Gooseberries

Anton Chekhov

The whole sky had been overcast with rain-clouds from early morning; it was a still day, not hot, but heavy, as it is in grey dull weather when the clouds have been hanging over the country for a long while, when one expects rain and it does not come. Ivan Ivanovitch, the veterinary surgeon, and Burkin, the high-school teacher, were already tired from walking, and the fields seemed to them endless. Far ahead of them they could just see the windmills of the village of Mironositskoe; on the right stretched a row of hillocks which disappeared in the distance behind the village, and they both knew that this was the bank of the river, that there were meadows, green willows, homesteads there, and that if one stood on one of the hillocks one could see from it the same vast plain, telegraph-wires, and a train which in the distance looked like a crawling caterpillar, and that in clear weather one could even see the town. Now, in still weather, when all nature seemed mild and dreamy, Ivan Ivanovitch and Burkin were filled with love of that countryside, and both thought how great, how beautiful a land it was.

"Last time we were in Prokofy's barn," said Burkin, "you were about to tell me a story."

"Yes; I meant to tell you about my brother."

Ivan Ivanovitch heaved a deep sigh and lighted a pipe to begin to tell his story, but just at that moment the rain began. And five minutes later heavy rain came down, covering the sky, and it was hard to tell when it would be over. Ivan Ivanovitch and Burkin stopped in hesitation; the dogs, already drenched, stood with their tails between their legs gazing at them feelingly.

"We must take shelter somewhere," said Burkin. "Let us go to Alehin's; it's close by."

"Come along."

They turned aside and walked through mown fields, sometimes going straight forward, sometimes turning to the right, till they came out on the road. Soon they saw poplars, a garden, then the red roofs of barns; there was a gleam of the river, and the view opened on to a broad expanse of water with a windmill and a white bath-house: this was Sofino, where Alehin lived.

The watermill was at work, drowning the sound of the rain; the dam was shaking. Here wet horses with drooping heads were standing near their carts, and men were walking about covered with sacks. It was damp, muddy, and desolate; the water looked cold and malignant. Ivan Ivanovitch and Burkin were already conscious of a feeling of wetness, messiness, and discomfort all over; their feet were heavy with mud, and when, crossing the dam, they went up to the barns, they were silent, as though they were angry with one another.

In one of the barns there was the sound of a winnowing mach door was open, and clouds of dust were coming from it. In the doorv standing Alehin himself, a man of forty, tall and stout, with long ha like a professor or an artist than a landowner. He had on a white sh badly needed washing, a rope for a belt, drawers instead of trousers, boots, too, were plastered up with mud and straw. His eyes and no black with dust. He recognized Ivan Ivanovitch and Burkin, and was ently much delighted to see them.

"Go into the house, gentlemen," he said, smiling; "I'll come direc minute."

It was a big two-storeyed house. Alehin lived in the lower store arched ceilings and little windows, where the bailiffs had once live everything was plain, and there was a smell of rye bread, cheap vodka, a ness. He went upstairs into the best rooms only on rare occasions, when came. Ivan Ivanovitch and Burkin were met in the house by a maid-se young woman so beautiful that they both stood still and looked at one a

"You can't imagine how delighted I am to see you, my friends," sa hin, going into the hall with them. "It is a surprise! Pelagea," he sa dressing the girl, "give our visitors something to change into. And, way, I will change too. Only I must first go and wash, for I almost think not washed since spring. Wouldn't you like to come into the bath-hous meanwhile they will get things ready here."

Beautiful Pelagea, looking so refined and soft, brought them towe soap, and Alehin went to the bath-house with his guests.

"It's a long time since I had a wash," he said, undressing. "I hav nice bath-house, as you see—my father built it—but I somehow neve time to wash."

He sat down on the steps and soaped his long hair and his neck, a water round him turned brown.

"Yes, I must say," said Ivan Ivanovitch meaningly, looking at his h

"It's a long time since I washed . . ." said Alehin with embarrassme ing himself a second soaping, and the water near him turned dark blue, li

Ivan Ivanovitch went outside, plunged into the water with a loud s and swam in the rain, flinging his arms out wide. He stirred the wat waves which set the white lilies bobbing up and down; he swam to th middle of the millpond and dived, and came up a minute later in a place, and swam on, and kept on diving, trying to touch the bottom.

