

TRIGORIN

Obsessions can lay hold of anyone. Well, my obsession is simply—write, write, write! I barely finish one book than a restless idea howls at me to write another, and then a third, and then a fourth—I'm like a wretched peasant toiling in a factory. I hurtle from one story to another, unable to stop. What's bold and brilliant? That's no miracle—that's unhinged! Even now, delighted as I am talking to you, I can't forget for an instant that an unfinished story calls me. And...also...my eye falls on that cloud there: oh, it's shaped like a grand piano; I make a mental note—use that! [*Flipping through notebook.*] I smell heliotrope; I jot down: a sickly smell, the color worn by widows; use it for a description of a summer party on a humid evening. I immediately heave these treasures into my literary war chest, certain that someday they'll be the key to that great novel, that immortal character—and I'll finally get it right! I cannot escape myself, even though I know it's consuming my life. I'm a madman. Shouldn't my friends intervene?

KONSTANTIN

Let's conduct a psychological analysis. Dazzling on stage, my mother can cry at will or make an audience double over in laughter with a raised eyebrow. In real life, yes, she's capable of charming anyone—she can nurse the sick like an angel, but if anyone praises Bernhardt or Duse? No! She alone can play "Camille"! She alone must be gushed over and written about! And! When the theaters close for the summer, she creates drama around her—just watch. Plus, I'm almost twenty-three—a living reminder she's not an ingenue. When I'm away she's thirty-two; I show up and she's forced to be forty-three. She knows, too, that I despise her kind of theater. She imagines she's serving humanity practicing her sacred art, but really, it's just a vehicle for commercial vanity and smug middle-class prejudices—contrived plots, sentimental endings, and pandering moralism. We need a new theater! Not the same people, doing the same plays, for the same audiences. Open the doors! New stories, new characters, new artists! Otherwise, we don't deserve theater!

SHAMRAYEV

I am grieved to inform you that your carriage awaits. The time commences, my friends, for our train departs at two-oh-five. [*To ARKADINA.*] Would you be kind enough, honored madam, to inquire whether Suldayev the actor still exists? A singular talent—I'm certain you recollect! And where his company resides? We passed so many jolly evenings together. He was inimitable in "The Stolen Mail." A tragedian called Izmailov played in the same company. No hurry, madam, you still have five minutes. If memory serves, they were both portraying conspirators. At one performance when they were suddenly discovered, instead of saying "We've been duped!" Izmailov accidentally shouted "We've been pooped!" [*Laughs.*] Pooped! [*Laughs. Changes tone.*] Drop us a note to cheer us up. It's time.

DR. DORN

I may have lost my wits, but I liked that play. When Nina spoke of her solitude, and the Devil's eyes gleamed across the lake, I felt the hair on my arms stand up...Oh, here he comes!

KONSTANTIN enters.

Konstantin, your play was very strange...I mean, I'd never seen anything like that. Of course, we didn't hear the end, so maybe it's foolish to say anything...but, my boy, it stirred me deeply. You have a great deal of talent...continue writing.

KONSTANTIN bursts into tears.

Oh, my! You're crying. Oh, goodness...There, there...Well, as I was saying—um—you chose a lofty theme—life!—beyond time and place, and presented it—uh—abstractly? Am I saying it right? [*Waves his hand.*] You know, I lead a quiet, contented existence, but if I ever created something like that from my own imagination, I would soar above the earth...Oh! One thing: every work of art should have a definite goal—know why you're writing. Without a clear purpose, you'll lose your audience.

NINA

I must go, Konstantin. It's late. And I have to find my own way. I know that. When I'm famous you must come and see me! Promise? Don't tell Trigorin anything. You see, I—I—oh, just say it!—I still love him. I love him even more than I used to. 'Just an idea for a short story.' I long for him passionately—I hunger to despair. [*Breaks off.*] No. No-no-no. Go back. Before that. Konstantin, look at me: remember how magical the old days were? The gentle, pure life we led? Carry that with you. Mourn it. Celebrate it. That's all I can say. [*Embraces him, then breaks away, but turns at the terrace door.*] "All humans, all beasts, lions and eagles, quails and noble bucks, geese and spiders, silent fish beneath the roiling waves, and creatures invisible to the eye—in a word, LIFE—" [*Exits.*]

ARKADINA

Konstantin told me his play was ironic—an experiment, so I treated it like a joke, a parody of the avant garde! But now it appears that he has birthed a masterpiece! Theater mustn't amuse! No, it must hector the audience and fumigate us with sulfur...and then run away, playing the victim! I'm tired of this indulgence. Forcing insolent tirades on an unsuspecting public, blaming us—that's the new art, the new theater? Thank you, no. ...Oh, let's not talk about plays or theater. Such a lovely evening. Listen! Music, friends. [*Pause.*] Long ago we had music almost every night. There were six grand houses. Music and laughter and romance—such romance! In those days the young idol was you, Doctor Dorn. He's fascinating now, but then he was irresistible! ...Oh, my conscience torments me. Why did I hurt my poor boy? Why? [*Calling.*] Konstantin!

