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(two renderings for the stage)

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Chekhov's Three Sisters
AND
Woolf's Orlando

TWO RENDERINGS FOR THE STAGE



By Sarah Ruhl

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*For Joyce Piven,
who teaches generations of children
how to change forms*



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When Woolf Saw Chekhov, something of an introduction

On another evening Vita and Virginia went to see *Three Sisters* and then called in on Dotty in her flat in Mount Street, who was lying asleep and "woke up chattering & hysterical. Virginia Woolf Virginia Woolf My God! Virginia Woolf is in the room. For Gods Sake Vita don't turn the lights on . . . We sat and drank."

—VIRGINIA WOOLF, HERMIONE LEE, P. 498

IT IS PERHAPS an unimportant fact that Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West went to see *Three Sisters* together one evening in London. The event could be a completely arbitrary (although tempting) justification for including *Orlando* and *Three Sisters* in one volume together, although truly, I put them in the same volume because I wrote neither one and my betters wrote both and in that sense they seemed to belong together.

Still, imagine: Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West went to see *Three Sisters* together one evening in London. Was the night rainy, was it pitch black? Did they weep at the end of the play, did they sigh, did they rise to their feet? Perhaps Virginia

was too English to weep in public; perhaps the performance did not merit weeping. Perhaps she turned to Vita and merely raised one eyebrow. Perhaps she commented on the slightness of the translation. We will never know. At any rate, after sighing or weeping or neither, Vita and Virginia left the theater and then called on "Doty" who was lying asleep and then became hysterical upon seeing Virginia Woolf. Then the three women, these three women, sat and drank with the lights off.

What did Woolf and Sackville-West make of *Three Sisters*, and why should it matter? And what do Virginia Woolf and Anton Chekhov have in common? For one thing, I think they were much funnier than we ordinarily take them for. They were of the nineteenth century and yet they formally destroyed the nineteenth century. They were both childless and sickly and wrote in many genres. They both died too young. They knew aristocrats but were not themselves born into the aristocracy. They were acute observers of that elusive thing called human nature, and they were not content to write about this or that issue, or this or that person—they wrote about the whole experience, they wrote about being. They constantly redirect the reader to the present moment of experience, rather than relying on the easy clean sweep of an arc.

Walter Pater, one of Woolf's favorite critics, wrote in *The Renaissance*:

Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us—for that moment only . . . Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us . . . is to sleep before evening. With this sense of the splendor of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch.

It is as though Pater's rallying cry is also Woolf's rallying cry—that experience itself, rather than the fruit of experience, is the end. One might imagine *Three Sisters*' resident philosopher Vershinin philosophizing right along with Pater, but coming to a different conclusion. Vershinin believed in progress, and I'm not sure that Woolf did.

Both Woolf and Chekhov land, in the end, on the epiphany that never quite comes. Woolf once said that the only thing she knew about the ending of *Orlando* was that it would end in an ellipsis . . . The manuscript version does end with ". . ." but the published version does not. (Perhaps it is difficult in publication to end in an ellipsis, as publication implies closure and finality.) At any rate, in this adaptation, I attempted to go back to Woolf's original intention and ended with a dot dot dot. I went back to the moment in the novel when Orlando says: "I am *about* to understand . . ." We are never quite sure if our hero/heroine makes it through the threshold to understanding, just as we don't quite know the outcome of Olga's last wish, "To know, to know!"

Virginia Woolf says of Chekhov in *The Common Reader*:

Our first impressions of Chekhov are not of simplicity but of bewilderment. What is the point of it, and why does he make a story out of this? we ask as we read story after story . . . But is it the end, we ask? We have rather the feeling that we have overrun our signals; or it is as if a tune had stopped short without the expected chords to close it. These stories are inconclusive, we say, and proceed to frame a criticism based upon the assumption that stories ought to conclude in a way that we recognize. In so doing, we raise the question of our own fitness as readers. Where the tune is familiar and the end emphatic—lovers united, villains discomfited, intrigues exposed—as it is in most Victorian fiction, we can scarcely go wrong, but where the tune is unfamiliar and the end a note of interrogation or merely the information that they went on talking, as it is in Chekhov, we need a very daring and alert sense of literature to make

us hear the tune, and in particular those last notes which complete the harmony . . . As we read these little stories about nothing at all, the horizon widens; the soul gains an astonishing sense of freedom. In reading Chekhov we find ourselves repeating the word "soul" again and again. It sprinkles his pages . . . perhaps that is why it needs so great an effort on the part of an English reader to read *The Brothers Karamzov* . . . The "soul" is alien to him. It is even antipathetic. It has little sense of humor and no sense of comedy. It is formless.

I too remember struggling with the word "soul" when I translated *Three Sisters*. The word seems to come out of the Russian mouth with less effort; out of an American actor's mouth, the word "soul" dangles. But I used it anyway, to be faithful, and both of the following adaptations are nothing if not faithful. The formless nature of the soul, and the formless nature of consciousness, seem equally important to Woolf and to Chekhov, who both seemed to ask: what aesthetic form might consciousness take? What if plot (like the body in *Orlando*) is a rather insignificant and illusory trapping that can be dispensed with?

In the American theater, we still have our Victorian fictions—the lovers united, villains discomfited and intrigues exposed. But what happens in the theater when the last notes which complete the harmony are somewhat incomplete? And I think it is no accident that Woolf used the metaphor of music when trying to describe Chekhov's form. It is almost as though he was writing linguistic music—the note completes the play rather than a thesis or a duel, in the same way that Woolf's linguistic rhythm made its own kind of meaning, mirroring the speed of the interior, rather than describing living rooms.

My beloved Belgian, Maurice Maeterlinck, another writer unafraid of the soul, wrote in "The Tragical in Daily Life":

There is a tragic element in the life of every day that is far more real, far more penetrating, far more akin to the true self that is in us than the tragedy that lies in great

adventure . . . It goes beyond the determined struggle of man against man, and desire against desire . . . Its province is rather to reveal to us how truly wonderful is the mere act of living, and to throw light upon the existence of the soul . . . Indeed, when I go to a theater, I feel as though I were spending a few hours with my ancestors, who conceived life as something that was primitive, arid and brutal . . . I am shown a deceived husband killing his wife . . . murdered kings, ravished virgins, imprisoned citizens . . . I had hoped to be shown some act of life, traced back to its sources and to its mystery . . . I shall be told, perhaps, that a motionless life would be invisible, that therefore animation must be conferred upon it . . .

Woolf and Chekhov, chasing illumination over and above animation, trying to capture the invisible moments as they fled, I humbly kneel before you. I am sorry to squeeze you together into one volume, to make false comparisons between you, to squeeze you, Ms. Woolf, onto the vulgar smallness of the stage, and to squeeze you, Mr. Chekhov, into the vulgar smallness of the English language. I did what I did with the tools that I have and I hope that you forgive me, and I hope that somewhere you are looking down on all of us and laughing, as you contemplate the illusory nature of endings.

—Sarah Ruhl
New York
December 2012

Three Sisters



By Anton Chekhov
English Version by Sarah Ruhl

BASED ON A LITERAL TRANSLATION BY
Elise Thoron with Narasha Paramonova
and Kristin Johnson-Neshati

For my sister Kate



original. We sat on her stoop while her baby slept and while her twelve-year-old daughter Masha showed us Tae Kwan Do kicks. That Masha asked: what did the other Masha say? Natasha gave me literal translations of the idioms—as when Solyony says: pull my finger, meaning, just as it does in this country, make me fart, which the more polite translations usually cover, making Solyony seem completely opaque. Or when Masha says: Life is a raspberry! I wanted to keep the raspberry, even though it's not readily accessible in English. Working with Natasha, it became clear to me that getting to the root of the original Russian was what I wanted, rather than putting my own authorial stamp on the text. I wanted to get as far away from a "stamp" as possible. I desperately needed a native speaker for things like: a word in act four that could either mean "a metal lid on top of steaming food" or "the kind of hat an entertainer would wear when performing for a czar."

Not speaking Russian and translating Chekhov, is of course, a terrible disadvantage. Luckily I had four very able helpers. Cincinnati Playhouse procured for me a translation to look at, by Kristin Johnsen-Neshati. It is a lovely translation, clear and modern, and was very useful to read in the early stages of my work. Because it is a wonderful translation in its own right, and not literal, I couldn't work directly from it. Still, it was a valuable tool for comparison, as was Stark Young's translation; and his, I think, is one of the closest in English to the literal Russian in terms of content, rhythm and punctuation.

After being in Los Angeles, I happened to be in Chicago, where I'm from, and where I talked at length with a teacher from childhood, Joyce Piven. I had adapted two Chekhov short stories with Joyce, and she's directed and studied Chekhov all her life. We drank tea, and talked about *Three Sisters* in her living room. Joyce studied acting in New York in the sixties with a woman named Mira Rostova, the great Russian acting teacher who taught the likes of Uta Hagen. Rostova divided speech into five melodies, called "the doings." One was the "lament with humor." Chekhov's work is full of laments with humor—the philosophical shrug of the shoulders and sigh that the oppressed people of the world know so well—it is the "ah, well" in the bars in Ireland,

AUTHOR'S NOTES

When Cincinnati Playhouse approached me to translate *Three Sisters* I was both terrified and happy. Terrified, because I don't speak Russian and I love the play; happy, because I don't speak Russian and I love the play. As such, I thought: I will learn from a great master, and I will try to learn Russian, a language I have always wanted to learn. They said: we need it in six months. So I thought: I won't learn Russian. But I will learn from a great master, with some help. As it turns out, quite a lot of help. Let me explain about all of my help.

The night before I first met John Doyle, the director of the project, I was at a fundraiser. My husband and I were seated with New York business moguls who often attend fundraisers. I glanced to my left. Three chairs down was a woman wearing a flowing red silk shirt, and she had very long tapered fingers. The hands of a poet, I thought. She didn't exactly look bored, but she looked intriguing. Who is this woman? I must move chairs, I thought. I moved chairs over dessert. It turns out the woman was a Russian scholar and an extraordinary playwright/director named Elise Thoron. We got to talking about Chekhov and his luminosity, transparency, and sparseness, which is often lost in translation. It was serendipity. After I met with John, I asked if Elise could come on as my Russian language conduit. He, and the theater, happily agreed.

Meanwhile, I went to Los Angeles for a family vacation where my in-laws live. My sister-in-law Natasha who is a native Russian speaker sat down with me and read to me from the

it is the "so, nu?" in Yiddish. It is the acceptance of fate, a beautiful forbearance with a touch of philosophical humor that seems so rare in America at times. It is ancient. Many Americans' first impulse, I fear, when struck with bad luck, is to complain rather than to lament. The lament contains acceptance, a "what can you do but laugh," whereas the complaint implies the measured control of the people who expanded westward: "how dare life do this to me, feel sorry for me, no one should give me a raw deal, I'm an American, I can change my fate." The melody of complaint comes through the nasal passages, "I didn't get what I wanted." The complaint should, I feel, be avoided at all costs in most theater but especially in Chekhov where there is such danger of it becoming the emotional vernacular of the play.

In Rostova and Piven's melodies, the "defy" also looms large. The classic defy is Shakespeare's: "Once more into the breach!" Rostova and Piven's notion is that playwrights' words have natural emotional and melodic rhythms that should be respected, rather than imposing bizarre "line readings" onto the line; for example, turning the natural sweep of "once more into the breach!" into "once more—into the breach?" I think Olga, Irina and Masha are often defying their fate ("To Moscow!") rather than complaining about their fate, and this assumption often dictated my choice in translation. For example, many translate the very last line of the play as: "if only we knew, if only we knew." In the literal Russian there is no pronoun (as there often isn't in the Russian) and it's not necessarily past tense. So I chose to translate the phrase as: "To know, to know!" which is a defy rather than a lament, and is certainly not a complaint. To look for the act of defiance in the sisters rather than the elegy; to find the philosophical lament with humor rather than the complaint. . . . this was my hope in the translation, and also my hope with the actors who ultimately do the production.

I came to this translation with no agenda, no desire to bend Chekhov to my will in any way, but instead, to learn from him. It is, then, a very faithful translation, phrase by phrase, stage direction by stage direction, comma by comma. I tried to cleave to Chekhov's original rhythms as far as I was able to. Sometimes that involved leaving out pronouns in the English where you might

normally see them. For example, in one of Irina's speeches, many translations use "I am crying" rather than, as in the literal Russian, "tears are flowing." "I am crying" implies bodily agency, self-pity, and self-awareness; whereas "tears are flowing" is a sudden *discovery* of a condition. And the discovery is another melody, another vital doing in Rostova and Piven's schema. I think much of the humor of the play comes from the moment to moment discovery of emotional states, though the play is often understood in terms of the lyricism of looking backward. Instead, the sisters are constantly discovering in the moment that they will not go to Moscow. They never know it ahead of time. And they keep forgetting, over and over, only to discover the same reality in the next act.

The emphasis in the Russian is on the noun "tears," or "Moscow," on the event, the discovery, rather than on the subject "I," the self-reflexive emotion. People watching themselves emoting and describing their own emoting with an "I" or a "my" seems more culturally American, and more contemporary. The flipside of the lack of solipsism in the Russian language is the possible abdication of responsibility, emotionally or otherwise, when one omits the "I." In terms of articles absconding . . . when Olga describes her headache, she is often translated as saying "my head, my head" when in the literal Russian her language is more fragmented, without an article, as in "head, head." One can imagine having a terrible headache and omitting articles. Rather than smoothing out or trying to make the language more logical, I tried to respect the breakages, disjunctions, oddness, and fragmentation that I think Chekhov was purposely working toward, as an expression of character, event or life view. His stage directions are almost all intact, particularly the odder ones, such as when Andrei "almost threatens the audience with his fists," so that productions can freely depart from the original, but they'll know what the original was.

I occasionally included words in the original Russian, to give the actors the flavor of the words inside their mouths, which I think would make their faces move more, and make their inner lives more suitable for Chekhov; and also because I think English is a terrible jackhammer for terms of endearment. Why say "dear

Masha" when you could say "Milya Masha." Why say "my little dove" when you could say "gahupchik moi." Poor English. Poor sad impoverished English with our lack of "ushas" and "itas" to endear ourselves, to play with, the names of our beloveds. Oh, and one note on my use of line breaks. Chekhov doesn't often use line breaks in his text in the way that I do—it is probably my only departure from the shape of the original. Because it is how I lay out my own plays in English, and how I see the way I hear the actors speak, I thought it would be useful for the actors to hear the rhythms in my head as I translated. But they aren't intended to indicate an overly poeticized approach, or epic pauses. They are more about the rhythm of thinking than anything.

One final note on Russian indifference and the phrase *razno* (it's all the same, it's all equal, what's the difference, who cares), which appears dozens and dozens of times in the text. I feel that the phrase is intensely Russian and almost impossible to translate. I think the best cultural equivalent is perhaps Janis Joplin on "Ball and Chain" when she croons, "it's all the same fucking day, man." *Who cares* is too casual, *what's the difference* is too caustic and oddly engaged in its disengagement, and *it's all the same* seemed about right in terms of a mathematical equivalence, but I am quite sure it sounds different on the streets of Moscow. I was tempted to leave it in the original Russian but didn't want the audience to be entirely left out of Chekhov's struggle with the indifferent stance, which was philosophical, literary, and of the street, all at once. I tried my best. Or, to be more in keeping with the defy and present-tense of the three sisters, "I try!"

Huge thanks to Elise Thoron; there is not a more intelligent, graceful person of the theater, and I loved every minute of sitting in her apartment, drinking tea with jam, and hearing her speak the original cadences of the play. She went through every single word with me, and I am so grateful. Also many thanks to my sister-in-law Natasha Paramonova, who, when she is not helping me with *Three Sisters* is a brilliant nurse on a cardiac care unit and was almost a nuclear physicist; to her husband Marcus and my husband Tony for feeding the children while Natasha and I talked about the particular light in Moscow in the spring. Thanks also to Kristin Johnsen-Neshati, for letting me look at her manu-

script early on in the process. I was also indebted to Stark Young for his faithfulness to the literal, Curt Columbus for sending me his translation, and Laurence Senelick for his careful scholarship. I would also like to thank all the actors who took the time to read the first two acts of the translation with me around a table; their insights were invaluable and cleared a path for me: Michael Cervis, Felix Solis, Bray Poor, Ron and Lynn Cohen, Keith Reddin, Yusef Bulos, Gian-Murray Gianino, Thomas Jay Ryan, Marin Ireland, Kate Arrington, Maria Dizzia, Polly Noonan, Kathleen Tolan, Manoel Felciano. Thanks to Kate Pines and Stefan Rowny for listening. And thanks to John Steber and New Dramatists for providing space and support for the occasion.

