

Feri Lainšček

**A HERDER OF HENS**

*pp. 1-26*

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The day was as sad as a priest's soul after leaving the confessional. The autumn had mercilessly engulfed the village and permeated it with a feeling of transience. Everything that had been ripening had now become fruit, and everything that was not healthy enough, now had to rot. It had already been raining for seven days and many had stopped looking at the sky in the hope that a sliver of clearness would appear. The water that was trickling from all sides was collecting in rivulets, which had already found a way; it was also becoming dampness that was increasingly forcing its way inside. It was percolating through the walls, seeping into the wood and collecting in people. It brought a chill, the smell of worms and a sense of discomfort that could not be escaped. The longer they had to remain beneath the same roof, the more it got on their nerves for they did not like to be forced together like this. They had already used all the words that they knew for describing the weather and their bad mood, so they preferred to say nothing. They potted around the stables, barns and cellars, waiting for the water from the sky to stop falling and for the earth to breathe again. Even during the day, the village was languishing in a silence that could be heard and that, too, was evidence that things were not alright with them. If someone beat a cow or a farmer's wife kicked a pig, the animal's sounds of distress reverberated far around. Only then might the dogs also make themselves heard; their hackles rose because of the sound of helpless torment that rended the sky and they tugged their chains and yelped into the air. Or perhaps in dog language they were saying something about the suppressed impatience that people were concealing, for it had long been held to be the case that in such circumstances it was necessary only to grit your teeth and somehow take care of yourself.

At the edge of the village, on the humped body of a hill, somewhere at waist height, or perhaps on a buttock, there squatted a small house that seemed the poorest of them all. It was built on a clearing, where the land could no longer be changed into a field, and so the ledge was just firm enough to be suitable for such a simple construction. For the house was made of clay and thatch, and had only three rooms, while on its lower side there was a wooden overhang

with a woodshed, a pigsty and a henhouse. During these days, the ditch into which the manure flowed had changed into a stream, otherwise it seemed that the water avoided this hump. Perhaps because it did not wish to worsen the poverty or because the woman, who was now sitting alone in the kitchen by the window, every now and then asked God to be merciful. Although she did not mention water specifically in her intercessions, the Lord was, at least in her mind, almighty and all-knowing, and so it was certainly clear to him what needed to be thought of and taken care of. And then, whatever he did was alright with her, she was grateful to him even for the small mercies that she felt, without his help, she would not have been granted. And if he overlooked something – and of course over the years such things accumulated – she never reproached him or held it against him. Not because she feared him, but only because it would not be like her.

And God knew that.

As did the people who knew her. For when they wished to describe someone humble, they simply said: “He’s just like Trejzka.”

For that was the woman’s name. She was thirty-nine years old and was pregnant for the second time. Her daughter, who was also called Trejzka, was known in the village as Little Trejzka, and she was already more than eighteen and had left home that year, while her mother was expecting a second child. Why she had not had another one before, she herself did not know how to explain. Nor why this had happened to her now, when the general conviction was that it was too late. Especially as her husband, who was called Pištek and who was a road mender for the municipality, was already forty-four and it would have been more normal if he was becoming a grandfather. But that was their lot, and already during the pregnancy they had to accept that there would be three of them in the house again.

She was thinking about what awaited her in silence, but Pištek, even on the day when she revealed that she was not only putting on weight, but that it was probably something else, had cursed from lunchtime to dinner time. He only fell silent when he ran out of breath due to the extreme excitement, or when he lit another cigarette and had to take a deeper drag, otherwise the curses formed a long chain and changed into a single hellish prayer that simply would not end. He cursed his humble origins and family, in which there was no one who could help him in life, and then he cursed her family members one after the other, who were also worthless to him. He cursed Marshal Tito, his lousy party and its red officials, who only made promises to the people, but who in reality mainly looked after themselves and their own, and then he of course began to shake his fist at the sky and berate the Almighty, who in the end was one way

or another always the biggest culprit for everything bad that had ever happened to him ... But nevertheless, even that day Trejzka noticed something that gave her back her hope and placated her. During his black mass, Pišteek had not once mentioned the child she was carrying in her stomach. So that was something he dared not or even did not wish to curse. And that was surely a good sign ...

