

## Andrii Yarylo

*Eugenia Kononenko*

That night was the first time the writer Yaryna Andriichuk had a dream about Andrii Yarylo. They were walking together down a long avenue, between rows of exceptionally beautiful trees displaying the golden colours of autumn, on their way to an unknown destination and exchanging some vague phrases. They both felt fantastic. Their fingers were intertwined, and this had a deeper meaning than if they had embraced. In the dream, their touching seemed very real. When she awoke, she remembered feeling the warmth of his palm in hers. A sensation that had never actually existed. Her whole being was overwhelmed by an incredible sense of lightness and closeness. Then he said: “On Saturday, we’ll see one another over there!” He pointed to a little cottage in the middle of the field that stretched beyond the row of trees lining the road. At this point, the dream was cut short. This is how bad dreams are interrupted, when the nightmare reaches its climax. Yaryna was upset. Not because she had had a bad dream, but because she did not know how it ended. She was awake now, and she could not get back to sleep. In America she often has sleepless nights.

Knowing that she would be unable to get back to sleep, she switched on the light and reached for her netbook. It’s night-time here, whereas over there dawn had long since broken. Her mailbox is already full of messages sent today. “Andrii Yarylo died today, at five in the morning.” So he had come to say goodbye. He had come illegally—the laws of that world are quite severe. He could not stay longer. So that’s why she had woken up so suddenly.

Why had he died? I don’t think he was ill. It’s true that about a month ago he had written: “I’m exhausted, Yaryna!” But don’t we all feel utterly exhausted from time to time? Yaryna looked back through her previous emails and found the last message from him, written two weeks ago. “Nothing special. It’s raining in Kyiv. What’s it like where you are? How is your writing going on the other side of the ocean? My aunt was very keen to have your book—not the last one or the one before that, but the one you published right after the Orange Revolution. It’s out of print. Whom can I contact to get hold of a copy? You gave me one, but people always steal your books from me.” She had not replied, as the message was rather dull. Previous mails from Andrii Yarylo had been long, and sincere. After they stopped seeing one another, they began corresponding, and perhaps she put more into her letters to him than she did into her books.

Yaryna got out of bed and went into the living room, where there were several books on the shelf that she had brought with her from home. From among them she pulled out a yellowing copy of her first book of short stories, which she autographed for him but had never given him. She gave him a different copy, with the routine dedication: A souvenir for Andrii from Yaryna. Not this one, in which she had written on the first page:

Why should I sign this book for you?

recalling all we had again?

It only speaks those things anew,

once more your frenzied gasps, your pain ...

And the date—twenty years ago. She and Andrii had already had many shared memories back then. Thanks to him, Yaryna had been through everything while still a schoolgirl. She had experienced nothing new after that. All subsequent events were mere variations on those experiences with Yarchyk in her school days. All those ups and downs, the friendships and betrayals, frequently provided frameworks for her short stories and novels. And those stories from childhood must have been very authentic, because every time she completed another story, Yaryna Andriichuk felt, albeit just briefly, a sense of having fulfilled an obligation to the force that gives us earthly life.

Even in his first years at school, Andrii Yarylo managed to convince everyone around him that he was the bee's knees. He was the darling of virtually all the girls and virtually all the teachers. Apart from the math teacher, whose favourite was Yaryna Andriichuk.

At first, they both looked down with haughty disdain on the young lover-boy hero who groaned in despair when called up to the blackboard in math class, unable to distinguish between the median of a bisector and a segment of a sector. At the time Yaryna boasted that she was not in love with that Casanova, unlike her friend Lily Maiko, who wanted to commit suicide after Andrii dropped her back in seventh grade, when she was only thirteen.

"Why did he walk me home all week! I didn't think I could mean anything to him," wept Lily to Yaryna, whom Yarchyk also tried to escort home after school. She gave him the cold shoulder, while saying she didn't go out with anyone who couldn't count to ten. He shouted after her, counting from one to ten in several languages! "Eins, zwei, drei! Four, five, six! Sept, huit, neuf!" He could count to ten! Beyond that there were calculators! And silly girl-mathematicians!

That was in grade seven. In grade eight Yaryna was constantly ill. It was a really difficult time: endless tests, screenings with faulty Soviet equipment, that awful salt-free diet. If one of her parents came to school for her homework, Andrii Yarylo was always around, and he promised to bring Yaryna whatever she needed. He visited Yaryna all year, first in hospital and then at home. Sitting next to her bed in the ward, he aroused envy in the other sick girls, even the older ones. Later she was allowed to go out to the waiting room, and they sat on tattered hospital couches. He came twice a week,

sometimes more often. That was when he told her he didn't want to be a dunce in math. As she was doing her homework, she also helped him shake off his stigma as a math moron.

At the New Year she was discharged from hospital, but her parents said she was too ill to go to a New Year's Eve party. Things turned out even better, though. Andrii Yarylo brought a tape recorder to play back for her all the music the eighth-grade students had danced to the previous evening. Her anxious parents decided that their sick daughter needed cheering up, so they did not give Andrii a hard time. At first, they kept peeping into the room where Yaryna and Andrii were circling round in a slow dance. Then they dropped off. The fourteen-year-old lovers did not betray their parents' trust. They did not even kiss; they just danced to the tape recorder until morning. But that was the night Yaryna gave herself to Andrii for good.