The year after my father died, when I was on the strange boundary between childhood and adulthood, I lived in a house with my sister, in a province, you might say, of Chicago, longing to move to New York. I don't mean to say that I can fully understand what it was to live in provincial Russia; all I know is, at the time, I dreamed of birch trees. I don't pretend to be anything in this manuscript but Chekhov's student, and Chekhov's ridiculously English-speaking student. I am sorry, Anton, for any havoc I have wreaked, and I thank you for your plays, your life, for, without intending to, giving me the gift of sitting in my apartment, while it snowed, trying to translate the line: Look: it's snowing. What is the meaning of snow?

Sarah Ruhl
New York
July 2009

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Three Sisters received its world premiere at Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park (Edward Stern, Producing Artistic Director; Buzz Ward, Executive Director) in Cincinnati, Ohio, on October 24, 2009. It was directed by John Doyle; the set design was by Scott Pask, the costume design was by Ann Hould-Ward, the lighting design was by Jane Cox, the sound design and original music were by Dan Moses Schreier; the dramaturg was Elise Thoron and the stage manager was Suann Pollock. The cast was:

OLGA Alma Cuervo
 MASHA Laila Robins
 IRINA Hannah Cabell
 ANDREI Alexander Gemignani
 NATASHA Sarah Agnew
 KULYGIN Keith Reddin
 VERSHININ Corey Stoll
 SOLYONY Felix Solis
 CHEBUTYKIN Terry Greiss
 TUZENBACH Frank Wood
 ANFISA Lynn Cohen
 FEDOTIK Tim Abrahamson
 RODÉ Joe Watts, Jr.
 FERAPONT Ronald Cohen
 MAID Kelly Pekar

Three Sisters opened at Piven Theatre Workshop (Byrne and Joyce Piven, Co-Founders; Joyce Piven, Artistic Director Emeritus) in Evanston, Illinois, on October 18, 2010. It was directed by Joyce Piven; the set design was by Aaron Menninga, the costume design was by Bill Morey, the lighting design was by Andrew Iverson, the sound design and original music were by Collin Warren; the dramaturg was Stephen Fedo and the production stage manager was Wendy Woodward. The cast was:

OLGA Joanne Underwood
 MASHA Saren Nofs-Snyder
 IRINA Ravi Batista
 ANDREI Dave Belden
 NATASHA Amanda Hartley
 KULYGIN Brent T. Barnes
 VERSHININ Daniel Smith
 SOLYONY Jay Reed
 CHEBUTYKIN John Fenner Mays
 TUZENBACH Andy Hager
 ANFISA Kathleen Ruhl
 FEDOTIK Marcus Davis
 RODÉ Jacob Murphy
 FERAPONT Kevin D' Ambrosio

Three Sisters opened at Berkeley Repertory Theatre (Tony Taccone, Artistic Director; Susan Medak, Managing Director) in Berkeley, California, in co-production with Yale Repertory Theatre, on April 8, 2011. It was directed by Les Waters; the set design was by Annie Smart, the costume design was by Ilona Somogyi, the lighting design was by Alexander V. Nichols, the sound design was by David Budries; the dramaturg was Rachel Steinberg and the stage manager was Michael Suenkel. The cast was:

OLGA Wendy Rich Stetson
 MASHA Natalia Payne
 IRINA Heather Wood
 ANDREI Alex Moggridge

NATASHA
KULYGIN
VERSHININ
SOLYONY
CHEBUTYKIN
TUZENBACH
ANFISA
FEDOTIK
RODÉ
FERAPONT

Emily Kitchens
Keith Reddin
Bruce McKenzie
Sam Breslin Wright
James Carpenter
Thomas Jay Ryan
Barbara Oliver
David Abrams
Cobe Gordon
Richard Farrell

CHARACTERS

The co-production opened at Yale Repertory Theatre (James Bundy, Artistic Director; Victoria Nolan, Managing Director) in New Haven, Connecticut, on September 16, 2011. All personnel were the same, with the following exceptions: the stage manager was James Mountcastle; Fedotik was played by Brian Wiles and Rodé was played by Josiah Bania.

The Prozorov Sisters:

OLGA
MASHA
IRINA

ANDREI (their brother)
NATASHA (his wife)

KULYGIN (Masha's husband)
VERSHININ (a colonel)
SOLYONY (a staff captain)
CHEBUTYKIN (an army doctor)
TUZENBACH (a baron and lieutenant)
ANFISA (a nurse, eighty years old)
FEDOTIK (second lieutenant)
RODÉ (second lieutenant)
FERAPONT (an old watchman)

Act I



The Protorovs' home.

A large room, with a living area and a dining area.

Midday.

Full of light.

A table is being set for lunch.

Olga, wearing a blue teacher's uniform, correcting student exams.

Masha, wearing black, her hat in her lap, reading a book.

Irina, in a white dress, stands, thinking.

OLGA

Father died a year ago today, on your birthday, Irina, May fifth.

It was so cold, it snowed.

I thought I'd never live through it, and you fainted, as though you were the dead one.

But now it's been a year, and we can remember with some—
lightness.

You're wearing white again, and your face is shining.

The clock strikes twelve.

→ SARAH RUHL ←

OLGA

The clock struck then too, on that day—it sounded like this. I remember, when they carried Father away, the music playing. And guns firing, at the cemetery. He was a commander, of a whole troop—still, not many people came. Well, it was raining—freezing rain mixed in with snow.

IRINA

Why remember!

Tuzenbach, Chebutykin, and Solyony appear in the dining area.

OLGA

Today is warm, we can leave the windows wide open. The birch trees are almost blooming. I remember so clearly, eleven years ago, Father was an officer, and we left Moscow, in early May, same as today. Moscow in early May!—blooming, warm, golden. Eleven years ago—but yesterday. My God! I woke up this morning, saw masses of light flooding in, and my God, the spring! I felt this great happiness in my soul, and I wanted to go home.

CHEBUTYKIN

To hell with you both!

TUZENBACH

Fine, fine, it's silliness.

Masha whistles a tune.

OLGA

Stop whistling, Masha. It's bad luck.

Every day I teach, every night I tutor. My head aches, always, and my thoughts are an old lady's.

→ THREE SISTERS ←

Four years serving that school and I feel my youth and strength draining out of me.

The only thing that gets stronger is a dream—

IRINA

To go to Moscow! Sell the house, be done with everything, and go—

OLGA

Yes! Fast as we can, to Moscow.

Chebutykin and Tuzenbach laugh.

IRINA

Andrei will most likely be a professor, he won't stay in this town. But poor Masha . . . stuck here . . .

OLGA

Masha can visit every summer.

Masha whistles.

IRINA

I hope so. (*She looks out the window*)

It's so beautiful out!

I don't know why I feel so happy!

This morning I thought: it's my birthday!

And suddenly I felt so happy, and I could feel my childhood, when Mama was alive.

And I thought happier and happier thoughts, coming at me like waves, oh what thoughts!

OLGA

Today all of you is shining, you're prettier than ever.

Masha looks pretty too.

Andrei would be nice-looking; only he's gotten so fat, doesn't look good on him.

And I got old, bony—it's because of the girls at school,

I get so angry.

But today I'm free, I'm home! My head doesn't hurt, and I feel younger than I did yesterday. Maybe everything is for the best, God's will and all that, but I do think if I'd gotten married and sat home all day, it would have been nicer.

I would have loved my husband.

TUZENBACH

(*To Solyony*) You say such stupid things, I won't listen.

Tuzenbach enters.

TUZENBACH

I forgot to tell you; today, you will have a visit from our new commanding officer. Colonel Vershimin.

Tuzenbach sits down at the piano.

OLGA

Really? That's nice.

IRINA

Is he old?

TUZENBACH

Not so much. Forty, forty-five at the outer limit.

He plays the piano.

TUZENBACH

Seems like a good man. And not stupid. Without a doubt. But he does talk. A lot.

IRINA

Is he interesting?

TUZENBACH

Mm—Sure. But he has a wife, and a mother-in-law to go with her, and two little girls. On top of that, it's his *second* wife. He

goes around saying: I have a wife and two girls. He'll tell you too. But his wife is sad and half-crazy, wears her hair in long braids like a child, talks in overblown language about "philosophy," and frequently tries to kill herself. She likes to add salt to his already existing wounds, I suppose. I would have left a woman like that years ago, but he's a stoic—he stays and complains.

SOLYONY

(*Crossing from dining room to living room with Chebulykin*) I can only lift fifty pounds with one arm, but I can lift two hundred pounds with two arms. What do I conclude? That two men are twice as strong as one, or three times even, or more . . .

CHEBUTYKIN

(*Reads a newspaper while walking*) A remedy for hair loss: mix two ounces of naphthalene in a bottle of alcohol. Dissolve and use daily. I'll make a note of that in my little book! (*Makes a note in his book. Then, to Solyony*) Here's what you do. Take a cork, stick it in a bottle, get a glass pipe, put it through the cork. Then take a pinch of baking soda—

IRINA

Ivan Romanych, my dear Ivan Romanych!

CHEBUTYKIN

What is it, my girl, my joy?

IRINA

Tell me why I'm so happy today!

I'm a ship with sails, full sails, and the sky over me blue and wide, and full of birds!

Big white birds!

Why do you think that is?

Why?

CHEBUTYKIN

(*Kissing her hands*) My white bird.

IRINA

I woke up this morning, got up and washed my face, and everything in the world seemed suddenly clear to me, and I knew how to live.

I knew everything!

Sweet Ivan Romanych!

People have to work, to *labor*!
Work by the sweat of our brows.

No matter who we are. This is our one purpose, joy, ecstasy!

The thrill of getting up in the morning and drilling a hole in the street! Or feeding sheep, or teaching children, or, or—making a train go!

My God! Why be a person? I'd rather be an ox—or a simple horse—and *do* something!—
Anything but a young lady, who wakes at noon, drinks her coffee in bed, and takes two hours to button a dress.

Disgusting!

I want to work the way I want an ice cold drink in the summertime. And if I don't manage to wake up at dawn every day and work, work!—then promise me you'll desert me forever, Ivan Romanych.

CHEBUTYKIN

(*Tenderly*) I promise to desert you forever.

OLGA

Father had us up at seven. Now Irina opens her eyes at seven but she lies in bed until nine, thinking, thinking. With such a serious look on her face. (*Laughs*)

IRINA

You look at me like a little girl, so you think it's strange if my face looks serious, but I'm all grown up!

TUZENBACH

Work, God, yes. I never worked a day in my life. I was born in Petersburg, where it's cold and people are lazy. And my family never knew hardship. I remember when I got home from school, our servant would take off my boots while I threw a tantrum. But

my mother just looked at me adoringly, surprised if the servants looked less than adoring as I kicked them. My parents kept me from hard work, always.

But now times have changed, there's a hurricane on the horizon, gathering speed and force, and soon it will be here! A great and terrible wind will clean out our lazy, sick indifference, and anyone who has ever expressed boredom will be washed clean out. I myself will work, and in twenty-five or thirty years we will all work! Everyone.

CHEBUTYKIN

Not me.

TUZENBACH

You don't count.

SOLYONY

You won't be alive in twenty-five years, thank God. In a few years you'll have a heart attack and drop dead, my friend; or else I'll lose my temper, and put a bullet through your head.

Solyony rubs perfume on his hands and chest.

Chebutykin laughs.

CHEBUTYKIN

I've never done a thing. After I left school, I didn't lift a finger, never got to the end of a book. I read the newspaper.

Takes out another newspaper.

CHEBUTYKIN

And I read in the paper about some famous writer, so now I know his name, and the fact that he's famous, but what he says, I have no idea.

A knock, people banging from below.

CHEBUTYKIN

Ah! It's for me, a visitor, I'll be right there . . .

He exits.

IRINA

He's got something up his sleeve.

TUZENBACH

Indeed, he looked rather triumphant. He must have a large present for you.

IRINA

Oh, how unpleasant!

OLGA

Oh, yes, it's awful. He can be such a little boy.

MASHA

By the bending sea, a green oak tree,
Where a golden chain is bound—

OLGA

You're not happy, Masha.

Masha, whistling, puts on a hat.

OLGA

Where are you going?

MASHA

Home.

IRINA

That's strange.

TUZENBACH

You'd leave a birthday!

MASHA

Oh, it's all the same day. I'll come back tonight. Bye, darling. (*Kisses Irina*) I wish you health and happiness. Back when Father was alive, thirty or forty officers would come to our parties, and it was wonderfully loud. But today we have approximately one and a half men and it's about as loud as the desert. I'm leaving. A touch of melancholy, as they say. I'm no fun right now; don't listen to me.

Laughing through tears.

We can have a good talk later, but good-bye for now, darling, I'm off. I'll go—somewhere.

IRINA

(*Vexed*) You're really something.

OLGA

(*Through tears*) I understand you, Masha.

SOLYONY

When a man talks philosophy you get sophistry but when a woman talks philosophy, or God forbid two, you might as well pull my finger. (*He makes a faring sound and laughs*)

MASHA

What's that supposed to mean, you horrible man?

SOLYONY

Oh, nothing.

A man cannot breathe in any case

When a brown bear comes and sits on his face.

And that—is how life is.

MASHA

(*To Olga*) Oh, stop blubbering!

Enter Anfisa and Ferapont, with a birthday cake.

ANFISA

Come in, come in, old man, your feet are clean—A cake! From Protopopov at the council office.

IRINA
Thanks. Tell him I said thanks.

FERAPONT
What?

(*Shouting*) Thank him!

IRINA

OLGA
Nanny, get Ferapont some cake.

(*To Ferapont*) Ferapont, go, get yourself some cake.

FERAPONT

What?

ANFISA
Come with me, Grandpa, let's go.

MASHA

I don't like Protopop—Popov—whatever his name is, you shouldn't have invited him.

IRINA

I didn't.

MASHA

Good.

Chebutykin comes in carrying a huge silver tea service. Murmurs of surprise and displeasure.

OLGA

(*Her face in her hands*) A samovar! My, God! That's for a husband to give a wife! How awful.

She exits.

The below three lines, simultaneously:

IRINA TUZENBACH MASHA
(*To Chebutykin*) Ivan Told you so. Ivan Romanich, you
Romanich, why? should be ashamed
of yourself.

CHEBUTYKIN

My dears, my darlings, you're all I've got, I love you more than anything in the world. I'm an old man, a husk of a man, aware of my own insignificance. . . . The best thing about me is my love for you, and if it weren't for you three, I'd have given up the ghost long ago. (*To Irina*) Darling, I've known you since the day you were born. . . . I held you in my arms. . . . I loved your mother, may she rest in peace. . . .

IRINA

But why such expensive presents!

CHEBUTYKIN

Expensive presents! That's ridiculous. . . . (*To a soldier*) Put the samovar over there. (*Mimicking her*) Expensive presents. . . .

Anfisa enters.

ANFISA

My dears, a strange colonel, at the door. A stranger, never seen him before. Already took his overcoat off, my angels, he's on his way in. (*To Irina*) Iri, be nice. Our lunch is already getting cold. Lord have mercy!

TUZENBACH

Must be Vershinin.

Ener Vershinin.

TUZENBACH

Lieutenant Colonel Vershinin!

VERSHININ

I have the honor of presenting myself.
Vershinin.

He salutes, military style.

VERSHININ

I'm so happy to finally be in your home.
(*To Irina and Masha*) Ay, look at you! What you've become!

IRINA

Sit anywhere. We're so glad you've come.

VERSHININ

Happy I'm here, happy I'm here! But you are three sisters. I remember—three girls. I don't remember your faces, but I remember that your father, Colonel Prozorov, had three little girls. I saw you with my own eyes. Ah, ah! (*Some American equivalent of Ay, ay, ach, oy, etc.*) How time flies. How time flies . . .

TUZENBACH

He's from Moscow.

IRINA

Moscow! You're from Moscow!

VERSHININ

Yes. Your father was a commander in Moscow, and I was an officer under his command. (*To Masha*) Now, your face I believe I remember.

MASHA

But I you? No.

IRINA

Olya, Olya! (*Calling with childlike excitement to the dining room*)
Olya! Come quick.

Olga enters.

IRINA

Colonel Vershinin—from Moscow!

VERSHININ

You must be Olga, the oldest. And you're Masha, and you're Irina, the baby—

OLGA

You're from Moscow?

VERSHININ

Yes. I studied in Moscow and joined the army there, served for a long time, and finally got my own command—here—in this town. Funny, I don't really remember you, but I remember that there were three sisters.

Your father remains perfectly stamped in my memory. If I close my eyes I can still see him under my eyelids. I used to go to your house in Moscow—

OLGA

I thought I remembered everyone, but—now—

VERSHININ

My full name is: Aleksandr Ignatyevich.

IRINA

Alexander Ignatyevich, from Moscow! What a surprise!

OLGA

We're moving back, in fact.

IRINA

Perhaps by September. It's our city!
(*Endow "our city" with the meaning—our native land, motherland, that which pulls you*)
We were born there . . . On Old Basmanny Street . . .

