

The one the fog brought in

(Excerpt in English)

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3.

When he finally reached the slope, which gently climbed into the courtyard of a lonely homestead, it had already grown completely dark. He could only make out the dark, hunched backside of the thatched roof against which the outbuilding leaned. That which had been shining on him all along was right in the interior of the courtyard. A kerosene lamp hung from the ceiling in some kind of open barn or workshop. So it seemed that the family had not called it a day yet despite the dimness. Otherwise, he could only guess whether they had moved near the livestock or were being held upright by something else. For even once he stepped into the light, and again stood uncertainly under the lamp for a few moments; there was no one here to be found. So he looked around, eavesdropped, and waited. The room in which the light was burning was most likely a smithy. The sooty throat of the fireplace gleamed in its depths, and black tools were strewn about and hung on the shelves by the anvil. He wondered if this might not be the blacksmith workshop he had been told about — and he wanted to know that as soon as possible. But here, as if it were cursed, there was still no one in the courtyard, nor was there movement behind the walls. He stamped his feet to shake the mud off his soaked shoes. Since it clung to them, he tried wiping them in the grass. Eventually he gave up and just like that, muddy and barefoot, he stepped under the eaves to the only door. He knocked — and then knocked again, harder. As no one had answered yet, he reached for the big door handle, completely impatient. The door was locked.

He closed his eyes and collapsed with his back to the wall.

It was all too crazy, really! — he could no longer wonder, nor did he want to.

On the pole, under the thatched roof above it, hung torn horseshoes. They were many different sizes — from the size of a man's palm to really huge — and some were worn down to the core. A plow was leaning against the buttress, right next to him. Its long teeth were bald and glistening like evil spearheads. A wire run lay above the courtyard from the entrance to the smithy. A heavy dog chain hung limp on it. The dog, which had incredibly broken away because there was no hook or collar at the end of the chain, was fortunately nowhere in sight. But could it also mean that the homestead was really abandoned!? He was nevertheless doomed to wait. He did not dare to think of stepping back into the night and into the unknown now. But he also couldn't break in just like that, not knowing at whose place he had found himself. Besides: as much as he wanted shelter and warmth, he was also very afraid of this deaf and dumb interior. And here was again: that strange, hitherto unknown fear which he had already tackled in the field. Fear, arising from the feeling that someone is watching him, takes pleasure in his confusion and lures him farther and farther into secrecy and self destruction. There was the anxiety that any time now he would no longer be able to resist, that this horror would overwhelm him and completely deceive him. But then, of course — could he even go back to the heathers, where the suitcase was hidden, and would he ever get to Mokuš at all? This is exactly what he wanted most now. He wanted it more than ever. Because it was in these anxious moments that he slowly realized that he could no longer do it alone, and above all, not without God's mercy. If a few days ago he did not fully believe Father Boniface that Mokuš could be his only penance, now he increasingly trusted the notion that Mokuš really was his destiny. So he needed to try

and persevere. He needed to at least try. So, without a doubt, he had no choice but to glance up again despite all the unpleasantness and strangeness. But when he lifted his head up again, looking for new strength in this realization, it seemed to him that something was moving there in the dark...

Yes!

He stood up and strained his eyes.

It was still there. And it came toward him across the yard.

And it spoke.

Moouoo! it wailed.

Come on – Jon Urski squeaked - *a cow!?*

And it really was a cow. Next to it, a thin, hunchbacked old man stepped into the light falling from the smithy across the courtyard. The lead was wrapped around his palm, leaving in his grip the better part of the thick rope, with which he whipped the animal on the neck just now. But otherwise he was completely irate, as if he'd honestly just tussled with the cow in the dark. The animal, on the other hand, looked utterly lazy and devoted. It didn't even flinch at the blows, let alone move faster. It only turned its head now and then, as if it was holding itself upright with the last of its strength. And then its big eyes seemed to get even bigger. Jon Urski thought these were the saddest eyes he had ever seen. Although sadness was not the only term that could be used to describe them. It seemed to him that the cow would cry any moment now... The old man, however, struck her with his fist, even more ruthlessly this time, so that she moved toward the wall, and he tied her to the pillar on a short leash in front of the smithy.

