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ANTON CHEKHOV

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ANTON CHEKHOV

A Nervous Breakdown

Translated by
Ronald Wilks

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Contents

A Nervous Breakdown	1
The Black Monk	37
Anna Round the Neck	85

A Nervous Breakdown

I

One evening a medical student called Mayer, and Rybnikov, a pupil at the Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, called on their law-student friend Vasilyev and invited him to pay a visit to S— Street with them. Vasilyev took a long time to make up his mind but finally put his coat on and went off with them.

He knew of fallen women only by hearsay and from books, and he had never been in their houses. He knew that there were immoral women forced to sell their honour for money under pressure of circumstances – environment, poor upbringing, poverty and so on. These women knew nothing of pure love, had no children, no legal rights. Their mothers and sisters mourned them as if they were dead, science treated them as an evil and men spoke to them with contempt. But for all this they had not lost the image and likeness of God. All of them acknowledged their sin and hoped to be saved – and the paths to salvation open to them were innumerable. It is true that society does not forgive people their past, but Mary Magdalene

is no lower than other saints in the sight of God. Whenever Vasilyev happened to recognize a prostitute in the street from her dress or manner, or whenever he saw a picture of one in a humorous paper, he always remembered a story that he had once read somewhere: a certain pure and selfless young man falls in love with a prostitute and asks her to become his wife, but she considers herself unworthy of such happiness and poisons herself.

Vasilyev lived in one of the side-streets leading off the Tver Boulevard. It was about eleven o'clock when he left the house with his friends. The first winter snow had only just begun to fall and the whole of nature was held captive by this fresh snow. The air smelt of snow; snow softly crunched underfoot; the ground, roofs, trees, boulevard benches – all was soft, white and new, and the houses looked quite different from the day before. The lamps shone more brightly, the air was clearer and the clatter of carriages was muffled. And one's sensations became just like the touch of white, new, fluffy snow in that fresh, light frosty air.

'Unwilling to these sad shores
 A mysterious force is drawing me'

sang the medical student in a pleasant tenor.

'See the windmill now in ruins'

the art student joined in.

'See the windmill now in ruins'

repeated the medical student, raising his eyebrows and sadly shaking his head.

He stopped singing for a moment, rubbed his forehead as he tried to recall the words, then he sang so loudly, so well that passers-by looked round at him.

'Here once I did meet light-hearted love, as free as myself.'

The three entered a restaurant and each drank two glasses of vodka at the bar without taking their coats off. Before they swallowed the second, Vasilyev noticed a piece of cork in his, raised the glass to his eyes and gazed at it for a long time, blinking shortsightedly. His expression appeared strange to the medical student.

'Why are you staring like that?' he asked. 'Please, don't start philosophizing! Vodka's for drinking, sturgeon's for eating, women for visiting and snow for walking over. Please try and behave like a normal human being, at least for one evening!'

'Don't worry, I'm not chickening out!' Vasilyev laughed.

The vodka warmed his chest. He looked at his friends affectionately, and admired and envied them. How well-balanced these healthy, strong, cheerful men were, how well-rounded and smooth their minds and hearts! They sang, loved the theatre passionately, sketched, talked a great deal, drank without having hangovers the next day. They were romantic, dissolute, gentle and audacious. They could work, be deeply indignant, laugh at nothing and talk rubbish. They were warm, decent,

selfless and as human beings were in no way inferior to Vasilyev himself, who was so careful with his every word and step, so mistrustful, so cautious, so prone to make an issue out of the least trifle. And so he had felt the urge to spend just one evening in the same way as his friends, to unwind, let himself go a little. Would he have to drink vodka? Then drink it he would, even if he had a splitting headache the next morning. Would they take him to visit some girls? Then he would go. He would laugh, play the fool, cheerfully respond to passers-by.

He was laughing as he left the restaurant. He liked his friends – the one with pretensions to artistic eccentricity in that crumpled, broad-brimmed hat, the other in his sealskin cap – he had money, but he liked to play the academic Bohemian.

He liked the snow, the pale street-lamps, the sharp black prints left on the snow by the feet of passers-by. He liked the air and particularly that crystal-clear, gentle, innocent, almost virginal mood that one sees in nature only twice a year – when all is covered with snow, and on bright days or those moonlit nights in spring, when the ice breaks up on the river.

‘Unwilling to these sad shores
A mysterious force is drawing me . . .’

he sang under his breath.

For some reason he and his friends could not get that

tune out of their minds and the three of them sang it mechanically, out of time with each other.

Vasilyev pictured himself and his friends knocking at some door in ten minutes’ time, creeping down dark passages, through dark rooms, to the women. Taking advantage of the darkness he would strike a match and suddenly illumine a suffering face and guilty smile. The woman – a mysterious blonde or brunette – would doubtless have her hair hanging down and be wearing a white nightdress. She would be frightened by the light and be terribly embarrassed. ‘For goodness’ sake, what are you doing?’ she would ask. ‘Put that light out.’ It was all very terrifying, yet intriguing and novel.

