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# THE SNAKE IN THE VODKA BOTTLE

by Laima Vincė

“*Va*, I found it!” Antanina exclaimed, bursting through the kitchen door of her cottage, her deeply lined face flush from excitement and alcohol. Her red and white cotton head scarf slipped back from her forehead, revealing tousled strands of grayish-brown hair. Antanina triumphantly held up a Soviet-era glass vodka bottle with a thick black snake curled up inside. The snake was inert, languishing in amber-colored liquid. Antanina rolled the bottle around in her hands, peering at it over her large round, badly scratched, plastic glasses. She gave the bottle a playful shake and said, “See, the snake is perfectly preserved, like Lenin!”

Loreta, Liepa, and I rose from our taborets and pressed our noses close to the bottle. We clucked our tongues and nodded approvingly, gazing at the perfectly preserved Lenin-snake, asleep for eternity. We fought back any revulsion we might have felt out of politeness and respect for our host, an esteemed village verbal charmer, the subject of Loreta’s research.



“This snake has been inside this bottle for thirty years,” Antanina said. “This Christmas it will be twenty years since my husband died, and it was about ten years before he died that he caught the snake, so that makes it thirty years. But look, she hasn’t rotted, not a single one of her scales has come off. That is how powerful the *spiritas* (alcohol) is.”

The snake lay daintily inside the bottle, her slender head resting prettily in a curve over her back. Through the thick glass of the Soviet-era vodka bottle, indeed, I could make out the outlines of each of the snake’s greenish-blackish scales.

“I’ll tell you what,” Antanina said, peering over her large round glasses at Liepa, “I’ll pour some of this medicine into that glass Bobeline bottle we polished off and you can take it home with you. Apply a few drops every day to that rash on your face. It will help. There was this woman who came to me once. She was skinny, skinny, all dried up, only her bones were left. She said to me, ‘Give me some of your snake medicine.’ And so I did. I share with everyone. I poured some into a bottle and she took it away with her. The next time I saw her she was plump and well.”

“Thank you, Auntie,” Liepa said in her soft therapist’s voice. Liepa was a gentle soul, tall and willowy with brown ringlets falling gently onto her inquisitive face. She was a professor of indigenous religions at a college in Syracuse, New York. Liepa, who had grown up in Lithuania, but who had emigrated in her twenties to the United States to pursue her doctorate, was in Lithuania for the summer doing fieldwork for a scholarly article on Lithuanian indigenous healing practices.

That morning, as we were driving to the village of Milkuškos to visit with Antanina, Liepa told us about how for over a year now she had been struggling with a rash on her face. Liepa had an autoimmune system disease that potentially could become fatal. Her doctor in America had prescribed some very strong

medication that Liepa was afraid to take because it was known to cause liver damage. She secretly hoped that Antanina would be able to prescribe a folk remedy for her rash.

“This will help you, I’m sure,” Antanina said, shaking her head so firmly that her head scarf threatened to slip off altogether. Then she turned and slammed the bottle with the snake inside it down onto the kitchen table between us and poured us all another shot of her *uzpiltine*, a home brew flavored with cranberries she’d collected in the bogs behind her house. The word *uzpiltine* is derived from the verb *uzpilti*, meaning to pour something on top of something else; in this instance, a good brew of moonshine was poured over delicious bittersweet berries.

“Let’s drink to Liepa’s health,” I suggested.

All the women around the table nodded in agreement. We eagerly downed our shots, slamming our shot glasses onto the small wooden kitchen table among jars of pickles, teacups, tea, and our store-bought box of Paukškiu Pienas chocolates.

“*Zabaraet folklor!*” Loreta said and giggled, her face flush after her tenth shot. *Zabaraet folklor!* had become our inside joke that day. Loreta taught us that Russian phrase, which meant something like “long live folklore!” It came from an old Russian film in which a Russian ethnographer sets out to the Caucasus to do fieldwork on drinking toasts and gets plastered with the locals everywhere he goes. The villagers enthusiastically ply him with drinks, so that he soon loses track of his work. He resigns himself to accepting every shot offered to him by gleefully calling out, *Zabaraet folklor!* Loreta claimed that we had become like the ethnographer in the film, held hostage by the subject of our research, drinking with enthusiasm.

We had not initially set out that morning planning on getting drunk with the subject of Loreta's interview on oral folk healing practices, 76-year-old Antanina. We had professional goals. Loreta, an ethnographer and researcher at the Institute for Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, wanted to see if she could squeeze any more verbal charm formulas out of Antanina, with whom she'd formed a bond during her field work expedition earlier that summer. She also hoped she might get Antanina's stubbornly silent and secretive neighbor, a more traditional verbal charmer named Ada, to reveal her charms. I was taking the opportunity to do some primary research for my novel *This Is Not My Sky*. One of my characters is a Lithuanian village charmer who flees the approaching Red Army, eventually ending up in America, where her charms no longer work.

After Loreta had completed her recorded interview, we lingered, invited by Antanina to a delicious lunch of hot beetroot soup and boiled spareribs. As we talked and shared our stories, our professional goals fell away and the urgency to heal Liepa of her skin rash grew.

"Tell me, Auntie," Liepa continued, "how did you get that large snake through that skinny narrow bottle neck?"

"My husband was an engineer on the collective farm," Antanina said. "He was driving the tractor, doing some excavating on the job site when he dug up this large snake in the sand. He got down out of the tractor and picked up a branch with a fork in it," she said, spreading two fingers into a V to show us. "He took the fork and pushed down the snake's head and stunned it senseless. That afternoon, through the kitchen window, I saw him walking home with a big stick slung over his shoulder and a long thick snake hanging from it, swinging from side to side as he walked. He came into the kitchen and demanded, 'Bring me a *butilka!*' I rushed out to the shed and came back with an empty vodka bottle. He took the cork from the bottle and whittled slats into it, for air, you understand.

