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The Wild Geese

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It Doesn’t Matter If It Was Good

„You devils”, hisses Gran and pulls us off the muddy road.

Other children are petrified, waiting for the danger to pass. When Gran drags us away, they will continue playing as if nothing had happened. Their fathers are not dying.

The two of us obey. We fly behind her swirling skirts like the ball we played with up until a moment ago. When she stops for a second, panting for breath, we float in the air. We think that her flaring nostrils will suck us in.

„You are hurting us”, we moan. Our wrists are burning.

But she just strides on. Her vice-like grip turns us into hovering bladders that will drown us in the small hours of the night.

„Shame on you”, she says when we get near the house.

We are silent. We don’t argue. We don't know if that is all she has to tell us in her anger, before we admit that we are ashamed of ourselves. For even though only moments ago we felt no shame and carelessly threw the ball into the sky, now in her grip we do and we are dejected.

Gran sees it. She loosens her grip, pulls her hand away and gives us sweaty, sticky kisses on the cheeks. But this time we don’t rub them off. It just doesn’t seem proper. Though even if we had wiped her saliva off our cheeks, she wouldn’t have noticed. She has other worries on her mind. She fixes her headscarf and tries to tuck in the stray wisps of gray hair that have peeped out in her anger, but they wriggle under her fingers like snakes under a stick. When she tucks one of them back under the headscarf, the other entangles itself around her finger and crawls out. Once her hair is back in place, she jostles through the crowd that moves apart to make way for her faster than it did a moment ago for the paramedics who carried our father on a stretcher out of the house. We scurry behind her.

The front yard is still packed with people. They are on the porch and on the fence, hanging from the branches of the cherry tree and everything else on and around the house. They peer goggle-eyed through the windows and the glass pane on top of the front door. Many of them are strangers to us because we rarely visit the other side of the village.

When Kuzmo died, his yard was also full of people. We had a nosebleed at the funeral. Blood poured out of our nostrils and onto our new sandals. And later in the church we felt like vomiting from the crowd of sweaty bodies squeezed onto the small pews and the smell of the altar lamp and hyacinths laid at the foot of the coffin. Or maybe we felt sick because on the day Kuzmo was taken to hospital we took, or rather stole, his most beautiful marble from under the logs in his front yard where it was hidden.

We stole it from under the same logs on which we sometimes sat watching the boys play marbles. Sullen and suntanned, they would punch the ground and spit with relish every time a marble ended where it shouldn't have. Sometimes they would stick their tongues at us or tap our foreheads with their forefingers to show us they think we are crazy, throw pebbles at us and pick on us because we brought them bad luck.

But Kuzmo would never let them chase us away.

„Leave them alone!" he would shout and the boys would obey. They would watch us as if we were dirty or contagious, but they would leave us alone.

And then Lord bit Kuzma.

Our dad took his gun and shot the dog.

„It doesn't matter if it was good. It's not any longer", he said.

Kuzma's mum got angry at our dad for killing their German shepherd without a permission. Father said he didn't need a permission; everybody knows what happens to the dogs who bite children. Had the cur belonged to the holy father pope himself, he would have nevertheless done it in. After that, Kuzma's mother stopped talking to our parents, and we stopped borrowing things from them and they from us. We no longer visited each other. Kuzma's sister no longer played with us, but we were still mesmerized with Kuzma. He was never angry at us, not even because of what happened to Lord. He loved us despite what our father had done and he let us watch him compete with other boys until one day he suddenly started foaming at the mouth and was carried away through the crowd of curious people who gathered in his front yard, to be later returned in a tin coffin.

Shame. Shame and death tied together into a knot. Forever. The marble in our pocket still burns us.

Inside the house, Gran places us in front of our mother.

„They played ball in the street", she says and immediately forgets about us. "Have you offered a drink to these people?" she asks.

