

TASK AND REALIZATION

Translated from the Russian by Isabella L. Yanovsky

They met at the appointed place and, trying to create an appearance of long-standing intimacy, exchanged loud greetings. In an attempt to skip some preliminary stages, he kissed her lips, without much insistence, not for very long, but sufficiently to determine the nature of their meeting and to establish a starting point for further developments. Her response was honest: she had only two hours at her disposal and Saturday was far off; one has to know what one wants from life, has to act accordingly and play the game freely and joyfully.

They walked with their arms loosely about each other. A passionate embrace could have given the impression of that excessive involvement at the beginning of a romance, while they, in tacit agreement, obviously sought to make their relationship seem of long standing, so as to facilitate—eliminate—the first steps with all their psychological and practical difficulties. With the instinct of a musically gifted person, she swiftly, unconsciously understood, approved of the plan, and now helped in its execution.

Stopping at a store with wine bottles and cold cuts in the window, they bought all that was necessary. That reminded him of a joke—not a very decent one. She laughed amicably, appreciating the story, and they kissed again to stress the point of it. There was to be no misunderstanding, and everything proceeded extremely well and smoothly. What guided them was not experience, but something else that made them unerringly clever and skillful.

It was about five o'clock in the afternoon. A gray autumn day; chilled lime trees, raw and naked; the sky a dull, limitless tarpaulin. And suddenly, above that incomparable city park, a band of light (God knows from where) vibrating like a chord.

"Pity it isn't Saturday," he said.

She agreed, then consoled him brightly: "But it's already Thursday!" And at that they kissed again.

He lived on the fourth floor, no elevator. His place adjoined the staircase. From within, he could hear the scratching and scraping of fingers on the

rough, slanting handrail; often at night, as he lay in bed, he would listen, counting and checking the noises. There were many tenants in the house—forever separated, unknown to each other, externally colorless. Sometimes the sound beyond the wall would change in texture and amplitude: lovers, ascending, descending, lingering in long, barren, unsatisfying embraces. (The house seemed an acoustical masterpiece.)

Now it was he who was going upstairs with this really delightful creature. He held her lightly and calmly caressed her. The fact that they pretended to be lovers of long standing added a special piquancy to the adventure. They stopped on every landing, kissed honestly and dexterously, slowly building up the excitement so as to be fully prepared at the appropriate moment.

They had to enter his place separately: he had to unbutton his coat, take the key from his trouser pocket. He did not at first notice the oblong of a telegram under the door. He turned on the light; she stood for a moment undecided, looking a little tired, very feminine, and, indeed, somehow close and familiar.

“Take off your coat. Make yourself at home,” he said in a friendly, nonchalant way and reached for the elusive slip of paper.

The telegram was from Russia. The words were Russian in Latin print, so that he had to read each one over again. A person named Raissa Shterina (or Shtcherina) notified him that on September seventh his father had died.

For a long time he had intended to write to his father, send a picture, a synopsis of his work. But he had been told: you better not write! So he had lost the habit. Years, years—they becloud everything. In an hour of exaltation, kissing a woman, trying to convince her severe eyes, you can vow: I am stronger than space and time, I am a man, not a rabbit, I shall never betray. But the years gnaw, they gnaw. There was a time when he could not have lived a year without his father. Even a day meant suffering, struggling, destruction, dying of the soul. How swiftly and imperceptibly that had shifted. The necessity for his presence, the flashes of nearness, had become weaker and shorter. Yes, he had appealed to him, had connected the success with the memory of his father, with the desire to give him pleasure. He had imagined their future meeting: the son a scholar, the father an honest worker, a physician—their lives complementing each other. What happiness to shake the old freckled hand. To feel closeness and respect—not to kiss and fondle as in childhood—but on a higher level. (“Father, I have never forgotten you.”) He had been harboring a strange dream that renewed itself periodically:

