

TRACE

**Traditional Children's Stories for a common
Future**

The black ram

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When the summer heat burns the ground, the rock and nothing else grows in the dry land, everybody goes to the Cetina river. Even during the hottest periods, the Cetina land is green, and what you've planted can be watered endlessly. The cattle drinks and cools off at the stream, and in the afternoon when the cattle are fed and resting, and the heat weakens, at that very exact moment children learn how to swim. Grandfathers tie them up with a rope around the nearest tree, so the water wouldn't take them, and bit by bit, every child learns the joyful process of swimming.

You should come to the river at dawn, before the heat. As the sun rises in the sky it becomes much harder to work near the water. Everybody awaits for the sound of the church bells which can't be heard from the village church (because the field is too deep in the canyon), but from the church on the other side, where the canyon is milder and the church positioned on a high rock above Studenci so it can be heard and seen from here there, and everywhere. That sound marks the most important part of the day. Men stop digging, and women picking apples and cherries, and everyone puts their hands together and briefly say their prayers.

A fierce bell toll, as if right above your head, suddenly marks noon. All other sounds stop and only that fierce toll fills the canyon and the field.

At that exact moment should you sit around a wood log, say your prayers and start dining. Everybody knows this and none should do elsewhat. Even the children know it's dangerous to do differently. However, no one knows why that must be done, it's something never discussed about, but still, everyone senses there is a story behind all this.

Amongst children there were and will always be those who are disobedient. As was this time. Young Josip does only what he wishes to do. And this time not only did he fail to sit and say his prayers, but he went straight down to the river while the bell was still filling the air with its fierce sound. When he came to the river, he remembered his mother's words who's always told him not to go into the river hot, because he could get cramps and drown. However, this seemed to him as a bedtime story, and right now he was trying to cool off, so he refused to listen to his mother's advice.

He slightly stepped into the refreshing, ice-cold water and started undressing with an already definitive decision to take a swim. He decided to swim downstream. Lifting his hands and hiding his eyes from the sun, he checked how far he must go. And what a sight it was, a huge black ram in the middle of Cetina covering the whole river with its body and looking straight into the boy angrily. Eyes black as the night glimmering from water in this bright, hot summer day. Its horns big, black and curled as two fat knobs. Its fleece glimmering from water drops that fly around from the Cetina rapids. The ram lying and looking at the boy, the boy, on the other hand, terrified as he was, wasn't even able to call his father, mother or his older brother, as if he was mute. He was unable to think or move. The ram continued lying

and looking at him calmly with his horrifying, fiery eyes. In a tiny part of sense, the boy had left, he remembered the fireplace story. He wasn't supposed to hear it, he should've been sleeping, however, Josip known for his mischief pretended to be sleeping. That was when he heard the horrific legend saying: "He who sees the black ram at noon, should outrun it, go home and not leave the house for three days and nights. Otherwise he will not live!"

Moreover, he remembered them saying that he who sees it will go crazy or die. And of the ones who saw it so far, only one was able to come home. All others would get to the "Big Board" where they would be found.

As soon as his feet started working again, Josip rushed to fetch his horse on the meadow and forced it uphill. He forced it while screaming of fear never even daring to look behind himself to even see if he is being followed by the ram. He knew that if he looks it in the eyes once more it would be the last thing he did. The horse running as the wind on that hot summer day, wet and on the brink of its power, and Josip ice-cold of the dispiteous fear. The skin on his back shuddering, while thinking about the ram who is inevitably by his side. The biggest hill was passed, and home was close. Rushing like the wind he was quite a sight for the old man who was returning home from the stream.

On the horse he saw a naked little boy, blue of fear, screaming and rushing the horse. The old man got scared thinking that an evil force is running to the village. He decided to stop the evil stepping in the middle of the dusty road rising his hands in the air. In one hand holding a stick, and the other using to make a sign of the cross, thus asking God for help. The old man yelled loudly in order to scare whatever there is in the dust rising behind the horse's gallop. Suddenly, he yelled, the horse already distraught, flew even faster sensing that his barn is close, and that his suffering is nearly over. The gallop was heard much sooner than the horse reached its barn, so Josip's uncle decided to check where the noise is coming from. And was he surprised by the scene. At first sight he also thought an evil force is approaching but looking closely he saw a horse galloping with his nephew on its back. Wanting to stop the horse he called him by his name, but the horse frightened, refused to stop and decided to continue to his barn. That's when the uncle was really scared, because he remembered that the barn entrance is too low for Josip to ride in, so he grabbed him from the horse's back in full gallop saving his nephew from sure death. Had he hesitated for a moment Josip wouldn't have been saved.

That's how Josip's uncle saved him. Josip refused to leave the house for three days and nights. And from that day on he listened to adults, and never questioned them anymore. Now he knew why you need to sit around the wood log in the shade, saying your prayers and not going to the water when the church bell marks noon.