Happiness

A memoir/essay by Josip Novakovich

Happiness was a strange concept to me when I was a kid, yet I think I was happy in many ways. I enjoyed reading late into the night the *Treasures of Sierra Madre, Mysteries of Paris, Winnetou*, and many other novels. There was no TV in the house as my father was a zealous Baptist who believed that TV was the blue eye of the Devil and so I was driven to books. After the reading nights, I usually had a breakfast of caramelized onions and eggs—they were free-range and unintentionally organic—sunny-side up, into which I could dip dry bread, and that taste made me feel happy and lucky. In Croatian, the same word is used for luck and happiness, ***sreća***. I suppose we are not experts on happiness, like the Inuit on snow, so one word suffices; forget the nuances. But it was the nuances of the taste of eggs that made me joyful.

I thought Christ was going to come in three years, and after that, I would go to hell for the eternity of pain and misery, so I better enjoy the moment. There were several moments which induced happiness in my childhood. I will recount two; they both had to do with animals.

One: through our town, Daruvar, in the spring huge flocks of sheep would bleat northward to green pastures near Hungary and later in the fall they would trudge back to Bosnia and slaughter. For me it was a spectacle on par with dancing bears, one of whom climbed the lamp-post next to my home. Now I saw some a lovely lamb who looked like a cat on stilts. A shepherd said, if you want her, 100 dinars. I ran home and told my Father gave me a red note with the picture of a woman harvester. I exchanged one crumply paper—even our money was made of low-quality materials--for a wonderful soul. I was 11 years old. I had no idea what future held. My father would die a few months later. The Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia and the country was barricaded in the summer. My brother went to the north, along the Hungarian border, to sit in trenches. All the salt, sugar, and oil were sold out in the stores. But I had a soul-mate. Šestica. I called my friend Sixy as she had black circles around her eyes which shot a line upward, so it looked

like 66 was inscribed into the furry face. I fed her spinach, and she ate flowers in the garden. I climbed our cherry trees and tossed her the branches with leaves. She raided the garden for cabbage and kale. For fun, we butted heads. This little creature would dig her hooves into the ground, tilt her head and look at me askance, and then charge at me, and her skull would collide with mine. When she was tiny, it didn't hurt, but later, she became an enthusiastic head-butter, growing fast, and I realized that I hadn't bothered to sex her, and that she was a ram. Even little horns began to grow out of "her" skull. He would leap at me and crash against my skull. I was OK with the mini-concussions. I wasn't allowed to sleep with Šestica as he couldn't be potty trained. After all, he was not a cat. My mother hated Šestica as he loved roses and tulips and she complained that he took all the color out of life.

Šestica and I spent many joyful afternoons running around the yard and garden. He hopped on all four legs at once, springing up and forward, which looked humorous, and it seemed to be a sort of language of happiness. Sometimes I ran after him, sometimes he after me, and I bleated to talk to him, and if I paused, he'd butt me, literally.

I didn't know what nefarious schemes were going on behind our backs. I went to a Baptist conference during a heat wave, to Sirač, near Pakrac, in Western Slavonia.The sermons went on for hours. People sang out of key. All I could do not to die of boredom was read the Bible, on the sly, David building tents out of the Philistine foreskins. Would pink sunsets appear through thin pink skin amazing in such a tent? Was that a heavenly experience, to sift celestial light through penis skins—isn't foreskin still skin?--of your enemies? Old Testament kind of happiness?

After nearly passing out from the heat in the closed church, I rode my bicycle back, some ten kilometers of hills. When I got a block away from my home, there was a big sign at the corner tavern, where I had never set my foot in, as I was told it was a congregation of the godless. *Fresh delicious lamb!* I smelled the burnt flesh, and with misgiving I went home and asked Mother (father was already dead), Where is Šestica? Oh, she said, he had to go. --You mean those fat drunks are eating my soulmate? And she answered, And the flowers can now bloom again.

I went to the attic and listened to the Rolling Stones, *2000 light years from home* . . .over and over again. Well, probably, for each moment of happiness, there's a moment of unhappiness later on.

My second memorable moment of happiness also had to do with an animal soul. A friend of mine had two little hawks. Kocis, a Hungarian boy, had found two little hawks. He claimed they had fallen off an oak tree. He wanted 100 dinars for a hawk. I said give me both for 100. He said, no, 150. I had only 100 and got one hawk. This was actually a year after I lost my sheep, when my father was already safely decomposing in the ground. He got a coffin made of pine, which would decompose. I like that idea much better than the new coffins made of impenetrable plastic. How can dust to dust happen when there's so much plastic? Well, my father was by now if not dust, then mud. Ok, is that how I write about happiness? Well, maybe true happiness couldn't happen without the horror in the ground and around me. The little hawk was immensely beautiful and alert. My asked, What will you do with this nasty predator?

