

The Beard

Love and adventure, they are a lottery, paying for vows, masses and lockets which are worth only as much as miraculous power, belief in heaven and the deception of life are worth...

Oh, I waited for the money and believed that, once I had the money, I could patiently wait for my beard to grow back.

Maybe then I could think about the question: where is my identity - in seriousness or in wantonness, in cynicism or in liveliness, in smiling or in scorn, in love or in coldness?

Could I admit then that my identity is in a shaven or in a grown beard and that all individualism sits on a fence, thus being very risky and dangerous. It always resides in something outside it; and if that something changes, it again falls onto something outside itself... And the world does not feel the pain of another's fall... Woe and behold to the poor hips, behind and thighs of the miserable individuals who must feel the pain in the spot where they are too embarrassed to even scratch themselves and which they cannot see the way others see it...

Translated by Ljiljana Šćurić

“Ecce homo!”

Mijo was coming home tonight later than usual. Now he didn't think about it as much as he used to. One time he was late like that, he got to talking with an acquaintance, and on the way back he was ashamed like a pupil coming home for the first time from a walk when he should have been at school. Mijo had been living alone with his mother for several years now. He paid no attention to that life because that life was as clear and simple as a “book of accounts” in which there are no big or frequent debits or credits, so having more than enough time, you can record and add up everything every day. Precisely! Mijo got up at seven thirty, went to school, where he studied music, then to lunch, then he took a nap and after it went back to school, then for a walk, to supper and finally he would play the piano until a hushed and timid voice said:

- It's ten already!

In that kind of life, because of that simplicity and clarity, there was a certain peacefulness of behavior and lazy lingering of the passions. So when he was late that time, he was embarrassed and his mother was angry, and when she said: - Where in God's name have you been? - he started apologizing, although he was already a young man. He didn't really keep company with anybody. His pals were pals in studying, discussing

their studies and passionate about them. The class was a working day, the intermission was Sunday, and the walk from home to school was bingeing and dancing. In that narrow, constricted existence, passions were sieved just like in other young men they were sieved from the pavement to the pub, from the first evening lantern to the last one in the morning. They were like the walk of the prisoner who uses his legs like any other man: the difference is in the surroundings, the shoes and the purpose. And although tonight he got so far away from reality, he was not aware of it yet. True, he hurried, but in the insurpressable smile grown into his lips, his feelings showed. He had landed in a completely new situation which required all his faculties and didn't leave him a single moment to think of anything beyond it. He was like a shipwrecked person struggling for life without asking himself what had been or what would be in that life.

He was returning from a date which he had had at the first bench in the park. A date in early autumn. The first cold, glassy breeze, the first yellow, melancholy leaf and first dusk. The promenade was empty. Mijo arrived very early. He was excited and restless facing a mysterious future; enraptured that a woman of awoken passion had promised to meet him there - this suddenly filled him with strength and ambition. At the threshold of something new he was already like a shipwrecked person so he forgot all about his mother. He gave himself up totally to the moment, peering at the passing walkers and breathlessly listening for her steps. And maybe it was that breathlessness that gave him the disorientation and forgetfulness, so now he disregarded any consideration, ready to leave his bed empty for one, two or ten nights, thus he became a "breathless hero" like the heroes of war. And she came. A few sweet nothings, a squeeze of the hand, close breath and whispering - it all lasted but half an hour. But Mijo carried it inside him as something very big, not long but wide. So he passed by the apartment and walked on.

He remembered everything. She, Mica, was before his eyes: tall and slender like a tourist, with a freckle on her nose that went beautifully with her wide, smiling lips; with very transparent eyebrows, rounded like in Japanese women, and hence very exotic; with hair curly above the forehead; with a pointed chin, a pale face and deep blue eyes. Seeing her like this now, he smiled thoughtfully and walked rather quickly, staring at the pavement... "She came", he now remembered. He had recog-

nized her step right away, gone to meet her and offered her his hand. She hadn't worn gloves. And then - he had said:

- I've been waiting for you a long time - it seems like it's been two years! - Mijo hadn't actually said it exactly in those words, but now the phrase elevated him and he began to hum.

"For two years I've been waiting, yes!"

And he felt he had really waited for her for two years. It seemed to him now that he remembered well when he had first heard of her arrival. Towards the morning that curved from the darkness, suddenly and quickly, in a haze and luxury, which circulated around his whole body and rose like boiling water when you lift the cover - the news had arrived. And, very excited, he went to meet the train. He waited a very long time... And then, before he could compose himself, he was too close to her breath...

