

## 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