



Damian's River

I.

Imagine one of the greatest cities, for instance Praha, Wien, or London. In the centre of the city imagine a square. In the square, through the six converging streets, smoke rivers flow, carrying the painted bodies of coaches on the waves of wheels. Can you see it? If you can, you have just entered the square wherein this story begins.

The fact that the square is filled with noise, clamour, and commotion is not unusual. What is unusual is that there are, here, two objects absolutely still and utterly quiet. The first is a large *camera obscura* mounted upon a wooden tripod. A bearded photographer unfolded it on a crosswalk between two streets, buried his head under its black draping, and became motionless. The other fixed object is a statue which stood beneath old oaks on the corner between merging streets. The face of the statue, carved from white sandstone, emanates peace. Its pierced hands are outstretched in that mysterious gesture of giving.

The stone at the foot of the statue shines dully from the wax of candles, which glowed and then died through countless nights. And it was to exactly this place that the photographer focused his camera.

Click, click—the swinging leaves above the statue frozen in place; click—a detail of the hands; click—the mysterious peace of the face ...

II.

The photographer had a son. Although without a beard, the boy resembled his father in nearly every way. Damian (such was his

name), always with an air of solemn anticipation, waited expectantly for what his father would take up from his dark closet.

This time it was two pictures, but what pictures! The father hung them on a white panel and was lost behind the closet door again. Damian stepped nearer to the photographs to see them from up close.

The first brought the waft of the wet fragrance of oaks below which, half hidden in the foliage, stood a mysterious statue. There must have been some peculiar power in this statue. It overwhelmed him and drew him inside towards itself.

He did not know how or when he crossed the white frame of the picture. And yet, he now stood at the edge of a vast meadow. Its opposite side was filled with colourful tents. The meadow looked as if it were covered with a swarm of colourful butterflies.

Next to the tents, horses were grazing on grass. Wooden carts covered with carpets woven from old rags stood next to the horses. Around the statue, standing here as mysterious and as motionless as in the photograph, a large crowd was gathered.

Damian smelled the scent of incense. The breeze brought him the monotonous sound of prayers. The white smoke, ascending from the censer, made the priests' purple robes appear silver. The last song ended, and the crowd moved towards the camp.

Damian ran after them. He mingled with the crowd, carried along by it until he grasped the edge of the robe of one of the priests. The priest turned around. "What do you want?" he asked sternly.

"Who does the statue in front of which you were praying represent?" asked Damian, voicing his question.

"The Lord, who will hold you accountable for these kinds of jokes!" The spiritual father could not conceal his anger.

Damian could not hear anything else. As he ran, the fading voice drowned in his own breath. He stopped before the statue. Gasping for breath, he looked searchingly into the stone face. In the enigmatic features, however, he could not see the slightest indication of what he had noticed in the priest's eyes.

Two lovers, almost noiselessly, approached the monument from the other side. A black-eyed boy carried a small bunch of forget-me-nots. "For you, my love, not to forget," he said while placing the flowers at the statue's feet.

"Who is it?" Damian pointed to the statue.

They looked at him absent-mindedly as if being roused from a



deep sleep. “Maybe our love,” said the girl and kissed her boyfriend on the lips. The lovers disappeared into the forest, and Damian returned to the camp.

Working his way through the canvas tents, he reached the middle where there were several fires burning. Over one of them, a pig was roasting on a copper spit. The fat sizzled in the midst of the heat, flaring up and dying out, so that the fire pulsated as if its very flames breathed.

People who had been praying a moment ago were feasting now. All of them were the same: pink-cheeked fat peasants whose hands were, at least for a short while, resting on their greasy clothes.

They were laughing and singing, and some danced. A man was standing in the middle of the resting people—a man with a round sweaty face, swaying to and fro on a pig-like neck. He was entertaining the whole company. Damian dared to go all the way to him.

“Uncle, uncle!” he shouted. “Who does the statue before which you were praying represent?” The man grew earnest.

“It is ... hmmm ... let me put it this way. ... He gives us bread and milk. Actually, for example, even this wine, this nectar of the gods.” Bursting out in laughter while speaking the last words, he handed

the boy a jug filled with wine. Damian grasped the clay jug, and took a sip from the cold drink. Heat flooded through his body; a bitter taste, however, remained in his mouth. He quivered and gave the jug back to the man.

