

# I am Me

By Alexandra Chichkanova

A Monologue

(In the style of Yevgeny Grishkovets)

Translated by John Freedman

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*A street. Street noises. A road. The noises of the road. Everything is familiar, everything is the same, it's the same old thing, day in, day out. A street, a road, noise and I am walking along.*

...So you're walking along, you're walking, I mean I'm walking, me, that is, I'm walking, walking along, down the pavement, walking on. It's summer, dust gets in my eyes and I'm walking along, going along straight on ahead, right on ahead right next to the road. I'm walking on one side of the road and over there, on the other side the road... it's a road like, well, a road like any other. In principle there's nothing special about it really – and not in principle, too – a road like any other, pavement as far as you can see and I'm movin' on down it, walking on right on ahead. I'm walking, going along and since

there's a road right here, there are cars, too, and motorcycles; so I'm walking on and buses are going by, yeah, passing by one after the other, and buses, see, are friends of the human race, they roll along, big buses, you know, made by a company called Icarus, but there are regular buses too, regular ones that motor down the road, yellow ones, red ones, accordion-like ones that bend in the middle. Yeah, "accordion" buses, but they can be yellow too, like the regular ones, except they're bigger in size and longer too, yeah, longer. So there's all kinds of different buses, different ones. There's one, for example, that uses cheap, stinking diesel, it gets around on that, others use gasoline, they get around too; some of 'em always make you sick to your stomach – that's usually in the regular ones, the red ones or the yellow ones – but in the other ones... no the other ones make you sick to your stomach, too, but that's only sometimes, sometimes you get sick, that's in the "accordion" buses, you get sick when it's hot and there's a lot of people and it's steaming outside, like 105 degrees, no, 115 degrees, and the bus is packed because everybody's going somewhere, everybody's got someplace to go in the heat like that; they got up in the morning, pulled themselves together and headed off somewhere and now they're sitting there, unsticking their shirts from their sweaty backs and they're afraid to get up because they're embarrassed. But in the bus there, that "accordion" bus, there's this rotating platform, a little rotating platform there that's kind of like the swings we used to have in the courtyard of our apartment building. You'd stand up, kick off with your foot and start

spinning and here in the bus, too, you stand on that rotating platform, hold onto the hand railing and the platform spins on its own, that is it does when the “accordion” makes turns – it’s not a real accordion, that’s just what they call it – so when the driver turns the bus around a corner this accordion thing in the middle of the bus stretches out on one side and the platform rotates and you’re standing there – I’m standing there – spinning along with it, with the platform. Those Icaruses, what they call Icaruses, they’re buses from Hungary, the Hungarians invented them and they sent them to us and what I’m trying to say is that there, in those buses, the Icaruses, no, you don’t get sick to your stomach, and even though I’m fibbing because it does happen, it does happen, those Hungarians are pretty cool, of course, yeah, but it happens, yeah, that if you go on a long trip, to another city, for four hours or something, no, say five or six, then, yeah, you might get sick to your stomach, but still it’s less, it’s less than in those yellow or red buses or even in the “accordions,” yeah, less of course, but still you do get sick.

So I’m walking along, going along, heading down the pavement. I’m moving down the right side of the road, the right side. I mean that’s if I’m going down there, ahead, then I walk on the right side, but if I go back, you know, if I just get it in my head to turn around and go back, because who’s to say I can’t turn around and go back if I want to? so if I just went back, then that would

be on the left side. You go there on the right side, you come back on the left and then you're doing it the way it's supposed to be done, yeah. There on the left, back on the right... aaaahh, but I only walk ahead, straight on ahead. I don't go back, no, no, no way. I don't even look back, right on ahead. There's people you know, basically regular people, normal everyday people, but they like to look around, check out where they should be going and where they shouldn't; they're always looking back of 'em, there's even a song about that, "I looked back to see if she was looking back at me looking back at her."\* You see that a lot in the movies, in films, like in ones about the war – you get one of our soldiers, one of our Red Army soldiers, going off to battle and his wife sees him off and she runs out the door and he – our soldier, that is – he left a long time ago but he's still standing there in a brand new shirt and boots, government issue stuff they gave him because they were looking after him – now go on and defend your country, son – so he's standing there really tall and handsome and he's looking off in the distance and the wind's blowing in his hair and there's a huge field all around him, and a forest and it's summer and the sun is shining; it's life, it's life. And everybody, I mean everybody but everybody who's watching this movie, everybody knows – this guy is not coming back; nope, he's not going to see these woods again or this field, he won't see his wife or his future kids, no, he won't, no way no how. But the soldier doesn't know that, he doesn't know this film script and his wife doesn't either; basically neither of them know anything, it's just they've got to

