

Damir Karakaš

Celebration

Translated by Tomislav Kuzmanović

Chapter Two

Dogs

The rooster crowed; the sun peered from behind the jagged forest wall, entered the room and got stuck in the cobweb; for a while he watched the sun sifting through the sieve of cobweb, then he noticed a hawk gliding above the village, looking for something to land on. "Mother," he shouted, "where are the chickens?" A slim, shrill voice replied, "They're here, with me!"

He walked out of the house, went to the well, dropped the wooden bucket attached to a chain, and when it sank, he pulled it out with a couple of brisk motions, put it on the edge, and splashed some water under the rancid armpit. "Keep an eye on the hawk!" he shouted. He washed the back of his neck, his chest, his face, red from the cold well water, went back into the house full of wooden patches: the light had beaten him for a second, but he pinned it down with the rickety door. He sat on the chair and, quickly, from his elbow, scooped spoon after spoon of the bread broken into milk his mother had left for him on the table earlier this morning: he glanced through the window, keeping an eye on the hawk that had just landed on the tall linden tree only to wave its wings wildly, scared by the mothers sharp cries, cvrrr, cvrrr – and the chickens pressed close against her in fear – and flew away. "There's a bullet with your name on it!" he shouted after the hawk, even though he didn't know what to shoot from, except for the old, homemade flintlock that presented more danger for the one pulling the trigger than the one on the other side of the shot.

He went back inside, put on the shirt made of handmade linen and walked out into the yard to look for his mother. She, dressed in mourning, with a triangular scarf on her head and her eyes planted deep beneath her eyebrows, knelt collecting nettles in her sack; she picked it quickly, so it couldn't burn, like when putting the red-hot coals back into the ravenous stove. "Where's the old man?" he asked and, as he passed, patted the young dog that slowly emerged from the hollowed beech trunk. "He went to Joso's to sharpen the hoe." He nodded, then went back to the tree stump, all beaten and cut, pulled out his axe, put it on his shoulder and said, mechanically using his father's hoarse voice, "I'm going up to the coppice to fell down those trees and I'll drag one home." He turned around with the axe on his shoulder and glanced towards the meadow where, next to always pregnant woman, children, bowl cuts on their heads, played, running after a fly that gave a name to every object it flew down on, because the boys were running after it like crazy, shouting, "There it is on the pitchfork! There it is on the rake!" "Mio, son," his mother told him, watching the children at play on the other side of the fence, "any girl would do, he and I are both ill, we won't last long." He ran his thumb along the axe's blade and said, "I've got to go."

He bent down and, the sun on his back, rolled the legs of his trousers, patted his calves swollen with raw strength, and then, the axe in his hand, headed across the freshly mowed meadow littered with old molehills: he walked and kicked the molehills with his feet; he saw a man ploughing, then a boy with a patch on his behind who, together with his curly, panting dog was driving a heard of sheep towards the woods and at the same time played his fipple: he nodded in greeting, the boy waved back at him and continued blowing into his fipple relentlessly. With the help of the wind, Mio whistled the boy's melody, then sang, "Oh, ay, you bear, you beast of the woods, who scratches your back, who washes your snout..."

He paused by the wild cherry tree and listened as the black fruit ripened: he picked one cherry, swallowed (it burst in his mouth), spat out the pit, kicked it with his foot, and walked on to the nearby coppice: the path meandered, full of insects, and every step along that path, overgrown with grass, made a difference between a creature alive and dead.

The moment he walked into the coppice, listening to the birds quarreling in the trees, he put his axe down in the grass, climbed the tallest tree that gave a perfect view; this was where he used to climb when he was a boy and he wanted to see the world – because at the top there was no difference between the heaven and the earth, but not until you climbed to the very top – that's where the sky is further away from anything you can imagine: the crisp air made him move fast; he wanted to see where she and her sheep were. He wedged himself firmly between two forked branches, hugged the trunk, stretched his neck and searched between the green thighs of the meadows: he looked around once again, made the full circle, then sent his eyes to the next village, where Drenka was from, there just under the hill on which sat the church with those colorful windows made of the finest shards of the sun, and next to the church, sleepy poplars kept watch: he heard a brief rustle and looked down: a deer ran through the fallen leaves, then stopped, he quickly climbed down with his eyes, regretting the axe was not in his hand, a twig snapped under his foot, the deer jumped up in confusion, training its eye at where the sound had come from, then it ran away, alive only when on the run. Mio climbed down slowly and, when he was three feet above the ground, he jumped off and skillfully landed on both of his feet: he quickly picked up his axe, to make up for lost time, lifted it up, swung and began thrusting the sharp blade into the bottom of the tree, shaking the red leaves: he kept swinging for ten minutes without stop, following always the same, even motion, breathing through the cracks of air: each swing had its own sound until the tree buckled down under the human's motions, letting out the terse smell of the heartwood within, then Mio pushed it with both hands and it broke and crashed against other trees that held it up, wounded. Mio made another cut, separated the tree from the stump, grabbed it and pulled it out from the forest's embrace into the clearing: he trimmed it with well places swings and sat down on it victoriously. Then

he lifted the wet shirt over his head, jumped up again, snatched his axe and charged other trees, until, one by one, he had felled and trimmed five of them perfectly.

He once again climbed to the crown's roof (he quickly walked towards the sky), stopped, found his spot on the very top and, firmly hugging the tree, looked around, but once again, nowhere within his view, he saw nor heard the sound of bells; creasing his eyebrows, he extended his thoughts: maybe she's already been here and left, she'll come again tomorrow. He climbed down with his eyes, brought them back up, then in the distance he saw a dark figure on a bicycle: he recognized him immediately, it was a man with a drum, hitting it with his sticks and yelling, "Hear ye, hear ye..." He climbed down and could already hear the rhythmical beating of the drum, mixed with the dogs barking; he tied his shirt around his waist, picked up the log, took the axe into his other hand and, thinking about taxes, finances... pulled the log towards the village. As he walked downhill, the trees around him leaned against one another, making everything seem slanted, wearing him down; every time he stopped to rest, he heard the beat of that drum (a buckshot of sounds), so dense as if the grains were being spilled somewhere near; then a dry wind blew from the forest, much stronger than before, it stormed and sieged the woods, and every time he heard the sound of that drum, the wind distorted it until it was no longer recognizable: he picked up his pace and crossed the grass numbed by the heat, eager to hear the news the messenger had brought.

