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That Time John Michael Got His Hands on My Scythe

(Story from the book: *The Grace of Cypresses*)

Let me start by recounting how exactly I died, and how I lived prior to my death. It should be noted that we don't often die around here. And there are not a lot of us here either: a total of ten houses, making up our village. Each house is like a petal of a flower, strewn across our meadow. Not of a flower growing in some peaceful garden, though – there are no peaceful gardens around here – but of a flower cruelly torn apart while someone was counting-out: he loves me – he loves me not – he loves me – he loves me not. You can always make it out who likes whom, and who doesn't like whom, around here. That's the way it is, since there are only ten houses in our village. Small places have their own small symptoms of being small-souled, a bit provincial, and small-minded. And the smaller the place is, the symptoms of its smallness are stronger; so, imagine how it is with us here, where you can count the roofs above folk's heads on the fingers of one hand. There is no place where people's small-mindedness is greater than ours is around here.

It's because we're so small-minded that I ended up dead. John Michael got his hands on my scythe, and so I died because of it.

There are ten houses in our village, and ten roofs in total, and even though they are scattered across the meadow like petals of a flower, they're still too close to one another, and never, no matter how you tried to imagine it, could you arrange them far enough from one another. No matter how much you tried to avoid it, everything gets out from under one's roof, and everyone knows everybody else's business around here. Everybody knows who loves whom, and who doesn't, and we don't need to be tearing flowers apart to find out.

That's why I died. It doesn't mean a place is cultivated if you compare it to a flower. There are sharp rocks on one side of our meadow, with many waves having crashed into them. On the other side, there is a forest, where many leaves have fallen away and sprouted many times anew. And the meadow itself is not so nice, and the grass is not so neatly cut because of our envy and jealousy, but because it is mowed regularly. John Michael has held the position until now, but he won't be doing it anymore.

My death was already there when Jane Mary first received the postman. Everybody has two names around here. There is a small number of roofs above our heads, but a lot of names, not despite, but maybe because of it. Perhaps that is also the symptom of our provinciality. Mini-tiny-provinciality, if you'd judge by the number of roofs we have around here. Micro-provinciality – yes, that's how they'd probably call it today.

That's how the rumors around the postman started. Jane Mary's husband hadn't been giving her what was hers by law for some time by that point, and that was a public secret. You could have

seen it on her face, in the way she walked, in the way she nested in a chair, in a tiny, quiet sigh she'd let out every time a swallow flew over her, in how she'd shiver with the rustling of poplar trees in the forest. A kind of fretfulness showed up in every move she made. A woman hides her bitterness deep inside her, but that can be read on her face. That is generally the case with men, as well. You couldn't have read anything on the face of Jane Mary's husband, but her face was an open book. And then came the postman. The postman would deliver her packages, but she never boasted about a new mixer or a vegetable chopper; yet there had to be something she was receiving in them. Strange vibrating sounds came from under her roof; everybody could hear them.

Everybody could hear them, but she came knocking at my door. And she wasn't wrong in doing so. She'd chosen well, because I was the only one who could have helped her with her troubles. When there are only ten houses in a village, it's easy knowing what you can expect from whom, and under which roof. If you want to make a confession, you go to the priest; if you want to go to jail, you go to the judge; and to be free – truly, and as humanly as possible, the way we wish to be deeply in our souls, and only rare of us manage to experience it – for that kind of freedom you come to me. That's why Jane Mary knocked at my door and bared her burden before me. For something did burden Jane Mary. Namely, the discovery of her clitoris.

“I have discovered my clitoris,” she said to me. “I have ignored it for a while, and for the longest time it proved only a nuisance during my working hours – in between of bearing children, feeding them, marrying them off, cooking for them, ironing their clothing, working, bearing some more children, cooking for them some more, ironing their clothing again, being a mother, being a woman, being a daughter, being everything you can be, and all at the same time.”

“It only gave me trouble,” she said. And then she discovered it. And as often happens with unexpected discoveries, she didn't know what was to be done about it.

It is because of her clitoris that I ended up dead in the field. Thorn apart like petals of a flower, bloody like poppies, naked as primroses, wilted among the budding weeds. And there'll yet pass some time before there comes someone new to mow the grass on our field. Before it is once again so tidy and green, as when John Michael would trim it. It should be said that nobody except for him had, or would have, trimmed it. Our meadow doesn't belong to anyone; it's a huge field over which our provinciality has spread, for which, as it happens, nobody really cares. Folks mown their own lawns and don't care about the grass growing on other people's lawns, which is strange, since they think of what's on other people's lawns and under their roofs as their own business. That's the way it is with small places. The smaller the place, the less time they spend snooping around under their own roofs, while the extent of snooping and the size of the roof don't matter at all.

And in the case of John Michael, size was an important attribute. John Michael was large in body, a truly gifted piece of man, and I'm not referring to his height nor the size of his muscles. John Michael was large in other aspects, too, and as it often happens in such cases, he had a very small mind. People are always balanced out by some sort of inner scaling: if one is very clever, he is often denied great physical beauty. If one is a great analytical thinker, in most cases he'll be lacking in emotional intelligence. It is always so that there is someone above average

in some respects, and without doubt, with as big a gap on the other side of his personality, if not an even larger one.

John Michael was like that. A large man, but with a gap in him, because of which he mowed other people's lawns; and the lawn in between our houses is not the only one he mowed. And it's not a secret that, before he'd start mowing our lawn, John Michael would come up to my house first. He'd come to borrow my scythe, but I'd not give it to him for free. "John Michael," I'd say to him, "one should first earn my scythe." And he'd truly give his all while earning it, as tall and large as he was. That's why he mowed our lawn; everybody knew it, just so he could come up and beg for the scythe. The smaller the people's minds are, the easier they fall prey to their instincts. The others would have gladly come up to my house as well, that is no secret, but their scruples and a common decency, and the practiced self-denial characteristic of respectable folk had stopped them. And John Michael, as obtuse and big as he was, had no trouble with it; he'd simply jump in, drooling from the side of his mouth.

That's why Jane Mary knew where to look for advice. If you want to make a confession, you go to the priest; if you want to go to jail, you go to the judge; and if you want to get into the idyllic oasis of a liberal set up between your legs, you come to me. I call it personal freedom and the right to bodily salvation. My neighbors call it different names altogether.

When Jane Mary came up to my house the day I died, she'd brought her vibrator with her and said she knew it was a godly little device, but that there was no way, no way she could reach every possible kind of blissful pleasure with it. And my mission always was to share the knowledge I had with others. And half an hour later, while I was earnestly working on getting her closer to God with the whole might of both my physical and astral being, John Michael showed up at my door. He came by to get the scythe so he could mow our lawn and saw us there. His little eyes on that big head of his blinked in confusion before the act of our penance. Jane Mary, with her legs spread open as the Virgin herself, being initiated into the world of sensuality and female bodily emancipation for the first time, and myself, butt-naked, raised high in the air and bent over her private parts, carefully focused on her carnal enlightenment.

The gap in John Michael's memory wouldn't fill out with heavenly symbolism and godly omnipotence of the scene. He blinked twice in confusion, drooled from the side of his mouth, his mustache winced, he got hold of my scythe, and had me done with.

That is exactly how I died, sliced into a mush of goo and bones with a scythe, because of the small-mindedness of the place, and that of John Michael, as well. My sins are yet to be numbered, but what my fatal mistake was – that, at least, is pretty clear: it was having abused my scythe for my own pleasure, like Death herself.

Translated from Croatian by Ema Brkljača