

A quarter of a century, or a day, has passed since I arrived in Jesenice on the trail of my missing brother. I was not yet twenty and I had just taken my final school examination. I ought to have felt free, for after weeks of study the summer months lay open before me. But I had set out with mixed feelings, what with my old father, my ailing mother, and my confused sister at home in Rinkenbergl. Besides, after being released from the seminary, I had got used, during the past year, to my class in the state school in Klagenfurt, where girls were in the majority, and now I suddenly found myself alone. While my classmates piled into the bus together and set out for Greece, I played the loner who preferred to go to Yugoslavia by himself. (The truth was that I simply didn't have the money for the group trip.) Another reason for my unease was that I had never been outside of Austria and knew very little Slovene, though it was hardly a foreign language for an inhabitant of a village in southern Carinthia.

After a glance at my newly issued Austrian passport, the border guard in Jesenice spoke to me in his language. When I failed to understand, he told me in German that Kobal was a Slavic name, that the word meant the span between parted legs, a 'step,' and consequently a person standing with legs outspread, so that my name would have been better suited to him, the border guard. The elderly official beside him, in

Repetition

civilian clothes, white-haired, with the round, rimless glasses of a scholar, explained with a smile that the related verb meant 'to climb' or 'to ride'; thus, my given name, Filip, 'lover of horses,' fitted in with Kobal, and he felt sure I would someday do honor to my full name. (Since then, I have often found the civil servants of this so-called progressive country, which was once part of an empire, surprisingly well educated.) Suddenly he grew grave, came a step closer, and looked me solemnly in the eye. I should know, he said, that two and a half centuries ago there had been a Slovene hero named Kobal. In the year 1713 Gregor Kobal, from near Tolmin on the headwaters of the river which in Italy farther down was known as the Isonzo, had been one of the leaders of the great Tolmin peasant revolt, and in 1714 he had been executed along with his comrades. It was he who had said – and his words were still renowned in the Republic of Slovenia – that the Emperor was a mere servant and that the people had better take matters into their own hands. Thus informed – of something I already knew – I, with my sea bag over my shoulder, was permitted to step out of the dark frontier station without showing any cash, and to set foot in the north Yugoslavian town, which in those days our school maps still identified by its old Austrian name of Assling (in parentheses), side by side with the Slovene Jesenice.

For a long while I stood outside the station, with the Karawanken Mountains, which I had seen in the distance all my life, close at my back. The city begins at the exit from the tunnel and winds down the narrow river valley, surmounted by a tenuous strip of sky, which broadens to the south and is immediately veiled by the smoke of the iron foundries. Jesenice is a long village with one exceedingly noisy street, the side streets being little more than steep paths. It was a warm evening at the end of June 1960, and the surface of the street gave off a dazzling brightness.

It came to me that what made the station so dark were the buses which stopped outside the big swinging door in quick succession and drove on. Strange how soothing the overall grayness – the gray of the houses, the street, the cars, so very different from the bright colors of the cities of Carinthia, ‘Carinthia the beautiful’ according to a nineteenth-century Slovene song – was to my eyes in the evening light. The short Austrian train that had brought me and that would soon go back through the tunnel seemed as clean and bright as a toy train beside the massive, dusty Yugoslavian trains, and the blue uniforms of its crew, who were talking loudly on the platform, provided a dash of exotic color amid the prevailing gray. It also struck me that the swarms of people in the streets of this smallish town, quite unlike the inhabitants of the small towns in my own country, took notice of me now and then but never stared at me. And the longer I stood there, the more certain I became that this was a great country.

Now, only a few hours later, how far behind me seemed my afternoon in Villach, where I had visited my history and geography teacher. We had talked about my plans for the fall: Should I do my military service at once, or get a deferment and study? But study what? And then, in one of the parks, the teacher had read me a fairy tale that he himself had written, asked me for my opinion, and listened to it with an expression of total seriousness. He was a bachelor and lived alone with his mother, who, while I was there, kept asking through the closed door whether her son was all right and whether he wanted anything. He had accompanied me to the station and there, as secretly as if he felt someone was watching, he had slipped me a bank note. I was very grateful, but I hadn’t been able to show it, and now too, when I tried to visualize the man across the border, all I could see was a wart on his pale forehead. The

Repetition

face that went with it was that of the border guard, who was hardly older than myself and yet, to judge by his bearing, his voice, and the look in his eyes, had evidently found his place in life. Of the teacher, his apartment, and the whole of Villach I had preserved no image apart from two pensioners playing chess at a table and the glitter of the halo over the statue of the Virgin Mary on the main square.