He arrived down there, dropped the axe and the log by the house (people had begun to disperse), he walked inside, quickly changed his shirt, came up to his father who was standing in the middle of the village, motionless: he lifted his chin, asking him a silent question. His father replied, "A mutt bit a copper in Letinac, so we're banned from keeping dogs." Mio turned around half a circle and stared at the man with the drum as he approached his bicycle, paused, lifted his leg up with the help of his hands, like when you raise the horse's leg before shoeing it; he picked around with his fingers, pulling the pebbles out of the ribbed grooves of his high boots, climbed on his bicycle and slowly rode away: as he rode along the road picking up dust, turning pedals faster and faster in a strained circle - diminishing to a size of an insect - and old lady shouted after him in a croaky voice, "Bastards, let your seed be dead and gone!"

At dawn, setting his own pace, his father mowed the meadow; his body bowed, his head calm, like it doesn't belong to that scraggy body, and his thoughts were expressed in the constant hiss of the scythe: shave the face of the earth in as wide an arch as possible.

Leaning against a fruitless apple tree, Mio watched his father, his sunburnt nape: when he paused to sharpen his scythe, his wrinkled face hovered above the grass. Then he stopped for a moment again, and his eyes were still late for everything happening around him, except for the black sharpening stone that

effortlessly, naturally glided left and right along the metal. Putting one foot in front of another, Mio walked around the roosters and its yellow, meaty spurs – he didn't want to kick it – and he slowly approached his father, waiting until he finished sharpening the scythe. "Give me, I'll do it!" he said. His father bent down, picked up a wad of freshly cut grass, smoothed down the blade and said, squinting through the specks of the sun, "Take some grass to the cow." As Mio collected an armful of sweet-smelling grass, full of petals drunk from night dew, the cow's hollow moo made its way through its twisted horns and echoed from within the house. Mio quickly brought the feed into the cramped space, laid it down into the wooden trough in front of the cow; it was still lying on the ground, its stomach protruding, and then, slowly, full of care for the calf inside, got up to its feet; he stood there, watching its round belly, listening as his father hammered a peening jig into the ground; he peeked out and saw him lying protected by the linden tree, one of his legs raised slightly, the other one stretched out on the ground, thumping the scythe's edge with watchmaker's precision, tinning it to razor sharpness; his father kept striking tirelessly, always with the same intensity, as if now the sound of the hammer had become permanent, beating a sharp clang out of the scythe; but the shadow of his pounding arm, even though he and the scythe were one, a perfect whole, escaped him, disrupting the harmony.

Mio went back to the house, removed a steel brush from a pin nailed into the wooden wall, and brushed the cow's shiny, red hair (much more gently on its stomach), after every stroke it shined even brighter; the cow tilted its head, watched him with its large, glossy eyes and, he could tell, took pleasure in it, and it even affectionately whacked him across his back with its tail; in the end, he picked the hairs from the brush, rolled them into a ball, and threw it out a small window above a packed pile of manure: then he heard his mother calling him to come eat his lunch.

Father was already at the table, clearing his throat, coughing, and the cough made the whole house shake to its foundations: he sat across from him, waiting for his mother to put the pot of beans on the table. She filled their tin bowls to the brim (hers, with a dent on one side, was only half full). Packed into a beam of yellow, thick light, the sun shined through the window, making it wider: as they ate in silence, Mio, breathing sharply, forced himself to eat as slowly as possible, but he just couldn't bring himself to it because he had got into a habit of eating fast when he was still a boy, when he had fought his sisters over every morsel of food on the table: his father ate slowly, but he also picked up his pace from time to time, because he too had fought his brothers and sisters over every bite, and in one such fight he earned a scar under his left eye, when he snatched a potato out of his younger brother's hand, and he almost poked his eye out with a fork; Mio, on the other hand, had grabbed his older sister by the hair, because one Christmas Eve she had taken a piece of meat from his fork, and pulled her until a large wisp of her hair

remained in his hand – even though the whole time his father had been beating him over his back like a madman with a shallow bone, gnawed clean, of a cow’s leg from which he had just sucked the marrow.

The dog barked outside, his father snapped to and said into the thin, cold circle of stew in front of him, “Take the dog away.” Mio glanced through the window towards the coppice and said, shifting his weight on an uncomfortable chair like on a saddle, “Maybe it would’ve been better if Mile brought his rifle and...” His father stopped scooping with his spoon, then ran a piece of bread to shine light on his bowl from all sides. “And who’s gonna pay for the bullet?” he said. His mother got up, collected the bowls and sank them into a pot of water. “It’s young, it’s a shame,” she said. “I know it’s young, but the coppers are gonna take our cow and the calf in it.” Father got up from the table, leaned against it with his fists clenched, took a deep breath, then coughed once again into his right fist. Mio said, “Should I do it, with the flintlock?” Father said, “Don’t be a fool.” “Truth be told,” Mother said and glanced out the window, “this is the worst dog we’ve ever had in the house. Any fox can pass by him and steal our chicken.” The cow mooed on the other side of the partition, and his father let out another deep cough, drank some water from the little pot, then muttered, “I’ll go see the cow, maybe it’s thirsty.” Mio walked out after his father and into the yard, he watched him as he passed through the other door of the house, the one eaten by worms, where the cow was, walked in, whispered to it slowly; Mio walked to the other side, up to the doghouse made in the hollow tree, where the black, skinny dog jumped up and down, cheerfully wagging that stump of its tail; a year ago, when his father brought the dog in his arms, he immediately – to make him bark and growl more – hacked its tail with an axe, pressing it hard against the block; the other dogs in their destiny saw the same destiny: but his father once said, “Had I chopped off three tails on it, it wouldn’t have been any more vicious.”

