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For Two Thousand Years

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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PART ONE

I

I believe I've only ever been afraid of signs and symbols, never of people or things. My childhood was poisoned by the third poplar in the yard of the Church of St Peter, a tall, mysterious tree, its shadow on summer nights falling through the window, over my bed – that black band slashing across my bedcovers – a terrifying presence I could not understand and did not try to.

And yet, I walked bareheaded through the deserted streets of the city when it was occupied by Germans: a white trail in the sky marking the passage of planes, bombs falling all about, even close by, the short dry thumps echoing across the open country.

And yet, with cold, childlike curiosity I calmly observed cartloads of frozen Turks passing by the gates in December, and not even before those pyramids of bodies stacked like logs in a woodpile did the presence of death make me tremble.

And yet, I crossed the Danube in a damaged boat, taking in water, to Lipovan villages, just rolling up my sleeves when it seemed the rotten bottom could no longer hold out. And God knows what a bad swimmer I am.

No, I don't think I've ever been fearful, even though the Greeks from the big garden, who pelted us with stones when they caught us there, shouted 'Cowardly Jew!' at me daily from the moment they knew me. I grew up with that shout, spat at me from behind.

I know, though, what horror is. Horror, yes. Little nothings which nobody else noticed loomed before me menacingly and froze me with terror. Vainly would I approach the poplar across the road in the light of day, caressing its black bark and, with bloodied nails, breaking splinters from the wood exposed between the cracks. 'It's just a poplar,' I

told myself, leaning back against it, to feel it right against me so as not to forget. But by evening I had indeed forgotten, alone in my bedroom, bedded down as always at ten o'clock. You could still hear the steps of passers-by from the street, muffled voices, occasional shouts. Then that familiar silence, arriving with the usual pace, in the usual stages. If I made an effort, I could perhaps recall those three or four internal beats with which my night began, real steps which I descended physically in darkness and silence. Then the shadow of the poplar found me once again tensed, with fists clenched and eyes wide open, wanting to shout out but not knowing how or to whom.

*

Made a curious discovery yesterday at the second-hand bookshop. George Gissing, *La rançon d'Ève*. From around 1900, I think. Absolutely nothing about the author (probably English). Passed a good four hours.

When I'd finished it, I went into the street for an evening paper. More fighting, at the faculty of medicine in particular, and in our own faculty. I didn't attend today. Why bother?

*

Marcel Winder stopped me in the street to tell me they'd beaten him up again.

'That's number eight,' he told me, not specifying whether it was his eighth fight or his eighth injury. He had a black bruise under his left eye. He was chatty, almost cheerful. Superior at any rate. I've certainly never aspired to that kind of thing. I've steered clear. It looks like the lads are getting ready for 10 December, but Winder didn't want to tell me too much about it.

'Not your sort of thing, pal. You've better things to worry about. And coincidentally, just coincidentally, they stop you getting into trouble with us. Just a coincidence.'

Winder is wasting his time. He's flogging a dead horse: I don't have that kind of vanity.

*

In a letter from Mama I received today:

... And, in particular, don't go to the university. I've read in the paper that big fights have broken out again, and the milliner's son, when he was home, told me it's worst of all at your faculty. Leave the showing off to the others. Listen to your mother and stay home.

'Leave the showing off to the others.' If Mama could know how that sounds.

*

Can that be it? This morning I went to the class on Roman law. No one said a word to me. I took notes feverishly, in order not to have to lift my eyes from my desk. Halfway through the lecture, a ball of paper falls on the bench, beside me. I don't look at it, don't open it. Someone shouts my name loudly from behind. I don't turn my head. My neighbour to the left watches me carefully, without a word. I can't endure his gaze and I look up.

'Out!'

He barks the command. He stands up, making space for me to get by, and waits. I feel a tense silence around me. Nobody breathes. Any gesture from me and this silence will explode.

No. I slide out of the desk and slip towards the door between two rows of onlookers. It all happens decorously, ritually. Someone by the door lashes out with his fist, but it is a glancing blow. A late punch, my friend.

I'm out in the street. I see a beautiful woman. I see an empty carriage passing by. Everything is as it ought to be. A cold December morning.

*

Winder sought me out to congratulate me on yesterday's events. I don't know who told him about it. And he gave me a ticket to go to the student dormitories the day after tomorrow. A group is being

organized for every faculty. The boys are determined to attend lectures on 10 December. A matter of principle, Winder says.

