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Excerpt from the novel:

Chapter One
The Swap Boy

“What was it that took you so long?”

An elderly gentleman stood in the doorway. He was wearing a faded corduroy jacket and he appeared to look rather uncomfortable in it. He had his oily hair swept back and had apparently waxed his moustache that had turned a pale shade of yellow from all the tobacco – Zalán’s face very nearly broke into a full grin when he saw this but he thought better of it as he was a boy who had been very clearly taught how to behave correctly. He managed to limit himself to a mild expression of surprise.

“I haven’t got time to stand around here all day long,” the old man barked. He held a battered trunk in his right hand, which he then used to push past Zalán and march completely uninvited into the flat. The boy hurried behind him to keep up. What exactly did he want? And who on earth was this old man?

He must have been knocking hard for a good quarter of an hour before Zalán had poked his head out of his room. He thought it sort of strange that his parents hadn’t gone to open the door. After all, both of them had been sitting in the living room happily flicking through a batch of supermarket catalogues they’d recently found dropped into the family letterbox.

“Can’t you hear the knocking?” he’d asked them but they’d both just carried on reading about the latest bargains to be had. *If not then not, I guess*, Zalán thought to himself and shrugged his shoulders before heading for the front door.

The odd old man made a beeline for the kitchen. He didn’t hesitate for a moment and didn’t bother with any other doors as if he knew exactly where he was going. Zalán trotted after him into the flat and by the time he had caught up with him, the elderly gent was already seated at the table and rummaging through his trunk.

“The reason they didn’t hear me is that I’m here to see you,” the old man nodded with a disparaging look in the general direction of the lounge. “It’s you I’ve come to collect. If you want to nip and pack a couple of things, I’ll wait for you here but you’ll need to make it snappy. I’ll blow up the swap boy while I’m waiting.”

Zalán didn’t move. He simply stood and stared at the old man. He was confused. He wasn’t the least bit scared but he was beginning to find this whole situation more than odd. He was still considering whether or not he should say something when he realised that his unexpected guest had a distinct smell of beans and onions.

“What do you want, mister?” he eventually asked with a rather clumsy expression on his face.

It sounded really stupid but he really couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Don't call me that, I don't like it when kids call me that. Call me Chairleg instead," the old boy responded and pulled something grey and floppy out of his trunk.

"I've come for you because you're a boy called Zalán unless I'm terribly mistaken."

"My name is Zalán," Zalán said sounding a little bit like a robot.

"There you are then!" the old man said, and he rolled the grey whatever-it-was out onto the table. It definitely had the shape of a boy of about Zalán's size. "Are you going to run and pack then, or what?"

"I live here with my parents. Why would I want to leave? I'm still just a kid."

Chairleg gave an irritated snort,

"Don't fret. Your parents will never notice. They're coming now."

And he was right: Zalán's mum and dad both walked into the kitchen. Zalán flattened himself up against the wall in shame – he was sure they were going to give him a good telling off for letting a stranger into the flat like that. It would be a waste of time him telling them that there was nothing he could have done to stop the old man because they'd never believe him. His parents had their own way of seeing the world.

But nothing like that happened. They didn't seem the least bit surprised. Mum produced a broad albeit mechanical smile and all she asked the intruder was,

"Coffee?" as she was already opening the cupboard door. The old man pulled a sour face when he caught sight of the jar of instant on the shelf.

"I'll think I'll pass, thank you," he muttered under his moustache. But it was as if Zalán's mother hadn't heard a word – she took a cup off a hook and started to dutifully spoon the brown powder into it.

"Milk? Sugar?"

"Mustard," Chairleg said and smirked as he winked at Zalán.

"There you go," Zalán's mum said, and popped a pot of mustard down on the table in front of him before flicking the switch on the electric kettle. Zalán couldn't help himself and he burst out laughing. The more he saw, the less he understood. The old man raised his bushy eyebrows and had a clear twinkle in his eye as he turned to face the boy's father who had been standing in the kitchen doorway like a piece of furniture stuck in transit.

"The reason I'm here is because I've come to take your son away. But don't worry, I've brought another one to take his place."

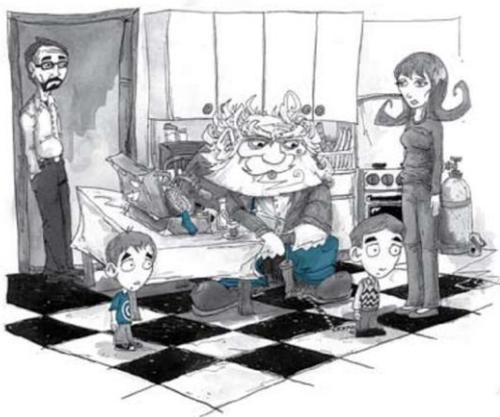
The parents didn't react to this either. Zalán's father just stared into space and his mother poured boiling water into the cup and placed it neatly down in front of Chairleg.

"See? They don't care one little bit." The old man looked right into the woman's face.

"Please turn around, madam!"

Chairleg then stood up and put his hand on Zalán's mother's waist. He fiddled with something and there was a strange noise like someone letting a bicycle tyre down. "Your mother's called Anna, is she not?"