Olga and Irina laugh with joy.

MASHA

(*Deadpan, as though to say: my sisters think of Moscow as a country*) Oh, a fellow countryman.

(*Suddenly very alive*) Oh, now I remember! I do! Olya—do you remember—they used to tell stories about the “Lovesick Major?” You were a low-ranking soldier then, but you were in love, so they teased you and called you: “The lovesick major.”

VERSHININ

Yes, that’s it! “The lovesick major,” that was me.

MASHA

You only had little whiskers then . . . Oh, you’re older now! (*Through tears*) You’re old!

VERSHININ

Yes, they used to call me the lovesick major, because I was young and I was in love. Now—times have changed.

OLGA

But you don’t have a single gray hair. You’re older but you’re not old.

VERSHININ

And yet, I’m forty-three. When did you come from Moscow?

IRINA

Eleven years ago. Masha, what’s wrong? Don’t cry, silly, you’ll make me cry. (*Almost in tears*)

MASHA

I—nothing.
What street did you live on?

VERSHININ

Old Basmanny!

OLGA

Same as us!

VERSHININ

And then I lived on Nemesky Street. I’d walk on Nemesky Street down to the barracks—remember that sad old bridge down there? Water rushing under your feet—what a sound! Alone on that bridge, the sound could make your soul go all cold.

Pause.

But this river—here—is such a joyful, big river! Wide, and strong!

OLGA

Yes, but cold. Cold with mosquitoes.

VERSHININ

Oh, come on now, it’s good weather here—fresh, bracing, healthy—Slavici A forest, a river, and—birch trees. Birches, as humble as they are beautiful. Of all trees, I love them best. It’s a good life here. But strange, no train station for eighteen miles. And no one knows why.

SOLYONY

I know why.

They all stare at him.

SOLYONY

Because if the station were near, then it wouldn’t be far, and if it were far, it wouldn’t be near.

An odd silence.

TUZENBACH

Ha ha ha, Vassily Vassilich.

→ SARAH RUHL ←

OLGA

(*To Vershinin*) Now I remember you. I remember.

VERSHININ

I knew your mother.

CHEBUTYKIN

A good woman, God bless her soul.

IRINA

Mama is buried in Moscow.

OLGA

In Novodevichy cemetery.

MASHA

Imagine, I'm already beginning to forget her face.

One day no one will remember us either. We'll be forgotten too.

VERSHININ

True. We'll be forgotten. That's life, there's no getting around it. Our projects, our obsessions—serious, big, important—a time will come when they won't be important anymore.

Pause.

And you can't guess what will be considered vast and important, and what will be considered small and ridiculous. When Columbus and Copernicus first appeared, people thought they were laughable, while some backwards drivel written by an idiot was the Gospel truth!

And it may be that our lives, so familiar and dear to us, will in time seem strange, stupid, disgusting, or even depraved.

TUZENBACH

Who knows? They might call us stewards of knowledge, a high point of civilization. We don't have torture, capital punishment, invasions—but still . . . all the suffering . . .

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→ THREE SISTERS ←

SOLYONY

(*Makes high-pitched chicken sounds for feeding chickens*) Cheep cheep cheep . . .

You don't need chicken seed for the Baron, he can dine upon philosophy.

TUZENBACH

Will you leave me alone for God's sake? Your jokes are getting boring.

SOLYONY

(*Higher voice*) Cheep cheep cheep!

TUZENBACH

But in spite of all the suffering, there are other cultural improvements, moral progress—

VERSHININ

Yes, yes, of course.

CHEBUTYKIN

You said, Baron, they'll call our lives a high point, but people are basically low. (*Stands up*) Look how short I am, for instance. Keep calling me elevated, I like it.

A violin is heard offstage.

MASHA

That's Andrei playing, our brother.

IRINA

He's the scholar of the family. He was born to be a professor. Father was a military man, but he gave birth to an academic.

MASHA

That's what Papa wanted for him.

OLGA

I'm afraid we teased him today. He's in love.

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IRINA

With a local girl. She might come to lunch.

MASHA

Oh, and her clothes! They're not ugly or unfashionable, they're just sad. A strange loud yellowish skirt with a pathetic fringe—topped off with a red jacket. And her pink cheeks, scrubbed, scrubbed, scrubbed until they're like apples! Andrei can't be in love, I won't allow it. He's got some taste, he's just teasing us. I heard she's marrying Protopopov, chairman of the county council, which would be perfect. Andrei, come here! Just for a minute, dear!

The violin stops. Enter Andrei.

OLGA

This is my brother, Andrei.

VERSHININ

Vershinin.

ANDREI

Nice to meet you. (*Wipes his face*) You're the new battery commander?

OLGA

He's from Moscow!

ANDREI

Oh? Well, congratulations, now my sisters won't leave you alone.

VERSHININ

I think I've already bored your sisters.

IRINA

Look at this picture frame Andrei gave me today for my birthday! He made it himself.

Pulling it out.

VERSHININ

(*Looking at frame and not knowing what to say*) Oh—yes—what a thing—

IRINA

And this one on the piano, he made that too.

Andrei waves his hand and moves away.

OLGA

Andrei's our little scholar; he plays the violin and can carve so many many objects out of wood. He's practically a Renaissance man. Andrei, don't go! He's always wandering off. Come back!

They lead him back, laughing.

MASHA

Come on, come on!

ANDREI

Leave me alone—

MASHA

You're being silly! Vershinin used to be called the lovesick major, and he didn't get upset.

VERSHININ

Not in the least!

MASHA

I'll call you—the lovesick violinist!

IRINA

Or the lovesick professor!

OLGA

Andrei's in love! Andryusha's in love!

IRINA

Bravo, bravo! Andryusha's in love!

CHEBUTYKIN

(*Approaching Andrei from behind, taking him by the waist with both arms and singing*) For love, sweet love alone, did Nature put us on this earth to roam . . . (*Laughing*)

ANDREI

Enough, enough already. I didn't sleep at all last night, and I'm not myself today. (*Wiping his face*) I stayed up reading until four, then I went to bed, but nothing happened. I thought of this and that, and suddenly the sun is climbing into my bedroom, so early. This summer, while I'm here, I want to translate this wonderful English novel—

VERSHININ

You read English?

ANDREI

Yes. Father, may he rest in peace, oppressed us with education. He really cracked the whip. I know it sounds funny, but after he died, I started to put on the pounds. It was like my body was suddenly freeing itself of my father and his discipline. Thanks to my father, we all know French, German, English, and Irina knows *Italiano*. But at what cost!

MASHA

It's a silly affectation to know three languages in a town like this one. No—not even an affectation—it's an extra appendage. Like having a sixth finger. We know too much.

VERSHININ

(*Laughing*) Oh, you know too much! How can that be, I can't believe any town could be so backward that it has no place for intelligent, educated people. Imagine that out of one hundred thousand people in this town—I agree, it's a little forlorn—and lacks culture—okay—but let's say there are only three people like

you three sisters. Of course, you can't transform the masses—you will instead dissolve *into* them—you will be silenced, by life, life itself will hush you up, but you won't dissolve without an imprint. After your death there will be six more like you, then twelve, and so on, and so on, until people like you—enlightened people—will become the majority! In two or three hundred years, life on earth will be beyond beautiful, beyond imagination, sublime—man *needs* that life, and if it doesn't yet exist, he must sense it coming—wait for it—prepare for it by dreaming of it! And that is why we must perceive more deeply than our parents perceived, see more fully than our grandparents saw.

(*Laughing*) And you complain that you know too much!

MASHA

I'll stay for lunch.

She takes off her hat.

IRINA

(*Sighing*) You should write that all down . . .

Andrei exits.

No one notices.

TUZENBACH

You say that life on earth will be beautiful, sublime. Could be. But to experience even a fraction of that beauty, even now, from far off, we need to lay the groundwork, we need to work—

VERSHININ

Yes. (*Rises*) Look at all these flowers! (*Looks around*)

What a beautiful place you all live in! I'm jealous. I've lived my life in tiny apartments with two chairs, a couch, and heaters that sputter. I think what I've been missing all my life—are exactly these flowers.

(*Throws his hands up*) Ah, well. What can you do.

TUZENBACH

Yes. We need to work. You might think: there's the German, getting sentimental. But, look, I'm Russian. I don't even speak German. My father was Russian Orthodox . . .

Pause.

VERSHININ

(*Pacing*) I often think: what if we could begin life over again, consciously? The life we'd lived before would be a smudgy rough draft, and the new life would be clean—the book itself! Then we wouldn't repeat our old mistakes, we'd at least invent for ourselves a new setting: a room full of flowers and masses of light! I have a wife and two little girls, and my wife is not a—well lady, and so on. But if I started my life over again from the very beginning—I wouldn't be married. No, no.

Enter Kulygin, wearing a high school teacher's uniform.

KULYGIN

(*To Irina*) My dear sister-in-law, allow me to congratulate you on the day of your birthday and to wish you sincerely from my heart, health and everything else a girl your age might wish, within the bounds of reason and propriety. Here is a token, from me to you, a history of our local high school, written by yours truly. It's a little nothing, a trifle, I wrote it long ago, when I had nothing better to do, but all the same, read it. Good afternoon, everyone! (*To Vershinin*) The name's Kulygin, teacher at the local high school, civil servant of the seventh class. (*To Irina*) You can find every single graduate of our high school in this little book, every name for the past fifty years. *Feci quod potui, faciant meliora potentes.* (*Kisses Masha*)

IRINA

You gave me this book last Easter.

KULYGIN

(*Laughing*) No! Did I? All right then, give it back! Or let's give it to the colonel. Here, Colonel. Read it when you're overcome with boredom.

VERSHININ

(*Bowing*) Thank you. (*Leaving*) I'm overjoyed that I met all of you.

OLGA

You're leaving? No, don't!

IRINA

Stay for lunch. Please do.

OLGA

We insist.

VERSHININ

I seem to have barged in on a birthday party. I'm so sorry, I had no idea! I would have said happy birthday . . .

He exits with Olga.

KULYGIN

Today, ladies and gentleman, is Sunday. The day of rest. And so let us rest, each according to his age and capacity. The rugs need to be rolled up for the summer, hiding until winter—in mothballs . . . The Romans were a robust people—they knew how to work hard and how to rest—mens sana in corpore sano. Their lives moved in regular orbit, pattern and form. Our headmaster says the most important thing in life is form—when things lose their form, they lose their nature. And the same is true of everyday life. (*Puts his arm around Masha, laughing*)

Masha loves me. My wife loves me. And the curtains should go with the rugs. Today I'm happy, in fine fiddle. Masha, we're expected at the headmaster's at four o'clock. They've arranged a little hike for faculty, and for faculty wives.

MASHA

I'm not going.

KULYGIN

(*Grief-stricken*) Masha my Masha-mine, why not?

→ SARAH RUHL ←

MASHA

(*Angry*) We'll talk later.

Fine, I'll go, but please—leave me alone . . . (*She exits*)

KULYGIN

So we'll spend the evening with the headmaster. In spite of his weak constitution, he does his best to be social. A shining example to us all. A magnificent, magnanimous man! Yesterday, after the faculty meeting, he says to me, "I'm tired, Fyodor, exhausted."

(*Looks at clock*) Your clock is seven minutes fast.

"Yes," he says, "I'm exhausted."

A violin offstage.

OLGA

(*Entering*) Ladies and gentlemen, come and eat! We have pie!

KULYGIN

Ach, dear Olga, my dear, yesterday I worked from dawn until eleven o'clock and I was so tired, but today I'm happy. (*Goes to the table*) . . . My dear.

CHEBUTYKIN

(*Combing out his beard*) Pie! Magnificent!

MASHA

(*Sternly to Chebutykin*) But not a drop of liquor for you, hear me? It's bad for you.

CHEBUTYKIN

Oh, blah blah blah. That's over and done with. I haven't been blotto in two years. And who gives a damn if I am!

MASHA

I do, so don't drink, don't dare, period. (*So her husband can't hear*) Goddamnit, another boring night at the headmaster's.

→ THREE SISTERS ←

TUZENBACH

If I were you, I wouldn't go. Simple as that.

CHEBUTYKIN

Don't go, my darling . . .

MASHA

Don't go my darling, easy for you to say . . . what a miserable goddamn life.

CHEBUTYKIN

Now, now . . .

Everyone but Irina and Tuzenbach goes to the dining room.

SOLYONY

(*Crossing to the dining room*) Cheep cheep cheep.

TUZENBACH

That's enough, Vasily Vasilych. That will do.

SOLYONY

Here, chickee, chickee—

KULYGIN

(*Cheerfully*) To your health, Colonel! I'm a teacher by profession, but here I'm sort of my own man. And Masha's husband. She's a good one, you know, she's a good woman.

VERSHININ

I'll have some vodka. (*Drinks*) Cheers! To your health! (*To Olga*) I feel as if I've come home.

Irina and Tuzenbach in the living room.

IRINA

Masha isn't herself today. She married at eighteen, when she thought her husband the most intelligent man. Not now. He's the most good, but not the most intelligent.

→ SARAH RUHL ←

OLGA

Andrei! Come on, finally!

ANDREI

(*Entering*) Now!

In a private corner of the living room.

TUZENBACH

What are you thinking?

IRINA

It's just . . . I don't like that friend of yours, Solyony. He scares me. Everything that comes out of his mouth is nonsense.

TUZENBACH

He's a strange duck. I feel bad for him and he grates on me, but mostly I feel bad for him. I think he's probably shy. When it's only me and him, he can be very smart and even sweet, but in a group, he's rude, a bully.

Don't go yet, let them unfold their napkins. Let me be around you. What are you thinking?

Pause.

You're young . . . Think how many years we have ahead of us! A long long carpet of days, unfolding, full of my love for you . . .

IRINA

Oh, don't talk to me about love.

TUZENBACH

(*Not listening*)

I want to live Irina, I have this hunger for struggle, for labor, and this hunger merges in my soul with my love for you, Irina . . . as if by design: you are so beautiful, and for that reason, life seems to me just as beautiful. What are you thinking?

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→ THREE SISTERS ←

IRINA

You say: life is beautiful.
But what if it only seems that way.
For us, three sisters, life has not been beautiful—it chokes us, like weeds.
Oh, tears— (*She starts crying*)
are not necessary—

Quickly wipes her face and smiles.

IRINA

Work. We need to work.
That's why we're unhappy—we stare at life from the outside in, through a dark pane of glass, thinking it awful, because we don't know how to work.
We were born to parents who despised labor.

Natasha enters, wearing a pink dress with a green belt.

NATASHA

Oh, they're eating already . . . oh, dear, I'm late. (*She primps in the mirror*) The hair is not so bad . . . (*Seeing Irina*) My dear Irina Sergeyevna, happy birthday! (*Kisses her on both cheeks strong and long, three times*) So many guests! I feel quite shy. Hello, Baron!

OLGA

(*Entering living room*) Ah, Natalya Ivanovna has arrived. Hello, my dear girl.

They kiss.

NATASHA

It's such a big fancy party, I had no idea, I'm terribly shy.

OLGA

Don't be silly, we're all old friends. (*Under her breath*) You're wearing a green belt! My dear, that's not good!

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→ SARAH RUHL ←

NATASHA

Why? Is it bad luck?

OLGA

No, it just doesn't suit your dress. It's somehow strange.

NATASHA

(*Quivering voice*)

Do you think so? It's not really green-green though, it's more of a greeny-beige . . .

She follows them into the dining room.

KULYGIN

I hope you find yourself a good husband, Irina. Your clock is ticking.

CHEBUTYKIN

Natalya, I hope you catch a husband too.

KULYGIN

Natalya already has a fiancé.

MASHA

(*Striking her fork against her plate*) Another glass of wine for me! What the hell, life is a raspberry—one little bite and it's gone!

KULYGIN

You get a C minus for behavior.

VERSHININ

This vodka is delicious. What's in it?

SOLYONY

Cockroaches.

IRINA

Oh! Why do you have to be so disgusting?

→ THREE SISTERS ←

OLGA

For dinner, we'll be roasting a bird and having pie. I'm home all day, thank God, and this evening, so I hope all of you can join us again for dinner.

VERSHININ

Will you allow me the honor of coming?

IRINA

Of course.

NATASHA

They don't stand on ceremony here.

CHEBUTYKIN

(*Singing*) For love, sweet love alone, did Nature put us on this earth to roam . . . (*He laughs*)

ANDREI

Oh, stop it! Aren't you sick of yourselves?

Fedotik and Rodé enter with a big basket of flowers.

FEDOTIK

They're already eating lunch.

RODÉ

(*Loudly and affected*) Dining? Yes they're dining!

FEDOTIK

Hold still! (*Takes a photograph*)

One more! Wait a minute!

