

## **Dinko Telećan**

### ***The Deserter***

Along the same way, always. Through the village to the Small Pier, then the path leading to the cemetery, and then turn towards the hill next to the house that will never be completed. It's followed by a track bordered by drystone walls, briars and brambles, trodden red earth flecked with stones, ever narrower and increasingly overgrown.

The drystone wall becomes lower and lower. On the Island they call it mocira. Mociras long ago became little more than monuments to the pre-tourist age. White networks in the dense green underbrush, appearing and disappearing. Trembling squares within which everything is the same as outside them; they would long ago have vanished completely were it not for salty winds that relentlessly tame the vegetation.

Next come a climb, sudden turns, ever more goat droppings. The trail is interrupted at a small plateau in front of the former barracks, wrapped ever tighter by brambles and supported from behind by sturdy trees, the tallest trees on the island. Almost the only ones, except for the obligatory cypresses down there in the cemetery, a few tamarisks which, shrivelled as they are, make friends with the northeast wind, and a couple of stunted olive trees. The human hand up here hasn't touched anything in all of twenty years, when the war began and it smashed everything it could.

A skinny black goat often climbs onto the lid of a huge cistern here, looks around, once, twice, incessantly chewing, then jumps onto a stone at its base and disappears into the thicket. This dense thicket, rough as a cat's tongue, which I constantly feel on the skin of my forearms and lower legs. When I go around the barracks and head along the path leading further up the hill, I usually take my first look behind. Actually, my eyes can be closed, and I may ignore what season of the year it is, to know what can be seen down there in the harbour: if the smell is thick, heavy, bitter-sweet, and chirping is equally dense and loud, against the background of a distant murmur, then hundreds of white masts are visible below, then the sea is lined with tracks of ships, boats and yachts, then the movement of people, thoughts, speeches, desires is vaguely discerned. Summer. If the smell is harsher, if silence, occasionally ripped by the screams of seagulls, leans upon one's body, then the sea down there is darker, composed of some other, cold, liquid where only small white wooden boats that make a tuk-tuk-tuk sound dare to navigate, leaving and returning infinitely slowly. Winter.

Across the bay there is another, higher, hill. On its summit there is a small church, and, seen from afar, a regular zigzag path leads to it. I seldom go there.

I climb further, my tool box becoming doubly heavy. Two more big turns await me, a considerable slope, and here I am on the stone plateau. At the top. Between the stones under my feet, only rare particles of red soil. Low underbrush. And the wind blows always, always. When the north-easter blows it's unpleasant, but good. All the channels are opened up. A clarity arises in all the senses. I can see far away without straining. One just needs to hold on to something: to one's own firm steps, to the thought of a spring fruit, of returning to a heated room, of the long trawl line which waits for too long, of an Andalusian square in the summer noon, in the meridional moment when the whiteness burns everything and everything is burned to whiteness.

My two pillars are waiting for me, recently painted in red and white stripes. One of them stands on the first plateau, where I trod after the ascent. By the loose path that leads along the ridge I reach the smaller plateau, which houses the transmitter of the rival mobile operator. Two equal concrete pedestals, slightly different structures. Sometimes I like the first, the older one, more, sometimes the

other, erected later. Depending on that, and it seems that it has to do with whether the bora or sirocco is blowing – less often, of course, the landward breeze, tramuntana or levanat as well – I piss on one or the other, having turned myself downwind. There is also the south-wester called libeccio, which makes me urinate in the northeast direction, and then the droplets sputter into the distance, sometimes even further than the concrete, and spray a whole barberry bush. In these circumstances, I contemplate a small island which is a copy of the Island, thus also being a butterfly or an opened shell. Only that this smaller island has been abandoned of late, and in its southern bay there is only a small ramshackle stone castle. The opposite cove is sandy, and from this summit of mine one can clearly see the sand and the bright blue sea, which almost reaches the abandoned, and yet miraculously preserved, houses and cisterns of the former village. The inhabitants left this place because the bay is too shallow, so larger ships cannot put ashore to bring the benefits of progress. Some people are still alive and now most live on the Island.

