

The Newspaper “Russian Invalid” for July 18th...

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Characters

Ivan Pavlovich

Nyuta, old nanny

Alyosha, nephew

Sashenka, niece

Curtain rises.

The theater introduces a neither rich nor poor living room in a Moscow home.

*At the back of the living room, a **lantern** is composed of 5 glass panes and 5 small window frames. In the lantern, a garden, where there is a finca palm with yellow spines, once a seedling planted by an unknown individual. Grapevines are woven over the top of the window frames, tumbling down them. In small round pots are dark violet perennial blossoms.*

*A tall **grandfather clock** with a slothful, copper pendulum and heavy weights. It has a walnut hull and a tower chime with a week's power reserve. The clock tower contains an entire scene, where a tin tree of paradise bears a heavenly apple. Adam and Eve stand by the tree. Tin Eve picks the apple from the tree and then hands it to Adam. Tin Adam is somber and pensive. And behind the tree, shaking his head, peeking out at the serpent. The tin has been touched by rust in some places.*

The **couch** is made of black leather, it feels good to lay your hot cheek on its cool leather. Pressed against the back of the sofa are cabinets with faceted glass, each one has its own key. But now all the keys have been lost.

The **armchair** is black leather, the back of it torn, leaving a “y” shaped gash. It is deep-seated and cold to the touch. If you sit in it, you will not be visible from the back. It is sewn up with black stitching. Underneath the chair is a **footstool**.

There is a large **ceiling light**, once white and clean, now yellow and dusty. Occasionally, it will swing on its own. There is a **carpet** with a dragon design. The rug has a large brown stain that cannot be removed. Over the years, salt has been poured over the rug, leaving it covered with many salt crystals.

There is a black **cupboard** with drawers for silverware, wine, and sweets. As a child, it was interesting to hide in the bottom drawer and eavesdrop on my father's secret conversations with Nyuta, then my father with my mother, and then my mother with Nyuta. And it always ended in tears... There was a hiding place in the napkin compartment, but everyone knew about it. There was also a hiding place in the fork compartment, but only some people knew about it, not everyone. Among the porcelain is a shepherd and a shepherdess, a ballet dancer with butterfly wings, and a fawn with a broken leg. Easter eggs made of silver and ivory: the silver one winds up and rings, while the ivory one winds up and spins. Chinese Easter eggs, in vases with tiny cracks, painted with herbs, where various silly things can be stored.

The blue and black nude **maiden lamp** occupies a distinct place in the living room. She bends one hip so that one might be able to put down a box of matches, and it would not fall off. She has a large, round stomach, which makes it seem like she is about to give birth to a blue and black baby. She has one visible nipple, and her legs are crossed, so you can't see between them or put your finger there. But it is fun, when adults are not around, to smack her on her wide black bottom. And her toes on her black feet are thick and short, her little toe as long as a grape.

On the shelf is a wind-up **symphonion** with forty tones; it has a tin disc with blind holes punched into it, playing Italian music.

And you cannot see the **writing desk**, it is behind a folding screen. Only when candles are lit on it does its outline become somewhat visible. A globe with a dent in Africa and Alaska, and a bulge in Turkestan. On the table is an ink bottle in the form of a Turgenev hunting dog: with the curves of its body, it embraced two narrow-necked inkwells, and its paw was placed on a penknife. There is a green cloth covered with ink on the left hand, the stain looks like a hare with two ears. A narrow woman's hand presses down on a coil with letters and old recipes. On the penknife is an inscription in an eastern language, which can be interpreted in a variety of ways,

however you want. In the drawer, a box with Ural stones is covered with gray marbled paper. A crystal ashtray and a porcelain troika sled, where matches with thick sulfur heads are laid out in neat rows. A malachite box with her father's ring, with her mother's medallion, where a strand of unknown hair lies; a nut wrapped in gold paper; a playing card—the ten of spades, signifying something dark, illness, and when paired with a king or queen, the marriage bed... A half-hour hourglass glitters; the sparkling sand flows so slowly that one can fly away from the course of events to the distance of the moon...

Wide, heavy **doors** with copper handles and latches. They open with a loud, drawn-out creak. As a child, it was fun to swing on these heavy doors.

Half of the **stove** protrudes from the wall of ribbed tiles. The squares of the tiles are covered with tiny cracks. A curved lily flower is cast on the dark door of the stove. Its windows are like buttons on a uniform, polished. On the smooth tiles, one could potentially write a bad word. Reading the clumsy letters, you can imagine, with a slight delay, the object that the word refers to. If the object is masculine, you can just smile, but if it is feminine, you are more likely to lick your finger and wipe away what you have written, as if it had never been there.

It is bright outside the **windows**.

Ivan Pavlovich is standing, turned away from the audience, and looking out of the windows.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. ...They ran away, leaving behind one empty hammock and forgetting a book in it. Mayne Reid, or whatever it is...

Silence.

Nowadays, it is impossible to go to the bathhouse. Leeches have settled in. Now you have to jump into the water with a swing, and then look for another place to get out... (In thought.) If water gets into your ear, you need to shake it with your little finger and jump on one leg... (Thoughtful pause.) Don't squint in the sun, or you'll get white wrinkles around your eyes! And it's better to brush your bangs up, otherwise your forehead will turn white...

Silence. Ivan Pavlovich rubs his forehead.

On the back of the bench, someone burned “fool” with a magnifying glass... (Laughs.) And they burned it without the hard sign, without the “iat” at the end of the word. Because they were too lazy! Because the hard sign at the end of the word always seemed unnecessary. Because even here you can't finish a single thing, because everything is done in a hurry! You need to focus the

beam into a tiny point and burn it like a needle. First, smoke will appear, and then a brown dot will appear from under the smoke. Bring the dot to the line and burn the letter evenly. If it's a hard ending, then of course there should be an "iat" at the end of the word! But what can you do if you suddenly get bored, if you can't finish a single thing properly...

