

FINALLY – THE DANUBE

Tito and I sit on the little porch of the wooden cabin. As we smoke cigarettes, we move our arms with the most minimal of effort, only to take the bottle of whiskey sitting before us on the floor. The city fell asleep long ago. From the distance, there are sounds of a passing car and the squeal of tires. Probably some kid showing off, flooring it through the empty streets. The windows of a high-rise across from us are mostly dark. Only a few let off light that falls onto the marina below, where boats are gently rocking in sleep. The military island, bathed in the Danube, all green, has opened its doors to night owls. We contemplate continuing our journey under the moon shining high in the summer sky sprinkled with countless stars.

I just don't feel like doing anything. I feel completely empty. Probably because we've already achieved a goal, some imaginary distance that we can already be proud of. I feel totally listless. Strange. But sometimes, and not only when I'm alone, a feeling not unlike nostalgia grips me. A strange yearning for past times, for something I was and for something I wanted to be. All of a sudden, from out of nowhere, indescribable sadness takes over me. As though I've just lost a brother, a best friend, a father or a mother. This dark force shakes me as I walk, in bed in the middle of the night, or during a ride on the city tram as late afternoon moves towards dusk. Just moments later, it's as though I fall back down to Earth, as though a balloon has been popped, and I finally realize who I am and what I am: a little tiny man on the playground of the universe. An ant whose role is important, but not crucial in the play directed by almighty forces. Then my walk becomes crystal clear, my thoughts sharp and calm, like the midnight tide that moves out past the heavy rocks. Then I notice every detail as I move slowly forward. At that moment, everything makes sense, and everything has its true meaning. That is the feeling that remains when we have achieved a set goal, because only then we realize that it was the path towards the goal that was more important than the goal itself. We set new goals and move forwards.

Why am I complaining? We still need to get to the Black Sea! Our goal is yet to be achieved, but I've gotten lazy in Belgrade. I have already forgotten what it's like to sail, forgotten the feeling of the stubborn river flowing under the boat, carrying us into new and unknown parts. It seems as though at the beginning of this journey we were restless, naive and inexperienced, and now, we're suddenly taking this seriously! We set sail in the morning! At dawn, we will leave, and not look back until we've reached our goal.

We take on our paddles like the greatest of galliots, ready to battle the mighty river. All the happenings on the Sava seem now like a distance dream or like a great party from a long time ago, like last year's vacation. What will follow will be completely different, much more powerful and uncertain. Just as I want it to be. We said goodbye to Boro yesterday, and already now, our boat is cutting through the waters of the wide and great Danube.

We pass through Belgrade and past the sign that reads 1171, which is the marker for the number of kilometers we still have to pass until we reach the Black Sea. From the cafe on the other bank of the river, we can hear muffled sounds of the song:

*My whole life I've dreamed of sailing down the river
on an old steamboat tugging salt,
carrying with me a long, lost love,
a long, thin cigar and a pair of gold spurs.
If I were Shane...¹*

As we listen, we paddle and move downstream as the sun breaks through the foggy morning in Belgrade. The water mixes and eddies beneath us. Napoleon once said, "The Danube is the emperor among rivers." It is as eternal as the Tiber, fertile as the Nile, magnificent as the Mississippi, loved as the Volga, and as spirited as the Rhine. The Danube is a unique river on the European continent. Through the ages, the history of the Danubian peoples has been written on its shores. We start a new chapter in our journey, and enter into it with a good dose of awe.

MIGHTY ĐERDAP – THE IRON GATES

From Belgrade, we sailed for two days and now found ourselves before the very entrance into the famous Đerdap gorge, also known as the Iron Gates. We passed by the cities of Pančevo and Smederevo. We stopped in neither, as we wanted only for the river we were sailing on. We reached the spot where the Danube begins to form the border between Serbia and Romania. We

¹ From the song *Sejn* (Shane) by the rock band Haustor, released in 1985, which makes reference to the title character of the 1949 book *Shane* by Jack Schaefer that was later made into a movie and television series.

