just how challenging and nerve-wrecking it could be to perform in his presence.

Yet here is the mystery! When he did eventually hear me play at the Institute (insofar as he could hear) he apparently could not see what dozens of ordinary mortals had already acknowledged to themselves: I had little musical talent! (I should stress that this glaring reality did not bother me; I was not offended in the least by people’s reactions; the sooner they got to know I didn’t have much talent and stopped asking me to play, the better!). Worse than my uncle apparently not seeing what everyone else could see, he had mountainous ambitions for me:

I am not a guardian from self-interest but I want to establish a new monument to my name through my nephew.

As the only child of the three Beethoven brothers, I would (with his indispensable help) carry the Beethoven banner into the future! He really did believe he could mould me as he wanted me to be: the authentic gifted heir to himself and his glorious achievements.

I have smiled often in thinking about his delusion, and when I shared it with different friends throughout my adult life, they invariably burst out laughing. I have to concede though: my susceptibility was no less funny than his

delusion: he deluded himself that I had musical talent and that I would fulfil all his expectations, but remarkably, he was able to convince me that that was the case; he treated me as if *that was* the case! Honestly! It didn't only apply to piano-playing: he would often sing or play some new musical theme or other circulating in his brain and ask for my opinion of it...seriously ask my opinion!

This was both embarrassing and scary. For a long time I played the piano thinking of and fighting the notion that I was playing well. I actually did imagine that his efforts and my inability to resist would see me playing his works at the Kärnthnerthor or some other prestigious venue...a horrible thought. It would be quite a while before I became reassuringly convinced that my talent was very limited.

But how did the critical faculties of my uncle's mind apparently cease to exist in pursuit of this unattainable desire? Instead of realising immediately like everyone else that I wasn't particularly talented, he set about investing time, energy, money and friendships in an attempt to reincarnate me, to make me what everybody (except him) knew I could not be. Some have suggested that his deafness was responsible for this madness: he couldn't hear how mediocre my playing really was. But he wasn't yet totally deaf: if he was close enough to the sound, he could still hear. The louder the sound the more likelihood that he *would* hear something. He heard me play at the Institute numerous times, because staff anxiously prepared me to play for him, and he always positioned himself very close to me - threateningly close - with his trumpet hearing-aid in hand.

Even assuming however that he was so profoundly deaf that he could hear nothing, he still should have known merely by *watching* me play, my posture, my total dependence on the music, my rigid focus on each and every note I played, that I was lacking in technique and spontaneity, limited in interpretation, colour, and

expressiveness, and failing to exude passion, spirituality, enjoyment and interest (my sense of rhythm wasn't too bad though; I enjoyed listening and tapping to military music). Had his hearing been perfect, I'm not sure which would have caused him the greater pain: watching me play or listening to me playing.

His first step towards this delusory goal was in ensuring that the Institute gave priority to my musical education. Giannatasio and his staff were initially more than willing to oblige, grateful to be contributors to an *enterprise* which their esteemed client regarded as so important. They worked hard. They improved my recorder playing. They introduced me to the violin, presumably because it was an entirely different sound to that of a piano and might at least stimulate my curiosity more, which it didn't. They ensured that I had a beginner's grasp of musical theory and history (both of which I found interminably boring). Inevitably however, they must all have reached the same conclusion as Fanny: something to the effect that there was as much chance of me becoming a virtuoso performer or a composer as there was of my uncle sending me back to my mother!

I have often imagined teachers, exasperated, reporting back to Giannatasio what he didn't want to hear. He had a greater challenge, though: explaining to my uncle why I wasn't progressing as quickly as he was demanding. He knew my uncle's tolerance level for bad news was zero, even less if that news contradicted his firm beliefs and convictions. How frustrating it must have been for him to be unable to convey the honest opinion of either his staff or his daughter, which would have meant an immediate withdrawal of me from his establishment and the loss of its most prestigious *parent*. Since my admission, the news that *Beethoven* had entrusted his nephew's education to the Institute had dramatically increased the number of enquiries and applications from well-to-do parents. Giannatasio simply could not afford to be honest with my uncle.

But he needn't have worried too much. With such a grandiose vision of my future, my uncle was unlikely to depend upon Giannatasio and his unknown school staff for turning that vision into reality. He had access to the best piano teachers in Vienna, anyone of whom would have regarded it as a privilege to teach the nephew of Beethoven! He chose a very special teacher indeed, Carl Czerny, already well established in the city and beyond.

Giannatasio must have been relieved on hearing that responsibility for fulfilling my uncle's delusory ambition for me had been transferred to someone who was not a member of his staff. Czerny was introduced to my uncle in 1801 when he was ten years old. He was already performing in concert and had played Mozart's concerto in C minor in its entirety to a rapturous audience in Vienna. He played the same work when he first met my uncle, who was so impressed that he offered to teach him two or three times a week. Within a few years, my uncle put his signature to a testimonial which spoke of Czerny's *extraordinary progress...far beyond what might be expected at the age of fourteen*. Czerny began teaching piano at the age of fifteen, and rapidly acquired a clientele of star pupils that eventually would include Franz Liszt. At the age of twenty, his astonishing memory enabled him to play all of my uncle's piano compositions without music. He revered my uncle.

Fortunately, at the time I knew nothing about Czerny's meteoric career; he was just an ordinary piano teacher to me. But I presumed that he had preconceptions about my talent. He must have reckoned that my uncle would not have been spending time and money in nourishing his nephew's talent if he was not certain about the outcome. My uncle did nothing to enlighten him, nor could he: his delusion about my potential was unshakeable. Czerny later recalled:

at his request I began teaching his nephew Karl, whom he had already adopted, and from that time I

saw him almost daily, since for the greater part of the time he brought the little fellow to me.

Yes, he *taught* me, *the little fellow*, almost every day, for more than a year! I can never forget our first meeting at the Institute. He was twenty-five, at the pinnacle of his career, stunningly successful in public performances and already impacting on the musical world with his own compositions. My uncle introduced us. The contrast in their appearances was stark. My uncle had reverted to wearing clothes that were ancient, threadbare and unwashed. Czerny wore a fashionable, dark blue double-breasted frockcoat with gold buttons over a buff waistcoat. His traditional white muslin shirt was ruffled on the neck and sleeves; his grey trousers had straps under his shiny black shoes; all his clothes and shoes seemed so spotlessly clean, expensive and new. His vigorously combed waxed hair receded, the forehead was expansive. The face overall was oval-shaped, the mouth curved upwards at either end. He did however share some characteristics with my uncle: he exuded confidence and certainty and his large blue eyes had a wildness and intensity about them, which had a similar effect on me: uncomfortableness.

‘This is Mr Czerny’, my uncle said enthusiastically; ‘he is a marvellous pianist and there is no finer teacher in all of Vienna.’ I was feeling tense minutes before this meeting, now I was scared.

‘I want to hear you play, little fellow’, Czerny said; ‘will you play for me? I hear you have talent.’

His exaggerated smile did nothing to calm me. Hearing that my uncle had told him I was talented, alarmed me; I stupidly believed I had talent too, but that didn’t give me the confidence to play! I bowed slightly. ‘Thank you, Sir’, and tried to return a smile.

‘And who is your favourite composer?’ he asked; ‘do you play any of the works of your uncle?’

‘I used to play his Minuet in G’, I said; ‘but I’ve forgotten it.’

My father often tried to encourage me to play my uncle’s work, but he tried too hard, and I didn’t try at all!

‘Can’t you play it with the music?’

Czerny had asked me only three questions and each one of them had caused me additional tension. I don’t think he was aware of that. He was a childless celebrity brimming with confidence. I was a child led to believe I had talent but I had no great interest in piano-playing. Even less I’m sure, was he aware that I was still in the throes of an emotional turmoil as a consequence of being taken from my mother a few months after my father died.

I shook my head guiltily, unable to tell him that, even with the music, I’d forgotten how to play my uncle’s minuet in G. ‘I can play Mozart’s sonata in C, the first movement’, I said nervously, oblivious to the fact that I was facing the man who publicly played whole concertos of Mozart when he was as young as me.

‘Show Mr Czerny to the music room and play for him’ my uncle said; ‘I need to speak to Giannatasio.’

About the slow progress in my musical education, I thought to myself. My uncle was obviously pleased with Czerny’s enthusiasm to get to know me; he may not have heard what was said, but his happy mood and his expressions of pleasant expectancy suggested a belief that Czerny would be more successful than the Institute.

Czerny sat far behind me in the music room as I prepared to play. He wanted to concentrate on the sound I made though he was also likely to be forming critical opinions about my posture. My trembling fingers caused me to hit the wrong notes in the first bar. I started again, but made the same mistakes. On the third attempt I somehow managed to reach the third line but came crashing down on the wrong note just at the point of modulating from C to G. I struggled on with the left hand legato, and hit the wrong note again

when the right hand was due to join in. I don't know what the maestro made of it all, but I knew I was playing woefully. Perhaps that was no bad thing!

'Right!' he said; 'right...right!' He came to the piano and I looked up at him but he didn't look at me; he could not conceal his consternation, 'Let's start again', he said; 'a little more slowly'; even the tone of his voice seemed different.

I did start again but his closeness made me more nervous: I made many more mistakes. Now he was listening and watching my fingers mechanically play each note with little feeling or expression. This was probably the moment when he knew what a hopeless task he had taken on. He must have been thinking: how could Beethoven seriously suggest that his nephew would follow in his footsteps? How could he believe that he, Czerny, could perform the necessary miracle in finding and nourishing talent which simply did not exist. And there I sat, believing that the cause of all this misery was that I *did* have talent which my uncle was determined to bring to fruition and all I wanted was to be rid of it!

Czerny did not have the nerve to tell my uncle the truth, well...not yet! I thought he looked a little less perky when the three of us met afterwards. My uncle characteristically wanted a highly complementary report and opinion, but Czerny, whom I'm sure was an honourable and truthful man, chose not to provide it. Apart from honour he may well have felt that imparting the truth was fraught with risk; he may also have been sensitive to my feelings. He uttered some generalities about my playing which my uncle strained to hear, and then said more slowly and more loudly that he was looking forward to teaching me. My uncle heard that all right!

What did Czerny really think on his journey home that day, and how did he feel? I'm sure he felt miserable! Friendship and loyalty probably played a part in his

decision to help - he and my uncle would remain good friends and colleagues for the remainder of my uncle's life. And I wasn't the only cause that brought them closer at this time; my uncle was becoming more dependent upon Czerny for the piano arrangements of his compositions. His interpretations of my uncle's work were also very much in demand. But my uncle's determination and conviction about *my talent* and his ambition for me, must have remained inexplicable to him. Perhaps in seeking some explanation, the thought crossed his mind - creating a frisson of doubt - that maybe...just maybe *Beethoven, being an older, more experienced, and a much more revered genius than me, could see potential in Karl that I cannot yet see*. If that was the case, then it made the overall situation bewilderingly ironical: Czerny, made to doubt his own professional judgement; I, persuaded by my uncle that I *did* have talent which I didn't have and didn't want; my uncle, seemingly never having sincerely addressed the question of whether or not I *did* have any talent but convinced nonetheless that I was going to be a worthy musical heir to the name of Beethoven!

The chaos, confusion and disruptions in my life were certain to continue a lot longer.

Chapter 12

Czerny did his best over the next twelve months and frequently went beyond the call of duty as my uncle later recorded:

I hear you sometimes give him an additional lesson of a half hour, a favour for which I cannot thank you enough.

I found the lessons exceedingly burdensome, repetitive and uninteresting. I detested having to practice every day, particularly the gruelling exercises that Czerny had devised, and I resented the fact that every single staff member in the Institute, plus the Giannatasios and their daughters, had been assigned the task of ensuring that I *did* practice every day.

Towards the end of March 1816, my uncle wrote a remarkable letter to Czerny. It appears to be in reply to what Czerny knew from the outset: that I would never be a concert pianist nor a composer: he had somehow plucked up the courage to tell his revered friend, who was having none of it:

My dear Czerny!

I ask you to treat Karl as much as possible with patience, even if things are not moving along as you and I wish, otherwise, he will even perform worse...Due to the very unsatisfactory distribution of lessons he is too stressed; unfortunately, this cannot be changed, right away, but, as much as possible, treat him with affection, but also seriously...

He even included passages of musical score to illustrate his point:

In such passages as these I want him to use all his fingers now and then...and in such passages as these he may slip one finger over the other...

I don't know what Czerny's response to the letter was but I could hazard a guess: indignation (*Does Beethoven not trust me to give an honest assessment*)? Incredulity (*Why is Beethoven still deluding himself about his nephew's capabilities*)? Sorrow and pity (*He'll eventually have to face the reality that his nephew doesn't have any great musical talent!*).

The letter also reaffirmed that my uncle was still no nearer to a realisation of what was happening to me: his observation that I was *stressed* was certainly an accurate one, but the cause of the stress was not as he claimed *due to the very unfortunate distribution of lessons* in the Institute...it was the consequence of him removing me from my mother and drastically limiting the time I could see her; it was also his ludicrous attempts to make me a musician!

Czerny struggled on and tried and failed on numerous occasions to dampen my uncle's expectations. My uncle never lost faith in his good friend but he became increasingly critical of the Institute and blamed it rather than Czerny for my lack of progress. He complained to another friend, Dr Bursy, about how awful the school was and how regretful he was for sending me there. As early as May 8th, he wrote to his friend Ferdinand Ries complaining about the expenditure he incurred. He couldn't resist rubbishing its reputation with a few choice words:

I am responsible for the care of my nephew who is still at the Institute...it costs me dearly...1100 florins...and it is such a poor school...

He wrote to his friend Countess Erdödy, whom he sometimes referred to as his *confessor*, asserting:

a school is nothing compared with the direct sympathetic care of a father. For as such I now consider myself, and I am seeking a way of having this precious treasure closer to me, so that I can influence him more quickly and gainfully.

More ominously for the Giannatasios, a third party was brought into the discussions between Czerny and my uncle as they dined together. This person is *a most distinguished professor*, who, my uncle claims: has undertaken all matters concerning my education. He cautions Czerny:

I ask you not to mention anything to the Giannatasios about the person who had dinner with us on the day on which you gave us the pleasure of dining with us, he has asked for this restriction.

In a similar letter to another friend Nanette Streicher, he adds a gratuitous insult to his denigration of the family he has been complimenting for months:

If you come upon any of the Giannatasios at Czerny's, say you know nothing of what is going on about Karl, and say that it is not my usual habit to disclose my plans, because when a plan is told to others it is no longer your own plan. The Giannatasios always like to interfere in the matter, and I do not want these vulgar, commonplace people to do so, both for my own sake and Karl's. Over their portico is inscribed, in golden letters "Educational Institution" whereas "Non-Educational Institution" would be more appropriate.

His visits to the Institute and the number of letters he wrote to it increased significantly, as did the pressure he

was applying to Giannatasio and his staff. I'm sure the encounters between him and Giannatasio were not pleasant!

*So far as his periods of piano-practice are concerned
I beg you to keep him at it because otherwise his
piano-teacher is of no use.*

After each of his visits to the Institute, Fanny or another member of staff would have a pep talk with me urging me to work harder. It is easy in retrospect to see what was happening here: neither Giannatasio nor his staff could do anything more to bring about the impossible in such an unhappy, resentful and talent-limited pupil as me, and nobody in the Institute dared to tell my uncle that he was deluded. Their only recourse was to exhort me to bail them out of their difficulties by working harder and practicing longer; perhaps I might just improve!

Later in the year my uncle asked Czerny to give me lessons at his home. He obviously thought the atmosphere in the Institute was not conducive to my learning, with too many distractions for both teacher and pupil, and too little enthusiasm on the part of staff for his grand goal. He arranged for me to be taken to Czerny's home either by himself or friends. I'm sure Czerny welcomed this change, as it meant him saving on travelling costs and time. But I'm not so sure the atmosphere in Czerny's studio was any more conducive to concentrated study, particularly when my uncle accompanied me. Both men would often indulge in ceaseless chatter about musical matters other than my piano playing, matters about which I had not the slightest interest. If my uncle was in good humour, he would also play the piano, dazzling Czerny with his improvisations and interpretations of the great masters; for me it was a relief to be temporarily forgotten about by both of them.

As you might expect my uncle could not be a mere passive observer when he delegated to others the task of

improving me. As early as late February, 1816, barely weeks after I had enrolled at the Institute, he wrote to Giannatasio indicating the likelihood of frequent contacts to come between him and I:

I intend to call for Karl tomorrow about half past twelve o'clock to take him to a concert and wish him to dine with me afterwards...With respect to his mother, you can tell her that Karl is far too busy, and that you cannot let her see him. There is no man to know or judge on this matter better than I, and all the plans I have for the welfare of my child would be jeopardised should we behave otherwise.

It was the first of many such notes requesting to take me out at various times in the day or evening. He wanted me to meet some of his musical associates and to attend recitals, particularly those of child prodigies, like five-year-old Sigismund Otto, and nine-year-old Leopoldine Blahetka. They were meant to inspire me but all they did was bore me and make me more resentful. My uncle had an additional objective which he later shared with Giannastasio:

Although you have accorded me permission to take Karl out twice, I must still beg you to let me send for him tomorrow about eleven o'clock for the reason that I want to take him to an interesting concert; besides, I want him to come to my lodging to play tomorrow, this having been put off for far too long time a time.

These requests increased dramatically over the months, demonstrating that my uncle was taking matters into his own hands and causing some disruption to the Institute in the process. He was soon disregarding basic courtesies by dispatching without notice messengers to fetch me, as my

mother used to do (but she was condemned and cruelly punished for doing so!). He ended his next letter by making it clear that I would soon be sleeping in his home, a ghastly prospect ever since my first visit there:

I entreat you to send Karl to my home with the bearer of this letter; otherwise, it will not be possible for me to see him all day which would not be in his interests as my influence apparently is required... May I also request you give Karl some night clothes, so that if we get back too late to return him to you today, I can keep him all night, and return him to you first thing next morning.

Which he did!

An 'occasional' night was not however enough: the great enterprise of making me a worthy musical heir necessitated even great effort and involvement on his part. Giannatasio could not have been under any illusions as to where all this was leading:

I will in so far comply with your proposal as to the cultivation of the science of music, that Karl may come to me two or three times a week, leaving you at six o'clock in the evening and staying with me till the following morning, when he shall return to you about 8 o'clock.

The duration of my absences from the Institute lengthened considerably, compelling him sometimes to blame his associates for my late returns:

I must apologise to you, my friend, for Karl coming home at so late an hour. We were obliged to wait for a friend who arrived so late thereby delaying us, but I will ensure I do not breach your rules again.

Obviously aware of how his behaviour irritated the adults around him, he remained oblivious to how that same behaviour was affecting me. I often sat in my classroom dwelling on the hopelessness of it all. I never knew what to expect now, other than being made to go (at very short notice...or no notice at all) to where I did not want to go, to do what I did not want to do. It was only a matter of time before this misery impacted upon my performance.

Giannatasio complained about my 'laziness', my 'withdrawals' and my 'isolation'. He advised my uncle to be sterner with me. As we walked hand in hand one dark evening from the Giannatasio household, my uncle looked down on me rather gravely and asked:

'Why are you not working as hard as you should be?'

I looked up at him despairingly, into the eyes of a genius who had no idea of what I was thinking or feeling. I understood the question, indeed, I was expecting it, but how could I, a ten-year-old, articulate what was happening to me, the confusion and pain he was causing me? Even had I been able to give him the most insightful and honest reply, he would not have been capable of understanding it, and he would have ignored it.

Suddenly I began crying. I gripped his fingers more tightly, a plea of desperation. But his fingers went limp, a conscious expression of coldness, or was it rejection? *He pressed my hand vehemently*, he wrote to Giannatstasio, *but met with no response from me*.

This deliberate coldness sent shivers through me. Why had he done that? Having loathed him and feared him and yearned only to be far far away from him, I was now almost panicking at the prospect of being permanently shunned by him.

'Why are you so unhappy, Karl?'

'Because I do not work hard enough', I blurted out.

It was abject surrender, knowing that was what he wanted to hear.

His fingers livened affectionately around mine and he smiled.

Distraught I was, and more disorientated than ever, but his perception of what he was witnessing was as usual bizarre: *This demonstrates*, he continued in his letter to Giannastasio:

That Karl has feelings of delicacy, and such traits persuade me that all will be good.

In the same letter, written on the 14th of November, he made yet another request:

I beg you will allow Karl to come to me tomorrow as it is the anniversary of his father's death and we want to visit his grave together. I shall come to fetch him between 12 and 1 o'clock.

He didn't tell me that's what he intended to do, nor am I convinced that that was his real intention. On a rainy windswept November afternoon, we stood staring down on my father's grave for about fifteen minutes. Contrary to what he wrote to Giannastasio I did not want to be with him: I wanted to be at the graveside with mama. Neither of us spoke. He seemed genuinely moved by the experience. I was not; for me it was simply another chaotic day in which I was at the mercy of his whims. As expected, he took me to a café and treated me, then to his home to lecture and to coach me. We got back to the Institute around teatime. Then he wrote to me, explaining that he would not see me the following day because he was extremely busy and unwell! He too was *grieving* for my father, he wrote, but he advised me that the most dutiful ways we could honour his memory was for me to *work hard and do well at my studies* and become a *good and righteous citizen*, and for him to take my father's place and be in every way a father to me.

Like most of his letters to me it had that narcissistic feel about it, centred on himself and unable to find a language enabling him to communicate with me. His need to explain why he couldn't see me suggests he was thinking I might have been disappointed: he could never have anticipated my relief knowing for certain there was going to be at least one day during which I would *not* have to see him!

My lessons with Czerny continued to be subject to frequent change, at little notice:

My dear Czerny! if you have time today, the little fellow should come to see you at 1 o'clock. Later, I shall pick him up and I shall ask you that you should have dinner with me.

Dear Czerny, Let Karl leave at eight o'clock, since my servant has to be at home, early.

Dear Czerny, today...I ask you to come to me at one o'clock, so that Karl will not fall back, too much.

Such was the inconsistency and chaos that he could actually forget whatever arrangements he had made for me and conveniently forget to pay Giannatasio:

...very demanding business matters...made me forget your account. I can promise you...that it will not be necessary to remind me again...I am grateful for you being so obliging yesterday in arranging for a servant to fetch him. As I didn't know anything about this beforehand, it may well have meant that Karl would have had to remain at Czerny's.

My head was beginning to spin!

All was not going to plan. Perhaps Czerny's head was spinning too! He told my uncle that lessons in his home

were becoming problematic. I can't think what those problems were except that my inadequate performances and limited progress may have become an irritant for Czerny; perhaps I was becoming something of an embarrassment to him, continually exposed and unfavourably compared to those highly talented individuals of all ages who enthusiastically trooped into his home from early morning to late at night, and who paid handsomely for the privilege. I certainly wasn't going to be asked to join his select group of pupils who assembled at his home each Sunday afternoon to perform for their parents and his friends.

By the beginning of summer that year, I was physically and mentally exhausted and more than a little disorientated. I had not seen my mother for six weeks. I had to see Czerny or my uncle nearly every day, often irregularly and unexpectedly; I always felt compelled to try to feign interest and enthusiasm in my playing for them both, but when either of them left me alone after a lesson, I often in a fit of temper raised both my hands above my head, clenched my fists, and brought them smashing down on the keyboard. That always felt good.

As the concerted yet doomed attempts of my uncle to mould me in his own deluded image gathered momentum, the Giannatasios became increasingly aware of the disruption he was causing and the misery he was inflicting. Even Fanny was beginning to lose patience. I'm sure her father groaned on opening another of my uncle's letters or heard him blustering into the Institute again to *advise* his staff on how to accelerate progress in my musical education. He surely would have groaned much louder if he had also learnt about the strident criticisms and downright insults my uncle was continuing to direct against the family and their beloved establishment.

There was another more profound consequence of his delusion which Fanny alone discerned. She was the last person in the world to openly criticize my uncle, but she

was the first to record something amiss in his perceptions and expectations of me. As early as April she had written:

I find it strange that Beethoven does not permit him to live in accord with his natural abilities but asks for a trust whose value and benefit Karl is not yet able to appreciate; and that may cause the little fellow to worry that there is something lacking in him, or worse, a tendency towards dishonesty, which might even lead him to lying.

Two months later, having picked up the vibes of my uncle's dissatisfaction, she noted his *stern countenance* and his *cold behaviour* which she said filled her with foreboding:

The worry that he will remove his precious little Karl from our care is still with me...

My uncle was indeed determined to remove me from the Institute, but due to an unforeseen circumstance in early summer, that objective was put on hold, rendering him totally dependent upon the Giannatasio family. I would be left in their care for the duration of the summer with my uncle nowhere in sight. It would be a turning point for all of us.

Chapter 13

Towards the end of June 1816, I woke up in the middle of the night yelling and crying for my mother. My three companions with whom I shared the bedroom, woke up too, in panic. One of them managed to light a candle and brought it to my bed. I was writhing in agony with one hand embarrassingly placed on the source of the pain, a hugely swollen cone-shaped area on my groin, adjacent to my genitalia.

‘What is it...what is it...?’ they said in unity, their eyes like saucers and their voices laden with fear.

‘Down here!’ I shouted, without exposing myself to them, yet making them doubly curious and scared.

We could hear the rustle of nightclothes in the corridor. The door opened and Mr and Mrs Giannatasio rushed in. Mrs Giannatasio hurried over to my bed and placed her arms around me while her husband beckoned to the boys to get back into their beds.

‘Oh please please ...’ I cried pitifully into Mrs Giannatasio’s eyes. ‘It’s sore...it’s a big lump!...Down there! What is it...? It’s sore...! Please get my ma-ma!’

‘Let me see, Karl’, she said quietly but authoritatively.

It was too painful for me then to have any overriding sense of modesty, to notice or to care that the boys and Mr Giannatasio stared awkwardly and embarrassingly as his wife took control of the situation. Her husband directed the boys to lie down and turn their heads; Mrs Giannatasio took the added precaution of positioning herself so that her examination would not expose my genitalia to my captivated audience. She stared at the lump, then fingered it and the surrounding area for a few seconds; her expression was inscrutable. ‘I’m going to get you something for the pain Karl, and then we’ll fetch the doctor...we need to move you into a separate room.’

‘My mama...I want my mama.’

She looked at me with sympathy and struggled to find the right words. She glanced at her husband tellingly, maybe even angrily, as though she was ironically asking *him*, the principal accomplice in my uncle’s desire to banish my mother from my life, how she was going to answer me. ‘Let’s get you the doctor first, Karl, to make you well again.’

My pain had not eased but my fears had. She tucked me up in bed, stretched her palm across my brow and reassured me that I would be okay. I didn’t want her to leave. But she hurried towards the door and out into the corridor, giving her husband another fierce glance as she passed him. ‘Wait here’, she said to him commandingly. He obeyed.

Dr Smetana came to see me, and, after carrying out an embarrassingly intrusive examination, confirmed the diagnosis, an inguinal hernia. It wasn’t an emergency, he told the Giannstasios, though it would necessitate surgery. This coincided with my uncle’s imminent removal of me from the Institute, which he said nothing of when he later visited me that day. He stood awkwardly at my bedside in my very own room. ‘Well...what is this?’ he asked with a strained smile which I did not find reassuring. He made no attempt to touch me nor was he curious enough to want to see where the pain was located. As the letter he would send to Mr Giannatasio in a few days’ time would reveal, he was preoccupied with how the impending surgery would thwart his plan to remove me as soon as possible from what he now regarded as the *wretched* Institute.

‘Sore’, I said, without looking at him.

Mrs Giannatasio had alleviated the pain with medicines prescribed by Dr Smetana; but the worse pain was in my heart, a terrible sense of separation from my mother. I then consciously took the risk of letting him know: I spoke as loudly as I could, yet slowly, opening my mouth widely to ensure he could lip-read: ‘I want to see mama.’

His whole countenance changed. He stared fixedly at me through bluish-grey eyes with lips tensed and his uncombed hair in disarray.

‘You cannot see her!’ he said emphatically.

I began to cry.

‘Don’t cry, Karl’, he said, coming nearer to me; his voice was hushed, his expression one of uncertainty: the last thing he wanted was for a member of staff, particularly Mrs Giannatasio, hear me cry.

He leaned over me and dried my tears, but he couldn’t console me. His only recourse was to *explain* why he was doing what he was doing and try to persuade me that it was in my own interests.

‘I cannot let her see you...when you are ill, Karl; you need surgery which Dr Smetana will carry out. When you have recovered I will arrange for her to see you then.’

How he expected that to satisfy me or what he expected me to say in return, I do not know. I could not say anything; I could only sob despairingly and wish that he were gone. It must have been a bitter blow for him to learn that five months after being placed in the Institute, my feelings and memories with regard to my mother had not changed one iota. I yearned for her more than ever now when I was enduring intermittent pain and facing the prospect of surgery that I knew nothing about.

Later, Mrs Giannatasio came to see me. She sat on my bed. She had often seen me cry when my uncle had left.

‘What is it, Karl?’

‘I want to see mama...my uncle won’t let me.’

She was silent for a while, then she looked into my eyes, her expression full of genuine warmth and care: ‘Your mother is very proud of you, Karl’, she said; ‘you really do love her, don’t you?’

That was not what I expected her to say but her words were an instant balm. I cried again...with tears of relief and joy.

My uncle wrote to Giannatasio on the 28th of July, only days before he was due to leave for Baden:

My dear friend,

Various circumstances compel me to take Karl to live with me; for that reason I intend to send you the whole amount for the coming quarter, at the end of which Karl will leave; do not think this has anything to do with yourself or your respected Institute; it is because of many other pressing issues connected to Karl's welfare...I shall grasp every opportunity that presents itself to me to preserve and honour the memory of your establishing the foundation of my Karl's moral and physical well-being. In respect of the Queen of the Night, restrictions are to remain as they have been. If Karl is to be operated on at your establishment, he will be unwell for a few days and thus more irritable and vulnerable; greater vigilance is necessary therefore to ensure she does not see him while he is in such condition, as she is capable of implanting wrong and harmful impressions in his mind. How little we should hope for anything better is demonstrated by her insipid scribble which I enclose for your consideration. There you will realise how justified I am in the attitude I adopt towards her. I leave Vienna tomorrow at five in the morning but I shall return often from Baden.

The increasingly destructive relationship between my mother and my uncle was well established now: he behaves abominably towards her; she reacts angrily, sometimes hysterically, even dangerously, providing him with all the evidence and excuses he needs to impose even more cruel strictures on her. I can imagine him reading and relishing the letter she wrote which he refers to as that *insipid scribble*. It has never been seen thereafter but my mother

did confirm to me that having been told by him about my forthcoming surgery and also that she would be barred from seeing me before, during and after it, she did indeed lose control. Then she wrote her letter, a desperate plea, yet unable to contain the anger and bitterness she felt towards him. This is exactly what he knew would happen. Her begging and insulting letter was for him incontrovertible evidence of her irresponsibility and the perfect opportunity for him to exact further revenge: to ban her and damn her simultaneously.

He did not *come in from Baden often* to see me as he said he would and I was more than grateful. Nor did he come on my birthday, 4th of September, which the Giannatasios helped me to celebrate with a party: Mrs Giannatasio had baked me a cake, and Fanny and her sister showered me with presents. The *various circumstances* he mentioned as the reason he must *take me to live with him* were undoubtedly an oblique reference to his criticisms which he had made in the previous weeks; he dared not have spoken to the family with candour: he knew how dependent he would be on them for the duration of the summer.

It was a measure of his status and authority (to say nothing of the influence he could still exert over the Giannatasios) that he could declare in his letter that he's taking me out of the Institute, but also, that he would be grateful if they could oversee my surgery and recuperation on their premises while he took himself off to the therapeutic waters in Baden for over two months. They were offended by his temerity as their daughter Fanny revealed in her diary: his letter, she said, *struck us like a bolt from the blue*. In truth though, despite the offense he caused them, my surgery and convalescence could have provided them with additional income during the leanest months of the year...presuming my uncle paid up!

1816 had, up until June, been an utterly miserable period, and one might think it could only have got worse through

the summer. Well...yes...I cried often, less because of the intermittent pain I was having than its reminder that my mother was being prevented from visiting me. The more fear and pain the hernia caused me, the more I longed to be in her arms again. Yet despite such privations, I couldn't help but notice certain positive changes in my life. As a child in pain awaiting surgery, and my uncle not there, I was no longer required to practice the piano for hours each day and therefore was no longer subject to the infuriating reminders by all and sundry that that's what I needed to do. The lessons provided by Czerny were temporarily postponed (I suspect his relief and satisfaction were even greater than my own). The Giannatasio family and our teachers were looking distinctly more content and relaxed. As well as their normal day-to-day responsibilities, they were also engaged in the onerous preparations for moving the Institute to the suburb of Landstrasse; the last person anyone of them wanted to see blustering in on them every few days with his complaints and demands was my uncle. Mrs Giannatasio, in all her wisdom, compassion and empathy was seeing me more often; she tread a fine line between encouraging me to talk about my mother and not raising my hopes that my uncle would relent in his command. These were all welcome developments and were a direct consequence of the good fortune that had befallen me: my uncle had gone away!

Chapter 14

In the days preceding my surgery I shared with Mrs Giannatasio some of my anxieties about not knowing what was going to be done to me and about my increasing desire for my mother to be with me. She comforted me as best she could, emphasising that the intermittent pain and discomfort I was suffering and the protrusion which was its cause would soon be a thing of the past. 'But what was this lump' I asked, and how was it going to be got rid of?' She shrugged off the questions by saying 'it was just a lump, and lots of boys get them...Dr Smetana will deal with it very quickly'. She sounded sincere and convincing.

On the morning of the surgery, Wednesday 18th of September, she beckoned me into a cool, spotlessly clean kitchen and cheered me enormously by handing me a letter from my mother. I hugged her repeatedly and didn't want to let go; the joy she had sprinkled on me momentarily banished my anxiety and eclipsed my pain. She also handed me something else: a small jug containing about a hundred millilitres of thickish yellowish liquid which I had never seen, tasted or smelt before. She told me this was essential medicine which I needed to take before Dr Smetana operated on me. 'Drink it all down, Karl...quickly, that's the best way.' The smell was flowery, almost pleasant, and I confidently did what she suggested. It tasted very bitter. 'Well done', she said; 'now here's something nicer.' She handed me what looked like a glass of wine. It did taste much nicer and was unusually sweet.