It really didn't sound all that much like a question. Zalán turned to look at his mum,



who'd always been a bit chubby and short, and he watched as she got slimmer and slimmer. Her dark dress no longer stretched tight across her tummy but fell into flat folds.

"That should do," the old man said and he twiddled whatever it was he'd fiddled with before and the hissing sound stopped. Zalán's mum stopped deflating and her dress, that was now several sizes too big for her, hung on her new slimmer self.

"You look lovely, love," his dad complimented

and that, it seemed, was that.

It was this last remark that made Zalán chuckle and he could no longer control himself. His loud laughter filled the kitchen. His parents would have normally told him off for making a show of himself like this but this time they just stood and smiled their politest smiles. Chairleg shoved his head back into the trunk for a second time.

“These two aren’t your real parents,” he explained to Zalán and disappeared up to his elbows in the junk that came tumbling from his trunk (there were bicycle handlebars, half a melon, a horseshoe and what looked like a tiny mouse scuttling through the lot). “Those others’ve been working in alphabetical order so they would have swapped both of them ages ago.”

Zalán had stopped laughing by this point. His parents might not have been the best parents in the world, they hardly spent any time with him and they took little or no notice of him, but they were still his parents. He didn’t like what he had heard and he was, in his own particular way, starting to feel the tiniest bit scared. He had to admit that he’d sometimes thought that it would be good to be free of them for a couple of days and stuff himself silly with chocs and sweets, kick a ball around in his room and rearrange the whole flat according to his own crazy taste – he’d keep the TV remote in the fridge, nail every last one of the paintings onto the ceiling and he’d always fancied keeping a crocodile in the bath. But he knew that it was all just a foolish dream because the remote would stop working, every last one of the paintings would fall off the ceiling and the crocodile would be more than sure to eat him alive. And anyway, where would he ever be able to find a real crocodile in the city?

The thought that his parents might not be his parents shocked him good and proper. And what was it that the old man had said?

“Who swapped them? And what do you mean about alphabetical order?”

Chairleg eventually managed to find what he had been looking for and brandished a very tatty bicycle pump in the air. Then he put the “flat boy” on the kitchen floor, somehow inserted the nozzle and started to pump it up.

“Them, of course. The ones who came from Boxville. I managed to get a look at the statistics a while back and then they’d got as far as the letter “E”. Your parents are called Anna and Balázs and so they must have swapped them ages ago. That’s why I came looking for a Zalán.

The old man kept talking and as he did, the flat boy started to take shape and look more and more like Zalán. But this Zalán had very neatly combed hair that the real one couldn’t stand, and wore the kind of clothes that all the other kids wore at school. What’s more, the real Zalán was sure that this plastic imposter had never seen a comic book in his life before. He was willing to bet good money that this one wanted to be a doctor or an engineer when he grew up and not a mountaineer, explorer, racing driver or, best of all, a superhero.

“Your parents will never realise that their real son isn’t here,” Chairleg went on to explain. “You never realised that they weren’t the real thing.”

And Zalán really hadn’t realised and why would he have done? They’d played with him a lot when he was little and told him stories. He and his dad had even played wars together: dinosaurs versus giant robots. They’d played less and less with him as the years had passed and now his parents either worked or went shopping or watched the news or cooking programmes and there were plenty of those to choose from since his dad had signed them up for a hundred channels. They’d told him that he was a big boy now and he could



occupy himself so they'd gone out and bought him a computer and a stack of games to go on it. But Zalán didn't like those sorts of games. And the dinosaurs and giant robots got packed away in a big box because it wasn't the same playing with them all on his own. "But it's still bad!" he spluttered and began to cry. "Where are my real parents?"

Chairleg had finished inflating the swap boy who stood quietly next to the table. The old man pulled the real Zalán closer to him, sat him on his lap and stroked the boy's head with his enormous, leathery hand. There was an immense amount of love in his touch and Zalán felt just like he used to feel when his mum – the real one – had rocked him in her arms. But this time his comfort was soured by sadness.

"In Boxville," the old man said with a serious tone. And Zalán suddenly knew that there could be no more terrible place on earth than Boxville and that Chairleg was just as afraid of it even though he looked too old to be afraid of anything.

"So are we going to go there now and set them free?" Zalán asked as he managed to bite back his tears.

"Let's go!" That was all that Chairleg said but it didn't sound all that encouraging. He lifted Zalán down from his lap. "Go and get your things!"

The boy stopped and stood in the middle of the kitchen and stared at his parents who were still smiling into thin air as if nothing had happened. Then he glanced over at the swap boy with his neat hair and empty expression and he felt his stomach turn. Now he knew who *they* really were, he didn't see them as real humans because they had nothing truly human about them: their skin was like rubber, all cold and clammy; their eyes were grey and flat like coins in the bottom of a shopping centre fountain; their smiles looked like tired dressing-up moustaches that had been stuck onto their faces.

He had to get away. He had to get away from this horrible place.

"There's nothing I need," he eventually responded. "I don't like most of my stuff anyway. I think *they'll* like it just fine though."

Chairleg nodded at these wise words, packed the pump back into the trunk, locked the top and stood up again.

"Whoever heard of coffee with mustard?!" he grumbled indignantly. He took young Zalán by the hand and the two new friends strode happily out of the flat leaving the false family behind who stood and smiled as if this had been a day just like any other.

Translated by Ralph Berkin

