HAPPINESS
IS POSSIBLE
A NOVEL OF OUR TIME

Oleg Zaionchkovsky

Translated by Andrew Bromfield

Introduction by AD Miller
‘I’ll kill you, you cow!’ It’s like a voice in a telephone receiver, only louder.

The air vent in the kitchen of my flat works like one of those old wired-in Soviet radio speakers that you can’t switch off: it starts talking and goes silent whenever it feels like it. Unfortunately, it broadcasts the same old performance all year round. Even so, I still don’t know the characters by name, because they address each other exclusively as: ‘cow’, ‘slut’, ‘bitch’, ‘whore’ . . . There are too many epithets to list them all, far more than the number of *dramatis personae*, and I used to get confused at first about who was who. That’s a problem I have in general: when I read other people’s novels or watch ‘heavy’ movies, they’re almost over by the time I start to figure out who’s called what. It can be quite disappointing – I’ve only just settled in and got to know the characters, and it’s the end of the movie already. But the ventilation system show is different, it doesn’t have an ending, so like it or not,
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eventually you start recognising the characters from their voices and their selection of epithets. The TV has assimilated this genre now as well, especially for dunces like me. But I think the censor spoils it all for them: if they’ve decided to show something, why blank out the most expressive parts of the dialogue with that hypocritical beeping? There isn’t any censor in my kitchen. I could try stopping the voluble vent’s mouth, of course, but then I’d be left with no air to breathe.

I don’t know their names, I don’t know what they look like, but I think about them a lot. When my own text – the one that’s my vocation, the one I’m paid money for – when that text betrays me, then my weary thought mingles with my cigarette smoke and streams out through the air vent.

So who are they, these mysterious, familiar strangers, living in my ventilation system? They are two women, apparently mother and daughter. The young one is more often called ‘bitch’ and ‘whore’, and the one who’s older is referred to as ‘cow’ and ‘stinking slut’, although sometimes they swap epithets and perhaps even roles. Occasionally the voices of some men or other reach me through the grille, but these male characters are clearly transient, and for them one epithet fits all: ‘asshole’.

Living in the ventilation system – that’s a joke, of course. In actual fact they live in the flat above mine, a fact that is easily confirmed by correlating the most vivid passages of their dialogue with the blows on my ceiling. ‘I’ll kill you, you cow!’ – and immediately a loud crash overhead sets all the lights in my flat blinking. Whitewash dust sprinkles down onto the computer and my timorous thought takes flight,
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fluttering this way and that haphazardly, but up above they seem as right as rain. Still alive, despite all the threats, pursuing their interminable combat with even greater gusto. I don’t know what weapons they use, perhaps they even pour water on each other, because sometimes after one of their battles royal the upper left corner of my kitchen turns damp. Incidentally, that’s a good excuse for going upstairs and getting to know these dear ladies a bit better. I ought to do that, but every time the damp patch dries out before I can pluck up the courage.

I hear broadcasts from below when I open the little cupboard under the sink, where I keep the rubbish bucket. They come up through the hole in the floor that the drain and water pipes disappear into. Fortunately, the people who live down there are quite meek, no one ever kills anyone, and their contentiousness peaks over the issue of soup that isn’t salty enough. I’d gladly swap floors with this good-natured family below me, but unfortunately that’s an idea from fantasyland. Flat swaps are a sore point with me in general – but we’ll get round to that later.

The people living below me and the turbulent couple above are unaware of each other’s existence. I’m the only connecting link between them. That’s the way things work in our high-rise: we live in layers and only play neighbours on the horizontal plane. And the one thing that obliges us to be neighbourly is our joint zone of responsibility and defence: the secure common hallway between the stairway and the flats. We call each other by name here as we argue about the felt boots left outside someone’s door and whose turn it is

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to sweep out our small piece of communal territory. I don’t mean by this that residents who live on different floors don’t recognise each other at all. Ultimately, we all share another common line of defence: our ironclad entrance door. We can spot outsiders – complete and total strangers – and we eye them severely, not to say suspiciously. But nonetheless, to each other we people of different levels remain a closed book behind seven seals. And I myself, when I encounter that young woman with the tired-looking face in the lift yet again, think: could she be the bitch who irrigates the corner of my kitchen? Or that respectable-looking man in spectacles: could he be the captious soup-lover who speaks from under my kitchen sink?

Sometimes my position seems strange even to me. There they are, knowing nothing about each other, and probably not even wanting to, but I know or, rather, I have invented so much about them. I’m stuck in the middle, I am – pardon the comparison – like a sanitary towel, absorbing other people’s intimacies. Now why would I want that? Perhaps it’s the reflex response of my authorial gland, secreting away compulsively even when I am overcome by the sleep of reason? Ah, if only that gland always functioned to good purpose . . .

And meanwhile, I have absolutely no response to offer my neighbours, nothing to entertain them with while they’re on pause. I am mute: my own soap opera has been a silent one since my wife left me. Only one thing betrays the fact that I’m still alive: the infrequent smell of bachelor-style home cooking seeping out under my door into the hallway.
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‘I’ll kill you, you cow!’

No, Tamara and I never sank to the level of expressions like that. Even during the most difficult periods of our relationship, neither of us wished the other would croak or anything of that kind. And the point here is not that even in emotional extremis, cultured individuals always bear in mind the ease with which domestic sounds travel in a building. It was simply that we hadn’t really anticipated getting rid of each other just yet. ‘I’m so tired of you!’ – that was what Tamara used to shout and then, after darting a rapid glance at the air vent, she would add the unquotable part of the phrase in an undertone. As befits a well-educated Moscow girl, she could be quite robust of tongue but, I assure you, she never made any threats against my person.

