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The Ghost of Anton Chekhov

Most probably they met in a waiting room in one of those clinics. The thin man comes in first and takes a seat, picking out something to read from the materials tidily scattered in front of him. Shortly thereafter, the fat man comes in, and as soon as his eyes fall upon the other he cries out: "No way! Impossible. You?! After all these years!"

A warm handshake, an embrace and kisses from the fat man; a look of surprise and embarrassment on the face of the thin man, who leans a bit toward the other and murmurs, "Well, hello to you, sir."

The fat man doesn't skip a beat; he recoils as if insulted and shouts, "Sir! Me, sir? Just like that, friend? You don't remember me. You really are good for nothing, aren't you? I'm . . . but no. By the triple divorce of my two wives,* I can't tell you anything, not until you remember me by yourself."

Besides the thin man and the fat man, there is a group of youths, jumping one after the other from atop a bridge overlooking an unfathomable abyss, seemingly tied together by a rubber rope. They scream as they fall, and their voices catch the fat man's attention as he sits down. He then watches them with exaggerated concentration, his back turned on the skinny man, a mien of childish anger and reproach etched on his face. The other does not look at the television screen, but rather at his old friend, still unidentified. He looks at him in silent pleading, furrowing his brow, thumbing through all of his old mental files in mad haste, the files of 50 years. His effort fails, so he begins a systematic review of his memories and past acquaintances, beginning with his early childhood. He notes a similarity between this and what he does with the awaited doctor, so he welcomes the exercise. The confidence expressed by the fat man just then suggested a deep relationship, not something totally outdated: closeness, intimacy, companionship, friendship, broken off by circumstance. But when and where? Had he met him here before? Impossible!

The receptionist, beautiful, as is usual in these clinics, came over to register their personal information. This should clear things up, thinks the thin man. "Can I register myself?" the fat man requests. "Of course," agrees the receptionist, oblivious to everything. She insists that they have a drink while waiting for the doctor. The fat man asks for any fresh juice, except for orange, lemon or guava, and the skinny man asks for black coffee, as if counting on the that mug of coffee to help him remember.

On the screen, one of the group of divers is speaking. She relates how she met her husband in a diving camp like this one, and that they had pledged to continue diving from heights their whole lives, until time separated them or health conditions put an end to it. She went on to compare the pleasure of flying and falling through empty space to the moment of sexual orgasm, then went back to correct her comparison – "No – a thousand orgasms at the same time, fused together, condensed." Here the fat man laughed his first laugh to kill the solemnity of the place.

"Wow, these people sure know how to live!

Then:

"I love jumping through the air!"

Then an abbreviated laugh, like a typical, recurrent signature, snatched, high-pitched and ringing. For his part, the thin man tries to hear the echoes of that laugh in the corners of his memory, near and far. He tries, to no avail.

The office boy, white, full-bodied and rather short, places their drinks in front of them with care and aplomb. The fat man takes out a pack of cigarettes, metal with a shiny golden cover. He offers one to the office boy, who accepts it after a brief hesitation. The fat man lights his cigarette. The office boy turns around halfway. Before he leaves, he whispers:

"By the way, smoking is prohibited."

And he smiles, which allows the fat man another opportunity to desecrate the dignity of the place and to unnerve the thin man still further with another ringing laugh:

"Damn you boy, I know that!"

The office boy withdraws, still smiling. Then the fat man says to his old friend, in a decisive tone:

"You don't smoke, of course."

"That's right, but how . . ."

"I'm not saying a word. Or do you want my house to fall apart, when I divorce my two wives?"

The fat man is in the bathroom. The skinny man is alone, feeling great comfort. He doesn't know why; he ponders this feeling of guilt, guilt merely because he hadn't known a person who had passed into his life some day. He is peeved with himself, but still more peeved with the fat man. He decides to stop trying to remember or appease him. The thin man picks up one of the non-medical magazines and sets out to read . . . He immerses himself in its lines and pictures, as if he might find his personal destiny inside.

