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Works: *Poems*, 1939; *The Rooke-
ry*, a novel, 1949; *Cocoons*, a novel,
1959; *The Shadows*, a novel, 1967.



IVANKA VUJČIĆ-LASZOWSKI

In Someone Else's Slippers

FROM THE NOVEL »COCOONS«

MR. MALEC STOPPED with the firm intention of continuing his journey straight away. His friend's bald head, glistening in the light of a street lamp, disappeared from above the orange-coloured cardboard in the shop window and reappeared at the window of the flat, the shopkeeper was as tense as a mouse in danger which keeps peeping out of first one hole then another.

»Well what is it?« asked Mr. Malec inquisitively, surprised at his expression, which looked just as questioningly back at him, and still more surprised at his words:

»Haven't you read today's paper?«

»No,« admitted Mr. Malec and a shudder of alarm ran down his spine. He stared intently and anxiously at his friend.

»Have you got a pass?« he heard the ominous question, realizing that he had actually been expecting it with a sinking heart.

»No, I haven't...« he whispered without shifting his already pleading gaze from the corpulent shopkeeper's face, shining at him with the curiosity of a man who felt absolutely secure. All that mysterious disappearing and reappearing, that concerned contracting of the flesh on the brow above the inquisitive eyes was for his sake alone and contained no promises, sympathetic only at that distance.

»There's unrestricted movement today only until seven o'clock...« called the shopkeeper softly with something like reproach in his voice, legitimate in a case of such negligence, which would require action, highly dangerous in times like these. »How could you have not known?«

Breathing out his peace of mind helplessly as a dying man breathes out his soul, Mr. Malec stood in the power of the dark, deserted street as under enemy fire. Not a soul anywhere, the evening sky above, filling unconcernedly with stars. The calm face of his friend, who felt he had done his duty, gazed down at him from the window. He did not look at him anymore, he did not dare, he slipped into the shopkeeper's garden, bemused, as though carried by someone else's unusually agile legs.

In the dark shop, where he had come of his own accord, without being invited, Mr. Malec discovered that a German general had been ambushed and killed at dawn the night before. Where and how he had been killed, and by whom were all questions which could assist a man in expressing at least a shred of formal compassion, Mr. Malec was not concerned with such things. He sank without a word onto a rickety chair. The expression of weariness on his face stood out of the darkness in piteous contrast to his friend's face which was resting peacefully, with the calm befitting the master of the house, free from emotion and passion, in the foully tepid stagnant air of his dirty lair. Behind this innocuous mask he was able untroubled to mull over everything from important political events to limited services like this which did not commit him to anything. He poured some of the home-brewed gin he always had handy into two small green glasses and in an expressionless voice began to expound monotonous sentences about how no-one could step outside his house nowadays without reading the papers. »All these new decrees...« he ended, his voice sinking into indifferent silence.

»This brute...« thought Mr. Malec despairingly, »is behaving as coolly as if he had never set eyes on me before.« He was even more taken aback by what came next.

»And you can scarcely get a proper night's sleep any more...« the shopkeeper came to life again, as though he had just woken up. »I sleep with one eye open and my wife sits up in bed, waiting... There'll be another raid tonight, it makes such a racket in the house, you can't get to sleep till morning, and then you have to get up.«

Mr. Malec reached for the gin. He poured himself another glass and drained it, prepared to drink a third. All his impotence and anxiety had sunk to his legs, the liquor sent a pleasantly warm current through his veins and down to his feet. »What a life...« he almost sobbed.

»Wartime...« rejoined the shopkeeper. »There's no point in philosophising.«

»To Hell with it...« Mr. Malec burst out, »it can be any damn time it chooses, but how am I going to get home, you tell me that. I can't go outside, I'm not crazy and I see I can't stay here...«

»What...!« cried the shopkeeper, »and get us both arrested? I don't see the use of that...« and he stood up and shuffled lazily around the counter. He unrolled an old blanket and hitched it to a hook above the window, covering his look-out with it at the same time. Enveloped suddenly in dense darkness as in boundless ocean, Mr. Malec leapt nervously to his feet.

»What are you doing?«

»I've got to put up the black-out,« replied the tranquil voice. He pressed the switch on the wall and feeble dingy light smouldered from a bulb wrapped in a torn sock on the low ceiling. And this meagre sprinkling of light made Mr. Malec think of his ultramarine bulb, of that little blue sun which existed somewhere in this desert like a lighthouse in the impenetrable heart of a storm.

