

Curtains

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Pavel's favourite time of day was sitting on the bench outside his cottage waiting for dawn to break. He could smoke his pipe in quiet contemplation before he had to face Elena and the rest of the villagers who didn't see things his way and never tired of telling him so. He struck a match on the rough stone wondering when things had all gone so wrong.

For a moment as the match flared he saw life as it used to be - the thriving vineyards, fields full of corn, hops in the hedgerows. The old Romania where the churches were full and the harvests plentiful. A time when work was hard but there was fellowship and laughter. When the seasons were celebrated in the old ways with songs and festivals. That was before the young ones had walked out and never come back. Now the church was cold and silent, the priest long gone. The people had all but forgotten the old songs and had grown too weary to dance. It was enough to work their plots and fall into an exhausted sleep every night.

He drew the first lungful of smoke and reality returned. The carpenter's house opposite had almost collapsed in on itself and forest was slowly reclaiming the vine terraces. His thoughts drifted as they did every day to the crumbling old farmhouse high above the village. If he walked to the end of his lane he would be able to see smoke curling from the chimney. The English woman would be up and about her business just as he himself was even though it was barely light. And it was that very business that was causing all the problems. Pavel sighed as he went to harness Cezar ready for a day's labour scratching a living from his meagre plot.

Elena was feeding the chickens when he returned for breakfast, her back rigid with self-righteous anger. 'Curtains of all things. Who could believe it? Fancy fabrics from the city. I make do with rotting shutters while she talks of curtains.'

'I assume by 'she' you mean the Englishwoman. You have spoken to her then?'

'No of course not. I had it from Marta.'

'Ah, Marta again. I see.'

Elena continued as if he hadn't spoken. 'Marta says that woman wants people to come here to rest. For peace and quiet. To read or paint or some such nonsense.'

'Marta heard her say this?'

'She heard it from Kristina.'

'And Kristina understands English, does she? That woman as you call her is English, is she not?'

'Well how should I know what she speaks? Stop bothering me with questions. All I know is that she arrives one day, buys up the best farm in the area and talks of holidays and curtains. We don't want her here.' Elena picked up a basket of eggs and flounced into the kitchen.

Well you might not want her here, he thought, but I do. I very much want her here, curtains or no curtains. That farm had been a ruin for years – hardly the best farm in the village. Now here was someone offering a way out. People might not like it, but that was too bad. He had learned many valuable lessons from his father about

farming and animal husbandry but the most important lesson he learned was that if something was not working you must change what you're doing to make it work.

It was late afternoon when Pavel drew Cezar to a halt outside the English woman's farmhouse. The huge wooden door was slightly open and he could see into the courtyard beyond. The changes were tiny but significant. An old tub had been planted with geraniums and the rioting ivy round the stable door had been cut back. A few chickens fussed in the yard and high up in the sloping orchard he could make out the solid figure of the English woman picking plums. She looked ordinary and homely wearing working man's trousers and a straw hat. Since her arrival a month ago, the stories had flown around the village about what had driven her here but no-one actually knew for certain. The main story was that she wanted to open a guest house - a place of tranquility where people from the cities could rest and think. A strange idea he thought. Why would people want to come here of all places? And to this ruin of a place? But everyone knew the English had crazy ideas sometimes. He looked at the staunch figure toiling in the orchard and thought that if anyone could bring life back to their village, this woman could.

He took off his hat and waited.

Two hours later, he made his way down the track back to the village trying to process what he'd learned. He spoke very little English, most of which was gleaned from watching English television programmes. She spoke virtually no Romanian. But despite that, they had understood each other well enough. She introduced herself as Lorna and on a makeshift map of England, drawn in the dust, pointed out

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where she had come from. She showed him the crumbling rooms which would be the guest accommodation, describing with her hands how they would look when she had finished. The crumbling loggia at the back would be rebuilt with a rambling fragrant rose. The garden would burst with vegetables and vines would grow on the long abandoned terraces. She would make wine and serve traditional Romanian dishes. The picture she painted had made his eyes mist over. It would be heaven on earth.

