



**Tales from Sherwood
forest:**



The Pink Blouse

Two gypsies were at our gate, carrying enameled pots and pans in large canvas bags on their shoulders. The woman in her long, flowing skirt and head bandanna looked at me through the wooden rails of the fence and said:

“Pots and pans! Pots and pans! We trade pots and pans for used clothing and shoes. Go tell your Ma’ we’re here.”

I ran back to the house and shouted:

“Marioara! The gypsies are here!”



Marioara was our live-in housemaid. She was eighteen, robust, tall, and good looking, and wore her long hair in two thick braids that reached down to her waist, or to the small of her back when she pulled them back. Overall she looked like Frans Hals’ *Gypsy Girl*, but I couldn’t have known that then. At any given moment you expected her skin to burst at the seams from so much carnal health, and all her vigor to spill out and around and dance for happiness and joy.

Marioara was from a small village in Salaj County, and had been hired by Mother while I was away. Marioara came to work in our house when I was in first grade living with my grandma and grandpa; that’s when my little brother was born. It was the custom in those days for village girls to hire themselves out as housemaids, and this was done according to a time-honored ritual: the girls gathered at the Maids’ Market by the fountain in Old Town Square every Thursday and Sunday afternoon (which were their afternoons off), waiting for the ladies of the town to come by and make offers. Most of the would-be maids wore voluminous, ankle-long skirts gathered at the waist, white cotton leggings, black flat shoes, long-sleeved embroidered white blouses, and short, black velvet vests, and some of them even wore floral-print head kerchiefs of gorgeous designs and vivid colors. Many of them had intriguing names, such as Ilonka, Piroska, Aniko, or Juliska; others were known by less remarkable designations: Anica, Ileana, Raveca, or Marioara—like our own girl.

Marioara and Mother had agreed upon duties, salary, and living conditions, and now Marioara was ensconced as our Queen of Domestic Matters: grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of me and my little brother. Of me she took care to the extent that this was possible. It wasn’t too large an extent, for I was an independent young person, had my own ways, and held on to them for dear life.

She therefore was in charge of pots and pans; plates and silverware; meat and bread and vegetables; towels, bedsheets, and clothing; dusters, floor wax, and brooms (we didn’t have a vacuum cleaner yet); soap and detergent; and a thousand other things that she would list every day for my benefit. When she went about the house chores she sang folk tunes from her village. These were mainly about young persons falling in love with each other. Or about young persons finding themselves in pray of terrible suffering from unrequited love. It was useless to tell her she would better learn about Classical music, which was obviously classier, as the name would suggest. I knew that because I was now a student at the School of Music for Gifted Children.

We got on fabulously well: I was fascinated by the few smallpox scars on her face and her incredibly white teeth. She had full lips, fleshy cheeks, contagious laughter, and she laughed mostly all the time when she didn't scold me. I could tell her stories that were only half true and she would believe them. Or if she didn't, she had me believe she believed them, which was pretty much the same thing and almost as good.

On the occasion of the gypsies' visit Marioara said:

"I hope you didn't let them get past the gate. Stay here. I'll go deal with them."

She rearranged her apron, then her braids. She got out of the kitchen through the back door, walked around the house by the dwarf dahlia bed, and after a while I could hear her voice:

"We need some pots, Mrs. Doctor said. Let me see them. No, don't step inside the gate; stay on the sidewalk. Oh, I see. Do you have larger ones?"

I couldn't hear the gypsy woman's answer, but Marioara came running towards the house, stormed into the kitchen closet, stuck her head in the pile of old coats and whatnots till I could see her braids no more, and from the depths of the dusty collection of rags assembled there since times immemorial she exclaimed, triumphantly:

"They're here! Your father's old spring coat, the one with the torn lining; and these two pairs of old shoes your mother doesn't wear anymore."

She grabbed these and off she went to meet the gypsies at the gate. They negotiated for a while, then she returned jubilantly to the kitchen:

"Look! I got these two beauties for next to nothing."

I looked at the pots: they were really beautiful, red and shiny on the outside, like royal apples; milky white on the inside; large and capacious, just the pots to make strawberry and cherry preserves in; or *zacusca*. "*Zacusca*" was one of my favorite autumn dishes: you took eggplant, big red juicy peppers (which were known as "fat peppers"), onions, tomatoes, carrots, and other vegetables of which I wasn't sure. You grilled the eggplant and cleaned the burnt skin, then sliced and sautéed the rest of the vegetables, first separately, then together till you obtained a thick paste which was made even more delicious by the eggplant and tomato and pepper seeds. When your mother or grandma or Marioara made *zacusca* you knew it was fall. In October the whole town smelled like *zacusca*. It was awesome.



Marioara put the new acquisitions in the pantry, then turned to me and said:

"Today is Thursday. It's my day off. Mityu is coming to pick me up at five-thirty and we are going to the movies. Your parents are going to a doctors' reunion, so you'll stay with your little brother. I am going to lock the gate and take the key, so you guys are safe."