»Well, have you thought of something?« coaxed the shopkeeper hospitably pouring out more gin. »Shall we telephone for a taxi?«

This time Mr. Malec said nothing. »You 'phone if you like,« he thought sullenly, »I can't think who would do a journey like that in these times.«

»Or shall I 'phone your friend Toni? Perhaps he could send his son-in-law's official car?«

»I thought of that,« said Mr. Malec, »but I don't know Toni's number. I've got it written down at home, it's secret number, it's not in the 'phone book and they won't know it at the exchange...«

»Well, my friend,« said the shopkeeper reproachfully, »you've certainly got yourself into a mess. Do you imagine I wouldn't let you stay here if I dared? The raids are worse here than in town, with the woods all around. As soon as it's dark you won't see me in the street. A few nights ago the police hauled off my neighbour, a perfectly innocent citizen, while the one they were after got right away. And they still haven't let him out.«

»I don't care what happened to your neighbour,« exclaimed Mr. Malec, »I could tell you any number of stories like that.«

»All right, all right, don't get upset...« said the shopkeeper, pressing Mr. Malec's bony arm with his heavy, warm hand. »Calm down and we'll ring for a taxi.«

»Not on your life!« contradicted Mr. Malec heatedly. He pulled his arm away from the firm, moist grip as though he were breaking a chain. »I know for certain that they're only letting official cars through. It would be...«

»I don't think so. What if you were travelling on the nine o'clock train for example, how would you get to the station if not by taxi?«

»You have to have a ticket, it's as good as a pass, but I haven't got one.«

They stared at each other without the least affection. The military tread of a police patrol rang through the street, accompanied by the clang of weapons. There was a lengthy pause in the conversation of the two friends. The patrol passed and returned. Their tread thudded

past the fence and moved away towards Zelengaj. As though a plague had spread through the street, dead silence now reigned.

»They must have caught someone if they're going back already...« whispered Mr. Malec.

»Most probably...« replied the shopkeeper mildly. Mr. Malec no longer took any notice of the shopkeeper, nor was he capable of deciphering his cunning face which could equally well have concealed anger and malice, anxiety and indifference, God knows which, so he reached all the more hastily for his gin. He was quite decided not to stir from this place until the following morning, and he left all the rest to his friend.

»Let's 'phone that dentist of yours and get him to call your wife, she could give you Smerkl's 'phone number, or ring him herself...« the shopkeeper persisted doggedly in his attempts to think up a solution to rid himself of this unwanted intruder. He might have been talking to a brick wall. Mr. Malec had stretched out his short legs and was flexing them gingerly. His face twisted as he did so, wincing with pain he turned towards the shopkeeper and stared piercingly at him, as from his deathbed.

»If you think I can move an inch...« he cried. »This cramp! Look! I was afraid of this... I've been on my feet since early morning,« he moaned, fighting the merciless spasms in his poor feet, which were visible even though he was wearing shoes, bosses were beginning to form where his toes were. The shopkeeper was nonplussed. And his predicament was made the worse as Mr. Malec reached for the leather thong behind his heel, widened the elasticated opening and freed himself from his shoes without too much torment. His face expressed appreciable relief. »If you only knew how I suffer from these spasms! I'm exhausted,« he whispered in a meek voice. »Please give me some slippers... you must have an old pair somewhere in the house. I can't rely on shoes these days, you can see how swollen my toes are.«

And they were swollen. Mr. Malec's clumsy, heavy feet had grown in the sweaty, striped socks like sodden dough, hot lumps on the bones at the root of his big toes stood out painfully, his feet had become gigantic for his stunted, rickety knees which were trembling uncontrollably.

»Give me some slippers,« he whimpered.

»Wait a minute, I'll try something,« said the anxious shopkeeper, an incorrigible egoist in the eyes of Mr. Malec, devoid of compassion, and at this moment devoid also of common sense. He disappeared for a while. »What else can he try? He can't throw me out into the street like this.« Those poor feet, from which he had suffered all his life now assured him so much moral strength that he was capable of putting up with this uncertainty. So much so that he even began to worry about his bed: »He surely won't expect me to sleep on the bench...?«, convinced that no raid had ever peered into this cunning fox's den, nor would.

He was becoming increasingly afraid of the unpleasant room with its black chasms of dirty bins, its rows of drawers, half empty, half crammed with dusty boxes, its greasy floor, slippery with damp, its peeling ceiling. There were bound to be rats. He almost wept for his comfortable bed with the eiderdown cover and the supple sprung mattress, his eyes would close of their own accord sinking their gaze

into the red shadows of the curtain, now the heavy outlines of the furniture would be drawn like thin little threads pulled under his lids, before everything was lost in darkness, a mysterious darkness before sleep like a theatre just before the curtain rises.

