

## *Summers*

How Chekhovian! How positively, autumnally Chekhovian!

In our student days, Oscar was, as they say, a happy-go-lucky fellow with good humour and millenarian fervour. Besotted, Cupid's smitten dupe, I was ever ready to listen to him. Even to his name, which Father said was more suited to a cat, I gave no second thought.

"There are many and stupendous things for us to do," he would say, pounding the air from a tree-stump like some young zealot on a Yarra Bank soapbox or a firebrand in a clandestine graffitied revolutionary cell. "While we, while we gorge ourselves to goose-swollen glut with the venison of Croesus, a hundred unnoticed human churchmice die from dearth somewhere every minute. Human beings, flesh and blood, possessors like us of bodies and minds and hearts and souls, are daily imprisoned because of the colour that is their inheritance, because of the deity to whom they bend the knee, or simply because others don't like the angle of their proboscis or the slant of their peepers. Meanwhile, pensioners and widows barely survive. The barons who scarcely need it reap in the wealth, while the worker suffocates and rots in the morass of his own poverty. And, travesty supreme, buddy-buddies with the barons, our would-be saviours, our leaders, elected to do us service, shit humbug by the bucketful upon the people, who in turn are too lazy or blockish or opiated by tuppenny ephemera and fripperies even to notice or particularly to care. There are

things to be done, Jenny-Jen! Change is what we need, change! A good, strong, wholesome and mighty revolution! At the very least, a revolution of minds!"

It was summer. Examinations were over. Day after day, we spent our time on the beach, with the water, the sand and the sun each a magnet drawing us unto itself. At ease, we watched the activities about us, peered into the pasts of old men walking by, threw crumbs at the seagulls, pointed at the oil-carriers and liners across the bay, and, of course, laughed a lot — all in a heady scenario as we gave clouds human faces, called the winds by name — *Eurus* and *Zephyrus*, *Aeolus* and *Favonius* — and thought how easy it might be to reach out for those clouds and grasp them in the palm and let the winds bear us away, bear us to places far better than our own where, as Oscar said, people were less concerned with wealth than with service, less with status than with decency, and less with hoity-toity airs than with simple goodness, creativity, honest living, duty and truth.

"To discover, experience, learn what is best in every place," he said, "and blend that best into a perfect whole — *that* is every individual's obligation, and if on this small large blessed cursed vibrant stagnant earth there is any purpose for us at all, this is by far the chiefest."

Ah, innocence! Ah, simplicity! Ah, nobility! How I agreed with him. As always, he made everything seem so simple, so easy to attain.

"It is up to us, isn't it?" I found myself saying, blushing even now in remembering it, but ready to forgive my Candidean naivety if only because I was eighteen then and barely out of high-school, and barely out from under the umbrella of my cosy, comfortable and sheltered parental home.

If summer had a colour that entered memory, there lastingly to endure, it was blue — turquoise, sapphire, cerulean blue. True, there was orange and scarlet and violet and vermilion, too, at the rising and setting of the sun, with dazzling incandescent white-light flashes of summer lightning and the leafy-green of gardens and the yellows of honeysuckle and the

golden ochre of soil — I know this, I know because I have often revisited those places since then. But what remains most vivid is the lightness, the blitheness, the optimism that came with the all-suffusing bluebell blue in which Oscar and I touched and nestled and stroked and in which I delighted in his pronouncements and in his unshakeable credo that, unlike so many others, in contrast even to the greater part of humanity, we were to be masters over our own fates.

Summer passed — as it had to pass, of course, eternity alone and nothing else being eternal. For Oscar, university days returned; for me, they were just beginning. Oscar was in his final Arts year, majoring in Political Science and History, the better, he said, to prepare himself for a future in journalism or politics or some other form of service to society. He was energetic. If earlier he had involved himself modestly in student affairs, he now threw himself into them with the intensity of total commitment. He addressed meetings, wrote for the journals, stood for the Students' Council. He campaigned for education, marched for Aboriginal rights, helped organise rallies against apartheid, against imprisonment of writers in Chile, against military oppression in Greece. Even if sometimes his utterances and pronouncements were radical, he always made sense, and I, happy and glowingly proud at those gatherings, was ever by his side. "Oscar and Tosca" were we to those who were close to us.