The girl may have been right, he thought as he slipped out of the guffawing crowd and was trying to find his way through the stretched ropes of the tents. *Love ...*

On his way he came upon an old woman, vigorously walking up a mountain. "Are you also going to him?" he asked.

"Where else would I go, my boy? This is the only place for an old woman like me. My body has withered—goats go grey and sag. Loving my man has burnt me out, and my children have worn me out. Life has thrown me aside, my husband has grown indifferent, and my children have deserted me—so, where would I go? I shall light a candle and go through the rosary with neither desire nor thought."

Damian remembered the blooming passion in the lovers' eyes—love. From the distance an owl announced the arrival of night. With the advancing evening, the hues grew dark and the shadows on the meadow stretched longer, until, eventually, everything sank into the gloom, as if the whole of the sky were covered with the wings of a black bird.

In the distance the last fire, still flickering in the camp, appeared only as a small, solitary piece of coal in a stove filled with dying embers. Damian did not even notice when the old woman left.

When the silver coin of the moon had floated out upon the sapphire surface of the forest, a mysterious figure emerged from the gloom of the oak grove. The boy, holding his breath, watched the emerging person, illuminated only by the light of the candle he carried in his hands.

An almost out-of-this-world being: it seemed that the canvas robe covered only a fleshless skeleton; long white hair shimmered like a dark halo, and his untrimmed beard fell in snowy cascades down his slender chest. The man went all the way up to the statue and put the candle down next to the withered forget-me-nots.

Damian stepped from the shadows into the moonlight. When the man cast a searching look at him, he whispered, "Sir, no one can tell me who this man is." Damian's eyes pointed to the statue. The man was silent and Damian, straining to see, followed the stranger's eyes wandering around the stone face, hidden in the foliage.

“A man is an animal, halfway to heaven,” said the stranger quietly, “an animal with a star in its heart.” Abruptly, the man looked straight into the boy’s eyes. “Anyone can make a mistake. Anyone can slip into the abyss of unconsciousness. The call of the flesh in us is much stronger than the roar of the lion. It stuns us, conquering our languid will.”

The stranger’s eyes were now meandering about the meadow, as if looking for the last light lost among the tents. “It is not to be wondered at by them. Searching is tiresome—many have drowned the star of the spirit at the bottom of their animal passions.”

“I know,” he added after a while. “They didn’t know because they couldn’t know. How could they know something that had already died inside them a long time ago?”

“And you?” Damian whispered hesitantly. “Do you know him?” The stranger walked closer to the statue, picked up the candle, lifted it, and the quivering flame suddenly illuminated the calm features of the statue’s face.

“I don’t know; I am learning to know,” said the stranger.

“So I ... I ... how can I get to know him?” asked Damian, becoming more and more fascinated by the magical power of the man’s words.

“Come,” said the man, as he set off into the gloom of the forest.

Before dawn they reached a house hidden deep within the mountains. The hinges made a squeaking noise, and they entered a dim room raked by the immaterial fingers of dawn.

Begrudgingly, the light was coaxing the dim contours of things from the darkness. Sketches, hung upon the walls, caught the boy’s attention. “I used to want to construct wings,” explained the old man. “I devoted many years to this nonsense.” The old man picked up an odd-looking frame, made of wood and waxed canvas covered with eagle feathers.

“Who is this?” asked Damian while studying the picture of a boy’s face that hung among the projects.

“My son,” taciturnly returned the old man.

“You have a son?”

“I don’t have ... he died.”

“He died?”

“He could not keep himself up in the air,” the old man’s voice grew troubled.

“He died when we were testing a pair of these wings,” added

the old man after a moment in order to put an end to the intense silence. "It was a senseless utopia," he continued in a voice more calm. "The human didn't receive the wings of a bird; the spirit is her or his wings. The expanding spirit breaks down the prison of this animal body and pervades the earth and the sky. The human spirit has no limits. The whole universe with all its suns, planets, and stars is to the spirit of a man only a grain of dust in the more spacious universe of consciousness. This is what you are looking for," he added while opening a door to the next room.

