

Narzissenfest

The joys of festivities encroached the village; from the blooming white *Narcissi* to the long row of delicately sweet *Kaiserschmarrn* and *Apfelstrudel*: spring had arrived.

Friedl Kos, recently turned eleven, stumbled to and fro with errands. His mother and sisters busied themselves in preparing for the festival while his father slaved away with wood-cutting, supplying the necessary materials for building a grand dance stage. Although he preferred helping his father chop wood, his village needed him to be an errand boy for the day's events. Gleefully, he accepted the role. It was only the mysterious white powder that made his skin itch. For as long as he complained of its irritating effects and the red rashes on his skin, his family and neighbors laughed.

"Silly boy! The white powder is not itchy," said his neighbor, Alexander.

"My Son, you do not understand its healing properties," informed the pastor, Vidmar.

"You're not old enough yet!" teased his sisters, Marilies and Resi.

All the adults in the village used it: sprinkling it here and there and mixing it with their water; "What could it be?" he wondered, but no one answered.

At last, *Narzissenfest* arrived! The stands opened, with vendors busy at work as customers crowded around. Music travelled afar, luring villagers to an imposing dance stage. Friedl recognized the pipe player: Helene. Helene's musical talents were renowned for being perfectly played, never missing a note. Her fingers thumbed over and beneath the instrument, her face pinkening with each exciting blow of the pipe. In the center of the stage he spotted his eldest sister, Marilies, dancing with Alexander. Their faces beamed with delight in their swaying dance. The festival came to a close with spilled drinks and confessions of spring love.

No one expected the following day to be riddled with illness. It started with Alexander, then Vidmar, until it reached even Papa. Everyone in the village was ill, except the children.

Friedl made no hesitation to hurry for the city doctor, who ran tests on everyone affected and collected samples from their local well.

Every evening, Friedl entered his home to find the doctor hunched over his family's beds and would ask, "Dr. Potočník, why is my family sick?"

Dr. Potočník, having no answer, shook his head, "We must wait."

Friedl waited and waited to no avail. When he found a stash of irritating white powder in his mother's storage, he presented it to him. Dr. Potočník immediately retreated to the city for testing.

Friedl sat at his family's kitchen table. Dr. Potočník sat across, his eyes avoiding him. He had returned with results. Judging from Dr. Potočník's furrowed brows, Friedl did not expect good news.

"Dr. Potočník, what is wrong?"

Dr. Potočník crossed his arms, "I'm sorry."

"About what, sir?"

Dr. Potočník did not give a reply.

"What's wrong?" choked out Friedl, his voice had grown raspy with earlier sobbing.

"Your family has poisoned themselves with arsenic trioxide for over fifteen years."

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