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THE BRIDGE

AFTERWORD BY
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THE BRIDGE

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Translated from the Serbian by **Alice Cople-Tošić**.

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THE RAINCOAT

I met myself at the entrance to the building where I live. I was just about to go inside after my afternoon walk, when someone pulled the door open from the inside. I stepped back to make room for the person coming out—and stared at my own self.

I recognized myself at once. Not so much by my physical appearance. It's possible to have a double or a twin brother you don't know exists. They might even look more like you than you do yourself. Here, however, the clothes removed all doubt. A double or twin brother would not be wearing my dark green raincoat. It was a recent purchase that I had yet to wear because the days were warm, even though it was already autumn.

The raincoat was singular owing to the fact that its lapels were inconsistent: one was narrow, the other wide. This insignificant flaw was why it had been on sale. No one wanted it, even though it was first class in every other respect. The defect didn't bother me. It was only noticeable if you stared really hard, and I had no reason to expect anyone to give me the once-over.

The recognition had to be mutual, because I looked at me intently

for a moment. True, it might not have been quite like standing in front of a mirror, but it would be odd not to recognize yourself on a recently taken photograph, wouldn't it? And that's how I acted—as though a stranger was standing in front of the door. I didn't even nod to myself as a sign of gratitude for standing aside to let me leave, which would have been polite even under these unusual circumstances. I just walked past me and headed down the street.

Bewildered, I stood there for a few moments watching myself walk away and then headed after me. What else could I do? Certainly not go home calmly and pretend that this was nothing out of the ordinary. If for no other reason, I was dying to know where I was going.

I strode along determinedly, like a man on a mission. I was not just out for a stroll. I kept a certain distance from myself, not wanting me to notice I was following, although I didn't look back. I picked up my pace when I turned right at an intersection onto a side street. Reaching the corner, I peered around it. I was still making steady progress. I waited several moments for me to put some distance between us and then turned the corner myself.

We went along like that for around 150 meters and then I stopped and went in somewhere. Since I was about thirty paces behind me, it wasn't immediately clear which shop it was, but I didn't need to get right up close to find out. I am well acquainted with the neighborhood where I live, and I also know myself. I certainly would have no reason to go into shops selling ladies' hats, lawnmowers or pet food. The only place that would interest me in this part of the street was the barber-shop. The one I regularly visit.

But what would I be doing at the barbershop? Less than two weeks had passed since I'd had my hair cut, and I always shave at home. What would my barber think when he saw me much earlier than expected? It might lead to a misunderstanding. Spurred by the desire to prevent this, I rushed towards the shop, but stopped dead in my tracks just before I reached the glass door.

I couldn't go in there now. I was already inside. What kind of chaos would ensue if another one of me appeared! It would require

an explanation, and what kind of explanation was there to give? The barber might even resort to calling the police to straighten things out, and then there really would be trouble.

I wondered for a moment what to do. I wanted to see what was happening in the barbershop, but couldn't from my position in front of the hat shop. I couldn't just stick out my head from time to time and look through the glass door. Someone inside would notice my peculiar behavior and come out to see what was going on. The best thing would be to go across the street and watch from there.

I found a place next to the trunk of a bushy linden tree whose leaves were already yellow, but soon concluded that I couldn't just stand there and stare at the barbershop. Passers-by would become curious. One might even join me as I watched, convinced that something was about to happen on the other side of the street. People tend to imitate one another. A crowd might form.

I had to be less conspicuous. I went to a nearby newsstand and bought a newspaper in the largest format available. I folded it in two, then tore out part of the inside edge. When I opened it there was a small hole in the middle. I went back to the linden. Now passers-by would find nothing unusual in seeing a shortsighted man with his head stuck in a newspaper, and I had a good view of the barbershop through the hole.

There were no other customers. I saw myself sitting there, and next to me was the barber who'd been cutting my hair for years. He had yet to reach for his comb and scissors. We were talking, and the barber was gesticulating vigorously, which he was not in the habit of doing. He was always reserved. Normally we would merely exchange a word or two about the weather, and here he was waving expansively. I was curious to discover what we were talking about, but even if I'd been a lip reader the distance made it impossible.

The barber finally opened his arms wide, as though abandoning any further discussion, and then moved away for a moment. He came back with a washbasin. He placed it at the back of my neck and I leaned my head backwards. So, that was it. He was going to wash my hair. Well,

he'd never washed my hair before, but why get so upset about it? It was nothing unusual. On the other hand, there was really no need to wash my hair. I closed the newspaper for a moment and ran my fingers through my hair. It was still quite clean. I'd washed it the day before yesterday.

When I looked through the hole again, the barber was already at work. He was standing with his back to me, blocking my view of his customer. Judging by the brisk movements, he was scrubbing vigorously. I didn't know how long it took to wash hair in a barbershop. At home I do it in a few minutes. Here, however, it was taking some time.

Some ten minutes later I got tired of looking at the barber's back, so I shifted my focus from the hole to the newspaper itself. On the left-hand side was the city's tabloid news. I started to read the articles, peering every now and then at the barbershop.

What first caught my eye was the story of a woman who had gone into a jewelry store and asked to be shown some diamonds. When they were placed before her, she grabbed a handful, stuffed them into her mouth and patiently swallowed every one in front of the dumbfounded salesmen. She made no attempt to escape. The police took her to the hospital where her stomach was pumped, but this did not return all the precious stones. Three failed to turn up for some inexplicable reason, and not even an x-ray of her innards could locate them.

