

The Alfa Cycle

Book Alpha

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AT THE CROSSROADS he had seen the mud coming together, the sodden earth with the puddles, the potholes, the cart ruts from four directions converging, intersecting, squashing each other, continuing, and had wondered whether to turn right or left or carry on straight ahead, and then hesitated for a long time without saying anything, fearing they might have lost their way, had merely looked, at the crossroads and at the ruts in the mud and at the three pairs of muddy feet around his, around his spattered legs which were the oldest and yet not even older than eight. And in his legs the unwillingness to start moving, to take the decision that he finally did take because he was the oldest and had to see them home safely as he had promised that morning, hours, days, weeks ago, with a “yes” on his lips and a “yes” in his eyes, and from head to toe a “yes,” yes and therefore finally began to move, taking a step, and another, choosing as he went to go straight ahead, without why or wherefore, until suddenly the mud snapped at him and his foot shot out of his shoe, as an omen.

So that was it: an omen. He was holding one leg up, and leaned on the shoulder of seven-years who was standing close beside him, and watched six-years bending over, clutching between his knees the bag that hung in front of his stomach and jerking the shoe out of the mud. He stuck his foot back into the shoe, knowing that it was a sign, that it no longer mattered whether they went right or left or not at all and that they would see light only when it had grown altogether dark. He said: “Eat something from your bag,” to the youngest who had begun to cry softly, and he went in front of the others to the narrow strip of grass by the side of the road, an improbable interval between fields without end and roads without end, and again he said, because the child did not stop crying and there surely was no reason to cry since he had not yet admitted that they were lost: “Eat something.” But the little hands stayed motionless on the bag and he noticed how forlornly they were put down here under a sky full of mud, their hands resting on the bags in front of their stomachs. He scanned the sky and estimated how long it would be before it was altogether dark. Soon, when it was nearly dark, they would set off again, turn left and stop over there by that small group of trees that stood so forlornly in the mud a little farther on, and sevenyears and six-years would give him a lift up and he would call out, from high up in the tree, that he saw a light, quite near you might almost say, and that he had known it all along: that they would see light as soon as it was altogether dark. And then they would run, heading straight for the farm, across the fields if necessary. No doubt there would be a dog in the farmyard; they would have to watch out, unless they sang, making it clear to the dog even from a distance that the day had not yet ended because there were still some that came holding up bags and singing and he

hoped the dog would have got used to it, to the coming and going of children of only five and six and seven and eight, and sometimes older, girls and boys walking into the yard singing and holding up their open bags and fleetingly saying “thank you” or no longer saying anything, only holding out their hand and hurriedly moving on; and that there would be no dog at all he hoped, so that he would no longer have to act bravely all the time just because he was the oldest. He thought it was funny really, that the dog (oh yes, they were sure to have a dog) was almost the only one who knew that the day had not yet ended, for there came only a bark through the open door with the fat shadows in it and at a stroke the yard was filled with strips of yellow light and with hands that mothered and pitied and were clapped together in disbelief and admiration and once again the bags were opened although there was hardly room for anything more in them, and then the cart was ready, pulled by the dog, the only one who understood that the day had not yet come to an end, although he probably realized that these were surely the very last ones. They: the last ones, as they had been the first ones before, early that morning when they had left the house singing while outside the night was still hanging over the earth and the lamps were burning in all the houses and all the farms—light that smoked and smelled of kerosene, of manure and of baking and of bedding and of old aunts—and between the darkness of the morning and the darkness of the evening there were hours of walking, miles of singing, a long rope of songs stretching across the village, through the mud, the rain that threatened, the grayness of the new year’s day, and beyond the village, past fields and farmyards and dogs, to yet other villages, all the time singing and filling bags, brimful, forever heavier, the millstone of cookies and fruit and chocolate and coins around their necks, and yet not tiring of anything.

