



NOWHERE MAN THE "LOST" PRONEK FANTASIES
"DAWN" AND "THE DRAWER"



DAWN

THIS IN TRUTH happened on a night train to Linz: swarthy-faced robbers startle Adolf and strip his felt jacket halfway down his arms so he cannot move them (their long nails scratching him just above his elbow). They slap his cheeks a couple of times, extinguishing any thought of resistance, and then tear the wallet out of his inside pocket. They open the door of the speeding train, and a moist deluge of night air bathes Adolf's face. They throw his easel and portfolio, respectively, out of the train—Adolf can hear the easel and the portfolio echoing it, slicing through the obscure verdure. Then they throw him out—the jacket bundled above his elbows—and he follows the trajectories of the easel and the portfolio. Adolf tumbles down the embankment, the gravel ripping through his pants (recently bought from the money he got for one of his landscapes), skinning his knees and elbows. He eventually stops the revolution and lays

still, the gravel ferociously pressing his cheeks. He can only see the rear red eye of the train in the distance, winking away at him, as if all this were a kind of benign joke. Adolf sits up. He can feel bruises spreading like ink blotches all over his white thighs and shaven cheeks. He can feel the skin on his knees and elbows tightening, trying to close quickly over the bloody wounds and cover them up—and there just isn't enough skin.

So there he sits in a throne of pain, at the bottom of the embankment, vexed at the ease with which despair invades every cell of his being (including the bruise areas), and the calmness with which he accepts it, as though it were the moment of relief after an explosive sneeze. His easel gone, his landscapes gone, his elbows gone, his suit gone, the train, with his money, gone. He doesn't even know where he might be—he was dozing, just about to enter a dream populated by fair and fecund Nibelung maidens, when the robbers startled him. Hoping that slumber might dissolve the mountain of problems, or

at least allow him to re-enter the maiden dreamland, he closes his eyes, but his heart throbs and throttles, it will not let him rest. An owl hoots (he opens his eyes) sending a signal to nocturnal creatures, and they respond, one by one, and then all together, eager to provide the needed information—saying, perhaps, that there is a large, weak body, breathing, close to the railroad. Adolf swallows a hefty gulp of dewy darkness, as if it were a magic potion, and crawls up the embankment, the gravel writhing and biting beneath his hands and knees. He reaches the rails and stands up—whichever way he looks, the rails narrow and disappear into a dark, uncertain horizon.

He walks for a while between the rails: the gravel monotonously crunching; the endless crossing of the same threshold; the steady pain in the parched knees and elbows; the tightening of the tired thigh muscles—he looks up, and the sky is wide and bright.

You cannot see the sun yet, just the forest below the embankment, and the glistening,

pale mist hovering on top of the deeply green trees; and the verdant ravine with a couple of brawny does grazing solemnly, looking up occasionally, as if expecting important news from afar. “This is divine,” Adolf thinks. “The Nibelungs must have roamed forests such as this one.” He stands petrified in the exhilarating moment, fretful to move, lest the landscape crumble into the daily banality of a country morning. It is at this moment that a choir of sparrows breaks out into a hysterically festive chirruping aria. The does scurry back into the forest, the trees ruffle their leaves petulantly, the mist dissipates, the ravine is an empty space, now.

Adolf keeps going, drowsily aware that a decision has been made for him, but does not know what in the world it might be. He walks and stumbles and walks again, storing away his fatigue and despondence as a character-building experience. Finally, he sees a puny railroad station way ahead of him, but he doesn't hurry up, as if he didn't want to let those watching him (wherever and whoever

they might be) know how close to a defeat he has been.

There is a railroad man stretching up on a ladder leaning against the station wall, extinguishing the lantern above the door. He descries Adolf approaching the station; he touches his forehead with the inner brim of his right palm, narrowing his eyes. His face is round, gathered around a tubby nose with vast oval nostrils. He climbs down the ladder and waits for Adolf, his arms akimbo, his fists resting on his stolid hips, as if he were an angry mother.

"You seem to have missed your train," the railroad man says, glancing at Adolf's tattered suit. "Good morning to you."

