

ÓLGA

It's a year ago today that Father died, May fifth, on your birthday, Irína. It was very cold, and it snowed. I never thought I'd live through it. You fainted, and you were lying there as if you were dead too. But now it's a year later, and it doesn't bother us to talk about it; you're wearing a white dress and you look lovely.

And the clock struck that morning just the same way. *(Pause)* I remember when they carried Father's coffin out, there was a band playing; it was a military funeral, and at the cemetery they fired rifles over the grave. He was a general, a brigade commander. I thought there should have been more people, but it was raining, raining hard, and then it started to snow.

Today it's warm enough to leave the windows wide open, even though the birch trees haven't put out any leaves yet. Father got his command eleven years ago, and we left Moscow and came here. It was the beginning of May then too; I remember exactly: Moscow was already full of flowers, it was warm, and there was sunshine everywhere. That was eleven years ago, and I remember it all exactly, just as if we'd only left Moscow yesterday. Oh, my! This morning I woke up and realized it was springtime: everything was so bright, I felt such a wave of happiness inside me, and I wanted so much to go back home.

Másha, don't whistle like that! Really! *(Pause)* I spend the whole day at school, and then I do extra tutoring in the evenings, and my head aches all the time; and I get so depressed sometimes, it's as if I'd gotten old all of a sudden. Four years at that high school, and every day I feel as if a little more life and strength was slipping away from me. There's only one thing that keeps me going—Yes, going back to Moscow, as soon as we can. Másha can come spend the summers with us, every year.

You do look lovely today—you seem really beautiful. And Másha is beautiful too. Andréy would be better-looking, but he's gotten awfully heavy; it doesn't look good on him. And I've gotten old. I've lost far too much weight; I'm sure it's all because of the girls at the high school—they keep making me so angry. But today is Sunday, I can stay home, my head doesn't ache, and I feel much younger than I did yesterday. Well, that's all right, it's God's will, but sometimes I think if I'd gotten married and could stay home all day long, that would be better somehow. *(Pause)* I would have loved my husband.

ÓLGA

Dearest, let me talk to you, as your sister, as a friend. If you want my advice, marry the baron. After all, you respect him, you value his friendship... I know he's not very good-looking, but he's a good man, an honest man... People don't marry for love; they marry because they're supposed to. At least I think they do. I would have married without love. It wouldn't have made any difference who it was, as long as he was an honest man. I'd even marry an old man...

Oh, darling, I know, I know. When the baron resigned from the service and first came to see us in his civilian clothes, he was so plain-looking I started to cry... And he asked me what I was crying about, and what could I tell him? But if God brings the two of you together, I would be very happy. You see, things are very different from what you thought, very different.

MÁSHA

I don't know. *(Pause)* I don't know. Of course, habit can be very strong. For example, after Father died it took us a long time to get used to the fact that we didn't have orderlies anymore. But I think I'm being fair about it, even allowing for habit. Maybe it's different in other places, but in this town the most respectable, the best brought up, and the best educated people are in the military.

I got married when I was eighteen, and I was afraid of my husband because he was a teacher, and I was barely out of school. I used to think he was terribly wise, intelligent, and important. Now I've changed my mind. Unfortunately. I've gotten used to him. But most of the people in this town are so vulgar, so unpleasant, so stupid. Vulgarity upsets me, it wounds me; I get physically sick when see someone who lacks finesse, who lacks kindness and gentleness. When I have to spend time with my husband's colleagues from the high school, it makes me sick.

Listen to the noise in the chimney. Right before Father died, the wind made a noise in the chimney. Just like that.

MÁSHA

My dear sisters, I want to confess something. I want to bare my soul. I want to confess something to you, and then I never want to say another word about it ever again. I want to tell you everything right now. *(Quietly)* It's my secret, but you should know it anyway... I can't keep it to myself anymore. *(Pause)* I'm in love, I'm in love... I love that man, the one you saw just now... Well, that's it: I love Vershínin.

What can I do! At first I thought he was strange, then I started feeling sorry for him... then I fell in love with him: in love with his voice, with the things he says, with all his problems, with his two little girls...

