

**Copyrighted Material**

# Anschluss

Vienna, 3 April 1938

After a long cold beginning to the year, a surprise mid-March thaw brings actual heat. Even with the fresh-seeming feel of summer, though, fires across the city continue to be lit, and those who have known such false ends before remain cautious of a last wintry bite, so that by noon most days, if there is not a good breeze blowing, the skies above Vienna are greased with smoke and turned the fatty buttermilk pallor of church candles.

There is a game that nobody wants to miss. Tickets have been given freely, because this isn't just a sporting contest, it is an event, symbolic of so much. The *Anschluss*; more than a handshake, more than an embrace, a unifying, of brothers and of blood. And from today, in the instant that the final whistle is blown, Austria as a national team – and to all intents as a nation – will cease to be.

Those without tickets have no choice but to turn to

touts, so the city's criminal element gets forging, understanding the killing to be had. The trick is not to gouge, and to have youngsters do the selling, put them on street corners or the least-lit booths of those cafes and bars who might be willing, for a modest skim of the profits, to allow such business to be done, with all due discretion and the guarantee that there is to be no trouble and not even so much as a raised voice. Keeping things to just two or three marks, reasonable and affordable, in the fortnight ahead of the game; then bumping the price to five for the couple of days before, and then, in the hours immediately preceding kick-off – once the thought of missing out has turned people sufficiently desperate, and because suspicions will be aroused if those who can take advantage, and are practically expected to, should for whatever reasons choose otherwise – going to as high as ten. Sixty thousand genuine tickets will pack out the Prater Stadium in Leopoldstadt, sixty thousand fists clutching small legitimate stubs of paper or constantly patting the pockets into which they've been tucked; and at least as many again and by some estimations as much as twice that number, will arrive at the turnstiles with their forged scraps and be directed unceremoniously away. Many in the waiting line laugh openly and gloat at the idea that anyone could be so gullible as to pay out good money to a tout, but others who look on shake their heads in sympathy, and even some sense of brotherhood, probably feeling their own stomachs stir in dread

that a similar fate might await them once they reach the entrance gate, because even though they've received their tickets freely and in an apparently legitimate way nothing feels quite guaranteed any more, that level of certainty has slipped from life as they know it.

Hours ahead of kick-off the streets heave with people, and soldiers stand by, squads of eighteen or twenty-four, grey-coated despite the brightness of the sun, and armed. A strange day, the air within the city trying for happiness, and bluster, but hazy with some pervading melancholy. Kids run, men stride on, eager to be inside the stadium for a good position on the terraces, a central spot behind one of the goals and halfway up the decks or higher, for the fullest possible perspective and so that there won't be too much displacement when the crush inevitably happens, when the big gates are thrown open the fifteen or twenty minutes after the game begins in an effort to clear the surrounding roads of latecomers and the ticketless and a surge takes place. Beneath the surface joviality, there's a darkness about the mood that soldiers and citizens alike are aware of, and if a few in uniform attempt to exchange banter with those passing by, even with rifles held across their chests and that much more throat to their accents, a kind of barking edge that jars against the languid Viennese lilt, it is because they are still, for the most part, just young men keen on fun, and because, in theory at least, football remains a game for everyone. This won't be an open match, but no one wants

to talk today about the shameful side of things. Instead, there is teasing, from the Germans but from the daring few among the Austrians, too: *So, this is why you boys have come to Vienna, is it? To see how the game is meant to be played? Or, Try not to take today's beating too much to heart now, soldier. The Paper Man makes shreds of everyone. Your lot just happens to be next in line.* Jibes, all that remains to the Viennese, to be met with shrugs meant to gesture grace in defeat even before a ball has been kicked, since this is a submission so slight as to be practically devoid of meaning. And on it goes, this fun taunting, many hundred times an hour, a harmless last release but knowing where the line is and careful not to cross it. Restrictions are starting to hurt, curfews are being enforced in certain areas of the city and taxation is on the rise, and there is widespread talk that Jews have been deliberately snubbed, by orders from on high, in the distribution of the match tickets. A number of Jewish families have already gone and more still are planning to, making for Switzerland, France or Hungary, wherever their familial connections lie, the arrival of the soldiers in the streets enough to convince them that bad days are coming. But not everyone has the wherewithal to run or the courage to abandon so much, and those who haven't fled hold to the hope, probably more wishful than believed, that things have already bottomed out and can't possibly worsen, because who in the world wants all-out war? Who stands to gain from that?

