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# ЧТЕНИЯ Readings

hope dies last



# ЧтЕНИЯ Readings

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## The Contributors

**ALEXANDER BLOK** (1880-1921) was one of the greatest Russian poets of the Silver Age. A leader of the Symbolist movement, he invented a new poetic language in his poems *Retribution* and *The Twelve*.

**ANTON CHEKHOV** (1860-1904) was a doctor, a playwright and a prolific master of the short story (having written over 400 by the time he was 26). His stories are often ironic observations on human nature that seem simple on the surface, yet hide deep veins of human emotion.

**MICHAEL DENNER** is editor of the *Tolstoy Studies Journal*. He is an associate professor of Russian Studies at Stetson University, where he teaches Russian literature, film and language. He writes on Tolstoy and popular culture, and is at work on a short biography of Tolstoy for Reaktion Press.

**ANDREY MATVIIV** (featured photographer) was born in Omsk, Russia, but now lives in Rovno, Ukraine. He is a graduate of the journalism faculty of Lvov State University and works in the Rovno regional newspaper *Рівне Вечірне* (*Evening Rovno*) as culture editor, photo editor and photographer. He also teaches journalism classes to high school students. He has taken part in several group photographic exhibitions and had his first personal exhibition in the summer of 2009.

**OSIP MANDELSTAM** (1891-1938) was a leading poet and essayist of the Acmeist group. Born in Warsaw, he and his family were allowed to move to St. Petersburg at the turn of the century, where Mandelstam got his schooling. He wrote poetry and essays and did a great deal of translating. His poem about Stalin got him arrested in 1933, yet miraculously he was only exiled to Voronezh. But in 1938 he was arrested again and

sentenced to hard labor. He died in a transfer prison, en route to the camps. "Only in Russia is poetry respected," Mandelstam once wrote. "It gets people killed. Is there anywhere else where poetry is so common a motive for murder?"

**ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA** (1958-2006) was a Russian journalist, author and human rights activist. She is best known for her reporting on the Chechen Wars from 1999 until her murder (still unsolved) in October 2006. She received numerous international awards for her journalism, including the Amnesty International Global Award for Human Rights Journalism, the PEN American Center Freedom to Write Award and the Olof Palme Prize.

**NADEZHDA PTUSHKINA** (born 1949) is a popular playwright, film writer and theater director. Born in Leningrad, she is a graduate of the MkhAT School for Directors and has written numerous plays and film scripts, the best-known of which include *Корова* (*The Cow*) *И дрогнет конец цены...* (*And the End of the Chain Quivers*, a play about Anton Chekhov), *Браво, Лауренсия!* (*Bravo, Laurencia*) and *При чужих свечах* (*By Foreign Candlelight*). None of her works have previously been translated into English.

**IRINA RATUSHINSKAYA** (born 1954) is a poet, writer and political activist. Born in Odessa, she studied physics and went on to teach primary school. In the early 1980s, she was charged with "anti-Soviet agitation" for "dissemination of slanderous documentation in poetic form." She was convicted and spent the next four years in a labor camp for political prisoners, and was released early from her seven-year term on the eve of the Gorbachev-Reagan summit in Reykjavik. She continued to write her poems in prison, etching them on soap until they were memorized, then washing them away. Deprived of Soviet citizenship, she lived in the U.S. from 1987 to 1998. She now lives in Moscow (having regained Russian citizenship) with her husband, human rights activist Igor Gerashchenko, and their two sons.

**DINA RUBINA** was born in Tashkent in 1953. She graduated from the Tashkent Conservatory and taught in the Institute of Culture in Tashkent. She lived for a time in Moscow before emigrating to Israel in 1990. Her first literary works were published in the journal *Youth* (*Юность*). A recipient of the Aryeh Dulchin literary prize for her book *Duplicate Family* (*Двойная фамилия*, 1990) and the Israeli Union of Writers prize for her book, *One Intellectual Sat Down in the Road*, (*Один интеллигент уселся на дороге*, 1995). Rubina's works have twice been nominated for the Russian Booker Prize and she is a recipient (2007) of the Great Book prize, for her novel *On the Sunny Side of the Street* (*На солнечной стороне улицы*).

## While She Lay Dying

*A Vaudeville in Three Parts*

Nadezhda Ptushkina

### CHARACTERS

SOFIA IVANOVNA: A very old lady

TATYANA: Her daughter

IGOR: Their new acquaintance

### Part One

*A one-room apartment in which two women are growing older. Everything is old-fashioned and comfortable, unmoved for years. A sideboard, a glass cabinet, bookshelves full of multi-volume collections, curtains with bows and valances, a tasseled tablecloth on a round table. Heavy chairs, deep armchairs, a floor lamp. At the moment, the objects can only be guessed at in the dusk and look all the more meaningful, poetic and sad. The room is lit by three candles. In their light, we can clearly see an old woman with a blanket on her lap (SOFIA) and a younger woman, seated on a low bench at the feet of the old lady, with a book (TANYA).*

TANYA (*reading aloud*): They walked in to dinner, arm-in-arm, and sat down, side by side. Never was there such a dinner as that, since the world began. There was the superannuated bank clerk, Tim Linkinwater's friend; and there was the chubby old lady, Tim Linkinwater's sister; and



there was so much attention from Tim Linkinwater's sister to Miss La Creevy, and there were so many jokes from the superannuated bank clerk, and Tim Linkinwater himself was in such a comical state, that of themselves they would have composed the pleasantest party conceivable.<sup>1</sup>

*Sofia sighs heavily.*

TANYA (*raises her head and looks at her mother*): Mama, are you in pain?

