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Remembering Forest

Translated by Tomislav Kuzmanović

The Trail

I lie in my bed and listen; bundles of old newspapers seal the wooden house yet the wind has found new cracks: the wind blows and moves the shadows about the room. Later, there's a sharp clang of chains: that's my father releasing the cattle. I dress quickly and run out, Suza, the cow, is already walking out of the yard: Šarava, Lozonja, Peronja follow; the forest climbs up the steep hill together with us. Suza knows the way and other cows follow closely: across the green grass, tall, low, freshly-cut; leaves get stuck on their hoofs. Medo runs out of the bundle of green brush. I pat his ears, pull his tail, out of pure joy, and hurry up after the cattle; my stride long, I walk, and a little later, on a clearing that has parted the forest, I meet up with my friends: one is called Pejo, the other Nenad. Lately, Mali comes along with us; he's just started school, this past fall, he's got only one cow, so we have to look after both him and his cow. Sometimes Biba comes too, and her sheep: she lies in the shade, reads "real books" and pretends we don't exist; we pretend she doesn't exist. We've put our stuff down under a bush, rolled our sleeves; just like yesterday we're competing in throwing rocks. Pejo and Nenad have already thrown theirs, now it's my turn. I crouch down, pick up the rock and see Biba's grandfather Mile; he's just standing there, his hunting rifle on his shoulder, keeping his stiff eye on me: silence has snuck its way into the barrels of his gun. I take a deep breath, let many moments melt into one, and some rage surges out of that sudden jerk of the arm; I throw the rock and imagine it fly straight at Grandpa Mile: the rock is flying, carrying gazes over. Nenad swiftly runs up to the rock and shouts: "I get the gold, Pejo silver, and you the bronze medal!" In anger, because I have expected a lot from this throw, a thought crosses my mind, at least I beat Grandpa Mile. And he, as if reading my mind, sniggers and says I've still got a lot to learn.

Once, when we just started looking after the cattle in the woods, he asked us if we wanted some honey. As one, we all said yes, then he took us to a hole in the ground; a white, taut membrane lay across it. He said, "There, dig in. Eat as much as you want." He went to the nearby thicket and shouted from there, "Leave something for tomorrow!" Impatient, we immediately got down on our knees around the hole, lowered our heads and began parting the membrane with our hands. Then there was a start; we jumped back to our feet like those Russian dancers. As we ran, our eyes we searched for the forest's edge. We zigzagged, running. Falling down, getting up; the wasps relentlessly buzzed down our necks. In the end, we ran into thick woods, that's what saved us, and all the while Grandpa Mile was laughing his head off. I got two stings: in the neck and in the face, so I quickly found two cold rocks and put them on the swellings; Nenad got one, and Pejo none. Back home, when I told this to Nana, she immediately got out in the yard. She shouted, "Had he gotten plague, he would've walked from one house to another and spat on people's doorknobs! That's who he is!"

She told me to never come near the wasps' nest again, because if they stung my tongue, it would swell, and I'd suffocate and die.

Ever since then, whenever we walk in the woods and run into a hole and a white membrane over it, we gather dry grass, leaves, hay, throw everything inside and quickly set it on fire. And then we run for the forest's edge. We get down on the ground and press our ears onto invisible rails. It sounds like heavy trucks passing by deep under ground.

Ball-Playing

We're playing football on the road; we're keeping an eye on my father, hoping he isn't around: he's already sliced five of our rubber balls. A couple of days ago, in the field, he attacked a pumpkin with the pitchfork: he thought it was a ball. Mother doesn't like me running after the ball either, but she only says quietly: "Don't go wearing yourself out for nothing." Father even hates football broadcasts on the radio; when there's an important game, I hold the thermometer over the iron-hot stove, then I shove it under my armpit, lie down in my bed, and pretend I'm running a fever. And as soon as Father angrily chases the cattle into the woods, I run to Grandpa Pave; he lives in a house at the end of the village. He was good friends with my grandpa; the two of them played cards, went for walks, often shouted in conversation. Grandpa spent his whole life working in tunnels, he was a miner, and all of those mines left him half-deaf: that's why he spoke a bit louder, he thought no one heard him well either. The day I came back from the Rijeka Hospital, because Father didn't let them operate on me, Grandpa, all in tears, embraced me. And then, once, when he and Nana were alone in the room, he said: "What can we do, he's defective, poor thing." Because of that word, *defective*, I hadn't spoken to him for three days, he thought I was in a bad mood because I'd gotten a bad grade in school; Grandpa always watched me secretly. An expression on his face, filled with pain. His eyes were large and blue, his lips pressed into a thin line, as if suffering pain for both him and for me; once I told him I felt no pain; he didn't say anything, but Nana said instead: "Why would you feel pain, dear child?" And Grandpa felt a lot of pain. Grandpa Pave says that no one endured more pain than him. That he, when he saw how my grandpa suffered yet the death just would not take him, would give anything to just drop to the ground one day. He was the one who told me that Grandpa walked around for years with an empty goulash can strapped around his waist with a wire; he kept his wee-wee in the can so not to pee his pants. He and Nana married when she was fifteen and he seventeen, they had three children: my father and my two aunts who live in Slovenia, but who almost never visit because of my father. Grandpa Pave never married: he has no children, no relatives, he has no one, all he has is a couple of chickens and his transistor radio; when the game starts, he turns on the radio and slowly pulls out the long antenna; after the game he tells me about all the famous players who played for Dinamo: his favorite is Dražan Jerković. He loves him, he says, because he was a real fox-in-the-box and because he never married.

