

Miha Mazzini

Childhood

(an autographic novel in fictitious stories, 42.751 words)



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Miha Mazzini
Fabianijeva 45
SI-1000 Ljubljana
e-mail: Miha.Mazzini@gmail.com
web: www.MihaMazzini.com

All persons, places and events are fictitious or are or are used fictitiously.

The author would like to thank his mother, his father and his grandmother. Without them being as they were, this book would not be as it is.

The pages with acting advice are taken from the book *Lessons in the Art of Acting* by Edmund Shaftesbury, published in 1889.

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*The hardest thing about a designer's work is
to make something that isn't complicated.
Complicated constructions are easy to design.*

Mikhail Timofeyevich Kalashnikov

Remembering means creating a story

Grandmother was seated on the back seat, mummified, smiling. I was not worried because I was driving a corpse around, just slightly annoyed. I stopped at the border post and when the police officer asked for my passport I offered him my grandmother. He shook his head and beckoned for me to move on to Customs. The customs officer didn't want her either. I drove down into the valley and tried to hand her over to the Health Centre. They would not take her. I drove to the hospital, also without success, then I woke up with the clear belief that I needed to continue what I had started in my dreams – I needed to let go of grandmother, leave her behind.

It was clear why my dream had begun at the border post. Nona, as I called my grandmother, died in May 1984. I had moved away from home years earlier, Yugoslavia and its borders still existed and this was the era before mobile phones. Supplying oneself with basic provisions in the Socialism of the time meant at least a monthly trip across the border and on that occasion I had gone by bus. A police officer came onto the bus and shouted out whether there was a Miha Mazini on board (he mispronounced the surname, of course) and when I responded he gave me the news. Just in case, he masked it with official behavior but still waited to see how I would react. An uneasiness in his eyes, he would have much preferred to be doing something else.

I thought about how it was just as well she had reached such an age, that she hadn't died earlier, I would have been devastated then. Now that I was grown up, I didn't bother me.

With peace of mind I can nod to the police officer, the expectant gazes of fellow passengers unfulfilled.

*

The young Mozart's music teacher was his father. Allegedly he once told his son to practice his scales and went off to bed. Wolfgang practiced until his father fell asleep and then stopped, of course – but he stopped a note short of a full scale. His father, still asleep, leaped up, went to the piano, pressed the last note and went back to bed.

Youth has two illusions; the first is that it is starting anew and is not a continuation of the past; the other that it can leave matters unresolved. We grow up when we realize that we are a link in the chain of ancestors and descendants, and that the more completed entireties within, the better.

Standing outside the mortuary chapel receiving people's condolences, I kept saying how it was easier now that I was an adult and I no longer had the same feelings toward my grandmother. I repeated the same thing to myself as I looked for the last time upon the waxen face, the hollow cheeks and protruding chin before the coffin lid was put in place. And again as I threw the symbolic fistful of earth that resounded upon the casket.

Not once did I think that I had received an incomplete link that was falling through the branches of my neurons, sinking into oblivion until the body would expel it as it might push out a splinter, painfully and full of pus.

*

Almost three decades had gone by, whereupon, for a whole year, persistently though not too often, I dreamt of going down into the cellar. I don't want to but I have to because my grandmother has sent me there. Potatoes were her staple and the cellar was where we kept potatoes. I started writing the story *Happy Families, Bright White Teeth* and things weren't going well for me. I had lost my voice while lecturing and

the otologist told me I had nodules on my voice chords and would need to have an operation. Once I had finished the story my voice returned and a follow-up at the doctors revealed that the nodules had disappeared.

As a child, Elias Canetti suddenly lost his ability to speak and it took years and many fruitless attempts by doctors before he talked again. During the night he had gone to get some water and caught the maid with her lover who drew a jackknife and threatened to cut off his tongue if he spoke.

A child remembers life-threatening orders with their body, not their reasoning.

*

I wrote other stories, a novel, a film script, then I slowly began forming the story *The Birth*, and I was overwhelmed with a barrage of psychosomatic afflictions, from arrhythmia to lumbar pain and numerous other symptoms that I later included in the story; I truly was a process of delivering the story, giving birth to it. It was clear to me that a part of my brain had set off on a journey. Time had passed and it was shifting back.

Nona had yet to appear in these stories.

With old-fashioned musical stars the orchestra first played a few instrumental pieces, warming up the audiences before the diva appears.

*

The dreams made me wonder how it was possible that I felt nothing upon learning of her death. Or had I merely frozen, standing up in the middle of that bus, an elongated stage?

*

There are questions which should not be pondered over, instead the answer should be experienced.

Twice I locked myself in, closed all the doors, picked up the pillow from my bed and pulled it over my head. I could not stop crying for a long time.

After the sadness came fear.

*

I started paying attention to wardrobes. Watching them I felt a pressure, a sense of helplessness and entrapment.

They found their place in my dreams, I would come across them during meditation. I followed the image: I open the door, darkness. Fear that I surmount, I enter. I am inside the wardrobe, a weight on my chest, will I suffocate? Will all the garments fall onto me and smother me? I am tiny, in among the hanging clothes. I look toward the door that has not shut properly, a surprisingly bright gap, the light from it falling across Mother's grey suit. Its sleeve next to my head, rubs me across the face. Someone is talking outside. Why am I in the cupboard? Was I put there as a punishment?

*

I woke up in the middle of the night without remembering my dreams, all I clearly heard was Nona's whispering voice telling me how "the soul in the body is like the body in the wardrobe." She suffered from goiter and had difficulties speaking, one of my roles was as her interpreter.

And fear, this fear. I was more and more afraid. The wardrobe is punishment.

I started thinking about the story *Thee Rounds of Death* and knew that rational construction would not get me very far. I needed to penetrate further into my brain, my limbic system was inundating me with emotions, chiefly fear.

But in there, right in the reptilian brain, was Nona, animalistic, magical, terrifying.

This is how I created the story in which the protagonist, the same age as I was when my grandmother died, comes to visit a demented granny who, of course, treats him as if he was still a child and punishes him by closing him in the wardrobe. The habits of his training were so deeply engrained that he is unable to tear away; in an attack of horror he ends up caged within walls that he could demolish by simply standing up.

*

I always found it fascinating at school reunions how people who have created lives of their own, always fall back into precisely the roles they had at high school. Memories can also be sticky traps.

*

The star of the evening had finally stepped onto the stage. In order to finally move onward it was time for a trip backward.

*

I had visited Topolò for the first time many years ago and when I entered the name of the village into my GPS the device came up with a surprising total of kilometers – in a straight line on the map it was only just beyond some mountains. I requested a rerouting to find the shortest route in distance. Voilà!

I have rarely seen roads so narrow. They became dirt tracks and forest paths, in one case even coming to an end in the barn of a mountain farm (I take this opportunity to thank the young couple for their warm welcome and clear advice). It took a few hours, but indeed the far fewer kilometers and the sight of Topolò with a sense of it being a nest in a hilly forest almost made up for the tortuous drive. All difficulties were finally outweighed by the fact that the locals were surprised how I was able to travel from Slovenia when, due to some goodness-knows-how high level

state visits in Trieste, the borders had been closed off. Clearly not the shortest route suggested by satnav.

Miha Obit had long ago invited me for an autumn week of solitude and the invitation seemed an appropriate opportunity for me to figure out where and how I should drop grandmother off. By now it was clear she was no longer just sitting on the back seat but migrating through my body.

*

I can understand writers who prefer to resort to drink or drugs rather than honestly drilling into themselves; drilling is painful and you never know what you might find. Crude oil is dark and smelly and needs a great deal of refining before it becomes usable. It is easiest to stop after some surface mining, especially if this has already brought financial success. Such temptation unfortunately has not befallen me.

Miha Obit had told me that the village was rather run down and abandoned, the old ladies who were its soul and driving force had mostly died. No one will pay attention to me there, I thought. In a way it suited me, I had a date with a very specific old lady who every so often reminded me of herself through waves of physical afflictions.

*

Stazione di Topolò / Postaja Topolove the web site announces and the slash between the Italian and Slovene languages is an indication of the steepness of the hill leading up to the village. Forests for as far as the eye can reach and as the sun moves across them the colors of the treetops change in long slow sweeps. Forests one could get lost in, simply disappear. I was not here to give up, not here to get lost; I had come to push my way through the thicket.

*

The grapes outside the house are ripe. I eat eagerly. I sit on the bed and stare at the clouds veiled by the net curtains. Rain starts pattering on the vine leaves. Such a simple sound yet so beautiful in its multitude, I try to breathe as quietly as possible so as not to desecrate it.

As the mist rises, it lingers longest beneath the leaves of the vine.

*

If the novel *King of the Rattling Spirits* (2001) was about my mother and me when I was twelve, what I was creating now, if indeed I will create it – an ever-present thought at any creation, will be about the first five years of my life that I had spent with my grandmother. Key years in the basic programming of our brain. I try to think about structure – nothing more than a ladder we can throw into the rough sea in the middle of a storm. If it is not there we wave about with our hands without anything to hold on to. All that is around us then are waves, striking at us with too great a force and if and when the storm settles, all that is left between our fingers is spume. Structure is the climber's hold, something solid that we can progress along, step by step.

I do not want to and cannot write a novel. At the age of twelve the brain is mature enough for longer stories, especially with a child such as I was – escaping into an imaginary world, who had a year or two earlier already read everything there was to read in the children's section at the library and moved on to adult reading. Earlier years, however, are mere flashes, images, scenes.

So, it is short stories.

What if I create a list of these flashes and do not connect them into a novel but create around each one a new story, disregarding the illusion of whether or how something had/hadn't really happened? A memory flash as a starting point.

And if I go up this ladder, contriving tales around every rung, is not the result a novel of sorts?

*

“Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy regains girl” is the most widespread formula of American screenwriting.

I spent my first five years with Nona, then her sons took her in and returned her about a year later.

Child has grandmother, child loses grandmother, child gets grandmother back.

But the child is not the same child he was after a year without her. In her absence he experiences playing outside the apartment block all day, running around with other kids, he acquires a taste of freedom. Once you savor it, it is hard to just obediently lower your head.

*

I stand up, stretch and go and make myself a sandwich. As I start covering the open roll with a blanket of mortadella, I hear a whine. A high-pitched thin sound that could also be the rusted hinges moving in the wind. I open the door.



If the bread is good I don't miss the mortadella.

Not during the next few days either, at the same hour, the same movement.

*

Donatella invites me to dinner, attended also by her daughter and a young man who tells us about how he spent two months walking from one mountain farm to another, living off the kindness of strangers. He says what a great feeling asking for something is; I understand his point even though he talks of what I find most difficult.

Without experiencing such kindness from kith and kin, it is hard to trust strangers.

*

The sense of sitting at the edge of the world. Silent and solitary and, with the occasional creak of the chair, I listen for spirits responding in the distance.

The logs in the stove crackle; the structure is written down, fear slowly recedes. Occasionally it cannot bear it and leaps at me once more, this time with thoughts about carbon monoxide.

Fear is the first association I have with my grandmother. The second is the warmth of her embrace. The problem was not that I earned it only rarely but more in that I had no clearly set rules for how to earn it.

I am becoming angry.

*

I am afraid of my own rage. But emotions are like a deck of cards that has been assigned to us and the secret of successful existence is in drawing the right card at the right time; anything else is merely cause for our own and other people's misery.

One of the scenes I have, to my surprise, never forgotten, and was thus included on the list around which I will create my story, is a kick with which I hit Nona in the shin. She cried out and I ran away.

I spent the first five years of my life with her in a plethora of spirits, souls, curses, prohibitions and the torment of saints, the only book she was always reading. The rule of *memento mori*, living *ad sanctos*. Then she was taken away by her sons, oh the *tears*, but all of a sudden I became an (almost) normal child, which in those times meant daylong rushing around outside the apartment blocks, racing our bicycles, and an explosion of smells and colors. Then Nona was brought back and she wanted to restore our previous state. But the spell had been broken and, despite my terrifying fear of God's wrath, of the fire and brimstone of hell with which she threatened me, I gained my path to freedom with a kick.

For a long time afterward I would check my own leg, waiting for signs of it withering.

*

In one night I write *The Bar-Tailed Godwit's Navigational System*, the story in which the boy stands up to his grandmother for the first time. Despite the story not containing anything that happened in reality, it is entirely autobiographical. What it contains is the genuine rage that outpours into revolt. The role of literature is not gossip but insight. In order to capture the truth, we need to make everything up.

*

In 1961 Federico Fellini said that we would initially be satisfied with photographs from the moon (something that happened eight years later) but after a while we would want to send a poet there who would give us a new vision of that new reality.

*

Only once do I visit the cemetery with three crosses above the entrance and a joint grave of Italian and Slovene partisans in the corner. Every morning and every evening, however, I walk as far as the wayside shrine in which Joseph has a disproportionately high forehead and Jesus has an adult face on a child's body. The figures look as if they have been carved out of aerated concrete or even polystyrene.

It shows that Joseph is a carpenter, he looks strong. He effortlessly holds Jesus in the palm of his hand without ever tiring. I stare at his fingers, he has only four. Had he severed his little finger whilst working or was the sculptor simply not a perfectionist?

It makes me think about the photograph I found as a child from which my mother had cut out everything else apart from a man's hand on my shoulder.

*

The Sadness of Frozen Mountains is the story of a child who finds a photograph of his father's hand. On his way home from school he one day comes across a man

with an amputated hand whose stump finishes in precisely the same place where mother's scissors cut off father's hand in the photograph.

*

If I walk to the top of the hill I can receive the phone signal from Slovenia. I check my e-mails, make few calls. Once the church bells start a full concert but by the time I walk back down to the church it is already locked.

I sit on a bench and stare at the clover covering the slope below.

I grew up amidst dried up plants. They looked like Nona, brittle and grayish white. Even the bright red rosehips darkened and became covered in white hairs.

When we learnt about Ottoman raids at school I remembered Nona and me; we were the Ottomans. All of a sudden she would stand up and start collecting plastic bags she would always keep, flattened with her hands and carefully folded. She would fill a basket with them and off we went.

Past the apartment blocks, along the railroad, past some wooden shacks that were called the Base, on toward the fields, opening up the valley through which the river meandered. We never went as far as the river because it kidnaps children and returns them bloated, full of eels wiggling out of their eye sockets and carp grinning from their throats.

We grabbed anything that Nona perceived as medicinal herbs. She spread them out on all our cupboards so the tiny apartment smelt of hay, on the balcony she arranged halved hips of roses, as she called them and would indeed make tea from these; I do not recall her ever using any of the other medicinal herbs in any way. In the autumn our balcony was full of slices of apples set out to dry. The apples slowly darkened, bees buzzing around them and flies slamming against them.

She collected the dried slices in plastic bags, locking them in the cupboard. They were a reward, not a snack.

*

We had to cross a bridge and once my foot had become stuck in the track points.

The moment I discovered that Nona loved God more than she loved me, *Something Everyone Talks About Yet Nobody Has Ever Seen*.

I realize that I am staring at the clover around my feet, looking for one with four leaves. I never found one. Not in Topolò either.



*

I make my list of *thorns* as I now call those flashes of memory. I still don't know how I will use them but I have created the ladder I will climb up.

The good news is that I already have a title for the entire collection: *Childhood*.

Simple and predictable, but every one of us has to get through it.

God willing, I should be able to write it within the year.

*

(Nona never used the future tense but always the present + “God willing,” believing that the future is in no way dependent on us)

*

Writing is no therapy, it has never cured anyone. It can merely be a sign of shifts being foretold, minute tremors in the magma, trying to find a way out. Creating offers us a retreat and the zeal of concentration that directs the lava into the channel we have prepared for it. We thus connect our emotional thorn with creation like Pavlov’s conditioned reflex and we are unable to differentiate between the two. Christian countries associate creativity with suffering; just consider the suffering of Jesus, the son of the greatest Creator! So we fear forfeiting our problem, falsely believing that without it we will no longer have the capacity to create.

So I stand on the top of the hill and because the signal is weak I need to step on the tips of my toes to contact my therapists and arrange a meeting.

*

Rilke never dared, “If my devils are to leave me, I am afraid my angels will take flight as well.”

James Agee did not manage it, believing that with therapy “his soul would no longer be his.”

Kipling was afraid of introspection; therewithin, he believed, await breakdown and madness.

Beckett hesitated until rashes, boils, panic attacks and irregular heartbeats forced him to enter therapy.

After therapy, Graham Greene declared that it had helped him to better creativity.

*

The list is completed, two more stories written and a few others planned, it is time to return home.

Four kilometers of a very steep hill lead down into the valley. I start the car and need to drive only a few meters before the road dips. I switch to neutral. I no longer need the engine; forces that have been and that will be propel me along and accelerate. All I need is to take care not to go too fast, I brake before corners and above precipices that could swallow me. I do not slow down for the fallen branches left in the wake of the storm, they crackle under the wheels and their crushed freshly exposed cores flash in my rear-view mirror. I am on my way. Grandmother is not on the back seat, she has moved into my head. I know that we will talk a lot before I prepare the book, a bed for memories, every page a sheet that both reveals and conceals, somewhere I can move her to.

Certain beings undergo a complete transformation within their existence; for example, they live as larvae, pupae and butterflies. People often look at their youth as if it had happened to someone else, as if it was the first stage of a metamorphosis, followed by adulthood and old age.

Writers are the only ones in a position to add an extra developmental phase to other people's lives.

When I first encountered my grandmother she was fanatically religious; some time previously she had shed her skin of a frivolous young girl. I had already left home when what encyclopedias predict happened, under the entry for 'pupa' that it

describes as a “motionless phase,” during which they “are inactive, and usually sessile,” the process in which a large role is played by controlled cell death.

Nona persisted in this phase for almost three decades before she was prepared for the next transformation for which she needs my help.

She could have carried out all that living in the tiny apartment on her own.

Set in motion, I cannot stop half way down the hill. I have work to do. I must forego what experts describe as: “comprehensive changes in the structure of the body; some organ systems (e.g. the nervous system) can entirely decompose and reestablish themselves.” I will transform my grandmother from a corpse and the emotions of my own experiences into a story.

This is the ultimate that people can become after death.

Happy Families, Bright White Teeth

LXVI

LESSONS IN ACTING.



28th ATTITUDE: HORROR.

This attitude is made by standing with the head thrown back, the face looking right oblique, both hands up and vertical in the right side, the left hand protecting the face, the weight on the left foot and the shoulders raised.

HORROR.

“Hence, horrible shadow : unreal mockery, hence.”
Macbeth, Act III, Scene IV.

I.

The sudden attack of nausea crept up to my throat, emptying the contents of my stomach. I pressed my forehead against the lamppost, feeling the blisters of rust furrowing through the surface of the paint. Passersby muttered scornful remarks about early morning drunks. I waited for them to leave and for whatever I had to pass, hoping it was not a heart attack. Cars stopped at the red light and someone beeped. A blend of orange juice and acid burnt its way into my nostrils.

I lowered my head and hurried home, blobs of breakfast sliding down my trousers.

*

I intended to call in sick, but after I drank a glass of water I felt excellent. I showered, changed, took a deep breath and once more set off for work.

The road felt like a minefield. The morning rush was over, workers in surrounding office blocks and skyscrapers were having their coffee, the few latecomers, focused on getting to their destinations, rushed past me without a glance.

Reaching the lamppost I had previously adorned with my vomit, I concentrated on my soles. Slowly I lifted my foot and moved it. The road had a slight upward slope, but I had the feeling I was walking downhill. Maybe it was motion sickness? Should I try focusing on the blue gap of sky in the autumnal spread, catching the horizon?

A man grinning to my right.

The whiteness of his teeth.

I felt a kick in my stomach as if some fetus was moving inside.

I became aware of my shallow breathing and closed my eyes until I could force myself to draw air deeper. 'It can't be him!' I kept telling myself, without knowing whom I was referring to.

The first indication that Socialism in Slovenia had come to an end were the expensive cars parked on the pavements, the police not daring to stick parking tickets on them. The second were the huge ad boards with colorful advertisements of Western corporations, erected across facades, in place of renovation. Now was clearly a time for a little spiritual sustenance; the man with brilliant white teeth was offering a book purporting to reveal how to effortlessly get rich in no time.

Once, in a bookshop in Seattle, I had stood by the section with self-help manuals, pulling the books off the shelf, trying to find the guru with the largest and brightest teeth. An impossible task. I had to give up, astonished; the very thing that in nature defines a beast, seems to be, on the other side of the Atlantic, an indication of spiritual wealth?

I expected gurus would spread to our part of the world. The newly independent state doled out apartments and bonds, signs of the unimagined wealth to come. Instead, properties needed maintenance and the decimal point on the value of the bonds kept sliding to the left. Companies failed, jobs were lost, pyramid schemes collapsed and faith was all that was left.

"Allow your inner wealth to reflect in your wallet!" the slogan promised. The fair-haired man in a dark suit was holding out his wallet towards me, his left arm out of the shot, probably checking his pockets for that inner wealth.

They lived on the top floor of the apartment block I grew up in and he was just a year older than me. Take out the evenly retouched tan and the porcelain teeth, and he looked just like his father. Even his suit had the same blue hue as the mechanic's

gown his father always wore, regardless of whether it was a work day or not. We considered him a child-hater. He called us all vandals and we would run out of reach before he had a chance to lash out at us. I don't know what we were supposed to be vandalizing; there wasn't much to destroy under Socialism. When the apartments were completed the builders left behind huge heaps of earth, confident that time would turn them into grassy slopes.

We avoided him because of his father. That blond, almost albino hair with a hint of baldness, already apparent in childhood. He begged us to play with him and kept bringing us gifts we would take and run away.

*

The guru had become ubiquitous. I could hardly open a magazine or switch on the TV without his hand reaching out. He announced his overseas expansion and I could not but ask myself why the Americans, with all their own bright dentures, would possibly need a Slovene version imitating their own?

My stomach turned every single time, but at least it held its contents. I worked a lot, got divorced, my two daughters grew up, and the ads for inner wealth became smaller and smaller until they disappeared. I no longer thought about the guru.

Then I started having this dream about walking up towards the crossroads, feeling as if I'm descending into an abyss. Not a night went by without me waking up in sweat or leaping up screaming. The feelings of loneliness, pointlessness and fear would not allow me to sleep.

*

At psychotherapy it all came gushing out like pus from a festering abscess. On my second visit I realized that I am in fact not walking down the road, but into a cellar. I must be six or seven and was sent to the cellar to fetch some potatoes. I am

holding a metal bucket, originally a bulk container for jam; its thin wire handle will cut into the palm of my hand once I fill it and drag it back up to the apartment. But for now I am standing on the first step, looking down. Darkness. I stretch up on the tips of my toes and turn the light on. A single bare light bulb glows in the long space below me. I am supposed to go down the middle corridor through a milky blue door.

It took many visits to the therapists before I managed to get down the stairs. Sometimes it took the whole session to move a single step, other times I didn't even manage that, very rarely two or three. I often felt so weak I didn't know whether I would vomit or just die.

In the cellar, spaced wooden bars divide identical compartments, the basement storage facilities for each apartment. The doors are made of coarse timber, full of splinters that resemble cactus spines and also hurt as much. Ours is the last booth on the right with a small window with a frosted wired glass pane above it. It is full of cobwebs and smells of rot and dust.

My fingers tremble as I unlock the padlock. I shovel the potatoes into the bucket, constantly listening out in case there is anyone behind me, often turning round with a shudder.

Eventually, a year into therapy, someone is standing there. The neighbor from the top floor with his translucent crown of hair and crooked yellow teeth. I can't take my eyes off them.

“Don't worry,” he says. “I like children.”

“Out there I just pretend,” he adds.

And then, a little later, when I tried to escape and he had to push me against the wooden bars with all his strength and grabbed my neck so I almost fainted,

“Close your eyes, it won't hurt a bit.”

*

Barracudas, piranhas, all those voracious, predatory fish: yellow teeth.

Years later a hippy friend who left for India left me his record collection. I went through it, looking at each one separately and even clutched some against my chest in delight. When I came to *Trout Mask Replica*, I picked it up with the tips of my fingers and took it to the garbage bin, without really knowing why.

*

If getting to cellar was hard and took the whole year of therapy, getting back out was even harder and took twice as long. Filled with feelings of guilt, filth and repulsion thick as treacle, my every move required an effort of which frequently felt myself incapable. Before each séance I came down with all kinds of psychosomatic illnesses and symptoms, but sitting down on the chair I transferred myself to where I had left the previous time - a socialist apartment block, on my way home.

I was never late and never missed a single session.

II.

A decade later people found that not even faith was sufficient. Slovenia was left with fanatical proponents of bickering, everyone else either emigrated or withdrew into themselves.

My eldest daughter had moved to Germany and when I visited her, she mentioned how she had passed the test of true Germanness and become a fan of potatoes.

“I wasn't sure whether it was hereditary,” she said, “You are so strongly allergic to potatoes and I do have half your genes. Had I inherited that from you?”

She smiled as she pricked her fork into the next bite,

“You know, I got all the antihistamine ready and even asked my boyfriend to sit close to me with the first aid set.”

I wanted to cry. She looked at me in confusion. I stood up and opened my arms, she put her cutlery down, we hugged and then sat back in our places.

“Now you can ask for German citizenship,” I smiled.

“But the hug wasn't about this, was it?” she said.

“No.”

*

Potatoes disappearing into my parent's mouths. There are less with every bite and the cellar is a step nearer.

Potatoes.

*

At the airport McDonalds advertised its fries across an entire wall.

“Hmm,” I said to myself, looking at it for a long time before going in and ordering some.

III.

Some interconnected events are difficult to explain without dragging in supernatural forces. I don't know why I stepped into the second-hand book shop despite being in a hurry, or why I went to browse along the wall with the self-help books and how, after flicking through only a few books, the one I managed to pull out was the guru's.

