



I

Going for a Walk

(1921)

What I see, what I see. What I see is the day in all its absurdity and triviality. A horse, harnessed to a cab, staring with lowered head into its nose bag, not knowing that horses originally came into the world without cabs; a small boy playing with marbles on the pavement—he watches the purposeful bustle of the grownups all around him, and, himself full of the delights of idleness has no inkling that he already represents the acme of creation, but instead yearns to be grown up; a policeman who fancies himself as the still point at the center of a whirlpool of activity, and the pillar of authority—enemy to the street, and placed there to supervise it and accept its tribute in the form of good order.

I see a girl, framed in an open window, who is a part of the wall and yearns to be freed from its embrace, which is all she knows of the world. A man, pressed into the shadows of a public square, collecting bits of paper and cigarette butts. An advertising kiosk placed at the head of a street, like its epigram, with a little weathervane on it to proclaim which way the wind is blowing down that particular street. A fat man in a cream-colored jacket, smoking a cigar, he looks like a grease spot in human form on this

summer's day. A café terrace planted with colorful ladies, waiting to be plucked. White-jacketed waiters, navy blue porters, newspaper sellers, a hotel, an elevator boy, a Negro.

What I see is the old man with the tin trumpet on the Kurfürstendamm. He is a beggar whose plight draws all the more attention to itself for being inaudible. Sometimes the falsetto of the little tin trumpet is stronger and more powerful than the entire Kurfürstendamm. And the motion of a waiter on the café terrace, swishing at a fly, has more content in it than the lives of all the customers on the café terrace. The fly gets away, and the waiter is disappointed. Why so much hostility to a fly, O waiter? A war cripple who finds a nail file. Someone, a lady, has lost the nail file in the place where he happens to sit down. Of course the beggar starts filing his nails—what else is he to do? The coincidence that has left the nail file in his possession and the trifling movement of filing his nails are enough to lift him about a thousand social classes, symbolically speaking. A dog running after a ball, then stopping in front of it, static now and inanimate—unable to grasp how some stupid, brainless rubber thing only a moment ago could have been so lively and spirited—is the hero of a momentary drama. It's only the minutiae of life that are important.

Strolling around on a May morning, what do I care about the vast issues of world history as expressed in newspaper editorials? Or even the fate of some individual, a potential tragic hero, someone who has lost his wife or come into an inheritance or cheated on his wife or in one way or another makes some lofty appeal to us? Confronted with the truly microscopic, all loftiness is hopeless, completely meaningless. The diminutive of the parts is more impressive than the monumentality of the whole. I no

longer have any use for the sweeping gestures of heroes on the global stage. I'm going for a walk.]

Seeing an advertising kiosk on which facts such as, for instance, Manoli cigarettes are blazoned out as if they were an ultimatum or a *memento mori*, I completely lose my patience. An ultimatum is just as inconsequential as a cigarette, because it's expressed in exactly the same way. Whatever is heralded or touted can only be of little weight or consequence. And it seems to me there is nothing these days that is not heralded. Therein lies its greatness. Typography, to us, has become perspective, value. The most important, the less important, and the unimportant only *appear* to be important, less important, unimportant. It's their image that tells us their worth, not their being. The event of the week is whatever—in print, in gesture, in sweeping arm movements—has been declared the event of the week. Nothing is, everything claims to be. But in the face of the sunshine that spreads ruthlessly over walls, streets, railway tracks, beams in at the window, beams out of windows in myriad reflections, anything puffed up and inessential can have no being. In the end (led astray as I am by print, by the presence of typography as an adjudicator of value) I come to believe that everything we take seriously—the ultimatum, the Manoli cigarettes—is unimportant.

Meanwhile, at the edge of the city, where I have been told nature is to be found, it isn't nature at all, but a sort of picture-book nature. It seems to me too much has been printed about nature for it to remain what it used to be. On the outskirts of our cities, in place of nature, we are presented with a sort of idea of nature. A woman standing at the edge of the woods, shielding her eyes with the umbrella she has brought along just in case, scanning the horizon, and seeing a spot that seems familiar from some painting,

zon, and seeing a spot that seems familiar from some painting, exclaims: "Isn't this just so picturesque!" It's the degradation of nature to a painters' model. It's not such a rare degradation either, because our relationship to nature has become warped. You see, nature has acquired a purpose where we are concerned. Its task is to amuse us. It no longer exists for its own sake. It exists to satisfy a function. In summer it provides woods where we can picnic and doze, lakes where we can row, meadows where we can bask, sunsets to send us into raptures, mountains for walking tours, and beauty spots as destinations for our excursions and day-trips. We have Baedeker-ized nature.

But what I see hasn't made it into the Baedeker. What I see is the sudden, unexpected, and wholly meaningless rising and falling of a swarm of mosquitoes over a tree trunk. The silhouette of a man laden with firewood on a forest path. The eager profile of a spray of jasmine tumbling over a wall. The vibration of a child's voice, fading away into the air. The inaudible, sleeping melody of a distant, even an unreal life.

I don't understand the people I see putting their best foot forward to enjoy nature. There's a difference between a forest and a sidewalk. "Recreation" is no necessity, if that's the expressed objective of the hiker. "Nature" is no institution.

Western Europeans set out into nature as if to a costume party. They have a sort of waxed jacket relationship with nature. I saw hikers who were accountants in civilian life. What did they need their walking sticks for? The ground is so flat and smooth that a fountain pen would have served them just as well. But the man doesn't see the flat and smooth ground. He sees "nature." If he were going sailing, presumably he would don the white linen suit he inherited from his grandfather, who was also a weekend sailor.

He has no ears for the plashing of a wave, and he doesn't know that the bursting of a bubble is a significant thing. The day that nature became a site for recreation was the end.

In consequence of which, my outing was that of a curmudgeonly soul, and I wish I hadn't undertaken it.

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