

Mitica and The Preacher's Boy

The bells on the approaching horse distracted Mitica (pronounced mi-tike-ah) and he stabbed nothing but the cool Romanian air with his pitchfork. Why was his father coming home so early? The church service they went to should have lasted at least until sundown. He'd counted on that, put off raking and stacking hay onto a cart so he could play a few more rounds of his computer game. Worse, he hadn't even touched his horrible math assignment.



Mitica doubled his effort, but more hay fell to the ground than made it to the cart. Maybe his father wouldn't care. Something must have happened for them to get out so early. Three forkfuls later, he set the pitchfork down and mopped his forehead with a sleeve, knocking off his hat.

The horse-drawn cart pulled into their farm yard. His father and younger brother were not alone. The pastor of the church sat next to his dad. Why wasn't the pastor driving his van? A kid he didn't recognize sat at the back of the wagon bed next to his brother. They were both swinging their legs. It was easy to be happy when you didn't have chores to do. The whole reason his brother went to church was to get out of doing all the stuff they had to do on their little farm.

Why did that pastor have to come? Mitica grabbed his pitchfork and lifted a small pile of hay in the field. That preacher fellow better not be coming to see his mother. He always brought up suffering and dying. He shouldn't be saying that kind of stuff to his mother. Sure, she had a weak heart and her kidneys were giving out, but why scare everyone talking about heaven and junk like that?

His father pulled on the reins and their horse slowed his pace. A nanosecond later, his brother Ladinás hopped down onto the dusty road.

"Jump down, Danut, we're here." His brother ran by the side of the wagon, his red scarf flapping like two flags behind him.

"I can't, the wagon is still moving."

Must be a city kid. Mitica retrieved his hat and returned to his hay heaping. His father better not be bringing some stupid brat into their house. They already had their grandparents, his uncle and his weird girl cousin staying at their house. With any more water in the soup, it couldn't be called soup any longer.

"Mitica, take the horse and wipe him down. I'm going to help Pastor and his boy get settled. Their van broke down and they're staying here tonight."

Mitica groaned. He'd planned on watching a movie that night. He laid his pitchfork against the barn and walked as slowly as he could toward the wagon. A whole night of that gloomy minister and now his son too was more than enough punishment for a year.

He unhitched the horse and led him to the barn. All the way there he explained to the old animal how easy a life it had. After all, he didn't get extra chores while his brother went off to the hotel-turned-into-a-church to goof around. Plus, he didn't need to sit in the house all evening, being absolutely perfect and not able to watch a show he'd looked forward to the past week. The horse would probably have a better supper than he would.

Mitica let the horse pass by him into his stall. He rushed through the wipe down, missing large patches. The poor creature turned and gave him a look that seemed to say "You're not done, are you?" But Mitica would not do any more than he absolutely had to do. This way, if his father asked if he'd wiped down the horse, he could say he did.

All the way to the well, Mitica muttered under his breath about how bad things were since his dad and brother started going to that church. Maybe if that pastor's van was broken down, he'd stop having a church service and things could get back to normal.

As he carried the bucket of water to the barn, Mitica shook his head, recounting how things were going from bad to worse. He stepped up the pace and some of the water spilled out of the pail. Some of it splashed onto his pants leg and he stormed toward the dilapidated old barn, spilling even more.

"This is all you're getting for a drink tonight. And remember, old swayback, you still have it better than I do." Mitica threw a couple handfuls of hay into the manger, pushed his hat further back on his head, and turned toward the house.

His father stood in the doorway with his arms crossed. "How are you going to finish with the hay before supper? There's supposed to be rain tomorrow night. You've got school tomorrow. One storm could ruin all of the hay." Apparently, there would be no negotiating. The smell of stuffed peppers drifted out of the house. Mitica's stomach responded with hunger pangs that he couldn't ignore.

"I'll do it after supper."

“Sun will be down in an hour; you won’t be able to finish it. Don’t suppose you did your math homework either. We’ll talk about it after supper. Pastor’s wife made a big pan of stuffed peppers and pork. Better decisions are made on a full stomach. Come on in the house now.”

