

Chance Encounter in Bad Nauheim

LARS KLEBERG

In the park of the Bad Nauheim sanatorium on a sunny day in late spring, 1897. A small, round grassy spot, encircled by white benches and bushes. At the rear of the stage, a tall evergreen hedge opens out onto a path.

NF – Niels Finsen

AP – Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

NF is seated on a wicker chair. He is wearing a heavy brown overcoat, is bare-headed, and has a little easel in front of him at which he is painting. AP, wearing a single-breasted linen suit and a straw hat walks past, halts a moment to glance at the easel, goes on, then returns slowly. Stops.

NF

(After a few moments of silence, without looking up). Are you interested in painting?

Pause.

NF

Are you interested in painting?

AP

Pardon me, I didn't mean to interrupt.

NF

Think nothing of it. *(Pause).* There's something special about the light here, the way it falls. Everything looks different when the sun is shining and the trees are in shadow. *(Pause).* I'm only an amateur. One needs a hobby.

AP

I have no hobbies, myself. There aren't enough hours in the day. Actually, I'm looking for a friend ... from a long time back. He's an artist as well, incidentally, by the name of Levitan. But apparently he has already moved on. You don't happen to have met him here, a Russian artist? *(Pause).* I'm Russian myself.

NF

(Smiling). Pardon me, Herr Chekhov – am I pronouncing that correctly? We easily saw through your alias, “Doctor Pavlov.” And your books are quite well known in Denmark, too. My home country. My name is Finsen. *(Attempts a bow, seated in his chair. Pause)*.

AP *(hesitates, begins to walk on, then asks)*

Do you mind if I sit down?

NF

Not at all.

AP

I came here to see my old friend, as well as to get away from all the attention back home. A writer must be constantly prepared to receive visitors, particularly elderly ladies, to reply to questions, to sign books and autograph photos. Excruciating. However, I find hordes of Russians here as well. Running away from oneself isn't easy – you have yourself with you wherever you go, so to speak. *(Finsen smiles, goes on painting. Pause)*. What do you do when you're not painting, if I may enquire?

NF

I'm a doctor – a physician and inventor. I don't really have time, either. But sometimes a doctor is also required to put on the patient's garb. I don't know whether the hydrotherapy is helping, but Doctor Groedel has a fine reputation. And this certainly is a lovely place. Hopefully a couple of weeks of carbonic acid baths will give me a bit of energy. *(Pause. Goes on painting)*. You're a physician yourself, aren't you?

AP

I am, but I have abandoned my calling.

NF

May I ask why?

AP

Well, my writing began as a hobby, but then it took the upper hand. I felt I was constantly betraying medicine, so in the end it was best to hang down my sign. (*Pauses. Looks at NF's painting. Pause*). If you don't mind my asking, are you colorblind?

NF

Funny you should ask. I am preoccupied with the impact of rays of light on the organism. As far as I know, I have always been able to distinguish between red and blue.

AP

But what about red and green, or green and brown? In any case, you use an unusual range of colors. (*Pause*). They say the colorblind are particularly sensitive to certain nuances others do not see. (*Pause*). What kind of inventions do you make?

NF

(*Sets down his brushes and palate*). Do you see that cat over there, sunning itself by the stone wall?

AP

I do.

NF

Look again in a quarter of an hour and you will see that it has moved, to keep out of the shade.

AP

Yes, I suppose it is enjoying the heat.

NF

It is enjoying something, but not the heat. Rather, what the cat is after are the invisible chemical rays, the ultraviolet rays. I have been aware of this ever since my student days. Later, when I began analyzing the wavelengths of light, I found that different animals sought out not only the light in general but specifically those chemical rays, which seem to have a particular effect of excitation. However, sometimes they try to keep away from those rays as well. Once when I trapped a chameleon in a box, the glass top of which was half red, half

blue, and let the sun shine on it, the chameleon remained pale on one side, while the other side quickly turned black as pitch. Protection from the chemical rays. That explains why we develop pigment, and why the Negroes in Africa are black.

AP

I believe I read about “Doctor Finsen’s red rooms” in a medical journal.

From the other end of the park, a brass band strikes up a sprightly march. Pause.

