

◆
CHEKHOV



Nicholas Ruddock

In 1904, throughout all of Europe, there was a premonition of madness in the air. Take shelter, the wind said. The rippling of water, the sway of wheat, the high sussuration of pine. A warning, a strum. Wildflowers bent before it. And the wind came from all directions: from the north, an exiled wind of suffering; from the west, French and sycophantic, suffused with ennui; from the south, softer, more sinuous like a slow warm carnival, as decadent as novels abandoned on windowsills, their pages turning on their own, *snick-snick*, the lassitude too much to bear; and lastly, from the east, honing in on Moscow in particular, a different, more robust wind came, wild and unexpected, torn with sleet and rain. The Revolution and the War were a decade away, but Nature already knew.

Anton Chekhov? He wasn't even in Russia then. He wasn't into politics, directly. But all those winds blew through his head.

It was July, 1904. He was forty-four years old and he was in Badenweiler, Germany. There, the air was clear and pure. The hotel he had chosen was small and comfortable, with window boxes full of geraniums, three floors straight up from the street.

Daily he walked over cobblestones. It was all he could do. Writing was out of the question; fevers robbed him of all strength and desire. He measured the certainty of his own death by the progression of his breathlessness. Twice he stopped yesterday on this small incline, today three times, tomorrow four, and the green of the fir trees progressively grew brighter, the mountains etched a painful blue.

Friends followed surreptitiously whenever he went out, in case he fell.

He wore a hat, a tweed suit grown too large for him, a tie, and he carried a small hand-sewn bag. Today, as every day, he turned down some steps to a door below street-level — *WASCHEREI*.

Steam filled the air, the smell of strong soap, carbolic, the voices of women. Some of them were singing. Washtubs, water simmered, and outside spilled the river, huge wheels of dripping wood.

Here it is, he said, my daily offering.

He handed the bag across the counter.

Herr Chekhov, she said, you are a great man. An honour.

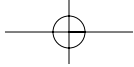
Her face was as red, suffused with heat, as flushed as his was pale.

She opened the bag, shook it, and out came the handkerchiefs, all of them soaked with blood, stained red, clotted together by phlegm, the heads of roses, deadly.

How sweet it must be to be inanimate and not fear death at all. A table, a chair, this counter.

There, she said. *Einz, zwei*.

Linen, monogrammed with an A and a T at the corner. Not meant for him, of course; he'd inherited them. Now that he needed them as unquestioning receptacles for whatever breath he had left, he had come to prefer the anonymity.



Drei, vier, and she continued to count them out, one by one. AT long dead already, perhaps of the same disease. The English poet Keats, dead at twenty-four.

Twenty-two of these, that's not good, she said.

Two more than yesterday, I know, he said.

She showed no aversion to the biological material she handled day after day. Quite the opposite, in fact, for in a spa town, Badenweiler, this was her life.

She filled his little bag with clean linen.

From yesterday, she said.

She held one up, the monogram.

AT, this is not you, Herr Chekhov.

No, he said. That's my only chance, I guess.

He smiled.

Eighteen handkerchiefs tomorrow, Herr Chekhov, she said, bring only eighteen. I would like so much to be out of your business.

Either way, he said, either way you will.

No, no, she said.

It was warm and she wiped sweat from her forehead, from her eyes.

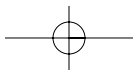
He climbed back up into the street and they were there again, the two of them, his friends, sitting at a café.

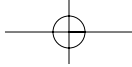
As soon as Chekhov turned towards the hotel, Dmitri raised his hand for the waiter.

Then the strangest and most unexpected thing happened to Anton Chekhov. On the way back to his hotel, he felt what could only be a small burst of energy.

Impossible. A memory, that's all it was, a trick, a cerebral stroke, some last-chance scenario offered the dying. Misfiring in the brain.

But no, no. God?