Mum doesn't answer. With the look in her eyes a little softer than a moment ago when Gran and she shot daggers at each other, she takes us from Gran, leads us into the front room and turns on the TV. We are scared. What if they broadcast the scary "Butterfly"? But she is already in the cramped, stuffy kitchen where Gran pours brandy for herself and the neighbours. She doesn't hear us.

We are afraid of "The Butterfly". Terrified. One night Mum and Dad fell asleep before us and left the TV on. After the evening news, white letters appeared on the black screen. We couldn't read properly yet, but from the number of letters and their order we understood that it read "film". No doubt „The Butterfly". Had we had the courage, we would have pressed the switch on the stabilizer. But we didn't. We just stared in horror at the dark screen with white letters, expecting to see the black dishevelled hair and long white dress of the Butterfly who would wring our necks like Lola wrung the necks of our chickens.

Shortly before nightfall the house finally empties. Dad has been carried away, neighbours are gone, even Gran has left. Mother gives us a bath. Again, she doesn't say a word, and we don't ask any questions. We are happy because there is peace and quiet. And because she has turned off the TV.

In the middle of the night, Dad knocks on the door. At first he just raps on the wood with his knuckles, then hammers on it with an open palm. Our heads reach only to the lock, and he watches us through the glass pane on top of the door. We watch him back. He is thin and yellow like a wax candle, but nothing smoulders in or around him. He is dead.

„Open the door", he says.

„You are dead! We can't open", we answer.

„Open the door, I said!"

Father is now very angry. He shakes the handle and rams his shoulder into the wood. He tries to force himself into the house.

We lean hard against the door to stop him from entering. We don't want him here because he is dead. The dread suffocates us, squeezing our bare throats with its metal fingers.

Mum still sleeps in the front room.

Then Father transforms into a bladder. He becomes a fish bladder with two other bladders attached to it. And he crawls under the door right at us, who are already petrified from fear.

Lola whines in the yard.

We are dead.

I Wish I Had Never Had You

We wake up wet to the chin. Stiff like frozen fish, we delay getting up from bed. We huddle against each other to keep warm, because the moment we lift the duvet we will be whipped by the cold and the smell of stale urine. The bladder has defeated us. But that is a defeat we can live with, for freezing in bed is nothing in comparison with the bone-chilling cold we will feel coursing through our bodies when Mother sees us. “You’ve peed yourselves again”, she will say exhaustedly.

We don’t have a washing machine. Even if Father earned enough money to buy it, it would make no difference because we don’t have water in the house. We don’t have it in the yard either. Mother has to haul it in tin buckets from the water well across the road. Then she places a tub on the waist-high wall of the porch, fills it with water and washes the laundry. Sometimes when she goes to get another bucket of water, we pour the detergent onto the laundry which is soaking in the tub. We know she will be angry, but we can’t resist. The bubbly lather we make splashing our hands in the tub is worth the risk of punishment.

But when we pee ourselves, it’s different. Nothing can soften Mother’s disappointment. Bubbles are funny, weak bladder isn’t.

Mother takes the wet sheets off the bed and carries the mattress onto the porch to air and dry it out. Her face is wet too. „I wonder if I’ll ever see a day without your wet sheets in this tub”, she says.

But we hear the unspoken, too: “I wish I had never had you.”

Mother may not say it loud, but her tightly pressed lips build a heavy wall of silence between us, the silence that can be interpreted only as: *I wish I had never had you*. If she were in a good mood, if we had done something that pleased her, she would have said: “If I hadn’t had you, I would have been all alone. Like a thumb. Or an owl. Or a coin someone has lost in the street. I would have sunk to the very bottom.”

„How can a thumb be alone?” we asked her once.

„I’ll tell you”, she answered. „Look, it’s here. It sees everything and knows everything, but it is apart from other fingers, in close touch with not a single one of them.”

