

Ladislav Fuks



Of Mice and Mooshaber

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LIMO

Kiosk





I

The Land of the Elves, which was the name of the local hostelry, had been hired out for the afternoon. The window into the courtyard was wide open and in the courtyard itself a tethered horse was at work on a sack of oats. A wedding party was sitting in the saloon.

They were seated at a table covered in a white cloth and decorated with flowers, candles, glasses and a dish full of fancy cakes or kolaches. At the head of the table, under a portrait of the sovereign, the Dowager Princess Augusta, and the Prime Minister, Albinus Rappelschlund, sat a man with big hands that had seen a lot of toil. He was dressed in black with a white shirt made of tow-cloth and was turning this way and that in a clumsy fashion, throwing out nods and smiles in all directions and even through the window towards the horse. This was the bridegroom. Next to him sat someone smaller and fatter, a blonde with a face that was puffy from laughing at nothing. A laurel wreath lay on the table in front of her, while she squirmed and swaggered and put on airs and rolled her eyes this way and that. This was the bride. Next to the happy couple sat a friend of the blonde called Rona, a girl of twenty who had collapsed in giggles, and the two witnesses, swarthy and strange.

The daily papers hung on the wall alongside the wedding table, full of assorted vignettes and titbits about Prime

Minister Albinus Rappelschlund, because today was his name-day. A few side tables had been placed beneath the newspapers.

At the bottom end of the table sat a young man with a dark chequered jacket and a white silk shirt. Delicate, ill at ease and taciturn, this was Lothar Baar. A second young man sat next to him, also well dressed and even more taciturn and ill at ease. This was his classmate from school, Rolsberg. And then right at the end of the table sat an elderly lady in a black and gold scarf, black waistless jacket with sleeves and a long black shiny skirt. She had shoes without heels on her feet and a smallish bag in her lap. This was Natalia Mooshaber.

‘My daughter talks about you all the time’, said Mrs Mooshaber to Lothar Baar at the bottom end of the table. The remnant of wine she’d been given – her glass had been almost empty from the start – was about enough to moisten her lips. ‘She is always talking about the tape she sold you in the shop.’

‘The tape recorder,’ nodded the young man with an embarrassed look towards the head of the table.

‘Just so,’ nodded Mrs Mooshaber, ‘surely you live in a palace somewhere, Mr Baar.’

‘I have private lodgings’, said the young man as he threw another look of embarrassment at the head of the table, ‘my friend Rolsberg and I are staying with a rich merchant who has a villa here.’

‘Do you also take meals with this merchant?’ asked Mrs Mooshaber, while she leaned forward in order to get a view of Rolsberg’s face.

‘Just breakfast,’ said Lothar Baar. ‘The rest of the time we eat in the student canteen.’

‘And you eat well there,’ agreed Mrs Mooshaber, ‘to be sure there’ll be ham and Italian salad, not to mention wine and lemonade. I would like to invite you to our own home, gentlemen, but we are just simple poor folk. We don’t live in a villa but in a run-down house. Why, even now there are masons around repairing the shared balcony...and as for food, we eat oatmeal...’ Mrs Mooshaber glanced through the window into the courtyard where the horse had its sack of oats, ‘...cornmeal too. Now and again I do a bit of baking. I bake, Mr Baar, it’s something I like. That dish of kolaches,’ Mrs Mooshaber pointed discreetly at the table, ‘that was all my own work. For my daughter’s wedding, you see. No one has taken any yet, but wait and see what happens after they’ve eaten the meal. In a little while...’ Mrs Mooshaber suddenly leaned forward and whispered to Lothar Baar, ‘...in a little while the banquet will arrive. The banquet, Mr Baar. They ordered ham and Italian salad,’ she repeated in a whisper, ‘wine and lemonade too. And ice cream, but that comes at the end. Oh yes,’ said Mrs Mooshaber laughing, ‘I like to bake. But other than that, Mr Baar, it’s bread for the likes of us.’

The bride at the head of the table, the plump and simple-minded blonde, was meanwhile laughing and fooling around with Rona and the witnesses. Her new husband beside her, the big hands that had seen much toil resting on the tablecloth, was spinning round, nodding and saying ‘yes’ to everything. When there was nowhere else to spin, he span to face the horse through the window.

