In VN’s novel *Ada* (1969) Van Veen mentions *fait divers* (a news item) with a certain Ivan Ivanov of Yukonsk:

Unfortunately after the rumored misadventure of the Volga herds and herdsmen a much better documented *fait divers* happened in the U.S.A. at the height of the controversy. An American, a certain Ivan Ivanov of Yukonsk, described as an ‘habitually intoxicated laborer’ (‘a good definition,’ said Ada lightly, ‘of the true artist’), managed somehow to impregnate — in his sleep, it was claimed by him and his huge family — his five-year-old great-granddaughter, Maria Ivanov, and, then, five years later, also got Maria’s daughter, Daria, with child, in another fit of somnolence. Photographs of Maria, a ten-year old granny with little Daria and baby Varia crawling around her, appeared in all the newspapers, and all kinds of amusing puzzles were provided by the genealogical farce that the relationships between the numerous living — and not always clean-living — members of the Ivanov clan had become in angry Yukonsk. (1.21)

*Ivanov* (1887) is a play by Chekhov. In his essay on Chekhov, *Tvorchestvo iz nichego* (“Creation from Nothing,” 1905), Lev Shestov compares Chekhov’s play *Chayka* (“The Seagull,” 1896) to a newspaper with an endless series of *faits divers*:

Забегая несколько вперёд, я уже здесь укажу на его комедию “Чайку”, в которой, наперекор всем литературным принципам, основой действия является не логическое развитие страстей, не неизбежная связь между предыдущим и последующим, а голый, *демонстративно* ничем не прикрытый *случай*. Читая драму, иной раз кажется, что пред тобой номер газеты с бесконечным рядом faits divers, нагромождённых друг на друга без всякого порядка и заранее обдуманного плана.

Anticipating a little, I would here point to his comedy, *The Seagull*, where, in defiance of all literary principles, the basis of action appears to be not the logical development of passions, nor the inevitable connection between cause and effect, but pure chance, ostentatiously unmasked. As one reads the play, it seems at times that one has before one a copy of a newspaper with an endless series of *faits divers*, heaped upon one another, without order and without previous plan. (II)

According to Shestov, the basis of action in *The Seagull* appears to be *golyi sluchay* (pure chance). In VN’s story *Soglyadatay* (“The Eye,” 1930) Smurov (the narrator and main character) affirms that *vsyo ot sluchaya* (everything is due to chance):

Глупо искать закона, ещё глупее его найти. Надумает нищий духом, что весь путь человечества можно объяснить каверзной игрою планет или борьбой пустого с тугонабитым желудком, пригласит к богине Клио аккуратного секретарчика из мещан, откроет оптовую торговлю эпохами, народными массами, и тогда несдобровать отдельному индивидууму, с его двумя бедными "у", безнадежно аукающимися в чащобе экономических причин. К счастью, закона никакого нет, -- зубная боль проигрывает битву, дождливый денёк отменяет намеченный мятеж, -- всё зыбко, всё от случая, и  напрасно старался тот расхлябанный и брюзгливый буржуа в клетчатых штанах времён Виктории, написавший тёмный труд "Капитал" -- плод бессонницы и мигрени.

There are no laws — a toothache loses a battle, a rainy day cancels a proposed insurrection — everything is vacillating, everything is due to chance and in vain have been the efforts of that ramshackle and grumbling bourgeois in Victorian check trousers, who wrote the obscure work called *'*Capital' — a fruit of insomnia and megrim. (chapter II)

Smurov is in love with a girl who dislikes her name Varvara, wants to be called Monna Vanna and who was nicknamed Vanya (a diminutive of Ivan) by her elder sister:

У них жила родственница, Марианна Николаевна, и по вечерам бывали гости, почти всегда одни и те же. Хозяйкой дома считалась Евгения Евгеньевна. У неё был приятный юмор, — она-то и прозвала сестру Ваней, в те годы, когда меньшая требовала, чтобы её звали Монна-Ванной, находя в звуке своего имени — Варвара — что-то толстое и рябое. Я не сразу привык к этому мужскому уменьшительному; постепенно же оно приняло для меня как раз тот оттенок, который грезился Ване в томных женских именах. (ibid.)

*Dyadya Vanya* (“Uncle Vanya,” 1898) is a play by Chekhov. In “Ardis the Second” Van quotes Sonya’s words to Voynitski at the end of Chekhov’s play, “we shall see the sky swarming with diamonds,” and Ada calls her brother (and lover) “Uncle Van:”

‘Well, that bit about spinsters is rot,’ said Van, ‘we’ll pull it off somehow, we’ll become more and more distant relations in artistically forged papers and finally dwindle to mere namesakes, or at the worst we shall live quietly, you as my housekeeper, I as your epileptic, and then, as in your Chekhov, "we shall see the whole sky swarm with diamonds."’

