

T H E
BLIND
Accordionist

NINE STORIES BY MAXIM GUYAVITCH



C . D . ROSE

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

MAXIM GUYAVITCH WAS born in Galicia in 1882. Or Dalmatia in 1894. Or perhaps in Moldavia, or maybe that's Moravia, in 1888, or '89, or '90.

He was an orphan who joined the army in order to save himself from destitution; the only son of a neglectful bourgeois family; an inveterate gambler; the greatest writer you have never heard of; a thief; someone with a far more respectable career as something other than a writer who used a pseudonym to publish their work; an itinerant pianist; a serial dissident; a man obsessed with pears. Opinions vary. Theories proliferate. "He" may actually have been a collective of writers, all for one reason or another anxious to hide their true identities. He may never have existed at all.

Truth is, no one knows much about Maxim Guyavitch.

What we can be sure of: Stories under his name began to appear in small magazines in various countries and various languages in the early twentieth century. There were only ever nine of them. Sometime in the early 1930s, they stopped.

What we can't be sure of: anything else.

The stories were later collected and published in German, Czech, Polish, French, Russian, English, Hungarian, and various other languages in editions ranging from leather-bound, gold-embossed volumes destined for private libraries to knock-offs made of cigarette paper and glue to be flogged at railway station stalls and newspaper kiosks. Few editions ever sold more than a handful of copies, and, fairly rapidly, they dropped out of print, then memory.

If you look carefully and study the minutiae of publishers' catalogues, conference proceedings, and literary tittle-tattle, you may from time to time see his name surface, and the stories, too, as they are rediscovered, then reforgotten. In the book world undergrowth, a small para-industry has flourished, samizdat versions of the stories have been circulated, and dubious new ones have emerged and, their authorship contested, sunk. Minor academics at major universities and major academics at minor universities have specialised. Letters have been written. Websites with improbable names, immune to search engines, still exist. His name was—and still is—whispered knowingly, as though uttering it might show membership in a certain group, though his work has been rarely read.

A few years ago, the modest success of the publication of a series of my lectures¹ created another small ripple of interest in Guyavitch and his work, and I was invited to edit a new edition of his *Nine Stories*.

1 *Who's Who When Everyone Is Someone Else*, Melville House, Brooklyn and London, 2018

The task was far from a simple one. The texts that exist are now difficult to come by, often corrupt, and usually conflicting. The edition I have put together—the book you hold in your hands or have laid flat on your table before you right now—may infuriate purists, pedants, and Pharisees, but I care little. Others may consider my choices merely idiosyncratic. For example, I have not included the story “Little Eli’s Shoes,” as I believe it of dubious authenticity and inferior quality, but I *have* included “Dead Johann,” refusing to accept the notion that it is somehow “cursed.”² I have arranged them in what I believe to be chronological order of production, noting the stylistic, thematic, and—I believe—personal development from “The Card Players” as far as “The Visitors.” In short, this is, I believe, the edition Guyavitch’s work deserves.

But enough. I do not wish to detain you further with distraction from the stories themselves. To those of you who already know Guyavitch, I hope you will again experience the wonder of reading these tales, as if for the first time. To those of you new to this curious, unsettling, beguiling writer, read on, and read carefully, for you may never return.

2 Though neither am I convinced by the suggestion that it is, in fact, the key to this enigmatic collection of work.

THE CARD PLAYERS



CHRISTMAS HAD PASSED, and though the bottles of pear champagne had been opened and drunk, January was reluctant to arrive. Snow, ice, and frost had slowed not only passage into or out of the town, but the very days themselves. At this sink of the year, the cold could crack bones. These days—when the light was starting to fight back but the darkness still won—inspired little desire to celebrate; everyone waited for the year to show itself before welcoming it. Beginnings to the year are rarely auspicious—it is only humanity, after all, that has chosen to mark them thus. Nature cares little, as it has neither ending nor beginning.

Some mornings—like this one—the very air seemed ice itself, each breath enough to freeze the tissue that lined a man's lungs. The light hung ashen and sluggish, thick and slow. The river that curled around the town had grown solid enough to build a railway on. Ice ruled the land.

And yet, this gelid day had been warmed by a rumour stewing,

softening the bite of the chill and perfuming the town with its potent smell of possibility.

