

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

IVAN CANKAR
ON THE SLOPE

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Ivan Cankar: On the Slope

“After the Wagon”

Francka couldn't fall asleep late into the night. All was already silent, nothing stirred in the dark, and she was almost afraid. Very seldom a curt voice cut through the night – a young fellow in the village exulted in life, he sang a song. As he treaded down the slope, the song grew voiceless and it sank into the night. At the shopkeeper's a dog barked away – he had heard god knows what, a rustling of a vicinal chestnut, a mouse's scratch in the shop, a young fellow's distant song, and so he raised his head and howled with a tight, squealing voice, then half-asleep he wailed once again and lay down on the tilt into slumber ...

Francka was covered with only a sheet, yet she felt hot and her forehead ran sweat onto her cheeks wetting the pillow beneath. The chamber was robed in darkness. The air was heavy and hot. She felt it would have cooled down had she uncovered the green curtain on the window and let the night skies' soft light break free into the chamber. Out of the darkness came the steady, weary wheeze of Mother and sister, who slept in their beds, and every once in a while a big wall clock's tick pierced through, its droning sound suppressing all the rest, and then again it vanished as if the clock had ceased to live.

Francka almost sank into slumber, but suddenly she felt as though she had been sliding downwards little by little, as if the chest on which she slept had been tilting, tilting ... she woke up, startled. Her mind was imbued with joyous and strange thoughts. Air, abounding with beautiful memories and hopes, loafed around the chest - lively, smiling faces, kind people dressed in their Sunday best.

As she was listening to Mother's and sister's arduous wheezing, her heart shuddered. She felt she was devoid of love for her Mother and sister, and that was a sin. They slept peacefully, a graceful godly sleep, their eyes shut, their lips open only a little, their cheeks burning hot – and if there had been light, Francka would have gotten up and tiptoed to the bed and leaned over them and tears would have come into her eyes.

Her eyes watered and she sighed deeply... Sometimes, when Mother beat her and screamed at her because she was tired and she sat on the chest, Francka could shout and cry with sadness. She could hit her sister because she was red and satiated and she was sitting about all day long always denouncing Francka to Mother. She could hit her and pushed her so that she'd hit her head against the threshold... But at this moment, in this tranquil night she would get up and step to the bed and ask Mother and sister for forgiveness. Kind and cheerful words, uttered god knows when, came to her mind. Mother's face all sweet and softhearted, like it had been god knows when, emerged in front of her, and Francka's heart shivered with love.

Otherwise her cry at night was silent and she always fell asleep sobbing. Especially on Sundays, for she was ashamed of wearing an old, smudgy, patched-up dress made out of Mother's skirt, which made everybody laugh at her. She left for the early Mass, her stride was

fast, her head bowed low. In her hand she clasped a big prayer book, which was all abraded. Meanwhile Mother and sister attended the morning High Mass in the beautiful parish church of Breg, which was one hour from their village. Nežka wore a red-roseate skirt and a new headscarf and her hand held a prayer book with a white osseous binding. The prayer book belonged to Francka. She had received it from the Reverend because she knew how to pray, but it was Nežka who appropriated it for the mass. Nežka was short, corpulent and red and she always cried. Mother always gave her candy. It showed around her lips as she came back home from the church at noon, when Francka was already entirely exhausted and dirty from cleaning and cooking. She wasn't even allowed to wear that Sunday dress of hers through the day. Once she was back from the Mass she had to change almost entirely and so she walked around in tattered clothes. Meanwhile Nežka was nobly sitting about in her red-roseate skirt and she could go out into the street, visit the neighbors. And if Mother said: "Change your clothes already, Nežka!" Nežka disregarded her. And then if Francka shouted: "What did Mother just say?" then Mother took an offence at her words and said: "Who asked you anything?" Thereupon life was sad, and if Francka cried, Mother never said: "Don't cry, Francka!" – Francka would have smiled at once – instead she angrily looked at Francka and made her quiver as she screamed: "What are you whimpering about? Look at you, huffy face!"

