Madam Nola

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Translated in English by: John K. Cox

The tomb of the Lazarić family, although they died out not too long ago, is today a collapsed crypt full of weeds and debris of bricks, granite, and fence-posts. This smashed-up corpse clutched the bases of a few more or less dilapidated grave-top crosses and propelled them up into the air. One of the markers stood out from the others; it was fairly well-preserved and stood straight up, like a mast on a shipwreck. It was the cross of Mrs. Stanojla Lazarićka. It was a handsome display with a boat and a mast. Madam Nola, who sometimes referred to herself as "a lively person," in fact seemed to be on duty still, standing guard over vessels that had run aground, a bunch of little boats that were clinging to her, along with tugboats and barges. In the tomb, besides Madam Nola, there happened to be otherwise only men, including of course her husband, Mr. Toša. All around the grave, and quite a bit farther from the town, were scattered the graves of people who had once been connected to Nola, or to her husband. There, on the hillside, in a cheaper, narrower tomb, lay Madam Nola's sister, the beautiful Julica; with her was her middle husband, the second of three, whom they called the Marquis. The first of her trio, Doctor Mirko, one of the most prominent citizens of the town---there he was, too, beneath a thick layer of ivy, with his wife and son, without any further descendants. Julica's third husband, Marko Popović-Srba, lived until recently on the remnants of Mr. Toša's *salaš*, as they called a farmstead in these parts. He was a once handsome man who had lived a neglected and undignified life. He'd twice undergone operations for cancer. "And what of it? If it's a crab, then at least it's not a lion!" Srba was also already in a graveyard, but it was the one near the *salaš*. And maybe Madam Nola's cross stood so strangely straight and high out of longing for her dear foster son. Along the narrow little path leading away from the Lazarević tomb, one reaches, to the north, the wall between the Orthodox and Catholic graveyards. Here somewhere, along the periphery, people claimed the favorite servant of Mr. Toša was buried, the gardener and dog-handler named Ljuba, who was a witness to the misfortune that had occurred on the farmstead. It was also said he was perhaps a participant in that crime, but later, on account of life's strange pathways, he was a sort of son-in-law to Madam Nola. On the other side of the wall slept his wife, Paula, a Slovak. She was the former housemaid and adopted child of Nola. Also, in the Catholic cemetery--no one knew where any longer--was also buried the knife-grinder with the blue spectacles. Rajnhart was his name, but Madam Nola gave him the nickname Luka. The knife

grinder's wife had been laid to rest in faraway Germany. Next to the small Catholic chapel was interred the very animated parish priest. And there was an invisible cord binding Madam Nola's mast to the skeleton of an Italian beauty from Trieste, who was buried heaven knows where. Near the cemetery well, Madam Nola had buried the unfortunate drunkard of a veterinarian; Pava, the woman veterinarian, ended up here later. And again, by means of another cord, Madam Nola was also tied to the grave, or perhaps the mausoleum, of a famous engineer and professor in Saxony, at one time a little kraut in Madam Nola's household. Onto the hillock in the cemetery, even with Nola's mast, had climbed the always high-flying and highly educated Mr. Joksin, Esquire, the chief judge of the local court. And so on. And today, atop Madam Nola's grave, was the famed dance of shadows. It quivers, it braids together and intersects; it buckles and tears itself free and hovers. No one knows, and no one can see, where the shadows come from, but they come.

It had long been said around the town that Madam Nola had adopted Paula the Slovak. That case was the first in a series that had underscored what kind of heart Nola had. The local newspaper reported that there was to be an eclipse of the sun, and that a nice viewing opportunity would present itself on such and such a day at such and such a time. Madam Nola, both as a business-woman and a zealous church-goer, had a great amount of respect for the sky, and she wanted to watch the eclipse, so she gathered information on the position of the sun according to the windows of her house. She knew, of course, where the east lay. But from early in the spring till deep in the autumn, she, by the time the sun came out, was usually already somewhere on the road, driving to her fields and stables, and very frequently she dozed off just from sitting in the cart. Therefore, she addressed Paula: "Go on now! Show me, but so a person can understand, where the sun is when you spot it from the kitchen." Paula walks directly over to the wrong window. "For God's sake, child. The sun doesn't come up over there! It sets there, towards evening. How in the world do you not know that? Oh, heavens!" Paula blushed. Nola went on: "Good God, I'm going to have to cross myself. So, have you ever seen that window turning red in the morning?" "No, I haven't." "Well, which one does turn red, then? Surely, it's this other one, since there are no others."

