

POLITICS

Hryhoriy Kosynka

“For three years I haven’t drunk at the same table as the rich, for three years I haven’t revelled with kin, for three years I’ve been at odds with them, but it seems I’ll be going carolling today... Doesn’t seem right, but I’ll go to spite them, see what politics those smart brother’n-laws and father’n-law will sing me...”

Shvachka stood beside the table like the best man at a wedding, hat cocked and droplets of water on his mustache. The broad palm of his hand came down on the table with such force that the light of the small lamp wavered.

His wife chattered and rejoiced:

“Afraid you’ll drink away your village headmanship?” she laughed, carefully spreading out her florid kerchief on the table. “Can’t squabble with people all your life an’ defend your poor peasant committees,” she continued, smoothing out one corner of the woollen kerchief, while looking intently at Shvachka and thinking: “Hope he doesn’t get angry!”

But Musiy Shvachka was laughing:

“Oh, feeling sorry again for your father’s land! Those six desiatynas¹ are lost forever, Mariana. Those poor peasants of mine took that land with their teeth! Still, no one, no one will bark that Musiy Shvachka makes wrong politics... Well, tell me, who will prove that it’s wrong politics?”

The word “politics” upset Mariana: Polityka, that’s how they teased her husband in the village, for sometimes he stuck that politics in even where it didn’t belong... She waved her hand:

“Served ’em and served ’em, and what thanks d’you get? Made enemies of half the village—that’s your reward. All the same, when I was starving to death with the kids while you were escaping with the commune, my father, God preserve him, gave us three poods² of rye for our rug...”

“Oh,” Musiy laughed, “when misfortune strikes you can get favors like that from a Gypsy, let alone your own father! Right, daughter?” he jokingly asked his eldest, Stepanydka, who was sitting on the plank-bed.

“Right,” she answered, stealing a look at her mother.

“Too right,” Mariana seized on the word. “You’re much too cocky.”

“Takes after her father!” Shvachka snapped, while Stepanydka blushed and fell silent.

Mariana still wanted to tell her husband that all the rich people in the village were cursing not only those for whom he had sliced off some land, but also Musiy Polityka, who had lost two fingers somewhere in the

Perekop trenches; if he didn't take care—he'd mislay his head too. But she said nothing; she wanted so much to visit her kin!

"At least don't bring up your politics at father's, in front of the brother'n-laws, or they might bash you up for nothing," she cautioned her husband, and waited anxiously for his reply.

Musiy stretched out his left hand towards the lamplight, the hand with the two small stumps instead of fingers. No longer joking, he said firmly:

"They shouldn't forget that Polityka mislaid two fingers of his left hand at Perekop, but his right is still whole, and Tsar Nicholas himself gave me a medal for marksmanship!"

He patted his right pocket, which contained a flat Browning—booty from the Perekop victory, and—with an "I'm off to harness 'em"—he stepped outside.

"Oh, Musiy, you're so hotheaded, but you aren't all there!" Mariana said to herself, sighing heavily.

And in silence she put on her black bodice, her indigo blue skirt and her shirt with the fine cut-out embroidery, the one she had worn as a girl...

She mused over the shirt with the cut-out embroidery, recalling her girlhood: "Hey, those years cannot be bought with gold, nor caught on swift horses..."

Her eyes rested on Stepanydka and she smiled, imagining her daughter's words: "Oho, mamma, the cuckoo will cry five more summers, and then you'll need to prepare a chest for me..."

"Don't go to that Christmas feast," Stepanydka said peevishly.

"We can't do that, we have to visit grandfather... He gave us some grain once," Mariana reminded her again.

The daughter fell silent. She remembered that bread and how her mother had brought back the three poods (she had milled it in a treadmill on the way back) and immediately kneaded up some rye flat-cakes, rolled them out on the table, and even marked them with a poppy head. All the while she had wept and wept, saying: "I can understand strangers bartering for a rug, but family taking material as security—not trusting..."

"Mother vowed then never to cross the threshold of the rich," the girl thought.