But while the future writes itself in ugly jagged crosses on walls throughout the city, a pretence or masquerade remains for now in place, as if this change is just a governmental shift and nothing to fret overly about. Being deprived of a ticket might seem a mean blow, with the game such a banner moment in the life of the city, but for those in the know, Jew or not, there are still ways to get the door open, because as sprawling as Vienna is, it is also close-knit. The ticket will come at a price, but the cost, in this instance, is only money. Tomorrow is another day, with other challenges to face, but for this afternoon, there is football and nothing else.

By two o'clock, a couple of hours still before kick-off, the stadium is already crammed. Gustav Hartmann is on the terrace behind the goal at the eastern end, halfway between the goal's right-hand post and the corner flag, and halfway between the terrace's top step and its bottom. He'd have preferred a more central position but this is not bad. The friends with whom he'd breakfasted earlier at Annahof, on warm rolls and lashings of coffee spiced by a passed-around hip flask just to get the ball properly rolling, have all been lost on the way in, taken by the tides of crowds flushing the streets around the Prater. The atmosphere even outside the stadium was vicious with expectancy, and all around him now, people are running their mouths, helpless against standing easy, and the sun feels warmer than it has in an age, the first

basking after a whole half a year's stretch of winter. Talking and shouting over one another about games seen, massacres and great victories, the facts vociferously disputed but the arguments part of the purpose. Most of what is said recollects Sindelar, of course, the one they've taken to calling the Paper Man – still, on his good days, the game's colossus. Goals, wonder-touches, demonstrations of skill unimaginable up to the very second of their execution. And the talk on this part of the terrace plays out in variation around the stadium until all is collage, a rain of white noise.

The sky is a pale but brilliant blue, and Hartmann lifts his face to feel the heat against his skin and for half a minute closes his eyes. And into the darkness of his mind Sindelar glides, ball at his feet, alert to onslaught and opportunity, shifting step against sliding tackles with a practised feint, a drop of the shoulder and the shove of one hip, until he is past and clear, into space. So, there are two Matthias Sindelars. There's the man he's known forever as Mutzl, his dearest friend since childhood, since before school was even a thing to be skipped, always ready with a smile for him at the Annahof cafe or in one of the dance halls, laughing, recounting tales of places he's been and women he's kissed. And there is this one, out on the pitch with a ball at his feet, a man apart, a colossus, imperious and untouchable, maybe the greatest there's ever been.

Now the stadium, which an hour ago had already

seemed full, looks packed to splitting, and with the new intensity comes an elevation of noise and, somehow, a brightening. The pitch is not pristine – months of winter football have taken a hard toll, leaving the surface torn and the grass across both goalmouths as well as through a wide stretch at the centre of the field trampled out of existence – but the glare of the day makes the most of what greenery remains. For the final time, he is about to see his great friend in the colours of their nation, a thought he can't bear to face, with so much already to be sorrowful about. But he pushes all of that away, because these couple of hours are what they have now, sliced free from future and past, to be seen, felt and savoured. The rest is silence. His surroundings are a small hillside of his people; most here will have been to the Prater before and experienced heaving crowds at big games; but for the sheer sense of occasion and the rawness of energy, few will have experienced anything like this.

'Bastard,' someone shouts, a woman's voice, from a position behind and to his right, and the word, a stabbing bleat, almost a scream, penetrates the wider noise. Those who understand the intent of it cough cheers of hard, angry, supportive laughter, but among the rest along this increasingly compacted section of the terrace there is only confusion until, down at pitch level, the nearest soldiers stiffen ahead of readying their rifles. Then another voice, very close now, probably within an arm's reach of where Hartmann is standing, suggests that the Führer is



here, in the box reserved for dignitaries, and that it's this that has the soldiers on edge. Lining up the German boys against the *Wunderteam* is an obvious mismatch; but with word of Hitler's attendance filtering through now from all sides, with some claiming to have actually seen him, and Goering, too, behind some barricades, on the way in, and others insisting on having got confirmation of it directly from soldiers outside the stadium, it seems a certainty that orders will have been given, of the kind which won't bear disobeying. 'Bastard is right,' another shouts, 'if it's the bastard of a whore,' and in response more cheers go up, making mob truth of it, the rising white-noise din of restlessly babbling thousands reaching something suddenly akin to the rapture of a hand-clap or a firecracker going off. Hartmann listens, absorbing everything, but can't make himself part of that pack. His stomach heaves as, down in front, on the strip of grass this side of the touchline, he watches the soldiers massing in response to the crowd. The eight who'd been initially spread across the width of the field behind the goal double in number and continue to gather until they are standing just a few paces apart and studying the crowd with expressions of stone, the earlier joviality gone or buried, rifles eager and at the ready.

