

The Paprika Ewer

by Marc Fitten

Valeria never whistled. Nor did she approve of people who did. One thing she had learned in her sixty-seven years was that people who whistled were crass. Butchers whistled. So did peasants. Gypsy ragamuffins—with nothing better to do than corrupt God's silence—whistled. Valeria thought about it while scrubbing the grout in her portico floor. She was certain that the Queen of England did not whistle. She was convinced that the Hungarian President did not whistle. She had seen the mayor in her village whistle, but that was only once; and theirs was a small village, deep in the *Alfold*, three-and-a-half hours from Budapest, two-hours from the Ukraine, and not connected to either by train. If the mayor—really just the cleverest of peasants—wanted to whistle, it did not matter; no one of importance would hear him and think less of the village. In fact, if from afar, the Queen of England or the Hungarian President somehow happened to hear the peasant-mayor whistle, they could easily write it off as wind stirring a distant crop of sugar beets. The mayor's whistle would be as insignificant to their ears as leaves falling on forgotten hunting grounds.

It was not surprising then that Valeria became alarmed when the urge to purse her lips and whistle a love song overtook her. She stopped what she was doing, put her brush into the pail of sudsy water resting beside her, and wiped the perspiration from her forehead with the back of her hand. Then she breathed a long and deep breath. She smothered the urge to whistle under the weight of her tongue. She barricaded the emerging melody behind a wall of clenched teeth.

Valeria retrieved the brush from the pail of water and resumed her housework. It was inattentiveness that caused her mind to wander. Nothing more. She had only experienced a momentary lapse of concentration, a momentary, uncharacteristic disregard of self-control. But she had regained it, and now her heart did not flutter and her lips were no longer puckered.

Valeria was preparing her portico for the arrival of a new pitcher later in the day. The potter was making it especially for her, in thanks for the large canister of fresh milk she had bicycled the ten kilometers out to his workshop three days ago. Valeria couldn't explain why she did that. She saw him at market early that morning and watched him as he pinched the heads off wild mushrooms.

"How darling," she whispered to herself.

Valeria hurried straight home. She pulled a milk pail and stool out to her cow, grabbed the animal's teats, and attacked them. The cow's head lolled about in discomfort, but a swift hard twist of its tail, and the cow settled down. It managed to spurt enough milk that would keep a family of six. Save for an apprentice in his workshop, the potter was a widower who lived alone.

Once the milk had been sealed in a canister, Valeria transported it across the village on the back of her bicycle. Villagers marveled when they saw her on the other side of the Centrum. They stopped and pointed, surprised to see their harsh misfit so far away from her garden. Even more surprising, though, were the flowered skirt and kerchief she wore.

"Did you see that-" they asked.

"Was she smiling-" they remarked.

"Where is she headed-" they wondered aloud.

"Why is she pedaling so fast up that hill-" they asked. "She's going to give herself a heart attack, for certain."

The village dogs chased after Valeria, lunging at her back tire and barking at her. Young boys threw chestnuts and laughed. Valeria ignored them all. She rode the ten kilometers to the potter's with her knotted legs pedaling as hard as they could; she never broke into a sweat.

When she arrived at the potter's home, she unfastened the cords that held the milk canister fast and hoisted it off her bicycle. She let her bicycle fall to the ground, and she carried the vessel of milk into his workshop. The potter and his apprentice looked up, startled by

the imposing shadow that blocked the sunlight and the harsh voice that announced, "I have brought fresh milk for your coffee. Where shall I put it?"

The potter blinked a couple of times, then shrugged. He motioned to a door. "I have an icebox in the kitchen," he volunteered. He looked to his apprentice. The young man, recognizing Valeria, shrugged.

Valeria grunted and marched past them, the milk canister balanced precariously over her shoulder. The potter rose to assist her but she stopped him with a wave of her free hand.

"Just go about your work," she commanded as she headed through an open door toward his kitchen.

The potter did not move. His young apprentice, however, took off his smock.

"I'm going into town. Nobody in the village will believe this," said the apprentice, and he left the potter sitting at his wheel, alone.

Valeria gasped when she entered the potter's kitchen. The wall behind his oven was black with grease. Next to a waist high refrigerator, on a small card table, were the remnants of a meager dinner long past—a slice of molded cheese, a sliver of wax pepper, and a half-eaten roll. A bottle of palinka, only half full, stood with its cap off on the windowsill. Valeria shook her head. She set the canister down beside the refrigerator and rummaged through the potter's cabinets until she found an old paint bucket. She used it for trash. She cleared the card table, poured out the palinka, and when she had finished, she washed what dishes there were. Finally, she scrubbed the grease off the floor and walls, washed the window, and polished the silverware.

At his wheel, the potter heard the noise coming from the kitchen but was too apprehensive to go and see what Valeria was doing. Instead, he cleared away what he had been working on, threw fresh clay in front of him, and began to spin it. When Valeria finally stepped out into his workshop wiping her hands on her skirt,

unsmiling, severe, he looked at her and said quickly, "I see you like flowers."

Valeria looked at her skirt and shrugged.

"I'm going to make a ewer," he continued. "For you. To thank you for the milk."

