

MOYSHE LEVIN

*Motye the Coachman*¹

Our Vilna coachmen are a pitiful gang. The same gloom that hovers over their bridled horses lingers over them. It's as though man, horse and harness unite into one bizarre, cheerless creature emerging from the urban asphalt, consisting of two heads, feet, wheels, and patience! Patience to wait for hours somewhere on a street corner near a place of entertainment, day and night, waiting and waiting. Bursts of light from colourfully illuminated windows and doors reflect off the waiting coachmen, accompanied by a mixture of jazz, shrieks of pleasure, shrill laughter, and dancing. Inside in the cabaret, everything whirls together in a knot of desire and hypocrisy. The coachmen wait in one long row down the street, lost in dreams on their cab benches, like old cats ... until suddenly, the cabaret doors tear open, bright light and giddy yelps pierce the late night quiet, sweaty couples tumble outside, and the coachmen come back to life.

Motye the Coachman sits on the bench of his cab, the last in line, gloomier than all his colleagues. He sits as if in mourning. His head, overgrown with grey as if wrapped in a spider's web, and tucked into a hard, official-looking cap, sinks into chest. He is hunched over. He doesn't take off quickly and smack his lips like his colleagues when a couple mount his cab and order him to 'Get going, faster, get a move on.'



Bentsye Mikhtom, 'Coachman on a City Street', in Moyshe Levin, *Friling in keltershtub*, Vilne, 1937, p. 78.

1 'Motye Droshker', *Yung Vilne*, 1934, No 1, p. 9–18; republished in: Moyshe Levin, *Friling in keltershtub*, Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1937, p. 77–86.

Rather, he allows his tired horse to drag along at its own pace. The passengers raise bloody hell: ‘To the devil! Who’s more of a wreck, you or your mare!?’

Motye cannot overcome the terrifyingly painful events that are the source of his deep sorrow to this very day:

Night. He waits in his cab on Broad Street, the city’s main drag that sucks into its muddy gutters all the surrounding filth and misfortune. An urban ruckus, and the shriek of cars, tramways, cinemas, cafes, brothels, and, most of all, people! They walk the sidewalks, the banks of this urban river. And out of this mess a young woman who works the streets suddenly breaks free. She lets out a yelp as she dashes down the street, pursued by two policemen. Motye the Coachman casts a tired, sideward glance at the commotion. He’s witnessed more such disturbances than calm on these city streets. The police catch hold of the squirming young woman, and lead her to Motye’s carriage. He understands: he isn’t going to make much from this trip to the station. They urge him to pull up. He pretends not to understand. But the two policemen and the girl have already mounted his coach. ‘To the Third Precinct. Don’t worry, the girl will pay you, she earns plenty!’

Having no other choice, Motye cracks his whip. The girl lets out a hysterical cry. The policemen try to calm her in an official voice: ‘What are you so worked up about! You types are in and out of the medical clinic, yet you expect to be treated like nobility?! ...’ At that instant, Motye senses something in the girl’s cries behind him that is uncomfortably familiar. He feels a piercing quiver in his chest. Not paying attention to the oncoming traffic of cars and passers-by, he turns around, and grabs a careful look at the young woman. His gasp is like his horse’s neigh:

‘Etke!? ...’

The girl tears herself from the bench. Her cried-out face, smeared in a mixture of powder and rouge, which resembles a wound coated with zinc ointment, beams with joy as if it is about to burst. She grasps Motye’s broad, stiff shoulders:

‘Father!’ she pleads in a childlike voice. ‘Father! Don’t drive me there. Please stop. They plan to take me to the hospital!’

Motye is overcome by emotion, like a stormy sky in which ominous clouds mingle with brighter ones. His thoughts are racing, and the reins slip from his hands.

‘Careful!’ the policemen shout. ‘You’re heading straight into oncoming traffic.’

They grab his arm to get him back on course.

At that very moment, the young street-girl twists around and hops out, dashing down the road, with the policemen in hot pursuit. All three disappear down a side street. It’s only then that Motye notices just how close they are to the station.

His ageing heart lets out a pang of resentment: why was he, with his own hands, in his own coach, destined to deliver his daughter to her fate? His only consolation, one buried deep within him, is that the girl managed to vanish. After all, how would he have handled things had they actually arrived at their destination? What would he have said to her? What would he have done?