And now, going home from the first date, he looked into that past that was waiting. But his true joy distracted him, so he didn't stay long with the past and found himself in the present instead, with reborn, merry and lively soul. Drunk with happiness, he was all immersed in a melody so sweet that he unwittingly opened his mouth and sort of sang, loosing himself in her azure, smiling eyes.

2

When he arrived home, there was no need to ring the bell. The door was open and his mother stood in it.

- Where in God's name have you been?!

The same words and the same exclamation. It was quiet, so the mean sound of her voice hit the silence clearly and did not sound like hissing. But hissing it was. Momentarily, while they stood next to each other, their physiognomies clashed. His mother's wrinkled, covered with yellow spots, white-lipped and gray-haired, long-suffering, with a very narrow and crooked nose and lines spread over her cheeks, forehead and chin - and his own, unexpectedly distorted, that had swallowed the smile... they clashed and looked at each other.

He stumbled past her, uttered something unintelligible and then yelled:

- I'm here!

The clash was strong and they bounced off like two balls, spinned slower than and finally reached a fixed distance, when they were both already in bed.

There Mijo was first relieved. He had been walking home happy and satisfied. But now he felt nothing remained of that mood. He wanted to bring it back by thinking of Mica, but a veil covered her picture, semitransparent and wrinkled. Mother. And in order to lift the veil, he began to occupy himself with her so much that he forgot even the picture. Yes, it was mother. Her exclamation, her hissing, her wrinkled physiognomy. But, strangely, this time he did not feel guilty at all. And this great turnabout seemed very ordinary to him, so he didn't even think about it: he was trying to lift the veil.

"What? What does she want? How dare she do that? She meant to scare me, but I'm not afraid of her. She resents it, but her resentment is very stupid, misplaced and naive. And the way she looked! And what for?"

He didn't try to explain his own exclamations. He called her behavior stupid and misplaced and only when he exclaimed, "What for?!" did he feel terrible rage. And already rage was the only thing he felt, a rage of a thousand such exclamations, insults and questions which found no reply. Everything his physiognomy had expressed in that first moment of meeting and which he could never have willingly chosen was now expressed in his thoughts. He condemned her; he was convinced she had been overly stupid, that there was no reason for her behavior, and wanted to show her that it was all unnecessary, that she wouldn't be able to stop him that way from the course he had chosen. If she couldn't understand that - good-bye! He is not a child, after all. Tomorrow he will explain it to her, simply and calmly.

And this way, gradually giving in and slipping from one thought to the other, he convinced himself that it could really all be resolved peacefully and decided to respond to her challenge, her hissing and her wrinkled physiognomy by speaking calmly, reasonably and ironically.

3

When he saw his mother the next morning, it seemed she had undergone the same line of thinking. He didn't say anything. What's

more, he decided to cut the date short or at least to say he was going to the theater. He wanted to calm her down in any way possible, and all his spitefulness was gone. From hatred and anger to the decision to explain everything time of thinking had passed, thinned the harshness, the bile was crushed out, and from the latter decision to morning, all night of sleep and semireasoning had passed - so they stood next to each other with the same thoughts, gestures and physiognomies as every morning.

- Mother!

She prepared to listen, but didn't say anything.

- I'm going to the theater tonight.

She gave him the money. And at that moment he didn't know whether to actually go to the theater. He hesitated. But as soon as he was in the street, he gradually forgot about his mother and became more and more merry... A date in the park in the evening with a young, charming, pretty woman... He was leaving one part and the closer he got to the other, the former became ever more distant and small, and the latter larger and closer.

So in the evening he went to the park.

And there Mica was again, chatty, quick, with a hundred nonsenses, trifles and news. And then - suddenly - she fell silent. Mijo held her hand and listen to her sighs, the rustle of her dress and the fine fluttering of her hair. Then he looked at her white, inviting neck. And she, sensing that he was listening and looking, turned her gaze to him. And their eyes met. Hers - listless, lost and wondering and his - energetic, conscious and unmoving. She gave herself to him as weakness and he held her as strength. And having a woman in his arms, her smile, her tears and words - he felt huge, strong and worthy.

She broke loose: they were parting. But he couldn't stand it. It seemed to him that without her, with all his hugeness, strength and worthiness he would become small, weak and worthless. It was as if all that was strong and worthy in her had gone into him, and all that was small and worthless in him was lost in her - and parting was hard for him. He held her to him. He was deeply touched. The past brushed him lightly - long, cloudy and luke-warm - his mother was there, wrinkled and hissing - and here was she, a woman, youth, laughter, passion, everything. He had never felt that way before. The past had never seemed so miserable and raggy and it

seemed he had only now realized all its blandness and gloominess. A sudden, strong light illuminated it all, and in her departure he saw the light going out. But not only that! That light illuminated the present also - the present was the light itself, the huge, strong, unexpected light.