In an instant she thought of that day, when she was crying till late night, so that her eyes hurt and her throat felt as if it had been blade-cut. Mother had returned home from a journey, she had been away all day. It was a Sunday, and it was beautiful outside, the skies were still bright – a pleasant evening sun was shining far above a hill – and Francka and Nežka sat in front of the house waiting for Mother to return. She came, a bundle under her arm, shoes covered with dust. She laid the bundle onto the table, which was mostly white and draped for Sunday. Both girls watched, and Francka's heart raced. She went to the kitchen to bring dinner onto the table, and the lids were slipping from her fingers. Mother had unwound the bundle – a light red silk kerchief was lying on the table and Francka's eyes, excited and desirous, burrowed into it. "Here you go, Nežka!" and Mother gave Nežka a silk kerchief, a light red silk kerchief that swished if taken into one's hands, so smooth and heavy. "Here, Francka, this is for you!" Mother handed Francka a green fustian apron, the kind people all over the world wear to work. Francka's ease of breath dissolved as if somebody had suddenly grabbed her by the throat and her hands were shaking as she carried the bowl to the table. Mother also brought some biscuits and when Francka was about to take a bite, her chest and body squirmed with sudden pain. She shuddered and burst out crying loud and late into the night.

She thought of that day, and now the pain rose little by little from her chest, and her voice, a compound of a sigh and a sob, nearly erupted from her throat. Then it happened. As if the room had lit up, as if a joyous laughter resounded nearby, right next to her bed, and caressed her cheeks with an amiable hand. Then the beautiful anticipation of a new life, of a vast unknown happiness crawled back into her heart, and the tears that had a moment ago stung her eyes now were laced with sweet tears of gratitude and hope. She turned in her bed,

sighed and pulled the cover up to her lips, so to contemplate the beauty of tomorrow that was to arrive so soon – perhaps only six more hours, six or seven, and if she closes her eyes and falls asleep, they might last only a split of a second. She will wake up and the sun will be shining and like the nobility she will sit on the wagon and – hi-i! – away on a wide white road, past the houses, past the meadows ... hi-i! ... and the houses now fly past, people stare from their doorways ... from afar the chime of the bells already echo ... now it chimes louder, that big bell that roars like thunder from the mountains ... hi-i! ... uphill to the Mountain of pilgrimage ... past the pilgrims whose Sunday best outfits are covered with dust, and whose song sounds sad ... and there on the Mountain ... reigns a big church, three times the size of the parish church of St. Paul on Breg ... up stand the white tents ... nothing but honey pastry, wheat bread, marbled walnut cake ... and red ribbons ... and silk kerchiefs, light red silk kerchiefs ... hi-i! ...

Francka fell asleep and while dormant she sometimes sobbed, sometimes laughed. In dreams her laughter was cheerful and loud, but in that fusty chamber, in that peaceful night her laughter was the very picture of a sickened man's moan. Her body, her thin miniscule body was lying in a fetal position, her knees almost brushing against her face ...

A neighbor, Kovač, a farmer who owned a house and a wagon and horses had come by late evening, and as he spoke to Mother, he said: "She can ride with us. It'll be ten of us, and I suppose one more child could hang onto the wagon." This was the evening of Whit Sunday, and the next day, on the festive Monday people made a pilgrimage to the Mountain in droves. Fully-crammed big rustic wagons rattled down the village in the early hours of the dawning skies. Francka had never before been to the Mountain, but this year she was adamant to go. All year she had been fantasizing about this marvelous journey: here everything was filthy and gloomy and painted with sadness. But the Mountain glistened up in the heavenly beauty. She had no new dress for this day. She mended and cleaned up the one from the last year, so that it almost looked beautiful, at least from far away. And she thought she was going to go on foot – had the Mountain been on the other side of the world, Francka would have set out on a pilgrimage first thing in the morning. But so it happened that Kovač had come by and he said, like it was nothing, "She could hang onto the wagon!" And Kovač had a beautiful wagon and beautiful horses – the roads shook under the rattling noise, wagons flashed past and out of sight, one could barely hear the happy voices from inside the wagon ... It will all flash past like in a dream, the village, the hayrack behind the village, the long furrow beds – and then a new world, a new life, the Mountain of pilgrimage and the bright sun and High Mass.

She opened her eyes, straightened up still half asleep, but in an instant the thought of it made her jump out of the bed. Mother had uncovered the window and dim light filled the chamber. The east was gleaming in white. The sun had not yet risen, but the milk-white was now assuming yellow tones and the rims of long and narrow clouds wore a golden shine. The village was still shadow-coated, albeit situated on a rather high spur of a low hill that rose from the valley. The hills on the eastern side of the valley climbed higher, thus the apple on the succursal's belfry only just glittered.