say their goodbyes, that's it, they've got to do it, so they're saying their goodbyes and the soldier comes back and hugs his wife. I'd even say he really grabs her one last time, that's what it says in the script, see, he grabs her and he would be happy to just stand there with her, next to her, hugging her like that because there isn't anything else he needs in the world. But there's a war on, the enemy is attacking, the Nazis, so he's got to hurry and he grabs her with all his might and plants a great big, huge, juicy kiss on her, really kisses her to make her knees weak, so much so that his wife is even surprised, she thinks: in all those years I've known him (even though she's probably only known him for three years or so, no more than that, but that thought just popped in her head while they were saying their farewells as if it had been a long time, a whole eternity), I don't remember him kissing me like that, like it was the first time. And so our soldier he sets off, our defender of the peace, and I'm walking along the pavement, walking along, right alongside the road there. He's walking along thinking, don't look back, don't look back, man, because if you look back, that's it, you'll never come back, never ever, and he's going along believing that, really believing it, because you have to have faith, you have to, everybody says so, and he's heard that too, and he believed it and so he has faith and he's walking along not looking back even though he wants to look at his wife, really wants to look at his wife because she's really a pretty girl standing there, the best thing he's ever known. But our soldiers are

tough, they don't look back and this guy he just keeps going, doesn't look back, that's how tough he is. Those other guys, those foreign ones, I mean those overseas soldiers, they can't do that, they can't just walk on and believe and not look back; they have faith, sure, but it's a different kind of faith, it's an overseas faith. There's another movie, another movie about the war, but it's a foreign one and it's nighttime in a field and it's dark and there's stars in the sky and this soldier, he's running. There's a scene like that, but just before you get to that there's another scene – you know, the way they do in the movies, one scene first then another and another and pretty soon you have a whole movie – well, earlier in this film this soldier, I mean the one who was running away from the enemy through the field all alone in the dark, he'd been running for a long time, he'd even stopped to turn and shoot back at them. Well he's running along and he's all happy-like because he got away and he's free now and he's thinking, man, I'm outta here, long gone, but, man, why didn't he just keep running, just keep on going? But, no, he's gotta think, "I wonder what they're thinking about me back there?" (And back there behind him, a long way off, you can see a guard's turret looming up there, something like in a prison or in a prisoner camp, and there's this guard up there and he's looking around.) So this soldier he gets this idea in his head to start wondering if they figured out that he's escaped or not. He's running like crazy but he can't help himself and he decides to stop and look back; he thinks I'll just take this one second and take a peek back there, just one little

peek to see what's going on back there. But our Russian soldier he would never do anything like that because he has faith. And so this soldier now he turns his head slowly, he's running through the field, it's dark and there are stars in the sky and that guard's tower is rising behind him in the distance and he turns round – one, two, three, four and he turns and wham! a shot rings out and he takes it right in the head, blood and brains everywhere. But, you know, they told him don't look back but he just didn't get what they meant. Our Russian soldier, though, our valiant warrior, he understands. So I'm going along on the right side of the road, always on the right side, and that's because I never look back and there's a bus driving down the left side of the road, an Icarus, and there are people in it, they're going somewhere, the bus is packed. These are all people from some other city going somewhere and they're all looking out the windows to see what they can see while they're riding along and looking out the windows. And I keep on going; I'm alone, all alone... I, I... I'm alone and they're all riding along looking out the windows. And it seems to me, no, I'm sure, I'm even sure that all of these people, this whole bus, this entire Icarus, this bus that was invented by Hungarians and in which you don't get sick to your stomach very often, I mean, you do, but only when you're going on long trips from one city to another, which, of course, means that all these people in there now are really sick to their stomachs, yeah, that's for sure, they're all sick to death. So they're

going along, moving down the road and they all feel awful, their stomachs churning, and they look at me, all of them, the whole bus except for the bus driver, of course, because he's watching the road and the stop lights, but even he, the bus driver, glances at me, just once it's true, but he did take a glance. So all of them are looking at me... Well, no, it just seems that way to me, I was only sure about that when I was walking down the pavement there next to the road, but none of those people knew who I was, they were just looking out the window 'cause they were interested to see what this other town looks like and so when they were looking at me they weren't looking at me as if they were looking at me. Because for them I'm not me, I'm just somebody. But I was thinking that they know who I am and were looking at me because of that. Well they were looking all right, but it wasn't at me. So what were they looking at then? Where the hell do they get off looking at me – hey, knock that off right now, knock that off looking at me. Because I am me but for them I am not me yet. So quit staring at me if you don't know; what are you gawking at? I could have even waved hello to them, but now there's no way, I won't do it on principle, no way. I don't give a damn if I ruin everybody's day because otherwise they'll start thinking here we've come to this new town for the first time and there she goes walking down the pavement down the right side of the street and we're all sitting in this bus looking at her out of the window and, to tell the truth, we're all totally exhausted and sick to our stomachs because of riding in this bus even though it's one of the good buses, one of