Mio pressed the dog firmly between his legs, slapped gently the left and the right keyboard of his ribcage, then dropped the cold, boiled potato out of his pocket: the dog wolfed the potato, stood up on its hind legs and sniffed Mio’s right pocket; that hawk appeared again, dove down from the sky, steeply and slowly, his body lazy, his gaze swift and fixed, his mother shouted out from the house, “Here, chick, chick, chick,” and a couple of hens, followed by a rooster, came the center of the yard in a second. Then his father walked out too, coughed, took the birch broom and started sweeping the blind leaves, mixed with the hawk’s elongated shadow.

He once again patted the dog along the ribs of his spine, sunrays sticking out of them, and when he was leaving with the dog tied on a loose chain, his mother told him, “Remember where you leave it, so you can come back for the chain.” He nodded, ran his fingers through his disheveled hair and went: his step was slow, and the dog followed him like a shadow. Some dog suddenly barked in the village, another one

raced along the field chasing a bird, then there was a shot, like a crack of a dry wood, then a dog squealing, then another muffled bang, after which everything went quiet. Mio and the dog had already reached the first steep glade above the village: he kept walking, and the dog stopped only to scratch its ear; Mio yanked him to hurry along, he says, "Come on," the dog rushed suddenly and shortened its step. Then, after he had kept picking up his pace for the next couple of hundred of meters, Mio sat down to rest, and the dog stopped behind him, its tongue sticking out and heavy, its groins shivering rhythmically. "You're tired?! Already?!" he said to the dog; he didn't want to stroke him because he thought it would be harder both for him and the dog when they say goodbye; he didn't even want to look at it, the dog might see what he thought in his eyes.

He heard the bells tinkle, pricked up his ears once again, and then, imprisoned by the single beat of his heart, hurried on with the dog much faster, across the rocky earth's bosom, until he passed the glade – they always called it the gap – then, having reached a clearing full of old, burned stumps, he walked into the dense bush, where the bells echoed much louder, in the rhythm of the sheep's jaw bones. Under one of the bushes, he saw a girl: she sat on her cardigan, her legs lucked in on a side and under her body, meddling with her leather shoe to while away her time. Mio watched her; right next to his eye, between two shoots in full leaf, he saw a spider spinning the silence into its cobweb, then it observed itself in the mirror-like drop of water, admiring its beauty; he went back across some rocks, tied the dog against a tree, brought his finger up to his lips and told the dog to keep quiet; as if it understood, the dog lay down, planted its head onto the ground, then it put its black paws over its snout and closed its eyes. Mio stood up tall, peered through the bushes, then picked up a dry branch from the ground, letting out a hollow moan and abruptly breaking the branch across his raised knee; the girls jumped up looking around. Mio broke the shorter half of the branch, which now gave an even louder crack, and he could already see the girl's pale face, which made her black hair even blacker: laughing, Mio walked out of the coppice, jumped over a white rock laced with veins of sunlight, and the girl, smiling, sat down back in the grass. Mio said, "Give me some water." She offered him her carboy, he pulled out a black, hemp cork, drank a couple of sips, and said, allowing the words to ripen in his mouth, "Eh, you saved me." The girl stood up, ran up on her slender, white ankles to the sheep and pushed one of the sheep that had moved away and brazed on the bush back to the rest of the herd. "Where's your dog? Šarko's the name, right?" Mio asked when she came back and, clenching her knees tight, sat down next to him. "You know where he is," she said, spinning a pebble in her fingers like a rosary: "Father took him yesterday..." Mio rolled out a dry hazel out of his pocket, bit into it, pulled out the pit, offered it to her, she shook her head no. Mio threw the hazel high above his head and deftly caught it in his mouth, crushing it with tiny motions of his teeth. He got up to his feet, walked across the rocks to the bush, jumping from one to another in a synchronized

rhythm, his arms spread wide, as if walking across a line stretched tight somewhere up high, then he picked some more hazels, came back to the girl and said, "Uh, a good year for hazels, they're everywhere." He sat down closer to her, so close he nudged her with his leg, she nudged back: then she suddenly stood up, spat out a flower, extended her palm in front of her and said, "Rain!" "Rain my foot," Mio said calmly, looked up, gazed into the dark, taunt membrane of the sky. "See, there's a drop on my hand," the girl said, showing him her wet palm: one drop fell on the girl's forehead, another on Mio's nose. The girl picked up her cardigan from the ground, tied it tightly around her waist, grabbed her linen sack, tossed it over her shoulder, and said, "Off I go, I don't wanna get wet." "Stay, come, sit," Mio told her, "you're not made of sugar, are you?!" But she was already running after her sheep, so Mio stood up suddenly and shouted after her, "Have you seen Drenka?" Running, she shook her head in a way that told him neither yes nor no and hurried up to catch her sheep.

A grumbling echo came along from somewhere, and behind it, with delay, a lazy bumblebee, that could barely keep up with its drone. Mio glanced into the low sky once again, the clouds were coming back, cramming together, so he walked back to the dog, untied it, and headed on through the play of light, because the sun appeared behind the clouds once again: it was there at one moment, gone in another, toying with the one trying to keep an eye on it.

Mio walked, his eyes paving the way for his feet; through the taunt chain, through its every link, he felt the dog's fast breath: but, better this, he thought, looking back at the dog across his shoulder, then quickly shaking its dogged gaze away, that to tie a rope around its neck and push it into an endless sinkhole like many people from the village are going to do; it would've been much worse if he had to kill it; then he'd have to look straight into its eyes; but how would he shoot it in the forehead, between the eyes, if not looking into its eyes; and he just wouldn't want to wound it and do the shooting all over again; besides, then he would have to open the horn, load the powder, add the new ball, push it all the way down into the muzzle with a rod, place a piece of paper in it to seal it, press it all again, and all the while listen to the wounded dog squealing. As his free arm followed the rhythm of his step, always a full length of the chain ahead, as he walked through the curtains of silence, he rolled his tongue in his mouth and gave out a couple of might whistles, because the silence of the woods always filled him with fear, and the dog, pulling its legs out of the snares of sinewy grass, barked at the birds that fluttered off the branches.