The village streets were already vivid with life. People, men and women dressed up in their Sunday's best, joyful and loud, treaded, at times in droves, the battered slope full of pot holes. At times they walked by one-by-one, even old women whose stride was like that of a chicken, small but swift. Almost everyone carried a tiny bundle, usually on a stick across the shoulder, which swung down their back.

Francka heard happy voices from the street, heavy steps and the grinding of gravel on the slope. The first wagon already clattered far away. Unkempt and bare-foot, Francka winced and looked out the window. It wasn't Kovač. Mother was preparing the breakfast. Pacing up and down the kitchen in her dirty underwear skirt she was shifting the pots and grumbling. Eventually the milk boiled over, because she had stepped into the doorway to take a look down the slope. Mother's anger escalated to a clamor, which woke Nežka who began to cry, like every morning. Francka rushed back to the kitchen to see what had happened, then she went to the living space to console Nežka who cried even more when she noticed that Francka was about to go on a pilgrimage. The skies reddened, the morning light ascended higher and higher, the sun rays now played on the Mayor's rooftop. Francka was fidgety; her heart beat with happiness and fear of missing the wagon. The act of putting on her shoes and tying the strings took longer than ever before, for she was rushing and the strings resisted being punched into their place. Her cheeks were burning and she was breathing fast. Nežka also straightened up little by little. She was sitting on the bed dressed in only a night dress and her sob was still audible. Her cheeks were painted in a sheen of night-sweat, and every once in a while a fat tear dripped out of her eyes. She ran her hand across her face and chided Francka. Mother set three sooty pots onto the table. The smell of burned milk that had overflowed the wood-burning stove wafted from the kitchen and nicely interlaced with the scent of a still-boiling hot coffee. Mother poured it in large bowls. She poured her own coffee from a special pot then she sat onto the chest and crumbled white bread into the bowl that was clenched in between her knees. Whenever she took the spoon to her mouth she laid her eyes on Francka. Nežka had her breakfast in bed and she spilled coffee all over her face.

"If you think of going, go!" Mother said as Francka hastened to drink up her hot coffee. She had already washed her face and combed her hair, and now she only had to put on the cardigan. Then she heard something from afar, it rattled down the slope ever closer and ever louder. Francka tilted the bowl and a few droplets of yellow coffee stained her shirt. The wagon had clattered from around the corner, now it was almost in front of the house. Francka didn't glance at the slope, but she knew it was the wagon of Kovač. She was putting on the cardigan, but the sleeve lining had slit so her hand couldn't push through. Francka burst out crying.

"Well, hurry up, you silly child! Don't snivel!" Still seated on the chest, a bowl in between her knees, Mother watched Francka getting dressed. Nežka sat on her bed, she sobbed now and again and fed herself with big bread pieces soaked in coffee.

The wagon passed slowly by the house. Its driver leaned off of the side and called with a coarse voice: "Where are you? We won't wait!" Francka was scurrying through the

chamber, god knows what she was looking for. She wrapped a big piece of bread in a kerchief. The osseous-bound prayer book was now in her hand and her head was already adorned with a kerchief, albeit awkwardly tied and oversized, which somewhat veiled her face. Mother set a dime onto the table and said: "Use your money wisely and do not squander!" Francka put the money away. Caught in the turmoil of craving the scent of sweetness flashed before her eyes: only for Easter and Christmas did she get to cup a copper coin in her hand and walk with it the whole long hour up and down between the tent stalls that stood in front of the church. As she stood in the doorway looking back at Mother and sister, her eyes brimmed with gratitude and love.

The wagon was slowly moving past the house. Somebody called out: "Drive already!" and it rattled off down the slope. Francka's face shivered with fright, but then she clasped the bread and the prayer book, bowed her head and ran across the crackling gravel after the wagon. A woman on the wagon turned around and said: "What are you running for? We will be waiting at the mill!" Francka tripped against a large stone, she had almost fallen, and thus she halted to catch her breath. For a moment she thought the wagon would escape from her sight, down the slope, across the valley, behind the hill, and fear clutched her heart. The kerchief had slipped down around her neck, her cheeks were scorching hot and she felt moisture beneath her arms. "We will be waiting at the mill," resounded from the wagon, and she continued with a slow, short pace, her body bent. It showed through her gait that she was a pilgrim. She gazed at the wagon and if it suddenly vanished around the corner for just a second, she quickened the pace.