Fully present to my mind, however – and still fully present today, twenty-five years later – was the morning of the same day, when I took leave of my father on the wooded hill from which the village of Rinkenbergr took its name. With sagging knees, dangling arms, and gout-gnarled fingers, which at that moment impersonated furious clenched fists, the frail, aging man, much smaller than I, stood by the wayside Cross and shouted at me: ‘All right, go to the dogs like your brother, like our whole family! None of us has ever amounted to anything, and you won’t either. You won’t even get to be a good gambler like me.’ Yet, just then, he had embraced me for the first time in my life, and I had looked over his shoulder at the dewy wetness at the bottom of his trousers, with the feeling that in me he was actually embracing himself. But then in memory my father’s embrace held me, not only that evening outside the Jesenice station, but down through the years, and I heard his curse as a blessing. In reality he had been deadly serious, but in my thoughts I saw him grinning. May his embrace carry me through this story.

Standing in the twilight, in the roar of the through traffic, which seemed positively soothing, I reflected that up until then I had never felt held in a woman’s embrace. I had no girlfriend. When the one girl whom I knew, so to speak, embraced me, her embrace struck me as mischievous or defiant. Yet how proud I was when we walked down the street together,

keeping our distance, but obviously belonging to each other in the eyes of the people coming in the opposite direction. Once somebody called from a group of strolling little-more-than-children: 'Have *you* got a beautiful girl!' And another time an old woman stopped, looked from the girl to me, and said literally: 'Lucky fellow!' Such moments seemed a fulfillment of longing. And then the joy, in the changing light of the movie house, of seeing the shimmering profile beside me, the mouth, the cheek, the eye. The ultimate was the sense of bodily closeness, which sometimes came unsought; even a purely accidental contact would have seemed an infringement. So perhaps I had a girlfriend after all. For to me the thought of a woman meant, not desire or lust, but the wishful image of a beautiful companion – yes, my companion would have to be beautiful! – whom I would at last be able to tell . . . Tell what? Just tell. At the age of twenty I conceived falling-into-one-another's-arms, loving, being fond of one another, as a constant, forbearing yet unreserved, calm yet exclamatory, clarifying and illuminating telling, and in that connection I thought of my mother, who, whenever I had been out of the house for any length of time, in town or alone in the woods or out in the fields, assailed me with her 'Tell me.' Despite frequent rehearsals, I had never, at least before her illness, succeeded in telling her anything. As a rule, I could only tell unasked – though, once launched, I needed the right questions to keep me going.

And now, outside the station, I discovered that since my arrival in Jesenice I had been silently telling my girlfriend about my day. And what was I telling her? Neither incidents nor events, but mere impressions, a sight, a sound, a smell. The jet of the little fountain across the street, the red of the newspaper kiosk, the exhaust fumes of the heavy trucks – once I told her about them, they ceased to exist in themselves and merged with one another. And the teller was not I, it was the experience

Repetition

itself. This silent telling deep inside me was something greater than myself. And, without growing older, the girl to whom it was addressed was transformed into a young woman, just as the boy of twenty, in growing aware of the teller inside him, became an ageless adult. We stood facing each other, exactly at eye level. This eye level was the measure of the telling. I sensed the tenderest of strengths within me. And it said to me: 'Jump!'

A star appeared, a constellation in itself, in the yellowish factory sky over Jesenice, and a glowworm flew through the smoke of the street down below. Two railroad cars bumped together. In the supermarket, the checkout girls were relieved by cleaning women. At a window in a high-rise building, a man stood smoking in his undershirt.

Exhausted as after strenuous exercise, I sat in the station restaurant until almost midnight, over a bottle of the dark, sweet drink which at that time substituted for Coca-Cola in Yugoslavia. Yet I was wide awake, quite otherwise than in the evening at home – whether in the village, at the seminary, or in the city – when I was always too tired to be good company. At the only dance I was taken to, I fell asleep with my eyes open, and in the last hours of the year my father tried in vain to keep me from my bed by playing cards with me. I think that what kept me awake was not so much the strange country as being in a restaurant; in a waiting room, most likely I would soon have felt tired.

