

The Russky Woman



Maria Matios

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**Mother Marica,
the Wife of Chrystofor Columbus**

Also by Maria Matios in English from
Bayda Books:

...Hardly Ever Otherwise
Apocalypse

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Translated from the Ukrainian
by Yuri Tkacz

**Mother Marica,
the Wife of Chrystofor
Columbus**

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by Paulo Onyfruk

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Maria Matios

Author's photo by *Mariharyta Boyko*

About the Author

Maria Matios is one of the top women writers in Ukraine. Her novels reflect the wild spirit of the Hutsuls, highlanders from the Carpathian Mountains, who still retain their old customs and colorful dress.

Herself born in the Carpathian Mountains, the author bases many of her books on the unique experiences of her own family. Maria Matios is a great fan of her native language. Her interests include psychology and ethnography. In literature she is a great martyr, a day-dreamer, a moderate adventurer and a lover of mystification. She loves to go about barefoot and grow flowers as she dreams up new plots for her novels.

Matios is the author of 7 collections of poetry and 12 books of prose. Her famous *Sweet Dariusia* (2003) and *Nation* (2002) have each been reprinted 4 times. Both have also appeared in Russian translation and *Nation* was translated into Polish. Her recent titles include *The Four Seasons of Life* (2009), *Armageddon Has Already Happened* (2011).

In 2005 Maria Matios won the prestigious Shevchenko Literature prize. She lives and works in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, but retires to the Carpathian Mountains for inspiration.

The cover art is by Serhiy Ivanov, an artist living and working in Lviv. He has illustrated all of Matios's books and recently held a personal exhibition entitled "Hutsul Mythology".

I would like to thank the author for allowing the translation and publication of her work, and to Serhiy Ivanov and Piramida Literary Agency for allowing the original cover art to be used.

Yuri Tkacz

The Russky Woman

Dedicated to each woman in particular...

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THE VILLAGE OF LANDLORDS VALLEY knew one thing for certain: that Katrinka had named her daughter not after the biological father, but only so as to deflect people's idle gossip away from the truth, to shield her child from censuring slander.

For in reality this is what had happened.

Petro Severyn, the son of Ivan, stopped seeing Katrinka exactly a day before the festival of Makovey on 14 August.

On Makovey in 1914 Petro Severyn was taken away to fight the Kaiser's war, together with two dozen men from the village.

And a week before Holovosik¹, on 11 September, for the first time during that first war, a foreign army descended on Landlord's Valley on grey horses. For the most part they were Russkies.

This army, envious of other people's wealth and fiercely eager to wreak havoc, would in time invade Landlords Valley two more times. But this would no longer have any bearing on Katrinka's fate.

But on this occasion, by the time the army had left the terrified village, its soldiers had managed to cause quite a bit of destruction among the people in only a little over a month.

From some farmsteads they swept out the farm equipment from the barns and sheds, as if with a broom.

Some farmers were left without a milking cow or a fattened hog. Not to mention all the chickens that had disappeared.

Some people had been dispatched prematurely into the other world because of their foolish blood and excessive strength.

But some of the locals were spared the pillage and plunder and were instead left with an addition to the household.

¹ Christian festive day, recalling the beheading of St John the Baptist.

So that when Katrinka unexpectedly gave birth to a child on the festival of Saints Peter and Paul on 12 July 1915, the residents of Landlords Valley named the child faster than the village priest.

Katrinka was the gossip of the chaste village women for several months, feeling like prey in a falcon's beak, and after all that, cleansed and her sins confessed in church, she did not waste any time thinking things over or seeking people's advice, and christened her baby daughter... Severyna. As if directly alluding to the father's surname. And it was no surprise that the child bore the same surname as Petro, the son of Ivan Severyn, since half of Landlords Valley bore the surname Severyn, and the other half – Polotniuk.

But in spite of the name entered into the church register, the spineless village gossips had branded the newly-born child with a name which stuck with her until her dying day – *Moskalytsia* or Russky Woman. As if bluntly, but now openly recalling the three black-haired Russian soldiers who had been billeted in Katrinka's house; after their departure the door from the porch to the entrance hall had remained wide open for a whole day and the orphan girl did not appear in the yard from Thursday until Saturday.

When in the middle of the day on Saturday Katrinka paused next to the well in a ripped white shirt covered in deep brown bloodstains, she first poured a bucket of water over her head, not the least bit worried if any of the neighbors were watching.

Next she brought all the domestic goods and furniture outside and set about whitewashing the squat house.

She whitewashed each wall three times.

On the outside and the inside.

In response to which the ever attentive and sharp-eyed neighbors shrugged their shoulders: Christmas was still a long way off and Easter even longer still, while the girl was cleaning the place up as if she were about to get married: must have been expecting Petro Severyn from the war.

But when Katrinka gave birth to a child, no one thought more of it and did not shrug their shoulders too much: every house had its own misfortune. With some people it was a lot worse.

As luck would have it, Petro Severyn, together with five other men from Landlords Valley, died in the fighting in Serbia. So there was no one left to confirm or deny his paternity. And finally, there was no need.

In the early stages of this story the more charitable and kind-hearted people tried to soften the name of the innocent illegitimate child, calling her *Rusachka*² behind her back. But the nickname *Rusky* stuck fast to the child, as if she had been tarred with a brush or it had been branded onto her skin.

Petro Severyn's father, Ivan, received a government pension for his fallen son and one day he brought Katrinka 30 krone³. He said very little. Except that he looked about the house for a long time, as if trying not to meet the gaze of the young woman, who herself resembled a small child, rather than a mother. And then he sank his eyes into her pale face – and stared at her thus, until he had finished saying everything that had been on his mind, without even catching his breath:

“Buy yourself a decent pair of shoes, poor dear. 'Cause I can't look at you walking about the village barefoot. I know full well your child is not Petro's. You were a virtuous girl. But it would have been better had the child been Petro's... we would at least have had a memento of our son. But what can one do – that's fate for you... And the war, may it go to hell, Lord willing...”

So as not to upset the kind man, whose eyes contained an autumnal grayness and ineffable compassion, Katrinka went and bought a pair of lady's shoes for twenty-four krone, even though she vacillated for a long time: she would have much preferred

² Meaning “Russian girl” in the local dialect and not derogatory.

³ Krone – monetary unit in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

going about in *postoly*⁴ until her dying days. Even to church at Easter.

But the new shoes, purchased with the money from Petro's father, once more reaffirmed Katrinka's chaste girlhood before the people of the village and were a sign that old man Severyn thought highly of her.

Katrinka placed the rest of the money behind the icon of Saint Catherine the Martyr – her gracious protector and patron saint.

The house mice never got round to chewing up that once-valuable piece of paper, which because of her ignorance Katrinka had forgotten to exchange for the new currency – Romanian *lei*. Just as she was incapable of grasping with her simple peasant mind the peripeteia of greater world politics. For greater world politics, as usual, rattled over lands and peoples with its heavy ruthless cart, and after the war and the new division of states the small Landlords Valley (Austrian from time immemorial and Ruthenian in essence) was now politically designated as being Romanian.

As usual in such cases, whether justifiably or not quite so, but all the same Nature enacted its law upon the people. Taking no one's side, being almost indifferent, it abolished everyone's debts and forgave petty trespasses, which had accumulated in a lifetime spent among people living in a cramped region.

The current natural law was enacted suddenly and cruelly: in 1927, in the blink of an eye, an unexpected flash flood during the night sealed the great drama of Katrinka's innocent soul, carrying away several properties from Landlords Valley in the floodwaters and together with them Katrinka's white body and indigent home, with its holy icons and the six Austrian krone still hidden behind the icon of Saint Catherine the Martyr.

The nocturnal catastrophe left behind no trace of her earthly existence.

And did not deposit her body on the riverbank for burial.

⁴ Moccasin-like shoes worn by Hutsuls.

It was as if she had never existed... had never been merry or wept, as if she had merely lived so that she could fertilize the earth with her remains.

That being the sole meaning of life.

KATRINKA'S daughter Severyna was lucky: the Lord had extended her days on this Earth, for at that time she had been working as a domestic for other people. And at the time of the flood she had been in Grassy Settlement rocking to sleep a child for the farmers Andriy and Paraska Polotniuk.

The suddenly-orphaned child had nowhere to return, so that several years later the Polotniuks' neighbors, the childless couple Dmytro and Maria Onufriychuk took in the wretched Severyna as a foster-child, and finally felt at ease that there would be someone to hand then a cup of water before they died.

The foster-child took well to work. She was a capable girl. Just as her mother Katrinka had once been before her. Only her character was somewhat... how could one put it? Well, somehow different.

In her girlhood days Katrinka had been the laughing-stock of Landlords Valley until a misfortune had befallen her, which had unexpectedly pranced into their household on horseback, bearing weapons.

Severyna needed to be rewarded for her words.

She never once answered to the curt nickname '*Russky*', which sounded like the crack of a whip.

She worked in silence, as if keeping a secret. Although in actual fact there was simply no one to talk to. Grassy Settlement was far from the village: by the time you reached the settlement from the church in Landlords Valley at Easter all your Easter eggs would have hatched into chickens.

Besides, the Onufriychuks had few neighbors:

there were the Polotniuks at the foot of the hill near the maple tree, which one reached on horseback after a quarter day's shaking about,

then there were the other Polotniuks down below near the roaring torrent, which one could not hear anyway from the Onufriychuks' place,

and the third lot of Polotniuks lived way over the-e-ere, three hills away from the Onufriychuks, where the devil said 'goodnight'.

So that even if one had wanted to chat to someone, there was no one around. Apart from the livestock and oneself. And it was like that until summer, when the shepherds appeared; or else in the autumn hunters arrived to enliven the monotonous life of the Onufriychuk household.

Except perhaps for the royal foresters, who dropped by year round asking to be given a drop of water and to taste some *brynza*⁵ cheese with sour cream.

They ate the cream – and meanwhile their eyes devoured Severyna.

She was no shapely young girl, but a real beanpole: tall, lean, flat-chested and sickly-looking. Lord knows why, but she always went about in black. As if there had been a funeral the day before.

But if she suddenly threw a glance from under her thick black brows – it was as if a sharp sickle had struck you. And just as suddenly she would hide that razor-sharp gaze under her eyelashes, as if driving the sickle into the ground.

Br-r-r-r... it was frightening to be alone with a lass like that.

And after a while gossip spread through Landlords Valley that in Grassy Settlement *the Onufriychuk's Russky lass (who would have thought?)* had, no more and no less, *hatched That One* (even the mere thought of *him* should never have surfaced!)... *Well, that very same one – the shcheznyk or mountain devil, evil incarnate.*

For what else was there for the girl to do if not warm *him* in her groin for forty days?!

Don't believe that?

⁵ A halloumi-type sheep's milk cheese.

Then why is it that ever since the foster-daughter started living with them, wealth simply drifted into the Onufriychuks' house of its own accord? They had a mountain pasture full of cows and bulls. And just look how their sheep had multiplied... five shepherds now worked for them on the mountain pastures, and they had three servants, apart from the Russky lass, to keep the house in order. One mowed. Another carried the hay. And a third did everything, and all at once.

It could only be that the devil was helping them... She must have given birth to a mountain devil! 'Cause she never warmed a lover in her groin, didn't share her warmth with anyone. Gave everything she had to that cloud-driver. And what a big deal it was, when a virgin used her virtue to hatch a devil! Then *he* received boundless power from the girl's chaste body.

The people weren't stupid – they had done the calculations: Severyna hadn't been down to the church in Landlords Valley for more than forty days. And now she refused point-blank to go there. She had hidden herself up in them there hills – sometimes trembling over her *devil*, and sometimes over the Onufriychuks' farm.

So there – you know how it goes: when a person is in league with the devil, they can't venture into church. Which was why the foster-daughter was in no hurry to open her soul to the Lord.

And one time in the Jew's tavern the shepherds from Grassy Settlement had recounted a very strange story. Several days previously they had brought the Onufriychuks all their barrels of *brynza* and fresh cheeses down from the mountain pastures; they were sitting in the house, having lunch, and the Russky lass was trudging around the table, like a cow in heat. It must have been time to feed the devil some fresh milk, but she dared not step outside when there was a house full of strangers.

But one of the shepherds was a smart fellow. He slipped outside, as if to relieve himself, but instead he poured some milk into a tin

can in the entrance hall and slid it under the stairs, after adding a pinch of salt, and came back inside.

Meanwhile the Russky lass popped out into the entrance hall, as if wanting to sweep the floor there.

But a minute or so later an awful clatter reached them from the loft, as if the devil were battling it out with a man.

The shepherds only glanced at one another.

Sometime later the Russky lass returned and began to curse the mice to death. She said she was chasing them about in the loft so much that she had overturned a barrel of dried apples; to hell with that tribe of insatiable tomcats, which had become fat as pigs and couldn't give a rat's ass about the mice; on the contrary, they were practically playing games with them.

The shepherds looked at one another in silence, nodded their heads, as if in agreement – and by the following day everyone in Landlords Valley knew for certain that there was indeed a *mountain devil* in Grassy Settlement. And his mother was the Russky lass.

And that foster-daughter was such a tight-ass, the likes of which the world had yet to see.

People said that Polotniuk's wife (the one living under the maple tree) came to borrow a bread-baking tin from the Onufriychuks, since her's had either gone rusty or had fallen apart. Maria, the farmer's wife, was not at home and the foster daughter was there on her own. Mrs Polotniuk explained her plight, saying she had set about baking some bread, but that her baking tins all had holes in them, so could the neighbors lend her some... The Russky lass went into the storehouse and emerged with three bread tins –

a large round one,

a middle-sized one with rolled edges,

and a small square one –

and she asked Mrs Polotniuk:

“Did you want tins like these?”

“Yes,” Mrs Polotniuk answered, almost overjoyed.

And then the Russky lass said:

“Then buy yourselves some, if you’re true farmers. Bread tins aren’t like pitchforks. We don’t lend them out to other people.”

And she swung about and disappeared into the storehouse.

So it wasn’t strange that such an unpleasant foster daughter had remained a spinster until twenty-five: who would have fallen in love with a beanpole of a girl, especially one who had dealings with the devil?!

The Onufriychuks decided to secretly arrange with the Polotniuks (those living closer to the raging torrent) to marry off Severyna to their older son Mykhailo. It didn’t matter that the son was eight years younger than her.

The next day Maria sent her foster daughter for no reason at all down to the Polotniuks by the river.

And the day after that Mrs. Polotniuk visited the Onufriychuks for no special reason and, with stealthy quick glances, sized up the wealth of her future in-laws.

The two households were practically ready to start the matchmaking process, meanwhile neither Mykhailo nor Severyna had any inkling of what was happening.

And how do such things happen in this world? A person thinks of a course of action to take, and the Lord, at times grinning, at times weeping, adjusts the person’s fate to His own liking. And He merely looks on as the person makes use of God’s gift.

So that finally Severyna’s turn came to take advantage of the Lord’s grace, and she had never even dreamt that the Almighty had placed a price on her head as well.

For why else would the Lord have sent her such trials, had He not wanted to accept her as His favorite?

...TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER Severyna’s birth Landlords Valley was again crowded with soldiers, who were just as fidgety and forthright as those who had been billeted in the house of Severyna’s mother, Katrinka. They even spoke the same patois,

except that they had different uniforms and had red stars pinned to their service caps.

The villagers who remembered World War One well, whispered among themselves that these present-day soldiers resembled somewhat those who had come years earlier, as children often look like their parents.

Or perhaps these... wanted to see the aftermath of their fathers' actions?

Or maybe they had other things on their mind...

This time there were lots of soldiers.

They appeared unexpectedly, without much fanfare, but it appeared that they intended to stay.

However, no one fought anyone.

They didn't even touch the womenfolk.

They only declared that now *power* would be *theirs*, no longer the Kaiser's or the king's⁶.

And less than six months later the Russky military ventured out among the local people to see how well the Hutsuls were farming. For guides and tell-tales they took along with them the local ragamuffins.

...THEY CAME AFTER THE ONUFRIYCHUKS to Grassy Settlement before dawn.

And no matter how early Severyna got up to start work, the guests from the valley came knocking as she was still dressing.

Mariya, the farmer's wife, had done her back in and had been lying on a hard bed for three days without any bedding, a belt of raw wool and mashed comfrey roots wrapped around her waist.

⁶ Until 1918 the territory of Northern Bukovyna formed part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. From November 1918 Bukovyna found itself a part of the Romanian state. On 28 June 1940 the Soviet army entered Bukovyna under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

Farmer Dmytro, covered with a pile of woolen blankets and rugs rising almost to the ceiling, was still fidgeting on the carved bed against the opposite wall, mentally making a note of the current year's newborn animals and deliberating what needed to be done in the autumn.

“Everyone stay where you are!” a military man suddenly commanded tersely from the doorway, without offering even a ‘good-day’. Holding a weapon in his right hand, he let two similarly-dressed soldiers into the house ahead of him.

Severyna, who was in the process of wrapping a *horbotka*⁷ around her waist, dropped it to the ground out of fear and surprise, without feeling embarrassed that she was left standing in her underwear before strangers, be it that her shirt reached down to her heels.

The head of the house rushed in from the adjoining room in his underpants – and was promptly made to sit cross-legged on the floor and ordered not to move.

Once they had ascertained who was who, Severyna was ordered to fetch the farmer and his wife their clothes.

Scared out of her wits, Severyna searched for auntie Maria's things, and was unable to find anything, which until now she could have found with her eyes shut. With trembling hands she dressed the farmer's wife.

Maria's arms seemed to be paralyzed: she couldn't slip them into her summer *keptar*, or tie the kerchief around her head. Tears streamed from her eyes, but she did not wipe them away.

And she wouldn't let Severyna wipe them away either.

While the house was being searched, Severyna stood stock-still in the middle of the lounge room next to uncle Dmytro, who sat cross-legged and stared at the floor.

⁷ *Horbotka* – local word for a woolen wrap-around skirt held in place with a woolen belt.

Clenching her teeth from the pain, Auntie Maria had also been ordered to sit on the floor, leaning back and supporting herself with her two arms, as if she had a stomach pains.

She looked outside through the window, where the blue mountains were beginning to appear from the darkness.

Peak after peak, and backed by more peaks.

When everything in the house had been tipped upside down, things had been tossed out of chests and something important was found in the bottom of one of them, the fellow who was in charge shoved several pieces of paper and photographs under farmer Dmytro's nose:

“What sort of counter-revolutionary material is this?”

“That, kind sir, is a thank-you note from the Kaiser for my loyal service in his army and a photograph taken with his heir to the throne, when he came to visit us in the trenches at the front.”

“And what's this?”

“That's our ‘Sich’.”

“What's this *Sich*?”

“It's a sporting and exercise association, which existed in our village from 1911. As boys we went there to undertake all kinds of physical training. But most of all, our members tried to stop the local villagers from drinking alcohol. They tried to convince people to drop the silly habit. Because at the time Landlords Valley was ruled by an official who had a tavern facing the windows of the council offices, another one to the right of it, and a third one in the offices themselves, where the village head and the deacon and other local landlords partied for nights on end, playing cards and drinking. Our member of parliament, Baron Mykola Vasylo, even wrote to the regional parliament about the matter, but nothing came of it. So we ‘Sich’ members tried to shame those drunkards of government officials a little. And we shamed them so much that the people finally threw out that village head. So that's what our ‘Sich’ was about.”

“Did you have weapons? Did you make proclamations against the Soviet regime?”

“Sir! God forbid! What weapons?! We were practically children then, we learnt what we should do in the event of a fire or some other public calamity. But without any weapons. We marched about on the village common so that we would make good soldiers in the Kaiser’s army. No one had yet heard of your regime then. It had not yet appeared, sir. Your present regime hadn’t been around even in your parts when we organized our ‘Sich’ here. You can work it out for yourself by comparing the dates.”

“All right, then. Some philosopher...” the officer interrupted Dmytro. “You can tell these lies when they interrogate you. And about your Romanian nationalist party, and the ‘Prosvita’ Society... We’ve known your local counter-revolutionaries for a long time! So get ready to leave – and without any wailing!”