“Can I wrap that for you?” the shop assistant asked.

“Most certainly.”

*

My top floor neighbor had managed to write a load of boring shit for the most naive, so it was not surprising it had become a best seller. The photo from the advertisement was used on the cover as well. Only this time it seemed as if his left hand was vanishing into my crotch.

I put the book down on the table and stared at it.

His father is probably dead now, but is there some of him in this guy?

Did the kids avoid him because they all had similar experiences with his old man?

Had the father at least left his own son alone?

*

I put the book into the recycling bin, but thoughts about the guru lingered inside me.

How does he deal with the legacy of his father?

Does he even remember?

*

Small countries have one great advantage that is at the same time also their greatest weakness: even if you don't know someone, someone you know will know them for sure.

I sent the guru an e-mail asking to meet him. He answered three days later, yes, he does remember me and is looking forward to my visit.

IV.

The person that opened the door was half the guru from the photo. The teeth were even more prominent and his shrunken body functioned as their mobile support frame.

Of course he noticed my surprise and hesitation.

“I had cancer,” he said even before greeting me. He gestured me to come in and waited for me to take my shoes off and put on a pair of clinically clean slippers. The apartment was dominated by the whiteness of the walls and glossy chrome fittings that the gaps in the Venetian blinds refused to endow with sufficient light.

We didn't shake hands. He held a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice and offered me some too. I sat on the leather sofa and waited for the humming of the juicer in the kitchen to die down.

The glass was cool and slightly wet to hold.

He sat opposite me.

“Look at the line,” he said and since I did not immediately comprehend what he was talking about, he pointed to the glass, “Half a pint, thirteen times a day.”

He took a sip.

“There is never one single cause of illness. Reincarnation teaches us that the soul decides upon its trials even before incarnating. This was mine. I overcame it and found a cure for cancer. This will be the theme of my next book. Half a pint, thirteen times a day. Vegetables, carrots mostly.”

I wanted to point out that it might be difficult to expand such a recipe into a whole book, but he wouldn't allow me a word in edgeways. His shallow breathing filled any gaps of silence in which I could have interrupted him.

“I don't want to limit myself to detoxifying the body. We humans are much more than just a physical level of existence, so we also have to detoxify the mind and emotions. But the body is the basis. You always read a great deal, you must surely know that inside us we have ...”

He put the palm of his hand on his belly.

“... our intestine that can be up to ten meters in length! Just imagine this labyrinth, this darkness, this underworld that we carry around with us! We don't even know what is in this darkness inside us!”

His eyes gleamed, wide with excitement.

“All this must come out! Into the light! Out into the open!”

A wheezing sound arose in his lungs.

“Water!” he smiled with contempt, grinding his teeth, “Some people think water! Coffee is the answer! That gets everywhere, through membranes into all your internal organs and cleans them out! That is the solution: from the top the body needs a continuous intake of fresh juices, from below we should wash it all out with coffee. Coffee enemas saved my life. My wife resisted at first but when she saw how it helped me ...”

As he leaned forward the doorbell rang. It confused him and he started blinking, as if trying to figure out where he was.

“My son! Back from school!”

He stood up and went to open the door.

A boy of about ten stopped suddenly when he saw me.

“Daddy's childhood friend, once we were both little boys just like you are now,” he introduced me.

I stared at the boy who looked exactly like his father. It felt as if I had been transported in time to outside that apartment block and need to tell him I don't want to play with him.

The boy dropped his bag on a purpose-made shelf and pulled at his father's shirt.

“Daddy, I have a headache. Can I have an enema?”

“Of course, son!” the guru stroked his hair. “You go along to the bathroom and get ready.”

The boy ran and the guru turned to me with a broad smile on his face.

“Only families that live healthily can be happy.”

It was apparent he was waiting for me to leave. I stood up and slowly made for the door. I had come without a plan or any prepared questions but, despite this, I had a strong feeling that I needed to ask him something, even though I didn't know exactly what.

He followed me out into the corridor, talking continuously,

“You know how it is. I am sure you have noticed. Parents don't just give us their genes, they give us a whole part of themselves. We can be their clones, follow them like sheep, no wonder that a sheep was the first animal to be cloned. The stronger ones among us sweep the table clear of all that the previous generation had prepared for them and start afresh. The greatest happiness is the knowledge that you outshone your parents because you managed to cut the chain of misery that your cloned ancestors had been passing down through generations.”

I put my shoes back on and tied the laces. He pointed to a place in the corner where I should leave the slippers, probably for disinfection. The gesture interrupted his concentration and I was able to speak, surprising myself,

“Your father had very yellow teeth.”

“Yes, yes! That's what I'm talking about, I'm so glad you understand me,” his eyes flashed and his teeth glowed in the half-light of the corridor. “It's true! Slovenia is such a backward country; tooth whitening only goes up to scale A 1. In America they even have A 00! And veneers that can be applied to your teeth! I always looked up to them! Even as a child!”

At the door he smiled at me apologetically,

“Glad to have had the chat, but I have some work to do now. I don't like to leave my son waiting.”

The door was already closed as I nodded.

The Birth

XCIV

LESSONS IN ACTING.



56th ATTITUDE: GUILT.

This attitude is made by standing with the weight on the right foot retired, the hands both behind, and the head inclined downward.

GUILT.

“From this time forth I never will speak word.”
Othello, Act V, Scene II.

The doctor gave me a helpless look and started placing the test results on the desk like cards in a game of solitaire. He didn't know why my blood pressure had been high for a few weeks before returning to normal and couldn't explain the month-long arrhythmia and the pains under my left shoulder blade that followed it. Or any of the other symptoms.

He rested his palms over the pages as if he did not trust the weight of evidence to hold them down. His face could not mask the hope that I might yet just get up and leave without any further symptoms.

"For your age," he said when the silence became awkward, "you are doing pretty well. All we have found is a slightly enlarged prostate, all the rest seems to be fine."

He turned toward the framed diploma next to the window, leaving me gawking at his bony profile.

I dared not console him: the symptoms have subsided since I conceived.

*

Initially I felt like a hearth with the fire not quite extinguished. The burning sensation at the bottom of my abdomen made moving about more and more difficult. I woke up in the middle of the night feeling like someone had placed a scorching brick on top of me. When, trying to grab it, my hands groped at thin air, I realized the weight was actually inside me.

I went to the bathroom, turned on the light and looked at myself for a long time. The antacid tablets were not much help.

The pressure worsened and it became the first thing I thought of when I woke up. I tried to visualize it, and it was not fire but darkness. A bundle of something that was biting into my flesh, stinging me, growing. Of course I remembered the film *Alien*,

but that alone was not much help. My back started aching and I realized I bent over slightly when I walked. At night in my half sleep I continued to try to seize the weight, making ever-larger strokes with my hands.

I slept more and more, attempting to utilize the moments before and after sleep to try to unravel the feeling. Every time I pulled at a new thread, ranging from guilt to anger.

Walking up to the glass door at the bank a fortnight later I noticed that I was waddling slightly. That was when the thought first crossed my mind. It seemed so unobjectionably real that I accepted it with relief: pregnancy.

I imagined the doctor writing me a referral to the psychiatrist.

‘Perhaps I really do need one?’ I wondered, ‘considering how calmly I have taken it?’

The question that followed was, ‘What was I carrying?’

A few days later, as I was waking up, I whispered the name Marco.

The time had come for me to return to my hometown.

*

How can a place bet on the same number for a hundred years and then be stunned to a standstill when it finally loses the game? The valley was once filled with a vast steel manufacturing plant and when production moved to a different part of the world, all that was left here was a single tall chimney to which various brand logos of foreign corporations were mounted. There is little else left to attract a glance from the highway that now bypasses it and the exit sign lists the name of the town last with lettering of equal size to the names of surrounding villages; no one wishes to boast of failed gamblers.

I deliberately parked on the main road so I could go for a walk. Carefully I made my way between the apartment blocks on the housing development where I grew up, expecting to come across swarms of shrieking children rushing around, but found only silence and solitude. My generation would trample the grass in the green patches between the buildings into the mud before it ever had a chance to grow; now, with children's legs wilting beneath computers, it even has to be mowed.

Crossing the courtyard, a couple of pensioners sitting outside in the May sunshine looked familiar. I did not want to stop, so in my imagination I did not try smooth out their wrinkles and return the sparkle to their eyes.

I found the passage through the garages and the narrow path that lead past the vegetable plots clinging to the slope, down to the railroad track. Only one of the lines had a polished shiny surface, all the others were covered in a dusting of rust.

I inhaled deeply what I have always called the railroad smell and which still makes my heart pound. The sun had heated the crossties making the tar that long deceased workers once coated them with and the excrement of generations of passengers ooze from their cracks. The wires above me hummed. My gaze followed them along to the ceramic insulators and down the pole, where I spotted a train of railroad cars on the outer, most overgrown line.

I knew I had to do something, but knew not what.

*

I tapped the palm of my hand along the side of the car. Shade and sun, hot and cold, I started to worry.

I remembered the news item about a member of a commercial delegation who said "Just a moment!" to his colleagues, walked up to the railings, rolled over and plummeted to his death. Was my out-of-control-moment coming up?

I looked at myself from the shoes upwards, including the smudge of red dust on my right hand.

I felt quite normal. Even the weight in my abdomen seemed to have waned in expectation.

The arched roof of the car awaited me. I looked for an access ladder on both sides, but there was none.

I climbed the steps that led up to the sealed door, pushed the tip of my shoe into the gap, grabbed the thin metal rail above the window and tried to reach the protruding edges between the metal boards with my leg.

I missed a few times and once even fell down and hurt myself. The abandoned industrial buildings behind me yawned impassively and the railroad car hid me from view of any prying eyes on the housing development.

A part of me wanted to get back to my car and drive as far away as possible, but I ignored it.

The leg managed to stay on the edge and the hand grabbed for support on the roof. I felt a stinging pain and noticed traces of blood when I pushed myself off and rolled onto the roof.

I pressed my belly against the metal and dared not move. The weight burnt through to my stomach, a consoling heat warmed my right cheek and my heart pounded away.

The abandoned remains of the industrial park were covered in nonsensical graffiti. I closed my eyes and breathed in the smell of the railroad. It was inviting me to stay. So unlike airports which have been made sterile in their quest for efficiency, with people having no desire to hand around a place with no smell. But even those who never travel go and sit at railroad stations.

‘And how are you going to get down?’ a shy voice asked me in the same way it used to ask when, as a child, I would climb somewhere too high or too dangerous.

A humming sound above me.

I bent my neck carefully, just enough to see the wires. One above the other, connected with transverse drop wires, they appeared blackened with grease.

‘Am I too close?’

I pressed lower onto the metal roof that creaked slightly, or at least it seemed to. A droplet of sweat rolled into my eye and I needed to close my eyelids to wash it out.

I was not sure what I was doing here. The internal mechanism that the symptoms had been winding up all year was running out of steam and left me motionless.

*

Mother thought Marco was badly brought up. “All he does is clamber and climb!” she said. “He’s not much good at anything else!”

It took much persuading before I was able to invite him home. We were in the same first grade class and I convinced Mother that we had homework we were to do together.

I was concentrating on copying out a single letter when I realized he was no longer at my side.

He had disappeared!

Then came a loud chuckle from above.

“Come!” he shouted. “Come!”

Marco had climbed onto the wardrobe, was holding onto the edge and started tilting his head as if he was about to somersault off it.

“NO! NO!” I tried to shout his laughter when Mother opened the door.

*

Everything ached from pressing against the roof. I needed to turn round. I started moving slowly, millimeter by millimeter and could not take my eyes off the wires.

Why had I not checked sooner how close I could come before the electricity jumped?

When I had my shoulder at the highest point I closed my eyes and could feel the dust that had blasted from underneath me when I rolled over onto my back settle on my face.

I was covered in sweat.

*

“See that?” Marco pointed at the largest building, "There's a huge turntable inside where they turn around locomotives!"

I stared at the large wooden doors and tried to imagine...

At that terrible moment my thoughts were still occupied with the turntable, but I suddenly sensed I was alone.

I turned around in panic. Marco was nowhere in sight.

“Come!” he shouted.

Where from?

“Up, look up! Come here!”

He was standing on top of the railroad car waving his hands as if inviting me to join him.

“NO!” I shook my head, “NO! Please, come down, come down!”

He laughed and jumped around, his teeth glistening provocatively.

“COME! COME UP! DON'T BE SUCH A CHICKEN!”

I continued to shout for him to come down, but was already walking up to the railroad car. I stood there, took hold of the metal bar.

I looked upwards into the blueness beyond the dark edge. In it appeared Marco's exultant face.

“COME!”

“NO!”

I ran backwards and almost tripped as my sandals skidded on the gravel.

“CHICKEN!” Marco shouted and raised his arms.

“NO!”

I covered my face with my hands and pressed my head against my chest. There was a flash, we both screamed, and then there was only me left screaming.

That smell.

*

I stared at the wires and cried. Tears rolled down my face and mixed with sweat.

I howled.

I was not allowed to attend the funeral; they said it would all have been too distressing.

I saw the white coffin as they carried it out of the apartment block, covered in flowers. I imagined the charred flesh inside, that...

Flocks of children ran around the housing development, but I sat at home reading. For a long time after I felt that all the looks I was getting were saying the same thing; you should have stopped him!

I should have.

Whenever I went from the apartment to the shop or to school I lowered my head, hurrying along as if expecting a sniper to strike at any moment.

I should have stopped him!

The wire traversing the blueness.

“How?” I kept asking myself, the weight in my abdomen started to bloat and crush me. I closed my eyes in pain.

The shivers began under the left shoulder blade, the wave expanded and soon turned my back into a pulsating web of muscles, ligaments and tendons. Quivering, dancing about, shaking, the weight inside my belly started to crumble and collapse in on me, falling onto my bones, sliding itself from them, traveling through me, and, kneaded by the convulsions, pouring out onto the metal beneath me. Consciousness persisted like a tiny pearl, shining faintly and I clung to it in desperation as the only point of support in the passage through the body I no longer felt was my own.

*

Waking up, I stared at the wires above me. My back hurt from the uncomfortable surface and I moved carefully. I realized that I could no longer feel the weight inside me.

Slowly, I pushed myself up into a sitting position with a groan, and then I remembered where I was.

I glued myself onto the roof and could not take my gaze away from the wires.

Blueness, divided in half.

The sun was setting and I felt cold from my own tears.

I remembered the tears I had shed at high school for a girl who had committed suicide without anyone ever finding out the reason.

In the clarity that follows the combination of deep memories and dreams with waking up in dangerous places, I realized that premature death visits each generation twice. It first comes for the defiant ones, those born with a feeling of indestructibility which makes them clash with the laws of nature to which they succumb. The second time it returns for the inconsolable ones, those whom, usually by mid-puberty, the

sadness of the world devours and destroys. We cannot save them from themselves, however hard we extend our arms or however vigilantly we look out. We survive them because we are all too prudent and insensitive, good enough only to talk about their transience, even briefer than our own.

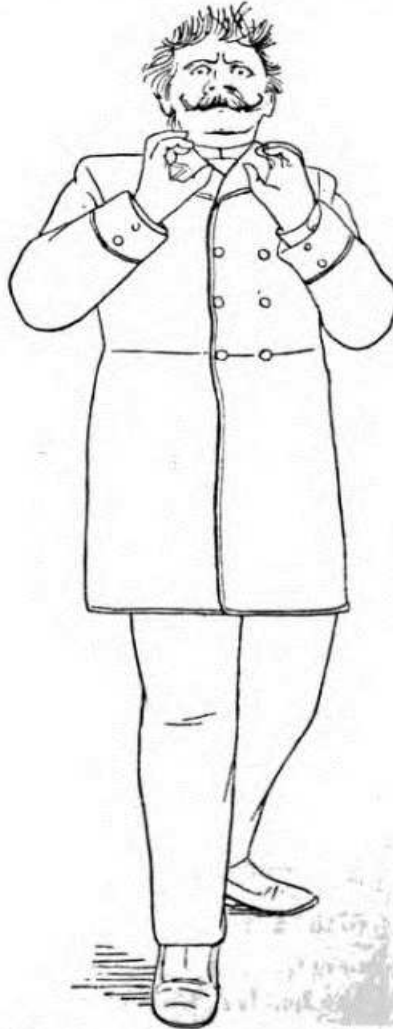
*

A train went past. There was a child standing at the window waving, though he did not see me.

Three Rounds of Death

XCVI

LESSONS IN ACTING.



58th ATTITUDE: HATRED IN HORROR.

This attitude is made by standing with the weight on the left foot retired, the shoulders raised; chin forward; crooked fingers raised to the mouth.

HATRED IN HORROR.

“An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth!”
Leah the Forsaken, Act IV, Scene I.

When he was asked to go and visit his grandmother he thought, ‘Why should I bother with her?’ before resigning to the task. Over the phone Mother talked about how everyone else was away, how it was Grandma's name day which she herself considered more important than her birthday, and mainly expressed her concerns about what they would say at the retirement home if nobody was to turn up, and so on.

The August heat made even the cats hide away in the shade. A few of the residents sat on a bench in front of the building, their mouths half open and their lizard-like skin starting to turn red.

He had to wait in the lobby before the woman at reception returned with a glass of lemonade and told him where he could find his grandmother.

She sat there in exactly the manner he had expected. At the foot of the bed, next to the window, turned towards the door, the palms of her hands open as if holding a book. Conspicuously the second bed in the room was not made up and since the papers were full of stuff about long waiting lists, the thought crossed his mind that perhaps her roommate must have died recently.

“Hello!” he greeted her and was not entirely sure she could hear him. She was always slightly deaf but Mother only specifically mentioned her bad eyesight, her eyes now entirely covered in cataracts, and her senility; “Go for us, not for her,” she added.

Grandmother didn't move. She held her head bowed and moved her lips as if she was still reading. He remembered her as being old, but not as feeble. In the decade since he had seen her she had shrunk leaving creases of skin that folded over each other.

He had spent the first five years of his life with her before his mother took charge once again. He began calculating; she was old even then.

He was unsure of where stand or what to say.

“Nice weather. Hot. Nona, how are you?”

The plastic curtain, smothered with a printed orange pattern, was drawn across the open tilted window with the distant hum of traffic carried through it. It sounded as if the cars were only with difficulty managing to plow on across the melted asphalt.

He licked a drop of sweat that had accumulated on his upper lip and mopped his brow with the back of his hand. The woman in front of him seemed not to be sweating, even though she was buried in layers of clothing.

She turned away.

With fascination he observed her shaky fingers as she raised her hand and moved her thumb in a semicircle towards the left where it paused for a while before returning to hold the non-existent book in her lap.

He knew every last detail of this movement, one he had not thought about for at least eighteen years since he had moved away. How astonishing an act is forgetting, this powerful eraser, even more so the rekindling of memories that all of a sudden created something that instantly took him to his childhood.

“Mother ... uncles and aunts, your sons and daughters ... all send their greetings!”

He checked the time. If he only stayed for fifteen minutes would the woman at reception consider it too short a visit? Twenty would probably be enough?

The room stank of a stuffy mix of cleaning agents and excrement, with a whiff of bodies from which life is departing, the smell that ripens into that of the flowers and wreaths they will soon be laid amidst.

Through the curtain he could make out the mountains, the forests below them and a flat slice of blueness.

A new question from his childhood: did he actually do anything else but gaze through the balcony door? He was filled with an inexplicable yearning and weighed down by a sadness that made him sway and he grabbed the curtain with the tips of his fingers, not for support, merely to have some kind of physical contact with the world.

‘Leave, as soon as possible!’ a voice inside him urged and he wanted to obey. He turned round and saw his grandmother extending her left hand. She had turned slightly, though she was still gazing across the bed somewhere beyond him.

“Into the corner!” she said and her finger started shaking even more.

He smiled at the senile woman who believed she had a child before her but was at the same time shocked by a sudden powerful fear that shuddered down his spine and neck like an ice-cube.

“I am too old to run after you,” she added. “Get into the corner!”

It would take two steps to reach beyond the foot of the bed, but he would need to press up against the wardrobe to get past the bony index finger and the grey nail that looked like something dug up from the ground.

“Get into the corner!” she repeated, surprising him with the strength of her voice. Or was he just hearing her orders the way he had perceived them in his childhood?

“I never wanted you, they just dropped you upon me!” she added in a voice that was tearful all of a sudden. A groan later it was filled with a new determination,

“Get in the corner!”

He moved backward into the gap between the bed and the wall. There were boxes of medication and an enamel feeder cup with a spout that looked like a duck beak.

The hand remained extended.

‘I’ll wait a while,’ he said to himself and realized he was bending slightly. He got the feeling that his body was making itself sit on the bed, but he would not dare do this, Nona hated anyone disturbing her while she was reading her Holy Book, as she called the *Lives of the Saints*. This time memories were not rekindled by words or emotions, but by the gesture. He squatted and sat down on the linoleum floor.

He smiled.

He was twenty-three, was about to graduate, was making his own living, lived with his girlfriend with whom they were discussing marriage, and here he was, visiting a woman who was more or less a stranger to him, and she instantly sends him into the corner.

He could not hold back. He pressed his fist against his lips to muffle his laughter.

He was only stopped by the worry, ‘What if someone was to come?’ He imagined a nurse staring at a grown man playing like a child with his grandmother and burst into a new wave of muffled laughter.

He looked up and all he could see between the curtain and the glass from this angle was the wedge of blue. How long had he stared at the sky as a child and wished he could be out there, flying high. But last year when he was given the opportunity to fly he chickened out, returning the tickets he had booked with his girlfriend and traveling by rail instead.

The clock asserted that the visit had already lasted for twenty minutes. Slowly he stood up and tried, quietly as possible, to get past the bed, maneuver his way round the footboard, past his grandmother towards the ...

“Get in the corner!”

What a voice she had!

“Come on,” he said, “I’m just going ... out!”

“No! I am too old, I can't keep an eye on you out there. The world is full of evil and I sure can't keep running after you. Get in the corner!”

“No. Nona, no! I am no longer a child! I am not ...”

“Look at your hand!” she said. He obeyed her.

“What is under the skin?” she asked.

He knew the answer, instantly.

“Worms,” she hissed. “Out there you will be killed and out come the worms and eat away at you. That is Death. You are old enough to understand what it is. I don't want you to die. Get in the corner. You'll be safe there.”

He must have moved while she was talking, for he was once more standing by the window wondering who it was that was commanding his legs. A few more steps and he was sitting in the corner, staring at his forearms.

How often had he sat like this as a child, looking at himself and actually seeing worms creeping under his skin? Though he now knew that he had taken his veins and the movement of muscles and tendons to be the nasty creatures just waiting to devour him from the inside, he was no less scared. He felt his bladder was about to burst. He could barely hold while the voice of reason kept repeating as if in a stammer, ‘Leave! Leave!’

He simultaneously existed both in the present and back at that studio apartment twenty years ago. Time and locations kept switching and became interlocked like Nona's fingers when she prayed.

‘I must leave!’ He took hold of the bed to help himself get up, inadvertently shaking it. The tremor traveled up the frame and jerked the feeble body sitting at the other end.

The finger left the book.

“Once they consume you, all that is left is your soul. You know yourself how many souls wander about in this world; they come to visit us every day. I cannot help them. That is Death. Do you want it?”

His hand slipped off the metal and he grabbed his knees. Sweat ran down his face and dark patches began to appear at the armpits of his T-shirt. He knew that all he needed to do was stand up and leave, seven or eight steps at the most, but could not do it. All of a sudden he was no longer inhabiting his twenty-three year old body.

He tried to move as little as possible, he even breathed as if he was drinking through a straw.

The hands on the clock on the wall opposite did not move.

He began to hope that a nurse would come in and break the spell. But lunchtime must be over and it would be hours before the evening meal would be served.

‘You are an adult, she is senile, she has mixed it all up, get up and leave!’ he kept telling himself until he felt that he had regained control.

Still avoiding touching the bed he tried to push himself up from the floor. Feeling that his knees were grinding, he clenched his teeth.

Bent over, almost on all fours, he crept along the side of the bed until he found himself gazing straight into his grandmother's eyes. White flakes floated across her pupils.

“You are old enough,” she said, “to understand what Death is. Once you have been eaten by worms you end up in Hell for not obeying your poor old grandmother. Look...” she turned the invisible book towards him. “This is the Fire of Hell. Do you remember? Do you remember?”

Terrified, he stared at her and a droplet of sweat slid from his sideburns and fell to the floor.

“Do you remember?” she insisted.

“What?”

“How badly the Fire of Hell hurts?”

He shook his head.

“Look at your right arm. Bottom side. Can you see?”

He obeyed her, bending his arm at the elbow as far as he could. He had to hold it with his left hand to stop it shaking. The faint sun with a red center glowed on his skin.

“Remember how it hurts! Now get back in the corner!”

He pressed his back against the nightstand with the handles poking out painfully. He could not take his eyes off the blemish on his skin. Mother had told him he had scorched himself with boiling milk when he was very young. That was all he knew about it and at the time took it to be unimportant, so never asked. He knew that pain cannot be remembered clearly because of the fear that masks it, but fragments of everything that had accompanied it were now dripping into his consciousness, causing waves to spread throughout his brain, pressing painfully against his temples.

He ran his palms across his chest; his shirt was a soaking rag. The visible piece of the sky had transformed into a wistful yearning, as unattainable as it had always been. He could not move his gaze away from the ribbon of a trail being pulled across the blue by an airplane.

He remembered the contrails he had observed in his childhood. First he would spot a tiny metallic cross, smaller than a dragonfly, somewhere in the distance, unreachable, leaving barely visible streaks in the sky that transformed into a white tail. It would take ages before the white cloud would dissolve and disappear. Then he would wait for a new one. Grow, sleep, wait, that is all there was.

‘I have fallen into her time! I must get out! Out!’

