

Acting Edition

Three Sisters

By Anton Chekhov

Translated by
Madeleine George

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|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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Madeleine George's translation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* premiered at Two River Theater (John Dias, Artistic Director; Michael Hurst, Managing Director) in Red Bank, NJ, in June of 2022. It was directed by Sara Holdren, the Lighting Designers were Emma Deane and Caitlin Smith Rapoport, the Choreographer was Chloe Treat, the Live Music Arranger was Daniel Schlosberg, the Scenic Designer was Jean Kim, the Costume Designer was Fabian Fidel Aguilar, the Sound Designers were Kate Marvin and Caroline Eng, the Wig Designer was Carissa Thorlakson, the Puppet Designers were Nick Lehane and Emma Wiseman, the Assistant Stage Manager was Mandy Scott, the Intimacy Coordinator was Cha Ramos, and the Production Stage Manager was Colt Luedtke. The cast was as follows:

OLGA	Anna Ishida
MASHA	Annelise Lawson
IRINA	Nemuna Ceesay
ANDREY SERGEYEVICH PROZOROV	Alex Brightwell
NATALIA IVANOVNA (NATASHA)	Kelly Letourneau
FYODOR ILYICH KULYGIN	Gabriel Levey
ALEKSANDR IGNATIYEVICH VERSHININ	Rami Margron
BARON NIKOLAI LVOVICH TUZENBACH	Rudy Roushdi
VASSILY VASSILYEVICH SOLYONY	Niall Powderly
IVAN ROMANOVICH CHEBUTYKIN	Mary Neufeld
ALEKSEY PETROVICH FEDOTIK / FERAPONT	Nick Ong
VLADIMIR KARLOVICH RODE / ANFISA	Regan Sims
YOUNG OLGA	Diana Osorio
YOUNG MASHA	Olivia Haney
YOUNG IRINA	Quinn McManus
IRINA UNDERSTUDY	Amaia Arana

CHARACTERS

(see endnotes for Russian name chart/pronunciation guide)

OLGA – the oldest sister

MASHA – the middle sister

IRINA – the youngest sister

ANDREY SERGEYEVICH PROZOROV – their brother

NATALIA IVANOVNA (NATASHA) – Andrey's fiancée, later his wife

FYODOR ILYICH KULYGIN – Masha's husband, a teacher at the high school

ALEKSANDR IGNATIYEVICH VERSHININ – a Lieutenant Colonel, the new battery commander

BARON NIKOLAI LVOVICH TUZENBACH – a First Lieutenant

VASSILY VASSILYEVICH SOLYONY – a Captain

IVAN ROMANOVICH CHEBUTYKIN – a military doctor

ALEKSEY PETROVICH FEDOTIK – a Second Lieutenant

VLADIMIR KARLOVICH RODE – a Second Lieutenant

FERAPONT – an elderly porter from the District Council's office

ANFISA – the elderly nurse to the Prozorov family

SOLDIER

OFFICERS

MAID

TWO MUSICIANS

SETTING

The action takes place in a small provincial city, the county seat of a rural district. There's an army base in town, but the nearest train station is a long drive away.

TIME

The end of an era.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

When John Dias, artistic director of Two River Theater, first came to me with the idea of translating *Three Sisters*, I was hesitant. I'd studied Russian since I was young and loved the Russians, particularly the early Soviet satirists, the mid-century lyric perverts, Gogol with his freaks and geeks. But Chekhov had always seemed inert to me.

Chekhov was bourgeois malaise in a nutshell: sets with tall windows giving out onto abstractions of birches, women gazing listlessly out those windows, cutlasses clanking in drawing rooms, colonels mansplaining their philosophies to whoever was bored enough to listen. I didn't have much use for these inward-gazing, backward-gazing tableaux. But Sara Holdren, who was directing this production, insisted that I was wrong, that I had just seen a bunch of bad productions and that *Three Sisters* was in fact a bubbling cauldron of big ideas. Her enthusiasm was infectious; I began the translation in the winter of 2020.