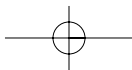
He walked up the hill to the hotel without stopping. Songbirds. His legs felt strong.

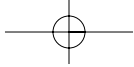
Hey, said Dmitri to Franz Josef, look at him go! Hurry!

Chekhov's steps were short but experimental, determined. In the tiny claustrophobic lobby, before the stairs, he coughed, and for the first time in seven months, the linen handkerchief, AT, came away pristine.



The historical record, such as it is, shows that Chekhov died on the night of July 14, 1904, in his hotel room in Badenweiler, Germany, accompanied at the time only by his friend Dmitri and, by chance, a fourteen-year-old boy, a guest at the same hotel, who later was the source of the historical record (such as it is). This young man wrote down all the harrowing details, once he realized how privileged he had been to be present at the final hour of such a great man, the few details that are "known": how the dying writer lay with his head back upon the pillow, his eyes fixed and unseeing ("He who saw so much," the young man wrote in his dramatic prose, "ironically" . . .), his breath rapid, shallow, and then how Chekhov had, in his penultimate moment on this earth, raised himself from his pillow long enough to drink a proffered glass of champagne in one swallow (" . . . his lust for life undiminished in death . . ."), how then he fell back, the rattle in the throat, the champagne glass rolling under the bed while Dmitri ("poor man, the faithful aide-de-camp"), laid his head down on the covers by Chekhov's chest and wept soundlessly ("the candle guttered and went out"). Then the arrival of the hotel doctor, shadowed in the dark so as





to be unrecognizable, the pronouncement of death, the white sheet. Then the first birds (“finches I believe”) welcomed the dawn. The end.

Later, when the sickroom was emptied, the young man and scribe-to-be returned once more down the silenced hall and opened the door. On his hands and knees, he recovered the champagne glass and held it to the dim light. He could see the imprint of the lips. He showed it to his mother that same afternoon (“Anton Chekhov’s!”) but to his surprise, she took it from his hands and dashed it on the rocks bordering the terrace on which they stood. (“You can catch your death from that! I told you, stay away from that man!”)



That is the historical record but that is not at all what happened.

When he realized, that night, that he was recovering, spontaneously, from his terminal tubercular state, Chekhov called for his closest friend to come to his room.

Dmitri, he said, look at me.

He took a deep breath. He exhaled forcefully and there was no rattle at all. The air came pure and unobstructed.

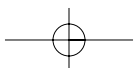
And look, he said.

He forced a cough, and held the handkerchief to his mouth. Again, it came away unblemished. He felt another surge of energy, a life force, an awakening within him like a fist.

I have recovered, he said. I can sense it.

Anton, can this be true? said Dmitri, though even as he questioned it, he knew it was so.

Yes, said Chekhov, Napoleon!



Napoleon? How do you mean?

Napoleon retreated on the verge of total victory, Dmitri, and now in the same way, the mycobacterium retreats from my lungs. It's rare but it does occur. My reprieve, I cannot believe it myself.

Chekhov went to the casement window and threw it open to the air.

Mother of Jesus, said Dmitri, Mother of Christ.

Then Chekhov walked across the hotel room, spun about and smiled.

Champagne! said Dmitri. Two glasses! Bread! To your health!

And he was about to run when Chekhov said to him, Dmitri, say nothing of this.

No? said Dmitri. Such news?

No, nothing must change. You and I, we still have a play to write. Tonight.

A play?

And to perform. Don't worry, there are few words.

So it was that Dmitri Mikhailovitch, overjoyed though he was, went quietly and soberly down to the hotel kitchen.

Champagne. Bread and cheese, he said. *Bitte*.

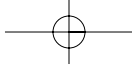
His German was poor, non-existent really. The simplest words formed in his mouth like stones.

You eat and drink in the face of death? You Russians! said the woman who was there in the kitchen all alone.

I do not understand, Dmitri said.

Ja, he said then. Yes.

