

Heron's Birthday

Mykola Riabchuk

Mike wasn't working anywhere, so by evening he got very tired. Today he was especially tired, because he was getting ready to go to Heron's on her birthday. Heron's real name was Oksana and being called "Heron" just about drove her crazy. At times Mike was in love with her. Heron worked at the railway station, selling tickets to Intourist visitors and other people who mattered. Tickets like those could get you pretty far.

Mike took all day to get ready, but in the end he set out in his everyday clothes. After all, coming back in the dark he might fall and get dirty. Besides, everybody knew that people of all sorts could show up at a birthday: some of them might simply be unable to deal with new shirts and ties. Going out the door, Mike met the Doctor.

Doctor was very amiable and walked around carrying a brown, diplomat-type briefcase. He had finished dental school at the Faculty of Medicine and now worked at a factory as a forklift operator. In his free time Doctor practiced yoga and said that he wasn't eating or drinking. But actually he both ate and drank.

He drank anything he could get his hands on.

Last week Doctor got paid and communed with Confucius nearly every night. Mike decided to go have a beer with him, since he didn't have anything against getting to know Confucius better himself, the latter's Chinese heritage notwithstanding.

In a dirty hall that smelled of puke, Doctor told him about the transfiguration of Buddha and the infinite life of the soul.

This appealed to Mike, but after his death he absolutely did not want his soul to settle in some cow whose udder its owner would tug at and who would be dispatched every year to a bull. He very reasonably recognized that not everything that's good for semi-feudal India is good for us too.

"Time to go," declared Mike, drinking the last of the rotgut that Doctor had bought instead of beer, owing to its higher caloric value.

"Go where?" said Doctor in surprise, surprising Mike even more.

"What do you mean, where?" he said. "Why, to Heron's, for her birthday."

"Do I know her?" asked Doctor.

Mike thought for a while.

"Well—probably not."

"It's not nice to show up at the birthdays of people you don't know," said Doctor, ordering two more glasses of wine.

"She's a great girl," said Mike. "Just because she's called Heron, don't think she's ugly. She's an amazing girl—way better than both of us."

What he was saying was absolutely true, and just at that moment Confucius chimed in.

"Do not be in such a hurry," he intoned in a sage voice, raising a finger smeared with mustard. "And do not seek petty comforts. He who hurries does not get far. He who seeks petty comforts does not attain great heights. The noble person sets himself lofty goals; the wastrel struggles to achieve insignificant ones."

Mike's voice trembled with emotion.

"She's a super girl. She said we didn't have to get married until I said I wanted to. And last winter, when I lost my gloves, she went out and bought me new ones."

"That's all so trivial," said Doctor. "One shouldn't live so frivolously. Didn't you ever read Li Bo?"

Mike, who hadn't, blushed. Doctor knew Li Bo's poems by heart and began to recite them. The red-nosed woman tending the buffet table, who had no appreciation of poetry, shoved him and Mike out the door. Outdoors, they ran into Capiton.

"Hello, Capiton!" exclaimed Mike joyously, eagerly embracing him. Capiton was sober and decidedly less thrilled at meeting Mike.

"Stop it, you idiot! I'm no Capiton to you!"

Actually, he really was Capiton—his surname was Capitonov. But as a kid he'd somehow gotten it into his head that everyone was supposed to call him Captain. The name Capiton came about as a compromise between a rose-bright dream and dark-brown reality. Anyone who challenged his dream cast a pall over his reality. The chief culprit in that regard was the creative director of the puppet theater where Capiton was the stage designer. Capiton created puppets—dolls, in short. But every doll he made, including the heroic ones, ended up looking like a dreadful Baba-Yaga. Today, on top of the usual troubles at work, some little floozy had turned him on, promising to come to his workshop and revel in his creativity. The floozy hadn't come and now Capiton was walking around in an agitated state, furious at the puppet theater and even more furious at dolls of all kinds, so to speak.

"You come too," proposed Mike. "Come with us to the birthday,"

"Will there be any booze?" asked Capiton suspiciously.

"There'll be an ocean of booze and a whole canyonful of breads," promised Mike.

"We'll need a present," noted Doctor.

"I'll give her a painting," said Capiton, acquiescing. True, he didn't know how to paint, which is why he staunchly regarded himself as an artist-primitivist with a tendency toward modernism—or the reverse.

"I think we should get flowers," said Doctor.

"Aren't you smart!" countered Mike. Doctor really was smart, so much so that it was offensive. "She can't stand flowers," declared Mike. "She absolutely hates them!"

"So, what does she like?" asked Doctor.

"Well, she...she....," said Mike, licking overly dry lips. Then he made a stab at it: "She likes—wine!"

"Now we're talking," exclaimed Capiton. "I too know some very respectable girls who like wine more than anything else. You'd offend them with flowers or silly trinkets of some kind."

Oksana was a good girl, and nobody wanted to offend her.

