A Swim in a Pond in the Rain

IN WHICH
FOUR RUSSIANS
GIVE A MASTER CLASS ON
WRITING, READING,
AND LIFE

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New York

We Begin

For the last twenty years, at Syracuse University, I've been teaching a class in the nineteenth-century Russian short story in translation. My students are some of the best young writers in America. (We pick six new students a year from an applicant pool of between six and seven hundred.) They arrive already wonderful. What we try to do over the next three years is help them achieve what I call their "iconic space"—the place from which they will write the stories only they could write, using what makes them uniquely themselves—their strengths, weaknesses, obsessions, peculiarities, the whole deal. At this level, good writing is assumed; the goal is to help them acquire the technical means to become defiantly and joyfully themselves.

In the Russian class, hoping to understand the physics of the form ("How does this thing work, anyway?"), we turn to a handful of the great Russian writers to see how they did it. I sometimes joke (and yet not) that we're reading to see what we can steal.

A few years back, after class (chalk dust hovering in the autumnal air, old-fashioned radiator clanking in the corner, marching band practicing somewhere in the distance, let's say), I had the realization that some of the best moments of my life, the moments during which I've really felt myself offering something of value to the world, have been spent teaching that Russian class. The stories I teach in it are constantly with me as I work, the high bar against which I measure my own. (I want my stories to move and change someone as much as these Russian stories have moved and changed me.) After all these years, the texts feel like old friends, friends I get to introduce to a new group of brilliant young writers every time I teach the class.

So I decided to write this book, to put some of what my students and

I have discovered together over the years down on paper and, in that way, offer a modest version of that class to you.

Over an actual semester we might read thirty stories (two or three per class), but for the purposes of this book we'll limit ourselves to seven. The stories I've chosen aren't meant to represent a diverse cast of Russian writers (just Chekhov, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Gogol) or even necessarily the best stories by these writers. They're just seven stories I love and have found eminently teachable over the years. If my goal was to get a non-reader to fall in love with the short story, these are among the stories I'd offer her. They're great stories, in my opinion, written during a high-water period for the form. But they're not all equally great. Some are great in spite of certain flaws. Some are great *because* of their flaws. Some of them may require me to do a little convincing (which I'm happy to attempt). What I really want to talk about is the short story form itself, and these are good stories for that purpose: simple, clear, elemental.

For a young writer, reading the Russian stories of this period is akin to a young composer studying Bach. All of the bedrock principles of the form are on display. The stories are simple but moving. We care about what happens in them. They were written to challenge and antagonize and outrage. And, in a complicated way, to console.

Once we begin reading the stories, which are, for the most part, quiet, domestic, and apolitical, this idea may strike you as strange; but this is a resistance literature, written by progressive reformers in a repressive culture, under constant threat of censorship, in a time when a writer's politics could lead to exile, imprisonment, and execution. The resistance in the stories is quiet, at a slant, and comes from perhaps the most radical idea of all: that every human being is worthy of attention and that the origins of every good and evil capability of the universe may be found by observing a single, even very humble, person and the turnings of his or her mind.

I was an engineering student in college, at the Colorado School of Mines, and came to fiction late, with a particular understanding of fiction's purpose. I'd had a powerful experience one summer, reading *The Grapes of Wrath* at night, in an old RV in my parents' driveway in Ama-

rillo, after long days working in the oil fields as what was called a "jug hustler." My fellow workers included a Vietnam vet who, there in the middle of the prairie, periodically burst into the voice of an amped-up radio host ("THIS IS WVOR, AMARILLO!") and an ex-con, just out of jail, who, every morning, in the van on the way to the ranch where we were working, would update me on the new and perverse things he and his "lady" had tried sexually the night before, images that have stayed with me ever since, sadly.

As I read Steinbeck after such a day, the novel came alive. I was working in a continuation of the fictive world, I saw. It was the same America, decades later. I was tired, Tom Joad was tired. I felt misused by some large and wealthy force, and so did Reverend Casy. The capitalist behemoth was crushing me and my new pals beneath it, just as it had crushed the Okies who'd driven through this same Panhandle in the 1930s on their way to California. We too were the malformed detritus of capitalism, the necessary cost of doing business. In short, Steinbeck was writing about life as I was finding it. He'd arrived at the same questions I was arriving at, and he felt they were urgent, as they were coming to feel urgent to me.