Then there was an article about a thief who lurked around parks and stole white poodles. He'd already laid his hands on fifty-six dogs, whose fate remained unknown. The police had still found no trace of the man. Even though all the poodles were stolen in broad daylight, no one had noticed the thief, who seemed to be invisible.

The Museum of Modern Art had been targeted once again. Nothing was stolen, but during the night another two paintings had mysteriously changed places. As on the previous occasions, the switch had been announced in a letter to the curator. He'd done everything he could to stop the crank: he'd doubled the guard, set up infrared cameras, and even spent the night in the museum, but nothing helped. In the morning the two paintings were found in each other's places.

One of the headlines reported an unusual suicide on a bridge, but I was unable to read more about it because the rest of the article had been torn out to make the hole. My eyes shifted focus in frustration and I looked through the hole in the newspaper towards the barber-shop—and what I saw almost made me faint. I was just coming out of the shop and my hair hadn't been washed but dyed!

No wonder it had taken so long and upset the barber. He clearly had made an heroic effort to dissuade me from this crazy idea. Indeed, how could something like that have crossed my mind? Well, some people dye their hair at my age to hide the gray, but gray doesn't bother me at all and besides there isn't much of it. And what normal person would choose such a bright red color?

I folded the newspaper and dropped it into a nearby trashcan, and then started to follow myself again, this time on the opposite side of the street. There was no danger of losing sight of me: this garish red made me distinctly visible. A multitude of questions swarmed through my head. Above all, why had I dyed my hair? And then, why had I chosen that color? Finally, how had I dared do it on my own whim? Didn't I have a say in the matter?

How was I going to face the barber when the time came for my next haircut? I couldn't appear in the barbershop with my normal hair. Would I have to dye my hair too beforehand at some other place? Furthermore, what if I ran into one of my friends or acquaintances with this red hair? They would be astounded when they saw me, and this would inevitably lead to gossip.

I didn't know where I was heading now, but I hoped I wouldn't stay outside very long. The sooner I went inside, the smaller the chance of an unwanted encounter. I stopped some fifty paces later in front of a wine shop. I took a look at the display window and went in.

This didn't bode well either. I have never drunk wine or strong alcohol. I have a glass of beer only on rare occasions. So what was I looking for in a wine shop? Was I intending to do something irresponsible again? After what had happened in the barbershop, I could expect the unthinkable from me.

I was both relieved and worried when I came out soon after. I was carrying three bottles of red wine in a transparent plastic bag. I hadn't done anything unseemly, but what was I going to do with so much wine? I wasn't going to drink it all by myself, was I? One bottle was enough to put me in the hospital. Had I bought it for someone, perhaps? After some hard thought I couldn't come up with anyone I would give three bottles of wine.

We continued along both sides of the street. Now I was even more fearful that someone would recognize me. I would leave a truly wonderful impression with this horrible dyed hair, obviously set for a binge. Such toying with my reputation was intolerable.

I stopped at the next intersection, waited for the green "walk" sign and then crossed the street. I scurried behind the nearest linden tree and peeked around it. After crossing the street I continued straight ahead. I waited a moment and then went after myself.

Once again I went into a shop I didn't frequent. I'd never liked sports, so I'd never needed sports equipment. I went up to the edge of the large display window and looked inside. There were lots of customers. I caught sight of red hair at the other end of the store, but couldn't see which section I was in because of the crowd.

As I waited impatiently for me to come out, I tried to figure out what might interest me there. My eyes went over the objects in the window. Boxing gloves? No, I shuddered at violence. Hockey stick? I couldn't even stand up on ice skates. Basketball? That didn't go at all with my height. Tennis racquet? Once I'd tried to grasp the rules of tennis, to no avail.

When I finally appeared at the door of the shop, what I was carrying was as foreign to me as everything else I'd seen in the window, although I had a little experience with it. I'd tried to bowl once, but given up after the first throw. I'd thrown the ball with such skill that it rolled diagonally, ending up in the fourth lane to the left.

My hair was no longer the most conspicuous thing about me. Now the bowling ball attracted attention. If they'd wrapped it in the store this might not have happened, but as it was the iridescent red color

was painful to the eye. In addition, I was swinging it back and forth by my side, as though just about ready to throw it. People moved out of the way, then turned back to look at me. They either shook their heads reprovingly or snickered.

As I thought feverishly about how to prevent this disgrace, I suddenly halted at a tram stop. Passers-by were still staring at me, but not as much anymore because I'd stopped swinging the bowling ball so crazily. I had no idea where I wanted to take the tram, but it made no difference to me. Just so long as it came as soon as possible and took me away from this crowded street where I'd become a public spectacle.

Luckily, the tram had a second car, so we didn't have to be in the same one. There weren't a lot of passengers and we would have been easy to spot. They would certainly conclude that we were twins, and when you have a twin brother who is clearly crazy, what would be more natural than for them to question your sanity too?

I waited for me to enter the first car then rushed into the second. Overcome with dark forebodings, I went to the front of the second car to keep an eye on myself through the two windows. My fears were unfounded, however. I was no longer acting immoderately. I was sitting on an empty seat and had put the bag with the wine and the bowling ball on the seat in front of me. If you didn't count the hair, I no longer stood out. No one even looked at me.