‘So you’ll be keeping your own name’, said one of the witnesses to the wedding party, a swarthy fellow with black hair and a low forehead. The plump and simple-minded blonde laughed and gave a bridal nod.

‘He’ll still be a Laibach.’ She gave him a shove and he gave a nod. ‘I’ll be whatever I’m called already. Food’s on its way now.’

‘You see, Mrs Baar,’ Mrs Mooshaber addressed both Lothar Baar and Rolsberg, ‘there’ll be food in a moment. Ham, salad, lemonade, they’ve got it all at the front behind the bar counter. Now there’s something I must tell you, gentlemen,’ and once again she leaned forward for a view of Rolsberg’s face, ‘when I went to school, which will be sixty years back from where we are now, I had a friend called Maria. She was so tiny and frail, the poor crooked thing, but she was bright and kind and the children loved her. She came from a rich family, her father was a farm steward and he had this watch, made from gold it was. Anyway she got married and took her husband’s name but then he died shortly afterwards and she became a housekeeper for a rich family. And she was the housekeeper in this family for two generations. I haven’t set eyes on her in fifty years. Fifty years,’ she nodded as she glanced over the wedding party at the portrait of the sovereign, the Dowager Princess Augusta, hanging on the wall with that of Prime Minister Albinus Rappelschlund, whose name-day it was, ‘fifty years. Did you know, Mr Baar, that I always wanted to be a housekeeper myself, just like my friend Maria? I can set a table and make it fancy. See here...’ she pointed at the white table laid out with candles, posies, wine and kolaches, ‘I could have managed this table too, only they went and ordered everything from the publican.’

‘And you will also be living apart.’ The voice that could now be heard at the head of the table belonged to the second witness, another swarthy fellow with black hair and a

low forehead. The blonde bride gave another foolish laugh and said:

‘He will carry on renting from that Klaudinger woman and I’ll be where I am now. What’s funny about that, eh?’ She gave the bridegroom another nudge and he just responded with a nod and a smile.

‘He’s a nice hard-working fellow,’ Mrs Mooshaber said to Lothar Baar in a quiet voice, ‘well brought up. He’s a mason. He was never in any school for troublemakers or house of correction and he’d do anything for our Nabule. He said that she can have everything he earns. He’ll just keep a bit back for his smokes. She’ll live with me and he’ll have lodgings with Miss Klaudinger, but only at the start, they’re saving up for a flat in the Elizabethan district. I would so like to invite you to our place, gentlemen,’ Mrs Mooshaber repeated, ‘but we are just poor people living in a run-down house with masons repairing the common balcony. All their tools are lying in the passage right in front of my flat. But let me finish telling you about this housekeeper. That’s what I’d have liked to be, just like my friend Maria. I always wanted to have one of those kiosks. You know, those covered stalls where I could sell ham, salad, even lemonade perhaps, but there again....’ Mrs Mooshaber gestured with her hand and glanced up at the newspapers hanging from the wall, ‘I’d rather not tell you about that now. I’d rather tell you what I’m actually doing. I’m working at a cemetery. I water the plants and tend the graves. And I’m attached to the Mother and Child Support Service.’ Mrs Mooshaber suddenly reached into the bag on her lap and took out a card with her name on it.

‘Miss said something about your dealings with the Welfare,’ confirmed Lothar Baar, taking a hesitant peek at the

card which Mrs Mooshaber tucked away again. He cast a somehow bitter glance at the blonde at the head of the table and continued: 'Actually she's a miss no longer but more like a missus.'

Then he spent a while looking at the portraits towering over the wedding party, at the old princess and Prime Minister Albinus Rappelschlund, whose name-day it was, before saying:

'So, Mrs Mooshaber, you have practical experience of children.'

'Indeed I do have practical experience of children,' agreed Mrs Mooshaber, while she took a peek at the head of the table and was going to elaborate further when Rona, the friend of the blonde bride, piped up: 'Where is Wezr, Nabule? Why isn't he here? Where could he have got to, that he was unable to attend his own sister's wedding?' And the blonde bride laughed until the horse behind the window to the courtyard turned round. Then she nodded in the direction of Mrs Mooshaber and said:

'Let her tell you where he is. Let her tell you' (this came with a shake of the head) 'where Wezr is, why he's not here. Why he's not at his sister's wedding.' Mrs Mooshaber gave a start and her eyes opened wide as she blurted out:

'No, my son Wezr is not here, he's elsewhere. He's got work to do...'

