

Nothing in the World (an excerpt)

by Roy Kesey

The Joke

All night the moon had watched him, and he'd been unable to return its stare. Finally there was sunlight, and Joško took up his rifle and rucksack. He had trouble keeping his balance at first, but gradually his legs steadied. An hour, two hours, three, hill after hill, and the air began to change. It smelled more of stone and less of dust, more of clouds and less of rivers, and now it smelled of seawater.

Joško came to a dry crest, and before him was the Adriatic, alive and glowing. He dropped down the slope, crossed a wide road and walked to the water. He washed his hands and face, and the saltwater stung the wound in his head. He dried himself with his bandana, straightened and looked around. To the northwest there was only the rock-studded coast; to the southeast, across a wide bay was the sharp white of a city he'd never seen before.

He kept to the shore, past refineries spitting yellow foam into the sea, past ships that rusted at anchor in the bay. On the outskirts of the city he found a bakery, but as he entered, the woman behind the counter drew back.

- Excuse me, said Joško. Can you tell me where I am?
- This is Split.
- Wow. I had no idea it was so beautiful.

The woman folded her arms and asked what he wanted. Joško thought for a moment. Once, when he was very young, his mother had made rolls covered with poppy seeds that a friend in Austria had sent her. Later he'd tried every bakery in Jezera and found nothing at all like the sharp lovely flavor of those rolls.

- Do you have anything with poppy seeds?

The woman shook her head.

— That's too bad. They're the most wonderful—

— Anything else?

— Plain rolls will be fine, I guess.

The woman walked to a bin at the far end of the counter.

— How many?

The bin was less than half-full, and Joško asked for all of them.

The woman filled two bags and part of a third and tied the bags with twine.

— Will that be all?

— Yes, thank you.

Then he saw a small krempita. The sweet cream of its center spilled out through its flaky sides, and he asked for it as well. The woman wrapped it in waxed paper and put it on the counter beside the bread.

— Six thousand dinar.

Joško opened his rucksack, removed his wallet and counted six one-thousand dinar bills onto the counter. The bills were stiff with dried blood and rakija. The woman paled slightly.

— That's okay, she said. Consider it a gift for a brave soldier.

Joško smiled and thanked her. He made his way along the waterfront, eating the krempita as he went. All he needed now was some coffee, and then he'd find a bus headed south to Dubrovnik. With luck he'd be at his sister's house by tomorrow night.

He turned away from the water into a marvelous maze of white. The streets were full, men brandishing rolled newspapers like clubs, women elbowing their way into shoe stores. He came to a wide street, and on one side was a bright terrace cafe. He chose a table near the sidewalk, set his rucksack in one chair and sat down in another.

A jeep full of soldiers flew by, and he wondered how the war was going. Better than before, he hoped—would that be too much to ask? He decided he would corner the next soldier he saw, buy him a drink, get the latest news.

The cafe's only waitress ignored him for some time, and as she did, he remembered the joke he had thought of, and realized that now was the perfect time to play it. When she came to take his order he was ready, but his cheek was twitching so badly that he could barely talk. He scraped his cheek with a plastic ashtray until it quieted, and smiled at the waitress.

— I'd like two glasses of your best Dalmatian wine, he said. One for me and one for my friend here.

The waitress looked at him, at the empty chair across from him and the rucksack on the chair beside him.

— The war has been hard on you, hasn't it?

— Not really.

He tried to keep a straight face but didn't quite succeed, and the waitress mumbled something he didn't catch. She was back in a few minutes with the two glasses of wine, and set one down in front of him and the other in front of the empty chair.

— Not there. Didn't I say one for me and one for my friend?

Joško pointed to the placemat in front of the rucksack. The waitress shook her head, picked the glass up, put it where he had pointed. He opened his rucksack and rummaged through it until he found what he was looking for. He took it by the hair, pulled it out, and set it on the table in front of the glass.

— There you go, Hadžihafizbegović, he said. I've heard that you Muslims only drink coffee, but it's time you learned how to drink wine.

The waitress screamed and vomited and collapsed onto a nearby table. Joško looked at the head again. The eyes had glazed to an iridescent bluish-green. Blood had dried black around the nose, in streams from the hairy ears, in patches on what was left of the neck. The mouth was set in a contented grin.

A crowd was gathering, and their staring made him uncomfortable. He took his glass, tapped it on the table, lifted it to toast Hadžihafizbegović's health, and drank it down. The murmuring grew louder around him. The joke had not worked at all, and he wondered what would have made it better.