SOFIA: No, Tanechka. Don't worry.

TANYA (*waits a bit and then continues*): Then, there was Mrs. Nickleby, so grand and complacent; Madeline and Kate, so blushing and beautiful; Nicholas and Frank, so devoted and proud; and all four so silently and tremblingly happy – there was Newman so subdued yet so overjoyed, and then were the twin Brothers so delighted and interchanging such looks, that the old servant stood transfixed behind his master's chair, and felt his eyes grow dim as they wandered round the table.

*Sofia lets out another sigh, drawn-out and mournful.*

TANYA: Should I go on?

SOFIA: That is a very difficult question.

TANYA: Are you tired of listening?

SOFIA (*sighs*): I must, I must talk to you, Tanechka. I must.

TANYA (*closes the book*): Page one hundred and sixty two (*puts the book on the shelf*). Shall we eat dinner?

SOFIA: Tell me the truth, Tanya. Truth and nothing but the truth.

TANYA: Yes, Mama?

SOFIA: When I die, will it be a relief to you?

TANYA (*comes to her knees before the armchair and presses her cheek against her mother's hands*): Mama, I love you very much!

SOFIA: Many old people, like myself, find comfort in the thought that our passing would make life easier for those we love. I have no such comfort. I will die, and, I am afraid, your life will be even sadder.

TANYA: Are you feeling worse?

SOFIA: My dear girl, I don't want you to panic or become scared. You should know: I will die today or tomorrow. Gloom has clenched my heart.

---

<sup>1</sup> Tanya is reading from *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, Chapter XLIII.

TANYA: You are obsessing. I will call the doctor.

SOFIA: It is time, it is... I am not afraid of death. It is for you that I grieve, Tanechka. I am leaving you alone, without a husband, or children, or anyone you love. You are the best of daughters. Where is justice in this world? Why should you have to go on alone? Why? Why?

TANYA: Mama, the world is full of spinsters.

SOFIA: Do not even say that! You are pretty! You have your slim figure and your university education! You are decent, practical, refined and without bad habits...

TANYA: Which adds up to the portrait of a classic spinster! Would you like oatmeal or rice?

SOFIA: Tanechka! I am serious.

TANYA: So am I. Cottage cheese or cheese fritters?

SOFIA: I never asked you about this...

TANYA: Seems like we haven't had omelets for ages. And we should!

SOFIA: ... and you are so hard to read.

TANYA (*tempting*): So what about an omelet? Slightly browned, with grated cheese and celery?

SOFIA: May I ask you before I die? It is very, very important for me know.

TANYA: Of course, Mama, ask whatever you want. But first tell me: would you like tea or your coffee drink?

SOFIA: Have you ever been in love?

TANYA: Naturally! I'm an awful flirt! Or I was forty or fifty years ago (*pushes the armchair to the table*). You must eat this salad, it's carrots and apples. It would be nice to manage without laxatives today.

SOFIA: And have you had any... liaisons?

TANYA: Liaisons? How do you mean?

SOFIA: Well, let's say... please, don't be offended... let's say, with men?

TANYA: I am afraid I did. And specifically with men. But you shouldn't worry, Mama! It's all in the past.

SOFIA: You have a past? Many?

TANYA: Many what?

SOFIA: Of the... you know, the liaisons?

TANYA: I believe there were two. Is that enough sour cream for you?

SOFIA: Two?! In how long?

TANYA: Don't worry, Mama! Two in my entire life.

SOFIA: Two! How terrible. Only two!

TANYA (*with dignity*): I was not trying to break any records.

SOFIA: Only two! And how long ago?

TANYA (*laughs*): Quite a while.

SOFIA: Why didn't you want to marry those two?

TANYA: They were the ones who didn't want it!

SOFIA: Idiots! And where are they now?

TANYA: Both married, as far as I know.

SOFIA: Did you stay in touch with them?

TANYA: Not since they got married.

SOFIA: That's a terrible lack of foresight, Tanya! They might have gotten divorced, or widowed. I am certain they remember you. And regret their mistakes bitterly.

TANYA: I doubt it. How's the food?

SOFIA: Have you tried making inquiries about them?

TANYA: Not in a million years. Mama, you are hardly eating today.

SOFIA: If you were married, I could die a happy woman. It is my fault. You are being left alone because of my selfishness!

TANYA: You are over-dramatizing, Mama! Another spoonful, please.

SOFIA: It is hard to be dying with such a burden.

TANYA: I should call the doctor.

SOFIA: The doctor cannot help me. One thing and one thing only could help me make peace with the thought of abandoning you: if you were married.

*A loud knock at the door.*

SOFIA: Someone is knocking. How bizarre!

TANYA: Nothing extraordinary. It's probably the neighbor.

SOFIA: It is strange that they are knocking instead of ringing the bell.

TANYA: The power is off, Mama, remember? (*picks up one of the candles and goes to open the door*)

SOFIA: Still bizarre. Make sure you ask who it is!

TANYA (*to the door*): Who is it?

IGOR (*on the other side of the door, playfully*): Cuckoo! Tanyushkin! Guess who?

TANYA (*opening the door, sarcastically*): Cuckoo!