For a while I wanted to become a football player. I played well in school, but I gave up on it when I realized that Turtle, the best player in our village, was only a backup at the club in the nearby town. That's the lowest league where the champion can't get promoted because there's no money, and the last club doesn't get relegated because there's nothing to get relegated into. I'm not even sure if I'd get the doctor's

certificate: it's mandatory for all, peewees, juniors, seniors, without it no club could register me. Turtle has had the certificate for quite a while now, my cousin from Senj who plays the junior league for FC Nehaj also has one. The certificate says: fit. I'd love to have that certificate, to be as fit as Turtle, to play for the club from the town like he does; that's where he got his name, Turtle: everyone calls him Turtle, so we do too. When he plays, he runs after the ball along the line and always keeps his arm slightly raised; people around the field shout at him: "Turtle, release the handbrake!" But Turtle has a good strike. People say that at one game he hit the ball so hard that it bounced five times from one post to another before it got in the goal; when after the game or practice he comes rumbling through the village on his moped, we run after him to clean his cleats; he eats cabbage and meat straight from the pot, with a fork, reads *Il Grande Blek,* his favorite comic book, and laughs out loud, while we fight to clean his muddy cleats. On Sunday he takes me, Pejo and Nenad to an away game on his moped: we are riding, leaning as we pass the bends; I firmly hold onto Nenad, he onto Pejo, Pejo onto Turtle: some of our players can't play because last night they got drunk, so Turtle is certain he'll start the game. The field is small, surrounded by thick woods; home supporters have come from the field, they carry hoes in their hands and sing in unison: *Nothing in the world am I afraid of, my knife and my gun are stuck in my sock*. Just in case, Turtle shoves us in that tin house where the substitute players sit, he adjusts his shin guards in his stocks, tightens his cleats: then the game begins. Our coach has already smoked half a pack of cigarettes; we keep biting our fingernails, that's how nervous we are. When our players groan and roll around the grass in pain, the coach quickly takes out a can of hairspray, runs to the player on the ground and sprays his aching leg: the injured player jumps up and immediately plays on; as the game progresses, the opposing team keeps attacking and pressing on, our players, for tactical reasons, send the ball to the forest, so they can catch a breather; after that the referees take a long time searching for the ball, we hear them shouting from the bushes: "Not here!"

Now Turtle strikes the ball, somewhere near the half of the field, for tactical reasons, and sends it flying towards the woods, he slowly turns around and starts walking toward his goal, the tips of his cleats tiredly dragging in the grass; then his overjoyed players start jumping all over him; Turtle from our village has scored a goal.

