

aries of our prison.”

“And what did you do?” I said with sincere interest.

“Nothing. We prayed, begged, asked questions. But there was no sort of answer, no sort of mark of comprehension. As usual. And then, suddenly, inexplicably, darkness descended, thick, black, starless. The face disappeared. We at length raised our sails and voyaged without stopping until we arrived in familiar waters.”

He fell thoughtfully silent. Something reminded me of something, for some reason I was afraid.

“That face,” I asked him, “what was it like? Was it like anyone? Would you be able to tell it by anything?”

He looked at me long, silently, opaque in his elderly way.

“Since you ask me,” he said, weighing his words, “it was most like yours.

And I heard his voice suddenly full of hatred. If he could, he would have nailed me to the mast on the spot.

Dubravko Horvatić

The Devil At Noon

One night, restless and irritable, I wandered for a long time in the Maksimir woods so as to find peace, but I didn't find it, I didn't find peace. Something different happened, something actually quite the opposite. While I was walking along the path that gleamed just a metre or so in front of me, in the total darkness, in the silence, I suddenly heard something rustling in the bushes, as if someone were snapping saplings, heading in my direction. I stopped, and shudders ran over my entire body. Then a voice spoke from the darkness:

“It is good that you have stopped. I would have caught up with you anyway.”

I thought for a moment of turning right round and hurrying off towards the city. I stayed silent, and a feeling of icy coldness with hot prickles ran over my back, elbows, knees. I spoke with difficulty, attempting to keep my voice ordinary, but didn't succeed at all.

“I'm not running at all. And what exactly do you want from me?”

And then something appeared from the shrubs and bushes, something I just could not quite make out. I strained all my powers of sight, red dots danced

in the dark, but I couldn't discern anything except a huge black patch. Was it a thief after my wallet, watch, ring? Or some sadist and murderer?

"There's nothing to tremble for. I am not what you think," said the dark appearance. "And I don't need your wallet, or your watch. And you haven't even got a ring. And I'm not going to torture you or kill you."

I went icy cold, could feel all the hairs on my body starting up, and the forest resounded with the beating of my heart.

"Not much of a hero, are you?" his voice came.

"Sorry, but what do you want, I don't know who you are," was more or less what I muttered.

It's interesting that I remember his words in detail while I can recall my own only approximately. We were two different, two opposite poles, because, among other things, that apparition knew what it wanted.

"Well, who is it that meets you in the middle of the night in a place like this, without wanting to rob you or knock you about, and can, in addition, know all your thoughts?

Weren't you just thinking that I was after your wallet, watch and ring?"

"What else would one think, given the... You don't have to be particularly clairvoyant to guess what someone surprised in this way might be thinking..."

"You've got your courage up, then, courage up, and you're going to make a fight of it, are you? But didn't you have this image in your mind a second

ago: me tying you to this trunk right here on your right hand side with a thick rope, and then, my jaw hanging open, stabbing you with some huge knife, now in your arm, then in your leg, now in your stomach, and loving it. Didn't you see just that, come on?"

He knew every single one of my thoughts. While he was talking, it seemed to me that my legs were going to give way, that I would collapse on the forest path and stay there forever. Just not that, just not that, I repeated to myself. And then, petrified, wet through, as if I had just got out of the nearby lake, I whispered in still greater terror:

"You are, you are..."

"Feel free to speak. I am not afraid of my name. It exists in all the languages in the world. Everyone knows me. Just say it. Yes, I am the Devil, the master of one half the world."

I don't know what was harder to listen to: his words, or the silence that came after them. In my terror I spoke again.

"And why... why me exactly? You can do everything. And why just here?"

"Oh, chummy, I could have waited for you in your room. But what might have happened! You could have started shouting, then the neighbours would have rushed in and you would have told them everything. And then they would have convinced you it was a hallucination, just an illusion caused by nerve fatigue, and then in your madness you would perhaps have gone off to be cured, and I would have had a hard time convincing you of my existence once

again. I wouldn't have been able to talk to you about what I want."

