

*“it is relatively easy to perceive that Gogol must have intended [The Nose] as a satire on social climbers...but it will become clear that...under the guise of grotesque farce, a drama of sexual failure is enacted. Spycher, P., The Slavic and East European Journal, 7. No. 4, 1963, p. 361*

## THE NOSE REPLIES

*(A homage)*

### **An empty signifier**

G (you know who I mean) reckoned that it was all extraordinary and happened in the Capital one autumn over a few days, barely a fortnight. What I find extraordinary is that nowhere in this celebrated story, amongst the whole cast—the drunken barber and his harridan wife, the unhelpful doctor, the corrupt and lazy police, the clamouring crowds and the censorious media— nowhere is my voice heard; I’m an object, an empty signifier.

You remember the story. Probably you’ve read it in one of those yellow paperbacks that publishers produce to satisfy the public’s insatiable appetite for salacious gossip and titillating mischief.

In part one, Sweeney the barber hung-over from another all-night bender finds a nose in his breakfast roll. Fearing it may be the result of some mis-shave where his unsteady hands haven't been able to push someone's schnozzle sufficiently out of the way of the razor's arc and keen to be rid of any evidence before the police come knocking, he decides to toss the appendage from Commonwealth Bridge. In part two, K, a mid-level bureaucrat, wakes one morning to find his nose gone—no wound, just a pancake of skin with a pair of holes in its place. During the next fortnight, the Capital being a small town, he spies the Nose in the back of a car on Barry Drive, and on Sunday in the congregation at All Saints. There K makes a scene, loudly begging it to return. The Nose refuses because by this time it has become a local celebrity with a crowd accompanying it on its daily power-walk around the lake, features in the supermarket glossies and a regular spot on talk-back radio. After further nonsense, the Nose is returned by the one honest policeman in the whole tale (mind you, he wasn't above soliciting a small consideration for his trouble) and Nose and bureaucrat are reunited.

G is right when he asks why authors bother to write such nonsense. Satire? Magical realism? Pah! The story is a complete tissue.

This is what really happened...

## **The Grain of Truth**

Where to start?

Start with Nina. Nina of the loaves.

My beginning and end, my beloved. Floured arms, aproned and oven-flushed, I see her now wiping sweat from her brow as risen loaves are racked into ovens.

Pillowly pulchritude Nina the baker's daughter.

I can still see this rose-complected beauty, hair tied with a flour-cloth astride the bakery like a brigantine in full sail, hefting buns from oven to counter. Juggling pies and pastries, as with whip and chair she would direct a cageful of unruly felines onto their proper tubs.

If it's a ship, then come about and prepare to be boarded.

And if that's a whip my dear, hear me meow.

Alas, where in the stories of this world (and others) is love ever easy?

Here's Nina's father Jacob, paranoid protector of her gaze and her virtue,

who with all his varieties—rye and wholemeal, plain and fancy, buns and bagels—twists filial duty into a rope

round her ankle, (round her neck). For all its leavened goodness, the bakery is a prison.



*The Grain of Truth* is at the end of that run-down row of shops before the highway. It's here that K buys his daily bread (and an occasional caramel curl). And Jacob, with all the cunning of a paranoiac, darts about the counter disturbing our view of the lovely Nina. Every time we try a smile or a flirtatious line there's jack-in-the-box Jacob: 'Mr K, have you tried the pumpernickel?' 'What do you think of this praline I've been working on?' 'Could you fill out this satisfaction survey?' K is easily distracted but not me; my compass turns magnetically, unerringly towards Nina.

Day after day, through long meetings, cafeteria lunches, office intrigues and droning afternoons where minutes are recounted and seconds proposed, I can only think of Nina.

We tried everything: sending in decoys, phoning the shop while he was out, all sorts of ploys but the greater our efforts the more frenzied Jacob became. Once we tried to pass her a note but Jacob snatched the correspondence and, without even reading it, popped it straight into his mouth chewing loudly and then opened wide to show us what a soggy cud he'd made of our plans.

K was discouraged and decided that this was all too much trouble but my ardour burned bright: I had to see her, be with her. So, as night

rolled on I left K sleeping and ventured out, down darkened streets to the alley behind the bakery. Tap on the door. It opens a crack and there she is dusting flour from her hands. We didn't speak but there in the fertile warmth I found myself rising as I followed the flush from her bosom to her neck to the bloom on her cheeks.

Breathing heavily we came together, she took me in her hands and we made love right there on the sacks of cereals—

— or we would have but for her father's tread on the stairs.

'Hide,' Nina hissed. 'He'll kill me, he'll kill us both.'

Before I could think, she had opened one of the unbaked rolls and pressed me into its yeasty darkness.

'What are you up to my girl?' he started. 'Did I hear voices? Who were you talking to? I saw you looking at that fool K this morning, flirting like the slut you really are. You'd better tell me or so help me...'

I was about to spring forth but Nina hefted my tray into the oven and slammed the door.

What was happening? What cruelty was Jacob now enacting? Would she defy him at last or cling to his knees weeping? All I could hear was the roaring of the gases, crusts cracking and then nothing.

