



85 1-2

a cane on a stroll

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His wife was listening: heavy footsteps pressed the floor, approached the wall and then moved away, went out into the hall toward the door of the flat, paused, waited, wited, and then returned and continues their conversation.

»He will. He won't. He will. He won't.«

The face was frowning above the old jacket above the nimble stitching; a prick of the needle, a jerk of the head backwards, the face relaxed, the forehead smoothed itself, the crust of an earlier thought dissolved and in the broad, relaxed face a new thought began to take shape, and the face again stiffened, stiffened and frowned.

And the footsteps in the other room were the cause of that thought, of one, then another, and still another, divided between constant assertion and denial, today the same as yesterday and the day before yesterday, the same for months now.

The floor yielded and gave a subdued moan. The shoes did not thump because he stepped with the entire sole, athletically extended his legs, but only by habit; now it was only the gait of a heavy-set body.

A steamer let out a whistle somewhere, then a horn blew, and a donkey somewhere on an upper street answered.

The footsteps stopped.

»It's no use, my dear,« she whispered and began to work the needle faster. »I know that it's all useless.«

In the cupboard a small bowl rattled among the dishes that were left.

He appeared at the open door of the little room. Grey eyes between pillowy eyelids joyfully came to life below a raised nose and the mouth sagged slightly, scorning the doubt.

»Everything's all right«, he said, forming his words with difficulty in a low, mumbling voice. She snapped angrily: »What's all right?«

»Everything you witch.« He raised the pitch of his voice indifferently. »Everything's all right, eh, everything.«

»Go to the devil!« But she immediately lowered her head, embarrassed because of her harshness. She busied herself more attentively with her darning.

Now he considered the conversation finished. He leaned over toward a bundle of canes sticking out of a vase in the corner. Delicately, he selected the ebony one with the ivory head of a spaniel, a gift from his father-in-law from New Zealand, a cane of the market and the coast, one that belonged to an appraiser of two-lagged charms and observer of distant, slow ships. With two fingers he slowly raised the cherished object, turned it nearsightedly before his eyes, and suddenly returned it to its place. He became frightened of his mistake.

Entering the room, he looked back at that time absent-mindedly. He approached the window.

»Il" see if there are any fish«, he mumbled in a deep voice.

»Go ahead. Who's stopping you, his wife replied.« Everytime, he's lookin for an excuse,« she thought. She knew his ways by heart. On the other hand, she wasn't at all interested where he was going. »He's already grown old. He's in his fifty-seventh year. He could only hide a glass

or two — or stop by the cobbler. Will he ever mend those shoes of mine,« she thought.

He stopped a step from the window, and she was rapidly closing, then opening her eyes, sensing his presence. He never gave any great significance to anything, never showed curiosity, that is, he protected the dignity of a man of his character, but he had a face that had a habit of scorning.

And now, with pretended indifference, he framed the sunny part of the market place with the window: the fountain, a stretch of the coast below the window, a peasant's boat. Two sailors in shabby blue linen uniforms were slowly unloading sacks of bluish sand, throwing them with even movements of their shoulders onto the pile next to the sidewalk. A boy and small girl interrupted their race, stopped short of the ship, and with raised shoulders, out of breathe, watched the work. They stood for a moment: what could they do with this now? And a little further, a yellow dog cautiously leaned over, stretched his head out over the edge of the pier, peeping into the blue unknown. Beyond, in the harbor, a small steamer was struggling along in the haze. The harbor was still resting from its war wounds, still did not open its arms to the distant world. And more and more people were coming out to the shore. A crowd was swarming under the brightly-lit façades of the houses and under the walls of the old palace.

He closed his eyes, then began to sway, as if he were going to fall over backwards. He opened his eyes and, not moving his head, fixed them on the picture above the Japanese bamboo table next to the window.

A boy with a long face and wavy hair looked at him with grey eyes, soberly and thoughtfully, with lips pressed self-confidently, just a little too bitterly.

