

Fame

Volodymyr Drozd

Just once, during my younger years, did fame brush me with its wings. And then it fluttered away to those more fortunate.

I had just published my first and, thus far, only collection of stories. It was on display in all the bookstores and newsstands, and every day I strolled down the city's central street and admired my creation. I picked up the book and leafed through it for the hundredth, thousandth time, my eyes caressing my own portrait etched in profile. The best part of the drawing was my glasses. Perhaps the lips in the portrait also resembled mine. Anyway, there was my name in large print under the portrait, and I recognized myself in every copy of the book. Unfortunately, nobody else recognized me. The salesgirls looked past me and took me for a crank who pawed and purchased one and the same book day in and day out—all the more so because nobody else was buying it. Occasionally a customer, seeing the book with its colorful cover in my hands, would ask trustingly, "Could you tell me what it's about?"

"About people!" I would answer with my nose in the air, convinced that I wrote like no one had ever written before.

The customer would take the book from my hands, finger it as if it were a length of cloth or chintz rather than spiritual food, gape at the humiliatingly low price, and then, distrustful of a cut-rate product, return it to the display stand.

Stealing hours from sleep for my writing, oh, how I dreamt of seeing the collection in bookstores. I thought everyone would stand up and notice. The world would change for the better! But nothing changed, and behind my back nobody whispered, "Look, there goes that writer...."

At the time I was working for a regional newspaper. I even had an office of my own, though, to tell the truth, it was a mere cubbyhole, a sidebar of an office with a column in the middle to support the dangerously sagging ceiling. In May, however, clusters of lilac peeped into my open windows, while in autumn flowers reached up to the sill and the heavy scent of marigold filled the room. On my desk, littered with manuscripts and copies of my book, there was a red telephone. I loved to hear it ring.

One day the telephone on my desk jangled. The pen I was using to busily scrawl out a story for the coming issue kept moving as I picked the receiver up with my left hand.

"Hello."

"Is this Volodia?"

"Yes, it is."

"This is Nina calling. So, you didn't phone me after all..."

I was frantically fumbling in my mind: now what Nina had I promised to call and didn't? I was free of matrimonial bonds at the time, and girls didn't shun me, or I them, but—Nina?

"You know, Nina, my copy editor's on holiday, so I'm the only one in the whole department right now, and a newspaper is like a child that has to be fed every day," I chattered away, playing for time as I tried to recall which Nina I was talking to, my right hand still dashing off line after line for the issue.

"I've got my pride, Volodia, and I wouldn't have called if ..."

"Of course."

I had to submit two hundred lines right away, and I didn't even have a hundred yet.

"... we weren't expecting a child, Volodia."

"Congratulations—children are always a cause for joy." I said, quoting from my own feature about a new maternity home. But suddenly the message registered in my mind. "Wait a minute. What do you mean, 'we'?"

"You and me. Have you forgotten, Volodia?"

My right hand froze over the sheet of paper.

The editor came into the room, glanced at my face, and asked in alarm, "Are you okay?"

"Now stop your silly jokes," I said into the phone. "I'm busy on copy for the next issue!"

I slammed down the receiver.

Instantly the phone rang again.

"What will I tell them in the village?" Nina wailed into the phone. "Mother will kill me! And I trusted you! I know the book you signed for me by heart and keep it by my pillow day and night. I thought writers were always truthful..."

I cupped the telephone with my hand and smiled sourly at the editor: "This is some kind of mystery."

After listening for a while, I said into the phone, "Are you calling from a phone booth? Where is it? Do you have the book with you? Catch a taxi right away and come here, to the editorial office. Agreed. I'm waiting."

I told the editor about the telephone conversation and asked him not to leave me alone with this unknown Nina.

Ten minutes later a girl of about eighteen crossed the threshold of my office. She was dressed in city clothes, but her constrained movements unmistakably betrayed her as a recent arrival from the countryside.

"May I see Volodia?"

I got up from the table with unbelievable relief in body and soul—I

was seeing this young woman for the first time in my life.

"I am Volodia."

Nina took a step back, shaking her curly, cold-permed head.

"Sit down, please, and let's see the book you were given as a present."

The book was mine all right, with a dedicatory inscription: *To my beloved Nina in remembrance of the enchanting days and nights at the resort on the banks of the quiet Desna, Ever yours ...* Below was my name, surname, date, month and year. Only the hand wasn't mine—it was too precise and clear.

