

...and the End of the Chain Will Quiver...

A Play in Two Parts

by Nadezhda Ptushkina

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"And suddenly joy stirred in his soul, and he even stopped for a moment to catch his breath. The past, he thought, is linked to the present by an unbroken chain of events, each flowing from the other. And it seemed to him that he had just seen both ends of this chain—that he had touched one end, and the other end had quivered».

— A. Chekhov, "The Student"

Dramatis Personae

ANTON CHEKHOV, 30 years old.

MASHA, his sister, 27.

MISHA, his younger brother, a student.

YEVGENIA YAKOVLEVNA, their mother.

PAVEL YEGOROVICH, their father.

LIKA MIZINOVA, 20 years old.

DUNYA EFROS, 25.

ISAAC LEVITAN, 29.

SOFYA KUVSHINNIKOVA, 43.

DMITRY KUVSHINNIKOV, her husband.

IVANENKO, 28.

OLGA KUNDASOVA, 25.

POLYA, a young servant in the Chekhov household.

AN UNKNOWN LADY, about 40.

The action takes place in Moscow, in the two-story house on Sadovo-Kudrinskaya that the Chekhov family rented at that time.

April 21, 1890.

Part One

A note for actors, directors, designers, and all others involved in productions of this play: Do not search here for historical parallels, allusions, multilayered subtext, scandals, or daring interpretations! The author is incapable of all that.

...Simply, once upon a time, the author was a little girl who, closing her eyes, would spend hours dreaming of that life "gone with the wind». And

now, as a grown woman, she tries to give voice to the dreams of that little girl—also "gone with the wind». The wind carries away our yesterdays, the moment of unconscious rapture this morning, the strangely thoughtful gaze of a man that just barely grazed you, only moments ago...

O merciful God! Is it not because our feelings are as intangible as the wind—so that we might treasure them all the more consciously in the very moment they descend upon us?

My first love was not a classmate, not my older brother's friend, not a boy from the yard, not a movie idol, not Robertino Loretto, not Fidel Castro—but the writer Chekhov. It was a real and passionate love, dreamy and sensual, ardent and selfless, full of contradictions and hopes. I dreamed not of a portrait, but of a living man. I knew how he moved, how he smiled, the timbre of his voice and his intonations. I adored his gestures, the open, guileless, trusting expression of his face, his defenceless, intently thoughtful gaze—perhaps from nearsightedness.

At a famous actress's home, my mother whispered to me: "That is Chekhov's wife!" A heavy, elderly woman, but somehow extraordinary. How could I know how heavy the burden of a legend is for living shoulders?

There—his wife! And I was seized with excitement and rapture at the nearness of his presence. His wife—she was already here. That meant that HE too was about to walk in! What did I care then about Time, Space, and Dates? It never occurred to me how it could be that HE was young while she was so old? And did his age even matter to me? Hardly!

And I would grow agitated, breathless, now feverish, now chilled, with the absolute presentiment—the anticipation—that HE would walk in at any moment! He would see me in the rocking chair, apart from everyone, impossibly beautiful and loving... and he would fall in love at first sight, forever! My grandmother used to say: "Trust in God, but do not be remiss

yourself!" And I tried not to be remiss. At seven years old, I tried to make my pose captivating and my gaze tender for HIM, who was about to enter. And I felt no remorse toward his wife, sitting right there nearby.

HE never did walk in that time, though someone kept coming and going as if on purpose. And each time I was shaken. For a long time afterward, I would go for walks near that house where his wife had been visiting, still hoping for a chance encounter with him. For some reason I easily "placed" him on Nevsky Prospekt and Vosstaniya Square, and expected that one day he would step off a tram. Oh, how ready I was for that meeting!

And at eight years old my heart was broken! At school, after analyzing the story about Vanka Zhukov, I learned that Chekhov had died. To this day, my mind cannot reconcile the misalignment of our lives.

But great love holds sway over time, over space, over dates. Love for the dead Beatrice made Dante a genius. The entire *Divine Comedy* is merely a dream of meeting his beloved. It was simpler for Dante; for him it was self-evident that the soul is immortal. He missed Beatrice because he loved her with a real, passionate love. So I "missed" Chekhov. But it was easier for Dante; he believed in meeting Beatrice; he missed her in anticipation of that meeting.

O merciful God, where, where are these men now, dressed so ceremoniously, even on weekdays? Where are they, with their manners—gentle, noble, restrained both in daily life and in times of upheaval? With their good breeding, their deference to women? With their attractive, captivating, secret sinfulness? With their virtue so obvious and universal that virtue itself seemed almost unremarkable, incapable of lending significance to a person. Beyond virtue, talent or intelligence was required, charm or boundless altruism, heroism or self-sacrifice, brilliant wit or encyclopedic knowledge, an infernal quality, or steadfastness in fateful circumstances...

And where, where are the women of my childhood dreams? Nervous and refined, unhurried, elegant, and proud? Women whose passions run deep and whose expressions of passion are restrained? Whose good sense does not devalue but intensifies love's sufferings? And whose love is always entwined with duty, honour, altruism, and trust in God's will? Even staying at home, they dressed more carefully than we do for going out. And their lace gleamed with a yellowish freshness. The eternal autumn of their lace! And each had her own style and atmosphere, acquired only through the experience of love, hope, expectation, suffering, and patience. And they wrapped themselves in their love as in costly furs, and were slightly languid and resembled queens.

And where, where, merciful God, do these rooms breathe, lit by candles? Rooms where Life, Love, and Death are present? And the Eternal is ceaselessly measured against the minute details of existence. As if the Eternal and the moment-by-moment, in two connected vessels, flow incessantly from one to the other.

Only on the stage can one repeatedly summon from oblivion those moments gone with the wind! Are these moments an illusion? Can one say with final certainty that the mingling of pathetic verisimilitude and the genuine feelings of living actors—feelings beautiful as flowers—is an illusion?

O merciful God, let me bring back and hold onto that narrow foyer, divided into two fairly narrow parts by the staircase leading to the second floor. The steps are covered in a red carpet runner, secured with gleaming brass rods. The banisters are upholstered in red velvet with fringe. The right side of the foyer is empty. On the left stands a wooden coat rack. The wide, deep windowsill of the window facing the audience clearly serves as a table beside the rack.

To the right are the entrance door and the kitchen door. To the left, the door to Anton Chekhov's study.

The study is large, with two windows overlooking the courtyard. Curtains hang on the windows, and beyond them bare branches of the front garden are visible. Dark wallpaper, a tall tiled stove. A writing desk, bookshelves, an oval table covered with a cloth, armchairs and a sofa around the table—all in white slipcovers. A carpet on the floor. Photographs and small paintings on the walls. Many kerosene lamps of various shapes and sizes. On the writing desk, candlesticks shaped like dragons. Along the left wall are two more doors—to Anton's and Mikhail's bedrooms.

In the middle of the room—an open plywood suitcase, tied stacks of books, on the armchairs and sofa—magazines, newspapers, folders with archives. It is dim and quiet, and the bells of Moscow's forty times forty churches are ringing.

Everything is lit only by a single candle standing in the foyer on the windowsill.

And the only living soul is Polya, finishing the floor in the foyer.

And, as if in a magic picture, two candles on Anton's desk light up by themselves and illuminate him, in felt boots and a scarf wound around his neck. He is carefully, seriously, and conscientiously filing letters into folders. Busy putting his correspondence in order—as if before a departure, or death.

The bells fall silent. And in their place, timidly at first, then more and more assertively, other, everyday sounds enter. Anton clears his throat, Polya's rag shuffles, Masha's footsteps sound as she descends the stairs, in her dark striped dress, resembling a teenager, already carefully coiffed since morning.

MASHA. (To Polya) Why aren't you lighting the stoves? The house is completely cold! Good heavens, what a slushy, cold, and late spring! What expenses for firewood! Why aren't you lighting the stoves, Polya?

POLYA. Good morning, young lady! Your father told me not to light the stoves, but to clean instead.

MASHA. Father is giving orders again! Good morning, Polya! Let him give orders in his own quarters! What is this obsession with cleaning?

POLYA. So what am I to—

MASHA. Quiet! Anton Pavlovich is coughing... Or did I imagine it?

POLYA. Your father thinks the old-fashioned way: they say after Anton Pavlovich leaves, you shouldn't clean—it's bad luck.

MASHA. (Not listening to her) Or is he coughing? (Paces anxiously) Where have all these drafts come from? Why have the doors stopped closing properly? And everything at once! Everything is breaking, falling apart! The house doesn't want to let Anton go!

POLYA. (To herself, while washing the floor) It's all just superstition from your father.

MASHA. (Listening to the second floor) Lord, give me patience! Is he moving furniture? Why? He's been giving orders here all week! (In a tearful voice) I'm exhausted. Even on the day of Anton's departure, no one gets any peace! And Anton works! He always works! And no one, no one wants to understand that!

Something crashes upstairs, and Masha rushes up the stairs. Yevgenia Yakovlevna darts out of the kitchen with a plucked chicken in her hands.

MOTHER. (To Polya, quietly) Has something happened again?

Polya shrugs helplessly.

MOTHER. (Devoutly) Holy Mother of Kazan, save and have mercy!
(Upward) What happened? (No answer, then louder, with panic in her voice) Marusya! Marusya! Marusya!

MASHA. (From above, quietly but with great vexation) Please don't get upset, Mama!

MOTHER. He didn't hurt himself?

MASHA. No, no, it's nothing.

MOTHER. (Crosses herself and blesses herself with the plucked chicken)
My dear boy doesn't take care of himself at all!

POLYA. Pavel Yegorovich is so serious, he keeps an eye on everything, gives orders about everything.

MOTHER. Everything falls on him, everything! (Disappears into the kitchen)

MASHA. (From above) Polya, finish there and come help up here.

POLYA. Right away, young lady, don't worry, right away.

FATHER. (Barely visible above) Manya, don't be angry—we have to... people will be coming to say goodbye... well, how can we—you know.

MASHA. You had to start this! We're moving out of the wing in a week!
(Comes downstairs, glances over the floors, adjusts something, blows out the candle on the windowsill)

MASHA. Mishka buys candles, he always tries to get the expensive ones.

Polya goes upstairs.

FATHER. (From above) Polya, come here! Order is a house—disorder is chaos!

MASHA. Chaos, Sodom and Gomorrah... (Goes upstairs) Sodom-Sodom-Gomorrah-Gomorrah... (Laughs)

A dog barks loudly under Anton's window. And a beautiful young voice:
"Korbo! Kor-boshka! My little Korbo, are you barking at me? At me? Much obliged! Tut-tut... All right, good boy, good boy, don't get your paws on me! In three days everyone here has forgotten me, not just you!" In response, devoted whining. Anton laughs, brightens, hurries into the foyer and flings open the door.

ANTON. Jamet!

And upon the threshold steps a young, magnificently beautiful woman, like a heavy, graceful vessel in which a whole storm is splashing.

LIKA. (Agitated and breathless) Forgive me! Or I will turn around and leave forever.

ANTON. (Carefully closing the door and lowering his voice) Exquisite, ravishing to the fourth degree, Lika! I don't know what I'm guilty of, but by all means... One moment, I'll get down on my knees right now... (Glances around quickly and lowers himself to one knee) And with my hemorrhoids, no less... Have mercy, divine, beautiful, young one! For the distress I've caused you, I gladly forgive you—but let this be the last time!