When he reached the coppice full of newly born trees, he pulled out his knife and carved her name at eye level in the soft bark of a young, green tree. Surrendering himself to the hum of the wind, he watched those white, irregular letters from which the tree's white sap oozed slowly, he closed his eyes, saw her again, hurrying to meet him, the sun shining in her braids as long as votive candles. The dog had lain

down in the meanwhile, as if it had spent all of its strength barking at the birds, so Mio tugged it to get a move on: they walked, one behind another, the gap between filled with the clang of the chain. Mio walked on, occasionally remembering the dogs they used to have before: a wolf grabbed one and took it to the woods; it appeared at the edge of the coppice, long, gray (he and his father had just been chopping down trees with their axes), the pup barked, the wolf cunningly ran away from it, the pup followed it, they called it to come back, but it just kept chasing the wolf, it never came back; another one died from some unknown disease; the third one was so angry with his sister that, when she came to feed it, it bit her hand so Mile, their neighbor, had to put it down; the one before this last one – that one could've tackled the bear – his mother took to the woods because it was old, blind and all of its teeth had already rotten away and fallen out. He glanced at the dog out of the corner of his eye as it cuddled up his legs, he felt sorry for it, but he felt even sadder about those other, better watchdogs, sheepdogs, the dogs that – he once again glanced at him with pity in his eyes – were long gone; but as he got deeper into the woods, as he distanced himself from the village, from the people, he felt closer to the dog, especially when a thought crossed his mind so he muttered quietly, "This is my dog." His eyes almost filled with tears, so much so it caught him by surprise, so he immediately thought of Drenka – maybe she's watching him somewhere from the bush – and this stopped the tears from coming out. He sat down, resting his chin against his pressed knees, the dog quietly sat down next to him. He picked through the soft dirt with the tip of his shoe, but the thought of the dog's grave came to him and made him stop: the arrows of rain had stopped a long time ago, but the forest was black, and it grew even darker because the trees they had just passed through were full of tattered black leaves: along the way, he and the dog stopped to listen to the deaf silence of the woods.

They picked up their pace and crossed the meadow, pressed on all sides by the fog, then they went through the woods so narrow and hostile that every tree in it shoved and nudged to get some room and found themselves among the firs scattered with rare bushes between which the creek gave out its fresh scent; his breath short, an unknown feeling in his gut, he firmly tied the dog against a young fir tree, the rain dowsing his face, trying to match its patter with the pleasant babble of the water; he pressed his eyes shut, and the healing noise of the water filled him with calm.

For a while he just stood there and watched – his eyes trying to see the ordinary, because he wanted everything about this day to be ordinary (like drinking water from his hand, that's exactly what he thought) – the brisk run of the water give out Drenka's image, without the middle and the edges, out in its reflective shine. Then, in his hair, he felt a yellow tube of straw and he sucked the sharp air through it for a while, wishing that nothing around him no longer concerned him: he took out his knife and slowly

cut the creek's current in half, watching as it kept going, unstopably, across the shiny blade and thinking that everything in this world followed some higher order of its own, which he could not understand, and there was nothing to put a stop on it; then he snapped out of this thought and stood up, his motions exaggerated, abrupt, then he sat back down not knowing what he actually wanted.

Suddenly, a wolf started to howl: the dog got up and pricked both its and Mio's ears; a chorus of wolves' voices echoed from within the heart of the dark woods: they howled, tuning up their voices; the dog stiffened as if every part of its body was made of a piece of taut spring. Mio walked up to the dog, patted its bristling hair, and said in a voice pulled out of the deep shiver, "All right, boy, have no fear..." The dog let out a yelp, Mio stepped out of the reach of the chain; the dog yelped louder, trying to hide the stump of its tail between its hind legs as if now it had become that whole shivering stump. The wolves' howls came nearer - the dog started to squeal, trying to break free, as if it wanted to pull the tree out together with its roots: the next time the dog ran and yanked the chain, Mio stuck his fingers deep into his ear: he kept running, falling, picking himself up, not thinking about anything except how to get home as soon as possible. He finally stopped just outside of the village; lightnings flashing all around him, extinguishing those few stars in the sky; as he climbed down through the yawning darkness, he began to bark, he walked faster and faster and barked: if he stopped barking, it seemed, he'd die.

Chapter Three

Celebration

“Are you done?” Mio shouted, standing in front of the freshly painted house besieged by the wooden ladders; he ran his hand across his hair, which he had smoothed with sugared water back at dawn. Drenka waved at him from the window, said, “Come in,” and disappeared in an instant, leaving Mio silent and motionless, observing that irregular square, waiting for her to appear again so he could wink at her in secret. He fixed his coat, faded by the sun and age, then he glanced at the small church with a copper helmet, then at a line of ladders in front of him, then high above the village, at countless ranks of the forest in leaf; everything he looked at reminded him of the war; then there was a growl, from a dog he hadn’t even noticed, because it lay curled up under the pigsty planted on four smooth stones and pressed against the extension of the house. The door opened suddenly, a man with a wooden crutch came out and called him in, waving the smoke from within the house with the same motion of his hand. “Milk boiled over,” he said, smiled and greedily gulped the fresh air, then, following the wooden step of his crutch, he made his way to the curly dog that had just barked again, patted him and said, “We’ve just got it, it’s not used to us yet.” Mio walked into the spacious yard, approached the dog, knelt down and smoothed down its long, loose ears, one of which twisted up as if it wanted to hear better. “What’s its name?” Mio asked. “It used to be Garo,” the man replied, “but if Drenka and Rude want, they can give it a new name. It’s all the same to me.” “I didn’t get a new one yet, but I’ll have to soon,” Mio said, looking at the dog that lovingly rubbed against his leg. The man with a crutch headed back into the house and tossed across his drooping shoulder, “Come in, have a glass of brandy, they’ll be ready in no time.” Mio patted the dog on its back, nodded, and went after the man; then he walked into the house, sensing the heavy smell of burned milk mixed with the light aroma of petrol; at the end of a long table, covered with white tablecloth, on a piece of kitchen towel, there was a disassembled cigarette lighter, square in shape, with latticed casing, and next to it there were a knitting pit, its tip charred, and the white, crumpled apothecary’s cotton wad. On the second attempt, the man finally managed to lean that crutch of his against the wall, then he pulled out a bottle of brandy from the cabinet and said, “I’m not allowed to, but you sure are,” and pointed his chin indicating Mio to take a seat at the table; Mio downed the first glass of brandy as clear as spring water, but when the man wanted to pour him another, Mio placed both of his hands on the glass and said, praising the strength of the man’s brandy, “No more.” “Just one more,” the man said, Mio surrendered, parted his hands, and the man slowly poured him another glass and put the open bottle on the table in front of him. As Mio sipped the brandy, this time slowly, a scrawny young man, his hair as black as Mio’s, except a bit more wavy, dressed in a tailored black suit, came down the