IGOR (*shoves roses and champagne at her*): Hi! (*realizes he's mistaken and is taken aback*) Hullo, Miss... Could you get Tatyana, please?



TANYA: I am Tatyana.

SOFIA (*from the room*): Tanechka, who is it?

TANYA: Just a moment, Mama!

IGOR: You mean *you* are Tatyana?

TANYA: What's your objection to that?

IGOR: Are you the only Tatyana here?

TANYA: The only one.

IGOR: Let's check! Fourth Bus Station street, number thirteen, building three, apartment thirty-one.

TANYA: Three-B.

IGOR: What?

TANYA: The building: this is three-B.

IGOR: And there's a three-A?

TANYA: Of course. Also three-C, three-D and three-E.

IGOR: Am I supposed to run around the alphabet now? And conquer the fifth floor for each letter? (*takes the roses and the champagne back from her*) I shall begin my unaided descent.<sup>2</sup> What a massively dark and stinking place this is, while we're at it! How do you people go on living here?

TANYA: Take the candle! (*follows him*)

IGOR: Thanks, Miss! I've got a lighter. (*clicks it*) Damn it! It only lasted the climb. Dead now.

TANYA: Take the candle! And mind your step! There are sometimes slippery things underfoot here.

IGOR: Am I supposed to go out into the street with this candle, too, like some church procession?

TANYA: It's dark. There's no power. I'm afraid the street lights won't be much help either.

IGOR: Ok, you talked me into it, Miss. Thanks! Bye!

TANYA: Take care of yourself! (*turns to go back to the apartment, slips and falls*) Ouch!..

IGOR: What now?

TANYA (*through tears*): Nothing. Don't worry about it.

IGOR: Do you need help?

<sup>2</sup> Igor sardonically refers to the fact that the elevator is not working either, due to the power cut.

TANYA: No, no... (*stands up with difficulty, sobs again*) Ouch...

IGOR (*returns*): What's wrong?

TANYA: I slipped. The neighbors' child is always eating bananas, and he throws the peels right on the floor.

IGOR: Did you break anything? At your age, every fall's risky.

TANYA (*irritably*): I don't need your help! Go on! Go!

IGOR: If you say so. Are you bruised? Let me walk you back at least.

TANYA: It's all right already, the pain's gone (*bursts out crying*).

IGOR: Why are you crying then?

TANYA: I cry because I want to! I'm sorry. Please, don't mind me. My Mama is dying.

IGOR (*after a short silence*): My condolences. But I'm powerless there.

Money won't help. Although... Here, take this! (*holds out money to her*)

TANYA: Are you insane?

IGOR: It's from the heart, albeit in material form. We all had a Mama.

TANYA: I haven't asked you for a handout!

IGOR: I figured you could use one. This is nothing for me. Take it, don't worry!

TANYA: How dare you humiliate me like this, so matter-of-factly!?

SOFIA (*shouts from her room*): Tanechka! Is something wrong?

TANYA (*shouts back*): I'm coming, Mama.

IGOR: I just wanted to help. And you just turn on me, out of the blue? Goodbye!

TANYA: I'm sorry.

IGOR: Have you changed your mind? That's better. When others are giving, always take it.<sup>3</sup> That's my opinion.

TANYA: Geez, I don't want your money. But you better walk me back.

IGOR: No problem. Grab my arm.

TANYA: Let me hold your roses and champagne. And you keep the candle. Igor escorts Tanya back to the apartment.

TANYA: Watch for the doormat. Mind your elbows – here's the door.

<sup>3</sup> Igor is paraphrasing the Russian proverb, "When there's giving, take it, and when there's fighting, run away from it."

*In this manner, arm-in-arm, Tanya and Igor arrive before Sofia. Tania is holding a bouquet of roses and a bottle of champagne. Igor is holding a candle.*

SOFIA: Good evening!

IGOR (*extremely hesitantly*): Good evening.

TANYA: Mama, let me introduce you. This is... this is...

IGOR (*finally catches on*): Igor. Very nice to meet you.

TANYA: And this... this is...

SOFIA: Have you forgotten everybody's names today, Tanechka?

TANYA: Sofia Ivanovna. My mother.

IGOR: Is that the one who...

TANYA: Yes, she is the one I told you so much about.

SOFIA (*to Igor*): Have you known Tanya for a long time?

IGOR (*looks at his watch*): Yes, I would say it's been about thirty-forty...

TANYA (*cuts in*): Years! Forty exactly! Years. Time flies, doesn't it Igor?

IGOR: I would say it just rushes right past you, sometimes.

SOFIA: Very, very nice to meet you! Please sit down, Igor? May I call you Igor?

Although you are not young, I am still much older than you. Why didn't you tell me that we'll be having a guest for dinner, Tanechka? And with such good manners: with flowers and champagne! You must make something right away! We can't be having champagne with porridge. Pass me the roses, please! What a heavenly aroma! I feel young and happy. We haven't had roses in our home forever. Tanechka, take Igor's coat. And off to the kitchen! Igor and I shall converse here.

TANYA (*to Igor*): Your coat, please!

IGOR: Actually, I have to go already! (*looks at his roses and champagne; decides to give up on the roses but takes the champagne back*).

SOFIA: Open the champagne! What a gentleman! Came with champagne and roses, sat down for a moment and is already leaving. It's almost old-fashioned, in a way. Oh no, I shall not permit you to leave yet. Do me the favor of taking off your coat first!

