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HELLO, LAST PAGE OF MY LIFE!

By
JULIA BRITTON

CHARACTERS

ANTON CHEKHOV – Russian writer
MASHA – His sister
OLGA KNIPPER – Actor, star of Moscow Art Theatre
ALEKSEI SUVORIN - Chekhov's editor
VISHNEVSKI - Actor
KONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKI - Actor, director
PEASANT
PRETTY YOUNG WOMAN (with a dog)
YOUNG MAN - Her lover
ARSENI – Chekhov's Handyman
NAZI OFFICER
NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO – Director of Moscow Art Theatre
ACTOR #1
ACTOR #2
DOCTOR SCHWORE
STUDENT
HOTEL PORTER

SYNOPSIS

The story of Anton Chekhov seen from the perspective of the two women in his life, actress Olga Knipper, his mistress and later wife and his devoted sister Masha. They struggled, sometimes bitterly, for his love during his lifetime and after his death, for their part in perpetuating his memory.

HELLO, LAST PAGE OF MY LIFE! had its first public reading (in this draft) by Performing Arts Productions at La Mama Theatre, Carlton, on Saturday, 12th October, 2002, with the following cast:

ANTON CHEKHOV	Mark Lee
MASHA	Penelope Bartlau
OLGA KNIPPER/IRINA	Maureen Sherlock
SUVORIN	Terry McDermott
VISHNEVSKI/ARSENI	Leo Faust
STANISLAVSKI/BORIS	John Jacobs
PEASANT/DR. SCHWORER	Don Munro
YOUNG WOMAN/NINA	Emily Nissam
NAZI OFFICER/YOUNG MAN/ KONSTANTIN	Matthew Walsh

Stage directions by JESSE KOT
Directed by ROBERT CHUTER
Stage Managed by RACHEL WARREN

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FOUR FIGURES STAND ON A DARKENED STAGE. CHEKHOV ALONE, OLGA WITH VISHNEVSKI AND MASHA ALONE. LIGHTS UP ON CHEKHOV. A SUMMER EVENING. GOLDEN LIGHT. CHEKHOV IS FISHING. HE REELS IN HIS LINE, SEES THE BAIT HAS BEEN TAKEN AND REACHES INTO HIS BAG FOR NEW BAIT. HE REBAITS THE HOOK AND THROWS OUT THE LINE AGAIN. HE SETTLES BACK TO AWAIT A BITE.

CHEKHOV: This is what I *love* best. A deep river with plenty of fish in it. And there's crayfish in the water holes. A comfortable dasha to sleep in -what more could anyone wish for? Solitude, space - for a hundred roubles I seem to have acquired infinity and eternity. **(There is a bite on the line and he concentrates on the fishing. It proves to be nothing and he idly throws out the line again)** There's no doubt that I think better with a rod in my hand. Watching a fish rise to the bait and splash, it's a sight a poet might delight in. But if you think about it, it's really the eternal pursuit of the weak by the strong. **(Pause as he reels in briefly)** And of course, it's all part of a life pattern in which destruction plays a normal part. And we accept this. And anyone who doesn't is deluding himself. **(Pause)** There's no way I can make head or tail of anything in this world. And I don't intend to try. I wrote this at the end of a short story which was published last month and came under some critical fire. People seem to think it's a writer's job to make sense of life. I don't believe this. It's time writers were honest enough to state that in this world you can't be sure of anything. This would be a great step forward. Socrates told them this a long time ago and so did Voltaire. Imagine death as a long dreamless sleep - and cultivate your garden or go fishing! **(Pause)** A bit of an insult to God, too, to set ourselves up, with our puny intelligence, to explain away His

universe. I'm dreaming of catching a perch in deep water much more exciting than sex, and the pleasure lasts longer.

THERE'S A TUG AT THE LINE. HE STANDS UP TO PLAY THE FISH AS THE LIGHT FADES. LIGHTS UP ON OLGA AND VISHNEVSKI. OLGA IS RECEIVING HER DIPLOMA AT A DRAMA SCHOOL.

VISHNEVSKI: Your diploma. Top marks.

OLGA TAKES THE DIPLOMA BUT VISHNEVSKI HOLDS ON TO IT FOR A SECOND. SHE GIVES A SLIGHT CURTSEY. HE TAKES HER HAND AND KISSES IT LIGHTLY.

VISHNEVSKI: Olga Knipper. my star student! Now what will you do?

OLGA: Look for work.

NEMIROVICH: You do realise, don't you, that a *serious* actress can't marry and have children, the theatre just swallows them up.

OLGA: Yes, I know. My mother always told me that. She wanted to be a pianist, but was never allowed to study properly.

VISHNEVSKI: Did she regret it?

OLGA: Yes, I think so, but she accepted it. There was no alternative. She was a lady.

VISHNEVSKI: And for you?

OLGA: My father refused to consider it. I was supposed to make a good marriage. But then he died, and things were different. There were debts. I wasn't married. And I never give up.

VISHNEVSKI: Yes, I can see that. You have an obstinate chin.

OLGA: Whenever I want something strongly enough and work hard for it, I always win. When your Drama School opened, I didn't ask permission. I just came and applied.

VISHNEVSKI: Do you know the Stanislavskis?

OLGA: The big landowners ?

VISHNEVSKI: Konstantin and I are setting up a new theatre. Get some experience if you can and then come for an audition.

OLGA LOOKS AT HIM RAPTUROUSLY, SHE CAN SCARCELY BELIEVE WHAT SHE IS HEARING. VISHNEVSKI SMILES.

VISHNEVSKI: Remember, the theatre isn't about getting good marks.

OLGA: No, to me it's a matter of life and death.

LIGHTS GO DOWN ON OLGA AND VISHNEVSKI AND UP ON MASHA.

MASHA: I've come to the conclusion that I don't exist in myself, only in relation to others. Perhaps I did once. I even dreamed of falling in love and marrying! But it seems a long time ago, I just can't remember what it felt like. I was the only girl. My brothers had it hard, very hard. But we studied somehow. Now Aleksandr is writing his way on the Moscow newspapers. Nicolai's an artist - they're all talented enough. I wanted to paint - I still do, last month I sold a painting at an exhibition, but I was never a serious artist. In the end I became a teacher. I watch my brothers drifting into alcoholism, depression, ill health, death. Kolya, the youngest, is dying of tuberculosis. But I'm determined to save Anton. He's the closest to me. Here's a talent worth fighting for. *And*, of course, I love him.

LIGHTS GO DOWN ON MASHA AND UP ON OLGA AND VISHNEVSKI. THE TIME IS THE 1940'S. VISNEVSKI, IS SITTING IN THE THEATRE ON THE STAGE IN FRONT OF THE GREY-GREEN CURTAIN WITH THE SYMBOL OF 'THE SEA GULL' ON IT. HE IS READING A PLAYSCRIPT. OLGA ENTERS WITH A SUITCASE AND PUTS IT DOWN BESIDE HIM.

VISHNEVSKI: Olga Chekhova! What's this I see? Are you leaving us?

OLGA: I've had a letter from Masha in Yalta. She's alone there and depressed. She begs and pleads with me to go and see her. I feel I must go. She thinks this may be the last time…

VISHNEVSKI: But the play! Have you thought of that? Yalta's a long way off and what used to take two days can take two weeks, now the military have taken over the railways. This is no time to be leaving Moscow, Olya. How can you think of leaving now? Surely this performance means more to you than a sick woman's fancies! The fiftieth anniversary of our theatre - The Moscow Art Theatre, Anton's theatre! You and Stanislavski and I are the only ones left. How can "The Sea Gull" go on without you?

OLGA: I'll be back, I promise you.

VISHNEVSKI You'll try, of course, I know that.

OLGA: Just a few days with Masha. That's all I ask. **(Pause)** When have I ever been late for a rehearsal? Have I ever missed a cue? At the first performance, you may remember, I had a high fever, but I waited until the final curtain before I fainted.