"It's all right for you, but they'll laugh at our father..."

"Nonsense, stop making things up and carrying on like an old woman!" Mariana replied. "Which of us will be laughing? They'll cry their eyes out, daughter!"

Musiy stood in the doorway in his sheepskin coat lined with green English cloth (this was still from that Wrangel greatcoat he had gotten at Perekop) and said:

"Our politics now is not to laugh at the poor, otherwise you'll become poor yourself, right Mariana? Work is moving, the office is buzzing, everything's going smoothly."

Shvachka wanted to embrace Mariana out of some inexplicable joy which welled up inside him, but refrained and quietly stroked Stepanydka's silky hair.

"What are the rich to us, eh, Stepanydka?"

Putting up her nose, Mariana added a word of her own: "Your office will be flogging beggars soon."

"Beggars aside, you're getting worked up like a fool! You'd better hurry and get dressed," Musiy said with a certain impatience, and Mariana dressed in silence.

She wrapped herself in the thick kerchief, knotted the patties into a bundle, fussed over the children, and when it seemed everything was done, she stood in the middle of the house:

"Sleep tight, children... The Lord bless you!"

"He says He's already blessed 'em!" Shvachka joked and threw the old greatcoat over his shoulders—the light imprinted the large shadow of his figure against the chimney.

"Sleep tight, children," he repeated Mariana's words, patting his pocket with his right hand, and left the house.

The Shvachkas drove out of the gate and onto the star-lit road. The frost was boiling under the runners, snatching vapor from their mouths as the horse waded through snowdrifts, and the snow kicked up by its hooves was like golden sand.

Mariana sat on the sleigh as happy as a spring lamb. It seemed to her that at any moment she and her husband would catch up to that long-awaited day when her wealthy family would no longer set upon Musiy as if he was the lowest of the low—when they would stop reproaching him for his "politics," when her sisters would stop sighing "oh, poor dear" at the market and stop showing their relief at being rich! "Let another year or two pass," Mariana thought, "and we (she was thinking of Musiy) will establish ourselves..." And she felt a rush of pride for her husband.

She was dreaming sweetly and her thoughts stumbled and ran off into the past...

The Polish officers had beaten her because of Musiy, the rich had wanted to drive her from the village—everyone had picked on her so, but when the commune came—let's go and bow before Mariana! It was as if her day had come and the world had expanded... They feared her husband, who was handing out land to the poor peasant committees, and they fawned on Mariana and made up to her—but it did them no good...

"Such is politics, Uncle Andriyan," Musiy said as he led the bull out of Andriyan's yard: they were dispossessing people completely.

"You're politics yourself, far worse than the plague," was Andriyan's retort, and from then on Musiy was nicknamed Polityka... Andriyan's wife had grabbed at the bull's horns in the street and yelled:

"Kill me, you damned sons of bitches, but don't take the animal from our yard!"

"Politics," the poor peasants laughed with Musiy and, thick neck bowed, the bull went off ahead of them like a prisoner. Four years had passed and still Mariana had not forgotten...

"What weird things are passing through my mind," she thought.

"Why are you so quiet?" Musiy asked his wife, giving the horse a sharp flick of the whip.

The sleigh bumped over a hidden reed fence, they were tossed into the air and the horse plucked them up the hill; from there on the road was flat, sown with blue strips of moonlight, as if someone had spread out linen to bleach. The snow creaked under the sleigh and it seemed to Mariana that nails were flying out from under the horses's hooves—strange silver, blue and golden nails... Musiy Shvachka's horse was pulling well uphill!

"I was thinking of Andriyan," Mariana said, leaning over her husband. "He and father are kin now; he'll probably be there too, eh?" She asked about Andriyan with an inexplicable fear.

"Yeah, they're in-laws now, the devil take them!" Musiy joked in reply, and they continued a while in silence.

"Stepanydka's asleep by now," Shvachka said at last, when they had left the village behind. And added: "Eh, I'm off to be taunted. Come on, tell me what fun it will be for me, when they'll all be hissing like snakes: 'The "Commune" is keeping up blood ties, beggars are raising their eyes'..."