II

The friends turned off Trubny Square into Grachovka Street and quickly went down the side-street which Vasilyev knew only by hearsay. Seeing two rows of houses with brightly lit windows and wide-open doors, hearing the gay sounds of pianos and fiddles floating out of all the doorways and mingling to create some weird musical jumble as if an invisible orchestra was tuning up in the darkness above the roofs, he was amazed and said, ‘So many houses!’

‘That’s nothing!’ the medical student said. ‘There’s ten

times as many in London – there's about a hundred thousand women like these living there.'

The cab drivers sat on their boxes as calmly and apathetically as in any other street. And, as in any other street, pedestrians walked the pavements. No one hurried, no one hid his face in his coat-collar, no one shook his head reproachfully . . . In this indifference, this cacophony of pianos and fiddles, in those bright windows and wide-open doors, there was something quite blatant, brazen, bold and happy-go-lucky. In slave markets long ago it must have been just as busy and bustling, people's faces and walk must have shown the same indifference.

'Let's begin at the beginning,' the art student said.

The friends entered a narrow passage lit by a lamp with a reflector. When they opened the door a man in a black frock-coat, with the unshaven face and sleepy eyes of a flunkey, lazily got up from a yellow sofa. The place smelt like a laundry with a splash of vinegar. A door led from the hall into a brightly lit room. The medical student and the artist stopped in this doorway, craned their necks and looked into the room together.

'Buona sera, signori!' the artist began, making a theatrical bow. 'Rigoletto, Huguenotti, Traviata!'

'Havana, Cucaracha, Pistoletto!' the medical student said, pressing his cap to his chest and bowing low.

Vasilyev stood behind them. He too wanted to perform

a theatrical bow, to say something ridiculous, but he could only smile, and the embarrassment he felt was almost a feeling of shame. Impatiently, he waited to see what would happen next. A small, fair girl of about seventeen or eighteen appeared in the doorway. Her hair was closely cropped and she wore a short blue frock with a white metallic pendant on her breast.

'Why are you standing in the doorway?' she asked. 'Take your coats off and come into the lounge.'

The medical and art students still talked mock-Italian as they entered the lounge. Hesitantly, Vasilyev followed them.

'Gentlemen, please take your coats off,' a servant said sternly. 'We can't have this.'

Besides the blonde, there was another girl in the lounge – very tall and plump, with a foreign-looking face and bare arms. She was sitting by the piano with patience cards spread out on her lap. She completely ignored the visitors.

'Where's the other young ladies?' the medical student asked.

'Having tea,' the blonde said. 'Stepan,' she called, 'go and tell the girls some students have come.'

A little later a third girl came into the lounge. She wore a bright red dress with blue stripes. Her face was heavily and clumsily made up, her forehead was hidden beneath her hair and her unblinking eyes had a frightened look.

After she came in she immediately started singing some song in a strong, coarse contralto. A fourth girl appeared, then a fifth . . .

Vasilyev found nothing novel or interesting in any of this. He felt as if it was not the first time he had seen a lounge, piano, mirror with cheap gilt frame, pendant, blue striped dress and empty indifferent faces like these. There was no trace of the darkness, the quiet, the secrecy, the guilty smile and all that he had been expecting and fearing.

It was all so ordinary, prosaic and uninteresting. Only one thing aroused his curiosity a little – this was the strange, seemingly deliberate bad taste evident in the cornices, the ludicrous paintings, dresses, pendant. There was something special, unusual, about this lack of taste.

‘How cheap and stupid it all is!’ thought Vasilyev. ‘What is there in all this rubbish I can see now that might tempt any normal man, that would make him commit the dreadful sin of buying a human being for a rouble? Sinning for the sake of magnificence, beauty, grace, passion, good taste – that I can understand. But this is something different. What’s worth sinning for in this place? But I mustn’t think about it.’

‘You there with the beard, get me some porter!’ the blonde said to him. Vasilyev was suddenly embarrassed.

‘With pleasure,’ he said, politely bowing. ‘Only you must forgive me, madam, I . . . hm . . . won’t join you. I don’t drink.’

Five minutes later the friends were heading for another brothel.

‘Now then, why did you get her porter?’ the medical student asked angrily. ‘Think you’re a millionaire! That’s six roubles down the drain!’

‘Why not let her have the pleasure if that’s what she wanted?’ Vasilyev said, defending himself.

‘It was *Madam’s* pleasure, not hers. They tell the girls to ask customers to treat them to drinks, and they’re the ones who make the profit.’

‘See the windmill,’ the art student sang, ‘now in ruins.’

