

"Let Fair Weather Bring Me Home: A Maltese Story"

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It was a lovely day. The first sounds of a working day, after a night of perfect silence, began to eddy around the neighbourhood, rising in volume with each passing moment. Soon the entire street would be full of life, a normal working day. Life could not go on as usual without its accompanying noise and bustle. The cockerels and hens, locked up in their coops on the roof of most houses, or ranging around freely on the farms, had started waking up everybody a long time before. This was the villagers' oldest clock; their every morning wake-up call, precise, courteous. The sacristan too, relied on their call, even though he often had to be up betimes, before them. Summer or winter, he knew what it meant to walk the streets when no one was about, and to open up the church when people were still languishing in bed.

Susanna opened the window and peered out, holding the two slatted shutters in her hands and feeling happiness well up inside her on seeing the sun shining brightly everywhere. Just like people's moods, the weather was changeable and the different kind of days they had often ran into a whole week. Some way off, beyond the area full of fields, she could see that the bright day promised fine weather more than could be discerned in the fastness of her humble dwelling. The glowing brightness of such a day could change her mood instantly, making her feel proud to be village born, a girl that had emerged from somewhere amongst the farms, the alleyways, and the winding paths hemmed in between vines, olive trees and carob trees resting their branches on the rubble walls. All of them led to some other place beyond, in wide open spaces, where land and sky met and lived together in harmony. In the depths of her heart, Susanna admitted to herself that she loved the village, and every grief she suffered and whimpered through because of it, was, after all, part of the price she had to pay for everything that was beautiful and good.

Wistin, above all.

He too was the land's offspring, like all her people going back generation after generation, and like his father's. Part of his make-up included all that had been fashioned during entire centuries, those same centuries she hardly knew anything about because they had only merited a brief mention in books. But the ancient stones stood there, around her, and every house and every hut stood witness there before her that the story had begun a very long time before she had come on the scene. Wistin, she reassured herself, should find this cradle ready for him. His cradle was this old village with all that

kept it steadfast – a solid rock in which entire centuries had barely made a dent. Though she was not too sure about that.

"Ever since my mother brought Wistin back to me, many things have changed in the village," Susanna mused. Not everybody looked askance at her, indeed the smiles and greetings from people, especially from women, had increased. People change very slowly... in time, she thought. This notion pleased her.

"Mummy, Mummy, is it time?" Wistin called out to her from his bed.

"It's a very beautiful day today," she answered him. "Come and see for yourself. But before you hang out of the window make sure to go and wash your face. You have fresh water, it's ready in the basin and there's a clean towel next to it. Don't forget. You must wash your face thoroughly, bring up water to your face cupped in both your hands, once, twice, three times and that's enough, and then wipe it dry. Don't forget your ears, wash them properly too! And this is something you should do every day, now and forever. Such things don't change. You must learn to do it from now so that you'll always do it."

"Even when I grow up and become a man?"

"Of course, even more so. When you become a man you'll need to wash your face more often. The more you grow up..."

"Why more so?"

Susanna did not answer.

"Tell me, Mummy."

After a short while, Wistin appeared in front of her. He was still drowsy and swayed as he walked. He slowly approached the dining table, pulled a chair and climbed up to sit on it.

"You haven't washed your face, I see! Did you think I wouldn't notice?"

"I don't feel like it today."

"You don't feel like it? As if feeling like it comes into it! You have to wash your face. Duty is not a question of feeling like it, son. Come, get up. Come and from today onwards you mustn't fail to do what must be done as soon as you wake up and get out of bed. That's what everybody does. And if everybody does it, well then, so must Wistin..."

"How do you know what everybody does, Mummy?"

"Ahh, I'm your mother, and I know. A mother always knows many things."

"But they, other people I mean, do they always feel like washing their face as soon as they get up?"

"Always. Every day, every day. They wake up early on purpose to wash their face."

"They never, but absolutely never, wake up and don't feel like washing their face?"

