

A FRIEND OF MY UNCLE

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My uncle has an old friend, who became my friend, and who may become an acquaintance, even a friend, of my sons. All of these friendships past, present and future are independent and distinct. No one in my family is like another, and each of us is certainly unlike the friend of my uncle.

My uncle was a hard, loud, robust farmer living almost on the Hart and Barren County line in south central Kentucky. He struggled with a freshman year at the University of Kentucky and with Coach Rupp before he quit his formal education and the basketball team. He owned an undivided one-half interest in two mules with my grandfather, and he owned roughly an undivided one-half interest in whatever it was that made me into whatever I am now. My uncle was a partisan Republican who served as Deputy Commissioner of Agriculture for Kentucky under then Governor Louie Nunn, relishing the firing of Democrats which was his principal duty. In spite of his first year at the University of Kentucky and maybe because of his lack of formal education, my uncle read alot, mostly fiction, mostly by Russians.

Now, contrast that with my uncle's friend. He was a small-town doctor, non-political, thoughtful and soft-spoken, but full of laughter and kindness with a remarkable sociability. He wrote short stories and plays. How he and my uncle got together is a mystery, probably insoluble now, because both my uncle and his friend are dead.

I think I look at photographs of dead friends closer than I do those of live ones. This is true of my uncle's friend. We have a few photographs of our friend. There is one photograph taken shortly before his death. He is standing—if that's the word for it—and leaning wearily on his cane in a flowering garden with a long black overcoat buttoned at the top and a black hat pulled low over his eyes. He's sickly and dour; he looks like he might have been sniffing horse radish. My uncle hated this photograph and never forgave me for sending him a *New York Review of Books* with David Levine's caricature of our friend taken from this photograph, showing our friend as an elongated, gloomy, black tape-worm.

It was, I believe, because of such photographs that my uncle disliked his friend's plays. The photograph of our friend in the garden, right before his death, reminded my uncle of his plays, and for that matter, vice versa. Both the photograph and the plays, reflected, at least to my

uncle, gloom, frustration and melancholy. When the Horse Cave Theatre produced a play by our friend, my uncle refused to attend.

On the other hand, my uncle enjoyed our friend's short stories, and probably for the same reason, the photographs of our friend as a young, and even middle-aged man. My uncle's favorite photograph shows our friend, 30 years of age, broad-shouldered, maybe six feet tall, surrounded by his family who were living with him as they did all of his life—his mother, his father, his brothers and sisters. Seated in the front of the photograph is our friend with a clear lucid gaze into the camera. He has a look that imparts energy, common sense and mischief.

Our friend did not like conversations on lofty ethereal subjects. He was wonderfully simple and loved everything simple, real and unaffected. He had his own ways of making other people simple and of making an issue or subject simple. His enemy was banality and he was a master of the art of finding and exposing wherever it might try to hide. He had melancholy gray eyes with a delicate mockery playing in and about them. But at times, his eyes would grow cold, piercing and hard, then his normal melodious voice sounded harsher, and you knew, then, that this gentle unpretentious man, if he had to, could stand up and resist any hostile force.

Our friend was a talented writer of short stories. In these stories, he dusted and cleaned every eave and cornice, every nook and cranny of human activity—farmers and businessmen, doctors and lawyers, soldiers and bankrupts and wives, bureaucrats and prostitutes, husbands, school teachers and artists. My uncle read our friend's stories thoroughly, and returned to them again and again. My uncle was neither intellectual nor literary. He simply knew what he liked, and he liked his friend and his friend's stories. My uncle even read his friend's notebooks and reread his letters.

I remember one book by our friend in my uncle's library entitled *The Black Monk and Other Stories*. I read it from cover to cover one Saturday night at my uncle's house in 1958. I was 15 years old. The names were hard to remember. My uncle told me to change the damn names if I wanted to—"just remember the people and the story." Years later, my uncle and I searched his house for this book, but we couldn't find it.

I like books. I like lost ones best. And even more the quest for a particular lost book.

At the Junior League Rummage Sale in 1983, I found the book. Like me, the book had aged since 1958, but it still was the same book—blue-black cover, gold title and author, same edition—"Printed in Great Britain by William Brendon and Son, Ltd., Plymouth"—1916—with an additional inscription—"Miss Lucy Green, 25th December, 1918." Since

then, I have envied Miss Green for getting such a wonderful present—my lost book—for Christmas.

For those of you obsessed with such irrelevancies as dates, let me allay your confusion. My uncle was born in 1923. I was born 20 years later in 1943. My uncle knew our friend for roughly 65 years by the time of his (my uncle's) death in 1998. I have known our friend over half a century. My lost book of stories by our friend was published in 1916, seven years before my uncle was born and (to be chronologically nauseous), two years before Miss Green's Christmas. And to carry this exercise further, Miss Green could not have known our friend as early (or as late) as 1918, because our friend died at age 44 in a rented room in the Sommer Hotel in Germany's Black Forest, far from home, in 1904.