At the store they chose five bottles of a rotgut wine called Radiance but were 20 kopecks short on the last bottle. Those kopecks were contributed by former pilot Flip, who was hanging around the store by himself, on the lookout for unforeseen adventure and romantic encounters. The bottles just fit in Doctor's diplomat-type briefcase, and the former pilot—a true friend in need—joined the guys going to Heron's for her birthday.

As they crossed into Levandivka, Mike forgot Heron's address. The building where she lived had one story—or maybe two; a balcony—or maybe not; a garden—or a treed courtyard; and an entrance at the front—or was it on the side? Almost every building looked something like that, so before long the fellas lit out for the woods, where they drank two bottles of the wine to restore their energy. Former pilot Flip declared that he had loved working in aviation and offered to fly them all from Lviv to Kyiv. First, though, they really should go wish Heron a happy birthday.

The fellas walked around a few more blocks, knocking at every gate. No one knew a girl called Heron—Mike had forgotten her real name, along with a lot of other things. By now it was really dark, so the guys went back to the woods, where they roasted some potatoes found in somebody's yard. Then they absolutely had to drink two more bottles of the wine, after which Mike announced that he wasn't going to fly to Kyiv, because he was scared to fly. Capiton was scared too—he said he wouldn't fly to Kyiv, or anywhere else. He said he wouldn't move at all and they could all go to—well, one and the same place. Meanwhile Doctor had climbed up a tree.

"I order all of you to stand!" commanded former pilot Flip, sensing that the moment for decisive action had arrived. He informed the wimps that an order was an order and that anybody who didn't obey would be shot—'rite then 'n dere.

"Instead of a pistol get out your gun," proposed Capiton, earning several kicks from the former pilot. When Capiton tried to put up a defense, he inadvertently punched himself in the mouth. After that, Mike got up voluntarily, and Doctor fell out of the tree.

Commander Flip got them in line and marched them in song around the streets of Levandivka. At the first intersection they bumped into some

local lowlifes and experienced some significant bodily damage. Worst of all, the last bottle of Radiance burst on impact against an enemy's head. Licking their wounds and exerting great effort, they made it to somebody's yard—and there, at the well, they came across Heron. Nobody recognized her, but she recognized Mike by his voice.

Other than that voice, there was nearly nothing left of Mike.

Inside her place there were soft lights, music, dancing, and pretty girls. It was a small piece of paradise, and Doctor, sitting cross-legged on a soft sofa, prayed to the great Buddha in gratitude. With his one unswollen eye Mike kept looking at the birthday girl and crying from happiness. Capiton took all the decorations down from the walls, making room for the paintings which he would bring by tomorrow. Meanwhile former pilot Flip was searching for love.

After a while the birthday girl got around to asking Mike about the guys he had brought over. Mike wanted to tell her what fine fellows they were, about the transfiguration of souls, and how in their next lives they would all—everybody in this room—become flowers on one vast and sunny meadow, or colorful butterflies and dragonflies above the marshes. But just then, he became extremely nauseated and threw up out the window. All of earth's infelicities and all of hell's powers gathered in that one room to spoil the guests' impermanent happiness. Capiton knocked a crystal vase off a shelf and in catching it broke the aquarium. The goldfish thrashed about on the rug, and the water flowed down to the neighbor below. One of the girls shrieked because soldier Flip declared his love for her. Fate plainly didn't want any love. Fate itself didn't know what it wanted.

Mike and his friends were expelled from paradise, and behind them its doors locked with dual locks—a slide bolt and a chain.

In the yard stood a small table, and the heroes resolved to rest there. In parting, aviator Flip had grabbed a couple of uncorked bottles, whereas artist Capiton had emptied three platters—of sausage, sauerkraut, and poached fish—into the diplomat-type briefcase. Aviator Flip couldn't drink anything any more, for he had quietly slid under the table and fallen asleep. Artist Capiton, having lowered his head to his knees, kept softly crooning a monotonous song that nobody knew. Doctor, having resumed his interrupted meditation, was standing on his head beside the fence.

The clear sky was alight with stars. Mike, his head thrown back, drank straight from the bottle, reveling in the beauty of the universe. As the stars twinkled and danced, flowers perfumed the air. The world was wondrous and unattainable—and the rotgut disgusting and vile. Mike threw the half-empty bottle against the wall of the building; it hit with a thud and shattered into crystalline shards. He grabbed another one, but hesitated a moment. Then, raising its neck to his mouth as if in farewell, he suddenly caught sight of a plane in the sky. It was flying very low, obscuring the stars, and sitting inside was Buddha. He had on a pilot's helmet and huge glasses.

Catching sight of Mike, Buddha said:

"Meditating, Mikey?"

"Yes, O guru," replied Mike.

"Contemplating things, Mikey?"

"Yes, O guru," replied Mike.

"Ah-hh, what a dolt—what a dolt you are!" said Buddha. And before Mike could reply—before he could ask anything, regret anything, excuse anything—the plane dipped its wings, gained altitude, and disappeared in the direction of Kyiv.

Translated by Uliana M. Pasiecznyk

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