Those entire five years appeared in his memory as a single wish for movement, for the world, for existing somewhere else.

His throat responded like scorched sand and he had difficulty swallowing.

He stood up rapidly.

“Ooooooh!” his grandmother groaned as she stared to get herself up. He feared she would fall as she started swaying before straightening her knees. She supported herself on the bed frame and hammered on the wardrobe with her right index finger.

She blocked his way. For a moment it dawned on him that he should just push past her, he was a hundred times stronger, but all the prohibitions and punishments embedded within stirred and restrained him.

“You are old enough,” she said, “to comprehend what Death is. First you are eaten by worms, then you burn in Hell, lastly you await the Resurrection that never comes for the naughty. You know where you should go, don't you?”

“No! NO!”

He jumped at the sound of his own squeaky voice without knowing what he was afraid of.

She impatiently banged against the wardrobe with her knuckles.

“Get inside,” she ordered, “I'll show you what Death is like in the end.”

She slid her fingers over the veneer until she found the small key that she tugged at. A few of her shawls and skirts hung inside with a bundle of them just thrown on the floor. ‘Sheets for the dowry,’ he remembered her explanation, though it still didn't make any sense to him.

With difficulty he squeezed into the wardrobe. ‘This is ridiculous! This is crazy! Bizarre!’ his reason cried out to him, severed from any actual movements of the

muscles. He had to sit down, bend his knees, turn around and stretch his legs upward. The wardrobe creaked and gaps started appearing in the joints, the whole thing was barely holding together.

Grandmother closed the door and turned the key.

He expected total darkness like in the wardrobe back then, but this one was of a far lesser quality and virtually falling apart. He was shocked that he continued to sit in the most uncomfortable of positions, waiting. A single kick or push would be enough for the wooden panels to fall apart and he could leave, free. He could feel the weakness of the cage that restrained him and the firmness of the order that had made him get inside. A part of him was laughing at himself but he could not react. All he did was stare at the swaying shawls hanging right in front of his face.

They smelt of her.

How he had liked to press against them whenever she was in a good mood.

She was only ever in a good mood when he sat in the corner for most of the day. Even when they went out for a walk together he was made to walk right at her side, follow her at her decrepit pace.

“Now can you see that you can't see anything?” she said and scratched on the door with her nails. “This is Death. Darkness. You lie and wait. Wait for all eternity, because you will never rise, resurrection is for the obedient. You cannot move, nor talk. You are alone. Death means eternal loneliness and immobility. Solitude and loneliness. Death.”

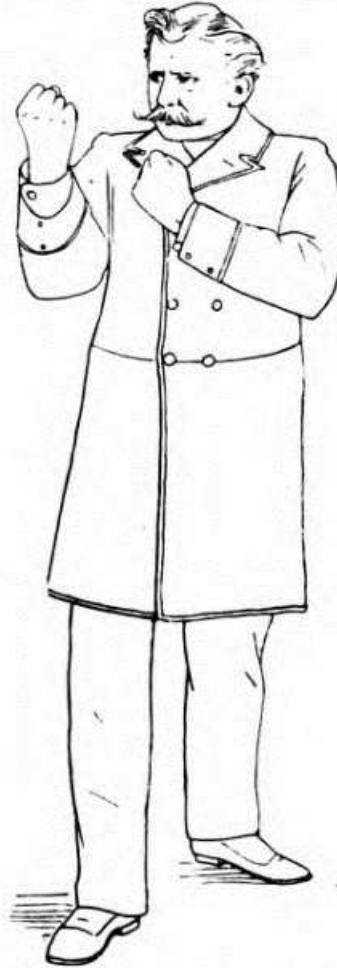
He closed his eyes and had the feeling he was falling. His own scream hit him like a geyser and he had to howl, holler and shout in order to maintain his precarious balance at the edge of the abyss. He pulled out a tuft of hair and could smell the blood, he bit his hands and shook his head. Only such faint evidence of existence

separated him from annihilation in terror. The calm and collected voice of reason also fell silent, shocked by the realization that who he was and how he was at that moment, all stemmed from the wardrobe of his childhood: his hatred of crowds –a crowd of people is a wall, it is like being cramped in a new wardrobe. At the same time his avaricious need for establishing new contacts and getting to know new people, his need to entertain, to participate in every party, his diligence and acceptance of new tasks, his need for the proximity of others, in order to brush against them, even if with only the tips of his fingers, to hear them, feel them close by, including his future wife whose body he needs whenever he wakes up in the night, unsure of whether he is alive or dead.

The Bar-Tailed Godwit's Navigational System

LESSONS IN ACTING.

CXV



77th ATTITUDE: DEFENCE.

This attitude is made by standing with the weight on the left foot retired, the fists raised as to fight.

DEFENCE.

“Brutus, bay not me.”

Julius Cæsar, Act IV, Scene III.

¹THE Bar-tailed Godwit makes one of the most amazing migrations known to man. The bird's 7,000-mile (11,000 km) journey can take more than eight days.

“Are you thinking about death?”

“Yes Nona, yes I am!”

“No, I saw you, watching the birds. You were smiling! No one thinking about death smiles! That’s right, you just look down. That’s where Hell is, the Hell that awaits you.”

***Consider:** Researchers speculate that some types of birds use the earth’s magnetic field for navigation, as if they had a compass built into their brain. It is possible that the Godwit additionally navigates by means of the sun by day and the stars by night. It seems that the Godwit can also sense upcoming storm systems that could allow it to benefit from tailwinds. Still, the details of just how these birds make their incredible journey baffle experts. “I’ve been studying them 20 years,” says biologist Bob Gill, “and it’s still jaw-dropping to me.”*

“You are at it again, watching the birds! Once again, not thinking about death!”

“Nona ... but the birds ...”

“Silence!”

As a baby, Nona had been dropped by the nanny, hitting the sink with the front of her neck. She was left with a guttural whisper of a voice that began gurgling like water just before boiling point whenever she was upset. The child lowered his head and gritted his teeth. He stared at the flaking parquet floor and tried in vain to console

¹ The text in italics is taken from <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/g201301/bar-tailed-godwit/>

himself by scrutinizing the carelessly laid joints. He did not want Nona to see him crying. He closed his eyes to shut off the tears. The sun illuminated the redness on the inside of his eyelids and phantom outlines of birds he had seen moments earlier flew across it. He remembered them from the spring when they flew in the opposite direction and to the five-year-old it seemed as if an eternity had passed since then. Surely the Death that his grandmother kept assuring him was imminent would come before the next budding and blooming.

The bed creaked. Nona turned around and once more directed her attention to reading *The Lives of the Saints*.

The birds vanished and all that was left was the redness.

Opening his eyes he turned toward the balcony window. The continuous flock spread right to the roof of the apartment block opposite. He became aware of a sensation that had, up to that point, always remained merely a mild aftertaste without ever really reaching his consciousness: his heart was tearing itself out of his thorax in an attempt to move upward. He thought he could actually see the growing bulge under his shirt. The heart left behind a feeling of emptiness that filled with pain, unable to exist in two places at once. With Nona, whom Mother had told him to keep an eye on as she was so ancient, and with the world outside, stretching beyond the edge of the apartment blocks, the laundry hung out on the balconies and the clouds that were already peeking from behind the rooftops.

Using his index finger he gathered up his tears and wiped them on his shorts. The sun had warmed up the tiny apartment and the badly rinsed out chamber pot staked out its claim.

He pressed his palms against the glass, momentarily comforted by the coolness.

He should be up there where Nona said the angels lived; he should have followed the speckled birds.

He did not hear the creaking of the bed.

“Once again you are not thinking about death!”

He quickly lowered his head and closed his eyes. This time the birds did not follow beneath his eyelids.

“Death will catch you unprepared if you don’t think about it!” Nona continued and from the gurgle of her words he knew how angry she was with him, “It could come at any moment! Any moment at all! Look!”

He obeyed her.

Nona used an old letter to mark the page in her book, closed it and placed it on the chair in front of her.

"You are..." she said, "...and then you are no more!"

She closed her eyes and slowly leaned toward the bed. Her bulky body halted at the boundaries of balance for a moment before slumping onto the blanket. The wooden frame creaked and it took a while for the sound to disperse. As always the boy froze in terror, only managing to overcome it by focusing on the outline of Nona’s body; she was breathing.

He sneaked a glimpse at the birds. The flock was dwindling and after a long gap a single latecomer flew across the horizon. He was amazed at the proud way it carried its bill and the graceful shape of its head, quite contrary to the vigorous flapping of its wings that did little to make up any of the distance it had fallen behind.

With a deep sigh of effort coming from every joint Nona slowly sat up again.

“Did you see?”

“Yes Nona.”

He stared at the floor and could hear his grandmother shifting her body in the same way she always had done, every day for all these years; then the image of the proud bird and at the same time its panicked struggle vividly appeared before his eyes.

“NONA!” he said, realizing that he was shouting but no longer able to stop himself. He had never seen her turn so fast. Her eyes bulged at him.

“NONA! WHY IS YOUR DEATH ALWAYS SOFT? WHY DOES IT ALWAYS STRIKE YOU WHEN YOU ARE SITTING DOWN SO YOU FALL ONTO SOMETHING SOFT?”

“What’s up with you?” she whispered in shock.

He clenched his fists and took another quick look over his shoulder – the flock had moved half way across the sky, the bird was still trying to catch up. For the first time in his life the sense of urgency transformed into an awareness of the finality of the time he had available.

He could not stop shouting,

“LOOK! LOOK AT MY DEATH! WHY IS YOURS NEVER LIKE THIS?”

He turned toward the door and started walking alongside the bed, marching like a soldier he had seen in a picture book. He felt his heels hammer against the wooden floor. Hitting harder with every step gave him courage. Something inside him chose the moment even before he was himself ready. Despite wanting to watch, he closed his eyes as he fell. He saw a spark and was consumed by the redness. A part of him was imitating death the way it should be, hard and painful. A salty taste filled his mouth as a prickly and at the same time painful feeling spread across the middle of his face. He used his palms to push himself back up on his feet. At first he could not see

anything through his tears. Then he saw a shadow and wiped his eyes. A startled Nona was standing up, calling out his name.

The trace left on the floor looked like a splattered tomato but was thicker and darker. Red trails ran under his shirt, he could feel them trickling down his skin. He dared not look out of the window; he needed all his strength to face the old woman before him. At that point the mixed feeling of love and fear he felt toward her disappeared; what was left was a concentration of steel, and a look full of daggers ready for battle.

“WHY IS YOUR DEATH NOT LIKE THAT, AH?”

“I am old, I can’t...” she started crumpling the edge of the shawl she covered herself in regardless of the season.

“DO OLD PEOPLE DIE DIFFERENTLY? IS DEATH NOT FOR EVERYONE? DOES GOD MAKE DISTINCTIONS?”

“NO!” Nona almost shouted as if she had miraculously recovered from the damage to her throat. She raised her index finger furiously, “Do not take the Lord’s Name in vain! Sinner! Death is the same for everyone because God is righteous!”

“AND WHY AREN’T ANY OF THEM OUT THERE EVER DYING? THEY WALK, THEY PLAY AND THEY RUN AROUND WHILE I SIT HERE IN THIS CORNER AND HAVE TO THINK ABOUT DEATH! IS THERE NO DEATH FOR THE KIDS PLAYING OUTSIDE?”

“There is, there is! They are all sinners, destined for Hell, but if you listen to me you shall go to Heaven! You are different to all of them! Different! The Angels will take you with them if you stay obedient”

“WHY DO YOU NEVER DIE WALKING? DOES GOD MAKE DISTINCTIONS?”

“NO!”

“HE DOES, I CAN SEE HE DOES! YOU LIED TO ME! YOU LIED!”

“NO!”

“DOES GOD EVEN...”

He stopped in shock.

Nona opened her mouth in horror.

Jesus on the wall reproachfully pointed towards his bleeding heart.

They stared at each other as if trapped in amber until the boy shouted,

“WHY IS YOUR DEATH DIFFERENT THEN?”

“It isn’t! IT ISN’T!”

“PROVE IT!”

Her hand fell back into her shawl. It shook as if it was searching for the thread to unravel the knitting.

“I am old.”

He felt sorry for her and tears started to clog his throat. He wanted to run up to her and hug her, begging her for forgiveness and accept his penance, but the image of the bird and its solitary motion drove him on.

“Prove it Nona, prove that death is the same for everyone.”

It was only this calmly said sentence that made her move. She slowly slid her right foot across the floor, used her left hand to grab onto the edge of the bed, opened the palm of her hand and then came to a standstill, checking her balance. He could not move his eyes off her. A part of him screamed that he loved her, begged her to stop, telling her it was not necessary, that he believed her. For a moment he thought he saw the shadow of the bird fly across the sunny patch on the wall.

Nona had almost reached the kitchen door and with a well-versed move reached for the door handle, touched it, and let go. She closed her eyes and with great effort, as if being held by invisible elastic, started falling onto her knees. Bones hit the wooden floor and her body accelerated. She tumbled forward and disappeared behind the bed with the thud of a dry branch falling to the ground.

The boy turned round and pressed his bloody face onto the glass. Only the last bird was left in the sky, its beak extended and proudly alone. The thought occurred to him that perhaps it deliberately didn't want to catch up with those in front and that the powerful flapping of its wings was an attempt to keep its distance and not to close the gap. He stared at the sky, frowning and totally confused.

“Good luck,” he whispered and fell to his knees. The bird was gone. All that remained was its bloody shadow on the glass.

What Do You Think? *Did the navigational system of the Bar-tailed Godwit come about by evolution? Or was it designed?*

Blue is the Color of Freedom



75th ATTITUDE: CHALLENGE.

This attitude is made by advancing the body, chest extended, the hands down, fists clenched; the right fist slightly in front, and left slightly behind.

CHALLENGE.

“I tell ye all, I am your better, traitors as ye are!”

Third Part of King Henry VI, Act V, Scene VI.

8

Nona held the cracked egg above the boiling water and slowly began to break it open. Old age gave her fingers a constant shake that eased the egg white out of its shell. “Touch it,” she said to the boy, who had to pull a chair closer and stand on it. Stretching his arm over the bubbling water that was trying to reach him, he pushed the tip of his index finger into the crack.

“What’s it like?” Nona asked.

“Wet.”

She nodded. “What else?”

“Sticky.”

“Yes. And soft, isn't it?”

The boy nodded.

“Move your hand away.”

Pushing her thumbs into the crack, she pulled the shell apart. The contents dropped into the boiling water. She laid the shell aside and picked up a ladle. The boiling water had turned the egg white. Nona scooped it up, draining it against the inner edge of the pot before turning around and slowly tipping the ladle above the table so that the egg rolled out onto the tablecloth.

“Touch it!”

His finger poked at the little heap and rolled it over.

“What about now? What is it like now?”

“It’s not as wet. It is solid. No longer sticky.”

“It has coagulated. That is what this is called. Have you ever heard this word? It means to harden.”

“At Mass, the Priest says that God can soften hardened hearts.”

“Good boy. That’s right.”

Nona sat down with a sigh. The boy took this as permission to jump off the chair and stare at the white lump across the edge of the table.

“It is,” she pointed to the egg, “like the human heart. It is created wet, so it can cry, soft, so everything can touch it, and sticky, so it can connect with others. But if you are not careful, it hardens, just like this...”

With a circular movement she swept the egg towards the edge. She held the ladle out for the boy.

“Hit it with the handle!”

He was uncertain what to do.

“Slash it!” she indicated impatiently with her right hand.

He took pleasure in striking it from above. The solidified white fell apart and the yoke squirted across the plastic tablecloth.

“See,” Nona said, “on the inside it is still just as it was created. But it can coagulate right through, harden all the way to the core. God can only soften such a heart again in Hell. But for ones like this ...” she waved her hand dismissively in front of her, “the Lord created repentance in this life and Purgatory in the next.”

She fell silent, her chin caught in her shawl. The boy thought she had fallen asleep and wondered whether she would allow him to eat the egg.

A summer shower tapped against the balcony windows and someone ran across the yard, cursing. The water in the pot was still bubbling away and the stove continued to send waves of heat into the tiny kitchen. Nona spoke without raising her head,

“Do you now understand?”

“What?”

She peered at him, without even blinking her age-discolored eyes.

“You asked why my daughter, your mother, sometimes does the things she does.”

He frowned without understanding.

“Because her heart is hardened,” Nona turned towards the table. The boy understood that he would probably not be allowed to eat the egg.

*

The boy did not want to wake up. Whenever he opened his eyes during the night he saw what he was not supposed to see, so he kept his eyelids firmly closed but didn't dare put his hands over his ears because then Mother would know he was awake.

“I have no life,” Mother hissed almost out of breath as if she had been running for a long time, “because of you! As the youngest, I am expected to look after you! So I was told by my brothers and sisters! It's easy for them, but I ... I have no life!”

He heard her pacing alongside the bed. There was a crash as she hit the edge and cried out. She almost yelled, but contained herself because of the neighbors.

The boy opened his eyelids slightly. Mother was holding Nona by the shawl, shaking her.

“I have no life! I have no life! I am trapped! Stuck here, looking after you instead of traveling and getting to see the world! It's driving me crazy! All the things I could be, the things I could do, but here I am, enslaved by you!”

Nona groaned and made a gargling sound as if she was about to vomit. Mother let go and the aged body subsided into the supporting cushion. Catching her breath, she sobbed.

Mother towered over her before suddenly turning round and running into the bathroom. She switched on the light and the beam coming through the gap of the half

closed door illuminated Nona's profile, nostrils flaring as she tried to catch her breath through her toothless mouth.

The plumbing made a whining sound before a strong enough jet of water came through the pipes. The boy knew that his mother was cooling off under the tap. This would destroy her hairdo, adding to her anger.

The sound of running water stopped.

Mother appeared in the door as a silhouette against the light. The boy forgot to pretend he was asleep. In the moment before his mother moved he prayed she would not leap at him but at Nona. At the same time he was ripped apart by a sense of guilt over hoping he would be saved to the detriment of his own grandmother.

The bed creaked and Nona's body straightened up faster than ever before.

"I'm leaving," she said, throwing the shawl across her shoulders.

"Where are you going?" Mother gaped at her.

Nona walked quite differently from her usual manner; no swaying on weak legs and dislocated hips, as she herself would say, but a determined, solid step that the boy did not recognize and even thought that somebody else must have covered themselves in all of Nona's shawls, pretending to be her.

"What is it with you? Have you gone mad?" Mother tried to stop Nona. They grabbed hold of each other and pushed each other around. The room filled with the scent of their sweat.

"I'm leaving! I've had enough! I'm leaving!" Nona kept repeating and Mother's rage had dispersed. The physical effort made her groan uncertainly and all she could do was ask in bewilderment what had happened.

Nona managed to reach the kitchen but Mother blocked the exit with her body and pulled herself together enough to push the old woman into the bathroom and lock the door.

Nona kept banging on the wooden surface, shouting,

“I am leaving!”

Bang.

“I am leaving!”

Continuously.

*

Mother came to collect him from kindergarten. As they approached their apartment block she slowed down and came to a halt outside the entrance, looking up at their balcony for a long time. There did not appear to be any movement behind the windows.

“She’s gone mad. It’s all that piety, that’ll be the reason!” Mother said and was not sure what she should do.

Once inside the building she fished the key out of her handbag and gave it to the boy.

“Go upstairs and stay with her. I am off to clean at somebody’s house, I’ll be back in the evening. Don’t let her out! She is not to get out! She would cause nothing but disgrace!”

*

Nona was sitting in her usual place on the edge of her bed, though she was not, as she normally would be, holding her *Lives of the Saints* but a linen suitcase that up until then the boy had only ever seen sitting on top of the wardrobe where he had perceived it as a constituent part.

“Let me out,” she said, “I’m leaving.”

“Nona, I can’t!”

The boy could not count on strength, so he avoided her by swiftness and skill. He ran lightly across the bed and jumped across to the chair whenever he needed to. Out of breath, Nona sat back down and held onto the handle of the suitcase.

“I’m leaving!”

“Nona, please, what has come over you? Mother told me to look after you. I can’t look after you outside, only in here, Nona, please!”

“I’m leaving, I’m going to Lourdes! And Compostela! I don’t want to look after you any more. There are so many holy places I’ll never see because I’m forced to look after the bastard’s bastard. God’s punishment! Praise be to Jesus! But now the time has come for me to leave. Saint Stanislaus Kostka will look after you while I’m on the road.”

She stood up, her movements still surprisingly youthful. She carried her case to the door and waited.

“Open it, you brat! I demand you open it now!”

“Nona, I’m not allowed to! Mother said…”

“What is your mother compared to God? And God is on my side! You have no choice, do what the Lord wants you to do!”

“Nona, I can’t!!!!!”

“I see, I see, your heart is hardening. Say it, say it out loud! Hardening! Can you hear it, thump, thump, thump, shrinking with every beat!”

Without intending to, the boy repeated after her and felt a crushing numbness to the left of his chest.

“You’re committing a sin,” she said and slowly returned to her usual spot.

“You’re a sinner and God will crush you like a nit. I’ve read the entire Bible to you,

you've been well versed and know exactly how just and angry the Lord is. How many cities he destroyed, how he brought the Deluge upon Mankind, do you not sense how he is coming for you?"

In fear, the boy glanced through the window towards the sky above the neighboring apartment block.

"It'll come as a sensation, a prickling feeling. Your hand will go numb, your body will wither. Worms will appear and start eating you alive. You'll spend every single moment waiting for His arrival and your own death. You will not, at any hour or any day, be allowed to fall asleep like most people can. You will stay awake because you are a sinner, sinning against your own grandmother!

The Lord shall show no pity, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!"

*

Uncle Vinko came. He told Nona he was not allowed to drive his mother in the passenger seat because the truck was a company vehicle. Uncle Jule came. He said that the back of his moped was not the place for elderly mothers. Uncle Bruno just shook his head and made a gesture rotating his finger on his temple as he was leaving.

*

Even when she went to the bathroom, Nona took her suitcase with her.

*

Once, after dinner, Mother stared at her hands for a long time, then at Nona, then her hands once more, over and over again. With a clarity that seemed so normal that the boy didn't have a chance to be surprised, he understood that she was asking herself what all the slapping and shaking ever managed to get out of Nona and how, if it were possible, could it all be pushed back.

*

Nona followed him around, telling him how he would fry in Hell, how worms would devour him, detailing all the signs of woes and illnesses the boy would instantly succumb to. He stooped more and more when he walked, staggered around, had difficulty breathing, developed tics on his face, ones that came in waves like the tide and overran his features.

He could not drop guard for a single moment. At times Nona would creep up on him with surprising stealth, trying to grab hold of him. He could not play or daydream, he had to stay on the lookout all the time and this focus became painful. He realized that it was the most difficult thing he had ever had to do.

*

“You look terrible,” Nona said, “and do you know why? Because, inside, your heart is still soft. You’re not one of those whose heart can harden right through. People will exploit you all your life. Have you ever considered that you could become a saint? What if we started together, with a small pilgrimage or something? What if we went to Compostela? You promised your help when I needed it!”

Her soft and gentle voice, that the boy had already become unused to, made him lean forward and slow down. She grabbed him and he had to wriggle for a long time before the key was safe.

*

Instead of learning how to read and write at kindergarten he just dozed off all the time, having spent all his attention at home. He overheard the teachers discuss whether he should be enrolled into a special education school.

*

He could no longer bear it. He wanted to get out, get away. Mother worked longer and longer hours and only came home to sleep. Nona carried her suitcase around the

tiny apartment and sometimes stood at the doorway as if waiting next to a timetable at a bus stop.

He stooped because he had God on his shoulders and the strain was crushing him. Anticipation was worse than punishment; he began to hate the invisible burden upon him, the expectations of the body's minor betrayals, the constant dread as to whether this was the first sign, whether it had begun, whether the punishment had arrived?

He wanted punishment now.

The faces of his uncles: Vinko, Bruno, Jule – the first always merry, the second serious, the third grumpy, but none of them in expectation of the terrible punishment? Nona still kept cursing them and promising they would end up in Hell, apart from Vinko, her favorite, whom she threatened with Purgatory instead – but they all just laughed, dismissively waved their hand and left.

Why doesn't the curse affect them? How can it just glide over them? Are their hearts hardened? Is the hard layer necessary so we do not cry continuously, are not affected by everything and can also live alone?

All of a sudden the boy discovered that his heart was still not hardened enough.

*

"Uncle Vinko?" the boy caught him in the corridor outside the apartment and locked the front door before turning to the waiting man.

"Are you not at all afraid of God?"

"Nona is scaring you, is she?" Vinko nodded and smoothed his moustache as if drawing back curtains.

"Yes."

The boy was on the verge of crying.

“You know,” Uncle Vinko said, “my God enjoys life, why otherwise would he create it, if he hated it?”

The boy’s mouth dropped open.

“Think about it,” Uncle Vinko winked at him before hopping away down the stairs as if he was step dancing.

“Uncle, please, don’t leave me like this!” he cried out from his heart, so that the still smiling Vinko became serious and waited at the bottom of the stairs for the boy to come running into his embrace, to the comforting smell of cigarettes, sharp fragrance and gasoline.

“Listen boy,” Vinko said. “Nona has read the entire Bible to you, hasn’t she, many times over? Do you not think that through the course of the book God appears very different, that he has many faces? Nona has chosen hers, you will have to chose your own. Do you understand?”

“No,” the boy shook his head, wiping away the tears.

“You are young. That is how it should be,” Vinko smiled with satisfaction.

He pushed open the front door and the boy stretched out his arms after him. Perhaps there was something about those extended hands that made Vinko stop and become serious. He crouched so he looked the boy straight into the eyes and whisperingly began to console him.