Then came the pandemic. A lot of us were standing at windows now, gazing out at our featureless futures, and in the cadence of our collective speech I began to hear Chekhov's rhythms everywhere. In hastily nailed-together sheds in the gutters of the stunned city we sat and drank too much, masks hanging tipsily off our faces, "philosophizing" to each other as searchingly as any Vershinins: "It's a catastrophe, but it's showing us the truth about our society!" "After this, how can we go back to the way we used to live?" We rehearsed our shared pasts, too, like Olgas and Mashas, recounting our experiences to the very people we had lived through them with: "Remember what it felt like riding the subway the day of the lockdown? Everybody trying to beat it home?" "Remember how empty the streets were back then? Like aliens had come and vacuumed everybody up?" "Can you believe it's been a year since we've seen each other? How is that even possible?" I'd only ever seen the opening line of *Three Sisters* ("Father died a year ago today," in most translations) delivered awash in wistfulness. Now I felt its true inner current: disbelief. How could this have happened? How is it still happening? How can our lives be so riven with uncertainty, and how are we persisting in the face of it? If only we could get our bearings for two seconds. If only we could know what was going to happen!

In the turbulence of that explosive year, the play flared vividly to life for me. I suddenly perceived the play's politics, so often submerged in American productions; Tuzenbach, the standard-bearer of sincerity in the play if there is one, can feel the huge change coming in Russia's political life, and warns of – thrills to – the coming storm that promises to blow the stupor of privilege away. I felt the pulse of the Russian language itself, as fresh and alive in Chekhov's usage as if it had been written down this morning. That cool spring and summer, as I worked through each act, it seemed to me that the English was shimmering

there just inside the Russian, flowing out to meet me from inside every line. I finally understood that *Three Sisters*, written in 1900, is a play poised on the cusp of an unimaginable new era, just as we are now. The characters are staring down their world-altering future with the same mix of fatalism, denial, self-medication and fragile hope that we bring to our own precarious moment.

I hope this translation captures the play's timeless timeliness. I didn't feel the need to update any details to make it relevant – it's all there, as eternal as it was when Chekhov wrote it. I apologize to Anton Pavlovich for my ignorance all those years, and extend my gratitude to Sara and John, who had the vision to help me see what was always there in this bold, urgent play.

Madeleine George (2023)

ACT ONE

(The Prozorovs' house. A living room; beyond that, a grand dining room. Midday – outside it's sunny and bright.)

(The table in the dining room is set for lunch.)

(OLGA, in the navy blue uniform of a girls' school teacher, walks back and forth, correcting student workbooks.)

(MASHA sits reading a book, dressed in black with her hat in her lap.)

(IRINA stands at the window in a white sundress, lost in thought.)

OLGA. Can you believe our father died a year ago today? Exactly one year ago, on the fifth of May. Your birthday, Irina. It was so cold, remember? It was snowing. I thought I wouldn't make it to the end of the day. You passed out on that couch and lay there like a corpse. And now a whole year has gone by. We can talk about it like it was any other day. You're in your party dress, standing in the sunshine –

(The clock strikes twelve.)

(As if this is proof of something.) The clock struck exactly like that on that day, too.

(Pause.)

The marching band played in his honor when they took him away. And then remember, in the cemetery they

gave him a twenty-one-gun salute? Hardly anybody came to the funeral, even though he was a general – a Brigade Commander. To be fair, though, it was raining. It was *pouring* – that sleety freezing rain.

IRINA. Why go over it all again?

*(In the dining room, **BARON TUZENBACH**, **CHEBUTYKIN**, and **SOLYONY** appear and gather around the table.)*

OLGA. You're right. It's warm today – all the windows are wide open, even though there aren't any leaves on the birches yet. It was May when Papa was given his command, too, and brought us all out here from Moscow to live. Eleven years ago, right around this time. I remember so clearly how gorgeous spring was that year in Moscow. So lush and green – it felt like the whole city was in bloom. Honestly, when I woke up this morning and looked out at this bright, green day, my soul was flooded with so much joy. And so much longing to get back there again.

CHEBUTYKIN. Like hell!

TUZENBACH. Complete and utter nonsense.

*(**MASHA** begins to whistle softly, absently.)*

OLGA. Masha, *please* can you stop whistling?

