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Volodymyr Dibrova

Beatles' Songbook: Why Don't We Do It in the Road

*No one's really watching us
Why don't we do it in the road*

I woke up at seven and looked out of the window.

The beginning of a new day was so dazzling that I turned my back to my hotel roommates and crossed myself. The cross I made turned out to be a very squint one due to my lack of practice.

A couple of days before the end of the summer term I was given a book about Dostoyevsky in which the word "God" was written with a capital letter. I was to return it next morning and not to show to anybody. The book was published in Paris and the author was Berdyayev. I worked out a summary of it and made a point of clearing up all this business about God.

The drivers had already gone. They must have left at five in order to clock up their four hundred kilometers before it got too hot. I scavenged the lard and tomatoes they left on the table, took my passport from the clerk and headed out to hitch a lift.

The young, cheeky sun was climbing the top of the sky. I marched down the road singing "Green Hop." Then, having warmed myself up, I broke into Beatles' "Why Don't We Do It in the Road."

"No one's really watching us," I shouted, "why don't we do it in the road."

Three university years are behind me, two still to go, I've had my exams and now I'm heading down towards the sea and couldn't give a damn about anything. I can see my long-awaited freedom, lucid and transparent, eating a full meal of morning air and heavy haystack yellow.

Why the hell can't we now and always live like this? Are we not able to? Don't we want to? Are we afraid? Of what? But hang on a minute, if the soul is really immortal, then . . .

A truck stopped to give me a ride and the driver gets a story about a poor student of archeology who got lost on his way to the dig and now is trying to catch up with his group.

He took me to a small town and pulled in. I thanked him and carried on.

At the bottom of the hill there was a police patrol car. A sergeant stuck his head out of the window and beckoned me over.

"Where are you from?"

I told him. He looked surprised and swore.

"Fuck, where are you going?"

I told him. He wanted to see my papers.

"So you're hitching, eh?" He reluctantly flipped through my passport. "That's OK, but listen, why is your home address entered on the page before the date of issue?"

The state borders were far away, I had well pressed trousers on, I had done nothing wrong, so when the sergeant told me to get into his car I didn't object, just asked him to drive me back to the highway later on.

The sergeant took me to the senior lieutenant's office on the first floor of the local police station. The senior lieutenant opened my passport, addressed me by my first and patronymic names and asked me to tell him what I was doing in his district.

It was useless if not dangerous to lie so I told him the truth: I'm hitchhiking down south to the sea, simple as that.

"Why didn't you take a train?"

"I have no money."

"Why are you traveling then if you have no money?"

"I have enough for food."

The lieutenant didn't believe me and advised me not to lie to him, because he could check up.

"We'll keep you here," he said, "until we have the truth."

I remembered in the Crimea my artists-friends were living in tents somewhere near Theodosia.

"I'm going to join them in order to learn to paint."

"Why can't you learn at home?"

"I have no time."

"And what have you got in your rucksack?"

I took out a packet of soup, toothpaste, then a sleeping bag and various artistic paraphernalia wrapped up in cellophane: water-colors, a notebook, a collection of Rilke's poetry.

"So far, as you see, I haven't drawn or painted anything, but hopefully . . ."

"Just a minute!" he started. "What's this?"

He fished several sheets of paper from a file. These were xerox copies of some pages from a book of Osip Mandelstam's prose. The woman who had secretly made them for me wasn't careful enough and had run off extra copies. I took them to make notes or use as toilet paper.

"Photocopies!" The eyes of the senior lieutenant flashed and he fell to reading avidly.

On the first sheet there was a title "Mensheviks in Georgia" and the name of a German politician Kautsky. On the second and third, extracts from "Journey to Armenia," four pages of the poet's prose broken into uneven paragraphs. On the fourth sheet there was a commentary which began with the words "Philosopher-mystic Leontyev, largely misunderstood by his contemporaries" and ended with "numerous manifestos."

"Where did you get this from?" The lieutenant was a handsome young man, thin, tanned, with clever, suspicious eyes. He obviously attended refresher courses and knew perfectly well what a dangerous thing a copier could be.

"It's my toilet paper."

"I am asking where you got it from."

"I found it."

"Where?"

"Near the cinema, you know, next to the book-binder's shop."

"What were you doing there?"

"I was ordering the cover for my project."

"What project?"

"For my course."

"What course?"

"The third year course."

"Were you given these sheets at the book-binder's shop?"

"I found them."

"At the shop?"

"No, outside the shop."

"On the street?"

"No, let me draw you a diagram."