On a silver tray, he took the champagne, the bread, the cheese, back up the two flights of stairs. He had to stop himself from running, from exuberance. Chekhov was sitting at the desk, writing now by candlelight.



First time in months that you hold a pen, said Dmitri.

He could not hide the excitement in his voice.

Letter to Olga, said Chekhov. Then the play.

Dmitri opened the bottle. The cork exploded and flew across the room and glanced off the mirror. Dmitri laughed.

Like the old days, Dmitri said. Drink this, and eat, for God's sake.

Chekhov wrote:

Dear Olga,

Had you been able to be here, for this, I would have kissed you and held you to me for the last time. But the contagion that weakened my hand and my resolve . . . I have loved you these three years, so short a time for us,

Anton.

Should he have married her, the actress? Complicated. She had her own life. He sealed the letter and placed it on the bureau.

Now the little play, he said. Pour me another, Dmitri.



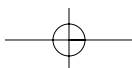
THE HOTEL ROOM

By Anton Chekhov

A Play in One Act, One Scene

We'll destroy this after the performance, he said. Too melodramatic, I expect.

Destroy it? Not likely, said Dmitri. I'll put it in my pocket, the moment your back is turned.



The cast:

Anton Chekhov, *a dying writer and physician*

Dmitri Mikhailovitch, *his friend of long standing*

Anonymous, *a young man, a guest of the hotel*

Franz Josef, *a friend of Dmitri, a doctor in the same hotel*

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

A hotel room in Badenweiler, Germany, 1904. It is night, towards dawn. The curtains beside the bed are open, revealing, outside, the bare arms of a tree. Diffuse moonlight. A breeze moves the curtains waywardly, infinitesimally. On a bureau stage right, a letter. A writing-table, a brass bed, a carpet, a candle. A wash basin beside the bed on a small table.

A middle-aged man, ANTON CHEKHOV, lies in the bed, coughing sporadically. He does not otherwise move and appears to be unconscious.

Enter stage right a YOUNG MAN. He is fourteen years old. He stands back, almost behind the bureau, self-effaced. He gazes upon the man in the bed.

Enter stage left DMITRI. He approaches the bed cautiously, as though uncertain as to what he will find.

DMITRI: Anton?

CHEKHOV *startles, half-lifts his head from the pillow.*

CHEKHOV: I saw a bird, a heron.

DMITRI: Yes, yes, I saw it too.

CHEKHOV: What a wingspread.

DMITRI: Anton?

CHEKHOV *falls back down into the pillow. Now his eyes are open, staring at the ceiling.*

DMITRI: Anton, the champagne. It's time.

CHEKHOV: Flew, flew around the bend. Oh Christ.

DMITRI *opens a bottle of champagne. A small "pfft" in his hand as he smothers the cork. Then he pours one glass. Holding it in his right hand, he puts his left arm around Chekhov's neck and lifts his head.*

CHEKHOV: Disappeared.

DMITRI: Here, drink.

Suddenly CHEKHOV sits up on his own. He looks around the room, blindly, confused. The YOUNG BOY backs up as though to withdraw but then stops. DMITRI holds the full glass carefully. He wraps Chekhov's fingers around it, then reapplies his own hand over Chekhov's to fully support the glass.

CHEKHOV: Oh here it is. At last.

He drinks the champagne in one swallow.

DMITRI: Good. Good for you.

DMITRI and CHEKHOV *simultaneously release the glass and it tumbles to the carpet and rolls under the bed. A convulsive movement from CHEKHOV and then absolute stillness. Sounds of a horse-drawn carriage from the window. DMITRI buries his head on the side of the bed. He weeps soundlessly. The YOUNG BOY takes two hesitant steps forward. Then footsteps on the stairs.*

Enter stage left FRANZ JOSEF. He is carrying the black bag of the medical profession.

FRANZ JOSEF: Well?

DMITRI: He's gone.

FRANZ JOSEF: Just now?