wooden, squeaky stairs; he addressed Mio, "How's it going?" and was already observing himself in the mirror attached to the wall under the steep wooden stairs. Mio looked him up and down, smiled and said, "Hey, student, you're all dressed up. You're going to the wedding or something?" The young man took the comb, dipped it into a white washbowl full of water, bowed down to have a better look and started to comb his hair, following the wet trail of the comb with his other hand. "This celebration is more important than any wedding," he said in a deep, round voice and once again dipped the comb into the water, "for the first time in a thousand years we have our own country." Mio discreetly glanced at his black woolen trousers, white shirt, black coat of a different shade of black than his pants: by god, mine are not bad either, he thought. He put on his best clothes, he would get married in it when the time comes to marry Drenka. "What time it is?" the young man asked, Mio glanced at the clock on the wall, and the man with the crutch said, "Not even eight." The young man said, "We shouldn't be late." "Ah, if we now headed for America, we'd get there on time," Mio said, the brandy keeping him warm, and slowly pushed the empty glass away. The man nodded, put down his crutch once again, sat down next to the burning metal stove and got his skinny hands busy: he began shelling the corn on his clasped knees, then he coughed and said, "Son, be careful. I hear they blew up the railroad at Blečić." The young man resolutely ran the comb through his hair once again and said, "If we fear now that we have our country, we're as good as gone." He bent down, quickly put on his yellow, new army boots, jumped up and down to better adjust them on his feet, pulled the legs of his trousers over the boots, then walked out into the yard and patted the dog's warm head with both hands. "Where did you get those boots?" Mio asked when he walked out into the yard after him, feeling the slimness of the soles of his worn-out shoes. "Next time bring me a lamb, and I'll get you a pair of these," the young man said, laughing and tightening his belt. "Huh, some math they teach you in the city," Mio said and patted him on the back. At the moment, the man with the crutch peeked out of the house and said, "Son, show Mio that horse we bought." "Come, let me show you," the young man said, but, as he reached the center of the yard, just a couple of meters from the new barn, the only one in the village separated from the house, a woman's voice stopped him in his tracks, "Don't you go into the barn now, you'll get all the stench from it, there'll be plenty of time when you come back!" so the two of them stopped, and the young man said, glancing at the window from which the voice had come, "Hurry up, aren't you done yet?" She quickly came down the steep wooden stairs, wearing a white dress made of thick peasant fabric, green branches and red roses embroidered at its collar and sleeves. "I need to pack up a couple more potatoes," she said, went back into the house, and, a minute or so later, brought out a backpack, tossed it to the young man who skillfully set it on his straight back. Then, out of nowhere, she pulled out an old, linen sack, covered with patches, stepped into a fenced chicken coop, dropped a couple of kernels of corn from her fist, and when the chickens and two roosters gathered around to feed, sinking their beaks into the dirt, helping themselves with their feet, she rounded

them, grabbed the smaller rooster, all grimy from dirt and mud, quickly shoved it into her sack and tied it in two swift motions. “Ah, Drenka, my dear, why that one?” the man with the crutch said at the door, cough scraping his throat, “you’ve got so many hens, this one crows so nicely every morning, the nightingale would be shamed by its voice.” She tied the sack a bit tighter, passed it to Mio and replied, her voice slim, “Because it pesters the hens, and the other day it attacked me,” she said, pointing at a dry scab on her arm where the rooster’s sharp beak had left its mark. Mio pressed that sack tight against his shoulder, feeling the angry rooster squirming, flapping its wings against his back, and then he thought, a man goes faster with wings on his back than without them. “Did you take enough water?” the man with the crutch asked and looked up into the blue skies. “It’s gonna be hot like hell today.” “I’ve got some,” Mio said, pointing at a canteen hanging from his belt, which he had inherited from his father, just like his trousers, his shirt, his eagle-shaped nose, while his dark eyes he had taken from his mother, “but we’ll get some more at the spring at Babina Greda when we pass by it.” The sun had already taken its full shape, when, followed by the barking of the dog that had meanwhile perked up, the sun shining on them, they headed towards the pine forest. Then they turned around, all three of them, and once again waved at the man with the crutch; he raised his free arm into the air and shouted after them, “Have fun, children.”

Rude walked first, he kept adjusting his backpack, as if it hurt his back, while Mio and Drenka remained a couple of steps behind; on the next step, Mio adjusted the sack on his back, it kept changing shape, then extended his arm and gently pinched the girl’s ribs; she stopped by the side and said, “Go ahead, right in front of me,” which made Mio give her a wide smile. After they had plodded over the soil overturned into thick, brown plough-fields and found themselves on the track carved into the ground, Rude picked up his pace towards the forest. Mio once again walked behind Drenka and told her, his feet making a new sound, “It’s better I’m behind.” Just as he said this it occurred to him she might take his words the wrong way so he added in a louder voice, “So some beast doesn’t attack us.” Then he lagged behind a step or two to get a better look of her; all dressed in white, as if floating in the snowy spume, among those shivering leaves, colorful flowers, flamboyant butterflies, she looked like a forest queen; when he caught sight of the clouds travelling swiftly across the sky, Mio thought it must be from all the excitement he felt while walking behind Drenka; as he walked on, he suddenly closed his eyes tight, then opened them even more suddenly, and now, miraculously, the white clouds weren’t there: only the feeling of her smooth red cheeks and her shoulder blades, comparing one against another as she walked; Rude was getting further and further away, making his distance from one tree to another, he was well ahead of them, and the two of them now walked side by side across the mowed meadow, full of brown molehills that kept moving, pulsating like the earth’s hearts, like Mio’s heart, they walked, always at a new distance from Rude. Every

time Mio gently touched her arm, and she didn't shy away from him, it was as if he was breathing on through that arm of hers.

