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Stranger

Sometimes ... I catch my inquiring look in the mirror: I see, not just another, but a completely unknown and utterly unsympathetic man who stares at me.

In those lineaments I try to find something that is mine, I try to recognize some personal seal, something that can tell me that this is me and not somebody else ... but to no avail.

Then I smile ... the stranger in the mirror reciprocates my smile, but I see that it is not my smile, I see only his lips moving, his face muscles imitate my face and the eyes belong to someone else.

Or: I wink at that guy in the mirror, I wink at him confidentially as do people who share some secret. He reciprocates my wink, but at that moment I cannot see anything on his face, not a single sign that he knows what I know, his lips are still compressed in a thin line of resistance and incomprehension, and I see that my efforts are in vain and I am addressing the wrong man.

Then, I try to smile and wink at the same time, but usually someone then enters the room, elevator, or public washroom and intrudes onto my mirror ritual. At that moment I look away from the mirror and begin to check my pockets as if I am looking for change in them, checking if I have my ID card with me, or taking my cigarette box out of a pocket ...

I remember the days when I got back from my father's funeral and I stood in front of the mirror. There was confusion in my soul, some thin steel probe was placed in my throat and it scratched me with each breath, in every muscle of my body I felt some chaotic, meaningless moves that wanted to come out of me, but I restrained them.

I stood in front of the oval mirror in the room and a pale face framed with long brown hair stared at me, a face that did not reflect my mood at all, that showed nothing of what happened inside of me, a face cold-hearted and indifferent ...

I hardly had strength to collect the spittle in my dry mouth and I spit on that stranger across from me and then he reacted, he was surprised, then he recoiled, looked at me with disgust and hatred, with a desire to retort against me, to hit me ...

In a collection of stories, "Russian Greyhound," by Milorad Pavić, there is a story

about a young girl, a communist activist, who was arrested and taken to a concentration camp in Banjica. She did not want to tell anything to the police, not a single piece of information about her organisation, about herself, not even her name ...

When she was taken to be shot, they asked her if she wanted to die nameless or if she wanted to be shot under her own name. Instead of her own name, she gave the banned name of another young girl and guy from her group ... On the lists of those who were shot that name was written down, and the oppressors stopped their pursuit after that young girl and lad ...

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I often wonder (in the breathing time between two dreams or in the moment when I wait for the green light on the semaphore and have a feeling I have already experienced this moment at some other time), who was that man who died instead of me, who took my name in the moment of his dying and protected me in that way, who made it possible for me to live and work safely and peacefully?

Did he have regrets because of that? And was he that stranger, who looked at me from the mirror, sometimes cold heartedly and sometimes with hatred?

I would like to say to him that it is not my fault, that he has no right to be mad because this life that I live is a matter of his choice and decision.

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