

# PILVAX

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**Iván Mándy** was born in 1918, in Szatmár County (Satu Mare in present-day Romania). He moved to Budapest at a young age and dropped out of high school. Like many Hungarian writers, Mándy got his start as a journalist. He published his first novel in 1943, which was followed by many other volumes, including books for young readers. Much of his writing revolves around Budapest street life, particularly in the Eighth district. He was considered to be one of Hungary's most decorated and respected writers when he died in 1995.

## **One Touch**

by Iván Mándy

(translated by Tom Bass)

They strolled out from the bar into the square. His hands jammed in his pockets, his torso filled with swagger/bravado/menace, Big Opra wore a soft, gray hat. He walked with such a bored, detached manner (such a poker face!) that no one would have suspected his little brother was lagging behind. Short and broad in the shoulders, Little Opra chewed on a cork. It didn't matter where he roamed: he could always acquire a cork from a bar, restaurant, or café.

They stopped behind the slide in the wide, open square.

"Let's sketch out the court," said Big Opra.

Little Opra tipped back into the crook of his brother's arms and Big Opra dragged him in a rough square. The divots left from Little Opra's heels formed the boundary. Then they divided it in two.

Big Opra pulled a rag ball from his pocket.

"No cheating, yeah."

"Who me?" Little Opra grinned and spit out some cork.

They took their places. Big Opra started the game, one touch. His brother immediately crossed the ball towards the right corner. But Big Opra was there. He reached the ball and returned it, quickly adjusting his hat. Little Opra scrambled to half-court, then retreated. The ball floated from foot to foot like it had hardly been stroked. Then it scampered away from the tip of Big Opra's shoe—past the sidelines.

"One-zip," said his little brother.

Big Opra didn't reply, but fetched the ball, and played on.

A shadow belonging to none other than a thin, crinkly-faced kid fell alongside the court. His head yo-yoed as he traced the flying ball.

"What a headache watching you guys," he said out of the blue.

"Then don't watch, Rat."

Who had spoken? The brothers' faces were motionless. They hadn't registered Rat's presence at all.

Rat stood alongside the court, listened for a while, then interrupted again:

“Looks pretty boring.”

With a bold, elegant move, Big Opra flicked the ball into the right corner but his brother was too late.

“One-one.”

“You guys play every day, huh?” asked Rat. No one replied but he wasn’t expecting an answer. He started again after a while. “Of course, if something cool would happen... something more like your kind of...”

The ball volleyed from corner to corner, from foot to foot, never touching the ground. It was like they had played forever behind the slide in the square. Rat squatted down and rubbed the gravelly dirt.

“Last I heard you guys really fixed old Coffee. What a nasty fellow.”

Big Opra kicked the ball at Rat’s face.

“Looking for trouble, huh?”

“Who squealed about that?”

Both brothers suddenly rushed Rat. They hoisted him up like some sort of sack.

“Everybody knows, guys. Plenty of folks were upset with Coffee.”

“We didn’t have nothing with him.”

Rat’s face shriveled when cornered by the Opra brothers. But he didn’t seem overly frightened, certainly he wasn’t as startled as when they whacked the ball at his face.

“I kind of figured it’s pretty boring playing one touch all the time.”

“What’s it to you, huh?”

“Got something better, stupid?”

“Kind of.” Rat slipped between the two Opra boys and edged towards the slide. “I could sort you guys out.”

Little Opra laughed out loud.

“You sort us out... You squealer?”

Big Opra stabbed at the ball.

“You got something in mind? Like breaking into a shop or what?”

“Thinking of Coffee, huh?”

“Whatever, Rat. Don’t matter what I think! A guy can hardly scrape together two pennies. And who has any money, anyway?”

Rat pulled himself up the slide’s iron steps. His legs dangled like a doll.

“Porky always has money. Who moves more foreign stuff than Porky?”

“The Swede, huh?”

“His wife’s the Swede, but she don’t count.” Rat jumped down to them. “You know Old Steiner totally messed up Porky’s business a half-dozen times.”

“The launderer?”

“The launderer.”

Big Opra doffed his hat and twirled it in his hands. “He moaned that his laundry wasn’t doing so hot last time.”

“Like he lives from laundry!”

“It’s brimming with coffee, tea, clothes—all foreign stuff.”

“Hey, there’s domestic stuff, too,” added Little Opra.

They giggled. Rat spoke again.

“Porky doesn’t like when you spit into his soup. And Old Steiner’s a real pest.”

Big Opra grabbed Rat as if he wanted to hang him from the slide’s iron bars.

“Porky sent you, yeah?”

“Yep, and I recommended you guys. He listens to me, you know.”

“That urgent, huh?”  
“Tomorrow, same time, same place, I will explain all.”  
“And as far the other part of this gig goes...”  
“Porky don’t care about the cash. Old Steiner’s a real pest.”  
“Ah, but it ain’t so easy...” Big Opra messed with his hat. “Plenty of people like the old man and drop by his laundry.”  
“And the neighborhood reeks of stoolies,” said his little brother.”  
“Porky knows.”  
“When we collect?”  
“Tomorrow, like I said.”  
Rat had just started off when he called back:  
“How’s your old man? Your pa?”  
“His legs are all swollen. He needs a holiday.”  
“Oh sure, some spa for a few weeks. Not a bad idea!” Rat laughed and then disappeared in the direction of Rákóczi Boulevard.  
Little Opra looked at Big Opra.  
“Hey, we really could send dad to a spa.”  
“Yeah, it’s never come together like this!” Big Opra took his place on the court.  
“How we stand?”  
“One-one.”

*The entirety of Iván Mándy’s story can be found in ISSUE 7 of PILVAX, locally available in Budapest.*