*Igor takes off his coat and gives it to Tanya.*

SOFIA: I don't understand: why are you standing around, Tanechka? Go make something, anything! And Igor and I will converse here in the meantime.

TANYA (*to Igor*): Don't be afraid! I'll be right back! (*leaves the room*)



SOFIA (*to Igor*): Tanechka has told me so much about you.

IGOR: She did?

SOFIA: Of course. She doesn't really have anyone else to tell me about.

IGOR: You must be mistaking me for someone else.

SOFIA: It's true that my legs are of no use, but my mind, as you can see, thank God, is in perfect order.

IGOR: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you. And what could Tanya possibly have to tell you about me?

SOFIA: You won't be surprised that it was all good. You don't even know how much you mean to Tanya.

IGOR: Indeed, I had no idea.

SOFIA: I've noticed this already: you seem not to have confidence in yourself. And you should! So what, you made mistakes! It's all in the past. Not all is lost! Don't let your age bring you down. It is still very possible for someone like you to find fulfillment!

IGOR: What kind of fulfillment?

SOFIA: The family kind, of course. There is no other in this world.

IGOR: I prefer personal fulfillment.

TANYA (*enters*): Igor is always joking. He's been joking for forty years. Here are some oranges, and the rest is vegetarian. (*to Igor*) What would you like? Organic salad? Oatmeal? Cottage cheese?

IGOR: Thank you. I'll take an orange.

SOFIA: A man must never be made to subsist on oranges alone! You are so shy. And so touching! Tanechka, give Igor some porridge, and don't skimp!

TANYA (*to Igor*): So, are we going to open that champagne or what?

IGOR (*stands up*): You'll have to go on without me. It was a pleasure to meet you! (*rushes out of the room*).

TANYA (*grabs the candle and runs after him*): Wait!

IGOR (*already in the hallway*): Where can I buy champagne and flowers in this hole?

TANYA: Let me pay you back!

IGOR: I don't need the money!

TANYA: Then stay a little longer! Please! I'll walk you to the store. For Mama's sake? She is dying!

IGOR: I'm not a doctor. And I'm not a priest.

TANYA: I'll explain everything! Just fifteen minutes?

IGOR: Alright. But I have to make a phone call.

TANYA: Of course, please, call all you want. Any time. Here's the phone.

*(Tactfully absents herself from the room, leaving Igor the candle).*

*Igor dials.*

*In the room.*

SOFIA *(conspiratorially)*: Is he one of those two?

TANYA *(mysteriously)*: Almost.

SOFIA: Which one of the two?

TANYA: Later, Mama! *(goes to Igor)* It's so awkward here. Let me hold the light! *(takes the candle and holds it up high)*

IGOR *(when someone picks up on the other end of the line)*: Tanyunchik? Bunny! I'm late here. I'll be there in half an hour, Pups. Me? At a meeting. Yes, out of the blue, it's killing me. Please don't pout, Mousie! No, Tweety, it won't take long! Kiss you passionately! You're my spiky Hedgehog, yes, you are! Ta-ta.

TANYA: You should have asked your tweety-bird the number of the building where she makes her nest!

*The phone rings.*

TANYA *(picks up)*: Hello? No, it's a residence. Who lives here? I do! Whom do you want? Pardon? What? *(hangs up)*. They switched to cursing. It must have been for you. It must have been your hybrid.

IGOR: Who? Damn it, she's got caller ID! What did she say?

TANYA: She said that if I'm a blonde, I'm faking it. And that she doesn't care for my legs even if they grow straight from under my teeth. And that I can take my sexy looks and... let's just say she doesn't care about the looks either.

IGOR: You're lucky she didn't call you names!

TANYA: You think she didn't? You're mistaken.

IGOR: She did?

TANYA: Naturally.

IGOR: And what did she call you?

TANYA: The usual!

*A pause.*

IGOR: She did, didn't she?

TANYA: Alas.

IGOR: I'm sorry!

TANYA: How's this your fault?

IGOR: She's got the temperament. She is only twenty!

TANYA: Twenty?! What do you talk about?

IGOR: We don't really.

TANYA: Twenty! And I made her jealous!

IGOR: You? Her? You were mistaken.

TANYA: You know, it was nicer talking to her than to you!

IGOR: She's never seen you!

*The phone rings.*

IGOR (*to Tanya*): Don't answer it! It's for me!

TANYA: Sometimes people call me here too! (*picks up*) Bunny, is that you?

Hello! Just a sec, Mousie, I'll get him. He's right here, Pups! Ta-ta, Hedgehog! (*gives Igor the receiver*)

IGOR (*into the phone*): Tan... Tan... Who's the womanizer? Who's got legs?

She's got no legs at all!

TANYA: Why would you say that? I've got legs. I've got legs like everyone else.

Even better!

IGOR: Who's a blonde? She's at least sixty! I swear to you, she is!

TANYA: You shouldn't. I'm fifty... nine.

IGOR: Tanya... (*apparently, he's been cut off*) Great. (*to Tanya*) What have

you done?! Do you have any idea? How long it took me? I spent two weeks on her, no less! I'm done. (*grabs his coat*)

TANYA: Don't leave! What will I tell Mama?

IGOR: I wouldn't move in with you even out of pity!

*The phone rings.*

IGOR: It's for me! For sure.

TANYA: Don't answer in my home! It compromises me.

IGOR: It does *what* to you?

