

Vasyłka

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It was seven years before the war. Maksym was getting ready to go to Canada. The night before his departure, he had a dream.

He walks as if in his own field, looking for its boundaries amid other landowners' fields, but cannot find them. His field and the fields of those other people are such a flat plain, which blends off in the distance with the sky so sincerely, that it makes you think: if you can get that far you'll touch heaven itself. But wait, not quite. Things never go the way man wants, but the way God Almighty wills. Maksym strains his eyes trying to distinguish the boundaries of his field, which he knows like his hands, plowed by years of work, but instead he catches a glimpse—and what does he see? From that far-off place where the earth and the sky usually meet as if greeting each other at daybreak, enormous billows of smoke are emerging quickly, one after another, and all of this is rolling directly onto the fields. Onto the fields, I say. Some slither like black vipers up into the sky, and others coil over the fields like snakes. What could it be? If it does not turn out for good, it will bring about something violent. And what do you know—here it comes. A white, elongated horse emerges from the smoke. The horse is without a saddle, its neck stretched for six hands. It is terribly emaciated. As if from a bullet wound, blood gushes from between its ribs. With its mouth wide open, the horse gallops feverishly, braying mournfully and menacingly. Billows of smoke rise behind it. The field is no longer a field, not a green wave of new sprouts, not God's freshly plowed land, but some kind of wasted plain, covered with dried lumps of turned-up soil, one larger than the other, and trenches of some sort. Is it a desert? What else can it be?

Maksym woke up. The stars were still shining, but he got up anyway. He did not wake his wife right away because she had been up late with the children. He had two of them: Dmytro, a little older, and little Annychka. Maksym went out into the yard, looked into the cowshed, gave the cattle feed and water, walked around his house, stable, and barn three times, washed his face, dressed, and went back inside. At the threshold, he met Vasyłka, his beloved wife.

"Maksym," she said. "Why so early this morning? You still have some time before you have to go."

"I couldn't sleep any more."

"How come?"

"Because," he said and told her his dream. "Be good and careful, wife,

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so you don't encounter any misfortune."

"From what?"

"From the field, of course."

"Huh-ah?"

"You see, in my dream I couldn't find the borders of our field. Smoke kept coming from somewhere, and it brought along a white and emaciated horse with a bullet wound. It was galloping someplace, braying mournfully. Perhaps it lost its master. I was bathed in sweat and woke up."

Vasyłka smiled faintly, showing her even white teeth.

"I don't think this is funny, Maksym. What you're telling me sounds very strange. Just think, you're leaving, and I will be on my own with the children. Although it's not a long time, as you keep saying; still, two or three years is hardly the same as two or three days. Don't worry about the field. I will hold on to it with my own teeth. Your family is also here and can help me, should someone decide to plow through the boundaries."

"Family? What family? Do you think my old aunt and her son can go to court hearings? Today, if misfortune comes your way, it will come. But do write to me, wife! Write the whole, real truth. Do not hide good or bad from me. God willing..."

"*You write, Maksym,*" she said, wiping tears away with the back of her hand.

"I will, Vasyłka! Hush! Don't cry! When I get good work and good pay, I'll send you money, and that will be my letter to you. But you must write to me about the children, the cattle, work, and *how* you'll manage the property without me. Write about everything. Don't leave out a thing. Take good care of our old dog, because when you sleep at night it keeps watch. Last night when you were already deep in sleep, it howled so agonizingly, so mournfully, that my heart grew heavy. And then that white, wounded horse in my dream. That's why I couldn't sleep."

An hour later, he took his leave.

He went down the road to the neighboring village, where he was supposed to meet up with several other men—two of them had already been to Canada—who were also traveling overseas.

He was walking fast so as not to let the sorrow that filled his breast overtake him, but also so as not to prolong his wife's suffering—he loved her dearly. When they reached the place where they had to part ways, he stopped and removed his hat.

"Vasyłka," he finally said in a tense voice.

"Speak to me, Maksym," she answered, pressing a handkerchief to her eyes.

"All sorts of things happen, Vasyłka..."

She looked at him and tears gushed from her eyes.

"*Take care of the children. Be equally kind to all of them...*"

She understood him.

"Children do not ask to be born into this world, wife!"

She sighed loudly and pressed herself to his breast.

"How could you say this to me, my husband? Do I deserve such words from you?"

"Wife, I'm just mentioning it. Don't get upset. I only want to *say* that things can happen. I could die. I'm saying it for *that* reason. Take care. Now go back to them, to *my Annychka*."

He cut himself short. His suppressed sorrow burst out of his breast in a loud wailing. He almost shoved his crying wife away, picked up his hat that had fallen to the ground, pressed it with an almost drunken motion to his head, and left.

* * *

The young woman looked back several times at her husband. They loved each other and had lived together in peace and harmony. Although they were not rich, neither were they poor. They worked hard and gradually, little by little, had begun to live well. A year ago, Maksym bought a small field that bordered his orchard. Since he did not have enough money in hand and did not want to sell his cattle, he had to take a bank loan for two hundred. To pay off his debt faster, he decided to follow good people's advice and go to Canada for a few years, earn money, and then come back and settle for good on his own plot of land. At first, Vasyłka objected. Why look for work overseas? Just crossing the sea can cost one one's life. Water isn't land. And the sea has *such* waters, they say. One can make money here too. She insisted on selling a cow. "If God is willing, we will get another," she kept saying. But he was firm in his decision. He had made up his mind to go, and her words did not sway him. He kept saying the same thing over and over until she finally gave in.