I'm in love! It's fate, I guess—I mean it's just my luck. And he loves me... It's all so funny. Don't you think so? Doesn't it strike you funny? *(Takes Irína's hand, draws her close)* Oh, my darling, we'll get through life somehow, no matter what happens to us... When you read about these things in books, it all seems terribly silly and predictable, but when you fall in love yourself, you realize nobody knows anything about it, everyone has to figure it out for herself. My dear sisters, there. I've told you. Now I will never say another word about it. The rest is silence.

IRÍNA

Andréy has gotten so petty, so slow, and so old, living with that woman. He used to want to be a scientist, and yesterday he was bragging that he'd finally become a member of the County Council. He's a member, and Protopópov is the chairman... The whole town is talking and laughing, and he's the only one who doesn't know anything, doesn't see anything. Tonight everybody went to see the fire, but not him. He just sits in his room and pays no attention to anything; he just plays his violin. *(On edge)* Oh, it's awful, it's awful, awful! *(Cries)* I can't stand it. I can't stand it anymore! I can't, I can't! Throw me out, please, get rid of me! I can't stand it anymore!

(Sobbing) Where is it? Where did it all go? Oh, my God, my God! I've forgotten everything; my head is all mixed up... I can't remember the Italian word for window, or ceiling... I keep forgetting things; every day I forget more and more, and life goes by and it won't ever come back and we're never going to Moscow, never, never. I can see it all now—we're never going to get there... *(Trying to control herself)* Oh, I'm so unhappy... I can't work. anymore, I won't work anymore. I'm sick of it, I've had enough! I worked at the telegraph office, and now I work at the municipal building, and I despise it, I hate everything I have to do there... I'm almost twenty-four, I've been working all this time, and my brain has shriveled up; I've lost my looks, I've gotten old, and nothing, nothing! There's no satisfaction in any of it, and the time passes and you realize you'll never have the beautiful life you dreamed of; you just keep digging yourself deeper and deeper into a hole... I'm in despair, I am really in despair! And I don't understand why I'm still alive. I should have killed myself long ago.

I'm not crying, I'm not... It's all right... There, see, I'm not crying anymore. It's all right, it's all right!

ANDRÉY

Tomorrow's Friday, there's no meeting, but I'll go in anyway... get something done. It's a bore around here... *(Pause)* How funny life is! Today I had nothing to do, I was bored, I picked up this book—my old lecture notes from the university—and I started to laugh. My God, I'm the secretary of the County Council, the same council that Protopópov is chairman of; I'm the secretary, and the highest honor I can hope for is to become a full member! Me, a member of the local County Council, and every night I dream I'm a professor at the University of Moscow, a famous scientist, the pride of Russia!

I have to talk to someone. My wife doesn't understand me; I'm afraid of my sisters, I don't know why... I'm always afraid they'll laugh at me, make me feel ashamed... I don't drink, I don't like bars, but I'd love to be in Moscow right now, sitting at a table at Téstov's or the Grand Moscow. In Moscow you can sit in a restaurant full of people, and nobody knows you and you don't know anybody, but still you don't feel like a stranger. In this town you know everybody and everybody knows you, but you're always a stranger... A stranger, and alone.

ANDRÉY

(Terribly embarrassed) Don't get upset. I just want to know very calmly what it is you all have against me. Just tell me.

No, I'm going to say what I came for, and then I'll go. Right this minute. In the first place, you've got something against my wife, Natásha, and I've noticed it since the day I got married. Natásha is a lovely person, honest and straightforward and well brought up. In my opinion. I love my wife and I respect her, you understand? I respect her and I want to make sure the rest of you respect her too. I repeat, she is a lovely person, and all your remarks and attitudes—well, excuse me, but you're just being stuck-up... *(Pause)* In the second place, you all seem mad at me because I'm not a scientist or a professor or something. But I have an occupation: I'm a member of the County Council, and I consider that just as honorable and just as important as an intellectual career. I'm a member of the County Council and I'm proud of it, if you want to know... *(Pause)* In the third place—I still have something more to say—I mortgaged this house, and I didn't get your permission. It's my fault and I'm sorry and I ask you to forgive me. I had to do it because I owed a lot of money—thirty-five thousand. I don't gamble anymore, I gave it up, but the main thing is you're all girls, you get a military pension, and I don't! I don't have any income at all...

Pause.

