At the Home
by Phillip

I won't bother you with details of how I broke my arm. Let me just say that some people are not as well coordinated on a skateboard as are some other people. I'll let it go at that. I might also add that you can break an arm from a skateboard even if you're not doing anything fancy on it. I wouldn't even bother to mention my broken arm at all except that it figures into the story that I have to tell, and my story is rather complicated, so I have to lay it all out. Maybe I should add one more little thing, except that it wasn't so little. Mine was not a simple break, what is called a simple fracture. Mine was a compound, a compound fracture, which means that the bone is broken in more than one place. Two, in my case. I'll let it go at that except for one more small matter.

It was my left arm, not my right, and I am right-handed, so I had to go to school anyway.

At school I found out that a broken left arm, even if it is compound, is of interest to other kids only for as long as it takes them to autograph the cast. After that, they don't think about it long enough to offer to carry your books home for you. Not that I ever carried that many books home, anyway. I'll let it go at that, except for one more tiny thing I should mention about a compound fracture of the left arm. Skateboarding is out until the cast comes off. I suppose that a really well coordinated person could learn to balance himself with one arm in a sling, but I've already mentioned that I am not in your basic category of the really well coordinated.

I came directly home from the school bus stop that Tuesday in April, the first day after I had broken my arm, and found my mother ready to go to the old folks' home. She goes there one afternoon a week and reads to some of the people. She also helps them make out checks or write letters. She usually stays until about five-thirty, when they are settled down for their evening meal. I had told my mother that I needed some batteries for my cassette player since I had decided to use this broken-arm time to improve my impersonations. Magic would have been my first choice, but I did mention that I am not terribly well

coordinated. I'm not spastic or anything, but in order to do magic, the kind of coordination you need is beyond basic, beyond *very*, somewhere in the category of superb.

I asked my mother to take me to the discount store where I could buy some batteries for my cassette, and then I'd walk home. Unfortunately, I could not immediately find my cassette recorder, and I needed to find it because I couldn't remember the exact size of the batteries it needed. Who can remember whether something takes C or D? It had been a long time since I had practiced my impersonations. It was also a long time before I found my cassette recorder. I suppose that I was making my mother nervous because she kept asking me if I had looked here or looked there; and finally, she said that she was going out to the car to wait, and I told her that it was not so easy looking for something with only one arm, and she told me that the better part of looking for something was thinking about it, like when did you use it last, and I told her that I couldn't understand her hurry to get to the old folks' home because those people weren't going anywhere anyway, and she told me that she would wait for me in the car with the motor running and using up gasoline and for me to remember the energy shortage.

I found my cassette player in my bookcase behind the Hardy Boys. Its microphone cord was hanging down, and the first three times I looked at that cord I thought it was a magic marker stain. Once I found it, I didn't hang around to take out the batteries. I rushed with it out to the car, where my mother was sitting not only with the motor running but also with the car door on the passenger's side open.

"I'm going straight to the home," she said. "You can go to the convenience store across the street from there and get your batteries. Then you can come over to the home and meet me, and I'll drive you back after I've finished with what I have to do."

"Batteries cost more at a convenience store," I said.

"Get them there anyway."

"At a convenience store they cost even more than they do at a *regular* store. Why don't you drop me off at the discount store?"

"For some reason, I seem to be running late today. I can't seem to find the time to make an extra stop."

"At a discount store, they only cost—"

"I'll pay the difference!"

"It will be a lot."

"I'll pay it."

"A whole lot."

"I'll pay it."

"It'll be more than the difference between a discount

store and a regular store. What I mean by a *regular* store is like a camera shop, where it isn't self-service—"

"I'll pay it. It will be cheaper than driving miles out of my way and using up all that gas," Mother muttered.

So I bought the batteries at the Minute Market across the street from the home. I kept the cash register receipt to help Mother keep her promise about paying the difference. I wandered into the lobby of the old folks' home. I sat there, trying to put the batteries in one-handedly, when this old man came up to me and said, "Need some help there, young man?"

He had an accent that sounded Communist. He took the cassette player from me and set the batteries in it just right, all the pluses where they ought to be and all the minuses where they belonged, too.

I had left an old cassette in it, and I wondered what was on it, so I turned the machine on and heard Walter Cronkite giving the evening news. I had worked on my Cronkite impersonation a long time before I decided that you can't make anything sound like a world crisis until your voice has changed.

The old man picked up the microphone, and I pushed down on the *record* button, and he began to sing. He sang a whole song all the way through in some foreign language, and I asked him what the language was.

"Ukrainian," he answered. I didn't say anything, because I didn't know what to say. I didn't know where Ukrainia was. He must have read my mind because he asked, "You know the Ukraine?"

I shrugged.

"It's part of Russia," he said. "What I sang was an old folk tune, something that is very appropriate, coming as it does from an old folk." Then he laughed at his little joke.

I laughed, too. I was glad that I had guessed right about his accent; Russia was Communist. I played back what he had sung, and he was so pleased with hearing it that he asked me to show him which buttons to push so that he could record another song. He learned about the buttons very quickly, and he sang not one but two more songs before my mother appeared.

"Ah!" the Ukrainian said, "so you are Leona's son." With his accent, the word son came out sounding like I was a whole generation, which I am because I am an only child.

That night after supper I picked up the cassette player. They had announced on TV that Rich Little would be on *Hollywood Squares*, and I thought that it would be very clever to impersonate an impersonator doing an impersonation, if you get what I mean.

I rewound my tape, and I happened to push the *play* button instead of *record*, and some of the Ukrainian folk songs came pouring out. I shut it off, getting ready to rewind again, when my father yelled, "Wait a minute!"

Needless to say, I waited.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Nothing's the matter. I would like to hear the rest of that."

So I played it to the end. My father asked me where I had recorded those tunes, and I told him. "Don't erase it," he said. "I'd like to have it."

