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# Book One

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I.

There once lived a boy who loved darkness. But the more he dreamed of a great night that would forever cover Lacki Roma with its blanket, the more forcefully did light penetrate his world. Finally his mother, Tereza, forbade him to close his eyes during the day. If she caught him with his eyes shut, she pulled on his ears; one backwards and one forwards. Or she yanked his hair so furiously that his scalp ached the remainder of the day. At the same time she shrieked, imploring God to finally open the boy's eyes, for only those who traveled the world with their eyes wide open could hope not to stray.

The boy could not make out her prayer, since it did not seem to him that he was going anywhere.

Then one day they also took away his nights.

His father, Mariška, who would always return just when the boy had forgotten about him, came wandering back once again—this time to stay. There were cuts and scratches on his chest and stomach that Tereza had to wash out with soapy water. Then she slathered the wounds with hedgehog grease and plastered them with fresh grasses. But Mariška was not particularly grateful for her care and concern; invisible wounds evidently smarted far worse. *Baba\* Hotile wished a hundred times over they'd cut off my head—and now they will too!* he repeated over and over. *Damn, goddamn, a hundred times damn Baba Hotile and her crazy head and her crazy mind!* he raged, lying on the cot. *I'd kick her in her trap if she could still open it! I'd slice her back to ribbons, if she still had one!*

*Let Baba be!* Tereza pleaded with him. *Baba's dead. You're not supposed to blame the dead for anything.*

*It was Baba Hotile and none other!* howled Mariška. *No other baba ever predicted my death! All of them—all the bags in the world always said I'd live in style and go that way too, except for Baba*

\* baba - grandmother or old woman in general, also an old crone

*Hotile—she couldn't get it into her head! Damn, goddamn, a hundred times damn Baba Hotile and her crazy head and her crazy mind—she couldn't get her head around it and I can't get my life around it, that's how it is—it's all her fault!*

*You must've done something terrible, eh?! Tereza now grew despaired.*

*Done something, I've done shit!* shouted Mariška. *Just let someone point a finger at me—his finger will wither! Let someone say one word—his tongue will stiffen! Let someone come after me—a thunderbolt will blast him into poppy seeds!* he raved all night and wouldn't allow the oil lamp to be put out.

The boy burrowed under his blanket, but there was no darkness there either to dream himself into. He tossed and turned on the brink of sleep and in vain tried to kick his way out of the scarlet light that scorched him like live fire. Then, through this intrusive light seared the outline of his father's intrusive face. His stiff whiskers tickled the boy's nose, his dry chapped lips slid along the boy's forehead, only occasionally touching him warmly. *What did you say the kid's name was?* Mariška turned toward the mother in the middle of the kiss that was so unpleasant to the boy.

*Ob!* she drew in her breath. *Heaven and earth, you've even forgotten his name again!?*

*Forgotten! I haven't forgotten anything!* the old man lost his temper. *The kid's simply Kid! It's just that now I'd like to know his real, Christian name. God knows I don't want to die before I hear and memorize his name.*

*It's Šanji,* Tereza finally answered.

*Šanji?* a surprised Mariška turned to face his wife. *Eh, eh! Crazy female mind, you crazy woman's head—how could you give my child a name like that?* And he bent over the boy again and asked him: *Are you really Šanji?*

*Šanji,* whispered the boy, who was, by this time, wide awake.

*Šanji!?* repeated the old man. And then to himself: *Šanji! Šanji! Šanji? No—that won't do! That won't do at all! It's just that,* he nibbled at his fingernail, *where do I find the time now to think of another, proper name? They can come after me at any moment! Any minute now the vultures can waltz in through the door!*

*Mariška!* Tereza presently called to him in a subdued and changed voice. *Have you really done something so horrible that*

*they'll take you away now and make you die? Or have you only, the Lord willing, gone out of your mind?*

*It's true alright,* mumbled the husband. *The OZNA\* has got it in for me!* Then he lay down just long enough to unleash his tears and gather new strength. *You, Kid,* he whispered to the boy. *I never had enough time to ever think of you. Or to ask God to watch over you while I was away. I never even brought you a handful of candy, though I should've showed you sugar at least, so that you'd know there are sweet things in this world too. And see, now that I honestly want to do all these things, I'm out of time again! The OZNA agents will be here any minute—to hell with them and let the devil shit on their heads!* He spit high into the air and stood up before the spittle came hurtling back.

