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you know this pain! ... Think of your mother, of her, in her grave! Tell me, would you not go down on your bare knees and dig up the grave with your own hands to say to her what you would not say when she could hear? A single word perhaps, just one, concealed by your vain shame, by the stinginess of your heart? Think of all the others, how many there are, who cannot hear you anymore and will never hear you, who waited eagerly for your word, and yet you withheld it! Do not keep silent or you will find yourself lamenting to deaf graves, calling out from the depths as the wind blows your words into the forest and across the fields! ...

How heavy my word is all of a sudden, how full of tears, how painfully it is torn from the frightened heart! ...

Last night I saw a large grave reaching from mountain to sea. A dead man lay inside it, so bright and beautiful that the heavenly stars stared at him entranced. On his face a limitless suffering turned to stone, on his lips, those poor lips, a last reproach quivered: "Count the hours, my son, when you looked upon me with devotion, and thought about me with pure love! Say a warm and gentle word, from the bottom of your heart, and with it, offer a drop of living life! Show me the tears you shed for me, show me the blood you spilled in my name! Your hands are empty; lie down next to me, there is enough room!" –

Oh God, it was just a dream – there is still time, still time! –

## The Mirror

But where have I wandered, where have I lived for so many long years? Was it all just a dream and am I only now truly seeing? I was among people all this time, I knew many of them by their names, and I thought I knew many of them also by their faces and their hearts. But now it is clear to me that I was wandering among grey shadows that coiled formless and inconstant before me. I was wandering half asleep, and what I naïvely used to look at and listen to, feel and touch, was only rarely a distant metaphor for truth, but more often a forgery and a lie. I could have slept through my days to the end and then quietly disappeared among the shadows, a shadow myself, an orphan born blind, deaf, and mute, a weary old man who was never a child.

But the hand of God came from heaven and set upon the earth an enormous mirror whose upper edge was laid against the stars, whose lower edge sunk to the bottom of the sea, and whose sides stretched from dawn until dusk. And all living things on earth looked at God's magnificent mirror as if under a spell, and their own true images were embodied inside of the mirror, without lipstick or jewellery, without velvet or silk. The sinner stood before the judge and the righteous judge passed judgment in silence.

But is that you? It cannot be you, my friend, most passionate orator, I do not recognize you! Once there

lived a young boy who wore a wide black bow, tied in the past manner of artists and barbers. He was thrilled beyond measure, thrilled so to speak by the sheer thrill of it all. He loved his country so much that he wept at the mere mention of its name; he offered it his heart's blood in the customary way, and was deeply anguished because there was no opportunity for noble heroics in that era. So as not to be reproached for laziness or cowardice, he went rummaging through hiding places looking for cowards, smugglers and selfish men, and when he found one, he grabbed him by the collar and dragged him without mercy to the pillar of shame. He went among the people with tight steps, his forehead wreathed with fair curls, and they pointed at him and whispered: "Look at him, that's him, that's the one!" – and the world respectfully paused and parted to make way for him... But is that you, my friend? In the corner of the mirror, all wretched, poor, orphaned, sullied by your own vanity, a tremblingly naked person, skin shrivelled by this low, bodily, cowardly fear that clings shamefully to your groaning bones... Turn away, eyes, look at a nicer place, a different face!

I knew a suit a while ago, respectful from top to bottom. It had a wide collar made out of the finest beaver and was nicely cinched across the belly. Wherever this respectful suit went, people took off their hats and bowed to it, greeting it from their hearts; many an eye was moistened by a strange emotion, just as the eye of a person moistens when, after long days of desolate dusk, he opens the windows wide in the morning and catches a glimpse of the heavenly light beyond the mountains in the east. This suit appeared benevolent from afar; it sprinkled gratitude and peace all around. It did not make coins appear from its wide sleeves, it did not share bread from its lordly pockets, but it smiled gently and kindly. It offered a warm

caress, sighed sometimes, and its smile was golden alms to the beggar, sweet consolation to the widow and orphan. Word went before it, as the altar boy goes before the priest with his incense: "Kneel, praise it to heaven, this suit, for it grants mercy, it gives comfort wherever it walks, wherever it looks! ..." But is that broad face not the same one that once hovered proudly above the respected suit? There it is, staring from the mirror, staring with a yellow wolf-like eye, its cheeks hollowed to the bone with greed, its teeth rubbed down by the gold they bit and gnawed. And the suit is nowhere to be seen, the respectful suit with the wide collar made out of the finest beaver – gone, the suit that spread benevolence to all sides – gone; naked, he stands there, shivering in shame; in his hands, in the talons of a vulture, he clutches the purse of Judas and the purse is full to the brim; he clutches it, shivering, until muddy blood oozes from beneath his fingernails, he would like to hide it, but he cannot... Oh, my poor eyes, turn away!