A part of him wants to run. There's been talk of some kind of camp going up, in Mauthausen, not far from Linz, where he has relatives, for the internment of prisoners, criminal types. Those friends of his who are talking

of getting out insist that the next few years will mark the end of the Jews across this stretch of Europe. For weeks he has sat in the cafe while friends indulged in such speculation, but as upsetting as such talk could be, its reality has remained at a distance. Seeing the soldiers so close and at the ready changes that. Even if today goes better than he anticipates, he suspects he'll no longer breathe with any kind of freedom.

Around him, again, the crowd stirs and finally a deeper roar begins, a war cry at first felt more than heard, registered as an irresistible pounding from within, that same directionless immensity. His eyes are wide open and huge in anticipation, knowing what is happening or about to but even so wanting it confirmed, the explosion sourced, and now the roar is a swelling boom, feasting on individual voices and the heavy tannoy static of some announcer trying impossibly to speak his piece. In an instant he exists within the monstrous, threshing chorus of sixty thousand baying voices, that number and who knows how many thousand more, with maximum capacity an ideal rather than a truth.

The two teams come out onto the pitch from the far left corner, the Austrians, no matter what the scoreboard insists on calling them, at Sindelar's behest forgoing their usual white-and-black strip for a red shirts, white trunks, red socks ensemble in representation of the flag that, after today, will fly no more. Most of the players on both sides

run but the Paper Man, distinct even from a distance in his appearance and gait, strolls into view, his left hand holding a shabby brown ball against his ribs.

The German players, full of nervous energy, hit the sunlight and fan out like scattershot before charging in a full-blown dash to the far end of the field, Hartmann's end, then fall without pausing for breath into a vigorous warm-up routine of sprints, stretches and scissors jumps. But as impressive as their display might be, it is made quickly inconsequential because Sindelar, who has taken up a position in the centre of the field, sends a long sweeping pass back to Sesta at the edge of the penalty area, leaps to take the slightly overhit return on his chest and, with bored nonchalance, sets about juggling the ball from foot to foot, and onto his knee, and now and then up onto his head, keeping it alive and moving in gainly loops, even after the referee's whistle sounds the call to order. The players of both teams trot to the right-hand sideline and form an orderly arrangement either side of midfield ahead of the various official presentations and the playing of the anthem, but Sindelar keeps on with his private game and for a full minute more the fun continues, the ball leaping as if a thing alive from his boot, knee or forehead, never for an instant beyond his control. His audience watches, restrained despite itself, as if afraid to disturb the spell being cast. And then, abruptly, he nudges the ball high, sets himself for balance and, as it drops, connects on the half-volley, sending a shot the remaining

half-length of the pitch and into the empty German goal just beneath the crossbar. The net ripples and the crowd, reading the gesture for what must surely be its intent, once more explodes.

Finally, Sindelar joins his teammates, moving to the end of the line beside Platzer, his goalkeeper, to take up the captain's spot. His restlessness is apparent. While the others hold still, facing the stand and feeling themselves overlooked from the high decks by the array of dignitaries and officials who have crammed into four or five rows, the area cordoned off entirely from the public by SS guards, Sindelar bounces and jumps, rolls his neck and stretches out his hamstrings. He raises his arm as the others do when the anthem begins but stops short of straightening the gesture of salute and keeps his head and gaze determinedly and noticeably averted, and before the music has played itself out he drops away, down into a stoop to undo and retie the laces of his boots, giving the task a surgical concentration, taking his time even when the referee's whistle blows again to draw the teams into position. His teammates pat his shoulder or ruffle his hair as they pass, so that he is immediately and comically dishevelled, and Stroh leans in and says something that with the crowd noise having lifted again is mostly lost but which seems to refer to balls. Typical of the big man. "These sons of bitches have you marked," he shouts, his mouth nearly to Sindelar's ear in an effort to be heard. "So, nothing stupid, all right? Don't give them the excuse."

Stroh's grin pulls wider, which only intensifies the worry that is tightening his expression. 'And make sure to keep well in from the sidelines. That's where the gunners are.'