The whole thing bores me to death. I'd like a big, clear, severe book with ideas that challenge all I believe in, a book I could devour with the same intense passion with which I first read Descartes. Every chapter would be a personal struggle.

But no: I'm involved in a 'matter of principle'. Ridiculous.

*

10 December. Walking straight ahead, head uncovered, in the rain, blindly, looking neither right nor left nor behind, without crying out, to avoid crying out, above all, and allowing the noise of the street, the people who are watching, and this hour of confusion, to wash over me. There. If I close my eyes, nothing remains but drizzling rain: I can feel the fine droplets on my cheek, trickling from my eyebrow towards my nostrils and from there falling suddenly to my lips. Why can't I be profoundly, imperturbably calm, like a horse drawing an empty cart through mud, through a storm?

I've been beaten. That's all I know. I'm not in pain and, apart from a punch to the thigh, none of them were severe blows. He had a strange expression, under his cap. I hadn't believed he was going to strike me until I saw his raised fist. He was a stranger: perhaps it was the first time he'd laid eyes on me.

I've been beaten and the world doesn't stand still for such things. Italian-Romanian Bank, paid-up capital, 50,000,000. Where Minimax guards, fire doesn't spread. The capital of Iceland is . . . Liebovici Isodor, what happened to you? If he found the door to the secretariat, he escaped. If not . . . But what the hell is the capital of Iceland? Not Christiana, for God's sake, and not Oslo either, because they're the same place . . .

If I cry, I'm lost. I'm still self-possessed enough to know that much. If I cry, I'm lost. Clench your fists, you fool, if necessary, believe yourself a hero, pray to God, tell yourself you're the son of a race of martyrs, yes, yes, tell yourself that, knock your head against

the wall, but if you want to be able to look at yourself in the mirror and not die of shame, don't cry. That's all I ask of you: don't cry.

*

If I thought it would do any good, I'd rip out that page I wrote the other day. One more pathetic outburst like that and I'll give up keeping a diary. What matters is whether I can understand calmly, critically, what is happening now to myself and others. Otherwise . . .

People say that this afternoon they'll decide to close the university indefinitely.

Yesterday, on the platform, as I was getting off the train, Mama looked thinner and older than ever under the weak station lights. It was probably only her usual nerves, in our first hour of being together again.

Her nerves . . . 'Have you got all your parcels? You didn't leave anything on the train? Button up your collar properly. Now, to find a carriage . . .' She talks a lot, hurriedly, about so many little things, and doesn't wipe the tear from her lashes, afraid I'd notice it.

*

First walk in town. Triumphant procession down Main Street, between two rows of Jewish shopkeepers who salute me loudly, each from his own shop, with discreet knowing nods.

'It's nothing, lads, keep your chins up, God is good, it'll pass.'

'For two thousand years . . .' says Moritz Bercovici (manufacturing and footwear), trying to explain to me the cause of our persecution.

At the barber's, the owner himself takes the honour of cutting my hair and asks during the operation if I have any bruises, scars . . . if you know what I mean, sir.

'No, I've no idea.'

'Well, the fighting.'

'What fighting?'

'The fighting at the university. Didn't you get beaten up?'

'No.'

'Not at all?'

'Not at all.'

The man is perplexed. He cuts my hair grudgingly, unenthusiastically.

*

A family evening. My cousin Viky has returned with her husband from their honeymoon. Seems she's pregnant. An uncle finds the matter amusing.

'You've been hard at work, you two!'

Viky is embarrassed, her husband serious.

'Well, young fellow, there you go! You're done for now! Whether you like it or not, feel like it or not, you have to . . . You know the story about the train?'

He tells the story about the train. Everybody laughs loudly. In the corner, Mama looks at me, confused . . .

I might have ended up like the rest of them, a fat married shopkeeper, playing poker on Sunday evening and talking dirty to newlyweds. You know the one about the train?

I sometimes ask myself, fearfully, if I have wholly succeeded in escaping them.

*

I asked Mama if we could stay at home. She works, I read. I look up from the book from time to time to see her, beautiful, calm, with the most peaceful forehead I know, with her eyes a little tired with age. Forty-three? Forty-four? I'm afraid to ask her.

'How are you getting on in Bucharest?'

'Fine. Why do you ask?'

'No reason.'

She continues working, without looking at me.

'You know, Mama, if sending me 4,000 is too hard . . .'

She doesn't respond. I go to the other side of the table, take her right hand in mine and squeeze it inquiringly.

'It's late, son. Time for bed.'