VISHNEVSKI: There are circumstances beyond even your control.

OLGA: I know Anton would have wanted me to go to her. She's old now. If the Germans reach Moscow I might never see her again.

VISHNEVSKI: It's too risky.

OLGA: Before he died Anton made me promise to help her. I wrote, of course, but she never replied to a single letter. I don't think she ever forgave me.

NEMIROVICH: Surely that's all forgotten.

OLGA: There's still a lot unsaid. She's Anton's sister. She's battled on alone, just as you have, to keep his memory…

VISHNEVSKI: Yes, I know all that.

OLGA: It's a cry from the heart.

VISHNEVSKI: You've only been back from America for a week, -twenty years away - and now you want to go off to Yalta. Olya, think! So much depends on this performance. These new audiences are totally different. They're only used to propaganda plays. Half of them are illiterate, some have never been to a theatre before. Stalin has never allowed us to put on a Chekhov play and probably never will again. Someone said to me: "How can anyone be expected to care if a man shoots himself, when every day hundreds are being shot?" Even Stanislavski doubts whether they'll accept it at all.

OLGA: But Chekhov's plays have had a great reception in Europe and in America.

VISHNEVSKI: True. But if Russian audiences didn't understand "The Sea Gull" forty years ago what are they going to think now? Olga Chekhova, you must be here. It's a great moment. If this is a fiasco we can write the Art Theatre off for good.

OLGA: I seem to think I heard Stanislavski use those words forty years ago. But the theatre is still here. I promise you, Vishnesvki, I will not let you down. **(Pause)** Just a few days. That's all I ask. **(Pause)** Whatever happens I shall be here to play Arkadina. At the first performance I was ten years too young for the part, now I'm twenty years too old.

VISHNEVSKI: Age has nothing to do with it. You will always be the ideal Arkadina. It's your role. You live it. Nobody understands it like you. I don't want to let you out of my sight!

OLGA: She's the last of the Chekhovs. All his brothers are dead. I'll play the part better if I've done what Anton would have wished me to. I'll feel I have his blessing. Please. This once!

LIGHTS DOWN AND UP ON OLGA WHO IS ON THE TRAIN TO YALTA. 1940'S.

OLGA: Sometimes I hate the theatre. It's brought me some of my *happiest* times, but some of my most *desperate.* The excitement of a first night, the applause, the feeling that you, you are the centre of this wild experience - you're in a different world, the eyes of a huge audience are concentrating on you - it's like a drug - you feel carried away on a wave of exhilaration. But then the body blow of a failure- the humiliation - was it my fault, where did I fail? But once in your blood there's no escape. The theatre stood like a flaming sword between Anton and I. It kept us apart when I longed for nothing more than to feel his arms around me. Of course I was ambitious. This was a dream I had just realised. But this fantasy world, this tinsel and cardboard, these unreal figures, creations of the imagination kept us apart as no real people could possibly have done. The theatre brought me Anton. And now the man whom I could have lived in the real world, has gone and I'm left with the shadows. If only I had known the real world would go so soon... but I can still live in his plays. He told me he wrote "The Three Sisters " for me and as I speak Masha's lines, he lives for me again and will do till the day I die.

LIGHTS DOWN AND UP ON MASHA AND OLGA IN A ROOM IN "WHITE HOUSE" - CHEKHOV'S HOME IN THE CRIMEA. THIS HAS NOW BEEN TURNED INTO A MUSEUM WHICH IS LOOKED AFTER BY HIS ELDERLY SISTER MASHA. IT CONTAINS A SMALL TABLE, TWO CHAIRS, A DESK AND ANYTHING APPROPRIATE TO INDICATE THAT IT HAS BEEN PRESERVED INTACT FROM THE TIME CHEKHOV LIVED THERE FORTY YEARS AGO. ON THE WALLS ARE LARGE PORTRAITS OF STALIN AND

LENIN. THERE IS THE SOUND OF INTERMITTENT RIFLE FIRE. MASHA, WHO HAS BEEN PUTTING AWAY PAPERS ON THE DESK, GOES TO THE WINDOW AS A BULLET SMASHES THE PANE. SHE MOVES BACK AS FAST AS SHE CAN, AND CROUCHES AGAINST THE FAR WALL.

ANOTHER SHOT HITS THE OUTSIDE OF THE HOUSE WITH THE SOUND OF SPLINTERING WOOD. MASHA CREEPS FORWARD AGAIN AND LOOKS OUT, SHIELDED BY A CURTAIN. SHE WATCHES FOR A MOMENT, THEN MOVES BACK INTO THE ROOM AND BEGINS TO TAKE THE PORTRAITS DOWN FROM THE WALL AS FAST AS SHE CAN. SHE QUICKLY STOWS THEM AWAY OUT OF SIGHT AND LOOKS ROUND FOR ANYTHING ELSE THAT MAY SHOW SIGNS OF SOVIET INFLUENCE. SHE GOES TO THE WINDOW AGAIN. THE GUNFIRE HAS STOPPED. THEN MOVES BACK QUICKLY AND TAKES DOWN THE SOVIET FLAG, AND A LARGE POSTER OF A HAMMER AND SICKLE. OLGA KNIPPER, COMES QUICKLY. SHE PAUSES TO REGAIN HER BREATH.

OLGA: My God, Mashenka, what's happening? I was sound asleep upstairs and heard a crash down here.

MASHA: A Nazi bullet through the window.

OLGA: **(Sees the broken glass)** My God. You could have been killed. Do you think they'll come here?

MASHA: Heaven knows! When they first came they took over houses in the town for billeting. But out here, we're out of the way, and they've left us alone so far. But who knows? I saw some soldiers in the street a minute ago. They stopped at the gate. I was terrified they'd come in, but they moved on. I took those old monsters off the wall in case they did. I suppose they want to take the place over?

OLGA: We must resist. That's all. We must never let them in.

THERE IS A LOUD KNOCKING ON THE DOOR. THE WOMEN DO NOT MOVE. THE KNOCKING IS REPEATED.

MASHA: They'll break the door down.

OLGA: I'll go.

SHE GOES OUT AND RETURNS FOLLOWED BY A NAZI OFFICER.

MASHA: You can't come in here. This is a museum. It's been preserved as a memorial to my famous brother, the

playwright, Anton Chekhov. The Soviet Government have authorised it and I am the curator.

NAZI OFFICER: Heil Hitler! Do either of you women speak German?

OLGA: I do. My parents were German. I am the wife of the late Anton Chekhov. You have heard of him, I imagine?

NAZI OFFICER: Chekhov? Was he a general?

OLGA: He is Russia's most famous playwright. His plays have been performed all over the civilised world. Even in Germany. I am one of the chief actors of the Moscow Art Theatre. We took the plays to Berlin, to the Berliner Theatre in l904.

NAZI OFFICER: In l9O4 I was not born. So spare me a lecture on the Russian theatre. My business with you is quite simple. This house is required for members of my staff. I expect you and this lady to pack up immediately and be out of it by noon tomorrow.

MASHA: What does he say?

OLGA: He says we must pack up and leave tomorrow. It's being requisitioned.

MASHA: Never. Tell him I shall never leave this house alive. Tell him I shall never give it over to the Nazi barbarians.

OLGA: Careful. He may understand more than you think. Leave this to me.

NAZI OFFICER: I can't waste time while you hold a conference in Russian. Just get this clear. Tomorrow I shall bring the major and six of his officers. I shall expect the place to be ready for them. How many rooms in the place?

OLGA: There's four bedrooms upstairs. One of these was Chekhov's and has been kept exactly as he left it.

NAZI OFFICER: And downstairs?

OLGA: Downstairs is his study again *nothing* has been moved. The pen he was using is still on the table. His books, the three unopened newspapers he used to have sent from Moscow, are untouched.

NAZI OFFICER: I am *not* interested in any of this. There is a war on. You two women must get this one fact into your heads. Your house will be taken over tomorrow. All the rooms must be prepared as staff bedrooms and all this junk must be cleared away.