#

There was the smell of dust, and then of sweat, and then of hot metal. Joško opened his eyes and found himself lying in a bare vineyard. It was late morning, and a line of ants was crawling along his outstretched arm. He brushed the ants off and opened his rucksack, felt a tickle on his neck, noticed another line of ants leading from his shoulder to his shirt pocket. He flicked them away, and now he remembered: the cafe, the wine, the joke that hadn't worked. A few young boys had followed him as he'd hurried out of the city. He had started to run, and by sunset he had been alone, and very, very tired.

He drew his knife, pulled out Hadžihafizbegović's ear, carved carefully around the earring and tucked it deep into his pocket, then buried the ear in the soft soil. He took a roll out of his rucksack and thought of the girl who had sung for him once. She was beautiful, he was sure of it. As beautiful as his sister, maybe. He chewed the roll, and the girl was Klara, and then she was not, and Klara was alone in her house in Dubrovnik, sitting on the side of her bed, soft light streamed through the window and across her face, she was thinking of him and hoping he was safe and now the Serb ships started firing, there was the scream of an incoming shell burrowing down through the air and Joško grabbed his things and ran.

He was barely out of the vineyard when his cheek started to twitch. He slowed to a walk, and a strange dizziness crept up from his stomach. His walking became a stumbling. Trees appeared from nowhere to block his path, and sweat ran from the tips of his fingers.

Images started flowing through his head, and the flow grew thick as sewage: unfamiliar faces that twisted together, cursing and then becoming each other, and now the images were only colors, browns and grays and shades whose names he didn't know. Joško fell, made it back to his feet, fell again and heard the rush of running water. He crawled blindly toward the sound, felt the damp earth, pulled himself forward and dropped face-down.

#

— Magarac! a voice shouted. Get over here! He's waking up.

Joško shuddered, turned, saw a burled brown arm. A moment later a bearded face appeared.

— Jesus, the mouth said. What a mess.

The face moved through and beyond his sight, and he was lifted and carried, dropped in the back seat of a jeep, and he wept without understanding why.

— Handcuff him? asked the one called Magarac as he settled in the passenger's seat.

— I wouldn't bother.

The driver started the jeep and pulled onto the road. Magarac took a headset from the dashboard, and lifted a microphone from between the seats. At first he said nothing but numbers, and his ears flared lightly as he spoke.

After a short silence he said, Not yet. Probably threw his tags into the sea the first chance he got.

Joško sat up, waited for his head to clear, and said, Excuse me. Where are we going?

The driver's head jerked around. Magarac took a pair of handcuffs from his belt and reached back, and now Joško understood. He gathered all the strength he had, grabbed Magarac's wrist with both hands, torqued it fiercely, and watched as the bearded man pitched out of the jeep.

The driver swore, and the jeep slid to a stop. Joško reached for his neck but the man twisted easily free, turned and drove his fist into Joško's stomach. Joško curled up, trying to disappear into himself. The soldier punched him in the kidneys and spine, and Joško twitched and rolled as the pain swept his mind away.

#

He woke again as the jeep pulled through a gate in a high barbwire fence, past a white line of barracks and up to a squat gray building. His hands were cuffed behind his back, and his abdomen rippled with cramps.

The driver got out and pulled him from the jeep, but Joško's legs failed and he fell into the dust. The driver kicked him hard in the side and pulled him back to his feet. Magarac stood silently, holding

his right arm to his chest, his nose scraped raw, blood running from a cut on his forehead.

Two guards came walking out of the building. One took Joško's rifle and rucksack, and the other led him toward the door. In the lobby was a clerk sitting behind a metal desk. As Joško came forward he took a clipboard out of the top drawer.

— Name and rank?

Joško didn't answer, and the clerk looked at Magarac.

— No idea. We found him passed out near a stream maybe twenty kilometers from here, and on the way back he attacked us and tried to escape.

— Okay. You want me to have the medic take a look at him?

— Nope. I like him just the way he is.

The clerk shrugged.

— Good enough. Take him to 12.

Joško was pulled down a hallway and around a corner. One of the guards took a ring of keys from his belt, opened the door to a storeroom and set Joško's belongings against the far wall. He closed the door, locked it, and walked on ahead as the other guard pulled Joško farther down the hall to a line of cells.

Here the air was slightly cooler. Each cell held three men, most of them in filthy army uniforms. Some slept; others paced or prayed or cackled. One of the cacklers, a short fat man with a thick moustache and tiny eyes, reached out at Joško as he was dragged past. The guard kicked at the prisoner's hand, the fat man shrieked, and laughter echoed through the cellblock.