The receptionist passes by them, so the thin man flags her down:

"Please, is the doctor going to be even later? We've been here for almost half an hour."

She raises one eyebrow, and speaks slowly, placing emphasis on the articulation of each letter as if she were teaching a mentally retarded child to speak:

"The doctor is not late. It is in fact you two who have come almost an hour early."

The fat man intervenes:

"But the time changed. Daylight savings started two days ago."

She replies instantly, her eyebrow still raised:

"Even so! The appointment stays as is . . ."

The fat man:

"I was just kidding, Miss . . . Miss or Mrs.?"

She ignores him:

"Anyway, the doctor is lecturing in a seminar nearby, and he will come in a little while . . . Now if you'll excuse me."

She lowers her eyebrow then goes out. Before she has fully disappeared, the fat man starts to imitate her voice and manner mockingly:

"The doctor is lecturing in a colloquium on performing sexual intercourse with nurses and receptionists between every two check-ups, and he will come in a little while to demonstrate the soundness of his theories with me . . . Now if you'll excuse me so I can get ready . . ."

And his laughter explodes uncontrollably.

The thin man:

"Lower your voice, I beg you!"

The fat man:

"I bet he takes her right here on this couch!"

The thin man, pleading:

"Your voice, I beg you!"

The fat man:

"Or in the examination room, and with poor patients waiting outside!"

The office boy picks up their cups. The fat man asks him with a conspiratorial twinkle:

"What's her problem, this girl?"

"The poor thing, sir. Her mind has started to go, working here."

"May God heal us all! And you? How's your mind doing?"

"Thank God, it was already set before I came here."

The fat man's laughter once again.

The skinny man taking refuge in his reading.

But the fat man drags him from his solitude, as if making amends with him.

"Have you frequented this doctor for a while?"

"This is my third visit."

"This is my first time. I heard he's a genius, or more properly speaking, a little crazy."

"God forbid! The man is rationality itself."

"What makes you think it's an insult? The truth is, I have a predilection for crazy doctors. With them, you feel at home, you have some common ground . . . But tell me, as far as your condition, do you feel improvement?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I feel like my condition really is improving, and other times it becomes apparent to me that the whole thing is just delusions within delusions."

"Wow! At last you've said something beautiful! Delusions within delusions. You reminded me of the old days, bro . . ."

"Listen, on that point, my memory is pretty good, and I don't know how I could have forgotten you completely this way."

"It's my bad luck. Even though I'm an unforgettable person."

"No doubt."

"But you could have at least fabricated some shared memories for us."

"Fabricate? How?"

"Make me believe that you remember – for example, bring up a situation that never happened at all, and I might play along and complete the story for you from my own stock. A little imagination never hurt anyone."

"My God, I don't understand a thing."

"So much the better!"

"And you?"

"Me? Me, I've tried everything, and I barely believe in anything anymore. That's the extremely abridged version. The matter has become nothing more or less than a habit, although I don't stop following crazy and eccentric doctors. I've gotten addicted to it, like people obsessed with collecting stamps and bottles or pictures of some celebrity."

"You mean you've started to take pleasure in your illness!"

"Exactly. And are beginning to understand me, and bring back our old memories together. How I yearn for my friend that once was!"

"Regardless of our old days together, don't you see something dangerous in that?"

"Meaning . . ."

"Meaning that taking pleasure in your illness becomes a kind of submission to it, or even a familiarity with it, to the point that you don't seriously want to be cured . . ."

"I think the opposite. Because this way I pull out its fangs and mock it, rather than it mocking me. The hero is he who sees nothing but adventure and diversion in his suffering. I'm not a hero, but . . . that's what I learned from Doctor Isa."

"Doctor who?"

"He's an Indian-American psychiatrist, who was following up with my condition by correspondence, via email."

"And is he crazy too -- I mean, a genius?"

