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“Lights”

by Peter Rock

Peter Rock was born and grew up in Salt Lake City, Utah. His new novel, *The Bewildered*, was published by MacAdam/Cage in April, 2005. He is also the author of the novels *The Ambidextrist*, *Carnival Wolves* and *This Is the Place*. THE UNSETTLING, a collection of stories (including “Lights”), will be released in spring, 2006. Other stories have recently appeared in *Zoetrope: All-Story*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Tin House*, and elsewhere. He lives in Portland, Oregon, and teaches at Reed College.

“The dog was barking excitedly outside. Through the window, in the porch light, the three men could see him—his front legs stretched out straight, his thin whip of a tail curved over his back. His name was Orca and, like most mongrels in New Mexico, he had a short, stiff coat of mixed black and tan, long legs, triangles of ears, and a thin snout. He was barking at the black, empty windows of the houses up and down the street; he paused, his mouth settling into a kind of smile, and then started again.

“He’s just lonely, out there,” Alex said. “He’s always been nervous; I got him at a shelter, you know.” Standing, he opened the door, and the barking stopped. Orca turned and lurched toward his master, his whole body wagging. Alex stepped out into the yard and bent down; the fabric of his work pants strained as he began scratching at the base of the dog’s tail.

“Good boy, you! Oh, you’re a character! Char-ac-ter! Who do you love, now? Who gives you attention? Oh, my Orca, my whale-boy!”

His voice changed, becoming ridiculous and more highly pitched, as he spoke to the dog. Vincent, now standing in the doorway, was slightly embarrassed of the older man. It was especially bad tonight, since they had a visitor.

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Q&A

Why did you begin this story ‘After Chekhov’?

Simply because it’s based on a story of the same name written by Anton Chekhov—though it now occurs to me that, given the quality and influence of his storytelling, perhaps all stories should be marked B.C. or A.D. with regard to Chekhov’s birth! The notion of following one of his narratives, or writing a story inspired by one of his is definitely something that’s been done before (“Lady with the Pet Dog,” for example, by Joyce Carol Oates, or Francine Prose’s “The Witch”); in my case, I was reading my way through the three volume collected stories I had, and it struck me that some of Chekhov’s great strengths—notably, patience with pacing and an extraordinary depth and generosity of characterization—were weaknesses in my storytelling. So one side of this story’s genesis is this exercise I made for myself, a pretty hubristic attempt to write one of my own stories with an eye on Chekhov’s. Writing this now, just setting out on these questions, I can foresee that much of what I have to say will revolve around Chekhov and myself, and will therefore seem somewhat preposterous, completely presumptuous. I don’t want to suggest that we are peers, in any way; it’s more like I leapt up, caught hold of the cuff of his pantsleg, and he dragged me around for a while before kicking me off.

Where did the idea of this story come from?

The last answer might suggest that it all came from Chekhov, that I completely ripped it off from him, but it’s a little more complicated than that. My wife and I were traveling around, trying to figure out where to live, about four years ago—she had finished medical school, and was interviewing at residency programs, and I was tagging along, trying to picture myself living in these places. We liked Albuquerque quite a bit, and had some friends there; they lived far outside of the city, in a development so new that the streets didn’t yet have names. We walked around, to the edge of their neighborhood, through identical houses, and a strange sort of deconstruction happened as we went—roofs came off, then siding, until finally we’d reached the place where there were only the newly poured foundations. On the horizon, the land was cleared, the future clearly defined. This—and the fact that behind these little adobe walls all these New Mexican dogs were barking at us, their curved tails visible sometimes, then their snouts, over the fence’s tops—made me want to set a story in a place like that. So new, so temporary, so simultaneously hopeful and desperate.

The setting of “Lights”, a development of houses half finished, seems to add so much to the story, and reflect the characters’ lives in a physical way. Was this something you consciously planned?

I had a sense, perhaps, that there was a resonance, or that the setting spoke to some things that were explicitly or implicitly going on in the story that I was imagining, but I’d say that I don’t plan that way (consciously), when writing stories. It’s more a sense of starting out with different, arbitrary and distinct things, and then, through writing, trying to make the case that they belong together and were never apart? A created inevitability.

With my students’ work, I often see stories fail because the writer already has the story’s themes and “meaning” in mind, so I try to allow metaphors and allusions to rise organically, or not at all. I believe that if you pay enough attention to the characters, and follow them, let them have the reins, that these issues, ones that critics or professors talk about, will take care of themselves.

What was the most challenging aspect of writing this story?

Well, I mentioned that I was trying to build up my narrative patience, and I certainly felt anxiety about not moving faster—especially amid Alex’s long story within the story, which is supposed to be kind of arduous and exasperating. I guess I overcame this, and saw it as part of the story’s experience, but my stories generally work a lot more quickly, with a lot less shifting of perspectives and much less interiority. Looking at it now, this story seems to be more about anticipations and possibilities that aren’t followed or realized, rather than things happening; that was an uneasy way for me to write. I do think I learned a lot, though, and that my subsequent stories have a slightly less anxious texture for having written this one.