TANYA: You wouldn't know! (*into the phone*) Yes, it's the legless sixty-year-old. Yes, I'd like to steal Igor from you.

IGOR: What the hell are you talking about? Give me the phone!

TANYA: The call is for me. For me! Hold the candle! (*shoves the candle at*



*Igor*) Is that what you think of Igor? I don't share your opinion. He is kind and generous. He is noble and well-mannered. And he is handsome, too! Who, me? Thank you! Who else am I? No, you shouldn't, you're flattering me! What am I? Thank you! I'm beginning to have a new faith in myself. And even like that? Pussy, thanks to you, I have shed my years. I've been reborn! Do you want to talk to Igor now? No? Oh, you were calling for me personally? I am touched. You should do it more often! Alright, I'll pass it on to Igor, my pleasure. All the best! It was great talking to you! (*hangs up*) (*To Igor*) I was asked to let you know not to bother. Mousie has someone else to keep her company tonight.

IGOR: It's plain dangerous to hang around you! (*shoves the candle back at her*) Hold this! (*dials*) Damn it! She's not picking up. What is it you think you're doing? At your age?

TANYA: What's your problem with my age? How old are *you*?

IGOR: I am a man.

TANYA: So what, a man only ages every other year?

IGOR: Well, how old do I look?

TANYA: About fifty...

IGOR (*flattered*): Aha!

TANYA: But that's because it's dark!

IGOR: I accidentally rang your doorbell. You slipped. I behaved like a gentleman...

TANYA: But you can't stop being a gentleman after five minutes! In that case, it's better not starting at all!

*Igor suddenly gasps and grabs his stomach.*

TANYA: What's wrong?! A spasm?

IGOR: Gastritis!

TANYA: Something to eat, right away! Porridge – that'll get you back on the horse!

IGOR: Alright, give me your oats.

TANYA (*drags him back to the room*): Hurry up! Is it bad?

IGOR: Tolerable.

TANYA: Sit down. Here's the stuff. Eat it!

SOFIA: Tanechka, you have forgotten the roses. Put them into a vase!

TANYA (*to Igor*): Keep eating. I'll be right back (*leaves with the roses*).

SOFIA (*to Igor*): Stop eating! Open the champagne first.

Igor, visibly disappointed, puts down the spoon and begins to uncork the champagne.

TANYA (returns with the roses, now placed in a vase; to Igor): What are you doing? Eat! Suddenly you have an urge for champagne! (puts down the vase, takes the bottle away from Igor)

SOFIA: Tanechka, I insist: opening champagne is a man's job.

IGOR (tries to wrestle the bottle back from Tanya): Let me open it!

TANYA: What, are you attached to the bottle or something? You eat, I can handle it.

*The cork flies out with a loud pop. Champagne spills onto Igor's suit.*

TANYA: Oh, I am so sorry! It's probably an expensive suit, too...

IGOR: Yes, its debut performance (dabs at his suit with a handkerchief).

SOFIA: Tanya has never encountered alcohol before. She has no idea how to handle it! We're a family of non-drinkers, however awkward it is to admit.

TANYA (to Igor): I'm sorry!

IGOR: Moving on! It seems that glasses might be in order.

*Tanya hurries to produce three glasses. Igor is about to pour the champagne.*

TANYA (jerks one glass away): Mama can't have it! (moves the second one out of the way) You shouldn't either! (pushes the third one towards Igor) This one you can fill – I'll drink!

SOFIA: Tanechka, let Igor have a little too. He doesn't look like an alcoholic.

TANYA: Champagne with porridge? (to Igor) Here, have some more. Mama, you can have a glass of iced tea with a drop of champagne in it. Let us drink! I mean, let us toast and clink and I'll drink.

SOFIA: Tanechka, please let Igor drink some, too!

IGOR: Don't worry, I won't.

SOFIA: You won't? Why shouldn't you? There must be a reason.

IGOR: I'm driving.

SOFIA: Oh, you are a chauffeur. A wonderful profession!

IGOR: I'm an accountant.

SOFIA: A chauffeur and an accountant, both?

IGOR: No, just an accountant.

SOFIA: Then why are you driving? A driving accountant? That's strange!

IGOR: I have a car.

SOFIA: Your own?

IGOR: My very own. Why does this surprise you?

SOFIA: How did you get it?

IGOR: What do you mean?

SOFIA: Well, you must have gotten it somehow.

TANYA: Mama, please don't ask impertinent questions.

SOFIA: Did you win the lottery?

IGOR: No.

SOFIA: Inheritance?

IGOR: I just bought it.

SOFIA: You bought it? A car! That couldn't have been easy. You must've been saving for it all your life. Denied yourself everything!

IGOR: Indeed, there was a time when I denied myself things. But you know what's amazing: back then, I never managed to save up anything! And now I just make a decent living.

SOFIA: You work several jobs, don't you? You shouldn't exhaust yourself so at your age!

TANYA: I propose we drink. I mean, I propose we all clink our glasses, and I'll drink.

SOFIA (*raises her glass*): To you, Igor, and to Tanechka! Let it all work out this time around.

IGOR: It's already much more than I expected.

SOFIA: Well-said! To you!

TANYA (*drains her glass and laughs*): It's gone to my head.

SOFIA: That's because you're not used to it. Still, it looks silly that Igor is not drinking and is eating porridge instead.