After arriving at another brothel the friends stayed out in the hall without going into the lounge. As in the first house, a frock-coated figure with a flunkey’s sleepy face rose from a sofa in the hall. As he looked at this servant, his face and shabby frock-coat, Vasilyev thought, ‘What sufferings an ordinary simple Russian must have gone through before landing up here as a footman! Where was he before and what did he do? What lay in store for him? Was he married? Where was his mother, and did she know he was a servant in this place?’ And now Vasilyev could not help paying attention first and foremost to the male servant in each house he called at. In one house – he reckoned it was the fourth – there was a frail, shrivelled-looking little flunkey with a watch-chain on his waist-coat. He was reading *The Leaflet* and paid no attention to the new arrivals. As he looked at his face Vasilyev concluded, for some reason, that a person with

a face like his was capable of robbery, murder and perjury. And it really was a fascinating face, with its large forehead, grey eyes, squashed little nose, thin, tight lips and an expression that was at once stupid and insolent – like that of a young beagle in pursuit of a hare. Vasilyev thought that it would be nice to touch that man's hair to see if it was wiry or soft. It was probably wiry, like a dog's.

III

After two glasses of porter the art student suddenly became drunk and unnaturally lively.

'Let's go to another!' he commanded, waving his arms. 'I'll take you to the best!'

After taking his friends to what was, in his opinion, the best brothel, he expressed an urgent desire to dance a quadrille. The medical student started grumbling about having to pay the musicians a rouble, but agreed to join him. They started dancing.

The best house was just as dreadful as the worst. Here there were exactly the same mirrors, pictures, exactly the same hair-styles and dresses. Examining the furniture and costumes, Vasilyev understood that this was not exactly bad taste, but something that could be called the taste (and the style even) of S—Street. This style was to be found nowhere else, and there was something honest about its very ugliness, which had not come about by

chance, but was the result of a long process of development. After visiting eight brothels, he was no longer startled by the colours of the dresses, the long trains, the garish ribbons, the sailor suits and the thick, violet make-up on the girls' cheeks. He saw that all this was correct and that if only one of these women had been dressed like a normal human being, or if one decent engraving had hung on the walls, then the entire tone of the whole street would have suffered.

'How clumsily they sell themselves!' he thought. 'Can't they understand that vice is tempting only when it's attractive and concealed – when it's wrapped up as virtue? Modest black dresses, pale faces, sad smiles and even darkness would have more of an effect than all this crude tinsel. The stupid girls! If they can't see that for themselves, then their customers should have taught them, shouldn't they?'

A young lady in Polish costume, with white fur trimming, came over and sat by him. 'You're a nice dark and handsome man, why aren't you dancing?' she asked. 'Why do you look so bored?'

'Because I *am* bored.'

'Treat me to some claret, then you won't be bored.'

Vasilyev didn't reply. After a short pause he asked, 'What time do you go to bed?'

'After five.'

'And when do you get up?'

'Sometimes at two, sometimes three.'

'And what do you do when you're up?'
 'We drink coffee and have dinner between six and seven.'

'And what do you eat?'
 'Nothing special. Soup or cabbage stew, steak, dessert. Madam looks after her girls well. But why are you asking all this?'

'Hm, well, just to make conversation.'
 Vasilyev wanted to discuss many things with the girl. He felt a strong urge to know where she was born; whether her parents were still alive; if they knew she was in this place; how had she come here; whether she was cheerful and contented, or if she was sad and oppressed by dismal thoughts; if she had hopes of escaping from her present situation one day. But try as he might, he just did not know where to start and how to frame his questions without appearing indiscreet. After a long, thoughtful silence he asked, 'How old are you?'

'Eighty,' the girl said, joking and laughing at the way the art student was comically waving his arms and legs about.

Suddenly she burst out laughing at something and produced a long, obscene sentence that everyone could hear. Vasilyev was struck dumb and, not knowing what kind of face to make, forced himself to smile. But only he was smiling, all the others – his friends, the musicians and the women – didn't even look at the girl sitting next to him. It was just as if they hadn't heard.

'Bring me some claret!' the girl repeated.
 Vasilyev felt disgusted by those white trimmings and the girl's voice and he left her. He felt hot, that he was suffocating, and his heart started beating slowly, with strong hammer-like beats.

'Let's get out of here!' he said, tugging the art student's sleeve.
 'Wait a minute, let me finish.'

While the art student and medical student were finishing their quadrille, Vasilyev scrutinized the musicians to avoid looking at the women. At the piano was a fine-looking old man in spectacles who resembled Marshal Bazaine. The violinist was a young man dressed in the latest fashion, and he had a fair, diminutive beard. His face was far from stupid, didn't look haggard – on the contrary, it was young, clever and fresh. He was fastidiously, tastefully dressed and he played with feeling. There was one problem: how did he and that respectable, handsome old man come to be here? Why weren't they ashamed to be playing in such a place? What did they think when they looked at the women?

If the pianist and violinist had been scruffy, hungry, miserable, drunken, with gaunt or stupid faces, their presence would perhaps have been understandable. But as things were, Vasilyev understood nothing. He remembered the story of the fallen woman that he had once read, but he found that image of humanity with the guilty smile had nothing in common with what he was seeing