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THE BLIND HORSE

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The estates in our neighbourhood were renowned for their fields, forests and cattle. Widely known were the arable land, groves, horses and oxen. Everybody could list the possessions of a high standing estate and what counted as its property in the village.

Less was known about the other, invisible part of someone's fortune. It was the possession in ducats, money in the bank and support from cousins living in America. Only some speculations were put forward with understandable exaggeration, depending on the imagination and cleverness of the narrator.

There was yet another thing that certain estates were recognized and remembered for, a supplement to the fortune one could not apparently do without. It marked distinguishingly the entire household, the way a lonely tree or a gray stone ridge remains as a permanent stamp after which we remember some cliff or a deserted crest of a hill.

For example, there were households with some fool in the family, known to every child in the village and, with time, this harmless coot would become more famous than the household itself with all its fortune. Everyone rushed forward to call his name, greet him or treat him. Also, some distant cousin, a bachelor, with no family of his own, would wander into someone's well-off household from across the world, usually from Lika ¹, and he would cling to the hearth, determined to spend the rest of his days there. One landlord under the forest, a lucky fellow, had a distant uncle at his home since the first war, or was it an uncle by marriage, who had a considerable pension as a former Austro-Hungarian Feldwebel ². The entire household enjoyed salt and tobacco on that account, and the grandpa pensioner received a glass of rakija ³ every morning, spending the whole day in blessed unconsciousness, neither knowing what empire he lived in, nor whose bread he ate. To keep the grandpa longer in life, they treated him specially, as if dusting a tree stump with a feather, afraid that one day he might crumble to dust due to his age.

There was also always some peculiarity in our household. As soon as one was gone, another replaced it overnight. The oldest one I remember from my childhood was an old blind horse.

In the last year of the First World War, our bay horse, which was one of the oldest horses in the neighbourhood, was sent away to the war logistics. That was already a clear sign that the country had fallen to its lowest point.

"Ah, my bay, as long as you pull carts out of the mud, it is no good," sighed grandpa Rade, saying

goodbye to the horse tearfully, as if sending some of his family members off to the front line.

Already in the coming winter, on one dry day full of crisp frost without snow, the bay horse appeared in our yard. He was brought by an armless member of the military supply unit, a peasant from the surrounding hills, who also had a horse name – Zekan.

“We experienced all sorts of trouble on our way, both hungry and thirsty,” tall Zekan was telling us, as if talking about two people. “Nobody wants to let us under their roof, they are afraid that we are some kind of thieves. I sometimes sing in agony, but the bay is silent, he is not of that sort.”

Finally, Zekan confessed one thing more that made the whole household sad: the bay went blind in the war. When it happened – the horseman could not tell. The others had noticed that before him and turned his attention to it.

“Well, what are we going to do now?” exclaimed one of the family members.

Grandpa was staring sadly at the weary horse and finally he concluded grievingly:

“Let him stay, this is his home.”

During those weeks and months, various people were passing down the road next to our house. They were floating in an unknown direction, like the driftwood and shipwrecks of the battleship of Austria. Everybody was looking for a peaceful place to settle down under the gracious Sun, the only one that remained unchanged and owned by everyone.

There was not a single person that went by during the day before the old man’s eyes that Grandpa did not watch him leave all the way to the bend, where the stranger would plunge into the shadow of the thick elderberry trees. Where did he go, sinner, and will he, eventually, find a peaceful shelter and his own foolish Rade ?opi? that will take him in?

And, in such a situation, he would always look at his old horse, martyr, whom the destiny brought to him to make amends and pay back for all the trouble and hardship that the war had poured down to this miserable world. It is everybody’s fault, even old Rade’s, to each one belongs his part of penance, and one must stoically bear and endure that of his own.

“But, people, why do we need this nag, who is going to feed him for free?” uncle Nidžo protested, and Grandpa would only look at him compassionately, like at a juvenile and unreasonable creature, and ask: “What do you mean for free? And who slaughtered and mutilated all this God’s world? One must pay for it.”

“But, who should pay for it? Is it my fault, huh?”

“Both yours and mine, my son. War is a disgrace and sin of every living creature. We were biting and butchering each other like mad dogs.”

“Well, yes, that is also true,” uncle admitted, sinking into sorrowful silence.