"But I need the cassette. I don't have another one."

"Buy one," he said, and reached in his pocket and pulled out a five dollar bill and didn't say anything about giving him change.

I took the money and didn't make any suggestions. "Why do you want that tape?" I asked.

"I like those songs. My mother used to sing them to me. She came from the Ukraine. What did you say the old man's name is?" he asked.

"I didn't say. I don't know his name."

"Why don't you find out? Maybe Mother will know."

So I went to my mother and asked, "Do you know who is the person at the old folks' home who has gray hair and who isn't very tall and is a little bit stooped and speaks with an accent and wears a beige suit and walks with a cane?"

"Give me a real hint. Man or woman?"

"Man. I said *beige suit*."

"The women wear suits, mostly beige. Give me another hint."

"He was very old."

"Old, you say?" Mother raised an eyebrow and put her finger under her chain and did what people call *knitted her brow* and said, "Old? Now *that* should narrow it down."

Considering my broken arm, I thought that she could skip the sarcasm.

"This one has brown spots all over his hands."

"Right hand or left?"

"Both."

"They all have brown spots all over both hands. Now, if this one was left-hand spotted . . ."

She was really getting me mad.

"This one's from the Ukraine," I said. I turned on the cassette and played a little of his songs. "He sang three of these before you came to pick me up. Don't you remember, he called me *Leona's son*." I must say I did an excellent job impersonating his *son*.

"Why didn't you say that you meant Mr. Malin?"

"How could I say I meant him when I didn't *know* it was him?"

"That's a *gotcha*, all right," Mom said. "Anyway, why do you want to know his name?"

"Dad liked his singing. Either his singing or his songs."

Mother smiled. "Ah! yes, the Ukraine. Why don't you come back with me tomorrow and ask your Mr. Malin to record some more?"

"He is not my Mr. Malin, and tomorrow is not your regular day."

"I know. But I got a call just a few minutes ago that Miss Ilona has broken her arm, and since her other arm is paralyzed, she has to be fed. They asked me to take care of her for supper tomorrow, and I agreed to do it."

I told her all right, that I would go, because I needed to buy a new cassette anyway since Dad wanted to save this one.

So I went.

I found the singing Ukrainian, and he told me that his name was Jacob P. Malin now, but that in the Ukraine it had been something else. When he came to this country, the man at immigration who was filling out his application wrote J-A-C-O-B just as Mr. Malin had told him to, and then he wrote P-E-T-R-O-N-O-V-I-C-H, because that is what the P stands for, and when Mr. Malin started telling him his last name, he didn't have room in the space for anything more than M-A-L-I-N, so they shortened his name to that, and that is what he has been ever since. He said that he has one brother named *Malinkowski* and another one named *Malinkovsky*; even though they all had the same mother and the same father, they all had different immigration officers and so they ended up with three different last names.

Mr. Jacob P. Malin sang another song for me, and I told him that I would bring him greetings from my father when I came the next day. Up to the minute I said it, I hadn't thought about going to the old folks' home three days in a row.

The lady at the front desk told me that I would find my mother upstairs, and I did. I found her sitting in a chair in front of a lady in a wheelchair. I assumed it was a woman because Mother was feeding her, and she had said that she would be feeding a *Miss* Ilona. The woman looked like a troll or one of those dolls that they make by drying an apple and letting it get all wrinkly. She had short frizzy hair on the top of her head, but it was so thin that each hair seemed to stand up like a tiny flag making claim to a quarter-inch of territory.

Mother said, "Phillip, this is Miss Ilona," so I knew

that I was right in guessing that it was a woman.

The first thing Miss Ilona said to me was, "I hope, Phillip, that you did something more interesting to break your arm than I did. I fell in the bathroom."

Maybe when people get as old as this woman was, they've gone to the bathroom so much that they don't get embarrassed talking about it. I said, "I wasn't going to the bathroom."

"I fell in the bathtub," she said.

"Oh," I added.

"A common enough accident. I would rather have broken my arm skiing with Robert Redford."

I laughed. It struck me as funny that this old person here who seemed so out of time should know about movie stars, let alone think about wanting to go skiing with them.

"He's very handsome," she said to my mother. I didn't know whether she meant me or Robert Redford. I thought she meant me. Mother dabbed at Miss Ilona's chin with a napkin. Miss Ilona continued, "I always look at a pretty face this way though: it's only half an inch away from being homely. And me, I'm only half an inch away from being beautiful. If I had half an inch less of nose and half an inch more of chin, I'd be a regular bald-headed beauty queen." She laughed.

"What kind of accent is that you have?" I asked.

"Hungarian. But not pure Hungarian. It's confused with French."

"Can I record it?" I asked.

I showed her my cassette player, and I was ready to explain to her in simple terms how it worked when she said, "A cassette? I'd love to hear myself on a cassette. But wait until I am done eating. I was taught never to talk with my mouth full."

When Mother finished feeding her, I held the microphone for her, and she said, "I am Ilona Szabo, presently known as Miss Ilona, from Budapest, Hungary, by way of Paris, France, Vienna, Austria, and New York, New York, and alive and not altogether well in an old folks' home." Budapest came out *Budapesht.*

She asked me what I planned on doing with her cassette, and I told her that I was practicing doing impersonations and that I thought that learning to do different kinds of accents would be valuable and that it seemed to me that everyone at the old folks' home spoke with some kind of an accent and that I could certainly get a lot of types out of this one place.

Miss Ilona said, "You'll probably get a greater variety of accents than of stories. The people here speak a common language. It's called boring. All except me. Come

back tomorrow, and I'll tell you how being so ugly saved my life."

I asked her to tell me now, but she said no, that she wanted to think about how she was going to tell me and how much she was going to tell me. So I left with Mother and asked her to stop at the discount store on the way home so that I could pick up a couple more blank cassettes, one hour on each side, and my mother stopped without being sarcastic about it.