"Maybe this is a hallucination," I said with some hope, under my breath, but at once I felt a powerful electric shock, as if I had stuck my finger in the socket. He touched me just for a second. The next moment I yelled that it was no hallucination, not likely, just let there be no more of this frightful shock. And I was certain now, really certain, that what was in front of me was no apparition.

"Want any more proofs?" he asked.

"No, it's obvious that you really do exist, that you are here, that you can do anything..."

"I can't do quite anything, chummy. I said that I was lord of just half the world. I can do only half of everything. I can't know, for example, how you would have acted if I had visited you in your own flat. What would have happened. There, you see, I don't know everything, I can't do everything.... And so that I can do everything, be master of that other half, I need every person. That's why I stopped you here."

I was silent as the grave, not so much from terror any longer but from amazement.

"Don't be so surprised, chummy. I have tried to get round you in various ways, but it didn't work. You have been evading me since you were little. What about that fabulous salary I offered you two years back, a position that was all you could desire, just for dancing to my tune. Ah now, you spat on it all, insisted on having things your way, you went to jail and did hard labour rather than live under my wing

like a gentleman. You see, I first of all make an offer, and if someone doesn't accept, then I punish him. .. And now, you've been hanging around the town for weeks, only just keeping alive, and yesterday you refused another offer. That your convictions and your honour do not permit you, you said."

"You... you were behind that?" I said flabbergasted, shuddering all over my body.

"Behind everything that you consider unworthy, dishonest, rotten, I'm behind all that, chummy. And you see, the whole world's coming round to me, and you, chummy, are just doing yourself down."

"Hm, just half the world, you said so yourself: just half," I somehow managed to venture.

"Fine, that's not at issue now.... But let's continue our talk tomorrow. I'll wait for you at noon on the terrace of Vidikovac. You'll be calmer and – more accessible to my reasoning."

I didn't manage to say anything, nothing at all, and that big black patch that was fluttering in the air in front of me suddenly vanished. I shouted into the dark, but no one replied. I went off in the direction of the main avenue, weary, staggering as if I had poured half a litre of brandy on an empty stomach. I wondered whether I would find a taxi on Maksimirska Road at this time of night. Strangely enough, there was a taxi parked right in the main avenue, where traffic is actually banned, where I wouldn't have dreamed of finding him.

"You free?"

The driver nodded drowsily.

"The theatre!"

It was only in the car that I lit up a cigarette. And so, dragging on this *Opatija*, I didn't notice how we got out onto the road. The great gates of the park were open then, at this time of night. Strange, I thought again.

In front of the Theatre Cafe I offered him ten thousand old dianrs, and he gave me back a blue note for five, we said thank you to each other, good-bye, good night. And it was only when he had disappeared into Masaryk St that I opened my wallet to put the note away: in my hand I was holding fifty thousand, fifty, not five. And I suddenly realized that it was all His work. The taxi in the avenue, the driver's muddle, if it can be called that. No doubt about it, he was forcing me to make tomorrow's meeting, for I had to give the money back. I didn't want Him buying me.

I looked at the yellowing woods and remembered the same park from my childhood. Whenever school was taken over by the army, usually for a day or two, we would go off into this wood and do our lessons here. In a few days we would be at our desks again, the dark green desks with holes for ink-wells, for the soldiers had already gone to the front, leaving hay behind them in the corners of the yard, or fresh incisions in the wood of the desk in some unknown language. Yes, many of them were in His service, I am sure of that. Why had that tall, yellow one killed a puppy in the middle of the road? Just to test out his pistol, I had always thought. Now it was all clear to me: he had wanted to display his complete devotion to Him. Perhaps he had wanted to

tickle some murderous fancy in one of us, innocent boys. But the pup, the white pup, curly like a lamb, turned over in the air, convulsed, and we scattered in horror. Since then we hadn't even like to meet them any longer. We didn't even want to take chocolate from the fat one. He surely wasn't in His power. Probably he just wanted, in this foreign country, to exculpate himself in his own eyes: offering us chocolate. And he pressed it on us, in his funny Croatian, wanting to give it to us at any price. You could see only confusion on his face: what were we laughing at, why wouldn't we?... Here, in the pavilion by the lake, we often had school, as we used to say. And in winter, when the lake froze, we would throw stones to leap and sing on its surface.