LIKA. When will you ever be serious with me? You are an insufferable man! Never? Wait, I didn't give you permission to stand. We were supposed to go to the theatre on Wednesday, if you recall... Instead of you, Misha came. Don't get up from your knees! Let Masha see! I asked Misha about you. A panegyric in honour of his adored brother and pitiful unconvincing excuses that you were busy. I took offence and didn't come on Thursday or Friday.

ANTON. (Quickly) Your absence was noted by me every single time!

LIKA. I've been beside myself—with anger, of course!

ANTON. I missed you very, very much!

LIKA. Finally! Pavel Yegorovich... Pavel Yegorovich! He sends to ask if I'm well and if I'll come to say goodbye to you! Goodbye! (Turns and pretends to leave)

ANTON. (Nimbly grabs her leg) Now, now, I've caught you by the foot! (Takes off one boot) Let's have the other one! (Takes off the second)

LIKA. (In a panic) Get up, get up! Masha is coming!

ANTON. Let Masha see how you torment me!

LIKA. Get up, I said! (Tugs him upward)

ANTON. (Standing up) Come to my study! I'll put you in the armchair next to me. (Takes off her cloak) There you'll be more comfortable torturing me. (Shakes out the cloak and hangs it carefully)

LIKA. (Anxiously) Is it decided?

Anton offers her his arm crook-fashion.

LIKA. It's—today?

Anton threads her arm through his.

LIKA. So you are indeed embarking on the path of self-sacrifice?

ANTON. (Leading her to his study) Already embarked. Do you feel it? The whole house smells of chicken. Sister, mother, father, servants—everyone is in a frenzy!

They enter the study.

LIKA. It's cold in here. Is everyone well?

ANTON. The whole household is in good health, thank God.

LIKA. And everyone is home?

ANTON. The student is taking his last exam today. (Clears papers from one armchair) Please!

LIKA. If I'm in the way, send me upstairs. (Sits down)

ANTON. I will most certainly send you. With your permission, I can both chat with you and work. I need to finish this.

LIKA. Very well, I'll go upstairs now. Have they all risen?

ANTON. I imagine they rose long ago.

LIKA. There I will sing like a siren. But there's no need to tie you down—you'll let it go in one ear and out the other without any effort.

ANTON. (Busy with papers) You're flirting, Lika, and flirting shamelessly. (Embraces the writing desk) Here are my chains! And they are creaking, about to snap from your charms.

LIKA. So it's from me you're fleeing all the way to such distant lands? (Stands up, approaches the large map) Siberia... Sakhalin... (Traces her finger along the map) Chekhov... Chekhov... Would you like me to follow you?

Pause.

LIKA. Chekhov, do you hear me at all?

ANTON. Of course I hear you. But please, repeat it one more time!

LIKA. I said—as soon as you leave, I will have an affair and start living a dissolute life.

ANTON. Congratulations in advance. (Coughs)

LIKA. (Defiantly) Amen.

Pause.

LIKA. Well, I'll go and greet your family.

ANTON. You see how quickly you've missed me!

Lika exits into the foyer, stands thoughtfully near the stairs, approaches the coat rack, takes her cloak, and finds a small book in the pocket. She ponders, examines the book, glances back at the study door, resolutely hangs the cloak back, and hurriedly returns. She knocks on the door.

ANTON. Come in!

LIKA. (Entering with the book extended) Here! Almost forgot. My family returns it with thanks. My aunt and mother wept with delight. They pester me: why is your Chekhov going to the convicts? My Chekhov—talk to me just a little!

Anton pushes the papers aside.

Lika sits down again and clasps her hands in agitation.

LIKA. Why? Honestly—I don't understand. It's not even practical for Russia. You are the only one right now whom people really read. They believe in you! They idolize you! All of Russia listens to you! You should write, write... Otherwise... You have no right... Let, let Sakhalin be necessary! You know best! Let it be. But why you? Aren't there enough honest and selfless people—but less talented? I... I'm talking nonsense, aren't I?

ANTON. (Gently) Likusha, I would agree to go my whole life without wine, without smoking, and without marrying, just to hear such words.

LIKA. Siberia is so vast! And you, across all of Siberia, by horse-drawn cart! With your love of comfort! With your complete unfitness for physical exertion! And across cold Siberian rivers! With your health! It's madness! You won't come back!

ANTON. Don't make a martyr of me, Lika!

LIKA. (Jumps up to him and right in his face, indecently fiercely and loudly) I know you're coughing blood! I noticed three months ago! There!

ANTON. (Quickly) Lika, be quiet! Not a word to your sister or mother!

LIKA. (Lowering her voice) Isn't your brother Nikolai's death from consumption a dire warning to you? Why are you so merciless to yourself? And to others?

ANTON. Lidusya, enough, you're exaggerating. It's nothing... (Raising his index finger, ironically) It's even good. It's splendid—it makes one stricter with oneself and more careful with time.

LIKA. My God!

ANTON. You're still very young, Lika! You're not even capable of understanding death yet. You have to work and work... And there is nothing in this life more certain, more reliable, or wiser.

Pause.

LIKA. My God! (Walks around the room, stops at the window) There's a draft from the windows! (Leans against the stove) The stove is cold. (Steps away) And there's a draft by the door. What's wrong with this place today?

Anton, silently, brings a shawl from his bedroom for Lika.

LIKA. Merci. (Wraps herself in the shawl and settles comfortably in the armchair.)

Anton works.

LIKA. And just recently it was Easter! Pavel Yegorovich filled the whole house with incense smoke! The house was full of people. Everyone laughed like mad! We broke the fast... went to the Kremlin... to churches... listened to the service... the choir... We went into some church... You saw an artist you knew and asked: "And which church is this?" He turned around, stared at me as if hypnotized, and answered you without looking at you, but so seriously, so solemnly: "D-d-devil knows!" We couldn't help it, burst out laughing, and ran out of the church. Did that happen or not, Chekhov?

Anton doesn't answer, fussing with papers.

LIKA. We went to the evening service at Christ the Savior Cathedral. We looked at how your late brother painted the wall in the choir loft. And you said—there, Nikolai is dead, but Christ the Savior Cathedral will stand, essentially forever! And Nikolai's paintings already belong to eternity. Then we stood on the Stone Bridge and suddenly the bells began to ring! (Humming) Ding-dilly-dong-dong... ding-dilly-dong-dong, ding-dilly-dong-dong... (Pause) How strange that this evening you will no longer be here. And you will never return to this house. Don't you feel sorry—for this house?

ANTON. Of course, the wing here was convenient. The landlords don't bother us, we don't trouble the landlords. And before this "chest of drawers," we changed no fewer than ten apartments.

LIKA. A chest of drawers! But to me it looks like a little Gothic castle! Some extraordinary thing, not like Moscow houses! Somehow red! It must be the kind of house you'd see in Venice or Naples. How lovely it was, covered in white snow, that evening I first came to you. Do you remember?

ANTON. (Warmly) I remember, Likusha, of course I remember.

LIKA. And other people will move in here. And everything will be different for them. And they won't know about us. And we won't matter to them. Don't you feel sorry, Anton?

Masha approaches the door with a tray.

MASHA. Anton, open up!

Anton opens the door.

MASHA. (Offers her cheek for a kiss) Good morning, brother! How did you sleep? Li-ka! Are you already here? (Approaches Lika and kisses her on the cheek) Would you like some coffee?

LIKA. Hello, Masha! Don't trouble yourself, I've already had breakfast.

MASHA. (Sets down the tray, to Anton) How did you sleep? It's cold in here. Drink your hot coffee. Misha ran off without eating. Mother has been suffering about it all morning.

ANTON. Sit down, Masha! Let's all have coffee together. I'll bring two more cups.

MASHA. No, no, I don't have time. I'll light the stove for you. (Fusses at the stove, to Lika) When you get tired of Anton's company, come up to Father. Father likes you. Have some coffee with the old folks. They've already been asking about you. We're in chaos. (To Anton, worriedly) Tell me definitively—should we pack the old frock coat or the new one?

ANTON. (Laughs) I'll manage in the old one. (Dries a cigarette over the candle) May I?

LIKA. For God's sake!

MASHA. (Takes the cigarette from him) Don't smoke on an empty stomach! (Kisses him) How did you sleep? It's good that I asked, because Mother insists we pack the new one. She's arguing! (To Lika) Why did you disappear? Were you melancholy? You've been melancholy lately. I wanted to write to you, but... You can see for yourself, I'm rushing around like crazy, not going to school... Don't hold it against me. (Kisses Lika) You've lost weight, you look drawn... (To Anton) So, the new one or the old one? (Returns to the stove, continues lighting it)

ANTON. The new, the new... You've been running yourself ragged, Marusya Pavlovna! And please don't forget the red blouse you sewed for my name day! I want to pass for a political suspect. And cod liver oil! And more pencils, most importantly!

MASHA. (Straightening up) It'll be warmer soon! But why are you sitting in the dark? (Lights the lamp, through tears) The late Kolya once joked about this pot-bellied lamp—that it was about to give birth to a dozen smaller lamps.

ANTON. (Embraces his sister) Manyunechka, calm down, what can you do? There's nothing to be done... You're tired. You're our mainstay. Without you, even the porridge won't cook right.

MASHA. (Still through tears, sobbing) You know, Levitan is back from Paris. Mark my words, he'll come to see you off! And remember, he wanted to go with you! Lika, come to the stove and warm yourself. Will you stay all day? Stay, stay. Soon you won't see Anton for a long time! What changes! (Walks around the room, lighting all the lamps) Honourable chest of drawers! Thank you! Thank you! In this chest of drawers, our youth passed. For four years we laughed, fell in love, worked here. Here Anton became famous. Here our evangelist came! The venerable Grigorovich came and said to Anton: "You stand above all writers of the new generation! There is no criticism in Russia, and that's why you haven't been properly appreciated». And we didn't take Anton's writing seriously then. We kept waiting for him to become a doctor! This abode was illuminated by the presence of the genius Tchaikovsky, Ostrovsky, Korolenko, Pleshcheyev... and Levitan. Oh, if only Anton weren't going to Sakhalin, we would never part with you, dear old Chest of Drawers!

ANTON. "Before you, memories have unfurled their long scroll!"

MASHA. My soul is uneasy, my heart pounds. But I won't give in to my moods! No! No one should think about their own feelings right now! The main thing is you. But remember, Anton, every minute without you I will be in a frenzy of anxiety. Take care of yourself and write to us from the road at least every other day. Otherwise I'll drop everything and follow you!

ANTON. I haven't even left yet, and your eyes are already wet.

POLYA. (From behind the door) Marya Pavlovna, are you there?

ANTON. Good morning, Polenka! Come in!

POLYA. (Enters) Marya Pavlovna, Yevgenia Yakovlevna is asking for you.

LIKA. (With tenderness) Hello, hello, Polenka!

POLYA. I didn't even notice you come in, young lady! Hello! Anton Pavlovich, the mail has come.

ANTON. Thank you, Polenka! (Takes newspapers and letters from her)

Polya exits.