(Pause.)

I spend all morning teaching, all afternoon tutoring, and all night grading, day in and day out. I have a constant headache and a constant nagging feeling at the back of my mind that I've gotten old. Much older than my age. In these four years that I've been teaching, I've lost my strength and my youth. They've seeped out of me, drop by drop. All I have left is one powerful, overwhelming dream –

IRINA. To get back to Moscow.

OLGA. Yes!

IRINA. To sell this house, wrap up everything here, and get back there.

OLGA. Yes. To get back to Moscow.

(In the dining room, CHEBUTYKIN and TUZENBACH laugh.)

IRINA. Andrey is on his way to becoming a famous professor, there's no reason for *him* to stay here. The only thing keeping us here is Masha. Poor Masha!

OLGA. Masha can come visit us, all summer every summer. Right, Masha?

(MASHA whistles quietly.)

IRINA. It'll happen. It's in the stars, you'll see. *(Looking out the window – big sigh.)* Isn't it beautiful out today? I don't know why I'm so incredibly happy. This morning I woke up, remembered it was my birthday, and my heart practically burst with joy! And then I started thinking about when we were little, when Mama was still alive. I just lay there in bed for hours letting my mind swirl with the loveliest, happiest memories.

OLGA. You're glowing today. You're even more beautiful than usual. Masha's beautiful, too – you're both stunning. Andrey would be handsome, too, except he's gotten so chubby! I don't mean to be harsh but he doesn't wear it well. Still, look at you – you're all gorgeous. Meanwhile I'm withering. Wasting away from spending eleven hours a day teaching those ungrateful girls. *(A turn.)* But enough: I'm off today, I don't have to see them or think about them. I'm home with you, my head doesn't hurt, I feel younger today than I did when I went to bed last night. I'm only twenty-eight, for God's sake! I know everything happens for a reason, but sometimes I think if I had just gotten married and spent my life lying around in some man's house, it would have been better for me.

(Pause.)

OLGA. I would have loved my husband, if I'd had one.

TUZENBACH. *(From the dining room, to SOLYONY:)* I'm not listening to one more word of your garbage.

(TUZENBACH enters the living room, addresses the sisters.)

Hey, I forgot to tell you, today our new battery commander is coming to see you. Vershinin.

(He sits down at the piano.)

OLGA. Wonderful! It'll be lovely to have a visitor.

IRINA. Is he old?

TUZENBACH. Not really, forty-something, forty-five. *(He begins to play the piano quietly.)** He seems like a nice fellow. He's certainly not stupid. The only thing is he talks a lot.

IRINA. And is he interesting?

TUZENBACH. Sure, very. It's just that he has this wife, mother-in-law and two little girls. It's his second marriage. Everywhere he goes he mentions his wife and two little girls – you'll see, when he gets here, sooner or later they'll come up. The wife is crazy, she wears her hair in two braids like a little girl but she talks like a pretentious academic. And she's constantly trying to kill herself – mostly to drive her husband crazy, I think. I would have left a woman like that a long time ago, but Vershinin just hangs on and complains about her.

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(**SOLYONY** and **CHEBUTYKIN** enter the living room.)

SOLYONY. See, I can lift fifty pounds with one hand, but with two hands I can lift a *hundred* and fifty pounds, or more. Thus I conclude that two men aren't just twice as strong as one man, but three times as strong. Or more.

CHEBUTYKIN. (*Reading from the paper.*) "To prevent baldness, mix two ounces of naphthalene with half a bottle of alcohol. Shake well and use daily." Well, let's just make a little note of *that*...

(*He jots a note down in a notebook he pulls from his pocket.*)

(*To SOLYONY.*) So like I was telling you, you take a bottle and a cork. You put the cork in the bottle, then insert a glass straw *through* the cork *into* the bottle. Then you take a pinch of ordinary, everyday baking soda, and –

IRINA. (*Coming to CHEBUTYKIN.*) Ivan Romanich! Darling!

CHEBUTYKIN. What is it, love? What is it, joy of my heart?