"Never, absolutely never."

"But I do feel like it."

"Well then, why didn't you wash your face on your own?"

"I tricked you! That's not what I feel like doing. I'm not going to tell you, you must guess. One, two, three, guess Mummy..."

"You feel like giving your mother a big kiss."

"Yes, but after I tell you what I feel like doing."

"Well hurry up and tell me!"

"I feel like going to fly my kite."

Susanna looked at him happily; she smiled at him and told him, "Yes, if that's what you want, let's go and fly the kite. Now don't forget what you've promised me!"

Wistin hugged his mother and kissed her many times on her cheek.

"And now let me tell you something. Today there's hardly any wind so the kite won't rise easily and maybe it won't rise at all. What do you think, should we go tomorrow or some other day when it's a bit windier?"

"No, Mummy, no, no, no! Today! I want to go now! The wind will come." His puling voice held a note betraying a spoilt child who knows his wishes are always granted.

"Well then, you know what? I'll prepare a picnic to take with us, some *ħobż biż-żejt*, bread with tomatoes and olive oil, some lettuce and capers and basil leaves and olives. This is the kind of food I grew up eating ever since I was your age, thought up by my forebears and you'll get to like it too," she promised him. She crammed everything in her *ġewlaq*, shoved a couple of napkins inside and everything else that would keep their hunger at bay. "You'll work up an appetite in the fresh air, Wistin, just you wait. And you'll gobble everything up," she assured him gleefully.

"But I won't have time to eat. I'll be flying my kite," he replied with pride.

Susanna looked him full in the face, shook her head and put her hands on her waist as if to tell him, "Since you say so, well that's what we'll do! But the wind doesn't blow as your fancy takes you! Now if the wind ever came into my hands, well, then that would be a different story!" She did not regret giving in to his every whim; she knew no better than to spoil him.

They left the house and began walking away, she laden with her straw basket in one hand and holding on to her son's hand with the other, while her son held on fast to his kite, the reel gripped tightly between his fingers. Wistin was nearly hidden by the kite, and its size was making him feel important. From time to time he lifted it up to see whether it would move and to show his mother that he knew what he had to do on his own. Sometimes he pursed his lips and blew, imitating the wind. He could see with his own eyes that not even a leaf in the trees stirred in the still air. And trees there were in great number. A settled calm lay over everything. He began to suspect as much himself. His mother was always right, or nearly so. She knew the answer to his every question, about all the different things he asked her about, and he never would rest till she had given him the exact answer he wished to hear. Sometimes she said that she did not know the answer because, after all, she did not know all that there was to know. But she always did her best not to leave him without some sort of reply.

"I don't know, son, I don't know everything; actually I know only so much. When you're older, ask someone who knows more than I do. Wait. But don't forget the question," she would tell him. "If you don't ask questions, you cannot grow up."

They continued walking holding hands, looking delighted with each other's company. Though they often went for walks together, they had never gone on such a long walk and at such an early hour. And all because of that kite that had him spellbound at first sight, more fascinated by it than anything else he had ever laid eyes on, Susanna observed. The minute he had discovered it, Wistin had laid aside all other toys.

"Mummy, where are we going, now? Are we going to keep on walking straight ahead?"

"Are you tired? No, you aren't, surely? You're still young. Walking is a new pastime for children your age. However much you walk, you feel light on your feet and want to walk on. You're still brand new, son!"

"Of course I'm not tired! I still want to fly my kite, Mummy, and to do that I must stay on my feet and walk, sometimes forward and sometimes backward. Then I must let the string spool out of the reel, play it out till the kite starts to rise slowly, slowly and then it will catch the wind and will rise faster and start racing, and rise so high up it will look like a pigeon, and this pigeon will fly here and there without hitting anything, and there will be no one to stop it or knock against it, and it will go up and up, without fear or looking back..."

"And then?" Susanna interrupted him gently.