Drenka gazed at Mio as they walked and said, "You've got a rash on your neck," he felt his neck, said, "Where?" then shrugged his shoulders blankly. She slowed down a bit and said, "When we get back, I've got some rabbit tallow, so I'll put it on it." They picked up their pace to catch up with Rude, the distance between them growing smaller, but when they looked at each other, it once again grew bigger: by now they had already reached the sun-washed meadow full of flowers., Mio bent down and secretly picked one of the open flowers, his first thought to give it to her, but at the last moment he changed his mind and decided to put it behind his ear; when the flower fell out, both of them laughed. They crossed a path strewn with yellow leaves and, on the other side of the meadow, saw a small herd of cows, not moving, not giving out a sound, instead, from a nearby grove came the voice of the shepherd mixed with the rising wind, "Oh, polenta, growing on the rock." Feeling hunger in his stomach, Mio silently finished the song, "I so love to eat you while you're hot." There were just fifty or so yards to the edge of the forest, Rude, out of breath, was already sitting by the hazel bush, Drenka had fallen behind, so Mio stopped, waiting for her to catch up, and then went on. "Are you tired?" he asked, to what she quickly replied, "Of course I'm not." When they arrived, Mio sat down in the grass, breathed slowly, and looked down at the village surrounded by small plots of land, resembling patches, tied by invisible seams, and in all the watching he forgot to take a sip of water. He glanced at the sack, dotted with five small holes that looked like the rooster's eyes multiplied countless times over. When Drenka sat down, Rude got up to his feet and moved on, and Mio took out his canteen, took a sip of water and tossed after him, "Why are you in such a hurry? You said we had time." Rude paused, picked a leaf of grass, put it into his mouth and said, "I'm worried we might get lost." Mio once again glanced at the sack he had placed by his side, it was calm as if the rooster - making peace with its destiny - fell asleep, then he pushed his finger through one of the holes, expanded it, so the rooster could get more air, and said, "I could find my way through the woods with my eyes closed." Rude replied, "You better," and headed along the path - the caps of poisonous mushrooms walked along the same path for a while - and when he disappeared, Mio and Drenka got up to their feet and walked into the forest after him; Mio glanced at his canteen, took another sip and offered it to Drenka, she shook her head and said, "Later." They quickly caught up with Rude, who was now walking much more slowly, because the path had become invisible; Mio's shirt was completely soaked, he felt like he had another skin on his back, but the fresh breath of the forest suited him. Rude waited by the forked tree, very much like a giant slingshot, which had made room for itself in the forest, he shoved a stick into the rotten hollow, red ants crawling out of it, smaller under his feet than they truly were. They once again headed slowly along the new narrow path, resembling a rut of a deep wagon wheel, that

suddenly got lost in the deep grass, but now Mijo was at the front, and Drenka in the middle. They were walking among giant beech trees, their bark smooth and gray, and behind every tree there was another, even bigger and wider, so they had to find their way through, which they did with ease. “When was the last time you went through here?” Rude asked, to what Mio said, “The clearing’s near,” and as he said this, the light became brighter, and they walked out into the nameless meadow, filled with the smell of mountain herbs; Mio took a couple of deep breaths, clearing his wide open nostrils with the sharp scent. Now the sun became hotter, because in the middle of the barren mountain ridge there was no shade except for the one the three of them made for one another, so as they walked through time slowed down by the heat, they kept battling the rays of the sun. Mio once again took out his canteen, shook it, wetted his hand, ran it against the back of his neck, and then drank some water; that’s what his mother had taught him, back when he was just a boy, when after a hard work in the field he had been hot and very thirsty. Rude hurried along, once again taking the lead, and when he reached the forest that opened up with a row of whitish birches and continued with a pair of tall pines pointed at their tip and a hundred years old oaks, where the trails parted at one moment only to be joined into one at another, he paused and said, “Where to now?” Passing by him, Mio tossed him that sack with the rooster; Rude reluctantly caught it, hung it over his shoulder, while Mio said, “This way,” then cleared a path, first with his penetrating gaze, then with his hand, feeling Drenka’s eyes on his back, and tossed loudly back over his shoulder, “Be careful not to get scratched.” For the next half an hour, they made their way in silence through the tightly-packed ancient trees, wrapped in moss and unaccustomed to people, with water shining between the rocks from time to time; as soon as they walked out of the thick wood, they found themselves under the shadowy mountain called Dog’s Peak, surrounded by a heavy ring of fog and a meadow full of white rocks, worn out by the wind; from the distance, the uneven rocks looked like a herd of scattered sheep: the old folk in the village told stories about these rocks, saying these were the graves of the people who lost their lives fighting the dogheads. They quickly distanced themselves from that mountain resembling a dog’s head, which looked to him like more ancient than the world itself. The sack once again on his back, Mio hurried them along, waited for Drenka to pass, then walked behind her to protect her, glancing in fear at those mountains – some of the people from his village still believed that in them, in their crevasses, bottomless sinkholes, that went so deep they had to reach the hell itself, the dogheads still lived. The wind picked up, coming from the very stony mountain, cramming the noises into the cracks and cavities, and for a moment Mio thought those were the dogheads howling; the forest they now entered was full of strained branches. After they made enough distance from those rocks, crossed the rocky gully and the steep meadow on which invisible bees buzzed, they paused by the lone wild apple to catch some rest, gather some strength, have some water; Mio picked up a mushy apple from the grass, surrounded by a swarm of flies, and crushed it in his fist until a thick juice oozed out of