(*Takes another. They are all frozen, for a long moment*)

Now you can all move again.

RODÉ

(*Loud*) Happy birthday! I wish you everything, everything! It's beautiful out today, shockingly beautiful. I walked all morning with my students. I teach gym at the high school . . .

FEDOTIK

You can move, Irina, you can move now.
(*Taking picture, looking at her*) You are interesting today.
(*Takes a top out of his pocket*) Look what I brought, it makes this crazy sound.

IRINA

It's delightful!

MASHA

By the bending sea, a green oak tree,
Where a golden chain is bound—
And on that chain a cultured cat
spins round and round and round—

Why am I saying this? This phrase stuck in me since early morning . . .

KULYGIN

There are now thirteen of us!

RODÉ

(*Loudly*) Ladies and gentlemen, you're not superstitious, are you?
Laughter.

KULYGIN

When thirteen people sit down to eat, it means two of them are in love. Is it you, Ivan Romanovich? God help us!

Laughter.

CHEBUTYKIN

I'm an old sinner, but why is Natalya Ivanovna blushing? I can't imagine . . .

More laughter. Natasha runs to the living room, Andrei follows.

ANDREI

It's all right, don't listen to them! Wait. Wait a minute, please . . .

NATASHA

I'm so embarrassed. I don't know what's happening inside me—they always laugh at me. I know it's terrible manners to leave the table like that, but I can't, I can't . . .

Covers face with hands.

ANDREI

My darling, please, don't take it to heart. Trust me, they're joking, they mean well. My darling, they're sincere, good people, they love me, and you.

He draws her to an unseen window.

NATASHA

I'm just not used to high society.

ANDREI

Oh, youth! Beautiful, perfect youth!
Darling, my love, don't worry! Believe me, believe me, it feels so pure, so good, so alive! I'm happy, my soul is giddy with love! With ecstasy! What is it, what, made me fall in love with you, and why? I have no idea! My dear good, my pure darling, be my wife. I love you, love, like no one! Never!

They kiss.

Two officers enter, shocked to see them kissing.

Act II



*Same setting. Eight o'clock. No lights.
The sound of an accordion, from far off.
Natasha enters with a candle and stops in front of Andrei's room.*

NATASHA

What are you doing, Andryusha—reading? Oh, it's nothing . . .
(Goes to another door, opens it, looks in) No lamps lit—

ANDREI

(Entering with a book in his hand) Natasha? What is it?

NATASHA

Just wanted to make sure no lamps are burning. During the holidays, the help forgets absolutely everything. You have to watch them like a hawk or the house will simply fall to pieces. Last night at twelve o'clock I saw a candle burning in the living room! I still don't know who left it burning. *(Puts candle down)* What time is it?

ANDREI

After eight.

NATASHA

And Olga and Irina still working. Always working, poor things. Olga's at some teacher's meeting, Irina's at the telegraph office. (*Sighs*) This morning I said to your sister, I said, "You really must save your strength, Irina, my dove." But she didn't listen. Eight-fifteen, you said? I'm worried our little Bobik is sick. Why is he so cold? Yesterday he was so hot, now he's so cold, I'm worried sick.

ANDREI

He's fine, Natasha, he's healthy.

NATASHA

Maybe. But I think I'll start him on a new diet. I'm afraid! And the carolers are descending on us tonight—it's better if they don't come, Andrusha.

ANDREI

I don't know. They were invited.

NATASHA

This morning the baby woke up and looked at me, and he smiled this beautiful smile. And I knew that he recognized me! "Bobik!" I said, "Bobilicious! Hello, my little boy." And he laughed! Babies are so smart, they understand absolutely everything. So—Andrusha—I'll tell the servants *not* to let the carolers in tonight.

ANDREI

(*Unsure*) But it's up to my sisters. They're in charge.

NATASHA

Of course, they're in charge, too. I'll tell them what I decided. They're so sweet. (*Leaving*) I've ordered yogurt for dinner. The doctor says you need to eat yogurt, and only yogurt, or you won't lose any weight. (*Stops*) Bobik's cold, I'm afraid he's cold in that room. He *must* be cold. We should move him to another room, at least until it's warmer. Irina's room, for instance, would be perfect for a baby! It's dry and gets sun all day. I'll tell her she can

share a room with Olga. She won't care, she's hardly home. She only sleeps here.

Pause.

Sweetie, sweetie-pie. Why are you so quiet?

ANDREI

Just lost in thought. What is there to say?

NATASHA

True enough. Now there was something else I wanted to tell you. Oh, right, Ferapont is here from the council. He wants to talk to you.

ANDREI

(*Yawning*) Send him in.

Natasha exits.

Andrei reads his book, leaning in toward the candle Natasha forgot. Ferapont enters, wearing an old coat and a scarf around his ears.

ANDREI

Hello, old friend. What can you tell me?

FERAPONT

The Chairman sent you a book and some papers. Here.

Gives him the books and papers.

ANDREI

Thanks. Good. But why didn't you come earlier? It's almost nine o'clock.

FERAPONT

What?

ANDREI

(*Loud*) I said, why so late? It's almost nine!

FERAPONT

True enough, sir. It was still light out when I came to find you, but they wouldn't let me in. "The master's busy," they said. Okay, if you're busy, you're busy, I thought. I'm in no hurry. (*Thinks Andrei said something*) What?

ANDREI

Nothing. (*Looks through the book*) Tomorrow's Friday, there are no meetings, but I'll stop in anyway. Keep busy. It's boring at home.

Pause.

Oh, my friend, life is so strangely changing, so deceptive! Today I was bored so I picked up this book—my old notes from university—and I thought, how absurd! My God, I'm a clerk for the county council, lorded over by Protopopov. I'm a clerk, the most I could hope for is to become a full member of a provincial county council. Mel!—on the county council—me, the same man who dreams every night he's a professor at Moscow University, a public intellectual, the pride of Russia!

FERAPONT

Dunno . . . my hearing's bad . . .

ANDREI

If you could hear, I probably wouldn't talk to you. I need to talk to someone. My wife doesn't understand me; my sisters I'm afraid of, I don't know why. I'm afraid they'll poke fun at me, humiliate me.

I don't drink, I don't like bars, but how happy I'd be in Moscow right this minute, sitting on a stool at Testev's, or the Grand Moscow.

FERAPONT

Speaking of Moscow, a guy at the office was telling a story the other day. Some guys in Moscow, businessmen, were eating blintzes. One of them ate forty blintzes—dropped dead. Maybe it was forty, maybe fifty. Can't remember.

ANDREI

In Moscow you can be sitting in a huge restaurant full of people. You don't know anyone and no one knows you, but you don't feel like a stranger. Here, in this town, you know everyone, and everyone knows you, but you feel like a foreigner. A stranger. Strange, and alone.

FERAPONT

What?

Pause.

FERAPONT

Oh, and this same guy was saying—now he could have been making this up—there's this rope, he says, stretches all the way across Moscow.

ANDREI

What for?

FERAPONT

Dunno. That's what the guy said.

ANDREI

He made it up. (*Reading his book*)
Have you ever been to Moscow?

FERAPONT

Nope. Not in God's plan.

Pause.

Mind if I go?

ANDREI

Yes, go then. Good night.

Ferapont exits, Andrei's nose is still in his book.

ANDREI

Good night. You can pick up these papers tomorrow morning. Go ahead, now.

Pause.

He's gone.

A doorbell rings.

ANDREI

Oh, well.

He stretches and goes to his room.

Offstage the nurse sings a lullaby to the baby.

Masha and Vershinin enter the living room, talking.

As they talk, a maid lights the lamps.

MASHA

I don't know.

I don't know. Of course, you can get used to anything. It took us a while after Father died to get used to not having all of his officers around the house. It may be different in other towns, but here, the most well-mannered, cultured, attractive people are in the military!

VERSHININ

I'm suddenly thirsty. I'd love some tea.

MASHA

(Looking at the clock) It'll be ready soon. They married me off when I was eighteen. I was afraid of my husband because he was a teacher and I was barely out of school. I thought he was the most wise, cultured, important man I'd ever met. Not anymore. Oh well.

VERSHININ

Well . . . yes.

MASHA

And the rest of the people in this town—and I don't mean my husband, I'm used to him—they're so rude, they have no manners, no culture. I get so upset when people are snupid, rude, unthinking—I actually suffer when I see someone with no manners, with no gentleness. When I'm forced to spend time with my husband's colleagues, I suffer.

VERSHININ

Yes . . . but it seems to me, the military and civilians are equally uninteresting. At least in this town, it's all the same. Listen to any soldier or intellectual around here—he's sick of his wife, he's sick of his house, he's sick of his horse. Russians are supposed to be lofty thinkers—right? Our heads are in the clouds—but our feet are in the mud. In life, why do we reach so low? Why?

MASHA

Why?

VERSHININ

Why are we sick of our children, sick of our wives? Why are they sick and tired of us?

MASHA

You're not yourself today.

VERSHININ

Could be. I forgot to eat lunch. I haven't eaten since morning. And my daughter's under the weather. My conscience eats away at me when my daughters are sick—it kills me, what they've got for a mother. You should have seen her today, she's almost not a person. We started fighting at seven this morning, and I slammed the door at nine. And left.

Pause.

I never talk about this. It's strange, you're the only one I complain to . . .

He kisses her hand.

Don't be angry with me. Without you, I have no one, no one . . .

Pause.

MASHA

What a strange sound in the chimney. Before my father died, the chimney made a whooshing noise, just like that.

VERSHININ

Are you superstitious?

MASHA

Yes.

VERSHININ

Funny. (*Kisses her hand*) You are a wondrous, magnificent woman. Magnificent-wondrous! It's dark but I can see your eyes, how they shine.

MASHA

(*Moving to another chair*) There's more light here.

VERSHININ

I love, love, love . . . love your eyes, and I dream of how you move . . . Magnificent, wondrous woman.

MASHA

(*Laughing quietly*) When you talk that way, I laugh, even though I'm afraid.

Don't speak, I beg you . . . (*Under her breath*)

Oh, keep talking. What the hell . . . (*Covers her face with her hands*) Someone's coming, change the subject.

Irina and Tuzenbach enter.

TUZENBACH

I have three last names. They call me: Baron Tuzenbach-Krone-Altschauer. But I'm really Russian Orthodox, like you. I've retained only my German stubbornness and my patience. I will wear you out with patience. I walk you home every night.

IRINA

I'm so tired!

TUZENBACH

And I'll continue to walk you home every night from that telegraph office, for the next ten to twenty years, unless you shoo me away. (*Happy to see Masha and Vershinin*) Oh it's you! Hello!

IRINA

Oh, God, I'm finally home. (*To Masha*) Today a woman needed to telegraph her brother that her son died. And she can't for the life of her remember his address. So she sends it without an address, just writes down a name, and a town. She was crying. I was rude to her for no reason. I said: "I don't have time for this." It just came out. Oh, how stupid! Are the carolers coming tonight?

MASHA

Yes.

IRINA

(*Sitting down*) I have to rest. I'm tired.

TUZENBACH

When you come home from work, you look like a sad child . . .

IRINA

I'm tired. I hate the telegraph office, I really do.

MASHA

You look thinner . . . (*Whistles*) . . . younger—your face is starting to look like a boy's.

→ SARAH RUHL ←

TUZENBACH

Because of her hairstyle.

IRINA

I have to find another job. This one doesn't suit me, not at all. The things I wanted, the things I dreamed of—are not at the telegraph office. It's labor, without poetry, without meaning.

A knock from the floor below.

IRINA

The doctor's knocking. (*To Tuzenbach*) Would you knock back, dear? I can't . . . too tired . . .

Tuzenbach knocks on the floor.

IRINA

He's coming now. We need to do something. Last night the doctor and Andrei were out at the club gambling again. They say Andrei lost two hundred roubles.

MASHA

(*Indifferently*) What can we do now . . .

IRINA

He lost in December, then he lost again two weeks ago. If he'd just go ahead and lose everything, maybe we could leave this town. Oh, God! I dream of Moscow every night. I'm like a crazy person. (*Laughs*) We move in June, so—January, February, March, April, May—that's almost half a year!

MASHA

We can't let Natasha find out about all the money he's lost.

IRINA

I can't imagine that she cares.

Chebudykin enters, combing his beard, just up from a nap. He sits at the dining room table and takes out a newspaper.

→ THREE SISTERS ←

MASHA

Here he is. Has he paid rent?

IRINA

No, not for the last eight months, he's clearly forgotten.

MASHA

(*Laughing*) Look at him sitting like that!

Everybody laughs. Pause.

IRINA

(*To Vershinin*) Why are you so quiet?

VERSHININ

I don't know. I'd like some tea. Half my life for a cup of tea! I forgot to eat this morning . . .

CHEBUTYKIN

Irina Sergeevna!

IRINA

What is it?

CHEBUTYKIN

Come here. Venez ici.

Irina goes to him.

CHEBUTYKIN

I'm lost without you.

She lays out a card game.

VERSHININ

Well, if the tea isn't coming, we might as well philosophize.

TUZENBACH

Let's. About what?

VERSHININ

About what. We could dream a little . . . For instance, life as it will be lived after we're gone, in two or three hundred years.

TUZENBACH

Well, after we're gone, people will most likely fly in balloons, wear a different cut of coat and discover a sixth sense.

But life will essentially be just the same.

It's difficult, and happy, and full of mystery.

A thousand years from now, people will still be sighing, just as we do: Oh, life is hard!

All the same, they will fear death. And try to avoid dying. Just as we do now.

VERSHININ

(*After a moment's thought*) How can I say this? I think everything in the world changes, little moment by little moment, while we're watching life go by, it's changing, imperceptibly. In two or three hundred years—or a thousand—a new life, a happy life, will begin, and we won't be part of it, but it's what we live for, now. We're working—we're *suffering*—for it, without realizing it, we're *building* it. And that's the purpose of our being here at all; you might say: that alone is *our happiness*.

Masha laughs.

TUZENBACH

What's funny?

MASHA

I don't know. I started laughing this morning and now I can't stop laughing.

VERSHININ

I went to the same school as you did but I didn't make it to college. I read a lot—never learned how to choose the right books, maybe I haven't read the right books, but the more I live, the

more I want to know. My hair is turning gray—any minute now I'll be an old man—and still I know so little, so very little. But the one important, real thing I *do* know (and I know it well) I only wish I could prove it to you:

Happiness isn't ours to have, nor should it be.

All we can do is work, and work, and work,

and if any happiness comes of it, we'll leave it for those who come long after us.

Not for me, but for my own ones, and for theirs, who come after.

Fedorik and Rodé play the guitar.

TUZENBACH

According to you, we shouldn't even dream of happiness! But what if I'm happy?

VERSHININ

No.

TUZENBACH

(*Throwing up his hands and laughing*) Obviously we don't see eye to eye. How can I convince you? (*Masha laughs. He wags a finger at her*) Okay, laugh! (*To Vershinin*) Two or three hundred years, it's immaterial. Even in a million years, life will be exactly the same. Life is unchanging, remains constant, follows its own laws—laws that aren't any of our business, that we'll never understand.

Birds who migrate—cranes—they fly on and on—no matter what thoughts, big or small, wander into their heads. They fly, not knowing why or where.

Even if one or two birds become a philosopher, still they fly. It doesn't matter what a couple of them philosophizes, as long as they all keep flying together.

MASHA

But there must be meaning.

TUZENBACH

Meaning . . . Look: it's snowing. What is the meaning of snow?

Pause.

MASHA

I think a person has to believe in something, or search out some kind of faith; otherwise life is empty, nothing. How can you live not knowing why the cranes fly, why children are born, why there are stars in the sky . . . Either you know why you live, or it's all small, unnecessary bits.

Pause.

VERSHININ

Too bad we can't stay young.

MASHA

Gogol wrote: Ladies and gentleman, life is boring!

TUZENBACH

And I say, ladies and gentlemen, you're impossible to argue with! You're completely—

CHEBUTYKIN

(*Reading the newspaper*) Balzac was married in Berdichev.

Irina sings or hums quietly.

CHEBUTYKIN

I must write that down in my little book. Balzac was married in Berdichev.

Reads newspaper.

IRINA

(*Laying out a game of cards*)
Balzac was married in Berdichev.

TUZENBACH

The die is cast. Maria Sergeevna, I'm resigning from the military.

MASHA

I heard. Too bad. I hate civilians.

TUZENBACH

Ah, who cares. (*Gets up*) I'm ugly—so what kind of military figure can I cut? Oh, who cares. But I'm going to start working. For once I want to work so hard that when I come home at night, dead tired, I can pour myself into bed and fall right to sleep. Real laborers must sleep soundly.

FEDOTIK

(*To Irina*) I bought you some colored pencils and a little knife on Moscow Street.

IRINA

You're used to treating me like a little girl, but I'm all grown up! (*Takes the pencils and knife happily*) Oh, they're adorable!