*

Not only had he not learnt a single letter at kindergarten, he was no longer capable of recognizing images he was shown. He felt his head buzzing and thumping. Was it really possible that this terrifying God who blamed Nona for all her sins was like that only towards her? What had she done that was so terrible? Was it something she had done in her youth? What did Uncle Vinko mean when he said God has many

faces? Was there still hope for him if he chose a face other than the one adopted by Nona? How and when would he find out?

*

He did not want to go back home. He wanted to get away, even if it was to Purgatory.

*

Teachers had forbidden climbing the tree, but he needed the solitude. How he missed his corner between the balcony door and the bed that he could now no longer retreat to and play in! The other children and the teachers were sitting in a circle, playing a game of Drop the Handkerchief. Nobody was looking when he ran to the bushes and started climbing the tree.

*

He squeezed into the fork of the tree and switched off. Images and thoughts floated all around him, competing with each other, weightlessly and without effect. The terrible God and the curse, the yellow toy truck, Uncle Vinko, waving from the driver's seat, Nona with her suitcase, scenes of collapse and horror, engravings from the Bible.

Then, all of a sudden, a focus; a nest in the branches above him. His eyes widening, he pricked up his ears. The other children were still playing, the tree was keeping his hands cool, he could feel the dampness of the bark through his trousers and smell the flowering lilac bush on the other side of the fence.

Slowly he began creeping along the branch. It became ever more wobbly, shaking, and the palms of his hand kept finding less and less space to hold onto as his heart drummed against the bark like a woodpecker.

Reaching as far as he could go, he still could not peek into the nest. He stretched out his arm and shook it. Pulled at it.

It fell and he saw it was full of eggs.

*

A single egg remained intact and it was this one that rolled out of the nest. He picked it up and put it back with the others. He could not take his eyes off the tiny contorted birds with sticky feathers and pink beaks, whose bodies throbbed as if the heart was all that was left inside them.

He picked up a stone and raised it.

He hit away, crushing eggshells and bodies, pounding and mashing all to death.

When he dropped the stone he felt a sense of relief. God would do the same to him. He wiped the slime and blood from his hands on some fallen leaves.

He closed his eyes and stood up, head drooping. He was plucking up the courage to face the wrathful but just God.

Turning around he raised his face without opening his eyes. He wanted to hold onto the sensation of calm that filled him.

Breathing in deeply through his nostrils, he expected the sulfur that spurts from the open Gates of Hell, imagining it as the odor that lingered across his town whenever the blast furnace at the local steelworks was tapped.

Upon opening his eyes, all he could see was clear blue sky.

He stared at it for a long time, then he joined the other children. Nona's God couldn't care less about him, so he would no longer need to kill.

*Men, in general, make God like themselves; the
virtuous make Him good,
and the profligate make Him wicked;*

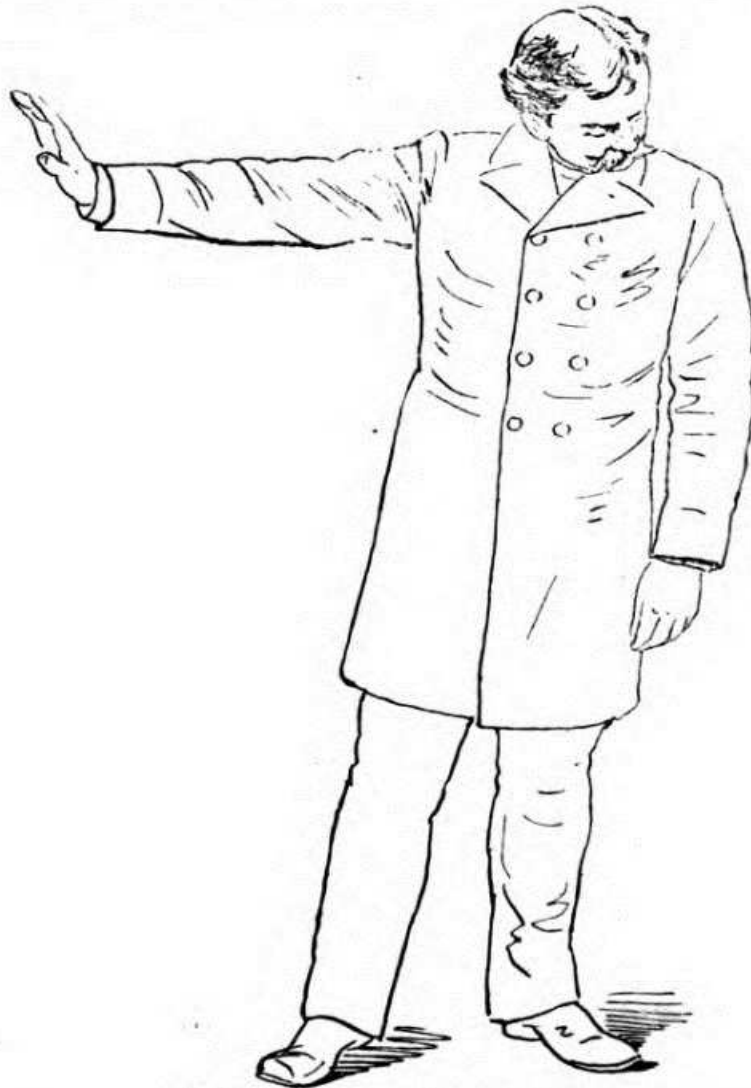
*ill-tempered and bilious devotees see nothing but hell,
because they would willingly damn all mankind;
while loving and gentle souls
disbelieve it altogether.*

Jean Jacques Rousseau: Confessions

Something Everyone Talks About
Yet Nobody Has Ever Seen

XCVIII

LESSONS IN ACTING.



60th ATTITUDE: REJECTION.

This attitude is made by standing with the weight on the left foot laterally, the head turned to the left, the left arm hanging at the side; the right hand horizontal lateral vertical.

REJECTION.

“O! get thee from my sight!”
Cymbeline. Act V. Scene V.

The boy and Nona both turned at once towards the purple ruffled cloud that was approaching them, and increased their pace. With the old woman this did not result in her walking any faster, it merely increased her moaning and sighing, the boy still had to restrain himself from running ahead. The bare soles of his feet squelched inside his rubber boots and the elastic that lined the lower edge of his shorts chafed his legs. He suspected he had inherited the trousers from mother and as they left town with his grandmother he lowered his head with embarrassment. Here there was nobody, just the path alongside the railroad tracks and clumps of grass that every so often brushed against his bare calves.

The town in the distance looked like a red molehill with smoking pipes sticking out of it. The metal railroad track glistened in the wavering humidity broiled up by the sun, creating what was to the boy the most wonderful smell in the world. Age-old tar oozing out of the cracks in the wooden ties, underlined with the musky scent of rot and corrosion; a sense of freedom. He could not often indulge in it, his grandmother didn't like venturing out of the apartment. She would only set off when she was out of medicinal herbs and here they were, dragging along their canvas bags with rose hip branches sticking out of them.

The cloud made itself heard for the first time, it was as if it was clearing its throat before a long speech.

“Nona,” the boy said. “Nona, can I go ...”

“No!”

“... to the other side to look for clover?”

“No!”

“But, Nona ...”

“No! We have to get back home. If the rain gets us we will catch pneumonia and die.”

The boy jumped and thought he could see a field of clover beyond the tracks.

“But...” he tried once more before he was interrupted by Nona growling from deep inside her lungs. She shook her head abruptly so that her goiter had difficulties keeping up, displaying a much-delayed quiver. Sweat rolled from under her headscarf and for a brief moment the boy thought she was crying.

The child was forever reminding her how they had received as many as six cards at New Year and all of them had a four-leaved clover on them. He had already seen a real snowman and a chimney sweep, the other motifs on cards people would send for New Year, but could not stop thinking about the plant with four leaves that brought luck. He used to copy out the letters from Nona's *Lives of the Saints* and always added a drawing of a cloverleaf. Every time they left the apartment he would take up the chance to look for one. He would walk alongside his grandmother and suddenly rush ahead, running, head down, straight to the patch of clover. He would turn around in circles with his face ever closer to the ground as if wanting to plough through it with his nose. Nona would call him to come back and scold him, tell him he was naughty and would go straight to Hell. All summer she never offered him a single compliment; the clover had turned him into a disobedient wild child that would promise anything to be allowed outside. Once out of town, his weak will would drown out all else.

“The four-leaved clover,” Nona started wheezing word after word in between breathing as she walked, “is something everyone talks about yet nobody has ever seen.”

“Nona,” the boy cried out in disappointment, “it was drawn on the ...”

“Anyone can draw anything they want, that does not mean it actually exists.”

“Have you ever seen one?”

“No.”

“But that does not mean ...”

There was a crash of thunder behind them.

“Stop all these buts! Do you want to die of pneumonia?”

They had reached the railroad bridge next to the workers’ residences on the town’s outskirts, the smoking chimneys on their roofs an overture to the local steelworks. They could hear the clattering of plates and inadvertently breathed in the smells of lunches being prepared.

They needed to step into the middle of the railroad track and adapt the length of their pace to the distance between the ties. Half way across the bridge the line split into two parallel tracks running into town.

The boy sensed that his boots would slip off his feet and began dragging his heels along, hitting his boots against the edge of each tie, only to feel his toes hitting against the tip. He was always made to wear boots, Nona was afraid of snakes.

“Nona, there is clover over there ...”

“NO!”

“Nona! Please!” he stopped walking.

“What is it with you? Let’s go!”

He pouted his lips in a sulk, sighed abruptly and moved. But his right leg would not budge and pulled him back. He repeated the move a few times and it looked as if he wanted to take off from the ground, but remained stuck.

“What are you doing, kid?”

He looked at his foot, stuck in the split in the rails.

“Nona, I’m stuck! Nona! Help me!”

“I see,” his grandmother said, laying the linen sack against the bridge railings. She pressed her hands on her hips, her natural pose.

The boy tried to shake his leg left and right, then backwards and forwards, but it remained wedged between the rails.

With flashes of lightning deep in the bowels of the cloud, it had taken over half the sky. The polished surface of the track appeared to lead right into it and the boy thought that it was not only the sound of thunder that he could hear.

“Is that an approaching train?” he asked with a whisper.

“Probably,” Nona said, still nodding as she looked at him.

“Help me, please!” his words drowned in tears.

“Now you see,” she said. “Now you see where not obeying gets you! God sees all and knows all, so you should never sin. Punishment comes when you least expect it.”

“Is that a train, Nona, please?”

“Touch the rails, you can feel a train before you can see it.”

The boy bent over and placed the palm of his hand onto the metal. It was hot, so he instinctively moved it away, then made himself touch it again and persisted. His hands shook with fear.

“I can feel something, it’s moving,” he said, looking at his grandmother with huge eyes, “Help me, please!”

“Let us talk about God,” she said and used the loose ends of the headscarf below the knot to wipe the sweat off her cheeks.

“Nona, please!”

“You didn’t think of me when you ran about foolishly chasing that clover. That is why it is so easy to sin, it comes about on its own. Virtue, however, is something you need to work on.”

The boy clenched his fists and put his arms against his torso, as if he was cold.

“Nona, please, the train is coming, help me, please, please!”

Heat escaped from the wood and the metal. The boy's bare legs were covered in a damp layer that glistened in the sun whilst the only part of Nona visible from under her headscarf, her shawls and long skirts was her bleak face.

“Now do you think about God?” she said.

“Yes,” the boy nodded eagerly.

“Because you are afraid. If we were fearless, there would be no religion in the world. That’s why we must fear. All the time. Are you afraid?”

“Yes! Yes!”

“I know. But ... you should have thought about God before, you should always think about God, now it’s too late”

She shook her head as if to say goodbye.

The boy stretched his hand out as far as he could and caught her shawl. He started pulling on it, Nona resisted, he pulled and unwrapped it like a bandage from a wound. When he spotted the sleeve of her dress he grabbed hold of that.

“Let go!”

“No, help me!”

“First you must repent! Repent of being naughty! Of not being obedient! For you shall end up in Hell! Do you repent?”

“I do, I do!”

“Let go!”

They both froze and the boy stared at his own hands, latched onto the dress, his only point of contact with his grandmother, the world and safety. Nona's body was still hastening to leave, stopped mid-action.

The barely-felt vibration traveled through the boy's muscles to the tips of his fingers that trembled but would not let go.

“I see,” Nona sighed. “Even now you disobey me. Even at the hour of death you continue to be sinful, as always! Let go!”

“No!”

Nona turned towards him in surprise,

“You dispute me? May the hand you raised against your own flesh and blood shrivel up.”

“The train will come before that,” he said and something wolf-like appeared in his eyes.

Afraid, Nona wanted to move away but didn't get far, held back by the boy's grip and the wood behind her back. She looked around to assess the space between the track and the railing that she completely filled with the bulk of her body.

“I see...” she said to herself.

The boy's eyebrows thickened into a menacing scowl of a mean black bird that even his sweat avoided, preferring instead to trickle down his temples.

Nona was unable to take her eyes off him, she kept nodding, twitchingly at first, then slowly like a float settling on the surface of water.

The sound of breaking glass came from the worker's settlement beyond the fence and a female voice started swearing furiously. The shadow of the cloud slid across the field and formed a veil that fused it with the horizon.

“Up,” she said.

“Uh?” the boy stirred from his shock. “What?”

“Up, lift your leg up!”

He looked down and obeyed. He was able to effortlessly slide his bare foot out of the boot. He stepped onto the rail and squealed with pain when it touched the scorching metal.

Grandmother walked in front, the boy a step behind her, his head lowered, limping as his bare foot swung above the ground, trying to avoid numerous rusting tins and shards of broken glass.

The storm rattled the balcony glass, thunder mixed with lightning, flashing throughout the tiny apartment. In the kitchen Nona cut up the fresh rose hips and made tea. She placed a battered enamel cup in front of the boy and when he sat down she said, “We need to have a talk about God.”

The kitchen table was so small the two cups almost touched.

“Instead of repenting you chose revenge. You are a sinner. If you start taking it seriously and live long enough, maybe you still have time to save yourself from Hell. Well, I don’t know for sure, of course.”

“I don’t care,” he spoke curtly, almost spitting. He looked up at her, the wolf-like glint still lurking in his gaze.

“You are stubborn and headstrong, you’ll have a tough life.”

“I don’t care.”

“God is watching you, even now. He might have spared you before ...”

“It wasn’t him. It was you! Because I was...”

He barely mouthed what he wanted to say. Shame surged across his face and he lowered his head. Without realizing it he repeated the simple movement from the railroad bridge, he lifted his right foot.

She held his hand. He wanted to tear away but her hold was gentle and warm, her folds so soft when they touched him that he was unable to. He looked at her in a new light and saw what he had been missing every day, that her face was a home, a home for many people, many personalities, and he could never know which he would find, the terrifying God of the Old Testament or the loving Jesus.

He lowered his head and with his gaze followed the wrinkles that were holding him. Nona's skin looked like that of a mermaid who had been swimming all her life, only to find herself clumsy and barely able to move herself out on dry land in her old age, here in this tiny apartment.

"God worked through me," she said. "You know, if you have been through what I have been through and reach the age that burdens me, trying to imagine what else awaits you, then you ask yourself about the meaning of it all and God is the only answer. Otherwise it would all have been in vain, all just a whim of nature. A drop in time, a squashed ant on the asphalt. A loneliness that would drive us crazy."

"Nona," he whispered, still bent over. "I was so scared. You should have saved me and told me straight away, why torture me with God like that? Do you not love me?"

"I torture you because I love you."

"What kind of a love is that?"

"Fear is faith and I shall make you fear for life. We each bear inside us the original sin, you in particular, having been born from it, born a bastard. So much more you have to pay off. I cannot waste time with your salvation. The worst and the most terrifying that each one of us hides inside them, what we are most afraid of, is precisely the weakest part of us, one that we should place in God's hands."

She tapped her left index finger on her heart.

He looked up, “You should have rescued me straight away.”

Something in his eyes brought a trace of a smile to her lips.

“It wasn’t dangerous,” she said.

“I didn’t know that. You should have saved me, Nona!”

“No, it was time to have a talk about God!”

“No Nona, it was time you started loving me!”

They stared at each other as if in competition. The tea was getting cold. The thunder was becoming more distant and they could no longer hear the rain. A fly buzzing in the bathroom kept smacking against the window with all its strength.

Nona looked away.

“Perhaps ... I made a mistake ... Perhaps ...” she whispered and then spasmodically cried out, “Please don’t abandon God because of this!”

“I don’t care,” he hissed, knowing that his mouth possessed a knife that cut deep.

“God ...”

“I don’t care.”

“If you deny God I will die.”

“I don’t care.”

She nodded, pushing the cup into the middle of the table and stood up with great difficulty. She swayed as she straightened herself before catching her balance and wandering off to the bedroom. The boy heard her bed creak, abruptly to start with, then in a prolonged groan as Nona’s body stretched out and settled.

He knew that only tears and repentance would wake her, but all he did was stare at the black chipped enamel along the edge of the blue metal cup, feeling such a void that, patting his hands on his stripy shirt, he had to check he was still there. He stood up, put on his sandals and stood by the door thinking how everything, all that had

been and the way it had been, was geared up to this moment when he was going to push down the door handle and leave the apartment alone for the first time.

Fear blasted from the cellar and extending up the stairs were its tentacles that he had to get through. His heart kept stopping and he would reactivate it by coughing lightly. Painfully it gave in and briefly started beating again, only to falter a moment later. He held onto the metal railing, afraid to even briefly let go. He felt each anomaly in the paint and used the tip of his sandal to feel his way along onto the next step before distrustingly shifting his entire weight onto it. He never took his eyes off the front door, gleaming in a spray of hazy light.

He did not stop when he went past the shredded remains that were once his boot. The misty vapors of the drying out bridge floated out above the river, becoming entangled in the branches of the weeping willows.

Once far out of town, he left the railroad track along a path leading across a grassy field. The grass rippled, shedding the raindrops it had accumulated. The entire field was crying and swaying like a choir singing a song of mourning. The blades of grass rubbed against him making his clothes wet right through. He walked through the grass until he came to the end of the field. Then he turned towards the town. All he could see from here was a single chimney and a whitish trail leading up to the sun.

The world had acquired a metallic glow, his every breath filled him with freshness and it occurred to him that this rally was the first time he had been out of the apartment alone. That his body is no taller than the grass and that all else had disappeared, sunken into the shimmering silver light. Grabbed by the terror of aloneness, he felt as if he was trying to push his head through a shirt collar that is too

narrow. The pressure suddenly eased and he was overcome with a sense of completeness and peace. An expanse that was so much larger than he was or anything he had ever seen, anything he had ever anticipated and all he had not. The allure of every single blade of grass quivering before him, grass that was slowly receding across the path he had just walked down. He had difficulties swallowing and breathed deeply yet silently, not wishing to disturb the wonder of which he had now become a part. He remembered God who sees this all the time and envied him. For a fearful moment he considered the possibility of him really not existing. Do people instead need to steal pieces of this perfection from transience by drawing and writing them down, making them last, worn out as they are, just a little while longer before being consigned to dust along with all else?

He cried so as not to feel the sadness. He fell to his knees without wanting to become submissive. He lay on his back, opened his arms and stared at the plane crossing the blueness. He then turned his palms downwards and pressed into the earth leaving a trace like making a snow angel. He kept his eyes closed until the tears stopped running. Upon opening them he realized he was lying in a field of clover, all of it four-leaved.

Trains



39th ATTITUDE: LISTENING.

This attitude is made by stepping in a right lateral direction, the weight being upon that foot, the head inclining to the right while the eyes look to the left. The right hand is placed to the ear.

LISTENING.

“I hear the sound of feet:—they march this way.”
Cato, Act IV, Scene I.

They sat in the tiny kitchen, the table barely covering their legs. Jule dragged on a cigarette as if sucking it up instead of smoking it and his sister glanced angrily across at him a few times, pressing her finger against her lips. Bruno preferred to stare at the wall, checking the doorframe with his finger. Every time a piece of plaster broke off he examined it for a long while on the tip of his finger as if it was a squashed insect. Vinko observed his brothers and sister with a broad smile, fiddling each newly lit cigarette, spinning it to his little finger and back to his thumb before flicking it into his mouth without burning himself or setting alight his hair, thickly covered in brilliantine.

They were going slow on the beer since their sister had only bought three bottles and, anyway, they needed to be sober when making serious decisions.

The bare light bulb shone above their heads, unable even to reach the corners of the tiny room. Every so often the tap dripped onto the plates covered in red sauce, stacked on top of the pan in the sink, making a lone forgotten piece of macaroni swirl in the trickle of water looking like a snail.

Jule began growling quietly as he pointed to the page in front of his sister. She looked at it and turned the large metal alarm clock towards her with a clink of the bell mechanism on top of it.

“Ten minutes,” she whispered.

“We can arrange things...” Bruno whispered before being cut short with a “No!” of normal volume by his sister. Aware of its intensity, she looked in panic towards the closed bedroom door.

“Mother is deaf,” said Jule. The sister began waving her hands about wildly, “Not so deaf, she isn’t! What if she hears us! We must discuss this between ourselves!”

“Well, let’s get on with it,” Bruno got involved again.

“Let us wait!” Mother insisted, “my boy also doesn’t sleep that heavily, he must not hear us. He has spent his whole life with our mother, to him this would mean...”

“Well, we seem to be discussing it anyway,” Bruno said. “I don’t know why we don’t...”

“BECAUSE I CANNOT...” their sister almost shouted and the three men all started calming her “Husssshh!”.

“Guys,” Vinko laughed and waved his cigarette as if trying to calm them with magic wand. “We wanted to go out to discuss this...”

“I’m not walking about in the night with three men!” the sister intervened.

“But we are your brothers!” Jule sounded offended.

“No one in this town knows you!” their sister insisted.

“Whatever,” Vinko went on, “we need some privacy and the kid is scared, our sister is right. He senses something is going on, children like him have excellent antennae. He will get far in life, he might even become a truck driver like me!”

"Yeah, sure!" the sister dismissively waved her hand, “I should know, I’m a MOTHER!”

She flinched and said “Hushhhh!” to herself.

Vinko didn’t persist though he did not stop talking,

“Did I tell you about that time during the war...”

“I don’t care,” Jule hissed.

“Alright,” Vinko seemed unbothered. “We also know that women get upset more easily. Sis just can’t whisper when it’s about a matter she considers vital. So let us continue the conversation the way we started it...”

“The neighbors also ought not to hear all this, we are a respectable family. I am not upset, it is just that we women experience the world in a deeper way than you men. You are always so superficial, no depth there at all. With you it is all a matter of first instance.”

She stopped and raised her finger towards the light bulb. It swayed slightly and the border of darkness flickered.

They all sighed at the same time.

The dishes in the sink rattled and the water trickled with greater intensity.

The noise of the train drew ever closer, stifling all other sounds.

“I HAVEN’T GOT A LIFE!” their sister shouted and pointed with both hands towards the room. “YOU HAVE ALL JUST DUMPED MOTHER ON ME, TAKE HER AWAY FROM HERE!”

“WHERE TO?” Jule screamed back.

“YOU TWO CAN TAKE HER!”

“I AM BUILDING!” Bruno shouted above the noise. “I AM BUILDING A THREE STOREY HOUSE, FOR ME, FOR MY SONS AND FOR MY GRANDCHILDREN, SHE CAN’T STAY IN THE COLD WITH ME!”

“AND I SUPPOSE SHE CAN STAY HERE IN THIS...”

“Silence!” Vinko interrupted her. The train was moving further away. The men lit cigarettes, their sister pulling faces and flapping her hands about, creating smoke swirls.

“When is the next one?” Vinko asked.

Their sister looked at the sheet of paper.

“The 21:15 Simplon Express.”

“Express? That one will pass quickly,” Jule grumbled. “I have better things to do than sit around here all night. Let’s ...”

“Guys, it won’t do, women will be women, did I ever tell you about the time...”

“We don’t care,” Jule and their sister hissed at once.

They were all silent, only Bruno found a flake of paint that appeared to be of good quality, surprising him, for he thought that the people building apartment blocks stole all the good materials for their own use.

This time they first heard the rattle of the dishes in the sink.

The Simplon Express arrived with a metallic whine.

“TAKE HER AWAY, I DON’T CARE!” the sister shouted.

“DID YOU KNOW MY WIFE GAVE ME AN ULTIMATUM, MOTHER OR HER! WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO, DRIVE HER AROUND THE COUNTRY IN MY TRUCK ALL DAY, OR WHAT?” Vinko protested.

“JULE, YOU’RE NOT BUILDING OR DRIVING! YOU TAKE HER! HAVE I NOT GIVEN UP ENOUGH OF MY LIFE, YOU SELFISH PIGS!?!”

“STOP INSULTING ME!” Jule banged his hand on the table and they all tried to calm him down. Blasting its diesel horn, the Simplon rolled into the distance.

Vinko pointed to the page on the table.

“A local one,” their sister said, “quieter, but takes much longer.”

They smoked, wrapping the kitchen in a grey veil that draped across everything, rendering all edges with a softer glow. Bruno cried out when a splinter from the doorframe stuck in his finger and spent ages trying to get it out in the low light.

“Where IS this train?” Jule was losing his patience.

Their sister turned the alarm clock towards the light,

“It’s late.”

“I used to work in Germany,” Bruno said. “There you can get everything done on time. Here it’s all ... so Balkan!”

They all solemnly nodded in agreement.

The local train rolled along slowly, its wheels clattering like an excited drunkard slapping his thighs.

“YOU TAKE HER, JULE!” the sister shouted.

“I CAN’T! I WORK ALL DAY LONG!”

“WHAT, AND I DON’T? I SLAVE AWAY ALL DAY, I HAVE NO LIFE WHATSOEVER! YOU LOT ALL HAVE FAMILIES, YOU TRAVEL, BRUNO, YOU SAID YOURSELF YOU WERE IN GERMANY, NOT TO MENTION YOU, VINKO, YOU ARE NEVER AT HOME. AND JULE, YOU GET AROUND ON YOUR MOPED, AND ME? WHAT ABOUT ME? WHERE HAVE I BEEN? I WANT TO TRAVEL TOO! DO I DESERVE LESS BECAUSE I AM A WOMAN AND THE YOUNGEST?”