PETRA/ARKADINA

ARKADINA. [*Fussing with luggage.*] There! That should be everything...

PETRA. We'll be lonely without you.

ARKADINA. I depend on you to keep this place running. And my life in the city is far too chaotic.

PETRA. A little chaos wouldn't hurt me. [*Laughing.*] I'm tired of lying about like an old cigarette butt. I ordered the carriage for one o'clock. I could throw a few things in a bag and we can whirl away together!

ARKADINA. Petra, I need you to keep an eye on my boy. You understand each other. [*Beat.*] Besides, the sooner I take Trigorin away, the better—jealousy.

PETRA. Among other reasons. [*Beat.*] Your son is a clever young man stuck in the provinces, without money or position, and nothing to do. He feels useless here.

ARKADINA. Let him run the estate!

PETRA. He's an artist. Can't you see that?

ARKADINA. [*Thoughtfully.*] Maybe he should join the army.

PETRA. Irina!

ARKADINA. Why not? To find himself.

PETRA. All right, it's too awkward to have us with you—at least give him some money.

ARKADINA. What!?

PETRA. So he can dress like a human being. Look at him! Wearing the same old tunic for years—he's like a serf pretending the emancipation never happened! And it wouldn't hurt to let him sow a few wild oats. Send him abroad, it wouldn't cost much.

ARKADINA. Are you mad? All right, I might manage some new clothes, a shirt, yes; but travel? I have no money. [*PETRA laughs.*] Don't laugh—I work in the theater! It's all illusion.

PETRA. Very well. Forgive me, darling. You're a noble, generous woman!

ARKADINA. [*Upset.*] My own costumes will bankrupt me this season.

PETRA. I'd give him money, but I haven't two rubles to rub together. My inheritance props up the estate or goes into cattle or bees. And what happens? Stupid cows die. The bees didn't. But you can't live on honey.

ARKADINA. You're marvelous and I adore you. So we're settled. What a relief!

PETRA. Huh. So Konstantin and I remain...

MEDVEDENKO/MASHA

MEDVEDENKO sets up chairs facing the stage. MASHA lolls about.

MEDVEDENKO. Why do you always wear black?

MASHA. I'm in mourning for my life.

MEDVEDENKO. Well, that's depressing.

MASHA. I'm unhappy.

MEDVEDENKO. Why? You're young, healthy, and so beautiful, Masha. Your father manages the estate of a famous actress. My life is much harder, but I don't wear black.

MASHA. You wear brown. Besides, happiness doesn't depend on money. Poor people are often happy.

MEDVEDENKO. Are they? My mother, two sisters, little brother, and I all live on my schoolteacher salary. Twenty-three rubles a month. We have to eat. You need tea and sugar, right? Tobacco—well, for my mother.

MASHA. The play will start soon.

MEDVEDENKO. Yes...Nina's acting in Konstantin's play. They've fallen in love. Their two souls will unite through the art of theater. The love of art, and the art of love. [*Chuckles a moment.*] But not our souls. I mean, I told you I love you. Why else would I tramp here, three miles, every day? Then again, why marry a man who can barely feed himself?

MASHA. [*Takes snuff.*] Medvedenko, I'm touched by your proposal—really! I just...can't, you know? [*Offering.*] Snuff?

MEDVEDENKO. No...thank you.

MASHA. So humid. It'll storm tonight... Look, you're sweet, but you do nothing but moon about or go on and on about money. Poverty's a tragedy, sure, but I'd be a beggar in rags if I could only—[*Hears voices off.*]*—they're coming!*

KONSTANTIN/NINA

KONSTANTIN. My enchantress! My dream!

NINA. [*Excitedly.*] Am I late? I hope I'm not late!

KONSTANTIN. [*Kissing her hands.*] No, no, no!

NINA. I've been out of my mind all day! Aaahhh! I was so afraid my father would find out, but they just went out driving, so I made a dash for it! My parents call this Bohemia. They're afraid I'll become an actor. But the lake draws me like a seagull. Oh, Konstantin, my heart is so full!

KONSTANTIN. We're alone.

NINA. Oh! Who's that over there?

KONSTANTIN. That's a tree. [*They kiss.*]

NINA. Why does it look so dark?

KONSTANTIN. It's evening—everything looks dark.
[*They kiss.*] Don't leave early, please.

NINA. I must!

KONSTANTIN. What if I follow you? I'll look up from your garden: "what light through yonder window breaks?"

NINA. The dog would growl, and the watchman would chase you away.

KONSTANTIN. I love you.