The stops passed by one after the other, and I sat there calmly in the front car, looking out the window. Finally I could take a little breather in the rear car. I even sat down, although I didn't have a good view of myself that way. I hoped I had come to my senses. We were already quite far from the neighborhood where I live, and this helped put me at ease. If any more foolishness crossed my mind, at least we wouldn't be around anyone I knew.

As soon as I stood up in the front car, I did the same in the rear car. Then another problem arose. No one apart from the two of us intended to get off at the next stop. If I headed back after getting off, we would meet for sure. And then what? I had no answer to that question nor

any choice. I couldn't stay on the tram. How would I find myself if I got off at the next stop, without any idea which direction I'd taken?

These quandaries were resolved as soon as we got off the tram. I left the front car and headed forward towards a nearby church. Bewildered, I stayed behind at the stop. I don't go to church at all, let alone equipped with wine and a bowling ball. What was this all about? When I reached the arched door, I shifted the bowling ball to the hand carrying the bag and then pulled down on the enormous handle. I had to push the door with my shoulder to get it open.

I hesitated but a moment, then headed after myself. Even though I didn't feel like going into the church, how could I stay there and wait for me to come out? Who could abide that suspense? I paused before the door, holding onto the handle, and then finally I too pushed with my shoulder to open it. I slipped inside and the door closed behind me.

It was quite dark inside. The only light was produced by two rows of candles on the floor that seemed to outline a long lane from the door to the altar. I walked along that lane towards two people standing at the opposite end. I had to wait a little for my eyes to adjust to the darkness in order to make out the priest and nun. He was short and stout and she was slender and at least a head taller than he.

When I reached them, not a single word was spoken. I shook hands with the priest and bowed to the nun, who returned the bow with a curt movement of the chin, like the top of a pole snapping. I handed her the bag of bottles. She removed one, raised it to the nearest candle and nodded her head.

I gave the bowling ball to the priest, and then both of us headed towards the door. I had to get out of the way quickly because they were coming straight towards me. I looked around and spied some pillars to the left and right. I disappeared behind the one to the right and peeked out cautiously. I was standing with the priest at the beginning of the lane and the nun was at the other end, placing the three bottles between the last two candles. Then she moved aside.

The priest tested the ball in his hand for a moment. Then he bent over and threw it. The church was suddenly filled with thunder. Echoes

of the metal ball rolling on the stone floor came out of the darkness from all directions, forcing me to flinch in reflex. All eyes, including mine, were fixed on the glass pins full of wine as the ball bore down on them.

A strike was inevitable. The distance between the bottles seemed too small to let the ball through. But that's just what happened. The priest's feat was much harder than hitting the pins. The ball slipped between the left and center bottle as though guided with the greatest care.

The thud that sounded when the ball hit the base of the altar merged with two piercing sounds. The priest's rumbling shout sounded like wrath tumbling down from the firmament, but what stayed the longest in my ears was the nun's shriek, as though the bowling ball had hit her in a sore spot.

The silence that reigned after the shouts died away did not last long. It was shattered by the sound of the bowling ball once again. The nun had thrown it back towards the door, but gently, so the thunder was more subdued. The ball stopped right at my feet.

I was gripped by fear as I stood behind the pillar and watched myself pick up the ball. Knowing full well the extent of my skill, I feared the damage I could cause somewhere in the dark, far from the altar. The only safe things in the church were the three bottles. I could hit just about anything but what I aimed at.

Sometimes a man can misjudge himself. I was flabbergasted to see the ball head down the center of the lane as though guided by a groove. Sensing the inevitable, the nun raised her hands to her face and covered her eyes.

Broken glass from the three bottles and spilled wine splattered the nun's robe all the way up to her waist. This time there were no accompanying shouts. It seemed to me that she was sobbing quietly, but I might have been mistaken. Nothing happened for a time, as though everything in the church had turned to stone. She was the first to snap out of it. She shook the glass off her robe, then started down the lane towards the bowlers.

I shifted to the other side of the pillar to get a better look. No one had yet said a word. She stopped in front of me and stared down into my eyes. Her gaze didn't budge even when she removed her headdress. Long red hair, the same shade as mine, cascaded from under the black cloth.

She shook her head, loosening her locks slightly, then slid her fingers into the hair at the back of her neck. She rummaged around a while and took out something that had been hidden back there, holding whatever it was hidden tightly in her fist.

I wanted to draw a little nearer, but this, of course, was impossible. I was already standing there, watching up close. When she opened her fist, I didn't look surprised, as though I knew what would be there. Flames from the nearby candles danced in reflection on three jewels.

I didn't take them right away. First I turned towards the priest and extended my hand. He shook it after a brief hesitation. Then I bowed deeply to the nun. The pole now bent almost imperceptibly at the top. Finally, I stuck out the cupped palm of my hand and she poured the brilliant little stones into it.

As I was putting them in my coat pocket, the nun turned swiftly on her heel and headed towards the altar. The priest waited a moment and then followed her, although not as briskly. He stopped at every candle, bent down and extinguished it with his fingers.

I had to pull hard on the door to open it. I went out, leaving me inside to stare at the trail of darkness the priest was leaving behind him. It wasn't until he reached the last pair of candles that I snapped out of it. The nun had disappeared from sight long ago. Unconcerned as to whether someone would hear me, I covered the distance to the door in two steps, gave it a forceful tug, and left the church, too.

