

1

You're here to buy beans, sir? From me? I mean, you can get beans in a store, any store. But please, come on in. Aw, don't let the dogs scare you. They'll just sniff at you a bit. Whenever anyone visits for the first time they have to sniff them. For my benefit. I didn't teach them that – they just do it of their own accord. Dogs are as much of a puzzle as people. Do you have a dog? You ought to get one. You can learn a lot from a dog. All right, sit, Rex, sit, Paws. Knock it off.

Out of curiosity, how did you find the place? I'm not that easy to find. Especially now, in the off-season. There isn't even anyone around to ask. You saw for yourself, there's not a living soul in the cabins. They're all long gone. Not many people even know I live here. And here you come asking about beans. It's true, I do grow some beans, but only enough for my own needs, which are pretty modest. Like with everything else. Carrots, beets, onions, garlic, parsnip, just so I have a little. And truth be told, I don't even like beans that much. I mean, I'll eat them, because I'll eat almost anything. But I'm not wild about them. Once in a while I'll make bean soup or bean stew, but not that often. And dogs don't eat beans.

Back in the day, sure, a lot of people grew beans around here. Because as you might know, at one time beans used to take the place of meat. And when you work as hard as the folks hereabouts would work, from dawn till nighttime, you

need your meat. Not to mention that the shopkeepers often used to come out here to stock up on beans. Not beans alone, but that's what they'd buy most of. That's right, during the war, when there was a village here. At that time, in the towns people were starving, as you know. Almost every day the locals would drive out to the station in their horse and cart to pick them up. The station's a couple of miles away. Then afterwards they'd drive them back with what they'd bought. It was around this time of year, late fall, that they'd come most often. Or in any case more of them would come about now, when the harvest was all done. They'd take all the beans that anyone had had time to shell, down to the last bean. Often the pods hadn't even dried out properly but already people would be shelling away in all the houses so as to finish in time. Whole families would be shelling together. From early morning till late at night. Sometimes you'd go outside at midnight and there'd still be a light in a window here and there. Especially when there'd been a good crop. Because beans are like everything else, sometimes they grow well, other times not. It has to be a good year weather-wise. Beans don't like too much sun. When there's too much sun there's not enough rain, and they get parched. Whereas if there's too much rain, they rot before they can grow. Even so, it can be a good weather year but still every other pod will be empty or the beans'll be bad. And no one knows why. Simple thing like beans, but they have their secrets.

Did you used to come out here back then, as a shopkeeper? No, I think I'd have recognized you. I knew almost all the people that used to come to buy beans. We grew a lot of beans, and all kinds of merchants would come buy them. Ever since I was a kid I've had a good memory for faces. And everyone knows that what you remember in your childhood, you remember for good. Course, you'd have been young back then, and dressed differently. In those days the shopkeepers would wear any old clothes, however rich or poor they were they'd dress down so as not to draw attention to themselves. In the trains they'd be searched, have their belongings confiscated. Shopkeepers was just our name for them. While now I see you're wearing an overcoat, hat, scarf. I used

to have a brown felt hat like that, and a coat like yours. And I'd wear a scarf, silk or cashmere. I liked to dress well.

But why don't you take your coat off? Hang it on the back of the door, there's a hook there. And please, sit yourself down. Either on a chair or on a bench, as you prefer. I'll just finish this nameplate, I'm almost done. It wouldn't take me so long, but my hands aren't what they used to be. No, it's rheumatism. Though it's better than it used to be. I can do almost anything. I just can't play the saxophone. That's right, I used to play. But aside from that, anything. Even repainting these nameplates, as you see. And that needs concentration in your hands also. The worst is with the smallest letters. If the brush slips you have to wipe the whole letter off with benzine and start over.

Why did I think you maybe used to come here as a shopkeeper? Well, you just appeared out of nowhere wanting to buy beans. You must have known people used to grow beans around here and you thought they still did. People often think, what could possibly have changed in a place where they've grown beans since forever. But how did you manage to hold on to the conviction that there are timeless places like that? That I can't understand. Didn't you know that places like to mislead us? Everything misleads us, it's true. But places more than anything. If it weren't for these nameplates I myself wouldn't know that this was the place.

You've never been here before? Not even as a shopkeeper back then? Then I'm sorry I took you for one. Evidently I've been sitting too long staring at these nameplates. What are they? First and last names, dates, God rest their souls. Every year at this time I take them from the gravestones and repaint them. It's pretty time-consuming. The first name and last name alone is a lot of letters. And you have to mind every letter so the deceased won't think I repainted his nameplate any old how because, for instance, he was from the other side of the river. Folks here were always divided into this side and the other side of the river. When people can be divided by something they always will be. It doesn't have to be a river.