Etke, his older daughter, had descended into disrepute a few years ago. Or, as the expression goes, she disappeared without a trace into one of those establishments that were scattered up and down Sophianikes Street, where they lived. From his standpoint, it was best that he didn’t run into her, because her disgusting behaviour was already the talk of the town, and especially of the street. She met the end of his whip when she used to slink in from who-knows-where before dawn like an alley cat, sweaty and dishevelled. At such moments, Motye truly believed that she was most comfortable in such godforsaken places. He cracked his whip over her well-groomed hair and before her face. He believed he was doing it out of love for his daughter, to get her back on course, but in fact he felt guilty. Motye was the horse deserving of a whipping, not his daughter! But it was no easy thing to find somewhere else to live. Folks withered away in cellars on Sophianikes. Poverty at home, his wife’s chronic illness, that’s what killed her. And wasn’t he also once laid up in bed with typhus without a penny to his name? He was told later that during his fevers he had cried out to Etke and Matlye, his two healthy daughters: ‘For God’s sake, earn some money to feed the horse!’ For the entire duration of his illness, it was she, Etke, who provided for the horse, and made certain that its stable was stacked with provisions (so much so that Motye didn’t recognise his horse afterwards, such a royal steed he had become!). So why did he have to whip Etke, and heap the worst curses upon her? What else could Motye have done to prevent himself from being consumed by the shame of it all?

Suddenly, the distant consciousness of Etke that was buried deep within him for two years, seizes hold of him and torments him with a new pack of woes. Memories of desperately running in search of her for hours at time and waiting, here at the police station, there at Savich Hospital. Because if he, her own father, was responsible for driving her to her fate, he might as well be struck down by lightning ...

Then he comes home late one night, and all his worries about Etke suddenly vanish from his exhausted mind. Matlye, his second daughter, is nowhere to be found! Her iron bed is still made up in the corner. Motye's eyes widen to take in the entirety of the miniscule basement apartment that he could stride across in five or six despondent steps.

'Where is Matlye?!' he screams at his wife. 'One o'clock in the morning, and she's still not home? She's only seventeen!'

His wife tears herself from her bed and peers into the dark void of the basement apartment. 'Matlye ... woe is me ... she really isn't here ... so late!'

'Heh, Heh!' Motye lets out a laugh, like a horse's neigh with tears mixed in. 'Why do you have to say "Woe is me," as if the anguish is only yours? Your younger daughter will bestow another calamity upon us, just like Etke! ...'

'Quieten down, Motye!' his wife screams. 'Hold your clumsy tongue. She's probably out enjoying herself, she'll be back soon ...'

'Fool!' Motye darts over to her with a panicked expression that says: 'What's wrong with you? What don't you understand? We live here on Sophianikes! And I can already anticipate another worthless trip to the clinic at Savich Hospital.'

Amid his confused thoughts about Matlye, Motye the Coachman reminds himself of her most recent behaviour. She is a girl of few words. She responds to his questions with a single word. He used to walk in on her going through the chest in the corner that took the place of a dresser. Her cheeks were aflame, her eyes sparkled. Perhaps she is storing her silk work clothes there? She seemed pale and emaciated, even though she is not lacking food (he recently gave up drinking, and took a midday trip home to shake out his earnings from his pockets). And doesn't she often come home late? If not for his encounter with Etke, he would never have thought to peek into Matlye's private corner, which he considered to be pure, because of her youth and good character.

He approaches his wife, his beard trembling as if walking through a storm, the veins on his neck taut like the strings of a fiddle. Out of despair and helplessness, she scratches her head with both hands.

‘Listen, you are fortunate that you’re not in good health, because if not, I might turn my whip on you. Since I’m out working all day and not at home, at the very least, you could keep an eye on Matlye, so that in our old age we won’t have two ... two ...!’

Matlye enters the room at that very moment. She overhears the yelling behind the door, and, mouth agape, prepares to answer for herself, since she has done nothing wrong. Her red cheeks contain a smile. She is holding a book, and drums with her finger on its cover to the rhythm of the song she is humming.