FEDOTIK

And I bought a little knife for myself. See—one, two, three blades. One for digging in your ears, one a little scissors, and this for nail cleaning.

RODÉ

(*Loudly*) Doctor, how old are you?

CHEBUTYKIN

Me? Thirty-two.

Laughter.

FEDOTIK

Now I'll show you another kind of patience. The card game.

A samovar is brought in by Anfisa. Natasha arrives and bustles around the table. Solyony arrives and sits at the table.

→ SARAH RUHL ←

VERSHININ

God, the wind!

MASHA

Yes. I'm sick and tired of winter. I've already forgotten what summer is like.

IRINA

Look, I've won at patience! See the cards? That means we'll go to Moscow.

FEDOTIK

No, you haven't. See, the eight is on the two of spades. (*Laughs*) That means you won't go to Moscow!

CHEBUTYKIN

(*Reading the newspaper*) An outbreak of smallpox in Tsitsikar.

ANFISA

(*Approaching Masha*) Masha, Matushka, tea's ready. (*To Vershinin*) Tea is served, Your Excellency. Forgive me, dear, I've forgotten your name.

MASHA

Bring it here, Nanny. I don't want to go in there.

IRINA

Nanny!

ANFISA

Coming!

NATASHA

Babies who are still breastfeeding understand absolutely *everything*. "Hello, Bobik," I said. "Hello sweetheart!" And he gives me this look—this incredible look . . . of course, you think, she goes on like this because she's his mother. But no, no, I promise you! He really is a remarkable child.

→ THREE SISTERS ←

SOLYONY

If that child were mine, I would fry him up in a frying pan and eat him.

Takes his glass and sits in a corner.

NATASHA

(*Covering her face*) What a rude, badly brought-up man!

MASHA

Happy people don't notice if it's summer or winter. If I were in Moscow, I wouldn't care about the weather.

VERSHININ

The other day I was reading this diary of some French politician, he was convicted of fraud, and wrote it in prison. He talks with such rapture, such delight, about the birds he saw through his prison window. When he was a politician, he never noticed the birds! But, of course, after he's out of jail, he *stops* noticing the birds! If you lived in Moscow, you would cease to *see* Moscow once you actually lived there. See: we can never *have* happiness itself. We can only wish for it, long for it.

TUZENBACH

(*Taking a box from the table*) Where's the candy?

IRINA

Solyony ate it.

TUZENBACH

All of it?

ANFISA

(*Serving tea*) A letter came for you, sir.

VERSHININ

For me? (*Takes the letter*) From my daughter. (*Reads*) Yes, of course. Excuse me, Masha. (*To Masha*) I'll just slip out. I won't have tea. (*Getting up*) It's always the same old story.

→ THREE SISTERS ←

CHEBUTYKIN

(*Laughing*) Don't touch her, don't touch her!

MASHA

You're sixty years old, but you act like a goddamned child.

NATASHA

(*Sighing*) Masha, dear, why do you use language like that? You have a lovely face, and nice features, and I'm sure you could be charming in society, to be frank, if it weren't for your swearing. (*Pronouncing badly*) *Je vous prie, pardonnez moi, Marie, mais vous avez des manières un peu grossières.*

TUZENBACH

(*Holding back laughter*) Pass me . . . pass me—I hope there's cognac there.

The sound of a baby crying.

NATASHA

Il paraît que mon Bobik déjà ne dort pas, he woke up! Oh, dear, he's a little fussy today, I hope he's all right. I'll go check on him. Excuse me.

She exits.

IRINA

But where has the colonel gone?

MASHA

Home. Something's wrong with his wife.

TUZENBACH

(*To Solyony, holding cognac*)

You're always sitting alone, thinking—thinking God knows what. Look, let's have a truce. Let's have some cognac.

They drink.

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→ SARAH RUHL ←

MASHA

What happened? A secret?

VERSHININ

(*In a low voice*) My wife poisoned herself again. I must go. I'll slip out, no one will notice. Horribly unpleasant, all of this. (*Ver-shinin kisses Masha's hand*) My good, sweet kind woman . . . I'll go quietly.

Exits.

ANFISA

Where's he going? I just served the tea! Lord have mercy.

MASHA

(*Angrily*) Oh, stop it. You're always nosing into our affairs! (*Takes her teacup to the table*) I've had it up to here with you, old woman!

ANFISA

Why are you so offended, dear?

ANDREI

(*Offstage*) Anfisa!

ANFISA

"Anfisa!" He just sits there.

She exits.

MASHA

(*At the table in the dining room, angry*) Well, I'll just sit here! (*Scatters cards*) Enough with the cards! Drink your tea.

IRINA

You're being mean, Masha.

MASHA

Well, if I'm mean, don't talk to me. Don't touch me!

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TUZENBACH

I'll play the piano all night. I might play a load of garbage. But what the hell!

SOLYONY

What truce? We weren't fighting.

TUZENBACH

You always give me the feeling there's something off between us. You're a strange man, you have to admit.

SOLYONY

(Declaring) I am strange, but who is not? "Be not angry, Aleko!"

TUZENBACH

Who's Aleko?

Pause.

SOLYONY

When I'm alone with one other person, I feel fine. I'm like anyone else. But in a group, I feel boring and shy, so I enjoy saying utter horseshit. But I'm more honest and noble than most people. And I can prove it.

TUZENBACH

You're always getting on my nerves. And you pick on me in public, constantly, but still, I like you. What the hell. No matter what else happens today, I'm going to get drunk. Let's drink.

SOLYONY

Let's drink.

They drink.

SOLYONY

I never had anything against you, Baron. But I have the soul of a poet who gets killed in a duel. *(Quietly)* In fact, I look like Ler-

montov . . . or so I've been told . . . *(Takes a bottle of cologne and sprinkles it on his hands)*

TUZENBACH

I handed in my resignation. Enough! For five years, I've been dreaming about it, and finally, it's decided: I'm going to work.

SOLYONY

"Be not angry, Aleko! Forget, forget thy dreams . . ."

While they talk, Andrei comes in with his book and sits near a lamp.

TUZENBACH

I will work.

CHEBUTYKIN

(Enters with Irina)

And the food was authentic cuisine from the Caucasus. Onion soup, and for the meat course—chekhmarta.

SOLYONY

Cheremsha isn't meat. It's in the onion family.

CHEBUTYKIN

No, no, no, my angel. Chekhmarta is not an onion, but is, in fact, mutton.

SOLYONY

No, I'm telling you, cheremsha—onion!

CHEBUTYKIN

No, I'm telling you: chekhmarta—mutton!

SOLYONY

No, no I'm telling you, cheremsha—onion!

CHEBUTYKIN

Why am I arguing with you? You've never been to the Caucasus, and never even eaten chekhmarta!

SOLYONY

I never tried it because I can't stand it. Cheremsha stinks like garlic.

ANDREI

That's enough, you two. Please.

TUZENBACH

When are the carolers coming?

IRINA

They promised to come around nine, so any time now.

Tuzenbach hugs Andrei.

Andrei dances and sings.

Chebulykin joins, dancing.

TUZENBACH, ANDREI AND CHEBUTYKIN

(Perhaps singing in the original Russian):

Oh, porch, my porch, new porch of mine . . .

A new porch made of pine

With criss-crossed wood so fine, so fine—

Laughter.

TUZENBACH

(Kissing Andrei) To hell with it! Let's drink, Andrusha. To friendship! I'll go with you. To Moscow, to the university!

SOLYONY

Which one? There are two universities in Moscow.

ANDREI

There's only one university in Moscow.

SOLYONY

I'm telling you there are two.

ANDREI

Make it three! The more the merrier.

SOLYONY

In Moscow there are two universities!

Group expressions of disapproval.

SOLYONY

In Moscow there are two universities, the old and the new. But if you don't want to listen because I annoy you, I'll stop talking. I'll even go to another room. *(Exits)*

TUZENBACH

Bravo, bravo! *(Laughs)*

All right, ladies and gentlemen, let's get started. I'm ready to play. He's a nut, Solyony.

Sits at the piano and plays a waltz. Masha waltzes alone.

MASHA

The Baron is drunk, the Baron is drunk, the Baron is drunk!

Natasha enters.

NATASHA

(To Chebulykin) Ivan Romanych!

She tells him something and exits quietly. Chebulykin taps Tuzenbach on the shoulder and whispers to him.

IRINA

What is it?

CHEBUTYKIN

Time for us to go. Good night, everyone.

TUZENBACH

Good night. Time to go.

IRINA

Wait—what about the carolers?

ANDREI

(*Embarrassed*) There won't be any carolers. See, my dear, Natasha says Bobik isn't feeling well, and . . . the thing is, I don't know . . . and I decidedly do not care.

IRINA

(*Shrugging*) Bobik isn't well.

MASHA

Oh well, life goes on, we won't disappear. If they're kicking us out, we'll go. It isn't Bobik who's sick, it's Natasha . . . right here! (*Taps her forehead with her finger*) She's a piece of work.

Andrei exits.

FEDOTIK

Too bad! I was looking forward to a party, but if the child is sick, of course. I'll bring him a little toy tomorrow . . .

RODÉ

(*Loud*) I purposely took a long nap after lunch today because I thought I'd be dancing all night. And look, it's only nine!

MASHA

Let's go outside. We can talk, figure out something to do.

Voices are heard saying: good night, be well.

The happy laughter of Turenbach.

Everyone exits. Anfisa and the maid clear the table and blow the candles.

The nurse is heard singing.

Andrei and Chebutykin enter quietly.

Andrei is dressed in an overcoat and hat.

CHEBUTYKIN

I never managed to get married because life passed me by in a flash, and because I was crazy about your mother, who was already married.

ANDREI

People shouldn't get married. It's boring.

CHEBUTYKIN

True, but it's not lonely. Philosophize all you want, but solitude is a terrible thing, my friend. On the other hand, who gives a shit.

ANDREI

Let's hurry up.

CHEBUTYKIN

Why the rush? We'll get there in time.

ANDREI

I'm afraid my wife will stop us.

CHEBUTYKIN

Ah!

ANDREI

I won't gamble tonight, I'll just sit and watch. I don't feel well. I have this shortness of breath. What should I do for shortness of breath?

CHEBUTYKIN

Don't ask me! I can't remember, my friend. Don't know.

ANDREI

Let's go through the kitchen.

They exit. The doorbell. Voices and laughter.

IRINA

Who is it?

ANFISA

It's the carolers!

The bell rings.

IRINA

Nanny, tell them no one's home, I hope they forgive us.

Anfisa leaves.

Irina walks around the room, lost in thought. Anxious. Solyony enters.

SOLYONY

No one's here. Where is everyone?

IRINA

Gone home.

SOLYONY

That's strange. You're all alone?

IRINA

Yes.

Pause.

Good night.

SOLYONY

I behaved badly earlier, I was being stupid. But you're not like the others—you're pure, above it all, you can see the truth . . . You're the only one who can understand me, you alone. I love, deeply and endlessly love—

IRINA

Good night. Go away.

SOLYONY

I can't live without you. (*Going after her*) My bliss! (*Through tears*) My soul's happiness! Those eyes of yours, those mysterious, stunning, almost-too-bright eyes! I've never seen another woman with eyes anything like yours . . .

IRINA

(*Coldly*)

Stop it, Vassily Vassilich.

SOLYONY

It's the first time I've spoken to you of love, and I'm not standing on this earth, I'm on another planet. (*Rubs his forehead*) Well, fine. You can't force love. But I won't stand for any rivals. I swear to you by all that's holy, I'll kill the competition. Oh, you beautiful girl!

Natasha approaches with a candle.

NATASHA

(*Peers in through one door and crosses past her husband's door*) There's Andrei. Oh, let him read. Oh, excuse me, Vasily Vassilych, I didn't know you were here, I'm in my nightgown!

SOLYONY

Who cares. Good-bye!

He exits.

NATASHA

You're tired, sweetheart. Poor thing! (*Kisses Irina*) You should get to bed earlier.

IRINA

Is Bobik sleeping?

NATASHA

He is, but not very well. By the way, dear, I wanted to talk to you. But you're never here, and I never have the time. I think it's too cold and damp in Bobik's nursery. But *your* room is just perfect for a baby. Darling, would you be a love and move in with Olga?

IRINA

(*Not understanding*) Where?

→ THREE SISTERS ←

IRINA

Everyone's gone.

KULYGIN

Masha too? Where could she have gone to? And why is Protopov downstairs waiting in a sleigh? Who's he waiting for?

IRINA

Don't interrogate me. I'm tired.

KULYGIN

Well, Little-Miss-Princess.

OLGA

My meeting just finished. I'm worn out. Our headmistress is sick, so I'll have to take her place. Oh, head, my head hurts, my head. . . . (Sits) Yesterday Andrei lost two hundred roubles at cards. The whole town is talking.

KULYGIN

(Sitting) Yes, even I got tired at that meeting.

VERSHININ

My wife wanted to scare me and she came this close to poisoning herself. It's all right now, what a relief, I'm happy. Should we be going? Yes, well, let me wish everyone good night. (To Kulygin) Fyodor Illych, come with me somewhere. I can't go home, I can't. Let's go for a walk.

KULYGIN

I'm tired. I don't want to go anywhere. (Gets up) I'm tired. Did my wife go home?

IRINA

She must have.

KULYGIN

(Kisses Irina's hand) Good night. We can rest tomorrow and the day after that. Good night! (Begins to exit) I want tea. I was plan-

→ SARAH RUHL ←

A sleigh with bells is heard driving up.

NATASHA

You and Olga can share a room, and for now, Bobik can have yours. He's such an angel. Today I said to him, "Bobik-wobik, you're mine, all mine!" And he looked at me with those sweet little eyes.

The doorbell rings.

NATASHA

That's probably Olga. She's so late!

The maid whispers to Natasha.

NATASHA

Protopopov? He's such a riot! Protopopov is outside, and wants me to take a ride with him. In his sleigh. (Laughs) Men are funny!

The doorbell rings.

NATASHA

Someone's here. I'll just go for fifteen minutes, a little spin. (To the maid) Tell him I'm coming.

The doorbell rings.

NATASHA

Who's ringing? It's probably Olga.

She exits. Irina sits, lost in thought. Kulygin and Olga enter with Vershinin following.

KULYGIN

How do you like that! They said there would be a party!

VERSHININ

That's strange. I just left a little while ago, maybe half an hour, and they were waiting for the carolers.

ning to spend the evening in pleasant company and—o fallacem
hominum spem! Accusative case exclamatory . . .

VERSHININ

Which means: I will go alone.

Exits with Kulygin, whistling.

OLGA

Head hurts, head . . . Andrei lost. Whole town talking. I'm going
to bed. (*Begins to exit*) Tomorrow's a holiday. Oh, God, how
lovely that will be! Tomorrow I'm free, the day after I'm free. My
head hurts, oh, head.

She exits.

IRINA

Everyone's gone. No one's left.

An accordion is heard.

The nurse sings.

NATASHA

(*Entering in a fur coat and hat, crossing through the dining room
with the maid following*) Home in half an hour! I'll just take the
littlest ride.

She leaves.

IRINA

(*Alone. The verb form of *toska***) To Moscow, to Moscow, to Moscow!

Curtain.

* "No single word in English renders all the shades of *toska*. At its deepest and
most painful, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific
cause. At less morbid levels it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to
long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness, mental throes, yearning. In particular
cases it may be the desire for somebody of something specific, nostalgia, love-
sickness. At the lowest level it grades into ennui, boredom." —Vladimir Nabokov

Act III



Olga and Irina's bedroom. Their beds are divided with screens.

Two A.M.

Sirens ringing.

No one has gone to bed.

Masha lies on a couch, dressed in black, as usual.

Olga and Anfisa enter.

ANFISA

They're hiding under the stairs, children . . . "Come up now,
come up," I say, "you can't sit there like that." And they cry, say-
ing, "Daddy, we don't know where he is. Please God, don't make
him be all burnt up." Can you imagine! And in the yard, so many
people, half-naked . . .

OLGA

(*Taking a dress out of the closet*) Here, this grayish one, take it.
And this little one here and this apron too—
This old skirt, take it, Nana.

What in the world is happening! My God!

The whole street must have burned to the ground. Oh, take this. And this. (*Throwing dresses into Anfisa's arms*) The poor Vershinins are scared to death, their house is almost charred to pieces. They should spend the night with us. We can't let them go back home. And poor Fedotik—he lost everything in the fire. He's got nothing.

ANFISA

Why don't you call Ferapont, Olyushka. I can't carry all this.

OLGA

(*Ringing for Ferapont*) He won't hear. Someone, come up!

Through the open door a window, red from the fire. Sirens.

OLGA

What a terrible thing! It's too much.

Ferapont enters.

OLGA

Take these downstairs. Under the stairs, the Kolatinin girls, camped out. Give them this. And this.