We are here and we sometimes touch her. Sometimes she touches us too. When she dresses us and when she is in a good mood. But as time goes by, we have the feeling we are less and less on this

world so that our mother would not be alone. Our existence, hands and laughter cannot hold her head above the water for too long. It's not the real water, but that's how she talks about it. It's up to her chin. It drowns her. We manage to keep her afloat for a moment or two, maybe a day, but not longer, because whatever drags her down is stronger than our little lives. Bigger than the words we can fully understand.

Mother is especially down when we return from Gran's with something in our hands.

„She has bought you again", she tells us.

We don't really understand how Gran has bought us, who she has paid for us, but we know we've done something wrong. We've messed up. That's why we no longer bring home the sweet treats Gran gives us "for later". Rather than dealing with Mother's disappointment, we find a secluded place on our way back from Gran's, eat ourselves sick on sweets and later vomit, or we hide them in the barn and around the yard, hoping that Lola will not find and eat them.

Mum doesn't love Gran. And she doesn't love Gran's love for us. But what she hates most is our love for Gran. We often try to ingratiate ourselves with her. We give her a firm promise that we no longer love Gran or that we won't love her from tomorrow on, but we always break it. And it makes our tummies ache. The darkness we push ourselves into, the gloom in which not even our thumbs touch each other, is horrible.

When Mother is very angry at us, she calls us by Gran's name. She wipes everything even remotely resembling a sound or a kiss off her lips and turns her head away from us. She punishes us with the worst possible punishment: her silence.

„Katas!" is all she says before she burdens us with the weight of her refused gazes and words.

We are Katarinas. Katas.

Being Kata hurts less in Gran's tiny cob house permeated with the smell of the soup cooking on the wood burning stove, eggy bread on a plate and Gran's sour but warm skin. At Gran's we don't have to go to the outdoor toilet when it's dark and cold. At Gran's everything is ours.

Our house is different. It is bigger and cleaner, and the walls are made of bricks so mice cannot chew their way through them, but it is not completely ours. Even if Father scraped up the money and bought it, it still wouldn't be really ours.

Mum and Dad often argue.

When the two of us argue, we call each other Kata. That's the worst thing we can think of. Much worse than pinching or hitting each other on the forehead.

„Crazy Kata! Crazy Kata, that's what you are!" we stick our tongues out in front of the mirror.

Once we were such Katas that Mother couldn't take it any longer and kicked Gran out of the house. She pushed her onto the porch and through the gate so fast that Gran had no time to utter an outraged *Sweet Jesus!*, let alone those other things that are anything but sweet and have very little to do with Jesus, but nevertheless slide effortlessly out of her mouth.

Then Dad kicked Mum out.

Everything was screaming, falling down. We closed our eyes and kept them closed. We didn't see it, but we are still sure that Mother's face was showered with slaps. The sky dissolved in rain, or it was us who created the deluge crying through the night. And the following day. We sobbed at first and then fell silent. Hugging each other, we decided to cry inside.

Maybe that's why we've peed our pants.

The House Often Grows A Belly

Someone has stolen Dad's transistor radio. Gran blames Mother for it, because she doesn't bring it in at night. She leaves it on the porch, under the window, and if yesterday it hadn't been stolen, moisture would have ruined it or the cats would have knocked it to the ground. That's not how things are taken care of. Mum blames Dad, because he is the one who always puts the radio on the outer window ledge of the locked room. She is not the one who listens to football matches on the radio. She doesn't have the time for much more important things in life, not even on Sunday. We understand Father. Sunday morning is his time for hunting, and Sunday afternoon for listening to the sport on the radio on the porch. Sunday is the day he takes for himself, and the porch with a little chair, an ashtray and the radio is the most convenient place. He is outdoors, but still under the roof where the voices resound louder – the voice of the sports commentator and his voice, when the team he roots for misses a goal or scores it.