Then, one evening, the world turned over.

Oscar had been to a committee meeting of "*The Three S's*" as we had come to call the *Students for a Saner Society*, and I met him afterwards as arranged at the Lapis Lazuli for coffee. Oscar seemed tired, depressed. He spoke little, dismissed the meeting in the tersest terms — "Crap!", "Clockwork mice, all of them!", "Mindless embryos still!", and "Know nothings, caring less, and each hankering solely, solely, for laurel on his own head!" — and avoided touch, closeness, eye contact. He was remote, preoccupied, anxious to get away. I had seen him this way two or three times before, but each time the mood had quickly passed. Now, at my door, he looked away, gazed dully

at the gathered darkness, and said, "It's impossible. I've thought about it. We can't go on anymore."

"Can't go on?"

"You. . . me. . . us. . ."

In public, on podiums, in the journals, he had always and easily and unfailingly found the right words. Now they came only after long hesitations. Above us, grey gloomy clouds drifted by, the treetops quivered and the streetlamps were circled by quivering haloes as a light drizzle began to fall.

"There are things to be done, places to see. . . A whole world to explore. . ."

"Can't we both. . ."

"To go on as we are is in time to become bound by the banal and the everyday."

"It needn't be like. . ."

"But it will be. I saw it. I saw it all. Even as I sat at that meeting. In a vision. . .yes, in a vision, even as those closet reformers talked of what colour to paint the placards for next week's anti-hanging procession, even as they argued over whether to march up Gibberish or Twaddle or Tomfoolery Street. I saw it all. What's the use of striving and wanting when everything here is pettiness and smallmindedness and stagnation, when there's a world out there. . . a world with spaciousness and scope and countless possibilities for the imagination to take flight? . . ."

"It needn't be so. . .it needn't be as you say. . ."

"Ha!"

"There is no reason to stagnate. We can travel together. . . We can go anywhere, do anything. I won't bind you if you don't want to be bound. I. . ."

"If that could only be true."

"It is true."

"For a while it is. But what does a girl want, any girl? A home. And children. And clothes, and friends for Sunday barbecues, a garden, comfort, a car of her own, and, eventually aerobics classes, tennis lessons, a swimming-pool."

"Have I ever said I wanted any of these?"

“But that’s what happens. It’s almost a law. Look at the Jacobsons, the Hilliers, the Wallants. Babies, nappies, overdrafts, insipid dinners or suppers Saturday nights, valuable time squandered over B-grade movies, nine-o’clock starts to the daily routine, five-o’clock commutings home, and then television, feet up, the evening paper, and another night lost to sleep before facing the next day, identical to the day before. And all the while, stagnation, boredom, dullness, sweeping over everything. . . everything. . . everything. . .”

Pleas, entreaties, promises — these all had their place. But, naive and unseasoned though I might have been, I was no marshmallowy soap-opera heroine given to histrionics; and there was also the question of pride. I had weathered his moods before, as he in like measure had oftentimes had to weather mine, and as long as he did not admit or hint at any loss of love, I held — could still hold — to the belief that this was just another phase which like other phases would pass into the stuff of future memories mutually shared. This did not stop the haloes around the streetlamps from broadening through the mist of gathered tears or my voice from splintering in a thickened tightened throat, but even as the clouds grew black with mounting menace, even as the drizzle swelled to steady rain, even as he turned away and, with head retracted into his collar, walked downstairs and through the gate, I took heart — or told myself to take heart — from my older cousin Julie who, like all the millions and millions of others, had been through the very same thing, and was now able to laugh at what she liked to call the “*affaires tristes de couer*”.”

But days, weeks, months passed, and were to time, to oblivion, to extinction irredeemably lost. And then another summer, and another, and more; the revolving cycles of seasons seeing me in time complete my teacher’s course, seeing me go out with this young fellow and that, and seeing me, if not wait, then hope at least for Oscar’s return — or for the coming over the threshold of another who could again excite vision and commitment, and self-giving, self-denying zeal.