The Russians, when I found them a few years later, worked on me in the same way. They seemed to regard fiction not as something decorative but as a vital moral-ethical tool. They changed you when you read them, made the world seem to be telling a different, more interesting story, a story in which you might play a meaningful part, and in which you had responsibilities.

We live, as you may have noticed, in a degraded era, bombarded by facile, shallow, agenda-laced, too rapidly disseminated information bursts. We're about to spend some time in a realm where it is assumed that, as the great (twentieth-century) Russian short story master Isaac Babel put it, "no iron spike can pierce a human heart as icily as a period in the right place." We're going to enter seven fastidiously constructed scale models of the world, made for a specific purpose that our time maybe doesn't fully endorse but that these writers accepted implicitly as the aim of art—namely, to ask the big questions: How are we supposed to be living down here? What were we put here to accomplish? What should we value? What is truth, anyway, and how might we recog-

nize it? How can we feel any peace when some people have everything and others have nothing? How are we supposed to live with joy in a world that seems to want us to love other people but then roughly separates us from them in the end, no matter what?

(You know, those cheerful, Russian kinds of big questions.)

For a story to ask these sorts of questions, we first have to finish it. It has to draw us in, compel us to keep going. So, the aim of this book is mainly diagnostic: If a story drew us in, kept us reading, made us feel respected, how did it do that? I'm not a critic or a literary historian or an expert on Russian literature or any of that. The focus of my artistic life has been trying to learn to write emotionally moving stories that a reader feels compelled to finish. I consider myself more vaudevillian than scholar. My approach to teaching is less academic ("Resurrection, in this context, is a metaphor for political revolution, an ongoing concern in the Russian zeitgeist") and more strategic ("Why do we even need that second return to the village?").

The basic drill I'm proposing here is: read the story, then turn your mind to the experience you've just had. Was there a place you found particularly moving? Something you resisted or that confused you? A moment when you found yourself tearing up, getting annoyed, thinking anew? Any lingering questions about the story? *Any answer is acceptable.* If you (my good-hearted trooper of a reader) felt it, it's valid. If it confounded you, that's worth mentioning. If you were bored or pissed off: valuable information. No need to dress up your response in literary language or express it in terms of "theme" or "plot" or "character development" or any of that.

The stories were, of course, written in Russian. I offer the English translations that I've responded to most strongly or, in some cases, the versions I first found years ago and have been teaching from since. I don't read or speak Russian, so I can't vouch for their faithfulness to the originals (although we'll do some thinking about that as we go). I propose that we approach the stories as if they were originally written in English, knowing that we're losing the music of the Russian and the nuance they would have for a Russian reader. Even in English, shorn of those delights, they have worlds to teach us.

The main thing I want us to be asking together is: What did we feel

and where did we feel it? (All coherent intellectual work begins with a genuine reaction.)

Once you've read each story, I'll provide my thoughts in an essay, in which I'll walk you through my reactions, make a case for the story, offer some technical explanations for why we might have felt what we felt, where we felt it.

I should say here that I expect a given essay won't mean much if you haven't read the corresponding story. I've tried to pitch the essays to someone who's just finished reading and has a reaction fresh in her mind. This is a new kind of writing for me, more technical than usual. I hope the essays are entertaining, of course, but as I was writing, the term "workbook" kept coming to mind: a book that will be work, sometimes hard work, but work that we'll be doing together, with the intention of urging ourselves deeper into these stories than a simple first read would allow.

The idea here is that working closely with the stories will make them more available to us as we work on our own; that this intense and, we might say, forced acquaintance with them will inform the swerves and instinctive moves that are so much a part of what writing actually is, from moment to moment.

So, this is a book for writers but also, I hope, for readers.

Over the last ten years I've had a chance to give readings and talks all over the world and meet thousands of dedicated readers. Their passion for literature (evident in their questions from the floor, our talks at the signing table, the conversations I've had with book clubs) has convinced me that there's a vast underground network for goodness at work in the world—a web of people who've put reading at the center of their lives because they know from experience that reading makes them more expansive, generous people and makes their lives more interesting.

As I wrote this book, I had those people in mind. Their generosity with my work and their curiosity about literature, and their faith in it, made me feel I could swing for the fences a little here—be as technical, nerdy, and frank as needed, as we try to explore the way the creative process really works.