"Who gave you this book?" Involuntarily, my voice took on the tone of an investigator. At that time I liked writing biting articles, and here was an interesting feuilleton in the offing.

"The writer, of course."

"I wrote that book!"

Nina dropped her head to her knees and burst into tears.

"He said it was his ... his ..."

"His pen name, you mean?"

"Yes."

Next morning I set off on an urgent assignment: the editor had asked for a feuilleton for the Sunday issue. The article had almost taken shape in my head: the only thing left was to uncover the real name of the protagonist. Through the window of the bus the autumn scenery flashed by as in a travel advertisement, while I sat gloomily thinking that fame resembled a capricious, skittish girl: now she scorns you and doesn't even look your way, and then suddenly, in a happy moment, she opens her loving arms and wraps you up in them. I had every reason to consider myself a popular and well-known writer, now that young men were borrowing my name to seduce young women. It was certainly pleasant to be famous amidst the general population—although, of course, there was my modesty to consider. In the article I'd probably leave out the name of the author of the book and put the matter this way: "The seducer used the good name of a famous author, etc., etc." I'd probably add "talented" as well. That famous and talented author was, of course, yours truly. In my bag I had several copies of my book, hot off the press: I'd give one to the director of the resort and donate one to the resort's library. Why not do something to benefit my readers?

But the library already had a copy of my book, prominently on display with an inscription on the title page: *To my dear readers, may the love of fiction never cool in their hearts. The author.* As it turned out, the director also had an autographed copy of my book.

"Didn't he like it here?" the director asked, obviously alarmed by my questions about this author. "Or did you come to get notes for a deeper insight into the man? He came to me the very first day and introduced himself. We tried to accommodate him and gave him a private room, so he'd have all the conditions necessary for creative work. We keep such a

room for VIPs, you know. The regional authorities occasionally pay us a visit, so we need it. I figured that the authorities were always coming here but this was the first time a writer had stopped at our resort."

"Did he register in his own name?"

"Oh no, they've all got pseudonyms." The director looked down at me as if to say: How little you journalists know about writing. "When an author publishes a book, he can sign it with another name—a pseudonym, it's called," he explained to me. "The author complained that he was tired of fame and asked me not to tell anyone that a writer was staying here. But can you really hide news like that: a living writer in our midst! As soon as he gave a copy of his book to the library, the vacationers recognized him from his portrait in the book."

I asked to see the guest registry, and suddenly, as they say in books, I felt a sharp pain in my chest (actually, I still had a good heart back then, which could withstand far greater stress without giving cause for alarm). Vitalii Piven—that's who my double was. Vitalii, the most garrulous member of the literary association I headed, who reeled off long-winded and meaningless speeches at every meeting. Vitalii, who brought me miles of paper with his unbearable poems almost daily! Vitalii, who really did look like me, and wore glasses, I suspected, to make the similarity all the more striking!

That instant, I lost interest in the lure of fame for many years to come.

Back at the editorial office, I rang up Piven. He was employed at a local designer's workshop, painting posters and slogans.

"Is that you, Vitalii? Could you please come over. I want to have a talk with you about your poetry."

"You'll publish them at long last?"

"That's what we need to discuss."

He showed up very soon, because he was simply mad to get his hackwork published. I sat behind my desk. After greeting me very casually (in his relations with me, he took great pains to underscore his independence), Vitalii Piven looked at the papers on my desk.

"What are you writing?"

"A feuilleton for the Sunday issue."

"Oh. What is it about?"

"About you."

"Wow, some joker you are!"

"I don't joke about my work."

Without saying a word, I brought my book with his autograph out of the drawer and gave it to him. Vitalii took it with two fingers.

"Are you trying to shove your deathless prose on me once more? Excuse me, but I'm already sick of it!"

"You better read what's written inside before you come to any snap conclusions!"

Vitalii opened the book. His face turned red like an overripe tomato, and he sank into the chair. Then his face grew yellow, after which it turned green and then, a moment later, brick-red. Just like the traffic lights at a street crossing. I dialed a number on the telephone.