IGOR: I haven't had porridge in fifty years! Mama made me eat it when I was a kid. She used to say, "Eat the oatmeal, Garik, you'll grow big and strong!" I didn't listen to her, and look – didn't grow all that big. This is my chance to catch up. (*to Tanya*) Could I have some more, please?

SOFIA (*to Igor*): You are a pleasant guest and a grateful eater.

IGOR: I love homemade food! Please feel free to recommend me in this capacity to all your friends.

SOFIA: Tanechka, I like your Igor very much! Very much indeed. And how did you find Tanya? After all these years?

IGOR: It must've been pure luck.

SOFIA: Well-said. Said like a man. You lost all hope, didn't you?

IGOR: I couldn't even imagine it!



SOFIA: I couldn't have imagined either that life would make me such a wonderful present at the end of my days! You just can't know anything. You can't.

IGOR: You are absolutely right! A mere hour ago I would have laughed at anyone who'd have told me that I would be dining on porridge in the company of two... such charming ladies.

SOFIA: What a wonderful toast! Let us raise our glasses! Tanechka, you're drinking for three people today.

*Everyone clinks their glasses. Tanya drinks and starts laughing.*

SOFIA: Our Tanechka is so happy today! It's all because of you, Igor. You haven't seen each other for forty years. Do you find that Tanechka has changed?

IGOR: Only to the better.

*Tanya pours herself another glass and drains it.*

SOFIA: Tanechka, don't get carried away. One must have moderation in joy and in sorrow.

IGOR: Oh, you think Tanya is drinking a lot tonight? You have no idea. I remember how much she could drink forty years ago. She could drink us all under the table!

SOFIA: You allowed yourself to get drunk, Tanechka? Well, it happens to everybody.

TANYA *(to Igor)*: Are you mad?

IGOR: It's all in the past anyway. What's the point of denying it now? *(to Sofia)* Sofia Ivanovna, I will never forget the way Tanya danced on the tables! She was applauded in tons of bars.

SOFIA *(to Tanya)*: You went to bars?

IGOR: She could make men go crazy. I lost my mind with jealousy.

SOFIA: It is so true that mothers are the last ones to learn the truth about their daughters. Now I understand why you didn't marry Tanya back then. But now she is completely different.

IGOR: Oh, I don't know... I'm not so sure.

TANYA: Igor has changed too: he's gotten braver! And tonight, Mama, he has plucked up his courage and proposed to me.

SOFIA: Tanechka, are you getting married? To Igor? That's wonderful!

TANYA: I must think about it first, Mama.

SOFIA: Think? Whatever about?

IGOR: You shouldn't, Sofia Ivanovna, pressure Tanya. I can wait.

TANYA: Thank you, Igor! We have had a wonderful night. I know you have other places to be. Let's let Igor go, Mama.

IGOR: Don't let me go! I don't have anywhere else to go anyway. Not anymore. I haven't had the cottage cheese yet! I am flooded with forty-year-old memories.

TANYA: I'm sorry, Igor. Mama needs to rest.

SOFIA: Only thanks to Igor, I feel at peace for the first time in years!

TANYA: We mustn't be so selfish, Mama. Thank you, Igor, and I'm sorry if anything was amiss.

SOFIA: What could be amiss? Everything is wonderful. You make a perfect pair. Are you planning to retire soon, Igor?

IGOR: It's not my goal. I prefer to work. What would I do in retirement?

SOFIA: What would you do? That's the best time of your life! You're retired. Tanechka is retired. It is so romantic. Buy a piece of land. Build a little cottage. We have some savings. Tanya will take up gardening. How could you possibly object to your own little cottage in the country?

IGOR: I don't. I already have one.

SOFIA: You have a dacha already? Where?

IGOR: In the Canaries.<sup>4</sup>

SOFIA: The Canaries? And what kind of plot do you have? Is it at least enough to stand and turn around on?

IGOR: Yes, it accommodates both standing and turning.

SOFIA: And the cottage itself? Not too tiny?

IGOR: No, not excessively.

SOFIA: And the woods? A river? Are those close by?

IGOR: Those things are a bit far.

SOFIA: Why did you agree to that location, then? Without the woods? Without a river! Does anything grow there, at least?

IGOR: Certain things do, yes.

SOFIA: And who is taking care of all that?

IGOR: No one. It grows by itself.

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<sup>4</sup> Igor refers to the Canary Islands, a popular vacation spot for many newly wealthy Russians. This is another development in the rising standard of living of which Sofia Ivanovna is completely unaware. She proceeds on the assumption that Igor's *dacha* is located somewhere common, around Moscow.

SOFIA: Men make me laugh. "It grows by itself"! And what are those things, growing there all on their own? Nettles?

IGOR: Oranges, I think. I don't go there very often. I don't have time.

SOFIA: Oranges?! What did you say the place was? The Can... opies? I think I've heard of it before, but I can't remember. What highway do you take?

TANYA: It's in Spain, Mama.

SOFIA: An orchard in Spain? So far. Why? It's so inconvenient. And expensive!

IGOR: Quite the opposite: it's cheaper over there.

SOFIA: Tanya, do you understand any of this?

TANYA: Some. Enough, in any case.

SOFIA: Then explain it to me!

TANYA: I will!

SOFIA: My God, I have fallen so far behind the times! In my day, no one would take a plot in Spain. Perhaps, it's not so bad after all. I think life has become more festive, in a way!

IGOR: Now I have to go for real. I was pleased to meet you. Thank you for a pleasant evening!

