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THE BLACK STRANGER

IRENA MAČIULYTĖ GUILFORD

Once, a river flowed between low banks lined with birches, a muddy stream that attracted no swimmers, but was fine to sit beside, provided one faced away, or didn't look too closely when hunting frogs. It was a lazy river that did not carry its silt well. No stones glinted on its muddy bottom. Children played at the edges, delighting in the sucking sounds their feet made in the mud. But no one swam.

Between river and forest, an old man and his wife lived in a house with a thatched roof, a low doorway and slatted windows. Evenings, they sat on the wide front step, watching nightingales or smoking a before-bed pipe. In all seasons, they were contented.

Each spring, the river cleared itself for one day. Then the old man would catch fish which the old woman would fry. They would sit and eat, licking first the bones, then their fingers, then the plates, making much of this fresh fish supper which came once a year. But mostly, they lived on brambles, berries and mushrooms, and an occasional rabbit which, if the old man was quick and steady with his rifle, would end up on their plates.

One year, the river cleared itself not just for one day, but for the whole summer. Then, the old man and woman swam, as in the youth of their love.

Many years passed in rhythmic happiness. The couple grew older than they had ever expected. Year after year, they were granted life, along with creaky joints and failing eyesight, bent backs and faltering voices, which they accepted with grace. And their love only grew.

One day, a black stranger appeared in the forest. He rapped on their door. He wanted to develop the land along the river. He would build theme parks, condominiums and hotels. He would clean up the river. *Everything is possible with technology nowadays. Just a snap of the fingers*, the black stranger said. *Well, old man, old woman. Will you sell?*

The old man squinted up at the black stranger. He could no longer look into direct sunlight, his eyes having grown weak, but he could see the dark stranger well enough, if only in shape.

No thank you. We are happy enough here.

What? the black stranger roared. You will not sell? I'll show you what's what.

Drawing a sword hidden beneath his cape, he slew the old man, who crumpled in a silent heap to the floor.

What is it? the old woman cried, groping her way forward. She had long since gone blind.

Your husband is no more, the black stranger stated. He was inside the house now. It filled with darkness.

The old woman gasped, a hand to her open mouth. The stranger smote her too.

He sat down at the table. He had moved in.

The black stranger tossed the bodies into a heap behind the house. After they dissolved, he used the bones for soup. After three spoonful, he spat it out. It had a taste he did not recognize. He threw it out—bowl and bones, soup and spoons—into

the back garden.

Bah, he said, bitter old man. Bitter old woman.

But it was not bitterness that the black stranger tasted. The old couple, feeling death, had pulled their lifeblood down into their bones. There it rested. That is what the stranger tasted, and what was not to his liking. And that is what lay seeping into the garden earth.

Blackness filled the house between the river and the forest. At night, no lights shone from its windows. The brambles and berries refused to grow. The river, always muddy, grew muddier still. In winter, it turned black. Then, the solitary stranger could be skating along its solid surface, his black cape billowing.

Twenty years passed. The memory of the old couple faded. Picnickers no longer sat by the river, even with backs turned. Anxious parents, knowing the dangers of river-banks, held their children back. The forest grew silent and dim, empty of plants, birds and deer.

The black stranger busied himself building a resort. He erected hotels and boathouses, theme parks and waterslides. The lone house became a thriving town. The stranger, once known for his billowing black cape, took to wearing gold brocade waistcoats and big rings. He grew corpulent, stout and well-respected, some would whisper, even loved. And with the old couple's bones finally gone, the past seemed far behind.

But the essence of bones lay in the garden. And though the three spoonfuls of soup no longer lay in the stranger's stomach, it rode in his flesh and blood.

One day, a young woman came to town. The townspeople thought she might be a granddaughter, come to avenge the old couple, but she was not. But she was tall, lithe and beautiful. The black stranger was smitten. He wished to marry her.

It is all I need to make my life complete, he thought. For he was lonely among his riches, though he would admit this to nobody.

He proposed, going down on one corpulent knee, his head bent, his be-ringed hand held out. The girl gave him a cool look. She did not like this fat old man with the encrusted gold rings, but she was tired of wandering. She accepted.

They lay together in the marriage bed, and it was not as bad as the young girl had expected, for there was comfort in that enfolding flesh and tenderness in the touch of those fat fingers. And he denied her nothing. He gave her gold, rubies and pearls, silks and brocades. He gave her a castle and a gilded carriage. He threw lavish parties, inviting painters, diplomats and princes. And he gave his quiet love.

The young girl enjoyed this for a time. She liked having her hair braided with pearls and her nails polished a translucent pink. She enjoyed dining with fine guests under great chandeliers and chatting over coffee in small, intimate rooms. The stranger was considered a great benefactor now and in the resort town, there was great rejoicing. The old man and woman, the thatched house between river and forest, were almost forgotten.

But the young girl grew bored with shallow riches. Soon, she left.

The black stranger was desolate. He searched far and wide for his lost bride. He scoured the deserts of Arabia, searched the beaches of Polynesia, scaled the mountains of Tibet. He followed China's rivers into the interior. He saw much beauty, but only beauty of flesh, not of spirit and soul. He wanted eyes that saw into other worlds.

At last, he returned home. He sank into his gilded throne, sick at heart. He called for food. He ate. He called for his money, and counted it, piece by piece, long into the night.

What good is all this, he said, if there is no love?

And at his great table, he put his head in his arms and wept.

He wept for forty years. Then, raising his dry-eyed face, he resolved to search again. This time, instead of going west to east, he would go east to west. He would follow the sun. He ordered his carriage and entourage. Then, at the last moment, taking only a horse and saddlebags, he set out alone.

He passed through dense thickets and dark forests. He crossed wide streams. He remembered the river beside which the old couple had lived. His horse faltered, but the stranger always urged him on, keeping the sun in sight.

One evening, he came to a cliff overlooking a deep abyss. He stood looking down into the dark. For many days, he had been wandering with nothing to lift his spirits. He was tired. For a moment, he was tempted to throw himself in. But he drew back.

That will solve nothing, he thought.

He tethered his horse to a tree and lay down. Then, under a starry sky, the sounds of night and the munching of his horse mingling in his ears, he fell asleep.

He awoke in a cramped, low-ceilinged cell with a dirt floor. He was hungry and thirsty.

A warden entered, carrying a tin plate of bones.

Where am I? the stranger asked.

You are here to eat the bones of your suffering, the warden replied, setting the plate on the ground.

The stranger recognized the bones of the old man and woman he had slain. He recognized the shape and size, the jumble of their assembly. They had dissolved in the ground, behind his house, many years ago, but here they were, before him, again.

Eat, the guard commanded, then retreated.

Eat, and you shall be free. The words fell into the stranger's mind like a blessing.

He picked up the bones and ate. They were bitter and, at the same time, sweet. They crumbled into soft powder in his mouth. A goblet of wine appeared at his elbow. He drank. The bone dust slid down his throat.

The vaporous form of his lost love arose before him. He reached out towards her, but she stopped him with an uplifted hand. She spoke.

Love me forever and you shall live. In memory and heart. And you will be forgiven your sins.

Then, she vanished. He fell back, exhausted. He was old now, as old as the couple he had slain. And she was gone forever.

He carried his love in his heart the rest of his days. He erected plaques, laid wreaths, and made speeches. He gave his love a voice. Even now, he can still be seen, working his way towards the horizon, bent over, tending small graves that line the road.



Artwork of Vytautas O. Virkau