The following day I found my singing Ukrainian, Mr. Jacob P. Malin, and played him "Hello" from my father, and then I went up to Miss Ilona's floor. After Mother had finished feeding her, she began telling her story into my cassette, and that was all right, that was perfectly all right, except for Mother.

There was Mother standing beside me listening and smiling. To tell the truth, I would rather have her sarcastic, because if there's anything a guy doesn't need—ever—is a mother standing right beside him approving of him right out in public. What a guy needs is a mother who pretends not to notice him in public, but who acts crazy about him in the privacy of his own home or condominium.

About all I found out that day was that *Ilona* means *Helen* in Hungarian and that Hungarian means *Magyar* in Hungarian.

"You know," I said to my mother as we were leaving, "if you sign a note for me to take Bus Eighty-two instead of Ninety-four, I can get off at the corner of the home on my way back from school, and I can feed Miss Ilona her supper."

"How will you get home after that?"

"I'll walk."

She gave me a look of what you might call surprise and said, "So now that you've broken your arm, you've discovered that you have legs?"

"It happens," I said, "that it was exactly trouble with my legs that got me a broken arm. Will you write the note?"

"I'd be proud to," she said, and I glanced at her, and she wasn't *looking* sarcastic. I guess she meant it.

So the following day I went to the home after school, and Miss Ilona started telling me her story.

"I promised that I would tell you about how being so ugly saved my life," she began. "Well, it all started in Budapest. My father was the second son of a rich doctor. My grandfather, the doctor, was everybody's rich relative. At least he was the rich relative that everyone bragged about. There were some others who were richer, but their money didn't come from such nice things as making sick people well. I was the first born, and when my

grandfather took his first look at me, he said to my father, 'You better educate her, Isaac, because she's never going to catch a man.' In his line of work, my grandfather had seen a lot of babies, so he knew right from the start that I was no beauty, and he knew that there was no hope that I would grow into one.

"I had two sisters born after me and then a brother. My first sister was not a great beauty, but compared to me, she was quite acceptable. My second sister was better looking than the first; she was almost pretty; and my brother was downright handsome. He had eyelashes as dark and as thick as mustaches, and he had thick, straight black hair that gave him a romantic look. It would seem that my parents had been practicing on me and my sisters and by the time my brother came, they finally knew how to make a proper-looking child.

"But if I had been born semi-pretty like my sisters, I wouldn't have been sent to the French school to be educated, and if I had not been sent to the French school at the early age I was, I would not have been able to speak French fluently and without an accent, and if I had not been able to speak French fluently and without an accent, I would not have saved my own life."

That is all I got on the first day. I couldn't coax another word of her story out of her. She said much more, but it was mostly about what I did in school and what subjects I liked best and what the world was like outside the home.

I told her about my teacher and about some of the kids in my class, and she listened with interest, as they say.

"Now, what about you?" I asked. "Tell me about your schedule."

"Oh," she answered. "Nothing ever happens among the Beige and Grays."

"The Beige and Grays?"

"Yes," she said, "everyone who lives here is either beige or gray or some other shade of boring. Except me."

"Will you continue with your story tomorrow?" I asked.

"If you come, I will."

The next day was Saturday. The school bus couldn't drop me off at the home, but it occurred to me that old folks have to eat lunch as well as supper, so I asked my mother if she would drive me over to the home so that I could help Miss Ilona with her lunch.

"Legs work only in one direction?" she asked.

"It's a question of time," I said.

"Yours or mine?" she asked.

"Yours or mine what?"

"Your time or my time? Which is it a question of?"

"If you drive me over, it's a question of both our times. Will you?"

"I'd be proud to."

That made twice in two days that she had said that, but this time I was not too sure she wasn't being sarcastic.

She drove me to the home at eleven-thirty on Saturday.

Miss Ilona was dozing in her chair when I got there. I didn't know if I should wake her, but the nurse nodded that I should, so I did. Miss Ilona seemed glad that I did. She seemed to enjoy me more than she enjoyed her lunch. "Phillip, dear," she said, "the food here is fit only for cloven-hoofed animals."

"Maybe I can bring you something from home," I suggested.

"Please don't bother. Just your presence and your cassette is all I expect you to carry with one broken arm. But the subject of cooking does figure into my story, and I think that now I ought to introduce you to the two things that Hungarians are proudest of. One of them is their cooking. They are very proud of it.

"If you go into fifteen of the best restaurants in New York City, one will offer French food and another Italian and another German or Chinese or Russian and so on and so forth." (She said and *so on and so forth* a lot. And it just broke me up. It came out *and zo on and zo force.* Her accent was very complicated, impossible to imitate, even for a professional, I'm sure.) "But in Budapest, if you go into fifteen of the best restaurants, they will all offer Hungarian cooking. And something else you should know about Hungarian cooking. Hungarian *fine* cooking is not very different from Hungarian *everyday* cooking. A lot of paprika. Do you know paprika?" (I nodded yes. I didn't, but I figured that I could look it up, and I didn't want to slow down her story now that she was almost started.) "A lot of paprika, a lot of onions, but good. And Hungarian baked goods are the best in the world. The French don't really understand whipped cream.

"It's important for you to understand about Hungarian cooking because it is important at a certain place in my story."

"But," I interrupted, "you said that there were two things that the Hungarians were proudest of. What is the other?"

"Their language," she answered. "You have to know something about the Hungarian language. It is unrelated to any other European language except Finnish, and people that I have known who have been to Finland are not so sure that it's related there either. It's as if when they were building the Tower of Babel, a solitary Hungarian—we are a very solitary people, you know—was working in some outside corridor, talking to no one. When God's wrath fell, the Hungarian continued with his labors longer than the others so that while most of the people left the Tower in huge families, the family Germanic and the family Celtic, the Slavs and the Romantics, the lone Hungarian stayed on. Finally, sensing that he was totally alone and altogether outside, the Hungarian left and met the Finn. But the Hungarian and the Finn soon parted, for Hungarians can never keep an ally.