To stop it from trembling I held the pen tight with all my fingers and started drawing an intricate diagram of the back yard with innumerable passages, the exchange point for empty jars and bottles, slippery stairs and a junk silo alive with dirty pigeons, where on the such and such of May or, to be exact, on the such and such of June this year, of course, I, having left the book-binder's shop, was looking for some paper to wrap my course project in and came across these sheets of paper which attracted my attention but I haven't read them and only took them because I thought they might come in handy.

The lieutenant used the phone. A tall, stern officer, who looked like a B-movie star, entered the room.

"A touring actor?" he nudged the lieutenant.

"Yeah, a courier," replied the lieutenant, spreading the material evidence neatly on the table. "Shipment of illegal literature."

The tall officer picked up a sheet of print and began to examine it. His forehead rippled like sand on the shore. Of all the printed words he understood only two, *mensheviks* and *Georgia*.

"And what's he got in his sack?" he asked.

The senior lieutenant ordered me to show him all my books and notebooks.

"What's that there?"

"That's, well, you know, it is my writing pad, I mean, I am not a writer, I'm still studying and just jotting down the most interesting. . .

Here, have a look."

I drove my fingers deep into the notebook, mercilessly twisted the pages, threw them from one side to another so that the police would not notice the banned surnames of Hrushevsky and Yefremov among Beatles lyrics.

"Here, have a look," I pointed to the well-accepted poems of Vorobyov and Kostenko.

"OK," said the older officer. I closed the notebook and felt enormous relief. At the end of the notebook was the detailed summary of Berdyayev's work in which God was written with a capital letter.

"All right, what shall we do with him?" The senior lieutenant asked his superior.

"Call them. Let them decide."

"What's their number?"

The B-movie star gave him the number and told me to follow him down.

"Just leave your things here."

I was shown to the waiting room where ordinary policemen dealt with everyday drunks. There was a dog-eared map pinned to the wall and beside it, a copy of the local police bulletin.

While the sharp-eyed policeman on the first floor was dialing their number I guessed the reason why we don't do it on the road. I couldn't get my head together and my heart was thumping out a frenzied rhythm, like it was trying to bang away its lifetime's ration, as if it was speeding to a final rest.

The policemen dragged in an old tramp who was dozing in the park, another man was showing his head as the evidence of an assault by a neighbor, a woman whose daughter ran away from home was wailing while I was murmuring: "Jesus Christ," then again "Jesus Christ" and then "have mercy on me." This prayer I had copied out from a book published not in Paris this time, but in St. Petersburg.

What could they do to me for Mandelstam? Nothing. The main thing here is that the expert they're waiting for doesn't snoop out God in my notebook. If he does, nothing will help me. Expulsion from the university would be the lowest price I'd pay. I made up my mind to stay cool, polite and not too zealous. Yes, I have found Mandelstam,

but I haven't the faintest idea what it really is. Yes, I have made a synopsis of Berdyayev's book, because I was foolish and interested in all kinds of rubbish. The book was shown to me by a Jew who immediately after that immigrated to Israel. I have never shown my notes to anybody or even read them myself.

Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!

The shaggy old bum who had been sleeping on the grass asks permission to smoke and then suddenly takes off. He's grabbed, hauled inside and beaten, but he doesn't utter a word, O Jesus Christ! They chuck him out, he gives everybody a wink and rolls a cigarette. They tell him, why you, dog's sexual organ, haven't you, female sexual organ, an old cripple whore, been beaten enough? Have mercy on me!

The old bugger is very soft, his eyes are clouded with thick fog, liquid is running down his trousers, have mercy on me, Jesus Christ! They beat him right in the middle of the room. The duty officer, a junior lieutenant, records his official report.

"Your surname!" he demands.

"A man!" the old man snaps, with dignity.

"Look at you!" The lieutenant is genuinely surprised, "You're covered in puke! You've pissed yourself!"

The old man is dumped into the cell.

I'm ordered to go up to the first floor. A sergeant escorts me. Before entering the room I manage to cross myself three times.

The senior lieutenant is with a fat little man in a suit. He inquires where I got the photocopies. I repeat the story about a book-binder's shop, the junk silo and the pigeons.

The fat little man is silent. I know he has my name and all my other passport details written in his notebook.

"Sign here, please," says the senior lieutenant and hands me a protocol. It says that I'm hitch-hiking down to the Crimea to meet an artist, so-and-so — Jesus Christ, have mercy on me! — in order to learn to paint.

I sign it.

"Show him down," says the senior lieutenant to the sergeant, "and you can take the rucksack with you."