MASHA. (To Lika) We'll expect you upstairs, Likusha! (Exits)

ANTON. Drink your coffee, Lika!

LIKA. You drink yours! It's getting cold! Please drink! I'll take one sip from your cup, if you'll allow it.

ANTON. I won't allow it. I have the flu.

LIKA. It would be an honour to catch it from you and die.

ANTON. You're unlikely to die. But you'll start coughing, sniffing, and you'll hate me. (Skims the newspaper) They're scolding "A Boring Story" again.

LIKA. Let me see!

ANTON. Forget it! Reading criticism will put cockroaches in your young head.

LIKA. Can you be serious for even one minute?

ANTON. (Takes Lika's hands and looks at her intently) What would you like to say to me as a last word?

A long pause.

ANTON. Golden-haired, grey-eyed Lika! (Coughs and steps away from her.)

LIKA. Masha is right.

ANTON. And in what way is Masha right?

LIKA. You smoke too much.

ANTON. I have many vices, Lika! I drink and I love women.

LIKA. That's not good.

ANTON. (Gazes at Lika long and intently) No. It's not good. (Returns to his papers)

LIKA. Oh, wasted life! Give me a cigarette too!

ANTON. (Without looking up from his papers) I'll thrash you, Mizyukova! Or I'll tell your father. You—and smoking! That's like compote with pickles!

LIKA. For once, don't be a hypocrite, admit honestly—you just don't want to waste a cigarette.

ANTON. Yes, I am a calculating man, but admit too that you simply want to smoke a great writer's cigarette out of vanity! I won't give it to you!

Pause.

LIKA. Great writer, what do you want most in the world right now?

ANTON. (Immediately) Idleness! (Intimately) And not to go to Sakhalin! To send everything to the devil! And to walk arm in arm with you through Paris! But... for some reason I have to look at letters and so on, and all in the same vein. I have to, have to, have to, Lika!

LIKA. (Quickly takes a sip from his cup) I stole a sip from you after all. Now I'll know what you're thinking! I won't test anyone's patience any further. I'm going... to Pavel Yegorovich. (Goes to the door)

ANTON. (Rises) Lika!

Lika stops and stands without turning, frozen in expectation.

ANTON. Here's the thing, Lika! Upstairs, please tell them—don't touch the medicines. I'll pack them myself. That's my department.

Lika nods, laughs, glances back, waits a little, and, receiving nothing, goes upstairs. Anton returns to his papers but gazes past them, thinking of something else. Yevgenia Yakovlevna enters quietly.

MOTHER. Are you unwell, Antoshenka?

ANTON. (Startles violently, hastily rises, embraces his mother) I'll fall ill myself, I'll cure myself. How are you, Mama?

MOTHER. (Sighs) You and Manya are making a mistake with this Sakhalin. What's so funny about what I said? Last night I came downstairs and listened to you coughing! Just like poor Nikolenka before the end. Thump, thump... Do what you will, but you shouldn't go! The shopkeeper told me that all along the Siberian route there are murderers and fugitive villains. And we've only just begun to live more comfortably. (Tears up) Not a year since Nikolenka died... Don't go, Antoshenka, don't go, my son! I'm afraid of the villains!

ANTON. Come now, Mother... I'm taking pistols with me.

MOTHER. (Crosses herself fervently) God forbid! Could you ever shoot anyone? And everyone lies to me! So—you're going?

ANTON. I have to, Mama.

MOTHER. Your father and I will pray for you every day. If only you wouldn't go, how splendid that would be! Lidochka, look—she came this morning! Without you, all their fun will fall apart. You'll come back and she'll be married! Doesn't that happen? Such a wife would be good for anyone! Interesting, educated, refined... And she earns her own money! Only she's

shy. Your father and I like her, but you always go for the livelier ones! And why won't our Manya marry? She's not young—twenty-eight. It always seems to me that you're no longer mine. My angel! You should get some treatment! Rest! You've worn yourself out with work. Of course, your work is intellectual, not very strenuous—not like your father's work in his shop—but still... don't overwork yourself, God forbid!

This unending monologue is interrupted by a prolonged ring of the bell.

Polya opens the door.

Levitan enters. Striking, dressed to the nines, in the latest Paris fashion—a little too latest. With a cane.

LEVITAN. (Striking a picturesque pose, booming) Crocodiles!!! (His r's are heavily rolled, almost into an l sound, and he lisps, turning sh into f.)

ANTON. (Springs out of the study with open arms) The Bedouin has arrived!

They laugh, embrace, jostle each other, both extremely pleased.

LEVITAN. Damn it, how wonderful, how great you look! You've probably stopped treating yourself?

ANTON. Parisian, the most Parisian of all Parisians!

LIKA. (Running down from upstairs) Ahasuerus!

LEVITAN. (Kisses her hands at length and ardently) Divine, hello! Hello, divine!

LIKA. (Joyfully) You've abandoned your velvet shirt! But your eyes are the same! Volcanic, fatal!

LEVITAN. Laugh, all of you! And Polenov will use me as a model for Christ!

Masha hurries down the stairs.

LEVITAN. (Rushing toward her) Holy heavens! Mademoiselle Marie!
(Kisses her hands with a hint of reverence) Marya Pavlovna! You are
dizzily beautiful!

ANTON. Don't jinx her!

MASHA. Welcome! Welcome! Welcome! (Kisses him on both cheeks three
times)

LEVITAN. Everyone alive and well?

MASHA. Thank God!

LEVITAN. How I missed Moscow! I missed your dear house! "Where warm
friendly greetings unexpectedly met me, where there is neither tedious
worldly stiffness, nor cards, nor vulgar chatter—inseparable from empty
life—but where days pass in labour». I missed only you in Paris! I missed
you!

MASHA. But we're moving out of here! Yes, the landlord has already
placed an ad for our little wing. Starting Monday, the painful saga of finding
an apartment begins. So if you hear of anything, anywhere...

LEVITAN. Everything ends in this world! Alas!

MASHA. Of course, it was incredibly convenient here! And we all grew
attached to our dear chest of drawers! But... no money! Anton won't be
back until December! We're all going to the country in two weeks. And
paying for both the country and an empty apartment—well, you know...

ANTON. Ma-pa has been bustling about, and is therefore in a state of
turmoil. She, and Likusha, and all their friends, worked for me for three
months like slaves! Never left the Rumyantsev Library! Made excerpts
about Sakhalin. I don't know how I'll ever repay them! Probably with coals
in the next world!

And then everyone notices Yevgenia Yakovlevna, who has been standing in the doorway of the study for some time, vigorously rubbing her eyes with the ends of her apron.

LEVITAN. (Rushes to her impulsively) Yevgenia Yakovlevna! Dear Mother! Sweetheart!

MOTHER. (Sobbing and gasping, looking at Levitan) Levitasha, oh dear... how thin you've become! And so pale! And so plain!

Everyone laughs.

LEVITAN. Do the French ever feed you properly? It's not food—it's a complete misunderstanding! I'll stay with you and eat my fill! Are you well? And Pavel Yegorovich? Is he well?

MOTHER. What health can we have? Today we live, tomorrow—we lived! We're not exactly sick, but we don't have health either.

LEVITAN. And you, my dear, my sweet Yevgenia Yakovlevna, you've grown younger! And you've started wearing light-coloured dresses!

MOTHER. (In tears) Only just, only just—Manya and I took off our black clothes...

ANTON. Today everyone's eyes are wet.

MOTHER. (Sniffs vigorously) Oh dear! (Rushes into the kitchen)

ANTON. The Bedouin has moved our mother to tears! She'll oversalt something now! In honour of my despicable departure for despicable Sakhalin, we're having a Lucullian feast! Actually, veritas, magis, atigital—Lika stole and ate the chicken.

LIKA. I did it by accident! But the broth is still there.

ANTON. (Bows several times to Lika) Most grateful for the broth. Most grateful! To the broth—crab liver. Then—smelts with vanilla. And for dessert—rosin ice cream.

LEVITAN. I'm as hungry as Jesus in the desert!

MASHA. So—how was Paris?

LEVITAN. (Weary) Paris? A devil of a lot of impressions! Plenty of wonderful things! But even more pathological! In everything—extreme over-refinement! My health is terrible, and my state of mind is even worse. External impressions give me nothing. The source of my suffering is within me. Travel anywhere is running from oneself. It's terrible to realize that.

ANTON. Let's go to my study! I'm afraid it's not cleaned up yet upstairs.

MASHA. And for that very reason, I'm leaving you!

LEVITAN. No, Masha, no, don't leave us!

MASHA. I have things to do, but I'll be back soon. (Goes into the kitchen)

Anton, Levitan, and Lika move to the study.

LEVITAN. (With the highest enthusiasm) No, your Masha is the height of perfection! She finished the Higher Courses, teaches history and geography at the gymnasium. I'm sure her students adore her. Right, Lika? They adore her?

LIKA. They adore her.

LEVITAN. She plays the piano superbly! Right, Lika, superbly? You're a musician after all?

LIKA. Superbly!

LEVITAN. And she writes wonderfully! (Examines the works on the wall) I see it! I recognize it! This is hers. And this! These are new works! Exquisite! Right, Lika?

LIKA. I'm no judge of that at all, but I'm sure Masha can't be surpassed in anything.

LEVITAN. And where did this come from? Kuvshinnikova?

ANTON. A gift.

LEVITAN. To you?

ANTON. To me. As a great writer.

LEVITAN. No progress since the Plyos days. Stagnation. But Masha, Masha! And she keeps the house in order! Peace, comfort, cleanliness—all the work of her little hands. Eh! I'd like to live even one day the way you always live, Crocodile!

ANTON. Yes, Marusya Pavlovna is our household goddess!

POLYA. (From behind the door) Anton Pavlovich!

ANTON. Come in, Polya!

POLYA. (Opens the door and pokes her head in) The photographs have come! They want payment.

ANTON. Levitan, Lika—behave more modestly with each other! (Exits)

LIKA. (Lively) The photographs have come! At Easter we all took pictures together as a souvenir. Out in the yard, by the wing.

LEVITAN. And here's last year's sketch by Marya Pavlovna! Such progress! How much is she painting now?

LIKA. She paints—not bad. But lately she's had so much trouble over Anton Pavlovich.

LEVITAN. A wonderful, selfless girl! She should send Anton to the devil! And the school! And come be my student! In six to eight years of hard work, she could amount to something! This is Levitan speaking!

ANTON. (Enters with photographs) What are you talking about without me? Don't believe Levitan, Lika! Only believe me!

LIKA. Let me see the photographs! How lovely! I adore having my picture taken! Oh, see—my eyes are crossed in this one! I always turn out badly!

ANTON. (Examining them with her) You're being a hypocrite, Lika!

LEVITAN. Anton, I know it will be painful for you to hear, but out of love for truth I can't hide it. When you, fair-haired and virtuous, have left, Lika and I will begin an affair! Because the moment I crossed the threshold, she stopped loving you and fell in love with me.

LIKA. I tremble at the thought that in a hundred years someone will pick up this photograph and ask about me: "And who is that cross-eyed young lady next to the great writer Chekhov?"

ANTON. Likusha, in a hundred years no one will remember me at all! And looking at the photograph and at you, they'll most likely say: "What charming young ladies there were a hundred years ago!"