To study the way we read is to study the way the mind works: the way it evaluates a statement for truth, the way it behaves in relation to another mind (i.e., the writer's) across space and time. What we're going to be doing here, essentially, is watching ourselves read (trying to reconstruct how we felt as we were, just now, reading). Why would we want to do this? Well, the part of the mind that reads a story is also the part that reads the world; it can deceive us, but it can also be trained to accuracy; it can fall into disuse and make us more susceptible to lazy, violent, materialistic forces, but it can also be urged back to life, transforming us into more active, curious, alert readers of reality.

Throughout, I'll be offering some models for thinking about stories. No one of these is "correct" or sufficient. Think of them as rhetorical trial balloons. ("What if we think about a story this way? Is that useful?") If a model appeals to you, use it. If not, discard it. In Buddhism, it's said that a teaching is like "a finger pointing at the moon." The moon (enlightenment) is the essential thing and the pointing finger is trying to direct us to it, but it's important not to confuse finger with moon. For those of us who are writers, who dream of someday writing a story like the ones we've loved, into which we've disappeared pleasurably, and that briefly seemed more real to us than so-called reality, the goal ("the moon") is to attain the state of mind from which we might write such a story. All of the workshop talk and story theory and aphoristic, clever, craft-encouraging slogans are just fingers pointing at that moon, trying to lead us to that state of mind. The criterion by which we accept or reject a given finger: "Is it helping?"

I offer what follows in that spirit.

IN THE CART

Anton Chekhov

(1897)

A PAGE AT A TIME

THOUGHTS ON "IN THE CART"

Years ago, on the phone with Bill Buford, then fiction editor of *The New Yorker,* enduring a series of painful edits, feeling a little insecure, I went fishing for a compliment: "But what do you *like* about the story?" I whined. There was a long pause at the other end. And Bill said this: "Well, I read a line. And I like it . . . enough to read the next."

And that was it: his entire short story aesthetic and presumably that of the magazine. And it's perfect. A story is a linear-temporal phenomenon. It proceeds, and charms us (or doesn't), a line at a time. We have to keep being pulled into a story in order for it to do anything to us.

I've taken a lot of comfort in this idea over the years. I don't need a big theory about fiction to write it. I don't have to worry about anything but: Would a reasonable person, reading line four, get enough of a jolt to go on to line five?

Why do we keep reading a story?

Because we *want to.*

Why do we want to?

That's the million-dollar question: What makes a reader keep reading?

Are there laws of fiction, as there are laws of physics? Do some things just *work* better than others? What forges the bond between reader and writer and what breaks it?

Well, how would we know?

One way would be to track our mind as it moves from line to line.

A story (any story, every story) makes its meaning at speed, a small structural pulse at a time. We read a bit of text and a set of expectations arises.

"A man stood on the roof of a seventy-story building."

Aren't you already kind of expecting him to jump, fall, or be pushed off?

You'll be pleased if the story takes that expectation into account, but not pleased if it addresses it too neatly.

We could understand a story as simply a series of such expectation/resolution moments.

For our first story, "In the Cart," by Anton Chekhov, I'm going to propose a one-time exception to the "basic drill" I just laid out in the introduction and suggest that we approach the story by way of an exercise I use at Syracuse.

Here's how it works.

I'll give you the story a page at a time. You read that page. Afterward, we'll take stock of where we find ourselves. What has that page done to us? What do we know, having read the page, that we didn't know before? How has our understanding of the story changed? What are we expecting to happen next? If we want to keep reading, why do we?

Before we start, let's note, rather obviously, that, at this moment, as regards "In the Cart," your mind is a perfect blank.

IN THE CART

They drove out of the town at half past eight in the morning. The paved road was dry, a splendid April sun was shedding warmth, but there was still snow in the ditches and in the woods. [1] Winter, evil, dark, long, had ended so recently; spring had arrived suddenly; but neither the warmth nor the languid, transparent woods, warmed by the breath of spring, nor the black flocks flying in the fields over huge puddles that were like lakes, nor this marvelous, immeasurably deep sky, into which it seemed that one would plunge with such joy, offered anything new and interesting to Marya Vasilyevna, who was sitting in the cart. She had been teaching school for thirteen years, and in the course of all those years she had gone to the town for her salary countless times; and whether it was spring, as now, or a rainy autumn evening, or winter, it was all the same to her, and what she always, invariably, longed for was to reach her destination as soon as possible.