Turn away, poor eyes of mine, but not there, not there, horror is there, horror without compare even in this terrible mirror. I saw her once, Suzana, in the spring, in May. Back then not even the dewy morning sun's godless kiss could approach her beauty. When she crossed the fields, the flowers turned to her in greeting. And wherever her laughing eye fell, the shadow was extinguished, the stain washed away. That was how youth sang among us, passed by us, the soles of her feet never touching the ground... But now a loathsome rotting wound is on display there looking for the place where it will be the most visible; a pair of dark green-lined eyes, two shameless sins beguiling from beneath a cheap wreath, midnight kisses leeches into swollen lips that now call for company... No more! Nothing more!

Oh, nothing more! But the eyes are under a spell, they do not flinch for an instant, and they keep staring faithfully at what they are most ashamed of and afraid to stare at. As many faces as I ever knew, kind and unkind, they are all unspeakably and horribly transformed into their distorted doubles; and only rarely a silent flickering light shines bright, like a lonely moth above the swamp, a pale face that has not been sullied, a pure heart that went through the honeyed mountain of sin and did not taste it. In God's mirror, the lie stripped of the stolen clothes of truth now looks at its own nakedness with chattering teeth. Not only did I see individual faces, recognizing them with great effort and an ill premonition, I also saw crowds of people swarming from hill to hill, leaders and idols, once worshipped and splendid, but now just a pile of rubbish beside a pile of dung. And I saw long processions of people, processions before carnival in which there were no brightly dressed, drunken bodies, but only kurent pilgrims with no clothes or ribbons, masks or bells, all naked, dressed only with hearts hanging out of their chests for all to see, filled with spit instead of blood. And I saw nations, mighty and shining, the soul and scourge of humanity, defying God with their abundance and wisdom, fame and might; I saw them... Eyes, have you no more tears?

If you still have any, shed them until there are none left! Who stares at me now from the mirror, among the last, the hidden, the shamed? Have I not seen him before, ages ago in my youth, more beautiful, purer, stronger? If you still have tears, eyes, shed them until there are none left! ... Why should I complain? Remember, you said it yourself: The sinner stood before the judge, and the righteous judge passed judgment in silence. –

## The Captain

A long time has passed since my dreams, like the dreams of every man, acquired a new and peculiar appearance. They are no longer desolate reveries, fleeting mists flowing into one another without purpose or cause before finally dissolving into nothingness. They are no longer dreams gazed upon in the morning by a man who greets them, eyes still heavy from sleep, with a half bemused, half angry wave of his hand: "The Devil take you from whence he gave you!" whereupon they tragically stumble down the abyss, like dwarves hiding in the forest at the first break of dawn. The dreams I dream now, and the dreams you dream, are shadows of the real truth; but they are frighteningly enlarged, strangely disfigured and malformed, and yet the truth remains; you understand it at once, and your heart grows sad.

It was a cold autumn morning. The mists dragged themselves down the valley and crawled along the steep ridges of the mountains; the rays of early dawn on the mountaintops bleached the first snow that had fallen the night before. The sky was clear; it still recalled the midnight snow and cold morning stars, but was poised to meet the sun.

I looked through a window; it had never been cleaned before, so I looked as if through a veil, and yet I could discern everything exactly as it happened in front of me; the voices were so clear in the pellucid morning air that

I could hear and understand each word. The courtyard was covered by an inch of blackened dust turned by the night into greasy mud; the same dust covered the low rooftops of the barracks and the wilted leaves of a walnut tree standing alone in the middle of the courtyard. Under the walnut tree, a soldier held the reins of a saddled horse that whinnied and shivered from cold and unease.