We lived as a married couple for many long years. Sometimes I recall those years with a radiant sadness, sometimes I want to lead as healthy a life as possible, so that my longevity will compensate for wasted time. The fact is, however, that when I ceased to be my wife’s husband, the scales seemed to fall from my eyes. The plugs seemed to drop out of my ears and the cotton wool out of my nose . . . Newly orphaned, I was adopted by the entire world, taken under its wing. Sounds forgotten since my childhood thronged around me once again. A little tree stirred by the wind, a fly buzzing past, even that kitchen air vent: they all started speaking to me, prattling away in thousands of voices, purveying some significant babble of their own. And I started wondering what the fly was buzzing about, and what the ‘cow’ on the next floor up had done to earn her death sentence.
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I used to spend long periods smoking on the balcony, bemused and bewildered, swamped by the sounds of existence. A previously inaudible aeroplane sang in the sky; a little dog tethered outside a shop wept inconsolably; children twittered in sparrow’s voices . . . The immense noise of the city, formerly echoed in my cranium only as a persistent, wearisome, drone, had now resolved itself into a multitude of small, distinct musical parts. And it seemed to me that if I investigated each one of these parts separately after only a very little while I would comprehend the total symphony of the universe . . . But the cigarette burned out, and the little dog would still be crying. The little dog cried and nobody came to untie it. The flies buzzed, the trees rustled their leaves, the city droned on and on and the ‘cow’ on the next floor up was still being killed. And then one day I realised that nothing would change, the symphony of the universe would not come together, if I remained a mere listener. What the symphony lacked was my own voice: that was what the leaves were murmuring to me. And so for the first time I became fully aware of the purpose of my writer’s calling and, having once grasped that, I started spending less time on the balcony and more time working. And this entire revolution took place when my wife left me.

Standing on the balcony is good for the nerves, by the way. Gazing at the generally peaceful, teeming bustle of humanity down below fills you with a benevolent, epic kind of calm. It’s so convenient to love humanity from the height of the ninth floor.

‘Filthy slut! Lousy skunk!’
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The battle's roar is even more distinctly audible out here; the window above me must be open. What if someone – the mother or the daughter – suddenly falls out of it? What if one of the two skunks tumbles out and goes flying past my balcony, flailing her legs? And then, a couple of seconds later, thwacks down onto the asphalt, falling silent forever. But no, while I’m on the balcony it won’t happen, no matter how much I dream about it. And it would be hard for her to thwack down onto the asphalt. The vast number of cars parked in our yard doesn’t leave enough space for an apple to fall, let alone a human being. Most likely she would land on one of their polished roofs, which would give me additional pleasure. I must confess that for some time now I have regarded automobiles with profound animosity. When my wife left me, cars became my major source of irritation (apart, that is, from the turbulent couple heretofore described). Automobiles are the root of all evil in Moscow. Scuttling about insolently all over the city, breathing our air and polluting the environment. Creeping into every chink they can squeeze their fat bodies into. But, worst of all, at night the cars crowd into the yards of the buildings and perform hideous caterwauling concerts. Automobiles acquired their vocal apparatus as a means of defence against robbers. There was a time when cars used to have their windscreen wipers, mirrors, wheels and even windcreens stolen without complaining, because they were unable to appeal for help. I don’t think anyone steals parts from them nowadays, but the alarm signal has developed into an independent form of musical art. I, however, am no fan of this music.
Lying in bed at night, listening to the demoniacal wailing, trilling and whistling, I call to mind other times, now long past. A nightingale nested quite close to us then; it wove its nocturnal melodies while Tamara snuggled peacefully in her sleep beside me. And though the car thieves were up to their tricks in the meantime, nothing they did ever disturbed the peace of the night.

Now the cigarette’s finished. What do I do? Launch the butt downwards along the flight-path of the neighbour who didn’t go zooming past? No way. I can’t remember a single occasion when I’ve thrown anything off the balcony. I have no wish to resemble the individuals who do that – and there are, by the way, quite a few such individuals in our block. The flat roof of the shop that is located below us has a scattering of assorted garbage. Gusts of wind, especially before a thunderstorm, stir up the lighter items and bear them off, but the empty beer cans, which can’t fly away, roll backwards and forwards across the roof, adding their own tinny thunder to the general aura of alarm at such moments. Today, however, the cans are lying still, because the troposphere is serenely becalmed. I don’t know how the geomagnetic background’s doing – I’ve never been sensitive to it – but the sky above the city is cloudless and tranquil. It’s the same colour as a woman’s eyes that you describe as blue while you’re trying to win her favour. Today the gauzy veil of Moscow’s habitual exhalations is so thin that the moon is actually peeping through it. So that’s how it amuses itself: spying on us during the day, while we go about our business.

Business . . . I mention that word without any specific
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reference to myself. For me personally, all the business of the
day is over, thanks to the two skunks upstairs. Now I’m enti-
tled to relax, which basically means I can put on my sandals
and go for a walk. Beneath the moon or in tandem with it:
I shall go spying on people too. There are lots of interesting
things to see in the city.

Yes, I think that’s what I’ll do. Walking is better for
the nerves than watching TV. Of course Philip . . . haven’t I
mentioned him yet? Philip’s my current flatmate. Of course,
Philip will want to come with me, but I’ll ask him to stay at
home. Because it’s only a manner of speaking to say that he
comes with me, everything actually turns out the other way
round. It has to be one thing or the other: a walk with Philip
or a stroll with the moon . . .

‘I’ll kill you, you cow!’
Damn! Where have my sandals got to?