On the morning when she felt cramps that were probably contractions, all attempts to resist her fate were already past. She was calm and ready to fight for the child who perhaps even in her stomach had drunk its fill of her bitterness and heard enough of its father's complaining, but was unable to know what mess of deprivation and uncertainty it was letting itself into when it finally made its way between her legs. All that she could really promise was that she would go into battle for the child and never let it down. Of course, she could wish many things for it, for her wishes could also include dreams. This gave her a good, warm feeling and brought a sense of excitement, even though it was later never realised. For a while at least it existed as a promise and a possibility or, which was perhaps even more healing, it made hope possible, for here there was really not much that one could rely on when looking to the future. And so her greatest wish was that the baby would know how to dream. Devotedly, vividly and confidently, as she had once been able to dream herself, those fantasies of hers were still the most beautiful thing that she preferred to remember from all that she had lived through.

She leant towards the window pane, which was scratched and by the window frame darkened with dried mould, so that everything she could see through it was blurred and barely recognisable. The branches that yesterday were waving in the wind and shaking off their last leaves were now motionlessly protruding into the greyness, and it seemed as if the rain had also stopped, for the overhang was only dripping here and there, which perhaps meant that the weather would finally change. A premature autumn that predicted a long winter had for some time been forcing Trejzka to think that fate had not chosen the best moment for the birth. Or that it had even deliberately contrived for it be more difficult for her and the child. She really did not know exactly why she was so fearful and suspicious, but the feeling that there was no one who would accept this unexpected pregnancy without reservations certainly added to it. Some people would always shake their heads when poverty gave birth, but this time they would also be bothered by their age, due to which they could add that perhaps they would not even be able to look after the poor thing until adulthood. Others genuinely felt sorry for them, because they had brought this worry upon themselves at this very time, when their daughter could finally make a living and they could begin to live better. There were also those who were convinced that they were no longer suitable parents, since they lived too much in their own fashion and

did not even have the time to raise a child. She spent whole days working on farms, while Pišteč stayed at work as long as necessary as he was truly obsessed with road maintenance. It was his field and mirror, everything that happened there could be a matter of pride or shame to him, so that of course she knew inside that there was nothing in this world that could attract his concern. But whatever the case, she was most bothered by the gossip of those who she was convinced really did not deserve a child. They wanted the couple to feel that they had got something they were unworthy of and had not earned, and that always upset her and sapped her strength. She badly wanted to show them that they were wrong, but of course for that time was required. Only long years of mindfulness, persistence, sacrifice, and obviously luck could contradict them. But she needed luck right now ...

So she just waved off all the troublesome thoughts at least for a few moments, moved and turned away from the window. Then she noticed on the mud floor by her feet a dark stain that was gradually spreading towards the stove. It struck her that water had got into the house and finally what she had most feared in recent days had happened. She got up and desperately looked for the vulnerable spot where the walls were leaking, then she noticed there was also water on the bench from which she had risen. She felt herself, picked up her skirt and realised with astonishment that her legs were also wet. So there was no doubt that her waters had broken. She stood in the middle of the kitchen, clutching her hands between her legs, feverishly thinking what this might mean and what she must do now. When Pišteč had left for work in the morning, she had felt no contractions and had calmly accompanied him to the threshold, and now everything was suddenly different. The contractions were more frequent, her waters were still trickling down her thighs and the puddle on the floor was getting bigger. She had heard it said that if your waters broke too early, you had to be taken to the maternity hospital in Váraš to give birth, but now for her that would certainly be of no help. Then she thought that in reality it could be something a lot worse. The year before last, hadn't Rétašna had a stillbirth because of this? Yes! She was sure of it. That's why it happened, she thought with horror and shuffled towards the door. In complete panic, she pushed down the door handle and went outside, and then hunched over, she went onto the veranda and cried out.

Her cry ominously severed the village silence and reverberated among the hills.