Silence.

Don't squint in the sun, look straight ahead, let it blind you, but don't squint, you're not a brother-in-law! The brother-in-law squints! ... The son-in-law likes to take, the father-in-law likes honor, and the brother-in-law squints his eyes ...

Silence.

You need to dilute soap powder in warm water and shave. You need to go to the city. You need to take a hat with a brim, and a cane, then go walking. You need to drop by a pastry shop. Then take a walk by the river. You need to go to the pharmacy. There are large glass balls filled with water and colored red, green, and blue in the window. They sell throat lozenges there...

Silence.

And if there's a thunderstorm, there's an umbrella for rain. I need to go and shave if I'm going to the pharmacy and for a walk, to the bakery...

Sighing.

God ruined summer with flies!

Silence.

There is a hut in the garden where you can lie on your stomach and read "The Captain's Daughter." In the hut, you can make a deal to exchange a grasshopper in a box for ladybugs. That summer, a grasshopper was worth two ladybugs, not three... You also need to be careful that a caterpillar doesn't fall on you from the roof of the hut... You can play the first settlers... Or you can play "The Prisoner of the Caucasus." You need to clasp your fingers together as if your hands were tied, and put shackles on your feet — tie a garden watering can to them. And sit with your eyes closed. And you want to drink! But no one will give you anything to drink! And then wait for the moment. And run with a funny little hop so you don't trip over the watering can. Run and shout, "Brothers, brothers! Save me!" And fall onto the lawn, where our people are already there, where the mountaineers are behind you! And our people, laughing, take off your shackles and throw the garden watering can into the bushes...

Silence.

“Brothers, brothers, I am one of you, I am one of us...”

A bell rings at the door.

Ivan Pavlovich doesn't seem to hear it.

Alyosha, Ivan Pavlovich's nephew, enters. He is wearing a cap, and under it, black felt earflaps, fastened with elastic at the top and bottom. He has left his overcoat in the hall.

ALYOSHA (*in French*). Il fait froid, il neige, il gèle !... (It's cold, it's snowing, and it's freezing!)

Ivan Pavlovich remains silent, not turning around.

IVAN PAVLOVICH (*after a pause*). I hear you.

Alyosha sits down in the armchair.

ALYOSHA. Even my chest is tingling. You can't even take a deep breath because of the ice-cold air!

He closes his eyes.

(Moaning) Oh, Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!

And again, drawn out.

Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!

IVAN PAVLOVICH (*turning to him*). What's the matter with you? Why are you being so noisy?

Alyosha attempts to pull one of his boots off, but the boot is very tight.

Ivan Pavlovich then tries to help him.

They struggle for a long time. They pull off one boot.

(Panting) Why on earth would you wear such narrow boots?

ALYOSHA (*pitifully*). Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!

IVAN PAVLOVICH (*starting on the second boot*). It's December! It's cold. Why punish yourself?

They pull off the second boot.

ALYOSHA (*in despair*). Do I have frostbite?! Do I have frostbite?!

IVAN PAVLOVICH. No. Put your feet under you so they can warm up.

Alyosha sits down with his feet in the chair, as Ivan Pavlovich instructed him.

ALYOSHA (*suffering*). Won't you give me some tea now?

Ivan goes to the door.

Some hot tea, hot tea!

IVAN PAVLOVICH. (*leaving*). Take off your cap.

Ivan Pavlovich leaves the room.

Alyosha obediently took off his cap. He jumped up and down a little in his chair, on his tiptoes. He jumped and then fell silent, staring at the narrow grasses on the folding screen, at the lilac birds. The lower elastic band of his headphones cuts into his throat, and he sometimes pulls it down.

Ivan Pavlovich enters.

ALYOSHA. Did you say tea?

IVAN PAVLOVICH. I did.

ALYOSHA. And do you have any lemons?

IVAN PAVLOVICH. I do.

ALYOSHA. With lemon, then. I also need some sugar to sweeten it.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. All right.

ALYOSHA. Don't stir it too much, so that it's hot and not sweet at first. And then stir it downwards, so that it gets sweeter and sweeter.

ALYOSHA. Well, there you go. What else? The coaster with the Turkish prisoner?

IVAN PAVLOVICH. With the Turkish prisoner. With the fortress of Varna.

ALYOSHA. The spoon. Do you know where the edge is worn down?

IVAN PAVLOVICH. I know.

Uncle laughs.

Alyosha watches him closely

ALYOSHA. My feet have pins and needles. They're frozen.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. It will stop tingling soon.

He sits down on the sofa. After a pause.

(Sways.) Well, what's going on outside? Tell me.

ALYOSHA *(shortly)*. It's snowing.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. No, in general. What's going on there?

ALYOSHA. Where?

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Well, in the city. In people's homes. In life in general.

ALYOSHA. Well, something is probably happening. I don't know. Certainly, something is being done. How could it not be? What, has everything around us come to a standstill?

IVAN PAVLOVICH *(patiently)*. Well, what's good?

ALYOSHA. Nothing good.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Is everything bad?

ALYOSHA. Why? What's bad? I'm not saying everything is bad.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. And you say there's nothing good.

ALYOSHA. What's good?

IVAN PAVLOVICH *(annoyed)*. That's what I'm asking you: what? How? What's good?

ALYOSHA. Nothing.

Silence

IVAN PAVLOVICH *(in a calm voice)*. Well, what's bad then?

ALYOSHA. Nothing bad.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. So everything is fine?

ALYOSHA. Well, I'm not saying that everything is fine...

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Well, then, how is it?

ALYOSHA. It varies.

Long pause.

Alyosha struggles horribly with mischief, with a desire to pull more pranks, but doesn't want to overdo it or go too far.