You're not listening. Natásha is a fine, honest woman. *(Walks up and down in silence, then stops)* When I got married, I thought that we'd all live happily together... happily... But oh, my God... *(Starts to cry)* Oh, my dear sisters, my darling sisters, don't believe me, don't believe me... *(Leaves)*

NATÁSHA

Andy, what you doing? You reading? That's okay. I just wanted to... The lamps aren't lit... Tonight's carnival; the maid's all in a tizzy. You got to keep your eyes on them so nothing happens. Last night after midnight I was going through the dining room and there was this candle burning. I never could find out who did it. What time is it?

And Ólga and Irína are still out. Haven't come home yet. They just work and work, poor dears. Ólga at the Board of Education, Irína at the telegraph office... *(Sighs)* This morning I told your sister, I said you take care of yourself Irína, you hear me, honey? She never listens. Did you say quarter after eight? I'm worried about Bóbik; I think maybe he's a little sick. Why is he so cold? Yesterday he had a fever, and today he's cold all over... I get so worried! Well, all the same I better start him on a different diet. I'm just worried. And they said the carnival people are supposed to come tonight. I just don't think they better, Andy.

This morning the baby woke up and looked at me, and all of a sudden he smiled and I just know he recognized me. Hello, Bóbik, I said, hello, darlin'. And he laughed. Babies know exactly what's going on, Andy, they really do... So I guess I'll just tell them not to let the carnival people in when they come.

It's your sisters' house too; I'll tell them too. They're so sweet. *(Gets up to go)* I told them to get you some yogurt for supper. Doctor says you shouldn't eat anything except yogurt, otherwise you're not ever going to lose weight. *(Stops)* Bóbik's cold. I'm worried he's going to catch cold in that room of his, he could, you know? We should move him into another room until the warm weather, comes. For instance, Irína's room is just right for a baby's room; it's dry and gets the sun all day long. We should tell her, and she can move in with Ólga until then... She's never here during the daytime anyway; she just spends the night here... *(Pause)* Andy, how come you never talk to me?

NATÁSHA

They're saying we better get a group together to organize aid for the people who got burned out. It's a lovely idea, don't you think? We should help out the poor anyway; that's one of your responsibilities if you're rich. Bóbik and little Sophie are fast asleep; they're sleeping as if nothing in the world were going on. And we've got so many people; everywhere you look, the house is full of them. There's some kind of flu going around; I'm scared the children will catch it.

Yes... I must be a mess. *(Looks in the mirror)* Who said I was putting on weight? It's not true! Not a bit! And Másha's asleep; she must worn out, poor thing

(To Anfisa, coldly) Don't you dare sit down when I'm around! Get up! And get out of here!

Why you keep that old woman around I will never understand. You just spoil her! She doesn't do a thing! She's a peasant, she should be living on a farm. I like things nice and neat around the house, I don't want things sloppy!

(Pats Ólga's cheek) Poor sweet thing, you're tired! Our headmistress is all tired out! When my little Sophie grows up and starts high school, I'll have to start being scared of you.

I know I say things I shouldn't, dear, I know, but you have to agree she could go live on a farm.

She can't do any work anymore! Either I don't understand you or you don't want to understand me. She *cannot work*; she just sits around or she sleeps.

(Astonished) What do you mean, let her sleep? She's a servant, isn't she? *(Almost crying)* I just don't understand you, Ólga. I have two nurses for the children, we have a maid and a cook... What do we need that old woman for? What for?

We've got to come to some agreement, Ólga. Once and for all. You're at the high school, I'm at home. Your job is teaching, mine is running this house. And if I tell you something about the servants, then I know what I'm talking about. I know what *I am talk-ing a-bout!* And I don't want to see that stupid old woman around here tomorrow! *(Stamps her foot)* And don't you dare argue with me! Don't you dare! *(Calms down a little)* Really, if you don't move down to the basement apartment, we are always going to be fighting like this. It's terrible.

VERSHÍNIN

Well... I don't see that much difference, though, between military and civilians—in this town at least. They both seem uninteresting. They're all alike! Listen to any one of the locals who claim to be sensitive or intelligent—civilian or military. His wife depresses him, his house depresses him, everything he owns depresses him. We are all supposed to be such highly developed abstract thinkers, but why are our lives so depressing? Why?

Why does his wife depress him? And his children? And why do they get depressed by him?