Then he took the snake off his stick and it came alive, slithering and writhing, shaking its stinger this way and that. He grabbed the head of the snake with his thick fingers and squeezed it just around its ears, holding it above the mouth of the bottle. The snake contracted and became skinny, skinny, skinny as my little finger. It slithered inside the bottle. Then my husband, capt, quickly popped on the cork.” Antanina demonstrated the motion by slapping her palm onto the top of the bottle.

“He took some *spiritas* and poured it into the bottle through the slats,” she continued, “just enough that the snake could keep her head above the *spiritas* and not drown in it. Then, the snake began knocking around the glass. Every time she hit against the glass, she’d release a white poison into the *spiritas*, turning it milky white. Whenever she calmed down, my husband would tap the bottle with his thumb and forefinger and she would jump and let out the poison again. It’s her poison that has the curative qualities, you see. The snake stayed alive in the *spiritas* for a long time and then eventually she died.” Antanina paused to refill our shot glasses. “Okay girls,” Antanina said, lifting her glass.

We had no choice but to follow. *Zabaraet folklor!*

We’d drifted away from interviewing earlier that morning when after a few hours of talk, Liepa asked if Antanina could say a charm to help heal the incurable rash on her face.

“My child,” Antatina said, “you can do it yourself. All you have to do is say a charm over your face cream! You make the sign of the cross over the face cream, you say the charm, you say your name, you make the sign of the cross again, and you put it on your face.”

“Really?” Liepa gasped. “It’s that simple?”

“It does make sense,” Loreta said, leaning over the coffee table towards me and Liepa. “If you charm butter to cure the Rose and you charm salt to charm away an evil wind, why not then charm face cream?”

A knock on the door had interrupted us. A shy, awkward, tall young woman wearing a headscarf over a knot of greasy hair poked her head inside.

“Come in, Rasa,” Antanina called out in a friendly voice.

The girl took one hesitant step, then quickly retreated when she saw us.

“Excuse me,” Antanina said and hurried away. She reached above her cupboard for a carton of cigarettes and handed it to the girl. The girl crammed her skinny arm into her pocket and yanked out a few grimy bills and handed them to Antanina. The two walked into the kitchen. From around the corner I saw Antanina pick up a magazine and open it up. She wrote something down on a sheet of paper inside the magazine, then folded the magazine, and slid it inside the cupboard.

“The border with Belarus is so close here,” Loreta whispered, “she must be getting cheap cigarettes illegally from over the border. They could practically toss them over the bushes to her.”

“Really?” I said, “A healer selling contraband cigarettes?”

“She has to live somehow,” Liepa said.

“She’s very generous though,” Loreta continued. “The last time I was here she gave me four charms. I’ve got them written down right here, in this notebook.” Loreta held up the notebook for us to see and then pulled it back possessively.

Antanina came rushing back into the room, “Girls, it’s one o’clock, make yourselves at home. I’m going out to milk my cow, Zibute.”

“Can I help you? Drive you to the pasture?” I asked.

“No!” Antanina exclaimed, waving her gnarly hand at me, “I’ll take my bicycle.”

Antanina was 76, but she was as spry as I was. With quick little steps on her short bow legs she trotted out of the room and we three women were left to our own devices: a dangerous thing, leaving three researchers unattended in a charmer’s house.

I watched through the white lace curtains as Antanina climbed onto her purple bicycle and pedaled off, a milk can dangling from the handlebar.

Loreta, Liepa, and I immediately made for the glassed-in porch where Antanina had left piles of her woven blankets set out on the windowsill. Others hung from a clothesline. We opened up the blankets, examined the patterns, the combinations of color, looking closely at the tightness of the weft. We established that not only could this magical woman heal, she was a weaver of the highest caliber.

By that time I was finding it hard to believe that I’d only met Loreta and Liepa this morning when I’d pulled into the parking lot of the Institute for Lithuanian Literature and Folklore in Antakalnis. At nine sharp, despite the heavy rain that was only just tapering off, Loreta and Liepa were already waiting for me in the parking lot.

 OLYMPUS DIGITAL CAMERA

“We are heading to the village of Milkuškos in the Švencionys region,” Loreta explained, as I pulled out of the parking lot onto Antakalnis Street.

Švencionys is a small provincial city 84 kilometers from Vilnius situated along the border with Belarus. It is surrounded by fir forests and farmsteads and fallow fields. Incorporated into Poland in the early twentieth century and for a brief period in 1939-1940 a part of Soviet Belarus, Švencionys was now Lithuanian, though just barely. The Švencionys region was made up of a mix of diverse multicultural villages inhabited by Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Russian-speaking people—few of whom could claim one of those nationalities exclusively. The average citizen of the region, regardless of their education, spoke, read, and wrote all four languages fluently.

During the reign of Vytautas the Great in the 15th century, the area served as Grand Duke Vytautas’s manor. Vytautas the Great personally settled Tatar craftsmen and tradesmen in Švencionys. He also established the town’s first church in 1414. By 1486 the town was officially named, but Švencionys only received town status in 1800. By 1812 the armies of Napoleon Bonaparte and Napoleon himself passed through the town and its surrounding thick pine forests. It is believed that Švencionys was named for a nearby lake called Šventa, which means holy in Lithuanian, marking Švencionys as a holy place on the Lithuanian folkloric map.

“The village was formerly called Samaduriškes,” Loreta continued as we turned off of Antakalnis Street and onto Nemenčinė Road. She waited for my reaction and when she didn’t get one she burst out laughing, doubling over in the front passenger seat. I was confused.

“The name literally means, ‘village of idiots,’” Loreta explained, catching my look. “It’s a name that’s typical of the combination of Lithuanian and Russian unique to this border region. In Russian ‘sama’ means ours and ‘dura’ means

idiot, then you tack on the Lithuanian ending for something belonging to something else, ‘iškes’, and the name literally becomes ‘village of idiots.’”

I had to admit it was funny. What village would name itself the village of idiots? No wonder they changed the name.

