

## Backward Glances

a short story by  
Shirlee Smith Matheson

I am the only non-Ukrainian girl attending the one-room Valley School in rural Manitoba. It's my first year in school, and the first time that I will be part of the Christmas concert. Following the concert there's to be a supper and dance, and we kids get to be part of that, too.

The night has finally arrived. I stand by the kitchen door, barely able to move in my bulky woollen clothing, waiting for my mother to check the stove and blow out the coal-oil lamp. We close the door and join my father and brother, who are waiting outside with the horse and cutter.

Our black mare, Dot, tosses her head. It must be difficult getting used to a cold bit, although dad has warmed it in his hand before putting it into her mouth. Dot's black leather harness is adorned with jingling bells.

My brother and I settle down onto little seats at the front of the cutter, facing our parents who sit on the bench. We pull the buffalo robe up around our chins. With a flick of the lines the horse lunges forward. The sleigh runners jump from their bed of soft snow and we glide past the frozen river, past the cows hunched under snow blankets, down to the main gate.

As my father jumps out to open the gate we hear the jingle of sleigh bells. We wave and call out "Merry Christmas!" to our neighbours, Pete Kuzenko, and his family. They ride in a covered van mounted on sleigh runners, pulled by a team of big black horses. Our voices spangle through the frosty darkness.

We turn onto the main road. Dot's hooves clip musical notes in the hard-packed snow. Every few steps a piece of packed snow flies out from her hooves, throwing us scents of barn, soft straw, and old manure. My brother and I search the heavens, trying to locate Orion the Hunter, and the Big Dipper. The moon's glow is reflected from the banks of snow at the sides of the road, causing them to shine like heaped treasure.

The school yard is already crowded with sleighs scattered at reckless angles. We work our way from under the heavy buffalo robe and jump down, our legs stiff and cramped. Dad takes the horse to the barn, while mother, my brother and I enter the one-room schoolhouse.

The small porch is packed with layer upon layer of coats, hats and scarves draped over and falling from big wall-hooks, and the floor is a sea of galoshes. We add ours, and stumble through the clutter to join the festivities that have changed our chalk-smelling school into a house of magic.

I edge around the piano and enter the backstage area, which has been sectioned off by a curtain made from white sheets and red bedspreads. Two grade four kids are crying. Parts of their costumes have been lost. Pale and frightened grade twos have forgotten their parts. The girl who is supposed to play Mary thinks she might be sick. Everyone suddenly needs to go to the bathroom. It's in a frozen shack behind the school, so most of us try to hold it. Some aren't successful.

I find the grade ones crowded into a corner. We will be opening the show. Each of us is to come out in turn, holding a letter spelling "MERRY CHRISTMAS," and recite a line. "C is for the Christ child," is mine.

We peek through a small hole in the sheet and watch the schoolroom fill up. Mothers, aunts, older sisters and a few old men sit on the board benches, while the fathers and young men stand at the back. Children who aren't taking part in the concert have been asked to sit quietly on the floor at the front, where paper has been laid so they won't spoil their clothes from the oiled floor.

Suddenly a hush comes over the audience. Our teacher is at the front of the stage, looking large and important in a bright coral-coloured dress, with a sparkling rhinestone brooch.

"Good evening," she says, in English, then, "Dobray vecheer," for in our valley there are many who cannot speak much English.

"Dobray vecheer!" the audience roars back.

"Now," Mrs. Leschuk continues in her teacher's voice, "Let's all stand for 'O Canada'."

She clumps down the two plank steps and sounds out the first chords on the piano. Following our teacher's lead we join in, at first soft and quavering. Then, when we hear the deep heavy voices of our fathers in the audience, we all stand to loudly sing a song of praise for our native land.

The last chord is our cue. I walk out, holding my "C" high above my head, and recite my line. Through to the last "S is for our Saviour," we blurt, whisper, rush and mumble our "MERRY CHRISTMAS" piece, holding the letters at rakish angles.

It's our turn, then, to sit on the floor to watch the rest of the program, and wait for the big moment. It is the grade one's special act, kept secret even from our parents. We have learned a dance. A Ukrainian dance. A splendid dance, done

with four couples, all grade ones. The music is fast, with an exciting beat that makes us hop higher and faster than we've ever done before. But it's the costume I love best. Our skirts are of bright pink crepe paper, cut in even strips that let our bare legs flash out through the streamers as our partners swing us around. We whirl, crepe paper flying, brighter even than the lit candles that we hold up in sweaty hands throughout the dance. We hear the people gasp — because we're so beautiful, and perhaps because they're scared of fire! — and then we hear applause. The audience is clapping hands and stamping feet in time to our wild dance.

I can see only a blur as I whirl to the beat of our un-Christmas-like dance.