Wow, that pastor brought food. Stuffed peppers were his favorite food in the whole world. He lifted his hat from his head and threw it in the air. He caught his hat and ran to the house. Maybe this wouldn’t be his worst day ever.

He dashed through the door and almost ran into the pastor. “Hello, Mitica.” The pastor reached out his hand but Mitica pushed his hands into his pockets. He might have come with delicious food but that didn’t make him any less of a trouble maker. His father cleared his throat. Mitica changed his mind and reached out a hand toward the pastor’s. Well, he didn’t have to look him in the eye. He kept his head down, shook hands then set down his hat.

“Mitica, may I introduce my boy, Danut? Couple years younger than you but he likes computer games too. Maybe you two fellows could share your favorites after we eat.” Danut grinned and nodded.

Mitica looked up and bit his lower lip to stop a smile from forming. He would not show this pastor any joy. But he’d said the magic words to make him happy: computer games. “Um, I have to finish with the hay.”

“I’ll help with that,” Danut said. He grinned again. What kind of kid was glad to help with chores? He was 100% a city boy. Probably didn’t know what to do with a pitchfork.

“Sure, I’ll get you my brother’s pitchfork. It’s smaller, easier for a kid to handle.”

Danut’s shoulders dropped. He turned to his father, then back to Mitica. “I’m not a kid.”

The pastor laid a hand on Danut’s shoulder and squeezed it. “I know, son. The smaller one will be just fine for this one time.”

They all sat around the big wood block table, with so many chairs everyone bumped an elbow with another. Mitica’s mother joined them, her face paler than ever. But she talked more than she had for weeks. Mitica closed his eyes for just a moment and pretended she was well again and things were back to normal.



“Pastor, where are you off to next week?” Mitica’s mother asked as she slowly cut her stuffed pepper.

“Sofia, Bulgaria. Complete opposite of this weekend, big city and everyone rushing around. But once we are sitting around the little apartment where we meet, I tune out the car horns and rumbling trams.” He leaned back and breathed in the scent of the food. “It is very hard to leave home when you have a wife that is a good cook. But there are so many places without a pastor. After Sofia, we will drive south to Katerini, Greece. The members of that little church are so enthusiastic.”

“Do you go to those places, Danut?” Ladinis asked after pushing a spoonful into his mouth.

“Ladinis, not with your mouth full” his mother said.

“No, I can’t because I have to go to school.”

Ladinis swallowed and asked “But during school breaks?”

“Not for now,” the Pastor answered. “Someday, maybe he’ll come along. The church services are always in English and then someone interprets it all into Bulgarian, or Greek. Danut doesn’t know English very well. It’s better that he stays home with his mother for now.”

After supper, Danut pulled his phone out of his pocket to show Mitica one of his favorite computer games, but the pastor made him put it away. Mitica had to drop his head so he wouldn’t get yelled at for smiling. Hard not to like a kid that loved computer games *and* wasn’t perfect.

After supper the boys headed out to the yard, Danut took the little pitchfork and tackled the stack of hay like his life depended on it. What was he trying to prove?

Halfway down a pile, Danut asked what type of math they had in school. What kind of kid asked about math? Mitica answered him then turned his head away so Danut wouldn’t see him roll his eyes, but answered him.

“I want to be an engineer when I’m grown up. I’m two years ahead in math so I’ve had that already. Want to do that when we get in?”

“Yeah, if you want.” Well at least he was helping him with stuff he had to get done. Might not be the worst city kid he’d ever met. But he definitely would have to bunk with his little brother.

“What do you want to do when you get older?”

“Have more fun than I am now.”

Danut stabbed his pitchfork into the hay. “Do you hate living on a farm?”

“No, but I hate getting stuck with chores when my brother goes to your stupid church.”

“Your brother always helps set up chairs and tables for the services, puts them away when we’re all done. He washes dishes when we have meals together.” Danut moved a little more hay, then stuck the pitchfork in the ground and planted his hands on his hips. “But I wish your father would talk to him about something. e does love to use the hose on the sink to spray me and never misses a chance to fling soap suds at me.”

“That sounds more like my brother.” Mitica arched his back and whistled for his dog to come in for the night. The little spaniel came bounding toward him, but stopped when he saw Danut, raised his nose, and sniffed a few times. Hah! Good old mut had his reservations, too. He petted him a few times and scratched behind his ear. The dog moved on to Danut, sniffed again and wagged his tail. Well maybe Mitica should give the kid a chance too.