"Hello. Is this the police station? I'm phoning from the editorial office of *The News* to ask a favor. We need to confirm the identity of the handwriting on two documents. Yes ... preferably with an official letter from your forensic laboratory. Thank you. I'll call back."

"You didn't have to do that," Piven said. "Yes, it was me." He started circling round the column. Lean, lanky, really looking like me, but with a smaller face, he seemed to be trying to catch up with himself going around the column. And it looked as if any moment he'd succeed.

"I wrote it! I signed it! I gave it away! I don't deny it. But did you ask yourself what my desperate act proves? It proves only one thing—inwardly I've matured for a book of my own. You have everything—fame, money, a book, but do you really believe that your prose is better than my poetry? You've gotten published because you work in an editorial office and have connections in the capital. As for me, you won't even give me a chance in the provincial press. For two years you've been promising to publish a large selection of my verse, but where is it? I'm an artist—I need contacts with my readers to thrive!"

"All right, you can have your contacts—as long as no children result from them!"

"What children?"

"Your Nina is expecting a child."

He stopped dead in his tracks, his face dissolving like the image on the movie screen when the film gets stuck in the projector and starts to melt. But that lasted only a brief moment. An invisible hand seemed to have switched the current on in him, and Piven again went running round the column.

"Children, you say—so what? Bearing children is probably nobler than writing books! Mind you, every child is an inimitable individual—as opposed to books like yours, which appear by the thousands every day with nothing but verbal froth and not much meat to them. Anything mankind really needs to know has been known for a long time. Do you really believe you'll say anything new in your books? In giving birth to children, we give birth to the future! Oh, my poor Nina! I would have phoned her long ago and told her everything, but I was afraid she wouldn't understand me properly. She instantly bloomed in my heart; she inspired me, and in one month of my holidays I wrote one hundred and seven poems! What could I tell her? That they won't even publish me in a regional rag? That I paint slogans day in and day out?"

Vitalii walked up to the phone. My best feuilleton was not destined to see print: the next day Nina and Vitalii were married. Truth is, Piven set one

condition—that the newlyweds would enjoy their honeymoon (only a week, since they had used up the rest of their holidays already) at a hotel, and in a deluxe suite, no less. I came to an understanding with the hotel director, and after a modest dinner at a restaurant (attended by members of our literary association and Nina's girlfriends from the dressmaker's shop) I showed the young couple to the deluxe suite. It was truly luxurious, with two big rooms and a vestibule. In the parlor there was a long table with flower vases and crystal ashtrays, the bedroom had an enormous bed, and in the corners of both rooms stood pompous-looking armchairs with soft, plush upholstery. Nina was so overwhelmed that she stopped on the parlor carpet with hands at her sides, her head bowed like a schoolgirl who had been asked a difficult question at an examination. Piven, on the other hand, behaved as if he had been living not in a workers' dormitory but in deluxe suites all along. Right away he moved the bed, carelessly flipped ash from his cigarette into a sparkling ashtray, and moved the table to the window facing the square: "Here's where I'll write my poetry," he said.

Later he bragged about writing sixty-nine poems during his honeymoon in the deluxe suite.

Nina and Vitalii have five children now; their eldest son is studying at the university. Vitalii still works as a designer at the plant. As for his poetry, none was ever published, and chances are he doesn't write any more. Once, when I dropped into a meeting of the university's literary workshop, I heard his son reading a poem, and a rather good one, at that.

Real fame has come to me only during the past few years, since I bought myself a miniature pinscher and trained him to run alongside me without a leash. Three times a day I walk him down our street. All the passersby smile at the pinscher mincing along gravely at my side, and they follow us with their eyes for a long time. My popularity is extending further and further beyond the confines of the street, spreading to the neighboring parks, public gardens, and markets. When I visit a store and stand in line to pay at the cash register, I frequently hear someone say, "The last person in line is the man walking the beautiful pinscher!"

"Oh—I know him."

When I carry my little dog across the street, pressing him gently to my chest, old women are moved to say admiringly, "It's a rare gift, to love animals—you're so kind and gifted."

At that, I become embarrassed and wordlessly agree.

Translated by Anatole Bilenko

Original publication: Volodymyr Drozd, "Slava," in his *Kryk ptakha v sutinkakh* [The Cry of the Bird at Dusk], Kyiv: Radians'kyi pys'mennyk, 1982, pp. 20–26.