Lunch

Since Grandpa died, I've taken his place at the table, so now I sit opposite my father; we have pork, potatoes and lettuce for lunch. Father chews and keeps one eye on me so that I don't drop the fork; as he eats, his eye keeps telling me: "Careful!" The other day my sister dropped her fork on the floor, but he only told her to eat slowly. I eat slowly, chew and keep my eyes on the plate in front of me; my sister can't get the potato on her fork; her teeth are rotten; they are even blacker when the shiny fork is near. Father has not even swallowed his piece of meat, yet he's already drinking water; there's a greasy mark left on the rim; Nana's lips move and she keeps her eyes fixed on her plate; when we are all sitting around the table like now, she seldom speaks. The moment she opens her mouth to say something, Mother says: "Can't you at least keep quiet while we're eating." She is getting back at Nana because she did the same to her when she married Father. Most often Father pretends he doesn't hear or see it, but sometimes he says: "Enough!" Yesterday I also took Nana's side, I cut Mother short, told her my corduroys needed to be washed. Mother paused, glanced at Nana and said, "I don't have ten hands." Father said nothing, he just observed the rotten rafters above his head. And then, between two mouthfuls, he said, "At the new house, there won't be any dust falling into our mouths." My sister dropped the fork again, this time on the table; we are eating, keeping quiet; outside Medo barks. He knows he'll get his meal after lunch. Father suddenly gets up and shouts through the closed window, "Don't make me get out there!" The barking stops, and Father sits down and mumbles into his greasy beard, "I'll teach you a lesson!" I twitch because it seems those words are meant for me; I take a new piece of meat from the bowl, I'm trying to eat as much as I can to get more weight; I'm skinny, but I'm growing so every day I'm even skinnier. Father says, "Even if you threw all that food away, you'd be stronger." Nana says, "He'll gain weight when he goes to the army, that's when everyone gets stronger and fatter." Mother opens her mouth to say something, but then swallows the word, picks up the kitchen towel and starts rubbing my sister's mouth. She tries to break loose and says, "Leave me be, I ain't baby anymore." When lunch is over, all the meat in the bowl has been eaten: there's only a thick layer of lard at the bottom. Father, like always, picks up the bowl with both hands, stands up, brings it slowly to his mouth: in two large gulps he drinks the lard; he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and tells me to take the bones to Medo, because he started barking again. I collect the bones from the table, toss them to Medo who crunches them with his strong teeth, then head to my room: I still have a lot of time, so I lie down and fall asleep. I haven't dreamt of anything, it's better I haven't; last night I dreamt one of the worst dreams ever: I lost a cow. I'm afraid to even think what Father would do to me if I came home without a cow: I wouldn't even go home. Mother walks in, sees me lying in bed with hands on my face, because the sun is getting into my eyes, and then she asks, "Are you in pain?" I shake

my head no, then get up, walk into the kitchen, and put bacon, five or six potatoes, and my folding knife into the bag. In a couple of minutes I push my way between warm cattle; I release them from their chains, minding they don't trample over me. Then I run to Medo who keeps jumping and pulling on his chain; I barely manage to set him free from all the yanking. I adjust the heavy bag on my shoulder, take the staff that's standing behind the barn door and get the cattle going up the hill. Along the way, I pick juicy strawberries; I keep glancing around after each strawberry I eat to see if Pejo and Nenad are coming. I bring my hand to my eyes to expand the view: through the curtain of tiny, leathery leaves I only see Mali with that one cow of his so I slash Peronja's back to pick up his pace; we first walk across the field cleared for crops, then through the yellow flowers; after we've all gather up on the pasture and started the fire, we're thinking out loud what we could play today. Mali says: "Cowboys and Indians." Pejo says: "You're too little to play smart!" Nenad is already rolling his sleeves, he wants to throw rocks like we did yesterday, I want to go look for wasps' nests and set them on fire. "Why don't we light one first," Pejo says, kneels down and takes out a pack of Opatijas from his sock. After that he shares the cigarettes among us while we sit around the fire, only Mali says no; we smoke and try to make rings; Pejo blows smoke into the fire and hands his cigarette to Mali. At first he is unwilling, then he takes it, inhales deeply and starts coughing, but it sounds like he is going to suffocate so we all start laughing at him.

Something on Wheels

Father sits on a tree stump; a yellow folding meter in his hand, carpenter's pencil tucked behind his ear. He gets up to his feet and walks around the house like a sleepwalker; I've overheard he's got a plan to build a new barn next to the new house so the cattle will no longer sleep and shit under our feet. Nana doesn't like it, she says, "For ages cattle saved our people from the cold. Their place is under our feet." I get up, get my schoolbag, take out my notebook and pencil, and go back to my chair. Nana gets up to her toes, reaches the light bulb and turns it on; Father sits on that lonely tree stump in front of the house again: his tired head sleeps in his hands; he gets up suddenly and shakes the numbness out of his left leg, then his right leg; his eyes are dim light bulbs. I gaze at the empty notebook, I imagine the new house again: the roof made of red tiles and the tin rooster spinning around as the wind commands it; more than anything I'm looking forward to the new house because the squeaking will stop; it makes me cover my head with the blanket at night. I listen, then I stick my fingers into my ears: the sounds shout at each other in the house, fingers in my ears don't help. Moaning is heard, and labored breathing, and the house sways, shakes, like a boat on wheels speeding down bumpy slopes. Every time this happens, Nana gets up angrily, stands in the middle of the room, and shouts at the wooden walls: "What's going on?" Although I know she knows what is going on, but she mustn't say. After her shouting, this lets up a bit, becomes quieter: some whispering voices. Then only Father's howl is heard, similar to Medo yawning. The house becomes dead silent, but the sounds stay in my head for a long time after. In the morning, as if I've been caught doing something indecent, I secretly glance at Mother to see if her belly has grown. Now I ask her: "When will the work on the new house start?" She just shrugs her shoulders. I ask again, she replies calmly: "When it does."