And his uncle struggles with irritation. He is truly serious.

IVAN PAVLOVICH *(after a moment)*. Take off your headphones, it is impossible to talk to you!

Alyosha takes off his headphones. And shoots a rubber band.

ALYOSHA. I can't seem to get warm.

Then Uncle took the blanket. With his other hand, he grabbed the bent back of the chair, carried it over to Alyosha, and the armchair. He sat down on the chair and unfolded the blanket. Alyosha stretched out his legs, and Uncle covered them with the blanket, wrapped them up, and put them on his lap. He pressed them with his hands to keep them warm.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Your father loved to wear terribly narrow boots, terribly narrow and terribly thin. It was scary to watch him walking in the cold, his boots so thin that you can see every toe! And he poured talcum powder or rosin inside them—something like that, I don't know. He even had a special board with a cutout for the heel; he couldn't take off his boots without it. And there were special hooks to pull on the ears. Torture! Boots, he said, are good to sew every day! To sew them up in the morning, to unpick them in the evening! And, very expensive. But his feet were incredibly small. How did he stand on his feet with such height? With such small feet? He was terribly proud of that, he said, “- that's the breed!” And I loved walking barefoot on the grass. But he would never do that...

Pause.

Nyuta, Ivan Pavlovich's old nanny, steps in. She brought tea.

Thank you, Nyuta!

ALYOSHA (*hissing*). Witch!

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Thank you, Dear!

Uncle, of course, heard the “witch,” but said nothing. Nyuta walks out.

ALYOSHA. You don't notice that she reeks? Tell her to bathe every day, to wash her dresses! Or give all her dresses to the laundress, you can't let her go on like this!

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Why are you making all this up, why are you making all this up?! Stop it right now!

ALYOSHA. Old women smell horrible...

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Well, with age everyone...

Alyosha. I would wash if I were old! You can skip washing when you're young, but in old age, please be kind!

Silence.

Alyosha wants to drink the tea, but it is too hot.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. How are you doing?

ALYOSHA. It varies.

Blows on tea.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. What about Lizochka?

ALYOSHA. Lizochka is Lizochka.

Uncle looks surprised.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. You don't love her?

ALYOSHA (*he shudders*). What kind of talk is that? I need money! And there's no money here. Here you go, Lizochka!

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Where does the money come from?

Alyosha sips on his tea. It was hot, but drinkable.

ALYOSHA. Here it is.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Really, where does it come from? Seriously?

ALYOSHA. Yes, here, uncle, a comma!

IVAN PAVLOVICH. What is this?

ALYOSHA. It's because the bride is old. Forty-six years old.

Drinks tea.

But there's a lot of money. So do the math, everything can be paid for.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Wait a minute! She's twice your age!

Alyosha finishes his tea. He chuckles.

ALYOSHA. Money!.. (*Sighing.*) How about some more tea?

IVAN PAVLOVICH (*hastily*). Right away, right away. (*Shouts.*) Nyuta!

Silence.

Waiting for Nyuta.

She arrives.

Pour more tea, sweetheart.

Nyuta takes the empty cup and leaves.

Silence.

IVAN PAVLOVICH (*cautiously*). But, you hopefully know, that when you get married, you will have to fulfill marital duties, and...

*Alyosha laughs.
And then he pushes his uncle hard in the stomach.*

*Unexpectedly, he falls backwards onto the ground.
Alyosha jumps up, startled.*

(Lying on the floor.) Damn it!

ALYOSHA. I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!

*Uncle stands up off the floor. He carefully puts the chair back in place.
An awkward pause.*

IVAN PAVLOVICH. It's nothing, nothing. I fell pretty smoothly, didn't hurt myself at all.

Silence.

Excuse me for a moment.

Runs out of the living room.

ALYOSHA (*clutching his head*). Lie, lie, demoniacs! There'll be a dead man for you.

Nyuta comes in with a cup of tea. She served it to him and was about to leave.

(With disgust) How old are you?

NYUTA. What?

ALYOSHA. I asked how old are you?

NYUTA. I haven't counted.

ALYOSHA. You idiot!

NYUTA. What?

ALYOSHA. Nothing. Just that you'll be dead soon!

NYUTA. And what's it to you?

ALYOSHA. Well, you will be buried in the ground. And we will dine on cherries and laugh.

Nyuta begins to weep.

Foo, foo! Go away. Uncle will get mad.

Nyuta leaves.

(To himself) We will be dining on cherries, cherries...

Ivan Pavlovich comes in.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Alyosha! Do you remember how we performed live scenes at Christmas? “Princess Tarakanova”? Sashenka was on the bed. And the mouse was made of black bread? Then you jumped on the bed, ate the bread mouse, and saved the princess!

ALYOSHA. I remember.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. It was fun, wasn't it?! *(Longingly.)* My God, it was so much fun!

ALYOSHA. Come on, uncle, let's get drunk! Do you have any vodka at home?

IVAN PAVLOVICH *(sorrowfully)*. No.

ALYOSHA. Let's send for some! Or here's what we'll do! *(fervently)* Come on, let's go with you, I know a place where we can get drunk as pigs!

Uncle is silent.

And then let's go to the whores! Come on!

Uncle sits down on the couch. His back is so tense, as if he were at a reception, waiting to be called.

I know where to find good whores!

Uncle is silent. Alyosha leaps up from the chair and walks barefoot across the carpet.

Do you, uncle, know what French love is?

Uncle makes a strange gesture with his hand, as if he were on a train platform waving goodbye.

No, at first I thought it was very embarrassing too!

Uncle closed his eyes. It was as if he wasn't there. Alyosha went quiet. Then he crouched down in front of his uncle.