FERAPONT

Yes, ma'am. Moscow burned in 1812. By God! I bet it took those Frenchies by surprise, willing to burn our own city down instead of letting the Frogs in.

OLGA

Go on, get moving.

FERAPONT

Yes, ma'am.

Exits.

OLGA

Nana, give everything away. We don't need it. Give it all away. Nana, I'm tired, hardly standing on my legs . . . We can't let the Vershinins go home. The little girls can sleep in the living room, Vershinin downstairs with the Baron; Fedotik too—or let him stay with us in the hall . . . The doctor is drunk, of course—can barely stand—we can't let anyone near him. Vershinin's wife—the living room.

ANFISA

Olyushka, dear, don't put me out of the house! Please!

OLGA

Oh, Nanny, what a silly thing to say, no one is putting you out of this house.

ANFISA

(*Puts her head on Olga's chest*) My darling, my little one, you're like my own . . . I labor, I work! But I'm getting weak, and I hear everyone say, "Get rid of her!" But where would I go? Where? I'm over eighty, almost eighty-two . . .

OLGA

Sit, sit. Nanutka. You're tired, poor thing. (*She sits her down*) You just rest, my good one. You're so pale!

Natasha enters.

NATASHA

I hear they want to create a charity to help the fire victims, as soon as possible. Why not? It's *such* a good idea. As a general rule, rich people should help poor people, don't you find? It's the responsibility of the rich. Bobik and little Sofia dropped off to sleep with no fuss, as if nothing in the world could ever be wrong. So many people everywhere! The house is crammed full, I can't move without bumping into someone. And there's a terrible flu going around, I'm worried the children will catch it.

OLGA

(*Not listening to her*) You can't see the fire from here, it's peaceful, this room . . .

NATASHA

Yes. I must look terrible. (*Looking in the mirror*) People say I'm "filling out" in the middle. It's not true! Not a bit! And Masha's asleep, wiped out, poor dear. (*To Anyfisa, cold*) How dare you sit when I'm standing right here? Get up! And get out!

Anyfisa leaves. A pause.

NATASHA

Why you keep that old lady, I can't for the life of me understand—

OLGA

(*Dumbstruck*) Excuse me, I do not understand *you*—

NATASHA

She has no purpose at all here. She's a peasant, she should be put out to pasture . . . why do you coddle her! I like order in the house. Useless people have no place in the home. (*Strokes Olga's cheek*) Oh, poor thing, you're all tired out. Our headmistress is tired. When my little Sofia grows up and goes to school, I'll be afraid of you.

OLGA

I won't be headmistress.

NATASHA

Oh, yes you will, Olya. They've decided already.

OLGA

I'll say no . . . I can't . . . I don't have the strength. (*Drinking water*) You were so rude to Nanny . . . I'm sorry, I can't stand it. I can't even see—black dots in front of my eyes . . .

NATASHA

(*Anxious*) Forgive me, Olya, forgive me . . . I didn't mean to make you mad.

Masha gets up, takes a pillow and leaves, angry.

OLGA

Try to understand, my dear—you might say we were raised strangely, but I will not stand for this. The way you treated her, it makes me sick, chops my soul to bits.

NATASHA

Forgive me, forgive me . . . (*Kisses her*)

OLGA

Even the smallest blunder, a word said without gentleness, it makes my stomach churn.

NATASHA

I say too much. On occasion. But you have to agree with me, my dear: she could go live in the country.

OLGA

She's been with us thirty years.

NATASHA

But she can't work! Either I don't understand you, or you don't want to understand me. She can't *work*. She sleeps, or she sits.

OLGA

So let her sit.

NATASHA

Let her sit? She's a *servant*. (*Through tears*) I don't understand you, Olya. I have a nurse and a wet-nurse; we have a maid, a cook—why do we need that old lady? Why?

A fire alarm rings.

OLGA

This one night and I am ten years older.

NATASHA

Let's come to an understanding, Olya. You live at school, I live at home. You have your teaching, I have a house to run. And when I say something about the servants, well then I know what I'm saying, *I know what I am saying!* . . . And by tomorrow morning, I don't want to see that old bag, that old thief . . . (*Stamping her feet*) . . . that witch! Don't you dare make me mad! Don't you dare! (*Catching herself*) Truly, if you don't move yourself downstairs, we'll be at each other, always. It's terrible.

Kulygin enters.

KULYGIN

Where is Masha? It's high time we went home. The fire, they say, is burning out. (*Stretching*) Only one block burned down—at first, with that wind blowing, it looked as though the whole town would go. (*Sits*) I'm exhausted, Olechka, my dear . . . I often think if it weren't for Masha, I would have married you. You're so good. I'm so tortured. (*Listens for something*)

OLGA

What is it?

KULYGIN

The doctor's on a bender, drinking to get drunk, to spite us. Sounds like he's on his way up—you hear him? Oh, yes, here he comes. Oy, what a one! I'll hide. (*Hides behind a wardrobe in a corner*) The scoundrel!

OLGA

He hasn't had a drop of liquor in two years, suddenly he's completely gone.

Olga and Natasha retreat into a corner of the room.

Chebutykin enters, walking as sober as possible, looks around, walks to the sink and washes his hands.

CHEBUTYKIN

(*Morosely*) Devil, devils . . . They think I'm a doctor, can cure any disease, but I know positively nothing. I've forgotten everything I knew, every goddamn thing.

To hell with it! Last Wednesday I treated a woman—she died—and it's my fault she died. Yes . . . I used to know something—twenty-five years ago, but now I know nothing. Nothing. My head, it's empty, my soul, it's cold. Maybe I'm not even a man but a walking thing who appears to have arms, legs . . . a head; maybe I don't exist at all, I only think I walk and sleep and eat. (*Cries*) Oh, not to exist! (*Stops crying*) The hell with it. At the club, talking, for a couple of days, they talk Shakespeare, Voltaire. I hadn't read it, none of it, I made this face to look like I had. Others did the same. The pettiness! The pretense! The stupidity! And that woman dead on Wednesday, she came back to me, everything came back to me . . . and my soul became crooked, ugly, vile . . . I went, I got drunk.

Irina, Vershinin and Tuzenbach enter. Tuzenbach wears civilian clothes, new and stylish.

IRINA

Here, let's sit. No one will come in here.

VERSHININ

If it weren't for the soldiers, the whole town would have burned down! Our brave boys! (*Rubbing his hands*) Slavs—they are a golden people! Our boys!

KULYGIN

(*Approaching*) What time is it, ladies and gentlemen?

TUZENBACH

After three. It's getting light.

IRINA

Everyone's sitting in the hall, no one's leaving. That Solyony of yours is sitting—(*To Chebutykin*) Doctor, you should go to bed.

→ SARAH RUHL ←

CHEBUTYKIN

It's nothing. Thank you, my queen, your highness, thank you.
(Combs his beard)

KULYGIN

(Laughing) Ivan Romanych, you're officially soused. (Slaps him on the shoulder) I commend you! *In vino veritas*, as the ancients would say.

TUZENBACH

I've been asked to put together a concert, to benefit the victims of the fire.

IRINA

But, who is there to . . . ?

TUZENBACH

We could do it, if we want to do it. Masha, in my opinion, plays the piano like a dream.

KULYGIN

That she does!

IRINA

But she's forgotten how. She hasn't played in three years . . . or four . . .

TUZENBACH

No one in this town understands music—not a soul; but me—I do understand it, and I promise you, I do; Masha plays beautifully, masterfully, almost.

KULYGIN

You're right, Baron. I love her very much, my Masha. She is a laudable woman.

TUZENBACH

Imagine, being able to play like that, knowing that no one, not a soul, understands.

→ THREE SISTERS ←

KULYGIN

(Sighing) Yes . . . But is it really appropriate for her to play in public?

Pause.

Really, gentlemen, I don't know anything. Maybe it would be good? I confess, although our headmaster is a good man, even a very good man, the most intelligent of men, but he has certain views . . . of course, it's not his business. But, all the same if you'd like, I could perhaps speak with him . . .

Chebutykin picks up a porcelain clock and looks at it.

VERSHININ

In the fire I got covered with dirt. I don't look human.

Pause.

Yesterday I heard a rumor that our brigade is being transferred—some say Poland—others say Siberia.

TUZENBACH

I heard that too. What then? The town will be completely empty.

IRINA

And we'll be gone too!

Chebutykin drops the clock, breaking it.

CHEBUTYKIN

To pieces!

A pause, everyone embarrassed and distressed.

KULYGIN

(Picking up the pieces) Breaking such a valuable thing! Ah, Ivan Romanych, Ivan Romanych! You get a minus zero for behavior!

→ SARAH RUHL ←

IRINA

That clock was Mama's.

CHEBUTYKIN

Maybe . . . so it was Mama's . . . Maybe I wasn't breaking it, only seems like I broke it. Maybe it only seems like we exist, but really—there is no we . . .

I don't know anything, no one knows anything. What are you all looking at? Natasha is schrupping Protopopov, and you don't see it. You all just sit there not seeing, but Natasha is schrupping Protopopov. (*Singing*) Eat a fig and tell me how you like it! (*Exits*)

VERSHININ

Yes. (*Laughs*) Well, how strange everything is, essentially.

Pause.

When the fire began, I ran home fast as I could, got there, looked . . . our house was out of danger, but my two little girls were standing at the door in their underwear, no mother in sight, people running, horses running, dogs—and I look at the faces of my little girls—panic, terror, a terrible kind of asking, written on their faces—and my heart froze when I saw those faces. My God, I thought, what more will these girls have to live through, in a long life? I grabbed them, ran, thinking one thought: what more will they have to live through in this world?

The fire alarm sounds.

VERSHININ

I come here, their mother's here, screaming, angry.

Masha enters with a pillow and sits down on the sofa.

VERSHININ

And when I saw my little girls standing on the doorstep in their underwear, the street red with fire, the noise terrible, it reminded

→ THREE SISTERS ←

me of some kind of enemy invasion from long ago, when the army would sack a town, looting and burning as they went. But what a difference between what is and what was! And a little more time will pass, two hundred or three hundred years, and people will look at our current life with horror, with disbelief, and our lives will seem cramped, inconvenient, strange. Oh, what life will be! What a life! (*Laughs*) Forgive me, I'm philosophizing again. But allow me to keep going. I'm dying to philosophize, I'm in the mood.

Pause.

Everyone's asleep.

I say: what a life it will be! You can only imagine . . . Here in this town there are only three people like you now, but in times to come there will be many more, more and more, a time will come when the whole world will tilt in your direction, everyone will live like you, and later, you'll get old, babies will be born who will be better than you! (*Laughs*) I'm in a funny mood today. I want like hell to live . . . (*Singing*) "Everyone must bow to love, cursed or blessed from heaven above, everyone must bow to love—"

MASHA

Trum-tum-tum—

VERSHININ

Tum tum—

MASHA

Tra ra ra?

VERSHININ

Tra ta ta.

He laughs.

Fedotik enters.

He's dancing.

FEDOTIK

Burned down, burned clean away! Everything.
Laughs.

IRINA

What is there to joke about? Everything gone?

FEDOTIK

(*Laughing through tears*) Everything is now nothing! Gone clean away! Nothing left! My guitar burned, my photography burned, all my letters. I wanted to give you a little notebook—it also burned.

Solyony enters.

IRINA

No. Please leave, Vassily Vassilytch. You can't come in.

SOLYONY

Why can the Baron enter, and not me?

VERSHININ

We should all go, really. How's the fire?

SOLYONY

They say it's dying down. No, really, it's very strange to me: why can the Baron enter, and not me?

Solyony sprinkles himself with perfume.

VERSHININ

Tram-tum-tum.

MASHA

Tram-tum.

VERSHININ

(*Laughing to Solyony*) Come on, let's go to the hall.

SOLYONY

Very well, my dear sir. I've taken note. I would further explain this thought, but I fear the chicken would cheep. (*Solyony stares at Tuzenbach*) Cheep cheep cheep.

He exits with Vershinin and Fedotik.

IRINA

Solyony smoked the whole room up! (*Startled*) The Baron's asleep! Baron! Baron!

TUZENBACH

(*Waking*) Sleep, sleepy, oh but the brick factory . . . I'm not talking in my sleep, I'm not . . . In real life, I am going to the brick factory, to start work . . . I spoke with them already . . . You're so pale, so beautiful, so charming . . . your skin lightens the dark air, like a lamp . . . You're sad, you're not satisfied with life. Oh, come away with me, come away, and we'll work together!

MASHA

Nikolay Lvovitch, leave.

TUZENBACH

(*Laughing*) You're here? I didn't see you. (*Kissing Irina's hand*) Good-bye, I'm going . . . I look at you now and I remember the day of your birthday, some time ago, when you were so full of joy, and life, rhapsodizing about labor . . . What a happy life appeared before my eyes then! Where is it? (*Kisses her hand*) You have tears in your eyes. Go to bed . . . it's getting light . . . morning is beginning . . . if only I were allowed to give my life for you!

MASHA

Nikolay Lvovitch, leave! Truly.

TUZENBACH

I'm going . . .

He leaves.

→ THREE SISTERS ←

MASHA

In any case, it's shocking. (*She lies back down*)

KULYGIN

You and I aren't poor. I work, I teach, I tutor. I'm an honest man. A simple man. *Omnia mea mecum porto*, as they say.

MASHA

I don't need a single thing, it's the injustice that makes me want to scream.

Pause.

Go home, Fyodor.

KULYGIN

(*Tries to kiss her*) You're tired. Rest a little, I'll sit out there and wait. Sleep . . .

(*He goes*)

I'm content, I'm content, I'm content.

IRINA

Really, Andrei gets smaller the more he grows up, how dried up he is around that woman! He was going to be a *professor*, and yesterday he was bragging that he had finally become a full member of the county council. He's a member of the county council, Protopov is his boss . . . the whole town is talking, the whole town is laughing, and he alone sees nothing, knows nothing. And now, everyone's run to help fight the fire, and he sits alone in his room, paying no attention. He only plays the violin. Oh, it's horrible, horrible, horrible! (*Crying*) I can't, I can't carry this anymore! . . . I can't, I can't . . .

Olga enters, tidying.

IRINA

(*Sobbing*) Throw me out, throw me, I can't anymore . . .

→ SARAH RUHL ←

MASHA

(*Lying down*) Are you asleep, Fyodor?

KULYGIN

Huh?

MASHA

You should go home.

KULYGIN

Masha, my Masha-mine . . .

IRINA

She's exhausted . . . Let her rest, Fedyia.

KULYGIN

I'll go now . . . My wife is a good woman, a laudable woman . . . I love you, my only one . . .

MASHA

(*Angry*) *Amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amanti.*

KULYGIN

No, it's true, she's really remarkable. I've been married to you for seven years, but it feels like yesterday we took our vows. On my word, it's true, you're a remarkable woman. I'm content, content, content!

MASHA

I'm fed up, up up! (*Sitting up*) I can't get it out of my head. It's shocking. Like a nail sticking in my skull, I can't be silent. I mean Andrei . . . He mortgaged this house to the bank, his wife takes all the money, but this house isn't *his*, it belongs to the four of us! He would know that, if he were a decent human being.

KULYGIN

Nothing to do, Masha, nothing to do. Andryusha's caught in a circle of bad loans . . . his debt is crushing him . . . God help him.

OLGA

What is it, what is it, love?

IRINA

(*Sobbing*) Where? Where has it all gone? Where is it?

Oh, God, my God!

I've forgotten everything, I forgot . . .

my head is foggy—

I don't remember the Italian word for *window*—

or for *ceiling*—

I'm forgetting everything, every day forgetting, and

life leaves us and doesn't come back, never—

never going to Moscow—

I see now that we will not go . . .

OLGA

Milaya, milaya . . .

(*Or: Sweet one, sweet . . .*)

IRINA

Oh, I'm so unhappy. (*Restraining herself*)

I can't work, I won't work.

Enough, enough.

First I was a telegraph clerk, now I work for the city council

and I hate every little thing they make me do.

I'm getting older, it feels like I've been working forever,

my brain's drying up.

I've become thin, stupid and old.

There's nothing nothing—no reward for it—

no fullness—satisfaction—

and as time passes, you move further and further away

from a real and beautiful life, moving and moving

toward some black pit.

I feel desperate, and how it is that I'm alive, how it is I haven't

killed myself by now,

I don't understand.

OLGA

Don't cry, my girl, don't cry. I can't bear it.

IRINA

I'm not crying, not crying . . . Enough . . . See, I'm already not crying. That's enough.

OLGA

Sweetheart, as your sister, and as a friend, if you want my advice, marry the Baron!

Irina cries quietly.

You respect him. You value him. True, he's not the best looking, but he's so *décent*, so clean . . . People don't marry for love, they marry for duty. At least, that's what I think, and I'd get married without being in love. As long as he was decent, who cares, I'd even marry an old man.