"And then...Let me think, Mummy, 'cause I don't know. And then, and then, I'll want to bring it back down. I wouldn't want it to blow away 'cause then I'll be left alone."

"Alone? What do you mean alone? Aren't I here with you? Am I not enough for you?"

"Yes, Mummy, but I was talking about the kite. The kite isn't a woman. You don't fly. Do you wish you could fly, Mummy, just like that, as if you were a kite or a pigeon with wings that can take you anywhere and when you wanted to you could go down to the ground or fly up and hide yourself up there, near Baby Jesus?"

Susanna looked at him, wordless. She pressed his hand as if to reassure herself that he was indeed there by her side, keeping pace with her, up the path she herself had opened up for him. "I don't fly, son," she said in her heart. "And it hasn't been all that long since I learnt to walk. There was a time when I simply crawled. I couldn't move forward in any other way."

"Will the kite fly up very high in the sky, today, Mummy?" he asked her.

They continued walking and she remained silent for quite a while. She could recall it all so well. There it was, the edge of the village where the Valley began... down there... well hidden among the ancient carob trees, densely decked with foliage. Every tree had a thick trunk and branches, all of them intertwined so closely that they resembled a series of walls offering shelter from rain and shade from the hot sun. Once upon a time, Susanna had been here, amongst the densely leaved trees, in the hidey-hole down here, when her beloved wanted proof of her love for him. And she had felt a strong shiver run down her spine and envelop her whole body, and she had wanted to... and at the same time had been reluctant. She could not recall whether she had told him no. Now she was afraid to remember what answer she had once given that young man, as if

that answer meant wanting Wistin or not. "Yes, yes," she told herself. Wistin had been conceived here, somewhere in that hidden place; she knew the exact spot. Precisely where it all began. Nothing had changed, and the trees appeared exactly the same; they did not appear to have aged even by one day. Withered leaves in yellow and red hues rustled beneath their feet, just like they had done once, as if they were the very same leaves.

"Mummy, Mummy, can't you hear me? Will the kite rise high up in the air, today?"

"I don't know, son. We'll see, it depends on what wind we'll find. Everything depends on the wind. There can be a light breeze or a strong one, a gust or a gale. The wind is its own master."

"But there's no wind at all, Mummy."

"Let's call it up, Wistin! Shall we call it up?"

"How do we call up the wind, Mummy?"

"We call it up," she prevaricated, thinking furiously, "we call it up, look, by calling to it! North Wind! Come, come North Wind! And we can call it by other names too. Leading Wind! Or Head Wind! Or Wind of Fortune! How shall we call it, Wistin? Which name do you choose? Make sure to call it courteously, because it holds all the power in its hands. It's in command."

Wistin did not heed her words. "Mummy, where are we going? Tell me where? I've never been in these parts and I don't know where we are. Where are we?"

"Don't you want to explore this place? Don't you like the Valley? This is a beautiful place full of greenery. I'd like you to see it. Walk with me, here, hold my hand and you won't fall. There's some more walking left. The Valley is a vast place and when you enter it you forget the rest of the world, because all the world can be found here. Everything is gathered in this place, son, in the Valley."

"You know this place, Mummy?"

"Now just pay attention where you're stepping. If you're not careful you can take a wrong step and stumble and fall. And if you fall you can hurt yourself badly. I know what I'm saying. But don't be afraid, I'll hold your hand all the time. Don't let go of my hand," she quickly added when she thought he was about to let go of her hand. "Hold on tightly and look at the ground. There are rocks scattered around... and they've taken on shapes sculpted by time, the wind, the rain, and the waters. Rainwater collects here, see,

and when it rains puddles form and you can sail paper boats on them. That's what children like to do. This is the Valley, son. This is it."

"What is the Valley, Mummy?"

"The Valley, son, is a place where life is born. The Valley means life. It's surrounded by high ground as if walls enclose it in, protecting it."