Well, let's just go outside and take a walk... You'll pick out the most beautiful tree for me, covered in frost right now—it's terrifyingly beautiful! You'll pick it out and give it to me as a

gift. And I'll find something for you too and give it to you as a gift! The skinniest horse! The oldest dog!

Uncle doesn't respond.

You haven't been outside for two years. That's an illness, you know? You're a healthy young man! Two years without leaving the house—that's an illness!

My uncle gets up and goes to the door.

IVAN PAVLOVICH (*in a strange voice, almost falsetto*). I'll bring you some tea.

ALYOSHA. It's a disease, and you could die from it! They'll bury you in the ground!

IVAN PAVLOVICH (*at the door*). With lemon. No need to stir in sugar.

ALYOSHA. Wait! Nyuta brought me tea! Here it is! Wait!

Ivan quickly leaves.

They'll bury your body in the ground.

Alyosha goes behind the folding screen. He rummages around on the table.

Of course! Of course!

He comes out from behind the screen and waves the letter in the air.

(*Reads*) “You must not respond to my letter! Don't, don't, my dear. It would be strange to correspond in my current situation. I am very grateful to you for everything you have done for me. Kotik and I often walk down your street, and I look at your windows. Look, I say to Kotik, there lives a very kind uncle... She looks with her eyes and, of course, doesn't understand anything yet. She owes her birth only to you! And if it weren't for you, she would have never been born! My husband knows this and thinks the same. With Kotik's birth, my life has been filled with meaning, and I am happy! Sometimes it seems like Kotik's eyes are yours, even though I know she is not your child. But I looked into your eyes for too long...”

Takes a break from reading.

Jerk! (*laughs*). What are they doing to with us! What are they doing!

Ivan Pavlovich entered, but Alyosha did not notice him. Uncle saw the letter in Alyosha's hands and froze.

“...The day will come when we will all gather in the evening under our green lampshade and drink tea with sugared nuts (remember how much you loved them!), and we will all tell you how grateful we are to you, and my husband will say it, and I will say it, and Kotik will say it too! He already says the word ‘goo goo’.

Alyosha suddenly saw his uncle. He was startled.

IVAN PAVLOVICH (*embarrassed*). Alyosha... You can't read other people's letters. It's very inappropriate...

ALYOSHA. I'm sorry. It just happened...

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Remember when you were peeping in the bathhouse... I hit you very hard then... I think your lip was bleeding... Please go away, Alyosha. I beg you.

Alyosha was very frightened. He grabbed one boot and tried to put it on quickly. He couldn't do it. He pulled it halfway on.

ALYOSHA. Okay, I'll put it on. Forget it. It's fine.

And he ran out. One foot bare.

Ivan Pavlovich picked up the letter Alyosha had thrown away. And he dropped it into a Chinese vase with small cracks in it, which stood on the sideboard. He paused. Then he reached into the vase and pulled out a whole pile of letters. He laughed. And threw them all back in again.

IVAN PAVLOVICH (*echoing into the vase*). Good, good... good my good! You have a very good, kind heart - and you can't do nasty things! For example, torturing a good man... He asks you only one thing... Don't, don't... don't write any letters to me.

And he put the vase back in its place.

Pause.

He looked all around with great interest.

I forgot everything. I don't remember anything. It was raining heavily outside the window... And the window was raised, and I was too lazy to lower it. You know, for some reason, their windows don't open outwards like normal windows; they open upwards. And you keep thinking that the frame is going to slam down at any moment, and glass will fly everywhere. This I remember very well. The frame that could slam down at any moment... How did I drop the jug of water? I remember! I laughed until I cried. And I remember the thin sheets of postal paper with the Gothic letters “Hotel Hoffman” stamped on them... And that's it! You won't believe it, it's funny, but it's true! I forgot everything. Honestly!

He paused to think.

But you can pronounce the Hoffman Hotel as Goffman, if you want. It doesn't matter to them: Hoffman or Goffman...

While Ivan Pavlovich was talking about Hoffman and Goffman, Alyosha appeared. He had only peeped through the door before, but now he came in. He stood timidly at the threshold.

ALYOSHA. Uncle...may I take my other boot? I'm cold, after all.

Uncle looked at him, not recognizing him, and laughed. Alyosha nervously laughed too.

Uncle, I cannot keep freezing in the hallway. Forgive me.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Of course, of course! Sugar nuts are great fun. Throwing them in your mouth! Sometimes you don't hit them, but it's very funny.

ALYOSHA. You're not angry with me, are you? I can't do it again.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. And here, you know, a man comes in. He looked at me so cloudy and hazy... And - bang on his knees in front of her! And he said something so terrible, I didn't even understand a word. And I suddenly got bored, because she's looking at me as if she's seeing me for the first time. I mean, very, very carefully. Small stature, blond, with hands like he had a cold somewhere... I took another handful of peanuts, shrugged my shoulders, and went for a walk along the river.

ALYOSHA. And you know, Uncle... It was the devil who pushed me, it wasn't my fault...

IVAN PAVLOVICH. A very dirty little river, with a name I've completely forgotten! I'll have to look it up on the map. They mark all their silly rivers on the map. Then I went to get another handful of nuts, but there was no one left in the room... Then everyone told me that this man was not blond at all, but brunette, and almost a head taller than me! I say, "Come on!" That means she has two husbands! The one who came in was blond! And having two is ridiculous. It's not serious, gentlemen. Or if it's the case that he entered Germany as a blond and lives in Russia as a brunet... Then he doesn't deserve any respect at all!

ALYOSHA. And they left. And you were left there alone.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. You know, Alyosha, I suddenly forgot that. Yes, I suppose so - they went away, and I stayed there alone... I cleaned up the room for a long time. I am very neat, as you know, and she was always ruining everything. (Laughs). If I didn't make up that story right away... I like to do that - fall on the couch and make up a story. (Suddenly). Look, look!