Mr. Malec's penitent heart was full of forgiveness for the monotonous thud of pigeon-toed feet in the hall, for the eternal clamorous wrangling in the kitchen between mother and daughter lent vigour and stamina by their inexhaustible good health. Although he had had quite enough of their criticism and accusations, he would give anything to be at home. Mr. Malec went on fretting like this until the shopkeeper appeared in the doorway with an urgent look on his face, holding a pair of slippers. His eyes gleamed victoriously. Mr. Malec felt the glare of that glance like a jet of excessively hot water. Dazed, he heard the news that there was an official car outside which was going to town and could take him home on the way.

»Official?« asked Mr. Malec tremulously.

»But, hurry, hurry...«

Four yellow incisors approached him so merrily embedded in the lower jaw below the upper set of false teeth and the two mangle-like lips which parted delightedly to reveal them, that Mr. Malec swallowed his superfluous question, and it felt like a bone in his throat.

He barely managed to thrust his feet into the slippers and grab his shoes and bag before he was pushed gently but firmly out into the street. He could make out the uniformed figure at the wheel of a luxury limousine of a deep chocolate colour. The brief bold glance of the stranger made him feel more acutely uncomfortable, as it moved from his hands holding the shoes to his poor feet in the old, worn-out slippers. How do these wretched doors open? He twisted and pulled the handle helplessly, and his hat, which he was holding in his trembling hand hindered his awkward greeting in the direction of the chauffeur.

»You've been very lucky,« whispered the shopkeeper coming to his rescue. »I found him in front of the house, just about to leave for town. He's the chauffeur of one of the vice presidents, he's a good sort, don't forget to leave him a suitable tip, but do it discreetly.« The merry incisors drew away from Malec's car and then came near it again, even more animatedly. Mr. Malec was burning with nervousness by this time. »Remember, you've been extremely lucky... As I said, I asked him personally, I wouldn't like...«

There was no time for the longer explanation which would seem to be required by a suggestion of this kind, thrown out casually at the last minute. Mr. Malec clambered into the car without replying, and fell back wearily into the soft velvet of the vice president's seat. »I'll give him what I would have given a taxi driver,« he thought, resenting the unexpected expenditure. »As if I need to be told what to do.«

»Ring me tomorrow,« called the shopkeeper, through the deafening roar of the engine, as he waved goodbye. »Don't forget what I told you.« In the small oval back window, between the silk fringes of the yellow curtains, behind a brightly coloured little doll bobbing about on a string, he could see the back of his friend's head, reclining already in enviable security and elegance.

Preoccupied by the novelty of his new situation, looking at the strong military shoulders in front of him as at an impenetrable wall, and at the calm grey eye fixed coldly on him in the driving mirror,

Mr. Malec forgot to thank his friend or at least to wave him goodbye, and when it did occur to him they had already turned the corner, gliding without a sound as though they were slipping through the air. Thrust suddenly into this golden-yellow interior which had previously existed quite outside his needs and habits, he began to look around, touch and sniff it inquisitively. All his senses seemed to wake as though after a rich bath. This button was for the light, the one on the right for the radio. A bottle with a gold label round its slender neck poked out of a pocket in the door—champagne! There was something in the pocket in the back of the driver's seat as well, probably sweets, biscuits or, God knows, cigarettes perhaps. He was surrounded on all sides by neat little piles of delight and the shaded lights gave out a thin mist of powdery light, which sprinkled his eyes intoxicatingly. He felt as though he were sinking into some unexplored cave and at the same time swaying on thin springs as on feathers; the combination held him in a state of tension.

Mr. Malec's astounded face quickly recovered, regaining consciousness with a blow from the steely stare set in the mirror. He restrained himself from touching the objects which had aroused his interest but he could not deny himself the pleasure of looking around him from under lowered lids. Very nice! he exclaimed pursing his lips. The little tail of a smile curled up like a little worm, whose tail was bitten off the next minute.