IRINA. Can *you* explain why I'm so happy today? I feel like I'm sailing across a wide blue sky with white birds flying everywhere around me. Why is that? Why do I feel so wonderful?

(**CHEBUTYKIN** kisses her hands tenderly.)

CHEBUTYKIN. You're *my* little white bird...

IRINA. This morning I woke up, got out of bed, washed my face – and all of a sudden I understood exactly how to live. Ivan Romanich, I know everything now! Here's the secret: A person has to *work*. By the sweat of their brow! If they don't, it's like they don't exist. That's the whole and entire point of life, the source of all happiness and joy. Just think how wonderful it would be to wake up at dawn and head out to, to – lay

cobblestones in the street! Or be a shepherd, or stand in front of a classroom teaching children how to read and write, or drive freight trains on the railroad. Even a draft horse or an ox has a more meaningful life than some aimless girl who wakes up at noon and has coffee brought to her in bed, then takes two hours wandering around vaguely getting dressed... It's an appalling life. I thirst for work like a parched man thirsts for water. If I don't get a real job, Ivan Romanich, you should refuse to have anything to do with me from now on.

CHEBUTYKIN. (*Tenderly.*) I will, darling. I will.

OLGA. Our father the battery commander raised us to get up every day at seven. Irina still wakes up at seven, but now she lies around thinking deep thoughts until noon. (*Laughing.*) With such a serious look on her face!

IRINA. You think I'm still a little girl and I'm incapable of thinking serious thoughts, but I'm twenty years old, you know!

TUZENBACH. This idea you have about work is so fantastic, Irina. I *love* it. I personally have never worked a day in my life. I was born in Petersburg, the capital of ice and boredom, into a family that had no notion whatsoever of the meaning of real work. No one in my family has ever had to earn a living. I remember I would come home from the academy and the servants would rush to take off my boots the moment I stepped through the door, and I was an absolute monster to them, I ordered them around and made them do any little thing my heart desired. And my mother just smiled at me adoringly while I was making these human beings satisfy my every whim. She always let me act however I wanted – she was always *stunned* if anyone criticized my behavior. I know she and my father thought they were protecting me: to them work was a hardship, and they didn't want me to suffer. But they couldn't have been more wrong. And you know, the time is coming

when it's all going to change. The masses are rising. There's a storm brewing, a strong, powerful storm that's gathering force and coming closer and closer, and one of these days it's going to break over this whole society and blow away all this laziness, this pathological prejudice against work, this aristocratic boredom that's rotten to the core. And I'm going to get a job. I can't wait to start working. In twenty-five or thirty years, every single person in this society is going to work. Every single one!

CHEBUTYKIN. I'm not going to work.

TUZENBACH. I wasn't talking about you.

SOLYONY. In twenty-five years you'll be long gone, thank God. I give you two years, three years tops, before you're dead of a stroke. Either that or I'll have blown your head off, angel.

(SOLYONY takes a little bottle of cologne out of his pocket, splashes some onto his hands and neck.)

CHEBUTYKIN. *(Cheerful.)* To be honest I've never done anything productive. The day after I graduated from university I started sitting around twiddling my thumbs, and since that day I've never read another book – never accomplished another blessed thing. I read the newspaper, that's all I do. *(He produces another newspaper from his vest pocket.)* So all I know is whatever you can learn from the paper. For example, I read here that there was a writer named Dobrolyubov. So I know the man existed. But do I know what he wrote about? I do not. Who does?

(A knock on the door downstairs.)

Ah! That must be for me. A delivery, probably. Better go down and let them in.

(**CHEBUTYKIN** *hurries out, stroking his beard with concern.*)

IRINA. He's up to something.

TUZENBACH. You're right. He had that look on his face when he left – you can tell he's about to give you a present.

IRINA. Ugh, it's so awkward when he tries to spoil me!

OLGA. It really is awful. He's always doing such inappropriate things.

MASHA. *U lukomoria doob zelyony, zlataya tzep na doobye tom, zlataya tzep na doobye tom...**

(**MASHA** *stands and starts humming quietly.*)

OLGA. You're in such a funny mood today, Masha.

(**MASHA** *puts on her hat.*)

Wait – where are you going?