"Hungary has been conquered time and time again, so there is no one in Budapest who cannot speak at least two other languages. Hungarians speak other languages to strangers so that they can speak Hungarian among themselves. It is a peculiar language, almost all consonants. I think we donated our share of vowels to Hawaii. The vowels that we do have, we put fancy dots and dashes over, just to make them complicated, too. It is a runt in the litter of languages, but we love it the way you can love only a runt. Conquerors have all thought of our Magyar language as worthless and have seldom taken the trouble to learn it. And we help them because, as I said, everyone in Budapest knows at least one other language. Hungarian remains our secret code."

"But you told me that learning to speak French saved your life. Tell me about that."

"I will," she said. "Tomorrow."

And I could not get another word out of her that day.

I had forgotten about Sunday School the next day, and I called the home and told them that I had an urgent message for Miss Ilona, and when she got to the phone (I suppose someone wheeled her there), she sounded so disappointed when I told her that I couldn't make it for lunch that I immediately told her that I would see her at supper, and I didn't even want to.

I fed her in a very businesslike manner, and she must have guessed that there were at least two other things I would rather have been doing because she got on with her story immediately.

"After I finished high school," she said, "I was very well educated and suited to appreciate good literature, mostly French, and good art, mostly French. I probably could appreciate better than anyone else in Budapest. My looks had not improved, and my family had no hopes of my making a good marriage. There was a tradition among my people—rather common at the time—that the second daughter could not marry until the first one had, and the third could not marry until the second, and so on and so forth. So there was only one thing for my poor father to do, if he was not to get stuck for the rest of his life supporting three daughters. So he did it. He sent me away. He sent me to Paris."

At this point there is a pause in the tape because Miss Ilona was studying her paralyzed hand. "That was 1938, one year before 1939."

"Well, yes," I said. "I guess I could figure that out. I guess 1938 came before 1939, just the way that 1948 came before 1949 and 1958 . . ."

"I see, Phillip, but don't you understand why 1939 was important?"

"I guess I don't."

"Hitler," she said. "In 1939 Hitler started his war to conquer the world. And in 1939 the head of our Hungarian government, thinking that this time Hungary shouldn't be conquered again, took himself on a little trip to Germany and met with Herr Hitler and promised him—by way of showing good faith—that he would cooperate with the Nazis and pass some anti-Jewish laws."

There is another pause on the tape where you can hear me being a little ashamed of myself. "So because you were ugly and couldn't get married, and your Father sent you to Paris, you got out just in time."

"Exactly," she said.

"Is that how being ugly saved your life?"

"That," she said, "is the first part of the first part."

"Did you like Paris?"

"Loved it. But, as you probably guessed, my one talent—speaking French without a Hungarian accent—was not considered a talent at all in Paris."

"So what did you do?"

"Well, being ugly came to my aid again. There was in Paris at that time a wealthy family who wanted a governess for their children. The father wanted a young woman of some intelligence and culture and so on and so forth, and since the father had something of an eye for pretty young girls, the mother wanted one who was ugly. I was qualified on both counts, you see. So I got the job."

"Is that how being ugly saved your life?"

"That is only the second part of the first part," she answered.

The nurse came and took Miss Ilona's tray, and Miss Ilona told me that she had nothing more to say, but that she would be happy to continue with her story tomorrow, if I would care to come back.

I said that I would.

On my way out I met Mr. Malin, and he asked me if

my father would like a few more songs. I told him I would find out, but that the songs would have to wait a while because I was busy recording Miss Ilona. He walked with me to the front door and said, "I'll sing for you whenever you like."

I said, "Okay, I'll see what I can arrange." He was practically following me out onto the sidewalk.

Over the next few days Miss Ilona did continue with her story. But there is a lot of stuff on the tapes that has nothing to do with how being ugly saved her life. I just kept the cassette playing, and the microphone turned on all the time that I fed her. I'm glad I did because when I play it back now, I can hear it all. Like the time the napkin fell off her lap.

On the cassette you'll hear me saying, "I'll get it."

Then Miss Ilona saying, "Never mind, Philip, we'll just use Kleenex."

"No, it's no trouble. Let me pick up the napkin." Then you'll hear clatter, clatter, bang. "I'll get it," one voice. "I'll get it," another. Then a thump. Then a crash. When I listen to that cassette, I see a movie of it in my mind where I reached for the napkin, and the cast on my arm bumped the tray and made Miss Ilona's fork and spoon fall to the floor, and then I reached for them and the whole tray fell over, and we called for the nurse and she came, and on the tape you can even hear the nurse being patient. It's there to hear in her voice as she kept asking Miss Ilona if she would like some *other* help with her lunch and Miss Ilona kept saying, "No, no, thanks."

There were other times when I arrived at the home and Miss Ilona would be dozing, and I would start to tiptoe away so that I wouldn't wake her, but she always woke up. And at those times she seemed especially glad to see me, and we would make good progress on her story.

"I had been governess for about a year and a half," she told me, "when the Nazis occupied Paris. Mr. Pomfret—that was the name of the man who had hired me—was sent away to a Nazi labor camp, and Mrs. Pomfret fell apart. Her total training in running a household had been in how to give orders to a houseful of servants. I am not being unkind when I tell you that she was a useless woman. I told her that I would stay on and help her if she would swear that I was her cousin and buy me some forged papers."

"You blackmailed her?"

"Of course. If the Nazis had found out that I was Jewish, my life would have been over. If I had not been there to help her, the lives of Mrs. Pomfret as well as her two children would have been over. They would have

dissolved in their own tears. Mrs. Pomfret cried a lot. So we developed this strange household. I ran everything. I cared for the children, did the shopping and the cooking, made all the decisions and so on and so forth, and at the same time, I made it appear that Mrs. Pomfret was in charge and that I was merely running errands for her."