But of course she couldn't do it all on her own. She was old – at least 70 he calculated. She needed a workman to clear stones and transform the old outbuildings. Someone who was used to toiling on the land in the unforgiving summer heat and the freezing winters. In short, someone like him.

Now all he had to do was tell Elena and he wasn't looking forward to that. Not one bit.

As it happened Elena already knew. 'So. In spite of everything, you went to see that woman. How could you go behind my back like that? Christian saw the cart there this afternoon. The middle of the afternoon of all things when you should have been working.'

Pavel knew he would have to tread carefully- not only about him working there but all the other things he and Lorna had talked about. Elena plonked down some salty cheese pancakes and a fiery dip in front of him. 'I don't know why I bother,' she said.

‘Thank you for the food,’ he said. ‘Yes I have some explaining to do and I will do so, but please may I enjoy this excellent food first. I promise I’ll tell you everything then.’

He tore a piece of hot pancake and dipped it into the sauce, thinking for the umpteenth time what an excellent cook his wife was. Surely the best in the whole village.

Later, they sat by the fire, Elena furiously knitting while he fiddled with his pipe. Eventually she broke the silence. ‘Well, husband. What have you got to say for yourself?’

He took a deep drag on his pipe. ‘What have I got to say? Firstly she is a very pleasant woman. Lorna is her name. English, with little Romanian. She is elderly but strong.’ Elena sniffed. He ignored her and carried on. ‘She has great plans for the place.’ He went on to describe how the farm would look when it was finished, trying to convey the glimpse of heaven on earth that had moved him so much. ‘However she cannot do it all on her own. I went to offer my services and she has given me a job. A job Elena.’

There was a long pause while Elena deftly negotiated a particularly complicated part of her knitting.

‘Well, I don’t like it. I don’t want you doing it. I don’t want city people here. What about the old ways?’

‘The old ways are dead and soon I shall be dead too, as we all will. And she doesn’t want to change things. She wants to bring back some of the old traditions. That’s what city people want apparently.’

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Elena stood up to poke the fire. 'Is she paying you or must you do it for nothing just because she is English and has crazy ideas?'

'Yes she is paying me. Very generously.'

He waited, nursing his trump card until the time felt right. The logs slumped down in the grate and the clock ticked on the mantelpiece. Outside, a wind got up and he knew the leaves would be raining down outside. Winter was just around the corner.

He got up to check that the door was bolted. 'Of course, I can't do everything. She told me that once the place is up and running she would need help. Domestic help.' He paused. 'Needlewomen to make bedspreads and curtains. Cooks to prepare the local foods - that kind of thing.'

The knitting needles stopped their furious clacking. 'Of course,' he went on, 'I had to say that she must look outside the village as no-one here wanted to be part of whatever she was planning. She was disappointed naturally, but with everyone so against her what could I say?'

He had his back to her but could imagine her expression as she processed what he had said.

'So, you think the women from Anesti could do a better job than our village women? You think I can't cook and sew as well as anyone?'

'Elena, you are the best cook I know. When I come home from the fields I dream about your sarmale. And I know we don't have curtains, but if we did ours would be the finest. No doubt about it.'

'I don't want curtains as you very well know. Shutters were good enough for my mother and they're good enough for me.'

But Pavel sensed the change in mood and he relaxed in the warmth of the fire. The knitting had slowed to a gentle clack and his wife's brow was furrowed.

Next morning as Pavel sat on the bench watching the sun rise and enjoying his first smoke of the day, the cottage door opened to reveal Elena dressed in her best hand-embroidered shawl, clutching a cooking pot. Even at that time in the morning the smell of minced pork with rice and spices made his mouth water. He knew better than to say anything as she climbed up onto the cart next to him. And for once she kept her counsel as they made their way through the growing dawn to the English woman's farmhouse.

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