I should have guessed. Things have not been going well at home. There's no more money. I've told her that from now on I'll manage on 2,000 a month. I'll stay in the student dormitories. It's fine there too, it's warm and clean and comfortable. (She doesn't seem to believe me – and I talk quickly, surprised at the positive qualities that I've suddenly discovered in those barracks in the Jewish quarter in Văcărești.)

*

I can hear her breathing in the next room. I'm well aware that she can't sleep and deliberately breathes as if she's sleeping to fool me so that I won't be worried.

Such childish nonsense. I should be ashamed of it, but I am not. At my age, unable to leave home for three months without that feeling of something clutching at my heart, without that great yearning overwhelming me just as I am about to be embraced goodbye. If I weren't ashamed, I'd go and kiss her now, as I would in the past, when I woke in the night from a bad dream. The bad dream: that suitcase packed for the journey.

3

The voluptuousness of being alone in a world that believes it owns you. It's not pride. Not even shyness. It's a natural, simple and unforced sense of being left to yourself. Sometimes I'd like to leave my own body and from a corner of the room observe how I talk, how I get worked up, see what I'm like when I'm cheerful or sad, knowing that none of those things is me. Playing at having a double? No, that's not it at all.

*

I ate at the canteen between a bad-smelling loud-talking Russian and a thin girl with chapped hands and badly applied lipstick. A concrete floor, the cold, a coat thrown over my shoulders, a plate shoved before me, a tin fork on the ground.

I'm never going to be a social revolutionary, I who in that moment somehow managed a cheerful smile.

There are eleven boys in the room, including me. Sadigurski Liova, my neighbour to the right, shaves with the old razors given to him by Ionel Bercovici, my neighbour to the left. I'm still guarded in my interactions here. I fear greater familiarity.

Towards morning, whenever I happen to wake, I like to listen to the chorus of breathing of the ten people around me, in this long, cold room: the rasping breath of the polytechnic student by the door, his neighbour's fluting whistle, Liova's sighing, the bumblebee buzz of someone towards the back, by the window and, above them

all, the loud, penetrating, animal snore of Ianchelevici Șapsă, the giant.

*

I watch how they return in the evening from the university, in drabs and drabs, or singly, worn out. And each one grimly enumerates the fights he's got into, like a billiard score, so that a competitor won't steal their points.

Marcel Winder is up to fifteen. The other day his hat also got ripped, which puts him well ahead on the road to martyrdom. Loudly, in the middle of the yard, he points out each of his wounds. This one and this one and this one . . .

*

Today they removed Ianchelevici Șapsă's mattress. He hasn't paid his bill for three months and they're taking action. He watched calmly, leaning against the wall, without protest. In the evening he laid down on his bed board and uttered a choice curse. I threw him one of my pillows. He sent it sailing back, high through the air, nearly smashing the lamp, and turned over to face the wall.

*

It was a tough day. It's been decided that we absolutely have to get into the civil law faculty, where they grade you for attendance. Up until now we've only been going in scattered groups of three people at most. This avoids major confrontations, but it achieves nothing as they usually identify us all and kick us out.

So today we had to change our tactics. We entered in a compact group and sat in the front rows, by the lectern. We don't respond to minor provocations, but defend ourselves if we're attacked. 'Until the end' – that was the slogan.

It's a bad strategy, I think, but I'm not going to tell the boys that, so thrilled are they with today's success. We gave as good as we got,

perhaps, but did nobody notice Liebovici Isodor, jammed in the corner by the blackboard, with his coat ripped and a bloody split lip? Ianchelevici Șapsă did wonders: he was pale and serious, holding the leg of a chair he had broken off for the fight.

Evening. Marcel Winder made a list of those who were beaten up, to give to the paper. I told him to rub my name out: I don't think I received more than two blows and, more to the point, Mama doesn't need to find out.

*

Calm exteriors. Perhaps antagonism has acquired a certain style.

'Dear colleague, would you kindly show me your student identification card?'

Three of them surround me, waiting. I take out my student card and display it to the one who spoke.

'Aha! Please vacate the lecture hall. Come along.'

He points the way.

*

Liebovici Isodor got badly beaten up. Again. I wasn't there, but heard from Marga Stern, who was.

I'm rather fond of his curt manner, his proud, firm reserve.

'Again, Liebovici?'

'Again, what?'

'They beat you up again.'

'No.'

'Of course they did.'

'All right, they did, then . . . You seem to know all about it.'

He turns and leaves, irritated, head bowed.

I lost my gloves in the scuffle or they were taken. And the weather is icy . . . Damn.

*