someday they would settle together. Winter, snow, a lonely farm; they would chop wood, make fire, prepare simple meals. It would be getting dark early. Behind them were cities and countries, smells, sounds. They had left all that. Neither conquerors nor defeated. They had left: they were outside. Long winter evenings—there would be time to talk. Sometimes he imagined another version: there would be no meeting; his father would die. Among strangers, knees wizened and naked. (Gay eyes and the strict, a bit childish, fussiness of old age.) He knew: only then would there be complete loneliness. For even in the most difficult moments of his existence he had always felt the presence of a rear guard, of a loyal friend behind him. Thus, in the Spanish campaign, he had left a comrade at the fording place and advanced alone, savoring his final abandonment as he made his way through the thicket. When he came back and found his friend with his head split, only then did he realize what it had meant to him to have a vigilant guard remain behind, and that only now, genuine, irreparable solitude would begin. Whenever he thought of his father's possible death, he remembered this episode from the war and supposed that the sensations would in many respects be similar: ultimate, icy emptiness behind him. Now, he even looked back over his shoulder as if to verify visually this familiar anticipation.

"Bad news?" she asked, busying herself with the sandwiches.

He hesitated and finally said: "Yes, rather."

"What do you want to drink?" She asked the question that had been on her mind, although she had already noticed the change in him, and what followed was not at all unexpected.

"I don't want to drink," he said impatiently. "I have to write some important letters. I'm sorry, but it can't be helped."

"That's all right," she said quickly, not quite sure, however, what he wanted her to do.

She had started on a sandwich, poured herself some wine, and now she did not know whether to leave it all or finish it. She waited for a sign from him, but he turned to the window in sullen silence. There, on the pane, the gray fog began to settle in raindrops, and it looked so empty and deserted that one wanted to howl like a wolf.

"Is it raining?"

"Not yet, but it will."

She began to button up her jacket, stepped into her shoes, which she had slipped off—they pinched—and in one whirlwind movement, still munching,

was ready to go. Looking a little above his eyes (at his forehead or the bridge of his nose), she gaily called out: "Good-bye, good-bye!"

"She is mortally offended, the fool," he thought indifferently. "I really ought to apologize." But he didn't.

She offered him her warm, childish cheek, giving him a momentary, flashy, meaningless smile. Their cheeks touched, and with a conventional gay nod they separated.

He held his breath, waiting for the familiar sounds: there, the steps and the scratching were already beyond the rough abyss of the wall. He sighed with relief. All along it had seemed to him that some serious, even urgent matter was waiting and that he had to rid himself quickly of unnecessary witnesses. But as soon as he was left alone he understood: there was nothing to do. Before him was a night, then a day, and then, no doubt, another night, and so on.

He walked up and down. Lit a cigarette. Stood at the window. A dense, fine, chilly, mean autumn rain was falling. Out of the fog a street lamp was blazing furiously, apparently exhausting itself. There was a feeling of the end—of rotting, agony, and dying.

He put on his coat, turned off the light, and thought with painful effort: where to now...That vague "into town" he knew was senseless. Around the corner a street, another one, then a streetcar or a bus, and then what... Everything awaiting him seemed unnecessary, and everything that should attract repulsed him. The very thought of running into some acquaintances made him shudder. He opened the window. A sharp wind fell with full weight upon the four corners of the room; untamed and raw, but in its very depth there was some hidden freshness, a bliss from beyond the sea, a remembrance of resurrection.

"Yes, of course, there will be spring," he thought in disgust. He stretched out on the bed; the linen was clean—he had given instructions to have it changed. Suddenly he wanted to cry but, from habit, checked himself. Then doubt came to him; why should he be ashamed... He released the inner brake and immediately it became clear: it wouldn't work, the spring was dried up (and he had been proud of his strength!). Only one half-sized tear, a freak, showed up in the corner of his eye and remained there, crushed, stillborn, neither falling nor drying.

"I swear," he suddenly whispered, "I swear forever to serve the poor, the orphaned, and the sick. I swear to be always with the weak and the dejected;

I swear to bind my whole life to the conquered and the suffering.” This spurted unexpectedly out of him and brought relief.

Later, he felt touched by the nobility of his impulse and by the fact that the mere memory of his father would foster such emotions. A stray beam from the street lamp hit the glass on the table and mysteriously illuminated the rest of the red wine. Behind the wall, the tenants of this truly unusual house slowly crept by: there was rustling and scraping.

He was thinking that he had just bound himself by an oath, that tomorrow was another working day, and the same the day after, and that he would do everything that seemed necessary and even a little more—but why he did not know, and would probably never fully understand.

