

## Sample chapter

# Evald Flisar

## The Sorcerer's Apprentice

**A**t the end of the canyon the old man drew my attention to one of the snow bridges that abound in Kashmir. Each winter, snow fills deep ravines and riverbeds to the brim and freezes over, while underneath water digs a tunnel and flows through it invisible, inaudible except to a trained ear. On top, one can cross the bridge without fear of crashing through its frozen layer. But in late spring, as the snows start to melt, the water tunnel grows steadily larger and the snow span above it thinner. Finally, a gap appears in the middle. Before it widens, one can leap across it, but towards the end of July this becomes hazardous. At the end of September, before the onset of winter, only a fool would venture on to one of those structures.

»Each of us carries his winter with him,« pronounced my companion. »And his snow bridge. And his gap.«

These were startling words for an old mule-driver who had offered to take me to Amarnath Cave for less than half the usual fee. But he was right. All of a sudden I saw my journey as a symbolic attempt to leap across such a gap in my soul, and my recent life as a series of such attempts, of jumps undertaken to reach the other side, of vertiginous falls; of attempts to find a less dangerous crossing point, where the gap would not be so wide.

I had always been aware of having a double. As children we used to be very close, but gradually distrust grew between us. The world took the side of my intellectual »I«, while my instinctive part, repeatedly shamed, withdrew. It settled in a dimension to which my intellectual »I« refused to grant equal rights, for to him it appeared inexplicable, non-scientific, however much it continued to be confirmed by experience.

As the old man and I continued our ride towards Amarnath Cave, I suddenly felt that on the other side of the canyon I could see, astride a Himalayan pony just like mine, and riding in the same direction, my rejected double whose absence had made my life so

unbearable. But I had waited too long; the bridges which could have brought us together had melted. Now there was a gap between us which my distrustful intellect could never clear without risking a catastrophic fall into mental illness.

Farther up we came upon a group of pilgrims who were returning from a visit to the caves; a small number of men and women resting, drenched by the afternoon sun, on the rocks by the wayside. The old man threw them a few Kashmiri words which drew surprised comments and laughter. As we rode on I could hear them exchanging scornful remarks.

»It's too late,« said the old man. »Lingam in the cave is no more. You should've come a month earlier.«

I knew I would not see the stalagmite of ice which mysteriously appears inside Amarnath Cave each summer and waxes and wanes with the phases of the Moon, reaching its highest point some time in August. But that didn't bother me. My pilgrimage had a different reason. I had been told that inside the cave I would find a remarkable holy man who might want to amuse himself by letting me stay by his side and help me across the gap in the snow bridge in my soul.

After crossing the Mahagunas Pass we reached a plain at an altitude of ten thousand feet. It was inevitable that years of inactive life would sooner or later exact their toll, but until that moment I had felt nothing more than a slight touch of vertigo and an occasional stabbing pain in the lungs. But as we descended towards the wind-swept shadowy plain, the grey rocks and granulated mountain slopes suddenly swayed in a twist and sank into darkness.

The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was the mule-driver's face, a mixture of apprehension and irritation. I felt something gluey on my left cheek; reaching out with my tongue, I tasted blood. I must have fainted and rolled off the back of my pony, striking a rock as I fell. I could feel another patch of slippery moisture on the right side of my skull. I dragged myself to the nearby stream and lowered my head into the icy water rushing over the rocks. I watched it grow dark with the blood.

»Shall we go back?« asked the old man.

»No,« I said.

»You have altitude sickness.«

He was right. Vertigo, buzzing in the ears, shortness of breath, pain behind the eyes, rapid pulse, nausea, thirst were all telling me that I had climbed too far

too fast. But never before had I been so close to the most important goal of my life! To turn back now would mean giving up too early. And for that it was too late. After a brief rest I struggled back into the saddle and we continued on our way.

Before long we had to dismount. The path was becoming very steep, winding its narrow and dangerous way past precipitous cliffs. Mist began to appear in front of my eyes.

»Rest,« I gasped, »a short rest.«

And I slid to the ground. I could see something luminous in the distance; it took me a while to realise it was the setting sun.

»We can't rest here,« I heard the old man's voice somewhere above me, »the horses will lose their footing and tumble into the ravine.« He was half dragging, half kicking them up the mountain.

I was lying on a rocky ledge, shivering, exposed to the hungry shadows of the approaching night. The old man returned and helped me to my feet. I let him grip my arm and drag me up the path, with a short rest behind each corner. »It's not far any more,« he kept saying, his voice in the wind sounding as if coming from miles away.