The game itself is a frustration and, after such a build-up, anticlimactic. Within ten minutes of play it is obvious to all in the stadium that the Germans are deeply outclassed, that they can't live with the speed of Austria's passing and movement, and if this plays out as it should there can be no right outcome but a double-figures massacre. The clearness of the afternoon has stripped the field entirely of shadow, leaving nowhere to hide and no blushes spared. Desperate to avoid outright humiliation, the visitors try putting two of their toughest players on Sindelar and for a while the game turns predictably rough, and even, in a few instances, violent. But after a long and arduous career spent enduring such attention, for most of the first half Sindelar dictates the pace with a striking display of one-touch efficiency, opening up the full width and span of the field with deft flicks, lay-offs and long, raking precision passes, pulling the German defence apart and giving his wingers fullest reign on either flank, Stroh out on the left side, Pesser down the right wing. The tackles that come at him, even the late and dirtiest ones, are easily anticipated, and when he finally allows one to get close it is only so that, in drawing the foul, he can fall into a certain heap and in the process bring a hard knee to his opponent's groin, the knock apparently entirely

accidental but enough to restrict his marker's ambitions for the remainder of the game.

The first half finishes scoreless, forty-five minutes defined by several wasted Austrian opportunities; Stroh going close with a header at a corner and then, again, with a strike from the edge of the box after cutting in from the left flank, and the normally clinical Franz Binder also twice firing wide when unmarked and in space from just six or eight yards out. But it is a moment shortly before the half ends that speaks most loudly of something underhand at play, when Sindelar collects the ball midway inside the German half and instead of switching possession out to one of the wings, as he's been so far doing, sets off on a run, weaving in and out of lunging tackles, driving into the box and entirely wrong-footing the goalkeeper with an audacious dummy. Then, with the goal at his mercy and the entire stadium awaiting a simple tap-in, he hesitates as if for effect and strokes the ball a few inches the wrong side of the near post.

Hartmann is at this end, but across the goal, packed into the terrace maybe thirty yards away, and even after the ball has gone wide he can't quite accept what he has seen, the display of skill elegant to the point of sublime and then, somehow, the incomprehensibility of the miss. The crowd noise lifts, full of anguish, but before the ball can even be put back into play the half-time whistle sounds and the teams trot off for the far corner and a temporary escape to the dressing-room area.

With the players' departure a kind of deflation follows. All that's just happened is considered in shouts, scrutinised and somehow made sense of, or at least justified, and only then, finally, laughed about, such a blatant miss declared obviously intentional and, what's more, savage in its goading. There's no predicting what Sindelar will try in the second half. Maybe stop the ball on the goal line and sit on it. After what the crowd have already witnessed, it'll take something that extreme to further salt the wound. And it's anyone's guess, too, what the newspapers will write about today, assuming that the articles haven't already been written.

In the Austrian dressing room, nobody has much to say. A pair of soldiers guard the propped-open door, seeing and overhearing everything. Barely out of boyhood, trying to make themselves staunch by clenching their jaws and avoiding everybody's eye, they know of Sindelar and have likely even seen him play, cheered his skills and out in the street or on some piece of waste ground with their friends, probably even attempted to replicate, feebly, his more audacious flicks and movements. But that excitement is fixed firmly in another time, and now they stand here with guns, facing into a different world. Tomorrow, if Sindelar wants to be considered as such, they'll view him as a brother, but today, while he is putting them to the sword, there can be no smiles, no ease. He sits against the dressing room's far wall, facing them but with his

head lowered, hunched forward, socks rolled down around his ankles. The team coaches pace the floor, cautious about what instructions can be given. One of them, a heavysset man with wild flaps of hair the colour of which, despite his obviously advancing age, reminding of nothing so much as autumn leaves, russets and browns, talks of keeping the game tight and the passing fluid, the way they've been doing, controlling the tempo. Let technique stand as the difference between the sides. And as for goals, well, a no-score draw won't be the worst scoreline. None of the players react, not even Sindelar, since these are words that in one variation or another have been repeated over and over in the weeks prior to this game's commencing. Sindelar studies the floor, in absent-minded fashion kneading his bad knee with both hands, and when the team stirs once again to life, the others readying themselves to get back out on the pitch, he remains still. And within half a minute he is alone.

