



Catastrophe

Row the train got demolished - I learned on the next day. What I felt on that occasion, I recalled only after a few days. What I saw and perceived, I remembered only after a few weeks, as then I began to think. It was easy to comprehend that we were falling; when we stopped still, I said: it is well. During the fall it struck me as if I embraced my fellow from a school excursion, Pankracius. I saw a priest's face sunk deep in blood. Then one thin, pale fellow-traveler as if being in a big rush, started to collect some papers, climbed the window (presently windows were above our heads) and ran away. I recalled that the conductor did the same thing before him; then I did the same and found myself on the rocks. All of that lasted for a few seconds. But, reconstructing the whole scene, I see all the details so clearly that to me, as well as to the reader, it seems that it must have lasted at least half an hour. There, I also remember this; it seemed to me that fall took a long time. When we stopped falling I was very circumstantially proving to my fellow traveler actor Babić and his wife that everything is well. I will repeat, all of it, the fall and the debate, lasted only seconds!

Here's something elucidating: I often dream of battles. Once I dreamt a whole novel; a revolution, the social system falling to pieces (crumbling, overthrown); I am a general, we erect fortresses, the people's assembly proclaims me a dictator; bombardments; I have a fiancée.

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and just as I leave her embrace, I debate with a reactionary, I ride a horse, I've been proclaimed a king; coronation, my brother dissuades me from a revolution, I resist, the people acclaim, the enemy army is approaching; I'm being hanged.... And when I woke up, I realized that all of that, which would require few hours of storytelling, lasted for just a few minutes.

Next time, I dreamt I had died; I was rising high above the earth; I had a body as light as breath, and for a long time I swam in the air; earth - fog, atmosphere - fog; all around brown, light, transparent clouds. I was being shaken by a moping smile, melancholy and sick pleasure. Then I arrived in a big park, dead as a crypt, half dark as a dawn, endless as the universe. I was alone: more melancholic and somber, as if being disappointed, but mute, calmed, resigned. And the colors of the trees, soil and earth immovably reflected my long, turbid, sleepy look. I went around the universe and this is where I had to stay forever and I was not a bit tormented by the thought when will all of that come to an end, will I find a human or will I witness a change. Thus I remained for centuries... When I woke up, it wasn't midnight yet.

On the third occasion, and that happens often - I dreamt I was flying; I just wave my hands and there I am, in the air; I wave more and I reach the belltower, I wave and I can't see earth anymore. Then I return. Usually I fly around domes and churches, I swim, sink and fly up and finally I leave behind me dense darkness, earth, night and the past and like a bird I dart into the universe's glass and I sigh after the earth, roofs and pavement.

To cut a long story short: during big events such as war, arson, catastrophe, crime and heroism all mental states are equivalent to a dream; we commit something terrible, dreadful, heroic. On the spur of the moment it seems to be something ordinary, feasible, and clear; our intensity and ecstasy pushes us into dreaming revolution, we kill people, see God, talk to the spirits without flinching, shivering or exhaustion. Why did he kill his wife, sculptor Cifariello does not know to this day. But he tells in details how did he kill her, and even argues with the witnesses whether he had his underpants or not. How he conceived the crime, did he conceive it at all - he had to fight common sense, logic and consequences - an entire chaos! - but when he was committing it, he was

totally absorbed in the deed and nothing else... Anyway, I found myself upon rocks; the train had rolled down the dike, only engine halted in the rails, so the coaches remained hanging. The horrible north eastern wind wouldn't let me stand up. I was crawling. Others must have been doing the same, but I did not see them. The locomotive ceaselessly whistled, desperately wailing. The wind tore its scream to pieces. I had only one wish: to climb up to the rails, and I only saw my hands, burnt by winter, and stones. For a moment I had a thought that all of my living is this climbing, exerting and crawling and it is my vocation, my purpose, my calling, and all my life I had done nothing else but that. I evaded the wind's swings with an actual skill, lying completely on my stomach, I was getting up very carefully and I instinctively knew when the wind would abate, when it would gather strength again. At the most, this could have lasted for a quarter of an hour!

When I first climbed up to the rails, I was overawed; there was a precipice in front of me and behind me, the wind kept hitting my face. Behind my shoulders, a flat, coppice edged sloping surface, ending pointed at the bottom. The scattered coaches began to frighten me. I looked again: there was a tunnel, in the tunnel there were people. But they were all silent, immovable, gazing at me on accidentally or out of boredom. There I saw Pankracius. He smiled, but his lips were narrow, dry and pale. He was smiling and looked as if he had suddenly come out of the dark to the light, or as if something had abruptly awoken him. I recalled how back in the train he came upon a basket full of eggs, and crushed them all; then he came upon a pile of money and delivered them to the hand which emerged in front of his nose. But I did not say a word to him.