That said, probably the most challenging aspects was trying to figure out how much to diverge from Chekhov’s story—how could I make it my own while somehow being true to its source? I tried to pay as much attention as I could to his story—the dynamics between the characters, and their desires, and the passage of time, and then tried to figure out ways to follow his narrative while making enough changes that it would seem enough like *my* story. The prospect of shedding my skin was never there, of course, but the degree of “collaboration” was a question.

Clearly, I moved the story through time, so that changed many of the details and the atmosphere, and I also moved it through space, from Russia to Albuquerque. That was a start. I’m not sure that a careful investigation of the difference in plot would be that interesting, but there are major changes.

The biggest adjustment, and the one that gave me the most satisfaction and trouble, was shifting the narration of the story. In the original, it’s a first person narrator, and the story is told by a traveler who’s been caught out after dark, slightly lost, and stops over at a hut where two men are building a railroad trestle. This traveling narrator is pretty benevolent, passive, and interested in these men—one older, one younger—and is the occasion for them to disport their personalities and beliefs. When I moved the story into the third person, and removed the access to the traveler’s thoughts, this caused the traveler—here, Jonas—to seem potentially quite sinister. This effect is certainly much more typical of my stories than of Chekhov’s.

Who is Jonas? What does his character represent in this story?

I don’t know that I’m the best person to explicate my stories, or even close. Probably the worst. I don’t know a whole lot more about Jonas than Alex and Vincent do; he may be working for the carnival, as he claims; he may be dangerous, or have intentions that no one has yet suspected. Part of the pleasure in writing the story was limiting my apprehension of him in the same way as the other characters’ apprehensions are limited; the tension of the narrative spins around the mystery of who he is and what he wants, so I didn’t think it was right for me to “know” more than the others. It would seem manipulative, were I to hint at insights about Jonas; to really explain him, I suspect, would let the story’s tension go slack.

Alex mentions reading a book called ‘Lightning Guides All Things’, and later describes his wife and children as “his lightning.” Can you talk about what he meant by this, and how this ties into the other lights in the story?

Again, I wasn’t thinking that much about these connections; looking at it in hindsight, though, I seem pretty clever. I suppose I was thinking of a book called “Early Greek Philosophy” that I read early in college, full of the pre-Socratic philosophers. Heraclitus (“the obscure”) was a favorite; only a few fragments of his thinking exist, one of which is “lightning guides all things.”

Though I’ve already questioned the author-as-reader, I’ll make a few guesses: I’m always struck by people misspelling lightning as “lightening,” as if it brings illumination. Perhaps that’s one way I was thinking about it, as a kind of flash of insight, a sudden and fleeting glimpse of the truth, a (forking) guide. At the same time, we live in darkness, and to be completely illuminated would be inhuman and consuming; to be struck by lightning? Part of what I’m getting at, here, is that the story takes it upon itself to both critique pretentious philosophizing while also putting forth some abstract thoughts, trying to have it both ways. I feel like a lot of my best thinking was done before I realized what pretension was, before I became self-conscious, and perhaps this is also one way to consider the story. (As I try to talk about it, I find myself sounding quite a bit like Alex, then Vincent, regulating myself through them.)

How long did it take you to complete this story?

I tend to collect pieces of stories—characters, settings, scraps of dialogue—and so there are details here that are probably ten years old. About four years ago I started thinking hard about the Albuquerque building site, and a few months later I read the Chekhov story and wondered about putting them together. Then, as I was struggling with a novel, other stories, and working as a temp at the University of Pennsylvania football office, I started putting notes together and building up a kind of an outline. I suppose in terms of focused activity it covered a couple months or so. In the time since I wrote it, though, I’ve taken it out at least every year and thrown out a page or so, changed things around.

What is the best bit of advice you have ever gotten?

Like many people who write, I kept after it because I was encouraged by teachers and friends. It’s easier—and less contentious—to encourage writing students, and it’s also important. At the same time, I am most thankful to Don Faulkner, my teacher in college who finally said “What you’re writing is very interesting—to you—but no one can tell what you’re writing about. If you want to go on writing journals, that’s fine, but if you want to write for other people, you’ll need to show them a little more consideration.” I don’t know if that’s advice, exactly, but the disdain and fury I initially felt toward him for this intervention has long ago turned to pure gratitude. Too often I tried to suggest that I was smarter than I was, and used obscurity and inscrutability as a shield. I still fight this tendency. I constantly remind myself that it’s only when we reveal everything that we can that we’re able to understand the actual limitations and mysteries.

That said, I notice that whenever I say something that sounds like general advice about writing to my students, everyone frantically begins to take notes. This scares me. So I think it’s wise to be stubborn, and wary of advice, and persistent in our struggling, so we can write uniquely. Writing is difficult, a complicated pleasure. The answers are different for everyone, and the best we can do is to make new and interesting mistakes.

What are you working on now?

I’ve been revisiting stories from my upcoming collection; this means tightening them individually, but also figuring out which stories are included. I’m hoping it will be a short collection, rather than a demonstration of how many stories I’ve written. Trying to cut down on repetitions and weak links. And I’m working on a new novel, the second in a series that take place during the summer of 2001 in Portland, Oregon (*The Bewildered* is the first), and some screen adaptations. Mostly, I suppose, trying to write in new ways.

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