

CIRKUS KALASHNIKOV

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By Aditi Brennan Kapil

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

### **Shipkov**

A Bulgarian circus artist who now drives a subway train in a US city. His monologue is matter of fact, stream of-consciousness, directed to audience. No Accent during monologue. Yes Accent, when he wakes up to address Man and Woman.

### **Man & Woman**

Voice only. Their conversation is casual, natural, as though Shipkov is not present. Until Shipkov wakes up.

## PRONUNCIATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

Shipkov (SHIP-kov)

-made from rosehips

Da (D'ah)

-Yes

Sofia (SQ-fia)

-capital of Bulgaria

Tati (TAH-ti)

-Daddy

Kalashnikov (ka-LASH-ni-kov)

-Russian rifle

Kazanlak (ka-zan-LAHK)

-town in Bulgaria

Kato Mazhe (Kah-to Ma-ZHEH!)

-Like men!

Kolko Elegantno (KOL-ko ele-GANT-no)

-How elegant

Glupak (glue—PAHK!)

-Dumb-ass

Baba Slavka (BAH-bah SLAHV-kah)

-old lady Slavka

Rakia (rah-KEY-ah)

-Plum brandy, very strong

Razbira-se (raz-BEE-rah-say)

-of course

*Circus music play softly in the background*

SHIPKOV

I've killed three people and one dog.  
Two men, one woman. You believe me?  
Hm?

I've killed three people and one dog in five years.  
Many drivers are lucky, they never have a jumper their whole career- these lonely loons, they seek ME out. Like missiles. Like death-seeking missiles looking for ME. Why meee? Whyyy Meee??? Haha!

In Sofia I was a circus man. Twenty years with the Circus Arena, OPPA! BRAVO! DA! BRAVO! I was in charge! Of telling the audience what to think, how to feel, when to laugh... or scream. Twenty years, I never lost an artist! Twenty years and we had only small injuries to remind us to stay alive to pay attention, but we never lost one! Not one.

They are so careless, these Americans, the way they stand right at the edge of the platform. Right at the edge like they can't be touched. Like the train is not real. Sleepy television eyes staring off into space as though space will tell them anything no matter how long they wait. Space is not interested in you. Not unless you hurl yourself into it with eyes wide open. OPPA!

I remember Lina, talented little Lina, trapeze-family of four generations. Great flair! But not courage enough to keep her eyes open! And you must keep your eyes open or you are an artist who will die, sooner or later. The trap flew toward her and in the moment before she reached she shut her eyes. And every

*Papers are shuffling*

**Man:** He's in shock. Hang on a sec...

*Woman coughs softly*  
*Papers shuffle*

time, she caught it! So she thinks she's doing great, right? Her Tati flying at her yelling 'Eyes open, Lina, eyes open!' and every time she shuts them. Their hands lock, BRAVO! They finish their number, OPPA! Like a child she thinks that's all that matters- the finale. I found her a job at my sister's store selling shoes. There are rules in the Circus. It's not the end of the world, Lina, some people should just sell shoes. Not everyone should fly...

They see the train coming, and what do they do? They bend forward to pick up a briefcase... a shopping bag... heads bobbing in front of me like a row of eggs. Who do they think will duck to the side if they come too close? The thousand-ton train? Dead sleepy eyes, no idea how close death is in every moment.

Do they think I can stop the train? They don't understand that I can not pull the brake and stop the train just because they poked their eggshell heads in my path and I want to save their lives. I can not stop the train. It is not possible. Now listen very carefully, because this important information may be necessary to save your life- the train does not stop just like that! It stops slowly for the safety of all the other passengers who are inside it. You? You and your eggshell head? You are an acceptable casualty. You are just one... or at most a carton of a dozen. I cannot stop the train for you. Do you hear me? Do you understand? No, of course not. Because you're stupid and half asleep and the rules in your mind say that trains are not supposed to kill you because that would

**Man:** Name?

**Woman:** Ship... um...

**Man:** Ship?

**Woman:** -Kov. Ship-kov. I think.

**Man:** Ah.

*Man is humming or whistling. Papers and objects are rustling and moving.*

be bad. And bad things cannot possibly be permitted to happen to you. You are special. And very busy. So go ahead and pick up your briefcase and we'll just hope for split second timing in your favor that you do not die in this precise moment.

If I'm lucky you will be killed by a man in the street with a gun before you cross my path and I get sent to therapy again.