OLGA: Impossible.

NAZI OFFICER: I am not asking your opinion or your consent. I am giving orders. Do you think you can oppose the army of the Third Reich? If you refuse you will find yourselves on the street within the hour and you will be lucky if you are not arrested for obstruction.

OLGA: Do you want to go down in history as the man who desecrated the memory of Russia's most beloved writer? Do you?

NAZI OFFICER: I have little interest in books, especially decadent Russian books. I need quarters for my men. Do you think I will allow my officers to stand out in the snow for the sake of a few dusty photographs and scraps of paper?

MASHA: What's he saying?

OLGA: That if we don't go they'll put us out in the street.

MASHA: Tell him that I will stand in the door until he shoots me down.

NAZI OFFICER: What 's she screeching about?

OLGA: She says she hopes you will leave the study and Chekhov's bedroom untouched. If you damage this shrine to the arts, the Russian people will not forget. I beg you to take the other rooms. Leave these two for us. Perhaps your major is a well read, cultivated man.

NAZI OFFICER: Of course he is well read. Germany has its own great writers, the finest in the world. We don't need to be *taught* by Russians.

OLGA: Come back at noon tomorrow. You will find the other bedrooms prepared. The dining room and sitting room will be yours. Soon I shall be going back to Moscow. My sister-in-law has devoted her life to keeping the memory of Chekhov alive. She will show the Germans round. Just let her stay here. She has nowhere else to go.

NAZI OFFICER: I shall come back tomorrow at noon. I won't make any promises. Tomorrow the major will decide. Heil Hitler.

THE OFFICER STRIDES OUT. THE TWO WOMEN EMBRACE EACH OTHER.

MASHA: Have they gone for good?

OLGA: No. He'll come back tomorrow. But with luck, we'll have this room and Anton's bedroom for ourselves.

MASHA: Thank God we can stay. It would kill me to leave Anton's house. You were wonderful, Olga. It was like watching you as Ramyevskaia in "The Cherry Orchard" again.

OLGA: "Do be generous, if only for a little bit, and spare me. I was born here, you know, my father and mother lived here, and my grandfather, too. I love this house, I can't think of life without the cherry orchard, and if it really must be sold, then sell me with it..."

SHE STRIKES AN ATTITUDE. THEY LAUGH.

MASHA: Wonderful, Olya. You are magnificent. So we have just tonight to be in peace with our memories before the German invasion. God, how I hate the thought of them in this house.

OLGA: But it's better to share it with them than to leave it to their mercies. Please God they'll be driven out again soon, or maybe they'll just leave Yalta alone and move on.

MASHA: There's some bottles of vodka left, Olya, let's drink one tonight. I was keeping it for the end of the occupation. But the Nazis will only swill it all down.

OLGA: Bring it out. We'll drink together as though Anton was here with us. He'd have liked us to. One of the things he complained of most about his tuberculosis was that it stopped him drinking. I'll never forget his going on that cure, off to the country to drink six pints of koumiss every day... no wonder he left for Yalta before it was finished. I tried to drink it with ! Sour mare's milk. I can almost *smell* it still.

MASHA UNLOCKS A CUPBOARD WITH ONE OF THE KEYS ON HER BELT, BRINGS OUT THE BOTTLE AND GLASSES, AND POURS GENEROUS DRINKS. OLGA STANDS AND RAISES HER GLASS TO A LARGE PHOTOGRAPH OF CHEKHOV ON THE WALL.

OLGA: To him!

MASHA: To my beloved brother! You, Oliuska, had him and the theatre. I had only Anton.

OLGA: That's true, Masha, but to me Chekhov and the theatre were inseparable. We met in the theatre, at a rehearsal of "The Sea Gull" - September l898. I'll *always* remember the date. It was my thirtieth birthday. It was so exciting. I was bursting with happiness.

MASHA: I think it was the ninth? Is that your birthday?

OLGA: Yes.

MASHA: So long ago...

LIGHTS DOWN AND UP ON CHEKHOV.

CHEKHOV: I'm a doctor, *not* a writer. I've always maintained this. I decided to be a doctor at the age of nine. One day in summer I'd been swimming and as I was walking home I collapsed. Typhoid followed by peritonitis. This wasn't surprising. My brothers and I worked in our father's small grocery store open from 5am to eleven at night. A shack, really, unheated even in winter. My father had two apprentices, one ten, the other, twelve. They worked without pay just for a little food. Peasants. They couldn't read or write. One of us boys had to sit there to see they didn't steal the cash or get drunk on the vodka. We sold kerosene, lamps, wicks, pickled herrings, tobacco, yarn, nails, hair-oil, cheese, coffee and of course, vodka. In summer the smells were dreadful. The coffee smelt of kerosene and the cheese of hair-oil. And the flies swarmed in. In winter I sat trying to do my homework. The ink froze solid and my pen hardly scratched the film of ice on my book. The candle guttered and the wind blew through the cracks. One day a rat fell in the oil vat. My father fished it out and got the village priest to consecrate it and we doled it out as usual. Every night and Sunday - except when we sang in the choir - he whipped us. My mother was in tears. "My father beat me," he said," and so I beat you. Didn't do us any harm." He gave my mother a beating too. "Beat your wife like you beat your sheepskin coat every Russian knows that." **(Pause)** I was very sick, that time and the doctor was called. He sat by my bedside and told me stories of… of his medical practice and of his

student days. He was the first person, ever, to show me any kindness. I made my mind up then. I would be a doctor. My mother, poor as she was, helped us. "Get to Moscow," she said, "enroll in Medical studies. You'll find work to pay your way." And I did. I wrote stories, like my brother Alexander.

CHEKHOV GOES BACK TO HIS ORIGINAL POSITION. LIGHTS GO UP ON MASHA AND OLGA SITTING AS BEFORE.

MASHA: Anton began studying seriously in Moscow. But it wasn't easy. After father lost his business he couldn't earn enough to keep us all. Ivan was training to be a teacher, Nicolai was painting pictures that didn't sell, Misha and I were still at school. Then there was Aunt Feodosiya, mother's widowed sister. Anton started writing encouraged by Aleksandr who wrote for the newspapers and was making quite a name for himself.

LIGHTS UP ON CHEKHOV.

CHEKHOV: I knew I could write after a fashion. I wrote three hundred pieces for magazines. But this wasn't serious work. I signed the stories Antosha Chekhonte. I just dashed them off. Literary excrement really. A bad beginning for a writer. I wrote entirely for money. They were all humorous pieces - that's all they'd publish. One of these rags was called 'The Alarm Clock", the other "Dragonfly'" and worst of all - "Splinters."

HE WALKS OVER TO MASHA. LIGHTS UP ON THIS AREA. A ROOM IN A MOSCOW FLAT.

MASHA: **(CALLING)** Where are you off Antosha?

CHEKHOV: Out. To get a drink. To walk in the park, anywhere, to get away from this.

MASHA: What about your work for tomorrow?

CHEKHOV: No one could work in this house. Listen! There's mother's sewing machine clanking away. Someone's arrived with a… a howling child.

MASHA: That's your brother Aleksandr; his baby's got colic. He's going to need to stay the night. You'll have to give him *your* bed and sleep on the couch.

CHEKHOV: Then Auntie - can't you hear? She's winding up her musical box and playing: "La Belle Helene." She's been at it for the past hour. Nicolai's just come in, drunk as an owl. And father's wandering around with some tract he wants to read to me. I'll come back when they're all snoring away and I can get on with it.

MASHA: You *must* attend to the baby.

CHEKHOV: It's just wind. If its mother stopped drinking vodka while she's feeding it, it would be all right.

LIGHTS GO DOWN ON MASHA AND UP ON CHEKHOV.