He always confronted him bravely. »I lead my life, and you, my son, lead yours, but — not without each other.« And now he spoke to himself and rubbed his nose as a humorous wave passed across his face. »You couldn't embarrass the old pleasure seeker, ha ha ha. . . .«

His son had been interested in music, played the cello, composed, and studied architecture. »He had dreamed of huge halls in which thousands would listen and look on in silent, collective enjoyment. He was, but he's no longer . . .« He blew his nose noisily and stared out the window.

»How could everything just disappear? All those thoughts, all that ambition, his eyes? It's too much. How could it all just disappear?«

But the eyes of the picture, with a slight trace of humor, reassured him: »I am alive. I will come.« And the old man smiled.

»You could not embarrass me, ah!« he whispered. »And why would he embarrass me? All that is part of life.«

»What did you say?« his wife asked.

»Nothing.«

»Aha, nothing. You've begun talking to yourself!« Her voice quivered strangely.

»So what. Isn't that so?« He winked at the picture.

And the eyes of the picture once more reassured him: »I am alive. I will come.«

»He will come!«

»What?« asked his wife.

»I'll be a little late. I'm going to the committee,« he said calmly. »A large factory is going to be built down by the bay.«

His wife remained silent.

He threw a glance at the canes in the corner, moved something in front of him with both hands, and began to sway, extending his arms and legs nonchalantly like an athlete.

»So long, old woman,« he said.

»Go on, go on young man.« She pressed her lips scornfully. And she too had enjoyed life, waited for some great opportunity, some glorious parade with infinite, adorned space and inexhaustible time, when she would enter enchantingly, magnificently, but 'with only one flower in her hair.'

The harbor was coming to life. Small ships were docking, departing, mooring by the shore. Life awoke slowly but unrestrained. The sun-

light was fixed on a row of old houses and ruins, as if it would remain so bright as to seal the peace.

And the ruins, entire blocks, the partially destroyed docks, the sunken ships, and even the small fishing skiffs were resting following the hard work.

»So, so! Civilization! Culture!« he said by habit while strolling.

His steps were uniform, in a definite direction. His face, elongated with deep wrinkles, like a famous actor, immobile, expressing wisdom on matters of girls, pleasure, families, property. All that was transient. This too had passed. He had no more strength. In the sky there were no planes. In the harbor there were no torpedo boats, no destroyers. There were no dangerous green uniforms.

Everything was passing, passing.

And suddenly he became angry:

»You see what they are capable of doing, huh!«

»Grandpa is talking to himself,« a young boy said, turning the other way.

»Yes, yes,« he said, »I am.« There, you see! People passing by, children going to school, youth strolling and discussing current affairs. The present, the present! Those bodies, even those clothes are from that era. How can he not be here!«

He had heard from his son's friends, the boys who had sat with him on the benches, paddled around on the sea, swam, and played in the orchestra. They came to tell him that somebody had told them that somebody else had told them that he had been seen in Italy. Someone had seen some of our boys in Germany. No one could prove that he had been killed. The last time they had seen him was during the Fifth Offensive. He had been riding an old nag covered with a blanket, barefoot (he had given his boots to a foot soldier), all swollen from kidney disease which had become worse during the endless walking without food. »Forward comrades, nothing bad can happen,« he had repeated constantly. He didn't complain. They broke the enemy selge. Days and nights passed. And suddenly he disappeared from sight.

»He was capable of crawling under some bushes and dying alone, so as not to be a burden on the others,« he thought. And that thought flattered him. »He stayed behind to sacrifice himself,« he said. He was startled by a young couple appearing next to him. »Taking a stroll, eh?«

»What else can we do, Uncle,« said the boy good-naturedly.

»Oh, nothing, nothing. Just keep on strolling. I have nothing against that. Go on, go ahead young man.«

They had left behind much of that. They were expecting something new. The steamers were sailing, the trains were rolling.