“The charmer we are going to visit heals absolutely everyone in that village,” Loreta explained. “She is very active in the healing community.”

It was already too late when I noticed the police officer parked alongside the road up ahead. I hadn’t noticed that the two-lane major road that into Švencionys had become the main street of the town with a lower speed limit. The police officer held up his traffic wand, then lowered it, indicating I must pull over.

“Oh,” Loreta gasped.

A tall, overweight, self-satisfied dirty blond police officer strolled over to our car.

“*Laba diena,*” I greeted him.

He did not return the greeting.

Liepa and Loreta smiled sweetly. Liepa poked her head into the front seat, “*Laba diena,*” she said cheerfully.

“Documents,” the police officer demanded, ignoring Liepa’s greeting.

I reached for my backpack, opened it up, and handed him my registration and inspection card.

“Insurance,” he barked.

I handed him the insurance.

“And your driver’s license.”

This is where things got tricky. He could nab me for driving with an American license. I’d never gotten around to getting a Lithuanian license, even after four years in the country.

“You were driving through a 50-kilometer zone. Do you know how fast you were going?” he asked in an accusatory tone. Before I could answer, he spat out, “Seventy-nine.”

“As soon as I realized it, I hit my brakes,” I said, “you saw me.”

Loreta’s face turned red as a beetroot. She gave me a look.

“You broke the law,” he said, “and now you are going to pay, dearly. I’m going to give you a very big fine, but it might not be so big for you since you are an American.”

That made me mad.

“Your fine will be just as painful to me as it would be to anyone else,” I said.

“Noooooo,” Loreta hissed at me, “you don’t understand Lithuanian police. Apologize, and tell him you won’t do it again.”

Liepa and Loreta both leaned in towards the window and repeated: “We’re so sorry, Sir, please forgive us, we won’t do it again.” Loreta and Liepa ran through their apologies, bending their heads in supplication like a pair of serfs before the lord of the manor.

The cop seemed confused. His face turned as red as Loreta's. He marched over to his car with my papers in hand and sat down inside.

“Laima, why are you challenging him?” Loreta asked.

In that moment we passed from the formal “*jus*” we had maintained all morning into the informal “*tu*.”

“Just wait and see,” I said.

The cop trotted back to our window. “Okay,” he said, wagging his finger in my face, “this time I’m warning you, but next time you’ll pay.”

“Thank you, Sir, thank you,” Loreta and Liepa bowed their heads. For a moment I was afraid they’d reach over me to kiss his meaty hands.

“Laima, your American driver’s license could have challenged him to teach you, the *Amerikonka*, a lesson.”

“Or not,” I said.

This is something I learned while interviewing prisoners of conscience. If challenged by a bully, if you hold your own, the bully will respect you. If you beg, the bully will feel that he can’t trust you, that you will betray him later. Then, he will want to destroy you.

“In these situations, it’s best just to apologize,” Liepa argued, “and beg for mercy.”

“Laima,” Loreta said, “if you keep acting that tough, sooner or later you are going to get yourself in trouble. That is not how things work for women in Lithuania.”

“You might be right, Liepa.” I was now so comfortable with “*tu*” that it had become unthinkable to me that half an hour ago these women had been “*jus*”. “But I just can’t back down when I’ve been challenged.”

“You’ll meet your end one day like that,” Loreta said.

It was probably safer to act demure, to flirt, to back down and be submissive and wiggle your way out of these situation. It certainly would make life easier. But there was something in my nature that never backed down when challenged and which never gave up.

We drove a block to the Maxima supermarket to buy gifts for the women we would visit today. We headed for the liquor section of the grocery store, two aisles crammed with bottles, looking for something exotic enough to impress, but not so exotic as to be beyond the palate of a country person. Loreta reached for a bottle of cranberry Bobeline and placed it in her blue plastic basket. Bobeline was cranberry hard liquor that was popular with the ladies in the provinces. The taste was bittersweet. The name also amused me. The root word “*boba*” meant older woman, as in tough older village woman. Literally, the drink was intended for our subjects.

We put our purchases in the trunk of my Honda and pulled out on Route 110 in the direction of Adutiškes. When we saw the sign for Milkuškos we pulled off the main road onto a gravel road. The gravel road led to a village that was literally footsteps from the Belorussian border. Wooden guard towers stood among the pines along the edge of the forest bordering the village. Loreta counted off the houses leading up to Antanina’s trim yellow wooden house. As I carefully negotiated the wet dirt road, up ahead we saw a young blond couple in their early twenties pushing a stroller. They were dressed in ragged clothing and had that downtrodden look of young people who couldn’t escape the village. There was a baby in the stroller and a tow-headed toddler trotting beside it. The

family stopped in front of Antanina's house. The woman headed down the driveway to the house and the toddler trotted off behind her.

“They must be her grandchildren,” I commented.

Loreta and Liepa collected their recording equipment, notebooks, and cameras, and we headed over to the house. As we turned into the driveway, the little boy we'd seen from the road, a tow-headed blue-eyed darling, came trotting down the driveway gleefully holding out a carton of cigarettes, eager to hand them over to his father, who was waiting at the top of the driveway with the baby in the stroller. We ran into the boy's mother in the doorway. We greeted her, but she averted her head

“*Laba diena, laba diena,*” Antanina shouted in delight when she saw us with Loreta. She came charging out of the little wooden cottage. “Come in, come in,” she said, leading us through her kitchen, through her bedroom, and into the living room, which was dominated by a large cylindrical metal *burzuika* that heated the entire house in the winter. It was an efficient method of heating: a pipe funneled the heat from the *burzuika* into the other room where special ceramic tiles lined an entire wall, holding in the heat and keeping that section of the house warm. On the opposite side of this wall that same heat was used to fuel the old-fashioned cooking stove in the kitchen. The stove could run on just a few logs all day long. All the sofas and chairs were covered with Antanina's woven bedspreads. In the corner, over the sofa, on the yellow-painted plaster walls, hung two sacred pictures: one of Jesus Christ with a large red heart in the center of his chest and one of a peasant girl with a lamb on her knees before the Virgin Mary with the Šiluva church in the background.