- Mica!

And their walk with tied hips, frequent hand-squeezing and touching of their heads, and the flower he picked for her, and the nocturno he explained to her, and she, Mica, his love, his youth, his passion, and this evening with the melancholy leaves and the silence of the frozen stars, and he, strength, energy - everything, everything...

His kiss was long and wet.

Mijo's eyes filled with tears.

4

This evening she didn't wait at the door. And he forgot and came home at the wrong time: he came earlier than he was supposed to.

- So early?

She knew everything. Her physiognomy was not unconscious like last night, but it was similar to it. It seemed as if every line (those jumbled lines!) was well studied. And despite the similarity, there was nothing of last night's despair in her. Mijo threw the money on the table. And again those hissing words, more stressed, as if cut off:

- Where in God's name were you?

He had decided to reply and explain reasonably. And maybe he had already directed his thoughts that way, but his physiognomy stood against hers just like last night: more aware and more stubborn, moving to every twitch of his mother's face. Invisible threads tied their expressions and an invisible hand pulled them.

- I was.

He didn't go on; he listened to her complaint. She had guessed it was about women. That's why she followed that line. Quickly, very animatedly, she started talking of his late father. He, she said, was destroyed by women. And his brother, the hapless Mirko, who had escaped over the border, had become a fraud because of a woman. Experience! Experience! "And you", she said to Mijo, "what would you know?"

At that point Mijo stopped listening. The thing about his brother - it had happened ten years ago - he now heard for the first time. And the "holy memory of his father" was now besmirched, so he never for a minute doubted that it was true. This evening, under a spotted light, after the first kisses - he heard from his own mother who had respected his father's memory a thing like this. It had to be true. And here he gave up. Her words were now arguments and attempts. So when she said: "Beware of women!", he replied convincingly, trying to calm her down, "What women! I was with Nikola."

And he said nothing more. He stared ahead as if listening carefully to the easy gait of his own thoughts.

Yes! He now began to take account of his life. In the "book of accounts" there was something uneven and unclear. All those things were told by his mother, with an experienced view of life; his mother who wanted only the best for her son. He, Mijo, feels that it's good to be with Mica; his mother, on the other hand, says it is bad. Maybe she doesn't know what she is like, the woman who steals his evenings, the evenings he used to spend at his piano waiting for his mother's "It's ten already!". And he cannot tell her. It seemed his mother would again say that Mica was all bad. And maybe she would be right. Mijo is poor, Mica has nothing. Where are they stumbling to, what can be ahead for them? What?... And here he was elevated by the allure of the unknown, the titillation of indecision which he until now only got from music in white, winter days with the creaking and breaking of ice... The same thing that can be found in Tchaikovsky, when he calls to mind with simple cords or notes a page from Rudin - - the one where the wind is howling and the homeless Rudin is walking and walking and walking, God knows where to and why...

5

So the game of deceiving began. Mother wanted to prove that at home, with her, everything was good, comfortable and happy, and made his life very pleasant. And he responded by deceiving her that he was going to the theater or taking lessons, telling her how stupid women were and how well he was doing in his studies.

They both suspected all these things were lies, but there was nothing to prove it. Moreover, Mijo - having amassed imaginary and intentful promises - felt obliged, regardless of the probability, to appear to her the way she wanted him.

And if something unexpected hadn't interrupted this shaky relationship, in the stability of which neither mother nor son believed, they would have both gotten used to the lie and maybe admitted its necessity, and then calmed and settled down.

But his mother was told that her son was often seen on the promenade with a very pretty girl. And she told him so.

Mijo wasn't surprised. He had expected it. From his suspicions, which detected something false in his mother's behavior, and from his behavior, which proved his own falsehood - from his relationship, in short - he knew that his mother would find out, that he would deny everything and that they would go on with their life as before. He was becoming placid, and he led the "book of accounts" like an experienced and skillful accountant who makes wrong entries but gets everything in balance in the end. Even if his employer criticizes him, he is prepared to argue that the accusations are wrong, and if that doesn't work, he will slap his forehead, call himself a fool and admit he made a mistake.

Thus, to his mother, he denied everything. He didn't "have somebody", there was no "sweetheart". After all, he is not crazy; why would he have a girl-friend when he had no intention of getting married. He has higher goals; he has his "seven-note-ideals", his "very unpopular favorites", which a woman, this stupid local woman, could never understand with her "sheep's brain"... And if - only if - he does keep company with a woman, it is something else - it's for music and music alone.