Unable to restrain himself, Shvachka swore in filthy language, then struck the horse in his fury. The horse dashed off through the drifts, pulling the sleigh with all its might. Mariana said nothing.

They were already entering the landowner's former estates, where new houses still stood unfinished, buried in large drifts of snow. One of the houses was more fortunate—someone had managed to throw a rag of buckwheat straw over it.

The blue light of a fire pot or a small lamp glimmered and faded; a second house across the way showed its naked rafters and gaped with the black holes of missing windows.

Trotting up to this house, the horse suddenly tripped and snorted fearfully. Shvachka pulled on the reins and stopped.

Mariana's teeth were chattering in fright. Carefully, ever so quietly, Musiy drew the revolver from his pocket—but all around there was dead silence.

The light in the house suddenly flared up—once, twice, and after a third attempt it went out. The horse stood still, pawing the snow... Shvachka ran on ahead a little and, bending over a black patch, suddenly called out loudly:

"It's a cat freezing to death! Poor thing didn't make it inside and now it's carolling out here!"

He picked up the cold, still living, frightened cat, which scratched at his hand, and brought it over to the sleigh. Upset by the incident, Mariana whispered:

"Damn, well throw it into the snow there—someone's left it here on purpose. Out of spite..."

"Silly girl!" Shvachka laughed. "Why should the poor thing perish?"

He placed the cat on his knees, covered it and, pocketing his revolver, said to his wife:

"I'll give it to Andriyan to make up for his bull... Imagine: he still hasn't forgotten the dispossession! Giddy-up!" Shvachka called out and tugged at the reins.

They had another two miles to go. The Christmas night in the steppe was sumptuous and resplendent, forged with stars.

When Shvachka turned into the road to the settlement where merry bright lights were burning in the windows, the horse set off at a brisk trot, the sleigh runners creaked over someone's fresh tracks, and only the wind rushed at them... Shvachka was approaching his father-in-law's with Mariana.

Already two stacks of straw were visible, painting a dark blue silhouette against the snowdrifts; the snow-covered poplars stood like fairy-tale guards and the orchard beside the road was blooming like lilac with hoarfrost...

"They're carolling," Shvachka said as he slowed the horse.

His voice, so sharp in the frost, seemed to jolt Mariana; the whole way she had thought only of this meeting with her rich family, fearing for her husband—he was so forthright, didn't weigh his words, and was hotheaded too...

"Musiy, I beg you," she intoned as they drove up to her father's yard, "don't argue with them over your politics, do it in public, not here..."

"Why are you so afraid?" Shvachka answered, offended. "Am I a baby who doesn't know when to talk and when to keep quiet!"

"Why are you fuming already?" Mariana said in a gentle voice, tears sparkling in her eyes; and one drop, as if coaxed out of her eye by the frost, silently fell onto her husband's knees. "Throw that devil away!" and she grabbed hold of the cat which had long since grown stiff on Musiy's knees. Wordlessly he shook it off into the blue snow.

"Will you allow us to carol?" Mariana called out to a tall male figure that had emerged from the house.

In a hoarse voice someone gave them his blessing, opened the gate, and when Musiy Shvachka's sleigh stopped near the stacks of straw, the voice said:

"Quite a frost, eh, Musiy Stepanovych? Truly biting! The carollers aren't in luck this year... Although Soviet power doesn't recognize carolling!"

Musiy unhitched his horse in silence and covered it with the old greatcoat, while Mariana was already being greeted at the door by her mother.

"Shunning us, daughter, pretending to live somewhere across the seas... The whole family has assembled here to carol."

Mariana burst into tears, but then composed herself and wiped away the tears. The frost played rosy-red on her cheeks, her thin lips were tightly pursed and a string of beads hung down onto her full breasts. She waited for Musiy in the vestibule; it was awkward to enter the house without her husband.

Oh, the steep mountain hummed and droned...
Holy eve, kindly eve...