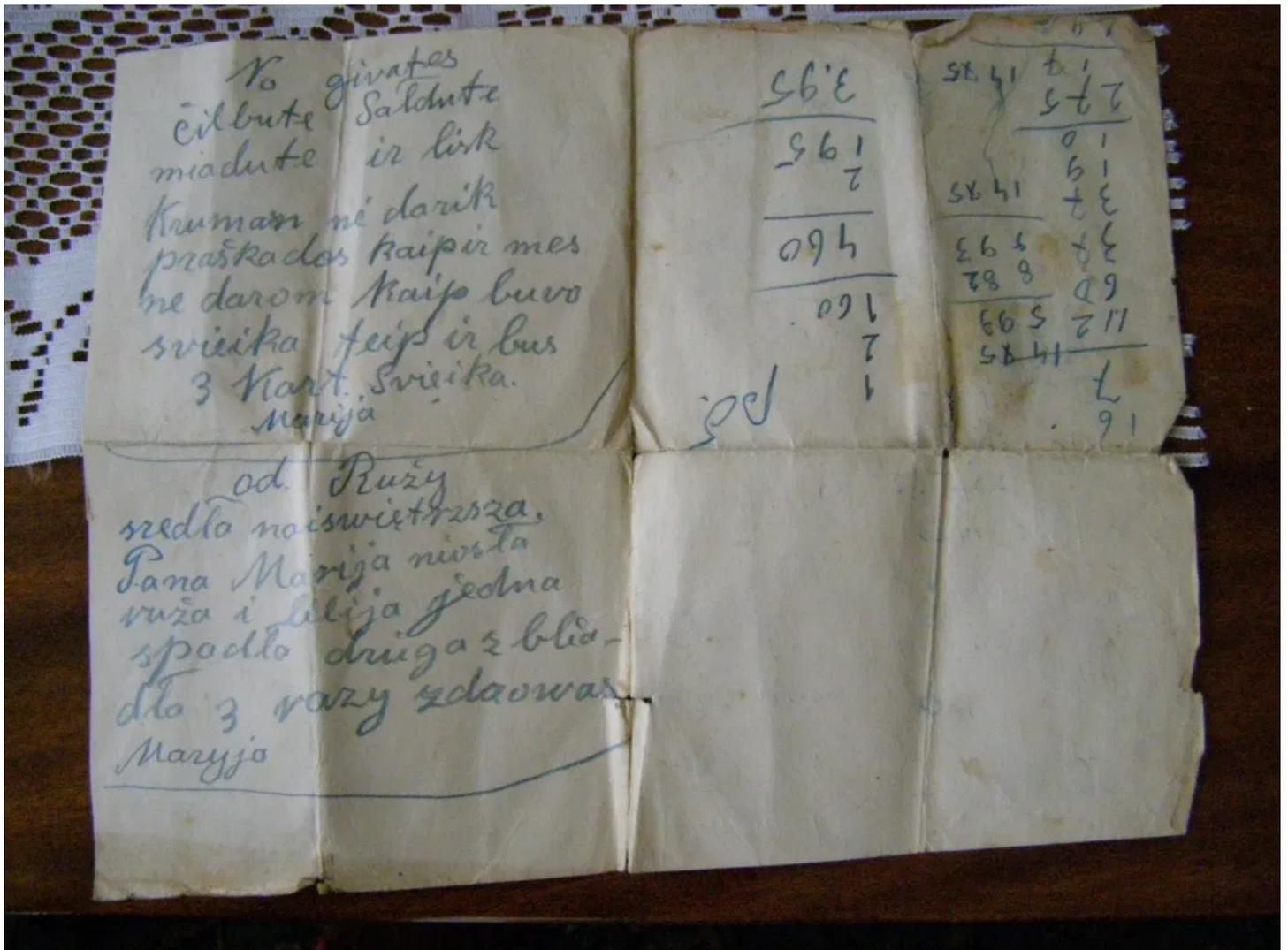
We sat down, Liepa and I on the sofa, Loreta on a chair with Antanina beside her. Loreta set up the recording equipment she had brought with her from the Institute for Literature and Folklore.

“If a person wants to learn the charms,” Antanina began, “then they absolutely should. God hears your words. Your words can help others. My neighbor keeps her words secret. But I don’t agree with that. I share my words with whoever asks me for them.”

“Isn’t it true that charms can only be passed to the firstborn or the last born?” I asked.

“That’s right,” Antanina nodded her head in agreement. “I am my mother’s firstborn. But no one taught me the charms directly. When my mother and my

father died, I was cleaning out their house. Among the books I found a sheet of paper. On that paper, written in Lithuanian but with Polish letters, I found four charms. My mother had written down those words for herself: a charm to cure the Rose; a charm to protect against evil wind; a charm to cure snakebite; and a charm for hernia. I deciphered those charms and I learned to heal with them. Indirectly, my mother passed her healing powers onto me after she was already dead.



“Do people pay you for the charms?” Liepa asked.

“There was one woman who I cured from the Rose. She saw me after church and said to me, ‘I bought you a box of chocolate, but I forgot to bring them with me today.’ I told her ‘I don’t need your candy. If a person needs help, I will help them.’”

“Who was your first patient?” I asked.

“A woman came with a horse with a wound on its leg. I put some lard on the horse’s leg and said the charm and the leg healed. Then my second case was healing a horse from the evil eye. A man was planting potatoes out in the wind. A woman passed by and said, ‘Oh, what a horse you have there, you don’t have to do anything for it. What a good horse.’ Immediately the horse went wild and became sick. They came to me with the horse. I healed that horse too. Later, I ran into them in Švencionys. They told me their horse was doing well. But their cow had gotten the evil eye and had stopped giving milk. I healed the cow and now it is giving milk. They wanted to give me money, but I told them absolutely not. I said, ‘If you like, you may offer the money to the church.’ That’s what they did.”

