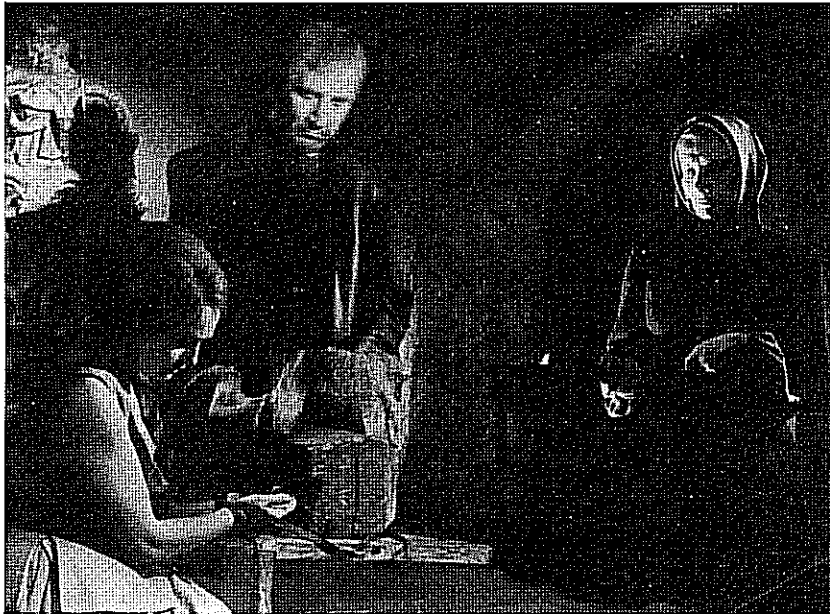


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THE SELF-SOWN



A scene from the film "The Self-Sown"
(VIBA FILM Production, 1963)
Directed by Igor PRETNAR

On a muggy summer day my friend Lipuš Košat and I had been wandering for two hours already, when we finally slumped down on our backs to rest; we had reached one of the northern slopes of the mighty Obir mountain range. This slope, together with many others, forms that gently rolling landscape which to the north levels out towards the Drava river; it looks as if some wrinkled roots of the Obir mountain have been drinking and sucking river juices to sustain life since time immemorial. One of these roots, the mightiest among them, had boldly defied the Drava and had twisted its course backwards to the northwest; in this way, the Podjuna valley, the heart of the Carinthia province, had been formed. At the top of this particular slope, which was called Karnice, there lived in the olden days a farming family named Karničnik. The owner, Karničnik, was known also under the name of Bonfireman, because the Karničniks had the right and duty to light bonfires on the Midsummer Eve. Therefore, they were known not only in the neighbouring Podjuna and in the lower valley of Rož but in every part of Carinthia from which you could see the bonfires.

The Karničnik homestead was among the first, if not the very first, in this part of the land, to become the victim of the so-called farmers' plague,¹ a disease which in the second half of the previous century destroyed hundreds of farms strewn on the slopes of the Karavanke mountains. Nowadays, the Karnice are the property of the county, and there remains practically nothing of its former pride. The fields had been planted over with trees, and beautiful forests have overgrown them twice already; of farm buildings nothing but a wooden shack and a sheep pen remain, the two now providing a dwelling for a poor tenant, a lumberjack; the fields that remain around the shack can barely provide food for two, three cows and a few sheep.

¹ Sales of family farms, often due to mortgage foreclosures. (All notes by translator)

All the traces of the once mighty farmhouse of Karnice had sunk into the ground long ago; there is only one spot, the spot where once stood the fireplace and the bread-oven, where a heap of rubble can still be seen, not quite overgrown with grass. Around the shack a few lonely, scraggly pear trees and wild apple trees smothered in mountain moss survive like grey ghosts. And all around this miserable dwelling black woods crawl, throwing their gloomy shadows.

"This house must have an interesting history," Lipuš Košat began our conversation after we had cooled down a little. "I mean, each of these farms that were swallowed by the 'farmers plague', each farm that slipped from the farmer's hand into those of the county, surely has its very own story. The story, I mean, of how it came to this change of ownership, what gave it the last push."

