

The Hung Gun
By Gail Gibbs

“If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise, don’t put it there.” Anton Chekhov

Have you studied Chekhov? I mean really studied him, not that glancing whiff of Famous Authors that passes for Literature Studies in the American education system. An excerpt from Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, perhaps reading aloud a Chekhov play, and the idiots pronounce you educated. Such a farce.

Anton Chekhov was the perfect writer. His short stories cry out to the intelligentsia; his theatrical plays speak softly to the bourgeois. Over one hundred years ago, this literary genius pricked the conscience of Russian royalty, and gave significance to the commonplace life of the average man. He presented complex stories of the common people, and exposed their angst, despair, and frustration for all of us to share.

So naturally, it was Anton Chekhov who guided me to commit the perfect murder.

Ah, now I have your attention. Murder does that. Regrettably, I must now hold you in suspense while I properly set the scene, so that you will better appreciate the astounding nature of my perfect murder.

If the world were fair, my extensive mastery of Russian literature would have provided me with substantial fame and fortune. But the world is a cruel place and my special sort of genius is rarely recognized.

As it is, I was forced to debase myself to earn a living as an accountant. Fortunately, I found my goldmine in the field of charitable giving, using other people’s money, of course. I, or rather my firm, guided the wealthy among the jungles of profitable non-profits, tax-sheltered trust funds, and interest-bearing charity endowments.

Interest-bearing, you ask? How can someone give away money and earn dividends on it at the same time? Therein lies the genius, because my clients never asked that question. They were perfectly happy to have their cake and eat it too, no questions asked. A liquid lunch, accounting babble, and regular small tax-free checks were all it took to bring on self-induced blindness.

In reality, the “interest” was drawn from the accounts of the other clients, in a swirling, blending, fiscal hurricane of transfers, payments and counter-payments. The construction was a thing of beauty, which I masterfully controlled, as I rode through the sky of monetary whirlwinds, with sizeable chunks of coinage dropping into my pockets along the way.

In order to keep the hurricane spinning, I occasionally needed a fresh infusion of real money to nourish the financial fantasy. Arthur K. Peabody was to provide that real money. His infusion would have kept the hurricane spinning a few more years, until I was ready for my final disappearance. But I had to murder him to get it.

It didn't start out as murder. When I first met Arthur Peabody, he was a sodden waste of a young man, destroying himself with partying and debauchery. By my calculations, he had 3.5 years left. He was also in possession of ludicrous amounts of Peabody family money, which upon his demise would be passed along to other, equally undeserving Peabodys. I had a better use for it.

So, for two years and eight months, I schmoozed and partied alongside the sodden Arthur Peabody, though my usual role was the tolerated designated driver, meanwhile designing a perfect trail of documents – inquiring letters, information requests, fund transfers, all approved with Arthur K. Peabody's drunken scrawl of a signature, or a perfect forgery if he was too passed out. Everything was properly mailed, delivered, registered and filed with the appropriate agencies, banks, accounts, and attorneys.

The final result was a perfectly redesigned will, safely stored in the vaults of the trusted Peabody retainer. This wonderful will left stocks, bonds, and one-fourth of the estate, not to me, heaven forbid, but as an endowment to a highly respectable charitable organization. This organization, which gets significant media coverage for its good works, is also a subdivision of a larger charity, which has a permanent contract to make donations to an overseas mission, which eventually pays 85% of the donation back to me. It was one of my better constructions.

My carefully balanced hurricane needed my attention, so once everything was in place, I left Peabody snorting away happily in Paris, not long for this world.

Unfortunately, while I was otherwise engaged, Arthur K. Peabody became acquainted with Miss Beatrice Dupont, with a disgustingly positive effect on his lifestyle. Not only did the little tart clean him up, she reconciled him into the graces of his family. Before I could intervene, they were engaged, with a bright, and apparently long, future ahead.

This was definitely a kink in my cash flow garden hose. The need to input real money into the hurricane was growing, as well as the risk that Peabody might discover and contradict my lovely paper trail.