Haven't they read the notebook? Didn't they understand what's

written there? Who's that fat guy? What if he's just an accidental visitor, and the one they're waiting for hasn't arrived yet?

Thank You, Jesus Christ, thanks a million, I'm whispering all the way down. It's vitally important now to tear from my notebook at least one page, at least a piece of it. The title of the book. If they don't recognize Berdyayev, then Mandelstam alone won't get me into trouble. I only found it and I'm gonna wipe my arse with it. You know how it is. We're all human beings, aren't we? Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!

Two hulking policemen are pulling in an emaciated drunk with squinty, whitish eyes. The drunk tries to make some idle chat with the policemen but the junior lieutenant interrupts him. Whatever he's done, he has to be kicked. It would be a misconduct to pass him by, even a sin.

"Who are you?"

"Nechuparellolenyky."

"Listen you, whore, male sexual organ, will you stop arsing about and tell us, who do you think you are, son of a bitch's whore, walking about without your papers."

Now I've got to somehow invisibly undo the rucksack, find the bundle, take out the notebook, carefully rip out a page and eat it.

"Give me your name or else . . ."

The drunk stands to attention and reports.

"Nechuparellolenyky."

"Nechuparello can go and stick his male sexual organ in his ear, for all I care. Your name!"

"Nechy-po-ren-ko Leo-nyd My-ky-to-vych," the drunk introduces himself accenting each syllable, clicks heels, tries to straighten up but collapses.

"So how come you got in this state, Nechuparello you pig's arse, copulating fellatio?"

The time has come for Rilke. I've got to take it out and read it for ten minutes, pretend that I want to jot something down and get the page out.

"I was going to see my mother who lives in Zahloby."

"What's her surname?"

"Korshakljubory."

"What sort of Lyubory, you, vagina's mouth?"

"Korshak Lyubov Borysivna."

No. Better not write anything down. The junior lieutenant is looking askance. I reckon he's not used to people writing in this room. If he snatches the notebook then that would be that.

"How come she's got a different surname?"

Nechuparello begins to give an amazingly eloquent and ornate account of what happened during the war, of a woman who wasn't quite faithful to her husband, of a man, who came back home without an arm and threatened to kill her, of him, at that time just a snotty kid, and of somebody else, who grabbed an axe and shouted: stop, you bastard, he's just a baby!

Nechuparello bursts into tears.

"And you," he leaps at the junior lieutenant, "you have no right to badmouth my mother's name!"

"Shut up you, brainless piss artist!" the policemen chorus. "Who are you to talk, out of your box and fornicating about! Now come on, turn out your pockets, loosen your belt and get those clothes off, you discharge from the sexual organ of a walrus."

But what if all this blows over? If the expert doesn't come and want to see it, then I have spoiled the notebook.

"Sit down, Mykolo, and make a list of everything that's in his pockets. And you turn them out, I had sexual encounter with your mother."

I start to slip open the cord of my rucksack. The junior lieutenant fixes me with his stare, the book of poetry and the notebook are at the bottom, this vortex is sucking me down, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me! I take out an apple from the top. All the thick necks turn to me. I pretend that an apple is sour, express this with my face, hands, shoulders, sneakers, socks that it's sour, yeah, really a crab-apple, phooey, it's shrivelling. I stick it back inside, have mercy on me, Christ, into the rucksack, tighten the cord, smile at them, oh, what a funny little bugger that Nechuparello is!

"Turn everything out," I said. "And what the devil are you gawking at?"

"Of course!" Nechuparello doesn't mind.

The sergeant is listing everything.

"OK, money . . . Vovka, count how much he's got."

"Small change . . . One rouble twelve . . . OK . . . thirty . . . hey, what this?"

"That's half a crown, pure silver, nineteen twenty six."

"Where have you nicked it from, you, dollop of hedgehog's stool?"

"It's mine."

"I'm asking you where you got it from."

"I always had it."

"How do you mean 'had it'? Did you mint it yourself?" Policeman Vovka puts it between his teeth to check it out. "Three roubles ten, four roubles . . . four ninety . . . and what's this?" The sergeant is examining a foreign coin.

"Who did you screw it from?"

"It's a present."

The policemen circle round the coin.

"What country is it from?" they ask Nechuparello.

"Any silly male sexual organ knows that . . . Poland . . ."

"Can't be Poland," the junior lieutenant says.

Each policeman tries to solve the riddle. Different countries are suggested: America, Afghanistan and, quite unexpectedly, Guadeloupe.

