

čedo prica

a lesson for the professor

HE CAME out of the small, heated room. All he could remember was that small drivers' altar with the symbols of cog-wheels and steering-wheels. A faint smell of oil and petrol remained in his nostrils as the holy sign of the world into which they had sent him. He wanted to go back to that little altar and tell them: that he didn't want to, that he had changed his mind. For what did Joza the driver know what went on inside him and about him, and how this aroma of petrol and oil had penetrated his fine nostrils and clung to his smoothly shaven face.

— You're mine, then« — he heard a voice at the very door.

— »Yes... And you are?«

— »Joza« — said the man in a grease-stained, worn-out leather coat.

To the professor, Joza's face appeared to have the same grease-stained and petrol-eroded leathery quality. — »Everything'll be O. K.«

— »You said, everything?«

— »Slowly, but immediately.«

— »How, immediately?«

— »Now. We'll get into the car, and be off.«

— »I wouldn't mind having some theory first, you know, first...«

— »Theory. But what's the good of it?«

He followed Joza in his dirty old leather coat, silently and meekly, Joza who walked ahead like a leader, like an initiate with an aimless smile which came to his face from habit or boredom since it happened five times a day, every day that he took someone along this path, to his car, opened the door and began his lesson. Joza smiled from habit, knowing that he, the professor, followed him like all those others, slightly afraid, and that it was up to him how long that fear would last. And thus, five times a day, he would walk out into the parking circle, walk out first with a smile feeling that he held their fear in his steady driver's hands and that no one in the world could have found him a better profession. The professor was the third in order. Before him came Doctor Hertz, and the University lecturer Dr. Hag. They had all of them walked in Godly fear behind his worn-out, stained coat which out in the open emitted an even stronger smell of the crude oil wells.

— »Get in« — said Joza, moving slowly on in his greasy shoes, with faintly echoing foot-steps, around the car, without any hurry, as if all were to happen by itself and in accordance with his ideas. He opened the door lowering his head, and the taut skin of his coat with its stained bottom seemed to explode, which gave him great delight. The relief was virtually visible. He bent his back and put his left foot into the car. He sat down quickly and thought it almost funny that unusual little explosion had not reached the ears and hearing of his pupil. His curious power over such people and the even less clear meaning of human relationships, struck him as funny. But Joza quickly dismissed these brief vagaries of his consciousness, and taking out a box of cigarettes asked:

— »Do you smoke?« — he gave the professor a friendly look knowing that he enjoyed his fullest respect.

— »Yes, I do... But, oh no, no, thank you...« — muttered the professor.

— »Have a fag, man. It doesn't matter« — said Joza striking a note of gaiety and cordiality. — »You certainly don't ever drink?«

1 cigarette - British

— »Well, yes... Oh, no, thank you, I don't smoke. And don't drink, of course.«

— »Why not?« — said Joza — »It isn't good. It's nothing, really.« — He took a cigarette and lit it.

— »Truly, I don't smoke« — repeated the professor tapping his fingers on the circle of the steering wheel. His fingers jumped as if they were touching an electric circuit. Each rebound caused his eyebrows to raise, and everything seemed to move and change as if he were suffering from the unfortunate desire to tap.

— »You're impatient? We'll be off then, now.« — said Joza.

— »You needn't hurry. As long as you wish...« — The professor did not complete the sentence, suddenly putting his fingers under the flap of his dark-grey coat. He blushed as if discovered in a prohibited and dangerous game.

— »Take it freely with both your hands.« — Joza pretended not to notice the professor's clumsiness and his long, pale cheeks, napped with little reddish islands spreading from forehead to jowls. He was used to it and knew these signs usually appeared on such faces. He sucked in the cigarette smoke with great relish, never as pleased as today to encourage and teach, thinking that life was truly inexplicable and God's ways truly too mysterious.

— »Here, now. Hands at ease and relaxed. Everything can be learned. You too are a teacher?«

— »Yes, I am« — the professor admitted unhesitatingly.