CHEKHOV: June 24, 1884. The most important day in my life. Look! **(He holds up a paper)** My medical studies are *over.* I'm Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, Doctor and District Physician. I'm going to put on my rubber boots and go fishing. Catch a pike or a tench. Next week I start work at the hospital. Last something happened as I was celebrating - blood started coming from my throat. It could be a small blood vessel broken. Real work now. The work I've always wanted to do. No more stories. The next book I'll write will be a history of Russian medicine.

LIGHTS GO DOWN ON CHEKHOV AND COME UP ON MASHA AND OLGA SITTING DRINKING.

OLGA: There's so much, so much in his past I don't know about. My life with Anton was so short and most of it we spent apart. I reproach myself for it. I often thought about it. I told him I was willing to give up the theatre, to spend my life looking after him. But he wouldn't hear of it.

MASHA: He knew he hadn't long to live. If you gave up your career it might ruin your prospects as an actress. You were independent, you could always fend for yourself.

OLGA: I was afraid if I became just a wife he'd grow tired of me. He loved the excitement of the theatre. He loved the parties, the drinking, the gossip, the rehearsals and in a way, I brought this into his life. He loved staying up late joking, laughing, discussing new ideas with Stanislavski, Nemirovich, all the writers and artists who flocked around them. And the actresses - *particularly* the actresses.

MASHA: He needed rest. He needed peace and quiet to write. Excitement brought on his hemorrhages. Drinking, parties all this upset him. Each time he came to Moscow in the

wintertime he became ill. Out in all weathers, getting too excited.

OLGA: He loved it all. The sleigh rides through the snow, shining, crisp in the moonlight. Wrapped in furs, the crunch of the tracks, the sleigh bells. It was exhilarating.

MASHA: Yes, for a fit man, Anton was terminally ill. He *knew* although he never admitted it. I was there when he was forced to go back to Yalta after two weeks of such wild living. I watched him write to you and explain. Don't you remember? **(OLGA turns away)** Or don't you want to remember?

LIGHTS UP ON CHEKHOV.

CHEKHOV: **(Writing)** My dear enchanting actress, greetings! How areyou, how are you feeling? I was bitterly disappointed to have to go back to Yalta. I had a bad headache, and my temperature was running high. I confess I didn't like to tell you and thought it best to go away quietly. I look at the photographs you sent me. There's a wonderful one of you looking dejected, with your elbows on the back of a chair, but under that mournful expression lies hidden a little imp. The other is good too. You look like a little Jewess, a very musical person who attends a conservatoire but at the same time studies dentistry as a second string and is engaged to a young man in Mogilev, rather like Nemirovich. Thank you for your good wishes for my marriage. I told my fiancee you were coming to Yalta soon to give her a little competition. She said: "If that dreadful actress comes here I shall put my arms round you tight!" I said, "That's not hygienic in the hot weather. I sweat rather a lot, you know." She was quite offended. "Where did you pick up such coarse talk? I expect it's in the theatre. I'm glad you've decided not to write any more plays. Kiss me!" I told her I'd been elected as a member of Academy in Moscow and couldn't be too free with my kisses any more, and she burst into tears and ran off. Think of me sometimes. I kiss you hard four hundred times, Yours, Antonio.

LIGHTS GO DOWN ON CHEKHOV AN UP ON OLGA AND MASHA.

OLGA: He wrote me teasing letters that told me *nothing.*

MASHA: He *always* concealed his emotions - and his illness Made light of it. But he was spitting blood, racked with coughing and the diarrhea he always suffered and the agonising hemorrhoids he'd had since a boy.

OLGA: Why couldn't he tell me? Why couldn't he treat me seriously? Why did he make a mockery of everything? When I asked him to tell me what was in his heart, he wrote back about the weather!

MASHA: There were things he was always serious about. Medicine, Tolstoi's work, fishing - and *gardening!*

OLGA: But never love.

MASHA: No. *Never* love.

LIGHTS DOWN ON AND UP ON CHEKHOV.

CHEKHOV: The *garden* at Yalta was a wasteland. The first thing I had to do was to plant trees - I chose a mixture northern and sub-tropical - birch, poplar, cypress, eucalyptus and palms. The birches didn't thrive, but the avenue of acacias I put in grew unbelievably fast. I planted seventy rose bushes and only three didn't take root. I had two Turks with red fezzes digging away, and had garden benches put up here and there, wooden ones, which I shall paint green. There's a stream running through the garden and I've put three small stone bridges over it. And fruit trees, of course - twelve cherry trees, four mulberries two almonds and a few others. The old ones are starting to bud and he pear tree is blossoming and the almond tree has put out pink flowers. Birds stop for the night in the orchard on their way north and sing in the morning. The thrushes are deafening. Arseni who helps me and does odd jobs, keeps the place watered. Two grey cranes have decided to live here - Arseni has clipped their wings and they are devoted to him. Whenever he gets back from a trip to town, they raise raucous shrieks and dance round flapping their wings and waltzing on their long legs, Two stray mongrels have adopted us - Little Ace, who barks at anything that moves and a fat clumsy fellow I've called Chestnut who follows him round and rolls over on it's back waiting for me to *stroke it* with my cane. I do my best to give them away. When the schoolteacher came to call I said: "Don't you want this dog for a present? He's incredibly stupid?" The house is overrun with mice. I catch dozens daily in my humane trap I invented, and let them loose in the Tartar cemetery next door. I'm quite sure that if I hadn't

been a writer I'd have been perfectly happy as a gardener. Of course the place is full of consumptives who come here to die. It's a pitiable sight. They come to me for help. There's not much I can do. What they mostly need is shelter and care. A comfortable place to die in. I intend to build a centre for them. I'll talk to the council - I'll raise the money somehow, and if I make the first contribution, the rich folk will be shamed into supporting me, especially one well-off society lady who's always asking me to dinner.

LIGHTS DOWN ON CHEKHOV AND UP ON MASHA AND OLGA.

MASHA: Anton put his heart into that *garden*. I helped when I could. I ordered plants for him from all over Russia, and we planned it together. And of course I planned the house with him and took a lot of the burdensome detail off his shoulders.

OLGA: The first time I went to Yalta he showed me round. The poplars were quite tall, but the silver birch missed its northern climate and didn't take root. The roses were splendid, he was so proud of them. - and the acacias, trembling at the slightest breeze. I was on tour with the Art Theatre. I was only there a few days as we were going to Sevastapol. Then we all came back and did the performance at Yalta. Anton was in high spirits. He was thrilled to see "Uncle Vanya" and Gorki's "Lower Depths." The actors were in and out whenever they were free. Anton loved listening to their talk. They sat in his study and talked for hours and hours and hours… We had wonderful parties - the last one, the liveliest of all ended upon the roof of someone's dasha. It was like a Spring Festival. I can't remember - were you there?

MASHA: No. I was teaching in Moscow. I was also seeing to the sale of Melikhovo which had to pay for the Yalta house. Our financial affairs were in a frightful muddle.

OLGA: Anton had *immense* charm. I could see why women ran after him. And he encouraged them. He could be cruel. He could lead women on, let them love him desperately, when he knew he'd no intention of marrying. He accepted love, serious love, but kept up the pretence that both parties were equally playing a game of dalliance and when things came to a crisis, he just retreated.

MASHA: He had his mistresses, like all the rest of them.

OLGA: Of course. I met Lika Mizinova, your friend, a lovely girl. She'd loved him since she was sixteen. She was one of them. He broke her heart. In desperation she left him, got pregnant, then went off alone to Switzerland. She begged him to come to her, but he refused.

MASHA: How do you know all this?

OLGA: From a friend of Ignati Potapenko, the writer, the man who got her pregnant.

MASHA: Mistresses must take their chance. Anton never wanted to marry. He told me so a dozen times. All his friends knew this. He made no secret of it. He told Aleksei Suvorin, he couldn't bear to face the everyday routine of a married man.

LIGHTS GO DOWN AND UP ON CHEKHOV AND SUVORIN.