The sun had almost reached the hilltop, the skies were sanguine, and the upper hill houses glittered in the morning whiteness. The valley was buried under the shades, and the willows that stood on both sides of the stream quivered in dew. The wagon was rattling faster and faster along the windy roads into the valley and Francka was racing too. Further away on the right hand side, by the water in the corner of the valley, stood a mill hidden by tall trees. A beautiful white road led there in a straight line and the wagon was already on it. Smooth and solid, the road ran faster and Francka began running.

The valley was cold and quiet. Dark green stream waters were as peaceful as a pond. Every so often a dull rustle from afar broke the silence. There across the white gravel, by the gouged slope, ran a brook that drained, weary and placid, from a round, deep basin into the valley. Here and there along the way a tall poplar jutted into the sky. Its swaying tips moved softly and the leaves were caught in equable tremble.

Each time Francka noticed her ever-growing distance from the wagon, she stiffened with fear that she might be forgotten and left behind. Her legs were now heavy and her breathing was short and toilsome. The left shoe pinched her foot, which burned as if she had walked across embers. The mill wasn't far anymore. At the end of the road a cluster of trees peeked out, the water's murmur grew louder. Francka saw how the wagon turned slowly to the left, she heard its dull rattle as it drove across the bridge and came to a standstill by the wall that glared with new whitewash. She ran, measuring the path, the length of which seemed to be no shorter than before. She felt that her legs moved as in a dream, where she

couldn't budge. Her throat tightened and she cried – no tears, quietly and almost peacefully. It appeared as though the cry, dull and concealed, had come from somebody else running beside her, where Francka would have only listened. Two people emerged from the mill, a man and a woman. Clumsy and lingering, they scrambled onto the wagon. Others rose to their feet to shift the wooden boards that were laid across the wooden brackets which were painted red. Finally the driver leapt onto the wagon, flourished his whip, shouted, and the horses jerked forward. Nobody turned back. They conversed with one another, laughed, and never thought of her.

Francka yelled out. The sudden shriek thrust from her chest involuntarily. She sprang across the road, as if she could get there faster from the other side. Her body buckled ever more and she ran with her mouth ajar. Her shoes had come undone, and they tramped like wooden clogs. Once she reached the bridge and the mill, the road ascended once again into a rutted gravelly path. Further up the road the slopes were steeper than on the other side. The slope was overgrown with rare beech forest. Sometimes hooky, smooth-barked branches stretched across the road.

The horses were vigorous and rested and the wagon rattled with uniform pace, albeit uphill. The steepest curves of the slope convinced the horses to take an easy gait, their manes nodding in assent. Each time Francka noticed their sluggish pace, she took a leap as if she wanted to catch up in only one step. Although her frame climbed further, her legs, heavy and clumsy, lagged behind. From time to time she felt like somebody looked back, nodded and swung his arm before her clouded eyes and the wagon stopped. But the wagon ran like she did, nobody had halted and nobody had swung his arm.

Francka began to call out, but her voice was weak and hoarse and nobody could hear it for it was smothered by the wagon's rattling. Her feet were moving ever more slowly and her stride was ever shorter. Sometimes she even thought that she was moving backwards, that the road was evading her feet, as if she had been treading on strong-current waters where the riffles under her feet hasten into the distance right in front of her.

“Wait! Wait!”

Hindered by the gravel, she was capering from one side of the road to the other, but the trail was all rugged and strewn with large keen-edged stones and the wagon still kept the same distance. She felt chills down her spine when the wagon disappeared behind the trees, and it struck her that the wagon would vanish down the hill and she would never see it again. She thought of cutting the curves and running straight through the woods. She jumped across the ditch, onto the grass. But after only ten steps the fear of missing the trail and losing her way prevailed upon her. She returned to the road and a long bramble scraped her cheek. As she made the leap, she landed on the strings of her right shoe which had torn off. Francka stood still for a moment. She cried out loud and then ran on.

They reached the top of the hill. The path led through the mountain ridge in a long line that sloped or jutted out here and there as if to give way to a cluster of old trees. Now and then the morning light gleamed through the foliage and one could see far across the plain that glittered in the sun. The wagon climbed the slope first. The horses were tired.