He suddenly felt how tired they were. The small hot fist which five-years had stuck into his coat pocket burned between his fingers. He gently pressed the fist, heard behind his back six-years or seven-years peeing lengthily into the mud, turning around and resuming his post next to seven-years or six-years who stood to his right, on his own, not huddled up against him like the youngest whose small body leaned heavily against his body, too tired to cry even, asleep at last, with his warm head pressed in the crook of his elbow and with the sleeping fist tucked in his coat pocket so that he dare hardly move, yet was aware how six-years and seven-years glanced up at him from time to time, questioning him without asking as he in his turn questioned without asking when he looked up at the sky from time to time and looked away again across the plain and listened to the voices which came from all sides and therefore from nowhere. Voices, some of which were filled with anger and unrest and fear, crowding together in the halfdark around the stove on which the cooking pots were still half full, and swarming away again toward the window with the parted curtains and to the table with the dirty plates and the other plates still untouched (he noticed) and at that moment, there between window and table, a piling up of shrill and dull and almost whispering voices, falling silent one after another, remaining silent for a time, rising up again and flowing away to the door and walking out into the yard here and there and front and back until one of the voices could bear it no longer, grabbed a bicycle and rode off to the village. Yes and mingled with these voices there were other voices that assailed him from deep down in the earth and from low down in the wind and from everywhere around him out of the gray silence, the grayness which as a phase between night and day and all day long it had thus been a day which was neither day nor night and maybe it would remain like this, who knows for how many more hours, gray and still not altogether dark, and maybe they would presently set off again, starting to walk and hesitating whether to turn right or left or go straight ahead, knowing only that they were lost. And with the gaze of six-years and seven-years fixed on him he discovered that they too knew it: that they were lost and that there was nothing for it but that sooner or later they would move on again, whenever he decided to give the sign—and that they said nothing because he was the oldest, as he said nothing because he was the oldest. Sharply he listened whether through the talking of the earth he might not hear a church tower striking and it was an unpleasant thought, to realize suddenly that

not only were they lost between heaven and mud but also lost in the day which was now without color and without hour and therefore without time and for the first time fear settled on him and this was different from being afraid of a dog in a farmyard or of the hand of his father and it was similar only to the trembling that came over him whenever the organ in church raised its voice or when he knelt in the darkness of the confessional and thought about all the things he had never committed while in this little cubbyhole it always seemed as if he had, time and time again it seemed so and it weighed on him so heavily that in his anguish he lied and confessed all manner of sins he had never committed and finally forgot that he was lying and then suddenly there was rain, waking up five-years who lifted his head out of the crook of his arm and raised up his eyes to him and did not cry, asked only when they were going home, asked it wearily, still not aware that they were lost. With five-year's fist clutched between his fingers he stepped into the mud once more. Behind him he heard six-years and seven-years also stirring and he paused briefly and when they were beside him he said: "Sing." He said it loudly and without premeditation and tasted the warmth of the word and felt how here and now words were needed only for the warmth they spread and hardly because of what they meant and again he said: "Sing," started a song and sang, louder and louder until the others joined in and even five-years detached his hot fist from his fist and sang, so that everything was again just as it had been hours ago when they went from door to door and from yard to yard and from farm to farm, although now there was nowhere a door or a farm to be seen. After a time it dawned on him that they had left the crossroads far behind and he could not even remember whether they had turned right or left or gone straight ahead and so only the awareness remained that they were on the move and singing, singing as they walked through the mud, the rain, the grayness of the new-year's day, their hands clasped on the bags in front of their stomachs.

