

The Ghost Rider

by Doruntina Vinca

They call me Jurendine, or the Ghost Rider. Before I was born, my mother had given birth to nine boys, my nine brothers, who resembled each other like nesting dolls: from the tallest to the shortest. “Is it a boy or a girl?” some neighbour asked. “It’s a baby! A healthy baby!” my grandmother cheered, as she showed me around to the guests while I slept soundly, wrapped in the softest wool blanket she had made for me. She placed my tiny body on top of a round wooden table where my aunts were sitting, waiting to dip tree branches in rose water and throw blessings at me. Then my mother made an announcement: I was to be called Jurendine.

This was my birth name. The Ghost Rider part came later.

I grew up in a noisy and busy household. My family owned a big horse farm, breeding race horses, lovely horses. Many curious eyes, young and old, from nearby villages and from distant lands, visited our barn. My brothers were excellent riders and would race one another to entertain us.

When they raced, a massive sea of dust rose from the ground, leaving visitors in awe.

When I turned twelve and my youngest brother Konstantin turned thirteen, we were gifted our own horses. I was given Mara, a young, soft-hearted, brown-haired beauty with the shiniest of coats. Oh, how I loved her! Her eyes were deep and dark, like two pieces of sparkling coal. Konstantin got Balo, a speedy horse with a coarse white mane. We went on a ride immediately that day, and every day after that. We'd race each other through the fields and rest under the shades of the walnut trees. These were the happiest days of our lives.

As summers went by, and winters came around, my older brothers left home one by one. They were eager to see and explore the world. Konstantin and I, the youngest of the lot, we stayed home. With them gone, there was more work for us. We'd ride Mara and Balo to the village square to buy honey and olive oil; we were sent to harvest the cornfield, unearth potatoes and fetch fresh water from the well. We'd clean the horse barn every day and help our aunts in the kitchen.

But, one cold and dreadful autumn, our horses, including Mara and Balo, fell gravely ill. Our aunts boiled many kinds of herbs and roots to help them heal. Konstantin and I spent all day at the barn, trying to feed them and make them drink the medicine.

"It's the evil eye! Our poor horses! We should have never let any strangers look at them," my mother cried.

"Burst the evil eye! Burst the evil eye!" my aunts said, following my mother to the kitchen. They pulled their cheeks in desperation and threw salt into the kitchen fire.

Konstantin and I followed them, praying for some miracle. Nothing seemed to help.

The oldest of my aunts, who was nearly blind, said the salt was too weak. Our only hope was to find the Mother of the Hearth, who lived in the foggy forest, and get some raw salt from her.

“I can go. I will leave right this moment,” said Konstantin at once.

“But it will not work, my boy,” my old aunt said. “This Mother is deaf to a man’s voice. It has to be you, Jurendine,” she said with her sleepy eyes.

All the eyes in the kitchen turned to me.

“But you must be quick,” she said calmly. “No soul other than the Mother of the Hearth can withstand the fog in the forest for too long.”

The next morning, I dressed in my thickest wool clothes and my leather boots and tied my hair in a tight braid under my hooded cape. My aunts had packed a small sack with some dry fruits and nuts and a flask of honey liquor for me to drink if my throat were to itch from the fog. Before I left, I went to the barn one last time to see Mara. She lifted her head up and uttered a gentle whinny.

“We will ride again together. Soon. I promise. I give you my oath,” I whispered in her ear.

I hugged everyone and left on foot immediately. It was the last day of October. A thin layer of frost had covered everything. I followed the narrow trail into the forest and kept my eyes alert for, what my aunts called, the eye of the fog. Tree branches spread over my head like frozen limbs, and the smell of musty earth seeped into the moist air. The only light was the whiteness of the fog. My wool cape felt heavier as I kept walking into the woods. Suddenly, a noise came. Was it a bird? A bear? What if it was one of those evil shadows that roam in the darkness? I quickly found a stout tree trunk and rested my back against it, trying to hide. My heart started beating fast, and my hands were sweaty. The sound was nearing. I closed my eyes and held my breath. When I opened my

eyes again, I could have sworn that some blood-thirsty lugat had emerged from the shadows to devour me, but there she was: Mara, my horse, was right there in front of me. I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Mara! What are you doing here?" I shrieked.

Her gaze seemed distant, but she smelled sweet and earthy like mushrooms. She lowered her neck, and I jumped on her back. I bent over and held her tightly as she galloped faster and faster, through the foggy forest. The fog made me dizzy, and I lost track of time. It was all so blurry and hasty, but suddenly, I felt my body tossed to the ground, right in front of a wooden house. I got up, light-headed, and then remembered to drink some of the honey liquor. I gathered my senses and knocked on the door.

"Come in! It's open, it's always open," I heard a soft voice coming from the inside.

I pushed the door open. I'm not even sure what I was expecting, but I felt relieved to see an ordinary room, with a bed on the right side and a kitchen on the left. There, in the middle of the room, was an old lady sitting on a stool, tending to the fireplace with a pair of tongs. She had long grey hair tied in two thin braids and a white cotton scarf around her shoulders.

"Come in, my child," she said gently. "Come sit close to the fire—you must be freezing."

"Are you the Mother of the Hearth?" I asked as I sat down across from her.

"Well, no, I am not the Mother of the Hearth. I am just the mother of this hearth," she replied. "Now tell me, my child, what is it that you need?"

I quickly told her how our horses became sick and how my aunts sent me to the forest to ask for some strong salt. She listened deeply.

When I was done, she got up, opened her healing cabinet and gave me a big chunk of rock salt.

“This should be enough. Tell your aunts to burn some of it in the kitchen. Save the rest for another time. Now leave before the night falls.”

I thanked her dearly and left. It took me a while to find Mara when I went outside. I could barely see her through the fog. I jumped on her back, and off we went on our fastest ride.

The night had just fallen over our house when we arrived. The full moon peeked through the heavy clouds. I left Mara in front of the barn and ran breathlessly towards home, straight into the kitchen.

Everyone was there. My mother jumped to her feet, looking pale.

“Jurendine! We thought you were gone forever!” she cried. “I thought I lost my only daughter.”

“But I came home as fast as I could. Look, the salt!” I said and turned to my aunts.

“You were gone for seven days and seven nights,” Konstantin said. “We were scared out of our minds. Are you okay? What took you so long?”

“Seven days? And nights?” I asked. “That’s impossible. I was with Mara all along. She found me in the forest and took me to the Mother of the Hearth. We rode back as fast as we could.”

A long silence followed. They looked at one another, distressed and in disbelief.

“But Mara... Mara died the day you left,” Konstantin said. “It’s impossible. I buried her behind the barn, where the mushrooms grow. Come and see for yourself.”

My knees grew weak, and darkness fell all around and inside me. I must have fainted, for when I woke up, I was laying in my bed. One of my aunts was patting my head with a piece of cloth soaked in cold water.



I slept for many days and kept fitfully dreaming of that long ride home. I could hear Balo and the other horses in the paddock, so I knew the salt had done its magic. When spring came around, people no longer called me Jurendine. They called me the Ghost Rider.