

THE STORY OF A BOY AND THE CUT ON HIS KNEE

I ALWAYS CONSIDER introductions useless in any kind of literary endeavor (if we can, of course, talk of literary endeavor). The title alone will suffice to introduce everything that is about to happen. So, in the beginning the boy will cut the knee, probably his own, and later, the cut will have hardly any significance as far as the rest of the story is concerned. Most certainly, the cut will be mentioned here and there; nevertheless, I will need to return to the cut near the end, not only to justify the title, but to complete the time sequence.

The only other thing I feel I should mention in the introduction is the fact that the boy will grow up, finish school, get drafted, then marry. So time will roll on. It's a pity. I hate time. It gobbles up everything alive. I don't want to consider the inanimate things. Let those who are paid to do so consider the inanimate.

And something else, before I start. I'll tell you the beginning and the end of the story. I'm not afraid to tell you because I know it won't be boring. No, I'm not afraid at all. So, the story will begin with the sentence: *The father forgot to lock the door behind him that morning*, and it will end with the clatter of iron railway wheels: *tadam-tadam, tadam-tadam*.

The father forgot to lock the door behind him that morning. On his way to the zoo where he worked as a keeper he'd no idea of the great favor he'd done his son who was dying to go down to the yard and play there with the other children. Mother had already gone to work. She left breakfast for her son on the table. It was usually French toast on a white plastic plate and a cup of milk, on top of which the cream thickened and wrinkled before the boy awoke. The boy took a teaspoon, skimmed off the cream, and threw it into the toilet.

On a shelf below the mirror, mother also left him a toothbrush with a tube of toothpaste, which meant that the boy should brush his teeth every morning. If he forgot, mother would beat him. She thought that was the only way to keep the boy's teeth healthy and white. But, in spite of her, his teeth were rotten.

That morning the boy washed his face and brushed his teeth. Then he went to the kitchen, chewed a piece of cold French toast, and sipped

some milk. He didn't really feel like eating or drinking. He was alone and he knew he would remain so for several hours. He threw all his food out the window. Then he looked through the window. Other children were playing outside. They didn't notice him. He walked to the door and found it open. Unhesitating, he went out. Children in the yard were playing hunters. Their only problem was to find a lion. As soon as they spotted the boy, it occurred to them that he'd make an ideal lion. He was solitary and had glittering eyes. He stood on the grass beside the fragments of a white toilet seat that someone had discarded.

"Wanna be the lion?" asked a little girl named Maya.

He had no choice. It was the only way to join in the game.

"OK," he said. Then he got down on all fours and crawled toward the hunters. He raised his lion's head in the air and let out a proud roar, his jaws wide open. The hunters waited behind the hedge taking deadly aim with their rifles. The lion was ready to pounce when suddenly it felt something on its back. *Tarzan*, he thought. But it wasn't Tarzan. It was Maya. She rode the lion and started bouncing frenziedly up and down on its mighty back.

"Lion-pion, lion-pion," she shouted riding the surprised animal. The hunters watched her, amazed at her courage. Suddenly the animal was wounded. Blood gushed from its right knee. The hunters ran away, sensing danger. Maya remained alone with the wounded animal. The jagged fragments of the broken toilet seat had done their work. Streams of dark blood ran down the boy's leg. He tried to stanch it with his white sock. Maya watched him. He didn't cry. Neither did she. She didn't run away. She didn't even feel guilty. He didn't either. He smiled at Maya as the blood ran down his leg. She smiled at him too.

Several years later it seemed that the scar was the only evidence of the cut on the boy's knee. But he couldn't quickly forget the beating he had received, first from his mother and then from his father. He couldn't forget the words his mother addressed to their neighbor:

"I don't know what to do with him. I beat him and beat him and beat him, but it doesn't help. He's as hardheaded as a mule."

The boy never really understood his error. He knew only that he was always beaten. He also never forgot that Maya too was beaten when she was caught with the wounded animal.

"Children are like elephants," the neighbor in the cellar said. "They never forget and never talk."

There were other events etched into the boy's memory. For example, his rare visits to the zoo. Although his father worked there, he didn't like his son coming to the zoo. It was probably because he was usually drinking on the job. Or maybe because his job was to clean the shit from the cages. Father hated animals because they were always shitting and making more work for him.