The Marquis went out at five, as the Marquis did, but today Eva and Ada had listened carefully, knowing the soft thud of each footfall, the creak of every floorboard, and the scrape of every opening drawer well enough to be able to envision him carefully trimming his moustache, slipping the small compact mirror into his right glove, then choosing his shiniest shoes to wear under his felt overboots. He came down (they scurried), then ate nothing but a slice of black bread with white cheese and requested only a light broth for supper on his return.

The rumour was true.

Tonight, there was to be a game.

Ada and Eva watched the Marquis head down the path and, once convinced he was out of eye and earshot, ran upstairs to change.

“The red?” asked Eva.

“No, the green,” replied Ada.

“The fox fur?”

“The sable.”

“Shoes?”

“Boots.”

Once painted, shod, coated, scarved, and furred, they opened their front door.

“Brass monkey,” said Eva.

“Frog’s tail,” said Ada.

“The Devil’s shoulder,” said Eva.

“Witch’s tit,” said Ada, and they set out.

They passed the cinnamon shop and the coral merchant, the seller of tallow candles and the importer of damasks. The baker had begun selling off the morning’s now-stale loaves, the printer had hushed his press. Behind the banked-up snow and the spaces of the silence, the rumour had taken flesh, begun to crawl, then to walk as fast as the small crowd now gathering around Eva and Ada, following the Marquis at a distance ample enough to consider themselves unseen. Peter and Johann cracked their knuckles, ready to pick pockets; the cartographer rolled his maps; Grasso carried up bottles of pear brandy from the cellar and stoked the fires. In the back room of the Golden Lion, a man sat with his notebook, frantically trying to record everything that was happening—everything, that is, as far as he knew or understood it, and quite possibly just making a lot of it up.

The town had no railway, but its arrival had once been promised, and in anticipation of that day a hotel had been built and popularly named the Station Hotel, and it was there, at this very moment, that a man with hunched shoulders and a bent nose wearing a stiff black suit and an unfashionable, wing-collared shirt, neither warm enough for the scouringly cold weather, walked down the stairs, across the lobby, and onto the street.

Even though evening was already cowering the narrow streets, the light seemed unexpected to him, and from his breast pocket he produced a pair of dark-tinted, oval-lensed glasses, which he carefully rested on the bridge of his nose and would leave there for the rest of the evening.

From behind these glasses, he looked around a moment; then he struck out, his boots clacking on the stone flags, then thudding on the board pavement as he turned off the square and made decisively for the knot of old streets in the town centre. On the corner where the alleys untangled and the main street began, he saw a group of people huddled in a close circle. Believing them to be warming their hands at a fire and now himself feeling the cold, he walked over to join them, but as he grew closer, the small crowd dispersed like leaves floating in a teacup, and he discovered there was no fire, and that they were gathered around nothing at all.

He feigned composure, adjusted his jacket against the cold, and carried on his way, vaguely aware of the crowd reforming behind him. The crowd, indeed, turned their heads to observe his progress. They muttered to themselves and nodded to each other. It was true: He was making for the Golden Lion. Not only was there to be a game this evening, the Galician had come to play.

The Marquis was the first at table. The Marquis was always the first at table. There was no reason for this, no rule except the unwritten one: if the Marquis wasn't first at table, the evening's game couldn't begin. As the Marquis took his seat, removing his overcoat and felt boots, the Galician was making his way down Golden Lion Street. As the Marquis broke a fresh pack of cards, the Galician was heaving open the heavy door into the saloon and pulling back the insulating curtain behind it. As the Marquis ordered a pear brandy, the Galician was brushing snow from his unsuitable shoes. As the Marquis sipped his brandy, the Galician walked into the back room of the Golden Lion Inn.

The game could begin.

The crowd swelled and bobbed. Ada and Eva were already there. Although they had left after the Marquis, their skill in navigating the slippery roads matched with their intention not to miss a second of the evening's adventure and led them to arrive before the Marquis. Despite the external chill, the fierce stove soon made the room uncomfortably hot, and many of the women removed their furs as more people (Peter and Johann, the cartographer's wife, the cinnamon seller) also pushed their way into the back room of the inn. Klug even brought the dog who he swore could talk, though no one had ever heard it do so. Two men who have no part in the story stood shoulder to shoulder in matching grey overcoats.

A chair was found for their visitor, and the crowd, anxious to know more about the newcomer, attempted to engage him in conversation.

"Have you visited our town before?" they asked him, but the Galician shook his head.

"Not that I remember," he replied.