Dragging Alyosha to the window.

ALYOSHA. Who's there? I don't see anyone. Who is it?

IVAN PAVLOVICH. "The best roof by engineer A. V. Elben in St. Petersburg"! Where's the mistake? Yeah, you can't see it! But I noticed a long time ago that 'engineer' is rarely spelled with the letter 'i,' but more often with 'e.' Sorry, just a minute!

And he rushed out the door. He didn't let Alyosha say a word.

ALYOSHA (*staring blankly out the window*). En – gi – neer... En – ge – neer... What is the distance?

Sits down in a/the chair and pulls on the other boot and then stomps his heel.

Bastards! Terrible bastards, that's what I'll tell you... Every last one of you. Yes, sir!

He stops talking.

Our brother tries not to delve into details, because we understand very little, just a tiny bit... Men somehow try to live on the sidelines, so as not to interfere too much. But women are the opposite! They live so comfortably, with all the amenities... Why are women's rooms always cozier than men's? And they know how to drink tea — where to lay the napkin... Here's an interesting thought: why is it that they are at home, and we are, as it were, their guests?!... But they live on top of us! And they always blame us for something... First, it's the witchy nanny, then mom gets involved, and when the time comes, there will be another one. Don't worry, she'll find herself! With a sweaty upper lip...

Thinking.

And they live longer than we do. The man dies sooner.

There is a noise in the hallway. And after a while, Sashenka enters, Ivan's niece. She's wearing a fur cap, and she is all flushed from the cold.

SASHENKA. A letter for Uncle! A letter for Uncle! Oh, I must have dropped it on the stairs... Uncle, Uncle, there was a letter for you!

ALYOSHA. Give it to me!

SASHENKA. I put it in my muff, and now it's not there!

Laughing, she throws Alyosha her muff.

ALYOSHA. Foolish girl! You shouldn't have clawed it with your cat paws. What is this sticky stuff in your muff?

SASHENKA. Candy!

ALYOSHA. Gross!

He takes out a crumpled letter from the muff.

It's a letter to Uncle! How did you get it?

SASHENKA. They gave it to me!

ALYOSHA. Who?!

SASHENKA. But she has a husband and a child.

ALYOSHA. Tell me, Sasha, why do women also suffer? Why do they have ailments, disappointments? After all, it's so convenient to live in someone else's head!

SASHENKA. What do you mean - in someone's head? I don't know anything about it.

ALYOSHA. He took her abroad because she was unhappy; she begged him to do so. And when her husband came to his senses and rushed after her, when they got together again... Uncle stayed there alone and paid, paid their bills...

Ivan Pavlovich enters.

Alyosha immediately hides the letter under him and sits on it. He threatens Sashenka with his fist.

Uncle kisses Sashenka on the cheek.

ALYOSHA. Just try saying anything

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Are you at it again? What were you talking about? What were you talking about just now?

He sits down on the couch. Sashenka, laughing, sits down beside him.

SASHENKA. I can't tell you, Uncle! He's showing me his fist. I can't say anything, I can't! If Alyosha let me speak...

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Alyosha, let her speak!

ALYOSHA. No!

SASHENKA. You see! I can't. It's not my secret, Uncle, it's Alyosha's! He used to be a cute little kitten, but now he has secrets...

She strokes her uncle's sleeve.

Our entire male lineage is surrounded by terrifying secrets... May I kiss you on the neck? Right here, in the hollow below your throat, between your collarbones? Here, on your neck.

Kisses her uncle.

Can I do it again?

Kisses him.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. That's enough, enough.

SASHENKA. One more time.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Enough, Sashenka, you kissed me already. What's new, what gossip?

SASHENKA. Are you a gossip uncle?

IVAN PAVLOVICH. A gossip.

SASHENKA. All right...

Alyosha, trying not to be seen by Uncle, waved the letter at her and shook his fist at her.

Lizochka is getting married!

ALYOSHA (*slapping himself on the knee*). Shit!

SASHENKA. She refused Alyosha and is getting married now!

ALYOSHA (*continuing to slap himself on the knee*). Oh damn, damn, damn!

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Is it true?

Sashenka's laughter rings out.

ALYOSHA. It's true! It's true! Stop laughing! Damn it! There's nothing funny about it!

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Alyosha! How can that be, Alyosha?

SASHENKA. She rejected Alyosha, and now she's getting married! She's getting married because of money! And Alyosha has no money! I have no money! You would have given us that money, uncle, if you hadn't spent it all on that junk! Right?

Laughing.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. I would. I would.

SASHENKA. If it weren't for that bitch! You have a letter from her.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Where?

SASHENKA. Alyosha has it. Bring it here, Alyosha.

ALYOSHA. Money!... Am I no good without money? Worse than with money? And if I steal or stab, am I better off with money?

He paused and gave the letter to his uncle. Ivan Pavlovich reads it and puts the paper on his lap. Carefully smoothing it with the palm of his hand. He is silent.

(Excitedly.) I won't cry now! The main thing is to get started. Spread the word among the old matchmakers that, my dears, I need money! I'll find it! The older the bride, the more money! Let them look for an old woman right away!

SASHENKA. That is indecent!

Sashenka quietly pulls the letter from her uncle's lap, from under his palm. But he won't let her have it.

ALYOSHA. What decency? Go away, there's money here!

SASHENKA. But old women have brown spots on their hands!

ALYOSHA. What do I care? She won't live forever...

SASHENKA. What if she does?

ALYOSHA. Poison her like a rat! Go away, old woman! Where can she go? She'll go, she'll go...

SASHENKA. Alyosha, she'll ask for love!

ALYOSHA. It's her money, let her have it. But in the dark, blow out the candle! No candles needed!

She pulls the letters towards herself.

IVAN PAVLOVICH *(sharply)*. You are intruding!