NF

The red rooms were meant to protect smallpox patients from the chemical rays. But now I am working on their positive effects, not least their ability to kill bacteria. A couple of colleagues and I have begun experimenting on treating *lupus vulgaris* with concentrated light therapy. As you know, until now there has been no effective therapy – scraping, cauterization and other unpleasant treatments have been tried. In the past in England there was even some belief in the laying on of royal hands! We hypothesized that at our latitudes we might need to compensate for sunlight deficiency, so we tried electric carbon arc lighting. One of our patients with severe lupus, an engineer at the Copenhagen electricity works, offered us electricity at no charge in exchange for his treatments.

AP

Some patients have useful contacts.

NF

The light we were testing was so powerful that we had to begin by filtering out the heat waves through lenses and blue water – the very opposite of the red rooms, which removed the chemical rays. The cold rays gave rise to other reactions on the epidermis than the warm ones, a kind of erythema, and soon we had proof of their bactericidal effect. Facial lesions this man had been going around with for years – reminiscent of a leper – fell away, and under the scabs there was smooth, healthy skin. Naturally, a great deal remains to be done. And since last year, with the support of this engineer and a number of patrons, I have been running a Light Institute for research on and treatment of lupus.

AP

Are you saying that the rays with a healing effect are the invisible ones? Very interesting. And do you sunbathe yourself, Sir?

NF

No... I really don't have the time; I am devoted to my patients and the laboratory. But I promise you that if light baths in the sun or under a carbon arc lamp were to come into general use, then we – particularly us northern Europeans – would be able to achieve improvements for thousands of people. The power of light is as yet nearly entirely unexplored. And our research is in step with the times. In Denmark there are already young men rabbleroising in favor of nude bathing and gymnastics in the sunshine. Their group calls itself Hellenists. And young artists are taking their lead and honoring the nude body in sunlight.

AP

Nude bathers? And in art? That sounds utterly alien to our culture. *(He has a violent coughing fit, then spits into a large handkerchief).*

Pause.

NF

Do you see the cat now? It has moved to keep out of the shade. *(Pause)*. I feel certain that sun worship will soon be popular in Russia as well. One day your poets will sing the praises of the sun!

AP

If we live long enough to see it. *(Pause)*. But not nude bathing. They say there are some semi-males who do it on the Karelian peninsula during the summers. But in principle, in my country, the naked body is never exposed, and particularly not in art. There is, however, one amusing exception that justifies the rule. It is said that in a mansion outside Saint Petersburg there hangs a painting of Elizaveta Petrovna, the daughter of the tsar, stark naked. As a child mind you, but the body is that of a nude woman. Today it may seem provocative, to say the least. But in the eighteenth century it would never have occurred to anyone that the naked body on the canvas was the actual body of the daughter of the tsar. It would have been obvious to all that although it was her head, the body was that of a classical goddess: the painting was an allegorical depiction

of the daughter of the tsar in the role of the goddess Flora. But with the triumphal march of realism in recent years, people's sense of the boundary between art and reality has become so blurred that the painting has had to be hidden away, so that no one should have to think they have seen the daughter of the tsar in the nude.

NF

(*Laughing*). Indeed, times change. Russian realism is an accepted concept in Denmark today as well. Turgenev, above all, is widely discussed. All the young radicals are reading Turgenev, myself included.

AP *sighs deeply, coughs.*

NF

However, his latest work, *Punin and Baburin*, was a dreadful disappointment. That old revolutionary who dies with the slogan "Hurrah, Hurrah! God save the tsar" on his lips when serfdom is abolished – no, not really ... Imagine if literature began to demonstrate a greater interest in state of mind than in engagements and debates, and ceased writing about "types" and "characters", things we've all read hundreds of times before. I am not very familiar with your writing, but you appear to be moving in a different direction. The reader doesn't know at the end whether the hero and heroine will live happily ever after, but in exchange there are individual cases. *The Duel* and *Ward no. 6* are available in Danish. But I found a book that came out in Swedish translation last year, *The Black Monk*, even more interesting. That story had something disquieting and magical about it. By the end you are unsure if you actually see the mysterious monk who appears to your protagonist, if you are awake or dreaming. Do you personally believe in these things, in mirages?

AP

Do you?

NF

I am sure there are rays about which we have no idea. But we have our hands full with those we already know exist, although their effects are as yet unknown to us.

AP

What interests me is not mirages, but how people perceive them.

NF

Actually, I preferred the story of the old professor.

