

Excerpt from the play

A DATE AND A SHOT OF BLACK BALSAM

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Two gentlemen are waiting for their blind dates. It looks like neither of the ladies is showing up. Is this a coincidence, or a finely crafted plan? To find out, follow the events as they unfold.

Street. A smartly dressed man (Oto) stands holding a medium-sized bouquet of flowers. He seems slightly nervous and keeps glancing around. He checks his watch. He is annoyed: the girl he is waiting for is already a little late. Another man (Aksels) appears. There is no bravado about him, he seems rather shy and somehow unaware of the things he is doing. He is dressed casually, not quite scruffily, but in comparison to the first man he looks a little shabby. He is wearing socks in his sandals. In one of his hands he holds a plastic shopping bag; in the other – a single flower whose stem is already bent in the middle. He tries to straighten it out. He stops quite close to the first man, who surreptitiously steps a little further away. The second man notices this. He looks over the first man, evaluating him. Oto looks away, as if not aware of Aksels' gaze.

AKSELS Do you have any scotch tape?

OTO Sorry, I don't!

Aksels continues his efforts at repairing the flower.

OTO *To the audience.* I have come here for a date, I am not a serial killer – why would I have scotch tape on me?

AKSELS I do, but it's black. I thought maybe you had some that's clear. *He pulls a roll of black sticky tape from the shopping bag and begins to work on the broken flower stem.*

Oto watches Aksels surreptitiously, averting his eyes whenever Aksels glances over.

OTO *To the audience.* Latvians don't tend to just strike up a conversation – unless they want to scam you.

Oto checks his watch.

AKSELS What's the time?

OTO *To the audience.* I've always been suspicious of people who don't have watches. They say that happy people don't count the time. One look at this bloke is enough to dismiss that theory. I think the only people who don't have watches are the unemployed – they don't need to be anywhere on time. And also those who like a drink and tend to lose their watch.

AKSELS *Pushes up the edge of his sleeve, revealing a watch.* Mine conked out a week ago.

OTO It's six thirty-seven.

AKSELS Damn, my bird is now an hour and a half late.

OTO But you only just arrived.

AKSELS *Replies with utter calm, he doesn't see a problem with this.* Yes, I did. *He pulls a packet of crisps from the shopping bag and tears it open.*

OTO *To the audience.* It is because of guys like this that it is increasingly difficult to meet somebody on the internet. The ladies think that behind any picture of a good-looking man is actually someone like this. If a woman asks you if you like crisps in her first message... *Points at Aksels.* You may as well thank him for that now.

AKSELS Is yours also late?

OTO No. *To the audience.* 37 minutes is not late. Sometimes I'll even allow a lady to be an hour late. Once a lady arrived two whole hours later. She thought I must be desperate if I'm prepared to wait that long and left 15 minutes later. Her loss – she missed out on a spectacular night. I had booked a motel in a quiet spot for half an hour.

AKSELS What time is it now?

OTO 40 past the hour. *To the audience.* The lady I've been waiting for for the last 40 minutes is called Gerda. I'll be honest – for her, I'd wait even longer than two hours.

AKSELS *Trying to be provocative, but still seeming quite shy.* 40 past already? That's women for you – they won't leave the house until they've covered themselves in makeup. The stuff they smear on their faces should be sold in vats, not in those tiny jars. This mussed-up Shrek crawls out of the bed, dives into the vat, and lo and behold – she emerges looking like a ride. And all it takes is a couple of seconds. I think we may be standing here for another hour and a half, at the very least.

OTO I don't think so, my lady is still not late. *To the audience.* I abhor vulgarity. Where's his respect for women?

AKSELS Mine's been brushing her teeth for two hours now.

OTO *Can't take it any longer.* Have you thought that maybe she arrived on time, and you were not here?

AKSELS She'd have waited.

OTO For an hour and a half?

AKSELS I have to travel up from the countryside, each stop is like Russian roulette for that bus. It will stop, and when the driver wants to start going again, everyone just holds their breath – will it go or won't it? At four of those stops we all had to get out and give the bus a good push. Then it would slowly start moving and the passengers would run and jump in, one by one. I think I might have made it here sooner if I had just run the whole way.

OTO *To the audience.* I hate talking to strangers, especially ones who start up a conversation. It's either they want to rob you or they are some kind of pervert.

AKSELS At least there's someone to talk to.

OTO *Somewhat grumpily.* Yes, that's true.

AKSELS May I call you by your name?

OTO *To the audience.* He looks like a person who'd have two favourite outfits: his birthday suit and a straitjacket. In other words, it's best not to upset him. *To Aksels.* Yes, we can be informal if you prefer.

AKSELS *Happily licks crisp residue off his fingers and holds out his hand.* Pleased to meet you, my name is Aksels, my friends call me Accelerator.