After a few days, Father pulls out the beds, the wardrobes, the tables, the chairs, the stove, and all other things from the old house, arranges them neatly on the nearby meadow. He takes out the cattle, chains it against the plum trees. He runs the rope around the house five times, as if wanting to capture it forever. Then he brings our two oxen, Lozonja and Peronja, puts a yoke on them and ties the rope against the yoke. For a while he just stands pensively next to the oxen and weighs the old house with his eyes. Then he slaps the oxen on their behinds and abruptly raises his arms in the air. As if he is shouting at the house: "Give up, you don't stand a chance!" The rope tightens, but the oxen just sink in the fresh mud. Father pushes them back in anger, picks up a shovel and slams the oxen's backs. Every muscle on their bodies gets taut. He hits them again with the shovel, shouts, "Pull, you lazy bastards!" This time the oxen simply pulled the house out of the ground, the house fell apart; where it once stood, there was just a black, foul-smelling hole, like when you have your tooth pulled.

“Didn’t know it was so rotten,” Father says and dusts his hands against the legs of his trousers.

He and Mother, while the new house is being built at the place of the old house, are going to sleep under the sky, next to the cattle. It’s summer, they have blankets, they won’t be cold. Nana and I are going to sleep at Grandpa Jozo’s house; when he was alive, he used to chase me, Pejo and Nenad from his meadow; he was old and slow, so we were in no rush to run away from him. We would calmly pick up our ball, head away, and shout: “Drop dead!” When he died, his daughter, who lives in the town, gave Nana the large, cylindrical key to open the house from time to time and let the air in. Pejo would never sleep in that house because more than once, late at night, his grandmother saw light in the attic; she thinks it’s the dead Grandpa Jozo visiting his house. I would never sleep in it alone, but with Nana, I’m not afraid. That first night, we sleep in the large wooden bed Grandpa Jozo shared with his wife when they were alive; above our heads, on a faded wall there is a plaster Jesus, it seems he has grown into the yellowing wall; I lie in silence next to Nana, she is muttering the Lord’s Prayer: she prays every night. On Sundays, she walks all the way to Letinac, the neighboring larger village where we also go to school, and then prays at church; Mother and Father, like most people in our village, rarely go to Church. Father says, “I’ll go when they build one in our village.” Grandpa never went to church. He used to say, “I’m bald, the church is freezing, I’ll catch a cold, and it’s just not right before God to wear a hat in the church.” I don’t go to church, neither do my friends, but Nana says I should start, and I should take the first communion. She crosses herself once again, covers me up, and says, “Now we can go to sleep.” A little later, above our heads, something rustles. Then it squeaks. It’s like Father and Mother are up there in the attic, right above our heads. I lie on my back and stare at the ceiling; at one moment, I feel its closeness and I cover myself up all the way to my eyes, I’m scared; I don’t know why, but it seems I’m going to die here, in this house, tonight; one morning, Nana walked to the door of our old house and saw some black, loud birds: the sky was full of them. She went back in and whispered to Grandpa: “Crows are merry. Someone’s going to join them today.” This was three days after they had released me from hospital and I was sure the crows were there for me; now it again seems I’m going to die, I nudge Nana with my elbow to wake her up, I say, “Something’s in the attic!” She sits up immediately; I think she might start yelling, but she just sits in the darkness and listens quietly.