Why do I think the dead have thoughts? Because we don't know that they don't. What do we know? Sometimes, after only two or three letters, especially the littlest ones, my eyes hurt and my hand starts to shake, and I have to break off. You need a lot of patience with those dead letters. I barely finish one lot when the paint starts peeling on the ones I did last year. It comes off faster in the woods. It's damp there, you only get sunlight in the clearings, so I'm always having to repaint. If I didn't do it, by now you wouldn't know whose nameplate was whose. I've tried different kinds of paints, including foreign ones. They all peel. You don't know any kind of paint that doesn't peel? You're right. It's not in anyone's interest that something should be permanent. Especially paint. Things are always being painted over with something else.

That I don't know. Maybe someone used to repaint them before, though not for long probably, because I could barely read what was written on them. Whoever it was must have decided that either way no one can be guaranteed anything in perpetuity in this world, so they just stopped. Plus there are the costs, the paint alone, then the brushes, labor. It's just as well I used to know everyone in these parts. Even so, I still had to scour my memory in some cases. It was worst with the children. Some of them I felt I was only now christening.

This here is Zenon Kuźdżał. I'm almost done with him. He was the youngest of the Kuźdżałs. Neighbors. Here on this side, a bit further into the woods. That was why they only had a fence on the side where the road was, the other three sides were woods, so they'd say they had no need of a fence. The woods are the best fence you can have. What danger could come from the woods? Who could come to the house through the woods? At most some animal. So they set snares and traps in their yard. Often their own chickens and geese and ducks would get caught if they forgot to remove the traps during the day. Though in the evening they never could count up all those chickens and ducks and what have you properly. And every evening they'd suspect their neighbors.

They only ever let the neighbors in through the wicket gate on the road. The wicket gate was in one side of the main gateway, and the gateway wasn't just an

ordinary gateway. It was twice as high as the fence, and it had a shingled roof and two figures on either side. I don't remember which particular saints they were. The fence itself was tall. The tallest person in the village was Uncle Jan, and he couldn't touch the top even when he went up on tiptoe and stretched out his hand. A rattle hung on the wicket gate, you had to rattle it and someone would come down from the house and let you in. But try getting in through the woods and right away they'd be coming at you with crowbars, sicking their dogs on you. You'd have to go back to the wicket gate and shake the rattle.

You wouldn't have gotten any beans from them, though, because they were all carvers. The grandfather made carvings, he was old as the hills, he had cataracts but if you could have seen him carving away you'd never have believed he couldn't see. How he did it I have no idea. Maybe he made his hands look? His three grandsons, Stach, Mietek, and Zenek, they were all carvers. All strapping guys, though you'd never see them out with young ladies. You only ever saw them carving. The only one who wasn't a carver was their father. He'd cut blocks of wood for them to make their carvings out of, rough-hew them. He probably would have made carvings as well but he was missing these three fingers here on this hand, they were blown off in the war before the last war. But he somehow managed with chopping and hewing. Word was the great-grandfather had been a carver, and the great-great-grandfather, and there was no telling how far back in time you'd have to go with those carver ancestors, because from what they said everyone in their family had made carvings since time immemorial. Even on Sundays, after the service or high mass they'd come back from church and right away they'd start carving what they'd heard from the Gospel so as not to forget it. They had plans to carve the whole Gospel, because as the grandfather put it, the world was the way God described it, not the way people saw it.

Their whole yard was littered with those carvings of theirs, they stood them all the way up into the woods. They went further and further. That may have been another reason they didn't build a fence on the side of the woods. You couldn't turn a wagon round in their yard, you had to back up. When they'd lead

the cows out to pasture they had to mind they didn't knock the carvings over. Cats would lie about on them sunning themselves. Sometimes their dog would start yapping out of the blue, they'd rush out of the house thinking someone must have come in from the woods, but it would turn out the dog was only barking at one of the carvings. Just as well he was on a short leash. Mrs. Kuźdzał would go out to throw grain down for her poultry and people would laugh and say she was feeding the carvings, because they were getting bigger and bigger.

They weren't regular carvings like you might imagine. I can see you're a decent height yourself, but those carvings were way bigger than either you or me. "The Last Supper," for instance, when they started carving that they made a clearing in the woods. The table alone was like several of these tables of mine, the benches were several times the size of my benches. And even so, the apostles were sitting so close to each other that it seemed there wasn't any room for Jesus. He was squashed between one apostle who stood with a glass in his outstretched hand, and another one who was already asleep with his head on the table, and he was a lot smaller than the others. If they'd all stood up next to one another he wouldn't even have come up to their waists. He was already wearing his crown of thorns and he seemed worried about something, his head rested on his hand. From the other side of the table another one of the apostles was reaching out toward the crown of thorns as if he wanted to lift it off his head because it was too soon for it, but he couldn't reach it. On the table there were pitchers of wine, and each one of them, I don't own anything to compare with it. That big jug over there, or that bucket, they'd be too small. As for the bread, I don't recall ever seeing such huge loaves being baked anywhere. And back then people would bake loaves that weighed over twenty pounds. They were going to add a roof over the scene, but they didn't manage to.

