

nova · nevedoma



Two Newspapermen, by Chekhov

nova-nevedoma.com/two-newspapermen-by-chekhov/

Rybkin, an employee at the newspaper *A Sneeze On All Your Head!*, a corpulent flabby man, dumped and dull, was standing in the middle of his hotel room, glancing lovingly now and then at the ceiling, from which a hook, meant for a lamp, protruded. A rope was dangling in his hands.

‘Will it hold or not?’ he wondered. ‘What if the rope breaks and the hook crashes down on my head... Wretched life! No place even to hang yourself’.

I don’t know how the madman’s deliberations would have ended if the door hadn’t burst open admitting Rybkin’s friend, Shlepkin, an employee of the newspaper *Judas, The Traitor*, lively ruddy-faced, jolly.

‘Greetings, Vasia!’ he began taking a seat. ‘I’ve come for you. Let’s go! In Viborg district, there was an attempted murder, for 30 lines... Some rascal stabbed but didn’t finish. Could have stabbed at least for a hundred lines, bastard! Often, brother, I think and even want to write about it: If only humankind were more humane and knew how badly we need to stuff our bellies, people would hang, burn and sue each other a hundred times more often. God! What’s going on here?’ he said spreading his arms wide having seen the rope. ‘You’re not thinking of

hanging yourself, are you?'

'Yes, brother...' Rybkin sighed. 'I've had enough. It's too much... Farewell! I'm sick of life. The time has come.'

'What kind of idiocy is that? What has life done to you?'

'It has pretty much done all it could... It's all foggy, uncertain... obscure... There's nothing to write about. Any thought makes me want to hang myself ten times: people are just beating each other up, robbing, double-crossing, spitting in each other's faces, but there's nothing to write about! Life's boiling, cracking, steaming, but there's still nothing to write about! It's some kind of a cursed dualism...'

'What do you mean there's nothing to write about? If you had 10 hands, that'd be enough work for all of them.'

'No, there's nothing to write about! My life's over! What do you tell me to write about? We've already written about cashiers, pharmacists, the Eastern question, and wrote about all of it so much that got it all mixed up and you can't understand a damn thing about it. Written about agnosticism, about mothers in law, anniversaries, fires, women's hats, moral degradation, about Zucchi. We picked over the whole universe and nothing was left. And now you bring up a murder: a person was stabbed. What a big deal! I know one murder where a person was hanged, stabbed, doused in kerosene, and burned – all at once, and still I keep my mouth shut. I don't give a damn! It's all happened before. There's nothing extraordinary. Let's say you stole two hundred grand or

set Nevsky on fire from both its ends – I wouldn't care less too! It's all ordinary, and it's all been written about. Farewell!!'

'I don't understand. So many issues, such a variety of events! You throw a rock at a dog but hit an issue or an event.'

'They're not worth a darn, not issues, not events. For example, I'm getting ready to hang myself right now. For you, it's an issue, a story, but for me, it's a mere five lines and fine print. That's all. It's insignificant. People have kicked the bucket, they are kicking the bucket and they'll keep on kicking the bucket – there's nothing about it. All this variety, brother, boilings, cracklings, steamings are so mundane. I'm sick of writing and I feel sorry for the reader: why should I fill their poor soul with melancholy?'

Rybkin sighed, shook his head, and smiled bitterly.

'But what if,' he said, 'something really extraordinary were to happen, special, you know, something earth-shattering, absolutely disgusting, something completely despicable so that even the devil would be frightened out of his wits, well, that would revive me! If the Earth passed through the tail of a comet, for instance, or if Bismarck were to convert to Mohammedanism, if the Turks took over Kaluga, or, you know, if Notovich was promoted to a privy councillor... in short, something incendiary, desperate, – Oh, how it would revive me!'

'You like to see the big picture! Try swimming in shallow waters for a change. Take a close look at a blade of grass, a grain of sand or a crack in

the rock... Everywhere, there is life, drama, tragedy. In every chip of wood, in every pig, there is drama.'

'It's because of your disposition that you can even write about an empty egg shell, but I can't.'

'So what?' Shlepkin bristled. 'What's wrong with an empty eggshell? It's full of issues! First of all, when you see an empty eggshell, you're overcome with indignation, even anger!! An egg is destined by nature for reproducing an individual, if you see why! Life! And this life, that in turn would have given life to a whole generation and this generation to thousands of future generations, has suddenly been eaten, become the victim of gluttony, of a whim! This egg would have become a chicken, a chicken that would have laid thousands of eggs during its lifetime. There you have it, the subversion of the economic system, the eating away the future! Secondly, looking at that empty egg shell, you are filled with delight: it means that we're eating well in Russia... Thirdly, it occurs to you that the eggshell fertilises the soil and you advise the reader to appreciate the value of leftovers. Fourthly, the empty eggshell reminds you that nothing lasts on the Earth: lived and is gone! Fifthly, why am I even counting? It can fill a hundred issues!'

'No, no, it's too much for me! And I've lost faith in myself, I've fallen into despair... The hell with it all!'

Rybkin climbed up on the stool, and attached the rope to the hook.

'You shouldn't. God knows you shouldn't!' persuaded Shlepkin. 'Just

look, we have 20 newspapers and they're all full! So there are things to write about! Even provincial newspapers, they're full, too!

'No... Silent letters, cashiers...' Rybkin muttered as if trying to find something to hold onto. 'The bank of nobility, passport system... dismantling the table of ranks, Rumelia... God be with them!'

'Well, it's up to you...'

Rybkin put the noose around his neck and happily hanged himself. Shlepkin sat at the table and quickly jotted down a notice about a suicide, Rybkin's obituary, a feuilleton about the frequency of suicides, an editorial about strengthening the punishment for suicides, and several other articles on the same topic. Having written all that, he put everything in his pocket and rushed cheerfully down to the editorial offices where money, fame, and readers awaited him.

nova·nevédoma

*A literary locus and solo samizdat press
for original fictions and translations.*

nova-nevedoma.com



scan to subscribe

Find us on Substack



blog.nova-nevedoma.com