Jon Urski coughed and stepped forward beneath the overhang.

The old man, who must have noticed him now, didn't even turn his head.

I was already amazed that there was no one anywhere, he tried to explain his embarrassment while also apologizing.

The man hadn't even looked at him yet. He rubbed his palm he had until now used to stretch and brandish the lead. You could hear his knuckles cracking. *I'll show you!* he hissed at the cow. *You'll get yours!* so much that he did not whack it again. Then, shuffling across the threshold to clean the muddy soles of his shoes, he stepped into the workshop.

Jon Urski just stood there by the wall, no longer knowing what to do. Did the stranger take so much pleasure in rage that everything else was superfluous to him? Or was he so engrossed in these intentions of his that he was really deaf and blind? In any case – what else could it be – it was as if he was trying to approach him again. *I just followed the light!* he exclaimed. *It was the only beacon to be found!* he shrugged and spread his palms. *Otherwise I surely would have gotten lost.*

The cow isn't yours then? the old man twitched and finally looked at him.

Mine? he was stunned, staring into the old man's tiny, strangely gray eyes.

I thought so! he avoided his gaze. *But how would it not be?* he bent down and began to tidy up the wood around the fireplace. Apparently he intended to light a fire...

So if you thought it could be my animal, Jon Urski reasoned. *Then it's not yours either?* he added fearfully.

Come on, come on! he whipped it again. *It's been bellowing around here since morning!* he angrily slammed a log down. *It crawled right here under the window when it thought I couldn't see it! When I took out the whip, it ran away, coward! Then it bellowed again and fled down there! Just how can a man know up from down after all of this?*

Jon Urski agreed in silence, though he did not understand. The old man was obviously telling him about something that seemed obvious to him. That's why he didn't intend to mince words anymore. He loaded all those thick logs on the fireplace and then chopped the remaining pieces with a carpenter's ax. At the same time, he blabbered on under his breath, sometimes he cursing the cows. Jon Urski, who shuffled beside him like a mutt, was now cold again. He was just

waiting for the runt to finally light the fire. But the rascal was now tidying up the wood around the anvil, and he didn't even give a second thought to Jon's chattering teeth. He also seemed to be in no hurry at all. All of his skillful work, and he was no doubt accustomed to this behavior, and was bit by bit shifting into a kind of ritual scene, the sort that had to be thought through and prepared down to the last detail. Such meticulousness is peculiar to all good craftsmen, the newcomer knew that, but now he could not understand what the man was actually preparing to do. What's more, it seemed to him that he intended to slaughter the old animal in a short while. Nevertheless, after a long hesitation, he asked him about it.

For the first time, the man really straightened his hunched back and blinked straight into his eyes. Astonishment and indulgent ridicule were etched on his old-fashioned, wrinkled face and, wrinkles upon wrinkles, at the same time. *You really washed up at the parish! his otherwise narrow and trembling lips were pursed. And I was even already thinking, maybe you came here to help me.*

I'm telling you, I just got lost, he said hurriedly. *I wanted to ask for directions, but then night caught me...* he tried to save himself from the craftsmanship on offer. *Even now, I would šbe on my way if you could just explain to me how to get to Mokuš!*

To Mokuš? he heard the old man.

Yeah, he nodded.

Straight to Mokuš? he was - it was really obvious - quite surprised.

Yeah, he could only nod again. *I've been looking for a way there all day.*

Now the old man turned away and said nothing for a long time. Then he just came back again and laughed in his face. *But if you really insist on going down there,* he slapped him on the back. *But if it is really true,* he said in an unsteady voice. *Then it is, there, wait for me to honestly shoe her - he pointed at the cow - and then, of course, as far as I'm concerned, you can just ride her! She's going to flutter there anyway! Where else would this old bag go?*

[...]

7.