CHEKHOV: Look, Suvorin, marriage is all right for you. But *not* for me. Women cheat you of your youth. I don't even want indiscriminate sex. Silk nightdresses only mean something comfortable, nice against the skin.

SUVORIN: Everyone marries one day. In the end a woman appears who seems infinitely desirable and with whom you are so infatuated that you're willing to take her on her own terms. It isn't a bad thing dear boy. And there's the question of children - bastards aren't the same. I adore my daughter. Why don't you marry her? I'd be perfectly willing to give her to you. And she'll have a dowry that will keep you for life.

CHEKHOV: I adore her too. But she's only… *eleven.*

SUVORIN: Girls grow up fast.

CHEKHOV: I'll consider the deal, if the young lady consents.

SUVORIN: Seriously, it would do you good to settle down. All this whoring has it's attractions but in the end it wears one out.

CHEKHOV: All right, if you must persist, these are my conditions - nothing must change. My wife must live in Moscow, I in the country. I'd visit her, of course. But happiness that goes on, day in day out, would send me mad, crazy. The *same* conversation every day makes me sweat under the armpits. Breakfast, bedroom slippers - Oh yes, my friend. I'd be a good husband, at a distance. Just give me a wife like the moon, who doesn't appear in my sky every day.

SUVORIN: A woman who would agree to that would either have to be very accommodating or have a career of her own - maybe a musician or an artist. And that would never work. If she was successful, you'd be jealous, and if she was a failure, you wouldn't want to own her.

CHEKHOV: But a domestic routine would cramp my style. I'd have to subject myself to some kind of order - regular living - I can't think I'd be able to adapt myself to that. Still, perhaps it's better than drifting on the ocean of life and tossing in the frail boat of debauchery. I must say I'm ceasing to care for mistresses - it seems I'm gradually becoming impotent with them.

LIGHTS DOWN ON SUVORIN AND CHEKHOV AND UP ON OLGA AND MASHA.

OLGA: But he still encouraged Lika.

MASHA: I think at the time he loved her. He wanted her. He was attracted to her. He wanted her to want him. But he was afraid of committing himself. Why should he?

LIGHTS DOWN AND UP ON CHEKHOV.

CHEKHOV: **(Writing)** Dearest Lika, you have turned my head. I think of nothing but when we'll be together again. I long to talk to you. I don't need to write, only to sit close to you, to talk and… Write to me! Do you hear? I beg you, on my knees. I wait for you and dream of your coming to Nice, as a Bedouin in the desert dreams of water. You know how I *need* you. Don't play with me Likusya, come. Come soon. You are *everything* to me. You know that.

LIGHTS DOWN ON CHEKHOV AND UP ON OLGA AND MASHA.

OLGA: But he left her, abandoned, to have her baby alone and miserable in Paris. He knew Potapenko couldn't *or* wouldn't be with her. He went to Italy with his wife.

MASHA: Potapenko was married with two children. She should have known. And Anton *never* promised to marry her.

OLGA: But he went on teasing her, having sex with her, feeding her hopes and dreams.

MASHA: She got over it in the end. She married a well-off stage director. They had a perfectly satisfactory marriage.

OLGA: So I heard. But her baby died. And I heard Anton went off to France with Suvorin. Paris wasn't so far away.

MASHA: The child was not his. The affair was over. There was no point in prolonging it. You have read Anton's stories, don't they tell you something about his thoughts? They're full of women who want to possess men, to enter into their souls, to invade the innermost recesses of their minds. They imagine their lovers are keeping secrets from them. But men like Anton, artists of genius need to preserve themselves from invasion. There's a core which has to be kept secret to survive. A place no woman can enter.

OLGA: He was right when he said medicine was his wife and writing his mistress. What room is there for a wife in that cosy little situation?

MASHA: That's a question that only you can answer. Finally, he told me he'd got over mistresses.

OLGA: But you once told him he ought to marry me. Isn't that true? He told me and he never lied.

MASHA: I wanted you to be friends. I told him you were brilliant and vivacious and I knew he'd enjoy your company. I also knew you were sensible, and independent and understood how to deal with life. Lika and Anilova and all the rest of them - they were unstable, madly emotional, wild - but of course, sexually attractive and beautiful -

OLGA: But you were convinced he'd never marry, weren't you? It was just a game you were playing. Confess. We're older now, we can afford to be honest. A stable, sensible mistress had its advantages.

MASHA: I won't answer you. I wanted him to be safe, I wanted him to be protected , to be looked after. Not to endanger his life. To enable him to live, to write in peace.

OLGA: You wanted him for yourself. Admit it.

MASHA TURNS AWAY SOBBING SILENTLY.

MASHA: He… he was all I had, my life, my *only* life.

OLGA: And I was his life.

MASHA: It's all one now. We both lost him. I don't bear you any grudge now. **(She passes her some more vodka)** This is the last of this bottle. Do you like champagne? **(Looking at the label)** *French* champagne?

OLGA: Champagne? What are we celebrating?

MASHA: Our love for Antosha. *And* our memories.

LIGHTS DOWN. WE HEAR THE EXPLOSIVE OPENING OF THE CHAMPAGNE BOTTLE LOUD, IN THE SILENCE, LIKE GUNFIRE. VERY DIM LIGHT ON CHEKHOV.

CHEKHOV: When a doctor attends a dying patient, and that patient is also a doctor, there's a special rule they observe. The doctor and the dying man drink a glass of champagne together. I did this once with a doctor friend who was dying and once again.

LIGHTS DOWN ON CHEKHOV AND UP ON MASHA AND OLGA.

MASHA: Of course I heard the rumours that he was intending to get married and it's true, I was very upset. Everyone was talking about it. Suvorin asked him point blank and he said…

CHEKHOV: Oh you've heard the gossip that I'm about to marry. Well I can tell you differently. It's not true!

MASHA: Suvorin told me himself. Then down at the theatre I heard Nemirovich tell Stanislavski that Anton had told him quite the opposite. It was all decided - he was marrying you. I couldn't believe he would do this without telling me. He never kept anything from me. I didn't say a word it would have been too humiliating. I went home and cried bitterly. I said nothing, I didn't want to believe it. The next day he left for Nice. He knew he couldn't stay any longer in Moscow. He was racked with coughing. His doctor said he couldn't survive the winter. Of course I knew you had been sleeping together when you came to stay at Yalta.

OLGA: I realised you and his mother knew. I hated that deception.

LIGHTS UP ON OLGA AND CHEKHOV AT YALTA EARLIER.

OLGA: Each night when we creep upstairs to your room, clutching our pillows and my quilt, the stairs creak. It's so loud, they must hear us. I hate it all. All this stupid mystery.

CHEKHOV: I love it!

OLGA: I simply can't understand how you are so afraid of coming out in the open. Masha suspects it, your mother must have realised. Why can't you be open, make everything clear? If you love me what's the point of creeping around at night? We're not children I want to know everything that's in your heart.

CHEKHOV: Can't you accept life and love as it is? Proclaiming it to the whole of Moscow doesn't alter it only makes complications.

OLGA : You harden your heart against me. I'm always loving and tender to you, and this heartlessness of yours makes afraid you are hiding things from me.

CHEKHOV: When have I been hard hearted? Tell me. When have I shown this flintiness? I've always loved you and been tender towards you. I'm not hiding anything from you. There's no sense at all in these accusations.

OLGA: Any day I shall go back to Moscow. What am I to think?

CHEKHOV: What do you want? Some long involved explanation with long faces and serious talk? Do you want it in writing? I don't know what to say to you.

OLGA: If you need to hide our love I begin to doubt whether you mean anything you say.

CHEKHOV: Olga, dearest, little pony, my dog, my angel, listen I've told you this ten thousand times already and probably I'll go on telling it to you for a long, long time I love you and that's all there is to it.

OLGA: We're never together long, we don't live together openly. Whenever I'm in Moscow, you're in Yalta. You only stayed two weeks in Moscow and ran back here to Masha and your mother.

CHEKHOV: It was not for want of wishing.