They were carolling in the house; still sober, the women's voices droned shyly—no one was singing at full throttle. The carol about the steep mountain sown with silken grass hung on a single note and broke off when the Shvachkas crossed the threshold into the room.

"This is great," Andriyan said from the table, sitting next to Mariana's father. "This is great... Musiy Stepanovych will teach us how to carol Soviet-style!"

And with a cunning smile he winked at the women who had been singing the carol, but the guests turned their heads towards the door, the women peeling their eyes to Mariana, while the men exchanged sullen greetings with Musiy.

"Christmas greetings—greetings to you all," Mariana's mother repeated, as if justifying her daughter in front of the family, called Musiy a dear son-in-law, so that there would be no arguments and, sweeping a place on the bench with her bodice, she invited her daughter and son-in-law to the table.

Food stood on the tables on large colorful plates, two headcheeses lay untouched in bowls, and liquor, flavored with lemon—such a smoky, turbid yellow—occupied the honored place on each table.

There was a full house of guests: four sons-in-law with their wives were already seated at the tables; Andriyan Kushnir, the father of one of the sons-in-law, was seated beside his son, occupying a place of honor at the table, for Kushnir was in fact the wealthiest of the guests; godparents, together with close and distant relatives, were seated at Musiy's table; they were amazed that such a diehard Communist as Shvachka had come to his father-in-law's to carol!

"God grant that your wheat bears well and your children walk this earth nicely!" the mother toasted Mariana's glass. Mariana emptied her glass, while the mother poured a second drink for Shvachka and said:

"Though they broke my rib because of you, son, my blood is still behind you. It turns out that in the family we are all equal..."

She ran her eyes over the guests—everyone was silent; Kushnir smiled into his black mustache, but after Shvachka had drunk with his mother-in-

law and the old woman had splashed the unfinished drink against the ceiling, he yelled out:

"Eh, this is no good! The mother-in-law is softening up her son-in-law, while we stare into empty glasses!"

Everyone began to chatter more merrily after that, glasses clinked, and a student, the daughter of Mariana's oldest sister, arrogantly came up to Shvachka's table and greeted him:

"I was thrown out of high school for being a kulak—it's idiocy! I wasted nine years in the gymnasium, and there you are—the daughter of a kulak!"

"Marry a Communist—they won't throw you out then!" Kushnir called out.

"Let her try, I'll smoke her out of the house with her rags," the student's stocky, puffy-faced father said haughtily.

Downing a third glass for courage, Shvachka could not help saying: "It's very simple, niece: that's Bolshevik politics—once the rich studied, now let the poor get some education!"

"Fie, what's it to do with *politics*?"

And Kushnir butted in again:

"That's right, Halyna Dmytrovna! It's plain idiocy, not politics!"

Everyone laughed at Kushnir's words. Shvachka had wanted to leave the table, to walk away from such revelry, but Mariana calmed him down, insisting it wasn't necessary to leave the party to the jeers and tattle of the guests.

Oh chalice, chalice of wine...

A young woman began in a thin soprano, while Kushnir recited the rest of the words to the song. But they didn't sing the song, for it was Christmas Eve—it wasn't right to sing drinking songs.

Surprisingly, everyone asked the student to sing a Ukrainian song. The girls laughed, while old Mrs. Kushnir sat upright at the table and announced haughtily:

"Sing me about that Ukraine, let me at least remember my son, whom the commune killed because of Petliura..."³

The girl blushed, lowered her eyes, looked askance at the table where Shvachka sat in silence, beetle-browed—but refused to sing.

"My dear family! Dear *svakha*!⁴ I'm merely asking my granddaughter to sing me about Ukraine..." And Mrs. Kushnir burst into tears.

The guests calmed her down, her son scolded her severely, and everything seemed to return to normal. The women sang carols, praising the hospitality of the hosts, glorifying the Christ child, and the house buzzed with joy.

Mariana sat as if on a bed of nails; her sisters had greeted her dryly,

and the youngest, who was married to Kushnir's son, pointed a finger at her kerchief as if saying: "Conjured out of someone's storeroom." Mariana felt such bitterness and pain that she found it hard to swallow—scared she might burst into tears.

