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*The Hunter*

Drawing attention to myself with idiotic sounds: Prr. Prr. Pook!  
And then: Uochk. Uochk-pchk.

That was me chomping and tearing at my meat in the *pel'menii* shop. I stood at the counter, drinking port. It's nice when they (people) look but don't touch. The bottle was wrapped in an issue of *The Literary Gazette*.

"I hope you're not a writer?" asked a big, bulky, crimson-mouthed man with dark hair. I myself am long, thin, pale-faced and blond. My meat was big while his was little, with mashed potatoes. I had vermicelli.

"No. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," he said. "No reason. I know one writer is all."

"So what?" I asked, glancing at him as if this was pointless.

He said nothing for a moment.

"Nothing at all." He sighed. "Though nothing good either."

I chewed quietly, withdrawing into myself.

"I wanted to become a writer once," he said suddenly. "I still didn't know that with writers—it's not your tongue, it's your hand."

Prrr! I ripped off another piece with my teeth. "How's that? What do you mean?" Uochk. Uochk.

"Well, you have to write, not tell stories. Shut up and write."

"Ah."

"It's like this," he went on, showing his red lips as he started on the potatoes. "A person wants to find a kindred soul who'll listen, not interrupt, but they won't let you get in a word edgewise."

"That's true," I said. I nodded at the port. "Want some?"

"Won't say no," he said, smiling (he turned out to have metal partials) and, dumping his stewed fruit into somebody else's plate that hadn't been cleared away, moved his cup closer.

"It's like this," he started again, after we'd emptied a glass (he seemed to be looking at me a little too intently). "This guy knew how to listen, while I, I don't even know what it was. It's just, in his presence, it was like in Perrault's fable, roses just flowed from my mouth. I told him all sorts of stuff, things I'd seen, things I'd

made up. I didn't know he was a writer. They're all thieves, I'm telling you."

"Well, that's neither here nor there," I said, seizing the meat with my teeth. Trr-r. Poook.

"What do you know about it? You're not a writer. You don't know what they're like."

"True." I smiled candidly.

An old man came up, tried to put his tray down between us. "The weather..." he began.

"That spot's taken, pops!" I snarled.

He moved away, offended.

The crimson-lipped man used his fork to pick out a vein from his meat and went on. "So once I happened to take up a paper and read a story, word for word one of the ones I'd told him, and..."

"What was the story?" I asked, pricking up my ears.

"About a guy who's tired of his life and decides to start again. Turns away from his family and friends, even leaves his work in hopes that something different will happen. But year after year passes and nothing happens except that his loneliness gets more and more agonizing. Then one day he spots his ex-wife in the crowd. He rushes up, takes hold of her sleeve, but it turns out it isn't her. 'You've taken me for someone else.' He wanders aimlessly through town and suddenly up ahead sees a school friend on a side street. No, this time there's no mistake. Left shoulder a little higher than the right, a sailor's jacket, swaying stride, broad profile. Out of breath, he catches up to him. 'What's with you?' says the other. 'You drunk?' Then he understands he's losing his mind. He's got to get away somewhere, leave the city for good. The next day he goes to the station, buys a ticket. 'Better hurry,' says the cashier. 'The train's leaving soon.' 'Okay,' he says and runs toward the platform. The train has already started moving. Suddenly, just when he's about to jump on, some man cuts him off. 'Hi! Long time no see!' The man's face is strangely familiar, but who the man is he can't recall. He tries to pull away because the train is gaining more and more speed. But the man doesn't let go. 'How can you possibly not recognize me?!' 'Let me go!' he yells and suddenly realizes that it's himself. Car after car of the train is going by. In a frenzy he pushes the man who's hindering him into the space between two cars, under the wheels."

“Yeah.” I chuckled.

“And do you realize, that writer had written and published it literally, I mean literally the way I told it and didn’t say a word to me. I was so stupefied that I went to the library to check the journal listings for the three years I’d known him. And what do you know. Not only did I find nearly all the stories I had recounted to him but—and this was the part that really shocked and angered me—I even found me described as the hero. He and I used to go drinking then, and I would often play around, act crazy. I was so angry it almost made me lose my head.”

I finished chewing and poured calmly. We clinked glasses and drank. Again it seemed he was looking at me strangely.

“So,” he said, dropping his eyes to his plate and taking up his potatoes once more, “I decided to teach him a lesson.”

“How did you do that?” I asked, feigning disinterest.

“If I’d known the thing would end so badly, I wouldn’t have thought it up.”

He grew quiet all of a sudden, pricking the meat with his fork. I waited.

At last he went on. “So one time I got him to talk about literature, all with the secret design of finding out which writers he’d read and which he hadn’t. Once I learned that he was completely unfamiliar with the works of B., I found a little story by that author entitled ‘The Hunter’ and decided to play it out in front of my friend. Of course, you see where I’m headed with this. He was supposed to take the bait, write down what I showed him, get it published, and then somebody would get him for plagiarism. The plot I was prepared to act out was like this. Two trains are departing simultaneously or almost simultaneously, from one and the same platform. In one is a girl who has just had an argument with her boyfriend. The boyfriend arrives at the station at the last minute and sees the two departing trains. Which one is she on? He rushes here and there. First he thinks she’s on one, then on the other. He understands he’s on the verge of losing her forever. Both trains begin to move. He makes his decision and leaps randomly onto one, and just then it seems to him that he catches sight of her in a window of the other. He jumps back down to the platform but can’t quite manage to leap onto the other in time. He’s left standing on the platform. The two

trains, one just outdistancing the other, disappear into the evening fog, their tail lights shimmering, though only briefly, behind them.

