

## Želimir Periš

### How We Thresh Our Wheat on the Threshing Floor

(Story from the book: The Grace of Cypresses)

My mother is the chief wailer in our village. Whenever someone dies, and that sad event needs mourning, they always knock at our door. The other wailers are not half as bad at what they do, but my mother is the finest there is. She weeps and howls with genuine hurt, beats her chest and pulls out her hair, raises her eyes to the heavens and casts them down at the earth, calls after the deceased one by their name, demands how will their family and friends do without them, then calls out the Lord himself and asks why, why did you have take our loved one away?

And then Sawyer's Betty died. Sawyer came to our house, carrying a piece of dry-cured ham.

"Sheila," he said to my mother, "Sheila, do your moaning, but don't bring me into this, your Lord be damned."

My writing teacher would call Sawyer a straightforward man.

"Dear Lord, how do I not bring you into this, Sawyer? Poor Betty, you were everything she had in this world."

"There she goes, for fuck's sake. Stop that! Take my name outta your mouth, 'cause if you don't, the Almighty himself will hear 'bout myself and come down here like he said. Take my name outta your mouth!"

And my mother, wasting not a moment, went straight to the pastor to make a confession. They talked of this, of that, and quickly concluded there is no doubt Sawyer himself murdered his Betty. For lightning was known to have struck folks down in this village before, but never three times in a row with an axe.

When I was tasked with writing a story about it, I first needed to make certain Sawyer would not discover who wrote it. Since this tale could have ended up God knows where and people could read all sorts of things into it, if it ever comes down to Sawyer, it's important he doesn't find out it was I who wrote it. That's why I changed the names of the characters. Sawyer shall be called Andrew, after his father. His wife's name will be Mary, and my own mother I'll call Violet. My mother loves the name, thinks it's very ladylike, and believes that whenever you're named Violet, it means you've grown up in a big city, having had pretty dresses and tiny shoes, having gone to important schools, and learned how to play the piano. My mother doesn't feel bad about not having had the dresses or the piano, but she surely would be glad if I called her

Violet. And as I am the one writing this story, I don't really need a name, do I. My writing teacher taught me that the one who does the writing shouldn't write about himself, but rather about others. That is how I began writing this tale.

On a hot summer day, with clouds floating through the sky, grasshoppers hopping through the grass, and frogs croaking in the creeks, Joseph's boy Peter, two years short of starting elementary school at the time, came back from the field shrieking. About how he'd seen a dead body. Well, where is it? Well, behind the Tanners' vineyard. Oh, my poor Marietta, her old mother began to weep at once, for Marietta hadn't been back from pasture that morning, and the night before the sky was full of lightning. When there is a thunderstorm around these parts, people try to find cover until morning, after which they return to the village. And it does happen that lightning sometimes strikes folks down on that hill of ours, so some never come back. The hills around here are barren; there are no trees, only tiny shrubs, so when you find yourself out during a storm, the only thing lightning can strike at is you. That is why people here have always firmly believed in the Almighty and have had a very special relationship with him. They hide nothing from him and always turn to him in loud prayer. For there is no other place on this earth where our Lord strikes down those untrue to him so often, and with such precision, as in our village.

The whole village got into an uproar, everybody ran to the Tanners' vineyard, where yonder in a dried-out ditch lay the body of Betty, Sawyer's wife. I have, however, said I'll call them Andrew and Mary. So, Mary was lying there dead and gone, her legs spread open, and her hair burnt to a crisp. It was lightning that struck her down, no two ways about it. And the people immediately saw that her head was split in two. She had to have kept horrible, evil things in there when our Lord chose to punish her this way. In our village, God never strikes down those who are innocent. He smote Angie, my friend Jerome's aunt, for whoring around. Jerry told us his father said so when they asked him why God took their aunt from them. But he is not one to be trusted, as my father saw him eat a green lizard alive, and from then on, his tongue remained green. The Lord killed Mr. Parker for his drinking. That's what we know, but God knows a lot more than we do. And he doesn't always kill by striking somebody down with lightning. One night, the Almighty strangled Sylvie, of the Jones family living just over the hill, in her bed. She'd also been a whore, you see. God likes them the least around here. And he doesn't really like children, either. Many had he delivered from their mothers' wombs already dead. The doctor lives far away from here, and not everybody has enough dry-cured hams to spare, so the women often give birth by themselves. The only one at hand is old Rachel, who had been a midwife to all children born around here since forever. And God knows at once if one is worthy of being born, and he knows who'll eventually turn good, and who'll turn bad. So, he cuts evil off at the root. That is the case around here.

