

Georgi Gospodinov

The Apocalypse Comes at 6 PM

(an excerpt)

Summary

The apocalypse is not necessarily a global catastrophe, horsemen, trumpeting angels, fire and brimstone. Sometimes the end of the world is a very personal, private and everyday thing. It comes at that hour of early autumn dusk, at that minute when the light has already gone but the darkness has not yet fallen. The stories here take place in that one long minute.

In the late October, a town is paralyzed under the threat of an invisible sniper killer. The people are hidden behind the window curtains staring at their TV's and waiting for the latest news at 6pm. This is the preferable time for the killings too, the hour when everyone's demons of fear and loneliness wake up, when long kept family secrets come to light; the hour of sudden revelations and revenges. Everyone could be both a killer and a victim.

This town could be anywhere in Europe. Each of its characters, migrants and natives, stands on the verge of their own darkness. One murder, or even the rumor of it, will suffice to open the gaps in the social contract. The play explores exactly this breaking point of our common existence beyond which we tend to violate the fragile armistices with the people around. The dynamite of the unshared, the untold stories and unsaid words blows up. The structure of the play is as faceted and fluid as the relationships of its characters lost in a post-dialogic world.

"I committed my first murder... when I was nine... I killed an accordion. It was a premeditated and cold-blooded killing," says the accordionist crossing the stage in the interludes. As a certain town Homer, he recounts some micro-stories from the 1980s and the 1990s, some "small personal apocalypses" always starting with the refrain "I had some friends..." The new heroes have found a new rhapsode who relates the tragic epic of the everyday life, of the invisible people from the dark side of the public moon. "They'll only notice us if they shoot us... Or if we shoot... Our stories will only be heard under threat."

A father, immigrant from Eastern Europe, kidnaps his own children and goes back to the place he strived to leave years ago. His wife stays in their western home which costs them exactly 12 years and one failed marriage. Just in this situation, distanced from one another, they start really talking after years of accumulated silence. While the parents straighten out their relationship through old traumas, complexes, and Plato's dialogues, their daughter disappears.

The tragedy of a man who is always unnoticed by anyone. He leaves no memories, no traces – neither for his wife nor for the world. He could be the perfect killer.

The story of a man who feels himself being watched by everything and turns into a serial killer of TV sets...

An aged German woman dies in the hands of a foreigner (a Bulgarian woman) hired to take care of her. What do we know about the person who could be our only companion in the last, sublime moment.

And more stories, shadows and voices from behind the windows of the town. All of them bind together, sometimes through a single phrase or hint, to sketch the silhouette of a dismembered social body - vulnerable, untold, made of loneliness and unfulfillment.

What if the town uses the sniper killer as an alibi? What if the town has made him up to commit its small and big, long suppressed evening murders?

Because the apocalypse is indeed a personal thing.

PS

To the director. I imagine the performance to be driven by the tango of the sadness, by its force and its hidden energies, not by its melancholies. Piazzola's Libertango could suggest the rhythm.

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Seven actors – four men, two women and one girl, who in various scenes play the roles of: the accordionist/narrator; a married couple around 40 years old; an old woman and the woman hired to take care of her; the Watched One; the Unnoticeable One; the Sandman; the disappeared daughter; the Old Man Waiting for a Sign; the Story Collector, his kidnapper and others. Some actors play more than one role.

Dusk, the last glimmer of sunset, or rather an orange-purple stripe that cuts across the horizon (at the back of the stage). As if time were standing still in that minute when the light has already gone but darkness has not yet fallen. The stories here take place in that one long minute. The years may pass by more quickly, changing from one into another, yet the minute remains.

Shadows of Voices

Dark. Voices, the shadows of voices from various points of the scene.

...I've gone through a couple of lives... But I didn't live out a single one to the end...

... They'll only notice us if they shoot us... Or if we shoot... Our stories will only be heard under threat...

...I committed my first murder when I was nine... it was just huhhh... huhhh...

...The whole problem is that we measure it in years. 70 or 80... in the best case scenario... But it's a bit insulting... a bit insulting. It should be measured in hours and minutes...

...Loneliness and hesitation – that's what we're made of. (*Silence.*) God gave me some of his own depression and aggression...

...I'm so tired. I hope there's not another life after this...

...Who would perform a play without an audience? (*Silence.*) But I've got to live out this life without a public...

...C'mon, use your brain... There's got to be a story, we're killing a person, after all.

...I haven't hugged anyone in years... or been hugged... I go get massages...

...Once upon a time TV channels went off the air. How could I have forgotten? And it seemed just as natural then as how they never end now... That sad sound and those white snowflakes after the national anthem... sssssssssssssssss...

...It's already totally dark. I must admit that nights are objectively frightening. I like that word, "objectively."

...I don't leave memories. I don't leave traces.