DMITRI: Yes. This instant.

FRANZ JOSEPH *removes a stethoscope from his bag and approaches the bed. Reverently, he crosses himself and then he gently turns down the covers enough to place the stethoscope on Chekhov's chest.*

FRANZ JOSEF: I place this instrument on the heart of Russia.

He pauses and listens.

FRANZ JOSEF: He is dead.

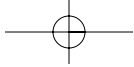
He pulls the sheet up to cover Chekhov's face.

The YOUNG BOY turns and runs from the room, exit stage right.

Dawn enters the window, a pink glow in the eastern sky. A calliope can be heard playing in the distance, faintly.

CURTAIN

I see what you mean, sentimental, said Dmitri. A calliope at dawn? The heart of Russia?



Chekhov laughed.

I'm out of practice, he said. Now, the play's on, 5 a.m. That's four hours. Make sure that boy's here.

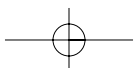


After the one and only performance of the play *The Hotel Room* by Anton Chekhov, the author left Badenweiler at dawn in a four-wheeler, a carriage with two nervous but sturdy greys. From the hotel entrance to the carriage took him three seconds, no more, and he was well disguised in a cape, and a heavy rain had begun to fall. There were no eyes to see him, no lips to report. Two days later, an empty coffin weighted by gravel was carried down Hermanstrasse to the foreign cemetery by his friends. A mockery, you might say, but for him, for Chekhov, it was the next irrevocable step.

Badenweiler to Hamburg to Rotterdam. A ship to Liverpool. Each and every day brought new vigour, even zest. His appetite returned. In December he booked passage on an outbound liner from London, bound for New York. Steerage. He had nothing with him but his medical bag, containing his papers of qualification.

Once he was out of Germany, there was no need for him to travel incognito; no one knew him, no one cared. He was free. "Scot-free" he read in a dictionary. He studied English for three hours a day. The Atlantic crossing was calm and peaceful, as though in fact the ship had left the surface of the earth and flew effortlessly through air.

New York. The New World. There were Russians everywhere, in small passionate numbers: anarchists, broken poets, labourers, cobblers, taverns full of drinkers. He kept away.



For six months, he worked on a small farm in upper New York State, north of Albany. There he worked with a scythe, he picked apples, he moved rocks. He cared for honeybees. He was so at home with horses that one night, by the light of three lanterns, he delivered a footling breech and the foal and the mare both survived, long after the local veterinarian had given up the ghost.

Then he said goodbye.

He took a train to Canada, to Montreal. For a few days he spoke French, a language in which he was never fluent. Then he went to the station again.

West, he said to the cashier. *Ouest.*

He crossed a thousand lakes. The boreal forest closed down for days before opening up to grass, to tumbleweed, to ducks on open patches of water. It was familiar to him now. He stood between the cars of the train, breathing. He hadn't coughed for months.

In Weyburn, Saskatchewan, he stepped, for the last time, from the transcontinental train. It was 2 a.m. The small platform was empty but for a baggage cart off to one side. All he had was his one suitcase. The prairie sky had taken a shift to the west; Polaris was over there now. Otherwise it was all the same, even the owls. He was forty-five years old, far too old to be homesick.

For the first six months, he rented a room in the drab hotel adjacent to the station. It was a far cry from Badenweiler but not from anything else he had known; the corridors were narrow, uncarpeted, the wood rough-hewn, the windows ill fitting. Slow flies clustered on the windows in the afternoons, or clung to long glued strips of twisted paper that hung everywhere, like curls. He could have been almost anywhere in Russia.

That first morning in Weyburn, he stood before a wobbly mirror and shaved off his moustache. Then he went to the town office and presented his credentials and resumed the practice of

medicine. He took his glasses, his thick accent, his bandages, his stethoscope and out he went into the prairie. It was not difficult for him. Here, the same diseases haunted the landscape: polio, diphtheria, measles, smallpox. All you could do with these was diagnose, watch, console. He could do that better than anyone. He was as sad and as effortless as life and death itself. His very first case was a young girl with diphtheria. By chance, she survived, and his reputation was made.