"Hey you," they call to me.

Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.

"What education have you got?"

Higher, though incomplete. Jesus Christ, get me out of here and throw back on the road so that it would carry me, a helpless thing, away from this odious hole.

"What country is it from?"

I pick up the coin.

"Spain."

"You see, you defecator, Guadeloupian whore, you pinched it from someone and forgot about it."

"No, I didn't pinch it from nobody," the defecator gets uptight.

"Look, I was on my way to Zahloby, got tired, dozed off for a bit. But

this coin was presented to me by my nephew."

"Nephew," echoes the junior lieutenant, then adds a new word, made by prefixing the word for a male sexual organ to the final syllable of *nephew*.

The police guffaw with hearty laughter. Out of the drunk's pocket some copper coins fell on the bench and down to the ground, followed by a shiny ring. (Vovka checks it on his teeth: "Aluminium!") and a rubber stamp which prints "Paid. Young Communist League" (Nechuparello can't explain to the police what he needs it for), a tiny screw, tobacco dross and something wrapped in a newspaper.

While the search is under way I dive into my rucksack, grope around for the book of Rilke's poetry and the notebook, fake a huge yawn and swim up to the surface with all my findings.

"What the hell is this? Unwrap it."

Police like treasure hunters crowd together round the small paper ball.

"That's a gift from Indira Ghandi," Nechuparello explains.

Vovka carefully, so as not to break anything with his yellow fingers like overripe cucumbers, extracts from the ruffled folds an Indian condom.

The telephone rings.

I take out the book, put the notebook under it and while the police express doubts as to whether a wretched drunk like Leonid Mikitovich is capable of using that thing I search for the beginning of the summary of Nicholas Berdyayev book *Dostoyevsky's Disposition*.

The policeman puts down the receiver and says that an external inspector is coming.

Nechuparello with his pockets turned inside out, without belt or shoelaces, is shoved into the cell. Somebody sweeps the floor, drags the bench closer to the wall, makes the waiting room as neat as he can.

"Hey, you there, untie it," the lieutenant gestures to the door which is secured to the bench with a thick rope.

Having found the right page I insert Rilke between the pages and ask:

"What if I just cut it?"

"OK, just cut it."

With one mighty blow I sever the police ratline and while the *melée* is going on (Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!) I turn my back on the junior lieutenant, praying that he won't spot what I'm doing, OK, what's up, I just want to go to the can, I had sexual intercourse with your mothers, floozy-whores, dogs of female sex (Jesus Christ!) and rip out the sheet on which I have written with my own hand the idealist-philosopher's name.

A car pulls up at the door. The junior lieutenant rushes out to it, gallantly plunges into the impenetrable dust. I compress in my hand a burning sheet of paper, while inside of me at full speed an express train bolts across the abyss. Babush-babush! The rails are shuddering, the engine driver hurls a scared glance into the jaws of the tunnel and covers his eyes.

The police inspector changed his mind. Instead of coming in he asks something through the window and moves off.

The junior lieutenant comes in and gives me a wink.

"Well, who's wearing the brown trousers then? . . . Whose is that jeep over there?" he asks his colleagues. "The number plate isn't local, I see . . . And I have absolutely flat tires . . . But what sort of male sexual organ is that sitting at the steering wheel?"

"May I go to the toilet?" I ask.

"Hang on a sec. Tolya," he says to the sergeant, "show the guy where to go."

"Oh sure," says Tolya, who is at least twenty years older than the junior lieutenant, "I'll run and do it."

"Less of your lip!"

But the sergeant doesn't move. He just leans back and picks his nose as if saying: get somebody else for your gofer.

"Uhuh, uhuh," the junior lieutenant grunts through clenched teeth and takes me out to a wooden piss-house in the corner of the backyard. I go in while he waits outside the door.

I stand above the hole, release a stream, crumble the piece of paper, cross myself (Come on!) and watch Berdyayev together with Dostoyevsky follow their course and disappear into oblivion.

Jesus Christ, thank you very much!

After an hour the senior lieutenant summoned me upstairs, told me

to sign my story about Mensheviks in Georgia again, gave me my passport and let me go.

For several kilometers I floated down the road, trying to loosen my stiffened feet. The haystacks were smiling as invitingly as ever but now I knew too well why we don't do it on the road.

A truck with a tarpaulin cover picked me up and took me straight towards the South. I was wondering what other tricks this road could conjure up for me, but unable to divine the future I just dipped my eyes into the space in front and watched it fly inside of me to rest there forever.

*Translated from Ukrainian
by the author*