Finally we reached the ponies, which were shivering in the freezing wind, and resumed our journey. Soon a long valley opened before us, so narrow that probably even the sun could not penetrate it for more than two hours a day. It was covered from end to end in dirty brown snow. As we entered it, leaving the wind on the slopes behind us, deep silence enveloped us. All we could hear was the muffled sound of a hoof striking stone here and there, and, each his own, hollow beating of the heart pushing blood in search of oxygen.

Through this cold shadowy valley we finally reached an opening from where we could see, rising before us, the broad face of the Amarnath mountain, casting a threatening shadow, much steeper than I had expected, strewn with white rocks. High up the slope I could see the dark mouth of the holy cave.

»There,« the old man said, pointing at it as if claiming credit for a wonder of nature.

I dismounted for the final ascent to the cave. It took me a while to reach the entrance. As I passed into the damp and dripping interior I could see nothing at first; my only sensation was of being touched, as if licked by a huge dog, by cold, stuffy air. Gradually, the

interior of the cave became visible. It was hardly more than a hundred feet high. I descended a steep ramp to an iron railing behind which I noticed a small mound of something that looked like decomposed flowers: perhaps the garlands which devotees had thrown on Shiva's lingam during the August pilgrimage. The wet ground was strewn with litter. I held my breath, listening. The silence finally persuaded me that there was no one else in the cave.

As I emerged into the dying light of the day, I was choking. Where was the holy man I had come to find? He was not in the cave. He was not at the entrance. He was not at the foot of the mountain. How could he possibly live in that empty wilderness?

I had imagined, God knows why, that there would be a village or a monastery nearby. Assured in London, and again in Delhi, and again in Srinagar by ten reliable people that I would find the man I was looking for in Amarnath Cave, I did not expect disappointment. Ten people, I thought, cannot lie. Ten people cannot be wrong.

I sank to my knees, leaning against the nearest rock. Tears welled up in my eyes, tears of an offended child. At the foot of the mountain the old man had already unpacked the ponies, pitched a small tent, rolled out two sleeping bags, lit a kerosene burner and boiled water for tea.

»Did you see Shiva's lingam?« he asked with a touch of malice. »You should've come in August, now it's too late.«

»You know perfectly well I didn't come to see Shiva's lingam,« I snapped. »I came to find Yogananda, the holy man. You swore he would be here.«

»How could a man live in that cave?« he affected surprise. »What would he eat?«

»Why didn't you tell me that before we set off?«

»You didn't want facts,« he said simply. »You wanted a dream.«

I found his words stranger than ever, completely at odds not only with his appearance but also with the work he did.

Even so, I felt I had been taken for a ride for no reason I could understand.

»You're a liar and a cheat,« I said, stepping towards him. »I hate being treated like a fool.«

I struck him in the face.

»I won't pay you,« I said, »and that's final.«

»I didn't bring you here to get paid,« he replied, gently rubbing his painful jaw. »I brought you here to

please myself by getting to know what sort of man you are.«

»Well, you know now.«

»Indeed,« he said. »So don't worry about payment. And if you want to find Yogananda at this time of year, your best bet would be Leh, in Ladakh.«

»What makes you think I believe you?«

»What you do or don't believe has nothing to do with me,« he said. »Would you like some tea?«

I was about to hit him again, but something in his eyes told me that this time he would strike back.

»Yes,« I said. »Thank you.«

\* \* \*

As soon as I arrived in Leh I found a modest room and collapsed on a rickety bed. My head was buzzing, my mind was awash with strange faces of the Baltis, Tibetans, Ladakhis, Indian state officials and Muslim traders with whom I had shared a two-day bus ride, and with the greenery of Kashmiri valleys which seemed to belong in another world – a much pleasanter one than promised to be »little Tibet«, as Ladakh is known.

I expected the high plains to be covered by snow drifts, but even in winter most of the snow remains on the slopes of the mountains piercing the sky on all sides. The winds are violent, sometimes warm, most often cold. They are caused by sudden drops in temperature which fluctuates wildly. There are few trees; in most places all one finds are stunted bushes.

Before nightfall I rose and crossed to the window. I gazed at the river Indus, at the city of Leh sprawling before me. I saw a sixteenth-century royal palace, empty, full of dangerous cracks. I saw a city of brown grey houses with terraced roofs and rectangular windows, shabby, Asiatic, seemingly without secrets. Where in this place would I find Yogananda? What on earth would he be doing in this crowd of Tibetan faces, in the heart of traditional lamaism, he, an Indian brahmin? No doubt the old mule-driver had sold me another lie.