In this one moment, this one indivisible long moment, the world shrank, the no-world, the no-longer world, within the small square of his field of vision: then the small crying of the little boy triumphed in the large crying of the street, the city, of the roads toward the city and away from the city and to the cities beyond, the small crying in the large crying of the streetcars, still jolting past as always, of the army trucks, honking as they drove into one another, of the baby carriages and bicycles and handcarts and under the carts the dogs and on the other side of the dogs the rumble of a crumbling wall somewhere, the large crying of the sirens to which no one listened any longer and which even when they were silent went on wailing, wailing through the throat of the little boy; and in the blazing sun the cold, impersonal voice from the radio, the millions of voices (including the husky, the brave, the never-tiring God-and-fatherland voices) from millions of radios filling the ether—and the air filled with the left-right left-right left-right within the walls behind his back and also far away but carried along on the dust of retreat and advance, the wailing before altars and the moaning in the beds of invalids and in parks and gardens the screeches of startled birds and the squeals of young birds fallen out of their nests and not a sound that remained absent, not even the singing (it came ever nearer, through the sky, across the land, it advanced in armored tanks, on motorbikes, behind propellers) the whole dazzling blinding cry of the erupting day gulping out of this little throat so that in these few seconds the small crying was the same as the large crying of the street, the city, of the roads to this city and to the cities beyond. Then the handcart with the crying little boy on it disappeared and thereupon the pain returned, in his right shoulder with the strap across it and reaching farther than the strap, to the left shoulder which had no strap across it, the pain in his loins, his calves, his soles which burned. And ceaselessly the marching orders behind his back, loud, the movement in front of him in the street, loud, the whole churned-up city that passed by him, jolting, swirling, spinning, running. Loud. And now, unsling his rifle, turn around, put down the rifle in the sentry box and walk away, past the garrison gate, plunge into the stream, take the street car and stay on it for seven stops, get off at South Square, turn into Calendar Street and pause briefly at Schram's, looking at the blood on his white butcher's apron, and say: "The time has come, Schram" (but maybe Schram had already gone), buy a packet of cigarettes, buy some

beer, buy a smile, buy casually and without guile what there was left to buy and stroke Haling's little girl, sitting on Haling's doorstep, over her hair and move on again if both Haling and his little girl had already gone too (Haling gone and Brand gone and Vanna and Pacco and all those who had names which still had a faint face on them, one large face for all those names that came to his mind; names, sounds), go on walking, no longer feeling the pain of standing guard, feeling different pains, feeling An, starting to move with An. He knew this was punishable by death. No one had ever told him this, he could not recall ever having been told this, but he knew it and he did not care, that it was punishable by death, if he now stirred, turned around and walked past the garrison gate to the streetcar stop: a soldier stepping out of line, a soldier leaving his post, leaving his rifle in the sentry box and suddenly being no longer different in anything—except different in uniform but this was not a difference to which anyone paid attention now that all differences had been suspended in the relentless movement of houses emptying and streets being flooded and all existence being flooded, even thought and will and feeling being flooded so that movement became thought and there was no longer any thought outside this movement nor any will nor any feeling, nothing outside it—and therefore no longer in any way different from the man with the handcart, from the man on the bicycle, from the man beside the bicycle with the suitcase on the saddle and a bundle of clothes tied up in a sheet on the luggage carrier and a handbag hanging from the handlebar on the left and a cage with a bird in it on the right, and by the side of the cage a woman, pushing, talking to the bird, to the bicycle, to the man on the other side of the bicycle, no longer in any way different from the people on the streetcar and the conductor who like him wore a uniform, wearing it for the last time maybe, about to leave his post without thereby incurring the death penalty and this made no difference either and he assumed that this was definitely the last streetcar, the very last one (South Square did you say? Yes, sure, with the depot being so near South Square that is a bit of luck, you'll be able to get as far as that, even on the very last one—I want to get away too, you see) and it surprised him that the very last one had not left hours ago, laboriously jolting its way through the heat, halting at the seven stops and halting as many times more for the sirens every time they sent their warnings across the rooftops although no one left the streetcar for it, and halting many more times before the ever thickening stream of bodies and vehicles that blocked the road, blocking the exodus with exodus until in the halting exodus the streets became hours, months, years and through these, through the hours, the months, the years, a long-drawn-out, seven times seven repeated I want to get away away away: and still he did not cry, not yet, he only held his knees tightly pressed together. He had let his pants down so that it would look real, in case they came to catch him, and maybe it would even become real, soon, very soon, he did not know yet. He screwed up his little body while listening to the jeering on the other side of the door, to the children to whom he did not belong, the lady teachers and the men teachers to whom he did not belong, the school to which he did not belong, and for one very brief moment he wondered to whom he did belong, his father? his mother? his little brother? yes, he believed he did belong to all those who belonged to the house he knew, the room he knew, the stove he knew, the bed he knew, and there was the big boy he knew and to whom at the same time he belonged and did not belong and, who knows, maybe he did not belong to anything or anybody and there was only this one feeling of not really belonging anywhere and the other feeling of at the same time belonging and not belonging but never really altogether belonging and therefore there was not really any difference between his father and the house and the big boy who said: "You're from the city, you never dare anything."
