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Boney-legged Bride

Radovan Carves a Coffer

Hail arm, thou art highly favored / you are the body's sole savior
if a man's right arm turns traitor/ left must handle the shock labor

From the dark streets of Vienna, we travel back to our sunlit lands, telling the tale of Radovan's right arm. Among other things, its very palm will touch Gila, so even the reader will get to feel the young healer's white hair and the delicate pallor of her cheeks.

Radovan's right arm woke up in pain. A ripping sensation started in the area around the elbow and radiated up the arm to the shoulder. It both tingled and prickled, migrating from shoulder to elbow, elbow to hand, coiling around the forearm, then stung the shoulder and sank into the blade bone. Worse yet, no matter what position it tried, nothing helped relive the pain. Clenching, stretching, lifting up or resting by the side, the pain was just as intensive and relentless. Even as the time passed nothing changed, it wouldn't go away, wouldn't fade, wouldn't age, persistently it frayed at him, not even a hint of stopping, so finally Radovan, to whom the arm belonged, got up from his bed, sat on a three-legged stool by the hearth and so greeted the dawn.

In the morning, the night incident seemed a half-forgotten dream. The hand ripped chunks of bread effortlessly, dunk them in milk, tossed the hard-boiled eggs into its owner' mouth, then used its palm to wipe the breadcrumbs off his lips. Then it gently and caringly tapped a few disheveled young heads and a pair of woman's hips, pushed the heavy wooden door and lead Radovan outside.

The day was clear and sunny, the bora blew away the fog and one could see all the way to Mount Vrčevo above which circled a murder of crows. Radovan paid no mind to his right arm, so it casually hung at his side, at times moving up to greet his fellow villagers. It was not until he was

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about to pick up his axe to hew out the mother of god on Škifo's coffer that he thought of it. He grabbed the axe handle, but the arm seemed to have misunderstood him, and so, having tightened its fingers only lightly, it dropped the axe on Radovan's toes. No harm was done, the thick leather of his opanak saved his toes, but the image of the axe heading for his foot startled him. He tried to pick it up one more time, but the hand, unable to hold the handle, let it slip. He then turned to his arm.

"The fuck's wrong with you?" he asked, but it gave no reply. He brought it closer to his face and examined it from every angle. It looked the same as usual, slightly wrinkled, slightly red, but strong and broad, it was a good hand of a peasant. Was it good, though? He tried to clench his fingers into a fist, observing how reluctant they were to bend. There was no strength in the grip of that hand. Radovan was clenching as hard as he could, but the fingers went only as far, before limply settling into their designed places within the palm. It was impossible to chop the oak tree with a hand like that, and our lady had to be carved at the front panel of Škifo's coffer. Last week, he carved a rough silhouette of the god's mother and left out bumps above her where the angels would fly. His plan for today was to shape the silhouette into the blessed virgin, but the arm, it seemed, had a different plan. He nervously flung the axe to the far corner of the room, then took his hand plane and spent the rest of the morning pushing against it.

Around noon, he tried clenching his fist again, and having realized it was still reluctant, he banged it against innkeeper Jako's bar. Innkeeper Jako poured him a wooden tankard of white wine. Many arms were at the inn, all of them pounding their fists against the bar, but the innkeeper's hand landed the strongest blows.

"Goddamn slut, fuck her and her lot! What brought her here?" roared innkeeper Jako.

"Sweet mother of god, why did she get here," others fussed. They spoke of a young woman who had turned up in the village the day before. A ragged young woman who held herself like a princess. She had told the women that she was a healer and that she could cure them, so the women hurried to give her something to eat and drink, though they had no clue where she was from or how she got here, for all they knew she could've been a heathen. Though she was not a heathen, her skin was white and so was her hair, it made more sense she had come down from heaven than out of hell, but then again, who the hell knew what a heavenly creature looked like,

they hadn't really seen one around here, and neither could be trusted, and both should be treated with caution, for they knew what brought her here. She was here for the Vrčevo.

"Damn these antichrists, must these spawns of Satan always lurk round this place," the men in the inn wound it up. It pained them, all those people who came drawn to their hill. The Hungarian baroness and her twenty servants, who had come to Gorica last autumn, were still fresh in their minds, climbing to Vrčevo, bringing with her an easel and sitting all day long on the hill painting and doing god knows what else. She rented the house of Andrija, the rabbit breeder, and packed the whole room with paintworks none of the villagers dared to look at more closely. The paintings were of the witches of Vrčevo, they said, dark shadows spinning round the pine trees and the ghoulish wights gathered under walnut trees. Some of her canvas frames were built by Radovan himself. One day her servant paid him a visit with a fistful of guilders, having overheard the village had a man who builds coffers, and why, if he could build coffers, he had to know how to build frames too. Fast money, Radovan thought, but then the servant soon came back, returned the frames, saying they were unlevelled. Radovan planed them once more, remeasured the angles, but they were no good again, for seven days he levelled what had been perfectly levelled and never saw the money. What did you expect from a Hungarian? the men at the inn had their finger on the pulse of international affairs. Hungarians are nothing like Austrians, worlds apart, that's what they are. And that baroness. What business has a baroness in Vrčevo, a small and unsightly hill, a place behind God's back and above their heads? Something just isn't right. The men at the inn shook their heads, then said, "To hell with Satan's affairs," and raised a toast to condemning devil worshipers and antichrists.

Radovan too tried to raise his tankard, but to no avail. A full tankard was unusually heavy today, as if the spruce wood had soaked up Jaka's homemade wine and grew much heavier. His hand tried to lift the tankard, but it could barely rise above the table, the liquid shaking and swirling, and all Radovan could do was watch his own hand about to spill the wine all over him. He tried to support it with his left hand, but its grip wasn't quite secure, the wine nearly missed his mouth. The men at the inn noticed. They fell silent, staring at him. Why is he spilling the wine all over himself? Though Radovan's eyes did not meet theirs, he could feel their stares.

"Zounds! Gimme a glass of rakija, god fucking damn it," Radovan gave up on the tankard.

That same night, sleep would not come to Radovan's right arm. The second it lay down on the bed, the pain began. What rose as a dull, radiating discomfort, soon turned into excruciating cramps. To no avail it tried to hide itself away from the pain, crawling under Radovan's body, slanting here and there, stretching, or shaking out, nothing helped. At last, out of despair, it grabbed Radovan by the face. There was nothing he could do to help it. He sat at the edge of his bed and pondered over the fate of his arm. What if it never got better? What if it never lifted another axe or tankard? What good is Radovan without his right arm? Radovan's right arm feeds his two children, his wife, him too, what are they to do if it deserts them? Could Radovan's left arm even carve coffers? An unrest awoke in Radovan for he spent his whole life relying on his right arm that now threatened with treason. Sure, Radovan still had his other arm, both legs, even his head was in place, but for the past forty years he had been neglecting them, and now, for the first time, remorse washed over him. Remorse was followed by despair, and despair by doubt. How can he ever trust his arm again? If it disobeys him now, who's to say it won't soon have a will of its own? What if it rose against him? What if the next time it dropped the axe was on his head instead? Radovan's own arm now terrified him, and he no longer felt like sleeping, so he got up from his bed, sat on a three-legged stool by the hearth and so greeted the dawn.



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