My writing teacher said life writes the best stories and, if one wishes to write, they should write about themselves and their own life. My life is not very interesting; in fact, the most interesting thing that happened to me was getting into writing school. My family didn't have enough dry-cured hams for me to become a doctor, and I am not good enough at math to be an engineer. That's why they sent me to school to become a teacher. If I manage to finish my studies, I'll be

a teacher at a school in Pupfield, attended by children from first to fourth grade. Everyone will be addressing me as Mr. Teacher, and they'll be bringing me their dry-cured hams, should their children be bad at math. That's why math is so difficult, Pa said. The State doesn't have enough big ones to pay the teachers their due; that's why they made math as difficult as possible, so that students who cannot pass the class have to bring dry-cured hams to their teachers. It's like taxes, this math, my mother used to say, and then Pa'd reply, Shut up, you silly woman, and stir the turkey. What even are taxes, if not mathematics? Numbers and percentages, so that poor people don't even know just how badly they'd been ripped off.

The pastor came up with a nice speech at the funeral. He spoke of our Lord Jesus Christ and his mission on this hard earth to save us all. Then he spoke of our Lord's eternal mercy and of the fiery inferno awaiting all those who commit sin and do not repent. For no one can hide from God. God sees everything and knows everything, every single one of our thoughts as well, and he is the only one who can judge us. And with his lightning, he strikes down all who do not repent, whose thoughts are wicked, who dream of doing evil, and are rotten to the core! Just like he did with our dear, beloved wife and mother, neighbor and friend, Mary," said the pastor, pointing at the aggrieved family and friends.

Then he crossed himself twice, said a prayer, and everybody said amen, so that Violet, my mother in this story, could have begun.

"Oh, our poor Mary, why did you abandon us to weep after you! O, our poor Mary, whom the Lord took from us in her youth, how wretched we are without you! O, our poor Mary, what should your children do without you, poor 'em! O, our poor Mary, what should your Andrew do without you..."

At that point, Andrew swore and yelled at my mother to shut her trap and not mention his name before God. My mother neither heard nor listened, but continued moaning and beating her chest, and Andrew stepped in front of her and kicked her in the shoulder, causing her to fall to the ground.

"Don't you mention it 'fore God, Christ be damned!"

"Andrew, leave the poor woman alone," said the pastor, trying to calm him down.

"Shut your trap, father!" Andrew pointed his finger at him. "Shut your trap, or I'll tell all, I'll tell everything, just so you know. That's why you'd better keep silent, you understand, damn your king Herod, and all your saints!" Andrew spat next to the grave and walked away, while some of the women crossed themselves. We curse our Lord a lot around here. It is because we have a special relationship with him and always talk to him in a very straightforward manner. And our pastor says sometimes it is better to say bad things than do them. He also says Lord doesn't like it when we say bad things, but it is better to speak badly out loud than to be mean in silence. God never killed anyone over a curse word; that's how we know he forgives us our

blasphemy, if our remorse comes from the heart. Nowhere is God as close to this earth as he is in our village.

After Andrew left, the pastor came up to my mother and helped her back to her feet. He said it had been enough; she wailed well and needed to do it no more. But my mother knew that not enough tears had been shed for the deceased woman, so she softly wailed on, in a way nobody could hear, but my own self. She went on, "O, our poor Mary, poor you, suffering for the earthly sins, and the divine justice mortal men serve for 'em." My mother knew you must weep after those who are gone, for if not enough tears are shed for those who left us, it may seem as if they hadn't been worthy enough while they were living.

The day after, the constables came to make a record of the accident. The pastor welcomed them at the rectory and offered them some slices of dry-cured ham, along with some cheese and red wine.

"What? Another lightnin' strike?" asked one of the constables.

"Who should doubt the will of God?" the pastor replied.

They ate the ham and the cheese, drank the wine, and after that, Joseph's boy, Peter, two years short of starting elementary school, took them behind the Tanners' vineyard, to the dried-out ditch where he found the dead woman's body. The constables took a look at the soaked-up blood on the piece of dried land, mumbled to themselves, and took out their cigarettes. One of them lit up a match and a cigarette with it, then lit up his colleague's, shook the match off, and threw it to the ground.