it and the apple smelled like brandy, the kind his father used to brew, back when he was still alive. Rude and Drenka slowly moved on, while Mio picked an apple from a branch, ate it quickly and then ran after them. A little later, by the spring that bubbled under a cold, gray rock, they filled both of their canteens, stopped, drank, listened to the gurgle of the water, and Mio knelt down, drank from his hand and said, his voice cleansed by the water. "Divine." Meanwhile, Drenka took the potatoes out of Rude's backpack, rubbed them in the water with her wet palms, removing the thick skin of mud, while Mio tickled her ear from behind her back with a straw, feeling her warm hair in his nose. "Stop it!" she said and twisted her body, and Mio tossed the straw behind his back, took one of the muddy potatoes out of her hand and began rubbing it in the water, smiling until her reflection in the water smiled back at him; Rude filled his canteen, took a sip of water, glanced into the sun and said, "Let's go, the noon has passed."

They continued their journey followed by the sudden hissing of the wind; it soon eased up and the sun once again appeared behind the clouds, shining on everything that moved in the forest; birds' eyes glistened in the treetops, Mio observed them as he went, then, stomping his feet, chased them from their branches, for they were black, like ravens, so they reminded him of those ill-omened birds that bring nothing good to your life. Once again he walked behind Drenka, at one moment looking at the bugs that live for just one day, at another watching her walk, like dancing: her dress got caught in thistles, while she kept an eye on the branches, fearing not to get it torn; it's a real miracle, he thought, it's still whole; soon they were treading over dry, fallen fir cones, listening to their horny sounds, then they stopped by the bird's nest from which a naked chick had fallen, it resembled a newborn's heart and Mio gently took it into his hands, then skillfully climbed the tree and put it back into its nest, feeling Drenka's warm eyes on his back as he went. They walked on and paused briefly one more time by a chipped rock, next to which there were countless hazel shells; someone had walked through here before. Mio stopped once again by a wide beech, lowered the sack with the rooster by his side and said loudly, "Know what? Why don't we eat?" Drenka looked around then lowered her eyes at the sack and said, out of breath, "If you're hungry, why not." Rude grabbed a branch, bent it towards himself and said, "And how long is that going to take?" Mio laughed silently and replied, "Until we eat the cock." He sat down on the green mat of grass, put the sack by his side, untied it, which made Drenka stand up straight and say, "Hey, it'll get away!" "And where?" Mio replied. "It's got nowhere to go." Meanwhile, the rooster scrambled out of the sack, puffed up its chest, flapped its fiery wings, bigger, more beautiful, shinier than the rooster the girl had pushed into the sack: it extended its neck as far as it could and crowed into the skies, changing the tone of its voice. "Oh, look at our singer," Rude said, whistling and snapping his fingers around his head to the tune of the rooster's melody: the rooster bristled, waved its wings, and attacked his boot: Rude took a step back, caught by surprise, Mio laughed at this loudly, and the girl went into the bush, sat down on

her heels and began collecting dry branches scattered all around: when she came back, she dropped the branches to the ground, brought some dried grass, placed a couple of the thinnest twigs into a cross, put the dry grass under them, got up to her feet and said, "Rude, do you have your knife?" He pushed his hand deep into his pocket and pulled out a switchblade, tossed it to Mio, who was caught by surprise, so he jumped up and hopped about like catching a hot potato; Mio grasped the knife, pulled the sharp edge out of its wooden handle, and said hesitatingly, "I can't cut its throat." Rude smiled and, looking straight into his eyes, said, "Who can't slaughter a rooster is not fit to defend his country." "Why don't you slaughter it then?" Mio replied and, after a moment's deliberation, almost tossed the opened knife back to Rude. "I don't want to bloody my suit," was Rude's reply. Mio stood up and said, trimming a twig off a hazel bush, "So, your suit's better than mine?" Drenka glanced sideways at her brother and said, "Stop it, light the fire," then pushed her hand into her pocket, took out a couple of kernels of corn, said, here, chick, chick, tossed them in front of her; the rooster carefully approached the food, looked around haughtily, gulped one kernel and was ready to gulp down the other when Drenka jumped in, grabbed its neck with one hand, its legs with the other, and pushed it firmly under her arm: it struggled, trying to break loose, those shiny feathers flying to all sides making it seem she was holding back a blaze under her arm. She walked over to Mio, took the knife out of his hand without uttering a word, then took the rooster to the fallen tree, pressed it against the stump, and pinned it down with her naked, round knee. The rooster set itself free, so Mio ran up to her, grabbed the rooster with both hands, pressed it down firmly against the bark of the tree, glanced at her and said, "Gimme that knife!" Drenka handed him the knife immediately, he made a sudden cut right next to his fingers interlaced firmly around the rooster's neck; he held it tight all until its head, after yet another cut of the knife, rolled down in the grass. Mio knelt down with the rooster squirming in his hand, wiped the blade against the grass, and glanced at Rude who was standing and looking at the first spurts of the fire; then he stood up straight, handed the knife back to Drenka who walked into the bush and was already swishing sharply into the hazel shoot, removing its bark and sharpening its tip. Mio still held the headless rooster: with every new jerk, a drop of blood dripped out of the rooster's neck. Mio once again looked up at Rude (still not knowing what he wanted to tell him with this gaze), who had squatted down by the fire and was now spurring it with his breath, and then he dropped the rooster to the ground; it first fell to one side, but then got up on its yellow, buckling legs and began wobbling around, all headless, then it extended its neck and, a couple seconds later, toppled down into the grass; it twitched a couple more times and then stopped. Drenka calmly went to the rooster, picked it up and pressed her fingers hard into its body, as if molding it all over again, and when another drop of blood oozed out of the red pipe of its neck, she picked it up by its legs, swung it twice through the air and tossed it much closer to the flaming fire.