We are there with him, silent as a graveyard on a little blanket at his feet. The antenna on the radio is nothing compared to the antennas on our heads. Every hair is there to receive Father's breathing, coughing and every single word he addresses not to us, but to the clumsy players from the radio. Every word is important, even those that would in different circumstances make us feel uneasy, guilty or bad. He says "fuck", he shouts and turns the air blue. He bounces on the chair. He utters bad words in a rather loud voice, but they don't sound as scary as when the two of us do something wrong or when he is angry at Mum. That's why each Sunday afternoon when Dad returns from hunting we quietly sit at his feet even when he acts wild, and we pretend to be playing with our dolls Vesna and Nada. Their names were chosen before they were bought and are written in winding letters on the cardboard box with a plastic window through which the dolls smile, so it is impossible for us to call them by any other names except Vesna and Nada. They are blonde-haired and plump, and their lids move up and down. They are dressed in wide dresses with Velcro strap on the back or white blouses and blue skirts. Socialist dolls, Mum says. We don't know what that means, but their roundness makes us like them better than the scrawny Barbie dolls in tight dresses that our other grandmother, Mum's mother, sends us from Germany.

When Dad listens to the sport on the radio, we are calm sitting on the blanket because he is different then – alive. We watch him light a cigarette and puff at it so hard that it burns down to the yellow filter in three puffs. Huddled at his feet like two sated cats, we discern all kinds of things in the clouds of smoke he blows not only out of his mouth but often out of his nose as well. Fat women with

rolls of fat hanging over the waistbands of their skirts and bulging out from under their blouses, before they taper or turn into fat hand bells. Then Dad takes an even deeper puff, and drunken clouds come. They stagger above our heads and scratch our noses and eyes with their bitter fingers. Boiling water bubbling out of the spout of the kettle. And mountains. A lot of mountains.

There are no mountains in our village. Everything is flat as far as the eye can see. We do have an embankment, but it doesn't count. The only mountains we see are those on TV. And we sometimes climb them in dreams, but we always fall. The rock breaks off under our feet and we lose our balance and roll down the slope. We usually end up in a pool and wet sheets.

The mountains our father blows high into the sky crumble under our fingers.

If he dies, we will miss football.

Gran and Mother have been searching for the radio since early morning. They have left no stone unturned. They have looked for it everywhere, even in Lola's lair, but they haven't found it. In the commotion in the front yard someone just walked off with it. Father certainly didn't take it with him.

„I bet it was the postman's son. Who else would do it? " says Gran.

„What sort of people would steal a dying man's radio?" Mother is outraged.

„Bosnians", says Gran.

Mother pretends she hasn't heard her.

She has just washed our bottoms with lukewarm water and pulled dry panties up to our waists. We will finish dressing by ourselves. The telltale bedclothes have been thrown out onto the porch, together with the rubber sheet that has long adopted the smell of stale urine and seemingly become porous, protecting the mattress less and less with each passing day. Now when we wet our bed, we wake up in a lake of pee.

In a moment or two, Mother will take a bucket and haul the water from the well, and then she will roll up her sleeves to erase every trace of our big defeat. Until the next time. But today we will not make it harder for her.

The missing radio bothers us. There is no curtain on the window of the locked room, so we peek through the dusty panes. The owners of the house in which we have been living since Mother persuaded Father to move out of Gran's cottage to a place of our own have crammed that room with everything

they deemed undesirable in their new home: bed frames with high headboards, mismatched chairs, pillows and bedspreads, and other old junk, including the one thing that interests us most but can't be ours no matter how much we long for it: a huge paper goose. A goose taller than us. If we could come close to it, we are sure that we'd barely reach to its neck. Our father, who is not a particularly tall man but is much taller than us, is probably only a head taller than it. That gorgeous Goose, which is a part of our lives despite all the walls and locks, is made of white crepe paper, and watched from this distance it looks like a real goose with real feathers. She has a blue ribbon around the neck and two dark eyes deeply set into a rather small head. Mum says they are just plain, plastic buttons, but when we look in them, we find them so alive, so penetrating, omniscient. Sometimes those eyes watch us with curiosity; other times they stare at us almost belligerently. The bird can't breathe in that room.