“Why don’t you take money for your healing?” I asked.

“What do you think I am? Some sort of a *burtininkė*, a magician, one of those types who takes money for fortune telling with cards! Oh no, never, that’s not me,” Antanina raised her voice in indignation. “If someone needs help, then I absolutely must help them. It would be wrong to take money for healing a person or an animal.”

I remembered the *wichasa wikan* or holy man from John Fire and Richard Erdoe’s oral history of the Lakota tradition, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*. According to *Lame Deer*, a true healer never took money for their healing. They could accept gifts, but should not expect them.

Antanina launched into a long involved story about how her daughter fell into the clutches of an *ekstrasenas*, a person who uses extrasensory perception to heal any ailment from cancer to heart attack.

“Immediately the woman demanded money,” Antanina said, “and I paid her. This woman had crosses hanging all over her mirrors to make it look as though she were so religious. Then she took my daughter on the highway to Kaunas. They stopped at that place alongside the highway where there is high electrical voltage. The woman made my daughter lie down under the electrical wiring. She flapped her arms around, muttering some sort of nonsense. She was dressed all in white. Then, she took my daughter to stay in a spa in Druskininkai. We would bring my daughter food there, but she just kept getting worse and worse.

We cooked *cepeliniai*, *šišlykai*, but she wouldn't eat. Then she stopped talking.

‘My child, for God's sake, let's go home,’ I said finally. ‘But the others will die without me,’ she said, meaning a man who was sick and weak and was staying in Druskininkai with her. So we took him back with us too. We brought that man to our house; heated up the sauna; treated him like a guest, like he was one of our own. Then we took him back to the fraud of a healer, but only when he asked us to. We brought him back, but we saw that he wasn't well, so we called the ambulance. The ambulance took the man to the hospital in Vilnius. Within two days he died. The doctors told us that the man had cancer.”

Antanina waved her hand in a gesture of disgust, “I heal all sorts of skin ailments, I heal from the evil wind, from snake bite,” she said, “but even I couldn't heal cancer.”

“What do you think about when you say a charm?” I asked.

“I just think about the holy words and about God helping the sick person and that's it.” Antanina said, glancing up at the two holy pictures on the wall in the corner.

“Have you passed on the charms to your daughters?” Liepa asked.

“Once I was in Vilnius visiting my granddaughter. She was crying out, ‘The evil wind has gotten me, Grandmother, I’m so sick.’ I went to her and I charmed away the wind. Then I sat down and I wrote down the holy words for her, so that she could take care of herself. The most important thing is to believe in the words and to believe in God. So no, my daughters have not learned the charms, but my granddaughter is learning.

“When my husband was in the hospital for his heart he called me and couldn’t even talk through the pain. He’d gone out into the hallway to have a cigarette and caught a chill. I was certain that the evil wind had cut him. I went to the hospital and saw the doctor. My husband’s tongue had curled back into his mouth and that was why he could not talk on the phone. I called a neighbor who knew good charms. She drove to Vilnius and said the charms. He got better. The doctor was amazed. I stayed a few days in his room. Whenever his tongue curled up, I’d say the woman’s words, and I healed him. The doctor just stood there with a gaping mouth and couldn’t do a thing for him. Without the charms my husband would have died then.”



Our conversation was interrupted. This time by a middle-aged Russian woman who walked into the living room. Antanina rushed out of the room together with the woman and quickly completed her cigarette transaction. Then she hurried back and picked up her story where she had left off.

“Our brother-in-law came to visit from Belarus. There was a party,” Antanina continued, “he went outside to smoke. All of a sudden, he began tearing at his clothes, shouting, ‘I feel bad, bad, bad.’ There was a neighbor at the party who knew exactly what had happened. She said immediately, ‘It’s the evil eye.’ She ran and got some salt and said the words and washed out his eyes. He was healed immediately and could rejoin the party.

“What is the evil eye?” I asked.

Antanina furled her brow. “A person can get very sick from the evil eye,” she said, “very sick. Someone sees a beautiful woman and then all of a sudden they feel very bad, very sick. It’s the evil eye. A cow might be giving good milk and then all of a sudden stops. Someone saw the cow and gave it the evil eye. It’s when a person sends evil thoughts in your direction.” Antanina leaned in towards me, “Now you’ll know how dangerous the evil eye is.”

“Can anyone give an evil eye?” I asked.

“Yes. It can happen very quickly,” Antanina said. “Someone sees a person and sends a bad thought and that person gets sick. The person who sends the evil eye is not necessarily a bad person. They might have bad emotions towards someone else for whatever reasons. It happens very quickly and that’s all.”

“What does it mean to be sick from the wind?” I asked.

“The wind blows and a person becomes paralyzed,” she answered.

“Is it like catching cold from the wind?”

“Absolutely not. It’s an evil wind.”

“And what about the Rose?”

“The leg is swollen and itches for example. The doctors can’t heal it. They say, ‘Go to the *bobutes*, meaning us old ladies.’ My neighbor was a brigade leader. He ended up in the Hospital for Infectious Diseases. It was the Rose. All the doctors said so. He was in the hospital a week and no one could help him. The neighbor said to me, ‘Go and take care of him.’ So I went. I bought some butter and I charmed it. I applied the butter to the rash and I told him not to go anywhere. I came back the next day and he stepped out into the hallway, healed.

It was all over. What's the point of staying in the hospital if there isn't anyone there who knows how to cure the Rose?"

"What about snake bite?" I asked.

"When we go out into the woods to collect cranberries, there are lots of snakes," Antanina said. "I tell my granddaughters, 'I'll say a charm and we won't see those parasites.' There's so many, you put down your basket and they crawl inside. Out in the fields, a snake will strike a cow in the leg and the cow will collapse. If you get a charmer to say a charm over the cow in time, then the cow will get better. Otherwise, it will be dead by nightfall."