IRINA

I've been waiting for us to move to Moscow, where I'd meet my soul mate, my beloved, I've already dreamed of him, I loved . . . But it turns out that was stupid, so stupid.

OLGA

(*Embracing her sister*) I understand. I do. When the Baron left the army and visited us in that civilian jacket, he looked so plain even I started to cry. He asked, "Why are you crying?" What could I tell him! But if God joined the two of you in marriage, I'd be happy. That would be an entirely different thing!

Natasha appears and walks from right to left, holding a candle.

MASHA

She walks around with that candle like she was the one who started the fire.

OLGA

Masha, you're stupid. The stupidest one in our family: excuse me, but it's you.

Pause.

MASHA

I want to make a confession, dear sisters. My soul is so tired. I'll confess to you and to no one else, never . . . I'll tell you this minute. (*Quietly*) It's my secret, but you must know. I can't be silent.

I love, love . . . love that man . . . You just saw him . . . That's that. In a word: I love—Vershinin.

OLGA

(*Goes off behind her screen*)

Stop it. Or go on, either way, I'm not listening.

MASHA

What can be done? (*Takes her head in her hands*) First, he seemed strange to me, then I felt pity for him . . . then I fell in love with him. I fell in love with his voice, his words—his unhappiness . . . And his two girls . . .

OLGA

I can't hear you! Keep saying stupid things, it doesn't matter, I'm not listening.

MASHA

Ay, you're stupid, Olya. I love—it's my fate. Or my one job in this life . . . And he loves me . . . It's terrifying. Yes? But is it wrong?
(*Pulling Irina's hand to her*) Oh, my dear . . . Somehow we will live through our lives . . .

When you read a novel, it seems that everything is clear, trite and understandable. But when you yourself fall in love, you understand that nobody knows anything and everyone must decide for themselves. Sweet sisters, I made my confession, now I'll shut

up . . . I will now be like the crazy man in Gogol—Silence . . . silence . . .

Andrei enters, followed by Ferapont.

ANDREI

(*Angry*) What do you want? I don't understand.

FERAPONT

Andrei Sergeyeitch, I've told you ten times.

ANDREI

First of all, I'm not Andrei Sergeyeitch to you but "Your Excellency"!

FERAPONT

The firemen, My Most Excellency, request permission to go through your garden to get to the river. As it is, they're going round and around in circles, like a punishment.

ANDREI

Fine, tell them it's fine.

Ferapont leaves.

ANDREI

I'm fed up.

Where's Olga?

Olga comes out from behind the screen.

ANDREI

I came to ask you for the key to the cupboard. I lost mine. You have that—tiny little key.

Olga gives him the key without speaking.

Irina goes behind her screen.

A pause.

ANDREI

What a crazy fire! It's starting to die down now. I'll be damned, Ferapont's made me so mad. I said something stupid to him . . . Your Excellency . . . Why are you so quiet, Olyya?

It's time you stopped this stupidity and acting like some aloof princess. You and Masha are here, Irina's here . . . excellent, let's come clean, once and for all. What do you have against me? What?

OLGA

Leave it be, Andrusha. Tomorrow we'll have it out. What a terrible night.

ANDREI

Don't get emotional. I'm asking you now—I am completely cold-blooded: what have you got against me? Give it to me straight.

VERSHININ

(*From offstage*) Tram tam tam!

MASHA

(*Gets up, loudly*) Tra ta ta!

Good-bye, Olyya. God bless you.

(*Goes behind screen, kisses Irina*)

Sleep well, good night.

Good-bye, Andrei. Leave, they're exhausted . . . tomorrow you can have it out.

She exits.

OLGA

Really, Andrei, let's leave it for tomorrow. (*Goes behind screen*) Time to sleep.

ANDREI

I'll say it, and go. Now . . . first, you have something against Natasha, my wife. I've watched you judging her ever since our wedding day. Natasha is a beautiful, honest woman, direct and—

noble in my opinion. My wife, I love and respect my wife, and I demand that others respect her, as I do. I repeat: she's an honest, honorable woman and all of your nitpicking, excuse me for saying so, is sheer capriciousness.

In the second place, you seem annoyed that I'm not a professor, that I don't fill my life with science. But I'm a member of government, of the county council, and I consider my service as holy and lofty as serving science. I'm a full member of the county council, and I'm proud of it, if you want to know . . .

Thirdly . . . one more thing . . . I mortgaged the house without asking your permission . . . and, in that, I'm guilty, I know, and I ask you to forgive me. I was forced to, by these never-ending loans . . . Thirty-five thousand. I'm already not gambling. I gave it up, long ago, but what's more important, what I can say in my own defense, is that you girls receive pensions, while I don't have any . . . salary, so to speak.

KULYGIN

(*At the door*) Masha's not here? (*Worried*) Where is she? That's strange . . .

He leaves.

ANDREI

You're not listening. Natasha is a most—excellent—honest—person.

When I got married, I thought we'd be happy . . . everyone happy . . . but, oh my God! . . . (*Crying*)

My sweet sisters, don't believe me, don't believe . . .

He exits.

KULYGIN

(*At the door, anxiously*) Where is Masha? Masha's not here? How very strange, how strange indeed!

He exits.

The fire alarm sounds, the stage is empty.

IRINA

(Behind the screen) Olya! Who's knocking on the floor?

OLGA

The doctor. He's drunk.

IRINA

There is no peace, this night . . .

Pause.

Olya! *(She looks from behind the screen)*

Did you hear? They're taking the army away from us, sending them somewhere far away.

OLGA

It's only a rumor.

IRINA

We'll be left alone—

Olya!

OLGA

Yes?

IRINA

My dear, sweet Olya, I respect—I very much value—the Baron; he's a beautiful person, I'll marry him, I give my word, only let's go to Moscow! I beg you, let's go! There is nothing better on this green earth than Moscow! Let's go, Olya! Let's go!

Act IV



A garden by the house.

Fir trees. A river in sight.

A veranda with bottles and glasses, someone has been drinking champagne.

Noon.

Passersby occasionally cut through the garden from the street to the river.

Five or so soldiers pass quickly by.

Cheburykin, in fine spirits throughout the act, sits in an armchair in the garden,

wearing a cap and holding a walking stick.

Irina, Kulygin with a medal around his neck,

and Tuzenbach on the veranda,

saying good-bye to Fedotik and Rodé, both wearing officer's uniforms.

TUZENBACH

(Kissing Fedotik) You're a good man, we all lived so easily together, as friends.

(Kissing Rodé)

One more time, farewell, my friend!

→ SARAH RUHL ←

IRINA

Good-bye.

FEDOTIK

Not good-bye, but farewell, we'll never meet again.

KULYGIN

Who knows? (*Wiping his eyes and smiling*) Oh, now, I'm starting to cry . . .

IRINA

We'll meet again some day.

FEDOTIK

In ten or fifteen years? But by then we'll hardly know each other, we'll greet each other like strangers. (*He takes a picture*) Hold still, one more, last time.

RODÉ

(*Embracing Tuzenbach*) We won't meet again. (*Kisses Irina's hand*) Thank you for everything, everything!

FEDOTIK

Hold still!

TUZENBACH

If God is good, we will meet again. Write us. You must write.

RODÉ

(*Looking around the garden*) Good-bye trees!
(*He shouts to produce an echo*)
Oooooooooh!

Good-bye, echo!

KULYGIN

I'm afraid you'll get married off in Poland . . . You'll have a Polish wife who will embrace you and whisper, "Kochany!" That's: "My darling . . ." in Polish! (*He laughs*)

100

→ THREE SISTERS ←

FEDOTIK

(*Looking at his watch*) Not even an hour left. Solyony's the only one from our unit going on the boat, the rest of us are marching.

Today three units leave, tomorrow another three, and then this town will be back to peace and quiet.

TUZENBACH

And extreme boredom.

RODÉ

Where is Masha?

KULYGIN

In the garden.

FEDOTIK

We must say good-bye to her.

RODÉ

Good-bye, I need to go now or I'll cry . . . (*He quickly embraces Tuzenbach and Kulygin, kisses Irina's hand*)
We lived beautifully here . . .

FEDOTIK

(*To Kulygin*) Something to remember us . . . a little notebook and a tiny pencil . . . We'll go this way to the river . . .

RODÉ

(*Shouting to produce an echo*) Geddy-uuuuuuup!

KULYGIN

(*Shouting*) Good-bye!

Fedotik and Rodé see Masha far off and say good-bye. They exit.

IRINA

They're gone . . .

101

She sits on the bottom of the terrace, close to the ground, the lowest step, along the road, like a stoop.

CHEBUTYKIN

And forgot to say good-bye to me.

IRINA

What about you to them?

CHEBUTYKIN

Oh, I somehow forgot. In any case, I'll see them soon, I'll leave tomorrow. Yes . . . only one more little day left. In a year they'll give me a pension, I'll retire, come back here and live out my century near you. Just one more little year, then I get my pension (*He puts one newspaper in his pocket and takes out another*) I'll come back here to you and change my life from the bottom up. Become a quiet, respectable little thing . . .

IRINA

Well, you should change your life somehow, my little dove. You really should.

CHEBUTYKIN

Yes, I feel that too. (*Singing*) Tarara boom de-ay . . . think I'll sit down de-yay!

KULYGIN

You're incorrigible, Ivan Romanitch, incorrigible . . .

CHEBUTYKIN

Be my teacher then. For you, I'll be corrigible.

IRINA

Fyodor has shaved his mustache, I can't look at him.

KULYGIN

Why not?

CHEBUTYKIN

I would say what your physiognomy now resembles . . . but, oh, I can't.

KULYGIN

So what! It's an accepted hairstyle, a shaved face is the *modus vivendi*. Our headmaster's already shaved his mustache, and when I got promoted, I shaved mine too! No one likes it, but for me, I don't care. I'm content. With a mustache, without a mustache, I'm equally content.

Kulygin sits.

In the back of the garden, Andrei pushes a baby carriage.

IRINA

Ivan Romanitch, my little dove, I'm terribly worried. You were on the boulevard yesterday, tell me, what happened?

CHEBUTYKIN

What happened? Oh, nothing. Silliness. (*Reads his newspaper*) So what.

KULYGIN

They say that Solyony and the Baron met yesterday on the boulevard outside the theater . . .

TUZENBACH

Stop it! That's enough— (*Waves his hand and goes into the house*)

KULYGIN

Outside the theater . . . Solyony was taunting the Baron, and the Baron wouldn't stand for it, and said something insulting—

CHEBUTYKIN

I wouldn't know. It's crap.

KULYGIN

This one time, at the university, a professor wrote in the margins of a student paper: "crap!" And the student misread it in Latin,

thought it said "carpe" and tried to conjugate it—carpo, carpere, carpsi, carptum . . . (*He laughs*) Delightfully funny. They say Solyony-is in love with Irina, and so hates the Baron. That's understandable. Irina is a very good girl. She's even a bit like Masha, she's a thinking person, she gets lost in thought. But you have a more gentle temperament, Irina. Of course Masha has a fine temperament. I love her, my Masha.

From the garden: "Aoooooo! Giddy-up!"

IRINA

(*Shivering*) Everything scares me today, somehow.

My things are all packed, after dinner I'll send them off. Tomorrow the Baron and I will be married, tomorrow we move to the brick factory and the day after tomorrow I'll start school, a new life is beginning. Somehow God will help me! When I passed the teacher's exam, I cried with joy . . . and gratitude . . . Now they're here to get my things.

KULYGIN

Yes indeed, you have a good deal of idealism, but you lack seriousness. Lots of ideas; very little seriousness. And yet, I wish you well, from my soul.

CHEBUTYKIN

(*Moved*) My good one, my golden one, you've gone far away. I can't catch up. I'm left behind, like some migrating bird that got too old, that can't fly. Fly away, my girls, fly with God! It was a big mistake, Fyodor Ilyitch, to shave your mustache.

KULYGIN

Enough! (*Sighing*) Well, today the officers leave, and everything will go on as before. I don't care what anyone says, Masha's a good, honest woman and I love her and I'm grateful for my fate. Everyone . . . fate is different for different people—I know this one man, he works for the taxation bureau. We went to school

together, but they expelled him sophomore year because he never could wrap his head around *ut consecutivum*. Now he's got no money, he's very ill, and when we meet, I say, "Greetings, ut consecutivum." "Yes," he says, "indeed, consecutivum," then he coughs . . . But me, I've been lucky, all my life, and happy—I have the Order of Stanislav, Second Class, and now I teach others the *ut consecutivum*. Of course I'm an intelligent person, maybe more intelligent than a good many, but intelligence doesn't make happiness, no . . .

Inside someone plays the piano, the Maiden's Prayer, a simple, sentimental song.

IRINA

And tomorrow night I won't be hearing that dumb song on the piano anymore, and I won't be bumping into Protopopov . . . Protopopov is just sitting there in the living room. He stopped by again today.

KULYGIN

And where is our headmistress?

Masha strolls in the background.

IRINA

Not here. We sent for her. If only you knew how hard it is for me to be here alone without Olya. She lives at that school, playing headmistress, busy with work all day long, and here I'm alone, bored out of my mind, the walls of my room disgust me. I've made up my mind: if I'm not destined to go to Moscow, then let it be. It's fate, nothing to be done. Everything is God's will, it is. Nikolai proposed to me. So? I thought it over, I decided. He's a good person, almost shocking, how good he is . . .

And suddenly it was like my soul acquired wings,
I got happier, and happier, and light—
And felt again the desire for work . . .
But only yesterday, something happened, a hidden thing hanging
over me . . .

CHEBUTYKIN

Crapo, crapsi, craptum.

NATASHA

(*Out the window*) Our headmistress!

KULYGIN

The headmistress has arrived. Let's go inside.

Exits with Irina into the house.

CHEBUTYKIN

(*Reading the newspaper and numbing to himself*) Tararaboom-
deaye . . . think I'll sit down de-eye . . .

Masha approaches.

Andrei is in the background, pushing the baby carriage.

MASHA

There he sits, and sits and sits . . .

CHEBUTYKIN

So what?

MASHA

Nothing . . .

Did you love my mother?

CHEBUTYKIN

Very much.

MASHA

And she you?

CHEBUTYKIN

(*After a pause*) That I already don't remember.

MASHA

Is my man here? That's how our cook Marta spoke of her police-
man: "my man." Is my man here?

CHEBUTYKIN

Not yet.

MASHA

When you snatch happiness in little bits, fits and starts, and lose
it, like me, you become coarse, little by little, you become hateful.
(*Pointing to her breast*) Right here, in me, it's boiling . . . (*Looking
at Andrei with the baby carriage*) Look at Andrei, our brother . . . all
hopes fallen away. In the Red Square, thousands of people lifted
an enormous bell together, huge amounts of labor, and money,
and suddenly it falls, it breaks. Suddenly, for no reason. Like
Andrei.

ANDREI

When, when will there be quiet in this house again? What a racket.

CHEBUTYKIN

Soon.

(*Winding his watch*)

I have a very old watch, see, it chimes.

(*It chimes*)

The first, second, and fifth units are leaving at one o'clock sharp.

And me—tomorrow.

ANDREI

For good?

CHEBUTYKIN

Don't know. Maybe in a year, who the hell knows, it's all the same.

Somewhere far off a harp and a fiddle are playing.

→ SARAH RUHL ←

ANDREI

The whole town is disappearing, exactly as if it were a tray of food, being covered with one of those huge metal lids.

Pause.

Something happened yesterday in front of the theater; everyone's talking, but I don't know.

CHEBUTYKIN

Nothing. Silliness. Solyony was picking on the Baron and the Baron exploded and called him a name and in the end Solyony was obliged to challenge him to a duel. (*Looking at his watch*) It's already time now, it seems. Half past twelve, in the clearing, the one you can see from here, past the river . . . Pop pop! (*Laughing*) Solyony fancies himself a Lermontov, and even writes poetry. A joke is a joke, but this is already his third duel.

MASHA

Whose?

CHEBUTYKIN

Solyony's.

MASHA

And the Baron?

CHEBUTYKIN

What about the Baron?

MASHA

I'm confused. In any case, I say: they shouldn't be allowed to do this. He might wound the Baron, or even kill him.

CHEBUTYKIN

The Baron is a good man but one Baron more, one Baron less—what's the big difference? Let them! No difference!

In the garden shouts off: "Aooooo aoooo, geddyup!"

108

→ THREE SISTERS ←

CHEBUTYKIN

Wait, wait.

That's Skvortsov, playing Solyony's second. He's sitting in a boat.

ANDREI

To me, taking part in a duel, even to be present at a duel, as a doctor, is quite simply immoral.

CHEBUTYKIN

Only seems that way. We're not really here, nothing exists in this world, not even us, it only seems that we do. Isn't it all the same . . .