stopped at the harbor master's office in Veliko Gradište to announce our departure from the country, as we planned to pass directly through the next 100 kilometers through the Iron Gates and to enter into Bulgaria, without stopping anywhere in Serbia. The town of Veliko Gradište stands at the spot where the Danube is about 3 miles wide! On the Romanian side, we could see the Carpathian Mountains in the distance, while on the Serbian side, the Homolje Mountains tapered down towards the riverbank. Armed with a bottle of brandy, the green pleasure from the military island and a great deal of positive energy, we wanted only to continue on our way. In the harbor master's office at Veliko Gradište, we were informed of the recent death of a fisherman between the sharp rocks of the Iron Gates. He had entered among the rocks, got caught up in a strong wind, and his boat was smashed to pieces. He couldn't have stood a chance. I found this hard to imagine, as the Danube here was as calm and tranquil as a lake. On the other side, this calm and serene Danube rages, shouts, rolls and crashes in the endless distance. There, it is dangerous and bloodthirsty. Hundreds of fishermen have found their deaths in its depths, even more shippers and warriors, from the Huns, Avars, Hungarians, right up to the present day. The greatest fear for shippers is the strong wind called *Košava*. It is similar to the strong north-eastern *Bora* wind and raises massive waves that even the largest cargo ships dread. The name of the wind comes from the Turkish word *koş*, meaning fast, and the word *hava*, meaning wind. Literally *Fast Wind*.

“This is it! We're finally here, and once we pass through the entrance, there's no going back,” I tell Tito before the entrance to the gorge as we prepare the boat to enter among the rocks.

“It doesn't look so bad. It's just a little narrow over there,” comments Tito, casting his gaze on the entrance to the gorge which, in comparison to the 5 kilometer width of the Danube not so long ago, now looks very tight. The river narrows all of a sudden, as though entering into a channel.

The Golubac fortress² stands on the rocky cliff, as though guarding the entrance to the gorge. It stands as a monument to the Balkan warrior epic which told the tale of this area in blood over decades, centuries and millennia. I can see a lone fisherman stands at one of the entrances to the fortress, casting his line towards the eternal river. Legend states that a beautiful girl called Golubana once lived here. When the tales of her beauty reached the Turkish Pasha, he began to

² The name Golubac also comes from the Croatian word *golub* (English *pigeon* or *dove*), and it occasionally called the *Town of Doves*.

bring her gifts to convince her to marry him. He punished her refusal by tying her to the rock, torturing her and leaving her body for the birds to mutilate.

We push our bags and personal items deep under the bow, under the small rubber covering. The oars are ready, and the Tomos 4 engine can hardly wait to be fired up.

“Freak!” Tito calls out, “I think we can get moving!”

“Should we sail to the dam?” I ask, as I wiggle about in the rear of the boat, trying to start the engine.

“Yeah! To the first dam and then to the second.”

There are two hydropower plants in the Iron Gates, and only after the second will we enter into Bulgaria and stop in at the first harbourmaster's office. Officially, until then, we should set foot on land at all. But whether we will or not will be up to the Iron Gates, and not up to us.

“Let's go, buddy! Full throttle and no turning back!” shouts Tito, opening the throttle.

We enter into the secret chamber, like dwarves among the massive rock cliffs. At the very start, the rock faces climb high above us, up to 100 yards, demanding awe. Here the Danube is only 300 yards wide. The wind becomes stronger, the waves grow larger. In order to make the sailing easier, we remove the tarp, as in the wind it takes on the properties of a sail, which pulls us to the side and slows us down. I leaf through the little booklet Captain Barut gave us. Inside is a small map. The names are written in tiny letters, and in Cyrillic, so I have to bring it right up to my eyes to try to read it. The map is really good, and very detailed. But as I read it, a strong wind blows the entire Balkan Peninsula right into my face.

“Put that away. We have more important problems. We need to steer this boat,” yells Tito, in the heat of the battle with the wind.

As hard as it is for me to do, I have to admit he's right. The only way to go is downstream and we need to focus all our strength on the river and on steering the boat. The next 60 miles through the Iron Gates will be more than entertaining, if we can judge it by this spectacular start. So much beauty and danger in one place.

We sail through the first narrowing, also called the Golubac gorge. We've now become accustomed to the gusts of wind, and to the light rocking of the waves. In the beginning it seemed terrible, but in the end, not a single hair was lost.

“If this was Đerdap, I don't know why they all warned us about it. Simić, Barut, everyone else,” Tito complains, as though there isn't quite enough danger. “Seems to me that this Đerdap is a little wimpy. I mean, it's beautiful and the nature here is amazing, but it's not nearly as dangerous as they told us. And we're even sailing in a little rubber dingy. Imagine that!”

I'm afraid to jinx the journey, but in the mild afternoon sun, and the light wind and light waves, the sailing is fantastic. The Iron Gates from the sailor's stories was something quite different from this. In their stories, men fought for their lives, and we're just sailing calmly through. A little wind? Big deal.

“Is that a boat over there in the distance?” Tito asks. “Looks to me like it's sailing. And it looks pretty big.”