"Oh, my goodness!" he repeated continually, enjoying himself oughly. "Oh, my goodness!" He swam to the mill, talked to the pe there, then returned and lay on his back in the middle of the pond, t his face to the rain. Burkin and Alehin were dressed and ready to go, still went on swimming and diving. "Oh, my goodness! . . ." he said Lord, have mercy on me! . . ."

"That's enough!" Burkin shouted to him.

The man called "Listen" through the curtain. The woman came out from the bar.

"Four reales."

"We want two Anis del Toro."

"With water?"

"Do you want it with water?"

"I don't know," the girl said. "Is it good with water?"

"It's all right."

"You want them with water?" asked the woman.

"Yes, with water."

"It tastes like licorice," the girl said and put the glass down.

"That's the way with everything."

"Yes," said the girl. "Everything tastes of licorice. Especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe."

"Oh, cut it out."

"You started it," the girl said. "I was being amused. I was having a fine time."

"Well, let's try and have a fine time."

"All right. I was trying. I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn't that bright?"

"That was bright."

"I wanted to try this new drink: That's all we do, isn't it—look at things and try new drinks?"

"I guess so."

The girl looked across at the hills.

"They're lovely hills," she said. "They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees."

"Should we have another drink?"

"All right."

The warm wind blew the bead curtain against the table.

"The beer's nice and cool," the man said.

"It's lovely," the girl said.

"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. "It's not really an operation at all."

The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.

"I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in."

The girl did not say anything.

"I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural."

"Then what will we do afterward?"

"We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before."

"What makes you think so?"

"That's the only thing that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy."

The girl looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two of the strings of beads.

"And you think then we'll be all right and be happy."

"I know we will. You don't have to be afraid. I've known lots of people that have done it."

"So have I," said the girl. "And afterward they were all so happy."

"Well," the man said, "if you don't want to you don't have to. I wouldn't have you do it if you didn't want to. But I know it's perfectly simple."

"And you really want to?"

"I think it's the best thing to do. But I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to."

"And if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you'll love me?"

"I love you now. You know I love you."

"I know. But if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you'll like it?"

"I'll love it. I love it now but I just can't think about it. You know how I get when I worry."

"If I do it you won't ever worry?"

"I won't worry about that because it's perfectly simple."

"Then I'll do it. Because I don't care about me."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't care about me."

"Well, I care about you."

"Oh, yes. But I don't care about me. And I'll do it and then everything will be fine."

"I don't want you to do it if you feel that way."

The girl stood up and walked to the end of the station. Across, on the other side, were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro. Far away, beyond the river, were mountains. The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees.

"And we could have all this," she said. "And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible."

"What did you say?"

"I said we could have everything."

"We can have everything."

"No, we can't."

"We can have the whole world."

"No, we can't."

"We can go everywhere."

"No, we can't. It isn't ours any more."

"It's ours."

"No, it isn't. And once they take it away, you never get it back."

"But they haven't taken it away."

"We'll wait and see."

Tilghman, Christopher. Mason's Retreat.
New York: Picador USA/St. Martin's, 1996.

1

HARRY MASON CAN picture his grandfather, Edward, on the sundeck of the *Normandie*, early morning, August, a pebbly North Atlantic mist. He is wearing a suit made of yards of heathery Irish tweed, and the fronts of his double-breasted Burberry, flapping slightly, are big as sails. He has paused on the silvered teak decking for a second or two and is looking toward the horizon. His large palms have gripped the cold steel of the life rail, greasy with sea dew. The waves are silver-flecked, broad-troughed; the swell is deep enough to turn walking into a slight climb-and-run, and the stewards and deck crews go about their daybreak duties with counterbalancing shifts of their weight. Edward Mason judges it a mariner's sea, and it gives him strength to reflect on the timelessness of the scene. He had, until a moment earlier, been quite content and untroubled, but some passing breeze has reminded him of the uncertainties

ahead, and now he must gather in his resources for a second or two. He assumes that those who see him in this nautical stance will not guess that he is performing damage control on his dreams. The man is good at this, especially when he has a lifeboat, in this case, the largest and finest liner in the world. Now isn't that a comforting thought? All around him the crew is at work. The smells of baked goods, of coffee and chocolate, blend with the sea mist into the narcotic essence of food. Edward Mason is one of those men who believe a fine appetite is something to give thanks for. He starts to feel a little better. He calms himself with the image of the outside *appartement de luxe* he has procured for himself, his wife, and two sons. He has made certain promises, mortgaged all to the French Line for this last extravagant passage, and, by God, except for a little too much vibration from the propeller shaft, the Frogs are delivering the goods.