Liepa said, "I'd like to learn the charms. I'm the eldest in my family." Then she added,

"You are very inclined to sharing your charms. You are generous."

"I don't know what I am," Antanina said. "But let me go check on my soup first. She stood up and rushed out of the room.

While she was gone, Loreta whispered to Liepa, "I'm sure she'll give the charms to you. But I'm not sure about you," she said to me.

"Right, I'm a middle child," I said. "I don't have any claim on the charms."

"In that case, just listen, but don't participate," Loreta said.

We heard a few drawers banging around in the next room. Antanina returned with a folded sheet of yellow paper in her hands. She set the paper down on the coffee table in front of Liepa. In blue pencil, in shaky large loopy handwriting, there were the charms, written out like poetry in short compact lines.

“Oh!” Liepa clapped her hands together in glee, “it’s the magical document! Auntie,” Liepa said in a voice full of reverence, “will you allow me to write the words down.”

“Of course,” Antanina said.

Liepa’s face lit up. She eagerly reached for her notebook. “Auntie,” she said, “your voice is so lovely. Could you please read the magical document out loud.”

Antanina reached for an identical pair of owl-eye shaped glasses and settled them on top of the glasses she was already wearing. Then she leaned in over the paper and read the words in Polish, “*Od poruszenie.*” That is for hernia.”

“Please continue,” Liepa breathed.

Antanina read slowly, speaking the cadences of the text in her dialect, a mixture of Polish, Belarusian and Lithuanian: *Zadu aš porušene ne aš/Panale Svenciausia ariotas apaštalai/3 kart s m.* (I charm for hernia/not I: The Holy Miss/angels the apostles). The “3 kart s m” was an abbreviation for: “Say the Hail Mary three times.” Most verbal charms end with similar instructions. The charms merged pre-Christian and Christian belief together into a single breath. In the end, it was all about intent, about the power of the mind and the spirit.

Antanina unfolded the brittle paper. On one side there were two more charms. On the other side, upside down, was a column of digits, obviously someone’s scribbled calculations. “This is for snakebite,” Antanina said, then read: *Zilbute Saldute Miadute ir lisk Kruman ne darik/Praškadōs kaip ir mes/Ne darom kaip buvo Sveika teip ir bus/3 Kart. Sveika Marija.*

“Oh my,” Liepa cried out, “listen to those cadences, hear the rhyme, this is pure poetry. How beautiful.”

Liepa leaned over the paper, copying the words into her notebook, gingerly pulling it towards her, handling the magical document with reverence. “Thank you so much for sharing this magical document, Auntie,” Liepa said in a breathy voice.

“Are there any charms for sickness of the spirit?” I asked.

“Oh my child,” Antanina said shaking her head, “I’ve never heard of any.”

That made me wonder whether sickness of the spirit wasn’t a modern phenomenon and not something that ailed people who kept themselves busy with the heavy toil of manual labor.

“Tell me, Auntie,” Liepa said, leaning in towards Antanina, “Any there any charms to ward off bad men?”

“No,” Antanina said in a serious tone, “None.”

Antanina stood up and walked over to the window and gazed outside.

“After independence they put up the border,” Antanina said, pointing at the guard tower in the bushes at the end of her backyard. “You see the guard post outside my window. Now it’s not so easy to travel over there to Belarus. You need a visa. It’s expensive. I can’t get the thread I use for my weaving. I’ve used it all up and they don’t sell it in Lithuania, only in Belarus. We can’t go to those villages where we used to dance and have friends. It’s only a kilometer away, but we can’t go. There’s a guard tower over there now and they watch us. It used to be that our friends and family from Belarus would come over with cigarettes and vodka—what’s a kilometer? When the Russians were here there was no border. We were Lithuanians and a stone’s throw away they were Belarusian, what of it?”

We all danced together. We lived together. Many of our neighbors speak Belarusian. We have no problems getting along.”

“The last time I was here,” Loreta said, “you told us that you had to go speak to the priest in Švencionys about your charming.”

“The neighbors were angry with me,” Antanina said. “They said I was committing a sin, that I was performing magic. My neighbors told me to go to confession. I went to talk to the priest about it. ‘It’s nothing,’ the priest said, ‘you are saying prayers, holy words.’ I told him I don’t cheat anyone or take anyone’s money. ‘So what, if they want to give you a donation, what of it?’ he told me. Those same neighbors come to me when they have a problem. They call it magic, but it’s not magic.”

Antanina turned away from the window abruptly. “My soup must be boiled by now,” she said and walked out of the room. From the kitchen she called out to us to come and join her.

But what was lunch without a little *spiritas* to aid the digestion? One digestive drink led to another and soon we were taking turns conjuring up curative toasts, shouting out “*zabaraet folklor!*” in chorus after each shot.

And that was how we came to be seated at this village charmer’s small wooden kitchen table with a snake in a vodka bottle standing between us.

“Let’s go visit my neighbor, Ada,” Antanina said. “She is sure to know some good charms for your rash.”

We stood from the table, put on our raincoats, and set off across the fields in the light rain. Loreta was thrilled. This was the charmer she could not get to budge

and reveal anything a few weeks ago when she'd been here conducting fieldwork.

However, Loreta's enthusiasm was crushed when we arrived in the garden outside Ada's house. The round-faced little old woman shouted from her potato patch that she has no songs to share with us and that she has work to do.

“But Auntie,” Liepa called out, “we are not here this time as researchers. We are here seeking your healing.”

The little round-faced woman marched up to us and peered at us curiously. I held out the bottle of Bobeline and a box of chocolates. She waved her hand dismissively and said “What need do I have for your gifts.”

In the end, Antanina wore her down, “*Eik jau eik*, just let them in. Talk to them. There's no harm in that,” she said.

Ada led us inside her house. Her house was considerably larger and better kept than Antanina's house. Ada's husband shuffled out of his bedroom to greet us and invited us into the living room.