MASHA. Home.

IRINA. But it's my birthday!

TUZENBACH. You're leaving before the party even starts?

* A note about Masha's earworm poem, which appears here and again on pages 28 and 100. It's the first few lines of *Ruslan and Ludmila*, a well-known epic fairytale poem written by Aleksandr Pushkin in 1820 and memorized by generations of Russian schoolchildren. It translates roughly to: "By the sea stands a green oak tree with a golden chain wrapped around it, and on the chain is a clever cat who walks around the tree all day and night, singing songs when he walks right and telling tales when he walks left." I chose to leave the Russian in place rather than replacing it with an English poem because a) it's hard to think of a comparable English poem written by a literary giant but accessible to young readers and known by heart by a majority of English speakers and b) any English verse that would replace it would cast a long symbolic/thematic shadow over the entire play, and it feels like a big production decision. Productions interested in substituting an English lyric should contact their Concord Theatricals licensing representative.

MASHA. I'll come back this evening. Goodbye, darling. (*She kisses IRINA.*) I wish you all the health and happiness in the world. Back when our father was alive, our birthday parties were big, noisy affairs – all kinds of people would come, we'd have thirty or forty guests, the house would be packed full of soldiers and officers. Today we have, what, a man and a half? And it's as quiet as a desert. I have to get out of here. (*Laughing through tears.*) Oh don't pay any attention to me – I'm just in a mood. We'll talk later, sweetheart. I'm going to go hide myself away somewhere.

IRINA. (*Upset.*) But what's wrong?

OLGA. (*Tearfully.*) No, Masha, I understand.

SOLYONY. When a man talks philosophy, you either get real thinking or sophistry. But when a woman does, or two women – brace yourself for bullshit.

MASHA. You're such a pig.

SOLYONY. Whatever. As it says in the fable, "He'd scarcely had a moment's rest when boom! A bear sat on his chest."

(*Pause. MASHA turns on OLGA.*)

MASHA. (*Angry.*) Stop crying!

(*ANFISA and FERAPONT enter with a cake.*)

ANFISA. Here we go, here we go, this way, sir. Come in, don't worry, your feet are clean. (*To IRINA.*) From the chair of the district council, Mr. Protopopov: a birthday pie.

IRINA. Thank you. Tell the council chair thank you.

(*She picks up the cake.*)

FERAPONT. What?

IRINA. I SAID TELL THE COUNCIL CHAIR THANK YOU.

OLGA. Anfisa, dear, make sure he gets a piece of that. Ferapont, Anfisa will give you a piece of cake if you follow her.

FERAPONT. What?

IRINA. ANFISA WILL GIVE YOU A – never mind.

ANFISA. Let's go, Ferapont Spiridovich, sir. Come with me. This way, please.

(She leaves with FERAPONT and the cake.)

MASHA. I don't like that Protopopov, he's a big dumb bear. He shouldn't be invited here.

IRINA. I didn't invite him.

MASHA. Fantastic.

(CHEBUTYKIN enters. A SOLDIER follows, carrying an ostentatious silver samovar.)

(A general wave of astonishment and dismay – OLGA covers her face with her hands, everyone speaks at once.)

OLGA. Oh *no*, a silver samovar?

IRINA. Ivan Romanich, darling, how could you?

TUZENBACH. *(Laughing.)* What did I tell you?

MASHA. Ivan Romanich, you truly don't have a drop of shame.

CHEBUTYKIN. My sweet girls, you must understand that you're all I have. To me you're the dearest things in the world. I'm almost sixty, I'm an old man – a lonely old man of no significance. I have nothing good in this world except my love for you. If it weren't for you, I would long since have given up the ghost.

(To IRINA.) And you, sweetest girl, I have known since the day you were born. I held you in my arms when you

were two hours old. I loved your sainted mother with all my heart...

IRINA. But it's embarrassing, Ivan Romanich – you shouldn't give me such extravagant gifts!

CHEBUTYKIN. (*Through tears, angrily.*) Extravagant – what are you talking about! (*To the **SOLDIER.***) All right, take it away. Take the “extravagant gift” away. (*Muttering.*) Extravagant gifts.