A woman, however, cannot afford to wait forever. Past

twenty-four, twenty-five, the body ages, changes, but continues to desire and begins to protest if persistently denied. The lines on the face, they, too, harden; fears of solitude and waste, however silent, intensify. And people begin to talk. Humiliation and shame attach themselves like desert flies. Father, meanwhile, tells of others' grandchildren, Mother hints, hints, repeatedly hints. Meetings, ostensibly by chance, are arranged and there is excitement for a while, along with expectations, sidelong glances and unuttered hopes.

And so, one day — ostensibly by chance — Bernard was introduced to me. He was shy, quietly spoken, considerate and practical. After three months, he bought me a ring and we brought the happy news to our families. Everything had moved swiftly and people gossiped ("People being people, gossip they must," Oscar had once said, not without a sneer), but in a strange and sober way, I was content. We were married in May, the merest six months after we met. Shrivelled russet leaves fell lightly on my veil; it rained a little just as we were having photos taken; while in the distance — we took it as good omen — a rainbow gleamed against a hazy sky. Mother wept and kissed Bernard as her own. . .

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Summers do not change. The sun, the heat, the oil-carriers and liners across the bay — they are all there, all there as though they have never left. The seagulls too, as before, swoop down to gather crumbs thrown to them; old men grown older still shamble by; the soft clouds still drift along like wanderers, while lively winds blow on, in no way spent by their constant motion. But the clouds have no faces now, nor do the winds bear names. They lost these long ago, in a time as retrievable as antiquity, when we looked at them with different eyes.

When Bernard speaks, it is about his clients in the office or about the Lodge. He has to deal with difficult people, he says. At work, they are always complaining; they are always wanting

his services more cheaply, even though he does all he can to squeeze the last cent off their tax returns; they are always, always dissatisfied; while, at the Lodge, where he goes for company and relaxation, he is surrounded by apathy and laziness. He is the secretary and works hard to perform well what he calls his part. If only others worked as hard as he, he sighs whenever he returns from a meeting.

Come summer, we take Helene to a coastal resort: Apollo Bay, Lakes Entrance, Torquay. Rachel, now seventeen, prefers to spend her vacations with her friends at camp, and who can argue against that? Meanwhile, day after day, we pass our time on the sand. Bernard does not care for swimming. He stretches himself out on his towel, covers his face with an open book — Robbins or Michener or Irving Wallace, whatever is escapist and modish at the time — and remarks, “Ah, this is the life. No-one to annoy you, no meetings to attend, no-one’s laziness or complaints to endure”, or “Wake me when it’s time to milk the cows”. And for hours on end, with his head resting in the cups of his hands, he breathes easily, evenly, deeply. At such times, he is the portrait of contentment, he is truly in Arcadia.

For my part, I sit beside him, brush the sand from my legs, rub myself down with coconut oil, take off and put on my glasses, wave to Helene leaping about in the shallows, think of Rachel at the camp, of the resumption of school in another two weeks or three, of the assorted chores I must attend to, and of the friends, the butcher, the newsagent, the fruiterer I must phone when we get back. And just recently, as I sat gazing across the waters, following to the right, then to the left the yacht-dotted horizon till it lost itself, here behind a headland, there behind a cliff; as I watched the interplay in the distance of colour and light and cloud and mist; and as I thought vaguely, distractedly of the books I should soon be teaching again — *The Cherry Orchard*, *Julius Caesar*, Machiavelli’s *Prince*; in short, as I sat there thus absorbed, a stray memory arose as if from nowhere and possessed me, a vivid scintillating blue-bathed recollection. . . and a thought, a question, a capricious and, at

the same time, a haunting reflection: "What might have been, what might have been if events had taken a different turn?"

Was this a premonition, the stuff of something supernal cutting across that earth-bound routine which, alongside Bernard, had evolved into a calm, untrammelled and sensibly sober means of living one day at a time through each given year?

"Fated" might be too strong a term, but I guess that sometime, somewhere we were bound to meet, Oscar and I; and meet we did — on our recent holiday near the boat-ramp in Torquay.

He had simply been walking, hands in pockets, northward along the sand as I had been walking south, sandals dangling from my fingers, watching the last slow dip of the sun into the sea; each of us alone, I for my part on my own because Bernard had taken Helene to buy the evening newspaper and bring back pizzas for dinner.