I ran after me. I was already on the other side of the street, rushing off somewhere, the raincoat fluttering behind me. From the way I was moving it seemed that I was very familiar with this neighborhood, although I had never been there before. I'd known where the church was, although I had never heard of it. It seemed I knew more than I knew that I knew.

It started to get dark. The streetlights hadn't been turned on yet. There weren't many stores in this part of town and the lighting in the display windows was subdued. There weren't many pedestrians, either. If I were to turn around, I could not fail to see me following me, but I was obviously not interested in what was going on behind my back. We went by a closed tailor's shop, then a shop full of knick-knacks and a shop with old-fashioned chandeliers and table lamps.

When I turned right, disappearing from view, I thought that I had gone into a shop. When I got closer I saw that it was an alley, barely thirty meters long and ending in a brick wall. I got there just in time to see me at the end of the alley as I opened a door on the left and went inside.

I'd made another wrong assumption. It wasn't the entrance to a house but to a shop selling secondhand books. I didn't go right up to it, but I took a sideways glance at the small display window. The glass hadn't been washed in a long time and the books behind it were stacked in disorder. I couldn't get a look at the inside without being seen.

Staying there in the alley was out of the question. When I came out of the bookstore I would run smack into myself. I went back to the street, a short distance away from the turn into the alley, and withdrew into a dark doorway. There was no danger of arousing suspicion since the street was almost empty. All that disturbed the silence was the sound of cars and the rattling tram passing in one direction or the other every few minutes.

Time dragged. What was I doing so long in the secondhand bookstore? I never stayed very long even in tastefully appointed bookstores. Was this some kind of ruse? Maybe I'd noticed that I was following myself and decided to shake me off the trail. Had I exited by some other door? I froze at the thought. I had to find out immediately.

I went back to the secondhand bookstore and stood in front of the window. The dirty glass and poor lighting made it hard to see inside. I had no choice. I reached for the handle, then jumped when a cluster of bells jingled above the door. I stopped in confusion, but no one paid any attention to me.

Although it hadn't seemed so from the outside, the room was rather long. Two elderly ladies were sitting at the counter on the right. They were dressed in identical bright yellow suits that clashed with the dreariness surrounding them, and both of them wore their gray hair in a bun. Staring at the chessboard between them, they didn't even raise their eyes towards me. I went in and closed the door to the sound of more bells.

At first I thought there was no one in the bookshop, but then I detected some movement in the gloom at the other end. I was crouched down next to a pile of books on the floor. Filled with relief, I went up to the long wall on the left. Shelves covered it from floor to ceiling, crammed with old books. As I browsed through them, I made my way towards the end of the room.

Now my back was turned towards me, so I glanced over my right shoulder from time to time to see what I was doing. I had opened a small book and was reading it in spite of the poor light. I stopped about halfway down the wall and I too took out a thick book and started leafing through it. My fingers felt dusty instantaneously.

The next time I glanced over my shoulder, I wasn't crouching anymore. I had stood up and was heading for the front of the store with long strides. I quickly turned towards the shelves so as not to be recognized, and after I slipped by me, I glanced over my left shoulder. I was convinced that I would go up to the counter and pay for the little book in my hand, but this didn't happen. I just passed by the two old ladies who were still engrossed in their game of chess and went outside with a sharp jingling of bells.

I couldn't believe my eyes. I had never stolen anything in all my life, and the last thing I'd steal would be a book. This was a sacrilege! Shame on me! Stealing from these two poor, trusting grannies. I might at least have stolen something with a little value. The slim volume couldn't have cost more than a few bucks. If I'd asked nicely, I might even have gotten it for free.

I could not let me get away with the theft, of course. I returned the dusty book to the shelf in haste, brushed my hands, then went up

to the counter, mulling over what would be the best thing to say. It wasn't easy. I'd never had to justify a wrongdoing before. It turned out, however, that no explanation was necessary. Even though I cleared my throat to get their attention, the old ladies kept their eyes riveted to the board.

I stood there before them for a moment, feeling doubly stupid, and then took out my wallet, found a bill that I felt was more than enough compensation for a little used book, and put it on the counter. I stopped briefly in the open door, my ears filled with jingling, and looked towards the counter. The money was still where I'd left it. As far as I was concerned, it could stay there forever, I thought bitterly. No one could consider me a thief anymore, that was what was important.

As I suspected, the alley was empty. I rushed to the end and looked right. I was walking down the street a little ways off, whistling. Matters were going from bad to worse; the thief was rejoicing after pulling off a job successfully. But setting aside the reasons for his satisfaction, who but a vagrant would act like that in a public place? Luckily there were no passers-by. I would surely have caused a scandal.

Whistling all the while, several minutes later I went into a flower shop. It was brightly lit, the only one in the whole neighborhood I supposed, and flowers in large brass containers covered the sidewalk in front of the shop. I quickened my pace. If I intended to repeat my exploit in the secondhand bookstore, this had to be prevented at all costs, even if it meant openly confronting myself.

Standing in front of the display window pretending to look over the flowers on the street, I kept an eye on what was happening inside, although I couldn't hear the conversation. The plump young florist nodded her head, smiling, then asked me something with a look of disbelief, came out from behind the counter and bent down, disappearing from view. When she stood up some time later, she was holding an enormous bouquet of white roses. It must have contained at least fifty flowers.