Just as I had begun to review ways to recover and dismantle my lovely set of documents, Chekhov came to my rescue. To calm my despair, I was reviewing a collection of plays in my vast collection, when a prologue mentioned Chekhov's Rule for Writers. My eyes locked on those fateful words:

"If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired."

I read the saying through a dozen times, each time my heart beating a little faster. At last, I could stand it no longer, and actually released a whoop of glee. I had my answer.

The human mind expects, no, demands continuity to every story. Human nature was to be my weapon, my ally, and my death instrument. I took up the challenge with renewed enthusiasm.

First, there were dinner parties. I threw four within a three month period, with a sufficient number of competent witnesses at each, including Peabody, of course. Each time I would lead a tour of the house, including a recently remodeled study.

While showing off the study, I would point out the antique shotgun in a rack above the fireplace. I know, it should have been a pistol, but I needed it to be a shotgun

if my plan was to succeed. I am sure Chekhov will forgive me – and you will too, once you see the brilliance of my strategy.

I would take said shotgun down from the wooden rack, blustering on all the while about high crime rate statistics. In the absence of children in the household, I said, only a fool keeps an unloaded gun. As I expounded on the reliability of the historical piece, some of the guests rolled their eyes, but I cared nothing about their opinions. All that I needed was for them to remember two things:

One, the gun was always loaded.

Two, that Arthur K. Peabody knew this fact.

Eventually, I would return the gun to the wooden rack, and continue with the house tour.

Meanwhile, at each dinner party, and at other occasions that presented themselves, I made sure Peabody witnessed a number of suspicious incidents involving his fiancé. Perhaps I stood too close, or lingered a little too long with a touch. Small things, details, but oh so important. Chekhov loved details. Some of his most intriguing slice-of-life stories are nothing but details, delicate word threads weaving into a stunning tapestry of imagery. Often during these encounters, I was able to glean information from Miss Beatrice that would become useful in the next phase of my project.

One evening, the opportunity arose for the piece de résistance. A carefully orchestrated misunderstanding allowed me to escort Miss Beatrice home from the theater - leaving my victim fuming and worried outside the wrong theater door for almost two hours. There were apologies all around, of course, but suspicions naturally lingered.

So, Peabody was of the perfect mental attitude when I invited him over. We entered the aforementioned study, I securely closed the door between us and the servants, and we sat down by the fireplace, drinks in hand. His was disgustingly non-alcoholic.

I then proceeded to quietly describe in detail to him a lurid, steamy affair between Miss Beatrice and myself. The details I had acquired from Miss Beatrice were now quite useful in establishing credibility. I was most descriptive in covering how she and I would often discuss him behind his back, using terminology that would be devastating to any man. I baited, teased, and inflicted pain again and again, a skilled verbal matador with hyperbole and insults.

Predictably, Peabody was in turn disbelieving, despairing, and outraged. He yelled and threatened, loud enough to carry through the door. Then I stood and reached into my pocket, pulling out what looked very much to be a handgun.

Peabody's eyes grew wide, then he lunged for the shotgun over the fireplace. I noted with pleasure that his hands were fully on the weapon, fingerprints and all. He jerked once, twice, quite ineffectually, of course. Since the last dinner party, I had securely bolted the gun to the rack. Although Anton Chekhov might need the pistol to fire, I had no intention of being the one fired upon.

Peabody released his hold on the gun and turned towards me, enraged, frightened, and off balance. But I no longer held anything like a gun. Instead, I was crouching down, holding my end of the small rug under his feet. I pulled hard, causing him to crash backwards into the fireplace hearth. Whether he landed on his spine, neck, or head was immaterial to my plan, as long as he was sufficiently stunned, which he was.

I finished the job with a quick smooth blow to his head with the heavy whisky decanter from the table. The blow had to be to the front of the head, of course, to show a fighting wound. I had practiced many times on watermelons to get the move just right.