When he knocked over his wooden suitcase, it rumbled hollowly, fatefully.

When he opened it, only a white violin lay on the bottom.

\* OZNA - the secret police in Yugoslavia after World War II (as feared as the KGB in the Soviet Union)

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**M**ariška resolved to teach the Kid how to play the violin before the OZNA came. He shoved and pressed the instrument under the boy's chin, turning it this way and that and adjusting it. He poked the boy with it and struck at his fingers, making the boy whimper and clench his teeth. He shifted the boy's hands on the bridge and helped him navigate the bow, making the strings groan and squeal. Tereza observed this torture for a while, then took pity on the boy and started screeching at the old man to leave the child alone, at least now, in the middle of the night. But Mariška, who kept glancing at the doorway as though the OZNA agents were going to peep through the tarpaulin at any moment, pushed her away and even whacked her with the violin a few times. He feverishly explained to his son how to correctly pluck the strings and how to draw out the most beautiful sounds with the bow. He lovingly stroked the boy's sweaty forehead, only to poke and pinch him a moment later, and swear at him as though he were a beast.

*If you're first string, you'll be the boss and tell everyone what to do! he told him. If you're second fiddle, you'll only have one guy above you who can order you about! he shouted into the boy's ears amidst their terrible music. And even if you're just a common fiddler, people won't be able to push you around as they please—oh, no! Just be careful you always have some money tucked away in a secret pocket! he waved the bow in the boy's face. You always have to have at least enough to buy a new fiddle in case someone smashes yours over your head or some drunk broad pisses in it.*

The boy nodded and fiddled and sniffled.

Because as soon as he'd caught some piece of advice or a snatch of melody in the midst of all the havoc which was making him dizzy and paralyzing his fingers, the old man drew the bow differently and sang a different tune. Only occasionally would Mariška be so overcome by a sad song that he took the instrument into his own hands and played it himself. Then the boy could close his eyes for a few moments and rub his

sore hands. And the mother could sigh loudly that the old man's senses must have gotten befuddled by blood and that it would be best if the devil came to claim him.

But now Mariška laughed and serenaded her.

*My wife, oh my wife, what will you do*, he played next to her ear, *what will you do when I die, when I die*, he gently leaned the fiddle on her shoulder, *and I'll die for sure, yet I don't have enough money even to get drunk*.

Then Tereza cried.

Mariška swore loudly and asked the boy: *Do you see how white my violin is? Why do you think this violin's so white?*

The kid just shrugged.

*So that you can find it if you ever lose it at night!* the old man taught him and pushed the fiddle back under the boy's chin.

The bedlam in Mariška's shack roused the entire settlement. First the old men started coughing. Then the babies became restless. Their mothers raised their voices and sullenly cajoled the children back to sleep. Half-awake, the men grumbled and swore until their sleepy anger inflamed them, and they sat up sharply in their cots. In short: All of Lacki Roma came to a boil and bubbled like a Gypsy stew. And that was definitely cause enough for alarm. Torn from their dreams, the neighbors called to one another through the thin walls of their reed-huts and wooden shacks to ask about the commotion. They cursed Gypsies, they lamented their common lot and tried to guess whose anguish had this time been uncorked.

Finally old Čejč raised the canvas hanging over the doorway and, bowed double, peeked into the interior. *A dog's work, Mariška!* he yelped in his lispy voice. *Honest folk sleep while you people carry on as though you've eaten funny mushrooms!*

Next to Čejč's gray head the even grayer head of his wife Marga bobbed, and she added: *What funny mushrooms, Čejč! Not even store-bought poison has any effect on these Gypsies! They won't rest until they rip the last nerve out of us old people who gave them their souls and brought them into this world!*

Mariška, who'd been bewitched by the music, remembered the OZNA again. With a jerk he jumped up and banged his head against the ceiling beam. He howled and rubbed the painful spot with both hands. The blanket he'd held wrapped around him slipped down, revealing the open wound.