AP

The problem with that one was that people took the retired professor for me. That his ideas – or his lack of ideas – were my lack of ideas. After that I had to move on to writing some kind of dialogues, you know, as in *The Duel*, so as not to be pinned down to any specific idea. And that ended up with the critics accusing me of not having any ideas at all. But I am interested in *how* people have ideas, not in proffering them. The critics are the real problem, those policemen of ideas who will rip a moral out of a story at any price. If they fail, it is the failure of the author. (*Pause*). As you just said, it is about individual cases, and no individual case can simply have conclusions drawn from it and then be pigeonholed. I learned that from the only one of our professors who impressed me, Zakharin. He was a phenomenal diagnostician.

NF

Zakharin, the name sounds familiar.

AP

His lectures were extraordinary. But when they were published in book form it was as if the music vanished, leaving nothing but the libretto. I understand they have now been published in English as well, but no one abroad will be convinced of the genius of Zakharin.

NF

One Swedish critic compared your work to Dostoevsky's, referring to you as one of the up and coming Russian symbolists.

AP

(*Laughs*). God save us... symbolists? We have a small group that goes by that name, but I am not among them. They may be good fellows, but I cannot accept their longing for the hereafter! If they spent a bit more time in the brothels, the problem would vanish. No, what is interesting is not the symbolists and their exercises. What we need is a new perspective, a way of seeing that does not require wearing ideological spectacles. Levitan, the painter I mentioned, are you familiar with him? No, I suppose that he is only known back home. But he is more interesting than all the other so-called realists and impressionists and symbolists put together. There is something about his work:

at times you are unsure what is foreground and what is background – they suddenly change places. He is currently working on a canvas called *Haystacks*, which pulls off that tour de force brilliantly. Everything hovers. If it were possible to achieve such a feat in literature, it would be a great accomplishment. I would like objects to appear quite naked, with no conclusions at all drawn. (*Begins to cough again, spits into his handkerchief*).

Pause.

NF

There is a new Norwegian author. You would probably be interested in his novel *Hunger*.

AP

Hansen...?

NF

No, Hamsun. His name is Knut Hamsun.

Suddenly the brass band can be heard, playing louder and louder. Through the opening in the evergreen hedge we see it pass by, followed by an entourage of sanatorium patients. The music ends abruptly. After a moment of silence, loud cheering.

Pause.

NF

What on earth is going on?

AP

(*Sighs, rises from his chair and goes to where he can see through the opening in the hedge*). Good grief, it seems my compatriots are celebrating the name day of some member of the Tsar's family.

NF

Are they here, in Bad Nauheim?

AP

No, no.

NF

Well, what's all the cheering about?

AP

Just in case.

Long pause.

NF

Getting back to Hamsun, I do believe his novel would interest you.

AP

I've read it... Too much Dostoyevsky, too much sweat. – that could, of course, be the fault of the translation.

NP

He is trying to capture the sensations, the subconscious or semi-conscious layers of personality.

AP

Can you imagine him without all that psychology? What is of interest is not the ego but the sensations themselves, the pure sensations. Untinted objects. (*Pause*). Tell me, there's something I don't understand – Hamsun is Norwegian, right? Well, doesn't that really make him Swedish? Doesn't Norway belong to Sweden?

NF

Scandinavia is a bit complicated. Take me, for example – although I am Danish, my family was originally Icelandic, though in the service of the Danish crown. And, actually, I was born on the Faroe Islands.

AP

Does that put you among the colonizers or the colonized? Is there a movement for liberation in Iceland?

NF

(*Smiling*). Yes, but it is very inconspicuous.

AP

I believe the coming century will be the time of the great liberation movements. Or the great wars. Or both.

Pause.

NF

You are a playwright as well, aren't you? Sadly, your plays are not yet available in Denmark.

AP

I used to be. I no longer write for the theater. Russian theater is an abyss that devours everything without a trace. *Horror vacui*. And it will always be that way, no matter how brilliant future producers are. *Horror vacui!* They pile everything upon everything else, horrid, ugly scenery, actresses who want nothing more than to show off the new dresses and jewelry they have acquired heaven only knows how. A theater worthy of the name would just leave everything in peace, including the audience. But the magic would still be there. When my last play flopped, I realized that no one understood what I was trying to do. The words, the people, the scant scenery, it was all meant to be there, side by side, without disturbing the other bits. Foreground and background were meant to suddenly change places, rather like in Levitan's *Haystacks*. You see, I am not interested in the minds of my characters, but in how they reflect each other. The question is how this can be depicted on stage. There is never enough air! (*Coughing*).