The company stood in a long, straight line, ready to set out for the battlefield at that same hour. They stood there as if made of stone, no eye flinched; the slender bodies were slightly bent under the burden of their heavy backpacks. I have never before seen so much young beauty in one place. All of the faces were very young, almost childlike, and they were all fresh, as if washed by dew and dawn; bright dew also sparkled in their eyes, and they gazed as if from distant shores, from beautiful dreams; all were facing the captain who was walking up and down in front of the silent line of boys with a slow and careless step.

The captain was an extremely tall man, taller than the others by a head; he wore a loose black coat, and underneath the coat appeared a pair of long, slim legs; in his hand, claw-like and bony even in its glove, he held a cane that helped him to walk. I could not see his face for it was always turned towards the line. A step behind him walked a young banner man who sometimes glanced around in fright as a man who wishes to escape might do, but feels himself chained without mercy.

Once again the captain began his survey from the end of the line. He stopped in front of the first one in the line, a tall slender boy who stared at him with black muted eyes. The captain stood directly in front of him.

“What is your name?”

The boy told him his name and my soul was pierced:

but I know you, beautiful young boy. Thoughtful boy, starting with a full heart into a grand future! A man among friends, a well-behaved child among elders! A living branch on a tree: to cut it down is to wound the tree itself!

The Captain posed a second question:

“Is your father at home?”

“I no longer have a father!”

“And how many brothers and sisters?”

“None!”

“Is at least your mother still alive?”

“I still have my mother!”

And a light shone bright in his muted eyes.

Then the Captain raised his cane, pressed the iron-bound end to the boy’s chest, and nodded to the banner man behind him. The banner man pulled a notebook out of his sleeve and wrote down the boy’s name. And the boy grew pale.

The captain walked past another and did not look at him; then he walked to the third and looked at him carefully. This one was a merry, outspoken, loud young man, a renowned singer and a favourite of the girls. He had a healthy, round face, bright curls of wheat next to his tiny ears. His azure eyes sang loudly and his dark red lips were rounded in a gentle smile.

“Do you have a bride at home,” asked the captain.

“I do, sir Captain, sir!”

The azure eyes sang even louder and the song reached the bright distance.

The captain raised his cane and the banner man wrote. And the song grew silent in those azure eyes.

In this way, the captain continued slowly down the line; he examined, questioned, and made his choices. Sometimes he skipped two or three, some he did not even look at, and at other times he chose five or six of them in

a row. And it seemed to me that he chose the strongest and fairest deliberately and with purpose.

He came to the end, raised his cane for the last time, and turned around. That is when I saw his face and my heart went silent. His face was without skin and flesh, with two deep caverns dug into his skull in place of eyes, and long sharp teeth grinning above a naked mighty jaw. The captain's name was Death.

“Onwards... march!”

The company moved in an instant and took a firm step into the mists below. The Captain rode in front; his black coat rose high above the fog. –



## Children and Old Men

The children had a habit of talking with each other before they went to bed. They sat beside the tile stove and talked about anything that came to their minds. The evening gloom peered through dusty windows into the room, its eyes full of dreams, and silent shadows rose up from every corner, carrying with them the strangest of tales.

They talked about anything that came to their minds, but to their minds came only beautiful stories, made of sun and warmth, woven from love and hope. Their entire future was a single long bright holiday; there was no Ash Wednesday between Christmas and Easter. Somewhere behind the colourful curtain all of life twinkled and flowed silently from light into light. Their words were half-intelligible whispers; no tale had a beginning, nor a distinct vision, no fairy tale had an ending; sometimes all four children spoke at the same time and none bothered the others; they all stared entranced into that magnificent heavenly light where each word rang true, each tale had its own clear and living image, and each fairy tale its own splendid ending.

The children looked so much alike that in the dusk you could not distinguish the face of the youngest, four-year-old Tonček, from the face of ten-year-old Lojzka, the eldest among them. All of them had narrow and tiny cheeks, and all of them had large, wide-

open eyes that stared at the distance and at themselves.

