

Belikov

Anton Belikov, weary from a hard day labouring, returned to his dreary peasant home to his wife and only child, Nikolasha Nikolay, who they called Nikolasha at home. As he was walking home, he looked upon his humble abode, at the simply constructed roof to the horribly slanted walls, to the vile greyish-brown colour of the house and the surroundings, and he sighed, as he had done for all his life. As he walked closer to the door, however, he noticed it was slightly ajar, and, as he knew no one in his family ever left it open, for fear of the cold, he knew something was amiss. He rushed to the door, only to find his mother standing with his wife and child, surrounded by icons and candles, heating up the hut immeasurably.

“What is this mother?” Anton demanded.

“I find offense in your forgetfulness! It is a present for your son’s 12th birthday” she replied

Anton panicked, not wanting to offend his pious mother, but also not wanting the house to burst suddenly into flames. The interior of the house rustled and cracked as the heat rose, since it was partially made of hay and thatch, and inevitably susceptible to fire. As his mother stood there, impatiently waiting for a response, Anton awoke from his state of worry to look at his mother and he tossed his mother out of the house in a fit of rage and commenced to extinguish the flames.

“What were you thinking mother?” enquired he, infuriated by her incompetence, “This house is everything to me, and you could have destroyed it all! You violated my rules, now I am not allowing you near my child or my house!”

“What rules? You never said I could not warm your house with my relaxing candles, I thought I would surprise you.”

“Heat my house? Burn it to the ground more like it! There was no way that was going to end well.”

“What bad would have come from it?” Anton’s mother enquired to the now crimson man
“Your wife and child were with me, and in any case there is nothing else important in that house...”

“There’s nothing of importance in there? That house is my life, it’s all I have!”

“You bought it for a copeck, you damned fool! Even if it did burn down it could be rebuilt within the day!”

Anton stopped, not wishing to pursue the argument any further. “What have you planned for my son, mother?” he calmly asked, wanting to change the focus.

“My dearest brother-in-law could use a waiter in his bakery. I asked him a few weeks ago if he would accept a family member. He hesitated at first, saying that service is rough up north, but I told him of Nikolasha’s financial hardships and persuaded him to hire Nikolasha, if you wish it to be. It is quite secluded though, so Nikolasha will have to live with him to work there.”

For Anton, the choice was simple. One less mouth to feed and the opportunity to get some money sent home outweighed any sentimental value between them. The family was coping, with only three mouths to feed, as opposed to the seven next-door, it was the best household in the village, but it could always be better, and with just him and his wife at

home and Nikolasha potentially providing a steady stream of income, life could be almost tolerable at home.

“How could I refuse this generous offer? Send him news right away that Nikolasha is coming.”

II

The cold harsh winter of L- had set in quite rapidly. As Nikolasha finally came close to the white, snow-covered bakery his hope diminished as he saw a vivid Russian exit in a fit of rage, swearing avidly at the Greek owner who had employed him, or at least he thought he was swearing, since he was speaking a language foreign to his. After ten days spent walking to the bakery, watching the bleak, grey landscape of his old house turn into the monotonous white of northern Russia, only fear of death kept him moving forward.

As soon as Nikolasha walked in the door, an intense wave of heat overwhelmed him along with the smell of yeast and vodka, not two smells he associated with one another. He noticed the piercing stares of the customers and felt unwanted, as was the starrer's intent. After an extremely slow minute standing in the doorway, Nikolasha's employer noticed the terrible silence from his normally lax patrons, and came out from the kitchen to find his new waiter shivering at the door. “Come in, little man, you are very welcome here.” He said, unfortunately in Greek. Nikolasha remained where he was, now more confused than scared. The baker, noticing the confusion in Nikolasha's now purple face, realized his mistake and, gathering up all of the Russian he could muster, he said uncertainly, Здравствуйте...прийти в...”

Nikolasha responded thankfully to this prompting, escaping from the cold of the white barren outside. As he walked toward the kitchen, the heat overwhelmed him so he followed the baker slowly, to get used to the heat. The kitchen was quite simplistic; just a soot filled oven and a bench to place food on top of to tell that it is ready. The baker silently showed the boy the number on the plate and pointed to the corresponding numbered table, and motioned Nikolasha to take the meal to it. The bakery was quite a small one, with only six tables to serve, but it was not in disrepair, due to the amount of work the patrons did on it to help the baker (and also to repay their debts). The patrons, all surprisingly Greek, had migrated from Greece together with the baker who, being a wealthy heir, paid for their journey. Due to these facts, everyone knew one another, so the elderly customers met the newcomer with hostilities. They refused to talk in his presence, and recommenced their conversations when his back was turned.

III

The day continued on in this fashion, nothing significant occurring throughout the day. At the end of the day, the baker led Nikolasha to his house, which appeared more liveable than his parent's abode. It was entirely yellow, the lightest yellow possible because of all the snow that surrounded it. It was very large for a house that only housed two, having four bedrooms and a large bathroom. Nikolasha assumed that the baker inherited the house from a wealthy relative, because it seemed that it was in a state of disrepair. As Nikolasha walked in the house, he met the aforementioned second member of the household, the baker's daughter and his cousin, Marya. (He assumed that her name was Marya, for that was

the first thing that the baker said when he greeted her. He was correct.) They talked in Greek for a while, and then argued, and then Marya looked at Nikolasha, compliantly. Marya took charge, guided Nikolasha to a bedroom, which appeared to accommodate two. Marya showed Nikolasha his bed and he quickly deduced that he was sharing the room with her.