The guests at the head of the table squealed with laughter.

'Her son Wezr is not here,' they shouted, 'he's elsewhere. He's got work to do...'

'They want to have a good time,' said Mrs Mooshaber in an apologetic voice to Lothar Baar and Rolsberg, 'you know what it's like with weddings, gentlemen.' Then she went on:

‘Well then, besides what I do for Mother and Child Support, which is unpaid, I work in the cemetery. The one in the centre in Anna Maria the Blessed Square. I water the plants and tend the graves. But you know, gentlemen,’ she went on, once again leaning forward a little in order to catch sight of Rolsberg’s face, ‘I look after something else too. I mean the fact that our building’s caretaker keeps a banner in my flat. A real banner, even two... well, one’s a spare as they say. Two banners, but you know, gentlemen ...’ Mrs Mooshaber was looking at the white tablecloth, ‘they’re black. Black, something you hang from the house when someone dies. I hang the banner from a long pole which I keep in a corridor behind the wardrobe. I have a little pension from my husband, who worked as a coachman for a brewery. I had my children late. There’s Nabule, the bride here, and Wezr, who’s not here because he’s got his work to do. I had them late, after I was forty...’

At this moment a waiter entered the saloon and went up to have a word with Nabule. She gave the bridegroom a nudge and stood up.

‘The feast is here,’ said Mrs Mooshaber in a quiet voice to Lothar Baar and Rolsberg, ‘the feast of ham and salad, which has all been ordered, lemonade too. And once they’ve eaten their fill, they will take my kolaches. Did you know that I spent a whole day baking them for my daughter’s wedding? I added vanilla, almonds and raisins, they’ll taste a treat. When the children were small, Mr Baar, I mean our Wezr, who’s not here, and Nabule the bride, I did what I could for them. I even sang them a lullaby. Just look, Mr Baar,’ Mrs Mooshaber suddenly glanced up, ‘the waiter’s bringing it already. Look, real ham, salad, and such a lot of

it, wine and lemonade, oh my...' Mrs Mooshaber looked at the plates which the waiter was setting down on the unused side tables beneath the newspapers, 'I've only eaten ham and salad once in my life – and that goes for lemonade as well. You know...' She leaned over towards Lothar Baar and whispered. 'It was at my own wedding. And fifty years have gone by since then...'

'It's like being in the Metropol!' yelled Rona with a glance at the ham and salad, 'we could be in the Ritz! And oh crikey! Look at those fancy pastries...'

'Pastries,' spluttered Nabule, her face at this moment looking even more bloated and banal, 'pastries. Ask her who did the baking, she'll spout it all out. Just start her off...' she nodded towards the lower part of the table.

'Yes, I baked them' said Mrs Mooshaber from the other end of the table, 'My daughter's quite right. I spent the whole day baking them for my daughter's wedding. I added vanilla, almonds and raisins, they'll taste a treat. But of course they're better saved for after you've eaten,' she gave a sudden smile, 'after all this salad and ham or we'll be too full up for the main course.' I like baking,' she said with a smile, 'but only now and again. But when dear Rona gets married,' she smiled again, 'I'll bake for her too.'

'Oh isn't she a one for baking,' shrieked Nabule, 'did you hear all that? When little Rona ties the knot she'll be baking pastries for her too. And she cares for the children and she tidies the tombs,' she yelled. 'And what's more, she could offer us a song,' shrieked Nabule.

The place went quiet for a moment and then gales of laughter broke out again.

'A song?' laughed one of the witnesses.

‘She can sing?’ laughed the other.

‘Yes, she’s a hoot’ screamed Nabule.

‘So make her sing,’ shrieked Rona, ‘make her sing...’ And in the twinkling of an eye they had gone quiet and turned to face the end of the table.

