

CHEKHOV'S WIFE

A SHORT STORY

BY

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My Auntie Janice used to smash eggs regularly.

Eggs were the only awful part of that first, long hot Summer holiday. It was one of my jobs to clean the sticky mess from the bottom of her thousand-year-old shopping-bag. This was in the days when eggs were sold loose; not packaged in little polystyrene nests, like today.

Egg breaking seemed to happen every time we went shopping. I was ten-years old and she was the only relative who seemed aware of my existence and apart from an 'Introductory' Christmas with her, this was my first 'long stay' anywhere.

As we emptied the shopping-bag, Auntie swore: 'Would you bloody credit it? All the little sods have slipped down again! I try to shop for them last but somehow they always wriggle down to the bottom, come what may.'

At the butcher's she complained about some dubious meat she'd eaten a few days before. The butcher, thinking he'd get the better of her, said: 'Madam, it were fresh when I got it, fresh when it went on the slab, fresh on the scales and fresh in your basket. And *freshly*-priced even if I say so myself.'

'Young man!' Auntie replied, 'My larder is temperature controlled. My thermometer is a high-grade scientifically calibrated instrument, mounted in the best walnut and installed to the highest specifications by my dear Jack. Science doesn't lie.' I got the feeling the customers had heard this story more than a few times and that everyone knew that he had passed on ten years back.

On the way home from the village, I asked her what the thermometer had registered on the day of the disaster. 'Oh, I ate it, darling. Very tasty.' When she saw my puzzled look: 'There's no better flavour than turning meat. It's a mystery though. You know how hot it was last Sunday but the thermometer said only 'Twenty' which of course is far too cold for anything so I left the larder door open all day long to warm it up.'

The next morning, I made up a story about checking the thermometer against the TV weather forecast and told her I'd take it to the village for repair. She said she'd like to come with me but her eyes were aching again. What I never worked out was how she got her Centigrade and Fahrenheit mixed up. And had she always confused them?

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Each Summer, Auntie became a little odder. Slower, more cantankerous, more in love with swearing, more embarrassingly flirty with shopkeepers and deafer than ever before. As for me, I was mad about the handsome Doctor. He was in his late thirties; had nice grey hair and a strong, almost congested face. I also liked his thick neck. It contrasted, I thought, nicely with my willowy one. He smiled a lot which was perhaps a good thing, as when he was serious his face seemed dangerously clotted with blood. So that Summer I had a tremendous number of ailments. On each visit, he expressed interest in my Auntie and asked after her health. 'Keep an eye on her, Sandra. She's too proud to bother the Practice with your everyday troubles.' I searched in vain for a mirror. 'Why don't Doctor's surgery's have mirrors?' I asked. He became serious, the blood flooding into his face. 'Some do - but I fancy people don't like to see themselves dying.'

Now I thought that was an odd thing to say, but it didn't stop me loving him.

Auntie had become a chore. I felt really guilty about this after all her kindness and had it not been for my romance, I would have hated the holidays.

One day, coming out of a teashop drunk on doughnuts, sponge with rum sauce and three cups of strong coffee, we collapsed onto the seat by the Market Cross. 'Sandra? Did we go shopping before the teashop or do we still have it to do?' We sat in the warm sunshine. A couple of cars and the local bus went by. I was feeling upset in not having seen the Doctor for nearly a week. I knew his smart little car; his hat, his frantic greeting from across the street, his three tweed-jackets... I vowed to visit the surgery tomorrow. I fantasised about him holding my narrow shoulders and seeing his face fill with blood; his slow smile of pleasure... During my very first visit - oh so long ago, he had stopped me in the street and told me I was the spitting image of Janice. 'What do you want to do when you

grow up?’ he had asked. ‘I’m going to be a dramatic actress,’ I said, hardly thinking about it. Then I went on: ‘Do you swear by all that’s sacred - by that oath thing doctors have - that you think me the daringest and prettiest girl in the village?’ ‘I do!’ he said, laughing and lifting my hand up as if I was about to wave. ‘A girl like you should be seen.’

A farm-lorry went by in a cloud of smoke.

‘Traffic’s awful,’ Auntie said, tears in her eyes. ‘I’ve been thinking I might have my groceries sent up.’

‘Why do you always buy two of everything?’ I blurted out.

She twisted round to face me and took out a lace handkerchief to dab her eyes.

‘I suppose you’ve always done it!’ I went on, irritably. ‘And you put two packets of fish-fingers in your basket this morning and you know and I never eat fish.’

‘It shows I’m not on my own, darling.’

‘And when I’m not here?’

‘I still buy two of everything, except for things like bleach, of course.’

A fat woman we disliked sat next to us. ‘I hear young Dr Old’s getting hitched. Very glamorous bit of fash by all accounts and a rich father to boot which don’t do no harm, do it?’

That evening, I shut myself in my room. Auntie knocked on the door and tried her utmost to get me to come downstairs. She was really sympathetic, shouted through the door that she had guessed I had a thing about the Doctor and that he was certainly a First Division man. She came up regular until her voice began to give out. Just before she went to bed,