The twelfth cell held only one prisoner, a gaunt pale man sitting in a pool of urine in the middle of the floor. Dried spittle crusted his beard, and when he saw Joško he rolled onto his stomach and scuttled into the farthest corner.

— Welcome to the Split Sheraton, said the guard who was holding Joško as the other opened the cell door.

Magarac stepped forward.

— Hold on a second.

The guard smiled, removed Joško's handcuffs, and Magarac kicked high into Joško's chest. Joško flailed and fell, landing in the pool of urine. The door slammed shut and the men walked away.

Joško dragged himself to the nearest of the three beds. He rested for a moment before heaving himself up, but couldn't get his leg to catch on the mattress, and fell back to the floor. Under the bed was a small plastic pail, and Joško wondered who had left it there. He folded one arm under his head, closed his eyes, and darkness lowered and held him.

#

When he came back to himself, someone was pulling him onto his side. Hands groped at his belt clasp. He opened his eyes, and his cellmate was naked on the floor beside him, crying softly. Joško shoved him away, cinched his belt and stood.

The man crawled to his bunk, got in and closed his eyes. Joško sat down and kneaded his stomach. Everything hurt, but his breath came easier, and the bed was at least as comfortable as his army cot in Šibenik had been. There was a heavily barred window set high in one wall, and he stared at the rectangle of sunlight that lay flat against the opposite wall. It stretched diagonally at one end, almost like the prow of a ship, and Joško remembered Klara, the Serb boats, the shelling.

He shouted for the guards, and the cellblock became a hoarse fanatic choir. A guard came running down the line of cells, swinging his baton to both sides, and walked slowly back up to Joško's cell.

— Did you start all this?

— I'm sorry, Joško said, but I have to go. My sister—

— You'll leave when the guys in 105 say you can leave. Until then, shut the fuck up or I break your elbows.

The guard walked up the hall and turned the corner, and Joško sat down on his bed. He listened to his cellmate crying in his sleep, and to the ranting of those in other cells. The rectangle of sunlight slid up to the center of the wall, widened into a perfect square and faded to nothing.

Then he heard footsteps. The two guards were escorting a battered soldier down the hall. One guard opened the door to Joško's cell, and the other thrust the soldier inside. The man's left hand was wrapped in blood-soaked bandages. He sat down on the one empty bed, swung his legs up, lay back and closed his eyes.

— What happened to you? Joško asked.

The soldier opened his eyes, looked across at Joško, and rolled over to face the wall.

#

The guards brought breakfast early the next morning: paper plates of bread and canned meat, and paper cups of water. Joško took his plate and cup from the floor, went to his bed and emptied the cup in one long draught. His cellmates still hadn't gone to get their food. The man who'd been there when he arrived was still asleep; the soldier with the bloody hand was sitting upright on his bed, and his eyes were open and empty.

— You really should eat something, Joško said.

— Why?

Joško had no answer. The man looked down at his bandaged hand.

— What happened was, I didn't want to die.

— What?

The man scratched lightly around the bandages.

— I ran. We all ran, at least at the beginning. Some of us stopped, and some of us didn't. Me, for example. And Tomislav. And Dubravko.

— Where are they?

— I don't know. They were here a few days ago, but I don't think they'll be coming back.

— I don't understand.

The man stared at Joško.

— Deserters get taken to Room 105. Sooner or later you sign your confession and they take you away.

— But if you're a deserter too—

— I told them that the others had forced me to go along because I was the only one who knew the trail. It wasn't a very good lie, but it was all I could think of.

— So they aren't going to take you away?

— Yes, they are.

— But if you didn't—

— I admitted everything yesterday.

— Why?

The soldier closed his eyes and folded his arms across his chest.

— You'll find out when they take you to 105.

#

The man with the bloody hand was named Kunić, and the other man was named Gusterica. Gusterica lay on his bed and refused to eat, so Joško and Kunić split his food and water. Again Joško watched the skewed rectangle slide up the wall, become a square, and fade.

There was more shouting, a shriek that sounded like the fat man with the moustache, more footsteps, and standing at the door were Magarac and the two guards. Kunić backed into the corner of the cell. Gusterica didn't even open his eyes.

A guard opened the door, and Magarac stepped inside. His right arm was in a cast, and there were fresh white bandages covering his nose and forehead. He told Joško to stand in the center of the cell, and not to move. Joško did as he was told, and Magarac nodded.