...This visit from representatives of the new regime finished with uncle and auntie Onufriychuk being sent off into the wide world without so much as a ‘God be with you’, just as Katrinka had once vanished in the flood. More precisely, burdened with several tied-up bundles, yesterday’s solid farmers were taken away in a black lorry, tightly covered with canvas. People said they took them to the railway siding in Vyzhnytsia. After which all trace of them was lost.

To this day.

...THE RUSSKY LASS WAS NOT TAKEN with the Onufriychuks to the railway siding – instead she was evacuated to Lustun, a settlement close to the village.

Here she was informed that

citizen Severyna Katerynivna Severyn was not listed in the registers of the village council or the church records as a family member of the politically-suspect kulaks, the Onufriychuks, that she had been utilized by them as a hired hand, so was therefore not subject to isolation.

She was given permission to continue living alone, and allowed to take with her only a bundle of personal possessions, some crockery from the Onufriychuk's storehouse, some of their farm implements and several baskets of foodstuffs.

All these things just fitted into a single cart.

The only thing Severyna allowed herself, when the soldiers weren't looking, was to take the Austrian cuckoo-clock, which Uncle Onufriy had brought back from the war; she wrapped it in a kerchief, taking it as a memento of her kind foster parents. The regular and monotonous ticking of its old mechanism in the room where Severyna slept strangely enough always gave her inner peace and a balanced feeling. And this probably was the only thing that had preserved the domestic warmth of the household, which these evil strangers had now decided to destroy.

Each morning Severyna's or uncle's hand had extended the endless life of this intelligent and tireless mechanism, whose heart was to be found inside its sealed body or in its tongue-like pendulum. As if reaffirming the immutability of human existence.

However, as it turned out, when other people intruded uninvited, nothing was more variable than a person's life.

Since the girl did not have her own house, the military personnel allowed her to move in closer to the village into a summer stable for cattle, which had once belonged to farmer Kosovan, who had been swept off into the wide blue yonder together with the Onufriychuks and many other farmers.

...IT WASN'T EVEN A STABLE, but more a tiny log shed, with a small prison-like window and covered with shingles. No larger than four by four meters.

Despite all its shortcomings for human habitation, Severyna's strange dwelling had one inarguable advantage: the structure, blackened by time and rain, looked as if it had suddenly jumped from its populated spot and embedded its rear wall into a steep knoll overgrown with beech trees.

The knoll had created an overhang above the small stable, shielding its tatty roof from wind and rain. Even more, the knoll acted as a silent guard and defender of the poor orphan, who had been squashed by yet another unexpected twist of fate.

Exhausted from worry, by the long time it took to move here and the uncertainty of her situation, Severyna sat on the doorstep of her dwelling and surveyed her new locale.

On both sides stretched the untrampled grasses of Kosovan's pastures and the holding pens for livestock.

A narrow path meandered down to the footbridge, which was equally narrow: the width of two chopped-down fir saplings. Evenly stripped of their bark, the two trunks could be easily thrown from one bank to the other over the torrent of water. So that according to her wishes or needs, Severyna could do away with the footbridge at any moment by simply dragging the two fir saplings into the grass.

In the blink of an eye the unsteady footbridge could be thrown across the small, but noisy torrent, which pressed against a cart track, and this in turn cut into the continuous wall of the sheer cliffs which ran off into the wide blue yonder, at times mimicking the zigzags of the forest-covered mountain ranges, and at other times copying the twists and turns of the fate of the local population, spoilt neither by wealth or any other excess – except perhaps by their enjoyment of the freedom of the endless mountain ridges.

The forested and leafless ridges took turns to form lines all the way to the horizon; from afar they resembled lines of nameless warriors which had been turned to stone, with shields covering their chests; in places they arched their backs like the swift Carpathian deer, driven hard by hunters taking risks or by savage beasts. Or else they opened up before people's eyes like undulating greenish-blue rolls of linen, or rose in the humpbacked waves of a sea never seen here by anyone.

The sharp tips of the ridges, at one time harshly broken by tectonic conflagrations, remained standing for eons and eons with a

steadfastness not evident in living creatures, shielding one another, as if defending some profound mystery hidden in their impassable jungles, known only to the fierce winds on the bare mountaintops, except perhaps for the sharp-sighted hawk suspended over the hunchbacked waves of forest, as if taking in with its keen sight the bustle of life upon the earth, hidden from human eyes.

Walking the well-travelled cart track to Lustun Settlement and at the same time gazing at the distant horizon, a person felt that he was indeed travelling through forest rather than along a track, for the forest which had swallowed the track up ahead, seemed to have released it out of its thickets for only a brief moment. And further on, beyond the bend in the track, the forest seemed to have ingested it once more, healing the exposed ribs of the track, trampled by thousands of feet. Or maybe for some reason the forest simply wanted to hide all those who were travelling through it on foot or on horseback.

There was something protective... defensive even in these natural formations turned to stone... Hidden by the forest, the track momentarily protected those who trampled upon its back from an evil fate or an evil person, ready at any moment to dash out from behind the trees and grab at the throat of the innocent and the guilty.

These were the kind of times now in these boundless forested mountains.

And these had always been the times here.

As had probably been the case everywhere else in the world.

But no one had had the time to mull over this, neither those whose umbilical cord had been severed here generation after generation, nor those who had appeared here recently to rule the place, neither asking anyone's permission, nor seeking their acquiescence.

Exactly like those who had come before them...

...HAVING SAT ABOUT AND SIGHED, taken in the desolate spaces until her head spun, Severyna finally set about her work.

First she nailed a rusty horseshoe, which she found in the stable loft, over the squeaky stable door.

Next she hung uncle's clock on the wall facing the door, without even sweeping away the cobwebs. It was as if a living soul had settled into her abode; she roughly set the time on the clock face, as if she was guessing a person's age. Wasn't it all the same to her now?

...That first night Severyna slept in the manger in the old hay, desiccated and turned to dust. She placed some fresh hay under her head, spread out her old woolen blanket, covered herself with its other end – and she made it until the morning, woken from time to time by the flapping of bats' wings in the loft and the annoying scratching of mice under the floor.

All night long the wind howled in the roof shingles, making them creak, rustle and hiss. From the black wooden boards, which served as the ceiling, hung the long frightening ghosts of ancient cobwebs, which at night shone white like corpses and stretched their huge deformed paws toward the completely devastated Severyna.

As soon as the first rays of sunlight broke through the stable beams, she shot out of the manger like a bullet.

Dazed, she had breakfast by the trough behind the stable, from which the Kosovans had once watered their numerous livestock.

Beyond the walls of the sullen stable was another world.

The fresh succulent grasses were glistening indifferently with dew.

The early morning sun, bold and hasty, but not yet annoying, shone right into her face.

And with her hair uncovered, but as always dressed in black, Severyna held back as long as she could, but then dabbed at her wet eyes.

She partly wept because of her fate.

Partly she tearfully thanked the Lord for yet another day of life.

And she was also simply protecting herself from the all-penetrating sun, which had pierced her heart.

...AND SO BEGAN Severyna's new life in this new place.

Just as well that she had experienced the life of a hired hand. And just as well that she had good ears and had listened to everything that auntie Maria had said. Even when there wasn't much to take heed of. Working as a domestic had taught the taciturn, but curious Severyna how to do everything without asking for someone's help.

The only thing she regretted was that, having learnt all kinds of work, especially men's work, she had after all never tried to hatch a mountain devil ('Lord forgive me for my present mention of him!') she thought, as the women in the village now claimed she had done; they were greedy for every kind of lie. She hadn't even given it a try! But she could have, had she had the time!

Her blood didn't drive her to be with anyone.

She knew how to hold her tongue.

She was patient.

But she hadn't hatched a mountain devil.

She had never wanted to have his powers and to give hers to him. For even as a young girl she had thought about death. She knew that those who coupled with the horned one died a more terrible death than by choking. And Severyna had been dealt a difficult card – an orphan's life, together with being a hired hand. So if she had been unable to have an easy life, she wanted at least to die an easy death.

You couldn't sew tongues onto people. A week or two would pass and these judases would be envying Severyna's present life. And they would attribute to the devil all the hard work she had done here with her coarse, skilled hands.

See, she's impure from birth.

Begun in sin.

And what's more – she's a Russky.

The Lord take them, those tongues of other people. Let things be. A person couldn't change what was impossible to change.

If God had driven her Fate into these cliffs and wilds – then she must have deserved such a fate. And if that was the case – then she had to thank the Lord for what she had. Tomorrow was another day and she would see what it brought her. But she wasn't of the type to sit about and wait until a yoke was placed upon her neck.

When Severyna recalled how meekly uncle Dmytro had sat cross-legged on the floor, his arms folded in front of him, before his killers had done him in (Severyna didn't have the slightest doubt that they had done him in!), she sensed the bitterness boil up inside her... how he had tried to explain to that predacious fellow in military uniform about the “Sich” Society... and the member of parliament, Baron Vasylo...

Severyna would have said nothing, for the fellow was not someone to be told such things, she would have defended herself as best she could, even with a pitchfork, if need be. Even if uncle had said the Lord's Prayer to them then, the military men would not have understood him; for they had come after his soul, not to hear some story about the “Sich” or to appropriate his wealth. One should speak only to those who listened.

Severyna looked before her on this joyous morning in a still sleepy Lustun and felt as if someone had tossed her into an abyss and left her there without bread or water. And she had no mother or father besides.

So how could she simply fold her arms and wait meekly?! She would fold her arms on her death bed. But it was too early now.

...THE FIRST THING SHE DID the following day was search through her new abode to make sure there were no mountain devils present. Because anything was possible. Who knew what kinds of animals the Kosovans had kept in their stable? Had there been horses – then she couldn't stay here for too long.

From a young age Severyna knew that horses were transformed devils; they liked so much to change into various creatures, so much so that in the end the Lord had blessed them with a horse's muzzle. Because of its greed, the horse was doomed to eat and never be satiated. For if the horse hadn't snatched some hay from the manger where the newborn savior lay, it wouldn't have been damned by Him later to eternal hunger. Which was why a horse can never feel satiated.

Although it would have been good now to have a horse to help with the work.

But to eat and sleep where the Kosovans once kept their horses... the thought of it made Severyna's hair stand on end.

So, fighting her instincts, she took a handful of wheat grains from the clay pot she had taken from auntie Onufriychuk for Christmas Eve, and made a small pile of grain in each corner of the stable.

In the morning it would become evident whether this abode was fit for human habitation, or whether it was suitable for the devil as well.

Once more Severyna barely clasped her eyes shut all night long: she listened to the gusts of wind and the loud rustle of the forest outside, the hooting of the owls and the distant howling of the wolves.

At the break of dawn, no sooner had it become light, she walked the length of the four walls of her abode – and was seriously upset: two of the small piles of wheat in the corners were left untouched, while someone had worked hard on the other two. And there was no need to say who that had been, given that it was the crack of God's day.

Now Severyna was convinced: this was not an auspicious place to live. *Evil spirits skulked about in two of the corners.*

But in the two other corners there was room for humans to live.

She knew what needed to be done – she had to distract the evil one. The way auntie Onufriychuk had taught her... like this... with an ordinary wooden slingshot she had to hit a crow sitting on a

fence. After this the gutted and stuffed crow had to be hung from the ceiling of the shed. Then the mountain devil could ride the crow all night long, instead of stopping Severyna from sleeping peacefully.

Meanwhile Severyna would try and make her small abode habitable. Because she knew no one else would do this for her.

...**BY FALL** smoke was rising above the patched roof of the small stable.

The walls had been insulated with clay mixed with horse dung and then whitewashed.

But Severyna left the old small window – it was hardly bigger than a human hand. And she had built an oven with a large clay bench on top, quite unlike the local ones: it took up almost three quarters of her stable-house. You stepped over the threshold as you entered and immediately you either climbed up onto the oven or took a step right and tripped over the bench or fell onto the table.

But there was no one to fall onto the oven bench: visitors did not come to see her – there was no time for that, nor was anyone interested in visiting Severyna.

As time progressed the world became ever more mournful and morose. And neither the flowering mountains, nor the tireless chirping of the birds brought any joy.

How strange, Lord...

Ever since the Romanian officials had left the village in 1940, giving way to the Russky officials, as if part of some great miracle, all of Landlords Valley suddenly remembered Severyna's real name. In a flash it had disappeared – that daily, age-old, snake-like hissing, that demeaning and scornful and ruthlessly indifferent nickname of *Russky Woman*, which always either moved ahead of her or meanly and pitilessly caught up to her from behind.

Like spittle.

Like a blow to the head.

Like the crack of a whip or a punch between the eyes.

It had pursued her ever since she was a small child and to this day.

And who knew why the village had suddenly seen the light with the coming of the new regime, restoring the name given to her by her mother?

Because the Russkies had entered the mountains for a long time?

Or was it because of her compatriots' subconscious fear of Severyna's blood ties to the vagrant foreigners?

Who knew... who knew...

But she never stopped to think about it.

BEFORE SEVERYNA HAD BEEN ABLE to work out what had happened the previous year to her fellow villagers to make them suddenly become kinder to her, a new war had broken out.

And the Romanians returned to the region a second time⁸. And with them returned her old name, an amalga-mation of her surname and nickname, her race, her stigma and her final judgment – *Rusky Woman*.

It was slippery and cold like a snake's skin.

Sharp as a pick-axe.

Heartlessly affixed by the righteous people of Landlords Valley on the day of her birth and impossible to wash away, just as the tar on the gate to her mother's yard had remained there until the night when the floodwaters had concluded their trial of the sleeping Katrinka and her house... or perhaps only of her fractured destiny, which occasionally reminded Severyna of the broken ridges of the local mountains.

When Severyna thought – she closed her eyes. It didn't hurt so much then. But all the same... whether you kept your thoughts secret or not, they crept into your head like mice coming up

⁸ On 2 July 1941 the Romanian army again occupied Bukovyna, having become an ally of Nazi Germany.

through the floorboards at night. And there was no salvation from them... Neither the mice, nor the thoughts.

Strangers had long since been farming the yard where shame and people's censure had caught up to her mother Katrinka, unaware that when she came down to the village to church Severyna avoided her old home by taking side roads around the village or by walking through the meadows along the river.

At nights she wanted just one thing – to bend over the edge for a moment and to stare into the darkness of their old well. And maybe to try and pick out the features of her mother's face somewhere down below. Flickering, indistinct, unclear. She just wanted to capture her outlines.

At times it seemed to Severyna that her mother was calling her from the depths of the well. Perhaps that was why she liked water so much. But not the placid water in wells or troughs – she loved tumultuous water: sudden downpours or the free-flowing water of mountain torrents. There was something secretive and human in that water, something lay hidden in its depths, always struggling to break free. As if during a flood.

Maybe it wasn't water which washed away the earth during floods, but rather people's passions, pitilessly tearing to pieces the mountains and the valleys, the way only people can rip one another to pieces?!

Occasionally Severyna stared for a long time at the raging torrent, as if expecting at any moment, that somewhere... just somewhere the image of her mother would flicker from under some boulder, an image now almost forgotten, but just as disturbing as the image of God in church.

But the water only foamed loudly, as if becoming angry at her, as a living person became angry, and in its fury it spattered her with its spittle and frothed at the mouth.

Then Severyna stopped thinking. She would venture through the mountains collecting herbs, just as auntie Maria had taught her. Severyna knew every plant here. And its uses. Now the herbs

allowed her to earn a living. For she had no cattle. Cattle needed to be looked after. But she wanted none of that: she had had enough of looking after stranger's things, so much so that even her own things were no longer dear to her.

All the land she had, was merely what was around her stable.

She didn't venture among the people.

She was her own hired hand.

For she had to make a living somehow.

But to put aside money for prosperity – Heaven help her. The Onufriychuks had been wealthy...

So she collected the herbs and helped people with diseases. And what were the best plants which helped cure people? Those that were collected where the person's umbilical cord was cut – that is, in their local region.

A lot of sickly women had appeared in the village since the start of the war, while there was a dearth of men. So she dried arnica flowers for them, and made a tisane of yarrow and horsetail. She would add a little marjoram, crush some thyme, add a few drops of anemone – and you had your medicine: no need to have a man. If by chance some male seed found its way into any of them – they would be as fecund as the earth. And would bear a healthy child into this world.

And the men also needed lots of male strength. For so many empty women's wombs were begging for seed! And where could you get that medicine which would guarantee healthy male seed, if not from the Russky Woman?

So here you are, thank you very much, *domnul-pan-tovarysh*⁹, a small root of belladonna steeped in vodka. Only don't take too much, only two drops on an empty stomach; and after that swallow half a liter of milk, if you please. Otherwise there will be misfortune: after the belladonna takes effect, a man can overturn

⁹ *Domnul* – Romanian for mister, sir; *pan* – Ukrainian and Polish for mister, sir; *tovarysh* – Ukrainian for comrade.

mountains, let alone toss a healthy woman under him. And you can also lose your mind, if you don't heed Severyna's orders to drink only two drops of the infusion... and not a gram more.

She knew so many other secrets about people's health, but never told a soul about them! The only thing she didn't do was play with those stupid magic herbs. And she didn't cut down people's strength.

God Himself would take away the strength from everyone who deserved it. Or He would tack some on, if people were lacking.

That was how she lived – extending people's lives.

And they in turn did not let her die of hunger.

Either they brought her a piece of clothing from the flea market.

Or they simply chatted to her.

That made her feel better already.

And they would recommend her to someone else for herbs.

Something was always bubbling away in Severyna's cauldrons: the smell spread throughout the entire neighborhood.

It was almost impossible to enter her house now: the whole ceiling and walls were hung with dried herbs and roots.

It was dark in the house.

And cool.

So little daylight broke though the tiny window that you wanted to bring in bucketfuls of it from outside.

In the middle of the day ten cats napped on the oven all in a row.
Br-r-r-r!

But if someone had known the truth, how it had really been... The cats had made their way to her house on their own, one after another. She had known how to entice them from the deserted yards overgrown with weeds, from where people had been snatched and sent off in to the distant world, just like the Onufriychuks. Who else could you entice amid these cliffs, if not a living cat's soul? She was not afraid of people and did not avoid them – but she refused to let them into her confidence. Now wasn't the time to let someone be close to you; letting them enter your yard was close

enough. Otherwise you would have to let them into your soul, not merely into your house.

And in her soul there was no longer any room for anyone. It was already crammed full for good.

Or maybe it was simply empty forever and ever.

She felt good when it was crammed full.

And she felt equally good when it was empty.

So that one day Severyna boiled up a cauldron of crushed valerian root, filled some tins with it and left them outside the house. Near the trough. Along the path.

By evening the cats from the settlements and the strays had begun to gather, attracted by the enticing smell; they were like wasps attracted to wild pears. The cats hungrily lapped up the delicious black stew and gradually curled up to sleep, like exhausted soldiers after a prolonged battle.

Severyna gathered them up neatly onto her arm, like sleeping babies, brought them into the house and lay them out on her bed on the oven, which was roughly strewn with the hard stems of fresh herbs. She left a bowl of milk for them, diluted with mashed valerian root.

Gradually she domesticated the cats just as assiduously as she would have domesticated a husband. For she needed protection. Maybe a cat could at least come to her defense, if there was no one else who was prepared to defend her during this stupid time. The old people spoke the truth when they said that in the past sheep followed their masters, and now only dogs and cats followed them.

One couldn't say that she was afraid of living alone in this half-deserted settlement, which had suddenly become depopulated in almost a single day. She could have ventured outside in the middle of the night looking for the mythical fern flower¹⁰.

¹⁰ In Ukrainian mythology a fern flowered in the forest wilds late in the night on the 7th of July, the festival of Ivan Kupalo. If a person were to pick the fern flower and sew it into the palm of their hand, they could then find places where

But what the hell could you find these days, apart from the calamities falling upon your poor head?!