It sounded as if someone's life was in danger, the dogs barked and the geese and chickens became agitated, and Trejzka kept yelling until she finally saw a figure coming towards her through the neighbour's apple trees. Confirmation that they had heard her and hope that they would be able to help her calmed her enough enable to regain control of herself. She pressed the door handle, pushed open the door to the room, pulled a sheet and some towels from

the only cupboard, and then she already felt so weak that she barely made it to the bed. She lay down and pushed some cloths beneath her stomach, but she did not know what else to do, she could not think of anything that she probably should do, everything inside her suddenly seemed stuck, only the contractions kept travelling through her body, now and again taking away her breath. She moaned and, increasingly numb, she realised that she could no longer help herself. Everything that was being triggered inside of her was going its own way, and everything happening around her was left to others. Her neighbour Ágneška, who was the first to come into the bedroom, was bending over her, wiping her forehead with a wet cloth, pinching her beneath the chin and encouraging her not to close her eyes, because now she should not pass out. Her gaunt, narrow face with pursed lips reminded Trejzka of a fox, sniffing and poking, ready to snap at her, so she tried to obey her. Soon, another neighbour came in: Lina, who was deaf and dumb, and had never learnt to speak so that anyone would understand her. Whenever she was angry or agitated, the noises she made were so loud and piercing, that sometimes she could be heard at the other end of the village, and now, too, she was of course totally beside herself. “Uy, uy, uylala,” she kept repeating. “Uy, uy, uylala, uykayka, kayka,” she added in between and that meant that she was very worried. Anyway, soon after that Middle Marička also appeared, who calmed her, telling her not to be afraid because everything was sure to be alright, as the child was already in position and the midwife would come at any minute ...

Meanwhile, many more people from neighbouring houses rushed to the yard as word of Trejzka’s contractions rapidly spread. Each one first thought of offering help, but was of course also attracted by curiosity. Trejza and Pišta Fújs came, Lina’s husband Károl, the lads who had just been at the Frigaški distillery, as well as others. That was the custom at births, accidents and deaths, for it would be unforgivable to leave someone who was in distress alone, and if someone looked away, it was held against them. They were closing their umbrellas, shaking them and moving beneath the overhang, where they barely found enough room in the narrow space, and the cold rain kept unpleasantly drizzling, and now and then fat drops fell from the thatched roof.

“Has anyone gone for the midwife?” asked Marička, who excitedly peered out from the bedroom, with a wet cloth in her hands.

Everyone shuffled and exchanged questioning glances.

“Didn’t Pišteč go?” asked Károl.

“Pišteč is working on the road!” Ágneš almost shrieked. “Someone should go for Nājncá immediately!” she ordered. “Tell her that she doesn’t have much time as her waters have already

broken,” she explained, stomping her feet as if she wished to show how very urgent it was. Then she slammed the door shut and went back to the birthing mother.

The men once again looked at each other, seeking someone who would decide to go to the other side of the river, where Nájna lived. But although it was obvious that something unforeseen was happening in the house and so it was necessary to make haste, for quite a while nobody moved. It seemed as if Ágneška’s sense of urgency had frightened them and they needed time to collect themselves, or perhaps they did not feel like going down the steep slope, in the rain and mud.

“Well, Djänček,” Károl then said.

“Me!?” said the lad, who was certainly the youngest there, in complete surprise. “Why me?” he bleated, with a frown. “How am I supposed to get there in all this?”

“Hang on a minute,” Pišta spoke up. “Why wouldn’t you be able to get there?”

“If I’m lame,” the lad said with a grimace and lifted the leg, which was visibly shorter than the other.

“You’re lame only when it suits you,” Károl also spoke up and pushed him out from under the overhang. “Now you’ve no need to be lame, because it’s urgent,” he wagged his finger at his back.

“And don’t forget to say that her waters have broken,” added Pišta, also wagging his finger. “So that the woman doesn’t dawdle ...”

“What waters?” the lad looked back questioningly and stood still for some moments.

“Come on, come on, get going, forget about the waters now,” said Károl, shoving him with both hands. “The old woman will tell you all about the damn waters, who knows more about these waters than her,” he then mumbled into his chin. “As if at this moment these cursed waters were the most important thing.”

Djänček finally gave in and limped energetically across the meadow.