There were no sweeping pronouncements or outrageous statements this time.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he said when I asked after his welfare, not knowing at first what else to say. "Fine. Just come for a bit of a holiday. Giving the brain cells a bit of a breather. With my wife, and my child."

I looked about as though I might have expected to see them.

"A daughter, Tamara. Ten. A good girl, doing well at school. She's with her mother who's back at the motel with a migraine."

"Oh," I said. "I'm sorry to hear that." There was little else that was appropriate to say. "And. . . I guess if you've come for a breather, you must be working rather hard?"

"I work," he said. "It's a job. What else is there to do?"

I intended neither malice nor hurt. "Once there were many things to do," I said.

He shrugged his shoulders. He had put on weight and his cheeks were a dusky blue — as Father's had been before his blood pressure was found to be raised.

"Our children may do better than we have," he said.



I remembered his protest. "And all the while, stagnation, boredom, dullness, sweeping over everything... everything..."

"What of *our* lives, then?" I wanted to say. "As adults, as parents, are we to expect nothing *for ourselves*?"

I did not do so, however. I settled for neutral conversation, for painless talk, though even painless talk was not beyond taking painful turns.

He had made his trip abroad, he said, running a hand through thinning greying hair. For three years he had travelled and worked in different places — as freelance reporter, proofreader, waiter, clerk. He had brought back a Canadian girl he'd met in London but she hadn't settled in at all well in her adopted home where they lived in an Elwood flat near Point Ormond and where he worked as a sales representative with a packaging firm. He had given up — long ago given up — all notions of politics; the only writing he did now, he said, revolved around the signing of cheques for school, medical and telephone bills. He bought season tickets for symphony concerts and the theatre; on Sundays, he might drive out to the hills, and once a month attended his local philatelic club. He had also recently taken up bridge.

"Now you know it all," he said in conclusion, and laughed — meekly, weakly. I saw a gap where he had lost a tooth. "And well may you ask," he added, "Is this what we were truly destined for? When I remember our plans, our designs, our schemes to change the world... and our determination to be master over our fate..."

He had become so vulnerable, so pathetic. I almost welcomed the opportunity to bite.

"You know what Confucius says: 'As one makes one's bed,'" I said, deliberately cool, even cruel, "'so must one lie in it'."

He reached towards me but did not quite touch. Behind him, a father and son in yellow life-jackets were hauling their boat up the ramp, a dog splashed about them in the shallows, a woman was shaking sprays of sand out of her towel. The light

over the waters had faded to a mellow violet and a breeze smelling oddly of rubber leapt up.

Instead of replying, he bit a lip, passed a hand down his cheeks and across his chin, and nodded. Swollen dusky folds, I noticed, weighed down his eyes. He then turned out his palms in a suggestion of helplessness, looked at his watch and said, "I really must be going. . . Penelope doesn't like me leaving her in a strange place too long. Tamara's probably hungry, and. . . and. . . I'm sorry. . . I must go".

He turned awkwardly and headed back the way he had come. He had clearly wanted to say something else, just as in his retreat, he paused and half-twisted his body towards me as if he were about to say it. But, giving himself pause to reflect, he simply heaved, raised his shoulders, waved a wrist in dismissal and continued on his way. I remained standing there for a while, nursing an image of light, but one no longer glowing in that once exhilarating enlivening burnished blue. Rather, it was matt now, more toneless, sooty and shrouded in grey. In grey. The beaten leaden grey in the tired cushions about his eyes, the dull sheenless grey of his diminishing hair, the dreary ashen grey of time-hardened mortal empty hands.

Downstairs, outside my window, children are playing. From far away, the tang of the sea drifts in like the finest feathers on unseen wings and the breeze on entering rustles the curtains.

It is cosily warm all around, and light. Ricky, the neighbour's son, eight years old and a devil, is pulling his sister Nicole's hair. Nicole, herself no angel, in turn kicks him vigorously in the shin. Adrian from across the street is chasing the bees among the nasturtiums; Fleur, the Sutcliffes' girl, a tomboy of the highest rank, sits straddled on the fence; while Harry, the Lampert's boy, is far away among the clouds in his ever-earnest studiousness, sitting crosslegged on a discarded crate and brushing away the flies that daunt his every effort to read. Along the street, Julian is bounding on his way from university. He jaunts home, his bag slung over a shoulder, tall and buoyant and

sturdy, his hair a mass of curls, his whole manner one of confidence as though he held the very future — and a splendid accomplished future at that — in his eyes. His mother Marta, to her despair, says he has wild ideas; he is forever critical of everything — of his parents, of his teachers, of the country's leaders, of national leaders everywhere — and would, if he could, she says, try to overturn the world. Rachel, meanwhile, dear Rachel, is obviously infatuated — I would even put it more strongly, she is clearly in love with him. She has never been so forgetful of things, or as sloppy at home; nor, against this, has she ever been so spiritedly radiant.