LEVITAN. Let me see too! Of course, Crocodile is in front in his white jacket, supposedly a genius! Can you really be a genius? That's very annoying to me! It's much more pleasant for me to be the only genius.

ANTON. With your permission, I'll change for dinner.

LIKA. And with your permission, I'll show the photographs to the old folks and Masha. (Exits)

Anton disappears into his bedroom, leaving the door open. Levitan paces the study, examining everything.

LEVITAN. All those letters, letters for you! But everything is the same, as if I'd never left. It's Saturday today. No doubt by dinner the house will be packed with people! So—you're really going? Everywhere is bad, but abroad is worse than home. I've heard from someone or other that this is a

heroic act on your part. And you're going straight into the history books! But I'm not much for heroic deeds. Except maybe love affairs! And you're no slouch at those either! Am I right, my friend? How is it not a feat?! Your impulse is beautiful, humane. You're risking your health, perhaps even your life. But what normal human sense is there in it all? But call your journey a feat—and then sense seems unnecessary. What drives you? What are you running from? All the editors want to publish you. All the theatres are eager to stage your plays. All the newspapers attack you. In all the Moscow salons, people talk only about you. I travelled on the train with the mother of two lovely young noble ladies. And the whole way we enthusiastically admired you. They knew me as an artist, but were interested in me only as your acquaintance. Women fall dead in love with you after exchanging barely two words. Your family adores you. Why do you need to go anywhere else? It's I who, like the Wandering Jew, can find no peace. Longing... Longing... Prescribe me something for longing! And you, like Ilya Muromets, sat for thirty years gathering strength, and suddenly decided to rush across all the towns and villages—to fight for truth!

ANTON. (From the bedroom) I need to live for at least six months not as I have lived until now. You see, if I were single, I would travel all over Russia. And perhaps the whole world, both hemispheres! Money! I'm frightfully afraid of money! You talk about genius—and I depend on twenty rubles not received! I live with a family. I don't know how to limit the family materially in any way. And I don't think it's right. Now I am calm—until December the family is provided for. (Emerges swiftly, already changed, and approaches the map) Look! You'll regret not coming with me! Nizhny. Perm. Tyumen. Tomsk. Irkutsk. Sretensk. Down the Amur to Nikolayevsk. Two months on Sakhalin. And then Shanghai, Manila, Singapore, Colombo. That's already Ceylon, Constantinople. Odessa and again—Moscow! Envious? (Coughs)

LEVITAN. You cough like the Lady of the Camellias in the last act! You need treatment! To the Crimea! Not to damp Sakhalin! You already found signs of tuberculosis in yourself last year! (Approaches the map) Russia! Bad roads! Stupidity, coarseness, and rudeness of officials! And gendarmes! Why do you want to "rest with the saints" before your time? "Eternal memory" won't escape you!

ANTON. I still have a quarter of a century before "eternal memory"! Nonsense! My relatives had worse lungs, and they were fine! It's a bad thing to be one's own doctor!

From above comes the sound of piano playing and Lika's singing: "Whether the day reigns...».

LEVITAN. (Staring at the ceiling) A superb voice! Superb! (Pause) I don't understand... What do you hope to do for those unfortunate people? With what right are you going into this ninth circle of hell?

ANTON. With no rights at all. And at my own expense. I couldn't get any official assistance from anyone.

LEVITAN. (Whistles in tune with the singing above) The first bureaucratic face you meet will send you back! Let you be a famous writer... Superb singing, superb... Let the best people of Russia listen to your voice... But what are you against the state machine, which grinds up both the righteous and the guilty? And do you even have the strength to solve these eternal Russian questions alone?

ANTON. Solve questions? Let the government do that! That's their affair! I consider myself, as a Russian intellectual, obligated to pose the questions correctly and to get them attention.

LEVITAN. (Citing with pathos) "Why didn't you go where the groans came from? Why didn't you sacrifice yourself?" Whose attention do you want to attract to Sakhalin? Who cares about it? Who finds it interesting? Who

among the powerful has any interest in anything that doesn't concern their own interests?

ANTON. Sakhalin is a place of unbearable suffering! We send thousands of people there into exile. From these books, you can see that we have rotted millions of people in prisons! Rotting them with impunity! We drove people in chains through the cold for tens of thousands of versts! We infected them with syphilis! We multiplied criminals! We drive more and more people to suicide! And all this we want to blame on the red-nosed prison wardens? Now all of Europe knows that it's not the wardens who are to blame—but all of us! But we don't care! We're not interested! We despise the opinion of Europe and we're already bored with the subject! We talked about it and dropped it! How easily we, the Russian intelligentsia, reconcile ourselves to human suffering! How easily we content ourselves with our own personal decency! How we strive for comfort and treasure it! None of us, living like this, can have a clear conscience! To live like this means to wish for new victims for exile! For prison! For hard labour! And for the gallows!

The singing above stops.

The men are silent, as if waiting for something.

And again from above: "Whether the day reigns...».

LEVITAN. (Carelessly) Ah, Chekhov, why go so far? In essence, all of Russia is the island of Sakhalin. (Sighs deeply)

ANTON. But something must be done?! What's the point of doing nothing? My conscience flutters its wings but doesn't know where to fly. I'm unlucky. I should have been born a hundred years later! A Russian man harnesses slowly but drives fast. And now he's only just begun to harness—and how it will end, I don't know...

LEVITAN. And to live in this wonderful time—neither you nor I will get to. (Sighs deeply, though in good spirits) Abel is righteous, Cain is sinful, and

both are killed. (Listens to the singing) Damn it, how beautiful! Lucky you, Crocodile!

Part Two

The second half of the same day.

Changes: in the foyer, bright garlands of flags. On the windowsill, several bouquets and baskets of flowers. In the study, everything is laid out and ordered. Anton is clearly finishing his work with papers.

The bell rings.

Masha descends and opens the door. Through the door, a basket of flowers is extended, and a rough, common voice says: "Ordered to deliver to the writer Mr. Chekhov».

MASHA. Thank you! (Accepts the basket, locks the door, reads the note tucked among the flowers)... with feelings... noble goal... self-sacrifice... see the future... Society for the Blind. (Laughs)

LEVITAN. (Bounds down the stairs) Marya Pavlovna! Machetta! What has Crocodile prescribed for you that you keep getting more beautiful? Flowers from admirers? I'll shoot everyone if you don't marry me!

Masha laughs.

LEVITAN. (On the very spot where Chekhov jokingly knelt before Lika earlier, he drops to his knees before Masha and kisses her shoes) Marya Pavlovna! Ma-pa! Every point on your face is precious to me! I refuse to live without you! I beg you! I beg you—yes or no? Right now!

MASHA. (Flustered) Right now—what? I don't understand—are you proposing to me?

LEVITAN. Damn you, yes! I'm expressing myself clearly, aren't I?

MASHA. But...

LEVITAN. To hell with all "buts"!

MASHA. But Anton...

LEVITAN. To hell with Anton!

MASHA. But Sakhalin...

LEVITAN. To hell with Sakhalin! To hell! To the devil! Yes or no?!

The bell rings.

MASHA. Forgive me, I can't think straight right now. Someone's at the door!

LEVITAN. To hell with whoever's at the door!

MASHA. Someone will come in right now! Please get up!

The BELL RINGS again.

MASHA. We'll talk later, later!

Levitan waves his hand and stands up. Masha opens the door. Levitan whistles and, without interest in who has come, goes upstairs. The Lady enters. She is well past thirty. Dressed expensively, but with absurd pretensions.

LADY. I'm not too late, am I? Is Mr. Chekhov still receiving?

MASHA. Unfortunately, no. He's leaving in a few hours.

LADY. I'll wait. When will he be back?

MASHA. Not before December.

LADY. But it's April now!

MASHA. Quite right.

LADY. But then why haven't you taken down the sign: "Dr. Chekhov receives patients from one to three"?

MASHA. Are you ill?

LADY. I am outraged. My dear, find out if Mr. Chekhov might find time for me?

Masha hesitates about what to do.

The Lady unexpectedly presses a banknote into Masha's palm.

LADY. This is for you, my dear, for tea! Announce me! Stupina, Nadezhda Mikhailovna, property owner.

MASHA. (With veiled irony) A property owner? Then Mr. Chekhov will probably see you. I'll check. Please wait. (Goes to Anton, closing the door behind her) A female property owner who is ill is here to see you, in need of urgent care. She looks remarkably healthy. See her! She already gave me money for tea!

ANTON. (Spreads his hands) I'll have to see her. Show her in! In about ten minutes, come in with some urgent matter.

They go out into the corridor together.

ANTON. (To the Lady) My respects!

LADY. (Excitedly) Hello, deeply respected Anton Pavlovich!

Masha goes into the kitchen.

LADY. (After Masha) What an insolent servant you have.

ANTON. Yes, I've spoiled her. Please come into my study.

LADY. I'm terribly embarrassed, but I... need to dismiss the cabman, and I have no small change. Could you change this? (Extends a banknote to him)

ANTON. Why dismiss him? Let the cabman wait for you!

LADY. I'm afraid I may be delayed with you.

ANTON. I'm sorry, but I must ask you to excuse me... You see, I'm leaving today...

LADY. Your servant warned me. I won't take a minute more than I need.

ANTON. I don't think I can change it, but here's some small change I have... (Takes out coins from his pockets)

LADY. (In a tearful voice) Lord, how awkward... I took the cab from Triumphal Gate... Please, go and give him whatever you think is right... Lord, how clumsy I am, it's from embarrassment...

ANTON. Don't worry, it's nothing, I'll take care of it. (Goes outside)

MASHA. (Coming out of the kitchen) But why are you here? Please take off your things and go into the study! And where is Anton Pavlovich?

LADY. (Carelessly) He's paying my cabman, my dear.

Anton returns.

MASHA. Anton! Going outside without your coat! Are you mad?

ANTON. You're right. I shouldn't have. It's damp. (To the Lady) Please, come in!

Anton and the Lady go into the study. Masha goes upstairs.

ANTON. Excuse the mess. Please, sit down. What are your complaints?

LADY. (Embarrassed) Tightness in the chest. A cough. It's tight—as if something has congealed and presses—usually before sleep.

ANTON. Are you married?

LADY. I'm a widow.

ANTON. Please, undress!

LADY. What did you say?

ANTON. Take off your clothes! I'll listen. (Turns away) To the waist.

LADY. (Undresses to her chemise) You have no idea what feelings I have.

ANTON. Tightness in the chest—I understood.

LADY. You can't imagine what I owe you!

ANTON. Nothing yet.

LADY. You have raised me.

ANTON. You think so?

LADY. Through your books. And when they are attacked, I'm ready to scratch out their eyes!

ANTON. That's too much! Everyone has their own opinion.

LADY. I'd hang them with my own hands for those opinions! But I'm so embarrassed—you're a busy man...

ANTON. I'm a physician, and seeing patients is my duty.

LADY. I've come at the wrong time, and you might think me importunate.

ANTON. Tell me—have you ever seen those caramels with portraits of writers on the wrappers?

LADY. What? How? No!