(*The **SOLDIER** takes the samovar away.*)

(***ANFISA** enters.*)

ANFISA. Girls, there's a colonel of some kind here to see you. He's already taken off his coat and he's on his way up. (*To **IRINA***) Arinushka, make an effort with him, will you? Be sweet, make him feel at home. (*As she turns to go.*) Oh lord, it's already lunchtime...

TUZENBACH. It must be Vershinin.

(***VERSHININ** enters.*)

Colonel Vershinin!

VERSHININ. It's an honor to introduce myself to you all: I am Colonel Vershinin. And I'm so, so glad to finally be here. My goodness, how you've all grown!

IRINA. Please, come in and sit down. We're so happy you're here.

VERSHININ. (*Warm.*) I'm so happy to be here! But – weren't there three sisters? I remember three little girls. I don't remember your individual faces, but I remember back when I used to visit your father, Colonel Prozorov, there were always three little girls around. I remember clearly. My goodness, time flies. It certainly does fly.

TUZENBACH. Aleksandr Ignatiyevich is from Moscow.

(***IRINA** sits upright in her chair.*)

IRINA. Moscow? You're from Moscow?

VERSHININ. Yes. When your late father was a battery commander there, I was an officer in his regiment. (*To MASHA.*) I think I remember *your* face a little, actually.

MASHA. I don't remember yours.

IRINA. (*Calling offstage.*) Olya! Olya! Come in here!

(**OLGA** enters.)

It turns out Colonel Vershinin is from Moscow!

VERSHININ. Hello. You must be Olga Sergeyevna, the oldest. And you're Maria. And that would make you Irina, the youngest.

OLGA. You're from Moscow?

VERSHININ. Yes, I went to school there and entered the service in Moscow. And I served there for quite a while. And then when I was finally given my own command, I was sent here. As you can see. I don't remember you each specifically, I just remember that there were three sisters. Your father, however, is perfectly preserved in my memory – I can close my eyes and see him as clearly as if he were standing here before me. I visited you at your house in Moscow a number of times...

OLGA. (*Trying to place him.*) I thought I remembered everything that ever happened in Moscow, but you...

VERSHININ. My given name is Aleksandr Ignatiyevich...?

IRINA. Aleksandr Ignatiyevich, how incredible that you're here. And you're from *Moscow*.

OLGA. You know, we're about to move back there.

IRINA. Yes, we'll be there by autumn! It's our hometown, you know – we were born there. On Staraya Basmannaya Street.

(**IRINA** and **OLGA** laugh with delight.)

MASHA. Nice to meet a fellow Moscow émigré. (*She places him.*) Wait, *now* I remember you! Olya, remember they always used to talk about this “lovesick major?” You were a lieutenant then, but for some reason everybody called you “major” to make fun of you. And you were madly in love with someone...

VERSHININ. Exactly right. The lovesick major, that was me.

MASHA. You didn’t have a moustache then. My goodness, you’ve aged! (*A pang of emotion.*) I’m sorry, but you really have.

VERSHININ. I guess I have. Back when they called me the lovesick major I was young and in love. But now...

OLGA. You look wonderful. You don’t have a gray hair on your head! You may have aged, but you’re not old – not by any stretch of the imagination.

VERSHININ. I’m forty-three. Have you been away from Moscow long?

IRINA. Eleven years. But Masha, why are you crying, you silly thing. (*Through tears.*) Now *I’m* crying.

MASHA. I’m not crying. What street did you live on in Moscow?

VERSHININ. Staraya Basmannaya.

OLGA. That’s where we lived!

VERSHININ. And before that I lived on Nemetsky Street. From Nemetsky I could walk to the barracks at Krasnye Kazarmi. On the way I’d always cross over this grim little footbridge with a river rushing beneath it – the kind of spot that makes a lonely man feel lonelier. (*Pause.*) But here you have that big, broad river. An impressive river – a majestic river!

OLGA. It’s freezing cold and full of mosquitoes.