"Don't be afraid, you stupid thing, sing!" the father said to the student.

The girl brushed back the cut, curly tresses from her narrow forehead and, tapping the floor with her finely made aristocratic shoes, shouted to the guests:

"Let's sing "Cover Thy Tables," know that one? The students like to sing this folk carol so much at parties, they are so captivated by it..."

"They also roar the 'Internationale' like bulls!" Kushnir retorted in a fit of anger, and said to Mariana's father:

"I heard those students in the train on the way home for the holidays—they're scum, not people! You write students, but pronounce it beggars."

"Is it true that the commune allows private trade now, Musiy Stepanovych?"

"Yes, it's true," he answered gloomily.

"There's a law now," Kushnir continued loudly, "that you've no right to touch private property—there!"

Everyone became interested in Kushnir's bit of news and none of the guests even thought of resuming singing; the student had already opened her mouth, revealing her nice white teeth, like shelled nuts, and froze in this pose. Recovering, she licked her lips and sat down beside Shvachka.

"Uncle will give me a poor certificate, please?" she asked Musiy.⁵

"And will uncle go to prison, according to you?" Shvachka replied in a different tone. The girl let out a whimper.

"Well, Musiy Stepanovych," Kushnir said to Shvachka from across the table, "it's been four years, thank you, since you took my bull away to the commune, but I still haven't forgotten. I won't forget till the day I die: it's robbery..."

"I wanted to give you a cat today for that bull, but it died along the way! It was a nice cat too..."

"You're too young to answer back like that..."

"How should I answer back? Suck up to you, yes?"

A quarrel was brewing. Shvachka sat pale-faced, his left hand with the two stumps was trembling, his eyes roamed mistily about the corners of the room. Mariana was no longer at his side—her little sister, the young Mrs. Kushnir, was reproaching her for something.

Shvachka got up unsteadily, left the table and went quietly outside.

It was a dark night. The stars had swelled, becoming very full, and the moon was ringed by a red half-circle—a portent of windy weather—and the whole enormous yard all the way out into the distant fields was swathed in snow...

"It's blowing up a snowstorm," Shvachka thought drowsily and came

up to the stable. His horse's nosebag of oats had fallen to the ground, and he searched for it in the dark a long time. When he eventually found it kicked under the manger, he berated the horse:

"What a fool you are! Hungry now?"

The horse neighed, striking its hooves against the wooden floor.

"Here, here," Shvachka repeated, replacing the nosebag on the horse's head. "Munch on that a little while and we'll set off home, so the rotters can stop hissing! They don't like our politics, brother! They're so overjoyed: trade's being allowed again, and Kushnir has already spread his paws out—wants his land back... He should be buried in it, the canker!"

The horse munched on its oats, a pig was snoring away somewhere in a warm pen. Shvachka stood and listened: "Sleeping so deliciously!"

He went back inside, his head rocking—he was tipsy, for he rarely drank vodka.

At the door to the vestibule Shvachka remembered the student girl for some reason—chuckled, and for the second time that day swore abominably.

"The bastard! 'Give me a poor certificate, uncle'... As if I trade in poor certificates!"

The house was full of singing. Carols were interwoven with songs about their glorious wealthy family, about wine barrels, spiral-horned oxen—the liquor had intoxicated the songs and they now rebounded insolently off the windowpanes...

"Rejoice, Shvachka," Musiy thought, "regale—it's Christmas Eve! Some people in the village could only season their borsch with pounded bacon today, instead of having headcheese piled up high! And Kushnir is flicking his tongue about like a copperhead serpent..."

He unfastened a button on his blue shirt, from under which appeared the dickey of a white one embroidered with red and yellow yarn, and entered the house with a firm step, an expression of resolve on his face.

"The dog doesn't want to tuck its tail in, but tuck it in he must," someone's words greeted Shvachka as he crossed the threshold, and the guests burst out laughing.

