

Night Obscures the Way

Vasyl Gabor

She stood in the doorway, blowing into her frozen hands. She had come such a long way, but nobody here recognized her and nobody, it seemed, expected her. The parents of her friend Marika were downcast and responded to her greeting with indifference. They were sitting by the stove, swaying drunkenly, gazing with unseeing eyes at the frost-covered window.

The cottage air was heavy with the bitter odor of old food, stale tobacco smoke, and alcohol. Guests had been there recently and the odors had not yet had time to dissipate.

“Perhaps Marika invited me to that meal too, but I didn’t make it in time,” Khrystia thought, still standing in the doorway.

Her hands were so painfully frostbitten that tears came to her eyes. She rubbed her frozen fingers clumsily. Marika’s parents acted as though she were not in the room. She remembered seeing a bucket of water in the corridor and dipped her hands in it, but the pain did not subside. Then Khrystia went out into the snow. She left the door open and white clouds of steam billowed out, like smoke, but it didn’t occur to anybody to close it.

Opposite the house of Marika’s parents, two children, a boy and a girl, stood behind a fence, watching her in silence and tightly holding hands. Their eyes showed no interest in her, no hint of sympathy, just a blank expression that Khrystia found most surprising. The snow was frozen hard and crunched underfoot. The crust was so hard that she couldn’t punch through it with her fist. She broke through with her heel. Scooping up handfuls of snow from the hole as though from a well, she rubbed her hands with it.

The door of the neighboring cottage creaked. With a great cloud of steam a rosy-cheeked young woman came out, wearing a padded jacket, felt boots, a gray head-scarf, and a man’s mittens.

“You’re keeping a sharp lookout, aren’t you?” thought Khrystia.

The rosy-cheeked woman frowned at the children and motioned toward the door with her head. Frightened, the boy and the girl ran indoors, still firmly holding hands. Khrystia thought they were tied together. She thought with bitterness of her own two children.

Meanwhile the rosy-cheeked woman came right up to the fence and gave Khrystia an apprehensive look. Then, mumbling to herself, she set off for the squat pig-sty. It was covered in snow almost a meter deep. It was a

wonder that the roof hadn't caved in, but apparently the owners did not intend to clear off the snow.

Khrystia, frozen through and through, scooped up more snow with both hands, and went indoors. Marika's parents were still sitting motionless in the room, but now they were looking at the stove rather than the window. Something was bubbling away in a large iron pot blackened by dirt and smoke. The water occasionally boiled over, hissing loudly like a snake. The smell of burnt food and smoke filled the cottage, but the old couple remained quite indifferent.

"I've come to see your Marika," said Khrystia yet again, but the old couple seemed not to hear her. Thinking that they were somewhat deaf, she repeated the phrase even louder. At this the old couple looked up in surprise, as if noticing her for the first time.

Khrystia began to regret that she had undertaken the long journey. It had been so hard on her. She had traveled to the nearest market town in an overcrowded bus. Then, there were no buses running from there to the village, because of the fuel shortage, so she had hitch-hiked part of the way and walked the rest. But what if it wasn't actually Marika who had called?

Khrystia had dashed off without really thinking. And it was all the fault of her damned drunken husband. He had been on a three-day binge with his buddies so she had gone off to her mother's with the children to avoid his ugly drunken face. On the fourth day her husband rang. He said that someone had phoned from the village, and asked her to come. Who it was and where the call was from, he couldn't remember. Khrystia had cursed him and slammed down the receiver. "Who could be looking for me?" she wondered. She had only one friend who lived in a village—Marika, a former classmate at the Institute.

Khrystia now remembered that in wondering who had phoned her, she had imagined straightaway that it was Marika. Yes, without hesitation she had decided that it was Marika who was looking for her. Since she had telephoned, something must have happened—otherwise she would have written. After all, Marika lived a long way off, in a God-forsaken village in the mountains. Khrystia decided to go right away. She thought this would also be one in the eye for her rotten husband. Her mother agreed to look after the children, so why should she stay at home? In the village, in the fresh air, she would finally get a break from her husband and from the dirty, noisy town, its expensive bazaars, and her boring job, which didn't even pay enough to live on. So she had set off. But here, it seemed, she was not welcome. Her friend was absent and her parents were pretending not to notice her presence.

She thought of asking someone on the street if they knew where Marika had gone, but she didn't fancy going out in the cold. Anyway, it wasn't likely there would be anybody out in such bitter weather. It would be pointless to wait for a chance passer-by. What about going to ask the

neighbors about Marika? But when Khrystia recalled the unwelcoming rosy-cheeked woman, her desire to call on the neighbors evaporated.

"But suppose I've come to the wrong cottage, and not to Marika's?" she thought suddenly, and began to look around the room. The walls were covered with icons and numerous framed photographs. Looking at Khrystia out of these frames were happy newlyweds, serious men, stiffly posing soldiers, pretty girls, cheerful children, and melancholy old women. Amongst all of these, Marika's face was the only one missing.