He gazed at the dreary scenery of the decaying farmhouse and its surroundings; he was sad and disturbed.

We turned towards the shack down below, near the woods. It was wrapped in that particular stillness reaching down from the mountains, a quiet filled with the incessant burbling of the water pouring out of a moss-covered pipe and falling into a wide through in a mighty arch. This pipeline was most likely one of the surviving monuments to the once mighty estate of Karnice. The wooden hut itself was surely over two hundred years old; it was built in that attractive alpine style, which - with its sprawling ease and its gables at each end - blends so nicely with its surroundings that a more artistic design could not be imagined. The walls of the dwelling were blackened and cracked because of age and wind. The only thing that spoiled the appearance of the wooden house were the windows which were too large and framed too rigidly by someone eagerly trying to keep in step with our times of modernization.

We did not notice anybody near or around the house. It

looked as if no one was at home, even though the entrance door stood open. We were about to enter, when we were intercepted by an old woman who appeared on the doorstep:

"We have nothing ourselves, we are just poor tenants."

The old lady aroused our interest. When she realized that we had no intention of bothering her, she calmed down, yet nothing changed on her yellowish, wide face; only from the movements of her body could we see that a stone had rolled off her chest. It would have been difficult to guess her age from her appearance. Her stooped body testified that she might have been close to eighty, her lively movements suggested twenty year less, but her shining eyes in which the fire hadn't yet died and her thick hair, hardly touched with silver, took away another ten. Visible satisfaction brightened up her face for a flitting moment when she heard us speak Slovene; people she met around here as a rule were strangers, either beggars or tourists and gentlemen who spoke German nearly exclusively.

After we had spoken a few words, the old lady sat down, exhausted, on the bottom step of the smoke-blackened staircase leading from the hall to the attic; we realized she did not consider us a nuisance any more. The smell of soot-covered walls and their pleasant coolness embraced us with hospitality; so we, too, sat down on the doorstep beside the old lady.

"It this all that is left of the old time Karnice?" asked Košat without any preliminaries; he was eager to draw some kind of information out of the old woman.

Granny did not budge, however; Košat had to spin on.

"How long has it been since Karnice became the property of the county?"

"Karnice was sold in 1875."

Her dry voice echoed with a particular kind of passion, which Košat's ear caught immediately.

"Grandma, what happened? How come they sold Karnice?"

"That's an ugly story." The old woman cut her answer short as if she wanted to stifle a newly awakened emotion. But before we had managed to pry any further, her eyes flashed in their deep recesses, and in their light her whole sallow face became strangely younger; something cracked in her chest as if a secret string had snapped, and then, unexpectedly, the following story of Karnice came pouring out in one vehement stream.

At Karnice, an old family had lived for longer than anyone remembered, and they had always been rich. The estate comprised three hundred acres of farmland, and their property reached down three slopes of the mountain, all the way down into the valley, as if Karnice rested on three mighty legs, like pillars driven into the land down below. In the back, their land leaned on the high walls of the Obir. They say that in the past, the property of Karnice reached right up to the top of the Obir; however, that part was taken away from them by the authorities for one reason or another. It seems that it was from those days that the Karničniks had had the right to burn bonfires on the Obir. Because of that they were well known far into the Carinthian land, at least as far away as one could see from the Karnice heights. And Karnice was situated at the highest point on the northern slopes of the Obir, and from that point one could see all the country down to the Savinja valley, up to the Dobra mountain and beyond the town of Šentvid. Everyone knows that the Karničniks never performed any serf duties in the olden days, and that they never paid tithes, but always paid their dues in gold. - The slopes of the mountain, where black forest stands these days, were covered with gently rolling fields, and on the farm over thirty head of cattle and over a hundred sheep grazed; in addition, the property comprised two cottages situated at the bottom of the slope, and each of these was able to support a few oxen as well.