When Nikolasha and Marya went to bed, Marya remained awake as she read by candlelight. This concerned Nikolasha, and partly frightened him as well, for they were supposed to be asleep. Nikolasha would have objected, but the language barriers forced him into submission. The room was laden with books that she had collected over the years, so rather than laying in his bed restlessly, he, in realisation that all the books were in Greek, picked up a book that looked suitable for him, a colourful children's book. Surprisingly, some of the words appealed to him, as he had remembered hearing them from the restaurant. He felt proud of this knowledge, and continued reading the book...

IV

An extensive amount of time passed. Nikolasha's employment with the baker remained stable, since, according to the patrons if any of them objected to Nikolasha being there it would offend the baker, so they eventually were acquainted with him and stopped worrying Nikolasha with their intolerance. After a long period of studying the Greek language, with many plays, tragedies and philosophical books, Nikolasha finally decided to speak to one of the patrons, after they asked him a question in Greek, forgetting that he did not respond to Greek. Nikolasha answered, as silence would have humiliated the patron, and revealed his knowledge of the language to the group, the baker included. He was not surprised at Nikolasha's comprehension, and he was sure that the constant exposure to the language at home and at the bakery forced him to learn the language.

Marya, still unaware of Nikolasha's understanding, continued to remain awake throughout the night. The baker noticed the lack of candles, but assumed they were for warmth, not for reading. Nikolasha was accustomed to Marya's habits by now, since for a long time he was powerless to object to them.

However, today was different. The patrons came in the bakery in a bad temper. Nikolasha overheard the baker and some of the patrons discussing the daily events, as they seemed to do every day. They were usually quite trivial, however today the incident was quite extravagant. A fire had broken out at the public house and, inevitably destroyed their vodka and alcohol. The fire was quite vicious after that, but the arctic cold of northern Russia and the townspeople fighting it together stopped the fire from attacking any other houses. This occurrence aggravated the patrons, making all the men quite cruel to Nikolasha, and they rewarded every mistake, misunderstanding and tardiness with violent taunting and laughter.

Nikolasha returned home more irritated than any of the patrons he served. While going to his room, he saw the candlelight and was infuriated. He started screaming at Marya. "Put that candle out! Let me have a full night's sleep this one time! You should never have started doing this, your father would forbid it if he knew!"

"What?" responded Marya, not comprehending how Nikolasha could speak Greek. "He never said anything to forbid it though, so that must mean I can do it." This explanation

bewildered Nikolasha; his sole response was to extinguish the candle. The astonishment showed on Marya's face, but Nikolasha was unable to see it, for he fell asleep before she could object.

V

The next year was quite eventful. The baker started sending Nikolasha to the market, to collect ingredients for his bakery. He caught the eye of a yeast seller, who had heard Nikolasha talk to the Greeks at the market. In reality, he was the Head at the local university, and he required a replacement Greek professor. Out of all the Greeks around him, Nikolasha's youth and ability to learn appealed to him. Eventually he asked Nikolasha if he wanted to work at the university. Nikolasha was hesitant to accept, but the allure of a large salary and the fact that he would be working with educated people forced him to agree. Fortunately, life at the university suited him. The students shared many of his viewpoints, and he learnt a massive amount of information from them, in other areas of study, like mathematics and Russian literature.

A month into his teaching, however, he returned to his residence at the baker's house as he had done for half of his life, since he was not able to buy a home yet with the money he had at the university. When he went into his room, Marya had the candle lit, yet again. Unfortunately, she had misplaced her book and, in searching for her book, she accidentally knocked over her candle. Due to the amount of books discarded from excessive use lying on the floor, the ground ignited. Horrified by what he saw, Nikolasha called Marya to move out of the room and, ultimately, the house. The fire spread rapidly, and Nikolasha only escaped with his thick overcoat, his galoshes and his watch and penknife, gifts from the university, inside the overcoat. Alas, Marya's father did not escape. A deep sleeper, he would not have woken even to the fire suffocating him.

As Nikolasha looked back on the house, he saw the yellow of the house turn to red and black, and he felt the immense heat of the fire on his face, and decided to continue fleeing the inferno. Unbeknown to him, Marya had retrieved her bicycle from the house as she escaped it, passing Nikolasha on it as he ran. He saw her face and the amount of black soot on it, and he felt pity for her, among the feelings of rejection and loneliness as she rode out of view. As he walked, he decided that he needed to go to the market, since that was the closest place where he could be safe. Luckily, he had brought his galoshes to protect his feet from the sleet, he thought to himself.