She regarded him. Her heartbeat quickened. He was decisive.

"I thought you might use it to water your flowers," he said. "You are Patko, Valeria, yes-"

She nodded.

"You have that beautiful garden on the other side of the village," he said. "I've been past it. You have the cleanest pigs I have ever seen!"

Valeria wanted to smile, but she didn't.

"It's odd how we've never met or even been introduced," he continued. "Don't you agree- I've lived in this village for thirty years...it was my wife's home. Did you know her- Did you know my darling Magda-"

Valeria nodded. She remembered a fat woman who cried all the time.

"You don't leave your garden much, do you-" the potter asked. "Except to go to market-

I've seen you there selling peppers in the fall. I don't think I've ever bought one from you, though."

"No, you haven't," Valeria answered. She suddenly remembered seeing something she had not liked. "You prefer to buy them from that slut with the unbuttoned blouse!"

The potter winced. "Perhaps I understand now why we've never met. No matter. You were kind to bring me the milk, and you have a lovely garden. Is it lonely in paradise- I wonder, are you lonely with your hurt feelings and pretty flowers-"

Valeria's eyes grew cold. "There are no flowers in my garden," she snapped. "It's a vegetable garden." Then she added, "You weren't really paying attention."

He nodded and resumed his work.

"It's true. I only know clay," he says as he looked into her eyes. Then he winked and smiled at her.

Valeria would never have blushed, but she took a step closer to him and looked at the wheel. She could see that he was making a large pitcher. At least fifteen kilos of wet clay were spinning in his hands.

"I think you will like this when it's done," the potter said. "It will be a meter tall. Do you have any pieces at home that you would like it to match?"

Valeria thought of the black plates hanging on her kitchen wall. She looked around his workshop, saw similar plates on a shelf, and pointed to them.

"Like those," she said.

The potter smiled.

"Excellent taste—a beautiful woman with excellent taste! I will make you a black ewer then," he said. "And I will etch lilacs into it. Do you like lilacs?"

Valeria shook her head; then said hopefully, "I like peppers. Can you make it with peppers?"

The potter nodded. "It would be my pleasure, Valeria. I'll bring it to you in three days."

"You are making me a black pitcher, then?"

Blackenedpottery was a valuable thing, and Valeria knew it. It required great skill to blacken clay. Oxygen had to be withheld during the firing process and the clay had to carbonize. It was a different chemical reaction from open-air firing. Valeria knew that the potter was doing something special for her. She was smitten again. Their brief unpleasantness had dissipated. The potter watched her as he spun his wheel. Her breathing became shallow. She imagined that she was being pressed into a diamond. Her face grew warm.

"Bah!" she said aloud, shaking her head.

The potter smiled. "If you promise to take that kerchief off of your head and let your hair loose, I'll even bring you flowers when I deliver this," he said.

Valeria said nothing. She turned and exited. She mounted her bicycle; she rode away.

On her way home, she stopped at the pub. Patrons looked up from their drinks when they recognized her. They looked at one another and shrugged. Valeria marched to the bar.

"I'm thirsty," she announced to the bartender. "Please give me a tumbler of sherry."

The bartender, a woman roughly Valeria's age, nodded and poured the drink.

"What were you doing at the potter's-" she asked.

Valeria looked over her glass.

"His apprentice was here," the bartender continued. "Why don't you leave the potter alone- He's a nice man."

Valeria put her drink down, threw her florints on the bar, and turned.

"Peasants!" she said. "You are all, to your last ringworm infested child, peasants. Even your dogs are peasants. How is it possible-"

The villagers waited until she left before they resumed their own drinking or spoke again. When they did, they cursed her.

Valeria spent the next three days preparing her home for the pitcher's arrival. She bathed the pigs and brushed the cow. She dusted and polished her furniture. She cleaned all of her windowsills and the hearth. And now, as she was finishing up with the grout, she tried to ignore the crowd of villagers shuffling in front of her house.

Everyone had heard about how she pedaled furiously up the steep hill on the other side of the Centrum, and about how later on in the day she had stumbled into the pub wild-eyed and looking for a tumbler of sherry. It had even gotten around that she had called all

the village children dogs. With all the stories of Valeria's strange behavior circling the town, with what the villagers had heard from the potter's apprentice, the citizens of the tiny hamlet knew something was about to happen. The curious crowded around the front of her home in anticipation.

"As I was hunting pheasant out in my field," one man volunteered, "I saw a fearsome shadow on the road. When I took a closer look through my binoculars, I saw that it was Valeria. She was on her bicycle. You should have seen her face! It frightened me. She looked wicked."

The villagers nodded understandingly. They pitied the potter. They all knew him as a kind man, the one who made those nice platters. In fact, for as long as many of them could remember, every newlywed in town had received a platter and a stein from him as wedding gifts, and none of them were ever alike. He wouldn't have had anything to do with a harsh misfit like Valeria if he really knew anything about her. She was wholly incorrigible. Why, the stories went that back in the fifties, she had even destroyed the church bells by burning through the ropes that held them up. Of course, they were just stories, but still, the villagers couldn't understand why she remained among them. Surely, it was out of spite alone. No, they all agreed. The potter should not have anything to do with Valeria. It couldn't be good for the village.