— »Well then, you too say that everything can be learned. I remember this saying from my school days.«

— »I do, indeed.« — He gave a little cough, touched his tie aimlessly, and again drummed his finger on the steering wheel.

— »Well then, we said easily and relaxedly. So. And now put your foot on the clutch, »the clutch pedal«, as it is known internationally... Further left, quite to the left, dear Sir. And what do you tell, I wanted to say, talk to your students about? What?« — Joza was only repeating his way of teaching, with this sudden question at the end in order to avoid using an oath in front of the professor. It was an oath well known to his former pupils, which frequently sounded passionately from under his lighted cigarette. This oath, like a synonym for Joza's name and Joza's nature, became part of an entire little generation of drivers, who have a long time past been driving over the streets of our city and beyond. But Joza knew, though he could not explain how, that professor did not like oaths, and that they were slightly bashful and limited human beings without the necessary breadth and understanding for frank utterances. This is why, in the beginning he would replace his oath with something that he thought was a more suitable and profounder question for the professors.

— »Ethics... I mean, morals, or rather, behaviour...« — stammered the professor feeling that all he said would remain vague. And he only wanted to be a pupil, the pupil of Joza the driver, and nothing more.

— »I know it. Anyone who wishes to take his test with us should first really pass his exam with you. You'll see their behaviour. They are bastards my dear Sir, behaving like blind fools... Here now, so. Now take the gear lever and shift it out... Slowly Professor, slowly. We'll do it together. From underneath, there. Can you feel it, now pull

it back. Do you feel we're in neutral, neutral gear as they call it internationally.

— »I can« — said the professor with greater confidence.

— »In that case we might as well start. When it's in the neutral, in the neutral gear as it is officially called, with your foot on the clutch, or transmission pedal, or clutch pedal as its known internationally, you see, dear Sir, how everything gets mixed up. But it can, it can be learnt... Is it all so complicated with you too?«

— »It is, sometimes, rather« — the professor was trying to repeat what they had done and answering to Joza he was really whispering to himself: »When in the neutral...« — »Now, we're supposed to start the engine, aren't we?«

— »Yes, of course. Press the clutch, and then press the accelerator on the right... Right, right, quite to the right, my dear Sir... Hell, complicated with you too, did you say?« — Part of the oath aimed at the pupil was saved by the question. Joza stretched against the back of his seat more nonchalantly, drew deeply from the almost burnt out cigarette throwing the butt out of the window. He was happy that his questions were so successful again... — Now then, the way to start is to shift into the first gear, then slowly release the clutch, the clutch pedal, as they say, give a look into the mirror to see whether anyone's on our tail, start slowly, dear Sir, then put out the trafficator or blinker as it is also called. Then, start, and again the accelerator, release, shift into the second gear, a look into the mirror, and so until the cross-roads. There we would stop again, and again on the principle of first, second, third, fourth... But, we'll repeat that several times, also in practice, until... How dirty it is, dammit. If we started now someone could sit on our tail, without us noticing. It's all so bloody complicated isn't it dear Sir?«

Joza took out a cloth and wiped the mirror, watching with his greyish eyes the impression he had left on the professor. He believed that he had to, and could leave some impression since it was important to win that first battle so that no one, not even the professor with his long, pale face and bony, hairy fingers, should have any superficial notions about the magnitude of the task that a man, sitting in this narrow seat and imbued with the smell of petrol and cigarettes, should do in order to sail among hundreds of other cars, trams, thousands of pedestrians; sail like a somebody, like the modern man who despises all those mediaeval and shabby habits, so terribly slow and dangerous. — »And that man could, so to speak, enter his new, modern state, dear Sir, he has to overcome all these complexities. But you'll manage it, because you know what it means to overcome. Only slowly, slowly, Sir, we'll do it once more, in practice what I've just said...« — Joza calmly lit another cigarette, and even more calmly put his large fist on professor's elongated, thin fingers, looking into his pale, saintly face and his tall damp forehead showing an occasional drop of sweat. Joza knew well enough that the battle was won and that the true lesson could start.