*Hoo!* exhaled the faces in the doorway. By now others had crowded around Čejč and Marga.

*A dog's work, Mariška!* lisped and spluttered Čejč again. *What in the world is going on here? You have such a disaster in the house, while we sleep like sheep and don't even hear you calling for help!*

*I'm not calling for anything or anyone!* Mariška at last regained his breath. *Why bother calling when I know I'm beyond help?*

*Eh, man, man!* Marga rubbed her palms together and wiped them on her skirt. *What are you raving about—if it's just your guts that are hanging out, we can stuff them back in.*

*Nothing's hanging out, Marga,* the wounded man placed his hand over his bloodstained stomach, and his laceration ceased to seem so very dreadful. *It's just that, he gazed gloomily at the multiplying faces, other, grimmer things are looming over me! The kind of things, my people, that neither God nor the devil can help me with!*

The crowd pressed closer and breathlessly waited for him to finally reveal his plight. Also Tereza and the boy, in whose lap rested the white violin, stretched their necks in curiosity. For a moment Lacki Roma was pervaded by the silence of foreboding. And into this silence, which created the impression that the whole world was listening, Mariška uttered: *I knifed an OZNA agent!*

A huge fire roared in the communal hearth.

Gathered around it, they pondered and speculated about the fugitive's fate.

And although Mariška kept protesting, the men were firm in their decision. Down to the last one, they agreed to build barricades on all the trails leading into Lacki Roma, to defend one of their own to the last ounce of their strength. *Let them come, let them try!* yelled Fat Babič. *They'll learn once and for all that Gypsies are people too.* Scabby Fico sharpened his long hunting knife with a black stone and shaved the hairs off his forearm.

But then old Čejč sowed the first seed of doubt.

*Let's think this over, people, let's think it over!* he spluttered. *I don't have anything against your plans, but let's just think them over! OZNA men are partisans—worse than partisans! And not even the Germans could weed them out!*

*Eeh!* Scabby Fico waved his sharpened knife. *The Germans weren't beaten by OZNA agents or by partisans, but by the Russians! That's why I'm telling you: The OZNA are shit! The partisans are shit! And we Gypsies are Russians!*

But the majority abandoned their previous determination. They fidgeted and exchanged glances until it seemed obvious to everyone that Mariška should simply be hidden. *That's right, hide him!* Lame Miška finally had his say. *I tell you people, there are holes under our shacks—and only I can tell you that, because I*



*built all your backs—holes where no man nor dog nor God can find you once you're in them. But we have to do it as soon as possible, and then patch things up!*

*Let's do it!* Fat Babič sprang to his feet.

*And then we'll give them the finger—let them search for a man who sank into the ground!* Scabby Fico drove his knife into the dirt.

*All right, people, all right!* old Čejč lisped again. *But let me tell you this—I know, and so do those of you who survived the great war—these devils often burned down the whole house because of one hidden man! And it's also true that they often torched the whole village for hiding one man!*

The men fell silent.

The boy waited in vain for one of them to protest.

And when he then unsteadily looked over at his father, he saw Mariška smiling—silently and with a strange pout, but smiling. *Stop ranting, men, let's be reasonable!* he told them gently, still smiling. *I've told you a hundred times I didn't come back to beg for help. And I didn't return to cause you trouble either, he paused meaningfully. I just came—I'd be hard put to tell you now why exactly I came!*

*Mariška! What are you thinking, Mariška!?* Fat Babič and Scabby Fico cried out in one voice. *That we'd leave you hanging just like that?* the former smashed his fist against his open palm. *Us, who grew up together in this place?* the latter hooked his forefingers.

But the others remained silent.

The fiddler Mariška played his last halgato\* by the big fire.