A relatively large tourism boat, a river cruiser, sails towards us. There are more and more of these types of boats sailing the Danube these days, on the route Black Sea – Vienna or Black Sea – Belgrade. This sailing fortress, a snob attraction, just does not fit into the natural harmony of these cliffs. With its powerful engines, it sails upstream and downstream without any difficulties. It needs only to dock when the winds are very strong.

“Look at the crowd up there! See?” shouts Tito, pointing to the deck where the passengers have gathered and are pointing down at us. They take out their cameras and starting taking photos. We are very close, almost parallel to them, about 30 yards away. Compared to the ship, we look like David standing before Goliath.

“Screw them! Drop your pants!” Tito yells, though I have no idea what he's talking about. “Take off your pants and moon them! Screw the snobs!”

I turn off the engine, stand next to Tito and drop my shorts. I turn around and Tito and I moon the tourists as they continue to take photos. We almost die laughing. Unfortunately, no one told us earlier that these river ships make huge waves. They come, one after another, and splash right into the left side of our boat. We rock and roll, left and right, like drunken idiots. We hold onto one another to keep from falling into the Danube, as water enters our boat with every wave. Finally, the waves subside and we are completely soaked and happy to have shown them who and what we are!

The days nears its end. The sun has already slid behind the tall rocks and mountains, and it's time we found a place to sleep. Though we shouldn't come onto land, we think that no one will

see us out here. And if they do, I doubt they'll tell the police about it. The first gorge, Golubica, slowly comes to an end, after 20 km. The Iron Gates consist of several smaller gorges with wide valleys opening up between them. Before us, is one such valley, the Ljupkova Valley. Wider hands calm the river. Calming the fury of the wind.

At this site, the Danube again looks like a lake, as it is up to several miles wide. The water is calm, and there are virtually no currents. All around the valley are meadows, and in the distance we can see a small village and hear the sound of children's laughter.

“We'll beach here,” I tell Tito.

“Where?”

“Right here in front of us, on this steep meadow,” I answer.

This is the first meadow I spot from the boat and it is perfect for our night's rest. It is surrounded by wild apple trees. Now I can admit, at the end of the first gorge, that the constant rocking on the waves has worn me out. Đerdap is much more trying than the other sections of the river we've passed, but not nearly as dangerous as everyone told us. Still, the feeling of pride just for being here is stronger than everything else. Such beauty is rarely ever seen.

“Look what daddy has...” Tito smiles next to the set up tent, waving a bag of green liberty.

“I'd already forgotten that we have that!” I exclaim. Boro had pushed the bag into our backpack unnoticed and told us about it, but the excitement over Đerdap completely shifted my thoughts in a different direction. Thank God I have Tito to remember these details.

“There's nothing else to do but try it. Tomorrow is another day, another gorge. It'd be better for us to relax,” he says.

Night falls silently and gently. The light of the stars falls on the waters of the Ljupkova valley and complete peace overtakes Đerdap. The joint in the shape of a lumpy carrot is Tito's creation. We sit in front of the tent, right next to the river, and share it. We stare at the sky and the darkness of night around us.

“You see these stars overhead, buddy?” asks Tito, with an odd and strangely uncynical tone, very unusual for him. “Whaddya think? Are there any rivers like the Danube out there?” he continues.

“I don't know about rivers, but I have my own little theory about space. Might not be accurate,

but you can't prove to me that it's not," I say, ready to outline my theory in the whirling smoke from the lumpy joint. "You know that theory about the Big Bang?"

"Yeah, I do! That's when the entire universe was created from that big bang, from a single point. Something like that, right?" he answers.

"Exactly. If that means that the whole universe was created from one magnificent explosion, then planet Earth was also created in the explosion. Isn't that right?" I tell him.

"Must be. The Earth is a planet in the universe. No other way to put it."

"Right! The particles that were present at the very start of the big explosion had the predisposition to develop into life over time, even into intelligent life. If that weren't true, there would be no life in the universe, and we can testify to all kinds of living species on Earth. Even here, right next to the river, if you turn around, you'll see hundreds," I continue.

"You're completely right, buddy. But those particles took a long time to spread into all those directions! Damn, that lasted a really long time," Tito says, contemplating.

"It sure did, my friend. But who's to say that those same early particles didn't lead to intelligent life somewhere else? Somewhere, in a galaxy billions of light years away. Who can say for sure that they didn't?" I continue.

We stop talking, each alone with his thoughts, and we each take another puff. My thoughts are spinning and my mind is moving 100 miles an hour. I feel like I'm going insane. It's one of those moments when you stop to think what there was when there was nothing.