"Nothin' to see here," said one of them.

"Aw man, fuck that shit," answered the other.

They finished their cigarettes, threw them to the ground, and stomped all over them. The first one had gone off to take a leak, and the other one stood and stared at the red stain on the ground.

"Sammie, son of a bitch, how much tobacco have we smoked through?" the one who stared at the ground yelled at the one who came back from taking a leak.

"Two smokes, damn it."

"And how many matches have we spent?"

"Only one, damn it. What d'you want now?"

"Well, there's two of them burnt matches on the ground."

Now the other one came back and observed the ground. Joseph's boy, Peter, who had stood on the side until now, moved closer so he could also take a look at the other match.

"Mary's hair was burnt by the lightning's strike," said little Peter.

"Screw you, boy, nothin' to see here!" The first constable took out another cigarette and lit it with a new match. "What d'you think?" he asked the other one.

"Aw man, fuck that shit."

Even the constables swear a lot around here. Their job is the most difficult there is. The State makes them scrub off all the dirt of this world. When it just so happens that somebody hasn't paid the taxes and must lose his home for it, the constables come and beat him out of the house. When the people need to be calmed down, after stoning the windows of the foreman's house because he wrote off their inheritance to himself, the constables come and beat them away. Whenever there's trouble the State disapproves of, here come the constables. Luckily, it is some three hours' drive between our village and Pupfield, so the constables don't come when they don't have to. And they'll have to, whenever lightning decides to strike again.

The next morning, Marietta came back from the pasture after three whole days. She walked up after the sheep, with a slaughtered chicken in one hand and a bloody axe in the other. Wasting no time, her mother slapped her in front of everyone on the street, saying, "Where've you been, you tramp, whoring around for three days, admit it! O, Lord, why've you given me this heretic, why've you cursed me with this luckless creature, o Lord!" Then she took the chicken and asked if it was Uncle Liam who sent it. "Praise him; I'll make it into a soup."

Marietta led the sheep back into the sheepfold and took the axe to the pastor. In our village, you always go to the pastor. When a woman is in labor, we have old Rachel for it; she has been a midwife to all children born around here ever since anyone can remember. Whenever a cow falls ill, there is Tony's Daniel, the only one from around here who has gone to school to become a doctor. He returned after three years, having grown a beard and acquired some leather boots, but with no diploma in sight. Nobody lets him treat their wounds, but he is the first one to call if your cow is struck with a disease. For everything else, there is our pastor. Our pastor is both our accuser and our judge. He teaches us what is right and how everything is to be done through God's mercy. You can always hear the same words thundering from his altar: God's judgement! Who harps on about what, but our pastor about the judgment of God.

When Marietta came to him with a bloody axe, he at once took her to confession. Marietta told him all about how she took the sheep to pasture, and ended up at Uncle Liam's, in Providence, for her uncle always gives her a warm welcome; however, it's not only for her uncle she went there, you see, but there is also this young man in Providence whom she fancies. Then he made her confess her thoughts about this young man, in detail, as a pastor is the one to judge which of these thoughts are forbidden to have, and which are not. For a young girl, it is sometimes not

forbidden or unusual to have thoughts of such kind, said the pastor, and made arrangements to go to Providence, to discuss the matter over with the young man's father.

"And what about the axe?" asked Marietta, standing at the gates of the rectory.

"What axe?"

"The one I found on the way, next to the black stump." The black stump marks the halfway point between our village and the Tanners' vineyard, where Mary's body had been found. It's the stump left over from an old oak tree, struck by lightning even before I was born. The Almighty also punishes trees for their sins; nobody can escape his judgement. That's the way it is around here.

"Don't you mind that axe; I'll see to its owner," said the pastor, and closed the gates after her.