“SINCE WHEN WAS IT THE MEN WHO LOOK AFTER THE PARENTS? THAT’S WHY PEOPLE ALWAYS HAVE A DAUGHTER IN THE END, DELIBERATELY!” Jule objected.

“TIMES HAVE CHANGED! I WANT TO START LIVING!”

“Shhhhh!” Bruno and Jule placed an arm each on her shoulders. The local train faded away beyond the apartment blocks and their sister shrugged off their hands in disgust.

Without being prompted, she looked at the timetable,

“The 22:45, Orient Express, the last train for today. We have not gotten anywhere with this.”

She started sobbing, silently, muffling the sound with a kitchen towel. The brothers looked at one another with embarrassment.

“Jule...” Vinko began.

“NO!” his brother objected and was barely able to refrain from banging his hand on the table.

“You see?” their sister said accusingly. “And you blame me for of not being capable of discussing things calmly. You’re just the same! The same!”

She returned to crying.

The dishes and the door started shaking at the same time.

“What is that?” Vinko was surprised.

“A freight train!” their sister said. “These aren’t on the timetable! And they are loud!”

“WILL YOU TAKE HER OR NOT?” she shouted.

“NO!” they objected.

She started banging in the table.

“GET OUR OF MY LIFE THEN! GET OUT! I’D PREFER ENEMIES TO BROTHERS LIKE YOU LOT! GET LOST!”

Using the diminutive of her name, as if she were once more a child, they tried to calm her down by stroking her. She leaped up and shook them all off.

“I WANT TO LIVE!” she yelled and her tears sprayed over them like the blessing of holy water. The freight train groaned and ground along.

The sister held on to the kitchen sideboard, barely keeping herself from collapsing.

“I AM FORTY! I HAVE NO LIFE! I DON’T WANT TO DIE THIS WAY!”

Her hair stuck to her cheeks and in the sparse light she glowed like a specter. She approached the table, looking at them all,

“HOW CAN YOU BE LIKE THIS? HOW CAN YOU BE SO INSENSITIVE? OH, WHAT A LIFE!”

She fell to her knees.

“BECAUSE OF YOU, I WILL MISS THE TRAIN, THE LAST TRAIN!” she shouted from under the table amidst the noise of the distancing train. In the silence that followed the brothers in unison checked the timetable in front of them.

Uncle Vinko

LXXII

LESSONS IN ACTING.



34th ATTITUDE: LOVE.

This attitude is formed by standing with the weight on the right foot advanced in an oblique direction, the head inclined in the same direction, the left hand on the heart and the right hand horizontal oblique supine.

LOVE.

“ And run through fire I will, for thy sweet sake.”
Midsummer-night's Dream, Act II, Scene II.

“I have traveled a long way to show you this,” he unwrapped a photo album from a plastic bag and placed it on his knee. His hands shook as if trying to weigh the air, all that was left of his cheeks were hollow dimples and only the only thing still coloring his moustache was tobacco. “I heard you passed your driving test. The second person in our family to do so. Will you be a trucker?”

I shook my head.

He looked at me for a long time, something painful flashing in the depth of his eyes, hidden behind the opaque flakes gathering on their surface like clouds before a storm.

“This,” he lowered his head. “Look at this life. A trucker’s life. The freedom and the joy. The wheel to steer not just your car, but fate. Look at me ... look at a young me on the Dunes of Pilat! And here... look, parked in the crooked forest of Czarnowa! Oh, how I negotiated the bends in the road up to Montepulciano!”

With his trembling index finger he persistently scratched the plastic covering until it came unstuck and he was able to reach a smaller photograph stuck underneath the one displayed. Out of habit he looked left and right before showing it to me, “See this beauty from Barcelona?”

He winked at me and put it back before turning the page.

“Look, here I am on the Oberalp Pass! The unforgettable hairpin bends of Trollstigen! The endless turns of Stelvio! These here, look, are the tires of my truck on the beach at Sylt. Do you recognize me here on the icy shore at Reynisfjar?”

I could sense he was staring at me and looked up.

“All this,” he said, bringing his shaky index finger up to his eyes. “All this is in here. These eyes have seen it all. The life of a trucker. These eyes...”

His voice faded into a long sigh.

He was still pointing to the cataract that draped his memories like a grey curtain.

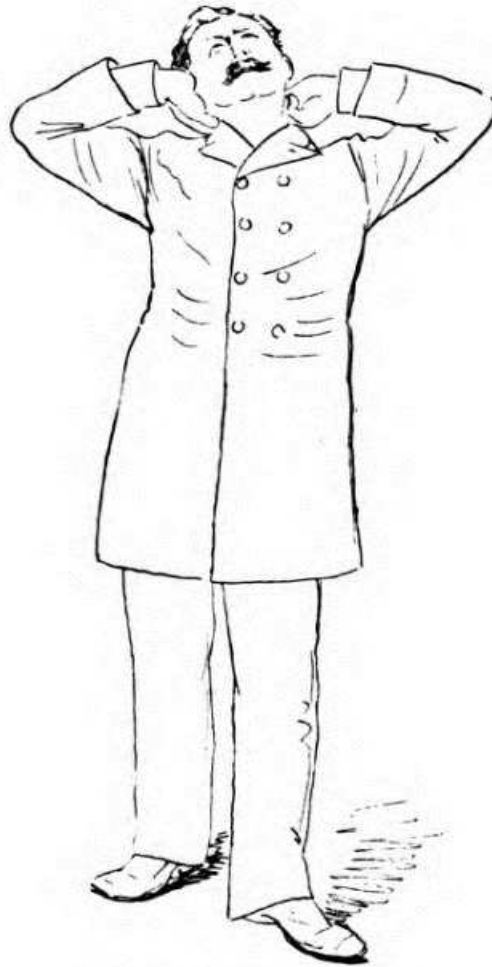
It seemed as if the ice we had just been looking at had pressed against us and started melting. The first drop appeared in his eyes, the second I felt in mine.

It came back to me; all the impatience with which I used to await his visits, hoping he would hug me so I could breathe in the scent only attractive and self-confident men possess; the scent of cigarettes, brilliantine, fake leather car seats and women's glances. I wanted to hug him, squeeze him, though he was now far thinner than me, wring out of him the last drops of the scent of his life and my own desire for my childhood to end, but I felt the tear half way down my cheek and cut all emotion short with the only thing I knew I should not ask, "What do the doctors say?"

He shut the album with a snap, "I'm off."

I stared after him through the window, his tiny bent-over figure moving from one shadow to the next, as if looking for shelter. His last words traveled slowly to my heart, "I must catch the bus."

Uncle Jule



87th ATTITUDE: AGONY.

This attitude is made by retiring the weight upon the left foot; placing the tips of the fingers of both hands back of the neck, the head falling back upon the left shoulders.

AGONY.

“O Antony! Antony! Antony!”
Antony and Cleopatra, Act IV, Scene I.

The boy was so tired his head hit the top of the bottle, making him cry out loud. Nobody heard him, the men at the bar had been arguing all day about how incompetent the Communists were, unable to get the country going. Eagerly he looked at Uncle Jule whose face was made for the bitter hissing he was now so fully engaging in. As the others shouted across each other, he snorted and waved his bear paw of a hand about. Every so often the noise died down and the company looked at each other in surprise before surging into the next round. It was in one of these pauses that the boy squeaked,

“Uncle Jule, can we please go home! I am tired! Please, please, please!”

“Give the kid another coke!” his uncle ordered without even looking at him. The racket continued and the waitress, her perfume intrusively strong, replaced the empty bottle with a full one. His palms immediately clasped the glass and he sensed that his feet were attached to the floor. Only his head was loose and rolled about on his shoulders like a heavy ball.

He looked towards the door. The night had already taken hold of the opaque glass. He remembered the moped they had come on that was leaning against the wall. He recalled the tingling of the wind in his eyes, fighting back with tears, and his hair flapping all over the place.

He didn't know how and when he got to the door. He looked back towards the bar with fear. Nobody had noticed. His uncle continued to hiss, “Argh! Argh!” extending his fingers into claws.

He climbed onto the moped and pretended he was racing. “Broooooommm!” he pouted as he drove through imagined corners towards the bed he was allocated when his mother brought him on a visit to the place where she was born.

He stared at the pedal that his uncle jumped on whenever he started the engine. The bent piece of metal stuck out invitingly from the body of the moped. A wide-eyed bird sat on the ridge of the roof, peering down, only once screeching as if it had been electrocuted. The bare light bulb above the door swayed in the strengthening wind.

With all his strength he jumped onto the pedal, and did everything just as he had seen his uncle do it, squeeze the lever with his left hand and twist his right wrist. The moped jerked and then just groaned and yelped. The boy would not give up. Again and again he repeated the onslaught, his shirt sticking to his sweaty back.

He only stopped when his uncle slapped him.

*

When the boy came out into the yard in the morning his uncle was crouching next to the moped. He beckoned to the boy with his finger.

“Look,” he said. “You forgot to open the fuel tap, that is why you didn’t manage to escape. When you next want to leave me, turn this valve.”



*

Uncle Jule's body barely made a bump in the blanket and his head looked like the remains of a dried-out trophy from the Amazon rainforest about to set off for outer space. Tubes attached to various parts of his body and a mask covering his mouth twitching steadily, a frog trapped in a far too small aquarium. The bandaging around the neck seemed too heavy, producing a gurgling and hissing sound from beneath. The boy, now long an adult man, stood at the foot of the bed and when he looked into the patient's eyes, a ridiculous thought occurred to him, that, at that moment, they were both remembering that unsuccessful ride on the moped. Uncle Jule looked up, somewhere to the left and his visitor noticed the valves on his tubing. His uncle's breathing became rapid, wheezing, his eyes imploring and his head twitching as if, unable to launch its own body into movement, it tried to prompt the one standing next to it into action.

Neither of them could take their eyes off the valves and, though wanting a larynx and vocal chords, the wheezing appeared to articulate into “Please, please, please!”

Uncle Bruno

CXXX

LESSONS IN ACTING.



92nd ATTITUDE: MENTAL PAIN.

This attitude is made by the weight on the right foot, placing the left hand upon the heart, the right upon the forehead, and inclining the head backward, the eyes looking upward.

MENTAL PAIN.

“Why, how is this? What sudden change has come upon the world?”

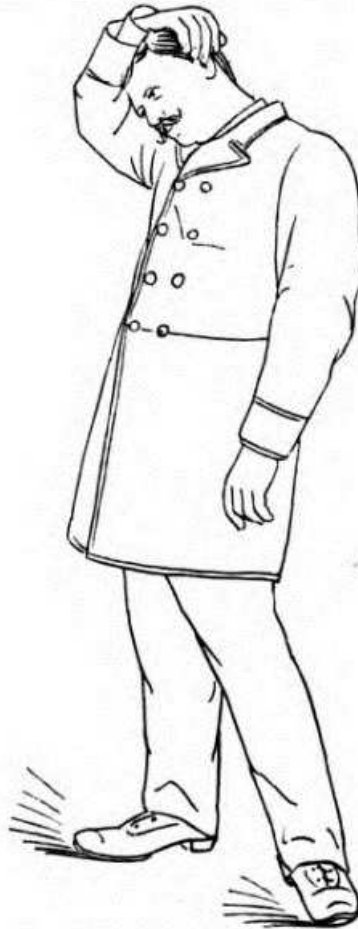
Ingomar, Act IV, Scene I.

“I am building a house!” Uncle Bruno said, his face beaming with excitement. “A tall house! The ground floor for us, the first floor for my sons, one on top for the grandchildren!” As he looked upwards in delight, an elongated bulging lump appeared on his neck. The boy could not take his eyes off it. The skin tightened over the rigid bulge and even the hairs of his uncle’s beard parted to expose its pale sheen. When he lowered his chin again, the bulge attentively moved to one side and lodged itself next to his jaw.

*

The boy could not take his eyes off the elongated bulging heap, the pile of freshly dug earth into which they stuck the wooden cross bearing his uncle’s name and surname in plastic lettering. It lay among the legs clad in black that gathered around it before moving away and leaving, amid them the flurry of the priest’s robe that swept across the sandy gravel on the path. “He paid for a large plot,” his widow sobbed. “His last wish was that this would become a family tomb, where all generations rest alongside each other.” The boy’s mother hugged her and with his suddenly freed hand the boy worriedly palpated his own neck.

Tears



91st ATTITUDE: HOPELESSNESS.

This attitude is made by inclining the head right oblique downward, allowing the right arm to rest over the top of the head, and the left arm to hang down.

LEANING AND DROOPING.

“Farewell, sweet dreams.”

Parthenia, Act I, Scene I.

Engrossment came as sleep does; the boy did not notice at which point in his exasperation he stopped pretending he was playing and actually became preoccupied with loading the wooden sticks onto the plastic trailer. The truck was supposed to be an accurate copy of a real forestry truck, but its thin plastic creaked at the mere touch of the child's hand. Apart from the broken-off wheelbarrow handle which he used to play soldiers, the boy had few other toys, so he handled the yellow and blue vehicle with greatest care. The sticks, double the length of his open hand, represented tree trunks and he carefully loaded them onto the truck, tying the load with a rubber band, driving the toy along the narrow space between the bed and the balcony window, unloading it and starting all over again.

Sometimes he turned the toy upside down and when he read the tiny letters 'MADE IN CHINA' it all sounded like coughing.

The sticks had blackened at the points where he most often held them and the run was so short that the load never had a chance to tip over. He would pile the sticks on the floor, make a circle with the empty vehicle and start reloading it once more.

There was someone standing in the doorway.

The boy flinched.

His mother and her two brothers were not looking at him but at their own mother, his Nona, sitting at the far end of the bed. Her head had drooped toward her chest and her goiter trembled with the drone of her snoring.

The boy remembered the vow he had threatened her with; he would never look at her or talk to her again, so he turned back to the figures at the door. He felt as if he had become a spirit, that they were not seeing him. Looking at his fingers holding a bundle of sticks he reached across with the other hand to touch them. He did exist.

Uncle Jule cleared his throat.

“It’s time!” he said as Nona droned on.

“You know she’s deaf,” Mother interrupted nervously as if she was in a hurry.

Uncle Jule stepped into the room, carrying in with him the smell of filterless cigarettes and cheap watered-down wine. Still not wanting to break his vow, the boy did not follow him with his gaze, but in the periphery of his vision he could sense his uncle’s hand poking lightly at Nona’s shoulder.

“It’s time!”

“Jesus Holy Mary!” Nona sighed, even more tearfully than usual.

The boy’s own stillness had begun to ache so he placed the first stick onto the truck. He could feel the wood sweating under his fingertips. Spring abundance had warmed up the small apartment.

“You’re going home,” Uncle Jule said with a tinge of anger entangled in his voice that made him clear his throat again.

‘Home?’ the boy asked himself. ‘Is this not home?’ He had lived with Nona and Mother ever since he could remember. He only saw his mother in the evenings if he didn’t go to sleep on time and on Sundays, but Nona sat at her end of the bed all day, reading from the *Lives of the Saints* with her goitrous voice that the boy himself was best at understanding.

His uncle still stood with his hand outstretched.

“Come on!” Mother whispered and looked toward the front door as if she was expecting someone.

“Have you packed?” Uncle Bruno asked with a pretend cheerfulness.

“Jesus Holy Mary, Jesus Holy Mary!” Nona whimpered.

The boy became aware that he was still holding the stick above the truck and could not let go. The pressure he was claspng it with had whitened his knuckles.

They will take Nona away.

He had told her he never wanted to see her again; somehow they had heard him and were granting his wish. A part of him was delighted with the power he had previously not known he possessed and the proof that wishes could come true. But mostly he was paralyzed by fear; how would he live alone, and guilt; where would they take Nona? He should have looked after her; she was too old for this world, as she was always telling him.

His left hand also found a stick to squeeze.

“The truck is ready, Vinko is waiting. Your Vinko!” Jule said and the boy could hear him helping Nona get to her feet. Just before she straightened her knees she swayed as usual, and even Uncle Jule cried out at this point, trying to catch her.

When the boy had threatened never to look again at Nona, she responded with her usual, “I won’t ever look at you either!” It was he who succumbed every time. Sometimes he bit his lip so hard it bled, but the fear of being left abandoned grew until he ran up to Nona and clutched onto her. She stank of staleness and urine, but the warmth that engulfed him was calming and reassuring.

Now he heard her voice calling him. She alternated his name with that of Jesus and Mary, as if it had always belonged there.

He had won! First time ever! He held out!

He lowered his head so the others would not notice his smile.

By then Nona was only calling out his name.

‘I need to save her!’ the boy thought. He looked at the sticks he was holding and a string of images flashed before his eyes. Cartoon superheroes striking at barriers,

knocking down walls, destroying tanks and tying cannon barrels in knots. Wherever they slam their fists a starry shape with the captions BOOM BANG SPLAT sprouts up. He could feel the power and imagined hitting the parquet floor and splinters of wood flying in all directions, as a warning only, he would never want anyone to get hurt.

He restrained himself. Nona can call out for him as much as she wants! The sense of power rendered him whole and determined, encased him in a shield of armor from out of which he would never again want to step into the open.

Nona who had always seemed so large, her shawls and her skirts, her broad face, bending over him, rarely with approval, a complaint of unfairness in the tone of her words, this very Nona was now calling him, needing him, begging him!

Only by biting hard at his lip did he manage to reduce his smile to a pout that would hide his true feelings. He could taste the sweet salt of his blood and used his tongue to spread it across his palate.

“Stop playacting!” Mother growled at her.

Uncle Jule supported Nona, Bruno helped Mother pull all of Nona’s clothes out of the wardrobe and throw them into a suitcase.

“I knew you would not help me when the time comes, I knew you were useless,” Nona cried and stopped calling out the boy’s name, returning to “Jesus Holy Mary! Jesus Holy Mary!”

“You’ll be alright! Much better than here!” Mother consoled her in a scolding voice.

With his newly found strength the boy slowly raised his head and turned towards Nona. She was almost lying in her son’s arms, looking through the window, moaning ceaselessly.

The boy felt hurt that she was not looking at him and no longer calling out his name.

The shield of strength shattered. Fears rattled around his body, jumping over and overtaking one another until they belched into his brain; Nona was leaving him, she no longer loved him, she had taken offence, he would be left on his own.

The boy observed his uncles and noticed for the first time that they were both much taller than Nona. Next to them Mother, whose outbursts he was so very afraid of and which were another reason he did not dare leave his corner.

Lowering his gaze, he peered at his own hands. They seemed so insignificant. The sticks he was holding were no tree trunks, nor was he a superhero.

‘I can’t do anything!’ he suddenly realized, and the flashes and super-punches from comics disappeared. The adults before him were acting according to their own will, quite incomprehensible to him, and he could not stop them.

“Cold, cold!” Nona said on their way to the door, refusing to move. Mother started saying “Warm ...”, but then looked over to her brother who brought Nona’s shawl and put it over her shoulders. Wrapped in the garment without which she never left the apartment, Nona could find no further excuse for resisting. Her body slackened and the uncles merely supported and directed her.

‘Nona, look at me! Please, look at me!’ the boy begged inside. He clenched the sticks once more as he stared at the back of Nona’s head. Desperate attempts at mind control concealed the excuse that there was nothing he could do and the hope that Nona would yet turn around and, at least this way, confirm that she had forgiven him. He still sought her absolution from the guilt that had stooped his shoulders and begun to eat through his skin into the flesh until he felt that it had always been part of him.

They departed through the front door and the boy was left staring at an empty hallway.

“I don’t care!” he said out loudly and Nona’s face appeared vividly in front of him but by shaking his head he managed to scatter the image.

She had abandoned him, leaving behind an enormous weight that made it almost impossible for him to breathe.

Without further thought he started poking the sticks he was holding at his stomach and was amazed to find that it did not hurt him. When he bent over he almost vomited.

He lay on the floor and heard that they had reached the front entrance of the apartment block. They were past the swinging doors, the dry hinge squeaked. Uncle Vinko had started up the engine, Nona cried out very loudly a few times.

The pain converted to heat and placing both his hands on his belly the boy dropped both sticks. Emotions traveled upward and accumulated in the throat. They would reach his eyes at the very moment the car drove away and Mother returned to the apartment.

‘She must not see me crying!’ the boy said to himself, ‘No one shall ever see me cry!’

He remembered how powerless and insignificant he was in the world of adults, so he directed his thoughts towards himself, to the shudder below his neck. In desperation he clung to the thought that in there, inside himself, he could arrange things as he saw fit.

He could cool down the heat, even freeze it over.

Nona; he allowed himself an image of her face, the contours of her wrinkles. He imagined snow falling over it. He watched it as he watched the snowflakes through

the window every winter. The whiteness covered his grandmother, snowing over all the feelings he had toward her. The snow eased the lump in his throat downward and the boy realized he needed more of it. He imagined Mother's face and covered it with snow. Then his uncles and aunts, some of Mother's friends that were quite indifferent to him. He snowed over people, froze them and did not want to leave anyone unfrozen whom he could cry over.

The fire turned into a sticky black mass and settled inside his stomach.

Then he began snowing over himself. First his heart. He imagined it the way he had seen Jesus' heart depicted, cradled in a hand with a wound and fire emerging from it. The snowflakes doused the fire, extinguishing it like a candle. He sprinkled snow over all the organs he had ever heard of though he could not imagine what any of them actually looked like. They all became soft and rounded, all pain drowning inside them.

Snow, snow.

Mother returned and, as she was used to, first looked across to Nona's end of the bed before turning toward the boy. She felt she had to explain. She tried to find the words but something distracted her. Bending over, she narrowed her eyelids to see better.

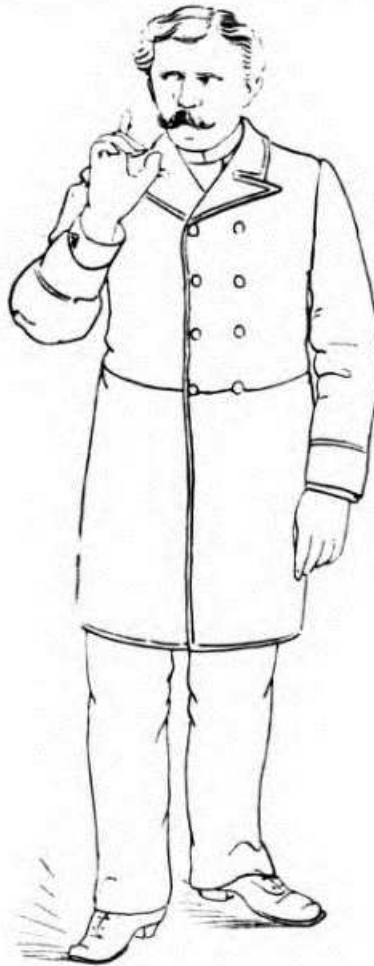
"What have you been up to?" she said and made the few steps across the room to reach the tiny figure in the corner. She ran her hand over the rime that covered the boy's hair.

She shuddered with the cold and stared at her hand in astonishment where the snowflakes were melting fast, turning into tears.

The Cricket

LESSONS IN ACTING.

CXVII



79th ATTITUDE : DETECTION.

This attitude is made by looking straight ahead, the face inclined forward, the index finger in front of the face.

DETECTION.

“ You told a lie, an odious, damned lie.”
Othello, Act V, Scene II.

“Now we will spend more time together,” Mother said, leaning back so that the chair creaked. The boy sat in his corner, not knowing what to say; his hands automatically loading tiny sticks onto the plastic toy truck and when there were no more left, his hands continued to search for them.

“You can ask me things,” Mother said. She was squinting because the sun was in her eyes. Instinctively, she tried to brush it off like a fly but then moved her head, making the vein on her neck bulge.

“If there’s anything you’d like to know...” she said almost whispering, completely engrossed in dealing with the sunlight. She held the chair by its seat, holding it against her buttocks as she stood up to move into the shade.

“Will Nona ever come again?” the boy asked, lowering his head. He realized his hand was aimlessly groping around and led it back to the sticks, unloading them from the truck, back onto the parquet floor.

“Of course she will,” Mother said with a broad smile. “She may be old, but she is my mother and tough as nails, that’s what we’re like. We don’t die from falling off a bed.”

The boy’s hand froze and the numbness spread through his body, too late however to muffle the beginning of the sentence,

“But I saw ...”

“What did you see?” Mother hissed, leaping up. Two steps later she was abruptly towering above her son as if she wanted bash his forehead against the floor.

“You didn’t see anything. Anything at all! You were asleep and it was dark. What did you see?”

Images flashed before him, blurred and confused, as if his eyes were stuck in a state between a dream and being awake. His hearing lent the memory of his mother's heavy breathing and Nona's moans, his mind the desperate wish that it was just a dream.

Mother retreated, picked up the chair and placed it in front of him. She sat down with a deep sigh,

“What did you see?”

She sounded determined to get an answer, her feet glued to the floor, ready to stay there as long as it took. She smelt of heavy-duty hand soap and kitchen disinfectant.

“Look at me!” she demanded.

The boy instantly obeyed, dropping the sticks so they rolled across the floor.

“What did you see?”

He could hear Nona's voice inside him, repeated so often that it no longer felt as if it was coming from his head, but lower down, somewhere half way down his chest, on the way to his stomach, ‘He who lies ends up in Hell!’

He looked down at his stripy T-shirt, somewhere between the lines above his navel.

“Look at me!” Mother hissed, sounding as if something large and dark was breathing along with her.

The eyes above him were imminent and impending, Hell would come later, so he chose the former,

“Nothing. I saw nothing.”

Mother moved back and relented.

“Good boy,” she nodded.

