

A Few Minutes of Evening

Valerii Shevchuk

I walked out onto the street. Cars were streaming by, one after another, and the trolleys were packed with people, swarming like bees in a beehive. A boy was peering through a rainy window, nose pressed against the pane. It was drizzling, and I couldn't get across the interminable, blaring, surging stream of traffic. A smoggy blue haze hung above the street. A taxi driver spat a cigarette butt out his window. On the opposite side of the street stood an old man who, like me, was waiting to cross.

Above me a small window opened with a splatter. I looked up, squinting.

“Hello!” said Maria. “Where are you off to?”

“Hello,” I said. “Just over there.”

“Still sulking, huh?”

I whistled softly. Maria didn't like me to whistle, and I knew she'd probably take offense. And she did: the window above my head was already fastened, and the drapes were drawn shut.

I stepped up to the intersection, to cross the street where one should. The old fellow standing on the other side lost patience with the flow of cars. Stepping off the curb, he briskly and bravely darted through the traffic.

I entered the park. The wet paths glistened, the autumn leaves strewn on them giving off a dull sheen. A girl was coming toward me. She was more like two girls, one walking on top of the asphalt and the other in it. Shoes with over-thick soles tread through the leaves, and these shoes were the only thing the two girls shared. I smiled at the girl, but she looked past me—as if there, behind me, a light was about to come on and a screen of gray sky would light up with an unimaginably fascinating movie.

It occurred to me that the girl's hair was cut like mine, and that our hair color was the same. Then it struck me that we resembled each other somewhat. I looked down and saw some young fellow in my shoes, walking in the asphalt and wearing pants that were too wide.

Two aging women were waddling toward me, bobbing slowly down the sidewalk like two big spheres.

“Maya's already married,” one of them said in a low voice.

“No—really?!”

"Her husband's got an apartment—he's an engineer."

I again began thinking about the girl who had just passed by me. Rosy crescents had flamed on her cheeks—no doubt she was getting married soon, too. Probably her future husband, too, was an engineer, and had a super-luxurious apartment. For now I was an electrician's apprentice, so maybe she had reason to look through me as if I were transparent.

I continued walking down the sidewalk and even began wishing that a window would open above me and someone would call my name. But the windows I was passing—storefronts, displays, hairdressers, fashion shops—weren't concerned with me. I began thinking that I shouldn't have offended Maria. We should be walking down these streets together, her steady guiding arm in mine.

Two people were coming toward me. A girl led an odd young fellow with flaming red hair by the arm. Her eyes showed that she had been crying. I felt the urge to take her arm away from her young man's and see a smile light up her sad face. Maybe that was why I smiled brightly at her. But the tearful girl just sniffled and deliberately thumbed her turned-up nose at me.

I crossed the street and made my way down the boulevard. An old man was sitting on a bench, a newspaper spread beneath him. His hands held another thoroughly rain-splattered newspaper and there was a plastic hood over his head—to me he looked like a being from another planet.

My stomach let out a rumble. Mother was working the swing shift today, so there'd been no dinner at home. I went into a cafeteria and bought five meat pies. I ate them standing up, propped at the counter, washing them down with water. Beside me was a drunk with a beet-red nose, drinking beer and making smacking sounds—he was probably sucking yesterday's dinner out from between his teeth. A girl stood in front of me, but it wasn't the one that I kept thinking about, the one who had so miraculously become two on the asphalt. This girl was holding a pie with two fingers—one of them with the nail polish half chipped off. She had dainty straight teeth—she ate her pie more by sawing than biting into it.

"Do you know Halia Bondarchuk?" a voice behind me asked.

"Why sure," came the response.

"Vovko's going out with her now."

"You don't say!"

I knew a Halia Bondarchuk too, but not the one this Vovko was going out with. The one I knew lived at No. 4 and had two kids. When she went out with them, one pulled her in one direction and the other in the opposite one, as if they wanted to rip this Halia apart, like the ancient Derevlians had once ripped apart Prince Ihor.