"The Valley?" Wistin repeated listlessly, devoid of any interest. "But I can't fly my kite down here! If I try to make it fly it'll get stuck in the branches and get entangled. Let's go away from here, Mummy. I don't like this place."

Susanna paused, her hand in his. "Look around you, Wistin, so you'll know. Life begins down here... Every tree was a sapling once and every sapling was once a seed. That's the way life goes on in this world of ours."

"Let's go, Mummy, let's go!" Wistin whimpered. "I don't like it here!"

Susanna stood still, seemingly deaf to his cries. "You don't like it here? You'll like it in the future, I reckon. This is where it all starts. And then, to fly the kite we must go elsewhere. Wait a little, it won't take us long to get there. Nothing happens in a flash, son. We have to pass from this place as part of our way. We have to walk along it together, the two of us. We came down together down here and together we'll climb out of it again. Leave it to me, Wistin."

"Alright. You're like the wind, Mummy, you're in command. This is the path you walk," he told her against his will. "But it's not mine. I don't like it here."

She made him walk further on for a while and then she told him, "Let's climb back up to the fields, now, to the wide open spaces and we'll be able to fly the kite there."

As soon as they reached the high ground and found themselves facing a large green area, thickly overgrown with grass, Wistin let go of his mother's hand and ran off, holding up the kite as far up over his head as he could manage. He ran faster and faster, frequently looking back over his shoulder to see it. "Fly, fly, go up, go up, go on, go up there, come on now!" he shouted. "Let's fly away together, far away from that Valley, up up!"

"Don't go far away, and when you run don't keep looking back," Susanna called out to him when he had gone quite a distance. "If you look back you can fall."

"Mummy, Mummy, can you hear me from there?" he shouted back at her, stopping in his tracks. "Look at me coming back there, me and the kite! When I run, it

will start to rise because the wind will come! Call to it! Call to it! You're in command and the wind will surely listen to you!"

"Run, let me see who's the fastest of the two of you!"

"Let's go. Run, run!" Wistin told the kite. "Fly up, fly up!" With his mouth, he made noises like the wind gusting away, his mouth forming a half circle, and he enjoyed listening to the sounds he produced.

Susanna stood waiting for him, holding the straw basket by her side, and as soon as he reached her she caught him up in her skirts and then knelt on the grass to embrace him. Gently she disengaged his hand from the kite and put it down on the ground next to them. He left her embrace and picked up the reel. She took it from his hand in one smooth movement and helped him unravel it slowly.

"Like this, Mummy, isn't it? Look, look!" he exclaimed straightening up with the kite in front of his face.

The kite made no movement. There was not even a slight puff of wind that could make it stir, however slightly, off the patch of grass. Not one leaf moved, however sluggishly.

"You see, Wistin! Your mother was right!"

"How did you know, Mummy, that the kite wouldn't fly?"

"How? I learnt it one day as I was reading a story."

"Tell me the story then, Mummy, tell it to me," he importuned her, seeming to have forgotten all about his kite lying beside him. "Did you read it a long time ago, long, long ago when kites could still talk?"

"No, Wistin, a long time before that. It was a time when we still played with paper boats, when we used to sail them in the puddles that formed after some downpour. Or else we used to sail them in the puddles down in the Valley. We had to wait for the rains, Wistin, to find puddles. We needed them. Wherever some rain collected, a boat could be floated. Boats cannot stay on dry land. And ships carry people on board, children and adults. We used to imagine ourselves at the harbour, where real ships come and berth. And sometimes these ships brought babies. At other times they brought people who disembarked for a rest and to forget shipboard life. In the harbour everyone feels small because the ships are very large, very high, and the sea is very deep, and it hardly ever moves, except when it's angry."

"Does the sea get angry too, Mummy?"

"Yes, Wistin, the sea gets angry too. The sea is male. But not around here because our village is far away from the sea."

"Everybody used to come by ship, Mummy?"

"If they were coming over the sea, yes, every one came by ship."