She spent a long time staring at the empty end of the bed where Nona normally sat. Then she turned toward the boy, looking exhausted,

“We are what we say. I wish you to be a good person, so you must only say good things.”

*

Mother came to pick him up from kindergarten. When they entered their apartment block she first checked the letterbox, annoyedly collected the blue envelopes and stuffed them in her purse, grunting something rude about paying the bills. The boy tried to walk behind her as invisibly as he could.

“Is this fair?” she said out loud and the boy looked around in panic to try and guess what he was supposed to say. Her eyes glanced at the lone newspaper sticking out from a letterbox in the top row.

“Some people have it all,” she added, “while others ...” She clawed the newspaper from the box, a torn scrap of paper flying through air as the remainder disappeared into her purse.

She pushed open the hallway door and they stepped into the corridor. Mother pressed the light switch and the bulb glowed hesitantly. Dampness and cold rose from the cellar as high heels tapped along the faux marble tiles. The boy felt a gust of air on his back, brought on by the door swinging behind them.

“HAH!” a man’s voice shouted.

Mother grabbed the boy under his shoulder and pulled him along.

The man pushed the door open as he repeated, “HAH!”

“Are you drunk again or what?” Mother said over her shoulder without stopping. They had already reached the first step.

The boy could not take his eyes off the neighbor who was clearly stuck on the meaningless word, yet with a tone of voice that promised some kind of enlightenment. His eyes, normally sunken in the folds of his wrinkles that resembled the flaccid sails on a becalmed boat, now glistened as he shook his stubby index finger, pointing towards the ceiling.

“Now I know!” he finally expanded his vocabulary. “Just now, as I took out the trash, the newspaper was there. A minute later it’s gone. Now I know who’s been stealing it!”

“What’s up with you?” Mother finally stopped. “Picking on a helpless woman? Are you delirious?”

“No one else went past, only you two!” the neighbor caught up with them and with Mother standing on the first step, their eyes were level. The man clenched his hands into fists, pushing them against his hips so hard that his knuckles sank into the flab under his nylon shirt.

“Mind your own business and your own newspaper, it’s nothing to do with me,” Mother sounded uncertain, surprising the boy. He bit on his lip and would like to have closed his eyes.

“Show me your handbag!” the neighbor commandingly lifted his chin toward Mother.

“You have no right! Are you going to rob me?”

“Yes, we can get the police if you want. Come on?”

“I must... go...”

Mother was whispering and the boy noticed a tremble in the hem of her raincoat.

“HAH! HAH!” the man was back where he started.

“You have no proof!” Mother finally found the right words and volume.

The neighbor could not take his eyes off her purse and his right hand followed his gaze. Mother turned, hiding her handbag between her back and the wall.

“Don’t you dare touch me! I’ll scream for help! What are you thinking of, just because you’re an engineer and I’m only a poor cleaner!”

The man was unsure what to do. His half stretched out hand throbbed and he snarled.

“Let’s go!” Mother grabbed the boy and with her newfound strength almost lifted him up the stairs.

The neighbor’s focus turned to the child and his hand found the movement it had been searching; almost digging his finger into the boy,

“He saw it all! HIM! Let him speak!”

“Yes!” Mother said, “Let him speak. Let him tell it all. How you’ve unfairly accused me and are standing here humiliating me over some stupid newspaper I never even touched!”

The boy’s head swayed between the faces staring at him, both taut with rage.

“Did she steal the newspaper?” the neighbor shouted, pouring forth at the boy a smell of aftershave and stale cigarette smoke.

“Did I or didn’t I? Speak up! And don’t forget what I taught you!” Mother said.

All of a sudden they sunk into darkness.

The neighbor frantically hit the light switch and the bulb once again illuminated the trio at the foot of the stairs.

The boy could hear whining and stammering but could not quite connect it to himself. His head shook rhythmically and his eyelids dared not blink.

“WELL?”

“SAY IT!”

A smell of stale urine wafted in the air. Worrying that he might have once again wet himself, the boy reached towards his crotch with the fingers of hands. Dry. There followed a sensation of stuffiness, of old age, of his grandmother ... Nona, was she back, was she behind him?

Confused, he turned to look.

“He’s avoiding an answer!” the neighbor shouted triumphantly.

“You stink to him because never wash!” Mother explained. “Come on, tell him so we can go home!”

Above the level of his height, the wall was painted olive gray, separated by a slightly wavy white line from the rest of the wall, covered in a tiny floral pattern.

Nona was nowhere but inside him.

Despair had turned him into a badly sealed bag of acid, leaking at all ends.

For the second day running, the choice was between Hell and Mother’s wrath.

Not fair.

His strength abandoned him and he had the feeling he was falling though his legs still held on. A terrible sleepiness started pulling his eyelids closed, only his neck kept swaying.

Right and left.

Left and right.

*

Mother gritted her teeth and bent her head as if wanting to throw it across her shoulders. With her right hand she slammed the apartment door behind them, then brought the curled-stiff fingers of both hands toward her eyes in a gouging movement. She was frothing and fuming inside and the boy pressed into the corner, though he knew he could not escape.

“Right,” Mother whispered amidst the sputtering and gurgling, “Right! You shall learn, once and for all, that you must shut up. Stay silent and invisible! Only say what needs to be said and no more than that! Prepare now for your punishment that will last and last! It has to, so you will remember for the rest of your life that silence is golden and that you should only ever say what I expect from you, because the truth is only what I want it to be!”

With a single move she pulled off her coat and threw it across the bed. She ran into the bathroom and there was a clanking sound of metal objects. The boy squealed in terror, digging his shoulders into the wall.

“Life will be easier for you when you learnt that,” Mother said as she returned to the room.

*

The summer rolled in through the half-open balcony door and Nona’s smell only lingered around the exact spot she used to sit in. Sometimes, when his mother wasn’t looking, the boy would lean over and press his face against the bedspread, breathing in the remnants of her scent.

When the heat of August became unbearable, Mother suggested one dinnertime,

“Perhaps we could go to the seaside, you’re old enough for your first visit. The steelworks has a holiday home on the coast.”

Mother shook out the collar of her blouse, trying to stir up a draft. With the kitchen towel she once more wiped away her sweat, trickling down her forehead since she had been cooking.

She smiled and looked out of the balcony window into the evening, full of lit-up apartments and people in shorts and T-shirts, sitting about on their balconies, exchanging brief trivial remarks. Down in the yard, men were slowly winding up

tinkering with their cars and the smell of multiethnic cooking filled the air, all wrapped in the vapors of cheap beer.

“It was the cricket,” Mother said with a smile. “It was the cricket that reminded me of the sea. I tell you, I once had a sailor uniform made for me, men’s style, it used to be fashionable.”

She drifted away in thought and her face softened and appeared younger. The boy thought it looked beautiful and was overcome by a wish to hug her and press against her. She only ever hugged him in front of strangers, strongly and impatiently, making him embarrassed and wanting to tear away. She would then always roll her eyes and explain, “That’s what he’s like. He was born that way.”

“Crickets...” she pursed her lips. “All there is in this town is dust and steel.”

She put away the dishes with a deep sigh.

“Poor you, you’ve never smelt pine trees.”

*

Mother was moving about. He could hear the bed creak and felt the vibrations transferred to his bunk. He didn’t dare open his eyes.

“Where is it? Where?” she whispered.

He opened his eyelids just enough to see. In the moonlight he was able to make out Mother, bending over, walking past the balcony door, stopping now and then to turn her left ear toward the floor.

“Where is it?”

She held a folded newspaper in her right hand and the boy shuddered with horror at the sight of it.

“Where is it? Can you hear it?” she said loudly as she turned to his bed.

The boy pretended he was only just waking up.

“Hear what?”

“The cricket? I can’t sleep and I’ve got to go to work tomorrow. It’s driving me crazy.”

The boy listened carefully and could hear a faint chirping, though he was not sure whether it was only because he was afraid of not pleasing his mother.

“Yes. It’s kind of quiet.”

“You know I’m a light sleeper.”

She walked up and down near the window for a while longer, then threw the newspaper onto the table and went back to bed.

“Damned insect!” she pulled the pillow over her head.

*

A thunderstorm cooled the air, but Mother still promised him a trip to the seaside, now saying they would go next year. After a late dinner she started rubbing her eyes and went to the bathroom where she spent a long time looking at herself in the mirror.

“These dark circles! The girls at work tease me that I have a man. A very lively one!”

She turned to the boy, “Is this normal?”

Unsure of what to say, he just squeaked.

“That cricket, all week. How long do these things live?”

“I don’t know.”

She nodded.

“You’ll learn about it at school, next year. Learn lots of things. Then you can tell me as well. I wasn’t able to get any real schooling, things were tough at the time.”

She returned from the bathroom and stroked the boy’s hair.

“You’ve been a good boy since you started being more careful about what you say.”

She reached for the dishes and suddenly stopped. She lowered her head and impatiently lifted her hair off her ear.

She slowly turned to her son.

“You!” she whispered, “it’s you!”

She stared at him for a long time, then turned her face and slowly started bringing her ear closer. She brought it right in front of his eyes, so close he could see the tiny grown over earring hole and the soft fluff covering the folds of her auricle. She listened out in front of his mouth, then lower down at his chest and then moved up again, placing her ear against his neck.

“It’s you!” she whispered as the outside sounds of the summer evening started dying down, retreating into the surrounding apartments.

She moved away as if handling a bomb and looked at him carefully for a long time.

“You are the cricket!”

“Mother, I...”

“Hush!”

“Listen to yourself. Can you hear anything?”

“Yes,” he said, more or less just to please her.

She raised her fingers and wiggled them in front of his face. He could smell frying oil.

“Shhh! Say something!”

“What?”

“Doesn’t matter what. Just talk till I tell you to stop.”

“But...”

“Talk!”

The only think he could think of was the Lord’s Prayer and he started saying it the way he was used to, as a rhythmical babble without any thought about its meaning.

With short movements of a conductor Mother indicated the beat, urging him to repeat the prayer over and over again. She slid above him with her ear, listening.

When she opened the palm of her hand, he stopped mid-word. She moved back toward the chair without taking her eyes off him.

“How do you do that? It is as if you really had a cricket inside you. You can be saying something entirely different, but your throat chirps away ... tsssk tsssk tsssk ... Were you even aware of it?”

He shook his head.

He tensed his throat muscles and the effort made him want to vomit. He too was now convinced that he could hear a kind of crackling sound inside.

“Mother,” he said, “it’s not intentional...”

“I know,” she said with a nod. “We shall see a doctor.”

*

“A tic?” Mother said. “Never heard of a tic like that before. And he says it will pass, that it happens. There’s no cure. Is that what they spend so many years studying for? Anyone could have said that, all they need to do is learn a few fancy words. Why call them doctors, they could just as well be compiling dictionaries!”

*

“I can’t take this,” Mother said, throwing her fork on the table. “I’ve had enough. I know it isn’t your fault; that this tic thing is a medical condition, but I’m not getting any sleep and I can’t go on like this. Then there’s this heat and August... How am I supposed to? No, I know it’s not your fault. The doctor said it was not your fault.

‘Look after this child, madam,’ he said. ‘He’ll turn out well’. Right I am looking after you. With Nona you were totally wild, let me not start mentioning that newspaper and how you slandered you own mother. But you have become a wonderful child. A really good boy. And now this. This ... tic! Tick, tick, ticking, it’s driving me mad. I go to the bathroom, close the door and still I hear it. It’s not that loud, the doctor said. Not to him it isn’t, he lives in his own house. In this apartment block the walls are so thin you can hear everything.”

She ran her fingers through her hair and grabbed hold of it as if wanting to rip it out.

“That damn doctor, the way he looked at those bruises. You’re a boy, boys fall over, you’re that age. A tic is like a virus, he said, it’s not the boy’s fault. Not his fault! I get it, not your fault. But I’m going crazy, all this chirping is making me crazy!”

She leapt up, swaying at the verge of a fit of rage and then almost fell back into the chair.

“It’s not your fault, it’s not your fault.”

She kept nodding as she pulled a lock of hair to her lips and sucked it. For a short moment she looked like one of the girls from kindergarten.

Someone started singing in the apartment building opposite and a few neighbors joined in. It ended in a bout of laughter after the first stanza.

“Tsssk tsssk tsssk tsssk,” Mother started crackling her lips. Then she jumped up, knocking the chair over, and rushed into the bathroom. She came back with a wooden spoon she sometimes used for stirring any washing that needed boiling.

Without a word, using both hands, she started hitting the boy. He curled up on the floor, covering his head with his arm, sticking his backside in her direction. The wood

kept smacking against his skin and she accompanied every blow with a short exhalation that sounded like spitting.

The wooden spoon fell on the floor and Mother dropped to her knees, her hands swaying at her sides, trembling.

Her crying, muffled because of the neighbors, yet painfully high pitched, sounded as if it was sewn in somewhere deep inside her and was breaking free, stitch by stitch.

“Why? Why me? My mother never loved me, I don’t have a father, I’m a bastard, my brothers and sisters never loved me, everyone despised me, laughed at me. How they beat and humiliated me! I’m at the bottom of the ladder at work, the bottom of the ladder in life, but at home ... at least in my own home ... can I not be in charge here at least? Can things not be the way I want at least at home? Here at least, please, at least here! So at least here I can be someone, SOMEONE! Please, please.”

She slid to the floor and remained lying there like a fetus next to her son. Her shoulders were shaking and the stitches continued to come apart.

Timidly looking toward her, the boy tried to pick himself up and grimaced with pain. He stared at his arms as he spread them, unsure of what to do next. Then he put them around his mother and pressed himself against her.

Mother’s arm held on to him and the cricket fell silent, just for a brief moment, like skipping a heartbeat before returning to the normality of the evening.

There She Stood in Her Best Red Dress



16th ATTITUDE: DESERTED.

The Fourth Sitting Attitude means *Deserted*.

It is made by inclining the torso forward, with the head down so far that the face cannot be seen. The left palm rests on the left knee, the right elbow is on the right knee; the forearm being horizontal. The right hand rests on the left hand.

DESERTED.

“He cast me forth into the night.”

Leah, the Forsaken, Act IV, Scene III.

Mother put on her best dress while the neighbor urged her husband to start the car and the boy squeezed his legs together, howling with horror, without taking his eyes off the blood that was filling the toilet bowl.

He continued gripping onto his mother's fingers at the hospital whilst they took his blood, measured his temperature and pressed a stethoscope against his chest and his back. "Be brave, you're a big boy now!" she whispered to him occasionally. "You will soon be six!" He kept his eyelids closed to block his tears, but they came through his nostrils, thickening into a lump he was unable to swallow.

They dressed him in stripy pajamas. The trouser legs had to be rolled up and still dragged along the floor. Mother and the doctor withdrew to the room next door. He tried to make out what they were whispering but then became aware of his own sweat mixed with his mother's on palm of his hand, cooling down and making him shiver. He was unable to hold back his tears any longer.

Mother told him she would come during visiting hours, that he should be good, not be afraid, everyone gets better in hospital, and waved at him through the glass in the door as she left.

They stuck a needle into the elbow pit of his left arm, fixed it in place with an adhesive bandage and attached a drip. An older nurse with an angular body and a protruding backside that she carried around like a padded armchair seat, looked at him strictly and said they would tie him to the bed if he moved about or tried to pull the needle from his vein. She grabbed the metal rail on the side of the bed with both hands and yanked it noisily into position.

The boy stopped breathing. The lump in his throat had spread to his windpipe. Only once the nurse was gone was he able to gaspingly inhale some air with a quiet squeaky wheeze.

He looked toward the window and through the net curtains sensed rather than saw the trees on the hill and a slice of the sky.

Mother!

He was afraid of moving. He twisted his neck and sobbed into his own right shoulder.

For dinner, the boxy nurse brought him a banana and some sickly sweet tea. “Eat!” she jerked her chin prompting him to get on with it.

The new order contradicted her earlier one about staying still, so he just stared at her with big eyes.

“Not hungry? Fine. They’re hungry in Africa.”

Panicked, the boy was still trying to guess what she was trying to tell him – Africa, banana, was he depriving someone of food? – when the nurse pushed some kind of a plastic bottle in front of him, telling him,

“Pee in this!”

She pursed her thin lips when he didn’t respond immediately and then loudly and slowly released the air from her lungs.

“Hold this with that hand, yes, the one with the infusion, then hold your winkle with your right hand and pee in here.”

She interpreted his hesitation as shyness.

“This is my job, honey. You think you’re something special? Thousands have been through this hospital before you. So get on with it!”

He put his sensitive skin, warm and wet on the slightly rough plastic surface. It took great effort before the bloody urine started trickling into the receptacle.

“You really are embarrassed, aren’t you,” said the nurse. “Your face is redder than your pee.”

The boy expected to have to wash his hands, like Mother always made him do. But the nurse took his temperature, wrote something on his chart and left. He stared at his open fingers and a realization arose inside him: no washing because there are no rules, Mother is not here. He found himself in unfamiliar territory.

The room gradually got darker and the treetops outside merged into one. There was a light in the corridor and he saw the nurse go past a number of times. She never even as much as looked at him.

The railings around his bed were like bars. He grabbed hold of the metal and squeezed with all his strength. He spent a long time staring at the glass bottle hanging above him and followed the tube leading into his arm. Trying to preserve his cautious calm, he breathed slowly and carefully. He did not wish to awaken the mass stuck in his stomach, which he imagined as a bear in its cave like one he had seen in a picture book.

He had always known that outside their small apartment there was a world without Mother and Nona, a world that must include a father he had never met, as well as landscapes and spaces that were completely different to everything he was used to. “Wherever you go, God is everywhere,” Nona would say and for the first time the boy realized that in this room there was no cross or a Jesus with a bleeding heart. At first he thought it strange but remembered that they make everyone better in hospital, they made Jesus better too.

He touched the cold sheet, then the blanket and the hem of his flannel pajamas. It all felt so strange, soft, almost intangible. He pressed the palm of his hand against his body, afraid that he too was melting into the darkness, disappearing, and would soon dissolve into thin air. All they would find in the morning would be the needle with a drop of blood at its tip. He imagined his funeral, a white coffin with a small bouquet of flowers, because they are poor, but many priests and altar boys with Nona always happy to give donations to God's assistants on earth, as she called them. 'Who will come? Who loves me?' he wondered and dozed off with the comforting smell of Uncle Vinko that his memory brought to his nostrils.

He opened his eyes abruptly and realized he wasn't at home. A tiny slice of the moon was wedged in the top right corner of the window, shining down on him. He remembered stories about werewolves and unfortunate people affected by the moon, so they walked along rooftops and plunged to their deaths, their innards splattered across the paving stones. This was why Nona always drew the thick curtains every night and blessed him, in case the curtains weren't enough.

"Mother?" he whispered.

A light was still coming from the corridor, but the light bulb must have been at the far end.

"Mother!" he said again, despite feeling it was pointless. He instantly knew he had made a mistake. The word awoke the mass inside him and it now started to discharge through him. A feeling of emptiness opened up like an abyss. He felt isolated like a small, lost fragment, carried along by the current, thrown to the surface for a brief false moment, before once again being swallowed up into the darkness. He did not dare move his left arm and used his right to search around for something to

hold onto. Something firm. A button. He grabbed it and held on for dear life. He cried without tears, trembling with horror and despair, and all of a sudden his hand was waving about. He bit his knuckles. There was something chaffing his palm. He stuck the button in his mouth, biting and chewing on it, tasting its hardness, until, sobbing, he swallowed it. Frightened, he stopped, then quickly felt around for another.

“What’s this?” said the nurse. “What sort of pajamas have you been given? They don’t have a single button. How come I didn’t notice yesterday? I’ll find you some new ones. Come on, have a pee.”

It was easier this time, now he knew how, though he still missed washing his hands. He held the plastic container, watching how he turned half of it red. The nurse returned with some new pajamas, a banana and an enamel cup of tea.

When he saw her coming, he was overcome by tears.

“Cry or don’t cry, it all passes,” she said.

He stared at the window, telling himself stories. The corner of his eye often darted toward the door, perhaps Mother was already coming down the corridor in her red dress she wore for special occasions. Eventually he spotted a face, but it was one strange to him, bleary-eyed and swollen. The cleaning lady in a blue uniform opened the door with the rag she had mounted on a handle, wiping the floor. She looked at the boy, but didn’t think it was worth the effort to greet him. The boy could smell her sweat, lingering on from previous days, and sensed a scent that made him open his eyes wide and draw it into his lungs until they could expand no further and hurt all the way up to his neck. Lysol; the disinfectant cleaning fluid that kills everything, his mother used to say, even unhappy women. She smelt of it when she came back from

work. He hated it, it cut into his nostrils too sharply, but here and now it meant contact with his own world.

The cleaner left and the boy started crying again, but this time dared not touch the buttons.

Doctors came, picked up the metal chart from the end of his bed, read it and shook their heads. They never noticed him.

He was brought a banana and sickly-sweet tea for lunch.

Mother didn't come. He stared at the ceiling and let his tears stream down his cheeks, his head soon lying on a damp patch.

He heard Mother's voice, whispering to him, "I'll come during visiting hours!" He awoke from his sleep and looked around with confusion. Perhaps they won't allow her to visit him? Was she standing in the corridor, crying? He rolled onto his side with pain, he felt so sorry for her. Poor Mother, all alone out there!

He carefully lifted himself up on his knees. He felt dizzy. He put his right hand over the needle in his arm so it wouldn't move, and slowly got up. By moving into the far corner of his bed, he could see part of the junction and the opposite side of the road. Cars, and the occasional bus.

He stood on the tips of his toes. What was that he sees?

He jumped up.

Mother!

There she stood in her best red dress, looking toward him.

He jumped again, the bed creaked, the wheels slipped, he lost his balance, but somehow managed to direct his fall onto the bed. The needle moved and he clenched his teeth not to cry out.

But everything was well.

Mother was there for him.

“We will have to tie you down if it happens again!” the boxy nurse said as she examined the growing dark patch around the needle.

The boy smiled shyly.

“You’re used to it now, aren’t you,” she said. “Everyone gets used to it, sooner or later. Your mother is at work, she’ll come to see you on Sunday.”

“She has taken a day off.”

“How do you know?” the nurse frowned.

“Because she’s here.”

“Where?” she looked around the room.

“On the opposite side of the road.”

The nurse went to the window and pushed behind the curtain.

“Where?”

“Next to the traffic lights, in a red dress.”

The nurse’s movements, impatient for having been distracted from their daily routine, came to a standstill. Even her breathing was put on hold for a few seconds before resuming with a quiet “Oh! I see!”

“Can I wave to her?” asked the boy.

“No. You’re sick and must stay in bed. Don’t get up again.” She allowed the curtain to fall back into place and turned slowly, avoiding his gaze.

“Can you wave to her for me?”

She stopped, still staring at the floor.

“Please, please,” the boy’s voice took on a hint of crying.

The nurse looked up and stared at him for a long time. Nodding slowly, she turned back toward the window and waved above her head, as if wiping the glass.

“Thank you,” the boy said through a smile. “Did she wave back?”

The nurse did not reply until her hand was on the door handle. Turning over her shoulder, she nodded,

“Yes, she waved back. No more getting up now.”

It all went smoothly from then on; from the constant bananas and tea, to the hospital rituals of blood tests, changing the IV bottles, measuring his temperature, to urinating into the plastic container and using a potty, where, for a couple of days, he had to continue to hide the buttons, clearly visible in his stools, under the toilet paper. The boy knew how much worse all this must be for Mother, standing alone in the sun; as a spring thunderstorm developed he silently implored her to find shelter, there was no need to go through all this for him, she should shelter somewhere dry.

At least once a day, twice if possible, usually in the evening as the reddening sun was losing its strength and he was overcome by his fear of the night, the boy stood on the tips of his toes and saw her. For a brief moment, through the net curtains, but long enough for the abyss of horror and despair inside him not to open up but remain a festering, gurgling abscess, incapable of piercing the shield of his Mother’s presence. He felt he wasn’t alone and the thus subdued days turned into a monotonous glide.

“I will be going on holiday tomorrow, down to the seaside” the nurse said. “A trainee will stand in for me.” She stood in the doorway, her right hand fiddling with the door handle like a forgotten handkerchief, as she tried to find the right words. “Perhaps it’s better you don’t tell her about your mother. Some nurses wouldn’t understand, they might even call the police. Better not say anything, OK?” she concluded quickly and left.

The boy was expecting a real dragon of a nurse, so he slept badly during the night. Instead, in came a young girl with a broad smile and bright eyes.

“Oh, you poor child!” she said and dropped the railing, sat on the bed and stroked his hair. “Oh!” she continued to say as she went about doing her work. Before lunch she even came and read him a story. She hugged him so hard he could hardly breathe and his bones hurt. He could not stop looking at her and took deep breaths to inhale the scent of her perfume and the fabric softener from her uniform.

She told him how she will go dancing on Friday night and how guys fight over her. All that the boy could do was smile broadly and feel grown up as she asked for his advice about which one she should go out to dinner with.

On the third day she turned to him and said, “I’ve never seen you cry. All the others get sad sometimes, but not you. Don’t you miss your mommy?”

“She’s outside.”

“Where?”

He told her everything, faltering only briefly on the other nurse’s warning not to tell anyone.

The young trainee was already standing at the window, straining on tiptoe with the curtain rubbing against her back.

“Where? Where is she?”