At first no one notices. The players take the field again, the Austrians making for the goal they'd in the first half attacked, and after a few routine warm-up stretches fall into their various assigned positions. Hartmann, at their backs now, only registers the absence of the Paper Man at the same moment that the rest of the crowd does, and there is an audible gasp that quickly stirs into a discontented rumbling. With the team set out in formation, his place on the pitch, the deep-lying forward spot, has



opened a chasm. But before the jeering can turn properly rancorous, he appears, strolling at leisure onto the German end of the pitch and pointedly ignoring what remarks the opposition defence, out of duty or obligation, start hurling at him. Though it may also be that he simply doesn't hear them, such is the racket of welcoming applause, a huge, relieved wall of sound that builds and sustains itself at a level that smothers all other noise, that obliterates thought. He moves up into the centre of the field to where Franz Binder, his strike partner, stands waiting, ball beneath one boot, alongside the referee, and without disturbing his easy amble takes, following a single shrill blast of the whistle, the touch that gets the second half under way.

This second period proves even more of a mockery than what has gone before. As fit as the Germans think themselves, the opening forty-five minutes spent running and harrying has left them badly off the pace, and in a central channel between the halfway line and the edge of his opponents' eighteen-yard box, Sindelar owns the ball. Roughhousing doesn't help, even with a Berlin referee calling the game, double- and in desperation sometimes triple-marking only exposes new gaps in the defence that Sindelar exploits effortlessly and at will. Within the first few minutes of the second half he has hit the right post twice with shots from the edge of the box and from just inside, and dropped the ball onto the crossbar from all of thirty yards, efforts that have him smiling and

waving to the crowd behind the goal. On the third occasion, after the long-range strike, he actually stops and takes a bow, much to the approval of everyone packing the terrace at this end. The crowd would rather count goals but are happy enough to sing loud, appreciative support for the kind of game their maestro has chosen to play, this exercise in grand humiliation. Most here must already know – though they'll resist speaking of it, not wanting to give it air in the world – that a limit is set on just how many more times Sindelar will be seen in fullest pomp, which makes this performance so worth savouring. When he runs, even at thirty-five, it is like watching a great dancer, that same godly elegance of power, grace and musicality, and against it the Germans have no choice but to abandon their strategy of hard tackling and instead fall back, trying, since nothing else is working, to pack the defence and with sheer numbers block his route to goal. Still, he glides and slaloms among them, and with scoring seemingly no longer the intent or motivation, every touch, pass and dribble becomes a small glory in and of itself, an exhibition in the purest sense.

Why he waits until twenty minutes from the finish to put the Austrians ahead, nobody can say. After witnessing a wondrous, flaunting hour-long demonstration of virtually unmatchable skill and dexterity, the Prater's crowd have begun to abandon all hope or expectation of a goal, and when it does come, it is a chance so quickly taken that many see nothing but the instant aftermath,

the bulge of the net and the ball nestled in its bottom corner, and Sindelar, in that familiar way, throwing his hands in the air and wheeling away in leaping delight. Those few – Hartmann among them – who do catch it see the merest glimpse of a deflected shot breaking hard and fast from the left side of the box to where Sindelar is standing in space by the penalty spot and, without even setting himself, he smashes home a volley to break the deadlock. It is a strike as instinctual as any of the several hundred he's scored in his long career, and given the enthusiasm with which he celebrates, to him clearly more precious.

Now the stadium's volume lifts to deafening levels, and on the terrace behind the home goal the jumping and heaving threatens a stampede. But nobody cares. Penned in as they are, there is nowhere to fall, and because of the compaction the ecstasy has no escape, except upwards. Hartmann shouts with everyone else and feels himself letting go, disconnecting into rapture. In this moment, the thousands crammed together on these concrete steps under the studied glare of Hitler or Goebbels or whoever it is that holds the most senior rank here today, jump and scream and sing at levels previously unknown to their voices and throats, and they embrace as brothers and sisters and feel, within the second's beating, free.