Father Jon Urski stirred the bottom of the large bowl with a ladle - but it was almost empty. This made him shudder and set down the spoon in one fell swoop as he pushed the plate away. Lanščak the clerk hit a pile of picked goose bones and just smiled. The two prattled on, and they ate as they did. And yet it seemed - it was not enough for them. But the host's sullen wife fortunately did not intend to bring them any more.

And then - well? the priest sighed.

Then, yes! the clerk refrained. *Then came the letter, first. And Magda's news that she was expecting a baby.*

But - !? now Jon Urski guffawed.

Yeah, yeah! he repeatedly moved toward him. *Marika Straj even claimed that there were many letters like these. And that they are not anything - well, they were not anything nice nor were they were at all pleasant.*

The pastor guffawed again and threw up a little in his mouth.

Was he so upset by the man's story, or had he eaten too much goose fat? But anyway, he could feel it now in his stomach as well as in his chest and throat. He felt like ripping himself open at the seams. So he sat down and scratched himself and swallowed into the void. But that only made things worse.

Is something not agreeing with you? the clerk asked, worried.

No, no, he said. *I'm just thinking - he frowned - but what: was she expecting his child?*

Ah! Lanščak now motioned. I told you we'd have more to share with each other! And he shrugged. But who would really know? However - he then scratched at his bald spot – that's not the point at all! Some time later, Marika Straj found a bundle on her doorstep.

Father Jon Urski stood up and grabbed his stomach. It was ugly and unbearable to him, but he had to hear it. *A bundle?* he sighed. *Yeah, but what was this - bundle?* he asked, though he had somehow already guessed.

The baby was in it, of course! the narrator nodded.

Now it squeezed him to the point of numbness. A moaning sensation rising from his stomach shot through his body, and at first he didn't allow himself to move at all. And when he realized then that he really was going to vomit, it was too late. With both hands, he grabbed the empty container from which they had previously eaten, and vomited into it. Then he tensed up and it went on, over and over again. In the face of these relentless cramps, tears came to his eyes and he was completely out of breath, so that he could only see what was going on around him as if he were watching from a dream. Možicelj was jumping and flapping around him, and his wife was standing in the doorway, shouting out loud. Her horror sounded like the chirping of a large, unreal, and unknown bird. And everything about her had changed - she was disheveled and in an evil rage...

I just knew you weren't going to be well, the clerk said somewhere.

But he was better now.

And he didn't care at all.

He sat down on a padded chair and covered his face with his arms crossed. He thought of a thousand things at once and wanted to ask just as many questions. But somehow he didn't have the strength to think it all through yet. The previous story no doubt upset him. And everything else that was going on around him didn't move him any less. After all - after all: didn't the clerk also say that it all started back then? But - what: everything? Was it a sin to love, or to hate? Did she save a life, or a death? Did she invoke the fate of God, or the Devil? Did something completely different happen, and maybe only by chance?

Do you, Mr. Lanščak, believe that? he asked.

What for? he looked at him fully, up close.

For all, he did not look away. *That it really was - that. That there really was a child. And that she blackmailed him with the child...*

You know - even if I don't want to -! whispered the clerk. *The child, however, grew up and is still here today. Now - did the late priest Janoš Talaber really intend to drown him? Was he really saved only by the good heart of the parish girl Marika Straj, who just took him as her own? We'll probably never know. And so we can continue to think about in our own way.*

What -? it overwhelmed him. *What about Magda?* he tried again.

I'm telling you! he came even closer to her. *There are countless stories - and now it's just a matter of which one you'll want to believe. That she is still alive and crying inconsolably somewhere beyond the hills? Or that, like both of her men, she left the world a long time ago? Or that somewhere here, between heaven and earth, she is still wandering and directing her anger at us?*

Father Jon Urski now just looked away and rubbed his eyes.

And which one do you believe? he then asked again.

Me - !? the clerk sighed. *I, of course, believe it really is her. Why else do you think I would cling to you like that and entrench myself into this ill-fated church?*

Wait - !? he grabbed him by the cold palm. *How - her?*

Her, exclaimed the clerk. *The one the fog brought in.*