NINA. Oh, Konstantin, my head's spinning!

KONSTANTIN. The moon is rising. Time for thea-tah! Places! [*A quick kiss.*]

NINA. Places! [*Fusses with her costume.*]

KONSTANTIN. [*Checking props.*] Good: sulfur to make the red eyes glow. Are you nervous?

NINA. Very! Not about your mother, but Trigorin. He's so famous. He's young, isn't he?

KONSTANTIN. Yes.

NINA. What beautiful stories he writes!

KONSTANTIN. Really? I haven't read him much.

NINA. Your play is hard to act—there aren't any characters in it.

KONSTANTIN. Life must be presented as it appears in dreams. Terrifying and unexpected.

NINA. And not much plot. It's more like a recitation.

KONSTANTIN. [*Listening.*] Get backstage! They're coming!

NINA. I think all plays should have a love story.

MASHA/TRIGORIN

TRIGORIN is finishing breakfast; MASHA stands beside him.

MASHA. I'm telling you all this because you're an author and you may be able to use it in a book. Frankly, I wouldn't have lasted a day if Konstantin had shot himself and died. But he survived, and I'm a survivor, too. I'll tear this feeling out of my heart by the blood roots.

TRIGORIN. How will you do that?

MASHA. I'll marry Medvedenko.

TRIGORIN. The schoolteacher?

MASHA. Yes.

TRIGORIN. I'm not sure that's the solution.

MASHA. To love without hope year after year, to sit in a house waiting for that look that will never happen—try it! So, I'm not marrying for love—obviously. But it'll deaden the memories and get me out of here. Another drink?

TRIGORIN. I'm eating breakfast.

MASHA. [*Filling her glass.*] Well, it's noon! Don't look at me like that. Women drink more than you think, but usually in secret. I just do it openly. [*Fills his glass.*] To your good health! [*They toast.*] You're easy to talk to—sorry to see you go.

TRIGORIN. I'm sorry to leave.

MASHA. Then stay.

TRIGORIN. She won't. Konstantin's been so erratic, and she blames herself. First, he attempted suicide, and now he wants to challenge me to a duel—why, I don't know.

[*MEDVEDENKO enters with a trunk, sets it down and exits.*] He's either completely silent or lecturing everyone about new forms of art—as if art was not expansive enough to accommodate everybody.

MASHA. Jealousy. No, yearning. That schoolteacher is poor and, God knows, not the cleverest, but he's honorable and loves me unconditionally. Why...? [*NINA enters, looks out the window.*] Anyway, goodbye. Remember me, and use anything you want. I know you will. [*Clears dishes.*] Send me your next book, if you haven't forgotten me, and write something in it. Not the usual drivel, just: "To Masha, who, for some inexplicable reason, exists." [*She exits.*]

PAULINA/DR. DORN

PAULINA. It'll turn damp. I'll fetch your galoshes.

DORN. I'm fine, Paulina.

PAULINA. [*Doting.*] So obstinate! You never take care of yourself—and you're a doctor. You like to see me suffer, that's what it is. Yesterday you sat out on the terrace all evening—on purpose.

DORN. [*Sings.*] "Oh, tell me not that youth is wasted."

PAULINA. You were so enchanted by Madam Arkadina you didn't even notice the time. Confess: you're infatuated.

DORN. I'm an old lump.

PAULINA. Nonsense. You've kept your looks magnificently. Women still adore you.

DORN. [*Sings.*] "Once more I bow to thee."

PAULINA. And you men all grovel before a famous actress, all of you.

DORN. So what? We need artists as heroes and heroines. Ideals inspire us.

PAULINA. When women throw themselves at you, is that idealism?

DORN. I'm not an artist. And I've always behaved honorably toward women. If they like me, it's probably because I'm the only doctor in town.

PAULINA. [*Seizes his hand.*] Dearest! [*Laughter offstage.*]

DORN. Now, now, Paulina! They're coming.

DORN. Honestly! I prefer my drama on the stage! Your husband should be fired, but it'll only end with Petra apologizing to him and soothing her sister.

PAULINA. I know! These misunderstandings erupt every summer. It's the heat—and I'm so sensitive! If you knew how this upsets me! See! I'm trembling all over! I'll never endure his uncouth outbursts. Trembling! [*Imploringly.*] My darling, my beloved, take me away with you. Our time is now—let's end this deception, before it's too late.

DORN. Paulina, be reasonable: I'm no romantic hero, and you're—

PAULINA. You refuse me? Are there other women? Oh, I understand. Forgive me—I should know my place.

DORN. No, of course, it's not that. You're married, and I'm just a—

PAULINA. Yes! You're just a country doctor. Always the object of everyone's attraction.

DORN. Oh, please...

PAULINA. Never mind. It's my fault. My jealousy. I'm too sensitive.