Most of all, the boy liked watching lions being fed, their teeth tearing apart some carcass' bluish ribs while flies swarmed all about. *Lion-pion, lion-pion*, he repeated silently to himself. Of course he remembered those words. And he would remember them all his life. But there were also some nice things to remember. First, what happened when grandmother was bathing Maya.

"Now you must wait," grandmother said mysteriously. "I have to bathe Maya."

"I don't want to bathe without him," Maya screamed.

"You can't go in together, he's a boy," grandmother tried to explain. "Only with him," Maya's face was red and upset.

Grandmother gave in. The boy watched while Maya enjoyed the jets of water from the shower and grandmother's gentle rubbing. He noticed that she didn't have the thing he had. He saw that Maya started laughing when grandmother said: "Now we'll do the little jinny."

Her thing reminded him of rolls they bought in the bakery, rolls that looked like two hills joined by a canyon. Maya was not at all ashamed. Neither was the boy ashamed.

But, there was some shame. Although nobody wanted to admit it. Perhaps it was shame that made him dream of Maya's grandmother turning into a witch with a black hood and a large warty nose. It was one of the dreams the boy remembered all his life. The witch was trying to grab his cool snail of a thing which the boy tried to hide between his legs. She got the better of him and finally managed to sieze hold of it, tear it off, and devour it in one bite. The boy didn't feel any pain. He was overcome by a new, silent horror. Blood dripped slowly over his white socks. Then he woke up and realized how deep and dark was the night around him. He heard only the barking of a stray dog in the street. It was then that he felt the cold stab inside him, which preceded fear. He quickly found his way to mother's bed. She welcomed him with a sleepy embrace. The peace he found there dispersed the traces of the bad dream. He noticed that mother had coarse, dense hair where Maya was soft and bare. *Mother is different*, thought the boy and slept soundly, without dreaming.

School began one sunny morning in September when mother dressed him in a cinnamon-colored outfit. He wore short pants and a little coat. Then she tied a black velvet bowtie around his neck. The boy felt uncomfortable in these clothes. He felt like the big velvet toy rabbit that he used to punish in his earlier years, beating and slapping it, for all the wrongs done him by others. He was usually that kind of toy for his mother. On the other hand, his father treated him like a real, live rabbit. The reason for that was probably that his father worked in the zoo and had liked rabbits since childhood. He thought they were harmless and stupid. He didn't notice that the boy's eyes observed everything in a most human manner.

On that September morning, the boy realized that he would have to fight with the school that the grown-ups called the school of life. He would have to wake up at six o'clock every morning and spend time with dull and indifferent teachers and lots of dull and stupid children. The fact that Maya walked to school with him didn't make things easier because they soon realized that they were not in the same class.

Three weeks after, the boy was given special duties by the teacher. He had to peek into other children's ears and see if they were clean. He also had to check if their hands were clean and their nails trimmed. Then he wrote down pluses for neatness and minuses for dirtiness in a special notebook the teacher gave him. The teacher chose him because he was always the cleanest child in the room. It was then that he decided his duty was to examine other people. There were a number of alternatives. He might become a customs officer, but he really wasn't that interested in examining other people's luggage. He left that to those who were paid to examine inanimate things. He might become a police investigator, but was dubious about an investigator's feelings for people. So, he decided to become a doctor.

He wasn't able to avoid his feelings for other people being changed when he became a doctor. After the anatomy classes where a dead human body was treated like a freshly slaughtered hog, he began to see his fellow human beings as walking piles of flesh and bones. Of course, he managed to keep all this a secret. Somewhere near the end of his medical studies, his father was killed in a famous accident that was reported in all the newspapers. It happened only a week before he was due to retire. Under the influence of alcohol, he fell too close to the lion's cage. It was close enough for the animal, eager for excitement, to break his skull with a single blow of the paw. The lion then tried to drag the body into

the cage, but the other keepers beat it back with iron bars. The boy (all his life, inside, he was the boy) had to identify his father's body.

"Yes, it's him," he said trying to figure out how the wound was inflicted. "He didn't suffer much," he said to the officer behind him.

"He didn't," the officer agreed.