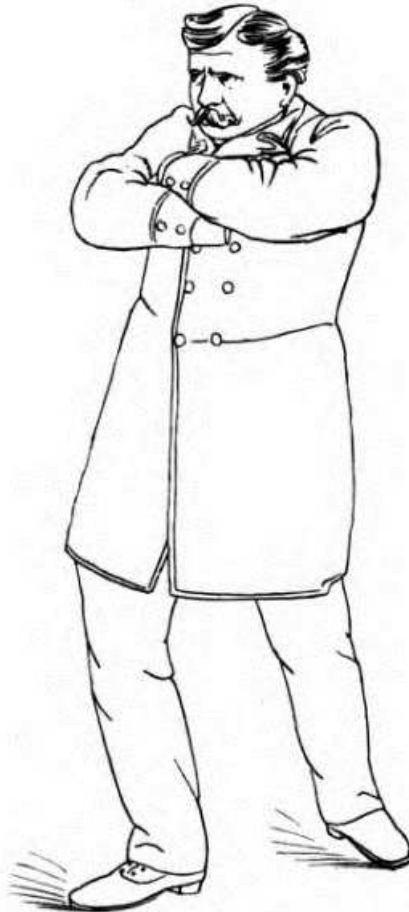
“On the opposite side of the road, next to the traffic lights, in a red dress.”

The nurse stopped and then shouted out loud, “Oh!”

She turned round and wanted to clap her hands, but the curtain got in the way.

“Oh!” she said, her chortle rolling out like glass marbles. “Poor boy, what a silly story! That’s not your mother, it’s one of those thing that firefighters use, what is it they call it, a fire hydrant.”

The Sadness of Frozen Mountains



85th ATTITUDE: STRENGTH.

This attitude is made by advancing the weight upon the right foot, far enough forward to slightly bend the knee ; and folding the arms upon the chest.

STRENGTH.

“Does no one speak ? I am defendant here.”
Virginus, Act IV, Scene II.

It was during Mother's spring-cleaning that he found Father's hand. She had taken the bundle of old letters and photographs out of the top drawer in the cupboard and put it on the table when she was interrupted by a neighbor at the front door and started chatting. The boy could not resist taking a look. The handwriting in the letters was so slanted he could barely make out Mother's name and their address, and the photographs looked like they had fallen out of a puzzle. The jagged edges sometimes left only a tiny piece from which smiled Mother in a pink dress. He saw himself at a very young age, barely having started to walk. His bewildered stare into the camera was probably the result of being told to 'watch the birdie'. Raised, his left hand was being held at the wrist by a male hand that had just lowered him to the floor and turned towards the photographer.

He touched the slightly torn paper. The scissors had hesitated at the wrist, should they leave the male hand or cut off the child's?

Mother laughed out loud. He stuck the photograph under his jumper and straightened the pile back into the plastic bag.

*

He sat in the corner and could feel the photograph pressing against his heart. Mother picked up the stuff from the table and stacked it all back in the cupboard. She had to stand on her toes to push the bundle of letters deep inside, right to the back.

He went to the toilet, staring longingly at the key that he didn't dare turn, as he had never before locked the door. He couldn't resist taking a brief peek at the photograph, bringing it right up to his eyes. He wasn't sure whether the cut went along the watchstrap or the cuff. He studied his own hands for a long time, stood up

and tried to position himself until he established that it was Father's left hand that was holding him.

He decided that Father must have been standing behind him and that this was why there was so little of the photograph left. Mother had had to cut around him, cropping herself out of the picture in the process, leaving only the boy.

**

He got up hurriedly and there was no need for Mother to urge him along on the way to school. With the photograph chaffing beneath his shirt, all he could think about was the school toilet that had a bolt on its door.

The pavement next to the railroad station was cordoned off and he had to cross to the other side of the road. Policemen and customs officials were making people get off the train. Most just yawned and rubbed their eyes, nobody was upset or agitated. Passers-by commentated that they must be looking for some criminal, defector or terrorist, before the train would disappear into the tunnel just beyond the bend in the tracks and re-emerge in Another Land.

He spent all the breaks in the toilets, his eyes fixed on Father's hand. In a low voice he counted the fingers, extending his own as he did so. He turned his left hand and tried to hold it the same way Father held it in the photograph. He squeezed it and closed his eyes. He could feel how it disappeared at the wrist. He wanted to cry and wasn't sure why.

Whenever anyone asked him about his father he followed Mother's instructions and said 'born out of wedlock' or 'single mother'. The kids at school didn't tease him, especially after he had fought with almost all of them in his first year at school. Even the older ones who beat him felt uneasy about his stubbornness, unsure of how to deal

with a person who persisted even when anyone else would long have given up fighting.

Police vans were still parked outside the railroad station and men in uniform waited on the platform, smoking and shuffling about, occasionally crawling out from under the overhanging roof, lifting their faces towards the sun. An icy wind blew from the snow-covered mountains, chasing away the clouds and leaving a crisp blueness in its wake. The sun wanted to make up for the lateness of spring and the boy felt hot in his yellow raincoat that reached down to his knees, his mother always keen to buy clothes that he would not grow out of too soon. He was worried he would sweat through to the photograph, so he unzipped the coat, allowing the still-wintery air inside.

Mother would not be back from work until evening, so he was in no hurry. He turned up the hill towards the outdoor market right at the edge of the forest, stopping outside a newsstand and gazing longingly at the colorful covers of the comics, hoping the woman with the beehive hair would finally invite him to browse through them.

“Marlboro,” he heard a male voice and looked upwards towards his right, seeing only a hat, curly black hair, a rucksack thrown across the shoulder and a brown coat, before returning his attention to the comic covers; Daredevil being attacked by a robot with extendable legs and Iron Fist smashing up the insulator on the power lines. He was about to sink back into daydreaming, when he flinched and turned once again towards the man who had placed the money on the mat and picked up the packet of cigarettes, all with one hand.

The boy followed the man’s arm with his gaze, starting from the left shoulder, and stopped breathing when he reached the end of the sleeve.

Emptiness.

The man turned round and walked off towards the market. Two peddlers were gathering up their wares, taking turns in telling each other jokes, some of the stalls were already empty, on the rest, women hawkers shouted out at the man, slight desperation in their voices, offering him lettuce. He paid no attention to them. As he lit his cigarette he helped himself by using his left hand. For a brief moment a rounded stump covered with skin peeped from the sleeve.

The wind caught the exhaled smoke and hit the boy with it. He felt it burn his nose and almost coughed.

The man reached the far end of the market and stopped. He stared at the steps leading back down the hill to the main road, the railroad station and the waiting policemen. He hesitated, took the first step down, changed his mind and turned around. Nervously, he turned his head, looking beyond the boy, deep in thought. Only after a while did he catch sight of the tiny figure staring at him, mouth wide open. He looked around, checking that it really was he who was the target of the stare. His brow furrowed, raising his eyebrows and bushy moustache into a hostile leer.

The boy pulled the photograph from under his jumper and stepped forward.

“Mister...” he started but was unsure of how to go on from there.

The man began shaking his head, gesturing with his hands and, with the boy still unable to take his eyes off the throbbing sleeve, said something in an unknown language. He turned around and hurried down the steps.

“Mister...” the boy said again, looked at the photograph and put it away. He leapt like a spring and ran after the departing man.

Once the man had walked down the main street, past the waiting policemen with their backs turned towards him, he slowed his pace, leaned forward and lowered his

head, as if he were concentrating on the line where the pavement touches the buildings.

The boy caught up with him and started walking alongside him. The man gave him a quick glance, looked across towards the uniforms and gritted his teeth, making his cigarette flick.

When they turned into a side street he stopped and gave the boy a querying look.

“Mister...”

The man reached into his pocket, pressed a banknote into the boy’s hand and practically ran away.

“Mister, that’s not what I want!” the boy shouted.

A passing couple stopped and watched the scene. The man gave them a forced smile and took the banknote the child was returning to him.

They set off slowly down the street again, walking next to each other.

Two policemen came in the opposite direction, one of them rubbing his face with the palms of his hands as if he had not slept for a long time. The man moved closer to the boy as they walked past, looking, smiling and nodding at him.

The boy returned his smile.

They stopped at the bottom of the steps.

The man gazed up towards the rugged ridge of the Alps, then lower down, across the forested slope and the houses built into the hillside. He nodded to himself and took a deep breath.

The boy stepped alongside him though he had to jump up two steps at a time and his schoolbag kept thumping against his back.

They turned past the open-air swimming pool that was still full of remnants of rotting snow, and soon reached the end of the tarmac. The houses became sparser and dogs behind fences ever more untamed.

“Mister, all I want is to ask something,” the boy said. The wind played with the tails of their winter coats, the bitterly cold air prickled the skin; abandoned by the dampness of winter, as yet to be filled with the scents of spring.

The road narrowed into a dirt track.

The man stopped, crouched and looked the boy in the eye.

“Shoo!” he said and flicked his index finger.

The boy stared at him with surprise.

The man was now pushing him away with his whole palm. He became angry and was soon waving both his arms. The boy could not take his eyes off the missing hand. Exactly at the wrist, exactly where Mother’s scissors had made the cut.

“I needed to cut him out of my life.”

Mother’s voice. When had she said this? To a friend, once when she thought that her son was already asleep?

The boy took a deep breath. The smell of tobacco, sweat and aftershave - a male smell. Occasionally Mother had a faint trace of this smell if she was late back from work.

The boy lowered his head. He saw the black, mud-covered shoes turn around, watched the feet walking away.

The scent of Father lingered in his nostrils. He knew he needed to lock his lungs or he would swallow it with his next breath and spit it out when he breathed out again. He held his breath until his body gasped in agony and Father had already disappeared.

All around, spruce trees with their drooping, defeated branches watched over the scene, blackened remnants of ill-fated snow scattered among them. He looked up towards the blueness that never needs anyone, ever.

He ran.

He spotted the man as a brown patch amid the tree-trunks along the forest path. He tripped and a dislodged stone made a noise as it tumbled off the path. The man briefly tilted his head above his shoulders but didn't turn around, just increased his pace.

Larch trees began appearing amidst the spruce and they had to step over broken-off branches that had blackened moss sliding off them. The wind bit at them with sharpened teeth and the blueness appeared only occasionally, in ripped patches. The path no longer kept to the shape of the slope and began winding up the hillside. The man slipped, the crust of frozen mud cracked and almost stole his shoe. He swore in an unfamiliar language.

The boy was panting with heat and did not want to button up his raincoat despite its tails catching in the dry branches and the plastic tearing as the result of his impatient pulling.

They went past a mountain hut with its wooden benches turned upside down and tied together with wire rope. A forgotten beer bottle lay at the door.

They didn't stop. They could hear each other's rasping gasps for air, urging them along.

They were met by snowdrifts that had devoured the path. The icy crust could hold the boy but gave in under the man's weight; sometimes he had to pull at his leg with such force that he would lose his shoe. As he retrieved it and put it back on, the boy would catch up and once even had to wait for him.

“Mister...” he said, despite not knowing how to go on from there.

The man growled and pushed on.

Now, only snow surrounded them. Above them a col between the mountains and beyond it Another Land, on the hills either side of it grey rocks peeped from the slopes like faces of abandoned grotesques.

Two figures, one brown, one yellow, big and small, leaving larger and smaller tracks in the otherwise unbroken white icy crust.

Sweat, dripping across their faces, getting into their eyes. They had to rub them with the back of their hands, the sharp air eating away at the lungs. Dampness oozes from the skin and the cold takes possession of it so quickly that their bodies shake involuntarily in waves of shivers.

They are alone on the endless hillside, the valley below disappearing into the darkness that from afar looks like a morass creeping after them.

Phlegm gathers in their mouths, they spit it out, furiously wiping it with their fingers, almost scraping it away.

Step after step. The boy lost his bag. It struck him that Mother would be angry but, he is also aware that everything that he had known until now was another life, strange and remote, a sort of fish bowl, an artificial creation, and that everything that meant anything and counted for anything was this, this persistence up the hill, the tension in his body, the edge of endurance and the fabric of the brown coat ahead of him.

A buzzing inside their heads, their hearts want to escape through their ears but then the droning becomes deeper, heavier, flat against a huge metal barrel and, as if by order, both figures come to an instant halt. They look up. High above them flies a passenger plane, large and silver, the setting sun briefly rendering it gold. The man

and the boy open their mouths and shiver. The mountains tremble along with them and a sheet of ice tears away from the hillside to their right and slides over the brink.

The airplane tilts and descends into the darkness. Both figures set off again at the same time and rush ahead.

The summit is close and they trudge through the snow with redoubled effort. The boy, thinking about how beyond the razor edge is another world where everything is different, a place he is not allowed to go. There, all that was now will end – he doesn't even know exactly what, he has forgotten why he is making this effort, chasing a father, the extreme effort having blurred the connection between him and the man in front who remained only the target that drove him on so he wouldn't stop and fall to pieces from exhaustion and despair.

The man pushes on, his every step a long jump. Sustained guttural sounds emerge from the depth of his lungs, he has dropped his rucksack and helps himself along with his arms, the stump hitting against the ice, the fingers on the other hand making holes into the crust, leaving a bloody trail behind.

The distance between them is increasing. The boy is exhausted, he staggers, snot running from his nose mixes with tears.

The last slope before the summit, the man is running along the ledge and disappears behind it. The boy reaches the overhang and catches sight of a small lake on the other side, half frozen, the sun having melted some of the ice that the night would soon once more render solid. The man is already on the final short run before the col, crawling on all fours towards the top and the boy realizes that it is over.

Collapsing, he just lies there. His raincoat opens up like a beetle's wings in its dying final throb.

His grandmother had often explained what death was like and although she had described it in a very different way, he recognizes it.

He watches the figure nearing the summit and feels as if he is watching a TV program he is no longer interested in.

The man reaches the top and turns around. He waves his arms with a silent, gleeful laugh. His golden tooth sparkles in the departing sunrays.

The miniscule remnant of strength that refuses to realize that it is all over, spurs the boy on to start crawling again. The ice burns as it bites at his hands, he slips, something cracks and he starts to roll down the hillside. He tries to hold on, but all is smooth, fleeting by.

He strikes the ice from a height, grabbing in all directions, sliding faster and faster.

The indescribably chilly water swallows him. The claws of the cold crush him.

Terror pushes his hands and legs into movement but everything under his feet disappears, there is nothing solid left, it is all in vain.

He is suspended in the loneliness, opening his eyes into the dark grayness.

A moment of acceptance, a moment of peace.

It is the end.

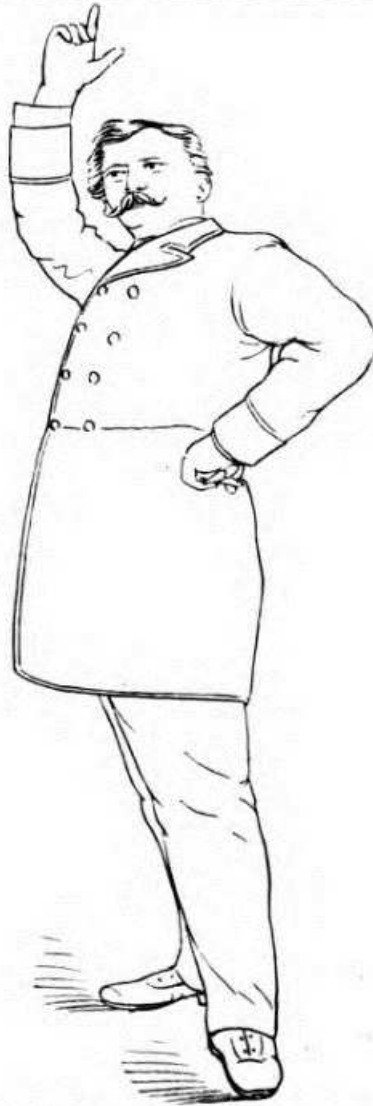
His hands float upwards like seaweed.

At that moment a male hand grabs hold of his left wrist, a powerful blow that sends a wakening shock through the boy's body.

The force pulls him upwards towards the light, air and life.

The man runs. The boy feels his every step, his slips, falls, how he slides along the snow, picks himself up and runs, runs. He is pressed up against him with the coat

that smells of Father over his head, in the darkness, safe, with his ear against the omnipresent heart, in the sound of its mercy and safety, a heart that is beating for him.



86th ATTITUDE: TRIUMPH.

This attitude is made by stepping back with the weight upon the right foot, the right index hand raised over the head.

TRIUMPH.

“Justice is satisfied, and Rome is free!”

Brutus. Act V. Scene I.

“She will die!” Mother held her head. The vein throbbing between her index and middle finger, scarlet and ripe, like a rising river, made the boy fear that he might be left alone if it burst.

“She will die!” she ran over to the balcony window, hitting against it with her elbows. The creaking of the glass was joined by the groans coming from inside her.

She dropped her hands and looked at the boy,

“She was bad enough when by brothers brought her back. She had pneumonia. Where on earth did they have her? I told the doctors I had nothing to do with it. What can I do? They just stared at me!”

Her gaze sharpened like that of a bird of prey, her chin almost narrowing into a beak.

“They probably gave her some wrong medication there, in the emergency department.”

The boy was not sure what to say, so he nodded cautiously. His mother was no longer looking at him; the sharpness vanished as she began dabbing her forehead with the palms of her hand, washing herself without water.

“She will die! And we haven’t even got a grave for her, or anything! Oh! Oh!”

The hands stopped and moved apart. Her piercing gaze made the boy gasp.

“Where does Nona keep her money?”

He turned towards the right wardrobe door. They both knew that on the top shelf, under a pile of fustian underwear, grandma kept a plastic bag hidden.

Mother almost jumped to wardrobe and began shaking the door. The boy moved backward into the corner so as to not be in the way as she ran into the kitchen, returned with the largest knife she could find and started picking at the lock. She

panted and the metal blade resonated as it made flakes of white-varnished wood fly across the room.

The door opened enough for Mother to grab and start shaking it until there was a loud crack and she had to catch her balance.

She opened the bag and stuck her head in it.

“It’ll do!” she said, grabbed her winter coat and slammed the door as she left.

The boy stared with horror at the hanging cupboard door and it took him a long time to dare even approach it. On the floor he found a holy card depicting Christ on the Cross. He swiftly picked it up, held it against his chest and closed his eyes, wishing for Nona to return.

*

Mother stamped her feet outside the door to get rid of the snow and entered with a triumphant glow on her face.

“You can be proud of your mother! There were some people at the cemetery; their sister has died, she had no other relatives and I did a deal with them about the grave. They have already signed it over to me. I think they were glad to get rid of her, I certainly wouldn’t give my dear mother away for such a price.”

She rubbed her hand, blowing out the cold from them for a long time.

“I must go off to work, do not go out, wait for them at home.”

The boy was unsure of what his mother was asking of him. He sadly looked at his rubber boots and then stepped to the balcony window, observing the fern frost that framed the glass. He could hear children shrieking outside and the occasional snowball came soaring upwards in an overzealous trajectory. The factory chimneys perforated the blanket of winter smog, exhaling through their grey black mouths.

*

“Where should we put her?” the man with a moustache said clearing his throat.

“Put her down here!” Mother pointed to the gap between the bed and the wardrobe.

“That won’t do, Madam,” the man shook his head, adding in a voice that allowed no objection, “We shall dismantle the bed, put the mattress in the kitchen, you’ll just have to bear it for these two days.”

*

The boy stared at the wet tracks left on the floor by their boots, slowly forming a puddle. The men in blue overalls leaned the bed frame against the balcony window, brought in a stand and some planks that they covered in black cloth, left and came back with the coffin.

They lifted it onto the bier and leaned the lid against the wall. A cross with a small branch winding round it glared from the lid. They straightened the plastic veil, placed a smaller stand at the feet and a piece of white cardboard with lettering and black ribbons stretched across its top corners. In front of that they paced a pot full of something that looked like salt. A sprig of spruce was tucked into a glass next to it.

“There,” the man in charge looked upon it all with satisfaction. “We’ll be back the day after tomorrow.”

Mother nodded.

With a final greeting they left. The smell of cigarettes and beer vanished and the room was filled with a much heavier, sweetly scent, stuffy yet at the same time inviting.

The boy stepped on his tiptoes. All he could see was a black hump inside the coffin with a waxy mass on the pillow, stretching the fabric netting that covered it.

“What is this, Mother?” he asked.

“We say *Who* is this,” his mother grunted. “You are old enough to speak correctly.”

“Who is this, Mother?”

“Maria Novak.”

“Who is Maria Novak?”

She flicked him above the ear, so he cried out.

“You’ll not get far in life, you are too curious. People don’t like that.”

Nevertheless, a little later she explained,

“They wouldn’t sell me just the grave.”

*

The boy climbed onto the chair and could not take his eyes off Maria Novak. She appeared to be incredibly old and pale, waxy, like the candles in church. He stared intensely at the veil and her mouth to see whether she would breathe. He tried competing with Maria, holding his breath, but gave up. He was tempted to go up to her and touch her, but didn’t dare. He thought Death might jump into his hand, turn him to stone. He tried to imagine laying in the dark, without breathing, alone and helpless, for all eternity, as his grandmother used to say, and thought he preferred to be in Heaven among the angels. Or even in Hell, anywhere, just not in the motionless solitude.

*

“I have taken the day off tomorrow,” Mother said. “Just pretend she is not here.”

The mattress in the kitchen was half leaning against the wall and when they tried to lie down there was barely enough space for one. The boy was thus given a folded coat on the floor and a winter jacket for a pillow.

*

“Go and play outside,” Mother said.

He ran out into the yard. Both warring sides showered him with snowballs but eventually one allowed him to join them behind the piles of snow that served them as ramparts. Though he shouted, jumped around, spat at the snowballs to get them to freeze solid, and participated in all the onslaughts, his inner thoughts were still back at the apartment. He kept looking up toward the first floor balcony, the wood leaning against the window and the darkness behind where Maria Novak lay.

*

“They will take her away tomorrow and bury her,” Mother said. “See, it wasn’t that terrible. Now everything is ready for my mother, were, God forbid, anything to happen to her. It’s a good job Maria Novak is a short name, they charge by the letter. We will need to save up.”

They had spaghetti with an instant sauce for dinner and the boy unwittingly looked towards the door.

Mother, wiping her enamel plate clean with a piece of bread, stopped. The boy also pricked up his ears. Slow, sliding steps could be heard coming from the stairs, as if the person approaching was unable to lift their feet the extra half an inch from the floor. They both held their breath and heard the asthmatic gasping for air.

Mother turned white and looked towards the room in panic.

The boy jumped to the front door and flung it open.

“Nona!”

He snuggled up to her and had to use all his powers to reach the familiar smell through the layers of disinfectant and medicine that had settled over it.

“Oh, at least you love me,” his grandmother said and stroked his hair. “But where is that useless daughter of mine? Having to make my own way back from hospital at

my age! In this weather! The doctor was kind enough to drop me off personally, such a good Christian, a true Good Samaritan!”

She leaned on the boy as she negotiated the last couple of steps.

Mother stood at the table, her fingers pulsating as if she was breathing through them.

“Admit it, you are not pleased I am still alive!” Nona said.

Mother muttered something.

Nona started making her way to her room, using the boy as crutch.

“No ... NO!” Mother finally moved.

“No what? Oh, I see, who are you hiding there? You have a man, Are you screwing around?”

“I will not allow you to speak like that in front of my child!” Mother arose.

“Why then am I not allowed into the room?”

“Because...” her voice suddenly became barely audible. “... I am asking you not to.”

“Hah!” Nona triumphantly opened the door and her loud breathing came to an instant halt.

“Oh!” she cried out, pushing the boy out of the way and leaping forward with unusual sprightliness.

“Maria Novak?” she read out the sign. “Who is Maria Novak?”

She noticed the broken door to her sanctuary.

“Oh! No! My funeral savings! You cow, you dared do this! Is there nothing sacred with you? You betray me with some other Maria! You go and bury her with my savings! May you roast in Hell! How could you? How? You went and got

yourself a new mother, one that is already dead! Is it not enough you almost killed the first one?"

All Mother did was open and close her mouth, waves of color flashing across her face. She spoke with the voice of a schoolgirl,

"I only meant well. I was buying a grave for you, Mother. And I was given her as well, her folk don't want her."

Nona placed her hand on the sign as if she wanted to read it with her fingers as well. She stared at the face under the veil.

"Leave me with her," she said.

*

Mother slept and snored slightly and the boy watched Nona sitting at Maria Novak's side, praying. She steadily pushed the beads of her rosary through her fingers. the only clear words being *the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

Her voice lulled him, his eyelids lowered and because the winter jacket kept getting dislodged, his head only stopped on the doorframe.

"...forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen."

"Amen," said the boy, already sleeping.

*

His arm went numb, sometimes his leg, his neck hurt, he cried out a number of times and sleepily opened his eyes.

Nona was talking to Maria Novak.

"I see," she said and remained silent for a long time. "It all goes by so quickly. Men, children, life, everything. Everything. But God remains. The more everything

else passes, the more God remains. In the end it is only He who is important. All the rest is wind ... dust ... nothing.”

The boy was asleep again.

*

With his right hand he grabbed his left and shook it. Only with great effort did he manage to regain sensation, and with the pins and needles came pain.

“I get you, yes. I used to carry bread around the isolated mountain farmsteads. The solitude, the cold, the fear, it’s all indescribable. Then you look upwards. So many stars, so much longing. I would like to see that sky once more, the sky, so much greater than me, like God is so much greater than creation.

What a sky! Imagine the rucksack full of bread, freshly baked. Smells so good, warms your back! Your stomach rumbles and you are worried it might dig its way through your back to get to the food.

The bread, right there, but not for you, and above you the sky that is for you, yet you cannot reach without God.”

She sighed deeply.

“It’s easier for men. They can leave. If they don’t leave, they are taken away. Did you have anyone you hoped would stay? Someone you looked into the eyes and said, stay, please stay?”

*

In her sleep, Mother stretched out her leg and kicked the boy. He looked up.

Nona was crying.

“How sad, that after all that you had been, you are just a body that nobody wants. I can understand you. I know what that’s like. Being a nuisance to everyone, all of them waiting for you to die so they can forget you. No one to light a candle for you,

no one to pay for mass and write your name on your grave. Your story, forgotten like a speck of dust.”