I was sitting in one of the brown wooden booths, rather like a choir stall. In front of me, the bright tiers of station platforms, and behind me, the equally bright highway with its illuminated apartment houses. Behind me, full buses were still running this way and that; in front of me, full trains. Of the travelers, I saw no faces, only silhouettes; but I saw the silhouettes through a face reflected in plate glass – my own. With the help of this reflection, which did not portray me as an individual

but showed only a forehead, eye sockets, and lips, I was able to dream the silhouettes not only of the passengers but also of the apartment-house dwellers as they moved through their rooms or, occasionally, sat on the balconies. It was an airy, luminous, sharp dream in which I had friendly thoughts about all the dark figures. None of them was evil. The old people were old, the couples were couples, the families were families, the children were children, the lonely were lonely, the dogs and cats were dogs and cats, each individual was part of a whole, and I with my reflection belonged to this nation, which I envisaged on an unceasing, peaceful, adventurous, serene journey through the night, a journey in which the sleeping, the sick, the dying, even the dead were included. I sat up straight to get a better view of my dream. The one thing that troubled me was the larger-than-life portrait of the President, hanging in the exact center of the room, over the bar. Marshal Tito was unmistakably there in his heavily braided uniform with all its decorations. Leaning forward over a table on which his clenched fist rested, he looked down at me with bright, fixed eyes. I could almost hear him say: 'I know you,' and I wanted to answer: 'But I don't know myself.'

My dream went no further until the waitress appeared in the dingy light behind the bar; in her shadowy face, nothing was distinct but her eyelids, which almost hid her eyes even when she was looking straight ahead. Suddenly, while contemplating those eyelids, I saw my mother, ghostlike but very real. She put the glasses in the sink, skewered a receipt on a spike, ran a cloth over the brass. Nameless horror when for a moment her eyes, mocking, impenetrable, met mine; horror that was more like a jolt, a shift into a larger dream. In this dream the sick woman had recovered. Thoroughly alive, she bustled, disguised as a waitress, from room to room of

Repetition

the restaurant. Her heels peered out of her slingback shoes. What sturdy legs my mother had now, what swinging hips, what a tower of hair. And though, unlike most of the women in the village, she knew only a few words of Slovene, here, in conversation with an invisible group of men in a neighboring booth, she spoke it with ease and self-assurance. So she wasn't the foundling, the fugitive, the German, the foreigner she had always pretended to be. For a moment, I felt ashamed that this person with the brisk movements, the singsong speech, the loud laugh, the quick furtive glances, should be my mother, and then, through this strange woman, I saw her as precisely as never before. Yes, until recently, my mother had spoken in such a singsong, and whenever she had actually started to sing, her son had wanted to stop his ears. In any choir, however large, I could instantly pick out my mother's voice: a quavering, a trembling, a fervid outpouring, which totally captivated the singer, but not the listener. And her laughter had been not only loud but positively wild, a scream, an outburst of joy, of anger, of bitterness, of contempt, of condemnation. When she cried out with pain at the beginning of her illness, her screams had still sounded like the surprised, half-amused, half-indignant laughter which she tried, more and more feebly as time went on, to cover up by singing trills. I conjured up the various voices in our household and heard my father swearing, my sister giggling and weeping in the course of muttered conversations with herself, and my mother laughing from end to end of the village – and Rinken-berg is a long village. (I saw myself as mute.) Then I realized that my mother was not merely self-assured like the waitress but positively imperious. She had always wanted to run a big hotel, with the staff as her subjects. Our farm was small and her demands were great. In her stories about my brother, he was always represented as a king cheated out of his throne.