It was already five minutes past twelve, and He hadn't come yet. I shouldn't have come so much earlier, then it wouldn't have been so awful to wait. Yes, but who would have stood it? Come what may, I could hardly wait for him to appear. It would cost me, I know, but I wouldn't be able to agree to any kind of deal. He had said it himself: whatever you think and call unworthy, dishonest, rotten, I am behind all that. And I would give him back the fifty thousand, and five more, he wasn't going to pay for my ride!

"Another please, miss!"

I would have another brandy and coffee, he was bound to come by half past. What guise he would take I had no idea. It would probably be some middle aged gentleman, well dressed, decent looking. But perhaps not; perhaps he would ape some old

chap, some pensioner in his frayed coat, who was, just for once, treating himself to a lemonade on the terrace after his walk. I would see, anyway, I would see.

Just then, someone called my name, nickname rather, some soft, somehow familiar voice. But there was no one anywhere, and the waitress and the few guests didn't seem to have heard. I leaned over the railing of the terrace and saw Ivana, down there, on the gravelled walk.

No one else could have surprised me so much. Expecting Him and finding Ivana. That was very likely what had to be called good fortune.

"Ivana, Ivana,..." and I beckoned with my hand for her to come up to the terrace.

"I'm in a hurry, come down... See me to the tram."

I looked at my watch, it was gone half past. He hadn't come. He would turn up, then, somewhere else. I paid, the waitress wanted to give me my change, but I hurried on down the stairs. I hugged Ivana, and it was obvious that she was pleased we had met here. How long since we had met, Lord! I suddenly wanted to tell her my problems, my experience of last night, to confess to her the fear that the next meeting with Him put me in, because He wouldn't give up, that was obvious. Perhaps he would show up in the evening. Perhaps he was waiting for me at home. But why should I burden her with it too? And I said nothing about it. And Ivana kept on chattering; she had been there on the university farm, and had wanted to walk through the woods, but hadn't realized how long the path was, and was now

in a hurry, but how happy she was, otherwise she wouldn't have met me. And why was I so taciturn all at once.

"You were so glad when you met me, and now suddenly it's as if something's got into you..."

"It's nothing, just talk...I love listening to you..."

She said that she knew all about my problems, how I had gone through a lot, but that I shouldn't let it estrange me from the world, at least not from old friends. They were here to help me after all. She had heard from them that I had become, to say the least, odd. I waved my hand, opened my mouth to say something, I don't know what, but she anticipated me:

"You can't think the whole world is unworthy, dishonest, rotten!"

She said just these three words, in that same order that He had used. I stopped, went white, stared at her. And I shook, I trembled with my whole body, not from fear but from anger.

"You know, I didn't know that you too were in His service. To have stooped so low. Do you think that you and your boss will get the better of me so easily."

A pale, almost tearful face stared at me. She wanted to run into my arms, she wanted to say something, but I pushed her harshly away. And then, in an instant, I knew that it wasn't her, but Him. Because she wouldn't have been able to dissimulate so hellishly. And she, I am sure, would never have entered His service. And realising this, I seized him by

his feminine shoulder, by that gentle neck that I had once kissed, and strangling him, yelled that I would kill him, not knowing at that time that my powers were nothing compared with His.

"Taking the form of the most wonderful creature I have ever known!" I murmured long after. There were four of them holding me, four of them. I don't believe that any one of them was directly in His service. They had happened by, quite accidentally, probably, and leaped to the defence of poor Ivana. They didn't understand anything.

"I'll kill him, kill him!" I repeated, while He climbed into the ambulance, still in her likeness, helped by some Samaritans who looked at me with hatred.