In the evenings the silent black walls of the mountains closed in on the settlement – and whether you wanted it or not, a feeling of fear crept into your soul.

Not a light anywhere.

Not a living soul.

Except for the splashing of the mountain torrent.

And some distant cannonade which agitated the earth at night.

Who knew what was happening in the world now and how things would pan out for people...

So she applied her sorcery to the herbs and medicinal plants – and kept an eye on the road running along the far side of the torrent: the road was getting busy for some reason. This was not a good sign.

...MOST OF ALL Severyna was happy when Ivanka Borsuk came to her to get medicinal plants. The small girl was a restless thing; she bustled about the yard, looked into every bubbling cauldron and chatted to the lazy cats, pinching their erect ears; and in the end she squatted on the doorstep and asked Severyna about different things.

“What are you doing today?” she would ask, her hazel eyes looking fearlessly into the blackness of Severyna’s gaze.

“Looking for fate,” the woman replied.

And she bent down to look under the bench.

“What the heck are you up to!” the small girl would exclaim, clapping her hands like an old woman, but never taking her eyes off Severyna. “Can fate really hide under benches?”

“*Oho*, Ivanka! Fate can be driven into the forest wilds, it can hide in the marshes, let alone be shoved under some bench. You can do

ancient treasure had been buried, could open any door without a key and understand the language of wild animals and birds.

whatever you like with it, the same as with a person. You can frighten it, it can be influenced by an evil eye, it can be damned or turned away with spells.”

“Do you know where my fate is, Russky Woman?” the child asked, after thinking for a moment.

She always thought a moment before asking something.

No one, apart from this slightly eccentric tiny little girl, Ivanka Borsuk, called her Russky Woman with such tenderness and warmth, as if she were stroking her, rather than calling her names.

The child stretched out her words, as if she were swinging on a tightrope with no fear of falling off it.

Tears welled up in Severyna’s throat then, but she fought them back, as if she were kneading dough with her hands.

“My dear child... Fate never seeks out people. People have to find their own fate and take control of it. Once you find your fate, it becomes yours.”

“And if I can’t?”

“Then you’ll live life without a destiny.”

Once more Ivanka remained silent for a long time. Then she eyed Severyna askance:

“Like you?”

Severyna did not answer and only placed a bowl of dried peas before the girl.

“Help me to pick through these Adam’s tears.”

“Are peas Adam’s tears?”

“When the Lord drove Adam and Eve from paradise, Ivanka, they had to live somehow and eat something. Adam had to till the earth so that he and his wife would have food to eat. But, like us, Adam wasn’t used to work, and so he wept when he had to plough the land for the first time. And peas grew wherever his tears fell. That’s why they’re called Adam’s tears.”

“That’s lovely...” sighed Ivanka.

“Oh, child... that’s painful, rather than lovely. But if you want it to be lovely, take this small sachet and hang it around your neck

together with your cross. It will be your lucky charm. I made it with Kupalo herbs¹¹. It will help you find your fate.”

“When I’m returning home? Tell me, Russky Woman...” Ivanka became unchildishly overjoyed. “Will it be a young lord?”

“I’ll tell you one day, Ivanka, one day... Better that it be a peacock than a young lord. But run home now and tell your mum not to scold you. Tell her that the Russky Woman was teaching you how to live in this life. ‘Doesn’t know how to live herself, but teaches other people’s children how to live,’ your mum will tell you. But don’t you ever go contradicting your mother. She always knows best.”

“And yours did as well?”

“Oh, that she did, Ivanka, that she did... better had she not known.”

...**AND THEN** people spread the rumor in Landlords Valley that the cunning Russky Woman had only lain low at the outset after the departure of the Russkies... in fact she had not only coaxed a forest devil away from Grassy Settlement – she had now hatched a whole dozen of them there... the evil one who served her had transformed himself into a doud of sleepy cats. And that devil was fornicating with the Russky Woman, who was pining away, awaiting the coming of the Russkies again... well, for sure... whether one liked it or nor, it was the call of her blood...

So maybe she was adding some kind of jimson weed to her medicinal herbs, which made people recover from their illnesses so quickly... and their wounds healed before their eyes... and some barren women became pregnant as soon as they tasted her potion... it had to be the devil helping her... beware, women and men! Do you really need that kind of health...? From the *devil*?

¹¹ Herbs collected on the night of Ivan Kupalo were supposed to have extra special magical qualities.

This talk reached Severyna's ears too. At which she only spat on the ground and then burst out laughing.

Briefly.

Stiffly.

To herself.

This made the woman passing on the village gossip flinch.

Wasn't it all the same to her what others said? For no one knew her better than she herself!!!

...ONCE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT three men *from the forest* knocked on her door. And she *recognized* them all.

But why did she need to remember this and to clutter her memory with their faces?

Feed them she did.

Gave them various ointments to heal their wounds.

And heard out their words.

But the news was not good: her house had appeared in the centre of the front line, right between two lines of defense, she was told by... well, *the fellow whom she had recognized first*.

The Germans were perched on one set of hills, defending themselves from the attacking Russkies. And along the other line of defense, beyond the hill, across the stream and over several more hills – the Magyars were ensconced¹². The Germans do not trust the Magyars, said *the fellow whom she had recognized first*, they don't trust them, even though the Magyars are allied with the Germans. And we, said *the second fellow* (oh, God, *how well she knew the second fellow!!!*), have to fight off both the Germans and the Magyars, for soon the Russkies will be back here again, and we'll have to fight them as well, Russky Woman... and he heaved a deep sigh.

¹² In 1944 part of the Bukovynian Carpathian Mountains were controlled by Hungarian forces who were allies of Germany. The royal Romanian state had terminated its union with Hitler.

But she wasn't offended that he had called her a *Russky*: he had said it without hatred, only with certain heaviness in his voice. As if sensing that he would not have the strength for a prolonged duel with the enemy.

Then all three men told her to hold her tongue and to prepare some healing herbs... for *the boys in the forest* would soon be needing a lot of those healing herbs.

...AND THE DAY BEFORE those who were now in power here visited her. They were temporary rulers, obviously. For during war no one stayed in power for long in the one place.

The present authorities were doing the rounds of all the houses.

The first to step into her yard was the *vijt* – the new village head, followed by a Magyar soldier with a feather stuck in his beret. And his left arm bandaged up to his shoulder.

Severyna already knew that the front line had moved into the mountains. The Germans were encamped on the Yanchula River, and the Magyars had dug themselves in at Siruk and Raduliv overlooking the Tovarnytsia River.

Along the cart track running past her abode on the far side of the mountain river, heavy draft horses were making their way toward Siruk and Raduliv with all kinds of weapons, provisions and ammunition. There was to be a bloody battle there... so Severyna surreptitiously removed the footbridge over the river. It was better to be safe than sorry.

If someone needed to visit her, they could stand on the far bank and yell: 'Ru-u-usk-ee-ee Woo-ooman!!!' and she would slowly toss the two fir saplings hidden in the grass onto the far side of the river.

When the water was low, up to the ankles, eager people could cross the river on foot, if they wanted. But once the river was in flood, you couldn't get across without a footbridge.

How else could she safeguard herself from misfortune?

Yesterday the *viyt* had told Severyna to be very careful, not have any lights on in the house at night, and if someone tried to visit her from the forest¹³, she should inform them in the village straight away.

Aha! She had nothing better to do than to dash off to the village to tell them who was trying to reach her house! As if she didn't know that *our boys* were making their way through the forests. If it weren't for the *boys*, there would have been no order among the people.

Hearing the proximity of the cannonade, the Romanians left the village – no one had managed to blink an eye. By the time the Magyars had entered the village, Landlords Valley had been living of its own accord.

Of its own accord ... and yet not quite... for someone had guarded the village against robbery and pillage.

For how did it go? Certain people had gotten so badly under the skin of others because of disputes regarding field boundaries or envy, that they would have set fire to their neighbor's homes in a flash, had they not been afraid that someone was keeping order in the village. And the *boys* kept order.

...YESTERDAY IN FAREWELL the *viyt*, who had weasely eyes, shifty and frightened, also asked for some salve for a wounded Magyar.

Severyna silently shot a glance at the soldier's bandaged arm and, without asking, took off the sling and began unbuttoning his uniform...

"What did you smear on him?" the *viyt* asked Severyna after she had finished, as he wiped away drops of sweat from the Magyar's forehead.

And, without blinking an eye, she replied:

¹³ From 1943 Ukrainian Insurgent Army units were actively fighting in Bukovyna.

“With snake spittle.”

...AND THE FOLLOWING DAY the basket of dried herbs hanging from a beam almost directly above the door to Severyna’s house began to emanate a muffled hissing sound from early morning.

She would have recognized that characteristic hissing, even if she were deaf.

However, Severyna was not frightened.

With the house cluttered almost to the ceiling with bundles of dried herbs, roots and twigs, she should have expected the appearance of some kind of animal life long ago. So that at last a snake had found itself a spot. Not everyone could keep a goat in their home. Goats had the devil’s feet up to their knees, which was why she refused keep a goat, although she loved to drink its nutritious milk, if anyone brought her some out of gratitude for her medicinal herbs.

In nature every animal wanted to live. Snakes were no different.

She had never been scared of snakes. Her mother Katrinka had taught her that there was no need to fear snakes: they never bit you the first time, even if you happened to step on them.

A snake didn’t bite you the first time, because it thought: *this person can’t see me.*

When you stepped on it a second time, the snake would say to itself: *this is the person’s way of joking about with me.*

And only the third time would it bite. Because *the person was obviously provoking it.*

And if someone pleased a snake, it would be grateful to that person until it had been killed.

When a person killed a snake, they would be absolved forever of forty sins without the God’s judgment.

But her mother Katrinka had told her that snakes lived in this world with the sole intention of biting people. Otherwise the earth would not accept them after the Feast of the Elevation of the Holy

Cross; which is why they crawled about until late into the fall, looking for someone who would take their life or attempting to deprive another living creature of its life.

However, a snake which had not bitten a person or an animal during the summer was allowed into snake heaven – this was the highest kingdom for slithering creatures, it was the throne of almighty power and insensitivity.

Severyna would tell Ivanka Borsuk one day about this snake heaven and how they selected a queen with golden horns there. The young girl would sit on the doorstep with eyes wide open and soak up every word, only on occasion shrugging her shoulders like some old woman and locking her hands together.

...FROM THAT MORNING on the thin black snake with shiny skin remained living in the basket, escaping into the loft from time to time through cracks in the old wooden ceiling.

And every morning after that Severyna got up onto a stool and placed some food among the dry herbs for her uninvited guest, who had begun lodging with her so unexpectedly.

But before this invariable ritual she would invariably make the sign of the cross with her hand into every corner of the house, then cross herself, and only then lowered her hand to the bottom of the basket.

“Are you a sorceress, Russky Woman?” Ivanka once asked, after passing her a jug of milk and a small bucket of mushrooms.

“Who told you that?” Severyna asked as she stroked the girl’s two thin plaits, formed into a circle around her head, from time to time glancing up at the ceiling, in case the snake suddenly showed its black arch from the basket.

She would have to tell the child. Or else Ivanka might take fright, if she unexpectedly heard the hissing.

“My mum told me. She said your mother gave birth to you on a Monday, and she weaned you on a Monday too. And that you don’t eat any meat on Mondays. Which is why you’re a sorceress.”

“Ivanka, I want you to remember once and for all: those who don’t eat meat on Mondays, they not only live well on this earth, but they also aren’t afraid to die.”

“How’s that?”

“When a person dies, their soul leaves their body and goes up to God in the sky. And the first person the soul meets is the gatekeeper to Paradise. His name is Saint Monday. And there, at the Holy Gates, Saint Monday asks the soul about its sins on Earth. True, he knows everyone’s trespasses without even asking them, but he asks all the same to check that the soul isn’t being crafty with him... that it’s not telling tales. Only after this does the gatekeeper escort the departed soul across the fiery river of death. And then he shows the soul paradise and hell. And there the Almighty Savior Himself says which gates are to be opened before the pious or sinful soul...”

But mum told me that Saint Peter meets souls at the gates to Paradise.”

“Maybe he’s called Peter, or Monday or he’s simply the gatekeeper. Who knows? No living person’s been there, so they can’t know his real name.”

“Listen, Russky Woman...” it was obvious that Ivanka wanted to ask her something and could not summon the courage to do so. “Listen... is it true that snakes live in your house and that you milk them once a week and then cure people with the snake’s milk?”

Before Severyna could answer, a hiss came from the basket overhead and then a thin black tail dashed along the top of the beam and disappeared into the loft.

“It’s tru-u-ue...” the child breathed out, covering her bloodless small mouth and looked without blinking at Severyna. “But I won’t tell anyone!” she spoke quickly again. “No one, not a soul... except perhaps mum...”

After that the Russky Woman also became the *Snake Mother*.

And snakes, as everyone in Landlords Valley knew, were descended from the devil, which was evident from their teeth. So

that people in the village said that the Russky Woman now had a whole farm of mountain devils.

It was an evil place there!

Better not to go there.

Even to get medicine.

...Whether it was the snake that helped her, or that the constellations in the sky were aligned fortuitously, but the front line never passed through Landlords Valley or the surrounding settlements, and instead moved in the direction of Berehomet.

Meanwhile life continued here in Lustun. And it might have let Severyna pass peacefully into old age, were it not for those people who always and everywhere loved to interfere in the lives of others, changing their destiny without reconciling this with the inventor and administrator of all fates – the Lord God Himself.

...**SHORTLY AFTER THE WAR**, but umpteen rulers in this land after the turn of the century

(no, she would count how many of them there had been here, much to everyone's misfortune:

when her mother Katrinka was still alive, the Austrians had ruled the village,

then during the First World War the Russkies had "ploughed" through here on their horses three times,

then the Austrians yielded the region to the Romanians for more than twenty years,

then the little Russkies had wheedled the territory from the Romanians until the start of World War Two,

and during this second world war the Germans had marched in here for a short while, bringing the Romanians after them again;

when the Romanians took to their heels, the Hungarians began to trod on people's toes here,

*and now, after this **government** had arrived once more – it would probably never leave here)...*

so that shortly after the war, but umpteen rulers from the turn of the century in this land, Severyna one day found herself standing on a stool in the open doorway to her abode, placing food into the basket to feed her *lodger*, when a shadow fell from the doorway and a cheerful male voice asked in Russian:

“Does Severina Katerinovna Russky live here?”

Severyna looked down, thought for a moment, and then slowly stepped down and stood before the young man dressed in a military uniform, wearing a peaked cap with a red star in the middle.

“What did you want, mister comrade farmer?”

“What is she asking me?” the visitor turned to address someone in Russian whose shadow loomed outside.

“She wants to know what you want from her, comrade captain,” came the reply in bad Russian.

“Then tell her to step outside, because it’s a little too dark in there. Even a little frightening. All you can hear is the clock ticking away.”

“She’s not the only one who drives fear into people here...” a third voice retorted outside in Ukrainian.

And these were the only words which Severyna understood properly. She even suspected that she knew the bearer of that voice: he was from Landlords Valley.

On the pen stood a man of forty-five, in a similar military uniform, but with blue tabs on his peaked cap and tunic.

“Authorized representative of the inter-district Ministry of State Security, Major Voronin,” the older man introduced himself. “We are conducting a yard-by-yard census of the population. Taking stock, so to speak, of the *kulaks* and unreliable element. Please show us your birth certificate.”

Severyna had never had a birth certificate, because there had never been a need to have one.

If there ever had been one, it would have been swept away by the floodwaters, together with her mother.

She told the senior officer as much. But she knew the time of her birth exactly – on the feast of Peter and Paul in 1915.

“Peter and Paul – when’s that?” Voronin asked.

“It’s on the feast of saints Peter and Paul. After Ivan Kupalo, but three weeks before Saint Ilya’s,” Severyna shrugged her shoulders. “If you don’t know, ask father Ilarion. He knows. Or take a look in the church register.”

“What’s she on about?” the younger fellow asked the older one in Russian.

“She doesn’t have a birth certificate and she doesn’t know her date of birth,” he answered in Russian.

“How ignorant...”

“She’s not ignorant. She’s a Russky woman. That’s what everyone calls her in the village. She has Russian blood in her.”

“How do you know?”

“Everyone knows everything about each other here, and some have even shared what they know with us,” the elder officer finally finished explaining and turned to Severyna: “What sort of farmstead do you have? Do you have livestock... I mean – horses, cows... A husband, children?”

Severyna felt her heart begin to beat faster inside her. She was not afraid of snakes, and she wasn’t afraid of people either. She perhaps only kept away from them. But right now it seemed to her that all her blood had started to pulse away – as if she had become one very large heart. This large heart stopped her from thinking straight.

“All you can see is my farmstead. I have no husband. Or children”

A pack of black and white cats lazily slurped milk against the wall.

Severyna pointed to them:

“These are my children. Unless I buy a revolver off you and shoot them, because they give me no peace, there’s so many of them now.”

“And you’ve nothing else?” the elder officer made a note in his book.

“I do. I have a servant,” Severyna replied, looking each man in the eye. “Do you want to see her?”

“A servant?” Voronin asked in disbelief. “Summon her here.”

“I can’t call her. Even though she’s my servant, she’s a haughty lady.”

“What’s she on about?” the younger officer inquired again.

“She says she has a servant girl.”

“A servant girl?! Her?! She’s a half-wit, obviously...” and the younger officer placed a finger to his temple and twisted it about as he whistled.

“Listen, Russky Woman... Or Severyna... Do the boys from the forest ever visit you at night? Your house is in the wilderness... And you’re still young. Hah, Russky Woman?”

Severyna seemed to lower her eyes, but then sharply pierced both men with her gaze, as if it were a pickaxe, making the younger officer flinch:

“Mister-comrade farmers! It is a big sin to cast aspersions on a complete orphan. Come inside the house. You can see my servant for yourself. And inside we can talk about the boys.” And she crossed her threshold, inviting the uninvited guests inside with her hand.

“Another time,” the older fellow replied reluctantly and both made their way down the path to the footbridge.

AFTER THAT SEVERYNA was unable to do anything about the house. One single thought kept drilling into her brain, burning her with the memories of her foster parents being taken away in 1940; she remembered how Maria Onufriychuk had beaten her head against the walls when the soldiers had told them to take only warm clothing and food for three days – and to leave everything else behind.

If they had come after her once, they would be back, Severyna told herself – and from then on she watched the road even more attentively. She would climb up the hornbeam, look about the valley – and then race into the house. She was obviously concocting something inside there.

The road was like a snake, winding along the banks of the mountain torrent. And she could see everything clearly from the hornbeam, all the way to Lower Lustun. Who was coming on foot, who was on horseback... and over there three horsemen were coming up from the valley, growing large and larger, their peaked caps with stars glistening in the sunshine.

Severyna slid down the tree, turned to face the east – and began to cross herself... and cross herself... and her pale lips whispered a silent prayer. As if she were asking someone to forgive her... or was repenting her sins... and then she rushed into the house without closing the door.

And this was repeated almost every day. Almost every day... God Almighty! She had to defend herself!

And what did those people do, who had a house full of children?! How did they defend themselves?

Severyna even knew that there was a document lying in the village council which stated that all of Lustun – both its Upper and Lower parts – was to be emptied of people. To the very last soul.

And this is what they were doing.

Hill by hill.

Outcrop by outcrop.

Settlement by settlement.

A little longer, and all that would be left here would be the beech trees and the firs. But if things kept progressing like this, there soon wouldn't be anyone left to press their face against a living tree trunk here, no one to wrap their arms around a tree to draw strength from its bark.

And again she dashed into the house, without closing the door behind her. And tried to concoct something. Or perhaps she was merely praying.

Who knows...

Had some fearless fellow pushed his curious head in through the herbs and roots hanging from the ceiling, he might have found out.

As it was... lazy cats napped in a row on the doorstep, as if guarding their mistress.

And that was all she needed.

...*WHEN THEY FINALLY CAME* for her, she was seated on a bench against the wall, wiping eggs.

No, not quite.