The professor felt the pressure of Joza's hand and the forward movement of the steel-cold ball of the gear-lever then, backwards, to the right, then forwards to the right, then downwards. His left foot moved stiffly with a fear that was its own and very different from the fear that was in himself, it moved stiffly and came back wearily. Joza's

words crackled between him and the windscreen smelling of genuine garlic. He tried to master all those opposite yet conciding actions, tried to follow Joza's words, his frightened leg and tired hand, connecting them and letting them be guided by Joza's garlic-smelling talk. The movements and the smells were hitting from the inside and from the side, and he heard an occasional squeaky noise. Fortunately, a new drop of sweat would slide down the surface of his cheek and he would again be able coordinate and notice that for a moment, Joza had stopped showering words into his face. Like sitting in a small, mysterious hollow where one was expected to do everything precisely and at the same time, in order to hear the first sound and feel the first sliding movement, to have the feeling of getting out of that deep little hollow, and finally with the sound and fresh air to move on. He was already supposed to move and sail along more quickly than had hitherto been the case in his life; especially after every discussion in the company of his colleagues who had already learnt to speed through the open spaces of this small world which he considered solely as a symbol, as the expression of some pure ideas and notions, as a conflict of moral and anti-moral forces: among them he had been sailing like a milestone, a spiritual signpost for a whole decade. Meeting Joza's sly eyes, who was again warning him that he had not managed to synchronize the pressure of his foot and the movement of his hand, he became frightened within himself of the possibility of clashing with the entire epoch of the new, technologically minded world, with that epoch which he theoretically opposed with his classical view of the world, frequently talking to a full audience that technological civilization demeans intellectual criteria and does not favour moral responsibility, that it drags out life into the space of pure suicide...

— »That would be a bad move, my dear man. You should know that the clutch pedal as they call it, should be pressed down while shifting the gears« — said Joza with a slightly raised voice.

— »Yes, you're right.« — From today and until he had finished this unusual test, which he had never considered worthy of himself, he wished to eliminate all misunderstandings between himself and Joza, he wished to be a little Joza himself, to be Joza's completely and do all Joza had planned or desired, to embrace him, even kiss him and say: »Joza, I'll do all you want me to. I must, Joza, I must. She's already asked me twenty times and I have promised twenty times, and didn't dare to tell her that I thought it had nothing to do with true human relationship... that, on the contrary, it would ruin them. But her, Joza...«

— »You've got to calm down, my dear Sir, and think only about what you should do next. There are so many stories about carelessness I've known, I'd better not even begin to tell you... A little, just a little, and you'll be O. K., Sir...«

— »Sorry, I'll do it all over again.«

He rubbed his slightly damp forehead, not wanting to think of all those pros and cons; he wanted for a moment to dismiss his usual ways which he used to solve the misunderstandings between himself and her, between the world as a becoming and the world which he interpreted in terms of a history and a moral entity. He rubbed his damp forehead, smelled the new oil and petrol odour of his palms, and gazed at his own bent legs which were thrust into the semi-darkness of

foot pedals. He caught the first sounds of the engine which he had already started, wishing from now on to become what she had wanted him to be: this was the time and Joza was paid to perform it.

— »It's better now. Everything can be done if only one wants to, my dear Sir, there is nothing one can't learn if there is a will. Let's start.«

— »Shall we start?« — he asked gravely.

— »We might as well. The sooner the better.«

— »Perhaps we could a little longer...« — he tried pleading even more gravely.

— »We'll do it under way. We'll do it all, many times.«

— »I thought...« — he muttered.

— »Why should you think. I am here to think. Hell, these windows do get steamed up.« — Joza took the cloth again and stretching as far as the rear seat wiped the windows. — »Now we can see in the mirror what's behind us.«

— »Indeed, one can see nicely« — he smiled for the first time.

— »Of course. It's been made that way To see everything. Let's be off.«

— »Where to?« — asked the professor more seriously.