OLGA: And now I have to go back.

CHEKHOV: My darling sweet Olusha, a week - that's all we've had together. A teaspoon full of milk after forty years of famine. I'm desperately lonely without you. I'm bored with this hot Siberia I have to live in. I *dream* of being with you. When I'm alone in Yalta I keep thinking the door will open and you'll come in. There's nothing I'd like more than to live in Moscow all the year round. You know I can't stay there in the winter, when it's damp. I can only come when the hard frost sets in. And no one knows when that's liable to occur.

OLGA: Sometimes this love doesn't seem real. We've been together in spirit for two years, more. All we do is write to each other. This affair is becoming love by correspondence. It's like one of your stories. I don't understand it. Sometimes I don't write because I'm expecting you all the time, because I'm longing to see you. What holds you back? I don't know what to think. I feel unhappy, insecure. Every day I want to cry. Do you wan me to give it all up and stay with you here? I will. Just say you want me to and I won't go back.

CHEKHOV: No, pony. You're going back to the theatre because we both want you to. **(He puts his arms round her and kisses her)** Tonight will make up for *everything.* I shall make love to you like a Turk.

OLGA: Be rough with me darling. I love it when you get rough, and then kiss me gently and caress me.

CHEKHOV: I shall fling you up to the ceiling and then catch you again by your feet.

OLGA: And I'll fight you like an Arab. I'll kiss you hard, so hard that it stirs all your senses and all your sinews feel it. I'll bite your ears and hug you till your ribs crack. **(They embrace. Pause. OLGA breaks away)** And then it will be all over. Nothing but an empty bed.

CHEKHOV: Darling, angel, dog. Try to understand. If we're not together now it's not your fault or mine. It's the devil who put the bacilli in my blood and the love of art in yours.

LIGHTS DOWN ON OLGA.

CHEKHOV: I went to see Dr. Altshuller and asked him for a thorough examination. How could I tell her? That I spit blood every night, that my right lung is eaten away, that my left is deteriorating fast. Dr. Altshuller told me it would be suicide

to stay in Moscow throughout the winter. There is no way I can tell her this. Even Masha doesn't realize. It's in my intestines now. I tell Altshuller its just diarrhea and he treats me for this - bland diet, no drinking and all that. But I'm a doctor, I know. I see the blood.

LIGHTS DOWN ON CHEKHOV AND UP ON OLGA AND MASHA.

OLGA: **(She takes another drink)** When you look back on your life with Anton, what are your happiest memories?

MASHA DRINKS MORE. PAUSE.

MASHA: There were many happy times. Perhaps most of all when we first went to Melikhovo. It was a charming estate it even had a cherry orchard.

LIGHT UP ON CHEKHOV.

CHEKHOV: Once Suvorin gave me some money to go into the country and write. I found a deserted estate in the Crimea, by a lovely river. The whole place was overgrown and the gardens gone wild. The windows were boarded up and birds were nesting in the shutters. I forced one of them open - trees were growing through the floorboards. I climbed in and mice scurried away in the dust. The house seemed haunted by figures who'd lived in it in their hey-day. I could sense them all - the old retainers, love-sick girls in white frocks, with ribbons in their hair - the piano, young voices. Then there was the English governess, the hunting in the forest. It filled me with sadness, And as I stood there a bittern raised it's forlorn cry, like a child, or a cow locked up in a barn! But I also felt a wonderful joy, a dream of the past. Then I shook myself free. All this is gone. Over. It's the stuff of every Russian novel of the past. A count, a countess of fading beauty, a foreign musician, dim footmen, nurses and a governess - and of course a German estate manager and an heir from America! Plus the Seven Deadly Sins - and a marriage at the end. That's over. The days of heroes and romance. Writing has got to change into something more true to life, Russian life… My reason tells me that. But the ghosts still haunt me.

LIGHTS DOWN ON CHEKHOV WHO NOW JOINS MASHA.

CHEKHOV: I've bought it. Masha, I've bought it. We're landowners now. We own an estate, acres and acres…

MASHA: How could you possibly do that? You know we haven't got the money to pay for it. You said yourself it was too expensive.

CHEKHOV: I got an advance from Suvorin. I promised him fifty five hundred stories, anything. I've paid a thousand roubles to the owner and he's given me a mortgage of five thousand from the Land Bank.

MASHA: How in God's name do you expect to pay a huge mortgage like that?

CHEKHOV: It's a great estate very profitable we'll grow crops, sell them, you'll see. It's ideal only two and a half hours by train from Moscow and a station on the doorstep, six hundred and seventy five acres, an orchard, a trickle of a stream, two ponds - and there's a piano, three horses, a cow, four geese, two dogs, ten half-dead hens, three carts, five sleighs and an aging sow.

MASHA: You'll never make it pay, you're no farmer, Anton.

CHEKHOV: I love planting things out, trees, beet, potatoes….

MASHA: It sounds wonderful, *but*…

CHEKHOV: *But* nothing. Do you realize there's a pond which comes right up to one of the bedrooms I'll be able to fish out of the window! And there's a carp in it with decidedly suicidal tendencies.

MASHA: Oh Antosha!

HE EMBRACES HER.

CHEKHOV: It's ideal for writing, quiet, mother will love it, father will be in his element, I'll practise as a doctor, dozens of patients, you'll see. I'll found a school here. We must educate the peasants.

MASHA: What?

CHEKHOV: We *must* educate the peasants. Don't *worry* about the money. I'll get the local land owners to contribute.

MASHA: It sounds…

CHEKHOV: *And* a dairy - that's for you.

MASHA: Be practical think of the work! A dairy! What do I know about dairying? It's madness.

CHEKHOV: I love the word 'estate'. A Russian estate. It's a poetic word. Think of Turgenev and Tolstoi. I love those descriptions in their novels. Now I'm starting to feel like a real member of the artistic set - they all have these houses and land. I'm not the son of a small trader any more. I'm a land owner!

LIGHTS DOWN ON CHEKHOV AND UP ON OLGA AND MASHA.

MASHA: You see our grandfather was a serf.

OLGA: A serf! and all of your brothers so brilliant.

MASHA: Didn't you know?

OLGA: I'd no idea. How did he get free?

MASHA: Money. Three thousand roubles. All his life savings. Melikhovo evened the score.

OLGA: You asked me to visit you and Anton. I think it was at Melikhovo I fell in love with him.

MASHA: Of course we had to sell the place. That was my job. It wasn't easy, and I had to sell it at a loss. We were both exhausted me with the dairy business and Anton with the planting, his surgery and writing the dozens of stories he had to turn out to pay off the mortgage. A disaster, really. The man I sold it to only made one payment, I never got the full price, cheap though it was.

LIGHTS DOWN AND UP ON CHEKHOV AT MELIKHOVO WHERE HE IS PRACTISING AS A DOCTOR. HE IS SITTING AT A DESK, WRITING IN A NOTEBOOK. HE WRITES FAST, LOOKING UP AND SMILING, SOMETIMES LAUGHING. HE IS ABOUT 28. MASHA ENTERS.

MASHA: There's a patient to see you. He's on the back verandah. Shall I tell him to wait?

CHEKHOV: What for?

MASHA: Till you finish it. You said you had to get it off… your story!

CHEKHOV: No of course not. It can wait. Send him in.

A PEASANT (MIKHAI IVANOVICH) ENTERS. HE'S SHABBILY DRESSED, OLD SHEEPSKIN COAT, MANGY FUR HAT, FELT BOOTS. HE BOWS LOW.

PEASANT: Respected doctor. May God bless you and spare you for many years and...

HE CROSSES HIMSELF.

CHEKHOV: Yes, yes, I am sure he will. What's wrong with you Mikhai Ivanovich?

PEASANT: Dr. Chekhov, I was chopping down a dead tree and clearing the ground in the North paddock, the Count wants to plant rye there this season, you see it's bringing a good price now, you know…

CHEKHOV: Yes, yes, I understand.