From the path, along which the group of men with peaked caps glistening with stars approached the house, they could see only one thing: that Severyna was sitting on a bench and between her spread knees she had a woven basket. Her hands were submerged in the large basket, but from a distance it was obvious that she was picking through it with her hands.

“Well, then...” Major Voronin addressed her from afar, without any special formalities, but in a reasonably friendly voice: “No need to play games. Drop what you are doing and come with us, Russky Woman. Maybe, thanks to us, your father may be found somewhere in this world...” He stood so close that she breathed in the smell of his sweat. The sweat was barely perceptible. And almost sweetish. “What are you doing here?” he glanced into the basket. “Getting eggs ready for the bandits? Well you’re too late. They’ll have to forgive you,” he smiled at her with very white teeth. “Wait, what are you doing there?” Voronin asked her again anxiously, bending further down over the basket, but suddenly he recoiled.

Meanwhile Dmytro Bernyk, a *strybok*,¹⁴ was circling the house, from time to time adjusting the sawn-off shotgun behind his back.

The courier from the village council, Vasyl Polotniuk, the eldest son of her former neighbors, those who had lived under the maple tree in Grassy Settlement, stood rooted to the ground quite some distance from Voronin, avoiding Severyna's gaze.

Meanwhile a young blond soldier was shooing away the march flies from a nimble Hutsul horse, which snorted as it nibbled on the grass behind the corner of the house.

No one seemed to be taking any notice of what was happening in the yard.

Severyna's heart began to beat heavily, filling up her entire chest. It made her catch her breath.

Slowly lifting her uncovered head with its greasy hair glistening from the sheep's butter, she said hoarsely:

"Mister-comrade farmer! Please speak softly, because my servant might become angry. She's a lady with attitude."

And with that Severyna placed the basket onto the grass before her; onto her knees, which were squeezed together, she laid out some small eggs, the size of a quail's, or perhaps even smaller.

"What?!" Voronin roared, rushing up to the basket, but then he suddenly pulled back.

He placed his hand on his holster.

Taking no notice of the officer, Severyna held the eggs in one hand and wiped them with the other.

There weren't many eggs.

Only eight or so.

However, they were strange eggs: not round, but ribbed.

Like soft or unset toffee.

¹⁴ Colloquial term, shortened form of "*yastrubok*" or "*chlen istribitel'nogo otriada*" (*member of an extermination unit*), for men who were called upon in postwar years to fight the detachments of the UPA, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army.

They were threaded together, like live cartridges in an ammunition belt.

Some had already darkened, others were almost black inside.

They seemed to be soft to the touch, a moment more and they would burst in Severyna's hands.

"What are you doing, the devil take you!!!" Voronin growled once more, this time quite furious. But he did not move, only removing his pistol from its holster.

Without getting up, Severyna leaned over the basket, barely touching the dried herbs on the surface, and rustled along the bottom with her hand—a moment later a snake's head began to rise slowly from the basket.

It was a small one.

With lackluster scales.

With glassy eyes.

Looking somewhat dead.

The snake's extended body froze, no longer moving. Only the head jerked several times, but then suddenly fell back into the herbs.

Severyna whispered something over the basket without taking her hand out, and with her free hand she added a bunch of herbs to the basket, as if covering the goods inside it.

And then she pushed the basket to an arm's length away from Voronin.

"Bi-i-itch..." Voronin hissed. "Playing with me, are you, bitch?!" his voice was transformed into a rattle.

Severyna got up from her bench, straightened her back and stood almost at attention, staring unblinkingly for a long time into Voronin's eyes, just like the snake in the basket, and then wordlessly, but very slowly, she began to remove her sleeveless little keptar.

The four men who had encircled the woman, stood rooted to the ground in surprise and fear, and a monstrous, terrifying picture was revealed to them:

from the deeply cut cleavage of Severyna's white shirt, embroidered in white thread, hung the black switch of a snake's tail, narrowed down to the thickness of a pencil.

The snake's body was obviously nestled somewhere under her breasts...

"You can take me away now, mister-comrade. But all my servants will follow me... I've got lots of them. As you can see for yourself..."

2

"D'YOU HEAR ME, RUSSKY WOMAN! Maybe we should take this opportunity to each drink fifty grams of this stupid whisky and recall our youthful years? What a hideous drink this is, I'm telling you! The children brought it for me from Kyiv. It's been six months since I've opened it, and I still can't finish the bottle, it's so bad. They told me to keep the drink until I had an honored guest. So that the guest didn't go and think that this grandpa had seen nothing else apart from *kulesha* and *brynza* cheese. My children would castigate me, if they knew that I didn't prefer their drinks. My son-in-law said he brought this whisky from England. It costs something like a hundred dollars a bottle there. But strike me dead with a birch stick, I still think there's nothing better than our raspberry moonshine. But you know that yourself. Or maybe not?"

a somewhat stocky old man fussed around the table; he was wearing a white shirt with blue stripes, and the corner of a crimson handkerchief poked from his chest pocket. His new dark-blue jeans sported a sewn-on patch with the word "BOSS". He kept bringing new treats from the refrigerator and set down plates of food and opened tins almost on top of one another.

If one took a good hard look, one could recognize him as being Vasyl Polotniuk – the eldest son of the Polotniuks who had once lived under the maple tree in Grassy Settlement. The former courier from the village council.

“Don’t squander your money, Vasyl. You know I’m not very attracted to drink. But I’ll have fifty grams of our own drink, may the Lord grant you and your children health! Those children of yours are faring well in that there Kyiv and they don’t forget you.” Severyna moved Vasyl’s hand away from the plate set before her, attempting to rescue it from a fresh portion of food.

“Well, my darling love, the children wanted to take me away to live with them, but I stayed there with them for a month and almost lost my mind. Millions of people everywhere, and no one to talk to. And I’ll let you in on a secret, my darling, they only mix with celebrities from the television. Now whenever I hear any of them on the news, I smile into my whiskers: oh, I’ve seen you and you in the flesh. And chatted with that one the-e-ere,” he pointed to a photograph on the wall. “My Lord, I had a good swig of whisky with that one! He’s a successful businessman and politician, I’m telling you, darling. My son-in-law said he’ll be an oligarch soon!”

“Who’ll become an oligarch? This fellow or your son-in-law?” another white-haired old man, who was sitting opposite Severyna and fingering a still-empty crystal shot glass in his hands, attempted to clarify.

“This one, I’m telling you, Sam! This same fellow, the cunning one with a beard, who speaks ace Ukrainian!” Polotniuk pointed to the photograph. “And thank the Lord, my son-in-law is not among the lowliest either.”

“We know that, Vasi, we know. Come and join us at the table at last, for God’s sake! Stop laying out all that stuff. You know that we love eating homemade things. Just slice me some salted pork, and that’ll do. You and your darling wife can keep poisoning yourselves with all those imported hams and sausages on your own.” Feigning displeasure, Symon chewed heartily on the olives all the same, and then grabbed a spoonful of red caviar from a bowl.

“Well then! Thank you kindly, my dear friends, for showing respect for this old grandpa by being present. For not forgetting that

this old man has reached four-score and five. May you all live to this day yourselves!” And clinking his glass with Severyna and Symon, Polotniuk heartily emptied the whisky into his mouth and grimaced, either for effect or because he was lacking practice. “If it weren’t for the children, I would have forgotten when I was born. How amazing!”

“Listen, Vasi, you were there in that Kyiv, you met with all those high-class people... c’mon, tell us, what’s going to happen to Ukraine? See, the Russkies are trying hard to squeeze Ukraine with their gas! They already want more than two hundred dollars a cube! And tell us, who’s going to defend the country, when all the smart ones have become oligarchs, and the rest have pinned their hopes on the Russkies?”

“Sam! You know I view the Russkies, like a barefoot fellow regards snakes!”

“Vasi! I’m not asking you how you view the Russkies. I’m asking, how does Ukraine see them and what’s going to become of Ukraine!!!”

“Listen, you lot!” Severyna adjusted her gray hair under the Canadian kerchief with its silk fringes and declared in an almost angry voice: “I’ve already asked you once before! And the two of you promised me on several occasions not to utter stupid things in my presence...!”

And the two white-haired old men bit their tongues.

Symon Dudka filled his mouth with salted pork.

And Vasyl Polotniuk – with caviar.

...SEVERYNA ALWAYS RETURNED to her place in Lustun along the same road after visiting the two old men.

Although from Landlords Valley one could head cross-country through the hills. But for quite some time now her feet were not what they used to be. She was too old to walk cross-country. And there was a chance a passing vehicle might give her a lift to her footbridge for a mere thank-you.

She loved walking more than anything else.

You trudged along.

Thinking your thoughts.

Nobody to upset your train of thought.

Even when there was someone to talk to, you didn't launch into a conversation with them.

For what was there to chat about?

Nothing.

She was just three split seconds from death and it seemed to her that she'd hardly lived. That she had merely waited...

If only someone could read the thoughts milling in her head... She couldn't say anything to Vasyl or Symon.

Men were coarse. Rough. They failed to understand subtlety.

And this was subtle.

Like silk cloth.

Like the first thin ice on a stream.

Perhaps a child kicked inside a woman's womb the way her past resounded inside her almost every day. Severyna had never experienced a child stirring in her womb, so she couldn't say for sure.

But she knew *one thing*.

It trembled inside her – and would not stop.

The time had come to prepare to move on into the next world – but *it* still trembled under her chest.

It stopped her from sleeping.

Sometimes Severyna got up in the middle of the night and stared out the window for a long time. She had finally plucked up the courage and long ago had installed a large window in Kosovan's former stable – it occupied practically the entire wall.

As if she wanted to look through the window to make up for all the previous years.

And it was true – and yet not quite.

In actual fact she wasn't looking out the window – she was actually waiting.

Waiting even now.

She was looking – and saw practically nothing: she was simply waiting.

Once long ago, while still a child, she had waited with clenched teeth for her father to appear. No one ever told her who he was, although she never asked. She knew that she had had a Father. But he had existed only before she had come into the world.

And when she had come into the world – her Father was no more. He was a Russky.

She thought now that even if he had appeared – it would have changed nothing.

For a long time now she didn't even hear people when they called her by her nickname.

Bastard child.

Russky Woman.

Severynka.

Shaman.

Even her close friend Polotniuk called her “Russky Woman”.

But it was all the same to her.

She had long since stopped being offended by it. Sometimes it even made her happy: few people in the village had such openly harsh names, which they were called to their face, as if the nickname was being read from their passport.

If you thought about it, it wasn't a help or a hindrance to her. Only occasionally did it feel as if someone had poked a knife in her eye.

But she did not wait long for her father. She became used to him not being around. Others had fathers – so what? Others had mums and dads, but no destiny.

She didn't have a living soul to her name.

Oh, the number of times in her life that she had had to struggle, the way a wild piglet struggled exhaustedly, when on a frosty snowy winter's day it tried to make its way to a spot under the fir saplings, or to reach some fat-laden beech nuts buried in the snow.

Once, when Severyna had been working for the Onufriychuks, auntie Maria had sent her – neither near nor far – to Pysarivka, to fetch some new boots from Pantela the cobbler.

It had been after Christmas, and the crackling snows had almost reached the treetops. Severyna's Hutsul horse stopped from time to time amid the virgin white savannah, catching its breath; it snorted, steam escaping from its nostrils, but step after step it obstinately pushed forward, neighing for all the hills to hear. Probably overjoyed that it was making headway. Or perhaps out of anguish that it was unable to choose its own path.

White hills and valleys with sharp black peaks of solitary trees and bushes seemed to be holding their breaths under the endless blanket of snow. But here and there, especially around the young fir saplings, amid the torn white canvas of the snow, could be seen the thin lines of frozen piglets, as if engraved by some pitiless hand into the silent cold landscape of the snow-covered mountains. Their thin black backs protruded from under the snow, looking somewhat childishly defenseless, so that Severyna wanted to dismount and warm each little piglet back to life in her bosom. The frosts and deep snow had trapped them on their way to their home and food – and had imprinted them forever upon this white expanse of cloth, having taken no pity on them and having no pity for these lost black-backed travelers.

Oh yes... each of us try to test the road to life as best we can. These wild pigs, seeking warmth and sustenance amid the fierce winter, were moving to a more cozy spot in the hope of surviving the cold and the hunger... people too sought warmth and protection as best they could... but fate sent them whatever it pleased. Occasionally – exactly the thing they most needed for salvation.

...FATE HAD GIVEN HER GOOD BRAINS.

Good health and good brains.

There was no need for wealth, after she had seen with her own eyes the consequences of having property and wealth.

All that remained of the Onufriychuks' farmstead were the walls, which later became part of the collective farm, while the household belongings which had not been confiscated were pilfered by their fellow villagers. The same ones who had taken their hats off in the street to the former owner of all that wealth.

She had never wanted a husband... just because she didn't.

Maybe she had a different kind of blood to others.

Perhaps a latent fear that her mother's story might be repeated had made her heartless.

All the same she didn't want to, so what...

What now?

There was no one to want.

And men didn't chase after her, because at first, she had nothing which would have attracted them... and later she only scared them off.

Now she was indifferent.

Perhaps that was why the Lord had given her more brains than heart.

And she had survived.

...SHE DID NOT SLEEP AT NIGHT.

She wandered across the pastures.

Prayed before icons.

Read the future using beans.

She ate no meat on Mondays and strictly observed the restrictions pertaining to Fridays.

After her foster parents had been taken away from Grassy Settlement for no reason at all, she began to devoutly observe lent on twelve Fridays every year.

The first Friday was to rid herself of filth and disease; she observed this during the first week of Great Lent.

To avoid sudden death, she ate no meat on the Friday before Annunciation.

To avoid unjust trials, adversaries and bloodshed, she found salvation by observing Easter Friday.

Observing Exultation Friday protected her from drowning.

Impenitent death, straying in the forest, violence, bondage and snakes could be avoided by observing lent on the Friday before the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul.

And observance of the Friday before Transfiguration protected her from fire and thunder and mortal sins.

Mother of God Friday steered her away from fever, enemies and swords.

The Friday before Feast of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist spared her from melancholy.

Protection during travel was afforded by observing Holy Cross Friday.

Protection from sudden death, from attacks by wild animals and various sins was afforded by observing the Friday before Archangel Michael's Day.

And fasting before St Andrew's and after Christmas offered her the greatest reward of all – the Lord would take her soul to Heaven and enter her name into His heavenly book. It would also protect her from wind and frost, and provide salvation in case of violent attacks.

On Fridays Severyna never did the washing, she did not soak the clothes in lye, did not leaven the dough or bake bread, did not comb or wash her hair, did not whitewash the oven hearth and did not sing.

Because of that stupid rumor which people had started about the mountain devil, the farmer's wives in the village looked at her askance in church, edging away from Severyna as if she were rabid. And after the snakes had appeared in her house...

Your will be done, Lord!

When a thief or a violent person lived in the same house as you, it was little better than sharing the house with a wild animal.

But you can't say anything intelligent to people who are intent on not listening to you.

And then one day Severyna told herself firmly: enough is enough! She would spend the whole of the Lord's week on her knees in prayer before the icons in her stable-home, but she would never again go to pray in public, where people would pierce her with their gazes, like Cain piercing Abel with a pitchfork; where people stood and cast slurs on you instead of glorifying the name of the Lord.

She would beseech the Lord in silence.

All alone.

Cherishing and tenderly uttering His name.

And seek forgiveness for her trespasses real and imagined.

She would have taught everyone, that this was the way to act. But there was no one to teach. Except for Ivanka Borsuk, who asked her about various things, listened and remembered everything. Unlike the others, she was not afraid of the Russky Woman.

And the good Lord helped Ivanka in a difficult moment.

But that was another story in itself.

...**ONE DAY** during these uncertain times Severyna was praying near the chapel in Lower Lustun, when a woman's voice suddenly wailed from the nearby yard of the Chyhryns. As if a dead body was being carried out of the house. Severyna didn't even need to go there or to ask anyone what had transpired: she knew straight away – *the Chyhryns' turn had come*. And why not. Two of their sons had gone off *into the forest*. Their father Ivan had not returned from Bucharest from military conscription back when the Romanians had been Germany's ally, although the Russkies refused to believe this. Nor did they believe the government document which said as much about Ivan's disappearance in Bucharest. And so Sofia Chyhryn was left on her own, burdened by five small children and her old father-in-law Petro...

Severyna had a good view from the chapel: the usually taciturn Sofia stood sobbing in the middle of the yard, holding two children in her arms, and three more were crying and holding onto her skirt. Bent double, grandpa Petro was waving his walking stick about before the eyes of two officers. Meanwhile one of these was yelling for them to hurry up and gather their things.

And again her heart quickened its beat. Children! Even small children didn't melt the hearts of these people hunters! So maybe it was better that she had no children?! Because how could one defend children in such times???

Today they had come after the Chyhryns.

And tomorrow they might come for her. It didn't matter that she had no one, that her house was in a desolate location right up against the forest.

And that night it struck her.

Lord!!!

How had she not thought of this earlier?!

She had such a big head, but still hadn't managed to figure this out?!!

...**SYMON DUDKA** had come for the salves and herbs *from the forest*, exactly as they had agreed. To be exact, Severyna herself had come to him beside the split trunk of the sycamore tree towering over her house, after hearing the simultaneous hoots of an owl and a wolf's howl. Which was repeated three times.

On this night the usually reticent Symon was somehow different. He began to speak almost at once, as soon as she had handed him the medicine:

"Hurry up, Russky Woman, and quickly tell me what medicine is for what. 'Cause I have to hurry: we've got lots of wounded and we can't send a doctor to tend to them. The Russian dogs have blocked all the paths leading to the hospital bunker. The boys are rotting alive there. And one more thing... So that you know: soon they'll be deporting the whole of Lustun to Siberia."

She had brought lots of herbal decoctions and salves made with badger and bear fat, and sheep's butter – for suppurating wounds, blood poisoning and hemorrhaging, proud flesh, lice, anemia, rotting teeth and gums.

But most of all Symon thanked her for the decoction to combat sleep. Severyna had tested it on herself: after a small cup of the drink she not only was unable to sleep – she simply had no desire to sleep. And she felt such a fierce strength inside her that she could have moved mountains. She knew how badly the boys needed that drink... because after the long treks, the tension, the hunger and the nerves they slept so little, that they could fall asleep on their feet. And this was bad when troops were dispatched to capture you.

“Symo...” she asked him that night under the maple tree. “Come here tomorrow during the day. I beg you. Before midday crawl into the hayrick – the one closest to the forest. Sit there and wait, until I take the hay down into the valley, together with you inside it, so that no one will know. You have to help me with something.”

When she was two steps from her house muffled rifle shots reached her ears from deep within the forest.

The next day, no sooner had Severyna gotten ready to go and fetch the hay in which Symon Dudka was meant to be hiding for her, when Vasyl Polotniuk, the courier from the village council, suddenly appeared in her yard: he had once been her neighbor from under the sycamore tree in Grassy Settlement.

But Severyna did not fazed: even the present village council had little to do with her household.

However, Vasyl seemed to be in no hurry and trudged about her yard, asking all sorts of things – until she finally unceremoniously interrupted him:

“Vasyl, tell me why you've come here, 'cause I have work to do.”

“It’s you, Russky Woman, who has to tell me what needs to be done. Symon won’t be coming to the maple tree or the hayrick today, because he was wounded last night.”

At this point Severyna hesitated.

“Don’t be afraid,” Vasyl said, removing his document case from his shoulder. “I was under the maple with Symon last night and overheard your conversation. Tell me what’s to be done. Because I still have to get back to the village council. How are your snakes faring? Milking well?” he laughed, dimples appearing in the corners of his lips.

“I want you to kill my snake,” she looked him straight in the eye.”

“What ever for?!”

She didn’t answer him immediately. At first she thought for a long time. Ivanka had taught her to react that way when she had something to say. And then she answered her former neighbor:

“Don’t you know, Vasyl, that for each snake you kill you write off forty of your sins?! And I need the snake’s innards to make medicine for the boys. So don’t take pity on the snake. I’ve got enough of them in my loft – I can vouch for that. And don’t be scared either. I’ve intoxicated my lady a little with belladonna and arnica, so that she won’t writhe about too much.”