"How do you know of the game?" they asked.

"Everyone knows about the game," he replied. No one asked who "everyone" was, each of them believing it to be themselves, and indeed, they did all know about the game, even if they did not know quite where it had come from.

The game, some said, was part of the Trick-Taking family, related to Euchre; similar, in its way, to Skat, Clabber, or Juckerspiel. Others claimed it was a branch of the Cuckoo group of

Draw-and-Discard, and more akin to Bester Bube or Krypka-sino, while others saw it as a piece of Schafkopf, like Spitzer or Kierki, or even a Partition game, like Chor Voli or Hazari. Still others considered it a variant of the classic Vying games, a distant cousin of Poker, Brag, Bouillotte, or Ferbli. The *chemin de fer* variation of Baccarat was also often cited. Discussions regarding the game's ancestry were as lengthy, complex, and passionate as the game itself. There was no right, no wrong, no reason. No one knew. The game was what it was.

"Surely," thought the crowd, "the Galician has an ancestor here. How else could he know about the game?" No one claimed to be related to the Galician, though Karm believed his uncle had once visited the region.

No stranger had come to play the game for as long as anyone could remember. The crowd speculated: the Galician, surely, was a millionaire come in hugger-mugger to buy up cheap land, or finally to bring the railway to town; the Galician was the illegitimate child of a shamed but unnamed local come to claim his rightful inheritance, or, at least, to demand recognition from his errant sire; the Galician was a spurned lover pulled by the magnetic force of jealousy; a lone traveller who had lost his way; an imperial spy; a nihilist anarchist; a cunning plotter come to destabilise everything everyone had ever known or would ever know. The Galician, it was said, wasn't even Galician.

The Galician said nothing.

(The speculation, however, fluttered around the Marquis's ears, making him uncomfortable, as it was known too that the

Marquis wasn't actually a Marquis, though he had been called so ever since anyone could remember. No one knew why, not even Ada and Eva.)

Although no one knew who the Galician was, he had come to play, and on this the rules were clear: the table was open, anyone was welcome to take their seat, and this the Galician did.

The work of the night awaited.

The crowd pointed out that there was no extra chair. The Marquis had a chair, the Galician seated opposite him had a chair, but there was no empty chair. One of the rules of the game (though whether it was a rule or merely tradition wasn't certain) was that one empty chair should always be present at the table. Should someone else, a guest uninvited or unexpected, a passing stranger, even, wish to take part in the dealing, shuffling, exchanging, and placing of the cards, they would always be welcomed. Stray drinkers stuck in the saloon were displaced as a chair was liberated and passed into the crowded back room, then given to the card players.

Another round of drinks was poured, though the Galician declined the offer of pear brandy and said he would prefer linden tea. Grasso had his wife prepare a pot of linden tea.

They were almost ready to make the toast that would signal the opening of the evening's game, but the tea was still too hot. They waited for the tea to cool.

While they waited for the tea to cool, the Marquis reshuffled two packs of cards, one French, the other Neapolitan. As the host, he would open the evening's play, though—it was said—he could, as a courtesy, ask the Galician to lay the welcoming card, but this was most improbable.

Someone could have consulted a rule book, but there was no rule book.

The game had its rules, but the rules were unwritten. Everything was precedent, tradition. Each precedent had, perhaps, begun as a cheat, or a challenge. No group had ever formally sat and ratified changes to the game. The rules were like the life-sized map of the town held in the Cartographer's shop: no one had ever seen it; all believed in its existence, apocryphal as it may be.

The game had been played in the town for many years, though no one knew how many. The game had not always been played in the back bar of the Golden Lion. Over the years, the game had moved from inn to tavern to the storeroom of the baker to the salon of the big house at the edge of town, and then back again around this circuit. The game had been played in the town square, under hedges, in fields, and at one point it was said that the game was being played only by two men in a ditch.

Different traditions related that the game dated back to when a bride was gambled, or children auctioned, or to the founding of the town itself by a man who had had to sell all his land. The game had begun so long ago no one could quite remember when it had begun, or where, or how, or why.

"Before we begin," said the Galician, "may I ask a question?"

The Marquis assented; the crowd cocked its ear.

"Would it be possible," he asked, "to add my own pack?"

Although there had been many iterations of the game, it was—as far as anyone knew—always played with at least two packs of cards, and sometimes as many as nine. French and Neapolitan

were standard, Latin and Swiss sometimes used, even Silesian or Sicilian, and very occasionally Tarot.