Maybe I'm a bit depressed myself today. I didn't have any lunch. I haven't eaten a thing since this morning. My daughter wasn't feeling well, and whenever something is the matter with my two little girls I always get very upset; it kills me to think of the mother they've got. God, you should have seen her this morning! What a fool she is! We started fighting at seven this morning, and at nine I slammed the door and left. *(Pause)* I never talk about these things. It's funny, you're the only one I complain to about it... *(Kisses her hand)* Don't be angry with me. You're absolutely all I've got. You're a strange, wonderful woman. Strange and wonderful. I can see your eyes shining in the dark.

I love you, I love you, I love your eyes, the way you move, I dream about you... You strange, wonderful woman!

VERSHÍNIN

Well... *(Laughs)* This is all really very strange, isn't it? *(Pause)* When the fire started, I ran right home; as soon as I got there, I realized our house was safe and sound, but my two little girls were standing in the doorway. All they had on was their underwear, their mother was gone, there were people running everywhere, horses, dogs barking, and on those little girls' faces was a look of horror, fear, anxiety, I don't know what all—it wrung my heart to see them like that. My God, I thought, what will those little girls have to go through during their lifetime! I picked them up and brought them here, but all I could think of was what they would have to go through before they die.

And when I got here, I found their mother—angry, screaming.

And when my little girls were standing there in their underwear, with no shoes on, and the street was all red from the fire, and the noise was terrible, I thought: This is the way things used to happen years ago—a surprise enemy attack, arson and looting... And yet of course there's really an enormous difference between then and now, isn't there? And after a little time goes by, say two or three hundred years, people will look back on our life with horror, or they'll laugh, and the things we do today will seem strange and complicated and impractical. And oh, what a life that will be then! *(Laughs)* Excuse me, I'm talking too much again; it's just the mood I'm in. *(Pause)* You're all asleep. Well, I'll keep talking anyway. What a life that will be! Just think: right now there are only three people like you in this town; another generation and there will be more, and then more and more, and a time will come when the whole world will have changed because of you, and everyone will live like you do, and finally even you will become part of the past, and people will be born who are better than you... *(Laughs)* I'm in the strangest mood today. I feel an urge to live, to do something wild! *(Sings)* "Lyubví vse vósrasty pokórny, yeyó porývy blagotvórny..." *(Laughs)*

KULÝGIN

(Going up to Irína) Dearest sister, allow me to congratulate you on this happy occasion and to convey to you my heartfelt wishes for good health and whatever else a girl of your age may desire—properly desire, that is. And allow me to present you with this little book as a small token of my esteem. *(Gives her a book)* It's a history of the first fifty years of our local high school. I wrote it myself. A mere trifle, written in an idle hour, but I want you to be sure to read it anyway. This little book contains the names of all those who have graduated from our high school over the last fifty years. *Feci quod potui, faciant meliora potentes.*

Today is Sunday, ladies and gentlemen, a day of rest. Let us all seek rest, each according to his age and status. These rugs should be rolled up and stored for the summer, in mothballs or naphtha... The Romans were a healthy race, they knew how to work, they also knew how to rest. They had a *mens sana in corpore sano*. They lived their lives according to the proper forms. Our headmaster always says the main thing in life is form. When things lose their form, they lose their identity—and in our daily lives it is precisely the same. Másha loves me. My wife loves me. And the window drapes should be stored with the rugs... I'm very happy today, in an excellent frame of mind. Másha, we're going to the headmaster's this afternoon at four. There's an outing for the teachers and their families.

And he's invited us all back to spend the evening at his place. Despite his precarious health, that man does his best to be sociable. Astonishing personality. A remarkable man, really extraordinary. Yesterday at the faculty meeting he turned to me and said, "I'm tired, Fyódor Ilých. Tired." *(Looks at the clock then at his own watch)* Your clock is seven minutes fast. Tired. That's what he said.

KULÝGIN

What I heard was Solyóný and the baron met on the boulevard near the theater, and Solyóný started teasing the baron, and he couldn't take it anymore and said something insulting ...

...and they say that Solyóný is in love with Irína and that's why he can't stand the baron. Well, it's understandable. Irína's a wonderful girl. She's very much like my Másha, both very thoughtful. Only your personality is easier, Irína. Of course, Másha has a very good personality too. I love her, I really do.