"Didn't you mind having to do everything?"

"No. It was more than a fair exchange. I was capable of doing all that I did plus a lot more, but Mrs. Pomfret was doing for me everything and the only thing she could do. She offered me her name. It was a fair exchange.

"I made up my mind that Mrs. Pomfret's children would never be as helpless as their mother was, and I took it upon myself to teach them how to do useful things like cleaning and cooking and so on and so forth. To learn to clean a house you need only to have a nose for dirt and be willing. Calloused knees also help. In order to teach the children how to cook, I had to learn to do it myself. And I did. I became quite a good cook, and considering all the wartime shortages, I also became a very inventive one, and that, too, helped save my life."

At this point in her story, I had been coming to the home for over two weeks, and I had become very good at feeding Miss Ilona one-handed. She told me that I had become adroit. Even though I had become adroit, it sometimes took us a very long time to get finished with her meal because she would ask me about my day and what I had learned at school, and some other days we had agreed to watch the same television programs, and we would have to discuss them when I came. We had mostly the same favorites. We both loved documentaries, and neither one of us could stand cartoons. So we decided that we both had excellent taste. One day she convinced me to read *The Little Prince*, and she was happy that I liked it. She told me that it was better in French, and then she laughed and said that she hoped I would always remember that she was the first snob ever to tell me that something was better in French.

Between various other discussions, I did learn that when World War II was over, Mr. Pomfret returned to Paris and once again took over management of his family. They no longer had need for her, so she planned to make her way back to Hungary.

"I left the Pomfrets in better shape than I had found them. The change in Mrs. Pomfret was for the better, but I knew it would not be permanent. With the children it was different. They were and would continue to be far more self-sufficient than when I first met them. And so was I. And, please remember, I was now competent in

French cooking as well as French literature and French art and so on and so forth."

By this time I, Phillip, had become something of a celebrity at the home. Everyone knew my name and said hello to me when they saw me, and Mr. Malin, the singing Ukrainian, often rode with me in the elevator up to the second floor. When he did, Miss Ilona would act huffy and say things like, "How is Mr. Musak these days?"

"Mr. Music," I corrected.

"I said Mr. Musak, and I mean Mr. Musak. Music is lively and interesting, and Musak is just there, but not there. It's what you get in supermarkets. Mr. Malin is jealous. They're all jealous. They think they have stories to tell."

"Maybe they do."

"Then let them tell them."

"Who to?"

"To Merv Griffin, to Mike Douglas, to Donahue. How should I know? Do you want me to continue with mine?"

"If you'll calm down," I said.

"I'm calm," she answered. "I just want you to remember that I am not a Beige and Gray."

"I'll remember," I said. "You're more of an Orange-Red."

"Why do you say that?"

"Fiery temper."

She seemed pleased with that, and she calmed down. "Where was I?"

"You were leaving France after World War Two."

"Yes. It was 1949 before I got my papers back in order and made it home to Budapest. Once I got there, I hardly recognized anything. My handsome brother had been taken by the Nazis to a concentration camp, never to be heard from again—even to this day. We can only assume that he was murdered, but without eyewitnesses, my parents continued to hope. They were old and broken, and I found them more helpless than the early Mrs. Pomfret had been. The older of my two sisters was now a widow with an eight-year-old daughter, and my younger sister had married a Communist."

"A practicing Communist?" I asked.

"The Communists had taken over the whole country," she said.

"Oh," I replied. My question had been the opposite of adroit, whatever that is.

"One thing I want to make clear to you before I have finished my story," she said.

"What's that?"

"It's not easy being a Hungarian. We've been conquered too many times. We've become quite good at it, unfortunately. We have a bad habit of taking on the characteristics of our conquerors until we remember that there is no satisfactory substitute for being a real Magyar."

"May I ask what all this has to do with how being ugly saved your life?"

"Has a lot to do with it. But," she added, "I don't like to make my point too sharply. I like to blunt it a little so that you really feel it when it penetrates."

Right there, on the cassette, you'll hear a pause, which is me thinking about what Miss Ilona has just said.

"Besides," she said, interrupting my thinking, "everything I tell you about the Hungarians will have meaning in some part of my story. You'll have to remember what I have already told you about how the Hungarians love their own cooking and their own language."

There's a gap in the tape again, me thinking again. Finally, I said, "So where do you come in?"

"Tomorrow," she answered. "Miss Ilona likes to make a grand entrance, even if it is in a wheelchair."

I shut off the cassette recorder. I was basically annoyed, and I didn't want my thoughts on tape.

As I left the building, Mr. Malin called to me, "Phillip, Phillip! Wait up."

I did.

He grabbed my good arm. "Now, listen to me, Phillip," he said, "I'm next. As soon as you're finished with Miss Ilona, it's my turn."

"I may be living here myself before Miss Ilona gets finished," I said. I was still annoyed with her.

He cupped his hand over his ear and said, "What's that?"

"You're next," I answered.

"Me, next."

"You got it."

"Got what?"

"Ohmigod," I said, under my breath, and I ducked out the fire exit.

The next day I thought that if I went in by way of a side entrance I could avoid Mr. Malin and keep Miss Ilona happy. I found a door that looked like an employees' entrance. I was practically an employee, so I went in and climbed the stairs. I climbed to the second floor, Miss Ilona's floor, but I found that the door there had no knob; it must have had a push bar on the other side and could work only one way, so I walked back downstairs and found myself going through a laundry room. I nodded casually to the woman who was folding laundry and walked toward a sign that said ELEVATOR, and I took the elevator. It was not the elevator I usually took, and it had only one button, so I pushed that. I got out of the elevator and found myself in a hallway that I had never been in before. I went to find the nurse's station. Unlike Miss Ilona's floor or the first floor, the hallway here was quiet and empty.

