

The Antonov

A traditional, heart-warming Ukrainian tale, retold for our times by John E Phillips.
Somewhere in the middle of Africa, Christmas 2005

Once upon a time there was an ageing Antonov¹. One morning it was decided that the Antonov should fly to a town in the forests of the distant north, and as soon as this was announced people started to stream in from far and wide—men, women and children— because they wanted to travel to that town.

First of all a group of people came laden with baggage and the steward first examined their tickets and then let them on board. But first they had to point to which bag, or case or carton or crocodile belonged to them, so that only the luggage belonging to *them* was put on the Antonov.



Then some more people came and said they wanted to travel to the distant town. The steward said “There is no room in the Antonov”. But the people raised their voices and protested that they had been promised a place. Whereupon the steward asked them their names and sure enough their names were inscribed on his list. “It will be a bit tight, but you may get on,” he said.

Then some more people arrived and said they wanted to get on too. And because they were persistent and because they had small children the steward said “Well, if you can find a small corner somewhere where you can fit you and your baggage in, you may get on board.”

Then along came a wide Mama with some huge nylon bags decorated with a plaid pattern. The steward barred her way and said, ‘There is no room’. But the Mama was not to be put off and said that she had all sorts of toys to sell on the market and if she was refused a place, the children of that town would have no presents—for it was the Eve of the Festival of Children. The steward thought of the poor children who might have to go without a present. Finally, he was moved by the Spirit of the Festival of Children to relent and allow the Mama to squeeze herself and her many bags through the door and into the Antonov.

By now the many people on board were beginning to get restless and complain that it was hot and stuffy in the Antonov. The steward replied that soon they would be flying and that maybe the air-conditioning would start working.

But just as the steward was pushing all his weight against the door of the Antonov to squeeze it closed, up came a heavily-built man in a dark suit, carrying a case. ‘Ah! Yaya²!’ exclaimed the steward in a high-pitched voice. They rubbed foreheads and exchanged news of the family. ‘Are you travelling to the town in the forests of the north?’ ‘No,’ said the man in the suit, ‘but this case must urgently go to the governor of the forests of the north.’ ‘Very well,’ said the steward and he took

¹ This is probably the Antonov AN-24, a twin-engine turbo-prop aircraft built in the Soviet Union from 1959 to 1979.

Some of these aircraft are still flying today.

² *Yaya* means ‘elder brother’. It would be inappropriate for a *leki* (younger brother) to say ‘no’ to his yaya.

the case and they spent several minutes pushing and shoving, shouting and heaving, until the case popped in through the door of the Antonov.

‘That’s it,’ declared the steward. ‘No more room aboard the Antonov.’ But then he noticed a young woman next to him. She smiled sweetly and said ‘Please, I have a letter I want to send to the town in the forests of the north.’ ‘No,’ said the steward resolutely. ‘There is no more room and the Antonov must leave.’ At this the young woman began to plead, saying that it was only a small letter, and that if she folded it in two it would be even smaller. Finally charmed by this young lady, the steward relented and opened the door of the Antonov, just a crack, and began to slip the letter into the bulging hull. At that very moment though, the ageing Antonov began to creak and shudder until with a ear-splitting crack, it split open at the seams and all the passengers, their bags, cases, cartons and crocodiles spilled out onto the tarmac.

Whereupon the steward walked back to the departure lounge, put his head round the door and said, ‘vol annulé³!’

³ *Vol annulé* is French for ‘flight cancelled’.