When Severyna placed the basket before Vasyl, Polotniuk first rubbed his forehead: the shining black body of the snake glinted, lying there in a zigzag at the bottom of the basket, which was lined with various roots. The snake’s head rested peaceably atop its black coil.

Screwing up his eyes, Vasyl sized up the immobile reptile. But no sooner had he squeezed the snake’s head with a pair of pliers, than it suddenly entwined itself around his arm.

It had all happened so suddenly, that Polotniuk didn’t even have a chance to make a mental note whether a snake’s skin was indeed cold, like the skin of a corpse, because with a swift blow from above Severyna smashed the snake’s head with a beech stick.

...*SHE DID THE REST HERSELF.*

After the sun had set, after the last drop of life had left the snake, she first took the eggs from under it, strung together like bullets in an ammunition belt.

She knew the eggs were alive, for they were already black. The heads of the baby snakes would be pushing through any day now.

But Severyna did not throw away the eggs. She only immersed them overnight in the freezing-cold water of a fast mountain stream: she knew a spot where even in the middle of summer the water made your hands burn with pain.

Next she slit a section of the snake's body.

Removed the innards.

She pieced together the pieces of its smashed head and smeared them over with fir resin.

She then sewed the skin together with silk thread taken from the fringes of her festive Easter kerchief.

She "stuffed" the snake's abdominal cavity with soft clay.

And then...

Then, without the slightest pang of conscience she removed the old Austrian cuckoo clock that had belonged to uncle Onufriy from the wall. She opened it up, as she would have cut open a human chest. And without hesitating another moment, she pulled its entire heart out – all those iron rods and springs. Just as if she had pulled out a beating heart from a living chest.

She tied the springs together – and then poked them through the snake's insides, which she had filled with soft clay.

And after that she practiced to make the dead snake appear alive...

If other people were not spared deportation to Siberia because they were still breastfeeding children or had tiny infants, or had hands that knew only how to hold a hoe or a rake, then everyone had to seek salvation as best they knew how.

If you were forced to defend your farm with weapons, rather than with scythes and rakes, then you took up arms.

But her hands weren't up to that. She didn't have the strength inside her to use a gun.

Wasn't up to it.

Didn't want to.

Didn't know how.

For it was a sin to bear weapons – weapons killed living things.

But then Severyna wasn't about to sit about obediently, waiting until they broke her neck. That wasn't in her make-up. Her blood was like that of a snake, either she had none left inside her or it had set hard forever. That was why her Muscovite¹⁵ blood did not get in her way. She didn't feel its presence inside her.

She would defend herself using the wisdom God had given her.

...She immersed her hands into the basket filled with herbs and gently squeezed the clock springs –

and a monstrous black head rose just above the edges of the basket, freezing for a moment;

then the head jerked a few times;

and fell to the bottom of the basket, released by Severyna's fingers.

It was more abominable with the tail.

But she had to do it, even if it meant she spewed her guts out for three days afterwards.

Br-r-r...

She tied a handkerchief around the cut end of the tail, wetted with water blessed on Christmas Eve, Epiphany and Candlemas Day, and sewed the handkerchief to the inside of her shirt. The other end of the tail she allowed to protrude out of the shirt, which was embroidered with white thread on white linen, and always washed

¹⁵ i.e. Russian

in clean water and “Yelena’s water” – water taken from a well or a trough before sunrise.

And thus she had settled part of the snake beneath her heart.

...And meanwhile she waited for *them*.

For it could never be that her unknown father’s countrymen would not come after her. They had no excuses for anyone here.

And her time had come.

And they came.

In what way was she better than those others, who were also innocent?

...Once they had brought Major Voronin himself to see her. After he had been wounded his leg had rotted to the bone. The local doctor had cleaned it with a knife. He had cleaned it so assiduously that they had wanted to lop half of it off.

But Severyna had used her witchcraft – she had whistled over the leg, made medicine using honey, white-flowered mint¹⁶ and carline thistle – they later said that some village farmer had almost sliced off Voronin’s recuperated leg, after he caught the soldier in bed with his wife.

...Severyna sprinkled the wound with carline thistle ash; then spread a balm made of honey and white-flowered mint; she then wrapped the wound in badger skin – and meanwhile Voronin, holding back his moans, practically stroked her with his eyes.

Was he begging her to help or was he afraid of her? She could have poisoned him, had she wanted. He had done enough to warrant that.

But she refrained from doing so.

Had he made an attempt on her when he was healthy... oh, then she would not have hesitated. But now a cripple sat opposite her. A

¹⁶ *Melittis carpatica*

murderer, but a cripple all the same. She could not become the killer of a cripple.

But could this be a reason not to touch her now, when the whole of Landlords Valley was preparing to leave on an enforced journey?

And when one gave it some thought, Severyna had committed a trespass before her compatriots, the Russkies. Oh she sure had.

Only two people in the world – Symon Dudka and Vasyl Polotniuk – knew who had passed on the medicine to the *lads in the forest*.

But then she would not have concealed this, had the Russkies asked her about it. She healed everyone who needed help. And she didn't ask where her salves would be applied and to whom.

O-o-oh... how much knowledge had died inside her! If anyone only knew how everything had been done back then...! How inventive and courageous people became when they were surrounded on all sides by horrors, suspicion, denunciation, treachery and hatred...!

Severyna caught snakes in the glades, killed them, cleaned out their innards, and placed their heads among the dried herbs in her basket.

Thus she spawned an entire den of snakes.

...THE CORDON HAD LASTED A WEEK NOW.

And for a week Voronin and his soldiers came to Severyna's yard, seeking traces of the guerilla gang.

And that week, day after day, Severyna sat in the doorway to her house with a basket filled with snakes' heads and an unbuttoned shirt front and moved the snake tail in her bosom with her breast.

With glazed eyes, and perhaps even a glazed mind, she sat before her house with her lady-servants in the basket – and their frightful hissing seemed to muffle the crackle of automatic gunfire.

In that clamor no one would have imagined that a human being could hiss no less naturally than a snake.

If they put their mind to it.

Meanwhile the guerillas that the MGB¹⁷ soldiers were hunting – Symon Dudka and Vasyl Polotniuk – were sitting in the hay up in the loft of Severyna’s tiny house.

Both of them – *the hunters and the guerillas* – knew that the lady of this house was untouchable.

Because she was *not all there*.

And both of them – hunters of each other – in one way or another thought about Severyna.

One lot – with hope, the other – with fear.

Even Vasyl Polotniuk, bound by mortal danger in the semi-darkness of Severyna’s loft, looked at Symon Dudka and silently asked himself: would a person *in their right mind* ask someone to kill a snake which they had encouraged to nest in their home, as Severyna had once asked him to do? Would they?! And what for? To be rid of doubtful sins?

What sins did this Russky Woman have? Living in solitude – that was all! And why kill a snake, when in the basket over there (Vasyl could plainly see them through cracks in the loft floor) there seethed a whole den of snakes – and the woman played with those reptiles, as if they were small children. Br-r-r...

Would a woman in her right mind kill an animal, which she had accepted into her house and spoken to, as if it were a living person?! She definitely wouldn’t, unless she was in league with the devil.

However, the young Polotniuk did not dare ask this of Symon, or to answer his own question. For at the moment that den of snakes was saving their lives.

Voronin did not dare ask too much either, only swearing profusely in Severyna’s yard, watching his savior sitting motionless in the doorway of her house, her hands immersed in a basket filled with snakes – and he was barely able to restrain himself from

¹⁷ *Ministerstvo gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*, i.e. Ministry of State Security.

spitting on the ground out of an acute feeling of squeamishness and suppressed fear.

Meanwhile Severyna sat there with her servants, champed something with her lips and, so abhorrent for a bystander to see, stroked the quivering snake's tail poking from her bosom.

'So tell me then, beaten and shot at as I've been all my life by every local banderite¹⁸ and non-banderite: would a sane person warm a snake in their bosom?!! Not if they're in their right mind! Not at all!' Major Voronin thought.

'Let her cuddle up to that snake then, if she wants to so much. There are enough other people here in the mountains. In place of this insane Russky woman I'll find someone else,' Voronin thought. 'In the end, if it comes to that – she's not such a dangerous person.

'The main thing is to smoke the guerillas from the forest.'

...DARLING ALMIGHTY LORD... So much time had already passed, that Severyna no longer remembered those times, except for perhaps in her dreams. Even with her old men – Symon and Vasyl (*the band of guerillas she had once rescued in her loft*) – she never spoke about those times: as if there had never been a past.

And these delirious old men, these faithful acquaintances from her youth, had assiduous men's work to do to this day – either attending their never ending weekly meetings, bringing along the musty old flags which had been packed away in their chests, or else with fresh flagpoles they scattered the rabble assembling under red-and-black flags.¹⁹

¹⁸ Derogatory name given to Ukrainian liberation fighters, from the name of Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian nationalist and arch-enemy of the Soviet regime.

¹⁹ The red and black flag was the banner under which the nationalist Bandera followers fought.

And so they spent their last years – going from gathering to gathering. And no one would ever have thought that it would come to pass that no one would be ordering her old men about.

But they didn't know the whole of it either.

They didn't know about everything in this world.

And they didn't know everything about her either. And hadn't any suspicions about her little servants.

Severyna had tricked them a little then too: neither Vasyl nor Symon realized to this day that the snakes in that basket and in her unbuttoned bosom, with which she had fooled bad people in those days – were in fact dead snakes. Killed with Vasyl's own hands.

But how could they have guessed such things? Any old smart person would never have imagined or dreamt that another person – *a person in their right mind* – could do what Severyna had done back then!

But if one thought hard, then a smart person need not be astonished: because what was a person to do, when others plotted to deport them to Siberia?! They had to save themselves, if they had a head on their shoulders! And no one had cut Severyna's head off. She had never cut her hair for a reason: so that her mind would not be dulled.

And so in a difficult hour she had taken the reptiles as her saviors and friends. No matter that they were cold and disgusting. They were living creatures all the same and wanted to live just as much as people. Which is why they bit people, after they were stepped on for the third time.

And as for previous human trials and tribulations, Severyna bore no grudges – she had never taken notice of anyone. She lived her own life, never opening her heart to others.

But sometimes Severyna lay in her home and stared at the ceiling – breathing, sneezing and coughing – and she could not hear her heart. She grabbed at her body with her hand, squeezing her wrists until they hurt – but was unable to feel the blood pulsing inside her:

it flowed along coldly through her cold veins and did not make itself felt.

Once Severyna had bled herself, when her high blood pressure had nearly split her head apart. Then she had purposefully tested how hot her blood was – and it had been cold. It was red, like the juice of frozen guilder-rose berries, it almost gave off vapor in the glass, but it was not warm. It was as if it had not been human blood, but rather tepid water. As if Severyna had no blood in her veins, but only something cold and red resembling it. Just like the blood of the snakes which she had learnt to crush without a man's help, when misfortune had fallen upon her and hemmed her in from all directions, the same way as Vasyl Polotniuk had once pressed firmly on that first snake's head.

This is what delayed fear and cold reason had done to Severyna: they had transformed her from a living person into a person oblivious to life.

She moved about, breathed, looked after her small household – but nothing quivered inside her, nothing twitched, nothing struggled to emerge into the light of day.

Not a single tear.

Not a single laugh.

Not a single deprecatory remark.

Silence and cold reason alone controlled her life.

Perhaps that was why her bones had not been frozen hard somewhere over there in Magadan, where half of Landlords Valley had frozen to death.

Because if you thought about it, it would appear that any person's life was worth no more than that of those black-backed young piglets, which had once been frozen solid into the snow in Pysarivka.

If she thought very hard about it and admitted the truth to herself, the fear had really never left her.

Even today.

To this day she still expected *them* to come for her.

To this day she could not believe that she had outwitted them.

She had fooled them all – her own people, and the strangers.

And if the real truth be known... well, very, very quietly, so that she herself could not hear... to this day Severyna did not believe that Ukraine's independence was for long.

Because there was so much of that overt and hidden madness around her!

People lied vehemently to her face, employing dishonest words – and didn't even bat an eyelid... they all lied, all of them! Both those who had travelled round the world as a result of their lies, and those who had once defended themselves against lies. Something invisible, but almighty, sticky, like tar, and harder than concrete, had cemented together the disbelievers and the righteous – and now they were like kindred spirits: the swindlers and thieves together with the righteous and former martyrs... they were all after one thing, although they usually spoke differently and seemed to lash out at each other with fierce and hateful words... but all of them so cunningly declared their love for Ukraine, that it often made Severyna want to puke from aversion.

One time, in a rage, she ripped the radio out of the wall together with the power point, after hearing yet another universal lie from those mendacious lips and faceless, disgraceful snouts. You didn't have to be a shaman or an herbalist to recognize the great wile promulgated every day by these crafty rogues, who had crawled out from every crack, like slithering reptiles.

At least reptiles hibernated when fall came, they crawled back into the earth; but these two-legged reptiles, who babbled non-stop on television and radio, they truly loathed their native land with every drop of their blood – and yet they did not choke on its holy bread.

So which intelligent person would believe that Ukrainian independence was for long, when so few people still remembered that there were more innocent bones scattered across the land than there were fallen leaves!

When few people even wanted to know about the foreshortened fates of so many people, who might otherwise still be living, were it not for the armies of those damned Voronins...

Oh! Severyna was not so much cunning, as she was concealed. She was like a snail inside its shell. Practically every day she thought that there was still someone somewhere who remembered that she was the Russky Woman.

Not Mrs. Severyn.

Not Severyna or Severyna Katerynivna, but simply the Russky Woman.

Yes, the Russ-kee Woman.

Even though wise books stated that a child was judged by its mother's bloodline. But that was perhaps in some other country... in some place where they probably didn't even ask you about your roots. But it did not apply to the local people.

For *here* people had very good memories. Here a person would die – and people would remember things about them for ages to come. And they would pass on to their children that Katrinka's Severyna was a genuine Russky woman, even though she never knew a single word of the Russky language.

People might not pass customs on to their children, they might twist rituals around, but they would indelibly enter another person's sin into their memories, as if it had been written in a book.

And they would bequeath it to their descendants.

In *this* land another person's fall from grace was never forgotten.

Well, the secret about her blood was known to everyone.

But they knew nothing about the snakes!!! To this day Severyna kept that old basket with the snakes in her loft. Just in case. Let them all continue to think that she was breastfeeding her *servants*.

But could you tell? Aren't there enough secretive and silent witnesses in this world biding their time?

And perhaps somewhere there just might be a person who had unraveled her long-held secret with the snakes.

For she wasn't the only cunning one in this world.
And one day one of them would surely come to visit her.
Either one of the Russkies.

Or one of her own people, one of the locals. Because maybe her close friend Polotniuk was still on the books of the village council as a courier. Who knows? Her mother Katrinka had once told her: don't trust others – and you won't lose anything.

...*THROUGH THE WIDE WINDOW* – stretching across almost the entire wall – Severyna watched the snow fall.

The snowflakes twirled about and wilted, like a powerless person, from whom the last minutes of life were ebbing, but who still wanted, above all else, to delay their mortal end; and so with every fiber in their soul they resisted the Lady in White.

But a Maiden would come for her, not a Woman.

There she was already standing outside the window for some reason – Severyna's resplendent Maiden, as if she had come straight from a wedding ceremony – and she played with the large snowflakes, the size of snake eggs.

The snowflakes covered the yard right up to the windowsill, as if wanting to lay a soft covering so that Severyna could make the crossing. The thick large snowflakes covered her eyes, but even through this sparkling, snowy material, porous like cheesecloth, she could still see

the branches of the old plum tree, split by the heavy burden of white pressing upon them,

and the dark sleek surface of the living, sparkling water in the trough,

and the pile of split billets stacked against the stable wall and now sprinkled with snow, which now protruded from the snow like those wild piglets which had been frozen dead in the Epiphany frosts in Pysarivka.

Severyna wanted to venture out into the white boundlessness of that virgin snow, to become lost in it forever so that no one would ever be able to find any trace of her.

And the smiling and simultaneously saddened White Maiden outside the window stretched out her white hand to Severyna – as if wanting to help her, so that she wouldn't sink into the bleached canvas.

Or did she simply want to help her, because...

They had finally come for her.

Vasyl and Symon?!

Or Voronin come for his Russky woman?

And to each of them she was a kindred spirit, although all her life she had tried to save herself from each of them.

They had finally all come together at the same time, but they didn't know which of them needed to start first...

But suddenly the White Maiden stepped between them, as if stopping them from approaching Severyna...

Oh, it was hard to tell here, who was friend and who was foe...

But the most friendly of all was this wise Maiden-Woman... because she suddenly dragged Severyna under her white folds, as if wanting to hide her under her immaculate robes.

Severyna had nothing to fear: like this just Woman, she too had been immaculate up until now.

She was a Virgin – even though her breasts had been sucked dry by the dead snakes; under these breasts her heart suddenly began to beat for the first time, and then it finally rested.

...Was it you, Gatekeeper to Paradise, who stopped my heart?!

You, Saint Peter-Saint Monday, was it you who liberated me from the persecutors and pursuers of my soul, so tired and wasted after all these long years?!

See, I thought that only the soul never became exhausted. But the poor little thing has fallen apart, just like my bones, which turned to dust, and now wants to take a rest from everything.

Because maybe you're not Saint Peter, and not Monday, Gatekeeper, but the father whom I have never seen or known... love me now, like a true Father loves his child, and open your black gate. Even if hell lies beyond it... see, they are catching up to me even here...

They have finally traced me to this place, Gatekeeper... they want to lasso me.

If they don't drag me off to their bunkers, then they'll certainly take me away to their Siberias.

And I can't tear myself apart to be with both of them, as I've been doing all my life.

Liberate me, Gatekeeper... from foreigners and countrymen. And let me finally take a breath without thinking a single thought.

Let me feel utterly empty.

Like this.

Without anyone about.

...In actual fact I was never really afraid of any of them, just as I never really loved anyone in my life.

I only resisted.

They probably didn't realize this.

But I won't let them forget anything.

Not even in the *Other World*.

***5 December 2007 – 29 March 2008,
Lekeche Outcrop in Bukovyna – Kyiv***

Mother Marica, the Wife of Chrystofor Columbus

Dedicated to each mother in particular...

1

The small town of Myshyn, to which Chrystofor brought eighteen-year-old Marica after he had completed his compulsory army service, did not differ in any particular detail from other equally pleasant, but not very memorable Ukrainian towns.

Cut in two by a shallow, quiet river, it had the appearance of a strange bird with outstretched wings hovering over the shiny calmness of the waters. Inhabited by several thousand natives and foreigners, it would at times be quietly comforting, at times loudly agitated in time to the small and great diversions of its residents, who displayed no special inventiveness.

Each season the men folk of the town, without undue anxiety, but at the tops of their voices, supported the exclusive legs of their incomparable soccer idol, Blokhin, and with great gusto emptied whole barrels of the tasteless (because it had been diluted with water) local beer; and either silently or not too judgmentally, except perhaps for hiding their jealousy, they shook their heads at the latest news of the sexual indiscretions of one of their compatriots.

The women, either in their kitchens or while queuing up to buy something, gave birth to and disseminated the latest gossip with a speed approaching that of light, and afterwards breathed a heavy sigh of relief that – thank God! – at least this time it did not involve their family.

Overall, life in Myshyn flowed without any great upheavals, luxuries or unrest.

Someone died, someone was born.

Some couples were married, others divorced.

Someone won a lottery, maybe a refrigerator or even a car, and jail beckoned to someone else for petty hooliganism or for black marketeering.

And this unchanging, strictly regulated whirlpool of life did not sadden anyone for long, but then again, nor did it move anyone for any length of time. Not even if they were overjoyed.

Except for Marica.