My uncle worked in Kazanlak at the Kalashnikov factory. An exciting life, he called it. All drinking and men and big international criminals coming through regularly to buy from him. Well, not from him personally, he was an assembly man, but he talked as if he sold every rifle there himself. Said he would some day turn spy and sell his information to the west for his retirement. Hehehehe! The west got the better of him, ah? You want to know what happened to my uncle? Actually my uncle and my cousins, they all worked there. Bloody Gorbachev and his big changes happened to them.

All your life you are learning to live by certain rules, you are learning to exist and succeed. And then they change the rules at the end. Right at the end! "And now we hate the west" ... "And now we are friends with the West"... "and now we are just like the West"... "And now we must discuss- are we selling legal arms or not legal?"

My uncle offered me a job there once when the circus was going down. I said no thanks, I am an artist, not a killer! He said 'You are a killer or you will be killed! That is it!' He talked in this manner, he and his friends all talked in this manner! Like Men! 'Kato Mazhe!' He thought how I talked was funny.

**Man:** Shipkov. Like Kalashnikov. Huh? The rifles? Shi-KOV, Kalashni-KOV. He's probably Russian.

**Woman:** OK.

*Man hums a familiar tune*

'How elegant!' he said, 'Kolko elegantno!'  
BRAVO! OPPA!

The first I killed was a man, a drunk. He fell on the tracks, it was late so no one saw him, and Glupak walks into the tunnel instead of climbing out. Or maybe he was too drunk to climb out, I don't know that. They don't tell you anything about them because it's psychologically better not to know any details. But the therapist said he was drunk. So I wouldn't feel so guilty. I saw him like a shadow, tipping around, doesn't even try to move out of the way. Trips and sits down on the track in front of me like he's going to tie his shoelace or something. OPPA! So, that was #1. I had great guilt with the first one. The drunk man. Because instead of pulling the brake right away with my hand I was stamping my foot, like this! -!-! Stamping for the foot-brake, like a car.

But it's not like that in the train, you pull with your hand like this, see? It didn't matter of course, there was nothing I could do to stop that train in time. So I went on medical leave and to therapy. To discuss my feelings.

Do you know what my uncle does now? And my cousins? Well, America offered foreign aid, but only if they close down our Kalashnikov Factory! Because guns are bad things! They kill people! So the whole town of Kazanlak is unemployed. And the government official in charge of taking the foreign aid and keeping it to himself buys a villa on the Black Sea and says- I know! We'll change the

**Man:** Muscular guy. Wonder what he does. Probably ex-KGB or something. Huh?

**Woman:** You think?

**Man:** Shit. Got a pen? Mine's dying  
*Shuffling*

**Woman:** Look at his leg... he's kicking something...

**Man:** Mr. Shipkov...? Mr. Shipkov...?

**Man:** Mr. Shipkov!

factory over to make something else,  
something peaceful and popular with  
Americans! So you will all be employed  
still!

Do you know what they make?

Do you want to know what they make?

Buttons! They make Buttons! For shirts!

Those little white transparent ones!

And Kazanlak emptied of people  
because there is, and this may surprise  
you, a lot less money in buttons than in  
rifles.

My uncle built a distillery in the barn,  
since he sold the cows when he started  
work at the factory twenty years ago,  
and the vats that used to hold milk he  
fills with Rakia. He carries them into the  
house and then he drinks. Last time I  
saw him he was much smaller. It's  
dainty work, buttons.

#2 was a woman. That was quick. She  
was standing there, and just as I came  
out of the tunnel she jumped. OPPA!  
DA! Her family called my boss because  
they wanted me to know she was  
depressed and had tried 3 times already  
to kill herself, sooner or later she would  
succeed. The therapist asked how I felt  
about this, and I yelled 'DAMN HER  
FOR CHOOSING MY TRAIN!' I said  
it just like that, very big, very emotional.  
He liked that. He talked about how good  
it was that I expressed myself.

Then he asked me where I am from, and  
I told him I am a Circus Artist from  
Bulgaria, and he said it's amazing the  
jobs that educated immigrants end up  
with when they get to America!

He loves talking to taxi drivers and  
finding out about them. I said yes, it is  
one of the great things about America

**Man:** You know I met this guy at a  
conference once, said he had KGB  
contacts...

**Man cont'd:** Drunk off his ass of  
course, but he said that the KGB is the  
new big Mafia on the block! Italians are  
old hat.

that you have interesting and educated foreigners driving your train and taxi.