He played for Fat Babič and Scabby Fico, who were the only ones to stand by him. He played for old Čejč, who disseminated his old man's wisdom any old way: To individual advantage or disadvantage. He played for all those who had remained silent simply because they were always silent. And for all those who had this time remained silent, because they were more terrified of the OZNA than of their dead forefathers.

And Mariška played on the top string for the women and the girls squatting in the dark or peeking from the window sills. And for the children, who were still free of the knowledge that his tune was little by little alighting on their souls, and that some of them would spend their lifetimes living out its sadness.

Then the fiddler lifted his bow and said: *What have I done? I haven't done a thing! I haven't even planted a tree in my life. Only this pup will stay behind me after all this*, Mariška caressed the boy and placed the violin in his lap. *And God help you, Gypsies, if any of you ever forget that I christened him and that his name from now on is Halgato!*

And then, before the break of dawn, Mariška left Lacki Roma.

For a long while afterward, they loudly cursed his unlucky star and the lousy Gypsy life and they scoffed at senseless Gypsy death. But the boy was unsure; to him it seemed that his father had simply gone off into the dark.

\* halgato - a special way of playing the violin; a piece of music so played

The day after her husband's departure Tereza swept out the shack and burned the rubbish. Then she did not touch a thing. She forgot about hunger, thirst, cleanliness, her child; she was not moved by Halgato's screeching fiddle nor by the fact that while so engaged, he kept his eyes closed. With a mute gesture she shooed away the anxious and curious neighborhood faces who peeked too closely, until they learned to look at the ground, even in coincidental passing.

Thus weeks passed.

Thus months ripened.

And more and more frequently she began wandering out of Lacki Roma, taking paths to avoid the women, who still pitied her, and the men, who let her know that she was alone again. At first everybody thought that she roamed the marshes and lingered by the river, but then her walks gradually became longer. Very often she came back only after the boy had despaired of waiting. Once, only once during an unexpected visit she, strangely, did not look through him but sat down next to him and even touched him. *You*, she asked, *do you cover yourself well at night?*

*I do*, he shrugged.

*And what about—* she bit her tongue, *food, do you get it yourself?*

*I do*, he shrugged again.

*And you really find enough of it?* she hastily added.

*Yeah, sure, enough*, he lied. He did not want to spoil her mood.

*Good*, she nodded. *Good. And all the other things will work out just fine some day. You'll see. God'll take pity on us. He knows it isn't right what he's doing. He's known that all along, it's just that he can't find the time for the two of us. But some day, you'll see, some day he's going to make it all up to us.*

The boy wanted to believe her, but too many doubts transpired. For a long, long time he watched his mother's profile, wondering whether to voice them. Then he decided. *You!* he

prodded her. *What if none of this is God's fault? Maybe the devil has always been in you and that's why God's too afraid to come near!*

*What?* his mother was alarmed. *Who told you that?*

*Everybody*, shrugged Halgato.

*Everybody*, sighed Tereza. *Sure: Everybody!*

*And I've also been thinking only bad things about you all this time*, he added.

*You too have been thinking only bad things*, she smiled melancholically, *what could you have thought about, my little chickadee? What's there for anyone to think, and whose business is it anyway? Gypsies!* she said and was silent for a few long moments. Her hands rested lifelessly in her lap, her chin was wedged between her knees, and her eyes squinted through the doorway—most probably at the clouds. Halgato thought that she was entranced again and that their chat had been only a brief and haphazard re-entry into this world. But then his mother suddenly got up and said: *I've got the right—it's my right! Because so far there's been nothing! Because Mariška never took care of his family. He never brought home a single penny. And then he went and did this to us.*

*Did what?* Halgato rebelled.

*What?* her eyes flashed. *Deserted us!*

*But—* he stammered, *but he died.*

*Sure: Died!* she flew into a temper. *That's the easiest thing to do—die! Leave the others—what does he care—let them starve, beg, howl!*

The women had a lot to say to each other about her behavior.