And now he had left.

She returned home in tears. She was already longing for her Maksym, as if she were never to see him again. Who made up this Canada that tugged at people the way a fishing pole tugs at fish?

Her children met her by the gate. Little Dmytryk, who saw her first, ran towards her. Little Annychka followed.

"Where is daddy?" cried Dmytryk from afar, "Where is daddy? Is he already in the city?"

"He is already in the city," she said in a faint voice, "already in the city." And she clenched her teeth tightly so as not to burst into tears again.

She gathered her children to her and brought them back into the yard. Their old guard dog, Tarkush, stretched his front paws toward them, barking and showing his teeth.

"Food, food, food," the dog seemed to bark in a friendly and impatient manner, addressing the mistress of the house. "Food, food!"

"All right, all right," she replied, patting the loyal animal on its head. "All right, I'll give some to everyone. None of you will be left out. Hush, be quiet!"

And all three vanished into the house.

* * *

Six years passed. All went well in Vasyłka's household. Everything was clean, neat, and well managed. The number of cattle in Vasyłka's stable grew, and she herself turned from a slim, young, and girlish-looking woman into a serious, robust, and hard-working mistress of the house. Energetic and decisive, she attracted particular attention with her bright, steel-colored eyes, which rested so inquiringly on everyone who entered her house, be they acquaintances or strangers. These inquisitive eyes demanded respect; otherwise her beautiful, white, wide forehead grew dark and stern, evoking discomfort, particularly when her red lips opened without a smile and started talking.

Maksym wrote and sent money. Years passed, but he did not come back. Dmytryk was almost ten, and little Annychka was already a smart girl, often helping her mother with chores. Both children had turned out well, and their mother's heart beat faster at the thought that if not this year then the following Maksym would return and see his children—his Dmytryk, whom he spoiled so much, and his favorite, Annychka, a wise and kind child who read every thought from her mother's eyes and the eyes of those who asked small favors of her. Yes, that Annychka, like a little mother, took care of everything when her mother had to leave the house and she and her ten-year old brother were left in charge of the household. But Vasyłka did not leave the house often. There was no time. Only on Sundays did she go to church or to the city to sell something. She used the money either to buy something for the household or gave it to their priest, who then took her money to the bank. Their debt was long paid off, and on Maksym's request Vasyłka bought another plot of land, which she cultivated on her own. But Maksym kept postponing his return. Another three months, he wrote, another five, another four, and then he would come back for good, because his work in Canada was hard. It ate away his strength every day. He could already feel it in his back. That is what he wrote until his letters stopped arriving. Why? Vasyłka didn't know. She asked other women whose husbands were also overseas. One man once wrote ambiguously that he would be home soon; he was only waiting for Maksym, who had gone with their supervisor to M., where they were to dynamite a mountain cliff that was standing in the way of their railway construction. That was the extent of the information.

Time and more time passed. Summer followed spring, and autumn followed summer. But Maksym did not return, and sent no news. Vasyłka began to worry. She could not sleep at night. She imagined Maksym dead. She cried and prayed. She engaged the priest for special services, sincerely hoping that God would enlighten Maksym and make him come back. At home, to be fair to her, her hands did the work of two persons. Her head thought for two. But, as God was her witness, her heart grew so sad sometimes, especially in the gloomy late autumn or in the winter. A man is a man. When a snowstorm raged outside and the temperature dropped, the windows nearly bursting from the frost and threatening to let the blizzard in, when the dog barked, howled, and rattled its chain, trying to break free as if guarding the house from someone or something, the woman had to calm the frightened children in their bed above the stove, pull on her sheepskin coat, and get knee-deep in the snow to make sure no shadow had slipped near the barn, the stable, or the house.

Oh, God!

Then the war broke out.

It broke out and shook the world.

The earth was ripped apart, turned over, and flooded with blood. That was when it really got going. Everything was covered with corpses. The voices of humans, animals, and cannon wailed, filling the air with their sound. Wounded soldiers wandered to and fro. The white, black, and brown ghosts of horses fell heavily to the ground.

At night, the stars shimmered timidly like small dots on the sky, and the moon hid half way behind the straight, dark strand of clouds. The moon was often pale.

When everything finally settled for the night, black crows came flying in and descended hurriedly to the ground.

* * *

One day during that time, Vasyłka stopped by my house. She talked about her children, about the household, about Maksym, who, it seemed, could not come home because of the war, and about the dreadful times we lived in. She spoke about the war and about the enemy. At that time, everyone learned what sorrow was, and saw their fill of blood. Everyone made sacrifices. People forgot about themselves and cried only when they faced something that they had never seen before—gruesome dismemberment. This was what the war brought for many years. Then, with many interruptions, Vasyłka told me the following story.