There can be no return to any kind of calm, but for reasons of formality the match must resume, and the Germans, although now eviscerated, get things under way again, only to quickly lose possession and fall back,

their single intent now being to brace against what can fast become a rout. But the Austrians, too, seem stunned, and they move the ball only by rote, ceding to years of honed technique, passing, slipping into space, keeping possession at times at a saunter and then in bursts suddenly shifting direction, one-touching the play back and forth across the field, toying with their foe like picadors around a weary bull, lancing and weaving away, moving as wind moves. And among them, the Paper Man conducts the onslaught, young-seeming again despite his harried look, his baldness and his spidery body, floating almost, rather than running, a dancer still but a prize-fighter too, with stone in his punches. He doesn't try for further glory, attempts no more shots, though this is now simply a matter of choice since it is clear that he can do so at will, the Germans having backed off to such an extent, surrendering the field to him until he gets to within twenty-five or twenty yards of their goal. Instead of strikes then, the crowd is presented with a show of vision and touch, passes no one else would attempt to make. And as time runs down there's no sadness, no more sorrow. Tomorrow will bring a fresh tide of that, and all who are here will weigh the joy of now against the falling away of everything that is solid, and some then will weep, when alone and with a chance to properly think and count the cost. But out here, with the game still going, there is no tomorrow, there's only the world as it is, with a bright sun warming a clear day after so many bitter ones. And

for Sindelar there is the alive feeling of running, the particular sense of capability with the ball at his feet.

Shortly before the end, a rare German advance brings about a foul, an overeager collision but with the attacker's studs left in out of frustration after a long, wearing day, and Sesta launches the resultant free kick forward from deep in his own half. Sindelar is loitering just inside the German box, with Binder a few yards beyond him. As cursory targets they move in and jump with their markers, challenging more out of duty than ambition, but the ball is high and the goalkeeper, impeded by his own climbing defenders and maybe, too, by the brightness of the day, can get no more than a touch on it. The long kick drops behind him and rolls into the net, by accident doubling the scoreline.

At the final whistle, nobody celebrates harder than Sindelar. He runs to each teammate and shakes hands, embraces Stroh, Sesta and one or two others, those players he's closest to and who he has lined up alongside for years, and applauds the crowd who rise in ferocious appreciation, making a cauldron of the stadium. Understanding that the cheers are for him, he breaks away from his teammates into the centre of the field and for twenty, thirty seconds accepts the acclaim. Then something in his demeanour turns steely, and after drawing and releasing a long, quivering breath he turns and jogs to the sideline where he'd earlier stood, arm so grudgingly raised, for

the German anthem. Hartmann watches from the terrace with growing disquiet, and the wall of cheering turns markedly heavy and starts to sag.

How the dignitaries, the top brass, react is open to speculation. They are likely appreciative of being singled out for such broad public acknowledgement and probably stand and smile, in the moment deciding to overlook the insult of the scoreline, since this makes up for it, this is what people will remember. They watch – Hitler, if he is here, watches – surely expecting a wave, a bow, possibly even a salute, some expression of respect and due subservience. This is conjecture; while in the months and years to come it will be discussed and dissected in relentless fashion, not one fan who was present this day in the Prater can report with accuracy on the reaction of the Nazi elite. Instead, every gaze is bound tightly to the star of the show, the Paper Man, every breath held in dreadful anticipation of what will happen when he reaches the sideline: will he fall in humbling genuflection from his heroic height, or throw himself down as Austria's martyr, ready to sacrifice himself to the lions and be torn to pieces? Either way, it has the feel of a Colosseum moment.

The consensus view of what happens is that he stops on the sideline, looks up without fluster or hurry, having apparently found some state of peace. He takes his fill of the watching faces and recognises some from pictures he's seen in the papers, noting even from his distance how their smirks stiffen with the hatred that defines them and

underlies everything of who they are. Then in a measured and yet seemingly entirely natural way, he extends his left arm to its fullest from his side, brings his right hand loosely to the centre of his stomach and, as his eyes fall shut and some inner music overcomes him, begins to sway in a slow and stately waltz. There is noise again, huge in greeting and growing ever more immense, but it remains for him at a remove. In his mind there is only the dance, the canting one-two-three rhythm as innate to him in darkness as a ball at his feet in daylight, and in his arms, if the world could only see, there is Rebekah, his love, gliding with him, the thought of her filling him with strength and hope. He dances at ease along the touchline, turning as the steps dictate, fifteen paces along and as many back, and he is not even halfway through when the racket that he has been holding at bay surges through and over him with the force of a dam breaking. At first he tries to stand against it by squeezing his eyes more tightly shut, but after a moment, understanding what the tumult is, what it means, the defiant howl of it for those roaring him on, he smilingly turns and weaves, letting the waves pass through him but drawing the thought of Beka all the closer.

When the dance ends he can hardly breathe. For several seconds he stands there, left arm still extended, his mind washed of thought and his chest on fire. He is afraid to open his eyes because he understands that nothing will have changed, nothing can have, the same few faces will