"It's different politics now..."

"Leave the Kushnirs alone, son," his mother-in-law ran up to Shvachka. "Let the malice pass under the bridge—there's no need for a quarrel, no need..."

"I'm not touching anyone, mamma," Shvachka replied loudly, for everyone to hear. "I may be poor, but he isn't feeding my children! Let him carry on..."

Shvachka glanced furiously at Kushnir.

"I may not be feeding them" Kushnir called out, "but the people are feeding them, man!"

"And who gave Mariana those beets after the spring?" the student

girl's father said smugly, leaning back on the bench.

O holy night, O good night . . .

The women sang the chorus with sincere voices. Kushnir waved his hand and the song died away, as if someone had plugged their mouths. Mariana ran to the middle of the room, tears falling to the floor, and said:

"I wrecked my eyes for those beets, Dmytro, embroidering a Ukrainian shirt for your daughter (she pointed a finger at the student girl), and you shame me in front of the family . . . Why such gratitude?"

"You took money, auntie, so you had to work it off," the student announced in the mute silence.

"You're lying, seed of your father, I made you that shirt for beets, not for money—your mother refused to take money from me . . . Am I telling the truth?"

"What truth is there here?" Everyone shrugged their shoulders and chuckled quietly. Shvachka stood near the entrance to the room, next to his mother-in-law, and was blue with pallor—only one arm, his left, was trembling, for Shvachka had been shell-shocked.

Kushnir rose at the table and said:

"Like that King Herod you were killing people somewhere. Left your wife and children for your father'n-law to feed, while you made off to rescue the commune!"

"Well, keep going—out with it all!" Shvachka said hollowly.

"All? Who, if not you, began dividing up the land in the village when you returned from fighting Wrangel? Wasn't it you who appropriated six desiatynas from your father-in-law and handed it out to the devils as playthings?"

"It was me."

"Aha, then thank him, bow before him . . ." Kushnir's eyes filled with blood. The knife in his hand tapped his plate in time to his speech, and the guests all sat silent and gloomy.

"Who needs this, *svat*?"⁶ his mother-in-law managed to utter beside Shvachka, but her voice was tersely interrupted by Kushnir's son.

"It's none of your business, mamma, be quiet and sit down . . ."

Suddenly everyone began to stir at the tables, someone called out:

"What are you doing?"

Shvachka scrambled for his pocket with his right hand and Kushnir's son, who was standing under the large hanging lamp, extinguished the light.

A wild, insane scream from Mariana's lips echoed throughout the room.

"Dear parents, don't widow me, don't kill . . ."

But her words were drowned out by a bottle being broken against a

doorpost. A shot sounded in the vestibule, and there followed a hoarse bubbling, like a bull being butchered...

"The wretch is shooting!" old Kushnir's voice resounded in the darkness, and all the women bent over the tables—only the student girl kept screaming: "Fall to the ground, the ground!" But there were no more shots.

Shvachka lay on his back in the vestibule, the large handle of a hog knife planted between his shoulders. He was still stirring and for a while kept clenching the fingers of his right hand.

There was a frightened, bustling silence. Someone lit a match.

Mariana lay semiconscious. Her florid wollen kerchief covered her eyes, her body beat against the earthen floor as she sobbed, and her openwork shirt was hitched up all the way to her shameful flesh.

Kushnir looked fearfully at Mariana, his eyes darted about, and he whispered:

"It's all right. Just a drunken neighborhood brawl—that's all. That's what you should say."

NOTES

1. Desiatyna—a measurement of land equal to 2.7 acres.
2. Pood—a weight measure equal to 36 pounds.
3. Symon Petliura (1879-1926), Ukrainian nationalist leader.
4. Svakha—a kinswoman.
5. Poor certificate—a certificate to prove that a person was indeed **poor**, usually meaning landless also. This assured easy access to higher education.
6. Svat—a kinsman.

BEFORE THE STORM: Soviet Ukrainian Fiction of the 1920s



Edited by George Luckyj
Translated by Yuri Tkacz

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