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...HARDLY EVER OTHERWISE
by Maria Matios

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Translated from the Ukrainian by Yuri Tkacz

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FOREWORD

Maria Matios is currently one of the top women writers in Ukraine. Her novels reflect the wild spirit of the Hutsuls, highlanders from the Carpathian Mountains, whose remote villages still retain the old customs and colorful dress.

Herself born in the Carpathian Mountains, Maria bases many of her books on her family's unique experiences. She is a great fan of her native language. Her interests include psychology and ethnography. In literature she is a great martyr, a day-dreamer, a moderate adventurer and a lover of mystification. Maria loves to go about barefoot and grow flowers as she dreams up new plots for her novels.

Matios is the author of 7 collections of poetry and 14 books of prose. Her famous *Sweet Darusia* (2003) and *Nation* (2002) have each been reprinted four times. Several of her books have been published in translation in Poland, Russia and Australia. Excerpts of her works have been translated into German, French, Romanian, Slovak, Italian, Serbian, Czech and Hebrew. *Hardly Ever Otherwise*, together with *Sweet Darusia* and *Nation* have been made into popular plays. Her other recent titles include *Mamma Maritsa – The Wife of Christopher Columbus, The Russky Woman* (2008) and *Armageddon Has Already Happened* (2011).

In 2005 Maria Matios won the prestigious Shevchenko Literature prize. She lives and works in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, but retires to the Carpathian Mountains for inspiration.

The cover art is by Serhiy Ivanov, an artist living and working in Lviv. He has illustrated many books and recently held a personal exhibition entitled "Hutsul Mythology".

I would like to thank Graham Hirst for editing the text, however the responsibility for any errors is all mine. Thank you also to my family for putting up with my absences while I translated the book.

Yuri Tkacz,
Translator of *Hardly Ever Otherwise*

PART ONE

FOUR BROTHERS, LIKE KITH AND KIN

Odokiya, known as Dotsia to everyone at home, was the wife of Cheviuk's eldest son Pavlo. She was having such difficulty carrying her fourth child, that even her father-in-law Kyrylo, a soft-hearted man, but short on words, was forced to intervene in the matter, which in Tysova Rivnia was never considered delicate, insomuch as it was no one else's business.

From time immemorial women's pregnancy in these parts had been accepted as an everyday affair. Almost a secondary thing, one could say.

Since the beginning of mankind, men had been worrying about having healthy seed and women – an enduring womb. And that was the long and the short of it.

However, having watched Dotsia's daily vomiting around the stable and seeing his daughter-in-law waste away into ash after living for several months on apples and water, Kyrylo said to his wife Vasylyna one night:

"We have to do something about Dotsia."

There was firmness in Kyrylo's voice, which everyone in the house always heeded.

"What can I do?" Vasylyna asked, sitting up in bed and sleepily rolling her eyes upward. "I had trouble carrying Andriy as well, but did your departed mother take pity on me? My eyes were ready to pop out swinging that stupid hoe about while the child was ready to come into the Lord's world, and your mother only egged me on: 'Eh, let's do two more rows, and that'll suffice. You're not hoeing it properly, anyway.' 'So what's the proper way, mum?' I asked her. And she answered: 'Don't know, but that's not the right way.' That's what it was like for me. Have you forgotten that our Andriy was born in the pumpkin patch?"

"Stop nattering and contradicting me, woman! I haven't forgotten a thing. And leave my departed

mother in peace! All her sins have been listed for her in the other world. Are you blind? Our daughter-in-law is fading before our eyes and won't utter a word of complaint. Look, we know that even if she gives birth to a cripple, it'll be no calamity: they'll manage to bring it up. But if Dotsia dies in childbirth, Pavlo will have to remarry. And he's already got three children. Who needs someone else's children to worry about? If his second wife bears him a child – the three he has now will become estranged from him. A stepmother is no sweet lollipop. Perhaps you've become so hard-hearted toward Dotsia because you've forgotten what it's like being an orphan, eh?" Vasylyna heard out her husband's monologue through gritted teeth, although the silence was difficult to sustain.

When she lay back down beside Kyrylo, she found that sleep had abandoned her completely, because she was filled with anger. She wasn't too fond of her first daughter-in-law, solely because of one thing: the rock-hard, silent love of her eldest and kindest son, Pavlo, for his Dotsia.