It took less than a minute for me to consume the two liquids, but within seconds, I was feeling their effect. I felt dizzy, weak and nauseous; I could not focus; the floor and the walls of the kitchen seemed to be floating around me and closing in on me; Mrs Giannatasio's lovely gentle face was becoming horribly distorted. I heard the kitchen doors

swing often; Dr Smetana and two burly men, whom I did not recognise, came towards me, one of them carrying a large tray too high for me to see its contents. I remember vividly that they all wore black-coats and had long beards, and that not one of them spoke to me. Then I felt myself being lifted and placed on the high kitchen table which was covered with numerous white sheets. I heard Dr Smetana's voice give instructions which I did not understand. My clothes were removed, my hands were held, my legs straightened and my ankles felt as if they had been clamped. It was such a rapid and all-conquering invasion of my privacy and my dignity that I had no alternative but to surrender in silence; besides, I had neither the will nor the strength to resist. Mrs Giannatasio had positioned herself just behind my head and gently laid the palms of her hands on my chin and cheeks. She occasionally caressed my brow. She lowered her head, partially blocking my blurred view of proceedings, but when I felt a sudden sharp pain as Dr Smetana made the necessary incisions with his scalpel, I burst into tears. 'There Karl...' she whispered; 'be a brave boy...it's going to be all right.' Her two hands clasped my cheeks, and had I attempted to raise my head she would have restrained me. But it was not a severe pain by any means; it just somehow released all the pressure and fear which had been accumulating from the moment that her concoction of opium and wine, supplied by Dr Smetana, began to have its effects.

There was much more pain to come, particularly when Dr Smetana was restoring my intestine to its rightful place, stitching both the abdominal wall from which it had protruded and the incision he had made to access it. Although reassured that he was not going to kill me, I was very preoccupied (in so far as my seemingly worsening drunken stupor would allow me to be) with the utter helplessness of my predicament, the reality that my fate really did depend upon the four people around me: Mrs

Giannatasio, who was forever comfortingly sympathetic, the good doctor who was silent, cold and clinical, and his two burly stranger associates with their iron-clad grips on my limbs. The weight of such deliberations and the still-lasting effects of the drugs allowed me to drift in and out of consciousness; I thought about my mother again and sobbed, wondering might I never see her again.

The surgery was a success though I had to endure some pain for a long time after. I continued wearing the supportive truss which I was always conscious of. The Giannatasios were cautioned by Dr Smetana about the need for me to avoid any exertions over the next few weeks. I was hardly likely to do that, when, in addition to the pain, I was wretchedly subdued and disoriented. Mrs Giannatasio spent even longer periods with me, persuading me that I would eventually recover, and that the pain and discomfort would soon be gone.

So, what was my uncle thinking and doing at this time of my ordeal? He was bathing daily in Baden's curative sulphurous waters which he needed to do several times each year (not always possible or practical, but my stay in the Institute under the care of the Giannatasios was fortuitous for him). He was also attending to professional matters neglected during the preceding months when he was so preoccupied with my (lack of) musical education. But he also must have been thinking about me. He wrote to me just before the surgery urging me to prepare for it strictly in accordance with the instructions of Dr Smetana. He expected to see me afterwards, in Baden! He signed off his letter:

*Farewell, my son! I am indeed through you, Your
trouser-button.*

He later explained his use of this odd term, claiming that I clung to him like buttons to trousers. That would suggest

that his delusions were not limited to the single matter of my musical potential!

After my operation he wrote to Giannatasio in fulsome terms:

I cannot express my feelings of thankfulness on hearing of Karl's successfully withstanding the operation...You must excuse me from uttering...even stammering my words here, But please say nothing about the honour I feel I must pay you.

In the preceding months, his letters were awash with sentiment about how much he loved taking on the role of *father*, caring for me and expending all that money in educating me. He must then have been conscious of people wondering why he was not in attendance for such a long period (two months) and particularly during my operation. It was a question I often heard from staff and from my peers, and when they learnt that he was still in Baden as I was about to face the surgeon's knife, some staff could not conceal their disapproval. In this extract from the same letter to Giannatasio he reveals that he is well aware of and sensitive to such reactions:

I would not be surprised you consider me an uncaring barbarian...That it causes me much pain to be unable to share the sufferings of my son Karl and that I am constantly wishing to hear about his condition, you must understand very well.

I didn't want him sharing in my suffering! My fear and pain would, I know, have been exacerbated by his presence. I'm sure it would have distressed him too, watching helplessly as Dr Smetana opened me up, seeing the caring role played by Mrs Giannatasio, and lamenting the fact that his own therapeutic pursuits in Baden had been put on hold.

A short while after surgery, I accompanied Giannatasio and his daughters to Baden. I had no enthusiasm for the visit; I was still experiencing a lot of discomfort despite wearing the truss. The mere thought of seeing him again, stressed me.

I needn't have worried. He was so preoccupied with other issues that he was totally unprepared for our arrival. So much so that Fanny was of the conviction that we were in his way. Possibly so, as it later emerged that he was engaged in a number of compositions and in sketching the outline of some parts of what would eventually become his great ninth symphony. Another more immediate issue, both embarrassing and frightening to me for the memories it evoked, was a row he had had with one of his servants, culminating in an attack leaving his face badly scratched. He came to us in a panicked state after this incident saying: 'Look what my servant has done!' The Giannatasios were mortified; I was terrified. On the following morning when we assembled at Anton Bridge for breakfast he described the incident in detail. He apologised for his passion and anger, and suddenly turned to me saying that he hoped I would never act like him. That may have been to impress the two sisters, but it could also have been an admission that he himself had instigated the row leading to the attack; knowing what I know now, I'm certain he was also the one to strike the first blow.

Nothing however could have dimmed Fanny's overall enthusiasm for the visit. The success of the surgery and the excellent care provided by her mother in particular was, she believed, helpful in resolving the dispute between my uncle and the Institute; she could not contain herself in regard to what this meant to her and her perceived relationship with him:

Only now am I able to write a few words on the surgery which took place and our sympathy for the

sufferer, poor little Karl. He will be more precious to us than ever now...An indescribable feeling of great joy envelops me each time I realise that we are now in a position to provide little Karl's noble uncle a service that he will always remember with gratitude.

From the moment we arrived in Baden, Fanny waxed lyrical about the 'great privilege' unexpectedly bestowed upon her and her sister by the revered Beethoven, who had converted his piano studio into their temporary bedroom. *Sleep was the least of our thoughts in this musical sanctuary*, she wrote. But she made a confession: in this treasure trove laden with all the necessities and reminders of his artistic genius and stardom she and Nanni wanted to examine every single item. One of those items was a thick notebook with some very personal content. They could not resist reading it. Fanny later admitted how guilty she and Nanni felt about this breach of his privacy (though that didn't stop her copying entries from his diary and inserting them in her own). Some of my uncle's entries poignantly revealed just how unhappy, in deafness, he could be:

My heart is overwhelmed by the sight of lovely nature... although she is never there...

And they inevitably came across entries boasting of his sacrifices on behalf of his nephew!

Why do I watch Karl as if he were my own son? Every trifling matter, every weakness, even tending to his great future. It is so difficult for me. But He above me is there. Without Him I am nothing.

Our visit to Baden was made ostensibly to let him see me after the surgery but mercifully, his compositional and business preoccupations during much of our stay precluded

him from spending much time with me or making a fuss of me. We accompanied him on one occasion to the baths which was a pleasant experience, but apart from that he seldom engaged with me whilst there were adults around him. I was therefore less tense and apprehensive in his company because I was rarely out of sight of the Giannatasios, and I was spared the crippling intensity and numbness which descended on me when I was facing him alone. But I was naïve in thinking that this situation would continue.

‘Now Karl’, he said to me one morning as we were dispersing after breakfast; ‘I’m taking you to Helenenthal where we will walk by the river...and talk about your future.’

This alarmed me not just because I feared whatever he might say to me about my future, but also my surgery wound was far from healed and I clearly remembered Mr and Mrs Giannatasio cautioning against me over-exerting. ‘I cannot walk far, uncle’, I just about managed to say, with little confidence and barely audible. He was looking at me when I spoke but I knew he couldn’t hear me. I feared having to repeat myself. He didn’t ask me to.

I was too anxious that morning to fully appreciate the bucolic splendours of Helenenthal: the sheer beauty and isolation of the place increased my tension. *He* was anything but tense; he walked upright with a spring in his step, in contrast to his usual stooping posture. He frequently gazed all around him, above and below, and many of the sharp features of his face, his piercing eyes, his tight lips, his taut, pock-marked swarthy skin appeared to soften and loosen with his smile. I was used to him smiling gratifyingly, usually when he uttered ridiculous statements about the great future that lay in store for me and the benevolence he was showering upon me, but here his smile was one of genuine contentment, the smile of someone hypersensitive to the natural beauty all around him, to the

gentle breezes and running stream, the fading morning mist and falling leaves.

‘Look! Look! he said excitably, too slow to raise a finger and point; but I also had seen the lightning flash of iridescence that had caught his eye as a tiny kingfisher silently skimmed the water’s surface, its reflection a worthy companion accompanying it all the way. In contrast, giant ponderous rooks danced ungainly but conspicuously in the highest branches of the tallest trees, their harsh grating sounds echoing for miles around. For the first time I became conscious of the magnitude of his affliction. I could hear all the variable sounds of the woods and waters, but I knew he could hear nothing. Yet judging from his countenance and movement, somehow, in deafness, he seemed to derive far more pleasure and meaning than I from what he was seeing, smelling and touching. He frequently bent over to caress and smell flower-heads and foliage, encouraging me to do likewise. He seemed particular captivated by trees, occasionally placing both of his outstretched arms around the trunk as though he was embracing an old friend. I did not follow suit. I thought it weird.

‘Aha! What have we here?’ he said, surveying the forest bed surrounding a massive Turkey oak tree. Before I could guess what he was talking about he was on his knees fingering unusual looking mushrooms that I had never seen before. There were lots of them scattered around, some fully mature and others barely breaking through the ground.

‘Aren’t they beautiful?’

‘Yes’, I said, nodding half-heartedly. The forest in its entirety was becoming oppressive to me.

‘But they are deadly’, he said.

He chose one that had a large grey and greenish cap, then flattened the grass around it and arched it in my direction.

‘They’re called death-cap mushrooms.’

He uprooted it with his fingers and came towards me. I was curious about its name and it’s ‘deadliness’. He

removed the stalk from the cap which he gently sectioned to reveal the purest of white gills all around it.

‘You die a slow painful death if you eat this’, he said, totally absorbed in his continuing dissection; ‘a small spoonful would be enough.’

This macabre diversion reminded me of how knowledgeable he was, how immersed and contented in the wonders of nature, so far away from his music...or so I thought! How was I to know that at that very moment, musical notes, phrases and all sorts of innovations were probably racing through his mind?

He smelt the gills, encouraged me to do likewise, then threw the mangled remains to the ground and walked on.

I was beginning to think he was never going to ‘talk’ to me when he suddenly reached out his hand beckoning to me to place my hand in his. I did so with reluctance, but his smile was additionally persuasive, convincing me I risked affronting him by refusal. This was only the second time we had joined hands; I disliked the feel of his coarse skin and the abundant hair that stretched from his wrist to his fingernails. The fingers felt so thick and strong in comparison to those of anyone else whose hand I’d held. I could only compare them to my mother’s hands, soft and slender, and always pleasurable.

We walked for about another fifty meters. The truss I wore was becoming less effective; my wound was hurting. He said to me: ‘I intend you to come and stay with me, Karl, whenever I can get the right servants and housekeeper...’

That was an awful prospect: I hoped that he would never find the right servants and housekeeper. But that was for the future; here in the present he had, as he so often did, said something that put me on the spot, to which I could not respond truthfully. I continued staring at the leaf-strewn path and asked: ‘Does that mean I’ll have to leave school?’

There was no response. I don’t think he heard me. I had the option of looking up into his face and repeating the

question as loudly as was needed, but I just wasn't motivated enough. Why was it so difficult for him to know how his thoughts, words and actions were impacting upon me?

'Then I can be assured that your musical education will progress', he said, twice applying a little more pressure on my hand for emphasis. 'You have a great future ahead of you, but you must practice more...you must learn more...'

I had dared to imagine in the preceding days that because I was recuperating and still in some pain, and also that Czerny was having a well-earned rest from teaching me, he would spare me any talk of practice; clearly that was not to be; I was angry, looked up at him, and blurted out loudly: 'I *do* practice!'

'But you must practice more...you've lost valuable time as a result of your surgery; you'll have to make it up. I can't trust the Institute to make sure you do.'

I wanted to pull my hand away from him; I felt so exasperated and tense and every step I took was more painful than the last. I lowered my free hand to the source of the pain and looked up at him, my eyes squinting and my lips stretched beggingly: 'Can we go back, uncle...it's hurting...'

'What...!'

'I want to go back...'

'You don't think this is important!'

'It's hurting...'

'Aahhhhhhh...' he suddenly roared at me; 'you still want back to *her*!'

My pain was intensifying, and I was speechless and scared. I started crying. He suddenly turned on his heels tightening his grip on my hand simultaneously and proceeded to walk back towards the town, literally pulling me after him. I yelled out in agony: whatever the suddenness of the turnaround had done to my truss and the wound it supported, the pain was now excruciating.

‘What do you think I am...? Do you think that I didn’t know that you talk about *her*?’

It never occurred to me that he might find out. Yes, I had been talking a lot about her because the Institute staff were less wary and more tolerant in his absence. Yes, I had been expressing sorrow at not being able to see her before, during and after my surgery, and I had been repeatedly sharing with them my hope that I may someday be reunited with her. Perhaps I should have known how risky that was, and how likely he would get to hear about it in Baden.

My uncle didn’t say another word to me until we were back in my room and I lay writhing on my bed. He stood over me, oblivious to my pain:

‘You must forget *her*, Karl...she is no good...I cannot...I will not allow her to care for you...she would destroy you...’

But that’s exactly what I felt *he* was doing to me...destroying me...trying to suffuse me with his hatred and his madness which, even had I not been writhing in the pain and despair he had caused me, I still could not have coped with. I felt almost delirious, my crying reduced to spasms of panicky snorts and chokes, certain only of hopelessness engulfing me.

When I got back to Vienna Dr Smetana came and examined the wound. ‘You must not exert yourself, boy’, he said, ‘less play and more rest!’

Chapter 15

Two days after returning from Baden, Fanny handed me a letter from my uncle:

As far as I can see, a certain poison is still within you. Therefore I only ask you to write down your spiritual and bodily needs. It is getting colder; do you need another blanket? Herr von Smentana will have seen you at my request. The surgical mechanic has been there too, but to no avail; he has promised me he will go again to give you a new truss. He will take the old one away to be washed. He has been paid for everything. Fare well, May God enlighten your heart and soul Your uncle and your friend Beethoven.

I trembled on reading that first sentence and I believed I had offended both him and God when I got to the last sentence. I was too young to discern between the lines his guilt and remorse for causing me pain, and his usual craving for recognition and praise for all that he was doing for me. I kept staring at the word *poison*. I kept thinking of his attack on me and what he had said. I had undoubtedly offended him by not responding enthusiastically (not responding at all) to his plan to remove me from the Institute. But I had more than offended him...I had wounded him by willingly expressing to the staff my love and yearning for my mother and my desire to be reunited with her. When he was told what I was saying to the staff it had obviously festered in his mind. He still couldn't understand the naturalness of my yearnings; he could only see my mother's *poisonous* influence over me. She herself therefore must be *poison*.

I stayed in my room a long time after reading the letter. Mrs Giannatasio popped her head through the door to ask was I okay; I should have been lining up for dinner. She

probably knew the letter I was holding was from my uncle, and she could see from the expression on my face that I was anything but okay. I held the letter out to her, both as an explanation of my mood but also welcoming the opportunity of seeing what someone else (especially her) might make of it; I wasn't certain at all about it, except for that word *poison*. But I still felt that my uncle, and, apparently, God, were displeased. I watched her reading it.

She read it at least twice. The furrows on her forehead deepened; her eyebrows rose and came closer together; her closed lips widened and tightened in emphatic silence. Was this perplexity? Was it anger? It was different to anything I'd seen before. It quite suddenly reverted to the warm, friendly face that I so much appreciated. 'I can't understand your uncle sometimes', she said, matter-of-factly; 'pay little heed.' She handed the letter back to me and walked towards the door. 'Don't be late for dinner.'

I lay on my bed staring up at the ceiling, occasionally looking at the letter, reading over and over again that opening sentence: *a certain poison is still within you*. I suddenly thought that if he had been standing at my bedside I could have said to him with truth and conviction, that he was right! There was *a certain poison* within me. But it was not my mother, nor my love and yearning for her; it was him...he was the poison in me...his *ownership* of me, his domineering, bullying self-righteous treatment of me, his hatred of my mother, his cruelty in denying her access when she knew I was suffering and undergoing surgery and recuperating; all of that was the poison, and it was seeping through me.

But I couldn't really have said such things to him. These thoughts returned to me again and again, even long after he died, when I occasionally looked at the letter whilst my own children played around me, and I speculated on his state of mind when he wrote it. Was he not capable of thinking what the likely impact his letter might have had on me? Did he not

realise that it might make me feel contaminated or freakish in some way; that it could have been a hammer-blow to my already fragile self-confidence? I don't believe he could see any of that. His letter was another reminder that his twin goals had nothing to do with my welfare or my happiness, but remained a total severance from my *poisonous* mother, and (the delusion) that he could turn me into a musician and scholar. Every effort he made in pursuit of those two goals were certain only to bring misery to me.

How does a ten-year-old survive this madness? I had already begun to adapt to my bizarre circumstances in various ways. As previously intimated, Fanny believed that my uncle's expectations of me were unrealistic. She had suggested possible consequences for me: confusion, a lack of confidence and *a tendency towards dishonesty*. That was very insightful. But what Fanny didn't know is that I had been dishonest ever since the day I was taken from my home. That's when I began telling lies. Lies were one of the tools enabling me to withstand the way he treated me, the pressures he placed on me, the unreasonable demands he made of me. I did not at all find it difficult to lie. I lied on my first journey to the Institute when I *thanked* him for all he was doing for me! I lied to him when I said I would write to him but had no intention of doing so. I lied out of fear when I pretended I enjoyed playing the piano but then bashed the keys violently with my fists when either he or Czerny had finished the lessons and left me alone. I lied a hundred times more when I told my uncle that I had enjoyed the concerts and recitals he compelled me to attend, the visits to his home I had to endure, the musical acquaintances I had to meet. I was determined to lie a thousand times had he discovered that my *Grimm's Fairy Tales* was missing, and questioned me.

I cannot blame my uncle entirely for my lying. My mother and father lied to me too (they must have often lied to each other, as I heard them scream 'Liar!' to each other in the

countless, sometimes violent rows they had). My father never discussed with me his decision that my uncle would become my *guardian* after his death, and I'm sure he lied to me numerous times to prevent me having any inkling of what lay in store for me; he knew how much I disliked my uncle and how frightened I was of him. On his deathbed he lied to me when he told me I would not be taken from my mother: he knew of my uncle's power and influence, and of his unshakeable determination to have me. And he more than anyone knew what his brother's abiding motivation was: not my well-being, but hatred of his brother's wife.

My parent's moral deficiencies however, were no worse than those of my uncle. He was a persistent liar who claimed that my mother was a prostitute, evil, wicked, vicious and unfit to care for me. When he made those slanderous claims to Giannatasio and his staff, they believed him and felt compelled to lie to me in various ways to avoid mention of my mother. He made similar claims to the *Landrechte* court in his battle with her over guardianship. That battle would resume in the not-to-distant future and his written and verbal lies to the court in order to assassinate her character would plunge new depths of malevolence. Worst of all, he lied repeatedly to me in trying to inculcate me with his feelings and convictions about her.

He had been lying from his youth probably for reasons not dissimilar to my own: to enable him to adapt and survive the gross unreasonableness, the bullying, violence and exploitation of his alcoholic father. He lied repeatedly to the Giannatasios, often praising them and all they were doing for me, at the same time castigating and ridiculing them, determined to remove me from them. He was an accomplished liar in his dealings with publishers, agents and promoters, which prompted a desperate outburst from one of them: *For God's sake don't buy anything from Beethoven!*

When, as a father of five children attempting to navigate my way through the memories of these events, I could not

help thinking that for a good part of my childhood and adolescence, I was reared in lies and deceptions, in misery and violence, and in loss and grief. None of that constitutes *poison*, but my uncle's palpable hatred of my mother and his cruelty towards her certainly does. He didn't need to express that hatred for me to know about it; like any ten-year-old, I could sense it. Yet I couldn't do anything about it. Nor could I cure his delusions that I was destined for *Beethovenian* fame, that he owned me...that he was not just my legal guardian but my actual father, and that I should honour, obey and respect him as such!

I would in the years ahead become bold enough to resist and defy such delusions...by being even more deceitful and dishonest. I would attempt to emulate his exploitation of the people and the circumstances surrounding him: his servants, his deafness and deteriorating health. I derive no pleasure from admitting that that's what I was going to do. My descent had begun long before his assertion that there was 'poison' in me, and my parents share some responsibility for that. But no one can doubt where the greater responsibility lies. About to be made to live with a musical genius, who also happened to be deluded, neurotic, volatile and parentally unfit, I was destined not for greatness on the concert hall stage, but for greater deviancy and punishment in continuing to defy him.

Chapter 16

During the autumn of 1816 when I had fully recovered from the surgery, my uncle's agitation to move me out of the Institute intensified, mainly because I was not making sufficient progress in musical studies, and his compositional output had dwindled to a trickle. With the exception of his piano sonata in A, written in the previous year and first performed just over two weeks after I entered the Institute, there were no major works produced in 1816 and there would be virtually no works at all in the following year. As for playing the piano and his increasing deafness, he had given his last public performance as far back as April, 1814.

All this lack of creative activity was a worrying preoccupation for him. It drastically reduced his income just as he was awakening to the realisation of the financial implications of the guardianship. He was constantly worried about the prospect of poverty descending upon him. His friend Ferdinand Ries, based in London, said that many of the letters he received from my uncle referred to how difficult he was finding it to make ends meet, in particular, the costs he had incurred in 'adopting his poor nephew'. He also wrote to Giannatasio asking for more time to pay my fees.

I'm sure he was aware of the reason for his lack of creativity at this time: the continuing conflict with my mother and the threat he believed she still posed. He could not have been unaware of much I still pined for her. These were circumstances hardly conducive to creating great music. Throughout 1816, he also had bothersome disputes with London publishers and agents. And he had illness to contend with, which he attributed to the bereavement he was still suffering over my father's death: *It affected my spirits and my works*, he wrote to Ries.

But now that the issue of guardianship had been resolved and my surgery a success, he needed to 'settle' once and for all the matters of getting me out of that *awful* Institute. Apart from failing to advance my musical studies as he demanded, it provided me with something he resented: growing companionship. On many of the occasions that he visited he found me engaged with other children and he didn't like it; I could tell by the expressions on his face. When I introduced them as my friends, he was coldly unresponsive. Another cause of resentment was my relationship with Mrs Giannatasio: she was increasingly becoming the substitute motherly figure I needed, but she had the tendency of behaving like a mother sometimes when my uncle was present, affectionately putting her arms around me and hugging me. I could sense his tension and embarrassment: instead of a smile, he frowned. Like her daughter Fanny, Mrs Giannatasio realised how ill-equipped my uncle was for his guardianship role. Given her responsibilities for catering, administration and general welfare, she was also well placed to see the disruption he was causing the Institute by frequently withdrawing me from class. I'm sure she and her husband argued about it, because I remember when I was leaving with my uncle one day for yet another musical diversion, she gave her husband such a withering look that he could not have forgotten it. The glowing compliments my uncle paid her in his letters ring hollow; he feared her motherly influence and her daily closeness to me. He really couldn't wait for the time when he would solely be in charge, living under the same roof as me...in control. He intended sharing with no one his '*precious Karl*', a term he used repetitively in his correspondence around this time.

This idea of isolating me and having control over me was also delusionary. If I was going to join him in his own home, he was going to have to employ additional staff: more servants, a permanent cook, a kitchen-maid, probably

a housekeeper, and employ them for longer periods each week. If I was not going to public or private school, he needed to employ teachers for my home tuition. I don't think he ever considered the possibility that I might just get as close to any of these people as I had been to Fanny, my schoolfriends and Mrs Giannatasio. He obviously wasn't aware of that fleeting moment of mutual understanding and fear between his servant girl and his *precious nephew* not all that long ago!

I had a similar experience with Marta, an elderly cook he sometimes called upon when the occasion demanded it. She should have been enjoying retirement, but, like millions of others reduced to penury and crippling debt by the wars and their aftermath, she had to accept whatever work came her way.

My uncle never introduced us, and I got the impression that she had been instructed not to communicate with me. But we couldn't be prevented from smiling at each other, which we often did when he wasn't there.

I first met Marta when my uncle took me from school one afternoon to attend yet another piano recital and meeting up with his associates afterwards. But before that I had to play for him at home and then share a meal which Marta was to prepare. I had been playing in his studio for about two hours when I heard Marta knock at the door. My uncle didn't hear it. Marta knocked harder and still he didn't hear. I continued to play but made many more mistakes. I couldn't stand it. I stopped playing and nervously pointed to the door, shouting into his ear that someone was there. 'BAH...!' he roared petulantly, 'that stupid woman!' I presumed he meant Marta and I feared for her; I was convinced she'd heard his insult, and if her timid knock was indicative of her anxiety whilst separated from him by a stout door, how was she going to cope as he went charging towards the door to wrench it open and bear down upon her? I held my breath!

But experience had taught Marta the strategy of first strike, and just when my uncle swung the door open to give her another mouthful of abuse, we both saw her standing there rigid with fear, but securely holding a large sheet of plain paper close to her chest; in the middle of it was scrawled one word: FIVE.

‘Five...five...Master...’ she spluttered; you told me you must eat at five o’clock and not a moment later...’

He didn’t hear what she said but the message she held in her trembling hands was unmistakeable, taking the wind from his angry sail. ‘Yes...yes...I know...’ he shouted, leaving her standing there as he returned to the piano. ‘We must finish’, he said to me. The door was still open and Marta stared at me momentarily, her heart still beating fast, I’m sure. She had that same frightened look as his servant girl weeks before. She turned on her heels and hurried back to the kitchen; I stared after her, feeling both sorrow and anger, which I would feel often in the coming years and for the same reason: he treated his servants badly.

I don’t remember the staff who were present when he first took me to his home, but I do know that at the end of a year, none of them remained, and that some of them had left literally hours after starting. Baron de Trémond, a keen admirer of my uncle’s work was determined to make his acquaintance and recalled visiting him unannounced. Neighbours cautioned him that my uncle was not at home, that he was deaf and had no servants because they had all gone, and that he was forever having to find new servants.

The major cause of his difficulties, apart from his deafness, was that he held servants in utter contempt. Curiously, he needed to let his friends know that’s how he felt: his letters abound with insults:

Lea is not strictly honest, an odiously stupid animal into the bargain,[she] must be managed not by love but by fear...

But since my servant has been endowed by the grace of God to become one of the greatest blockheads in the whole world...

I cannot endure either of these vile creatures... She is too uneducated, too brutish to be a housekeeper, indeed quite a beast; but the other, in spite of her pretty face, is even lower than the beasts...

My sympathy and my anger were of little use to his servant victims. I dared not express my feelings and I had neither the will nor the confidence to protest against his excesses. Whatever specific servant behaviour had provoked his wrath, his reaction would always lead to a broader condemnation whereby he regarded them as the personification of everything he saw corrupt and wrong in his country of adoption:

If I could only have the faintest hope, in this corrupt Austrian state, of finding an honest person...

I often heard him blame servants for his ill-health; when he wrote about it his description of their *incompetence* would be laced with bitter irony:

The day before yesterday my precious servants took three hours, from seven in the evening to get the fire going in the stove. The bitter cold...gave me a bad chill, and the whole of yesterday I could scarcely move a limb.

It was not long before I realised something perverse about my uncle's treatment of servants: my presence was likely to encourage him to be even more abusive; he derived some peculiar gratification having an audience. Ferdinand Ries told the story of him throwing a plate full of food at a

waiter who had a large number of plates in his hands, and, to the amusement of customers, helplessly licked the gravy as it ran down his face. *A picture worthy of Hogarth*, Ries wrote. Similarly, Ignaz von Seyfried, an opera conductor friend recalled my uncle's reaction to his housekeeper when the eggs she was about to use for cooking were not as fresh as he demanded. She was summoned and subjected to his predictable rage and abuse. She knew this was the precursor to an assault, turned on her heels and began to run. That defensive move lessened the number of cracked eggs he was able to throw at her!

Presumably Ries and von Seyfried expected readers to laugh when they wrote those accounts. When I first read them they evoked guilt in me because they reminded me of my helplessness when I saw similar abuses. They also reminded me that my presence made him want to hurt and humiliate his servants even more. Grotesque as that might sound, it was consistent with his tendency to boast about his violence towards them:

All the devilry began yesterday morning, but I made short work of it by throwing the heavy armchair beside my bed at Baberl's head, which procured me peace for the rest of the day.

(To Zmeskall, about a new servant): *If he is a little hump-backed, I shouldn't mind because then one knows immediately what is his side to attack him on.*

for I have given my servant 5 florins, a kick in the rear, and sent him to the devil!

I often wondered how his servants could tolerate him. He paid them miserably and I often heard him scrutinise complainingly about every penny they spent. The annual cost of a bread roll for his kitchen maid shocked him: "A

roll a day adds up to 18 florins for a year!" In another letter to Zmeskall, he was pleased to tell him he has acquired a servant who was a former soldier and who was entirely dedicated to serving his needs. But within a fortnight he was gone! He apparently stayed out at night and got drunk and was appallingly insolent and rude! I'm sure he wasn't the only member of the household to resort to alcohol for an escape.

Zmeskall took it upon himself the task of replacing staff after they'd left or been sacked. He was a busy man! When my uncle returned from Baden in September he instructed Zmeskall to find new servants who:

should be good, of decent deportment, well recommended, married, and not murderous so that my life may be safe inasmuch as for the sake of several rascallions I want to live a little longer in this world.

The phenomenal turnover of staff serving my uncle was no reflection on Zmeskall's judgement of character in choosing them; it was simply that they were unable to withstand the intolerable demands, the verbal insults and violence. And it would be wrong to deduce that his problem with servants had suddenly arisen in 1816 out of his plan to accommodate me in his own home: Frie and Zeyfried's reminiscences are from a much earlier period. In 1809, Countess Erdödy, in whose home he lived for more than a year, was so concerned by the rapid turnover of his servants that she secretly made a payment of twenty-five florins to the latest one and paid him an additional five florins a month to entice him to stay. My uncle was furious when he found out and did a walkout himself, departing Erdödy's salubrious residence and casting unfounded aspersions on her motivation in wanting a servant to remain. He later accepted that her actions were merely generous and caring.

Despite the problem of servants forever worsening, Zmeskall loyally continued to try and find suitable replacements. Another friend, Annette Streicher became immersed in the same task. She was the wife of Johann Andreas Streicher, a well-known Viennese piano maker, and had been helping my uncle on domestic matters generally over a number of years. I'm sure Zmeskall and Streicher were genuinely sympathetic to my uncle's perennial predicament with servants, but I don't think they ever attempted to enlighten him about its cause. It is ironical that he abused and mistreated the one group of people he needed most.

When I was in my late twenties, my mother told me something more revealing about my uncle's attitudes to servants than anything I had ever witnessed. In 1812, his youngest and only remaining brother Johann, then settled in Linz, announced his intention to marry Therese Obermeyer, his housekeeper...worse than that, a housekeeper with an illegitimate five-year-old daughter! My uncle hastily travelled to Linz, determined to persuade his brother otherwise. He enlisted the help of the Bishop of Linz, the city's civil authorities and the police in order to prevent the marriage, unwittingly ensuring thereby that the matter came to public attention, sensationally so. He confronted his brother (no doubt with all the subtlety of a domineering big-brother bully) warning him (as he had warned my father) that his proposed marriage to a housekeeper with an illegitimate child would be a catastrophe for the Beethoven family name. Johann, a successful apothecary was much more preoccupied with making money than with family honour, and told him to get lost. That provoked my uncle to throw the first blow.

His journey to Linz was in vain. On November 8th soon after the brotherly fracas, Johann and Therese married to circumvent the Order the police had issued banning her from Linz! There was no legal rationale for that Order; it

was merely the result of the city's church and municipal authorities giving in to my uncle's demands, deferential to his fame and quick to respond to the aspersions he cast upon the character of his prospective sister-in-law. no one could have better empathised with Therese than my own mother, both of them equally despised, lacking money, influence and class, and both seen as unworthy of the name *Beethoven*.

At long last my uncle accepted that his 'great project' of removing me from the Institute and setting me on the path of musical fame was going to have to be postponed: *My household greatly resembles a shipwreck...* he wrote in late 1816. Zmeskall and Streicher may have nudged him towards this reality, realising that the conditions, the general chaos and clutter, his pervasive illnesses, the mutually destructive relationships with servants, and his frequent resort to violence to intimidate or control them...these conditions were not conducive to his ten-year-old nephew joining him. But he still had no awareness of his own culpability:

All projects concerning my nephew have foundered because of these miserable persons.

My uncle always knew that there were consequences if he treated friends and associates badly: he often felt bad himself and was willing to retreat, apologise or make amends. Not so with servants. I cannot recall a single moment in which he spoke or wrote about servants in a positive light, either praising or thanking them, or acknowledging that despite them enduring daily his intolerable behaviour and demands, he depended upon them for ensuring that he did not sink entirely in the chaos, clutter and self-neglect of his own making. His perception of them, of their 'low intelligence', their 'lack of integrity' their 'general uselessness', their 'criminality'...was so deeply

ingrained that he was incapable of feeling remorseful no matter what pain or humiliation he inflicted upon them. He didn't realise that there could be a costly price to pay for treating them that way.

Chapter 17

In 1817 my uncle composed music for a poem in Schiller's play *William Tell*. It was called *Song of the Monks*. At his command I was in and out of his apartment quite a bit during the time he wrote it; my presence reassured him that his thwarted goal of having me live there permanently would eventually be realised.

I seldom took an interest in his composing but this very short piece was so relentlessly sombre and foreboding it made me curious. When I read the words of the poem (which I had to do because I couldn't understand my uncle's garbled rendering of them...he was a terrible singer) even I, at the tender age of eleven, could appreciate how perfectly apt his music was:

*Swiftly comes Man's death, He is given no warning.
It strikes him mid-course. It severs him from the prime
of life.
Whether prepared to go or not he must stand before
his judge!*

Both the words and the music are symptomatic of the fatalistic mood which gripped my uncle throughout 1817. His fame and popularity had not waned, but he was burdened with three major concerns: he had composed nothing of significance that year nor in the previous year; he had failed in his goal of removing me from the Institute, and his debilitating ill-health showed no signs of abating. The death of his dear friend the violinist Wenzel Krumpholz on the 2nd of May deepened his depressive mood.

Since June 1816 he had been suffering from what he called a *malady of the lungs*. Numerous other ailments afflicted him in the coming months, which he needed to write about to his friends and patrons:

Since October last year, when I was stricken with a terrible illness, I have seldom been in good health and am still suffering the consequences.... How awful it is to feel uncared for, with no friends, entirely alone, and suffering...I have taken all kinds of medicine...I must abandon the hope that I for so long clung to, of gaining complete recovery... I know now what it feels like to move daily closer to my grave.