“Do you think the human race is coming to an end?” she asked yesterday at the dinner-table.

“That's rather drastic, don't you think?” Bernard replied, his expression patently feigning seriousness.

“Justin thinks it will end, the way we're going about destroying ourselves and our ecosphere. One morning, he says, the sun won't rise, it simply won't rise, and there'll be no moon. Nothing will be there. We'll have blown ourselves to bits or suffocated in our foul atmosphere or some other catastrophe will have taken place and there'll be nothing at all, nothing except darkness and void, as it all was once before.”

She sounded cheerful, vivacious, somehow delightfully innocent to the gloomy prophecy inherent in her words.

“How frightful,” said Helene.

“Is there no way out then?” asked Bernard, controlling a smile.

“There is a way,” she said, “there is a way,” so grown-up as she brandished her fork in emphasis. “We must change, change for the better. Justin wrote an article in a students' journal. He doesn't have answers to all the problems, but he does make sense. To be just and honest, not worry or strive for power or for influence or personal laurels, and to work hard. And to think of others, of *others*, not only and always of ourselves. This, he says, means revolution. But the revolution is in ourselves, in our behaviour. Mankind must change within to save itself, for

world peace will come only when each person has established his own inner peace.”

Ah, innocence! Simplicity! Nobility!

And trustiness! Enchantment! Faith!

Faith!

Faith such as had once been mine, had been Oscar's, had been ours in tandem! Ah, what might have been? What might yet have been?

But go, turn back the years, erase what has more truly been. Forget that children have been born and have grown up. Ignore the fact that age has been creeping on, that the skin is no longer smooth and plastic, nor the spirit so weightless, and that the energies for big things are sapped, and return to the time when frivolity and seriousness were at once boundless and sublime, to the time when one could, without blushing, proclaim that one indeed was master over one's life. Where do we go wrong? Why do we so complicate our lives? Why do we choose one path in life and not another? Indeed, do we choose at all or is it chosen for us? Or is it neither choice nor destiny which directs our ways but something quite beyond and outside ourselves — some capricious demon perhaps, a whimsical gremlin, or a cosmic prankster ever bent on mischief? Or does even this not suffice to explain? Might it be what some call chance and others chaos, or still something else as yet unnamed that flirts for its pleasure with the happiness of men? Rachel glows with fervour. Her naivety is touching. I pray with all my heart for the fulfilment of the remedies that her Justin offers to the world, as also for her own happiness and the untrammelled realisation of her every wish.

Meanwhile, it's already late afternoon. The roast in the oven is nearly ready. In an hour Bernard will be home. We will eat our dinner, talk a little. Rachel will tell of her lectures and spout some new idea she has received from Justin, or from whatever is today's equivalent of our own one-time "*Three S's*". After that, Bernard will read the newspaper or type his minutes of last week's Lodge meeting, the girls will study, and the evening will pass, serenely as always, safely, a model of peace sublime.

Then it will grow late and we will all retire to bed. And for a while, in the darkness, we will talk, Bernard and I, he about his clients and the Lodge, I about my classes, the children, the neighbours, the bills. Then we will lose ourselves to the world, the two of us, distract ourselves from excessive thought and concern, if only for an instant, in the forgetfulness of embrace. And Bernard will then turn over to meet his dreams, while I will lie awake for a time and listen to the sounds outside, to the murmurings of the treetops and the hollow echoes of the wind, and wonder, simply wonder, about summers long ago and about blueness and sunshine and about clouds with faces and winds with names, trying, trying to imagine the possible courses of paths untrodden, the faces of children never born, and the fate of full-blooded hopes, ideals and schemes left, forever, unfulfilled.