“Last year the enemy, the Muscovites, was stationed in our village, S. One of our soldiers, a dragoon named Ivan Rotenchuk, was hiding at a neighbor’s house, and it fell to me to bring him food. The enemy searched the

place but did not find him. Later he came over to my place and asked to stay with me for a few days. I made up my mind and said, "I'll hide you until *our* troops come, or as long as I can." I had some hay behind the house, and that was where I hid him. He stayed there while it was still warm, but when it got cold I said, "Come into the house. We'll dig a hideout under the bed."

I told the children to hold their tongues.

"This is our soldier, children!" I explained to them. "If the Muscovites find him, they'll shoot him."

"How can he be our soldier if the Muscovites are in the village?" the children asked.

"The Muscovites have taken over, children," I said, "but he escaped from them, and wants to hide here till our troops come back."

After thinking for a moment, the children—Dmytryk was then ten, and Annychka eight—replied, "And what if the Muscovites come and start asking?"

"Then tell them he is your daddy. The truth is, the Muscovites captured him near Stanislav, but on the way to Russia he escaped, changed into civilian clothing to look like a Ruthenian, and made it here pretending to be a local."

"How can we say that, if our daddy is in Canada?"

"Dmytryk! He is a soldier, and that is very important. That is why we have to say he is our daddy."

Dmytryk agreed and promised together with Annychka not to tell anyone. He also added earnestly: "In that case, we have to keep it quiet so that our emperor can have a lot of soldiers and defeat the Muscovites."

Dmytryk took after his father. He always pondered over things, and when he set his mind to something, it was a pleasure to listen to him.

So Ivan crawled into his hideout under the bed.

One day the Muscovites caught him at home and said, "Very well! Why is your husband at home and not on the front? Why is he not fighting?"

"He is deaf," I said.

One Muscovite tried to talk to him.

"You have to yell at him because he can't hear you."

Stepping closer and touching him, I yelled into his ear, "Pay attention, the soldier is speaking!"

He opened his mouth and said, "Huh-ah?" Then he addressed the Muscovite, "Please yell louder, I can't hear you."

"It's good that you are home," the Muscovite replied.

He didn't speak to Ivan after that. The children were so quiet, as if they had water in their mouths. When the Muscovite stepped outside, they burst out laughing. Later some soldiers came and asked to stay at our house, but I didn't let them in. I always kept my doors locked. When I had to go to the village or the city, I strictly ordered the children not to open the door so that, God forbid, a Muscovite might not get in.

One day the Muscovites came to the door and started banging, demanding we let them in.

"Mother is not at home," Dmytryk answered, "We won't open because you may steal something."

I was at home, but hid. The Muscovites went to the neighbors, where they were told that I'm a Uniate, that I do not house any Muscovites, and that I *must* be at home. They came back with an ax and ordered the children to open the door, threatening to chop it down right away if they didn't. I ran to the other room and told the children to open the door. They did so. The Muscovites came in.

"Where is your mother?" they said.

"We don't know where Mother is!"—but they knew very well that I was home.

"If only she would come home! What is she thinking? Soldiers are being billeted everywhere, but she isn't housing any?" said one of them.

Hearing these words, I came in immediately and said:

"What kind of a commandant is this, to talk about me this way? Who is this big shot, I ask you?" I said.

"Why aren't you letting anyone stay in your house?" he answered.

"I have two small children, as you can see, and I'm not always home. I'm afraid I'll get robbed. One woman I know was robbed, and I'm afraid the same will happen to me," I said.

Then he lunged at me with an ax and wanted to hit me. Another soldier grabbed the ax.

"Leave the woman alone. She speaks the truth. In the village there will always be some scoundrel who would steal, so she is afraid," he said.

"If your commandant gives the order to house you and anything is stolen, then I'll know where to complain," I replied.

After that they spoke nicely, and a sergeant came over and assigned three soldiers for housing at my place.

"Don't do any harm to this woman and don't take anything. She's afraid," he ordered.

"If anything is stolen, or if they take something, come to me," he said.

The soldiers went out to get their things, and it grew quiet in the house. Then I gave Ivan thick, warm linen pants, a big sheepskin coat, two blankets, and a pillow, and sent him to the stable, back under the hay. That's where he hid from the Muscovites.

When there was no one at home, he would come in to warm up and eat. Sometimes I called him in myself. At those times, one of the children kept watch by one window, and the other by the second window to make sure nobody stepped into the house. "If anyone gets close to our house," I told them, "Call me, so I can greet the guests myself." That's how it went: when he stepped into the house, I would feed him, and the children would keep

watch by the windows.

When it became very cold I went to see my mother, who lived two kilometers away. I went through the fields so that no one would see me. It was snowing and snowing. The field was empty. There was no one around. Occasionally a lone raven would fly by and nothing else. I finally got there and told her everything.

"Mother, he can't stay under the hay in the stable any longer. He'll freeze. What shall I do? Give me some advice!"

Mother thought for a moment and said, "Woe unto you! He has to go. The Muscovites haven't billeted anyone with me, and rarely does anyone come here. Bring him here and let him stay with an old woman."

With that, I returned home. The following day I dressed him as a woman. I gave him my shirt and my skirt, made him a headdress out of my scarf, cloaked him in two sheepskin coats and took him to my mother's place.