The request baffled the crowd. The polyphonic unwritten rules were consulted: the crowd debated; opinions varied.

Cheating, Klug reminded everyone, was not unheard of in the game. There were many modes of cheating, Karm asserted, some of which, over the years, had come to be accepted as acceptable modes of play. The Marquis himself had been known to cheat, had even admitted it, only a little, only ever slightly, but he was able to justify himself: it was, he claimed, his way of righting the balance of the world, of taking action against an unjust universe. He had, he said, been cheated against on several occasions (both large and small), but had—in those cases—never taken any revenge nor caused any scene nor publicly questioned anyone’s honour. He had merely decided, in turn, to cheat *back*. Such was the world, said the Marquis. Cheating could happen, but cheating had to be regulated. The Galician could certainly propose a new pack, but the pack would have to be inspected.

It was set to be a long evening. Food supplies were called for: the soup was stirred, the stale bread dampened and put back in the relit oven. Grasso carted up more pear brandy from his cellar. Link boys, their buckets of fire hanging on the ends of their poles, would be needed to guide the drunks home.

A committee (Grasso, Klug and Karm, Johann and Peter) hastily assembled, abetted by the others, each with their own theory: the Galician was going to play a double, introduce an extra to the pack, one more card, thus disturbing the game’s precise possibilities of combinations of variants. According

to the rules, each card should have its twin, although the twin card was not necessarily identical. But if the card were, in turn, marked in some way (a dog-ear, a nicked edge, a tiny inked cross nestling at its corner), the delicate order, the unique balance of the game would also begin to totter, to crumble, to disintegrate. The fine calibrations would sway as if they were a house, and not a game, of cards. The intricate order would have mutated, been changed in a manner at once infinitesimal and immense. Such a corruption of order would call everything everyone knew, had ever known, or would ever know into question: everything would still be connected to everything else, but nothing would mean anything.

The game was not a game of cards, much less a game of money: It was a game of life, played with cards. Everything had its sequence, everything had its order, no matter how random or unpredictable it should seem.

Whether the Galician was aware of this or not, no one knew. He merely sat, his cooling tea before him, unconcerned about the commotion his query had caused. And then he made another.

“What,” he asked, “lies on the other side of the river?” The crowd looked at each other, blank faced. No one knew what was on the other side of the river. No one had thought to ask what lay on the other side of the river, over the bridge, on that far muddy or frosty bank.

“Bears,” said someone, and there was a murmur of agreement, though all were in truth unsure. The story of the bears was dimly remembered, spurious at best. There was no lingering menace, no ancestral curse that lay over the far bank; it was simply that no one had the slightest interest.

“There is a map,” Karm said to him, “in the Cartographer’s shop. It shows the whole town, life-sized. Perhaps it also shows what lies over the other bank.” No one knew because no one had consulted the map for many years, one said. It was no longer reliable, said another. In tatters, said a third.

By now the pack had been inspected and found to be in valid playing condition, and the tea, almost forgotten about, was judged cool enough.

The Marquis lifted his glass.

“One for salt!” he cried, and the crowd echoed him.

“One for salt!”

“One for iron!” he cried, and the crowd echoed him.

“One for iron!”

“One for blood!”

“One for blood!”

“... and one for the devil!”

(This last line was the Marquis’s own addition to the rhyme that had opened the game ever since anyone could remember. It was not universally liked, some feeling it overly macabre, but the Marquis felt it gave his game a flourish, a distinction not seen among previous generations of players.)

The game could begin.

In truth, the game had already begun. The game had begun a long time ago, and once it had started, the game was always in progress. One story recounted the tale of a player who had died at table and carried on regardless. (Quite how the deceased player carried on is never told. It is perhaps more probable that it was his companions who carried on regardless.)

“A true champion,” said Ada, whenever this story was told.

“A true hero,” replied Eva, whenever she heard the story.

“To die doing what one loves doing most in this life, surely, is no death at all,” said the Marquis, after he had told the story.

The game was being played whether the Marquis was at table or not. The game was being played even on the far side of the river. The game had always been played, and always would be.

The Marquis laid a card on the table: French suit, the Ace of Hearts. A simple, honest start, the crowd agreed. The classic opener for when a guest was playing, a show of welcome, of hospitality.

The Galician nodded but, before responding with a card of his own, made a further request.