“This one was born in America,” Antanina said, pointing at me, “and that one is a professor in America,” she said, pointing at Liepa.

“But my grandparents were from Lithuania,” I said.

“Where were they from?” the old man asked.

“My grandfather is from the Mažeikiai region,” I said.

“Oh, northern Samogitians,” the man said with respect, “those are tough people, the real thing. They never back down.”

Ada sat down and the consultation began.

“Auntie, do you think you can heal me?” Liepa asked.

Liepa came up close to Ada and showed her the rash on her face.

“Nothing the American doctors have prescribed has helped me,” Liepa said.

“Does it itch?” Ada asked, softening towards Liepa.

“Sometimes a little,” Liepa said.

“It looks like this rash is caused by an evil wind,” Ada said. “I will help you. What is your name?”

“Liepa, no, call me Liepaitē,” Liepa said, reverting to her diminutive, Little Linden Tree.

Ada gazed intently at Liepa, her small blue eyes piercing through Liepa’s gentle doe-like glance. Then she walked out of the room and disappeared into another room and closed the door. She remained there a long while.

The rest of us settled into chairs in the living room and made conversation. Antanina reminisced about her travels as a collective farm worker to Moscow and to Leningrad. She proudly told us about how she saw Lenin in his tomb and how he reminded her of her snake.

“Ugh, you keep one of those snakes in a vodka bottle,” the old man said. “You’re one of those people?”

Antanina nodded proudly.

“I had a friend who kept one. He forced me to drink from the bottle. It was disgusting.”

Ada returned with a plastic bag twisted shut. Inside the bag there was a pinch of salt.

“I’ve said the charm,” Ada said, “now you must mix the salt with water and apply some to your face every day. Don’t go outside or anywhere after you’ve applied the salt. Go straight to bed.”

We stood to leave. It was already late afternoon.

“Will you stay longer if I heat up the sauna,” Antanina asked.

Liepa’s face lit up. Her dissertation had been on the spiritual curative qualities of the sauna.

“I would love to go in the sauna,” Liepa said.

“I wouldn’t mind,” I said, gazing out at the cold rain pattering outside the window, “If Loreta and Liepa agree.”

I was calculating in my head how long it would take for me to sober up sufficiently that I could safely make the drive back to Vilnius. The sauna would help me sweat the alcohol out of my system.

“I’d rather not,” Loreta said, “but you two go ahead.”

“Very well then,” Antanina said. “It will take an hour and a half for the sauna to heat up. In the meantime, we can enjoy a few more drinks.”

We walked to the sauna, a wooden shack beside Antanina's house. Antanina and I went to the woodshed to gather armfuls of firewood. I was happy for the physical work. Since I'd left my house on Peaks Island a few years ago, I'd not stoked a wood stove. I missed the work.

Antanina tried to treat me like a guest, saying, "No, no, no, I'll do it myself."

I insisted and gathered the wood from the woodpile. We shoved the logs inside the stove, lit them. I stacked more logs close by to dry them out. Antanina filled the metal tub built onto the side of the country stove with water. Attached to the metal tub and the masonry stove was a large metal basket filled with stones. Once the stove grew hot enough, it boiled the water, which warmed the stones. Then, you had to ladle hot water over the stones to create the steam that had curative properties. Once the fire was going, we returned to Antanina's kitchen to wait out the hour and a half before the sauna would be warm enough to bathe in. Once again and despite ourselves, we had a taste of her cranberry *uzpiltine*.

Loreta began narrating the story of the police officer who had stopped us on the main road of Švencionys.

"Was he short and skinny or tall and fat?" Antanina asked.

"Tall and fat," Loreta answered.

"Ai!" she shouted, laughing and slapping her hand onto the side of the table, "That's Arvydas. He is a sweetheart. He only plays at being tough."

"That's right, he didn't give us the fine, just a warning," Loreta said.

"I ought to call him and thank him," Antanina said. "You should have just said you were going to visit me and everything would have been alright. Both my

daughters work for the police.”

Again there was a knock at the door. Again, someone wanted to buy contraband cigarettes.

“Her daughters work for the police,” I whispered, “and she deals in contraband?”

“That’s probably how she gets away with it,” Loreta whispered back.

I remembered that I hadn’t reassembled my documents after the officer had asked for them, so I took the pause in conversation as an opportunity to organize my paperwork. Antanina sat back down at the table. She looked at my pile of papers curiously.

“May I see what an American license looks like?” Antanina asked.

“Of course,” I said and handed her my Maine license. Antanina took the license from me and gazed at it intently. She peered through her two sets of glasses at my haggard face on the license. “That is not you,” she said finally. “You are a beautiful woman, but this is the face of a woman who is exhausted by life. This is a woman who is beaten down.”

“That photograph was taken while I was married,” I said. “The woman you see before you now is a free woman, a woman who is divorced,” I said, surprised by my own sudden honesty.

Antanina gazed at me with piercing eyes. She picked the license up from the table and solemnly handed it back to me.

“Let me tell you my daughter’s story,” Antanina said.

Antanina told us about how her daughter had been married young to a village drunk and had two children with him. She suffered terribly over it. He started drinking so hard he'd begun pissing himself. According to Antanina, that was the sign of total and complete degradation. He drank away his entire inheritance, his parent's land, 18 hectares, leaving nothing to their children. Antanina told her daughter that she must leave this drunk. But her daughter would cry, "Mama, I love him." Finally, Antanina took matters into her own hands. She took a metal bucket, filled it to the brim with cow manure, hung it onto the handle bar of her bicycle, and pedaled over to her daughter's house. She found her son-in-law drunk and belligerent as usual.

"Look at what you are doing to your wife and children," Antanina shouted at him.

He took a drunken swing at her.

"You can't live like this!" she shouted.

He stumbled around the kitchen, ignoring her.

Antanina went back outside, unhooked the bucket of manure from her bicycle and walked up to her son-in-law. With her strong sinewy arms she lifted the bucket above his head and dumped the manure onto his head and shoulders. Then she turned and walked out the door. That was the end of the marriage.

