

Oklahoma r e v i e w

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Lyuda

The vineyards withered in the heat, yellowish-green like the clouds in the sky. The clouds were wild hammers that killed the sun but gave no fresh air. Lyuda didn't care about the sky. The vineyards stretched endless before her, she rode her old horse Matey through the hot leaves, cursing under her breath. Not a living soul was in sight, only the yellow road, full of sun, climbed the hill and sank behind its scorched crest.

There were only old men in that village. They wore their new suits and dreamt of naphthalene, killing the moths in air around them. Her husband went to Italy, to Julia Nova or another damn place at the back of beyond, and left her with the old funeral suits of the geezers and their drooling son who howled no matter if it hailed, rained or the clouds just beat it towards the town of Radomir, leaving the sky ugly and hot above her house. Lyuda lived with her mother-in-law, at the end of the village. She could not stand it any longer in that heat, with her wailing baby and the constant chatter of her mother-in-law, a woman who left bread for the ravens.

There was a guy, Stoycho by name, in the neighboring village. He was single. She made up her mind to take her son to doc Petrov there and drop in at Stoycho's place on her way back. There was nothing wrong with her son, nothing really, but she wanted to see that Stoycho guy. She was young and the clouds bothered her. She rode their toothless horse Matey through the scorching vineyards, through the dusty maize fields, then through the pepper garden she had to water in the afternoon, all the time thinking, why

are there only old men in that lousy village. They were so many, the old geezers, more than the stones on the road. In the neighboring village, Stoycho lived with his mother. Rumors had it his heart was weak and gave him trouble.

Well, her baby son howled as though there was fire burning in his mouth when Lyuda entered Stoycho's house. Stoycho's mother, the old darling, started treating Lyuda to blackberry jam. I made it for Stoycho, you know, she explained. The old hen could have taken the baby for a while, Lyuda thought then said, "Aunt Dimka, can you mind my little Pavel while I go to the next room. I'd like to ask your son about a problem I have with my raspberries."

Then she turned to Stoycho, "Stoycho, let me see that magazine you have about the worms that eat the roots of raspberries."

When the two of them went to his room and he, scraggly and yellow in the face like the withered maize, bent over a basket full of old issues of Bulgarian Agriculture Magazine, she said, "Stop that," and pressed against him. He was thin and gaunt, like her mother-in-law's dog. Her mother-in-law was as stingy as a vice and she thought the mutt could well live on the rats he chased. Stoycho bent under Lyuda's weight, cold like a bottle of lemonade in a fridge, though it was baking hot in the room. The horizon moaned, warped by the burden of the noon. The sky had a swollen cheek and the bad tooth in it was the sun.

"Don't talk," she said, paying no attention his face went scarlet like a packet of red pepper. He gasped and he choked but she swallowed his hiccups and her blouse took the cold lemonade of his body.

"Pavel is crying, Lyuda!" Stoycho's mother shouted from the other side of the door.

"Crying won't do him any harm," Lyuda said, pressing hard against Stoycho's weak heart.

"Lyuda, come! That child of yours will burst! He's wailing!" the other side of the door shouted. Pavel, like a volcano, spurted out another howl. "Did you find the magazine, Stoycho?" his mother shrieked but he could not say, "Not yet." His words sank into Lyuda's mouth.

"Come tomorrow at my place... the house under the willows. You know where it is," Lyuda whispered, then jumped, opened the door and took her son from the arms of the old woman. The baby's shirt was wet down to his belly button.

"Doc Petrov said he's got a third tonsil in his throat. He'll spit and spatter like that until we cut it. But Pavel is still a baby, the doc said, and we'll have to wait a year or two," Lyuda explained, suckling her son. She had plenty of milk, "I'm like a cow," she said unhappily. Her breasts weighed like sacks, she had filled Stoycho's mouth and eyes with her milk, too. She had soiled his shirt, and it was a pity there was not another baby nearby she could suckle. In fact there was one, a six month old girl in a village further down by the river. Her milk was clean and strong like a cement road, so why should she waste it? Pavel put on a kilo every month with her milk, and every old man and every old woman who had trouble with their sight asked Lyuda to sprinkle some of her strong milk in the bad eye, and the eye healed.