My uncle never did like the book *The Black Monk* particularly because of the translator, R. E. C. Long. My uncle preferred the translations of our friend's writings by Constance Garnett, the Englishwoman who translated Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. My uncle's shelves housed thirteen volumes of her translations of our friend's stories published by MacMillan and Company in 1917 and reissued in 1944.

And so, another irrelevancy or two: The friend of my uncle, that uncle who during the Cold War voted for Dewey, Eisenhower, Nixon, was a Russian.

Hopefully, now, to end the irrelevant once and for all, the name of our friend. I will paraphrase what my uncle told me years ago, talking loudly from a haywagon up to me under the hot roof of a barn, punctuated by bales of hay that he pitched to me.

"There's a 'T' in front of the 'CH', but it's not written down, it's just there. Do you understand that? (Punctuated by a hay bale.) "You don't say 'checkers': you say 'Tcheckers' from the roof of your mouth down. (Another hay bale.) And the 'OV' is really an 'OFF.' Don't ask me why that is. So, it's 'Tchekhoff' even though it's spelled 'Chekhov.' 'Anton Pavlovich Chekhov'—because his father's name was Pavel, and the 'ovich' means 'son of,' as in 'bitchovich.'" (Another hay bale.)

In some ways, those of you who have read Chekhov are at a greater disadvantage than those who have no idea of who Chekhov is. This story is not about *the* Chekhov, or *your* Chekhov (probably the gloomy consumptive old goateed creature who wrote plays), but rather about my uncle and his Chekhov, *our* Chekhov.

The facts won't seem so strange to those of you ignorant of Chekhov. There was an aging, big, brusque tobacco and grain farmer who lived and worked in Barren County, Kentucky (my uncle), who, between bouts with family, weather, soil, farmhands, broken combines and Democrats, had a friendship disparate in space and time with a dead Russian writer

of short stories. He loved this Chekhov. He studied this Chekhov. He traversed many times the human landscape of thirteen volumes of Constance Garnett's translations of the stories of Chekhov. He strived (rather unsuccessfully) for, as someone said, Chekhov's balance of sensibility and sensitivity, supreme objectivity and gentleness. To paraphrase Nabokov (another Russian writer), as a good reader of Chekhov, my uncle was one of Chekhov's best characters.

You must understand that these are my words, my characterizations. For my uncle was not bookish nor intellectual nor literary nor romantic. He was a practical man, impatient with dreams and ideas. He was, in other words, much like his friend, Chekhov.

Let me tell you something about our Chekhov, the way my uncle told me.

Our friend is born in Taganrog, on the Sea of Azov, in 1860. During the last four years of his life (age 40-44), he lives at Yalta on the adjoining Black Sea. In between youth and death, he lives in Moscow, making a living. His father, the local grocer, bankrupts when Chekhov is about 15 years old. The whole family moves to Moscow for work, all except Anton. He stays in Taganrog to finish school and to supervise the bankruptcy. At age 19, Chekhov receives a scholarship to the University of Moscow Medical School. In Moscow, he uses the scholarship to get his family out of hock.

For five years, he attends medical school and supports his family by writing short stories, sketches, one-act plays, jokes, law reports, one-liners and half-page tales for small press magazines like *The Dragonfly*. His father and older brothers defer to him. He heads the family. He keeps it together. This continues until his death.

Our friend becomes a doctor and works as an assistant to a district doctor in a small provincial town. He continues to write to bolster his income. He says that medicine is his wife and literature is his mistress. Over time, the roles reverse, but there is always medicine and writing. He is a good general physician. During a cholera epidemic, he works alone as a district doctor, taking care of 25 villages. A whole book can be written about Chekhov's work in Yalta as a member of the Board of Guardians for the Visiting Sick.

A great kindness pervades his medical practice and his literary work, not of program or message, but simply the natural coloration of his talent.

Our friend publishes two collections of short stories in 1886 and 1887. He is acclaimed by the reading public. From that time on, he belongs among the leading writers and publishes stories in the best periodicals. He tries, but never succeeds, in writing a novel. He is a sprinter, not a long distance runner.

Chekhov buys Melikova, a small estate near Moscow, and moves his whole family there. He is inexhaustibly active. He writes, practices medicine and plays pranks. Construction work fascinates him. He founds Moscow's Clinic for Skin Diseases. He organizes the Museum of Painting and Fine Arts in Taganrog. He starts the Crimea's first biological station. He collects books for schools on the Pacific Island of Sakhalin, the Tzar's prison island. He builds three schools for peasant children, and a belfry and fire station for the villages around Melikova. He builds another school in Yalta.