She trimmed some of the stems with a pair of clippers, wrapped the roses in transparent cellophane and tied a narrow red ribbon around

the bottom. The critical moment arrived when she gave me the bouquet. I drew closer to the door. If I took it and tried to run out of the shop without paying, I would prevent this, by force if need be. Even though I had no experience of this kind of confrontation, I imagined I would be able to cope with myself.

Luckily, this wasn't necessary. I took out my wallet and paid for the roses. I even waved my hand dismissively at the change the florist offered me. Her broad smile and bow indicated that I was being generous. I moved quickly away from the entrance, once again pretending to look over the flowers. Who could figure me out now? First I had stolen something almost worthless and right afterwards I turned out to be gallantly open-handed.

I left the flower shop but didn't continue down the street. I went up to the curb and looked left. Not long afterward I raised my hand up high, the one holding the book. A green taxi stopped at the curb. I opened the back door and got in. The taxi driver turned to me, I gave him the address, and he drove on.

I had to act quickly. If I didn't find a taxi soon, everything was lost. I had no idea where I was heading with so many flowers. I looked down the street anxiously but the first taxi that appeared was taken. I felt the cold fingers of panic start to tighten.

Then I saw a lighted sign on one of the other cars. Throwing caution to the wind, I ran almost in front of it, waving both arms. The blue car stopped with a screech. I jumped into the back, pointed straight ahead and blurted out the detective movie cliché:

“Follow that green taxi.”

Asking no unnecessary questions, the driver floored the accelerator. The sudden departure pressed me into the seat. We caught up with the green taxi at the third intersection. When we stopped at a red light, there was only one car between us.

The taxi driver clearly had experience in tailing. He avoided the spot right behind the green taxi so we wouldn't be noticed, but he kept the distance between us small so we wouldn't lose it in the traffic that was worsening the further we went. He didn't try to strike

up a conversation either. He must have understood I wasn't in the mood.

The trip took a quarter of an hour. When the green taxi stopped, I was filled with bewilderment and discomfort. What was I doing here? I'd never been in the red light district. As I paid, my eyes avoided the taxi driver's. I could only hope he understood that I would never go to a place like this unless I was following someone. I sighed with relief when he drove off without a word.

The flashy hair color, swinging bowling ball and whistling probably would not have singled me out here, but what I was carrying now certainly did. Indeed, who would come to this area with an enormous bouquet of roses? Once again people turned to look as I went by. They even chuckled openly and pointed at my back.

I paid no attention, apparently not bothered in the least. The bouquet soon proved to have a good side too. The flowers seemed to discourage the garishly painted ladies and occasional, equally ostentatious males from approaching me. But I, having no such protection, was besieged.

It was hard to get rid of the vermin. At first I thanked them politely for the services they offered, saying that wasn't the reason I was there. This didn't put them off, however. They started to tug at my sleeve and stick their faces into mine, assailing me with the heavy odor of cheap perfume. In the end I had to use my hands to fight them off, bringing a flood of insults and even threats.

I stopped in front of the only house with no one standing in front of it. It was a low, narrow two-story building that seemed to be trapped between its stocky neighbors. The two windows were covered with pleated burgundy-colored drapes. I smoothed my hair a bit, put the book into my coat pocket and then rang the bell. The door opened right away, but no one was behind it. As soon as I went inside, the door closed behind me.

More trouble. I could stay outside, but curiosity gnawed at me. How could I miss such a chance? I was vaguely aware that the voyeuristic desire to watch myself in a brothel was rather odd, but strangely enough, this didn't bother me very much.

Just a few moments before, I'd felt a great resistance to going in myself. It's always hardest the first time. But since I had just broken the ice, it was easier for me. I went up to the entrance and rang the bell again.

The door opened as before. I hesitated briefly and then went in. After the door closed behind me, seemingly on its own, I was left in reddish gloom. Everything around me was covered with the same drapes I'd seen on the windows: the walls, floor, ceiling. It was as if I'd been enclosed in a box lined with velvet.

Before me was a small vestibule that ended in a steep staircase. As I stood there uncertainly, a very tiny figure appeared at the top of the stairs. At first I thought she was a child, and then I realized that the woman was a midget. She was wearing a long terrycloth robe, also burgundy, and was barefoot. She bowed and crooked her finger, indicating I was to go up.

I started up the stairs against my better judgment. She waited for me to reach her, and then, with a smile, motioned down the hall to her left. I peered in that direction cautiously. The hall was empty, short and dark-red throughout. There was a door in the middle on the right, and beyond it something resembling a small window with the curtain drawn.

She went first, her head turned towards me, a smile glued to her face. When we reached the door, she stretched out her hand, palm up. I stared at it briefly before I understood and quickly reached for my wallet, but didn't know how much to take out. I thought of asking, but that seemed gauche, so I took out a bill and put it in her hand.

Her hand didn't budge and her smile tightened. I promptly took out another bill, which broadened her smile, and received a new bow. Both notes disappeared down her cleavage under the terrycloth robe. She pulled down the handle and drew the door towards her, stepping aside.

A multitude of tiny eyes turned my way, looking at me from all sides except the large empty bed in the middle of the room. I had never seen so many poodles in one place, or for that matter so many dogs

of any kind. Their white fur seemed to take on a bloody hue in the subdued dark-red light.