Suddenly a pungent aroma of dust, decay, and mould wafted by Damian. The room had no windows. In a narrow beam of light, falling from behind the open door, he beheld mysterious figures.

Pillars, pyramids, and shapeless mounds, resembling disintegrated tombs in an old cemetery, filled the space in the room. When Damian's eyes adjusted to the darkness, he began to recognize piles of books in these strange-shaped figures. It seemed that everything was there: beginning with clay tablets covered by cuneiform; through old papyrus codices; fragments of papyri; old thick files of yellowed paper in metal-tipped, calfskin cases; up to the books resembling those that he had in his own bookcase.

The old man, who had stepped out for a moment, brought in a burning lamp. "Stay here and read," he said. "In the depths of wisdom collected for thousands of years you will meet the one you are looking for."

A few days or several months may have passed in the room while Damian was sitting on the wooden floor and reading. The spirit awakening inside him grew stronger and spread its wings more markedly as time passed by.

Damian hovered over the sacred places in India, listening to the obscure murmuring of the Tibetan monks, to the wind in the prayer wheels and also to the magic formulas in the currents of the old Ganges while its powerless waves carried flower wreaths away into the rose-coloured dusk.

He took the road of ages to the pearls of mysteries, to the wells of knowledge springing in the ancient mountains of history. He floated over the Areopagus amidst the southern sun; he immersed himself in the dimness of the sepulchre in Thebes; he flew through the cavity in the dry body of a mummy.

He floated over a mulberry tree, and over a buzzing swarm of flies under which a woman was auguring from the thickening blood of

a dead mare. He was everyone, and he was everywhere. He sensed that the borders inside him had disappeared.

He felt that he had transcended his limitations. Now he was incarnated in the grass and stones; he was pulsing in the trunks of the forest trees; he was rising through the sky; he was stretching out into the vast space between the stars; he was filling the universe.

The bigger his spirit became, the more the things around him disappeared, and he remained alone. He himself was the pilgrim, the road, and the goal of the road. The child's part of his soul, which had not been touched by the dark transformation, began, from deep within him, to ask for help.

A little grain of boyish purity was sufficient for him to recognize the loneliness of the hell of cosmic exaltation. "I am lonely. I'm scared," called out his heart. "I'm scared," whispered his eyes. "I'm scared," he cried and ran out of the room.

In the last daylight he saw the old man sitting at the table, leaning over a book coloured pink by the dusk. He was a little relieved when, after so many days of solitude, he saw another human being again.

It seemed that the old man did not notice him; therefore, he approached the old man and put his hand on the man's shoulder. The shoulder, however, fell apart as he touched it; the old man tumbled down, and what remained was a mound of dust, swirling softly in the breeze blowing through an open window.

He ran through the dimness of the forest into the hands of the dark night. He tripped, stumbled, fell and got up; he did not know where to run, nor to where he was running. He ran until the dark crowns of trees above him pulled back the curtain of black foliage and a space full of stars gaped over his head. Once again, he was standing in front of the statue that had not yet revealed its mystery.

As puzzled as he was at that moment, he began to recognize in the space before him one of his hometown's squares. The streets that used to be busy all day and all night long were now unusually quiet.

There were no lights in any of the windows and the square, wrapped in dark, seemed vacant. Yet, after a while, on the sidewalks between the houses, he could distinguish people in gray suits. Like ghosts, noiseless and solitary, they were walking across the square in all directions. One of these weird men bumped into him.

Damian turned around, and in the faint light he saw the face. In

the space where he expected to see eyes, only empty sockets stared back at him.

All of them are blind, he thought to himself and started running across the square, dodging in and out among the wandering beings, not realizing when or how he stepped across the white frame of the photograph.

III.

As if waking up from a deep sleep, Damian slowly began to recognize things in the room. The voices from the evening street entered from outside. Long shades, drawn by the beams of a dim light, danced upon the walls of the room.

The shadows of lovers noiselessly danced below with those of peasants and a scrawny wise man. (Will the shadows never leave his child's soul?) A board was hanging on the wall in front of Damian.

Drawn, he stepped closer to look at the photograph. There was only a face. "Who are you?" whispered the boy and pressed his face so close that he could only see those astounding eyes.