Out in the street, the high altitude sun gathered me into a stunning embrace. I was glad when I reached the winding alleys of the old city, which the sun could not penetrate. Passing a profusion of little shops, I decided that a stab in the dark was the best option I had. So I entered a shop selling padded winter jackets and asked the trader if he knew an Indian holy man Yogananda.

He grabbed me by the elbow and rushed me to the door. I thought I was about to be thrown out. But the trader dragged me across the road to a shop opposite, in front of which sat a plump young Ladakhi with a round cap on his head. A conversation ensued, during which the plump man listened attentively, but kept shaking his head. Then a middle-aged lama with glasses came past, carrying two travelling bags. He paused for a chat, which went on for almost ten minutes.

When the lama finally took his leave I, too, turned to go, but the trader reached out and held me back.

»The lama knows Yogananda,« he said. »Maybe you'll find him in the lamasery of Thikse. Or Lamayuru. Or some other.«

I raced to the government information office to find out how many lamaseries there were in Ladakh. A sleepy official explained that there was one in almost every village. In some there were hardly more than three or four monks, but the largest held hundreds. Reluctantly, he made a list of the most important ones. Outside, in front of the entrance, I spread out the map of Ladakh and Zanskar and soon realised that even to visit a few of the largest monasteries I would need more than three weeks!

I had to lean against the nearest wall. My head was spinning. It was a mixture of rage, helplessness and self-pity. If the wily old mule-driver had suddenly appeared before me, I would have knocked him to the ground and spat in his face. When, after some minutes, I opened my eyes again I realised with a shock that in my rage I had actually visualized him so well that he seemed to be standing before me, almost real, watching me with a mixture of curiosity and surprise – even, I thought, amusement.

»Where have you been so long?« he asked. »You look for me and I find you; is that a good beginning?«

His voice was certainly not an illusion. And neither was he. The old mule-driver was standing right in front of me! But he looked very different. He was dressed in a faded yellow gown, the usual garb of an itinerant holy man, with a necklace of beads round his neck. In his right hand he was holding a thick bamboo stick. Because he was no longer wearing a turban I could see that he was bald on top of his head, with plenty of greying hair falling down to his shoulders. He seemed to be taller, and his bearing more dignified. His eyes were different, too: less conniving, more astute, more spiritual.

It came to me in a flash. »Are you...?»

He nodded before I could finish my question.

»But why did you...?»

»Because I was hoping you might hit me again,« he smiled gently. »Won't you?»

I said I felt ashamed for losing my temper so disrespectfully. And I would, of course, pay him for taking me to Amarnath Cave, as agreed. With interest.

»Don't worry,« he said. »Forgiving fools for their follies is my favourite pleasure.«

An hour later we were on our way to the lamasery of Thikse. Old Yogananda was far from talkative. Occasionally he paused in his stride, turned and looked me up and down with a cynical grin. His wiry body exuded strength which was astonishing for a man of seventy, although strength may not be the right word; it was more a question of lightness and physical harmony. Why had I failed to notice that in the mule-driver?

He walked very fast. Before long I fell behind, increasingly short of breath, unable to understand why he preferred steep mountain paths to the more leisurely road along the river. With each step, my backpack grew heavier. But the old man would not wait. He soon vanished behind the steep rocks overhanging the path.

Go to hell, I thought as I paused to regain my breath. Far below I could see the city of Leh, half bathed in sunlight, half sunk in deep shadow, with me in a far deeper shadow under a vaulted rock, and with my hopes, which had blossomed an hour earlier, in the deepest shadow of all. The old man was so scornful that I felt he didn't like me at all.

Lifting my backpack, I staggered on.

Behind the first corner I was greeted by an unusual sight. In the middle of the rocky path, Yogananda was standing on his head, perfectly vertical, immobile. Only the bottom ends of his gown, which had collected round his waist, were trembling in the wind. The top of his head was resting on a flat stone. His feet were held slightly apart.

I waited. After five minutes he slowly bent his knees, arched his back, touched the ground with his feet without lifting his head off the stone, then manoeuvred himself on to his knees and finally, without any visible effort, extended himself into a standing position.

»Your turn,« he said.

I explained that my doctor had warned me, on account of a weakened vertebra in my neck, never to stand on my head. He laughed so loudly that the

chilling sound flew down the mountainside and vanished somewhere above the valley. This was the first time I heard the laughter with which he would later greet each of what he called my intellectoidiotisms. I almost shivered when I heard it; it was rude, gross and derisive.

