

## FRANK GALUSZKA

*Summer at Emmaus, 1977*  
Oil on canvas, 66 x 46 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## JOSIP NOVAKOVICH

# Strangers

**W**e have friends in our lives, perhaps enemies as well, but we also have strangers, and usually I think the strangers matter least of all, but perhaps we should love our strangers more than our neighbors. Sometimes years after a random encounter, I suddenly wonder, How is that awesome stranger doing?

As a provincial in Croatia in the early seventies, coming from a little town where everybody seemed to know everybody or at least too much about everybody, a complete stranger was a wonderful concept. In Zagreb, when I was about fourteen, I met two lads from India who lived in an attic on Vlaska Street. They studied medicine. They were happy, funny, had white teeth, and offered me powerful tea. I don't remember much more, but when I mentioned them to one of my relatives, he said, "But they are gypsies. Why talk to them? They probably steal." "Come on!" I replied. "They are smart and generous people."

In Russia, I encountered the same kind of chauvinism toward India. Pharmacists wouldn't sell me medicine made in India. And I said, "But why?"

"Here, we have German pills made by Bayer."

"Probably half of Bayer's chemical engineers are from India. They are the best engineers in the world." And the shop assistants looked at me like I was raving mad.

I was taught not to talk to strangers—it seemed most of us in Croatia were. During my first visit to the States, when I was eighteen, I experienced liberation. I'd go to the Public Square in Cleveland, find a stranger, and say, "Do you mind if we converse? I would like to practice my English." Sometimes people laughed and indulged me, sometimes they looked at me like I was insane. At the time I drank Coca-Cola and no beer or wine. A man with long hair and a beard said, "Let me warn you against Coca-Cola. When you go home, put an iron nail into it, and look for it a month later. You won't find it. The cola will dissolve into nothing. Just imagine what it does to you."

And then there are acquaintances, who remain strangers. Well, here's one. Marina N. I met her a long time ago in Saint Petersburg, Russia, when she ran the library either for the British Council or the American Corner. She said, "Oh, your last name is similar to mine. I have made several friends with last names similar to mine. That's a good sign." She had a strange charisma about her, black hair and radiant blue eyes, positively something otherworldly about her

as though she were a character in a science fiction movie. We stood in front of the Nevsky metro station, a crowded intersection, and she gave me her email address in blue on lined paper, like a bit of jazz melody. I put it in my pocket. She left. Pretty soon, four guys jostled me from different directions. I felt something in my pocket and pushed a guy's hand away. I stood at the curb and checked for my wallet. It was gone. I ran to the hotel and cancelled all the credit cards. Just as I was done with that, two elegant strangers, a man and a woman, who looked like an ad for cognac, appeared. "Are you Josip Novakovich?"

"How would you know that?" I said, in Russian.

"We picked up your wallet from the pavement. We saw you standing on the curb and feeling your pockets. But as you reached down, you knocked out your wallet, which was sticking halfway out. So here it is."

"How did you know where I was staying?" I asked, a bit suspicious.

"A copy of your visa was in the wallet. Well, here it is, stating the address, Pushkinskaya 6."

"Why didn't you let me know right away?"

"We couldn't as we were driving a car, and by the time we parked and got out, you were gone."

I had fifty dollars in the wallet. "I'd like to give you at least the fifty dollars."

"We don't want it. We are happy with the good karma. Maybe someone will help us like this one day." They smiled and left and I looked after them, admiring how nicely they moved, like athletes. And I thought, Did I accidentally pull the wallet partly out from my tight pocket when I put Marina's email address into the pocket? Did those four guys try to pickpocket me? Maybe yes to all the questions? I guess I'll never know the answer, and I won't know who these two good people were who showed up, whether ballet dancers, investment bankers, or the police.