I'm sure that at the end of 1816, he made many resolutions that 1817 would be a more productive year, but he could never have foreseen the onset of these illnesses nor their duration. 1817 was in fact a far more barren year for his creativity.

My experiences over this same period contrasted sharply with my uncle's. Admittedly it had begun badly with my hernia and surgery, not helped by his temper and cack-handed responses to my recovery. But this had turned out a blessing, a respite from the gruelling practice demanded of me: my lessons with Czerny didn't resume until mid-October. He wrote to Czerny then, eager for the lessons to recommence, but cautioning him that I *must not undertake too much all at once*. By the end of the year 1816, despite seeing my mother less and less (and thankfully my uncle too) I was feeling a little bit more settled. I must have been feeling like that because I was becoming more confident and assertive amongst my peers, and less fearful and anxious in his presence. I no longer hurried to his summons when he arrived, nor felt the need to pretend that I was listening to every word he spoke. Fanny occasionally admonished me for this apparent lack of propriety.

Changing perceptions of my uncle were partially responsible for my behaviour. Also, certain roles had been reversed unexpectedly, a reversal that I would never have thought possible. One year after my enrolment in the Institute, the adults who governed my life were no longer

the oppressive and cohesive force I had known and feared. On that day in February 1816, I was nine years old, traumatised and very vulnerable. I was at the mercy of powerful people led by my uncle and Giannatasio, all of whom perceived my mother in the worst possible light. Nearly a year later however, Giannatasio and his staff were confronted with a stark reality: that despite having got rid of one source of trouble in the person of my mother, they were increasingly subjected to much greater disruption and demands from another, my uncle! Giannatasio in particular could not fail to recognize the irony of my uncle's delusory motives now generating more turmoil and pressure within his beloved Institute than my mother had ever caused. She was severely punished for her behaviour, but my uncle caused much worse mayhem with impunity over a far longer period. He had taken on the role of disruptor-in-chief and was fulfilling that role remarkably successfully. His disruptions were made worse by their unpredictability. When he was ill for two or three weeks or more and could not get to the Institute, he made up for his absences when he was feeling better, visiting unannounced every day for as long as his brief respites permitted, and complaining more loudly. It wasn't long before every member of staff, especially Giannatasio, had to concede that my uncle was impeding progress in the smooth running of the Institute. There was no let-up in his criticisms and insinuations on the subject that really mattered to him:

With regards to his practice, you must be firm and keep him at it. He did not do any practice yesterday, and this has happened on many days. I know this because I keep an eye on what he is doing, in order that I can judge how he is progressing.

Even when he was ill and in his bed his preoccupation with my musical progress compelled him to continue

summoning me to his home at a time suitable only to himself. He would rise and enrobe in his flowery dressing gown, throw a heavy blanket around his shoulders, and place himself in his usual position, watching me and standing over me. He wouldn't have shaved for days, making his swarthy withdrawn face darker. Despite feeling miserable, his eyes never lacked vitality, nor that piercing quality that had often made me feel on edge. But oddly enough I did not find the experience anywhere near as intimidating as it had been six or seven months before, maybe because I sensed that his illness made him less volatile, and it usually limited the duration of the lesson; I did, however, find his wheezing and coughing exceedingly unpleasant.

'Why aren't you practicing, Karl?' he once asked me in a voice less vexatious than usual. It registered disappointment and pain, but it also sounded like resignation: his illnesses were restricting his ability to supervise me.

I turned round to look up at him, so that he could see my lips moving; 'I do practice, uncle.'

'But not as much as you should.'

He was right. But the reason was far worse than he could have imagined. Yes, I had slackened off, but so too had the Institute's staff. They had become wearily accustomed to his criticisms and much less responsive to his demands.

'Sometimes I can't', I said, knowing exactly where I was going.

'Why not', he asked instantly.

'Because of my other work'.

'What do you mean...other work?'

I raised my eyebrows, nodded my head right, then left, as though there was a great selection of 'other work' to choose from. I knew nothing would impress him, but I did want him to hear: 'ARITHMETIC, GRAMMAR, COMPOSITION, DRAWING, RELIGIOUS STUDIES...

‘And they put that before your music...?’ he asked rhetorically. His voice was louder, his expression meaner.

I chose not to reply. I knew now that I was playing some part in exacerbating the already dismal relationship between him and the Institute. He registered his grievance against it by not paying my fees. Giannatasio gently reminded him, conscious of his persistent moaning about poverty and his genuine ill-health. To Fanny’s delight, her father offered him accommodation within the grounds of the Institute, whether to ease his financial burden and ensure he wasn’t alone when he was ill, or, for the closer proximity enabling her father to apply a little more pressure on him to pay up! My uncle refused the offer.

Relationships deteriorated fast. Giannatasio later wrote to my uncle, demanding payment and expressing disappointment at the constant criticisms being levelled against the Institute’s work. He asked me to deliver the letter. I was due another lesson in Czerny’s home and both Giannatasio and I knew my uncle would be present. But I didn’t then know the content of the letter, which, when my uncle opened and read it, caused him to erupt. Czerny was embarrassed having to listen in my presence to a deluge of foul-mouthed insults and condemnations directed at the Institute; I was more scared than embarrassed, being reminded again of my uncle’s volatility, and holding myself responsible in some way.

My uncle replied in a scathing letter to Giannatasio, unleashing all his pent-up fury about ‘teaching methods’, indiscipline, and lack of progress in my musical education. He didn’t just *request* that I deliver it, he simply thrust it into my hands and ordered me to do so. To my relief Giannatasio didn’t read it in my presence; but I later picked up the vibes convincing me his whole family were deeply offended. Fanny was appalled:

Beethoven’s anger with us is a very great challenge for me. Whatever he thinks we have done we do not

deserve his bitterness and biting sarcasm. He must be aware of all the affection and interest we show him and have always shown him...I suspect he wrote that letter in one of his uncongenial humours. I forgive him.

My uncle could rapidly change. Fanny wrote soon after: *We are friends again...*but she added something else, which, had I seen it then, would have alarmed me as much as it would have angered me:

It hurts me very much to acknowledge that Karl is to blame for all these misunderstandings and it pains me still more that we had to tell his uncle of his many misdemeanours.

They made me a go-between, the deliverer of letters that each must have known would at least challenge if not offend. Then when their relationships deteriorated to the extent whereby they seemed irredeemably impaired, they sought to blame me! It would be many years before I realised how much I was being exploited in this situation. I don't think Giannatasio, Fanny or my uncle knew what they were doing or the risks they were taking: I was petrified when I next delivered a letter!

Having said that, I must admit there was some accuracy in Fanny's observations. In that more divisive yet paradoxically freer environment, I felt more emboldened and did indeed indulge in various misdemeanours. When he was told about this my uncle wrote to Giannatasio, stipulating that I be shown the letter:

I beg you will enforce the strictest discipline on him, and if he refuses to obey your orders to do his duty, I trust you will at once punish him. Treat him as if he were your own child rather than a mere pupil, for I

already told you that during his father's lifetime he only submitted to the discipline of blows, which was a bad system; still, such was the fact, and we must not forget it.

Relationships amongst the adults then settled somewhat. My uncle made a number of social visits to the Giannatasios when his health permitted it, an obvious conciliatory gesture. Even though I sensed that there might soon be another crisis with my uncle at the centre of it, I was gratefully aware of the fact that my mother could not be the cause of it, and, that there was no longer a united front battling against her. Mrs Giannatasio was more explicit than ever in encouraging me to talk about her.

Whatever temporary peace had been achieved Giannatasio had become disillusioned with my uncle, as had his staff. They no longer wanted to be participants in the delusionary effort to make me great and famous. His recurring ailments and absences gave them the opportunity to lapse on many of their commitments. I could sense this happening and I could see its effects every day. No longer were they compelling me to do long periods of practice and learn and relearn musical theory, they didn't even bother to ask me had I done so of my own accord. The repercussions of this were enormous for me personally: if the staff no longer revered him there was less pressure on me to pretend that I respected him. I was grateful that my uncle was now perceived as a massive disruptive force; this must surely alter their perceptions of my mother.

As for Fanny, quick to reprimand me whenever she felt I was aggravating his condition, she remained under the illusion that her hero, twenty-four years her senior, might reciprocate the intensity of love she felt for him:

No matter where I am...I feel his presence all around me, and it fills me with sweetness and joy.

My uncle had more pressing concerns. Circumstances had got much worse: once the colossus striding almost daily into the place complaining and demanding, he was now a sick man cooped up in his bed for long periods. At times Fanny couldn't stand it:

The insufferable state of our dear Beethoven is a matter of great concern to me. That he has no friends, that he is, as he says himself, "alone in the world!" ...is a terrible thought.

His status and celebrity in the outside world had not suffered, but in the Institute he was increasingly perceived as someone not to be taken seriously. Giannatasio no longer felt the need to humour him and was more than willing to challenge his ridiculous demands. Although he and his family did not want me to be taken out of the Institute (thereby losing publicity and prestige associated with the name Ludwig van Beethoven) he was no longer prepared to tolerate the additional stress that my uncle invariably caused.

I suspect that at some point Giannatasio must have had a word with Czerny about this very subject. Both men had something in common: they shared the burden of attempting the impossible as demanded by my uncle. I can just imagine the two of them when the subject was broached for the first time, cautiously, tentatively, exploring each other's opinions of my musical prospects, each wary of the possibility of the other reporting a *betrayal* back to the *master*. They must have been relieved on learning that their opinions were exactly the same. I would not at all be surprised to learn that both men ended up doubled over in convulsions of laughter realising the absurdity of their predicament.

Even though it was obvious to me now that life was markedly more pleasant when my uncle was ill for long

periods, I was not so callous as to pray to the Lord that he died. I was just happy to be having a good time in the Institute he despised. I was regularly reassured by Fanny lamenting that he was still holed up in his bed coughing, spluttering and wheezing. He would recover at some time, I knew, - he usually did, and then I would have good reason to fear him again: he might try even harder to get me out of the Institute so that I could live with him. I still feared his sheer physicality, his loudness, unpredictability, and volatility. But I was learning fast. His greatest works and fame were yet to come, but my main preoccupation was: would I ever escape from him? I was beginning to sense that although it may take a long time, the means of escape were clearly audible and visible: his status within the Institute had shrunk; he was more susceptible to illnesses; he was getting deafer, he was weaker, more vulnerable and more dependent upon his associates than he had ever been. And for the first time, when I looked into the faces of those he encountered, I thought some of them were silently mocking him.

Part III

Chapter 18

It was sometime after it occurred but when I heard about it, I could not believe it: in February 1817, my uncle visited my mother! He made a number of visits to her over a period of weeks, pre-planned, though subject as usual to the vagaries of his condition.

No, it wasn't a reconciliation; it was a demand for money for my maintenance. I don't think I could ever have predicted that one of his resolutions for 1817 would be to approach the woman he loathed, to compel her to contribute towards the costs of my education and upkeep. Considering how he had treated her the previous year, this may appear as sheer effrontery, but he was not doing anything untoward: she was legally bound to make a contribution. The puzzling thing is why it took him so long to remind her of that. Maybe it was because the relationship between them had been so explosive that any form of contact was out of the question; or perhaps he was aware that despite inheriting property and wealth from my father and her parents, she was still incurring substantial debt in the form of loans. Although she had acquired sole ownership of the property in Alservorstadt on my father's death, she had issued so many promissory notes making herself surety for sums of debt that far exceeded the value of the property. Another possible reason is that while money had not been a problem for him in the lucrative years of 1814-16, it most certainly had become a major issue for him in 1817.

He had learnt a lot since placing me in the Institute. No more could it be said of him that he *understood neither the value of money nor what things should cost*. My mother later told me she was quite taken back by the preparation he had made for their initial contact (Nanette Streicher and Giannatasio obviously had a hand in this). He showed her detailed, comprehensive lists of all expenditure incurred in

the Institute, all the clothes bought for me during the year, the full cost of my music and musical tuition, the cost of the *hospitality* he regularly afforded me, and he reminded her of the legal grounds on which his request for a contribution was being made. She could hardly refuse after hearing all that.

A contract between them was signed on the 10th of May, 1817. Amongst its stipulations was that she immediately paid him 2000 florins, and thereafter contribute half of her pension by regular quarterly payments in advance, towards my education. He later claimed in one of his letters that my mother had asked for this contract; I don't believe it!

For him to have sat down with her and negotiated a settlement suggests two things: he believed his financial situation was dire, and if he was going to get any money from her, his hostility to her had to abate. Thereafter, it appears that the agreement had a significant effect on his behaviour towards her. So much so that she felt able to request a more favourable location for her and I to meet. He had sometimes resorted to arranging access in the homes of his friends or associates, one of whom, he insisted, should always be present, a stipulation which often inhibited both of us. He considered my mother's request for some while and discussed it with Giannatasio. The request was granted, though not gracefully: he explained his apparent good will with the remark that my mother was now *powerless to do me any harm*, and that he was forever conscious of the need to avoid treating her harshly, inhumanely (had my mother heard him say that, she would have responded with bitter ironic laughter!) He wrote to tell her that he was bringing me to see her...in her own home! Then he felt compelled to write to Giannatasio with further explanation:

It is my intention to come for Karl early tomorrow morning. I wish to place his mother in a more credible position with her neighbours so I am doing her this

favour of taking her son to see her in the company of a third person. This will occur once each month. In regard to all that has occurred, I ask you neither to speak nor write of it further, but, like myself, to forget about it all.

Returning to my mother in her own home was both a wonderful and weird experience. I had the urge to literally dance my way around each room which I think she expected me to, but I also felt constrained: conscious that I'd grown older (and taller) and that frolicking about at this particular time wasn't the thing to do; nor would I dare to make it obvious to my uncle that I was overjoyed to be *visiting* home, and that this was where I permanently wanted to be. So I said nothing of the nostalgia and intense longing I felt in walking round the place, slowly climbing the staircase with my fingers clasping the banister, entering my very own room made fresh by an open window, and lying stretched out on my very own bed. I knew I wouldn't be staying the night, but the visit strengthened my conviction that I should be...every night!

As my mother had been forewarned, he had invited an apparent friend to join us, a tall, austere, young man, bespectacled, in his early twenties. He wasn't introduced to us when he arrived; he sat conspicuously uncomfortable in a corner. He never spoke nor was he spoken to by my uncle but there was clearly an understanding between them. He was offered refreshments which he refused. I think it was my presence rather than that of my mother which inhibited him. Within a very short period I had seen enough of him to know that it was unlikely he would attempt to engage me. I was relieved about that and felt that I could safely ignore him, though he continued to perplex me.

This *privileged* visit was followed by another: my uncle arranged for us to meet again in his lodgings in Heiligenstadt, to where he had retreated in May in an attempt to get rid of

his 'inflammatory catarrh'. When Fanny first told me that I would be joining him for the day, she waited a few moments to see my jaw drop in disappointment and to listen to my objections before telling me of the purpose of the journey: to see my mother again! That was well worth enduring a journey to Heiligenstadt and being in my uncle's presence for a few hours.

He explained his change of heart in a letter to Zmeskall whom he also requested to be in attendance:

Having considered this, I have changed my mind. After all, it would be painful for Karl's mother to see him in strange surroundings...there is more severity in this than I like, so I shall let her come here (Heiligenstadt) tomorrow.

I wasn't aware of the financial settlement my uncle and mother had reached beforehand but I couldn't fail to notice the changes brought about: I was seeing her again and they were speaking civilly to each other. Although I was mightily relieved, I was also wary, sometimes feeling that it was too good to be true. Since removal from home, I had painfully learnt that even to mention her name in his presence was dangerous. Could the good will I was now witnessing and which I was the principal beneficiary of be genuine? How had all this change come about?

Zmeskall, Giannatasio and his family and staff must have been baffled by these developments. They had all witnessed and most of them had unwittingly colluded in a callous campaign which he had led against her. They had for more than a year listened to him persistently denigrating her as a social pariah: depraved, cruel, vicious, evil, wicked, immoral, a *Queen of the night*...and they could see and feel the visceral hatred when he spoke about her. In his own diary, he later attempted to explain his change of heart in the form of a prayer

My duty O Lord, I have done!

It would not have been possible without offending the widow...but an injustice I would never do. O my all, Thou almighty one...Thou seest into my inmost heart and knowest how it pains me to be obliged to compel another to suffer by my good labours for my precious Karl! Thou seest into my inmost heart and knowest that I have sacrificed the best of my own for his sake...Bless my work, O Lord. Bless the widow Lord, Lord, my refuge, my rock, Oh hear me always, Thou Ineffable One, hear me...the unhappiest of all mortals...

This is excessively self-indulgent and delusory even by my uncle's standards, asking God to accept that he was *compelled* to make my mother suffer for my sake. He still does not realise that in making her suffer he made me suffer even more. The Almighty would have been sceptical hearing him speak of his *pain* in inflicting suffering upon her when so many of his letters to Giannatasio revealed the sadistic pleasure he derived from it. And what would The Almighty have thought knowing that his change of heart and his repentance coincided with him demanding and receiving a considerable sum of cash from her. He didn't want anyone finding out about this, particularly the Giannatasio family. This is why he asked Giannatasio not to mention his new-found kindness and sensitivity towards my mother...just forget about it! Talking about it might have revealed that it was her financial contribution that had brought about the change, which would have been as shocking to the Giannatasios as it would have been embarrassing for my uncle.

Here was another incentive to get me out of the Institute...before they found out! His attitude towards the Giannatasios remained two-faced, praising them when he felt he needed to, yet scathingly criticising and ridiculing their efforts to his friends. While he didn't yet include me

amongst the recipients of such harsh criticisms, he obviously had less inhibitions about letting me know of his dissatisfaction, increasingly asking me critical questions about my day-to-day school experiences, then responding by muttering contemptuously under his breath.

The ban on my mother stepping into the Institute's grounds was lifted; she came to see me there a number of times and nobody complained. But the deterioration in my uncle's relationships with the Giannatasios accelerated:

Karl is a different child when he is with me which reassures me in the intention of him staying with me always. Besides, it will spare me much pain caused by that (Institute).

Throughout the Spring and Summer of 1817, I could not but be aware of the gathering storms once again revolving around me. Nor indeed could my school-friends, listening to heated arguments between Giannatasio and my uncle that often culminated in his furious walkouts. They wanted to know what was happening and I was not inclined to tell them.

My uncle moved to new lodgings in the Gärtnerstrasse on 24th April, to be nearer the Institute which had already moved. This enabled him to keep up the pressure on Giannatasio and his staff, and to be nearer to Nanette Streicher on whom he was so dependent in planning for the changing domestic arrangements necessary for me to join him. Unsurprisingly however, he changed house again in June, not an inexpensive thing to do, and probably facilitated by the new financial arrangement between him and my mother. He then went on the offensive against the Giannatasios. His weapons were as usual, a delay in paying my fees which were due. Giannatasio would send him a reminder via me, and he would pay up via me! But the payment might include a letter that was unreasonably demanding or even insulting:

I forward to you through Karl my good friend, payment for board that is due to you. I want you to give more attention to the nourishment of his feelings and the kindness of his heart. The latter in particular is the stimulus of all that is good, and despite how the kindly feelings of man are often ridiculed, we know that some of our greatest authors, like Goethe and others regard it as an admirable quality, without which no man can attain eminence nor depth of character.

Another weapon more commonly used around this time was his moods! Fanny noted that she was frequently finding him in a bad mood: touchy, impatient, intimidating, aggressive, sullen and intolerant (he shook his finger threateningly at her sister Nanni one day simply because she had been unable to understand his notoriously illegible writing). He needed to let people know how unhappy and dissatisfied he felt, and how resistant he would be to anyone attempting to make him feel otherwise.

At the beginning of July, his hostility towards the Institute and the Giannatasios took a sinister turn. He wrote a damning letter to me which he knew I would show to Fanny. In it he not only complained about the Institute in general but alleged that I was being unfairly treated by her father. That was untrue: I wanted to stay in the Institute; I wanted to remain with the Giannatasios; I was hardly likely to provide him with ammunition enabling him to remove me from them. Neither Fanny nor her parents however would have been thinking anything so devious; they would have been solely preoccupied with establishing the source of such a slanderous accusation, and the only conclusion they could logically arrive at was that it was me! It wasn't therefore just a lie that my uncle had concocted; it was a defamatory allegation against Giannatasio that was certain to turn the family against me. Surely my uncle must have realised the risks.

Fanny was horrified when I showed her the letter. I told her I had no idea what my uncle was talking about. She had no one to confide in but herself:

How can he think that my father could treat Karl as he describes? If I were to think the same, I would be very miserable.

When I later visited him in his new lodgings as he demanded, he no longer made any attempt to mask his hostility and contempt for the Institute. He watched me play the piano without any real interest, because my efforts were nothing more than an excuse for him to rant and rave about the awful musical education I was receiving. He interrupted my playing, deciding there and then to write to Giannatasio. I sat on my stool looking aghast as he foamed at the mouth and his hair seemed to stand on end. He talked to himself so quickly and repetitively that I could not determine to whom or to what he was referring. But he frightened me working himself up into a frenzy apparently by the very words he wrote. Then he did what I was hoping he would not do: he folded the letter, put it in an envelope, sealed it, and said: 'Take that...make sure to give it to the *Abbess*!' (This was a mildly mocking term he applied to Fanny. She detested it).

I didn't understand why I was being asked to give *her* the letter; surely it was meant for her father. But it didn't actually matter to me who it was addressed to; I knew it would be unpleasant reading for whoever it was intended and whoever read it, and I was again being used as the deliverer of bad news. However, on this occasion, it was much worse than *bad*!

The letter was personal, deeply offensive, and based upon unfounded allegations. The object of his tirades, however, was not just Giannatasio, but also, Fanny herself. This was why he had ordered me to give *her* the letter to read before she gave it to her father: he was wanting to lash out at her. I

could not have known that at the time, yet I gave her the letter with an aching, guilty heart.

Two days later I had a lesson with Czerny. He handed me a note which my uncle had written, addressed to Fanny. He instructed me to deliver it as quickly as I could. I wondered what other condemnations and insults it contained. Once again I was being burdened during so-called piano lessons with the task of delivering letters that I knew would offend, thereby implicating me in the toxic neurosis that was now gripping my uncle.

As I made my way back to the Institute, I could not resist opening the hastily written unsealed note and reading it. Its contents almost took my breath away. My uncle *wasn't* insulting anybody...he was requesting...no! not requesting...but begging Fanny not to show the letter he had written to her father and which he had asked me to deliver only two days before. In the note I was now holding in my hand, he was apologising to her, saying he had written that letter when he was feeling low (an understatement: how could I forget his *raging blindness* as he wrote it!).

Undoubtedly Fanny was relieved by his apology, but she hadn't been spared reading the letter addressed to her father (which she dared not have let him see), much of its vehement criticism directed at her personally. In her diary she could not but lament:

Beethoven has sent my father a letter in which he writes about me so injuriously that for the first time I felt real anger towards him. No one has ever said things like that about me, least of all someone whom I respected so highly. How could he think I could be so mean? If he imagined me capable of sharing with Karl my criticisms of his uncle which I have always kept to myself, or worse, encouraging Karl to think less of his uncle...If someone allows himself to become so suspicious of others, whom he knows are worthy of his

every confidence, then it is highly likely he will also doubt anything one would say to prove he is wrong...however, I forgive him freely, though his words have pierced me and wounded me very deeply.

Fanny was entitled to feel aggrieved. Never in my presence did she criticise my uncle or cast aspersions on his motives; never did she attempt to lower him in my estimation. On the contrary, she irked me repeatedly saying how wonderful he was and how privileged I should feel for all the love and affection he lavished on me! In those few sentences of her grief-laden entry, she revealed the extent of the neurosis my uncle was now suffering. And yet I have to admit that had she shared with me any of the criticisms my uncle alleged she made and the pain they caused her, her words would have fallen on fertile ground: I would have told Fanny that he was mad, that his behaviour was despicable and unforgivable. I would have also felt emboldened to defy him further!

Chapter 19

Whatever appeal the disintegrating relationships between my uncle and the Giannatasios initially had for me, it was fast dissipating in the latter half of 1817. I could see the anger, misery and disruption it was causing, for Fanny in particular. Although this sorry state of affairs had been brought about by adults, I, by then a mere eleven-year-old, could feel myself in the centre of it; in some ways responsible for it, increasingly guiltily so. Apart from making me the message boy, the deliverer of bad news that was certain to provoke the recipients, I was also my uncle's convenient excuse: whatever pain and disruption he caused, he explained it away by declaring that he was acting *only* on my behalf; it was about my future, my *musical career*, my happiness!

In raising the stakes in his dispute with the Giannatasios, he became more careless and indiscreet in his criticisms of the Institute. During another successful access visit he complained to my mother for the very first time, about something other than my mother! About the way Giannatasio and his staff had let him down, the obstacles they posed to his efforts of making me his heir apparent. This just didn't sound right. I don't know what my mother was thinking, but she certainly didn't look uninterested, and I sensed that whatever she said to him in response encouraged him. When I reflect on it now I think she must have felt vindicated to some extent: he had taken her son away from her because he believed in her *malign influences*; he had placed him in a safe environment under the protection of principled people with unimpeachable credentials; yet here he was treating her as a confidante, sharing with her his condemnation and ridicule of those very same people from whom he was determined to remove me.

Whatever motivated my mother to report such explosive information back to the Institute? I remember the day it happened, when she was mysteriously invited into Giannatasio's office: she had written to him claiming that she had something important to tell him. I stood in the corridor feeling apprehensive, because she hadn't said anything to me about her intent, and even though she and Giannatasio were unusually polite to each other, I just sensed that trouble was brewing.

Giannatasio was incensed by what she told him, so much so that he asked his older daughter Nanni to sit in on the meeting and record everything my mother said. Then he wrote to my uncle, demanding an explanation.

My uncle's response and its immediate consequences must have quickly made my mother realise that she had made the wrong move. He wrote a scathing reply to Giannatasio, claiming that her *lying chatter* vindicated him for his stance and his actions during the past year:

I am grateful to your daughter Nanni for taking the trouble to write down what was said by this woman. It is possible that I casually said something about disorderliness and irregularity in the Institute, but I do not recall ever having written anything about this to her. Her gossiping is only an attempt by her to provoke you against me, as a means of obtaining and getting more from you; in a similar way that she has said all kinds of things about you to me! Needless to say, I took no heed of her. On this most recent occasion, I wished to see whether or not she could be improved by a gentler, more patient approach. I told Herr Schmerling of my intention, but now I must acknowledge that it has failed. For that reason I have decided to adhere to the earlier discipline, though too late to prevent her from once again infecting Karl with her poison. In a word, we must stick to the zodiac

and only let her take Karl twelve times a year and then we must barricade her so effectively that she cannot smuggle even a pin to him...

Had I seen this letter I probably would have cried. I may not have fully understood its cunning cleverness and its strategic aims, but I would have realised immediately what it meant for me. Suddenly, all the benefits of the short-lived rapprochement between my mother and my uncle were to cease. She was permitted one last visit to the Institute, and thereafter access to me was to be severely curtailed and the strictest supervision imposed.

You can sense the confidence with which he writes, certain that Giannatasio will believe whatever he tells him. The worsening conflict between the two of them is forgotten about; they are united by his use of the words ‘we’...we together must deal with this terrible woman, and we will again enlist the help of Schmerling, the same senior court official with whom my uncle and Giannatasio liaised shortly after guardianship was awarded. Schmerling was soon to be married to Giannatasio’s daughter, Nanni, and now he was about to be told of my mother’s scandalous breach of trust and her attempt to sow the seeds of discord between my uncle and the Institute.

My uncle wrote the above letter on the 14th of August, 1817, eighteen months after the same three men first met to compose their damning submission to the court aimed at denying her any access at all to me. I wonder this second time round, did she have a foreboding sense of something similar occurring, with the same outcome: the same battle lines drawn, the same opponents: those three well-known pillars of the establishment backed by reputable legal minds and aristocratic friends, all pitted against her, and she, having behaved with recklessness and stupidity, now additionally guilty in their eyes of malicious gossip, lies, and *imparting poison to her son*.

My uncle's letter immediately had the effect which Fanny craved:

Some of our family at least, have got closer to him since that miserable affair...he is overly friendly and warm to Nanni and my father.

So much so that he resumed his frequent visits to the Giannatasios, played and sang the piano with Fanny and Nanni, laughed and joked and had lengthy philosophical discussions with them on love and marriage. The problem for my uncle was however, that despite this so-called reconciliation and the same united front pitted against my mother, her shockingly indiscrete gossiping to Nanni was actually the truth: my uncle was becoming even more scathingly critical of the Institute, and more determined than ever to get me out of it. Having put my mother in her place he now felt entitled to resume his pressure on Giannatasio. In yet another letter demanding greater effort, he cannot resist critically comparing the Institute's shortcomings with the *success* of another:

The couple of hours given to his music studies are insufficient. I must insist the original duration of practice agreed upon is adhered to...I know of another child in another school destined to become a professor of music, who enjoys every facility of study, including a distant room for practicing longer periods, without disturbing other pupils, or being disturbed himself.

The offending letter made no difference whatsoever to the Giannatasio family or the Institute's staff; they had long ago accepted that he was deluded and they had no inclination to revert to the rigid disciplinary supervision of my practice and playing. They also knew that I was in no

mood to respond to such futile efforts: I was angry and confused and feeling thoroughly let down. No one told me what was happening, but I had this overwhelming sense of a ridiculous, unnecessary battle amongst people, not one of whom, not even my mother, had given a single thought to the consequences for the eleven-year-old at the centre of it: hopes raised then dashed yet again: the tiny flickering of a reconciliation extinguished; meetings with my mother to be severely curtailed, supervision strictly imposed and to be located in venues without privacy and laden with tension

My mother didn't tell me when she arrived at the Institute that it was to be her last visit there; nor did anyone else take the trouble to tell me that these draconian measures were now in place, or tried to explain them to me and help me better adapt to them. I would learn about them gradually as they were enforced. Yet I should have picked up on the magnitude of what was afoot in the way my mother behaved during that visit.

'He is going to remove you from the Institute, you know that, don't you?'

Yes, I knew, but it surprised me that she came to that depressing topic so quickly and directly; I was used to her skirting around or avoiding such issues. Then she said nonchalantly:

'It needn't be as bad as you think it might be.'

My brow creased in perplexity as I stared into her lovely large brown eyes that were gazing at me and through me, probing for the impact of her words. 'Where will I go?' I asked her, instantly imagining only two possibilities: another Institute which I did not relish, and my uncle's residence which I profoundly disliked.

'If you lived in his home which is not too far now...you would not necessarily be living with *him*', she said.

That was just a little too ambiguous, but the words *which is not too far now* had a tantalizing effect that stirred me. Did she mean: *not too far...from her*?

‘Your uncle is extremely busy; his work takes him away from his home for long periods; his bad health takes him to Baden and Heiligenstadt most of the summer.’

‘I don’t want to live in his home...I don’t want to leave where I am now’, I said, shaking my head, yet knowing that my uncle had already decided. I too was capable of deceiving myself, often thinking that because so often in the past when my move was about to happen, it didn’t happen, and so therefore it was not likely to happen! And here was my mother, having been cast into the wilderness again as a consequence of her recklessness, attempting to prepare me for the inevitable. But why?

‘He wants you to have a private tutor. Whoever that is, is not going to be teaching you all day long...it’s going to be very different from being taught in a school in which you live.’

There was a conspicuous silence then, before she continued, more slowly, in a lower pitch of voice: ‘He has other people working for him...a housemaster...and servants...and a cook...you’ll see more of them than you do your uncle.’

I couldn’t really see why she was mentioning that; we both knew what my uncle felt about servants, and how angry he would be in discovering me fraternising with them. I had nothing more to say but I sensed that she hadn’t finished yet.

‘We might even see more of each other’, she said, with a smile that could have been either intriguing or roguish.

But it made me smile too, the more I thought about it. Now I was beginning to understand what she was getting at; I could see all the relevant factors she had clearly considered: his deafness, his ill-health, his forgetfulness, all getting worse; his abuse of his servants, his obsessive preoccupation with his music and new compositions and lucrative commissions...and not least his months-long stays and constant need of healing waters in the various spas. I

too had randomly thought of many of those factors ever since that day I angrily retrieved my *Grimm's Fairy Tales* which he had confiscated and then forgotten about. His situation could only worsen; the prospect of my mother and I secretly rendezvousing when I was *living* with him was surely greater than were I to remain under the watchful eyes of numerous staff in the Institute.

She watched me absorb all the pleasantries associated with her plan and then she felt confident enough to say: 'Let him think you're looking forward to joining him.'

We stared at each other; our smiles broadened; then we both burst out laughing and embraced and hugged.

When we had recovered she told me of the fallout with my uncle and her banishment from the Institute. She was quite honest about causing it. She swore me to secrecy about what we had talked about. What she was advocating was different in degree though not in the nature of the path I had already chosen. But I didn't realise that treading further and faster along this path was potentially self-destructive for both of us. My uncle's cruelty had once nearly driven my mother insane; it had driven me to intrigue, lies, deceptions and opportunism. Now she was inviting me to join her in a strategy far more corrupting and dangerous because it necessitated corrupting others. But it sounded irresistibly exciting. I was neither deterred nor afraid when I thought of how my uncle might react should he ever gain the slightest whiff of what was being planned.

I left her that day in late August feeling invigorated. It was her initially cryptic manner, suggestive of secrecy, mystery and danger that kept me awake for a good many nights afterwards. I could not wait to see her again. Within a month I *hadn't* seen her! I complained to Fanny. She couldn't tell me why I hadn't seen her. Weeks later and with still no sign of my mother, I complained more vehemently:

"Why can't I see her...you told me I was going to see her once a month...why am I not seeing her?"

‘I don’t know, Karl...I honestly don’t know.’

I looked into her sad brown eyes and then self-pitying tears began to swell in my own eyes. ‘She always tells me she loves me...’ I blurted; ‘why is she not coming to see me?’

Fanny’s eyelids widened and the mass of black curls usually dangling merrily on either side of her face seemed as immovable as stone. It looked as though she had been stricken by a realisation of the depth of my misery. Then I thought I could see tears swelling in her eyes too. I couldn’t stand it. I ran away from her.

In this intolerable situation of not knowing why I was being prevented from seeing her, it was inevitable that I would dwell upon possible explanations. Was she ill...was she *very* ill? Fanny was able to reassure me that she wasn’t. Had she then changed her mind about *our plan*, which, not having seen her for such a long time, I was beginning to think she had abandoned.