— »Wherever you want. There are three directions: straight ahead, but this means going where the traffic jams are; to the left is a wood and beautiful trees; to the right the road is bendy but otherwise smooth and blue.«

— »Did you mean to the right, then?« — asked the professor wishing to while away the time while they were still in one spot, to examine all the details so that the choice would occur by itself, or could be discovered in Joza's eyes. But Joza's eyes were indifferent and sleepy, and the few words he had used to describe the road and the landscape appeared to be a trap: Joza's sense of beauty was to be avoided by all means.

— »To the right? Let's go then« — said Joza without revealing anything that would indicate to the professor a good or bad choice.

— »I thought that you...«

— »What's there to think about, my dear Sir. Think on what I tell you, and the road, God knows, every road is interesting, every one leads somewhere.«

This sentence, too, Joza had used a number of times as many had wished that he should choose the direction and the road. He always impressed the »professors and thinkers«, as he called them in his simple fashion, and he always watched them seemingly indifferently and lazily, but in fact tried with his cunning eyes to discover the impression he had made on them. This time, too, he gave a short and knowing look confident that the victim was finished and the battle finally won, and that henceforward his authority only would mount. He clicked his tongue and gave a snort through his wide and hairy nostrils, looking somewhere ahead through the windscreen. He was calmly expecting that the professor's first steps, his walk through an old and a new world, would start in all the stuttering awkwardness in which situation his knowledge and his experience only would be of help. A short, growling shudder was felt and two little jumps, and then nothing, almost nothing. He knew that this was always the way it began, but equally he would always tell his pupils that this was how they should not begin. He

remained sitting calmly as if nothing had happened, as if he were interested in something outside that quivering little noise and the jumps.

— »I didn't expect it from you« — said Joza calmly.

— »Sorry, I don't know why I did it.« — The professor blushed and again removed the perspiration and a few drops of sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief.

— »One should know. I've explained it all and said, and you have repeated it. You're a mature, grown-up man. Damn this mirror it's steamed up again.«

The professor barely heard him and understood even less. What remained in his ears was the oath and the slow little movement. He didn't even look at Joza's hand, but only saw his own face, long, impotent and vague as never before in his life. »It's because of her, her, shall I tell him, she who said that every trollop in this town has her own car, and that she, the wife of a senior University lecturer, oh, my God... Shall I tell him that in my whole life couldn't bear to have even an ordinary wooden wheel... That I'd kiss him if necessary.«

— »Now, you'll do it again. As we said you'll slowly release the clutch, the clutch pedal in other words, release it slowly and accelerate; and then immediately change gears in the same way: one, two, three, my dear Sir...«

He took his eyes off the mirror, thus erasing his miserable image, put his nose into his palm and sniffed the smell of petrol and of something like garlic, probably from Joza's fingers; he was rather encouraged by these strong, coarse impressions, and, hunched in his seat, he forgot his elongated height of a lecturer behind the lectern, forgot the smell of sweat from his face and his long hairy fingers which the eyes of his students watched with awe while he signed their attendance records under the heading »ethics« — as if he had never been anything else but a confused beginner shut into this tin box with Joza's white-hot flesh on his right side. He whispered: first, second, third, gazing in front and feeling that his ears themselves moved with the sound; he felt that in fact he was involuntarily moving already in the direction of the tree-lined alley. He let himself go in that direction, firmly embracing the steering-wheel as if he wished to insure himself from a fall, from a loss of balance, resisting the sudden departure. He didn't dare to look either to the left or to the right, but tried to follow Joza's words telling him to do »the same, press left, shift into the second, accelerate again«. It was probably correct what he did when something screeched, and when hearing the word »accelerate« his right foot pressed downwards as if released from a cramp, and the car suddenly forward past the trees.

