

1 MY MELANCHOLY FACE

Author: Heinrich Boll was born in Cologne, Germany, in 1917. He was drafted into the German army in 1939 to serve in World War II. Many of Boll's books were inspired by his experiences as a soldier and as a prisoner of war. Because he was a witness to the devastation brought about by Germany's Nazi state, Boll's work often reflects the absurdity of a totalitarian regime.

As I stood by the harbor to watch the gulls, my melancholy face attracted a policeman who walked the beat in this quarter...

But suddenly an official hand was laid on my shoulder, and a voice said: "Come along!" With this, the hand tried to jerk me around by the shoulder. I stood where I was, shook it off, and said calmly: "You're crazy."

"Comrade," the still invisible person said to me, "I'm warning you."

"My dear sir," I replied.

"There are no 'Sirs,'" he cried angrily.

"We're all comrades!" And now he stepped up beside me, looked at me from the side and I was forced to pull back my happily roaming gaze and sink it into his good eyes....

"What grounds....," I tried to begin....

"Grounds enough," he said, "your melancholy face."

I laughed.

"Don't laugh!" His anger was genuine....

"Come along!...."

Before I became aware of it, my left wrist was enclosed in a thin chain, and at this moment I realized that I was lost again. One last time I turned to the roving gulls, glanced into the beautiful gray sky, and tried, with a sudden twist, to throw myself into the water, for it seemed better to me, after all, to drown alone in this filthy water than to be strangled in some backyard by the myrmidons¹ or be locked up again. But the policeman, with a jerk, drew me so close that escape was no longer possible.

"And why?" I asked again.

"There's a law that you have to be happy."

"I am happy," I cried.

"Your melancholy face....," he shook his head.

"But this law is new," I said.

It's thirty-six hours old, and you know very well that every new law goes into effect twenty-four hours after its proclamation."

"But I don't know it"

"That's no excuse. It was announced the day before yesterday, over all the loudspeakers, in all the papers, and it was published in handbill to those," here he looked at me scornfully, "those who have to access to the blessings of the press or the radio; they were scattered over every street in the area. So we'll see where you've spent the last thirty-six hours, comrade."

He dragged me on. Only now did I feel that it was cold and I had no coat, only now did my hunger assert itself and growl before the gates of my stomach, only now did I realize that I was also dirty, unshaven, ragged, and that there were laws that said every comrade was obliged to be clean, shaved, happy, and well-fed. He shoved me in front of him like a scarecrow who

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convicted of stealing, had to leave the home of his dreams on the edge of the field. The streets were empty, the way to the precinct not long, and although I had known they would find some reason to arrest me again, still my heart grew heavy, because he had led me through the places of my youth, which I had wanted to visit after viewing the harbor, gardens that had been full of shrubs, lovely in their disorder, overgrown paths – all this was now planned, ordered, neat, laid out in squares for the patriotic leagues which had to carry out their exercises here Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays. Only the sky had its former shape and the air was like in those days when my heart had been full of dreams.