He rushed down the slope, although he couldn’t understand why it had to be him who was sent on this urgent mission, when he had one leg a few inches shorter than the other and swayed even when he was just walking. If it was really so urgent, he certainly wasn’t a good choice. However hard he tried, it seemed to him that he was moving like a fly in porridge. When he tried to rely more on his longer leg and hop a little, he slipped on the wet grass, and if he tried to walk quickly, he gradually began to stumble. Although his legs were not hurting yet, even by the time he got to the dip at the stream, he was so out of breath that he had to rest for a while. He gasped for air, wiped the wetness from his face and wrung his sleeves, which were completely wet through. He was afraid that somewhere on the way up the hill, which now rose

above him, he would become completely exhausted and that would probably be fatal. He was wondering whether the child could crawl out of the woman's stomach without the midwife's help, but he somehow couldn't come up with an answer that would at least slightly calm him, for he had never heard of anybody giving birth just like that. He wiped his nose and gathered his strength to trudge through the sticky mud, which was soon clinging to his shoes and making them even heavier. But he had to get across and go forward as quickly as possible, for at any cost he could not allow anything to go wrong with this birth. If he himself had been born a cripple, who even the doctors in Váraš were unable to help, he now had to do everything to prevent another such accident emerging into the world. After all, the baby for which he was now trembling and running up the hill, if of course all went well, would be his cousin ...

He was the illegitimate son of Trejzka's younger sister Marička, who had in the meantime finally got married somewhere near Šentvid and left him to be looked after by his grandmother. For a while they still kept promising him that when he was a little older his mother would take him in, but then everyone forgot about this. Because of this, Djänček had never been to Šentvid and could not even imagine it. But it must have been something big and fine for whenever someone said she's in Šentvid, it sounded almost as if they were saying she was in heaven. Well, he knew of course that Šentvid was a town, but certainly not such an ordinary town as Váraš, as it was at least five hours away by train and not everybody could go there. And if they were allowed to come, they could only use their baptismal name there. And so in Šentvid he could only be Janez. This was something else that he was not completely sure that he would be able to get used to. For now he knew very well how it was to be Djänček, but what it was like to be Janez, he could not imagine.

"Where are you hurrying to, lad?" someone snapped at him from behind a donkey, giving him a fright. "Did someone have a go at you?" he wanted to know.

He stopped and looked round timidly. It was Vájda's Djúši, who was trying in vain beneath a soaking wet canvas to get to drier straw and was brushing off everything that had stuck to him. "I've been sent for Nájncá," he replied when he had got his breath back. "Trejzka is having contractions ..."

"Oh yes?" said Djúši. "And they sent you?" he added. "Was there no one else there?" he wondered.

"There was," shrugged Djänček.

"Well?" the other one was even more surprised, but he did not say what he was probably thinking. "And will you be able to hobble up there?" He now sounded more worried.



“I will, I will,” he nodded. “I will because I have to,” he shrugged again and carried on moving.

“Maybe it would be good if I went with you,” decided Djúši and followed him, taking long strides, through the orchard and across the meadow.

They thus rushed up the hill, which was becoming increasingly steep, for some time without speaking. For the lad, the race against time had now changed into a race against the interloper, who of course only wanted to help. Although he had been afraid before that he would not make it, that he would twist an ankle or throw out a knee and thus would be unable to carry out his mission, the man was increasingly getting on his nerves for he now badly wanted to be the one who got the midwife when Trejzka was giving birth. When the older man then began to overtake him, he felt like tripping him up as it really did not seem fair that in the end he would get there first, and all his previous long trek and struggle that could be compared to walking up Calvary would be forgotten. He was leaning forward and making his way relentlessly, occasionally using his hands and waiting for an opportunity to reach the other man and knock his leg from under him, but when he was finally right behind him, he did not dare to do this. Even if it looked like clumsiness or an accident, he would not be able to forgive himself and in the confessional it would be hard to explain to the priest what had got into him and why he had been unable to resist the Devil. Yes, it would be hard to explain, he confirmed to himself. Or I wouldn't even be able to say it, he repeated in his thoughts, as if it had got stuck. It would remain an unforgiven sin, he was increasingly convinced. Such a miserable sin, not great and not small, but still eternal, he was horrified to think. Even God would not be able to explain completely what kind of sin it really was, but would a thousand years later still be repeating: Eternal, eternal, eternal, eternal, eternal ...