Mrs Mooshaber clasped hold of the bag in her lap and spoke in an apologetic and hesitant manner:

‘No, I don’t know how to. I only used to sing when the children were little. A lullaby. Of course I could sing that if you like, just for fun. After all this is a wedding and we’re supposed to be having fun, aren’t we?’ She smiled and everyone gave way to spluttering laughter and Nabule did one of her twirls and then stood up and bounced over to the tables below the newspapers where the plates of ham and salad were laid out.

While she started doing the rounds with the plates of ham and salad, setting them down in front of the guests, Mrs Mooshaber sat up a little straighter at her end of the table and started singing:

*Now it’s good evening and now it’s good night
Now by the power of angelic might*

Everyone was in stitches, laughing, shouting and shrieking. Only the bridegroom sat nodding and smiling, and only Lothar Baar was bewildered and subdued, alongside his even more subdued and bewildered friend Rolsberg, while Nabule went on doing the rounds with the plates of ham and salad and setting them down in front of the guests. And Mrs Mooshaber looked at the guests while she sang:

*Tomorrow in the morning-time
You will once more rise and shine*

She was so determined that the song was as good as she was able to make it, that she didn't even notice that Nabule had put plates of salad and ham in front of everyone else while there wasn't so much as a morsel on the table in front of her. Lothar Baar and Roslberg, on the other hand, did notice and they looked at the blonde in astonishment. But she just exploded in cackles and then all of a sudden burst in unexpectedly on her mother's song.

'Cut it out,' she broke in, 'that's enough howling from you. Shut your gob. Tuck in then,' she said to the guests before going back over to her mother and saying:

'That's enough of the wailing woman. Now get out.'

Lothar Baar and Rolsberg were struck dumb. So was Mrs Mooshaber. But before Lothar Baar and Rolsberg knew what was happening, and before Mrs Mooshaber could recover her composure, with a huge cackle Nabule had reached over to the plate of kolaches, got one into her claws and had hurled it at the ceiling. The kolache rebounded from the ceiling like a ball, fell amongst the flowers and candles on the table and leaked cream cheese and even its raisin topping onto the tablecloth. And then, to the accompaniment of another huge cackle, Nabule took the whole plate in her claws, flounced over to the window and hurled the plate of kolaches at the horse. Then she seized hold of some wine and yelled at the lower end of the table:

'Aren't you gone yet, for Christ's sake? Aren't you off to water your corpses or cosset those mothers and children? Scram!'

Mrs Mooshaber, who up to this point had been sitting stock-still staring at the tablecloth, now showed the first signs of coming to life. The bag shaking in her hand, she stood up and slowly made her way to the door. She left the room looking like an old and withered tree. The pub dissolved into shrieks and yells.

‘She’s off,’ they shouted, ‘she’s going to water the graves.’

‘She’s leaving,’ they screeched, ‘to care for her children.’

‘And make sure to stop at Wezr’s,’ laughed Nabule, ‘the one who’s got work to do.’

‘Tell him to get himself here, Mrs Mooshaber,’ laughed Rona, ‘his work has taken him long enough.’

Lothar Baar and Rolsberg came to life only when Mrs Mooshaber had gone through the door into the bar. They glanced up at all the people chuckling and shouting at the top of the table and looked out of the window at the horse wolfing down the kolaches in the courtyard, and then the two of them jumped up from their chairs.

‘Where do you think you’re off to?’ shrieked Nabule, ‘it’s not curtains yet. The party’s just beginning!’ But Lothar Baar and Rolsberg were already running through the door from the saloon into the bar and from there into the street, only to find the street outside the pub deserted. Of Mrs Mooshaber there wasn’t a trace. They rushed round the nearest corner, but there was still no trace of Mrs Mooshaber. They went back to the bar, but the bartender told them that the lady had definitely left. Back they ran into the street, but there wasn’t a soul to be seen there. There was nothing but a single withered old tree on the pavement opposite.

Mrs Mooshaber had been hiding behind the door of the next house. Only long after Lothar Baar and his friend Rols-

berg had finally departed in a shocked and disturbed state, did she herself venture out and hurry home along the street.