Their heavy walk crushed gravel under hooves and their heads hung down almost to the ground. The pilgrims were joyous and women's shrieking voice resounded across the woods. Francka arrived after the wagon, gasping for breath far behind. She appeared tiny and short from the wagon, like a comically-sewn, tattered rag doll covered with dust shuffling along the road. Her voice was razor thin and weak, like someone had been squeezing her chest for his own pleasure and made her whine. So she ran after the wagon, she ran incessantly and cried with that thin, whining voice. On the wagon a corpulent, oafish woman turned around to reinstall herself on the seat when she looked down the road and caught the sight of Francka.

"Look already, that child is still running to catch us. Drmašk's Francka! ... Gosh, girl, have you lost your mind?"

Francka pounced forward. She heard them how they called her and felt sorry for having forgotten about her. She pounced on and she ran fast and with ease. The weariness that had befallen her now passed, the tears dried up as if somebody had wiped her cheeks with a cool kerchief.

Now others turned around and watched. The wagon driver drove on.

"Look, she's still running, really ... silly girl!"

Žirovec, a cheerful man, called out:

"Listen, girl, why would you walk: come up! ... She's running like a dog after a wagon. I bet if you whipped her back, she'd keep on coming!"

Another pilgrim, a slim and wrinkly woman with a basket on her lap, took pity on Francka and shouted:

"Don't be silly, girl, and stop running. How dense is she!"

She glanced angrily from the wagon and spat.

The chatter hushed down. All the pilgrims now stared back at that ludicrous and dusty rag doll that moved after the wagon. The wagon driver drove on.

At first Francka thought that the wagon was coming to a stop, that the horses' gait weakened to single steps and that they were going to turn aside and wait for her. Her feet sprung light and happy over the gravel, over the muddy puddles that had lingered since the last rain in the shade of sprawling-canopied beech tree. But soon she realized that the distance between her and the wagon wasn't any smaller. She stopped to look: the wagon hastened on, the driver sat slouched in front, the reins in his left and a whip in his right hand.

"Wait! Wait!"

Why don't they stop now, when they saw her and called her to come up? The weight of incomprehensible horror fell upon her and her back felt cold as if a frigid wind had clutched her by the spine.

"They don't want to wait!" It flashed through her mind in an instant. It seized her like hardhearted hands. They see, yet they don't want to wait. They sit on the wagon and they watch her run and yell and cry. And they laugh. They sit comfortably, their hands propped

against their knees, their heads bowed a little, and they laugh covertly just like that Jew in the church who sits on the side and watches Jesus being whipped.

She jumped over a puddle, her left shoe slipped loose and flew to the side. She tripped and fell. Within a second she was up again, she had barely brushed against the ground, and she ran, one foot shod and the other bare. The bare foot was pleasantly cold and since her step was more fluid she took off her other shoe. But soon she felt the sharp gravel scraping against her toes, which started to bleed. She was so sad that she could sit on the grass and die. The last sliver of the exciting fear and hope was gone – now it was just ubiquitous sadness, in which one could hide in darkness and never lament to anyone.

“I will never catch up with them!” she thought, and it seemed to her that she could never catch them even if she had run after them to the end of the world and for the rest of her life. A sad thought, but peaceful enough that she was able to think of other things. It was as if she had been sitting in the kitchen or lying in bed. It didn’t feel like running, her feet bloodstained, after the wagon, which was as far away as the sun in the skies. Thus she remembered that evening and the red silk kerchief that had been spread out across the table and that swished when touched. She felt she was never going to catch up with either the wagon or the silk kerchief, and everything would always be dreary and sad. If she had been running to the end of the world and till the end of her life, she would have never caught up either with the wagon, or the silk kerchief, or the buttery bread ... all happiness lies before her and she’s back there with bloodstained feet.

Her body ached and the world swung before her eyes. It occurred to her she could simply stop and rest. Thinking of it she kept on running, her shoes, the bread and the prayer book pinched tight to her chest ...

The Kovač’s serf boy, a square-shouldered and red young man, turned to the driver and said: “Why, wait a little ... let the child hang on ... How she runs!”

The horses walked one step at the time. The wagon driver turned around a little and looked back.

“Now, run! We won’t wait long!”

Francka ran fast, but her stride was so short that she was no faster than the horses whose gait was wide and heavy.

“Run! Run!” they called out from the wagon and Francka’s inner voice screamed with fear and pain: “Run, Francka, run, run!” Her staggering legs swung bearishly, she was tottering from one side of the road to the other.