For the first few years of her life in Myshyn, Chrystofor's young wife reacted to the town's news – be it good or bad – the same as people reacted to such news in her native town: tempestuously.

The violent reactions of the inhabitants of Marica's hometown, Frunza Verde, were, naturally associated with its geographical location. Marica's little homeland, or fatherland in the local language, was known by the only two-worded characterisation in common use at that time – *sunny Moldavia*.

Marica could not understand why radio programmes spoke so favourably, almost fawningly, of her country; after all, it had its fair share of rain, and mud, and drought, and bad people. Someone would think that across her fatherland's expanses there was only joy, music and sunshine.

And nothing else.

Oh, yes. Her compatriot's temperament, especially in dances, apart from evoking 'oohs' and 'ahs', at times brought on tears of rapture. The hot blood of her land, coursing through the veins of her greatest artistes, quickened the pulse of those who took delight in the filigree of her compatriots' bodies as they performed the furious *moldovenească* or *zhok* dances.

But Marica occasionally grew angry when here, in Myshyn, someone, almost inadvertently, blurted out that life in her home country consisted principally of dancing, songs and the downing of glasses of wine.

In such moments, she recalled the backbreaking work of her parents, indeed, her whole family, on the endless state farm vineyards and tomato plantations – and her eyes filled with tears,

be they of heartfelt pity or sadness, at the entrenched, almost cement-like views of others about her sunny Moldavia being a land of endless dancing.

Whether she felt pity for her exhausted parents, with bad backs from excessive work, or whether she was sad because of the lack of strong sunshine overhead... But any such mention of her colourful homeland would upset her each time.

Even after living several years in Myshyn among these considerate, but somewhat passive people, as she was wont to think, whenever she heard the merry sounds of a violin or the mournful cry of a *fluier*²⁰ or *naj*²¹ on the radio or television, Marica felt like launching into a song or a dance, or even weeping, if not for the thought that this spontaneous outburst of hers might be misinterpreted by the locals, who, although they had learnt to understand her mostly 'funny' language, interwoven as it was with Moldovan words, might misunderstand the language of her body or the call of her blood.

Let them figure it out any way they wanted, as long as they weren't judgemental. Negative public opinion might not only bewilder, but could also influence, the future course of a person's life.

Therefore, in Myshyn it was considered wise to avoid being judged by others.

Although there was always room for manoeuvring by individuals.

On rare occasions the locals could even fail to take heed of written laws.

However, the judgement of the community always had to be taken into account. For any misdemeanour before the community, each inhabitant of Myshyn could be sentenced more severely than by any magistrate through the application by the locals of traditions or conventions. And a sentence handed down by this collective

²⁰ *Fluier* — a Moldovan folk wind instrument resembling a flute.

²¹ *Naj* — a Moldovan version of the pan-pipes.

court was carried out in a singular, but well-trying manner – complete silence and a total boycott: everyone would cross to the other side of the street on catching sight of the guilty party.

Thus, before doing anything important, every inhabitant of this little town who cared about their good name or the good name of their family, needed to think about this territory's fundamental law – whether their actions or deeds might not result in general censure, which could result in a heart attack, or even death.

True, Marica did not dwell too deeply into this philosophy of local life, just as she wasn't too upset at the thought that people might misunderstand her, people whom she genuinely loved, if only because they lived where Marica was happy.

Up until now her happiness was complete and immeasurable.

And her happiness was called – Chrystofor.

It was all embracing.

Universal.

And it was unending.

This happiness was timeless, unquestionable and had not the slightest tinge of sadness.

It could only grow and take on new aspects, colours and forms. This enduring happiness was like the aching memory of Marica's far away land of sun, red tomatoes, grapevines and tear-jerking *fluier* music.

If she heard a melody from her fatherland on the radio or the television, brimming with sunny cheerfulness or bottomless dark sorrow, Marica would open the door to the pantry, stand between the tubs of flour, sugar or bacon, put her hands on her hips and, swaying to the melody, eyes closed, move to the beat of the music for as long as she could bear it.

However, she could not bear it for very long, seeing as she was, by nature, not very patient and sometimes as edgy as the melodies of her native *zhok*. The precipitous Moldavian *zhok* at times reminded her of the no less temperamental *hopak* dance of Chrystofor's fatherland. Although there was much more movement

and action in the *hopak*, the *zhok* cut you down with an almost deathly passion, capable of bursting the blood in your veins or the heart in your breast.

...*MARICA NJAMCU*, whom Chrystofor Rybachuk had brought to Myshyn, practically snatching her from her school desk, now studied eagerly by correspondence at the local Pedagogical Institute and worked as a teacher in the local kindergarten. And Chrystofor, who was nicknamed *Columbus* in the little town from an early age because of his exotic Christian name, worked as a truck driver at the local state farm. He would often disappear on long trips, transporting goods, and each time Marica would wait more or less patiently, or so it seemed to her, for his return home.

However, one time her patience betrayed her.

Chrystofor was away from home all week. The first few days Marica was lazily bored, and then she impatiently longed for him. And, then, on the seventh day, when she became convinced that she was at last *pregnant*, she was ready to rush out with joy to greet her husband.

Too many times she had pulled the window curtain aside, looking out for the headlights of Chrystofor's truck.

And on the seventh day she spent half the night standing in the darkened doorway, not taking her eyes off the road; listening to her body.

Every now and then, during moments of excessive worrying and waiting, which was becoming unbearable, it seemed to Marica that she could sense the growing life inside her. There, in the warmth of her womb, underneath her heart, Chrystofor's seed was growing bigger by the minute – and soon a foot would kick out or the bent-double body would stir.

At such moments, the woman would begin to cross herself uncontrollably: from fear that she would go mad from joy and be unable to tell her beloved Chrystofor that they would at last be having a child.

A curly-haired little Moldavian boy who babbled like Marica.
Or a swarthy, brown-eyed Ukrainian girl with two dimples – a copy of her dad.

2

...**MARICA COULD NOT REMEMBER**, how it was that she didn't go mad when, first thing the next morning the front door to their building creaked unnaturally – and at the entrance to her house stood the state farm director, a midwife and a local militiaman.

She remembered only that the midwife gave her something bitter to swallow and injected her a couple of times just above the elbow, while the director kept repeating that some drunken *KAMAZ* had struck Chrystofor's truck head on, slicing his cabin in two.

Marica lost consciousness from the terrible and unexpected shock, and then kept crying out repeatedly: 'Where's my Chrystofor?!'

And the director, without growing tired, kept repeating in a quiet, almost peaceful voice, about the *KAMAZ*.

...Chrystofor Rybachuk was buried in a sealed coffin in the local cemetery, without even his parents being allowed to see his mangled body. Some time later, the doctor from the local hospital, after a glass or two, let slip that Chrystofor had been buried without his head.

However, since no one had seen Chrystofor, who had been 'alive yesterday and dead today', in his coffin, his absence was not associated with his death.

The man's not here – so he's not here.

Many other people flicker before your eyes every day...

...Right up until her labour Marica lived in a kind of fog or misty drizzle.

She was always listening –
in case her forever-smiling Chrystofor scratched at the
windowpane in the night,
whether he might come to her in a troubling dream to say
goodbye at least.

But only the winds shook the ragged roof of the old building and
howled at the windows like restless hounds. And the untethered
dogs bayed at the moon or at the odd passer-by, stopping her from
catching even a wink of sleep.

Her insomnia became so bad, so unbearable, that the shattered
Marica would get up from her bed, drag a stool over to the wall and
rest her hot forehead against the cold windowpane.

The earth, silver from the cold or the moonlight, seemed to shiver
beyond the windows of the orphaned house, while a dishevelled
Marica peered at the nocturnal contours of the sleeping town – and
felt a great lassitude and dreams overcoming her body wept empty
of tears.

After Chrystofor's death she was never afraid of the dark. Even
in the dead of night she could walk to the cemetery and sit beside
her husband's grave, listening to the eerie rustling of the treetops
overhead or the inopportune chirruping of the cicadas in the
cemetery grass, and then return home and sit until morning,
propped up against a wall with her hands locked around her
ballooning stomach.

No one visited excessive attention upon her or special
condolences.

Chrystofor's sister, burdened with three children and a drunk for
a husband, at first came round almost every day, but after the
fortieth day appeared only once a week. And that was mainly to cry
over her own misfortunes.

Close neighbours pitied Marica, but with a strange kind of pity –
they acted, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened:

they gossiped about local news,
quietly criticised the state of affairs in the country,

complained about shortages,
but they never touched on the most painful subject of all –
Chrystofor's death.

This is why she found it easiest at work. Caring for other people's children took her mind off her own misfortune. With cries of joy the ever-grubby tiny tots constantly clung to their teacher, and the boldest among them asked to touch her rounded, ball-like belly.

And when the warm, tiny hand of a child rested for a moment on Marica's extended stomach, in which a new life was now confidently kicking about, it seemed to her that at that instant she felt a burst of joyous wedding violins inside her and the *fluier* exploded into tiny splinters because of the age-old grief harboured inside its miniature wooden body.

Then she would cover the child's warm little hand with her numb palm, close her eyes for a moment, subduing the voice, which seemed to come from the other world – and listened to the beat of her own heart and the heart of their joint creation.

This untimely, irrelevant, senseless joy utterly exhausted her, because it did not reflect her black clothes or her dark thoughts.

However, the days at work flashed past, somewhat like the striped concentration-camp uniforms of Soviet prisoners-of-war in films about the war, which had lately occupied the screens of the black-and-white television sets. Everyday after work Marica would lay down on the couch, switch on the television – and spend several hours mindlessly sitting in front of the television, which showed only the striped concentration-camp clothing, which at times distracted, and even calmed the woman, for whom the days and nights seemed to flicker in the same striped tones.

Then Marica was once again overcome with laziness. It took a great feat of will to get up out of bed, to do the necessary chores and to set off for work.

And with time, she no longer had to go to work – against her own will, despite her tears and her pleadings, Marica was put on

extended maternal leave: such were the humane laws of the great USSR back then.

Then the whole world, both heaven and hell, finally collapsed upon Marica.

...**MARICA DID NOT BUY** any baby bonnets or nappies, nor did she stock up on children's juices.

For days on end she would lie on the couch and stare at the ceiling.

From time to time they took her to the outpatient's clinic, did tests, told her to move about a lot, and not to feed the already large foetus too much.

She would listen carefully and nodded her head as a sign of agreement – but at home she lay down on the couch and stared stolidly at the ceiling.

But one day, when she was in her ninth month, Marica lay down on the unfolded couch and stayed there until her labour pains arrived. She felt a universal laziness and ennui inside her; at times it seemed these were growing inside her together with the child. She felt that at any moment now she would split open like a melon; from the laziness, from the lack of desire to live and her excessive weight.

Did she want to laze away so that it would last her a lifetime?

Or was she following the encoded orders of Mother Nature?

Who can tell now, when no one can know what forces and voices motivate a woman during her greatest mystery – the bearing of a new life...

3

THE BLUISH, WRINKLED baby that sucked lazily on her tender and overfilled breast, lazily opening its rheumy eyes, even in those very first days sent Marica into a fever: it seemed as if

Chrystofor himself had somehow transformed himself into this baby that now clumsily champed on her darkened, swollen nipples, as if trying to suck out the last drops of milk that had yet to flow.

Then, overcome by fear, almost in anger or hatred, she would tear the baby from her breast.

But a moment later, she would search for love inside her toward this living bundle – and only heard her muffled heartbeat and felt a slight disdain that the appearance of Chrystofor’s miniature copy evoked in her, which in some strange way filled her with fear and an uncertain worry.

There was something threatening about this – the memory of a dead husband being nurtured by a baby that Marica was obliged to love from the moment of its appearance into this world; but she was unable to feel this love, not on the second, nor even the third day after its birth.

The gaze of the helpless baby, a look-alike image of its father, filled the soul of the new mother with an incomprehensible antagonism, if not even aversion – and she was forced repeatedly to suppress the self-pity and tears welling up inside her, afraid to show the staff of the maternity ward her inner turmoil.

She could not have explained where this aversion had come from.

Did all young mothers go through this, or was this merely her tragedy manifesting itself, having immersed a hitherto happy woman in a black cloud of sorrow?!

Numerous times every day Marica would pull out from under her pillow a small photograph of Chrystofor taken just after he was born – and then she would look at him in the flesh: the recently-born baby was so like his father.

And then, again and again, the good and the bad feelings would churn about her inside her.

And for days on end, she would not take her eyes off the innocent child. As if expecting it to pass on some sign from its father.

The baby would quieten down, falling asleep at her breast, or, lightly nipped by Marica on the cheek, would again try to feed with greater gusto, beginning to resemble a defenceless puppy.

And then the woman was ready to tear out her hair, utterly angry with herself.

But by the third day such warmth and languidness began to fill her body, that the young mother pressed her lips upon the baby's wrinkled cheeks – and again became quiet for a long time, listening to the wedding violins of her homeland suddenly begin to play somewhere at the very bottom of her soul. Then Marica would begin to hum a melody under her breath in time to the wheezing breath of her baby – and the sweet happiness of a hitherto unknown luxurious feeling would sharply pierce her body, and then slowly fill out its contours, almost weightless now after the birth.

At that moment there was not a force on earth that could have stopped her from giving the baby his father's name.

Because of this Chrystofor's sister even had an argument with her sister-in-law. Not because she did not like her deceased brother's name, but because of the local superstition, which forbade naming a baby after a departed relative. Even more, naming it after a dead father.

For all that, the little boy blinked ever more joyously at Marica with the misty eyes of his father and three weeks after the birth Marica announced his name at the civil registry office in a very firm voice: *Chrystofor*.

The registrar at first looked up at her in surprise, and then quietly bent over her papers, almost imperceptibly shrugging her shoulders, perhaps because she failed to understand, or perhaps because she did not approve from opposition, or perhaps even, because she condemned Marica for her action.

From that day on Chrystofor Columbus once again appeared in Myshyn.

4

THE FACT THAT THE FORCEPS, those terrible metal forceps that the humane midwives had used to hasten Chrystofor's entry into this world from Marica's womb, had had a very terrible effect on her baby, Marica realized much sooner than her doctors; but it was later than the medicos should have realised.

At first, even though he did not develop as quickly as other children of his age, it did not make her uneasy. A lot of children started talking much later than expected. And the fact that the baby spent most of its time lying quietly with its eyes closed the young mother put down to temperament. In fact, it was the baby's quiet character, which made him so similar to his father.

So, though she occasionally felt uneasy, the young mother quietly and secretly assured herself that with time everything would be fine.

But as the months passed, there was no point in fooling herself any more.

A year after the baby's birth Marica once again started living in a world of constant tension or as if in a heavy fog. She wanted to see as soon as possible her little son put his lips together and say something strange, unclear, something understood only by her. And that it would be unmistakably similar to 'mama'. She wanted to hurry this moment along, but did not know how.

And the baby seemed to be testing its mother, at times with clear eyes, and at times with a dull look. And Marica, having listened to all the knowledgeable women of the area, decided on an ingenious course of action that at the time could have been viewed as being funny or strange.

She would feed the child straight from pots and pans, without using a spoon or a dummy – so that it would start talking sooner.

Or she would go around the surrounding villages and seek out underground herbalists and fortune-tellers.

Or she would endlessly repeat ten of the simplest words, expecting the child might pick up at least one of them.

The little boy with the dull gaze and a continual slight smile in the corners of his lips did try unsteadily to patter about on his thin legs, but his lips seemed to be permanently sealed: all he could manage were the babbling sounds of a six-month-old baby – and the hot blood of despondency and despair began to fill Marica's mind ever more often.

Then with the help of the wife of a priest from a distant village in the neighbouring district she secretly christened the child, asking that he be given a double name – Chrystofor-Bohdan.

Now Marica would refer to him only as

Bohdanchyk,

Danchyk,

Bohdasyk,

Siasyk,

Bohdas,

Bubochka,

Bunchyk...

However, whether it was from the sudden change in name, or because of its progressing illness, the child rarely reacted to any of them. The little boy could fix his eyes on a single spot and could sit on the floor for hours, without moving. Except, perhaps, for hammering soft toys with his hands. Or the exact opposite could occur: he would be overcome by a burst of very fierce, almost furious energy that needed a similarly furious outlet.

And then Chrystofor-Bohdanchyk smashed everything around him with the ferocity and hatred of a wounded beast.

First the toys.

Then the crockery and the glass in the doors.

Later his aggression was directed at anyone who crossed the threshold to the house.

The child, who now seemed to be developing faster than was to be expected for a child of his age, simultaneously provoked feelings of

sympathy and aversion, from not only neighbors and doctors: even Chrystofor's close family began to visit them more and more rarely.

In fact the boy was not developing in the usual sense of the word – he was simply growing. Quickly his shoulders became uncharacteristically fleshy and broad, all day he his dull-bright gaze wandered around him, or he continuously 'moored' and 'owed', or howled – and then took to trashing everything that fell into his hands, which, with time, took on an unworldly strength.

When Marica led her son out into the yard, having first fed him a handful of calming tablets, and sat him into a specially built chair, the pacified Chrystoforchyk-Bohdanchyk would gaze at the ground for a long time or he would weep silently, using his large fists to wipe his face, which was red from tension and discord. Overcome by her own tears, Marica would then press the large elongated head, somewhat resembling a cucumber, to her breast, hugging him tightly with both hands, and for a long time they both sobbed.

In time the boy would quieten down, imperceptibly falling asleep to the sounds of his mother's quiet sobs, which had the effect of a lullaby – but for a long time after that the woman would hold back her hot tears, except for some quiet sniffing, so as not to wake her son prematurely.

The child's nervous outbursts became more frequent. His anger needed an outlet – and, tired from the constant tension, the woman, after long consideration, finally ordered a wooden door covered with tin. And on the windows in his room she placed some bars, the wooden bed she nailed to the floor and covered with a mattress that had no springs. Apart from the bed, there was nothing else in the room.

Marica gave up her symbolic job as a teacher in the kindergarten, even though it was only at a quarter salary, which the good-hearted, even brave, director paid her, snubbing her nose at the fact that there might be repercussions from the audit department because of this 'underground' staff member.

At first she made do exclusively on the pension she received for her invalid son. But those miserable thirteen roubles were not enough, even at such a bountiful time in her country's existence, a time when it had attained positive and inevitable socialism, on the horizons of which one could see the shimmering splendors of communism.

With her narrow female mind Marica was unable to detect the advantages of developed communism, but she did understand that things did not taste any sweeter, and that the fridge was not getting any fuller, however much the 'little liar' reviled the things the locals hadn't seen and praised those before their eyes.

Every morning, almost synchronously with Marica's waking up, a loudspeaker nailed to a black pole on the opposite side of the street would begin its noisy eighteen-hour shift. The pole was painted on all four sides from top to bottom with the slogan 'Glory to the CPSU!'²²

For some reason almost every morning's program began with the words: 'Two worlds – two ways of life.' Still in bed, Marica listened about the horrors of the unseen world abroad, where discrimination of the local dark-skinned population was entrenched and draconian laws turned people into animals.

Next the loudspeaker spat the spittle of hatred at the lurking bourgeois nationalists, both here and abroad, who even in their sleep thought about how they could undermine the foundations of Marica's joyous present day and introduce discord into the fraternal ranks of the happy Soviet people.

Having spat out its righteous hatred, the radio burst into song.

And what happy and uplifting songs they were!

'How lovely it is for us to sow and reap',

'Beetroots in rows, covered in leaves',

*'My address is no house and no street. My address is the You-Es-
Es-Are'...*

²² Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

But for all that Marica couldn't laze about in bed for long before her day of hard labour began; no-no – she cast aside the despicable thoughts, which turned her away from the overseas world, to her present life. It was a distant or rather a parallel world to her pain and suffering.

This world had no relevance to the world being thrust upon her by the indefatigable loudspeaker.