They walked through the woods, their thick breaths pressing against their backs and pushing them forward. "Are we on the right path?" Rude asked, pushing aside a slender branch with a smooth, long leaf. "The worst thing is that I ate too much of that cock so I can't go as fast," Mio said, glancing at him with an expression on his face that was supposed to be a smile, then snapped a twig off and picked his teeth to remove the remaining fibers of tough meat. Meanwhile, Drenka knelt down, licked her sleeve trying to remove the tiny drops of blood that had caught on it. Mio stopped, glanced left, then right, made a couple of steps forward and said, his voice dry, "Yes, we're right on track, straight on." He loudly sucked in another morsel of meat, took his canteen, held a long gulp in his mouth, gargled it about, and slowly drank, thus making Rude know there was no reason to worry, even though it seemed that the last time the trees had not been this tall, and it had been just two months before, when he went to town to sell his cow. He walked on, the two of them following him, the forest growing ticker, quieter, as if it had its own life. Mio stopped once again, ran his eyes around, pricked his ears; everything in front of and around him seemed familiar: that one tree was about to hum, the red-tailed bird he had seen the last time he was here would chirp happily behind that other tree, but none of it happened, except that the sun broke through the branches and brought that squint back into his eyes. The birds grew completely silent too, all that could be heard were muffled steps and the movement of firm plants crowned with sharp thorns: they walked over lichens and moss and, every couple of steps, rubbed their feet against the heads of curious white flowers that kept showing themselves in the grass. Wild cherries hung from above, tiny, juicy, and Mio would've liked nothing better than to stop, climb the tree, stuff them all in his mouth, but, he thought, there's time for the cherries on our way back. A spindly bug came out of nowhere, it arrived with one sound, left with another, then it got lost in the dark space between the trees. Mio stopped and waited for Drenka to catch some breath, because she had just stopped and rubbed the blood with her saliva. When she moved on, Mio followed close behind her, while Rude walked on, straightening his coat on his chest with his hands. Walking down a path hidden in the grass, which he didn't remember from before, Mio suddenly made out a couple of crouching shadows; like a dream that lasted as long as his gaze: two men rushing through the bush. He stopped dead in his tracks, Rude and Drenka slowly came to a halt behind his back. Then some more fleeting shadows ran by at the other side of the forest; then a woman with a child in her arms; her breath and sighs mixing audibly. "What's that?" Mio asked, and Drenka replied even before he had finished asking, "The gypsies." "I know they're gypsies," Mio said. "But where are they going?" Rude walked around a disheveled bush and stopped to look around, then said, "Never mind the gypsies, let them be. Tell me, do you know where we are?" Mio yanked a leaf from a branch, blew his nose and spat into it, then once again took the lead and headed on, his step certain; his thought once again ran back to those gypsies; he wanted to ask them, hey, you, how far to the town.

He glanced back; two squirrels jumped around a tree, chasing, appearing and disappearing, flaunting their brown, bushy tails.

Mio walked on, parting the forest with his hands, Drenka and Rude walked close behind him, following his motions. "We're almost there," Mio said, "maybe an hour more, maybe less." Then they came out of the forest that always seemed as if the wolf could get lost in it, yet he, didn't, again, and then they plunged into the sea of wavy green, into some tall grass, so tall their heads were barely visible in it; Drenka walked while her eyes, every once in a while, escaped to those drops of blood on the sleeve of her dress. "Give me some more water," she told Mio. He poured water on that spot, she walked and rubbed her sleeve, but the bloody stain only grew wider. "You'll wash when we get to town, there's a soap in every toilet," Mio said, and Rude looked back at them across his shoulder and said, "Come one you two, hurry up." "Rude, leave us be," Drenka said, slurping the air through her nostrils to calm her angry voice. Her words made Mio feel even closer to her; he could barely hold back from putting his arms around her; they walked on through the rolling grass, then through the valley filled with hot air, then again through the forest, which kept becoming younger; Mio walked faster and faster, every breath brought him a new scent, every new scent a new view; he could already clearly imagine the town, its white, rich people's houses, noisy taverns and their sweet smell of beer foam. When they finally got out of the woods, they could already hear the occasional echo of music in the distance; they crossed a cornfield with plants the size of an adult, and one steep hill, a short climb filled with pines, was all that stood between them and the town; a couple of times, a lithe crook appeared by the road, breaking itself in half, and Drenka immediately went down to it, grabbed the hem of her sleeve and rubbed that bloody stain with water. Mio stood and hurried her along, wiping the grains of sweat from his brow, droplets splashing all around, and then he said again, "You'll get it out with soap in no time." Rude had already reached the flat portion of the ragged road, bearing the deep ruts of wagon wheels: to all sides, like in a picture of someone's family tree, the road branched into smaller tracks and paths filled with people, some of them carrying tricolored flags on their long poles.

Rude kept moving further and further away, and Drenka and Mio barely managed to keep up; as he walked, he picked up a tuft of grass by the side of the road and so, shortening and lengthening his stride, but never stopping, polished his boots. At the next gentle bent, a man on a bicycle, a rifle on his back, overtook Drenka and Mio, and the two of them, rushing to catch up with Rude, passed by an old man who carried a shiny picture of Jesus in his hands and kept rising it into the air every couple of steps, shouting, "Oh, thank you, Lord! Oh, thank you, dear Lord!" Then, in the thunder of unshoed hoofs and dust, a horse-drawn carriage crammed with people and decorated by ribbons passed them by, then

another one; a rickety ox-wagon, its heavy wheels sparking, joined the road just behind a plum orchard and tightly packed haystacks, children waving from it; they wore paper soldier hats on their heads with the letter U written on them. Mio waved back at them, walked past and, together with Drenka, who walked along looking straight ahead, suddenly picked up his pace and after a couple of minutes caught up with Rude. When they came nearer, they could already see and hear clearly: crowds of people, then the sound of an accordion and dancers in folk costumes, who spun and twirled around – like the cogwheels in the clock’s womb – in circles, the sudden turns of their bodies only intensifying countless steps that hurtled towards the town.