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FROM HOME

JURGIS JANKUS

(SHORT STORY)

Light rain was falling like a fine mist. Clouds descended to the tops of the pines, and the smell of dampness covered branches of trees, roofs of houses, and the well-worked fields of Kalnėnai. Everywhere in the air, in every little branch of pine, even in the gray drops hanging on the needles of the pines, everything was full of silence. Nothing disturbed it. Not a bird nor an animal was heard, not even the baying of a dog. Along the fringes of the forest, along the sandy road, with their wagons filled to overflowing, moved the ones who were running away. But even their going did not disturb the quiet, which had covered as if with silver veil that whole peaceful little corner nestled among the pines. The runaways not only did not speak among themselves but also did not urge the horses on out loud, as if afraid someone might hear and stop them.

Andrius Blažys leaned on the picket fence and looked toward the edge of the forest. He hadn't closed his eyes all night. The last three months everything had quieted down so much, it seemed it might just go on this way until the Germans would bring together more forces to bear down upon the Russians and would push them back. Still, there had been nothing to indicate they were indeed getting ready to do something.

Until yesterday afternoon. Blasts, such as he had never heard before in his life. Not even in the First World War, not even a couple years ago, when at the break of dawn the iron might of the Germans had rolled like a dreadnought toward the East. Then there had been shooting, a tremendous amount of shooting, but yesterday they had roared like a cloud of ice. All of a sudden they had roared and roared — and then had died away. Everything had become quiet and had stayed that way. The idea had come to mind this storm had not come from the side of the Bolsheviks but that it was the Germans who had halted the movement of the other side. Although his son says it was the others who had crushed the German front, what does he know. If it had been crushed they would have been here long ago. They are not so stupid to wait until the Germans recover. So it was probably they themselves who had gotten hit.

Wrestling with such thoughts he had tossed about on his bed until midnight when, he had risen to take a look around and had been astonished: the entire patch of sky between his stand of pines and the state forest far off to the left had gleamed with fires. He had counted fifteen and then, having walked around his stand of pines, he had counted twenty three more. And no other sound had been heard other than that of the flames racing heavenward. "That's what happens to people's toil and sweat," he said out loud to himself in the silence of the night. "Well, if you really want to fight, then fight, go crazy, beat each other to death, but why do you torture people? Don't you know there are more than just Germans and Russians living in this world? There are also people. How have they sinned against anyone?"

With these words he left the corner of the pines and returned to lean upon his fence. He stood there, leaning and chasing one thought after another — but also from time to time without thought, simply holding on, alone with his. unease.

As the gray of dawn became lighter, he felt his wife come out of their cottage and again he spoke out loud:

"So what do they have to go for? Flocking as if to the festival of St. Rokas. It's so peaceful ... If the others had broken through, they would have been here long ago. They're probably running again. You can't see the smoke through the fog, but last night all the houses over there were burning. And look how they're forcing the animals across the sandy lands! They could wait right here until it was time to go back. But even then. And where do they think they're going? What do they think they'll find, when Satan has already laid everything to waste over there. People will have to live on bare fields."

He talked, but he himself could not really say to whom he was saying these words, because saying them he did not even look toward his wife.

"We know why they are going," she answered. Looking too at the forest edge. "If he said that the German front has been crushed, then that's the way it is. The Germans themselves told him that. Maybe they're sneaking out through the forests quietly, so that fewer people would run. Why they're running we all know, but what they'll find only God himself knows. Obviously, there's no one waiting to welcome anyone there. Who doesn't know that it isn't good to leave one's home, to leave everything, but the heart does not decide that. Even if you stay, what's to be done, when your house is no longer yours, your work is no longer yours. Even if they don't turn it to ashes, they'll put someone else here in our place, and then they'll just load us up and ship us off. Like the last time. As if we've forgotten . . . Us, we're just us. Even if they take us away, our days are numbered anyway, but the children. Surely among people we wouldn't perish."

From afar the woman tried gingerly to turn the talk in her direction, but a sudden anger seized the old man. He turned away from the fence and stared at her with his gray, time-bleached, eyes.

"Don't talk to me about your 'people!' As if anyone is waiting there with cakes. Run! Bolt! Go like crazy! Crab up your skirts and run! Like the freaky winds. You're all the same. Just run, just scatter everything along the sides. Everything! To the last crumb!"

He wasn't talking anymore but was shouting so loud even the dew soaked pine forest echoed. And he wasn't shouting any longer at his wife, for in the middle of his words he had turned again to the fence. He didn't lean on it; instead he grasped the posts with both hands, so hard that his knuckles were white, and he shouted to the fields and forests. Probably so that even those who were still moving along the edge of the forest might have heard. So that all those might hear who of their own will would leave their homes to go out and scatter everything away.