Babić was waving his hands, asking me to come over. He was too fat and couldn't slip through the window. Pankracius and I began to pull him out. We hit his belly - for no good reason. Then we unbuttoned his waistcoat and collar and we buttoned it up again. He consented to everything. Then we dragged out his wife; she also yielded herself with resignation or conviction. Then we had to bring her up to the rails and into the tunnel. Pankracius and I tackled the work with great diligence and soberness, without hurry, as if concerned that the task be performed reliably and well, even if we had to sacrifice more time to it. And when the wind blew, we threw ourselves on our stomachs as in the drilled

rhythm; we were throwing the woman as if she was a sack. She was convinced that everything we did had to be done that way, and she would be a sack, if we found it appropriate. We came upon a few others in the tunnel; still others were arriving; but I did not notice any rush or particularity. As if that tunnel was a coffee house, where guests meet daily, rubbing their hands, staring speechlessly, bored, used to the same faces. At that moment it seemed to me that nothing whatsoever had happened, and although that numb poise of staring and dull glares was momentary, it now seems eternal to me.

One woman began to creep towards the rails. A few amongst us curiously observed her strenuous moves, as if we were in a circus. But nobody moved. However, she did not fall and roll down the slope, as we might have expected. Somewhat disappointed, with the same dullness, we went to observe the sky, heavy, dense and low. On the edge of the chimney, the machine's smoke was falling in flakes; the whistle went on and on, now it was the wind that was whistling.

Then we finally made a decision; it grew dark, we had to move. Many had gone already, here and there, and nobody asked about anyone else. A man approached me. He did not speak. Like a mute person, he started to draw attention with his hands. I approached him. His hands were dirty, his nose hanging, face full of puckers, blood, crusts, soil and slobber. I thought he is warning me of his nose. Now I stared at his face with the same attention I gave to my hands and rocks before. I shrugged: "Nothing to be done." He was warning me all the same, his eyes full of mucus. Then I heard a thin and rough voice, he wanted me to tie his necktie. I did it without wonder. On the contrary, I wondered how it was that I couldn't immediately understand that man, whose nose is hanging on a small thread of skin, murky, bloody slobbery soil gelatinizing his mustache, eyelashes and face in one piece, how could I not understand his tie is not fitting, as it should befit. He thanked me with a movement and I lost him out of my sight. The other man was wiping his face, as if he was sweating. At once I touched mine, mechanically imitating him; my hand was bloody. Again I wiped my forehead without a handkerchief. I did not want to stain it. Then I spat and started to pick my teeth. Babić's wife pulled my sleeve. Pankracius was wiping his shoes and pants with a handkerchief. I called out to him. He did not respond. First he dusted his hat, shaping it into form, and for a moment

stood as in a front of a mirror. A gendarme was leading a woman: one of his hands was red, but that was a handkerchief. We joined him. As if it were my family, with which I had always lived and would live with forever more, we all of set off together. The gendarme took us to the nearest station; Babić's wife did not inquire about her husband, the wind blew vehemently. We had to resist it and this completely engaged our attention; we forgot everything that was and didn't have the slightest notion about what was to be.

At the station we met doctors, commissioners, police and other untidy, dirty, pale people who, we finally realized, had also been on the train. How many people are dead - they asked. I knew less than they did. How did the catastrophe happen - they asked again. "The wind", I answered at once and started to remember all the things which until then I hadn't even noticed. "The wind was raging terribly. We could all feel the coaches were jumping; As if they were dancing a heated dance, jolting. Several times we thought: it's all over. The swings of the wind were long, persistent. Then we could hear one, and instantly we knew that it wouldn't end just like that. And indeed, the train slipped off the tracks, lost its foothold. The coaches began to slide and suddenly, my coach hit sheer rock. Immediately I comprehended our position. In order to have an even better orientation, I climbed the window; the wind wouldn't let me out. Meanwhile, I examined whether anything was wrong with me, I searched my pockets, consoled my fellow-travelers and went to see what could be done first. I came back, and we dragged others out. I wanted to search the other coaches, but "one person" told me it would be in vain; everyone who was saved had got off already. However, I had to try to save Mrs. Babić, because she had lost her consciousness completely..."