Other members of the Institute’s staff must have felt some disquiet as they observed how the separation was affecting me. I’m sure some could still recall how my mother had been barred from seeing me during my surgery. Unlike when I first entered the Institute and they revered my uncle, believing every slander he uttered against her, they now knew all about his volatility and his delusions and his irrational demands. They must have talked about it often; they must have shared their concerns (though not face-to-face with him); they must have felt helpless in their efforts to educate me knowing I was so often too angry and bitter and miserable about something over which they had no control.

Mrs Giannatasio remained my constant refuge during these bleak months. She repeatedly told me that my mother still loved me, and while I always longed to hear her say that and know that she meant it, afterwards it raised questions that I could barely cope with: if she loves me, then

why is she not seeing me...or not being allowed to see me...or deliberately choosing not to see me?

Drowning in my own sorrows I seldom gave a thought to what my mother might have been feeling. She was probably consumed by her own pain and anger in being deprived yet again of access, and possibly also guilt-stricken by her own recklessness in bringing this situation about. But she was an adult and I was still a child. She had implanted in my mind what I then regarded as a brilliant plan which, with all the impatience of a child, I wanted to see executed within days. Yes, that meant I wanted out of my beloved Institute to do what I had for years dreaded being made to do: live with an uncle whom I couldn't respect. My mother had convinced me that it was a gamble worth taking, a situation that we could easily exploit, and one in which we could regularly meet. But the longer I had to wait without seeing her and without explanation as to the delay, the more depressed and hopeless I felt.

My uncle prevented us from seeing each other or communicating for nearly six months, between August 1817 and February 1818. He ignored all her correspondence pleading to see me or inquiring about me, even after she retaliated in the only way possibly to her: withholding her pension contribution towards maintenance. He never told me of his intention to deny her access or why, though I suspect there could only be one reason: she needed to be punished for betraying him. I wish I had been brave enough to tell him how I felt, but experience had instilled in me a fear of the consequences of mentioning her to him. It was obvious to me that he still had not the slightest awareness of how this feuding and chaos was affecting me.

I eventually forgot about our conspiracy. I became more rebellious, disruptive and defiant. I listed in my mind all the grievances I felt. I wanted people to know just how badly they were treating me. I kicked out mainly at Fanny, because she was my most constant companion when I was

feeling down. I refused to sit at my desk and do my work, or get to our dinner tables on time, or eat the nutritious food which had been lovingly prepared by the Giannatasio women. I told Fanny I had had enough! I reminded her of my uncle removing me from class umpteen times at the shortest notice and compelling me to attend concerts and meet people I did not really want to meet. I told her it was cruel when I had got used to seeing my mother more often (and at home) and then I'm prevented from seeing her for months on end. Now I didn't know whether I was coming or going! Am I staying or am I leaving? Nobody seemed to care about what this was doing to me. Nobody prepared me; nobody explained to me...this was just the horrible way it was...I wasn't supposed to know or understand what was going on, but I was expected to adapt to the whims and conflicts of the adults arounds me, no matter how miserable and unhappy their actions made me.

I increasingly worked myself up into such a temper that the Giannatasio family did not know what to do with me. They must at times have asked themselves was it worth having me. Fanny always sympathised, put her arms around me, and assured me things would get better. I didn't believe her. But she was right. Things would get better, but they would get much, much worse for my uncle, and for Fanny herself. The finger of guilt would inevitably point at me.

Chapter 20

On June 9th 1817, my uncle received an invitation from the London Philharmonic Society to travel to England in the coming winter and perform two new symphonies. One of those was meant to be his great ninth symphony which he had been working on and off for years (it would take another seven years for completion). By the autumn, despite all his frustrations and preoccupations with me and the Institute, there were clear signs that he was emerging from the compositional doldrums of the past two years. His only significant work in the previous year (1816) had been the piano sonata in A, but by the end of 1817, he was immersed in the *Hammerklavier* sonata in B-flat. It was the longest and most challenging sonata he had ever written, the one that I would become more familiar with than any other; it would not be completed until the summer of 1818.

The offer from the Philharmonic Society, a basic 300 guineas with the prospect of additional supplementary earnings, was very welcome; it coincided with another hefty devaluation of the Austrian currency which greatly reduced the value of his annuities. His main challenge now was to settle the matter of my education, meaning getting me out of the Institute before he began preparing in earnest for the London trip.

But there was another problem outstanding, indeed, worsening: his ill-health, particularly the audible, visible inflammatory catarrh which he had been enduring for nearly a year. He often looked pained and exhausted after bouts of protracted coughing that failed to shift the thick phlegm gathered in his lungs (it reminded me of the last dying days of my father). All this time his deafness too, was worsening, causing him much exasperation in unplanned encounters, trying to understand and be understood. In virtually every letter he wrote throughout the year 1817 he

felt the need to mention one or more of his ailments: in a letter written in June to his friend Countess Erdödy he listed them all! That made it a very long letter. The details are excruciating; he also tells her that he is *depressed, cash-stricken and helpless*, but then unconvincingly declares that he is not asking for a handout, nor would he accept one if she offered it!

In letters to Zmeskall in July and August, he laments that *ill-health* and *servants* are driving him to the edge:

I really am in despair because I am condemned by my defective hearing to spend the greater part of my life with this most odious class of people and to be in some degree dependent on them.

I am...tempted to put an end to my life...If my condition does not change...instead of being in London, I shall probably be in my grave.

Yet two months later, on the 1st November, despite having made little or no progress on either his health or his servants, he resolutely wrote to Giannatasio, informing him:

I shall be unable to leave Karl at the Institute any longer than to the end of this quarter (because of) my straightened circumstances... I should wish that you would recognise my intention herein as true and pure.

Giannatasio responded in a way that exposed my uncle's intention as being *not* wholly *true* and *pure*: he kindly offered to keep me at the Institute for a lower cost! This put my uncle in something of a quandary. He wrote back thanking Giannatasio for the offer, but then quickly diverted onto a series of unrelated matters. These included my *Queen of the Night* mother (who, he claimed, was potentially dangerous to me, an irresponsible, negligent

woman, forever indulging in defamatory gossip!). He absolves himself of any responsibility for keeping us apart:

She never makes contact with me or writes to me so I feel under no obligation to arrange meetings between her and her son.

Everyone at the Institute knew that my mother made countless pleas in writing to see me. My uncle ignored them, probably assuaging his conscience that it was a just punishment for her betrayal.

The pretence of reconciliation and cooperation with the Giannatasio family continued as he simultaneously ridiculed them and determinedly planned my departure from them. In a letter to Nanette Streicher, he swore her to secrecy about his efforts to find a private tutor. He wrote again to Giannatasio on the 6th of January, informing him that he was definitely removing me at the end of the month. He then deals with Giannatasio's offer of a reduced rate in costs, refusing it with his usual bogus gratitude and praise:

My hands are tied with regard to your...proposal...if I accepted it, my further projects for Karl's benefit would be entirely frustrated, but I sincerely thank you for your kind intentions...I have great things in mind for him, especially after the excellence of your guidance and care in the last two years.

In the same letter, he says he may be away at the end of the month but will designate someone to accompany me home from the Institute. He hopes that Giannatasio will *not* think it peculiar. With my departure imminent, he writes something else which probably *did* sound peculiar:

I will not be coming myself to collect Karl, as it would be a kind of leave-taking; this I have always avoided.

What he actually needed to *avoid* was the sight of me being kissed, hugged and embraced - with lots of tears thrown in - by the Giannatasio women in particular. Fanny was not taken in by his excuses and explanations:

At the end of this month, we will have to say farewell to Karl and with his leaving us an important link which binds us to our dear friend, Beethoven, who has so recently caused us so much trouble, will be broken. I failed to recognise at first why this should give me such acute pain. But I know now that it was the manner in which it was done. His polite but cold and formal letters, expressing not one iota of interest or affection for us, has caused me more pain than I care to admit. He informs my father that Karl will be fetched at the time of his departure because he himself will probably be away. The tone of his letter shows the utter lack of regard for our feelings or for any opinion we have about what he is doing.

The flurry of letter and diary-writing expressing my uncle's frustration, Giannatasio's efforts to facilitate him, and Fanny's shock, horror and hurt on reading what he has written, was all very sad. But it was exclusively about the adults. They might have thought it was ultimately about me, but there is nothing in their exchanges to suggest that they were aware of or cared about what I was feeling. My uncle's repetitive reference to *Karl's interests* may have indicated good intent, but the reality was that having been my guardian for nearly two years, he still had no insight into what my feelings, interests and needs truly were; he still didn't know that in making my mother suffer, he made me suffer even more.

Days before I was due to leave the Institute, he summoned me to his home and sent one of his servants, Lukas, to collect me. I was beginning to believe that this

was my destiny: always to be subject to the unknown, never knowing what adults were preparing for me; never knowing for certain whether I would ever see my mother again. If I was going to live with my uncle, which seemed imminent now, life was going to be even more unpredictable and unsettling, and I would be powerless to do anything about it. Little wonder I was indifferent to the prospect of yet another interminably boring appointment with him: it was the indifference of resignation.

Lukas was in his thirties. He had a friendly disposition, smiling and greeting me warmly when Fanny introduced us. I made the effort to reciprocate, but I'm sure he recognised that I simply didn't care. I remembered seeing him in my uncle's home about two months previously, which made him something of a veteran for having stayed so long. I thought I detected a little anxiety in his eyes and movement, as though he wanted to complete this onerous task as quickly as possible. I would later learn that he was instructed not to converse with me, an instruction that he ignored as soon as we were out of sight of the Institute. Then he seemed more relaxed.

'Are you glad to be out, Karl?' he asked, with a familiarity that took me by surprise.

I shook my head wearily, having no wish to explain my troubles to another adult; every adult in the Institute knew of my *troubles* but were unable to do anything about them.

He walked at a brisk pace and I had difficulty keeping up with him.

'Do you play the piano too...? You must play well. Your uncle is famous.'

This annoyed me intensely. It's what everybody I met, said. He must have known I played. Why did he feel he had to ask fatuous questions to make conversation? He wasn't even looking at me for an answer when I nodded

fractionally to register my complaint. He seemed to have something else on his mind.

We walked through Stadtpark and along the bank of the river. I expected him to turn right soon, to get to my uncle's residence in Landstrasse. But he turned left and headed for the city centre. I didn't recognise the route he had chosen yet I had a growing sense of familiarity in the streets and alleyways we walked along. For the first time I looked up at him with more than a passing interest. His focus remained fixed straight ahead, and he had that look of seriousness that deterred me from interrupting his thoughts. But when I knew we were only about five minutes away from my mother's home I could contain myself no longer. He knew it and pre-empted my excitable inquiry:

'Yes Karl...I'm taking you for a visit to...I think you know who...but it's got to be a very short visit...and you tell no one; do you understand?' He pressed his forefinger to his lips.

I looked at him wide-eyed and with a gaping mouth, so overcome I could not speak. Nor could I recover as his pace was quickening all the time. Yet his words filled me with joyous expectancy. *Will she be there*, I had to ask him, but I dared not; she had to be there!

When we reached the main front entrance of my home, the door had been left ajar. He glanced nervously to his left and right just before we entered. My mother stood in the hallway with both hands outstretched towards me. I ran into her arms and she drew me into her breasts, her sweet fragrances suffusing me. Neither of us spoke for a few moments. We just held each other tightly. Her cheeks were warm in a warm house; mine were chilly coming in from a January cold, but she didn't mind.

Lukas sat in the hallway as my mother led me into our parlour.

'Half an hour', he said to her earnestly. She turned to him and nodded.

She sat with her arm around me on the parlour settee. 'Did you think I had forgotten you?' she asked; 'you might well have after all this time.'

Lots of thoughts flashed through my mind but I didn't feel like talking. Even uttering a single word would have intruded into this longed-for intimacy. I shook my head, consciously not revealing there were occasions of misery when I really did think of that possibility.

'They would not let me see you or write to you...', she said emphatically; 'they would not even tell how you were.'

On my uncle's instructions that had to be, I thought, a frisson of resentment running through me.

'No matter how many times I begged them...' she added.

She needed to tell me that and I knew it had to be true; it was the reason why my own painful pleas must have discomfited staff who told me nothing yet had probably been shown her begging letters the day before. She hadn't forgotten me. She must have spent hours and days preparing to see me. She must have frequently reconnoitred my uncle's residence watching his servants come and go; she must have chosen Lukas, someone her female guile told her would be approachable. She must have contrived some *chance* meeting with him, got to know him, told him of *our* plight, and won him over or bribed him...or both.

But I wasn't thinking of things like that just now; I was still luxuriating in her arms and happy to remain there forever in the warmth of her embrace. 'When...?' I asked her, consciously adopting a more cryptic style and knowing that she would instantly understand.

'I can't say, but the sooner you live in his home the easier it will be to see you again.'

That wasn't precise enough! It was full of chance and uncertainty, which had long blighted my life. 'Why can't Lukas bring me again next week?'

'We'll have to see what next week brings', she said, making me think for a moment about the complexity and

risk of the enterprise, and that so much depended upon opportunities that might arise.

It didn't depend on me, that's for sure. I was merely the recipient of its pleasures, and enormously grateful. It could be suddenly sprung on me again as it was just twenty minutes ago. Or perhaps circumstances would compel my mother and Lukas (or some other servant, or servants) to tell me in advance so that I would be ready to do as they instructed.

Our thirty minutes were coming to an end and Lukas had twice knocked our parlour door, the second time with an audible impatience. My mother wasted no time in preparing me to leave, kneeling on one knee, straightening my wrinkled coat and trousers, combing my hair, and encircling me with her arms again. 'Remember', she said; 'let him know you'll be glad to live with him...it'll make it easier for us both.'

When she first said that months ago I didn't fully understand. I did now.

We arrived at my uncle's apartment in Landstrasse to find him standing on the fourth-floor landing, leaning over a rail, enthusiastically welcoming me: 'Karl...my son...come up!' he shouted, loud enough for any of his neighbours to hear. His bright smile widened and my guilt intensified as I got nearer to him. The absence of light made his face look darker, but I noticed that his usually fiery, bluish-grey, piercing eyes were calm and unthreatening. He had a look on his face which suggested he was the bearer of good news but was not entirely confident it would be received as such. I was more than surprised to see that he had made some effort to spruce himself, having shaved and brushed his hair, and wearing a stylish, unruffled morning coat made of longhaired grey fabric.

His embrace, which I used to dread but had learnt to live with, was of shorter duration than usual, because he was keen to get me inside and tell me...what I already knew

(apart from my mother's intrigues, I had picked up so many vibes in previous weeks from Fanny and other members of staff that I would be leaving the Institute very soon). Lukas left us and I followed my uncle through a hallway, turning left at the second doorway into his studio. This was dominated by his French Érard upright piano that could barely be seen underneath a mountain of manuscripts and scores covering many of the ivory keys and spilling onto the floor. The view he had from the huge single window was impressive, taking in most of the Mölkerbastei area, the university, a section of the Glacis outside the walls and Vienna's north-western suburbs; beyond that were the countless rolling vineyards stretching all the way to surrounding forested hills. A well-worn armchair which, I'm sure, functioned often as a bed, had been positioned near the window. Prominently centred above the hearth was a life-sized portrait of his grandfather, Kapellmeister Ludwig van Beethoven. He was of short stature, though muscular, his face well proportioned, his unblemished skin sharply contrasting with the pock marks of his grandson. His eyes pierced through me. He sat on a stool, wearing a fur cape with miniature serpent embellishment, and a velvet red and black hat. He held a scroll of music in his right hand. He looked both authoritative and significant (I would see this portrait taking pride of place in every accommodation I later shared with my uncle).

On the left side of the hearth was an ornamental tassel at the end of a thick platted bell cord, which ran through numerous walls and rooms to the servant's quarters: it enabled him to summon his servants at any moment without having to bellow at them; I'm sure they appreciated it too.

'How are you, Karl...my son?' he asked, pointedly shepherding me to his piano stool. I'm sure he had often envisaged me sitting there practicing every day, and he accelerating my journey towards excellence! He sat on his armchair, peering at me proudly.

‘I’m well, uncle’, I said, which I wasn’t: my sense of guilt was discomfoting, and there was fear in my heart because I couldn’t help thinking of what might happen if he knew.

‘Do you like my apartment?’ he asked.

I didn’t like the clutter and the chaos of his studio, but I felt obliged to make a favourable comment. Nodding towards the window I said: ‘The view is lovely.’ I knew he couldn’t hear me, but, given our proximity, he could easily lipread me. I still had no inclination to shout at him; my voice remained boyishly weak, and shouting to make oneself heard was still alien to me.

Maybe he had finally recognised that, because, to my great surprise, he produced a notebook and pencil, saying: ‘My hearing is much worse, Karl; I need you to write in this notebook whatever replies you give me; I don’t want to miss anything you may say to me...can you do that?’

‘Yes uncle.’

I reached out for both items. I was quite taken back by this first admission of his hearing difficulty, and, insofar as I was aware, his first use of a conversation book, hundreds of which he would increasingly depend upon for the rest of his life. He had been lipreading most of what I said for nearly two years now, not with any great difficulty, I thought. In retrospect though, our conversations had always been brief and stilted, my responses monosyllabic, and perhaps he was seeking something more substantive in reply to the pronouncement he was about to make.

‘You will leave the Institute on Saturday and join me here.’ He paused a few seconds, staring at me to gauge my reaction. ‘You will not need to share your bedroom as you do now; you will have your own bedroom. You can practice on this piano any time. You can read any books that interest you on my shelves. You will have private tutors; you will still continue piano lessons with Mr Czerny and myself, and you and I will both have more time to go to the best concerts

and hear the best musicians...now what have you to say, Karl? Write it down.'

He watched me eagerly as I began to write.

The guilty tension which had spread through me drained away. It wasn't only because I was feeling that little bit safer, feeling more confident that he had no inkling whatsoever of what was going on around him, but also, his offering me the novelty of silence: he was releasing me from the burdens of speaking to him, of raising my voice so that I could be heard.

I cannot tell you just how much this meant to me. It was nothing short of a liberation! From now on, communicating with him was going to be easier. In responding to him in writing, I would be spared the discomfort of having to look into his piercing grey-blue eyes; I would have my head lowered in writing, and he would have his head lowered in reading it. I would have more time to think as I wrote; if I wrote something that then looked to me to be inappropriate or provocative, I could simply scribble over it and start again without having to explain to him; that was preferable to the excruciatingly difficult task of making myself heard; of unintentionally *saying* the wrong thing then trying to stutter and stammer my way out of it. Writing would give me a confidence and control in communicating with him that speech would never permit.

This was turning out to be an exceptionally good day. I had spent more than thirty precious minutes with my mother which had been totally unexpected; I had learnt that she had established a liaison of some kind with a servant (or servants) which would ensure more meetings in the future, and now...a way of communicating without stress!

I had never forgotten the occasion in February 1816 when he instructed me to write the lie he made me tell Giannatasio on the day before I started at the Institute: '*I am very glad to come to you*'. With a minor addition those words were convenient at this moment in time; I wrote:

Thank you, uncle.

I am very glad to come to you and look forward to living here.

I handed the conversation book back and watched him. He read it and beamed like a child.

‘Good...good! I will arrange for a friend to collect you and your belongings on Saturday.’

What did that mean? Was he going to be away when I arrived? And who was the *friend*? He certainly couldn’t have meant a servant. He didn’t have servants who were friends. I was alarmed enough by this news to impulsively gesticulate my request to write a response.

I wrote and glanced at him as I returned his book, hoping my questions would not vex him. I think he liked what he read, interpreting my inquiry about his whereabouts on the day I leave the Institute as a disappointment that he might be away! He *reassured* me that he would be here in his home when I arrived, contrary to what he had told Giannatasio initially. On the second question about the identity of the caller, he said:

‘My young friend Anton Schindler has kindly offered to collect you’.

The name meant nothing to me then, but I didn’t feel bold enough to inquire who or what Anton Schindler was.

‘You met him before’, he said, ‘where you used to live.’

I had to think hard; it might have been easier had he said *in your mother’s home, when I took you there to see her*. Now I remembered: that lanky, austere, bespectacled, young man, who had not been introduced to us, and who sat silent and expressionless throughout my return, silent I’m sure, because my uncle had instructed him to be so.

‘Anton will be at the Institute at 9 o’clock’, he said.

I nodded approvingly and said ‘thank you’ loudly.

He showed me around his apartment which was more spacious than his previous residences in Gärtnergasse and Seilerstätte. My bedroom was at the side of the building and

did not command much of a view, but it contrasted favourably with his chaotic, litter-strewn studio. It was sparsely furnished though spic and span. It had a single bed centrally placed, opposite an open fireplace already prepared with firewood. A small walnut almirah stood in one recess, two bookshelves in another; the shelves were sufficiently low for my convenience and full of musical texts. A school desk and chair were placed below the window. Everything seemed so unused and new, the room itself obviously the result of much cleaning and preparedness. I was pleasantly surprised, and my uncle noticed. I thanked him again.

As we left the room, Lukas hurriedly passed by. Our eyes met for a split second, causing a slight rippling tremor of fear to rush through me. Then, as though he knew he had committed some transgression by being there, he pointedly looked away from me with his head lowered; he never spoke, and my uncle appeared to ignore him which was a relief.

This brief encounter with Lukas in the presence of my uncle unsettled me. I could sense my uncle's contempt and disregard for his servants and of the fear he instilled in them, but there was also a foretaste of something I had not considered: the secrecy and the tensions inevitable each time a clandestine visit to my mother was arranged. The events of the day which I previously described as *precious*, *joyous* and *exceptionally good* were rapidly being forgotten about.

I did not sleep well that night. I tossed and turned unable to relieve myself of a strange, disturbing, yet not fully formed consciousness of what was happening to me. I knew now that I was part of a conspiracy that had made a fool of my uncle; we had lied to him, deceived him and betrayed him, and my mother and I had indulged in the fruits of victory, the pleasure of being with each other, albeit for the briefest of thirty minutes. Wasn't this what my mother had

conspired to do? Wasn't this the *plan* I thought was irresistibly appealing: its secrecy, its riskiness, and not least as it then seemed to me, its fairness and justice in the face of my uncle's unreasonableness?

I would have many more sleepless nights dwelling on this day, when the unseen, unheard process of corrupting me initiated by my mother and now involving one of my uncle's servants, reached the point of no return. Neither of them were aware that they were corrupting me, nor of its consequences. Both of them probably thought that I was as much a victim of my uncle's behaviour as they were themselves, and that they were doing me a service in sabotaging his efforts to keep my mother and I apart. In reality, they were consolidating the already dubious moral framework that circumstances had compelled me, and me alone, to erect. When I started lying, deceiving and manipulating nearly two years before, I did so with trepidation; I feared my uncle finding out and I feared God's retribution. I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I felt that I had to do it and *felt* that it was right. I retained these moral ambiguities for some time after, but their hold over me weakened. They weakened considerably more each time I read *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, my precious book, a constant reminder of my resistance. Fantastical though the stories were, they were often about children I easily identified with: children who sometimes lied or deceived or manipulated in order to survive, just as I was doing; they often ran away which I was not (yet) capable of doing; invariably they emerged triumphant because they were befriended by good people who helped to rescue them. When my mother captivated me with her *plan*, and, this morning, activated it with Lukas, I had no moral qualms at all about lying and deceiving. My mother and my uncle's servant were doing it and they were my *good* people rescuing me. I was part of their conspiracy and they were dependent on my unspoken approval for lying and

deceiving which I was more than willing to give. It seemed to be the natural, instinctive thing to do. It is what *Hansel and Grethel* would have done, and *Cinderella* and *Little brother* and *Little sister*, and *Snow White*... God didn't come into it at all.

Yet my tossing and turning and my continuous sleepless nights indicated that I was far from being at peace within myself. The prospect of daily intrigues and deceptions had excited me, but now when I thought of living with my uncle I grew fearful again. Not *guilty*, but fearful! Contrary to my mother's assurances that he often wasn't at home, I knew now that there would still be periods during which I would be in close proximity with him, and it would be then that I would be most burdened and fearful, thinking...knowing that I was at the centre of a conspiracy that, should he have found out, would have devastated him. The extent to which he was being duped can be gauged by the letter he wrote to Nanette Streicher. He told her I'd be leaving the Institute on the following day and that he was wrong in thinking that I might have wanted to remain there; that I am in great form, and much livelier than usual, and that I show him my love and affection every moment!

I was obviously a much better actor than I gave myself credit for! I had never shown him genuine love or affection because I never felt either of those feelings for him. His delusion in this regard increased the risks of what I was doing. If he discovered what was going on, his humiliation and rage would know no bounds. He would see it as a wicked conspiracy that sabotaged his two main goals: ensuring that my mother would never have any influence in my life and turning me into a musician and scholar worthy of the name of Beethoven. He would attack and sack any servant involved. He would redouble his efforts to ensure my mother didn't have access of any kind. Then he would turn his attention to me, and I would be alone...and still be living with him!

Chapter 21

These were not ideal conditions for an eleven-year-old to switch homes: moving from the care of the Giannatasios and their staff to the delusionary, neurotic world of a deaf genius constantly at war with my mother and his servants. But for my uncle, who had striven for nearly two years to enable me to live with him, his hopes often dashed by unforeseen circumstances, his goal was now about to be achieved. It coincided with another happy event: he was about to receive a very special gift, a sparkingly new grand piano from the reputable British manufacturer, *Broadwood*. He must have felt that fate was at last being kind to him.

Schindler came to collect me on a drab Saturday. My farewells, hugs and kisses with the Giannatasios clearly embarrassed him: he could not wait to get my luggage on board the two-seater carriage he had ordered. I was relieved to sit adjacent to him, rather than having to face him; I suspect he was relieved too, for he hardly spoke a word thereafter.

I don't know why I suddenly spoke to him; maybe I was getting bored: the journey was boring, the streets boringly familiar; the weather, low, dark grey January clouds, drearily dull. Maybe I spoke to him because I knew nothing about him and I believed that he knew nothing about me, therefore posed no threat to me.

'Do you work for my uncle?' I asked him, as I gazed through the window of the carriage.

The question startled him; I could feel him stiffening and turning his head to look down on me – he was unusually tall and skinny.

'I am a lawyer-in-training', he said, emphatically; I'm employed in the office of Attorney Doctor J. B. Bach.

It sounded impressive, and whatever it meant, his formal black dress and manner accentuated his self-importance.

When I turned to look up at him, I'm sure I detected resentment in the eyes looking down on me; they were cold, unfriendly eyes magnified by tiny spectacles. His tightly shut lips curled downwards at either end, possibly the result of a life-time's suppression of any tendency to smile. His was an unattractive face, less ugly than my uncle's face it should be said, but more sternly rigid and utterly expressionless; it was wholly compatible with the heavy cloud-laden sky above.

Schindler first met my uncle in April, 1814, when he was eighteen. That was the year public adulation for my uncle was at its height. Schindler however, had been a devotee long before that as he made clear in the biography he would write 20 years later, the first Beethoven biography, which I would read with a mixture of incredulity and hilarity. But his reverence for my uncle was sincere:

The desire to be able to stand for even a moment beside the man whose works had for several years inspired me with the greatest reverence for their author was now to be so unexpectedly and strangely realised.

Thereafter, he sought every opportunity to acquaint himself with my uncle. From 1816 onwards, they met numerous times at musical events (Schindler was an aspiring violinist) and popular taverns like *The Flowerpot* and *The White Swan*. I sometimes had the misfortune of being with both of them when they attended concerts.

Schindler then, was the perfect choice to accompany me from the Institute, but not just because he was willing to carry out whatever task my uncle assigned to him, but because he would do it discreetly and unquestioningly. My uncle could have asked any one of his friends familiar with the saga of my stay at the Institute, to accompany me, but they surely would have asked the question: why was he not

doing so himself on what was a momentous day for both of us? He had already lied twice about this and no doubt would have done so again. But there was no possibility of a smitten Schlinder barely out of his youth asking him that same question.

A conspicuous silence followed which I'm sure was the intention of his not very subtle putdown. It occurred to me that he did share at least one characteristic with my uncle; he was not relaxed in the company of children and he didn't seem to know how to communicate with me. I had no enthusiasm for making the effort to engage with him again, but I was curious and a little anxious to find out whether or not he was living with my uncle. It was a relief to see him quickly depart from the residence only minutes after he deposited me there.

My uncle was in good spirits and subjected me to a longer-than-usual embrace when he came upon me in the vestibule. That only served to increase my tension, his stocky frame and powerful arms enfolding me, reminding me of the conspiracy of which I was a part, and of the ease with which he might crush me if he found out. His servants were nowhere to be seen, which I found puzzling; I had expected them to be lined up to be introduced to me; I wanted to be reassured by the presence of familiar faces. Only when he had showered me with expressions of love and good cheer, did he ring for a servant to carry my luggage and lead me to my room. It was Lukas who had the pleasure of doing that.

'Hello Karl', he said when my uncle left us; 'how was Mr Schindler?'

I was unprepared for the question and sensed some haste and irony in it; he'd obviously been keen to ask me. 'He didn't say much', I replied.

'He's not one of us...'

'I know; I asked him did he work for my uncle. He said he's a lawyer.'

‘Don’t ever let him know...what you and I know, Karl. He’d tell your uncle immediately.’

‘I won’t.’

I was pleased that Schindler was not a part of the conspiracy, well imagining him hurrying to my uncle to tell anything and everything. I was dying to ask Lukas was anybody else involved or knew about it. ‘Who else is here...working for my uncle?’ I asked him, when he had his back turned to me, and was placing my trunk on the bed.

‘Uuuuff! You’ve missed a lot of the fun! Baberl has gone...for the sake of her life! Lea is due to leave tomorrow for the same reason. He has a new cook called Peppi, and a new kitchen maid called Alina who’s starting on Monday. You’ll like Alina; she’s not much older than you; she helps in the kitchen and does the laundry.’

He paused then and turned round to me. ‘I think they’ll be okay’, he said, and winked.

That made me smile.

It saddened me though didn’t surprise me that Baberl had gone and that Lea was due to leave tomorrow; I had already witnessed my uncle ferociously arguing with them, insulting them and accusing them both of theft; the flareups and walkouts had been going on for months. This constant tumult, the change of staff and the necessity of increasing the number of staff *for my benefit* must have cost him dearly. The financial burden would increasingly preoccupy him, and he would divulge it to many of his friends, sometimes beggily. But for now he appeared and sounded like a happy man.

Lukas left me to unpack without mentioning my mother or our next rendezvous. I didn’t mind. I knew he would tell me in due course, probably at the last moment, a strategy that minimized the risk of exposure. I only had to wait six days, to the following Friday, a day on which my tutor was off, and my uncle was in the city on business. It took ten minutes for Lukas to get me to my mother - how right she

was when she had remarked on how near we now were to each other. Over the next month, I saw her on average once a week, the duration of my stay increasing each time. The prospect of seeing her regularly under clandestine conditions like these had once kept me awake night after night tortured by the triple demons of sin, guilt and fear. But all that emotional and moral ferment weakened by the day. I now felt that what I was doing I was more than entitled to do, having been deprived of seeing my mother during the previous six months. My only preoccupations now were not being caught, and being certain of which members of the household staff could be relied upon. Lukas would surely at some point let me know.

My uncle wrote to Nanette Streicher after I joined him, telling her that he did not permit me to exit the house for a few days at least. It must have read like a punishment of sorts, which it wasn't: it was an attempt to delay my mother's *discovery* that I had arrived in his home! But that was based on a fallacy which she cunningly sustained, even to the extent of writing letters to him and delivering them to the Institute to pass on, pleading with staff while she was there to let her know where her son was. She knew precisely where I was.

How did he expect me to be contentedly confined within his four walls, isolated from all my former peers as well as my mother? In ordinary circumstances, this would quickly have become intolerable for any eleven-year-old. But these were not *ordinary* circumstances, nor was I a typical eleven-year-old. I didn't care what restrictions he decreed, because I was convinced they could all be circumvented with Lukas's help. So, I was *patient, well-behaved, obedient, submissive* and *attentive*. Any normal parent would have realised I was up to something!

I need not have been so devious. Nor did I have to rely on my uncle making business trips in order that I saw my mother. As I quickly discovered (and the servants were only

too aware) he was immersed in his composing most days, oblivious to the world around him, sometimes forgetting the meals that had been cooked for him. In the same letter to Nanette he expressed gratitude to the Lord for enabling him once again to commit himself wholly to his art, and making everything else in his life subservient to it. He became totally engrossed in completing his *Hammerklavier* sonata. He had his *precious son* with him, no longer under the influence of those *awful* Giannatasios. His good-for-nothing sister-in-law, he believed, didn't even know where her son was. He felt in control again, at peace within himself. Even his physical ailments apparently eased off: his letters and diary for that brief two-to-three-month period following my arrival were distinctly lacking the usual self-pitying accounts of his suffering. These were times when I felt I could have spent the whole day with my mother without him knowing: no one would have dared interrupt him to report me missing! But I had no intention of putting that to the test: the ideal time for my escapades remained during his absences, when he assumed that I would be strictly adhering to whatever studies and practices he had decreed.

The day after I arrived he introduced me to Gruber the tutor and told me I would receive tuition three days per week. It was a poor substitute for residence in the Institute, where some learning, not just academic, was going on every day. Gruber was much younger than my uncle, distinctly bookish-looking, small, rotund and bearded, with an extravagant lorgnette hanging from his breast pocket. I don't know what particular qualities of character he had which appealed to my uncle, or who recommended him (he too was a bachelor). I quickly gained the impression that he wasn't really all that interested in my tuition, that he was uncomfortable in looking me straight in the face, and that whatever his objectives were, establishing a rapport was not something he had thought of. My priority was the degree to

which he might wittingly or unwittingly impede me seeing my mother. Lukas ensured our rendezvous occurred only on the days Gruber was off.

‘Can I go on my own the next time?’ I asked Lukas one Friday morning as we returned.

The startled look on his face gave way to curiosity.

‘Why do you want to do that?’

I shrugged my shoulders. I just wanted to do it and I sensed that he was getting tired of taking me.

‘I need to ask your mother’, he said.

I smiled secretly to myself: I had already asked her and she’d consented. How could she do otherwise than welcome the prospect of not having Lukas hanging about her hallway, anxiously clockwatching?

I ran alone to my mother that first morning, quickly forgetting Lukas’s warning of the three-hour limit he had imposed. But I didn’t run back! I meandered. For the first time in years I walked freely on the streets of my city, unchaperoned, drawn inevitably to its bastions and walls (or what remained of them after the French departed and bombarded them), to its spectacular new Palace Gate The Burgtor, bigger and grander than the original that Napoleon obviously took delight in demolishing. Then through the Gate to the narrow passages that pulsed like veins, onto the bustling centre of the city which I had not seen since before my father died. I walked slowly along the busiest thoroughfare, The Kärntnerstrasse – I could hardly walk faster, so teeming was it with bodies and carts and wagons and donkeys and horses, dogs and cats. It seemed as though the entire population of our city was there, though not on the move, with many milling around, propping up walls, and many more who lived in the street, leaning on their balconies, motionless spectators of the enormous commotion below. Ironmongers had their shops on the street, and the freight wagons that served them caused havoc and drew curses from the general traffic. Hundreds

of merchants and craftsmen sold their wares from less obtrusive makeshift constructs.