— Now you're going to tell me your name, your rank, and what you were doing by that stream instead of fighting the Serbs with the rest of your squad.

— My name is Joško.

— Joško what?

— Joško Banović.

Magarac smiled, then laughed, a tremendous braying that echoed down the cellblock.

— Ah. So you're the famous Joško Banović, the man who shot down two jets over Šibenik, who left the head of that demon Hadžihafizbegović on a cafe table in Split.

Joško thought about bringing out the earring as proof, but of course if he did the guards would take it, and he'd have nothing to give to Klara when he finally found her.

— I'm not sure it was him, but—

— Brother, I'm going to give you one more chance. Who are you?

— Joško Banović.

— Of course you are. And I'm Marshall Tito.

Magarac smiled again, and drove his cast into Joško's groin.

— Let's try something else. Tell me why you deserted your squad.

Joško tried to answer, but no words came out.

— There's no hurry. Consider your answer carefully.

— It was a special mission. The planes came and killed them all, and now my sister—

Magarac slammed him into the wall.

— Are you making fun of me?

— No, I know, but she—

The man smacked him into the wall again.

— You're aware, right, that the war isn't going very well? That whole towns are being slaughtered? And do you know why? Because cowards like you are abandoning their posts. Now tell me the truth, or so help me—

— I did. The—

Magarac threw him to the floor.

— Fuck you and your God both.

— And may my God fuck you back.

Magarac began kicking him, his boots slamming into Joško's stomach and chest. Joško clawed his way under the bed, and the two guards stepped in and pulled Magarac away.

— I'll see you in Room 105, he said, wiping sweat from his chin.

Then he looked over at Kunić still huddled in the corner.

— And you'll be seeing me early tomorrow morning.

The door slammed. When the men were gone, Kunić came to Joško, helped him up and onto his bed.

— Your head's a mess.

— Yes.

— Seriously. You need to get it looked at.

— I know. Thanks.

Kunić hesitated.

— Are you really Joško Banović?

— Yes.

— Wow. I heard the guards talking about you yesterday—you've been in the newspapers and everything.

Joško didn't reply. For a time Kunić stared at his bandaged hand. Then he turned and walked to the corner of the cell. He knelt on the floor, stared into the wall, and rocked gently back and forth.

Joško didn't sleep much that night. Kunić stayed in the corner, working through the rosary prayers over and over, and Gusterica came over twice to fiddle with Joško's belt clasp. At last a thin light slipped in through the window. The guards came walking down the hall. One of them opened the door to the cell, drawing his pistol as the other entered, went to the corner where Kunić knelt, and lifted him to his feet.

#

Later that morning, Magarac stopped by to tell Joško that he had until the end of the week to think about what it meant to desert his squad, to betray the Motherland, to be a coward. Kunić did not come back, and no new prisoners were brought in. Gusterica continued to cry noiselessly and still would not eat, so Joško ate for him, and the food seemed to be repairing what Magarac had broken.

For three days he saved his waste in the pail beneath his bed. After breakfast on the fourth day he went over to check on his cellmate. Gusterica was asleep, his eyelids scaly with dried pus and tears. Joško stepped to the door of the cell and called for the guards.

Again the other prisoners joined in the shouting; again one of the guards came running down the hall, swinging his baton like a sword. Joško waved him to a stop.

— Gusterica hasn't been eating, and now I can't wake him up. I think he's dead.

The guard looked at Joško, then over at Gusterica.

— Shit. Okay. Go sit on your bunk, facing the wall.

Joško did as he was told.

— If you move at all, the guard said, I swear to God I'll put a bullet in your brain.

Joško nodded. The guard unlocked the door, stepped into the cell and closed the door behind him, walked over to Gusterica and put his hand to the man's wrist.

— You asshole, he said, turning back around. He's—

Joško slung the contents of the pail into the guard's face and his hands closed around the man's throat. The two of them fell to the floor, rolling in the stew of feces and urine, and the guard lost consciousness before he could get his pistol out of its holster. Joško kept his grip on the man's throat a moment longer, let go, and the guard's head fell back.

He took the key ring from the man's belt, went to his bed and wiped himself as clean as he could on the mattress, opened the cell door, and hesitated.

— Goodbye, Gusterica, he said. Best of luck.

His cellmate didn't reply. Joško walked up the hallway, and all around him the prayers and ranting went quiet. One fat hand reached out to grab at his shirt, and Joško stopped, stared at the prisoner, and the man drew his hand slowly back in.