Others too were giving accounts in full length. Everyone used the phrase "the train was dancing a heated dance". As the event became more remote, my description became livelier and more ample. Pankracius narrated in a big voice, almost out of himself, how he smashed some eggs, just out of pure jest, to encourage others. One girl was lying in an armchair, sighing. The doctor was shaking his head pitifully: Her face was covered in wounds, looking scalded here and there. Furthermore, she gained some serious internal injuries and death was inevitable. I tried to encourage and embolden her; and everyone else

who came out of the accident intact, started to enliven her cheerfully, good-humouredly and jokingly. The longer we felt safe, the more wanton we became. Boisterously we started to persuade each other how we hadn't been frightened at all, but we retained serious faces just out of regard to those who were quailing out of fear. The doctor whispered to us confidentially, in a low voice: "You are doing it all wrong. You should say you were terribly frightened. You have to say you got frightened terribly, because that's grist to your mill. You will get compensation for the fear you suffered." Pankracius felt pain in his right arm. When he heard the doctor, he started to writhe with pain. Due to his pride, he could not say: "I got terribly scared." Maybe that was the reason he screamed in pain and started to grab his right arm. I thought: "Of course, I did get frightened, for commission, because of the compensation." I winked at him. He too winked at me, nudged my ribs and whispered, suffocating with laughter, "Like hell we got scared."

In the midst of our gale and ironic shouts, that girl incessantly sighed and cried. Her face was disfigured, her lung injured. But she did not care about her lung, for what could not be seen. Miserably and desperately she asked: will those wounds on her face heal? Will a bit of her nose grow back? Will she again become beautiful, as she once was? Will anyone want to look upon her now? We were winking at each other. Babić whispered: I would have gladly given my entire nose for a few thousand. And I thought to myself: women! We love life with money, they love beauty without money, so they can buy both our life and our money with it...

Thus we boomed for an hour, expecting another train to take us to the town. The women decided they wouldn't travel. They were still haunted by the picture of the scattered coaches.

Feeling great contentment, I didn't even think about those wretched persons with hanging noses and injured lungs otherwise than as upon rich material, from which I would be able to drag rates of interest in storytelling and memories for a long time to come. When we arrived into town, it was already very late. Untidy and muddy, Pankracius and I nevertheless went to a coffee house. People kept soliciting us with questions. Enviously and jealously we started to compete with storytelling, and in that moment we wished to each other that which

quite certainly we did not want for ourselves. We spoke in more and more details. We pretended not to hear the questions about the number of the dead and wounded, because we knew very little about that. Indeed! We did not even know how the coaches fell; whether they rolled or slipped, how far away they were from the rails; which of the coaches suffered most damage; who was in the coaches... Actually, we were wrong about the very event; for a moment I thought the coaches were hanging, for a moment that our coach was halted by sheer rock; I claimed only that it was smashed to pieces. On the contrary, we described everything that was secondary, and which maybe wasn't true at all; the terror of the wind, the bloody faces, the women's cries. To the point of boredom, Pankracius repeated his comedy with the smashed eggs, how I led a man with a hanging nose, how that man's pain was terrible, his face awful, my coolness appalling... Then we told about the miraculous force of the wind, how we climbed up to the rails for an hour, how the wind had lifted three of us in the air and then had thrown us on the ground... Pankracius, however, began to feel real pain in his arm, and I took him to the hospital. Here I met the gendarme.

- So, people were killed! - the gendarme said in surprise. Even he knew nothing.

The following day I learned from the papers that six people were seriously injured and one old man was struck dead in the spot, with his pipe still in his mouth. Now I became surer in my narration, and began to be enraptured:

- I'm not sorry for going through all that. Imagine the loneliness, the clouds, the wind, the rocks. The train is whistling. The wind is howling. Wailing, yelling for help, curses. Bellow and above - abyss and wind - inexorable, wild, raging. Yes, I enjoy those nature's big passions, where man dissolves inside the soul of hurricane, thunder, death. It's intoxicating! It is a delirium! Ecstasy!

Similarly I wrote to my mother. On the third day that girl died. Postcards appeared: "train accident". I observed them for a long time, longer then I had looked at the actual scattered coaches. But I was taken aback when eventually I discerned my own coach. I identified it only because I knew it was second in order. It was less then four meters from the rails! I became very upset. But now I could be even surer in my story

telling - as if I had truly been on the spot!!! Although to that day my stories were full of humor (still confused by the brunt the catastrophe had given me, I wanted to display my cold blood), from then on they were full of rapture. As the event shifted away, the rapture grew; the more it grew, the more my storytelling was accurate, full of reflection, comments and critique. And when we read the newspapers, we started to interpret - to the people, how the whole cause of the accident lies in the fact that there had been very few travelers, that the coaches were light, the wind strong; and how precisely all that had been very fortunate, because if the coaches had been heavier, if there had been many travelers, they would have pulled the locomotive along the sheer slope, and we couldn't have been left hanging the way we did...