‘Oh, you’re here!’ Motye calls out sarcastically. ‘I was about to run off to look for you alongside your sister at Savich Hospital ... So, you have a book? ...’

Matlye lets out such an innocent giggle that all of Motye’s angry thoughts melt away.

‘Father, stop tormenting yourself with complicated questions? You can see very well that I’m holding a book? Here, take a look! ...’

Matlye’s pure laughter stuns Motye. Her sister does not laugh that way. And such natural lips, without the kind of heavy makeup worn by her sister. This one is so unlike the other. And Matlye goes out in such simple clothes, in a black satin shirt, looking like a young man.

‘I’ve gone too far!’ Motye declares in his coachman’s voice. ‘Matlye would not allow herself to be reined in to such matters ...’

He takes her book, puts on his glasses, and approaches the lamp. He appears like a clay golem in his big coachman’s boots, his wide caftan, and his tin-plated hat. He bends over the book, and with great difficulty chews out its words:

‘Uhhh, Kkkarl Mmarx and Ffridrikh Engels ... Ccomm ...’

‘I was at my girlfriend Leyke’s,’ Matlye says calmly, ‘and we were reading together. If you don’t believe me, you can ask her in the morning! ...’

But Motye is still caught up in the words he has just read, words that are now dancing before his eyes: black, round, worm-like, merging together into a serpent ... He wants to shout out ‘Danger!’, because communism is already making too much of a mess on the street, and he doesn’t want to play any part in it. But now that his suspicion of Matlye has faded away, a sleepy calm comes

over him, similar to the kind of calm he feels after a day of hard exertion. He crawls into bed, heavy like a bear, still in his cap, coat and boots.

And in a muted voice, he mutters: ‘Matlye, you’d be better off reading a novel, like those in the *Ovnt-Blat* newspaper, than reading about communism ... Such matters are off limits!’

‘Go to sleep, Father. Get some rest. It’s already late,’ Matlye answers from under her covers. ‘You have to get up early tomorrow.’

Matlye also wants to sleep. She has so much to do! And, of course, her chronically ill mother also wants to go to bed ...

The dawn light of early May pours through the tiny basement windows that lie just below the sidewalk, as if through a funnel. A swathe of pink pressing in from the east slowly dilutes the blue-green sky adorning the street above. The tiny basement windows of Motye the Coachman’s home are no longer sufficient to contain the dawn light, and it suddenly bursts through the door. Violent knocks startle everyone awake before they have managed to earn a full night’s rest.

‘Who’s there?’

‘Open up! It’s the Police!’

Motye springs from his bed.

‘The Police?! What for?!’

‘This is Matlye Solodukh’s address! Open up!’

‘You probably mean Etl Solodukh!’ Motye responds, trembling. ‘But you’ve already arrested her! ...’

‘Open up, now!’

The weak door gives in.

Motye is baffled when his wide eyes observe the following:

In the chest that he had suspected, hidden underneath the silk dresses favoured by working women, a policeman pulls out a red scarf, a pack of white papers, and books. His daughter Matlye, that pale innocent girl in the black shirt, one glance at whom was enough to dissipate any suspicion, is arrested even more forcefully than Etl had been on the city street. She is guided out, and she doesn’t put up a struggle. Instead, she smiles.

‘Don’t be afraid Father. I’ll be released tomorrow.’

‘Gentlemen, why?’ Motye and his wife lunge towards the police. ‘She is such an innocent young girl!...’

'Enough!' yell the policemen, 'or we will arrest you too for possession of a red banner and propaganda in your home ...

'That fabric ...' Motye grumbles in confusion, 'probably came from a red dress.'

'Idiot!' the policemen scream at him from beyond the door, as they lead Matlye away.

For a moment, Motye hangs on the door like a hinge. It's hard for him to catch his breath, as if pliers are claspings at his throat. Suddenly, he reminds himself of something. He dashes out of the apartment, and yells down the street:

'Hold on, gentlemen! At least let me untie my horse and drive you and my daughter to the station. It's cold, and she's only wearing a light shirt.'

They do not respond. They are already at the corner.

More than anything, Motye is tormented by the fact that he had personally driven Etke, she who wallows in perversion; but Matlye, his pure child, has to make her way on foot ...

Translated by JUSTIN CAMMY