That night something strange from foreign lands entered the heavenly light, and struck mercilessly with a violent hand into the holidays, the stories, and the fairy tales. A letter had announced that their father “fell” in Italy. “He fell.” Something unknown, new, foreign, completely incomprehensible, stood before them now, and it stood there tall and wide; it had no face, no eyes, no mouth. It belonged nowhere; not to the loud life in front of the church and on the street, not to the warm dusk around the tile stove, not to the fairy tales. It was not joyous, and yet neither was it especially sad; for it was dead, it had no eyes to explain with a look why and from whence it came, and no mouth to speak of it in words. Their thoughts stood in front of this large phantom, meek and frightened, as if facing a mighty black wall, unable to move. They approached the wall, blankly stared, and fell silent.

“But when will he return?” asked Tonček, deep in thought.

Lojzka shot him an angry glance:

“But how can he return, since he fell?”

All of them were silent; all four of them stood before the mighty black wall and could not see beyond it.

“I will go to the army as well!” said seven-year-old Matijče with a quick wave of his hand, as if he had grabbed hold of the perfect thought and knew exactly what to say.

“You are too small!” four-year-old Tonček, still tucked in a coverall, warned him.

Milka, the smallest and most sickly among them, wrapped in her mother’s too large headscarf, so that she looked like a travel bundle, asked with a soft silent

voice that sounded as if it came from somewhere beneath a shadow:

“But what kind of army is this, Matijče, tell me... tell me a story!”

Matijče explained:

“Well, an army is like this: people stab each other with knives, cut each other with swords, and shoot each other with guns. The more you stab and cut, the better, and nobody scolds you for it because that is how it must be. That is an army.”

“But why do they stab and cut each other?” asked Milka, helpless.

“For the Emperor!” said Matijče, and they all fell silent. Somewhere in the distance, in front of their veiled eyes, something magnificent appeared, illuminated with bright glory. They did not move, their breath hardly dared to escape their mouths, as if they were in church before a great blessing.

Then Matijče waved his hand and caught a second thought, perhaps only to dispel the grim silence lying over them.

“I will go to the army as well... I will march upon the enemy!”

“But what does the enemy look like... does he have horns?” Milka suddenly asked in her thin voice.

“Of course he does... how could he be the enemy otherwise?” claimed Tonček, serious and almost angry.

Matijče did not know the answer.

“I think he does not!” he said slowly, but his speech halted along its way.

“How could he have horns... he is a man like us!” said Lojzka, annoyed. Then she thought for a moment, and added: “But he does not have a soul!”

After long deliberation, Tonček asked:

“But what happens when a man falls in the army. Is it like this, on his back?”

He showed them how a man falls on his back.

“They beat him... until he is dead,” Matijče explained calmly.

“But father promised he would bring me back his gun!”

“And how will he bring it, if he fell?” Lojzka reproached him.

“But did they beat him... until he was dead?”

“Until he was dead!”

Four pairs of young wide-open eyes stared dully and meekly into the dusk, stared at something unknown, incomprehensible to their hearts and their minds.

Grandmother and grandfather sat on the bench in front of the house. The last red rays of light shone through the dark leaves in the garden. It was a quiet evening; only from the stable could a muffled sound be heard, a raspy crying; the young mother had gone there to feed the cows.

The old couple sat with their heads deeply bent, close to each other, and they held hands as they had not held them in years; they watched the evening's heavenly rays of light with tearless eyes, and they did not speak. –

## Fear

Three of them sat at a table; one was a hunchback, one was lame, the third one was an idiot. The idiot sang with a beautiful and pure voice:

“Oh, but what can they do to us – do to us – do to us –”

The hunchback poured wine for all of them, and addressed the lame one:

“When I pour, I get the feeling that the three of us should not be allowed to sit at the table. And not even in the corner. Our true table is out in the hallway on the floor.”

The lame one looked around the room, which was deaf and mute.

“Let us stay here as long as it is empty!”

The hunchback bowed his head.

“It is too empty! I have never liked rooms like these, where a man can hear his own word repeated nine times. I was afraid to be left alone even as a child, and even in broad daylight. I thought: now the door will finally open, slowly, quietly, the doorknob won’t make a sound; when the door is opened wide, someone will enter the room – but who?”

“Who?” asked the lame one sullenly, instinctively glancing at the door.