She looked at her still young hands, already wilted from the constant washing and cleaning she had to do, or she stroked her face, which was gathering wrinkles – and a strange anger, similar to heartburn, settled inside her, like some chronic illness. And sometimes it seemed to her that it wasn't just the negroes who were being downtrodden in some far-off country, but that she too was a black negro in her own white country... with these constant shortages and her miserly pension, with a cramped (twenty-four square metres) Khrushchev-era apartment and unable to cope with her disabled child.

The never-ending, untiring, age-old hissing from the black post got under her skin so much so that finally one night, when she was returning from visiting Chrystofor senior at the cemetery, she grabbed an axe to shop down the loudspeaker post.

But then she stopped and laughed to herself: what was this post with the lying loudspeaker guilty of, as far as she was concerned? They will just move the post, the loudspeaker will become even louder, and then they – God forbid – they will come for her and imprison her for fifteen days. What would happen to her child then?!

It took her a long time and countless visits to the district hospital and the district executive committee offices, before she finally managed to get the loudspeaker volume turned down a little.

May the Lord forgive her sinful soul, but Marica lied to them that the loudspeaker had a detrimental effect on Chrystofor, that its loudness evoked greater aggression in him.

And although much more quietly now, the radio kept up its daily barrage against those Soviet people who earned income without toiling – through the growing and selling of vegetables and fruit on private plots of land, and it exposed the speculators – those who carved wooden souvenirs or embroidered blouses for sale.

But Marica took no notice of this and brought down from the attic her old pedal-driven *Singer*, which she had brought with her from Moldavia.

The young fashion-conscious local lasses, hungry for goods, which were never available in the stores, queued up before the new seamstress, who had good taste and a good sewing machine. There was no lack of people to sew for. Only a lack of time. Marica spent countless nights, which became her workdays, because of insomnia and because she was afraid to draw attention to her income made ‘without toiling’.

Tired from the endless whirring of the sewing machine, Marica massaged her numb fingertips – and again a despicable thought drilled its way into her burning brain: why was this miserly income, earned through hard labour, seen as being earned *without toiling*?

But there was no one to ask.

And she had to be wary of the talkative neighbors, who could inform on her to the local militiaman.

So as not to draw attention to herself, Marica did not keep the money she earned for a ‘black’ day in the bank, but tied it up in two plastic bags and sewed these into Chrystofor’s mattress.

Even if the militia decided to search her house, as they had done recently across the street in the house of Myshyn’s wealthiest ‘tomato man’, Pavlo Hrytsiuk, Marica figured they would not dare rip open the mattress of a disabled child.

However, all her oppressive thoughts scattered, not because of her miserable income, but because of Chrystofor’s reaction to his mother’s work: to Marica it seemed more constructive and thoughtful than the reactions of esteemed people who knew about her clandestine income.

When his mother's *Singer* clattered away in the next room, the little boy held onto the half-open door with his hands, every now and again poking out his cucumber-like head, listening to the sound on the other side of the wall. And then his baseless aggression and rebellion disappeared.

At first, the boy would run his wide-open eyes over the walls, and then he would suddenly plop onto the floor, rest his head against the doorjamb and would not take his attentive gaze off his mother until she got up from her work.

At such moments Marica was prepared to keep working all day long, just so that he would be pacified by the sound of the *Singer*. For no sooner did she get up from her work, than her son would jump up and become agitated once more.

But Marica could not always be at home. There was a myriad of trifling everyday matters that she alone had to attend to. Anyway, there was no one whom she could rely on for help; especially since the appearance of any new person evoked unprecedented aggression in Chrystofor.

Leaving home for any amount of time meant having to inject Chrystofor with soporific drugs supplied by the doctors; she would tie one of his legs to the bed with a large homespun sheet and, sticking out her tongue, race off to do her errands.

This woman never walked – she only ran, as if some devil was perched on her back and spurred her along with a whip.

But the thick sheet did not always prove effective. If Chrystofor came to before her return, he would ferociously tear up the fabric, and his hands became covered in blood from striking the bed or the tin sheathing of the door.

Once he had battered his head against the bars on the window. Little Chrystofor was sitting on the floor beside the bed with bloodied hands – and tears flowed down from his bright eyes, or so they seemed to his mother – inundating her numbed being with a painful hotness.

Marica struck her head against the doorjamb a few times too – as if trying to take some of her son’s frustrations upon herself.

But she only saw yellow and red sparks scatter in the darkness before her eyes – and they disappeared into the unknown space of her chronic pain.

5

MARICA WAS ASKED TO ATTEND the district polyclinic one day.

Actually, it happened like this.

The head doctor sent a car and two hospital attendants to collect Marica and immediately bring her to the polyclinic.

The medical commission, consisting of four round-bellied doctors, did not delve into the finer points of child development matters. Having lazily examined the boy, who was already growing some bumfluff under his nose, the commission rested three pairs of eyes on the weeping Marica. The essence of the conversation came down to a simple proposition with no choices: the handicapped child needed to be taken away from its mother and placed in a safe and comfortable environment, inasmuch as the conditions under which he was being kept made the doctors, the general public and the town’s residents feel uneasy.

Marica was unexpectedly startled after hearing this unworldly nonsense, especially the bit about the ‘general public’, which in Myshyn was associated with a dozen known and closet alcoholics sitting in government positions, a shell-shocked Afghan veteran from the Party Committee of the local bakery and sixteen red-cheeked war veterans, who were scattered among the personnel and secret sections of the milk factory, the public services depot and the road transport firm *Agricultural Machinery*, and she began to cry and babble at the same time. First in her native Moldavian, and then in a patois in which the words of the two completely unrelated

languages were mixed in such a manner that she herself could not have translated what she had said.

She cried without pausing, and then shouted – so that finally the head doctor was forced to threaten her, that he would summon a militiaman.

After calming down somewhat, she asked herself and those present: “Is he clean in my home?” and then answered her own question: “Yes. Is he well fed? Yes. Does he understand me? Yes. If he wants to show me something – does he? Yes. And who cares if he becomes agitated when he hears a stranger enter the yard; he doesn’t do anyone any harm.” And she fell silent for a moment. “And if he does do any damage, it’s only to me and no one else. Besides, I’ve found a carer for him,” she lied, not looking any of them in the face.

...But after all of this, when Marica and her son were driven back home, after being given a whole battery of tablets, needles and ampoules, she came to the conclusion, that they had simply been going through the motions.

Without much enthusiasm, the doctors had waved little hammers in front of the child’s eyes; they hardly cared to hear about the progression of his illness. They were not even particularly insistent that Chrystofor go to a boarding school for the disabled.

Without asking too many questions the social security official filled in his form, forcing the mother to sign in three different places that she had no claims against the medical staff and the social services department, and also that she assumed full responsibility for the state of the child’s health. Instead of bidding her goodbye, he shoved the papers into Marica’s hands, without even raising his eyes to look at her.

Only the old nurse, who had helped Marica undress and dress Chrystofor, silently wiped away her tears with the sleeve of her white coat and at the end, in front of everyone, made the sign of the cross three times over the mother and the child.

HAVING CRIED ENOUGH TEARS for at least two lifetimes, having wrung her hands and once again cursed her unfortunate fate, Marica one day locked the front gate and set to work for the first time in her life in Myshyn.

Firstly she burnt the district social security document which stated that she, Maria Todorivna Rybachuk, could apply to have her son, Chrystofor Chrystoforovych Rybachuk, a class one invalid from childhood, accepted into the boarding school for the disabled at such and such an address. Then she took out Chrystofor senior's bankbook, put her son to sleep with two injections and hurried off to the post office. At the post office, under the direction of the Savings Bank officer, she wrote a letter requesting that the savings of her deceased husband be released to her to help with the upkeep of her handicapped son. She then dashed to the department store, where she bought all kinds of knick-knacks, including exercise books and multicoloured pencils. She would become his school.

From the post office, she went post-haste to Katria Ovadiuk, the daughter of the local schoolteachers, whose mind had firmly lost contact with sound reason after Vitya Andrukhov, for whom Katria had waited two years to leave the army, was brought to Myshyn in a galvanized-iron coffin from Kabul on his twentieth birthday.

On that day, frozen with horror, Katria pronounced herself a widow, and yet wore only white, almost wedding-like attire. Both in winter and in summer. Except perhaps that, she did not wear a veil.

And from that time the old maid, whose plait reached down to her ankles, over a number of years came to Marica's house almost every day, asking her to bring Chrystofor out into the orchard for ten minutes, for he looked so much like her Vitya.

Katria would sit down on the grass or the leaves on the street side of the fence – and could have looked at Chrystofor for hours on end through the steel mesh that surrounded Marica's orchard.

Marica sat her son in a special wheelchair, put some soft toys in front of him – and silently bent double over her vegetable patch or

the endless washing, though never taking her eyes off the two tragic figures on either side of the fence – her son and Katria.

Katria looked at Chrystofor and for some reason always hummed some melody, which only she herself understood.

Chrystofor, injected with sedatives and soporific herbs, feebly and occasionally waved his thin hand at her. And then he would take his teddy bear, hug it tightly to his chest and stroke its head, the way he sometimes stroked Marica's head when she was putting him to sleep. Her son's lips would spread in a misty smile and then he would stretch his hands toward the fence, as if he was trying to pull the singing Katria in through the mesh.

...This went on until one day Katria's parents came to Marica and summoned her outside to the well. They both spoke in hoarse whispers, interrupting each other – the mother and the father of the old maid. Marica barely understood their confused babbling. But when she did – she smiled and started crying at the same time.

Katria's parents thanked Marica and asked that she allow their daughter into her yard.

They assured her that Katria would not harm Chrystofor.

Nor would she steal anything from her yard.

And if she were to be healed completely with Chrystofor's help, they would be indebted to her.

Because, you see, Marica, ever since Katria has been coming to see Chrystofor her sound reason has been returning.

And they so wanted her to get an education.

To get married.

And bear them grandchildren...

Marica said nothing – she only acted: she covered the wooden bench next to Chrystofor's wheelchair with a bright, Moldavian runner (her mother's), which was covered in red and green roses; and she opened the window from the house. And so they all sat for half the day:

Chrystofor pressing the twisted head of his teddy bear or felt dog tightly against his sunken chest;

Katria with her eyes peeled to Chrystofor;
And mother Marica bent over her old *Singer* next to the open window facing the orchard.

Every now and then her prematurely grey head would pop up, like the head of a mechanical instrument, which reacted to the slightest sound in the orchard, where one adult child played, and the other adult child watched that incomprehensible playing with an enchanted gaze.

When it became cold, Marica told Katria's parents she could no longer let the children suffer outside in the freezing cold. Therefore, she asked permission to allow Katria to come inside.

Now Marica spread out the warm blanket on the floor – and again the two big children continued their monotonous work day after day:

Chrystofor tore off and then refitted the heads of his felt and rag animals,

while Katria silently blew away the non-existent dust off them and stroked their torn sides.

Katria said something under her breath.

Chrystofor breathed heavily or howled quietly.

Only Marica turned her head away from the sewing machine every now and then, watching this idyllic scene of two children passed over by fate from the next room.

6

...**ONE MORNING KATRIA** did not enter the Rybachuk's yard, but only beckoned to Marica from the front gate.

She looked at her with her wide-open hazel eyes, which seemed to stretch halfway across her face, and held back tears of insult (or maybe fear) and Marica felt her legs begin to give way beneath her.

Katria had not yet uttered a word, but Marica could feel with her skin that a new misfortune was afoot. She wanted to postpone this

moment of upheaval, but could do no more than Katria by the arm and drag her into the depths of the orchard.

The girl resisted, following her unwillingly, but Marica stroked Katria's hot fingers with her numb palms, as if asking her to remain quiet.

But Katria, drawing in a deep breath, suddenly tugged at Marica's hand and stopped in the shade of a large walnut tree, and spoke softly, but quite lucidly.

As if she had never been bereft of sound reasoning and clear thought:

"I've come to tell you that I won't be coming here anymore. I'm still a virgin, auntie... But he tried to force me. Do you understand? Moreover, I'm a widow, auntie Marica! A widow! I can't break my vow. Have you broken your vow? You haven't, have you! So why haven't you taught him to leave widows alone?!"

...It seemed to Marica that she had died the moment that the gate creaked shut behind Katria. She merely buried her fingers in her grey hair – and then stood there for a long time with a tuft of hair ripped out with the roots in her hands.

And through the open window, like exploding cannon shells, came Chrystofor's animal-like cries, for he was tied to his bed. Angered or wounded by Katria's departed voice

...He frenziedly attacked his mother's bosom,
scratched her face,
punched her shoulders,
but she didn't defend herself or try to avoid his blows,
she merely tried to calm him as she had done up until now –
holding him to her breast and stroking his head.

However, Chrystofor didn't hear her now, nor did he understand her.

He sensed only the call of his carnal desires and sought an outlet. He bellowed and thrashed about so much she was forced to call an ambulance.

“Marica, place him into a boarding-school for the handicapped...” the old doctor-psychiatrist said in a calm and kind voice, as he looked at Chrystofor’s even breathing, after having given him a double dose of all the possible medications which one gave in such situations, while at the same time filling out his paperwork. “You won’t be able to handle him. He is twenty years old. Hormonally, he is fully matured. And this can’t be managed for any length of time by even the most powerful medications.”

“But they will kill him there by over-medication...” replied Marica, almost indifferent now as she wiped her son’s wet scratched face with a handkerchief. “How can I sign him in there?! It’s my own fault that I fed him so much when he was in my belly. They told me to move about, but I just lay in bed and stared at the ceiling... because of my misfortune...”

“What are you talking about, woman...” the old doctor corrected her softly. “He suffered a trauma at birth.”

“But Chrystofor would curse me from the other world, if I did that! Only maybe after my death... will they take him there, because who else will look after him when I’m not around...”

“Oh, Marica... Just stop and think how old you are! You could still have children. It’s not your fault that he was born like this.”

“He was born healthy!” interrupted the woman. “The midwives made him like this, because they were in a hurry to celebrate Midwives’ Day. I can’t give him up! Would you give your child up? Would you?”

“I don’t know,” the grey-haired doctor said after a lengthy silence, lifting his head from his papers. “I don’t know... I have three children.”

“But they are all healthy!”

“That’s why I said that I don’t know...”

SHE TRIED TO DEADEN her son's carnal desires with herbs.

And medicine.

Spells.

Incantations.

Marica was afraid to summon the doctors too often: at a recent medical commission they had warned her that they would have to take him to a boarding school for the handicapped, if his psychosis got worse.

Then Marica turned to God.

And although God was considered something of a dissident at the time, Marica secretly recruited priests from neighbouring villages – and they blessed the house in the evenings, some quietly, some aloud; they read prayers over sleepy Chrystofor. And afterwards – silently, with downcast eyes, they put Marica's meagre donation into the wide pockets of their cassocks and, just as quietly left the house, blessing both mother and son a final time from the doorstep, though the child remained beyond God's help and grace.

Then one day Katria the widow came unexpectedly, bringing doughnuts filled with plum jam.

She even went into Chrystofor's room.

At first he looked at her incomprehensibly for a long time, then finally smiled and came toward her, arms outstretched. As if wanting to embrace her.

Katria raced out of the house screaming, leaving behind one sandal in the corridor.

For a long time after that Marica kissed her on the head and gave him cold water laced with a handful of tablets to drink.

After that, some kind people advised her to hire Odarka from a neighbouring village for Chrystofor... Well, you know, Marica... there's this good woman, who visits anyone who wants it or needs it... you must have heard... who hasn't heard of the Afghan

veteran who was brought home without any legs and she services him as a wife... and everyone's satisfied... the boy's parents are happy... and so is he... and her too... maybe she can visit Chrystofor... if not for free, then maybe for money... he's a gift from God... what can you do... that's his nature... and her's as well... try it, Marica...

Odarka visited Chrystofor once a week. On Saturday evening. Without saying a word she would take off her battered raincoat in the corridor and with the words: "I won't need you, Marica," would enter Chrystofor's room.

Chrystofor always met her in the same way: first – with a bellow resembling the call of a young male deer and then he would whimper like a young puppy.

Marica would cross herself, listen for a moment to the sounds emanating from behind the closed door, turned off all the lights in the house and went into the next street – to the deserted kindergarten, where she had once long ago worked as a teacher and where she was now remembered perhaps only by the aged orchard and the peeling walls of the old buildings.

She would sit on the swing, close her eyes for a moment – and pretend that she was swinging. And then she would stare at the blackened windows of her apartment – trying to stop the centrifuge, which had suddenly picked up her body, which had regressed to childhood, and took her somewhere beyond here and now. Maybe the world really was swaying beneath her and it only appeared to her that she was flying through the air on the children's swing... or the world was a centrifuge... but no, the ground really was moving, everything was swaying and swimming before her eyes if she kept her gaze fixed on the windows behind which Chrystofor was with Odarka.

Then she listened to her heart speaking inside her.

Quickly-quickly, as if she were running a marathon.

Then suddenly it was silent – and Marica clutched at her chest, afraid her heart would forever lose its ability to speak.

And she could not afford to be without a heart!

Opening her mouth wide, Marica breathed in the day's stuffy air, which was just as exhauster as she was, so as to quicken the pace of her equally tired heart.

At some moment she was overcome with a fear of death. It came from nowhere, suddenly, like the silhouette of a traveller that suddenly appeared on a deserted path. Moreover, you are not sure whether this unexpected apparition is approaching to rob you or become a true companion.

Marica could not explain how she had attracted that fear, or where it nested inside her. But the fear was like a living being, it was everywhere in her. It swelled like rising dough. And spread into every cell like a cancer. It did not hurt, she did not suffer – it only grew, each time letting its presence be felt through the quickened beating of her heart. In the most unexpected of moments.

Marica first felt its presence when the prospect arose of Chrystofor being taken away to the boarding-school for the handicapped.

She hadn't experienced this fear after her husband's death or after finding out about Chrystofor's disability.

She never sinned, even in her mind, about an untimely death or ending her own life.

She suffered badly.

But she had never thought about death.

And here, all of a sudden...

A boarding school for Chrystofor meant death for Marica.

This clear and logical thought at first frightened Marica. But with time, she realized that the fear had nothing to do with her own death. This fear, this cold paralysis of her thoughts and feelings, was associated only with her son. More exactly, associated with the possibility of her losing him.

At times, she spent hours gazing at the sleeping Chrystofor – at his disfigured head and the constant spittle trickling from his

mouth, at his white body bloated from all the medication, which was exposed to the sun in only small doses; at his thin legs, which were like the stalks of a dandelion, covered with thick black hairs – and rivers of unspeakable pity and sharp pain flooded her completely, to the last fiber of her soul.

The longer it lasted, the more she felt she loved him, even more than she had once loved her parents and then her husband... she loved Chrystofor more than her former girlhood freedom and carefree existence, and her far-off fatherland blanketed in a golden halo.

When she recalled her first feelings after the birth, she became very angry with herself; maybe she had sinned in her thoughts and maybe for this she had been subsequently punished – for that disgust toward the newly-born child that had lasted a few days. But later she listened to other young mothers and realized that they all travelled this route – the route of short-lived, silent and inexplicable rejection of their own children, the absence of instantaneous love toward them.

Marica's thoughts turned more often to those days when she had experienced a growing anguish and an emerging fear as she gazed at the bluish face of her son, as if she was gazing into the face of her husband, Chrystofor... which was when she understood that her child, in reality, was herself...

And now it sometimes seemed to her that she had lost her mind.

When her son's age surpassed that of his father, Marica's thoughts sometimes became confused: which of the two Chrystofors was in fact sitting in front of her?! Their similarity frightened and paralysed her at the same time.

Here he was, the younger one (no, merciful God, he was already older!), hugging the felt teddy bear with its torn-off head to his chest in exactly the same way that Chrystofor senior (though in fact he had remained younger!) had hugged Marica to his chest... he did everything the same way that his father had once done... wiped his lips after eating with only with his forefinger... tugged at his

jet-black hair with his right hand the same way... slept with his head covered. That meant he was not handicapped. He was intelligent. Like his father. He had only been injured.

Chrystofor senior might have been like this, had he survived that accident.

Then she would have been caring for the two of them.