It was as if he were looking into the deep well of memory, into the serene, cold waters of the past, or into the intangible springs of his origin. Those unfathomable eyes ... those eyes.

Within this sudden silence he heard a rustle—first, only a distant purring, then clearer tones of quiet music. The melodic beats of a drum united in a common rhythm with the drumming of his heart, and with the whisper of his breath. It was not a harp, nor a flute, nor the strings of a violin; it was everything together—and it was even more than inside and around him—it was simply everywhere.

"Who are you?" cried the boy's whole being, and the music replied, "Come ... Come ..." At the bottom of a well, he found himself on the bank of an unknown river. Walking on the warm sand between fragments of pearls and empty shells, he came to a smooth, almost motionless river. "Come ... Come ..." The music was carried upon the river. He walked along the river's bank, following the music's voice.

Suddenly he realized that the river, acting as a film screen, was reflecting pictures coming from an unknown height. First, he saw a picture of himself, sitting in the room across from the board with the photographs.

As he was walking upstream, the scenes were moving backwards

toward the past. He saw a garden where his father, years ago, taught him the names of the trees. He saw the funeral of his grandfather—the coffin, wreaths, candles, and places of mourning that he no longer remembered.

He saw it from close up, in all their details. He saw pain as well as a grandeur that he had never inwardly embraced. He saw himself at the bosom of his mother—he sensed that he was coming upon the spring of his origin.

He could not recognize the image of his birth very clearly, because the mighty river narrowed to a mere brook. “Come ... Come ...” The streamlet was running down the stairs of a sanctuary.

He mounted the stairs and knelt down to the place whence the river sprang. He felt an enormous energy of warmth and light. It seemed to him that inside the sanctuary time and space ceased to exist.

Everything—the streamlet, the brook and the mighty river, the colourful images of ancient times, the past and the future—were all united and inseparable in the eternal present. He drew water in his hand to moisten his thirsty lips.

Suddenly, he was awestruck. Streams of blood, in little rivulets, were flowing down into the spring. He raised his eyes and unexpectedly met another person’s eyes—standing alive and unbelievably there.

The stone statue only imperfectly expressed the captivating grandeur and the boundless power of love in his face. From the wounds in his punctured hands, ever-fresh streamlets were flowing, watering the well of life at his feet. “Lord, who are you?” Damian wasn’t sure whether his lips had spoken the question out loud, or if his mind had merely whispered it.

“I am the beginning and the end. I am the spring, the bed, and the estuary of your river. I am the search by which you were looking for me, and I am the eternal present of this encounter.”

Damian didn’t hear the words; it seemed that the voice sounded somewhere deep in his own soul. Was it actually a voice?

“I am the one who lasts while everything else comes into existence and ceases to exist in the whirling dance of restless movement.”

“Why did not anyone I met on the road know you?”

“These people, Damian,” Damian trembled when he heard his name, “they were you—different forms of you in the future. From the spot where you are now standing lead thousands of roads, and

at the end of each a different form of you is waiting. All of the people that you met were captured by the world that ceases; therefore, they didn't know anything about me. Human love, the compass of human spirit, or the entire richness of a man's life is only a sign, an engagement ring given for the wedding. He who has loved the shadow too much, will never be able to see the person."

"I don't want to become any one of them!" Damian blurted it out almost against his will.

"I know; otherwise you would have never gotten here. Come and drink from my spring." Damian drew water from the spring and drank. The blood had the fragrance and the taste of wine. He felt that his old haughtiness was disintegrating.

The proud spirit, inebriated by the wisdom from the old man's books, was dying, and in the decaying consciousness the serene soul of a child was born. It seemed to him that he was carried through the gates of the cemetery.

The crowd with the candles, like a hedgerow full of fireflies, followed him down the dark alley. His heart, however, was now filled with music—not distant any more, but his own, gushing from the inside of the unknown life.

Then he clearly heard the peal of the bells. When he tore his eyes from the photograph, it was already late evening. The bells in the church tower were still ringing. Everything was entirely the same—as it usually was at that time of the evening.

He knew, however, that everything was different. Over the flowing time, over the boundless space, over the inception and extinction, there is always the sanctuary, and always the same peaceful river stream, and the Eyes forever present.

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