To leave. To emptiness. To nothingness. From here, where for sixty years he had broken apart every larger clod of dirt, where he had turned this sandy pine-producing sand-soil into fertile earth. Oh that one should . . . that you should . . .

The wife quietly stepped away inside; so quietly, even the door made no sound. She put her arms around her daughter and both of them looked through the fogged up window to the East, from whence came destruction. Unstoppable, implacable, like death itself. Through that same window she herself had seen the fires in the night. When one had started to die out, soon another had lifted its flames to the sky, as if the world itself had caught afire.

"If someone would come and tell us how it would really be, then we'd know if we should leave everything and go, or if we should fold our hands and wait until everything stops roaring," she said, and not to her daughter, but straight to the pane of glass.

She looked at the bent back of her husband, who was still standing by the fence. Pain tore at her heart. Her life had seen it torn more than once. When her daughter had died, when the Russians had deported her son. It had torn even more deeply when the Germans had found the mutilated body of her son in the NKVD garage. It had torn deeply then, but in a different way. Then it had torn from loss, but now it was tearing because man is so paltry a thing, so powerless, and against what? Against that self-same man. Without moving her lips she whispered, "Dear Lord, if this hour I did not have these living ones I would have no worry, my heart would not even ache. I would give myself up to your will and would just sit here. Let be what must be. But, why, You Yourself have placed them all in my weak hands? The children and my husband, who also has a heart, but who just doesn't want to open it. Oh God, oh God!" she quietly lamented, so softly even her daughter could barely hear.

"It's as quiet as a Sunday morning," Kęstutis, the last living son of the Blažys family, interrupted his mother's thoughts as he came in through the door. "The birds are all gone, the shepherds are sleeping, and what the Germans and the Russians are doing only they know."

He had been like this from early youth. Whatever subject he would touch he would turn it on its side, would make a joke, would even turn his own pain into laughter. These words of his rendered his mother and sister even more sorrow-stricken, and they could not find words with which to answer him. The house grew even more silent than the outdoors; only the pendulum of the old wall clock continued to tick rhythmically and mundanely, but this ticking just served to accentuate the silence.

The son stood a while. He touched a colorful rug that had been placed on a bench, and then said,

"The weather is warm, the mist is heavy, the fog drizzles along the ground — there will be plenty of mushrooms. Even tomorrow we'll be able to gather baskets full of them."

He spoke unconcernedly and even with a slight smile on his lips. But he realized at once how out of place this was and his voice trembled anxiously of itself.

"Have you finished harnessing the horses?" his sister asked. Her voice was also soft: burdened, like a sigh, as if she were afraid someone might hear.

"I harnessed a team. We'll be able to start out and speed right along to the church festival. St. Simon-Jude's. Did you see that the sacristan has been burning candles from midnight already? Hope we make it on time for High Mass. I don't want to get there only to put out the candles."

The mother suddenly turned from the window and looked at her son. It had struck her that a healthy person does not talk like this. Could the child be getting confused? But Kęstutis was looking very calmly through another window, not at all like a madman would. Except that his face was pale, and his lips were trembling, as if he were striving with all his might to hold back the tears. And perhaps words as well. Not such as he had spoken but totally different. The kind he usually kept to himself.

Then she turned, came up close to him, and put her hand on her child's shoulder. Not the whole hand, but just the tips of her work thickened fingers. She wanted to tell him to go to his father and talk to him man to man. If everyone is going, and if the Germans had placed cannon at the edge of the pine forest, no good is to come anyway. She was still searching for words when her son began to speak just as if he were still talking about gathering mushrooms.

"Look at father. He's dug a hole all by himself, and now he wants to put a roof over it to keep the rain off."

"Kęstutis, dear son, how can you talk like that at a time like this ..."

Kęstutis grasped his mother's fingers with a firm grip and said, "I'm sorry, Mama, I didn't mean it angrily, but when —"

His voice broke off, his face trembled, his mouth twisted convulsively. Now. they stood, holding each other. It was completely light outside and they could clearly see the wagons working their way along the edge of the forest. It was even possible now to recognize who it was that was going. A group of German soldiers trudged through the fringe of the pine forest. Not like people but like colored shadows. One of them stepped to the side and came up to the people in the wagons: he said something and hurried back to the other soldiers. He had probably ordered the people in the wagons to move faster, because one of the men the soldier had spoken to immediately pulled on the reins and the horses jumped into a trot. In that same moment the father turned from the fence and inspected the ditch. He shoveled the dirt in several places where it had been dug up out of the ditch and tossed it further away. He looked about as if wanting to be sure no one was coming to help him, then he pushed his hat back and turned toward the barn, where piles of wood were stacked in a shed.