In order to find him some work to do as well and put him in the right place within the household, Grandpa was harnessing and loading his bay with sacks of wheat every Sunday, on our day for milling. Slowly, one foot in front of the other, they were ambling along the narrow path across the fields in the direction of the small local mutual mill at the creek. They were advancing, meekly and

peacefully, as if going to some kind of ceremony they might not come back from.

“The old ones left,” Uncle was grumbling after them, with a dim shadow of sorrow and forgiveness for all their redundancy in this cruel world.

Next autumn, when Petrak, the saddler, came as usual to our Slava⁴, St. Kyrijak Otshelnik, he and Grandpa simply got out of control around the blind horse. They were more concerned with him than with, God forgive me, the Saint Kyrijak himself. To make the affair even stranger, they called that member of the military supply unit, Zekan, the saviour of the bay, to come down the hills, and then the three of them left the feast table and the rest of the guests, and moved to the stall, close to the horse. They were drinking and singing there alternately, crying and kissing the bay, until they fell asleep in the hay under the manger. Some of our guests even got offended afterwards.

With all the godfathers, friends and comrades present, old Rade went to celebrate the Slava and drain his glass with the horse. His bay is more important to him than all of us.

Little by little, our blind horse became more popular even wider, away from the village. Seeing a bunch of children in the pasture next to the creek, learning to ride the big, calm horse, a passer-by would immediately recall that it had to be the blind ?opi?’s horse who was brought, rumour had it, even to the Slava, among the guests.

“Old Rade doesn’t want to give him away, otherwise Gypsies would have harmed him long time ago,” one could hear people say, and immediately after that somebody would complain:

“You see, and my own children want to chase me away from my home, that’s the way it is.”

In summer, on one clear St. John’s Eve, our horse went missing from the pasture right under our house. In the beginning, nobody was worried about it, he would be found somewhere in the neighbourhood, it could be that the children had taken him away to play with.

When the midnight had passed, and there was no sign of the bay, Grandpa started fidgeting in his bed and got up at dawn to search for him. Some kind of dreary and austere morning with heavy dew was dawning, so the old man went out barefoot in order not to wet his opanci oputnjaši⁵. He searched through all the hidden curves, groves and thickets around the creek, also under the woods and the grand Lisina Forest, but there was no sign of the horse. He came back before lunch, frail and pallid, and on the same day he fell ill and started to cough.

“There you have your bay,” uncle Nidžo was grumbling, doing his best not to appear before the old man’s eyes.

“Honestly, nobody else but this thief of yours must have sold him to the Gypsies; they were passing by same days ago,” Grandpa’s cousin Sava was recalling, sitting next to the old man’s pillow. “I know Nidžo very well.”

There came the winter, but Grandpa did not leave his bed. Most often there is nobody he can talk with, so he draws me close to him. While the snowstorm blows and I do my homework, the old man is quiet up on his pillows, and he suddenly says turning his face towards the window:

“Baja, is it neigh I hear?”

Now I also move and start to listen. Somewhere close by a bare branch is scratching the roof, some

sparrows can be heard, and in the lowlands, a rhythmic and subliminal hum is travelling down the valley of the small river Japra, announcing an even heavier snowstorm.

“Do you hear it, dear?”

“I do,” I am whispering, imagining some large faceless monster drifting down the valley in a dark robe made of cloud and sadness.

“Ah, such a pity!” Grandpa exclaims and turns his face towards the wall, and I remain even more alone, with the snowstorm that tirelessly buries all on the way.

That same winter, Grandpa quietly waned. I was at school on that day, and when I came back, I found the trampled yard full of people and scattered kindling. Grandpa was lying, long and in ceremonial clothes, in the middle of the big room, and it seemed like he was intently listening to something in silence, under the yellow candle. I was the only one who knew who he was waiting for and who could have woken him up.

Translated by Ana Stanovi? Obradovi? and Mirjana Savi? Obradovi?

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Notes

1. Region in the former Kingdom of Yugoslavia that now belongs to Croatia. ?
2. Non-commissioned officer rank. ?
3. Traditional strong alcoholic drink. ?
4. Saint Patron’s Day. ?
5. Traditional peasant shoes intertwined with knotgrass. ?

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