

Tale about the Man Who Knew Doubt

Emma Andijewska

There once lived a man who from birth was defeated by doubt. No matter how he began any activity, whether indifferently or conscientiously, whether work or recreation, he would be seized by doubt. At that instant the work would become loathsome to him, or the pastime would slump into boredom and despair. Nothing brought him any pleasure, and existence itself seemed such a heavy burden that the poor fellow would gladly have rid himself of it, had not the resolve entailed effort beyond any that he could muster. For doubt did not allow him to make a final decision about anything.

When they realized something was amiss, the man's parents tried every way they knew to alleviate his distress, but all their attempts proved futile. The older their son became, the stronger his doubt grew, and all his worried parents' urgings and counsel served only to increase his despair and hopelessness, making their son weary of life.

Finally the parents became convinced that in his condition neither threats nor pleas were of any use. So they began to equip their only child with the things he would need to travel far and wide, in the hope that by being out among people he would gain the wisdom and experience needed to cure him of his excessive doubt. At last, having given him directions and bestowed their blessing, they let their feckless child go off on his long journey.

But even in far-off lands doubt continued to torment the man, and sooner or later everything he undertook ended in failure and vexation. From time to time the man came across kind-hearted people who took pity on him and gave him shelter and work. But as soon as the man took a good look at whatever he was doing, doubt would seize him again: he would abandon everything and find himself once again in the same situation as before. Yet now he was no longer an impetuous youth but a man full grown, for whom it was time to have a roof over his head and a family of his own.

And then, in his wanderings from place to place, because Providence, if not always immediately then at least occasionally, tends to even the most forsaken of men, the man somehow found a corner to call home and acquired a wife and children. Now he felt pleased that at last he was making something of his life. But as soon as his children began growing out of

diapers, doubt once again seized the man, doubt stronger than he had ever known before. He left his wife and children and set off aimlessly into the world, as before.

And then one day, as he was fording a stream along his way, the man turned around and chanced to see that his doubts were seven chargers forged together as one black steed, bearing him into an abyss of no return. The terrified man, feigning calm, tried to vanquish the doubts now taking on such increasingly physical form. But his powers proved too weak to scatter them. Calling on God to bear witness that he could carry on no more, exhausted in body and soul, he dropped down at a crossroads, under a tree, and fell asleep.

As soon as his eyelids closed, he beheld a little old man standing before him, tugging at his sleeve. Pointing to a small yard made of packed clay, smooth as a finished floor, the old man asked, "Will you agree to sweep my yard? For this job I need a man defeated by too much doubt. Here are the sun and the moon—they will serve as your two brooms—and as for your pay, what I have to give you is one small seed."

"All right," said the man, and as he began to sweep the old man's yard, he immediately felt his doubts vanish somewhere. After a time the old man made him stop, saying that his job was done, and in remuneration he gave him the one small seed.

The man thanked him, and then awoke. To his amazement, in his palm there indeed lay a small, luminous seed. As the man took another look at the seed, doubt again reared up within him, with such angry force that the man understood: his end was at hand, for the chargers were racing at a gallop under him. They were galloping so fiercely that, to stop himself from falling and cracking his skull as doubt was about to plunge him into the abyss, the man grabbed the horse's mane with one hand while pressing the other, the hand holding the little old man's payment to his breast. At that instant he felt the seed fall tremulously to the bottom of his heart and immediately send forth a slender shoot. And from the way the shoot trembled, the man understood that the seedling sprouting in him was hope.

"You have become a bad horseman," the man's reason immediately admonished him.

"You will never make any headway in life if you don't pull that log out from your heart," the doubts added angrily, slackening their galloping pace.

"It's not a log but a new doubt stirring in my heart," lied the man, all the while feeling the sapling of hope within him sprouting forth new branches.

"A person is a person only when he is overwhelmed by doubt," declared the doubts, appeased. And that was the last that they said. For hope, which from a tiny seed had flourished in the man's heart into a blossoming tree, silenced the voices of doubt. For only the tree of hope, growing in the human heart, helps man vanquish the doubts that are his horsemen to the abyss.

Translated by Uliana Pasicznyk

Original publication: Emma Andievs'ka, "Kazka pro cholovika, iakyi mav sumniviy," in *Kur'ier Kryvbasu*, no. 134 (January 2001), pp. 14–16.