The Karničniks were well-known not only because they were

a wealthy, mighty family; they were also famous for their pride, stubbornness and selfishness. These qualities were bred into them at their family hearth; but they were also the result of arranged, important marriages. The mistresses of Karnice always came from powerful homes in the near and far neighbourhood. The Karničnik family ties reached into wealthy, influential homes all the way across the Drava valley. Pride and conceit ruled in the Karničnik house, and it was this conceit that precipitated Karnice towards its miserable end.

My story begins some hundred years ago, at the time when the second to the last Karničnik ruled at Karnice. He had three children, two sons and one daughter. According to the custom, the heir to the farm was to be Ožbej, the oldest son; for this reason his father had sent him away to learn how to read and write, and in order that the boy learn German he sent him as an exchange worker far beyond the Svinec mountain. In addition, he arranged that his son be exempt from military service.

When Ožbej was twenty years old, a new maid was hired for general work at Karnice, a girl who came from one of the gullies around there, Meta Hudabivnik. The Hudabivniks were poor people who lived in a shanty and supported themselves as farm hands, poachers, resin gatherers and charcoal dealers. Because of this, and because their house was always swarming with children, they were considered bad people, even though they were as honest as any of their neighbours. It is hard to be poor, even nowadays; at that time, however, in the olden days, when a poor man had no rights whatsoever, poverty was even harder to bear and even more disgraceful. Probably this was the very reason why the Hudabivniks were given such a wicked name.² The children's godparents were the Karničniks.

² Hudabivnik means "The Evil One."

At the age of seventeen, Meta was the most comely wench in the whole parish, and most likely in the whole Podjuna valley. She was of medium height, her face was fair, her eyes blue, her hair dark and long as strands of hemp; her skin was velvety and her figure as slender as a pine on the Obir. Her godmother, the mistress of Karnice, soon realized the grave danger in which the young maid Meta found herself. Therefore, she urged her to practice self-restraint and repentance, and made her say more rosaries than the whole family did altogether.

Meta had hardly stepped over the threshold of her seventeenth year, when she already became big with Ožbej.

In the house the news struck like a bolt of lightning. This was an abominable event, and for two days nobody cared much for food. A horrible nightmare lay down over the house:

"Same for Karnice..."

The first thing Karničnik did was to put Ožbej across his knees and beat him like a five-year-old child. Nobody lay a finger on Meta. But as soon as her bad luck became known, she was not allowed to sit at the table any more. They locked her away in a chamber, where dissolving in tears, she waited for the judgement.

The following day they sent for the old mother Hudabivnik, who, being a widow, also represented the girl's father. When she came running to Karnice like a confused beast, she burst into sobs as soon as she crossed the gate:

"Meta, Meta, what have you done?..."

Her cries penetrated the walls of Meta's chamber. The girl, however, was unable to answer her mother because she was suffocating with weeping and cramps in her exhausted bosom.

The two Karničniks received her mother like two judges:

"Look here, Hudabivka,³ see what shame you piled on our

³ Voranc used the following feminized forms of the surname Hudabivnik: Hudabivka, Hudabivnica, Hudabela.

house?..."

The face of the miserable mother showed more fear than anger because of what had happened. How could it have been otherwise? At home she had three more small children, and two others - although younger than Meta - were already working as shepherds under the Olševa mountain.

After that, Meta wasn't mentioned any more. Hudabivka was offered a seat at the table and was shown hospitality according to the old customs, as if nothing had happened. Mother Hudabivnik felt as if she was eating poison, but in order not to offend the hospitality of the house, she forced herself to eat. The house was quiet; except for the master and mistress, no one was seen anywhere; a holy horror permeated everything.

"Listen, Hudabivnica, I don't want to make your heart any heavier than it quite justly already is. Through you shame came on our house, and you are responsible for what you gave birth to. We are not guilty of anything; no one could have supervised Meta better than we did. Nevertheless, so that nobody will be able to spread any idle gossip, I will deposit thirty florin - for fifteen florin you could, at that time, buy a pair of oxen - with the county administration; and for this you will swear on your blood and soul that Karnice will never again hear either of you or Meta or the bastard. At the castle in Dobrlaves I will make the necessary arrangements so that Meta won't be able to get any kind of job in the neighbourhood - and the Hudabivniks no shack of any kind."

