

REPERTOIRE
Andrei Bychkov

From the cycle *In the South*

“Look here.”

“Who’s there?”

“Me.

“Who’s that talking?”

“Look back here.”

“Well I looked and there isn’t anybody.”

“I’m right here.”

“Well where is ‘here’, dammit?!”

“Right next to you.”

“I don’t see you!”

“You didn’t look right. You have to look differently.”

“What is all this? What does ‘look differently’ mean? And who in the hell is talking anyway?!”

“Shall I describe myself? Maybe then you’ll see me.”

“Well?

...

“Why don’t you say anything?”

...

“Thank God. Imagining things. I thought only other people did that.”

“I’m no way in particular. Or rather, I don’t know quite how to describe how I am to you. One morning I had brown hair. But in general it’s most often blond.”

“You’re dressed in something at least, aren’t you?”

“How can I say it.... In the summer sometimes I wear a Dynamo soccer shirt.”

“Cops.”

“But other times it’s Army.”

“Dirty stable boys!”

“One night I was walking on Red Square in the form of a colonel from the Tsar’s army, in a rather rumpled dark blue dress coat that looked violet in the night lighting. And only when a patrol car came up and shined its search light did...

“Why did you do that?”

“What?”

“Why were you walking there?”

"I don't know. It was one of my stages. Like the nando fish that imitates dry leaves on the surface of the water, immobile day after day amidst the leaves, waiting..."

"Did they arrest you?"

"Who?"

"The cops."

"No. I said I was an actor and I'd just finished a rehearsal at the Bolshoi, dropped the director Grigorovich's name."

"And they believed you?"

"Yeah. And it's not even because they're idiots. Of course they are idiots. But it's always easier to believe in the improbable. You believe I'm here after all."

"I'm raving! I don't want to hear this! Get away from me, whoever you are! Get lost!"

"See, you believe."

"What?!"

"I said, 'See, you believe.'"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You believe."

"This is insane! There isn't anybody there!"

"Look back here."

"Easy. Take it easy. I don't hear anything. There are no voices."

"Look back here."

"Nobody's there. Nobody's there!"

"Look back here."

"God, when will this be over?!"

"Look back here."

"What do you want from me? Tell me! You're there..."

"Hm... I'm not quite sure. Well, how can I say it... Something is supposed to happen between us."

"What?! Between whom? I don't even see you. Prove to me somehow that you're there."

"I know a lot about you."

"Like what?"

"I know you collect it."

"What?"

"It."

"What is 'it'? You keep saying it, it. What do I collect? You just said I collected. I'll answer you first. Since you know so much about me, that means you're my delirium, a hallucination is all, and sooner or later this will go away. If not in one minute, then in twenty. And you can throw in your 'look back here'" too.

"All people collect, or have collected, something. Stamps maybe, or coins, or pins. With you it's... yes, while I for instance collect cheese."

"Cheese?"

"Yes, cheese. I knew a woman who also collected cheese. She did it in order to be different. As soon as I knew about it, I told her right off that I collected cheese too, even though I hadn't really started yet."

"Why'd you tell her then?"

"Well I started collecting it later."

"But before that you didn't?"

"Right, before that I really didn't collect cheese, but I told her I did on purpose."

"What for?"

"The best way to explain it is.. let's see... it's.... Well, I wanted something to happen between us."

"Delirium! I'm raving. Am I going out of my mind or what? God!"

"Take it easy. You're not going out of your mind. The simple fact is I really exist. The simple fact is we're having a conversation. That's really nothing. A vibration of the air. Why are you reacting so violently? Calm down. Nothing has happened."

"Well what in the hell is supposed to happen then?"

"I told you I don't know yet."

"Okay. What happened between you and that woman then?"

"Y-yes."

"What does 'y-yes' mean? What happened between you?"

"That's what I'm talking about. You just didn't let me finish. She was what I wanted to tell you about. She looked like a goat. She was supposed to lie in the grass so that she couldn't be seen. I mean, if you looked from the level of the grass or maybe a little higher. Of course, from a helicopter she could have been seen, but not if you were pushing your way through and in so doing had to bend over a little bit. You're going along, bent over, so..."

"You killed her?"

"Why do you ask me that? I'm saying she was supposed to lie on some crumpled grass. Really tall grass all around her, with thick stems. And I was supposed to walk along a path that led through the grass, or rye, or wheat, or whatever it was that grew there, I don't remember what. I could be following a bird, for instance, a quail maybe, that had flown low along the path. It could have flown away from me some twenty meters and then stopped and seemed to wait and, when I approached nearer, fluttered up and flown further ahead, sailing low, lower than the level of the grass, along the path. And I would have been walking, following the bird, and then suddenly, for no apparent reason, all at once gone to one side, into the grass, where I would have happened to see the woman."

"And then?"

"Then nothing."

"But you said something was supposed to happen between you and her."

"Yes. Afterward something did. Afterward, yes."

"But then, when you were walking along the path and happened to go to one side, then, no?"

“Then, no.”

“Because that was the first time you’d ever seen her?”