Vasylyna had never seen Pavlo show great affection for his wife or ingratiate himself with her, even after he returned from the war. She had never seen him press her against the storehouse wall, for example, or roll about with her in the hayloft above the stables.

But the fact that her Pavlo was incapable of even breathing without Dotsia – this she knew intuitively.

To tell the truth… at least Vasylyna could admit to herself the number of times she had seen double and there had been ringing in her ears as she stood stock-still outside the door or the windows of the house where Pavlo and Dotsia were spending the night together unsuper-

vised before they were married, in an effort to catch any sounds emanating from inside the walls. Above all Vasylyna wanted to relive at least one fleeting moment from her own past, the kind of moment which now appeared to her to have never taken place, a moment which only seemed like a mirage from her youthful years with Kyrylo.

However, Pavlo and Dotsia seemed to be so secretive, that the mother was left only with a profound anger and wordless astonishment when early in the morning her son and daughter-in-law took to work with such earnestness, as if they wanted to hurry the day toward evening, so that they could jump back into the steaming hot night together.

And there *was* something to remember…

But… perhaps only to remember. Because a sudden illness had taken Kyrylo's masculine strength from him, as if it had never existed. More than likely some two-legged she-devil had envied them their sons, healthy as nut kernels, and had ended the days of Vasylyna's pleasure, making Kyrylo impotent well before old age, an affliction worse than being crippled.

What could she do? It was fate! Kyrylo's father had given his mistress a child at seventy-five years of age, while here…

And so Vasylyna had secretly resented her daughter-in-law almost from the very start for enjoying with Pavlo what she had long since forgotten.

Who could she talk to about this?

Vasylyna knew only too well that in character and virility Pavlo was like the old Kyrylo, who now only lazily played with her occasionally, when they returned from some celebration, unlike in days gone by when he had taken no notice of Lent or Easter, or even a

death next door. That's how it had once been, but now all that had changed…

Meanwhile Pavlo was making Dotsia children. And he did this without using carrots. The proper way.

…And so, having sighed a thousand times from self pity for her predicament and out of anger toward Dotsia, Vasylyna went off to the sorceresses and herbalists, just as Kyrylo had bade her, to seek help for her daughter-in-law. In their family a wife had no right to disregard her husband's bidding.

However, neither herbs nor church services helped Dotsia: she simply faded before everyone's eyes, except that her recently-sunken stomach began to swell, as if it was feeding on yeast.

'There's surely a cripple growing in her belly. Holy saints above!' Vasylyna crossed herself wordlessly, watching as her daughter-in-law finished tying the laces on her *postoly*[1] with great difficulty.

"…WIFE, SUMMON ALL OUR CHILDREN FOR TOMORROW," Kyrylo commanded Vasylyna, after eating dinner in silence and saying grace.

"All of them?" asked Vasylyna, clapping her hands, and then for some reason wiping them on her apron.

"All of them!"

Vasylyna wept silently: 'Oh, all of them… You can't summon Dmytryk from the grave… So Kyrylo has dreamed up some plan. God in Heaven, protect everyone's children and our own…'

Cheviuk's three sons, Pavlo, Andriy and Oksentiy, identical as three drops of water, sat around the oak table

1 *Postoly* – moccasin-like shoes worn by the Hutsuls, Ukrainian highlanders from the Carpathian Mountains in southwestern Ukraine.

in the middle of the largest room, which was usually reserved for guests. The fourth drop of this same water, the father, paced in silence around them, pausing for a long time behind each son's back and briefly slapping each on the neck.

Kyrylo was silent, because he was thinking; the sons sat silently, because they did not know what their father was thinking.

"Let's pray for Dmytryk…" he finally said.

All four of them turned their eyes toward an icon of the Holy Virgin under an embroidered sash in the centre of the wall and held their palms together in prayer.

"…Accept, oh Lord, the sinful soul of your servant Dmytro into Your Heavenly Kingdom, and shield us from evil intent and foolish actions…" the old Cheviuk finished the prayer with some unusual words and assumed his place at the head of the table.

Andriy and Oksentiy seemed to clear their throats.

Only Pavlo wiped a tear from his eye.

AFTER HIS HORRIFYING DEATH no one had spoken of Dmytryk in the Cheviuk household.

They simply prayed.

There was nothing to say.

Those who knew crossed themselves in silence.

Whilst those who were not privy to the details of the dark story made no attempt to ask any questions.