While we were walking along the road, several Muscovites popped up before us as if from under the ground. They stopped us and started fooling around. We didn't feel the ground under our feet. They pushed me, but I pushed back. They tried to grab his breasts, thinking he was a woman.

"Leave her alone!" I cried angrily, pushing the enemy away, "Can't you see she has a tooth-ache? You think we have trifles on our minds. Not at all! She is in pain and can't see God's world since morning. She can't even speak! And just look at you!"

Then the Muscovites started questioning us about where were we going and where were we from.

"There is a doctor in the next village. We went to get medication for her teeth. Now we are heading home," I said.

With that, they left us alone, thank God. We didn't meet anyone else. My mother housed him for a while, but soon he had to return to us.

"It's better this way. Some time here, some time there," she said.

The Muscovites who stayed at my house never saw him. Yet when he moved back to my place, one Muscovite who was stationed at the neighbor's house caught sight of him going through the yard to the stable, and he immediately called on me.

"Who's the fellow who went to the stable? He looks more like a spy than a soldier."

"Don't say such dreadful nonsense. It is war out there," I answered him. "Your soldiers can easily send me to Siberia for that."

When my tenants came back from the forest where they had been hewing wood, they asked directly from the doorway, "Are you keeping a soldier here?"

"No, I'm not," I said, "I'm not keeping anyone but you."

"Really!?" they said, "Our comrades saw a spy going into your stable."

When the neighbor's tenant asked me about the man that went to my

stable, I immediately sent Ivan to Maksym's sister.

"If they're talking like that, they'll likely search my place," I said to him, "and then we'll be in trouble."

My tenants kept whispering something to one another, and finally said, "Hey, soldiers! Let's go and look if someone is really hiding in the stable."

They went out to the stable, but didn't dare to go up to the loft because it was already dark. I ran back to the house and brought a candle.

"Look carefully for that spy!" I said, giving them the lit candle.

They climbed up to the loft and searched everywhere, making sure no one was hiding there. But *he* wasn't there.

"There is no one here," they said and climbed down.

And my children, my dear children, held their tongues and didn't say a single word. My Annychka only followed everyone with her eyes, which popped out of her white face, and didn't say a word. She was already sick. Oh, God!

* * *

For a whole year I wandered around so exhausted from poor sleep that people couldn't recognize me anymore. For four months, I suffered from a headache day and night. I couldn't sleep at all. I would hear a sound outside, and my whole body would shudder, and I would think, "Oh my, the Muscovites are coming again." How could it be any different? Just think, I had to make food and take it to him, but the enemy was always watching over my shoulder. I withered so much that I had to see a Russian doctor. He told me, "Woman, you are ill because of stress and lack of sleep. You must rest." And the doctor gave me powders for my sleep and for my head. God give him health, the powders made me feel better.

But Annychka wasn't getting better. She had gotten sick long before Ivan came to our house. She had caught cold when our soldiers were stationed with us. The soldiers slept in the big room on one side of the house and I slept with the children in the small room on the other side. That small room had a big hole in one corner, and the draft got to my Annychka's lungs while she slept. Despite her illness, she kept watching over Ivan as vigilantly as she did when he first came to us. When our troops were in the village and the Austrian doctors treated her, she felt better, but under the Muscovites, she grew worse again.

During the time that Ivan spent at my sister-in-law's, another man like him who had run away all the way from Russia joined him. The two stayed together, and I fed both of them. My Russian tenants grew suspicious of the food I would take there.

"Who are you taking that food to?" they asked

"*She*—that is Maksym's sister—lives in poverty now," I answered.

"She has no money. She has only one cow, and right now it doesn't give any milk. That's why I take a share of what I cook to her. When our troops were in town, she was getting paid for her husband who serves in their army, and she gave me some money. And now, you can see how things are!"

"All right, all right then," the Muscovites said.

From that moment onward, I was very careful not to get noticed. The Muscovites often used to go to the forest to hew wood, and I told *him*, "When they aren't home I'll throw a towel on the fence. You check the forest"—it was not far from my sister-in-law's house—"and if they aren't coming back, you may come over, eat, and then go back again."

And he started coming. He ate, took food for the night, and I didn't go out any longer. It was nice to have a break. And the Muscovites saw nothing. Soon, they moved out. And he came home again. When someone came over, my doors were always shut and if they wouldn't go away, he would retreat into his hideout under the bed, and only then would I open the door.

Because of him I put wooden floors in my house, so he could have a hideout under the bed. If not for that floor, I'm not sure he would have been able to hide from the Muscovites for so long. When I was installing the wooden floor, the Muscovites asked me what was it for.

"It is warmer that way," I said.

Right at the time that I was putting the floor in, an aunt from T. arrived and asked to stay a night at my place. I didn't let her into the house because Ivan was there. Later, her son met me at the road and asked, "Why didn't you let my mother stay with you for a night? You were giving birth, weren't you?"

Can you imagine how hard that was for me, and what harsh words I had to hear then? But I replied, "Why? I will tell you, but you and my aunt have to keep it a secret. Don't tell anyone. I used *military boards* to put in the floor. When people find out about it, they'll report it to our troops once they get back, and they'll scandalize my household. They'll take the boards back. That's why. But don't tell anyone, I beg you!"