But about Marina I know. We exchanged a few emails. Then last year, at least ten years after, I thought, who do I know in Saint Petersburg? I thought of getting in touch with the people I knew and sort of knew as I was tempted to take a trip to Russia while staying in Bulgaria for a few months. The flights were cheap. I could be there for US\$150 round-trip. In Sofia, I was tempted to get a Russian visa. I lived around the corner from a huge Russian center. I wrote to several people. One of them wrote, "I won't be

there. You've probably read about that metro explosion at Senaya Ploshad? I was in the train just ahead of that one, two minutes away. It could have been me dead. I am leaving the city." Anyway, then I wrote to Marina, and she said, "Yes, wonderful, let's meet up when you visit."

"How has life been this last decade for you?" I wrote.

"Up and down. I am spending too much money on doctors and medications. I will tell you in person. Just come and visit."

We corresponded back and forth. She was curious about Bulgaria and Croatia but said it was too complicated to get a travel visa and time off her work. Two months after our flurry of correspondence, I checked her Facebook page. There were all kinds of wishes for a better life.

Her picture is still there—she is sitting in a steeple of a tall church, her elbows on the ledge, looking out with a sensation of longing, perhaps longing for flight.

I gathered from talking to mutual acquaintances that she had jumped out of her apartment window from the ninth floor. Marina had suffered from depression. She took medicine to keep her balance. It was hard for her to keep her balance in a window—the downward pull got her. Well, I must say, I don't know much about her. She has remained a stranger. Her death made her for a few days a close friend whom I grieved. But I never knew her, only the tragic outline of her biography. She was in her midthirties, living alone. Maybe she'd never been able to get along with anybody despite being intelligent and well-read, and she obviously couldn't get along with herself. Maybe she had a terminal illness and wasn't depressed but couldn't face the prospect of a long decline and pain. I wish I had had a chance to talk with her. I had the chance I didn't take. Next time, if I meet a fascinating stranger, I will at least make sure I drink some powerful tea with her.

**JOSIP NOVAKOVICH**

## Anatomy Professor

**D**r. Radomir Davidović six foot six, thick black eyebrows, deep voice, lectured on human anatomy in Novi Sad from 1975 to 1976, and he terrified his audience. It's all right if you miss a lesson in grammar, but if you are going to be a surgeon, it's not all right to miss a nerve. As a practicing neurosurgeon in Zemun (Belgrade), he offered clinical examples, strokes, spinal cord injuries, to show where neural pathways led. The year before ours, he had failed 50 percent of the students—better that some people not become doctors than that some people die from malpractice.

Since I was from Croatia, my Serbian roommate claimed I had no chance, that as soon as Professor Davidović heard my Croatian, he would flunk me. A Croatian student from Osijek passed out as soon as she walked into the auditorium for the final exam conducted by Davidović. I have no idea whether she's a doctor now. That happened right before my exam. I was taken aback, and I gave my answers hesitantly and asked for time-outs to sketch on a piece of paper various neural pathways, and then I answered. Dr. Davidović said, "I like your method. Anatomy is spatial and visual."

He asked me a question, which he prefaced as his own anatomy professor's question in his final exam, and I thought it was an encouraging nudge. I took time to answer. He said, "Come here, I give you a big hug. Next year, be my teaching assistant, and we'll get you a good stipend. Promise you will be a doctor."

I wondered why he said that as though he knew I was dropping out.

I emigrated to the United States. I visited Novi Sad once, got in touch with my old roommates, found out who had dropped out, and found out that Dr. Davidović no longer taught. I talked to Nikola, a fellow student, who had proposed to me to assassinate Tito together; his house was on a curved slope, a ninety-degree angle to the street, and we knew Tito's parade would pass by right there. We rehearsed, poking rifles beneath the tiles of his red roof. Nikola said, "If we both take shots at him at the same time as they slow down, we are bound to get him."

"Yes, and the cops will shoot us. We'll each get one hundred bullets."

"We will die famous. Who knows famous surgeons? But famous assassins, everybody! Brutus, Princip, come on!"