Until the end of eighth grade Andrii kept bringing Yaryna her homework and taking her completed work back to school. Her parents sent her to a health resort for the summer. On the first day of school in grade nine, Andrii shared a desk with Lily Maiko.

For several days that autumn, Yaryna went through hell, except that, unlike Lily, she was not contemplating suicide but rather how to kill him, the betraying weasel. She was seriously working out how to do it. What saved the day? Her burning desire to outshine him in their literature class, where Yarchyk was unsurpassed. On the other hand, he did not develop any further and remained on the level of outstanding student in grade school literature class. However, the teachers knew what they were doing when they set up a career-oriented system at school, harnessing as the driving force not thirst for knowledge but enthusiasm to be the best performer. To this day Yaryna still remembers the extended poem by Shevchenko she learned by heart at that time, and the books about his works she read, so as to be able to respond in the literature lessons better than that upstart Yarylo who had betrayed her. If she had been kissing him in the corners as Lily Maiko did, she would not have achieved that painful leap in knowledge, not only about Shevchenko, but about herself and about something else very important as well.

"How insightful! A woman rescued from unrequited love, achieving a higher professional status than the lover she grieved over!" said a reader who telephoned Yaryna Andriichuk on a live call-in show, fascinated by her story named after a line from Shevchenko: "In Vilnius, that famous city."

"Andrii Yarylo liberated many of us from the girlish reserve instilled in us by family and school! Here's to you, Andrii!" Lily, née Maiko, toasted him, raising her glass on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of their graduation.

"So you lost your virginity to him?" asked Yaryna, who was sitting next to her school friend at that reunion.

"Oh no, no way! But I did go around with that boy wonder for some time, and he was the one who gave me my confidence, actually." After Andrii's second betrayal, Lily no longer contemplated suicide; she sought

solace in the company of another boy, whom she married a few years later. "By then I had acquired communication skills, so I knew how to get along with the boys! It was all thanks to him!"

When Yaryna published her novel *Communication Skills*, Lily objected, pointing out that she had not consented to the revelation of her experiences, even in literary form.

"Sue me," replied Yaryna Andriichuk. "It'll be good publicity for me."

The women laughed heartily. Yaryna had not explained to her old girlfriend that the story behind *Communication Skills* was not Lily's but her own experience with that same Andrii Yarylo. Her friend had merely suggested an apt title. Did he and Lily have conversations like those she had with him during the year when she was seriously ill? Oh God, my hair still stands on end at the thought of the torture of that treatment. Despite all that, it was still the happiest year of her life. An extremely positive experience, inextricably linked with an equally powerful negative one. Heaven and Hell are not the nether regions and the heavens; they both co-exist in everyone's soul, in everyone's life.

Her relationship with Andrii did not come to an end when they left school. For several years they fell out and made up again, saw one another and made several attempts to form an adult relationship. But fate intervened. After agreeing to move into his aunt's apartment, Yaryna spent a couple of days going out of her mind from the suspense. But Andrii met her nervously at the trolleybus stop, apologizing that his aunt's planned journey was off. Yaryna did not want to see him for six months after that, and she did not know how to escape from this new circle of hell. Then, finally, the aunt did go away as she was supposed to, but the moment they embraced a fire started in the apartment next door, filling his aunt's entire house with foul-smelling, acrid smoke. Yaryna kept her distance from Andrii once more, convincing herself that this time it was for good. Fate still drove them together time after time; nevertheless, it never worked out for them.

"I really love your story 'Stood Up!' I don't remember, perhaps we were in adjacent beds in some hospital and I told you everything about myself?" At a meeting in the local library a woman told her of her impressions of what she had read.

Yaryna Andriichuk's life had more to it than being stood up by Andrii Yarylo. She got married and had a son. Yes, she called the son Andrii, and his father did not object. For a start, he knew nothing about Yarchyk, and then Andrii is the best name for a boy, after all. Later she got divorced and remarried. Both her husbands took an interest in her work. The first one jealously searched through her stories, looking for allusions to other relationships, and he got very annoyed that they were so hard to find; she must have encrypted them! The second one still makes occasional efforts to get her recognized as a popular writer for glossy magazines. He advises her to include as much mysticism and eroticism as possible in her writing. But what's the point of this eroticism, when she has never shared a bed with the

man her work is actually addressed to!

The idea of what he might be like disturbed Yaryna Andriichuk for a long time. This idea became especially unbearable when Yaryna had not broken off her relationship with her ex-husband before she started a relationship with the present one. I don't compare them with one another, I compare each of them with the Andrii Yarylo of my childhood dreams, she told herself.

"Your story 'What is he like, actually?' is simply fantastic!" a university lecturer whispered to Yaryna Andriichuk after a meeting between the writer and some students. "I am very grateful that you had the courage to write about this!"