those the Hungarians made, an Icarus, but we're tooling along looking at her, you might say, exhausting the last resources of our organisms even though we still have a long road ahead of us and we'll be looking out the window for who knows how long and she, she's just walking along paying us no attention whatsoever. You see that, you see what they're thinking about as they ride along, that's what they're all thinking, all together. So, no, I'm not going to wave to you, I won't do it, I will not wave, you just sit there in your Icarus and suffer; may you all be sick and barf, every one of you. I don't give a damn, not a bit, because you'd better know that I am Me.

Or like the same thing, you know, the very same thing only in a different place, like, for example – the same thing so much there's not even any point comparing it's so identical. I'm going, for example, to the library. I'm going and I'm going and I get there. I'm there, I look around and I take a book, something good, something interesting and I take it and go home and I start reading it; I read and I read, I read every single page, it's like I know the whole thing by heart this book that I'm reading; I read it all day long and even when I'm eating and when I'm watching the TV and when I'm talking on the telephone I'm still reading the book because when you've got a good book, an interesting one, you want to read it as fast as you can. Yeah, and when you're on the phone that's the funniest thing of all because the person

I'm talking with, that person on the other end of the line – that person's sitting at home, too – this person thinks I'm all ears and he or she even imagines that I'm sitting there like he or she is listening to him or her, but, no, I really am listening to them, I'm listening, but it's like I don't understand although I do understand, of course, I do understand because I answer all the time and I nod my head and the main thing is I answer precisely, not just any old way. So I understand but I don't really understand completely, of course, because I've got this book, I mean, I'm reading it, I can't tear myself away from this thing, so I'm reading and talking at the same time, reading and talking; I'm holding the receiver, I'm talking into in my left hand and the book I'm reading is in my right hand, only I've got to turn the pages slowly, quietly so that the person on the other end, whether it's a he or a she, anyway, the person I'm talking to on the phone doesn't realize what I'm doing and doesn't get offended, otherwise this person could realize and really get angry and never call back again. And you think, well, so what? so what if this person never calls back? So don't call then, but there's the habit of the thing, I mean, if you've called, then that means you've got to call, it means you wanted to call, so go ahead and call because it's when everybody will have phones with video screens in 'em, like televisions, like in movies you see about the future, now that's really when nobody will call me anymore because they'll see right away that I'm sitting there reading a book and they won't call me back anymore, yeah. But for the time being not everybody has those video screens,

so go ahead, go on and call me. I'm reading this book, this library book, I read it in the day and even at night, yeah, I read it in the night, well, I sort of read it because I put it under my pillow at night, right there under my head, right beneath my brains, these ones right here, I put it down there and I sleep on it and I dream, not always, true, but sometimes I have these dreams about what's written in the book. Only if it's a scary book then I won't put it under my pillow, no, I only do that with good ones, interesting ones. I don't mean it has to be a nice book, I mean, maybe it's about evil because you have to have evil, so it's okay if it's about evil, all I care is that it's interesting, this book of mine. So here I am with this book day and night and hot and cold and waking and sleeping and I finally finish it and I take it back to the library, get it back on time, not right away – I finished it earlier but didn't take it back right away because I couldn't part with it; as I said, we grew on each other, this book and I. So I bring it back and put it down carefully on the table, the one where the librarian sits with her log book, and I say, here, have your book back, and she takes it because that's her job, all day long, nothing but books, and she takes the book and crosses it off in her log book. And that's that. And I leave; what else is there for me to do? I turn around and leave and my book, the one I read through thick and thin, it just lies there and it probably weeps inside because it misses me and the next day or some other day later, some other guy or some other girl will come to the library and check out my book, but

that's the book *I* read – before he came in there or she came in there; *I'm* the one who was in that book. My fingers. My fingerprints. My dust from My desk. My dog-eared pages – yeah, sometimes I fold down the page corners, on the pages, in the book, it's like the poet Mayakovsky said, “they call boys like that bad” – or girls. I remember that poem from way back in kindergarten; our teachers read it to the whole class, real loud, with feeling, and then they made us make our own books, glued them with homemade glue made out of flour and starch so that all the children would be good, the boys and the girls, and we would boil that glue at home even though we didn't know how to, by the way, because we were so little, but we did it anyway because we all wanted to be good little children. So we all boiled up jars full of glue and then we'd bring them to kindergarten and we'd do nothing but glue and glue and glue things. But now I'm known to fold down a corner on a page and sometimes I even use a pen to underline smart thoughts because I have the right to do that, because back then, in kindergarten, I glued enough to do me for my whole life. I answered for all the books whose pages I might turn down; I became the very best girl.