Malediction! I had made plans to go see that evening *Robin Hood* on Ileana's TV, for we didn't have a TV set yet. And now I was going to be stuck with my little brother, while she was going

to rejoice in the splendors of Robin Hood's medieval adventures. A thousand curses on Marioara! May her boyfriend Mityu burn in Hell!

Mityu wasn't his real name. It was Michael. He was Hungarian and she was Romanian, and I often wondered what language they spoke when they were together. Every Thursday, when Marioara had her afternoon off, Mityu would come by our house, stop on the sidewalk, and whistle. She would go to the gate, unlock it, prop it open, and the two of them would stand there and talk for hours. That's how she spent her "day off."

But today was different: she was going out with him, and I was expected to babysit my little brother. What's more, she was going to the movies—and I was stuck with the little plump red-haired fellow, all my hopes of watching *Robin Hood* shattered to pieces. Dust and ashes. *Robin Hood* was a TV series made in the fifties but it had reached Romania in the mid-sixties. Well never mind that, but if you missed an episode you were left with an immense information chasm which couldn't be filled by Ileana recounting the story. You lost continuity, and that wasn't good. Why even grandpa had said so.

I spent all day making plans on how to get out of this. None of them seemed to be workable: should I say I had to go to school, Marioara would surely reply this was my summer break. Should I say I didn't feel well, she would say tell my parents, since they were doctors. There was no way out.

In the end, I stole the gate key, which was hooked on a nail on the gate itself, and hid it behind Vinogradov's *Life of Paganini*. Marioara didn't read books, so I was sure she wouldn't think of looking in the library.

At five-thirty Mityu showed up, dressed to kill. Marioara had spent the afternoon trying on various outfits of her own, and in the end she went for the floral gathered skirt and pink nylon blouse. The latter was a dream: I say that as a connoisseur of things made of nylon. The blouse she had purchased from an unnamed source, but it was so beautiful it took your breath away: it had silk embroidery on the chest and sleeves, and a round collar trimmed with pink ribbon. She paraded the blouse in front of the large mirror in the entrance hall, and I was charmed by her poise: when it came to fashion, she had the know-how. Besides, she put on her nylon stockings and the new, black high-heeled shoes. That was a touch of great finesse which I had only seen in fashion magazines. Not even Mother or her lady-friends had shoes like that. Marioara said:

"It's a pity your silk poppy flower is red. It doesn't match the pink of the blouse, otherwise I would ask you to lend it to me. Oh well, it'll have to do without the flower. Do I look well?"

She looked stupendous. But she was going out, and I was staying in, and that drove me insane.

Mityu was getting impatient at the gate, and Marioara said:

"I have to go now. The movie starts at six. Take care of your brother. See you later."

And off she went.

But she only got to the gate.

"Where is the key?" she shouted.

"What key?"

“The gate key.”

“Isn’t it on its hook?”

“No, it’s not here. Did you do something with it?”

“I?! I would never do anything with the gate key. Keep looking, it’s got to be there.”

“No it isn’t. You little brat, you took it and hid it somewhere, didn’t you?”

“On my word of honor, I didn’t take the key. I have no idea where it could be. Perhaps Mother and Father took it when they left.” Yes, that was it: how come I didn’t think of that earlier? It was so simple, so easy: obviously if the key wasn’t there it meant my parents had taken it when they went to their medical reunion, and forgot to tell Marioara. That was what I should have told her from the very beginning. I wasn’t as smart as I thought I was.

She returned to the house and started frantically searching for the key. Mityu came with her. They looked in cupboards, wardrobes, and beds; under tablecloths and rugs; and behind the mirrors. (Luckily we didn’t have any paintings, for Father had said he knew nothing about paintings, and it was better not to have any than to be stuck with works of dubious taste.) But she never thought of looking at the library shelves. I knew that!

Finally they gave up. I had ten more minutes to *Robin Hood*, and in this short amount of time I had to make sure my brother was safely seated behind the wire grate in his little bed, grab the key from behind *The Life of Paganini*, walk to the gate, lock it behind me, put the key in my pocket, walk to Ileana’s place next door, ring their bell, wait for Nagymama to come to the gate and unlock it (she was a slow walker, for she had arthritis), walk to the house, enter the living room, and grab a seat in front of the TV set.

Marioara was both worried and furious, and I sort of understood where she was coming from. Her cheeks were of a pink much more intense than the pink of her blouse. They were closer to the color of my silk poppy flower, the one she wouldn’t wear today. There was no smile on her face at all, which was a rare occurrence. There was a murderous look in her eyes. She said:

“Well, we are leaving. The movie starts in ten minutes and we’ll have to walk fast. I won’t be able to lock the gate, but I trust you’ll be a good girl and watch your brother. No stranger is likely to walk into the garden; it’s a quiet street. The gypsies are gone. Still, I don’t understand where the key could go. We’ll talk about it when I return.”