She felt as though she had been living in these parts for a long, long time, for a hundred years, and it seemed to her that she knew every stone, every tree on the road from the town to her school. Here was her past and her present, and she could imagine no other future than the school, the road to the town and back, and again the school and again the road.

. . .

Now your mind is not so blank.

How has the state of your mind changed?

If we were sitting together in a classroom, which I wish we were, you could tell me. Instead, I'll ask you to sit quietly a bit and compare those two states of mind: the blank, receptive state your mind was in before you started to read and the one it's in now.

Taking your time, answer these questions:

1. Look away from the page and summarize for me what you know so far. Try to do it in one or two sentences.

2. What are you curious about?

3. Where do you think the story is headed?

Whatever you answered, that's what Chekhov now has to work with. He has, already, with this first page, caused certain expectations and questions to arise. You'll feel the rest of the story to be meaningful and coherent to the extent that it responds to these (or "takes them into account" or "exploits them").

In the first pulse of a story, the writer is like a juggler, throwing bowling pins into the air. The rest of the story is the catching of those pins. At any point in the story, certain pins are up there and we can feel them. We'd better feel them. If not, the story has nothing out of which to make its meaning.

We might say that what's happened over the course of this page is that the path the story is on has narrowed. The possibilities were infinite before you read it (it could have been about anything) but now it has become, slightly, "about" something.

What is it about, for you, so far?

What a story is "about" is to be found in the curiosity it creates in us, which is a form of caring.

So: What do you care about in this story, so far?

It's Marya.

Now: What is the flavor of that caring? How, and where, were you made to care about her?

—

In the first line, we learn that some unidentified "they" are driving out of some town, early in the morning.

"The paved road was dry, a splendid April sun was shedding warmth, **but** there was still snow in the ditches and in the woods. Winter, evil, dark, long, had ended so recently; spring had arrived suddenly; **but** neither the warmth nor the languid transparent woods, warmed by the breath of spring, nor the black flocks flying in the fields . . ."

I've bolded the two appearances of the word "but" above (and yes, I phrase it that way to avoid saying, "I bolded the two buts above") to underscore that we're looking at two iterations of the same pattern: "The conditions of happiness are present, **but** happiness is not." It's sunny, **but** there's still snow on the ground. Winter has ended, **but** this offers nothing new or interesting to . . . and we wait to hear who it is, taking no solace in the end of this long Russian winter.

Even before there's a person in the story, there's an implied tension between two elements of the narrative voice, one telling us that things are lovely (the sky is "marvelous" and "immeasurably deep") and another resisting the general loveliness. (It would be, already, a different-feeling story, had it started: "The paved road was dry, a splendid April sun was shedding warmth, and although there was still snow in the ditches and the woods, it just didn't matter: winter, evil, dark, long, had, at long last, ended.")

Halfway through the second paragraph, we find that the resisting element within the narrative voice belongs to one Marya Vasilyevna, who, failing to be moved by springtime, appears in the cart at the sound of her name.

Of all the people in the world he might have put in this cart, Chekhov has chosen an unhappy woman resisting the charms of springtime. This could have been a story about a happy woman (newly engaged, say, or just given a clean bill of health, or a woman just naturally happy), but Chekhov elected to make Marya *unhappy.*

Then he made her unhappy in a particular flavor, for particular reasons: she's been teaching school for thirteen years; has done this trip to town "countless times" and is sick of it; feels she's been living in "these parts" for a hundred years; knows every stone and tree on the way. Worst of all, she can imagine no other future for herself.

This could have been a story about a person unhappy because she's been scorned in love, or because she's just received a fatal diagnosis, or because she's been unhappy since the moment she was born. But Chekhov chose to make Marya a person unhappy *because of the monotony of her life.*

Out of the mist of every-story-that-could-possibly-be, a particular woman has started to emerge.

We might say that the three paragraphs we've just read were in service of *increased specification.*

Characterization, so called, results from just such increasing specification. The writer asks, "Which particular person *is* this, anyway?" and answers with a series of facts that have the effect of creating a narrowing path: ruling out certain possibilities, urging others forward.

As a particular person gets made, the potential for what we call "plot" increases. (Although that's a word I don't like much—let's replace it with "meaningful action.")

As a particular person gets made, the potential for meaningful action increases.