ANTON. (Examines, listens, taps) Don't breathe. Imagine—Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Korolenko were honoured with this distinction, but I wasn't. Offensive. Breathe!

LADY. (Exhales) Offensive for Russia! Or... are you joking?

ANTON. Not at all! So—doesn't hurt?

LADY. No.

ANTON. Indeed—I haven't seen myself. And here?

LADY. No.

ANTON. I wondered if you might have seen them?

LADY. And now—should I breathe or not breathe?

ANTON. Whatever is more comfortable. Get dressed! The picture is clear. Nothing fatal. A mild neurosis. Any stomach trouble?

LADY. What? How can you?

ANTON. Splendid! I'll prescribe you some drops. (Writes a prescription)
Take them for a week—sixteen drops before bed.

LADY. Before dinner or after?

ANTON. After! And go to the country for the summer, for the healthy air. Go for walks, have romances, and before you know it, everything will pass.

LADY. (Finishes dressing) I'm so grateful, so grateful... I already feel better. You have an effect on me...

ANTON. You have a very mild case. No thanks needed. (Makes it clear the consultation is over)

Pause.

LADY. I can imagine how many importunate, tactless female visitors must besiege you, taking time away from literature... Believe me, I'm not one of them.

ANTON. Not at all! It was a pleasure to meet you!

LADY. Despite being so busy, you received me and helped me. How can I repay you? How can I thank you?

ANTON. It's my job.

Pause.

ANTON. Don't be ill! I'd be delighted to chat with you more, but I don't have time. I'm leaving today.

LADY. (Sits down) At what time?

ANTON. Around eight. But, you know, before a departure there's always so much to do.

LADY. When will you be back?

ANTON. I expect in December.

LADY. Where are you going?

ANTON. A small voyage. Ceylon and a few other places.

LADY. You priests of art have such a vivid life, such a festive one! No earthly worries! I'll see you off! Don't refuse me, I beg you!

ANTON. Many people are seeing me off—relatives, friends.

LADY. I'll be at a distance. I won't come near.

ANTON. I ask you not to do that.

LADY. (With a suffering gesture, rubs her temples) It's all over! You've taken me for heaven knows what.

ANTON. You're mistaken.

LADY. Well, I'll leave now, and you'll forget me instantly. Or casually mention to your acquaintances: "There was a vulgar little woman, declaring her love».

ANTON. I have no reason to say anything of the sort about my patient. And in any case, I'm a decent man. (Laughs)

LADY. So much the worse for me! Let me see you off! I have a right!

ANTON. (Categorically) I beg you not to trouble yourself.

LADY. Have I frightened you? (With a sigh and some pathos) Such cosiness, such peace, so far from life in your high tower... And suddenly such a storm that sweeps everything away! Chekhov the writer—alas—is more perceptive and wiser than Chekhov the man... I'm hinting at your best story, «Late-Blooming Flowers». Oh, how accurately you described Marusya's feelings for Dr. Toporkov! Why can't you recognize exactly the same feeling in life? Or does it frighten you? (Sobs)

ANTON. (Pours water from the decanter into a glass and hands it to her) Please, calm yourself.

LADY. (Drinks the water) It must happen to you often... But it's all the same to me... There, I've said it... You forced me to... Pour some more water!

Anton pours another glass and offers it.

LADY. Not for me! For you! Drink some water! You're agitated! (Advances on him emotionally aggressively) You live in a crystal castle! Amid flowers and roses! Far from feelings! And I burst in on you with feeling! And you're frightened! And you don't know what to do!

MASHA. (Enters without knocking) Anton, are you almost done? I need you urgently!

LADY. One more minute!

ANTON. Forgive me, but I'm very busy.

LADY. Just one minute! I'd give my life for that minute!

ANTON. I'm listening. Masha, wait here!

Pause.

LADY. Write to me, I beg you, write to me from Ceylon! Write, I have so much to tell you. Polyanka, my own house. Stupina, Nadezhda Mikhailovna. It's a pity I didn't know you were leaving today!

MASHA. Poly!

Poly enters.

ANTON. (To the Lady) All the best!

LADY. Have a good journey! I'll pray for you to Saint Nicholas!

ANTON. Thank you.

MASHA. (To Poly) See the patient out!

The Lady exits. Poly takes over.

Masha closes the study door tightly and doubles over with laughter.

ANTON. A minute later and she'd have proposed to me! She treated me like a writer on the marriage market.

MASHA. And earlier, I was treated like a girl on the marriage market.

ANTON. I'm at a loss. Who? If it's not a maiden's secret.

MASHA. A secret, but not from you. Levitan.

ANTON. Seriously, Masha?

MASHA. He's serious. Just like in the best vaudeville—down on his knees, wild African passion, and an honourable proposal.

ANTON. And what did you say?

MASHA. Nothing! And again, like in vaudeville—at the height of the explanation, the bell rings and your patient appears. We were interrupted!

ANTON. Do what you will, Masha! You have enough character for Levitan. But in my understanding, family life is peace, not passions and struggles.

MASHA. In mine too.

ANTON. So?

MASHA. Refusal!

ANTON. You are the steadiest of all the young ladies I know! I bow to you! Well, Machetta—last tasks. I've organized the archive. Threw the excess into the stove. I ask you to make sure nothing gets lost during the move. Send these collections of mines "At Twilight," "Gloomy People," and "Children" to the Taganrog Library. And "The Power of Darkness" with Tolstoy's autograph, same place. I've decided to bequeath my library to my native Taganrog. While sorting through it, I saw that a mass of books had been stolen. Masha, don't make a tragic face! I intend to live another hundred years! But I'm afraid that in the meantime, my good acquaintances will pilfer the entire library! And Taganrog will get nothing! And here I've written—all my money and future income from my books—to you! You'll pay my debts and take care of Mother.

MASHA. What thoughts are these? Let's postpone the departure! You've put in so much work and you're exhausted. I'm afraid. You shouldn't go now!

ANTON. I need at least a piece of social and political life! Even a tiny piece—that's the only medicine!

MASHA. I believe you'll return safely! I believe it! And you'll write your best book! A book about Sakhalin! And no one will dare call you unprincipled, ideologically empty, thoughtless anymore! Everyone will recognize you as a true writer!

ANTON. Honestly, I've become indifferent to success and failure. The chaos has tired me! Ladies who treat themselves for boredom and fall in love from boredom! They don't pay a penny for visits, and make me pay for the cab! Guests and guests every day! No one values my time. Long, tiresome conversations about nothing. Small requests. They borrow money and don't repay it! They steal books! If artists and writers are the best part of society, then that is very sad for society! And what kind of society is it,

when its best part has so little initiative and civic feeling! Life seems meaningless to me! And at times I begin to hate everything!

MASHA. What to do, Antosha? The path of every great artist is thorny!

ANTON. Don't speak platitudes, even you! (Pause) Forgive me! Since my brother's death, I've had this irritation against everyone and everything, and a feeling of guilt.

MASHA. (After a moment) You'll rest, Antosha! After Sakhalin, you'll see Ceylon, Singapore, Japan... Living fairy tales of our age! And things will be easier financially. Misha will separate. That's right. It was the right decision to give up this apartment! Six hundred and fifty rubles a year—too heavy for us! I'll take on private lessons...

ANTON. You must study painting, Masha! Or your time will pass! If there's even a little talent—it's immoral to waste it.

MASHA. I'll never regret not becoming an artist! My life has a different meaning, a different purpose.

ANTON. In your feelings, as in mine, there is too much common sense. And we can't make ourselves disregard it! That's bad, Masha! It leads to stagnation of the soul. You need a personal life, Masha! Get married! My own irreplaceable sister—can you feel my magnanimity? Or—relax, go to the Crimea for twelve days! Have an affair and live life to the fullest! Make the devils sick!

MASHA. Merci for the advice! I'll get married immediately and give birth every year!

ANTON. Marya, you are as mysterious as a sphinx. You're the only young lady in the world who genuinely doesn't want to marry. And from my observations, you've broken no less than a dozen hearts!

MASHA. Imagine—much more!

From the street comes Misha's voice: "Shout, sound of victory! Rejoice, valiant Ross!"

Anton and Masha race each other to open the door.

MISHA. (Staggers in tipsy) Antuan! Marya! You see your own brother Mikhail for the last time in his life! In student uniform. And God save me henceforth from all uniforms, ranks, medals, titles—except the title of a decent fellow and honest scribbler! Amen!

MASHA. (Embraces him) Mishka, you swine—already drunk?

MISHA. Marya, I respect you but be quiet! You don't understand anything! I'm talking to my brother. He's a student. And I'm a student. We're both university men. I'm proud. (Embraces Anton and hangs on him)

ANTON. (Drags him into the study, grumbling) You've found something to be proud of. I can't stand Russian students! They're lazy! (Lays Misha on the sofa) At university they do anything but study!

MISHA. (Throws his legs up) Right! Hur-rah-ah-ah!

ANTON. They don't attend lectures regularly, they don't take notes, they study haphazardly...

MASHA. Mostly just before exams! And when they finally get through the whole university course...

MISHA. Traversing it like a creaking cart over potholes and bumps...

ANTON. Then the Russian students don't become intellectuals, educated specialists who know their business.

MISHA. (Mimics tearing out hair and banging head against wall) I'm ashamed! Curse the day I became a student!

ANTON. (Strictly) Mostly, they leave the University as people spoiled by four years of idleness, unfit for serious work. But with aplomb and official

right to judge what they don't know or understand. (Pause, then solemnly)
But not you, Finick! You deserve all respect for your thirst for knowledge!
For studying foreign languages! For your writing!

Masha runs out.

ANTON. Masha, where to?

MASHA. I'll be right back!

ANTON. And I, your elder brother—therefore the one responsible for you
before God and men—command you! Do not rest on your laurels! Forget
student idleness! And fill your days with hard work!

Masha returns with a bottle of champagne and glasses.

MASHA. Let's drink to that!

Anton opens the bottle.

MISHA. (Interfering with kisses) Antuan! My eloquent brother!

Anton pours the champagne.

MISHA. (With glass in hand) Thank you for giving me the opportunity to
study at the University and graduate! I thank you and bow low.

They drink. Misha quickly pours another round.

MISHA. Good is he who feeds and waters, but not bad is he who
remembers bread and salt!

They drink.

ANTON. And I thank you.

MISHA. For what, brother?

ANTON. For your help to me! For your many years of courier work and
secretary work. For the degrading errands to the editorial offices for my
then still paltry fees!

MISHA. (Laughing, throws himself into Anton's arms) Oh, you haven't forgotten, brother! What tormented me most were the "News of the Day».

ANTON. (Laughing) The outrages of the day!

MISHA. The whole office in one little room. You'd squeeze into a corner and wait for hours. And meanwhile subscriptions were being taken, staff shouting, visitors jostling. And in the middle of the room, for some reason—a piano! Behind it some relative of the editor playing scales! Ta-ta-ta...

MASHA. (Squeals with laughter) Mishka, you rogue, you're lying!