When I found the nurse, I saw that she was sitting in front of a whole panel of TV screens, all of them black and white and all of them showing one variety or another of an old folk in bed. The nurse was keeping guard by way of closed-circuit TV.

I studied the panel of screens and said in my best game show host voice, "Do these contestants understand that there can be only one winner in our Mahatma Guru look-alike contest and that . . ."

The nurse's eyes traveled from my broken arm to my cassette recorder and said, "You must be Phillip. What are you doing on this floor?"

"I'm lost," I answered. "How do I get to Miss Ilona's from here?"

Both the nurse and I were instantly distracted because about a million red lights began blinking on a panel in front of her, and the nurse had to flip about a hundred million switches and ask, "What is it?" about a thousand million times. She obviously had left her microphone on and every one of those stars of the mini-screen had heard that I was Miss Ilona's friend, and they all wanted to see me. They all had a story to tell, and they all wanted to tell it to me, Prince Phillip and his Magic Cassette. The nurse held a microphone out to me and said, "Would you care to say a few words to these people?"

I took the microphone from her and debated for a minute about doing my Fonzie imitation, but I decided that they wouldn't understand, so I played it straight. I told them, "I have a date with a singing Ukrainian after I finish with Miss Ilona." I glanced over at the panel and saw those million million lights blinking. "But," I added, "I want you to know that I am working on a plan that will enable all of you to tell your stories." Then I gave the microphone back to the nurse and asked her to please pull the plug. She did. I asked her how I could get out of there, and finally she told me without interruptions.

"You're late," Miss Ilona said.

"You're lucky I'm here at all. If the people on the fourth floor had not been bedridden, I would have been kidnapped and held for a ransom of twenty-six bedpans. Now, I want you to know, I not only have the Beige and Grays, I also have the Whites after me. Everyone has some story to tell."

Miss Ilona said, "Those old folks want to tell you about how they excelled at being a mother or a father, and how, now that their children are grown, they never come to visit them, and so on and so forth."

"What about Mr. Malin? I see him quite often, and he never complains about his children."

"Mr. Malin, the Ukrainian, who walks up here with you?"

"Yes, that Mr. Malin."

"No wonder he never complains about his children. He has none. He never got married. He was a singing troubadour. Toured all over Europe. The only people who don't complain about their children are the ones who don't have them."

"Well, I sort of promised him that I would get started with his story after you get finished with yours. If you ever finish."

"Don't rush me. I'm here all the time. It was you who was late today. Now, where was I?"

"You were up to 1949. You had just returned to Budapest and found your family very changed or missing."

"Yes," she said, "there were terrible food shortages in Budapest at that time. Everyone was hungry. Except, of course, the occupying Russians. They managed to get the best and the first for themselves. The Russians have never been short on nerve, I can tell you. They had the nerve to complain about the Hungarian cooking. 'Onions and paprika!' they yelled, as they sat down to eat. They began calling my people *Papriknicks*. The Russians put a *nik* or a *ski* on the end of most of their words.

"My sister who had married the Communist heard of these complaints, so she told her husband, 'It's no wonder that Comrade Zloty is in a bad humor all the time. He has indigestion from eating our awful Magyar cooking.' 'Yes,' her husband agreed."

I began to say something about remembering that the Hungarians were most proud of their cooking, but Miss Ilona stopped me. "My sister *pretended* to sympathize. She was only pretending because she had a plan. She said to her husband, 'I know a young man who was chef to a wealthy French family and who could move into Party headquarters and cook for Comrade Zloty. He could also train the present staff to cook in the French manner, for he speaks Magyar almost as well as he speaks French.'

"My sister meant me, of course. She cut my hair like a boy's and dressed me in a chef's uniform and presented me to her husband."

"You mean that you fooled your own sister's husband?"

"It was easy. Her husband had never met me, and besides, in a Communist country there are some things

that wives never tell even their husbands, and there are other things that wives *especially* never tell their husbands."

"So did you take the job?" I asked.

"Indeed I did. And I did my job very well. I mentioned that there were all kinds of food shortages, but the Russian always got first choice of everything, and I had learned to cook under even worse conditions. I got so good at substituting that sometimes I could save enough ingredients to smuggle some out and give them to my family, including my sister who had married the Communist."

"And is that how being ugly saved your life?"

"That is the first part of the second part."

"What is the second part of the second part?" I asked.

"I had a little ceremony that I taught my Hungarian helpers."

"What was that?"

"We spit in the soup."

"You what?"

"We spit in the soup. We passed the pot around and each of us spit in the soup."

"How did that save your life?"

"It saved my soul," she said. "And that is the second part of the second part of how being ugly saved my life."

As I was leaving the building, Mr. Malin approached me. He was holding a Beige lady by the hand and pulling her along. "Phillip!" he called. "I want you to meet Mrs. Silverman. I promised her the turn after me."

Mrs. Silverman held out her hand to shake mine and I noticed a number tattooed in blue on her forearm. "Pleased to meet you," she said.

"Do you have children you want to complain about?" I asked.

Mr. Malin grabbed my good arm—he had developed a bad habit of doing that—and pulled me over to the front door. "She lost her children at Auschwitz." He pointed to his arm, the spot where her tattoo was. "In the concentration camp."

If ever, if ever, if ever I felt the opposite of adroit; if ever, if ever, if ever I needed to be able to erase what I had said out loud the way I could erase what I said on tape, I would have done it then. I walked back from the door and said, "Mrs. Silverman, please excuse what I just said."

"It's all right, Phillip," she said.

As I walked home that afternoon, I got madder and madder at Miss Ilona. If she had not put into my head the thought about Beige and Grays and people wanting

to complain about their children, I would never have made that remark to Mrs. Silverman. Miss Ilona was certainly an interesting woman, but she was difficult.

