

Shvonts

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Ivan Shvonts was shaving with a blunt razor, scraping the bristle from both his flaming-red cheeks. He shaved feverishly, with haste and even anger. He moaned, pouted and ground his teeth, but did not sharpen the blade. He was in a hurry. The pounding of joyous drumbeats, the wail of a violin, and singing reached all the way here to his house from the Mykolaichuks' place. Old Mykolaichuk was marrying off his daughter Maria to a young man from Vuibarevo. At the very least, Ivan wanted to dance a little at her wedding.

He sat down on a stool and got up again and again, but didn't take his eyes off the small square mirror propped against an enamel jug, stubbornly continuing to scrape away with the blade. He was naked from the waist up. When he got up from the stool again or leaned toward the mirror, the muscles on his back rippled like snakes or braided ropes. He tossed his dirty shirt under the bench and threw a brand-new one, never worn, clean as snow, onto the bed.

"Ivan, son, I implore you: drive the hemp to Chumaliv for soaking!"

Shvonts turned abruptly to his mother, who was standing near the door, and asked sharply:

"Couldn't you have picked a different day?"

"When, if you're always so busy?"

He wasn't listening to her.

"Damn it, a hoe would be sharper." He cursed the razor under his breath, stubbornly scraping the bristle on his chin.

"Ivan, my son, I implore you: listen to me just this once!"

"I said I wouldn't take the hemp for you today. And that's that."

"Ivan, you—" she was wiping away her tears—"you swore to me that you wouldn't do anything foolish."

"And I don't plan on doing anything. I ju-s-s-t... damn, what a blade! Ma, I...," he turned his head to the door, "I just want to dance at Maria's wedding. Can't I do that?"

"Dear son, I am begging you, have pity on me! Drive the hemp over to Chumaliv." She dropped to her knees. "My heart ... is not made of steel."

Shvonts hurriedly raised his mother up from the ground.

"All right. I'll drive the hemp," he said without looking at his mother, and picked up the shirt he had tossed on the ground. "Gather your things."

He said this last phrase hoarsely as if it were tearing at his throat, unwilling to come out into the daylight.

He harnessed the horses and hastily began tossing the hemp sheaves onto the wagon. Mother tried to help him but he pushed her away.

"No thanks! I'll do it myself."

After loading the hemp and bracing it with a drying-pole, he helped his mother up onto the wagon. He then climbed up himself and laid the whip sharply on the horses' backs. The horses had not been expecting this from their master. In surprise, they jerked in different directions, nearly flipping the wagon over into the ditch.

"Ivan!" Mother screamed with alarm. "Have you gone crazy or what?"

Seeming not to hear his mother's words, he jumped down off the wagon and, restraining the horses, began lashing at their legs with all his might. They snorted and tried to pull away, but Shvonts held the reins firmly.

"I'll teach you to pull!" he yelled. "Take that! And that! Now!"

"Ivan, leave the animals in peace. They've done you no harm."

Ivan flashed his angry black eyes at his mother for a second and then lowered his head. It was evident that he had regained his senses and cooled down. He jumped back up onto the wagon, but now without the anger.

"Giddy-up, Chillok! Giddy-up, Tsyhan!" He yelled to the horses, and together they began to move forward.

Then, as if deliberately, the drumbeats became livelier, the violin started to wail, and the sound of a wedding song flew to the heavens, although its words were hard to make out. Even the melancholy sound of the flute was clearly audible from the other side of the hill where the Mykolaichuks lived. The flute's lament disturbed Shvonts's soul.

"Hmm! I guess it's true what they say—the sound of a flute beckons the heart," he said to himself, grasping his heart with his hand.

"Ivan, are you ill?"

"No, Ma. I heard a flute."

"Yes! And when a bride hears it, tears flow from her eyes."

Shvonts let out a dull moan and his teeth clenched.

"Ivan, what's wrong with you?" She grabbed her son's hand and rested her face on his shoulder. "Don't torment me, my child, and don't torment yourself."

"Okay, Ma, I won't torment you any more," he said and urged on the horses.

They rode on in silence. The autumn sun hovered above the hills on their right, warming them gently. Here and there, along the banks, ferns were already changing color.