He was appeased and went away.

My neighbors also had Muscovites stationed with them. Once, Ivan went to the stream for water. A neighboring Muscovite saw him and when he went back to his house announced, "That woman has a tall man walking around her place. Could her husband be back from Canada?"

The neighbor's wife ran straight to me to find out.

"Did Maksym come home from Canada?"

"Huh-ah? Where?" I said.

"That Muscovite said he saw him carrying water."

"That was Gregor's boy" I said.

"Huh-ah? Why would he come to you, Vasyłka?" she said.

"He took my pig to the market in S., but I didn't pay him because I didn't have any change. He came to remind me about it. But I can't show him

where I hide my money, so I asked him to bring water. Meanwhile, I took out the money and then gave it to him. I couldn't show him my hiding place because first he'll notice it, and then he'll come back and swipe the money. That's how it is, my dear neighbor!" I replied.

This all took place during Lent.

The Muscovites finally stopped bothering me. When Ivan would occasionally step outside and a Muscovite would show up, the children looked at each other and quickly ran to warn him.

"Daddy, hide—because mother cannot run out to warn you all the time or the Muscovite will notice her."

And so he hid either in the house, up in the hayloft, or in the hideout under the cow's stall. He lived in misery, just like the children and I did. Meanwhile, my child, my Annychka, grew weaker and weaker. She died exactly two weeks after Easter.

The night before Annychka died, he stayed up with me by her bedside. He climbed out of his hideout under the cow's stall (it was much better there than in the house), and lay down next to her so that he could give her a candle if I fell asleep. "Go to sleep or else what will become of you? You haven't slept much lately," he said to me.

He covered up the windows so that no one would look in.

And we both sat there like that and kept vigil.

I looked at the child again—I won't speak of my grief—and saw a trickle of saliva was dripping from her mouth. "Do you want some water, Annychka?" I asked. I took her into my arms and gave her a sip of water with medicine. But she didn't want any. Then he lit the candle, gave it to me, and I put it into the child's hand. And when the child was dying and Dmytryk and I were crying, in that moment of my great sorrow, I suddenly saw a man with white hair as if floating in the air above the child. And I heard the words, "*Don't cry, for she is in my light now.*"

My mother-in-law came from the other room and took the child from my arms. And Ivan said, "Don't cry. Don't you see she is an angel now? It's better for her now."

Then he sent me outside, because my sorrow was so unbearable that my heart almost broke. But when I thought—no, when I heard those words, perhaps from within me, perhaps from my missing husband—"Don't cry, for she will be in my light," I felt better.

He also cried bitterly, but continued to comfort me.

"Don't cry," he said. "Look after your other child. Also, if you fall ill, who will watch over me?"

When Annychka had died—it happened before daybreak—he went alone through the fields to the forest to get my mother. The following day, when I went to C. to ask our priest to perform the funeral rites for the child, my mother stayed at our home. When people started to come to the room

where the deceased lay, he was still sitting by the window. When I came back from C., it was late at night, I found a lot of people in the house. Ivan went to the stable and stayed there. My mother brought him food.

"Mother, I can't eat because the child who watched over me and cared for me is no more. I can't eat!" he said and cried bitterly again.

"Tell *her* she has to eat!"

I was given food, but I couldn't eat because my heart was grieving so much for my child that I didn't understand where I was. Only when I went to the neighbor's house was I able to fall asleep. People left the house, but my mother and he stayed by the child all night...

When I came back home in the morning, he hid, as before. I went back to C. to buy a few more things and to hire a wagon to bring the priest to the funeral. I returned when it was already dark. I found the house filled with people again. I asked mother if she had fed Ivan, and she said, "I brought him food, but he doesn't want to eat. All he does is think about something."

I went to see him myself and asked, "Why aren't you eating, poor fellow? You could fall ill, and it's hard to be ill in the trenches."

Then he ate a little.

My mother went back to her house and promised to return in the early morning.

He told me, "You stay in the house while people are still there, but I will go to sleep."

I agreed. He went to sleep, and I stayed up till half past midnight. When everybody left, I woke him up and he came to the house.

"There is milk and bread—eat something, and I will go to sleep now. "

I went to bed with two sheepskin coats and my boots on, because it was very cold that night. He put another blanket and a sheepskin coat on top, and I fell asleep.

Sudden voices woke me. I raised my head to look around and saw a house filled with Cossacks. I screamed as loud as I could, although I was so scared that my voice was barely audible.

"Who is it? Who is it? Why are all these soldiers in the house?"

I thought it was a search, since so many Cossacks had filled my house.

"Don't scream!" said someone from the crowd. "Don't scream! Is there an Austrian in your house?"

"No!" I said.

The Muscovite captain began to speak.

"Maybe it's your master? We won't hurt him. Only tell us. Yes or no? He will only go with us to Russia."

"No, Captain! There is no one here!"

"We will either hang you or shoot you if you don't tell us the truth," threatened the captain.

"Shoot me! Hang me!" I screamed again, "but there is not a single

Austrian here!"

"And what happens if we find one?" the captain asked again.

"Captain!" I replied, "I am not thinking straight now, because I just buried my child."