I had made my way, intriguingly but with difficulty, through about one third of the length of The Kärntnerstrasse. I wanted to get to the end of it, to Stephensplatz and St Stephen's, but my fascination with this sprawling mass of humanity in all its density and cacophony gave way to an overpowering claustrophobia and stench: men and women surrounded me, towered over me, increasingly pressed into me, brushed past me, and occasionally shunted me out of the way. Some of the bodies reeked of sweat; many of the hands that touched me were unclean. The remnants of countless piles of horse manure, dog turds, and human excrement thrown from balconies the night before had been well and truly splattered and flattened under dozens of carriage wheels and thousands of human feet, probably including my own. Worse than all of that was the pungent, penetrating whiff of urine, rotting flesh and stagnant water of nearby tanneries: I had to leave Kärntnerstrasse!

I turned right into Weihburggasse then left along Churhausgasse to the rear of our iconic St. Stephen's. I had passed it many times, too young to be interested or inspired, but here I felt myself dwarfed, overawed by its sheer size and dominance. I wandered slowly round to the main entrance where there was a steady trickle of sightseers and some street vendors; then to the South-eastern entrance to gaze slowly upwards at its strikingly patterned roof, its Gothic spire, so tall that by the time my eyes were focussing on the cross of its pinnacle my neck was sore. I had never been inside the cathedral, and I did not feel confident enough to make my way in now.

But I had peered over the city walls before and wanted to do so again from the vantage point of Stubenbastie, only 200 metres from St Stephen's. Our history lessons repetitively taught us about the many marauding hordes

encamped in the expansive Glacis below, besieging our city, which, until Napoleon came along, had remained impregnable. I stood there imagining past skirmishes and battles. Somehow the history was more interesting to me than the relative beauty, peace and order of the day: thousands of neatly spaced trees and shrubberies lining roads and lanes furnished with lanterns. Genteel folk in all their finery gathered around fountains in the Stadpark area, and patiently queued at marquees selling refreshments. There was a constant two-way flow of people - workers, residents, visitors - on foot and in carriages, making their way in and out of the Gate below me. I could have stood there gazing and imagining all day long.

This escapade is indelibly imprinted in my memory for one very special reason: I cannot remember any other occasion in the two years since I had been taken from my mother when I was *not* preoccupied with my own woes! During those three or four hours I may have felt momentarily overwhelmed by the stench of The Kärntnerstrasse, but I never once had an unpleasant thought about myself; never felt self-pity or despair, never worried about retribution from my uncle who I now regarded as much a worthy victim of my dishonesty and deceit as I had been a victim of his neurotic obsessions and his cruelty. I felt this escapade would be the first of many, and although mentally and physically exhausted, I felt exhilarated too. I rushed home not out of fear that my uncle may have returned but because of an intoxicating sense of freedom in the realisation that there was a great big, wide and wonderful world outside of my uncle and his music, and his delusionary ambitions for me.

Chapter 22

The only person I wanted to see as I dashed noisily along our street was Lukas: to apologise to him for being late, to be reassured by him that everything was all right, and also, if he might listen to me, to regale him with the details of my adventure. But something terrible happened as I approached the house: I heard my uncle *playing*...or, more accurately *battering* his piano intermittingly, trying to hear with the help of a metal sound amplifier attached to it; trying to edit, to perfect each phrase of his gargantuan *Hammerklavier* sonata. I had heard him batter his piano many times before, but that didn't prevent me from believing that at this particular moment he was playing violently and angrily, and that I was the cause.

Something had brought him home earlier than anticipated. I would have been the first person he sought out. He must have quickly found out that I was missing. What might he do to me? He might attack me and interrogate me and force me to reveal the extent of the conspiracy which had brought this situation about. Should I run? Was there a possibility that he knew nothing? that he had returned so keen to get into his studio and try out anyone of the myriad of musical ideas that ceaselessly floated around his head all day long. Lukas would know. I must see Lukas before I see my uncle or he sees me.

I slowly and quietly crawled up the two flights of stairs leading to the main entrance, as though I had forgotten he was deaf and was trying not to disturb him!

His piano-playing got louder and more threatening to me. When I stepped into the vestibule, I was praying that Lukas would be there. But there was no one there. I moved quickly along the hall past his studio, to the kitchen at the other end. Peppi and Alina were there; my appearance startled them. 'Where's Lukas?' I asked.

Peppi stared at me. She was usually a bubbly woman with a heart-warming smile but her face at this moment was full of anxiety. Alina could not bear to look at me.

‘Where’s Lukas?’ I repeated.

‘He’s gone’, said Peppi...the master threw him out!’

The words struck me like a bolt of lightning. I turned pale. The thought that I should run crossed my mind again...run back to my mother; but I was momentarily paralysed. Neither Peppi nor Alina knew what to say to me. Neither of them was capable of comforting me. It was obvious they had witnessed a terrible confrontation, a violent one most likely, and they still hadn’t recovered.

I desperately wanted to ask Peppi why he had thrown Lukas out but I dreaded her reply. I turned on my heels, ran to my room and threw myself on the bed. I could still hear him playing...thumping! Would he, I fearfully thought, be thumping me with his fists in a few minutes time: he often hit my knuckles with a pencil during lessons and occasionally clipped me around the ear, but if he punched me I’m sure he would have knocked me out cold...or worse!

What had he done to poor Lukas, I asked myself. I’m sure Lukas had punches and missiles thrown at him. But what exactly did my uncle find out? What did Lukas tell him? Did he tell him everything? Or tell him nothing: pleading ignorance of my whereabouts, my forbidden destination. Perhaps I could lie myself and deny everything. I could say I had gone for a walk...to the park...to the city’s walls... admit to staying too long and that was it! Everyone did that.

A knock on the door made me jump. I knew it could not be my uncle because he would never have knocked my door, and, besides, I could still hear him at the piano. Could it be Lukas? Would he have dared to come back to tell me what to say? I got off my bed and opened the door. Peppi stood there, no less anxious and fear-laden as myself.

‘Tell him the truth...’ she whispered; ‘he already knows!’ She hurried away, determined I thought, to get back to her kitchen before my uncle emerged. But she turned round before being out of sight and said: ‘he told me to tell him when you returned’.

I’m sure he did, and we both knew if she did not obey that instruction, she would suffer. As I stood at my open bedroom door, I heard her knocking my uncle’s studio door. She must have known he would never hear her timid knock. She knocked louder and louder each time the piano ceased being played, but still he couldn’t hear. My heart beat faster. I pitied her and I feared for myself. I ran down to the studio door and told her to remain where she was. I was the only person permitted to enter his studio; I knocked futilely before opening the door. There he was engrossed in his *Hammerklavier*. He would catch sight of us eventually when he raised his eyes. He would see us both, with Peppi still standing at the open door, *obeying* his instruction, not just informing him of my arrival but *delivering* me to him. This was neither a kind nor self-sacrificial act on my part to rescue Peppi; I wanted her to be close to me at the moment he saw me; perhaps...just perhaps, it might dampen his wrath!

It didn’t! He charged from the piano to the door uttering just one single accusatory word: ‘YOU!’ He grabbed me by the shoulder, swept me into his studio and slammed the door in Peppi’s face. I stood helplessly as he came towards me. I looked pleadingly into his piercing bluish-grey eyes and his swarthy, pock-marked complexion; I had never seen him uglier or more frightening.

‘Where have you been?’ he yelled.

Unlike previous occasions, I was not being granted the facility of writing down my replies. He wasn’t interested in my replies, other than trying to trap me into lying to him. I was grateful to Peppi for forewarning me. ‘Mama’s’, I said, knowing he could not mistake that word on my lips.

He came towards me and grabbed both my shoulders. I was used to him grabbing me by the shoulders and shaking me, but I was terrified of him punching me.

‘Don’t hit me uncle Ludwig...’ I begged him and then burst into tears.

‘Your mother...! She put you up to this. She bribed my servants. She is a bad woman! She is a liar! Can’t you see that, Karl?’

Each condemnation was emphasised by a tightening of his grip on my shoulders. My tears flowed freely, no longer scared of him hitting me, which he seemed not inclined to do, but each aspersion he cast on my mother deepening the pain and confusion he had already inflicted on me.

‘You must promise me you’ll never visit her again.’

I nodded helplessly, with neither conviction nor intent.

‘Go to your room. Come back in one hour. We will have lessons.’

He accompanied me to his studio door. His grip had relaxed. It was now an embrace. He enclosed my head and face in his arms and pressed me against his waist, stifling my breathing; the smell of his stained clothes was gut wrenching. In a soft voice he said: ‘You are a good boy Karl but your mother is bad. I won’t allow her to harm you.’

I cannot describe how I felt on my journey back to my room. He had often made me feel hopeless and helpless, distraught and fearful, and angry though usually resigned. I felt something of nearly all of those emotions but the overwhelming sensation was more surreal, an inability to believe what I had just witnessed and heard: that he had learnt absolutely nothing about me apart from my mother’s *evil* influence over me. My pain and anguish meant nothing to him, because he could only see it through the prism of his hatred for my mother, whom he held responsible. He himself was entirely blameless!

Nothing had changed. He was incapable of change. He probably thought that his explosive response on discovering

the conspiracy, attacking and sacking Lukas, was enough to scare the living daylight out of me, and, more importantly, terrify the servants who witnessed it! As usual, he would boast of this violent decisiveness in letters to Nannette Streicher and Zmeskall, gratifyingly highlighting his righteousness and deluding himself about its effectiveness. Neither Streicher nor Zmeskall would dare tell him otherwise. A short while after, his friend Bernard ingratiated himself further by saying as long as he was my guardian and I remained with him, he would still have to struggle with my mother's intrigues. If only I had been able to tell Bernard and my uncle that his contempt for and his ill-treatment of servants would remain a far more potent cause of their *treachery* than any attempt by my mother to bribe them.

And so it proved. Thanks to the efforts of Nanette Streicher, Peppi and Alina were soon joined by a new housekeeper, Corlotte, who was much older. Nanette obviously hoped that Corlotte's mature years would enable her to be more resilient in the face of the inevitable challenges and temptations that would come her way. Corlotte was indeed very different to any staff he had enlisted before. She was tall and elegant, well-spoken, confident and assiduous in all the tasks allocated to her. She knew exactly who my uncle was, and this may have attracted her to the post (as far as I can gather, Nanette did not forewarn her that serving the illustrious Beethoven would not all be sweetness and light!). She had married in her earlier life, had six children and even more grandchildren, but was eventually compelled, like many other Viennese women, to find employment after her husband died. She initially struck me as a woman of common sense, reasonableness and sound judgement, and there was an informality and relaxedness about her that augured well for our relationship. It wasn't long before she encountered my uncle's irascibility and took an interest in

my plight. She quickly recognised the cruelty and the craziness of preventing me seeing my mother. Within six weeks, to the delight of Peppi and Alina who had been totally cowed by my uncle, Corlotte was arranging a secret meeting for my mother and I, and thereafter, weekly visits. Genuinely interested in how I had got here, she went much further, and actually visited my mother. Neither of them told me about their meetings (my mother did, decades later!) rightly assuming that such knowledge would implicate me. All this was more dangerous than anything Lukas had attempted, but Corlotte was an unusually confident housekeeper and I think she recognised something both pathetic and tyrannical about my uncle; she was not afraid to confront him or be confronted. Unlike all her predecessors, she was on occasions able to ignore him with impunity, or tell him what she really thought when he bellowed out unwarranted complaints and unreasonable demands, or fumed about the cost of living and the corruption of the state.

A little earlier than usual (mid-May, 1818) my uncle announced that he was moving to Mödling for the summer and that I would be accompanying him. So too, would Corlotte and Peppi. He invited my tutor to come, but Gruber was glad to be able to tell him of commitments to his university post throughout the summer months. My uncle was particularly keen to get to Mödling this year: his new Broadwood piano was there and he was still immersed in his *Hammerklavier* sonata. He was probably also keen to get far enough away from my mother, because he swore me to secrecy not to tell her; I duly did tell her on the first of a new series of clandestine visits. So too did Corlotte!

On the journey, he could not desist from telling the women what an ogre my mother was, and that even in Mödling, he didn't feel entirely safe from her machinations. Corlotte gesticulated that she wanted to respond through his conversation book, a sensible gesture since his deafness and

the mighty din of horses' hooves and screeching carriage wheels made it impossible for him to hear anything we said. She wrote: *You only have to rely on me.* He read it aloud and then stared at Corlotte for a few seconds before smiling ambiguously. Corlotte, Peppi and I smiled too, and I wondered how my uncle would react if he knew that rather than an escape to his country retreat, the whole rotten edifice of lies, deception, conspiracy and collusion which would ensure mama and I would meet up again, was simply being transported from Vienna to Mödling. As if that was not bad enough, he would encounter a new adversary there who would dare to challenge him on matters he regarded as sacrosanct: his fitness to be a guardian and his exclusion of my mother.

Chapter 23

Someone had recommended to my uncle that I attend a school in Mödling adjoining the Catholic church of St Othmar, and only a few hundred metres from our residence, Hafner-Haus on Herrengasse. The school, which had only twelve pupils was run by Father Fröhlich, a thinnish, elderly, wiry, man, who was also the parish priest. He was well-known and respected, a member of various charities and trusts, and a place in his small school was much coveted by the well-to-do of Mödling. He and my uncle had a lot in common: conviction, pride, confidence, single-mindedness...and ferocious tempers! Neither man was in awe of each other. My uncle's name and fame meant little to the priest.

The introductory meeting with Father Fröhlich contrasted sharply with my initial visit to the Giannatasio Institute in January 1816. Then I was in the depths of despair, my whole life being taken over by strangers under the illusion that my uncle was *rescuing* me; here in Mödling I was indifferent and bored, because in sharing his aspirations for me with the priest, there was nothing my uncle said that I hadn't heard before, most of it focussing on his own efforts and sacrifice on my behalf. I think Father Fröhlich may have noticed my disinterest, judging by his disapproving looks, especially when he was talking about the privileges of Catholicism, the school's emphasis upon moral teaching, and the condition laid down that all pupils must attend Catholic services in the adjoining church. All this had been communicated in correspondence to my uncle days previous to our arrival. I still remain puzzled by his choosing this particular school: Father Fröhlich's emphasis upon spiritual development and Catholic ritual was not entirely compatible with his own religious convictions, nor was it conducive to fulfilling his ambition

of making me a musician and scholar. But perhaps it was that very spiritual emphasis and the discipline it necessitated that appealed to him; perhaps he reckoned that *wicked adults*, meaning my mother and servants, undermined his guardianship and were dragging me down the slippery slope to perdition; so why not place me under the care of a priest whose all-consuming passion was saving souls, ensuring they didn't succumb to the temptations that came their way. But it would not be long before Father Fröhlich reached the conclusion that the souls of my uncle and I were beyond redemption!

I had changed significantly in the two years preceding Mödling. I was no longer the hapless victim of a dominant, domineering, tyrannical uncle and those willing to do his bidding. I had found solutions of a sort: guile, subterfuge, betrayal, manipulation, lies, escapades, defiance, refusals, sulks, temper tantrums and self-imposed isolation. While this did not bode well for my future prospects, it enabled me to survive, and it was, perversely, indicative of an increasing confidence. Each time I did wrong, in action or words, I felt clever and confident; each time I did wrong and got away with it, I felt much more so. Very soon I realised that Father Fröhlich's regime was no less tyrannical and no more tolerable than that imposed on me by my uncle. In some ways it was worse. An early rise was necessary to get to mass before lessons began; on entering the church I had to make the sign of the cross on my forehead with cold, supposedly 'blessed holy' water; then I had to genuflect as I found my seat, kneel in prayer, learn and recite my responses, and pretend to be wholly attentive and reverential. I didn't do any of these things well, and increasingly, not at all. My fellow pupils warned me of the consequences, which I ignored. Father Fröhlich, in the privacy of his own office, stripped me and flogged me.

I was cowed but not for long. I had suffered greater humiliations at the hands of my uncle but had after each

occasion inevitably drifted back to the deception and deviousness which were rapidly emerging as core traits of my character. I impressed and corrupted some of my younger fellow pupils. I encouraged them to be less obsequious to our little clerical dictator; I made rude signs and signals to them as he closed his eyes in prayer, or when he interrogated us on catechism; I tempted them to miss class and roam with me through the beautiful valleys and limestone hills of Mödling, climbing the tallest trees, exploring the ancient ruins of castles, robbing orchards, chasing chickens. The residents were appalled by such delinquency and complained. Father Fröhlich summoned my uncle.

I wasn't present at that meeting, but it wasn't long before I was given a rather jaundiced view of its outcome. I expected my uncle, on hearing of my misdemeanours, would have come charging back to our residence to manhandle and threaten me (I feared that prospect far more than a flogging from Father Fröhlich). He did shout at me, but to my relief his anger thereafter was aimed more at the priest than me. Whatever embarrassment and shame my behaviour had caused him, was nothing to the impact of Father Fröhlich casting aspersions on his competence as a parent, critically probing whether or not his fame and all his commitments precluded him from providing the care and the supervision his wayward nephew required. Worse still, the fearless little cleric challenged my uncle on the wisdom of excluding my mother from any say in my upbringing.

Having worked himself into a frenzy of anger and indignation as he relayed this information to me, he bellowed: 'What gave that arch-ass the right to talk about such things...has he been talking to her...?'

If my mother had been speaking to Father Fröhlich, I knew nothing about it.

I don't think my uncle had any awareness of the irony: summoning me to face the charge of misbehaving and

disrespecting a priest, and he, heaping abuse on that same priest in nearly every utterance. But I didn't mind. I was feeling safe and confident enough to tell him how Fröhlich knew about my mother: 'He asked me lots of questions about mama', I said.

'He's a scoundrel! A spy! Tell him nothing!'

My uncle was not a very good role model! After listening to his diatribe, I was hardly likely to go crawling back to the classroom in a repentant mood willing to show more respect to Father Fröhlich. I seem to have been here before: adults fighting around me, and me *benefiting* from the fallout. In the days that followed, I felt I could do whatever I wanted inside and out of school! I could hurl apple cores at pupils in front of me; I could pee in their inkwells, I could truant and fight and poach and trespass; I could openly defy Father Fröhlich in front of his pupils. He flogged me again, and then delegated that *responsibility* to an older pupil, Heinrich, a big bully, who after Fröhlich had lined me and my fellow miscreants up, lay into us with sadistic fervour. It had little impact on me, except to intensify my hatred of Fröhlich and Heinrich and to make sure that whatever misdemeanours I carried out in the future, I would not be caught.

My behaviour strengthened the priest's conviction that my uncle was failing in his duty of imposing discipline and instilling Christian values in me. And he was right. My uncle did not bring me and his servants all the way to Mödling for that purpose. He was there primarily to escape from the heat and dust and populace of Vienna; he was there to concentrate on and finish his fiendishly difficult sonata; and he was there to indulge in the bucolic delights of Mödling, usually followed by a visit to the *Three Raven's Pub* for a hearty meal and copious wine. Apart from my daily piano practice which he peeked in on occasionally, I saw very little of him. So, I felt liberated, unsupervised, glad to be away from his darkening, cluttered, stultifying

residence in Vienna and the private tuition of Gruber. His row with Father Fröhlich somehow enhanced my sense of freedom, whereas had they seen eye to eye in imposing constraints upon me, they would have easily subdued and controlled me.

Having dared to raise questions about the exclusion of my mother, it seemed unlikely that Father Fröhlich would get the opportunity to speak to my uncle again. But he did, and only because my mother wrote to him. I suspect Corlotte must have written to her to tell her all that was happening. My mother then would have rightly presumed that a *priest* would have been sympathetic to her cause. She wrote pleadingly to him about how her son had been taken from her by her brother-in-law, denying her access and all knowledge of his whereabouts and welfare.

Father Fröhlich would have been better advised to keep the contents of this letter to himself and not to get involved, but he chose to do the opposite by writing a supportive reply inviting her to meet him in Mödling. He obviously believed that my delinquency was attributable to the absence of mama and her maternal influence. He actually brought my mother's letter to our residence, brandishing it in my uncle's face and condemning him for his heartlessness in as loud a voice as he could manage. 'No mother deserves to be treated like that', he added. My uncle cursed him for his 'violation of a *father's* privacy...' flung open the door and ordered him out.

Father Fröhlich walked calmly along the arched balcony that looked down onto our courtyard, then just before he began descending the staircase, he looked back at my fuming uncle and said: 'But you are not the father!'

He probably knew my uncle could not hear him, but his expression and his posture made it plain that he had uttered another insult. Only I could appreciate just how searing an insult it was, and I dreaded my uncle demanding me to write it down, which, when we returned to his studio, he did.

It took at least ten minutes of intermittent and thunderous tirades directed against the priest and my mother before my incandescent uncle calmed down. In the meanwhile, Peppi remained cowed in the kitchen and Corlotte kept well out of his way, both uncomfortably aware of their roles in a conspiracy to get my mother to Mödling to see me. Now they were witnessing the likely reaction if they were found out.

Later, I opened the door of my uncle's studio and beckoned to him for permission to come in. His face was flushed and dark, his eyes still full of raw energy, and his hair as usual, in total disarray. I lifted a slate which he had near him and chalked on it: *'Mama should not have sent that letter...Father Fröhlich should not have brought it here.'* I held the slate so that he could read it.

He read it and stared at it. Then he looked at me, his eyes widening and his lips smiling appreciatively. 'Thank you, son'.

My action was not an expression of sympathy or pity. I had watched and listened as the focus of their row had shifted from delinquent *me* to my mother. At the outset I was conscious and grateful that my uncle was supporting me in the face of a catalogue of misbehaviours read out by Fröhlich. But when they argued about my mother's role and rights (my uncle claiming that my *disreputable* mother had no role or rights) something occurred to me: an opportunity; a realisation that I had made my own life so difficult by frequent and demonstrative expressions of love and loyalty to my mother, in stark contrast to my equally demonstrative resentment and betrayal of my uncle. Why did I have to let him know again and again that I would forever be loyal and loving towards her and resistant and resentful towards him? All I had to do was to pretend the opposite: that I was not blindly loyal and obedient to my mother; that I *could* see her faults and her failings and could speak out against her. From that moment onward I was

going to pretend that I could see my mother through his eyes; I was going to criticize her, just to please him, to reassure him, to allay his suspicions and lower his guard...while Corlotte and Father Fröhlich plotted and planned to arrange the meeting between my mother and I in Mödling!

My mother recounted to me years after just how easy it was when Father Fröhlich was central to the conspiracy. Both of them were now in regular correspondence, and he was clandestinely seeing Corlotte at his presbytery which he offered as the proposed venue for our reunion. My uncle would have exploded at the mere thought of his sister-in-law coming to his peaceful summer haven; but if she was being invited by a priest, there was nothing he could do about it. As long as he didn't find out what the ultimate objective was, Corlotte, Peppi and I could not be held responsible! It would undoubtedly however intensify his hatred of Father Fröhlich and increase his fears about the priest and my mother concocting some vile demonic strategy to remove me from his *care*.

My mother's attempts to enlist the support of Father Fröhlich was problematic for me. I hated him and I didn't want him to play any part in my destiny. Each day I returned from school with more tales of his religious fanaticism and his tyranny. My uncle invariably agreed with me, but he couldn't resist reminding me that my *lying, scheming, dishonourable* mother (he now felt at liberty to use such terms) was in league with that very same man. I felt compelled then to respond by condemning her further. This pleased him enormously: he must have thought that Father Fröhlich had within days brought about a transformation that he himself had sought to achieve over two years: getting me to accept how *evil* and harmful my mother was. On another occasion when I referred to her as a *mother raven*, a particularly insulting term I had once heard him use, I thought he was going to dance with joy! He actually

handed me a *groschen*, suffice to stock my candy supplies for a week, and certain to accelerate my corrupt and corrupting downward spiral. Triumphantly, he marched to the presbytery to confront Father Fröhlich with the sole purpose of rubbing salt in his wounds: there could be, he told him with barely disguised infantile glee, no more compelling vindication of the punishment and condemnation of *this woman* than her son calling her a *mother raven*. He obviously didn't consider the possibility that Fröhlich might unleash a flogging vengeance on me as a consequence of his letter.

Father Fröhlich summoned me to his office: 'Did you call your mother a *mother-raven*?

I hesitated. My instinct was to lie, but having watched my uncle dance with joy on hearing me call her that, it felt too difficult to deny. 'Yes.'

'Do you know what it means?' he asked.

'Yes...a bad woman.'

'Did you say that about your mother'?

'Yes.'

'Do you believe it.'

'No.'

'Then why did you say it?'

'My uncle said it.'

Normally inscrutable, the wizened face of Father Fröhlich appeared to blanch. It was not entirely a lie. I had no intention of confessing to him that my action was part of a concerted plan to say things my uncle would like to hear.

'Your uncle should not have said it. Nor should you. Don't you know the commandments?'

'Yes.'

'You must love your mother...'

'I do love her.'

He stared at me in pity and disgust. I know now from the testimony he would later produce in court what biblical words were then going through his mind: *Whoever causes*

one of these little ones who believe in me to sin it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. He must have thought that my uncle was evil personified, and that he, a priest, must do everything in his power to rescue me from his influences.

‘Let us pray’, Karl he said, resignedly.

I thought that was a ridiculous idea, but better than being flogged. We knelt. He closed his eyes, bent his head, breathed heavily, and said, with great reverence and humility:

‘Dear Lord, we ask for your protection of Karl in this sinful world; fortify his resistance to temptation; help him to withstand evildoers who seek to destroy his soul; return him to the bosom of his beloved mother so that he be honourable and righteous in your presence. Have mercy on Karl, Lord. Forgive him all his sins. Grant him peace.’

For a week or so, my uncle seemed happier and more relaxed than ever before: he spent hours each day working on his nearly completed *Hammerklavier*; he watched over me practicing Cheribini on his beloved *Broadwood*, and he had the satisfaction of (mistakenly) believing that I had lost interest in my mother, except to denigrate or insult her. In late afternoon he rambled in Mödling’s beautiful *Divine Briel* valley (always with sketchbook in hand) eventually making his way up to its cliffs’ perimeter to gaze meditatively over the lush vegetation below. In this state of relative contentedness, he agreed to yet another portrait to be painted by a promising young artist, August von Klöber, who was studying in Vienna. I mention this only because my uncle uncharacteristically gave me a role to play in this event: he instructed Klöber that I appeared in the painting! He didn’t ask me whether or not I wanted to, and I had no say as to where and what I would be doing in the painting (I would be, inconspicuously it has to be said, reposing under a nearby tree!).

Another task was to enable my uncle to surmount the challenge which he had presented to all previous artists: remaining in the same position for long enough; so he told me to play his *Broadwood* during much of the sitting, as though it was just another lesson he was giving me which would prevent him from getting bored and then agitated. Klöber later wrote down his detailed observations, noting with amazement how my almost totally deaf uncle somehow knew when mistakes were being made, and ordering me to repeat passages again and again. I also helped the artist and my uncle to communicate, either by shouting into my uncle's ear-trumpet, or by writing Klöber's requests and comments on a slate.

I have often wondered why I was included in that painting, the first and only time I was invited to do so. Was it simply a generous impulse, or must he have thought it would enhance the final outcome? Did he believe that at last I had seen the light and was behaving like his one and only son should behave? Did he feel that we had become the family he had so long desired and wanted to capture this 'father-and-son' moment for posterity? Was it a 'thank you' for me making life difficult for his arch enemy, Father Fröhlich, a priest who dared to cast aspersions on his parental abilities? Or was it in gratitude for my *apparent* disownment of my mother, no longer pining after her, no longer engaged in conspiracies to be with her, and uttering her name only to condemn her. Not for the first time was I *acting* so convincingly that I believed I would never be found out, and I never gave a thought to the likely consequences if I *was* found out.

Chapter 24

On the 26th of June, 1818, my uncle wrote from Mödling to Nanette Streicher in Vienna. It was the longest letter he ever wrote to her, a detailed account of his discovery of treachery and his reaction to it. His opening sentence informed Nanette that he had got rid of Peppi and Corlotte who had ‘shamefully joined forces’ against him; he *marched them out of the house* as a warning to all future servants. He referred to Corlotte throughout the letter as *the old woman*.

I had misjudged my uncle in believing that he was naively unaware of the machinations around him. He tells Nanette that before we left for Mödling, he received an anonymous letter which filled him with terror. It convinced him that he had not been imagining things, that the signs of treachery had been visible to him over a period of months. The letter also informed him that I had been seeing my mother before we left Vienna and that Peppi and Corlotte knew all about it (they didn’t only know about it, they helped to arrange it!) Worst of all, he learnt that Corlotte had visited my mother, and that could only mean that she was far more deeply immersed in treachery than any of her servant predecessors. *Oh what wickedness*, he wrote, *what liars! What sinners! And they, women of a venerable age*.

This suggests that on our journey to Mödling, my uncle was every bit as good an actor as I thought *I* was. How did he maintain this self-control, seated in a carriage with those he knew were part of a conspiracy, myself included? I can only surmise that when he was sharing his thoughts about my mother with Peppi and Corlotte and encouraging (or tempting) them to profess their loyalty, he was setting a trap, simultaneously reassuring them that he had not the slightest inkling of what was going on.

You would think this was a crazy thing for him to do: Mödling was meant to be an escape, particularly from my

mother and anyone plotting to deliver me to her! But forever conscious of his uselessness in running a home, and being many miles from his omniscient saviour Nanette Streicher, he knew he needed Peppi and Corlotte to get settled in. He obviously intended confronting them then, and getting rid of them as soon as it was convenient to do so.

But he could never have foreseen the very distracting problem arising from his placing me in the care of Father Fröhlich. This had developed over a few weeks into an all-consuming major crisis. His honour was at stake; his morality was questioned; his fitness to be a parent was undermined. He leaves Nanette in no doubt about the ferocity of the conflict and his desire for revenge:

I shall gladly cudgel his Reverence Fröhlich...I shall deliver such a merciless thrashing with countless spiritual flails and curses...that the whole parish will tremble.

The flareup which led to the dismissal of Corlotte and Peppi was entirely unforeseen, and provoked by a rather innocuous event. Tragically for me, it occurred on the evening before I was due to meet my mother at Father Fröhlich's parsonage.

Corlotte passed me by in the hallway when I was about to be embraced by my uncle who had just returned from his ramble in the hills. She looked at me momentarily and smiled as my uncle's arms came round me. My head was turned in her direction and I looked up at her and returned her smile as my head rested on my uncle's frockcoat. These were not purely innocent smiles. How could they be? Whatever situation we found ourselves in, Corlotte and I could not look at each other without thinking of the conspiracy which bound us and the project which motivated us...on the eve of fruition!

He described Corlotte's smile just when I embraced my uncle as a *scornful expression*. He then suspected perfidy of some kind and thought how deplorable and how reckless such an *old woman* could be. The effect on him was immediate and frightening. In the midst of an embrace, I was suddenly flung aside, almost losing my balance as my uncle charged at Corlotte. His whole countenance was transformed, his eyes ablaze with anger, his posture that of an animal about to spring.

'WHAT IS THIS...WHAT IS IT...?' he shouted at her.

Facing a threat like this she dared not admit anything. She feigned pain and perplexity that asked: how could he suspect her of wrongdoing? She remained upright to face him, uncowed, fearless, though I'm sure her heart was beating fast. 'Master Beethoven, what are you saying...what am I supposed to have done?'

He moved to within inches of her face, gesticulating, yelling, making it clear that he would not believe a word she said.

'I know what you have been up to...you and Peppi...I know of your treachery...I know you have been seeing that...woman...she bribed you...didn't she? You went to her home...I know you encouraged my son to see her...didn't you...?'

His voice got louder and more menacing. I was sure he was going to attack her. She shook her head and held out her hands submissively, an acknowledgement that whatever she said he would not believe. She then mimed writing, an unspoken request to allow her to fetch a slate with chalk. But he wasn't having any of that. He raised his head, closed his eyes and let out a roar. Then he mocked her:

'What for...so that you can lie to me again...betray me again...?'

I could feel myself disintegrating in the memory of his attack on my father. He was exactly the same man, ugly and frightening, in uncontrollable rage that threatened violence.

It was far worse now, because his grievance was based on undeniable facts about our wrongdoing, not on some spurious claim about a missing manuscript.

I suddenly ran. I had to get past both of them to get to my room, and as I almost brushed past Corlotte I was stricken with guilt for leaving her. She turned her head away from my uncle to watch me, still running, and she shouted after me:

‘Don’t tell, Karl...for your mother’s sake.’

The words seared through me. My uncle heard nothing, but he could not have failed to recognise Corlotte’s attempt to forewarn me of something.

From the railing of the balcony outside my room I looked down and listened. He ceaselessly harangued her and then ordered her to accompany him to the kitchen. I’m sure Peppi was terrified listening to this onslaught, knowing that she would be next. She did not have Corlotte’s confidence or guile, though just like Corlotte she was defenceless because she was guilty as hell.

Their ordeal lasted many more minutes during which they had to endure the usual smash-up of crockery to emphasise his rage and to intensify their fears. He continued interrogating and haranguing with no intention of letting either of them have a say. He told them both to be out of the building in twenty-four hours. He came rushing out of the kitchen slamming the door behind him. I darted into my room and leapt onto my bed. I could not control my trembling. I could hear him on the staircase muttering curses and threats about his miserable life and all those responsible. Then the door handle turned and the door swung open. He stood there, menacingly, his stocky frame blocking the light that normally cascaded in from the balcony. He came towards me, staring into my guilt-laden face. I sat up on the bed, my feet dangling, frighteningly aware that I was making it easier for him to grab me and be on top of me and do whatever he felt like doing.

‘Tell me the truth’, he bellowed; ‘the whole truth!’

How could I tell him the whole truth...or tell him anything? He was deaf and I was terrified. I was so frozen in terror on my bed that I could neither answer him nor beg to leave him to fetch pencil and paper that would enable me to communicate with him.

‘Was this your wicked mother’s plan?

I nodded painfully, knowing I was betraying her.

In his long letter to Nanette, my uncle was honest about what happened next:

I lunged at him and not without sound reason, gave him a good shaking, but he was too frightened and too full of guilt to confess everything that had occurred.

Yes, I have mentioned him shaking me before, and I had got used to it. But I knew from the way he had pounced on me and the ironclad grip of his powerful hands on my shoulders, that this would be a punishment that I would not easily forget. He effortlessly lifted me from the bed and stood me up, solely for the purpose, it seemed, of shaking me more violently. I yelled out in panic. The shaking was not sustained, nor could it be; that would have exhausted him too quickly. Instead, he subjected me to many separate shakes, of shorter duration but maximum impact because of the climactic intensity in each of them. There seemed to be some diabolical pattern of action and rhythm emerging during this retribution: each shake was administered against the backdrop of a self-pitying plea:

‘Why do you do this this to me...Karl...you are my son...? I have sacrificed so much for you...can’t you see that...You lied to me...you’ve lied to me again and again...why? You allowed yourself to be seduced by those temptresses...what do I have to do...what more do you want me to do...do I have to kill my own son?’