Ivan did not avoid puddles; the wagon swayed so sharply that it seemed all the hemp would fall off.

"Ivan, drive more carefully or you'll shake the soul out of me," she pleaded, only half-jokingly.

"Okay, Ma, I'll drive you as I would a young lady." He called to the horses, "Hey, Chillok! Hey, Tsyhan! Ease up and stop shaking Ma."

They continued in silence again, following the road that led out of the village. The drumbeats were now muffled and barely audible. The sound of the violin and the flute no longer reached them, but the drumbeats, like a slender thread, kept hold of them, pulled them, lured them, and begged them to return.

Mother wanted to ask her son to drive faster to escape the drumbeats, but she did not dare. She looked at her Ivan. His face was still enflamed from shaving, so he licked his fingers and cooled first one cheek and then the other. A lock of black hair hung over his pale forehead. There was sadness in his eyes. It was painful to look at them, so she set her gaze on the sky, and joyfully yelled out in surprise. A stork was slowly flying over their heads.

"Look there—look, Ivan!" she said, pointing up, and then added quite softly and tenderly, "Look, Ivan, a stork is flying."

The son flashed his eyes crossly at the sky and mumbled, "I see."

"Do you remember, Ivan, when you were little and took eggs from a stork's nest? And then you couldn't sleep all night? I asked you why you weren't sleeping and you answered: 'Ma, I didn't listen to you and I took eggs from a stork's nest and now I'm scared that they'll come with embers in their beaks and burn down our house—and you'll burn to death because of me.' Do you remember?"

"I remember. Whoa, Chillok-Tsyhan! Cha! Cha! Chillok!"

They passed the last houses. Just ahead of them, some old women sat on a bench, warming themselves in the sun.

"Good day, ladies," Shvonts's mother greeted them.

"May God grant you a good day as well," the old women answered. "Where are you taking the hemp? To soak it?"

"Yeah! To soak it. To Chumaliv."

The old women nodded their heads and smiled. "We know the eddies in Chumaliv. We soaked hemp there more than once when we were young and healthy."

"Ivan, stop the horses for a minute. I want a drink of water."

"Why didn't you drink back home?" he barked, and then yelled to the horses, "Whoa, Chillok! Whoa, Tsyhan!"

"Keep going," she said, holding back her tears.

"Go on, drink your water! Why aren't you going?" he said, without looking at his mother.

"I've changed my mind," she said, gritting her teeth. "Drive on."

Once they were out of the village she let her tears flow freely.

"Oh God, oh God! Why do I suffer so in this world? I put up with his father," she motioned towards her son, "and now he, too, is disrespectful to me. God, why do you punish me so? What sins am I suffering for? His father danced with a knife and I lived in constant fear, and now my son wants to run me into the raw earth. Lord, why have you sent me this punishment? Did I offend someone? Did I malign anyone?"

"Stop whining, Ma. Look, people are coming and they're going to stare at us."

"Let them stare. Let them see what my son has reduced me to!" She sighed heavily, quickly wiping the tears from her eyes with a corner of her kerchief. "And why was I born into such misfortune? So many nice young men chased after me, but stupid me—I chose his father. When he asked for my father's blessing, he didn't do it the civilized way. No! He threatened my dad with a knife. 'If you don't let me marry Olena,' he said, 'then I'll either burn your place down or stab you.' Dad was so terrified he asked me to accept the marriage proposal."

She spoke in a barely audible whisper.

"Good day, Olena!"

"Good indeed, Stefan," she said, looking at a man about her own age, dressed up in his Sunday best and standing at the side of the road with a package under his arm.

"Why so sad, Olena?"

"And what do I have to be happy about?"

"There's a wedding in the village! You should go dance and sing a little."

"My singing and dancing days are over, Stefan."

"Just recall how Old Mykolaichuk and I once chased after you and you'll be dancing already. And probably singing too."

The woman looked sadly at her old friend and smiled painfully.

"And why didn't this handsome young man go to the wedding?" He asked to keep the conversation going.

"Excuse me, I forgot to ask you what I should be doing!" Shvonts shot back sarcastically and whipped the horses. "Go, Chillok! Go, Tsyhan! Go!"

