Maja Zamiejska

Kikimora

It all started last fall when my dear mother crossed the dreadful bridge to join those residing in a place we believe, or at least hope, exists called the afterlife.

One early foggy morning, the fisherman found her stiff, half-naked body lying on the shore of a nearby lake. They immediately went for one of the elders to examine the corpse, for such an incident had been unheard of in years. Well, what happened to her nobody knows, yet everyone in the village speculated that she was perhaps drowned by Vodnik or another water spirit, judging by the hand marks resembling those of a demon on her pale neck.

Despite my firm pleadings, they didn't allow me to take even a glimpse of my mother's feeble body, saying I was too young for such a horrifying view.

I wasn't satisfied with the popular explanation; my mother rarely visited the lake. She would always say that there was something deeply unsettling about it—as if it were inhabited by a ghastly entity lurking beneath the green froth and sallow lily pads. I never believed her; I thought it was just another sinister tale designed to evoke irrational fear in my gut.

Yet maybe it was actually not far from the truth…

I was certain none of this had happened without a reason. The folk had accused her of witchcraft in the past due to her extensive knowledge—something unattainable for an average woman in the community. They cursed her, claiming the only reason she was still alive was because her husband happened to be the only apothecary in our region, making him impossible to dispose of. Mother never complained about these unpleasantries, but the hideous actions and comments did weaken her spiritual power, leaving her more susceptible to demonic influences. Eventually, these unfavorable encounters made her unable to protect herself.

My father was a kind-hearted yet naïve soul who did his best to help others, the poor and the rich alike, and never asked for much in return. Alas, his health deteriorated extensively after the gruesome event. On many occasions I would find him sitting in the dark corner of our herb-filled hut, staring at the spider weaving its cobweb with meticulous precision across the dirty windowpane.

"Dear father," I cried, hopelessness eating my heart, "please tell me what is the matter, for I fear a dark power has taken hold of your senses…"

"Don't worry about me, Mira, my lovely daughter. Fear not, and before you realize it, everything will be like in the old days," he replied with a deep sadness in his voice.

"But father, I can see in your countenance the greatest misery a man can endure. It is my duty to take care of you in your old age," I grabbed his pale hand, trying to talk some sense into him.

“Please, do not quarrel with me. Not even two weeks have passed since your mother’s departure. I know how hard this is for you, so do not trouble my melancholic state.”

I let him be. There was no use in me trying to convince him to let go of his grief.

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Time passed. I wouldn’t have noticed it if not for the naked trees, leaning gently and peeking curiously through my small window. Stripped of their colorful attire, they stood there motionless, filled with an unexplainable sorrow. The darkened leaves, once rich and full of themselves, had rustled proudly in the warm summer air or served as a tranquil inn for the small birds and other visiting animals. Now they lay on the cold, muddy earth, the time of their greatness long gone and forgotten.

The lonely trees reminded me of myself. I, too, was left to forces beyond my control. Solitude, however, had never troubled me much. It was as familiar to me as any other daily task, for I had no siblings or even distant cousins to turn to. My father was the only relative I had, but after my mother died, he changed so profoundly that I felt obliged to care for him. I had no one left to look up to.

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The chilly wind coming through the open door of the hut woke me. I had fallen asleep at the table where I studied various medical infusions.
“Dear father, could you please close the door? The wind will steal the precious heat, and we cannot afford that.”
Silence.
“Father?” I lifted my head at once and looked around our small chamber. He was gone.
I glanced out the window. Twilight was approaching. The trees seemed to gape in fear at whatever was unfolding outside. I rose to my feet, rushed to the entrance, and stopped abruptly when I saw my father standing before it, quivering and weeping like an infant.
“Father, what happened? Why are you here, in the cold?”
“Mira, your mother returned!” he cried. “My dear wife, she is here! She is truly here—”
His voice swelled with such fierce passion that I feared he might tear his own heart apart.
“Nonsense!” I exclaimed. “Mother is dead! It is over. Accept it, for Nature’s sake!”
He pointed toward the silhouette standing in the distance before us. I glared at it with rising fury; in that instant, my senses were blinded by the wrath swelling within me. It began advancing toward us.

Step by step.

At last, the mysterious figure stopped before my poor father and me. It neither moved nor spoke. It was dressed in a long dark cape, a modest linen dress, and a white scarf that covered most of its head. At first one might have thought it human, most likely an

old woman, but the way it walked on its fragile legs, wobbling from side to side, made it certain that this creature was not in the least akin to our kind.

The creature removed the scarf, and before our eyes stood a bizarre being whose bird-like face gleamed faintly in the last rays of sun sinking behind the horizon. I recognized it at once. I had read about such beings but had never seen one with my own eyes. Instead of a mouth, it had a beak of some sort. But most striking of all were the creature's horns—long and powerful, resembling those of a devil.

"You are…" I began, hesitation tightening my voice. "Kikimora," the creature said slowly, smiling mischievously. "Mira," my father announced, "please, meet your mother."



Wiktoria Szamotulska