Atomic Bomb Sleeps

Nana watches as Father lays new tiles in the toilet: brown tiles on the floor, white tiles on the walls. Father says, “Why don’t you go away, you’re blocking my light.” Nana leaves, and Father lays a new brown tile and says, “Go get me a glass of brandy.” I walk down the corridor to the kitchen, get the bottle and the thick glass and run back as quickly as I can; with one eye closed, he measures the tiles. In the morning, he takes out his only suit, coffee colored, his only tie, blue, puts them on, and all dressed up takes the oxen and the cart to the town; around noon he comes back with the water tank, spigots and the squat toilet. I carefully help him unload the tin squat toilet. Mother helps us too, she tells me, “Let me.” I tell her, “No, let me.” Father affectionately pats the toilet with his hand and says, “Now let them see who is the first in the village!” In a couple of days, he gets up early again and yokes the oxen, this time he wears his everyday clothes; he walks in front of the oxen and whistles: it’s been a while since I’ve heard him this happy. I peek through the window and think, today he is surely going to get a TV, the first TV in our village, I’ve been hoping for it for years. And he’s been bringing it up a lot too. Later on I get dressed, leave for school. Half way there I sit under a hazel bush: Pejo comes along and I tell him in confidence, “Tell the teacher I’m running a fever, and tell to my folks the teacher let us go early.” I go back and immediately climb the hill above the house: I stand and wait. I keep my eyes peeled on the point where any moment my father should appear: shadows of the trees have extended their necks, and it seems that everything around me keeps peering at that one spot. Father is not yet here: then I see him. When he finally arrives, he stops the oxen and the cart in the middle of the yard; at first sight that iron barrel tilted in the hay looks like an atomic bomb. I touch it with my hand, knock on it with my finger, knock-knock. Father says to Mother, “There, that’s water pump, now we’re going to be the only ones in village with running water.” Nana asks, “Does it take a lot of power?” He says, “It takes how much it takes.” Soon an electrician in blue overalls comes from the town in his Zastava van; he and Father take the water pump into the basement. Father turns on the light with his elbow as they pass; they set the pump in the corner. They spend hours messing about with it. They attach wires, run black, rubber tubes: wave their hands about as if trying to create magic. The electrician goes to the kitchen and sets up the spigot with his pliers. He opens it, waits. Something rumbles, then bangs irregularly: yellow, murky water unwillingly starts flowing out of the spigot. The electrician glances at my father, pats his shoulder and says: “It’s good!” He then takes the water tank, goes to the toilet, asks for a chair; Father brings him the chair, the electrician climbs on it and sets the water tank. A smile on his face, he lets me be the first to flush the toilet, Father is confused, then he shouts, “Come on already, what are you waiting for!” Then, all together we watch ceremoniously as the foaming water runs from the tank and crashes into the squat toilet’s dark hole. After that the

electrician takes a short, bright yellow screwdriver out of his bag and installs two dark red light switches next to the toilet door. He explains to my father, and now as he speaks there's a loud sound in his chest, the first switch is for the heater, but since there's no heater, he says, it won't work. "The second one," he adds, "is for hot water." The electrician walks to his van and together with my father brings something grey, metallic, cylindrical, something that again looks like a bomb. "The boiler," says the electrician to Nana who has just come from the field, she just shakes her head in desperation. "Go do something," Father tells her. They use long screws to put it on the toilet wall, again it takes them a long time to attach the wires. A little later, the electrician presses that other switch and it turns bright red. He turns it off, nods happily, and says, "Well, that's that." In the afternoon, Father, his stride long as if measuring something, goes to town and comes back with a shower on his shoulder; first he sets up the pole, then the head that looks like a telephone. Happily he calls Mother to come over. When she comes, and straightens her sleeve with the hand, he presses that other switch next to the toilet door and tells her, "You turn this on an hour before you want to have hot water, don't forget to switch it off after that." Then they walk in the toilet together, I follow them at a safe distance: ready to take to my heels in case something happens. Fully dressed Father steps on the ribbed surface of the squat toilet; he then sets up the showerhead a couple of inches above his head. He turns on the spigot and the water disperses in a hundred little arrows. Father bursts into laughter, his hair wet, he jumps to my mother and peers at the water as it slams from the shower and into the squat toilet's hole; laughter sets free from his mouth again. "This will save our lives when we come back from the field and take a shower," he says gleefully.