— »Let it go, professor, again left, push it up by the joint, up, up, dammit, man, do you have hoofs or something, are you like a... hell, men are like elephants; don't you see how the alley is nicely blue and the trees lovely...«

Perspiration and blushes covered both his cheeks, and something sad and lonely sounded inside him while he was passing ever closer, as it appeared to him, to the trees, and his fingers tightly gripped the rim of the steering-wheel. He abandoned himself to shame and stiffness, believing that it would all pass away and that he would again find himself upright and clean, without a black spot, with his brief-case

and Jodl's »Ethics«. All this should be endured come what may, and the calm and upright walk along the alley of the University would again come: he would be what he had been and as if he had never visited the world into which they had simply pushed him: »You shall drive, my darling, if you put your mind to it, and you won't talk to me about things in this fashion.«

— »Put your brakes on, Lordalmighty, have you got hoofs, man.«

— »I will...« — he shouted.

— »You shout but don't brake.

— »I do.«

— »You're pressing down the accelerator. Take your foot off it, ^{off}bleeding hell, why didn't I take another car with double steering controls... Don't you see how lovely these trees are and what a pleasure it is when one knows to handle the accelerator.«

They came to a stop right by the brownish edge of the road, close by an elm tree behind which stood rows upon rows of trees: a real wood. Both gazed at it, the professor a little out of breath and perspiring, and Joza indifferent and with a twisted smile which he was in the process of filling with a new cigarette pretending that his existence, and this coolness were the expression of the courage and wisdom of a man standing there on the brink of disaster. The University lecturer only perspired and glared across this brink, not believing that he was so close to the ridiculous danger as to be photographed for the column »Traffic accidents« in the evening paper which he followed with contempt during breaks in his lectures and after the argument with her at home about why and wherefore to accept the idea of an unpredictable civilisation. »A suicidal and inane world, my dear...« echoed somewhere deep down in the remainder of his consciousness reflecting all that was happening to him. »Don't be ridiculous, darling, you're not the lowliest person in this town. You're known and we can't walk about like ordinary people with dust on our shoes, or in galoshes when it rains.« This was the echo of her voice, a voice which he adored especially at the time when it answered him in clear tones during their pure and transparent walks along this very alley by the wood. »A horrid world, incomplete world, corrupt world can think in this way«, he heard his voice again. »No, my dear, you're mistaken. You can't be so defiant, one's got to get where one does by a means that does it well, and this isn't your feet, or theories...« »But, look. Everyday the same: heads smashed, arms, bones mingled with metal, hair in the branches, bodies in puddles on the road, eyes and shattered glass. Where do we get in this way, where, I'm asking you?« He was listening to himself with increasing attention, gazing into so many motifs of the slaughter on the roads, gazing at the thick tree, the heavy shadows of the wood which seemed to expect him to enact a similar scene. »Let's sit down on a bench like savages in their cave and dream of meals or raw meat and wild mushrooms. Let's not go out anywhere though we could die from gas poisoning even here, could be struck by electricity, could fall from the balcony; we could, indeed, my dear, be killed if the chandelier falls on our heads... My God, what proofs, what assumptions!« »That's something else, that's an accident, it's not us, but chance. But when we get into that noisy bug, we do it consciously to some extent, do it as if we wanted to end up as a gory scene, and a news item in the papers. Can't you see?« »I can't, I don't understand

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anything that is cowardice and metaphysics, anything that figures as a bare assumption, I don't... Why don't you admit that you're incapable and frightened of what is for everybody else life, and life's little plaything.»

»Incapable?... Life's little plaything?«, finally he heard it quite distinctly, as distinctly as it had echoed in him earlier during his lectures, conferences, tram rides, or when listening to his own footsteps in their little backyard.

— »You should be aware of what all those who drive well know, and this wouldn't happen to you.« — Joza uttered these words after a pause, with their uneasy rest on the very brink of uncertainty. — »Every mistake is a little carelessness, and every carelessness can be your last mistake my dear Sir. If you wish to know how things are done, which is possible, this mustn't happen again; one should transfer all one's mental powers into one's legs, dammit. Don't you see how beautiful this alley is and how lovely this tree, but on condition that we don't go at it, but pass it by...« — Joza smiled, more to himself, pleased with his own calmness and his ability to pass form instruction to swearing, and because his words certainly sounded well even for professor's ear.

