

DANILO KIS

*The Man Who Came
from Far Away*

Translated from
Serbo-Croatian by
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*For three
days and
three nights
soldiers
passed by
our house.*

You can imagine how many soldiers that makes when they pass by your house for three days and three nights solid! They came on foot and in carts, on horseback and in lorries. For three days and three nights. And the whole time, I stood in the shelter of the lilac bush. The last soldier passed by on the afternoon of the third day. He straggled way behind everybody else. His head was bandaged and he carried a parrot on his shoulder. It was only after he had passed that I stepped out from behind the lilacs and onto the street. There was no way you could tell that soldiers had been passing through the village for three whole days. Except, perhaps, by the silence.

I was already rather sorry that there were no more soldiers to pass through the village. When soldiers pass by your house for three days and three nights you begin to get used to them.

Afterwards everything looks so deserted. Nobody riding a horse, nobody playing the accordion.

Then I saw a cart appear in a cloud of dust at the end of the village and I thought it was the army again. But it was just a lonely, funny-looking little cart. It was hitched to two jennies (actually mules, as it later turned out). Their colour had changed so much from the dust that they looked more like two mice than jennies or mules. Two mice who had come out of a sack of flour.

Since there was no one in the village standing in the street at that hour and eyeing every passerby, it was me the man spoke to. He said something to me in a foreign language, but I didn't understand him very well. I only knew that when a man and a woman come from far away in such a small cart, they are bound to want water. So I said:

"You must have come from far away?"

I knew that he would understand me. My father had once explained to me that two men who speak different languages can still somehow understand one another if they are men of good will and good brains. All you have to do in such situations is to speak slowly and intelligently, and you mustn't, of course, ask difficult questions. So, very slowly and very simply I asked if they had come from far way. And I waved my hand vaguely in the direction they had come from. I wanted to punctuate the meaning of my words.

"Young fellow," said the man as he stepped down from the cart, "it's enough for you to know that we come from far away and that we are in a hurry. So tell us where we can get water for these mules to drink."

"And I thought they were jennies," I said. "Although they look more like mice. As for water, you can come to our yard."

The man then grabbed the mare by the ear and led it into our courtyard. I ran into the house and told my mother that a man who had come from far away and who spoke so that you could understand him quite nicely, even though he was a foreigner, was stopping by. Then I took the bucket and brought water from the well on the corner. Since our relatives had not returned from prison camp, I had the run of the yard and the barn. So I told the man that he could unhitch the mules.

While he was washing his face (his wife remained sitting in the cart), I asked him whether he hadn't, perhaps, met my father

somewhere. Because when a man comes from far away, he is bound to meet lots of people along the way. I told him that my father was tall, had a slight stoop, wore a black hard-brimmed hat and wire-rimmed glasses and carried a pointed walking stick. "They took him away two or three years ago," I said, "and we haven't had any news of him since."

The man then told me that he had indeed met lots of people on the way, because when a person comes from far away he meets many people. "And among them," he said, "were some with black hats and walking sticks, and your father was no doubt one of them."

"He had a rather funny walk," I said, "because he had flat feet." And then I asked him whether some of those people he had met with a black hat and stick hadn't had a funny walk too.

"Perhaps some of the people I met," said the man, "were indeed flatfooted. When a man travels for months on end he is bound to meet someone with a funny walk."

"When he left home," I said, "he was wearing a long coat and dark trousers with light stripes. He had a part in the middle of his hair and a high collar band. Did you by any chance meet somebody like that?"

"Oh," smiled the man – probably thinking that I was a big liar or prankster – "I actually did meet a man like that. He was wearing a black hard-brimmed hat, wire-rimmed glasses, had a stick and all the rest. He had a funny walk and wore a long black coat and trousers with light stripes. And he had a high collar band. That," he said, "was exactly four years ago in Bucharest. The man, young fellow, was the Japanese Minister of Heavy Industry!"