If I said that they kept me like a bird in a cage, it wouldn't be true. For a bird can at least see what is going on outside through the bars. He cocks his head, his eyes twinkle, he watches you. Yet the windows in our room are so high up that there is nothing to be seen. This morning I climbed up on my bedside table to see at least where the room was facing, but I couldn't see anything, just a patch of sky and the tops of the trees. Oh yes, something quite different from a cage or a coop. The door of the room is constantly open, and the first nights I was afraid to fall asleep, lest someone from a neighbouring room should simply beat me up in a fit of madness. I told a physician of this fear of mine, but he just said it was one of the symptoms of my sickness. And yet he said nothing, nothing at all, when I asked him if he would feel comfortable sleeping among lunatics.

Dinko, whom I share a room with, is a quiet lad and sometimes you can have quite a nice chat with him. Yet I feel uneasy when, almost every evening, as soon as they put the lights out, he attempts to bring me round to his plan: we should, he says, get a Geiger counter from somewhere, come what may. Then we would see how much uranium there is in all those tablets and pills they cram us with. And then we would throw it in their faces. With evidence, after the measurement. As it is, you can talk from morning till night, to no end whatsoever. Because they know we've no proof. But if we could show them the counter, that would be another story.

"Come on, old fellow, stop romancing. Uranium doesn't grow on trees, it costs a mint," I would usually say when I had had enough.

"I know, but it's worth putting money into a venture like that. You see that they're researching into whether we're dead or living organisms."

"Good night," I said and turned over away from him.

Dinko whispered a bit more about uranium and about the eternally living and the eternally dead, and then drifted into sleep. And before dawn old Renić would march down the corridor, commanding his army, orders flying thick and fast, sometimes in Spanish, or in Croatian, sometimes in Russian. "Pasaremos, attack, comrades," roared Renić, while Tončić and the other nurses dragged him off in some, to us, unknown direction. In two or three days Renić was among us again, mild as a lamb. Now he was no longer a commander, he was underground. "Com-

rade, it's worst of all when the stomach turns into a character," he whispered, and shoved some brochure of Lenin's into the pocket of my gown, covertly, conspiratorially; probably you could buy it in any book-shop, or borrow it in any library. "He's completely off his rocker," was the comment of Rudi, the ex-airforce lieutenant. "If you put a plane in his hands, he would murder half the world."

"And you wouldn't, good grief, what are you here for," muttered Tonči the nurse under his moustache.

"Me? What do you know about me, you fool. I machine-gunned my own house, my own, got it? To kill that whore and her bastards."

"Lucky for them, and for you, that they weren't home," said Tonči, getting up and going out.

"Lucky, you say, asshole, creep. You'll pay for this luck," shouted Rudi after him, in a rage and red-faced, but the orderly didn't turn round.

And that evening, when Tonči went into Rudi's room, he was waiting for him leaning on the entrance wall with a chain in his hands. The blow, says Tonči, was frightful, but it wasn't well aimed. Now Tonči's wearing a bandage under his cap, it peeps out a bit on the left hand side, and Rudi's been dragged off to where they take Rendić every so often.

Isn't it, all told, then, worse than being in a cage? A bird is by itself, or at least with some bird of its own kind. A deer is with does and stags, a bear with bears and bearesses. And who am I living with in this corridor?

"Don't think that your attack on Ivana is much different from Rudi's assault on his own house," replied the physician to me.

"But that wasn't Ivana," I objected.

"She told you herself a few days ago that it was her. And you still tried to have a go at her."

"Because once again it was *not* her. He took her shape again."

He waved his arm weakly, and then asked me:

"Fine, but have you yet come to accept the fact that there has been no cafe at Vidikovac for a good twenty years?"

"But that day there was. There was a waitress, tables, guests...And I paid the bill, two brandies and two coffees."

"Look, I have even put an ad in the paper to find the taxi driver who mistakenly..."

"You don't think I am going to believe some mercenary of hell? And you think he will come forward? That is really utter naivety."