I backed away instinctively, as though confronted by great danger, although not a single poodle made any threatening sound. On the contrary, most of them were wagging their tails. I started to shake my head, horror-stricken. Still smiling, the midget calmly closed the door.

As I leaned against the wall in alarm, my eyes as big as saucers, she took my hand, patted the back of it, and then led the way further down the hall. I went docilely, like an obedient child. At the end of the hall was another steep staircase that we took up to the second floor.

There we were greeted by the same empty hall with the covered window and door. When she pulled me towards it, I refused to go, shaking my head wordlessly. She patted the back of my hand again, and this time stroked my cheek as well. Even so, when we continued she pulled me more than I went of my own free will.

We stopped in front of the small window. Her hand stretched out again. Several long moments passed before I took out my wallet. I chose the smallest bill I had and placed it in her palm, then swiftly put the wallet back in my pocket without giving her a chance to ask for more. When this bill disappeared under her robe, the pint-sized woman opened the curtain on the window.

I didn't look up right away. She had to nudge me in the back before I finally looked through the square glass. In the middle of the otherwise empty room was an ordinary wooden table without any covering. On the right side, sitting on a stool, was a girl dressed in an orange firefighter's suit. Bright red curls flowed from under her high-crowned metal helmet.

She was holding the little book I had stolen in the secondhand bookstore. Although I couldn't hear anything, I could see that she was reading out loud. On the table in front of her was a small pile of torn paper. Soon she finished reading the latest page. She tore it out with a brisk movement and added a new handful of confetti to the pile.

I was sitting across from her, in the raincoat, eating. I would take the crown of a white rose from the bouquet on the table, put it on a

plate, cut it in half with a knife, stick it on a fork, dip it into something that looked like sauce or dressing and put it in my mouth. This clearly gave me great pleasure, although it made my stomach turn.

The curtain was suddenly pulled across the window. I looked at the midget questioningly, and she stretched out her hand in reply. I shook my head angrily. She shrugged her shoulders, dropped the smile and motioned towards the stairs. I toyed briefly with the idea of defying her, then gave it up. I had already seen everything there was to see. It would only make me nauseous again. Really, eating roses! I turned and left.

At the bottom of the first staircase I looked behind me. For some reason I thought that the midget would see me out, but there was no one there. As I passed by the door on the first floor, I heard growling and then an angry bark. I quickened my steps and almost ran down the second staircase. As the door opened in front of me, I breathed a sigh of relief.

I was in for a wait. I wasn't going to stay up there until I ate the whole bouquet, was I? In that case they might take me out on an ambulance stretcher. I moved a little away from the entrance and stood by a wall. This soon turned out to be a bad idea. Passers-by started to give me the eye. I didn't understand why I attracted their attention until one came up and openly asked me how much.

I don't know what stunned me the most: the question or the eruption of curses that I poured on the would-be customer. I never dreamed that something like that could come out of my mouth. This was where I was plainly mistaken. Vocabulary of that nature was quite suited to the person currently giving vent to such eccentricities on the second floor.

I felt like going back inside the narrow building and confronting the midget lady once again. I'd pay her as much as she asked, go into that room and sharply order myself to hurry up, regardless of how much I enjoyed what I was doing. Was any pleasure worth the humiliation I was going through?

That's when the door opened again. Not only did I come out, but I was in a terrible rush. Once outside, I didn't stop. I ran in the direction

we'd come from, as though being chased, although no one else appeared at the door to the house, which closed immediately.

There was no time to hesitate. I ran after me. The sight of two men on the threshold of old age chasing each other must have looked odd even in this part of town, and the sound of whistles, expletives and even shouts soon started to echo behind us. I wanted the earth to open up and swallow me for the shame.

The chase did have a good side, though. In a twinkling we were out of the red light district and onto a busy street. The catcalls stopped, but people parted before us, sending us reproachful looks. Luckily there were no policemen in the vicinity to stop us and see what was going on, which was the last thing I needed.

Even though, owing to my regular walks, I was in good shape for a man of fifty-six, this demented running was too much for me. Covered with sweat, I soon started to grow short of breath. I would have had an easier time had I known where and why we were running, and particularly how much longer it would take until we got there, but I had no way of knowing.

When we finally stopped, everything seemed clear. A pharmacy, of course! This was exactly what someone who had stuffed himself with white roses needed. We ran inside at close intervals. I almost ran into my own back. The older pharmacist and the young woman who was being served eyed us suspiciously.

Panting, I started to list the medicine I wanted to buy. I listened in bewilderment, standing behind myself in the line. As far as I could tell, none of it had anything to do with indigestion. The pharmacist took three vials of pills from the shelf, each a different color: blue, yellow and brown.

I stuffed them into the pockets of the raincoat, paid the bill and hurried out. The pharmacist was left with her hand stretched forth, holding the change. I felt the need to offer some explanation, but since nothing convincing came to mind, I followed my own lead. Turning around, I too rushed out of the pharmacy.

The pursuit continued, although it slowed down a little. Had I been

following someone else, and not myself, I probably would not have been able to keep up the pace, but as it was there was no fear of being left behind.