PEASANT: And the axe slipped, and I fell back on a sharp stump. You know how it is- these dead trees splinter and I'd taken off my jacket, it's been hot weather, and now I can't work and can't the Count says, *no* work, *no* money.

CHEKHOV: Take your coat off Mikhail Ivanovich and let me look.

THE PEASANT REMOVES HIS JACKET AND REVEALS A LOT OF RAGS, AND BLOOD STAINED, TORN SHIRT STICKING TO THE FLESH.

PEASANT: You see, Dr. Chekhov, I can't work and there's not a kopeck in the house, and there's nothing for the children to eat, nothing, Dr. Chekhov.

CHEKHOV PULLS HIS SHIRT, OFF. THE PEASANT SUFFERS SILENTLY

CHEKHOV: Yes, you've got yourself in a nice mess. **(Calls)** Masha!. He takes a pair of tweezers from a box. **(MASHA appears)** Bring Mikhail Ivanovich a glass of vodka, a *large* one. **(He begins to peel off some rags stuck on the wound,)** There's a splinter still inside and the whole wound's gone septic.

MASHA COMES BACK WITH A GLASS AND A BOTTLE OF VODKA. SHE PUTS THESE DOWN AND THEN RETREATS. CHEKHOV POURS HIM A GLASS.

CHEKHOV: Here! Drink it down.

THE PEASANT LOOKS AT IT WITH JOY, AND DRINKS IT DOWN WITHOUT A BREATH.

CHEKHOV: Here! Hold on to the chair and bend down.

HE QUICKLY PULLS OUT THE SPLINTER. THE PEASANT GIVES A MUFFLED GROAN.

CHEKHOV: You've got an abscess here. Push your trousers down more.

THE PEASANT LOOKS AT THE BOTTLE OF VODKA. HE LANCES IT QUICKLY.

CHEKHOV: *Wait.* It's not finished.

CHEKHOV GETS A BOTTLE OF IODINE AND A SWAB. AND DABS IT.

CHEKHOV: That stings but it'll be better tomorrow.

THE PEASANT LOOKS LONGINGLY AT THE BOTTLE OF VODKA. HE STARTS PUTTING ON HIS CLOTHES AND TRIES TO WRAP THE RAGS AROUND HIS BACK AGAIN BUT CHEKHOV GRABS THEM.

CHEKHOV: Burn these.

PEASANT: But….

CHEKHOV: *Burn* them.

PEASANT: Dr. Chekhov, this is my bandage. The only one in the house. If a child gets burnt or a cut…

CHEKHOV: Then tell your wife to wash it in boiling water and salt. Boiling mind you, boiling.

PEASANT: Yes, Dr. Chekhov. They say you… write stories, Dr. Chekhov.

CHEKHOV: Stories! Who's they?

PEASANT: The school teacher reads the comic paper: "Splinters".

CHEKHOV: Can you read?

PEASANT: No, I can't. But my eldest son goes to the new school. Do you write those… those…

CHEKHOV: Stories? Of course not. I'm a doctor, not a story writer. Look on the wall, you'll see my certificate. Anton Pavlovich Chekhov. Doctor. University of Moscow. That writer… I know him. He's a fellow called Anton Chekhonte - that's who he is. Medicine is my work. I've *no* time for *anything* else.

PEASANT: That writer, the teacher says, writes about us poor folk. It's comic, isn't it? He writes about us?

HE LAUGHS.

CHEKHOV: Here's a bottle of castor oil. Take a spoon each day. Clears out the insides. What's wrong with your eye?

PEASANT: That's nothing.

CHEKHOV: Let me look. There's a cut here. Who gave you that? At the pub? Fighting, were you? Getting drunk?

PEASANT: No, Dr. Chekhov, I work twelve hours in the fields. The Count's a hard man.

CHEKHOV: Haven't you got a wife at home?

PEASANT: How can I go back home? What with the children yelling and pushing each other off the stove. No peace. And the tax collector came and took our samovar. That's the latest. If you can't pay up they take your samovar. It's the only thing we've got. What's life without a samovar? My wife cries all day. How can I go home to this?

CHEKHOV: **(Searching his pockets)** Here's nine… *ten* kopecks for your wife to buy bread. *Bread*, mind you!

PEASANT: God bless you, sainted doctor. May He rain his Heavenly Grace upon your head.

CHEKHOV: That's enough. Here's *five* kopecks for a drink in the pub. Now go home early and sleep. *And* get a rat trap! You've got rats everywhere, I suppose.

PEASANT: Yes, one bit the baby's ear and my wife's foot through her favourite slipper. And one even chewed up a lighted candle and now we don't even have…

CHEKHOV: Listen! Get rid of them.

PEASANT: I will. I'll *drive* them all out, Dr. Chekhov…

CHEKHOV: And look after your children.

PEASANT: I will, I promise you, Dr. Chekhov….

CHEKHOV: How many?

PEASANT: **(Counts on his fingers)** That's nine and two more dead. My wife had twins, but stillborn. God's will be done. **(He crosses himself)** My eldest son can write. He goes to the new school. One day he'll keep us all. He'll be a government official. We'll go to Moscow.

MASHA ENTERS WITH A LETTER IN HER HAND. THE PEASANT BOWS LOW TO THEM BOTH AND BEGINS TO LEAVE.

CHEKHOV: Send the woman with the howling child in. Oh and give Mikhail Ivanovich a shirt please.

MASHA: Not one of your *good* shirts!

CHEKHOV: Well, one of father's then. He won't miss it.

MASHA: Did he pay you?

CHEKHOV: Of course not. But he's given me a good idea for a story, Masha.

MASHA: This has just arrived from Moscow. **(She hands him the letter)** I thought it might be important ..

CHEKHOV: Thanks. **(He opens it and reads it)** ... My, God, my God… I don't believe it!

MASHA: What? Is it the mortgage?

CHEKHOV: No, no. It's from Grigorovich. Listen, he says… he says…I have a lot of talent. I'm a *real* writer.

MASHA: But of course you are.

CHEKHOV: But a *serious* writer. Listen: "You have a real talent for the visual scene. You can create a picture in a few lines. You describe clouds on a sunset - "Like ash on a dying fire". When I read that I knew that here was a real writer. Your work is wasted in trivial magazines. You *must* have respect for a talent that is so rarely granted. I read another splendid story in "News of the Day" - Oh God, that scandal sheet –

"it should be called "Screws of the Day"", and they never even paid me for it.! "Stop doing hack work!" he tells me. But how can I?

PAUSE.

MASHA: Go on.

CHEKHOV: "I don't know how well off you are, but better go hungry and save your impressions for work that is as near perfection as you can make it. I read one story in the "Petersburg News" called 'The Huntsman.' It's a fine piece of work. Then I read all I could find by Antosha Chekhonte"- Oh my God, all that rubbish! - "I hear you're publishing a book of stories. Don't hide under a pseudonym. You'll make your own name famous. I shake your hand as a friend."

MASHA: Oh Anton! Grigorovich! He's *president* of the Academy!

CHEKHOV: I must write back at once. How many more patients?

MASHA: Just the old man who fell in the pond, and the woman with the baby.

CHEKHOV: Send the woman in. How can I write serious work? I wrote "The Huntsman" on the bathhouse floor. The only place I can be sure of a bit of peace is on the lavatory. Fortunately, with my hemorrhoids I spend a lot of time there.

MASHA: Things will get better,

LIGHTS DOWN ON CHEKHOV AND UP ON MASHA.

MASHA: That night he sat in the bathhouse and worked till dawn. He finished the story which was to pay the mortgage installment. He'd already written dozens of stories. Before his last in 1 he'd written more than five hundred. That's the published figure, there were lots more which were never traced.