NF

A French colleague who visited me in Copenhagen not long ago spoke of Japanese theater. In Paris, people are wild about Japan. Everything must be *à la japonaise*: fans, lacquered chests, stoneware jars – they are all selling like hotcakes. My colleague brought me a gift of a lovely woodcut. He spoke fascinatingly of Japanese theater, although he had never seen a performance, only read about it in a magazine. According to him, the mastery of the actor is alpha and omega in Japanese theater.

The dramas themselves are classical, based on mythology, but that is not the important thing. It is the art of acting which is at once extremely traditional and absolutely vital. Just as it is said that a certain wooden temple is destroyed and burned down once every two decades, only to be built up again – exactly as it was, but brand new – that is how each generation of actors precisely imitates its

predecessors. And yet in a way that makes it seem absolutely new! All this I heard from my French friend, and it reminds me in a way of what you are saying. An actor who does not look to the past and the future and the world around him, but who is fully focused on the present moment, on a point at which everything stands still. Although Japanese drama does have some kind of transcendental content, there is nothing in it that is anywhere but here and now. The text in itself, the music in itself, the actor in himself, and yet all unified.

AP

In Russia there is only one actor who would understand that, and she is the young Komissarzhevskaya. She was in that play of mine that was booed out. But at the dress rehearsal the audience sat in tears. She knows what reduction is. Her eyes. She made time stand still. The lines stood still, hovering in the air. (*Pause*). But I'm finished with all that now. *Finita la commedia*.

NF

But it's all right for an experiment to fail, is it not? Why don't you try again?

AP

I will not. Perhaps as a story, where the narrative can speak for itself, with no interference. (*Pause*). I find the Japanese art of which you spoke fascinating. Like everything Japanese. Yes, even Japanese women. I once had the pleasure of intimacy with a Japanese woman. They have a very objective and sometimes humorous attitude to love. Reminiscent of a professional equestrian. It is completely different from that of Russian girls with their false modesty and equally false rapture. But perhaps Danish girls are different?

NF

Sorry to say I have no experience to speak of.

AP

Really? But you are a physician, aren't you? (*Pause*). That same objectivity can be found in Japanese art. In Paris we looked at Japanese woodcuts in a shop, amazing landscapes. Behind the counter you could also see erotic images, too explicit even for French taste, entirely without those mendacious smiles and semi-buttoned corsets. The pictures by Utamaro and others are quite shameless by our standards. And their composition is drastic as well, like segments of a large image we are not being shown. You have no idea what is big and what is small; the central perspective has been suspended.

NF

You are interested in oscillation between foreground and background.

AP

(Laughing). Between you and me it is possible that the explanation is that I am nearsighted in one eye and farsighted in the other, so my focus is constantly shifting. Details become quite insistent.

Pause.

NF

In our profession the individual case must always be our lodestar. In every case, it is an individual who will receive the treatment. I have always detested university medicine, in which research for a PhD takes priority over patient's choices. I pity young doctors today, required to submit to such underhanded trickery. I once had to dissuade a younger colleague from pursuing an exciting research prospect simply so as not to arouse the jealousy of his professors. Pick a narrower topic, I said, try to get your work praised by some foreign dignitary, and be careful not to present any overly interesting conclusions – do that and you'll have your PhD in no time. *(Long pause)*. May I request a favor? Would you be so kind as to get me some water from the the Ludwig spring, the alkaline one?

AP

(Surprised). Of course.

NF

Thank you.

AP

(Leaves).

NF

(Eyes shut, breathing heavily).

Pause. NF begins to paint again.

AP

(Returns with a carafe of water). Here you are.

NF

Thank you, very kind of you. (*Takes out a small glass bottle, about half a cup, fills it with water and promptly pours out the rest onto the ground*). It's my heart. Some kind of long-term pericarditis no doctor can explain. Ascites, of course, but the puncturing is only palliative. I have begun to reduce my intake of solid foods and liquids. I weigh and register everything. I only use this water to moisten my lips when they get too dry. (*Raises the bottle to his lips without swallowing*).

AP

And yet...?

NF

And yet it does not help. I suppose I will not live long, but for the sake of my work I would like to go on as long as possible. (*Pause*). I would give almost anything to attend my own autopsy.

AP

(*Smiles. Pause*). What you were just telling me reminds me of something Zakharin once mentioned – the armoured heart. Very rare. Is there any TB in your family?

NF

No, none that I know of.

Pause.

AP

I believe you are married. If you had known that you were going to die soon, would you still have wed?