For her heart was divided into these two boundless loves – and sometimes she thought she was just as traumatised as her poor child and her dead husband.

Her longing after her husband did not diminish with the years, in fact it became stronger. Just as the horror of death kept growing, spreading into every cell of her body like some untreated infection.

In the first years after Chrystofor's death, strange as it may seem, his death had taken second place – all of Marica's attention was focused on her poor child. However, with time... once she had become accustomed to her son's disability, she returned more and more often in her thoughts to the first unbelievably happy years of her marriage... she could talk silently for hours on end, especially during the night, with her dead husband, as if she was talking to a living person. She shared her thoughts, sought advice, argued, expressed her dissatisfaction, wept, laughed – as if he really was by her side and could stop her at any moment, contradict her or pacify her.

But when she remembered this, she waved her hands in front of her face, as if she was shooing away flies, fending off dangerous thoughts. Then she would feel her head, her chest... everything... was fine... she only let her anguish get the better of her for a few minutes. She just lost control... because there was no one to lean on... even fences had to be propped up from time to time. And she was not made of wood... and if you thought about it – she had no

one to fall onto... but that was enough... enough of that... she would drink her *corvalol*²³ in a minute... and her vitamins.

She had to stay healthy. She could not afford to catch cold, fall into a depression, or think about her husband.

She could only be healthy and level-headed.

Oh, she had to be like stone, like granite... Like that idiot with the cap (forgive me, Lord!) who loomed in the twilight in the town square, his hand outstretched, as if he was asking for alms²⁴... Marica didn't rely on alms from anyone, she relied only on her own means... after many years of staring intently at that statue, Marica caught her self thinking that whoever had made the statue must have had a physical disability, for hadn't he compared the length of the granite arm to the rest of the body? Because if he had, he would have noticed that the fingers of the outstretched arm would have reached down below the calves of the body... how was that possible... but how many strange and stupid things there were about... did anyone notice anything so trifling as the length of an arm on a statue?!

Marica leaned her head against the swing and her dry eyes scanned the evening sky. How beautiful the world was at that moment!

The unreachable and untroubled stars sparkled innocently overhead – but none of them could comfort Marica's indifferent gaze.

Nor her soul.

Nor her body.

The full moon bobbed about amid the small sparse clouds – but its little game had no charm for her, no purpose.

²³ *Corvalol* is a barbiturate-based heart medication and a mild tranquilizer popular in Eastern Europe.

²⁴ She is referring to a statue of Lenin.

Marica's tired gaze moved across the endless Milky Way – but she only saw rather than sensed, she understood rather than enjoyed.

She had no pleasures.

She only had sick little Chrystofor.

At times it seemed to her that her son understood her and pitied her. Because he would sometimes sit pressed against the doorjamb for hours, while she sewed simple dresses and skirts with her *Singer* sewing machine.

If he didn't understand that she was doing this for him, would he sit so patiently for so long?

Without taking any tablets.

Without injections.

Without Odarka.

Oohhh... she tried not to go mad from these thoughts, that couldn't be shared with anyone; sometimes late at night, when Chrystofor had been pacified with sleeping pills and the neighbors were snoring on the other side of the wall, Marica would turn off the overhead light, switch on the outdated *Sirius* record-player and put on the scratchy records with music from her sunny Moldova.

Then she could close her eyes for a long time and listen endlessly to the sorrowful melodies of her dear *naj* or *fluier*.

The melodies brought goose bumps to her skin and fire filled her veins... so that she could lament as if for a departed relative, or just gently sob as if after a sweet parting... or she could simply rest her hands on her hips, not even get up from the table, and imagine the wild dances of her compatriots.

The sadder her everyday life became, the more she wanted to hear the joyous, frenzied music... the one that carries you like floodwater, dark in its depths and unsafe, dangerous... that neither heart nor legs can keep up with... maddening, like a dry brush fire... like thirsty, delirious lips.

Then Marica swayed in her seat, as if she were drunk, to the beat of the melody – and then wept quietly for a long time...

because before her eyes she saw the yellow-green waving stalks of young sunflowers...

and big fat red *gogosharu* peppers and capsicums rang out...

endless vineyards filled with intoxicating juices that would soon be frothing as young wines...

her young mother, with a white kerchief and a checkered apron, took out a hot bread from the oven...

and her young and healthy father in a green hat and goatskin boots, placidly cracking his whip in the middle of the yard and calling to her: '*Moj, fetico, moj...* Oh, girlie, oh...'

And Marica, agitated and flushing, pressing a photo of a clean-shaven young soldier to her breast; he seemed to be smiling at the world and to his one-and-only Marica – and she didn't have the courage to come up to her father to show him her first puppy love, which engulfed her in a mist of intoxication...

now she stood in her father's yard, inebriated, as if she had just left a wine cellar...

Marica listened to the mournful cry of the violin coming from under the needle of the old record player and she felt that someone was tearing out her veins...

in olden times in her homeland, this must have been how the *hajduks*²⁵ had tortured their foes...

or how the local brigands had meted out punishments to the sons of their landlords...

and this music would probably one day punish her...

because no beating heart could withstand such virtuoso torture by such a delicate violin bow of anguish and pain...

for Marica had nothing but distant memories since the death of her beloved Chrystofor Columbus.

²⁵ **Hajduk** (or **haiduk**, **haiduc**) is a term commonly referring to outlaws, highwaymen or freedom fighters in the Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe. In reality, the *hajduci* of the 17th – 19th centuries were as much guerrilla fighters as they were bandits.

After that she had never once been back to her joyful and bright Frunza Verde...

hadn't even seen her parents' bodies after they had died...

her poor child had not let her attend the funeral of either her father or her mother.

And she was not made of stone. She sensed her guilt.

Because at times her mother spoke to her in her sleep. Tried to placate her.

While her father cracked his whip before her eyes – but did not strike her back. He was angry, for sure. Because when has it ever come to pass that a child has not farewelled her parents on their final journey?!

Maybe they are angry at her.

Or maybe they have forgiven her: they must know how hard it is for their Marica.

...Marica swayed about in the evening shadows in the children's playground, waiting until Odarka turned the light on in her house.

And her thoughts skipped from joy to sadness.

Or she heard music.

Then funeral wailing.

Her son's bellowing.

A puppy's whimpering.

With both hands Marica squeezed her feverish head.

Closed her eyes.

Clenched her teeth.

No, it was better to relax.

Like this, as if taking your clothes off before bed.

She wanted at least once to dive into herself. To touch every cell... not with her hands, but with her feelings. She never really has her own time. She was never really alone. She never had time. She was always hastily washing or dressing.

She lived furtively, as if she was running somewhere, chasing something.

But she loved her child so much, as if it was her last breath. As if she had never breathed in the fresh air after a downpour or the sharpness of the wind.

She had yet to sense the freshness of life, and yet it was too late now.

There was only a shadow of her old self left now, someone who knew what she 'ought to do' and 'had to do'.

Marica wanted to silence those concurrent voices and sounds. Sometimes she even stamped her feet...as if wanting to trample into the ground her despair and helplessness.

Suddenly there was a crunch under her foot... My God, where did this May beetle come from? His ironclad wings crunched loudly, like the crunch of breaking human bones.

Marica hopped off the swing. She felt she was a merciless executioner... as if she had crushed some living soul to death.

She was ready to scream into the night – but at that moment the window of her nearby apartment exploded in bright light.

And Marica hurried through the children's sandpits. As if racing to extinguish a fire.

...She always came back to an empty apartment, full of mixed smells – Odarka's perfume and the dispersed scents of hot human bodies.

She would look at her relaxed son, whose chest rose and fell in a sweet sleep – and only then the tension left her. 'Lord... how good and kind You are: for You have given my poor child peace. And a little bit of peace to me as well.'

At such times Marica didn't think what would happen in the future once Odarka decided not to come anymore or, heaven forbid, she were to die. That could not happen: Marica couldn't bear for something like that to happen.

However, she also knew that there was a limit to God's testing of people. Because even He was not thick-skinned. He held the cup of misfortune up to everyone, dividing up one large, all-embracing

misfortune like a loaf of bread – a little for each person and for everyone: so that no one was left offended or jealous.

Therefore, God had decided to give Marica a rest, sending Chrystofor Odarka, who would never die – of that, Marica was certain.

8

...ODARKA DID NOT DIE, nor did anything else happen to her.

One summer's day the legless Afghan war veteran simply killed her out of jealousy and then killed himself, without even leaving a note behind for the crime investigation team.

Not that there was any investigation to speak of. The two deaths were attributed to the inadequacies and psychological instability of the former soldier-hero – and that was that.

No one was interested in questioning the outcome of the investigation or arriving at the truth. Not that there was any need for this: the situation was quite evident and understandable, no investigation would have been warranted, except for the just laws of the day.

Odarka and the Afghan war veteran were buried in the same grave.

...And meanwhile a truly endless dark night had begun for Marica, blackened by misfortune.

For the first time in all these years she took to her bed, so that the neighbours were forced to look after her.

Not that Marica was sick: she was not in pain and there was nothing visibly wrong with her. She just lay there, not closing her eyes during the day or night, and stared unblinkingly at the ceiling.

She did not undress.

She did not eat or drink.

And she didn't react to anyone's presence until the old doctor, who was looking after Chrystofor more and more, forced some

water laced with vitamins into her. Finally he threatened to call out a commission and the militia.

Marica did not react to either the threat of the militia or the medical commission. Apart from closing her tired eyes.

Whether she was asleep or whether she was simply distancing herself from people's voices, the doctor was unable to tell. So he took a large spoon and, with a deep sigh, silently fed her some thin gruel and vitamins with *corvalol*.

For a couple of days an unusually quiet Chrystofor, with frightened eyes, looked from his room at his almost motionless mother – but on the third day, sighing deeply, he moved across the corridor into his mother's room and sat down quietly on the floor next to his mother's couch.

But his silence did not last very long. At first, he just lowered his closely-cropped head onto his mother's shoulder, then he banged his head against the bedding, and then the room was filled with the howls of a little puppy...

Or maybe it wasn't even a puppy...

maybe it was the squeak of a half-frozen or trapped baby mouse...

or a strong wind was blowing a traveller off his feet – and he was asking to come indoors to warm himself.

Chrystofor put his large palm onto his mother's hand, which lay stretched unnaturally alongside her body, and large round tears, like wild sour plums, ran down both sides of his face, disfigured by weeping and avitaminosis.

That inhuman whining was enough to make a rock talk.

However, Marica's body, having long ago been transformed into stone, did not have a living soul within, or a caring heart...

Though maybe not...

her shrivelled soul beat behind the bars of her chest; her heart spoke unclearly, in some foreign language, which doctors called arrhythmia...

but for all that, she seemed to be truly dead.

The fear of death, which had suddenly sprung to life inside her, bound her up so much that even Chrystofor's desperate, inhuman cries, which now creepily shook the walls of the house, did not move her at all...

why wouldn't she react to him, if she were alive...?

She seemed to be listening to her son's howls – but the howling of another voice which emerged from under her hair, from inside her very brain, took away the power to show even a small sign that she could hear the voice of her unhappy child.

“Get up, Marica...” said the old doctor, shifting the bottles of medicine about on the table and not looking into her eyes. “No one, apart from you, can save him. This is your cross to bear. And you cannot hand it to anyone else,” and he injected Chrystofor above the elbow.

And Chrystofor no longer bellowed or whimpered – he only noiselessly wept tears onto Marica's hand, noisily sniffing, without even getting up off the floor.

9

...**THE RESIDENTS OF MYSHYN** started crossing the street rather than greet Marica when radio OGS (One Granny Said) announced the latest news in that town lost between heaven and Earth.

It announced that after they had buried poor Odarka, this shameless Moldavian Marica had started to live with her son as husband and wife, showing no shame and no conscience... Lord save our children and even our enemies from the likes of this.

This latest news had become the talk of the half-sleepy town after a strange change had come over Chrystofor, which was noticed by those sensitive to such things:

he no longer went on rampages,
stopped hitting his head against the door,

no longer punched his mother –
only followed her around meekly, as if tethered to her.

Up until that time Marica had never ventured out in public with her son, but now they wandered down the street holding hands... except that every now and then Marica would pop a lolly or a pill into Chrystofor's mouth. God only knows... and then she'd stop to talk to some woman who wasn't afraid to talk to her.

Meanwhile Chrystofor never took his eyes off his mother and didn't let go of her hand, every now and again tugging at her blouse with his free hand.

...*WHEN SNATCHES OF THIS* sleazy gossip reached poor Marica's ears, she was standing in the middle of the river with her skirt hitched up, washing her bed linen, striking it with a battledore.

And, when the ball lightning of the carelessly spoken words struck deep into her heavy heart, suddenly shrivelled and shrunken, Marica knew that she would never leave the water alive, would never reach the bank.

Up until that moment, the shallow and not too clamorous Myshyn River, which from time immemorial had cut the little town in two, quietly and unhurriedly continued to flow, as if through every cell of Marica's body... or was it only washing her feet... or washing away her black days and nights, not entering into what was really happening to her, just as the water took no interest in the daily torments of any other local person.

Because everyone on this Earth had their own troubles and equally their own joys. But not everyone was aware of this.

Even when they were keen to know.

Besides, do other people's troubles really stop people from sleeping?

Are people really so eager to know about the misfortunes of others?

But some people's excessive worry about *another person's pain* can at times seem sharper, than a knife thrust into their chest...

And this evil knife did not pass Marica by, as she stood bent over in the water.

For at that moment when her tired white hand holding the battledore was poised over the white bed sheet, someone's sharpened and unerring knife ripped open her chest, still black and blue from Chrystofor's nightly beatings...

or maybe it was just a sudden summer lightning bolt that had cut down her fragile body...

or maybe, in defiance of everything, she had wanted, for the first time in her life, to wander along these rumbling stones and muddied waters to finally reach her once joyous Moldavian town with a name, that begged to be in a dance or song – Frunza Verde...

but at that same moment, when that biting word, like a lively weasel, at first seemed to silently sail around Marica and then loudly struck someone's black palate; the overworked battledore, worn down by time, fell from Marica's suddenly withered hand into the river, as if she had been cut down by a stray bullet, but first having been painfully struck on the leg –

and then Marica followed the battledore into the water, face first; she was as white as the bed sheet in her hands...

she seemed to be rushing to grab the battledore...

or was hurrying to rescue herself.

She seemed to want to briefly wave to someone, hinting at a final farewell...

or a secret sign about a soon-to-be-held meeting...

but a terror, a deathly terror, which had been nesting insidiously in her small female body for many years, now emerged from her every orifice like an enormous tapeworm...

no, it slithered out of her like a giant octopus, entwining the suddenly heavy woman with its countless tentacles and heads.

A black or perhaps a grey horror suddenly and mercilessly gripped Marica's lips and throat and heartlessly stopped her from breathing – so that from the pressure and resistance the weakened

alveoli of her lungs exploded like mines and the bloodless capillaries of her eyes burst.

And Marica floated off, bound in that horror, in the glistening smooth muddied Myshyn waters, like a thin bow that flows over the body of an old violin, assiduously extracting from it muffled or once-dead sounds.

However, the suddenly blackened water could not extract any sounds at all from the spreadeagled Marica, who seemed to be crucified on a watery cross – for all the living sounds, inherent and accessible to human beings, had dissolved in the burst heart of the poor woman. In that same heart which had stopped beating just at the moment that the deadly knife blade had entered her chest, driven in all the way to the handle of inhuman callousness...

Oh!

Is it anyone's fault that not all people in this world are familiar with the simplest – charitable – words and notions, which can at times be equally light as feathers and heavy as clods of clay?! At the same time redeeming and deadly?!

Is it anyone's fault that not all people in this world are as quick to guess that sometimes select words move among people like real barbarians, showing no pity or mercy? Just as ill-mannered people in boots trample flower beds or march with weapons among red deer in spring. How many words in this world still have their steel knuckles, silk nooses and sweet poisons! Their bloodstained blades and traumatizing crutches.

They are exactly like heartless people.

Sometimes it seems to people (quite wrongly!) that the most important words in their life are 'bread' and 'lots of bread'. For in haste or in poverty, in bitterness or in hatred, few people know what really sustains a person in life... and what effect an unwise word can have – much like a hammer striking porcelain.

Do people ever stop and wonder that there are taboos and truths in this world, which few people need? So that they need not say – no one needs them.

And that in this world there is a higher truth, which is needed by the majority of happy and unfortunate people.

But for some reason no one fights for this truth with such foolish courage and bravery, as they do for truths, which no one is in need of...

Oh, those who sharpen the knife of some supposedly higher justice of theirs against others, they don't realise that all surgeon-butchers only help people before their death.

Maybe this happens because the blacksmiths who forged these knives are in their essence childless; even if they in fact have a whole crowd of insatiable mouths to feed... these universally righteous people have probably never known what maternal desperation is or what maternal love is in hopeless situations.

But we never ask others about their love... we only quiz them about their money – at times with malevolent smugness and at times with smug malevolence... even when we ask them about other things, we are really asking them about money...

however, never about love, nor about the caverns of the heart in which, as in honeycombs, the sweetness and bitterness of everyday existence accumulates like honey.

...Maybe Marica would have used such words to voice her farewells to people and the world, crucified as she was by black human palates.

But she was deprived of even such a farewell – because her white body now struck the sharp-edged rocks lurking under the river's surface. And nothing could have opened her blue lips anymore, just as nothing can change the nature of bad people, except for personal misfortune and despair.

And following behind her, instead of her relatives, were the darkened sheets of her washed bed linen, churning in the black waters. A moment earlier the cloth had been white and whole, but now it was shredded by sharp stony teeth, and it writhed like eels and snakes in the thick, muddy, suddenly agitated silt – as if

attempting to overtake the uninvited traveller. Or perhaps they just wanted to bind the woman's bleeding wounds, so they would hurt less.

That was why the linen sheets flapped so frighteningly and so pitifully over the voluntarily drowned Marica, like the thrashing billowing wings of sailing ships – as if calling for help at the tops of their voices. Or have they merely capitulated before the merciless cruel world and its cruel people who, in the blink of an eye, without a second thought or any pangs of conscience, are willing to tear apart an innocent heart, sending it from the murkiness of everyday life into the murkiness of the frightened waters.

Although...maybe that heart had already been torn apart for a long time, except that no one had realised it, until it had been covered by the black and fierce waters, as if sewn up.

But Marica will never manage to tell anyone about anything, for her lips were sealed by sand and fish scales...

she won't manage to utter a curse, or to forgive...

nor even to give thanks for being freed from the oppressive yoke of excessively heavy load...

for she is being borne along by the kind – kinder than people – waters of a foreign land, accompanied by the native music of a delirious violin, whose strings keep snapping one after another, as if the violin's heart itself is snapping, exhausted by the daily chore of making music...

from time to time the music is interrupted by the frenzied thunder of the river's rocks...

all the same... even this murky water is sweeter than ruinous human voices...

...this is the music of her life-saving Frunza Verde. The music isn't calling people to dance now – but to lament, and these lamentations overtake the unbreathing Marica, even in the depths of the all-pervasive water...

But it is all the same for the woman now: let them lament... either the people or the violin... neither lull her... she is being lulled home now by the water...

...her long unseen fatherland will appear any moment now beyond the next sharp-bladed boulder – and it will never again release her from its tight embrace.

...Except perhaps for a moment... to be with the two Chrystofor Columbuses.

...To one of them she was a mother...

And to both a...

...‘Wif-e-e-e!!!!’ Chrystofor’s lifeless hand grabs at the remnants of her soul in the muddy silt.

While the other finishes her off: ‘Moth-e-e-r-r-r!!!!’

...After that there is nothing, except for the continuation of the drama...

5 November 2007 – 24 July 2008
Kyiv – Truskavets (‘Karpaty’ Sanatorium)



There are no bounds to a woman's
inventiveness in times of mortal danger.
There is no fear, which would rob a
woman of the will to survive.
There is no person able to understand a
woman who has cherished a secret her
entire life...
Any woman on this Earth could have
created this gallery of truths.