"I really like the text too," the writer replied sincerely, because just by writing it she had gotten rid of the accursed question that had tormented her ever since eighth grade: whether the teachers knew what was in the mind of an outstanding student, a medal-holder.

"Do you know you are a writer of genius, Yarka?" said Andrii Yarylo on the phone to her one day. Until then, he had at best praised the covers of her books or asked how she had managed to arrange for them to be reviewed in a reputable newspaper which everybody read. And now, Andrii Yarylo was impressed by her story "Alongside the Square," one of the few that were quite unconnected with him personally. From what layers of her unconscious had this story come? An artist had finally discovered a previously hidden inspiration. He was creating his finest triptych at the very time when all Kyiv was bringing buckets of hot food for those standing in the Square. It was a time when everyone was involved in major events, forgetting about their personal affairs. There was more to it than that: it was a time when it was shameful to be concerned about personal affairs. Everyone had to go to the Square and shout "Yes!" He locked himself in the studio on St. Sophia Street, which leads to Independence Square, painting a triptych that had nothing to do with the Orange Revolution. But the power of the Square fuels the sacred flame of his creativity in some incomprehensible way.

"My grandfather also hid away, fervently writing the story of his life, while everyone was celebrating Victory Day. He wrote with a lead pencil in a pre-war notebook! At the time there was a tremendous, wild fervor in our society, though it did not last long. I kept this notebook of my grandfather's. It's a remarkable thing! But I never told you that story. Where did you dig up your storyline? Anyway, you're such a terrific writer, not judging anyone, not praising anyone. So where are you coming from as an author, Andriichuk?"

After that phone call of his they met and spent almost the whole night wandering around Kyiv. It was like resuming, after so many years, the conversations they had had when she was ill. In those days they argued over many very adult issues, debating them at length. They also told one another about their families, about their grandparents. He told her a lot about that same aunt, pointing out her windows on the fourth floor of the building they were just passing. When he brought her home, she ventured to give him a new

collection of her short stories, this time unabashed at the passionate dedication:

May all complaints about fate be in vain!

May fantastical worlds swoop into the joyful abyss!

I love you, my noble, sentimental creep!

"What makes me a creep?" You will object, insulted.

"What makes me a creep?" Andrii Yarylo wondered a few days later, really hurt as he read the dedication. "What makes me a creep? Is it just about the idiotic goings-on at my aunt's place?"

"Because in eighth grade you visited me when I was ill so you could catch up in math. You took advantage of me."

"Just the opposite! Mathematics was my excuse to visit a wonderful girl! I already knew then that you had a brilliant future! You really have no idea of my tenderness, actually..."

"And I don't want to."

Communication between them became more awkward than it had ever been. Inept dialogues led to nothing. Andrii was not living with his wife just then, although they got together again later. His disastrous longing to clarify their relationship with her tormented him several hours a day. He phoned Yaryna, trying to convince her about something, reminding her of their school days, of their dates after school, of their chance—but inevitable—meetings later on, when they both had families: "Remember, we met in the Podil, at the river port! And you were then telling me that I hadn't read any books after I left school! Actually, I had read those you hadn't!" Sociologically speaking, Andrii Yarylo had long since ceased to be a star in any social category; he was an unremarkable man who had also ceased to be a creative woman's muse. Her new story, "The Sad Epilogue," would have its readers too. But for some reason she was reluctant to publish it.

Perhaps it was only to get away from pointless conversations with Andrii Yarylo that Yaryna Andriichuk agreed to go to America with her husband for a year, for previously it had been agreed that he would go on his own while she remained in Kyiv. But here she was. Distance heals and adjusts. She began to correspond with Andrii. Then, unexpectedly, their correspondence ran into the sort of communication difficulties they had in their conversations during her illness. She began to put more effort into her letters to him than into her story.

Her husband went to New York for a few days on business, and she was left alone in the large American house they had settled in for the year. It was just then that Andrii Yarylo appeared in her dream.

No, he wasn't asking her to follow him. She would live as long as destiny allowed. There was a great deal worth living for in her life. But she and Andrii Yarylo would meet in some other lands. After all, as Lily Maiko said, he had given them all unique communication skills. And he had also given Yaryna Andriichuk the joy of creativity, that divine state which can be appreciated only by those who knew it. But he was the cause of the greatest

suffering in her life too. It was because of him that Yaryna was trying to prove something during her sleepless nights, emitting crazy impulses into the unknown, and that was hell for her, a time when she bit her hands until they bled, bitterly gritting her teeth, and shuddering as though undergoing electric shock treatment. And then she began to write a new story. The more tormenting her inner monologue became, the better the story turned out, the one Andrii Yarylo had not read much of, but which others read with great understanding.

Now it was all over. No, now it was all just beginning! Her best writing was yet to come. Because he had arranged their meeting on the other shore in a few days' time. And THERE time is non-existent. THERE no one can be stood up on a date. Her stories will involve eroticism and mysticism. But her husband will still just shrug his shoulders with a sigh. Because there is no way her writing will be suitable for glossy magazines.

*Translated by Patrick John Corness<sup>1</sup>*

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