"Gimme a cigarette," the drunk said to me, his red nose gleaming now

that he'd finished his beer.

I gave the man a cigarette. He said nothing in reply.

"Thank you," I prompted him.

"Wha'd ya say?..."

I was out walking on the crowded sidewalk again. The rain had stopped, but people hadn't closed their umbrellas. They bloomed strangely alongside the walks and trees, as a blue haze of gas fumes shimmered above the street.

I went into the post office to write a letter. The letter was to a classmate whom fate had swept out of our city. He had come to mind today—actually, his address had fallen out of my notebook. "It's letter-writing day," proclaimed the post office billboards, as an eager mass of people pressed to have their envelopes stamped. I let out a laugh and began to write. I wrote that I was an electrician's apprentice and that I was the only one in our class who had chosen that profession. I wrote about the last soccer match and about an LP record that another classmate, Borys, had given me. I wrote that I didn't have a girl, that the one I had been going with was on hold at the moment.... I looked up and envisioned an empty path, totally strewn with leaves so that it glistened. A girl was walking through those leaves—she was two girls, one walking on top of the asphalt and the other in it. We looked at one another, and I was again struck by how much she resembled me.

"You're making it up!" I caught myself. "She didn't even glance at you."

Bending over the letter, I brutally scratched out what I'd written about not having a girl. I wrote that I had a new girlfriend. I had met her in the park—my pen kept scribbling—one evening when I was out walking aimlessly.... Suddenly I wanted to crumple the letter up and throw it in the wastebasket. But instead I sealed the envelope and went to have it stamped.

The streetlights were already on. It wasn't raining, but people were still carrying colorful umbrellas over their heads.

"How nicely the umbrellas bloom!" I remarked to myself, and spat on the ground.

But it happened that the spit landed not on the ground but on a lacquered, remarkably polished and glossy shoe. I looked up into a stare so astonished that I had to bow.

"Excuse me!" I apologized.

The coat sailing past seemed to be one I had seen before. Of course! The girl I was constantly thinking about had worn that kind of coat! I hurried after it, but the profile that turned back to me had such an amazing nose that I halted in my tracks.

A movie theater loomed before me.

"Good film?"

"Yeah—great!" said a big-bellied, burly man. "A spy thri-il-ler!"

I bought a ticket, took a seat, and began to watch. To my left sat a long-haired youth who at first I thought was a girl, and to my right was an old maid with an upturned nose, noisily crunching an apple.

On the screen people were running about and shouting incredibly. I sat looking at the screen, or somewhere past it, or maybe far beyond it. I smelled the fragrance of leaves and the aroma of wet wood benches, and asphalt glistened before me.

"No," I told myself. "That's enough—enough about that girl!"

And I did forget about the girl. As I watched the heroes track down the spy, I thought about Maria, sitting home alone and knitting herself some wool gloves. Thrown over her shoulders would be the wool shawl she had made when we were still going together, and on her feet hand-knit socks thrust into worn furry slippers. I recalled that my mother wore the same kind of slippers and that for a couple of months now my dad had been saying he'd buy her new ones.

The spy was finally captured and there was nothing left to do but leave. Outside the theater I again spotted the girl who had made such an impression on me in the park. She was holding the arm of some slick, clever-looking dandy and gazing lovingly into his eyes.

The clock showed ten. I waited for a car to pass and then crossed the street. The light in Maria's window was on, and now I knew for sure that she was sitting over her endless knitting. I stopped by her window and tapped, expecting it to open and Maria to answer. But around me there was only silence and solitude—not even the passing of a car. Crooking my index finger, I tapped it lightly on the pane three times, as I had a month and more before.

Translated by Uliana Pasicznyk

Original publication: Valerii Shevchuk, "Kil'ka khvylyn iz vechora," in his *Dolyna dzherel*, Kyiv, Radians'kyi pysmennyk, 1981, pp. 145–48.