“So I figured out when two local trains would be leaving at about the same time, and made arrangements with an actress friend of mine, and the three of us one evening ended up, by chance so it seemed, in a restaurant next to the station, where she and I pretended to have an argument, keeping an eye on the clock. She ran out. We went after her. I fell behind on purpose so he wouldn’t be able to see which train she got on. In a minute the first of the two was supposed to pull out. I started rushing here and there.

“Suddenly my friend called out, ‘There she is! There!’ Up he jumped onto the edge of the car, holding open the door so she wouldn’t be able to slip away before I managed to jump on. What could I do? ‘No, no!’ I called, trying to turn the situation back to the point of departure. ‘You’re seeing things. She’s over there!’ I waved in the direction of the other train. ‘No, no!’ He took hold of my sleeve. ‘Jump on. She’s here. I’m sure!’

“The train started to move. I tried to free myself. He tried to drag me on. Then he accidentally slipped and fell onto the platform. I didn’t have time to help him up before a handrail on the passing car caught hold of him and flipped him over. He fell into that dark space between the car and the platform. I can still hear his scream. It’s a miracle he didn’t die. But his right hand.... They had to amputate his right arm at the shoulder. I felt like I was to blame for everything, even though I hadn’t planned it. I started going to the hospital to look after him. He was touched. Once he confessed everything to me. ‘God punished me,’ he said. ‘I could learn to write with my left, but I’m not going to do that. Forgive me if you can.’ He started crying. I was moved. I told him I forgave him, but I couldn’t bring myself to confess to him.

“‘You should be the one to write,’ he says after. ‘You’re the real talent. I’m just a pitiful plagiarist.’ It was like cat claws scraping at my heart. ‘I tried once,’ I tell him, ‘but nothing came of it.’ ‘Start by describing that last story,’ he says. ‘Describe how you’re rushing back and forth between the two trains set to depart almost simultaneously, how you don’t know which one your girl is on. Lying here in the hospital, I’ve thought through the plot. But for the end make it so both trains leave and the hero is left there. Don’t write about what really happened. It’d be vulgar if the hero had some kind of

tragedy happen to him. Please do it. I'm asking you. Only then will I feel better, that God has forgiven me, and you too. Write. It'll be a great story. When I get out of the hospital, I'll set everything up to get it published. You'll become a famous writer with your very first story. Only trust me, trust my experience, make the ending the way I've told you. Otherwise the story won't be any good.' An idiotic position to be in, isn't it?"

He buried his crimson lips back in his plate, scraping up the last of his potatoes. I said nothing. I looked at my meat, which had grown cold, and honestly didn't feel like finishing it. I poured out the rest of the port. We drank. He went on.

"So. For some reason I started to feel like my blame was as great as his. It weighed—no, that's not the word—it ate away at my soul. I literally thought of myself as a murderer. I couldn't sleep. I marked up papers on purpose to show him, to demonstrate, that I couldn't write. But he kept at it: 'Try again. I'll make corrections. I'll edit.'"

He stopped talking and looked at me again.

"So?" I said, not taking my eyes from him. "What happened?"

"I'm going to see him tomorrow at the hospital."

"What, so this just happened?" I asked calmly.

"Yes."

"What will you do?"

He sighed suddenly and dropped his gaze. "I don't know what to do."

Then, after a moment, he asked, "What do you think?"

"I don't know what to tell you," I said. "So what's stopping you? Go on and write it."

"And then he'll get it published and everyone will see it's plagiarized."

"So what? Or have you really decided to become a writer and you don't want to start by plagiarizing?"

"It's too late for me to become a writer," he sighed. "That's not the point anyway. He'll understand that I deliberately set up that whole situation at the train station. My actress friend told me I'm a jerk, scum, as if I'd pushed him on purpose. She'll tell him for sure as soon as it comes out. I told her about the whole scenario from start to finish, even about the story by B."

"I see."

“Idiotic. I feel like if I don’t write, then I’m doubly to blame for what happened to him.”

He looked at me carefully.

“Well maybe,” I said, “you could write the whole story of the interrelations with your friend. Then it wouldn’t be plagiarism. And the fact that you’ll be confessing that way, maybe that’ll make you into a real writer. You did say you wanted to once? Your actress friend will probably tell him either way.”

“No,” he said. “That’d be worse.”

I took the empty bottle from the paper and put it under the table. Then I straightened out the paper and started folding it to put into my pocket. “Why read when life itself is so interesting?” I thought.

“Sorry. I have to go,” I said.

“Maybe you could try writing it?” he said suddenly, nodding towards the paper.

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“But I’m not a writer.”

He laughed bitterly and said, “There isn’t a single person who, in the depths of his soul, doesn’t consider himself a writer. Everybody’s observant about certain things. Everybody likes to tell some kinds of stories.”

“No,” I said, extending my hand to him in parting. “Not even in the depths of my soul do I consider myself a writer.”

*Translated from the Russian by Russell Scott Valentino*