They thought that she was in such a state because she had refused to venture near her husband's surkalo before he left. Probably she'd been worried that he would have put it in too deep and left her stranded with a baby which she would, of course, have to provide for. Even old Marga, who was the most incredulous and always contradicted everyone, believed that the unfortunate man held it against her and was for this reason now coming back to squat on her soul. But at the same time she claimed that Tereza had only done the right thing, because she had prevented an even greater calamity. The dead hold special power over a child born after his sire has passed on to the other world. For, before he first cries, his ears are

filled with such filth that neither spells nor a good beating can ever drive it out.

She claimed that quite a few had been born in Lacki Roma like that, but she did not dare point them out. Halgato was convinced that her Čejč was one of them.

Then Baba Fikale, who was no younger nor any less mouthy than old Marga, brought the terrible news of Mariška's ordeal from Big Village.

*There's something here that stinks to high heaven!* she whispered to everyone who came to crouch by her black hearth. *I'll put my hand in the fire*— she shoved it into the flames, — *that there's something terribly rotten that's mixing with our air! Because that Mariška, the one that everybody's talking about there now, wasn't the real Mariška! Cizi Neni says so, she's the one he brought chewing tobacco to when he went to Town, and she liked him more than any other white woman liked a Gypsy. Janči from the committee says the same, the one who always kissed Mariška's violin when he played it close to his ear and who said you couldn't find another Gypsy like him if you hunted high and low. And Big Pejpi Bači says so; he's the one whose four daughters Mariška married off with his music and would've married off the fifth one too if it hadn't been for this. In short: Everybody says that Lucifer took hold of Mariška that night!* the old woman rolled her eyes demonically. *Lucifer himself, or even a greater devil!* she punctured holes in the warm smoke with her fists and squinted through them into the faces. *Because that very night—if you remember—I also said that those raw wounds the poor man had on his chest were made by no ordinary knife and gushed no ordinary blood.*

Nobody could recall Baba Fikale saying anything that night.

Somebody remarked that the cuts were most probably made by the OZNA agent when he and Mariška were wrestling for their lives.

But Baba would not believe it. *Maybe they were made—or maybe not!* she shook her head. *Because: Judging by Mariška's condition when they saw him in Big Village on that day we could draw many conclusions.*

Of course they were curious.

And Baba told them over and over; sometimes down to the last tiny detail, sometimes her own version. But she never forgot to mention that on that morning, when Mariška walked into Big Village from Lacki Roma, he no longer had human

eyes. And it was allegedly with those terrible eyes that he compelled the inn-keeper's servant to roll out a whole barrel of wine at daybreak and then give him a jug instead of a glass. Then Mariška ordered OZNA agents to be sent for, and committee members and generals and Tito himself, while he tilted the barrel and downed all that poured out. All who had gathered in the square at that hour said that he drank more than was believed humanly possible. And disbelievers even today peek into the cask and measure its emptiness. But nobody dares touch the remaining wine because it is rumored to be rank. It reeks of that which took possession of Mariška. Of that which is still in the air.

It was said that by the time the OZNA arrived, Mariška was already bathing in wine.

Of each new jug he spilled part down his throat, part over his head. And laughed at those who laughed at him. And scowled at those who scowled at him. He told the former and the latter: *Why should we measure things and hold grudges? You have a big village, we have a small one. We have big surkalos, you have small ones. You'll gobble up the whole district, we'll only eat what's left. The OZNA will suck all of our blood, but only a bit of yours. But only the devil knows who's going to pay for this wine! Because if we do, it goes on our tab. And if you do, it goes on yours. So, it would be best if nobody paid for the wine.*

The people, who hadn't yet heard of the OZNA agent's death, listened and speculated about the reasons for the Gypsy's insanity. Those who knew him were convinced that the alcohol was not to blame, since up until then Mariška had always drank from the smallest glass, and even that only on the rare occasions when he visited the tavern without his violin. They were far more prepared to believe that a love affair with a city wench had sent him over the edge. He had a soft spot for them, and many a time, when talked into it, he would recount his hasty escapes from enraged husbands. But later, when the OZNA roared into the village square on their motorcycle, followed by a car, the audience quickly grasped that the Gypsy's most recent misdemeanor had been far more fatal.