VI

As he reached the market, he only saw one light on. He walked towards the house, a neat little red brick of a house, with nothing to define it. Nikolasha intended to ask the occupant for a room for the night, because of his being burnt down, but when the owner of the house opened the door, he saw his blackened state and his almost blue face and embraced him. He put Nikolasha in his bed, and put on several blankets to keep him warm. He took off his galoshes and put on proper socks, and kept him warm throughout the night.

When Nikolasha awoke, he was surprised to see the man lying on the ground next to the bed, awakening. Nikolasha, slightly confused by the benevolence of the man, asked him his name.

“My name is Afanasy, boy”, he responded in a hard Russian accent, “I was a batman in the war, but now I am a sous chef for my neighbour’s restaurant, not a very good one though, because I hate the place. I wish I could get out of here, but my house is worth nothing and I do not earn enough to buy another somewhere else.”

“I think I can solve your problem, sir. I am a teacher at the nearby university and I earn a lot of money, but I have not acquired enough to get a house of my own. If we combine our resources, we can buy a house together. Then I can hire you as my cook with my salary, to get you away from working here.”

Afanasy liked the idea, so they travelled to the university, under Afanasy’s umbrella. Nikolasha brought his galoshes, which protected him from the sleet and wet ground throughout the journey. After they received Nikolasha’s pay, they bought a nearby apartment, one newly built, so that no one had ever used it before.

After locking up all his possessions in the house, Nikolasha walked out of the apartment only to see Marya on her bicycle in the distance. Shocked, he ran towards her, but it was too late. After riding all night, her legs gave way on her, and she fell to the ground. Closer to the incident was the Head’s wife, who screamed out as she saw it happen. She ran to Marya, but unfortunately, she had died. Nikolasha went up to her, but the Head’s wife, knowing she was dead, kept him away. Nikolasha relented, seeing her state, and started to walk away, but the Head’s wife asked him where her father was. Nikolasha knew that she would accuse him if he told her, so he continued walking away.

Nikolasha remained at the university for decades. He was cold to his colleagues and very finicky when it came to the rules, quite unambiguous and authoritative. Many things scared him, including Afanasy, so he thought if he remained the same as he was before Marya’s death and kept wearing his overcoat, galoshes, watch and penknife he would be safe. The Head’s wife soon forgot the incident, but Nikolasha never forgot. The school forgot many things, including his name, and no one knew him well enough to ask it, so after a while he simply went by his last name, Belikov.

Commentary

I intended to adopt Chekhov's style and language throughout this story, through a lengthening of "Man in a case" from Belikov's point of view, to explain why he is what he is in Chekhov's story because of my love for his story and because the character of Belikov and his psychology interest me. Key aspects of Belikov's way of thinking are addressed; why he hates women riding bicycles (Marya's death); why he is always so afraid of things that are "allowed or authorized" (the candles that burnt down the baker's house); how he so protective of his possessions (he only survived the fire with a few key belongings that he carried throughout his life). This story would fit in before the trilogy, before the story "Man in a Case".

I tried to emulate Chekhov's descriptiveness, with descriptions of the locations and the surroundings of Anton's house, the bakery and the baker's house, which partially incorporates nature as well, but not as much, for the lack of beauty of northern Russia, but the bleakness displays the constant lifeless spirit of the character

I diverged from Chekhov's style with the dialogue between Anton and his mother, but it was necessary to explain the transfer of Nikolasha to northern Russia. Since I could not find any instance of extended dialogue in Chekhov's short stories, just brief monologues, I had to use my own style to write the discussion, with Chekhov's language.

I attempted to write my story like "Ionych" as well, as a tragedy that ended in the cynicism of the main character, and made him disliked at the end of the story. In addition, youthful vulnerability was a theme, as it was in "Ionych", but with different circumstances emotionally injuring the characters. Similar to "Ionych", my story was in the third person narrative, unlike "Man in a Case" which was a story told by a character in the story.

I employed some Russian dialect to emphasis the confusion between Greek and Russian. , "Здравствуйте...прийти в..." means "Hello...Come in..." The foreignness of the text is how Nikolasha would perceive the language, and makes the audience see his bewilderment.

Chekhov always divides his stories into numbered parts, which I have adopted in my work to distinguish between different settings, situations, time and main characters. This also gives the information in relatively small pieces, rather than a massive chunk of action all at once, which is quite unlike Chekhov.

I tried to incorporate the theme of social class as well, with Nikolasha coming from a peasant house and rising up to his great uncle the heir's house and then going into the university with the intelligentsia. In addition, there was the Greek patrons that intimidated Nikolasha when he first arrived, at that I think was due to social as well.

There was also instances of foreshadowing with the candles in the hut foreshadowing the candles in Marya's room and ultimately the fire burning down the baker's house.

I found writing a short story in Chekhov's style quite intricate, as there were many elements to fit in to my story. I think I managed to put most of them into my story, but there were things I could have mentioned, like romance, inertia or religion, which are other themes that Chekhov likes to employ. I think also that I used my own style of writing a little too much, instead of using Chekhov's style as the response demanded, but I think my plot

was a lot like Chekhov's and my descriptiveness as well. This creative response has given me a greater understanding of the original text and greater respect for the authors' writing skills.