Mrs. Shvonts held on tightly to the drying-pole, but she didn't ask her son to slow down. She wasn't happy to have met her old friend. Inadvertently he had disturbed her soul by stirring up vivid memories of the summers of her youth. He also evoked sad thoughts about her son and his stubborn courting of Maria Mykolaichuk. Ivan had sent matchmakers to her house three times, according to tradition. And three times she had rejected him by escaping through a window.

"If you won't marry me, you won't marry anybody," he had told Maria.

"Oh sure! I'll check with you about whom I should marry!"

He said nothing more, but from then on he would intercept young men on their way to visit her and threaten them with a knife—the one his grandfather used to slaughter pigs back in Shandriv.

"If you want to live—don't visit the Mykolaichuks!" He would say.

Some were scared away: "How can you deal with this maniac? You say one word to him and he starts pacing with his knife and foaming at the mouth!" So these young men avoided the Mykolaichuks' farmyard. Others, braver ones, did visit her. These Shvonts would meet beyond the hill, by the forest. He beat them. He beat them so fiercely that they too would forget, once and for all, the path that led to Maria's door.

Spitting out blood and the teeth that had been knocked out, the men swore to take their revenge on Shvonts.

"Just try," he would say, showing them the butcher knife. "Try—if you're not afraid of death."

The young men stopped visiting Maria. Shvonts sat on top of the hill across from her farmyard and watched the girl as she fetched water from the well and went about her chores. This went on for a long while until Maria could not bear it any longer and sent her father to talk to him.

Old Mykolaichuk was out of breath by the time he climbed up the hill. He sat down next to Shvonts and lit his pipe.

"I have a matter to discuss with you, Ivan, but I don't know how to begin without riling you."

"Tell me the worst part first and the rest won't be so bad."

"I came to tell you—leave Maria alone. She doesn't love you, and doesn't want to marry you. So why are you forcing yourself on her? Why do you seek her out in public?"

"You may not believe this," said Shvonts softly, "but I'm being pulled towards her. Something comes over me that drives me to her, and I can't control my actions."

"So you grab your knife and threaten to stab Maria if she doesn't marry you?!"

"That only happened once ... and your Maria is not easily frightened—she's courageous."

"Courageous or not, I beg you—leave her alone!"

Shvonts said nothing in reply. But from that day on, he was no longer seen up on the hill, though Maria claimed that she could still sense his gaze on her.

Back home, Ivan became restless. He could not work and the smallest things threw him into a rage. He beat the horses ruthlessly. Whenever he approached them, they trembled in fear, pricked up their ears and neighed in fear. Whenever anyone said a word to him, malicious or not, he grabbed for his knife.

Then news spread throughout the village: a young fellow from Vuibarevo had sent matchmakers to the Mykolaichuks.

"What will Shvonts do now? Will he kill that young fellow from Vuibarevo?" the women asked each other. Now they had something to chatter about.

Shvonts's mother was beside herself. Fervently she prayed God to take pity on her.

"Ivan! don't do anything stupid!" she would beg her son in the evenings. "You're walking around black as night. You've thought up something evil. Don't do it!"

For a long time he was silent. Then, one day, by the river, he pulled the knife out from the leg of his boot and threw it into the water.

"From this day on, Ma, you don't have to worry that I'll hurt anyone. I just want to dance at the Mykolaichuk wedding."

That had calmed the old woman. Only today, when she heard the joyful drumbeats, the wailing of the violin, and people singing, did fear grip her again. She was terrified for her son. She wanted him to be far, far away from the village today. That is why she asked him to take the hemp to Chumaliv, where the river flowed through a neighboring village, in the opposite direction from Vuibarevo. When he refused, she had become petrified. Remembering yesterday's dream, a horrible dream, she had fallen on her knees before her son, crying and begging him:

"Ivan! have pity on me! My heart is not made of steel!"