“I would like the decks to be riffled and reshuffled.”

Once again, the crowd grumbled and murmured, moaned and burbled. The request was licit, surely, this was known, but to certain players—whether onlookers or active participants—it implied not only a certain degree of bad faith, but something more.

Though the rules of the game were Daedalian, its method of play was simple. A number of strategies or gambits could be put into effect at any given point in the play by any player or group of players, much as in a game of chess. Over the years, such strategies had earned names: the Shepherd’s Loss, the Sicilian Blade, the Swiss Entry, the Blacksmith’s Lament, the Russian Linesman, the Dancing Horse, the Lame Swan, the Bottle of Smoke, the Tattooist’s Daughter, the Drinker of Jasmine Tea, the Levantine Merchant, the Hungarian Dog’s Back Leg.

The Galician's curious and unexpected questions had led the Marquis to a particular suspicion.

"I take it, Sir," said the Marquis, "that you intend to play the Blind Accordionist."

The Marquis knew, as Ada and Eva knew, as many of the assembled murmuring crowd knew, that the Blind Accordionist was one of the most controversial moves that could be made. The Blind Accordionist had never been played before; the Blind Accordionist had only ever been mentioned in hushed tones, spoken of behind closed doors, with nods of heads and grave faces and the low voices of men sitting in the quiet back room of the Golden Lion. The Blind Accordionist, it was said, would reorder everything, reconfigure the way in which the game was to be played.

And yet, the Marquis knew more than this.

"The Blind Accordionist," he whispered to Eva and Ada, "cannot ever be played."

"Why ever not?" asked Ada, or Eva.

"The Blind Accordionist," said the Marquis with gravity, "is the move that will end the game."

The game could not end.

Much as no one really knew how the game had begun, it was known that the game could not end. The game had always been, and would always be. The game could not end because the game could not ever be won or lost, because the game was life itself.

At this point, their options were limited. They could play a Bookbinder's Reel, or the Dandelion Clock; they could invoke the Drohobych Variant; they could use extra-ludic strategies (as far

as anything could ever be outside of the game): having a telegram delivered to the Galician calling him home on urgent business, shouting “fire!,” actually starting a fire. Other, darker, suggestions were made before being almost instantly dismissed.

There come times in every game, or every life, when chaos seems to be the constituent element. There are, if one is fortunate enough to know them, certain people for whom this is a moment not only of opportunity, but of meaning. Ada and Eva were two such people.

“Ada?” said Eva.

“Eva?” said Ada.

As if by clockwork, as if they had waited for this moment, as if this had all been planned and prepared, Ada and Eva moved in.

No subterfuge nor sleight of hand would be necessary. All that was needed was a reinterpretation of everything. A slight changing of the borders or the boundaries that would make everything—although completely different—stay exactly the same.

“The Galician,” said Eva, “is simply a man in the wrong place.”

“Or rather,” corrected Ada, “we should say that there is no wrong place.”

“Indeed,” said Eva. “Location is all relative.”

“Like time,” said Ada.

“We simply need to reinterpret.”

“To see from a different perspective.”

“Are you suggesting,” asked the Marquis, “that we change the rules?”

“The rules are always being changed,” said Ada.

“There are no rules—that is the rule,” said Eva. “There are no *things*.”

“Only events,” said Ada.

“It is up to us to make a sequence of them.”

“To give them pattern.”

“Order.”

“Form.”

“Nothing can end,” said Ada.

“Only change,” said Eva.

The Galician looked at Eva, then at Ada, then at Ada, then at Eva. The cards were reshuffled. The Galician held his pack.

“Go ahead,” said Ada.

“You may,” said Eva.

It is said that the Galician then played a card, or cards, though no one who was there that night agrees on which or how many cards were placed on the table, or indeed if even any were at all. It is said that a wind came and blew all the cards away, that everyone was too drunk on pear brandy, and that the whole tale is a mere fiction, that Klug’s dog spoke but that everyone was too busy worrying about everything else to actually listen to what, if anything, the hound had to say.

The only things that were certain is that the Galician left for Odessa, the Marquis continued to drink, and Ada and Eva even joined him, and everyone, everywhere, continued to be part of the game, because the game could not be stopped, because every-

one was part of the game; even those who lay in the cemetery or continued to walk the streets of the town with no bodily form, memories only, they too played the game, because everybody is playing the game, even—yes, at this very moment, as you read this page—you.