The Goose must have seen who stole the transistor. It couldn't have failed to notice it despite all the commotion, noise and wailing ambulance sirens. The imprisoned Goose knows everything. Her evil eye can see what's on the drawings we regularly push under the locked door.

„Why did the Marcins lock that room?" we ask Mother.

„Because they think we are like them."

„What are they like?"

„They are brutes who plunder the poor."

Mum doesn't know that we are like the Marcins. We would steal the Goose, like we have stolen Kuzmo's marble, even though we know how we would feel afterwards. We would liberate the Goose from its imprisonment and claim it for ourselves, only if we could.

„Who did they plunder?" we ask to hide our wicked thoughts.

„Jerries", she says.

Jerries are people who no longer exist. They are not called that anymore; now they are called Germans, but whether they are Jerries or Germans, there isn't a single one of them in our village. Mum says they left first, but our shameless people couldn't leave them well alone. They followed them like the longhorn beetles. Her mother has left too, but that's different. She never plundered anybody, and we believe Mum when she says that, although we don't really love that other grandmother and are a little afraid of her.

There was a time when Germans lived in our house, the house of our first neighbour and some other houses in the village. In all old but big houses. We know it because Mum and Dad call those houses *Jerry houses*. There are other old houses that are much smaller and more numerous. They are called *Šokci houses*. Gran calls them like that too. She says it is very easy to recognize a Šokci house because it is whitewashed to the gable at least once a year, and the part of the foundation walls that protrudes above the ground is painted in brown colour twice a year – for Easter and for the feast of the village's patron saint. And she says that those other houses were last whitewashed when Jerries lived in them. But whitewashed or not, we would recognize the Šokci houses because they are often potbellied. Adobe escapes from its place, soaks up the water and the house often grows a belly or two. Brick doesn't surrender that easily. The belly grows on the wide wall without doors and windows. The house of the cobbler's widow Amalija had to be propped up with pillars to keep the roof and the ceiling from caving in. The belly soaked up the water and opened. Beds and cupboards on the other side of the gaping hole looked like gnawed bones. Amalia sat on the bed covered with plastic sheets and cried like she had cried when her fat husband died. People watched her from the street as if the house were a big, mud-spattered TV screen.

Moisture peels plaster from the bricks. You put your finger on it, and it crumbles under your fingernails. Plaster has a bitter taste and it crunches under teeth, but old walls are still standing in one piece. That's what the Jerry houses are like.

„Pompous pricks", Gran says for Jerries and their houses. "It was easy for them. We've been here for ages, but foreigners always think they know better. Where were they when this was just a marsh?"

The marsh is gone, but the mosquitoes have stayed. They drink our blood and their bites itch so much that we sometimes cry at bedtime. Old people hit them with willow switches, but we don't have time for that. They stand in front of the houses and wait for mosquitoes. They talk and flog their legs, arms and backs with willow switches.

„It's just as well that door is locked", mother says about the door of the locked room. "If it opened, millions of moths, bedbugs and cockroaches would burst out of it and into our home. Just like the Marcins and other *honest* fellows like them burst into the homes in which lunch was still steaming on the table. And they blame Bosnians."

Now Gran pretends she hasn't heard what Mum said.

The two of us draw Dad's radio. We give it a long antenna for better reception, and then we add Dad. We consider putting a smile on his face, but then it wouldn't be him. Tired of sinning and hiding, today we choose the truth. We draw a straight line for his mouth and leave his eyes without a dot in the middle. We do it because he is ill. Then we push the drawing under the locked door. "Who has stolen the radio?" we shout to the Goose through the key-hole, but just as we expected, it doesn't answer, so we turn around and go out onto the porch.

Our panties and pyjamas are drying on the clothesline together with the bed sheets. The wind plays with them, transforming them into ghosts and nervous kites. They look pained, resentful of us for our mother's tired hands and pruney fingers.