SOFIA: No, Igor, I won't let you go just like that. Tanechka, turn me around, please. Are you baptized, Igor?

*Igor is at a loss.*

TANYA: Well, did your Mama have you baptized in church?

IGOR: A long time ago. When I was a kid.

SOFIA: That's good enough. Come to me. Stand here. Tanechka, get the icon from the wall and give it to me.

*Tanya takes an icon off the wall and gives it to Sofia.*

SOFIA: And go stand beside Igor.

TANYA: What did you think of now, Mama?

SOFIA: There's no time for me to lose. I feel I am about to die. Tomorrow. Next week at the latest. Children! God bless you! Live long and in accord! Take care of each other and be happy. I give you my blessing!

TANYA: Mama!

SOFIA: Don't interrupt! These are the most wonderful moments in a woman's life. I remember now how your father and I got our blessing, Tanechka! We were caught... Well, that's not important now. And your father gave me this wedding ring (*shows them her hand*). It won't come off now. I'll be buried with this ring. And then we were married in church.



Put the icon back, Tanechka. What's your opinion of a church wedding, Igor?

IGOR: In general? It's a beautiful ceremony.

SOFIA: Tanechka, promise me that you and Igor will have a church wedding!

TANYA: We mustn't rush these things, Mama.

SOFIA: Tanechka is so proud, Igor. She never chased after men. Never! But she had this one friend, and you know what that friend did?

TANYA: Igor doesn't want to know about my friend, Mama.

IGOR: Quite the opposite! I want to know about everything here.

SOFIA: See, Tanechka, you are wrong. Igor really loves you. And because he does, everything about you fascinates him. So. That friend would pick a suitable man in the street and pretend, right then and there, that she had slipped. She'd grab onto this man and ask him to walk her home, since she, the poor thing, couldn't make it on her own. And this way she got married eight times, and my Tanya never did! *(to Tanya)* You must warn your man what some women are capable of. *(to Igor)* No, not my Tanya! Never. When is the wedding? We'll have a wedding, won't we? It can be small, but we must have it! When?

TANYA: I don't want to rush it.

SOFIA: Rushing is wrong, but it's no good dragging your feet, either. How about in a week's time?

IGOR: We accountants have our annual reports now. I wouldn't want to pile one on top of the other, the annual reports, the wedding...

SOFIA: Of course, it's not right to mix it like that. When's your report due?

IGOR: By March 1. And right after that we have the first quarter, by April 15. And then...

SOFIA: I won't live that long. I have this premonition, Igor, that it is my time. I have a week, perhaps two. But that's it. Of course, I'll do my best.

IGOR: I won't have you changing your plans because of me!

TANYA: Igor!

SOFIA: But if I die, won't you have to postpone the wedding, because of the mourning, at least for a year?

IGOR: Oh no! Who mourns these days? And for a whole year?

TANYA: Igor!

SOFIA: Come back early tomorrow. We'll talk it all over and make our final decision.

TANYA: That won't work. Igor is leaving on a business trip tomorrow.

IGOR: Me? On a business trip?

SOFIA: For how long?

TANYA: Six months.

SOFIA: What about the annual report?

TANYA: He'll write it on the road and send it in.

SOFIA: If it were not for me, Tanechka could have accompanied you, Igor. It's I, it's always I who's the greatest obstacle in her personal life.

TANYA: For me to go with Igor? That's impossible! Do you even know where you're sending me?

SOFIA: Where am I sending you?

TANYA: To the tundra! Permafrost. Riding dog sleighs. Eating fish. Live fish. And wait in a yurt with a whale-oil lamp while Igor is working on his report.

SOFIA: Quit that job, Igor!

IGOR: Someone has to do it.

TANYA: Igor will call me often.

SOFIA: From a yurt?

TANYA: It's the end of the twentieth century, Mama!

SOFIA: You better write! I still have the letters that Tanya's father wrote me. If they had had phones in the trenches, what would I have now?

*The lights come on.*

IGOR: Do they only turn your lights on when people sleep? (*kisses Sofia's hand*) Thank you for the amazing evening, Sofia Ivanovna.

SOFIA: Take care of yourself, for us! (*draws him closer and kisses his cheek*) I've grown to love you like a son.

IGOR: You take care too.

*Igor and Tanya exit to the hallway.*

IGOR (*putting on his coat*): Had I stayed any longer, you would've thought twice of launching me to the next galaxy.

TANYA: Are you completely mad?

IGOR: Don't mention it! Except...

TANYA: Except what?

IGOR: It bothers me a little that I promised to marry you before an icon.

TANYA: Forget about it!

IGOR: I wouldn't want to have any misunderstanding with God. I don't seem to recall that He has much of a sense of humor.

TANYA: And you call that a problem? So what, you gave your word? I hereby solemnly return your word to you.

IGOR: You are an incredibly capricious woman! You haven't even kept your word for half an hour. I begin to get an inkling of why you never got married.

TANYA: Where did you get the idea that we promised something in front of an icon in the first place?

IGOR: You, I should point out, were the only one drinking. I, you would notice, haven't had a sip.

TANYA: Did you even look at the thing? An icon! I took a portrait of Charles Dickens off the wall, and Dickens, by the way, has a great sense of humor. *Igor runs back to the room, looks at the portrait, runs back out into the hallway and stares at Tanya.*

TANYA: So?