“Look, and now she won’t run! ... Haw-haw, can you believe that!”

Francka’s head was bowed as deep as that of a worn-out horse. Her mouth was open and she gasped, loud and hoarse. Her eyes stared blankly for they saw nothing but the wagon that rocked as if it were riding on the moving ground.

“Hi-i!”

She made a dash, a bound, then hit the wagon. She raised her hands and propped herself up on her elbows to fling her body up ... The wagon shook and shot out of her sight, she bumped her forehead against the edge, and fell.

She was lying on her knees, face down as if she had been praying. Her bread was almost buried in the sand. She held the prayer book in her stretched-out hand.

The serf boy jumped off the wagon and bent over Francka.

“Get up! Have you hurt yourself badly?”

His thick, heavy hands took her by her shoulders and lifted her up lightly. His wide-cheeked face radiated something soft, something childish. He took her in his arms, picked up the bread and the shoes and carried her onto the wagon. Francka opened her eyes, looked into his face and, overwhelmed with sweetness, she clasped her hand around his neck. He set her next to his seat and called out to the driver: “Drive on!” and the wagon rattled off down the straight road cradled by branchy beech trees ...

The light from behind the foliage grew stronger. The sun was piercing deep into the woods, the road and the moss glittered with big bright blotches of light interlaced with shadow. Every now and then the trees receded into the background and for a moment, when the wagon shot past, the view opened onto a plain of green meadows. The path slanted, finally it rose steeply and the gravel was crackling and crushing under the spinning wheels.

Francka gazed across the plain with big, happy eyes. Every so often she shuddered, sobbed as she did after a long episode of crying. Above her forehead, where she had bumped herself against the wagon, a grey swelling surfaced. Her naked legs were all dusty, dust on the toes braided with blood. The kerchief rounded her neck and her hair was disheveled. But when she looked down into the valley, her face changed only to flash with a healthy, vigorous blush. Her lips were taut, dark red as if painted with paper enclosing red chicory. Her eyes glimmered placidly under the shadow of long eyelashes. From time to time they blinked due to the light that poured down the skies ever more fervently across the godly land.

As if she had died when she lay on her knees and face and heard or saw nothing and now as if she was heading towards holy Heavens’ heavenly euphoria ...

The Mountain of pilgrimage now towered in the distance. A dull bell resounded from its peak, as it did in other churches, on surrounding knolls and hills, in between which a beautiful chime from the St. Paul parish church’s great bell ascended high. The air abounded with a beautiful song that was now resonating loud and powerful enough to soar right to the sun, and the very next moment it was slowly diminishing to the volume of a trembling sigh.

The wagon reached the plain, a big, wide, smooth road. Here and there a house stood by the road – doors locked, windows nailed off. Everybody was on the Mountain. Some pilgrims caught up and passed by the big crammed wagon, the weight of which was detrimental to the now-enervated horses’ performance. The pilgrims on foot soon took a different trail that first led through the marsh, then up a steep hill. The pilgrims advanced upwards like a line of black ants.

Francka had put her shoes on once again. She dusted her shoes against a sackcloth that lay by their feet at the bottom of the wagon. She set her hair and tied up the kerchief. Every once in a while she reached into her pocket to assure herself that the dime was still there. Her grief was already far behind. It vanished without a trace like the shadows that just a while ago were covering the whole valley and now were gone. It was only the body that still

quivered on occasion – the way leaves vibrate in the morning dew at the sight of a coming dawn.

The wagon slowly pulled up the windy road. Halfway up the hill a light carriage that carried the priest of St. Paul caught up with them. The men took off their hats, the women saluted, their voices as tight as during the litanies. The light carriage pulled forth and soon it disappeared behind the trees. The noise from up above grew louder. It was as if they had been drawing near to a waterfall. The noise was mysterious and festive – Francka wished she could enter the church of roaring organs and incense-scented air, her body doubled over and piously downcast. From behind the trees rose tall, grey walls. The tower rang the bell for the ninth mass, but the chime in its proximity sounded vague, as though it had levitated off the ground.

The wagon came to a standstill in front of a big house, an inn. The women, their legs stiffened, slowly alighted from the wagon. The serf boy hauled the bare wagon into the backyard. Francka stood there not knowing where to turn next. Her head reeled with a tremendous bustle – present every Sunday in front of the church – and the shriek of folks who were walking past in groups. She followed the wagon. The serf boy looked back at her and smiled.