LIGHTS DOWN ON MASHA AND UP ON CHEKHOV HE IS SITTING IN A DECKCHAIR ON THE PROMENADE IN YALTA. HE IS WEARING A WHITE SUIT AND A STRAW HAT. HE'S WRITING IN A NOTEBOOK. HE LOOKS RELAXED AND LOOKS UP FROM TIME TO TIME AT THE VIEW OF THE SEA BEHIND. A PRETTY YOUNG WOMAN, IN LIGHT SUMMER CLOTHES, ENTERS WITH A SMALL WHITE DOG ON A LEAD. AS SHE APPROACHES HIM HE LOOKS UP AND THEIR EYES MEET. SHE PAUSES FOR A SECOND. THEY BOTH SMILE SLIGHTLY. SHE SEEMS ABOUT TO SPEAK,

HE HALF RISES. SHE GIVES A TINY BOW AND WALKS ON. SHE SITS ON A BENCH NEARBY WITH HER BACK TO CHEKHOV. HE WATCHES HER. SHE FONDLES THE DOG AND LOOKS AT THE SEA.

CHEKHOV: **(He is jotting notes down)** I think I'll start my story like this.
"Women always saw in him someone who was quite different from what he really was, and they loved this man they had created in their imagination." **(He pauses and thinks then goes on.)** The man must be the sort person they'd been looking for all their lives and when they actually find him and realise their mistake, they can't break away from this ideal they've built up - they can't stop loving him. And of course none of them find happiness with him. But he's also looking for happiness or at least distractions. And he goes on having affairs and leaving them but he never actually falls in love - or whatever you like to call it - anyhow it wasn't love, and he knows it. And now, when his hair is turning grey and he's thinking he's got to give the game away, he falls in love and I mean really and truly in love, passionately, sexually, for the first time in his life… I think that's a promising start

HE GLANCES ONCE MORE AT THE FIGURE ON THE BEACH. SUVORIN DRESSED IN SUMMER ATTIRE, ENTERS AND SITS BESIDE HIM.

SUVORIN: I thought I'd find you here. What are you writing? Another story?

CHEKHOV: I've written hundreds for you already, isn't that enough?

HE CONTINUES TO GAZE AT THE YOUNG WOMAN ON THE BEACH.

SUVORIN: What's so interesting about that young woman's back?

CHEKHOV: Can't you see, she's waiting for something to happen - maybe the most important thing in her life?

SUVORIN: You mean she's trying to pick up some philanderer?

CHEKHOV: She's very attractive and there's an air of tragedy about her.

SUVORIN: Just on the prowl.

CHEKHOV: No, she's waiting for her fate, watch!

A YOUNG MAN ENTERS FROM THE OPPOSITE SIDE. HE STOPS BY THE BENCH AND THE YOUNG WOMAN LOOKS AT HIM. HE BENDS TO

STROKE THE DOG. SHE SMILES. THEY MIME A CONVERSATION. HE RAISES HIS HAT, SHE BOWS. HE SITS BESIDE HER. THEY LAUGH. SHE STANDS UP AND INDICATES THAT SHE IS GOING SOMEWHERE. HE STANDS TOO, OBVIOUSLY WISHING TO ACCOMPANY HER. HE OFFERS HER HIS HAND, SHE HESITATES, THEN TAKES IT. SHE DISENGAGES HERSELF AND PUTS UP HER PARASOL, HE TAKES THE DOG'S LEAD. THEY WALK PAST CHEKHOV AND SUVORIN. AS THEY PASS WE HEAR A FRAGMENT OF DIALOGUE.

YOUNG WOMAN: As a matter of fact I was going to meet a friend off the boat from Odessa.

YOUNG MAN: Of course, it's the great event of the day. May I come with you? Or is it your husband?

YOUNG WOMAN: Oh no. Just a friend. Please come.

THEY MOVE ON, TALKING.

CHEKHOV: Of course that's the start of an affair. She has a husband, a minor government official - he's boring, she's come to Yalta to escape him. He's, yes, the man's a womaniser, looking for a holiday diversion married? Yes, I think so. This evening they'll make love. It's meant to be a casual affair, but it's not. They try to leave each other, but it's the only passion they've ever known. They'll make love again. They're *obsessed,* infatuated. They meet in secret months afterwards. They plan to go away together.

SUVORIN: How will it end, will they both commit suicide? Is it a tragedy?

CHEKHOV: No, it's life. Life goes on, doesn't it. Tragedy's for fiction.

SUVORIN: Could this be a new play?

CHEKHOV: No. I don't think I'll write it at all.

SUVORIN: It's good. Controversial. You're making this adulterer your hero. We're going to be asked to sympathise with him - and the young woman - not a thought for her children, her faithful husband.

CHEKHOV: Tolstoi wouldn't like it.

SUVORIN: Takes the stuffing out of "Anna Karenina" don't you think?

CHEKHOV: Perhaps I will write it.

SUVORIN: Anton, why don't you give up medicine once and for all? You're wasting your time over patients that exhaust you, they don't pay you, they take up your energy.

CHEKHOV: I'm not a writer, Tolstoi's a writer, Dostoevski, Gregorovich. My stories are dashed off, stuck in papers and magazines. In five years, *no* seven years they'll all be forgotten.

SUVORIN: I want to publish a collection of your work. That'll sell. You'll be rich.

CHEKHOV: I doubt it. And young writers today - I dislike the whole scene - ambitious, bowing and scraping to get good notices. All the intrigue that goes on. And all the high-flown ideas - and not a real character among them. Let's be ordinary. Look at life as it is.

SUVORIN: Isn't that limited, boring - the small town life, the ordinary life we really know, Russian life ?

CHEKHOV: Better than unreal romance. What I look for is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, love, yes - and the need for freedom - freedom from violence and lies. Those are things we know about.

SUVORIN: But writers must concern themselves, surely, about issues, visions of a better world, ideals.

CHEKHOV: No! Writers are here to state problems, not to solve them. *No* preaching, *no* message, *no* ulterior motives, just life. It's not their job to lecture us on God, depression, peasants, the fate of capitalism, drunks, boots, female complaints, - don't pass judgment. Leave the readers to be the jury. Record, just record.

SUVORIN: But there's so many problems. Land reform, political freedom, the place of women…

CHEKHOV: Women!

SUVORIN: Yes, women!

CHEKHOV: A young writer wrote to me about his *women* characters. He said they didn't seem real. I said: "Listen. You must describe women in such a way that the reader feels that your tie is off and your waistcoat's undone. Let yourself go.

Be honest! " And *no* politics, *no* philosophy - leave that to the experts.

SUVORIN: Yes, as a publisher I see a lot of that idealised, unreal stuff. That's what's different about what you write. It's original, a new view on Russian life. It's real. I feel I know your characters.

CHEKHOV: You *probably* do.

SUVORIN: Have you put me in yet?

CHEKHOV: No, but I *probably* will.

SUVORIN: Are you saving me for a play?

CHEKHOV: Plays! I've *finished* with the theatre, *finished.*

SUVORIN: Finished?

CHEKHOV: It's a disease of the cities. A rash!

SUVORIN: **(Laughs)** A rash! My dear boy…

CHEKHOV: Contagious - and it's spreading. Only the unhealthy love it. We need to abolish it. Get it out of the hands of grocers and into the hands of the writers. Even those at the top are corrupt. The exploit, they're unscrupulous. Who am I writing for?

SUVORIN: The audiences, of course.

CHEKHOV: Audiences! I don't *see* my audiences, I don't believe in them. I don't want to know them. They're uneducated, ill-mannered. They've no idea what the play's about. Russians! Thick headed, lethargic, full of guilt feelings, and sudden bursts of excitability. How can you write for such cretins? Germany has no lethargic, pessimistic, superfluous people. And the French - they're excited all the time - into senility. I'm getting bored with literature. A *sprawl* in the hay and a *perch* on the line gives me more pleasure.

SUVORIN: But you'll write this story - about the lady with the dog for me?

CHEKHOV: I don't know. I'm sick of critics who complain I don't make social statements, of people who borrow my books and go off with them, who borrow money and don't return it,

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