And on and on it went! My head was so flung about that I felt it might separate from my neck; maybe inside my head my brain had already detached from my skull...I couldn't see properly. My heart was aching; my stomach was churning; I was sure I was going to die, and I was less frightened of dying than I was of enduring any more of this. I just cried...and cried out louder than I had ever done before: 'stop uncle...I'm sorry...please, please stop...'

He didn't hear what I said but he could not mistake the words on my lips and the terror in my eyes, and that provoked him into shaking me one last climactic time, faster and more vigorously than any of the preceding shakes, accompanied by ironic incredulity: 'Stop..! You ask me to stop? When will you STOP...torturing me...? When will you STOP lying...? When will you STOP scheming with my servant scum...? WHEN WILL YOU STOP MAKING MY LIFE A MISERY...?'

There was a long pause and then he drew my face nearer his own, as though to emphasise his suffering and to demand an answer which I was incapable of giving. He was panting for air and I could smell his rancid breath; I could see the muscles and veins of his face swell, his wild eyes roll doubly wild, and his lips quiver. He relaxed his grip on my shoulders and then the tension in his face appeared to ease too. He brought me closer still and embraced me! Now I could not see his face but I could hear deep sighs and sounds that made me think he was about to weep. His voice was strangely subdued.

'Karl...my son...'

This was small relief to me, to know that I was going to live; but if my body was recovering from the convulsions inflicted on it, my mind was unable to cope with the visible and audible metamorphosis that was rapidly occurring before me: his deafening murderous violence now replaced by a silent anguish; his energy and strength and mobility by an apparent paralysis. I could not comprehend. I did not

know the right way to respond nor the wrong way! I remained silent, silently terrified, hoping and praying that he did not ask a question that I would have to answer.

‘You are my son, Karl...’

I waited for the supplementary *aren’t you... or don’t you know that...?* But neither was asked. He wasn’t really conversing with me; he was embracing me and looking over me, and probably not even thinking of me.

‘I am the unhappiest of God’s creatures...’ he said, ‘because of your mother.’

I thought this must be the precursor of another full-blooded assault, justified surely in his eyes by my feigned condemnations of my mother and collusion with his *wicked* servants. But he never physically or verbally attacked anyone unless he was in a rage, unless his looks and movements and his words were full of violent intent, and now he just seemed exhausted and bereft.

‘She has wronged me too often’, he said; ‘she has done you no good, Karl.’

I remained in his *embrace*, wanting nothing more than to be with mama. Tears swelled in my eyes.

‘But she is your mother...a bad mother, but still your mother!’

I sobbed, but my head still held against his stomach, remained motionless. He couldn’t hear me sob, but I dreaded him feeling any of the vibrations of my sobbing and then turning my head in his hands to look into my eyes to say something else that I would not understand. I understood the ‘bad mother’ bit, and it hurt as it always did, but there was a conspicuous and hushed hesitancy in his utterance: *But she is your mother*. That perplexed me and only now can I say with certainty that it was laden with guilt, doubt and ambiguity.

Was this my uncle’s painful acknowledgement of reality? Of the naturalness of my mother’s unswerving efforts to maintain contact with me no matter what obstacles

he placed in her way or what devious methods she had to use or what person or persons she had to employ or bribe? In the letter to Nanette, he also acknowledges that I have ‘done wrong’ but he absolves me entirely because he knows just how ‘manipulative’ and ‘intriguing’ my mother can be. Would he never accept that *my* wrongdoing was as much rooted in him as in my mother?

He had no more to say to me. He released me from his embrace and slowly and quietly made for the door. His whole countenance and movement suggested that he was full of remorse for shaking me so violently, but he was incapable of saying ‘sorry’. I had said ‘sorry’ to him but said it beggingly, begging him to stop shaking me. I had no regrets about what I had done, except that I was found out. I too was incapable then and thereafter of feeling genuinely sorry for any wrong I perpetrated against him, no matter what grief it caused him. Sadly, that was the nature of our relationship.

It took a few days for him to recover, to re-immense himself in the completion of his *Hammerklavier* sonata. I had heard those impassioned opening fanfare chords at least a hundred times in the year or more that he had been working on the piece and I never tired of them; I always thought they were the perfect start to a grand military extravaganza. But they lasted only a few seconds before dissolving into a starkly contrasting pianissimo phrase. Having almost on a daily basis, heard the piece as it evolved, in all its complexity, its obsessiveness and its relentless counterpoint, I knew that this was music I would never fully understand. After he attacked me however, I inexplicably found myself listening to him playing the *Adagio* movement, a seemingly endless lamentation that occasionally overwhelmed me with guilt. I imagined him suffering the anguish that his creation was evoking, and I sometimes had the urge to escape; but I always knew that the grief and pain would dissipate in the concluding bars.

Is it a figment of my imagination in thinking that this sonata underwent some change as a consequence of the incident? I'm not sure. But I do know that as he put the finishing touches to it and played sections of it over and over again, it sounded different: I have no doubt all for example, that he played fortissimos far more vehemently! How his beloved *Broadwood* survived the completion of the *Hammerklavier* in that summer of 1818, I shall never be able to tell.

Part IV

Chapter 25

The debacle in Mödling put an end to conspiracies and secret meetings...for the foreseeable future at least! My uncle enlisted temporary housekeeping staff and found a private tutor specifically to prepare me for entry into the prestigious *Academic Gymnasium*. I accompanied him back to Vienna for a few days in August and successfully took the examination for this purpose. In early September, back in Mödling, we had a surprise visit from Fanny Giannatasio and some of her friends. She was sad to hear about the domestic turmoil of recent weeks but was reassured that matters had calmed considerably and she left favourably impressed about the apparent ‘contentment’ of my uncle (he played his new *Broadwood* for her, a very rare occurrence); she later *explained* my uncle’s contentment in her diary: it was obviously because my mother was *giving him no cause for sorrow!*

Can you imagine the impact of the news from Mödling on my mother? She was told everything by Corlotte who, understandably, may have been feeling resentful if not vengeful when she returned jobless to Vienna. She must have been alarmed to learn that my uncle knew of all the intrigue behind his back. But she was also incandescent with rage to hear that he had attacked me so viciously that both Peppi and Corlotte feared that he may have seriously injured me. She admitted to me many years later that she wanted to kill him!

When all her passions had subsided she felt vindicated; she believed there was no clearer evidence of my uncle’s unfitness to be a guardian; she felt for the first time since I was taken away from her, that there was a genuine opportunity for us to be reunited. Surely the *Landrechte* court, she thought, would now accept that he had failed in his parental duties; that he was incapable of providing the

regular and constant supervision I needed. She sought advice on the matter from a distant relative, Jacob Hotschevar, a clerk in the office of the Imperial privy purse (his wife and my maternal grandmother were stepsisters). He had no knowledge of guardianship law, but he had worked as a tutor in several aristocratic homes, and considered himself learned in education and psychology. He cautioned her that her objective was unrealistically ambitious at this stage. But in early September she went ahead and petitioned the court anyway, requesting that I be returned to her; that I was missing her terribly; that I couldn't possibly be receiving proper care and attention from a sick and deaf guardian, that I was subject to constant disruption and was not being brought up in accordance with the norms of civility, decency and moral principles. Her petition was rejected.

On September 21st, she submitted a second petition. This time she heeded the advice of Hotschevar: she requested not my return but a revocation of the court's original decision granting my uncle exclusive authority over my education and training. She specifically asked for permission to place me in the *Imperial-Royal University Konvikt*. This was a reputable state college that awarded bursaries to promising pupils whose parents may not have been able to afford it; it also provided board and lodgings (Franz Schubert had enrolled there). After all the disruption I had experienced in my second year at the Institute, and the chaos and violence in Mödling (not to mention the differing locations and tutors involved in my education) she must have felt hopeful that she would at least get a sympathetic hearing.

I was not told beforehand about my mother's first and second petitions. I was barred from seeing her and it was far too soon after the bone-shaking I suffered at Mödling for me to even contemplate risking my uncle's wrath again. But I could hardly be unaware of what was going on, particularly when he summoned me after my mother's

second petition. I didn't know what for, but I sensed he suspected me of something.

'Did you know about this?' he asked.

'No...know what, uncle?'

For a few horrible seconds, his piercing greyish-blue eyes locked on me, pressurizing me to blurt out my innocence which probably would have convinced him I was guilty. I just about managed to remain silent.

'Your mother!'

'I don't know, uncle...I haven't seen her...I swear to God, I haven't seen her.'

The panic in my voice rose, but by then I think he knew I was crumbling out of fear, not guilt.

'She is determined to make me ill again...!'

She could indeed make him ill! She could provoke him into a rage, which somehow could trigger relapses, particularly with his abdominal ailments and his persistent diarrhoea.

'She has applied to the court' he continued, 'alleging that I am unfit to be your guardian and that you should be returned to her.' He moved around his studio; I sensed that he was monologuing rather than conversing. 'Never...' he said.

What could I say to him? Certainly not what was on my mind: that I could no longer live like this...on a precipice! The only person on my mind was mama, and she was the only person I wanted to be with. In my fearful state I could not ask my uncle what this was all about, but if I had been with mama I would have showered her with questions on *how* it had come about, because I truly believed that when Corlotte conveyed to her what happened in Mödling, no matter how angry it would have made her, she would have wisely decided to lay dormant for months at least. Apparently not.

As soon as my uncle released me I ran to my room and threw myself on the bed, hoping and praying that he was

wrong; that mama would win and that I would join her once and for all. My uncle remained thunderously mad that she had the audacity to petition the court twice within a few days. This must have told him how determined she was. She had obviously made a decision: no more bribing of the servants, no more clandestine meetings arranged; no more sharing with me or implicating me in her latest and dangerous plots and subterfuge. She was stepping out of the shadows and into the limelight, prepared to fight; to fight openly, courageously and legally! It was a battle she had brought on herself simply because of a still unshakeable conviction that she was my mother with a natural and a God-given right to be caring for me.

After her second petition was submitted, she and my uncle were summoned to appear before the court on 23rd of September, but it was deferred until the 30th of September because my uncle did not attend; he alleged that he didn't get the summons which was sent to Mödling when he was in Vienna. Yet for the hearing a week later, he submitted a letter on the 25th of September rebutting each of the points in my mother's petition. Someone had informed him about the contents of her petition, most likely Joseph von Schmerling, the senior court official who, two and a half years earlier, had been instrumental in drawing up the severest restrictions on her seeing me.

My uncle's rebuttal letter to the court was very different from the countless letters he wrote throughout his life: it was structured, coherent and controlled, suggesting that here too he was helped by a legal mind familiar with the style and conventions of court papers. As well as Schmerling, that could have been his friend Mathias von Tuscher, a magisterial councillor; or the sycophantic Schindler, still training to be a lawyer and who would have been more than willing to seek advice from one of his more senior colleagues (Schindler had been ingratiating himself with my uncle for more than four years by then).

For me the most striking content in the letter was his views on my education: he was apparently no longer deluding himself in seeing me as the musically gifted heir to the Beethoven legacy. He claimed to the court that he brought me out of the Institute to live with him specifically to see whether or not I *possessed more inclination to music or the sciences*. He proudly declared that since I had joined him, he had *instructed* me in music for *two and a half hours daily* (it was nowhere near as long nor as consistent). But he admitted that my greater potential seemed to lie within the sciences. If this was a genuine shift in perception and not an instruction from his legal mentors who helped him write the letter, then it represented a considerable leap forward in my uncle's grasp of reality.

His first reference to my mother in his letter is about her *moral incapacity* and her hindrance of his efforts to educate me. She is, he asserts, a *base-minded* woman who seizes upon his deafness and his *alleged ill-health* to cast doubt on his ability to fulfil the role of guardian. He answers those charges not entirely truthfully:

everyone who knows me can testify that verbal communication between my nephew and I [and between] myself and others is successfully carried on without problem or obstacle...my health has never been better than it is now...

He refuses to consider my mother's request that I transfer to the *Imperial-Royal Konvikt* for the following reasons: the staff would not be aware of how my mother persistently undermined my education in the early months of my placement at the Institute; she would undoubtedly take advantage of its proximity to her home to do the same again, resorting to the *untruths, deceits and briberies* for which she was notorious. These illegal attempts on her part to breach the court strictures then placed upon her were

most *injurious* to my education, as demonstrated by the written testimony of the Director of the Institute, Giannatasio. My uncle tells the court that he has incurred substantial expenses in educating me, and that my mother's *piffling* contribution in comparison, 2000 florins and half of her pension each month, *can hardly be considered* (many Venetians would not have regarded these sums of money as *piffling*). He says that he incurred every expense, exercised every care and had borne every trouble to:

instruct him and turn him into a worthy and useful citizen...this is so much the case that the tenderest loving father could not better care for his own child.

He concludes the letter re-emphasising my mother's *moral unfitness* and suggesting that she should be excluded from all influence over me.

On the 3rd of October, the court rejected my mother's second petition. At some point she must have bitterly reflected on the imbalance of power between her and my uncle: he, with all his fame, wealth and influence, advised and served by influential, well-established, professional and legally knowledgeable friends who forewarned him about the petition and enabled him to counter it; and she, a single parent relying on a distant relative who was not qualified in law nor had any connections with the court. It was almost identical to the overwhelming odds she faced in the spring of 1816, pitted against the same powerful trio of my uncle, Schmerling and Giannatasio, now joined by the Magisterial Counsellor von Tuscher. Outside of this quartet, my uncle had powerful friends in prestigious positions and he had no qualms about bribing them. He ordered his publisher friend Anton Steiner to send him copies of his vocal duets and quartets in order that he might *grease* the palms of those who were important to him. The guardianship, he wrote:

compels me to use these gifts, in order that the wheels can be effectively greased to reach our destination!

As I learnt more of the current battle from my uncle's outbursts and threats, I became less confident about the outcome. I sensed that something was critically wrong and that if my mother persisted in whatever course she had embarked upon, she was sure to fail again. I cried as much for myself as for her on hearing that her second submission to the court had been rejected.

In October I commenced study at the Academic Gymnasium. I was twelve years and two months old. My uncle also arranged for me to have private tuition in French and drawing, both of which I enjoyed, while he retained responsibility for my progress in music. When I started at the Institute in February 1816, a mere nine-year-old, I joined a small group of well-established children whom I did not know; I felt wholly disorientated and scared, and cried often for mama. My commencement at the Gymnasium felt very different: I was an older, more confident, sometimes cocky twelve-year-old. I found it relatively easy to integrate into the large third-grade intake. I made friends effortlessly and I quickly realised how much more freedom I was going to have: I just somehow sensed my uncle wasn't going to be barging into this much larger school haranguing staff about its failures in nurturing my musical potential!

Now freer than ever before, however, I was soon flouting rules and regulations and provoking my uncle's ire. My behaviour should hardly have been surprising, least of all to my uncle, who had witnessed me losing all sense of responsibility in Mödling. There I had felt unleashed, experiencing pleasure in each gradation of deviance and bad influence I exerted, especially in defying and riling Father Fröhlich. Here at the Gymnasium, a group of us would meet in the nearby Prater Park area of Vienna two or three times a week. As the nephew of *Beethoven*, my status amongst them was assured, but I behaved in a way that proved to my friends I was in no way constrained by having

such an illustrious guardian. I was an instigator in many of the confrontations we had and in the mayhem we liked to create. I often returned home late to face interrogation and reprimand.

My uncle had sometimes turned a blind eye to my escapades in Mödling, even willing me on in my defiance of the priest, but my studies at high school were a different matter, and he promptly issued another decree banning me from leaving the house unaccompanied. I'm sure it was my companionship with children my own age as much as my misbehaving and staying out too long that concerned him. As in the Institute, he never expressed an interest in meeting my new friends, and when he was unable to avoid them, his coldness and indifference did not go unnoticed.

I protested at the new restrictions imposed upon me, but he was adamant, so much so that he inflicted more misery upon me by reducing my weekly allowance. His stance was not unreasonable in the circumstances, considering his expenditure on my public and private education, but it was neither intelligent nor wise, bitterly reminding me of all my grievances of the past, and convincing me that I would forever remain in his shackles.

Chapter 26

Three new household members joined us: Birgid, a housekeeper; Mia, a cook, and Helka, a servant working only two days per week, mainly in laundering. All three women had been chosen and recommended by the Giannatasios. When Fanny had got back from Mödling in September, she had relayed to her parents about my uncle's domestic woes and his loss of faith in Nanette Streicher who had supplied him with the *traitorous* duo, Corlotte and Peppi. The Giannatasios felt sorry for him. He was grateful to them for finding alternatives, probably thinking they were uniquely qualified in vetting staff, having had personal experience of my mother's bribery and manipulation of untrustworthy servants, and of me colluding with both. I can well imagine Giannatasio warning the new trio of the wiles of my mother, the deceptive angelic innocence of her corrupted son, and of the fates of Corlotte and Peppi instantly sacked and made homeless in Mödling for their part in the conspiracy. So, Birgid, Mia and Helka came to our home prepared, made well aware of my uncle's explosive temper, and displaying a conspicuous coldness towards his nephew! I never once saw any of them smile at me.

I remained at home at night, seething with anger and resentment and indulging once again in thoughts of rebellion. But there was no one to listen to me or comfort me and there were certainly no potential co-conspirators around.

When I got back from school each day, I escaped to my room to enjoy the limited privacy available to me. Soon I would enter his studio to commence practice under his discerning eye! Then I would have a short break before one of the private tutors would arrive. All this learning was tolerable before I was prohibited from leaving home and

meeting up with friends in the evening, but now it felt oppressive and I could see little point in it. Numerous times my uncle was out on business, and I took advantage of it by doing only a fraction of the practice he demanded...or none at all! But on one occasion Birgid confronted me, reminding me not just of my failure to practice, but also, of my lying to my uncle about it when he returned. This was the first time she had spoken to me, the first time she had come close to me. I was stunned and angry. I looked at her with uncertainty. She was an attractive middle-aged woman who seemingly in my presence felt the need to look distinctively unattractive: austere, humourless and unfriendly. I thought for a moment that my uncle had instructed her to 'keep an eye on me' and to report back on any misdemeanour or omissions. But that was unlikely, because it was not the first time she had observed me choosing not to practice when he was not there; if she had reported me any time previously, my uncle would surely have made me regret it. Emboldened with this deduction and convinced that she was asserting an authority she didn't have, I straightened upright, stretched out my puny chest and said to her: 'it's none of your business!'

I could see an intake of breath in her parting lips and a shifting focus in her deep-set green eyes; I could sense her indignation rapidly morphing into humiliation. She didn't want to look at me, but standing over me in her long black frock and her black pleated bonnet, it was obvious that she didn't know what to say. She wanted to move on quickly, to regain her dignity, but my challenging insult seemed to have paralysed her. I passed her by, feeling somewhat triumphant.

The more I thought about Birgid confronting me the less respect I had for her and her colleagues. I reckoned that she had been wanting to exercise some control over me but would now be exceedingly reluctant even to try. Sometimes consciously but more often unwittingly I began making a

nuisance of myself. I would enter the kitchen demanding food, or, in the absence of staff, helping myself to succulent dishes that should not have been disturbed until mealtime. Then when challenged I would aggressively deny being anywhere near the kitchen. Birgid knew I was lying, but I also knew that she lacked the confidence to interrogate me and get me to admit it.

Slowly yet inexorably the relationship between Birgid and I worsened. I actually sought out novel ways to annoy and provoke her, and when she shouted at me I'd call her names: *nanny-goat* was one she found particularly annoying, an insult I'd heard my uncle call out repeatedly to previous servants. Birgid, Mia and Helka had been prohibited from having any meaningful contact with me; they were therefore of no use to me. I increasingly saw them as my uncle's ancillaries in the ever so restrictive regime he had imposed upon me.

My behaviour worsened considerably over the next month or so. I drove Birgid to distraction, but her backing down after challenging me had sealed her fate: for whatever reason then, she had chosen not to tell my uncle, with the inevitable consequence that as my provocations became more disruptive, she was faced with the dilemma of wanting to tell him but feared being exposed on not having done so previously. Only when I began stealing some money that was lying about in the kitchen and gorging myself with sweet-cake, did Birgid act. Not directly, though; she did *not* go to my uncle and tell all. Rather, in a clear sign of her desperation she wrote a letter, and then another, both addressed to the woman chiefly responsible for her being employed by my uncle: Fanny Giannatasio. In the letters she listed all my misdemeanours and the effects they were having, the misery and despair they were causing her and her colleagues.

She must have known my uncle would learn about this sooner rather than later, because he was visiting the

Giannatasios regularly since returning from Mödling, keeping them informed about my new education and the continuing *attempts* by my mother to sabotage it. (I'm sure the Giannatasios could see some irony in the fact that having made monumental efforts to get me out of their Institute, my uncle was now ending up with precisely the same challenge he faced when he put me there: battling my mother!).

The Giannatasio parents were acutely disappointed by Birgid's letters. Fanny, still incredulously harbouring romantic feelings about my uncle, was appalled:

It grieves me to learn of Karl's delinquency and ungratefulness. But Beethoven has to be informed of the whole sorry truth regardless of how difficult and painful it is for us to do it, and the risk it might pose to his present unhappy state of mind. He already knows Karl is inconsiderate of others but I do not think he is aware of more serious traits of character...his nephew's heart is corrupted! Beethoven must be told, then, before it is too late, if it is not too late already. The most efficacious means by which this can be done is by writing to him.

Irrespective of the anger and pain Fanny was feeling, she must also have felt vindicated. My behaviour was what she had presciently predicted more than two years ago: *a tendency towards dishonesty*. She had also then identified the cause: my uncle's constant pressure on me and his unrealistic expectations.

On the 30th of November, Fanny wrote to my uncle a letter of the deepest sympathy (and, needless to say, condemnation of me). She attached it to the two letters from Birgid. In the months to follow I would often wonder had she considered their likely impact. Her diary entry clearly indicates she was aware of the risks the letters might pose

to my uncle's *unhappy state of mind*, and she must have known they would unleash his wrath that could only have one aim: me! But she can be forgiven for not realising that the three letters would lead to a sequence of events far beyond me, with devastating consequences not just for my uncle's mental health but also for his guardian status and his standing in the court of public opinion.

Chapter 27

On the 3rd of December 1818, I returned from college around 4.30 and went to my room. The house was eerily quiet and I had a half an hour to spare before my drawing tutor Moritz arrived. I had no inclination to prepare for that lesson, but when the half hour was almost up I was beginning to feel agitated: a slight unease and guilt; a resentment that I was made to feel like that; a resolve to close my ears if I was to be hectorred about wasting my tutor's time and my uncle's money.

At 5.10pm, the usually punctual Moritz had still not arrived. At 5.30pm I was curious that neither my uncle nor one of the servants had come to tell me why. I assumed that none of them knew why, otherwise my uncle would have given me an alternative task. Recalling how silent it was when I got home, I went onto the landing and peered over the banister. Still no sign of life. I went down the stairs and put my ear to the door of my uncle's studio. I was sure I could hear him but was puzzled as to why I had not heard him play a single note in nearly an hour. That was unusual. As I approached the kitchen, the smell of fried pollock, one of my uncle's favourite dishes, wafted over me; I could hear Birgid and Mia talking; Helka was not working that day. My relationships with all three women were worse than ever, and it had been quite some time since I'd entered the kitchen knowing any of them were there. Memories of my deliberate provocations came to mind, making me feel vulnerable and uneasy. But I so much wanted someone to tell me if they knew why Moritz had not turned up. I was disinclined to interrupt my uncle because that would have meant writing every single word I needed to say to him; besides, my relationship with him was at such a low ebb. I stood for another few minutes, then opened the kitchen door.

Both women had their backs turned to me. Mia was busily engaged at the table; Birgid was just standing there chatting to her. They looked around, and Mia, on seeing it was me, immediately resumed her work. Birgid kept her eyes on me. I thought she looked a little tense whereas I must have been looking hesitant and guilty, now standing in the location of my crimes. That's how I felt: *hesitant* and *guilty*. I summoned up as much confidence as I could to ask her:

‘Moritz hasn’t come...do you know why?’

Birgid did not answer promptly, which convinced me she knew the answer. ‘Your uncle told him not to come’, she eventually said, determinedly.

If she was tense and apprehensive when I entered, she certainly wasn’t so now. She must have known that that answer would have perplexed me: I was doing well at drawing and I enjoyed it; I had never given Moritz cause for complaint.

‘Why did he tell him not to come?’ I asked; I could only assume my uncle was taking me to a concert, and as usual had forgotten to give me prior notice. I had no interest in going to a concert.

Birgid shook her head and said nothing; I felt that she knew something. I left the kitchen, worried. I walked past my uncle’s studio and up the stairs with my head bent low, looking at each rising step in front of me but not seeing a single one: I was too engrossed in what my uncle had in mind for me. As I neared the top of the stairs I suddenly found myself looking at his golden velvet slippers, a present from Nanette. I glanced up guiltily and there he was standing motionless and threatening, waiting for me. He had some letters in his hand and I thought he must have been to my room looking for me. His mouth was grimmer than usual, and his steely stare more disconcerting. With the slightest movement of his head, he beckoned me to follow him, back down the stairs, to his studio.

My mind raced over everything I'd seen and heard since leaving my room. It was all beginning to cohere into a logical though scary sequence. The letters he held in his hand were obviously about me, and whatever they were or whoever had written them, I was certain they were not testaments to my innocence or goodness. I was more scared now, than worried.

He opened the door of his studio and allowed me to step in before him. As soon as I had passed him I felt the sole of one of his feet burying itself in my buttock. I let out a yell and went stumbling across the studio floor at enormous speed. I ended up saving myself from injury with the palms of my hands preventing my head from smashing into the frame of his piano. He came hurtling towards me, dropped the letters on the piano stool and grabbed my throat with one of his hands. He slapped my face with his other hand. I truly did believe that he would kill me.

'What are you?' he roared; 'you're a good-for-nothing scoundrel! You're a plunderer...! You're a thief!'

Even in my petrified state I was wise enough not to ask him *what had I done!*

'What made you think you could treat servants like that?' he asked.

If only I could have said to him: *But I've seen you treating them much worse!*

I wasn't certain whether or not an admission and an apology would rescue me from this ordeal or provoke his rage to new heights, but I had nothing else in my armoury. I bent my head low in total submission, blurted out 'sorry' and began to cry. But this fearful apology and brokenness was nowhere near what he required.

He reached for the letters and gave me the first one. 'Read it', he ordered; 'read every word!'

But he would not be able to hear; he didn't want to hear; he already knew; he merely wanted to intensify my guilt, humiliate and frighten me.

I recognised Birgid's handwriting:

Dear Frau Giannatasio, my heart aches to burden you with the contents of this letter, but I can no longer tolerate the behaviour of the nephew, and I beg you to do something before my staff and I are compelled to leave.

The master has confined him to the house when he returns from college because he cannot be trusted with the company he keeps. It seems that whereas he cannot disobey the master, he can vent his anger and frustrations on Mia and I, which he does with a vengeance!

He raids the larder daily and makes a mess in the process. He took a capon and buried it in wood where it suffocated. He drinks the milk and leaves it uncovered; his room is like a hovel despite being serviced each morning. On his way into the house he insists on ringing the caretaker's bell when there is no need to do so. When the Master is not there he's late for college, fails to practice as the Master has instructed, and brings his companions furtively to his room.

Mia and I have challenged him many times. He first ignored us, then he started abusing us. His language has become deplorable, his name-calling deeply offensive. If I challenge him now he yells at me. If I threaten to tell his uncle, he ridicules me and tells me his uncle will be furious...which I know he will be! What am I to do? Please help me, Frau Giannatasio.

The indictment was so damning that I could barely get to the end of each sentence. He had clearly rehearsed this moment, anticipating the fear and the cold sweat it caused me. But he did not allow me to dwell miserably on the letter

for too long: he had another which he handed me, with an even more serious indictment. I opened it with trembling fingers; I could see instantly that it too was from Birgid. It was much shorter, but it intensified my fears alarmingly even before I read a single word:

Pray forgive me Frau Giannatasio, for having to report that since I first wrote to you only a few days ago, the nephew has become a thief. We cannot now leave a single kreuzer in the kitchen, which as you can well imagine is very inconvenient. I can see no end in sight. I have decided that I must tell the Master; I know how angry he will be; I know I may have to leave. But I cannot remain knowing that the situation can only get worse; the nephew will not change...

‘You’re a thief’, he shouted; ‘that’s what you are’, ‘a scoundrel and a thief!’

The weight of evidence bearing down upon me and the vehemence of the judgement pronounced against me meant that any word I spoke or any tears I shed would be useless at best, more likely a provocation.

‘Look up...look at me’, he said. He needed to *see* my humiliation and helplessness.

I raised my head and tears trickled more freely down my cheeks. I looked into his darkened face, the taut veins and bulging muscles, the thick black eyebrows that seemed to continue in a deep furrow at the side and round the bottom of his accusing eyes, framing them, accentuating their penetrating, unyielding stare.

‘Do you know why you are a thief?’

It was a question I was not likely to consider. I shook my head.

‘Do you know why you do these wicked things?’

I shook my head again, but sensed his gratification in providing the answer, which he roared at me:

‘BECAUSE OF YOUR MOTHER!’

He grabbed my shoulders and I anticipated he would, literally, shake the life out of me. I didn’t care. But that was not his intention. He tightened his grip not to shake me but merely for emphasis on what he was going to say to me. He brought his face closer. It was an uglier, angrier face, made so, I think, not by my recent sins but by the image he had conjured of my mother and his damnation of her.

‘Can’t you see, Karl, she has poisoned you? She has poisoned you with her wickedness. She...would destroy you if she could...I will not let her do that...! Do you understand?’

I nodded in fear. I did *not* understand.

There was no spontaneity here: this was obviously the climactic moment in his rehearsal, the moment in which he was determined once and for all to sever the bond with my mother and to impose his will upon me. But there was another reality at play here, one he was neither in control of nor aware of: he was in effect crying out to me to rescue him, pleading with me to understand what he was saying, and to agree with him. Only now is it possible for me to appreciate the nature of the dilemma I posed for him: this genius, feted by royalty and aristocracy, able to influence powerful people and institutions, able to compose music divine...a man supposedly in control of his fate. Yet here he was, face to face with a twelve-year-old who had nothing...other than the means to disobey, defy and betray him, making his life a misery, painfully exposing the reality that he was hopelessly *not* in control.

I did not know then that I had this power or that this was what I was doing; nor did it *feel* anything like that. In fact, I had never felt weaker or more scared. It was not his oppressive, crushing presence and his iron-clad grip on my shoulders that made me feel like that. It was his madness...his fixation on my mother as a *poison*. He had said this and written it too many times now, and he would

continue doing so for years to come. I could not say to him that whatever sins my mother had perpetrated against him, she was not responsible for my current truculent behaviour, which was nothing more than a rebellion against his increasingly harsh attempts to restrict my social life. But his hatred of her and his pathetic attempt to *poison* my mind against her clearly showed what the future held for me: my every action that might provoke him, every decision I made that he disapproved of; every failure to meet the standards he decreed, and every deviation and wrongdoing which would incense or embarrass him...all this he would interpret in his warped mind as my mother's *poison* still seeping through me. And he would tell me so.

I had often dwelt on a miserable future living with him, but I had not envisaged it with such clarity before. It was a terrifying prospect, so awful that it stirred me out of the abject submission in which I was held. Still gripped in his arms with my back pressed tight against the frame of his piano I yelled at him as loud as I could: 'LET ME GO!' I wrenched myself free. He was flabbergasted, immobilised, standing there with his empty hands limply held out.

I ran to the door and flung it open. Birgid was just then hurrying away along the hall, obviously caught out listening at the doorway. I nearly caught up with her before turning to rush up the stairs. She turned her flushed face around and for a split second our eyes locked. I don't know what she was thinking, but if she had been listening for any length of time, she may well have felt vindicated or even avenged: my humiliation was thoroughly deserved, though my storming out probably would have horrified her, convincing her nothing really had changed.

When I got to my room, I slammed the door tight, and with difficulty, dragged my bed up against the door. I sat on it and listened. He was not coming after me, not yet, anyway. I didn't want to see him again. I had to get away from him, far, far away from him. I had to get away from

this place, from my room above him, from Birgid, Mia and Helka who could never be my friends. How cunning it was for him to publicise so dramatically the conflict between his servants and I, thereby ensuring that the mutual antipathy between us could only be sustained and intensified: Birgid and Mia would never be my accomplices in any future attempts I might make to see my mother; never would they facilitate me defying or betraying my uncle.

I lay on my bed and gazed at the ceiling above me. I did not know anything about my mother's criminal record but I did know that he was an inveterate liar. He had no awareness that when he likened me to her because of, as he saw it, our *criminality*, it gratified me. I so much wanted to be like my mother, and so much detested being like him. If my deviancy, criminality and rebelliousness made me like her, so be it. I wanted to be with her *now*, more than ever. Yet how could I? The servants who had made it all possible were gone. He would be more determined than ever to strictly monitor me; I was attending college which had been warned about her past behaviour; I had two private tutors whom he had personally chosen, and now there were three servants on whom he could totally depend...these were all factors that made it highly unlikely that I could see mama secretly and return to my room feigning innocence. But I was no longer thinking of a *return*...I was contemplating seeing mama but not returning to my uncle! I was going to run away...run to my mother and stay there! I imagined all this happening and in my childish innocence I could not envisage one single obstacle lying in my path. The mere thought of me doing this in the past would have caused me fear and doubt; now in the privacy of my room and unaware of the implications and the consequences, it was making me tingle with excitement. I had been under his tutelage for nearly three years now, and I could pick out all the milestones that signified my growing confidence in how I adapted to him and responded to him (either honestly or

deceitfully; it was mostly the latter!) But this was different. I didn't intend deceiving him or defying him or betraying him; I intended telling him what I was going to do and why, but ensuring that he would not do what he always did: stand in my way.

It was only when I sat down to write the letter that I had some foreboding sense of consequences far worse than my uncle's wrath:

*Dear uncle Ludwig,
I cannot live with you anymore. I know I have misbehaved. I told lies and stole monies to buy sweetcakes, but you withheld my allowance and confined me to my room.*

You don't like my friends and you don't want me to be with them. My friends don't like you and think you're odd. You keep hitting me and hurting me. You hate mama. You stop me seeing her. I love her. I cannot stand hearing you say bad things about her. So I am leaving.