Her mother-in-law cured some rash on her stomach with Lyuda's milk, too. When the old men cut their hands while they chopped the grass for the small chickens, they brought their cut fingers, Lyuda squirted her milk on the cut and they watched her breasts, round like the clouds above the hill. But what could old men do? Her husband picked rotten olives somewhere in Italy, and she tortured poor Stoycho. The guy was thinner than his own shirt. Didn't that vineyard have an end? Her horse Matey was exhausted, he could hardly drag his own hooves forward, and Pavel, swimming in his own drool, had finally fallen asleep

Her breasts were swollen and hurt her, she had to squeeze the milk out of them, and she hated to do that. Pavel was a lazy baby with wrong tonsils in his mouth, and he made no big efforts to suck her milk. Her breasts squirted white rivulets on his cheeks and wetted him even more. She had heard women's milk was expensive in the town of Pernik, but the ticket for the bus was so expensive she forgot about that right away. If only she could get rid of that milk. Faraway, by the road that sank into the clouds and the pieces of tattered sky, she noticed several brown dots as big as fleas. Yes, that was Boko's herd of sheep. Oh my, how come she had forgotten about Boko. He was the second single man in the district and lived in a whitewashed house in the village of Opal. He drove his sheep as if they were infantrymen from one mountain to another, all the while swearing his throat off. He was shorter than the ram whose horns he decorated with geraniums. Boko had a tractor as well, and last year, when Lyuda's husband still hadn't started itching to bury himself in Italy, Boko got drunk like an eel and drove his tractor through her mother-in-law's barn. It was then that Lyuda figured out Boko was as tall as her chin, but now when her breasts weighed a sheep each with that milk in them, she didn't think about her chin.

Lyuda had to go and water the pepper garden. In the evening, she had to weed it. That damned pepper! The more she hated it the stronger it grew. Every stalk was covered with big white blooms. The weeds in the pepper garden could hardly wait for her to turn around and suckle Pavel. They quickly threw their seeds behind her back, and on the following day they had already sprouted big and leafy. Does Boko pass by the canal or by the river on his way home with his herd, Lyuda wondered.

The village of Opal was in the midst of the wilderness. The old men there were more than the flies, the old women did not like her at all. There was not even a doctor there so she could not take Pavel to have his tonsils checked again. Boko lived with his mother if the old nanny-goat still had not

met her maker in that heat. Imagine the two hours' ride Matey would have to limp before he hauled his old hooves to Opal. Finally, Lyuda came up with an answer. Boko mowed the old men's meadows and took a two liter bottle of brandy an acre. She'd ask him to come and mow their pop's meadow under the vineyard. Bullshit, Lyuda said to herself. I can mow that meadow myself. A toddler could. Why should I ask Boko when he's as tall as my tits? If you're so smart, tell me how you'll bring him here then. He'll get drunk and he'll fall asleep in the middle of the road. So what, Lyuda reasoned. She'll go and find him.

At that moment Pavel wailed again. She had forgotten the bottle with his water in the box with Stoycho's magazines. Everybody who could run or drive moved to live in Pernik, but her husband, she wished he'd choked on a rotten olive in Italy, left her in the old village so she wouldn't think of bad things. There were two younger men in the three villages: the first on his deathbed, his heart weak like a bottle of the local beer. The second could not walk half a mile without falling drunk after the first hundred steps he took.

Oh, her smart husband that tiptoed to pick olives in Italy! He had calculated it all. She'd water the pepper garden all the time. Her father-in-law, too, was in Italy, picking olives, although it was high time he put on his new naphthalene suit and prepared for the better world where all water was brandy, and there were two pubs on each cloud. Lyuda wished there was another baby she could suckle. Her breasts hurt in the heat. How come that milk in them doesn't go sour, she wondered. Lyuda's husband left her the old Moskvich car all busted up. She could not start it and couldn't drive to Pernik. If you took a peep in a pub there, no matter which pub, you'd see a man who was tall to the ceiling and his heart never gave him the slightest trouble. "Don't go, Plamen. Don't go to pluck these frigging olives in Italy. You know what we do in the morning and in the evening. Forget about money. We'll sell the wine. We'll sell the Moskvich, too. Pavel doesn't eat

much. He's okay with my milk, and I am full of it like a dairy. I have the feeling that if you touched me below, milk will run from there, too. Before he went to climb the olive trees like a gorilla, her husband didn't go out of bed for four days.

"Are you ill, son?" her mother-in-law asked, concerned.

Lyuda was very angry, indeed. "He's not ill at all, woman. He is with me. He protects my milk from getting sour. What will Pavel eat if that happened?" Before Plamen, her husband, left for Italy, he told her, "Don't look at anybody. Listen to me carefully. Don't look at anybody. If you do, I'll kill you when I come back. You know I can always detect when you've looked at another man."

Who can I look at, Plamen? You don't have breasts that weigh a five gallon barrel each, and there is no other baby but Pavel to suckle, the vineyard has no end, sugar beet field has no end. You pluck these fucking olives in Italy and I'll stay here. Squirt more milk into the old men's eyes? In all the three villages, there is no old man whose eyes I had not squeezed milk into at least twice. Come on, Matey, old horse. We are still not going home, you know. I have to weed the pepper garden.