Seconds counted now, 4.35 seconds to be exact, as I had calculated from numerous rehearsals. I stepped forward, removed the bolts and clamps from the gun rack, and placed the gun on the floor beside him, careful not to smudge his fingerprints. After all, it was my gun, my fingerprints should be on it, but not on top of his. It's the attention to those little details that turns a painting into art, a clever tune into fine music, or crude homicide into a perfect murder.

I dropped the incriminating bolts and clamps behind the hearth grating, along with the small piece of firewood which, when held at the right angle, looked just like a handgun. Then, I screamed. By the time the servants burst in, I was kneeling by the dead man, sobbing most convincingly.

Self defense, of course. The shouting, fingerprints, all proved I was innocent, a victim of a jealous suitor gone mad. Under questioning, I reluctantly revealed that I had confessed to Peabody a gentle, unrequited, yet growing fondness for Miss Beatrice. I had felt the only honorable thing to do was to explain why, in the future, I would distance myself from my best friend Arthur and his loving fiancé. I had been totally unprepared for such a violent reaction. The pathos, the regret were a perfect blend, balanced, just so.

So you see, the pistol does not have to fire at all to be effective. Only a genius like me, Chekhov's equal, could have seen beyond the rules. Only I could comprehend that sometimes the strictest of rules can and should be properly broken, resulting in a superior level of creativity.

I was released from custody almost immediately. All was going perfectly, which I suppose should have been a warning to me. How perfectly Chekhov. His most famous plays and stories end in tragedy, the characters condemned to a slow, pathetic decline as the result of nothing more significant than ordinary human nature. In my case, apparently, the detective in charge was simply curious.

Any other homicide detective would have closed the case, moved on to other crimes more worthy of his attention, or even gone on vacation. Any other homicide detective wouldn't have given my business a second glance, since it was obviously unrelated to the case. Once my few office staff (I have very few, for obvious reasons, and arrange for the turnover to be high) had given the officers the standard lines that had soothed many an investor, they should have gone away.

And they did go away, for a short while. However, behind the scenes, the detectives were apparently having words. The homicide detective showed his notes to a theft detective, who conferred with a fraud detective, who consulted a white collar crime specialist. Eventually, federal agencies became involved.

Then, in a flurry of procedural efficiency, I was swooped up into jail again, while reams of subpoenas flew off the presses, confiscating hundreds of files and computers. We could have ridden it out, had I gotten the word to my multiple wealthy pigeons to sit tight on their roosts, securely behind their lawyers. But, ironically, or perhaps intentionally, bureaucratic mishmashes resulted in the maximum allowable delay before I was granted my obligatory phone call.

Without my soothing guidance, the brainless pigeons caved to the investigators, and blind eyes suddenly grew wide in feigned innocence. Those who could not hide behind innocence felt compelled to save their furry hides and rat me out.

All my lovely fictitious charitable constructions quickly collapsed into their equally fictitious foundations. Piddling white collar infractions piled one on top of the other, fueled by that nastiest of phrases Ponzi scheme, growing into a white mountain of paper which buried me in dozens of counts of fraud.

My emergency escape plan became useless when bonding out was not an option, and I have been confined to this jailhouse ever since.

So you see, I have indeed committed the perfect, undetectable, murder. The irony, and Chekhov so loved irony, is that while the murder was perfect, the fraud was only near-perfect.

The jury found me guilty as charged on all counts yesterday, and the judge is determining the preferred sentencing as we speak.

If the prosecutor has his way, and I suspect he will, the multiple sentences will be served sequentially. Should that happen, I will be in prison far longer than if they had convicted me on a single count of first-degree murder. How ironic.

In addition, I feel sure a prison hospital will not provide adequate treatment for this odd black lump I felt under my skin while shaving this morning. I tried to show it to the jailhouse medic, but he was noticeably unimpressed. So it's possible that I have gotten the death penalty after all. The tragedy is complete, the irony is impeccable. Chekhov would have been so proud.

The End

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