"Have you seen any Austrians walking around other houses? Tell us the truth, and we'll capture them on our own. They wander on the roads from time to time," the captain asked.

"I haven't seen any Austrians!" I said.

"You! *You* are a real scum! We know it already, don't you worry!"

Then I fell silent.

When I was sleeping and the Muscovites knocked on the door, he, not knowing what to do, hid on the porch under the sacks. After talking to me, the Muscovites went outside to look for the "Austrians." Guards stood around the house, so nobody could escape and there were plenty of Cossacks inside. When a Cossack found him under the sack, he called on others to shoot and shot once himself, knocking Ivan's hat to the ground. Having dragged him outside, they hit him under the ribs so hard that he bent over in pain.

Then they turned to me.

"So, what now? There are still no Austrians here?!"

"People, what are you doing? I already have one corpse in the house, and you want to add another one?" I screamed.

"*You see?* Don't you deserve to be hanged? You said there are *no* Austrians, and now—think for yourself!" the captain said to me then.

"Captain! My house is like a tavern now! A dead body lies on the table, so anyone can come in," I said.

"And why did you give him a sheepskin coat?" he retorted.

"Merciful God! Since God took my child, let the devil take the coat, too! I had to take a soldier in because if I didn't house him and didn't give him the last crust of bread, he could have set my house on fire in no time," I said.

Then they told me to open the stable. On my way there, I cried so bitterly that all the Muscovites pitied me. When I saw him in the yard standing among them, pale as death itself, I nearly fainted.

They asked about his rifle.

"Captain," he replied, "when your soldiers captured me, they took everything away."

They told me to give them a belt to tie his hands. I had one, but didn't want to give it away. There was a wire stretched between poles near the house with some laundry hanging on it. They cut the wire and tied his hands behind his back so tight that they turned blue. And I—Oh God—I was wailing, yelling, and crying so bitterly.

"Oh, God! What did I do wrong on *this night* that you want to part me with my other child?" I was saying this on purpose to let him know *what* he should say about *when* he had come to my house. The Muscovites indeed

jumped up to him with questions about when he had come.

"It was probably half past midnight or one o'clock when I came," he said. (They had captured him around two.)

"You haven't slept yet?" they asked again.

"No," he said, "I haven't."

"Where did you come from?" they asked.

"From another village," he said

"What is it called?" they asked.

"I know a lot of villages," he said. And he told them about villages somewhere near Galicia.

"Why did you come here? Did you *know* her, or why?" they pressed further.

He said that he had been going through the forest when he saw the village. He had come closer, looked around, and saw that there was a corpse in the house. Then he went in, because he knew they feed everyone at funerals. He came inside, but there was nobody there. Then the mistress of the house walked in and gave him food. He did not leave, and then the soldiers came. He said that the first woman who hid him gave him away because she was restless... maybe even jealous. Then he told the commandant, or whoever he was, that he was glad that the Muscovites captured him because he wouldn't have to suffer any more, because now he would have food.

* * *

Ivan was taken to C. and put in jail. When the Muscovites took him, they told the villagers and me that we were facing *years in Siberia*. In response to that, I sent my father to see an informer and ask him to appeal on my behalf so that they wouldn't take me to Russia. The informer only said, "Oh, I see—he stayed at your daughter's house and you didn't know about it?"

"I didn't know about it," my father said. "How would I? And she, my daughter, didn't know. She is still so young and ignorant."

"But I know it all. I know that even when he was still staying with the first woman, Zoika, he was already seeing your daughter. I know it all. And not only I—the Muscovites know it too," the informer claimed. "Why didn't your daughter Vasyłka come to me *on her own*?" he continued.

Father came back and told me, "Go and see that stubborn man yourself. He won't listen to me."

Early next morning, I went to see him.

"Would you be so kind as to appeal to those in power not to punish me and not to send me to Russia? I have only one child left. Who would look after him if they take me?" I asked him.

At this moment, the commander in charge of the search entered.

"We captured *that* soldier at *this* woman's house," he said.

"Why did you hide the Austrian?" he asked, turning toward me.

"Gentlemen! For seven years, I have been living without a husband. It's been four since I last heard from him. I think he is already dead. And I love *this* man, and he loves me. He doesn't have a wife and we could have gotten married. And he also used to tell me, 'I wish the Muscovites stayed here longer because when our Austrians return they'll either shoot me or send me back into the trenches, and you wouldn't have me anyway. The Muscovites are very kind people. If they take me to Russia, it might be even better for me. They are kind people.'"

But everything that I told them wasn't true. I had to be cunning, so that the Muscovites wouldn't get angry and wouldn't kill us.

"She loves the Muscovites," the commandant continued. "Sure she loves them. But we were told that your Austrian officers left money for you to hide him, and that he is a spy—it's just that simple."

"Our officers didn't leave us any money, and I fed and housed this man out of love, and he didn't trick the Muscovites," I objected once again.

"So how much do you love him?" the commandant and the informer asked me then.

"Very much, gentlemen, as much as I love my own heart. Let me see him one last time."

At this point, both men burst out laughing.

"We know," the commandant said, "how love goes. I am sorry you haven't had a husband for seven years, but . . . perhaps . . . perhaps we can help you a little. Only, you see, it'll cost you. But don't tell anyone. We are going to C.—and you come here tomorrow very early."