He did not know a single minister, let alone a vice president, it was not possible to distinguish or remember faces from the various badly printed photographs in newspapers, but he could still imagine in detail the expression on the face of the man who felt at home in this chocolate box. Indifference to surroundings that normally intrigued even the most stuck-up nose, lips like two horse-shoes which knock and ring, long-sighted eyes too penetrating to see close to, focused on conquest like rifle bullets. He could imagine the voice too, sonorous and hard with a well hidden reserve of deafening strength. And he could imagine the smell of his skin, greasy, lolling replete in some masculine scent, musk or lavender, according to the taste of his wife or mistress. A man for whom people were figures and scores in the scheme of his ambition. When this part of his activity is subtracted from the efficacy of his government work, what is left for the general good? Mr. Malec could not think about these things in any other way; »Have I been blind and deaf these sixty eight years?« He remembered his father, a militant teacher, an ardent member of the Croatian Nationalist Party, who had been swallowed up by the pro-Hungarianism of a small market town, just because he had different opinions on such matters. The sudden remembrance of one detail of his father's constancy, one might even say courage, brought a mild smile of belated forgiveness to Mr. Malec's bitter lips. This detail was stamped on his memory by his lively curiosity and that was why it had been preserved. Gržanić's boot in petit-point and the motto beneath the little ornament of old Croatian wicker-work: »Edes Kedves Marguerite, got a booting in the seat« on white silk, hung in a gold frame over his desk. When anyone came to their humble home, the good-natured fellow would toast this picture and tears would run down his face. He was suspended twice and finally they retired him after twenty four years of service, they starved, his mother died of a weak heart and all because of all

this, because of the free Croatian state, where Italians and Germans now swaggered to their hearts' content, Chetniks and Partizans in the forests, what a mess it was—and for whose good... If his father were to rise from his grave now, what would he say?

It is possible that Mr. Malec would never have thought these things, such matters did not interest him, he was adroit enough not to become entangled in the meshes of any regime, had the brazen gaze in the driving mirror not seemed to wish to chase him out of the car like a mangy dog. »Look at me if you like, carry on... if I wasn't born to this, at least I know how to sit in this kind of car exactly as your precious vice president does...«

To rest his eyes a little from the light that trickled steadily out from under the shades, as from under anxious hands, he looked for a while out into the darkness of Zelengaj. »If only I were home already...!« he sighed, stretching his heavy legs, full of treacherous pains. He was taken aback by the greeting of a guard standing stiffly to attention under a street light. He nodded in reply, what else could he do? After several such greetings and responses, which went perfectly smoothly, he stopped minding whether the police would take him for the vice president's father or uncle, in twenty minutes or so it would all be over, like a troubled dream. He went on acknowledging greetings, to the right and left, a little resentful of the tedious obligation.

Suddenly everything was confused in his tired mind, he felt the buzzing of forgotten thoughts and the deep boring of their buried content. He began to feel the awkwardness of these unfamiliar surroundings more acutely, as though he had suddenly come into a mine-field. It was as if the well-fed face of the owner of this stifling box were somewhere in it, sniffing him greedily like the head of an insatiable pig, selected for fattening. He started in alarm, he was unpleasantly surprised to find that he could have dozed off in such a difficult situation.

When they emerged from the wood the engine began to pull. They flew through Radnički lane, which was deserted, and drove on at a suspicious speed, the driver slowing down barely perceptibly at corners. »This is all I need...« Mr. Malec began to be alarmed, »he thinks he's driving his vice president.« It sometimes happened when he was out for a walk that an official car like this would sweep past him. What would he see? The outline of a figure hunched in the corner or no-one at all for the simple reason that the curtains were drawn. Cowardice undermines all authority. He would sometimes smile at the flying beetle concealing the chicken's heart of an inaccessible personage beneath this brilliant shield. »I wouldn't want to be in his skin...« Mr. Malec would think.

»Go easy, there's a good fellow...« he called to the massive shoulders in front of him, »have a care, I can't take such fast driving.«

At the same time something flashed in the mirror. Mr. Malec was not quick enough to make out whether it was the glare of a street lamp or the malice in that terrible eye which he was sure was observing him unceasingly. They drove on at the same rate.

»He can't be drunk...« Mr. Malec was so agitated that he began to look around for his shoes, it would not have been hard to put them on if only his feet had not been so swollen. But he was soon obliged

to take back his suspicion when the driver's skill prevented them from hitting a police car, a monstrous thing which suddenly blocked their way. He had heard from Branko about 'Black Marias' and 'Green Tommies', and had never understood the humour applied to such inappropriate subjects, and this time he even condemned it, be reasonable, such things just should not be joked about. Never mind what they were called, green or black, cars like this were more terrible than hearses because they drove you to your death as well but for just such a harmless omission as forgetting to buy the papers one day... Mr. Malec trembled and moved away from the window. He hunched himself nervously into the soft seat while the driver skilfully manoeuvred to avoid his colleague who was evidently in a merry mood as he was driving on the wrong side of the road and did not want to admit it until they had left him behind in the darkness with his terrible, puzzling burden. Behind them the heavy engine roared savagely in the deaf silence of the town, as the car wound along the road which was vaulted over with a dense arch of wild chestnuts.