There is a total of three teachers at my school. There's one teaching me how to write, the one who has tasked me with writing this story. The second one teaches physical education, and he tasked me with running seventy laps around the field. And the third one teaches math. He is the most difficult teacher there is. Pa takes me to school on the back of our donkey on Mondays and comes to get me on Tuesdays. In the mornings, it is there I write my tale, run laps around the field, and learn how to count; in the afternoon, I clean the courtyard and the schoolhouse, and peel the corn that belongs to the rectory. There are eight of us at school, and beside me, there is also my friend Jerome, who comes from our village. If I manage to pass every single one of my classes, next year I'll go to school at Pupfield. Your old man takes you there on Mondays and doesn't come to get you before Friday. When he takes me down from our donkey, Pa always says, "Go and study, your schooling costs me a fortune. And if you come back with a beard and a pair of boots instead, I'll break your legs, God dammit, understand?"

Jerome's family wanted him to become a doctor, as his father owns a great flock of sheep, along with ten pigs. He himself always said he wanted to become a pastor, since his father always repeated that pastors lack nothing. There is always something to eat and something to drink, and swear to God, they don't lack any pussy either, but his family didn't want to hear about it. Jerry told us the pastor came over for a visit one time, and asked his father how come he has so many sons and hasn't given one up yet to become a pastor, but his father gave him two dry-cured hams, and so the pastor never mentioned it again.

On a hot summer day, with clouds floating through the sky, grasshoppers hopping through the grass, and frogs croaking through the creeks, the pastor came into our home empty-handed.

"Sheila," he said to my mother, "we're burying Sawyer tomorrow. Do moan after him well, will you, since there's no one else who'd do it."

Sawyer and Betty never had any children. Some folks said Betty didn't have the hips for childbearing, but others said Sawyer would plough through his brandy, and not his wife. That

is because Sawyer didn't really like his Betty. His father, Andrew, arranged it with her father and made them marry, which Sawyer didn't like at all, since he was after a girl from Victoria. Afterwards, Betty had been known to moan about the village about how her Sawyer gets drunk on brandy and then rides over to Victoria, staying out all night. When Sawyer finally came back, had he heard that she'd been blabbering on about the village, he'd have given her a good thrashing. He'd tell her that, if he heard her jabbering around for one more time, he'd strangle her. God overheard everything, and that is why last night, while Sawyer was drunk and asleep in his own bed, he thundered into his house and stabbed him through the heart with a knife.

When he died, there was no one to inherit his piece of land, so by law the parsonage took it over, and the parsonage would be lending out the field for the price of half the harvest to anyone most willing, and to anyone with enough sons for plowing.

Sawyer was buried on a Monday, while I was at school. And when I came back home, nobody mentioned anything about it.

Since Sawyer died, I don't have to invent any more names for my story. And the fact that our Lord took him away so soon meant that my mother was right when she said he was the one who split his Betty's head in two. Mother also says others beat their wives, too, but the Almighty doesn't punish them for it. Only when blood is drawn does our Lord get angry and exacts justice with his fire and sword, and his shotgun, if need be.

That is why, when the constables came after two days, they didn't only take their clubs with them, but their shotguns as well. They were looking for the pastor, but couldn't find him, because little Peter's father, Joseph, took him and Marietta to Providence, to talk to the father of the young man Marietta fancied. In our village, the pastor takes good care for everyone to marry well. If some fathers can't arrange it between themselves, the pastor steps in to reconcile them. A good marriage comes down to a nice dowry. When everything is settled, the bride arrives with the dowry on Thursday, and the pastor marries them on Sunday.

The constables stood waiting for the pastor at the rectory. Old Rachel, who keeps the keys because she cleans the place and makes lunch and dinner for the pastor, let them in. She put some dry-cured ham and cheese in front of them and poured them some red wine. She brought out some more refreshments three times before little Peter's father, Joseph, drove the cart back from Providence. On it sat the pastor, and next to him Marietta, bound up and beside herself with tears. The cart hadn't even halted before the pastor started shouting, "There you have it, your whore of Babylon! The sinner who took upon herself to do the work of our Lord! Her Uncle Liam of Providence swore before God that she hadn't been at his place for three days, but one, and she came back with a bloody axe after her whoring, it is still there, at my rectory! She pranced a bloody, whorish dance when she split poor Betty's head in two with that axe! She confessed everything before God: both her whoring and having stabbed Sawyer through the heart!"

The constables took out their shotguns and asked if it was true. Marietta said it wasn't. Little Peter's old man, Joseph, said it was. The pastor said there is no room for falsehood under our Lord's heaven and instructed them to take the sinner away.

"We'll interrogate her at the station. Take her away, dammit!" The constables took Marietta with them and hauled her away on their cart.