In this delirium and fever, he again began to fall behind and he was soon quite a distance behind Djúši, who was still running with long, healthy strides. He realised that he was losing the battle and his anger brought him increasingly close to tears, but then suddenly something opened up in front of him that gave him back his hope and totally excited him. Between an abandoned vineyard and the bushes that surrounded the fields, towards the ridge where Nājnca's house stood, there appeared a shortcut, which seemed to him sufficiently passable and without giving it any thought, he went that way. He ran along the unploughed strips, pushing his way between branches and crawling on all fours over the bumps so that he was soon covered in mud, scratched and ragged, but that could not stop him. He could now burrow beneath the earth, swim across a pond, jump over an abyss, he might even be able even to fly and drop like a hawk from on high into the courtyard – it was only God's chosen hero, the archangel Gabriel, that he

perhaps could not be. He had wanted this earlier, to be able to move just like that, to knock on the window in flight, to kneel in front of the door, take the midwife in his arms, merely flap his wings a few times and sail back with her to the other bank, where they were all probably on edge. It would have been a miracle, they would have all been struck dumb, the child would have been born healthy, and for the whole of its life the victorious birthday would be celebrated on the day when Djänček changed into an archangel and brought Näjncá. But of course, these were dreams which could not come true, he still had to run, crawl, dig, roll and clamber, if he wanted to prove to all of them that at least here, on this slimy bank that had absorbed moisture like a fungus and swollen, he could be first. For it really did seem to him that the hill had grown and was still growing, since every time he climbed over a hedge and thought it was the last, before him was again the distance that he needed to overcome. But luckily, Djúši had in the meantime also tired or had chosen a much longer route, as he was still below where the cart tracks ended, and orchards and meadows spread out below the houses.

“Näjncá!” Djänček shouted before he even got to the fence. It was an exclamation of relief and victory. But then, when nothing happened for some time, he got worried and again shouted: “Näjncá! Näjncá, are you home? Näjncá ...”

“What are you yelling for?” Näjncá grumbled somewhere inside. But when she eventually opened the door and saw him, her voice instantly changed. “What’s the matter?” she mumbled in shock. “What happened to you?” she wanted to know. “Who did this to you?”

“No, no, I’m alright,” he shook his head. “It’s something else,” he tried to explain to her as quickly as possible that he was not there because of these abrasions and scratches. “Trejzka is going to give birth and they sent me for you,” he panted, his voice trembling. “They’re just waiting for you ...”

“Trejzka,” she nodded. “I know she’s going to give birth,” she shrugged. “Every pregnant woman is going to give birth,” she said dismissively. “First, we have to clean you up a little and put some schnapps on those scratches,” she decided. “Otherwise they’ll go septic.”

“No, no, please,” he trembled and moved away. “They said you’ve got to come straight away,” he raised his voice. “She’s having contractions and her waters have broken.”

“Her waters?” she repeated and stopped. “How much was there?” she wanted to know.

“I don’t know,” he squeezed out. “They didn’t tell me that ...”

“If that ...” she frowned. “If that’s so ...” she pursed her lips. “Then I really shouldn’t wait,” she finally uttered her decision and rushed into the house, probably for things she needed for the birth.

Djänček stood in the middle of the muddy yard and it never occurred to him that he could finally go beneath the roof. He was completely wet through, muddy to the waist and with bloody scratches on his hands, but he did not feel cold nor any pain as he was still feverish. He had accomplished the task that he had been convinced he would not be able to achieve, he was celebrating his great victory and it did not bother him that only Nājnca and Djúši were there to witness it. And that they were now paying no attention to him. The old woman had already locked the door and with a big black umbrella on her shoulder was hurrying along the footpath; a little lower down, Djúši managed to catch his breath beneath the apple trees and then he slowly made his way home. Only after a while did Djänček realise that there was no one else around and that he was completely alone in the yard. Even the hens, which had sheltered in the barn from the rain and were sitting on the wooden rails, were paying no attention to him and no dog came to sniff him. Nevertheless, there had to be another pair of eyes somewhere, which saw all this, counted it to his credit and remembered it. He still believed at least this, because he felt that otherwise it would not be right. Or at least that it would not be fair. Especially if the midwife performed her duties well and, also thanks to him, everything ended happily.

