

Happy Go Lucky

VASILY SHUKSHIN

1972

Leo Tolstoy famously said, 'A quiet secluded life in the country, with the possibility of being useful to people to whom it is easy to do good, and who are not accustomed to have it done to them... such is my idea of happiness.' This vision of the countryside's morality and the city's decay pervaded the 19th Century Russian novel, and this alongside the moral benefits of hard labour seeped deeply into Russian culture.

Vasily Shukshin's film opens with an almost documentary vision of countryside life: Ivan, played by Shukshin himself, mows a field, he waves to greet the people who pass along the path. Clearly this is a place where everyone knows everyone else. Nyura played by Lidiya Shukshina, his wife in real life, brings him lunch. They sit by the field's edge and eat. Ivan lights a passerby's cigarette. Sprawling landscapes surround them. There is an inherent beauty and simplicity communicated by Shukshin, but there is a difference in perspective when considering the countryside and city. Unlike the vast majority of people who have weighed in on the debate that surrounds the countryside and city divide, Shukshin actually hails from the countryside, namely the Altai region, and a farming background. For him it was neither romanticised, nor an edifying tourist experience of hard work and increased simplicity, it was a way of life. A lifestyle that was and is increasingly atrophied.

In many ways, Pechki- Lavochki is about blatant classism in an apparently classless society. Ivan and his wife are patronised and ridiculed at nearly every turn. From the moment they leave, their first companion on the long train ride to the South questions Ivan and says, 'You should have left your village ways at home in the village. Or not gone anywhere at all.' When the couple reaches the resort, one of the people who works there audibly says, 'They let anyone into the resort these days,' in reference to the pair. Ironically, one of the only people they encounter that receives the goodhearted duo with any respect is the thief they share a carriage with - a witty comment on the nature of bourgeoisie society. This social rejection even reaches Ivan's subconscious. As he sleeps on the train he falls into a nightmare. He dreams of Nyura talking to a gentlemen from Moscow in the carriage. The gentlemen ridicules Ivan to his wife,

for his drinking and for his lack of ability to provide for her. He tells Nyura he knows a man in Moscow, elderly, who loves children. She could move in with him and look after him. Ivan is plagued by nightmarish visions of Nyura and a tiny, elderly man. He sees Nyura rocking an elderly man in furs whilst the man laughs hysterically. When he wakes up he finds his wife recounting his achievements proudly. When the pair write home to the village, Ivan describes the more populous regions in that letter, he says they are, 'Much closer to communism than we are, because everything is mechanised.' A villager interrupts the reading with, 'Why is he so political all of a sudden.' Pechki-Lavochki, communicates its message humorously. As well as deriding high society, he also lovingly pokes fun at the naivety of villagers. The pair's uneasy interactions on the train are hilarious. In the course of a day's travels they do a full 360 between suspicious; then actively open, after being ridiculed for their caution; and then paranoid after discovering their charming comrade was a thief. In a hilarious caper, as the couple discover the thief has gifted Nyura a stolen blouse, the camera swings to outside the train carriage. We watch the couple rush around the train carriage comedically. They then treat the next man in the carriage with extreme suspicion, unable to understand the nuances of society; understandably given the small population of their hometown. Despite being adults they are like children outside their context, it is a spectacle that is funny but also incredibly melancholic.

But Shukshin and his wife are shown as having something that those they meet do not, the ability to make fun of themselves and sincere respect for each other. When they finally reach the beaches of the Black Sea in the south, his wife writes home to the village. 'Ivan tells me that if everyone of my figure was to bathe there'd be a flood from here to Turkey. I say it's ok, let them live on a raft.' Ivan is frequently questioned by people who can't understand why he brought his wife, as though it is uncultured to want to spend time with her. In his own life, Shukshin was a misunderstood figure. Deeply talented, his peers did not understand his down to earth artistry. The film ends with a shot of him smoking in the field back home, he breaks the fourth wall and addresses the camera: 'Well that's the end guys'.