

Who Is MARTHA?

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Sample Translation by Kári Driscoll

I feel fine. No complaints, nothing. I can barely feel my own body. I am a feather, I might say. Now I know what it means to moult, doctor. First hand, doctor. Lewadski pads over to the window. He hadn't noticed that it had got dark. Has he slept? It's evening. An evening in autumn with hooded crows. It's like at a café, Lewadski smiles, they sit there on the branches, back to back, the crows, as if they were sitting around tables at a café, airing their derrières, looking like they're about to reach into their plumage, pull out their wallets and pay ... An evening in autumn with crows and a nest. Lewadski takes his opera glasses and tries to see into the crow's nest. But his window is too low down, and the nest is too high up.

Drop dead in two weeks ... Habib didn't respond to that. He has always got something to say about everything, and now? *À chacun son goût*, my mother would have said. She would have taken her glasses off, peered at me with her suddenly smaller eyes, and laughed. Without her glasses, her eyes were naked; naked and dull. God knows whether they were green, grey, or blue. But they were naked without the glasses. As naked as I must appear to others without my dentures. Where is everyone? Where is Habib? Should I ring for him?

Lewadski's eyes wander to the telephone and the button with the butler on it. Balancing a tray with a steaming cup of coffee in one unflinchingly steady hand. In the last few days Lewadski hasn't pressed the button but Habib has come by all the same, appearing daily in the doorway, saying what a beautiful morning it is. And now? Lewadski sticks his head out between the curtains. An illuminated tram with two passengers goes past: a woman with a dandelion hairstyle is wiping a child's nose, a rocking horse floats above them like an ominous cloud. A helium balloon attached to a thin string whose existence Lewadski, from his vantage point, can only infer.

Lewadski heads for the door. The northern bald ibis flies south over the Alps. Its foster-father leading the way in a small aeroplane. Inaudibly the internal clock keeps ticking;

inaudibly the propellers spin. He steps outside. The confusion of voices from the lounge spreads like an aroma over the gallery. In two steps Lewadski is at the lift and presses the button, keeps pressing it till the lift arrives. The barman with the cocktail shaker in his hand steps aside with a smile.

'Hello, did you sleep well?' Lewadski says he had sweet dreams, thank you. 'Which floor?'

'Fifth.' The barman smiles and runs his index finger over all the buttons. You rascal, Lewadski thinks.

The barman gets off on the first floor and turns left, shaking his shaker vigorously. The parlour maid from Novi Pazar scuttles light-footed past the open lift door and gives Lewadski a wave by raising and lowering her wicker basket. Lewadski had observed precisely the same gesture in the window of a lighthouse at that spa by the Black Sea, just before a black-headed gull snatched a piece of cake out of his hand. You stole my joy!, he no doubt shouted after it, stomping his foot, red in the face. The lift door closes with a gentle squeak, the maid is singing in the hallway. Lewadski can barely make out what she is singing, but he can hear her, he picks up the word joy. Spark of the gods? He lunges for the lift door and presses his ear against the cold metal. He must have misheard.

On the second floor, the lift comes to an abrupt stop. The door opens hesitantly. If only the barman hadn't pressed all the buttons, Lewadski thinks. That rascal ... Again the barman is standing before him. Lewadski steps to one side. 'Sleep well?' The barman thanks him with a short but energetic shake of his shaker.

'I had a dream about you,' he says, 'that you graced the bar with a visit.'

'Oh really?'

'Yes, and then a hatch opened up behind the bar that looked exactly like this lift, and you suddenly wanted to go to your room, and I accompanied you downstairs. Have you already pressed?'

'You've already pressed yourself—all the buttons.'

'Nonsense, I was just dusting them off, but now!' The barman's index finger stretches out toward the flat golden buttons. Quickly he presses numbers three and four. But for five he exercises a certain deliberate care.

The barman gets off on the third floor. 'Good luck,' he says to Lewadski and rattles his cocktail shaker. And again the parlour maid skips past the open lift door. Lewadski looks

into her basket. Its contents, covered with a white napkin, suggest raspberries. And again the up and down motion of her hand. As the maid turns the corner it seems to Lewadski that she is singing. The lift door closes. No doubt about it, she's singing, she really is singing! Again Lewadski presses his ear against the door. Over the squeaking of the cables and wheels he can quite clearly hear the maid's song.

And we enter, drunk with fire ...

And all men will become ...

Where your tender wing may rest.

'Brothers! Brothers, is how it goes!' Lewadski cries and clutches his forehead. It's the ninth. She's singing Beethoven's ninth!

All creatures drink of joy ...

All good beings, and all evil ...

'At the bosom of nature ...', Lewadski joins in quietly.

'Be embracèd, oh ye millions ...' the parlour maid replies.

'This kiss for th'entire world' Lewadski sheepishly sings into the crack in the door.

On the fourth floor there is not a soul in sight. Lewadski pokes his head out of the lift. Nothing but the gentle clinking of the wall lamps' crystal droplets. And somewhere the powerful sound of singing.

Happy, like His heav'nly bodies ...

Go now, brothers, on your way ...

It must be coming from the music society, thinks Lewadski, that singing, I can't explain it to myself otherwise. Not unless there's an entire choir hiding in this hotel ... a red feather floats through the air as the lift door slowly closes. Or was I mistaken? Maybe the building is on fire? A blood-soaked feather and a tongue of flame are not the same thing. But right now it doesn't matter whether there's a fire or not.

On the fifth floor it's been snowing. Lewadski steps out and walks with creaking steps across a carpet of feathers. Must have been the barman hoping to surprise me, Lewadski thinks in wonder. Who else would have emptied so many pillows out onto the floor? Nobody except that rascal of a barman, wanting to give me a treat up here on the last floor. As if it were my birthday! As Lewadski forges a path through the white splendour, a quiet doubt begins to nag at him. Is it really autumn? If it really were my birthday today, then it would have to be springtime. Or is it in the autumn? Lewadski stops up as if rooted to the spot. A down feather clings to his lower lip. Another down feather gets stuck in his left eye. He

wipes his face with the sleeve of his jacket. The feathers in the hallway are suddenly gone. Gone with the wind. Summer or winter, the fact remains that the fifth floor has no windows! How am I supposed to look into the empty nest if there aren't any windows? Pressing his hand to his chest, Lewadski runs along the hallway. His dentures are missing. So is his tippie cane, which he has left in his room. As if he had known that he could easily make do without these accessories today. So, why so surprised? Not a single window, who would have thought.

Happy, like His heav'nly bodies ...

Flying through the firmament ...

Joyous like a hero's victory ...

The parlour maid's voice resounds from behind one of the many doors. Lewadski makes a fist. But he's not about to knock. It is joy that is surging through him like a cramp. A charley horse of epic proportions. Lewadski drags himself along from door to door with fists of delight. Behind each door the maid keeps on singing. Behind each door Lewadski hears her song.

Be embracèd, oh ye millions ...

Brothers o'er the canopy ...

He must live above the stars ...

At the end of the hallway Lewadski stops short, breathing heavily. He can't go any further. Or can he? A fire door is standing open. A short flight of stairs leads upwards. The song of the parlour maid, which seems to be coming from all directions, blinds him, lashes his eyes, his face. He wants to kneel, fall and sink into the floor, but he holds onto the door handle and looks up to the head of the stairs, where, in the half-light, he can see the oily leaves of a rubber tree and a door which, as he stands there looking at it, slowly begins to open.