"Let God give you your due!" the pastor shouted after her.

"God don't give nobody their due around here! He ain't do nothin' but murder! Fuck you, and your Lord with you!" Marietta yelled back in tears.

"Listen to that heathen mouth, cursing the name of our Lord! Here you have it, here's your proof, she's a wicked Jezebel! 'Tis Satan from hell himself!" The constables hit the reins, and the pastor went on yelling after them.

Marietta's mother afterwards swore her daughter had done no wrong, for she had nothing to do with either Sawyer or his Betty. Marietta's old man took a barrel of brandy with him and didn't come out of the house for three days. They say Marietta was interrogated for five days. That they hadn't given her anything to eat or drink until she confessed what had happened and where she got the bloody axe from. On the fifth day, she escaped them and jumped out of the second floor of the station. When they were burying her, my mother acted the part of the chief wailer once more.

That is how I decided to end my story. Before that, I managed to finish those seventy laps around the field, so my P.E. teacher gave me a passing grade. I didn't know how to do the counting, though. My math teacher told me, "Math ain't for everyone. Does your old man have any dry-cured hams?" Thank God he does, a single leg of a dry-cured ham kept in the attic for over six months, for the sole purpose of paying off my math teacher – so I got a passing grade in math as well. And, finally, I showed my story to the writing teacher.

"It ain't that clever, what you wrote," the teacher said to me crossly. "It just ain't clever. You should be writing clever things, not this. Have you gone mad, boy? You want someone to see this? Come on, rip the pages out and throw them away, and start again. The part where you wrote 'bout frogs jumping 'round was good. Write 'bout something like that. 'Bout frogs jumping 'round, and 'bout how it is yonder up the hill, how y'all pass the time. Write 'bout the way y'all thresh that wheat on the threshing floor."

I only have a single notebook, so Pa'll give me a thrashing if I tear the pages out. Pa bought it when he went to town to sell wool, and he never says a word to me about how I should dress or comb my hair, but he always tells me to take care of my notebook, for my education costs him a fortune. When he was learning his letters, they didn't have notebooks like ours back then, and they wrote letters by scraping black berries over a piece of rock. And when they came back the day after, the paint would have faded away already, so they could write again over that same

spot. So, the same piece of rock lasted throughout the winter; they were writing all sorts of clever things all over it, but those didn't really last another day. That is why he never learned his letters.

I have learned how to write, and I have learned it well, because I can always read what I wrote before. That is why I didn't want to tear the pages out, and why I decided to write down the second story just after the first one.

On a hot summer day, with clouds floating through the sky, grasshoppers hopping through the grass, and frogs croaking through the creeks, they were threshing wheat on the threshing floor, belonging to my Pa and my uncles. You had to do it on a hot day, because grain wouldn't come out in cloudy weather. Pa tied two of our horses to a pole and flogged them into running over the threshing floor in circles, trampling the grain, and in the meantime, he and my uncles used their pitchforks to shove everything that escaped from the floor back under the horses' hooves. Usually, after the grain is set apart from the hay, they clear out the threshing floor. The women take up sieves, pick up what's left after the horses, and throw it into the air, so that the wind may blow away the hay, and the grain may fall onto the sieve. Then the grain is thrown before us, children, so we may clear the grain of any leftover straws.

We had just finished the second round, and the men started throwing in new wheat, when Marietta's old man came up to the threshing floor. He wore a woolen waistcoat, bloodstained and torn, while holding a cigarette in his mouth, and a lath in his hand, drenched in blood.

"Give me some wine," he said. My mother handed him a wooden cup and poured him some wine, which he chugged in a single gulp.

"Philip, what happened?"

"Lightning. Lightning struck again. Struck the pastor down, out of the blue. Straight to the head."

Everybody went silent, looking at the lath in his hand.

"The Lord gave him his due."

Marietta's old man gave the cup back and went away with his lath dripping with blood, and we carried on with the threshing. When the last of the wheat was done, Pa and my uncles used their shovels to gather the leftover hay and chaff, which we then took to the granary. The hay gets piled up there, so it may be given to horses and sheep in winter. Nothing ever gets thrown away; even if not useful to man, it will be useful for the livestock.

That is how we thresh our wheat on the threshing floor.

*Translated from Croatian by Ema Brkljača*