If a story begins, "Once there was a boy who was afraid of water," we expect that a pond, river, ocean, waterfall, bathtub, or tsunami will soon appear. If a character says, "I have never once in my life been afraid," we might not mind it so much if a lion walks in. If a character lives in perpetual fear of being embarrassed, we have some idea of what might need to happen to him. Likewise with someone who loves only money, or confesses that he has never really believed in friendship, or who claims to be so tired of her life that she can't imagine another.

When there was nothing in the story (before you started reading it) there was nothing that wanted to happen.

Now that Marya is here, unhappy, the story has become restless.

The story has said of her, "She is unhappy and can't imagine any other life for herself."

And we feel the story preparing itself to say something like "Well, we'll see about that."

Paused here for what I expect you are finding an unreasonable amount of time, at the end of the first page of an eleven-page story,

we're at an interesting place.* The story is under way. The first page has radically narrowed the concerns of the story; the rest of the story must now address (use, exploit) those concerns and not any others.

If you were the writer, what would you do next?

As a reader, what else would you like to know?

* One of the features of this page-at-a-time exercise: the better the story, the more curious the reader is to find out what's going to happen and the more annoying the exercise is.

. . .

She had lost the habit of thinking of the time before she became a schoolmistress and had almost forgotten all about it. She had once had a father and mother; they had lived in Moscow in a big apartment near the Red Gate, but all that remained in her memory of that part of her life was something vague and formless like a dream. Her father had died when she was ten years old, and her mother had died soon after. She had a brother, an officer; at first they used to write to each other, then her brother had stopped answering her letters, he
[2] had lost the habit. Of her former belongings, all that remained was a photograph of her mother, but the dampness in the school had faded it, and now nothing could be seen on it but the hair and the eyebrows.

When they had gone a couple of miles, old Semyon, who was driving, turned round and said:

"They have nabbed an official in the town. They have sent him away. They say that he and some Germans killed Alexeyev, the mayor, in Moscow."

"Who told you that?"

"They read it in the papers, in Ivan Ionov's house."

And again there was a long silence. Marya Vasilyevna thought of her school, of the examinations that were coming soon, and of the girl and the four boys whom she was sending up for them. And just as she was thinking about the examinations she was overtaken by a landowner named Hanov in a carriage with four horses, the very man who had acted as examiner in her school the previous year. As he drew alongside he recognized her and bowed.

"Good morning," he said. "Are you driving home, madam?"

. . .

So, I ended my last section by asking what else you wanted to know.

What I wanted to know was: How did Marya get here, in this crummy life?

Chekhov answers in the first paragraph of this page: she's here because she has to be. She grew up in Moscow, in a big apartment, with her family. But then her parents died, she fell out of touch with her only sibling, and now she's alone in the world.

A person could have "gotten here" by being born out here, in the sticks, or by being an idealistic young woman dedicated to rural improvement who broke off her engagement with her conventional, citified fiancé and fled to the countryside. But here's how Marya got here: her parents died and financial necessity compelled her.

And all she has left of her family is that sad photograph, in which her mother is just hair and eyebrows.

So Marya's life is not just monotonous but lonely.

When we talk about fiction, we tend to use terms like "theme," "plot," "character development," and "structure." I've never, as a writer, found these very useful. ("Your theme's no good" gives me nothing to work with, and neither does "You might want to make your plot better.") These terms are placeholders, and if they intimidate us and block us up, as they tend to do, we might want to put them aside and try to find a more useful way to think about whatever it is they're placeholding for.

Here, Chekhov gives us an opportunity to reconsider the scary term "structure."

We might think of structure as simply: an organizational scheme that allows the story to answer a question it has caused its reader to ask.

Me, at the end of the first page: "Poor Marya. I already sort of care about her. How did she get here?"

Story, in the first paragraph of its second page: "Well, she had some bad luck."

We might imagine structure as a form of call-and-response. A question arises organically from the story and then the story, very considerately, answers it. If we want to make good structure, we just have to be aware of what question we are causing the reader to ask, then answer that question.

(See?
Structure's easy.
Ha, ha, ha.)

We've known, from the first line of the story ("**They** drove out of the town at half past eight in the morning") that someone else is there in the cart with Marya. Halfway down the page we learn that this is "old Semyon" and wait for Semyon to exhibit some characteristics. ("Who are you, Semyon, and what are you doing in this story?") If his answer is "I'm here to drive the cart," that's not good enough. A million peasants could drive this cart. We're waiting to find out why Chekhov chose this specific peasant to do it.