MISHA. (Imperturbably) And next to her, a music teacher pounding the beat with her foot and trying to outshout everyone. (Mimics the teacher) One-two-three... and, one-two! (With a tear) That's how you'd sit... sit... and cry and long for home. And the publisher would come out: "What are you waiting for?" «I'm here for my three rubles». (Mimics the editor) "But I don't have them! I don't have three rubles! Here—take a theatre pass!" (Tearfully) "I need three rubles!" (As the editor) "What a difficult fellow you are! Take some new trousers instead of your three rubles?" (Mimes agonizing indecision) «I'll take the trousers». "Then go to the tailor Arontrikher and get them on my account!"

MASHA. But you're lying, Mishka, you're lying!

ANTON. (Embraces his brother) Poor Finick! If I had gone after my own fees, I'd have quit writing! Let's have one more! I'll get so drunk I won't even get on the train!

MISHA. Let Marya Pavlovna speak now!

MASHA. What to say? (Sighs) I remember and love you as a little grammar-school boy in a cold coat! How you walked three miles to the grammar school on Razgulyai! Walking and crying! You were weak, half-starved, and they bullied you at school. And when you left home, you asked

Mother for two handkerchiefs. One for tears—you called it your "crying handkerchief». They offered to send you to be a shop-boy at the warehouse. More filling, warmer, and under Father's protection. But you passionately wanted to study!

MISHA. I took after my brother. I understood that Antosha in Taganrog suffered and starved in order to finish grammar school. He sold our household belongings and sent all the money to us in Moscow. How we waited for his money! And he wrote us such cheerful letters! We read them all together and separately and laughed! And I'd run to Father at the warehouse to be the first to read him Antosha's letter.

MASHA. And now, you, the youngest of our family have made something of yourself! Father and Mother dream of you in a government post, in a good position. That's for you!

They drink.

ANTON. (Paces thoughtfully) The civil service won't escape him. Mishka, gather your courage and take up literature seriously. What you're writing now—it's not bad for a start.

MASHA. But only "Children's Reading" publishes him! Serious magazines refuse him.

ANTON. Let him publish even on a windowsill, if he's read and paid! And how did I start? Through "Alarm Clocks," "Dragonflies," and "Humorous Sheets"—that's how I made my way to the thick journals and the hearts of decent people.

MASHA. Mikhail is not you. He has too weak a character to be a free artist. I think you're wrong to orient him that way. Our material circumstances are constrained. Misha could make a living as a notary on the side.

MASHA. It's hard to pray when one's mind is divided.

ANTON. I don't see why it's bad even if the mind were threefold! I pray to three gods medicine, literature, and theatre!

MASHA. You can't compare yourselves! At his age, you were already supporting the family!

ANTON. Don't exaggerate! No one sat idle! Everyone worked! And by the way, I helped the family through my literary earnings! Misha has literary talent.

MASHA. Nikolai was very talented! A disorderly, irresponsible life destroyed him! He didn't manage to create anything truly significant. He didn't even finish his best works!

MISHA. Manya, don't talk about our deceased brother, Nikolasha, like that...

MASHA. Fine! I'll only talk about the living! Our eldest brother Alexander—how proud we were of him! He graduated from the University in two faculties! A brilliant linguist, a superb journalist, capable in natural sciences. He wanted to earn a Master's degree, then a Doctorate. To become a professor at Moscow University! And what happened? Two premature marriages! He had children! In his home—dirt, cockroaches, poverty, and arguments! A free artist! Ivan, your brother, and I, your sister—we're also not without abilities. We're teachers. We work for the state. We honestly perform our duty and bring what modest benefit we can to society. We are financially independent. We honour our parents and, as best we can, make their old age comfortable. Father lives with Ivan as if in Christ's bosom. Mother wants for nothing with us! Our grandfather was a serf. Father a shopkeeper. Anton became a writer famous throughout Russia! His writing desk is his altar. And on this altar he has laid his youth! And daily he sacrifices his health on this altar! And his personal life! Examine yourself first, Misha—are you capable of all this?

MISHA. I belong to a normal family. I'm a university man. I ought to work. In any service, one can be useful. And anyway, it's time to stop living on your neck, Anton! I must live by something! I must help my sister and mother!

ANTON. We attach too much importance to money! It comes from the environment we grew up in. It shouldn't be that way!

The clock strikes four.

MASHA. Oh dear! We'll have guests soon! (Takes the bottle and glasses, carries them to the kitchen)

ANTON. We'll postpone the decision until my return. You've just finished university. Rest! Look around! Go to the country this summer! They can't be without a man. And we'll see.

MISHA. I can't refuse the civil service. Such turmoil would start in the family—God forbid! But I promise you, Anthony, I won't give up writing!

ANTON. We'll think of something!

The bell rings. Polya opens the door.

Masha comes out of the kitchen.

Anton and Misha come out of the study.

The Kuvshinnikovs enter.

SOFYA. (To Anton, sharply) Freeze! Don't move!

Anton freezes in a clownish pose.

SOFYA. (Walks around him) I've understood how you ought to be painted. In your face, for all its intelligence and nobility, there's a guileless peasant fold. In your eyes—the slyness of a country lad. Right, Kuvshinnikov?

KUVSHINNIKOV. (Shakes hands with everyone) Yes, my soul!

SOFYA. (To Anton) Let me shake your honest hand! (Shakes Anton's hand vigorously with both hands)

Anton remains in the same pose. Everyone laughs.

Lika, animated, and Levitan, languid, descend the stairs.

LIKA. (Still from above) Sofya Petrovna, greetings!

MISHA. Levitan! Mizinova! What illustrious people we have today! And Manya and Anton are silent! (Grabs Lika and whirls her) When Lika's gentle bell rings for us, we, young and old alike, hearing her timid chime, rush to her from every side!

LIKA. Finished university, student? (Kisses him on the cheek)
Congratulations!

LEVITAN. Well then Russia can be congratulated on a new prosecutor! I'll give you a copy of my "Vladimirka».

MISHA. I don't like jokes on that subject! I don't want to be a prosecutor or a judge! Demanding punishment, even the death penalty is against my moral principles!

MASHA. Misha, as the most eloquent in our family, will become a lawyer!

Sofya, left unattended, takes off her own boots and says to herself: "Merci!"
Anton notices and helps her take them off.

SOFYA. (To Anton) Merci!

Polya takes Sofya's cloak.

ANTON. (To Sofya) I can't find a worthy compliment for your modish robes!

SOFYA. (Spins, showing off her tunic to everyone) Everyone look!

Animated, indistinct exclamations from all sides.

SOFYA. I dyed the fabric myself. The colour is a mixture of tulip, orange, sunset, and criminal passion! (Unexpectedly kisses Lika on the cheek) Absolutely! Absolutely must use her as the model for the Swan Princess! Right, Kuvshinnikov?

KUVSHINNIKOV. Yes, my soul!

Yevgenia Yakovlevna comes downstairs.

SOFYA. (Extends her arms to her) Hello, kindest, most hospitable Yevgenia Yakovlevna!

MOTHER. Welcome!

SOFYA. Kuvshinnikov, have you forgotten?

KUVSHINNIKOV. Yes, my soul! That is—no, my soul!

SOFYA. Anton Pavlovich, we have a surprise for you!

KUVSHINNIKOV. With your permission! (Hangs a bottle in a leather case on a strap over Anton's shoulder)

SOFYA. And strict instructions! You must drink this cognac only on the shore of the Great Ocean!

Everyone laughs and applauds.

MISHA. Anthony gets cognac, Ceylon—but I get nothing!

ANTON. (To the Kuvshinnikovs) Thank you!

MASHA. Lika, look what a beautiful case!

SOFYA. I spent all evening working on that case! In all the salons—your trip is the most fashionable topic! There are persistent rumours that the convicts are only a pretext, and you're really going for the political prisoners.

ANTON. That's not true! The head of the Main Prison Administration allowed me to inspect all of Sakhalin. But he set a condition: not to meet with political prisoners. And I accepted that condition.

SOFYA. And what's interesting about convicts? I see them every day! Come and visit us at Kulizhki—as they now say—in the back of beyond with the devils. You'll see so many exotic types. Isaac didn't have to go far to paint his brilliant "Vladimirka," did he? It made him the first landscape painter in Russia! Right, Kuvshinnikov?

KUVSHINNIKOV. I don't understand landscapes, my soul! But convicts are reduced to a pitiful state. And raising one's voice in their defence is a sacred cause! Anton Pavlovich, both as a doctor and a writer, has set himself a noble goal.

SOFYA. Kuvshinnikov, you're right! You and Anton Pavlovich are honest, serious people!

LEVITAN. I really did want to go with Anton, but the accursed neuralgia from the squabbles and malice of people... Put it off until next spring! We'll go together!

FATHER. (From above) Then he'd become like that philistine who, every morning before putting on his boots, grunts, groans, and scratches his lower back for a long time.

The bell rings. Polya opens the door. Modestly, sideways, Ivanenko enters and immediately feels awkward at the crowd.

IVANENKO. Oh, the whole world is already here!

ANTON. Ivanenko has arrived! (To the Kuvshinnikovs) You haven't met, have you? Ivanenko! A true friend of the entire family! (To Ivanenko) The Kuvshinnikovs. Sofya Petrovna. Artist. Levitan's student. Tremble,

Ivanenko! Her paintings have been acquired by Tretyakov on multiple occasions. Dmitry Pavlovich, her husband. A physician colleague of mine.

The bell rings. Polya opens the door. Kundasova enters swiftly.

KUNDASOVA. Greetings to dear Chekhovia!

ANTON. (To Kundasova, parodying Kuvshinnikova) Freeze! Don't move! (Circles around Kundasova—everyone laughs) We must paint her immediately as a young novice.

MISHA. Astronomer, may I court you? (Helps Kundasova with her coat)

KUVSHINNIKOVA. (To Misha) Hey, English Grammar! Haven't they kicked you out of the University yet?

MISHA. They haven't had time. Today I took my last exam.

KUVSHINNIKOVA. Didn't you stumble?

MISHA. (Goofing around, rattles off) The Russian monarchy is something of its own kind, and can perhaps be studied only in its individuality. To confuse it with other existing monarchies would mean misunderstanding it. The unlimited nature of supreme power in Russia is proved by...

ANTON. So, my law education is at an end! Finick always scattered his lectures on criminal law, legal procedure, and prison studies. And I read them for lack of anything better to do.

MISHA. Admit it, you got the Sakhalin idea from my lectures!

KUNDASOVA. I, of course, revere and so on—Anton Pavlovich's self-sacrifice... but essentially, you're wasting your time! Your trip won't change anything in our poor Russia!

FATHER. The world isn't only what you see through your window! Step out of your hut and you'll see more!

KUNDASOVA. Sakhalin is such a terrible place, ladies and gentlemen! They say of it: "around—sea, in the middle—grief». I did research for Anton Pavlovich, and now I know everything about Sakhalin. The soldiers serving there are paid huge sums and have double years counted. But they all dream of escaping! It's no secret that our government loves to promise but doesn't like to keep its promises! So, what then? Give Sakhalin to Japan or China? Exiling people there is undoubtedly the only solution! Yes, yes, ladies and gentlemen, I justify forced colonization!

ANTON. A person's life, even one who has committed the gravest crime, should not be regarded as a means to any end!

IVANENKO. As I understand it, Anton Pavlovich, you are close to, so to speak, the fundamental Christian idea that every human soul... every human existence constitutes an independent, immutable, absolute value?