“No, not because it was the first time. We already knew each other, and I already knew she collected cheese, and she also knew that I collected cheese. I had already told her about that so that something would happen between us.”

“So you went to bed together.”

“That’s not important—I killed her, we slept together—it’s unimportant. There are more horrifying things than murder, more pleasurable things than simply sleeping together. Everybody has something. Understand? Each person wants his own. That woman collected cheese, and she was supposed to lie in the grass, and I had to walk along a path and happen to go to one side and catch sight of her. Understand?”

“Not a bloody word.”

“Well it’s unlikely, impossible.”

“That two people collect cheese and happen to meet somewhere out of town, in a field?”

“No. That I purposely told her that I collected cheese so that something would happen between us, and then was walking in the rye or wheat and happened to go to one side and see her, lying in the grass, for instance, with her blouse unbuttoned and her breasts a little to one side, downward I mean, like the udders of a goat when it’s exhausted and rolls over, looking you in the eye.”

“Did all this happen or not, dammit?”

“It was supposed to happen.”

“But actually you and she...”

“Actually it happened almost. That woman and I talked on the phone for two months without meeting. Then I told her that something was supposed to happen between us since we, both she and I, collected cheese. I told her to go to Malinovka, explained to her how to get to the field, and at what time to be there. I said: whatever she wanted to happen would. For my part I couldn’t even be sure she would go, especially since on the phone our conversations had always been rather reserved, and I had really only seen her three or four times in all. Even until the last, I didn’t know what she wanted.”

“So you, after all...”

“Listen, the whole thing’s up to you.”

“No, I mean, you...”

“Quiet! Quiet, quiet, quiet. Don’t say anything. Wait. Once, another time... I’m going to tell you about another time now, but it’s really important, really. Just wait, listen. It has to do with that woman and with you. One time I jumped under a train because of someone. He needed for someone to die. I staged a suicide. I played it out kind of by chance. I’d found out a lot about him too. We had started talking once in a bus. He admitted to me, like you might to a chance companion, that he wouldn’t mind paying money for such a thing. Then we went our separate ways. He didn’t notice that I followed him and found out where he lived. Then I dropped a letter into his mailbox, saying that if he left a lot of money there at

night, more than a thousand, what he wanted to happen would, but that if he didn't want it to happen, he didn't have to leave any money at all. I didn't know that he would. He did. And I took it. Then a couple of days later I left him another letter, telling him to be in front of the last car of a local train stop outside town on a certain day and time. He came. When I saw him, I let two trains go by and then jumped. I'd planned out everything beforehand, how much time before the train I needed to jump in order to get down flat against the rails. And for blood and meat, I had brought a sack with me that was filled with ground up goat..."

"Get away from me!! Bastard! I don't want any more! Not a word! Get lost! I'm going. I'm getting up right now and going."

"Go ahead. If that's what you want. Go."

"I am."

"Well, go ahead then."

"I might even run!"

"Run then. Why aren't you running?"

"Well I can run, can't I?"

"Of course you can. If you run, you run. But before you do, look back here."

"I don't want to look! I want to run."

"Run then. But it might happen between us while you're running. A lot of things happen in this world while one is running. All sorts of things. To each his own, of course. Ostriches, for instance... The male overtakes the female at a speed of eighty-five kilometers an hour and they couple. Yes, sir. Honest to God!"

"Shut up!! I want to run and not hear anymore of this bullshit and see something else, trees, columns, and think about other things and listen to the plastic of my coat rustling as I go."

"Stop. So, you don't want to hear me?"

"I do no-o-ot!"

"You won't listen?"

"I won't!"

"Fine. Swear to me you won't think about me after you run away, and I'll leave you alone. Nothing will happen to you. But be careful, if you think about me even once, even by accident, then that's it."

"That's what?"

"It."

"What's 'it'?"

"It'll happen. Between us. If you think about me."

"What are you trying to scare me for? What is it that'll happen?"

"What's inside you. How you actually are. You can convince yourself consciously of being one thing but want something else altogether. What happens this time might be something else at another. It's hidden deep inside you."

"Okay. So what happened to that woman?"

“What is that to you now? You were ready to run away. And now you’ve started asking questions again. Next you’re going to want to know about that man, whether he saw or not.”

“Pig.”

“You are frank.”

“Yes, I hate you.”

“So you’ll swear?”

“No, I won’t because I know that if I swear, then I’ll think about you by accident, without wanting to of course, but I will.”

“Well why do you insist so much that you don’t want it to happen between us? Are you so sure it might not be something good?”

“How am I supposed to know? You yourself said I can’t know what it is, that it’s inside me and I can’t be conscious of it.”

“So you don’t trust yourself, is that it?”

“I don’t want to answer anymore of these idiotic questions!”

“But you can’t.”

“Can’t what?”

“Not answer.”

“That’s the limit. One more time, what is it you want from me? Tell me your conditions. I agree to something happening between us... I agree to everything.”

“Everything?”

“Yes, if it means I don’t have to listen to this anymore.”

“But everything has already happened.”

“What?”

“While we were talking.”

“What happened?”

“You and I had a little talk. That’s enough for me.”