*pp. 78-87*

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The space on both sides of the swollen Krka stream had completely changed into a land of shadows, darkness merged with fog, the sky lay upon the earth, making its way into every hollow and fold, the lights in windows twinkled like lonely stars, only the turtle-like shape of the inn at the crossroads was glowing like a heavenly ship. On it were sailing debauched troublemakers, galley slaves, serfs, vagrants, all united in a drunken dance, lost in time, looking only into their glasses and cut off from everything that may still be awaiting them far away. Now and then someone else came in and joined them, although uninvited, for word of the celebration had miraculously spread, or they had simply sensed that finally something was happening. Pišteek no longer hoped that all this would end at the right time, he had long ago given in, he knew how to be the one to treat others, although he rarely allowed himself to do so. But now, when he had no choice, and he knew that he would be left only with his wages, but without any savings, he was trying at least to allow himself some pleasure. He wanted to have something from what he was paying for, and while the others were enjoying the toasts, his soul was able to sing, he had created life, he had a son, the circle was now complete, everything had begun again. "I'll make sure that something will come of this one," he said to Êrni. "I'll

teach him to read even before he can walk,” he decided. “He’ll already be clever when he gets to school.”

“Take it slowly,” his comrade calmed him. “First, you’ll have to wipe his arse ...”

“Everyone knows how to wipe an arse, but I know something that the others here don’t know,” he objected. “A person can never dig himself out of the shit with a hoe,” he said philosophically. “Even with the biggest digger that’s not possible,” he added. “The only thing a person can take hold of and pull himself out with is school. You can only get the kind of job where you don’t have to work with your hands if you get some kind of education.”

“If you don’t want him to work with his hands, then maybe it’s better if you enrol him straight away in the Party,” said Méšič, teasing him. “If, of course, Trejzka hasn’t already promised him as a priest ...”

“I’ll give her priest,” he replied. “That’s another thing I’ve learnt in life, that you shouldn’t sell your children’s souls either to God or the Devil,” he preached, with his index finger in the air. “You have to wait for them to decide for themselves.”

“Then we’ll wait,” his comrade eventually agreed; the theme seemed a very heavy one. “There’s plenty of time,” he laughed. “Meanwhile, we’ll have another drink.”

And of course they drank, as if it was necessary to empty Djüri’s cellar by the morning. Their cheeks reddened, their foreheads sweated, their eyes glittered, some withdrew even further into themselves, while others became even more verbose and noisy, but all of them wanted to have a drink with Pištek. Because of that he quickly became inebriated, even though he had eaten four sausages and a lot of horseradish. He would raise his glass and try to explain to each of them how he would take care of his son, no longer noticing that they were not interested. The celebration was for everyone, the child was only his, making promises was easy, but then action was required and anyway it seemed pointless discussing the future, as no one knew yet whether the little one would get jaundice and whether he would get over it. That was how they were thinking and they ignored him, but the road mender no longer knew how to stop, as his brain had become fixed on drunken hallucinations. “You’ll see and then you’ll say I was right,” he kept repeating. “I’m not going to teach the little one to dig, every fool knows how to do that,” he said. “What does a man get from spending his whole life digging ditches from Dolénci to Šálovci?” he wondered. “He can dig them to Váraš, or even to Maribor, but they’ll still just be ditches, in which every dog can piss. I won’t have him become a watch mender or a mechanic, absolutely not,” at another table his expectations grew even greater. “Some people learn to mess about with an engine a little and they think they know everything, but in reality only the ones who make engines are worth anything,” he declared. “Engineers, project

managers, architects, those are the ones who know how to make something, they're the ones that are needed, everyone bows down to them ..."

"So now he'll be an engineer already," said Djüri with a frown as he went by with a tray.

"Come on, come on, the only thing he can be is a herder of hens," commented Dóunek. "Pišteč doesn't have any other livestock."

"You can talk, you who doesn't even have a cat in the house," snapped Pišteč. "He'll be much more than an ordinary engineer," he said confidently.

"Maybe he'll invent a new kind of electricity," said Íček with a grin. "The kind we can eat. You'll eat three spoonfuls of electricity and then be nicely lit up the whole evening ..."

"You'll be lit up tonight without electricity," commented Miščérin. "Till your old lady turns you off ..."