Mijo's manner of speech contradicted him strongly. But, strangely, he found this contradiction adequate, reasonable and logical. He believed it struck his mother the same way. At first, when she was telling him the "news", she looked scornful, malicious and bitter. Then, after his arguments, she began to vindicate women, to defend them from such mail slander and prejudice which called them stupid and devoid of feelings. And then, when he admitted it was only music that tied him to the woman, he pleased her as a woman and admitted that her arguments were justified.

When they reached that point in the conversation, they both looked pacified. For, from that first night which was new and unexpected, then during these few days of lies and deception and finally through this conversation - they both got used to talking about Mica. And the insentience, clumsiness, sincere desperation, hatred and resentment of this clear, normal and reasonable fact - everything from the first night became sentient, reasonable, sensible - it became ordinary.

6

Mother saw them. Had Mijo had a chance to turn around, had he known that she was looking at them with the same scornful resentment that always made her nose look thinner, larger and more crooked maybe he wouldn't have been so close to Mica's breath. But all he saw was the sun, windy crispness and the last greenery. Her smiling eye darted wanton looks. She rested them on her lover's profile like a bird sitting on a wire, moving about, making a sound and flying off. They were just walking, not kissing or holding each other; they were walking like morning lovers, enamored of the heels of their shoes, of chatting and the whispers of those who envied them.

So when Mijo came to lunch, the first thing he heard (although his mother actually said much more) was her sentence, deeply deliberate and excellently aimed:

- A good choice you made. Today I saw her with you, and the other day with another.

And immediately, without a moment's hesitation, Mijo knew it wasn't true. Had someone else told him so, he might have been in doubt; but hearing it from his mother, he knew it couldn't be true. So mother wailing - and the fact seemed quite natural to him. Hence he just shrugged his shoulders and said: "So?" - and tomorrow he saw Mica again.

He didn't know he was provoking her, even though he did expressly to provoke. He was walking very close to Mica, speaking more intimately, and he felt that the smile lingering on his face was forced and artificial, but he couldn't stop it.

When he came home, he heard it all; he actually came more to hear his mother than to have lunch. And while until now he came aut

matically, without looking at his mother or hearing her questions, today he came to carefully study her face and listen to every word.

Later he was never able to define the expression on her face, but he kept looking at it. The same was true of her speech. She knew everything! That Mica of his! Some fine lady! You only had to ask Mrs. N. And everybody else!... He scornfully denied it, she scornfully argued on. But their expressions, accents and facts grew. Throughout the dialogue they kept looking at each other: a glitter in the eye expressed triumphant satisfaction. For they looked only at their own faces. So in the growing mass of words, facts and accents, one thing came out:

- Slut...

All the malice, envy, torment and scorn hidden behind the triumph suddenly broke out.

- You monster...

And they parted. Mijo had responded by saying "monster". The word had slipped out of his mouth on its own and he hadn't even tried to stop it. In the swelling of emotions he could be unfair; but even later he had to admit that the word was a good and precise expression of his reaction to "tramp". Judging his own behavior he again had to conclude it had been impeccable. He noticed, to his great joy, that mother had besmirched the memory of his father which had hitherto been holy, and had also uttered a word that was hitherto not permitted in their house. And comparing these facts, it was clear to him that she had lied. That was certain beyond doubt! She lied about his father to estrange Mica from him, and she lied about Mica again to estrange her from him. And it became clear to him that this battle that had lasted a whole week was about her, the silent and smiling Mica: one side was attacking, the other defending. The opponent had used all weapons and that attacked with the ultimate - and he, Mijo, responded - and won. For Mica was his; it was over with his mother.

7

"What was the use?", he thought, "nobody will be hurt, and I can see and feel that my life is unimaginable without Mica. Unimaginable! So why is she trying to take her from me? Why?"

Arriving at that question, he immediately realized that it was no longer a question, that it could not remain a question. The answer was in the very flow of his thoughts that had asked the question. And he realized that the battle had been about him. Mica was as one with him, and his mother was fighting for him. To her, he was life, and Mica death, and Mica was life to him and death to his mother! Thus he was life to his mother, but was becoming her death!

"My mother is dead" - he whispered in the deep whisper that rustled through his breast, his throat, his mouth and ears. "My mother is dead", he whispered at the threshold of his life, the real, monumental life. He had come out as a winner who had realized his victory over the dead body of a hero. And in this moment, when homage was wavering over the dead and the living, in the moment of memories and hopes, in the last link of the past and the future, in the quiet formula of eternal being - there were tears; tears that showed the face, the feelings and the nature - huge, drunken, hysterical tears.

Mijo was moaning.

Translated by Ljiljana Šćuric