...And anything that looks at me for more than three seconds, be it man, beast or saltshaker... for more than three seconds... can kiss its eyes goodbye.

...huhhhhhhhh...huhhhhhh...

Murder of an Accordion

The accordionist (around 40, street musician) comes out with his accordion, an old small Weltmeister that has almost become part of his body. In his hand, he's carrying the accordion's black case, what is in it remains an enigma to the end. Quiet Piazzolla can be heard.

I committed my first murder... when I was nine... I killed an accordion. It was a premeditated and cold-blooded killing. I had an accomplice, Tihomira, the neighbors' granddaughter. She was deaf-mute, 10 years old, living with her grandma. She was born deaf, and afterwards no one ever taught her to talk so... She was the perfect accomplice, she would never squeal on me. We committed the murder on a Tuesday afternoon around 3 PM. The deadest time. All the parents were at work, and all the old folks were sleeping like the slaughtered. That's what we say around those parts, "sleeping like the slaughtered," but that has nothing to do with the crime I'm describing. Then again, who knows? Maybe it does – everything is connected to everything else, right?

I took the accordion, wrapped it in an old jacket to hide it and carried it to the very back of the yard near the sheds by a barren fig tree. Then I went and got the big kitchen knife, the murder weapon. Tihomira was already waiting by the fig tree. We had dug a grave to hide the body in the afternoon before. Because I really hated that accordion. Because I was ashamed of it. Because I wanted to play the piano, I dreamed about the piano, because the girl I was in love with had a piano – probably the only one in town. We didn't have the money for a piano so my dad gave me an accordion for my birthday. A Weltmeister. The best possible. But I didn't want to play accordion and refused to take it. I later found out that he had saved up for a whole year to buy it.

Still I was ashamed, Gypsies at weddings played the accordion, while the piano... On accordion they played sappy old chestnuts like "Last night I drank red wine down to the last drop..." while the piano was for "Für Elise," the "Moonlight Sonata"... But it's like a piano, it's the same thing, my father said, here's your keyboard, it's just a little smaller and portable. I knew it wasn't the same thing. The accordion was the poor man's piano. When you couldn't have what you wanted, you always found something almost the same. I kept imagining how I would walk down the street with my accordion strapped to my back and how the girls would sneer at me, "Going to a wedding or a baptism?"

I took the knife out from under my shirt, whipped the jacket off the accordion and only then realized what I was doing – but it was too late to turn back, and besides, Tihomira was watching me.

The accordion is actually quite beautiful, glossy red and scaly as a dragon – with the black and white of the keys like ivory, it looked like a strange animal, in any case a living, breathing thing. I stretched it out as far as possible, took a deep breath along with it and plunged my knife into its chest. I remember how I immediately jumped back as if I expected it to leap up, to spatter me with blood, like the chickens hopping around after my grandma cut their heads off. There was no blood, no music, just a single huhhhhhhhhh....huhhhhhhhhh... I'll never forget it.

We buried it quickly and scattered some leaves on top so the wet soil wouldn't show. I was shaking all over, that night I got sick, I confessed everything, my father didn't hit me, he didn't even yell at me, that was the worst part, he just stood there silent, smoking near the window. Very confused, very old and unhappy, that's how he seemed to me.

I felt terribly guilty. And because of him I decided I would take up accordion after all. We brought it to a repairman, he glued it, sewed it up, brought it back from the other world, he said.

And look (*He opens the accordion and shows.*), where it was torn is now the strongest part.

The six o'clock news

The TV set from the first floor behind the accordionist. He comes close to the open window and listens with a peculiar voyeurism of the ear. The voice of the newsreader.

Good evening and welcome to the six o'clock news. This special report just in - today the city sniper's seventh victim was a 57-year-old white male, a university professor on early retirement due to health problems. The murder literally took place only minutes ago. (*Police and ambulance sirens can be heard in the background of the report.*) He was shot through the window as he stood in front of the television in his room on the second floor. Witnesses say that earlier in the day they saw a white van at one of the exits eight kilometers from the city. More details to follow on the ten o'clock news.

The Accordionist

I had some friends during the 1980s. Then they bought a VCR... (*The lights fade out, the beginning of a melody is heard that breaks off, repeating after each story.*)

I had a friend at the university who started dating a girl, they hadn't been together a week when they had to get married. Because it was 1991, they didn't have money for an apartment, and the dorms were for married couples only. They told

themselves if it didn't work out that they would just split up. It didn't work out. They didn't split up. They had a daughter. They left for Germany.

I had a friend. They called him "Toronto." He ran away to Toronto. There they called him "the Sofianite."