They met as agreed. He had feared they might not recognize each other, but they did. From the very beginning the tone was right: gay and amicable. They kissed. She received and returned the kiss honestly, slightly prolonging it, admitting courageously the purpose and meaning of their meeting. “I have only two hours,” she reminded him.

They stopped at a large store with meat and liquor in the window and bought ham, fruit, and two kinds of wine. He told her his favorite joke: a couple stops in front of a pharmacy, and the man says: “Wait a minute, I’ll buy something to go with the tea.” She appreciated it, and they took the occasion to kiss again.

It was cold and raw; rain or some kind of disgusting snow could be expected. She was dressed lightly. Without haste, he put his arm around her and warmed her. Carrying the packages, they slowly climbed the stairs to his place. They paused on every landing and kissed, more deeply and more intimately the higher up they climbed.

Still in the dark, he noticed, sensed from habit, the envelope under the door. He turned on the light, smiled—“make yourself at home”—and unhurriedly picked up the telegram. Russian words in Latin print; at first he did not understand. Somebody called Raissa Shtenina (or Shtchenina) notified him of his father’s death. He had sometimes dreamed of their future meeting, of the signs of respect—between two grown-ups—that they would show each other. He would tell his father how he had often thought of him and how it had helped in moments of despair. Of course, the possibility of his father’s death had also occurred to him: then only, he thought, complete, penultimate loneliness would set in. His first movement now was to feel fully, mea-

sure in its entirety the emptiness that suddenly surrounded him. He even looked back so as to make sure that there was no longer anyone behind him. He met her eyes. Hesitantly, she said:

“Bad news?”

“No, no, on the contrary,” he answered quickly. Then he thought: “Why am I lying?” and, without looking at her, corrected himself: “You see, my father has died.”

She was saying something, putting her suddenly strong hand (or had he grown so weak?) upon his shoulder; cautiously she led him to the couch and made him sit down. He did not grasp the meaning of her words, but they comforted him, and her eyes were suddenly so good, like those of a woman in childbirth or a suffering animal—a doe, a lamb, a squirrel—loving eyes, faithful and at the same time courageous, conscious of sadness, knowing life and all its involvements.

“You see, I wanted to settle with him at some time or other. Fields. Winter. Cold. Long evenings. And we are alone. Serious, remembering something,” he explained; all of a sudden his face wrinkled, and he began to cry awkwardly.

Like a mother, she pressed his heavy head to her breast. She wore a velvet jacket with thick-set folds. The touch of the fabric irritated him: he undid one or two buttons and rested in the dark and warmth.

Until now she had been moved only by compassion, the urge to soothe and comfort, but at that moment a change came over her. Was it curiosity or malice...looking obliquely at him, murmuring something, she pressed his head with rhythmic motions to her generous breast. There, in the dark corner, it was damp because of his tears, and warm—and there came to him an unaccountable smell of mother (or milk). Busily and absentmindedly he began to kiss everything in the immediate vicinity.

“My poor boy,” she whispered. Before, he had not caught her words, but now that they had become lies he heard them. And when everything was over she repeated several times: “My poor boy...” now in another voice, with a distinct undertone of pitying superiority.

The sharp autumn rain beat against the window. She made ready to leave. He was afraid of the loneliness to come, but this he could not admit to her. Standing there, she hurriedly ate a sandwich. He asked for some wine; she brought him a full glass and used this as a pretext to give him a wifely smack on the cheek.

He watched with curiosity, almost with awe, as she tidied herself in one whirlwind movement: put on her hat, her shoes, tenderly said good-bye, promised to come and stay the weekend—and was gone.

Before him was the long night. He lit a cigarette, went to the window. There, resignedly, the day was dying, the evening, the city, the world. Everything was deserted, deadly, chilled. What flat, everyday agony, like a chronic, inveterate ache.

Of course, he could go out, anywhere. Tomorrow would be a hard day, then the library; the same the day after. On all fours, he would continue—this he knew, although he forgot why. On Saturday she would perhaps come and spend the night.

“God, what a long life,” he whispered, twitching as from a bad toothache. He opened the window. With the mustiness, rot, and darkness from below, there also came a whiff of freshness: a grain of sky or sea.

“Yes, this rain will pass and autumn too; spring will come and so on,” he thought indifferently and lit a new cigarette. But he did not enjoy it, nor had he enjoyed anything else he had been doing lately.

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