

Cezarija Abartis, an experienced short-story writer, enters our pages with an evocative tale about a decisive summer for a family in an Eastern European country that appears to be modeled on Lithuania. It is part mainstream historical, part folk tale, and—perhaps—part ghost story.

On Grandmother's Farm

by Cezarija Abartis

In the Old Country in 1913, when I was ten years old, I saw my mother's ghost, and not only in dreams.

When Mother died, we were packed off to our grandmother's farm half a day's journey away on the back roads of Lietuva. We would have gone to our aunt's house, but the midwife had told her to rest and stay in bed or she might lose this baby like the other.

My first glimpse of Grandmother from the cart was of a brown shadow that looked like a horse against an empty horizon. I rubbed my eyes. What I thought was the head of the horse turned out to be an ax she was lifting over a tree stump. When she saw our cart drive up, she paused, raised her arms, let the ax bite one more time.

The cart creaked to a stop in front of her leaning farmhouse, and the driver handed down my brother and me. I smoothed my skirt. Vytas and I stood in the rutted, dusty road and watched her prop the ax against the tree stump and trudge past a well with a bucket swaying loosely at its top. We tramped over brown weeds and pebbles and passed the ax, its handle against the tree stump. A yellow and scarlet chicken head no bigger than my fist lay on that stump, the body on the ground still twitching and stretching. I grasped Vytas' hand to make sure he was not frightened. I was not frightened because, after all, Vytas was younger and depended on me.

"With death taking so much, you have to hold on to what you can." Grandmother's voice was matter-of-fact.

My hand closed more tightly around my brother's.

She wiped her hands on her stained apron and peered down at us, drawing her brambly eyebrows together. She had wide hips and shoulders and two heavy braids of hair, still skillet-black, that I later learned she could whip into lariats if she wanted to. "Well, my little peeps, poor babies, poor orphans." She patted Vytas' head. "Tonight we'll eat chicken."

Children, I thought she said, and flinched.

"And you, Ruta, be strong," she said, "be strong." She stared at me with her storm-dark eyes and gripped my shoulders—hard—as if she could press strength into me. I felt as if I were falling into the well in the yard.

The door clicked shut and we were inside her house. I was accustomed to snowy-white tablecloths, embroidered pillows, lace curtains. This was an unpainted room that smelled of boiling potatoes and vinegar. Through the window, I could see the raw sun setting, blood-red. "Come here," she commanded, crooking one long finger and holding up a lantern, even though there was still light. "You've grown, you're not babies anymore." She hugged Vytas, who was only four (I was almost eleven), and then me.

"You have my son's eyes," she said to me approvingly. The sleeves of her gray blouse were rolled up. She had large hands and wrists and dark hair on her forearms. She picked up my right hand, around which I had tied the green silk kerchief given me by my departed angel mother. "And *her* small lady-hands." She snorted, turned away, and tossed a piece of wood into the belly of the iron stove. "I'll go get the chicken." A cauldron of soup simmered on top, the steam writhing into the air.

"You must eat," she said. "Don't pine for your mother. It's late." She set a place for the hired boy, a slouching adolescent with slow wits and a large, mobile jaw thrust forward. "This one has no harm in him," she announced to us. "He's left alone in the world." Algirdas ate heartily and then went outside.

That evening after supper (I didn't eat any chicken), we heard a buggy in the driveway. She pulled aside the yellowish muslin that served as a curtain. "Viper!" she said under her breath.

There was a knock on the door and a man strutted in, paunch first, then pale pudding-face, the wily eyes sunk deep in flesh, the jaw fringed with a thin gray-brown

beard. He removed his Homburg. His hair tonic had the sweet effervescence of apples on the edge of rotting. He surveyed the room familiarly and said, "Good evening to you, Madam." He fixed his eyes on Vytas and me as if he knew and owned us. "You have little guests, I see."

"My son's children," she said, rigid, only her eyes moving.

"Charming." He sniffed and wrinkled his nose. "Charming. It's been the sorrow of my life that I never fathered children."

"You can't do it here. What do you want?"

"To be friendly." His voice was smooth, theatrically offended. "Our farms are side by side. We should be friends."

"Fine, we're friends. What do you want?"

"You are curt, Madam, not as cordial as you were wont to be."

"I am not cordial to people who try to steal my farm."

"Ts, ts, ts. What's this about 'steal'? Once again, I say, that rather than dealing with the bank, you should deal directly with me. I want to help you." His pale lips stretched in a smile over his teeth. "Let me take the loan over from you, eh? And I'll even present you with ten rubles now. You won't get this good a deal from the bank, just the grief of being thrown out in September." He rose on his toes in his polished, lace-up shoes. "Your late husband—may he rest in peace—would have agreed in a minute."

"A coward, a foolish man."

"It's not for me to judge," he said benignly. He tilted his head to one side. "Such small white hands you have. Those of a lady. You should live in town."

Why did he say her hands were ladylike? Her hands were in back of her, and she had made one into a fist, the knuckles prominent and red. "I thank you for instructing me in mannerly living, and I beg you to leave so I can study this lesson."

He reminded her that a year ago he had lent her money for her payments to the bank because she was a good neighbor, but now he wanted her to repay his loan. He said he had seen some pale woman walking the perimeter of the land, and he did not want the land sold to her. Nobody else had made Grandmother an offer, so this must have mystified her. He would buy the land from the bank in autumn so she might as well sell it to him now and he would give her a little extra for the plow and other implements, the chickens, and two horses.

"Why do you want both horses?" she asked.

He cleared his throat. "I'll stake you to a new life. I'll give you a hundred rubles if you leave next week."

She closed her fist tighter. "Why so much?"

His large mouth with its whitish lips fell slack and

uncertain for a moment. "There was a girl a long time ago. She lived on this very farm and rode a horse like your Gintaras." His fingers skittered over his forehead.

Grandmother crossed her arms over her chest. "I never saw you in love with anybody."

"She died."

She looked at him sideways and hissed.

He spoke louder. "She was real. This is true." He looked toward the window off into the dark. "She's dead."

"Liar. It never happened."

His shriveled eyes glittered, and he turned away. He dabbed at his eyes.

Maybe she regretted her savagery. "And where am I to live?"

He rose on his toes. "Madam, you are too old—it pains me to say this—too old to be roistering around the countryside."

"It's the well you want. Yours is beginning to dry up."

His white face reddened. "That's right. I must have the land!"

"Pfft."

"You owe me money!" A vein throbbed in his temple, a fat purple spider.

"When my barley comes in, you'll get it."

"I want it now. I'm taking a chicken for the interest you owe me." He pulled on his Homburg. "You'll give me apoplexy."

She flourished her fingers next to the lantern, and the fingertips glowed like candles. "Some say I have the power of the old ways." She nodded significantly. "My two husbands died."

"Oh, yes." He laughed cruelly. "And your son."

"Get out of here!" She picked up a broom and would have thrashed him if he had not been quick.

Vytas and I had watched wide-eyed. I started to breathe again, for I had not been breathing the whole time the man was there.

She paced back and forth across the floor of narrow pineboard, muttering. Vytas and I drew close to each other on the bench. I thought at the time that grown-ups had power. But Mother had died. Maybe only some had power.

Grandmother twisted her apron. "What am I to do? The viper means to have everything. Nothing will be left for these orphans." Her eyes took us in fiercely, stabbed at us. "I don't like to give in to this devil."

She raised her fist to the door. "He thinks he can get something without working." I did not know at the time that she had inherited the farm from her dead husband. But of course, Grandmother was a worker, and of course, love is work, too. "He thinks there's something valuable