‘Did you find them all, Uncle Van?’ she inquired, sighing, laying her dolent head on his shoulder. She had told him everything. (1.31)

On Antiterra (aka Demonia, Earth’s twin planet on which *Ada* is set) Chekhov’s play *Tri sestry* (“The Three Sisters,” 1901) is known as *Four Sisters*. The name of the fourth sister, played in a film version by Marina (Van’s, Ada’s and Lucette’s mother), is Varvara:

Varvara, the late General Sergey Prozorov’s eldest daughter, comes in Act One from her remote nunnery, Tsitsikar Convent, to Perm (also called Permwail), in the backwoods of Akimsk Bay, North Canady, to have tea with Olga, Marsha, and Irina on the latter’s name day. Much to the nun’s dismay, her three sisters dream only of one thing — leaving cool, damp, mosquito-infested but otherwise nice and peaceful ‘Permanent’ as Irina mockingly dubs it, for high life in remote and sinful Moscow, Id., the former capital of Estotiland. In the first edition of his play, which never quite manages to heave the soft sigh of a masterpiece, Tchechoff (as he spelled his name when living that year at the execrable Pension Russe, 9, rue Gounod, Nice) crammed into the two pages of a ludicrous expository scene all the information he wished to get rid of, great lumps of recollections and calendar dates — an impossible burden to place on the fragile shoulders of three unhappy Estotiwomen. Later he redistributed that information through a considerably longer scene in which the arrival of the *monashka* Varvara provides all the speeches needed to satisfy the restless curiosity of the audience. This was a neat stroke of stagecraft, but unfortunately (as so often occurs in the case of characters brought in for disingenuous purposes) the nun stayed on, and not until the third, penultimate, act was the author able to bundle her off, back to her convent. (2.9)

When her husband is dying in a Ladore hospital, Marina is in Tsitsikar, flirting with the Bishop of Belokonsk:

*‘A propos,* I have not been able to alert Lucette, who is somewhere in Italy, but I’ve managed to trace Marina to Tsitsikar — flirting there with the Bishop of Belokonsk — she will arrive in the late afternoon, wearing, no doubt, *pleureuses,* very becoming, and we shall then travel *à trois* to Ladore, because I don’t think —’ (2.11)

In “The Three Sisiters” Dr. Chebutykin reads a newspaper and mentions Tsitsikar, a city in Manchuria where smallpox is raging:

Чебутыкин (читает газету). Цицикар. Здесь свирепствует оспа.

CHEBUTYKIN. [Reading paper] Tsitsikar. Smallpox is raging here. (Act Two)

*Ospa* (smallpox) brings to mind Dr Stella Ospenko’s *ospedale* where Demon Veen (Van’s and Ada’s father) recovered from a wound received in a duel with Baron d’Onsky:

The alcohol his vigorous system had already imbibed was instrumental, as usual, in reopening what he [Demon Veen] gallicistically called condemned doors, and now as he gaped involuntarily as all men do while spreading a napkin, he considered Marina’s pretentious *ciel-étoilé* hairdress and tried to *realize* (in the rare full sense of the word), tried to *possess* the reality of a fact by forcing it into the sensuous center, that here was a woman whom he had intolerably loved, who had loved him hysterically and skittishly, who insisted they make love on rugs and cushions laid on the floor (‘as respectable people do in the Tigris-Euphrates valley’), who would woosh down fluffy slopes on a bobsleigh a fortnight after parturition, or arrive by the Orient Express with five trunks, Dack’s grandsire, and a maid, to Dr Stella Ospenko’s *ospedale* where he was recovering from a scratch received in a sword duel (and still visible as a white weal under his eighth rib after a lapse of nearly seventeen years). (1.38)

The name of Demon’s adversary seems to hint at Onegin’s *donskoy zherebets* (Don stallion) in Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (Two: V: 4). Yukonsk, Belokonsk (the Russian twin of Whitehorse, a city in NW Canada) and Skonky (d’Onsky’s one-way nickname) bring to mind Chekhov’s feuilleton *Skoropostizhnaya konskaya smert’, ili velikodushie russkogo naroda* (“The Sudden Death of a Horse, or the Magnanimity of the Russian People,” 1889). Its title reminds one of Polevoy’s *Istoriya russkogo naroda* (“The History of Russian People,” 1829-33), a work that was reviewed (negatively) by Pushkin, and of Tolstoy’s story *Smert’ Ivana Ilyicha* (“The Death of Ivan Ilyich,” 1886). At the beginning of Tolstoy’s story *Posle bala* (“After the Ball,” 1903) the narrator mentions *sreda* (environment) and *sluchay* (chance):

— Вот вы говорите, что человек не может сам по себе понять, что хорошо, что дурно, что всё дело в среде, что среда заедает. А я думаю, что всё дело в случае. Я вот про себя скажу.