“That is the worst part – who? Fear would not exist if a man knew the true nature of what frightened him, the phantom waiting behind the door to turn the doorknob,

to creep into the room. Fear is a disease that spins the strangest images in the lonely heart until one day it makes them come true. It is only a hint of the unknown, of the otherworldly; that is why a man dies from fear, because he must die; for how can he go on living among the clamorous people once he has seen the other side?”

The idiot stared straight ahead with empty eyes and sang without stopping:

“Oh, but what can they do to us – do to us – do to us –”

The lame one pointed at him, smiling.

“Well, this one has already seen the other side! Do you know what happened to him when he was still a boy? He was once alone at home, in a large room, and it was already dark; his folks had gone to a wedding to feast their eyes. The child hunkered in a corner and watched the night tip-toe closer and closer. It was then that the neighbour Šimen thought up a very special prank. He found a hollow pumpkin, carved a set of eyes and a mouth in it, and placed a burning candle inside of it. He set this pumpkin on his head, flung a long white sheet around his shoulders, and went into the hallway. Ever so quietly, ever so slowly, he opened the door, opened it wide, and stood in the doorway, tall and frightening and not uttering a single word. He left as he arrived, slowly and quietly closing the door behind him. Outside he blew out the candle, threw away the pumpkin, and returned to the room, merry and loud. ‘Well, Mihec, what are you doing here all alone and quiet, hunkering in the corner? Are you by any chance afraid?’ The child said nothing, pressed himself against the wall, his body shaking, his teeth chattering. ‘Well, Mihec, why are you shaking – it is I, Uncle Šimen!’ The child remained silent. Well, he did manage to get his tongue back, but he never regained his wits... Tell me, when he saw Šimen with that pumpkin and that sheet, did he see the other side as well?”

“He saw the other side as well... he was blessed to have seen it so soon!” the hunchback replied sadly, deep in thought. “For he did not see Šimen! Even if he had taken off his pumpkin, thrown away the sheet, and laughed out loud then and there, the child would not have understood that the phantom was no phantom but Šimen in disguise. Because at the very moment when the door opened wide and a pair of red eyes shone high above him, he saw the very same thing his own frightened heart had imagined in its loneliness... He is blessed! He sings... we cannot because we have not seen Uncle Šimen yet!”

The lame one turned to the window with a strange smile, not in any way merry. It was getting dark.

“I think he is already near!”

“I think so too,” sighed the hunchback. “The fear in my heart is announcing his arrival. If it were only possible to escape somewhere from the loneliness, from the silence; but it is impossible; a man carries loneliness inside of him, wherever his steps may take him... Do you hear that?”

Joyous singing and festive cries could be heard outside; they came closer, passed the house, and echoed all the way down the hill. The idiot shouted and scampered to the window, and the lame one pulled him roughly by the sleeve and sat him back on his chair.

“Silence, you freak... are you not ashamed?”

The hunchback hung his head low, and hid his eyes in his palms.

“Tomorrow they may already be looking at death... but death is not the frightening thing, the unknown apparition that sneaks and crawls down a dark hallway; death steps in front of a man uncovered, large and clear, and takes him into his arms... The man may experience terrible pain; but the pain is not...”

“Is not Uncle Šimen with a hollow pumpkin on his head and a sheet drawn around his shoulders!” said the lame one.

“You miserable wretch, you will not see death the way those cheering boys outside will see it... it will crawl one day silent and ugly from under your bed like a phantom. You will not taste pain. You are abandoned, cursed to sit in solitude, to gaze at the door, to tremble and wait for the thing that must appear to finally appear! This unknown fright is already in your heart and it will soon be incarnate... is the door already ajar? I feel as if a chill has blown in with the night.”

“It is close, I tell you, it is already in the hall!” the lame one shivered. “But what about you, my little Mihec, are you not afraid that the thing will come now, mighty all the way up to heaven, and look at you with eyes burning bright and...”

The idiot smiled broadly and sang with a resonant voice:

“Not a thing can they do to us – do to us – do to us –”

A harmonious tune was heard from the distance, from the valley:

“Oh, this old soldier’s drum...”

Heavy night descended upon the room, and no face could be made out in the darkness.