I came early the next morning but found only the informer.

"Don't tell anyone what I'm going to do because around here the whole of Russia can be sold for two kopecks. Your business will cost you fifty rubles, and nothing will happen to you. If you don't have enough right now, I'll stop by your house tomorrow early in the morning since I am going to visit the officers in C.," he told me.

He came early indeed, and I gave him twenty more rubbles. And, to tell the truth, they didn't even mention me in the protocol. Ivan was taken to Russia on the third day. I walked from S. and only caught up with him by the forest on the hills near C. I followed him all the way to the next village because the guards didn't allow talking during the march. When we were finally able to talk, I gave him a few shirts, three loaves of bread, and a box of honey cakes.

"Don't be sad. I would escape, but I have no money," he told me.

"I'll give you money," I said, "but only if you are willing to defend our emperor."

And I gave him twenty-five rubles.

"Oh God! You are so sincere! I'll escape, whatever it takes, and I'll defend our emperor as long as I have any strength left in me. Because I know that we live with our emperor as well as we would with our own father. For six years I've served and never did I come to any harm. Unless I get killed, I won't stay in Russia," he said.

When he was ready to take his leave, I instructed him, "Don't smoke, don't throw money in the air, but do buy bread once you get to a village, so you have something when you are on the run."

He agreed with everything I said.

When they put him on a train in Kamianets P., he used the first opportunity and escaped together with another comrade who had been also captured by the Muscovites hiding in villages. The Cossacks raced after them, searched, questioned everyone, but couldn't catch them.

After fourteen days, they came back.

Exactly at midnight, at twelve o'clock, Ivan arrived at my place. Earlier, when we had been parting ways, I had whispered into his ear, "If God helps you escape, sneak back into my house so quietly that only a night-bird might notice you!"

He did exactly that. He hid under the stable, and that *other* man went to another woman. I didn't recognize him at first. He was dressed as a Muscovite and had a very dark face. When I saw him under the stable, I started yelling.

"What?" I said, "Has a Muscovite come to me again? Is he going to steal from me?"

He said nothing.

Then I came closer and looked carefully. I looked, and it was *him*.

After feeding him inside the house, I said, "What are we going to do? Our house is under suspicion. You have to fix the hideout under the cow's stall and stay there so that even my child doesn't know you are here."

Again, he heeded my words.

All at once, more than a thousand Cossacks came to our village and set up their quarters in the same corner where my house was. There were so many of them everywhere—in the house and in the yard—that there was no place to hide from them. They did not stay long, but it was still frightening. From now on, all I cared about was making sure there was plenty of bread in the house. So I was taking care of him once again. I brought him food and everything else he needed so that he didn't have to get out of his hideout. Three weeks passed that way. When I milked the cow, I fed him and, as a result, brought only a small amount of milk back to the house.

"Your cow doesn't give much milk, does it?" the Cossacks said.

"Very little," I said, and that was all.

Once I went to C. to sell a young bull and there ran into the informer. I didn't recognize him, but he stopped me.

"Woman," he said, "are you out of your mind, or is there something else

wrong with you? Why did you let that *soldier* that we once captured at your place back into your house?"

"I don't know. I didn't see him." I said, and my heart grew cold. "Go and search for him. If you find him, you can take my head off too!"

With that, I visited a fellow parishioner and asked her to hide him for a few days until after the search at my house.

"I'll give food, money, and anything you want," I said, "but hide him for a few days so that they don't kill me or him."

Three days later, they searched my house. I went to the field to reap rye, which was lying low, almost to the ground, as if asking to fall under the sickle, and the Muscovites came and turned the whole house upside-down. In the hideout under the cow's stall, they found his maps and his magnifying glass. The whole village knew they found maps at my place.

I went to the informer and started to cry.

"So, did they find maps?" he asked.

"The children brought them from the forest. When our troops retreated, they left things behind. The children found them because they were playing in the trenches. Is it my fault?"

"Oh sure—they *were playing!*" he said. "You say you don't know anything, but the news that he is back in your place is spreading around the village like fire. Great!"

"I swear, I don't know anything," I said.

"He might not be there, but the maps were found at your place. You will be in a lot of trouble, Vasyłka!" he said.

In response, I gave him thirty rubles, and he promised that nothing would happen to me. And that is how it was.

People kept coming to the informer and kept provoking him.

"Is *she* going to pay for that? Why is Vasyłka not being punished?" they said.

"Be patient, people—be patient: she'll get *six years* in Siberia. Don't worry about her," the informer answered.

When I heard about it, I went to him and cried, "I gave so much money, and now I have to go to Siberia for six years? Where is justice?"

"I say this on purpose because people need something to gnaw on. They need a bone. Can't you spare them one?" he said, and laughed.

He was right.

Meanwhile Ivan stayed with that woman, and I gave him as much food as I could. After the search, he came back. When the Muscovites retreated, I told him everything that was going on in the village, and we rejoiced together.

That is how it went until our troops came back.

When I heard how on the last day before the retreat the Muscovites searched for Ivan and the maps at my mother's place, my vision blurred and turned yellow. I nearly fell to the ground. I was certain then that they would

shoot or hang both of us. But they didn't come. They ran out of time.