Apart from officials and police there was no-one in the streets. All the windows were closed and blacked-out, all the doors locked. For the first time he saw Zagreb in the grip of extreme measures which seemed to be warding off more serious rebellious actions. »If it only hurt those who deserved it,« thought Mr. Malec, »but take my case...« He shivered as though in a fever. »When will there be an end to this dreadful situation!«

Mr. Malec stared dejectedly in front of him. This evident confusion in his mind, this anxiety were replaced by fear at the noise they were approaching. The car had slipped silently into the rate of advance of an Ustashe detachment, thudding on the asphalt in a clearly defined rhythm, like a single hobnailed boot. The quiet hum of the engine in the dead silence of the town, the horrific flight of the limousine through the silence fractured only by the blows of that enormous military boot. As though they had crushed his neck, Mr. Malec cowered motionless in the velvet corner of his extraordinary shelter, an expression of terror on his face. This nightmare would dissolve as soon as he was behind the locked door of his own flat, when he had once more become a loyal citizen in the eyes of the law, as he had in fact always been and as he would remain until death. »What could stop me staying that way, although I may have different ideas about many things? What's the good of banging your head against a brick wall?...« He peered out of the window. He had to yield, some black-uniformed figures were passing, their faces sternly altered by their tense concentration. He wished with his whole heart that these terrible military faces which were at this moment engaged in a hunt for people should be transformed as soon as possible by his senses and feelings, so that he should feel his country defended and his own existence ensured by these detachments. For the time being he was incapable of such feelings because he was under the pressure of the danger felt by a wild animal surrounded by a pack of crazed hunting dogs.

Necessity drove him to feel a sense of obligation towards the provoking man at the wheel, whose watchful eye, as though wrought into the mirror, adapted itself with unerring precision to unseen obstacles, for the limousine was winding from street to street, avoiding the shortest and most direct route to Mihanović street. Something

terrible was happening on one side or other of this winding. The more strongly he felt this the more he strove not to think of all the measures which an occupying terror might take in a subjugated country. »It doesn't concern me,« he mumbled nervously, »as you make your bed so lie on it...«

He glanced up to see why the driver was slowing down. They were in front of the City Library at the top of Sava Street. Can a man who is suddenly overcome by blind panic believe his own eyes? At first he thought he had seen part of the darkness shift, black heaps of shadows under the trees in the light of the street lamps spread like the wings of a monster, nesting, improbable, in such an improbable place. The kind of thing one sees in troubled dreams when one is suffering from indigestion. In a flash the illusion vanished, there were spaces between the tangled limbs of the darkness which broke away staggering under the trees.

Four civilians swiftly and silently spread out over the breadth of the street so as to stop the car. Mr. Malec was one of those people who quake at the slightest danger, but are not without resources at really critical moments. Everything he saw and heard in that second collected in one single concept:

Assassination!

The vice president's car, how were they to know the vice president was not in it? As when a clumsy beetle falls on its back into the cup of a flower, if it succeeds in extracting itself it takes with it on its humble shield the treacherous pollen of the fragrant resting place of butterflies and bees, and so it was with Mr. Malec. He felt that, no matter what he did in this closed silken box, equipped with champagne, biscuits, a radio and the goldish half-light of exalted comfort, in these hard times of war, when the people were certainly suffering, he would be held responsible for all evils. »...If I tell them I'm not the vice president,« thought Mr. Malec, in despair, »they'll still kill me just because they've found me in this damned cradle.«

But there was no more time for indecision. If he was out for a walk and a sudden storm surprised him he would stretch out on the ground and wait patiently for the thunder to pass, and he did the same now. As he could not squat, he lowered himself onto his knees, hunched himself up as small as possible and thrust his head under the cushion on the seat. He felt as though he had been completely emptied like a dry butterfly's chrysalis with no content, wrinkled and uninteresting. This absolute nothingness nevertheless possessed something: hearing, which registered the ensuing events with enviable accuracy.

