

The gingerbread baker

- Milka, hurry up, I won't be able to make it!

I heard my mother's call from outside the room. It was starting to get light – the market was about to open. An annual event where I could meet most of my friends with whom I used to run through the muddy fallows or pick flowers in the meadows to make wreaths. Until a few years ago, we did this every day. Each of us has many siblings, so the work was spread out enough that we had time to rest in nature. Unfortunately, some of our group left to work in the city or to join the army in Toruń, which meant that everyone had more responsibilities on the farm. I am the youngest of seven siblings, and Rasław is the oldest, which is why we stayed in the countryside with our mum. One of our brothers is training to be a monk far from home - that was his destiny. We believe that offering him to the Church will bring happiness and fertility to the family - this custom has been prevalent in our area for centuries. The rest of the siblings were hired to work in the city or on other farms. This was the life of every family in the area.

Toruń was the centre of life here in Pomerania. In addition to the annual fair, various traders were stationed here all the time. We and others working in the fields supplied them with goods, which we exchanged for the items we needed. What's more, in the city you could visit the church and watch performances by acting troupes. I must admit that I always looked forward to Sunday – the day of mass and performances. It was a pleasant break from hard work in the fields and with the animals. The dynamic development of Toruń was ensured by the Hanseatic League. Rasław explained to me how it worked when I was younger. He even showed me a map that was hung in the market square during one of the fairs. It was filled with colours, with a predominance of blues - symbolising the Baltic Sea, separating Poland from Sweden and Denmark. The cities that belonged to the community were marked with red crosses. Although I had never been abroad, I could learn a lot about the country of origin of the newcomers from distant lands who were exhibiting their goods at the fair. Each of the merchants sold something different - the coastal ones brought fishing and navigation equipment, while others brought plants that were not found in the area. They also spoke different languages that were incomprehensible to most, but we had no problem communicating with them through gestures and facial expressions.

I grabbed the basket with the spools of wool and joined the woman who was already waiting on the well-trodden path.

'Is Rasław going?' I asked, resting the basket on my hip.

'He's sitting by the gate on our side. Unless the ones from the forest start arguing again,' she snorted. A few weeks ago, an argument broke out because one of the lumberjacks set fire to part of the forest. It is not known whether it was intentional or not, but for some it was a great excuse for a fight, which the guards had to calm down. 'Did you see what they did to him? He's missing a piece of his ear! He almost lost his head because of a piece of wood. As soon as I get my hands on them...

'Mum,' I quickly interrupted to spare myself and passers-by the insults. In response, she only let out a sigh. Preparations for the annual fair, where everyone presented their best products, were nerve-wracking. Toruń's spacious market square and the streets leading off it were the centre of commerce. In just a few days, it was filled with foreigners from faraway places. I won't lie, it got so crowded that it was almost impossible to get the goat to the stand. The animals didn't cooperate - they were frightened by the bangs, knocks, shouts of people or dogs running freely looking for leftover food.

The mother counted down the days until the end of this noisy event. She walked around dissatisfied, as if a flock of geese had bitten her. And how she complained! First there was noise, then someone knocked over the bowl of rye and the good grain went down the drain.

After arriving at the stand and setting up the tailoring materials on the oak table, I turned to Rasław. 'They really beat you up...' I grabbed a piece of linen cloth and wiped the now dried blood from my brother's side of the head.

'It's nothing, the important thing is that they've stopped fighting. For now,' he replied with a slight grimace of pain. Rasław, being the eldest of my siblings and having been through a lot, showed the most common sense. He rarely showed weakness. It's hardly surprising - he was taller than me, and working as a guard made him build muscle, stand up straight and learn self-defence. Besides, he had a scar on his cheek - the result of one of the fights during a night raid on the guardhouse where the weapons were stored. Rasław's appearance could be a cause for concern.

Our attention was drawn to a man running towards my mother. He was breathing nervously and irregularly, and his work clothes, which he usually wore when working in the fields, showed signs of a fight. I knew him from seeing him around, he was already quite old and had a bunch of children who sometimes stole grain being transported to a nearby mill and fed it to the chickens. His eyes were wide open and his step was uncertain and trembling.

'Bandages. Quick!' he gasped, resting his hands on his knees.

'But what happened? Who is hurt?' Mum tried to find out anything, but the farmer was not willing to reveal details of the apparently dramatic situation. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that Rasław was hastily getting on his horse. He stretched out his hand towards the man in a gesture of help.