VERSHININ. What are you talking about, this is wonderful country! The woods, the river, the fine, vigorous Slavic climate...and of course the birches. The simple, elegant birches. The birch is far and away my favorite tree. Yes, I find this a very invigorating place to live. The only drawback is how far away it is from the nearest train station. Twenty miles – it's funny to build a town so far from the railroad. And nobody seems to know why it is that way.

SOLYONY. I know why it is that way.

(Everyone turns to look at SOLYONY.)

Because if the station were closer, then it wouldn't be far away. And if it were far away, then it wouldn't be close.

(An awkward silence.)

TUZENBACH. Solyony, you joker. Always joking.

OLGA. Now I remember you. Now I remember!

VERSHININ. I knew your mother.

CHEBUTYKIN. A wonderful woman, God rest her soul.

IRINA. Mama is buried in Moscow.

OLGA. In Novodevichy Cemetery.

MASHA. I realized the other day that I'm starting to forget her face. That'll happen to all of us, I suppose – sooner or later, we'll all be forgotten.

VERSHININ. That's true, we will. It's our fate to be forgotten, and there's nothing we can do about it. Everything in our lives that seems so urgent and important – give it a little time and it'll all be forgotten. Or revealed to be more trivial than we ever knew.

(Pause.)

And it's interesting – there's absolutely no way to know which parts of this life we're living now will be considered important or highly evolved in the future, and which will be considered backwards or pathetic. Just think about the discoveries of Copernicus, or Columbus – back when they were being made, these breakthroughs were considered stupid or false, even the ravings of madmen. Meanwhile the ravings of actual madmen were revered as holy truth. For all we know, every single part of this life we're living, everything we cling to, and care about, and tolerate, and take for granted, could all seem stupid or strange one day. Even sinful.

TUZENBACH. It could. But on the other hand, maybe the way we live now will go down in history as a pinnacle of social evolution, and we'll be deeply respected by future generations. After all, we don't allow torture in our society anymore, or capital punishment. We've been at peace for many years – we're done fighting off invasions. Of course at the same time there's still so much suffering –

SOLYONY. (*Half-clucking, half-kissing – like you'd call a flock of chickens.*) Chick-chick-chick-chick... There's nothing the baron likes more than to cluck his way through a piece of two-bit philosophy.

TUZENBACH. Vassily Vassilych, will you give it a rest?

(*He moves to sit further away from*
SOLYONY.)

There's only so much a person can take.

SOLYONY. Chick-chick-chick-chick...

TUZENBACH. (*To* **VERSHININ.**) Then again, the very fact that we're *aware* of suffering in our society – and there is so much of it – is in a way a sign that we've reached a certain level of moral sophistication.

VERSHININ. Yes, yes, of course.

CHEBUTYKIN. You just said, Baron, that future generations will call this life highly evolved. But it looks to me like people are still pretty primitive. Look at me, I'm primitive – I'm practically Paleolithic! Just look how primitive I am. (*He gets up so they can look at him.*) Anyone who calls me “evolved” is just trying to make me feel better.

(*Offstage, a violin begins playing.**)

MASHA. That's our brother Andrey playing.

IRINA. He's the scholar of the family. He's going to be a professor one day. Papa was a soldier, but his son chose an academic path for himself.

MASHA. Well, Papa chose it for him, too.

OLGA. We've been teasing him rather mercilessly today. It seems he's fallen in love.

IRINA. With a girl from town. She's coming to lunch, I think.

MASHA. You should see the way she dresses. It's not that she's not pretty, it's just – she always shows up in some gaudy yellow skirt covered in fringe or something. And her cheeks are always scrubbed-scrubbed-scrubbed, just like a little peasant girl's. I don't even believe Andrey's in love with her. He has standards. He's just playing with us, pretending to like her. Anyway yesterday I heard she's getting engaged to Protopopov. (*To VERSHININ.*) The chair of our district council. And to that I say: Fantastic. (*Calling out the side door.*) Andrey, Andriusha, come in here! Just for a minute!

(**ANDREY** enters.)

OLGA. May I introduce our brother, Andrey Sergeyich.

VERSHININ. Vershinin.

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ANDREY. Prozorov. (*Wiping his sweaty face.*) So you're the new battery commander?

