In the Autumn Rain

“A horse stopped by the bar one day.
“Give me a double,” he said.
The bartender poured it; the horse drank it and ordered another. On his way out he suddenly turned his head and said:
“ Aren’t you surprised to see a horse drinking whiskey?”
“Not at all,” answered the bartender, “I drink sometimes myself.”

“Aren’t you surprised to see a horse talking?” asked Béris, the bay horse. The harsh autumn night glowed in his big, sad eyes. “No,” I answered, “I talk sometimes myself.”
“Well, what do you know . . .” Béris shook his head. “Bored?”
“Hell, yes,” I said, rubbing my wind-burned face with the palms of my hands.
“ Heck, yes,” Béris corrected me and yawned broadly.
“I’ve never seen such weather. It never used to rain like this.”
“You’re right,” I told Béris. “It used to rain much less . . . Are you cold?”
“A bit.” Béris tried to shake the mane from his eyes and pushed his behind windward to make himself more comfortable. “You’re probably soaked, too.”
“To the very bone.”
“It’s a dreary time of year,” sighed Béris. He bit into a tuft of grass and spat it out in disgust. “I’d drown myself if summer weren’t just around the corner.”

“Summer’s still far away. October, November . . .” I counted on my fingers. “Eight more months. That’s the hell of it. Until then we may have to wait in the cold for a miracle. But this rotten fall may bring a miracle yet, just wait . . .”
“It’s sickening!” Béris shook his head, “Just sickening. Though, to tell you the truth, miracles do happen, even in the fall.”
“They do,” I agreed. “Wasn’t it like this three years ago? It rained and rained, and then suddenly it stopped.”
“I’m not talking about the rain,” said Béris after a rather long pause. Only then did I notice that he was staring off into the distance, morosely, his head bowed in unhorselike sadness.
“What are you thinking about?”
“I just remembered a story,” answered Béris after a moment.
“You’re right, it’s damn cold,” he shook himself and looked at me mischievously. I could tell he was up to something.
I’m not that gullible. I caught on to his horsing around right away. Still, I was the shepherd! I had no right to leave my post.
“Nothing doing,” I said and grudgingly glanced at my herd, snorting and stomping in the pestering autumn rain. “Nothing doing,” I repeated, getting angry at myself. I pulled a wad of tobacco from my breast pocket and began to lick the rolling paper. “All right, tell me this story of yours . . .”
Béris sighed scoldingly and fell silent for a long while.
“I was in the field one day,” he finally began. “Do you realize there was a time when no one was tending us?”
“I sure do. Those were the days.”
“Well, let’s see . . . I was in the field one day. And the weather was just like today: the rain was beating on my face, the wind whipping my back, the grass so wet that I couldn’t lie down, or even rest my head. I wasn’t so much standing as leaning. My mood, you understand—was gloomy, to say the least. I’ll go and find myself a barn or shed somewhere, I thought. Enough of this. I was angry, you know? I thought of all the people, asleep in their warm houses. Even wild animals have caves. But there I was, alone, huddled up in the rain like a dog. I was already heading toward town when I heard some footsteps nearby. I turned my head and almost snorted in surprise. In front of me stood a mare. A small white patch glimmered on her forehead. I swear, I’ve never seen a mare with such a beautiful white spot.”
“What are you chewing on?” asked the stranger.
“Nothing, there’s nothing to chew on here,” I didn’t particularly like the stranger’s tone.
"Then why are you hanging around in the middle of this field?"
"I don't know," I said. And I really didn't know, although I had been standing in this field all evening and could easily have found shelter nearby. But you know yourself. In this kind of weather nothing but profanities pop into your head.
"It's lonely around here. And bleak," sighed the stranger.
"Does it always rain like this?"
"Almost all the. You're not from these parts, I take it?"
The stranger didn't answer. She walked around me and stopped very close to me. Then she gently touched her lips to my neck. I have never felt such soft, passionate lips. I melted. My entire body felt whipped. Back then I wasn't this old. But I was no spring chicken either. Maybe that's why the earth trembled beneath my feet.
"What's your name?"
"Bēris."
"And I'm Whitestar."
"That's a strange name," I said.
"Yours is too. But I like you, anyway. Would you like to escort me home?"
At this point my blood boiled. All my good feelings for the stranger vanished into thin air. I was pretty popular then, but to go off with the first mare that comes along?
"What are you afraid of? Wolves?" I said, ready to call it quits. I was chilled to the marrow, and more than anything I was longing for a warm barn or shed.
"Who?" asked Whitestar.
"Wolves," I said. Do they frighten you?"
"What kind of fowl are they?"
Lion, king of the jungle! The shock almost knocked me off my feet. And to this very day I don't understand how she made it there all in one piece. Do you remember how many of those bloodthirsty creatures were prowling our forests that year?"
"I remember. It was a living hell."
"Probably worse," Bēris corrected me. "You know, after that kind of answer, I couldn't leave the silly mare to her fate. It was probably the first time she'd ventured away from her mother and run into this fierce world, about which she apparently didn't have a clue. On the other hand, as I mentioned earlier, I was at the age that, after one soft caress, I could forget the whole cold, tiring week. You should also remember that I was rather sick of being alone.
"Well?" asked Whitestar impatiently.
"We could trot for a while," I said.