'I'll give you a ride, it'll be faster,' said my brother, and after a moment all that could be heard was the clatter of hooves on the cobblestones lining the streets of Toruń. My mother and I exchanged concerned glances. Our neighbourhood was a rather quiet one - when we were children we sometimes walked home after dark. We didn't go too far, but the darkness in the fields was like night in Egypt. The biggest threat came from the forest animals: wild boars, foxes and wolves, but they didn't come out in broad daylight. I started to think more and more about what had happened to this poor soul. I didn't have to wait long for an answer.

Following my mum's instructions, I went through the gate where the men had left earlier. Despite the blinding sun slowly setting, I was able to spot my brother galloping towards me on his horse. The horse lowered its head and its chestnut coat glistened with sweat. The August heat was getting to him too.

Rasław jumped off the horse and looked at me with resignation.

'I've never seen anything like it.' He grimaced and put his hand on the animal's neck. 'I used to laugh at those stories about devils and other monsters, but this... The wound looks like it was cut with a sickle, but the rest of the marks look more like burns to me, you know?'

'Aren't you going to get a doctor? Maybe he will be able to tell us more.'

'I was just going to see him, but I don't know if he will deign to come this far from the city because of the fair.' I nodded and stepped aside so that he could pass through the gate with his horse.

Returning to the table where my mother and I were trading on behalf of the landowner, our employer, I heard a woman's raised voice. After a moment, I recognised her as Wojsław's mother. She was standing in the middle of the market square, crying, and curious onlookers were stopping to ask her what was wrong.

'Some devil has torn my son to pieces, who knows if he will survive! And the medic is only asking for money! There is no mercy in these people...' she sobbed, tearing her hair out. From the crowd came questions about where, how and when it happened. The woman was unable to answer any of them.

Rasław separated from the group of onlookers and put his arm around the victim's mother. I noticed that he started to whisper something in her ear. After quickly looking in my direction, I realised that he was talking about visiting her son. A moment later, the woman was in the care of an older woman, and my brother was galloping towards the exit of the town with the medic on the

second, bay horse.

The next day, when only empty tables remained at the fairground, I told my mother the whole story. "I'm not surprised that something finally happened to him. He always liked to do something mischievous or to tease the girl. Do you remember when he threw Rasław into the lake one winter? The ice broke under him and we could hardly save him! Then the herbalist gave us warming ointments, which made him shiver. Did you go to her with this matter? She asked, taking wheat bread out of a piece of cloth and setting up two wooden dishes.

'My brother brought a doctor, but he didn't want to say anything without payment, he just made eyes like pennies, he left and ordered the room to be aired.' I replied resignedly, 'I'll tell Rasław to go to her.'

'You'd better go. She always got on better with the girls.' In response, I raised my eyebrows slightly. As I left the cool chamber, I felt a wave of hot air. It was the middle of summer, the grain in the fields had turned golden, and wildflowers – poppies and cornflowers – were peeking out between the ears. I chose the path leading through the land where my family had been working for as long as I could remember. But something caught my attention.

'Hey you there! Get out of that field this instant!' I heard a shout coming from the edge of the forest. Slightly frightened, I approached the initially unknown peasant. I didn't have to say anything; he probably realised from my expression that I didn't know what was going on. After a while, I recognised him as my mother's brother.

'The devil will get you. The same one who almost killed Wolsław with an axe.'

'The devil?'

'Yes, a girl in rags, as scary as hell. You're young and don't know it yet, but it's not just wild boars that roam these fields. Stay in the forest until it gets cooler. We have water, if... The man's eyes widened as he stared into the distance of the field. When I turned around, I immediately believed his words.

A girl was hovering above the ploughed earth, but her silhouette looked more like a naked human skeleton. She was wearing a tattered, dirty tunic, and her hair resembled a cloud of dust – tangled and swirling around her head. Here and there, mice and spiders were wandering among the tangles, and the smell of rot reached our noses.

The sight of the midge terrified me, I felt a piercing cold – despite the scorching sun overhead. After a moment, I shook myself and looked at the peasant woman crouching next to me.

"How do I get rid of her? She'll kill half the village before she finishes working in the field!"

'It's not the first such bogeyman in these parts. A good dozen or so years ago, she was also on the prowl here.' The aunt pointed to a female spirit circling the ploughed earth. 'The unfortunate person who brought her here did not survive the attack, unlike Wojsław. The family of the deceased was advised to put up a figurine of her.