"You take the piss if you want, you've no idea in any case what man has already created," said Pišteč in disgust and he shuffled to another table. "Man has created more in this world than God has," he continued his lecture there. "God created water, the sky and the earth, he created plants, animals and people, but everything was created by man," he told them. "Houses, machines, cars, planes, watches, guns, radio, everything, all that is really man's work. We only have human intelligence to thank for the fact that we're no longer sleeping under trees," he waved his finger at them. "So today you can no longer rely on God, you need to use your head," he proclaimed, banging his fist against his forehead. "And so I'll work only so that I can send my son to the highest schools ..."

They kept rolling their eyes, refilling his glass and drowning him in wine, since there was no longer any point in disagreeing. He was completely caught up in his fantasies, believing that his crazy dreams would come true, any doubts only spurred him on, he was certain that they were envious and didn't want him to have this great victory, which is why he was ready to fight for it. He pursed his lips, gritted his teeth, clenched his fists and pushed his chin forward, becoming on this confused battlefield, where no one was still willing to do battle, an increasingly pathetic warrior. In his overlarge rubber boots, wet trousers and well-worn leather jacket he actually looked more like a troll that had wandered in from the wilderness and now wanted something.

The only one shabbier than him was poor Gusti in his long coat, which he never took off at night, whether he slept in a barn, a stable or in his mother's tumble-down hut by the stream. For him it was an item of clothing, a blanket and a travelling bundle. In its deep pockets he carried everything he owned and needed, under his arm he hid beneath it a violin, which was

the only thing he looked after as far as he was able. He would forget or lose the bow now and again, and then they would look for it, for without it the violin was voiceless and the fiddler silent. "The Devil has carried off my bow," he explained his sorrow. "I don't know what he's got against me, I've never done anything to him," he complained. When someone finally found it, he was once again shameless, ungrudgingly admitting: "I knew he wouldn't know what to do with it. The Devil doesn't know how to play ..." And then they had to persuade him to leave the bow in the inn on a shelf so that it was handy, but he could not accept this for very long either. The first time he played again, he took it and the whole thing began over again.

Well, tonight when it was a party, Gusti also had his fill of food first. He put away the sausages that Êrni and Pišteĸ left on their plates, and stuffed some pieces of bread into his pocket, ordered a large spritzer and only then listened to those who were asking him to start playing at last. He liked it when they begged, he listened to all their requests, thinking them over, nodding and shrugging, but he always then played what he wanted to. Sometimes it was his day for dirges and then nothing lively could be coaxed from his fiddle, on other occasions he was inspired to play czardas and he could not stop jiggling, even when it got on everybody's nerves. Nobody really knew whether this was just moodiness, buffoonery or perhaps just madness, which meant he really couldn't control himself, and so they usually just laughed at him. The only one capable of calming him with a word was Djüri, before whom he always respectfully doffed his greasy cap and bowed, but the innkeeper but rarely did this. It seemed as if he was secretly on his side, even when he seriously ridiculed someone. It particularly amused him to have a go at gendarmes or politicians from Váraš, since no one dared to say to them what they were really thinking. On such occasions, Gusti was not just a poor soul, but the village fool, the only one who dared to poke the fire. They would laugh behind their hands, egging him on, and if someone really did lose their temper and wanted to do something to him, they immediately took his side. "What, you'll attack a fool, he doesn't know what he's saying," they would say protectively. "Does nobody get a joke anymore," they would shake their heads and look surprised. "Now they're even going to lock fools up," they were indignant. Then Gusti would understand that he had again crossed the line and needed to save himself. "Where is it nicer for a gypsy than in prison!" he would begin. "He has a roof over his head and a bed. And how many times a day do they give him food," he would exclaim enthusiastically. "They bring him breakfast, lunch and dinner," he enumerated, using his fingers. "Where else can he get all that for free?" he would ask, showing everyone three raised fingers. "I've only eaten that often, for heaven's sake, when I was chopping firewood for the priest," he licked his lips and smacked them like a child. "The more I ate, the less I cut, it's true," he grinned. "I preferred working

with a spoon, I couldn't put it down, and I certainly couldn't lift the axe," he finally showed that he was not quite right in the head and no one should be offended at him.