»You've brought your doctor with you?« he sneered. »Well, don't worry. You *are* standing on your head. You must've been doing so for the best part of your life.«

He picked up his bamboo stick and walked on.

The path began to descend, so I found it easier to keep up with him. He even slowed down, as if wanting to tease me. Once or twice, in a moment of inattention, I almost bumped into him. Then, without any warning, he sat down on a rock beside the path.

»Carry on,« he said, »don't wait for me.«

I said I would prefer to stay with him.

»Why?«

All I could say was that I wanted to change, become different.

»You *are* different,« he said. »If you wanted to become such as you were you would have better reasons for wanting to stay with me.«

»That's it,« I said. »I want to find myself in my essence. Transform myself into what I used to be. Heal the gap inside me, become whole again.«

»My dear friend,« he laughed, »these are just words, the most worthless kind of poetry. So I tell you: don't seek, because you'll miss. Don't seek, simply find.«

He grinned, waiting for me to continue. By now it was more than obvious that he was not teasing me. But all his statements were so paradoxical that they failed to penetrate the defences of my rational mind. I said that I understood what he meant, in a way, but at the same time perhaps I did not.

He narrowed his eyes and wrinkled his forehead. »You lack innocence. Ideas and philosophies sprout from you like a multitude of weeds. You planted every seed the wind brought you, rejecting nothing. Now you're overgrown by a thick forest of nonsense. Are you prepared to burn it?«

I said I was prepared to sacrifice many things, including what he called my garden of weeds and which is, in fact, a collection of my experiences and knowledge of the world. But yes, I was prepared to let go even of that. Perhaps not by erasing it, but by paying it less attention...

He interrupted me with a chilling laughter. »Why don't you go to the bazaar in Leh? You'll make good money there. But here, my friend, there is no bargaining. And prices are steep! Playing this game, you have to put everything on the table. And there is no guarantee that you won't lose it!«

Gradually we were enveloped by a hollow night of the Himalayan heights, a stillness in which I became aware of my breathing, of the movement of lungs, of how much I owe to air.

I was zipped up in my sleeping bag. The old man was happy with a blanket across his knees. In the moonlight his eyes burned like those of a wild tiger. I told him how some eight years earlier, during my first visit to the Himalayas, I had tried to familiarize myself with Tibetan secrets and learn the art of *tumo*, the heating of the body with an inner fire. And how I failed because I lacked determination and was too superficial, merely a seeker of sensations.

»Are you different now?«

Yes, I said. I am different because my search is no longer an intellectual game. I am different because I am no longer interested in the panoramic breadth of the visible world, but want to descend to its core. For a long time my distress resembled distant rumblings of a storm which never came close. Now I am in the eye of that storm. Now my distress is so real that I find it painful even to talk about it.

I am like a furrow waiting for the seed of something, anything, that will save me. I am like a man with a terminal illness, willing to try anything that might help me.

»Even a kick in the ass?« his voice reached me through semi-darkness. »If it comes with a guarantee that it'll free you of the burden of your un wisdom?«

He said that in reality my distress was nothing more than the burden of my intellectoidiotisms which had

started to suffocate me. What would I do if he assured me that a kick in the ass would bring me relief?

Yes, I said, I would accept even a kick in the ass, or whatever he meant by that.

»When I say kick in the ass,« he laughed, »I mean the kind that knocks you flat on your face. I can't handle this overblown language of yours in which everything you say means something else.«

So simple, I thought. *Is it so simple?*

I began to speak, to explain, not so much to him as to myself, as if trying – again – to achieve some sort of overview of my situation. I said I was an outcast, a fugitive from the world of scientific materialism in which I am unable to live in a way that would make me feel at home. Knowledge I have, but not the knowledge of insight and understanding, merely a plethora of facts and opinions, a richness of habits and mental reflexes. My Western world of scientific objectivity disallows questions which can have only subjective answers, or allows them only so long as I am prepared to admit that such subjectivity is not binding. As long as it remains in the outer reaches of religion, poetry, art; as long it isn't subversive.

I long for knowledge which would embrace the world not only in its appearance, but also in its most hidden aspects. I long to be able to penetrate everything that is not visible, to reach deeper than what the world appears to be, and to remain permanently in touch with that hidden dimension.

»And now,« asked Yogananda, »you want me to save you? So they can save the world?«

I said I was neither naive nor a fool. All I wanted was for someone to show me the path. Because, I said, the first step was the most important.

»The first step you've taken,« he said. »You believe you can reach understanding by methods which your rational world does not recognize. Why else would you come to an old man who lives like a beggar and twice a day stands on his head?«