When Harry Mason thinks about his grandfather and his life, it is often in the twin, blended image of the man and this ship as they sliced back and forth across the Atlantic for those few years before the war. He loved that ship, from its whaleback bow to the elegant stepping of its afterdecks; no drowning person ever clung to a shattered spar with more desperate strength than Harry Mason's grandfather gripped the *Normandie*. Every thwart and bulkhead adorned with gilt bas-reliefs, paintings by the latest rage, tile friezes, and carved sliding doors. The *Normandie*, the *Normandie*, huge but graceful, financial madness, the man's likeness, his brother doomed to die young.

Harry can hear his grandfather's voice, on this early morning in 1936, bellowing out of the fog. The crossing is in its second full day, and by now the entire ship's company—stewards, actors in the theater company, waiters—has experienced that voice; even Captain Thoreaux, standing stiffly on the wing of the bridge, has been distracted from his duties by a greeting projected from some-

where near the deck-tennis courts. The crew and passengers must be wondering whether there are two, or even several, of this large figure on board. Was he not taking a nightcap last night in the smoking room well after two, and is that not his voice out here somewhere in the deep mists of the promenade deck? Is that not he taking part in the regularly scheduled Sunrise Deck Walk, drawing close, suddenly a gray form above all the others, plunging forward like the clipped bow of this ship, rigid with turboelectric energy?

"A splendid morning," he is pronouncing. The ladies, one of whom is being pushed in a large wicker wheelchair, are delighted with his company. Two men amble meekly behind, just in front of three enormous Rottweilers followed by a pair of dark-skinned stewards with brass water cans and fireplace shovels. "I must say, Mrs. Francis"—Mason leans down to enunciate carefully to the woman in the wheelchair—"you were quite right to insist I come."

Mrs. Francis is an elderly American who makes transatlantic crossings frequently, always, it seems, just slightly out of phase with her husband, who has business dealings with the Germans. "Your wife and sons are still asleep?" she asks.

Mason reflects that Edith, his wife, is always up by now, by six, and usually earlier. This habit of hers had disappointed him when he discovered it on their honeymoon almost fifteen years ago. As for the boys, he has hardly seen them since they boarded. "My wife is enjoying the luxuries," he says.

"As well she should," says Mrs. Francis. Her speech is flat and coarse: her words are all business. Mason takes pleasure in language. It was this sort of embellishment, a depth and savor to daily things, that he and Edith had been seeking when they moved to England in 1922.

"No one gives wives of industry credit for the work we do," Mrs. Francis adds.

He's wearing the uniform of the Guardians, but his cap is tilted at a jaunty angle and his sleeves are rolled to the elbow, showing his forearms, tanned but with a stipple of dark hairs. He has a cigarette stuck in the corner of his mouth, which shows that he too has something he can trade on the black market.

I know this man's name: *Nick*. I know this because I've heard Rita and Cora talking about him, and once I heard the Commander speaking to him: Nick, I won't be needing the car.

He lives here, in the household, over the garage. Low status: he hasn't been issued a woman, not even one. He doesn't rate: some defect, lack of connections. But he acts as if he doesn't know this, or care. He's too casual, he's not servile enough. It may be stupidity, but I don't think so. Smells fishy, they used to say; or, I smell a rat. Misfit as odor. Despite myself, I think of how he might smell. Not fish or decaying rat; tanned skin, moist in the sun, filmed with smoke. I sigh, inhaling.

He looks at me, and sees me looking. He has a French face, lean, whimsical, all planes and angles, with creases around the mouth where he smiles. He takes a final puff of the cigarette, lets it drop to the driveway, and steps on it. He begins to whistle. Then he winks.

I drop my head and turn so that the white wings hide my face, and keep walking. He's just taken a risk, but for what? What if I were to report him?