That same night I dream that he and the electrician have brought me a present; inside it is an iron heart. Father calls my name and announces ceremoniously, "Only two people in the world have a heart like this, the American president and you." I stand next to the box, peek inside, ask the electrician, will they accept me into the army with a heart like that? He pats my shoulder, points at the box and says, "There's no bullet in the world that can pierce this iron heart." I salute and, happy, as if I'm already in the army, run into the field. I lie down in the grass, watch clouds in the sky; they remind me of pillows filled with feathers, then I fall asleep again. In the morning, the water pump wakes me up, it bellows like a captured animal; the light bulbs flicker in the evening, sometimes they even burn out, as if the water pump takes revenge on us for some reason. And as the time passes, most people from the village complain about the water pump: they say it ruins their light bulbs. Father replies calmly, shrugging his wide shoulders, which he inherited from Grandpa: "Dear people, it's not my fault that we have such weak power in the village." At home, he tells Mother, "Fuck them, fucking rednecks." When in the evening I go over to some of our neighbors, almost

always the light bulb starts flickering in the ceiling; then everyone in the room stares at that light bulb, then they start cursing my father, his mother and the water pump. At first they curse silently, then more loudly and angrily, until they remember I'm there, then they calm down a bit. But, I'm glad when they curse us; they are on one side, I and Father on the other: that's when I feel the closest to him.

The Women Who Tread Cabbage

I stand next to my father, I wait for him to tell me what I need to fetch, where I need to run. He says, “Bring me those wooden stakes.” I quickly bring back the wooden stakes, he attaches all four of them into the holes on the cart; when we’ve set up the cart, all that is left it to yoke the oxen. A little later, the two of us, I in front of the oxen, Father on the cart, go to the nearby field: that’s where cabbage grows. The sun is low, half-hidden behind the clouds, and the tracks of light connect the sun and the horns so it seems as if the sun steers our oxen with its shiny reins. I walk following my father’s confident steps, lash the oxen’s backs, Peronja’s more than Lozonja’s; I yell at them. Soon I park the oxen and the cart and lead the oxen into the bushes, so that the flies don’t get to them. I smash a big fly with my hand: it reminds me of the large fluorescent brooch teacher Vahida used to wear. The fly clings to the edge of the ox’s eye, then the ox blinks, and the dead fly drops to the ground. Peronja eats rich, leafy grass that has sprung out in the shade; Lozonja’s strong teeth crunch stems, shrub leaves, empty hazelnut shells, so they each pull to their own sides. One wants to go up, another down; the yoke screeches. Father shouts, “Lazy bastards!” He comes over, slaps their backs, and chases them away deeper into the brush: the sun shines on their behinds covered in shit. Then he takes the knife from the cart, bends over and starts cutting the cabbage, and the sun switches to the knife’s blade: he hands me the knife. I seize the handle, bend down, start cutting the cabbage heads, but I’m very slow. Father takes the knife from me, yells, “Goddammit, you’re good for nothin’!” He kneels down, grabs the cabbage head with one hand, like a person’s head, and in one swift cut slices the head’s neck. He again hands me the knife; I approach a new head, imitate his motions to the last detail, and cut off the head. Father says, “Give it here!” He snatches the knife out of my hand; he keeps slaughtering cabbage in the field, I walk behind him and throw the cut head into the cart. I imagine I’m a basketball player, it makes the time pass more quickly. When the cart is filled, we’re tired and we go home, but as the cart clatters along, some heads fall off and start rolling down the road, so I pick them up and throw back onto the cart. At home we all stand in line: Father, Mother, Nana, I, only my sister is not here; she is too little. We pass cabbage heads to each other, from one hand to another, and Father arranges them in our basement’s dark corner. The next day he takes out a large wooden barrel, with three iron hoops, and puts it in the basement. He gives the barrel a thorough brushing, then he washes it, smells it. Then, on his shoulder, he brings a large wooden grater, puts it between his legs and starts grating the cabbage heads: he moves his arms back and forth along the grater, as if rowing; his black, thick eyebrows, full of strength, follow the rhythm of his arms. Every couple of minutes, Mother picks up the cabbage that falls into the pot in thin strips and tosses it into the barrel. Occasionally she scatters pearl-like grains of salt on the grated cabbage in the barrel. Nana is cooking lunch, she takes a peek into the basement,

smells the air and says, “Oh, the cabbage smells so nice.” I stand in the corner waiting for the village women to arrive; there’s nothing I like better than women’s bare feet treading on the cabbage in the barrel. A little later, they arrive, take off their hard leather shoes, their socks, they wash their feet and get in the barrel: Pejo’s mother is there too: only Nenad’s mother never comes. Nana says, “They’re good people, no doubt, but who ever saw Gypsies treading our people’s cabbage.” In the end, Mother gets in the barrel too; this is the only time in the year when she is at least a little happy. She is mostly sad, as if she walks around in some impenetrable balloon: I think that’s because of me and my ill heart.