Lyuda bent down to weed the pepper. She left Pavel on his white sheet and she weeded, and weeded, and weeded until the pile of sour weeds became taller than Boko. It was good that Pavel started screaming, for she suckled him and relieved her breasts. Suddenly she remembered there was another baby in the village of Vladimir, the six month old girl. Petrana and Petar had adopted her. They couldn't have children for twelve years and when the small thing squeaked in their house things became happy and peaceful. Petrana and Petar went to live in Pernik first, but there was more smoke than air there and the baby was a puny one. It didn't gain enough weight, so in the beginning Lyuda wondered if its heart was okay. When little Yana fed a month on her milk, the little thing buckled up.

Come on, Matey, old boy, let's go to Petrana and Petko's place to give weak Yana some milk. I hope she'll drink much this evening and make my breast easy. And you, lazy, lazy guy, she turned to her son Pavel. You couldn't suck all my milk. Well, it's not your fault that I am like a cow. Lyuda rode five miles of the road that was full of sunset and warm wind, before she made it to Petrana and Petar's place. She saw Petar, big and slow, milking the cow in the barn, but didn't say anything to him.

"Petrana," Lyuda called out. "Bring little Yana here. I'll suckle her. You prepare a clean bottle and I'll fill it with milk for her. Quick, woman, quick. I'll burst like a grenade with that milk. Petrana, wash my Pavel, please, while I give suck to your Yana. Then give me something to eat. I'm starving. I ate only raspberries today. My belly's full of raspberries, my milk is raspberries and a million raspberry thorns are in my fingers. I'm afraid I may scratch your Yana. Yana, treasure, smile at me. Smile."

Petrana, who had been waiting twelve years for a baby, gave Pavel his bath smiling happily. She touched him so lovingly as if the boy didn't have his drool all over him. Lyuda noticed Petar's eyes on her breast as she suckled small Yana. Petar is okay, Lyuda thought then she turned around and saw Petrana ladle out delicious soup in the plates on the table.

"I'll give you more soup, Lyuda," she said beaming with happiness. "You give the kids your strong milk."

"Yes, it's strong," Lyuda said. For a split second she looked at Petar. A drop of milk dripped from her on Yana's neck. She was a lazy baby, too, and Lyuda had to pinch her nose to wake her up. Yes. It was true Petar's hair was gray. It was true he wore old patched trousers that smelled of dogs and manure, but Lyuda smelled of Matey, of dust and of horse's saddle. So what. Let her husband pluck olives. It served him right. Don't go to Italy, Plamen, please. Please, don't go. I cannot live without you.

Plamen held her fifteen minutes in his arms before he caught the bus to Italy. He and his father almost missed it on account of that.

It was true Petar's back was hunched, but, on the other hand, if it wasn't that hunched, he'd pack and go to Radomir to make twice as much money. Here he planted potatoes, herded cows and mowed for the old women. He was with his wife and probably every morning he held her in his arms.

Lyuda ate three plates of the soup, then Petrana went to bring some cherries. She had plucked them today, she said, so Lyuda could have some cherry vitamins in her milk for the kids.

While Petrana went out for the cherries, Lyuda looked at Petar once again then started squeezing milk into the bottle for little Yana. Then she looked at hunchbacked Petar. He shook in his soiled pants, patched at the knees. She saw his face. Although it was tanned by the sun it changed color, now red, now black around his eyes. The two babies slept quietly on the couch, Pavel's tonsils slept as well. Petrana had dressed Pavel in a pair of her daughter's pants.

Petrana came back with the cherries, a big, full bag of them, and Petar said, "I'll go and give Matey some barley. Poor soul, he's been under the scorching sun all day."

"I was there, too," Lyuda told him. She thought she was stronger than Matey, but didn't say so. The two women talked about Pavel's tonsils, and about fruit juices they were supposed to give the babies. Finally, she wrapped Pavel in his white sheet, propped him with a pillow on the couch and went to check Matey that was blissfully chewing his barley. Petar smoked by his side, the cigarette like an open wound on his mouth. He stood up and moved restlessly as Lyuda approached him, then left his place to make way for her, but she did not go the way he had made for her. She went directly against him, she collided with him, with his old patched

trousers, and with his shirt she collided, making it all wet with her milk. Stay quiet, she said. Yes, it was true he smelled exactly as Matey did, like the stables at the end of the village. But if one took a walk through the vineyard or if one weeded the pepper garden, one stopped smelling of Matey. "Wait. Wait," she said. He was hot like the stones of the stream that had run dry under the heat of the yellow clouds. She thought she had squeezed all her milk into that bottle, but Petar's chest was white all over with it. Then his shirt was a white cemented shield and her milk was stronger than ever. "Now go to Petrana. Quick. Hold them in your arms, both of them, Petrana and Yana," she whispered into his ear. But then, again, Lyuda didn't go the way he had made for her. She bumped into his soiled pants, patched at the knees, for a second time. Pavel suddenly wept and kicked in little Yana's pants that he had already wetted. Matey went on eating his barley, the best food the old horse had seen for years.