Perhaps he was merely being friendly. Perhaps he saw the look on my face and mistook it for something else. Really what I wanted was the cigarette.

Perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do.

Perhaps he is an Eye.

* * *

I open the front gate and close it behind me, looking down but not back. The sidewalk is red brick. That is the landscape I focus on, a field of oblongs, gently undulating where the earth beneath has buckled, from decade after decade of winter frost. The color of the bricks is old, yet fresh and clear. Sidewalks are kept much cleaner than they used to be.

I walk to the corner and wait. I used to be bad at waiting. They also serve who only stand and wait, said Aunt Lydia. She made us memorize it. She also said, Not all of you will make it through. Some of you will fall on dry ground or thorns. Some of you are shallow-rooted. She had a mole on her chin that went up and down while she talked. She said, Think of yourselves as seeds, and right then her voice was wheedling, conspiratorial, like the voices of those women who used to teach ballet classes to children, and who would say, Arms up in the air now; let's pretend we're trees.

I stand on the corner, pretending I am a tree.

A shape, red with white wings around the face, a shape like mine, a nondescript woman in red carrying a basket, comes along the brick sidewalk towards me. She reaches me and we peer at each other's faces, looking down the white tunnels of cloth that enclose us. She is the right one.

"Blessed be the fruit," she says to me, the accepted greeting among us.

"May the Lord open," I answer, the accepted response. We turn and walk together past the large houses, towards the central part of town. We aren't allowed to go there except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is

In more precise line-by-line analyses of fictional voices I would now want to show that the subject (unlike the book) need not underplay "the language of fiction."[6] For now, as reminder, suppose we take a quick look at a piece of it—the opening paragraph of Flannery O'Connor's story "Parker's Back."

> Parker's wife was sitting on the front porch floor, snapping beans. Parker was sitting on the step, some distance away, watching her sullenly. She was plain, plain. The skin on her face was thin and drawn as tight as the skin on an onion and her eyes were grey and sharp like the points of two icepicks. Parker understood why he had married her—he couldn't have got her any other way—but he couldn't understand why he stayed with her now. She was pregnant and pregnant women were not his favorite kind. Nevertheless, he stayed as if she had him conjured. He was puzzled and ashamed of himself.

In the first two sentences we receive unqualified information about the scene, from a voice that we shall never discover any reason to question. But with the third sentence a second voice joins the first, the voice of Parker. From behind it, as it were, "Flannery O'Connor" says something like this: "Parker *thought*, as he looked at her, *that* she was very plain." But it is Parker who repeats the word "plain"—a Parker whose style matches the character already hinted at in the second sentence: in the word "sullenly," in the careful placement of him at "some distance," and perhaps even in the wary choppiness of the sentence as a whole.

Once the double-voicing has been established, we can move to more of his sour thoughts without the need of quotation marks, reporting both his words and the author's view of them in phrases that are sometimes his, sometimes the author's, and sometimes indistinguishable. The two similes—onion skins and icepicks—and phrases like "got her," "not his favorite kind," and "conjured" show the way his internal language works. But "nevertheless" is

[6] The phrase of course refers to David Lodge's book (No. 554), much of which I could happily incorporate, in spite of the limitations imposed by his assumption that fictions are not only *told* in words but are in fact *made out of* words. The most systematic discussion of the consequences of these contrasting assumptions is in Phelan, No. 465. For further instances of illuminating attention to language, see Bakhtin (esp. No. 368) and Genette, No. 532. For more about *erlebte Rede* see Nos. 539 and 582.

obviously not *his* word, and "puzzled" and "ashamed" are probably not the words he would use to express puzzlement and shame. What is even more complex, the word "ashamed," by the time we come to it, has been subverted, turned from its normal use, associated with the shame that is felt for an offense, into a comic term that thoroughly divorces the voice of the narrator from Parker's. In O'Connor's opinion, to be ashamed about faithfulness to a pregnant wife is clearly a funny kind of human failing.

Though we cannot yet know, then, just how comic or how serious this story will turn out to be, we know already that there will be both a great intimacy and a great distance between the narrator and Parker: she will know his thoughts and she will report them in *his* language, but she will steadily distance herself from both the moral content of the thought and the style in which the thought occurs.

Booth, Wayne C. The Rhetoric of Fiction. 2nd ed. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1983.