KUNDASOVA. It's not about Sakhalin, ladies and gentlemen! Every struggle in Russia is doomed! Life is becoming petty. The mind is narrowing. Energy is fussy. Personality is being erased. (Growing excited, gesticulating wildly)

Misha, behind her, quietly mimics her.

KUNDASOVA. Universal human interests are formal! The main thing is the interests of petty-bourgeois well-being! On this path we will repeat China! Perhaps some crisis will save us from Chinese decay! But where will it come from? Look around! What can rouse the people? Is there such an idea? Can one still be born? We're going from imperfect philistinism to perfect philistinism!

Everyone laughs.

KUNDASOVA. Have I said something funny?

LEVITAN. In our Russian life, indeed, much is unsound. But vulgarity and philistinism are alien to us! Russia is an uncivilized country, but I love her, the bitch!

FATHER. Antosha, was there any mail?

ANTON. Yes, "News," "Stock Exchange Gazette," and "The Doctor». Take them from me.

Father goes into Anton's study.

ANTON. Let's go to the sitting room, ladies and gentlemen!

Everyone goes upstairs. Father comes out of the study with newspapers and follows them to the second floor, browsing the papers as he goes. Levitan lingers, reading the notes attached to the flowers. Kuvshinnikova returns and stops near Levitan.

Levitan catches himself, wants to avoid a tête-à-tête, but Kuvshinnikova blocks his way to the stairs. They look at each other in silence.

KUVSHINNIKOVA. The Chekhovs' staircase is like the one at the Nobility Assembly.

LEVITAN. Don't, Sofya, please don't make scenes, at least not here...

KUVSHINNIKOVA. What is the banister upholstered in?

LEVITAN. Manchester. Please don't make scenes here!

KUVSHINNIKOVA. You've completely avoided me. Since Plyos, you haven't given me a chance to explain myself to you.

LEVITAN. I'm tired.

SOFYA. Do you like Lika?

LEVITAN. No.

SOFYA. Masha?

LEVITAN. No.

SOFYA. Who then?

LEVITAN. I'll shoot myself.

THE DINING ROOM.

A small room with light yellow wallpaper. In the centre—a long dining table. Around modest Viennese chairs. Above the table—a hanging lamp with a white glass shade. A white tiled stove. On the door—cherry-coloured drapes. On the walls—trays, decorative plates. On the windowsills—azaleas, ficus. In planters on the walls—cacti. A large aquarium. Light, joyful tones predominate.

Everyone is already seated. Kuvshinnikova and Levitan slowly ascend the stairs.

FATHER. (Finished skimming the newspapers, indignantly) Outrageous! Disgraceful! Not a word about your departure! They glorify Cossack Peshkov! As a loyal subject, as a patriot! He was photographed with the Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich! What kind of patriotism and love for the Motherland is it to travel in honour of the Tsar from Blagoveshchensk-on-Amur to Petersburg! He got an order!

KUNDASOVA. Ah... They're all scum!

SOFYA. (From the doorway) And what about Cossack Peshkov's mare? Was she awarded an order? (Sits beside her husband) General laughter.

MOTHER. That's enough, Father! Let's have dinner! (Crosses herself) Polya!

Polya serves soup to everyone.

FATHER. (Slaps Misha on the back with all his might) So—I've raised all my children into the world! Though I myself studied on copper coins!

MISHA. Gently, Father!

FATHER. Now you must go into government service—so you won't be living hand to mouth.

MOTHER. Antoshenka, look after the young ladies!

LEVITAN. (Sitting down) I'll do the looking after! Crocodile, answer me—why do so many decent, intelligent, elegant young ladies visit you?

MOTHER. They're not guests. They're family!

IVANENKO. And now, if I may express myself... This dining room is graced by a young lady of extraordinary beauty...

ANTON. Die, Ivanenko—you couldn't have said it better! Manya, Olga, Lika—here's a splendid excuse to tear each other's hair out!

MOTHER. And they all lie to me! Manyechka, serve the guests!

ANTON. I'll serve! Eat this salted sturgeon, ladies and gentlemen! It costs two rubles seventy-five kopecks per pound! And these sprats—not forty-kopeck ones, as you might carelessly assume—but sixty kopecks a tin! We'll drink Marsala. Mishka, how much did you pay?

MISHA. Two rubles eighty kopecks a bottle.

ANTON. How expensive it is to treat ladies to Marsala!

MASHA. Boys, stop it!

ANTON. We'll have vodka—three shots each, and the ladies—one each! (Pours vodka)

Misha pours wine for the women.

KUNDASOVA. Pardon me—but I'll have vodka!

ANTON. Levitan, what are you whispering to Lika?

LEVITAN. I'm seducing her!

ANTON. You're wasting your effort! She's virtuous. (Rises with his glass) To our father and mother! To the people dearest to me! I'll be grateful to you for the rest of my life for giving us, your children, an education!

LEVITAN. I join in your inspiration! I never had a home or family of my own. And with all my soul I love your home and your family!

IVANENKO. And I found a home and refuge here in the storms of life.

They all clink glasses and drink.

MOTHER. And do you know how Antosha began to write? We were poor then. We all worked as best we could. Masha cooked, washed, mended. Thanks to her, none of us went about dirty or rumpled. We dressed poorly, of course, but cleanly and neatly. I knitted kerchiefs all day and sold them for fifteen kopecks. Little Misha, frail, would get up long before dawn and go to the shops for bread and whatever else we needed. Father lived and ate at the warehouse, with his employer. Our eldest son, Alexander, helped little. And our late Nikolenka had already started drinking and would just come by to eat. Anton was a student. He studied sciences all day. And he was very upset that my name day was coming and there was no money for a pie. He took pen in hand and wrote a story! The story was published! And he received a few rubles. (Laughs) We had a name-day celebration! And from that time on, he became the family's breadwinner. With Anton, we fear nothing! Help yourself to the fish, Isaac!

LEVITAN. Thank you! And I'll take a pickle!

FATHER. God grant, Anton, that your feelings for your family never change until the grave!

MOTHER. Eat, Antoshenka! When will you eat properly again?

ANTON. On Sakhalin I'll eat real fish. Sturgeon! And oysters are almost free there! And I'm very curious to know who, when I'm gone, will carouse

with you, Lika, until five in the morning? How good that Ivanenko has no money! Or I'd kill him out of jealousy the moment I arrive!

LEVITAN. And they'd send you to Sakhalin a second time—but at state expense, not your own. FATHER. Today marks fourteen years since I came to live in Moscow. It was spring then too, just as wet and cold as now. But we had no money at all! I went four days without eating. Evochka, abstain from rich food, remember the Last Judgement!

ANTON. Papa, as a doctor, I categorically state—Mother needs butter every day! LEVITAN. Why, Yevgenia Yakovlevna, are your pickles always so delicious?

FATHER. We pickle them in pumpkins!

SOFYA. Lovely, lovely! I look at your table and think—what a pity I don't paint still lifes! Such abundance! Such colours!

MOTHER. (To Kundasova) Olenka, you're not eating anything at all!

KUNDASOVA. Don't pay any attention to me!

ANTON. Levitan, move the bread away from Lika!

MOTHER. Don't make things up, Lidochka isn't plump at all! I don't like that thinness is in fashion now. Eat, Lidochka, don't listen to him!

LEVITAN. Allow me toast! I read in Gogol an expression of Kolchugin, Ivan Grigorievich, the Moscow bookseller: "These journalists with their books—like young ladies with Platonic love—'I love, I love,' but there's nothing there!" So let's drink to the departure—which is also to the triumphant return! Your inspiration!

They all clink and drink.

FATHER. Through the prayers of the holy wonder-workers of Moscow, Antosha will return alive and well. Perhaps they'll give him an order! I

remember as a boy in famine, I ate oak bark and goosefoot. And we drank tar during cholera. Internally—tar. (Sighs)

Polya changes plates and takes the extra dishes downstairs.

ANTON. When I return, I'll marry an intelligent, educated young lady. And during the honeymoon, we'll sit together and sort through the Sakhalin notes! I've exploited Marya enough! Let her have a personal life!

LEVITAN. I'm surprised, Anton, that you're still unmarried at thirty, when you're surrounded by so many beauties!

IVANENKO. Do you remember the Apostle Paul's epistle to the Corinthians? "I would have you be without care. He that is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But he that is married cares for the things of the world, how he may please his wife».

LEVITAN. And I'll get married too. I'm tired. I want family, tenderness, companionship.

ANTON. Bedouin, if you're hinting at Lika, I'll poison you! And let me be Salieri and you Mozart.

KUNDASOVA. I don't understand—should I congratulate Levitan or not?

ANTON. How naive you are! Congratulate him! He's getting two houses on Maroseyka and ten minor children with the bride!

LEVITAN. And what do you say, Marya Pavlovna?

MASHA. I think all this is not serious. You have such success with women that your future wife would have to be very unjealous.

LEVITAN. Yes, women love me! And I sometimes become very infatuated. But I want to marry only one.

KUNDASOVA. And now I want to transport you to your world, where you must multiply the line of Adam: eat, drink, endure, work, tremble, laugh, weep, sleep, and die.

SOFYA. And I have a request for you, Anton Pavlovich. You'll be sailing past Plyos. You'll see the cemetery, the church, a solitary house on the hill under a red roof... Bow to it all for me! A melancholy harmony—but I spent the happiest summer there. Levitan and I worked a lot and successfully.

ANTON. (Courteously) Certainly. I'll go out on deck and bow on your behalf.

LEVITAN. Damn it all—why does everything in the world end? I'll be bored without your disgusting face, Crocodile!

MISHA. The trip is well and sensibly conceived. But it's painful to see you off! Your absence will be very keenly felt by me. You haven't left yet, and the house is already empty. The order and structure of our lives are crumbling before our eyes. As if you alone filled all the rooms at once!

IVANENKO. And nowhere have I spent time as happily as in your chest of drawers! How much tea I've drunk here! At least five pounds! How many dinners and suppers I've eaten! I value your kindness and affection. In my dire straits, you supported me. You didn't let me perish; you saved me from ruin. You found me work. In short, I will miss you terribly, Anton Pavlovich! (Dabs a tear)

MISHA. The idyll in our house is over! After an idyll, usually comes drama.

MASHA. (Through tears) Mishka, you're an idiot!

ANTON. (To Masha) You and Mother don't need to see me off to Zagorsk. You'll have cried yourselves out in Moscow anyway—no need to repeat it at the Lavra.

MASHA. Yes. (To Kundasova) And the day after tomorrow—back to school, Olga, to our students!

KUNDASOVA. (Noticeably tipsy) Perhaps I'll sail with Anton Pavlovich as far as Kineshma.

ANTON. Delighted. Thank you!

KUNDASOVA. In the ravines near Kineshma, I have an appointment with someone.

ANTON. I envy the fortunate man! Excuse me, I'll go to my study for a quarter of an hour. I need to dash off a few more business notes. Thank you, Masha—the roast is excellent.

MASHA. And where is Polya? It's time to clear the table.

ANTON. I'll send Polya. (Descends the stairs)

MISHA. Ivanenko—to the piano! (Sings "Glory to Thee")

IVANENKO. What a voice...