Late in the afternoon doctor Nana comes to tell us that the hospital has called and that our father has had surgery. That means that tomorrow morning Mother will go to the hospital to visit him and that we will spend the night at Gran's. We will lie in her bed and dream the door of the locked room. It will open with the squeak of the hinges. When the Goose's yellow beak pokes through the crack in the door, our heart will start pounding like the drum of the town crier when he proclaims announcements in the streets.

Here it is, flying over the clean bed sheets. Flapping its wings in the whipping wind until they crumble into a shower of small pieces of paper. Soft, fluffy feathers are all around us. Tiny handwritten letters in which we, though we can't read properly yet, clearly see the message: THE POSTMAN'S SON HAS STOLEN THE RADIO.

The sky has darkened. We just hope it doesn't rain. The Goose is already half-plucked and crippled by the wind; it will dissolve in the rain. And we pray "that" doesn't happen to us again.

Afterwards We Feel Bad

We never pee ourselves at Gran's. Never. Maybe because we often find ourselves dozing bare-bottomed on a chamber pot in the middle of the night, with Gran crouching beside us. Barefoot and with the net of tiny red and blue veins on her swollen ankles, she looks as if about to pee onto the wooden floor. But she never does. The two of us pee, and she waits until we are done and then tucks us back in and pushes the pot under the bed. In the morning, when she empties and washes it, she will put it back on the same place.

Maybe we would stay dry even without Gran's watching over us. We don't know, we are not sure, but we don't give it much thought. The important thing is that we wake up as we should to breakfast already waiting for us on the table: a mug of white coffee and a plate of "market": small cubes of bread, arranged like stalls at a market and topped with a thin slice of sausage and a slice of pickled gherkin. Some of them are adorned with little towers of cream or cheese, for our teeth and bones. We don't like that stupid thing on top of the gherkins, but Gran knows how to sell her merchandise. Sometimes she manages to sell us everything on her stall, but sometimes she has to open her mouth instead of us.

„Now you", we say.

This morning we bought a lot.

Then Gran pours lukewarm water from the pot on the stove into a wash-basin. She lets us run our wet hands over our mouths and eyelids, before she wipes the sleep out of our eyes and picks up a comb. As always, she combs us slowly at first, gently stroking the surface, until the teeth of the comb run smoothly from our foreheads all the way down to the end of our hair. She doesn't push the comb hard into our hair, straight to the roots. Mum doesn't have patience. She doesn't believe us when we complain we feel sick as she rakes the top of our head, trying to untangle our mane. She doesn't believe us even when we, neatly combed once the torment has finished, vomit our hearts out.

Whenever we get a chance, we run to Gran to comb our hair. Afterwards we feel bad about it and we are ashamed of ourselves because we are traitors. We avoid looking into mother's eyes for the rest of the day and fix our gazes on her mouth. If we forget and accidentally look her in the eye, we shrink in her pupils. Like boiled socks, we become rigid, abrasive and several sizes smaller.

Today we are soft and of the right size.

After breakfast, Gran tells us she is going to her vegetable garden and warns us to keep out of mischief. God sees everything. Then she leaves us alone in the house.

As soon as she disappears around the corner, we bring our neighbour Mara to play with us. We consider her a friend, although she has never said her opinion about that or many other things for that matter. She is the only friend we have, the only one who is not grown-up and doesn't tap our foreheads with her forefinger. Even though, the way she sometimes behaves, it is us who could tap her forehead. She moved into our street last winter, huddled in a tractor- trailer with her father, older sister and a battered cooking-stove. Her father cradled a TV set in his arms. He squeezed it tight against his chest, as if he were afraid that someone would dash at him and snatch it out of his hands. If only our father had held his radio like that.

Together, Mara's family looked like heads of cabbage in a wooden barrel, salted with snow and ready for pickling. And they smelt like cabbage. A mountain of bulging plastic bags towered above them, and when Mara's father hurled them onto the ground, we saw the bed in which Mara's mother lied.