OLGA. Andrey, can you believe it? Aleksandr Ignatyevich is from Moscow!

ANDREY. Really? Well congratulations, now my sisters won't give you a moment's peace.

VERSHININ. Oh, I've already talked your poor sisters' ears off, I'm afraid –

IRINA. Look at this lovely little picture frame that Andrey gave me for my birthday today! (*She shows* **VERSHININ** *a wooden frame.*) He made this himself.

(**VERSHININ** *looks at the frame politely, doesn't know what to say.*)

VERSHININ. That's...quite something.

IRINA. And that frame over the piano, he made that, too.

(**ANDREY** *gives a little wave and starts to retreat.*)

OLGA. He's the most intellectual of all of us, and he plays the piano, and makes all kinds of lovely things out of wood – he's a renaissance man. Andrey, wait, don't leave! This is a bad habit of his – he's always slinking out of rooms. Come back, Andrey!

(*Laughing,* **MASHA** *and* **IRINA** *grab* **ANDREY** *and manhandle him back into the conversation.*)

MASHA. Come on, come back!

ANDREY. Please just leave me alone...

MASHA. You're so sensitive! Back in Moscow they called Aleksandr Ignatyich the "lovesick major" and *he* never got angry about it.

VERSHININ. Not one bit!

MASHA. I think I'm going to call you the lovesick violinist.

IRINA. Or the lovesick professor!

OLGA. He's in love! Our Andriusha's in love!

IRINA. Bravo! Take a bow! Andriushka's in love!

(CHEBUTYKIN comes behind ANDREY and bear-hugs him around the waist.)

CHEBUTYKIN. *(Singing and chuckling, never dropping his paper.)*

SOME ENCHANTED EVENING

ANDREY. *(Struggling free.)* All right, all right, enough!

(They all back off. He wipes his face apologetically.)

I'm sorry, I didn't sleep last night and I'm not myself today. I was up reading until four a.m., then I went to bed but I couldn't fall asleep even though I was totally exhausted. I just lay there, thinking about nothing in particular, and before I knew it, it was dawn. The sun was climbing the walls. My plan for this summer while I'm here is to translate a book from English.

VERSHININ. Oh, you read English?

ANDREY. Yes, our late father insisted that we be educated. He was extremely strict about it, like he was about everything. In fact, it's funny – maybe this isn't appropriate to talk about, but after he died I started to gain weight. And I've gotten pretty impressively fat in only one year. It's like even my body has been liberated from his oppression. But still, it's thanks to my father that my sisters and I know French, German and English – Irina even knows a little Italian. Then again, what good does it do us?

MASHA. In this town, knowing three languages is a useless luxury. Not even a luxury – it's more like a useless appendage, like a sixth finger. We know lots of useless things.

VERSHININ. What a thing to say. (*Laughing.*) You know lots of “useless things.” As far as I can tell, there's no town so dull and depressing that it doesn't need its share of thoughtful, intelligent, well-educated citizens. Let's say that among the hundred thousand or so inhabitants of this town – almost all of them, I'm sure, pretty rough around the edges – there are three cultured people like you. It goes without saying that three people alone can't change the character of an entire town. And as you live your lives, maybe you do feel a bit like you're drowning in ignorance, surrounded by the unenlightened masses. You might even feel like life is stifling you completely. But in reality, all that time, you'll be having your own small influence on the people around you. Maybe each of you touches, say, two others. You die, but you leave behind six people who are now like you. Those six touch two people each – now there are twelve. And so on and so on, until finally thoughtful, intelligent people become the majority. In two or three hundred years, just think how unimaginably, stunningly beautiful life on earth will become. That's the life we deserve. That's the enlightened world we're meant to live in. And if it doesn't exist yet, it's our job to anticipate it, and dream of it, and get ready for it. If we want progress to be real, it's our responsibility to see and know more than our fathers or grandfathers knew. (*Laughing.*) And you complain that you've been taught “useless things.”

(**MASHA** takes her hat off.)

MASHA. I think I will stay for lunch.

IRINA. (*With a sigh.*) I wish someone had been writing all that down...

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