"And everyone comes by ship, Mummy?"

Susanna lost command of herself. "Yes, everyone," she stammered. "People are always coming and going. The harbour is open. It bids farewell to those who leave and welcomes those who arrive."

"Do ships come in everyday, Mummy?"

"Of course they do, every day."

"At what time?"

"At any time. Whenever people arrive from abroad and want to disembark."

"And when will my father arrive, Mummy?"

"There are many people queuing up to arrive, son. Each person has to wait a long time, behind the people who came before him, till his turn comes. In the world, out there beyond our village, there are many people wanting to set sail, but there are only a handful of ships. That's why they take a long time to get to their destination."

"You've been telling me for ages that he should be arriving."

"There are many people waiting to board. Each one behind the other, and nobody can jump the queue. Just like when we're at the market doing our shopping. We wait in line. Don't you remember? Can we jump ahead of someone?"

"No, we can't. Everybody has to wait for his turn. And who gets down from the ship first, children or grown-ups?"

"Who do you think, Wistin?"

"Whoever had been waiting the longest, I suppose."

"Is that what you think? Well then, that's how it is."

"But then why did I arrive here before my father? Maybe there are ships only for children, Mummy, and others only for grown-ups. The children's ships are small and those for grown-ups are big, so that there'll be enough space for all of them. That's what I think, 'cause otherwise... But my father's been waiting ever so long! Do you know how long he's been waiting, Mummy? Let me tell you, Mummy."

Susanna looked gravely at him.

"As long as I have years," and he started counting on his fingers, one after another. "I know the numbers well, all of them. One, two, three, four..."

Susanna reached out and gently closed his fingers one by one and clasped his hands so that their four hands together looked like one whole thing. She raised his hands to her lips and gave them a gentle kiss. Her head was bowed.

"Four..." Wistin was about to go on.

Susanna's right hand covered his mouth. "And what about the story? Hadn't we better continue it?"

"Isn't this another story, Mummy? One day I'll be the one to tell you a story, Mummy. Would you like that? And you'll sit and listen to me."

"And how does that story begin, Wistin?"

"I'll start off like this, listen. Once upon a time, there was a little boy who was always waiting to see the ships come into harbour, because there were some ships that brought children over and others that brought grown-ups... The harbour remained open, day and night."

"That's a nice story," she told him somewhat curtly, as if she had taken offence all of a sudden. "Would you like to eat a piece of bread, now?" she asked him as she spread out a large napkin on the ground and started getting the food out of her straw basket. "I brought the food for us to eat it; I don't want to carry it back home. If you eat some bread the basket will get lighter. What do you say?"

But Wistin continued with his story. "And this boy was always gazing hard, across the sea, and waiting, and asking all the people there, "Have you seen anyone? Have you seen a man?" He would go up to every man he saw and ask him if he was his father."

"Wistin, here, take this piece of bread. After all this time in the fresh air you must be very hungry, and don't forget what we said before we left home. In all this fresh air we work up an appetite. We're far away from the Valley."

"But I felt like flying my kite, Mummy."

In the distance, on the edge of the field, Katarina came striding purposefully towards them, and Wistin saw her at once.

"Wistin! Wistin!" Katarina called out to her grandson, and waved energetically at him as if she had not set eyes on him for a long time.

"Granny! Granny!" Wistin shouted happily running towards her.

Katarina knelt down on the grass and lifted him up, stood up with him in her arms and brought him to Susanna. "My goodness, how heavy you're getting to be, you little scamp! I'm no longer as strong as I was! Do you know I can hardly lift you up? Goodness knows how many times I lifted up your mother in my arms! She felt as light as a feather!" She let him down and patted his hair into place.

"Would you like to join us and have some bread, Mother? I thought you might turn up. I suppose you went looking for us at home," Susanna greeted her mother.

"Where would you have me search and find you, daughter? At home, of course, I looked for you at home," Katarina replied.