So far, the story has declared itself to be about, approximately: a woman unhappy with the monotony of her life, a life forced on her by necessity. Semyon, by suddenly appearing, has become, whether he likes it or not, an element of that story and, therefore, doesn't get to just drive the cart while gazing out at the scenery. He has to do something for this particular story, the one with (bored, unhappy) Marya in it.

So, what do we learn about Semyon?

Not much, not yet. He's old, he's driving (she's seated behind him, we realize). He tells her some news: the mayor of Moscow has been assassinated. Marya's response ("Who told you that?") feels remonstrative and impatient (she doubts him). Semyon heard it read aloud, from a newspaper, in a teahouse. (This implies that he can't read.) And although Marya is skeptical, Semyon is actually correct: Nikolay Alekseyev, the mayor of Moscow, was, in fact, shot, in his office, by a deranged person, in 1893.

Marya's reaction? She goes back to thinking of her school.

We don't know what to make of any of this yet, but our minds quietly file it under "Semyon, Stuff About," and "Marya, Stuff About." Our expectation, given the extreme frugality of the form, is that the stuff in those files will prove meaningful later.

In the penultimate paragraph of this page, Marya's thoughts about her students and the upcoming exams are interrupted when the cart is "overtaken by a landowner named Hanov in a carriage with four

horses, the very man who had acted as examiner in her school the previous year."

Let's pause here a second. How did your mind "receive" Hanov into the story?

I recall here a phrase from old movies: "What do you take me for?"

What did you take Hanov for? What did you think he was here in the story to do?

There should be a name for this moment in a story when, a situation having been established, a new character arrives. We automatically expect that new element to alter or complicate or deepen the situation. A man stands in an elevator, muttering under his breath about how much he hates his job. The door opens, someone gets in. Don't we automatically understand that this new person has appeared to alter or complicate or deepen the first man's hatred of his job? (Otherwise, what's he doing here? Get rid of him and find us someone who *will* alter, complicate, or deepen things. It's a story, after all, not a webcam.)

Having understood Marya as "she who is unhappy with the monotony of her life," we're already waiting for some altering presence to arrive.

And here comes Hanov.

This is the big event of the page, and notice this: having made Marya on its first page, the story didn't stay static for long at all. (We didn't get a second page merely explicating her boredom.) This should tell us something about the pace of a story versus the pace of real life: the story is way faster, compressed, and exaggerated—a place where something new always has to be happening, something relevant to that which has already happened.

The main way fiction writing is taught at Syracuse (and at most MFA programs) is by way of the workshop model. Six students come together once a week, having read work by two of their number, and we all discuss that work in a technical way. We've each read the stories at least twice and line-edited them and provided some pages of commentary.

Then the fun begins.

Before we launch into our in-class critique, I'll sometimes ask the workshop to come up with what I call the "Hollywood version" of the story—a pithy one- or two-sentence summary. It's no good to start

making suggestions about a story until we've agreed on what it's trying to do. (If a complicated machine showed up in your yard, you wouldn't start altering it and "improving" it until you had some idea of its intended function.) The "Hollywood version" is meant to answer the question "What story does this story appear to want to be?"

This is done in the way artillery fire is directed, at least in my imagination: an initial shot, followed by a series of adjustments for precision.

An unhappy woman is going somewhere in a cart.

A schoolteacher, Marya Vasilyevna, unhappy because she's been teaching too long, is on her way home from a trip to town.

A schoolteacher, Marya Vasilyevna, unhappy because she's been teaching too long, bored with the monotony of her life, alone in the world, teaching only out of necessity, is on the way home from a trip into town.

Marya, a bored, lonely schoolteacher, runs into a man named Hanov.

Actually, she runs into a *wealthy* man named Hanov (he's "a landowner" after all, and has those four horses).

Notice that, in spite of the fact that we are literary sophisticates, engaged in a deep reading of a Chekhov masterpiece, we feel the sudden appearance of Hanov to be a potential nineteenth-century Russian meet-cute:

A lonely schoolteacher runs into a wealthy landowner, who, we feel, might transform her depressing life.

Put a little more crassly:

Lonely woman encounters possible lover.