Yesterday's dream was still giving her chills. She had dreamt that her Ivan was still a little boy, and she was bathing him in a wooden trough. Suddenly the water had turned red. Frightened, she had pulled her son out of the water and held him close. Then she dreamed that her son was grown up. There was a wedding at the Mykolaichuks. Her Ivan is wearing a snow-white shirt and desperately wants to go to the Mykolaichuks, and she will not let him. But he doesn't listen to her. Mrs. Mykolaichuk greets him cordially, embraces him, looks him over from head to toe, and then, over his shoulder, signals to the young men who are present: "He doesn't have a knife!" Relieved, they sing a while, making conspiratorial nods that no one else notices. Her Ivan drinks a glass of vodka, declines some food he is offered, and gets up to dance. Spinning in a frenzied dance with some young girl, he glances at Maria. Suddenly Ivan Slupak, who had always scowled at her son in the past, yells:

"One! Two! Three!" And all the young men fly in a whirlwind at her Ivan.

They beat him and thrust their knives into his back and chest. Instantly his snow-white shirt becomes red. Ivan backs into a haystack and his eyes feverishly search for Maria—he seeks forgiveness and help only from her.

The women raise a chorus of shrieks and wails. The violin cuts off the song at its highest note, the cymbals ring and fade but the drummer seems not to notice: he strikes the drum five or six times more and only then, coming to his senses, presses his hand against the tightened drum skin.

But the young men from Shandriv continue to dance around her son with their bloody knives. They beat him and keep beating him, yet her son does not fall to the ground, to the green grass, but stands firmly! And it's no wonder!—he's the strongest young man in the village. And then they finish him off with poles.

What kind of wedding can there be with a corpse?! The musicians gather their instruments and set off for home. Maria is put on a wagon and driven to Vuibarevo, unaccompanied by any songs.

Mrs. Shvonts awoke from her dream soaked in sweat, her teeth clattering in fear. She moved close to her son. Only after touching him, after feeling his steady breathing, did she calm down.

"Whoa, Chillok! Whoa, Tsyhan!" called her son, bringing her out of her trance.

"Ma, we're here. Where should I unload the sheaves?"

"Yes, yes—here, Ivan."

He helped her off the wagon, lifted the drying-pole, and began unloading the sheaves onto the ground.

"Ma, I drove the hemp over for you, but I won't be soaking it today," he said after unloading the last of the hemp. He wiped the sweat off of his forehead. "I'm going home."

"Ivan!" His mother cried. "Don't leave me alone! Do you hear me—don't leave me!"

"Don't be so worried! I'm not going to do anything to anyone. You saw me throw away the knife. I'll dance once with the bride, then maybe I'll come back and help you out," he said and turned the horses around, gaily waving his whip above their rumps.

The mother's eyes followed her son. The longer she looked, the more it seemed that he wasn't riding down the dirt road, but flying like an arrow. The wagon rattled and tossed so much that she thought it would fall apart, its wheels rolling off in different directions.

Sighing heavily, she began soaking the hemp, but it was hard to keep working. She kept looking at the village. Suddenly, she went numb: from the top of the hill flowed bloodied water.

"My God!" she cried, crossing herself and waddling hurriedly to shore.

She looked all around. It was quiet everywhere. Only the river beside her bubbled, carrying the bloody water. She dropped everything and ran to the village as fast as she could.

She wanted to hear happy drumbeats, the wailing of the violin, or the villagers singing, but everything around her was silent. Now and then she would stop to catch her breath, thinking she heard drumbeats. But it wasn't a drum—it was her heart that was pounding. Her anguish deepening, she hurried even faster. She passed the first houses without noticing anything.

"Oh God, let the musicians at the Mykolaichuks be playing, let them not be still," she begged God in her thoughts. "Do you hear me? Tell them to keep playing!"

But perhaps God was very far away in the heavens. He didn't hear her. Mrs. Shvonts began to implore the musicians: "Fiddlers, why have you gone silent, why aren't you playing? Please play, play on—don't torture my heart!"

She was now in the village, but neither the beating of the wedding drum nor the wailing of the violin, nor the mourning of the flute were heard from the Mykolaichuks' farmyard. Mrs. Shvonts wailed sorrowfully:

"Ivan, my dear son! Why didn't you listen to me?!"

Translated by Mark Andryczyk with Yaryna Yakubyak

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