

Reflections

CAREFUL,” LHOTA CALLED to a fisherman he didn’t know from Adam, “you’ve got a bite!”

“Aha, thank you,” the man replied affably, “would you like to land it?”

Lhota promptly slid down the embankment and took the rod. There was nothing on the line, and when Lhota pulled it in, he discovered that the hook had a red string attached to it.

“Isn’t this where the worm goes?” he asked, annoyed.

“Yes,” the fisherman said with a sheepish smile.

“Have you caught anything yet?”

“Never.”

Lhota returned to the embankment, not knowing whether or not to laugh. How is it possible, he thought, how could it ever be possible to fish this way?

“You see, I’m not fishing,” the fisherman remarked, “I’m only sitting here with a rod so that people won’t laugh when they see me.”

“Are you from around here?”

“I live in that cottage behind us. I’ve been walking over to this place for many years, because I love it here. But I don’t fish.”

Lhota looked into the fisherman’s large, shining eyes. “You’re not well, are you?”

“I can’t walk well. Not for ages now. I haven’t been past this point for years – But it’s beautiful here.”

“Indeed,” Lhota said doubtfully. The bare embankments stretched as far as the eye can see, and between them flowed the wide, gray river.

“You ought to be here at sunset,” the sick man said, “or in the morning. I sit here from morning on, and it’s never tiresome. Later, when I go home, I sleep without dreaming; night after night I sleep beautifully and dreamlessly. It’s only in winter – ”

“What happens in winter?”

“Nothing, just dreams. In the winter I can’t come here, and I sleep night and day, without pause, until I’m too tired to sleep any longer. In summer I’m here every day.”

Deep in thought, Lhota looked at the water: it flowed by, broad and formless, chafing against the rocks in never-ending streams; he watched it rippling, undulating, churning, until his eyes failed him. And then it was a rushing river no more, only a purling sound which did not linger but kept flowing away and disappearing without bounds, without limits, an escape from everything –

“And in winter I dream only of water,” the sick man continued. “The same dream appears to me all day and night, for months on end, interrupted only when I wake up frightened. It only ceases in the summer, when I see actual water.”

Lhota, his mind slightly reeling, narrowed his eyes. “I wouldn’t want to dream about flowing water.”

“No, it’s not really flowing,” the invalid said. “I don’t dream about real water. There is this great river which stands without moving, and all along it flow reflections. They drift away much as those leaves are being carried away in the current.”

“What kind of reflections?”

“Things mirrored. Riverbanks reflected on the surface. They float by on the water as rapidly as those waves and never cause a ripple. Perhaps they come all the way from the mountains. There are giant trees which slip along quietly with their crowns facing down, as if they were descending into the bottomless sky. Even the sky flows along this motionless river,

as do the sun and the clouds and the stars. I've seen reflections of hills and riverside villages go drifting by, and reflections of people, too. Sometimes a white house, standing all by itself, or a lighted window."

"It's an absurd dream," said Lhota.

"Frightening. Sometimes a mirrored city floats by, and the lights burning along its waterfront. The leaves of the trees shiver on the water's surface, as if a wind were blowing, but they too never make the water ripple. A young girl wrings her white hands and is carried farther on. And it seems to me in the reflection that someone standing on the opposite bank wants to look at me or signal me, but the image in the water flows on by, even with my hand placed to my eyes."

The sick man was silent for a moment. "And sometimes," he began again, "it is only the light from a lamppost on some forlorn dock along the riverbank; it sways as if in a November wind and floats on by. Nothing can stop, nothing lingers. Nothing disturbs the water, and nothing is above or outside of it. Eternity is horrifying."

Lhota stared into the water; wave after wave returned without end to the stones beneath his feet and retreated again in persistent play, which both annoyed and comforted him.

"Often," the sick man said, "I wake up covered with sweat and scared to death, and I say to myself: Eternity is horrifying. Wave after wave arrives and breaks against the rocks, rock after rock rolls down into the waves, and the waves scatter them. But I've seen the surface, and the surface doesn't dash or break against anything. The light and shadows of everything on the surface simply pass away. Hills roll away and trees rush past; towns and bluffs flow by, the young girl wrings her hands in vain, and the beginning and the end of the world rush by, mirrored. But the surface is never rippled and cannot be. It touches nothing and can never touch anything, ever. And who-

ever looks upon it sees only the mere reflections of things vanishing, stripped of reality.”

On the opposite embankment a man stopped and watched for a moment. “How about it,” he finally called over, “are they biting?”

“They aren’t,” the invalid replied merrily. – “I love to sit here.” He was speaking to Lhota again. “When a leaf falls into the water, the water trembles and I tremble, too, but not from any anxiety. Sometimes, at sunset, I think about God. Eternity is horrifying.”

Lhota looked at him quizzically.

“At times,” the invalid continued, “I’ve seen such curious ripples on the water that it’s impossible to comprehend from whence they’ve come. Sometimes a breaking wave flashes more beautifully than the others and in the sky there are natural phenomena. – This happens very seldom. But then I think: why couldn’t this be God? Perhaps He is precisely that which is most fleeting, perhaps His reality is the sudden breaking and flashing of a wave; it is singular, incomprehensible, but it happens and passes on. – I’ve often pondered this, but then, I have such a limited horizon, it’s been years since I’ve been farther than here. It’s possible that in people, too, just such a ripple or flash occurs, and then it breaks. It must break. True reality must be paid for with destruction. Ah, the sun’s already going down.”

A young, barefoot girl was now standing behind the sick man. “Yes, we’re going,” he said. “Good night, sir. Look, now – now,” he pointed to the river. “It’s never the same twice. Good night.”

Slowly and impassively the girl led him home. The river was nacreous, endlessly varied, and Lhota, his mind steadily reeling, went on staring at the unrelenting play of waves.