

Petr Nemirovskiy

Murder on Emmons Avenue

Short Story

(Translated from the Russian by Patricia Flaherty)

1

Jacob, a run of the mill writer, was walking along Emmons Avenue. Saint Mark's Cathedral with its soaring bell tower rose up on one side, with a row of grocery stores and a bank stretching along the other. Strewn about were scraps and pieces of newspaper, flyers and other trash commonly abundant on the shopping streets. Jacob returned from somewhere, lost in thought as usual, but at the same time observing, with a writer's curiosity, everything around: the people's intent faces at the ATMs, fish lying on ice in the stalls, even the damp maple leaf which clung to the tire of a Chevrolet, where a woman in a provokingly open blouse sat. He didn't distinguish her face.

He suddenly froze—froze internally while externally continuing ahead, a glazed look in his eye. The bell rang in the cathedral tower. A deep, powerful boom rang through the September air, trying to muffle the roar of the cars, the sound of train wheels on the trestle, and the voices of the crowd. Jacob froze for the second time and almost fell over from a tough, criminal-looking man in a leather jacket jostling him.

The noise, crashing, and evening bells with all of their wonderful texture no longer held the slightest literary value for Jacob. He had once described, and described very well, the picturesque Emmons Avenue in the best of his stories, which he adored, but alas this story brought him neither money nor fame.

The protagonist of his tale had often walked this street, skirting and jumping over puddles—a longhaired man, an eternal student who believed in God and sacred love. In the beginning he walked alone, returning from the university in his outfit of worn-out denim, and later he walked together with Diana. In the novel Jacob called her Vicky, because Diana wouldn't let him write in peace; she constantly flitted before his eyes, flirted, vowed that she was in love with him, prayed at the cathedral, and then cheated on him with someone else. Her shadow ran around on the white sheet of paper, where black tortuous letters extended, though often crossed out in a hurry. Though, it is not unlikely that it was in fact a gnat, circling round the gleaming table lamp that cast the shadow. Time to time, tearing himself away from the page, Jacob looked at the lamp with its long thin bulb hidden beneath the round matte glass. He created the gnat as a hackneyed literary character in his imagination and even metamorphosed into it. He performed several ritual passes around the lamp until he felt the terrible heat that burned his wings and, getting scared, instantly transformed back into a human.

2

Back at Emmons Avenue, the astonished Jacob first painfully pinched his own leg, and then, turning around, started against the flow of people pouring into the subway. He reached his

starting point—the fish market, where the hero of his tale, the student, would often purchase sea bass.

Jacob entered the shop and, turning to the perpetually smiling—but this time seemingly confused—salesperson, asked him to weigh a couple of fish. With astounding dexterity the salesman hooked the gills of the two bass on the counter, threw them in a plastic bag and, having weighed them, twisted the bag, tied it off with a string, and offered it to Jacob. He paid for his purchase and again wandered along the street, looking around with his deathly frightened eyes.

He walked along the lifeless avenue, himself a corpse. He followed the trail of his protagonist, the longhaired man and student for life. Then that very man appeared in front of him yet again! The horror consisted of the fact that his character was alive and real. He dreamed and he loved, and Diana was still waiting for him (only later she began cheating on him.) His character had somewhere to run to. He was hungry, his stomach grumbled, and there was an unpleasant, bitter taste in his mouth because of a liver ailing from heavy vine consumption. The character was alive, and Jacob turned into his shadow. Jacob realized that he no longer had a stomach, not even a sick liver, because love no longer filled his heart. He was nothing, an empty shell, just a “bag of bones and a cup of blood” as Diana mockingly called him lately.

But being stubborn, he refused to give up, again and again making his way to the subway and returning to the fish market, buying sea bass and heading back yet again. He hoped to break through from nonexistence into reality in this mechanical way.

After having completed this bizarre journey for the fifth time, still feeling no signs of life, he suddenly came upon a surprisingly simple but dangerous idea: all of his problems are because of this character; this freak is to blame for all of his misfortunes. “I have to be done with him once and for all!”

A wild smile played upon his lips and his eyes lit up. He suddenly transformed; he sniffled, slouched, and put his hands in his pockets. Something criminal appeared in his walk. He began to resemble the character of his other novel, the one crime thriller he wrote solely for the money.

He lowered gangly the visor of his nonexistent cap, turned up the collar of his jacket and, grinning broadly, took the familiar road: past the grocery shops, Saint Mark's Cathedral, and the bank. His fingers felt in his pocket for the knife handle.

He had purchased the knife for three dollars at a flea market from an old Asian man. The knife had a long blade, curved at the end, and a smooth ebony handle. Jacob usually cleaned sea bass with it, cut off the heads and cleaned out the white bubbles from their maw, removing the caviar and slippery green entrails. The knife fit well into Jacob's palm and once, when the poverty of a writing life had overwhelmed him, the knife had fallen onto a sheet of paper and rattled through the silence, frightening the gnat he imagined flying around the lamp. Following the reckless turn, the gnat's wings caught fire, and it fell, alongside the knife, onto the white sheet of paper. This became the starting point of his murder novel, for which Jacob was very ashamed, but was paid well. Thanks to that money he hadn't wound up on the street, and even moved to the new apartment.

3

Nightfall was coming. Split between the two characters, Jacob realized that he would have to choose between the eternal student—who had separated from his wife, lost his health,

and even hope, but continues to believe in God and sacred love—and the short-haired criminal from his murder novel.

This guy was a rapist and a crook. In the guise of a policeman, once he had stopped a Chevrolet, got into the car and demanded the attractive blonde driver in a provocative open blouse take him to a deserted embankment not far from Emmons Avenue. After raping her, he knocked her out with a blow from his knife handle and, leaving the car, took her wallet and withdrew money from her bank account. This crime finally helped the FBI to come upon his trace.

The people hurrying to the subway elbowed Jacob and pushed him aside. He tried to keep in sight the longhaired, denim-clad man.

They both entered the subway and went through the shiny metal turnstiles onto the open platform. Despite the late hour, there was a crowd on the platform. Jacob noted that his heart was beginning to beat hard. Beats pounded in his chest and merged with the pounding of the church bell. There was a salty taste in his mouth. Blood has such a taste; one also tastes it before losing consciousness.

Several long, eternal minutes passed. Jacob kept his eyes on the fellow who stood on the platform near the phone. In the distance the train appeared, its two bright yellow lamps cutting through the twilight. “Choo-choo,” it sounded as it approached, and that rebounding noise jolted the distraught Jacob into action.

His breathing grew swift. In fact, he was no longer breathing now; the wheels of the train had knocked him cold as it was approaching the platform of the Emmons Avenue station. At the last moment, Jacob’s disintegrating sense whispered a faint, hopeless, “no.” Still, he drew his

knife and, pressing it against his thigh, crept up to the guy. As the train slowed down and arrived at the platform, Jacob stabbed him with the knife and then pushed him onto the tracks.

Only in the last moment he realized that *he* was this longhaired man.

Jacob's wake was held at the Saint Mark's Cathedral. Only three people came to pay their respects: the salesperson from the fish market, an old Asian man, and a blonde woman in a black veil who didn't wish to reveal her name.