"We came here early because Wistin wanted to fly his kite."

"Today of all days, my dear? In this weather? Not even a leaf stirs," Katarina replied. Then she encouraged the boy to play some way off. He took up his kite and went off at a run with it raised over his head.

Susanna raised her eyes, intent on watching him. "Wistin, make sure you don't run far, out of my sight."

"Listen, daughter, now I can speak freely to you," Katarina began as soon as she saw the boy put some distance between them. "Look here, the worst is over! Finally we're going to have fair weather. God answered my prayers, and all that Fr. Grejbel did was not in vain. Everyone is overjoyed to have him back. Nowadays, the villagers love him more than ever before. Your son is with you. You lack for nothing, daughter. There's only one thing you lack, and it's not a small insignificant matter. I pray you, go back to your husband. Arturu will always be your husband. Go and speak to Fr. Grejbel. He will help you for sure."

"Mother, you've stood by me through thick and thin. You're the only person I have left. But these matters aren't as easy as you're making them out. Lately you seem to think that everything will fall out the way you'd like them to, just like that."

"No, daughter, I haven't changed all that much. I was a woman of my word and I still am. I know that things have to take their time, slowly."

"Maybe not all that much, but nearly so."

"Nearly so, indeed, nearly so." After a short pause Katarina went on. "What do you say, huh? If you dash all my hopes, you'll cut off all the life that's left to me."

"Do you think it gives me any pleasure to deny you? How can I not say yes to you?" Susanna replied handing her a cup of tea.

Her mother's face lit up with happiness. "I'm going, let me go straightaway to find him and tell him that you'd like to speak to him. Dear daughter, bless you! I bless you with both my hands and with all the strength that's left to me, now and till the last breath I draw."

"Wait a moment, Mother, just wait. Here, drink some tea first. Where shall I go to speak to him, and when?"

"Leave it to me. I'll fix it. I'm going now and I bless you again with both hands, the way Fr. Grejbel will when he sees you once more. My blessing counts for something, but his may count for much more."

"Fr. Grejbel saw me at some distance, and he saw my son with me, the same way he saw you, in the crowd."

"I know he saw us, and I'm sure he was very glad to see us all! I'll explain everything to him, myself," Katarina said bubbling with joy. She gathered her long skirts spread all around her on the ground, got up and brushed her clothes quickly and looked in the direction where the boy was playing. "Wistin, Granny has to go! She's too busy for words these days! Bless you, you too! Even blessings need work! Bless you both," she shouted.

"All these loud blessings are going to make people think you're blessing the whole world, dear Mother!"

"The world? How would I know the whole world? My hands reach only as far as the edges of our village. That's my whole world, Susanna. That's how it always was and that's how it should always be. And what should people think, after all? When I'm happy,

I'm happy! My happiness is loud and clear! That's me! Don't I deserve some happiness in my last years? Don't you know what sort of oppression I had to live under? But there, let me keep silent about that. I don't want to fall into error and let my tongue run away with me and endanger my soul's salvation. Marriage is for life and it's a closed box. After all, your father will always remain your father."

"God rest his soul!" Susanna said the time-worn phrase under her breath.

"God rest his soul!" her mother echoed her and went off in haste.

The thoroughfare between the field and the village square ran in a direct line and Katarina soon entered the church, went down on her knees as if she was about to start praying, made the Sign of the Cross and glanced around. Fr. Grejbel was not there so she went to look for him inside the vestry, which was quite small. Not finding him there she went on to his house and after rapping on the door twice, she found herself face-to-face with him.

His face lit up as soon as he saw her and he smiled, and feeling as if he had something stuck in his throat he gestured for her to enter. She bowed her head, keeping her hands together as if still at prayer in church and waited for him to speak and invite her to sit down. After a few moments of silence, she lifted her gaze to his and burst out weeping.

He went to her side and clasped her hands in sympathy. His eyes were brimming with tears as well but he made an enormous effort to appear steadfast and calm.