I read it a dozen times. I changed the first sentence *I cannot live with you anymore* to *I cannot live in this place anymore*. I changed: *You hate mama* to *You don't like mama*. In re-reading again and again the sentence: *I cannot stand hearing you say bad things about her*...I was stricken with guilt and hypocrisy: I had spoken ill of her to please him. I resolved to confess to her. I left the sentence unchanged.

No matter what changes I made to the letter I knew how explosive and devastating my departure would be. It was illuminating for me to write nevertheless, because expressing my honest thoughts and feelings in his absence reminded me how difficult it was to do so in his presence. I was under no illusions that he would acknowledge that or make some effort to rectify it. Another insight it gave me

was the realisation that even though I was not engaging in another conspiracy and deception aided by bribed servants, my actions were neither as honest nor as courageous as I initially thought. Unlike my mother who had bravely decided to confront head-on my uncle and his legal coteries in the *Landrechte* court, I had decided to write down what I thought and felt and then run away before he had had the chance to read it!

Chapter 28

I ran away without possessions. So anxious and frightened was I that I could think of nothing other than getting down the stairs and through the main hall door without being detected. It was a cold winter evening and I didn't have a coat. I didn't have my schoolwork nor my games nor my toiletries nor my nightwear. But I was soon free and mobile and on my way to my mother's in Tiefer Graben where she now lived. It was only then I thought of what my uncle's reaction would be. But I didn't really care; I was getting further and further away from him.

'Karl...my darling!'

'Mama!!'

She would soon hear from me what had happened and realise the implications, but that one, instant, spontaneous moment of embrace when she opened her front door was what we had both craved. Neither of us wanted to let go; nor spoil it with words, nor dampen it with worry about what my uncle would do next.

Fifteen minutes later, I had to undergo the predictable motherly scrutiny and consternation about my appearance. She thought I looked pale and had lost weight, was not eating the right food, was not wearing proper clothing and footwear on this cold winter night. I had clear signs of chilblains on my fingers which led to her inspecting and noting similar signs on my toes; there was plenty of evidence that hygiene standards in the *care* of my uncle were substantially lower than her own (it was always a pleasure to be locked in her arms suffused by her freshness and fragrance, but she must have been appalled by the contrasting odours wafting out of my unwashed body and my unchanged underwear). Whilst I bathed, she prepared for me delicious brown soup dumpling, two platefuls of which I consumed. Now replete, I sat with her on a sofa before a crackling fire, its mesmerising flames

dancing merrily. I recalled the miseries of the past few weeks and said to her: 'I want to live with you.'

Her expression was one of sympathy but her tongue wetted her lips and she swallowed, struggling to say what she really thought of that idea. 'I want you to live with me too', she said reassuringly, as though that was something new, rather than the profound truth which had pervaded my thoughts and feelings ever since I was separated from her: we wanted each other.

I sensed her doubt about this mutual desire ever being fulfilled. She knew *he* would come after me, and, if necessary, with Orders from the court, lawyers on hand, and policemen at the ready. I never thought of any of that because I had convinced myself that this unannounced, unplanned *visit* to my mother would be permanent.

In my naivety I had unknowingly burdened my mother with another consequence that she could not possibly fail to see. She had nothing to do with my absconding but my uncle would never believe that. He would hold her responsible and curse her and condemn her. He would use it in whatever way he could to convince friends, lawyers and judges of her incorrigibility. Such awful thoughts must have been running through her mind as she embraced me, cried with joy, talked with me, laughed with me, caressed me and fed me. But she never shared those awful thoughts with me.

'I have something to tell you mama.'

'Oh?'

'I spoke ill of you.'

'What do you mean?'

'I spoke ill of you...to please uncle.'

I could tell from her changing expressions that my confession perplexed her and my motivation dismayed her.

'What did you say about me?'

That was a question I hoped she would not ask. I told her what I had called her and of the criticisms I had made of her. I had the urge to blame my uncle again, but managed not to.

She stared at me; her brow creased severely. She was silent for a few moments and a terrible tension gripped me. Then a horrible thought came into my mind: she might just walk away from me!

‘Did you mean it?’

I yelled ‘NO...mama!’ I burst into tears and threw myself at her. ‘I’m sorry, mama...forgive me...I love you...forgive me!’

She held me in her arms and my tears dripped onto her neck.

‘I love you too, darling’.

At about 8.30, the peace of the night was shattered by the loudest knock on our front door. We looked at each other for the briefest of moments, my mother much better at remaining calm than I: I could not stop myself from scurrying into the hall and up the stairs shouting: ‘I’m not going back.’ I’m sure it sounded more panic-stricken than determined.

It didn’t make my mother’s task any easier. She got up and hurried to the front door, not wanting to hear him knock a second time. I hunkered down on the landing, watching and listening. She opened the door to face him alone.

‘Where is he?’ he bellowed.

‘He’s with me’, she said slowly and calmly, knowing he couldn’t hear but could probably lipread those three simple words which would have wounded and incensed him.

‘He must come with me!’

My mother shook her head. ‘Tomorrow’, she said.

‘Tonight!’

‘It’s too late...I’ll bring him to you...tomorrow.’

He couldn’t hear that. But I could and my heart sank.

‘Tonight’, he insisted.

She shook her head again, conspicuously looked behind her at the pendulum clock in the hall, and tried again to tell him it was too late.

But it wasn’t really: she was not being awkward; she was neither stalling nor stubbornly refusing merely because our

joyous reunion had come to an abrupt end; she just didn't want to hand her son over to a man so visibly and audibly incandescent with hatred and rage. How could she have done so having been told by Corlotte about his vicious attack on me?

'You'll pay for this', he roared at her, before turning and hurrying back to the carriage in which he had arrived.

I believe my mother was courageous in the circumstances but she needed more than courage for the challenge she faced when she returned to the hall looking shaken and pale: I came running down the stairs, threw myself into her arms for the third time that night, and cried out:

'I don't want to live with him mama...I hate him...I hate living with him...I hate his servants...they hate me...I hate his friends... they're not my friends...I won't go...I'll run away...I'll hide...I'll go to another country...I'll never come back!'

She managed somehow to absorb all my pent-up anxieties and fears, which, given the helplessness of her situation, must have been gut-wrenching for her. But she could not reassure me, because, deep down, she knew I *would* be taken from her, soon.

But not just yet! In the morning another loud knock! I held my breath and gripped the banister as my mother opened the door. The friendly tone of her greeting told me this visit was prearranged. It was not my uncle, nor the police nor any agent of his coming to take me away. A rather distinguished looking, well-spoken gentleman with whom my mother was obviously familiar, entered the hallway. They went into the drawing room and talked for quite a while. I could not make out what was being said though I heard the word 'he' often. She eventually called and introduced me to Jacob Hotschevar the distant relative who had advised her in submitting her petitions to the court. He was a naturally cheerful man who stood up, shook me by the hand, and quickly put me at my ease by talking about things other than

my running away: he was particularly interested in my love of drawing (which, I chose not to say, was the result of my uncle providing private tuition). He directed me to sit beside him; my mother sat opposite us, purposely saying less and less as the meeting wore on. All the time he spoke to me, I could see his focus casually but frequently shifting from my face to my clothes...my glaringly inadequate clothing and footwear, then to my reddish-tipped, frost-nipped fingers. The contrast with his manicured hands and his iridescent silk velvet three-piece suit held in place with extravagantly large decorous buttons could not have been more stark. Yet I felt comfortable in his presence, and before long I was able to tolerate his more challenging questions about my relationship with my uncle. I felt relieved in telling him how dependent I had become on lying to my uncle, criticising and name-calling my mother in order to please him. I was not an inveterate liar: every word in the letter I left him (indelibly imprinted in my memory) was the truth, but I had fled terrified at the thought of being anywhere near him when he read it because he would not be able to bear the truth. Occasionally I glanced at my mother as I told Hotschevar all this; I think I was able to talk so freely and honestly because she had forgiven me. I suspected she had already told him, keen to share with someone...anyone, the moral chaos of her son's life, which she attributed entirely, and wrongly, to my uncle alone.

There was a price to pay for this civilized chat about my present and my past: I unwittingly lured myself into a false sense of security. Surely, I thought, they would not send me back to my uncle now! But that's exactly what they prepared me to face, because they had no other option if they really intended fighting this in the court.

My mother brought me to a police station, told them what had happened and asked them to return me to my uncle. It must have been a terrible journey for her knowing the risk she was exposing me to. Her hope was that involving the

police would have tempered my uncle's response. They had been contacted by him the night before, demanding my return; they just hadn't got round to dealing with it.

Two burly policemen walked on either side of me, each one holding one of my hands, not because they thought I might dart off at the slightest opportunity and lose them in the darkness of Vienna's alleyways, but because (I think) they felt genuinely sorry for me, taking me from my mother who could barely conceal her anguish.

I'm sure they felt worse when they handed me over to a man incapable of masking his true feelings. They attempted to lower the temperature by conversing with him cordially at the door but he gave them short shrift. He came after me in the hallway where I stood submissively. The journey from my mother's, despite the efforts of the police to cheer me, was one of deepening despondency and fear. I knew what to expect. In running away from him I had not only defied him, I had humiliated him, shamed him...how would he explain my absconding to his countless friends, associates and patrons to whom he boasted boringly about his fatherly goodness and generosity?

I cried myself to sleep that night, not because of the pain he inflicted on me, but because I could not understand my mother telling him the truth: that I was with her when he knocked on her door. Why couldn't she have told him a lie and hid me somewhere?

Maybe I *had* become an inveterate liar!

Chapter 29

It was Thursday, a day on which my uncle nearly always had bread soup and eggs for dinner. I cannot remember what time I ran into our nearest woodland but the cool, knee-deep, silvery mist surrounding it was eerily unforgettable. Strangely, I couldn't hear my running steps on the wet putrefying leaves, nor could I smell any of the other damp earthy fragrances which must have been rising all around me.

Despite the mist I found the death-cap mushrooms easily, a troop of them at the base of a huge Turkey oak tree just as they had been in the Helenenthal forest where my uncle and I had walked more than two years previously. Moss-wrapped rocks also encircled the oak, convenient as footrests or temporary table-tops. I searched for the largest death-caps, removed them from their stalks and proceeded to dismantle and dissect them as my uncle had demonstrated. I did not feel entirely safe in handling them even though the texture had a pleasant sponginess and their compacted gills were immaculately white. I could well imagine someone who didn't know any better eager to pick them, cook them and eat them.

When I returned home I slipped into my uncle's studio when he wasn't there and *borrowed* the knife he used for thinning and pointing his quill. In my room I sliced the death-caps into the tiniest pieces then used the handle of the knife to mash them into a moist pulpy mass. It was no longer white, more a wet and dirty greenish-grey, much less conspicuous. I emptied it into a small earthenware dish which I then placed in one of my drawers, concealing it by laying a book on top of it. I lay on my bed listening to my uncle shuffling and playing in his studio below.

Time seemed to flash by. I heard the bell cord in my uncle's room reverberating throughout the apartment. He

was summoning the cook as he often did around this time. I almost fell out of my bed in haste, opened the drawer and placed the dish in my trouser pocket. I hurried down the stairs until I saw Mia emerge from the kitchen then I slowed my pace and walked past her. Neither of us spoke or glanced at each other. I waited until I knew she had turned on the stairs and was out of sight and then I dashed towards the kitchen. I prayed Birgid was not there. No one was there.

The bread-soup was simmering. I walked slowly towards it. I felt neither anxiety nor fear. My heart beat normally. I removed the dish from my pocket, turned it and held it over the bread-soup. The moist mushroom mash clung to the surface of the dish and would not move. I shook the dish; it still didn't move. I fingered it out of the dish then stirred it around in the soup with the ladle Mia had been using. It didn't dissolve but I think it would have been unnoticeable to anyone other than myself. Then I calmly left. I passed Mia on the way to my room. Again, we neither spoke nor glanced at each other, though I noticed her looking at my empty hands and trouser pockets, probably wondering had I been pilfering in the kitchen again.

I do not remember being called for dinner nor excusing myself which I must have done. But I will never forget the agonised roar of my uncle in his studio some hours later. I opened my bedroom door and stepped onto the landing. I could see his studio door was closed tight and that assured me: I could listen to his suffering without having to witness it.

Birgid came running up the stairs desperate to help him and hammered at his door too afraid to enter without his permission. Even if his hearing had been restored he probably would not have heard her frantic hammering, so loud and continuous were his cries. She could not stand it. She turned the door handle and entered. I heard her instant cry: 'Master!'

He managed to roar out just three words in reply: 'I'VE BEEN POISONED!'

I fled back to my room and shut the door tight. Fully clothed (I didn't even remove my shoes) I got under the blankets of my bed and pulled them over my head. I was no longer calm. I was terrified. Those three words *I've been poisoned*...an allegation...a truth...a judgement, uttered with such passion and venom, seared through me. I was the cause of every moment of his deafening torment. I could not listen to it, not because of any sympathy or regret for the excruciating pain he was suffering, but because he knew I was responsible.

Surely he could not come after me? He was dying. I prayed that he would die quickly...that he would die right now...and then there would be silence...and nobody may ever know. But he did not die. His agony intensified and his screams and his roars permeated the floor and walls of my room. I could hear him vomiting. I could hear him lurching from one part of his studio to another. I could hear him tripping over his chairs and his desk. It was all futile. He could not escape the ghastly pain. It could only get worse. Then I heard something hideous: he must have stumbled or fallen near his piano and tried to save himself with palms outstretched crashing down onto the keyboard. Fifty notes his hands maybe fell upon, but there was just one momentary sound...a sound from hell!

I burst out crying, a panic-laden crying. I could not lie under the blankets any longer. I ran onto the landing with only one intent: to escape to my mama. I reached the top of the stairs but his studio door below opened. He staggered out and stared up at me. He was covered in vomit. His face was monstrously contorted and he slowly mounted each step towards me. Then I saw Birgid emerging slowly from his studio. Her whole countenance and movements contrasted sharply with his. There was no hint of the panic she felt when she came running up the stairs and hammered

at his door. She looked up and as my uncle struggled towards me she smiled malevolently.

He got nearer and nearer, and I turned and ran back up to my room, screaming. He came after me but occasionally stopped, doubled over and roared with spasms of abdominal pain. I reached my room; I shut the door tight and helplessly cried out: 'Forgive me uncle...please...please forgive me!'

He could not hear me.

He came crashing through the door and caught hold of me. He turned me and lifted me and threw me onto my bed. Then he leant over me and encircled my throat with his massive hands. I stopped struggling; I stopped begging for mercy and forgiveness. I surrendered. I couldn't breathe. I felt myself slipping into unconsciousness. I had one last glimpse of his ugly terrifying face, his contortions of excruciating pain replaced by the laughter of triumphal gratifying revenge. I woke up screaming in the darkness of the night, my nightshirt ringing wet and my eyes stinging with the sweat still trickling from my brow. I felt more terrified at being alive than dead. I could not move. I could only yell and scream, wanting someone, anyone to come to me and hold me and comfort me and rid my mind of that dream...that nightmare...

But my uncle could not hear my screams.

Part V

Chapter 30

I lay cowering in my soaking nightshirt for many hours afraid to get out of my bed. I was terrified merely thinking of leaving my room and discovering that my uncle *was* dead. He was not dead. Nor can it be said that he was very much alive. I heard him leave the house a few hours later, to make his way to the Giannatasios. They were the only people with whom he felt he could share the news of my absconding. Unlike his threatening confrontation with my mother the night before, he approached the Giannatasios, according to Fanny, in tears. He blurted out: *Karl ran away to his mother...He is ashamed of me...*

He showed them my letter, which proved to Fanny how *heartless* I was. She wrote:

Never shall I forget the moment he came and showed us his nephew's letter...evidence of his vileness...To see this man crying...how dreadful it is that he must suffer because of such outcasts...that bad child...that unnatural Raven-mother!

This uncharacteristic foul-mouthing of my mother and I, which continued for some days, was undoubtedly Fanny shifting the blame after learning of the sequence of events. She should never have sent Birgid's letters nor her own letter to him. He would have eventually found out about my bad behaviour, but to have suddenly been informed about it by the two women (the implication being that everyone except him knew what was going on and were talking and writing about it) must have infuriated him.

Whatever anger Fanny felt towards my mother and I, and whatever level of guilt she felt, she was nevertheless heartened by the outcome; she was still harbouring romantic notions about my uncle:

It is a pleasure and relief for me to know that Beethoven depends upon us...we are his one and only refuge. He must know by now that he has judged us too harshly and treated us wrongly. He is a strange and peculiar man.

My uncle's visit to the Giannatasios was not just the need for a sympathetic ear; it had a strategic purpose. He asked them to consider my return to the Institute. He told them the lie that my mother was responsible for my absconding. All his efforts, his expenditure on private tutors, sacking of disloyal servants, placing me in the *Academic Gymnasium*, his physical abuse of me, all had been to no avail: he was convinced my mother was certain to entice me to run away again. Worse still, he feared that she might take me out of the country, with no prospect of him ever finding us (that's what my mother feared too: that he would, as he often told friends, take me out of Vienna and place me in a school far enough away from her to make it as difficult as possible for her to find me).

Giannastasio agreed to have me back in the Institute, not with any enthusiasm it must be said: he had bad memories of the disruption both my mother and my uncle had previously caused and the unfounded criticisms the latter had made. Fanny, on the other hand, was delighted with the prospect of seeing my uncle regularly again; she hadn't however, forgiven me for causing him such grief (and making her feel so guilty for her own role in the affair); her attitude towards me thereafter was distinctly cool.

My absconding impacted upon my mother in a way that my uncle could never have anticipated: it encouraged her to petition the *Landrechte* again, and she did so, within 24 hours! She reasoned that my running away in the dead hour of a winter's night and the neglectful condition in which she found me were likely to strengthen the argument that he was failing in his guardianship duties, and that she should have

some responsibility for my education and welfare. In her petition, she stressed that she had no prior knowledge of my intention, and that she had ensured my return through the police. She again requested permission to place me in the *Imperial-Royal University Konvikt*.

The *Landrechte* court responded quickly. My uncle and I and my mother were summoned to attend a hearing on Wednesday 9th of December. More importantly for me (now staying at the Institute) I was visited by my uncle just before the hearing.

I can well imagine how he must have felt in receiving this summons a few days after the shattering discovery that I had run away from him. Only a few weeks before he had roundly defeated my mother twice in the court's rejections of her first and second petitions. He must have been confident then that she would not be causing him any trouble for a while. Now as a consequence of what *I had done*, she was about to pose a greater challenge for him. He knew that my absconding was likely to be interpreted by the court as a child's desperation and unhappiness. He would counter this by asserting that my mother was exploiting my absconding, raising questions about the quality of care he was providing. But he must have been worried, because whatever help and advice his legal friends gave him, they were not going to be around when he was being questioned in the *Landrechte*.

I knew nothing about my mother's new petition when my uncle, unexpectedly as usual, turned up at the Institute; I automatically thought I was in trouble again. But the look on his face, not the angry threatening look that had been thrust into my own face too often in recent weeks, reassured me that I had done no wrong.

'How are you today, Karl?' he asked, rather formally, beckoning me to sit down. 'Your mother has petitioned the court again, seeking to remove you from my care, and to place you in another school.'

This was obviously a first test: I couldn't very well tell him I was elated and wanted to cry out with joy, or that I had wrongly assumed that my mother had surrendered to the baleful pressures he had applied, and given up on the goal which had driven her for years.

'We have to attend court on Wednesday', he said, in a voice unusually restrained. 'You will be asked lots of questions...about living with me.'

He watched me intently. Multiple thoughts raced through my mind, perplexing me initially, then fusing into one particular unavoidable conclusion: I was being primed to give answers in court that would satisfy him, that would not incriminate him. He must have noticed my expression changing; I was beginning to feel uncomfortable, not just oppressed by his presence but pressurized by his intent. I wrote down: *Will you be there...* I wanted to continue writing: *when I'm answering questions...* but I lost my nerve. I held the uncompleted question out to him.

'Yes...yes! I'll be there; I am your guardian!' He allowed that deadening assertion to sink in before adding: 'You must say the right thing...you must tell the truth. Do you understand?'

No, I didn't understand. *The truth! The Right thing!* What truth was he talking about? That he often threatened me and beat me? Grabbed me by the throat and made me think he was going to strangle me? Gripped my shoulders in Mödling and shook the living day lights out of me? That he hated my mother so much that he denied her access which the court had stipulated was her right? All of that was the truth; did he really mean that it was also the *right* thing to say? He couldn't really mean that, could he? I felt that he was deliberately tying me up in knots to ensure that I would carefully and anxiously consider every word I spoke. Suddenly it dawned on me that he did *not* want me to tell the truth! He wanted me to say what he regarded to be the right thing! And there seemed to be a threat: that I better not

say anything that cast doubt on his oft-repeated claim that he was a committed, caring guardian. I nodded that I understood...far more, now, than he could have imagined.

Chapter 31

My second stay at the Institute which had begun on Monday the 7th of December was very different from the first. Apart from the sour relationship with Fanny who couldn't resist reminding me about the continuing suffering I was inflicting on my *poor* uncle, I had to adjust to a regime even more oppressive than the one I had run away from. My favoured member of the family and staff, Mrs Giannatasio, who had made my previous stay in the Institute more than tolerable, was seldom seen now due to a progressive, debilitating illness.

My uncle issued instructions to the Institute to ensure that I would not run away again. Included was an order that I must not under any circumstances have any contact with my mother whom he continued to blame for my absconding. Giannatasio was only too keen to impose his own severe restrictions: he had endured enough turmoil and disruption in the years I had previously been there. Having heard about her petitions to the court, he was also inclined to believe my uncle's claim that she wanted to take me out of the country, and he probably had visions of her stealthily returning to his premises and luring me from the school playground! Now that the police had become involved and I was due to testify in court, Giannatasio must have been wary about becoming embroiled in the case: a scandal arising perhaps, should my mother actually do what he feared and he then being accused of negligence, or worse, being charged as an accessory! He therefore intended keeping a tight rein on me, and to punish me for any transgressions. When I was reported a few days later for misconduct and for setting a bad example to younger pupils (maintaining my reputation already gained in Mödling and the *Gymnasium*) I was confined to a cold dark room and forbidden to have any further contact with pupils.

None of this was conducive to preparing me for the ordeal of attending the *Landrechte* court, but I was grateful for the brief respite it gave me from the prison-like conditions I was now enduring. As I walked up seemingly endless steps leading to the court's grandiose façade, my uncle's presence did nothing to mitigate my sense of loneliness and foreboding. I imagined robed judges with funny hats looking down on me with scorn as they interrogated me; instead, I was questioned by two lowly legal clerks in a small sparsely furnished room off the main corridor. One asked the questions, the other wrote down the answers. The first questions related to my education. I told them I had achieved 'eminence' in Latin and 'first-class' in other studies, including drawing. I felt rather good about that. The questions I dreaded came soon after; I dreaded them because my uncle sat only a few metres away:

Why did you leave your uncle?

How could I answer that truthfully? He was staring at me. He couldn't hear me, but he was staring at me. For an agonising second I thought I might tell them the truth. But I couldn't.

'Because my mother wanted to send me to a different school; she told me it would be better.'

But haven't you done well at the school your uncle sent you to, and the private tuition he has provided for you?

'Yes, sir.'

How did your uncle treat you?

I could still feel him staring at me. He could see neither my tension nor my fear.

'He treated me well, Sir.'

Where do you prefer to be: with your mother or your uncle?

I could feel my face redden and my heart pumping. All I could think about was his not-so-subtle warning with its implicit threat. The clerks with their heads buried in their papers had no idea of the impact of their question. I thought

I might explode. I told them a pathetic lie, which my uncle, if he had heard, would certainly not have regarded as the *right thing*. It came rushing out of me, as though laden with guilt and a desperate need to get to the end of it.

‘I would gladly stay with my uncle if he had someone else staying there too; my uncle is deaf and I have difficulty talking to him.’

Did your mother persuade you to leave your uncle?

‘No, Sir.’

Did your mother encourage you to return to your uncle?

‘Yes, Sir, but I was afraid of my uncle for having run away.’

Has your uncle mistreated you in the past?

‘He has often punished me...’ I hesitated, looked at the floor, felt myself flushing again, and then told a bigger lie: ‘but only when I deserved it.’

How has he punished you?

‘By shaking me...he threatened to strangle me when I was brought back from my mother’s.’

But he didn’t strangle you!

‘No, Sir.’

How long were you with your mother?

‘Two days.’

Have you ever spoken disrespectfully of your mother?

‘Yes, Sir.’

Have you done so in your uncle’s presence?

‘Yes, Sir.’

Why?

I thought it would please him, Sir.

Has your uncle encouraged you to pray?

‘Yes Sir.’

Suddenly it was all over. I looked at my uncle trying to ascertain whether or not he had heard the questions, more importantly, the answers I gave. I don’t think he had. But given the rigid controls and the solitary confinement he and Giannatasio were now subjecting me too, he was probably

convinced I would not have said anything too critical of him.

It was now his turn to give testimony, not in a small corridor office but in the splendid central court before an enrobed noble judge and his entourage. He was joined by his longstanding friend Carl Bernard to ensure he understood any follow-up questioning. I vaguely remember the events of the day, and vividly remember the impact of his answer to the last question he was asked. It would be some time before I became curious enough to visit the *Landrechte* court and see a precise account of his whole testimony.

Why did your nephew leave you?

‘I cannot tell the cause of his departure. He has accepted responsibility. His mother may have asked him to come to her the day before, but it might have been fear of punishment. I do not know exactly. He left a note of farewell.’

Punishment for what...what did your nephew do?

‘I had a housekeeper who had been recommended to me by the Giannatasio family. My housekeeper sent two letters to Miss Fanny Giannatasio about my nephew Karl. Miss Giannatasio sent these two letters and one of her own, to me. All three letters complained about Karl’s behaviour. He called the servants abusive name and took money from the kitchen to spend on sweet-meats.’

In whose care was your nephew?

‘I have provided him with private coaching in French and Drawing and I myself give him daily tuition in piano. These lessons and the work they necessitate use up all his leisure time...he doesn’t need care. I have had servants in the past who were bribed by the boy’s mother and couldn’t be trusted to care for him or to supervise him. I put him under the charge of a priest in Mödling during the summer, but the mother managed to get to him too, thus sabotaging my plans for him.’

Has your nephew ever spoken disrespectfully of his mother in your presence?

‘No! I have continually warned him about speaking the truth. I once asked him was he fond of his mother; he said “no”.’

How did you get the boy back?

‘With the help of the police. I went to the mother to demand his return, but she would promise nothing except that she would deliver him back the following day. I feared that she intended to take him to Linz where my brother lives, or to Hungry. That is why I went to the police. As soon as I got him back I placed him in the care of the Giannatasios.

His mother wanted to enrol him in the Imperial-Royal University Konvikt. What is your objection to that?

‘The supervision is not strict enough and there are far too many pupils. I cannot allow him to be enrolled there.’

The final question seemed uncontentious, giving my uncle another opportunity to burnish his credentials as a benevolent, committed guardian:

What means do you propose to employ in the education of your nephew?

He presented the options available to him as he saw them: to keep a tutor or tutors who would be with me at all time; to prolong my stay with the Giannatasios for the duration of the winter; eventually to send me to the Mölken Konvikt in the north of the country, which, he had heard, was to be highly recommended. He mentioned a fourth alternative, the *Theresianum*, prefacing that suggestion with the words ‘if he were of noble birth.’

Everyone knew the *Theresianum* school founded by our beloved Empress Maria Theresa to serve the children of nobility; its grounds were also more popularly known as a destination for picnic-goers on a Sunday afternoon.

I didn’t know what my uncle was talking about when he said: *if he were of noble birth*. I knew he was talking about

me and educational choices, but my concentration slowly shifted to the impact those words had made in the court: mutual glances all around; a pregnant silence, the judge lowering his head and staring perplexedly over his spectacles. Moments later he asked my uncle:

Are you not of the nobility? Do you not have documents to prove that you are?

Bernard quickly wrote the questions down. My uncle looked at them. They then looked helplessly at each other, both realising the implications. My uncle stuttered, he stammered, he rambled, his face got redder and his voice got louder, but the judge's persistent questioning eventually compelled him to admit that he didn't have any documentation verifying that he was of noble birth.

It would be quite some time before I learnt why this matter so concerned the judge: the *Landrechte* was a court that served only the nobility. My uncle and my mother were battling it out in the wrong court! And if that's what they were doing in December 1818, they had also been battling in the same wrong court three years previously. But how did this come about? How did my uncle initiate proceedings in a court serving only the nobility in the first instance?

When he first applied for guardianship in November 1815, he had achieved iconic status with his rousing compositions that celebrated victory over Napoleon and the end of fifteen years of devastating war. He was much in demand at the Congress of Vienna the previous year, his opera *Fidelio* being performed before thousands of delegates. The court administrators who dealt with his application for guardianship may have assumed such a revered man had to be noble, particularly given his accompanying character references from authentic noble and aristocratic patrons, who included Archduke Rudolph, brother of our Emperor Leopold II.

Another possibility is that the administrators checking his 1815 application mistook the word *van* in his name for

von. The difference is vast! The word *von* predominantly denoted nobility throughout our empire. The word *van*, as my uncle was now attempting to explain to the noble judge, was merely a Dutch predicate (which denoted nothing; his family's origins were Dutch). Trying to maintain his dignity during the judge's questioning, he conceded that *van was not exclusively applied to the nobility*. That provoked a few sniggers around the court, because everyone knew that *van*, whatever it signified in other parts of Europe, certainly didn't refer to the nobility in Austria!

The issue was followed up when my mother testified, but not before she was given the opportunity to express serious misgivings about my uncle: his failure to adhere to her right of access; his intention to send me away from Vienna, 'perhaps into foreign lands'; his deafness; the poor quality of care relating to my cleanliness and clothing. Regarding me speaking disrespectfully about her (which my uncle had denied) she deftly side-stepped the issue by saying she personally had not heard me do so. Then she was asked the question that, for the noble judge, eclipsed all other matters: *Was your husband of noble birth?* She replied:

'He once told me he was. The documents proving of nobility were said to be in the possession of his older brother, the composer. At the legal hearing on the death of my husband, proof of nobility was demanded; but the documents could not be produced.'

This would suggest that both my father and my uncle had been misleading my mother and all and sundry in Viennese society. I'm sure my mother was shocked to learn that she had not, as she had been led to believe, married into nobility; but she couldn't have failed to notice that her case had most likely been advanced by this revelation.

Long after I married and my uncle was dead, my mother revealed to me that for many years there were persistent rumours that my uncle was the son of the King of Prussia! The rumours were eventually published as fact in reputable

journals and music dictionaries. When his childhood friend, Franz Wegeler became aware of them, he was dismayed: he had known my uncle's parents very well, and thought particularly highly of his mother. Wegeler wrote a stinging letter to my uncle, demolishing the rumour with calendar facts, and attributing his neglect of the matter to his all-consuming preoccupation with music:

Why do you not avenge your mother's honour when...it is given that you are a love-child...only your inherent fear of having anything but music of yours published is, regrettably, the cause of this reproachable indolence.

It took my uncle nearly a year to write back to Wegeler. Given the seriousness of the issue his response was nonchalant to say the least:

You tell me of rumours that I am the son of the late king of Prussia. I am aware of those rumours. But I have made it a point of principle to ignore things that have been said about me. For that reason I am happy for you to enlighten the world about my parent's integrity, especially that of my dear mother.

His mother had been dead nearly forty years when he wrote that letter. But he didn't post it! Puzzling that may be but not unusual: I used to see many unsent letters on his desk, some of them remaining there after he had died.

Perhaps the rumour that he was the child of a king was as highly gratifying to him as his exposure as a commoner was devastatingly humiliating. He did eventually refute the rumours on his deathbed, conscience thereby dictating that he must, at last, defend the honour of his mother.

Chapter 32

For the second time in only three years I found myself at the centre of a conflict involving many people: my uncle and his most intimate, trusted friends, especially Bernard; my mother, Giannatasio and his staff, the judge, lawyers and police. I was not just at the centre of the conflict, I was the cause of it: I had run away from my uncle! To end up at the centre of a conflict knowing it was your actions which triggered it would suggest that I knew what was happening all around me. Not really. My misery during this period stemmed more from *not* knowing and *not* understanding what was happening. The court officials who had questioned me told me nothing; nor did Giannatasio nor Fanny in the days leading up to the hearing; nor did my uncle, other than reminding me of how wicked my mother was and issuing veiled threats over the testimony I was about to give. My mother might have told me something if she'd been able to speak to me, but, even though we must at times have been only meters apart in the courtrooms, my uncle was determined to deny her that opportunity, particularly after her devastating testimony which publicly confirmed that he was a commoner masquerading as a nobleman.

I still could not forget that he had also denied the court the opportunity to see the letter I wrote to him before running away from him. He purposely and misleadingly referred to it as my *farewell note*. Little wonder: it might have been seen as further evidence against him. It was a brief and hurried letter, but it had caused him such pain, and had rendered him tearful and helpless in the home of the Giannatasios. It encapsulated all the misery and hopelessness of my situation, and would have I'm sure, made far more sense to the court than the weightier briefs of clever lawyers.

My uncle never spoke to me as we made our way out of the *Landrechte*. I initially thought this was a form of punishment, that the very sight of me would conjure in his mind images of me tiptoeing down the staircase of his apartment and fleeing from him. But the reality was that he was so despondent he didn't want to speak to anyone. Nor did he, as Bernard and I accompanied him back to the Institute *prison* where he left me. The Giannatasio family knew something had gone terribly wrong and tried to reach out to him; but he was unreachable. Gnawing at him then, and in each hour and day to follow, was the excruciating memory that he had brought this misery upon himself: a few ill-chosen words which had dramatically altered the course of proceedings, and now the *Landrechte* had left him to stew in suspense and apprehension as it deliberated without hurry on the decisions it had to make.

My mother was about to make his situation and his condition worse. Encouraged by developments in the *Landrechte*, she submitted her third petition on the 10th of December, again requesting that I enrol in the Imperial-Royal Konvikt. She supplemented her efforts with two supporting documents, which, when my uncle was able to see them, must have driven him apoplectic. One was written by Father Fröhlich from Mödling, whose opening statement acknowledged my 'aptitude for study' but lamented the fact that my morals were 'totally corrupted'. As well as listing my misdemeanours and my corrupting influences amongst his pupils, he got to the heart of the matter: the relationship between my uncle and my mother was so bad that I learnt to please him by reviling my mother with the *vilest epithets in his presence...* at which my uncle *expressed great joy!* He described the visit my uncle actually made to him solely for the purpose of reporting with *malevolent delight...* that I loathed my mother and had called her a *raven-mother*.

Coming from a priest this was quite a damning testimony. By the time I got round to reading it in my adult

years, I had long forgotten the brutality of Fröhlich's beatings, the zealousness of his religious teaching, and just how much I had loathed him. But it was reassuring to learn that he was a staunch supporter of my mother. Fortunately at the time I knew nothing about what he had written: to learn that I was *totally corrupted* and to be repeatedly reminded by my uncle that I was infected with *my mother's poison*, would have been too much to bear.