When we turned off the boulevard onto a side street, the running turned into fast walking. It would have been difficult to run there, anyway, because of the many small restaurants whose tables covered a good part of the sidewalk. I hoped we might sit for a moment in one of them, just long enough to catch our breath, but there clearly was no time to rest.

We did stop in a little while, though. Since I was only a few steps behind me, my loud panting seemed to echo back to me. The window of the store we were standing in front of was full of used theatrical equipment: costumes, overcoats and tricots, boots and ballet slippers, eyeglasses and monocles, wigs, fake beards, moustaches and noses, a jewelry box, a snuff box and powder box, lances, swords and daggers, parts of set designs, framed posters, autographed pictures of actors, programs, opera glasses.

We went in one after the other without opening the door twice. The counter was at the opposite end of the store. I went there, while I stayed by the entrance, staring at an upright suit of armor. I pointed to something on the top of the shelf behind the slim, hunchbacked salesman. The man climbed up a small stepladder and took down two masks: comedy and tragedy—symbols of the theatrical arts. He held them out to me.

I chose the tragedy mask and then beckoned the salesman to draw near. I whispered something to him, and he nodded. I paid and headed for the door. I passed by me without looking at myself, and went out. I was just about to step out too, when the salesman called to me.

“Sir!”

I turned around.

“This is for you.” He raised the comedy mask.

I looked at him in surprise, pointing my thumb at myself questioningly.

“Yes, for you.” He came out from behind the counter and headed for me.

“Thank you,” I said tersely after taking the mask. I doubt I would have known what else to say even if I hadn’t been in a hurry. I gave a little nod and went out.

I had already gone pretty far. I had to run again to catch up with me. The mask was light, probably made of aluminum, with slits for the eyes and mouth. It was worn by holding onto a short handle that ended under the chin. The gold paint was scratched in places, as though someone had tried out steel fingernails on the smiling face.

The restaurants and stores thinned out as we continued down the street. They were replaced by low houses in which, judging by the unlighted windows, no one seemed to live. There weren’t many street-lights here, and it had already grown dark, so it became harder and harder to see. Even though I was walking close behind me, had I not known that it was me I would soon not be able to recognize myself.

Owing to the poor lighting I couldn’t tell where we were when we finally got there. The brick wall we’d followed for the last fifty meters had no distinguishing marks. It could have been a large warehouse or a tall fence. I heard a metallic sound when I knocked on it. I had to stare hard to make out the dark outline of a door in the wall.

A lighted rectangle appeared head-high. I put on the tragedy mask. Darkness reigned once again when the rectangle disappeared, but not for long. The door opened inward with creaking hinges and I was bathed in light. I entered quickly and the door closed noisily behind me. I was alone in the darkness.

I might have been uncertain as to what to do, but the unease I felt decided matters for me. I didn’t feel like staying there. I went up to the door and knocked. The metal was rough and cold. A small window opened and a large male head, totally bald, appeared. He glared at me without a word.

As I brought the comedy mask to my face, I wondered whether it might be wiser to stay outside. But there was no time to change my mind. The door opened with another creak and a giant appeared.

He was naked to the waist, wearing only broad cotton pants and slippers. His skin was shining, as though rubbed with oil. He waved

me inside. I couldn't refuse that invitation. After all, I couldn't turn my back on myself.

Closing the door behind me, the giant turned and indicated the long hallway extending before me. The floor was covered with a thick black carpet. Framed pictures lined both walls, lighted from the ceiling by the slanting beams of spotlights.

I gave a brief nod to the Goliath and then headed down the hallway. As I followed my distant figure, I glanced at the paintings I passed. They were not ordinary portraits. The faces of the men and women of varying ages were anything but cheerful. They expressed anxiety, worry, fear, even despair. It was as if they had just come face to face with something dreadful. I scurried after myself.

I caught up with me at the place where the hallway widened into an enormous room. It was illuminated by four chandeliers resembling huge Christmas trees. The floor and walls were lined with marble, so white that it sparkled in the bright light. On the right-hand side were six tall windows with black drapes pulled over them.

I headed towards the left-hand side and the massive roulette table in the center of the wall. The croupier at its head was a girl with short red hair and a round face sprinkled with freckles. She was wearing a white blouse and green vest, with a matching green bow tie.

An easel had been set up behind her and a painter was sitting on a tall round chair, holding a palette. He was young as well and sported a thick beard. He was wearing a formal evening suit, and his tie was so colorful that it looked as though he used it to wipe his brush.

On the opposite side was a rather stout middle-aged violinist in a gray evening gown. Her hair was the color of coal and it reached almost to her waist. She was looking at the floor, head bowed.

On the wall above the roulette table hung two large paintings in heavy engraved black frames. The left one depicted a gold mask with its crescent-shaped mouth turned upwards, while the right one had the crescent turned downwards.

When I sat on the only chair at the table, placing the mask in my lap, the painter stood up and set to work. He mixed the paint on the palette

a little with his brush, then started to lay it on the canvas with short, brisk movements. At the same time, the violinist raised her instrument and bow and started to play, her head still bowed.

When I too went up to the table, no one paid any attention to me. I stood behind myself, holding the mask behind my back. Although there were no bets on the table, the croupier spun the roulette wheel, then threw the ivory ball in the opposite direction. When it stopped, the long rake used to clear the bets was pointing at number three.