Darkness

Some jostling

...and rolling...

but mostly...

nothing...

...until hours later, the barber opened his breakfast bun and out I popped onto their kitchen table.

### **From the bridge**

So here I am morose in the barber's pocket. A few crumbs still adhere but my hopes and dreams have been brushed away. Say it out loud: we can never be together, her father will never agree. So go on, you cabbage-headed razor-wielder, let's end it. To the bridge! The waters await. Maybe I will Jonah a while in the belly of a carp or be lake-changed into some coral knob or encased in mother of pearl. Dimly iridescent, I will peer through columns of light at the world above.

Sweeney couldn't even get that right.

Having braced himself with several long swallows from the bottle in his coat, he set off on the short walk to the bridge. But even before he reached the corner of Empire Circuit, there was Colonel Lovett who announced that he'd be in for his short back and sides on Tuesday, 9.15 sharp. Then it was the Macalister twins, Deano and Robb, wanting the new gangsta cut and Mr Lonsdale, (who had been completely bald for years but came in every fortnight for a tidy-up) and Mrs Onegin and her son Yuri ('You can see he really needs a trim.' 'Next week? You couldn't fit us in this afternoon or even this morning?')

Everyone was out; everyone had time to waste, to chat about the frost or the footy or whatever.

Eventually, we arrived at the bridge.

And there I was perched on the railing hyperventilating, preparing for my dive, when a voice calls out: 'Hold there barber.' A policeman has pulled his car over on the far side of the bridge and is hurrying towards us across the traffic. Sweeney groaned and threw his arms up in surrender and there I go...

...dislodged...

over the side...

...free-falling...

...to the lake below.

And then out of the blue a gull, mistaking me for some tasty morsel, swooped, intersected my trajectory and mid-air gobbled me into its gullet.

What a story of journeys this is. Just how far round the globe will it take me? How thin is my character to be drawn by harsh luck and improbable circumstance? But then, why did I care? Loveless, I was indifferent to my fate. So I lay there amongst fermenting chips, plastic wrappers and eerily luminescent fish eyes while the bird flew higher and higher.

The next thing I remember was sunlight, the stink of diesel, the slosh of seawater and the world rolling from side to side. The bird had disgorged me onto the deck of a fishing boat and above me stood a deckhand. 'Welcome to *the Queen of the Seas*,' he said.

He took me to the master. 'So what can you do?' the Captain asked. 'This is a working boat. We carry no baggage, no tourists and no Lord Byrons.'

There I was, covered in gull spit and fish bits, a lone nose without love, without prospects. What could I say?

'Well,' I said and then I told him all about my childhood fixing nets by the docks in Marseilles, my teen years hauling bluefin at the Tsukiji fish markets, my fisher ancestors going back three generations and my recent spell as assistant third mate on *The Pelican* out of Mallacoota.

The Captain didn't believe a word but being a big-nose himself was sympathetic. 'You can start on the gutting line.'

And for a while the oceanic mountains and mirrored plains that *The Queen* traversed, the sleek treasures and bug-eyed horrors it drew daily from the deep was enough. Enough but for the setting sun which again and again returned my thoughts to Nina.

### **Meanwhile K**

All this time K wore a prosthetic nose; a sculpted rubber fabric-covered dingus imported from Switzerland by Silas the local

cosmetician. The contraption was attached with flesh-coloured tape and the joins were powdered over with make-up. Although inconvenient (he spent an hour each morning in front of the mirror, turning from side to side dabbing filler here and there) he told Silas that it was less trouble and had a more pleasing 'Scandinavian' slope than the precipitous angularity of the original. It fooled no one of course.

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### **Retirement**

Three months on, I'm in the Catalina bar, my wallet fat with back pay having left *The Queen* for good. And after a long night of drinking and garrulity, someone is offended and I find myself in the car park out back with the carpenter and his apprentice being schooled on the uppercut, the long-arm jab, the roundhouse swing and the kick in the guts for good measure.

Next morning finds me broke, bruised and sore sitting up the back of the Murrays coach as it climbs the escarpment towards the Capital. I had nothing left but conviction: I had spent a season over the horizon but Nina was my lighthouse, calling me back, calling me home.

### **Forgiveness**

Anyone can find work in the Capital. Recruiters in cheap suits are on every corner calling out as you pass. They'll sidle up to you in cafes and pursue you in the parks and gardens, so that after a morning touring

the monuments, your pockets will be full of business cards and you'll have an interview at two and another at three-thirty.

And the interviewer will be smiling and offering you tea (or coffee or a citrus spritz if you prefer) and a sandwich. Despite your demurral, she'll muscle the platter towards you insisting you take an egg triangle. And while you're chomping away she'll be scanning your CV and saying things like: 'Oooh yes, we could really use someone with your particular skills...'

Finding work was easy but my conscience was troubled.

'Forgive me father for I will sin.' I knelt at the All Saints service.

*How can there be forgiveness if there is no remorse?*

'I am remorseful. I wish it were not so, that it were not a necessity but the thing I must do I must. I am compelled.'

*Take responsibility for your actions.*

'And ignore unreasonable circumstance, the twisted heart and outrageous luck?