I had a friend, Jagger. That was his job – being Mick Jagger. He knew every Stones tune, he had all their vinyl (which at that time, during the 70s and 80s, was no small feat), he'd even been arrested a few times because of it. He looked strikingly like Mick Jagger. He even managed to be born on the same day, July 26. During the 90s, when travel was finally allowed, he pawned his mother's house and went to chase after Mick Jagger on a tour in Canada. He came back six months later and said:

"That guy just copies me now. That bastard stole my life, but he's welcome to it. At least he takes good care of it."

He couldn't pay back the cash, they took his house, his mother managed to find shelter somewhere and died. He was out on the streets, Jagger was, but he was still the coolest of the bums at the Beggars Banquet.

(Music, a phrase from the Stones record.)

I had this friend. It later turned out that during the 80s the girl, because she was the daughter of "politically suspect" parents, was forced to inform on the guy's parents (who were also politically suspect). At the same time they recruited the guy, my friend, to inform on his mother and father-in-law, the girl's parents.

There's political theater for you! There's theater of alienation for you! There's a nark as director for you! There's schizophrenic theater for you! And each of them had to play two roles at the same time in front of two different audiences.

And so we entered the brave new millennium, each of us having gone through a micro-apocalypse in advance.

The Watched One (The TV set serial killer)

Everything watches me. I sit at the table and know that the saltshaker is an eye. The eye of an insect, a mosaic of lenses, watching me from every tiny hole. And the vinegar jug watches me with its single eye, like a Cyclops. And the leaves on the trees. What do they look like to you, eh? (*Waits.*) Their shape is no coincidence at all, God doesn't play around with coincidences, he gives signs.

(*Drawing with his finger.*) An eye. Leaves are shaped like an eye.

I lock myself into my room and shut the shades. The room is absolutely empty, four white walls, a ceiling and a floor. The window, like I said, is tightly covered by the shades. And yet, damn it all, I feel his little eyes. Through the holes in the electrical outlet. He's peeping in from there. If I turn around very quickly, I can see his shadow as he slips into the outlet.

And what could the lamp hanging from the ceiling be but an eye turned into a lamp? Pretending to be a lamp – it's so obvious that it doesn't even bother trying to hide, it's gone glassy, hanging from that nerve disguised as a cord.

People are out of the question – I always sit with my back to the wall. One day I'll get started and anything that looks at me for more than three seconds, be it man, beast or saltshaker... for more than three seconds... can kiss its eyes goodbye.

(*While speaking he waves around a red laser pointer.*)

(*Pause.*)

As they say, just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean they're not following me. I have proof. I read her dossier, she informed on me even way back when we were dating, and on my folks. It wasn't a marriage, but a mission.

(*Pause.*)

Then I discovered the biggest conspiracy of all. Television. That's the real spy. We think we're watching it when really it's watching us. An ingenious invention.

I've shot nine televisions so far... This'll be the tenth. And I still don't think I've made the news. Actually, I don't really know, since I like to shoot them right when the news starts. The ones on the first floor are the easiest, I've got a straight shot.

(*He aims the laser beam at one of the windows.*) There are 12 seconds left until six, there's the clock, the signal. I wait for a close-up of the anchorwoman. Oh, a new haircut. Tha-a-at's it... And right when she says (*his voice and that from the television in synch*) "Good evening and welcome to the six o'clock news"...

A quiet shot is heard, followed by the sound of breaking glass. The television dies out. The stage is dark, the shooter's retreating footsteps can be heard.

I told her not to start working for the news.

The Kidnapping 1

A young married couple, the wife is pregnant, in front of the screen of a 3-D video monitor watching the baby. We hear their monologues, which can overlap or run parallel, during the pauses in one we hear lines from the other. As they speak, they both watch the screen, each lost in his or her own thoughts.

THE FATHER: It looks like an amphibian... it really *is* an amphibian... like in biology class... those glass jars full of formaldehyde... reptiles... frogs... yeah, it looks most like a frog... or a salamander... a frog is an amphibian... now there's a miracle for you... amphibians... the stomach is a flask... her stomach as a flask, a flask, a flask... that's not formaldehyde... it's swimming... moving... breathing, it's transparent... its spine is like a piece of string... phylum Chordata... it's still not human... it's still an amphibian... they only reproduce in water... that's an ocean there in the stomach. Every day millions of years of evolution pass by... first there were... which were the first creatures?... life began in water... then came the lungfish, with gills and lungs, amphibian... then it'll become a mammal... you can see it's just a few centimeters away, under the skin of that stomach, yet it's a million years away from you, traveling fast, it'll catch up in five or six months...

THE MOTHER: It looks like an alien... it looks an awful lot like an alien... exactly like that... how come nobody thought of it... with that huge head... that huge head disproportionate to the body... round open eyes, slightly wrinkled skin... like an ancient one... like it's a thousand years old... Yoda, it looks like Yoda from *Star Wars*... I watched that movie 17 times, at the end they let me into the movie theater for free... so the human was an alien... I've always suspected it... but here's the proof... there's no evolution, no Darwin... we're not monkeys, thank God... it moves as if in space, swimming through space... in zero gravity... under this belly button... the cosmos is inside my stomach... the cosmos and the stomach are spheres...