‘And you say that a man cannot, of himself, understand what is good and evil; that it is all environment, that the environment swamps the man. But I believe it is all chance. Take my own case . . . ”

Describing the method of his work, Van Veen mentions some farcical 'influence of environment' endorsed by Marx père:

Van Veen [as also, in his small way, the editor of Ada] liked to change his abode at the end of a section or chapter or even paragraph, and he had almost finished a difficult bit dealing with the divorce between time and the contents of time (such as action on matter, in space, and the nature of space itself) and was contemplating moving to Manhattan (that kind of switch being a reflection of mental rubrication rather than a concession to some farcical 'influence of environment' endorsed by Marx père, the popular author of 'historical' plays), when he received an unexpected dorophone call which for a moment affected violently his entire pulmonary and systemic circulation. (2.5)

The popular author of 'historical' plays, Marx père seems to blend Karl Marx (the author of the obscure work called *'*Capital') with Shakespeare (whose name was also spelled Shaxpere), the author of history plays whom Tolstoy disliked and VN admired. Chekhov signed a letter to his brother, in which he described the first performance and unexpected success of his play *Ivanov*, “Schiller Shekspirovich Goethe.” When Adolf Marx (the publisher) bought his Collected Works, Chekhov said that he was a Marxist. The five Marx brothers were American comedians (whom VN admired). In the Kalugano hospital (where Van recovers from a wound received in a pistol duel with Captain Tapper) Dr. Fitzbishop tells Van that Philip Rack (Lucette’s music teacher, a composer of genius) is in Ward Five where hopeless cases are kept (1.42). The name Tapper seems to hint at Chekhov’s story *Tapyor* (“The Ballroom Pianist,” 1885). A member of the Do-Re-La country club, Tapper is an expert on maps, horses, horticulture. In Chekhov’s play “Uncle Vanya” Astrov demonstrates a map that he drew. *Astrum* and *stella* are the Latin words for “star.” Horticulture brings to mind Chekhov’s play *Vishnyovyi sad* (“The Cherry Orchard,” 1904).

In his essay on Chekhov Lev Shestov (the philosopher whose penname comes from *shest’*, “six”) calls the author of *Palata No. 6* (“Ward Six,” 1892) *pevets beznadezhnosti* (a poet of hopelessness):

Чтобы в двух словах определить его тенденцию, я скажу: Чехов был *певцом безнадежности*. Упорно, уныло, однообразно в течение всей своей почти 25-летней литературной деятельности Чехов только одно и делал: теми или иными способами убивал человеческие надежды.

To define his tendency in a word, I would say that Chekhov was the poet of hopelessness. Stubbornly, sadly, monotonously, during all the years of his literary activity, nearly a quarter of a century long, Chekhov was doing one alone: by one means or another he was killing human hopes. (I)

Van’s and Ada’s half-sister Lucette commits suicide (drowns herself in the Atlantic) at the age of twenty-five. Nadezhda (Hope) is the name of the title character of Chekhov’s last story *Nevesta* (“The Bride,” 1903). The name-and-patronymic of her fiancé, Andrey Andreevich, brings to mind Ada’s husband, Andrey Andreevich Vinelander, and Van’s angelic Russian tutor, Andrey Andreevich Aksakov (‘AAA’). In a letter of June 12, 1903, to Mirolyubov Chekhov says that on this day he sent to Mirolyubov, the editor of *Zhurnal dlya vsekh* (“A Magazine for All”), his story *Nevesta* and that he is reading Sergey Aksakov’s *Semeynaya khronika* (“The Family Chronicle,” 1856):

Дорогой Виктор Сергеевич, сегодня послал Вам заказною бандеролью рассказ. Простите, делать мне нечего, и вот на досуге я увлёкся и почеркал весь рассказ.

Читаю «Семейную хронику» С. Аксакова.

*Ada*’s full title is *Ada or Ardor: a Family Chronicle.*

Alexey Sklyarenko