The ditch he had begun to dig a long time ago, as soon as he had heard that the Russians had reached Kaunas.

"What for?" Kęstutis had joked. "Do you think they will come here to fight? One morning you'll just wake up and there'll be a chekist behind the door. "Hey, tovarisch! Get dressed," he'll say, "and *paidiom* to Siberia." But his father had told Kęstutis first to wipe the mother's milk from his lips and only then to teach his father.

"Do you think the Germans will let them come into their country so easily? You'll see what happens when they come this far. I know what happened during the first one. Not only did people crawl into holes themselves, but they dug them for their animals as well. Otherwise many of them would have wound up dead. When I get dug in, into this earth, let them fight for weeks. Let them fight as much as they want. Now, none of you want to lift a finger to help me, but when things get rough, you'll come. And how you'll come. Crawling for your lives." That was what he had said then: now he pulled beams out from under the roof. Thick ones, planed on two sides. The same ones he had been planning, just before the Russians had come, to use in building a special small kitchen at the end of the stables, so they wouldn't have to prepare fodder for the animals in the dwelling house. But when they had come, when suddenly everything had become no longer one's own, he had left the beams for a better time. Now he gathered them to cover his hole.

Kęstutis turned from the window.

"Father dug himself a hole right here, but where have we?" he began. "Maybe it will be like he said: we'll all fit there until the NKVD types arrive and pull us out, one by one."

His voice was now dark, heavy, and cold as ice. So cold, if you pierced your heart itself with his frost, you would feel no pain. It would freeze even the pain.

"What's the matter with you today? Enough, Kęstutis! Be a human. Co, talk to him. He doesn't listen to us, but he'll surely listen to you. He can't want what happened to Vytukas to happen to you," again his mother urged him.

"He won't listen, Mama. I talked to him; last night I talked to him. He ordered me to stay, too. He said, the Russians will have learned and will return different from the way they were. He won't listen. Do you think it was easy for me to watch him drag those beams all by himself? If he would listen, I'd help him, but he won't listen anymore. It seems the time has arrived when we each listen to ourselves. Do you think it's easy for me to be leaving here? Don't imagine that when they get here they will quickly leave. This time hiding in the forest won't work for me. Then again, perhaps. Perhaps father is right, but something keeps telling me that a dog once stepped upon is more apt to bite. And when those return they'll bite. They'll

tear like crazy, but will father understand that? You know, Mama, it's not easy for me to leave here, but he, through his entire life, has merged from head to toe with this sandy land. Where can I find such a word that he would heed? He simply is unable to throw everything aside and leave. But everything is packed. We could have easily driven away last night already; the border, they say, is open, but how can we leave him alone? How? Mama, how can we leave father here all alone?"

He fell silent. The mother did not speak. Neither did the two sisters. All of them watched as the father took a beam, heaved it over his shoulder, and, as if bent under a heavy cross, walked through the yard.

"You get ready," Kęstutis suddenly decided. "I'll help carry the wood, we'll cover the top of the hole. At least I'll help that much, and then we leave. No one can say how much time there is left. Father is immovable, but I won't leave any of you."

He stepped toward the door, but the mother caught his hand.

"Then I'll stay here, too," she stated. "How can we leave him here all alone, like something I don't know what. You young people, who would ..."

From the eastern side a machine gun sounded, very close by, as if someone had strewn steel peas on a tin roof. The morning's quiet was suddenly torn apart, and all of them started so violently that the mother's last word broke off in her throat. The father stopped for a moment and turned his head towards the side of the shooting. Soon after the first, a second and the third volley burst out, as if answering each other. The father then quickened his pace and almost in a run approached the gate, where the end of the beam became caught in the branches of the cherry tree. Tearing his way through he loudly cursed that everywhere he has to do everything by himself, that if it weren't for his bloody sweat, they all would have seen an end long ago.

Having come up to the hole, he put the beam down and wiped his sweat. The shooting died down. It broke off just as suddenly as it had started. Even from far off the father's face showed concern, whether he will have time, all by himself, to carry enough beams to cover the hole. And he had thought to cover it with a double layer. First width-wise, and then length-wise, so as to withstand even a direct hit.

"I'm going," said Kęstutis, letting go of his mother's hand.

Perhaps he wanted to say something more, perhaps he wanted to say he would not leave her for anything, but he was cut off by a piercing sound, like a violent sneeze. A sound to make one's insides shake.

"Oh Jesus!" screamed the mother, crouching down near her son's feet. Petrutė jumped from the window and grabbed the patterned rug from the bench, as if she could shield herself with it.