Paula was silent. "How can this trip you up so much? Come on, be so kind as to tell me that you see the sun every morning through this window." "I do not see it." Madam Nola paused cautiously. She thought: either the girl is confused by the way I'm grilling her, like in school, or she has heard about the eclipse and is afraid of it. She stroked Paula's cheek, scrutinizing her hair full of ribbons, and said gently: "Is it right, what I said?" "I don't know. The lady

knows.” Madam Nola now hastened out to the hallway, crossed herself once, and then a second time right away, and decided to adopt Paula.

“It's that German church, and that devil of a parish priest! A hundred rosaries and Hail Marys, but she can't see the Lord's sun. She is seventeen years old, and she's been in my household for a year, and every morning she accompanies me out to the green gate, which is right where the morning sun strikes. O God, forgive this old woman her sin. I nourish her body, but I take no interest in her soul. But who can remember to do everything? This beautiful girl of mine follows along in the processions; the nuns taught her how to sew, and she can find any demon lurking in any nook of my house, but she can't see the sun in the sky. You might as well keep her locked in a barn...I must talk with her mother. I will care for her like my own child. I cannot allow this pretty, good-hearted child to stay wild and take beatings from men her whole life.”

For the greater part of her years, Madam Nola led the life of a widow. She did not even pass ten years with a husband, and under ordinary conditions, she only rarely used her husband's name. Somehow, when people were at her grave, memories of Mr. Toša were revived. “Look, I beg you—" said someone. “See what is written on the marker?” Had Lazarić been fated on that day to escort them with Madam Nola’s body, he would be close to a hundred years old. “We didn't think about that, but it wasn't that we didn't know. Had we not, in our younger years, heard so many times that Stanojla Perčinova, over there somewhere across the Serbian-Bosnian border, had married a man more than thirty years her senior.” – “Right you are. And with my own eyes I once saw the odd groom that was Toša, and his odd ‘bride,’ big and strong like a healthy young man...It turned out to be a miracle. And there were misfortunes, but good deeds of the type that seldom come to pass. May God forgive everything to the soul of Madam Nola.”

She did not just look manly; she was a man. “Yes--strict, serious, upright like a man.” “And smart, smart, pal, nobody could match her in that. And so strong that she never knelt, and she valiantly defended herself and others...A man! Only death could dress her like a woman. It's a shame God did not grant her a child of her own.” --Here the pummeling of the earth on the coffin ceased, and one of the people near the edge of the grave said in a very excited voice: “She was a mother, a holy mother! May God be good to her, and merciful, and may she rest in peace.”

When the procession came back down from the grave, the conversation turned into a proper almanac. Out were names, facts and figures,

and anecdotes. They soon arrived, however, at Nola's house, at the famous green gate on the driveway. And now the joking and laughter commenced. "Oh my God, what's going to become of that *štajervagn*? (Madam Nola was inseparable from that yellow two-horse carriage. Old-fashioned, heavily used, narrow, poorly maintained, muddy and dusty, it came creaking out every morning before five, every single day, as sure as the "amen" in a prayer. Madam Nola rode into the fields on it, to her corn, to the mill, to the *salaš*, off to a village. On the way, she pushed her big coarse boot into the coachman's back to get him to stop---to pick up someone and bring them along.) She often took me to the brickyard and to my vegetable garden, which was pretty far out of her way. I'd climb up, and there was room for me to sit next to her, but she didn't miss a beat, didn't budge. It's like I can see her right now. Her shoes were proper army boots; the laces were as thick as your finger. Her outfits, piece by piece--do you remember? A gray skirt, a blouse, and a coat of the same gray fabric, down to her knees. A safety-pin on her back, and through the safety-pin, if it was windy, was attached a wool scarf to keep her back warm. Her black hair, slicked down and pulled together in a tight bun. A little hat on her head, neither masculine nor feminine, and it was gray, too, and meant neither as a flourish nor as protection. What's more, it was all cracked from getting wet and then drying out. Large hands, strong, always without gloves."