Mitica moved the pitchforks into the barn just as the sun lit up the mountains to the west. He pulled his shoulder blades together and allowed himself a moment to enjoy the red and orange sky behind the Transylvanian range.

“You ever go camping in the mountains?” Danut asked.

“Not lately, my mom has been too sick and I always have stuff to do here.”

“My dad is trying to arrange a camping trip to the mountains next year. I hope you can come along, catch a break from the farm chores, show us city guys how to start a fire, fish, stuff like that. Your dad said you could survive on your own in the mountains, even if a bear came around.”

“Well, maybe. But I don’t go to your church.” He closed the barn door and walked toward the house.

“You could still come.”

Mitica lifted a stray handful of hay and threw it onto Danut’s head.

Danut gathered the pieces from his head and shoulders then swung it at Mitica. He laughed for a moment, then the wind caught it and soon Danut’s chest was covered with it.

“Hey Danut, how would you like a job as our scarecrow? The old one has a lot less hay than you do.”

Danut brushed off his shirt and broke into a contagious giggle.

Mitica’s younger brother had just walked out of the house. When he saw Danut, he ran back inside and yelled to his father “Mitica threw hay onto Danut, hurry dad.”

Danut shook his head. “Let’s take a stab at your math homework before the police get here. If you’re like me, you don’t need any help getting on your dad’s bad side.”

“You in trouble? I don’t believe it preacher boy.”

“Bet my dad will be out before your dad is.” Danut shook his head. “My dad could tell you lots of stories. Let’s not get him going with that.”

Mitica patted his dog’s head. “You gonna come along next time your dad visits my mother?”

“It depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“What kind of new computer games you’ll find.”

“I will not disappoint you, city boy.”

Mitica lightly punched Danut in the arm. “Might want to build those muscles up a bit. Next time I’ll be chopping wood.”

Danut’s father walked out to the yard. “Danut, what’s going on here?”

“Just working hard with this tough guy. Really dad, everything is just fine.”

They headed inside, Mitica picking a few pieces of hay out of Danut’s hair. “Hey, does your dad ever let you watch stuff on television?”

“Yeah, if it isn’t too violent or bad in some way.”

Mitica described the movie he wanted to watch. He crossed his arms and glanced sideways at Danut.

“That should be okay. I think I’d like it. Is there enough time to look at your math before we get started?”

“We probably have about ten or fifteen minutes, so I think we’ll have enough time.”

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The following afternoon, Mitica got back from school, and found out Danut and his dad had left. Mitica had wanted to show him another computer game. He tossed his backpack onto his bed and changed into clothes to finish with the hay.

When he rounded the corner of the barn, Mitica stopped in his tracks. All the hay had been gathered and brought into the barn. His dad must have abandoned his work for the day and finished the job. Mitica shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. He would surely catch it from his dad.

With his head hung low, Mitica shuffled off toward the barn. He kicked an old pail next to the well. It would be wonderful to have one day when he didn't get into trouble. His father was repairing a tool, whistling as worked. Hmm, maybe things weren't as bad as he thought.

Mitica stood by his dad. "The hay?"

"Danut worked on it all morning. They didn't finish fixing the van until an hour ago." His father blew on the tool he'd just sanded. "He figured he'd do something useful since he couldn't get to school in Brashov. Not a bad day of work for a city boy."

Mitica couldn't find a word to speak. If he'd gotten an extra day off school, he'd have filled it with computer games or going fishing. That Danut, he was awesome.

"Think his father will come back here with him?" Mitica leaned against the barn door and ran his hand through his hair.

His father set down the tool and looked Mitica in the eye. "He usually stays in town when his dad comes here to see your mother, but I think he'll want to come here again. You might just tip the balance if you wrote him a thank you note. What do you say, son?"

"Maybe. I did want to tell him about this other computer game, maybe show him some stuff. I think the farm is sort of interesting to him."

"I think Danut figures he has a new friend."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far, not yet. But really, he's okay." All the hay in the barn smelled good. A sweet smell indeed.