NF

I asked myself that very question before I proposed. I didn't really know about my heart condition, but I did know the prognosis was not good, so I explained the situation to my fiancée. And I asked her to choose her freedom. But she replied that whatever time we have together will be good enough. This was fully five years ago now, and as you see I am still alive. We had one son who died at birth, and that gave me the feeling that things were still not right. Last year, however, we had a second son, who can now run about and play. (*Pause*).

I think about *The Black Monk*. I understand that you are not entirely well, either. If you had to choose between your health and your creative work, what would you choose?

AP shrugs. Pause. NF goes on painting.

AP

Tell me, do you believe in God?

NF

The problem is that you have to go to church as well. That is absolutely alien to me, although I attend occasionally for my wife's sake. She is the daughter of a bishop, mind you. What about yourself? In Russia I imagine church and religion are indivisible. What about church and the other authorities.

AP

In Russia it is either/or. Between, "there is a God" and "there is no God" lies a whole vast tract which the really wise man crosses only with great effort. A Russian knows one or the other of these two extremes, and the middle tract between them does not interest him. (Pause). When I was ill in hospital last spring, Count Tolstoy paid me a visit. He was most eager to discuss the immortality of the soul, and resurrection on the Day of Judgment. I didn't know what to say, beside which I was forbidden to speak, so Tolstoy carried on the conversation singlehandedly. I am a great admirer of his art, but matters of faith leave me cold. At best. (Coughs, spits).

NF

The great French philosopher, Pascal, demonstrated irrefutably that the existence of God cannot be proven. One can merely have faith. Have you read Pascal's *Pensées*?

AP

No. But Lev Nikolayevich, Tolstoy you know, spoke of him.

NF

Anxiety, the *inquietude* of the soul, is the prerequisite to faith. According to Pascal, we must be uncertain and dare to invest everything in the great leap of faith. We may succeed, we may fail. His worries and impatience are understandable, he was ill, in constant pain, and died at only thirty-nine. No one can

say what the diagnosis was. He himself seems to have believed that illness is the correct state of mind for achieving faith. (*Pause*). Today it might have been possible to save his life. Some people say, however, that the sum of illnesses is a constant; when one has been obliterated, another comes to replace it.

AP

No, I am firmly convinced that we are moving forward, toward better times. I have seen progress during my own lifetime. I often say this: the difference between when I was beaten in my childhood and when I was no longer beaten was enormous. Since then I have believed in progress. Is it true what you say, that Pascal only lived to be thirty-nine?

NF

Thinking about all he had accomplished by the time he was my age makes me blush.

AP

How old are you, if you don't mind my asking?

NF

Thirty-six.

AP

Almost the same as me. (*Pause*). Tolstoy also spoke of another French philosopher, of whom I had never heard. To be honest with you, I found him more interesting than Pascal. Étienne de La Boétie. He is said to have died at just thirty-four. Still, he was able to write a remarkable essay, "Discourse on Voluntary Servitude". According to Tolstoy, La Boétie claimed that human servitude to any tyrant rests ultimately on approval of the oppression by the oppressed. What makes us unfree? Who makes us unfree? The answer is: we do it ourselves! What makes mankind willing to bend under the yoke, if animals refuse, asks La Boétie. We who are meant to have free will, why do we not wish to be free? Although oppression may seem insuperable, someone must have granted the tyrant his power. It begins with his having five or six underlings, "accomplices to his cruelty, companions to his pleasure, souteneurs to his lechery, and partners in whatever he grabs up". Soon these six will have six hundred in their turn, taking advantage of them just as they are taken advantage of by the tyrant. And in their turn, these six hundred will soon have six thousand underlings, all of whom deliver upwards at the same time as they

take advantage of those below them, and under them soon hundreds of thousands or million on whom the entire system, and thus the emperor, rests. This was written by a philosopher more than four centuries ago! It sounds incredibly topical, not least where I come from. But how can mankind ever be free if human beings are prepared not just to humiliate their neighbors but also to allow themselves to be humiliated? According to La Boétie, what we must do is to realize our freedom. But there's just one little detail – human beings fear it, fear freedom. (*Long pause. A bell rings*). That's the lunch bell.

NF

I'm not having any.

AP

I understand. (*Pause*). Well, it was interesting to meet you.

NF

The same to you.

AP

And best of luck with that light therapy of yours.

NF

If we live long enough to see!

AP walks offstage. NF remains seated, eyes shut. Then he returns to his painting.

THE END

(Translated by Linda Schenck)

Note: NF = Niels Finsen, 1860–1904, Danish physician. 1903 Nobel laureate in medicine. AP = Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, 1860–1904, Russian author.