One cloudy September afternoon, he left the University building. School was over. *But the school of life is never over*, his father had always said. However, dilemmas persisted. Why continue to live? And how? It seemed that the school of life could only function as a redundant introduction. He came home in that frame of mind. Mother was sweeping the floor for the third time that day. She was wearing black, her eyes swollen from crying. She didn't even hear when he told her he had graduated. She only repeated:

"What will happen to us, poor orphans. . . ."

The boy wanted to cross the street and talk to Maya, but realized that now she was a married woman with a child and that it would be uncomfortable to call on her since they were no longer children. He went to the yard of his childhood, looking for some signs of the games he used to play there when he managed to escape his parents' control. In vain. The yard was filled with cars. There was no space left for playing.

"Such is life," the neighbor in the cellar said, although nobody had asked his opinion. "Today we are, tomorrow we are not."

The boy looked at him without having to answer. He heard the distant cawing of crows. It darkened.

The moment came for the boy to take his place on the barricades of the fatherland.

One day he rode the bus to a provincial town where his new Army comrades met him at the station and took him to the camp.

"It's not so bad once you get used to it," one of them told him. *Get used to what?* That wasn't clear to the boy.

"First few years are difficult," they told him laughing cruelly, "after that, it gets easier."

Those healthy, strong, determined boys seemed pretty strange. During the night, iron beds shook from bad dreams and masturbation.

"Are they really jerking off?" the boy asked a Bosnian when the lights went out.

"Of course they are. Don't worry, and you will too," he laughed heartily.

The boy wasn't worried. He knew that he would have to get used to loneliness in that numberless crowd of male comrades. For them, female comrades existed only in the imagination and in men's magazines.

The boy had slept with many girls before joining the Army. But he never did it out of real desire; he did it only because he had to prove that he was no longer just a boy. Girls liked him—brunettes and blondes. In the beginning he preferred blondes, but later he switched to brunettes. In the beginning he preferred plump ones, but later he switched to slim ones.

"Slim ones are better," the Bosnian agreed while they were marching down the road.

It happened during the violet twilight on their third or fourth excursion from the camp. In late May the sky grew violet at dusk in that little town. The boy was walking down the street in his olive-grey uniform when suddenly he smelled the heavy scent of roses. He started following it like a bloodhound following the blood of a wounded animal. He felt like a cross between that bloodhound and the hunted animal. It was then that he experienced the real, irresistible need for a woman. And a woman was waiting for him just round the corner leaning against a fence where roses grew. She was gazing along the street and smiling. The boy stood in amazement, looking at her and numbly inhaling the scent of roses. The girl laughed out loud. He came closer.

"It smells nice," he said.

The girl didn't speak. She looked into his eyes and started reading them. When finally she found passion and appreciation in them, she invited him inside. She didn't feel uncomfortable because he was a soldier, although she knew what people in her town thought of girls who went with soldiers. They talked about ordinary things that could hardly mask their desire for one another. She tried to encourage him with her laughter and quick bold movements of her body. His cheeks burnt and his eyes sparkled. He was shy. Then she invited him to take a bath with her. He couldn't speak. He just followed her. She stripped without hesitation and started running warm streams of water over her body. *Now we'll do the little jinny*, he remembered grandmother's voice.

"Dear doctor," she said suddenly, "would you like to examine me?"

He entered the bathtub. She touched him, pleased with his proportions. They clutched at each other, crazily and desperately. When they finally slid down to the bottom of the tub, only the sound of the locomotive roaring on a nearby track could be heard.

“One day you will take that train,” she said while a tear rolled down her cheek into the mixture of water and semen that covered their bodies. He squeezed her, unable to say anything.

They were married three months later. He decided that he would take her with him back to the city. He didn’t feel like staying in that small town to which he would be attached only by the memory of the time he had spent in the camp.

Whenever he could, he ran away from the camp. By her side, all the shadows the Army had cast over his boyish soul vanished. Often they lay on a multicolored blanket and talked about the past and the future. One hot summer afternoon, with only two days of Army service left, they were hurriedly preparing for their departure when she noticed a scar overgrown with hair on his knee.

“Where does that come from?” she asked him curiously.

“It’s a story that needs a long introduction,” the boy answered. “Maybe I’ll tell it to you one day, when we get there.”

And he sprawled on the bed with satisfaction, hearing only the distant clatter of the iron wheels that would soon take them far away from here. *Tadam-tadam, tadam-tadam. . . .*

translated by Daniel Weissbort and Tomislav Longinović