11

It was a beautiful September afternoon as she hurried through street after street, past banners hanging from the public buildings in honour of Prime Minister Albinus Rap-pelschlund's name-day, until at last she reached the square named in his honour. The statue here had been hung with flowers and ribbons of various kinds, but the people going by didn't so much as glance at it, each one preferring to look at the pigeons swarming over the ground. Along the main avenue she had to make her way past a crowd of people in front of the editorial offices of *Our Blooming Homeland*. There was always a crowd of people here discussing sport or breakthroughs in transplant surgery or the different types of seaweed and sky, or even swapping stamps. They were chatting on this occasion about the fact that despite the banners on the state buildings and the fully beribboned statue in the square, the windows of apartments were empty and deserted...indeed they were really empty and deserted, lacking not only people but a single flower, candle, glass of wine or piece of cake, such as were to be found on the name-day of the Sovereign Dowager Princess. And for once no one was so much as burning a stick of incense in their apartment. Mrs Mooshaber made her way past the crowd in front of *Our Blooming Homeland*. Then she passed the glass and laminate fronts of the street stalls, where people were eating ice cream, ham and salad or drinking lemonade.

Keeping her head down, she quickly passed them all and was glad when she found herself running over the white stripes of the asphalt crossing by the *Sunflower* department store. Then she hurried down three drab alleyways and was near to the place where she lived.

It was really an old and dilapidated two-storey house with a large cavernous passageway. This was where a pile of masons' tools was to be found and some bricks, a wheelbarrow and a tub of lime. A woman in her fifties wearing a short summer skirt stood in the passage. Another woman was beside her with a lad of perhaps twelve in ragged clothes. His eye was swollen and he was looking unhappily up and down the street.

'My God, Mrs Mooshaber,' called out the woman in the short summer skirt as Mrs Mooshaber went by, 'have you come back from the wedding already? Is it all done and dusted at *The Land of the Elks*?'

'It was *The Land of the Elves*' said Mrs Mooshaber as she shook her small black bag. *The Land of the Elves*. I had to leave, I wasn't feeling very well. I probably had too much to eat. You know what it's like with weddings. But what's up, Mrs Faber?' Mrs Mooshaber threw a quick glance at the other woman and pointed to the lad. 'What happened to him?'

'He's daft as a brush', said Mrs Faber coldly, without a muscle twitching in her face, 'fat-headed, dim-witted, always answering back, never able to stay still and not the slightest idea of what he's doing. Climbed the scaffolding used by the masons and could have put his own eye out. Brainless halfwit but bold as brass, so he's off to the eye specialist as punishment.'

‘Perhaps he doesn’t need to,’ said Mrs Mooshaber looking at the young lad standing there looking gormless, ‘I tell you what, Mrs Faber, I’ll make him an eyebath and then when it’s cooled you can use a piece of cloth to dab his eyes.’

‘I’m not dabbing his anything’, Mrs Faber replied in her cold voice, still without so much as a muscle twitching in her face, ‘he’s going to an eye doctor. Let the doctor cauterise it.’

‘Now then, Mrs Faber,’ laughed the woman with the short summer skirt, ‘Mrs Mooshaber knows a thing or two about these things. She works in the cemetery and for the Welfare, she’s got a card to prove it. Mrs Mooshaber, don’t you have a card? Anyway, Mrs Faber, you know that much yourself. And besides,’ the woman suddenly added, ‘it’s a national holiday. There won’t be any optho treating eyes today.’

‘There will be somewhere,’ said Mrs Faber while she examined the card which Mrs Mooshaber had taken out of her bag, ‘after all, my husband’s working as usual.’

‘Just stay where you are,’ said Mrs Mooshaber as she slipped the card back into her bag, ‘I’ll sort out his eye. Let him come and see me in the evening. And you can come too,’ she said to the woman in the short summer skirt who was the building’s caretaker. Then she gave a quick nod and hurried through the front passage.

Mrs Mooshaber’s flat gave directly onto this passage. The pile of mason’s tools, the bricks, the ‘barrow and the barrel of lime, stood right at her front door. By the door was a corridor containing a pantry and wardrobe, with a very long pole towering up from behind the latter. The corridor led to the kitchen, which had a frosted glass window facing back into the corridor where some stairs began and another door leading to a further room. This further room had a window