Hudabivnica was choking with fear. Karničnik continued:

"This is the first matter which we have attended to in this way; the second one, now, is penitence. You know how such things have always been punished. At one time whores were tied to the pillory in front of the church. That was a tough penitence. Let's decide now on the type of punishment for Meta. Let me tell you that I have the right to decide because

I am the godfather and am substituting for her father. - Ožbej I have already punished to such an extent that he won't forget it as long as he lives."

The man spoke as if chopping wood. His expression was relentless, his eyes shone with hatred. Hudabivka was so afraid that her jaws rattled, and she thought of her shack, her old mother and her three young ones.

"I don't know, I don't know anything, father Karničnik..."

But Karničnik's condemning voice droned on:

"Flax and eternal shame."

"Flax and shame!"

"Flax and shame, this is the penitence I've decided to mete out to her. Penitence is necessary in order to atone for the offence committed by your wretched Meta against the honour of this house."

After that the preparations for an ancient rite of chastisement began, the right in accordance with which they used to punish fornication in proud old houses. The mistress covered the table with a white cloth. Karničnik put on it a skein of unspun flax. Then he called from the smoke-room¹ in an authoritative voice.

"Ožbej!" And the son, who was nowhere to be seen before, dragged himself into the smoke-room and collapsed on the bench beside the stove.

The mistress brought in Meta and seated her down at the table in such a way that she faced the crucifix in the corner of the room. Her face was bloated with weeping and sorrow, her eyes bloodshot with burning tears.

"Mother, mother," she cried out as soon as she noticed the old Hudabivka, and she wanted to throw herself into her arms.

The old Hudabivka's body contracted as in a mortal spasm,

¹ smoke-rom - the main dwelling area in an oldfashioned farmhouse, a smoke-filled living room and kitchen combined.

but, realizing that her daughter was guilty and that she herself was a poverty-stricken woman, confronted with the mightiness of Karnice, she suppressed her motherly love and pushed her daughter back towards the bench.

"Mother, mother, are you cursing me, too?" Meta screamed.

Her mother, stiff with fear, could not answer.

A horrible tension lay over the smoke-room, a nightmare permeated with a peculiar solemnity. Meta, who was not quite sure what was happening, looked in vain for an explanation on the faces of those around her. Through her tears she saw her crushed, timid mother, supporting herself against the wall, and the crushed figure of Ožbej beside the stove, a figure that did not resemble his real self at all. She saw Karničnik's severe, cold, pitiless face, and she saw the insensitise face of her mistress, in which she could not discern anything except a burning hatred for her. This hateful face did not change a bit when the woman asked harshly:

"Want to eat anything, Meta?"

The girl did not touch the food offered to her.

Upset and confused because of the mysterious preparations, and also because the whole house seemed empty and dead, because no member of the household appeared from anywhere, although three male servants, the daughter of the masters, and three female servants lived in the farmhouse, she cried out in despair:

"What do you intend to do with me?..."

Her voice pierced the mystery-saturated air in supplication, but it received no answer.

When they had had enough of these painful preparations, the merciless Karničnik stepped towards Meta.

"You miserable wench, what do you have to say to yourself?"

His voice was dry and harsh.

Meta only looked at him timidly, as if she did not understand

him.

"I'm asking you if you repent of what you've done?"

Only now Meta understood what the master was saying. More with heart than with her lips, she exclaimed:

"Oh, Father,⁵ I repent of this sin from the bottom of my heart" Father, Mother, forgive me..."

This heart-rending supplication entreating Karničnik to show mercy and compassion was beaten down with his next question:

"Do you renounce this sinful affair forever?"

This question pierced Meta's bleeding heart. In her childlike inexperience she did not understand Karničnik's question the way he had asked it; she saw no other consequences stemming from her wounded young love than those which were already obvious. She thought neither about Karnice nor the honour of the house; only her young love burned with a hot self-sacrificing flame of pure dedication to Ožbej, a man she had chosen among all others, a human being closest to her, whose beauty she had experienced with all her heart.