“Go on now, we’ll wait for you. We’ll set out after lunch.”

When she went, he shouted:

“Don’t worry, we’ll look for you!”

She passed by the people up the hill and hit a vast space that unfolded in front of the church. The church was old and big, the grey walls brimmed to the skies so that the chestnuts thriving next to them appeared pygmaean. The massive door was wide open. A broad stony staircase paved the way to the door and steered people up and down without rest. A sonorous sound echoed from the church – it was a sermon time. The candle-lit altar that glimmered with gold and silver was dazzling to the eye, thus one had to blink if he was to look up. In front of the church stood innumerable white tent stalls with beautiful and costly things for sale. Francka was squeezing the dime in her hand and forcing her way through the crowd – it was like in a dream. People were thronging before each and every tent and Francka could hardly push through to watch. The saleswomen, red and fat, never ceased to yell. The women wrangled, contemplated the holy images, holy medals, rosaries, crosses, candles, and clothing fabric, aprons, stockings, kerchiefs ... People spoke one over the other, the voices shuffled, coupled, then rose and dwindled, so it all sounded like one lone indistinct noise. Francka floated as though she had been swimming. Now she drifted to the tents close to the church, where candles, holy medals and rosaries were sold to the devout pilgrims. Then she drifted back to the tents heaped up with honey biscuits. She held tight to her dime, but the thought of a purchase never entered her mind. She merely watched and it felt as if she had experienced all of the beautiful things that she had beheld, as if it were all prepared just for her.

The current led her back up towards the church and she noticed her feet were already mounting the stony staircase. People gushed over from every direction – it rang for the tenth

mass that was to be offered by the priest of St. Paul. They swarmed in the doorway, crammed together in place. Some people were still coming out from the ninth mass, and sometimes the whole current got pulled right back to the staircase, but then it surged forcefully back to the door. People kept silent, nudging with their elbows. A massive crush stood before the holy water basin. Francka had elbowed her way to the basin three times, yet each and every time she was carried aside. She kept reaching out to dip her fingers into the blessed water in order to cross herself, but not being able to move, her wet thumb dabbed only her mouth. Arms pinched tight to her body, she couldn't reach up to her forehead.

The bells jingled, the organs woke in the organ loft, a cloud of scented smoke rose up from before the altar.

Francka stood in the middle of the church, beside the pews. Slowly she knelt down, bowed her head and opened the prayer book. A caress of something indefinably beautiful and sweet befell her and she felt that she could cry with happiness. Slowly, one letter at a time, she read beautiful prayers. Her lips were moving under her burning cheeks and dewy eyes. From familiar mysterious phrases during the reading, from which the reader's thoughts stray to other places, to the sins of past life, to the hopes of the future, rose a profound sweetness that filled her heart to the brim, and up rose a bells' jingle before the altar, the majestic roar of the organs and the scent of incense that hovered above the heads and then lay as a blessed veil upon the devout people. Francka barely dared to utter the words that stood there in big black font and stared at her as peacefully and mysteriously as the Holy Mother from the altar. Her tiny little body leaned ever lower, and from under her bowed head tears were plummeting onto the open prayer book. She thought of all the sins she had ever committed, of Mother and Nežka, and she took pity on all who lingered in her mind, feeling she had sinned against them and hurt them. She knelt as though she was immersed in a cloud, her eyesight fogged with lucent tears and her legs grew numb. Sometimes she felt as if she had stirred, then risen and knelt afloat – like in a dream, where she spread out her hands and flew over golden wheat fields, her legs gliding just above its ears – and even the church, the altar, and Holy Mother, everything soared quietly and slowly upwards through the mist of scented incense, behind which trembled the flames of innumerable candles.

Therewith, at this very hour that was full of love and gratitude, her soul detached from her body, which shook on the solid stone, small, fatigued and poor ...