"I wanted to speak with you again. I'm not going to keep on thanking you because there aren't enough words to describe...Since you came back, I took heart and I've been trying to urge Susanna, a word here or there, to come and talk to you about her marriage to Arturu. I've always mentioned you and that's the only reason she's listened to me. Your name, not that I want to flatter you, but your name opens doors. I cannot reach up to where you can."

"They've remained separated, meanwhile? They've never approached each other?"

"Since you left, Fr. Grejbel, nothing's changed between them. He's on one side and she's on the other. And now there's the boy stuck in the middle, and he's not Arturu's son."

"You've managed no mean feat there, bringing her son back to her. God bless him, I saw him in the crowd, at a distance. You cannot have done a finer thing than that, Katarina."

Katarina recounted the whole sorry story to him. "You remember my husband, Saverju, and you know how nothing would ever make him change his mind. If he thought something should be one way, that's how it had to remain whatever happened. He had taken it to heart that Susanna was with child out of wedlock and he spent a long time refusing even to see her. And then you know what he did, so that when Susanna gave birth, her baby was immediately taken away from her and left in an orphanage. He did his best to hide things from me as well. But as you can imagine, I did my utmost to find out where the baby was and I didn't rest till I was certain of his whereabouts. Sometimes I saw that Saverju closed an eye to my activities. I knew who was taking care of the baby. I sometimes paid the little mite a visit, behind Saverju's back. I set my mind at rest that at least the baby was in good hands and well-taken care of. But Saverju was always dogging my footsteps; he didn't trust me in this matter. He was afraid I would somehow betray him. And I felt that way too, that I shouldn't let him down... He remained stoutly in denial right up to the end... And on his deathbed he never said a single word to Susanna about her baby."

"I know, I know,"

"You were there. You've always been there for us, Fr. Grejbel, throughout our sorrows."

"And even in your joys..."

"Yes, even in our joys, truly. When Susanna married Arturu, you mean. My husband and I weren't there that day. He didn't want to attend her wedding. He didn't even want to speak to Arturu. And if my husband didn't want to go, then I couldn't, either. Poor girl, she didn't deserve all that she's had to face!"

"Don't fret, don't fret, in the meantime you still loved her, and she felt your love, surely, even at a distance."

"How could I let her down? I could only do so much, with my husband around. And then he passed away. But then your troubles came. They were all our fault, all our fault."

"No, no, don't say that, don't think that. It wasn't your fault. Every good gesture causes some movement and that can hurt. Whenever we do some good, we have to cause some pain, somehow or other. But it's not wasted suffering. That's all. If we realize this, we understand the why. It doesn't become any easier to bear but at least we don't remain in the dark. Tranquillity... we call this tranquillity."

Katarina was still puzzling over the idea. "Well then, whose fault was it? You did nothing but good, not just to my family but to all the villagers. It was our fault."

"That's life for you, that's how it is. That's how it's always been, now and forever and everywhere. That's how it was in the beginning and that's how it will remain till the end. The important thing is to do our best, even if we come to the brink."

"And you did get to the brink, Fr. Grejbel..."

"But see, life brings its own consolations, too. Now we find ourselves here, at this point, so that we may look ahead. And then...I would like you to continue with your story..."

"Well, then, when your troubles came about, I didn't have the courage to do something to bring the boy back. I feel I let you down, at least in my thoughts, Fr. Grejbel. It's as if during all that time, I too accused you of wrongdoing. My silence confirmed your guilt, even though all I was doing was staying loyal to my husband. I had to remain loyal to him, whatever happened. Marriage is for life, and continues in the afterlife. I pray you understand, I too am village born..."

"Of course I understand, but this idea shouldn't even cross your mind."