"It is a good morning after all," Adolf says. "I was just admiring the ravine down this way, and it is beautiful."

The railroad man smiles and nods. His uniform is dark and neat and reliable, with glimmering badges in the corners of his collar and an array of pens in his chest pocket.

"Beautiful country, makes you happy to

have been born here," Adolf says and scans the landscape around the train station—there is not much to admire around there, but a moment of pensive solidarity is created. "I wouldn't mind camping here some day."

"Indeed," the railroad man says. "Indeed."

Adolf attempts to stretch out his arm and offer his hand, but the move is hampered by a swollen elbow.

"I am Adolf Hitler, from Linz," he says. "I am a painter."

The railroad man leans forward to reach Adolf's hand—he seems about to fall forward, but he grasps Adolf's hand and shakes it heartily, as Adolf grimaces in passive pain, and then restores his balance. "I am Joseph Pronek, from the railroad," he says. "Would you care for a glass of warm milk?"

"Certainly," Adolf says, and follows Pronek to the door. He can smell the oily railroad-and-coal scent, and he can see the sun ascending behind the forest, long shadows extending behind him.

"I hope you don't mind me asking," he

says, “but are you Jewish?”

“Oh, I am many things,” Pronek says and opens the door. “More than I can handle.”

As they step into the warmth of the station office—the fire in the stove belching and crackling, as if happy to see Pronek back—the ground gently rumbles, adumbrating the oncoming train, the rumble growing stronger and stronger, until it tickles Adolf’s feet, so he has to make a few tiny steps, this way and that way, as if furtively dancing.

This all happened a long time ago.

THE DRAWER

HISTORY HAS SHOWN that there are few more joyous daily rituals for Joseph Visarionovich than going through the contents of his dark-wood desk drawer. And rightly so, for the drawer is a little cabinet of historic wonders: behold the bullet that nearly killed Vladimir Ilich, a puny nugget of lead; hear Yagoda’s teeth rattle in a little red velvet pouch, always ready to amuse Joseph Visarionovich; study the picture of Vladimir Ilich and Joseph Visarionovich heartily shaking hands, as a smirking Trotsky is standing a pace away, clearly plotting something that is never to come to fruition; browse through the American comic book in which Joseph Visarionovich is represented as a lecherous, hirsute beast surrounded by a pig-tailed throng of enthralled Soviet girls; amuse yourself over the picture of Hitler (kindly provided by Kauders) in his underwear—striped shorts, reaching half-way down his flaccid thighs—standing grim, with his arm

firmly erected; grip the wooden spoon given to Joseph Visarionovich by a quivering babushka, wrapped in a star-embroidered scarf, who voluntarily submitted to the inevitability of collectivization; look at Dr. Steiner's mezuzah, which used to be at the doorpost of a secret chamber behind a tall book case, bent a little, due to a misstep by a clumsy NKVD operative; and, yes, read the letter from Bukharin—Joseph Visarionovich likes to read the first sentence aloud, stressing different words: “Koba, *why* did you need my death? Koba, why did you need *my* death? Koba, why did you need my *death*?” *Da*, there are many other things in the drawer. Joseph Visarionovich goes through some of them briskly, and some of them he ignores, never entirely succumbing to the tickling of today's delight, always leaving something for the better tomorrow.

It is Tuesday. The fire is throttling in the wood furnace, but outside, it is a sunny day: the window-spine shadow is stretching languid and long on the office floor; the dust

motes are twitching in the air; baloonish cloudlets are lingering over Red Square, as if waiting for the order to unload the rain; a healthy unit of chirruping sparrows has gathered over the grain that Joseph Visarionovich ordered to be procured for them. Joseph Visarionovich can hear cars revving outside, tenor doors and bass gates slamming, curt precise orders prompting curt precise answers—the revolutionary mechanism is humming along harmoniously, it seems.