"The very creation of the universe liberated so much energy that still today holds together the enormous cosmic expanse. The energy started from the initial point and extended to all corners of the universe. This is energy that someone has at least once in their life felt, that they belong to something greater, that they are part of some greater plan and part of some common entity. That energy, that's so hard to describe, was in those first particles during the Big Bang," I explain. I continue this train of thought that's starting to annoy me, but I can't stop the flow of thought. Boro really put his best into those plants on the military island.

"It's gotta be that way, my friend. But if all that started from one point, then everything is in its exact place in the universe and is common to all living beings. That's the way it's gotta be," Tito agrees, and starts to roll another. He starts to get up, but gravity won't let go, and drops him

back into a seated position. For a moment, he is limp and deep in thought.

“I mean to say, that there only is one energy. The entire universe is connected to it. There's no other explanation, if it all started from the same point,” I conclude.

My brain is about to blow and we need to end this discussion. How on earth did it begin?

“You mean to see that there are aliens, and that they look like us?” Tito asks.

“They might not be physically similar, but I am certain that they were created from the same point as we were. Get it? It all started from one point. These aliens are practically our long lost brothers. Really! So it's possible that out there somewhere, there is a river similar to this Danube,” I say.

“So, you wanna say that we're nothing but plain old star dust to them?” Tito asks, obviously tired, with his eyes half shut.

“That's right! It's sad, but at the same time, beautiful.”

We talk a while longer under the depth of night completely takes over the horizon, and the light waves start to lull us to sleep. Slumber is the only real medicine for tomorrow's continuation of our journey.

We start the new day with our now traditional bath in the river, inspection of the boat, and packing up our things from the short. Mostly, this was the tent and our sleeping bags.

“You were pretty talkative yesterday,” Tito says laughing.

“Ha! Wasn't the only one, it seems. You were looking off into the distance, lost in your thoughts,” I shoot back.

“Wasn't me! Boro mixed something funny into that bag. But, really! What's the next gorge?”

“The next gorge is...,” I pause as I leafed through the booklet, “Gospođin Vir, and it's right there, after the valley,” I say pointing.

“Let's get moving then!” he shouts.

Tito revs up the Tomos 4, the classic among engines, and the boat headed to the main current from the valley, moving downstream towards Gospođin Vir, the Lady's Eddy. Just before entering the gorge, the water starts mixing and the waves are even higher than they were yesterday. The cliffs are higher and sharper, and the actual river is much narrower. Gospođin

vir is a narrowing that is 72 miles long, with cliffs that reach up to 550 yards in some places! In the gorge, the Danube narrows to just 220 to 380 yards. The tale says that the gorge was named after a wealthy lady who did not believe the reports of her servants that the eddy crashed and swallowed up their ship, and so she paddled out alone to see for herself. She never returned. This is also the deepest river depth in Europe, of up to 90 yards!

The boat began to rock unbelievably on the yard high waves. The wind whipped our faces and turned the boat here and there, but we continued to move downstream with some help from the engine. Our biggest fear was the sharp crags that we barely managed to keep off of, by pushing back on them with our oars. However hard we tried to get back to the middle and the main current of the river, it kept pushing us back out towards the edges. The fact that there was a giant eddy here before the construction of the Iron Gate I hydropower plant, and that the eddy swallowed up even the largest ships, made my blood run cold. Though the eddy is no longer here today, just the thought of it is terrifying. The thought that it could pull in a ship, crush it and pull it to the bottom, 90 yards deep. There's no going back from there.

“Push harder, moron!” shouted Tito, soaked to the bone, as the waves pour over him and keep him constantly on his guard.

“Get on the engine, and I'll push! Come on!” I shout, moving up to the bow to try to push the boat away from the rocks. The engine helps only occasionally, as when the waves lift it up it loses its transmission power. The waves are just stronger. But all the same, all we can do is battle against them.

“We gotta get to the middle, to the main current!” I tell him.

As the river plays ping-pong with us, we both grab our oars and decide to row without the engine as hard as we can, to the middle, at least 50 yards from the rock. We row like madmen. It looks as though Simić was right to test us in Slavonski Brod. That test was just as hard and trying as this rowing is now. Fortunately, we're up on our rowing practice.

It took half an hour of battle to pull out of the firm grip of Gospođin vir. Finally, we caught the main current which began to pull us downstream. Though it was still wavy, after a few miles, the river calmed and so did the wind that blows from the southern Carpathians of Romania on the left bank. We entered into another valley – Donji Milanovac.