SASHENKA. I won't, I won't.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. What time is it now?

His voice is unpleasant, as if he were somewhere in an office or at a train station.

ALYOSHA. A quarter to six.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. What time?

ALYOSHA *(softly)*. A quarter to six.

Pause.

An old woman can cheat with young men! Of course, she will threaten to commit suicide. The rules are the same for young and old alike here!

*Uncle reads the letter again.
Sashenka watches his moving lips.
And Alyosha watches too.*

(Waiting for the silent reading to end.) The whole house is full of death! Scissors, sulfur and phosphorus matches, knives and forks, vinegar, knitting needles and crochet hooks, crushed glass, arsenic balls, a bathrobe belt, a Turkish saber above the sofa, from the fourth floor into the street, under a cab, into the river, burned to death in the bathhouse...

IVAN PAVLOVICH. What time is it now?

ALYOSHA. Half past five, probably.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. How much?

Silence.

ALYOSHA *(laughing)*. You know, of course, that all old women are terribly mean! An old woman, for example, might write a letter saying, "You'll be judged when you die!" Of course, I'll find it and tear it up, but the old woman will say she still has it, that her lawyer has it! Just hold on, don't give in, or you'll end up in the madhouse! Then Lizochka will drown herself in the river.

*Uncle reads the letter again, for the third time.
Sashenka tries to read it upside down, but she fails. Pause.*

IVAN PAVLOVICH. What were you just talking about, Alyosha? Sorry, I got distracted. What time is it now?

ALYOSHA. I'm saying that Lisa could drown in the river.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. What Lisa? In the river? Why? God bless you, I don't understand anything. What time is it now? Tell me.

ALYOSHA. In any river! There are plenty of rivers now, aren't there? There are rivers everywhere!

Nyuta enters. And leans on the doorframe.

NYUTA. Are you going to have dinner?

Silence.

Or tea again? Or do you want something to eat?

Silence

ALYOSHA. War to the grave—that's our deal! Either I go to the madhouse, or the old woman goes to the grave: The die is cast!

NYUTA. Who goes to the grave?

ALYOSHA. The old woman.

NYUTA. Who is it?

ALYOSHA. An old woman I know.

Sashenka takes the letter from her uncle's limp hands and reads it.

Alyosha watches her lips move as she reads.

They all move their lips like children when they read.

NYUTA. What's her name?

ALYOSHA. Who?

NYUTA. The old woman.

ALYOSHA. I don't know.

NYUTA. Do I know her?

Sashenka shrugged her shoulders.

SASHENKA. Horses. A kerosene lamp. Three mandarin slices.

IVAN PAVLOVICH (*softly*). Gloves.

SASHENKA. Yes, and gloves. And a glass of sulfuric acid.

Uncle closes his eyes. It was clear that he was not here but somewhere far away.

Sashenka sits down on the footstool near his feet.

And Nyuta sits down, folds her hands on her knees, and adjusts her apron.

Quiet.

That's what happens when the samovar on the table stops making noise, and you can hear the ticking of the wall clock.

SASHENKA (*to uncle*). Where are you?

He is silent.

High or low?

ALYOSHA. On water or land?

IVAN PAVLOVICH. On land.

ALYOSHA. In a forest or a field?

IVAN PAVLOVICH. In the forest.

ALYOSHA. By the water or by the mountains?

IVAN PAVLOVICH. By the water.

ALYOSHA. Day or night?

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Night. What time is it?

Pause.

ALYOSHA. It's a quarter to six. What's in the letter? Shall I read it? May I?

Alyosha quickly takes the letter and reads it.

NYUTA. And guess where I am? Not in the city, not in the forest. Not day, not night. I can see the church and hear the birds singing... Oh, you've given it all away...

Alyosha reads the letter aloud.

"My fate is sealed! I can no longer be around this person, I can no longer be under his control! My lot has been cast... Yesterday afternoon, I intentionally gave Kotik three mandarin segments to eat. By nightfall, red spots had appeared on her cheeks and hands. This means that my mother and sister will be here in the morning! At six o'clock in the evening, I will be waiting for you at the colonial goods store. There, in the shop window, they light kerosene lamps in the shop window so that the glass doesn't freeze. I'll see you through the glass and come out to you. There are cups of sulfuric acid in the window to keep the glass from freezing..."

Looking up.

Crossed out.

He reads on.

"It's not his reproaches, not his frowning silence that weighs on me. No, not that... But the way his nails are cut on his hands - that is what is intolerable, that is what makes me want to scream and one night, it seems, strike!.. When my strength leaves me, and I can find emotional support nowhere, I sneak to the coat rack, where his gloves are usually thrown on the table. I press those gloves to my face and breathe in his scent... My eyes darken, I become a wild animal, and all

around me is a bamboo forest, and all I want is blood, blood... Let's go, let's get out of here! Don't take anything with you, just your passport and money! We'll have everything, believe me, we'll have plenty, because being with you is happiness. I will wait for you at six sharp. Take the horses."

Silence.

Nyuta contritely shakes her head.

Alyosha can not stay still, jumping up, and running back and forth across the room. But quietly, on tiptoe, without disturbing the silence. He falls into the chair. Jumping into it.

ALYOSHA. Well, what are you writing about these days?

IVAN PAVLOVICH (*not opening his eyes*). Yes.

ALYOSHA. You write for the "Russian Invalid?"

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Aha.

ALYOSHA. That is a trashy newspaper.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Travel notes. A travel diary, you know. They print them.

ALYOSHA. Rubbish, rubbish, trivial! It is a directionless little paper. It's only a bunch of deadbeats sitting around.

IVAN PAVLOVICH (*still not opening his eyes*). Yes, that's just how I am. Usually, it's about questions. "On the question of...", "Once again about...". Now it's travel notes, small stuff. They're being printed.