He found the storeroom and got the door open, took up his rifle and rucksack, turned back around and met the second guard coming in through the door. Joško drove the barrel of his rifle into the man's stomach. As he fell, Joško flipped the rifle around and swung it down again and again until the man's skull broke open.

Up the next hallway, into the lobby, and the clerk was standing at the open door, staring out at the morning. Joško brought his rifle back over his shoulder, drove the butt against the back of the man's neck and watched him fall.

Across the compound a group of guards stood talking and smoking, and to his right he heard the rumble of an engine. He walked around the corner, saw a jeep with its hood gaping open, and a soldier leaning in so far that one of his feet was raised off the ground. Joško stepped forward. It was Magarac. Joško watched the

man work for a moment, then reached up for the hood and slammed it down.

The engine coughed thickly and Magarac's legs lifted, collapsing against the fender as the engine died. Joško opened the hood and pulled the body out. The fan had caught Magarac on the temple and peeled his face away.

— I'm sorry, Joško said.

The corpse did not answer. Joško dragged it over to the side of the building and stretched it out flat, taking care to fold one of Magarac's arms gently under his head. He put his rifle and rucksack in the back of the jeep and climbed into the driver's seat, turned the ignition key, and the engine spat and went silent. He turned the key again, and this time the engine hacked and sputtered, then roared.

Through the middle of the compound, past the circle of guards. The sentry shaded his eyes to get a better look. Joško took up his rifle, shot him in the chest, burst through the gate and out onto the road.

#

The wind sang around him, and Joško smiled as he thought of how soon he would be at his sister's house. He imagined his arrival in Dubrovnik: the gunboats were silent, and Klara was on her balcony, saw him walking toward her, came running down the stairs to embrace him.

The landscape went pale and dry as he flew along the ragged coast, slipping onto side roads when he could, shunting back down to the highway when there was no other choice. Hard bright cliffs grew from nothing to his left, and the sea mumbled and tossed to his right. Then the cliffs fell away, and a small village stretched along both sides of the road. He slowed when he saw children playing in a patch of sand nearby.

He checked his canteen and found it empty. He searched the sides of the road, and when he saw a stand with a sign advertising ripe tangerines, he pulled onto the shoulder and smiled at the pudgy woman who sat inside.

— Hello, he called. Is there somewhere around here where I could fill my canteen?

— Nothing is free, said the woman.

— And if I bought something first?

The woman shrugged, and scratched at the bristly black hairs that grew from the mole on her chin. Joško opened his rucksack, then saw a five-thousand dinar note stuffed into a plastic box between the seats. He took the bill and held it out.

— What will this buy?

— Twenty figs, ten tangerines or two melons.

Joško walked to the stand. The tangerines and figs looked good, but the melons were overripe, and some of them had started to rot. One was exactly the size of Hadžihafizbegović's head, and near the base there was a crack that curled up to either side like a grin, as if the melon, at least, had gotten the joke.

— Ten figs and five tangerines, please, said Joško.

The woman reached under the counter and came up with a plastic bag. She blew it open, counted the figs into it, took up four tangerines and dropped them in as well.

— You—

— Minus one for the water, the woman said. You want free water, go to the sea.

— Where's the faucet?

The woman jerked her thumb around the corner of the stand, then wrinkled her nose.

— You really stink, she said.

She leaned forward for a closer look, drew back in and reached up, slammed a metal grate down between them. Joško found the spigot and filled his canteen. He washed his hands and face, his neck, his arms, and sprayed off his uniform as well as he could. As he walked back to the jeep he called his thanks to the grate. There was no reply.

A few kilometers farther on he came to a checkpoint, and it seemed that the soldiers were waiting for him. One stood in the middle of the road and waved him to a stop. Another took out a pad

and a pen, walked around behind the jeep, and shouted to the one in front, who drew his pistol.

Joško hunched as low as he could, slipped the gearshift into reverse, and jammed the gas pedal to the floorboard. He felt the jolt of the rear soldier's body, put the jeep in first and hit the gas again. A bullet shattered the windshield, and there was another jolt, a soldier flying up over the hood, catching on the top of the windshield and again on the tailgate, tumbling away. Other soldiers along the road were firing as well, and then Joško was past them, past a row of tents that hunched like khaki vultures, and now he was alone with the sea and its pinpointed light like a million scattered rhinestones.

There would be other checkpoints soon, he knew. He tried the first side road he came to, but it dead-ended only a few hundred meters inland. He tried the next one as well, and it curled southwest and burrowed into the hills.

