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WALNUT CASTLES  
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*Translated by Daria Torre*

In the following months he was building the house of the walnut wood from dawn to dusk, and his back never hurt, his joints never swelled up; he felt that same strength in his arms and hands that he used to feel a long time ago, in Bosnia, when he would have raised a trunk of a hundred years old walnut-tree from the ground. He built the construction quickly, in seven or eight days. He did not need any more time to construct the partitions for the rooms and to make the inner staircase, but the real work started with the room doors, the furniture and the household appliances. First he had to use needles, razor blades and nail scissors to make the tools that he was going to use, for instance, to carve a bathtub not bigger than a thumb or a kneading trough smaller than a fingernail. He worked on that kneading trough for two days and he took more trouble with that than with ten heads of Prince Marko. But in the end they looked like the real thing. It was even more difficult to execute the ornaments on the period furniture, to put the knobs on the doors, to make the set of the miniature kitchen knives. The longer he worked the more things necessary to any household he noticed to be missing. He went by the rule that nothing could be so tiny that it could not be made. He made kitchen cloths out of the pieces of silk and carpets out of Matilda's formal gown.

Every Saturday he visited the future grandfather, sat with him in front of the house and waited for sunset. He watched Kata's belly and face swelling and he listened to the future father's fingers snapping while he was trying to say who knows what. With these people he shared peace that he never before experienced. He declared the toy was a secret that was going to be a surprise and he would not concede at any cost and reveal what he was doing. Kata would pester and press him to disclose the secret; she would nag him and pull his coat. She would touch August and if there was something that he could not stand it was people touching him, taking an invisible hair from his shoulder, slapping him merrily on the back or grabbing his forearm when they wanted to tell him something important... But she wasn't bothering him. He laughed, waved his hand at her saying that he was an old man and that he enjoyed that such a young and beautiful woman wanted something from him. Kata would blush and run into the kitchen; the grandfather would nudge at his ribs, raise his eyebrows and flash his eyes. Just as a brothel-keeper would do while offering his girls around! But there was nothing improper or deliberate in that. It was just a childish joy of the old men who had, well, become a bit silly while waiting for the new life to come.

A month before Kata would give birth, August started to race with the baby who was coming into the world. Two other rooms were yet unfinished and he still had to make the future inhabitants of the house: a man, a woman, three children and a dog. A doghouse as well. The inhabitants were also to be made of walnut wood. Rag dolls always bothered him and they would not be appropriate if a boy was going to be born. Boys never play with rag dolls, but people and dogs of walnut wood are parts of the male as much as the female world. Every joint of the figure had to be movable, the people were going to sit, stand and walk, turn their heads and move their fingers and the dog was going to have mobile jaws - so that his barking would be evident. He even imagined their faces. At first he wanted the adults to look like Kata and her husband. But why would a child want toys with faces of his mother and father? He renounced. How could he even think of such a stupidity!

In the last days he worked even at night. Only to make sure that the house would be finished in time. Then he had to give up the dog and decide that there were going to be only two children. The last Saturday arrived and the midwife said that Kata was to give birth next week. August was finishing the house gate until dawn and then he lied down for an hour before Ante the tanner would come with a cart to take him and the toy to Dubrovnik. Everything was ready: the man and the woman were sitting

in armchairs looking at each other, the children were running in front of the house, the clean white kitchen was glowing, the plates were set for breakfast. He made plates of plaster instead of walnut wood. Why? Somehow he felt that it was inappropriate to make plates out of a noble wood. They should break easily when a family dispute occurs and when the times of despair come. And now, when everything is fine, the plates alternate on the table like seasons. One set for breakfast, the other for lunch, the third for dinner. And then from the beginning again. In the small world of the walnut house the time passes faster. Five minutes of children's play is enough for a day to end and in half an hour a whole year passes by. In a year of flesh and blood a whole century of wood goes by. In the walnut world one lives longer. One lives for as many centuries as the childhoods he has.

The only thing that remained unfinished on the house was the sign above the gate. He thought about it at length; all kinds of names came to his mind, but he found nothing that was good enough. Maybe it will not be important for the child, but August wanted to have a name for his art work, the most beautiful thing that his hands made, something that was worth all the trouble of past months and that would justify the years of August's life. Maybe he is not a great artist, maybe he was only imagining that he was an exception among the dilettantes of the carpentry, but this is something that nobody could contest. Nobody in the world. And it was created for only one child. It made him happy. The fact that the most important art work in walnut wood is going to be destined to one child only.