"A mercenary of hell, hm, big words..." he said, looking at me right in the eyes.

I didn't run from his look, for I had no reason, and, giving it back to him again, asked: "Why did you pick on just those words? Do they sting you? For can you guarantee that you aren't Him, and He hasn't for the moment taken on your shape? You have to understand, I cannot be sure of whom I am talking to."

He rang and orderlies appeared at both doors. Each sat on a chair by the entrance. He was obvi-

ously worried I was going to attack him.

"My friend, you are getting worse and worse. I don't know what to do," he said wearily. "While others attempt to explode their own fictions, you just multiply yours. Your hallucinations..."

He didn't finish; I interrupted him:

"Well, fine, so they are hallucinations, I mean the visual things, but what about that electric shock?"

"I told you that too already; just as you saw the devil, so you felt the electric shock. That was a visual, and the other a tactile illusion."

"Not likely, well, he warned me himself it was no illusion. He ran that shock through me just to prove it to me. That's logical at least."

"It's all logical, whatever your say. But all of it starts off from the wrong premises."

Wrong? How do you know that yours are right? Everything that doesn't fit in to your pseudo-scientific ideas about the world is wrong and so sick. And that's why I have been rotting here for months, being kept among real lunatics, because I have met the Devil who, according to your theories, simply doesn't exist. And if I had experienced it several centuries ago, let's say, who would have cared? Then, thank the lord, your science didn't exist."

"Then? Then they would have burned you at the stake. Or Ivana perhaps. That's what you would have wanted?"

"You know I wouldn't. Because the stakes were all his doing."

"A few days ago you said you would talk to a priest. But now you won't. Why?"

"That ought to be clear. Now I won't for the same reason that I told you a little while ago that you were perhaps Him. (I felt the orderlies starting, but the physician still continued watching me calmly.) And by the same token he might take on the shape of the priest."

"Since you have been in hospital you haven't had any hallucinations, have you? If that devil, who doesn't exist, if he wanted to, he would have appeared by now. Why would he take the priest's shape, or mine, or Ivana's?"

"I don't know, I can't think with his brain. I just say that it is possible: he can take anyone's shape."

"Anyone's shape, you say. Let's say I let you out, and as soon as you're outside the hospital, you strangle the first passer-by because, apparently, he's the devil. You have to see yourself that I can't let you out as long as you don't understand that you are gravely, seriously ill."

What else can I do? It'll take months, I know that, to convince the doctor that I am persuaded of my own ostensible sickness; perhaps a year or two to convince him that I have freed myself of it. And until then I'll have to rot here among these madmen, unless one of them finishes me off in the meantime. It was better inside; I knew I had to serve my year and a half, even if it was among criminals, but I knew why, and I knew how long. You build an embankment and curse the mothers of the guards and the government. Occasionally thoughts of running away occurred to me, but I knew that there was no escape that way. Now however escape seems the only way

out: some time or other I'll have to escape, whatever the way, and grapple with Him, by myself. I know that I won't be on the winning side, but I also know that He's going to lose something in the battle.

Nedjeljko Fabrio

The Infernal Dominican

My lord the king, on my life and your
grace, truly do I tell you that of all worth
and beauty there is nothing dearer to me,
nothing that my eye has longed for or that
has cleaved to my heart or exalted my mind
than the devil that beguiles mankind.

Barlaam and Jozafat, 17th century
Dubrovnik manuscript

Whenever I happen to be in that area, I make haste to visit the island; you might actually say that it's because of the island that I do visit the region, at the bottom of Europe, in the south of Croatia.

The island is like all the islands of the region: conical, rocky right down to the sea, but otherwise packed, the crickets, the swifts, the soft magnolias and blown dandelions, with the bell-tower of the Dominican church planted high on the very peak of the island, dark blue in winter, then again yellow. To get to the church at all you have to climb, wind, twist round the deformed old stone housings, but the sky peering in patches of azure from slashes in the walls draws you constantly on and at the top, when you have arrived at the small stone terrace in front of the church, you are given up to the sky it-