Then I told him how in Sofia we have one subway stop that goes nowhere. There it is in the center of Sofia, the tracks come out a few meters on either side, but before even a second stop was built the money ran out. He thought that was very funny. And besides, I told him, once you start digging, every few meters you run into some important ruin from the Ottomans or the Greeks or Rome, and the Westerners have a fit and you have to stop digging. Why do you think the money ran out?

Kazanlak has great ruins, right near the Factory. We always took lunch there when I visited. You know, they're turning it back into a Kalashnikov Factory now? The money ran out so there's no reason to make buttons anymore. It's too late for the house, they already sold it, they rent a room from Baba Slavka, but maybe my cousins can get a new house when business picks up again. Americans will see some competition again, why should they be the only ones to sell their M16s? I'm surprised that they stopped the bribes, one villa on the sea was a cheap price for monopoly of the arms market. But when word gets out that Kazanlak is open again, business will return! Kalashnikov is a better gun than M16, everyone knows!

I was very angry about #3. The dispatcher screwed up on that one. Word comes out on headset that a dog has run into the tunnels and they stop all the trains going West because that is the track he is on! But the idiot forgets that the tracks connect, East and West

**Man cont'd:** I said, tell that to the Italians... Hah.

**Woman:** Is that clock right?

**Man:** I think so. Hot date?

**Woman:** Nah...just...

**Woman:** Huh. He isn't Russian. It says here Bulgarian.

**Man:** Isn't that the same thing? Former Soviet...something or other...?

**Woman:** I guess.



running side by side for several meters, and doesn't stop the trains going East, so the dog runs onto my track and OPPA! DA! #3. I was very angry about that! About the dog. The dog wasn't trying to die. That was a big screw up!

#4 reminded me of little Lina. I wanted to tell him, look my friend, some people should just sell shoes! But what American wants to hear that? Huh? I saw him in my headlights, he was standing with his arms out like he's Jesus Christ or something, eyes closed, just walking toward the train. Walking toward me, arms out like this, eyes closed like this. What is he thinking? Lie down or something! What an asshole! SOME PEOPLE SHOULD JUST SELL SHOES!!! YOU ASSHOLE! OPPA! DA! #4!

He was a young guy. They seek me out, I told you. Help me, Shipkov! Tell me, please! Should I laugh? Should I scream? Who am I? At Circus Arena, we all got old in the end, that's why we folded. I was the young one, and Lina. And then we hired special artists every season to tour with us, but they mostly didn't like all the extra work. Small circus, everyone has to help out. The clown works the safety ropes, the aerialist sells popcorn. And the artists from Scotland or wherever don't want to do that for more than one season. Plus, who goes to the circus anymore? Just because the circus is real and movies are not? What is real? It seems trains are not real. It seems that way to me, standing inside the train. If I was real, wouldn't you look at me?

Let me tell you this.  
The train is coming! OPPA! Step Back!

**Man:** Check his eyes

*A flashlight is shifting across Shipkov's face...then lands*

**Woman:** Mr. Shipkov? Sir?

**Man:** Look at me, Mr. Shipkov...

**Woman:** Mr. Shipkov...

It misses your eggshell head? BRAVO!  
Clap! Clap! Applause! Bravo! Everyone!  
You can't keep your eyes open?  
Think! Maybe you are ordinary? Maybe  
you should make buttons? Or sell shoes?  
Maybe you should break the law?  
Maybe you should talk big and invent a  
life that you would prefer? Fine.  
But if you get in my way, I will kill you.  
I have no choice.  
I will kill you.  
That's why you seek me out, isn't it?  
Me? I am a circus man. And I keep my  
eyes open.

*Background circus music stops abruptly*

*(with accent)* Da...  
A little.

Razbira-se. Sorry, I mean -of course.

I am feeling 'Why me?!?!?'  
And I am feeling very sad. Very.

Of course!

*Hops up, stands and bows circus-style*

OPPA!  
BRAVO!  
DA!

**LIGHTS OUT. END OF PLAY.**

**Man:** Good, keep your eyes  
open... Okay, excellent. Hi. Do you  
speak English?

I'm Dr. Mayer and this is Samantha  
from HR. Okay, so you had a bit of a  
shock, but you're back now. Can you sit  
up?

I understand you've had a rough time, a  
jumper in front of your train? How do  
you feel?

**Woman:** That's understandable. It's  
great that you can express it though, it's  
important not to keep those feelings  
inside.

**Man:** Can you stand up?