*You're making excuses.*

And her father? Does he not have a slice? Why couldn't he charge me with twelve impossible labours: find the golden fleece, trim the Gorgon's fringe, distil a tincture of moonlight, indenture me as sweeper in his flour mill for a decade, all this would I gladly do. But he is obdurate, his refusal is a boulder, a lump.'

### **K interrupts**

—right there with an over-loud clearing of his throat, once, twice and again. So loud that the whole congregation turned and the soloist, finding her way unsteadily through Bach's *Air on a G string* completely lost her place and had to start over.

'Pardon,' he began. 'I must interrupt. Break your meditation because sir, I now request your return.' He carried on like this for some time with that irritating mouse-squeak in his voice that he gets when he is tense.

His arguments were as follows.

- (1) We have a natural bond, which should not have been broken. Obviously, we don't, if we had it wouldn't have.
- (2) My absence was causing him embarrassment and discomfort. As if I cared. And, since he hadn't written or tried to make contact in all this time could he really claim he missed me?
- (3) We could *only* be happy if we were re-united. Unlikely. I knew in whose floury arms my happiness was to be found.
- (4) *He* was incomplete (now we come to it) without the 'appropriate appendage'. Even with the rubber nose, he had hardly retreated from life: he was still assistant director (acting) in the fifth division of the Ministry, he still attended Mme Orlov's salon on alternate Tuesdays, kept up his theatre subscriptions and had now started a pointless flirtation with that air-head Alexandra and her overbearing mother.

I pointed all this out to him in an emphatic (perhaps harsh) whisper and then I left: disturbed and unabsolved.

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### **The means**

Anything is possible in the Capital. A phone call or two, take a cheap room at the Riverside (register under an assumed name), two or three withdrawals from different ATMs on different days and it's yours. Even if the stock is chipped, the barrel dull and scratched, the cylinder so clogged with black grease that it barely turns and there are only four bullets in this oily rag, it will do.

'Under fifty metres, it'll drop anything no worries.'

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*The Grain of Truth* was unchanged: loaf-laden baskets and the early crowd lined up for their pastries, an espresso machine hissing and spitting in the corner.

### **Ten days**

On the first day he laughed. 'But you're not even...you're incomplete—'. He offered me teacake. 'No charge. No charge at all.'

On the second day he was too busy.

On days three and four he had workers servicing the equipment. The retarder and the proover all needed work and the oven was way out: he wasn't seeing anyone.

On day five, it rained and the shop was crowded. 'Layabouts who buy one lousy coffee and think they're entitled to a nice warm seat out of the weather for the entire day,' he muttered.

On day six, he had developed a sniffle and closed the shop early.

On the seventh day, he sat down with me but as I was about to start the phone in back rang and he didn't return.

Early on the morning of the eighth day someone had thrown a brick through the shop window and for the rest of that day he had police and forensics dusting for fingerprints and asking questions over and again.

On the ninth day, the glazier was late and then he had an appointment with the insurance assessor. 'You've no idea of the paperwork those little bastards have put me through. And when they catch them there'll be more forms.'

On the tenth day, I put the revolver on the table between us.

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'It's like that is it?' Jacob said.

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*'...but at this point everything became so completely enveloped in mist it is really impossible to say what happened afterwards.'*

Come on G. We both know what happened next. Nina rushed over to her father lying on the lino. She needed to be sure and laid her head on

his cooling chest. Then it was done. Her apron hit the floor, she snatched her purse, kissed me as she passed and was out the door.

I caught a glimpse of her at the Murrays terminal, her head against the glass as the coach, with a spit of pneumatics and a growl of gears, started down that long road out of the Capital.

And there I stood amongst the fumes and autumn leaves, the chill of another winter already in the wind.

Perhaps it was for the best.

After all what could I, a fugitive nose, offer a woman like that? A life on the run, living hand to mouth, never settling anyplace. Is that what I wanted for her, for us? And K? imagine him in his old age, a blanket round his shoulders and with that stupid beak still taped to his cheeks. He was never going to get that promotion or any gold leaf lettering on any glass door in the Ministry without my help.

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G got the final part right.

K and I *were* reunited and after a while reattached, he to me and I to him, seamless.

Despite statements from several witnesses, the police case was impossible and no charges were brought. (A detective interviewed K for several hours while his assistant moved the desk-light about looking for any tell-tale joins.)

The Scandinavian prosthesis, the tape and powder is still in a drawer downstairs. K thinks he might need it again.

Maybe he's right, perhaps one day she will call.

—

I still dream of her, often.

My favourite is a scene with rain.

Temperate water streaking  
through the flour on us both,  
on her arms and her cheeks 'til it runs  
a slurry onto the floor and reveals  
flows and deltas of clean pink skin.

Sometimes it rains until we're  
all clean and beautiful and innocent  
dripping together like a forest.

Sometimes there's more and more revealed:  
ribs heaving, teeth clenched, sweat in golden light.  
But the closer I look, the further we recede,  
replaced by actors line-reading.

Empty signifiers, stand-ins for our love.

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*est reading time 275 w/m = 12 mins*