I had to make it up to Mrs. Silverman. I had to figure out some way to get her and Mr. Malin recorded. And all the Whites. Maybe I could get my Sunday School involved, but I thought of Myron Pincus and Lisa Halpern, and I knew that I didn't want to get babies like him or jocks like her involved. It was better to do the Beige and Grays one at a time. Waiting their turn would give them something to do. It was better for each of them to be center stage solo than for all of them to be part of a Beige and Gray chorus. How could you ever see a little blue tattoo if everyone stood in line backstage?

When I returned to the home the following day, I told Miss Ilona about my encounter with Mrs. Silverman. She got very touchy and said, "I didn't say that everyone who has children wants to complain about them."

"That's the impression you like to give. I'll bet that if you took the trouble to find out, you'd find that there are a lot of interesting stories in this place."

"But at what cost? At the cost of being bored out of my natural skin? I told you that Hungarians have a bad habit of becoming like their conquerors. I don't want to become a Beige and Gray."

"There are parts of every story that are boring," I said.

"Well, then, I better hurry up, so that you won't be bored too long," she said.

"There's no reason for you to get insulted," I said.

"You said that there are parts of every story that are boring, so I must bore you at least part of the time."

"Let me just say that some parts of your story are more interesting than other parts."

"What is least interesting?" she asked.

"The parts about the Hungarian language and Hungarian cooking."

"But they are necessary!"

"I know that!" I said. "That's why it's important to listen to the less interesting parts."

"What parts are most interesting?"

"Where you spit in the soup. I'm in no hurry for you to hurry," I said. "There's nothing I would rather do during my broken-arm phase." She smiled, and I could see that she had returned to what is called good humor. "What really puzzles me," I said, "is why no one ever guessed that you were not a boy." (By this time I had completely forgotten that when I first saw Miss

Ilona I had not been certain whether she was a Ms. or a Mr.)

Miss Ilona laughed, "I never had much of a figure."

I think that at that point on the cassette you can hear me blushing, that's how red I felt.

"Actually," Miss Ilona continued, "Hungarians are artists at deceit. Some of the greatest art forgers of all time have been Hungarians."

"I'm just surprised that the Russians never caught you. In movies they are always so suspicious."

"I was almost caught once. That was in 1953, the year that Stalin died. What saved me was that after Stalin died, the man who came to power in Hungary was a man named Nagy. *Nagy* in Hungarian means *large*, and he was that. He was over six feet tall, and for a Hungarian, that's basketball player size. He loved good food, good drink, good clothes, and so on and so forth. In short, the only thing Communist about him was his politics. After he tasted my cooking, I could have been a trained chimpanzee, and he would not have let me go. In fact, Nagy was so much a Hungarian at heart that he began to loosen up a bit on the government. He began to allow the factories to manufacture things like toothbrushes and refrigerators and so on and so forth. The Hungarians loved it. Of course, the Russians did not. So after two years they removed Mr. Nagy and put one more like their own back in. And for the next year and a half while I continued to cook up my soups inside, trouble was brewing outside.

"I told you that the Hungarians have a bad habit of becoming like their conquerors . . . but only up to a point. I will explain it to you. That is, if I won't bore you."

"How will I know if you'll bore me until I hear you?"

"All right. Let me explain it like this. The Russians said to the Hungarians, 'We want to dress you up like Russian bears. Look at all the fun you will have with these sharp and powerful claws!' So the Hungarians put on the claws and scratched out a few eyes with them. Then the Russians said, 'See what fun! Now, suppose you put on a bear skin. See how warm it is.' So the Hungarians put on the bear skin and saw how warm it was and how tough the skin was. Then the Russians said, 'Now, suppose you wear these bear teeth and learn to eat like a bear.' That's when the Hungarians became a little worried."

I nodded. "Because they love their own cooking," I said.

"Yes," Miss Ilona agreed. "But they try on the teeth anyway, and they try the bear's diet, but they get a little bit of indigestion, and I must tell you that there is no one

in the world who feels as sorry for himself as a sick Magyar. So the Hungarians did not take kindly to having to eat bear food. Finally, the Russians said, 'Now that you are wearing the claws, skin and teeth of the bear, the only thing that remains is for you to learn to bark like a bear.' And that is when the Hungarians revolt."

"Because they love their Magyar language," I said.

"Exactly," she said. "And that revolt is the first part of the third part of how being ugly saved my life."

"I see how the boring parts fit in," I told her.

She smiled, looking very satisfied with herself.

"So it was that in October of 1956, the Hungarian writers—for there are none who love or need their language more—became disgusted with having to wear the Russian bear costume and make sounds like a bear. The writers organized a protest, saying that they would be Communist, but they wanted to be Hungarian Communists, not Russian ones. They wanted to bark in Magyar, not Russian, and that was when violence erupted."

"Where did the violence break out?" I asked.

"Tomorrow," she answered.

"I asked *where*, not when," I said.

As I left the home, I was asked by the receptionist to wait at the desk for a minute, that there was someone who wanted to see me. I waited, and the nurse from the fourth floor came down.

"Listen," she said, "you've got to get someone to listen to the people on my floor. You told them you were working on a plan, and they've been asking me several times a day if Phillip has come back yet. Each of them, several times a day. That's a lot of the same question," she said. "Listen, Phillip, I beg of you, come up with something for me to tell them. I can't stand it much longer, Phillip. You've got to do for them what you've done for Miss Ilona. You've got to come up with something."

I stuffed my cassette between my cast and my chest and put my good hand on her shoulder, and said, "Don't worry, nurse, I'll see to it that it gets done."