I reached into the pocket of my raincoat and took out the three vials. Without a moment's hesitation I put all three on the space for black numbers. The ball once again went on its circular path. As though uninterested in the outcome of the throw, I looked at the central area with numbers in front of me, arms resting on the edge of the table. I, however, bent over slightly so I could see better.

This time the croupier pointed at number twelve, then reached out with the rake to clear the vials. She drew them in with a skilled movement, without knocking any of them over. They disappeared into a round opening next to the roulette wheel. The rake went up again, waiting for a new bet.

My hand plunged once more into my coat pocket. Again there was no hesitation. I put the three jewels on the space for even numbers. My eyes focused on the table top once more, but I drew closer to the head of the table.

I didn't understand how I could be so indifferent. These weren't pills of no consequence but authentic gems. Where did I acquire the audacity to take such a risk? I had never gambled before. What if an odd number came up?

I stared dully at the tiny ball that came to land in pocket number fifteen. There was a lump in my throat as I watched the shovel at the top of the rake pick up the three precious stones and carry them inexorably towards the opening in the table next to the croupier. They disappeared as though swallowed up by a dark, round maw.

The monster was clearly insatiable because the rake went up once again, inviting new bets. But what was left to bet? The answer appeared

straightaway: the mask in my lap went into the space for the first eighteen numbers.

The croupier bowed. The painter placed his palette and brush on the chair and clapped. The violinist raised her head for the first time, and the flicker of a smile crossed her lips. When the ball was rolled for the fourth time, I went right up to the head of the table. My eyes began spinning too, unintentionally following its circular movement.

My eyes kept moving even after the ball stopped, as though wanting to move it from number twenty-six where it had callously landed. Not wanting to watch the rake pull in the new booty, I turned towards myself. I was sitting stock-still, staring blankly, as though this had nothing to do with me.

The croupier cleared her throat. I didn't see what she did with the mask. The opening was too small for it to go inside. The rake pointed to the ceiling again. The painter picked up his palette and brush, but did not go back to painting. The violinist was holding her instrument at the ready, but did not put the bow to the strings.

I got up from the chair. The game was over. I had nothing else to lose. What a dupe I'd made of myself! A man really doesn't know himself, at least not when he's patently losing his self-control.

In utmost disbelief, I watched as I took off the raincoat, rolled it up and put it on the number zero. Although the space was considerably larger than the other numbers, the coat covered it completely, even going a little outside the rectangle.

The painter started laying paint on the canvas in feverish, almost frenzied strokes, as though suddenly overcome by a burst of inspiration. The tempo of the violin, striking up the same moment, lagged not a bit. The croupier threw the ball again, more forcefully than the other times. It spun so fast I thought it would fly out of the wheel.

When it started to slow down a feeling of sadness came over me. I couldn't take this lunacy any longer. I couldn't watch the final circuits of the ball or my own self as I stared at the tabletop. I raised my eyes from the roulette table to the two paintings hanging above it.

And that's when it happened.

The ball hadn't landed yet. Although I noticed the change, at first it seemed a matter of course, like something I see every day. It was not until the large wheel turned silent that I finally figured out that paintings don't change places just like that. The comedy mask should have been on the left-hand side and the tragedy mask on the right. And not the other way around, as they were now.

I stared fixedly at the two large frames, although there was a stir around me. It took a loud noise to snap me out of my fascination. The croupier stood up and broke the rake. The painter angrily jabbed the sharp end of the brush into the canvas, making holes and tears. The violin was on the floor and the violinist was stamping on it in wrath.

The wheel was moving very slowly now, carrying the ball where it rested in the only green pocket—the zero. On top of the raincoat covering this number's space lay the mask with the mouth turned down.

I first took the mask, then the coat, paying no attention to the demonstrations of anger around me. I threw the raincoat over my arm and headed towards the hallway. I didn't linger a moment. I headed after myself.

We weren't walking one behind the other anymore, but side by side. The hallway seemed shorter, as though we were getting to the giant faster than we'd reached the room. He was looming in front of the door, arms crossed on his naked chest. I handed him the tragedy mask I'd just received as my winnings. He took it, but didn't move. I quickly gave him my comedy mask.

The darkness we entered wasn't the least bit forbidding anymore. We weren't in it very long, though. Still walking side by side, we continued down the street, which started to curve to the right. At the end of the bend we reached a new boulevard with a river running along the opposite side. I hadn't been in this part of town, but I knew approximately where we were located.

The boulevard was bathed in neon light and had more cars than pedestrians. We took the first pedestrian crossing to the other side and turned left, going along the river under a row of bushy chestnut trees. We didn't talk. A man only rarely has something to say to himself.

A stone bridge soon appeared before us. It had a low, wide parapet and ornate lighting. We stopped in the middle and stared at the water, where the lights were shimmering in reflection as though in a dark, trembling mirror. A brightly-lit boat full of cheerful music started to emerge festively from under the bridge.

When it had gone downriver, I looked around me. There weren't any vehicles or people on the bridge just then. I laid the raincoat across the parapet, then climbed onto it. For a moment it seemed that I would turn and say something. But I didn't.

I took a step over the edge and disappeared at once, as though sucked in by the darkness below. I didn't watch myself go. I knew I wouldn't see a thing. Just as I didn't hear any splashing sound that might have disturbed the calm evening waters. Leaving the raincoat on the parapet, I headed back to the riverbank. Tomorrow I will buy a new raincoat with lapels of equal width.