Following the Mass Francka walked past the tents once more. Her stride was slow, her eyes dappled. If anyone brushed against her and shoved her aside, she felt nothing. She bought a holy medal and biscuits for Nežka and wrapped the remaining three cents into a kerchief. The field facing the church slowly cleared, people had gone to an inn or sat on the grass eating their lunch. Some had already gone back home and deep down the slope motley-colored swarms of people stirred towards the valley. Francka walked to the backyard, took the bread off the wagon and settled at the backside of the inn across the backyard, which opened to a broad view of the valley. The plain glistened from under the silvery haze of dust that covered its sheer vastness. Below the hill that was hardly distinguishable from the dust, something white glistened – Ljubljana. Francka gazed as if spellbound and her heart

thumped with sweet excitement. Ljubljana – marvelously beautiful and marvelously remote, beautiful and distant, like the heavens themselves. Straining her eye she gradually discerned gleaming towers, big white buildings that stood there like one church next to another. Ljubljana was distant, endlessly distant to walk. Francka wanted to visit one day, and she yearned peacefully and happily, just like she sometimes yearned to visit the fairyland where everything was made of sugar and cake, and like she yearned to visit the heavens where angels dwell.

At this hour her soul was like a water spring, and all bitterness was gone.

The serf boy emerged from the inn and called her. He handed her a glass of wine and a roast, wrapped in paper.

“See, the bump on your head!” he said and his thick fingers touched her forehead. “Drink and eat, we won’t be leaving for a while.”

He returned to the inn. Francka would have wanted him to stay longer. She drank the wine and she was happy. She wished she could have shared her mind and laughed. Then she packed half of the roast into the paper and put it away for Mother and Nežka.

The women had dawdled and it was late when they began boarding the wagon. The sun was far west and the road back was entirely hemmed in by the shade. Down in the valley the light sparkled again, but the closer they were to the hills on the other side, the faster came nightfall. Halfway across the valley the wagon twined with long shadows that poured down, blanketing fields and meadows, and slowly crept up the knolls and hills on the other side. Francka looked back – there rose the Mountain of pilgrimage, half-veiled in shade. The pilgrims were retracing their steps into the valley on every road and path, the wagons were rattling down crisscross, and it looked from afar as if they had come to a standstill.

They entered the cold shaded woods. The trees around them rustled quietly. The horses drew the wagon unhurriedly and the driver did not spur them on. The women chattered aloud, the men laughed, their faces red and gay. Francka found the atmosphere pleasant enough to fall asleep. She sat next to the serf boy on the first plank behind the driver, her head against the boy’s arm, the prayer book, the biscuits, the roast and the remaining bread on her lap. She never stirred – she could sit like this forever and ride the wagon to the end of the world, in cold shade past the trees that gently rustled. Now she heard nothing but an indistinct sound, she saw nothing but the passing shadows, but it seemed as though the wagon had been at a stop and only the trees kept moving. They reached the mountain crest. The path sloped down. A loud rustle whirred in the air not far off, and the wagon stood at the mill. Francka flinched, opened her eyes and something heavy fell onto her heart, a bitter memory of something sad, dim, half-forgotten.

The night was almost coal-colored when they arrived at the village. The wagon made frequent stops and people got off accordingly. Francka too got off close to the house. Her legs were stiff and oafish. She walked slowly – she felt as if she had been stranded in a strange place that she had only seen once in her dreams.

Mother stood in the doorway.

“At long last, you’re back.”

Francka laid the roast and the bread and the biscuits onto the table. Mother and Nežka ate. She undid the kerchief, and gave Mother the three cents, which were put away. Francka wanted to tell them about the journey, but something cut her short. She looked at Nežka and Mother and she didn't say a word.

"What do I see on your forehead?" asked Mother.

"I hit myself as I was running after the wagon."

"Next time knock your head off, you klutz!"

Something bitter stirred within her soul, but fell silent at once.

Hereupon she went to bed, pulled the cover over her head and fell asleep.

As her eyelashes slid shut, the Kovač's serf boy, nicely attired and entirely different, came forward. Her attire was beautiful too. On her head she wore a big wreath like at a First Communion. The serf boy was strong and tall and he took her into his arms and carried her far, ever further and ever higher – the Mountain of pilgrimage and Ljubljana, everything beneath them bathed in shade, but the light of the heavens shone before them. And down below the Mountain of pilgrimage rattled the wagon, and after the wagon ran an ill-fated child, poor Francka, her dusty skirt patched up, her legs blood-stained, her eyes tear-stained. She cried and screamed, but the wagon rattled on and they laughed. Thus she ran long, long, to the end of the world, till the end of her days, until her body toppled, her face and knees on the ground.

Francka, dressed in a white dress and a wreath on her head, looked down. The serf boy, his face soft as mercy, looked too.