"It's only the German cannon, nothing to be scared about," Kęstutis calmed them. "It's only the start. They, it seems, are trying to slow the Russians. Mama, get up. It's time. Now no home will keep us safe. Not even father's ditch. Let's go. I'll take him in my arms and carry him like a baby. Otherwise I'll never get him out of here."

He helped his mother get up, but suddenly there was a flash of light and a blast that shattered the window, its pieces landing on the floor and on the bench. Through the window he saw the falling beam his father had placed upright at the side of the hole. It seemed to him his father had purposely pushed the beam forward and had himself toppled over backwards. With one leap Kęstutis was through the door, but his father no longer needed help. He lay on the freshly shoveled sand with his head thrown back in an uncomfortable position, as if he wanted to see what was back of his head. But he had nothing left to see with. In place of his eyes and his furrowed brow there was only a formless, splattered mass, from which only now did blood begin to seep.

The son knelt down upon one knee, took one of his father's lifeless hands and looked for a time at his face, of which was left only the narrow, taut lips and several days growth of stubble on his chin.

Russian cannon thundered from the other side of the forest, missiles flew overhead, some exploding further off in the pines, others right by the houses; the Sunday quiet was completely torn apart. But Kęstutis did not really hear all that. He, with both hands, placed his father's head in a more normal position. He then stood up and looked about, as if unable to think of what more he should do. His mother and sisters were already standing next to him, speechless. He hadn't felt their arrival. Petrutė still held the rug clutched in her embrace, pressing it with both hands to her chest. She was the first to speak.

"Do you need some help?"

Her words woke Kęstutis up as if from sleep. He lifted up his head and took a quick look around.

"Okay, help. Bring a saw and an axe."

When his sister was near the door, he turned to the youngest.

"And you, Steputė, run to the storehouse. Under the window in a box there are some nails. Bring two of the biggest. No, take three," he corrected himself.

As the girl ran off, he spread on the ground Petrutė's colorful rug that she had dropped there, picked up his father, and placed him upon it. He wrapped him up in it, then picked him up and climbed down into the ditch. He laid him down on the floor that had been carefully evened and covered with boards.

The mother, kneeling at the edge of the ditch, began to pray. Kęstutis and Petrutė sawed off a length of beam and then sawed crosswise upon it: with several blows of the axe, Kęstutis split the shards away and made a nest, then pressed the beams together and hammered three large nails into them, so that they would really hold. He took up the whole heavy cross and set it in the hole past his father's head. He told Steputė to hold it, and he and Petrutė began to shovel earth back into the hole until in its place was a mound of sand. There were no thoughts in his mind, but all of him felt as if someone had nailed his feet to the spot. When he lifted his head again, everything was quiet again. No missiles whistled, no bombs burst. And the German cannon that had been at the edge of the forest were no longer to be seen. While they were working at their father's grave, the cannon had disappeared somewhere.

"Let's go!" he said glancing once more across the fields.

He took his mother by the hand. She almost stumbled. Petrutė jumped to her other side. Steputė ran ahead towards the barn, where the horses had been standing harnessed since dawn. Kęstutis seated the women and jumped up himself. He pulled on the reins and they were off. They didn't even turn back to close the barn doors. In any case, soon others would be opening and closing them. Or perhaps not — just beyond the stand of pines the buildings of the Stirna family were already afire, sending smoke and flame up to the clouds that still hung just above the rooftops.

With her right hand, the mother made the sign of the cross over the farmstead and her sweat soaked fields. Kęstutis kept urging the horses to a brisk trot. They were completely alone; no one was to be seen either before or behind them, as if they were in the middle of a big emptiness. Only after a few kilometers, when they drove out of the forest, did they see the highway to the right. German army vehicles still crowded the highway, and not all of them were heading West. From time to time one or two were seen speeding towards the East.

They could hear cannon fire start up again behind them, but no missiles flew overhead. Kęstutis slowed the horses, who had begun to overhead, to a walk. At the Šerkšna stream he halted them completely.

"What happened?" asked Petrutė, who was sitting next to him.

Kęstutis lifted up his hands. They were bloody with the blood of his father.

"When I wanted to straighten his head — " he said, then got down from the wagon and washed off the last part of his father in the stream. When he had begun to drive again, he said,

"He used to say there are more than just Nazis and Bolsheviks in the world, without whom the world would not be the world. People who plant, who grow things, who don't destroy anything, who work, so not only today but tomorrow would be better. And there, there was a person, but they came from somewhere and crushed him like a flea. They don't even know they crushed him. Like nothing, like he had never existed."

The women remained silent. They just from time to time wiped their tears. Kęstutis fell silent, too. He had no idea whether he had succeeded in putting into words what not only he but the entire world seemed full of. At least it seemed to him that it was full.

Translated by Tadas Klimas