Wherever he went, he rode on his horse, Zorky, and he took his time. He was able to save some money, so he opened up a bank account. They misspelled his name; he smiled at the irony. He cared nothing for worldly things but now, here, he was "Checkhov." It was lonely in Weyburn, but the loneliness brushed off him like chaff. He bought a small farm on the outskirts of town. He grew his own vegetables, cultivated native trees to form a windbreak on the west.

When prairie dogs moved into his garden, he went to the hardware store. By then, he knew how to speak in the vernacular.

A varmint gun, he said.

The man brought him a shotgun.

No, Chekhov said, a pistol. All I want is a pistol.

You're better off with this, prairie dogs, the man said. Take out two at a time, this baby.

The pistol, please, Chekhov said. I scare them off, that is all.

Yes sir, Doctor sir.

He rode back to his farm, armed for the first time since he left Russia, and he placed the pistol and the ammunition into the top drawer of a small table that stood close to the kitchen window, affording him a view of the garden.

Then, one day, when he was fifty-four years old and had been in Weyburn, Saskatchewan for nine years, a girl came to his door, looking for housework. She was a Russian girl named

Sonja, rejected by her family because of something secretive, God knows what, he wondered. A pregnancy, a miscarriage? Something, for her, unspeakable.

He accepted her.

She slept on a cot in the kitchen, he in a four-poster bed upstairs. She prepared meals and did the housework, so at last he had some moments to himself. Secretly, he began to write again, short stories in English, a play.¹

After three years of this pleasant arrangement, Sonja began to run fevers, lose weight and cough. Soon she was bed-ridden with, as fate would have it, advanced tuberculosis, and their roles in the household became reversed. Now it was the doctor who waited on the housemaid. Eventually, all she could do was swallow broth, and her face became the colour of meadow-rue. For two weeks, he cancelled all appointments.

One evening during this time, late, Chekhov walked outside. A soft rain was falling, so soft that the still face of his pond, fringed by cut water-grass, was barely stippled. A shroud of mayflies swept from shore to shore, dipping and twisting in the pellucid air. Some fell, some spun like the briefest of pinwheels, and twisted there upon the grey surface. He could hear a train in the distance, the whistle, the heavy rumble of grain, iron on iron. A blue heron rose and flew away.

He heard a cry from inside the house.

Sonja was covered with a cold sweat. She was sitting up to breathe.

I'm drowning, drowning, she said.

He opened the window and stood there, not knowing what to do. He fanned her with his hands.

Doctor, she tried to say but even those two syllables were beyond her, so wracked was her chest.

Then: Save me, Jesus, she said.

¹ None of these survive

He wrapped his arms around her, lightly.

Breathe, he said to her. Breathe.

Not Jesus, she said.

Oh, I know, he said. I know.

Slowly she relaxed back upon the pillows. She coughed weakly. Blood rose to the corners of her mouth.

At last, she appeared comatose. Again he walked outside. Again she cried out.

Drowning, she said.

Chekhov walked to the table by the kitchen window and removed the pistol. He walked over to the bedside.

Look, he said to her, prairie dogs.

When Chekhov's neighbours heard the unfamiliar crack of a pistol, they came running to investigate. No one answered their knock on the door.

Had they been familiar with his written work—an impossibility under the circumstances, his obscurity being so profound in Weyburn as to rival the obscurity of all of us today—then they need not have run. They could have walked, knowing the solace of what they would find.

Prior to the introduction of street lights, in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, the *aurora borealis* would often be visible, particularly in autumn; it would sweep the northern sky with a sibilant green-gold hiss, like a curtain falling all night, and it would stay like that until the blaze of the sun tipped up, fired once, fired twice, upon the eastern horizon.