So this guy or this girl takes my book, checks it out and takes it home, goes inside, closes the door and sits down, in a big easy chair for example, sits down, puts the book on his or her knees, opens it up and suddenly thinks: Now that's just what I thought – somebody else checked this book out before

me, no doubt about it, there's no question at all, and just like me, they sat there and read it, read the whole thing to the end and then returned it. Meanwhile, I'm sitting at home, too, and I'm thinking about this person, whoever checked out my book, while this someone, the one sitting in an easy chair, this someone knows that somebody definitely checked that book out before only there's no way of them knowing exactly who it was. And that was me, I am me, and this person knows he or she is he or she, because every person is somebody, every person is their own I, but they're not *me*. I, for me, am Me; just like anybody else is I for him or herself. For him, for example, he definitely is Him but as for Me, whether I am me or not, he can't know that and that's the way it should be because only for me, for me alone am I Me. But I can't possibly be Me for others because they don't know me. And so it will always be, somebody looks at You and sees You, they are completely convinced that this is You – well, not You, something more like *you*, but the thing is that they see somebody else, another, because *I*, that's only for me. By now the book is already all covered in his fingerprints and maybe he's even turned down his own pages there in that book of mine that's his now. My tears are still there and My saliva because when a book is sad, when somebody dies in it or even lives in it, but lives unhappily, then you cry, or maybe somebody lives there unhappily at first, unhappily, but then suddenly, as if by magic, happiness comes to them, then you cry too; as for saliva, when

a book's really interesting my mouth drops open and I drool, well, not only because it's interesting – there may be other reasons, too, for example, maybe they're eating something there in that book, they're sitting there at a table that's groaning under the weight of all that food. Well, then, I drool at that, too.

Basically I don't like it when people eat in books – I don't mean putting food in a book and eating out of it, no, I mean when writers write about food, you know, he writes, "there was a table and it was covered with..." and from there he goes on and on and on and on and, naturally, you immediately get hungry and the problem isn't that you don't have anything to eat, sometimes you even have a little something, not always, but sometimes. But the thing is that even if you do have something there to eat, you still don't want to tear yourself away from your book, you think if you go get something to eat something interesting is just about ready to happen in the book, something you can't even imagine and I really love it when stuff happens, something really interesting, a riddle like. As for riddles, for example, no, I don't like riddles like stand up with your arms outstretched and guess that that's a T, no what I like are real riddles in things. So then we come back to a bus, say, you're riding in a bus somewhere, well, let's say you're going to work, you've been doing this for five years, no, ten, you get up in the morning and every morning you go out of the house and you wait at the bus stop, get on the bus

and ride it to work, ten years of that in a row, and every day you get on that bus and you're right there with it – you go by this wall, a big, long cement wall where people write things in paint like “Gravestones made quickly” or “We cut wood and deliver” or maybe somebody glues up posters on it – in other words, a wall like any other wall. And all these ten years you ride that bus by that wall and you wonder what's behind it because you can't see and it's big and tall and it's a riddle and you think that every day, you wonder what's on the other side, behind that wall there, what's on the other side of the wall. Then one day you have to get off the bus, almost right there next to that wall, not on purpose, no, it just happened that way. And you're walking along there, going along and up ahead you see that wall, your wall, that one you've been looking at for ten years from the window of the bus, through the glass there, and you come up to it and you realize that you're not going to walk past this thing so easily, no way. And you walk up and down the wall in an area where there aren't many people around and you find a box or something or a rock and you push it up against the wall and you get up on it and you think – okay, here it is, here's the moment of truth, ten years have gone by in a flash, like a single day, and your heart's beating faster and faster and you peek over the top and look and... there's nothing there, nothing but emptiness, just some bare asphalt and junk, asphalt and junk and you realize that maybe a year ago or half a year ago even, there used to be something here. There was,