When the landward breeze blows, I turn myself to the Citie, whose lights can be seen on clear nights, just as, on the opposite side, in the days cleared up by the bora, Italy is visible. When the north-easter plays its whistling tune, I turn southwest and return to the places from which I returned here: to Andalusia, then beyond Gibraltar. I close my eyes, take a running start, I grow wings, I grow feathers, my nostrils are filled with Morocco, mint tea on the palate, the screams of dark children and the coloratura of muezzins in my ears. The Citie, however, now only means Errands – I say “I’m going on Errands”, I see it through, buy what is needed and return the same day, or the following one at the latest. The Citie means the past, which means it does not exist. Or it is there as a long-abandoned, ravelled bird's nest hung on a wall as a decoration or keepsake.

When pissing down the wind is done, I set about examining the posts, first the older and then the younger one, as is due. I check the connections and cables, lubricate as necessary, clean the salty spots. Only very seldom some more serious failure occurs, and when it does it's mainly on the newer transmitter. Then the whole forenoon has to be spent on the repair, but at least I know that I didn't drag all the tools up for nothing. Just as I hadn't attended that absurd vocational school in vain. I've grown so close to my columns that I've also given them names: Vjeko is the older one, and the younger is called Tiko.

It was a windfall, this job of mine, there is no dispute about it. And I got it immediately upon the Return. It was Vjeko's company which first invited applications. Maintenance of a transmitter, I was qualified for that, and there were no other candidates on the Island. The salary was small, but one could survive with it here. Not even a year passed before applications for a maintainer-custodian were invited by Tiko's company as well. I was the logical choice. In addition to the qualifications, I already had almost a year of experience. Tiko's dad even offered a little more money than Vjeko's, so I had quite a bundle guaranteed on the monthly basis now. In Toni's store I don't always have to choose the cheaper pasta, and I can go to the Citie when I feel like it. Even if I don't feel like it often.

So I sold myself. Once again.

And, of course, I got a mobile phone from each of the companies. First zero phones, then two of them. A small Vjeko and a small Tiko. I fell for it, used them, and they used me; I was calling and I was responding, I babbled and chatted and twaddled, sent SMSs and MMSs, carried them with me, became upset when I didn't have them on me. It fell apart on the day when I found myself holding one of them in my left hand and the other at my right ear, saying to the right-hand one that I was just being called by the left-hand one, so I had to put the former, the right-hand one, on hold for a moment, just to call him again in a minute. I went to the Small Bay, still with one piece of black plastic in my left hand and

the other in my right hand, and tossed both of them theatrically into the sea. I was very proud of it. What great courage and liberation! You bet. Trouble arose the same afternoon, when Vjeko's company called me in vain to check something relating to the maintenance of the transmitter. Later I imagined how the mobile phone rang on the seabed, lying amongst the algae, and how fish gathered around it, all amazed, listening with their mouths pursed and eyes goggling as the digital version of the theme from the Turkish March repeated indefinitely.

My latest years have thus been financially secure, leaving the space and time for the smoke left from all those booms and bangs in the previous couple of years to subside or disperse, speck by speck, those endlessly burning years which might present novelistic material for someone, whereas to me, now, from this distance, they look like time spent in a semiconscious state, a state that only one single face once cleared up, or so at least it seems to me. One face and perhaps one man's words that I, only just now I know it, once listened to with half an ear. I'm encamped in a safe haven, until further notice. The basic needs are met, if by the basic you understand that which is down, not up.

Once it seemed there were much more of these bottom needs and necessities. I did not realize how little is necessary. No, I am not an ascetic. It is not my goal to reach the "free minimum that leads to the maximum freedom", the one written about by Miro or some other rapporteur from the East, I do not remember any more, although now from the outside everything about me looks bleak and dry compared to the brim-full and sparkling glass of life from which I, whenever there was an opportunity, eagerly drank and even swore oaths to. So I like to roll a good tobacco, not too flavoured, strike a match whose flame I blow away, and which I then put in a tin box with an ambiguous A carved on the lid, comparing the fumes to clouds. I like to wash down the fish I catch with a good, dense red wine. Just as I like the fasts that accompany my silences: the days when, without doing anything, I do more than the creator of a hundred worlds. With Blackcoat I can sometimes get tipsy, and then we manage to soften dogmas beautifully. Both mine and his. With Kate it can also be nice, although this is not it, as we both know. I like to remember the words and stories of the man from the city of Fez, whose name means friend and who, in fact, sent me back here, to gather what is scattered and see what I can do, what one can do, what we can do.