I couldn't tell you what those carvings were worth. Back then I was simply afraid of them. But can fear be a measure for carvings? Especially when you're the age I was then. When mother sent me over there on some errand, to ask about something or borrow something, I'd tell her they didn't have any or that

nobody had been home. Did you shake the rattle? I did, but no one came out. Actually I don't think she believed me, because a short while later she'd send over one of my sisters, Jagoda or Leonka, but she'd do it so I wouldn't see.

You never heard of them trying to sell any of their carvings. Who would they have sold them to? Take them to market? What an idea. And who would come all the way out here to the village to buy carvings? People came for foodstuffs, like I said – beans, flour, kasha. Though one time the grandfather, that's right, the blind one, he went to ask the priest for permission to put one or two of the carvings up in the church. But the priest wouldn't allow it because none of them had gone to any school to learn to carve.

Sometimes I'd have dreams about those carvings. I'd jerk awake in the middle of the night with a shout, bathed in sweat. Mother would think I was coming down with something. I'd have to drink herbs and eat honey because I was afraid to tell her it was the carvings. I don't know why. Maybe I was afraid that I was afraid. And of carvings on top of everything. Every fear has different levels, as you know. One kind of fear tears you from your sleep, another kind makes you fall asleep. And yet another kind . . . But there's no point talking about it. The carvings are gone, the Kuźdzałs are gone. Besides, I actually liked honey, though the herbs made me scrunch up my face. But mother would stand over me, drink it all up, it'll do you good.

Do you like herbs? Then you're like me. But I bet you like honey? I'll give you a jar to take with you. At least you won't be mad at yourself for making a wasted trip. I have my own, not store-bought. Here at the edge of the woods, maybe you noticed, there's a handful of hives, they're mine. There aren't that many of them but when it's a good year I get oodles of honey. I couldn't eat it all myself. I've got some from a couple of years ago, the best kind is when it's left to stand awhile. When someone does a favor for me I'll thank them with honey if they won't let me pay them. Or like now, in the off-season, whenever anyone comes to visit they won't leave without a jar of honey. Or if someone has a name day party in one of the cabins, I'll go wish them all the best and at least take a jar of

honey as a gift. Or where there are children, I always remember children even without any special occasion. Children ought to eat honey.

But honey's best when it's drunk. How? You put a teaspoon of honey in half a glass of lukewarm water. Let it stand till the next morning. Squeeze in a half or a quarter of lemon, stir it, and drink it on an empty stomach at least half an hour before breakfast. If it's too cold, add just a dash of hot water. It's pure goodness. Good for your heart, for rheumatism. Honey's good for everything. It'll keep you from catching cold. When I was young and I worked on building sites, one time we roomed at the house of this one beekeeper and he taught me all that. But back then who gave a thought to drinking honey. There was never the time. And if you were going to drink anything it would be vodka. In those days vodka was the best for everything, not honey.

What kind do you prefer, heather or honey-dew? The honey-dew is from conifers, not deciduous trees, it's virtually black, it's much better. In that case I'll give you a jar of each. My favorite is buckwheat honey. There used to be a guy here grew a lot of buckwheat. Three days ago I repainted his nameplate. The buckwheat hadn't even begun to flower and already he'd be putting up hives in it. I used to go watch him collecting honey from those hives of his. He'd be wearing a hood with a net over his face, and I'd just be there. And you won't believe it, but I never got stung by a bee. They'd land on me, but they never did a thing. He couldn't get over it. You're a strange kid, that you are. I'm the beekeeper here . . . Go bring a pot. And he'd pour me some honey straight from the hive.

These days, who'd grow buckwheat around here, and where? You saw for yourself, there's the lake they made, the cabins around the lake, and the woods. The woods were always there. They're the only thing that was there then and is here now. Except that the woods were mostly on this side. Now they've spread to the other side, where the fields used to be. If you don't hold woods back they'll grow everywhere, into your yard. They overgrew where the farmyards used to be. When I say the other side, I mean the other side of the Rutka. The Rutka?

That was the river that used to run through here, I told you how it split the village in two. How could they have made an artificial lake if there hadn't been a river? The name comes from "ruta," rue, not from "ruda," iron ore. Do you know what rue is? You're not the only one. Here in the cabins hardly anyone knows anything about herbs. At most mint, chamomile. They don't know their trees, can't tell an oak from a beech. Not to even mention hornbeams, sycamores. They can't tell rye from wheat, wheat from barley. They call it all grain. I wonder if they'd even recognize millet. I don't see many people growing millet these days.