The chauffeur drove on. Opening the window he snapped coolly at the attackers:

»Why can't I pass, I'm not driving the Vice President. Let me pass.«

The car jerked abruptly away, Mr. Malec was fortunately able to stop himself with his hands and avoid hitting his head. They shouted after the car and the driver swore. He let them shout, now he realized that they were police agents, only he did not understand the driver's reply: »I'm not driving the Vice President, let me pass.« He surely was not so foolish as to provoke trouble, even if he did not care about his fortuitous passenger. His heart went on beating loudly, and the stiffness in his knees was making it likely that he would not be

able to move without the driver's help. He had completely collapsed with his recent fright and he felt even more helpless than before, when he had thought he was in danger. He felt the weight of the driver's hand on his back like a blow.

»What the blazes are you doing...?« Asked the driver in a stern, mocking voice.

Mr. Malec peered over the top of the seat defiantly, and accepted the help of the driver's iron hand, although it was galling to do so, the car swerved a bit but he was soon sitting in his former position, staring at the driver's shoulders which were shaking with laughter.

»What were you so afraid of?« asked the churlish man at the wheel without ceasing to snigger, which exasperated Mr. Malec to such an extent that he did not want to reply at all. He searched for his shoes and, feeling for their elastic tongues, carefully placed them by his feet. He closed his eyes not to have to watch the driver's shoulders shaking. He was really worn-out and utterly exhausted. It was just as well that he did not have to rack his brains thinking up a punishment for such insolence, the class consciousness which is always alive in the heart of a citizen who has spent his life at an office desk and not at the wheel of someone else's car, came to his rescue now of its own accord: »As if I care what a chauffeur thinks of me,« Mr. Malec exclaimed to himself, »let alone one who is expecting a tip from me.«

The next time the car slowed down, he took it somewhat more courageously. He was less than a hundred yards from the building where he lived. He was only a little worried that this ass might not wait while he unlocked the front door. He could imagine the car streaking away and himself struggling with that damned lock while strange footsteps drew near. He began to hunch himself up and cough with anxiety. Preoccupied with this thought he did not at first notice a new sound added to the roar of the engine: an uneven tramping, a huge weary tread, as though a leafless autumn tree had suddenly begun to walk silently behind someone out for a quiet walk, a soundless moving of the earth. The limousine progressed slowly as though it were pushing some great weight before it. Although he was afraid of the malicious eye in the driving mirror, Mr. Malec could not contain his curiosity.

»Don't move,« snapped the driver, »why the hell must you look?«

He sank into his corner immediately, without a second's hesitation. He had not seen much, the dark outline of a crowd, probably under armed guard. There was something huge and dark like a storm cloud in front of his eyes, something threateningly oppressive. But he was already so worn out from everything he had experienced that day, that he stared helpless and shattered in front of him, clinging firmly to the only comfort left him: »Thank God I am here, right next to the house...« he yawned with such uncontrollable fatigue that his jaws creaked. He thought of an explanation for the driver's comment: »I'm not driving the Vice President, let me pass.« Mr. Malec's lips drew into a bitter smile. »A Vice President should not see a procession like this, nor the procession him, that's why.«

»Here we are...« he reminded the driver timidly for they were approaching the main door of the yellow four storey block where he lived. The young man at the wheel did not stir. They were going at a snail's pace admittedly and it would not be hard to stop the car, but

nonetheless Mr. Malec would have liked to have even the slightest indication, however, curt, that the driver had heard and noted his observation.

It was the last moment for him to find his wallet, and this gave him an opportunity to curse the shopkeeper again for suggesting that he ought to dig rather more deeply than usual into his pocket. Unfortunately too much depended on it for him to take this advice lightly. »If I don't do it quickly,« he thought anxiously, rummaging in his wallet, »God knows where he'll take me, perhaps right to the corner. If one could only guess what goes on in the head of a churlish, uncivilized brute like this, when someone else depends on his compassion, someone whose social position he might envy, only unfortunately he is not in a position to impress him with his position or for instance a limousine like this which he had to groom in order to earn the basic essentials of life. Had this fellow ever heard of good up-bringing, or humanity, in order so to speak to be able to measure correctly my good will according to my humble resources, even after this murderous drive, which he would have had to do even if he hadn't taken me.«

He found five thousand in notes in his wallet, not a single coin of small change. »Shall I give him a thousand?« He took all five notes out fingered them and looked at them carefully. By selecting one, the most tattered one, he seemed to have decided on the amount of the reward. He shoved his wallet back into his pocket and sighed. Through the window he could see the dark recess in the yellow wall, the iron shoe-scraper on the ground, he could even see the grille in the door, superfluous because the children still went on breaking the panes.