- And put it back with their favourite food. Remember when the whole community was looking for berries in the forest? - added my uncle, and his wife answered the question with a nod.

Listening to the conversation of the peasants sitting next to me, I watched a terrifying creature thrashing around in the field. Interestingly, it was not interested in harming the animals - the cattle, harnessed to the ploughs, and the birds pecking the juicy centres of the seeds from the hard shells. The poltergeist did not even glance at them, only looked around in search of a human being, whom it would certainly treat like Wojsław.

We went around the field with the copse and split up, entering our own cool wooden huts. My mother was just preparing the afternoon meal, mixing groats and adding some goat's milk to it.

"Where did the wind blow you for so long, Miłka?"

'I saw her... The one who massacred Wojsław,' I replied, sitting down on a wooden stool, my mum letting go of the spoon. 'She was wandering in the neighbour's field, but she didn't see me! We hid in the copse with my uncle and aunt.'

'Don't go anywhere alone tomorrow.' She looked at me so sternly that I shivered. "Don't take any risks."

'B-but mum! I think I know how to get rid of her!'

'There are other people who can take care of it,' she said harshly and went back to preparing the meal. A few minutes later, she placed a wooden dish filled with steaming food on the table with a bang.

Rasław took my side, which made him unpopular with mum. However, he was older than me and worked in the guard, so he knew how to defend himself. And to run away, if necessary.

- I'm going to meet with Wojsław today, I'll ask what his beloved liked and why she became that ghost.

'Thanks, bro. Mum won't take her eyes off me, I'm hooked.' I folded my hands as if they were bound with invisible shackles, and a dissatisfied look appeared on my face. Rasław chuckled and ruffled my hair.

'I'll tell you everything she says, sis.'

Shortly afterwards, he got on his horse and rode away from the chamber at a leisurely pace, while I went with my mum to our stand at the fair. It was loud, crowded and stuffy – after all, it was the middle of summer and the harvest was approaching.

Today, we sold quite a lot: a few spools of woolen thread, loaves of fresh and crispy bread, and linen cloths. The lord of our land was a rich and honourable knight, dressed in a tunic with a large coat of arms on the back. The drawing depicted the coat of arms of Toruń - an angel holding a golden key in his hand. The lord took our previous takings and left us enough money to buy a dairy cow. This opened up many possibilities - our goat gives milk, but not much. Besides, cattle pull ploughs, which will definitely reduce our work in the field.

The atmosphere between me and my mum was tense – she only gave me dry orders, nothing more. In the evening, we returned home in silence. A little later, my brother came back, just in time for dinner. While we were eating, he nudged me under the table on my calf, signalling that he wanted to talk to me. I looked at him knowingly, making sure that mum was looking at her bowl.

'Milka, listen. I found out a bit and I think we are close to driving out this devil.' We sat on the grass at the side of the room, looking at the fields and walls of Toruń. 'The girl baked gingerbread, so of course she loved it. She lived near the market square with her father and several sisters. As for her death... Wojsław said that a few days before her wedding, she became very ill - probably poisoned by something. He said she probably mixed up the plants.

'Do you think he had nothing to do with her death?'

'I haven't thought about it, but apparently he called a herbalist. She gave the girl some antidote, but it was too late.'

'Then we have to ask the old woman,' I replied. Everyone called the herbalist "the old woman." She was an older woman, mysterious, and she didn't talk much. I don't think anyone had ever seen her set foot in the city. She walked in the woods and meadows, spending whole days collecting plants or bird feathers. Most of the peasants used her services - they were much cheaper than those offered by the town doctor and often more effective.

My mum let me go free - I could go wherever and whenever I wanted. So Rasław and I went to my grandma's. Her cottage was not far from ours, but it was hidden among the trees at the edge of the forest. There was an overgrown path leading there, no animals passed through it, so the ground was not compacted like the pastures. We felt soft grass under our feet, it felt like I was walking on moss. Unlike my brother, I didn't have my own shoes, I went barefoot all the time. Only in winter did my mum and I wear galoshes to keep our bodies warm.

'Are you inside?' Rasław knocked on the wooden door, which creaked in its hinges under the

pressure of his hand. When we were little, older kids used to scare us by saying that as soon as we went near this very door, our grandmother would grab us by the collar, pull us inside and never let us go again. Of course, it was all nonsense – the old lady never hurt anyone, and if necessary, she would even use her potions to heal the wounded.

She did not answer, but we both heard her put down her things and walk towards the door. She opened it and looked us over.

‘What do you need?’