Rue was used to treat different illnesses, on its own or with other herbs. They used it for eyes, for nerves, cuts and bruises, to prevent infection. You could drink it or make a compress. It could break spells. And most important of all, young women wove their garlands out of rue. It was like a magnet for young men. A lot of it grew around here, maybe that's where the Rutka got its name? You can't imagine what that river was like. It wasn't especially big, rivers that run through villages never are. It came down a broad valley where there were meadows, then after the valley the fields began. It was wider at some points, narrower in others. In some places, when it hadn't rained for a long time you could get across by stepping from one rock to another. When you stood at the edge of the valley and the sun would come out from behind the clouds, it looked like the Rutka was flowing across the entire width of the valley. Course, there were times it actually was that wide, when the ice melted, or when it just kept raining and raining. At those times you wouldn't believe it was the same Rutka, it was so wild. It didn't just cover the valley, the fields flooded as well. Anyone that lived close to the river had to move to higher ground. At those times people swore revenge on the Rutka, they wept over it. But then the waters would fall and it'd go back to being calm and good-natured. It would flow in its leisurely way. You could throw a stick into the water and walk alongside on the bank to see who was faster, you or the Rutka. Even if you only walked slowly, you'd always win. It twisted and turned, and in the places where it meandered it got

overgrown with sweet rush, bulrushes, water-lilies, white lotuses. When it all bloomed you can't imagine what it was like. Or if you could only have heard the nightingales in May.

It wasn't all shallow. Most places it was shallow. But it had its deep moments too. One of them was the deepest of all. People went there to drown themselves. Mostly young folks, when their parents wouldn't agree to them getting married. They said most of the ones that had drowned there, it was for that reason. That people had always gone there to drown themselves, because that was where it was deepest. Though they did it for different reasons. And not just young people. Though they didn't always choose drowning, some people hung themselves. And the Rutka just flowed on.

You might find it hard to believe, but to me it seemed the biggest river on earth. I was even convinced that all rivers were called Rutka and that they all came from the Rutka, like from a single mother. I'd already started at school but I still couldn't believe there were much bigger rivers in the world, and that they each had their own name.

We had a boat. Sometimes I'd drag it into the densest rushes, everyone would be calling me, mother, father, but I wouldn't answer. I'd just lie there in the bottom of the boat feeling like I was nowhere at all. And if you were to ask me whether I'd ever been happy, it was only ever then. You'd rather not ask me that? I understand. Or I'd take the boat out into the middle of the stream, lie down in it and float and float, and the river would carry me. What do you think, do rivers like that disappear? I really don't know. Sometimes I go and stand down by the lake and look out there wondering where it must flow now. And you know, one time I managed to make out one of its banks. Which one? To know that, I'd have to have known which one I was standing on.

I couldn't tell you where it came from or where it finished up. Back then no one went that far. It was scary to walk such a distance, the woods in these parts stretch on and on. Nowadays I don't go walking that far either, because why would I. Besides, you go into the woods on this side or the other, and right by

the edge you have everything you could need. Blueberries, wild strawberries, blackberries, mushrooms. Not at this time of year, of course. You're too late for that. Now there's only cranberries. But you'd need to wait till the frosts set in, because they mostly grow in the bogs. The bogs aren't far from here. I could give you a jug, you could go pick yourself some. Cranberries are delicious with pâté. Especially when you add pears as well, and if it's pâté made from hare.

I don't go picking. I don't have time, I have to mind things here. Now for example, in the off-season, aside from me and the dogs there's not a soul here. Once in a while someone'll come by to check on their cabin. Though in fact they don't need to. Everyone knows that it'll all be OK. It couldn't not be, because I'm here looking after things. They've had many an opportunity to see that for themselves. But I've no right to stop them if they want to come and see what's what. They're their cabins. But that's usually in the morning. This time of day no one's likely to show up. At this time nothing happens. And dusk is starting to fall a lot earlier. A month ago I wouldn't have needed to turn on the lights. I could see the letters perfectly well, even the tiniest ones. And I wouldn't have needed my glasses. Whereas now, like you saw, it's dusk, and there isn't even the faintest ripple on the lake. You'd be forgiven for thinking the water had hardened into solid ground. Especially on a day like today, when there's no wind, someone might imagine they could cross from one shore to the other without getting their feet wet.

So you're staying in Mr. Robert's cabin? I don't think you arrived in the night, I would have heard you. I didn't sleep at all in the night, I'd have heard. In the night the faintest sound carries across the lake. I only got to sleep in the morning. The dawn was already starting to break, I looked out the window, but you weren't there then. After that I dropped off, I don't even know when. The fog held you up on the way? We didn't have any fog here. True, in the fall you get fog that's so dense you can barely drive through it. You're driving along and all of a sudden there's this white wall.

When I was still living abroad, one time in the fall, round about this time