On the way to my mother's house, weak and nearly dead, I stopped in the middle of the road and thought, "God, if you give me death, give it in the name of our emperor, not in the name of a Muscovite. So many men gave their lives for the fatherland and the emperor, let one woman also fall for them, too."

At the last moment, a Muscovite ran in and took a cow. But I cried and begged him, and he left me that dear cow. I sent it far away into the field with the man, so that it was visible only as a variegated dot on the horizon, and I myself stayed to watch the house.

I hid in the back room closest to the road and listened, in case the Muscovites might come back. No one is protected from them. It may look as if they are retreating, but they still come back to grab something or to bid someone farewell.

Oh Dear God!

So I listened for some time crouching down and putting my year to the ground. This way I might hear better what was coming. All of a sudden I heard a hiss and then silence, and again—a hiss and then silence! I wanted to go out, but I was scared. "Oh God," I thought. "Maybe it's the Muscovites ambushing our troops and they will soon start shooting their canons." I listened for what words would reach me—Muscovite or German?

And I heard German—our words! Then I—Oh God! Should I scream? Should I jump?

"Our troops—our troops have arrived, Ivan!"

* * *

Ivan reported for duty and went back into battle.

Some of our people complained about me to our troops and said that I assisted the Muscovites.

When I complained to a sergeant (he wasn't a German—no he was one of us), he—I don't know why—said, "*You hid a soldier for the tsar, didn't you? For the tsar?* And after that you dare to complain! You so-and-so! Go back to where you came from!"

I didn't have any money—he knew that. And so it was. I left in tears.

* * *

With these last words, Vasyłka silently wiped away tears with the back of her hand.

"And what happened next?"

"Nothing."

Tears welled up her eyes.

"And what about Ivan?"

"Well, I told you. He reported for duty and went back into battle. Then God's will was done."

"What was it?"

I raised my head from my papers and looked at the young woman. She had never talked in such voice—no. Her face grew stone cold. Her eyes were cast down, and her hands hung helplessly on both sides of her body.

"What happened?"

"God's will. He was captured."

"By whom?"

"By the Muscovites. He was destined to go with them."

"He will come back, Vasyłka."

She bit her lips and said nothing but good-bye.

* * *

About two years later, she visited me again. It was on the second day of the feast of the Intercession. She had come on a pilgrimage, along with some other people.

She looked more serious, as if her past life of daily toil was now appeased. Her face had faded and grown darker. Under the white scarf, it looked as if it were cast from bronze. Her eyes ran thoughtfully over people, as if asking something.

"Are you managing your household well?"

"Well enough. Why not?"

She was happy she could do her work again. If it weren't for the land, work, cattle, and house, she would've lost her mind long ago.

"Any news from Maksym in Canada?"

"Not from him personally. But the priest made an inquiry, and a letter came saying that he had died. They wrote he had been blowing up some cliffs with dynamite for a railroad. He was working there, and one time he along with his supervisor and a few other men were blown up in a blast. Only his hands, they wrote, were found. Of the others—a leg, a head, and some pieces of flesh, like in a war. That was all."

I was silent for a moment, and she sighed.

* * *

"And did you get any news from Ivan?"

"I did once."

"Where is he?"

"They took him far, to Siberia. That's very far. One man who escaped from there—this man wasn't with him—told me that it's so cold there that a

word uttered by one man falls frozen to the ground before it can reach the other."

"That's all?"

"That's all. Who can retell everything? He also said that the nights are very frightening there."

"Yes."

"Frightening and deep, they say, as if one rolls into the other, as if rising from an eternal abyss. The summer is short. One has barely enough time to look at oneself and get a glimpse of the blue sky. The sun blinds the eyes there. We have it good here, they say."

"Good, Vasyłka."

Silence.

She fingered timidly the fringe on her colorful belt and grew pensive.

"*Summer is good*," she said coming back from her deep thoughts, "I work in the field and around the house. It has a new roof now. I weed, I weave, I whitewash. There is enough work for a woman. It never ends, as they say. But in the winter. Sometimes it gets so gloomy."

"You have a child, Dmytryk."

"He is my happiness. He is the only one God left me, otherwise, who knows? At night, which comes so early in the winter, I spin. I take such a pile of wool that I can't even see the room behind it."

"I can't see you behind the wool, mother,' Dmytryk sometimes says, 'turn your head toward me.'"

"Oh son..."

"I want to see you. I don't want you to cry. Daddy is in heaven—you told me so yourself. Don't cry!"

"Yes, it seems so."

"Sometimes one cries," she turned to me, acquitting herself. "Or I sing, and the child listens until he falls asleep. Once he's asleep, I listen. Back in *those* times, I learned to listen carefully at night. Every now and then, I get frightened when an animal cries out in the stable. My body shudders. It all seems so prophetic. '*Someone might be coming*,' I think. Sometimes, the dog howls or the wind wails in the fireplace, and I get frightened remembering *all of it*. God forbid I ever have to live through another war. I get up, put the wool in the corner, and pray. 'Glory to You, Oh God—that You exist,' I say."

Translated by Yuliya Ladygina

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