— »So sorry, I've been a bit rash« — muttered the professor.

— »You've hesitated, and I told you: it's no good hesitating. Calmly like everything one does. Calmly in one direction, tenderly, my dear Sir, and no hesitation. Try it, try it again.«

— »Do you think so...«

— »There's nothing to think about, dear Sir. Too much thinking and one may die, but when you try and act calmly you stay alive. Let's start, Sir. Move backwards, in the reverse, as they say, shift it completely to the left. Let's go, let's go...«

The edges of the alley stood pink in front of him, autumnal. The tree bloomed in its old age, its bark carved in places. Undoubtedly it also smelled but he could only see the edges. He could not feel its perfume but only the smell of burning petrol vapours from beneath. It drizzled lightly. He thought like a true romantic, that it would be good to open the door, escape and walk through this wood. Instead he only pressed the accelerator while this noisy bug hummed and trembled. In its little bowels a small noisy being was being born, perhaps more than one of such beings, with small round heads and arms: with taut forms which were also cold and wet. Everything, minute and twisted seemed to move and ring inside this steel and tin skeleton which had come alive. It was he, he who suddenly wanted to save himself in the wood, behind the cover of scented brown barks; who was being born like his own monster, hunched in this ridiculous straddling position, so small and wet, that it seemed to give rise to a baby-like cry between his half-open, frightened lips. He almost voiced his protest against such a self.

— »Shall we start, Professor. The tree is lovely, but there'll be a lot more and lovelier ones along the way...«

His left foot, weary as it was, slowly gave way in terror, but his right resisted the fear and stiffness, taking upon itself the whole weight of the long, hunched body. The edge of the wood leapt towards the branches and disappeared in the glass. His courage and desire to stand on his own feet, the resistance to his apparent self turned into a mighty

sound which echoed back, carrying with it the blurred picture of the wood and the view opening out beyond the tree-tops.

— »Cor blimey, you do have hoofs...« — Joza's hands suddenly mingled with his own, seeking for the hand-brake. He was watching a small cloud, bathing, so he felt, in the sweat of his own fever, listening to Joza's words and trying to see the sun. He needed it like the wood, but there was nothing except that cloud. He was beginning to feel happy because all had thus ended without tension, and because he was resting in the welter of voice and sounds coming from the side. He pressed his head against the windscreen and the cloud disappeared, and the peace that entered the space of his monstrous birth cleared the sky and freed him from fear. Fresh air poured into the thirsty mouth. He was already picking himself up outside, himself again, not listening to anything or anybody, just getting up and licking something warm under his nose. He made a step. »I can walk, can't I?« was the first word bursting out with the excitement that he should hear his own words after such a long time of uncertainty, and somebody else's rough reproaches. He started to run. He saw Joza's body squeezing itself out of the side, and he started to run ever faster along the soft woody space breathing in the smell of autumnal decay and licking the warmth underneath his nose. »I'm running, am I?« he cried to himself, and to make quite sure he stopped, and then again started to run up a small clearing surrounded by the wood. A voice filled with oaths and reproaches reached him again. They were calling him and scolding like a child; a horrible word reached him too. To preserve his isolation and freedom he began to run even faster. »I'm flying, am I?« he listened to himself lying on the rotting earth to remember why and when it had all begun...

— »Professor, come back. That was nothing, man...«

»I'm walking, truly walking«. He got up afraid that they might take him back, and happy to be able to escape behind the woody hill on his own feet, and pleased that never again he would have to go through this again, breathless and covered in muck. »At least they'll believe me that this is not... But I couldn't care less anyway... One can draw the necessary conclusions...« He found himself at the corner of the park and the long avenue, and entering a small cafe said in a strange, frightened voice.

— »A brandy, please, after all this...«

Translated by Ivo Curćin