And so he arrived at the station at the right time. He passed by the wreckage of the buildings and found himself in a sunny opening. The train from Zagreb was expected from the North. In front of the rails, like in front of an imaginary border, like in a game, stood the people: women, boys, girls. There were also many flowers and cheerful faces. The people were chatting as usual. Nothing unusual there. All of them were expecting someone known, announced. There was no reason for excitement.

And two boys with turned-up noses and hands in their pockets were mingling with the other people. They winked at each other toward the bouquet of flowers in the hands of a somewhat overjoyed girl. Evidently they had nothing to do. They were just soaking in the impressions.

»Who are you waiting for,« he asked them.

»No one,« said one of them, slightly confused.

»Mister Butra,« said the other.

»Well, what are you doing here then? It would be better for you, my children, to go home that your folks don't worry about you.« The boys grinned at each other, mockingly, wonderingly, and went on, looking for a chance to laugh, forgetting all about the old man.

Slowly he took out a small tobacco box, looked at it for a while, tapped it with his finger. He stared at the ground. He tapped it again, and then opened it. For a long time he was trying

to choose a cigarette. Let the time go by, let the time pass. Let the things happen.

All around, here and there, at the distant points on the tracks are cities. The rails hug the earth, cross borders, penetrate into the bowels of the earth, enter huge stations. The old man imagined such a station where the people were approaching the tracks. In the crowd he pictured a young man drawing near, excited because he is going home. There is much work to be done at home. Many things left behind are awaiting him. On him are the rags of a uniform; on his face and hands, traces of a prison's gloom, hunger, hard work, beatings. He walks as if in a dream, not yet believing the reality. With glowing eyes he searches the railroad cars in which the strength he needs is gathered. He climbs up reverently, searches for a seat. And the train starts out, roaring for an age. The rails rattle at crossroads. The villages, the cities float by and he looks through the window, waiting for the signs of familiar landscape ... There it is! He sees it! The sea! The city! ...

He heard the whistle. On the tracks beyond the bridge was a cloud of steam. The rails were clattering as he slowly lit a cigarette. He bowed his head to exhale the smoke. With his finger and thumb he flicked the match away and saluted it. He drew on the cigarette, inhaled, exhaled, releasing the smoke lavishly through his nose and mouth like a factory of pleasure. The locomotive passed under the bridge, chugging, hissing, smoking, pressing the rails (they yielded obediently.) Slowly the earth trembled under the weight of the important train. All the heads of the waiting people turning toward the arriving train. The faces from the platform and from the windows of the cars met. Ah, the sweetness of the return.

But the old man stood off to the side. He didn't want to give his question too much weight.

The train stopped, whistling tiredly.

He didn't move. He glanced almost carelessly at the exits. The doors of the cars were opening. The travellers with their suitcases cautiously stepped down, holding back those behind them,

making them impatient. Others were jumping out quickly, as if they wanted to set free someone behind them who had to get to the ground as soon as possible. The train was quickly emptied.

He threw away his cigarette in a wide arc. He exhaled the remaining smoke, then swayed, taking long strides with his arms hanging and fingers folded casually. He left after the last passenger. They dispersed like a dream. They didn't notice that anything was lacking among them.

And so from the exit he continued up to the shore. How clear it was, and how blue and open the sea was. A ship was gliding on the smooth surface, coming from the island. He stopped every now and then, took out the tobacco box, tapped it with his finger, coughed a little, and swayed at the knees.

The white ship was steaming directly toward him. A tall ship, listing a bit to one side, frothing gaily and smoking, moving with ease, as if it meant nothing to furrow the breadth of the earth like that. Its two eyes, with wet sails, squinted humorously and even winked, as if to make happy the numerous people waiting at the dock.

»Hey, Uncle, waiting for someone?« a porter asked confidently. »Waiting, aren't you?«

»The ship, brother. I'm waiting for the ship,« he drawled.