The lame one and the hunchback fell silent. –



## May

First I went into the garden. The apple trees were in bloom; some of them were pure white, while others had a pink tinge on their soft leaves, like the first blush that appears on the cheeks of children in the morning. Beneath the apple trees, a shining blue carpet of forget-me-nots unfurled; it was woven so thickly that the grass could hardly breathe and had to strain towards the light. From above the woods, still in the misty dreamer's twilight, the morning sun, the bright-eyed master of the skies and earth, held watch over all this beauty.

I plucked a forget-me-not and spoke to it: "But can't you see, young innocent one? Don't you know anything? Why, this is a completely different sun, a completely different spring! And you remain just as you were." After five minutes the flower withered in my hand and died. Seeing her dead and thinking about all the others I had trampled without thought or remorse, I was struck by fear: "You are a human being; and death is your memory!"

I headed into the woods. Everything was just as before, there was no sign of rot, no scent of bodies left unburied lingering in the air. The succulent leaves of a young oak shone from behind the tall dark spruces; the ground was covered with fresh ferns and wide fields of blueberries; a late wood violet revealed itself at the end of the path, silently greeting me from under the leaves, and there, a row of white daisies shone brightly, while a crop

of timid lilies of the valley hid in the deep silence. The gentle golden-green buds of young spruces and pines enfolded the subdued branches in shining wreaths. I plucked a flower that looked exactly like a Greek cross, I caressed it and spoke to it: "Soft golden-green flower, you helpless one, don't you know anything? Don't you know how hard it is for us in this world? You enjoy the light as if it were still the same warm light! You drink life and you love it as if it were still the same young life! Oh, foolish innocent flower!" After five minutes the flower withered and paled; death seized it when a man went by.

The woods suddenly parted on both sides, and I saw a wide meadow that had not been there before. Chestnuts had grown there once, a proud and merry fellowship, but now only tiny poor stumps remained amidst the shrubs and ferns. It seemed to me that I was looking at the remains of cleanly sawed-off arms and legs displayed by a band of wounded soldiers. From underneath the dead stumps young sprouts moaned, yearning for space and air; but something dark and merciless held them to the ground, would not let them up towards life. Just below me a sprout moaned for the last time, it sighed and trembled: "Man has walked here; his memory is death!"

The May sun, usually so sweet and soft, had not yet reached its zenith, and yet it already scorched the barren meadow with the strength of hard summer. I lay in the ferns and slumber fell gently over my forehead and eyes. A tiny bluish flower grew right next to my arm; I did not know its name. An enormous bumblebee sucked on the flower; it gulped so greedily that its lower body shook; the flower swayed. I raised my hand carefully, aimed, and let fire with my index finger. The bumblebee went flying, tumbled into the ferns, then quickly picked itself up and buzzed around me in hasty circles, half mad, half scared,

before setting off into the sunlight. The flower's stalk was broken just beneath its neck, its head bent low. Just then a long black ant crawled quickly and restlessly onto my shoe, as if it had lost its way, and then staggered towards my sock. I secretly aimed at it, but it saw me; it fled to one side and then the other but could not escape; I fired at the right time, and it flew up high and disappeared.

I was soon so taken by slumber that the tall trees around the meadow began slowly swaying in rows, taking on strange and monstrous shapes; the dark spruces resembled human giants with long forked arms, eyelashes reaching down to their stomachs, and enormous clumsy legs that could only be lifted from the ground with great effort. The light on the meadow became mild; it flowed into my soul like wine. I saw and heard everything around me but did not move; a sweet lazy drowsiness covered my body in a soft blanket, and I remained still so that it would not slip off my knees. I heard the birds singing and chattering in the branches, the solitary cuckoo calling from afar, and the trees themselves talking to each other, their subdued voices speaking words of wisdom. I found a great uninterrupted calm in these conversations, the deep silent joy of a lake resting beneath the noonday sun.

Just then something clumsy and fat appeared on the blanket; it stumbled, it staggered, it climbed ever higher; it was a fat bumblebee, huge, nine times larger than the one before. Immediately behind it, from the other side, a quick and agile ant rushed over; this one too was strangely long, longer than any ant I had ever seen before. As they approached each other on my belly, they paused and looked at me with bulging eyes; they pointed at me and conversed silently. My heart was anxious; I would have liked to have heard and understood at least one word. But right at that moment, a couple of titmice