"He's the greatest there is. Through him I discovered the world of yoga and meditation, and I knew spiritual serenity, if only for a few stolen moments."

"And why did God not see to your healing at his hands?"

"He died."

The fat man begins to cry suddenly.

The thin man's alarm reaches a fever pitch and he scoots to the edge of his seat, his face a grim reflection of the misery that has erupted across his friend's face, and the tears overflowing from his eyes. His face is still rosy, smooth and round, but it has transformed from the face of a clown to that of a tattered, lost old man.

"His plane blew up five years ago. Leaving me alone in this world with no support. I felt orphaned for the first time in my life, and depression seized me once again. I went back to gluttony in food and sex and everything else. Then I tried to commit suicide, over and over. . ."

His tears flow harder and faster, and his crying transforms all of a sudden into a wild sobbing fit. The thin man finds no escape from getting up to go sit by the fat man and comfort him.

"Say, there is no God but God!"

"There is no God but God."**

The fat man buries his face in the thin man's chest, resting the dead weight of his upper body on top of him, and then devotes all his efforts to his weeping and wailing, like a hungry infant. At this point, the receptionist comes in, and raises both eyebrows this time. Amidst his tears, the fat man sees her, whereupon the sound of his crying gets louder and more piercing, as if he was seeing the mean woman who had just struck him, and wanted to confirm to his mother, by his mute crying, that it is she, she is the criminal. But his mother, the thin man, pushes him off and pulls away a bit, leaving only his hand caressing the fat man's shoulder, mechanically, as if it was acting of its own accord. He directs his gaze to the receptionist.

"The doctor has arrived. Go ahead, sir."

Then the fat man screams, as his tears continue unabated:

"But I can't wait any longer . . . I beg you, I beg you, I can't bear it. I want the doctor now . . . Aaaaahhhh! . . . May you rest in peace, Doctor Isa!"

The receptionist prefers to leave this choice to them, so she goes out in indifference, after saying:

"Work it out between yourselves, but quickly."

Here the fat man backs away from the thin man, looking toward him, pleading yet firm.

The thin man waits, alone.

On the television screen now is a program about the relationship between dogs and their owners. Every two or three minutes he looks at his watch. Then he reads a paragraph on any old subject, and in so doing the word "patience" catches his eye. He reads (The story tells of a person who wants to leave the 20th century. He learns that there is a tour company that transports people to a utopia called Ferna, in a parallel world. Thus Charlie – the name of the hero – pays all of his money to the tour company . . .) That fat man is a very strange case; he laughs suddenly, he cries suddenly. Poor guy. He utters a profanity. How does he not remember him at all? Impossible to forget such a person. (The tour company deposits Charlie and his traveling companions in a wheat barn in a remote region, and they are told that they must wait patiently.) He too must wait patiently. That's the real test, the test itself is perpetually ongoing. Waiting for something, perpetually. He wonders, what is happening now, inside the doctor's room? (And after a very long, boring wait, Charlie becomes convinced that he and his companions have fallen victim to a band of thieves who had usurped their money, so he leaves the barn, annoyed.) What if the fat man was just mocking him, making fun of him? Has he too fallen victim to the bizarre visions of a lunatic? How could such a banal, paltry lie like that have duped him? Parallel worlds! What does that even mean? (And as soon as Charlie moves away from the barn, the whole place transforms into that promised utopia. He

realizes his mistake and struggles to get back – in vain, for the time for that has passed. And he understood then that the long, boring wait was in fact the test, to weed out the unbelievers who had participated in producing a civilization devoid of patience."

"I beg you, next time try to remember me."

"Don't worry, I'll remember you right away."

*Islamic law dictates that a man can verbally divorce his wife twice in anger, but doing so a third time is binding and requires the couple to undertake the official process of divorce.

**The first part of the shahada, a Muslim's declaration of faith, uttered to protect or heal.

Translated from the Arabic by Anna Swank