"You are so late. Where did you go?" her mother-in-law asked when Lyuda came home and left Pavel on the bed, wet like a fish, drool and milk all over him. His tonsils were evidently at work again, ruining the little guy's peace and quiet.

"I visited Aunt Petrana and Uncle Petar, " Lyuda answered. "I suckled little Yana. She is as thin as wire. I left her a bottle of milk, too, and while Matey chewed his barley, Petrana gave me something delicious to eat."

"Good. It's good you help her with that child," her mother-in-law said. "Petrana's had hard times, those doctors, hospitals and all. But now that she has her Yana, she's settled down. Listen, your aunt Malina came and said that the grass in Pop's meadow was ripe enough. You have to mow it, Lyuda. Tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow . . . Listen, I almost forgot. Stoycho came here an hour ago. He brought some agricultural magazine for you . . . there's something in it about worms in the raspberries. I thought

there were no worms on the raspberries this year. He left ten minutes ago... long and thin like a thread. His heart's no good. I am sorry for him."

"I am sorry for him, too," Lyuda heaved a sigh.

"The poor soul," the old woman went on. "He plodded five kilometers in the heat to tell you about that worm. He trudged all that dusty road in vain. I am sorry for him, he is a sick man."

"I wish I came back half an hour earlier," Lyuda said.

Pavel turned around on the bed and gave out a howl. It sounded like he had a beehive in his mouth. Lyuda gave him her breast. She had suckled little Yana, she had left a liquorice bottle, full of milk for her and she dripped milk again. Where did that milk come from? She was afraid to think what would happen when the grapes would be ripe. Then probably she'd drip a white milky path after Matey's tail in the fields. She wished she could go to Pernik. Women's milk there was more expensive than these bottles of French perfume, which transformed you into a lady. Never in her life had such a lady weeded a pepper garden, nor shoveled manure into a truck. There was not even one old man in Pernik, and not one old-fashioned suit. The pubs there were full of tall men. Well, her husband Plamen held her fifteen minutes in his arms before he caught that bus, it was true. But how could she live with fifteen minutes a whole year until Plamen made enough money to buy an apartment in Pernik? Plamen, don't go. I can't live without you, she said several times, but he went.

Now she wished she had come back home earlier. Stoycho could have told her about the worm that ate the roots of the raspberries.

"Lyuda," her mother-in-law said. "You send a word to Boko...Oh, don't tell me you don't remember who Boko is. A small guy, as short as a keg. He's a shepherd."

"Yes, yes. I know him," Lyuda said and wiped the milk from her son's cheek.

"You told my cousin to go and ask Boko to come and mow our Pop's meadow. Didn't you mow that meadow last year, Yuda? You did, and you were pregnant at that time. Yes, I remember. You had Pavel in your big belly when you mowed it."

"We'll see," Lyuda said. "I have to dig the vineyard, I have to put manure in the bean field and I have to water the maize. I have to pick the raspberries, too, so I said to myself that Boko could help us."

"Well, yes. You know these things better than I do. I forgot to tell you that Boko... the poor guy is no bigger than one of his sheep, you know. And he didn't grow up because he drank from an early age. So Boko came here in the afternoon to ask when you wanted him to mow our pop's meadow. Lyuda, give me a glass of water, will you?"

Lyuda gave her some water and the old woman went on, "Boko said that tomorrow he'd find you in the maize field under the vineyard. You'll go to water the maize tomorrow, won't you? Tell the guy when he's to start mowing. Oh, you are blessed with your milk, you can take my word for that. And Pavel is such a handsome baby, Lyuda. Let me touch wood. Let me touch wood just in case. He sucks your milk as vigorously as a calf, and he's so strong. Lyuda, be tomorrow, about seven p.m. in the maize field. Boko will come there and talk to you about Pop's meadow. Did you hear me. Lyuda?"

She had told Plamen not to go to Italy. We'll make enough money, she had said. But he was hard-headed, he went to pick the rotten olives there. "Yes, I heard you, "Lyuda muttered. "I'll be waiting for him there in the maize field, under Pop's meadow."