Well, the troops are leaving today, and then everything will be back the way it used to be. Whatever people say, Másha is a wonderful woman, an honest woman. I love her and thank God for her. People turn out differently... There's a clerk in the local tax office—Kózyrev, his name is—we went to high school together. He never graduated because he couldn't understand the *ut consecutivum* construction. He's terribly poor, not well at all, and whenever I see him I say, "Hello there, *ut consecutivum!*" "Yes," he says "*ut consecutivum*, that's right," and then he coughs. I've been lucky all my life. I'm happy, I've even got a certificate of merit, and now I teach the *ut consecutivum* to others. Of course, I'm intelligent, more intelligent than most, but that won't necessarily make you happy...

TÚZENBACH

My God, I really understand that desire to work! I've never worked a day in my life. I was born in Petersburg, where it's cold and boring, and no one in my family has ever worked, or even had to worry. I remember whenever I got home from military school there was always a servant to take my boots off. I was a real little monster to them, but my mother just smiled and let me do whatever I wanted. She never understood when other people objected to the way I behaved. They tried to protect me from hardship, but I don't think they quite managed. And now the time has come, there's a storm gathering, a wild, elemental storm, it's coming, it's almost over our heads! And it will clean out our society, get rid of laziness and indifference, and this prejudice against working and this lousy rotten boredom. I intend to work, and in twenty-five or thirty years we will all work! All of us!

SOLYÓNY

What do you mean, be friends? Who said we were enemies?

(Reciting) "I am strange, we all are strange! Forget thy wrath, Aléko!"

Whenever I'm alone with someone, I feel all right, just ordinary, but when I'm in a group I feel depressed and shy, and I... I say a lot of stupid things. But still, I'm more honest and open than a lot of other people. A lot of others. And I can prove it.

Let's have a drink.

I don't have anything against you, Baron. But I have the soul of Lérmontov. *(Quietly)* I even look a little like Lérmontov... At least that's what people say... *(Takes out his bottle of cologne and rubs some on his hands)*

(Reciting) "Forget thy wrath, Aléko! Forget thy dreams..."

And if it bothers you all to listen to me, if my words offend you, I don't have to say anything. I can even leave the room... *(Goes out)*

CHEBUTÝKIN

(Sullen) The hell with 'em all... the hell with 'em. They think I'm a doctor and I know how to cure people, but I don't know anything. I forgot everything I knew, I don't remember a thing. Not a thing. The hell with 'em. Last Wednesday I went out to Zásyp to take care of a sick woman. She died, and it's my fault she died. My fault... Maybe I knew something twenty-five years ago, but now I can't remember a thing. My head is empty, and so is my heart. Maybe I'm not even human... Maybe I don't even exist... maybe it's all my imagination. *(Starts to cry)* Oh, I wish I didn't exist! *(Stops crying. Sullen, as before)* What the hell... Two days ago I went to the club, they were all talking about Shakespeare and Voltaire; I never read 'em, but I pretended like I did. So did all the rest of 'em. They all pretended. Made me sick! I kept thinking about that woman who died on Wednesday, I kept thinking about everything, and I got feeling ugly and twisted and mean... So I went out and got drunk.

ANFÍSA

(Giving musicians some money) God bless you, dears. Poor people. *(To Irína)* Rinie, hello! Oh, my dear, what a life, what a life! We're at the high school, Ólga and me, in one of the faculty apartments. The Lord is taking care of my old age. I never lived so good, ever. It's a big apartment, rent-free, and I've got a room and a bed of my own! All rent-free! And when I say my prayers and go to sleep at night... My Lord! I'm the happiest woman in the world!

FERAPÓNT

Chairman sent over a book and some papers. Here. *(Gives him a book and a packet)*

I came by a while ago, it was still light. Wouldn't let me in. Said you were busy. That's what they said. Well, that's fine: if he's busy he's busy. I'm not in no hurry. *(Thinks Andréy asked him something)* What?

I dunno... Can't hear too well.

Now, in Moscow, there's a fella over to the office the other day, he says there was this bunch of men in Moscow, businessmen, he says, and they were eatin' pancakes. Now, this one fella, he ate forty of 'em, he up and died. Or maybe it was fifty. Can't remember.

What? *(Pause)* This same fella, he was tellin' us—coulda been lyin', I dunno—he was sayin' they got a rope in Moscow, hangs all across town, one side to the other.

I dunno. This fella was tellin' us.

(Pause). Mind if I go?

FEDÓTIK/RÓHDE – read KULÝGIN