OTO *Stares at the proffered hand with obvious disgust. To the audience.* There's definitely something wrong with our nation, at the genetic level. All the germs of the world must be living on that hand. I bet he picks his nose instead of washing his hands after visiting the lavatory – but I'll just do this. *Oto, with obvious displeasure, wants to gingerly press Aksels' hand, but the other man grabs Oto's hand, gives it a good firm shake and holds on to it.*

AKSELS If my bird does not show up, at least I'll have a buddy in the city.

OTO *Without taking his eyes off his hand, which is still in Aksels' clutches. To the audience.* I can feel the oil from the crisps permeate my skin right now. At least I hope it's the oil.

Aksels lets go of Oto's hand. Oto is relieved.

AKSELS I don't have many friends. I used to be buddies with my postman. But I had to decide if I wanted to continue my newspaper subscription. I had no money, so I decided to cancel. So now I don't really have any friends.

OTO *To the audience.* With people like this, the main thing is not to strike up a conversation, however they try to get your pity.

AKSELS I've never met my parents, but I think they must be models. Sometimes I look at my footprints in the snow, and I have to tell you – it's a very neat, straight track. Yeah! Every year, Winter arrives and reminds me: 'Aksels, you have a gift!' Look!

Aksels parades back and forth in front of Oto. He walks quite clumsily.

AKSELS Well?

OTO Well – what?

ASKELS The gait! And look at my face! *He's squinting his eyes.* That's a classic model look. Want to know the secret? You just imagine your nose is 30 centimetres long and focus your eyes on its tip. *He walks and focuses.*

OTO *To the audience.* My date tonight is a very cultured lady – she loves poetry, the theatre – you know, a black-and-white movie kind of woman. That's to say, if you watch a film with her and get any sense of what it is about, then the film is clearly below her level. In our text conversations she often uses quotations from

books, it's been difficult enough to pretend I have read them. If she comes and sees me talking to this... *Watches Aksels, who is still walking and focusing on his imaginary nose.* I bet even Gerda's underwear is intellectual, but, thanks to this guy, I may never find out for sure.

AKSELS Do you have siblings?

OTO I have a brother. *To the audience.* I'm answering him, but my brain is working on one thing: how to get rid of him.

AKSELS I don't. I sometimes like to imagine I also have a brother. That he is a poet. Famous. But he never publishes his poetry, he only gives it to me to read.

OTO How can he be famous if he doesn't publish? *To the audience.* Goddammit, did you see that? I'm already slipping into a conversation.

AKSELS People would just feel that he writes bloody good poetry.

OTO How?

AKSELS I don't know how! I'd read a poem to someone, and they'd tell everyone that it's this whole great thing.

OTO I don't think that would work.

AKSELS Let's try it, I will read you one!

OTO *To the audience.* There you are, he's tripped up already. A moment ago, he had an imaginary brother, and now he's going to read me his poem.

AKSELS I know what you're thinking. I don't have a brother, so what am I going to read you – right? But the thing is, I sometimes imagine I am my own brother, and I write some stuff.

OTO *To the audience.* You can tell rabid dogs by the way they're foaming at the mouth. Unfortunately, crazy people are not that easy. We can't even imagine the sort of individuals we meet on the street every day.

AKSELS *Rummages around in his shopping bag. Extracts a crumpled newspaper, flattens it out on his knee.* Sometimes inspiration strikes uninvited. I had already crumpled up the paper, you know, for the loo – and boom! I feel something come into me. I listen and I hear inspiration speaking to me. All I have to do is write it down.

OTO Your lady is already two hours late. I don't think she's coming.

AKSELS Yeah, could be. Look – let's go have a beer, two rejected males that we are.

OTO *Checks his watch.* I'm sorry, but my lady is about to arrive. *To the audience.* He knows he can't scam me, so he's becoming brazen.

AKSELS *Disappointed.* Alright then, I've already smoothed it out, so I'll read you a poem by my 'brother', the world's most popular unpublished poet, and then strut back to the bus terminal.

OTO Sure, why not! *To the audience.* You'll see, in a minute he'll be short of a euro or two for the ticket!

AKSELS *Reads expressively.* The hoarfrost on the cacti is bitter today. () I want to lick it off, but it slips away. () Wait, bitter fiend! But it won't stay. () It flees, and I'm left with bare spines to play. () With cactus-stung mouth I give myself up to it all () And pour beer for myself and my friend – the wall. *He finishes and looks at Oto with expectation.*

OTO *To the audience.* What does he want me to say? 'Bravo, you will be discussed in fifth-grade literature class'?

AKSELS Good, isn't it? It's just a pity I didn't write it. I would not keep it under wraps, I would publish. You know, so the people get something beyond bread and circuses.

OTO *To the audience.* This is the kind of bloke whose self-confidence enters the room ten minutes ahead of him. *To Aksels.* Very nice.

AKSELS Right? It's a pity no-one else will hear it.

OTO *Checks his watch.* What time is your bus?

AKSELS I didn't check. There should be one today.

OTO Just one?

AKSELS All the motorways have decided to avoid my back-of-nowhere village. At least the air is fresh, but there's only four people to enjoy it, myself included.