Mother had already made the appointment for the cast to come off my arm. The doctor said that after the cast came off, I would have to do some special exercises to strengthen those muscles. I knew that I wasn't going to have time to do all of the life stories. And then it came to me in a flash. The nurse had said that I must do for the others what I had done for Miss Ilona, and I asked myself, what had I done for her? I had done for her exactly what I had done for myself. I had saved her from being bored to death. Well, once her arm was better, she could have my half of the job. The cassette-listening half.

But I didn't tell her my decision immediately.

I listened first to the rest of her story.

"You asked me where violence at last broke out in Budapest. It happened outside the Budapest radio building. The people demanded that the Russian army leave our country. As the crowds gathered there, some of the Hungarian police, wearing those Russian bear skins I told you about, fired into the crowd, and that made the crowd madder. To think that Hungarians would fire on Hungarians, that they would have already forgotten who they were.

"The writers were soon joined by students and office workers and even soldiers who suddenly remembered that being Hungarian was more to their liking than being Russian bears. Everyone began marching in the streets, carrying banners, saying, INDEPENDENCE AND FREEDOM and WE WANT NEW LEADERS and WE WANT NAGY. Remember, Nagy was the Communist who came to power after Stalin had died. The one who loved good drink, good clothes and my cooking.

"There were gatherings in every public square, and in Budapest Square itself the crowd began to pull down the statue of Stalin. They didn't get the statue down until the next day, but the effort was good." Miss Ilona looked back into herself and smiled. "Oh, yes, that was good."

"What did the Russians do?" I asked.

"They did what they always do. They gave the people some of the things they wanted. They put Mr. Nagy back in as head of the government, and they got him to plead with everyone to lay down their arms. It was a wild time in the city. Radios were blasting from all the windows. Between threats and pleas—*if you don't get back to work, we'll shoot you, and please go back to work and we'll forgive you*—the radios played waltzes and czardas and so on and so forth. The city was a crazy place.

"Then the Russian tanks left the city, and I knew that they were planning something awful."

"How did you know?"

"Because I recognized the tactics. Remember, I had been exposed to the Nazis. I knew that they would draw back only to be able to get a running start for their final push. I knew that if anything good were to come of it, I would have to be the one to make good out of bad, just as I had learned to make good out of ugly. So while the radios blared forth for us to return to work, I began walking. I headed west to Austria and in the lull between the time the Russians said that they would leave Hungary and the time when they actually came back in and crushed the revolt, I walked on the Budapest-Vienna highway to freedom. About one hundred and sixty thousand of us did so.

"The United States took thousands of us in, and that is how I came to America."

"Did the Russians come back into Budapest?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Within a few days. They took Nagy prisoner and they clamped down on my poor people and dressed them all in bear suits again. And walking to Vienna is the second part of the third part of how being ugly saved my life."

"But," I said, "I don't see how being ugly saved your life this time."

"Well," she answered, "if I had not been born ugly, I would not have been me, and if I had been someone other than me, then it would have been someone else's life that I would have saved."

"I hate your story to end," I said.

"Why?" she asked. "Now you can get the cast off your arm and return to riding your skateboard."

"Now, listen to me," I said. "When I first broke my arm I was doing only one thing well, and that was feeling bored and feeling sorry for myself."

"That's two things," she said.

"You're right," I said. "The same two things you were doing. When you're feeling sorry for yourself, everything looks beige and gray. Even people. I couldn't separate out one Beige and Gray from another. Until you. Until you told me that you were ugly and that being ugly saved your life. At first I was listening to Mr. Malin and *not* listening to him at the same time. Because something in my head wouldn't make room for seeing him as anything but beige and gray. Now, I'm still having trouble sorting out the people on the fourth floor, the Whites, but I figure that that will be your responsibility. Yours and Mr. Malin's."

"Never!" she said. "They would bore me to death."

"Someone has got to listen," I said. "And, Miss Ilona, you've got to overcome your prejudice about old people. How can you ever see a small blue tattoo if you're blinded by beige and gray? Now, since Mr. Malin has use of both his arms, I'm putting him in charge of the cassette, but I'm putting you in charge of Mr. Malin."

"They'll bore me to death," she repeated. "I'll become a Beige and Gray. I told you that Hungarians always take on the habits of their conquerors."

"Up to a point," I said. "You'll remember that you're orange-red, fiery Miss Ilona, and I think that will sort of add color to the Beige and Grays. Someone's got to listen to these people, and I think it has to be you."

"What have these people got to say?"

"How will you ever find out if you don't listen?"

"They'll be boring."

"Parts of them will."

We more or less quarreled until it was time for Miss Ilona to go to bed, but when I walked home, I walked home with her agreement that she would do it. And I walked home with something else—with the feeling that she had wanted to give in after a good fight.

Two days later when the cast came off my arm, it looked about as ugly as an arm could look. It in no way matched my other arm because it was smaller and purpler, and it looked so pitiful that I thought it was going to mew because it looked and felt as weak as a kitten. I insisted that Mother and I drive to the home to show Miss Ilona and Mr. Malin. Mr. Malin met us in the lobby, and we all went upstairs together.

Miss Ilona said, "I've got three more weeks to go before my cast can come off, but Jacob and I have already started on Mrs. Silverman's story."

Mother said, "The volunteer women would like to make duplicate copies of the tapes and keep them in the library of the home. We'd like to save these lives as part of the history of the home."

"Well, Leona," Mr. Malin said to my mother, "you can thank Phillip here for getting us all started."

"Not at all," Miss Ilona said. "You can thank me."

"Now, why is that?" Mr. Malin asked, obviously irritated with Miss Ilona.

"Why? Because Phillip paid no attention to anyone until he noticed me, and he never would have noticed me if I had not been so ugly. So you might say that my being ugly saved all of our lives."

"On tape," Mr. Malin corrected.

"Not only on tape," Miss Ilona said, "not only on tape."

I liked that. I liked ending with a beginning of the first part of the fourth part. And so on and so forth.