"And now look at my daughter," Antanina said, proudly pulling two large glossy color photographs from her kitchen drawer and handing them to me.

In one of the photos a plump blond woman in her forties was perched on the back of a camel in the desert. There was the logo of a travel agency in the corner and the word: "Tunisia". In the other, the same blond woman was standing with

her arm locked around the arm of a tall, plump, pleasant looking man, also in his forties. They were standing beside some palm trees. This photo also read: “Tunisia”.

“I brought over those photos to show that drunk,” Antanina said. “I said to him, look and see, my daughter is a Ponia now, a real lady. She is happy without you. She has traveled the world. This man takes good care of her and of your children too. Like I said before, there are no charms for sickness of the spirit or charms to protect against bad men. Those are things you’ve got to learn to take care of yourself.”

Loreta fiddled with her cell phone, but she had no reception. “My husband took the children on an outing today,” she said, “and I’m worried about them getting caught in the rain.”

“Tell me about your husband,” Antanina asked.

“I have a wonderful husband,” Loreta said, “we’ve been married fifteen years, happily. I was an only child and by the time I was 21 my parents wanted to marry me off. They kept throwing me parties and inviting one momma’s boy after the next. A parade of them! I liked none of them. When I was 27, an old maid by standards at that time, I told my parents I’d had enough. I would never marry; I wanted to find my own life; I was moving out. I went and rented myself a room, found a good job, worked on my doctoral thesis, and began to thoroughly enjoy my life. And you know why, because I’d completely given up worrying over finding myself a good husband. I resolved that I didn’t need one and that I’d live for myself. And then, just as I’d emancipated myself, a long line of eligible men began coming to my door. I was able to choose. And I did choose. I chose myself the very best one, my husband.”

After Loreta finished her story, I took it upon myself to be the one to run out into the rain and stoke the stove in the sauna. When the sauna was finally steaming hot, I told Liepa, and we both went outside. We undressed in the small room outside of the sauna and entered naked into the steam. We sat on the wooden benches, allowing our bodies to drink in the heat. Whenever the sauna started to cool, one of us rose and poured a ladle of water over the stones, setting them off steaming and hissing and crackling. Liepa picked up the vanta, a broom made up of birch leaves, and beat my arms and legs and back, and then I beat hers.

“This skin rash,” Liepa said to me, “is not a disease that will go away when the symptoms are treated. This is a disease of the spirit that comes from deep within and which will be healed when I have resolved what is hurting me.”

Then Liepa told me her story. She had been in a relationship with the father of her child for many years, but he’d made no commitment to her. He was in an open marriage and she was his lover while he remained married and lived with his wife. She’d spent so many years in her twenties studying and working just to get by as a young immigrant in America that she’d never dated, never learned about men. The father of her child was the first and only boyfriend she’d had and he was not faithful to her. It had broken her heart.

“I am a traditional woman who needs to be in a safe relationship,” Liepa said, “then I can thrive. When I am strong enough to leave the father of my child, then I know this rash will heal.”

I saw before me a beautiful, gentle soul, a kind and intelligent woman. Liepa and I poured cold water on our faces, on our necks, our breasts, our legs, and arms. We breathed in the good steam. I realized then that although we did not quite know it before, that all of us had come here today for healing, and that although it would still take work and time, and possibly a long time, we would all

eventually be healed. Then another truth came to me as if carried through the thick steam: We must each learn to live with our curses, and to overcome them.

I returned home late, at midnight, just as the summer sun was setting. I impulsively sent a few friends a text message: I've had the most beautiful day. I sent the text for no other reason than to pass on that good energy I'd brought back with me. I stripped off my clothes and lay down naked between my flannel sheets. The flannel was worn and uncommonly soft on my skin, which was still sensitive from the heat of the hot dry stones and the hissing humidity of the country sauna.

My mind reeled back to my first weeks in Vilnius when I came here with my three children seeking to rebuild a life after divorce. I remembered the shock of seeing that urban landscape of typical Soviet-era faceless cement buildings against a bleak horizon. I thought of the undercurrent of seediness that permeated everywhere then. I remembered the unspoken trauma of the hundreds of thousands who'd suffered the history of this region, a history that seemed to simmer always under the surface no matter where you were and what you did. I'd thought then that only with love could one survive the history of this land. I had known so little about love then—and perhaps I still do, only now, I've learned that it is possible to live with my land, and with my people, and with our history, such as it is.

The next morning I popped across the hallway to pay Rolanda a visit. I told her about my day with Antanina, the village healer; I told her about the snake in the vodka bottle.

Rolanda waved her manicured hand at me and said dismissively, “Oh, Laima, everybody has a snake in a vodka bottle in their closet. We had one in our cabinet for years until someone finally threw it away.”



*Laima Vincė is a writer, playwright, poet, and literary translator. She is the recipient of two Fulbright Fellowships and a National Endowment for the Arts grant. Laima Vincė has lived and worked in Lithuania for a total of eight years (1988 – 1989, 1995 – 1997, 2007 – 2011) and visits frequently. She is the author of a trilogy of literary nonfiction works about Lithuania: Lenin’s Head on a Platter, The Snake in the Vodka Bottle and Journey into the Backwaters of the Heart. Her play about global issues and immigration, The Interpreter, has been running for three years at the Vilnius Chamber Theatre. Laima’s novel about three generations of Lithuanian women, This is Not My Sky, is forthcoming this year.*

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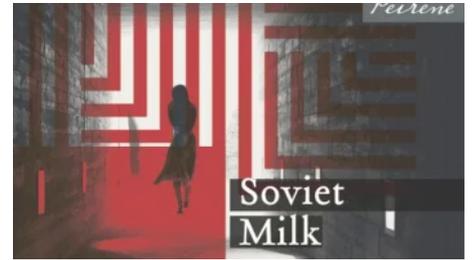
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