OTO Really?! Just four people?

AKSELS Actually, you're right. My neighbour is 97, it's a bit generous to consider him a full person. By the way, he doesn't subscribe to any newspapers either. He says what's the use of paying good money when you don't know if you'll make it past the headline. So I visit him once a month – to check his temperature. If it's above 36 degrees, I give him a short summary of what's going on in the country.

OTO He's all by himself? *To the audience.* I'm asking, but actually I couldn't care less if he has someone or not. A Latvian has a harder time finishing a conversation than a Norwegian five-year-old has winning at biathlon.

AKSELS Of course he's not – he has a wart on each thumb.

OTO *Smiles.* *To the audience.* Goddammit, I smiled. Now I'll never get rid of him.

AKSELS You know, I have a question for you, but I'm a little embarrassed to ask.

OTO *Smug, to the audience.* There we are, he'll now be asking for a few cents for the bus ticket. *To Aksels.* Tell me, how much do you need?

AKSELS Need for what?

OTO Stop pretending – for the ticket. How much?

AKSELS Return or one way?

OTO *To the audience.* The nerve of him – he wants a return ticket! When he was born his shame didn't come out with him. *To Aksels.* One way will do – back home.

AKSELS A ticket that way is as much as a ticket this way. 4 euros 35 cents.

OTO *To the audience.* Damn, he's getting his way, I'm willing to give him a tenner just to get rid of him! *Pulls out his wallet.* *To Aksels.* I wonder, how were you going to entertain your date without any money?

AKSELS Why do you think I have no money?

OTO You're asking for money for your ticket, so I drew the conclusion.

AKSELS There must be some mistake, I have money for the ticket. *Proudly pulls a five euro note from his pocket.* And I was going to entertain the lady in a gentlemanly manner.

OTO By treating her to a cup of tea for 65 cents?

AKSELS So what do I have this for? *Holds up his shopping bag.* Sparkling wit and liver pâté sandwiches are a sure path to a lady's heart. Besides, I also have a little tippie in a stoneware bottle, to put some roses in her cheeks. *Pulls up a bottle of Black Balsam.*

OTO *To the audience.* I once saw a lady's dating profile that said, "men who like Black Balsam need not apply." The poor little thing must have encountered this pâté-fuelled Romeo. He's no competition to me, he's like a virus. As a woman, you don't become immune only to him, you need to become a little immune to all men. When I start messaging a lady, I have to spend an entire week just to prove I am not an idiot with pâté sandwiches in my pockets. And why? *Points at Aksels.* There you go, there's your answer.

AKSELS Money is not the most important thing to a woman, women love with their ears.

OTO *Sarcastically.* Yah, I've never heard that.

AKSELS That's okay, you will understand eventually. I'm a bloke from the country, I'm strong on theory but a bit short on application. But do you know how I got to this idea about their ears?

OTO *To the audience.* Enough, he's waiting for me to say "well?" But I'm not doing it.

Oto is silent. Aksels stares at him, it is obvious that he wants to tell the story, but he won't just do it. The pause lingers – until Oto gives in.

OTO Well?

AKSELS I went on a date with a bird. I met her on the internet. It's not that easy to meet someone in my village, because it's not like I'm some spring chicken, but the youngest person in my village calls me a boy.

OTO I do realize it might be difficult to find a wife among four villagers.

AKSELS Especially if there are no women. We jokingly call our village our Bachelor Kingdom. But that's beside the point. So! I met up with this bird. She filled her profile pic right up to the edges, if you know what I mean. But I always think, as long as the person is nice, the rest can be sweated out. We meet up – you could see her coming from a long way away. She's coming up to me. I'm looking at her, everyone's looking at her. She's like shy, not confident at all. I couldn't just say "a pretty girl should not be this shy," it's not right to start a relationship with a lie, that's not a manly thing to do. So I say to her: 'Chicky!' – because just calling her a bird would not be right either. We were standing, just like you and I are standing right now, and I say to her: 'Chicky, there's the park, I have some pâté sandwiches. I can't carry you to the park like a proper queen, Chicky, but it would be my honour to roll you there.' You know, just like this, in this chivalrous manner. The girl blushed, said thank you for the date and left. It took just a single sentence to make a person happy. She didn't want to date me after that. You know why?

OTO *To the audience.* I'll never get rid of him. Allow me to present my probable new flatmate. I have a home bar with 387 different bottles. *He solemnly bows his head for a moment.* I just said my mental goodbyes to them. This guy looks like someone who'll guzzle up two or three bottles of wine while he ponders what he would like to drink.

Aksels stares at Oto, wants to continue the story, but is waiting for something. Oto notices this.

OTO Well, why didn't she want to date you anymore?

AKSELS I dug my own grave. Raised the bird's confidence so much that she's now ashamed to be seen with someone like me. I took a lump of clay and made an Angelina Jolie, and now I can only look at her through a pair of binoculars. That's a man's destiny: to allow a woman to outgrow him.