He decides to go out for a ride, visit some factories and security units, see some real people. He pushes the drawer with his belly, the navel button on his uniform pings (ping!) against the edge. The drawer dutifully rushes forth, then abruptly halts with a shrill screech: Hitler's picture slides in, so now only his melonish white knees and black socks stretched below them can be seen. Joseph Visarionovich tries to thrust the drawer forward, but it will not budge. He forces the chair back (a floor thunder) and stands up. He feels his mustache and his

neck hair bristling, he glares at the desk: the Tokyo file spread in front of him, a golden pen sticking out of the holder helplessly pointing toward a remote, irrelevant ceiling angle; an inkwell; a dark telephone; a chessboard with a king cornered by a couple of rooks; a mug of kvas—he glares at the desk as though he could frighten it into submissiveness. He presses both of his hands against the recalcitrant drawer with all his strength, but it is as though the drawer has always been in this position. Joseph Visarionovich feels the rage swelling in his groin, then splitting in two to crawl up his sides and inflame his armpits. This time he kicks the drawer with his knee, unwisely, for a flash-flood of pain zooms up and down his legs, as the desk quakes, as the king wobbles and the rooks roll on the board to stop at the edge, as the earpiece rattles in its cradle, and as the kvas mug and the inkwell conspire to produce a tide of yeasty goo with inky spirals beginning to slowly rotate, like nascent galaxies—the pain zooms.

Joseph Visarionovich consequently employs his deep voice to commence cursing: the devil this, the devil that, fiery hell and some more hell, all the while pounding the desk with both of his palms, both rapidly reddening. Joseph Visarionovich growls and pants and the room is spinning like a zoetrope, as the drawer stands immobile in its center. But then the revolution stops and Joseph Visarionovich beholds a scrawny bespectacled man, one of those young believing bureaucrats who all look as if they were produced in the same provincial factory. He is standing in the door, bedeviled, his feet apart, his suit orderly, reliable. “Is everything all right, Comrade Stalin?” he asks.

Joseph Visarionovich’s fury is dissipated, though his knee and his palms are throbbing. He doesn’t know who this young man is, but he watches him intently, for he seems to have soaked in all his rage like a sponge. There he is: a bay of baldness widening into his dark hair; his glasses having slid down a bit, exposing a ruddy impression on the ridge

of his nose just above the rim; spit ardently blobbing in the corners of his mouth. He is holding a black-and-green pen, lightly, as if it were a wand. "I am Pronek," the young man says. "Joseph Andrievich Pronek."

Joseph Visarionovich stretches his face into a smile, strokes his mustache comradely, first the left end, then the right one, and says: "Clean this up, Comrade Pronek."

"Yes, Comrade Stalin," vociferates the young man. "Let me get some water, Comrade Stalin." With a long stride, he disappears through the door. Joseph Visarionovich looks through the window, Joseph Andrievich's steps thudding away: the sparrows are gone, leaving no grain, the cloud balloons have not moved at all, the rain order has not arrived. He can hear the kvas and ink dripping hesitantly from the desk. He walks to the desk, stepping around the swelling ink-and-kvas puddle, picks up the phone, waits for a moment.

Moment.

He says: "Yes. I have a cadre problem

here."

"Now," he says. "Yes."

"Pronek. Joseph Somethingievich Pronek. Yes," he says.

And Pronek re-enters, with a silvery bucket in one hand and a sallow sponge and the same black-and-green pen in the other. Joseph Visarionovich looks at him calmly, then exudes a fatherly sigh and says: "Comrade Pronek, let me take your pen." Pronek puts the bucket down—the water billows to the rim, peers over, but then recedes—takes the pen out of his hand and gives it to Joseph Visarionovich, who says: "Now, clean this." Pronek marches eagerly towards the desk, looks around it, assessing the priorities, then pushes the drawer in, effortlessly, soundlessly. He sponges the ink-kvas mush off the desk, makes the rooks stand up on the chess board (albeit cautiously away from the king), and then squeezes the sponge over the bucket, producing a droplet staccato.

Joseph Visarionovich goes to the armchair

by the wood stove and drops in it, exhausted. The armchair gushes with a sigh, as Joseph Visarionovich leans back and closes his eyes. He listens to the fire crackling, he is quiet, breathing deeply, still holding the pen, waiting for Pronek to vanish, so he can doze off.

READ NOWHERE MAN EVERYWHERE SEPT. 17

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