And Karničnik received no answer to his question.

But before he was able to repeat the question and reiterate it so harshly that the young girl's heart would collapse, and she would fall down on her knees in front of him, Meta burst into impassioned weeping, and her crying filled the old house to the roof. Instead of giving an answer, she burst out:

"What are you going to do to my child and yours?"

"Shut up, you sinful woman!"

A stone would soften sooner than Karničnik's heart. Slowly, as if he were rolling a chopping block, he brought from a corner a heavy carpenter's bench and placed it in front of the table. When Meta saw the bench, a flax cord and a bunch of flax fiber, it hit her what was in store for her. She cried out

from her horror-stricken heart:

"Mother, mother, defend me..."

Her eyes caught the eyes of her mother, but she was traying in vain to find in them what she was looking for. Her mother collapsed like a heap of misery behind the table, her face grey; but from her eyes, swollen with tears she had wept, something shone, something like consolation, encouragement and a silent disgust of a soul who in its misery felt that it was being unjustly humiliated.

"Meta, be firm and strong; what you are suffering; suffer for the salvation of your soul."

Her voice was brave.

Meta's heart could not comprehend it, however; therefore, she turned for protection to her lover:

"Ožbej, Ožbej..."

Her call was not in vain: Ožbej, who had sat there with his face buried in the palms of his hands, jumped to the middle of the room:

"Father, punish me, it is my fault..."

But his father broke him with a single cold, menacing glance, without having to reach out with his hand.

"On your knees, son!" the old one thundered above him, and Ožbej, crushed and broken, collapsed on his knees beside the bench and he again buried his head in his hands. Meta saw the slight tremor of his body, and although she was half dead herself, there was in her heart room for silent compassion for her devastated lover.

At that moment the iron fist of her master touched her. She was overcome with horror and disgust, yet she found enough strength to get up, walk towards the carpenter's bench with a firm step and sit down on the torture stool, resigned to her fate. Her mother's behaviour, as well as pity for Ožbej, filled her with courage of which she had not been conscious a few moments earlier. Her sobbing subsided, and tears which

⁵ "Father," "Mother" - the terms used by servants in addressing their masters.

were still pouring from her eyes were not those bitter tears that flow because of some heart-felt misery; and even these dried up soon; the feeling of her new-found strength grew inside her as she sat down on the torture bench, placing her hands on it in such a way that her cruel master could tie her wrists to the wood with her palms upturned and forming a tight, rounded bowl.

Meta's grief had burned itself out during her imprisonment in the chamber; the shame to which she had been exposed after the discovery of her unfortunate condition, had pushed her to the limits of her endurance. Yet now, everything that she was going through - when on the one hand, together with her mother, she felt her poverty, her insignificance and her worthlessness, and on the other, the cruel mercilessness of her employers as well as their choking hatred, and on top of all that her trampled-down love for Ožbej - cleared her mind and filled her with new strength. Deep inside her awoke her offended pride, and a hidden resentment, which kept growing, had filled her completely just at the moment when the torture began.

She realized that she had to accept the suffering as an unavoidable battle against injustice and that in this, although unequal battle, she had to win.

"Work fast, father Karničnik," she said in a strong disdainful voice.

The penance consisting of the burning of flax in someone's hands was an old-time right of free farmers⁶; they were allowed to punish their servants this way for adultery, theft, disobedience, sloth and other sins. About a hundred years ago this cruel custom was still practised here and there, but later on it disappeared. This type of punishment is a lot worse then it seems. Smoldering flax does not sear only the palms

⁶ As opposed to the formerly dependent peasants, or serfs.

and the fingers, it does not only scorch the skin right down to the living flesh, it burns with hellish pain through the brain, the heart and through all the organs of the body. Flax burns slowly, without a flame, but it burns so intensely that even the strongest people cannot bear the torture for longer than a brief period of time.