The second supplementary document in support of my mother's petition was written by Hotschevar, her distant relative, with whom I had spent some time in her home the day after I ran away. It was vastly different from Fröhlich's rather shrill testimony.

In a pre-emptive move Hotschevar acknowledged the criminal record of my mother but stressed that she received 'ample punishment' all those years ago. Thereafter his case revolved around two core assertions: that she was wrongly deprived of the predominant influence of her child, and that:

Karl van Beethoven should not be allowed to remain entirely under the influence of his uncle, otherwise his well-being will at great risk: he will be in danger of being physically and morally harmed.

Hotschevar asserted that my uncle and my father were more often enemies than friends, and that my father was only on good terms with him when he needed money. This led him onto a sensational allegation (which has never been denied) that my father, seriously ill with consumption and consequently deprived of a salary, agreed to my uncle having guardianship only in lieu of financial support. My uncle provided this in the form of a 1500 florins loan. Hotschevar produced a statement written sometime after by my father in which he denounced the agreement he had made under the duress of illness, and committed himself to nullifying it.

I would never have drawn up an instrument like this if my illnesses had not caused me intolerable expenses. Only in considering these could I have felt compelled to put my signature to this instrument. But from the very moment it was signed I was determined to demand its return, whenever an opportune pecuniary moment arose, or to render it invalid by another instrument. My brother is wholly committed to his music, and therefore, in my opinion, can never become my son's guardian; nor could I ever give my consent to the same.

Hotschevar reminded the court that my father did indeed attempt to invalidate the sordid barter by the codicil added to his will, which stipulated that I should remain with my mother. My father's wishes could not have been clearer, but, Hotschevar alleged, my uncle somehow managed to persuade the *Landrechte* to terminate my mother's influences on all matters pertaining to the guardianship. Subsequently he believed, I had become totally immersed in the enmity which for years and indeed from the beginning prevailed between my uncle and my mother. My uncle's aim was to eliminate any devotion and affection I felt for her. The consequences were serious, he claimed, elaborating with some licence on what I told him that morning in my mother's home: that I must lie and deceive in order to please my uncle, for if I were to be honest in what I say, especially about my mother, he would punish me or not believe me. This perverse state of affairs had eventually led to my shocking disregard for religious practice, my tendency towards licence, freedom and pilfering; I was in danger of spiralling out of control...and becoming a danger to society. Even with regard to my physical welfare, my uncle had failed, Hotschevar himself having witnessed my frost-nipped fingers and inadequate clothing (and having accepted my mother's testimony about

my unchanged underwear and my apparently unwitting lack of hygiene). He ended with a plea to my uncle to give up the guardianship:

or at least...to give way to the mother or to someone better qualified than he, who will exercise those moderate influences which are vitally necessary to rescue the boy from the ruinous path upon which, through no fault of his own, he has been set.

Hotschevar must have had many conversations with my mother and access to all my father's papers and diaries. He must also have been a source of advice and support for her during the darkest moments of her struggle. Yet in that last comment above, he prudently avoided a fulsome advocacy of her regaining her maternal rights over my care and education; instead, his objective was persuading the *Landrechte* to remove those rights from the man in whom they were then invested, the implication being that anyone else, not just my mother, would be a more competent guardian!

It is not difficult to imagine the impact of Hotschevar's words upon my uncle...at any time. But this was the worst possible time, when he was still trying to cope with the pain and the consequences of me running away, and his abject misery in not being able to provide documentary proof that *he was* of noble birth. He now feared that he might lose me, and Hotschevar's carefully crafted testimony could only have exacerbated those fears. Having had me returned to the Institute where I was now virtually imprisoned, he unexpectedly paid me a second visit, Monday 14th of December. He had obviously spent the weekend mulling over his predicament. He needed to see me, embrace me and profess his loving care of me. But he must have been shocked when he arrived at the Institute and had to await a member of staff fetching a key to open the door of my *cell*!

When I was told my uncle had arrived, I shuddered. Having seen him in the depths of despair a couple of days ago as we left the court, I anticipated him attacking me: I was, after all, being locked up in solitary confinement and punished by everyone around me, so why shouldn't my uncle attack me when I was responsible for bringing so much misery into his life (as Fanny never ceased to remind me)? Yet when I anxiously walked towards him in the foyer his expression bore no malice. He stared at me, aghast. I had never seen him scrutinize me like this before. He took my hands, opened up my fingers and remarked on how cold they were; then he enveloped me in his arms and cried. I had seen him on the verge of tears many times before, but I had never seen him cry.

'My son...what are they doing to you?'

I burst into tears myself then, relieved beyond measure by what looked like my impending release and overwhelmed by this apparent compassion: he had not come to attack me or harangue me about misdemeanours!

I was in no position to answer his question. I didn't have a notebook in my hand to write a response and, in any case, he held me too tightly. Had I tried to speak to him he would not have heard me. But when I later recalled this unexpected embrace, I'm not at all sure that he was asking *me* the question; I think he was asking himself: *what have I done to you?* And he knew the answer. What *they* were doing to me was exactly what he had asked *them* to do: to confine me so securely that I could not possibly run away and my mother could not have access to me. Fanny, whose antipathy towards me increased by the day, wrote of what she called her father's *great act of friendship* towards my uncle:

Karl has been with us for nine days now. In accordance with his uncle's wishes and the agreement made with my father, he has been kept a

close prisoner. He has not been allowed contact with other pupils, lest he corrupt them.

This is undoubtedly what my uncle had demanded, but that demand was made before he read of the condemnations and the criticisms levelled against him by my mother, Fröhlich and Hotschevar. Their allegations that he had neglected my physical well-being shocked and angered him. He needed to come to the Institute to remind himself of the clothes I was wearing, and to see the chilblains on my fingers (he never noticed things like that on his previous visit) and now he could also see the small dank spare room in which I was incarcerated for much of the day.

But what could he do about it? He had persuaded a reluctant Giannatasio to take me back! Shocked, angry and guilty as he may have felt, he chose not to confront Giannatasio on his premises. When he got home he sent him a letter complaining that my room ought to be kept warmer because I had never been accustomed to cold hands and feet. He never meant me to be so severely treated...he believed I had been punished enough...it must stop...by continuing with such severity, things could only turn out worse in the end...!

This was the final straw for Giannatasio. He wrote to my uncle, stressing that he and his staff had gone out of their way to accommodate me, and that if he wasn't satisfied, he should remove me. Two days later (probably because of my uncle's letter) I was allowed out of the Institute *prison* to accompany Nanni on a journey into the city. She didn't volunteer for the task, and I wasn't particularly enamoured of her, but we didn't argue, and I didn't attempt to run away. Nanni's sole preoccupation at this time was her forthcoming marriage to Leopold von Schmerling for which she was on a shopping expedition, with me in tow.

As we walked across Weiskirchnerstrasse bridge on our return, we saw my uncle approach us; he'd just been to the

Institute. His face lit up. He gave a hearty welcome to Nanni who was quite taken back.

‘I will relieve you of my nephew’, he said smiling broadly; ‘he’s coming home!’

‘Oh...!’ Nanni did not know what to say, but she was not inclined to challenge him.

‘I’ve been to see your father; he knows that’s what I’m doing.’

‘What...what about his belongings?’ she asked timidly.

He could not possibly have heard that but he must have lipread and correctly interpreted her expression and her gesticulation: ‘I’ve arranged for them to be delivered to our home’, he said.

Nanni looked visibly relieved if not a little perplexed. Before she could say anything, my uncle had one arm around my shoulder and we were walking away from her.

Usually I loathed walking alongside him. His slovenly appearance, his peculiarity of mannerism, his deafness, all attracting the attention of gaping passers-by. But on this day, at this moment, as the distance between Nanni and us lengthened, I had the urge to roar in relief.

He turned around and shouted: ‘Thank you, Nanni.’ He was still smiling, gratified I think, by leaving her speechless.

Thereafter, we merrily hurried along...should I say *floated*...such was the sense of liberation we both enjoyed. He chattered ceaselessly. I could not stop smiling, and occasionally burst out laughing for no specific reason.

Birgid and Mia must have been quite startled when my uncle and I noisily made our entrance, he with one arm still around my shoulder, and me still holding one of his conversation books which had been utilized numerous times on our journey. He was nothing short of ecstatic: I was back home with him, alleviating him of all the guilt he had felt...and fear too, of losing me. The last few weeks had been traumatic but at this moment in time they were a

distant memory. He was convinced our *reunion* was as inevitable as it was desirable!

This is not what the two women anticipated or wanted. They put on a brave face, but they must have been seething incredulously watching him shepherd me towards his studio. I had driven them to distraction; their letters had provoked his attack upon me, a just reward I'm sure Birgid thought, a vindication of their complaints...a guarantee that they would not be so troubled by me again! And yet here they were seeing me return as a prodigal son, my guardian with his arm still around me, his eyes permanently beaming, his mood one of undiluted joy, and his visible and audible intention to indulge me in whatever way he may choose.

Chapter 33

He purchased new winter clothes and shoes for me; he spent hours teaching and playing chess with me, he increased my weekly allowance and gave me more freedom to spend it; he was much less demanding during my piano lessons, praising my efforts to an unwarranted extent; and he made sure that Mia provided me with copious amounts of my favourite meals.

How much all this contrasted with my life in the Institute, which had become a cold and heartless place that had once been a haven of peace and security (as long as Mrs Giannatasio was there and my uncle stayed away). Now I was overly conscious of the debt I owed him. But my uncle's actions were not without strategy and self-interest. In my adult years, having read all the relevant court papers, my reflection on those happy days was drastically altered.

Whatever joy or triumph he felt on taking me out of the Institute, he could not entirely rid his mind of the decisions the *Landrechte* court might yet make. It had in its possession the severest criticisms of his care of me from three separate sources: my mother, Father Fröhlich, and Hotschevar. My languishing in the Institute under intolerable prison-like conditions served only to vindicate those criticisms, because he had placed me there! He gave Giannatasio carte blanche to impose whatever discipline he thought necessary (and Giannatasio was not likely to have forgotten the advice my uncle gave him in the preceding year, that I *only submitted to the discipline of blows*). He had previously come to see me not to check on my welfare but to prime me for the hearing, and it was the criticisms levelled against him that prompted him to visit me on that second occasion. I have no doubt that he felt compassion and guilt when he saw the conditions in which I was living and realised those conditions made a mockery of his written

assertion to the court three months previously that he was a loving guardian...*the tenderest father who could not better care for his own child*. He must have instantly decided then to have me back home with him as soon as possible, living in more favourable circumstances. This was not just because of his self-promotion as a kind loving father, but also because he was about to make one last written attempt to influence the *Landrechte* in his favour. He had to convince the noble judges that he really was a guardian who had invested much love, time and money in my well-being and my future.

How can I be sure of this? Because we were home barely a few hours when he sat down and composed yet another letter to the court which was delivered on the following day. Attached to the letter were certificates reaffirming my success at school, the *paltry* amount contributed to my education by my mother's pension, and testimony from Giannastasio about her disruptive behaviour when I attended the Institute. It's opening statement read:

In this my address to the Noble Landrechte, only the strictest truth prevails, and is attested by my widely known opinions and my publicly acknowledged moral character. In this regard the enclosed documents will provide irrefutable evidence.

They don't! But the letter does provide convincing evidence of his sense of injustice: that he had been hard done by, by the court, by my mother, by Fröhlich and Hotschevar. There is no awareness, no acknowledgement of how his behaviour may have spurred me into running away; there is no regret or remorse; and he demonstrates at the very outset that he is still prepared to risk lying to the court.

Regarding the letters Birgid had written to Fanny complaining about my behaviour, they were serious enough to provoke his verbal assault and threats on me and for him

to mention them when he was first summoned on the 9th of December. In this desperate letter only six days later however, he brazenly writes that the letters cannot be found, and that in any case, their contents were stupidly wretched, common gossip. He mocks the list of *petty* complaints made in the letters, then advances a notion which insinuates that my mother was culpable:

these letters were sent to me so that I would rebuke my nephew for his behaviour. They arrived on the same day that, by complicity, he left me. It is obvious what the intention was in dictating them and writing them: to create a pretext for his departure.

In other words the whole episode of Birgid's letters of complaint and my running away on 3rd December was a scheming plot conjured up by my mother. Fanny then would have had to have been at the centre of this plot, and Birgid too, instructed by Fanny on what to write!

His letter dwells upon the huge sacrifices he made on my behalf; about expenditures he incurred for the surgery necessary for my hernia, and for my education and private tuition in music, French and drawing. He stresses again the point that my mother's financial contribution was *very inconsiderable*, and he complains that he received nothing at all from her during the last six months (without mentioning that she did indeed withhold her pension contribution because he had arbitrarily denied her access to me).

He seeks to reassure the court about the *true* relationship between us. With regard to me running away and all my misdemeanours, he cannot help indulging in a little make-believe:

He knows of his faults and he repents; he begs only to remain with me.

His concluding statement reaffirms his commitment:

I shall continue to surmount the difficulties which might be put in my way (a clear reference to my mother), bearing in mind only the very best for my nephew and forever conscious of the wishes of my dear, deceased brother.

My dying father, in the codicil to his will, had dared to hope and pray for a miracle:

God permit them to be harmonious for the sake of my child's welfare. This is the last wish of a dying husband and brother.

If this miracle did not occur in 1815, it most certainly wasn't going to occur three years later when my uncle's hatred of my mother was at its most intense.

Chapter 34

As long as the noble judges of the *Landrechte* took time to consider what their role was and were able to see my uncle's last-ditch attempt to influence them, I suspect he lived in hope. Although the court had adjourned on the issue of nobility, he may have thought that since the issue had played no part in the original court hearing in 1815-16, it could decide again to proceed with the case and make a judgement in his favour, particularly in the light of his most recent desperate letter. His hopes were quickly dashed. The *Landrechte* didn't even acknowledge his letter, and only three days after he submitted it he was informed that the noble judges were transferring the case to the Stadtmagistrat, the court for commoners! They explained their decision in a terse statement:

Ludwig van Beethoven is unable to prove nobility hence the matter of guardianship is transferred to an honourable magistrate.

This was devastating, so much so that he could not bear to speak or write about it. In a letter to Archduke Rudolph he could only mention the impact:

A terrible event took place a short time ago in my family during which, for a time, I lost my mind.

I did not see him *losing his mind* but I could not avoid his reaction to this *terrible event*. He went berserk on hearing of the *Landrechte's* decision. I rushed from my room to the landing and stared down on his studio with its door shut tight. Birgid and Mia nervously stood at the bottom of the staircase, gazing up. The volume of noise he created, roaring, thundering back and forth in his cramped

studio, kicking out at whatever objects were in his way, made all three of us coil like springs ready to dart out of sight should his door have opened. I wasn't sure what he was railing about, but could only imagine that, as usual, I must be at the centre of it. I heard some words and phrases: '*judges...cretins...nobles...what do they know...?*' interspersed with the foulest of insults directed against the *Landrechte*, Vienna, and our country.

My privileges did not last long. He didn't play chess with me that day! He didn't give me a friendly, encouraging lesson; he didn't share a meal with me; he didn't throw his arms around me. In the mood he was in, he was incapable of reassuring me that all would be right, because he knew that from his perspective, things could not have been worse. Having unleashed his fury, he then silently confined himself to his studio for a whole week, exiting only for toilet and food. He ate very little though his habitual consumption of black coffee made with sixty coffee beans which he personally counted out, remained undiminished, as did his dependency on red wine, judging by the accumulation of empty bottles. He never came near me that week.

I could be in no doubt about my uncle's fathomless anger, but I wasn't aware of the extent of his ignominy. My sole preoccupation was avoiding him, but since I was conscious of the efforts he himself was making to shut himself off from me and everyone else, I felt relatively safe. Decades later I would learn that what was happening beyond our four walls was the major source of turmoil and self-doubt in his mind. The case was already a sensation throughout the city: the struggle of a lone mother to regain custody of her son battling against a titan whom everyone had assumed was *noble*, now diminished to the lowly status of a commoner. Some newspapers reported dispassionately on a bitter custody battle; others titillated their readers about a great man's fall from grace...the grace of the nobility!

Unlike the publicity surrounding the original battle for guardianship three years previously, the Viennese public unanimously took my mother's side.

How would he feel when he dared venture from his hideaway to face the world, and when he next had contact with royal patrons and noble friends? The subject would surely be unmentionable but the look in their eyes would tell him it was a subject they endlessly talked about. Worse than that they might gaze at him with pity and concern; some might even risk reminding him of their warnings never to have taken me on. How then might his detested commoner status impact upon their perceptions of him? Schindler wrote that this was the 'greatest insult' my uncle had ever received, and that he was 'deeply mortified', facing an 'unjustifiable depreciation and humiliation' leaving an 'impression too deep to be ever erased from his mind'. In attempting to enable us to understand his master's depth of pain, Schindler gets to the heart of the matter:

neither his genius nor his works would have gained him the favoured position he had so far held in aristocratic circles had there not been a presumption that he was an equal.

My uncle had little respect for the Stadtmagistrat court. Apart from it being a commoner's court he could hardly forget that it refused his request in 1815 for documentary evidence of the trial of another commoner: my mother! Now he was at the mercy of that very same court, exposed as an imposter, and according to Schindler, casting aspersions on its competence and integrity.

Three years in a child's life is really a lifetime. I was nine years and three months old when my father died and my uncle removed me. I was now twelve years and three months old and my uncle was facing the unthinkable prospect of losing me. I never truly understood beyond my

own misery what was happening in 1815-16, but now as the year 1818 came to a close I was increasingly aware of the magnitude of the crisis engulfing him. His explosive reaction to the decision of the court, then retiring to his studio, to be visited by concerned friends all rallying around him, trying to comfort and reassure him...how could I not know that he was suffering, and how could I avoid the glaringly obvious fact that in running away from him I had triggered a whole series of events and actions which had brought him to this very point?

I have to admit that as the central issue of *nobility* gradually seeped into my consciousness, I was both sympathetic and baffled. It was incomprehensible to me how he could have been regarded as anything other than a nobleman (unless one was merely considering the clothes he wore). I was often with him in the company of noblemen. I watched as they and his many musical friends and associates treated him as though he *was* of the nobility. I believed that he was a nobleman because of his dominance and influence amongst such people. I feared and loathed him when he removed me, but I also was convinced then, and remained so, that only a very powerful man could have done that with impunity. He was the most powerful, arrogant, confident, self-righteous and determined man I have ever known. Additionally, during every day of my childhood I could not but be conscious of the fact that he was a very famous man, a musical genius in the musical capital of the world. How could he not be Noble? Noble, famous and powerful!

Three years ago, my mother and I endured a miserable Christmas worrying about what decision the *Landrechte* court would make. I was then immersed...drowning almost, in despair, at the very real prospect of my world being turned on its head, of being uprooted from my family, my home, my school, my friends, my whole way of life. Exactly three years later, Christmas, 1818, my uncle was

enduring a similar experience. He was immersed, drowning almost, in despondency and humiliation; but there was also a seething cauldron of rage beneath the surface, and a genuine, well-founded fear that he might lose me.

Although it was a decision about my destiny that was once again being decided by others, I felt somewhat detached from it all. The decision was now entirely out of the hands of my mother and my uncle, and being made by magistrates and administrators unknown to me. That could only mean less pressure. I felt relatively freer. I was not indulging in any tension-laden plot to get to my mother. I was not being treated abominably by my uncle; I was not even being given piano lessons by him, because he was in no condition to tutor anyone! I saw so little of him, though his misery and humiliation, and his dread about the decision that would be made in the Stadtmagistrat court pervaded every room in our home.

Inevitably though, as Christmas drew nearer, I thought more and more of my mother. I imagined visiting her on Christmas day and presenting her with a bouquet of red roses. I imagined staying with her for a few days, travelling to Vienna's nearest snow-covered hills, to sledge, snowball-fight, roll the biggest snow boulder ever seen! But these recurring thoughts did not last long, because I knew that at this particular point in time, it was near impossible for me to see her. I had no prospective co-conspirators around me to arrange a clandestine visit. I was not going to abscond again because I was too much aware of my uncle's state of mind, and the very thought of running away from him for a second time and what that might do to him precluded serious intent. The only possible way I might see my mother was to ask him for permission to visit her. But I think I know what his reaction would have been. He held her responsible for the four months of hell he had just endured, culminating in his shame-laden, publicly proclaimed commoner status, and the contempt shown by

the *Landrechte* court not even acknowledging let alone replying to his last desperate pleading submission. I believe that had I asked him to allow me to see my mother, it would have crushed him.

I feel guilty in saying, not for the first time, that he was more tolerable to me as a result of his suffering. When he was suffering, he was no longer oppressive and threatening, bullying or violent. And whatever the extent of suffering and self-imposed isolation he was enduring, it must have been exacerbated by his profound deafness. For the first time in my life, I pitied him.

Chapter 35

During the first week of January 1819, he summoned me to his studio. A few hours previously, he had been visited by two officious-looking men dressed in black, one of them carrying a bulging attaché case. I naturally assumed that my summoning was a consequence of their visit, and I suspected my uncle had something important to say to me. He had said nothing to me or the servants for quite a while.

I had to wait for a few moments before he spoke. He paced slowly across his studio floor, his head bent low, and, I think, purposely not looking at me. When he did eventually raise his head his dark face was very grave-looking. I wondered and worried had he been told of another of my misdemeanours. I didn't want to be inflicting more misery on him. He sat down to face me. His voice was uncharacteristically quiet and subdued.

'The court has decided that you must return to your mother.'

I froze, unable to cope with the enormity of his words. Did I hear him right? How could he so calmly say something which meant that the battle he had fought against my mother for more than three years was lost? I half-expected him then to launch into a tirade against her, but that required energy and passion and there was none of that in his demeanour or in his voice; he looked shattered, incapable of...even uninterested in scrutinizing the expression on my face or asking how I felt about what he had just said.

Thankfully I was unable to speak and he was unable to hear. I say *thankfully* because I didn't know how to respond to him, but neither did I think he wanted me to respond. This was his chosen moment, to announce with all the gravitas at his command what he had dreaded for years: I was returning to the woman he loathed. This news should have

stirred in me joy, jubilation and relief beyond measure, which I would have had to suppress. But I wasn't feeling joyful or jubilant. I was still uncomfortably aware of how wounded he was: the public exposure and humiliation inflicted on him by the Noble Landrechte court, and now, a decision by the despised *Stadmagistrat* commoner's court that he was losing me to my mother.

The tension was unbearable. I wanted to know *when* I was returning to her but dared not ask for fear of offending him. I wanted to know how this had come about but that would surely have caused him more anger and pain in even having to think about it...the monstrosity of it...the injustice...the recklessness of it: returning me to that corrupt and corrupting woman!

Unable to withstand the tension and the silence any longer, I stood up and reached out for one of his conversation notebooks. I began writing, grateful that it was so much easier than talking which he would not have heard in any case. I wrote: *I'm sorry to be leaving you, uncle...* and handed it to him.

He read it and smiled weakly. 'Thank you, son.'

That encouraged me. I sensed now that it was unlikely that I would provoke him though I remained nervously aware that I might unintentionally do so. I wrote another few words, equally ingratiating:

When I leave, I want to come back to see you.

'Come and see me often.'

I will. Is there anything I can do for you now? I scribbled out the two words: *for you...* They just didn't look or feel right. I showed him the depleted sentence.

He stared at it for a few seconds and his sad dull bluish-grey eyes suddenly became a little enlivened.

'Do always', he said, 'be honest and trustworthy. Always tell the truth.'

I nodded.

'Be brave...'

I nodded again.

‘Don’t let yourself be misled.’

I shook my head.

‘That is the way I have always tried to bring you up.’

I know you have, uncle, and I am grateful.

‘Come here.’

I got up and walked towards him. Everything I had written and said had pleased him. I had to be rewarded with his embrace.

He pulled me towards him, close enough to be unable to see his face and his tears swelling.

‘You are a good *son*.’

I could not answer and he could not hear. Eventually he said: ‘We must attend court next Monday, but you need to pack your belongings now; you will be leaving me tomorrow.’

Tomorrow! After three years of tumult I was without notice or preparation returning to mama within twenty-four hours! Now I did want to scream out with joy, yet was conscious of how the words he had just spoken must have scathed him.

He loosened his hold on me and I beckoned towards the notebook. He let go entirely. I quickly wrote down the burning question in my mind. *Does my mother know?*

‘Yes’, he said.

I wished I had been there when she was told.

For me this was becoming a challenge that I could never have envisaged: I have often described how fearful and intimidating he was to me, and I have admitted how tolerable he became when he was debilitated in some way, bed-ridden or absent from my life. But he could not have been more debilitated than he was at this moment: depressed, profoundly deaf and deeply wounded. I did not find that tolerable. I imagined him sitting in darkness and deafness when I’d gone, in the depths of despair, not wanting to see anyone. I curiously felt obligated towards

him, and at the same time, I felt guilty in saying I wanted to come back to see him, telling him a lie for my own comfort.

Another guilty thought returned to torment me: that despite him holding my mother responsible for every misfortune that had befallen him, my absconding was the real cause of all his woes. It was central in the case against him, unmistakably and undeniably the desperate plea of a child yelling out that he could take no more; letting judges and magistrates know what so many already knew, that my uncle was incapable of being a successful guardian to any child. Would he ever acknowledge that?

The Stadmagistrat had acted with exceptional speed. Considering that the noble *Landrichte* court had only decided on the 18th of December to devolve the case, magistrates in the lower court must have very quickly digested the file contents (noting I'm sure, not just the damning testimonies of Hotschever, Father Fröhlich and my mother, but also the lies, inconsistencies, contradictions, and gratuitous insults in my uncle's written and verbal testimonies). The magistrates then decided that there was sufficient evidence of an error of judgement in removing me from my mother in the first instance. So much so, that the new year had hardly begun when they issued an interim order suspending the guardianship and demanding that I be returned to her immediately (thus the visit of the two court officials this morning).

The next day (coincidentally three years to the day when he was awarded guardianship by the *Landrechte*), he arranged for the return. I knew he wouldn't dare risk seeing my mother, feeling utterly humiliated and defeated by her, so he instructed Birgid to accompany me. It was not a pleasant journey. She still hadn't forgiven me. We never spoke. We purposely avoided even glancing at each other. Thankfully, there were some interesting and distracting sights to be seen through the carriage windows: armies of workers demolishing war-torn buildings; people passing

by, some of whom recognised me and gawped disbelievingly at me. I smiled at them in return and gave a half-hearted wave, inhibited somewhat by the stern-faced Birgid.

My mother was standing waiting at the door when I jumped from the carriage with alacrity. She held her arms out to me, her joyful expression giving way to amazement at the few centimetres I had gained in height since we had last met. She had not changed in any significant way, but my perceptions of her were altering as we spoke. I had never consciously thought of her as beautiful, but I couldn't help myself thinking that now. She was thirty-two years of age, lithe and nimble in her movement, her smooth forehead and cheeks without blemish, her gorgeous nut-brown eyes still lustrous and deep, and seemingly free of the tensions, anguish and rage which she had so often tried to conceal from me. I was nearly as tall as her now, and I encircled her with my arms and laid the side of my head on her shoulder. Birgid pretended not to notice, but she couldn't hide her look of distain. She left my belongings on the pavement and stepped back into the carriage. She never spoke to my mother.

I yelled out with relief and joy on entering my *new home*. My mother laughed.

'Is this really it?' I asked, walking through the house. 'Can you believe it, mama?'

There was a slight pause before she said 'no'; I was too excitable to attach any significance to the pause.

'How did your uncle react to you leaving', she asked.

'Like a baby...crying on and off...he locked himself away in his room for more than a week...he must have known it was coming ... I felt sorry for him.'

'Now he knows what it's like to lose a child.'

'Will I have to visit him regularly?'

She thought about that. 'Let's not talk about it until you've unpacked; do you want me to show you your room?'

‘No...I’ll find it myself. I’m sure it’s as good as the room I should never have left.’ I gave her a rueful smile, keen to resume our conversation.

I half-unpacked and then explored every room in the house. When I came across my father’s piano, I curiously had an urge to play. I sat and played a few lines of my uncle’s *Rondo in C*, which made my mother stop what she was doing and come to watch and listen. She didn’t inhibit me; she didn’t praise me, she made no comment at all, but I think she was pleased.

‘What did he tell you?’ she later suddenly asked me.

I had to think: *Tell me about what* ‘He told me the court had decided that I was to go back to you.’

‘That’s right. And here you are, back with me.’

‘Is there something he didn’t tell me?’

‘I don’t know. You tell me.’

‘I can’t remember him telling me anything else, except...that I was good...to always tell the truth...be brave...that’s the way he brought me up...and all that nonsense.’

‘Did he mention school?’

‘No.’

‘Your education?’

I wanted to tell her again that he was in no condition to talk to me about anything other than losing me, and of the hurt and pain he was still enduring as a consequence of no longer being regarded as noble. But it was patently obvious now that my mother had something else to tell me.

‘You need to know Karl, that your uncle will still be responsible for your education.’

I nodded hesitantly as if I already knew, but the look in her eyes informed me that I hadn’t really considered the implications. ‘Did you not want him to be responsible for my education?’

She looked at me benignly, conscious of my childish ignorance of all the complexities of the battle fought. She

shook her head slowly and said: 'It was one of the reasons I went to court, to get that responsibility taken off him; I wanted you to attend a public school nearer to me.'

'So what school will I attend?'

She didn't speak for a few moments, as though she dared not tell me; then she said: 'I wish I knew.'

Now I was beginning to understand.

'The guardianship has been taken away from him, temporarily at least', she said. 'But he still has the right to choose where and how you'll be educated. That's what your father wanted. That's what was in his will. Your uncle may choose to continue having you educated by tutors, though it's unlikely he'll send tutors here if you're living with me. He may decide to send you to a boarding school. You need to know that. You need to be prepared.'

I'm sure she genuinely didn't know what he intended, but she had just reminded me of the reality of his continuing influence over me, shattering my illusions in the process. I really had believed when I left him this morning that he would no longer be the dominant force in my life, and that my destiny was now more or less in my own hands. How was I now to prepare for the unknown: his *plans*...did he really have any plans?

She watched as myriads of questions arose in my mind, questions about his future contacts with me (certain to be as erratic as ever); about his emphasis on my musical studies, his choice of schools and tutors, his potential for disruption and complaint! And if he was to remain responsible for my education he must then maintain contact with my mother; how would that work out? When I left him a few hours ago, he seemed bereft of interest, energy and hope; he appeared crushed by an accumulation of afflictions, and then...to lose me...to her! But now I knew he would recover. He had the greatest incentive to recover. He would exercise that responsibility for my education in the only way possible to him: his motivation would have less to do with my learning

or my well-being, or my happiness, than it would with his unwavering determination to exclude her from my life.

Perhaps this was overly pessimistic, even neurotic. But the reality is that within days he had me enrolled temporarily in a school run by a friend, and within a few months I was compelled to leave my mother to be enrolled in a boarding school of his choice. Thankfully it was not in a far distant land; it was in Vienna, near enough for my mother to visit. But when the head of that school, Joseph Blöchlinger committed the *unforgivable crime* of allowing such a visit, my uncle subjected him to a torrent of insults, intimidation and threats and thereafter schemed with his friends to have me sent abroad well beyond the Viennese authority's and my mother's reach.

He was prevented from doing so. In September 1819, the Stadtmagistrat made its final judgement: my mother was to be reinstated permanently as my legal guardian (which meant little when my uncle retained the right to determine my education). A co-guardian was appointed by the court, Leopold Nussböck, a Municipal Sequestrator. In their concluding comments the magistrates, having reviewed my schooling in particular declared that I had been:

subjected to the whims of Beethoven and had been tossed back and forth like a ball from one educational institution to another.

They believed that his written and oral submissions to the court were:

Much more idle gossip than they were truthful evidence, revealing a blatant hostility towards the boy's mother.

But the battle between my uncle and my mother was not over. The Stadtmagistrat's judgement would galvanize him

into action. He would employ whatever means and incur whatever cost to try to repossess me and vanquish her. As for the struggle between him and I it had hardly begun. Advancing through my teenage years my disrespect for him would increase and my defiance would continually enrage him. Schindler, his most sycophantic apologist, was nevertheless honest and perceptive enough to identify the initial and the lasting source of the problem:

Beethoven was still more to blame because he could not, even in the presence of his nephew, refrain from expressing his detestation of the boy's mother, to which he gave utterance sometimes in the most violent manner; forbidding him all intercourse with her, utterly regardless of the voice of Nature, which, sooner or later, may awaken and become its own avenger.

My uncle's ability to mould me and control me could only dissipate. His health continued to deteriorate, alarmingly on some occasions. There would hardly be a day without an ailment of some kind afflicting him.

None of this dampened his zeal and determination to defeat my mother in court and repossess me. Unfortunately for him this coincided with my natural yearning for intimacy and love, which made him jealous and resentful to an insane degree. I eventually decided I could no longer risk introducing him to male or female friends because he knew of no other way of coping beyond bullying and verbally abusing me, immediately followed by remorse and embarrassing attempts at reconciliation. I could survive him only through seizing every opportunity to avoid him. There had to be a reckoning. Our struggle would culminate in a series of life-threatening crises. Only when I attempted to kill myself was it possible for him to contemplate releasing me.

So, there would be no victors. Our struggle would last nearly a decade. Paradoxically, the heartache and suffering it would cause him would inspire him to compose some of his greatest music. There would be no victors, but posterity would be the beneficiary, and I would unwittingly and unwillingly play a part.

That is another story.

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Beethoven was a musical genius. He has given pleasure to millions. What is less well known is that he removed a nine-year-old child from his mother and embroiled himself in one of the most bitter, protracted custody disputes in childcare history.

Karl van Beethoven was the only child of Johanna and Kaspar van Beethoven, the composer's brother. When Kaspar died, Beethoven was determined that Karl did not remain under his mother's care. He loathed Johanna. He frequently referred to her as 'poison', claiming she had infected Karl with her 'poison'. Beethoven was awarded guardianship over her child. Thereafter, his behaviour towards Karl, described in his own letters, in the observations of his contemporaries, and in court testimonies, constitutes one of the earliest, most comprehensive records of emotional and psychological abuse. This is the story of a child's resilience and survival in the face of cruelty and intolerance, and of Beethoven's failure to sever him from the mother he loved. It is a fictionalized memoir based on documented fact.

Karl, Beethoven's nine-year-old nephew, struggles to survive in a complex world where he has recently lost everyone who was dear to him. In this superbly written story based on real events, Karl is marooned with his volatile uncle, and feels compelled to resort to strategies that endanger his life. Beethoven's startling lack of empathy, and his unawareness of what he is doing to Karl, lead us into a fascinating tale of betrayal, corruption and retribution.

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