SASHENKA You could write a story! From life. Or a novella is good, a novel is long, but a novella is good! Or you know, a novelette!

She claps her hands and laughs loudly.

Yes, yes, a novelette with a story! I love it when it's a novelette! With a story!

Uncle opens his eyes.

IVAN PAVLOVICH.What is the...

Didn't get to say the word "hour." He didn't have time.

The tin picture in the clock came to life: Eve holding out an apple to Adam, and so on... There was nothing new in the way the pieces of corroded tin shook conclusively. No one was looking at it.

The clock strikes six times.

Everyone, like fools, whispered and counted all six strokes. Knowing that there would be six, not five, not seven.

Silence.

IVAN PAVLOVICH (*in despair*). Why do you lie?! Why?... What an absurd, childish passion for lying! (*Grasping his head.*) Why, why?!

ALYOSHA (*jumping up*). What have we lied about? What?!

SASHENKA. Us? Lying?!

IVAN PAVLOVICH. It is a disease: lying and lying and lying! The cure must be utilized! When they steal and steal, it is kleptomania. And when they lie and lie and lie, -it's, it's... -I don't know what!

ALYOSHA. Tell me, tell me, what was lied about? Tell me!

SASHENKA. There is nothing to tell! Nothing!

IVAN PAVLOVICH. "Have you been drinking the milk, Alyosha?" - "No, I haven't." Instead of the letter «ЛТ» it's the letter «BE»! "Don't drink!" Then who has been drinking the milk? Who's got a white lip? "Sashenka, have you been eating marshmallows?" - "Nope!" It's that damn «BE» again! And who has sticky fingers and a sticky face? It is disgusting to even hold such a child in your arms!

ALYOSHA (*in a shaky voice*). What if I ask you back now? Huh?.. Who called the children gluttons?!

SASHENKA (*shouting*). Called me Meat Street!

NYUTA. Children need not be stipulated when they eat well. If you call a child "fat, ruddy," he can be jinxed. It is not good.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. (*jumping up*). To hell with them - let them eat! No one has ever said a word against them, no matter what they eat! Why should they lie? Why should they lie?!

Alyosha jumps up.

ALYOSHA. So!... Just a moment! Just a moment. I ask you to tell me now, as an honest man, what was lied about?

Pause. Uncle suddenly went limp. He looked around in bewilderment.

(*Ringing voice*) Well, I am waiting! I'll ask the question again. Well, what was a lie?

IVAN PAVLOVICH (*muttering*). Oh my god... Why all this, why? What about Lizochka? That she doesn't want to marry you, that everything fell through, that the money, you know... That the bride is 46... Some old woman, with love for money, but without candles... Why? That Lizochka drown herself in the river?! (*Laughing.*) No, you tell me, look me in the eyes, tell me - am I stupid, for Lizochka to drown herself in the river? I, on the other hand, am not stupid enough to drown myself in a river! Why, why are you lying?

Silence.

NYUTA. To berate children about food is the last thing you should be doing.

Silence.

ALYOSHA (*earnestly*). I'm lying. I lie. I don't know why. I don't know why.

And covers his face with his hands. He sits down. Sashenka laughs.

NYUTA. Now would be a good time to eat. Maybe have dinner? It's a quarter to 7:00.

She doesn't get an answer.

Alyosha sits there with his hands over his face, swaying slightly.

IVAN PAVLOVICH (*to Alyosha*). My darling, my darling... Lizochka loves you, wants to marry you. But you're dragging it out. You'll lose your hundred rubles in cards, you'll drink 15 bottles of champagne with Dulevich... You'll have a good time, and then you'll get married... Children will come: chicken pox, rubella, urticaria, sweat, itching, and vesicles - God have mercy!... My wife has a breastbone, a lisp, an estate in Smolensk province, where men cut wood without asking... My father-in-law has a cello. In the evening, plain sourdough with black bread, at night - Mein Rida... To cure the boy's stammering, to buy sheet music for the girls, to learn the mandolin himself, to learn the mandolin himself... And for God's sake! - No novelettes with a plot. None of that/this is necessary!

ALYOSHA. I'm sorry. I thought it all seemed like fun: to lie.

SASHENKA. It was fun, it was fun! - About the old woman on the fourth floor in the hallway! It was fun about the candles, too!

ALYOSHA. I thought I needed to cheer up my uncle. So...

IVAN PAVLOVICH. I hate stories! I hate stories with a plot! Novelettes, novels...

Silence.

NYUTA. I guess it's time to put the samovar on.

Silence.

SASHENKA. Oh, I love it! "Poor Liza!"!.. "The Headless Horseman"!.. "The Edge of Life",... "The Thorny Path," "The Prince of Honor" by Seslavin, "Whispers of Life" by Breshko-Breshkovsky!... Robinson Crusoe! How much he, poor man, endured, not knowing that everything would end so well at the end!

Ivan suddenly sobbed.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Poor, poor Robinson!

Pause.

ALYOSHA. You've gone to pieces, uncle. You're not feeling well at all. Lie down.

Uncle lies on the couch.

(Helping him lie down) I like a story, you know? By God, sometimes nothing.

Uncle pulls a large plaid handkerchief out of his pocket and blows his nose loudly, resentfully.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. I hate, I hate it all... "In the shade of a tall linden tree, on the bank of Moscow, on one of the hottest days of the thousand eight hundred and fifty... of the bloody year, two young men were lying on the grass. One looked..." How silly! Stupid stupidity, I have nothing more to add.

Blows his nose. Then sighs..

"What, Pyotr, have you not seen it yet? - asked on the 20th of May of the thousand eight hundred and eight hundred and stupid year, coming out without a hat on the low porch of the inn, a forty-something baron in a dusty overcoat... and without plaid pantaloons..."

