

Chequeov **by Nicholas Ruddock**

In 1904, there was a premonition of madness in the air. It was easy for him to make up that story about tuberculosis, his spitting of blood, his slow decline and death, with champagne, in Badenweiler. Instead, Anton Chekhov shaved off his moustache and left for Canada, to Weyburn, Saskatchewan. The note he left for his wife, Olga, upon the dresser in the hotel in which he “died”, has ever since been suppressed by her family.

In Weyburn, he put away his fountain pen and resumed the practice of medicine. He took his thick accent, his glasses, his bandages, his stethoscope, and out into the prairie he went. He rode on his horse, Zorky, and took his time. At night, the prairie sky had taken a shift to the west. Polaris was over there now, otherwise it was all the same, even the owls. He actually made some money so he opened up a bank account. They mis-spelled his name; he smiled at the irony. Now he was Chequeov. It was lonely in Weyburn, but the loneliness brushed off him like chaff. One day a girl came to his door, looking for housework. She was a Russian girl named Sonja. She slept on a cot in the kitchen, he in a four-poster bed upstairs. After three years of this pleasant arrangement, Sonja began to run fevers, lose weight and cough. It was like old times, back home. Soon she was bed-ridden with advanced tuberculosis, as fate would have it, and their roles in the household became reversed. Now it was the doctor who waited on the housemaid. Eventually, all she could do was swallow broth, and her face became the colour of meadow-rue. One evening, Chequeov walked outside. A soft rain was falling, so soft that the still face of his pond, fringed by cut water-grass, was barely stippled. A shroud of mayflies swept from shore to shore, dipping and twisting in the pellucid air. Some fell, some spun like the briefest of pinwheels, and twisted there upon the grey surface. He could hear a train in the distance, the whistle, the heavy rumble of grain, iron on iron. That night, when Chequeov’s neighbours heard the unfamiliar crack of a pistol, twice, they came running to investigate. Had they been familiar with his written work—an impossibility under the circumstances, his obscurity being so profound in Weyburn as to rival the obscurity of all of us today-- then those neighbours could have walked, confident in the solace of what they would find.

Prior to the introduction of street-lights, in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, the aurora borealis would often be visible, particularly in autumn; it would sweep the northern sky with a sybillant green-gold hiss, like a curtain falling all night, and it would stay like that until the blaze of the sun tipped up, fired once, fired twice, upon the eastern horizon.