"Our village had never gone through such an experience before. I felt withdrawn into myself, almost forgetting my daughter and her son, everything. I thought, everything is in ruins and there's nothing left to pick up. In my eyes, my husband appeared to be the only one who had been right all along. I started telling myself, 'So much time had to pass, and now that he's dead, he's been proved right, and by the entire village.' But I was wrong, and he too was wrong..."

"Don't say that. Say that he did all that he thought was the right thing to do. Each person did his duty as he saw it and felt he must do. And when our different duties meet each other head on, what happens? They clash. There's conflict. A bolt of lightning comes out of the blue. And somebody is caught in the middle, in a vice. It may be that everybody is caught in such a way. But then time passes and it's all water under the bridge and the water runs clear. That's all that's happened," Fr. Grejbel soothed her gently with infinite kindness.

"Where did you come by such tranquillity, Fr. Grejbel? Where did you find such peace?" she asked him wonderingly. "You never did lose it, did you, throughout your troubles?" She fell silent and gazed at him. In a different tone she briskly took up the tale, speaking decisively. "But then, when I learnt that you had been sent far away from here, I started feeling guilty. I said to myself, 'This is as far as I go, obeying my husband blindly, even after his death. Now I must do something to redeem all the victims.' The

victims were you, Susanna and Wistin. And I didn't rest till Susanna and the boy were re-united. Well, re-united in a manner of speaking because they had never been together except during her pregnancy. And they weren't a happy nine months, either."

"But look at what's come about from those difficult nine months! Aren't you happy with such a victorious outcome? Be glad and proud of all that you've achieved."

"Proud, of myself? After I've collected all these years? If it weren't for the sacrifice you made, then..."

"Everyone had a part to play. And now?" he asked her with a rising inflection in his voice, showing her plainly that he could make a good guess about the matter she wanted to discuss.

"And now, Fr. Grejbel, I would like you to do your utmost to bring Susanna and Arturu back together. I had never imagined that my daughter would one day enter that house to serve Arturu and his mother and she would remain there and end up becoming his wife. Not only did I never imagine such a thing but I almost wished it had never happened. But it did, and today they are man and wife. What a shame, they've spent more years apart than together! From the little I know about their marriage, I know he was ready to welcome her back with her son. Susanna says he often told her so and I believe her."

"Truly, I can reassure you on this point myself. Arturu made this promise in front of me. More than once."

"There you are then, you see! If only they can come together again! Marriage is for life! For life!" she repeated over and over again, sadly but with a hint of hope.

"Do you want me to speak to her? I don't want to make a false move, either do too much or too little. And after all, it's important to see how she feels about it, at this stage."

"What do you think, Fr. Grejbel? Can you please talk to her? Open her eyes. She'll listen to you, as she's always done."

"I'll do my best. You've done all you could as her mother and you deserve some help in this."

"With your help, Fr. Grejbel. I needn't repeat it all. That's what I say to whoever asks after my daughter and her son," she confessed, turning round to leave. She stopped and raised her open palms to her face, as if thinking twice about saying more. "I don't think I'd be doing the right thing if I didn't add something else," she hesitated. "My husband Saverju seemed to believe that after his death I would go and fetch the baby. But he wanted to have nothing to do with it. Absolutely nothing. He remained hard and

unforgiving till the end but he didn't want me to be stubborn about it like him, forever. I felt that he expected me to do my part, in time. If this wasn't so, he wouldn't have let me know where the baby was being brought up. He just wanted me to keep silent and wait."

"We all waited, do you see? We do well to wait. Hope is our ability to wait. There's no limit to how long we must wait. Sometimes only a short while and sometimes for a very long time. The important thing is not to lose our way in the meantime. Have hope, now as well."

"Are you telling me, in all this time, you've never felt the least bit aggrieved with my husband? You waited without feeling anything?"

Fr. Grejbel merely smiled at her and lowered his head. She went out and he closed the door behind her. As she walked, she went over in her mind how she was going to tell Susanna about it. Her lips moved soundlessly and various expressions chased each other across her face. She had forgotten she was walking in the street.