but you didn't get here in time to see it, you didn't get out of the bus here before, you didn't get up on a box or a rock and take a look. And man that really starts to hurt; there was a riddle here but there isn't any more, and so you're going along, just heading straight on ahead and you're not thinking about anything anymore, you don't want to get up the next morning, go to work, wait at the bus stop, ride that dirty bus – you don't want to do any of that. Just like I don't want to put that book of mine down and go get something to eat, just going to get something to eat, that's not very interesting somehow, you just sit there and eat but the writer he wrote, he tried his best, he went without eating, all writers go without eating, that's usually how it happens, that's what everybody says: He didn't eat, he had nowhere to live, he was sick, he was dying, but he still didn't quit working; he wrote and wrote, he didn't give a damn about all the hardships of life. That's what everybody says although, of course, there have been rich writers too, they had inheritances so they could eat, they would eat and write and what interests me is which writers like writing about food most – the ones who ate in life or those who didn't eat? I don't know. But when you've got nothing to eat and there's all that food in a book, some other kind of food, boy I don't like that at all. I might even skip right over that, like nature stuff too – forests, woods, trees and more trees, skies and clouds, yeah, I skip right over nature and sometimes over food and prefaces, yeah. I don't read them, almost never, oh it might happen once in a blue moon just by chance or something,



otherwise no, or epilogues either, I don't read them. And there's some books, you know, they have a big preface and then lots about nature and then food and it all ends with an epilogue, it's real big too, and that's the whole book, it's over, and you sit there and think, what the hell did these writers sit around not eating, not sleeping, living in dirt and cold for, and you think about that and you go and you get yourself something to eat and as you're eating you get to thinking there's something wrong here, something uncultured about it. I don't mean uncultured, but something lacking in culture, artificial, I mean, lacking in art. There's no art in your sitting there eating, but in that book there was, even if there was too much about nature and food and a preface took up half of the whole book, still there was art in it.

And then you have art that is like art and art that isn't like art, something you can't call art until you really think about it and then you realize, oh, yeah, that's art – people talk about the "art of living," you know, and there are times in life, times that seem to be very common, but they're like art, too. Take for example a bus – I don't mean that bus I was talking about, that Icarus that was made by the Hungarians where everybody gets sick to their stomach, no, I mean just a regular bus, although it might be one of those accordion things. It's going along, driving down the road and it sees a bus stop – well, the bus doesn't, of course, but the bus driver does – he sees the stop and he stops, he

waits there while people get in and out until it's time to head on to the next stop, because the bus driver, he knows how much time he can stay at any one stop, how many people he can wait for, so he stays there until he gasses it and leaves. But just at that very instant when he takes off, he's just started to roll, he slams on the brakes and stops abruptly – he opens a door, the back one, and everybody in the bus is sitting or standing there thinking to themselves, what the heck did he stop for again, we're all in a hurry to get where we're going, we've got to get there fast, we've all got things we've got to do and here he is slamming on his brakes. That's what everybody thought, but no sooner did they do that than this woman gets on the bus through the back door, no, she didn't just get on the bus, she came running onto the bus, she jumped up onto the platform and without even stopping to catch her breath she starts saying thank-you, thank-you; she can barely even breathe but she's standing there now going, thank-you, thank-you everywhere. People look at her and think, what's she doing, man, and a couple of people they even smile because they seem to think that this woman here is saying thanks to all the people in the bus, she's saying thank you to everyone even though she doesn't look at me, but I hear her thank-you which must mean that she's saying thank you to me, too, and you get this really nice feeling although you kind of wonder what's she doing that for; it was the bus driver that opened the door for her but she's saying thank you to all of us including me – thank you, thank you, that's an art, too, yeah.

And so I just keep going and going and I keep thinking, how is it they All don't realize that I am Me. That Icarus went past, no, I didn't wave to it; I mean to those people in it from another city, the ones who are all sick to their stomachs in there, but they keep on looking out their windows there whose glass is all smudged up with people's fingerprints and then later other people will get on that bus and look at the fingerprints they've all left but they won't know anything about those others who were there before them, no, of course they'll know that somebody had been sitting there, but no, they'll never know it was those very people who were there. And then after these others, still others will get on that bus and it will keep on going for eternity and these other people, and those books in libraries will get checked out by people who don't know anything either. That's the way it has always been and so it will always be. And I will walk the streets and look at Icarus buses and see the faces in the windows and I won't ever wave hello to them, not for anything at all; I won't even raise my hand because you've got to know that I am Me.

*The same street, the same road, the same noise and I keep walking and walking and walking.*

**The End**