And she saw me as the rightful heir to the throne yet doubted from the start that I would ever reign. Sometimes, in looking at me, her face froze into an expression of pity without a glimmer of compassion. I had often been characterized by someone – a priest, a teacher, a girl, a classmate; but in that silent look of my mother’s I felt not only characterized but seen through and condemned. And I am sure that it wasn’t after a certain lapse of time, for any specific reason, that she started looking at me like that, but that she had done so ever since I was born. She lifted me, held me up to the light, laughed inwardly, and condemned me. And later on, when I was a baby thrashing about in the grass, screaming with the love of life, she would hold me up to the sun to make sure, laugh at me, and again condemn me. I tried to think it had been the same with my brother and sister before me, but I couldn’t. I was the only one who elicited the exclamation which commonly followed that merciless look: ‘Aren’t we a pair!’ which she sometimes addressed to a farmyard animal about to be slaughtered. True, at an early age I felt the need to be seen, perceived, described, known, but not like that. For instance, I had felt known on one occasion when, not my mother, but my girlfriend, had said: ‘Aren’t we a pair!’ And when for the first time, after all the years at the seminary, where no one called us by anything but our family names, I heard the girl next to me at the state school address me quite casually by my first name, I took it as a characterization that exonerated me, almost as a caress. I had a feeling of relief and I can still see the sparkle of the girl’s hair. And so, once I learned to decipher my mother’s looks, I knew: This is no place for me.

Yet twice in those twenty years she literally saved me. When I was transferred to the seminary from the Gymnasium in Bleiburg, it wasn’t because my parents wanted to make something better of me. (I believe my father as well as my mother

Repetition

was convinced that I would either amount to nothing at all or become 'something out of the ordinary,' by which they understood something ghoulish.) The reason for the change of schools was that at the age of twelve I acquired my first, and from the start deadly, enemy.

There had always been enmities among the village children. We were all neighbors, and proximity often made a neighbor's idiosyncrasies unbearable. It was the same among grownups, even old people. For a while two neighbors would pass each other without a greeting; one would pretend to be busy in his house or yard, and the other, within plain sight, would also be busy in his own way. All at once, even without fences, there would be an inviolable boundary between properties. Even in his own home a child who felt he had been unjustly treated by a member of the family would stand silent in a remote corner of the living room with his face to the wall, as though in observance of an old custom. In my imagination, all the living rooms of the village are joined into a single room of many corners, all of which are occupied by quarrelsome, sulking village children, until at length one of them, or all at once (as always happened in reality), breaks the spell with a word or a laugh. It's true that no one in the village referred to anyone as a friend – they spoke instead of 'good neighbors'; but it is equally true that at least among the children there were no quarrels leading to lasting hostility.

Even before I came up against my first enemy, I had suffered persecution, an experience that had its effect on my later life. But there was nothing personal about this persecution; it was simply a child from Rinckenberg being persecuted by children from another village. The children from that other village had a longer, harder way to school than we did; they had to cross a deep ditch and, if only for that reason, were thought to be stronger than we were. On the way home, which as far as the fork was the same for both groups, we Rinckenbergers

were regularly chased by the Humtschachers. (Though they were no older than ourselves, I couldn't see them as children. Now for the first time, as I look at pictures on the tombstones of those killed in early accidents, I am struck by how youthful, not to say childlike, they all were even as young men.) For an eternity we ran along a road (there were never any cars at that time of day), pursued by the menacing roar of the faceless, heavy-legged, clumsy-footed horde, brandishing gorilla-length arms like cudgels, wearing their schoolbags on their backs like combat gear. There were days when, hungry as I was, I would dawdle in the safety of Bleiburg until the jungle menace had passed; at such times the town was dear to me, though as a rule I longed to go home. But then came a sudden change. Once again, starting at the edge of the town, I was pursued by the howling, so terrifying precisely because it was incomprehensible. But this time I let my fellow villagers run and sat down in the grass triangle enclosed by the road and the forked path running into it. In this moment, with the enemy bearing down on me, I was confident that nothing would happen. I stretched out my legs in the grass, looked southward at Mount Petzen, which forms the Yugoslavian border, and knew that I was safe. I felt shielded by the fact that I thought and saw the same thing at the same time. True enough, nothing happened to me. As they came closer, my persecutors slowed down, and one or two of them followed my eyes. 'It's beautiful up there,' I heard. 'I went up there with my father one time.' I looked at them and saw that the horde had broken down into a few individuals. They smiled at me as they sauntered by, as though relieved that I had seen through their game. No words were exchanged, yet it was clear that from then on there would be no more persecution. Looking after them, I noticed their sagging knees and dragging steps. How far they still had to go in comparison with me! And I began to feel a bond with