„Poor wretches", our mother said and pointed her forefinger at us. "I don't want to see you mock that child."

„You climb on that side of the bed, and we'll climb on this one", we tell Mara now.

She watches us with the blank gaze of her huge eyes, round like the eyes of Lenka's newborn calf, and doesn't budge. That's why we push her to the foot of Gran's pallet which is not filled with prickly straw, but with corn shuck. Standing on the two featherbeds on top of the mattress, we are high, almost brushing the part of the uneven ceiling that broke off many years ago and fell on the bed in which grandpa Bono was sleeping. That's why his nose was knobby for the rest of his life. The wavy sky of dry mud roughly coated with slaked lime is what we watch instead of TV, which Gran doesn't have and refuses to buy because it poisons children. We watch it at every bedtime, after Gran has read to us at least five pages from the children's Bible and until she wriggles herself out of her skirts, combs her hair and turns off the light. If there is a big moon on the real sky and it peeks through the small window, we continue to watch the sky in our room. We stare at the ceiling full of the scariest monsters and creepiest creatures that would frighten us to death if Gran's shrivelled but warm body didn't lie beside us. We used to stare at Grandpa's nose with the same delight, searching for the images for our own frightening film, maybe scarier than all the Butterflies and their old mills, rattling doors, loud screams and wails, but Grandpa is gone. He died, and our Dad may die soon. They will sit together on

the fattest cloud and watch us getting upset over the radio that has gone missing or over something bad the two of us have done again. For instance, peeing ourselves.

Mara is standing at the foot of the bed, where we want her. We are on the opposite side, with the pillow on the floor, for a softer landing in case we slip and fall. Mara will be fine if she tumbles off the bed, we reckon. We don't have a pillow for her. Besides, her father always says that Bosnians have thick heads.

We don't think there is a lot in Mara's head to keep it together, let alone make it thick, but there is definitely more than in the head of her older sister, and that is why we drag her along ever since she moved into the house next to ours.

„When we jump, you will fly into the air like a goose", we tell her.

She just gapes at us. She doesn't understand what we are talking about.

„Not an ordinary goose, but a wild one! Like this: Ga! Ga!" we cry, our arms flailing.

We jump, but Mara doesn't fly into the air as we expected. Instead, she just sways, or rather tilts sideway and topples on the floor.

„Again!" we encourage her. „It's your turn now."

From the distance we hear the gate open. Gran is coming back from her vegetable garden.

„Jump! Jump!" we squeal because we are desperately running out of time.

Booted footsteps pound on the porch. We won't make it.

Mara jumps anyway.

How do geese throw each other in the sky? Dad makes things up, he lies to us just to get us fall asleep as quickly as possible. We didn't fly; instead we found ourselves up to the neck in the corn-shack pallet when the featherbeds slid from under our feet and slats moved apart. Over the rustling mattress, we hear Gran shouting.

„You rascals!"

Gnarly fingers pluck us out of the bowels of the bed and lay us on the bench by the table. Carefully, so we don't break. We or the doll in a folk costume, which we took from its place on the neatly made bed before the fly of the geese, and placed on the bench to encourage us. Mara is still where

we told her to be – at the bottom of the bed, holding on to the footboard not to slip straight into the hole from which the two of us have just been rescued. Jesus and Mary with bloodied heart watch her from above.

„And you, dirty brat, get out of my sight and go home! I don't want to see you here ever again!" roars Gran.

Mara climbs down from the bed. Her skinny legs tremble in fear. Gran's wrath is like a flaming fire. It burns the skin. Grown-ups flinch faced with it, let alone a little girl who has just moved into the village. We watch her, trying to tell her with our eyes that there is no reason to be afraid, that Gran is simply like that and there is nothing anyone can do about it, but we can't catch her gaze. With her head bowed, she silently puts on her shoes with shaky fingers and leaves.