She laughed at Josa, the coachman, who, as soon as autumn set in, would put on his woolen mittens: "You put your hands in sheaths, and then you drive like that? The reins slip out of your hands, and the horses have no respect for you!" In the summer, on the seat next to her, was the perpetual trench coat, which she never donned; she just sat on it. An umbrella, dark green in color, enormous, patched, with a thick, banged-up handle with a crook in it. If she is simply passing by one of her fields, she ties the handkerchief onto the top of the umbrella, stands up in the cart, and brandishes this standard a few times, so that the workers could see it and know she is there and that she might come out...But all of it suited her well...I mean, especially that uniform of hers..."Well, her style of grooming eventually grew elaborate. As Madam Nola aged, she hung a pince-nez on a broad black band. My sons, who hung around over there because of Julica, described that pince-nez to me: huge and awe-inspiring, both when it dangled and swayed and when it was planted on her hefty nose. Supposedly, one rascally apprentice attached an old pair of spectacles to a dray horse and said: "And here I give you Madam Nola!"

"Wait, I still need to finish my part. We ride along--we ride, and she seldom utters a single word. She naps, and it's obvious that she's always tired. But tomorrow she will get up with the chickens again. When we get close to

the brickyard, I motion to her with my hand, and she uses her foot to give Josa a sign on his back, and then I jump out. She never shook hands. “All right then, farewell!” she nodded at me, and then she just shouted to Josa: “Josa, the gentleman is leaving. Is there a sparrow hiding beneath your cap?”

On the return trip to the town, Madam Nola couldn't pick up anyone with her cart. It was too full at that point. There were two shops to supply the town and one butcher shop. Together with the coachman, Madam Nola unloaded hampers of eggs, greens, fowl, *rakija*, flour, peasant towels, and blankets. In each arm she clutched a ham, and she delivered them right away to the butchers. She called out to the Hungarian who ran the shop: "Go on and take these, and weigh them, and write it down right away. Or else later on you’ll cheat me,” she joked. “So, let’s agree now on what is mine and what is yours.”

“Eh, we sextons,” the conversation continued, “we know a different Madam Nola. The same cut of her clothing, to be sure, but it was all black and very fine, and our benefactor would appear at the church service punctually, to the minute; she stood in her row there, tall and straight and black, like a *vladika*, one of our bishops. She put good money in the collection bag. For the beggars in front of the church, no matter how many of them there were, she found spare change. Of course, she directed a sharp word to anyone who needed it, but she gave. May God forgive her for the way she treated priests. She loved the church, but she did not love priests, and at the drop of a hat, she would toss off some reprimand at them, but when she saw a church, she donated to it with both hands. You should repair those ripidions. Is it really a matter of indifference to the priest that you carry those clubs around in the church? I will pay, whatever it costs.” -- “Yes, yes, sharp, sharp even in front of the church, and when she comes out of it, too. We, her foremen and servants, came on Sundays, after the liturgy, to settle accounts and make requests.” The place was swarming with peasants, tenant farmers, and middlemen. They complained about each other, and the Jew named Štajn was perpetually complaining about them. There was a ruckus until she approached. As soon as she took up her position before them, everything grew quiet, and every dispute was abandoned. She sized us up and began: “You, Štajn, do not forget that in this house there is no gouging or fleecing. Let us have no more added zeros! And you, Maksa, don’t be like that grandfather clock of yours on the *salaš* that displays one time and strikes another, for I can tell what time you’re showing. I'm coming from church, pal, and I can see through you like glass! It's true! Don't stall, and don’t lie!” And the people spoke truthfully, and everything was cleared up..... [END OF EXCERPT]