And off they went.

That gypsies stole children was beyond the shadow of a doubt, as proven in Verdi’s *Il Trovatore*, which grandma and I had seen at the opera. The old Gypsy woman Azucena had stolen the Count’s baby and thrown him in the fire—only she mistakenly threw her own son into the fire. But we were not in Spain, so I didn’t let the fact bother me. Besides, Azucena didn’t sell pots and pans, and this morning’s gypsies didn’t sing.

I did exactly as planned, and it took me five minutes to go through the motions I had envisaged while Marioara and Mityu were looking for the key. Finally, I reached my destination. It was about time: *Robin Hood* had already started.

Ileana and I were watching Robin Hood delivering a valiant speech to the Sheriff of Nottingham, who was wearing a chain mail coat and agitating a huge sword, when I thought I heard Marioara's voice calling my name from the street.

"It couldn't be her," I said to myself. "She must be watching *A Fistful of Dollars* at *The Miner* right now."

But it was her voice. She stood in front of Ileana's window, shouting at the top of her lungs, calling my name and calling me names. She had returned!

"Come out, you little brat! Come out, I swear to God I'll show you an episode you'll never forget. Have you no shame, no fear of God, are you completely irresponsible? What do you go to school for? Who taught you to steal keys and lie? Come out, I tell you, or I'll go in and you won't like it a bit."

I slowly got up from my chair and tiptoed to the window. Peeking through the Venetian blinds I could see her face: it was of a red so rich, so intense, the Gypsy woman's pots were nothing compared to it. The fear of death crept up my every bone. She had caught me red-handed, and I was done for. Nagymama came into the living room:

"Go, for God's sake. Go and see what she wants. I bet you were up to something and she caught you. Come, I'll unlock the gate for you."

I thought for a second she might defend me, for she was known throughout the neighborhood as a good, compassionate woman. But no: even Nagymama was willing to deliver me into the hands of the enemy. So I followed her. Death loomed large in my soul.

Marioara was waiting for me outside Ileana's gate, and I couldn't even look at her. She had put the fear of God in me. We walked to our house, she in front of me, I praying to my Little Guardian Angel, asking Him to intercede in my favor. If He did, Marioara wouldn't report my crime to Mother and Father. But in my heart of hearts I knew there was little chance of that. Besides, Father didn't believe in Guardian Angels. Then I thought of St. Peter. He was the Keeper of the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, so He was a specialist in keys, and perhaps would be able to protect even a key thief like me from the fury of Marioara.

When we got back in the house Marioara said:

"I KNEW there was something terribly wrong when I couldn't find that key. You damn well ruined my day off. I couldn't enjoy wearing my new pink blouse at all. I didn't even get to see the movie. All the time I walked on Red Creek Street towards Old Town I was thinking of the damn key. Your parents would have let me know, had they wanted to take it. But they didn't: they left it on its hook where it usually is, and you, Miss Big Lies, stole it so you could go to Ileana's and watch that damn TV series. By the time we got to the Little Orthodox Church I told Mityu I had to come back, and when I found the gate locked I KNEW: YOU took the key! You left your little brother alone. The gypsies could have stolen him. You're doomed. You're finished. You're kaput."

I knew I was.

The next morning Father and Mother woke up at their usual time, which was the ungodly hour of six a.m. I could tell they were up because of the radio. It broadcast the morning news, followed by patriotic songs and a few folk tunes. I was in bed, pretending to sleep, when I heard

Marioara saying good morning in the kitchen. I was now waiting for her to say: “Your daughter is a cheater and a liar. She steals things and is an irresponsible young person. Never trust her with anything. You should send her to a school of correction.”

But she didn’t.

I waited for Father to come home from the hospital at one o’clock, thinking Marioara would tell him all about his criminal daughter. She did not. “She must be waiting for Mother to come home at two, then she’s gonna tell them both over lunch. I’m doomed. They won’t let me play with my friends ever again, and it’s summer, and I’ll have to stay inside and guard my brother so the gypsies don’t steal him, or help Marioara with house chores. That’ll be awful: she isn’t even talking to me anymore. Oh God.” But she did not tell on me. Perhaps she was waiting for dinner time.

Thus the day passed in cruel agony. Yet at dinner time she didn’t say a word.

“It’s for tomorrow, then,” I speculated. I went to sleep with a heavy heart, praying to St. Peter. Then it occurred to me that neither Gagarin nor Shepard, both of whom had been in Outer Space never reported seeing either St. Peter or any Guardian Angels. That meant they didn’t exist, and I was really doomed. Marioara was bound to tell on me.

But on the morrow she kept mum. And the following day. And the next.

Marioara never told my parents what I’d done.

I did.