We trotted at a brisk pace. The heavy, rain-soaked earth sloshed under our feet, the rustling forests flew past us, while the farmhouses appeared and disappeared in the darkness. I felt the blood in my legs reviving and my numb muscles reawakening. A long-forgotten warmth was filling my body. I no longer regretted accepting the stranger's invitation, especially when, to my great surprise, the rains stopped and the skies cleared. Above the glistening trees a big clear moon sailed into the sky. In disbelief, I looked at my friend, trotting half a pace ahead of me. For a second time, the earth swayed under my feet. At my side, with her jet black mane flying and her head thrown back in the wind, was the princess of the forest herself. I had never seen such a young and elegant body. Her graceful legs overrode the dangerously slushy meadow and the slippery forest path. Under the moonlit sky, with her feet on the ground, soared the most beautiful swan in the world. A swan as black as coal. Never had I seen such a mare!
"Tired?" Noticing my gaze, Whitestar turned her head. Her white patch was mocking me.
"Are you kidding?" I answered, but I realized that in a few more minutes my lungs would be finished.
Fortunately, Whitestar slowed her pace, and the road started to descend. In half an hour we found ourselves in a deep valley, at the very center of which a wreath of trees encircled a lake. A warm mist, fragrant with sweet flag, floated above, and moonbeams crossed the lake like a silver bridge.
Steam was coming out of my nostrils, sweat poured from my sides, and my lungs were wheezing like a punctured bellows. I shuddered, warding off a sudden deadly fatigue. Whitestar was standing among the cattails, her head high and proud. Tall and graceful, she was poised to leap across the lake.
"We're home," she said. "You may go for a swim, if you like."
"A swim?" I asked, astonished. "Who on earth goes swimming in the fall?"
"Give it a try," she gestured, and her patch seemed more openly mocking than before.
I dipped my nose in the water. It was as warm as in midsummer! When I raised my head, I was dumbstruck: there was no trace of autumn! Not in the cattails or up in the trees. Everything was flowering luxuriously, as if the winds and rains ravaging the other side of these hills had completely forgotten this hidden corner.
The lake rinsed away my fatigue, and for a long time I splashed and snorted in its waves. When I waded across the hard gravel
bottom to the shore, I felt such a fierce hunger that I completely forgot my manners. The grass was succulent and sweet, and it smelled so temptingly of summer that my stomach, starved from the fields, wasn't satisfied with just a little. I ate till I could eat no more, and only then did I lift my head sheepishly from the ground.

"Isn't it wonderful here?" Whitestar asked, without concealing her pride. She still looked ready to leap across the lake. The moon shimmered and flickered through her mane.

"Wonderful . . ." I said and gently touched her neck with my lips.

When I awoke, the eastern skies were ablaze with red light. Freshly bathed and glowing with dew, Whitestar came wading from the lake. Water splashed from her muscular legs and splattered all around, smoothing the flattened grass on the bank into waves. Her neck arched high and chest thrust out, she resembled more than ever a black aquatic swan.

"Time to head back," I said, suppressing a strange shudder in my heart as her legs touched the shore.

"You want to go back?" asked Whitestar, the white patch on her forehead sincerely astonished.

"Of course, what else am I to do?"

"You're going back? To the cold and the rain?"

"That's the way things are," I said, and I was seized with terror. Wasn't she going to say "Stay"? Could she have forgotten our night of love? I held my breath and watched Whitestar, completely absorbed in her black eyes as black as her mane.

"You don't like it here?"

"I like it. Very much."

"Then why are you leaving?"

And then I understood. It was I, a visitor from the gloomy and barren lands, ravaged by the cold and rain, that had to say it.

"My fields are back there," I said.

Whitestar pulled back her head, the white patch on her forehead mocking me again.

"Then go back. Go back to your fields."

But I couldn't tear my eyes away from her. I knew, I knew with all my heart that I would never meet another Whitestar—not in the greenest forest clearing, not in a barn overflowing with sweet crunchy hay. So bow your head, visitor from those cold wretched lands, and say it.

"Take care of yourself," I said and walked over to the hill, the lake, red from the bright morning skies, and Whitestar's dumb-founded patch, raised high, shimmering in my eyes.

Halfway home, when clouds darkened the sky and the damned rain began pelting my back once again, I realized my mistake. But there was no going back. I had said the wrong thing entirely.

Béris was silent.

"And she hasn't shown up in these fields since?" I asked.

"No," answered Béris, staring off into the distance, his head bowed in unhorselike sadness. "I tried to find the path back to the lake but had no luck."

We were silent for a long time. The rain pattered on the clover, my herd, huddled together, stamped and snorted, swatting the wind with their tails.

"It's so damned cold," Béris tossed his mane and squinted at me again.

A cottage stood in a quiet glade in the forest. During the long autumn nights the village men would meet there, some to play cards, some to watch TV, and others just to kill time. The owner had once worked in a distillery and knew a bit about blood-warming beverages. We opened the door and were immersed in smoke and the ringing of voices. No one paid the least attention to us. They were busy enough with their own affairs.

"The usual," I growled at the bartender and sat down in an empty corner.

"You sit, too," I pushed a bar stool toward Béris. "Tonight you'll be human."

"I won't," said Béris. "But I will sit down."

After we had our third round of the usual, and I began wondering about the meaning of life for the second time, Béris looked at me again with his big, sad eyes and said:

"By the way, what I told you earlier never actually happened. I made the story up myself . . ."

I felt something somersault inside my chest.

"I feel like crying," Béris said and smiled.

I must point out that a horse's smile has never been known to cheer things up.

"Let's sing instead," I said.

"I've never tried to sing in my life. I doubt the guests here would appreciate my voice. Let's go back outside."

"Okay," I said.

But halfway out the door I stopped. A strange thought had occurred to me.

"Hey, buddy," I cornered the owner as he hurried past. "Don't you think it's strange to see a human being walking around with a horse?"
“Not at all,” answered the owner, “I walk around sometimes myself.”

“Thank God,” I said, relieved, and followed Béris out into the autumn rain.