MASHA

All day long: talk, talk, talk . . .

(*Going*)

You live in this climate, every time you look up it's snowing, and on top of it, we have to *talk* . . .

(*Stopping*)

I'm not going in the house, I can't . . .

When Vershinin comes, tell me . . .

(*Walking up a path*)

The migrating birds are off . . . flying . . .

(*Looking up*)

Swans or geese—

Sweet ones, happy ones!

She goes out.

ANDREI

Our house will be empty.

The officers will go, you will go,

My sister will go and get married, and I'm staying in the house, all alone.

CHEBUTYKIN

What about your wife?

Ferapont enters.

109

ANDREI

A wife is a wife. She's honest, decent—well, good in her way—but she has something in her that reduces her to a petty, blind, crude little animal. In any case, she isn't a person. I say this to you as a friend, the only person I can open my soul to. I love Natasha, I do, but sometimes she seems to me incredibly vulgar, and then I get lost, lose myself, I don't understand what I love her for, or why—I love her so—or—at least, loved—

CHEBUTYKIN

(*Rising*) Brother, I'm leaving tomorrow, we may never meet again, so, a word of advice: put on a hat, carry a big stick, and go—be off, go, without a glance back. And the further you get the better.

Solyony walks by the rear with two officers; he turns to Chebutykin.

SOLYONY

Doctor, it's time. Twelve-thirty already.

Solyony waves to Andrei.

CHEBUTYKIN

Coming. I'm sick of you all. (*To Andrei*) If anyone asks for me, Andrusha, say that I'm— (*He sighs*)

SOLYONY

A man can't breathe in any case
When a brown bear comes and sits on his face.

(*Walking with Chebutykin*) Why the groaning, old man?

CHEBUTYKIN

So!

SOLYONY

How's the health?

CHEBUTYKIN

(*Angry*) Like butter from a cow!

SOLYONY

The old man is getting upset for no reason. I'll just indulge myself a wee bit, I'll only nip his wing like a wood-snipe. (*Sprinkling perfume on his hands*) See, today, I poured out a whole bottle, and still they smell. Smell like a corpse.
Remember the poem?

The restless soul seeks out a storm
As if in storms were in-laid peace

CHEBUTYKIN

A man can't breathe in any case
When a brown bear comes and sits on his face.

Shouts are heard, Andrei and Ferapont enter.

FERAPONT

Papers to sign . . .

ANDREI

Leave me alone! Go away please! I beg you.

Andrei exits with the baby carriage.

FERAPONT

What else are papers for, but to be signed.

Ferapont exits.

Enter Irina and Tuzenbach, Tuzenbach in a straw hat.

Kulygin crosses the stage, calling: "Aoooo, Masha, Aoooo!"

TUZENBACH

The only man in town who's happy to see the soldiers go.

IRINA

It's understandable.
Our town will be empty now.

TUZENBACH

(*Looking at his watch*) Sweet girl, I'll come right back.

IRINA

Where are you going?

TUZENBACH

I have to go into town . . . see my comrades off.

IRINA

That's not true . . . Nikolai, why are you so distracted today?
What happened yesterday, by the theater?

TUZENBACH

(*With an impatient gesture*) In an hour I'll be back and I'll be with you again.

(*Kissing her hand*)

Beloved . . .

(*Looking into her face*)

Five years of loving you and I'm still not used to it,
you seem always more and more beautiful.

What beautiful, wonderful hair!

What eyes!

I'll whisk you away tomorrow,

We'll work, we'll get rich,

my dreams will come alive.

You will be happy.

Only there's one, one thing—

you don't love me.

IRINA

That's not in my power!
I'll be a good wife, I'll be faithful and humble
but there's no love, what can I do?

(*She cries*)

I've never been in love, never in my life.
Oh, I've dreamed of love, dreamed endlessly, day and night,
but my soul is like a fine piano that's locked,
and the key is lost.

You look restless.

TUZENBACH

I've not slept.
There's nothing in my life so terrible that I'm scared of it,
but that lost key is lodged in my soul—won't let me sleep.
Say something to me . . .

IRINA

What? What can I say? The trees are so quiet, everything hidden
from us, even the secrets of trees . . .

She puts her head on his chest.

TUZENBACH

Say something to me . . .

IRINA

What? What should I say? What?

TUZENBACH

Something.

IRINA

Enough . . . enough!

Pause.

TUZENBACH

What silly little things sometimes take on meaning in life, suddenly, out of nowhere. And you know they're little nothings, and you laugh at them, but all the same, you go on feeling them, you can't stop . . .

Oh, let's not talk about it! I feel happy. I see, as if for the first time in my life, these firs, maples, birch trees—and they all look back at me, curious, waiting.

What beautiful trees, and what a beautiful life should be lived under their branches!

A shout is heard: "Aooooo, gedyup!"

TUZENBACH

Time to go. It's time.

That tree is dead but it's still moving with the others in the wind.

So, if I die, I'll still be part of life, one way or another.

Good-bye, my dear—

(Kisses her hand)

The papers you gave me are on my table, under the calendar.

IRINA

But I'll go with you.

TUZENBACH

(Alarmed) No, no!

(Leaving quickly, then stopping)

Irina!

IRINA

What?

TUZENBACH

(Not knowing what to say) I didn't drink my coffee today. Ask them to make me some.

He exits, quickly.

Irina stands, thinking, then sits down in the swing.

Andrei enters with the baby carriage.

Ferapont enters.

FERAPONT

But Andrei Sergevitch, these aren't my papers, they're official, I didn't dream them up.

ANDREI

(Almost threatening the audience with his fists) Oh, where is it, where did my past go, when I was young, happy and intelligent, when my dreams and thoughts had some grace, and the present and future were lit up with hope? Why is it, that when we've just started to live, we grow dull, gray, uninteresting, lazy, useless, with flattened-out souls? Our town has been around for two hundred years, a hundred thousand people live in it, and there's not a single one who's not just like all the others, not one that stands out, past or present, not one scholar, not one artist, not one mildly remarkable person, who would arouse envy, or passionate imitation. They only eat, drink, sleep, and die. Others are born—they too eat, drink and sleep, and, to save themselves from insane boredom, they find variety in vicious gossip, vodka, cards, and pointless lawsuits, and wives deceive their husbands, husbands lie too, pretending not to see or hear, and this vulgarity inevitably wears away at the children, and God's spark dies out in them. They become the same sad homogenous corpses as their fathers, and their mothers . . .

(To Ferapont, angry)

What do you want?

FERAPONT

What? Papers to sign.

ANDREI

I'm sick of you.

FERAPONT

(Handing over the papers) Just now the doorman at the taxation bureau was saying . . . it seems that last winter in St. Petersburg the temperature was two hundred below.

ANDREI

The present is disgusting, but when I imagine the future—oh, how good! It becomes easy, spacious, in the distance, a little piece of light, I see freedom, how my children and I will be free from idleness, from beer, from goose and cabbage, from epic prandial naps, from being sick leeches . . .

FERAPONT

They say two thousand people froze. People were scared out of their wits. St. Petersburg or Moscow—can't remember . . .

ANDREI

(*Suddenly tender*) My dear sisters, my good sisters! (*Through tears*) Masha, my sister . . .

Natasha appears in a window.

NATASHA

Who's talking so loud! Is it you, Andrusha? You'll wake Sophie. *Il ne faut pas faire du bruit, la Sofie est dormie déjà. Vous êtes un ours.* (*Getting angry*) If you want to talk, give the carriage to someone else. Ferapont, take the carriage.

FERAPONT

Yes, ma'am.

He takes the carriage.

ANDREI

(*Embarrassed*) I am talking quietly.

Natasha from behind the window, teasing her child.

NATASHA

Bobik! Naughty little Bobik! Baddy Bobik!

ANDREI

(*Looking through the papers*) Fine, fine, I'll look at them and sign what I need to sign, then you can bring them back to the council . . .

He goes into the house, reading the papers.

Ferapont pushes the carriage.

Vershinin, Olga and Anfisa emerge from the house, and listen quietly for a moment.

Irina joins them.

ANFISA

Iri, hello!

(*Kisses her. Clicks her tongue*)

My child, how I live! How I live!

In a brand-new government apartment, at the high school, with Olya—God has blessed me in my old age.

From birth, sinner that I am . . . I've never lived like this—

A big apartment, the government pays, a whole room to myself and a little bed.

It's all on the government! I wake up in the night—and oh Lord, oh mother of God, no one's happier than me.

VERSHININ

(*After looking at his watch*) We're leaving now, Olga Sergeyevna. It's time.

I wish you everything, everything.

Where's Maria Sergeyevna?

IRINA

She's off in the garden. I'll find her.

VERSHININ

If you would, please. I must hurry.

ANFISA

I'll help look. (*Calling*) Mashenka! Yoo hoo!

Going to the rear of the garden with Irina.

VERSHININ

Well, everything ends. And here we are, saying good-bye.

(*Looks at his watch*)

The town gave us a send-off, a little lunch, champagne, the mayor speechified. I ate and listened, but my heart was here with you all . . .

I've grown so used to you . . .

OLGA

Will we ever meet again?

VERSHPININ

Probably not.

My wife and two girls will be here for another month or so before leaving. Please, if anything happens, or if it's necessary to . . .

OLGA

Yes, yes of course. Not to worry.

By tomorrow there won't be a single officer in town; all will be a memory.

And of course, for us, a new life begins.

Nothing turns out the way we plan.

I didn't want to be a headmistress and here I am, a headmistress. Moscow—it's not to be.

VERSHPININ

Well . . . Thank you for everything. Forgive me, if anything wasn't quite right, I talked too much, much too much, forgive me for that too. Don't think ill of me.

OLGA

(*Wiping her eyes*) Oh . . . why isn't Masha coming . . .

VERSHPININ

What more can I say to you instead of saying good-bye? I could philosophize for you . . . (*Laughs*) Life's hard. It can look so dim, so grim, but doesn't it get clearer and more light? One day it will be perfectly light. (*Looks at his watch*) Time for me to go, it's time! Used to be men were utterly consumed with war, our whole existence was filled with marches, invasions, conquests—now all of that's over, leaving in its wake a big empty space, waiting to be filled in. Mankind searches passionately for the filling, and of course will find it one day. Ach, let it be soon!

If only we could add the love of wisdom to the love of labor, and the love of labor to the love of wisdom . . .

Looking at his watch.

VERSHPININ

But my time is up.

OLGA

Here she comes.

Masha enters.

VERSHPININ

I came to say good-bye . . .

Olga withdraws.

Masha looks at Vershinin's face.

MASHA

Good-bye . . .

A long kiss.

OLGA

Let it be, let it be . . .

Masha sobs violently.

VERSHPININ

Write to me . . . Don't forget! Let me go . . . it's time . . . Olga, take her, I already . . . have to go—it's time . . . late . . .

Deeply moved, he kisses Olga's hand and embraces Masha again and leaves quickly.

OLGA

Let it be! Stop, sweet Masha.

Kulygin enters.

KULYGIN

(*Embarrassed*) It's all right, let her cry a little, let her . . . My good Masha, my kind Masha . . . You're my wife, and I'm happy,

whatever happened . . . I'm not complaining . . . I won't give you a single bad mark. Olga as my witness . . . We'll start over again living as we used to live, and I won't say a word, not a single syllable . . .

MASHA

(Reigning in her sobs)
By the bending sea, a green oak tree—
Where a golden chain is bound—
Golden chain is bound . . . I'm losing my mind,
Bending sea, green oak tree—

OLGA

Be peaceful, Masha, calm down . . . give her water.

MASHA

I'm not crying anymore . . .

KULYGIN

She's not crying . . . she's a good one . . .

A shot is heard faintly from far off.

MASHA

By the bending sea, a green oak tree,
Where a golden chain is bound
And on that tree a cultured cat
goes round and round and round—
a green cat, a green oak

I'm mixing it all up . . .

She takes a drink of water.

It's an unlucky life . . . now I don't want a thing. I'll soon be calm.
It's all the same.

What does it mean, a bending sea?

Why is that phrase stuck in my head?
My thoughts are foggy.

Irina enters.

OLGA

Calm yourself, Masha, there's a good girl, let's go inside.

MASHA

(Angry) I won't go in there!
(Sobbing, then stopping)
I don't go in that house anymore and I won't go!

IRINA

Let's sit together, and let's be quiet.
Tomorrow I'm going away . . .

Pause.

KULYGIN

Yesterday I took this mustache and beard away from a sophomore . . . *(He puts on the mustache and beard)* I look like the German teacher. *(Laughing)* Don't you think? Those boys, so silly . . .

MASHA

You really do look like the German.

OLGA

(Laughing) Yes!

Masha weeps.

IRINA

What will be will be. There, Masha!

KULYGIN

A lot like—

Natasha enters.

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NATASHA

(*To the maid*) So? Protopopov—that is to say, Mikhail Ivanitch—will sit with Sophie, and Andrei can take Bobik for a walk. It never ends with children!

(*To Irina*) Irina, you leave tomorrow, what a shame! Stay for one more week, won't you?

(*Sees Kulygin and screams.*)

He laughs and takes his mustache and beard off

You scared me half to death!

(*To Irina*) I've gotten used to you, do you think letting you go will be easy on me?

I told the servants to move Andrei and his violin into your room—let him play in there!—and in Andrei's room we'll put my sweet Sophie. She's such a divine, miraculous child. What a dumpling pie! Today she looked at me with these eyes and said: Mama!

KULYGIN

A beautiful child, without a doubt.

NATASHA

So tomorrow I'll be all alone here. (*She sighs*) First, I'll give orders to chop down this row of pine trees, then the maple. At night, it looks really scary and really ugly.

(*To Irina*) My dear, that belt doesn't suit your face. It's the height of bad tastefulness. You need a pastel. And I'll order little flowers to be planted . . . everywhere, little flowers! And they'll make so much smell! (*Suddenly stern*) Why is there a fork here lying on a swing?

(*Crossing into the house, shouting*) Why is there a fork lying on a swing, I'm talking to you!

(*Screaming at the maid*) Don't talk to me! Shut up!

. . . And she's off—

KULYGIN

The band plays a march. Everyone listens.

OLGA

They're leaving.

Chebutykin enters.

MASHA

All our boys are leaving. Well . . . happy journey.

(*To Kulygin*) Let's go home . . . Where are my hat and coat?

KULYGIN

I took them in the house . . . I'll go grab them, right away.

OLGA

Yes, let's all go home. It's time.

CHEBUTYKIN

Olga Sergeevna!

OLGA

What?

What?

CHEBUTYKIN

Nothing . . . don't know how to say this . . .

He whispers in her ear.

OLGA

Not possible!

CHEBUTYKIN

Yes . . . that's the story . . . I'm exhausted, I've had it, can't talk. Incidentally, it's all the same.

MASHA

What happened?

Olga embraces Irina.

→ SARAH RUHL ←

OLGA

Terrible day, today . . .
I don't know how to tell you . . .

IRINA

What? Out with it. What? For God's sake! (*Crying*)

CHEBUTYKIN

The Baron was just killed in a duel.

IRINA

(*Weeping quietly*) I knew, I knew . . .

CHEBUTYKIN

(*Sitting on a bench*) I'm exhausted.

(*Takes a newspaper out of his pocket*)

Let them cry a little . . .

Taraboomdeyay—think I'll sit down de-yay . . .

Isn't it all the same . . .

The three sisters stand with their arms around one another.

MASHA

Oh, the music!

They're leaving us, and one left absolutely and forever.

We're left alone to begin our lives over again.

We must live . . . we must live . . .

IRINA

(*Putting her head on Olga's breast*) One day the time will come

when we know why we suffer,

there will be an end to all this mystery—

but meanwhile we must live,

we must work, only work!

Tomorrow I'm going away, alone,

I'll teach school, and I'll give my life away

to the people who need it.

It's fall now;

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→ THREE SISTERS ←

winter will be here soon and cover the world with snow . . .
and I'll work, I will work . . .

OLGA

(*Embracing both her sisters*) The music is so happy, so brave, it
makes you want to live!

Oh, God!

Time will pass and we'll be gone forever, we'll be forgotten,

They will forget our faces, our voices, how many of us there were—
but our suffering will turn into joy for those living after us.

There will be happiness, peace—on this earth,

and they will remember us later with a gentle word—
they will bless us,

we who live now.

Oh, my sisters, our life isn't over yet.

We will live!

The music is so happy, so full of joy,

as if we're only one moment away from knowing

why we live, why we suffer . . .

Oh to know, only to know!

The music still plays, more and more softly.

Kulygin, smiling, happy, brings Masha's hat and coat.

Andrei pushes Bobik in his carriage.

CHEBUTYKIN

(*Singing softly*) Taraboomdeyay—think I'll sit down de-aye—

(*Reading his newspaper*)

It's all the same, all the same!

OLGA

To know, to know!

CURTAIN

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