When Meta's enemy, the master of Karnice, lit the flax, his clean-shaven face remained deathly calm. When she felt the first bolt of searing pain, she instinctively tried to wrench her hands out of the binding rope, but since they were tied to the heavy bench securely, only her body twisted helplessly. After that, the stench of burning flesh soon spread around. Meta's eyes got larger and larger, bulging out of their recesses; her forehead became wet with sweat born of torture. The martyr bit her lips in order to endure her suffering and to suppress her moaning.

Her mother, Hudabivka, who had fallen on her knees, clasped her hands in prayer and, turned towards the crucifix in the corner, chanted the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary. "Jezus, who sweated blood for us..." Her muffled voice now utterly foreign, unknown and hollow, echoed through the large smoke-room. The custom required that all those present prayed aloud throughout the torture. This time it seemed that only Meta's mother was praying. Karničnik carefully loaded bits of fresh flax onto Meta's burning palms, and with his other hand pushed her bound wrists with all his might against the bench to prevent the martyr from moving; through all this his lips were twisted in passionate pleasure stemming from the evil core of his hatred.

Mother Karničnik leaned on the wall and stared fixedly at Meta; her face showed that her lips were not answering Hudabivka's sorrowful rosary. Ožbej remained on his knees beside the stove, contracting into an even smaller heap and burying his face deeper and deeper. From the trembling of his

body one could judge that deep inside he was praying with Hudabivka.

Meta tried to join in her mother's prayer, at least silently, in order to retain her strength; in prayer her suffering soul was searching for support, but her mind found none. Therefore, she became confused at the very beginning, and as a result, she began groaning with pain.

Hudabivka prayed eagerly and quickly:

"Who was scourged for us..."

"Who was scourged for us..."

And even more eagerly and faster:

"Who carried the heavy cross for us..."

According to the old custom the torture was not supposed to exceed the duration of the recital of the sorrowful mystery of the rosary, if the judge had not stopped it even sooner. Karničnik, however, remained merciless to the very end, completely absorbed in his bloody task. With greedy eyes he kept placing one ball of flax after another on Meta's palms. On her fingers the flesh was already separating from the bone, and the stench spread over the smoke-room more and more thickly.

Meta, straining and twisting with pain, seemed to have reached the limit of her endurance. Her breathing became more and more laboured and louder and louder as she tried to suppress her moaning. From time to time her body doubled up in such a spasm that the bench shook under her. Towards the end, Meta's groaning drowned her mother's breathless prayer.

"Who was crucified for us..."

Once, twice... ten times...

Then the rosary rattled to the floor. Hudabivka threw herself on Meta... the bloody torture was over. Karničnik untied Meta's hands and then quickly blew the ash from her palms, disclosing one big, huge, burnt wound filled with swollen flesh

and exposed veins.

Meta shot up, but immediately she collapsed into her mother's arms, her hands limp at her sides.

"The justice of this world has been served - to satisfy the justice of the other is up to you..."

With these words Karničnik finished his job. After that he paid no attention to her any more.

Meta was completely drunk with pain and she blindly followed her mother, who gently embraced her around the waist and led her out of the house, trying to whisk her from the presence of these merciless people as fast as she could.

At the door, however, they were intercepted by Karničnica, who, up to that moment, had been sitting as if carved of wood. Hudabivka quickly pulled Meta after herself across the high doorstep as if she wanted to protect her from a new attack. But in the hall, Karničnica, with a single push, tore Meta out of her mother's arms, took hold of her and attacked her with undescrivable hatred. She furiously pulled the scarf off Meta's head, grabbed her hair and kicked her over the threshold, so that she flew out of the house in a high arch and landed on her face.

"You damn whore..."

Karničnica swore and at the same time she threw all of Meta's things after her, her dresses and her underwear, all of which amounted to not more than a small bag. Then she slammed the door against the door frame with such a force that the whole house shook.

Now the second part of Meta's punishment began: Public exposure and abuse in front of the household from which she had been ejected forever. In those days nearly every girl who had transgressed against the peasant moral code was punished by public disgrace, especially if she had sinned against an important family; the consequences of such punishment remained vivid long after the flax had stopped burning.