We remain onstage for wave after wave of encores, curtsying and bowing, our breath coming in hot rasps, perspiration gleaming on our bodies, holding high our flickering, dripping candles.

Suddenly the back door flies open and a cold blast of air hits the room. We hear bells, and laughter. It's Santa! A red suit fills the doorway, fronted by a huge red belly trimmed round with white fur. He throws back his head in a roar of laughter, exposing two rows of straight, white teeth.

"Veseli svyato, deewchata ee hloptsi!" he cries. His eyes are a snapping brown and his beard shining black. "Veseli svyato!" he bellows again.

We kids stand still for a second, then with a yell everyone runs toward him, grabbing at his sleeves, his belt, his big hands. "Svyatay Nykolai!" the kids shout, English forgotten.

"It's Santa Claus," I say softly, and I run, also, to hold onto his sleeve, to accompany him as he lunges toward the front, the bumpy canvas bag rolling around on his big, red shoulders.

He sits down — oomph! — on a chair placed near the Christmas tree, and bends to untie the rope that holds his bag. His hand stops for a moment and he looked up at us kids, ringed around his chair. With a hearty laugh, he peers at the little package in his hand, then calls my name.

I climb onto his knee and look up into a smiling face edged with a bristling black beard.

"Vell," he says, looking at me, suddenly serious. "And haf you been goot gurl? Eh?" His mouth is a wide red laugh. I nod, and suddenly it strikes me: Santa looks just like our neighbour, Pete Kuzenko! Santa isn't some stranger who flies through the air in a sleigh pulled by reindeer! He had come in a van, behind two beautiful black horses! We had followed him here to the school!

"Oh, Santa — Svyatay Nykolai —" I say, hugging him, feeling his whiskers scratch my forehead.

"You haf a goot time now, little gurl," he says as he gently pushes me from his knee and turns to the next child.

We open our presents near a pile of desks at the back of the room, while the adults take apart the stage and set benches along the wall, in readiness for the dance. The band sets up. The teacher sits at the piano, and three neighbour men take up an accordion, fiddle, and guitar. After a quick tune-up they yell, "Hey!" and music bursts forth in a fast-beat Ukrainian song. This time it's the adults' turn to take the stage.

They dance at first slowly, with delicate steps, to a music brought over from Galacia. I watch the women as they dance, women who I know as hard-working farm wives and mothers. But now they seem so young! They are laughing, not caring that hair falls from neatly wrapped braids or 'Victory rolls,' to trail down necks. Their large, dark men whirl them around the shiny oiled floor that has been sprinkled with sawdust to make it less slippery. Dust rises as the floor bounces from pounding feet.

The dancing becomes faster and wilder as song follows song. We kids get up and dance with each other, stiffly bumping knees as we try to imitate the adults. We avoid looking at each other.

I notice my parents standing quietly at the back of the room. My mother's eyes are shining, her head bobbing to the beat. My father, standing beside her, looks quietly embarrassed by the antics of people who keep bumping into him. My brother also stands quietly watching, envious of the fun but too shy to join in. I nod stiffly toward them as my partner, Nicky Olynick, jerks me past. Then I look back toward the floor, and forget everything but the beat of the music and my fellow dancers.

Mother's voice breaks through my dream world: "Come on, dear, get your coat. Dad is getting the horse ready."

I am back suddenly in the hot, dusty one-room school, stuffing sweaty arms into cold coat-sleeves, poking stiff legs into leggings and boots that turn my dancer's feet into black clods. I answer sullenly to words of farewell shouted in English and Ukrainian, as we edge through the men grouped on the outside steps, cooling off with the help of a brown crock being passed around.

The horse stands by the gate, chewing on her cold bit, impatient to get her job done. She turns her head toward us and watches our approach through black leather eye-blinkers and a lacing of frost that coats her eyelashes. My mother puts heated foot-warmers underneath the fur robe, and helps me climb into the cutter and settle onto my seat. With a lurch the sleigh swings through the gate and onto the long white road.

I slide down until the cold fur tickles my cheeks. I turn my head slightly and look out past the silent posts of barbed-wire fences to diamond-blanketed fields that roll in a white wave to the ends of the earth. I lay my head back and look up at the tiny stars, the moon now a small, silver button. I stretch out my legs, still warm and tingling from dancing, and find the angled foot-warmer near the bottom of the sleigh. I close my eyes.

I can hear, from far off now in the distance, the fiddler playing a dancing song, and the joyful shout of a dancer. The rhythm of the mare's trotting feet matches the regular breathing of my family around me. I lay back, allowing the sounds to hold me.

And as I lay, rocked by the swaying sleigh and the beat of music and hooves, an added sound floats through the air. My mother and I are humming. With lips closed against the piercing air, each of us, lost in private dreams, are calling back the music of my wild Ukrainian dance.