This time, too, it would have been better if he had not been given anything to eat before he pulled out his violin and raised the bow. For he was now full and the wine had also warmed him, which meant that he did not feel like playing. He shuffled in his seat, took off his cap, smoothed his forehead, peeped at the door through his fingers, wondering if he could maybe sneak out. The night would still be long, he would be playing to drunks, who would make requests and then not even listen, in the morning his arm would hurt or his shoulder would start bothering him again and for some time he would be crippled. Maybe he would get a few coins, but he would spend them in the morning, getting a kilo of bread or perhaps a few sugar cubes, and once again he would realise that they had in truth tricked him.

"What's up, Gusti?" Pišteek eventually prodded him. "You've stuffed yourself with sausages, and now you'll doze off here," he said critically. "Come on, play one!"

"Okay, okay," he nodded. "I will, I will," he promised. "I just don't know which," he muttered and frowned. "Maybe one of ours?" he decided and wiped the instrument with his sleeve. "Since if we are now related ..."

"Related?" said Pišteek incredulously. "How related?"

"Something was said," he shrugged

"What was said?"

"Erm, Lácika was saying ..."

"What was he saying?"

"And Ríčekin also heard ..."

"Come on, for fuck's sake!" exclaimed the road mender eventually. "What crap have they told you again?" he growled at him, putting his hand beneath the other man's chin and lifting it.

Gusti put his head between his shoulders and closed his eyes. Then after a while he opened one eye and peered around for someone to help him. But the men had fallen silent and no one moved. They were shrouded in silence that could not be cut in any other way but to blurt it out. "We're related, because your baby was made by our lad," he said. "Kóuči ... They say that he had a hand in it ..."

Pišteek just stared, mouth open.

Then he simply raised his fist to punch him in the face, but Méšič's long arm intervened and pushed him off with one movement. "What's up with you?" he then asked, slowly getting up and stepping between them. "You can see he's bullshitting," he tried to calm him. "Even if

there was anything in it, that doesn't mean you're related," he shrugged. "Gusti doesn't know what he's talking about ..."

"How could there be anything?" asked Pišteek in a deep voice.

"I'm telling you, there isn't," said Êrni glumly. "Of course there isn't."

Then no one spoke.

He felt this silence, as if he was drowning in boiling water that was not only penetrating his ears, but flooding his insides. The faces around him were dumb, frozen and expressionless, he could no longer see anything even in their eyes, which would have allowed him some hope. That's how an animal probably feels when the butchers choose it and surround it, he thought. Even if someone does feel sorry for it, they can no longer show it or do anything to save it. So, there was certainly something that only in this way they could keep quiet about, he was completely sure by now. Something so bad that even the most hardened among them did not wish it upon him. He shifted his weight, tripped and tried to balance, he had to do something to cut through this dumb staring, but the glass that he wanted to smash on the floor slipped from his hand and did not break. He kicked it and stumbled, so that he barely managed to grab hold of a chair and stay on his feet. The wine that had hitherto filled him with strength, was now only undermining him and blurring his vision. He felt he was losing himself and that he would collapse at any moment, and so he just wanted to go out into the fresh air. "You won't see me on my knees," he gasped. "Pišteek will never kneel," he clenched his jaw and made his way to the door. "Pišteek would rather shit on everything," he spat and somehow pushed his way out into the dark night. And then he ran and ran and ran ...

For a long time, his path to salvation consisted of nothing but darkness.

He neither saw nor heard anything, nor did he feel the ground beneath his feet.

Perhaps he was flying, maybe swimming, perhaps he was already being carried by the angel who sometimes watches over drunks and ensures that in their blindness they do not step into emptiness. He was being driven by implacable rage, all of his righteous anger condensed in a thought that was lodged in his head and that he kept repeating. He must not allow the Devil to poke his tail in and to gloat. He must find a way to stop that. He must be ready for a fight such as the world had never seen before and which no one could imagine. He must also dare to do all that the Devil himself had not experienced and would not even expect from a man. If because of this it was necessary to kill, he would kill. If it was necessary to die, he would die. He would not give up at any price. He would not give way even for a millimetre, he swore. And at that moment, the Devil tripped him up ...



*excerpts from the novel translated by Maja Visenjak Limon*