MASHA. He's started singing after all! What a dreadful voice! It's agonizing! Everyone laughs. And we will not return to the dining room.

Anton enters the foyer and hears sobbing. He approaches the coat rack, parts the coats, and finds Polya crying.

ANTON. Polenka, what are these unseen tears? Who has hurt you? Have you been offended?

POLYA. No, no... my teeth started aching.

ANTON. Then let's do something about your teeth!

POLYA. Thank you, Anton Pavlovich! They've already stopped. I'll go now. (Goes into the kitchen)

Anton stands for a while in bewilderment, then goes to his study and sits at the desk.

The bell rings. Polya opens the door.

EFROS. (Enters confidently and resolutely, to Polya) New servant?

POLYA. Yes, sir.

EFROS. (Listening to the sounds from the second floor) Is Anton Pavlovich at home?

POLYA. Yes, sir. But he's leaving today and isn't receiving outsiders.

EFROS. (Nods upstairs) Who's there? I don't hear his voice?

POLYA. Anton Pavlovich is in his study.

EFROS. Alone?

POLYA. Yes, sir.

EFROS. And Marya Pavlovna?

POLYA. Upstairs with the guests. I'll call her now.

EFROS. Don't bother! (Presses money into Polya's hand) Here—take this! And don't say anything to anyone! Anton Pavlovich is expecting me! (Without taking off her coat, quickly and without knocking, she enters Anton's study)

ANTON. (Astonished) Dunya?

EFROS. How's your worldview these days? How many lines have you written? How much per line? I've come for my letters! Don't worry—we won't be caught! I gave your servant three rubles to keep quiet. They're counterfeit, by the way! My Jewish brother draws them perfectly. The illusion is complete! Why are you staring like I'm a ghost? You'll strain your eyes! Give me the letters quickly! Or that damned Masha will sniff it out!

She pokes her nose into everything! And nowadays she can't stand me!
(Rudely and feverishly rummages through Anton's papers herself,
scattering them)

ANTON. Why are you always so angry, you vexatious creature? Don't crumple the photographs! And don't break my pencils! Don't make a mess! Here are your letters! I was going to take them with me.

Efros quickly scans the letters and throws them into the fire.

EFROS. I wish you a good rattling in the post-carts! To get stuck in the ice! To freeze with delight that you're a great writer! To catch a nasty disease from the Singapore girls! After your journey, you'll be a globe-trotting fool instead of just a regular one!

ANTON. It's a pity you refused to marry me four years ago. We would have been divorced long ago by now! But for the year or two we would have lived together, you could have said all sorts of nasty things to me without hindrance!

EFROS. Marry you? A splendid idea indeed! But you were so worried that your parents would be upset by a civil marriage! According to you, I should have converted to Orthodoxy and been left penniless! My father would have disinherited me! But of course—such trifles compared to the honour of being your spouse! To live with your entire family! And what if it was poverty? To spend the honeymoon in a passage room! And in summer to vacation on some dirty little farm in Little Russia! To learn from Masha and your mamma how to sew your shirts and cook! To spend six months saving up for a new hat and consulting the whole family about it! I'm beginning to regret having missed the opportunity to be the great writer's wife!

ANTON. Beginning to regret? But it's not too late, Dunya!

EFROS. You see, I can't exchange my horses for you! And I like to holiday abroad! I'm a coquette! And I can't dress as cheaply and absurdly as

Masha! I'm used to spending money on myself without counting and without answering to anyone! (Suddenly falls silent)

ANTON. You know, Dunya—my brother Ivan wrote on a student's paper "Nonsense," and the student read it in Latin as "reniksa». Everything you say is reniksa. And yet, you've grown prettier, and your character has grown calmer.

EFROS. Anton, Anton! Everything is nonsense and trivial! I have enough money! Spit on everything! Let's go somewhere! Abroad! To Paris!

ANTON. Reniksa. You're still a fantasist!

EFROS. Why, why are we both unhappy? For what? Yes, you didn't mistake yourself! You're famous now! But you still live in squalid conditions. The foyer stinks of cabbage soup. Why do you live like this? You have such an intense spiritual life! You've suffered and still suffer so much that at least outwardly you should be surrounded by comfort! Oh—your dragons are glaring at me, they want to bite! (Slaps the candlesticks with her gloved hand and jerks it back) But! Naughty! Damn! I've burned my glove! (Pulls off the glove and throws it on the floor) My cord! You're still wearing it! Kindly return it! (Tugs at the cord around Anton's neck)

ANTON. You little shrew! Let's go! (Takes it off himself, throws it to her, rubs his neck) You nearly strangled me! This noose is a symbol of the happiness that only you could give.

EFROS. Farewell! I still love you madly! Damn you! (Rushes out of the study and runs to the front door)

ANTON. (Dashes after her) Dunya!

Efros stops abruptly, runs back, and throws herself into his arms. A long kiss. A very long one.

On the stairs above, Lika comes out. She sees them. Presses her hands to her mouth. Then almost falls, grabbing the banister. She stands and stares.

They don't notice Lika. Efros shoves Anton away sharply and runs off.

Anton notices Lika spreads his hands helplessly, and goes back to his study.

Lika runs downstairs, frantically searches for her cloak, and cannot find it.

In the study, Anton picks up the glove, looks at it, kisses it, and throws it into the fire.

MASHA. (At the top of the stairs) Lika? Did someone come?

Lika doesn't answer and doesn't show herself.

MASHA. Polya!

LEVITAN. (Follows Masha out) Marya Pavlovna, I'm waiting for an answer.

MASHA. Please understand me correctly. I cannot disrupt Anton Pavlovich's customary way of life. I cannot deprive him of the order he needs so much. I cannot deprive him of the creative atmosphere I always try to create for him. I cannot! I cannot cause him unpleasantness! My life belongs to him and no one else.

LEVITAN. (Whistles) I bow and play the retreat.

Misha's singing resumes.

MASHA. (Shouts into the sitting room) Mishka—enough! I can't bear it!
(Comes downstairs)

SOFYA. (Approaches Levitan) Tell me only one thing—have you abandoned me completely? LEVITAN. I'm tired.

SOFYA. What does that mean? Don't torment me! (Grabs his hands and kisses them) You are the last chapter of my romance!

LEVITAN. (Under his breath) I'll shoot myself. For the third time I'll shoot myself. Is that what you all want? (Goes back into the sitting room)

Sofya sits on the steps and lays her head on the banister.

Masha stands in the middle of the foyer, pressing her fingers to her temples, repeating: "My God, my God...». She notices Lika and immediately approaches her.

MASHA. Are you hiding? What's wrong with you? Are you upset about something? Why are you standing here alone?

LIKA. I'm leaving. My teeth are aching unbearably.

MASHA. How unfortunate! Just today! And brothers Ivan and Alexander so wanted to see you. They'll be here soon. How you've matured, Lika! Just six months ago, you were so funny, telling your youngest class: "Mesdames, hush... mesdames, hush...». I wanted to show you off to my brothers, so I invited you over.

LIKA. I didn't even know then that you were Chekhov's sister!

MASHA. Because of your usual shyness, you didn't come into the rooms but stayed right here. I went upstairs to get a book for you, and on the way I told Mishka: "I've brought a magnificent beauty. But she's very shy and is hiding behind the coats». Mishka began slowly going up and down the stairs, trying to get a look at you.

LIKA. (Laughs) I almost cried from embarrassment and really did hide behind someone's coat.

MASHA. But Mishka spotted you. He went to Anton and reported: "A very pretty girl has come to see Marya—she's standing in the foyer». Anton dropped his work and slowly went upstairs. Misha followed. Then they came down, then went up again.

LIKA. And I pressed myself against the coat rack as hard as I could.

MASHA. They passed by about ten times, looking at you.

LIKA. And I stood there thinking—good heavens, so many men in this house! And why do they keep walking up and down the stairs?

They laugh and embrace.

LIKA. What if I just went with Anton? I'd seduce him and marry him somewhere in Tyumen! We'd send Sakhalin to the devil! And we'd just go straight to Ceylon for our honeymoon!

MASHA. (Laughing) I'm afraid you're not the only one with such plans! Kundasova is determined to accompany Anton—who knows how far! Won't you scratch each other's eyes out?

LIKA. I'm too meek for that—I surrender without a fight. I'll study singing. I'm perishing, Masha! I swear to you—I'm perishing!

MASHA. Now, Likusha, there, there... Why are you so upset?

LIKA. (Close to hysterics) I'm perishing, Masha, I'm perishing! You're so confident, so clever... Help me, I'm perishing! Help me—tell me what to do!

MASHA. Hush, mesdames, hush... It's nerves and nothing more. It's just a mood.

LIKA. I'm perishing, Masha—I have a foreboding that I'm perishing!

MASHA. Everything will work out. You're young, beautiful, you have a wonderful voice! You'll become a famous singer! And I'll be proud to know you. Just have more character and willpower! Don't get caught up in bohemian life! Work on yourself, and everything lies ahead! Your future is in your hands! Everything will be splendid!

LIKA. I'm perishing, Masha.

Anton comes out of the study.

MASHA. (To Lika) Hush, mesdames! (To Anton) I'm distracting Lika from her toothache. She has a toothache, so Lika is leaving.

ANTON. Am I a doctor or not? When I was still a student and practicing in Voskresensk Hospital, a patient came with a tooth problem. I confidently applied forceps and, after some torment, quite respectably pulled out a perfectly healthy tooth! "Never mind, never mind," the local doctor encouraged me, "pull healthy ones—you'll get to the bad ones eventually!" I started pulling the bad tooth, but it went worse than the healthy one. I broke the crown. The patient cursed us all out and left.

MASHA. I'm not sure these reminiscences encourage Lika.

ANTON. Never mind. Bring some cotton, valerian, or vodka, Masha. Before Lika goes completely cross-eyed and floods our house with tears.

Masha goes upstairs, passing Kuvshinnikova.

KUVSHINNIKOVA. (To Masha) It's so nice in your house. Peaceful, sleepy, like in the country. No passions.

LIKA. (To Anton, after an awkward silence) Oh, how I wish I were already an old woman. Like Kuvshinnikova.

ANTON. Why? As you are now, you're very charming.

LIKA. I feel worthless, empty, and of no use to anyone! Oh, how I wish I understood why Garshin committed suicide, why Dostoevsky went to hard labour, why Levitan is always melancholy... and why you're going to Sakhalin?

ANTON. I'm too tired now. I can't say anything sensible to you right now, Lika! Sakhalin has taken all my thoughts and all my time. And I can no longer dispose of either as I please. On top of that—family is a question, my sister is a question, Mishka is a problem! My personal life—a thousand questions! And not one answer! I feel dull and heavy.

Wait a little longer, Lika—be patient! And you and I will understand what's happening to us now, we'll make sense of it all! We're still young, Lika! And we still have a long, long time to live... Sakhalin will give me, I hope, vigour and faith in my purpose. Don't leave, Lika—be generous! It will be lonely for me to leave if I don't see your dear face among those seeing me off!

MASHA. (Returning) Here—as requested, Mr. Doctor! You may begin treatment! And I'll send Mishka for a cab. He'll take Lika home.

LIKA. Thank you, Masha—no need. I'll stay. I'll stay...

THE END