A lean OZNA agent in a leather coat hopped off the moving bike and dashed towards Mariška, as though he feared the Gypsy intended to make a getaway. With a single swipe of his gun, which seemed to have grown out of his hand, he knocked the jug from Mariška's hands and drove a knee into Mariška's face. The fat motorcycle driver soon joined him, reaching into Mariška's tangles with his gloved hand, and with a few quick circular motions twisting several strands around his index finger, lifting Mariška off the ground.

Mariška simply grinned and stuck out his tongue.

*Blaah, you sons of bitches, you vampires, you pig sires*, he babbled. *You're out to get me—you wanna get me...*, he groaned, as the blows resumed. The fat one slapped his face, the leather one aimed his highly polished boot directly at Mariška's shin. The kick sent him flying like a snapped string. He kicked and writhed for a few moments, then rose, grinning, with his back against the wall. *You're out to get me*, he panted, *you wanna show me the way to heaven? You scroungers, you chicken thieves, you red rats!* He spread his arms and stomped up invisible stairs leading into the sky. The OZNA agents each grabbed a sleeve, throwing him to the ground and burying his face in the dust.

*Comrades!?* dryly inquired a third agent who had just stepped out of the car. *Are you sure he's the right one?*

*It's him!* spat out the leather one. *It's him all right!*

The fat one reached into Mariška's hair with a well-trained gesture and hoisted him up. *This is the son of a bitch, comrade Sviligoj!* he reported.

Comrade Sviligoj, a man well advanced in years, stepped up to the martyr and thrust his face into the bloody pulp. *It's you then!* he panted through clenched teeth. *You're the one who stabbed Comrade Laci!?* *Comrade Laci—we went through the war together. Comrade Laci, who was honored by Comrade Tito himself! You, you—* he searched for a word, *you Gypsy!*

*Blaah!* Mariška spat blood. *It was me, me! And if I meet him again somewhere up there, I'll slice him up some more...* he whimpered. Once again blows began to rain down. All three OZNA agents contributed kicks and punches. The driver stayed by the car, slowly lit a cigarette and stared past them into space.

The villagers, who at first averted their eyes, began to retreat in horror. Some scurried home. Others paused behind corners and fences, mutely asking each other about the significance of such a ghastly beating. Of course, they had heard much about OZNA agents; they feared them more than the devil fears holy water. But that the brutes should now want to squash a man—this they could not fathom. The unfortunate Mariška, now practically naked, rolled and crawled about the square; the blows had torn off his clothes and his skin. Yet it was as though the barrel of guzzled wine had transformed into blood; while it poured out of his wounds like from a pruned vine, he still had his strength.



*For God's sake, Mariška—fall down, Mariška!* many a man whispered. *The sooner you fall, the sooner this terrible agony ends!*

But—no!

Mariška rose again and again.

And still his giggles and *Blaahs!* resounded throughout the large square. All the while blows fell, resulting in sounds very unpleasant to the human ear.

And then all the bells in the church tower behind the tavern began ringing.

The OZNA agents stopped and looked at each other. They drew their guns in unison, left the butchered Gypsy with the driver, and ran to the church tower. They were more than a little perplexed when they realized that nobody on the ground was ringing the bells. And even more so when they climbed the tower, reached the platform, and saw that the bells were ringing of their own accord.

In Lacki Roma only Halgato's violin remained to remind them of Mariška's mysterious farewell.

The boy played first thing in the morning. And then he played right up to, and through, lunch and into dinner. He played with unfathomable zeal, hoping that the hollowness of the white violin would whisper about his father's disappearance and his mother's abandonment. But there were no real answers. Only his melodies became more harmonious and pleasant to the ear.

The children chased each other about the settlement in pursuit of different passions and did not dare approach Halgato. They thought his lonesome exploits were peculiar and sacred. They saw it in the faces of the adults, who spoke of the boy with a dark broodiness in their eyes. The adults never yelled at him when he picked up the violin as they lay down to rest. And they did not search for him if he chose to spend the night by the river, which, because of its dangers, was forbidden to the other children.