In the over-heated cottage Khrystia began to feel warm and even found it difficult to breathe. But nobody invited her to take off her coat and sit down. If only Marika would come soon! Who knows how long she might have to wait! So Khrystia took off her coat anyway and sat down on a bench by the window. Only once she sat down did she become aware of the exhaustion that had overcome her. Her shoulders hurt and her legs shook slightly. And she realized how hungry she was after a whole day without food.

Leaning against the wall and stretching out her legs, Khrystia half-closed her eyes and relaxed. She recalled how she had made her way to the village. As she approached, the first person she had met was an old woman carrying a bundle of twigs as wide as the road itself. She wore no gloves, yet her rough hands showed no sign of redness from the frost. Khrystia had stepped off the road to let her pass. The old woman was so bent over under the bundle of twigs that Khrystia could not see her face—she could only hear her heavy breathing. The old woman breathed in and out with a groan, as though there were a blockage in her chest through which the air had to force its way. Khrystia found it surprising that the old woman was carrying her bundle away from the village. She herself had walked a good hour along that road without spotting a single dwelling. She stood watching the bent woman and thought how sad it was to be old.

Some five minutes later a horse-drawn sleigh flew at full tilt around a corner towards Khrystia. A short, small-faced man stood on the sleigh, holding the reins and waving a whip over the horses' hind quarters. If his face had not been covered in wrinkles and his right eye had not been bloodshot—"perhaps it's a wall-eye," thought Khrystia—he could easily have been taken for a youth. Khrystia leapt out of the way of the horses and fell over into the deep snow. By the time she got up again, the sleigh and horses and the fellow driving it had disappeared behind the snowdrifts. She had not gone much further when she heard horses' hooves behind her. Quickly turning off onto one of the paths leading to the first cottages, she let the now familiar sleigh driver with the red right eye pass by her.

On the sleigh, behind the driver, sat the old woman on the bundle of twigs. When Khrystia caught sight of the woman's yellow face her entire body stiffened. Immediately she remembered the hospital where her elder daughter had been taken several years earlier. It was two o'clock in the

morning when they took her in to operate and the doctors came out of surgery at five. Those three hours of waiting had been the most dreadful of Khrystia's life. She walked up and down the long corridor hardly able to breathe. She opened a window and gulped air through her mouth. The sound of the clock ticking away loudly in the corridor reverberated in her head. She prayed for her dear daughter. Sometime around four o'clock drowsiness beset her mercilessly. She splashed warm water from the tap onto her face and kept walking and walking. She thought that if she dozed off for a second or stopped praying it would be disastrous for her daughter. But intermittently, as she leaned against a wall, Khrystia fell into a kind of sleep. And it was then, when she was in a half-waking, half-sleeping state, that death had shown its face. It was an old woman wearing a black head-scarf, her face yellow, like wax, and covered in eczema-like freckles. Her nose was very slightly hooked and she had black holes where her eyes should have been. Her deathly smile seemed to be molded in alabaster. Khrystia had been seized by such terror that she instantly awoke and, falling to her knees she had prayed to God and all the heavenly hosts to rescue her dear daughter from disaster. The operation was a success but for a month afterwards Khrystia kept having that nightmare about the yellow face with black holes instead of eyes. And now she thought she had seen that nightmare in reality.

She had been frightened merely to walk along the road. Reaching the cottage nearest to the street she tapped lightly on the frost-covered window. Inside, someone began to wipe the window-pane, breathing on the silvery patterns made by the frost. When a clear patch had thawed, an eye looked out intently at Khrystia. After a while it disappeared and Khrystia heard someone shuffling to the door, jangling the keys. The dry hinges creaked as the door opened, and a tall, gray-haired man came out onto the doorstep. Khrystia found it surprising that the cottage was locked in the daytime, when people were home. She expected the man to address her, but he remained silent, so she asked him how she could find Marika's cottage. The gray-haired man's bushy eyebrows had twitched comically and without uttering a word he had indicated the cottage she was now sitting in.

Recalling all this, she felt uneasy. It seemed she had been sitting here like this, propped up against the wall, for a few minutes, but when she opened her eyes the cottage was already dark. Dusk had fallen outside.

Khrystia looked around as though she had just entered the room for the first time. To the right of the window there was a sturdy bed covered with a thick woolly blanket. In the middle of the room there was a steamer trunk with cast iron bands, and opposite the bed stood a stove, with several small chairs beside it. There was no table and nothing more in the house.

A door by the stove led into the adjoining room. But it was locked with a large key, like the trunk. Khrystia got up and went over to the door. Standing on tiptoe, she glanced through the lace curtain into the next room.

In the middle were two tables pushed together and covered with white material. There were benches along the walls. On them sat women with their heads lowered, holding lighted candles, which burned slowly and quietly sputtered. All the women were dressed in black and wore black head-scarves, and the horrifying thought occurred to Khrystia that if they raised their heads they would all have yellow faces, like wax, and black holes instead of eyes. This thought sent shivers down her spine. She recoiled and rushed to the door that led into the yard. But it would not open—it was frozen shut and a snowstorm was howling outside.

A long dark night awaited Khrystia.

Translated by Patrick Corness and Natalia Pomirko

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