IGOR: That friend who got married eight times – she's an angel compared to you.

TANYA: For my part, I wish you all the best with your long-legged hedgehog, blonde kitten, sexy rabbit and the rest of the petting zoo!

IGOR: Thank you. Good bye.

TANYA: Farewell.

IGOR: I'll stop by tomorrow to inquire about your Mother's health.

TANYA: Don't trouble yourself!

IGOR: It's no trouble. I'll be in the neighborhood anyway. Although, I never did get her building number.

TANYA: Get it, then, and stay there with your little mouse.

IGOR: Did I offend you somehow?

TANYA: Oh no, you were fantastic.

IGOR: Did I even manage to remain a gentleman? Your honest opinion, please!

TANYA: Top marks!

IGOR: But I can't be a gentleman only for one night. I'd be better off not having started at all.



TANYA: The kitten will be thrilled with this view of yours.

IGOR: The kitten appreciates my other qualities more.

TANYA: Say hi to the kitten for me.

IGOR: What are you going to do if I don't come back? Will you kill me in a car accident? Push me onto a mugger's knife? Infect me with a sudden lethal disease?

TANYA: I'm not that bloodthirsty. Live on, what do I care! I will remember the story of our... relationship on long winter evenings. And retell it to Mama. You have no idea how imaginative I can be!

IGOR: I do have some idea already. Maybe I'd like to hear those stories too.

TANYA: Don't you remember anything yourself?

IGOR: What am I supposed to remember?

TANYA: You're right. It's difficult to remember something that never happened forty years ago.

IGOR: It can be helped. I am prepared to remember whatever you need me to.

TANYA: I will read your letters to Mama.

IGOR: Letters? Oh, yes. From the tundra. I hope you'll be modest and will skip over the intimate details. I am happy to learn that our accidental acquaintance has such promise.

TANYA: I realize that our lives seem insignificant to you. It is easy to guess what we do every day. You can easily imagine the stores where I make my unremarkable purchases. There's simple cleaning, cooking, laundry. Rare phone calls. Who would call us anyway? A long letter from distant relatives, twice a year. We read aloud. A monotonous, boring life, in which nothing ever happens. An old woman whom no one cares about and her spinster daughter.

IGOR: But you look great! In any light.

TANYA: Thank you. But my Mama and I see ourselves and our life very differently. We love each other very much. And wherever there is love, there's plenty of events, storms, joys and fears. I don't just go shopping, cook, or clean. I do it for my Mama, to prolong her life. And still, one day, I will be alone. What will I do with my love and kindness? With the need to care for someone and worry about them, every waking hour? Who will listen to me with genuine interest and understanding? And who will I listen to? No one in this world will give a thought to me!

IGOR: Revive your old friendships. Socialize!

TANYA: Replace love with a social calendar? Lonesomeness and suffering are more dignified. Mama fears abandoning me. I will deceive her. Let her leave this world with the certainty that I won't be all alone. She dreams of me getting married. Let her keep believing that her dream will come true.

IGOR: Why wouldn't you find someone real, so that you won't be alone?

TANYA: I refused to marry without love in my twenties, and I'm certainly not about to start in my sixties. I'm sorry you wasted your evening on us.

IGOR: Quite the opposite: I had a wonderful time. I'll stop by. I'll make sure of it. It won't be any trouble, I'll be around anyway.

TANYA: Thank you. But that's out of the question.

IGOR: Is that how much I appalled you?

TANYA: I'm afraid you made too strong an impression on me.

IGOR: I'm pleased to hear that.

TANYA: It must be everything together: the candles, the roses, the champagne going to my head... Oh, why should I conceal it? You are very attractive (*laughs*). I'm out of my depth here. I am stirred. I am confused. I am talking too much (*laughs*). Oh, what difference does it make? All this, naturally, won't go any further.

IGOR: I truly enjoyed visiting you. And I liked your Mama. I would like to see her again.

TANYA: No. You shouldn't come here again.

IGOR: Let me write down your phone number. I'll call you some time.

TANYA: That's also too much.

IGOR: But perhaps...

TANYA: Not worth it.

IGOR: I would just like to...

TANYA: Thank you! Goodbye.

IGOR: Goodbye! (*comes back*) It seems stupid to just cut it off like this...

TANYA: Farewell!

IGOR: Are you sure?

TANYA: Absolutely.

IGOR: But it seems to me...

TANYA: Categorically!

IGOR: What if?..

- 112 TANYA: What's wrong with you? It is late! It's time for you to go. And I must go to my Mama. Farewell.
- IGOR: Goodbye! It was nice to meet you.
- TANYA: You too.
- IGOR: And what – I just leave now?
- TANYA: Take care! (*closes the door behind him and returns to the room*).  
Mama? How are you?

*Tanya's conspiracy takes another turn when she recruits a street vendor to pose as her long-lost daughter. Just as Dina, the impostor daughter makes her dramatic appearance, Igor comes back: he is growing fond of Tanya and Sofia. Forced to improvise, Tanya casts Igor in the role of Dina's father, and with such conviction that Igor himself begins to believe he and Tanya had, in fact, met forty years earlier. When the ruse is revealed, Igor storms out, upset about how powerfully the manipulation affected him. On New Year's Eve, however, both Dina and Igor return to the women who had welcomed them into their lives so easily: Dina with presents and news that she is pregnant, and Igor with an engagement ring and a new love for Tanya. And they all live happily ever after.*