They stopped. Mr. Malec hastily did his duty. He put the thousand note on the empty seat beside the driver, coughed to draw the driver's attention to it, and, picking up his shoes and bag, waited for the driver to open the door for him.

At this moment the grey eye in the mirror began to blink. In the days when he used to go hunting, Mr. Malec would sometimes come across a tortoise, which would watch for its prey just like that. In that apparently sleepy blinking he could imagine all its hideous experience and skill, perfected perhaps over a hundred years. Tortoises kill and eat their victims with a benign air. He felt something of this in the driver's blinking too. He turned away, hoping to cast off this unfortunate notion. When he looked up again, the driver was rolling a cigarette. He had not touched the money, had even turned his back on it, leaning lazily with one arm on the wheel, a hand as broad and heavy as a mallet, and with the other he put the cigarette to his lips. It was a terrible hand, moving sluggishly and carefully, craftily disguising all that it was capable of doing. And as though nothing had happened Mr. Malec's unhappy face once again subjected to that sharp, merciless observation.

»What's he waiting for, why doesn't he open the door?«

After a few more minutes of patient waiting Mr. Malec took hold of the handle himself. He shook it, joggled it, but to no avail.

»Open the door!« he shouted distracted, no longer able to contain himself. »I'm right in front of my house and I can't get in. Open up now and please just wait till I've opened the front door.«

As he spoke the driver's broad shoulders disappeared and Mr. Malec was confronted by a broad, healthy face, a little on the plump side with the keen glint of grey eyes smiling mockingly at him.

»I can't,« he drawled lazily, »You'll have to wait a bit longer.« He thrust his head out of the window looking into the darkness behind the car.

»I'd like to know why we're waiting,« burst out Mr. Malec rashly. »I have a right to know. If I knew I wouldn't ask. I'm right in front of the house, and I can't go inside. What does it mean? Anyone would want to know, young man. I am very grateful to you for bringing me here, and what's more I've done what was expected of me...«

The driver motioned him curtly to be quiet. The footsteps on the asphalt that Mr. Malec had quite stopped noticing in his agitation, seemed to have doubled. A new procession of prisoners was approaching, now the movement was building up behind them, and drawing near in waves, which grew like flood waters, breaking their banks. Something which would transform the ground as it passed and leave ineradicable traces, like the earth shaking and space shifting.

An Ustashe convoy with fixed bayonets could be made out in the filtered light around the street-lamp, then an exhausted crowd of dark figures. They were gradually submerged in the growing silent multitude, the coughing and the sound of wearily dragging feet, the stink of their ragged clothing and sometimes a face, or rather a pale blot, like the belly of a dead fish, passed by, carried by the current.

Mr. Malec sat down, what could he do. »They must be prisoners from Sava Street prison,« he thought, »They're probably being taken to camp.« He simply could not understand people who consciously plunged into such suffering. Fools! He watched the stooping crowd from his corner—he did not dare move any nearer to the window—men, dragging themselves along as though their backs were broken, and women carrying bundles of rags, staggering as though their legs were dislocated. »What's it all for?« exclaimed Mr. Malec to himself, unable to believe his own eyes. »Why resist authorities which can break their insubordinate necks?« He stared horrified at the starving, beaten people who kept coming, kept on coming... a ghostly procession from the most terrible nightmare. Sometimes the crowd would become so dense that one could see only a grey movement, breathing laboriously.

He thought of the shopkeeper and his prattling... he should see this! And at the same time he remembered his bank-note, it was lying untouched in its place. Quite disregarded, as though it had withered and would disintegrate like a dry leaf, crumble away in the fingers. Mr. Malec's anxious glance moved from the note to the driver. He was smoking, leaning on the wheel, whistling.

How could he draw his attention to it, if he had not seen it? He can go on blackmailing me with that door, which unfortunately I do not know how to open, and I cannot do anything. The more I talk, the less he listens. He was already thinking of slipping the note unnoticed off the seat and putting it into his hand without any beating about the bush. If he had a crooked stick he could easily pull it sideways, push the note nearer and knock it onto the floor. It would not be much of an exploit to pick it up. If I do not do that, he could easily catch it with the hem of his coat, knock it onto the floor and tread

on it. He regretted not giving him a newer bank note, this one only needed to be a little crumpled and it was finished.