»Oh yes, the ship, the ship, of course.«

»Well, why shouldn't I wait for the ship?«


»Of course you can wait, man. Go ahead and wait. Who's stopping you?«

»I thought you had something against that, you old oyster.«

»No, I have nothing against it, even if you're waiting for two ships.«

»Two, huh? One is enough for me, enough.«

The ship docked, the passengers disembarked. And the old man set out along the shore, back into the city. Through the narrow little streets he surfaced onto a small square behind a tower. The square was encircled by the stony faces of the houses, by the empty shop windows.



There was a monument in the middle of the flat pavement, and a hot patch of sun slid by on its northern side. Many people were passing through, and two women were chatting on the corner. A child about three years old drifted away from his mother and set out for the shop windows to look at the multi-colored displays of victory. A large red-white-and blue flag on the other side of the square attracted his attention, and he ran, his legs working like scissors. His eyes bulged worriedly because he had ventured so far from his mother.

»Ah, my brave one, where are you off to?« he said to the child. »Come, give me your hand. Look, here's a flag, a flag, a large star. And there's a picture, see? Now, let's go to your mother. There she is looking for you, you see. Mommy is looking for you.«

The child looked at him with wide-open eyes.

»Hey, you're running away! Let's go down to the docks.« His voice was like distant thunder or the roar of a lion. The child felt like giving his hand to this velvety, deep-throated man. The child straightened up, as if he had become the hero of the day. Triumphantly he approached his mother. He dropped the hand which had guided him, ran, nestled himself behind her skirt, and from its shelter, gave a small smile to his big friend.

»He's a good boy. Take care of him.«

»I will, I will,« said the woman solemnly. »You see. Uncle will let you have it if you run off again.«

»Oh, no. I won't do anything to you. You are a good boy, my little june bug. Let him enjoy himself. Take care of him. People have died for those like him.«

»The sun is shining for him,« he said to himself.

In the dark sleeve of the street, a child about ten or twelve approached him, holding one hand in his pocket, and brushing the wall with the other. Preoccupied, he walked in a somewhat fixed direction, and along the way he was testing some imaginary contraption.

»Hey son, where are you off to all alone, huh? What, nobody at home?«

The lad started, glanced at him fleetingly, and walked around him, continuing on his way.

»Go back to your folks,« he grumbled. But now he lowered his head, as if ashamed, as if he had overdone it in some way, and pulled himself a little faster as he emerged onto the market square. The sun had already spread itself on the broad square and had somewhat warmed the sidewalk. He didn't turn his head toward the café in front of him where his cronies (and even some younger retired friends) were already sitting in the shade. With steady, firm footsteps, and swinging, arms with folded fingers and a masked expression of his face, on the brink of irony, he sank into the shadow of a narrow street on the other side of the square and passed through it to the fish market. There a mass of housewives streamed by with baskets and bags in their hands, and at several places, two or more chatting women were blocking the traffic.

»The fish is flying,« he said to the women.

»What did you say, old man« the women asked, intrigued by his deep voice.

»The fish is flying, I said.«

»Well, catch it, if it's flying.«

The thunder of his voice, the long white face, his thick skin, the strong lines of his face, the stiff hand swinging chopily in stride, his small grey eyes ... The folded fingers, the firm step — the great indifference of a man who know a lot. They gaped at him with ever increasing interest. One of them shook her head as if fighting off a shudder and quickly concealed it. »Uncle is joking,« she said.

»Joking, just joking,« another woman helped mechanically, still entranced with him.

The smells of the sea. The clamor. The din under the high archways. Small groups of people were standing in front of the tables. There were no crowds, just a lot of fish, just sardelle. First, he smelled the sea world, examined the faces from the depths, and asked how the fishermen got the fish. His glance stopped on the facial

expressions of the fish mongers. He noticed their official attitude. »They feed the people and that requires conscientiousness,« he thought.

»Workers of society, workers,« he said. »Workers, eh, workers.«

The fisherman frowned, with his palms pressing on the table, shrugging his shoulders, and staring into the distance, indifferently.