In his half-sleep the boy thought he could hear an unfamiliar voice answering back, but he could not make out what it was saying.

*

Mother was mixing the coffee substitute and when Nona came out of the bathroom she handed it to her meekly as if it were the greatest gift.

The doorbell rang.

Mother looked at the clock, said ‘It’s too early’ soundlessly by moving her lips and apprehensively opened the door.

An elderly woman with grey hair, a black jacket and skirt said, “I have come for Maria Novak. I feel guilty.”

“Alright,” Mother said. “Will you also return any of the money?”

“I will.”

“How much?” Mother’s face became slightly cunning.

“What’s going on?” Nona interrupted the haggling. “You will sell Maria? Sell her into slavery, like the early Christians? Such heathens, I cannot believe it. I won’t give you Maria!”

She angrily pushed her daughter’s shoulder.

“For years and years I was merely a nuisance to you all. When I finally get a friend, you start trading with her, you cow!”

Mother growled at her,

“There is no pleasing you! It’s impossible to satisfy you! I want this, I want that! Only last night, I want my money, I don’t want Maria! And today, I want Maria, I don’t want the money! How am I supposed to follow what you want?”

“I won’t give my friend! I won’t!” Nona sobbingly shook her fist in front of her face. “What will you do to me? Send me to hospital again?”

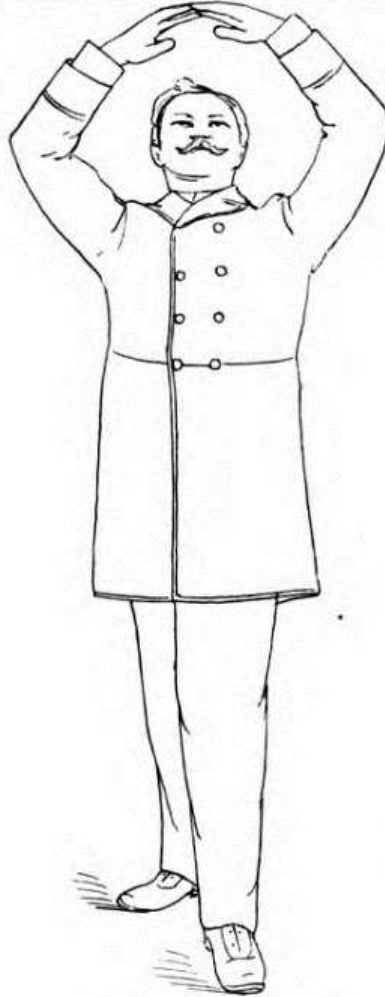
Mother put her hands on the hips.

“Tell you one thing, you old bat, it’s about time you realize who is boss around here. You can only have one head of the family. That is me. Is that clear?”

*



Avro Lancaster



33rd ATTITUDE: JOY.

This attitude is made by standing on the right foot retired, with the head thrown back and the finger tips interlaced over the head, forming, with the arms, as round a circle as possible.

JOY.

“Seven hundred pounds, and possibilities in good gifts.”

The Merry Wives of Windsor, Act I, Scene I.

“The Lord is watching you! We are not alone! There is someone above who sees everything!” Nona pointed to the crucifix hanging on the wall. Jesus seemed totally engrossed in the wound oozing blood down his ribs, but the boy still lowered his head, petrified. He closed his eyes and could still see the waxy body of Christ nailed to the charcoal black wood. A few minutes later he heard his grandmother turn around, with some difficulty, and once more begin reading the *Lives of the Saints*. The words coming out of her mouth were unintelligible, like gurgling bubbles breaking on the surface.

With Nona, being good entailed endless hours stuck in the corner between the bed and the balcony window. He carefully slid along on his buttocks right up to the foot of the bed frame and gazed at the cross. He still didn't get the feeling that the suffering Christ was paying any attention to him whatsoever. He turned toward the sky and at first thought that his eyes still held the afterimage of the cross that seemed to be floating before him, then he realized that the object out there was something different, a metallic cross reflecting the sun, with letters like those above Jesus' head written all over it. He stared at the sky until, despite pressing his cheek against the glass, the cross disappeared from his field of vision. Children could be heard shouting in the yard. It would upset him to see them running around amid the apartment blocks, so he stayed in the same position until the pain in his neck became unbearable.

He once already asked Nona what the thing in the sky was, but she merely waved her hand scornfully and snorted, “Argh! Contraptions, machines! Carry people! Human vanity!” She then immediately crossed herself twice, just as she always did whenever she became angry.

It took until a new cross came flying over. This one left a thick trail across the sky. He remembered a trick he had discovered in the winter and bent his index finger against his thumb, leaving only a tiny hole in the middle. He peeped through it and could see much clearer. There must be some kind of fire inside the cross, this probably meant it was transporting people to Hell. Nona was right. He never dared question, but a small voice inside him often disputed her, albeit terrified, whispering, quickly spilling out his doubts and taking flight before he had a chance to suppress it. Particularly when his grandmother talked to spirits he could not see and certainly whenever she predicted who would step through the door the next moment and it didn't happen. Nona would forget all about her prophecy, only to remember it when the person really did arrive. "See, I told you! What did I just tell you?" Most often she would predict Mother's arrival, late in the evening when she'd return from work. In Nona's prophecies her other children for the most part either died or were injured in accidents, though they kept coming round to visit alive and intact.

Nona would often read from the *Lives of the Saints* to the boy, but she didn't like answering questions about the world out there. She would mention sin and wave her hand in front of her nose as if trying to get rid of a horrible smell. Whenever they went out for a walk the boy would hurry across the block with his head down, so he would only hear the other kids' caustic remarks without allowing them to exacerbate his shame by pulling faces at him as well. Once out of town they would walk alongside the railroad and occasionally a train full of people would drive past. The boy would wave until his hand felt numb and tingling.

Some of these trains were pulled along by engines that also had smoke coming out of them, but people at the windows sat peacefully, slept, and some even smiled. Was it possible that a similar train could also fly like a bird? The boy shook his head.

He would have to ask Uncle Vinko, the only one of mother's brothers who ever talked to him and knew so much about everything.

*

When he played, he used his plastic truck to imitate the train as well as the metal crosses in the sky. Bees and flies were the only airborne things he ever had the chance to observe at close range, so now he pressed the sides of his tongue against his palate and “Bzzzzzzz” the toy slowly flew past the bed, circled around and then returned back to its starting point. He used his pencils to draw both crosses, the one from the sky and the one from the wall, placed the pages next to each other and compared them. The black one was easy to draw, but the one from the skies eluded depiction. He left Jesus out of the drawing and asked his forgiveness through prayer.

Some words stick and won't go away. Several times over the following days he heard himself say, “The black one is easy to draw”, without knowing why. Nona liked to explain the workings of the mind: we carry an angel on our right shoulder, a devil on the left, both of them constantly whisper things in our ear. But this voice was coming from inside him, right from the middle, and he was unable to judge who it belonged to.

He kept repeating the sentence when Nona sent him to get some potatoes from the cellar, when they sat in the kitchen peeling them, when he was playing with the broken rod of a lost wheelbarrow and when he was drawing and gazing out of the window while his grandmother fell asleep reading.

“The black one is easy to draw.”

*

It took a number of days before he summed up the courage to slowly pull the chair up to the cabinet during grandmother's usual afternoon nap.

The following day he stepped onto the chair.

A day later he pulled himself up onto the cabinet and had a close look at Jesus.

If he was sick, Mother went along to church with Nona on Sundays instead of him. She always looked annoyed. Didn't want any dealings with priests, she would always say before closing the door and leaving him alone, adding that they would be back soon.

He needed to be alone and the only way to achieve that was through sin. He hesitated and tormented himself, kept telling himself that both Nona and Mother were able to see right into his thoughts. In the end he pretended to feel sick and could hardly believe it when they did leave. He thought again that it would be safest to just stay under the blankets, but could already see his hand throwing back the bedclothes.

*

“BZZZZZZ!”

How his black cross flew. He held it with his thumb and index finger, stuck a rather shabby-looking plastic figurine of a clown on it and flew him off either to Hell or on a trip somewhere, depending on the day - he could still not make his mind up as to the purpose of the crosses in the sky. He flew low, never above the edge of the bed and kept looking over at Nona. The first few days his heart plunged into his intestines every time Nona approached the cabinet, looked toward the crucifix on the wall, crossed herself and muttered a greeting to the Lord. She had often said that she didn't see faraway things very well, but the boy didn't imagine that there was anything in the crammed apartment that could be described as *far* away.

He was much less worried about Mother, he could not recall her ever looking over to the wall.

How his cross flew!

“BZZZZZZ!”

Jesus did not strike him with a thunderbolt either. He continued to pore over his mortal wound and didn't seem to be bothered that he was now nailed to a cross that was merely drawn on the wall.

*

Uncle Vinko stepped over to the boy's corner and crouched.

“How are you pal?” he asked and gave him a smile broad enough to display his golden tooth. Men wore brilliantine-smoothed hair, but Vinko would deliberately ruffle his after applying the brilliantine, making it swirl above his pointy ears. As even the boy's mother would admit, with a moustache trimmed into a triangle and his tanned skin Vinko looked like a movie star, always adding that as he was the one member of the family who had achieved most, he could afford to. He drove a truck and had seen a lot of the world. Only when he was around did Nona smile and her eyes gleamed, though her mouth continuously uttered warnings, “Sinner! Vinko, you are such a sinner!”

He also smelt like a person who had come from outside, without stuffiness and mold. The boy forgot all about his secret and straight away showed his uncle his new toy.

“BZZZZZZ!”

“Oh, an airplane!” Vinko said.

The boy stared at him.

“What's up?” Vinko was surprised.

“There are lots of them ... in the sky.”

Vinko ruffled the boy's hair affectionately, something Mother hated, claiming an exclusive right to her son's hair as her own territory and creation.

“Pal,” Vinko laughed. “Lots? You ain't seen nothing yet! They would cover the sky during the war. You couldn't see the sun!”

The boy's jaw dropped and, as he always would in such cases, Uncle Vinko used his index finger to push it back up.

“You are not at the dentist, pal, believe me.”

“Are there people inside? Like in a train?”

“Yes.”

“Alive?”

“Yes, of course! What did you think, pal?”

“They go in and ... what do you call it ... travel?”

“Yes, Paris, London, ... Stockholm for porn...” his uncle grinned and winked, though he knew that the joke meant nothing to the boy.

His knees began to hurt, so he stood up. The boy followed him, unable to move his eyes away. His jaw once more slid towards his chest and this time his uncle did not adjust it.

“Uncle, have you ever flown?”

“Of course. Hah!”

The boy could not find words for the feelings that filled him. All he managed to do was stretch out his hand and grab hold of his uncle's wrist, making sure it was a man that stood before him, not an angel.

*

How they flew! The plastic clown, Mickey Mouse's head, a rolled up piece of bread, a bow-legged cowboy who lost his horse and now fitted most comfortably onto the airplane. They visited places the boy had often heard of: Jerusalem, Bethlehem,

Canaan, Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, Sodom and Gomorrah, as well as those less known, mentioned by Uncle Vinko: Paris, London, Stockholm and Forporn.

Once, as they were trying to avoid the Great Deluge, they made a hard landing on top of Mount Ararat and the plane shattered. All of a sudden he was left holding two broken pieces of wood, one of them split half way down its length. He stood in the corner facing the wall and cried silently until he calmed down enough to push the remnants of the cross into the gap under the baseboard.

*

No longer did he want to gaze at the sky.

*

“Pal, I have something for you!” Uncle Vinko said, holding his right hand behind his back. Since his uncle would often be just messing around, the boy dared not get excited. He couldn't move his eyes off the shoulder and the hand that started to appear. His uncle produced a crumpled plastic bag, clearly not very heavy.

“Put your hand inside!” he said. “Close your eyes first!”

The boy obeyed.

He felt a slight prick on his fingertips and shyly moved his hand away without daring to open his eyes.

“Hey,” Uncle Vinko said. “Come on, come on!”

The boy felt his way across some sort of spikes that slipped out of the way, then suddenly metal, wide at first, narrowing suddenly.

He could not take it any longer, he opened his eyes and, holding his breath, carefully peeled away the bag.

Mouth agape he faltered.

“An Avro Lancaster bomber, pal!” his uncle said and winked at him.

The boy held the airplane as gently as a breeze.

“They'd fill the sky,” Vinko went on to say, “but even spotting a single one while I was lying in that fucking ditch, looking up and there it appeared, out of the blue - you are too young to understand - I understood that I was not alone. That we were not just abandoned in that shit. That there were others above who would help us. They were coming and would end this shitty war. But later, in the final days, they filled the sky! Woah ho ho! I was already a tanker by then. How we rushed towards Paris! In the evenings the Lancasters would fly out against the Krauts, what murder machines! They would return at dawn. Pal...” He picked up the brightly painted aircraft made of thin metal and held it by the fuselage. “They returned ... You wouldn't believe it ... Sometimes they were missing half a wing, others had broken tails. Some had so many holes in them you could see right through them. But they still flew. How many of our lives they saved! And how many Krauts they killed! But that's how it goes, pal!”

He gazed somewhere beyond the boy who, begging that his uncle would not take it away, dared not stretch out his hand to reach for the plane.

Vinko stood still, breathed deeply for a while, then loudly sniffed the mucus back up his nasal passages and gave the bomber to the boy.

“Pal, just remember, memories are like the taxman, you can never get rid of them. Right, now for something more joyful! See this watch?”

He pulled up the sleeve on his nylon shirt and tapped the glass with his finger.

“Look what it says here!” he said and stopped mid-upcoming-narrative. “You can't read, can you?”

The boy shook his head, though he did think that the first letter was a *D*.

“This is a Cartier, the real thing, pal. When you get to wear one you can say you made it in life. So there we are, rolling into Paris with our tanks, and I see this shop...”

*

For the first few days he didn't even dare pick up the plane, let alone play with it. He gradually worked up the courage and started to examine it more closely, though he still did not touch it: The colorful roundels on the wings and the sides, letters, tiny men that were simply painted onto the seats in the cockpit and in the back. And wonder of wonders, plastic propellers that actually rotated.

He didn't want his eyes to distract him from the actual contact, so he closed them tight when he first touched it. The body was made of two halves, the top and bottom of the fuselage, bound together with tiny hooks. He obsessively copied out the writing on the underbelly of the aircraft onto paper: Avro Lancaster B Mk.I.

*

Whenever Nona was dying, she always called for a priest to administer the last rites. On such occasions Mother would put her coat on and run over to the only neighbor with a phone.

That night the priest said he had an urgent case elsewhere, and that Nona had been given her absolution and final sacrament so many times that she could manage without him.

Mother lingered in the doorway and suggested she called a doctor, but Nona refused. She did not want other people to interfere in matters that were strictly between her and God.

They all lay awake, each in their own bed. The moon did not appear that night. In the middle of the night workers at the nearby ironworks tapped the blast furnace, an event Nona accompanied with loud screaming about the advent of the Devil.

Nona's moans occasionally extended into a whining groan. Mother clenched her fists and gritted her teeth, repeating more than once her suggestion that they call a

doctor, but Nona only wanted a priest. “He said NO! NO!” Mother shouted, then realized how late it was and looked around, checking whether the neighbors were already bringing their ears to the walls.

“Light me a candle!” Nona cried out.

Mother obeyed. She held the candle in her hand for a while and then placed it on the cabinet, right in Jesus' view. They all watched the flame flicker until Nona had another spasm.

“Go bring the priest! Get the priest!”

“NO! He said NO!”

Mother ran into the kitchen and closed the door behind her. Nona started to cry. She called out Jesus' name, then she gradually replaced it with that of the boy.

“Are you here?”

“I am,” the boy said and lifted himself up.

“Good, good.”

A new bout of groaning took away her words. She gasped for air before she could continue,

“Give me the cross, let me die with it!”

Obediently he jumped up, ran to the kitchen, grabbed a chair - mother was sitting at the table with a coffee, holding her head - closed the door behind him and climbed onto the cabinet.

Then he remembered there was no cross.

“The cross! The cross!” Nona shouted.

He knew that Mother would soon storm into the room, grab the cross, throw it at Nona and demand some peace and quiet.

He ran his fingers over the drawing and for a moment thought of just handing Nona Jesus. But the figurine alone without its mount seemed rather lost and powerless, Nona would instantly see the difference.

“The cross! The cross!”

He pulled at the baseboard and brought the sad remnants into the half-light. They sat mockingly in his hand. Nona continued to groan and demand, grabbing at her abdomen and chest.

The chair in the kitchen creaked - was mother getting up?

The boy's hands shook, his gaze drifted across the room lit by the flickering light.

A reflection on the metal.

*

Nona grabbed the object the boy had passed her with both hands and pressed it against her chest, burying it in the layers of shawls and cardigans. She held onto it with all her strength, begging Jesus, God and Holy Mary to help her, not to allow the Devil to come for her, to redeem her and when her time is up, save her soul.

Slowly she calmed down, stopped groaning and fell asleep. Mother came out of the kitchen, caressed the boy and said, "Go back to sleep, everything is alright!"

Once both Nona and Mother were breathing steadily the boy carefully climbed out of bed, crept up to Nona and from her loose fingers retrieved the object that she had clung onto in her fight for life.

*

There was not much left of the airplane. It had lost part of one of its front wings in the battle, the other was bent, the back wings had fallen off, the body was flattened and the underbelly split. The plastic propellers had disappeared altogether.

Tears rolled down the boy's cheeks, though he did not have the feeling that he was crying, but merely emptying his feelings.

Dawn was breaking. The flat still stank of candles and the battle with Death, the prospect of day covered everything with a cloak of grayness. The boy stood next to the balcony window holding the remnants of the airplane he had never dared to fly.

Crying, he pressed the sides of his tongue against his palate and hummed.

“BZZZZZZ!”

Quietly, so the sleeping women would not hear.

“BZZZZZZ!”

He raised his hand above his head, held up the plane and took his first step.

Uncle Vinko was right, despite everything it did still fly!

“BZZZZZZ!” it set out alongside the bed, past the footboard to the other side, into the darkness next to Nona, then it turned around and returned back towards the window and the faint light.

The boy knew that the airplane that had killed and saved so many was deciding what would happen to him. Then he plucked up his courage and jumped, feeling the soles of his feet leaving the ground and the airplane accepting him, the steady drone of its engines turning toward the morning and the world.



The Foretelling

The wheels defiantly bounced once more before finally yielding to gravity. The engines roared and the airplane stopped so suddenly the seatbelts tightened with a jerk. The girl sitting diagonally in front of me clutched her purse with fingers that had turned white and when we came to a standstill she had to stare at them before they were able to loosen like a spring.

I had come on a pleasant task; a half-hour introductory speech at a conference in return for traveling expenses and three nights stay – a rarity in an era that equates efficiency with cutting costs; not necessarily where it should but where it dares to.

The credit card was the only document the man at reception was interested in. I left my suitcase in the room, left the window ajar and went for a walk with a bag over my shoulder.

I planned to see the tourist attractions the day after the talk. Until that is over it remains wrapped in my mind, a part of my brain preoccupied with it and occasionally demanding my full attention.

I chose the less busy streets and avoided the tourists with a conceited feeling of not being like them, I was a roamer, for I was walking aimlessly. I set off down the hill, the façades looked like the Stations of the Cross of dereliction. Rust overwhelmed miniscule balconies and it was impossible to tell the redundant cables apart from dead climber plants. I stepped carefully along the worn paving stones, the sky was but a long strip of blue above me. Exhaust fumes were replaced with a heavy, earthy smell, remembering bygone foods and peoples. Once I started concentrating on it I was not sure whether I was breathing or nibbling it.

Only a few hours earlier I was at the airport, the metal and glass modern layer of the town. By contrast, this quarter was still in the nineteenth or perhaps an even earlier century. Open windows, grayish laundry hanging across the narrow streets, old men smoking on benches and workshops with lights already switched on.

I heard a group of children behind me and stopped. A boy with a runny nose bumped into me, almost as if he wanted to walk straight through me, bounced off and ran away without as much as a glance. I checked to see whether he had left me a smear of his snot on my trousers.

The children ran around the corner. An old woman sitting under a roof scolded them. The mouthful of sh-sounds that peppered her language buzzed their way into my memory that made the hair on my neck stand up on ends. Only then did I notice that she was not looking at those who had ran past, but had turned toward the bench on which, right in the corner, sat a small boy. His head tilted, he stared into the passage into which the children had disappeared. It appeared as if he was trying to catch the remnants of their distancing yells. He looked frozen mid-desire to run after them; his left foot pushing against the ground, his buttocks slightly lifted.

“Não!” the woman hissed.

He made himself press his shorts back against the wood.

“Não!”

He lowered his head.

“Não!”

He raised his leg. It was left suspended mid air without purpose or meaning.

“Não!”

He sat on his bent leg and began playing with a toy car, driving it up and down his thigh. All I could see beneath his hair was his offended pout.

The old lady nodded in satisfaction and turned toward me. She said something and beckoned with her hand at the table in front of her. A pack of Tarot cards lay on the plastic tablecloth.

“Não Português,” I accentuated my lack of knowledge of the language by waving my hands.

“Destino... cinco euros... destino...” she waved with ever greater speed (and determination). There must once have had been a great more of her under the skin that now appeared crowded across her skull. There was too much of it for ordinary wrinkles, creating waves, most prominent under the eyes, smoothing out only on her pointy chin that glistened as if the woman had not properly wiped off some oily food she had been eating. Her dark eyes could easily have been watching me from a much younger body.

She was now only repeating about the five Euros.

“OK,” I said, pulling the note from my wallet and placing them before her. It instantly disappeared under her flowery shawl. Just to be sure, I repeated,

“Não Português.”

“Destino,” she said.

“That indeed,” I added in Slovene and smiled. She picked up the cards, stacked them into a deck and passed them to me. I was unsure what I was supposed to be doing with them. She indicated with her fingers I should shuffle them, talking throughout.

The cards were sticky and heavy, difficult to handle and arose in me a slight repulsion. I tried to remember whether I had brought the small bottle of disinfectant with me.

The old woman nodded with satisfaction and urged me on with her hand. The boy started to hum; his offended pout had become the exhaust for the toy car that drove across his skin faster and faster.

The woman's hand stopped. I obeyed.

She started blowing and a part of me found itself somewhere else; in the one bedroom apartment with my Mother about to have one of her bouts of rage. I looked around worriedly.

The woman was blowing at her palms and indicated I should follow suit.

I did.

She smiled, satisfied.

Patting my left hand with her index finger, she showed me to put the cards down. I lay them all down, triggering a long monologue. Her sh-sounds hit me with force and I needed to remind myself that this was just a coincidence; this woman whose age made her similar to my Nona was merely speaking her own language and did not have the same speech impediment.

The issue was that I was supposed to only have put some of the cards down. She shook her head with irritation, sighed, and began to show me how I was supposed to turn them and where I should place each card. Creating combinations that meant nothing to me, I stared at the images that had faded through use.

The old woman spoke fast with surprising energy. She tapped the cards with her fingers, waved her hands above them, said "infância" and cried out, nodded joyfully with "futuro", repeated the word "ame" a number of times, winking as she did so. I could not follow the rapid flow of words, my thoughts floated away, a part of me was here, another part in my childhood, I wished I could just run up the street and disappear into the largest group of tourists in the open-air market at the far end.

She picked up the cards and stacked them, only then falling silent, clearly satisfied with herself.

“Obrigado,” I slowly stood up. My knees cracked.

I really did need the crowd, tourists, the present. Metal and glass, the electronic display that merely lists events that have yet to happen.

The boy was still humming, driving along his toy, stealthily lowering his left leg toward the ground.

“Não!” the woman growled as if she had eyes on the back of her head. He instantly obeyed. His pout was too upset to continue making engine noises. He pressed the plastic so hard the wheels left marks on his skin.

“Moment,” I said and pulled the phone out of my bag. I typed in the text into the translator and read it out the way I imagined it should sound,

“Estou perdido. Podem o menino me mostre o caminho para perto da estação de bonde?”

Her frown indicated that my skepticism over my pronunciation was justified.

“Perdido,” I repeated a few times and pointed at the boy and then up the street.

I once more turned my attention to the telephone and started reading,

“Eléctrico... bonde... carril... carro eléctrico...”

Something worked.

The woman nodded, hissed something at the boy who jumped up and stood a few steps in front of me.

“Adeus,” I said to the fortune-teller and followed him.

At first a few building still looked familiar, then we entered even narrower streets, yellowed with the rust from the drains. We walked past workshops in which old men cut leather or planed wood as if globalization had never happened. The path became

steeper and stank of cat piss, a cold breeze sent moldy greetings through cracked doors. The boy walked fast and did not look back at me. The paving stones became steps of uneven height so I had to take care with every step and when we came to a standstill the sudden overwhelming light made me close my eyes.

We stood at a busy street, someone was sounding a horn, a young man was hanging out of a tram, shouting at a girl waving at him from a balcony.

“Stop!” I said to the boy, even though he was standing quite still.

I grabbed my phone and started typing in what Uncle Vinko had told me that day in the corridor.

“Don't worry, boy. Everything passes, even childhood. You have something in you that makes me not worry about you. You're a fighter. You'll get through this and make something of yourself.”

How I held on to the sound of his voice and the trust in me that it emanated! I had built myself a memory that with time almost became tangible; my refuge, towards which I would leap with open arms in times of despair, one that comforted me when I touched it.

Now I read out the words of Vinko's talk to the boy, loudly and decisively, in computer-translated Portuguese, without having the slightest clue about pronunciation. I felt stupid but sometimes one needs, even in this way, to complete tiny circuits in time.

When I had finished I remembered that the boy was probably waiting for a tip and not inherited wisdom. I reached into my bag to find my small change wallet. Strangely, as soon as the coins jingled, the boy ran off down the hill and disappeared into the darkness.

THE END