Mr. Malec took out his wallet, selected the newest thousand note, put it beside him on the seat and began his preparations. He could imagine the whole operation without the stick as well, only with more care. A swift movement of the hand over the back of the seat, and then another, for was there any need to preserve dignity and discretion with a lout like this? He should simply thrust the thousand under his nose and ask him to give him back five hundred. »I didn't take enough trouble at the beginning,« Mr. Malec admitted humbly, »and that's why everything has gone like this, as badly as could be imagined.«

He hesitated a moment and then, just as he had placed his hand on the back of the seat in front of him, at the very last minute before his act, so risky that his heart was pounding wildly, something occurred that made his hair stand on end. A clenched fist appeared in the widow, a bony yellow knot, a rusty wire drawn tight round its wrist. It moved unrestrainedly, deadly resolute in a gesture of menace or defiance, probably this uncontrollable impulse meant both, as the hand was already drawing away with an effort, with great endurance, for the wire was drawn tight, one could see the blood-stained edge of the torn sleeve.

Mr. Malec glanced at the driver who had reached swiftly for the back pocket of his trousers, he could not follow his hand any more because everything happened in a matter of seconds. He did not know who had opened fire, two reports were heard, the driver probably fired first, from his Browning and the other shot came from one of the Ustashe escorts. The clenched fist of the unknown victim hovered in the air for a moment, then began to bend, and fell like a broken flag in a battle. The car lurched blindly with the confusion in that part of the procession, was lifted partly off the ground before falling back into its former place.

Mr. Malec was hanging on to the door-handle with all his weight. His eyes wildly dilated, he implored the driver to open the door, for the young man had sat back in his place, laying his revolver on his knee, and, swearing with extreme crudeness, he lit another cigarette.

»What's the matter with you?« he snapped at Mr. Malec. »Hang on till this lot's past, for Christ's sake.« He turned out the headlights and the light inside the car, leant on the wheel and went on whistling. One of the Ustashe guards had shouted at him because of the lights, and he wanted to emphasize by his behaviour that he did not much care what they were shouting and so excited about.

Just as Mr. Malec turned round to collect all his belongings, which he had not done in his fit of fear, the driver suddenly opened the door of the car, taking no further notice of his passenger who rocked awkwardly but caught himself on his hands at the last minute, sniffing the dusty asphalt in front of the house. His shoes and bag flew over his head, the car moved away. The end of the ghostly procession dragged itself along beside the car, which was scraping along the edge of the pavement.

As he became conscious of everything that had just happened, Mr. Malec felt that he had hurtled to the depths of a vast endless void. A muffled groan as he fell warned him to go gingerly, he moved his jaws to bring them to life, and his arms, afraid that they might be broken. He was as heavy, immovable and insensible as wood, with that

alien something that came from the pounding of his agitated heart, he made as best he could for the door, crawling, grabbing his shoes and bag on his way, pushing them in front of him, while tears poured down his numb cheeks. The dull self-accusation kept thudding monotonously in his brain: »How could I have put my wallet on my knee when I saw what a scoundrel I had to deal with?«. He had left it in the car.

When he tried to stand up, everything spun crazily in front of his eyes. In the whirlpool of darkness his agitated glance happened to fall on a heap of rags, stirring with some vestiges of movement, groaning. The man whom the two bullets had lodged in was trying to raise himself onto his elbows, as he opened his eyes Mr. Malec saw the shaved head, swinging as though the neck were broken, fall face down onto the pavement and the limbs, beginning to stretch unnaturally in the pool of blood that was starting to reek, raw and lonely in the familiar damp smell of the street.

While Mr. Malec was kneeling and feverishly jabbing at the lock with his key, a swift step separated itself from the heavy tread of the procession, now moving indomitably on, and the clank of weapons filled the lacerated silence. Dragging himself on his knees through the doorway, Mr. Malec leaned his whole body against the door to close it. Through the broken glass he saw a sight which made him turn his eyes hastily away, he pressed his trembling fingers to his ears, waiting tense and motionless for the shot to resound, for this whole nightmare to end once and for all. Still, he caught the muffled groans and the merciless blows, then three shots which made the door shake as though it would collapse. The Ustashe who had returned to finish off his victim, kicked the body which shuddered and was still.

Mr. Malec crawled to the stairs. He moved slowly forward, trying with his last scrap of consciousness not to cause the slightest sound. He was afraid of his own limbs, which stumbled nervously over each other, pushing the exhausted body up the stairs. Mrs. Malec, who had probably been expecting her husband and was staring through the peep-hole in the door, in mortal terror, since the shots in the street, responded to the scratching on the wall and the groans outside the door in a thin voice wrung with anxiety:

»Who is it?«

Mr. Malec thumped feebly on the door with his elbow:

»Open the door, it's me!«

Translated by Celia Williams