»He thinks I'm mocking him. I'm not mocking you, my son, I'm not. People have died for that. I know.«

Quickly he backed away from the amusement. Hastily he bought a fish, the first one he picked up, and left immediately.

»The mall must have come by now,« he thought. The huge bell-tower, as if by command, struck nine times. »That could be considered a serious warning,« he said to himself. On the shore, the bell of a small white stone church weakly echoed. That bell bored into the ears, demanding that people think about death. It howled like a village dog, endlessly, day and night, without regard for anyone's nerves. »Usually it begins to toll after it strikes the hour,« and persued by this fear, he began to move further away.

Opening the door of his flat and pushing it slowly back to its former position, the thought came to him: he has been killed. He has been killed or has died, for sure. My little one has been killed. No one got out of that part of the war that we didn't hear about it even before the end of the war. You have been killed, my little son. I know that. I know it too well.

And stretching his legs athletically, bending slightly forward as if dividing the weight of his body evenly between both feet, he entered the kitchen with the old steady step.

His wife paid no attention to him. She was ironing the jacket, that light thing, one of the few which they still had left after the selling during the occupation. She was getting ready to go out.

»Here's the food,« he said as he dropped the sardelle on the table. »There it is,« he added in

a tone of voice that hinted everything was as it should be.

She kept silent, waiting for that first moment to pass, for that violent rage in her to calm.

Outside, under the window, the swallows were chirping. The sun began to warm the kitchen. She turned quickly and walked to the window. First she pulled the shade down, across the entire window, then raised it jerkily.

The swallows kept chirping, fluttering above the yard.

And she stood on one foot, controlling her balance, peeping out into the courtyard.

»The summer is beginning,« she said quite calmly. Immediately she regretted having said that. With exaggerated carefulness, she bent over the jacket. »My little one will paddle no more,« she added to herself. She saw him clearly, wrapped in a peasant coat, cold and dying on an emaciated nag.

»I'm off to the ruins, now,« she said loudly.

He tapped his fingers on the tobacco box.

»Ah, the ruins, the ruins,« he grumbled. »A child under every cloud,« he added softly.

»What's under every cloud?«

»That's what they say in Tisno when the brothers settle an estate. They say: 'I too would like to have a piece of land under every cloud'.«


»Don't talk nonsense.«

»Nonsense, huh?«

»At least the ruins are common property of humanity,« he thought. »There she will hear something about those who returned from war prisons, from concentration camps, from Germany, Italy, even from England, America, France, wherever people were lost in this war.«

»The fish wasn't expensive,« he said and started for the bathroom to wash his hands. Then he went into the big room, the bedroom, and leaned out the window to see what had happened on the street while he had been gone.

Beneath the window descended the stone steps from the upper city. Above were the small, ancient stone houses, and below, as the street



widened, the larger and newer buildings for rent.

A child about four years old walked slowly down the street, lowering his little legs one after another, anxiously looking below on the wide expanse between the palaces, all the way to the sea.

»Little one, hey, little one. You, yes you!«

The child stopped, pressed his hand frantically to his chest and raised his large eyes toward the window.

»Where are you off to, huh?«

»Me?«

»Ehh, who else? Where are you going?«

»I'm ... I'm going ... to the shore.«

»You can't go to the shore. Get back to your mother.«

The child looked indecisively down on the square, then up to the window. He squinted and inhaled. He didn't dare go on.

»Go back home, my little lamb. Get on back!«

The boy frowned desperately, to the point of crying. What now after so much trouble and after so much longing.

»Wait a little, just wait a while, my little one,« he said kindly.

And the child relaxed, and indeed waited a moment. He stood there in pants which were too small, a mended jacket, and slippers.

»Nothing to be afraid of, nothing«, he thundered, approaching the child. »Give me your hand, my friend.«

The child gave him his hand and set out with him down to the shore.

Translated by Vasa D. Mihailovich