(At the end they turn towards each other.)

HER: It's an alien...

HIM: An amphibian.

HER: You're an amphibian... it's an alien...

HIM: It's an amphibian. You read too much science fiction.

HER: Darwinist.

HIM: OK, fine, it's an amphibian-alien.

(Fade out.)

The same couple, years later, each wearing a headset and sitting back-to-back in front of separate laptops and talking on Skype.

HER (*Crisply, coldly*): Do you have any idea what you've done? You – kidnapped – our children. There's no other way to put it. It's called kidnapping in any language.

HIM: No one will believe you.

HER: You kidnapped our children.

HIM: Wait a second, there's no such phrase as "You kidnapped our children," it just doesn't make sense somehow. They are our children – of course, only you know that with 100 percent certainty, but let's assume that's the case.

HER: Psychopath.

HIM: One more comment like that and I'm hanging up. I call the shots now.

HER: God, just listen to yourself! You already sound like the consummate kidnapper. I wonder if this is the first time or...

(The line goes dead. She calls back.)

HER: This isn't a game!

HIM: Where were we? Ah yes, kidnapping. If we assume that kidnapping is the forcible abduction of a person dragged off in an unknown direction by unknown people with the goal of gaining some kind of leverage, by death threats and so on, what part of this situation resembles kidnapping to you? The children are with their father visiting their grandmother.

HER: Look...

HIM: Don't interrupt me. For all these years you've been trying to manipulate everyone. And you know what? You have the terrible habit of never listening to anyone else. Well, now we can finally have a real conversation. Something like this had to happen so we could finally talk. Last night I was thinking that if you added up all the minutes that we've really talked to each other over the past ten years, they wouldn't even make a single night.

HER: It takes two to talk, doesn't it?

HIM: You're the expert on Plato's Dialogues, you tell me. I'm just a stupid physicist.

HER: Have I ever said that?

HIM: That I'm a stupid physicist? Not directly, but your tone of voice...

HER: You know what your problem is?... Never mind.

HIM: So where does all this Platonist arrogance come from? All those heavenly spheres and yadda yadda... Does our man say anything about the ideal family or did he only get as far as the ideal state?

HER: Oh ho, I didn't know that you've been snooping through my books – I thought you only read my e-mail...

HIM: I'll ignore the latter remark... Yes, I read Plato, secretly, so you wouldn't mock me, because I wanted us to be able to talk, God damn it, I was trying... to save something.

HER: I didn't notice.

HIM: That's your problem, you don't notice... you would never take a look at any of my books.

HER: Actually once, when you weren't home, I read one of those books about fractals and... I must admit I was impressed, it's pure philosophy, just in a different language...

HIM: You never told me that you'd read about fractals.

HER: You never told me about the Dialogues...

HIM: You know what I discovered? In those Dialogues there actually... isn't any dialogue... not real dialogue... Of course, there's an exchange of questions and answers, but the thermodynamics are weak, if I can express it like that...

HER: You express yourself very well for a physicist... Sorry, I didn't mean that sarcastically...

HIM: I don't know, I was disappointed, I had expected to learn something about conversation, about the structure of the dialogues, about their mechanics... I wanted us to talk.

HER: Look, you made an admirable effort, but Plato isn't part of the "Chicken Soup for the Soul" or the "How to Learn to Share and Get Others to Listen to Us" series. It's even less of a mechanics textbook or...

HIM: I don't know, I expected something more... In our arguments I've noticed that you've learned a lot from Socrates, you're a Socratist, right? (*Pause.*) He kills any idea of dialogue. A bullet-proof manipulator. If the point of a dialogue is to confuse your opponent, to force him to say things he hadn't thought of, to lead him from point A to point B by giving him an electrical shock now and then like a white mouse in a maze, then afterwards rubbing his nose in it – no, forcing him to rub his own nose in it... If that's the Socratic Method, then you're the reincarnation of Socrates himself. But where is the dialogue, God damn it?... We're just trading monologues. That's all.

(*A long pause.*)

HER: Please just give back the kids...

HIM: Jesus, more of your manipulation again. I can't give them back because they were never kidnapped. You abandoned them.

HER: What?

HIM: You abandoned our children. Don't you remember? But I'm giving you another chance. You can come back to them. Here.

(*Fade out.*)

The Accordionist

It gets dark so fast...

I hate this hour. The day has gone, the night hasn't come, a rather uneasy pause. You've only got your fears. It's like with aging, you're never as old as you are when you're 40. After that it gets easier. You know there's no going back, but at 40 you still have hopes, you've just crossed over.

Translation from the Bulgarian: Angela Rodel

(to be continued)