

Three Idioms Reimagined as Short fiction

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I. You Can Sharpen an Ax on top of his Head (Russian: *Хоть кол на голове теши*)

Stefan Stefanóvich never asked to be a horsebutt. He could have done without the schoolyard and pivnoy jokes. Never mind. With his ax in one hand and the kitchen table strewn with knives and pairs of scissors, he dabs Dedushka's mineral paste upon his leathered head and draws a glistening blade across it.

As a schoolboy, Stefan Stefanóvich watched Papa stropping edges, and his childish curiosity passed into an adolescent dread, those classroom jeers not helping. Yet by the time he reached eighteen, he'd learned the hold, the touch, the art of pressure—his stropping head already leather. The trick is knowing the stropping angle and how many strokes serve a blade; each edge has its own personality.

Candlelight flickers. Near the *izba*'s sooty *pech* lies wee Alexander Stefanóvich. Soon, the babe will walk. Already, he can say “ax” and “knife,” and he'll reach for scissors. For a bit longer still, Stefan Stefanóvich will work only as his son sleeps.

Like Papa and Dedushka before him, Stefan Stefanóvich will

not draw blood. But unlike the old pissers, he will not drink. Papa and Dedushka lie safely in the *izba's* woodland clearing, each beneath a birch cross silver-aged. A third cross, its wood still oozing sap until last November's frost, marks where Alexander Stefanovich's *mámo ka* lies. She might have led husband and babe out of the woods had she not gone ahead, alone.

Heartache's blade never needs whetting.

The *pech* radiates heat. Stefan Stefanovich opens its iron latch and tosses wood onto its glowing coals for the long night's heat. The babe sighs. His soft head will be leathery one day: Fate rocks the lives Death does cradle.

Against the *izba's* dark windowpanes, Night leans her cold forehead to peer inside. She delivers Snow—the silencer, the blanketer of forests and fields, roofs and crosses—the Wind storms Decemberist.

In the clearing, wolves circle.

Hunger hangs again upon their ribs.

II. To Steal the German's Pipe (Romanian: *A Fura Luleaua Neam ului*)

For centuries, our fortified church—in Kli-Schink on Transylvania's fertile plains—guarded stores of firewood, booze, and food for beast and man, and a well of the sweetest water. It sheltered the village's documents and bibles. Within its stone walls grew vegetables and herbs.

In days long gone, the irregular ringing of the church bells alerted every Saxon man, woman, and child in Kli-Schink. Guests of Hungarian kings yet lawmen of their own kith, kin, and culture, they made for the church's hold, barking dogs sprinting through their rising dust. Old men pushed wheelbarrows loaded with icons, tools, implements, and trundled infants crying in fear. Women and children carried bedding. They lead horses and milk cows by ropes and tugged the pigs by their nose rings. They herded geese, sheep, and goats to safety. They wrapped chickens and ducks in their arms and plopped any peeping chicks and ducklings into their caps or apron swags.

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The gates closed.

Men not gone soldiering posted themselves along the fortress's parapet or climbed to the top of the bell tower. As smoke rose, its acrid smell in every nostril, the elderly, woman, and mumbled prayers. *My Lord, King of Kings, save us from the Turks.* Fresco saints stared from the church walls, their compassionate eyes aglisten with tears.

Village after village swiftly razed and plundered; the Turks knew better than to stop and fight the Saxons or attack their church fortifications.

The smoke stains of those days lay under many coats of white-wash, by the time of my youth. More recent, more violent, more devastating conflicts emptied our villages. The Romanians and Gypsies, who invest nothing in our old structures or ways, who have no need for our language or culture, occupy our lands, succeeding in decades where the Turks failed over centuries.

Our church's final minister was Swabian. Had the man stood sideways and stuck out his tongue, my brother Arnold claimed, he'd have resembled a zipper—so we called him *Fermoar*, zipper in Romanian, a tongue he did not speak. Worse than being skinny, he stank of schnapps and sweet pipe tobacco, his fingertips yellow. Following his regular trips home to the Fatherland, he'd smuggle tobacco, along with an optimistic supply of modern songbooks and a refreshed Swabian slur, past our Communist border guards.

The summer Arnold and I reached sixteen and fifteen, our parents paid the Communists for our family's way out of Romania (and the West Germans paid the same Communists for our safe passage). The night before our hush-hush departure, Arnold and I slipped across the village road to the crumbling fortified church. A harvest moon glowed sandthorn orange. Tomcats growled in shadowed duels. Dogs yapped openly. A horse-drawn cart clip-clopped past without raising dust; recent rains had left the air heavy and sour. At the moonlit entrance to the church cellar, we found a candle and matches. Stacks of dusty bottles lined a passageway. In our flickering candlelight, shards of glass twinkled.

Over time, wine consumes its own warmth and bite. Schnapps

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loses fragrance but not fire. From the cellar's deepest corner, Arnold and I disturbed centuries of cobwebs in our grab for bottles; we coughed yet grinned. My candle lit a familiar curving shape, wooden and ivory—look what's been forgotten here!

That night, before our family abandoned our history and Kli-Schink, before we exchanged being treated as Saxon in Transylvania for being treated as Romanian in Saxony, Albert and I stole the German pipe.

III. Go Bother Camões (Portuguese: *Vai Chatear o Camões*)

In the walled garden of a Cova da Beira hillside villa, four-year-old Sofia Mariana's avô napped, shaded by the branches of a cherry tree. Sweet, juicy fruit weighted the tree's branches. Sofia Mariana, wishing to reach and eat the cherries, climbed upon avô's chaise longue.

The weekday care for the child fell to the old man, a widower and pensioner. He scowled. "*Vai chatear o Camões.*"

Sofia Mariana knew Camões lived in avô's library. The room's French doors opened to the garden, its terracotta floor cool to her bare feet, and its illumed walls lined with leather-bound books. She sat on the floor and cradled a volume of the poet's work, its frontispiece the great man's image.

The poet winked.

Sofia Mariana giggled. She returned his wink and found herself sitting upon a lap at a wooden table facing the cherry tree. Her skinny legs dangled. She wriggled her toes.

6 A handful of crows fluttered and cawed in the tree, and avô, despite their commotion above him, snored, chapfallen. Sofia Mariana, ready to laugh at the old man, felt a finger press her lips. Camões.

"Sshhh!" he said.

His wink, she saw, was no wink at all, but an eye sealed shut by a scar. She longed to touch it. The great poet dipped a large feather into a pot of black liquid. The feather screeching and scratching, he formed glistening black loops on paper.

Sofia Mariana yawned. Camões smelled of leather, sweat, and

spices. She leaned into him and put her thumb in her mouth, imagining herself high in the tree, her thumb a plump, sweet cherry. The world beyond the garden walls spread out before her like a treasure-filled market. A crow with a red-stained beak hopped close. He tilted his head. "Climb upon me," he said. "I'll teach you to fly."

Drowsy Sofia Mariana already knew how to fly.