‘We came to talk,’ Rasław replied gently, smiled, and touched the door with his hand to open it wider.

“Um...”

The herbalist went deeper into the room, signalling for us to follow her. She put a pot of water on the fire.

“We know that Wojśław called you when his beloved was ill. However, she could not be saved. Is it possible that he deliberately called for help too late?”

‘You read people very well, my children.’ The woman leaned against a large table on which bunches of dried herbs were spread out. ‘By the time I arrived with the medicine, it was already useless. It would take a miracle for her to recover. The poor girl... There are no plants in our area that cause such symptoms of poisoning.’

- So... he acquired the poison from somewhere? But why?

- Her death was no accident; she died soon after the wedding. Wojśław had already received the dowry, so he had enough to live on...

My brother and I looked at each other. He shook his head and lowered his gaze to the floor.

Wojśław was Rasław's age. They may not have been close, but he had always been in the background of his brother's childhood. They would always say ‘hello’ to each other when they passed each other. And now... Wojśław turned out to be a murderer. And a money-hungry one at that.

I couldn't sleep that night. I tossed and turned, constantly thinking about what I had found out about Wojśław. My head was playing tricks on me - as soon as I managed to fall asleep, I had absurd nightmares. Looking out of the window in my sleep, I thought I saw him with a knife or a vial of poison. Rasław was on night duty. My mum slept on the other side of the room, breathing steadily and lying motionless. Every sound coming from outside sent a shiver down my spine. I started to wonder why the murder had been committed. Was it just about money? Maybe Wojśław's future wife had found out something she wasn't supposed to?

The market was coming to an end - all that was left was to collect the unsold goods, clean up and hand over the takings to the landlord. Mum and I finished by midday, and my brother helped us to put away the table.

‘You seem lost in thought. What's on your mind, Mila?’ My mum put her hand on my shoulder. She looked at me with concern, but I couldn't tell her the truth. I couldn't leave the hut again. I understand my mum – she did what was safe, while I had to do what was right. Drive away the midday sun and make Wojśław regret his actions.

‘I'm thinking about next year's fair. A lot will change once we have our own cow.’ I smiled and gave my mum a gentle hug. ‘I'm going to Rasław for a while.’

She nodded in response and let me through the door of the room. I set off briskly through the edge of the forest - I didn't want to risk running into the midday sun.

I approached my brother, who was standing at the western gate of Toruń.

“I'm going to visit the family of the murdered woman.”

‘Now?’ He looked at the sky to check the position of the sun. “In that case, you'll have to manage on your own, I'm exhausted.”

'Maybe it's even for the best. No offence, but a girl is best understood by another girl,' I replied and winked at him. I adjusted my hair, which was tied with a jute string, into a braid and grabbed the material of my skirt to make sure I didn't fall over because it was too long. It was one of the clothes I shared with my mum, but it didn't fit me very well - I had to be careful not to step on the fabric. Shortly afterwards, I knocked on the door of a house squeezed in between others in the very centre of the city. An approximately eight-year-old girl opened the door and immediately called her sister.

'What's the matter?' The girl looked at me suspiciously and folded her arms across her chest.

"Was Wojśław supposed to be your brother-in-law?"

'Yes, unfortunately. It's a good thing he got a ... smack on the head.' The girl hissed. I immediately noticed that she was overwhelmed by strong emotions. "Sorry for being rude, come in. Would you like a drink?" She replied, pointing inside the house.

'Yes, thank you. August can be tough.' We sat down together at a wooden table with mugs of slightly fermented chokeberry juice. 'Do you know anything more?'

'That devil was only after money, and my sister was too in love to see it. Finally, my father took an interest in what his valuables had been spent on - he cut Wojśław off from his livelihood, and he went mad.

'When they got married, the fortune became his.' "I finished what the girl started." "Sorry to ask, but... Did you see the body? How did she die?"

'She hit her head on something,' her voice began to crack and tears welled up in her eyes.

The testimonies began to contradict each other. Did she die from poisoning or a fall? The herbalist did not mention any external injuries, so this means that the wound on the back of her head could not have been caused before her death. Wojśław thought that Babka would not say a word, and then he realised that accidental poisoning was too suspicious a story? It seems that way. He was probably too blinded by the girl's money to plan everything properly.

The girl noticed me thinking. She wiped away her tears and waved her hand in front of my face.