Today, when I talk about it, I like to mention how that old man, who died on the spot with his pipe in his mouth, made the deepest impression on me... And everyone confirms it was the most horrible sight... But the dead old man was seen only by those who were in the same coach with him, and that was, if I'm not mistaken, before the actual accident happened... We learned about his classic death from the papers. At first, his fellow travelers said that he had disappeared without trace... Had we learned about his death at once, surely we would have presented the actual catastrophe in darker colors, with more gesticulation and - humor in front of the commission.

But when I really think about it, it still seems to me that the 2-3 seconds of the fall lasted for a very long time, and that the 25 years of my life passed by very quickly. And the facts - the two seconds and 25 years - how mightily they contradict my conceit; and though I am convinced in the truth of the facts, my conviction cannot destroy my - conceit. This would have eclipsed my conception and reason, if I had not been cheered up by Pankracius who to this very day gives accounts full of rapture and cynicism about how he smashed eggs in a jest. The other thing is - I timely convinced myself how I enjoyed orgies and delirium of nature and catastrophe, and a dead old man with a pipe in his mouth was a worthy finale of the big tragedy I witnessed with my own eyes and in which I played my role with conscience, temperament and confidence....

I mentioned that we were certain about the indemnity. Papers were proving, with irrefutable arguments, that the accident happened

because it was bound to happen, because those who undertook the building of the rails did not take into consideration the atmospheric conditions, the position, the protests of natives and community arguing that such light coaches and narrow-gauged rails could not sustain stronger winds.

And when after a week of starving, unwashed and without a bed, I received the sum of 500 crowns due to "the suffered fear", I embraced my comrade Pankracius. Having inside a pocket such a sum of money, earned overnight through one unfortunate accident, which the two of us survived by pure chance - well, our mental system got deranged. Until that day we took things to the pawn-shop, selling watch-chains, shoes or ties for a coin, so our thoughts and reasoning were occupied with these small but for us highly important sums. We were concerned with the question whether, for our stomach and existence, it would be more profitable to invest in a warm bed or a meal, in a piece of bread or chestnuts, soup or wine, brandy or tobacco. Now all of a sudden we were handling big sums: both meal and tobacco and wine and a bed - we could have all of that and more: a new suit, a woman, an excursion to Nice. After all, that sum was like a tip, and we could have it at free disposal (for our daily needs we received some money from home). How it came, thus it went away. It was this "how to spend it" - we did not know. Nothing of the kind had happened to us before; having 500 crowns which are superfluous to our way of life. But inside me, so many wishes were born by a sole sight of a woman, liqueurs, wine, by a thought of the big city, theater, Paris; desire for pleasure, sport and commodity. Beforehand I had to carefully appraise the appearance of an ale-house I was entering (you guess the prices from the appearance); how much money would the woman I was going to bed with ask, what was the price of the wine I was going to drink. As from that day I could, without fear and premeditation, enter wherever I wanted, and take whatever I wanted. I went to the barber-shop: I gave the barber three crowns, I went out to dinner; I paid and didn't take the change from a paper banknote, I went to a coffee house and got intoxicated with liqueurs, I went to a brothel to sleep, the sleep of a righteous man it was, because I was completely drunk; I bought suits without bargaining, and a merchant gave me stuff of bad quality; I took an apartment in a hotel and I fell asleep on a bench, I rented an elegant room and departed next day in first class; I bought a vio-

lin, for which I had yearned so much, but I never touched it, because fifteen days later I placed in pawn both violin and dinner suit and I ran away, without paying the rent, unshaved, with no coat and no meal.

And I would have committed suicide if it hadn't been for my deep conviction, gained through experience, that something will again arise, some misfortune, lottery, thousands, millions and then, being experienced, I would know how to use my money better, how to enjoy it more. Too often, without a single penny in my pocket, I walk down the street and think to myself: "maybe I will find a hundred banknote accidentally", and when I have a crown more, I buy a lottery-ticket: "maybe I'll win by accident"; when I have no job, I invent letters to some multimillionaire in America, or in my dreams I have presentiments that a windfall is awaiting me.

And I wait patiently, full of hopes, plans, faith and idealism, and no financial pinch can drive me to suicide. Indeed! Within me the fear of death is so big, that I do not travel much, and if the wind is blowing, I will not board a train, not for all the treasures of this world...

All of that does not deprive me from believing in a lucky incident. On the contrary, it assures me even more that one can find accidentally a hundred banknote on the street...

Torino, October 30, 1908

Translated by Majda Juric