Where might the story go from here?

Scan your mind, make a list.

Which of your ideas feel too obvious? That is to say: Which, if Chekhov enacts them, will disappoint you by responding too slavishly to your expectations? (Hanov, on the next page, drops to one knee and proposes.) Which, too random, won't be responding to your expectations at all? (A spaceship comes down and abducts Semyon.)

Chekhov's challenge is to use these expectations he's created but not too neatly.

No pressure.

. . .

This Hanov, a man of about forty, with a worn face and a lifeless expression, was beginning to age noticeably, but was still handsome and attractive to women. He lived alone on his large estate, was not in the service, and it was said of him that he did nothing at home but pace from one end of the room to the other, whistling, or play chess with his old footman. It was said, too, that he drank heavily. And indeed, at the examination the previous year the very papers he had brought with him smelt of scent and wine. On that occasion everything he wore was brand-new, and Marya Vasilyevna had found him [3] very attractive and, sitting next to him, had felt embarrassed. She was used to seeing cold, hardheaded examiners at the school, but this one did not remember a single prayer, did not know what questions to ask, was exceedingly polite and considerate, and gave only the highest marks.

"I am on my way to visit Bakvist," he continued, addressing Marya Vasilyevna, "but I wonder if he is at home."

They turned off the highway onto a dirt road, Hanov leading the way and Semyon following. The team of four horses kept to the road, slowly pulling the heavy carriage through the mud. Semyon changed his course continually, leaving the road now to drive over a hillock, now to skirt a meadow, often jumping down from the cart and helping the horse. Marya Vasilyevna kept thinking about the school, and wondering whether the arithmetic problem at the examination would be hard or easy. And she was annoyed with the Zemstvo office, where she had found no one the previous day. What negligence! For the past two years she had been asking them to discharge the janitor, who did nothing, was rude to her, and cuffed the boys, but no one paid any attention to her.

. . .

Although we might feel a little guilty for, just now, expecting this to be a love story, reading the first paragraph of this page, we see that Marya's thinking along the same lines. Hanov (she observes) has a worn face and a lifeless expression and is beginning to age but is still "attractive to women." He lives alone, is wasting his life (he does nothing but play chess and drink). Last year, when he came to her school, his papers smelled of wine. Surely this must have irritated and horrified her? Well, no, actually: his papers smelled of "*scent* and wine," and Marya had found him "very attractive" and, sitting next to him, had felt "embarrassed," which we read as "embarrassed by the feelings she was having because of his proximity."

Let's look at the last sentence in that first paragraph for a little insight into how Chekhov makes characters. We learn that Marya "was used to seeing cold, hardheaded examiners at the school." This sets us up to expect that Hanov will be the opposite (warm and softhearted, say). We carry that assumption of warmth and softheartedness into the next bit of text, where it's affirmed (he was "exceedingly polite and considerate") but also complicated. If Hanov is warm and softhearted, he's also clueless and disorganized and incapable of an adult level of discrimination (he doesn't remember "a single prayer," gives only the highest marks).

So a broad character (a handsome rich man) is cross-painted with contradictory information (he is, yes, handsome and rich, but he's also a bumbler, and we feel his alcoholism to be a function of his bumbling, a form of inattention or denial). The person that emerges is complex and three-dimensional. We wonder about him, rather than having him neatly in our pocket, and we're not sure if we want Marya interested in him or not.

Hanov announces the purpose of this trip in a way that completes this portrait of an amiable doofus: he's taking this long drive through the mud to visit a friend, but he has no idea whether that friend is even home.

The carts turn off the highway. In a lesser story, Marya's thoughts would be only of Hanov. But Chekhov remembers the Marya he's made. She's lived here a long time. She knows Hanov and he knows her. She's

already, we suspect, thought about Hanov as a possible savior before. So, her mind returns easily and naturally to the school, and we might now recall that this is just what it did after Semyon's assassination anecdote, earlier. She's twice now retreated from the world to thoughts of the school (and we're that much more sensitized to future occurrences). Why does she do this? What does this tell us about her that we might need to know?

We put this aside for now. But notice that, even as we do, we're again enacting an expectation of efficiency—if it turns out that this tendency of hers isn't somehow used later, we will feel it (slightly) as wasteful.

Yes: it's a harsh form, the short story.

Harsh as a joke, a song, a note from the gallows.