'Oh, I'm sorry. I wish there was something I could do to ease your pain.' I gave her a comforting smile. 'I know we don't know each other and maybe I shouldn't have come here at all, but there's something I want you to know. Wojśław poisoned your sister. I spoke to Grandma, the one at the edge of the forest.

"I realised it wasn't an accident. I just... didn't want to believe it was his fault.'

'I understand.' I stood up and straightened myself. "Listen, if we gather a group of people and evidence, we will have a basis for banishing him from here. And give your sister's soul some peace." What did she like to eat the most?

'Oh, I see.' The girl also got up and went to the next room. She returned with a wicker basket of gingerbread cookies in the shape of rectangles with rounded corners and indentations on the sides - traditional Toruń Katarzynki cookies. 'Here, I wanted to bury her with them, but...'

'Thank you so much!' "I smiled broadly as I looked at the cookies. "We'll leave the gingerbread in the field at dawn tomorrow and wait. According to the herbalist, your sister should accept the gesture when the sun is high. Then it will disappear.'

The girl nodded, put her scarf over her face and started crying again. Tears welled up in my eyes too. I put down the basket and carefully put my arms around her.

The next day, we gathered at the edge of the forest. The family of the deceased, the herbalist, Rasław, mum and I. We brought the necessary items - a basket of gingerbread and a wedding ring. We left them in the field and immediately returned to the trees. Everyone was silent, and the nervous atmosphere was immediately palpable. We sat down on the soft grass and started talking about various topics to pass the time - the fair, our past, working in the fields...

It was already midday. We didn't have to wait long for the field to sparkle and the phantom to appear. A deafening scream reached our ears, and then the midwife began to circle the ground in

search of a victim. A violent shiver shook me.

'Let me take care of it, my dears.' The herbalist stood in front of us and held out her hands to take the basket and the wedding ring. We stepped back as the woman lit a fire at the edge of the field. She added dry forest litter to boost the flame.

Then we saw a figure making its way through the golden ears of wheat, which resembled a beautiful lake. My brother recognised the man from the bandaged part of his head. Wojśław was walking towards the ghost.

'Damn him!' Rasław swore and ran forward before my mum and I could stop him. "Get out of here or she'll kill you!"

The man in the field looked distractedly at my brother. Unfortunately, the mermaid had also noticed him. She started walking towards him, and it felt like time had stopped. All I could hear was my heart pounding. I stood rooted to the spot, watching the ghostly figure approaching Rasław. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a stone flying towards us.

The herbalist successfully attracted the monster's attention. With trembling hands, she threw gingerbread cookies and a wedding ring into the fire. The woman stopped and then turned her head towards Wojśław.

'I'm so terribly sorry! Forgive me, please!' he shouted, running towards his deceased beloved. He dropped to his knees and hid his face in his hands, his body shaking with sobs.

During this time, the wedding ring had heated up to red and the gingerbread had charred. The half-woman began to dissolve into thin air, at the same time becoming more and more like her human form. Her face no longer looked like a skull covered with thin, grey skin, but healthy, ruddy. Her hair was tangled in a golden braid, wrapped and pinned on her head, and a light linen dress appeared on the girl's body. The moment she became almost alive, she disappeared.

The family of the meridian, freed from its earthly wanderings, embraced each other, crying with grief, but also with joy. Rasław approached Wojśław and tied his wrists with a rope.

'Did you think you would get away with murder? Tears won't repair the damage you've done to innocent people,' he hissed, pointing to the teary-eyed men embracing each other. "We'll see what the court has to say, eh?"

Rasław, using his physical advantage, pulled the man to his feet. He took him to the city. The deceased's family thanked the herbalist effusively, to which she smiled and blushed slightly. The woman, usually overlooked and considered dangerous, was now the centre of attention. The girl's father promised to pay the herbalist handsomely.

Life in and around Toruń returned to normal. Various rumours spread like wildfire in the city, including the fact that Wojśław was sentenced to exile from the city and to pay compensation to the family of the deceased. What happened to him next? Nobody knows, everyone has their own guesses, but no one talks about it.

Using the funds provided by Wojśław, the girl's relatives erected a monument to protect their story from being forgotten. The image of the deceased, preserved in stone, was also a warning. Every immoral act will have consequences sooner or later. There is no crime without punishment. The forces of nature watch over justice and mundane values should not interfere with it.

The monument still stands in Toruń today. A legend, even if it is made up, always contains a grain of truth. The world is changing day by day, but the memory of history, culture and ancient beliefs should occupy a place in our minds. After all, you never know when the knowledge accumulated by our ancestors will come in handy...

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