It's a sweet baby who can't even fly. What are you talking about?

It will grow up and pluck your eyes if you don't watch out. You should let it go.

It can't hunt yet. If I let it go, it would die. I must take care of him.

Without sexing this creature, I decided it would be a male bird and I called it Yahbo. *Jastreb* is hawk in Croatian and I thought this would make a good nickname, a cross between hawk and Yahwe. This little bird was going to be my personal god, a revelation from the heavens. I had no idea about sweat-lodges and the totem animal, but Yahbo was certainly mine. (To this day I admire the flight of a hawk—red-tail hawks were a solace to me when I lived in Nebraska and taught at the Santee Sioux Indian Reservation). In the attic, my father had kept bales of oxhide, around 100 oxen skins. He used to cut out clog tops from the leather. It was an improvement on the Dutch all-wood model. My mother continued the business with my father's former assistant's help. I used

to nail the leather over the wooden soles (made out of beech), 22 nails per shoe. I didn't realize that I was a child laborer. I did this 3 evenings a week for several hours, until falling asleep, and waking up when hitting my left thumb with the hammer. My thumb was blue. We went to school 6 days a week, and then on Sundays I would spend at least 5 hours in the church. I was rarely happy there—mostly bored when not terrified of the vivid descriptions of hell, which our minister loved. I was a child prisoner yearning for freedom.

Freedom was exemplified to me in my soul-mate, Yahbo. But the poor soul was not free. The attic was huge, and there were beams everywhere for Yahbo to sit on and fly from one to the other. When I got him, his beak was open and he was thirsty. I gave him a pot of water but he didn't understand it. I went to the nearby hospital garbage dump and got large syringes. I washed them out, and then filled them with water. I have no idea whether they still carried TB bacillus, hepatitis, of some other evil, but after shooting water from it several times, I deemed it safe, and then squirted into Yahbo's beak. When he swallowed the water and opened the beak again and I squirted again, I was happy. Yahbo would live! But then, how to feed him? What do hawks eat? Well, my father was a vegetarian and my mother not far from it, so there was no meat just lying around. We ate fish, carp usually, once a week. Eggs for breakfast. But otherwise, it was vegetable stews which I grew to hate. A milkmaid delivered milk and cottage cheese twice a week. I got TB from raw milk. But that was earlier and no need to dwell on it as I am writing about happiness.
Actually, I got lot of happiness out of tuberculosis. Namely, my father sent me to the Julien Alps, in Slovenia, and I absolutely loved it there. No older brother to beat me; no church; no school. Now I spent many hours in the attic blissfully observing Yahbo, his flight, his eyes, and the film that sometimes covered them. He often stood on the ledge of the window staring toward the green mountain in the east. Every other day I went to the butcher's shop and bought cheap meats—beef liver, lungs, and brains. And I would toss a bit of the liver in the air next to Yahbo expecting him to swoop and catch the meat. Usually, the slab of meat fell onto the bales of hide. He loved tearing the liver and swallowed hastily, gulping with gusto. At the time I was very thin, perhaps as a consequence of the TB and chronic bronchitis and my mother shouted at me for feeding the bird rather than myself. At the end of August, Yahbo was so large that it crossed my

mind that maybe it was an eagle rather than a hawk. He flew all around the attic and then pointed his body to fly between the laths of the window, but the glass stopped him and he fell to the floor. He shook off his dizziness and repeated the attempt. I realized I was more a jailer than a friend and decided to let him go. His instincts would probably kick in and he would survive in the wild. I put him in a large carton box, dug small holes in it for air, and trudged with the hawk to Vranjevina, Raven's rock, in the foothills of the Papuk Mountain. Here there was a stream, a little pond, and thick forests with lots of squirrels, weasels, rabbits, and if that didn't work, below there were vineyards with all kind of birds feasting on grapes. And peasants had lots of chickens. Yahbo should be able to survive. I opened the box and at first he didn't want to jump out. He was suddenly scared of the space and the sky above. I grabbed him and tossed him up. He flew to the nearby oak tree and sat on a branch and stared in amazement at the world. He looked at me, the trees, the mountain, the sky, and he flew in a circle and landed on the same branch and seemed to think. And then he flew high up and circled above where I was six or seven circles. I thought he was saying goodbye to me. Maybe he was circling a victory lap of freedom. He found some updraft air and floated without moving his wings and his flight was beautiful. I was sad I couldn't keep him, but I was happy for him. He was free. And maybe he loved me as well. It was a moment of transcendental happiness.