SASHENKA (*seriously*). What's he doing without pantaloons? Is that what it says? You must have gotten it wrong.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. What's the difference?

SASHENKA. If you, uncle, don't understand...

IVAN PAVLOVICH. I don't understand! Yes!... I don't understand!... To make it even more important, they also indicate the year when it happened! It never, never happened! It never, never happened at all! Why, why do you lie, why do you specify the year, the day, winter or summer, the hour, and at such and such a place, they say it all happened!... "Looking at her, he thought." You don't know what the hell he thought when he looked at her. You'll never know, you fool, you tramp! "He loved her!" The plot! She ate a piece of meat, he killed her. A charge from misfortune to happiness. Hell no!

NYUTA. You said damn three times. It's the middle of the night. Why?

IVAN PAVLOVICH. Fools, I'm not sick, I'm just the opposite, I'm well now! I won't be in the plot another time...!

Up on the couch.

You can't let yourself be mixed up in the plot.

And shakes his fist.

Where to?! To the purveyors of "Home Reading" novels? To the bourgeois tragedy and family romance?! Into Kouroleska?!... To become the hero of a novel in a new flavor. From a quiet, good life, my God. Where there's a cigarette machine, and on the teapot - a warm cap, on the keys - trinkets, where "Italian Noon" in the living room, and under the bed Conan Doyle and all his "bi-vos-vea", all "shelle and vill"... Where everything is so good, where such a good, warm, ridiculous life, and suddenly - bye! - into an affair?! Where some bastard will give importance to all the accidents of life and find their universal connection? Will find causes, effects, beginning, middle, and end, - what a horror!... And the funny thing is, there'll be style. Oh, style!

Laughs.

And there's none of that! There's no connection, no beginning, no end! And I'm sorry, but life is completely unfair. It's as it comes, and that's good! And thank God, I live my life the way I want, I can't be lured into stories and histories! Travel notes - it's possible, it's free. All kinds of descriptions are also good, and when about hunting, also good. But not a single paragraph with the word "suddenly" in it! If only like this: "Suddenly the weather turned bad, but suddenly it got better. "Suddenly, it was winter and then suddenly it was summer..." That's good, isn't it?

Pause.

ALYOSHA. I'm suddenly hungry. What about you?

SASHENKA. It would be good to put a whole trace of marmalade on white bread and butter, maybe even two traces!

ALYOSHA. Or better still, a turnip of onion, dipped in salt, and with black bread!

Nyuta quietly stands up and leaves.

SASHENKA (*calling out*). If there are walnuts, I can crack them. And you pour honey on top!

Silence.

ALYOSHA (*sighing*). And yet, uncle, I sometimes wish for a story. With a good ending!

IVAN PAVLOVICH. It just goes on and on; it never ends. Fools, you think that if he falls under a train on the last page, it's a bad ending? It's good, it's good! But if he lived and lived, and everything was the same - that's bad!... You're so stupid! Why, why? Look how good it is...

Gets off the couch. He stands thoughtfully in the middle of the room. Sashenka immediately takes his seat, with her legs on the sofa, one pillow under her back, one on her knees, and hugging another in her arms.

Where do I start? Well, it doesn't matter at all. Fools say that the beginning is that which itself does not of necessity follow another...

Curling his fingers while counting.

Eleven words! You can start with anything, and Aristotle's all over it. Let's start at least with the stove! It has a curved lily flower molded on its dark door... Who says it's a lily, and who's to say it's not? But we don't care. Its windows are like buttons on a uniform, polished. My mother said it was a court counselor, I said it was a police officer, and the stoker said it was a torment...! You can write a bad word in ink on a tile. And if you whisper it afterwards, a chill will run down your spine. Reading the clumsy letters, you can imagine, with a slight delay, the object that the word refers to. If the object is masculine, you can just smile, but if it is feminine, you are more likely to lick your finger and wipe away what you have written, as if it had never been there.

ALYOSHA. Then put an "ehr" on the end of it!

Laughs.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. And if the subject is female...

ALYOSHA. That's without "ehr."

Laughs.

IVAN PAVLOVICH. ...Then, as soon as possible, spit on your finger and erase what's written, as if it had never been here!...

He walks around.

Here's the cupboard. You can hide in it, in the bottom drawer. That's where Father and Nyuta were overhead talking. And then father and mother. And then mother and Nyuta. It ended in tears... There is a secret hiding spot that everyone knows about. And in the fork compartment, there's a secret hiding spot that not everyone knew about, but some did... There's mother's locket, where a strand of the unknown man's hair is, and you can't ask about it! A nut in gold paper... A playing card: a ten of spades means a black thing, a disease, and with a king or lady - a marriage bed!... And you can't ask about her either, no one ever did... On the desk is a globe with a dent in Africa and Alaska. It fell twice, once with Africa and once with Alaska. From which a bulge on Turkistan was made... The green cloth is covered in ink on the left, the stain

came but with a hare with two ears. You'd better cover it with your elbow when you write. Because when you see that hare, you think of something else. Other things.

The clock strikes seven. Silence.

(Mumbles) There's no end to the description. The end doesn't matter at all. They say there's nothing after it. But that's not true.

Pause.

You can give a curtain whenever you want. You pull the string, and it falls. And what happened after him is their own business; that's where our interest ends. Maybe someone has already traveled through a black, smoky tunnel in the Alps, where it makes your ears pop. And at the tiny station, where flower pots are suspended from the ceiling, he has already bought himself a mug of goat's milk and a bouquet of violets... And now he is smoking a cigar, pouting his lips into an "o"... But that's another story, and it doesn't concern us - God forbid!

Nyuta enters.

NYUTA. There's also veal, but it's stale because it's hot outside, there are flies, and your beloved Stephan, even though I told him...

Curtain closes.