One of the village children came running toward them.

"The potter is coming! The potter is coming!"

The villagers became agitated.

"Valeria and the potter! Can you believe that-"

"The poor man. She must have tricked him. He must be confused."

"He's a widower! I knew his wife. She was a lovely woman. She was always selling wild mushrooms in the market. Don't you remember-"

The others nodded and remembered the potter's wife.

"That poor dead woman."

"She was a saint!"

Valeria watched pensively from her portico as the crowd grew. She picked up a handful of pebbles. She hurled them.

"Get away from my house!" she shouted. "Get away."

But the villagers would not move. In fact, the more Valeria shouted and the more stones and chestnuts she cast, the more quarrelsome they became.

"Look at her! What could the potter possibly want with her-"

"She's so plain. I can't understand it."

"She wouldn't let me taste her peppers, not even one. She charged me five florints for it!"

"She called the children animals."

"She called them dogs!"

"She's always throwing chestnuts at them."

"She wants to kill the children! She wants to stone them!"

"And what about the potter's dead wife-"

"She was a saint!"

While they spoke, the potter arrived. He rested his bicycle against Valeria's fence. The villagers could see that he had combed his moustache, that his cheeks and neck were clean-shaven, and that he was freshly bathed. In a satchel across his chest rested a bouquet of wildflowers. The crowd was outraged. However, what made them angrier still was the meter tall object strapped to the back of his bicycle and wrapped in green tissue paper.

He smiled good-naturedly at the villagers, his neighbors, and he held out his hand.

A woman shouted at him straight away. "What kind of platter is that-"

"Silly woman, that's not a platter," said another man. "It's a beer stein."

"Look here, potter," a burly man said. "What's this all about, anyway- My stein was only big enough for half a liter. That looks like it could hold at least thirty liters."

The crowd began to shout at the potter and with each other. They argued with one another over whether the package was a stein or a

platter, and they argued with the potter over his bringing whatever it was to Valeria.

“But why does any of this matter-” the potter argued. “I have never given anything to Valeria, and three days ago she brought me a canister of fresh milk and helped in my kitchen.”

The crowd wasn't interested and slowly the potter felt himself being pushed against Valeria's gate. Valeria watched from her portico.

“Enough!” she shouted. “Or I will call the police!”

The villagers parted at her rough voice, but when they saw that the constable was already there, that he was as red-faced and angry as the rest, they became emboldened.

Valeria ran down to her gate and pulled the potter in. The pair ran into her house as curses, chestnuts, and pebbles rained on top of them. Valeria and the potter locked themselves inside and peered out her window.

“We know you destroyed those church bells!” they shouted.

“Saboteur!”

“You won't kill our babies!”

The mob pulled the package off of the bicycle. They let the children rush at it and rip small handfuls of tissue paper away. Then the adults tore at the larger pieces. When the paper had been cleared away, when the massive ewer was exposed, the villagers became silent. It was the most beautiful piece of pottery they had ever seen. Even Valeria, seeing it through her window, gasped.

“Oh! But you made that for me-”

The potter stared at his creation. He was nodding.

“It is my masterpiece,” he said. “I think it's the peppers.”

Valeria looked again. Peppers! She could see them etched around the pitcher, garlanded around its hip, its neck, and under its lip. She especially loved the lip, the spout. It was polished. It looked wet already, like it had been kissed.

The villagers gawked silently. The ewer was a meter tall and black. It was as black as a cellar broom closet. And though it wasn't

glossy or enameled, it glowed. A few people threw their hands up, shook their heads, and walked away. There was silence for a moment; but then one of the village mutts approached the ewer, and he lifted a rear leg. He made water on it. The man closest to the mutt kicked at him to make him stop; but the dog, seeing the encroaching foot, jumped to the side, and when he did he hit the pitcher and tipped it over. There was a crunch. The potter flinched.

Valeria opened her door and rushed out. Her kerchief flew off her head as she bent over to grab a handful of pebbles.

“My pitcher!”

This time, the constable was nowhere to be seen. The mob saw her coming and thought of the stories, of the church bells. Then they thought about their own homes. They thought of their babies. They thought of flames licking their comfortable cottages. Whether it was true or not, they had no stomach to test Valeria's wrath. They dispersed quickly, pebbles stinging them as they ran. Even the dog that tipped the ewer over yelped when a stone hit him on the ear.

Valeria opened her gate and stepped out. The pitcher's handle had broken off and when she stood it upright she saw a hole in its side.

Her lower lip trembled. She thought about gluing the handle back on and using plaster-of-paris for the hole. She thought about doing any number of things to fix the pitcher, but all she could manage was a sigh.

“My pitcher,” she murmured. “My beautiful pitcher.”

She felt a warm hand massaging her shoulder. It was strong. She turned to look. It was the potter. He was smiling, concentrating again, on her. She looked back at the ewer, at its lip and whistling spout. The potter was caressing her cheek. The world was spinning.

“I'm glad you let your hair loose,” he said. “I've brought you flowers.”