Only Fat Babič stopped by his hut every now and then.

*What about Tereza?* he'd drawl. *She's not here?*

*No, she's not,* the boy shook his head.

*She's not?* he grimaced, although he knew. *But, you know—* he then prodded the boy, *I'm beginning to have an inkling where she might've gone!*

The boy became excited and looked up.

*She never liked our men,* Fat Babič leaned towards him. *Even as a girl she used to say that we men in Lacki Roma had thin and crooked dicks. Yeab, yeab—Mariška was never enough for her!* he paused meaningfully. *But, luckily she wasn't enough for him either. Why do you think he had to knife that OZNA agent, if it wasn't because of his wife?!*

The boy listened, although he did not understand.

*I'll be bitten by a bat if she didn't go to the tinkers!* spat the man. *She always used to go there! When she was young, Mariška forbade her to go, so she went in secret! And when Mariška no longer*

*held her back, she went in plain sight of everybody! And now, well, you can see for yourself!*

*What is she doing there all this time?* asked Halgato softly.

*What do you think she's doing!?* yelled Fat Babič. *I'll tell you: She's giving it to someone! She must've found some devil and she's giving it. And she doesn't think at all, the damn broad! How could she? It's not without reason that they say the larger the hole between a woman's legs, the larger the hole in her head!* his anger spilled into blotches on his face. Nervously he paced the room, peeking into the only pot, which was of course empty, looking into the chest, where of course there was no food either. *Damn, damn, damn the woman's hole!* he paused in front of the boy again. *And what about you, kid, do you eat at all?*

*I do!* nodded the boy. *I also eat sorrel,* he explained. He did not wish to admit that he sometimes stole scraps in the settlement, although he felt he could have confided in Fat Babič.

*Sure: You graze on sorrel and other weeds,* the Gypsy waved it off. *You're growing like a goat. And we're supposed to watch with our arms crossed while that cow's drooling over there. No—no! It can't go on like this! Very soon now we'll have to bring her to her senses!*

For some time Halgato lived in the hope that Fat Babič would bring Tereza to her senses.

It was a forlorn hope.

Apparently, Fat Babič dealt with the situation only in his mind.

*You'll see!* he assured him again and again. *I'll catch up with her somewhere in the brush. Or better still, in the woods. No, no! I won't deal with her in front of everybody. Things like that are done in private. Quietly. Face to face,* he whispered through his index finger, which he had placed against his curled lips. *I'll cross her path like a black cat—like this: Once, twice, three times—so that she'll know in advance that this time she won't get away from what I've owed her all along,* he stalked his imaginary victim with big eyes. *And then: Wham! Not a single step more, backwards or forwards! That's enough of this screwing around, woman! The man hasn't even settled in his grave and you're already walking widely! Oh, no, not even our Gypsy God has ever seen anything like this before!*

The boy nodded his agreement, although he no longer believed him.

And Fat Babič stood with his legs planted apart, searching for words, as though Tereza were standing in front of him. *You whoring slut!* he said to her. *The tinkers, hub?! They're all you ever think about, as though theirs were made of gold, eh? I'll show you the tinkers and their golden pricks!* he grabbed himself between the legs. *I'll show you this! This, our thing! I'll ram it up to your navel! I'll skewer you with it! And then I'll ask you: What about the tinkers now, hub!?* *How come you never even think of them now?*

Thus month after month passed.

Thus the seasons changed.

The boy, who liked to chew sorrel most of all, also grew like sorrel. And was surprised when he knocked the top of his head against the beam above the entrance to the shack. And felt oddly nice when he happened to measure himself against Fat Babič and discovered that he was now up to his shoulder. But this miracle bewildered him at the same time. His peers had, one after another, donned long trousers, and more and more often their fathers took them along when they went their men's ways. But nobody had plans for him. And he did not know what to do with himself either.