Chekhov still writes and publishes stories, and now, plays: *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. His tuberculosis becomes worse. He moves south for his health to Yalta on the Crimea. He commutes 600 miles to Moscow to work with Stanislavski and the Moscow Art Company in staging his plays. He's dying from consumption at age 42, and he marries Olga Knipper, an actress, age 20. It is not a happy marriage. He goes to Germany for a cure, and he dies there. His body travels back to Russia in a railcar marked "Fresh Oysters." He is buried in Moscow.

When I am one year old, General George Marshall and Ambassador Averell Harriman room together at Chekhov's villa in Yalta during Roosevelt's meetings with Churchill and Stalin. When I am 15 years old and reading *The Black Monk* and catching hay bales, Olga Knipper gives her final performance of *The Cherry Orchard* for Krushchev in Moscow.

I grew up with my uncle and Chekhov, knowing each of them through the other. My uncle rarely talked about himself, his thoughts or ideas. However, I discovered that I could learn something of Chekhov and my uncle by getting him to talk of his friend and his friend's stories. Then, he would open up and talk about all sorts of things—religion, ideas, women, boredom, hopes sanity—all the while talking of Chekhov and his stories: "The Lady with the Dog," "Ward No. 6," "In the Steppe," "The Black Monk," "The Duel."

My uncle once told me about Chekhov's (and probably his own) impatience with philosophies and ideas. What I remember most is how he told me. He showed me two photographs that I knew. One was of Chekhov visiting Tolstoy at Gaspra in 1901. The great writer Tolstoy has a flowing white beard, wears his peasant clothes and looks like some fiery prophet out of the Old Testament. The other photograph was of Chekhov at his house in Yalta in 1900 with Maxim Gorky, the Soviet writer, then a young revolutionary just out of the Tzar's prison. In both photographs, Chekhov looks like a small-town doctor with his black three-piece suit, felt mid-brim hat, pince-nez and goatee. In fact, he looks like my great-grandfather at a medical meeting in Tompkinsville, Kentucky, around 1900.

Pointing to the pictures, my uncle said, “And here’s Chekhov visiting old Tolstoy. When Tolstoy was young, he screwed every woman he could find and gambled away his estate. Now, he’s old in this picture, and he’s found God and non-violence, and he’s preaching here to Chekhov about all of these great ideas that he has—God, religion, non-violence, how great the simple rural peasant life is—and you know what Chekhov is doing? Chekhov is listening. And, here we have Chekhov with Gorky. Do you know what Gorky is telling him? About social protest, revolution, all of these great early Bolsheviks that he just met in prison, and the higher, political purposes of literature. And do you know what Chekhov is doing? Chekhov is listening; and do you know what he does? He uses these ideas, just like I *use* my hay baler.”

There is no end to this story of my uncle and Chekhov and me. After all, the three of us are very much alive and well. But I will give one final scene to a chapter. It is Thanksgiving Day, 1982. I am just back from a trip to Russia. Our family sits around the dining room table at my grandmother’s house in Horse Cave. Years ago, my grandmother gave her son, my uncle, the book *The Black Monk*. Like most of our family, she neither knows nor cares about its author. Everyone is silent as my uncle asks me questions: “Did you visit Melikova?” “Did you find his grave?” I tell about my search for Chekhov’s grave in the old cemetery at the Novodevichy Convent in Moscow. I walked in the new section of the cemetery where all of the Soviet politicians are buried who don’t make the grade to the Kremlin Wall behind Lenin’s tomb. Krushchev is in this cemetery. I noticed behind Krushchev the old section of the cemetery, rather overgrown with the ironwork in disrepair. I spent a good half hour rummaging among the old graves until I found our friend Chekhov, between the graves of Gogol and Bulgakov. As I recite these names to my uncle and he nods and responds, our relatives at the table glimpse something of my uncle they did not know before.

And so, what are the points of this story?

First, it tells a strange but rather simple story about a friendship of two men with probably no point to it, no resolution, no message. It is a story (albeit a bad one) that Chekhov could have written.

Second (and both Chekhov and my uncle would wince at this), it may give you some inkling of my belief in the immediacy, vitality and practicality of literature. Good teachers teach more than they know—so it was with my uncle who gave me Chekhov and who taught me about the immediacy of and the absolute need for, his stories.

Third, and finally, it illustrates an idea of another writer, Jorge Luis Borges—that reading a book is as creative an act as writing one. The writer and the reader are creative artists relative to the book and to each other. Chekhov’s act of writing recreates and nurtures my uncle.

My uncle's act of reading recreates and nurtures Chekhov. And so it goes with writing and reading, with Chekhov and my uncle, with writers and their best characters.

—for *R. E. Palmore, Jr.*

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