Kyrylo was in essence a kind and gentle soul, but he would have killed anyone with his bare hands had they dared mouth off against his youngest son, whom they had buried as a single man in the cold clay, before he had even celebrated his twentieth birthday.

No one knew, however, that Kyrylo was ready to forfeit everything he owned just to find out the name of the animal that had killed his innocent child.

…What had happened to Dmytryk Cheviuk habitually happened to people not only in times of war, but in any old year and during any season, when one half of the material world was choking on misfortune, and the other half thirsted for adventure.

It was the same old thing in this world: one set of people killed other people, and at this same time another set of people loved yet others. And yet others hated those who had loved.

And neither the first lot, nor the second lot could cope.

Either with the love.

Or the hate.

And hardly ever was it otherwise.

…*WHEN IVAN VARVARCHUK*, like many men from Tysova Rivnia, was taken away to fight for Emperor Franz-Josef, his young wife Petrunia was left all alone with a fair-sized estate to look after. Sometimes she managed well, and at other times she was barely able to cope looking after her burgeoning landholding.

But when in the space of a single week in the Varvarchuk's farmyard two cows calved, a mare foaled, the sow had ten piglets, the yearling bull began to snort through his inflamed nostrils, like a bear in the brambles, and to hoof the stable floor so forcefully that sparks flew out from under the floorboards, and the leg of the wife herself was bitten by a weasel, Petrunia convinced her near-

est neighbours to allow their youngest lad to give her a helping hand, not as a hired labourer, but merely to help out.

The Cheviuks had never been poor, so they never hired their children out as labourers.

But they took pity on Petrunia, as a neighbour: after all, their own eldest son Pavlo, like her Ivan, was fighting at the front for the Kaiser.

The agreement between Kyrylo and Petrunia was a simple one: Dmytryk would look after the Varvarchuk's cattle, and in return the meadow hay and two mowings of late-season hay from Pohar together with two *kopy*[2] of maize from Varvarchuk's garden in Trepit would go to the Cheviuks, in lieu of payment for their helper Dmytryk.

Quiet and hard-working Dmytryk, from whom no one ever heard an unnecessary word, cleaned out the cow stalls and tended to the mangers from morning till night, without so much as putting down his pitchfork, shovel or cattle brush. Even the Varvarchuks' bull, fierce as a proper Epiphany frost, began to rub against Dmytryk's shoulder almost trustfully, and stopped overreacting at the appearance of strangers in the yard.

Everything would probably have remained so peaceful and good to this day, had not the farmer's wife clambered up onto the loft in the stable one autumn afternoon to fetch some hay for the calves.

And Dmytryk, who had been feeding a cow from a bucket, at that very moment happened to glance up, without first closing fast his innocent but all-seeing eyes, the eyes of a virgin…

2 1 *kopa* = 60 sheaves. A sheaf is a bundle of unthreshed corn tied with string.

A linguist by profession with a degree in Ukrainian literature, Maria Matios has stormed the book market with her bestselling award winning novels set exclusively in the legendary Ukrainian highlands. Named the "Grande Dame" of Ukrainian literature, Matios, whose ancestors settled here in the 1700s, is no stranger to the land where she was born and raised. Maria had worked in the literary industry in various capacities before taking to creative writing. Seven books of poetry and five books of prose earned Maria Matios an unofficial title of Ukraine's most prolific female author, and the official titles of Chevalier of the Ukrainian Order of Merit and Honorary Citizen of the city of Chernivtsi.

Painting a tortured picture of life's harsh brutality in the region, Maria provides an insight into the complicated history of this remote corner of the Carpathian Mountains. Against the colourful backdrop of local traditions and highlanders' rites she weaves her story of love, intertwined with a heart wrenching human tragedy, not avoiding intimate details of the anatomy of relationships between men and women.

"They jumped about on top of poor Dmytryk, as if they were dancing a wild dance, stopping only after they heard that his bones no longer cracked..." Enchanted by the impeccable style of this family saga, the reader becomes baffled by the character's actions. In the words of Maria Matios the book is about people's deeply concealed nature. When familiar irresistible passions like love and hate, joy and envy overcome them, consequences reach the catastrophic magnitude. Each character is flawed, detestable, but in the book's finale they incite compassion as their painful past comes to light. Having eternal dilemma of sin and atonement in the book's core, the author does not shy away from carnal encounters and masterfully describes the psychology of lovers, accentuating people's struggles on different levels.

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